

MOVING PLEDGES: ART AND ACTION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Earl Lu Gallery
Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore
LASALLE College of the Arts
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Artists

FX Harsono
Mella Jaarsma
Bui Cong Khanh
Koh Nguang How
Justin Loke and Yang Jie
Manit Sriwanichpoom
Restu Ratnaningtyas
Ikoy Ricio
Jakkai Siributr
Sutee Kunavichayanont
Truong Tan
Tay Wei Leng
Josephine Turalba

Guest curator
Iola Lenzi

Moving pledges: art and action in Southeast Asia presents 13 works produced by 14 artists over four decades between 1977 and 2018. The exhibition employs a ‘snapshot’ curatorial approach to reveal a distinctive and enduring strand of Southeast Asian contemporary art centred on interrogating the contemporary social-cultural-political order. Through various materials and media, artworks from five countries deploy inventive aesthetic and conceptual strategies to engage viewers on shared social questions.

In some cases, this is achieved through a work’s participative build. Such participatory installations and performances enlist viewers bodily—offering clothes for trying on, notebooks for writing, other familiar actions—in conversations about culture, power, and associated violence. Several works were originally conceived for public spaces because artists sought wide involvement in art discourses without institutional or commercial intermediaries. Other exhibited pieces don’t require physical intervention. But in their material and symbolic referencing of the social and artistic status quo, and in their

sometimes heterodox and tension-creating construction, these pieces call audiences into critical discussion about the meaning of being in the world, citizenship, and the possibility of challenging norms.

Exhibited works use expressive tactics to activate—not direct—viewer response; their methods shape process, not result. *Moving pledges* thus uncovers how contemporary Southeast Asian art may function to provoke discourse, without being explicitly didactic. Moreover, this semantically open, interrogative work, if sometimes appropriating signs of national authority, can’t be confused with national art promoting consensus narratives. Indeed, in their selective reframing of emblems of state, exhibited pieces challenge these narratives and, though originating in domestic specificities, pieces are multilayered, transcending borders to engage transnational publics in critical assessment of all our contemporary social realities. In today’s polarised global forum, FX Harsono’s 41-year-old question-as-artwork, *What would you do if these crackers were real pistols?*, remains compellingly incisive today.

List of works

Dimensions are given as height preceding width (followed, where applicable, by depth). Where a style other than minimal capitalisation is used for artwork or other titles, capitalisation reflects the artist’s/author’s preference.

1 Koh Nguang How

Born Singapore 1963, lives Singapore

16 views: Koh Nguang How’s eye on Singapore art and artists in the city, 1988–96 (printed 2018)
16 black and white and colour photographs
various dimensions
Courtesy the artist

Primarily known as an archivist documenting the Singapore art scene from the 1980s onwards, Koh Nguang How is in the first instance an artist and founding member of Singapore’s The Artists Village (TAV). In this exhibition, images from Koh’s extensive photographic practice have been chosen to uncover how, through photographic composition and selective documenting, Koh’s frames reveal aspects of content and action of emerging and formally innovating social practices in Singapore in which he took part. Through his photographic handling, Koh underscores the integration of performance art’s components: public space, action, and audience interaction/participation. Koh’s lens is trained on Tang Da Wu’s *Life boat* (1989), performed in Singapore’s open-air Cuppage Terrace; Amanda Heng’s *In memory of 4th June 1989* (1992) in Hong Bee warehouse; Tang Da Wu’s shadow puppet performance at the former St Joseph’s Institution (SJI), *Incident in the city* (1988); and the 1996 mobile collaborative artwork showcase *Tour de art lah!* that crisscrossed Singapore. Through Koh’s eye, viewers discern a triangular negotiation of poles of power: artistic agency/publics in public space/the city as zone of contested ownership and control.

2 Truong Tan

Born Hanoi 1963, lives Hanoi and Paris

Nappes (Tablecloths), 1995
5 pieces, each 159 x 190 cm
Collection of Jean-Paul Chatenet, Paris

This is part of a larger collaborative work of functional tablecloths made by Truong Tan, Nguyen Quang Huy, Nguyen Minh Thanh and Veronika Radulovic. All cloths in this exhibition by Truong Tan

Truong Tan holds a seminal place in Hanoi’s early contemporary art history. His innovating art languages of the 1990s combine stylised graphics, reduced palette, and autobiographical, sometimes raw commentary on queer sexuality. The form and content of Truong Tan’s images were particularly risk-taking in conservative Hanoi, and thus can be understood as challenging the social order, as well as asserting the artist’s own sexual identity. Along with Vu Dan Tan and Nguyen Van Cuong, Truong Tan early-on combined text and image, an experimental form that contributed to shifting the aesthetics, function and reach of art in Hanoi. A second and related innovation of the Hanoi 1990s avant-garde is exemplified by *Nappes*. The work, originally 19 or 20 pieces, crosses the high-low art boundary as Tan merges utilitarian objects from everyday life, tablecloths, and his and his friends’ various narratives painted onto the cloths. The piece is art, but also served a household function, and is duly food-stained in places. The integration of art into life, and vice versa, as manifested by *Nappes*, is a trait visible in other pieces in the exhibition.

3 Tay Wei Leng

Born Singapore 1978, lives Singapore

Integration III, 2018
sound installation
2:45 minutes
Courtesy the artist

Tay Wei Leng’s practice focuses on identity, borders, and displacement—physical and cultural—leading to a meditation on ideas of belonging/non-belonging. Often using a mediated documentary approach to film-making and photography, Tay’s intimate works awaken identification and response in viewers who decipher its understated tensions. *Integration III*, a variation on a 2013 commission, is unusual in Tay’s practice for its reliance purely on sound, not image, as an expressive conduit. The piece engages listeners on the complex contract between citizen and nation that we all know, but do not necessarily appraise in its depth and meaning. Cryptically alluding to the difference between ‘being a citizen’, and actively desiring citizenship with the nation as an identity and framework, *Integration III* speaks thoughtfully to current global concerns of resurgent nationalism, migration, and exile.

4 Ikoy Ricio

Born Manila 1978, lives Manila

Tubero, 1999
collage of painted plumber signs on board
6 boards, each 91.5 x 61 cm
LASALLE College of the Arts Collection,
Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore.
Purchased with funds from Lee Foundation Painting Fund, 2000. 2000.004.01–06

Working with found, popular objects at a time when Filipino art was still predominantly painting-based, Ikoy Ricio’s late-1990s multimedia practice signified the popular strata of Philippines society, not as ‘other’, objectified by the elite, but as an active and participating force. Referencing working people as a central, moving entity through their street signage (or with slippers, as with the 1999 *Cadence*), rather than pictorially depicting them in the way of conventional Filipino realistic painting, Ricio avoids pathos for the poor and, instead, gives the underprivileged political and social presence. Avoiding facile sentimentality, Ricio thus mounts a critique of the systems that continue to support class and affluence divides in Filipino society.

Tubero, which means ‘plumber’ in Tagalog, uses the appropriation of 108 street-found hand-painted plumbers’ signs that include the plumber’s telephone number and name. Through this gridded assembly of individual signs, Ricio identifies each worker through his name and handwriting. The plumbers are not pictured, the artist preferring to present each one through his handmade business card. Thus, the workers retain their dignity through their name and profession. Each man has presence and agency within *Tubero* through his specific identification and handwriting, that together present him as a contributing member of society. In addition to its non-literally manifested social engagement, the piece shows Filipino contemporary practice’s continuing development of non-painting languages that are exploited to communicate on various critical levels beyond pictorial description.

5 Manit Sriwanichpoom

Born Bangkok 1961, lives Bangkok

Horror in pink #5, #4, #6, #1, #3, #2, 2001
6 type C photographs
edition 2/7
(#5) 187 x 119 cm, (#4) 119.5 x 189 cm,
(#6) 119 x 142.5 cm, (#1) 119.5 x 164.5 cm,
(#3) 119.5 x 159 cm, (#2) 123.5 x 177.5 cm
LASALLE College of the Arts Collection,
Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore.
Purchased, 2002. 2002.007–12

Photographer Manit Sriwanichpoom’s two-decade *Pink Man* opus 1997–2017 is predominantly materialised by photography. Within this corpus, *Horror in pink* stands out for its tension-creating iconographic construction, time-play, and visual draw. These are used together to interrogate persisting state brutality against citizens in the exercise of power in Thailand. The series is unusual within Manit’s oeuvre for its appropriation of existing black and white documentary photograph shot by Thai and foreign press photographers. The incidents in question were three infamous episodes occurring in 1973, 1976, and 1992, the second, involving the massacre of unarmed students, still not entirely acknowledged in Thai official history today. Manit, using the old press images as raw material, inserts his Pink Man emblem of vacuous urban consumerism seamlessly within each existing frame, such that the mascot appears to have always been present, unperturbed by the unfolding brutality. *Horror in pink*, in its juxtaposition of documentary, monochrome images of historical violence, and complacent Pink Man, produces a nagging and inescapable discomfort in the viewer whereby the horror of the original press images is continually renewed beyond their initial time and space, by the complicit indifference of everyman Pink Man. This visually and conceptually elegant integration of the historic and contemporary, crossing temporal and geographic lines, thus gives *Horror in pink* enduring power to perpetually honour the victims of three long-ago Thai incidents, while also raising questions of civic responsibility in plural contexts today.

6 FX Harsono

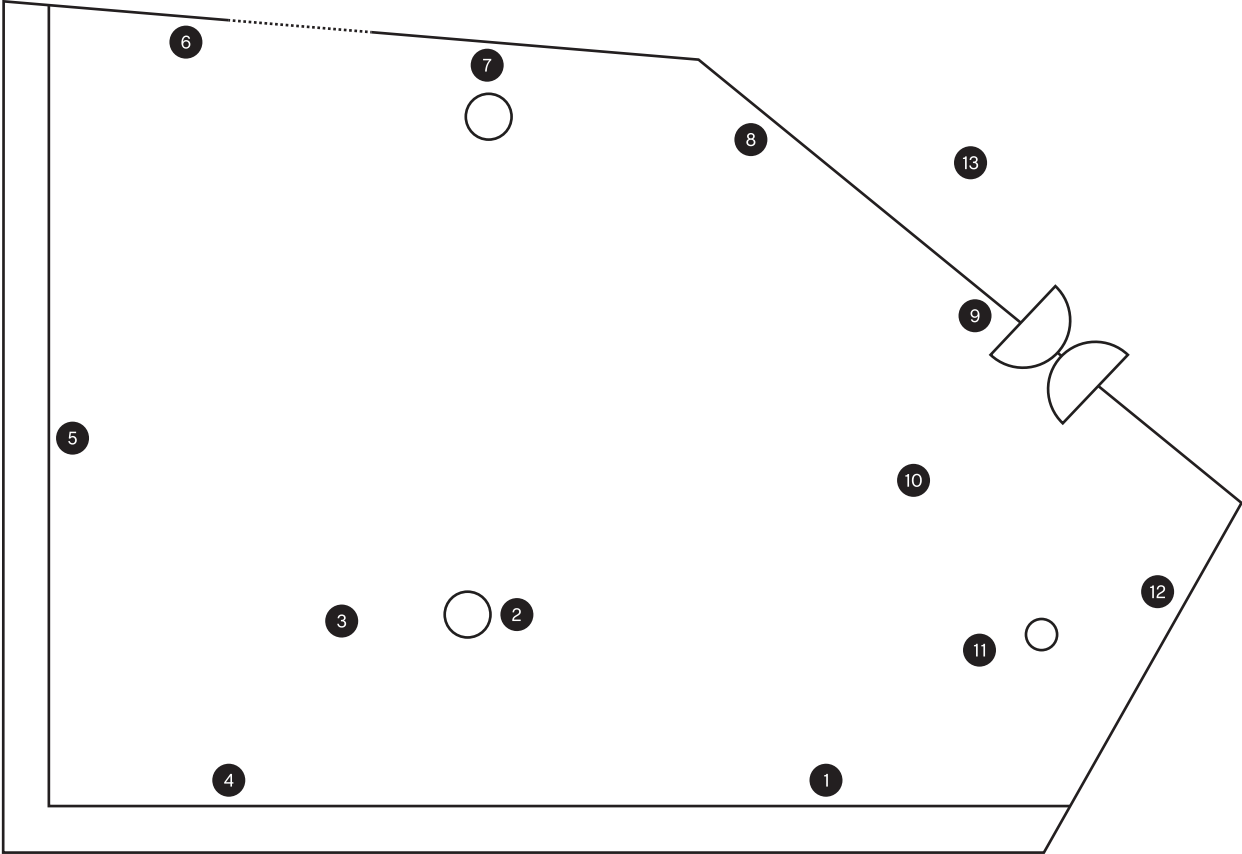
Born East Java, Indonesia, 1949; lives Jakarta

Apa yang anda lakukan jika krupuk ini adalah pistol beneran? (What would you do if these crackers were real pistols?), 1977–
2 cast-iron moulds, 10 rice crackers, 4 notebooks
installation dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist

Visitors are invited to respond to this work in the notebook provided

In this 2018 iteration, in addition to a few crackers for reference and a blank notebook for audience responses, relic notebooks filled with previous viewers’ comments are presented, along with the cast-iron moulds used to produce the crackers.

FX Harsono is a pioneer of contemporary art in Indonesia. He was cofounder in 1975 of the Javanese collective Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (GSRB, The New Art Movement) that sought new form, and with new expressions, wider reception for art with a social function. *Apa yang anda lakukan* of 1977 is among Indonesia’s and Southeast Asia’s earliest participatory works. The piece embodies a new methodology in art whereby its central component is an idea—a question—that triggers conversations with audiences. The concept is supported by form, but the latter is adaptable, the crackers presented either for aesthetic effect, in a vast mound, or a few, as in this iteration, as



a material reference to the concept in play, which is the public's power, or possibly obligation, to consider guns, what they are used for, by whom, against whom.

7 Bui Cong Khanh
Born Danang, Vietnam, 1972; lives Hoi An, Vietnam

Stamp on me, 2003–
performance with 2 stamps
Courtesy the artist

The performance by Bui Cong Khanh will take place on 4 December 2018. Documentation of a 2004 performance with 6 stamps in Tokyo's Shinjuku is screened on a flatscreen TV

Khanh's multimedia practice is focused on the interrogation of social, cultural and political conventions in Vietnam and elsewhere. *Stamp on me*, first publicly performed in Saigon in 2003, is both a conceptual and physical work of art. It shows the artist using his body as a concrete and metaphorical receiver of audience choice and action. The work empowers audiences in public spaces to choose one stamp over another—'yes' or 'no'. This choice references bureaucratic power as the official makes decisions that impact citizens' lives. Viewers stamp the artist's naked torso, initially timidly, but sometimes more violently and relentlessly as the stamper becomes comfortable violating the artist's body. The piece can thus be critically trenchant as the artist's invitation may be 'abused' by the public. Such abuse, not always the case, but always a potentiality, recalls the possible abuse of power in entrenched systems everywhere. In addition to Saigon 2003, the work has been performed in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Canada, and the USA. The piece's conceptual nature allows it to be performed by others.

8 Jakkai Siributr
Born Bangkok 1969, lives Bangkok

Changing room 2017
embroidered military jackets and kapiyoh (Muslim caps), mirror, table, clothes rack
installation dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist

#changingroom
Visitors are invited to try on the jackets and kapiyoh

Jakkai Siributr's multimedia practice explores social frictions in Thailand and beyond. Harnessing material construction and a mix of irony and empathy to convey ideas, it probes abuse of power and social exclusion. Siributr is often described as a textile artist. However, as his work in *Moving pledges* reveals, vernacular techniques and materials provide conceptual clues via embedded, legible cultural references. This critically slanted mode of material choice defies simplistic media-based categorisation, and rather, is located within a Southeast Asian methodology of contemporary practice allied with familiar culture, visible in regional art since the 1970s. *Changing room* is a shop installation that uses the conceit of the commercial space to provide public access to its ideas. It offers jackets and caps for viewer try-on. But the jackets, appropriated Thai army camouflage, and caps, *kapiyoh* Malay Muslim headgear, have been embroidered with images depicting episodes of communitarian Buddhist-Muslim strife in Thailand's deep south (Yala, Patani, and Narathiwat provinces) which has been simmering for decades. Narrating via stylistically childish thread images, rather than commenting, *Changing room*, through viewer involvement, uncovers how sectarian tensions affect different groups in the south: local civilians, Muslim and Buddhist, and soldiers of different faiths trucked-in from the far corners of the country. Fun in its invitation to take selfies, through

the changing of identity afforded by costume, *Changing room* co-opts audiences to put themselves into the shoes of the 'other', the minority Muslim southerner, possibly awakening critical awareness.

9 Restu Ratnaningtyas
born Tangerang, Indonesia, 1981; lives Yogyakarta

Transmission, 2014 (printed 2018)
16 hand-stamped black-on-white cotton sarongs from a larger series
each 225 x 100 cm
Courtesy the artist

Visitors are invited to try on the sarongs in the gallery

Multimedia artist Restu Ratnaningtyas' sarong series brings together the functioning, wearable sarong, and heterodox, thought-provoking pictography. The works have been produced by traditional means, the artist providing her designs to a skilled Javanese textile-print block carver who has transferred her images to cotton, which is then traditionally dyed. Thus, at first glance, the sarongs' crisp cotton and familiar style conform with convention. However, closer inspection of their designs reveals trios of huddled, faceless women; pairs of double-ended legs, surreal without torso or head; endless sequences of hands masking a figure's face; a series of bodiless helmets. The sarongs' monochrome production heightens the images' visibility on their white ground. Thus, the sarongs, aided by their familiar aesthetic and function, easily penetrate viewer spheres where their ambiguous, slightly uncomfortable imagery engages critically with shifting contemporary culture in Java. With its functionality, non-preciousness, and appropriation of traditional technique, the series reveals how art languages discarding the conventional high-low art divide can ably broach complex issues with all audiences.

10 Sutee Kunavichayanont
Born Bangkok 1965, lives Bangkok

History class (Indonesian version), 2016
8 engraved wooden desks, paper, pencils
each desk 70 x 40 x 60 cm,
installation dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist

Visitors are invited to make rubbings of the desktops using the paper and pencils provided

From early in his career, Sutee Kunavichayanont has built artworks that, through participative strategies effective outside the institutional space, engage audiences on questions of social responsibility. His multiple-iteration *History class* began in 2000 when he installed children's desks on a busy sidewalk in view of Bangkok's Democracy Monument. The desks, engraved with events occluded from Thailand's official modern political history, invited passers-by to sit down and, from each table's incised surface, produce a rubbing to take home. In this way viewers possessed a narrative of the past different from that of official histories taught to Thai children in the national school system. Through presentation of history that could be inconvenient for those in power, *History class* triggers audiences to discover hidden views of the past that have implications in the present. This allusive methodology puts viewers in charge of critical appraisal, and finding their place in contemporary systems of power. The artwork opens the possibility of agency for all. The 2016 *History class (Indonesian version)* is based on the same concept as the original, but changes its political/historic focus from Thailand to modern, nation-building Indonesia. Teak-wood desks commissioned from Sutee for the Indonesian leg of the Bangkok Art & Culture Centre (BACC) traveling exhibition *Concept Context*

Contestation about Southeast Asian conceptual practices, are engraved with incidents from 1965–66 Indonesia. The images, appropriated from various popular and media sources, reference the Indonesian state's leftist purge—roundups and mass-killings responsible for some 500,000 to possibly more than a million deaths of leftists, ethnic Chinese and others—that took place as the political regime in Jakarta changed. These killings, and their true scale, have still today not been adequately accounted for in official Indonesian history, so this piece serves not to remind, but rather prod Indonesian viewers to take ownership of this taboo history and its meaning.

11 Josephine Turalba
Born Manila 1965, lives Manila

Scandals, 2013–
10 pairs of hand-stitched slippers made from empty bullet cartridges with plastic and leather
various dimensions
Courtesy the artist

Visitors are invited to try on the slippers in the gallery

Josephine Turalba is a multimedia artist whose practice centres on history, memory, and various social tensions. As a performance artist, she frequently incorporates audience play into her works. In her ongoing *Scandals* series, Turalba uses the appeal of touch and try-on to draw viewers to experience walking in her hand-made slippers. The wearer, attracted to the footwear by its aesthetic and intricate fabrication, on close inspection realises the shoes are produced with spent bullet cartridges, in addition to coloured leather and other materials. The visitor puts on a pair of slippers and tramps around the gallery. Fun and novelty lead to discomfort as the wearer experiences pain because the spent metal bullet shells dig unpleasantly into heels and soles. The work is thus a tangible and metaphorical entry point to discourses revolving around gun ownership and use, violence, and choice. Conceptualised in the Philippines, and grown out of Josephine Turalba's home environment where guns and violence are pervasive, *Scandals* transcends geography and cultural contexts, co-opting viewers through experience to ponder the often unquestioned intertwining of violence and daily life in many places.

12 Mella Jaarsma
Born Emmerloord, the Netherlands, 1960; lives Yogyakarta

The landscaper, 2013
single-channel, high-definition video projection,
16:9 aspect ratio, colour, sound
3:40 minutes
Courtesy the artist

Central to Mella Jaarsma's multimedia, humour-filled and formally sensual practice is a critical probing of social pluralism, impacts of cultural transfer, pernicious aspects of identity politics, and exclusion/inclusion from established systems and clubs, among others. Though often using the immediate Indonesian context as her work's starting point, Jaarsma's installations and performances translate transculturally, their merging of questioning idea and form resonant in many contemporary settings. *The landscaper* conflates two seemingly unrelated ideas: first the video protagonist, a dancing figure reminiscent of a dervish, who in today's more religiously conservative Indonesia, can be seen as challenging a purist conception of Islam; second, the swirling figure's skirt, which isn't cloth, but rather a patchwork of miniature images in the *Mooi Indie* (Beautiful Indies) romantic style of Dutch colonial painting of the Indonesian landscape. *Mooi Indie's* idealised view of Indonesia was also appropriated by

some Indonesian painters, complicating local rejection of Dutch cultural imperialism. Thus, beyond its formally engaging aspect, Jaarsma's video links several critical questions, suggesting their interdependence: discourses of purity, repercussions of cultural colonialism, and the reality of shifting identities, not monolithic in the way proposed by dominant groups who use belonging as a tool of power.

13 Justin Loke and Yang Jie
Born Singapore 1979 and Singapore 1984, respectively; live Singapore

Decadent teachers, 2018
chalk on double-sided blackboard
181 x 167 x 60 cm
Courtesy the artists

Justin Loke and Yang Jie's commissioned work, *Decadent teachers*, in its title and appropriation of an old-fashioned double-sided schoolroom blackboard, offers a direct reference to education. National education distinguishes itself among the state's spheres of influence because it is unavoidable and sustained over decades, during students' most intellectually formative period. Loke and Yang's 'lesson', through an imagined mind map, connects Singapore/Chinese contemporary identity politics, conceptions of Asian modernity, and oblique allusions to power emerging from colonial emancipation. Viewers must 'read' the mind map to attempt to make sense of contemporary culture in Singapore/Asia today. Clues to local/global cultural frictions are embedded as well, bilingual English and Chinese characters highlighting the terms *dialect*, *identity*, *Song dynasty*, *civilisation*, *Bruce Lee*, *Yellow Man*, *Banana Man*, *chauvinism*, and *Frank* (sic) *Fanon*, among others. On the other side of the blackboard, in seeming opposition to the pedagogical mind map, is a rubbed-out chalk interpretation of a Chinese literati painting, abstract forms possibly reminiscent of a blurred, uniform cityscape, behind trees. A first duality within the lesson then, words or image? Is there a hierarchy between the two? Need there be? And beyond this first binary of crisp mind map (ambiguously defined) vs blurred landscape, what has become of literati painters' risk-taking in contemporary China and Singapore? Whether words or image, how can one determine the shape of Singapore contemporary culture? Is there such a thing? Does it matter? What is China's role? Via the supposed neutrality of its teaching form and proposed linkages, *Decadent teachers* provokes viewers' critical weighing of overused/misused terms and concepts. Anti-colonialism remains a nationally unifying precept in Singapore/Southeast Asia today, but was colonialism banished when the British were supplanted by local leaders? And are Europeans the only colonisers in Southeast Asia? Are colonial mechanics not duplicated in national contexts? At the heart of the work's rush of questions is a pointing at the decadence of apathy vis-à-vis blurred meaning and subjectivity. The responsibility for appraising rests with students who must decipher and decide.

Iola Lenzi, guest curator

Iola Lenzi is a Singapore-based curator, historian, and critic of Southeast Asian art. Also trained in law, her research interests include Southeast Asian art's transnational negotiation with history and society. She has conceptualised numerous Southeast Asian art projects for institutions in North Asia, Southeast Asia, and Europe, and is the author/editor of four anthological research catalogues contributing to Southeast Asian contemporary art discourse. Lenzi teaches the module Society and Politics in Asian Art in the MA Asian Art Histories programme at LASALLE, and is the author of *Museums of Southeast Asia* (2004).

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