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Rebranding *the Mahathir Era*

In July 2016, the curators of Ilham Gallery, Kuala Lumpur asked me to lend my 1994 video of the *Warbox, Lalang, Killing Tools* exhibition that had been held at the former *Pusat Kreatif, Balai Seni Lukis Negara* (Creative Centre of the National Art Gallery), for their forthcoming exhibition *Era Mahathir*. After considering their request, I arrived at the following conclusions.¹

Throughout history, art often has been appropriated by those in power to prototype new ideas, represent conventional or alternative notions of beauty, represent and enhance power, and construct narratives. Power and patronage have long been passionate bedfellows, and artists usually end up serving both. The *Era Mahathir* exhibition (24 July–30 November 2016) provided a compelling insight into the Rabelaisian bedchamber of Malaysian patronage and power.

The political and economic benefits of sponsoring the arts has not been entirely lost on Malaysian politicians and patrons, although the country in this regard has lagged far behind its neighbour, Singapore. This may have been a motivating factor in the opening of Ilham Gallery in 2015 by Malaysian entrepreneur Daim bin Zainuddin, the former Economic Minister during Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's rule. Daim owns and underwrites the gallery while it is managed by the well-known Malaysian gallerist Valentine Willie, with Rahel Joseph, formerly a curator at Galeri Petronas and Director of Cultural Affairs at the Australian High Commission to Malaysia.² Ilham's third major exhibition, *Era Mahathir*, was curated by Valentine Willie, Rahel Josef and Assistant Curator Azzad Diah. It correlated Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's two decades as Malaysia's Prime Minister with progressive and activist art produced during that time. The gallery borrowed works from several private collectors but primarily from the exhibiting artists.³ The didactic wall text clearly intended to bring the public into synch with the exhibition's historical context:

The Mahathir era (1981-2003) was a transformative period for the visual arts in Malaysia, a period which saw the re-emergence of the figurative in producing socially relevant art... It saw the flourishing of art as a form of social commentary. Artists began to respond to the complex socio-political issues of that time with works that addressed far-ranging subjects from the effects of globalisation and rapid development to specific political events such as the Asian Economic Crisis and the sacking of the former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim which subsequently led to the Reformasi movement in 1998.

The *modus operandi* to showcase “socially relevant art” is of intrinsic value and feeds a local and international market where such works hold an important niche. But this exhibition was not just about art and the market. Mahathir and Daim are still active in Malaysian politics. Mahathir signed the 2015 *Deklarasi Rakyat* (Citizens’ Declaration), demanding the resignation of current Prime Minister Najib Razak and has been working since to depose the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) he had formerly led, currently under the leadership of the Prime Minister. During the two decades of Mahathir’s rule most artists experienced ambivalence toward his authority. On the one hand, Mahathir oversaw a period of substantial infrastructure and national development that accompanied the migration of the rural population to the urban centres, especially Kuala Lumpur, which was conveyed by the exhibition’s wall text:

During the twenty-two year administration of Malaysia’s fourth Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the country underwent a transformation from an agrarian nation to a largely industrial one. The landscape of the country was forever changed with new infrastructure and development projects including the iconic Petronas Twin Towers, KL International Airport, and the network of highways which connected urban and rural centres all over the country. At the same time, Malaysians were imbued with a burgeoning sense of self-confidence which epitomised the “can do” spirit (“Malaysia Boleh”) of those times. His policies transformed the physical, political and social landscape of this country, the effects of which are still felt today.

Not articulated here (but mentioned in the catalogue essays) was that artists, students and activists also created artworks and established civil society organisations that opposed Mahathir’s draconian policies, including the coalescing of executive power over all other organs of government. And they did this at considerable personal risk. Non-government organisations and the opposition were controlled through the reactivation of a series of colonial acts—the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971, the Societies Act 1966 and the Printing Press and Publications Act 1984. The most significant of these was the Internal Security Act 1960 (ISA) that allowed for indefinite detention without trial. The ISA provided the threat and force behind all the other acts. It was deployed in the 1987 *Operasi Lalang* to arrest one hundred and six opposition figures, including Members of Parliament, NGO activists, intellectuals, students, artists, scientists and other members of civil society. Student activists were also detained, ironically when they demonstrated against the government’s deployment of the ISA. Following the ‘9/11’ attacks on the New York World Trade Towers, many Muslim activists were also detained under this act.

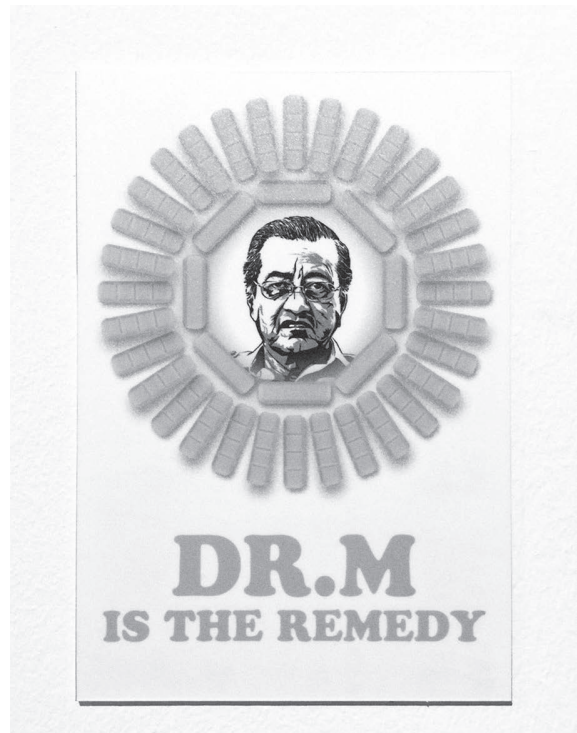
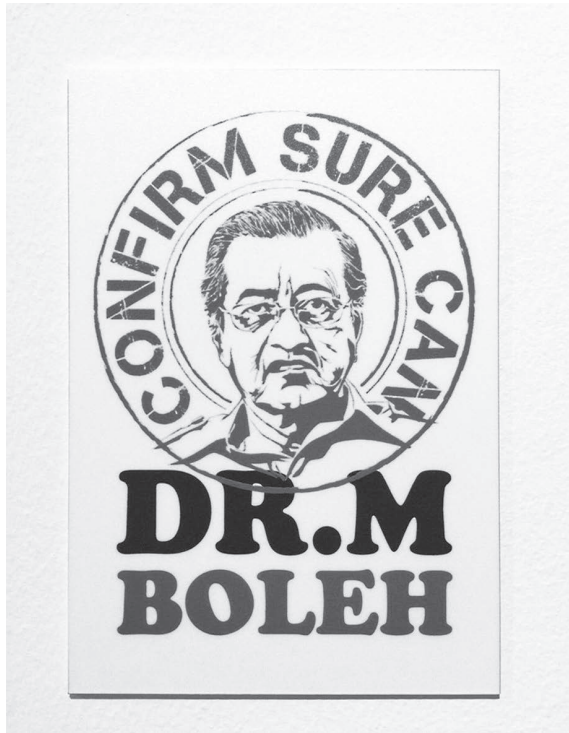
Era Mahathir included some critical art works from this period, and several generated by the *Reformasi* movement that began with the removal from office of the Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim in 1998, and continued through his arrest on charges of sodomy under the old Section 377, a remnant of the former British colonial era penal code. Mahathir deftly capitalised on the ubiquitous homophobic sentiments held by a conservative populace and even by some opposition politicians. *Reformasi* activists, including some of the artists in the exhibition, subsequently sought reformation of the government and the electoral system through demonstrations. The multi-cultural opposition party, the coalition *Barisan Alternatif* (Alternative Front) in 1999, and the *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (People’s Justice Party) were established. Splits in the PKR in 2015 led to establishment of *Patakan Harapan*, which Mahathir later joined.

The exhibition, the gallery and the artists were thus all tied into the “game of thrones” of Malaysian politics—the spectacle of an apparent struggle between two groups of economic elites, with the former power nexus of Mahathir and Daim on one side versus the current Prime Minister Najib with his cabinet on the other. Both groups have demonstrated their belief in the efficacy of autocratic governance supported by the arbitrary deployment of force—a political philosophy certainly not shared by most of the exhibiting artists. Neither of these two economic cartels has shown genuine interest in the democratic process or egalitarian consensus when in power. But since his retirement Mahathir has been reborn as a political reformer.

In *Era Mahathir* cultural time was presented as coeval with national time, and the artworks were positioned historically and hierarchically within a nationalist framing of power relations, patriarchy, ethnicity and ideological interpellation. Visitors could easily have gained the impression that the *Reformasi* artists had decided to re-align themselves with the anti-Najib, pro-Mahathir/Daim camp, despite the fact that much of the art on display had explicitly or tacitly emerged in opposition to what was then perceived as Mahathir’s corruption and autocratic rule. The curatorial depiction of an apparent U-turn⁴ by the artists further implied that Mahathir was now open to criticism of his earlier policies. This assumption of course strengthens his hand in gathering support for his current efforts to unseat yet another of his former deputies.⁵ Courting criticism from others and engaging in public self-criticism offers the image of a resilient self with a humanist core: fallible and willing to learn from earlier mistakes. It is a classic propaganda technique formerly used by Mao Zedong during the Yan’an period of the Chinese Revolution. It was also used more broadly by the USA during and after the Cold War to divert attention through affective display while the underlying project of coalescing hegemonic power proceeded uninterrupted. Hence the conundrum faced by the artists: the exhibition’s structural footing tacitly promoted the present activities of the now semi-retired but still politically active Mahathir, while it subverted the long-standing enmity of the artists by appropriating their critical works presented in a gallery owned by one of his closest confederates.

Intended or not, the exhibition thus functioned as a rebranding exercise for both Mahathir and the artists. Extraordinarily, the artists were either not cognisant of this or were willing to ignore it. Perhaps they were motivated by a long desired historical recapitulation of their early careers, reconvening earlier alliances and informing the public of their early ideals and ideas, or they decided to dust off old works for reintroduction into the market. Some artists have since expressed disappointment with the rush to mount what could have been a more substantially researched exhibition, noting the curatorial gaps, including works by Wong Hoy Cheong, Hisham Rais, Sharon Chin and others. Participating artist Yee I-lann also noted the intriguing absence of the blatantly propagandist murals on display in the UMNO headquarters.

Where were the adulation paintings of Mahathir?... Those epic paintings of the Malay warrior, of UMNO’s worldview. That ideology has shaped this country and given picture to it... Where is the wall of hundreds of idolatry Mahathir paintings that fed multiple artists throughout the 1990s? Where is the depiction of Mahathir as hero, as God even... these hero paintings at that other end of the spectrum that give rise to such a figure. Isn’t that important too? To understand how art has given rise and made possible an era dominated by this God-like figure.⁶



These profoundly reactionary and partisan murals would have seemed completely out of place aesthetically, but would have been a sociologically and politically fascinating addition. They exemplify some of the central themes of Mahathir's rule, nostalgically presenting an unabashedly racialised and masculine romance harkening back to an imagined 'golden age' of Malay supremacy during the fifteenth century Malacca Sultanate. Implicit in the mono-ethnic depictions is the underlying *bumiputra* ("son of the soil") essentialism that dominated UMNO politics under Mahathir, and remains unabated under Najib Razak. Along with the gaps, there were also some odd inclusions. Not all the artworks were from the Mahathir era, thereby eroding the exhibition's conceptual rigour and raising questions about the validity of the title.⁷

Had the murals been included they would have revealed the propagandistic gambit already in play, namely the farcical re-presentation of the formerly politically active art scene now driven by contemporary political expediency, nostalgia and commodity capitalism. The exhibition called to mind Karl Marx's comment on a phrase by Hegel in the former's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce."⁸ Marx was referring to the ludicrous nature of historical fetishisation. In *Era Mahathir* exchange-value replaced use-value. Works formerly meant as oppositional political statements now repackaged that former radicality for the benefit of Mahathir and for subsequent marketing. This reading suggests that the exhibition was a cognitive trap, perceivable only by those members of the public familiar with the implications of its institutional affiliations with Daim and Mahathir. Most visitors, unfamiliar with local political intrigues or with the importance of undertaking this sort of structural reading, probably would have approached the exhibition simply as presentation of interesting, progressive artworks displayed on neutral white walls. If there had been a statement by Ilham openly spelling out the exhibition's complicity with the Mahathir-Daim faction, or if the catalogue had dealt with this issue, then it would have had a much stronger theoretical and historical footing. None of the commissioned texts in the catalogue presented this, nor did any of the artworks.

This exhibition's foray into contemporary Malaysian politics also had the effect of concealing a far more complex view of Malaysia as a situated cosmopolis. Ilham Gallery's mandate on its website reads, "Ilham is a public art gallery committed to supporting the development, understanding and enjoyment of Malaysian modern and contemporary art *within a regional and global context*."⁹ But this "regional and global context" was absent. Ignored in the curatorial concept and design, its traces nevertheless appeared *within* the individual artworks, most of which were clearly aligned with prevailing international styles and conceptual methodologies of the period. While 1980s and 1990s global art references were framed within the artworks, there was no curatorial cross-referencing to artistic trends in the region or in other cosmopolitan centres. The border of the nation-state co-served as the parergon to the exhibition. This was accentuated by the exclusive selection of artworks by Malaysian-born artists in a country inhabited as well by artists from elsewhere in the world. Birth and passport were seemingly co-determinant with the exhibition's precis and non-naturalised contributors who were active during the period of its embrace were elided.¹⁰ During Mahathir's rule the Malaysian art scene was a diverse plurality, but ironically, the country's complex transnational profile was more inclusively represented in a historical timeline at the entrance by art historian Simon Soon, rather than in the exhibition itself.

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Interestingly, Singapore shares some of the same tensions. Many of the drivers of Singapore culture during the 1990s and early 2000s carried Malaysian passports. The Singapore government perversely reminds them of this by periodically retracting Permanent Residencies and work visas and deporting them without explanation or recourse. Any serious history of Singapore art would unquestionably include these artists, actants and activists. Correspondingly, Malaysian academics, artists and theorists can be found in universities and cosmopolitan centres throughout the world, carrying motifs of their culture with them.

This missing ‘international other’ in *Era Mahathir* eliminated one of the most important aspects of Mahathir’s tenure. He significantly increased Malaysia’s global profile through his ideology and acts, and his willingness to speak truth to Western hegemonic power on the international scene through his “Look East” policy and “Asian Values” rhetoric. Tragically, he did this while simultaneously crushing dissent and abetting domestic cronyism and corruption. The Mahathir years exemplified a ‘situated cosmopolitanism’ rooted in an agoraphobic nation-state while engaged with the larger forces of globalisation: the non-aligned movement, the aftermath of the Vietnam War and the decay of undisputed American global influence, in tandem with the expansion of Asian influence in international affairs. And most significantly, the period was marked by a growing influence of the global Islamic resurgence in Malaysia (and other parts of the Malay archipelago) with the formation of *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia*, the “Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement” (ABIM) in 1971, at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia by Anwar Ibrahim and others. The global economic collapse in 1997 that triggered the Asian Economic Crisis led to Mahathir’s shock pegging of the ringgit’s exchange rate and sequestering of the Malaysian economy, as he resisted the imposition of austerity and control by the International Monetary Fund. This was a clarion call for other small nations to protect their economies from the hegemonic forces of the IMF, the World Bank and the Washington-London-Brussels nexus of neo-liberalism.¹¹

It might be queried why this exhibition didn’t reflect these global aspects of Mahathir’s tenure? Instead, it presented a closed, essentialist representation of Malaysian art created only by registered citizens with a covert political subtext that could be appreciated by only a small coterie of cognoscenti who were perhaps too jaded to notice. Structurally, the exhibition’s representation was antithetical to the internationalising tendencies during Mahathir’s rule. It provided no new research or insights into the various off-shore constellations and generational flows of art production in Malaysia and their global and regional links. Artists were treated as siloed individual creators or as members of Malaysian-only artist groups, rather than as nodes in regional and global networks of transmission and circulation. Correspondingly, the artworks were presented as economic fetish objects of desire, rather than vehicles for ideas in global and regional circulation at the time. This impression was accentuated by the absence of non-commodified, ephemeral varieties of artistic production during an era that saw a global shift toward the theatricality of performance art, guerilla video art, community-based and socially engaged initiatives, street art and the aesthetics of the barricades. This erasure of influences and cross-fertilisations flattened and homogenised the diversity and depth of Malaysian culture from the 1980s through the 1990s.¹²

The so-called “Mahathir era” was a particularly fecund period of biological and cultural miscegenation between the cultural agents of Southeast Asia. Artists met, traded information, developed the first international festivals and exhibitions, and experimented with a wide variety of art forms, ideas and aesthetic methodologies. Their work was informed by many other artists, writers and thinkers who were also working locally but thinking globally in their respective countries. The individual artworks ultimately contradicted the exhibition’s constrained theme and title. They demonstrated that the art and

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ideas of that period could not be reductively squeezed into a singular category named after a singular politician, no matter how important. Indeed, from the evidence of his policies, Mahathir seemed determined to curtail those registers of Malaysian culture that he feared or could not comprehend. He clearly showed a human failing that we all share: he had a limited understanding of his own time. Was it really *his* era? I prefer a more Tolstoian view of the man and the period. Like everyone else, Mahathir was along for the ride.

Notes

¹ Ilham Gallery sought my documentary after the artist Wong Hoy Cheong decided not to exhibit his artwork from the 1994 exhibition *Warbox, Lalang, Killing Tools*, produced by Five Arts Centre, of which he was one of three participating artists, while I was editor of the exhibition catalogue. I noted that the curators perceived my video as a shorthand representation of Wong Hoy Cheong's outdoor installation and performance *Lalang* (1994) from the exhibition, rather than as an artwork in itself, that mirrored Malaysian culture in that historical moment. In reviewing the wall texts, a catalogue essay and photos of the proposed artworks, the contradictions that I have laid out in this text became all too apparent

² Until 2014 Valentine Willie owned five regional art galleries. According to Joseph, Ilham Gallery is run as a non-commercial public art gallery or museum, with no sale of artworks and no collection of its own. Works for exhibitions are regularly borrowed from collectors and institutions, university museums and various private collections

³ Including two from Daim bin Zainuddin's collection. The artists were Ahmad Fuad Osman, Abdul Multhalib Musa, Anurendra Jegadeva, Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Chang Yoong Chia, Chuah Chong Yong, Hamidah Abdul Rahman, Ismail Zain, Nirmala Dutt, Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman, Nur Hanim Khairuddin, Phuan Thai Meng, Rahman Roslan, Roslisham Ismail (ISE), Syed Ahmad Jamal, Tan Chin Kuan, Vincent Leong, Yee I-Lann, Zulkifli Yusoff and Five Arts Centre

⁴ A reference to the 'No More U-Turns' slogan of the *China Avant-Garde Art Exhibition*, National Art Gallery, Beijing, 1989. The two exhibitions of political art in its tenuous relationship to political power in the two countries make for an interesting study in contrast

⁵ Mahathir infamously undercut the power of his former Deputy Prime Ministers, Anwar Ibrahim, who was sacked and imprisoned, and Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who succeeded him as Prime Minister from 2003-09

⁶ Whatsapp chat with Yee I-Lann and Kean Wong, 13 September 2016. Yee is a cross-disciplinary photographer and installation artist whose work was presented in *Era Mahathir*. Wong was a special issues editor for the Malaysian *Sun* daily newspaper in 1994. He is currently an independent media consultant in Australia and Malaysia, and has covered the *Reformasi* period and its aftermath for *The Economist* magazine

⁷ In an interview with *The Edge* writer, Sarah Abu Bakar, 4 November 2016, Valentine Willie justified the inclusion of contemporary works: "For better or worse, the policies and politics of Dr. Mahathir continue to have an impact on Malaysia today. The man himself remains in the news and continues to loom large. We have always tried to use our small galleries on level three to commission new works as we did in our inaugural show, *Picturing the Nation*. The three new works on level three of Ilham, commissioned for *Era Mahathir*, show how the man and his policies continue to seize our collective imagination." The works comprise Mohd Azlan Mohd Latib's series of 55 photo-collages and installation titled *Wayang: Proparism* (2010-16), Kenneth Chan's 91 postcard-sized digital prints titled *#DrMLovesU* (2014-16) and a video work by Rahman Roslan, *Testimonial* (2016). Sarah Abu Bakar, 'The indelible Mahathir factor'; <http://www.theedgegalerie.com/news/2016/11/indelible-mahathir-factor>, 4 November 2016

⁸ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852; <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>; accessed 8 April 2017

⁹ My emphasis. See <http://www.ilhamgallery.com/about/>; accessed 27 March 2017

¹⁰ Whether indigenous (*Orang Asli*) artists were included is not clear from the listed biographies

¹¹ Jahabar Sadiq, 'From Dr. Mahathir to Malaysia, a Complex, Diverse Legacy', in *Era Mahathir* (exhib. cat.), Kuala Lumpur: Ilham, pp. 24-29. The sequestering of the economy by an all-powerful executive protected the Government Linked Corporations that had been doled out to the new *Bumiputra* entrepreneurs under the New Economic Policy, who were Mahathir's power-base. As suggested by Jahabar Sadiq in his catalogue essay, Mahathir's actions then set the stage for the succession of Najib Razak, who now uses those same tools of executive power pioneered by Mahathir

¹² A fuller exposition of some of these issues may be found in Nur Hanim Khairuddin, Beverly Yong and T.K. Sabapathy eds, *Narratives in Malaysian Art Volume 4: Imagining Identities*, Kuala Lumpur: Rogue Art Volume IV, forthcoming

