

Making The National Art Gallery of Singapore 'Great'

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Two dozen art community insiders and academics from Singapore and around the world presented their views at a one-day symposium titled 'Making a Great Art Museum: Contending with Southeast Asian Modernities and Art' on July 13. The event, which was jointly organised by the National Heritage Board Academy and the Institute of Policy Studies, was attended by over 200 museum experts, academics and administrators. It was held at the LASALLE College of the Arts, which was a sponsor for the event. The discussion centred on The National Art Gallery, Singapore (TNAGS), which will have the world's largest collection of Southeast Asian art when it opens in 2015.

The specific characteristics and functions of an art museum for Southeast Asian modern art were addressed by Dr Partha Mitter in the keynote address. With the historical influence of the West in art history discourse, the challenge for TNAGS would be to showcase Southeast Asian art without being beholden to European perspectives, said Professor Mitter, Emeritus Professor in Art History at the University of Sussex.

The first panel, titled "What Makes a 'Great' Museum in Singapore?", sought to examine the factors that would contribute to a successful museum within the Southeast Asian context. Dr Apinan

Poshyananda, the Director-General of Thailand's Department of Cultural Promotion and an established curator, said the 'greatness' of any museum comes not from a collection connoting the affluence of the host but from a meeting of great minds. The museum must not reproduce existing social and political hierarchies, such as the nation-state, but also examine its cleavages, such as through an inclusion of art from the tribal and nomadic peoples of the region.

Mr Wayne Modest, drew on his experience as both a specialist in Caribbean art and as head of the curatorial department of the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, an institution which had its genesis as a collection of objects from the Netherlands' former colonial possessions. The challenge for TNAGS curators, he said, would be to embark on the exercise of establishing 'Southeast Asian greatness', but to critically examine the assumptions implicit in existing knowledge and to try to 'de-centre' these assumptions. For Dr Oscar Ho Hing-Kay, Director of the Masters of Arts Programme in Cultural Management at the Chinese University of Hong Kong noted that the 'civil service culture' wherein a low appetite for risk runs counter to the creativity and criticality

required for the arts sector to flourish was a danger that TNAGS should be aware of.

The second panel, 'Whither Modernity in Southeast Asian Art?' asked how the conditions of modernity were seen in the art of the region. Dr Flaudette May Datuin, artist and faculty member at the Department of Art Studies in the University of the Philippines, said one needed to go beyond the 'vertical relations' typically established in art history that trace chronologically a particular region's aesthetic output. She called for the mapping of 'horizontal relations' where narratives of interaction and contact between regions could be told through seemingly innocuous objects like the bedpan. This would allow the telling of the stories of 'glocalisation' (a process by which local communities respond differently to global changes), rather than simply a more flattened narrative of 'globalisation' (the process enabling capital to operate internationally).

The modern, when manifested through the symptom of the nation-state, had led stories and storytelling to develop in certain ways. In his presentation on modern Balinese art, Professor Adrian Vickers, Director of the Australian Centre for Art and Archaeology at the University of Sydney showed that the narratives of art history could be told through the prism of the nation-state, with contesting -- and equally valid -- local narratives subsumed. Further, Nora Taylor, Vietnamese art expert from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, said that since the founding of the modern Vietnamese nation, its artists had displayed a conscious understanding of the nation and sought to participate in the broader national narrative through their output.

The third panel, 'Building and Belonging to an Art Ecology', looked at how a new art institution would fit into an increasingly complex international art landscape, and what would be needed to create the knowledge networks required. Ms Gridthiya Gaweewong, Founder and Co-Curator of the Project 304 art space and Artistic Director of the Jim Thompson Art Centre in Bangkok, said that TNAGS must establish its core values and what it hoped to achieve for society. For Ms Gaweewong, the integration with the art ecology should be the first priority of each museum, with flexible organisation, visionary leadership, sustainable funding bodies and strong support from constituents, together with inclusive public participation creating a sense of belonging and of sharing within the community.

Mr Amir Sidharta, Director and Curator at the Museum Universitas Pelita Harapan and owner of an auction house in Indonesia, reflected on the state of Indonesia's art ecology by looking at the roles curators, museums and auctioneers had played in the last two decades. A sustainable art ecology, he noted, requires the participation of multiple stakeholders. In Indonesia, art markets have become the key driver of art knowledge and production. Regrettably, it is the markets that determine which artists are worthy of publication, as 'the advancement of institutions of art knowledge is lagging far behind the tremendous growth of the art market', with a lack of investment in the latter area. This created a detrimental cycle where auction houses support known artists who continue to produce works that are already accepted by the market in return. Art critics are in turn co-opted by the market to become artists' agents.

Mr Jean-Francois Hubert, a senior consultant at Christie's auction house, called for museums to adapt to rapidly changing conditions, in particular to participate in the art market. He suggested that the museum go beyond its role as 'conservatory for art' to take on the role of art promoter, not only buying pieces that would inform knowledge but also to sell pieces that it does not need at a price the museum itself determines.

The last panel asked speakers what they would do if they were made the Director of The National Art Gallery, Singapore. Malaysian dramatist Mr Huzir Sulaiman, whose brand communications firm was also involved in the re-design of the National Museum, envisioned the 60,000 square metre space in the former Supreme Court and City Hall as one that would 'create an electrifying experience for visitors in a museum that is a work of art in itself'. To this end, he proposed that the visitor experience to be designed to five criteria which he called 'HEADS': the holistic [experience], the emotional, the aesthetic, the dramaturgical and the semiotic aspects.

TheatreWorks artistic director Ong Keng Sen had a different vision: TNAGS should ideally be a site of 'unabashed humanism which culminates in a new way of being at home in the world, moving against national solidarity, national culture and privileging other, more open affiliations'. Fundamentally, the museum should be an 'intangible enhancement of encounters between the peoples of Southeast Asia which would be humble, sensitive to our larger context'. His 'dream museum' would have 'multiple entryways and exits' with unpredictable, open, 'and hopefully co-existing' pathways for the visitor.

In his closing remarks for the symposium, TNAGS Director Kwok Kian Chow noted that the preceding discussions expressed implicitly a hope for a museum environment that would be dialogic, discursive and generate new values and social activities through an interrogative engagement with museum material and a recognition of the visitor with multiple identities and values. The institution of the museum, he added, could only be completed with the audience and community as for the site to be transformed into a civic space. For Mr Kwok, 'a great museum begins with great public ownership of the institution', and the broad range of topics discussed during the forum would form the agenda for a forthcoming public forum on the establishment of TNAGS.

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