

Detail from Bagyi Aung Soe's (1923–1990) manuscript in Burmese and English, c. 1988. Digitised by National Gallery Singapore Library & Archive with kind permission from Maung Maung Soe, Save the Library in Myanmar.

“Art” in My Language: Writings in the Vernacular on Modern & Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia & the Region

8 June 2024

Cinéma 1, Centre Pompidou, Paris

Event in English, with simultaneous interpretation into French.

Attend the symposium on line: <https://vimeo.com/event/4320576>

“Art” in My Language: Writings in the Vernacular on Modern & Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia & the Region aims to investigate and compare narratives of art written in vernacular languages across Southeast, East and South Asia in the 20th and 21st centuries. Their content, ideologies, terminologies, methodologies and genres will be examined with the objective of elucidating their sources, agencies, platforms, reception and typologies within a comparative framework.

In so doing, the symposium aspires to contribute to recent and continuing efforts to widen the scope of writings on art that are known to writers and readers in English and European languages. More specifically, speakers are invited to attempt the following questions:

Beyond writings on art in English and European languages, what is the range of narratives articulated in the vernacular?

Who wrote, and who read?

What do these writings in the vernacular inform us about the ways in which once foreign constructs of “art” have been understood, engaged with and discoursed on in Southeast Asia, as well as in East and South Asia? How did they evolve over time?

How are these narratives’ methodologies and modalities analogous to, yet distinct from, writings on art in the Western world? What might be the reasons for the similarities and differences?

How might these texts in the vernacular have been shaped by local premodern thought systems as well as approaches to the activity of image-making and the function of images?

How might language have shaped the formulation of these narratives of “art”?

What are the similarities and differences between these narratives of art across these regions within Asia? What does the unevenness suggest about the practice of art and writing on art in Asia?

Scientific committee:

Dr Yin Ker, Art Historian

Dr Roger Nelson, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Dr Marcella Lista, Musée national d'art moderne - Centre Pompidou, Paris

Moderation:

Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, Guggenheim Abu Dhabi

Organisation:

Chenxin Zhou, Musée national d'art moderne – Centre Pompidou, Paris

With the support of KD Collection and Amis du Centre Pompidou

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09:30 Opening

Dr Marcella Lista Chief Curator, Musée national d’art moderne - Centre Pompidou, Paris
Floriane de Saint-Pierre President of Amis du Centre Pompidou

09:45 Introduction

Dr Roger Nelson Assistant Professor, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

10:00 Writings on Painting in Chinese

Dr Éric Lefebvre Director, Musée Cernuschi, Paris

In China, calligraphy and painting have been the subject of written comments since the pre-imperial period, giving rise to the development of a critical tradition which embraces aesthetic, historiographical and technical fields. The fundamental links between calligraphy and painting, the early appearance of printing, and the formation of the literati painter paradigm have gradually placed critical writing at the heart of artistic practices, as is emphasised by the adding of calligraphic inscriptions on the paintings. However, from the end of the 19th century, the political, social and cultural crisis that China was going through deeply modified the forms of expression of thought: the classical language became the target of criticisms by progressive intellectuals who defended the use of spoken language. At the same time, the adoption of Western artistic practices, such as oil painting, were followed by the interest for new concepts inherited from the European intellectual history whose main authors were beginning to be translated into Chinese. Thus, the Republican period (1911-1949) is characterised by a climate of effervescence in the artistic sphere marked in particular by the publication of numerous specialised books and magazines. The practice and theory of Chinese painting were then rethought, giving rise to the affirmation of a national definition of art.



Chen Zhifo (1896-1962),
Wild geese with a quotation of Li Rihua (1565-1635)
Mid-1940s. Ink and colors on paper, 106,3 cm x 36,8 cm

10:40 Tracing the Multiple Trajectories of Art Writing in South Asia

Dr Sneha Ragavan

Senior Researcher and Head of Asia Art Archive, New Delhi



Page from essay in Gujarati by Jyoti Bhatt for *Kumar* magazine, 1980. Courtesy of Jyoti Bhatt and Asia Art Archive

In this presentation, I attempt to explore how the study of art writing in the vernacular in South Asia opens us to a plurivocal understanding of the field of art and cultural production in the region, beyond what is made visible through dominant institutional and canonising narratives. While this includes a reckoning with the fact of the vernacular itself consisting of (if not replicating) hierarchies and conventions, I hope to explore the ways in which it sets up a counter-point to the predominantly anglo-centric mainstream narratives in the field of art writing in South Asia. Further, I interrogate the place of English within the region as one that demands contextualisation and decentring. I draw upon case studies from multiple research projects undertaken by Asia Art Archive in India, in particular a four-year project from 2011–2015 to compile a *Bibliography of Modern and Contemporary Art Writing of South Asia*, to demonstrate how writing in the vernacular forms a crucial site that shapes the debates and terms through which we make sense of the field beyond its few axial points, be it with regard to those who write, where writing gets published from, or who constitute its reading publics.

11:20 The Modern in Southeast Asian Art: A Reader

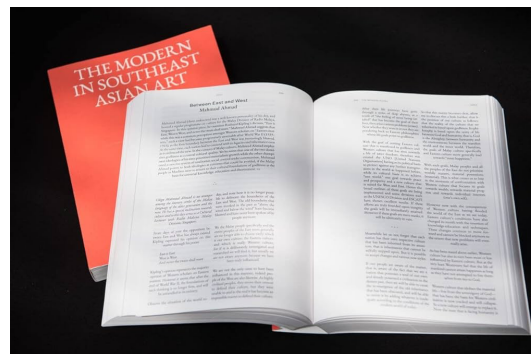
Dr Patrick Flores

Professor, University of the Philippines Diliman, Manila;
Deputy Director, National Gallery Singapore, Singapore

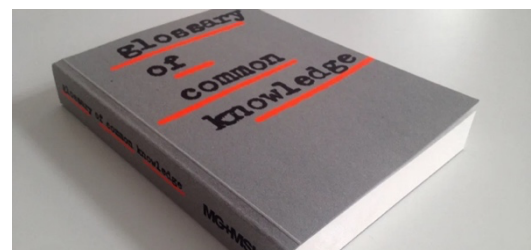
Zdenka Badovinac

Independent curator and writer

This conversation revolves around the experience and practice of assembling texts in Southeast Asia and Southeast Europe that may form a corpus to be called a “reader” and a “glossary.” Specifically, these pertain to the *Modern in Southeast Asian Art: A Reader* (2023) edited by T.K. Sabapathy and Patrick Flores published by the National Gallery Singapore; and *the Glossary of Common Knowledge* (2014–2022) initiated by Zdenka Badovinac and Moderna Galerija Ljubljana as part of L’Internationale. To be reflected on in this exchange between Zdenka Badovinac and Patrick Flores include issues raised by questions on modernity and epistemology, pedagogy and art history, authority and anecdote, translation and collective practice, among others. It is also interested in discussing methods of surfacing and annotating texts alongside other sources of sensing and knowing such as oral narratives and the various media in the popular public sphere.



The Modern in Southeast Asian Art: A Reader (2023)



Glossary of Common Knowledge (2014–2022)

12:00 Q&A

12:30 Lunch Break

14:00 The “New”, the “Avant-garde”, and Everything in Quotes: Tiptoeing Around Words and their Potential Meanings in the Indonesia New Art Movement 1975-1989

Grace Samboh Independent scholar; Hyphen —, Yogyakarta

When writing for something that will be translated to English, there is a certain carefulness in the use of italics, quotation marks, and capitals. But are anglophone readers conscious of this, though? For example, there is simply too much burden in this following assembly of words: Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia, which literally translates to ‘Indonesia New Fine Art Movement.’ It is a movement. It is new. It is written in Indonesian language while stating its Indonesia-ness. ‘Other’ problems occur in the translation of the phrase “Seni Rupa”. The title of this presentation—and in many of its ‘official’ translations—conveniently and seemingly unproblematically goes with “Art”, but its literal meaning is “Fine Art”.

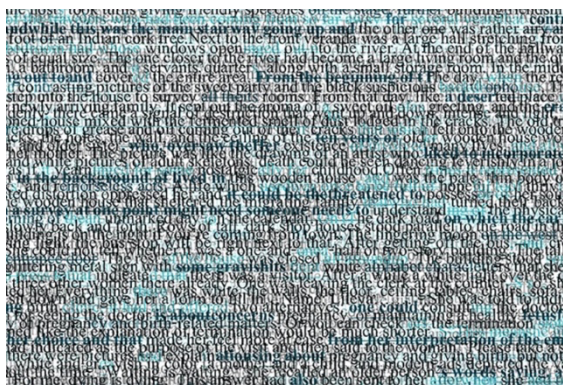


Exhibition view of *Seni Rupa Baru Proyek I: Pasaraya Dunia Fantasi (New Art Project I: Fantasy World Supermarket)* at Pusat Kesenian Jakarta (Jakarta Art Center) Taman Ismail Marzuki, 1987
Photo taken by FX Harsono, digitized by Hyphen—
courtesy of the artists

In this paper, I will try to unpack the problems in quotes through these questions: How has art been written about in the Indonesian language (officially used only since 1900) and for whom? What was the necessity of being new in Indonesia in the mid-1970s? What sustained this newness to 1989? Now, decades later, how do we write about this? Is “avant-garde” a convenient, loaded, or useful term in speaking about them? If we render them as “avant-gardes” in English, how do we write it in our language?

14:40 I Am An Artist, He (and She) Said: On Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook’s Writing

Dr Roger Nelson Assistant Professor, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore



Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, *Potpourri* (detail),
from *A Novel in Necessity's Rhythm*, 2020
Photographic print on canvas. Courtesy of the artist

“I’m not teaching art history here,” Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook writes in *I Am An Artist (He Said)*, a book first published in Thai in 2005 with the title, *(Phom) Pen Silapin*. In the same book, she writes that “In Thailand... no one attempts any explanation of [art]. What we have is the artists babbling on about their inspirations and the reporters printing it verbatim.... There’s no street called Art History down which a sorcerer slithers his way to reach the glimmering, shimmering staircase of an art centre in which knowledge is stored and imparted. What we have created doesn’t lead anywhere.” The book—which was translated to English by Kong Rithdee, and published in 2022—is written as a dialogue between a masculine and feminine narrator, denoted by

differing first-person pronouns commonly used in Thai. This transgression of gender norms was controversial, as are many aspects of Araya’s artistic practice.

In this paper, I will consider three questions. If Araya’s writing is not “art history” in any conventional sense, then what is it? What can we learn from her use of differing masculine and feminine pronouns? And what can we learn from the relationships between Araya’s artistic practice, her writing, and her teaching?

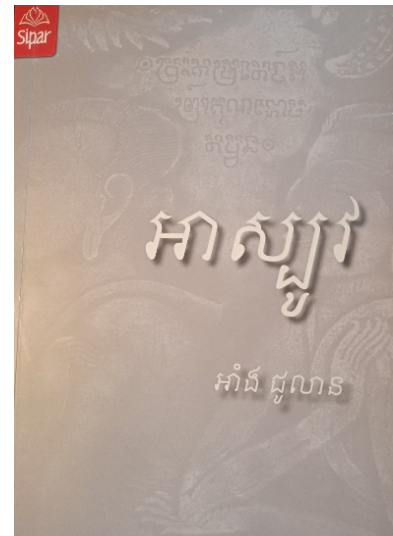
15:20 The Writing of Angkor Wat

Dr Ashley Thompson

Professor, SOAS, University of London

In a world where ‘to construct’ is ‘to compose,’ where ‘to write’ is ‘to adorn’ and ‘to display,’ where words, like stones, are ‘lifted’ into place, where a ‘monumental construction’ is an ‘epic tale,’ ‘writing on art’ is perhaps an ill-suited phrase. Ill-suited because assuming and effecting a foundational separation between text and image: on the one hand, there is art, the phrase tells us, and on the other, there is writing – whereas our Khmer constructions suggest otherwise. Or perhaps attention to Khmer idiom can bring us to hear the English otherwise: taken literally, ‘writing on art’ evokes words carved into the very surface of the work, at once adorning, constructing and reconstructing it. In other words, the work is never finished.

Built in the 12th century in what is today northern Cambodia, Angkor Wat temple has long been a substrate of composition in the Khmer language. This talk will focus on a recent reiteration of the temple’s regenerative power: Cambodian anthropologist Ang Choulean’s 2022 novel, *A Sbuu*, in which the writer reinscribes devotional inscriptions made by ancient pilgrims on the temple’s walls. Drawing out what is left unsaid if not unseen in the material record, we will follow our author in asking: what’s love got to do with it?



A Sbuu, a novel by Ang Choulean
(2022)

16:00 Q&A & Roundtable

Moderated by

Shabbir Hussain Mustafa

Senior Curator and Head of Exhibitions, Guggenheim Abu Dhabi

18:00 Closing

Biographies

Zdenka Badovinac is a curator and writer. From 1993 to 2020, she was the Director of the Moderna galerija in Ljubljana (MG+MSUM). From 2022 to 2023 she was Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb (MSU). She currently works as an independent curator, author and international consultant. Her most recent exhibition is *Sanja Iveković, Works of Heart (1974-2022)*, *Kunsthalle, Vienna*, (2022) and *MSU in Zagreb* (2023). Her most recent books are *Comradeship: Curating, Art, and Politics in Post-Socialist Europe* (Independent Curators International (ICI), New York, 2019) and *Unannounced Voices: Curatorial Practice and Changing Institutions* (Sternberg Press / *Thoughts on Curating*), 2022. Founding member of L'Internationale. President of CIMAM, International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art, 2010–13.

Patrick Flores is Professor of Art Studies at the Department of Art Studies at the University of the Philippines and concurrently Deputy Director at National Gallery Singapore. He is the Director of the Philippine Contemporary Art Network. He was a Visiting Fellow at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. in 1999. Among his publications are *Painting History: Revisions in Philippine Colonial Art* (1999); *Past Peripheral: Curation in Southeast Asia* (2008); *Art After War: 1948-1969* (2015); and *Raymundo Albano: Texts* (2017). He was a Guest Scholar of the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles in 2014. He was the Artistic Director of Singapore Biennale 2019 and Curator of the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2022.

Yin Ker trained in art history at the Sorbonne University where she completed her PhD on Myanmar's foremost modern painter, Bagyi Aung Soe. She was Assistant Professor for Buddhist and Southeast Asian art histories at the undergraduate and graduate levels at Nalanda University, India, and Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. In 2021, she co-curated the first monographic exhibition on Bagyi Aung Soe at the Centre Pompidou - Musée national d'art moderne, after which she developed Southeast Asian art at the museum along the axes of collection, research and outreach. In this framework, she co-curated in 2023 *Tang Chang (1934-1990): Non-Forms* and authored a publication accompanying the exhibition. She has contributed to various peer-reviewed journals and archival projects, notably AungSoeillustrations.org.

Éric Lefebvre is the director of the musée Cernuschi - Asian Art Museum of the city of Paris. He holds a PhD in art history from the Sorbonne University. His area of research is the history of Chinese art collections in pre-modern China, and the Chinese artistic presence in France in the 20th and 21st century. He has curated several exhibitions on modern Chinese painting, including *Chinese Artists in Paris, from Lin Fengmian to Zao Wou-ki* (Paris, 2011), *The Shanghai School, paintings and calligraphies from the Shanghai museum* (Paris, 2013), *Paris-Chinese Painting, Legacy of XXth century Chinese masters* (Hong Kong, 2014), *Walasse Ting, the flower thief* (Paris, 2016), *Song of Spring, Pan Yuliang in Paris* (Hong Kong, 2018), *Ink in Motion, an History of Chinese Painting in the XXth century* (Paris, 2022).

Marcella Lista is Head Curator of the New Media Collection and in charge of research and collections for the Asia Pacific region at the Centre Pompidou - Musée national d'art moderne. Her recent exhibitions include: *Hassan Khan. Blind Ambition* (Centre Pompidou, 2022), *Ma Desheng* (Centre Pompidou, 2022), *Saadat Ismailova: Double-Horizon* (Le Fresnoy Studio National des Arts Contemporains, 2023), and *I Never Dream Otherwise than Awake: Journeys in Sound* (Centre Pompidou x West Bund Museum, Shanghai, 2024). Lista has just completed a team research project on *Les Immatériaux* (1985), which is published as a virtual exhibition online <https://lesimmateriaux.beyondmatter.eu>. She recently co-authored *Eric Baudelaire. Make, Do, With – Films and Exhibitions 2011-2022* (Paris, Paraguay Press, 2022) and is currently preparing *Chris Marker, Survivances de Zapping Zone : Catacombes et lumières* (Paris, Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2024).

Shabbir Hussain Mustafa is Senior Curator and Head of Exhibitions at the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. He explores narratives by engaging with artists and thinkers, often creating spaces of temporal frictions in which the act of recollection becomes a vector for imagined futures. Before joining Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, Mustafa was Senior Curator at the Singapore Art Museum and National Gallery Singapore, where he sought to build links between Southeast Asia and the world. His latest projects include, *Tropical: Stories from Southeast Asia and Latin America* and *Ho Tzu Nyen: Time and the Tiger* (both 2023).

Roger Nelson is an art historian and curator, and Assistant Professor of Art History in the School of Humanities at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He researches modern and contemporary art in Southeast Asia, and is currently working on a book about artistic art histories. He was previously a curator at National Gallery Singapore. He was the 2022 recipient of the A.L. Becker Southeast Asian Literature in Translation Prize, and co-editor of the first book-length translation of the artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's writing. He is co-founding co-editor of *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia*, a scholarly journal published by NUS Press.

Sneha Ragavan is Senior Researcher and Head of Asia Art Archive in India, a New Delhi-based independent arts organization established in 2013, and an overseas hub of Asia Art Archive (AAA) in Hong Kong. Together with colleagues, Ragavan is responsible for building archival collections from South Asia, administering artistic and research grants, creating online bibliographies and publications, facilitating institutional collaborations, and organizing workshops and seminars on art history and writing in the region. She holds a PhD in Cultural Studies (2016) from the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India for her work on the discourse of the national modern in twentieth century architectural historiography from India.

Grace Samboh lives and works either in Yogyakarta, Jakarta, or wherever her friends are at. She is in search of what comprises a curatorial work within her surrounding scene. She jigs within the existing elements of the arts scene around her for she considers the claim that Indonesia is lacking art infrastructure especially the state-owned or state run as something outdated. She believes that curating is about understanding and making at the same time. With Hyphen — (founded 2011), her concern is to encourage Indonesian arts and artistic research projects and publications. Her research looks at contemporary practices outside the existing centres of the Indonesian art scene and slowly reconnects them all with the past and central narratives. With Enin Supriyanto, Yustina Neni & Ratna Mufida, she used to run Equator Symposium (Yogyakarta Biennale Foundation, 2010-2018) where they explored the possibility of connecting equatorial countries through current life situation with an admiration to the past and optimism towards the future. In 2019, she joined a gallery-based initiative in Jakarta, RUBANAH Underground Hub.

Ashley Thompson is Hiram W. Woodward Chair of Southeast Asian Art at SOAS University of London. She maintains a sustained research focus on premodern Cambodian arts and literatures, and complements this with more punctual work on the contemporary period and the arts of the larger Southeast Asian region. Her research is informed by deconstruction and revolves around questions of memory, political and cultural transition, embodiment, sexual difference and subjectivity. Books include *Engendering the Buddhist State: Territory, Sovereignty and Sexual Difference in the Inventions of Angkor* (Routledge 2016) and two recent edited volumes, *Early Theravadin Cambodia: Perspectives from Art and Archaeology* (NUS Press 2022) and *The Routledge Handbook of Theravada Buddhism* (2022). She leads Circumambulating Objects: Paradigms of Restitution of Southeast Asian Art, a collaborative research program funded by the Getty Connecting Art Histories initiative.