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South by Southeast: *A Curatorial Proposition*

In my professional work as a Southeast Asian postcolonial art historian, the idea of a national art history seems to be a natural horizon for the necessary political work of representation within that narrative of art history. The enchantment with representation accrues to this disciplinary technology, however it may be characterised in the normative sense of Western, English-language art history, or alternatively annotated with the markers of “world” or “global” art history to decisively lay bare both the impedimenta of the colonial and the indicia of the still-possible ‘universal’. Surely, the desire to be present within a representational regime is one arising from the struggle of the colonial and the modern, and the assemblage that is the colonial-modern. Both terms demand intense theorisation as they come in contact with projects of *détournement*, such as the de-modern and the de-colonial. These projects of rupture or severance, remnant of the avant-garde unconscious, are productive, without doubt, only that they need to revisit their conceptualisation of the colonial and the modern, and their residues in the colonial and the global modern. It must be stated persuasively that their life-worlds have been substantially transformed by animate agencies through the instinct to transform and the exigency to survive, so that their ‘turning’ cannot be imagined as being merely operated upon the diffusion of stable forms—like the colonial and the modern. In other words, both have already been turned from within, with sufficient trickster improvisation across their everyday life and their afterlife, and that it has always been so since the time of their encounter.

This representational imperative, however, proves to be a limit, one that tends to over invest in the nation-state and the national as the exclusive framework of the history of art, or of history and of art, no matter how strategic they may be held up as elements to enhance the immune system of the local for it to defend itself against the virality of the global. When this framework extends into a realm called “the regional”, the latter merely absorbs the nation-ness, the nation-stateness, or the nationalism; it regularly fails to fulfill the promise of the inter-national in the most generative meaning of the prefix “inter” and of the worldliness of human labour and its incendiary social movements. The history of the modern and the national overdetermines the politics of the historical and the poetics of art. It is in this light that I endeavour to destabilise the median of the Southeast Asia region by experimenting with the ‘Southeast’ as a vector of relations. How could the region be freed from its geopolitical construction under colonial and Cold War auspices and give art the chance to remap its geography? In this manner, I propose to address the persistent questions pertinent to the anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s own inquiries into ‘the nation’. To paraphrase him, what is Southeast Asia if it is not a region? What is a region if it is not a locality of countries? What is a country if it is not a nation?¹ This relay, I think, is a loop that runs on iterations and reversals.

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It is for this reason that I explore different idioms of mediating the national through the regional, regardless how fraught that rubric may be. To do so would be to harness another ensemble consisting of art historical work and curatorial practice, fields to which I respond intellectually and professionally. Such an ensemble is able to sift through the sediments of material that becomes object, and an ecology that becomes an exhibition. It is at this intersection that I concentrate on the category “southeast” —enlisted here deconstructively, that is, uttered ‘under erasure’, its almost default recognition refunctioned as a dilemma, or the schema that permits questions to be asked about the object of study through a subjectivity fretful about its intuition to objectify. The axiom of “Southeast Asia” therefore, is made to play out until its conceptual stamina wears down in the face of the poetics of art, or better still, the geopoetics of the exhibition to be broadly called “South by Southeast”. The ‘south’ in this situation is subjected verisimilarly to a complication through the coordinate of the ‘southeast’. It is not the global south, reified in the ideology of inclusion or the politics of the decolonial, but ‘south by southeast’, which signals a laterality or adjacency to reorganise an area conveniently designated by government, scholarship, and the financial market as Southeast Asia.

The first presentation of *South by Southeast* in 2015 was held in Hong Kong at the Osage Art Gallery, produced by the Osage Art Foundation, and was modified in Guangzhou at the Guangdong Times Museum in 2016 with the subtitle, *A Further Surface*. The locations are salient in this regard, Hong Kong and Guangzhou being part of the southern sphere of the Chinese monolith. The series was envisioned to be of incremental exhibitions that would continually reiterate Southeast Asia alongside other articulations of the ‘Southeast’ elsewhere. It is not a thematic proposition, but a geopoetic one that offers an opportunity for the place to render contemporary art and for the latter to render the place. I take the cue from Indian anthropologist Arjun Appadurai who has in mind not nation-states or regions, but “process geographies” in which the life-world is formed by “precipitates of various kinds of action, interaction, and motion — trade, travel, pilgrimage, warfare, proselytisation, colonisation, exile, and the like. These geographies are necessarily large scale and shifting, and their changes highlight variable congeries of language, history, and material life.”²

This series required another procedure: collaborative curatorial work, introducing another knot in the meshwork, a co-conspirator in the enterprise of reinvestigating the mangroves of contemporary art. I co-curated the first exhibition with Anca Mihulet, an independent curator from Sibiu and Bucharest in Romania who currently resides in Seoul, South Korea. The project brought together contemporary art from Southeast Asia and Southeast Europe, dwelling mainly on the formation of subjectivity through image, memory, and material condition. In the critical project to resist the legacies of a Eurocentric or Orientalist fantasy, the category of ‘the South’ would be cast as a figure or a trope of many guises. Whether margin or periphery, colonised or developing, failed state or sweatshop, ‘the South’ has imbibed various valences. Always, however, it is charged by the tension deriving from the distribution of asymmetrical power. Such distribution has been subjected to numerous ways of calibration, given that its movement may be capillary and alternating, and not solely direct or linear. That being said, the exercise of power results in both unimaginable suffering and sweeping prospects for something overwhelming to happen.

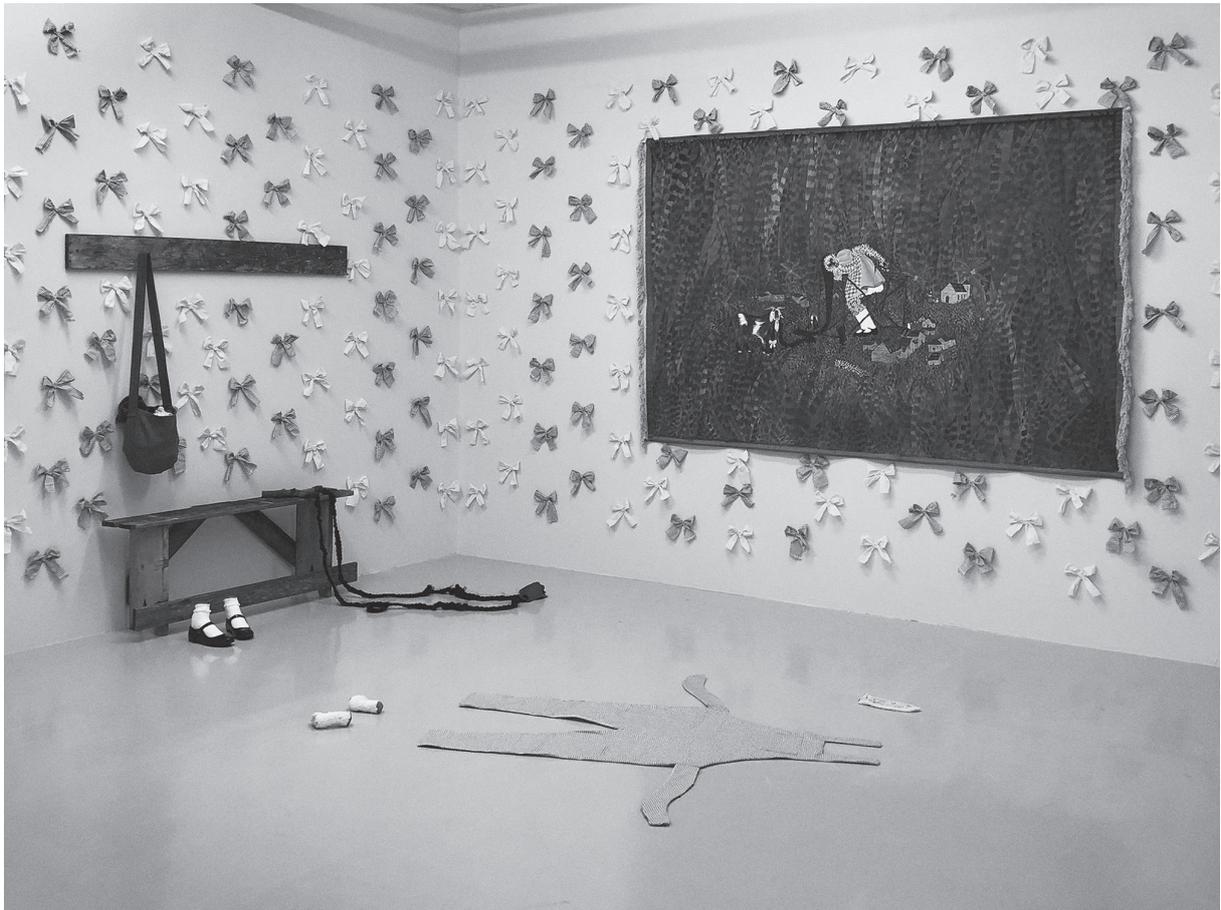
It is readily apparent that the West underpins the points of the cartographic intelligence about the art of the time (contemporary art) and the time of the art (art history). It has become a habit to refer to it as the defining agency of art and history, institutionalised as it is by structures of exhibitions, collections, professions, and discourses. It is at this conjuncture of power and critique that an anticipated third moment might intervene, and the manifestation may well be curatorial,

which in itself is a tricky venture, but one that proves catalytic in many ways. At the outset, the curatorial intimates a gathering of sympathies within a space in which a substantial density accretes; it is always and already emergent or imminent. A curatorial response to art history or the history of art ensures timeliness and urgency because it brings to the fore the question of modernity and cracks its codes across mediations and afterlives elsewhere. Curation, therefore, becomes a material gesture of exposure to a milieu of reciprocities, or to put it more precisely, of an ex-position in which art recovers its contingent state, its flux from the fixities and fixations that leash it, often inveterately.

When curators convene this gathering, they conjures what Foucault so felicitously phrases a “sudden vicinity of things” amid people who experience works in their time, asking questions about them and about themselves. It is these “intense proximities” and “productive adjacencies” that render the curatorial demonstrative: that it has to allude to crystallising moments and events in the critical phenomenology of reception so that the history of art becomes expectant once again, open to the surprises of unknowing and the untimely. How do we glean the silhouette of this curatorial foray? Will it take the form of an archive, object studies of “comparative contemporaries” or a survey of the horizon for sight lines? Whichever way the instance is acted out, it hovers above the question or crisis of representation, or better still, the representational aesthetic, the affect that the sign of the ‘Southeast’ stirs up ‘under erasure’ or strategically and essentially. Furthermore, it recovers a seminar within a space of encounter, a confrontation with the burdens and anxieties of modernity, alongside the prohibitive institutionalities that inhere (fetish, accumulation, authenticity, even climate control). Ultimately, it choreographs the longing, the exasperation, the tedium and frustration, the melancholy of this modernity in contemporary time, feelings that are routinely belaboured and yet rarely transcended.

These queries may lie at the core of the exhibition that attempts to foreground a level of interaction between Southeast Asia and Southeast Europe. This kind of interaction endeavours to move beyond equally important procedures of explaining exchange between art ecologies by discerning, for instance, affinities between artistic productions across a region, an act that may consolidate a regionality to shore up varied interests. Such a notion of a region, or regionality, may also be critical and reflexive, assessing the place of nations within a region of art, or the category of the nation as a circumscription of an aesthetic tradition. In other words, it may be a foil to the nation itself or its progression into a geopolitical inter-national, or the radical particularisation of the local that precludes translation. Clearly, the local as well asserts its presence in relation to the national or the regional. On another level, this undertaking looks into the problematic of the global, or globality. Where is the global and how is it formed? How is its history written? How is its art distilled from the welter of everyday spectacles and epiphanies? In constellating two modalities of ‘the Southeast’ or ‘Southeastern-ness’, the global is displaced, laterally, its hegemonic geometry bisected, as it were.

In pondering these concerns, *South by Southeast* might have been unconsciously in conversation with Alfred Hitchcock’s film *North by Northwest* (1959) in which Cary Grant plays the role of the main character who is mistaken for someone else. In many ways, *South by Southeast* may be regarded as a post-Hitchcock scenario as it effects a sharp shift from the distress over misrecognition, which is the central phase in the formation of subjectivity and inevitably leads to the capture of the subject in ideology. In such a mindset, it is mainly illusion and critique that frames the imagination of Southeast Asia, thus restricting the latter to a repetition of otherness and difference, authenticity and consciousness. It might be productive to delay this dialectic and recover in the interval a coordinate, or even a tangent, instead of a centre. It is an interval that may give rise to both tension



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and cosmology not necessarily lying within the civilisational and the avant-garde, both of which sometimes lead to mass discriminations of people and revolutionary slaughter. It instead points to another intersubjective space of the impossible in which future and failure transpose: not yet and just too much to be possible.

It was also the aim of the exhibition to sail beyond the regional teleologies of countries. For instance, we worked with artists from Sri Lanka, Taiwan and Hong Kong, places not considered part of Southeast Asia. In the same vein, we worked with artists from Turkey and Greece, sites not regarded as belonging to the Balkans. Therefore, we risked the insertion of these terrains into the emergent geography of contemporary art and in keeping with the spirit of Southeast Asia as a vaster domain, if we consider its Austronesian matrix that implicates as far away a place like Madagascar, and if we carefully probe how the region 'inclines outwards' via three restive bodies of water: the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific.

Southeast Asia is no longer just east of India, south of China, and north of Australia. It is all of these, of course, but a swarm besides in terms of natural diversity, cultural mixture, integrities of ethnicity, and migrations. Here the geo-poetic curatorial disposition finds its bearings, largely because it does not preempt the place to yield its robust materialities. Rather, it sensitively facets the angles of the place to speak its forms, something that thematisation undermines as it reinforces the conceit of the cosmopolitan curator. Because the method unhinges this conceit, there is now difficulty in instrumentalising the project through the exhibition critique. This does not exempt it from conversations around the effort, but the project necessitates a rethinking as well of the language through which an annotation of the exhibition can transpire. It must be patient with close reading and must keep in mind the geo-poetic movement within the exhibition space itself. In many ways, because the exhibition is not tempted to thematise, and without themes to administer the behaviour of the audience, the viewer is left to other devices of figuring, and figuring out. While it is easy to propose prompts like the trauma of fragmentation for the Balkans or racial violence and creole survival for South Africa and the Caribbean, it is not tenable in the long duration of attentiveness. And as Southeast Asia has made manifest, the geography resists the regionalising mechanism even as the region furnishes it with an always-already disseminating identity. This being said, certain common contours surface. These are to be acknowledged as incipient grounds for comparison and possible convergence. They are not final testaments. The persistent haunting of civilisation and empire, the contentions of class and sexuality, the dissipation of personal ethos into historical vicissitudes, and the pressure of dissidence are all distributed in many artistic instantiations. They are treated as trajectories, not a terminus of meaning, relevance, or context. What is cogent is the granular expression, the fine lines of the material ecology in which thought, action, urge, ambivalence, and claim come to form the problematic-poetics of art and the contemporary. With this expression and ecology comes a theoretical vernacular, honed in very distinct spaces and tenor of production and remediated in the site-specific exhibition. Being built up in this process, therefore, is not only an assembly of art, artists, curators, and an art world, but also the basis of interlocution that is freed from the obligations to rehearse the customs of knowledge centres. This is not to disavow, however, the heritage of this epistemic mythology. It is rather to summon a forum of translocal and transversal thinking. For instance, meditating on post-socialism in Southeast Europe should finesse an understanding of political art in the Philippines. Or the history of performance in Romania might be able to explain the travails of women artists in Indonesia.

Present Passing was an iteration of the *South by Southeast* framework that sought to expand and heighten the imagination of Southeast Asia. Presented at Osage Gallery in 2019, it was co-curated with Natasha Becker, originally from Cape Town and now New York. This exhibition persevered to release the region of Southeast Asia from commonplace assumptions about its scope, and unburdening it from the inheritance of the colonial theatre and Cold War geopolitics. For this phase, the exhibition's title was derived from the literary criticism of French feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous, whose sense of the present and the passage elicits the urgent and fragile ties between the southeast ecologies of art. This iteration focused on the ties between Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, which is southeast of the hegemonic North American mainland, and South Africa, which links to Southeast Asia and the Caribbean through seafarers. This option led us to revisit once again how we reflect on the place of region in the contemporary. It does not only broaden the solidarities of Southeast Asia, it gestures towards a theory of the global, the worldly, the hemispheric through not only the south but through the southeast: not the centre twice, not west and not north, the better for it to slide across the scales and registers of the geopoetic spheres of exciting mingling. Here, the space of Southeast Asia would further mutate to include Cheju in South Korea and Okinawa in Japan. Ambiguous, or better to say, fluid spaces like the liminal Shan State were brought into sharper focus to disclose the conflicts at the fringe of nation-state territories.

As Southeast Asia complexifies through increments of co-ordination and co-incidence, so do the other indices of 'the Southeast' gather density and generosity. I surmise that as Southeast Europe, South Africa, and the Caribbean touch the nerves of Southeast Asia, their systems will enliven, too, and begin to open up to the sensibilities of a kindred formation elsewhere. No symmetry is anticipated in this proposition, only equivalence and the curatorial conjuncture for curators, artists, and the public to finally crisscross and interlace one another's 'normative commitments'.

As Artistic Director of the 6th *Singapore Biennale: Every Step in the Right Direction*, I also contend with the issue of the region in relation to Singapore, which in 2019 is commemorating the bicentennial of Great Britain's establishment of it as a trading post, and then a colony. Such a colonial event is entwined with a modernity that propelled it from a Third World post-colony to a First World city-state, one that has been described by the architect Rem Koolhaas as a "Potemkin metropolis". Again, in this endeavour, I am guided by a method that allows me to concretise the geopoetic and the ethical gesture of art: to evoke the place of Southeast Asia and beyond as a generator of contemporary art and to present works from these places as a way to remap the world as a project of reconstruction, a kind of making right, one step at a time, what colonialism and globalisation had wrought and continue to deny.

Notes

¹ Clifford Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001

² Arjun Appadurai, 'Grassroots Globalisation and the Research Imagination', *Public Culture* 12, no. 1, 2000, p. 7