1 Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, "On Alternative Modernities," in *Alternative Modernities* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2001), 1.

2 See John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1998); Apinan Poshyananda, et al., *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions*, exh. cat. (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1996); Caroline Turner, *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific* (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005).

3 See Nora A. Taylor, "The Southeast Asian Art Historian as Ethnographer?," *Third Text*: *Contemporaneity and Art in Southeast Asia* 25, no. 4 (2011): 475–88. The journal dedicated a special issue which sought to unlock this emerging field.

4 Anthony Reid, *History of South East Asia: Critical Crossroads* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015).

5 Jennifer Lindsay, ed., *Between Tongues: Translation and/of/in Performance in Asia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2006).

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Drafting History: Meditation on Location, Institutions and Myth-Making in Visual Arts in Postcolonial Singapore

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There is a new confidence to draft history into the writing of art discourse in postcolonial Singapore—a youthful city-state, with deep financial pockets in a sea of tumultuous but ancient cultures and economies. Culture drafts (sketches) and drafts (enlists). Perhaps drafting for a new generation of confident museum goers crisscrossing the axis of finance and culture in a prosperous city; or perhaps it is a newfound opportunity for the creative economy to generate discourse and enrich cultural value. As newly minted museums and gallery systems emerge—as signifiers of both culture and commerce—one is left breathless at the rapid speed of development in the visual arts sector.

At any given point in time, contemporary art-making in Singapore resonates with the development of the city state: imagined and engineered in simulacra of identities borrowed and emulated from established economies of 20th-century Western society. It is no denying that history of art in Singapore and Southeast Asia (SEAsia) is a product of modernity "awakened by contact; transported through commerce; administered by empires, bearing colonial inscriptions; propelled by nationalism; and now increasingly steered by global media, migration, and capital."[1] It is a key consideration when seeking to tease out the place of art in a fast globalising SEAsia. The narrative structures of art are inscribed both by heritage and received knowledge of colonialism, and continue to imbibe an identitarian politics located in both continental philosophy and modernity.[2]

Contemporary art in Singapore can be ascribed to a strange meeting of foreignness on a deserted island seeking to present worldviews that are located within highly developed and classified Western historical and aesthetical systems. A foreignness determined by the en-

thusiasm of colonisers to increase their wealth by imbuing a wasteland into a trading powerhouse in SEAsia, which brought about an internationalism that remains critical to the success of Singapore. The range of platforms, from museums to heritage centres; from biennales to museum-curated exhibitions; from commercial galleries to art fairs; from academic centres to not-for-profit sites; and from artist collectives to art consultancies, enforce a critical perspective of internationalism in contemporary Singapore. A panoptical scan of Singapore's finely regulated ecology of cultural systems reveals a visual assault of imageries espousing the critical place of art in the making of a global city: It affords an opportunity to look deeply at the production and circulation of meanings and the making of culture. But the magic of cultural transformation works wondrously fast in Singapore while its neighbouring countries continue to struggle to preserve cultural identities. This essay is a meditation on location, institutions and myth-making, at how they intersect and draft history into becoming a conspirator in discourse-making.

Location

In recent times, the rush to historicise is eminent. This is front-ended by the changing geopolitical scenario in SEAsia as fast developing countries in the region, with rich and deep cultural histories, carve out their territories in art. I opine that much of 20th-century engagement with SEAsia and its art had an ethnographic/anthropological sense of discovery and contextualisation rather than an inimitable point of view about the world and its very own socius.[3] Furthermore, the art market that constantly seeks to add to its Asian portfolio of offerings, as evidenced by auction house sales and the proliferation of art galleries from Singapore to Hong Kong representing SEAsian art, continues to reinforce this ethnographic/anthropological perspective.

The 21st century sees a new beginning as these countries proposition a confidence that directs their perspective on art. SEAsia, with an approximate population of 625 million people, a huge economic base and an extremely large youth population across its ten countries, remains a sleepy enterprise trapped within geo-graphies and neocolonialist cultural formulations when contrasted against the energetic developments in East Asia (China, Japan and South Korea). It is awakening. It is now a fecund region of fast-emerging economies that have deep and ancient histories, as well as a long developed arts and culture scene that is alive and vibrant. SEAsia is seeing a renaissance in economic and cultural growth propelled by industrialisation, globalisation and a rising middle income.[4] But the development of its arts and culture continues to be plagued well into the 21st century, with debates on preservation and promotion of traditional arts against the growth and promotion of contemporary arts that are demonstratively aligned with economic progress and an emerging affluent and mobile society.[5] The twin agents of change, globalisation and internationalisation, have created opportunities that sustain and preserve the production and circulation of traditional arts and crafts. I define globalisation as a manner in which, through colonialism, foreign policy, commerce and popular culture, a veneer of sameness emerges as nations become centrally controlled by market economies. Aspiring nations emulate and indulge in establishing global cities full of cultural vibrancy (e.g. art markets, biennales, etc.). Internationalism, on the other hand, allows nations to articulate their point of view. In doing so, they enable others to understand, learn and engage with culturally specific endeavours. There are numerous examples of this, and both globalisation and internationalisation have been used as tools of cultural policies in rising economies in Asia. Whilst internationalisation has been useful (for example, here I am reminded of the way Indonesian

gamelan music found its way into the musical compositions of many globally), globalisation, on the other hand, has reduced Asian arts to brands, embellishments and consumables (e.g. Shaolin monks and their world performance tour; Ai Weiwei and his brand of political activitism) where they play to highlight the flow of cultures within cities and societies.

The opening of the National Gallery Singapore in 2015 marked a major infrastructural investment in the visual arts. It seems to arrive audaciously late at a waning global city party, as cultural developments were evident as early as the beginning of the millennium.[6] Yet it started with a provocation. Its 2015 opening exhibition on Singapore art is titled *Siapa Nama Kamu*? ("What is your name?" in Bahasa Melayu). It is a question found embedded within the 1959 social-realist painting by Chua Mia Tee, *National Language Class*. While the work foregrounds questions of identity in a new country through the notion of learning the language of place, it takes on mythic propositions in 21st-century Singapore where issues of identity and future-proofing are critical for the longevity of this multicultural, multireligious and multi-ethnic country and its purposiveness to SEAsia. The guide accompanying the exhibition states that "the most arresting fact about Singapore is her location: set in a vast archipelago of island neighbours, she raises questions of scale and proportion whenever she is contemplated. Seeming almost submerged in the immensity of their surroundings, Singapore's sea-locked inhabitants are constantly compelled to look outwards."[7] The exhibition, through its display of works, prompts the visitor to contextualise history through the lens of art.

Location for Singapore goes beyond a mere structural relationship to geography: It is manifestly embedded in history-making and imagining a nation. For a city-state of approximately five million compared to SEAsia's scale, history's structured geography is crucial. I draw on Arjun Appadurai's seminal essay, "How Histories Make Geographies: Circulation and Context in Global Perspective," in which he asserts: "we need to recognise that histories produce geographies and not vice versa. We must get away from the notion that there is some kind of spatial landscape against which time writes its story. Instead, it is historical agents, institutions, actors, power that make the geography."[8]

The shaping of Singapore through political, economic and industrial instruments of governmentality is well-documented. Singapore is birthed by geopolitical history and this is imagined through the city-state's role in trade and its lack of resources for self-sustainability. As such, the arts play a critical function in the shaping of culture: image-making through artefacts and visual narratives; events and systems of community engagement; and buildings as lifestyle destinations. These anchor and integrate themselves within the ecology and, at appropriate times, signpost and perform the nation and culture, respectively. They foster a "circulation of forms" and "narrate the nation" to the external world which crystallise what a vibrant financial and business city can do by linking art, business and enterprise.[9] It is systematically done through a bureaucracy of beauty and aesthetics, to borrow from Dutta, whereby instrumentalisation of making and exhibiting predetermines the face of cultural identity.[10]

The Singaporean environment is deeply complex. While the nation is defined through multicultural, multireligious and multi-ethnic dimensions, art and its practice are largely defined by contemporary aesthetics and investor–collector interest. In actual fact, much of it is considered in reference to aesthetics that are imbibed through Western, though not exclusively, discursive frameworks. Art historian John Clark provides plausible rationale for the reliance on Western discursive frameworks. He says, "[i]n Southeast Asia, realistic European oil painting was not connected with the strong

6 Late in that Singapore arts infrastructural development to support the city-state's global city aspirations commenced in 1998 propelled by cultural policies such as the Report of the Advisory Council of Culture and the Arts (1998) and the Renaissance City Plans in three parts (RCP I, 2000; RCP II, 2005, RCP III, 2008). During this period, massive infrastructural development, of the Esplanade–Theatres on the Bay, Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore Art Museum, National Museum of Singapore and the Singapore Tyler Print Institute framed the way national visual identities were to be experienced.

7 Sara Siew, ed., *Siapa Nama Kamu? Art in Singapore since the 19th Century: Selections from the Exhibition* (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2015), 6.

8 Arjun Appadurai, "How Histories Make Geographies: Circulation and Context in Global Perspective," *Transcultural Studies* 1 (2010): 4–13.

9 Ibid, 4; Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London & New York: Routledge, 1990).

10 Arindam Dutta, *The Bureaucracy of Beauty: Design in the Age of its Global Reproducibility* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

11 John Clark as quoted in David Chou-Shulin, "Introduction to the Aesthetics of Southeast Asia," in *Asian Aesthetics*, ed. Ken-ichi Sasaki (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011), 248.

12 Ibid., 253.

13 Elizabeth Mansfield, ed., *Art History and its Institutions: Foundations of a Discipline* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

pictorial discourse of China and Japan, each of which had developed parallel art theoretical or poetic criticism."[11] But any attempt at articulating a collective aesthetic for SEAsia—premised on geography, language and history—is challenging and, to say the least, a futile exercise. The influence of more than three centuries of colonial presence could make allowance for those who "surmise that Southeast Asian artists are, in a sense, more thoroughly (classically) Westernised."[12] From the Philippines to Singapore, one would find that the strong language of Western realism is pervasive. But with the regions' transition to postcolonialism, which ushered in a period of political upheaval and industrialisation, this language of realism underwent a phantasmatic transformation to become an Asian stylistic form. This provides an entry point to understand public institutions deliberating over contemporary art practices. However, one could argue that contemporary art practices resonate better with the aspirations of a future-looking nation than ideals of tradition and preservation. Yet, as the Singaporean population ages, the ideals of tradition and preservation seep into critical discourse as museums become emblems of the past. While a young nation such as Singapore and youthful SEAsia continue to historicise from without, there is urgency to historicise, to contextualise and to summarise from within so as to articulate a cultural legacy, especially for an aging population; at the same time concepts of national identity need to be crystallised for a youth population that is much more globally connected yet locally distanced.

Art historians in Singapore have resisted the act of historicising art in Singapore. This is because the drafting of history requires the historian to take a self-professed positioning outside of the regime of the system—art, people and exhibitions.[13] In a rapidly developing art environment in Singapore, the art historian is also located within the regime of the system, advising, co-curating and participating in institutional projects, dabbling in aesthetics and advising and guiding artistic practice; the art historian constantly arrives at a fork in the road: museum or academia, disciplinary practice or professional practice, and research or curation. It is particularly useful to see art historians negotiate the dichotomy of at once being within

14 Venka Purushothaman, "Cultural Policy, Creative Economy and Arts Higher Education in Renaissance Singapore," in *Higher Education and Creative Economy*, eds. Roberta Comunian & Abigail Gilmore (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 201–19.

15 Great exhibitions refer to blockbusters that showcase the world and are popular with visitors. Major museums, such as the Tate (United Kingdom) and National Gallery of Victoria (Australia), often stage defining exhibitions to enhance visitor engagement. Such exhibitions could take the format of presentation of masterpieces (e.g. National Gallery Singapore's presentation of works from the Centre Pompidou, 2015) to surveys of individual artists such as Andy Warhol and Ai Weiwei.

and without, and how it compromises or enhances their particular fields of study. The slippages between their coterminous roles provide for a rich interplay between history-making and contemporary curation. The manner of influence and manifestation of their oversight predetermine the outcome of a curatorial concept before historicisation sets in.

This does not mean that art history or a sustained engagement with it is not evident. Its discourses are circulated in artist monographs, exhibition catalogues, cultural policies, government documents and cultural studies, revealing often, though not always, a largely hagiographical approach to art. Commercial galleries, auction houses, collectors and artists enlist art writers and art historians to contextualise their practices (perhaps to win a spot in the line-up of history?) as art trade fairs organise deeply thought-provoking seminars with brand-name academics from the Western art world to educate the Asian consumer. A fascinating mélange of activities cajole the marketplace of the importance of art and investment.

Institutions

Art's legacy is often left at the door of the museum. Here it is collected, polished, organised and catalogued into a large canon. The museum structure is relentlessly harsh and antithetical to the artist's studio where creativity flourishes in a sacred, yet private, space. The solid walls of a museum (unlike the walls of art galleries which invite a transactional perspective) define, categorise and guide the public through revelations of the artists' minds stripped bare of their deep dark secrets. As a site of the curator's acquisitional pride, a museum is where art becomes object; history becomes canon; and artists are anointed. Access reigns as technology-infused platforms, educational programmes and restaurants drive connectivity and fuel enthusiasm, thereby increasing visitorship—the viewer is transformed into a participant of the institution and destination. Here, there is no place for the politics of aesthetic ideology; it is a place of agreeability, of compromise, of spectacle: a *wunderkammer*.

Singapore's rich collection of public museums supported by a subsidiary commercial and not-for-profit gallery system is a recent evolution. This ecology emerged as part of the grand plan for a cultural and creative centre in the 1990s to make Singapore a vibrant global city for the arts.[14] Public museums, notably the National Museum of Singapore, Singapore Art Museum, Asian Civilisations Museum, National Gallery Singapore are key cultural destinations and must-sees in the cultural and excursion/tourism sectors. As Singapore museums and galleries signpost a 50-year-old nation, they speak of a nation, a society, articulating a sense of location, thereby contextualising its relationship to and within SEAsia.

Whilst located in SEAsia, Singapore does

not boast SEAsian art; it is an imagining of colonialism, a mere trading port of Chinese and Indian migrant communities. The National Gallery Singapore revisits this. It is a centripetal force drawing SEAsia into its legal chambers-turned-galleries. It occupies Singapore's former Supreme Court and City Hall buildings and as these are heritage buildings, the National Gallery is required to maintain a number of its chambers while other spaces, including the prisoners holding areas, remain intact. The gallery exhibits its own permanent collection and co-presents SEAsian art. In presenting the regional, the arbitration of art in a former Supreme Court elevates it to a meta order of myth-making. The gallery's commanding presence, both in terms of architecture and collection, allows it to fetishise art from SEAsia and to steer scholars, art historians, curators and art writers toward discourse-making. Balancing being a *kunsthalle* and a *wunderkammer*, public museums such as the National Gallery, in recent times, pack themselves with PhD-clad curators and invest in discourse-making through colloquia and publication; it begs the question as to the type of historicising that will emerge in an arts ecology that is bureacratised, museified, financialised and academicised.

Salleh Japar's 1993 installation *Mechanised Learning* is a critique of knowledge and information accumulation in an industrialising Singapore that privileges acquisition over reflection, transaction over mediation and the general over the particular. An installation of books vice-clamped and mechanically propelled to squeeze into the head of an individual, the work comments on the over-emphasis of rote learning in Singapore at the price of developing the human mind. The work remains a sharp and timeless reminder of the reality on the ground, of cramming to acquire knowledge. The 21st-century museum is in a similar conundrum as the head that is mechanically cramming into a process of study. But historically, institutions, such as public museums, have functioned as the mediatory site between art and the public, and are the centralising force in the cultural and creative ecology. They acquire, curate, exhibit, educate as well as promote art and certain lifestyles, to create mythic and utopic experiences rooted in the ideals of the nation. Their condition is, deterministically, to play the role of canon-maker and be the manifestation of state/national power. It cannot be either/or hence remaining a site to historicise art. The *national* gets performed as art wears the building. Over time it will wear down the buildings as the patina of familiarity envelopes the national. Over time the engagement with that which is within will be critical: the entry of the great exhibition will be imminent.[15]

Myth-Making

Ho Tzu Nyen's *Utama—Every Name in History is I* (2003–2015), a series of video and portrait paintings (later transcreated in 2005 into four episodes of "docu-visuals" for television), appropriates the 14th-century mythic founder of ancient Singapura, Sang Nila Utama. Ho's work is the first discursive platform to present a revised imagining of the founding of Singapore, conceptually locating it in SEAsia. In deconstructing the collective proposition of history and the historiography that has accompanied Singapore thus far, Ho judiciously brings myth and history together. The work boldly goes where political historians do not: that modern Singapore is a myth created to be located into SEAsia. It is structured on quantifiables and binaries, and its lack—of resources, of primal identities—is its presence, existence and strength.

SEAsia itself, with its disparate, multilingual cultures, beliefs and value systems, does not lend itself well to quantification and binaries. It is still understood through the gaze of foreign policy and commerce even today, though the transgressive nature of these is less effective than that of colonialism. For example, in SEAsia, one would find that the connection between land

as "the known" and as "the unknown" is often negotiated through the body as means to transgress and transcend the grounded realities of the spiritual, imaginary and virtual world.[16] This negotiation is done through the trope of myth, which allows Asians their ontology of place, geography and self to navigate contradictions inherent in society.

I am interested in visiting myth-making, which when contextualised in SEAsia has links to the spheres of ritual, spiritual, darkness, magic, illusion and play. In art, it manifestly stands out in social realist art that serves to ethnographically document the everyday. Social realism's closest ally, I would deem, would be magic realism: a device of creating a transcendental quality to fictional imagining, conjuring the funny and fearful, melodramatic and real, and the productive and counterproductive revealing that which is there yet unknown, unspoken. It is at once a play (*lila*), an illusory moment (*maya*) and a discovery giving voice to that which is not represented. I have argued in my earlier writings that magic realism, which was popularised by postcolonial novelists such as Salman Rushdie, has been a useful device for re-claiming cultural representation from colonial representation worldwide.[17] Its potency is in its ability to unravel the weaves of social, political and cultural structures and knowledge that are often taken for granted and assumed as appropriate. Postcolonial theorist Stephen Slemon writes that "in the language of narration in a magic realist text, a battle between two oppositional systems takes place, each working toward the creation of a fictional world from the other" and the "real social relations of post-colonial cultures appear, through the mediation of the text's language of narration, in the post-colonial magic realist work."[18] But more importantly the play with binary logic and the triptych logic of physical–metaphysical–self is constantly at hand but never quite the same. Thereby magic realist texts "tend to display a preoccupation with images of borders and centres, and to work towards destabilizing their fixity."[19] Magic realism in art conjures paradoxes that allow for the conception of alternative planes of existence. It propels a discursive otherness through illusion, facilitating the emergence of hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies and plural exchanges in a transnational space where power structures are deterritorialised. To contextualise these as being of SEAsia is an opportunity for the museum sector to build upon.

Perhaps it is irrelevant to prove if Singapore is of SEAsia and how institutions frame this through art. Rather, it is the construction of the mythic possibility, that is to prove the centrality of Singapore for art in SEAsia, by exhibiting, acquiring and historicising, that such an enterprise can even be taken seriously.

Conclusion

This essay is concerned about the rapidity of history-making. I am informed by Nietzsche's epic lament on history in *Untimely Meditation* (1873) that humans do not define history but are defined by it. Charging particularly at Europe for its "excessive concern for the past" in the 19th century, he foregrounds that modernity's excess had led to the construct of history being defined by symbols of power, namely individuals, and less so by lived lives or philosophical renderings.[20] Museums can be entrapped for monumentalising artists, celebrating the historic successes of the past and/or simply moving away from it. But public museums should be based on a site of inspiration, not merely a site of remembrance. This would be being true to the etymology of the word "museum" which is of muses and a place of inspiration. Hence, a balance between the historicising of art and a forgetting of the institution is necessary to move forward.

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16 Barbara Watson Andaya, *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2006); Fred B. Eisenman, Jr, *Bali: Sekala and Niskala* (Hong Kong: Tuttle Press, 1990).

17 Venka Purushothaman, ed., *The Art of Sukumar Bose: Reflections of South and Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013).

18 Stephen Slemon, "Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse," *Canadian Literature 116* Spring (1988): 9–24.

19 Ibid, 11.

20 Mark Sinclair, "Nietzsche and the Problem of History," *Richmond Journal of Philosophy* 8, Winter (2004): 1–6.