

## Art Criticism versus Art Writing: The Malaysian Situation

SARENA ABDULLAH

Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia  
sarena.abdullah@usm.my

**Abstract.** This paper discusses the state of art criticism and art writing in Malaysia. Although Malaysian artists have moved into contemporary art practices, the exhibition strategies adopted by private galleries, including the national gallery have not changed significantly for the last fifty years. Curatorial practices have been regarded as unimportant, resulting in repetitive and limited ways of presenting art works. Consequently, art exhibitions tend to be a cluster of work assembled in gallery premises, and usually connected by very loose themes. Often art essays are published in conjunction with the exhibitions. Since research papers on contemporary art are limited, the essays or writings published in the exhibition catalogues become an important source of reference on Malaysian art, and they have been referred to as "art writings". Besides the lack of proper "art writing", there is also a problem with "art criticism" in the country. The lack of professional art critics and the multiple roles played by writers, artists, art historians and arts manager are among the main reasons for the present art criticism and art writing scenario in the country.

**Keywords and phrases:** Art writings, art criticism, Malaysian art galleries and spaces, Malaysian fine arts, Malaysian art

### Introduction

Since the 1990s, the changes in Malaysia's cultural domain have been very significant. In the recent years, the Malaysian art scene has become an ongoing and thriving art initiative that is constantly changing. Additionally, the advent of globalisation and cyber technologies, particularly the Internet, has influenced and directed the energies in the arts and the artists into very different directions. Since 2006, the price of the works of some Malaysian artists, such as those by Ahmad Zakii Anwar, has soared as the general international demand for Asian works has trickled down to a few Malaysian artists. Some of them have gained international recognition, and a few have even won commission from Japanese and European museums. Some have also been invited to participate in prestigious biennales around the world. The Matahati collective, for example, had its first major US show in Los Angeles entitled *Malaysian Contemporary Art to the World*.

While there are many positive developments in Malaysian arts, the state of Malaysian arts, especially modern art, is quite different from Euro-America, where the art world comprises of people who are involved in the production, commission, preservation, promotion, criticism, and sale of arts. It consists of a formally structured network of artists, critics, dealers, galleries, museums, collectors and educators who engage with the realm of art at various levels. In Malaysia, however, the roles of these parties are quite limited. For example, the functions of the national art institutions in Malaysia are still being discussed under the pretext of "art gallery" and not "art museum", to insinuate its contemporary collection even though the National Art Gallery (NAG), currently known as the National Visual Arts Gallery (NVAG)<sup>1</sup>, has started to acquire its collection right after Malaysia's Independence.<sup>2</sup> This situation reflects how Malaysian modern and contemporary artworks to date have not been taken seriously in the larger context of Malaysia's cultural and social milieu, as these artworks are not acknowledged as significant artefacts that should be housed in a proper art museum.<sup>3</sup> There are not enough patrons, collectors and buyers of modern art in Malaysia and the secondary market for artworks is almost non-existent. Most importantly, there is inadequate public awareness among Malaysians on the appreciation of modern art in particular, as the education system in general neither supports nor encourages the arts and cultural fields. In terms of writings and documentation, only limited forms of writing have persisted. This is referred to as "art writing", which will be discussed in this paper.

Despite the positive developments in Malaysian artistic production, serious scholarly research and analyses within the field of Malaysian art history and criticism have not developed as progressively and have not been regarded as important as the development of Malaysian art itself. The lack of such text in terms of quantity and quality is indeed a source of grievance and discontent among those involved in the Malaysian art scene (Sarena 2010). This is unlike in Euro-America, where writings on art called "art criticism" and "art writings" proliferate in tandem with the works of art, written and published under different contexts and for different needs. This paper emerges from the challenges outlined above in order to create an opening towards the necessary emendation within this particular sector of Malaysian art. My analyses are divided into three main sections – the first section discusses art galleries and spaces in Malaysia, the second section focuses on art writings produced in Malaysia, and the third section discusses art writings and art criticism in Malaysia.

It must be noted here that the discussion on art writings in this paper does not include peer-reviewed essays that are related to academic art history such as those published in local academic journals. There are several of these that are engaged in arts, culture and design discourses such as the *INTI: Jernal Perintis*

*Pendidikan Senilukis dan Senireka, Forum Imajan: International Journal of Art and Design* and *Wacana Seni: Journal of Arts Discourse*. However, the influence of the papers published in these journals on the local art discourse could not be determined as they are usually practice-based inclined and are not engaged in critical discourse. Also, due to their limited circulation and the specificity of the topics discussed, the papers are largely inaccessible to the general public. Academic books on modern and contemporary arts are also limited and therefore will not be discussed in this paper.

### **Art Galleries and Spaces in Malaysia: The Current Scenario**

Basically, there are a few types of art operations in Malaysia – institutional, corporate, commercial galleries and arts management, alternative or independent art spaces and collectives, and other minor galleries such as art shops as well as shops which sell related items and also provide other services. In terms of the production of art writings, only art institutions, corporate and commercial galleries and alternatives as well as independent spaces are active in publishing art writings. The National Visual Arts Gallery (NVAG) and the Petronas Gallery, both located in Kuala Lumpur, are the two main institutions which promote modern and contemporary arts. The former is funded by the Malaysian government. The latter, meanwhile, was established by Petronas, the national petroleum company, and is categorised as a corporate gallery. The NVAG is the main national institution which has been collecting art works produced by Malaysian artists for the past 50 years. Although the gallery has existed for slightly more than half a century, the need for a significant national funding to collect, conserve and preserve art works is more often than not being sidelined. It was not until 1998, with the move of the NVAG to its current location<sup>4</sup> that appropriate technical facilities such as conservation and proper storage have been made possible. And in the last ten years the gallery has had more experts working on its collection, either in terms of research and curatorial services or conservation and preservation. These efforts are applaudable despite the fact that they are still minimal compared to those carried out in art museums in Euro-America.

Another institutional gallery is the Penang Art Gallery and Museum which has been acquiring significant artworks produced in the late 19th century as well as a number of recent works, mostly those by Penang artists. Other galleries include the Sabah Art Gallery and the Malacca Art Gallery. All these are state institutions and their effort to collect and exhibit is fairly limited due to their reliance on government funding which is often quite constrained. There are also university galleries and museums in Malaysia such as Muzium dan Galeri Tunku Fauziah

(MGTF) in Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang and the Museum of Asian Art (*Muzium Seni Asia*) in the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur.

The main corporate gallery is the Petronas Gallery. Located at the base of the PETRONAS Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur, it is fully owned and funded by Petroliam Nasional Berhad (PETRONAS). The gallery was established in 1993 at the Dayabumi Complex, before being moved to its current location to promote the development and preservation of art in Malaysia. Other corporate galleries or museums which collect and exhibit artworks are the Islamic Arts Museum which concentrates on artefacts and arts related to the Islamic world, and Bank Negara Malaysia's Money Museum and Art Centre. Despite the existence of these museums and art collections set up by institutions or corporations, in terms of fine arts collections, only the National Visual Arts Gallery and Petronas Gallery consistently collect, exhibit, promote and support modern and contemporary art in Malaysia. These two institutions have played a major role in supporting and promoting modern art development in Malaysia through various programmes, publications, lecture series, public education, etc.

There are other institutions such as commercial or private galleries, which exhibit and support modern and contemporary art. These exhibition spaces are usually converted or renovated shop lots, office spaces, houses or private bungalows. The establishment and sustainability of these commercial or private galleries are very much dictated and influenced by financial contingencies and the sales in the general art market. While these commercial galleries usually promote certain established artists, it must be noted that most Malaysian artists choose not to be represented exclusively by one gallery. Although there is a general awareness among those in the art scene on which gallery represents whom, this representation has not been exclusively stated or contracted between the artist and the gallery. The practice of having formal agreements and contracts is still new among the artists, and since exhibiting opportunities are quite limited, most artists favour the opportunities to participate without the constraint of having any particular gallery representing them.<sup>5</sup> Wei-ling Gallery, Pelita Hati, Shalini Ganendra, NN Galery, RA Fine Arts, Taksu Gallery, Galeri Chandan and Valentine Willie Fine Arts (all located in Kuala Lumpur) are among those galleries known to represent or associate themselves with the works of significant Malaysian artists. These galleries have consistently organised exhibitions and sold the works of these artists to collectors.

Besides institutionalised, corporate or commercial galleries, there are also other art spaces, which organise exhibitions, or other art activities and produce art writings in the forms of catalogues, flyers and even pamphlets. These alternatives or independent art spaces and collectives include *Matahati*, *Gudang*, The Annexe Gallery, *Rumah Frinjan*, *Rumah Yayasan Kesenian Perak* (YKP), Studio in

Cheras, KL (SiCKL), Findars Space, 12 Art Space, *Rumah Air Panas* and the Lost Generation Space. These places offer new alternative venues which enable dialogue with digital media, performance and installation in the context of fine art practices. Most importantly, these spaces are not as market-driven as commercial galleries. Works that are exhibited are more exploratory, unconventional and transdisciplinary in nature, and in some cases, involve community engagement. *Matahati*, for example, is a group of five artists that has become a Malaysian success story. Founded almost twenty years ago, the group now has its own gallery and art space named the House of Matahati (HOM). The group has since managed their own MATAHATI Art Residency programme, SAGE Residency (SAGER), which is a regional exchange residency programme co-organised with TENGGARA Artland from Indonesia and Project Space Pilipinas from the Philippines. The group also established the MATAHATI Art Fund and the MATAHATI Art Award as platforms for financial and professional support for artists. An annual "Artriangle" group exhibition is also organised with the aim of inviting artists from neighbouring countries to showcase their artworks.<sup>6</sup>

The Lost Generation Space<sup>7</sup> is another group, which was established in the early 2004 by a group of artists who aims at encouraging originality, creativity and individuality as well as promoting contemporary art. It provides an alternative space for exhibitions and performances that are innovative and designed for multilayered artistic culture. Since 2006, the Lost Generation Space has been organising its artist residency programme for local and foreign artists. In 2004, 2005 and 2007, the Lost Generation Space organised the *notthatbalai* art festival as their major activity. In a lesser but still significant way, *Rumah Air Panas* is another independent art space supported and run by a group of art enthusiasts who aims to explore and bring together visual arts and other cultural practices through collaborative projects, documentations and hosting discussions for artists to exchange ideas. There are about 15 official members, comprising of painters, performance artists, installation artists, art instructors and writers.

Besides the activities promoted by the galleries and spaces mentioned above, artistic endeavours are also supported by residency programmes organised for Malaysian and international artists. Among such programmes are the *Rimbun Dahan* Artist Residency and the ABN AMRO-Malihom AiR Programme. The *Rimbun Dahan* Artist Residency was established in 1994 and is the longest serving programme. It was initiated to encourage links between the artistic communities in Australia and Malaysia, as well as within Southeast Asia at large, providing the studio environment and other related facilities to encourage visual artists, writers and other creative individuals to explore and develop their artistic work in situ. On a similar scale, the ABN AMRO-Malihom AiR Programme too was established to provide a conducive environment for art-making, allowing

artists to pursue personal creative work with the hope that they can get new inspiration, perception and understanding by immersing in the culture and the natural environment around them. These programmes are organised by the private sectors instead of national art institutions.

The art galleries and spaces discussed above can be considered the main players in the development of the Malaysian art world, providing the necessary mechanisms to launch local artists into national and international spheres.

Besides these significant exhibition spaces, there are also art shops all over Malaysia. It must be noted that these art shops function differently from the "art galleries", although some of these shops incorporate the term "gallery" in their names. These shops sell artworks, most of which are produced for decorative purposes to adorn interior spaces. The artworks featured in these shops normally focus on "safe" subjects such as abstractions, flowers, still life landscape, figures, Chinese landscape, etc. The walls of these shops are usually filled with artworks, some of which are even stacked together. These shops do not organise exhibitions, produce catalogues or promote artists. Some of these "galleries" provide other services such as framing services, art classes, sales of art materials, souvenirs, cafes, as well as bed and breakfast (B&B) for travellers.

### **Art Writings in Malaysia**

As mentioned earlier, despite positive developments in the Malaysian art scene, research and writings on Malaysian modern art are still very limited. Eddin Khoo lamented about this poor state of literature thus:

If a broad review of critical and historical Malaysian writings were conducted, the inevitable discovery would be a gathering of shards, fragments of writings confined principally to catalogues, articles and reviews and expressed in a vocabulary largely anecdotal and rooted in collection. And even within these, there is really little attempt at locating the making, production and staging of Malaysian art works in a critical and historical perspective. (Khoo 2003, 11)

The "gathering of shards, fragments of writings confined principally to catalogues, articles and reviews" described by Eddin Khoo above is what we term as "art writings". It must be noted that these art writings are the kind of literature written about art in Malaysia that have been documented and produced consistently. These art writings can be categorised into several types – first, writings published in art catalogues; second, writings published in art magazines;

third, writings published in other types of magazines and newspapers and finally, writings published online.

The first and the main source of art writings are catalogues accompanying exhibitions organised either by institutional galleries, commercial galleries or alternative spaces. Art catalogues are published in conjunction with most exhibitions especially those held at the National Visual Arts Gallery, the Petronas Gallery and significant commercial art galleries such as the Valentine Willie Fine Arts and Weiling Gallery. Among the popular curatorial strategies and the topics essayed in the catalogues are: (1) historical overviews, often featured in major exhibitions such as *Rupa Malaysia: A Decade of Art 1987–1997* (1997) and *Susurmasa: Timelines* (2008), (2) thematic approaches such as *Takung* (2005), *Selamat Datang ke Malaysia* (2007), *Menerusi Mata Kami – Through Our Eye* (1999) and *Aku: 99 Potret Diri* (1999), and (3) exhibitions based on materials and techniques such as *Revival: Evoking the Batik Tradition* (1999), *Malaysian Drawings* (1997), *Malaysian Photography: History and Beyond* (2004). Other curatorial exhibitions, which are essentially on-going programmes at various galleries, are solo shows and group shows. Group exhibitions are curated for various art collectives, with each programme framing a specific group of artists such as young artists, female artists and random artists. At times, exhibitions are also curated based on the states that the artists come from.

The art writings produced for exhibition catalogues are usually very general, laid-back and uncritical. They basically employ formalistic or descriptive analysis because their main objective is to appraise the artworks selected for the exhibition. This form of art writing aims at the general readership and its main purpose is to introduce the works in the exhibit to the public in a very educational and simplistic manner. Most of these writings are commissioned and the writers are selected by the curators of the exhibitions.<sup>8</sup> Bigger curatorial exhibitions and projects will allow more contributions from various authors. In such cases the publication often contains one key essay by the curator and two or three essays contributed by guest writers. The content of the essays depends on the curatorial approach or theme.<sup>9</sup> In an exhibition entitled *Bicara Sifu*, organised by the Petronas Gallery in which a number of writers were involved in terms of essay contribution, the writing tasks as well as the topic of the essays were assigned by the curator. The essay topics, however, were negotiable as long as they were related to the theme of the exhibition. Essays are usually edited and proofread by the editor but the editor does not act as a reviewer. It must be noted that not all exhibition catalogues will publish the attached essays. The publication of the catalogues and the essays commissioned depends on the availability of fund<sup>10</sup> from the organiser or the art gallery itself.

Besides catalogue essays, exhibition flyers and pamphlets are also very common and are cheaper alternatives. It should be observed, however, that most of the catalogues/pamphlets/flyers are produced bilingually (Malay and English) to accommodate the readers of both languages. There are, therefore, translation costs that have to be borne by the organisers or the galleries.

The second type of art writing comes from articles that are written for art magazines – either commercial or non-commercial ones. Commercial magazines are those, which are published and sold for money, regardless of the question of the success of these magazines in terms of self-generating income.<sup>11</sup> A current art magazine that is still in operation is *ArtMalaysia*, first published in July/August 2009. Published by Dunia Seni Lukis Sdn. Bhd., it has sections such as *Insight* which highlights artists and their work, *Sniff* which discusses the selected issues, themes, and investigation, and *Intouch* which focuses on art reviews. *Art Corridor* is a quarterly art magazine that is now defunct, after its 12th edition in 2003. Its contents include *Cover Story*, *Features* which consists of five to six articles on art, *Focus*, *Senior* which focuses on senior artists, *Artists Profile*, *Learning Curve*, *Views and Muse* and others. The editor was Ming Chua while the writers include Elyantie Mohamed and Vinita Mahadeva, and some of the contributors include artists such as Sulaiman Esa, Tan Chee Kuan and Khatijah Sanusi.

Non-commercial art magazines in Malaysia include *tANPA tAJUK* and *SentAp!*. *tANPA tAJUK* published only two issues while *SentAp!* is still in print although the frequency mostly relies on funding obtained by the publisher. To date, it has published eleven issues. This art magazine/journal is published by Teratak Nuromar and has been in circulation since July/August 2005. The content and readership are more specific, targeting those involved in the "multi-faceted and diverse entities of visual art" and hoping to bridge the "gaps between artists, both local and abroad" (Nur Hanim Mohamed Khairuddin 2005, 4).

*Senikini* is a free art broadsheet published by the NVAG since 2009. The gallery pays RM250 for an 800-word essay aimed at a general audience. The writers are either those working with NVAG or external writers. The general aim of this publication is to promote art happenings around Malaysia although the content usually focuses on Kuala Lumpur. The writings are mostly reports on events organised by the NVAG, reviews of exhibitions by NVAG, essays on specific art exhibitions and exhibition highlights. Some articles are devoted to the demise of key historical figures in Malaysian art such as Peter Harris and Mansor Ghazali.

Additionally, art writings in Malaysia also include articles in newspapers and magazines catered for the general readership. Newspaper sections often feature specific articles, reports or events. The contents of these sections vary from



lengthy *Lifestyle, People* and *Events* to brief reporting of art happenings especially those officiated by representatives of the Ministry. These writings are usually published in both Malay and English newspaper pullouts such as the *Utusan Malaysia's Sastera dan Budaya*, (featuring writers such as Siti Rohayah Attan and Azman Ismail), the *Sunday Star's The Arts*, the *News Straits Times' Events* and *Arts* (featuring writers such as Ooi Kok Chuen), the *Harian Metro's Fokus* and the *Malay Mail's Around Town* by Gerald Chuah. Well-known newspaper sections are *Photography* in the *News Straits Times' Events* and *Arts* by Eric Peris (from 1986–1998) and *Arts and Antiques* in *Business Times* by Redza Piyadasa, which discuss both local scenes and international issues related to art. These columns are more in-depth, informative and educational in nature. On certain occasions, they have other international writers discussing about art in London, Amsterdam, New York and other major cities in the world. Such writings usually give a general review of art exhibitions, reports on art events such as art auctions, interviews with artists, news reports on raising issues regarding artists and disabled artists. The subjects of the art sections in the newspapers range from fine arts, ceramics, tribal sculptures, glassware and ornaments, Chinese calligraphy, landscape works, pottery, jewellery-making, precious stones collections, textile design, batik and others.

Art writings also appear in the sections of lifestyle magazines such as *KLue, Off the Edge* and *The Expat*. Décor magazines such as *Impiana* and *Anjung Seri* usually feature artists and their residences, various art galleries and the artworks that they sell and also the artists' profile. Magazines such as *Dewan Budaya* and *Dewan Masyarakat* also have sections such as *Seni Lukis, Budaya Kreatif* and others.

More recently, gallery websites, blogs by artists, art groups or writers, Facebook profiles and online sites such as *kakiseni.com* (now defunct), and *Arteri* (*arterimalaysia.com*, now also defunct) have played significant roles in disseminating information on art events. Some websites have even written their reviews and comments on various art exhibitions around Malaysia. *Arteri* for example, was created in March 2009 by Simon Soon, Sharon Chin and Eva McGovern. The creators of this website have published critical writings, casual observations, and personal reflections on arts. Other features of the site include poems, reviews, photo essays, profiles, interviews and cartoons strips.

### **Art Writing versus Art Criticism**

As indicated earlier, despite the aforementioned developments in Malaysian art, art writing has never established itself as a form of art criticism. This phenomenon contrasts starkly with Euro-America where the most consistent,

accessible and widely read literatures on art are "art criticisms". "Art criticism" is a form of writing which analyses and evaluates works of art based on judgment and evaluation. This form of critique has never been produced significantly in Malaysia. Although the various art writings discussed in this essay can be loosely identified as art criticism, my stance in using the term "art writing" instead of "art criticism" to designate these literatures is anchored in the fact that art writings that have been produced in Malaysia lack the critical aspects of judgement and evaluation that are essential to art criticism.

So, what is art criticism and why, despite the progressive unfolding of Malaysian art in the last twenty years or so, does this particular genre of writing not emerge accordingly in the Malaysian art world? Carroll (2009, 13–14) explains that art criticism is the act of criticising art works although it is not limited to giving opinionated agreements on what is a good art exhibition and vice versa. "Criticism", according to Carroll, involves analysing art works, which includes describing, classifying, contextualising, elucidating, interpreting and, most importantly, reasoned evaluation of the artwork or the series of artworks under discussion.

Art writings are subjected to different categories, depending on the type of analyses or critique that the author offers. For example, an art critic "... is a person who engages in the reasoned evaluation of artworks"; they can be academics, journalists or art writers who essay their evaluation with well-supported reasons. Arguably, therefore, writers who write art reviews, also known as consumer reporters, are not "art critics" (Carroll 2009, 8). James Elkins (2003, 16–73), in categorising art criticism in America, also discussed the different types of art criticism. He classified art criticism as follows – catalogue essays, academic treatises, cultural criticisms, conservative harangues, philosophers essays, descriptive art criticisms and poetic art criticisms. With the exception of catalogue essays, none of these types of art writing have emerged substantially in Malaysia.

Unlike in America, the published materials on Malaysian art are limited to essays written for exhibition catalogues, newspaper sections, magazine sections and online publications. These publications largely embody generalized and formal analysis of series of artwork, reporting of arts events, personal interviews and profiles of artists. Despite their varieties, these writings fail to incorporate the essential component of art criticism, namely critical discussions of the artwork based on value judgements and evaluations. These literatures also neglect to offer proper historical, social and political contextualisation of the artworks or exhibitions that are being discussed. Catalogue essays, for instance, simply narrate the artists' self-declared subject matters rather than compare any potentially invidious assessment between one artist and another. As a result,

curatorial activities and curatorial essays consist largely of a "neutral" gathering and discussion of art works according to themes and genres.

There are several reasons why art criticism has not developed in parallel with the development of art in Malaysia. First, as mentioned earlier, the structure of the Malaysian art world is not complete. Art as an important field of knowledge has not been promoted and supported accordingly in the education system that is founded on the National Economic Policy,<sup>12</sup> in which the weight of science and technology presses on every level of Malaysian life, pushing away the artistic and cultural realm from many government policies and popular consciousness. In the Malaysian education policy itself, there is a huge emphasis for students to major in the Sciences rather than the Arts. Art programmes at tertiary levels are quite limited and it was not until the 1990s did we witness the burgeoning of art and design schools, both at public and private levels. However, this development does not address the predicaments of art writing in Malaysia, as the undergraduate programmes at Malaysian art schools are exclusively studio-based.<sup>13</sup> "Writerly" subjects such as *Art History* and *Art Theory* only exist as elective or compulsory courses to supplement the studio programmes. To date, there is no systematically developed field of art historical research in Malaysian art schools, let alone the area of Art History or Art Criticism as a major. Consequently art criticism is often misunderstood as art history and those who enrol in local art schools or in liberal arts programmes are not exposed to researching and writing about art. The effects of this handicap are especially evident in postgraduate theses and dissertations that lack a critical understanding and analysis of art. Most MA and PhD researchers concentrate on documenting primary sources and lack the analytical and theoretical insights to augment the quality of their research and analyses.

Second, criticism is a genre that is almost non-existent in Malaysian art writings; if there is any (perhaps the weekly art column in *Business Times* from 1992 until 1996 by Redza Piyadasa is an exception), it is quite unsustainable, and to date there is hardly any serious art critic with a consistent column in the local newspapers, magazines and etc. To date, there are limited writers/journalists who specialise in art criticisms and reviews. Those who engage in art criticisms and general reviews are individuals who occupy multiple positions of being an artist, art historian, curator, academician, or arts manager. Some notable names in this regard are the late Redza Piyadasa (artist, art historian, curator, writer), Nur Hanim Mohamed Khairuddin (artists, curator, writer), Hasnul Jamal Saidon (artist, curator, museum director, academician, writer), Wong Hoy Cheong (artist, writer) Beverly Yong (arts manager, curator, writer), and Snow Ng (writer, curator, arts manager) and a few others. The only exception is Ooi Kok Chuen, a journalist and arts reviewer who has been consistently writing about Malaysian arts in a major newspaper. Perhaps it is not uncommon in an art scene where

writings and writers on art are scarce, the *non-literati* are compelled to take up the pen – artists turn into writers, private gallery owners into curators and writers on art, artists run private spaces/galleries, gallery owners/curators become art historians, and art writers into artists, etc. Such multiple positions defy the unwritten rule described by Heartney that art critics should not be friends with artists, should not accept their favours, and should not receive payments for catalogue essays from commercial galleries for whom they are writing (2006, 101–107). Unfortunately, with the multiple roles of writers who are also involved directly in the Malaysian art scene, all the unwritten rules that is meant to form the art critic into a detached observer and intellectual cannot be met.

Third, there is also a question of whether the role of an art critic is well understood by the Malaysian artists and public in general. Groys (1997, 80–84) claimed that the figure of the art critic emerged at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century. According to him, the art critic is not regarded as the representative of the art world but strictly as an outside observer whose function is to judge and criticise works of art in the name of the public. Therefore, judgements that are made by any art critic must bear no obligation to the artists. As explained by Morton (2010, 33–34), criticism is "... an endeavour that turns on a set of intimacies: between the writer and the work, the writer and the artist, the writer and the reader, and the writer and him – or herself". In other words, the value of criticism should be both "educative and constructive" and must be free of special biases and fair in its evaluation besides emphasising the value of a particular work or an event in a larger context, which can be done by comparing the artwork with the previous similar work or other works by the same artists. (English 1979, 3)

Chua (2003, 15) points out that "Not only was a passing commentary on a piece of art work impossible, it is perceived as wrong". Since the important aspect of criticism is judgement, opinions on what is good, bad or ugly can be uncalled-for in Malaysian society. In the Malaysian art scene, it is not fully understood that art critics should speak for themselves and must be conceived as private citizens with a singular opinion striving to be heard within the competing voices and opinions – to decide whether something is worth seeing or not.

A point worth noting is that the state of art criticism in Malaysia is different from the lamentation of the Euro-American on the subject. In the Malaysian situation, it is art writing, not art criticism, that persists, and judgement has never been the key objective of art writing. Elkins (2003, 12) argues that the current art criticism in America as fleeing from judgement and has shied away from deeming works of art good or bad. Affected by the postmodern nausea towards grand narratives, contemporary American art criticism is framed by the question of whether judgements can be made. In a different stance, McEvelley (2006, 14) asserts that

judgement can still be made and explains that they "can in fact be a postmodernist and exercise the value judgement as long as they do not delude with the idea of the universals or the absolutes".

In the Malaysian context, however, where the assertion of judgement by an art critic is rare and good academic papers on art is similarly limited, the roles of explaining or contextualising art automatically falls on writers and curators instead. This can be made by any publication opportunity that is available, mostly through art catalogues. Bigger and more established galleries that could exert more influence on the way the artists' works are presented to the public through these writings if they have enough money to produce coloured art catalogues and commission more writers to provide 3000-word essays on various aspects of the exhibiting artist(s). It seems that since the 1990s, when the number of galleries in Kuala Lumpur started to increase, those in the curatorial position, or gallery owners in general, seem to have the upper power in becoming the prime mediator of contemporary art in Malaysia. On top of that, the Internet, too, offers an important platform for publishing writings either in gallery websites, websites dedicated to art, web groups, and social networking websites such as Facebook, and blogs. Nevertheless, to examine these online writings (usually published in blogs) and the usage of the Internet as a platform to disseminate information on the arts deems another study on the subject itself.

## **Conclusion**

The foregoing discussion suggests that the term "art criticism" does not accurately describe the types of writings that have been produced and published for Malaysian art. The term "art writing" is in fact more appropriate to describe the various ways and writerly positions that are used to discuss art in Malaysia. In a country that is lacking in the development of Art History and Criticism as an academic discipline, art writings in art catalogues and various essays or reviews, reporting in local newspapers and magazines, interviews and conversation published online are indeed the resources that document the artistic activities in Malaysia at present. But do these art writings need to be just a mere formalistic analysis or reporting of art events? They certainly do not. Although these writings aim at a general readership, it does not mean that the writings should just be a simple explanation of the formal qualities of an artwork or the biography of the artists. It helps to have knowledge of art history, the fundamentals of art criticism and the knowledge of various theories of art. Instead of producing "art writings" that merely depict artworks, art writings should also engage with the contents and contexts of the artworks. Doing so will help the public better understand the importance of these works. For example, the writings should bring to light the contexts, in terms of the history, local influences, and social and

cultural milieu of each work. The critic must assume a degree of detachment and write in the interest of the public. Critical comments and opinions about the artwork must be based on facts and not personal biases. Although rooted in a different trajectory, art writings in Malaysia form a crucial segment of Malaysian art and need to be improved, for they are the archives that will eventually help us to understand the past, the immediate present and the future of the history, culture and art of Malaysia.

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### **Notes**

1. National Visual Arts Gallery (Balai Seni Visual Malaysia) is the new name for National Arts Gallery Malaysia (Balai Seni Lukis Negara). The renaming happened in 2011 in conjunction with the passing of the National Visual Arts Development Board (NVADB) Bill 2010.
2. The use of the word "visual" portrays contemporariness of the field. The adoption of the word "visual" in the name of the National Art Gallery is in line with the use of the word by the Ministry of Education Ministry in its school subject; it was argued that the word "visual" would better encompass various platforms of art including multimedia, sculpture, photography among others. See "National Art Gallery's New Description Deflects Historical Roots", *The Malay Mail*, 27 September 2011, <http://mmail.com.my/content/83213-national-art-gallery-s-new-description-deflects-historical-roots>.
3. Except for Penang Museum and Art Gallery that housed eight of the ten original oil paintings executed by Captain Robert Smith and other works by numerous paintings William Daniels and a few other artists.
4. The NVAG gallery was housed at Jalan Ampang and Jalan Hishamudin prior to its move in 1998 to its current location in a building at Jalan Temerloh, off Jalan Tun Razak in Kuala Lumpur.
5. Interview with Beverly Yong and Rachel Ng of *Rogue Art*, 19 February 2011.
6. See their official website at <http://matahatikematadunia.com/>.
7. See their website at <http://lostgenerationspace.blogspot.com/>.
8. It must also be noted that not all exhibitions are accompanied by a catalogue, and not all catalogues contain accompanying essays. This depends on the organisers' or art galleries' financial resources. Flyers and pamphlets are very common and are cheaper alternatives to catalogues.

9. Unfortunately, the state of curatorship too is like the state of the art writings in Malaysia, there is no professional expert that has managed to redefine art exhibitions in Malaysia – as a result, many exhibitions tend to be repetitive and quite limited in the way of presenting art works to the public. In the end, art exhibitions tended to be a cluster of works assembled in a gallery premise, usually connected by a very loose theme. A very loose theme oftentimes results in a very loose and not well-supported essay.
10. Most smaller galleries invite other art writers to contribute with a minimal payment ranging from RM200 to RM500 for a 1000 to 1500-word essay for an exhibition. More prominent galleries or institutions on the other hand, pay up to RM1 per word for a 3000 to 3500-word essay.
11. Art magazines publication remains unsustainable due to a very small readership and limited market of such magazines. *Art Corridor* (commercial) and *tANPA tAJUK* (non-commercial) were the few magazines that had to face such conclusion.
12. Economically, the goal of the NEP was to increase Malay economic ownership from around three percent in 1971 to 30 percent over a 20-year period, through massive government effort and interventions in order to bring the *Bumiputeras* into the modern urban economy.
13. Currently, art schools and programmes are offered at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) and other college-universities and colleges at diploma, undergraduate and postgraduate levels. For example, the Faculty of Art and Design (*Fakulti Seni Lukis Dan Seni Reka*, FSSR) at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), previously known as Institut Teknologi MARA (ITM), offers diploma and degree courses in the fields of Graphic Design and Digital Media, Textile Design, Fine Metal Design, Industrial Design, Ceramics, Fashion Design, Photography and Creative Imaging, Fine Arts, Footwear Design and Technology and Printing Technology. It also offers Master's and Doctorate programmes in Art History and Cultural Management. The School of the Arts (*Pusat Pengajian Seni*) at USM offers undergraduate programmes through its Design, Fine Arts, Drama and Theatre and Music departments. It also offers mixed-mode programme and research-based Master programme. The Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts (FACA) at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak has five main disciplines – painting, printing, 3-D sculpture, photography and electronic art. Besides these public institutions, the Malaysian Institute of Arts or MIA, a private art institution, also offers a range of three-year diploma courses in the fields of fine art, music, illustration and design (textile and fashion, graphic, industrial). Other private institutions include Centre for Advance Design (CENFAD) and Lim Kok Wing University of Creative Technology which offers wide-ranging art and design courses from foundation to postgraduate levels.

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