The Contemporary in Southeast Asian Art: The 1970s
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I

This chapter was originally presented as a keynote paper at the conference convened by and at The Australian National University (ANU) in association with Contemporary Worlds: Indonesia, an exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia in 2019 and the first, I understand, in recent years at that institution for curating Asia as manifesting contemporary art worlds.

I am reminded of another occasion scaled expansively, of the fervour attending it as presaging a dawning of a new age in Brisbane, 1993, when and where the Asia Pacific and its contemporary were artistically incarnated, triennially, on the premises of the Queensland Art Gallery, transforming it significantly.

Even as we are in Canberra, I pause at Brisbane 1993. At that inaugural Asia Pacific Triennial (APT), the Asia Pacific was curated as consisting of three sub-regions, namely: Southeast Asia, East Asia and the South Pacific. ‘South-east Asia’ bore a hyphenated presence—south as separated from east—and in turn was made up of six nations: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. I focus on Indonesia, as it is the subject in the exposition and conference.
Nine artists were nominated, each showing a body of works. FX Harsono was one of them and he is the reason I pause at Brisbane 1993. Among his works displayed then is titled *Just the Rights* (1993; see Figure 5.1). The other artists were Dadang Christanto, Heri Dono, Nyoman Erawan, Sudjana Kerton, A. D. Pirous, Ivan Sagito, Srihadi Soedarsono and Dede Eri Supria (Figure 5.2).

Harsono had been featured in the Artists’ Regional Exchange (ARX) in Perth, 1992, a year before appearing at the APT, where a production titled *Power and Oppression* (1992) was installed. This work is illustrated in the catalogue issued for the inaugural Asia Pacific exhibition. While its display at Perth in ARX is acknowledged in the caption, there is no comment on this matter or on the work and its inclusion in the text, written by Jim Supangkat, introducing Harsono (Figure 5.3).

What might we make of it? We could read it as illustrating a kind or type or category of work produced by this artist, thereby signalling to viewers in Brisbane and in Australia a precedent or kinship with what is shown in the APT. We could read it also as registering Harsono’s artistic footprints in Australia so that he is seen appearing in Brisbane not as a complete unknown in and to the artistic milieu in Australia. Let us pursue this thought a little further.
Figure 5.2: Photographs of Indonesian artists reproduced in the catalogue of the First Asia Pacific Triennial, Queensland Art Gallery, 1993.
I draw attention to Harsono to underline the importance of examining crossovers by artists as they migrate and by artworks as they circulate from site to site within bordered precincts, and across them, in order to discern deeply the provenance of individual practices and productions. The term provenance may sit uneasily, inattentively when applied to examining contemporary art worlds; yet conceptually and methodologically it is apt.

I direct attention to Harsono to underline the usefulness of forging networks for linking artworks that are curated over time and space, networks that draw attention to relatedness or separateness of artworks, thereby dispelling the apparent strangeness, inexplicableness of their appearance, and instead propose inflected pathways for apprehending them. How these are distilled when exhibiting creative productions as experientially compelling in their particulars are among heartbeats propelling curatorial decisions and orientations. Anticipations are for encountering a work resonantly—yes! Anticipations are also for encountering a work as yielding varied interpretive desires and interests.

I draw attention to Harsono to underline propensities for trans-locating a practice and artworks, hinting at the cumulative impact of such itinerancy on curating and seeing art. Of course he is not exceptional in any of these respects as trans-located-ness is acclaimed as a defining attribute in being contemporary in the art world. There are other interests and destinies.
In one instance Harsono is hoisted onto exalted registers, cast as embodying exemplariness when assessing recent art in Indonesia and Southeast Asia. Agung Hujatnikajennong offers such a measure and reckoning. It appears in an essay he writes for a publication issued for an exhibition dealing with conceptual approaches and strategies employed by contemporary artists in Southeast Asia; its title is *Concept Context Contestation. Art and the Collective in Southeast Asia* (CCC) shown at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre from December 2013 to March 2014.

We read his appraisal:

FX Harsono’s work *What Would You Do If These Crackers Were Real Pistols?* (1977) has been specially remade for this exhibition [see Figure 5.4]. This work becomes an important sample especially in relation to the social and political context in Southeast Asian countries that still seem to stand out as co-existing factors that created differences and similarities of interest in regional art practice. In CCC, FX Harsono occupies a unique position as one of a few living artists who connects successive art developments since the 1970s. He has experienced the ups and downs of Indonesian political transitions in the country. The development of his art has consistently demonstrated a genealogical link between conceptual strategies and the issue of contesting power in Indonesia.

It is useful to re-read FX Harsono’s trajectory and use Indonesia as a case study for how endogenous and exogenous factors have shaped current conceptual practices in Southeast Asia.\(^1\)

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S. Sudjojono is the supreme patriarch of Indonesian art. In recent writings, claims for exemplariness are advanced for individuals esteemed for political/social activism as artists in the 1980s. For instance, Aminudin Siregar propels Semsar Siahaan into singular prominence when he says:

There may not be another artist who better represents the development of Indonesian art in resisting the despotism of the Soeharto, The New Order regime whether through artworks or sociopolitical activities than Semsar Siahaan (1952–2005). He is a representative of the rebel generation of the 1980s, his name shines since studying as a student at the Institut Teknologi Bandung campus.

In his estimation, aspects of contemporary art in Indonesia and Southeast Asia are historically telescoped into conforming to the life and creative practice of an individual. We may recoil from valorising of one artist as manifesting the wellspring source of the new historically, although Hujatnikajennong inserts his claim thoughtfully. Hence, it would be a gross misinterpretation to leave this citation unaddressed, conveying impressions of Harsono hijacking what Agung Hujatnikajennong has to say in this essay.

Titled ‘Trajectories/Contingencies: Indonesian Contemporary Art and the Regional Context’, Hujatnikajennong proposes perspectives for assessing exhibitions of Southeast Asian contemporary art featuring works, gestures, testimonies exemplifying conceptual interests or traits, spanning the 1970s and the 1990s, in exhibitions in locations in the region. It is not a survey; it is a discussion of complexities entailed when examining the region and its art as historically formative—via exhibitions. Harsono is raised to unrivalled prominence in this account, as is Indonesia.
In the year Agung Hujatnikajennong publishes his essay (i.e. 2014), there appears *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities and World-Making*, published by ANU Press. Edited by Michelle Antoinette and Caroline Turner, it is made up of writings on the modern and the contemporary by several authors, and research facilitated by The Australian National University. A year earlier, in October 2013, the Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong convened a symposium on ‘Sites of Construction: Exhibitions and the Making of Recent Art History in Asia’. As the title indicates, the symposium’s interest is twofold: firstly to examine claims that exhibitions are formative sites for developing, representing histories of especially modern art; secondly, and arising from this, how might exhibitions be studied historically. *Yishu. Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* devoted its entire March/April 2014 issue to it, publishing papers that were presented and transcripts of panel discussions at the end of the symposium. Exhibitions are increasingly examined; they are hot topics for research, publications and conferences.

The essay I have earlier discussed by Agung Hujatnikajennong is the third in a trilogy he writes on the contemporary, publishing in the English language. Each is written for an occasion held at a specific location; all are affiliated with exhibitions. The suite of texts constitutes potentially significant readings on the contemporary in art, chiefly in Indonesia although Hujatnikajennong’s analysis may be read as having wider pertinence. I say potentially as it needs to be examined and discussed. For the present I offer these observations; brief as they are, it would be undeserving to merely pass by them.

The first essay, titled ‘The Contemporary Turns: On the Indonesian Art World and the Aftermath of the 80s’, is for a publication issued for an exhibition, both named *Beyond the Dutch: Indonesia, the Netherlands and the Visual Arts, from 1900 until Now* with the exhibition at the Centraal Museum, Utrecht, from October 2009 to January 2010.  

The art world in Indonesia in this instance is initially defined by patronage determined by acquisitions of artworks via commercial agencies and transactions driven at the onset by domestic demands dominated by powerful, collector conglomerates amassing extensive private collections,

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and subsequently by global/corporate capitalism. Yet the contemporary is not cast completely in their shadows. Hujatnikajennong sharply points to sites, spaces, agencies, such as artists’ initiatives, regional expositions, biennials—even as these are entangled with state/national imperatives—as also providing alternative representations and mediations and as constituting patronage. And then, as John Clark dramatically and pointedly identifies, there appears in these arenas ‘a new kind of actor’ who brings into art worlds a ‘notion of the contemporary as a new kind of art practice’. A practice no longer assessed and assessable by prevailing interpretive codes but by ‘a new aesthetic fuelled by directing access to subjects of daily life’.3

The new actor is the curator; not any or all but, John Clark underlines, particular curators ‘who at critical times performed and built careers’ that are ‘intertwined with the rise of new contemporary spaces, often in cultures which lacked formal and permanent museums of modern and contemporary art’.4 This appears in a foreword written for Patrick Flores’s Past Peripheral: Curation in Southeast Asia, an important comparative study of curators, especially in Indonesia in the 1970s and Thailand in the 1980s. Past Peripheral was published by the National University of Singapore Museum in 2008, a year before Hujatnikajennong’s essay appears.

And Hujatnikajennong cites Flores’s analysis in his account, whose tenor separately and collegially substantiates John Clark’s observations as I have reported them. The actor who emerges prominently, dominantly in Indonesia, is Jim Supangkat, whose curating of especially the ninth Jakarta Biennale in 1993, precipitated seismically wideranging debates, disputes and partisanship, altering discourses on the modern and the contemporary in Indonesia. Hujatnikajennong scrutinises these entangled trajectories methodically while underlining difficulties when weighing them historically and regionally.

The second essay, titled ‘The Contemporary Turns: Indonesian Contemporary Art of the 1980s’, is for an exhibition-cum-publication called Negotiating Home, History and Nation: Two Decades of Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia 1991–2011, by and at the Singapore Art Museum, the exposition running from March until June 2011.5 Similarities between

4 Ibid.
the Utrecht and Singapore texts are acknowledged and publicised as the latter being a reworked, revised version of the former. Its republication underlines the editor’s view of its importance and continuing pertinence.

I return to the third essay in Agung Hujatnikajennong’s trilogy, written for *Concept Context Contestation* in Bangkok in 2014; in it Harsono is installed as exemplary when writing histories of recent Indonesian and Southeast Asian art, art identified, represented and examined as contemporary. The time span Hujatnikajennong allocates is the 1970s, a decade defined by the Black December incident/statement and by the inaugural exposition by the Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia (GSRB, the Indonesian New Art Movement) in 1975.

As Hujatnikajennong tells it, one morphs into the other almost naturally. Again Harsono is named, along with Siti Adiyati, B. Munni Ardhi, Ries Purwana and more, as spearheading a transformation of a protest gesture (with immense cost to the lives of those who delivered it) into a gathering of artists with disparate interests and dispositions, assembling from different locations (all in Java of course), to form a loose, fluctuating collective with ambitions for altering the foundations, impact, significance of the practice, production and showing of art. The GSRB ignited intense discussion; it was disparaged and commended.

More than any other group, it is now identified as marking the advent of the contemporary. So much so it is now customary to say Indonesian contemporary begins with the Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia in 1975. For that matter, the GSRB has been written on from its onset and continues to be written on—by those from within its formation and those who behold its representations from other constituencies. Foremost among writers from within are Jim Supangkat and Sanento Yuliman. Siti Adiyati is never mentioned; yet she writes lucidly, advocating aims and destinations of the new in the new movement in clear terminology and by employing vivid analogies.

This is not an occasion to recount any of these in detail. The GSRB was not a topic in the NGA exhibition or in the conference at ANU, although it was not completely absent from either of these. In the NGA exposition, the contemporary was represented from 1998 onwards, the year marking the overthrow, the ouster, the departure of Suharto from the presidency and the end of the New Order regime. A year preceded

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6 Editors’ note: an alternative spelling is Bonyong Munny Ardhi.
by sustained civil action mounted by disparate bodies stemming from calls for eradicating inequality, poverty and injustice; actions mounted at immense consequences for individual lives; action that is collectively referred to as Reformasi.

Nineteen ninety-eight: a year signalling endings—momentously; and a year promising beginnings—fervently.

Beginnings and endings precipitating, according to NGA curator Carol Cains:

the sudden, unfamiliar opportunity for innumerable individual voices, beliefs and opinions to be broadcast created a declaratory cacophony accompanied by tactical manoeuvres as numerous social and political groups jockeyed for prominence.7

The pace and tumult vividly captured in Cains’s prose continue to be lived until today, yielding at times different destinies and at times persisting in unchanged conditions. And for Cains they materialise in Jompet Kuswidananto’s Staging Collectivism (2013), installed in the exhibition (Figure 5.5).

I am not sufficiently familiar with the NGA exhibition (not having viewed it prior to writing this paper) to deal with it here.

I aim to step back and sideways and talk of the contemporary historically by examining a handful of representations in locations in the region other than Indonesia. The focus is chiefly on the 1970s, comparable to some of Agung Hujatnikajennong’s preoccupations—with tracking wellsprings for showing, seeing and writing the new, the different in art practices. In large measure, readings of Hujatnikajennong’s trilogy of texts are aimed at gaining entries to what I wish to say here. In this sense too, writings by Chaitanya Sambrani, Elly Kent and Carol Cains for the NGA publication have accompanied thoughts and preparations for this occasion. Each of the texts is deeply inflected by historicalness, distinctively, and I am glad for such companionship.8

7 Carol Cains, ‘Contemporary Worlds: Indonesian Art at the NGA’, draft text.
When nominating the decade of the 1970s, the purpose is not to fix, consolidate chronologies for contemporary art’s beginnings, but to indicate a time frame for detecting a parting of ways, scrutinising shifts whereby prevailing values, modes of practice and interpretation are interrogated; elbowed to make room for actions, positions that are different; room for registering claims that practices of art are overtly related to conditions of daily life or that conditions of daily life are vital resources for art practices and for materialising them as works of art. Resources fuelling such engagements are also derived from encounters with representations in locations in Europe, Japan, the USA and Southeast Asia.

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Between 1972 and 1974, Cheo Chai-Hiang set down his thoughts on art and its predicaments in three texts, written for audiences in Singapore. In 1971 he departed for England, enrolling as an undergraduate in the art department of Brighton Polytechnic and subsequently in a graduate program at the Royal College of Art, completing studio-based studies in visual art in 1978. The foundations for his creative practice were consolidated during these years, as were orientations for his thinking on art.

Prior to his departure for art studies, he was briefly a student at the then Nanyang University studying literature; subsequently he joined a teachers’ training college where he gained rudimentary knowledge of painting and drawing. Pursuing these with self-study, he produced pictures, exhibiting them with the Modern Art Society, established in 1964, of which he was a member, a society that vigorously articulated the modern as the avant-garde in Singapore and in Southeast Asia, and as having a worldly compass—a worldliness embodied, represented largely by the Western, newly resurgent post–World War II capitalist hemisphere.

The writings I discuss were produced while he was studying in England. Two were written in Chinese and one in the English language. Even as he was away, he was not absent. Cheo maintained a close brief on the goings-on in Singapore art, intervening, provoking with creative gestures, artworks and writings. The writings were directed at and for Singapore artists and their publics. While they are site specific, they may be read as pertinent for thinking of the region.

The first, in 1972, in the Chinese language, was for a monthly magazine reporting on a wide range of topics; its title ‘New Art, New Concepts’ (the new is tirelessly registered and claimed along many fronts in Southeast Asia, a new that is of the 70s). In this essay he outlined strategies for striking out in directions that are new, cultivating and thinking new ways for producing art—art that speaks differently, art seen apart from prevailing works whose import tended to fold inwards. The following are listed as desirable goals. Concepts, ideas are mentioned as paramount; he says so at the beginning of his text and again towards the end. I quote: ‘the changes in art do not only occur in subject matter, content, materials and techniques; the crucial changes occur in considerations of ideas and
Formalism is rejected or swept aside as a presiding artistic principle. An artwork may now be made from simple, ordinary, non-artistic materials; it need not satisfy conventional aesthetic values and need not even be visually satisfying, but strike viewers as experientially connected with the world.

The second, in 1973, is written for the Modern Art Society’s eighth annual exhibition. It was mailed to the residence of its president, which was also the postal address of the society. Cheo’s text was not a review of the exhibition in that year. It was a no-holds barred appraisal of prevailing trends in Singapore, judging them sterile. He restates goals outlined a year earlier, directing them forcefully towards criticising the commoditisation, precocity of art. Practices of art are restricted; he urges discarding limits and adopting open, porous attitudes towards the world. He introduces the artist as contemporary, socially connected even convivial and says: ‘contemporary artists do not mind others participating in the making of their work. In a way, the whole activity becomes less exclusive and more gregarious’.

The third text, in 1974, was written in the English language as a foreword for the Modern Art Society’s exhibition that year. In it the contemporary is named clearly, forcefully, prominently. Its mandate as a creative practice is set out, as are outcomes. All of these are laid out, nugget-like, in five brief paragraphs. Paragraphs 1 and 2 read as follows:

1. Contemporary art has in fact reached a point when artists are prepared to adopt anything as a medium to work with. What is important is not the execution of an art work but the idea. The speculation about the nature of things is sometimes more interesting than the rendering of actual appearances.

2. An artist should be able to deal with any kind of material and transform it into something that affects the spectator physically, intellectually or emotionally.

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Cheo Chai-Hiang’s thoughts in these texts were beamed from the vantage of regarding Singapore from the outside, from seeing its artists and art along perspectives he was cultivating while studying in England. Yet, his is not solely an external, expatriated view, fuelled by newly inflected ideals absorbed unthinkingly by a freshly arrived, starry-eyed student, enthralled by the metropolitan milieus in England and in Europe. The tone in his writings is informed, rigorous and subtle; its tenor is weighted towards affecting change in a particular site. He explains terms, elaborating them with references to historically marked instances and adopts a dialogic stance.

Cheo remarks that the visual field is crowded and competitive; painting—and this is significant for Singapore and for Southeast Asia—can no longer claim a commanding presence for visual representation. Other media, formats, technologies—all of which are vigorously promoted and directed by the Singapore government then for economic, industrial development—are capable of producing images far more compelling and seductive. Those who practise painting will have to seriously reckon with these advances, redefine the foundations for its continuance (we encounter analogous assertions in the Black December Statement in 1974). He urges artists to discard the straitjacket stifling them, and instead cultivate critical openness, connectedness in creative practice and for the reception of artworks, artworks that are no longer embalmed by inwardly turned aesthetic doctrines but that resonate with living experience. To do so, practitioners and viewers are asked to unyoke themselves from restrictive, rigid orthodoxies some kinds of modern practices had congealed into.

The tone and tenor fly in the face of reigning political ideologies. These were unflinchingly aimed at mobilising peoples of a newly constituted modern state (i.e. Singapore) into yielding their lives as material resources for economic development, uniformly and conformingly. To think, act and live otherwise is to do so unproductively outside the prescribed political arena. Cheo Chai-Hiang was well aware of this, writing his thoughts subtly yet pointedly. Ho Ho Ying, the society’s president to whom the second text was mailed, considered it as significant to the extent it required a broad readership. He submitted it to a Chinese language newspaper where it was published. These are not defiant acts; they are publicised in the mass media, in spaces set apart from the glare of headlines and editorials, and available readily.
While Cheo Chai-Hiang’s analysis and exhortations lean towards unravelling the new as the contemporary, he does so by addressing artists and art agencies rooted in the modern, in Singapore, from which he emerged. What he says would not otherwise make sense. As it would not otherwise too when regarding the Black December disruption/statement and, for that matter, the emergence, the advocacies of the GSRB. Their pertinence for propelling the new, the different, is measurable when weighted with or against the modern as reigning aesthetic regimes in the 1970s, regimes that may well be troubled from within.

Patrick Flores illuminates this situation when he says:

an argument can be made about the seventies as a flash point in the history of modernity in Southeast Asia. In mapping out the coordinates of certain shifts in this history, it is important to locate that point at which the modern would be challenged and made to yield to a condition of post-ness. The latter may be described as post-modern or contemporary; in whatever way it is conceived, the legacy of an always-already precarious modernity is threatened.13

Flores repositions the modern vis-à-vis the contemporary, beaming headlights onto its predicaments in the seventies. All is no longer completely well in the world that is the modern! As an argument it is useful for substantiating the historicalness of the contemporary as I am describing it.

Cheo Chai-Hiang’s writing was read attentively, at least in and by the Modern Art Society, although not passively. There were written responses, countering his positional claims and reasserting the society’s artistic goals. Matters came to a head in 1972.

In that year Cheo mailed a submission for display from Brighton, England. It consisted of instructions to the Modern Art Society’s exhibitors in Singapore to draw a square, 5 feet in dimension, partially on a wall and partially on the floor adjoining it. The drawn square, without an image, was to bear the title Singapore River, referring to landscape paintings featuring this river, a perennial feature in pictures produced in the 1950s

and 1960s. It was not considered for inclusion as there was no work as such, no work that was tangible, no work created by an artist for curatorial assessment.

Ho Ho Ying wrote a lengthy account for its exclusion. It was a letter written in the Chinese language and mailed to Cheo in Brighton, England. He acknowledged the seriousness of Cheo’s thinking, but it had insufficiently to do with art. He recognises the importance of innovation, of not being restricted by aesthetic dogma. Even so, he safeguards foundational principles as they are inalienable. Here is a paragraph encapsulating some of these ideals; reading it is to hear the modern writing back!

Art, besides being new, also has to possess intentionality and particularity in order to strike the viewer’s heart. Imagine an artist installing nothing other than a bare cube in a big public square, and declaring, ‘This is real art’. The viewer can also place a dead tree in the middle of a park and say this is art too. This is definitely confusing art with non-art. I personally believe in the importance of the created form in art, but I can’t accept those found objects that are neither well thought out nor carefully fabricated.14

The divide between two worlds cannot be more starkly etched. Cheo Chai-Hiang was not surprised by any of this. Towards the end of the second text written in 1973 for the Modern Art Society’s annual show, a year after receiving this letter, he points out that issues he raises are not removed from or alien to the modern in art. ‘Modern art’, he recalls, ‘is the constant struggle to go beyond its defined boundaries’ and ‘whoever tries to pre-set a rigid boundary will sentence it to oblivion’. And this has, for him, come to pass. As it had at the Major Indonesian Painting Exhibition convened by the Jakarta Council in December 1974, instigating its disruption by a handful of student-artists, an intervention now known as the Black December event. There too the matter had to do with boundaries constraining modernist practices and of painting.

The contemporary and the modern are entangled,-complicatively and troublesomely.

The struggle for freeing oneself from the grip of inwardly turned, exclusive aesthetic doctrines by experimentally breaking constraints, by exploratory widening the scope for creative practice so as to be in the world openly and critically are, for Cheo Chai-Hiang, writing in the early 1970s, ‘precursors’ to ‘what has been happening in the contemporary world’.

In all these regards and bearing in mind my brief description of political demands made of the newly formed, modern Singapore, Cheo’s closing remarks in this 1973 text are unerring and for us prescient:

These are questions for artists of the seventies to think deep and hard about. It is a testing time for artists. It also poses big challenges for mankind. We need to be more open when we look at the world. We also need to be more courageous and have faith in ourselves when engaging in new experiments.\(^16\)

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\(^16\) Cheo Chai-Hiang, ‘Written for the Occasion of the 8th Modern Art Exhibition’, 120.
It is circumspect and it is assertive.

Before leaving Cheo Chai-Hiang I draw attention to his conversion of that letter from Ho Ho Ying into a monumental representation; on four large canvases, he transcribes the letter, magnifying a private communication albeit consisting of important matters into assuming a public spectacle (see Figure 5.6). The circumstances prompting this work have to do with a spate of rejections that Cheo met when submitting works as public commissions.

III

In August 1974 Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa brought a year-long collaborative research-based creative project to fruition and publicised it in the writers’ corner, a room for readings and book launches, in the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (a government agency for promoting Malay as the national language and literature written in it) in Kuala Lumpur. It was called Towards A Mystical Reality: a documentation of a jointly initiated experience by redza piyadasa and suleiman esa (hereafter TMR). A publication bearing the same title was issued as a salient component of this documentation. The two have insisted that the publication is the real thing in this project. Mention of artist, art, exhibition, are avoided in naming it, underlining the radicalness they sought to deliver up front. Although in the text proper, art, artists are fervently discussed.

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17 Editors’ note: the lower case for the second part of the title, including the names of Piyadasa and Esa, and spelling of ‘sulieman’ are as they appear on the front cover of the catalogue.

18 Editors’ note: Towards A Mystical Reality: a documentation of an experience by redza piyadasa and suleiman esa, Kuala Lumpur, undated. A range of images and extracts from the text of Towards A Mystical Reality can be found on a number of internet websites including Sulaiman Esa’s own website and the M+ Archive Hong Kong. Esa was selected as an artist for the First Asia Pacific Triennial in Australia in 1993 and his work Garden of Mystery 1 (1992) was purchased by the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art. Piyadasa was an adviser and co-curator for the Malaysian artists for the First Asia Pacific Triennial.

As a display it consisted of things cast away as refuse or matter-of-factly used; things retrieved by the two of them from diverse locations, including their respective homes. The very stuff Ho Ho Ying refuses to admit into his art world.

Although ordinary and discarded, each of these was shown as artefacts are in art exhibitions—raised on plinths, suspended on walls and from the ceiling. A label bearing details on provenance and purpose for showing accompanied every item. The information does not mimic the tenor of data furnished for artworks and reading texts when seeing them. References to aesthetic intentions or formal properties are excluded. In their stead one reads anecdotal notations as to when, where from, a thing had been retrieved and how it might be of incidental interest in the display. Each of these comes over casually, obviously and unremarkably.

TMR has been discussed in a number of publications. As with GSRB it has been written on from its onset, commendably and disparagingly, never fading from attention. As with GSRB too, it is singled out as the most significant flashpoint illuminating the departure from the modern as the reigning aesthetic orthodoxy and as ‘opening the floodgates of the contemporary’ in Malaysian art practices.

I summarise TMR’s aims and move to deal with its prehistory. They are as follows:

1. sow seeds for creating, spurring a new art in Malaysia and Asia
2. free artists from the dominance of the West by cultivating foundations affiliated with Asian philosophical traditions, seen as congenial for creative practices in the present
3. bypass formal principles as defining for the making and appraising artworks and, in their stead
4. present stimuli, provocations that may entail visual, concrete objects for apprehending reality directly and from one’s lived, cultivated experiences.

20 ‘Interviews with Prominent Art Personalities by Nur Hanim Khairuddin: Simon Soon’, in Raja'ah: Art, Idea and Creativity of Sulaiman Esa from 1950s–2011, ed. Nur Hanim Khairuddin (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Visual National/National Visual Arts Gallery), 141. Simon Soon’s observation is as follows: ‘TMR did open up the floodgates to the contemporary but it was by no means the ONLY exhibition that did that and certainly not the first’. He is also cited as remarking: ‘I think that TMR is an important flashpoint from the modern into the contemporary in its radical reevaluation of the aesthetic paradigm’ (p. 141).
The familiarity of such an inventory is not surprising. We encounter it when examining textual representations of certain kinds of art in the 1970s in locations in Southeast Asia. They are articulated variously, with differing resonance arising from specific social-political conditions and expressed distinctly in particular languages. When reading Cheo Chai-Hiang’s texts I highlighted ambitions, aims that are at times symptomatic and at times declaratory of the contemporary in art. These traits may be aligned comparably when interpreting the TMR as I have reported it and earlier in this account with reference to Black December and GSRB.

I track back from 1974, back from *Towards A Mystical Reality* and round off this paper. I introduced it as marking a fruition of creative collaboration between Sulaiman Esa and Piyadasa. It did not come about just for that project but predates it by quite a while. The two were students in London, had shared accommodation there, fuelling each other’s thinking on art and fortifying their mission to shake Malaysian artists into recognising new realities. They were colleagues as teaching faculty in the school of art and design, MARA Institute of Technology (in Malaysia), and were a formidable force in art education.

In 1970 they held an exhibition, titling it *Experiment ’70* with three other artists, all allied by interests in minimalist strategies, in two- and three-dimensional productions, developing cool, detached, serialised methods for designing, fabricating works as art. Their aims were positioned as antithetical to the dominant strains in painting in Malaysia in which expressivity/expressiveness were upheld as aesthetically and existentially paramount.

Artists in *Experiment ’70* direct attention to the primacy of materials, to thought-and-processes in practice and production. These were cast, however, in modernist parlance, envisaging art that is created as edging towards a kind of terminus for modernist possibilities. For instance, Piyadasa claims: ‘my work is conceptual in nature’, it ‘exists as visual documents’ even as he concedes that his works are sculptures.21 As notions, they simultaneously are anchored in modernity while aspiring to be freed from it.

Sulaiman Esa and Piyadasa persisted with strategies unveiled in 1970 and two years later in a joint exposition they called *Dokumentasi 72*, presented framed planes and pigmented surfaces barely, residually, recognisable as

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pictures. They had depleted the parameters of painting and sculpture as these had been advanced as defining the modern in visual art in Malaysia, in their practices. This is not to imply that painting and sculpture as such are finished. Indeed these are reconfigured, enlivened in part at least by young artists on seeing Experiment ’70 and Dokumentasi 72 and in part by impetus gleaned from imagery, technologies of representation in the domain of mass media as well as sharp perceptions of political and social violence.

To say they had emptied painting and sculpture in their practices is to signify that pathways leading to Towards A Mystical Reality are developed systematically. And that TMR, esteemed as it is, as inaugurating the contemporary in Malaysian art did not erupt suddenly, inexplicably. It emerges gradually, spanning four years; it emerges from collaborative orientations of two artists’ practices and thinking, directed at interrogating the terrain of the modern while traversing it, and then exiting it by prospecting criteria, methods for making a different kind of art. As remarked earlier, the contemporary and intimations of the contemporary are complicatedly entwined with the modern. One is, historically, unthinkable without the other, at least in the 1970s.22

Towards A Mystical Reality was initiated five years after outbreaks of racial violence in Malaysia, in May 1969. Collectively and colloquially referred to as ‘May 13’, it ended an alignment of power set along separate ethnic identities designated chiefly as Malay, Chinese, Indian, stitched into forming an accommodating coalition. In the reconstructed post-May 13 Malaysia, such an alignment persisted although separateness is heightened. Access to power, resources and nationhood are zealously guarded and contested within separate grids. Being Malay and Muslim are constituted as paramount.

In the midst of these manoeuvres a cultural congress was convened in 1971 to determine new directions. This is a complicated issue, largely unexamined. I touch on it as it is germane to the lives of Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa, to their relationships/collegiality and their respective art practices.

In the congress, proposals for a national art were forwarded; such an art was envisaged favourably as springing from Malay/indigenous traditions. Proposals such as these were debated and contested. Towards the end of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s discussion of such traditions and creative practices were transformed by precepts from Islam, precepts spurred by religious/ethnic imperatives spurred by Malay-Muslim Malaysia and the proclamation of an Islamic republic in Iran in 1979, which had global ramifications. In 1982 the Malaysian government introduced an Islamisation program, seeking to inculcate Islamic values in various facets of the life of Malay-Muslim communities. This affected every artist. It affected Sulaiman Esa and Piyadasa profoundly.

The two had participated in the congress of 1971. The latter read a paper on the modern in Malaysian art in which he unambiguously underlined its history as shaped by multicultural, worldly wellsprings and not by any one cultural resource or ideology; a worldview he maintained throughout his life—in his creative practice, his teaching and writing. Sulaiman Esa, on the other hand, immersed himself in the study of Islam, its history, art and culture; he also embarked upon field studies of weaving and woodcarving among rural Malay communities. The two went their separate ways.\(^{23}\)

\(^{23}\) Zainol Sharif hints at the difficult, complicated circumstances in which these two forged their respective creative trajectories after TMR. He remarks that Sulaiman Esa’s ‘Islamic works came in the wake of the global reassertion of Islam. It also seemed like a profound manifestation of his personal struggles as an artist and social being’. By way of a riveting metaphor, Zainol Sharif connects and distinguishes the two:

If Sulaiman has been awakened by the thunder of Islamic revolution, his mystical fellow-traveler through reality, Redza Piyadasa, too has not been deaf to the amplified decibels from the minarets. His mixed-media collages incorporating silk-screened images of photographs [collectively named as *The Malaysian Series*] emerged amidst the government’s Islamisation programme. And if Piyadasa was not deaf to the call from the minarets, he also was not blind to the obvious connections between ethnicity and Islam in the country. His images of recent ancestors of present-day Malaysians are aesthetic reactions echoing the latent and manifest fears of Malaysians, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, of political and social marginalization.

TMR marked the culmination of their artistic collaboration; it also marked the end of their collegiality and relationship.

TMR was initiated and received in such a milieu. It steered a course away from an inward national turn and instead turned to cultivating prospects so that Asia could be encompassed artistically in the present, and to simultaneously claim it mattered in the world. It was possible to do so fearlessly and briefly, in the early 1970s.

**IV**

I have described circumstances in which kinds of art produced in the early 1970s as well as thoughts written on such art are distinguishable as the contemporary. Individuals, instances named are seen as departing, differentiating from the modern, as it is represented in art domains in the region. This is not to indicate the modern is displaced, replaced; it is to direct attention to other values, separate destinations forwarded, claimed as significant; so much so the modern as such is affected by them. I have leaned towards reading texts in which the contemporary is on one hand symptomatically discerned and on the other heard declaratorily.

Two nominations are examined closely: writings by Cheo Chai-Hiang, and texts and works by Sulaiman Esa and Piyadasa. There are others I wished to have discussed, especially Roberto Chabet and Raymundo Albano and their curating of new art within and outside of the Cultural Center of the Philippines in Manila, in the early 1970s.

Cheo Chai-Hiang and Piyadasa/Sulaiman Esa are contemporaneous. However there is no evidence of contact between them, that they were acquainted with one another’s thoughts, actions, productions. Hence, we surmise that initiatives for advancing a sense of the contemporary spring from the make-up of individuals or collectives, and their worldviews; from historical factors particular to specific locations and to living in them, and not from a single, identifiable wellspring or from interconnected resources within the region of Southeast Asia.
Be that as it may, when reading these texts I have maintained sight of one in relation to another, interweaving them, bringing to bear implications arising from what is written in one instance or occasion on another, when the two are not known historically to be related, aligning their readings so that they yield comparability pertaining to the contemporary in art in the early 1970s, in and across locations. These are for me beginnings in seeking to connect sites and temporalities within the region of Southeast Asia, and to subsequently develop methods for examining them.
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