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Predicaments and Promises: Reflections on Art Writing in Malaysia and Singapore

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Art lovers in affluent and progressive societies today are privileged with the opportunities to attend artistic events happening concurrently and simultaneously at different localities. This is indeed true for Malaysia and Singapore. The profusion of visual art activities from national institutions and commercial galleries presents a bevy of local and regional artists, with the occasional insertion of international figures. Interestingly, recent content of these art activities gravitated from the historical theme to its polarized contemporary. Of course much depends on the vicissitudes of curatorial direction and differing objectives. The reading and articulation of pictorial images (by the artistically/non-artistically inclined) is thus dependent on the erudite writings that ink the accompanying catalogues and other forms of literature to contextualize and frame the proposition of the exhibition. Assuming that every exhibition provides curatorial essays or introductions in the form of printed materials, we are certainly privileged with a wealth of research materials. However, the current state of art writing in Malaysia does not reflect this development. There is still a serious lack of critical writings on modern Malaysian art, a problematic which we intend to address in this essay.

What is the significance of the writing? It is our opinion that the written word may percolate artistic intentions to the general public and construct an intellectual platform for art scholarship. Various quarters in the Malaysian art world have continuously lamented the dearth of writing that is consequential for the lack of criticism and analysis in Malaysian art. While one may acquiesce to the lack of publications, an elaborate search on the art history of Malaysia and Singapore begs differing views on this anomaly [1]. Much material can be found in exhibition catalogues, monographs, newspaper articles, and papers presented in forums and symposiums. Senior artists and writers also possess a wealth of oral information on topics as yet unexplored today.

It is with the aim of understanding contemporary art that more rigorous efforts must be made to analyse the short history of modern art in Malaysia and Singapore. Why Singapore and Malaysia? Indeed, attempts to understand modern art and its intricacies in Malaysia and Singapore ought to be seen from a wider lens, to encompass a reading of the political scenario of yesteryears. Prior to the independence of Malaysia, and the separation of Singapore, there existed Malaya under British colonial rule. The influences and changes brought about by colonialism significantly 'modernised' the local landscape. Perhaps a study of postcolonial theory and 'the modern' may deepen our understanding of its cause and effect.

Essentially, modernity in this part of the world occurred much later than, and followed different trajectories from, the West. If we take a moment of caesura,



Material on Malaysian contemporary art, photo taken from a reading room in Kuala Lumpur.



Material on Malaysian contemporary art, photo taken from a reading room in Kuala Lumpur.



Singapore Art Museum (SAM), the main museum building.



art was very much overshadowed, if not submerged by political and economical priorities. Looking beyond the segregation of geography and politics, the art history of Malaya and Singapore was very much intertwined during the formative years of these countries that culminated in their respective independence and autonomy as modern nation-states. Until today, one may argue that certain cultural facets of these two countries are relatively similar. We shall return to the interrelation of politics in regards to art writing later.

As it is, the writing of art in the contemporary has evolved from that of the past. Much of what we see today is a presentation of different stylistic approaches and methodology addressing various trajectories of art, artists and connoisseurship. Insinuated with different negations of political, social or individualistic concerns, writings on art come in the form of reviews, journalistic reporting or artist biography, to name a few. Indeed, the current concern of the artist and the brief analysis of works on exhibition take precedence in providing the audience with relevant information on artistic objectives and directions. The audience today is perchance more informed with the ready availability of information from the World Wide Web. Yet, who is the target audience? Is it the connoisseurs, art practitioners, academics or the ordinary person? It may be unlikely that one model of writing caters to the needs of different readerships, unless the intention is for generic purposes. Hence, the necessity for specialised writing to meet the demands of art and art history.

In seeking to address the needs for different writing, it is imperative to look deeper and further to the writers and subject matter at hand. We mentioned the association between politics and art writing earlier. Due to the apathetic nature of the suzerainty for art education during the colonial era, it would prove insightful to understand its foundation in Malaya – and how it relates to art writers and writing then and at a later period.

Tertiary art education in Malaya started with the inception of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (1938) in Singapore. It should be noted that tertiary art education was not initiated by the colonial rulers. Furthermore, the study of art was directed towards studio oriented learning [2]. At this point, it would be of consequence to look into the educational endeavours of Singaporean art historian T.K. Sabapathy. He undertook two years of undergraduate studies in the history of art with Michael Sullivan at the then University of Malaya in Singapore. That was in 1958. Yet, the history of art was offered as electives, not a major course of study. Unfortunately, even this route of history of art education encountered difficulties in its continuation. There was a glimmer of hope as Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang, founded in 1970 with the School of Humanities, offered a Fine Art degree programme. There was significant study in the history of art throughout the four years of undergraduate work [3].

Academic institutions in Malaysia and Singapore today offer postgraduate programmes in the visual arts. For example, University Malaya conducts the Master of Art (Visual Arts), while Universiti Sains Malaysia offers masters and doctoral degree in Fine Arts. A more theoretical approach may be seen in Singapore, with La Salle College of the Arts offering the Master of Arts in Asian Art Histories programme. The past decade bore witness to foreign art institutions joining the local bandwagon to provide tertiary art education (studio based learning). An incident of note is the Sotheby's Institute of Art in Singapore. Since its inception in the city-state in 2007, the institution offered Master's in Art Business and Contemporary Art. Unfortunately, a local newspaper article dated July 15 2010, reported the cessation of the programmes from May 2011 [4].

The reason for highlighting tertiary education here is to re-emphasise the subject of writing of art history and contemporary art that was invoked at the beginning of this essay. One would be hard-pressed to obtain art historical writings in the formative years of Malaysia and Singapore. With the exception of individuals like T.K. Sabapathy, many of the artists multi-tasked, producing art as well as serving as curators and writers. This phenomenon is crucial to the understanding of art in these two countries. It was only much later that students who graduated with history of art studies from foreign universities returned.

The underlying message here is the fact that much of the early materials on art activities and documentation of Malaya/Malaysia and Singapore was written by artists trained in the studio practice rather than art history. It goes without saying that the writings by these individuals are very much defined by the methodologies and approaches of studio practice rather than those of art historiography. Yet, these documents serve as important material, and most often are the only materials available, for the study of art history of this region. It must be stressed that we are not reacting negatively to what was and has been projected and presented as art writing. Rather, due to the limited

literature, the daunting task faced by researchers is how to position and negotiate the aforesaid in the scholarly study of art in Malaysia and Singapore.

To take it one step further: how they can be juxtaposed to reflect the birth of modern art of these two countries in relation to the larger framework of Southeast Asian Art? The lack of art historical tradition as compared to the West creates a much-needed occidental reading of art with political, economical and social insinuations. Circumstantial and conditional milieus provoked and shaped the artistic landscape of modern art in Malaysia and Singapore, resulting in the appraisal of art based on different settings, time frames and platforms as compared to Paris or other parts of the world.

In view of such, the presentation of historical and contemporary exhibitions in national institutions, university museums and commercial galleries nowadays present opportunities for re-reading, re-contextualising, and re-framing the modern and contemporary art with informed readings relevant to current agendas. The influx of foreign-trained art practitioners co-mingled with local and regional-minded perspectives generates a varied interpolation, which is important for critical discourse and art writing.

Nonetheless, it should be stressed that another factor central to the current problematic is the lack of researchers and a concerted effort towards a systematic research on modern art in the region. There is indeed a wealth of materials available, which, if researched and gathered systematically, would provide significant entry points towards a vibrant scholarship. There are two major factors that we believe are hampering this progression: firstly, the reliance on individual researcher instead of a research team; and secondly, the tendency to limit field-research to modern/current geopolitical locations. Given the various limitations that include funding, expertise and audience, we believe that the field of Malaysian/Singaporean art history must be founded upon collaborative efforts through a formation of a team of researchers with a carefully designed research agenda. This will not only enable a more efficient deployment of individual expertise and scholarship but will also provide a sustained platform for dialogues and discourses among scholars and researchers.

It also important for this collective to not limit itself to art specialists but also to include those outside art-historical field who are actively engaged in Southeast Asian and Asian Studies. One must recall that the field of Southeast Asian studies originated in an interdisciplinary framework that gathered the works of archaeologists and naturalists, which subsequently gave rise to the social sciences in modern education as we know them now [5]. The lack of art historical tradition in this region is largely due to the failure of the (Eurocentric) tradition of art historiography to engage meaningfully with artistic traditions and languages such as those of this region that are not based on monuments[6]. Indeed, art scholarship of this region will benefit much from transdisciplinary efforts with visual anthropology and other social sciences that have developed research tools and methodologies for studying organic, socio-cultural and historical texts. It is foreseen that such collaboration shall engender much more vibrant art research activities. It will enable art historians and scholars to expand their points of reference to the larger geo-political and cultural framework that Malaysian/Singaporean art belongs to. It will instil the consciousness that Malaysia/Singapore do not exist in a vacuum but instead belong to the larger network of Southeast Asian and Asian histories, that the field research of the region's art historiography must include China and Japan as well as Europe.

1. See for instance the collection of documents and materials available at the National Library Board, Singapore

2. For further reading, refer to *The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia: Artists and Movements*, edited by Masahiro Ushiroshoji and Toshiko Rawanchaikul, Fukuoka: Fukuoka Art Museum et al, 1997.

3. Sabapathy, T.K., *Road To Nowhere: The quick rise and the long fall of art history in Singapore*, The Art Gallery at the National Institute of Education, Singapore, 2010, pp 4-31.

4. Lin, Wenjian, 'Sotheby's axes local degree'. The Straits Times, Singapore, Thursday, July 15, 2010, p.C5.

5. See, Cowan, C.D. and Wolters, O.W. (eds.), *Southeast Asian History and Historiography: Essays Presented to D. G. E. Hall*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976; Tarling, Nicholas (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia, 2 vols.*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992; Journal of Southeast Asian Studies 26(1), 1995. Special Issue on the State of Southeast Asian Studies.

6. Holt, Claire, *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change*, Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1967; Taylor, Nora, *Studies in Southeast Asian Art: Essays in Honor of Stanley J. O'Connor*, Ithaca: Cornell University, 2000.

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