

# sentAp!

A D E C A D E



a malaysian artists' production

# sentAp!

A D E C A D E

## Editor-in-Chief

Nur Hanim Mohamed Khairuddin

## Guest Editor

Syed Omar Husain

## Translation

Teratak Nuromar  
Yap Sau Bin

## Text Contributors

Bharti Lalwani  
Chai Chang Hwang  
Chu Yuan  
Gina Fairley  
Hasnul J Saidon  
Niranjan Rajah  
Roopesh Sitharan  
Safrizal Shahir  
Sarena Abdullah  
Simon Soon

## Image Contributors

Chu Yuan  
Murat Germen  
Niranjan Rajah  
Yap Sau Bin  
Sarena Abdullah

## Production Manager

Roslissham Ismail aka ISE

## Design

Yan Designerspace

## Associate

Parkingproject  
parkingproject@gmail.com

## Printing

Matahari, Kuala Lumpur

## Publication date

December 2015

## Published by

**TERATAK NUROMAR**  
27, Laluan Tasek Timur 12  
Taman Seri Dermawan  
31400 Ipoh, Perak  
Malaysia  
E-mail: terataknuromar@gmail.com

and

## INSTITUT TERJEMAHAN & BUKU MALAYSIA BERHAD

Wisma ITBM, No. 2, Jalan 2/27E  
Seksyen 10, Wangsa Maju  
53300 Kuala Lumpur  
Malaysia  
Tel: 603-4145 1800 Fax: 603-4142 0753  
E-mail: publishing@itbm.com.my  
Website: www.itbm.com.my

**ISBN 978-983-43887-3-7**

Copyright © 2015 Teratak Nuromar,  
Contributors and Artists.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, except for purposes of research or private study, criticism and review, without prior written permission from the publisher.



**ITBM**

Institut Terjemahan & Buku Malaysia



# C O N

## EDITOR'S NOTE

6-7

- 
- 1** THE BRIDGE BETWEEN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND TURKEY  
REVIEW OF THE ROVING EYE: CONTEMPORARY ART  
FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA 9-19  
Bharti Lalwani
  - 2** SEEING THE SPROUT IN THE GERM: AN INTERVIEW  
WITH YAP SAU BIN 21-27  
Chai Chang Hwang
  - 3** THREADING VOICES THROUGH DRAWINGS AND  
CONVERSATIONS: VOICE PIECES, YANGON, 2013 29-39  
Chu Yuan
  - 4** CURBED TONGUE AND PRICKLY FEELINGS 41-47  
Gina Fairley
  - 5** *MENGADAP GURU, LAGI* (FACING A GURU, AGAIN) 49-55  
Hasnul Jamal Saidon

# t e n t s

## 10

- |       |  |           |
|-------|--|-----------|
| 6     | 'KELING MAYA, POST-TRADITIONAL MEDIA,<br>MALAYSIAN CYBERSPACE AND ME':<br>ALIRAN SEMASA, KHIZANAT, IPOH, JULY 2013<br>Niranjan Rajah | 57 - 79   |
| 7     | EGALITARIAN IN PRACTICE: NEW MEDIA AND<br>CONTEMPORARY ART<br>Roopesh Sitharan   | 81 - 89   |
| 8     | ART CRITICISM IN MALAYSIAN CONTEMPORARY ART<br>Safrizal Shahir   | 91 - 97   |
| 9     | THE AMBITION OF AMBITIOUS ALIGNMENTS:<br>A REFLECTION BY A MID-CAREER ART HISTORIAN<br>Sarena Abdullah                               | 99 - 107  |
| 10    | NOTES ON ART AND WEB 2.1<br>Simon Soon   | 109 - 118 |
| <hr/> |  |           |
|       | CONTRIBUTORS   | 118 - 119 |
|       | ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS   | 120       |



## The Ambition of Ambitious Alignments: A Reflection by A Mid-Career Art Historian

Sarena Abdullah



"Ambitious Alignments: New Histories of Southeast Asian Art"<sup>1</sup> is a research programme funded through Getty Foundation's Connecting Art Histories initiative for the period 2015-2016, and initiated by the Power Institute Foundation for Art & Visual Culture at the University of Sydney. The idea of the programme was initially mooted and developed through a series of planning meetings in 2012, also supported by the Connecting Art Histories initiative. The meetings involved investigators from Sydney University, the programme's steering committee,<sup>2</sup> and the programme's regional partners, namely, Institut Teknologi Bandung (ITB) and National Gallery Singapore (NGS). The application for *Ambitious Alignments*<sup>3</sup> was finally approved and granted in 2014 for a period of two years. The success of this grant allowed smaller mobility grants to be awarded to fifteen early career researchers to enable them to conduct their archival research projects based on their proposals that had been approved. A significant portion of the grant was also used to fund investigators, field experts and research participants to attend series of meetings, workshops and public events in Sydney, Bandung and Singapore in 2015 and 2016.

After several rounds of discussions and suggestions during the Connecting Histories planning meeting in 2012, the *Ambitious Alignments* programme finally took off in its current form: submission of proposals of small-scale, one-year archival research projects from interested early career researchers;<sup>4</sup> selection process by investigators and field experts; and announcement of the successful projects and participants. The research projects should cover the period from 1945 to 1990. As the research topics were not confined to visual arts alone, a few successful projects also involved research on architecture,

sites and memorials. The mobility grant was then allocated to fund fifteen selected projects to be conducted by early career researchers from Australia, Southeast Asia and Hong Kong.<sup>5</sup> The backgrounds of these researchers are quite varied, from PhD candidates and lecturers of arts, art history and architecture, to art writers, curators and archivists.

The initial meeting was convened at Sydney University in early February 2015. In the meeting, the researchers presented their proposals, and then, their research topics were discussed in detail. During the

presentation and discussion session, some research topics were further refined and redirected, and subsequently, fieldworks were executed. The second workshop was held recently at Institut Teknologi Bandung from 31 August to 4 September 2015. It was preceded by a field trip to Yogyakarta in which the group visited a few important sites that signify the vast pre-modern Southeast Asia, an all-encompassing region once existed before the advent of colonisation and the formation of nation-states. Prof. T.K. Sabapathy led the group on a specialist tour to the Temples of Mendut, Pawon, Borobudur and Prambanan. The purpose of the tour was to contest the participants' pre-conceived notions of what Southeast Asia is and to consider the various possibilities and viability in defining Southeast Asia. These on-site lectures reminded us that there were larger networks playing vital role in the region before the demarcation of boundaries resulting from colonisation. This is a fact that seems to be forgotten as Southeast Asian countries posited their nationalistic ideology and paradigm post-Independence, which can be seen through the various quests for national identity in modern art. The group was also brought to visit other relevant art spaces in Yogyakarta: OHD Museum, Dr. Oei Hong Djien's private collection, Indonesian Art Archive (IVAA), and Cemeti Art House. At the end of the Yogyakarta trip, we boarded an eight-hour train ride to Bandung for the workshop programme.

The second part of the programme comprised a four-day workshop for the participants at Galeri Soemardja, Institut Teknologi Bandung, and a one-day public

event for the public. During the workshop, the researchers presented their topics, especially on what they have found out from the archives during their fieldwork. This was followed by a group discussion in which other field experts and participants presented their ideas and suggestions on how the projects could be fine-tuned and developed into publishable book chapters. Two Masterclass seminars led by Prof. T.K. Sabapathy and Prof. Patrick Flores were also organised as part of the workshop session.

Although such interest in Southeast Asian art histories and collaboration between a western institution and regional institutions is welcomed by those hitherto working in seclusion in their own institutions and elsewhere, there are quite a few criticism that can be drawn from these espoused 'alignments'. T.K. Sabapathy's concern with the comparative




perspectives and methodologies raised during his seminar reminded me of the general aim of this research programme as stated in its website: "The project's outcomes will include the publication of an edited anthology of participants' research that will constitute *an important landmark in the formulation of modern Southeast Asian art histories.*" [My emphasis] Such possible formulation in writing and conceiving modern Southeast Asian art histories could probably be seen in several, though not all, research projects by these researchers.

Most of the selected research topics for the Ambitious Alignments project still linger on scholarship about several key figures and nationally constrained themes. Focusing on important art figures are Aminudin T.H. Siregar's research on Claire Holt, the author of *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change* (1967); Chomchon Fusinpaiboon's archival research on Prince Vodhyakara Varavarn, a modernist architect whose work spans the transitional period of Thai's architecture; Kelvin Chuah's archival research on Malaysia's art patron, photographer and ornithologist Dato' Loke Wan Tho in Canberra; and Roger Nelson's investigation of Nhek Dim, a Cambodian artist. The few projects that pursue topics within the construct of nation-state are Bui Thi Thanh Mai's investigation of optimism as the key element in Vietnamese art;

Claire Veal's analysis of Surrealist themes and techniques in Thai photographic practices in the 1960s; Melissa Carlson's inquiry on female artists and censorship in Burma; Natalie Johnston's investigation of Burmese post-colonial identities in visual images; Thanavit Chotpradit's study of communism through war memorials in the Thai Highlands; and Wulan Dirgantoro's research on the representation of trauma in Indonesian art.

It must be reminded and highlighted here that Ambitious Alignments, at least as construed from the statement in its website, attempts to position itself as a major effort to consolidate Southeast Asian art histories until today; a point that I basically agree with. Despite this supportive and coordinative attempt at helping early career researchers from Australia and Southeast Asia, there are a few impediments that need to be addressed for other future research collaborations such as this. As a case in point, there is not much clear direction on the research topics or scope, for the Call for Participants states that, "The focus is particularly on the years between 1945 and 1990 – a period characterised by decolonisation, independence, struggles for democracy, and the geo-political conflicts and tensions of the so-called Cold War era." Based on these possibilities, the grant could be seen



*Ambitious Alignments workshop  
at Galeri Soemardj, ITB, Bandung*



as promoting research topics that are new and exploratory. However, it could also be a hindrance to the whole notion of the programme since the 'formulation of modern Southeast Asian art histories' is not adequately framed or guided.

The project's website states that "... participants in Ambitious Alignments will pursue independent research on individual projects that together span the region, map different media, and forward *new methodological approaches* ... as well as the *collaborative formulation* of new histories of art and culture during this important period." [My emphasis] The keywords I would like to raise here are 'new methodological approaches' and 'collaborative formulation.' During the Bandung workshop session, in the seminar led by T.K. Sabapathy entitled "Yielding a Region: Writing Art in Southeast Asia", he raised these pertinent notion of 'new methodological approaches' and 'collaborative formulation' that he asserted has 'slipped out of our cones of attention'. I find this comment relevant and useful to be addressed here. During the proposal and fieldwork stages, there were only a few projects that seemed to adhere to the idea of 'collaborative formulation', or at least attempted to develop the idea espoused by the programme. This could be observed in Brigitta Isabella's paper, tentatively titled "From Asia Africa to Southeast Asia: The Politics of Friendship in Indonesian Art World 1955-1965", which attempts to address the use of art, art activities and art exhibitions as soft power in the wake of the 1955 Bandung Conference. On a similar note, and yet as a counter narrative to the state-initiated diplomacy investigated by

Brigitta, Vera Mey's research, inspired by Prince Norodom Sihanouk's book *Charisma and Leadership* (1995), tries to link state diplomacy with citizen diplomacy as apparent in the Ten Men Art Group's activities involving travelling, painting and exhibiting throughout Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, the researcher has not yet elucidated whether or not a fruitful link can be established between the group's artistic activities and Sihanouk's narration in his book of his encounters with some of the leaders of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, this research is interesting since it tries to draw and position Southeast Asian experience and encounter by the Ten Men Art Group with state diplomacy. As we know, Nanyang artists' regional trips to Bali and Latiff Mohidin's journeys throughout Southeast Asia had inspired a collection of paintings that have been discussed consequentially. Nonetheless, the impact of the Ten Men Art Group's journeys on the larger Southeast Asian art communities at that time has never been explicated, contextualised and investigated.

Another attempt at re-examining the arts and cultures beyond the Southeast Asian region is noticeable in Simon Soon's research project. Simon tries to draw comparisons of cultural topographies between the Nanyang University (NU) and the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) in the 1960s. Similarly, another promising research project that attempts to investigate more fluid international artistic exchanges and cultural impacts is by Michelle Wong. However, she focuses instead on the artistic exchanges between Hong Kong and Manila during the 1960s. Although the artistic exchanges and comparative efforts

*Masterclass with T.K. Sabapathy at the Borobudur temple*

in Brigitta, Simon, Michelle and Vera's research seem to adhere to the essential idea of the 'collaborative formulation', it must be noted that the comparative approaches applied in these projects do posit some challenges to the researchers. Perhaps they could resolve these challenges by reflecting and addressing pertinent questions, such as, Who were directly affected by these exchanges? How did these exchanges influence artistic practices of that time? What are their memories of these exchanges? How did these encounters with different artists and different works inspire the artists? These are some of the complex questions that should be taken into consideration in examining artistic exchanges to make the research and the written paper more compelling and meaningful.

Besides the projects I have discussed above, Eileen Ramirez's research falls somewhat under the rubric of 'new methodological approaches.' Although most of the research

proposed are of archival and historical character, Eileen Ramirez's research on Filipino artists Genara Banzon and Lani Maestro attempts to develop art history using a journalistic methodology. Eileen has to rely heavily on both artists' personal archives and oral narratives in order to craft accounts of the site-specific works that they produced in the 1970s and 1980s, which have not yet been documented. There are limited methodological discussions in the field of art history, and most art history employs historical methodology or adopts theoretical frameworks from literary or cultural studies. In the case of Eileen Ramirez's research, the journalistic methodology has to be clearly explicated. Additionally, a detailed and extensive discussion on how methodologies from different fields can be used in writing art history should also be made. The explorative and methodological route of her research should be constructed as the framework of her paper. My concern with the outcome of her research is that the discussion on Genara Banzon and Lani Maestro's works, rather than the journalistic methodological approach that she uses, will eventually become the main focus of her paper, rendering it not much different from other papers on art history.

Among the approved projects, some deal with biographical and archival research and national visual narratives, as I have briefly mentioned in the early part of this paper. This is somewhat inevitable seeing that the period covered by the research falls at the time of the emergence of newly formed nations of Southeast Asia. Some of these are fundamentally basic research projects pertinent to filling the

research gaps in the larger frameworks of national art narratives. The few projects drawing on art history within the larger contexts of cross-national boundaries and international relations, as well as of research methodologies, however, present more challenges to the researchers. This is because they need to be not only widely read in the local and regional art histories but also substantially familiar with other fields and approaches.

There are some other comments concerning the programme that I would like to address here. One of the idealistic objectives of *Ambitious Alignments*, as stated in its website, is that this collaborative network will hopefully form "the basis of a new and effective network of scholars, curators and critics who might shape the future of art history in the region." I need to deliberate on this because I feel that the idealistic optimism of this research programme should not fall only onto the shoulders of the 'new and effective network of scholars, curators and critics'. Public programmes, like the one held in Bandung, should reflect an effective senior scholar's leadership driven by scholarship knowledge and sensitivities. Gender balance and generational mix should have been taken into consideration in organising the one-day public programme. This is because, whether we like it or not, the credibility of the *Ambitious Alignments* initiative is also highly dependent on these public programmes. Although none of the research projects undertakes a hard-core feminist theoretical framework, ten out of these fifteen early career researchers are indeed female. The field is still largely dominated by male scholars, but serious

determination to include female scholars in public programmes and roundtable discussions must not be rescinded. At the time when gender scholarship has achieved significant highlight in most scholarly fields, an all-male roundtable slipup should not have happened. Albeit one of the presenters' apologetic remark about the all-male roundtable discussants in the programme in Bandung, one of the speakers' lackadaisical and thoughtless response with regard to gender roles in art collecting reflected that male scholars sometimes lack sensitivity on this matter, despite the fact that approaches and examinations through women and gender studies have amplified in different humanities fields in the last half decade.

As I am writing this essay, the research programme is still on-going. In January 2016, National Gallery Singapore will organise a major public programme that will see the participants presenting their research to the public. Additionally, the book envisioned to be part of the final outcome of this programme will also be published next year after a series of editorial and peer review process. As I have been involved in the early planning meeting of *Connecting Histories* in 2012, and have known the participants and their projects through the *Ambitious Alignments* programme throughout 2015, I wish them all the best in their efforts to develop future Southeast Asia art historical scholarship. Even though I am in fact not considered a 'senior scholar' of this programme, I must admit that learning the work by junior scholars is as refreshing as learning the work by established senior scholars. The attempt to make Southeast Asia as

an emerging art historical field certainly relies on the future work by this team of researchers, as well as by others working and writing in their local languages in their own countries. The sharing of regional research via academic writings and books, or even simple essays for public readership,

whether on contemporary and modern art, or crafts and traditions, will definitely contribute to the general development of the regional art history. Therefore, any attempts at engaging with such discourses should be applauded. **5**

---

NOTES:

1. The project is led by a team comprising Prof. Mark Ledbury, Prof. Adrian Vickers, Dr. Stephen Whiteman, and Emeritus Prof. John Clark. The field leaders and experts are Prof. T.K. Sabapathy, Prof. Patrick Flores, Dr. Sarena Abdullah, Dr. Eugene Tan, and Dr. Agung Hujatnikajennong.
2. The project steering committee for the 2012 planning meetings comprised of Prof. T.K. Sabapathy (National University of Singapore), Prof. Patrick Flores (University of Philippines), Prof. Sutee Kunavichayanont (Silpakorn University), Dr. Pandit Charrochanakit (Ramkhamhaeng University), Dr. Sarena Abdullah (Universiti Sains Malaysia), Mr. Agung Hujanikajennong (Institut Teknologi Bandung), Mr. Aminudin T.H. Siregar (Institut Teknologi Bandung), and Mr. Nguyen Quan (independent scholar).
- 3.- See the official website at <http://ambitiousalignments.com/>
4. The Call for Participants was advertised as follows: "The opportunity is open to early career scholars in art and cultural history, curatorship or related fields with a demonstrable record of achievement in their field, relative to opportunity, who hold at least a Master's degree or comparable professional experience. Scholars should be based in Southeast Asia or Australia."
5. From more than forty applicants, fifteen early career researchers were selected, namely, Aminudin T.H. Siregar (Indonesia), Brigitta Isabella (Indonesia), Bui Thi Thanh Mai (Vietnam), Chomchon Fusinpaiboon (Thailand), Clare Veal (Australia), Eileen Ramirez (Philippines), Kelvin Chuah (Malaysia), Melissa Carlson (based in Hong Kong), Michelle Wong (Hong Kong), Nathalie Johnston (based in Myanmar), Roger Nelson (Australia), Simon Soon (Malaysia), Thanavi Chotpradit (Thailand), Vera Mey (based in Singapore), and Wulan Dirgantoro (based in Singapore).