

The Art of an ASEAN Consciousness

Dr June Yap

Director (Curatorial, Programmes and Publications),
Singapore Art Museum

What constitutes a regionalist reading of Southeast Asian art?

Today, the act of grouping art and aesthetic practice under a regional rubric appears reasonable, even intuitive. Yet, if asked to sum up Southeast Asian art in a word or a few, an answer might not be as swift and forthcoming.

The present-day configuration of the region of Southeast Asia that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) represents arose from a specific compact from 1967, forged in Bang Saen, Thailand, even though regional reference has had a longer history in various forms. Contributing to and cementing this alliance were the region's colonial pasts and the effects of the Cold War in the region whence its nations emerged. The goal in the establishment of ASEAN was regional cooperation and stability, predominantly in the spheres of economy and security. That said, homogeneity or uniformity was, and is not the intent. Indeed, one would likely say that the differences and variances from nation to nation are, in fact, productive and generative.

Nevertheless, the formulation of the region, beyond purposes of safety and stability, has deeper roots, such as in shared and related historical and cultural heritage, as well as languages and linguistic foundations. In the course of trade and exchange over centuries, language, custom and belief have been shaped and transformed, through influence, appropriation, adaptation and synthesis. It is such affinities — with the great traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam setting the stage — that are often invoked when it comes to cultural similitude and relation within the region.

The subject of my present reflections upon the region and its history is, however, quite specific

– the developments of regional consciousness in the visual arts. Although culture may not have been the primary concern in the constitution of ASEAN, the impact of regionalism on the visual arts may be observed even in its early days, with exhibitions organised under the auspices of ASEAN from the time of its formation: the first in Jakarta in 1968, continuing in Singapore in 1972, in Kuala Lumpur in 1974, and so on. The capacity to organise cultural activity was further enhanced with the setting up of the ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information (ASEAN-COCI) in 1978. But it was not till a decade later that formal discussions focused on the confluence of region and aesthetics.

The “First ASEAN Symposium on Aesthetics” was held in Kuala Lumpur in October 1989 with the theme “Tradition: The Source of Inspiration”. Yet, the discussion at this symposium was not focused on traditional aesthetics *per se*. By the late 1980s, the developments of art in Southeast Asia had moved into what might be deemed early contemporary and contemporary art practices, characterised by a pluralism of forms and experimentation that had extended from the practices and influences of modernism and international movements. Rather than foreground, traditional aesthetics served as “cultural backbone” and was the source of indigenous practice and history — with this demarcation of “folk art”, as noted at the symposium, was a result of colonisation, in the introduction of a stratification based on Western aesthetic canons and interpretation. It was at the second symposium in 1993 that a regionalist thinking was explicitly broached. Even so, it was less an aesthetic than a consciousness that was put forward.

Despite the optimistic theme “Towards the Shaping of an ASEAN Visual Arts”, as Filipino artist, educator and academic Brenda V. Fajardo

commented at the second Symposium, the theme of the symposium was neither a statement nor an espousal of a singular and distinct ASEAN visual identity, even as traditional aesthetics formed the basis of connection between nations and inspired contemporary expression. Instead, it was to support “an attitude or a move towards an evolving ASEAN consciousness”, akin to a national consciousness.

Such a consciousness, one might say, reflects the nature of ASEAN. After all, sovereignty and affinity are at the heart of ASEAN, a dyadic principle that is the origins and narrative of ASEAN, and which may be observed as the founding premise of projects and programmes. That is, even as each nation retains (and promotes) its specificity of cultural forms and practices, as well as narrates the historical developments of its aesthetic directions, links and relations are drawn. As art historian T.K. Sabapathy described in the curatorial introduction to such a regional exhibition specifically produced under the aegis of ASEAN, speaking on the “twin notions of connectedness and continuity”: it is “axiomatic” (Sabapathy 1993). In fact, the curatorial basis of this exhibition was a purposeful call to collective reassembling and mutual support.

This exhibition was *36 Ideas: Contemporary Southeast Asian Art*, a project of the ASEAN-COCI that was organised by the Singapore Art Museum (SAM). Conceived in 1999 with curatorial representation from all ten member nations, *36 Ideas* took as its starting point the Asian economic crisis of 1997 that was triggered by a run on the Thai Baht, which then spread to currencies in the region, and its wake of political and social effects. In the curatorial framing, reference was made to a song, *Diobok-Obok*, that had been popular in Java, Indonesia. For the curators, the lyrics which described the water of an aquarium being stirred,

resonated with the situation and conditions experienced in Southeast Asia, and served to unpack the region’s art. The curators had met in Singapore for a three-day forum on contemporary art practices and discourses, with this discussion — unsurprisingly — “surfacing much that are similar and yet disparate in the artistic developments and preoccupations in Southeast Asia”, according to then Director of SAM, Kwok Kian Chow, in his foreword (Singapore Art Museum 2002, 10).

Whereas the artworks — as they often do — presented the specificities of country and condition, the register of regionalism was most evident in the exhibition’s expositions. In his essay *Homespun, Worldwide: Colonialism as Critical Inheritance*, art historian and academic Patrick D. Flores, who represented the Philippines in the curatorial team of *36 Ideas*, made a crucial observation extending from the subject of colonial pasts — one of the oft-cited threads that binds the region together — the colonial inheritance of aesthetic education.

Noting that the institution of art was a “vital vein of the civilising mission” (Singapore Art Museum 2002, 17) of colonial rule (Spanish, British, Portuguese, Dutch and French), for Flores, whilst aesthetic inheritance occurred in influences of form, method and appreciation, aesthetic education also resulted in “re-conversion”, which he described as the “creative and critical response that is informed by reflexive tactics to represent even that which is repressed.” This point was further demonstrated in the accompanying essay by artist Niranjan Rajah who represented Malaysia in the curatorial team. In his essay *Towards a Southeast Asian Paradigm: From Distinct National Modernisms To An Integrated Regional Arena for Art*, Niranjan observed that the colonial influence on aesthetics also served the

nationalist struggle contributing — inadvertently — to colonial resistance, citing Raden Salleh's *The Arrest of Prince Diponegoro* (1858) and Juan Luna's *Spollarium* (1884).

Such exegeses citing connectedness and continuity in content, concerns and developments, remain essential to regionalist readings and exchanges today. Indeed, the Singapore Art Museum's collection of contemporary artworks from the region is developed in recognition and appreciation of the importance and necessity of such intersections. But what these present reflections also bring to the fore is another aspect that is as significant for the regionalist reading as connectedness and continuity. This is the aspect of relation which the emblem of ASEAN represents.

The principle of ASEAN is illustrated in its logo of sheaves of rice stalks — a sheave for each of the member countries — standing together. In the semiotic interpretation, the immediate reading would focus on the sheaves as constituting the same material and stock, even as there are subtle differences among sheaves. Another vital detail in this symbolic designation is, of course, their standing or being bound together. It is this latter feature that the aspect of relation elaborates. Whereas the historical account is one of political and economic exigency, and the cultural account of long traditions underscores exchange and influence, the crux of an aesthetic consciousness of regionalism, as invoked by Fajardo in 1993, is found in relation. Or to put it in another way, of a certain agency and collegiality. If tradition forms the cultural backbone, relation may then be read as the ligaments that, whilst not as structural, performs an indispensable connective role. It is, after all, such connections that had been forged in the discussions of the early 1990s.

To trace the beginnings of such an ASEAN consciousness, it would be useful to recall a lesser-cited historical event involving art historians and cultural practitioners: a meeting in November 1992 at Asia Society in New York City. Convened by Vishakha Desai, appointed Director of Asia Society's galleries in 1990, the three-day event gave rise to both initial and early meetings of figures now familiar in the visual art scene and art history — T.K. Sabapathy of Singapore, John Clark from Australia, Zainol Abidin Ahmad Shariff (also known as Zabas) of Malaysia, Jim Supangkat of Indonesia, Eric Torres of the Philippines, and Apinan Poshyananda of Thailand. As reported in the following year by New York Times art critic, Holland Cotter, Ms Desai's determination to present contemporary art of Asia in New York was "close to revolutionary". The convention in New York was not the first of such meetings though, for Sabapathy, it was bookended by other regional gatherings such as the Salon Malaysia of 1991 and the first Asia Pacific Triennial in Queensland in 1993 helmed by Caroline Turner. Further meetings of the time among these and other influential figures such as Ismail Zain, Redza Piyadasa and Kristen Jit of Malaysia, Rod Paras-Perez and Alice Guillermo of the Philippines, Nguyen Quan of Vietnam, Somporn Rodboon of Thailand, and Ushiroshoji Masahiro of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, may be seen as significant to the formulation of a regional consciousness at the time via conversations and congregation. In fact, one might say that, like the aquarium being stirred in Diobok-Obok, these meetings and encounters gave rise to consequential articulations of region and regionalism, the ripples of their effects still felt today.

To the question of what constitutes a regionalist reading of Southeast Asian art, the answer remains complex, defying summing up and simple reductiveness (for good reason), in that,

what defines the region is not merely the chronicle of shared history, the effects of exchange and influence, but also a sociability that arises from encounter and event, and a willingness to seek and advance the confluences between nations, places and peoples. Although the reflections here have largely been on the past, one can easily show that the same goes for the present; that the sociability observed in the present mirrors the flows and influences invoked in the historical analysis and relation.

Today, artists, curators, historians, academics, and cultural workers across the region continue to cultivate meaningful and deep relations that connect and shape the region and its art. These processes of interaction, mutual observation and reflection is as much at an intellectual level as it is at a cultural level, involving association, organisation, interlocution and even production.

I count amongst these my colleagues helming museums, galleries, organisations, departments and programmes, who are actively initiating and renewing connections and networks in the region.

As for positing a regional aesthetic or consciousness, just as our regional identities are shaped and defined by these processes of encounter and exchange, one might say that such exists, though not in a single form or formula. Rather, it is embedded in the art, and found circulating in conversation and discourse within groups and among individuals, in both formal and casual settings, and, crucially, arising not merely from necessity and need, but with a spontaneity that is fundamental to, and is the essence of, the creative and critical response that is contemporary art, of expression itself. □

Bibliography

ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information (COCI). *The Aesthetics of ASEAN Expressions: A Documentation of the Second ASEAN Workshop, Exhibition and Symposium on Aesthetics (Manilla, Philippines, 8-21 October 1993)*. Manila: ASEAN-COCI, 1994.

Cotter, Holland. "ART: A 'Contemporary Being' at the Asia Society." *The New York Times*, September 26, 1993.

Sabapathy, T. K. "Thoughts on an International Exhibition on Southeast Asian Contemporary Art." *36 Ideas from Asia: Contemporary South-east Asian Art*. Singapore Art Museum & Southeast Asian Nations Committee on Culture and Information, 1993.

Singapore Art Museum. *36 Ideas from Asia: Contemporary South-east Asian Art*. Singapore: Singapore Art Museum & Southeast Asian Nations, Committee on Culture and Information (ASEAN-COCI), 2002.