

**Report of
IPS CDD: Southeast Asia via Singapore: Musings on a New Museum
Mr Kwok Kian Chow,
Director
The National Art Gallery, Singapore (TNAGS)**

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By

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Introduction

The National Art Gallery, Singapore (TNAGS), due to open in 2013, is an art gallery that will have a contemporary Southeast Asian focus. The Gallery is envisioned as a civic and creative space established for the enrichment, enjoyment and engagement of Singaporeans and visitors from all over the world, and aims to be accessible to its visitors and users in physical, intellectual, cultural, social and virtual terms.

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) organised a closed-door discussion on TNAGS and its mission, with approximately 40 participants in attendance. For TNAGS, the discussion formed an important part of its ongoing consultation with artists, scholars and the public to help refine the museum's mission. Mr Kwok Kian Chow, Director of TNAGS, presented a paper outlining TNAGS' concept of Southeast Asian art and culture, and what that would mean for the museum itself. Mr Kwok's presentation was followed by comments from two discussants, Associate Professor (A/P) Goh Beng Lan from the Southeast Asian Studies Programme, National University of Singapore (NUS), and Dr Charles Merewether, who is Director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts at LaSalle College of the Arts. Participants then saw a video presentation of the Gallery interior, and also contributed to a broader discussion.

Ong Keng Yong, IPS Director, opened the Closed-Door Discussion with welcome remarks. He noted that the Singapore government to date has put in a tremendous amount of resources to develop the arts, and expressed the hope that the end-result would fulfil the government's expectations and add the "buzz" that is needed in Singapore. With regard to the new Gallery,

he said that the planned focus on Southeast Asia art is “extraordinary”, a “greater idea” that is timely, for in his time as Secretary General of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) he had received feedback that more needs to be done to showcase Southeast Asian culture and heritage. He recalled an instance wherein Singapore was described as an “[expert] of cultural mining” by a senior Indonesian leader. Finally, he expressed the hope that participants would benefit from the subsequent discussion.

Tan Tarn How, IPS Senior Research Fellow, then gave an introduction to the discussion. He thanked Mr Kwok Kian Chow, TNAGS Postdoctoral Curatorial Fellow Dr Adele Tan and TNAGS for the opportunity to hold this event. He noted that policies surrounding the Gallery were very much a work-in-progress and public consultation in this form and in the present stage of planning were rare. The move to hold the Closed-Door Discussion, he said, shows courage and conviction on the part of TNAGS.

Presentation

Mr Kwok Kian Chow prefaced his discussion by noting that IPS and TNAGS have agreed to focus on “ideas” rather than collection artefacts, and in particular on the conceptual aspects of the museum such as the museological vision and positioning of the Gallery. In terms of physical location, TNAGS will be housed in two historic buildings, City Hall and the former Supreme Court building. At an earlier stage of planning, TNAGS had convened a curatorial advisory committee which was chaired by Professor Kwok Kian Woon of Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Assistant Professor Lai Chee Kien of the National University of Singapore. The committee to discuss the vision of the Gallery was composed of academics, artists and curators. In 2009, a two-month-long workshop was held to discuss the details of TNAGS’ operations. The aim was to provide an update on the Gallery’s development, and to share the current institutional thinking on TNAGS. The event was also to form part of the public consultation for TNAGS.

Mr Kwok explained that the title of his presentation, “Southeast Asia via Singapore: Musings on a New Museum”, was chosen to emphasise the relationship between Singapore and the region. He noted that TNAGS is very much a platform for cultural relations, and hence there was the need to confront the idea of “Southeast Asia” as a coherent and congruent region, as well as “Singapore” as a subjectivity given the “National” in the name of the Gallery. Generally, he said, other “National” art galleries such as the National Gallery in London showcase national art culture and history. However, these “National” galleries operate in fields of art history knowledge that are stable, with clearly identified periods such as the Renaissance. The

challenge for TNAGS in presenting Singapore and Southeast Asian art history, said Mr Kwok, is that the field is new, and the research and knowledge base has not been extensive. There is a relative absence of a Southeast Asian art historical discourse that could be depended and built upon. The question that needs to be answered is: why Southeast Asian art history in the first place, and what kind of relationship is there between the Singapore (“the subjective”) and Southeast Asian art history (the intended art display)?

Mr Kwok noted that Ms Jane Ittogi, along with other TNAGS board members, had helped in sharpening the thinking and vision for the Gallery. The purpose of the discussion was to go further in developing museological vision of the Gallery. He took the opportunity to introduce Postdoctoral Curatorial Fellow Dr Adele Tan and Curators Seng Yu Jin and Joyce Fan. He also acknowledged the input from Adjunct Curators Lindy Poh and Professor Patrick Flores.

Mr Kwok listed the three themes that he would cover in his presentation:

1. **Art history and TNAGS.** How do we “do” Southeast Asian art history, and what does it mean for the Gallery? What has the Gallery done so far?
2. **The discursive aspects of such a Gallery.** How would the Gallery relate to the broader intellectual and cultural landscape of the region? How would TNAGS participate in, benefit from, and contribute to existing knowledge in fields such as anthropology and music? According to Mr Kwok, the field of cultural studies has been identified as an extremely important field for the Gallery other than art history.
3. **The museological¹ and experiential aspects of the Gallery.** Mr Kwok noted that the Gallery will serve as a platform for multiple programmes and activities for a variety of different audiences. Therefore, TNAGS sees the museum as a confluence of many opportunities, some of which experiential, that go beyond the acquisition of knowledge.

An early statement on the institution’s website reads:

“... [TNAGS will be] a new art visual arts institute which will contribute to building Singapore as a regional and international hub for visual arts. This institution will focus on the display, promotion, research and study

¹ The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines “museology” as the “science or profession of museum organisation and management”.

of Southeast Asian art including Singapore art, as well as play host to international art exhibitions.”²

Mr Kwok pointed out that the idea of Southeast Asian art and Singapore as a hub for such cultural production has been included in the concept of what TNAGS will be since its germination. At the current stage, the Gallery proposes to change the phrase “play host to” to “co-curate” as it is important that the museum directly integrates Singapore, Southeast Asian art and international art, working between travelling exhibitions and permanent collections, as well as facilitating dialogue. TNAGS, he said, is not just about Singapore *or* Southeast Asia; the Gallery’s collection and presentation will, instead be about international *relations*.

Mr Kwok noted that some would consider the art historical approach as relying on a chronological presentation. He clarified that the Gallery has indeed adopted a chronology-based presentation, but mainly to provide structure. He also noted that even within a structured presentation there are many opportunities for creative exploration. He recalled Ms Ittogi’s reminder that the Gallery’s presentations should not be closures – or definitive readings of artworks – in themselves, but should facilitate and contribute to further scholarship. He sees TNAGS’ position vis-à-vis art history, including broader world and Asian art history as one that is interactive. For there will be interest internationally for art histories which are considered to be beyond the mainstream. Therefore, the Gallery will create networks with these fields and discourses, and contribute to current broader discussion.

There are “interesting challenges” in presenting Southeast Asian art of the 19th century, said Mr Kwok. Instead of providing a straightforward presentation of Western influence in Southeast Asian art, the Gallery is going to provide a broader cultural milieu of the region. This means that Western influence on the cultural production of the region is going to be only one part of the presentation; indigenous art such as Buddhist art in Thai arts and crafts would also be included along with considerations of local aesthetics and cultural sensibilities. He noted that historically there had been multiple cross-fertilisation or exchanges of ideas between the West and Southeast Asia, within the region itself and within the broader Asia region, and he hopes to provide a better context of 19th to early 20th century regional art with these flows in mind.

According to Mr Kwok, another idea important to the Gallery is the recognition of the seventies period as an “important turn” in Southeast Asian modern art. During this period, he said, several groups of artists emerged in the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand in response to political transformations of the time. These groups of artists produced work in a more emphatic and socially vocal fashion using a wider range of media. Therefore, the Gallery’s curatorial

² <http://nationalartgallery.sg/home.html>

concerns have to be broadened in order to accommodate multiple cultures and media outside painting and sculpture, so that artworks may be better contextualised and hence better understood.

In what Mr Kwok termed as “the evolving museology of TNAGS”, the discipline of art history will only inform one part of the knowledge production and discursive development at the Gallery. He noted that term “Southeast Asia” has had different valences at different historical moments. For instance, there were moments where Sri Lanka and Yunnan in China were considered to be part of the region. The idea of “Southeast Asia” then, said Mr Kwok, is really a set of historical conditions in time. In this light, the Gallery plans to encourage thinking of *cultural Southeast Asia* as a discursive unit not necessarily bound by geography. The region’s interactions with rest of the world and with the Southeast Asia diasporas will also be considered. He emphasised that while the art history framework is useful, it is insufficient, and must be complemented by other disciplines such as history and sociology. Mr Kwok also acknowledged the fact that the idea of “Southeast Asia” itself has been quite fluid, and that the Gallery must consider artistic flows to and from places beyond the region itself, such artistic connections between Manila, Xiamen and Singapore. These are aspects of “Southeast Asia” that must be considered in any effort to add to existing knowledge.

In the course of developing the new Gallery, the curatorial team was also reminded by Patrick Flores against having a clear line between art history and politics, as social and cultural conditions surrounding the artwork are crucial for one to get a fuller picture of any artistic expression. He said during the 2009 workshop, A/P Goh Beng Lan also pointed out that the term “Southeast Asia” in itself carries connotations of the modern and modernity, both of which emerged in Europe at a certain point in history. Broadly speaking, the “modern” has often been seen to be introduced in the non-Western world, with the implication that the modern also ushered the beginning of modernism. However, Southeast Asian art history is a lot more complex when one looks at art of early masters, for example, Raden Saleh of Indonesia, for there were emerging strands of tension between the colonial and nationalist in such artworks. She further suggested that it is then possible to consider cultural history as a parallel history of modernity in Southeast Asia.

For the curatorial team, the development of the Gallery has also factored in the audience. During the 2009 workshop, Dr Mairii Aung Thwin, Assistant Professor of Southeast Asian/Burmese History at NUS, suggested the Gallery consider Stanley Fish’s theory of the audience as “interpretive communities”. The visitor’s experience at the Gallery should be an experience of creating and learning at the point of encounter. The place of artworks in such a

setting would be that of primary source for understanding Southeast Asia, and the Gallery aims to cultivate such interpretive communities through learning platforms where one's learning is enhanced.

In his closing, Mr Kwok noted that the Gallery is very fortunate in that the government is putting in a lot of resources for its development. There have been many critiques of museums as authoritarian institutions as they have generally tended to present materials in a structured way which lacks openness and democracy. He observed that in the 1960s artists have performed social critique of the museum *qua* institution by bringing their own works to the museum, which underlines the need to pay attention to the museum process. In Singapore, through subjectivity and our own art history, the Nanyang School of artists had been looking for regional identity and culture. So far, there has been a predilection of wanting to look at the region and be part of the region. Mr Kwok stated that it is important to note the very process of mapping the "national" in the course of curating a national gallery, whereby our identity has hitherto been outward-looking towards the region and the world. The Gallery's focus on "Southeast Asia" and the possibility of going beyond – in terms of both the geographic region and academic disciplines – are opportune for an unfolding of different layers of what "Southeast Asia" means.

Mr Tan Tarn How then introduced the two discussants, A/P Goh Beng Lan and Dr Charles Merewether. He noted that in the course of devising the programme for the Closed-Door Discussion it was felt that other perspectives should be represented. Thus, two discussants hailing from different fields – A/P Goh, a Southeast Asianist, and Dr Merewether, an art historian and curator – were invited to comment on Mr Kwok's presentation.

Discussant I: A/P Goh Beng Lan

A/P Goh, who is Head of the Southeast Asian Studies Programme at NUS, congratulated the TNAGS team for their work thus far, and noted that they are working on an "exciting project" so ambitious in scope that "only Singapore" has the capacity to pull the project off. She noted that preparations for the Gallery amount to an "exciting but also onerous task", as the issue of how Southeast Asian art can be represented is a tricky one with no easy answers for two reasons. First, she suggested that there can "never" be consensus among Southeast Asian art experts on how Southeast Asian art history could be told. Second, there is also the issue of the difficulty of fully articulating art and aesthetic issues within the realm of language.

A/P Goh suggested that the TNAGS team acknowledge the limitations that are present, and work with these limitations in mind. As she is an anthropologist, she sees the art museum as a political institution that is linked to power, the power elite and the existing social hierarchy. The museum's particular structures of representation are both inclusionary and exclusionary. The art museum is powerful as it gets to define meaning around artists and their artwork. She noted that the TNAGS project is important as it establishes solid but also open grounds of meaning for the understanding of "Southeast Asia", hence establishing a platform for others to also embark on similar projects. Therefore, there needs to be a lot of thought about what the Gallery is going to represent, include and exclude.

With regard to the challenges and various possible ways of representing Southeast Asian art, A/P Goh said that Mr Kwok's three themes have provided an important framework that pins down the challenges they have had to deal with. In terms of historiography³ the field of Southeast Asian art is a necessarily complex one due to the myriad of artistic borrowings over time. The discursive examination is important as any organisational structure of thought impacts the way we think about the relationship between art and culture. She added that the experiential factor is also crucial because an experience or encounter with an artwork always localises it. Using artistic and open narratives may, over time, foster conversations and develop analytical categories for the nascent field.

A/P Goh stated that she saw two "conceptual dilemmas" in defining the place of Southeast Asian art in Singapore, and in a Singapore gallery. The idea of modern art, which frames and informs the collection, is problematic as the origins of modern art, which has been a Western narrative thus far. The question for A/P Goh is: how does such a term and framing narrative translate in Southeast Asia? What are the links, and the differentiations within Southeast Asian art in terms of style, genre and aesthetics? Second, she proposed that to look at Southeast Asian art critically is to interrogate what we know about modern art and modernism beyond mainstream Western knowledge itself. One must look at connections and understand that there was, prior to the onset of Western modernity, an earlier era where regional artistic practices were embedded in the Chinese, Islamic, and Indian civilisational networks. There might have been an earlier form of modernity in this form of embedment, and "modernity" as we know is perhaps only a replication or a recent wave upon earlier instances. In this regard, A/P Goh said that she was inspired by Alexander Woodside's book, *Lost Modernities: China, Vietnam, Korea, and the Hazards of World History*, which argued that preindustrial states such as China and

³ The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* has three definitions for the term "historiography": a) the writing of history; b) the principles, theory and history of historical writing; and c) the product of historical writing.

Vietnam had worked out rational structures of governance far ahead of their European contemporaries.

A/P Goh sees opportunities for the reflection on some issues of regionalism within the ambit of the new Gallery. Three issues she would like TNAGS to explore in the presentation of its collection are: i) regionalism; ii) diversity; and iii) the issue of non-indigeneity in Southeast Asia. In her opinion, the Gallery's decision to approach the issue of regionalism is a good idea, but would like the Gallery to go further and examine in detail the tension, conflict and processes of adaptation inherent in a regionalist project, in addition to the agreements, coherence and congruity such a project may propose and effect. Such a move, she said, will also foster artistic expression without producing or policing cultural purity, an important and delicate issue given the rise of fundamentalism and increasing religiosity globally. The idea of regionalism, she said, should not be used to force integration, and should be encouraged to interrogate problems in the region, such as the increasing gap between the rich and the poor. Another possible subject of inquiry would be, how has Singapore dealt with regional roots in the face of hegemony? For A/P Goh, the Gallery presents tremendous opportunities in examining critical questions through the presentation of its collection.

A/P Goh noted that one of the strategies TNAGS is using to build up its collection is diversity. For her, the idea is a good one, but is now being plagued by the stigma of cliché. Diversity, she said, should not be just matter of representing diverse styles or group of artists, but also analytical categories and cultural politics rather than just a picture of hegemony. In terms of the issue of indigeneity (which encompasses issues such as colonialism, sense of belonging, the question of "civilisation", *et cetera*), A/P Goh suggested that it would be good to look outward for the story on Singapore art, as it encourages transformations and translocality as key to modernity's interrogation of the local and the essential. The idea of indigeneity could be used to interrogate narratives of inclusivity and exclusivity, especially in light of Singapore's issues surrounding the relationship between Singaporeans and Foreign Talent. The idea of indigeneity could also used to interrogate migration or even the condition of subalternity⁴ which according to A/P Goh is an important structure of feeling by the non-indigenous. She suggested that, in fact, the state and experience of subalternity informs a great part of Singapore's feeling towards its neighbours.

⁴ The term "subaltern" refers to a junior officer in the British Army. In colonial times, subalterns are commonly natives who serve senior British officers while maintaining order in the lower (native) ranks. In the field of postcolonial studies, the term "subaltern" is used to describe a state where a colonised individual's subjectivity is torn between that of the coloniser and the colonised.

She noted a sentence on the Gallery's website, which reads, "The National Art Gallery will be a civic and creative space, established for the enrichment, enjoyment and engagement of Singapore residents and visitors from all over the world." The challenge implicit in this line is to imagine TNAGS as a site of civic and political engagement which may run counter to the establishment, the elite, and the logic of the art market. She proposed that the Gallery regard art as objects of cultural production which engages with its circumstances, that are always culturally mediated, rather than use the Western idea of art as being transcendental. Art, she said, is a practice embedded within society, and may thus provide terms of inclusivity broader than that of the state or art market, and may allow one to interrogate issues endemic in modern society. Another way to think about the challenge is, how can a Southeast Asia gallery not foreclose narratives of the past, and make art relevant to the present?

Finally, A/P Goh noted that contemporary art is still considered "a little peripheral", with painting and sculpture enjoying privileged positions. She cautioned that historically there were moments where art practices that we now take for granted were considered peripheral. She reminded TNAGS to be careful in its bracketing of different kinds of art, with some forms considered as more important than others.

Discussant II: Dr Charles Merewether

Dr Charles Merewether, Director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts at the LaSalle College of the Arts, was the second respondent. He prefaced his comments by stating that he appreciated the "courage" showed by a sitting Director to put out a concept paper for public consultation. Dr Merewether began his comments with a suggestion based on his reading of Mr Kwok's paper: perhaps, he said, TNAGS could be named "The TransNational Gallery of Singapore". For Dr Merewether, the paper was "full of conundrums", which provided him "a good starting point" for thinking issues through, and gave him the opportunity to think through certain questions other national galleries have had to think through. Some of these museums, he said, have come up with "really odd" solutions to the problems they faced. For instance, he said, the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts in Amman chose to exhibit only art from Muslim countries. However, such a move engendered other issues, such as that of congruence when, for example, an artwork from Malaysia is exhibited next to a piece from Syria. According to Dr Merewether, the organising logic which governs every operation of the Gallery is crucial. Further to his renaming suggestion, he proposed that the stairways and passageways of the Gallery, typically seen as transitional spaces, may be a good way of organising the transnational art history of the region.

Dr Merewether noted the “subject” of inquiry, in this case “Southeast Asian art”, can only be formed after a critical orientation and foundation has been formed. He turned to the issue of cultural history, which in turn gave rise to the discipline of art history after German cultural historians migrated to new lands. These cultural historians “wrote the outline of Western art history as we know it today”. He stated that it is important for TNAGS to think about, and come back to, the region as cultural history, for as to what constitutes art production – let alone cultural production – in any one of the countries may not have been clearly established. He cited London’s National Gallery as an example. Some items in the collection were acquired for their artistic value, while some were acquired for their value as cultural artefacts. Cultural history needs to be relooked in terms of the founding of art history, and also broader definition that can accommodate the art practices of Southeast Asia. Therefore, there is a need to think about what gets included and what gets excluded. For instance, although ceramics are not part of the Western canon of “art”, it may be a key site of cultural production in a particular country.

Turning to the title of the Closed-Door Discussion, “Southeast Asia via Singapore”, Dr Merewether remarked that the phrase had reminded him of “stopovers” or the idea of transit. If Singaporeans want Singapore to be “more than a stopover”, he said, then what constitutes the national and Singapore must be considered more deeply. The questions to consider are: what is the relationship between Singapore and the region? How are audiences supposed to make a connection? Is Singapore a “house” or a “home”, with the former merely a container and the latter a sense of place that is “lived in”? Dr Merewether suggested that thinking more about the layout of the Gallery may be beneficial.

On the issue of the modern and modernity, he recalled his personal experience working with the Art Gallery of New South Wales, where rooms are devoted to aboriginal work, white-Australian work and international work. These works were installed in separate spaces with no explication of the flows and reciprocity that may have informed these bodies of art. He cited a second example of the National Gallery in London, where the collection is not solely focused on British art. For Merewether, it is a national gallery without being too “National”. The “National” in this case is not representation, but a sort of symbolic expression of Britain’s multi-faceted pasts and peoples. The United Kingdom has, over its history, seen multiple waves of immigration and by and large museums in England have sought to be more progressive and sought to reflect relations rather than representations as a result.

Dr Merewether also posed the issue of expatriate artists in Singapore, and their place in the upcoming Gallery. Would the Gallery include works by expatriate artists? What criteria would TNAGS use to “admit” expatriate artists? Do they have to have spent a significant amount of

time in Singapore? Would he or she have made an impact on the local arts scene? For him, these are important questions to ponder as the process would also contribute to the understanding of the national in the Singapore context.

Following the presentation and responses, a video fly-through of the Gallery interior was shown to participants.

Discussion

A broader discussion followed the presentation and two responses, and was moderated by Mr Arun Mahizhnan, IPS Deputy Director. Below is a summary of the conversations that ensued.

- *What Can We Do with the Space?*

Dr Merewether noted that the Gallery has been criticised for using existing buildings rather than a custom-built one, but something positive to think about from this is what constitutes modern Southeast Asia. One way to broach this is to deliberate on colonial modernity. Colonial modernity is what made Singapore “modern”, and colonial modernity is encapsulated in the very space the Gallery will occupy, along with Singapore’s place in the region and its links with the Cold War, given the history of the space. He suggested that the Gallery deploy “tortuous passageways” in service of this history, and acknowledge that the buildings themselves as modern. TNAGS, he said, should foreground the modern characteristic of the space. He also suggested that the Gallery foreground the problematic of a “mixed-up” body of Southeast Asian art so as to interrogate the region itself.

A participant observed that leaders like Dr Goh Keng Swee were very aware of Singapore’s position in the region as “the sheriff’s deputy”. Further, he noted that any ethnography of Southeast Asian cultural production, such as the field of architecture, cannot be satisfied simply by Western cultural models. He noted from the video fly-through of the Gallery interior that the space will be full of white boxes and white spaces, which will lead to the “sanitisation” of objects which are then viewed in isolation. This “diversity of separate objects”, he said, is an aesthetic that is antithetical to the Southeast Asia experience. He suggested that in order to present the Southeast Asian experience more fully in all of its commonalities *and* disjunctures, an “outrageous” treatment of the space – such as using a Minangkabau structure to link the Old Supreme Court and City Hall buildings – may be necessary.

Following up on the previous participant’s comments, A/P Goh suggested that TNAGS could also look into “interdisciplinary” productions in other media which lead on to art productions in

painting and sculpture. In this regard, the white space may be useful for contextualising the artworks on display. Context, she said, is important, particularly for laying the ground for knowledge production.

Mr Kwok stated that the Gallery does intend to foreground the very history of the buildings and of Singapore, and to contextualise the institution against the backdrop of Singapore. However, international understanding of what a museum is means that TNAGS would have to comply with certain requirements (such as climate control) which may necessitate the sealing off of specific art pieces.

- *The Question of Modernity / Modernities and Identity / Identities*

Another participant noted that the term “Southeast Asia” was essentially an invention of the Cold War, so how we talk about the region can be a sensitive issue. For him, “Southeast Asia” has always been seen through the prism of the postcolonial, with the postcolonial condition and the Cold War having gone hand in hand in this region. He suggested that TNAGS engage with studies outside of art history.

He observed that the problem of a lack of modern Asian art narrative has been an exciting field that has occupied scholars for the past two decades. He wondered, however, how this exploration is going to be actualised. He expressed the hope that the Gallery will have some “serious, scholarly catalogues” and a plan for their distribution. He asked what the initial steps to interrogating the Southeast Asian experience would be.

Dr Merewether noted that the ongoing discussion is fascinating for art historians and curators. He recounted his experience in curating a museum in Abu Dhabi, where the debate about what the institution was going to be was never held publicly. One could see the current project as a historical endeavour that will lay the ground for other institutions, and for others to better understand the history of the contemporary. For the contemporary to give evidence of the past, it has to continue with or break with the past. He cited Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s writing in the *Journal of Subaltern Studies* where she wrote on language and how the possibility of a break is inherent in the sentence even before it ends. He regarded this concept as important as a kind of model for the way in which one thinks about the contemporary. If the institutions have this kind of dialogue, he said, it would then be possible to show one artist in two spaces (such as TNAGS and the Singapore Art Museum (SAM)) in different ways, as it opens up the possibility of bringing multiple readings of one object and destabilising master narratives.

Adding to Dr Merewether's observation, A/P Goh wondered if there could be a way to convey, in the museum setting, the ambiguity of the modern.

- *Singapore-as-Subjectivity*

Ms Jane Ittogi noted that when Singapore art history is being talked about one usually begins with the Nanyang School of artists. She requested input on how visual art from the 1950s, by artists from China, could be represented as part of the national art narrative. She posed a further question: how then do we translate these ideas and continuing dialogue on who we want to be on the museum's walls?

A participant noted that 19th century painting and sculpture actually point him to broader intellectual and cultural networks outside of the region to places like China, Europe and Egypt, and he was not sure if there is more to the "exotic subject" in Southeast Asia cultural production. He suggested that there may be a need to look at the field in terms of flows and exchanges, which may de-centre the notion that Singapore art in the beginning was primarily Chinese diaspora art. "Looking to other regions", he said, may be more productive for the Gallery in the long run.

Another participant wondered if the choice of chronology – beginning from the 19th century – has, in fact betrayed a certain Singapore-centrism on the part of the Gallery. Hence, he asked if TNAGS could ever be "non-imperialistic" in this region, given that Singapore has always been linked to "global hegemonic forces". He also noted that despite its inextricable links to the region, many of Singapore's neighbours find it difficult to accept the state as one of their own. What is the "national" in Singapore, he asked, and could the "national" be expressed in terms of "content" rather than the state's intentions?

He also suggested that the story of Singapore was never about the region, but about its links to China, India and Malaya as sources of political consciousness. If the Gallery is to focus on Southeast Asia, he said, then there should not even be a "roadmap" to begin with. The Gallery should tell no history other than the history of the artwork. He posited that that the history of the region "exceeds" the history of Singapore, and "Singapore" has to be displaced in order for the Gallery to be successful.

Dr Merewether asked if the "dis-relation" between Singapore and Southeast Asia had changed at all over the preceding 200 years. In response, the participant said that what the Gallery should do then is to "look forward and not backwards". In this way, art will be presented in more

global, capitalist model". The interesting thing to do, the participant said, is to make a decision. A future-looking model, he suggested, would be a lot more compatible with the national outlook "in a nation that does not look back".

Mr Kwok said that there were practical reasons for choosing the 19th century as a point of departure for TNAGS, as the mandate for SAM starts from the 20th century. He noted that there are several institutions which adopt this chronological approach, along with universities and the community at large.

Another participant wondered if Singapore could ever "speak" for the region, and also wondered if Singapore has links to UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), for that would open up an opportunity for the Gallery to stage a show on the region's many World Heritage sites. He cited another example of creative cities, saying that the Singapore story could be used to showcase city planning in a Southeast Asia setting.

- *Can We Build Up a Museum and an Eco-System?*

Mr Tan Tarn How asked: why is Southeast Asia worth looking at, and why would a Gallery focusing on the region's art worth coming to? The question was crucial for him as TNAGS is the first instance of regional art being established on a very large scale. He did not think that the answer to his question is self-evident at the current stage, compared to a museum of Chinese art or a museum of Islamic art. He suggested that perhaps the success of such a Gallery is not just dependent on TNAGS itself, but also supported by the success of other actors in the eco-system, such as ministries, universities and human capital. He expressed uncertainty about the success of the Gallery without such supporting actors, citing the example of the British Museum which came to pre-eminence on the strength of its scholarship. Is MICA (the Ministry for Information, Communication and the Arts) aware of the need for an eco-system, he asked, and are they prepared to put in the kind of resources necessary to help the Gallery succeed? Mr Arun Mahizhnan noted that it was not the first time the subject of an arts eco-system has come up, but it has not been realised due to the lack of resources. He asked if there were any efforts to institute visiting fellowships for local museums. What could TNAGS do against this backdrop, he asked, and how do we build this eco-system? What useful ideas could the community offer to policymakers and funders?

One participant said that "it should go without saying" that the Gallery should be a centre of scholarship, and should have links to local, regional and international scholars. Underpinning the scholarship should be lectures, and talks, and series of lectures by international speakers.

He suggested that the Gallery's exhibitions and displays could be part of a concentric experience, where visitors could access art that are both well within the Gallery's mandate as well as items that are related to the Gallery's core mandate, both of which serve to inform of the cultural relations of the region.

Another participant expressed doubt that the discussion could be held solely by Singaporeans without the participation of others from the region. She noted that in terms of constructing Southeast Asian art history, the various national collections have been curated based on consultation with local historians. She was concerned about how these conversations and consultations are structured, as it would impact on what is included and what is excluded in a museum's collection. The ecology of ideas, she said, has to include Southeast Asian voices.

In response, Mr Mahizhnan said that the original intention for the event was to bring in participants from abroad, but resources did not permit that. For the TNAGS one-day conference planned for 2011, he promised that there would be people from around the region. He noted that in planning for the event there had been a search across local institutions but to no avail, which brings back the question of a sustainable ecology.

Another participant noted that the suggestions for what TNAGS could do sounded like what the university should be doing. Without a foundation, she said, one cannot expect the museum to deliver the rigorous programme that a university is doing. Ms Joyce Fan from TNAGS agreed with this participant, noting that there have been efforts to start an art history programme in Singapore that would produce the requisite manpower for research programmes.

- *The Value of Such a Project*

In response to a participant's observation that participants from around the region are needed in order to have a good discussion on the TNAGS project, Dr Merewether argued that it is possible to have a session where one is deconstructive of oneself, and that such an exercise is actually valuable for Singaporeans themselves to work through their assumptions about themselves and then further work the discussion to some level of expression from whence one could open up the debate. Such a debate, he said, would be more productive rather than polarising.

A/P Goh added that the benefits of such an exercise are not merely in terms of art history. Questions such as: "Is there something that responds to Asia?" are questions that need to be answered, and one must cease "self-bashing" and begin to work on these issues. "There are certain things Singapore can do," she noted, and it is therefore important that Singapore be able

to execute these projects in the best way possible. She suggested that the value of such a project lies not just in presenting something that is reflective of the region, but also in something “that can push the region forward”. Strategically, it may make sense for such an institution to be a platform for ideas to seed.

Mr Mahizhnan noted that the last theme for Mr Kwok’s presentation was the “experiential”. He further noted that in the Frequently Asked Questions section of the Gallery’s website, it was stated that TNAGS would be “for everyone – Singaporeans, residents, friends and visitors. It will offer an open and accessible civic space where Singaporeans can visit and view good art over and over again”. One question, he said, is if the space would only cater to the elite. He asked: how should this space be used?

In reply, Mr Kwok expressed greater confidence after having heard feedback, and noted that the session was a “great opportunity, through a museum frame, to stimulate scholarship and conversations on cultural matters”. The concern displayed and many discussions generated are exactly the kind of processes the museum should help promote, he said. Dr Merewether noted that hidden in idea of civic space is the notion of the public sphere. In the range of participants present, there was tremendous opportunity to compose something that TNAGS can contribute to the public sphere. It is very important to flesh out the opportunity that has presented itself, he said.

- *Wrap Up*

In closing, Mr Mahizhnan said that the purpose of the session was “not to find all the answers”, but to have conversations that are part of the public sphere that Dr Merewether spoke of. He expressed the hope that Mr Kwok and TNAGS staff had benefited from the discussion. Although there was “some anxiety” about what the Gallery would be, he said, he also noted that the “anxious” are also keen to help the project succeed. He also said that discussions on the project would not end for there would be a bigger conference with more voices to be heard in 2011.

He thanked the participants for their time. Mr Tan Tarn How also invited participants to respond further, either directly to TNAGS or IPS.

Appendix A

At the end of the discussion, IPS Senior Research Fellow Mr Tan Tarn How asked participants to send in individual responses to the debate. Below is a summary of the responses received.

- *What should TNAGS be?*

Respondent A, an independent curator, wondered if TNAGS was going to be just an art museum or a “truly civic and cultural space” as he hoped, where “modern art sits alongside ethnography and history”. He⁵ envisioned an “interdisciplinary space” where elements of the TNAGS collection could be presented in a thematic format in collaboration with private collectors, academics and civil society participants. TNAGS, he wrote, should also be “a more inclusive museum” which does not valorise modern art over other forms of cultural production, such as ceramics. Such a museum could, for example, put together an exhibition on the theme of migration and itinerant networks using a display of trade ceramics, 19th century British topographical drawings, works from the Nanyang artists’ 1952 trip and the works of Milenko Prvacki, all in the same space. Such juxtaposition, he felt, would demonstrate a “committed eye to observing history in a trans-disciplinary way”. Further, he felt that there are possibilities for creative contributions to art scholarship, both on the part of SAM and TNAGS, if these museums could read the histories of artworks in a continuous path uninterrupted by chronological breaks.

Respondent B, who is an academic, expressed the hope that any interdisciplinary presentation of TNAGS’s collection, would not sacrifice disciplinary depth for breadth. The museum’s “product” would have to be crafted by professionals such as writers and researchers, and he felt that there should be a study to look into the level of art history expertise required for this aspect of the museum’s work. The respondent proposed that TNAGS look into the implications of a participant’s remarks during the forum, which was for the museum to look at relations and flows that may extend outside of Southeast Asia. Doing so, wrote the respondent, would necessitate a “discursive amplitude of the notion of media” on the part of TNAGS, where a “reflexive, regionally-calibrated” notion would be central to a “less ‘limited’ art history.” The corollary to this observation is that TNAGS should not focus solely on “traditional (Western *beaux arts*) media”, but should also include other forms of cultural production such as local crafts and ritual traditions. Respondent C suggested that photography and the moving image be included as part of the museum’s collection to attract a greater number of visitors.

⁵ For the purposes of this appendix, the male pronoun will be used for all respondents.

- *What should TNAGS do?*

The need for the Gallery to build links with local academic institutions was mentioned by Respondents B (whose concerns have been outlined in the section above) and C. In particular, Respondent C felt that excellence and scholarship “should be the hallmarks of the new venture”, and proposed that TNAGS create partnerships with local institutions such as the LaSalle College of Art, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and the School of the Arts to provide opportunities for young artists. TNAGS, he wrote, could also contribute to local art history scholarship by sponsoring Chairs at universities, and also by providing fellowships and bursaries to encourage the study of Southeast Asian art history. On a related note, Respondent C also encouraged strong relationships with local artists through the provision of a space where art presentations and performances of all forms could be carried out.

The area of arts education is also crucial for TNAGS, and Respondent C also suggested a variety of ways in which the museum could create greater knowledge and broader awareness amongst the local audience. He suggested a series of lectures, talks and exhibitions that would cover different aspects of the museum’s aims, some broader and some more focused in scope. Blockbuster exhibitions, he wrote, will help in funds generation and attracting large numbers of people “who might otherwise not be attracted to the Gallery.”

Respondent D raised some questions in his/her capacity as arts journalist. How would a museum of this size and focusing on regional art draw audiences in? He was not sure if Singaporeans, who are detached from the state’s neighbours, would be attracted by the idea of a Southeast Asian art museum. Second, as the media space for the arts continues to shrink, how “sexy” would TNAGS’ shows be? He noted that while there may be some objections to blockbuster shows, bringing these in may help to fill the museum with quality shows that may otherwise be too ambitious for its home market.

Respondent C also suggested that the museum could contribute to the region in other ways. Since TNAGS is situated in Singapore, it should take up the mantle of seeking the status as a City of Southeast Asian Art and Culture, under the creative cities accreditation initiative, with a direct appeal to UNESCO. In this way the Gallery can further its aims to be a “beacon and centre of excellence for the region as a whole”. The Gallery should also be seen “as a centre for the study and preservation of Asian culture”, to foster the protection of Southeast Asian heritage and to act as a heritage resource for the region.

- *The Arts Eco-system: Why and How*

Respondent B acknowledged a point made by another participant during the event's discussion. No expertise or "museum labour force" could substitute for a dedicated academic programme, he noted, and thus university scholarship should be a "high and immediate priority" for the museum community and for the Singapore government as well. Cultivating knowledge and expertise via the universities would provide "steady, cumulative solutions to many of the key problems" which the museum community faces, such as the lack of skilled labour, an indifferent public, weak local attendance, as well as bolster local artistic energy, quality and regional engagement.

The place of the state within this desired eco-system was also an area of concern for Respondent B. He wrote, "these organs of the arts body fail us not because they're going about things the wrong way, but because they're the wrong sort of organ – because, to be blunt, they are the state. [And] this will hold *a fortiori* when it comes to scholarship". Respondent B noted the "bureaucratic persecution, and impending exile" of a prominent local art critic, curator and teacher, which for him makes for "a disastrous message to be sending to the potent intellectual network [that] such a man maintains in the region and beyond". He contrasted the situation to what he called "the state's developmental claims" vis-à-vis the arts sector. The challenge for Singapore, he observed, is to "furnish for itself the intellectual density that will yield ideas (whether as objects, as images, or as texts) that people actually want. [To] do this, it will need to attract the kind of arts professionals who can take production and discourse to the next level".
