



## Dr June Yap

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### Biography

Dr June Yap is Director of Curatorial, Programmes and Publications at the Singapore Art Museum, where she oversees content creation and museum programming.

Her prior roles include Guggenheim UBS MAP Curator (South and Southeast Asia), Deputy Director and Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, and curator at the Singapore Art Museum.

Amongst exhibitions she has curated are *No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia* as part of the Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative, *The Cloud of Unknowing* at the 54<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale with artist Ho Tzu Nyen, *The Future of Exhibition: It Feels Like I've Been Here Before* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (Singapore), *Paradise is Elsewhere* at Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (Germany), and media art exhibitions *Interrupt* and *Twilight Tomorrow* at the Singapore Art Museum. She is the author of *Retrospective: A Historiographical Aesthetic in Contemporary Singapore and Malaysia* (2016).

### Abstract

## The Festivity of Art

Festivals of art and culture are premised upon an interest in aesthetic and cultural creation, and a belief that the shared expression and experience of such creations have real value and benefit for audiences, creators, mediators, and even cities and communities.

The biennale of art has a relatively long history amongst presentations of such scale. Since the initiation of the Venice biennale - considered the oldest of biennales focusing on the arts, established in 1895 and which includes Art, Architecture, Dance, Cinema, Music, Theatre - numerous others have emerged, and the name, if not form, continues to proliferate. On the basis of the sum of such events and their measure of regularity of framework and compass - or at least expectations of these - it might reasonably be asked if there is a glut of biennale events. Yet, one might also argue that with the rise of the biennale, there is both greater enthusiasm for and understanding of art. That is, as opportunity to view and engage with such artistic fare increases, the range and volume of artistic production also rises. The question of whether such expansion and spread yields better expressions and offerings is open to debate. Coming from the visual arts field, the speaker's observations (as indicated) will largely focus on the history and developments of the biennale of art.

However, in considering the form of the festival, the presentation will explore the biennale within this larger framework of the festival, its aspects and lineage, to consider the opportunities for their continued relevance.

# THE FESTIVITY OF ART?

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Museums are commonly perceived as being the antithesis of a festival. While a festival conjures images of animated activity, bustling crowds, and moments of fascination, museums bring to mind the images of long, silent and hallowed halls. Museums are perceived as a meditative space where one is quietly awed and enlightened, in an experience that requires a measure of initiation and that is esteemed for its singularity. Yet contrary to these stereotypes, museums of today are far less contemplative and introspective. In fact, they can be as captivating and engaging as a festival.

It is because of this that a biennale of art – art which is stereotypically characterised to have a certain scale, level of communality and public engagement, and holds visual art as its primary focus – may be considered a good fit for category of the festival.

This essay will touch briefly on the history and form of the biennale of art in relation to the framework of the festival. It will consider the opportunities for the continued relevance of the biennale, and in turn, also the festival. It is in this context that the notion of the museum experience being one that provides introspection and contemplation will also be put up for scrutiny.

Let us consider some artworks by Singapore artists that were shown in biennales and similar exhibitions of scale. One example is the work of artist Ho Tzu Nyen, titled *The Cloud of Unknowing* (2011), which was exhibited at the Singapore Pavilion of the 54<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale International Art Exhibition. This involved an installation comprising video, sound, and timed smoke-machines. The work references a medieval 14<sup>th</sup> century mystical primer for aspiring monastics,

and an aesthetic exposition by French philosopher and art historian, Hubert Damisch, on the subject of the cloud in Eastern and Western art (*A Theory of / Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting*, 1972). As the filmic component of the artwork unfolded, the viewer was presented with scenes and tableaux featuring the cloud. These were also personified to uncanny effect with vignettes and pictorial compositions alluding to meditations and revelations found in both the ascetic and aesthetic experience – and one might say, in the festival and biennale. From this artwork, we turn to meditate on the origins of the biennale.

The Venice Biennale is considered – and prides itself as being – the oldest and longest running art biennale in the world. It was established in 1895 when the first International Art Exhibition was organised. The event expanded when music, cinema and theatre were added in the 1930s, architecture in 1980; and dance in 1999. It has been put forward that the Venice Biennale has since inspired some 150 biennale events in various countries.

But the Venice Biennale did not emerge in a vacuum. One might consider the World Expo as its antecedent. The first World Expo was held in 1851 in London and was intended to “promote the triumph of the British Empire.” At the time, it was French painting, tracing back to 17<sup>th</sup> century French Royal Academy of Fine Arts, that was considered aesthetically superior.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the World Expo launched a certain form and frame for a global

outlook that one will find familiar in the current biennale model: an exposition and positioning of global players. In the case of the biennale of art, it is the global artists, or global-artists-to-be, who vie for recognition.

In observing antecedents and histories, Chia Chuyia’s *Knitting the Future*, a piece that was commissioned for the Singapore Biennale in 2016, comes to mind. It was a performance that involved the use of leeks – a plant significant in the culinary and cultural consciousness of the Teochew people (Chinese immigrants to Malaysia from Chaozhou of eastern Guangdong) – and representative of the artist’s genealogy. As part of her performance, the artist spent hours knitting the leeks into a full-length garment in a performance intended as a comment on history, consumption, ritual and future – through the creation of a costume or armour to protect the body from the unknown.

Just as Chuyia attempted to use history to weave a form suited for the future, so the biennale, too, is shaped to serve and even anticipate a range of needs and conditions. Unlike the first World Expo, which was put forward as a celebration of Empire, the Venice Biennale had rather different beginnings. It was founded in 1895, when Venice was far from the bustling city with the global stature it enjoys today. The Biennale was originally intended as a regularised patriotic tribute to the wedding anniversary of Queen Margherita of Savoy, but city administrators capitalised on the occasion and expanded the event into a

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Chin Davidson, ‘The Global Art Fair and the Dialectical Image’, *Third Text*, Vol. 24, Issue 6, November, 2010, pp.719–734, p.723.



fair in order to build the tourist economy and to compete for artistic standing. Given the popularity of the Biennale today, it appears that they have succeeded.

The benefits that the Venice Biennale brought to the country is also enjoyed by other biennales around the world, as these events continue to drive traffic and interest in cities, giving artists and artworks on display both affirmation and recognition. Amongst such biennales, particularly those which go back in time, those that are of note include the Carnegie International that was launched in 1896, Sao Paulo Biennale in 1951, Documenta in 1955, the Sydney Biennale in 1973, and the Jakarta Biennale in 1974 (also known as Pameran Seni Lukis Indonesia, or the Indonesian Painting Exhibition).

These biennales have endured over the years, and for each the biennale in name remains the same, although its form has inevitably evolved over time.

A key aspect of a biennale is its repetition. This surfaces in Chuyia's work with repetitive acts and pattern-making as she knits. With its cyclical character, a biennale recalls the ritual—this is seen in its repeated invocation of name, and its rehearsed and recognisable form and format. One might also suggest that the biennale also takes on the guise of the carnival because of the festivity that it embodies and engenders, particularly during its opening. Although the carnival is generally associated with expression and festivity, and rituals are typically

associated with symbolic cultural and social performance, the two are not so different. That is, rituals can be high-spirited, and carnivals, too, can have symbolic and transformative purpose.<sup>2</sup>

The biennale embodies aspects of festivals, rituals and carnivals. Although it is ritualistic in cycle and custom, it also embraces the carnivalesque and the festivities in its form, engagement and experience. Like the festival, it is also a time of enjoyment and of a moment of feasting.

In 1997, Matthew Ngui was invited to participate in the Documenta exhibition at Kassel, Germany, which is held every five years. There, he presented a multipart work titled: *You can order and eat delicious Poh-piah*. Poh-piah is a spring roll comprising a thin flour wrap or crepe around fresh raw and blanched vegetables with a sweet and spicy sauce. Versions of this roll are found in Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Taiwan and Thailand. The components of Matthew's presentation included an installation of PVC pipes through which the artist communicated with audiences who wanted to order and eat the delicious poh-piah; a kitchen where the poh-piah was made; a film examining the assumptions of cultural identity; and an anamorphic chair which looked whole, but defied sitting. Between the visitors ordering their poh-piah via speaking into the PVC pipe, and Matthew responding with texts sent via a screen, a conversation on culture and cultural experience ensued. The physical mediation of the conversation between artist and viewer in distance

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<sup>2</sup> Jack Santino, 'The Carnavalesque and the Ritualesque', *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 124, No. 491 (Winter 2011), pp. 61-73

(PVC pipes) and technology (screen) was mirrored in the cultural exchange, where two strangers navigated a dialogue where they shared their backgrounds, opinions and tastes. In this, Matthew's approach to Documenta as platform was a fitting enactment of the cultural exchange that the exhibition presupposed and had provided a platform to test.

But beyond the act of eating, which Matthew's work employs to great advantage, to feast is also to partake with a certain gratification and delight—such as in the phrase “to feast one's eyes on something”. What would one wish to feast upon in a biennale or festival of cultural fare? Just as it was with the Expo in its early days, so one of the key features of the carnival is the presentation of the curious and different. In the context of the biennale and festival, we might read this as the unfamiliar and the untried. In fact, the carnival, and perhaps also the ritual, is sometimes produced as a liminal state: a place outside of place, a time outside of time; the world not as it is, but as it could be, where possibilities are broached, where the question, “what if” is tried.

Returning then to the subject on hand, and drawing from the fact that a ritual anticipates change, and that customs change over time, perhaps the relevance of the festival and biennale lies in this. Not in the havens of the familiar and known, but in the uncommon, the alternative, and the new. That is to say, beyond the offerings of new art and fresh ways of experiencing culture—which the framework for biennales and festivals allows for—it is also important to encourage the introspection and mediation that brings about a change or evolution as anticipated in the carnivalesque, custom and ritual. Thus, to find oneself starting out at a novel point or arriving at a revelatory or transformative conclusion would be reason for some festivity.