

Re-writing a National Art History:

National
Gallery
Singapore

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(036)

Today, the situations that national galleries — from Southeast Asia to Western Europe — find themselves in are not just complex, they may even seem contradictory and paradoxical. Whether founded recently or a century ago, the national gallery is under increasing pressure to confront not only the demands of globalisation but also the challenges of contemporaneity.

While many of today's dynamic museums are not necessarily positioned as national institutions, the problems faced by these national institutions can be a good starting point for thinking about the challenges facing all museums in the twenty-first century. Art museums today function as anchor points in the fast-changing cultural landscapes of our contemporary societies. In particular, the national gallery highlights the inherent tensions in mediating between the presentation of the art historical development of a country and the nationalist imperative to represent the nation through art. This is further complicated in Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore, where nationalism and nationhood have served as important themes in artistic modernism — at the same time, modern art of Singapore has served as a space to potentiate individual expression.

How can national galleries, which are tied to national histories, tell stories of art that are fully responsive to the changing contemporary conditions of art today? Do they transport audiences back in time or do they bring heritage forward to the present? How are the public functions of these institutions changing? If the audiences for today's museums are regional and international, how then do national galleries position themselves as connecting points for regional histories? What does it mean to go beyond a "national" art history? Does it mean the development of a regional, international, or global perspective? What does it mean to stake a regional perspective in contrast with a global one?

Re-writing art history at national and regional levels

Taking National Gallery Singapore — the country's newest museum which opened on 23

November 2015 — as a case in point, this article will propose how a "national" art history can be re-written and how the presentation of this re-writing of "national" art history is an important part of the global conversation of art today. It will outline how National Gallery Singapore addresses some of the key challenges that face many museums of the twenty-first century through its exhibitions and programmes. National Gallery Singapore aims to re-examine Singapore's art historical development, going beyond a "national" art history towards the creation of a platform for regional perspectives and global conversations.

National Gallery Singapore has been converted from two National Monuments, the former Supreme Court and City Hall, which were constructed in the 1920s and 1930s. The highlight of the museum will be its two permanent or long-term exhibitions: one that tells a history about Singapore art and the other about Southeast Asian art. Through these two galleries, National Gallery Singapore aims to examine the shared historical impulses in the region, highlighting the complexities and relationships between national and regional art histories. This is further complemented by projects which contextualise these developments within a wider global context.

These permanent exhibitions at National Gallery Singapore are something new for a Singapore-based art museum. In addition to bringing a sense of history to the art scene, which has been lacking, what they also offer is an opportunity for a dialectical approach towards curating art history. Over time, the propositions set forward by the earlier exhibitions will change, as we will respond to the critical discussions within the institution and, very importantly, to discussions that the institution has with other art historians, critics, curators and artists. The permanent exhibitions of National Gallery Singapore also set a new precedent for national museums in Southeast Asia, given the scale and depth of these exhibitions. Each of these exhibitions will feature around 400 works, dating from the nineteenth century to the present and will be the most extensive surveys of the art of Singapore and the region to date.

Questions of identity and belonging

The inaugural exhibition in the Singapore Gallery begins with two questions: “What is your name?” and “Where do you come from?” These questions, posed in Malay, are found in a painting by Chua Mia Tee (b. 1937), entitled *National Language Class*, painted in the year 1959. Chua was part of a generation of young artists who were actively involved in the independence struggles of the 1950s. In 1959, the year when the painting was completed, Singapore had gained internal self-government. Malay would be declared as the national language to unite the different ethnic groups in Singapore through a common Malayan identity.

Siapa Nama Kamu? – which is Malay for “What is your name?” and which is the title of the inaugural exhibition in the Singapore Gallery, actively courts an analysis of how art and identity operate through inclusions and exclusions, representation and de-representation, and the accumulation of art historical memory in museums. As it operates within this exhibition it is an intimation into what is shown, how it is shown, but also maybe what is not shown. *Siapa Nama Kamu?* is then a question and an invitation. In the painting, a group of Chinese students are seated around a table, learning the national language from a Malay teacher. Behind him hangs a blackboard, on which the two basic questions about identity and belonging were written. Like the title, the exhibition is a query, one into the art history of Singapore. The exhibition therefore foregrounds the consideration of the parameters of personal and national identity in art, and, reflexively, the writing of a national art history in a country barely fifty years old. While Singapore has been an independent nation for fifty years, she has been a site for the production of art for much longer. And the history of modern art in Singapore that *Siapa Nama Kamu?* presents begins in the nineteenth century and continues till today. It is interesting to note that Chua was a member of the Equator Art Society, whose contributions to Singapore’s art history have never been fully acknowledged because of its affiliations to left-leaning political groups.

The aim of *Siapa Nama Kamu?* is to create a discussion about art in Singapore. How it has changed, who are its artists, and where do we even begin. How do we understand its art in a larger regional context? And how can we move beyond a national narrative for art history? The answer is not simply to move toward a regional perspective. For what does a regional perspective mean? If trying to define Singapore as a nation is complicated, then trying to define Singapore as part of a region called Southeast Asia is no less complex. Southeast Asian art history is a relatively new field and has evolved considerably within a generation. Art historians have previously focused their attentions on individual countries within the region rather than Southeast Asia as a whole. Ten years ago, scholars would have argued for the recognition of the “other modernities” that contrast hegemonic notions of Western modernity. Today, however, researchers and practitioners have begun to move beyond the opposition of East versus West and engage in an inter-regional conversation.

Regions as interpenetrated systems

Of course, Sociology and Cultural Studies are other fields that have also tackled the question of Southeast Asia as a region, and it is important to learn from those fields. Let me, for instance, cite two examples from the beginning of the turn of the twenty-first century, that show a discursive that has moved away from the binary opposition of East versus West to an emphasis on inter-regional conversations. Sociologist Ananda Rajah (1953–2007), in 1999, wrote the essay “Southeast Asia: Comparatist Errors and the Construction of a Region”, where he argued that the problem is “not whether we can or cannot identify Southeast Asia as a region”; the problem is that “we lack a conceptual framework, if not a theory, of *regions as human constructs*”. The “errors” of Rajah’s essay title have to do with how “comparative methods imply systems of classification” — to think of Southeast Asia as a region is necessarily to think of other regions with which to compare it to — and yet, in the case of Southeast Asia in particular but also more generally, the category of “region” is,

in the first place, not adequately developed. His point is that we should not focus on the question of a Southeast Asian regional *identity* in comparison with other identities; rather, we should be looking at *interactions* of “inter-subjectivity over geographical space and time”. As Rajah reminds us, such interactions were not and are not self-contained — regions are interpenetrated systems.

In 2000, the journal *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* was founded by National University of Singapore sociologist Chua Beng Huat (b. 1946) and Taiwanese cultural studies scholar Chen Kuan-Hsing (b. 1957). They deliberately used the term “inter-Asia” rather than “intra-Asian” for the title of their project. The term “intra-Asian” would have arguably put the emphasis on articulating what an Asian regional identity might be, whereas “inter-Asia” redirects our attentions to the interactions of an interpenetrated system. Rajah, Chua and Chen are all in a sense arguing that we will not uncover some underlying essential identity of Southeast Asia. What we are doing is constructing the region, constructing its complex and layered meanings, as we look at the historical inter-connections. And this is what we hope to do with our other permanent exhibition — of art from Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asia between declarations and dreams

The aim of the Southeast Asia Gallery and its inaugural exhibition *Between Declarations and Dreams* is to provide a regional narrative of modern art in Southeast Asia from the nineteenth century to the present, highlighting its richness and diversity through shared historical experiences, as well as the key impulses to art making across the region. For the first time, there will be a long term and comprehensive exhibition devoted to the historical development of art in Southeast Asia from a regional perspective. While the current understanding of Southeast Asia is through the economic-political configuration of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the 10 countries that it comprises, it is also acknowledged that this approach encompasses the grouping’s complexities

and limitations. Therefore, it is also the aim of *Between Declarations and Dreams* to complicate this understanding of the region and of regionality, to address how we understand “Southeast Asia” as a geopolitical as well as an imaginary entity – and by consequence – the art produced within these contexts.

The title of the exhibition, *Between Declarations and Dreams* may be credited to one of Indonesia’s most cherished poets, Chairil Anwar (1922–1949). In 1948, Anwar wrote *Krawang-Bekasi*, a poem that lamented a massacre of West Javan villagers by Dutch colonial forces, giving vent to the desire for national independence at the time. This line may also be said to encapsulate the experiences of many artists in the region, caught as they are between declarations and dreams, the personal and the political. The exhibition unfolds over four main sections which highlight the main impulses to art-making in four imbricating time periods:

“Authority and Anxiety”, which examines the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, begins by exploring the role of art production in asserting cultural authority in a period of immense social instability brought about by the widespread colonisation of the region in the nineteenth century. The section includes works by artists such as Raden Saleh Sjarif Boestaman (1811–1880) from Indonesia, and Juan Luna y Novicio (1857–1899) and Félix Resurrección Hidalgo y Padilla (1855–1913) from the Philippines. “Imagining Country and Self”, which examines the 1900s to 1940s, then highlights the period when art academies as well as formal and informal structures like exhibition societies and spaces were first established in the region, giving rise to the new modern identity of “professional artists.” Growing interest in synthesising the new mode of representation with local aesthetics can be found across the region at this time, which also marked the beginnings of a conscious reaction against academic training and practice.

“Manifesting the Nation”, which examines the 1950s to 1970s, is organised along the different perspectives on the art produced from the decades of decolonisation and nation-

building to the Cold War era. Artists were often pulled by the two forces – one responding to the needs of the new nation, and the other to the increasingly shared global artistic trends. The final section, “Re:Defining Art”, which looks at art in the post-1970s period, examines works that mark a turn against conventional and academic definitions of “art,” as well as new social commitments that challenged traditional gender, class, identity, and institutional borders.

Stories that will unfold and evolve

Launching a national gallery in the twenty-first century means confronting many challenges and opportunities. At the beginning of the article, I posed a series of questions: How can national galleries, which are tied to national histories, tell stories of art that are fully responsive to the changing contemporary conditions of art today? What does it mean to go beyond a “national” art history? How should one re-evaluate the role of national galleries, and how might they re-invent themselves? It is clear that the full answers cannot be provided here. Rather, from the perspective of the National Gallery Singapore, the answers will

come, not only in how we make our exhibitions and conduct our programmes, but in how we look back and reflect on what we have done, and how we evolve and innovate.

Singapore now has a national gallery with two major permanent exhibitions — one telling a story of Singapore art, and the other telling a story of art from the region, from Southeast Asia. The term “permanent” is not quite right. And the terms “nation” and “region” are also not straightforward. What is exciting about these permanent exhibitions is not only that they tell fascinating stories that complicate our understanding of what it means for Singapore to be a nation, and what it means for Southeast Asia to be a region — but that these stories will unfold and evolve. As these stories evolve, we hope that National Gallery Singapore will also create a shared sense of continuity. As humans, we do not just tell stories, we tell stories in series, changing them along the way. Storytelling is serial by nature. The stories we tell about art, about how art tells a story of a nation, a place, region, or a corner of the world — what these stories do, above all, is not to answer our questions, but keep the questions open, and keep them interesting.