SPECIAL SECTION INTRODUCTION

Nation-building in the Post-war Period: Modern Art and Architecture in Southeast Asia and Beyond

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With the end of the Cold War, constant waves of liberalisation and democratisation in Southeast Asia brought significant changes in cultural, social and political aspects in all countries included in the region. The Asian-African Conference at Bandung in 1955 marked the region’s first attempt to neutralise the tension between the communist and allied countries. The Cold War overlapped with the dual process of decolonisation and nation-building. The search for and assertion of national identity could be directly observed through the desire for a symbolic new beginning in architecture and the arts in many of the countries. The establishment of national monuments, stadiums, mosques, museums and art galleries is among the early signals of these early decolonising and nation-building attempts through the changing urban landscape.

This special section is a collection of four articles that discuss the multiple ways of nation-building in the post-war period through in-depth research of exhibitions’ histories, religious architecture and contemporary photography in Southeast Asia.

Sarena Abdullah contextualises the transnational relationship between the Malaysian National Art Gallery and the Commonwealth Institute in London through a close investigation of the international exhibitions organised by the National Art Gallery. Drawing on Malaya’s early exhibition history on multiculturalism and the Malayan identity, Abdullah draws the link between the National Art Gallery in Malaya and the exhibitions that were co-organised with the Commonwealth Institute in London. Abdullah situates Commonwealth Arts Today in 1962, The Commonwealth Arts Festival in Glasgow in 1965, The Malaysian Art Exhibition in 1966 and the Exhibition of Malaysian Art from 1965–1978 co-organised with the Commonwealth Institute within the larger context of the post-World War II period and the British decolonisation in Malaya. These exhibitions can be interpreted as reflecting Malaysia’s need to be recognised internationally amidst the period of Confrontation. The exhibits also served as a platform to promote Malayan identity, which aligned with the Commonwealth’s essential values and ideals.

Using a more regional approach, Hera presents her case study of Art ’76, the inaugural exhibition of Singapore’s National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG) in 1976. Like the exhibitions at the Malaysian National Art Gallery mentioned in Abdullah’s paper, the Art ’76 exhibition was unique within Singapore’s exhibition history. Based on her studies of existing visual and oral archives, Hera critically examines the concept of space. Her paper demonstrates how the case of distinct spatial typology that arose out of the unique institutional and socio-political dynamic in post-independent Singapore can be made. This resonates with other visions of modernity in neighbouring Southeast Asian nations in their post-independent pursuit of nation-building.

Based on the architectural history, Ru Oliveira Lopez discusses how mosque architecture designs in Brunei Darussalam demonstrate cultural identity and construct a collective identity. As the local cultural values and identities in architecture are noticeable in many parts of the world, especially in the post-colonial context, the author investigates how the mosque buildings negotiate the tensions between international style and formal conventions. In addition, the author examines the integration of this Bruneian mosque architecture with vernacular architecture and other forms of expression of Bruneian cultural

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identity. Through a close examination of national and municipal mosques, the author traces how the “Melayu Islam Beraja” architecture was developed as a form of Brunei national identity, resulting in the development of an indigenous architectural style.

As mentioned above, the three articles widened the discourse of architecture and the production of visual art and culture through the exploration of multiple modernisms in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei during the late 1960s. However, Cambodia went through another political turmoil under the Khmer Rouge era (1975–1979). The Khmer Rouge regime slowly built up in the jungles of eastern Cambodia and gradually expanded its control of the Cambodian countryside in a civil war that continued for nearly five years from 1970.

Suzie Kim examines the works of three photographers, Kim Hak (b. 1981), Khvay Samnang (b. 1982) and Neak Sophal (b. 1989), all born in the post-Khmer Rouge era. These third-generation Cambodian photographers construct portraits that steer away from identity or avoid direct evidence or reference to a specific person by avoiding a direct presentation of Cambodian people. Kim argues that these anonymised portraits signify a diverse interpretation of the traumatic past, its resilience and the newly added social problems of current-day Cambodia. Kim also discusses how Cambodia still struggles in the aftermath of the Cambodian genocide despite recent economic growth.

We hope these papers contribute to the recent discourse and research directions in this relatively understudied field of visual arts, exhibitions, architecture and photography in Southeast Asia.