

WHERE ART HAPPENS SESSION I

ART SPACES: POLICIES, AGENDAS, WAYS FORWARD

Saturday 13th June 2009. **Moderator: Beverly Yong**, RogueArt

Through the month of June RogueArt held a series of three talks on the theme “Where Art Happens”. The aim of the talks was to introduce questions and open discussions of how art is presented to and supported by the larger community. Museum and gallery directors, corporate sponsors, art managers, art patrons, and artists, both in Malaysia and within the Southeast Asian region, came together to share their experiences and ideas. The project was made possible with the support of Yayasan Sime Darby. Our media partner was Off The Edge Magazine.

ABOUT THE PROJECT SPONSOR

Yayasan Sime Darby endeavours to support and promote the development of arts and culture in Malaysia. Its aim is to encourage creativity and foster talent amongst Malaysia's multicultural peoples, regardless of age. It will sponsor initiatives to strengthen arts institutions, develop cultural knowledge and resources, and encourage contributions from artists to enhance the quality of life in a multi-cultural society. The desired result of such initiatives is the instilling of awareness and appreciation for the richness of Malaysia's unique cultural heritage and legacy.

General

The primary intention of Session I was to survey the current situation of local art spaces and also to compare ideas and strategies in the regional context. The session was divided into two parts, covering major institutions in the morning and other types of art spaces in the afternoon.

MORNING PANEL

Dr. Mohd Najib Ahmad Dawa, Director General of Balai Seni Lukis Negara (BSLN) spoke about the role of BSLN and its historical context, about changing times and finding new strategies.

When he took up his position in December 2007, he found that they needed to “re-look” and to “refresh” BSLN.

Regarding acquisitions, Dr Najib described a scenario in which the BSLN “cannot compete” in the present art market, while being at the same time blamed for a poor art market, quoting accusations that the BSLN collection was of “no standard” (later rebuffed by **Iqbal Abdul Rahim** who said, “At Bank Negara we see your collection as one of the finest in the country because you have a more or less complete record of art since Independence”), and that artists saw BSLN as the “last stopover after visiting their patrons”. “The scenario today is one of art as a commodity”, in a context of “over 100 commercial galleries”.

It would seem that Dr Najib has adopted the strategy of taking the scenario by the horns, by “looking at art as a creative industry, and promoting the industry locally and internationally”. At the same time he is concerned with “how to bring back visitors and artists” to BSLN.

Some of the initiatives recently made by BSLN are an artist membership card, a directory of private galleries, podcasts on their website to ‘market’ artists, and a regular art news bulletin, a new gallery café showcasing the work of young artists, and a gallery shop selling artist materials.

They have linked up with MATRADE to package “Made in Malaysia” art, recently bringing works to the Dubai Services exhibition. Community outreach programmes include bringing the BSLN out of KL and the Klang Valley.

In programming, Dr Najib said BSLN saw itself as a “national visual cultural centre”, “serving all levels of society and the community”. Hence they have embraced areas such as graffiti art and becak painting, as well as “art as tourism”.

Other planned initiatives are a revaluation of the artworks in the BSLN collection to provide a pricing benchmark for Malaysian artists, organising a weekly bus service for artist studio visits, and an artist’s survival kit.

Most promisingly perhaps, the resource centre is to become a working library within the next 18 months, thanks to an injection of RM200,000 from the National Library.

We learnt some numbers from the Q&A with Dr Najib. Of the RM40m stimulus package allocated to the field of culture, 30m is for the performing arts and 10m for crafts, ‘0 for art’. On BSLN’s own budget allocation, this was RM8m in 2004, climbing to RM16m in 2009, which however Dr Najib said was yet “a poor man’s budget”.

Both **Hasnul Saidon** and **Ahmad Mashadi**, Head of NUS Museum (Singapore) spoke about their role as heads of their respective institutions, and their strategies for the modern-day institution. Both institutions incorporate major fine art collections with other collections of traditional art and artefacts; MGTF is in fact an art and science museum.

In his presentation, “Not Just A Fiction – Making Of Transformers & Directing Transformation”, **Hasnul Saidon** spoke about the process of turning around the institution he took charge of in 2005, beginning with himself. Can a museum director, his team, the museum be open-minded, participative, cross disciplines, pupil-friendly, nature-friendly, gender sensitive, a risk-taker, have a sense of humour? To enable transformation, shifts had to be made “from Government culture to corporate culture”, “from KISS ASS to INTEGRITY” and so forth.

“I said to myself, well, perhaps my team and I should direct the Museum & Gallery like a film director... What we need to do is to imagine and create scenarios that can later be the catalysts of transformation, action and reaction; of dialogue, event, discourse, exchange and more...” He then spoke in detail of the vision, scope and strategies within the ongoing transformation of the museum and gallery.

Among the activities and programmes described, it is noteworthy that “In making the collections more contemporary, MGTF is also purchasing artworks, especially video art by several key Malaysian artists of the 90s and young artists of post 2000”. Apart from an exhibition programme of 12 shows a year, there is “Virtual Screen” a programme that features new media art, explorative video art and independent films as well as a series talks and forums. MGTF also started publishing again in 2007. MGTF even functions as a consultancy for other institutions and private organisations.

In his presentation “NUS Museum - Past, Present and Beyond: Seeking New Perspectives”, **Ahmad Mashadi** considered the situation of NUS Museum in the light of philosophical and practical issues, seeking strategies to make the role of the museum both relevant and creative, referring also to the ‘universal suffrage of museums’.

“Undoubtedly the limitations and exhaustion of existing museum models calls for a renovation,

and probably, one of the possible terrains for the generation of a new paradigm could be the university." (from Graciela de la Torre, "La paradoja del post museo" (2006) cited in Karen Cordero Reiman "A Museum or a Centre for Mexican Contemporaneity?)

Coming to his position from a curatorial background, he has chosen to approach his role as a museum head fully "cognizant of the imperatives of curating". Three main imperatives came to light – 1) that of reflecting history on the contemporary, 2) to negotiate a role in dialogue with the university, its mission not to be subsumed by the university's agenda, and 3) to engage museum audiences in a way that is 'emancipative', divesting the assumed 'authority' of the museum to the individuals who come to it, "to facilitate through a range of curatorial strategies as reflexive practice, a fluid meeting of discourses and perspectives – complementary, differentiated or divergent – recognizing diverse modes of production and reception, and meaning making, "

He spoke of the 'dire situation' of NUS Museum when he came to it a few years ago, practically starting from scratch to build a functioning institution. He then described elements of NUS Museum programming, highlighting its work with NUS students through curatorial workshops. He also noted that while museums are inevitably tied to patronage and the art industry, it was important for museums to maintain a 'distinct position' in this relationship.

It was an exciting privilege to hear **Iqbal Abdul Rahim**, Creative Producer, speak about the forthcoming Bank Negara Malaysia Museum and Art Gallery (BNMMA) sited in a brand new premises at Sasana Kijang in Bukit Perdana, currently still under construction. The museum takes up 10,000 sq metres over four floors.

The main thrust of the Governor's intention for the museum is that the whole of Malaysia should be financially literate. The art gallery is only one of the six galleries in the BNMMA, which also incorporates a children's gallery, Bank Negara Malaysia gallery, Islamic Financial Gallery, Economics gallery, and Numismatics Gallery. The art gallery will be home to 1400 art works from the Bank Negara collection. Three temporary exhibition galleries will showcase two major exhibitions a year, one local and one regional or international exhibition, although these will not be limited to art exhibits.

Other art-related features will be a conservation centre for their own art works later to be opened up to other institutions, a sculpture terrace which will display recently commissioned works by Malaysian sculptors and an artist's residency studio. Scholarships in art history, museology, curatorial studies and archaeology are being looked into. The biennial art competition Anugerah Kijang is to be reintroduced.

During the **floor discussion** "Motivations & Challenges For Local Art Institutions Today" it was interesting that when asked, none of the panellists felt that funding was a particular issue.

Puan Wairah Marzuki asked Iqbal Abdul Rahim if 'cultural literacy' shouldn't be added to the agenda of creating financial literacy at BNMMA, to which he responded that he agreed and that programming at the museum focuses on this issue.

Hasnul Saidon added that it was important to note that at MGTf the majority of visitors are children 7-12 years old, re-emphasizing the importance of strategies to engage audiences, to get over the image of museums as 'sepia'-coloured, haunted places. He later noted that kids easily relate to contemporary art.

Eva McGovern asked about inter-institutional relationships in Malaysia. *Ahmad Mashadi* said that “collaborative structures are crucial” in order to allow “many different perspectives to emerge”. *Hasnul Saidon* expanded with “Now is the age of global collaboration rather than competition – decentralisation. We have no choice so please we have to work together.”

AFTERNOON PANEL

The afternoon panel included **Rifky Effendy**, an independent curator from Indonesia, **Pang Khee Teik**, Arts Programme Director of The Annexe @ Central Market, **Simon Soon**, Independent Curator and co-founder of ARTERI and gallerist **Syed Nabil Syed Nahar**, of NN Gallery. Unfortunately representatives from a number of key local alternative spaces, such as Patisatu and I2(Art Space) were unable to attend. We were nonetheless offered many stories of and ideas for the development of art spaces both at home and abroad.

Rifky Effendy spoke on the situation “Post-Art Boom in Indonesia”, taking us on a visual tour of Indonesian art spaces today. He described the good and bad effects of the recent (2007-2009) boom in contemporary Indonesian art.

On the minus side: the proliferation of young artists being influenced by the successful ‘styles’ of more senior artists; the “goreng” strategies of speculators and dealers to raise prices of contemporary art; the auction house bubble; the crisis in curatorship, becoming subordinate to the art market system; the lack of art criticism and journals, replaced by “advertorial” content.

On the plus side: drawing, objects, photography, and recently video have emerged as alternatives to painting in the art market; young artists have become rich and have a better life; a boom in art publication thanks to commercial gallery support; the internationalisation of Indonesian art; the development of artist management; and finally the upgrade of galleries and the appearance of many new galleries.

The recent economic crisis has also prompted new building owners to let out mall space to galleries temporarily, creating opportunities for the non-art community to take in some art, and for commercial galleries to develop new collectors. We were shown a vast array of established and new commercial galleries from Jakarta to Bali, Bandung, Yogyakarta, Semarang, and Magelang.

Besides commercial spaces, there are also many artist-run spaces, including new additions such as Sangkring, Jumaldi Alfi’s new space, and S14, all in Yogyakarta. There are also recent private museums and art centres, including the Akili Museum, Budi Tek Museum, Semarang art space, Selasar Sunaryo, Salihara cultural centre and a new private art and science centre being developed.

Another positive development is that some commercial galleries are willing to take on curatorial projects and experimental works aside from more mainstream works.

The effect of the economic crisis has been a correction in the art market. Galleries and dealers are working hard to cultivate younger collectors. And curators and artists are starting to search for new roads for the development of Indonesian art.

Pang Khee Teik talked about how the Annexe Gallery started with the new landlord shifting Central Market artists to the “outhouse at the back”, and how architect Nani Kahar then convinced him to turn the whole building into a cultural centre. At first they had planned designated spaces for music, theatre and art, but found that it made more sense to allow artists

to use the space as they wished, offering them only lights and space, forcing artists to be creative in their use of material and resources.

During his visit to New York last year, he found there was no place like the Annexe there – a centre where everything happens. In a city where the arts were so established, so well-funded, everyone fell into a niche. When he went to Japan, he found a wholehearted embrace of the creative cities concept - the Mayor of Yokohama spoke of how the city had bought over buildings for art events. This seemed great until he found that in Yokohama and Kobe such initiatives had driven out earlier communities without engaging them, such as elderly people made homeless by the earthquake. While he used to complain that there was no good arts policy in Malaysia, he now found that 'policing' could be counterproductive to the creativity of a place.

Pang brought up the Malaysian National Cultural Policy of 1971. Although not mentioned much these days, it is "a ghost" at our back, "trying to define what is acceptable and not acceptable culture". "When the state defines culture, it always limits cultural production of the community".

"I believe in a space where people are free to define culture for themselves". Regarding the "role of activism and NGOs - like artists, both are forms of expression that are threatened, or given less space especially in the media" so another aim is "a space where activism and art meet, finding creative ways of talking about indigenous rights, migrant rights, sexual rights, etc."

Information and knowledge are powerful in our society where it is not always freely accessible, and bringing together different areas of the arts can together add to knowledge. "I don't want the Annexe to be considered a multi-disciplinary space – I'd like to see us as a space that will become "post-disciplinary".

Simon Soon offered us a sampling of independent and alternative spaces around the region. 'Independent' often refers to typically artist-run spaces not backed by commercial or institutional interests, whereas 'alternative' describes the "production of artistic knowledge that is outside the normal avenues which for many of us are the first points of experience with works of art".

In Kuala Lumpur, Lost Generation Space, best known for the Not that Balai Festival, with its clear anti-institutional stance, provides a multi-disciplinary platform, encouraging risk-taking and at times provocation. Lost Gen mainly runs as a studio for local artists and foreign artists in residence. Green Papaya in Manila is a similar set up with more frequent exhibitions as well as poetry recitals and music gigs.

The sort of work produced at such spaces is at times raw and unpolished, and "not concretized as you find in commercial galleries or institutions".

He described Findars space in the Annexe, talking about its Rain Project, a collaborative performance with video artists and ambient musicians, and a weekly music programme including improvised sound art, and curated sound programmes. SicKL (Studio in Cheras KL) hold an open lab every two months, with a curated programme of video art, poetry recitals, performance and sound art.

Such artist-run spaces engage the arts community as a whole, “providing a comfortable, non-threatening space which allows artists to create new works and challenge themselves without the expectation of placing a commercial value on their work.”

In Bangkok, WhiteSpace Gallery shows works by fresh art graduates which are not necessarily commercial, such as installation, video and photography. Sol Gallery is video art-based with a workshop component where participants are taught how to use software programmes for multimedia art works. The Conference of Birds specifically addresses art dealing with politics.

In Vietnam, Saigon and Hanoi showed different approaches to alternative spaces. Spaces such as San Art in Saigon are run by Viet Q (overseas Vietnamese returnees) and take a more Western view of contemporary practice, seldom referencing local subjects. In Hanoi, Na San Dak is an alternative ‘space’ under a wooden stilt house. Its focus on installation and performance art, an ephemeral and ambiguous form, reflects perhaps the fact that Hanoi is the administrative centre of a government which maintains repressive control over artistic production.

Spaces outside of the urban context show that art doesn’t only happen in the city. The term GalDes (Galeri Desa) in Indonesia describes community-based kind of spaces such as Kersan Art Studio and Sangkring, which like House of Matahati in KL, were founded by successful artists to promote the works of younger artists. Kersan Art Studio focuses on women artists, providing them a space for discussion and exhibition.

In Chiangmai, Simon surveyed ‘land’ spaces. The Land Project initiated by Kamin Lertchaiprasert and Rikrit Tiravanija is based around a rice field. International artists were invited to build experimental homes and other constructions there, including a biogas system created by Superflex. A more sustainable initiative seems to be the Kon Plong Village of Creativity which treats the land as a huge canvas, focusing on multi-disciplinary projects aimed at sustainability.

To conclude, he underlined the potential of alternative and independent spaces to exceed what we normally understand as art, allowing artists to experiment and play with new ideas and approaches. They “require our support as an audience” as such spaces are “leading the way in what art making as well as art thinking may be in our near future”.

Syed Nabil Nahar related the history and philosophy of NN Gallery, which he started with his sister in 1996 in a small bungalow in Jln Imbi, later relocating to Ampang. Their main focus has been to promote Malaysian art, and on occasion crafts and ceramics, a variety of things that encompass Malaysian art and culture. Our love is to promote Malaysian art as best we can. Our ideal situation for an exhibition is to have a cohesive body of work, to show the best of the works of an artist and to have a nice catalogue to accompany it. We obviously want an audience to come to sustain the exhibition and as a commercial gallery of course we want the sales to come too”. “Running a gallery is a labour of love... I’m sure all gallery owners share the same passion especially during this difficult times when it can be difficult to sustain the market.” His message to artists was to keep making works and keep showing. He talked of early challenges, such as cultivating new collectors, although “things are slowly changing with a lot of younger collectors coming in who are generally quite sophisticated.”

The afternoon **floor discussion** “Creating Art Spaces In The Era Of Boom & Bust” stimulated a diverse smattering of questions, veering at times into the market and censorship. On the theme of art spaces, *Yap Sau Bin* asked Simon Soon to elaborate on the differences and similarities between alternative spaces in different countries.

Simon made the point that a primary difference between independent spaces in the region and those in the West is funding, where they can often get government or other funding. In this region it seems that funding/support comes largely from the artists themselves. Pang however pointed out that the National Arts Council in Singapore had also started to identify art groups to 'house' in spaces on the condition that such groups have to prove their sustainability. Rifky said that in case of Indonesia, or Yogyakarta at least, the difference is that they can quite easily make art spaces, or even run programmes in a house, as in the case of Mess56, because rent is very cheap.

Raja Anuar asked Syed Nabil "In your personal opinion do you think it is an advantage to have new galleris in a market as small as Malaysia?"

Syed Nabil replied that he definitely thinks there should be more galleries but stressed that we should "Differentiate between proper galleries and certain frame shops that moonlight as galleries". With growth of more galleries, certain galleries could specialise. When probed by Pang on his issue with moonlighters, Nabil said that professional galleries "have invested a lot of money into their space, investing in artists, publications for artists", "one of the problems is that there is no gallery association to help validate the position of galleries".

John Kirk, an American journalist asked "Do you see a correlation between more art spaces more political art, more commercial spaces less political art, or any relationship between the kinds of art being produced when the commercial is dominating, more or less?"

Pang talked about how the Annexe as a "democratic" (for hire) space had room for both "watercolours of Putrajaya" and more politically conscious works, that it was important for their audiences to see both sides of the political context. He was "happy to see more spaces even commercial spaces giving space to political art". Apparently the Annexe has never had to censor their exhibits, although they "urge artists to say things in a way that will not cause us to be shut down".

Artist and curator *Faizal* asked Rifky "Do you think Malaysia needs an auction house?"

Rifky explained that a secondary market system is necessary in Indonesia as there are a lot of artists and galleries— "auctions in Indonesia are the only place for young collectors to buy works" as it is often impossible for them to acquire certain high-in-demand artists from galleries. Auctions also show clearly price standards as well the 'game' being played - fake prices etc. "I don't know in the case of Malaysia – how many collectors there are here, how many galleries."