

Which “regionalism” for Southeast Asia?—Curating art in time of globalisation and neoliberalism**

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Abstract

This paper looks into different conceptualisations of “regionalism” in Southeast Asia as put forward by selected art exhibitions on the theme. It explores how these exhibitions engage in knowledge production constructing different versions of “regionalism” for the public. The paper asks if Iola Lenzi’s curation of *Concept Context Contestation*—though politically committed, based on the nation-state paradigm—is the answer for the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) whose ontology pivots on transnationality. The paper, then, engages the exhibition *Missing Links* by Gridthiya Gaweewong to demonstrate that her taking on ‘regionalism’ drew on transnationality. However, in leftist terms, transnationality is not without a problem. Given that the AEC is primarily an economic integration and was conceived as part of the process of the globalisation of neoliberal capitalism, the paper—in favour of art activism and emancipatory politics—proposes that pressure be put on the exhibition’s advocacy of transnationality. It asks if the migrancy and circulations put forward in *Missing Links* merely responded to the globalisation of neoliberal capitalism as a factor of production or resisted it.

Keywords: *AEC, regionalism, globalisation, neoliberalism, curatorial knowledge production, role of art and culture.*

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**Received April 17, 2016; Accepted January 9, 2017

“ภูมิภาคนิยม” แบบใดเป็นคำตอบ สำหรับเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้?— การสร้างนิทรรศการศิลปะในเวลา แห่งโลกาภิวัตน์และนโยบายเสรีนิยม แนวใหม่**

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความชิ้นนี้ศึกษาการสร้างองค์ความรู้เกี่ยวกับ “ภูมิภาคนิยม” ในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้รูปแบบต่างๆ ที่แสดงออกผ่านการออกแบบนิทรรศการศิลปะที่มีเนื้อหาเกี่ยวกับประเด็นดังกล่าวบทความตั้งคำถามว่าการออกแบบนิทรรศการ *Concept Context Contestation* ของ Iola Lenzi ที่แม้จะแสดงบทบาททางการเมืองแต่อยู่บนพื้นฐานของความคิดแบบรัฐชาตินั้นเป็นคำตอบสำหรับประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียนหรือไม่ โดยเฉพาะเมื่อการรวมกลุ่มดังกล่าวอยู่บนพื้นฐานของการปฏิสัมพันธ์ข้ามชาติ จากนั้นบทความศึกษาการออกแบบนิทรรศการ *Missing Links* โดยกฤติยา กาวีวงศ์เพื่อชี้ให้เห็นว่ากฤติยาใช้การมีปฏิสัมพันธ์ข้ามชาติในการนิยาม “ภูมิภาคนิยม” อย่างไรก็ดี ในมุมมองของฝ่ายซ้าย การมีปฏิสัมพันธ์ข้ามชาติก็มีปัญหาในตัวเองกล่าวคือในเมื่อการมีขึ้นของประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียนเป็นการรวมกลุ่มประเทศด้วยเหตุผลทางเศรษฐกิจเป็นหลักและเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของกระบวนการแผ่ขยายไปทั่วโลกของลัทธิทุนนิยมแบบเสรีนิยมแนวใหม่ บทความตั้งคำถามว่าเรื่องราวการย้ายถิ่นฐานและการเคลื่อนที่ที่ *Missing Links* เสนอนั้นมีนัยรับใช้กิจกรรมข้ามชาติภายใต้ลัทธิโลกาภิวัตน์ และทุนนิยมแบบเสรีนิยมแนวใหม่ในฐานะปัจจัยการผลิตหรือไม่ หรือว่าการเคลื่อนไหวดังกล่าวเป็นการต่อต้าน

คำสำคัญ: ประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียน ภูมิภาคนิยม โลกาภิวัตน์ ลัทธิเสรีนิยมแนวใหม่ การสร้างองค์ความรู้ผ่านการออกแบบนิทรรศการ บทบาทของศิลปะและวัฒนธรรม

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As another level of integration has recently taken place in Southeast Asia, from ASEAN to AEC, art institutions in the region enthusiastically welcomed this occasion with exhibitions whose objective was to prepare the public for a better understanding of this new “regionalism”. The Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC) and the Jim Thompson Art Center in Bangkok are two such institutions in Thailand which entrusted themselves with such a task. BACC commissioned *Concept Context Contestation (CCC): Art and the Collective in Southeast Asia* as part of the various activities carried out from mid 2013 to early 2014. The aim of these activities was “to break ground for the public to be aware of the socio-cultural movements of the ASEAN Community that already occurred, are on-going, and will exist in the near future” (BACC 2014, 6). Further down the same Rama I road, the Jim Thompson Art Centre put on two exhibitions on the theme: *Transmissions* (2014) and *Missing Links* (2015). The former’s curatorial statement suggested that the exhibition was “timely as Southeast Asia readies itself for greater political, economic and cultural integration” (Teh 2014). The latter proffered that its goal was “to encourage audiences to rethink the background of this area and how it relates to today’s reality” (Gaweewong 2015). The inception of the AEC was, indeed, the rationale behind the mounting of these three exhibitions this paper discusses.

Concept Context Contestation and the nation-state paradigm

However, despite sharing the same purpose, these exhibitions did not necessarily reflect an identical understanding of what “regionalism” was. At least as advocated by Iola Lenzi’s essay which opens the catalogue of the CCC,¹ what unites Southeast Asia is the art practice which mobilizes “conceptual strategies”. According to Lenzi, these strategies have been embraced by a significant body of regional artists [and] emerge as a defining attribute of contemporary regional art” (Lenzi 2014, 10). This new idiom from Southeast Asia, she emphasizes, is independent from Euramerica’s Conceptual art although both share the same critical spirit and the trajectory to “respond to” as their similar point of departure:

If gleaning context determines the successful reading of conceptual approaches wherever the art is birthed, then conceptual strategies in Southeast Asia legitimately have their own history, independent of Euramerica’s Conceptual art, even while sharing the latter’s primary departure point as a “response to,” or “critique of,” a standard reflex in all cultures (Lenzi 2014, 10).

¹This paper limits its scope of understanding of the exhibition only as advocated by Iola Lenzi.

Despite acknowledging that contemporary Southeast Asian artists knew of Marcel Duchamp² and Joseph Beuys, Lenzi argues that it is the socio-political contexts unique to Southeast Asia that set the conceptual strategies in the region apart from the Euramerican Conceptualism. The agency of “reacting to” unique to the conceptual strategies in the region she reasons,

can be traced to the late twentieth century’s great social, cultural and political shifts [in Southeast Asia]. The sea-change in visual expression that begins as early as 1970s in some locales, later termed “contemporary art”, did not appear from nowhere....In Thailand the Vietnam War brought a growing middle class and changed ideologies. In Vietnam reunification in 1975 and *doi moi* in 1986 yielded progressive alteration to social fabric. In Indonesia of the 1990s, even as the Suharto regime hardened politically, its liberating financial policy helped the dynamics of dissent that eventually toppled the dictator. In the Philippines People Power revealed the potency of the collective. (Lenzi 2014, 11)

Despite the shared critical spirit, Lenzi further argues, “the conceptual tactics, intrinsic to contemporary Southeast Asian art, in their varied expression...and ties with art’s political function in the **nation-building** era, serve to apprehend the world in a broader, more fundamental way than [Euramerican] Conceptual art does” (Lenzi 2014, 22).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate whether Lenzi’s claim for the autonomy, or even superiority, of the conceptual strategies in the region is valid or not.³ What is of interest here is the reason the Singapore-based Canadian curator proffers to qualify that independence. That is, the specific socio-political and cultural context of each of the Southeast Asian countries to which these conceptual strategies respond: that the “[c] onceptual strategies in Southeast Asia can’t be dissociated from cultural and socio-political critique, individual-versus-state-tensions...” (Lenzi 2014, 22). Indeed, “nation building” and “individual-versus-state-tension” reveal that underlying Lenzi’s argument is a mobilisation of the nation-state model of governance.

²Lenzi also reasons that as Duchamp was unveiling *Fountain* in New York, Southeast Asians were simultaneously encountering other schools of art and “Duchamp is unlikely to have stood out from the rest” (Lenzi 2014, 23).

³Although one is quickly reminded that Euramerica’s Conceptual art, too, is often imbued with a strong socio-political dimension, reacting wider dissatisfaction with society and government policies. See for example Joseph Beuys’s social sculpture. (<http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary/c/conceptual-art#introduction>)

An important contribution to the regional art scene though it is, the curatorial emphasis on the socio-political specificity and cultural independence, however, leads to **the viewer's focus on the insularity of each nation state in the region**—each with its own socio-political problems; each to which national artists respond and critique. It is a curatorial space where one barely sees cross-borders activities. It is a series of stark building blocks the curator was proposing, not an organism which thrives on translation or hybridisation. This insularity might, however, compromise, first, the curator's aspiration for these Southeast Asian conceptual strategies to go beyond local registers, and, second, the nation-state model which the curator mobilized might challenge the project's own mandate to prepare the public for the inception of the AEC, the latest integration of the region.

In her refutation of Tony Godfrey's criticism—that the selected works in the exhibition of Southeast Asian art *Making History* (2010) which Lenzi curated were difficult to read: that '...its weakness is the indirect allusions that they [the artists] use to make their point...' (Lenzi 2014, 10)—Lenzi asks, at the beginning of her essay which offers an overarching structure to the whole CCC exhibition, if "...the Southeast Asian frame referenced by Jaarsma, Reamillo *et al* so local as to be undecipherable? Did these works rooted at home, not also succeed in transcending home to speak universally?" (Lenzi 2014, 10). Indeed, while claiming for the closeness of the

Southeast Asian semiotic system, Lenzi, at the same time, stresses on its open structure. She argues that, regardless of their primary thematic sources, these Southeast Asian "works are not boxed into a single, parochial frame, the most successful pieces offering numerous levels of reading, so speaking to wide audiences at home *and* abroad.' (Lenzi 2014, 12; emphasis mine). An admirable initiative to steer away from parochialism, and make these strategies glocal, the "conceptualism's elliptical grammar having the added advantage of shielding from the censors" of the local authorities which the curator flags as unique to the Southeast Asian conceptual strategies, however, might challenge the very aspiration towards glocality. This unresolved contradiction of claiming for a closed and, at once, open semiotic system culminates when a reference is made to Raden Saleh. Although belonging to the nineteenth century (1811-1880), Saleh is cited in the essay to support the argument that conceptual strategies in the region existed long before Euramerican Conceptualism. Saleh's subversion, the curator writes, "sourcing within vernacular visual tradition," used "enlarged, slightly grotesque heads derived from Javanese mythological representation" to portray "the heads of the Dutch officers [... as] the heads of *raksasas*, monsters..." (Lenzi 2014, 16). Not having gone through sufficient process of translation or hybridisation, this appropriation from the local Javanese visual tradition, however, proves not to be universally understood: The Dutch, in the

curator’s own words, “seemingly failed to decode its encrypted defiance. *Arrest* shows Raden Saleh using an allusive approach to implant contentious information **legible to Javanese audiences but not to Dutch ones**” (Lenzi 2014, 16). As the case proves, a Southeast Asian conceptual strategy drawing on a specifically local tradition is after all not so decipherable for others outside the remit in which the work is produced.

Secondly, and most importantly, Lenzi’s emphasis on the specificity of the Southeast Asian conceptual strategies as a closed semiotic and historical system puts the current project of figuring “regionalism” at risk as it reinstates the nation-state model—which ushers the viewer’s attention back to the insularity of the nation-state confine—rather than transnationality which characterizes theregional integration.

“Regionalism” as transnationality

While CCC’s configuration of “regionalism” draws on contestations of socio-political context—specific to each Southeast Asian nation state—via the regional artists’ deployment of semiotically exclusive conceptual strategies, hence the title “*Concept Context Contestation*”, transnationality and translation are central to the Jim Thompson Art Centre’s taking on “regionalism”.

Transmissions (2014), curated by David Teh, explored Thailand’s pre-national unconsciousness to establish links between communities in the region before the epoch of nation-state. This is done via setting the collection of art and artifacts of the Jim Thompson Thai House and Museum to interact with contemporary art practices. The show argued “that ‘tradition’ is not just an inheritance of forms and techniques, but a live process of translation and adaptation that is integral to the experience of modernity” (Teh 2014). Like other important Thai collections, Teh reasoned, the contents of these collections including that of Jim Thompson’s are actually older than Thailand itself—“certainly older than the modern nation state inaugurated in the 1930s”. Teh argued, given these art and artifacts “speaking to us from pre-modern and pre-national times” and “taking in centuries of cultural exchange and an area now spanning many countries, what the museum assembles and displays is also a collection of *regional* art”. (Teh 2014).

While Teh surpassed the nation-state model by regionalizing the “Thai” collection at the Jim Thompson Thai House and Museum, Gridthiya Gaweewong’s⁴ *Missing Links*—also striving to take the audience beyond the divisive forms of nation state—mobilized moving images and time-based works “to encourage audiences to rethink the [transnational] background of this area and how it

⁴ I would like to thank Gridthiya Gaweewong, Director of Jim Thompson Art Centre, and the Centre’s staff for kindly helping me access the materials of *Missing Links* retrospectively.

relates to today's reality" especial "[w]hen the national borders continued to dominate the conceptualisation of Southeast Asia" (Gaweewong 2015).

Referencing Southeast Asia as "the 'contact zone' for Chinese Diaspora, locals and the West since the 17th century and even earlier", Gaweewong stressed that national borders have created ruptures in the region. And to fill these ruptures in, the curator put on offer the "missing links"—an alternative perspective on the region which explored and revisited the shared consequences of colonial and post-war history and how the locals dealt with these situations—an interconnected strand of transnational historical narratives. A major part of this is "the people's sensorium during the process of modernisation, industrialisation, urbanisation and migration in this area".

Modernisation, industrialisation and urbanisation are the interconnected conditions that together bind works in the first part of the exhibition "Modernisation and Urban Conditions": be they a documentary-style visual narrative of what the routine is like in a local glass recycling factory with minimal production technology and a few bare hands involved in the production process in The Maw Naing's *Again and Again* (Myanmar); a wild animistic dance of the human body amidst the revolving heavy machinery in a sugar factory in

Jompet Kuswidananto's *War of Java, Do you Remember?* (Indonesia); an optical seizure of visual dissections of Celestial Motors Jeepney in Maria Taniguchi's *Untitled (Celestial Motors)* (The Philippines) and a graceful waltz danced by a parade of multi-coloured motorcycles in Uudam Tran Nguyen's *Waltz of the Machine Equestrians* (Vietnam).

The second part entitled "Diaspora and Identity" focused on the collective experience of migration and trans-national economy in the region. Brian Gothong Tan's *Imelda Goes To Singapore* (Singapore) spoke at its best of displacement due to economic disparity in Southeast Asia. In his signature static shot of a building of the same name where he used to live, Chris Chong Chan Fui's *BLOCK B* (Malaysia) presented a game of hide and seek. The video required the viewers to participate in semiotic determination and find out themselves who says or does what and where in the Block-B building where families of Indian expatriates live. Short-term residents on short-term (two-to-three years) employment contracts, these civil engineers and their families not only challenged the Malaysian stereotype of "poor Indians" but also offered a good glimpse of what lives and human relations on a constant move are like.

Studio Revolt's *Neang Neak* (Serpent Goddess) (Cambodia/USA) pivoted on a regional myth⁵ of the same name to convey a sense of

⁵*Neang Neak* is a regional myth about a female naga who came into the human world and fell in love with a man. She felt alienated from the humanity due to her long tail.

alienation the choreographer of the video Sophiline Cheam Shapiro experienced during her migration to Los Angeles in early 90s due to her long black hair. Despite being put in the second part of the show, Studio Revolt’s video showed the thread of modernisation and urbanisation running through from the first part. The concrete Olympic Stadium in Phnom Penh and the modern-world crowd in their office attires with mobile phones collided with a female body clad in traditional dress and head gear acting out a regional myth through a traditional dance. The contrast between modern and traditional produced many layers of alienation.

Another piece in the second part of *Missing Links* was Nipan Oranniwesna’s documentary-style video entitled “The storm continues to rage outside and the wind sweeps relentlessly across the land from the same direction”⁶ (Thailand). The video charted a visual narrative of a return journey (of the artist himself, however not visible in the film) from Kawthaung Island in Myanmar through an immigration check point in Thailand’s Ranong province where the border crossing of Myanmar migrant workers to Thailand takes place. The material of the video was, according to the artist, anything in the interstice between Thailand and Myanmar which were connected to one another by the voices of

Aan, a Myanmar worker at BACC whom Nipan earlier interviewed for his previous work, and an anonymous Thai soldier guarding the check point in Ranong. The viewers were made disoriented mistaking the Myanmar-style pagoda and the Buddhist celebration as happening in Myanmar while actually it took place in Thailand’s Ranong. The video’s trajectory towards hybridisation culminated at the end when an obsolete Burmese coin constructed by the artist by moulding the Myanmar and Thai coins together appeared in the end credits.

Unlike Lenzi’s configuration of “regionalism” which directed the viewer’s attention to the confine of nation state, curation at Jim Thompson foregrounded transnationality and the common experience shared by the peoples in the region, bridging the gap caused by national borders. Furthermore, while Lenzi denied external influence from Euramerica on the Southeast Asian conceptual strategies, Gaweewong accentuated such external influence was an important experience shared by and tying different countries in the region together. The American influence and presence was outstanding, for instance, in both Taniguchi’s *Untitled (Celestial Motors)* and Studio Revolt’s *Neang Neak*.⁷

⁶The title is after a line in Bela Tarr’s *The Turin Horse*

⁷According to Anida Yoeu Ali, one of the two members of Studio Revolt, “the Cold War created Vietnam war in the Southeast Asia, then, created situation that encroached on the Cambodian border and bombings which destabilized Cambodia, opening it up eventually to Khmer Rouge” to take control.

Gaweewong's emphasis on the United State's influence in the region is telling to the current project. Especially when the curator drew our attention to the fact that the Southeast Asian region as a whole not only "suffered from colonisation, world wars, wars of independence and cold wars" but also that the integration of the region itself as "a collective entity as a result of a **second wave** of regionalism [was] **steered and convened by the United States...**to fight against the communist threats from Russia and China coming through Vietnam" (Gaweewong 2015; emphasis mine).⁸

Unlike the second wave of regionalism where sovereignty in the international realm is still in an embodied form of identifiable nation states, the current regional integration of the AEC—which is informed by globalisation and neoliberal capitalism—witnesses a kind of sovereignty that is **detrterritorialized** and far from disappearing as usually believed (Hardt and Negri 2000, xii-xiii). In contrast with ASEAN which was conceived under the US hegemony primarily to contain the spread of Communism, the ASEAN Economic Community or AEC, I argue, is fundamentally an economic integration where no one particular nation state is held exercising its hegemony. Furthermore, not only does AEC have more members than ASEAN originally did, the fact that nominally Communist

states like Vietnam and Laos joined the economic bloc underlines the region's official (ideological) submission to the hegemony of capital.

Art and culture in time of globalisation and neoliberalism

Given that the mandate of these exhibitions was to prepare the public for the inception of AEC and that the Director of BACC herself directly referenced the current regional integration as primarily an economic one in the foreword to the CCC catalogue, it is rather surprising that the economic dimension of the integration itself was not much touched upon by the exhibition. The focus had been shifted instead to the ASEAN ASCC and the socio-cultural movements of the ASEAN Community: "While this market is crucially large, one might notice that the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC)—one of ASEAN community councils' pillars—is seldom mentioned or registered" (BACC 2014, 6).

Although research shows that—similar to other economic integrations whose main component is economic liberalisation—the integration pertaining to the AEC is expected to experience negative impacts "on child labour, women, environment and [economic] inequality" (Jitsuchon 2012, 3), the BACC Director chose to stress only on

⁸Although it can be argued that such a reading underestimates the region's quest for "autonomy" from superpowers' intervention, it is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on the point.

...the **positive** effects relating to capital transfer, the job market, labor and many other issues that could be the consequence of this integration of 10 Southeast Asian countries; countries that constitute 10% of the world’s population (BACC 2014, 6; emphasis mine).

Leftist critics identify globalisation and neoliberalism as the source of today’s growing economic inequality and social injustice. Marc James Léger specifically argues that art and culture in time of globalisation and neoliberal governmentality has been stripped of its antagonism and capacity to politically problematise and engage. This is because “[t]he process of globalisation...channelled culture in such a way as to give it a privileged role in economic development” (Léger 2012, 515-527). According to George Yúdice “culture is today treated as an expedient, construed as a resource for socio-political ameliorism and job creation, a process that coincides with capitalist ideology and biopolitical regulation” (Yúdice 2013; paraphrased in Léger 2012, 516). Furthermore, Léger argues “the truth of globalisation [which also underpins the regional economic integration of the AEC] is not the cultural particularity of the location in which the exchange takes place, it is the social act of exchange itself (Léger 2012, 526). Based on this argument, the role of culture as taken up and promoted by BACC, especially that of ASCC, is that which has lost its antagonism and resistance

to politically problematise and engage with inequality as a result of economic globalisation. And based on this leftist argument, the ‘transnationality’ put forward in *Missing Links* through the theme of migration, diaspora and trans-regional economy, together with *Transmission*, must be put under pressure and examined if it merely responded to the current economic integration *insofar as* it promoted free movements of people, goods, capital and services **as factors of production**. Oranniwesna’s “The storm continues to rage outside and the wind sweeps relentlessly across the land from the same direction”, together with Tan’s *Imelda Goes To Singapore* and Fui’s BLOCK B which partly constituted the second part of *Missing Links*, is, after all, depictions of routines of border crossing which facilitate, rather than disrupt, transnational labour migration. Such engagement with regionalism’s ‘transnationality’ might be in contrast with emancipatory politics as the dissolution of national borders here rather ‘implies the *adoption* of the market model and Western economic standards...’ (Léger 2012, 525), than the *rejection* or resistance to them.

Pitting CCC and *Missing Links* against each other begs the question of whether going transnational automatically assigns to loss of political commitment and agency or whether the nation-state paradigm is the only space from where political activism can emerge. But can political activism arise within transnationality too?

Or to turn the axis sideways, does this comparison between *CCC* and *Missing Links* suggest that emancipatory politics demand a return to the (nation-)state form? Or at least that we cannot completely abandon the state and focus only on transnational forces? After all, the state is still central to solving the problems in the region from poverty and inequality to ecological and financial regulation. Of course it will have to be a “new” kind of state too. In other words, will a new regionalism be possible without a new kind of state?

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