

Opening Remarks by Ambassador-at-Large Ong Keng Yong
and Director of the Institute of Policy Studies in the
Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore,
at the Official Opening of
“Negotiating Home, History and Nation:
Two Decades of Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia 1991-2011”

Friday, 11 March 2011

Singapore Art Museum

Excellencies

Mr Kenneth Choe, Board Member, Singapore Art Museum Board

Mr Michael Koh, CEO, National Heritage Board

Mr Tan Boon Hui, Director, Singapore Art Museum

Artists and Curators

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good Afternoon

Thank you for inviting me to join you this evening to celebrate contemporary art in Southeast Asia. I am happy to return to negotiating my journey through the diversity of Southeast Asia.

In my five years as Secretary-General of ASEAN (that is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations which is a regional organisation of the ten countries in Southeast Asia), I was exposed to the overwhelming variety of attitudes, colours, sights, sounds and traditions of Southeast Asia. To complicate the picture, there is always the clash of modernity with the native characteristics of our respective societies. Indeed, Southeast Asia is at the cross-road of humanities and civilisational influences. It is not easy to absorb this diverse landscape. Indeed, it is mind boggling!

I am always impressed by the ability of our artists to capture in a succinct manner the complicated surroundings and experiences they have been exposed to and to communicate their dilemmas with the public. They try to maintain their respective identities even as they inter-mingle with the realities and change thrust upon them.

In ASEAN, we have cultivated a culture of accommodation and mutual respect for the diversity we have in Southeast Asia. We have our differences and some of the gaps are very big. Yet, we travel together, sit around the same table and exchange our diverse views in a cooperative and understanding manner. More and more, I see the sense of common purpose among the different nations of ASEAN. This will be important as we advance our ASEAN community building to meet the common challenges.

This exhibition today is an extensive showcase of art works created over the last two decades by more than 50 artists from 6 Southeast Asian countries, namely, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. I have not yet seen the respective works created by the artists except the pictures I saw in the newspapers yesterday. However, our colleagues in the Meseum have told me that the various pieces display the socio-political contexts and deeply rooted cultural practices intrinsic in each of the countries where the artists come from. I hope we will all be able to digest what is being displayed and be inspired by these creations as we walk through the various

galleries this afternoon.

From my days in ASEAN, I know it is not easy to put together any exhibition of Southeast Asian art. To do so for contemporary art is even more difficult because contemporary art is evolving and there is no one set pattern of definition and expression. I therefore commend the Singapore Art Museum and all the artists and curators for taking up the challenge to bring to us this insightful exhibition of contemporary culture, expression and integration.

It gives me great pleasure to declare the exhibition open.

Thank you for your attention.