

FIELD NOTES ⁰³

フィールドノート | 搜記 | Mga Tala ng Paglalakbay | 현장 기록 | क्षेत्र पत्रि | سرشون ذلیف



MAPPING ASIA

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Note from the Editors

'Change, or impending change, can often inspire the creation of myth, for it both threatens and promises. It threatens security of the established, while providing hope to the disestablished....'

– Michael Aung-thwin¹

The title of the third issue of *Field Notes*, Mapping Asia, should be enough to induce an immediate state of dizziness at the sheer impossibility of such a proposition. Or perhaps generate a certain amount of curiosity at what AAA's map of Asia looks like. How we define 'Asia' at Asia Art Archive is the question we are most frequently asked. And out of the three A's that make up our name, 'Asia' is the one we most consistently debate, deliberate, and tussle with.

We realize that there is something about the positioning of Asia, Art, and Archive next to each other that presupposes a mapping process. Acknowledging both the value and limitations of the map as a tool, AAA has attempted to trace the phenomena, practices, discourses, and developments in contemporary art in Asia by building up a collection based on breadth (via a widespread network of researchers, advisors, collaborators, and friends) and depth (through focused thematic archival projects). As such, we are practicing a mapping of Asia that no longer depends on the map as artifact, but as something that lives and continues to unfold. And while we believe that AAA's collection allows for a comparison of cross-regional histories and ideological networks, we must stress the importance of reading its material in conjunction with other mapping and archival initiatives.

In our most field note-like issue to date, we interweave artist work, an email exchange, literary extracts, a film plot, exhibition reviews, newspaper clippings, comics, and

archival photos. If we were to list some of the entry points for the selections they would include (in no particular order) Guangzhou as site, speculative geographies, Hong Kong, seaborne histories, territory and myth, island disputes, language, migration, and sites of knowledge production and distribution. The journal is in no way intended to survey or comprehensively cover any of these, but to point to the entanglements between them, and provide an additional space, alongside our other projects, to construct reference points and connections across time, sites and geographies. We share with you some of the enquiries, threads, and (to borrow a geological term) hot spots that are currently shaping our notion of Asia. Echoing MAP Office's *Atlas of Asia Art Archive*, which is imagined as an archipelagic configuration, like a series of islands that are independent, yet intricately connected by their relationship to one another and the ocean, we invite you to ignore the pagination and draw your own connections as you navigate the journal.=

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'We are imagining a space in which the objects of identification can be multiplied and alternative frames of reference constructed so that societies in Asia (and those situated in the 'Global South') may also become each other's points of reference...to provide alternative horizons and perspectives from those well-travelled.'

– Chen Kuan-hsing²

It is believed that the term 'Asia' was adopted in Asia in the sixteenth century after being introduced by Jesuit missionaries under Matteo Ricci. However, as discussed in the introduction to *Pan-Asianism; A Documentary History*³, it was not until the eighteenth century that Asia

ceased to represent something beyond a technical term used by cartographers. In reaction to the threat of Western colonialism, 'Asia' became a distinctive geopolitical space with common histories, diplomatic ties, trading links, religions, and now, a shared destiny.

While the justifications for, and definitions of an Asian solidarity throughout the first half of the 20th century were numerous, and often highly contentious considering Japan's role as a major exponent in its legitimization leading up to World War II, the variations of a 'Pan-Asianism' discourse created the space from which concepts of the nation and nationalism, the region and regionalism were formed and still live with us today. At the same time this anti-colonial movement forged what might otherwise have been unlikely transnational alliances from Turkey to India to Japan.

In this issue of *Field Notes*, we trace what might be read as a contemporary lineage to these earlier debates between intellectuals and revolutionaries in the region with a recent email conversation between artist and *Third Text*⁴ founder, Rasheed Araeen and Professor Chen Kuan-hsing inspired by Chen's book, *Asia as Method*⁵. In their exchange they move away from the idea of Asia as a site 'in opposition to,' and instead deliberate Asia and art as 'active'; as possibilities upon and through which a process of de-colonialisation and deimperialisation can take place. We simultaneously draw a thread to the work of Bagyi Aung Soe (1924-1990), who upon returning to Burma from a year of study at the university in Santiniketan in 1951, created an artistic language that was able to challenge accepted notions of modernity as shaped by European perspectives. Bagyi Aung Soe's work was clearly influenced by the school's curriculum which combined traditional Indian theories of aesthetics, universalist ideals and pan-asianist

theories. Concerned with the linguistic rationale and the communicative functions of art, Aung Soe's work was able to transcend the simplistic binaries of tradition and modern, and East and West, by drawing on multiple reference points. And yet for this very reason, his work was labelled psychotic or mad painting by the art community and the very people who had supported his scholarship and passage to Santiniketan in the first place.

*

*'My memory is again in the way of your history...
Your memory keeps getting in the way of my history...'*

– Agha Shahid Ali⁶

'You can see the nice view of China from here,' is a travel photo taken in the late 1970s, 20 years before the handover of British-colonial Hong Kong to Mainland China. The sign in the photo, hand-painted in English and Japanese text, leads one's gaze to an underdeveloped piece of land that is now the city of Shenzhen with a sprawling and rapidly growing population of over 10 million. As we look back, the photo stands in stark contrast to the image of geo-economic power that we have of China today. On the one hand it calls us to watch this rapid transformation unfold from the birth place of Deng Xiaoping's open door reforms, and on the other, it reminds us that we can do so but only from a distance. Looking across the border, 16 years after the handover, the significance of the sign as a delineation between two distinct territories remains – Mainland Chinese require a special visa to travel to Hong Kong, while a child born from Mainland and Hong Kong parents has right of abode the Mainland parent does not, and there is a growing xenophobia of Mainland Chinese, who are often referred to as 'locusts' in the city.



Last year, hundreds of thousands gathered outside government quarters to protest the introduction of a mandatory national curriculum aimed at developing a sense of national identity and pride. Denounced as a brain-washing exercise by swathes of the public in Hong Kong because of its advocacy of China's one party system, it invoked widespread demonstration, leading to its eventual withdrawal. Images of the protests echoed the since forgotten 1967 riots in the city, a leftist uprising against the colonial government originating from a minor labour dispute. Who gets to write the history of Hong Kong, and what that history will look like is a debate that will continue to play out in multiple arenas, especially as Hong Kong deliberates its course to universal suffrage as laid out in the Basic Law. At the same time, we might ask, what is it that Hong Kong can offer, with its recent colonial history, Chinese immigrant population, and status as one country/two systems as a site for reconsidering alternative constructs around the nation? And what do these major historical ruptures and shifts in alliance do to the distortion of history and memory?

*

'All places are misplaces, and all misplaces are misreadings,'

'The prerequisite for the setting of boundaries on maps is possession of the power to create fiction.'

– Dung Kai Cheung⁷

Maps and cartography have long been imperative to understanding how civilisations have navigated, rationalised, conquered, and shaped territories. Through a mimicry of objective reality, maps visualise nations and spatial limitations and create illusions of finitude. They

erase the layering of movements, migrations over time, and the entanglements of connected histories and produce in their place identities, traditions, and models of existences based primarily on invented boundaries. The practice of mapping is one that is fundamentally flawed, in that it is inevitably skewed by the agenda of the map-maker and excludes everything that falls outside its borders. What forms of objective knowledge are ruptured when new islands suddenly make themselves apparent in the world?

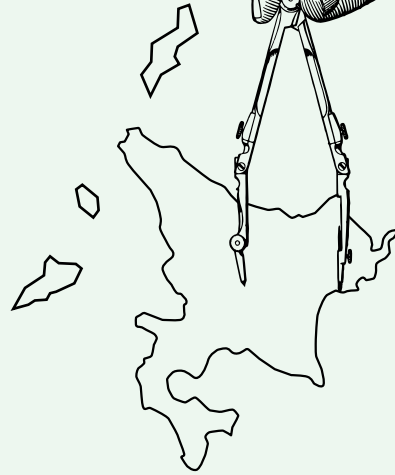
Returning to our image of Shenzhen; this city's transformation from a fishing village to a metropolis with one of China's largest ports in just three decades has become synonymous with China's economic miracle. Remarkably familiar from a 21st century vantage point is Guangzhou in the 19th century, home to a mixture of traders and travelers, a world where long distance travel was commonplace. It is representative of other geographical nodes around the globe that because of their location and relationship to, for example, the sea, have become sites for convergence and crossover, migration, hybrid language, shared histories, and myths. It is these sites of layered pasts, these rich culturally-entangled histories that we are particularly interested in activating, especially with regards to enriching our often binary understanding of current global geo-political relations and economies. We point to these layers through the site of Guangzhou at three distinct points in time; the Ming dynasty voyages of Zheng He; the 19th century opium trade, and today's China – Africa trade axis.

We are interested in exploring the necessity of myth and liminal spaces in constructing notions of territory and history. As such, we are pleased to include *W for Weretiger*, the first entry in Ho Tzu Nyen's *Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia*, a project being developed as part of his residency at AAA investigating the formation of the notion of South East Asia. The dictionary echoes the necessary negotiation between inherited maps, borders, and systems (nation, history, politics, economy) and

terrain that is often slippery and unstable (myth, histories, memory, fiction) yet an essential component for considering the formation of territory. By continuously opening up our mapping process at Asia Art Archive to interventions, enquiries, and debate we hope to continuously expand and extend the notion of Asia. By activating less visible and/or dormant sites of knowledge and offering new reference points, how might we positively de-stabilise the often debilitating notions of territories that we have inherited?

- 11 Aung-Thwin, Michael A., *Myth and History in the Historiography of Early Burma: Paradigms, Primary Sources and Prejudices*, Leiden, BRILL, 2001.
- 21 Chen, Kuan-hsing, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*, London & Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.
- 31 Saaler, Sven and Christopher W.A. Szpilma, *Pan-Asianism: A Documentary History, 1850–1920*, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011.
- 41 *Third Text: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Art & Culture*, published by Kala Press, London until 2011 thereafter published by Taylor & Francis, London.
- 51 Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*
- 61 Shahid Ali, Agha, Farewell, *The Country Without a Post Office: Poems 1991-1995*, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- 71 Cheung, Dung Kai, *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City*, Dung Kai Cheung, Anders Hansson, and Bonnie S McDougall, trans. New York, Columbia University Press, 2012.

Atlas of Asia Art Archive



Asia ... [MAP Office] is a point of arrival and departure. [D10] Numbers of buildings, starting from a checkpoint, are already welcoming visitors who want to apply for a passport and become its **residents**. [H06] Voices of ‘**Yes**, sir! **No**, sir!’ are heard. [J03] Those **generic places** with no defining characteristics apart from the smoothness of the necessary zones of frozen temporality are the antechambers of anticipation of something, somewhere, about to happen. [I04] From the surface, all **Asian metropolises** have a lot in common, beginning with the compulsive use of media devices, LED screens, and lights transforming the skyline into a luminescent body. [G01] Understanding the complexity of a city/territory is a difficult task, where one **can lose him/herself** within his/her own search and wherein the subject of this exploration can eventually also disappear. [C12]

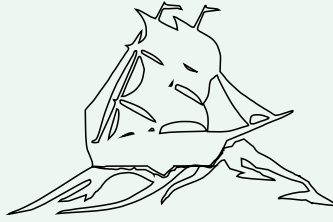
Our **naked** body is our first territory. [E06] A personal atlas of the world includes one’s individual interpretation and experience. [A04] New organisations and new horizons of a **personal universe** are consigned to miniature representation. [E09] Finalised to the last pixel, the image idealises a territory close to **perfection**. [A08] Bringing attention to the smallest hidden details, it distorts a simple **documentary** into a complex **fiction**. [D02] A personal empire starts from the strength of one’s **imagination** and materialises in a symbolic dimension. [H09] Tools are transformed into toys and routine into ritual. [I05] The **transposition** requires movement from one dimension to another and is the subject of many interpretations and fantasies of the **cartographer/ sculptor**. [G09] How to **collect**? What to collect? [B06] **Blind** people are also travelling. [C07] Photography, found objects, encounters, and collections of any kind are the **materialisation** of a voyage. [C03] Adding one element after another, documentation and interpretation are achieved through the construction of a visual and performative **atlas** of a society in its complex sociologic, political, and psychological definitions. [K06]



Imposing their rules on the difficult **sea**, the Moro **pirates** have threatened trade and colonial aspirations. [C13] Forced and unfair trade has been commonly practiced over the last centuries, leading to the establishment of **colonies**. [J05] The **trade** of primary resources, such as cotton, wood, silk, tea, porcelain, opium, and slaves charted new maritime routes between different continents. [J04] For centuries the Southern hemisphere was seldom sailed due to a lack of maps and resulting **navigation challenges**. [F06] The North Pacific Ocean

corridor is populated by vessels linking one side to the other. [J01] Beginning a long sea journey driven by anxiety requires a mixture of both courage and desperation. [D03] Maps are the primary

instruments used to main managing charts geographies are defined the world around us and **Americanisation** from populations with the – mass production, mass



navigate oceans as well as the for **business**. [J02] **Dynamic** as the way we endlessly **evaluate** continuously readjust to it. [F09] the 60s shaped young Asia Pacific development of a mass society consumption, mass media – a

new pattern for a traditional society left alone to reconstruct a **memory** of the present into **nostalgic** imagery. [D09] Abandoned detritus shaped by years of war resembles pre-historic fossils populating the no-man's land. [L02] War memorials often fail to carry the messages they are made for. [K05] The remains of America's secret 2,756,941- ton bombing campaign during the Vietnam War, **bomb craters** are now peacefully scattered in the rubber plantations, left unnoticed to the foreign eye but still very present in local residents' memories. [K08] In reminiscence of forgotten wars, the villagers and the soldiers engage in violent occupations. [D11] **Marking** a territory often means taking possession of it. [H07] The **partition** is the simplest approach to marking and emphasising differences. [L08] **State symbols** along the route include colour codes related to different political colours. [J07]

It is true that territories like mountains, oceans, jungles, and rivers are more populated by **strange creatures** than by humans. [C11] **Fisherman** without sea will meet them on the new land, wandering around in a mirror- like relationship. [K03] Myths, legends, fictions, stories, histories...as many **narratives** as possible are required to define the contours of a territory. [C08] Geography and epistemology **on the road** as territories on the move are amongst the best training. [B03] **Everyday routes**, like going from home to work, can take on various characteristics depending where one lives. [L04] Following an **oil pipeline**, one eventually reaches its end and can reconstruct the world from a new perspective. [A06] The variety of **mountainous landscapes** has given birth to a



multiplicity of languages and identities. [C10] **Mountains** are a location for finding deeper meaning in human life; they are often sacred, full of superstitious beliefs from various religions. [D07] The planned **flood**, submerging the entire valley, will gradually move the boat to the top of a mountain, where it will remain after the water is gone. [H05] **Tsunamis, earthquakes, and typhoons** are frequent in Asia. They are tragedies that deeply affect the population, the ecology, and the economy of a region. [I03] Along the riverbanks, forced migrants became the subject of this tragedy brushed by the artist.

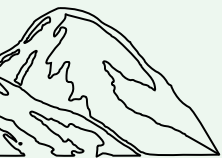
[D05] **Water** can be contained in numerous ways. [F02] A **rainbow** may be seen later, when the sun dares to appear. [E01]

30 metres deep **under water**, a collection of structures forms well-organised geometries with parallel lines, provoking the scientific world to question whether this is the ruin of an ancient **Asia Pacific super-civilisation** older than Egypt. [D06] The **legend** of a giant mermaid measuring 165 metres from head to tail landing on the beach was the foundation myth for constructing the Sea Goddess Palace Temple. [C09]

Only its traces remain in the **memories** of its inhabitants as part of an artistic construction. [B10] Staring at the water flowing in a river makes people **nostalgic**. [E08] Here, villagers live their lives following the rhythm of the **seasons**. [A07] Their **friendship** remains a key to its fundamental value. [H03] The idea of a village is defined by the reality of a **community** as a form of social organisation. [A03] Clothes, books, kitchen tools, and toys are arranged with the same compact rational organisation as when in **transit**. [B01] **Chinatown** is a frozen territory. [B09] Day after day, month after month for several years, the artist's **blog** has provided a significant picture of a society at a given moment. [F01] Deprived from its life, the house is a source of sadness but also the occasion of reconstructed **memories**. [I06] A house is the **body** occupied by our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual selves. [G08] 'The home is a suitcase' suggests another level of abstracting the concept of home. [B07] Its mobility allows the garden to be located anywhere and everywhere, making its **ubiquity** possible. [B05] A community without **land** [E11]. Living in a sphere or a **bubble** is unusual as it allows for the possibility of constructing a limited world in a same way that exists for an island. [B02] **Floating** cities or simple cabins, they allow passengers to experience a disconnected moment of time. [C05]

While displaced, **war refugees** tend to lose their identities, which are usually embedded within their lands. [K07] The imbrication of body and territory is never so intricate as when the **flesh** inscribes the contour of territorial struggles. [L05] In another approach, war takes the form of forceful **resistance** in order for a population to defend its right to the land, to the memory of its inheritance. [K01] An **abandoned** group of houses, new shells for the definition of the elsewhere, is a common situation that tends to make people's lives part of a **ghostly** scenery. [B08] The first symptom of an **occupation** begins by laying out familiar and recognisable objects. [B04] Here and elsewhere, the need to be different, to learn

from each other, is the basis of one's **identity**. [E07] Un-claiming the rock, the nationalist **flag** is temporarily swapped by another belief in a possible reconciliation. [H01] To be well-behaved and have good manners is the basis of **politeness**; what is legal and illegal depends very much on the time and place of a culture. [E05]



Iconic architecture is connected by a massive infrastructure that recreates a **meta-China** ruled by massive capitalism. [H02] Another **Babylonian** tower in construction anticipates its own destruction. [G04] As this will always refer to a collective **dream-like** perception of the present time, it is most likely that the city of tomorrow will resemble a repeated scenario. Contrary to myth, **history** fluctuates in a conflicting appropriation of tangible traces and recognised facts. [C04] The staging of **artificial nature** is a perfect setting in which to unfold a variety of occupational scenarios: resort, golf, retirement center, prison, or military base. [K02] Palm trees, the horizon line, skyscrapers, and street scenes, the usual attributes of a tropical island, are viewed from the angle of an imminent drama. [K04] Its mountains will be **erased**, its buildings and bridges will collapse, its cities will be destroyed. [G10] The possibly **forgotten city** is disappearing within its sub-structure where the foundations are melting to the point of no return. [G05] Dark and wet, the **underground** is an ideal stage for detective stories or hidden bomb shelters. [G07] No sign of the once vibrant city actively dreaming to build an ‘imagined community’ after the Partition. [I01]

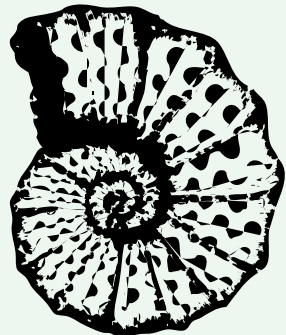
Islands are **laboratories** for building new societies but also for preserving old ones. [D04] The attraction of the **complex island** is embraced from one viewpoint. [G03] Disconnected from the continent, the island imposes another **temporality of the everyday**, an ever-interrogative place from which to question contemporaneity. [D08] A small pile of sand topped with one palm tree exists next to the gas stove, opening a new **geopolitics of the household**. [C02] Referring to the **lost land**, each image is taken on the site of a newly built wall or obstacle in the desert. [L01] The reflected image of reality would be perceived in an **infinite reproduction** of possible territories. [F08] Those **mythic images**, like the many layers of an archaeological site, have shaped our memories

of this part of the world. [D01] Due to their (islands’) small dimensions, they are more subject to political shifts. [J06] A land of empty shells shining in the sun, a landscape of deliquescence where **humidity** reaches the climax of mugginess, the new square metre of territory is the perfect platform. [F04] Among them, **Loveland** is a theme park dedicated to sex exhibits, large phallus statues, stone labias, and an exhibition on the ‘masturbation cycle’ for the future health of the new couple. [E04] It is perhaps a new homeland for an unspoiled human geography. [C01]

Like the pieces of a **puzzle**, no territory could exist without those surrounding it. They form a network connected by the complex system of **portolan**, a navigational measure using triangulation. [AAA edition] **Water** is the earth’s biggest territory. [A05] Can we guarantee its security? [E03] What if the oceans were transformed into one **giant island**?

Land and sea are inverted, borders change positions, names and legends become arbitrary, topographies are replaced, and the **center of gravity** is shifted. [E02] Soon it disappears. [L03] Sounds from **sugar lands** extract sounds of the fabric of a new society. [J08] The sky is mirrored in the dormant water, accentuating this **infinite** dimension. [F07] It is a sign of **existence and eternity** placed here and there consuming any surface. [E10] A new ecology, bellowing for rebirth will eventually emerge from the dirty water. [A01] Phosphorescent polyps and fish glowing at night echo the shining stars in the sky. [F05] We all have a piece of sky [H04], before **borders** and other territorial constraints. [H08] **Constellations** are defined by groups of stars connected through lines-of-sight in permanent rotation around the earth's axis. [F03] A globe flattened and sliced like an apple's skin loses its three dimensionality. [I02] The projected linear **man-made monument** is the horizontal expansion of limitation, producing a mirror effect on either side. [L07] A **bridge** is a frontier between two sides of a span. [L06] Most of the contemporary and future human conflicts of the globalised world are/ will be concentrated in this relatively small territory. [A02] **Asia** ... is everywhere and nowhere. [G02]

Asia is the montage of phrases (1) directly cut from the 111 territories found in Atlas of Asia Art Archive (2). Together they epitomise a hazy silhouette, like a ghost, a quintessence of Asia. Built on the multiplicity of contemporary art production, the Atlas opens another form of narration through the classification and connection of artworks and practices from artists based in Asia. Together, they create an archipelago of related territories functioning in a composed yet diffuse geography. Then, following Edouard Glissant (3), it would seem appropriate to outline a metaphorical map of the Asian archipelago from the selection of artists and the territories they work with as collected by Asia Art Archive. This new reading would allow a possible representation of the fragments of Asia in defining a new taxonomy of its contours.





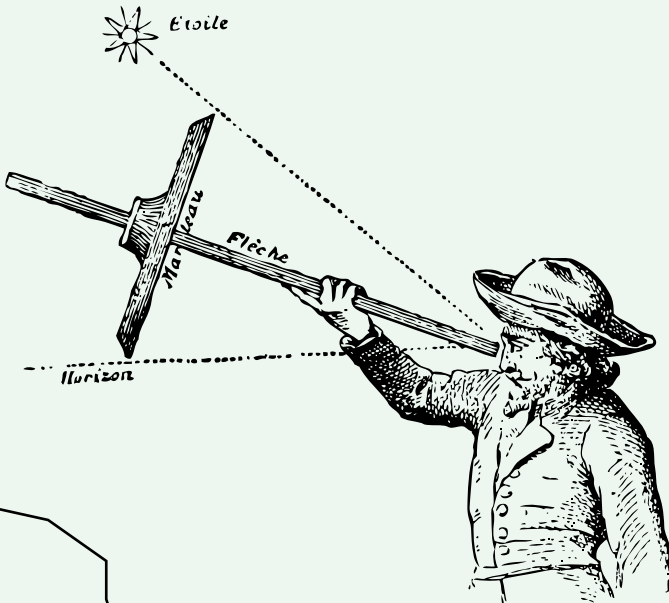
1 Each of them ends with a code [XXX] leading to the hyper-linked page of each of the 111 territories and their classifications.

2 The *Atlas of Asia Art Archive* is the result of a six-month artists' residency at Asia Art Archive from February to August 2012 and can be downloaded at: www.aaa.org.hk/atlas

3 Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1997.

MAP Office

MAP Office is a multidisciplinary platform (Laurent Gutierrez + Valérie Portefaix), working on physical and imaginary territories using varied means of expression. This duo of artists/architects teaches at the School of Design, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University.



A Conversation between Chen Kuan-hsing and Rasheed Araeen

From: Rasheed Araeen / To: Kuan-Hsing Chen / 11 Aug 2013 11:00 PM / Subject: Greetings

Dear Kuan-Hsing CHEN

I have just finished your book, *Asia as Method*¹ which I read with great interest and I write to you to express admiration for the work you have done.

Before I respond to some of your points, I must tell you I'm not an academic, nor do I write academically, for academics. The struggle I invoke here was somewhat in defiance of what you call 'the limits of colonial history.' I was born and educated in Pakistan, and moved to London in 1964 after graduating with a degree in civil engineering to pursue art. Here I encountered the most advanced forms of modern sculpture but at the same time, I began to feel disillusioned and frustrated because I was seen as an outsider, 'the other'. I came across the work of Frantz Fanon in 1971 and began writing about cultural imperialism in 1975-76 as part of a collective struggle of Asian and African people in the UK. In 1978, I founded the magazine *Black Phoenix* (later resurrected as *Third Text*) where I published 'Black Manifesto' in the first issue. 'Black Manifesto' became the mission statement for what followed as a continuing struggle against the Eurocentric production, dissemination, and legitimisation of knowledge.²

Around the same time, the British state developed its own plan and agenda to pacify the struggle. First in 1973 a controversial meeting invited Asian and African groups to discuss their situation. This was boycotted by radical groups including the Black Panthers. In 1974, Naseem Khan (later appointed as Head of Diversity for Arts Council England) supported by a committee that included Prof Stuart Hall (a pioneer of Cultural Studies) was commissioned by Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (CGF), the Arts Council, and the Commission of Racial Equality, the latter two organs of the British state, to investigate 'the cultures of African and Asian people'. Shortly after, Khan published a book *The Arts Britain Ignores* (1976 (the year I finished writing *Black Manifesto*)) largely welcomed by those Africans and Asians of British society who saw in it a space in which they could pursue their careers. But this was not a space that would lead them into the mainstream, with the possibility of confrontation and de-colonisation, but one that allowed for a separate discourse to define and represent exclusively those who must remain 'immigrants.'

In 1987, four years after I began publishing *Third Text*, the Arts Council

launched its project: 'To create in the UK the foremost gallery for the exhibition and appreciation of contemporary visual arts by artists from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific basin and those who have cultural roots in these regions but who live in Europe and the West.' This project was named INIVA and had as its first director Gilane Tawadros (member of the Advisory Committee of *Third Text*) with Stuart Hall as the Chair of its Trustees Board. In addition, the Arts Council launched the gravy-train of so-called 'cultural diversity' in the early 1990s and the first person to jump into the driver's seat was Stuart Hall.

As Chair of the Trustees Board of INIVA for 15 years, with approximately £15 million of public money spent, why did Stuart Hall, eminent professor of Cultural Studies, fail to help Britain's art institutions to de-colonise themselves? Was this failure owing to his self-interest or was there something fundamentally wrong in some of the ideas of the cultural studies he pioneered and theorised? My point is that while post-colonial theories, cultural, and subaltern studies have exposed issues and produced a discourse whose importance I do not deny, they have not led us into what you have suggested as the urgent need for the de-colonisation of the prevailing world system. Knowledge is still dominated, legitimised and promoted globally by the West. While there is resistance to it, there is no substantial work done within post-colonial cultural studies scholarship which deals theoretically and art historically with it.

This brings me back to your book. I find it difficult to agree with the assertion that 'the intellectual and subjective work of de-colonisation... was stalled by the cold war.' The cold war did interfere with it and we suffered many defeats, but the struggle for de-colonisation was never stalled or stopped, not even in East Asia. In fact, the ideas of modernity and modernism became tools against colonialism. They were taken up by artists in the colonies to reinforce the struggle for the independence of their countries. For instance at the end of the war, East Asia was in turmoil, trying to recover from its material devastation and assert its independence. And although it did somehow recover economically with post-war industrial modernisation, its intellectual work got trapped by the domination of American Abstract Expressionism, which created artists who were mostly surrogates of what was happening in New York. But this situation also triggered an extraordinarily original avant-garde art movement - the Gutai, emerging in Japan in 1956. Although the historical significance of Gutai lies in its defiance of American cultural hegemony, it made no impact on the continuing imperialism in Asia or elsewhere. The fault for this did not lie with the artists' practice but with the absence of scholarship, sufficient material and intellectual resources in Japan or East Asia which was needed to underpin their work as historically and

ideologically significant. Only when Asia produces its own interpretation and understanding of history, which advances the ideas of modernity and modernism, would it be possible to understand the true significance of Gutai. The main struggle of art today is therefore the struggle against this history.

And so I want to propose that an important part of the struggle was missing from your book: that which lies in its confrontation with 'Knowledge production [which] is one of the major sites in which imperialism operates and exercises its power.' In 2008, I started publishing *Third Text Asia*, 'to offer a critical space for the development of scholarship... In pursuit of [our own] understanding of art's complexity and significance...' I saw Asia as a site, not as *method* as proposed by you. Asia can and should be a site of anti-imperialist struggle, but your proposition of Asia as Method is too ambiguous and general. It does not lead us into a concrete discourse by which we can confront the particularity of neo-imperialist knowledge and produce counter-knowledge. Instead, I would propose *Art as Method*, because it is art by which modernity as an advancing force is defined with its exclusive European subjectivity; only art can confront neo-imperialism and offer a model of de-colonisation. Moreover, art is concerned with making things and thus can enter the everyday and become part of its collective productivity. Only through collectivity can we win the struggle.

Regards,

Rasheed Araeen

From: Kuan-Hsing Chen / To: Rasheed Araeen / 16 Aug 06:04 PM /

Subject: Re: Greetings

Dear Rasheed,

Thanks for the engaged discussion. Reading your letter makes me immediately aware that you are one of our *qian-bei* (a respected earlier generation intellectual), from whom we learn a great deal. I also feel that we may have a similar take on writing: my generation (born in the 1950s) still writes for the larger intellectual community beyond the academy and despises those with academic pretensions. But my book *Asia as Method* has to find an entrypoint into the discussion, and 'cultural studies' is a cross-discipline field which I am familiar with, and in which I have been able to get work done.

I very much appreciate your telling the story of how 'British Cultural Studies' (in particular Stuart Hall as a representative figure) has supported the mediation of the state agenda of multi-culturalism through art institutions, and has not been able to carry out de-imperialisation work in the UK. Never having had a chance to study or stay there for more than a week, I do not have enough knowledge of the London intellectual scene, especially Stuart's role in the art world, so your analysis does fill an important gap in my understanding; I feel grateful for your honest account. But your stronger argument regarding what is inherent in cultural studies on the de-imperialisation and de-colonisation part can perhaps open more discussions here: as a general tendency, in the imperial metropolises of, London, Paris, and New York, de-imperialisation has not become a broad cultural-political movement. This cannot be explained by the 'complicity' of cultural studies or post-colonial studies; though larger intellectual work (both in and outside the academy) can be held responsible, the reasons for the lack of de-imperialisation are still to be discovered. What was the historical conjuncture when the Third World de-colonisation movement (in the form of national independence) began in the 1950s but did not culminate on all levels in a self-critical and reflexive intellectual movement in the metropolises, not even opening the imperialist history up for debate? My own imagined test to identify the extent of de-imperialisation would be looking at textbooks used in

London schools to see how British imperialist history is being written now.

When imperial history is not fully contested, and public-political understanding of that history is not placed in the 'internationalist' imagination, multi-culturalism will come into the picture to contain the 'post-colonial subjects' (migrants from the former Commonwealth colonies) within the British nation state as 'ethnic minorities'; racism becomes a 'local' issue to be absorbed into state management.

Besides the larger historical forces that need to be put in place to explain the 'complicity' in different metropolises, on one level, and only one level, my short answer lies in the limits of 'European modes of knowledge,' which include cultural studies and post-colonial studies. To be able to articulate what 'one's own' mode of knowledge is requires an outside system of thought, including language. English monolingualism would perhaps need to be overcome to even begin the work of de-colonisation. I guess I'm saying that more substantial research needs to be done to explain more explicitly what undermines struggles like *Black Phoenix* and *Third Text*.

Another missing dimension of 'Asia as method,' as you correctly point out, is an engagement with the arts. My knowledge about art is really close to nothing. In fact, I have only begun learning about the art world recently in joining the West Heavens project and in organising the Asian Circle of Thought Forum³ for the 2012 Shanghai Biennial. My initial understanding is that, as you know well, many art institutions have been and continue to be set up in different parts of Asia, but this does not mean de-colonisation work is being done through institutions, and worse, certain institutions are even more Eurocentric. This is partly the case because the notion of 'art,' like other major subjects such as 'religion,' 'philosophy,' and 'science,' has not been problematised and still follows the European understanding of art (history) which organises everything. And, you know better than I do, once these institutions are in place, they are very difficult to change, since change involves the entire apparatus surrounding the 'arts.' It is at this level of work that I'd like very much to learn more from you on 'art as method,' and to what extent it can be a major vehicle towards de-colonisation, once the very notion of art itself is problematised, and to what extent art institutions in reality can lead in constituting a larger movement of de-imperialisation in the metropolises and of de-colonisation in the former colonies. For me, Asia is much more than a site. Asia has many histories

of practices and diverse modes of knowledge, and critical intellectual traditions. The point is whether we can re-articulate these practices and knowledge from non-Eurocentric eyes. The recent formation of Modern Asian Thought⁴ is precisely such an attempt.

Best,

Kuan-Hsing

From: Rasheed Araeen / To: Kuan-Hsing Chen / 17 Sept 2013 11:28 PM /
Subject: Re: Re: Greetings

Dear Kuan-Hsing,

I agree with your idea of Asia as 'a site to intervene' but 'cultural studies' as a site is too general for me. In order to be effective, we will have to be specific and concentrate particularly on the kind of discourse in which ordinary people can enter and turn into a collective struggle. I want to focus here on art. Its theoretical ideas as well as modern history are still being determined and dominated by a colonial discourse, so we have to develop an alternative discourse which deals with it both theoretically and historically.

Following your own guidance, there are at least three tasks to be performed: 1) to recover the suppressed or misrepresented knowledge from the history of West-centric discourse of (neo)imperialism 2) to produce new knowledge which can take humanity towards real liberation and freedom 3) these must not remain trapped within institutional ivory towers, but must enter the dynamics of ordinary people's lives. Only when these people can speak for themselves, with the possession of knowledge and consciousness of their own creative power, will there be a revolution.

In light of the above, I want to propose *Art as Method* for the following reasons:

1) You were right when you referred to the Cold War as an impediment to the continuity of the struggle for de-colonisation. Besides the post-war domination of American popular culture in Asia, Abstract Expressionism

also distracted from and undermined the creative potential of the post-colonial nation states of Third World, particularly when they had a democratic 'socialist' agenda. In Pakistan, Abstract Expressionism arrived in 1958, following the arrival of Rock-n-Roll, Coca-Cola, and blue jeans, and was patronised and promoted by the CIA-supported military regime of Ayyub Khan. As such, Abstract Expressionism was deliberately used as a cold-war policy and tool by the US against socialism, and it is art that can confront neo-imperialism.

2) Although the kind of art I have alluded to above is of an elitist disposition, dependent on and addressing the bourgeois regime, there is also a level at which ordinary people are involved. Art is about making things, and making them creatively, which is fundamental to the creativity of ordinary people. Once this creativity is recognised as central to the overall struggle for democratic freedom, the re-appropriation by people of the knowledge produced by the bourgeois regime can enhance the interface between creativity and productivity. My point is that what we produce intellectually as a counter-discourse must be transferred to the level by which the masses can enrich their understanding of what is required to move forward in the modern world.

3) While critiquing the West, it is imperative to recognise the historically valuable aspects of the knowledge produced under the shadow of imperialism, which can empower our own struggle, such as the mainstream history of modernism in art. The Western tradition of art, the precursor to modernism in the 20th century which spread globally with colonialism, is based on representation, particularly of what the eye can see. However, one of the important aspects of modernism has been its struggle against representation, so that imagination could liberate itself from the spectacle of the visible and contemplate ideas beyond: its not enough to reflect but to change the world (Marx). At the end of 1960s, some artists decided to abandon the making of art in the form of painting, sculpture, etc, and turn to what they found in the rural earth and to intervene in and change it. This was historically a paradigm shift in the perception of art: it was a shift from representation or reflection to intervention in what one saw and experienced to change and transform it.

4) The art world is still occupied with the idea of art as a precious object or commodity legitimised by the bourgeois art establishment and sold in the market place. Alternatively, *Art as Method* proposes a creative process by which to liberate the idea of transformation

by transferring it to the ordinary people who, by making it part of their productivity, produce an egalitarian system of production, social relation and discourse involving other disciplines of knowledge, such as philosophy, science, history, economy, ecology, etc. as I have suggested and elaborated in my book *Art Beyond Art* (I can send you a copy if you like).

With kind regards,

Rasheed

From: Kuan-Hsing Chen / To: Rasheed Araeen / 23 Sept 2013 04:26PM /

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Greetings

Dear Rasheed,

I do understand everything you are saying and I am mostly in agreement with what you try to do. But I'm not certain to what extent people involved in the art world would want to hear it, since you are attempting to challenge and redefine the very notion of art as it is practiced in the institutional (in all senses of the word) context. Elsewhere, I have used the image of 'living fossils' to describe friends who are involved in some of the projects across Asia, since it is that specific generation of intellectuals who share common concerns and beliefs, and want to implement what needs to be done when they are in a position to do so. At the same time, we all realise that the larger contexts and conditions have been transformed to the extent that others, especially the later generations, can no longer fully comprehend the historically constituted driving energies of our attempts.

When I began to be involved in the Shanghai Biennial in early 2010, I quickly realised the strategic value of the art institution as a 'site for struggle,' since it was estimated that there would be a half million people visiting the exhibition. But I was also quickly reminded of unrealistic expectations since there have always been well established gaps between 'the elites and the masses,' i.e., those who organise and produce the work and the visitors. Museum programme

officers, curators, and artists are talking to and among themselves, and the success or failure of the event has nothing to do with the genuine participation of the visitors/citizens. I guess there is nothing new in this simple realisation for people like you who have always wanted to transform the situation. The dilemma is that it would be stupid to give up this potentially important strategic site, always and already put in place to be mobilised, but it is in vain to change the received elitist understanding of art, not to mention to change the brain of those who drive the institutional machine. One would further have to come to terms with the material reality that interests operate on all levels, including artists who need to make a living. It is in light of this dilemma or productive tension that I want to reflect on or echo the points made in your concrete proposal for 'Art as Method.'

If I correctly understand your point about Abstract Expressionism in the early Cold War period, the literati circle in the pro-US side of East Asia seemed to have a very similar experience, not only in visual arts like painting but in the triumph of modernist literature, promoted through the hand of the US Information Office based in Taipei, Hong Kong, and Seoul. In the Cold War/authoritarian era, 'abstract expression' had become artistic and literary techniques to avoid political troubles. The result created a generation of works of art that avoided government censorship, but at the same time had an unintended consequence: elitist abstraction could not reach out to popular readership. A group of us have begun in the past several years to reconstruct the history of post-war leftist thought in Taiwan by focusing on the work of leading novelist Chen Yingzhen and painter Wu Yaozhong. To understand their work today, efforts have to be made to read not just contextually but to slowly unpack the nuanced expressions. I would guess that the popular understanding of art as something abstract and not fully comprehensible has to do with that moment of history, when the gap between artist and reader was opened.

In this context, as you point out, 'art is about making things, and making them creatively, which is fundamental to the creativity of ordinary people.' It not only means to 'return' art to ordinary people, but also a redefinition of art as creative work in the daily life of popular struggle. This very understanding of art as creative practice in popular life can take us in different directions and has many implications. It may turn our eyes to the creative energies and

forms of mundane daily life, such as a mother making beautiful dinner dishes invested with love and care. It may change the very idea of art institutions, since creative works are produced and created everywhere in social space, such as the eye-catching slogan displayed in the street demonstration. It may also challenge what needs to be written into a so-called art history, to include all forms of creative work. It further reveals that creative work cannot be reduced to the category of visual arts as it is now so dominantly conceived and organised in all the art biennials. In short, if we want to follow your notion of art, we'll need to radically turn things around.

It's interesting to note that, in your account of the shift from 'representation or reflection to intervention' in modernism, that art institutions for better or worse have consciously or unconsciously performed the function of documenting the transformation process. Perhaps, this can be highlighted: art institutions as documentation sites for popular memory, so that social transformation can be prepared or even inspired to happen elsewhere. Conceptualised this way, one would not then have the illusion to expect 'bourgeois institutions' to do more than they can afford, but to redirect where forms and energies of intervention can be made in more strategically relevant social and political arenas. Conceptualised this way, one would expect genuine artistic practice to go on in the struggle of daily life; and individuals or groups who creatively make things that contribute to social transformation on all levels will be given due attention for their genuine artistic work. And only by establishing an alternative understanding of art and rewriting art history accordingly, can one begin to change the conception of art as a rare object to be sold in the market and to assign the role of art as a creative process to change the world.

I have not yet read *Art Beyond Art* but would very much like to. My hunch is that the key points you are making in formulating 'Art as Method' are in tune with the arguments made in *Art Beyond Art* as well as the spirit upholding the *Third Text* project from the very beginning. I am certain there are many people out there sharing your ideas, and these are not necessarily the living fossils within the art world, but those who believe in the necessity for ongoing social transformation towards a better future.

Best,

Kuan-Hsing

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Best,

Kuan-Hsing



Protest against National Education in
Hong Kong, 2011

Photos courtesy of Terence Pang

From: Rasheed Araeen / To: Kuan-Hsing Chen / 23 Sept 2013 6:57PM/
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Greetings

Dear Kuan-Hsing

Many thanks for your beautiful response. By 'Art as Method' I actually mean 'Creativity of People as Method.' Once this creativity is recognised as part of people's productivity and is then organised as a collective endeavour, it can become the basic tool of the struggle. I will come to this later when I have some time to elaborate on this point, and respond to your letter properly. Meanwhile I want to send you my book *Art Beyond Art*. Please send me your address.

Best wishes, Rasheed

Footnote:

1 | Chen Kuan-hsing, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*, Duke University Press, London & Durham, 2010

2 | *Black Phoenix* was discontinued after three issues and was resurrected in 1987 as *Third Text: Third World Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture*.

3 | "World in Transition, Imagination in Flux-Asian Circle of Thought 2012 Shanghai Summit" invited six Asian thinkers from South Korea, Japanese mainland, Okinawa, Malaysia and India, to deliver speeches from Oct. 12 to Oct. 19 and engage in discussions with 40 plus intellectuals from across Asia.

4 | This is part of a larger project contributing to the (re)integration of Asia at the level of knowledge production.

Chen Kuan-Hsing

CHEN Kuan-Hsing is Professor in the Graduate Institute for Social Research and Cultural Studies, and also the coordinator of Center for Asia-Pacific/ Cultural Studies, National Chiao Tung University.

Rasheed Araeen

Rasheed Araeen is an artist, writer and the founder of both Third Text and Third Text Asia.

In May 2013, AAA's Hammad Nasar visited Rasheed Araeen with a copy of Chen Kuan-hsing's *Asia as Method*.

A Short Story of Bagyi Aung Soe in Five Images



1951-1952
Pastel,
gouache,
and ink on
cardboard
110 × 150 mm
Image
courtesy
of U Sonny
Nyein

In 1951, Bagyi Aung Soe (1923/24-1990), who would come to be recognised as the pioneer of modern art in Burma, was awarded the Indian Government Scholarship to study art at the Viśva-Bharati University founded by Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) in Śāntiniketan. This undated sketch of a female figure in Santhali red-bordered white sari probably goes back to his brief but momentous sojourn there, where there is a sizable Santhal community. The painterly approach of European academic painting in his earliest illustrations between 1948 and 1950 is here superseded by a linear treatment of form. In spite of the still hesitant line

work and the lingering tendency to suggest spatial depth and three-dimensional volume, a paradigmatic shift in seeing and representing the visible world is clearly in place.

Prior to his immersion in Śāntiniketan, Aung Soe worshipped Western art as the sole model for artistic creation, and expressed negligible interest in traditional Burmese art. To be sure, the relativisation of Western art here witnessed and the ensuing volte-face cannot be understood independently of his initiation to Śāntiniketan's concept of art and the artist. Fostered through a pedagogical programme devised by Tagore's



c. 1985

Pencil, gouache and
felt-tip pen on paper

228 × 298 mm

Collection of Gajah Gallery





right-hand man and Aung Soe's revered guru, Nandalal Bose (1882-1966), it was the sum of ancient Indian theories of aesthetics, Tagore's humanist and universalist ideals transcending demarcations of national borders, and the debates on nationalist and Pan-Asianist ideologies initiated by many a luminary in the orbit of the ashram: Okakura Kakuzō (1862-1913), Sister Nivedita (1867-1911), and Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), for example.

Indeed, the impact of Tagore's university 'where the world roosts in one nest' (Sanskrit: 'Yatra Viśvam Bhavatyekanidai'¹) was enduring. More than thirty years after leaving Śāntiniketan, Aung Soe continued to draw guidance and inspiration from his experiences there, as can be seen in a painting from the 1980s which features the exact same silhouette of the slightly bent Santhal female figure at work in the fields. It even bears the inscription 'Santineketan [sic]' in homage to his *alma mater*. Conforming to his guru's instructions on 'life rhythm,' whereby '[a]n accomplished artist is absorbed with the expression of the inner character and movement of objects, not their anatomical (or structural) variety,² details of the body structure are foregone.

1| Nicolas Mercam, *Peindre au Bengale (1939-1977): Contribution à une lecture plurielle de la modernité*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005, p 70-72.

2| Bose, 1999, p 28.



Śāntiniketan taught Aung Soe to see and to think of art in terms of its linguistic rationale and communicative function. Style was not an end in itself. Following his return to Yangon in 1952 and over the next three decades, through illustration, which, in place of the virtually inexistent gallery and museum, served as *the* site of avant-garde artistic experimentations, he examined the linguistic rationale of a plethora of pictorial idioms, ranging from the *ukiyo-e* to cubism.³ In innovating new idioms, his non-figurative illustrations published in *Shumawa Magazine* in January and February 1953 provoked a furore which saw traditionalists branding his art as '*seik-ta-za-pangyi*,' meaning psychotic or mad painting – an epithet that would become synonymous with Aung Soe's works as well as modern art in general in Burma.

Shumawa Magazine,
February 1953
Gouache on paper
Dimensions unknown
Current location
unknown

The reaction to these illustrations must be understood against the context of Aung Soe's scholarship to study in Śāntiniketan. His candidacy was supported by Burma's literary giants like Zawgyi (1907-1990) and Min Thu Wun (1909-2004) who aspired for the modernisation of traditional Burmese art, and it was a mandate that he took on when he left for India. But Aung Soe's contemporaries were ignorant of the intricacies of Tagore's and Bose's vision of art and hence failed to appreciate his reorientation. Even Min Thu Wun was disappointed that the wunderkind's works had strayed from Burmese art – a criticism that did not take into account the full scope of Aung Soe's experimentations embracing traditional Burmese painting and modern European art alike.⁴ Indeed, Aung Soe's quest to create a modern Burmese painting according to Tagore's definition of true modernism as 'freedom of mind, not slavery of taste' and 'independence of thought and action, not tutelage under European schoolmasters' based on the world's wealth of pictorial traditions was a solitary odyssey with neither ally nor aid.

3| In addition to Aung Soe's aversion to the kismet of art as merchandise and that of the modern artist as the professional, he was eager to take art beyond the gallery and to reach out to all levels of Burmese society. Until he passed away in 1990, illustration provided him with just the means to do so as well as a modest income.

4| Min Thu Wun, 'The Beginnings of the Story of Bagyi Aung Soe' [Burmese manuscript], c. 2001

After returning to Yangon from Śāntiniketan, Aung Soe avidly studied traditional Burmese art. He lived and worked amongst craftsmen, and travelled to archaeological sites like Bagan to examine both folk and classical art. While he experimented freely in folk art, the isms of Western art, and other pictorial styles since the beginning of the 1950s, it was only in the 1970s that he published innovative adaptations of classical Burmese painting - one of the most consummate examples of which is this collage. On this cover of *Moway Magazine*, Aung Soe revisits for the umpteenth time the theatrical representation of the Hindu epic of the *Rāmāyana*. Against a brightly coloured expressionistic background are cut-outs of drawings of actors in the costumes of Rama (Burmese: *Yama*), Sita (*Thira*), Ravenna (*Datthagiri*) and his sister Sūrpanakhā (*Trigatha*) in the form of the golden deer executed in the classical style, as well as a love sign in scarlet.

The underlying aesthetic rationale of this blend of artistic references and techniques is a unified vision of the traditional and the avant-garde, the East and the West. For Aung Soe, as it was for Bose, while 'the artist cannot discard his cultural heritage' because 'the stronger the national identity, the greater its place in the world,'⁵ it was his or her duty to bridge the old and the new: 'to search for the soul in the old and foster the progress of the new' and 'to forge new paths out of the old.'⁶ Traditional art was not perceived as a hindrance to the spirit of invention - on the contrary. Based on Bose's vision of the dynamic symbiosis between the old and the new, whereby tradition is conceived as 'the outer shell of the seed that holds the embryo of new growth,'⁷ Aung Soe created modern Burmese art based on 'new tradition': 'the tradition of the world's traditions.'

5] Bagyi Aung Soe, *From Tradition to Modernity* [Burmese], Yangon: Khin May Si Sapay, 1978, p 217-222.

6] *Ibid.*

7] Tradition is the outer shell of the seed that holds the embryo of new growth; this shell protects the embryo from being destroyed by heat or rain or violence. When it is intact it will come out, break open even this hard shell. Similarly in art, this inner embryo should have the power enough to break tradition open. Then only will new art emerge.' K G Subramanyan, 'Nandalal Bose,' *Nandan: Nandalal*, Kolkata: Viśva-Bharati, 1982, p 1-22.

Moway Magazine,
August 1979
Collage with gouache
and
pen on paper
Dimensions unknown
Current location
unknown





c. 1985
Felt-tip
pen
on paper
280 x 183
mm
Collection
of
Gajah
Gallery

In Śāntiniketan, alongside Bose's concept of 'life rhythm,' Aung Soe was initiated to the classical Indian pictorial strategy of visual correspondences (Sanskrit: *sādhīśyabodha*).⁸ These approaches prioritised the subject matter's energy and spirit over its literal form. By 1978, he had resolved to paint the formless mind animating matter: 'to paint truth, not pictures' according to the teachings of the historical Buddha.⁹ It was not just any episode from the Buddha's previous and last lives that he sought to picture, but the truths he taught, such as the Three Marks of Existence of impermanence (Pāli: *anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and non-self (*anattā*). The question would be how he made manifest - not just described, narrated or symbolised - that which has no form through art. It was towards the middle of the 1980s that he made the quantum leap, of which this felt-tip pen drawing of a topsy-turvy Buddha with the gesture of 'calling the earth to witness' (Sanskrit: *bhumisparśamudra*) is an example.

The vocabulary of this novel pictorial language comprises of esoteric devices valued for their 'psycho-cosmic mechanism'¹⁰: *mantra*, *yantra* and numerals and letters of the 'great language,' such as the 'powerful' Burmese consonants 'sa-da-ba-wa' and 'ka-ga-na-la.' The *yantra* comprise of Burmese esoteric diagrams (Burmese: *sama*) and cabalistic runes (*in*), while the *mantra* include auspicious incantations widespread in Burma, as well as Mahayanist ones like the *Heart Sūtra* and *Avalokiteśvara mantra* rendered in Tibetan script, which are almost unheard of in the country. 'Om' whose Burmese equivalent is 'aung' is here written in Bengali. To be sure, none of these apparatuses are endorsed by Burmese Theravāda Buddhism.

Aung Soe drew on the spiritual strategies and instruments of Zen, Tantra, and Burmese esoteric paths alike, and did not confine himself to any single doctrine. Even scientific formulae and mathematical equations were employed to articulate the ultimate realities expounded in Buddhist teachings. It is clear that *manaw maheikdi dat* painting cannot be pigeonholed into any single category of the modern, the traditional, the Burmese, the Indian, or the Southeast Asian.

To picture the ultimate reality beyond appearances, the lesson on pattern and rhythm distilled from classical Burmese painting also allowed Aung Soe to simulate the behaviour of the most fundamental element of all mental and material phenomena, such as the vibration of waves and particles within an atom. In this work, tightly packed, short parallel lines embody the rise and fall of the breath as experienced by the mediator-artist without the intermediary of a foreign medium like an electrocardiogram. Meditation is subsumed into artistic creation, and it is not fortuitous that Aung Soe christened this art '*manaw maheikdi dat* painting,' meaning the painting of the ultimate constituents of all phenomena through mental power achieved in concentration meditation (Pāli: *samatha*). His affirmation of 'I draw solar energy' refers precisely to the picturing with and of this mental power likened to the sun's rays. He specified: 'If you want to know what I draw or paint, try meditation and you will see it.' Keenly aware of the abstruse nature of his version of Buddhist art, he acquiesced: 'Those who know can appreciate and benefit from it; those who don't pass by without seeing anything.'

8] Abanindranath Tagore, *Some Notes on Indian Artistic Anatomy*, Kolkata: Indian Society of Oriental Art, 1914; Nandalal Bose, *Vision and Creation*, Kolkata: Viśva-Bharati, 1999.

9] See Aung Soe, 1978, p 217-222.

10] Philip Rawson, *Tantra: The Indian Cult of Ecstasy*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1978, p 64.

The female figure traverses Aung Soe's entire career. Beginning with studies of the female body and psychology, he later moved on to explore the female principle: the *śakti* or Great Goddess and the *yonī*. The most important goddess in the country today is certainly Thuyathadi, guardian of the Buddhist scriptures and Burmanised version of Saraswatī, the Hindu goddess of knowledge, whose role in Burmese esotericism is moreover paramount. In Aung Soe's first attempts at picturing the goddess in the 1970s, conforming to iconographic conventions, she is invariably represented with a book and her sacred goose (Burmese: *hintha*). In stark contrast are evocations of the same goddess in the 1980s, as is this profile representation of a stout female figure wrapped in a common sarong, whose ample buttocks are conflated with the *hintha*. The background is a mosaic of his characteristic 'rainbow' or 'psychedelic' colours, with each case bearing numerals and letters of the Burmese alphabet.

It is no longer the resplendent goddess transmitted through tradition that we see, but Aung Soe's return to the quotidian: his full assimilation of the principles of emptiness (Pāli: *suññatā*) and thusness (*tathatā*) which transcend all dichotomies between the sublime and the plain, the earthly and the divine, the traditional and the modern, and even form and non-form. Again, Aung Soe's attainment mirrors Bose's: 'I used to formerly see the divine in the images of divinities alone; now I see it in the images of men, trees, and mountains.'¹¹ Ultimately, it is the activity of the goddess of knowledge that Aung Soe sought to render manifest, not her appearance which is fictitious in the first place. Oftentimes, there is not even a female figure featured; only the *mantra* associated with Thuyathadi - written over the torso in this instance - allows the identification of a drawing or painting as such. He

explained: 'The goddess Thuyathadi does not have a body and exists only in spirit which can only be met in the supernatural spiritual world.' Given that her nature is 'similar to the intangible (Zen) painting which cannot be touched but only felt,' 'one can assume that her statues and images in paintings arise from the imagination of painters.' In other words, all representations of the goddess are necessarily mind-born, and likewise those of the Buddha. Above all, each *manaw maheikdi dat* painting is a support for meditation and the site of mental and spiritual transformation. Even the sensuous female body serves the same end: the transformation of desire through meditation on desire, thereby achieving release from attachment to it.

11| Nandalal Bose, *Vision and Creation*, Kolkata: Viśva-Bharati, 1999, p 18.

Yin Ker

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Yin Ker works on stories of art beyond the Euramerican narrative, with particular interest in interpretations of Buddhist images and objects.



c. 1985
Felt-tip pen on paper
Dimensions unknown
Image courtesy of Aung Soe Family

River of Smoke

(an excerpt)

Bahram and Zadig had their first glimpse of the General as they came around a corner: Bonaparte was standing amidst a copse of trees, surveying the valley below. He was a thickset man, a little shorter than Bahram, and he was leaning forward a little, with his hands clasped behind his back. He was much stouter than Bahram had been led to expect: his belly was a sizeable protuberance and seemed scarcely to belong on someone whose life had been so extraordinarily active. He was dressed in a plain green coat with a velvet collar and silver buttons, each imprinted with a different device; his breeches were of nankeen, but his stockings were of silk, and there were large gold buckles on his shoes. On the left side of his coat was a large star, emblazoned with the Imperial Eagle, and on his head he was wearing a cocked, black hat.

At the approach of his visitors, Bonaparte removed his hat and bowed briskly, in a manner that might have seemed perfunctory in another man, but which in his case seemed merely to indicate that time was short, and there was nothing to be gained by wasting it on superfluous niceties. It was his gaze, most of all, that Bahram was to remember, for it was as penetrating as a surgeon's knife, and it cut into him as if to lay bare the flimsy nakedness of his bones.

Once he began to speak it was evident that the General, military man that he was, had been at some pains to inform himself about his two

visitors: he clearly knew that Zadig was to be the interpreter for it was to him that he turned after the introductions had been completed.

You are named 'Zadig' *hein?* he said, with a smile. Is it taken from Monsieur Voltaire's book of the same name? Are you too a Babylonian philosopher?

No, Majesty; I am Armenian by origin, and the name is an ancient one among my people.

While the two men were conversing with each other, Bahram took the opportunity to observe the General closely. His build reminded him of one of his mother's Gujarati sayings: *tukki gerden valo haramjada ni nisani*—'a short neck is a sure sign of a haramzada'. But he noted also his piercing gaze, his incisive manner of speaking, his sparing but emphatic use of his hands, and the half-smile that played on his lips. Zadig had told him that Napoleon was capable of exerting, when he chose, an extraordinary charm, almost a kind of magic: even the barriers of language, Bahram saw now, could not diminish the power of his hypnotic appeal.

Soon it became apparent that Bahram himself was now the subject of the conversation, and he knew, from the General's darting glances, that he was going to be in for a lengthy interrogation. It was odd to be spoken of without knowing what was being said and Bahram was glad when Zadig turned to him at last and began to translate the General's words into Hindusthani.

It was in the same language that Bahram answered—but Zadig was by no means a passive interpreter and since he was more knowledgeable than Bahram about many of the subjects that were of interest to Napoleon, the conversation was quickly triangulated. For much of the time Bahram was merely an uncomprehending spectator. It wasn't until much later that he was to understand everything that was said—yet in retrospect he remembered it all, with perfect clarity,

as though he and Zadig had been listening and speaking with the same ears and the same tongue.

Napoleon's first set of questions, Bahram recalled, were of a personal nature and embarrassed Zadig a little: the scourge of Prussia had declared that he was forcibly impressed by Bahram's appearance and could see in his face and beard, a resemblance to the Persians of antiquity. In his costume, however, he saw no such similarity, for it seemed to be of the Indian type. He was therefore curious to know what aspects of the civilization of ancient Persia had been preserved by the Parsis of the present day.

Bahram was well prepared for this question, having often had to deal with similar queries from his English friends. The General was right, he answered; his clothing was indeed mostly that of Hindusthan, except for two essential articles: his religion required every adherent, male and female, to wear, next to their skin, a girdle of seventy-two threads called a *kasti*, and a vestment known, as a *sadra*—and Bahram was wearing both of these, under his outer garments, which were, and the General had rightly surmised, no different from those which any other man of his country and station would have worn upon such an occasion. This adaptation in outward appearance, accompanied by the preservation of an inner distinctiveness, could also be said to extend to other aspects of the life of his small community. Where it concerned matters of belief Parsis had clung faithfully to the old ways, making every effort to adhere to the teachings of the prophet Zarathustra; but in other respects they had borrowed freely from the customs and usages of their neighbours.

And what are the principal doctrines of the Prophet Zarathustra?

The religion is among the earliest of monotheistic creeds, Your Majesty. The God of its holy book, the *Zend-Avesta*, is Ahura Mazda, who is omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent. At the time of Creation Ahura Mazda is said to have unleashed a great avalanche of light. One

part of this aura submitted to the Creator and was merged into him; the other part turned away from the light and was banished by Ahura Mazda: this dark force came to be known as 'angre-minyo' or Ahriman—the devil, or Satan. Since then the forces of goodness and light have always worked for Ahura Mazda while the forces of darkness have worked against Him. The aim of every Zoroastrian is to embrace the good and to banish evil.

Napoleon turned to look at Bahram: Does he speak the language of Zarathustra?

No, Your Majesty. Like most of his community, he grew up speaking nothing but Gujarati and Hindusthani—he did not even learn English until much later. As for the ancient language of the Zend-Avesta, it is now the exclusive preserve of priests and others versed in Scripture.

And what of the Chinese language? the General asked. Living in that country, have the two of you made any attempt to familiarize yourselves with that tongue?

They answered in one voice: No, they said, they spoke no Chinese, because the common language of trade in southern China was a kind of patois—or, as some called it 'pidgin', which meant merely 'business' and was thus well suited to describe a tongue which was used mainly to address matters of trade. Even though many Chinese spoke English with ease and fluency, they would not negotiate in it, believing that it put them at a disadvantage in relation to Europeans. In pidgin they reposed far greater trust, for the grammar was the same as that of Cantonese, while the words were mainly English, Portuguese and Hindusthani—and such being the case, everyone who spoke the jargon was at an equal disadvantage, which was considered a great benefit to all. It was, moreover, a simple tongue, not hard to master, and for those who did not know it, there

existed a whole class of interpreters, known as linkisters, who could translate into it from both English and Chinese.

And when you are in Canton, said the General, are you allowed to mix freely with the Chinese?

Yes, Your Majesty: there are no restrictions on that. Our most important dealings are with a special guild of Chinese merchants: it is called the Co-Hong, and its members bear the sole responsibility for conducting business with foreigners. In the event of any wrong-doing it is they who have to answer for the behaviour of their foreign counterparts, so the relationship between the Chinese merchants and the others is, in a way, very close, like a partnership almost. But there exists also another class of intermediaries: they are known as 'compradors' and they are responsible for supplying foreign merchants with provisions and servants. They are also charged with the upkeep of the buildings in which we live, the Thirteen Factories.

Zadig had said the last three words in English, and one of them caught the Generals' attention: Ah! 'Factory'. Is the word the same as our *factorerie*?

This was a subject that Zadig had inquired into and he was not at a loss for an answer: No, Your Majesty. 'Factory' comes from a word that was first used by the Venetians and then by the Portuguese, in Goa. The word is *feitoria* and it refers merely to a place where agents and factors reside and do business. In Canton, the factories are also spoken of as 'hongs'.

They have nothing to do with manufacturing then?

No, Your Majesty: nothing. The factories belong, properly speaking, to the Co-Hong guild, although you would not imagine this to look at them, for many of them have come to be identified with particular nations and kingdoms. Several even hoist their own flags—the French Factory

being one such.

Striding briskly on, the General gave Zadig a sidewise glance: Are the factories like embassies then?

The foreigners often treat them as such, although they are not recognized to be so by the Chinese. From time to time Britain does indeed appoint representatives in Canton, but the Chinese do not countenance them and they are allowed to communicate only with the provincial authorities: this too is no easy thing, for the mandarins will not receive any letters that are not written in the style of a petition or supplication, with the appropriate Chinese characters—since the British are reluctant to do this, their communications are often not accepted.

Napoleon laughed briefly and the sunlight flashed on his teeth: So their relations founder on the barriers of protocol?

Exactly, Your Majesty. Neither side will yield in this matter. If there is any nation that can match the English in their arrogance and obstinacy, it is surely the Chinese.

But since it is the English who send embassies there, it must mean that they need the Chinese more than they are themselves needed?

That is correct, Your Majesty. Since the middle years of the last century, the demand for Chinese tea has grown at such a pace in Britain and America that it is now the principal source of profit for the East India Company. The taxes on it account for fully one-tenth of Britain's revenues. If one adds to this such goods as silk, porcelain and lacquerware it becomes clear that the European demand for Chinese products is insatiable. In China, on the other hand, there is little interest in European exports—the Chinese are a people who believe that their own products, like their food and their own customs, are

superior to all others. In years past this presented a great problem for the British, for the flow of trade was so unequal that there was an immense outpouring of silver from Britain. This indeed was why they started to export Indian opium to China.

Glancing over his shoulder, the General raised an eyebrow: Started? *Commencé*? You mean this trade has not always existed?

No, Majesty—the trade was a mere trickle until about sixty years ago, when the East India Company adopted it as a means of rectifying the outflow of bullion. They succeeded so well that now the supply can barely keep pace with the demand. The flow of silver is now completely reversed, and it pours away from China to Britain, America and Europe.

Now the General came to a halt under a tree with strange hairy leaves: plucking two of them he handed one each to Bahram and Zadig. You will no doubt be interested, he said, to learn that this tree is called the ‘She-Cabbage Tree’ and exists nowhere else on earth. You may keep these leaves as souvenirs of this island.

Zadig bowed and Bahram followed: We thank you, Majesty.

They had come quite a distance from the house by this time, and the General now decided to turn back. For a moment it seemed—somewhat to Bahram’s relief—that his attention had wandered from the matters they had been discussing before. But once they began to walk again it became clear that he was not a man to be easily distracted.

So tell me, messieurs, do the Chinese perceive no harm in opium?

Oh they certainly do, Your Majesty: its importation was banned in the last century and the prohibition has been reiterated several times. It is in principle a clandestine trade—but it is difficult to put an end to it for many officials, petty and grand, benefit from it. As for dealers and traders, when there are great profits to be made, they are not slow to find ways around the laws.

Napoleon lowered his gaze to the dusty pathway. Yes, he said softly, as though he were speaking to himself; this was a problem we too faced, in Europe, with our Continental System. Merchants and smugglers are ingenious in evading laws.

Exactly so, Your Majesty.

Now, a twinkle appeared in the General's eye: But how long do you think the Chinese will suffer this trade to continue?

It remains to be seen, Your Majesty. Things have come to a pass where a cessation in the trade would be a disaster for the East India Company. Indeed it is no exaggeration to say that without it the British would not be able to hold on to their Eastern colonies; they cannot afford to forgo those profits.

Quelle ironie! said Napoleon suddenly, flashing his visitors his arresting smile. What an irony it would be if it were opium that stirred China from her sleep. And if it did, would you consider it a good thing?

Why no, Your Majesty, responded Zadig immediately. I have always been taught that nothing good can be born of evil.

Napoleon laughed. But then the whole world would be nothing but evil. Why else *par exemple* do you trade in opium?

Not I, Your Majesty, said Zadig quickly. I am a clockmaker and I play no part in the opium trade.

But what of your friend? He trades in opium, does he not? Does he believe it to be evil?

This question caught Bahram unawares and he was temporarily at a loss for words. Then, gathering his wits, he said: Opium is like the wind or the tides: it is outside my power to affect its

course. A man is neither good nor evil because he sails his ship upon the wind. It is his conduct towards those around him—his friends, his family, his servants—by which he must be judged. This is the creed I live by.

Napoleon directed his piercing gaze at Bahram: But a man may die, may he not, because he sails upon the wind?

The thought withered on his lips for Longwood had come into view, and an aide was seen to be hurrying down the path in search of the General.

Bonaparte turned to Zadig and Bahram and swept his hat off his head: *Au revoir messieurs, bonne chance!*

Amitav GHOSH

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Amitav Ghosh is the author of 8 novels. River of Smoke follows Sea of Poppies as the second of The Ibis Trilogy.

This excerpt is taken from Ghosh, Amitav, River of Smoke, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 2011, p 168-175

DAYS OF CANNIBALISM



THREE LOCATIONS – THREE ECONOMIES

THE HOTEL | THE BAR | THE CATTLE POST

Days of Cannibalism is a film about the people living in the shadow of the China/Africa trade axis.

It starts in a hotel in Guangzhou, China and moves to a bar in a village called Ha Sekake, in Lesotho, Southern Africa that leads to a cattle post in Lesotho's high mountains.

It's a film about three economies:

It moves from the hotel where the import/export economy of global capitalism plays out, to the small scale capitalism in the village with its bar called Days of Cannibalism to the violence of a cattle raid.

Cows to the Basotho have a greater than monetary value; they are traditionally an extension of the self, so a cattle raid is an act of metaphoric cannibalism and is thus at the very core, a metaphor for what happens in the other two locations and economic systems.





























Teboho Edkins

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Teboho Edkins is a film maker. These photographs are part of the research for Days of Cannibalism, a film project in development that takes place between Guangzhou and Lesotho.

Images courtesy of Teboho Edkins.





After the Plague



The exhibition *A Journal of the Plague Year: Fear, Ghosts, Rebels, SARS, Leslie and the Hong Kong Story* takes its name from *A Journal of the Plague Year*, a novel published in 1722 by English author Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) which depicts London under siege by the plague that struck the city in 1665. 'Defoe goes to great pains to achieve an effect of verisimilitude, identifying specific neighborhoods, streets, and even houses in which events took place. Additionally, [the book] provides tables of casualty figures and discusses the credibility of various accounts and anecdotes received by the narrator.'¹ Whether the *Journal* should be regarded as fiction or as an historical account with facts to back it up was a controversial subject in the eighteenth century when the book was published. With the appearance of the new genre of the 'historical novel' early the following century, 'other literary critics have [since] argued that the work can indeed be regarded as a work of imaginative fiction, and thus can justifiably be described as an "historical novel".'² Seen from this perspective, I would say the Para Site exhibition has appropriated the historical novel form to explore the dialectics of history writing and its oscillations between the excavation and construction of evidence. Documents, ephemera, and contemporary

works of art are displayed side by side to guide the viewer in and out of two worlds: one solid and the other floating, engaging sensory as well as reflective faculties in an exploratory experience.

The subtitle of the exhibition works as a montage of sorts and speaks to a chain of events that forms people's collective memories: boiled vinegar, face masks, quarantines, Amoy Gardens, death tolls, an infected city, Leslie Cheung's suicide, 500,000 people coming together to rally against Article 23 on July 1.... And thus Hong Kong is changed...

Fundamental to the exhibition is the evocation of the haunting imagery brought on by the traumas of SARS and Cheung's suicide. In the words of Natalia Chan, Cheung's death became a legend: 'the tragedies and damage of the SARS epoch are infused into his flesh and blood.'³ The exhibition abounds with documents and works that stand on their own right and yet engage in dialogues with one another that bring them into being poetically. Abandoned and shadowy souls are depicted in paintings by Firenze Lai. Magazine clippings, music albums, and stiletto heels cobble together portraits of Leslie Cheung in show business. An eerie scene from *Vanilla Sky* of

the male protagonist lost in broad daylight on empty New York streets plays over and over again in a never-ending loop. Historic photographs of 1894 plague cases serve as reminders of past epidemic horrors. Stills ingrained with murkiness by photographer Bernd Behr (2003-2007) capture the SARS site at Amoy Gardens. A pair of blood-stained straw shoes – remnants from the Sino-Japanese War – evidence the biological warfare waged by the Japanese Army's 731 battalion (collected by James T Hong). The medical pathology records of mid-nineteenth century Lam Qua (whose original name was Kwan Kiu Cheung) are treated as artistic portraits. Select cuts of the movie *Farewell My Concubine* play. Adrian Wong's chicken-kissing photo defies the inherent threat posed by intimate contact with the SARS host (*Chicken Kiss*, 2007). Tozer Pak's July 1 protest march (from his works that appeared in newspapers) is documented.

Poet, literary critic, scholar, and cinephile Natalia Chan undertook in-depth studies of Leslie Cheung, demonstrating the indulgence and obsession of a fan (Chan followed Leslie for over 20 years) as well as presenting cogent arguments and analyses that had taken her deep into the nooks and crannies of Cheung's life. In her eyes Cheung was a 'butterfly of forbidden colours', 'his delicateness, vulnerability, glamour, luminosity, pride, and loudness representing a forbidden, foreboding, forbidding, and discarded type of colour that is not of this conventional world, and [is

hence deemed] unacceptable.' ⁴ In Chan's analysis, Cheung was a forbidden colour in body and gender politics. Let's begin with his name: Cheung's English name, Leslie, is gender-neutral, therefore flagging his gender orientation. Then one can consider his sensuous and exquisite looks: a male body with female sensibilities, an air of nobility belonging to the upper class, a gaze that sends come-hither signals, a delicate beauty denoting a tenderness that is completely feminine. More importantly, with his actor-auteur consciousness, Cheung brings forth his own subjectivity. In the early 1990s Cheung made a comeback in show business, taking on roles that challenged him in every sense, roles that were acrobatic and gymnastic, floating around the transgender margins and subverting the rigidity of conventional rules about gender and sexuality. In his concert his attire was at once male and female. Through costume changes, he roamed the in-between frontiers of the two genders. He made the utmost effort to fight for the leading female-portrayed-by-a-male role in *Farewell My Concubine*. However, with his performance he successfully subverted the homophobia inherent in the movie, reaffirming his artistic talent and his out-of-the box creativity. ⁵

Reading Natalia Chan's appraisal of Leslie Cheung's achievements and position as an artist reminds me of the insight offered by poet and critic Jass Leung, who reviewed the reprised performance of the Yuan dynasty opera *The Logbook of Ghosts* by



Yang Kang

1830-1850

Lam Qua, *Portrait no 48.*

Oil on canvas

Image courtesy of Yale University,

Harvey Cushing/John Hay Whitney Medical Library and Para/Site

Zuni Icosahedron in 2009, and argued that 'ghosts [are] a spiritual consciousness that exist in the margins of the human world, [and that] the Yuan opera points to an artistic medium that has more penetrating power than mainstream knowledge and value systems.'⁶ Despite being one of the few pan-Asian superstars and an idol to millions, Cheung, in the margins, never found out where he truly belonged.

An overly strong sense of subjectivity naturally induces in others the fear and anxiety of being marginalised. Hong Kong artist Ricky Yeung's performance, *Man and Cage* (1987), featuring him bare chested, painted with oils, and caged for forty-eight hours, speaks directly to the fears and worries of Hong Kong people about integration with China during the 1997 transition. China and Hong Kong are immensely and intensely bound, and in conflict that cannot be untangled or resolved easily. The serious problem of parallel imports of baby milk formulae at the border and the influx of pregnant Chinese mainlanders on return visas entering Hong Kong to give birth, are reflections of these fears and worries. In 2013 Hong Kong people put an advertisement in the newspaper to object to the visits of these pregnant women on return visas; they even compared these women's children to locusts. The plague overtook Hong Kong in 1894, giving rise to 'a dubious association of the disease with Asia and heightening the "yellow peril" scares in Europe and America at the time.'⁷ Have Hong Kong's trials been

in vain? *Liquid Borders* (2012-13), an audio collage by local artist Samson Yeung, is a first-hand attempt by the artist to record, on location, the sounds of vibrations of the metal fence at the border and of the Shenzhen River, before the disappearance of the restricted area at the border between China and Hong Kong. In Yeung's mind, more obstructive than the physical fence is the invisible wall of cultural values, attitude, and consciousness separating the two places. *Taipei 101: A Travelogue of Symptoms* (2004) by American-Chinese artist, James T Hong, is a video production about the experience of an American-Chinese finding his roots in Taiwan, 'discovering to his surprise [that] Taiwanese culture has apparently been invaded forcefully by American culture, and has become so polluted that it's been globalised as well as Americanised, appropriated by capitalism and cross-border white supremacy.'⁸ *A Travelogue of Symptoms* was shot during the period of SARS; in the film the off-camera coughing sounds become a metaphor for the 'invasion.'

In 2013, ten years after SARS, Leslie Cheung's passing, and July 1, how do these layered memories resonate? Underneath all the changes, does anything remain or repeat itself? What seems most disturbing is not always the plague but the amnesia. In Hong Kong novelist Dung Kai Cheung's *Atlas* (1997), a chapter entitled 'The Curse of Tai Ping Shan'⁹ keeps readers contemplating long after they put the book down.

The sad history of Tai Ping Shan was then buried under the flowers and birdsong of Blake Garden. Giant banyan trees locked in the souls of the dead, their benign roots driving out putrid vapours so that everything implied by the name 'Peace Mountain' came true. From then on peace spread as widely as the plague had once done. It eroded the memories of Victoria's inhabitants, while also bequeathing the symptoms of forgetfulness to later generations, so that people eventually began to doubt that Tai Ping Shan had been the home of their forefathers, just as they also failed to realise that many directors of the earliest charitable institution in the entire city, Tung Wah Hospital, had been opium merchants. A small number still obstinately believed in the story of Tai Ping Shan but were no longer able to find any clues to its existence on maps.

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A Journal of the Plague Year: Fear, Ghosts, Rebels, SARS, Leslie and the Hong Kong Story was curated by Cosmin Costinas, Executive Director of Para Site, and Inti Guerrero, Independent Curator.

1| http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Journal_of_the_Plague_Year. (Accessed on 20 June 2013).

2| Ibid.

3| Chan, Natalia, *Butterfly of Forbidden Colours: The Artistic Image of Leslie Cheung*, Joint Publishing, Hong Kong, 2008, p 22. (In Chinese)

4| Chan, p 25.

5| Ibid.

6| <http://leungjass.blogspot.hk/2009/05/blog-post.html>. (Accessed on 20 June 2013).

7| http://urbannomadfilmfest.blogspot.de/2009/12/blog-post_08.html. (Accessed on 15 August 2013).

8| See *A Journal of the Plague Year* exhibition brochure.

9| Dung Kai Cheung, 'The Curse of Tai Ping Shan,' *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City*,, Dung Kai Cheung, Anders Hansson, and Bonnie S McDougall, trans., Columbia University Press, New York, 2012. Para Site has reprinted the chapter in chapbook format and distributed it as a free artwork at the exhibition.

Phoebe Wong

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Phoebe Wong is a Hong Kong-based researcher and writer dedicated to art, design and visual media.





Ricky Yeung Sau-churk
Man Inside the Cage, 1987

The Critical Dictionary For Southeast Asia: *W* for *Weretiger*

W

A common notion found throughout the peoples of Southeast Asia is that there are some individuals who have the ability to magically transform themselves into tigers.

The basis for this belief lies in the ambiguity of the tiger's association with people: the two species occupy similar ecological niches, in which they neither have a relationship of direct competition or mutual cooperation. The tiger's preferred habitat is an ecologically liminal or transitional zone: spaces near water and at the edges of forests. Similarly, the people of Southeast Asia had historically settled along water, while their agricultural activities created forest edges, the tiger's preferred transitional zone. The agricultural produce of men

attracted deer, pigs, and monkeys, which in turn attracted the tigers that hunted them, leading tigers to populate the liminal areas between villages and the forest.

People have a tendency to attribute human-like qualities to the animals they live in close proximity with. Thus, tigers are sometimes believed to live in villages, subject to rulers, and with their own social structures and rules. Occasionally these tigers transform into humans, a magical act that usually takes place in the crossing of a boundary such as passing through a tunnel or swimming across a river. These tiger-people were thought to be dangerous, and were feared, although they were not necessarily always considered evil.

To the peoples of Southeast Asia, tigers embodied the power of nature, which was essentially ambiguous. The forest was a space outside civilisation and beyond human control, but it was also the place where magical herbs for healing could be gathered. In this sense, tigers were guardians and emissaries from the forest, passing between nature and culture, a boundary also traversed by shamans, who are in turn also attributed with the power to transform into tigers. This relationship with the tiger is apparent in the healing rituals of some village shamans: their hands may appear to change into tiger claws, or their behaviors might take on aspects of a tiger. Sometimes, the presence of tigers can even be perceived to be beneficial to a human community, as they help to rid cultivated land of foragers. And since the protection of crops is a task usually assigned to the community's ancestors, it is perhaps unsurprising that a partial merger should occur between tigers and ancestors: tigers are sometimes perceived as ancestor spirits, and as such, they might even be regarded as enforcers of ancestral rules, punishing offenders, but also guarding their descendants' property.

This symbolic web between tigers, ancestors and shamans should be differentiated from that of magicians

who magically transform into were-tigers for their own, usually nefarious purposes. The magician's purpose for transforming into a tiger can range from a taste for raw flesh to murderous intent. These transformational processes sometimes require the magician to go some distance from the village, where he will shed civilisation by the removal of his clothes, followed by the recitation of a magical formula. This process can sometimes be facilitated by the use of a piece of tiger skin or a yellow and black striped piece of cloth. Sometimes, it is said that the transformation requires one to somersault – occasionally through one's own urine, creating the sign of the spiral, which in turn evokes water, traditionally understood as a passage to the underworld.

The tiger is an inhabitant of the liminal zone between the civilised and the wild, and as such, the relationship between the human and the tiger is one of deep ambiguity. As manifestations of protective ancestral spirits they can be considered a force for good, but when a man takes the form of a tiger outside the community, such actions are considered to be beyond the pale. He is thought to have forsaken humanity, to be out of touch with 'God' or the creative power of the universe.

The Critical Dictionary Of Southeast Asia

Closed in on the north by the impenetrable mountain complex of the eastern Himalayas, and gradually broken off into an archipelagic swarm of islands in the South that are finally rounded by the massive geological arcs of Sumatra and Java is a region of bewildering multitudes, a region that has never been interpolated by the force of a single language, polity, tradition, or religion.

The Critical Dictionary Of Southeast Asia springs from a simple question: what constitutes the unity of this region? And it proceeds by engaging thinkers and artists working on, and in Southeast Asia to speculate on a series of motifs that cut across the boundaries of nation states and slip through the borders of academic disciplines. While their collective vibrations promise to deliver a song of the region, a Southeast Asia manifested not by reason, but resonance.

Text by Robert Wessing with images by Ho Tzu Nyen. W for Weretiger is the first entry in the Critical Dictionary for South East Asia, a research project developed out of Ho Tzu Nyen's residency at AAA.

Robert Wessing

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Robert Wessing is an anthropologist who obtained his Ph.D. at the University of Illinois, Urbana. His main interest lies within Southeast Asia, value systems and symbolic reality, and religion.

Ho Tzu Nyen

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Ho Tzu Nyen makes films, videos and theatrical performances. His interests include history, philosophy and the relationship between sound and image.



FOREST



DEFORESTATION



British road survey disruption



a leaf can be a tree



BRITISH COLONIALISM



In the liminal zone between the river and the forest live tigers & men - a tale in shadows



Buffalo-Tiger fights

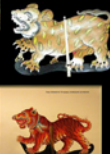
Deforestation leads to Man - tiger encounters
Man killed by tigers become weretigers



TIGER HUNTS
tiger vs capitalism



Shadows to Photos to TABLEAU VIVANTS
The Natives/Humans



The **SHAMAN** is a weretiger; he summons tiger spirit and bless performance



Ethnographic tableau



puppets (on sticks), moved by hands without bodies



HOUSE
Southeast Asian houses between forest and water. They are on legs/sticks: protection from water and tigers



puppeteers



KINGDOM of WATER: sacred Hindu substance flux and change



SIVA S



EMPIRE of RAIN

IRRIGATION HYDRAULICS - key to state power
sedentary men - tax and military power



Water + Ocean of Stories



Water brings life and also **DISEASES**, epidemics result in unburied corpses and give tigers taste for human flesh



Region of Archipelago a labyrinth of infin hallucinations



ted



: WERETIGERS



ITS on TIGER

Water brings mixture: trade piracy colonialism

+ Evaporation

lagoes, site

a story of flags



in the forest, shadows and rising sun



Japanese Army: swift in forest savage, amphibious and cunning (like tigers returned)



JAPANESE OCCUPATION - Tableau vivant - hunting British - dead soldiers talk - ghosts in the forests



General Yamashita The Tiger of Malaya



Malayan Anti-Japanese Army. Guerilla battles against Japanese in forest MALAYAN COMMUNISM



BRITISH RETURN and hunt the Communists in Forest (sometimes hunted by tigers)



Miniature forest: bonsai flows to external space

BRITISH order COMMUNIST HUNT with cash rewards



Voices of the past

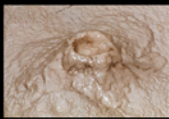


History of Communism and the left suppressed in Malaya

INDEPENDENT SINGAPORE rides the Communist Tiger, then betrays them



KINGDOM of HUMIDITY



Actual junk + Mud



Evaporation: heating coil

Objects rot (mixtures) histories evaporate MALAYA = EMPIRE of DECAY, KINGDOM of ROT







Spatializing the Contemporary, Philippine-Style

I want to finish drawing this navigational map, this inventory—fluctuating and mobile....Once this work is done it will be clearly seen that all the rapports I traced out either followed or invented a possible road across the ensemble of movements from place to place. Note that this maritime chart, an ocean of possible routes, fluctuates and does not remain static like a map. Each route invents itself.

-Michel Serres

The island is a mountain under water, and a mountain, an island that is still dry.

-Gilles Deleuze¹

In a Museum Educators Forum in 2009 National Museum of the Philippines Curator Elenita Alba recounted an exhibition strategy conceived by then-director of the Museum Corazon Alvina and University of the Philippines art studies professor Patrick Flores which saw the deliberate juxtaposition of the display of the museum's ethnographic artifacts with the exhibition of contemporary art pieces. In a practice that departs from 'traditional presentations,' Alvina and Flores were reportedly able to elicit a 'positive response' from museum-goers otherwise 'extremely tired of what they usually see... from the old collections.'² Citing the example of Roberto Feleo's installation on the Bagobo (an indigenous community in Mindanao), Alba observes that having it set among ethnographic artifacts earned it the public's interest and that the museum's 'old collections' themselves, as a consequence, could have evinced renewed interest among spectators.

Something of this 'wholistic approach' is ostensibly behind 'The Philippine Contemporary: To Scale the Past and the Possible,' the permanent exhibition of modern and contemporary Philippine art launched early this year at the Metropolitan Museum of Manila. In an interview with the newly-appointed Director of the Tina Colayco and the exhibition's curator Patrick Flores, journalist John Magsaysay notes that with 'The Philippine Contemporary,' the Museum marks a major shift in its own history and practices as a Filipino cultural institution. 'Once the fortress of pre-colonial fineries and colonial fine art,' the Museum now seems to display 'such penchant for the art of the new and upcoming...[and it] is indeed an exciting movement in our awakening local art scene.'

The impetus for this initiative stems, Flores affirms, in the philosophy of ‘art for all’ conceived—although, for the longest time, more preached than practiced—in the aftermath of the 1986 People Power Revolution, ‘when there was a shift from international art to art for all’ in the aspirations of local art practitioners and galleries or museums. He suggests that a reorientation in the Philippines toward local audience development has taken place, from the long-running obsession, since the time of early modernists, with Philippine art and artists making significant breakthroughs into international art circuits.³

Featuring 220 artworks, ‘The Philippine Contemporary’ is described by Flores as ‘a historical survey from 1915, the Amorsolo period up to the present...almost a century’s worth of Philippine art in one exhibition.’⁴ Occupying the upper level galleries of the MET, it takes the viewer from a statement of curatorial concepts (rendered in English, with Filipino translations) at the entrance through three wings spanning the eastern and northern sides of the exhibition space and representing its major sections titled ‘Horizon/*Abot-Tanaw* (1915-1964),’ ‘Trajectory/*Tinatahak* (1965-1983),’ and ‘Latitude/*Lawak* (1984-Present).’ It is an itinerary that loops back to the western and southern ends where changing exhibits are earmarked for the sections ‘Sphere/*Palibot*’ and ‘Direction/*Tunguhin*,’ spaces dedicated ‘to a deeper study of particular themes, artists, art worlds, styles, and movements,’ with ‘Direction/*Tunguhin*,’ in particular, ‘as the laboratory or workshop [it] is envisioned to become, a becoming that will move to the rhythm of the art it invites.’

In the absence of a published catalogue or a brochure to guide the viewer, a comprehensive timeline forms part of the wall texts, interposed and elaborated in various forms (e.g. the rare Philippine Art Gallery scrapbook from the 1950s; or video montage in monitors) along the exhibition’s wings and hallways. This timeline lists and tags noteworthy moments in the development of Philippine contemporary art, from the *historico-political* (such as the ‘living exhibits’ of Filipino natives at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair, or the protest action of artist David C Medalla against the Cultural Center of the Philippines in 1969) through the *institutional* (like the founding of the School of Fine Arts at the University of the Philippines in 1909, or the creation by the state of a National Commission for Culture and the Arts in 1992); and from the *stylistic* (for instance, the advent of the modernist mode dubbed as ‘Neo-Realism’ by writer-painter E Aguilar-Cruz in 1949, or the recognition of electronic art and digitality as signified by the launch of online journal *Ctrl+P* in 2006) through the *industrial* (say, the institution of national art competitions by sponsors like Shell in 1951, or the establishment of the Art Association of the Philippines in 1954).

Highlighted are the art movements or artists' collectives. One preeminent example concerns the challenges posed by Philippine modernists (beginning with Edades and his cohort in the interwar period and peaking with the formation of the Thirteen Moderns group in 1941) to the dominance of the so-called 'conservatives' and academic painting; and how the Moderns' own subsequent sway over the country's art scene would be disputed, in turn, by a motley of other tendencies like those represented by the 'social realists' of the 1970s and late Marcos-era, and post-dictatorship conscientized or iconoclastic artists.

An exhibition of this scale and scope is bound to raise questions about its breadth and depth, and what it recognizes or marginalizes. In his case Flores reveals that he had to

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The world's newest island

It is an island that did not exist just two days ago, made up of mud and rocks forced up through the sea off the Pakistani coast by a huge earthquake that struck the country on Tuesday. Despite being warned to stay away, locals yesterday climbed the island, which is about 20 metres high, 30 metres long and 75 metres wide and sits about 220 metres off the southern coast near the town of Gwadar. But the island is not expected to last long. A similar island created by a quake in 1945 disappeared soon after. Photo: AFP > FULL REPORT ASIA AIO

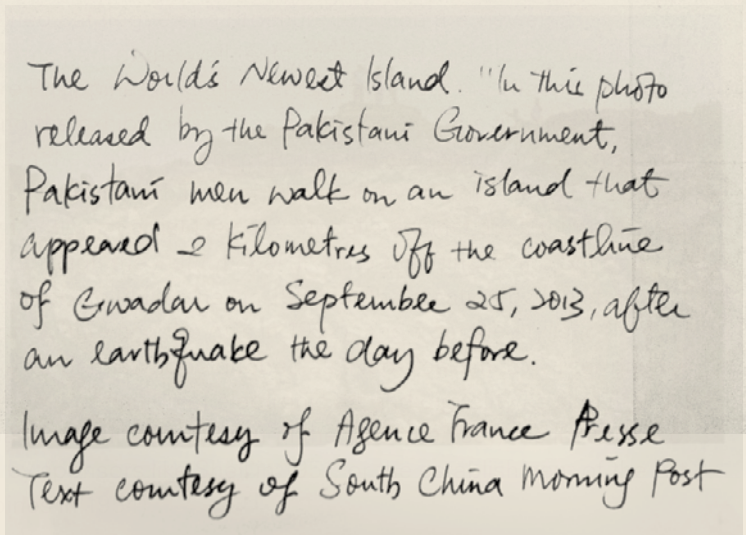


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In the absence of a comprehensive timeline, various forms (e.g. the montage in monitors, tags noteworthy moments in the historico-political scene at the World’s Fair, or the presence of the Philippines in the Department of Fine Arts at the University of the Philippines, for instance, the advent of E Aguilar-Cruz in 1990, the launch of online national art competitions, and the Association of the P



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An exhibition of this scale and scope is bound to raise questions about its breadth and depth, and what it recognizes or marginalizes. In his case Flores reveals that he had to work from a carefully negotiated mix of personal taste, 'institutional validations of the art world,' and what can be adjudged as 'the importance of [a] practice in its particular field.'⁵ While there is certainly little space for extended explanations about the choices made for any exhibition, a catalogue could have included a summarative account of the exhibition's own process of canon-making. With the exception of some enlightenment enabled by the curatorial statement (in the wall texts), and the timeline, viewers would not find the choices of artworks and practices, and their constellations together, self-explanatory or evident.

The Philippine Contemporary: A Conceptual and Cultural Critique

One is particularly struck by the spatial or cartographic metaphors organizing the sections, and by the exhibition's audience-friendly orientation in Philippine terms, the intent and attempt to develop what may be called a 'strategic insularity' that could appeal to local cultural sensibilities. Otherwise understood as a 'politics of vernacularization' in Philippine literary, cultural, and historical studies in recent years, which means both the localization and transposition of the outside or exogenous within, this strategic insularity speaks to the endemic difficulties and limitless possibilities of imagining community (both its tradition and modernity) in a nation fractured and fragmented by its archipelagic geography and corresponding ethnocultural heterogeneity (complicated all the more by the accelerating diasporic dispersals of Filipinos across the globe within the past three or so decades).

From the standpoint of late-modern critical theory, reception aesthetics (in literature, 'reader-response' models) seem to undergird the decision to render the curatorial statements and categories in bilingual terms, that is, in the postcolonial language of American English and in the national language of Tagalog-based Filipino.⁶ Simultaneously, Flores' recourse to a language that lexically alludes to and mixes the vocabularies of topology and nesology feeds into this reorientation inwards in 'insular' ways, which is to say the hailing or interpellation of Filipino viewers and readers as the exhibition's primary or prioritized audience:

This exhibition tries to map the history of modern and contemporary art in the Philippines. It imagines itself as a project that scales the past and the possible.... The past and the possible are gathered as distinct articulations of time and place as well as common experiences of passage....The past is history, culture, and tradition. The possible is the future, expectation, and hope. The past and the possible both partake of circumstance and context, and therefore of chance. Here is the opportunity to create conditions that animate the vital role of art and its effort to rethink the present progressively and retroactively and as the agent and portent of what is yet to come.⁷

Reckoning with modern and contemporary Philippine art according to the 'passage' of historical time (past, possible/future, present), Flores clarifies that this 'passage' is better interpreted in spatial rather than in temporal fashion, describing the exhibition concept as

....an attempt to initiate a plot: a story, a piece of ground, a scheme, a perimeter, a map. Thus, the metaphors defining this task come from wayfarers, settlers, migrants, world makers: horizon, trajectory, latitude, sphere, direction. It invites the audience to be cartographers of the contemporary themselves, charting their own course along, against, through, and beyond this rendering of the routes of the modern and the contemporary.

Here it is important that Flores chooses to emphasize the term 'plot' over 'narrative.' In literary fiction, we often make a distinction between plot and what French narratologists call *histoire* (story, also history), the former to refer to the sequence of events and moments as chosen and arranged to produce meaningful relationships between and among them, and the latter to refer to the relatively fuller order of events in their natural

(usually chronological) duration. In emplotment, two events otherwise removed from each other in terms of sequential time might be brought together in a relationship of contiguity to suggest parallelism or repetition (and not causation), for example. Defining a concept at work in the exhibition's emplotment (or its 'writing'), Flores spatializes sequentiality: 'The word scale refers to how a relationship is seen in terms of distance, value, dimension and how it is grasped from a perspective, a milieu, an environment, a 'sudden vicinity of things.'⁸

The conceptuality behind 'The Philippine Contemporary,' in seeming accord with topological notions of time and nesological categories of space, is probably resounding more exciting ideas about Philippine (or islander) notions of contemporaneity and temporality, the 'nature and culture' of the Philippines as '*katubigan-kapuluhan*' (maritime/archipelagic), and culturally specific perspectives than it might have actually intended.⁹ In asking its Filipino audiences to function as 'cartographers of the contemporary themselves,' the exhibition is practically interpellating them to engage and affirm, in Epeli Hau'ofa's words, 'the contemporary process of what may be called world enlargement that is carried out by tens of thousands of ordinary Pacific Islanders right across the ocean—from east to west and north to south... making nonsense of all national and economic boundaries, borders that have been defined only recently, crisscrossing an ocean that had been boundless for ages...' For another, inhabiting the itinerant position of such passants, local audiences are then empowered to reconstellate what they view in so many possible ways in synchrony (rather than diachrony) with their own emplotments or 'writing' of personal and communal histories. As philosopher of science and of art, Michel Serres, in explaining his emphasis on chaos theory, percolation, and turbulence (which are themselves 'nesological' realities) to theorize time and history topologically, over against the tendency to think about both as measured intervals or determinate periods, as progression, argues: 'We must bring the word pass closer to *passoir*—'sieve.' Time doesn't flow; it percolates....In Latin the verb colare, the origin of the French verb *couler*, 'to flow,' means precisely 'to filter.' In a filter one flux passes through, while another does not.'¹⁰

What might seem like the 'anything goes' or 'disordering' that conceivably ensues from such a 'perspective, milieu, environment, a "sudden vicinity of things";' with respect to historical time or development, for example, isn't really so; it is to what the philosopher and art critic Jacques Rancière would 'give the generic name of literarity [*littérarité*].' This 'disordering' [*dérèglement*] which he finds germane to 'writing' (here understood as the emplotments, mayhap the 'scaling,' of art history and historical contexts, in which

curator and citizen/viewer are supposed to be commonly invested) 'constitutes a graver challenge for thought, perhaps, than the disorders of poetic fiction' itself. Strikingly calling the units and methodological protocols of this writing/disordering 'word-islands that silt across the channeled river of *logos*,' Rancière beautifully discerns that 'they re-carve [*redécoupent*] the space that is between bodies and that regulates their community. They outline, on the topography of the community, another topography. And this topography divides up the insular spaces of another community: the community governed by the letter and by its islands, that is to say democracy.'¹¹

The democracy, 'the art for all' philosophy, by which Flores and the MET abide, and that is summoned forth by 'The Philippine Contemporary' is, as Rancière would say according to his theory of 'the distribution of the sensible,' subject to 'verification.'¹² If one considered the 'word-islands' figured in the wall texts, and does so by way of rhetorical analysis of the democratic language, the language of the people (Tagalog-based Filipino) in which the curatorial statements are simultaneously cast, other kinds of emplotment/writing concerning Philippine art and its contemporaneity become possible and conceivable. By looking at the conceptions of the exhibition linguistically, taking seriously its emplotment/writing of modern and contemporary art in the Philippines betwixt and between two linguistic registers, one might indeed be able to think vectorially,¹³ to consider such art as vehicle and make sense of it, divine its direction/s, the temporal trajectories it takes, its movements and transformations; and to do all these, in terms of 'disordering' and a practicable idea of democracy (in letter, of letters, of emplotment/writing), a Rancièrian 'literarity.'

For instance, Flores observes for the viewer/reader, as if inviting them to weigh in, that 'Surely, the notions of the modern and the contemporary as aspects of the new and the now continue to be discussed, subjected to spirited critiques.' Translated thusly, the passage displays a certain paradox: '*Tiyak na ang mga palagay hingil sa Modern at Contemporary ay bahagi ng bago at ngayon at patuloy na tinatalakay, hinaharap sa masiglang kritika.*' The rendition leaves the keywords Modern and Contemporary untranslated, or to use a term Flores apparently prefers over 'translation,' they become a matter of 'transposition' (he brings up the latter term to describe the vernacularization or localization of the Spanish *naturaleza*, in the section on 'Direction/*Tunguhin*').¹⁴ It might be that there is no rough equivalent in the vernacular for Modern, given that the closest morpheme available, *Makabago*, would seem to limit the complex and multiple senses of the term Modern to the fetishism for novelty and rhetoric of rupture inhering in, but not fully exhausting, its acceptations in (Western) philosophical discourses

about modernity (and modernism). The case of Contemporary and the various ways in which it has been theorized of late, however, can be more than adequately captured by any of the words *Magkapanahon*, *Magkapanabay*, or *Magkaalinsabay* (meaning, 'simultaneous' or 'astride/alongside each other,' which is to say, made 'to share in the same space of time,' 'to be at the same time,' fundamental senses to topological and nesological understandings of Contemporary and contemporarity). On the one hand, to so transpose the English *Modern* and *Contemporary* into the domain of the vernacular is precisely to implement contemporarity between the master/postcolonial language and the language of the *demos*. On the other hand, it is paradoxically to suggest that



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Ang Soe with Affandi at Rabindranath Tagore's
ashram in 1951 in Santiniketan, India. Image
originally published in Sumichan, Sardjana (ed.)
Affandi, Jakarta: Bina Lestari Budaya Foundation
Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2007, p. 202.

Image courtesy of

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=593172870733>

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The exhibition presents '...an attempt to initiate a plot: a story, a piece of ground, a scheme, a perimeter, a map.' /*pagtatangkang pasimulan ang isang banghay: katha, kinatatayuan, balangkas, hangganan, mapa.*' The choice of *banghay* for 'plot' emphasizes the sense of 'structure, scaffolding' or the order underneath the disorder through which emplotment/writing grapples with chaotic, turbulent, percolating time in the exhibition's context and concepts. *Katha* ('creation') for 'story' performs a similar semantic exorbitation as, more than the near-equivalent word available, *salaysay* (narrative, story), it foregrounds the sense of creativity involved in the act of story-making and storytelling encouraged in the ordinary citizen. For 'a piece of ground,' the selection of *kinatatayuan*, while approximate to the concept of 'footing' or 'foothold' being suggested, is not as specific as *tuntungan*, which could have better evoked both the precarity and rootedness of location (here of the islandic/islander) that the English phrasing clearly and simultaneously signifies. 'Scheme' is better understandable to Filipinos not as *balangkas* (which means 'map') but as *balakin*, even *panukala* ('plan,' especially for a hermeneutic argument or communicative/expressive intent, what Mikhail Bakhtin would call 'speech plan,' and which, one supposes, is being meant by the deployment of 'scheme' here in contradistinction to map/mapping, to describe the 'plot' that the exhibition 'initiates').¹⁵ *Hanggan* for 'perimeter' presents a special problem because what it would mean in English for Filipinos would be 'border' or 'boundary,' even 'frontier.' A more proximal word-choice, perhaps, is *kaligiran* (or 'surrounding/s;' an elaborative phrasing in Filipino, to convey the sense of 'the circumambient measure of one's surroundings' is *ang paikot na sukat ng paligid*). *Balangkas*, rather than the transliteral *mapa*, could have been better

reserved for 'map' as, in the vernacular, to map is understood as *balangkasin* (also synonymously, 'to graph').

The metaphors cited to describe the task of emplotment, the statement declares, relate to 'wayfarers, settlers, migrants, worldmakers: horizon, trajectory, latitude, sphere, direction (*maglalayag, dayo, nangingibang bayan, manlilikha ng mundo: abot-tanaw, tinatahak, lawak, palibot, tunguhin*).' Abot-tanaw for 'horizon' is poetic but where sea and sky meet (*ang guhit-tagpuan ng karagatan at kalawakan*), an everyday perceptual experience characteristic of islandic existence, is perhaps more appreciated by Filipinos as *panginorin* or *panginoorin* (which possesses the higher sense of divination, discernment). *Landasin* (passage) can substitute just as well for, if not better than, *tinatahak* for 'trajectory,' here in keeping with the Serresean concept of bringing the English 'pass' (or passage) closer to the French *passoir*. *Lawak* ('breadth' or 'expanse') to transpose 'latitude' in Filipino suffices, but it could have been paired with *laya* ('freedom,' even 'space') which, as Epeli Hau'ofa would say, islanders (Pacific, here Philippine) tend to take, reflexively, as their privilege, inhabiting as they do vast oceanic spaces, 'a sea of islands.' *Palibot* ('surrounding/s') might literally translate as 'sphere,' but like *lawak* with *laya*, and notwithstanding the cost of sacrificing translational parallelism, it could have also been paired with *katayuan* (in the sense of 'domain,' e.g. 'you belong to a higher social sphere,' perhaps in acknowledgment of the social distinctions or hierarchies that precisely the 'art for all' philosophy seeks to address or supervene). Finally, *tunguhin* for 'direction' as goal or purpose is certainly apt but in the vernacular, direction can also mean *pamamahala* or *panuto* (leadership, instruction), additional semantic layers that concur with the exhibition's call for its audiences to exercise creative and cartographic agency, to map their own interpretive trajectories in ways that would allow them to establish 'relations' between and among the moments or events of history and culture (across time/space) which they apprehend or with which they are confronted. 'Relations,' as Serres refreshingly perceives, 'are, in fact, ways of moving from place to place, or of wandering,' and most reassuringly, that the resulting 'ensemble of movements from place to place....this maritime chart, an ocean of possible routes, fluctuates and does not remain static like a map. Each route invents itself.'¹⁶

It is ultimately the topological and nesological considerations of the Contemporary, which the curatorial conceptions allude to, and invite intercultural and interlingual reflection on, which might form part of the distinctive contributions to artistic and critical discourses about it that the exhibition—as presentation style and as 'plot'—can make. In the aptitude and amplitude about thus contemporizing the Contemporary itself that the

curatorial statement expresses and enables,

This exhibition gestures towards the co-incidences of the past and the memory of the present. The feeling is that all is possible in the contemporary, conceived as a constantly extending and deepening constellation of art.

Bumabaling ang eksibisyong ito sa mga magkatiyap na pangyayari ng lumipas at sa gunita ng kasalukuyan. Ito ang pakiwari: na maaaring ang lahat sa contemporary, nahihihinuha bilang laging lumalawak at lumalawig na santalaan ng sining.¹⁷

Transposing the notion of ‘co-incidences’—between the past (*lumipas*) and the present (*kasalukuyan*), to limn or divine on the horizon (*panginoorin*) the glimmers of the ‘possible’ (*maaar*)—as *magkatiyap* (which, in Tagalog-based Filipino can mean ‘conjunctural, articulated together’), this exhibition leads to a ‘feeling’ (*pakiwari* can also be understood as ‘supposition’) that ‘all is possible,’ with the Contemporary seen as a ‘sphere’ (*katayuan*, as well as *palibot* or ‘environment/surrounding’) that is, in the end, boundless in scope and unlimited in scale (which *malawak*, *malawig* also additionally signify). In spatializing the Contemporary, the exhibition puts forth a cultural and critical problematic of it made all the more complex by a demos (*pamayanan*, in the Filipino language, the English ‘polity’) that is a *nesos* (‘island’ in English, or *pulo* as Filipinos would call the characteristic ‘piece of grounding’ on which, as a maritime and archipelagic network of communities, they secure a foothold, to stay rooted, on the one hand, and from which to explore/map their local worlds and the world/s yonder, on the other).

11 Michel Serres, *Michel Serres with Bruno Latour: Conversations on Science, Culture & Time [Eclaircissements]*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1995 [1990], p 105; Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and other Texts, 1953-1974*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Michael Taormina, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles and New York, 2002.

21 The transcription of ‘Pananaw’s Museum Educators Forum: Highlights and Anecdotes’ in *Pananaw: Philippine Journal of Visual Arts* 7, 2010, p 35-36.

31 ‘The Met’s New Guards & The Future of Philippine Contemporary Art’, *Philippine Star*, 2 February 2013.

4l Ibid.

5l Ibid.

6l The literary and cultural comparatist scholar Jason Pilapil Jacobo of Ateneo's Department of Filipino provided translation assistance to the curator. Many thanks to Professor Jacobo for facilitating my access to the translation typescript.

7l Patrick Flores, p 1. Michel Serres succinctly defines topology as 'the science of proximities and ongoing or interrupted transformations,' *Michel Serres with Bruno Latour: Conversations on Science, Culture & Time*, p 105. For a particularly useful introduction to nesology as the study of 'island forms' and 'the discursive production of insularity' (as well as their poetic, postcolonial, and geopolitical deployments), see Antonis Balasapoulos, 'Nesologies: Island Form and Postcolonial Geopoetics.' *Postcolonial Studies*, vol 11:1, 2008, p 9-26; an alternative current of the field but just as heuristically provocative and theoretically cogent goes by the name nissology, simply defined by Christian Dapraetere as 'the study of islands and islandness,' in 'The Challenge of Nissology: A Global Outlook on the World Archipelago [Part I: Scene Setting of the World Archipelago & Part II: The Global and Scientific Vocation of Nissology].' *Island Studies Journal* vol 3:1, 2008, p 3-16, 17-36. Developing their work independently in their fields of Pacific Islander studies, postmodern literary and cultural critique, and cultural anthropology, respectively, and with no apparent consciousness of the emergent notion of the nesological/nissological that their scholarly and critical work would enable, Epeli Hau'ofa, Antonio Benitez-Rojo and Marshall Sahlins may be said to have produced the 'classics' of this new and now-thriving field; see Hau'ofa, 'Our Sea of Islands', 1993 in *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 2008, Benitez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, trans. James Maraniss, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1995, and Sahlins, *Islands of History*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1985. Again, similarly and independently, the most exciting work to develop along nesological or nissological lines in the Philippines is in historiography and historical archeology, see Lars Raymond C Ubaldo, *patnugot*, ed., *Paglaya-Paglawud: Paglalayag at Ugnayan ng mga Pamayanan sa Kasaysayang Filipino [Upstreaming and Downstreaming: Seafaring and Relations Among Local Communities in Philippine History]*, ADHIKA and National Commission for Culture and the Arts, Manila, 2012.

8l The notion of scale/scaling, which, in 'seek[ing] passages connecting the local and the global' and being 'an intrinsic part of topological thought,' may enable, according to Paul Harris, 'a unique ability to reveal the large....by the small.' Paul Harris, 'The Itinerant Theorist: Nature and Knowledge/ Ecology and Topology in Michel Serres,' *SubStance*, vol 26.2, p 83 [An Ecology of Knowledge: Michel Serres Special Issue], 1997, p 50.

9l On the Philippines as 'katubigan-kapuluan' (maritime/archipelagic unit) and what this means in terms of its history of heterogenous community and cultural formation/s see Ubaldo, *patnugot*

ed., *Paglaya-Paglawud: Paglalayag at Ugnayan ng mga Pamayanan sa Kasaysayang Filipino [Upstreaming and Downstreaming: Seafaring and Relations Among Local Communities in Philippine History]*.

10| On islanders and 'world enlargement,' see Hau'ofa, 'Our Sea of Islands,' p 30. On the English 'pass' brought closer to the French 'passoir' and the French 'couler' returned to the Latin 'colare,' see *Michel Serres with Bruno Latour*, p 57.

11| Jacques Rancière, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, transl. Charlotte Mandell, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2004, p 103-104.

12| On Rancière's concept of *le partage du sensible* [sometimes translated as 'the partition of the perceptible'], including the presumption of equality in intelligence among all upon which it is predicated and the 'politics' (of *verification*) to which it is perpetually subjected (or by which, in his terms, it is 'subjectivated'), see *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 2000, trans. & intro. Gabriel Rockhill, Continuum, New York and London, 2004.

13| 'There is neither beginning nor end, there is a sort of vector... Vector: vehicle, sense, direction, the trajectory of time, the index of movement or of transformation.' *Michel Serres with Bruno Latour*, p 104.

14| Flores, p 1, 6.

15| Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist and transl. Vern W McGee, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1986.

16| *Michel Serres with Bruno Latour*, p 103, 105.

17| Flores, p 2.

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A PARALLEL NARRATIVE







(1)

Despite the economic diversification and technological advances in our world today, cultures remain separated, even isolated; the conceptual barriers that exist between them cause nations to misinterpret each other. The abyss separating cultures still remains.

Our images of the world we live in, our social identities, and our knowledge are largely based on a set of ideals. In *The Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche claimed that the products of a scientific pursuit of history might overwhelm weak minds and prevent future generations from undertaking their own projects of cultural reform and renewal. Gilles Deleuze responded to this theory by saying that the reality of history is not the same reality experienced by people.



Following this logic, I propose that Chinese sailors crossed the Pacific Ocean in search of what could be found on the other side. Contrary to what has been proven, when we observe archeological artefacts from pre-Hispanic America, we notice that they are very similar to those of societies elsewhere in the world, and that these different cultures used some of the same technologies.

The challenge in understanding the links between these two bodies of archeological pieces of art is in doing away with our preconceptions of the cultural functions of science and art. To investigate the similarities between Chinese and South American 'antiquity' without prejudice, we must find new ways to reconcile the apparent irrationality of visual evidence with the apparent rationality of the language of scholarly research.



(2)

The zenith is an imaginary point directly 'above' any particular location, vertically opposite to its apparent gravitational force, which pulls us towards the nadir.

The zenith works as a conceptual image, a powerful metaphor for the imaginary lines we draw between points and a useful tool in understanding how natural and political frontiers are in fact imaginary boundaries. The zenith illustrates how soft power, the power of attraction, functions.

The notion of the zenith helps us to chart a course toward a point that will never be reached, but will lead to other points along its path. We allow ourselves to be guided by it. The zenith is the conceptual device that sailors would have used to imagine the other side of the horizon.

The zenith is a notion that can also be applied to history, a political symbol illustrating how societies evolve. As a metaphor, it represents what keeps cultural systems isolated from one another, yet it could also function to demonstrate the way a culture integrates elements of other more powerful cultures. An isolated culture may conceive of itself as having reached its zenith when this integration is complete, but in fact it may just have disappeared. This image helps to explain how cultures evolve by looking for a point that can never be reached.

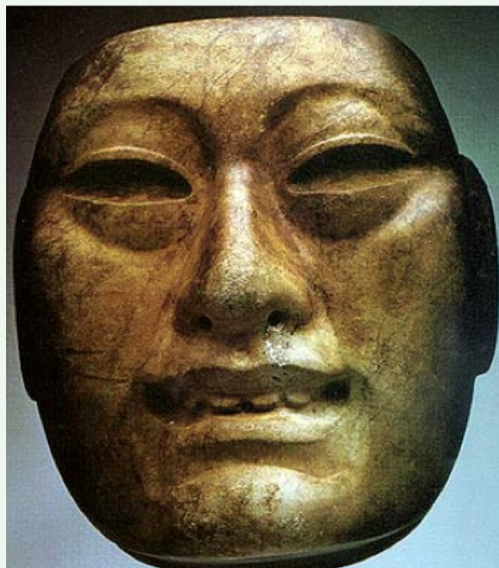
(3)

For the Chinese, the ocean was something to be afraid of. It contained monsters. If we observe the decorations in the Forbidden City we find many ocean monsters. The Chinese cosmological order may have discouraged attempts to explore and conquer the seas. The Chinese were a people of the land. For them the ocean represented the far end of the yang principle.

But we have uncovered evidence of travels by the Chinese of the early Ming Dynasty to places as far as Sri Lanka, the Arabian Peninsula, and east Africa. They even brought a giraffe back to China.

On both sides of the ocean, the representation of objects for both utilitarian and ritual purposes appears similar. In China and Mexico, jade was carved by the same technique and it is said that royal families from both sides of the ocean were buried with jade balls inside their mouths.

There are claims that antique objects from China and South America are so stylistically similar that it is not easy to identify their origins. The official academic hypothesis is that these similarities are the result of the 'Hegelian Spirit,' but when two archeological objects from both shores of the Pacific region are juxtaposed, it is clear that the similarities are beyond Hegelian concepts, and it is apparent that a social network was established between two cultures from Asia and America much before the Spaniards arrived in America.





(4)

As an historical fact, China was self-sufficient and needed nothing from the Indian Ocean or any other ocean, and the Chinese were concerned about the growing threat to their western land borders, in his book 1421, the Year China Discovered the World, the sailor and adventurer Gavin Menzies hypothesises a trip from China to the Americas made by Zheng He's great ships, a fleet ten times that of Columbus.

Is it so far-fetched then, in reading the style and technique of these archeological objects, to trace similarities in the stylistic evolution on both shores of the Pacific and recognise a relationship? Can we imagine a methodology based on this hypothesis, or on affinity, or on the zenith?

Recently divers discovered a big ship off the coast of Japan. The ship had been transporting commercial goods such as porcelain dishes, cups, and teapots, as well as many sculptures and other art objects. The water conserved these fine art pieces for many centuries and they came back to the air in a perfect state, as if they were just put on the bottom of the ocean a few hours before.

Francisco CAMACHO Herrera

As an artist Francisco Camacho seeks ways in which his work can exist within official social channels. His practice evolves around the possibility of art to bear practical effects on the cultural background and reflects on re-defining common concepts that can lead art to change the way in which we conceive society.

A Parallel Narrative is part of a video artwork project that hypothesises Chinese General Zheng He's travels to South America in the early 15th Century.

Supported by Mondriaan Foundation.

Contemporary Asian Art at the Guggenheim

'We are following the path that will lead to an international common ground where the arts of the East and the West will influence each other. And this is the natural course of the history of art.'

–Yoshihara Jir , 'A Statement by Jir Yoshihara: Leader of the Gutai,'
1958.

Presented as bolded text on the wall alongside the Guggenheim's recent major retrospective of the Gutai, the above quotation applies not only to the intention of the Japan-based Gutai artists, but also to recent curatorial programming at the Guggenheim. Unprecedented among Euroamerican institutions is the museum's recent focus on Asia as seen in the four exhibitions it hosted during spring 2013: 'Gutai: Splendid Playground,' 'Zarina: Paper Like Skin,' and 'No Country: Contemporary Art from South and Southeast Asia,' as well as a small exhibition by the latest Hugo Boss prize winner, Vietnamese-born Danh Vo. The museum's efforts to seamlessly integrate Asian-born artists into a larger canon of world art history is, at times, precarious, but generally successful in acknowledging alternative discourses that go beyond mere recuperation, or art history as 'salvage project.'

The curators of 'Splendid Playground,' Alexandra Munroe and Ming Tiampo, ask how viewers might renegotiate art history's long-held Western-centric assumptions regarding the origins and developments of different styles, discourses, innovations, and experiments. 'Splendid Playground' neither exploits a subaltern 'otherness' of non-Western, Japanese artists, nor ignores a series of alternative, and sometimes competing, narratives about modernism. While references to Western artists such as Jackson Pollock still make their way into the display, they are not included to authenticate Gutai or suggest it as merely derivative of Western artistic production; instead, Pollock is inserted into the conversation as an artist working contemporaneously with Gutai counterparts like Kazuo Shiraga and Kanayama Akira who chose to respond to Pollock in the mid-1950s in what they assumed as the international art world,

Other exhibitions concurrent to 'Splendid Playground' also attempt to work Asia into preexisting histories of art without necessarily subscribing to its assumptions. 'No Country' represents the Guggenheim's broader UBS MAP initiative, one that has enabled the museum to expand its collection of non-Western art. Although the show's title pointedly suggests a desire to avoid curation by national representation, the arbitrary pairing of South and Southeast Asia as a region ultimately creates new boundaries and categorisations that compromise the show's purported intentions. More successful is 'Paper Like Skin,' a retrospective of Indian American artist Zarina, whose work focuses on issues of boundaries, maps, notions of home, and the properties of paper. As an Indian-born artist who lived and trained all over the world, later settling in New York City in the 1970s, Zarina presents a relevant case study of an artist whose claim to international status is concurrently based on her geographical and artistic peripateticism. While these exhibitions move towards the disintegration of definitive borders as a way to integrate Asia into an established canon of art history, questions remain as to whether these efforts at disintegrating borders paradoxically delineate other boundaries as limiting as those these shows attempt to challenge.

GUTAI: Splendid Playground

Too often critics, art historians, and curators have framed the early works of Gutai -- namely those executed prior to their 'discovery' by French Art Informel theorist and critic Michel Tapié in 1958 -- as examples of 'action painting.' Emphasising the performative and gestural aspects of the Gutai artist's hands, feet, or body, 'action painting' as a category misses the extent to which the materials themselves were foregrounded. 'Action painting' implicitly highlights the agency of the artist through his or her active manipulation of the materials at hand, thus reiterating the status of the artwork as the inert product of the artist's labour. This narrative, which repeats the modernist paradigm of the artist-genius applying 'his' skillful creativity to a set of raw materials to produce an artwork, effectively loses sight of the degree to which the Gutai artists sought to explore the materials' virtual agency as inferred from how certain materials resist or challenge the physical efforts of the artist. As Yoshihara Jir points

out in the 'Gutai Art Manifesto,' 'When matter remains intact and exposes its characteristics, it starts telling a story and even cries out.'

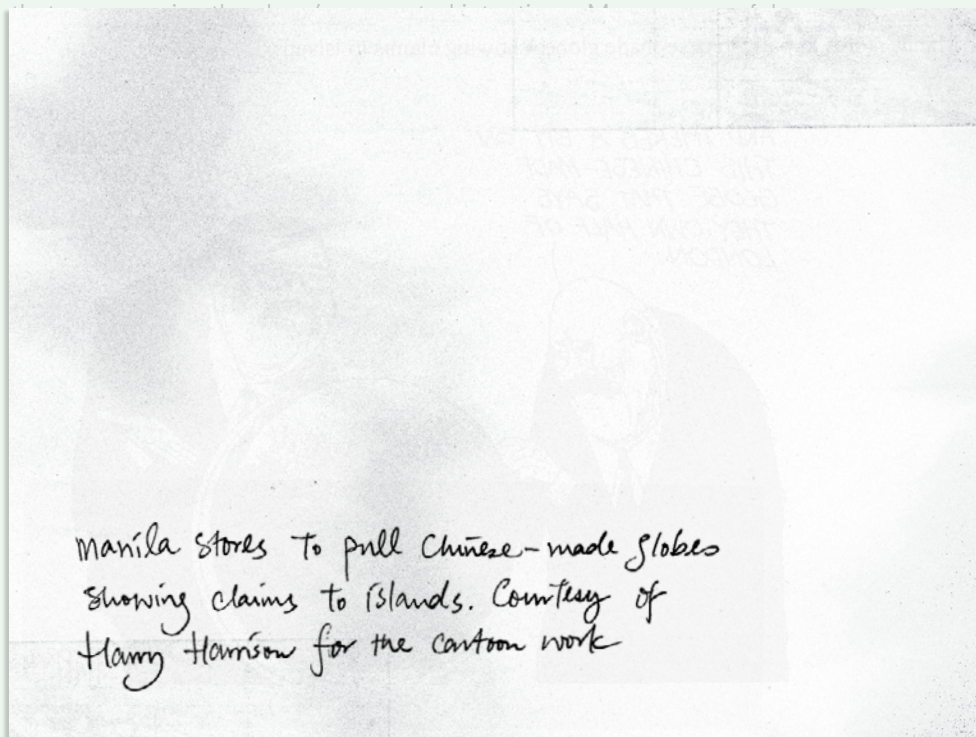
Featuring a collection of accompanying videos and documentary photographs displayed next to the Gutai artists' final 'paintings,' the curators of 'Splendid Playground' drew attention to a series of critical interactions between artists and their chosen materials. Murakami Sabur's *Passing Through* (1956) is the trace of an exhaustive battle between man and material whereby the artist ran through twenty-one

Manila stores to pull Chinese-made globes showing claims to islands



While the videos and photographs emphasise the performative aspect of these works, it is important to point out that the works were presented as paintings rather than performances or events. Hung upright on the wall, signed, and referred to as 'paintings,' these works insist on engaging with questions of medium. Instead of presenting these works as the product of artistic labour, however, they stand more as reflections on the agency of materials as inferred from their properties and interaction with the human body. Instead of signaling

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the artist's triumph against materials, these works emphasise the materials as themselves capable of confronting and struggling against the artist – these are materials in possession of their own intentionality.

At the beginning of the Gutai show in a separate space of dim light connected with the rotunda is a room-sized, illuminated and suspended red vinyl cube, a refabrication of a work by Yamazaki Tsuruko. A short documentary on the wall explains that the work was originally shown in the 1956 'Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition,' where, in opposition to the well-framed cube in the Guggenheim, the red cube was precariously hung from trees. While the original work was meant to invite the viewers to enter the cube 'to create shadow plays for spectators standing on the outside,'¹ the *Red Cube* at the Guggenheim exhibition does not project shadows. In the exhibition catalogue, Tiampo observes that "Gutai's most poetic expression of its commitment to building democratic capacity can be found in its interactive works."² However, in 'Splendid Playground,' the degree and type of interaction between the artwork and the viewer is far less interactive and playful than the 'First Gutai Art Exhibition' and its partner, the 'Outdoor Gutai Art Exhibition.' Each of the artworks is presented in a partitioned section of the rotunda, and is installed or otherwise placed close to the wall, a decision that implicitly frames the works within a kind of canon in contrast to how the works were initially presented. Although viewers may experience the works from various angles and distances by standing on different points of the museum ramp, audience involvement is limited; for example, a security guard hovers around Tanaka Atsuko's *Bell* to prevent viewers from pushing the bell which was originally meant to be pressed freely.

Citing Yoshihara: 'the most important thing for us is to make contemporary art the freest site for people living in today's trying reality, and for creation in such a free site to contribute to the progress of humanity.'³ Tiampo views the Gutai mission in two parts: the first entailed a freeing of itself from wartime totalitarianism between 1954 and 1961, while the second consisted of an attempt to free itself from the excesses of Japan's postwar economic boom between 1962 and 1972.⁴ This attempt at liberation is not as effectively transmitted through the display of some of the Gutai works, a shortcoming perhaps attributable to the very format of the exhibition. As David

Summers observes in his own efforts to define what a 'world art history' might look like, it is difficult for exhibitions to convey 'a symmetry between our feelings in the face of a work of art and the significance it might have had for its makers and users.'⁵

'Splendid Playground' also leaves unanswered the question of intergroup dynamics. In negotiating Gutai's position in the international arena of the avant-garde, the exhibition presumes a group solidarity that glosses over a nuanced understanding of how individual artists worked with, between, and even against, one another. To a large extent, the show still portrays Gutai as a group project sustained by Yoshihara's ambition and hegemonic leadership. By opening the show with a quote from the *Gutai Manifesto*, the curators cast each individual artist as an executor, rather than an initiator, of Yoshihara's goals. This narrative is further reinforced by the prioritisation of works by selected 'star' artists like Shiraga, Shimamoto, and Kanayama whose works correspond most readily to Yoshihara's call for automatism and artistic novelty. Yoshihara's pivotal role in developing Gutai is undisputed, yet equally, if not more significant was how the members of the Gutai interacted with one another. Such dialogues are richly evident in the 1957 Gutai stage performance, whose video is oddly located at the section 'Performance Painting.' One first encounters Shiraga's highly choreographed log cutting performance, followed by Kanayama deflating a giant balloon, and subsequently, Tanaka tearing off layers of her outfit. One wonders about the sequence of these performances and what it says about the Gutai as a function of specific interpersonal relationships. Although some sketches for the stage performance are displayed, they are juxtaposed with other drawings of much later works in the last section 'Environment.' It would have been useful to have foregrounded these artistic correspondences rather than prioritising individual members whose works best exemplified the ideals stated in the group's manifesto and other related texts.

Consider the relationship between Shiraga Kazuo and his wife Fujiko, whose relationship has never been fully addressed in any Gutai exhibition to date. In 'Splendid Playground,' Shiraga Fujiko can be seen in one of the videos actively engaging with the colouration and execution of Shiraga's feet paintings. Yet her mixed media work from

1961 is located near the enamel paintings by Yamazaki without further explanation, as if the only aspect binding them together is that they were among the very few women artists in the group. By downplaying the interaction of the artists, the exhibition reinforces the myth of Shiraga Kazuo as an autonomous hero-creator.⁶ Notable too is that despite the frequent appearance of documentation accompanying the works, none of the photos recording the early Gutai shows at the Ashiya City Museum of Art before 1957 are reproduced in the exhibition. The architectural setting of the Guggenheim further reinforces this image by showcasing each artist and their works within isolated cell-like spaces. It is thus ironic that all Gutai retrospectives insist on portraying Gutai as a group, even as the artists worked both jointly and severally.

In contrast to previous Gutai shows at Lugano and Tokyo, 'Splendid Playground' usefully de-emphasises chronology in favour of a thematic grouping of works, a shift of focus that enriches our understanding of artists' innovative approach to established categories of medium. Such a shift facilitates an understanding of Gutai as being parallel with, rather than derivative of, its Western counterparts. The stress on materiality and the formal specificities of artworks make the case for the agency of the group's artists, an argument necessary in challenging the tendency to think of cultural encounters in terms of grand narratives.

Paper Like Skin -- Zarina Hashmi

Tucked away in the peripheral galleries at the Guggenheim Museum, 'Paper Like Skin' is a retrospective of Zarina Hashmi's subtle prints, drawings, and sculptures. Her work has often been described as minimalist because of its simplicity and grid-like iteration of forms; *Shadow House* (2006), for example, is one of Zarina's larger works on paper that consists of neat rows of vaguely house-shaped cutouts arranged in a grid. The cutouts allow the paper to cast distinctive shadows on the wall, giving the work a certain sculptural quality. Although similar adhesion to a grid format or serial organisation can be seen in the minimalist works of Carl Andre or Donald Judd, Zarina is careful to note in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition that she 'never thought of the grid as a modernist invention.'⁷

Paper Like Skin includes work by Zarina from the 1970s until the present. Avoiding a strict chronological approach, the exhibition presents a selection of her work from the 1990s and 2000s in the first room. Directly across from the entrance of the retrospective is a large, glaring gold work, appropriately titled *Into the Blinding Light* (2010) and made out of Japanese okawara paper gilded with 22-karat gold leaf. Most of the first room is filled with recent works that include an array of ambiguous and abstracted map-like prints and the aforementioned *Shadow House* (2006) and *Shadow House II* (2006). The center of the room is occupied by a large, circular display that serves as an archive of miniature-like prints titled *The Ten Thousand Things*. In a semi-circular shaped room in the back of the exhibition are two distinct but serial works: a series of prints called *Home is a Foreign Place* (1999) and one of the few objects in the exhibition not composed of paper, *Crawling House* (1994). While *Home is a Foreign Place*, a series of thirty-six prints of abstracted forms that include Urdu calligraphy, resembles many of Zarina's prints in the adjacent room, *Crawling House* consists of sharp, angular metal forms that are mounted like a flock of birds against the curved wall. The juxtaposition of these two works, both of which refer to home and travel, reflect a tension between materials, Zarina's notions of home, and her personal history of travel.

The most compelling works are those from the 1970s, made when the artist first relocated to New York City. Placed together in a dimly lit room towards the end of the exhibition, these works include paper that has been torn, scratched, poked, or even knotted through. *Untitled (Pin Drawings)*, 1976-1977 consists of twenty framed pieces of BFK paper through which the artist systematically poked embroidery needles of different lengths and thicknesses. The result is a series of stunning, textural pieces of paper that range from very ordered grids to more chaotic and ambiguous formations. Made during Zarina's early years in New York City, the works bear the trace of gestures that mimic those involved in the production of crafts associated with feminist explorations of pattern and decoration in the 1970s. Yet these works were decidedly abstract, their insistent whiteness recalling painting of other artists engaged with the possibilities of monochromy, including Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns and Robert Ryman. In her choice of gesture, materials, and

affiliation, Zarina provocatively throws into relief the tension between identitarian and formalist approaches to artistic production in a way that vigorously resonates with present struggles over the interpretation of art recognised in the wake of the 'global turn.'

Overall, *Paper Like Skin* leans towards works that Zarina made within the last twenty years, featuring her interest in home, borders, and maps over some of her more interesting paper works from the 1970s. Perhaps this emphasis occurs because these later works allude to her identity as a diasporic artist; her abstracted maps and geometric rendering of floor plans can be connected to Zarina's dislocation and compressed sense of space, the presumed response of an artist for whom physical movement and mobility acts as a kind of support, or medium. By having Zarina's later works emphasised at the beginning of the show, the retrospective seemed primarily concerned with linking Zarina to ideas of global displacement as a means of conforming to certain consensus views of international art where an artist's physical mobility is a necessary condition for acknowledgement. Works like *Untitled* (Pin Drawings), 1976-1977, or *Fence* (1976) (in which the artist scratched a border around a piece of paper) explore the material properties of the paper support over the presented image by highlighting paper's ability to withstand, as well as call attention to, its pulpy, fibrous qualities. Giving more attention to these works would more effectively place Zarina in conversation with the larger 'Splendid Playground' exhibition of Gutai art, thus opening up the potential for broader discussions about abstraction outside received mainstream histories.

No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia

'No Country: Contemporary Art for South And Southeast Asia' is the first exhibition of the Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative at the Guggenheim Museum. The Guggenheim UBS MAP series is an initiative backed by UBS that will allow the Guggenheim to expand its collection in three broadly defined geographical regions: South and Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East and North Africa. As a part of the MAP series, the Guggenheim will not only expand its collection to include artworks from these areas, but has also planned educational programming around this expansion that includes a series of lectures and a curatorial scholarship from regional scholars and

curators. June Yap, the Singaporean curator chosen for 'No Country,' is the first of three regional curators recruited by the Guggenheim under this initiative. Featuring the work of twenty-two artists from India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, the exhibition 'proposes an understanding of [South and Southeast Asia] that transcends physical and political borders,'⁸ by focusing on regional and intra-local cultural practices, networks of influence, and histories that inform ethnic and cultural subjectivities

As both the date of the exhibited works and their sheer diversity attest, all of the works featured in 'No Country' are recent acquisitions. Indeed, so overwhelming was the diversity that the only common ground shared by the artists was that national and ethnic origins happened to fall within the regional boundaries of 'South and Southeast Asia' as imagined in the West. While the diversity was likely intended to reflect a laudable desire to be as expansive and inclusive as possible, it also doomed any chance the show had at visual or narrative coherence. On some level, the absence of coherence read as a deferred throwback to the 1990s, in particular of the sprawling style of curation championed in such exhibitions as the influential 'Cities on the Move'. Yet where the chaos of 'Cities on the Move' felt purposeful, the effect here was less controlled. One wonders whether it would have been less burdensome and more forthright to simply call the exhibition 'Recent Acquisitions'

There is a clear distinction in the rhetoric used by the Guggenheim Museum and UBS Bank to frame the joint MAP Initiative. Yap and the Guggenheim explicitly position 'No Country' and the MAP Initiative within existing critical academic frameworks, highlighting the importance of the project in challenging 'Western-centric [views] of art history,' and providing space for a more inclusive and truly global view of contemporary art practices. In contrast, when praising the global outreach of the MAP Initiative, UBS representatives often emphasise the economic vibrancy of these regions and the myriad investment opportunities for their clients; Jurg Zeltner, chief executive of UBS Wealth Management declared as much, stating that 'art is becoming more and more of an asset class, [and] UBS is looking to increase our profile in these kinds of special fields of interest.'⁹ While

many observers will find the disparity between these institutional articulations unremarkable, the need to explore the symbiosis between museums, the art market, and corporate interests is especially urgent given the accelerated rate at which both the market and infrastructure for contemporary Asian, especially contemporary Chinese, art has expanded in the past decade. That the installation of 'No Country' bore more than a passing resemblance to an art fair made the exhibition a good point from which to think about the relationship between the market and institutional decision-making.

It was ironic that although 'No Country' hoped to direct focus away from differences between countries, the overall effect did just that, an effect partly exacerbated by the lack of space given to the show as a whole. Large-scale works often spanning whole walls crowded the small gallery space and the rich discourse evident in the public programming accompanying the exhibition was all but absent from the show itself.

One of Yap's goals for 'No Country' was to create alternative visions of the region that break away from hegemonic representations of South and Southeast Asia as clearly defined spaces. Explaining in her curatorial introduction that, 'contrary to what the exhibition title *appears* to assert,' the true focus of the exhibition lies within the highly personal biographical experience of the artists, and that reductive views of culture and community overlook complex exchanges of dialogue, resistance, and assimilation. *Television Commercial For Communism*, by the Propeller Group, is a one-minute video envisioning what would happen if the five remaining communist countries hired a publicity firm to rebrand communism. The inclusion of the Propeller Group illustrates the futility of classifying artworks according to arbitrary national boundaries. A group formed in California and based in Los Angeles as well as in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, it is impossible to classify the Propeller Group as simply Vietnamese. Projected onto the overhang of the entrance to the exhibition, Tran Luong's *Lap Lõe* shows a red silk scarf typical of the uniform worn by Vietnamese school children under communist rule whipping against a man's bare chest. Tran's work is meant to illustrate the oppression that Vietnamese people faced under communist rule. The young man embodies the rationale of 'No Country,' whereby history and culture are literally

inscribed upon the bodies of men and women. But such immediate legibility frequently compromises the possibility of more involved engagements with the works. Perhaps as these recent acquisitions are integrated into the Guggenheim's collection, future scholarship can exhibit works by artists from South and Southeast Asia not by region, but by shared commitments to particular issues that could then aggregate into more inclusive views of contemporary art. The UBS MAP Initiative satisfies the important first step of acquiring works of contemporary art from outside of Europe and the United States, yet one asks whether geographical expansion must necessarily mean the prioritisation of certain kinds of content, certain sets of expectations, and by extension, certain audiences. For whom are such exhibitions intended and why?

The Guggenheim substantially invested in new acquisitions of artwork from South and Southeast Asia as well as organising and hosting an impressive array of educational programmes related to the new and coming exhibitions in New York and throughout the world. All this suggests a serious intention to 'catalyse dialogue and creative interaction both regionally and globally, fostering lasting relationships among institutions, artists, scholars, museum-goers, and the online community.'¹⁰ The discrepancy between how 'No Country' was framed and the experience of actually seeing the exhibition unintentionally illustrates a key dilemma underwriting the field of contemporary Asian art. Are artworks served by the rhetorics deployed on their behalf or are they made to conform to the political agendas such rhetorics serve? Must artworks be primarily justified as symptoms of some broader social or cultural issue or in terms of their market value? How do we also consider the actual experience of encountering the artworks?

Beyond Mere Expansion

As a whole, the three exhibitions reflect the Guggenheim's effort to offer different approaches to framing contemporary art outside a Eurocentric framework. All attempted to reconceptualise the direction of artistic exchanges without privileging any nation or culture as the ultimate reference point to varying degrees of success. In trying to engage with and problematise the very notion of 'world art' by

disintegrating cultural borders and highlighting artistic agency through a sustained focus on artists' engagement with materials, all three exhibitions demonstrate the challenges of historicizing contemporary Asian art through the medium of the museum exhibition. There is still a crucial need to reflect on such questions as the reenactment of ephemeral performances and artworks, the need to pay close attention to the issues raised by what we see of the artwork and the challenges of upholding the ideals of 'borderlessness' without sacrificing curatorial vision. That an institution previously devoted mainly to Euroamerican art should feature contemporary Asian art so extensively, however, is a bold and encouraging step towards bringing the idea of a global art history to fruition.

1| Ming Tiampo, 'Please Draw Freely,' *Gutai: Splendid Playground*, Ming Tiampo and Alexandra Munroe, eds., Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2013, p 55.

2| *Ibid.*, p 55.

3| Yoshihara Jirō, 'For Publishing this Pamphlet,' *Gutai*, vol. 1, January 1955, p 33.

4| For the details of the two stages, see Tiampo, p 45.

5| David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*, Phaidon, London, 2003, p 33.

6| For a discussion of Fujiko Shiraga's role in Shiraga's feet paintings, see Tomii Reiko, 'Shiraga Paints: Toward a Concrete' Discussion, in *Kazuo Shiraga: Six Decades*, Tomii Reiko and Fergus McCaffrey, eds., McCaffrey Fine Art, New York, 2009, p 26.

7| Sandhini Poddar, 'The Garden of Dark Roses: Zarina in Conversation with Sandhini Poddar,' *Zarina: Paper Like Skin*, Allegra Pesenti, ed., Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2012, p 168.

8| The Guggenheim Foundation, *Guggenheim UBS Maps Press Release*, 21 February 2013, http://www.guggenheim.org/images/content/New_York/press_room/photo_service/guggubsmmap/mappresskit/guggubsmmap_mediakit_02.21.13_optimized.pdf

9| Quoted in 'Guggenheim Project Challenges 'Western-Centric View,' *New York Times*, New York, 11 April, 2012.

10| See the Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative description and overview at <http://www.guggenheim.org/guggenheim-foundation/collaborations/map/overview>.

**Steven Apotheker,
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of Art History at University of Michigan.*

A Footnote to History

Gypsies: . . . coming originally from India to Europe a thousand years ago . . .

On the banks of the Indus,
just before

it reaches
the ocean,

and just before
the monsoons,

they left
me clutching

islands of farewells.

For ten centuries
they sent no word

though I often heard
through seashells

ships whispering for help.

I stuffed my pockets
with the sounds of wrecks.

I still can't decipher
scripts of storms

as I leaf through
the river's waves.

Half-torn by the wind,
their words reach

the shore, demanding
I memorize their

ancient and recent
journeys in

caravans ambushed by
forests on fire.

(for Bari Károly)



The photograph shows the blackened skin of the last tiger shot in Hong Kong displayed at the Tin Hau Temple in Stanley on Hong Kong Island. The tiger was bagged outside the local police station in 1942 by officer Ruh Singh. The beast weighed in at 240 pounds and was 73 inches long, standing 3 feet tall.

Hong Kong was under Japanese rule at the time
The tiger is not native to Hong Kong.

Texts sourced from <http://beijingvisitor.blogspot.hk/2009/02/last-tiger-shot-in-hong-kong.html> and
<http://www.biosch.hku.hk/ecology/porcupine/por25/25-vert-tiger.htm>
Image courtesy of Jeannie Wu.

FIELD NOTES

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