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Review article

When art was political: Historicising decolonisation and the Cold War in Southeast Asia through curatorial practice

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Awakenings: Art in society in Asia 1960s–1990s
An exhibition at The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, 10 October–24 December 2018; National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea, 31 January–6 May 2019; National Gallery Singapore, 14 June–15 September 2019
Exhibition catalogue edited by BAE MYUNGJI, SENG YU JIN and SUZUKI KATSUO
Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2019. Pp. 352. Illustrations, bibliography.

Suddenly turning visible: Art and architecture in Southeast Asia (1969–1989)
An exhibition at National Gallery Singapore, 19 November 2019–15 March 2020
Exhibition catalogue edited by SENG YU JIN and SHABBIR HUSSAIN MUSTAFA
Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2019. Pp. 312. Illustrations, timeline charts.

In Asia, and in Southeast Asia in particular, the Cold War was far from cold, witnessing the most deadly conflicts and political massacres of the second half of the twentieth century. Also, the clash of ideologies there did not follow a binary logic but included a third force, nationalism, which was rooted in the anticolonialist movements of the interwar years and played a significant role even in countries that decolonised peacefully after the end of the Second World War. The Cold War thus overlapped with the twin process of decolonisation and nation-building, which had its founding moment at the Asian-African Conference at Bandung in 1955, where the non-aligned camp, which advocated a neutral position vis-à-vis the two rival

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blocs, coalesced (one year ealier, the anticommunist Southeast Asia Treaty Organization had been established). Postcolonial aspirations to national progress that tied socioeconomic development to the civic and cultural elevation of the citizenry were widely shared among newly decolonised countries. By the mid-1960s, however, the utopian 'Bandung Spirit' had lost ground to Cold War realpolitik; intra-Asian and communal conflicts fomented by Cold War enmities (the Sino–Indian War of 1962, the Indo–Pakistani War of 1965, Indonesia's anticommunist purges of 1965–66) along with the escalation of the Vietnam War and the consequent exacerbation of regional divisions, belied governments' earlier commitment to human rights, Third World solidarity and world peace.[1] The authoritarian involution of several Asian countries that were often American allies, redoubled by the opening of their economies to multinational corporations, led many artists and intellectuals to embrace political activism.[2] The conception of art as a revolutionary instrument in the service of the masses had been famously articulated by Mao Zedong at the Yan'an Forum in 1942.[3] In China, Mao's prescriptions on art were sidelined, though never officially repudiated, only in the early 1990s, following the end of the Cold War and the adoption of a socialist market economy, by acknowledging the necessity 'to respect and guarantee the creativity of individuals'.[4]

Two exhibitions presented at National Gallery Singapore (NGS) in the latter half of 2019 and early 2020, the extraordinarily wide-ranging *Awakenings: Art in Society in Asia 1960s–1990s*, and the geographically and chronologically narrower *Suddenly Turning Visible: Art and Architecture in Southeast Asia (1969–1989)*, constitute, with their excellent catalogues, seminal contributions to historicising those most turbulent decades in recent Asian history. Asia is central to the new Cold War studies, which seek to decentre both the geopolitical and the thematic focus of earlier scholarship by approaching the confrontation between the rival blocs from 'peripheral' perspectives and by privileging the social and cultural dimensions of the confrontation over the diplomatic and military ones.[5] But since Cold War-era documents in East

1 Christopher J. Lee, 'Between a moment and an era: The origins and afterlives of Bandung', in *Making a world after empire: The Bandung moment and its political afterlives*, ed. C.J. Lee (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), pp. 15–17.

2 In India, a state of emergency was declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi from 1975 to 1977; in Indonesia, Suharto's New Order (1966–98) made the military politically paramount and routinely repressed dissent; in the Philippines, President Marcos (in office 1965–86), ruled under martial law from 1972 to 1981; in South Korea, martial law was in force from 1972 until 1979 under president (General) Park Chung-hee (in office from 1963 until his assassination in 1979); in Taiwan the ruling Guomindang (Kuomintang) Party upheld martial law from 1949 until 1987; in Thailand, military governments were in power from 1957 until 1980 (and, again, from 2014 to 2019), bar the three years from October 1973 to October 1976.

3 Mao Tse-Tung, *Talks at the Yenan Forum on Arts and Literature*, 2nd ed. (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1960). In addition to regular quinquennial celebrations, the 70th anniversary of the 'talks' was commemorated by the PRC Ministry of Culture in May 2012.

4 As reported by *Wenyibao* (9 Mar. 1991), cited in Geremie R. Barmé, *In the red: On contemporary Chinese culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 35. The changes in the Chinese Communist Party's official line on art are usefully periodised by John Clark, *Asian modernities: Chinese and Thai art compared, 1980 to 1999* (Sydney: Power Institute, 2010), pp. 209–11.

5 The social and cultural historiography of Cold War Asia has grown considerably over the past decade. See, among other, Tuong Vu and Wasana Wongsurawat, eds., *Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia: Ideology, identity, and culture* (Palgrave-MacMillan, 2009); Tony Day and Maya H.T. Liem, eds.,

and Southeast Asian state archives are still mostly classified, the strategy deployed by these two exhibitions of examining the sociopolitical history of the period by way of documenting the history of art groups and institutions proves highly successful. In countertendency to the trend of marketing art galleries and museums as a lifestyle pursuit for affluent urbanites, these exhibitions remind visitors of not too remote a time when art in Asia was not an investor's choice but an instrument of radical politics.

Jointly organised by NGS, The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, and the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea (where it was on view prior to coming to NGS), together with the Japan Foundation Asia Center, *Awakenings* is a monumental exhibition, both in its geographical scope and in the number and variety of the artworks featured. These include 142 works (sculptures, paintings, woodblock prints, photographs, posters, videos and installations) by some hundred artists from Cambodia, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the People's Republic of China, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand (with a predominance, however, of Korean, Japanese and Southeast Asian artists). The wealth of artworks is framed by a transnational and comparative curatorial approach that conceives of Asia as a constellation of connections and correspondences with their gravitational axis in cities — the loci of intellectual and artistic production and socioeconomic modernisation, institutional nation-building but also political radicalism. The title *Awakenings* is meant as a reference to the gradual emergence throughout Asia of a critical awareness of modernity as a result of anti-imperialism, decolonisation and opposition to domestic authoritarianism. The exhibition's timeframe encompasses the three-and-a-half decades, the 1960s through to the mid-1990s, when such awakenings gradually took place across Asia, beginning in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan in the 1960s and 1970s; followed by India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines in the 1970s and 1980s; and ending with China from the late 1980s onwards (the exhibition significantly leaves out Chinese Political Pop, a darling of the global art market that contributed in no small way to the commodification of Maoism's legacy in post-Tiananmen China).

The co-curators, in their introduction to the exhibition's catalogue (p. 23), qualify *Awakenings* as being 'in some ways a decolonising project … [that] shows how art transforms people's depoliticised consciousness to open up new ways of activating art, spaces, materials and people that lead to social change' — an unfashionably solemn, idealistic statement in the current context of the capitalist occupation of most spaces of collective participation, true even of still nominally socialist states, and routine censorship in the region of works of art and literature that express views critical of official policies. Structuring *Awakenings* are three 'propositions' (a term the curators say to favour over 'themes') — Questioning Structures, Artists and the City, and New Solidarities — that articulate the diverse strategies artists in Asia employed to deal with changing political and socioeconomic conditions: from pushing the boundaries of art practice and making ordinary materials and the artists' own bodies into

Cultures at war: The Cold War and cultural expression in Southeast Asia (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University [SEAP], 2010).

media to agitating for social and political reform; from forming artists' collectives and producing openly political art to advancing women artists and feminist thematics. There are, of course, overlaps in these propositions and indeed several of the artworks in the exhibition could be considered representative of more than one strategy. The curators argue that hostility to capitalist modernisation and cultural Westernisation led in the domain of painting, particularly Southeast Asian painting, to the rejection of abstraction — the trademark of American modernism (recently revealed to have been covertly promoted by the US Central Intelligence Agency during the Cold War)[6] — in favour of locally flavoured Social Realism.[7]

Among the works exhibited in the first section, 'Questioning Structures', there are photographic and video recordings of Yoko Ono's famous performance *Cut Piece* (as staged in New York in 1965), in which spectators were invited to cut off pieces of her clothing with a pair of scissors; and of Korean artist Lee Kang-So's 'Disappearance — Bar in the gallery', a performance staged in June 1973 in a Seoul art gallery where people (in an instance of what, a quarter century later, was termed 'relational art'[8]) sat down around tables and conversed freely over food and drinks as an explicit reference to the stifling of free speech under martial law in South Korea. But while several Asian artists in the 1960s and 1970s endorsed the avant-garde's mission of shocking the philistines, their provocations tended to arouse considerably less public interest than they did in the West, as suggested ironically by Thai curator Apinan Poshyananda's featured video, *How to Explain Art to a Bangkok Cock* (1985), inspired by the German artist Joseph Beuys' performance of 1965 (incidentally, the same year as Ono's), *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*.[9]

Rapid urbanisation and mass consumerism are the key phenomena addressed by the works in the section 'Artists and City'. Two photographic series three decades apart from one another — Hirata Minoru's *Cleaning Event* (1964), documenting a Situationist performance by the H-Red Centre collective in the streets of Tokyo in the weeks preceding the Olympics, and Wang Jin's *Ice 96 Central China* (1996), documenting a real mob in Zhengzhou (Henan), smashing a wall of ice blocks in which the artist had encased luxury consumer goods — configure the experience of urban

6 Louis Menand, 'Unpopular front: American art and the Cold War', *New Yorker* (17 Oct. 2005); https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/10/17/unpopular-front (accessed 20 Jan. 2020); Frances Stonor Saunders, 'Modern art was CIA "weapon"', *Independent* (22 Oct. 1995); https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/modern-art-was-cia-weapon-1578808.html (accessed 20 Jan. 2020). See also Frances Stonor Saunders, *The cultural Cold War: The CIA and the world of arts and letters*, 2nd ed. (New York: New Press, 2013).

7 Social Realism had, in fact, originated in mid-nineteenth-century France as a reaction against academicism, hence it was a precursor of the turn of the century modernist avant-garde, even though in the USSR under Stalin it functioned, in the triumphalist 'Socialist' Realist style also adopted in the People's Republic of China, as a barrier against (bourgeois) modernism. For a recent critical reassessment, see *Socialist realisms: Soviet painting 1920–1970*, ed. Matthew Cullerne Brown and Matteo Lafranconi (Milan: Skira, 2012).

8 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational aesthetics* (1998), trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with Mathieu Copeland (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002).

9 See Sam Gaskin's review for *Ocula*, 'Aesthetic radicalism in "Awakenings" at Singapore's National Gallery'; https://ocula.com/magazine/reports/awakenings-art-in-society-in-asia-1960s1990s/ (accessed 23 Jan. 2020). Apinan himself acknowledged that his video 'paid respect' to Beuys, as well as Bruce Neuman and Nam June Paik, in an interview contained in the catalogue of *Suddenly turning visible*, pp. 245–6.

space in East Asia as oscillating between sanitising surveillance and pre-political anarchism. That most iconic artefact of American consumer culture — the Coca-Cola contour bottle — is the subject of Park Buldong's photographic print, *Coca Cola Molotov Cocktail* (1998) and Indonesian artist Arahmaiani's installation *Sacred Coke* (1993). In the former, the bottle, filled with the torn fragment of an American flag meant as a fuse, suggests striking back at imperialism with its own weapons (the command of US Forces Korea moved out of Seoul as late as June 2018 and is now headquartered in Pyeongtaek, 35 km south of the capital). In Arahmaiani's work the Coca-Cola bottle, capped by a condom that emphasises its phallic shape and placed at the centre of a round table covered with soil and rice, may be taken to reverse the generative symbolism of a yoni-lingam by alluding, as the artist herself explained in an interview, to the industrialisation of agriculture in New Order Indonesia brought about by the 'Green Revolution', which was promoted in Asia, as well as in Latin America, by the World Bank, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation (which, coincidentally, had been funding since the 1950s the study of Asian art, particularly Japanese art, in the United States).[10]

I found the section 'New Solidarities' to be not only the most coherent of the three, but also the one making the most significant contribution to art history by documenting the collectives formed by artists to challenge the national art system and confront state authoritarianism: from the pioneers of the 1960s and early 1970s, H-Red Center and Zero Jigen in Japan and The Fourth Group in South Korea, to the politically committed United Artists' Front of Thailand (formed in 1974) and Kaisahan (Solidarity) in the Philippines (formed in 1976), and from the Gwangju Freedom Artists' Association and Reality and Utterance in Korea (both formed in 1979) to the Green Team in Taiwan (formed 1986) and the Filipino feminist art organisation, KASIBULAN (formed in 1987). Originals and replicas of the posters and billboards designed by the United Artists' Front of Thailand in the mid-1970s, during the three years of open politics ushered in by the mass demonstrations of 14 October 1973 that caused the fall of the military dictatorship in power since 1957, are displayed to great effect, their militant and antimilitarist imagery being at once historically dated yet still powerful visually. The same is true of Hong Sundam's woodblock prints, *5.18 Series* (1983–89), denouncing the military repression of striking workers in South Korea. Far less arresting are the works selected to illustrate feminist thematics, with a prevalence of paintings stigmatising women's subordinate role in Korea's patriarchal society. Standing out is Filipino sculptor Julie Lluch's *Thinking Nude* (1988), which invites reflection on the position of women both in society and the history of art by straddling hyperrealism (the terracotta figure

10 Susan Silas and Chrysanne Stathacos, interview with Arahmaiani, *The Revolution will be Sponsored/ la revolucion sera patrocinada*; https://larevolucionserapatrocinada.wordpress.com/2016/12/18/arahmaiani-sacred-coke-1994-2014/ (accessed 28 Jan. 2020). Cf her painting, *Linga/Yoni* (1994). The term 'Green Revolution', semiotically denoting both 'agriculture' and divergence from communist ('red') revolutions, made its debut in a 1968 speech by William S. Gaud, director of the US Agency for International Development (USAID). For a critical appraisal see John H. Perkins, *Geopolitics and the Green Revolution: Wheat, genes and the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). On the Rockfeller Foundation's funding of the study of Asian art, see Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, 'Art history and the global: Deconstructing the latest canonical narrative', *Journal of Global History* 14, 3 (2019): 424.

of a woman whose body carries the signs of a Caesarian section and breast feeding) and conceptualism (a hanging mirror reflects the figure that is non-naturalistically cut off mid-thigh and raised on a platform). Only one of the works exhibited deals with homosexuality, the documentary film *Oliver* (1983), directed by the Filipino film-maker and film scholar Nick Deocampo, which follows the daily routine of a female impersonator who performs in the gay bars of Manila during the time of the Marcos dictatorship.

Towards the end of the exhibition visitors come across an assemblage of three brick-size deformed casts made of gypsum brushed over with silver paint and rubbed with black shoe polish. Entitled *D-Cell* (where 'd' stands for 'detention'), this work by Singaporean sculptor Teo Eng Seng provides a commentary on the incarceration without trial in 1987 of 22 local Catholic social activists for their involvement in an alleged Marxist conspiracy, including his own sister, lawyer Teo Soh Lung (who after an initial four-month detention in May 1987, was rearrested in April 1988 upon issuing a self-defence statement disputing the government's account, and kept in solitary confinement until June 1990). The *D-Cell* series, explains NGS senior curator Adele Tan, 'is forged from the active and desperate imaginative acts of an artist robbed of actual sight of a loved one', his sculptures' 'surface depressions indicating only the bleak and unmitigated force of violence'.[11] Teo's indirect evocation of state violence contrasts jarringly with the very last work on display, Sino-Indonesian artist F.X. Harsono's 1977 installation (recreated in 2013) comprising a pile of pistol-shaped pink-coloured rice crackers and a desk holding a booklet where viewers can pen their answers to the hyperbolic question posed by the work's title, *What Would You Do If These Crackers were Real Pistols?*[12]

Some of the historical processes and art historical themes surveyed by *Awakenings* are explored further in the follow-up exhibition, *Suddenly Turning Visible: Art and Architecture in Southeast Asia (1969–1989)*, which borrows its evocative title from a description of Manila's changing cityscape. Both an appendix to the monumental *Awakenings* and an insightful exhibition on its own, *Suddenly Turning Visible* takes the lead from three art spaces that operated in the same years in three Southeast Asian capitals: the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) in Manila (the only extant building among the three), the Alpha Gallery in Singapore and the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art (BIMA) in Bangkok. Although coverage of architecture in the exhibition is limited to some drawing plans and cardboard scale models of the three institutes, their parallel operation provides a coherent curatorial focus for reconstructing, through artworks as well as archival material and interviews, the social and institutional dimensions of the production and reception of art in Southeast Asia in the context of the American debacle in Indochina, domestic economic growth

11 Adele Tan, 'From political travesties to aesthetic justice: The ugly in Teo Eng Seng's D-cells', in *Ugliness: The non-beautiful in art and theory*, ed. Andrei Pop and Mechtild Widirch (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), pp. 147, 153; see also Tan's essay in the catalogue of *Awakenings*, 'On the inadequacy of art, or ruminations on the year 1987', pp. 221–2.

12 Harsono, in an interview given in February 2019 to the *Korea Herald* (repr. in *Jakarta Post*, 11 Feb. 2019) for the Korean inauguration of *Awakenings*, said (jokingly?) that he would have shot the director of the art school from which he was kicked out.

spurred by foreign (largely Japanese) investment, and internal political and cultural crises.

Designed by the architect Leandro V. Locsin and realised under the personal patronage of Imelda Marcos (whose appreciation of art was encapsulated in the slogan 'the true, the good and the beautiful'), the CCP was criticised for its cost even before its inauguration in 1969 by the opposition leader, Senator Benigno Aquino Jr. (whose wife, Corazon, became the first president of the post-Marcos era). The inaugural director, Roberto Chabet, and his successor, Raymundo R. Albano (his is the phrase 'suddenly turning visible'), championed modernism and aligned the CCP activity with Marcos up until his fall in 1986, and thus alienated politically engaged artists who opposed the regime ('Where there is oppression, there is resistance', proclaims a collage by the Filipino artist, David Medalla, which is among the works on display). The Alpha Gallery in Singapore opened in 1971 as an artist-run exhibition space devoted to the promotion of modernism under the aegis of the UK- and US-trained architect Lim Chong Keat; over its seventeen years of operation at various locations, Alpha Gallery's collective allowed local artists to share studio space and resources, participate in critical debates and connect with networks abroad. While the formalist experimentations of the artists associated with Alpha Gallery were seemingly apolitical, their promotion of aesthetic innovation was organic (in the Gramscian sense) to the government's modernising drive. Named after the naturalised Italian art educator, Silpa Bhirasri (born Corrado Feroci), BIMA was the brainchild of Westernised Thai royals; it was built on a plot of land donated by Princess Chumbhot in Bangkok's Sathorn district, where most of the European embassies and cultural centres are located. Inaugurated in 1974, BIMA was directed by Chatvichai Pramadhattavedi from 1976 (the year of the military coup that brutally ended the period of open politics and incidentally forced into exile Dr Puey Ungpakhorn, ex-governor of the Bank of Thailand, which had financed BIMA) until its demise in 1988. Chatvichai's ecumenical approach ensured government support and corporate sponsorship even as it allowed for the exhibition of the work of non-mainstream artists.

The curators of *Suddenly Turning Visible* explain in the catalogue that the exhibition 'examines the major paradigm shifts in the visual arts at the time, characterised by the articulation of new artistic modes of working that freely reinvented styles such as abstraction and realism, and melded conceptual art with folk traditions rooted across Southeast Asia' (p. 6). Indeed, the question of (late) modernist Asian art and architecture's relationship to vernacular traditions, sidelined in *Awakenings*, surfaces more clearly in this latter exhibition. The Southeast Asian reinvention — one could even say localisation, citing Wolters[13] — of Western modernism allegedly resulted 'in early instances of decolonising manoeuvres that directly challenged the validity of the modern project and actively provoked publics in Bangkok, Singapore and Manila to engage critically with the question of progress' (ibid.). The latter may be somewhat of an overstatement, as underscored by the curatorial inclusion in this exhibition, too, of Apinan's *How to Explain Art to a Bangkok Cock*. What

13 Oliver W. Wolters, *History, culture, and region in Southeast Asian Perspectives perspectives*, rev. ed. (Ithaca, NY: SEAP; Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999).

clips of contemporary reviews of art shows indicate is the appreciation by the intellectual and political elites of the contribution that artists could make to the development of national culture. Imelda Cajipe-Endaya's print series, *Mga Ninunong Tagalog*, or 'Tagalog Ancestors' (1979), whose manipulation of colonial-era images of Filipinos hints at the legacy of Spanish and American colonialism, prefigured the academic debate on postcolonial identities that dominated the 1980s and the 1990s. Conversely, looking at Chabet's neo-constructivist sculpture, *Tatlin and Co* (1984, remade 2012), one cannot help wondering what the Marcoses might have thought of the CCP director's homage to early Soviet art. The works by the artists who were associated with the Alpha Gallery display a predilection for geometric abstraction (e.g., Anthony Poon's *Squa-Tri Uni* [*c.*1970] and Teh Tien Cheng's *Meta-Form* [1978]), which suited the civil (and social) engineering characteristic of Singapore nation-building. On the other hand, the artworks that were exhibited at BIMA showed a considerable stylistic variety; among them, maverick artist Vasan Sitthiket's *Coffin for Gorbachev, Thatcher and Reagan* (1985, remade for this exhibition along with his other intallations), with three coffins standing vertically against one another, offered a sarcastic commentary on the final moment of the Cold War.

The picture of artistic and intellectual life in Cold War Asia, and Southeast Asia specifically, that emerges from the two exhibitions is one of great experimentation and possibilities, occasionally naïve but always animated by the belief in the liberating power of art — not in an individual, psychological sense, but in a collective, political sense. For viewers with neither personal recollection nor historical knowledge of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, the evocation of political ferment and of artists' commitment towards the ideals of nationhood, social justice and freedom of expression might come as a surprise. This evocation raises the question of whether anything remains of this commitment amidst the current art market's hype about Asian art and the proliferation since the mid-1990s of regional biennials and museums of contemporary art, which, in addition to promoting the local tourism industries, have the greater ambition of achieving international cultural legitimation.[14]

As mentioned above, the transnational curatorial framework of *Awakenings* and *Suddenly Turning Visible* aims at illuminating the distinctively inter-Asian exchanges of artistic ideas and practices, thus challenging the paradigmatic status of Euro-American modernism in line with the aims of so-called global art history. Conceiving of the history of art in terms of a polycentric model, in which vernacular artistic idioms have coexisted and interfaced, as opposed to a diffusionist model positing the global diffusion of Western art as a result of commercial expansion, colonialism and modernisation, has unquestionable merits; yet the criticism is also founded that the globalisation of the art market has played an even greater role than postcolonial theory in promoting such an approach.[15] Indeed, there are two orders of problems — one historical, the other methodological — in the attempt made by the two exhibitions under review to build global art histories from below.

14 See Andrea Buddensieg and Hans Belting, eds., *The global art world: Audiences, markets, museums* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009); Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal and Solveig Ovsdetbo, eds., *The Biennial reader* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010); Sabine B. Vogel, *Biennials: Art on a global scale* (Berlin: Springer, 2010).

15 Joyeux-Prunel, 'Art history and the global', p. 429.

Most of the artworks in *Awakenings* and *Suddenly Turning Visible* show clear analogies with the new visual art genres — from landscape and performance art to conceptual installations and video art — that achieved currency in Western Europe and North America (as well as other parts of the world) from the 1950s onwards. While such analogies do not necessarily demonstrate a chronological or ideational primacy, they do testify to the familiarity of Asian artists with contemporary Euro-American art, which publics in Asia had the opportunity to see in loco (the Museum of Modern Art's International Program, for example, brought exhibitions to Indonesia, Laos, Singapore, South Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines to spread the word of modernism), and also to their interaction with fellow artists and institutions in Europe and the United States. Indeed, many among the artists featured in *Awakenings* and *Suddenly Turning Visible* studied or were trained in the United States and in European countries (North Vietnamese artists, not included in *Awakenings*, did so in the Soviet Union), not in other Asian countries.[16] And despite analogies and parallels, the exhibition provides no indication of any sustained conversation or collaboration among artists *across* countries in Asia during that period.

Coming to methodology, one wonders whether geography should be the only, let alone the most meaningful, criterion for comparison. The conditions that characterised the period from the 1960s through to the end of the Cold War were not unique to Asia. Latin America too was a region where cultural identities were shaped by colonialisms and nationalisms and where, to contrast the alliance of revolutionary peasant movements and the urban intelligentsia, rightwing military dictatorships that opened up economies to multinationals ruled several countries in those same decades, with the support of the United States (whose foreign policy perversely aimed, as in Southeast Asia, to promote democracy and the market economy by sponsoring authoritarian governments bent on crushing students' and workers' movements).[17] The tropical modernism typical of Southeast Asian architecture of the 1960s and 1970s resonates strongly with earlier endeavours in Latin America, where architects and also painters had since the 1920s adapted European modernism to the luscious landscape and progressive politics of the continent.[18] Another art historical comparison that could be meaningfully pursued is with art movements of the 1960s and 1970s in Italy (host during the Cold War to several NATO frontline facilities, but also the Western European country with the largest legal communist party), particularly

16 There are exceptions, of course. The Korea-born Nam June Paik studied in Tokyo in the early 1950s before going to Germany in 1956. He returned shortly to Japan in 1963 before moving finally to New York.

17 The Latin American countries ruled by long-term military dictatorships were (in chronological order): Ecuador (1963–66 and 1972–78), Guatemala (1963–85), Honduras (1963–66 and 1972–82), Bolivia (1964–1982), Brazil (1964–85), Argentina (1966–73 and 1976–83), Peru (1968–80), Panama (1968–89), Chile (1973–90), Uruguay (1973–84). Among the ample literature on this subject, see the classic study by Alain Rouquié, *Military and the state in Latin America*, trans. Paul E. Sigmund (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

18 For two critical overviews, see Dawn Ades, *Art in Latin America: The modern era, 1820–1980* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); Luis F. Carranza and Fernando Luiz Lara, *Modern architecture in Latin America: Art, technology, and utopia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014). John Clark notes in *Asian modernities* (p. 22): 'The Asian modernities are much more a discursive construction than the Latin-American, since their casual relations are much less closely interlinked, but they are similar in that they propose a common set of issues and constructions.'

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that of Arte Povera,[19] whose utilisation of base, ordinary objects and materials as art media is common to Southeast Asian artists such as the late Montien Boonma (among the most accomplished of his generation), whose installation *Handprints and a Hand Thrasher Element* (1989) is featured in *Awakenings*.

The catalogues of *Awakenings* and *Suddenly Turning Visible* are integral components of the curatorial projects that resulted in the two exhibitions as well as essential resources on their own for students of the cultural and art history of East and Southeast Asia. They both contain a wealth of valuable documentary material, such as translations of art collectives' manifestos, excerpts from exhibition catalogues and reviews of them, contemporary photographs of artists and art events; in addition, the first catalogue contains concise yet incisive essays, and the latter in-depth interviews conducted by the curators of *Suddenly Turning Visible* along with the artists, architects and curators who animated the various art scenes. The scholarly calibre of both catalogues is complemented by their sophisticated design. Exhibition catalogues are very different publishing objects from the academic monographs that are routinely reviewed in this journal. In addition to combining high-quality images and scholarly essays, the most accomplished catalogues possess a distinctive aesthetic that resonates with their subject matter. While having different formats (album format for the catalogue of *Awakenings*, book format for that of *Suddenly Turning Visible*), the design and graphic layout of both catalogues evoke the severe avant-garde aesthetic typical of art exhibition catalogues and ephemera of the 1960s and 1970s, and not just in what were then developing countries. It is thus hugely regrettable that the catalogue of *Awakenings* inexplicably disappeared from sale during the exhibition and presently does not even figure in the publications list of NGS.[20]

The (mostly young) curators at NGS, along with their colleagues in Japan and Korea, deserve much praise for these two exhibitions and their catalogues; senior curator Seng Yu Jin in particular coedited both catalogues and wrote several of the essays in them. One can only hope they will keep enjoying institutional support for furthering the pioneering, archive-based curatorial work that make *Awakenings* and *Suddenly Turning Visible* path-breaking.

19 The movement's manifesto was penned by the art critic Germano Celant, 'Arte Povera: Appunti per una guerriglia' [Arte Povera: Notes for a guerrilla war], *Flash Art* 5 (Nov.–Dec. 1967), p. 3; available in English at: flash---art.com/article/arte-povera/ (accessed 27 Jan. 2020).

20 National Gallery Singapore, Exhibition catalogues; https://www.nationalgallery.sg/discover-learn/publications/exhibition-catalogues (accessed 27 Jan. 2020).