

M.A.TTER UNBOUND

A Periodical of the MA Asian Art Histories Programme

Issue 2, 2020

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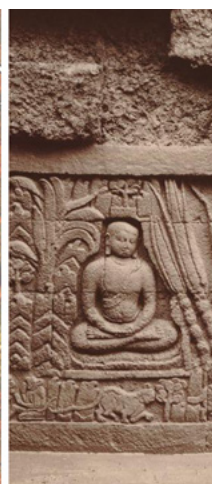
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Editorial

Dear Readers

We are pleased to announce the second issue of M.A.TTER UNBOUND, a publication of the Masters in Asian Art Histories Programme. This publication reflects our commitment to our students and alumni by providing a platform on which they can continue to have a voice. Apart from M.A. TTER UNBOUND, we will be looking into ways of promoting our graduates and the programme in the coming years. On this note, I would like to thank all the contributors for making the publication a great success. I would also like to add a special thanks to my colleagues Jeffrey Say, Programme Leader, and Dr. Clare Veal for their continuous commitment towards the programme.

Dr. S. Chandrasekaran
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The first issue of M.A.TTER UNBOUND was launched in 2017 and almost three years have since passed. During those three years, the programme hosted a 3-day international Southeast Asian conference that the editors organised called *Art and Action: Contemporary Art and Discourse in Southeast Asia*, which took place in December 2018. It was the first international conference on Southeast Asian contemporary art histories to be held in the region and featured keynote speakers Professor Terry Smith and Marian Pastor Roces. Since the first issue, the LASALLE website has undergone a major revamp. We had announced in the first issue that M.A.TTER UNBOUND will eventually be hosted as an online periodical on the LASALLE website with expanded features and multimedia functions such as videos. As such, we are delighted to announce that our readers will have access to videos and a podcast in this issue.

In the inaugural issue, we had said that M.A.TTER UNBOUND is, first and foremost, a platform to showcase the research and writings of students and alumni in the Asian Art Histories Programme. Indeed, a significant number of our graduates have gone on to contribute to the field through various research and writing initiatives, which can be traced back to the work that they had undertaken when they were studying in the programme. While the majority of the essays in the inaugural issue of M.A.TTER UNBOUND were distilled from the papers and theses that were completed as part of the programme, the writings in this issue are more broad-based in terms of the themes of the various texts.

Our co-editor, Clare Veal has contributed to this issue a video interview that she conducted with Australian-Thai artist Phaptawan Suwannakudt in her Sydney studio prior to her exhibition *Retold-Untold Stories*, held at Sydney College of the Arts in March 2016. The interview begins

with a discussion of Phaptawan's gendered experiences in Thailand as well as the way in which she negotiated cultural differences after her move to Sydney. She then moves on to discuss how these experiences impacted the development of the three works exhibited in *Retold-Untold Stories*, which she completed as part of an Asialink residency at Ne'Na Contemporary Arts Space Chiang Mai.

This issue also features two of the programme's current students, Theresa Tan and Nurdiana Rahmat, who have written an invigorating piece on their experience of the study trip to Taipei, Taiwan in November/December 2019. They provide a detailed day by day insightful account of the interesting artists, art spaces and exhibitions that they encountered and passionately describe the artworks that they saw. Alumni Ramakrishnan Ramesh reflects on his artist residency with Indonesian collective Ruang MES 56 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, which he completed soon after he graduated from the programme in 2018. The residency, in many ways, merged his art historical interests with contemporary art and his photographic practice. As an artist-researcher, Ramesh undertook research on the "hidden base" of the Borobudur temple and interpreted it through a contemporary lens (pun not intended). These images were then shown in an exhibition titled *Hidden Karma*.

The 6th edition of the Singapore Biennale, entitled 'Every Step in the Right Direction', took place from November 2019 to March 2020 under artistic director, Professor Patrick Flores. Odile Calla-Simon, who graduated from the programme in 2016, looks back at the biennale and frames its political message in terms of three trajectories: identifying and acknowledging, making decisions and initiating actions and process of change. Calla-Simon concludes by stating that "with its multiple narratives

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offering subtle but tangible changes, the 6th Singapore Biennale shows again that it is an essential cultural tool to build renewed perceptions of the environment, society, culture and politics, that is capable of responding to the phenomena of globalisation.”

Tanya Michele Amador, who graduated in 2019, has contributed an essay that is based on the research that she did for her MA thesis, which sought to investigate the viewer’s experience of performance art through a methodology called Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is a qualitative method of data collection that attempts to understand an individual’s experience of a particular phenomenon from his or her perspective and specific context. In this essay, Amador presents her findings of audience reception to Indonesian artist Melati Suryodarmo’s *Exergie Butter Dance*. A video link to the performance is provided.

In 2019, a group of the programme’s alumni, who graduated in 2018, founded an art space called SEED. In the podcast, you will hear current student Ely Nayir interviewing the three SEED directors about why they started the art space, their future directions and the inaugural exhibition featuring local artist Ernest Chan. Finally, alumnus Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani’s essay is a critical discussion and analysis of the film *Three Seasons* (1999) by Tony Bui. It analyses the film primarily in terms of cinematic space and how the use of contested and imagined space could generate a nostalgic and exoticised vision of Vietnam. It also discusses how cinematic space is used to explore notions of cultural belonging and identity. A video link to the film is provided.



Cinematic Space in the Filmic Narrative of *Three Seasons*¹

Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani

Three Seasons, by Vietnamese-American film director Tony Bui, was released in the United States in 1999. Bui left Vietnam with his family at the age of two, following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, and spent his formative years in the United States. Belonging to the significant '1.5 generation',² Bui was exposed, along with his contemporaries, to the way the United States viewed and represented the war in mainstream culture.³ That is, the war became, in its immediate aftermath, "a resource for the American culture industry".⁴ Publishers, television reporters, film and music producers contributed to immortalising the war into a "media-myth".⁵ Ranging from *Apocalypse Now* (1979) to *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) and *Forrest Gump* (1994), to name but a few, mainstream moving images undoubtedly took centre stage in American social culture as a way to acknowledge the trauma of the war with which the American society was struggling to come to terms. In this effort, shared by the growing Vietnamese diaspora, to counterbalance the predominant American discourse on the war and, also, to learn about Vietnam, a country largely unknown and unfamiliar to the filmmaker and his diaspora, Bui's cinematic choices have favoured, throughout his career,

"Across the unraveling of the film, key cinematic spaces are used to this end, in an effort to spatialise underlying notions of cultural belonging and identity, and the grip of tradition on the rapidly evolving Vietnamese society."

the depiction of a nostalgic, bygone Vietnam that would allow him to figuratively "translate notions of misery, heritage and history to a diasporic spectatorship".⁶ To this end the Vietnam depicted in most of Bui's production is an idyllic blend of ideals and aesthetics, where "curiosity vies with nostalgia, and reconciliation often overcomes resentment".⁷

Three Seasons, Bui's first feature film produced when he was only 26 years old, is located at the intersection of

cross-cultural encounters. Despite being an effectively American production, *Three Seasons* was granted permission to be fully shot on Vietnamese grounds. Also, in contrast to its American counterparts, *Three Seasons* is shot entirely in Vietnamese, except for a few sequences in which Harvey Keith, American actor and co-executive producer of the film, appears. Notwithstanding the film's large outreach across America and Europe, as well as its several award nominations,⁸ it received mixed responses by critics and the public and was criticised for being an "unashamedly sentimental movie" that makes use of fairy tales and stock images to tap into sugar-coated sentiments of lost virtues in the face of globalisation.⁹ Viewed in this context, the poster

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promoting *Three Seasons*, a key visual for the marketing campaign worldwide, is particularly telling. The poster depicts an artificial locale: the foreground is framed by a cascade of red petals; on both sides, trees along a quaint, rural path converge. The focal point is an “exotic” female

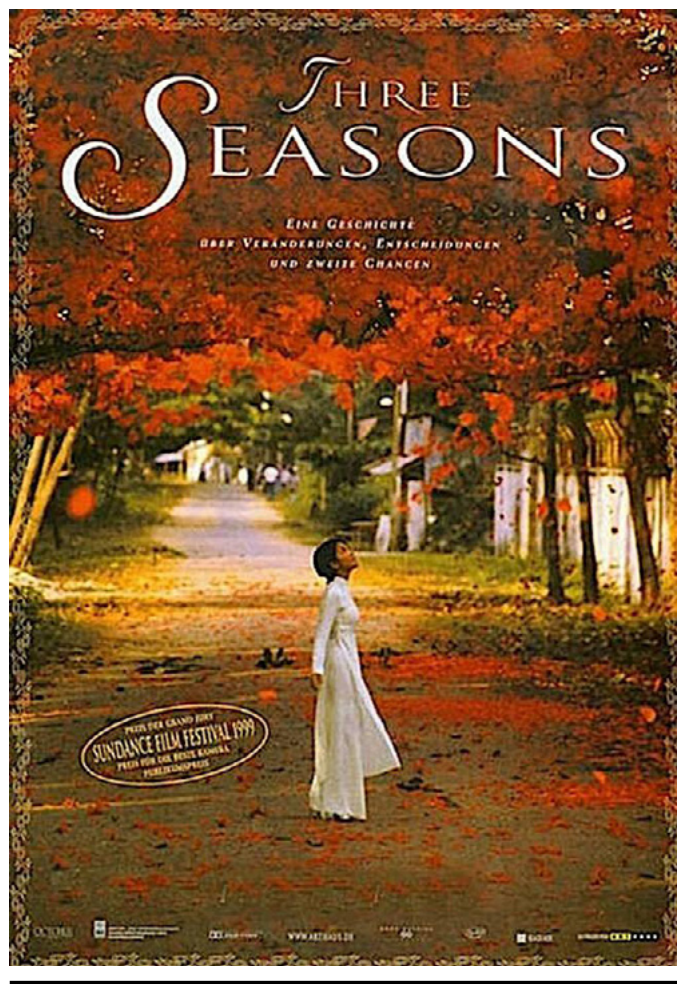


Figure 1 The poster produced for *Three Seasons*

figure wearing a white *áo dài*. The tagline reads: A haunting tale of changes, choices and second chances.

Beyond the visual artificiality of the film's brand image, how does the movie actually embody the nostalgic cliché

of a bygone Vietnam, which, in post-Đổi Mới 1999 (when the film was first released) was conversely encroaching on Western sentiments? In this paper, I propose that we approach the filmic narrative of *Three Seasons* from a spatial, or 'architectural', perspective to analyse the performative potential of key cinematic spaces. To do so, I focus on the use of cinematic space in *Three Seasons* as a discursive tool to apprehend how the conceptual deployment of contested or imagined spaces is able to contribute to the creation of a nostalgic vision of Vietnam, exoticised by American mainstream movies into a distant, oriental Other. Across the unraveling of the film, key cinematic spaces are used to this end, in an effort to spatialise underlying notions of cultural belonging and identity, and the grip of tradition on the rapidly evolving Vietnamese society. Varying from glamorous to dilapidated buildings, street alleys, private homes and temples, to cinema halls, shops and restaurants, the “represented or produced spaces”¹⁰ in *Three Seasons*, this paper argues, serve as tangible referents to a reality that is adapted to accommodate, and in response to the filmmaker's cross-cultural outlook on Vietnam, a country Bui and his contemporaries would have known only through “American movies and books, all of them in the English language”.¹¹ Specifically, this paper focuses on three distinct localities that function as the film's visual and conceptual landmarks: the Temple, which is portrayed as the ultimate locus of tradition; the Roundabout, which functions as a transitional space; and the Hotel, highlighted in the film as a space of transaction. Together the tradition-transition-transaction association contributes to depict Vietnam as an imagined land, at once idyllic and in danger of losing its soul. In fact, the Temple, the Roundabout and the Hotel are the film's real exponents, whose corollaries are their inhabitants: Dao, teacher and poet, and Kien An, the lotus farmer, in the temple; Hai, the cyclo driver, Woody, the

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street urchin, and James Hager, a former GI, in the city's roundabout; and Lan, the redeemed prostitute, at the hotel. Discussed in the paper as a second line of inquiry are in fact the inhabitants of said spaces and their ethnographic specificity to each locale in the attempt to address underlying questions of identity and cultural belonging.

Represented or produced spaces

Take one: The Temple

The film opens with a pastoral scene over a luscious, emerald-green lotus pond. Located in the middle of a pond created by the film crew to evoke a bucolic sanctuary is the residence of Teacher Dao (Tran Manh Cuong), one of the main characters in the intertwining plots of *Three Seasons*. Elderly and stricken with leprosy, Teacher Dao is the only inhabitant of the residence but, precisely because it is the locus of Dao's poetry and higher thinking, the residence is elevated to the status of spiritual shrine: a Temple, as it is referred to throughout the film. The Temple's architectural structure resembles that of an aristocratic house with a large compound that extends into the surrounding pond by large, sheltered patios and *salas*. Surrounded by water and lotuses, the Temple's floating appearance exudes a sense of mystery. This mysterious dimension is further emphasised by the Temple's cavernous interiors. The long and detailed pan views of the interior are systematically shot in the dark, revealing only sparse, dimly lit furniture: the desk, at which Teacher Dao writes his poems; his wheelchair; and his bed, visible only at the time of his passing in the film's final sequence. Viewed from within, the Temple is covered in dust, which, whether physical or imaginary, accumulates over objects and ideals. Viewed from the pond, the Temple seems to be reachable only by water, save for a rudimentary



Figure 2 The Temple

bridge that is a metaphor for the only link to Vietnam's fading traditions.

As the film unfolds, sequences of modern Saigon, whose periphery the Temple inhabits, bleed abruptly into shots overlooking the Temple. From pan views of the interior and exterior, to close-ups of the pond's white lotuses and portraits of its farmers, the site of the manufactured Temple underlines, visually and conceptually, the elegiac value of the past towards which we should turn our gaze. On the outside, the sunbathed lotuses in their alabastrine whiteness



Figure 3 Kien An and Hai

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shines on the Temple's sombre facade—a diamond cocooned in a gloomy, wooden shell. On the inside, poetry, education and intellectual sensibility have so far been treasured. But, for how long, Bui seems to implore, implicitly, thus examining the value of tradition over change. The only hope for the survival of past traditions is in the hands of Kien An (Nguyen Ngoc Hiep), the youngest of the lotus farmers, and the right candidate, the unravelling narrative tells us, to pass on the knowledge.

Take two: The Roundabout

After the initial sequence shot at the Temple, and for the whole duration of the film, *Three Seasons*' montage cuts back and forth to the streets of Saigon. The viewer is continually jolted into the film's other dimension, that of a city's cacophony of sounds—where “old and new, capitalism and socialism, ancient and modern collide”.¹² Tormented by cranes and new construction bulging like monsters everywhere, the city of Saigon weaves within itself its many tales. Yet, as this jostling city of corruption unravels before our eyes, we are presented with an alternative way, literally, a roundabout, where hope for the ‘nostalgic’ past will triumph.

Hai (Dan Duong), a hardworking cyclo driver, whose street-life experiences allow him wisdom and kindness, inhabits the city's most vital juncture: a colourful, heavily trafficked intersection that quickly becomes the film's main feature. Literally a road junction where traffic is permitted to flow in one direction, the Roundabout in *Three Seasons* guides the passage of time as well, marking the lives of its many passers-by. On one side the Roundabout is flanked by a red wall emblazoned with ‘Coca-Cola’. Beneath the sign, Hai and his companion cyclo drivers rest, quenching their thirst not with the expensive drink advertised just behind them, but,

conversely, with traditional pressed sugarcane concocted by the nearby stand also featured beneath the logo. This shot alone speaks to us on many levels. On the one hand, it speaks of the contrast between old and new, and the value of local, natural products against the seduction of imported goods; on the other, it signals, once again, Bui's deliberate choice to partake in the vision of Vietnam as a disappearing



Figure 4 Hai and his companion drinking sugarcane juice

paradise fuelled by America perception, rather than dismantling, in my opinion, “conventional ways in which Americans have seen Vietnam” as suggested by Michele Janette in her otherwise insightful reading of the film.¹³

On the opposite side of the red wall there is Hager (Harvey Keitel), an ex-GI, who is overlooked by the cyclo drivers while he sits still, all day, on a camping chair, his back firmly set against his shabby hotel, his eyes focused on the restaurant where he last encountered his daughter's Vietnamese mother. Hager's steady presence at the Roundabout also functions as *trait-d'union* with Woody (Huu Duoc Nguyen), another main character. A young inhabitant of Saigon's busy streets, Woody's life epitomises a different urban

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dimension all together: that of the homeless, destitute child of the war, whose life is only worth occasional interactions with foreigners, buyers of his many trinkets. Bouncing our gaze from one to the other side of the Roundabout, we are exposed not only to the constant transition of people and goods, but also to the changes of daylight according to the people and their stories: sunny and bright over the red wall, where Hai's modest life points to a brighter future, bleak and



Figure 5 Woody admires the luxurious hotel

perplexing on Hager's side, whose views on Vietnam are still stuck to the war, to shadowy and precarious on Woody's occasional roaming of the site.

Take three: The Hotel

Towering over Saigon's busy streets, the Hotel is a luxurious establishment, and, in *Three Seasons*, the indexical signifier of the 'foreign' and the 'insidious', the only space in the film whose threshold is traversed by most of the main characters. In fact, all excluding Kien An, whose virtuousness prevents her from entering the corrupted world, and Hai, who briefly inhabits the hotel to the end of redeeming Lan (Zoe Bui), the prostitute. Comfortably cushioned in air conditioning,

the Hotel seems to exist in its own universe—where time passes differently than in the streets and where people, even Asians, "have a different talk, a different walk. The sun rises for them, not for us...", Lan tells Hai.¹⁴ She is, among all, the only one that moves comfortably back and forth the Hotel premises. Lan can inhabit it and she can be one of the Hotel's guests, but only just. At night she moves out of that space as if otherwise it transforms her. Underlining



Figure 6 Lan

the film all along is the sentiment that the Hotel is a place of transaction, a place where gain and loss chase each other in a continuum. Capitalism has its grip on it, its opulent décor makes no secret of that.

But there are many shades to Saigon's urban life, as there are many hotels. There is in fact the hotel inhabited by Hager the "crazy guy", as the film tells us, the former US Army officer, whose familiarity with Saigon makes him almost a local. His hotel, placed to counterbalance its foreign corollary, seems to belong to a different city: its unassuming exterior contrasts greatly with those of the grandness of the Hotel and so is its dark, damp interior juxtaposed to the Hotel's brightly lit foyer. Notwithstanding its appearance of

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decay, Hager's hotel comes across as secure and authentic. While prostitution happens in both localities, the luxurious and the rundown hotel, there are no pretensions in the latter. For instance, during Hager's last dinner at the hotel, when he finally finds his daughter, we see the hotel guests and their accompanying girls carelessly exchanging food and intimacies. Such spontaneous behaviour seems to contrast with the code of conduct subscribed by the Hotel customers, where prostitution is portrayed as a sanitised act of transaction.

Inhabiting the spaces

Approaching the film from a spatial or 'architectural' perspective as proposed at the beginning of the paper—both in terms of analysing the spaces and how they function in the film, and in terms of mapping those very spaces within the filmic narrative—I have highlighted thus the extent to which *Three Seasons* employs manufactured or imagined locales. I have argued that the Temple, the Roundabout and the Hotel are the film's real protagonists, corresponding to the notions of tradition, transition and transaction as charged referential indexicalities. However, there are other representative spaces in *Three Seasons* that should be equally explored in further research. For instance, the bar, artfully named *Apocalypse Now*, where Hager and Woody have their only verbal exchange; the TV shop, whose premises Woody inhabits, if only temporarily; and the cinema, whose makeshift screen Woody traverses. There are also the restaurants: like the one where Hager has his last dinner in Saigon and meets his daughter for the first time. Lastly, and crucially, there is Lan's private home, particularly her bedroom that should be viewed in parallel to the Hotel's bedroom, both inhabited by Lan and Hai.



Figure 7 Hager and his daughter

Through Bui's performative use of these various locales as indexical cinematic spaces, the narrative of the film exposes the underlying, fundamental struggle with identity and cultural belonging the inhabitants of each specific locale are



Figure 8 Kien Han

subjected to through their disjointed presence/absence. This staccato structure of the film is achieved not only by the film montage technique that works simultaneously on various chronological planes, but also by the characters' peculiarity to each given space.

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Their ethnographic specificity to each locale reflects, I would argue, Bui's attempts to create an imagined or perceived space—a Vietnam he is estranged from and to which he is conforming.¹⁵ While the characters and their conduct seem, in fact, to be carved out of specific anthropological contexts—street life, prostitution, peasantry, military background and so on—in the film they also appear to be compelled into their roles and out of sync, so to speak, with their personae. While the actors play their roles, the roles themselves become an assumed, or clichéd ethnography of Vietnam that Bui would have adapted from mainstream American cinema.¹⁶ This spatial and cultural slippage between the actors and their personae has not so much to do with the acting per se, which is not within the scope of this paper, but in their atemporality in relation to their space and time. That is, the personae appear forcefully constructed to fit their identities, so to speak, within the performativity of the cinematic spaces and the narrative they unravel. This paradox describes a slippage that is partially due, this paper argues, to Tony Bui's unfamiliarity with Vietnam despite being part of its diaspora, which had been overwhelmingly represented in the years following the end of the war by mainstream American film industry. On the other hand,

the film does succeed partaking of both Vietnamese and American cinema by featuring established actors from the two countries, in this way, foregrounding a broader dialogue on the legacy of the war.

Produced in response to the mainstream film industry, how does *Three Seasons* intersect with its contemporary productions? In this short paper, I have done a formal and contextual analysis of the *Three Seasons*, examining the film's attempts in counterbalancing Western appropriation of the war by giving an alternative voice and interpretation of the country's past. I have argued that the film uses constructed cinematic spaces that possibly aggrandise the stereotype of Vietnam. This need for a clichéd, even if nostalgic, portrayal of the country is due to Bui and his diasporic audience's attempts to reconcile their cross-cultural identity and remote familiarity to Vietnam—a land of great cultural transformation.

Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani graduated from the MA Asian Art Histories Programme in 2011.

Three Seasons can be viewed at this link
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yDcC4WQfMI>

Endnotes

1 For a streaming of the film, see "*Ba Mùa (Three Seasons)*," YouTube video, 1:44:11, posted by "Lampson Nguyen," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yDcC4WQfMI>. Henceforth, all the images featured in this paper are stills from the movie or otherwise downloaded from the internet.

2 The term '1.5 generation' is used to describe people who arrived in the United States as children and adolescents.



Figure 9 Lan and Hai at the end of the film

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"Unlike their first-generation parents or U.S.-born siblings, their identity is split. They are American in many ways, sometimes in most, but not entirely." See Leslie Berestein-Rojas "Generation 1.5: Where an immigrant generation fits in," *Southern California Public Radio*, March 21, 2012, <https://www.scpr.org/blogs/multiamerican/2012/03/21/7963/what-is-a-1-5-where-an-immigrant-generation-fits-i/>.

3 Part of my interview with Dinh Q. Lê, another diaspora artist of the same generation, the artist says: "I was confounded by the American way of writing about the Vietnam War and, basically, the Vietnamese people. It wasn't about us, although we won the war, it was pretty much about the Americans in Vietnam". See excerpts of the video interview, part of the exhibition *Pure Land: A Solo Show* by Dinh Q. Lê at Tang Contemporary Art Bangkok, 2019, <https://www.tangcontemporary.com/2019-pure-land>.

4 For the mediatic power of the Vietnam War, see Rick Berg, "Losing Vietnam: Covering the War in the Age of Technology," *Cultural Critique* No. 3, American Representation of Vietnam (Spring 1986): 92–125.

5 Berg.

6 Lan Duong "Manufacturing Authenticity: The Feminine Ideal in Tony Bui's *Three Seasons*," *Amerasia Journal* 31, no. 2 (2005): 3.

7 Michele Janette, "Look Again: *Three Seasons* Refocuses American Sights of Vietnam," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, no. 1–2 (February/August 2006): 254.

8 *Three Seasons* won the Grand Jury Prize, the Audience Choice Award, and the Cinematography Award at the 1999 Sundance Film Festival.

9 Andrew O'Hehir, "Poetry in Motion: Tony Bui's 'Three Seasons' is a cinematic love poem to Vietnam," *Salon*, May 7, 1999, <https://www.salon.com/1999/05/07/seasons/>.

10 See Lilian Chee and Edna Lim, *Asian Cinema and the Use of Space: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2015), 4.

11 Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Our Vietnam War Never Ended," *The New York Times*, April 24, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/26/opinion/sunday/our-vietnam-war-never-ended.html?_r=0. Like Bui, Nguyen belongs to the 1.5 generation of the Vietnamese diaspora.

12 O'Hehir, "Poetry in Motion".

13 Janette, "Look Again", 256.

14 See *Three Seasons*, 50:16–50:25.

15 For a complementary reading on cinematic ethnography to interpret a Vietnamese film, see Leslie Barnes, "Cinema as Cultural Translation: The Production of Vietnam in Trần Anh Hùng's *Cyclo*," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 5, iss. 3 (October 2010): 106–128.

16 For a further psychological analysis of the protagonists and, in particular, the section "Disrupting Stock Images," see Janette, "Look Again", 259–262.

Hidden Karma of an artist-in-residence: Reflections of an art history student in a photography collective in Yogyakarta

Ramakrishnan Ramesh

Introduction

Artist residencies play an important role in facilitating meetings between diverse artists and collectives or art spaces, and generate new ways of thinking within the ecosystem that produce new ideas. Residencies mean different things to different people and are ever changing. Although the practice has been around for several years, each artist comes in with his or her own perceptions and expectations. Artist residencies are expected to ignite some change in the methods of working, challenge assumptions of time, space and process, and produce works or ideas that would not have happened otherwise. In this paper, I present some reflections from my own process of researching and creating. In any such encounter, several processes and negotiations occur, all of which have some value to both the space and the artist. Primary for me was the act of creating something, in this case photos and exhibition objects, within a defined time and space. Philosophically, I observed that the notion of a residency is not a fixed thing; it is an evolving thing, an open-ended process where art is meant to be created, presented and interpreted, and then the whole cycle repeats. Even as I write this, I can sense that I am having different thoughts about my own work and the processes that I followed, and these iterations are making me evolve as an artist and writer.

Background

After graduating with an MA in Asian Art Histories at LASALLE College of the Arts, I decided to develop my art and photography practice by taking up artist residencies. It is not all that common for graduates from art history programmes to undertake residencies, but I was keen since I had heard that many artists do their best work when away from their home base, in a different place and amongst other artists and people.

I came into the MA programme at LASALLE as a photographer and wannabe artist. I have been involved in the arts sector ever since my university days but my 30-year career was in business. I wanted to pursue my interest in photography at a different level, make it more than a hobby and get involved in the arts scene. However, the MA programme offered the flexibility to choose photography as an area of research, which I eventually did for my assignments and thesis. As a mature student, coming back to academia after three decades in corporate life, I was hungry for more intense experiences and ready for some experimentation and learning. My long-term objective is to contribute as an artist-researcher and do some teaching. As such, I felt that immersing myself in the art scene via artist

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residency programmess would benefit my learning, and give me direct experience with the contemporary art of the region.

I applied to several places for my residencies in Asia, including India and Japan. I found two that suited my needs and most importantly, the time and topic flexibility—one in Yogyakarta (also called Jogja) and another in Bangkok. In both these art spaces, I could do specific projects in photography and culture that blended well with their needs and scope.

Jogja: Ruang MES 56

My artist residency was at Ruang MES 56, a photography-based art collective run by photographers in Jogja, Indonesia. It was divided into two phases, each lasting roughly four weeks: Phase 1 from November to December 2018 and Phase 2 from January to February 2019. Ruang MES 56 is a non-profit institution established in 2002 by a group of artist-photographers. It mainly functions as a laboratory to spread photo-based art with a conceptual feel. The approach is exploratory and experimental with a nod to conceptual, historical and contextual work. Their mission is to delve into contemporary art discourse and visual culture in the Southeast Asian region through various programmes and activities such as residencies, presentations, discussions, exhibitions, and interdisciplinary art projects.

Ruang MES 56 is a very intense and creative hub with many things happening at the same time. It has a basic and primal feel about the space—just a few exhibition rooms, a small screening room and a rock-strewn foyer with a small open pantry (Fig. 1). The premises also house a music collective, a small eatery and shop that sells exhibition

merchandise, T-shirts and beer. The visiting crowd is young and edgy, mostly students from local colleges. The space is what one would call 'rough and ready', and had its own unique atmosphere. The collective members even live on the premises and gave the place a lived-in feeling. Despite the lack of a formal structure, Ruang MES 56 attracts many artists from all over the world, and is considered a pit stop for many curators and collectors who pass through Jogja. Though informal and very open, they provide the core setup for mediators and integrators, bringing together international artists and incubating their ideas.



Figure 1 Ramakrishnan Ramesh, Ruang MES 56 entrance, 2018-2019, Digital photograph

The name Ruang MES 56 comes from the old administrative term that denoted housing for government officials. It is located in the Mangkuyudan district with many galleries and other arts spaces nearby. Photographer, historian and curator Zhuang Wubin, in his publication, *Photography in Southeast Asia*, says that "this Yogyakarta-based collective is sometimes projected as [photography's] sole exemplar. Blurring boundaries between art and life, the bohemian

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house not only serves as a working space, but is also where the artists live, sleep, socialise and party.”¹ Over the years Ruang MES 56 has developed a strong sense of community and is seen as a helpful resource. Often, it is this spirit of *gotong royong*² that is the prime aspect of the collective (Fig. 2).



Figure 2 Ramakrishnan Ramesh, Shelf in the Ruang MES 56 library, 2018-2019, Digital photograph

Jogja was the former capital of Java Island, a sultanate with a kraton and walled palace in the middle of the city. Jogja is considered the core of the art scene in Indonesia and Ruang MES 56 is a key part of this contemporary art scene, with several members taking their art to a regional and even international level. There is a special charm to Jogja, as it is the centre of Javanese culture, where old ways of life

exist side-by-side with bustling modernity, says Tan Siuli, a curator at the Singapore Art Museum.³ Jogja is seen as a “happening” place with many openings, art shows and artist talks every weekend (Fig. 3). Many famous artists and photographers such as Heri Dono, Agus Suwage, FX Harsono and Eko Nugroho also come from this area or have studios in Jogja. During my brief stay, I was able to visit several of them, notably Heri Dono (who offered valuable suggestions for my *Hidden Karma* project) and also visited many other exhibition spaces. Jogja is also home to the seminal Cemeti – Institute for Art and Society and Sangkring Art Space which, among many other galleries, add to the vibrancy of the area.



Figure 3 Ramakrishnan Ramesh, Chess players street side, 2018-2019, Digital photograph

My Reflections: Hidden Karma

Going into this residency, I was quite clear that I wanted to delve into some of the photography work I had done in the past at the Borobudur temple and revive it. As a

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photographer and co-creator, I had made photo books using images shot in Borobudur between 2009 and 2014. These photo books served as my starting point for going deeper into what I wanted to do in my residency. Additionally, I had access to the 160 photographs of the “hidden base” of Borobudur taken by Kassian Cephas⁴ from the KITLV, University of Leiden (Fig. 4). I was keen to re-present them in a contemporary venue and space, so as to add to the already growing interest and re-examine them in today’s context (Figs.5-7)

Right from the start, I realised that I was on my own and that there was no instruction or structure to the development of my project, specifically in the aspect of combining the historical photography of Borobudur and contemporary interpretation using my own photos. The members of

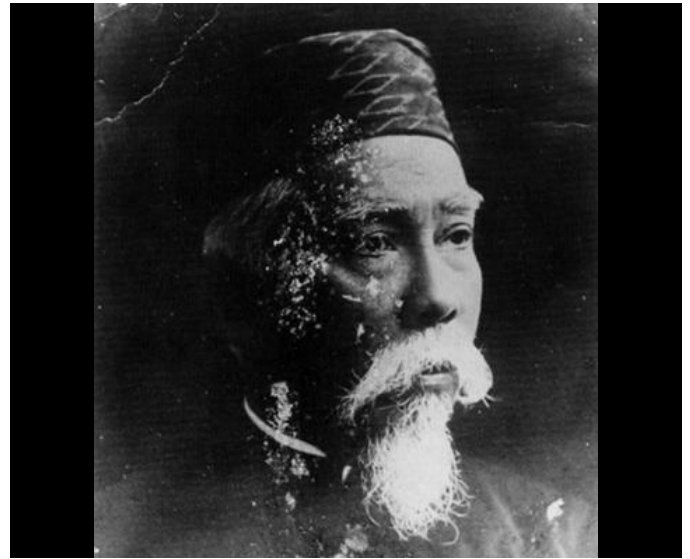


Figure 4 Photograph of Kassian Cephas (1845-1912), 19th century Source: <https://digitalcollections.universiteitleiden.nl/imagecollection-kitlv>



Figure 5 Kassian Cephas, 1845-1912

Life Activities, Relief panel from the “hidden base”, 1890-91, (digitally enhanced photo by author for this article)

Original Source: https://digitalcollections.universiteitleiden.nl/search/kassian%20Cephas?type=edimax&cp=collection%3Akitlv_photos

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Figure 6 Kassian Cephas, 1845-1912

4 Meditative Buddhas, Relief panel from the "hidden base", 1890-91, (digitally enhanced by author for this article)

Source: https://digitalcollections.universiteitleiden.nl/search/kassian%20Cephas?type=edismax&cp=collection%3Akitlv_photos



Figure 7 Ramakrishnan Ramesh, Pak Harsono, a senior guide at the Borobudur chandi, explaining the relief panels, 2019, Digital photograph

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Ruang MES 56 were delighted that I was working on something local but essentially left me alone after my initial presentation on the project. The first meeting I had with some of the founders of the MES 56 collective was so informal that it left me with a huge sensation of openness, that anything is possible, combined with some child-like excitement. I still recall what I had mumbled to Wowo, one of the senior directors of the Ruang MES 56 space: "I am just putting a few things in the pot, adding some spices and letting it cook. Let's see what emerges." He had no objections, and added that "cooking is good".

I am a photographer taking beginner steps as an artist and this was my first residency. Given all these, I decided I could work with a beginner's mindset and explore different avenues. This turned out to be good as I got involved in a few projects that were beyond the scope of my work on *Hidden Karma*.⁵ In the first week of my research phase in late 2019, I made it a daily habit to visit several art spaces and galleries in the city, and began looking at contemporary art in a different way—a more open, free and unstructured way. I deliberately did not do anything about the project I was supposed to work on but instead allowed my mind to roam. My MA studies in LASALLE College had given me a good grounding on art history and critique but I still needed to learn more about curation and making art and photography to match site specific requirements.

The benefit of spending time outside of your home base is the chance to engage with other people, deal with unfamiliar spaces and see what everyone else is working on. This free exploration gave me several ideas and visiting other shows helped me to situate my presentation in a relevant context. Many of the shows and presentations I saw were large scale productions and well put-together. Seeing

them helped me imagine my own work with reference to the space available in Ruang MES 56.

Development

At the end of Phase 1, I gave a talk about my research and the project's scope. I put up 40 images of the "hidden base" (from the Kassian Cephas Archives, University of Leiden) on the wall in the foyer and invited people to comment on them (Fig. 8). Several local artists and friends of Ruang MES 56 were invited and many of them gave me their views. What surprised me was that many of them had not considered this rich set of panels and visuals as projects to work on even though they lie hidden so close to their backyards. These story-based relief panels are also referred to as the *Karmavibhanga* (the story of cause and effect in life, according to Buddhist philosophy) and remain buried



Figure 8 Afdruk. A., Ramesh explaining the "hidden base" panels, Digital photograph, 2018-2019. The panels were divided into three groups—good deeds, bad deeds and neutral deeds. The audience was to reflect on the content of the images as input for Phase 2 of the project

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under the Borobudur temple. Each of them is nearly 20 feet in length and they encircle the temple as its base foundation. They hold up the other levels of the temple and so the authorities in charge felt that it is better they remain buried, for structural reasons. Four of the 160 panels in the south east corner of the temple have been uncovered after the latest renovations and are now open for public viewing.

By analysing the content of these images and their links with Buddhist philosophy and texts, I wanted my project to shed light on these hidden treasures. During my research phase, I learned that the reasons that these images are hidden are not very clear and are often mixed up with ideas about bad



Figure 10 Kassian Cephas, View of the “hidden base”, Borobudur Temple, taken at the time of digging and making photographs, Digital photograph, Source: <https://digitalcollections.universiteitleiden.nl>

karma and the sensitive and explicit nature of the images. There were also some controversies about the actual content of these relief panels, some deemed inappropriate or too sensitive or simply disagreeable, as well as the notion that it is not ‘safe’ to display or open them out.

Kassian Cephas, the Sultanate’s official photographer in the 19th century, was entrusted with the task of documenting the panels before they were covered up with rock and stone. The process must have been laborious and quite a challenge but Cephas meticulously photographed each of these panels (Fig. 10). The originals are now in Holland with the University of Leiden archives.⁶ There is also a physical museum in the temple compound in Magelang in Borobudur that aims to show and tell the narrative of the Maha Karmavibhanga. My project was titled *Hidden Karma: Reflections on the hidden base relief panel photographs*. I was attempting to relook and review the Kassian Cephas images from several viewpoints and also to question the reasons for which these panels continue to be hidden.

There have been studies of these hidden panels but most of the knowledge is from an archaeological perspective. There are a few studies that also relate the text to the images and provide a link to some specific sutras. But there has not been an exploration of the images as a photographic process, nor a perspective on their content and, as far as I can tell, no one has directly questioned the reasons they are hidden. With this in mind, I wanted to locate my inquiry in the crosshairs of art history, Buddhist philosophical thought and photography. My aim was to engage with the artistic community and general viewers and begin a dialogue to relook at the images and see if they can in some way be opened up and displayed.

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The Exhibition Mandala

All my research work from Phase 1, the exploration and study of the Kassian Cephas photographs, were printed in different formats. The curator and I jointly surveyed the available rooms in Ruang MES 56 and decided that we will exhibit several of these images befitting the project title: Hidden Karma. This exhibition, a final coming together of all the work, also served as a space to experiment with ways of creating and looking at images of the Karma Vibhanga relief panels. It was held in the Ruang MES 56 premises from 2 February 2019 to 19 February 2019. One of the photos displayed near the entrance clearly echoed the overall idea. "It is not the way it looks, it is the way you look at it" (Fig. 9). Some of the images are layered with the text from the *Karma Vibhanga* sutras to allow us to reflect on the ways photos and texts work together, while a few of the images are deliberately layered with penetrating filters and attempts to visualise the negative and positive nature of "emptiness"—a core teaching of Buddhism (Fig. 11). Our relationship with Buddhism (religion) and God



Figure 11 Ramakrishnan Ramesh, *Hidden Karma*, exhibition view, 2018-2019. Four digital photos printed on transparent latex explaining the rules of Karma stuck on the glass window frame of the MES 56 gallery

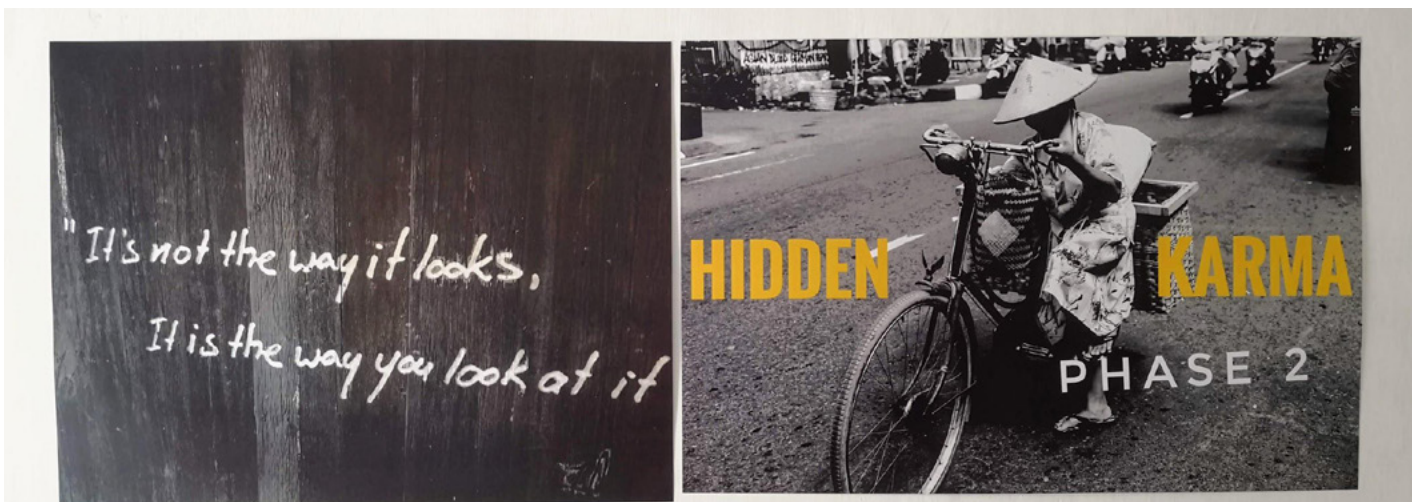


Figure 9 Ramakrishnan Ramesh, *Hidden Karma*, exhibition view, 2018-2019. Two digital printed photographs near the entrance. "It's not the way it looks, it is the way you look at it" became the basic theme.

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is an ever-changing one which, at times, can become very transnational and commercial. Without being critical about Buddhist philosophy or the sutras, the photographs themselves are intended to work as visuals — to compare what we value and why. The exhibition then becomes a “mandala”, a world of images and messages that are interconnected and to be viewed as a whole and viewed as parts (Figs.12a and 12b).



Figure 12a & 12b, Ramakrishnan Ramesh, *Below Stones and Mandala*, exhibition view, 2018-2019, Digital photographs. Some of the photographs in the exhibition were placed on the floor to point out the “hidden below” and that concept of Mandala is a “grounded” idea

The exhibition showed some of the Kassian Cephas images covered in translucent paper to suggest the hidden nature of their content. It also showed the key ideas that still hold us back from seeing the images for what they are. This method asks us to lift the veil, so to speak, to see the real truth and to deal with it. It is also meant to be an action (karma) that one has to do, to see the truth for oneself and not rely on myths and stories (Fig. 13).

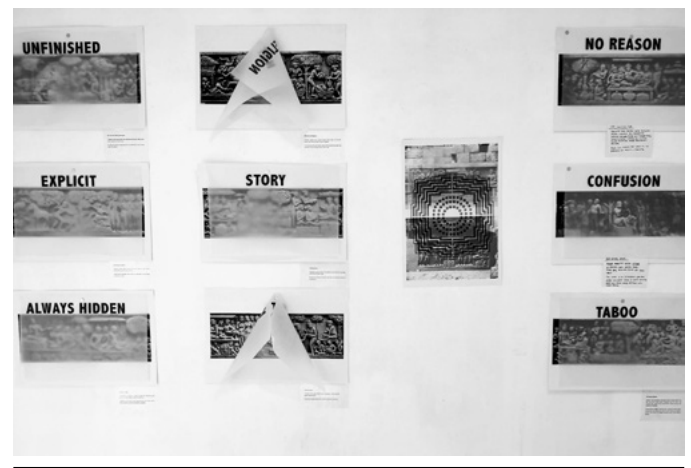


Figure 13 Ramakrishnan Ramesh, *Why We Hide*, Nine “hidden base” panels and words covering them, exhibition view, Digital photographs covered in translucent film, 2018-2019

The architecture of Borobudur itself was based on the mandala design. It is a physical structure showing the steps to reach Nirvana that simultaneously narrates the life of the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas. The Desire Realm or human world is at the base; as one goes up the temple, one moves up through the form worlds (*Rupadhatu*) and towards the formless (*Arupadhatu*) at the top. Likewise, if we compare the photographs in the exhibition to the panels, we can make the leap from the 9th century to today’s world, and vice versa. The exhibition takes the viewer on a journey,

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using contemporary images as stimuli. On one level, it asks us to question the world around us while, on another, to examine why we as people hide certain thoughts and ideas. The rest of the exhibition takes the concept of mandalas of expression and uses contemporary photographs to expound the narrative.

Other Encounters

In Nov/Dec 2019, during Phase 1, Ruang MES 56 was supporting a group of new photographers from East Timor, coaching and guiding them in photography display and

other ideas. I lent my camera equipment to one of the young artists from this group and worked with him in telling a story of a horse cart driver and his horse. Working with someone and sharing some techniques not only helped him but added value to my own artistic process. I was able to use some of the monochrome printing ideas from his work later in my project. I also had a chance to work on two other projects. In the first instance, I was invited to photograph a group of four transgender women who were living out of the city near the airport. I responded to this project immediately and with gusto as I had worked on the photography of transgender people for my MA thesis in 2018. To facilitate this process, Ruang MES 56 assigned me a student from the Art Institute in Jogja, Deni Fidinillah, to act as local translator and assistant. Deni was my go-between when I shot and interacted with the transgender women. I created a set of images, mainly atmospheric portraits of the transgender people in their homes and in and around Ruang MES 56. The photographs were presented in a cafe gallery alongside a performance focused on raising awareness about transgender issues. To give the photos a human touch, each of the individuals recorded their aspirations and dreams in a handwritten note in Bahasa Indonesia, which was then pinned to their image in the exhibition (Fig. 14).

In the second instance, I worked with Wimo Ambala Bayang, a senior member of Ruang MES 56. He had been working on landscape photographs taken near the river Progo that were used as part of the 'say no' to the construction of the New International Yogyakarta Airport project. For this project, Wimo and I travelled south to where the River Progo meets the sea, and photographed the changing lifestyle and landscapes of the area. We noticed huge changes in surrounding beachside villages where fisherfolks live. As a part of my exhibition, we were able to exhibit some



Figure 14 Ramakrishnan Ramesh, *Project Amuba*, 2018-2019, Seven photographs of transgender women with their dreams and aspirations in handwritten text in Bahasa

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photographs from the same location taken in the past, and compared them to what was happening in the present. I also used some found objects and wooden tree barks to suggest the transformation taking place in the area (Fig. 15).



Figure 15 Ramakrishnan Ramesh, *Then & Now*. Wall text of the exhibition of photographs and found objects exploring the impact of the construction of the new international airport in Jogja

Conclusion

In summary, after my Jogja Residency, I felt fulfilled. Firstly, I was happy that I had the chance to break up the project into two parts. I realised it was important for my artistic mind to shape up some ideas and also find the time and space to execute my vision. By having a break, I was able to let go of the project for a while and then to catch it again and bring it to fruition. I was also pleased that I had the opportunity to be involved in other projects. They helped me explore multiple ideas at the same time and also brought me the opportunity to work with others who helped me shape my photos to a specific narrative.

As for the specific nature of the projects that I undertook, I am particularly proud of the fact that I was able to respond to a request and produce exhibition-quality work in just a few days for the transgender project. I am also proud of the fact that the MA programme prepared me sufficiently to see things in their proper historical context. The MA programme thus gave me the confidence to talk about my work and my reasons for doing or creating things in the first place.

Moreover, viewing my own work from a distance and making choices on what goes up on the wall and why was very exciting even though I must admit that I did not always agree with what the curator had to say. I took some decisions on how the work should flow from one room to another and what it should look like in the end. Even though people walked about the galleries in a random way, putting a few works on the floor and making them read something towards the end gave some space for contemplation.

Finally, I developed some sense of the feelings and emotions that came up in the creating and thinking process of art, and how to work with them to meet a certain objective. On many occasions, I had to remind myself of my original objective: what am I creating? why did I decide to do this residency? The flow of work and ideas may not always have gone on as planned or expected but in the end, I produced work that I am proud of and made several friends along the way. There is a kind of alchemy in the process of working in a new place and with things away from one's comfort zone. It was not comfortable at times, being with new people and working with strangers, but towards the end, the satisfaction one gets is well worth the deviations and the discomfort.

There is a basic trajectory to how these residencies work. It is a normal curve and it rises up over time—the trick is to keep

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it up there by creatively energising the project. In the end, it will come down, and the whole thing, when put together, feels different. Writing about the residency after nearly a year made me realise that the trajectory of *Hidden Karma* was the same. As the Buddha said, that is the nature of all things: they are born or created, they rise and grow over time, and in the end, they decline and eventually perish.

Ramakrishnan Ramesh graduated from the MA Asian Art Histories Programme in 2018.

Endnotes

1 Wubin Zhuang, "5 independent art spaces in Yogyakarta," Date accessed 1 March 2019, <https://artradarjournal.com/2017/08/06/5-independent-art-spaces-in-yogyakarta/>.

2 In Indonesian society, the communal spirit is a quintessential aspect of culture. It can be understood on many different levels, including ways of working together, and ways of resolving matters collectively through reciprocal help, with the active participation of members of the community. The photography collective RMes56 uses the practice of *gotong royong* to fulfil everyday needs and create programmes to sustain the collective independently. Source: www.mes56.com.

3 Siuli Tan, "Artsy Jogja, where the old way of life co-exists with modernity," Published on Oct 23, 2016, Accessed 1 March 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/travel/artsy-jogja>

4 Kassian Cephas (1845-1912) was a Javanese photographer for the Yogyakarta royal court and was the first indigenous Indonesian to become a professional photographer. He was recognised for his documentation work for the Dutch Archaeological Union.

5 *Hidden Karma* is the name of the project that was coined in a discussion between the Ruang MES 56 curators and myself when they asked me to give a title to the project. It is drawn from the words "Hidden Base" (a term used to refer to where the relief sculptures lay buried in the Borobudur Temple) and the famous Buddhist text these sculptures are based on called Karma Wibhanga, a narrative text about cause and result.

6 Link to the digital 3D archive: <http://masterpieces.asemus.museum/borobudur/map-theme6.html#7>

Observing the Observer Through a New Methodology Case Study: Melati Suryodarmo's *Exergie Butter Dance*

Tanya Michele Amador

Prevailing art historical discourse often briefly references the audience as being participants in an artwork, but seldom goes deeper into the individual viewer's experience. This study proposes a new method of analysis through the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). A qualitative method of data collection, IPA allows the reader to understand a chosen individual subject's reception of a particular event, or 'phenomena', from their perspective and specific context(s). Using a video of a performance, *Exergie Butter Dance* (2000–15) by Indonesian performance artist, Melati Suryodarmo, as a case study, this ongoing research project draws from an insightful interview process with individual spectators to narrate how the viewer's preconceived notions, cultural values, experiences, and pre-programming cause them to understand performance works in the ways that they do.¹

Background and Framework

Existing frameworks for considering performance art tend to scrutinise the art form by addressing its ephemerality, the use of the artist's body, and psychological nuances as pertaining to emotionally elicited affects. These structures many times ignore altogether the habitus of the spectators.²

For example, the use of feminism as a framework does not typically consider the viewer's perspective, but rather focuses on the artist's critique of patriarchal dominance and their reclamation of the female body, using the performance as a vehicle. Art historical discourse often briefly references audience participation, but seldom goes deeper into the experience of the viewer. The same holds true with sociological and textual framing which focus on political and social themes.³ Granted, these frameworks give us much insight, such as an understanding of an artist's oeuvre, the psychology of the performer, the emotions they affect, and the somatic uses of the body and their implications. However, they fail to help us understand *how* a spectator reads a work, *why* the performance causes them to receive the works in the ways that they do, and how this differs from viewer to viewer.

According to Amelia Jones in "Presence' in Absentia", for the spectator, a performance is a projection of a situation in which the viewer's own desires take place. Drawing from Jacques Derrida, Jones asserts that, "body art performances exacerbate the body's supplementarity and the role of representation in momentarily securing its meanings through visible codes signaling gender, race, and other

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social markers." She goes on to argue that "the body in performance is fully dependent on the ways in which the image is contextualised and interpreted (by the viewer)."⁴ Performance art has always been a fundamentally disputed and contested genre of contemporary art. It has also remained one of the most inaccessible for spectators to understand and connect with.⁵ While an artist might be direct or ambiguous in conveying meaning to an audience, it is ultimately the viewer who determines how the work is absorbed and interpreted, or "received".

Research Methodology

The first and most important foundation of IPA is phenomenology, the very word contained in its title. Phenomenology is essentially a philosophical approach to the study of experience. The founding theory that established the phenomenological approach is Edmund Husserl's argument for the meticulous assessment of the human experience in its intentional consciousness.⁶ Hence, the essence of this research is dedicated to applying this method of analysis to the individual's reception of a particular event, or "phenomena" in the context of the particular chosen individuals and their specific circumstances. Further, this paper considers Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theory that each individual's experience in the world is unique to their own "embodied" nature.⁷

The selection procedure of choosing sample subjects for an IPA study is far more detailed than is possible to fully delve into for the purpose of this article's approved length, but it most commonly demands a fairly homogeneous and small group of participants for whom the research question would be meaningful.⁸ Furthermore, studies of this type

aim towards theoretical transferability rather than empirical generalisability and search for connections across emergent themes by contextualising them within the personal accounts of each participant's cultural and temporal experiences. Normally a study such as this focuses on more precise key moments in a participant's life. However, during the interview process, the interviewees' narratives do not always provide such specific information but on a whole, in my experience, their accounts often related to their familiarities in a broader sense of retrospection on culture within family, social and work life.⁹

In purporting to discover the most optimal way to understand how the/an audience grasps a performance, I asked the participants the question: "what do you think?", "What do you *really* think and why?" To take the thought process further: *How* do you receive it? What does it mean to you and *why*?

Case Study Melati Suryodarmo Exergie Butter Dance

Regularly placed within an international lineage, Indonesian artist Melati Suryodarmo is a pioneer of performance art in Southeast Asia.¹⁰ Trained in Butoh dance under the master, Anzu Furukawa, Melati has been performing internationally since 1999.¹¹ Melati was also mentored by Marina Abramović and has championed performance art from the early days of her artistic development.¹²

Exergie Butter Dance (Figures 2.1–2.6) is a live performance that was first presented in Berlin in 2000 and afterwards performed and screened in other cities globally.¹³ The

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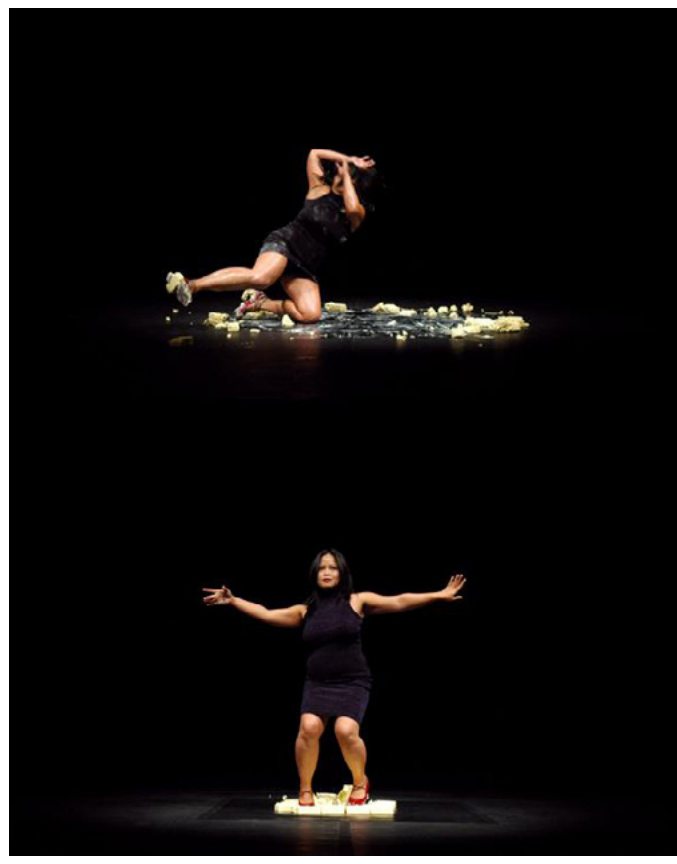
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6:10 minute, single-channel video clip of the 20-minute performance shown to participants in my study is from an iteration Melati performed in Malmö, Sweden in 2010.¹⁴ Photographic and video documentation of the performance can also be found in the collection of the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) and the work was performed there as part of the group exhibition *Medium at Large* (2014–2015).

Melati's performance is set against a completely dark background and black floor. She dances sensually and slowly on a pile of butter to traditional Javanese drum



Melati Suryodarmo, *Exergie-Butter Dance*, 2000, Performed at the VideoBrasil, Sao Paolo, Brazil, 2005
Photo courtesy of Melati Suryodarmo

music, dressed in a tight black dress and red high-heeled shoes. During the performance she continually loses her balance, and with a look of terror on her face, falls down harshly and gets back up to repeat the movements, over and over, obviously suffering through much pain.

At a recent workshop in October 2018 conducted as part of Da:ns Lab's *This is Women's Work*, Melati presented an account of several of her performances over the years. In this lecture, she described *Butter Dance* as a way of overcoming her existential fear of life and failure, the main objective being to fall and get back up again. For her, the performance embodies her displacement and her exploration of the duality of her identity that comes with being a diasporic artist.¹⁵

Findings

By contextualising the participants' narratives within the important moments of their lives that have had the most impact on their predispositions, I reached an abundance of conclusions by evaluating the emergent themes garnered from the interviews. Although each participant hails from a different cultural group, they have all lived in the diaspora. Thus, the cultural values and life experiences which stem from their Asian identities affected how they received the performance, but this was in turn influenced by worldviews influenced by their experiences of living in Western countries. These characteristics of these individuals made the group fairly homogenous.

Common themes in participants' reactions in the study included defeat, but also perseverance, strength, courage, and acceptance, based on their own experiences and identities. This included one participant who related his

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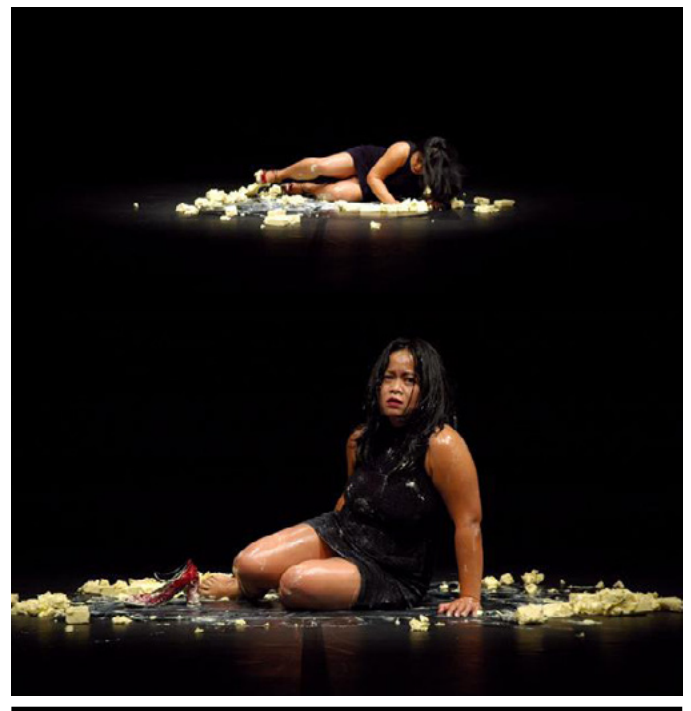
experience of the performance to challenging times he has had in his career, his distant relationship with the conservative and religious values of his family because of his sexual orientation, as well as his subsequent tenacity to continually pick himself up and accept himself.¹⁶ Another participant related the performance to her experiences as a woman in a job in which she observed gendered trauma,



Melati Suryodarmo, *Exergie-Butter Dance*, 2000, Performed at the VideoBrasil, Sao Paolo, Brazil, 2005
Photo courtesy of Melati Suryodarmo

stating that watching the performance took her back to the dark place of a haunting moment she would never forget. In Melati she saw the same strength of the women she observed in the sex trade.¹⁷

In past critical art historical discourse of Southeast Asian art, *Butter Dance* has been examined within the frameworks of gender, feminism and sexuality.¹⁸ The focus on Melati's attire in the performance has been sexualised consistently and these themes were echoed by the participants in this survey when they each described her attire as being sexy. One participant called the red shoes "risqué" and another likened the butter to "lubricant" used in sexual intercourse.¹⁹



Melati Suryodarmo, *Exergie-Butter Dance*, 2000, Performed at the VideoBrasil, Sao Paolo, Brazil, 2005
Photo courtesy of Melati Suryodarmo

Conclusion

The primary aim of this study has been to develop a new methodology for considering audience reception of performance art on a more intrinsic level, rather than solely

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relying on existing methods, as most art historical discourse remains fundamentally driven by exhibitionary curatorial agendas. At present, these approaches are predominantly hypothetical as they do not emphasise subjectivity and the “embodied nature” of the individual, as per Merleau-Ponty’s theory of experience in the world.²⁰ The employment of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis offers an avenue to accomplish this in the future, thus enhancing academic positioning of audience reception in art history.

Assuming that in developing this process as perhaps one of the most adequate methods for mapping how spectators receive a performance by Indonesian performance artist Melati Suryodarmo, or any performance for that matter, the secondary function of this study is, what can the data tell us about the what and how of audience reception of *Butter Dance*.

Concisely, all three of the participants received the performance by attributing its meaning to their own experiences of Asianness, identity, and diaspora, with empathy and admiration for Melati, with some assigning meaning to sexual identity. It also illustrates that differences in their receptions also exist, supporting Jones’ argument that the performance is “fully dependent on the ways in which the image is contextualised and interpreted [by the viewer].”²¹

It is with optimism that I hope this framework may in future be utilised by researchers so that they can evaluate its transferability to persons who share similar contexts. While this is an investigation into an alien terrain with perhaps, lofty goals, it is undertaken with faith that further mapping might be fulfilled by myself and/ or by

others in future to build a greater representation of wider populations in Southeast Asia, opening the doors to broader understanding of the reception of performance art.

Tanya Michele Amador graduated from the MA Asian Art Histories Programme in 2019.

[Butter Dance performance can be viewed at this link
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnPNr9yquuc&has_verified=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnPNr9yquuc&has_verified=1)

Endnotes

- 1 Tanya Michele Amador, “Observing the Observer Through a New Methodology, Case Study: Melati Suryodarmo’s *Exergie Butter Dance*” (Master’s thesis, LASALLE College of the Arts, 2019).
- 2 Nick Crossley, “The Phenomenological Habitus and Its Construction,” *Theory and Society* 30, No.1 (2001): 82-84.
- 3 Wulan Dirgantoro, *Defining Experiences: Exploring Feminism in Indonesian Visual Arts* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 5-10.
- 4 Amelia Jones, “‘Presence’ in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation,” *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (1997): 14.
- 5 Amanda Coogan, “Performance – a broad church,” in *The What Is IMMA Talks Series?*, ed. Lisa Moran (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, Royal Hospital, 2011), 9.
- 6 Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2009), 11.

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7 In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty described this “embodied nature of our relationship with the world and how that led to the primacy of our own individual situated perspective on the world” as one we can never escape. Smith et al., *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*, 18-19.

8 Smith et al., *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*, 48-49.

9 Smith et al., 84.

10 Born in Surakarta, Indonesia, Melati Suryodarmo moved to Germany in 1994 where she lived for close to 20 years and graduated with a degree in fine art from Hochschule für Bildende Künste Braunschweig. Both of her parents were traditional dancers and her father was a self-taught dancer who blended Javanese and Buddhist meditation practices with Javanese dance to create his own style of movement.

11 Anzu Furukawa was a Japanese Butoh dancer and performance artist. From 1973, she worked as a choreographer, performer, and dancer in various groups in Japan (including the Butoh company Dairakudakan) and Europe. Sondra Fraleigh, *Butoh: Metamorphic Dance and Global Alchemy* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 112.

12 Marina Abramović is a New York-based Serbian performance artist who began her career in the early 1970s. Her work explores the relationship between performer and audience, the limits of the body, and the possibilities of the mind. She was awarded the Golden Lion for Best Artist at the 1997 Venice Biennale. In 2008, she was decorated with the Austrian Commander Cross for her contribution to art history. “About,” Marina Abramović Institute, accessed April 29, 2018, www.mai.art/about-mai/.

13 Following the Berlin performance, *Exergie Butter Dance* was performed in other cities throughout Europe (2000–2010), Brasil (2005), Australia (2006), Indonesia (2006), and Hong Kong (2012).

14 Lilith Studio, “Lilith Performance Studio presents Melati Suryodarmo – EXERGIE – Butter Dance,” video, 6:10, October 21, 2010, posted by “Lilith Studio,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnPNr9yquuc?>

15 Melati Suryodarmo, “This is Women’s Work” (presentation, Da:ns Lab 2018, Singapore, October 8, 2009).

16 Amador, “Observing the Observer Through a New Methodology”, 50.

17 Amador, 46-47.

18 Dirgantoro, *Defining Experiences*, 28-30.

19 Amador, “Observing the Observer Through a New Methodology”, 50.

20 Smith et al., *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*, 18-19.

21 Amelia Jones, “‘Presence’ in Absentia”: 14.

Contemporary art aiming to trigger change: A look at the Singapore Biennale 2019

Odile Calla-Simon

Globalisation has affected the perceptions and presentations of contemporary art, exposing new grounds within the art world.² If any characteristic of contemporary art directly entwines with the geopolitical transformations of the past three decades, it is the biennale phenomenon. Reflecting the politics of a global world in constant development, biennales have come to play an increasingly significant role in responding to the immediacy and flexibility of contemporary art's development.³ As alternatives and more permeable terrains to the conservative "white cube" exhibition paradigm, biennales have proved to be critical platforms of inquiry, experimentation, innovation and risk-taking. They have arisen as an optimal 'medium' for curatorial strategies and discourses. Fostering a profusion of approaches, biennales are "sites of self-reflexive artistic practices, culturally inclusive discourses and critical articulations of difference".⁴ Redefined and restructured, each edition of these exhibitions usually introduces radical changes and, as such, offers the potential to generate new frameworks and dialogues.

Within this context, since its launch in 2006, the Singapore Biennale has emerged as a key laboratory where exhibition

"Contemporary art, by its own constant redefinition is an art of becoming, of happenings, occurrences and occasions."

strategies, methods and curatorial approaches could be tested, altered and re-invented.⁵ While the monolithic narratives of the first three Singapore Biennales successfully established Singapore's own national and global position in relation to the arts of Southeast Asia, they were ultimately not able to achieve greater rootedness within the region. Both the 2013 and 2016 editions, in raising the critical need to approach contemporary art from the region away from the spectre of 'global

gaze', highlighted the limits of any attempt to unify the region's histories as a singular identity, given the multiple narratives in Southeast Asia. These previous editions have epitomised that at the core of a biennale is a need to cultivate edgier and riskier approaches to the point of accepting frustrations, if not failures, as a possible outcome. It is a biennale's versatility and resilience which emphasises its full realisation.

Embracing the fact that one of the foremost opportunities of a biennale its constant potential to re-invent, the Singapore Biennale 2019, titled *Every Step in the Right Direction*⁶ undeniably initiated another curatorial turn under Patrick Flores's artistic direction.⁷ Renouncing the classic schema of linear narrative for the original format of

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a “cross between a seminar and a festival, an archive and a workshop”,⁸ the collaborative curatorial team challenged audiences to take artistic journeys into current pressing circumstances and the changes they call for.⁹ Within this innovative curatorial strategy, Flores sought to trigger, “the ethical imperative for both artists and audiences to make choices and take the steps to think through what the world is facing right now and decide on how it can be different.”¹⁰ While ambitious, this broad reflection was intended to emphasise how art and artists, along with the engagement of audiences could contribute to the current realities and challenges of the world, becoming a catalyst for change. As an “experience” rather than a formal cultural affair, and based on the exchanges and interdisciplinarity stirred by the diversity of contemporary art in the region, the 2019 Singapore Biennale aimed to depict the social role and function of art in today’s societies.



Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum

The Biennale’s title draws from Filipina Salub Algabre’s¹¹ statement about the failed peasant uprising she led against

the mainstream nationalist movement, which was believed to be favouring landowners and not seeking genuine independence from the American colonialists: “No uprising fails. Each step is a step in the right direction.”¹² As such, ‘*Every Step in the Right Direction*’ is an open invitation to go ahead. It articulates the necessary action of moving forward, the “right” direction only mattering within the context of the action one is willing to undertake. This idea of motion was reinforced by the curatorial choice to disperse the works across 11 sites in Singapore that, rather than just being a geographical spread of venues, compelled audiences to embark on a journey of multiple frameworks.¹³

The Singapore Biennale 2019 established a moving trajectory with its non- thematic proposition/argument to reflect on and take action in a wide array of contemporary contexts. Whether through participatory and community-based projects or reflective, archival, discursive oriented works, artists and audiences alike were invited to explore a three-step process: (1) identifying and acknowledging the issues, (2) making decisions and initiating actions (3) enacting positive changes. If most of the artworks tackle contemporary themes that have arisen from globalisation, the three-part process created multiple dimensions, with participating artists covering perspectives such as individuals, communities, societies, contexts, boundaries, legacies and relationships in the past, present and future.¹⁴

Step 1- Identifying and Acknowledging

Assessing the world’s current social, cultural, political states is an imperative element of the Biennale’s three-step process: without prior identification and acknowledgement,

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changes cannot occur. Flores and the Biennale's curators prompt artists and viewers alike to recognise their place in the world and the reality of today's critical circumstances. At a time when the region and the world face major crisis whether social (the rise of inequality, humanitarian and health emergencies), political (the rise of populism, nuclear proliferation and declines in freedom), or environmental (global warming, pollution and biodiversity loss), recognising and reflecting on them is imperative. Under the umbrella of the Biennale, artists become active correspondents who lay bare some of those crucial matters. Several exhibited works draw attention to the impact of climate change and the pressing need for action in favour of

not only endangered species but entire complex ecosystems facing human interference. For instance, exploring the sounds of wildlife under threat, Zai Tang, in *Escape Velocity III & IV*, poetically captures the paradox between nature and the development of so-called wildlife eco-tourism destinations. Tamsüyanger Longkumer's series of terracotta sculptures, *Parallel Communes*, organically illustrates the flawed connection between nature and humanity. Others account for the evolution, or even more candidly the erosion, of nature, such as Ruangsak Anuwatwimon in his work *Reincarnations (Hopea Sangal and Sindora Wallichii)*,¹⁵ and Zakaria Omar in *Fossils of Shame: The Pillars*. Likewise, Robert Zhao Renhui with his cabinet of curiosities, *Queen's*



Installation; Zai Tang, *Escape Velocity III*, 2019, as part of Singapore Biennale 2019 (22 November 2019 – 22 March 2020). Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum

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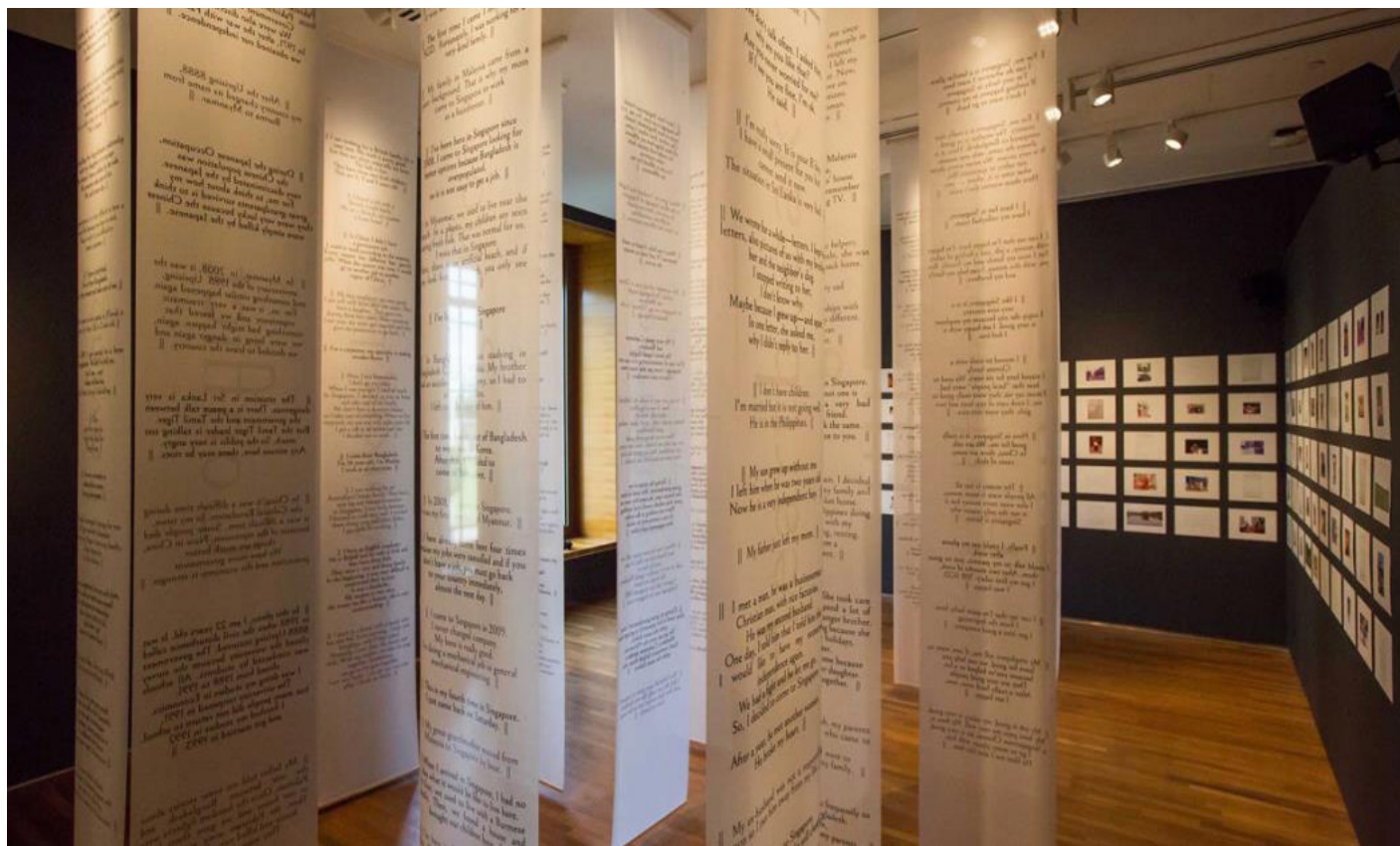
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Own Hill and its Environs, which featured more than 100 components including found objects, videos and photography, beckons viewers to engage closely with a historical narrative of the forest surrounding Gillman Barracks, including artist-led tours into this area.

Societal issues are also substantially tackled in the exhibited works. Dennis Tan, with his work *Many Waters to Cross*, stresses the loss of tradition in the face of rapid globalisation, while Lim Sokchanlina highlights the marginalisation of a group of Khmer migrants in Shinjuku, Japan in his video installation *Letters to the Sea*. Going further, Verónica Troncoso, in *Telling Stories from Outside*

and *Inside*, challenges visitors to stop, read and reflect on stereotyped communities often disregarded, with a powerful and confronting immersive installation of ceiling to floor scrolls on which narratives of migrant workers and local students she interviewed are documented. Walking through the scrolls and listening to related audio-recordings, viewers are defied to engage with the chronicles of migration and mobility across different generations in Singapore. The work visibly echoes both the feminist and post-colonial concept of 'othering' which critiques the treatment of some communities as "aliens" or inferiors. Most of these exhibited artworks emphasise societal issues that audiences could have easily overlooked if not directly



Installation; Verónica Troncoso, *Telling stories from Outside and Inside*, 2019, as part of Singapore Biennale 2019 (22 November 2019 – 22 March 2020). Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum

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confronted with them in context. As clarified by Flores, one reason why the process of acknowledgement is critical to the curatorial framework of the biennale is because “when one is able to understand what is happening in the work, one is also led to understanding what is happening in the world.”¹⁶

Step 2– Making Decisions and Initiating Actions

Identification and recognition are, however, only one of the three segments of the journey that the curatorial team

intended. If “change” is the outcome, then decisions must be crafted, and actions undertaken within the realms of the self and the community. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, “The future depends on what you do today.”¹⁷ While the choice of multiple venues for the Biennale already highlights this second phase, steps outlining what can be personally and collectively done are represented in the works of artists inviting audiences to participate and engage actively. Stepping into action is intrinsic to the work of Amanda Heng who, literally playing on the Biennale title, revisits her *Let’s Walk* series¹⁸ with *Every Step Counts*.¹⁹ Using a major element of her art practice, Heng invites the audience to reflect on the act of walking and its implications with regards



Nabilah Nordin, *An Obstacle in Every Direction* (detail), 2019 as part of Singapore Biennale 2019 (22 November 2019 – 22 March 2020). Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum

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to one's body within rapidly evolving social and cultural environments. With *An Obstacle in Every Direction*, Nabilah Nordin playfully invites visitors to explore an obstacle course made from found objects, forming manifold possible paths and endings.

If one work truly epitomises the process of taking action, it is Sharon Chin's *In the Skin of a Tiger: Monument to What We Want (Tugu Kita)*. Prior to the opening of the Biennale, Sharon invited people to sew stitches on a series of banners made from recycled fabric cut out from discarded political flags that she collected after the 2018 historic Malaysian

general election. This participatory performance project offers a clear invitation for people to contribute to the process of building their society as they aspire it to be.

If some of the numerous video installations do not seem to invite physical action, they unquestionably require the viewer to step back and reflect. Time and attention become of the essence in Marie Voignier's *Na China* (1:10:00 mins), Okui Lala's *National Language Class: Our Language Proficiency* (50:00 mins), or Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier's *Never real historians, always near poets* (41:51 mins). However, while some works engage audiences on clear



Detail; Sharon Chin, *In the Skin of a Tiger: Monument to What We Want (Tugu Kita)*, 2019, as part of Singapore Biennale 2019 (22 November 2019 – 22 March 2020). Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum

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paths, others tend to convey highly intricate meanings for them to connect. Given the Biennale's interest in research-based, archival and social practices (a rather substantial site of inquiry in contemporary art practice and theoretical discourse) the curatorial team invited artists elaborating on the function of the archive beyond a repository of documents, in order to develop contextual projects. As Flores explains, "context can be assessed through archival material. Artists today also engage in research; it is part of their practice and process. There is a shift from just using [art] as a form of expression, it goes beyond that now."²⁰ Thus, creatively using archives allows the artist to create work with the potential to deconstruct, build, reveal and connect differently with audiences. Such dense and

complex works request greater engagement and action from audiences. Remaining unequivocal about the academic character of the Biennale, Flores intends the audience to go beyond just looking. Celine Condorelli's complex *Spatial Compositions 13*, which spreads over three galleries at the National Gallery of Singapore, gathers the archives of five artists through an idiosyncratic personal perspective, with the act of curation becoming an artistic gesture.

The artist-curator incorporates beach-like lounge chairs inviting visitors to inhabit and occupy the space. These 'support structures' seem to either back the intricacy of the work and the mountains of information the viewer has to take in. Or, they might be seen as creating a more



Installation; Céline Condorelli + Artists' Archives (Raymundo Albano, Ha Bik Chuen, Ismail Zain, Judy Freya Sibayan and Carlos Villa), *Spatial Composition 13*, 2019, as part of Singapore Biennale 2019 (22 November 2019 – 22 March 2020). Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum

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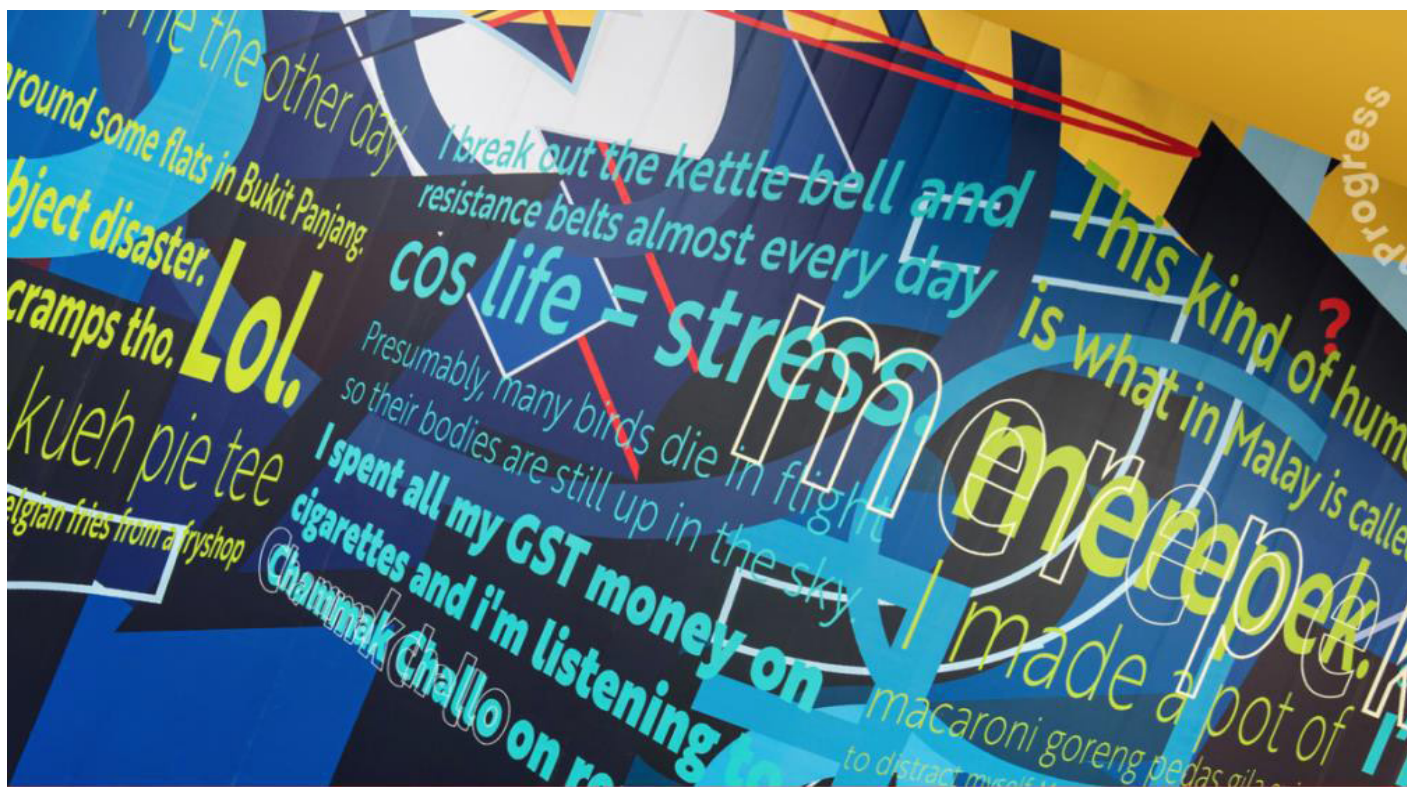
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relaxed atmosphere and alleviating the complexity of the archives to render them more accessible. While the artist aspires for her work to create dialogues between viewers, the nexus and intellectual quality of the archives may still be too multifaceted for the audience to connect with and apprehend fully. Several other archival works request a deeper academic engagement from viewers. For instance, when the Biennale journey brought visitors to LASALLE College of the Arts where the works were, for the most part, complex to grasp. However, if archival installations such as Prapat Jiwangsan's *Aesthetics 101* may be problematic for general audience to understand, the choice of the college as its site of display highlights the critical role of education in any process of change.

Step 3 – Process of Change

The process of change is the Biennale's significant last step towards what is collectively or individually decided upon as the right direction. If slightly elusive, this dimension is central to the three-step process envisioned by the curatorial team. For instance, once suspended, Sharon Chin's monumental banners turn into a message of hope and start to symbolise an actual collective endeavour that may lead to constructive changes. If one person cannot change the world, each individual holds transformative potential.

The aptitude that Pooja Nansi emphasises in *Coping Mechanisms*, reveals that positive changes can stem from



Detail; Pooja Nansi, *Coping Mechanisms*, 2019, as part of Singapore Biennale 2019 (22 November 2019 – 22 March 2020). Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum

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Detail; Min Thein Sung, *Time: Dust*, 2017–2019, as part of Singapore Biennale 2019 (22 November 2019 – 22 March 2020). Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum

everyday casual conversations and exchanges. As Flores states, he conceptualises, “change not only in terms of grand events like spectacular upheavals, but also in very personal, intimate, everyday endeavours. It doesn’t happen immediately. It takes time, patience and sustained commitment.”²¹ These are three factors that Min Thein Sung metaphorically symbolises with layers of particles settled on white canvases in his work, *Time: Dust*.

With its multiple narratives offering subtle but tangible changes, the 6th Singapore Biennale shows again that it is an essential cultural tool to build renewed perceptions of the environment, society, culture and politics, that is capable of responding to the phenomena of globalisation.

A dynamic platform that is transient and flexible in nature, there can be no denying that the Singapore Biennale’s ability to launch dialogues about enacting changes is already proving that “Every step is in the right direction.”

Odile Calla-Simon graduated from the MA Asian Art Histories Programme in 2016.

Endnotes

- 1 Terry Smith, “Biennials Four Fundamentals, Many Variations,” *Post Biennial Foundation*, 7 December 2016, <https://www.biennialfoundation.org/2016/12/biennials-four-fundamentals-many-variations/>

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2 Within the scope of this article, the term globalisation involves spatial extension of social relationships, increasing density of social interactions and greater cultural interpenetration.

3 However, while the idiom biennale can be understood as an “umbrella” term, such structures have developed away from a single format. If biennales share common features, it is crucial to understand that there are as many models of biennales as there are biennales.

4 Jeannine Tang, “Of Biennials and Biennialists: Venice, Documenta, Münster,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 7-8 (2007): 247-260.

5 The Singapore Biennale was established in 2006 as the country’s pre-eminent platform for international dialogue in contemporary art. The 2006 and 2008 editions of the Biennale were organised by the National Arts Council. The NAC commissioned the Singapore Art Museum to organise the 2011, 2013, 2016 and 2019 editions.

6 The Singapore Biennale ran from November 22nd 2019 to March 22nd 2020 with 150 works by 77 artists and artist collectives from 36 countries and territories.

7 Patrick Flores is an Art Historian, Professor at the Department of Art Studies at the University of the Philippines and Curator of the Vargas Museum in Manila.

8 *Singapore Biennale 2019: Every Step in the Right Direction* (exh. cat.), ed. Patrick Flores and Joyce Toh (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2019), 11.

9 The collaborative curatorial team included artistic director Patrick Flores (The Philippines) and curators Andrea Fam

(Singapore), Renan Laruan (The Philippines), John Tung (Singapore), Goh Sze Ying (Malaysia), Anca Verona Mihuleț (Romania) and Vipash Purichanont (Thailand).

10 Jasmine Tay, “How Patrick Flores is Steering the Singapore Biennale in the ‘Right Direction’,” *Lifestyle Asia*, 10 November 2019, <https://www.lifestyleasia.com/sg/culture/art-design/how-patrick-flores-is-steering-the-singapore-biennale-in-the-right-direction/>

11 “Born in 1894, Salud Alagabre was a member of the Sakdal, a Philippine peasant organisation founded in 1930 by Benigno Ramos. The organisation protested against the mainstream nationalist movement led by Manuel Quezon, because the Sakdalistas considered that it was not seeking genuine independence from the American colonialists and that it was dominated by landlord interests. Salud figured prominently in an uprising on 2 May 1935 in the town of Cabuyao, Laguna, when she led a group of Sakdalistas who blocked the railroad, cut telegraph lines and patrolled the national highway.” Luisa T. Camagay, “Salud Alagabre: A Forgotten Member of the Philippine Sakdal,” *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*, edited by Susan Blackburn and Helen Ting (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), 124–146.

12 Grant K. Goodman and David R. Sturtevant, *Popular Up- risings in the Philippines, 1840–1940*, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1976), 317.

13 The more than 150 artworks in the exhibition were spread across 11 venues in the city: Singapore Art Museum & SAM at 8Q, National Gallery Singapore, Gillman Barracks, LASALLE College of the Arts, Asian Civilisations Museum, National Museum of Singapore, SMU de Suantio Gallery, National Library, Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Far East Plaza, and WILD RICE @ Funan.

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14 With more than 150 works exhibited, only a few will be surveyed within the scope of this article.

15 The *Hopea Sangal* and the *Sindora Wallichii* are two species of trees endemic to Singapore that are critically endangered.

16 Podcast - Dialogues, Art & Market Conversations: Patrick Flores, November 13, 2019 <https://www.artandmarket.net/dialogues/2019/11/13/art-market-conversations-patrick-flores>

17 Jessica Gray, *The Story of Mahatma Gandhi's Assassination 70 Years Later* (Ocala: Atlantic Publishing Group, Inc. 2018), 179.

18 *Let's Walk* was first presented outside the campus of LA-SALLE – SIA College of Arts at Goodman Road on 9 December 1999 as part of the exhibition *Ambulations* at the campus' Earl Lu Gallery.

19 Amanda Heng, *Every Step Counts* (workshop documentation), 2019, multi-disciplinary project including workshop, text work in public space, archival footage, video projection and live performance, dimensions variable. The larger-than-life text work was featured on SAM's hoarding along Bras Basah Road, while the video projection was exhibited at the Esplanade tunnel, joining the line-up of outdoor artworks displayed during the Singapore Biennale 2019.

20 Mae Chan, "The Singapore Biennale 2019: Instigating Change Through Contemporary Art", *Options the Edge*, 2 January 2020, <https://www.optionstheedge.com/topic/culture/singapore-biennale-2019-instigating-change-through-contemporary-art>

21 Toh Wen Li, "Singapore Biennale to make a hopeful case for change in the face of pressing challenges", *Straits Times* online, 30 July 2019.

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MA Asian Art Histories Taipei Study Trip 2019

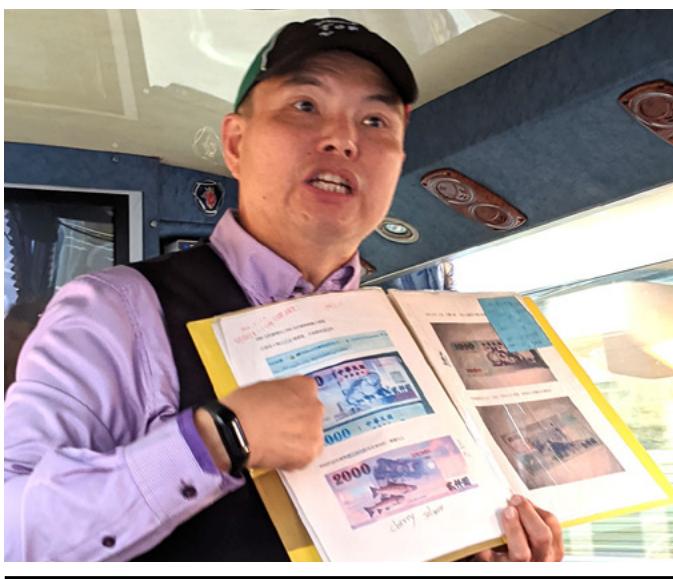
Nurdiana Rahmat and Theresa Tan

On 18 March 2020, Taiwan made the announcement that all foreign nationals will be barred from entering the country. This is the new reality we are living in the thick of the global coronavirus pandemic. It is hard to believe now that just about four months ago, at the end of November, the Asian Art Histories students were in Taiwan and experiencing one of the most exhilarating milestones in our learning journey.

We were in Taipei from 30 November to 4 December 2019. It would be the first trip to Taiwan for some of us while others looked forward to returning to one of their favourite cities.

We were very excited to travel together for the first time and to get a brief reprieve from the Singapore heat.

Upon arrival, we met our exuberant guide Alex, who gave us a quick lesson on Taiwan's history through the artworks featured on the Taiwanese currency notes and a hand-drawn Taiwan map by his daughter, annotated with regional specialties! Throughout the trip, Alex became our much-needed support system – always ensuring the places we



Alex sharing about the history of Taiwan through its currency.
Photo by Nurdiana Rahmat



A map of Taiwan that Alex recreated just for us.
Photo by Theresa Tan

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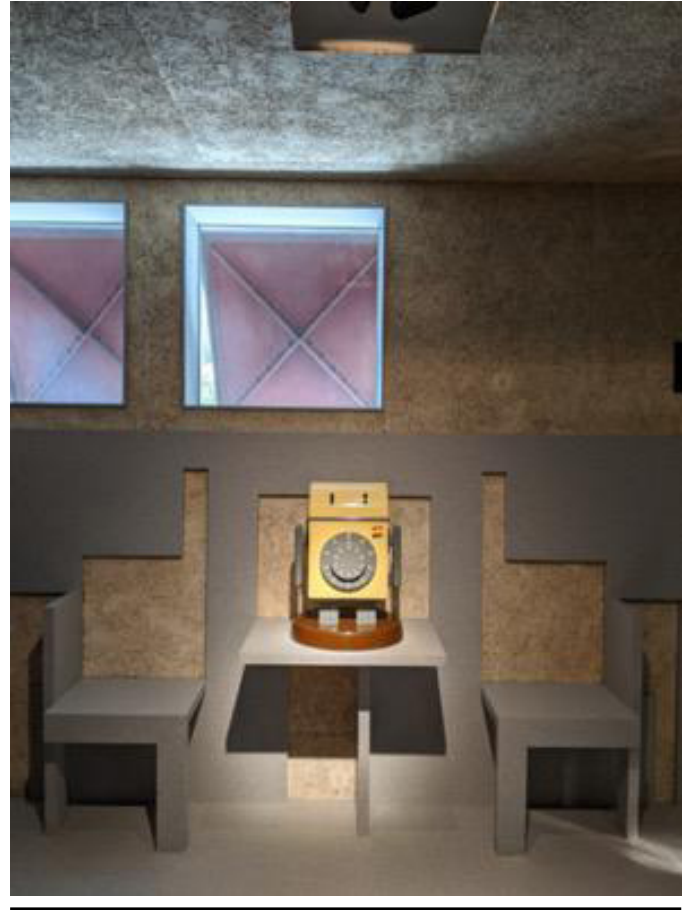
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visited were ready for our arrival and planning all our meals. Our stay for the trip is the Hua Shan Din Hotel by Cosmos Creation, located in the vicinity of the Hua Shan 1914 Creative Park. The moment we got off the bus, we were greeted by the hotel logo's three primary colors of red, yellow and blue intersecting with the black and white of the buildings original window frame, which reminds us of Piet Mondrian. Inside the hotel, the interior design incorporates



Interior of Hua Shan Din Hotel by Cosmos Creation

local arts and culture with Lichtenstein-style pop art, with a mascot designed to pay tribute to the historical building's banking history.



An interesting take on public chairs inside the hotel

Our first stop is the Eslite's bookstore at Dunnan to visit the art gallery there. Unfortunately, the gallery has recently closed (permanently) ahead of the planned 31 May 2020 closure of the Eslite bookstore. After local dinner in the basement food court, we went to the Hua Shan 1914 Creative Park, an almost 20,000 square metre park housing various creative art spaces—less than five-minutes walk from our hotel. Originating from an abandoned sake and ginseng factory of Taihoku Winery built in 1914, this hipster park is now home to many designers and artists. This art and culture hub houses facilities for meetings, exhibits and performances inside remodelled brick warehouses. We

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had our retail therapy in whimsical shops of indie brands, stationery and bookshops. Unfortunately, we arrived late into the evening, so the digital and interactive museums, theatre, and the concert spaces were all closed. However, we chanced upon the outdoor laser light show, sponsored by a sports brand, telling stories of courage, strength and resilience.

On Day 2, we started our day with Apichatpong Weerasethakul's solo exhibition, *The Serenity of Madness* at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM). Curated by Gridthiya Gaweewong, this exhibition is a survey of Weerasethakul's artistic practice through some of his experimental and short films as well his photography, sketches and archival material. A highlight from this show is *Teem* (2007), a 3-channel video installation where Weerasethakul films a sleeping Teem, his

partner, every morning throughout the course of Teem's self-proclaimed winter hibernation. The exhibition spans almost the entire of TFAM's third floor with a good distribution of work around the space.

The rest of the third floor, facing Weerasethakul's exhibition, was converted into Michael Lin's 24/7, a tatami-filled interactive exhibit space resembling a cosy traditional Japanese living room. The walls are painted in grid-shaped blocks of red, blue and green resembling a form of urban planning. Audiences are encouraged to co-exist with the space and most took it as a much-needed resting space after walking around the exhibits.

On level two of the museum, the exhibition *On the Island Tales: Taiwan and Australia* commemorates the 20th



Installation view of *Teem*, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 3-channel video installation, SD Digital (filmed on mobile Vodafone), silent / colour.
Photo by Nurdiana Rahmat

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anniversary of friendship between TFAM and Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts since 1999. Curator Chien Cheng-Yi used the exhibition as a platform to tell stories rooted in local cultures that explore the multiple possibilities created by time and timely meetings. As opposed to history, which emphasizes realistic descriptions of the past, this exhibition employs fictional language to interpret and reinterpret stories from the past and various subjects. This process of “remémoration” forms a bridge between time and locality. Thirteen artists from Taiwan and West Australia were invited to be part of this journey inspired by the idea of tales, of imagination and exploration between two islands, from two cities, revolving around stories, rumors from the grapevine, records, and even inconsequential and personal memories.

The final exhibition we saw in TFAM was *Art of Motion*, an exhibition featuring commissioned works by four contemporary Taiwanese artists responding to the notions

of movements through industrial machineries. One of the most memorable work from this exhibition is Chiu Chao Tsai's *Percussions* (2012) where the artist lined everyday items such as mugs, wine bottles and dishes on three wooden shelves which are connected to a toy piano. It is an incredible participatory work where audiences are invited to play a piano key or tune to trigger corresponding small hammers to strike these items on the shelves to play a symphony of sounds by everyday objects.

After lunch, we went to the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) to view the exhibition *Co/Inspiration in Catastrophes*. Right outside MOCA, a huge installation of a sampan fishing boat welcomed us. Numbered “MG3-44187,” this sampan is the Japanese fishing boat, “Fujimaru 7” from Kesennuma



Art in Motion at Tokyo Fine Arts Museum.

Photo by Nurdiana Rahmat



Photo by Nurdiana Rahmat

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City in Miyagi Prefecture, Japan that was found on the shore of Nantian in Taitung's Daren Township in March 2014. It was dragged into the ocean after the tsunami triggered by the Tohoku earthquake hit Fukushima on March 11, 2011. The fishing boat drifted from Japan to Taiwan, which substantiates the law of natural flow—propelled by ocean currents, regional borders are no longer interpreted in terms of national borders. Disasters happening around the world caused by extreme weather conditions are all taking place in a closely connected world.



A still from Ai Wei Wei's *Human Flow* (2017)

Stepping into *Co/Inspiration in Catastrophes*, we were absorbed by the somber artworks covering “natural disasters” to “man-made calamities,” and even “shared karmic consequences” that mix natural and man-made disasters.

Curators Huang Chien-Hung and Yuki Pan presented Pierre Huyghe's *Cerro Indio Muerto*, an image of an apocalyptic landscape that mixes natural and man-made disasters right at the beginning of the exhibition. It then brought the viewers from natural disasters through to man-made disasters, cleverly utilizing the long corridor of the MOCA. Ai Weiwei's lament for the lives of refugees and Pakavulay's red quinoa bamboo heart mourns for the traumas caused by past catastrophes. At the end of the exhibition, the viewer witnesses an imminent tsunami that is about to overwhelm Taipei in Wu Chi-Tao's work, which embeds the disaster in a gloomy, ethereal yet somewhat perfect state.

After the sobering walkthrough, we were thankful to end the day of museum and gallery hopping at 1839 Contemporary Gallery. This space focuses entirely on photography work and they were hosting Yutaka Matsubara's *Local Public Bath "Sento"*. Matsubara spent about 11 years between 2006 to 2017 photographing public bathhouses in his hometown of Mie Prefecture, Japan. We were delighted to be given a tour by Matsubara himself and he provided interesting insights into the unique personalities of these bathhouses through their intricate wall art and sculptural fixtures. After the tour, the group sat down with curator and director of the Gallery, Dr. Edward Liu to discuss about the state of photography in Taiwan. Having existed for over ten years in a city where photography may not be one of its most popular mediums as a consumer, we find 1839 Contemporary Gallery to be such an inspiration. For some of us, we decided to end the night exploring Ximending, bought our second bubble tea for the day (when in Taiwan!) and a late-night karaoke.

On Day 3, we travelled a little outside of Taipei's main city to the independent art space Bamboo Curtain, which was located amidst the greenery of Danshui. Its curator

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Installation view of *Local Public Bath* by Yutaka Matsubara. Photo by Nurdiana Rahmat

Iris and her dog (who stole one of our classmate's heart immediately) welcomed us as we walked into this former farm and gave us a detailed tour of the various carved out spaces that promoted sustainability by launching art projects within the community to bring awareness about the environment, global warming and sustainable living. Margaret Shiu, a renowned cultural activist in Taiwan and the founder of Bamboo Curtain, hosted us personally.

After bidding farewell to Margaret, Iris and the dog, we visited TheCube Project Space which is currently hosting Malaysian artist Au-Sow Yee's solo exhibition, *Still Alive*. The exhibition presents her "live cinema" which was produced using her own image capturing devices that she created in her earlier practice. We sat down with the curators to chat about their amazing "Talking Drums Radio" project where they collaborate with artists, scholars, internet activists



Class picture at Bamboo Curtain Studio. Photo by Adrian Liaw



Photo by Nurdiana Rahmat

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MA Asian Art Histories students in conversation with TheCube team. Photo by Adrian Liaw

among others, to explore the city's sound culture. They keep an archive of their projects on their website at <http://talkingdrums.tw>.

Any trip to Taipei is not completed without visiting the world-renowned National Palace Museum, most known by its abbreviated Chinese name *GuGong*. We quickly figured out that we needed to use the same strategy when visiting other large museums, that is, to focus on the highlights and not attempt to cover the sprawling place in one afternoon. The museum's collection include paintings, ceramics, calligraphy, jades, bronzes, curios, documents and rare books laid out across three floors of a purpose-build Chinese architecture building, punctuated by interactive multimedia narratives. After zooming in on the national treasure, the "Jadelite Cabbage" (a piece of jadeite carved into the shape of a Chinese cabbage head, and with a locust and katydid camouflaged in the leaves), all of us went our separate ways in pursuit of whatever interests us the most.

Some experiences will last forever. On the last day of the trip, we had the morning to ourselves and five of us (including



Ju Ming's Taichi series

both writers) headed up north to Juming Museum and we were rewarded with beautiful views of the Pacific Ocean coast along the way. The entire museum, which includes a sculpture park, is devoted the world renown sculptor Ju Ming's colossal oeuvre. One of the museum buildings also hosts temporary exhibits such as Dina Goldstein's ironic "Fallen Princess" series. Our favourite was the main museum itself, nestled in the middle of the sculpture park, hosting a permanent exhibition of Ju Ming's earlier works and his *Taichi* series which truly captures the state of motion through sculptural work.

The Juming Squad rushed back to Taipei after lunch and arrived in time at the National Taipei University of Education for a conversation with their newly-hired academic Francis Maravillas about their MA in Curatorial and Critical Studies in Contemporary Art programme. It was interesting to learn about the pedagogy of their MA programme and some of us were tempted to return Taipei as their students (the Taiwanese hospitality and delicious food are very seductive)—if we still remain energetic after our own thesis submissions.

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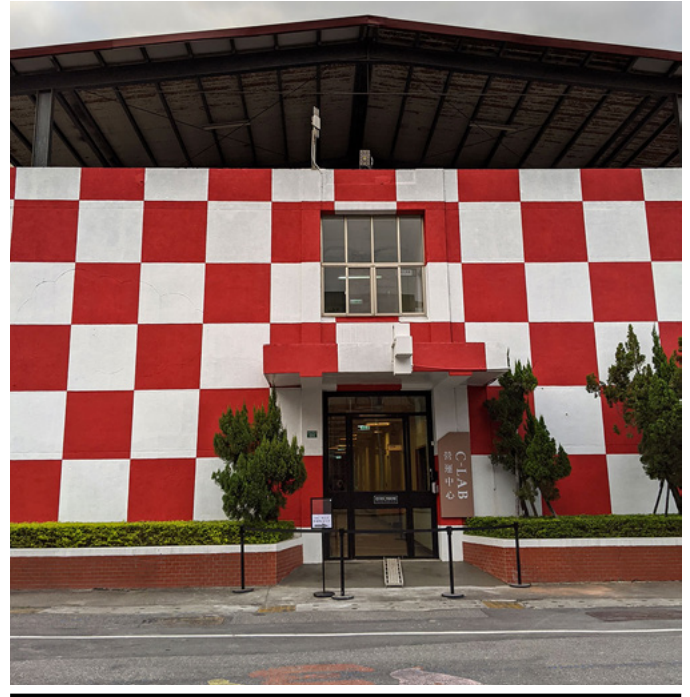
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Juming Squad. Photo by Adrian Liaw

After we bid our goodbyes, we visited the Taiwan Contemporary Culture Lab (C-Lab). For some of us, this space is a definite highlight of the entire trip. Located at the former Air Force Command Headquarters, a visit can only be made possible by making an appointment. We visited their annual exhibition, *City Flip-Flop*. This project is part of C-Lab's initiative to engage Taiwan's creatives through artistic presentations that involves historical and cultural data



Taiwan Contemporary Culture Lab (C-Lab). Photo by Nurdiana Rahmat

collection, archival research, sound art, theatre performance and other forms of creative outputs.

The exhibition was rich with research and archival materials. It was definitely a treat for art history students like us. We had an amazing tour by Juliet and her team, and some of the exhibits that stood out for us were Haruko Sasakawa's *Beautiful Smile* (2019) and Chin Cheng-Te's *Tender Soul – Cold-War Era Beitou Waitress Memorial Steles* and *The Chill of the Exquisite Twin Cities – Cold-War Era Taipei Bar Girl Memorial Steles*. Both projects gave insights on how images of women were implicated during times of war. Sasakawa's work centers around the main subject of an actress being filmed as a nurse and instructed to project a "beautiful smile" while Chin's is drawn from the controversy around the archival image of the "Beitou Bathing Scene". This image,



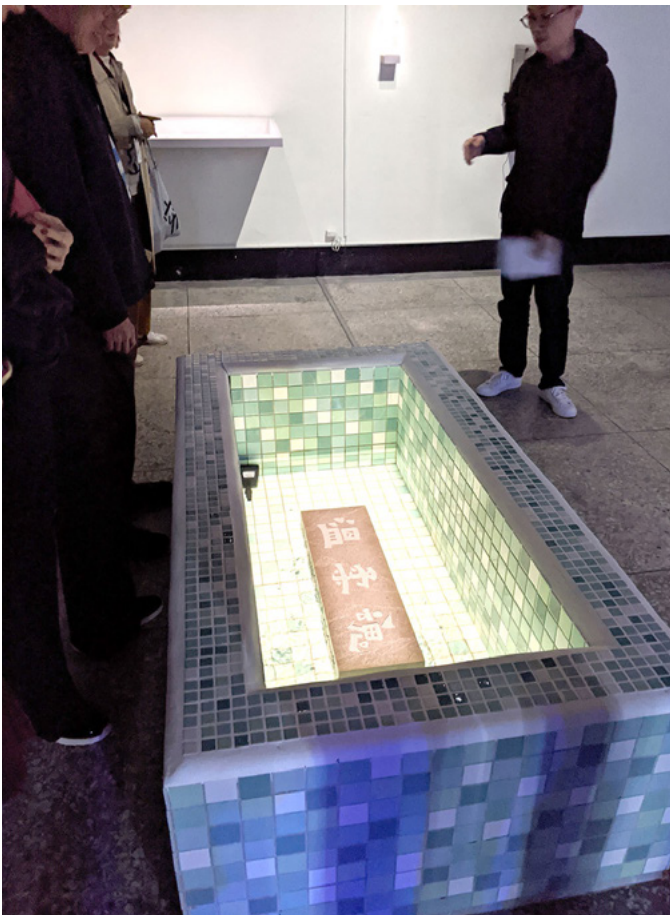
The students of LASALLE Asian Art Histories with Francis Maravillas (4th from the right). Photo by Adrian Liaw

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featuring an American soldier sharing a hot spring bathtub with two Beitou waitresses, received critical responses when it was first published especially towards the two women captured. Chin's project attempts to raise questions on the skewed gaze and reception towards the female body and viewing them on-site at the former Air Force Command Headquarters provided sense of time and spatial experience. It was an activity-filled four days in Taipei with meaningful exchanges between art educators, artists and curators to give us a taste of real experiences in the field of art history and contemporary art. As they say in Taiwan, *jiǎ bà buāi!*



Installation view of Chin Cheng-Te's *Tender Soul – Cold-War Era Beitou Waitress Memorial Steles*. Photo by Nurdiana Rahmat



Installation view of *The Chill of the Exquisite Twin Cities – Cold-War Era Taipei Bar Girl Memorial Steles*. Photo by Nurdiana Rahmat

(how are you? / have you eaten?) and so, we ended our last night in Taipei with a dinner over a hotpot.

Nurdiana Rahmat graduated from the MA Asian Art Histories Programme in 2020.

Theresa Tan is a current student of the MA Asian Art Histories Programme.

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Installation view of *That's one small step for mankind, One giant leap for species*, Kuo I-Chen, 2019, mixed media



The students of LASALLE Asian Art Histories with our tour guide Alex. Photo by Adrian Liaw

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Retold-Untold Stories: An interview with Phaptawan Suwannakudt

Exhibited at Sydney College of the Arts, 2016

Curated by: Yvonne Low and Clare Veal

Interview: Clare Veal

Camera and editing: Marcus De Giorgio

This interview was undertaken with the artist Phaptawan Suwannakudt, in her Sydney studio prior to her exhibition *Retold-Untold Stories*, held at Sydney College of the Arts in March 2016. *Retold-Untold Stories* was produced as part of an Asialink Arts Residency programme funded by Arts NSW, that Phaptawan undertook from October–December 2014, at Ne'-Na Contemporary Art Space, Chiang Mai. The works were first exhibited at Chiang Mai University Arts Centre during three weeks in December 2014, before they were restructured and reexhibited in Sydney, eighteen months later.



<https://vimeo.com/428417832>

Retold-Untold Stories explores Lanna (Northern Thai) social history through oral poetry and the personal experiences of women. The work connects the artist with her mother who was born in Northern Thailand and then relocated to Bangkok to settle her family. When Phaptawan moved to Sydney and gave birth to her daughter, she recalled that her mother became a nun after giving birth to her last child (a daughter), the same age as when Phaptawan gave birth to her first.

Retold-Untold Stories retells unrecorded stories heard (or unheard), told (or untold) in Lanna culture. The exhibition consists of three groups of works:

Let Me Tell You Child is based on a poem by the late Ms Chantieng, a Lanna village scholar. The poem was recounted by her daughter to Phaptawan and became real to the artist only as a sound bite. To retell the story Phaptawan refashioned fabric herb vessels into the shape of letters and filled them with produce from her local environment. The reverse side of the letters are only partially readable in the

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mirror reflection at the far end of the room. The poem in Lanna dialect is written phonetically with Thai consonants, but can only be fully understood by those with knowledge of Lanna language and culture.

There, there is created in memory of Phaptawan's mother who began speaking the Lanna dialect during the years when she suffered from memory loss as a result of dementia. Phaptawan sculpted the head from a memory of when her mother was a nun and, as she made the sculpture, she felt her mother from afar. The scattered fabric masks are placed together and made into containers that are filled with produce.

Broken the Spell imitates the act of tattooing—a practice, together with the performance of spells, that is restricted to male members of the Lanna community. As part of the production process, Phaptawan rhythmically pierced paper overwritten with Lanna poems in tea and coffee. Through this meditative act she pays homage to women who had, for generations, sought ways to empower themselves in spite of gendered limitations imposed by their societies.

A catalogue from the exhibition may be purchased at:
<https://shop.powerpublications.com.au/products/retold-untold-stories-phaptawan-suwannakudt>

Artist's profile:

Phaptawan Suwannakudt trained with her father as a mural painter. She led a team of painters who extensively produced work in Buddhist temples and public spaces in Thailand during the 1980s, and in the 1990s and was involved in Womanifesto, a women artists' group in Thailand. Phaptawan relocated to Sydney in 1996, where she lives and

works as an independent artist. Phaptawan has exhibited extensively both domestically and internationally during the last eighteen years including at ARC One, Melbourne; Biennale of Sydney; 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney; 100 Tonson Gallery, Bangkok and Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York. In 2018, she exhibited as part of the inaugural Bangkok Art Biennale, and in 2020 her work was shown as part of Asia TOPA at the Arts Centre, Melbourne. For other works and biography go to www.phaptawansuwannakudt.com

Image credits:

Phaptawan Suwannakudt, *Retold-Untold Stories*, 2014, installation view, Sydney College of the Arts, Sydney. Photograph by Marcus De Giorgio.

Phaptawan Suwannakudt, *There, There*, 2014, mixed media and organic matter, dimensions variable. Figure cast: fabric and resin, 30 x 30 cm. Photograph by Marcus De Giorgio.

Phaptawan Suwannakudt, *Broken the Spell*, 2014, handmade paper, tea, coffee, hand-dyed thread, 90 x 30 cm. Photograph by Marcus De Giorgio.

Phaptawan Suwannakudt, *Nariphon III b*, 1996, acrylic on silk, 90 x 90 cm. Photograph by John Clark.

Phaptawan Suwannakudt, *Let Me Tell You Child*, 2014, mixed media and organic matter, dimensions variable. Alphabet cast: fabric and resin. Photograph by Marcus De Giorgio.

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SEEDing Something New

Lourdes Samson, Ivy Lam and Connie Wong

What inspired three MA Asian Art Histories graduates to establish an independent art space, and how do they see their space contributing to the local art scene? Did their experience at LASALLE College of the Arts shape their plans? In this podcast, current Asian Art Histories student, Ely Nayir, sat down with the three founders of newly-formed SEED The Art Space Ltd (SEED) to find out what they each bring to the table.

Ivy Lam, Lourdes Samson and Connie Wong first met as students in the MA Asian Art Histories Programme at LASALLE in 2017. Although coming from very different backgrounds, the strong camaraderie of their cohort formed the foundation for their current partnership. The initial idea was sparked off when Connie shared her idea of starting a non-profit space to support artists and the local art community upon graduation. Committed to her graduation



Ely interviewing Connie and Ivy, Image courtesy of Lourdes Samson

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plans, she first approached Ivy and Lou to be part of this initiative, while their classmate Tina Jailani joined as their first collaborator. Connie mused that the name of their new venture was inspired by the biblical parable of the mustard seed, “similar concept to our platform, a very small seed we envision its potential to turn into something much bigger.”

To kick off their business plan, the team launched their maiden exhibition in November 2019 in collaboration with local artist Ernest Chan Tuck Yew, who is coincidentally also an alumni of LASALLE. Not only did the exhibition present miniature paintings as an expansion of Chan’s artistic practice as a printmaker and painter, it also allowed audiences to appreciate Chan’s dexterity in adapting this traditional painting format to more contemporary approaches. The exhibition aimed to contribute to ongoing discourses on contemporary painting in Singapore, which is aligned to SEED’s vision of “seeding” new ideas, new audiences and new dialogues. SEED hopes to continue pursuing such small but meaningful projects with artists, in order to expand their practices further. “We are not chasing numbers,” explains Ivy, “we are chasing our authenticity and how true we are to our core of why we started SEED.”

The different backgrounds of the founders have been the key to making their small team work. Drawing on Connie’s financial expertise, Ivy’s training as an art teacher and arts administrator, and Lou’s marketing experience and collector network, the SEED team is able to complement each other quite effectively. “I’m sure they didn’t know what they signed up for,” Connie joked. They all feel, however, that their shared passion for art and their grounding in art history and academic research sets their initiative apart. When asked how the MA Programme at LASALLE influenced SEED, Lou answers candidly, “Even with my original background in



SEED directors, from left to right, Lourdes Samson, Ivy Lam and Connie Wong, Image courtesy of Tina Jailani

business, having this arts education and having the ability to think critically and academically about all aspects of art, gave me the confidence to actually start up this project with my friends.”

Mindful of how the current global pandemic has affected the local art scene, SEED is also working on projects outside

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their physical space. Their website is now being developed and, in response to social distancing measures, the team is also embarking on a podcast series with artist friends and other collaborators. They are already planning their next exhibition and they have some small projects lined up with institutional and individual collaborators. The founders of SEED are working to build their non-profit initiative from the ground up and are so far enjoying the ride. "The fact that we can pursue this shared passion together," says Lou, "makes it an even more worthwhile experience."

Lourdes Samson, Ivy Lam and Connie Wong graduated from the MA Asian Art Histories Programme in 2018.

Ely Nayir is a current student of the MA Asian Art Histories Programme.

Click below to listen to a Podcast Interview by Ely Nayir with the 3 founders of SEED.



<https://vimeo.com/428419544>