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- 1 Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver & Rachel Weiss, foreword to *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, ed. Philomena Mariani (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), vii–xi.
- 2 The writers point to a wide range of destabilising circumstances coincidental with the emergence of

this art. “The emergence of conceptualist art also coincided with broadly destabilizing sociological and technological trends propelled by large historical forces, as the political, economic and social landscapes of large parts of the world underwent significant, often traumatic, transition.” *Ibid.*, vii.

(17)

Reading Conceptual Art in Southeast Asia: A Beginning

T.K. Sabapathy

I

When the National Gallery Singapore (hereafter the Gallery) invited me to write an essay on conceptual art in Southeast Asia for a proposed publication, I accepted without hesitation and, I must add, without much thought. I would, I assured myself, settle on an approach soon enough. After all I had dealt with aspects of conceptual art when examining practices of artists in Malaysia and Singapore, and when curating exhibitions featuring art produced in the 1970s, regarding it as new, different from the modern. Matters came to a head about a year ago when the Gallery requested an outline for a text. Without pausing, I submitted a page consisting of preliminary notions orbiting a citation of the foreword for a publication on *Global Conceptualism*, convened as an exhibition in New York in 1997.¹ In it, curators and writers indicated interests in appraising conceptual art produced in locations globally, along comparative trajectories, and historically.

The citation has remained in my thoughts and increasingly assumed emblematic significance.

Yes, it could serve as a point of entry for thinking on, researching and writing for the occasion. There is another matter springing from reading *Global Conceptualism*; it is personal and important. In this publication is a text on conceptual art in Southeast Asia, the earliest known to me. It is written by Apinan Poshyananda, for whom I have immense regard. Our paths crossed especially in the 1990s, when a handful of historians of art, curators and academics from countries in the region were earnestly, energetically engaged in representing art in Southeast Asia in national, regional and international forums. Apinan registered a voice significantly and was sought after, globally. A network was forged linking one another in the region and fostering scholarship—individually and at times collectively.

Apinan and I have not met frequently enough these past 15 years, although each heeds what the other has written. In this situ-

ation, reconnecting with Apinan has been via reading his essay; it has been vicarious. The pleasure in reading a text in this instance is sparked by connections such as these.

Reading *Global Conceptualism* and Apinan's account of conceptual art in Southeast Asia (South Asia is also included in it) has spurred thoughts on an approach for this occasion. Could I deal with this topic by reading writings on it? Who are the writers? What do they say? How is conceptual art represented in the region, textually? Is it conceivable, in our midst, to write on art by examining writings on art exclusively? Is art in Southeast Asia interpretable, inter-textually? These questions propel this account. I do not offer a theoretical exegesis on reading texts on conceptual art in Southeast Asia. I offer a kind of guide for reading a handful of writings, while suggesting that deeper registers for reading these and other writings may be developed.

I examine texts from three sources in which Southeast Asia is declared as of primary consideration in writing on conceptual art; without exception, they are published in conjunction with exhibitions, which are predominant sites for writing on art, here. Even as Southeast Asia is flagged as of abiding interest in these publications, focus is on individual countries that constitute the region or constitute the region partly. The command of country is powerful. Be that as it may, I have tended to read country-based accounts relative to thinking on the region. This is not an exhaustive treatment of the topic; it marks a beginning of a study of textual representations of a category of Southeast Asian art.

It is with deep regret that I omit discussion of *Concept Context Contestation: Art and the Collective in Southeast Asia* (edited by Iola Lenzi and published by the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre in 2014), which features a constellation of texts on conceptual art. Reading and discussing texts from the three sources have consumed more attention than anticipated;

I had run out of time and needed to hand in this essay; schedules for reading submissions could no longer be delayed. This publication is undoubtedly important for appraising conceptual art; I aim to deal with it on a future occasion.

II

In 1997 an exhibition titled *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s* was convened in the Queens Museum of Art, New York. Its impetus may be discerned in the foreword of the publication issued in conjunction with the exposition. It is useful to read an extract from it, as it is pertinent for the present; the extract is the very one that appeared prominently in a draft submitted to the Gallery and was mentioned earlier.

The exhibition traces the history of a key development in 20th-century art in which art's response to both its traditions and its immediate milieu shifted from a consideration of the object to that of the idea. This shift with its inevitable destabilization of artistic convention occurred in locations around the world in two relatively distinct waves of activity: the first from the late 1950s to around 1973, the second from the mid-1970s to the end of the '80s.²

The claim is that over a span of nearly 40 years (i.e. from about the end of the 1950s until the 1980s), disturbances were registered in art worlds virtually everywhere. Disturbances instigated by artists who produced work (I use the term here, elastically) in which interest is in the idea rather than in artistic form as embodying meaning and significance. The shift from seeing art as an aesthetic entity or artefact to encountering art that is an idea is recognised as heralding a turn towards the conceptual in art. A move such as this took root and prevailed in many locations in the world. So much so, a

new term was coined to deal with it as marking a significant moment in 20th-century art, namely: conceptualism.

The writers of the foreword devote attention to terminology, distinguishing conceptual art from conceptualism; it is important to heed their distinction. While conceptual art refers to formalist practices developed in the aftermath of increasing reductionist tendencies in producing works as art, conceptualism signifies a wider swath of involvements, attitudes and expressions. Yes, the role of the art object is decreased and its material integrity degraded; there is more. Conceptualism is esteemed as reaching out even further, nudging art into assuming connections with other constituencies or realities that are embraced as forming milieus in which artists pursue their practice, such as the social, the political and the economical. Artists yearn for open, immediate connections with various publics, collectively and informally. The appeal of conceptualism springs from attributes and principles such as these. It is acknowledged and installed in discourses on art as profoundly altering what art is or “destabilising” it, in many respects.³

These disturbances did not occur simultaneously in all locations in the world. The writers of the foreword gauge them as surfacing in two consecutive although distinct, temporal waves. Their claim is also that movements giving rise to these disturbances and their outcomes are globally extant, substantially and sufficiently consistent to represent them as an exhibition set along historical perspectives and write about them historically. The conceptual in art is susceptible to (art) historical explication. The 1997 show in New York bears testimony to these claims.

Global Conceptualism features works signifying conceptualist attributes, traits, tendencies, properties and principles, by artists from “locations around the world.” Locations are categorised variously; at times they are identified as countries (Japan, South Korea, the

Soviet Union). At times they are gathered as country-clusters, in which instances the components that make up the clusters are regarded not necessarily as equal to one another (Australia and New Zealand; mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong). At times locations are geographically subsumed as regions (Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Latin America, South and Southeast Asia) and even as continents (Africa, North America).

It is not clear how these variables could yield satisfactory exhibitory and textual representations of the conceptual in world art. The intention is, nevertheless, to widen the terrain for dealing with the topic by devising platforms for appraising the conceptual comparatively, and do so with curatorial vigour and critical discrimination. In this vein, the aim is to remap a significant chapter in 20th-century art without only endorsing practices and productions, and texts from sites in Europe and the United States as reigning paradigms for defining world art.

Global Conceptualism is undeniably ambitious. The project’s complexity and difficulties are acknowledged in the foreword. Nevertheless, redrawing the map of world art in order to represent the conceptual with requisite historical sensibilities is clearly stated as a goal. Hence the exhibition (and the accompanying publication) “intends to revise conventional historicisation of conceptual art through the strategic addition of multiple, poorly known histories presented as corollaries rather than appendages to a central axis of activity.”⁴ This is not to say that the exhibition surveys the geographies (known and newly known) of conceptual art, comprehensively; this is impossible. The exhibition consists of “emblematic works and movements” specific to locations.⁵ Southeast Asia enters a stage featuring global conceptualism in New York in 1997 along these passageways. It is represented by Apinan Poshyananda, a historian of art and curator.

It is a strange entry on a number of counts. I highlight two of them.

- 3 *Ibid.*, viii.
- 4 *Ibid.*, xi.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 *Ibid.*

- 7 Apinan Poshyananda, "'Con Art' Seen from the Edge: The Meaning of Conceptual Art in South and Southeast Asia," in *Global Conceptualism*, 147.

Firstly: How and why might South and Southeast Asia appear as con-joined? A basis for coupling the two regions is not clearly stated either by the exhibitors or by Apinan. A consideration that might be interpreted as testimony for connecting the two appears at the end of the foreword, where it says:

We have invited Dr Apinan Poshyananda to contribute an essay to this catalogue on the activities of conceptual artists working in South and Southeast Asia today. Since the end of the Cold War, South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and other rapidly developing areas have seen the rise of identity politics, ethnic cleansing, nationalism, and the theocratic state. Currently, like others before them, artists in these regions are adopting conceptual practices in their work, opening new chapters in their ongoing history.⁶

This does not qualify as an explanation. It is made up of surmises and generalisations hastily assembled in order to justify a decision rather than knowingly illuminate or secure South and Southeast Asia as con-jointly fecund locations for generating conceptual art practices. In any case we might ask how "identity politics," "ethnic cleansing" and "a theocratic state" in and of themselves prompt or instigate artists to produce work that is conceptual in tenor! As listed in the foreword, these do not lead to the provision of answers to these questions.

Apinan treads gingerly when treating the two as connected locations. In his writing he shies away from relating them directly and consistently; preferring, instead, to juxtapose them beside one another discreetly. An exception to such an arrangement is noted when he highlights tensions/crises/violence instigated by religious fervor demonstrated in public domains, aimed at forcibly asserting the dominance of one religion over another. Spurred by encountering such events or situations, Apinan names a number of artists who produce very different works. Montien Boonma (from Thailand/Southeast Asia), for instance, creates environments for contemplation and introspection. On the other hand, Vivan Sundram and Sheela Gowda (from India/South Asia) create conceptualist works consisting of "fragments of riot scenes, an image of a dead victim, and a monumental gateway."⁷ And so on. South and Southeast Asia are not symmetrically aligned; Apinan's principal interest is in Southeast Asia.

The second count by which the entry of these two enjoined locations is gauged as strange is their absence in the exhibition. The catalogue does not furnish data and information of works by artists mentioned and discussed by Apinan. When we consult the checklist of works in the exhibition, there are none from South and Southeast Asia. Artists from these two regions are not registered in sections devoted to artists' biographies. The publication features chronologies of events deemed as significant landmarks for the advent of the

8 Unless we read the following as an explanation: “Limitations of physical space, and of the possible scope of inquiry of a single exhibition, preclude the inclusion of the dozens or hundreds of other artists who are un- or underrecognized.” Carmnitzer, Farver

& Weiss, *op. cit.*, xi.
9 Poshyananda, *op. cit.*, 146.
10 *Ibid.*
11 *Ibid.*, 147.

conceptual in art in various locations; South and Southeast Asia are not represented. Four pages in the publication contain bibliographies pertinent to discourses on the conceptual in locations named as making up global conceptualism; here too, South and Southeast Asia are absent.

The absence is not noted or mentioned by anyone from the Queens Museum of Art or the writer of the essay; the silence is incomprehensible.⁸ Rather than speculate on it, I propose to deal with Apinan’s writing as the only testimony of the inclusion of South and Southeast Asia in this project; extensive geographies and complicated histories are, in this instance, represented textually. I focus on Southeast Asia.

Apinan’s is the earliest text on conceptual art in Southeast Asia. There are earlier studies on conceptual artists in locations-as-nations in the region; writers of these accounts occasionally and fleetingly look across borders at movements in neighbouring locations. By and large, their attention is focused firmly on matters that are local. In these regards Apinan’s writing for this occasion stands apart from extant publications on conceptual art and conceptualism as an artistic phenomenon.

It stands apart for other reasons as well. It bears hallmarks of the author’s irrepressible involvement with wordplay and with idiosyncratic coining of words and phrases. The abbreviation of conceptual art as “con art,” for example, is characteristic of Apinan’s aim at deflating names, terms, labels installed in histories of art with definitional aura or status by

writers in institutions in Europe and the United States. “Con art” immediately conveys prospects of encountering deceit, the dubious and the unreliable; its insertion in quotation marks, however, indicates we need not read it literally to imply these meanings. The title of his essay reads as: “‘Con Art’ Seen from the Edge: The Meaning of Conceptual Art in South and Southeast Asia.” As a word gesture “con art” may strike as coarse and crude; in all likelihood such an impact is intended. These are devices the author employs to stir readers into assuming wary, watchful stances when encountering dominant ideologies, systems and apparatus for interpretation, in the worlds of modern and contemporary art.

He begins his account by noting that while conceptual art is understood in artistic terms as giving increasing prominence to the idea in a work over form or over things created as materially significant, such a view is expanded to include other considerations. Southeast Asian artists are not mere recipients of conceptualist impulses from the West. They have actively shaped them while residing and working in locations in the West and have relayed these involvements on their return. Artists have also created conceptualist works spurred by circumstances that are specific to locations in the region. In some of these outcomes, the conceptual slides into other, unorthodox kinds of practices such as installation and performance. These may not be pursued or developed in terms of clearly delineated categorical involvements.

In this regard, he remarks that conceptual art is translated in the Thai language as *sinlapa ruapyad* and “refers variously to installation, performance, and the use of readymades.”⁹ It may well be that Apinan is pointing towards conceptualism as spurring a wide range of experimental practices and actions intended to counter prevailing orthodoxies in art worlds in the region, affiliated largely with the modern. Hence, four of the six illustrations in his essay are of artists shown in performative actions (Heri Dono, FX Harsono, Santiago Bose and Kamol Phaosavasdi) in the 1990s.

Apinan suggests that actions by artists in the early 1970s, levelled at challenging, and replacing authoritarian institutions in art (and in the political sphere), led to new practices, some of which are affiliated with conceptual tendencies. By doing so, the conceptual as such in Southeast Asia is seen as conforming to the second wave, proposed in the foreword of the exhibition’s publication. The New Art Movement (Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru, hereafter the GSRB), in 1975, in Jakarta (Indonesia) and the student uprisings against the military dictatorship in Thailand in 1973 and 1976, are featured prominently for ascertaining shifts: changes that affect art profoundly in locations in Southeast Asia. These have been examined closely in subsequent writings by several writers and installed as significant in nascent historical accounts of recent art in the region. Apinan features an enlarged detail of a work by Jim Supangkat titled *Ken Dedes* (produced for the inaugural GSRB event) as a frontispiece illustration for his text. This production has assumed emblematic stature in discourses of the conceptual and in signifying new, contemporary developments in Southeast Asia.

While acknowledging conceptual art practices as distinct, Apinan demonstrates that they are also advanced in relation to other unconventional ways of producing art; these interrelations are complicated and entangled. The task of analysing them awaits future researchers.

We leave reading Apinan with two impressions. The first is that towards the end of the 20th century, or at the time of writing his views, conceptual art practices are “widely accepted in the art arenas of Southeast Asia. To varying degrees, artists in Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore have adapted conceptual strategies as vehicles for critique and reflection on their rapidly changing societies, and several international exhibitions in Asia and Australia have legitimized these forms of conceptualism based on local idioms.”¹⁰

The second impression hoists the conceptual in Southeast Asian art onto historically conscious registers. Hence we are urged to acknowledge that artists in the region “recognize that conceptual art in the West has its genealogy, but their own interpretations of such art have often derived from different trajectories. Artists have developed conceptualist practices to the extent that various networks have formed within the region.”¹¹ Attention is on relations between artists and their practices, on surveying and analysing them so as to yield an understanding of conceptual art as it is a phenomenon in this region. We leave Apinan for the present and move away from New York to read texts from sites in Southeast Asia.

III

In 2007, ten years after *Global Conceptualism* was staged in New York, Ahmad Mashadi curated an exhibition titled *Telah Terbit (Out Now): Southeast Asian Art Practices during the 1960s to 1980s* in Singapore (part of the title is derived from an artwork by FX Harsono named *Telah Terbit*). The show was organised as a special event as part of the inaugural Singapore biennale in 2006. It is frequently cited as an exemplar for curating and exhibiting Southeast Asian art. The topic for the exposition and its publication is the contemporary in the region’s art.

- 12 Ahmad Mashadi, *Telah Terbit (Out Now): Southeast Asian Contemporary Art Practices During the 1960s to 1980s* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2007).
- 13 T.K. Sabapathy, "Intersecting Histories: Thoughts on the Contemporary and History in Southeast Asian Art," in *Intersecting Histories: Contemporary Turns in Southeast Asian Art*, ed. T.K. Sabapathy (Singapore: School of Art, Design and Media, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 2012), 46–7.
- 14 In a foreword to this exhibition's publication, Kwok Kian Chow amplifies the twin topics set out by Mashadi. I cite a section at length, as it illustrates varying accents in discussions of conceptual art. "FORM in the context of this exhibition relates to conceptualism, a term used in the art world to designate

the questioning of the central position of materiality in art. In conceptualism artists started to explore the boundaries of art, and questioned the relationship of art practice, history, criticism and aesthetics. The reexamination of the conceptual assumptions of art then used form (or 'undoing' of form) to critique a modern art that privileged abstraction. By doing so, artworks were deemed to have taken on commentary on values ascribed to conventional forms along with the social systems that substantiated such values. The title [re-form] given by the curator designates this new understanding. FIGURE is mainly concerned with the idea of the figurative or representational, in the sense of recognizable objects, to specifically refer to contemporary

In the exhibition Mashadi boldly sketches chronologies for the contemporary, commencing in 1962 when Jose Joya and Napoleon Abueva participated in the Venice biennale that same year, and rounding his survey in 1980 with the *Contemporary Asian Art Show* at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in Japan. This is not to say that Mashadi shows that the contemporary dries up and fades in 1980 but that the two decades spanning the 1960s and the 1980s may measure its first coming.¹² I have commented on this exhibition elsewhere.¹³ For the present, interest is on the treatment of the conceptual in art in this show and the writing on it.

To talk of conceptual art is to talk of the contemporary in art. The contemporary is topically exhibited and written along two routes. One is labelled as form and the other as figure; both are conceived as turning away from the modern. Mashadi employs them as signifying distinctive traits and particular values for seeing the contemporary. He also employs them as propelling contemporary art practices in the region, historically and critically, along competing contemporaneous trajectories. Form has to do with conceptualist thinking and presentation whereby artists are introspective, reflexive, criti-

cal in regarding the making, the appearance, the material constitution and reception of art and artworks. Figure has to do with representations of strife, conflict, exploitation of peoples, primarily by figural and narrative schemes.¹⁴

Mashadi conveys his thoughts on the contemporary and his intentions for the exhibition in the following disclosure.

The exhibition is divided into two inter-related sections. [re:form] includes works that explicate the articulation of the visual language which includes a rethinking into the constitution of art and its theoretical and material references. [re:figure] looks at attempts to situate contemporary practices into the contextual grounds of social and political engagements, through re-privileging of the figurative and narrative.¹⁵

He draws attention to the contemporary as made up of two major intersecting trajectories; conceptual art is ascertained along one of them, namely: [re:form]. It is not, in other words, possible to consider it in isolation, on its own. In dealing with this matter, I forward four observations.

practices in situating itself in the context of social and political activities, and how this is related to the renewed emphasis on the figurative and narrative in works which also critiqued the privileging of abstract art in the 1960s and 1970s. Figurative art was also a means to reach a broader base of audience. Social realist art and religious art are two such cases that often use figurative techniques. In these cases, figurative art is used for its narrative and descriptive purposes. Figurative art is also often the choice for artists when they are seeking to elicit strong emotions from the viewer in reference to certain events and social messages.” Foreword to *Telah Terbit (Out Now)*, 9–10.

15 Ahmad Mashadi, introduction to *Telah Terbit (Out Now)*, 11.

16 For discussion of complexities related to inter-media and interdisciplinary ambitions see Alex Coles & Alexia Defert, eds., *The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity* (London: BACKless Books & Black Dog Publishing, 1998); Gunalan Nadarajan, “Not Modern: Theses on Contemporary Art,” in *Contemporary Art in Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, Lasalle-SIA College of the Arts, 2007), 19–23.

17 Tony Godfrey, who is from the United Kingdom, was appointed to teach and coordinate a master’s degree course in contemporary art in Sotheby’s Institute of Art Singapore. The institute was established here in 2007. In 2011 it was closed. Godfrey continues to reside in Singapore and in locations in Southeast Asia.

Firstly, conceptual art is a subset in the contemporary art field; historically and geographically it signifies the contemporary. Secondly, it is distinguishable in relation to other art practices that are also claimed as new and of its time. Mashadi positions it alongside the figural as embodying varieties of realism. Thirdly, conceptual art practices intersect with and bleed into other media and spheres, demonstrating inter-disciplinary tendencies.¹⁶ When saying this we are reminded of Apinan’s explanation of the translation of conceptual art in the Thai language, when it refers to installation, performance and the use of the readymade (in which instances conceptual art as such may well have elided into conceptualism).

Fourthly, conceptual art emerges in Southeast Asia historically. Mashadi’s interest is in the region. He delineates a regional map of the contemporary in art by means of an exhibition, positioning conceptual art as one of two landmark developments, raised prominently between the late 1960s and the 1980s, in it. Even as his interest is internally focused, this is not to say that he is ignorant of or indifferent to connections between Southeast Asia and the geographies and histories that make up other

locations. Apinan’s brief is, on the other hand, to nudge conceptual art practices and artists in South and Southeast Asia into assuming relationships with those in locations globally. When we read what each has to say, we hear their texts resonating somewhat with one another although each is differently oriented. In their accounts, conceptual art is distinctive in the 1970s, cresting as a first wave in that decade in the region and as part of a second wave globally.

IV

In 2012 Marcel Duchamp was envisioned as having visited Southeast Asia. No, this is not a spectre conjured from my feverish adoration or veneration of an artist of undeniable renown and enduring enigma. I am not afflicted by such a malady. It is a topic of an exhibition conceived and curated by Tony Godfrey in 2012 in Singapore. Titled matter-of-factly and with tongue-in-cheek certainty as *Marcel Duchamp in South-East Asia*, it springs from a programme of the Equator Art Projects based at Gillman Barracks in Singapore, for which he was the director of exhibitions.¹⁷

- 18 Tony Godfrey, introduction to *Marcel Duchamp in South-East Asia* (Singapore: Equator Art Projects, 2012), 4.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 FX Harsono, "Aku Tak Kenal Duchamp (I Do Not Know Duchamp)," in *ibid.*, 28.
- 21 Ibid., 4.
- 22 Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon, 1998).

- In conjunction with Godfrey's imagined visit by Duchamp it is useful to read *The Duchamp Effect: Essays, Interviews, Round Table*, eds. Martha Buskirk & Mignon Nixon (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press & October Magazine, Ltd., 1996).
- 23 Agung Hujatnikajennong, "The Duchamp Look: Revisiting Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru Indonesia," in *Marcel Duchamp in South-East Asia*, 33.

Godfrey's premise for this enterprise appears in an introduction disguised as a conversation with himself; it is made up of answers to questions set out sequentially in a publication bearing the show's title. In it, Duchamp's visit is cast fictively and bandied as an absurdist device for remembering this artist. Underlying such jocular, benign posturing are historically weighted and culturally demanding intentions. These are borne by convictions that Duchamp's "presence lingers here as elsewhere. [Hence] this is an opportunity to think about him and his work and show something that can help us think usefully and pleasurably about that lingering presence."¹⁸

The exhibition was to consist of two components. One would show about one hundred objects and prints by Duchamp, the first such exposition in Southeast Asia. The other, parallel component would display Southeast Asian artists' works that "in some ways reflect on the work or legacy of Marcel Duchamp."¹⁹ The first mentioned part was deferred and did not materialise. Duchamp was not materially present in Southeast Asia. What we see are imprints of his lingering presence, residual concretions of his legacy. Might this be a not-so-disguised manoeuvre to demonstrate the paternity of certain kinds or categories of art practices in the region? Is Duchamp's visit to Southeast Asia a measure for legitimising "con art" from the edge (echoing Apinan's bemused anxiety)?

These are not merely tub-thumping, defensive questions posed for effect (Duchampian and otherwise). One artist in this show was riled enough by such perceived impositions to make a submission spurred by denial. FX Harsono titled his gesture *Aku Tak Kenal Duchamp* (I Do Not Know Duchamp). This is not all. The denial is substantiated by a fiery accusation and an equally fiery disavowal. It appears in the exhibition's publication on a page facing an illustration of Harsono's work. This is what he says:

My participation in this project is caused by my desire to assert that Western dominance is still felt in the Asian art scene. A statement that I do not know Duchamp is an assertion that ideologically and historically I am not related to Marcel Duchamp at all. So why do I have to make such a work related to Duchamp? I could choose not to participate in this activity, but instead use this exhibition as a means to express my disapproval of all efforts that try to demonstrate the superiority of the West over other nations.²⁰

A vociferously protesting participant, a self-proclaimed outcast, Harsono does not turn his back on moves to incarnate Duchamp in Southeast Asia. He registers, instead, a dissenting voice, projects a disavowing presence, pro-

claims severance of lineal connection with an artistic fatherhood and resists being culturally disempowered in and by an exhibition that appears as staged for venerating a godhead. His submission may be gauged as aimed at dispelling the lingering presence of Duchamp in the region.

Not all artists who decided to participate were similarly incensed. There were submissions conceived as homage to this artist; some others were emulations of particular works by Duchamp. I leave these matters and turn to interests in conceptual art in this exposition. Are there any and how are they spoken of? In developing answers to these questions I look at writings published in *Marcel Duchamp in South-East Asia*, especially those in which conceptual art is mentioned and discussed.

Its first mention is in Godfrey's introduction, appearing boldly and commandingly. What is more, its paternity is clearly, singularly underlined. Joseph Kosuth's voice is enlisted to announce its origin and advent. His oft-cited declaration that all art after Duchamp is conceptual was republished for this exhibition, signifying, no doubt, its reigning resonance in and for this region; and underscoring Kosuth as a formative agency for transposing Duchamp into assuming conceptual art's fatherhood. Godfrey bolsters the authority of these moves by saying "Duchamp created the paradigm shift in and how we think about and make art."²¹

Duchamp is the primal cause for creating and apprehending art anew, then and now, everywhere. It follows that if he is not actually present (say in Southeast Asia), Duchamp as an idea, Duchamp as a presence is pervasive and consequential for making and beholding art in Southeast Asia.

Thoughts such as these may well have prompted Godfrey when composing his introduction. Needless to say, Harsono thought otherwise. A note has to be entered on Godfrey's involvement with Duchamp and conceptual art. It did not spring unaccountably. In 1998

he published a book-length account of conceptual art, providing a critical survey of the principal trajectories along which this category of art was developed in Europe and the United States, especially in the latter half of the 20th century. It remains a significant publication on the topic. In it Duchamp is installed importantly. *Marcel Duchamp in South-East Asia* is a platform devised by Godfrey to further his interest in this artist and in conceptual art in the region, and for securing credentials for representing art practices here.²²

Agung Hujatnikajennong endorses the authority of Duchamp in the contemporary art world. His interest in writing for the show's publication is to deal with "conceptualism as a discourse in Indonesian art." Such a discourse is, he says, spurred by the impact of Duchamp. Hujatnikajennong states this as a given, as self-evident, without scrutinising it. He then nominates the GSRB, which is installed with landmark status in recent Indonesian and Southeast Asian contemporary art, as exemplarily manifesting conceptualism.²³

He cites Duchamp as directly affecting decisions and actions by artists in the GSRB at its inaugural exhibition in 1975. He points to their employments of discarded, ordinary, everyday materials which are inserted in an exhibition space and displayed as objects enlisting some interest in the realms of art. These things and materials are derived from Duchamp's arrangements of readymades. However, we remember that at the time Duchamp featured them in exhibitions, they were not represented or interpreted in conceptual art terms; they were recognised as such in Europe and the United States in the 1960s and in Southeast Asia in the 1970s. It would be tenable to propose Duchamp as historically significant for the GSRB through complex relays of conceptual art and conceptualism's developments within and without Southeast Asia, and not directly.

In his discussion Hujatnikajennong highlights rapid changes within the GSRB, espe-

cially when gauging its goals in its 1978 show titled *Pameran Presentasi* (Presentation Exhibition), when its scope extended beyond the domains of art. The conceptual traits that propelled its 1975 inaugural show sprang, in part, from seeking to counter, bypass conventions of the modern as these were associated with institutions in Indonesian art; in part, they were spurred by actions for creating alternative, open platforms for producing and appraising art. The aims for the 1978 presentation were expansive. Hujatnikajennong says that they have to do with “the totality of the field of art, where the process of creation, mediation and art appreciation are inseparable from the field of economic and political power.”²⁴ Conceptual art and conceptualism in Southeast Asia tend to be distinguished by locating them amongst these intersecting “fields,” and interpreted as related to them.

Hujatnikajennong concludes his assessment of the GSRB and of conceptualism in Indonesia on this note. In doing so, he turns to *Pasaraya Dunia Fantasi* (The Fantasy World of the Marketplace), which was staged in 1987. A manifesto was published for the occasion, signaling its bequest to the world of art. “At this point,” says Hujatnikajennong, “conceptualism turned into a political statement aimed against the elitism of high art.”²⁵

Lee Weng Choy writes on conceptual art in Singapore. It is the only text in *Marcel Duchamp in South-East Asia* in which this category of art as a subject is declared up front. The title of his essay is “Missing and Public: Conceptual Art in Singapore.” The qualifications he enters alert readers not to expect a recounting of conceptual art in a location in the region in 500 words, neatly encapsulating history for easy, undemanding reading. He does deal with the historical, though, in order to signal that when writing history we do not necessarily show the past as such, as unravelling continuously along a single, uninterrupted plane. What do we do when writing history?

Lee Weng Choy replies:

When we write history, what we produce is not just a picture of the past; what we conjure is a snapshot of a *present* comprised of a complicated, unfixed past. History pivots on the question, who are our contemporaries? And the answer is not just those contemporaries in the conventional sense, near to us in time and space, but also those with whom we find some remote resonance and relation—regardless of how distant in history and geography.²⁶

Writing history in this vein is chiefly aimed at justifying, validating the present; it is a view that prevails in Lee’s thinking and in accounts of the contemporary in art. It does not exclude or invalidate other interests in thinking on history. Hujatnikajennong’s account of the GSRB’s historicalness is, vis-à-vis Duchamp and conceptualism, aligned along the very trajectory proposed by Lee. There are differences separating the two. While Lee proposes that connections between the contemporary and the past may historically be felt as distant, at times remote and complicated, the GSRB’s link with Duchamp is said to be direct and patent. For Lee, the present resonates with history; it is important to discern this resonance even when routes along which relations between the two appear circuitous and entangled. The conceptual credentials of his two nominees from Singapore—namely: Lim Tzay Chuen and Ho Tzu Nyen—are forwarded and appraised along such pathways.

What did the two artists produce? Lim intended to ship the Merlion, a sculptural representation of a recently devised mythical animal form, installed at the mouth of the Singapore River and symbolising the city-state (which he named Mike), to Venice as his (and Singapore’s) entry for the biennale there in 2005. Permission to do so was refused (by the Singa-

- 24 Ibid.
 25 Ibid., 34.
 26 Lee Weng Choy, "Missing and Public: Conceptual Art in Singapore," in *Marcel Duchamp in South-East Asia*, 43.

- 27 Ibid., 46.
 28 See especially Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
 29 Lee, op. cit., 46.

pore Tourism Board which commissioned its creation and is its custodian). In its absence the artist displayed a signboard saying, "I wanted to bring Mike over" on one side and *illustrating* a printed icon of the Merlion on the other, and two toilets—one male and one female (fig. 17.1). These were placed in various locations in the area designated as the Singapore pavilion. The absence flagged in the essay's title alludes to the non-appearance of the Merlion or Mike in Venice. Of course the Singapore pavilion was not completely emptied, as there was a signboard and two toilets standing in for another intended presence!

Considerable publicity was sparked by the absence of Mike. Lee submits the publicity that was circulated as bearing significance related to conceptual art and to understanding such art. Conceptual art is, in this instance, constituted by texts and the reading of them.

We are reminded of another absence and the provision of writing as ameliorating non-appearance of art, intended as conceptual. We zoom back to *Global Conceptualism* and recall the non-show of South and Southeast Asia in Queens Museum of Art in New York in 1997. When discussing it I remarked that the two regions were represented only textually. The public encountered conceptual artists and art from Southeast Asia, in that exhibition, when reading Apinan Poshyananda's written account. Then too, as in Venice, conceptual art is apparent, textually.

We are led to Ho along this very register. Lee introduces this artist by saying: "I want to end not with an artwork of Ho's but a text he wrote for a web-anthology project."²⁷ In it Ho talks about prevailing sensibilities amongst writers who write on artists and art in Singapore, historically. He highlights anxieties infecting writers, especially when examining artistic influences (he singles this writer, i.e. Sabapathy). Ho points out that there is a tendency to adopt defensive stances when discussing influences. This arises from fear; to say an artist has been influenced by another (especially from the West) is to cast that artist as inferior and to diminish or deny originality in one's practice. Ho urges writers to set aside anxieties regarding influence (he is deeply affected by Harold Bloom's thesis on the topic) and to write history from seeing art without inhibitions and dynamically.²⁸

Lee concludes his essay and his view of Ho by remarking "Ho's own wish is for art critics and historians to face questions of influence 'free of defensive anxieties'. He dreams of 'an art history without names', when we no longer worry about missing fathers, but are able to look at what isn't there, and enjoy the view."²⁹

There are matters in this concluding note that need attention. I will touch on the issue of "missing fathers" and skew its treatment towards the abiding interest in this essay, which has to do with reading conceptual art in Southeast Asia. "Missing fathers" could refer to

Duchamp or to one of manifold personifications of Duchamp.

Lee begins his text by installing Duchamp as a fountainhead for talking about art that is recognised as conceptual art (although he notes that Duchamp is a conceptualist through adoption by artists in the 1960s in the United States) and about two artists from Singapore. When we regard Lim and Ho as they are presented by Lee, we lose sight of Duchamp and keep faith with conceptual art somewhat faintly. Hence when we read of Mike as missing in Venice and leaving a trail of texts and information, and of anxieties when writing on art in Singapore historically, Duchamp is so remote as virtually not to matter. If we are to regard these two artists in conceptual art terms as they appear in this writing, criteria for doing so are no longer beholden directly to Duchamp (as Lee intimates) but determined differently.

Yet Duchamp is not completely absent or cast adrift in the telling of his visit to South-east Asia, although his relation with conceptual art practices is not overtly, evenly discernible. I round off this account by reading one more text from *Marcel Duchamp in South-East Asia* in which we hear passing mention of conceptual art. It features Roberto Chabet prominently, heroically even. In and through him, Duchamp is venerated and incarnated in the Philippines as in no other location in the region.

Chabet is esteemed as a conceptual artist; in association with Raymundo Albano, the two are hailed as “champions of conceptualist art.”³⁰ In Ringo Bunoan’s telling, Chabet was the first to employ arrangement of things/objects recognised as readymades in a 1969 exhibition in Manila. Works that he produced and displayed in the 1970s are seen as closely related to Duchamp’s set-ups and gestures; so much so that Ringo Bunoan positions the two as assuming conjointly comparable presences. In doing so, Bunoan adopts an adorer’s worshipful attitude towards her master (Chabet).³¹ There is more!

Chabet memorialises Duchamp; here is a description of what may well have been an annual remembrance:

Chabet celebrated Duchamp, literally, by organizing exhibitions on Duchamp’s birthday at the University of the Philippines College of Fine Art, where he taught for over thirty years. While he did not impose a Duchampian kind of practice, he did introduce a conceptual way of thinking about things.³²

An immediate reaction to this report is to recall Harsono’s disavowal of Duchamp as a father. Chabet and Harsono are placed at polar ends in regarding an artist who is installed in some of these accounts as a progenitor of conceptual art.

V

I do not aim to end on this note. There is another matter germane to the topic in this essay, and it is more suitable for affording a pause in these readings of writings on conceptual art in Southeast Asia. It has to do with the description of birthday celebrations initiated by Chabet. Even as he venerates Duchamp, Chabet is said to avoid transferring his esteem onto his students and introduces, instead, “a conceptual way of thinking of things.”³³ I appreciate Bunoan’s discrete positioning of Chabet and Duchamp with regard to the practice of conceptual art. She hints at separating Duchamp’s practice from the emergence of conceptual art in the late 1960s and 1970s (we recall Lee entering a similar observation, earlier). It is important to keep this in mind and furnish it with historical frames.³⁴ I end on this note and with two observations.

Firstly, a distinction is to be made between Duchamp’s provocations and arrangements that appeared and were presented in Europe and the United States early in the 20th

- 30 Leonides V. Benesa, "Printmaking: Art for Many," in *Art Philippines: A History 1521–Present*, eds. Juan T. Gatbonton, Jeannie E. Javelosa & Lourdes Ruth R. Roa (Pasig: The Crucible Workshop, 1992), 369. In 2015 a comparable view was presented by the National Gallery Singapore, in descriptive terms. "In the Philippines, conceptually oriented artists Roberto Chabet and Raymundo Albano developed an exhibition space and programme at the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) that sought to promote a conducive environment to support new artistic approaches in the country, which would be regarded as a form of resistance to the Modernist tenor and internationalist ambitions (favoured by the Marcos regime) dominating the Philippine art scene during the Martial Law era." Adele Tan, "Re:Defining Art," in *Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia since the 19th Century*, ed. Low Sze Wee (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2015), 62–3.
- 31 There is tendency to claim Chabet as the originating wellspring for conceptual art and conceptualism in the Philippines. The situation is a little more complicated than it is customarily made out to be. David Medalla, for instance, is absented and yet felt as a spectral presence in inaugurations of new, unorthodox, experimental practices in the Philippines. Researched accounts may well signify Medalla as a formative precedent for conceptual art and conceptualism in Southeast Asia.
- 32 Ringo Bunoan, "Duchamp: Re-Made and Unmade: A Partial History of the Readymade in the Philippines," in *Marcel Duchamp in South-East Asia*, 17.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 In her essay on Duchamp visiting and being sighted in Southeast Asia, Adele Tan remarks swiftly and grandly: "Duchamp's presence is gleaned from the extensive engagement with other art movements such as Dada, Surrealism, Pop Art, Fluxus, Conceptual Art, and Arte Povera whose ideas made their way to Southeast Asia from the 1970s on." Adele Tan, "Did Marcel Duchamp come to Southeast Asia? They Came, We Saw, He Check-Mated," in *Marcel Duchamp in South-East Asia*, 66. Presence is the thing!
- 35 John Clark writes that modern art in Southeast Asia "exists in a context of severe historical disjunction between the different linguistic and cultural situations inherited from colonialism or neo-colonialism." This is not to signal that writing histories of the region's modern art is not feasible. The task is to write these disjunctions historically; or, as Clark remarks provocatively "there are also broken genealogies which serve as historical parallels between different countries in the region." John Clark, "Modern Art in South-East Asia," *Art and Asia Pacific*, Sample Issue (1993): 35–6.

century from conceptual art movements which emerged in Southeast Asia in the 1970s. One is not necessarily manifested as the other without mediation.

Secondly, the lineage of conceptual art (and conceptualism) in Southeast Asia does not settle upon Duchamp (or anyone else) as a primordial ancestor. Its genealogies have to be

mapped by tracking wellsprings and resources from diverse geographies and histories, including those within the region of Southeast Asia. In all likelihood, the ensuing schemes will not yield continuously linked lineages but broken and separate genealogies.³⁵ These need separate studies. The texts I present for reading may foster such studies.



17.1

To view this content, please refer to
the print edition of the book.

17.1 Lim Tzay Chuen
Mike
2005
Singapore Pavilion Courtyard
51st Biennale of Venice
Image courtesy of the artist