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# sentAp

CONTEMPORARY VISUAL ART MAGAZINE

Positioning Malaysia's Postmodernism

Contemporary Art and its Trajectory

Are We There Yet: A platform of shared discourse and practice for contemporary art between Filipinos and Malaysian artists



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## Editor's Note

Due to annual festivities, the local art activities in the first two months of the year were rather quiet. Our graphic designer went for an eye operation and the marketing team moved so slowly. Despite all the excuses we finally managed to push forth the third issue of sentAp.

Interestingly in this issue, Sarena Abdullah's Positioning Malaysia's Postmodernism, Hasnul J Saidon's Supposed To Be A Script For A Reality TV Program, Sophia Natasha's Contemporary Art and its Trajectory and Riel Hilario's Share Ware... carry similar gist that touch upon the pervasive influence and effects of Western ideas on art practices in the region. The prevalent dichotomisation of East-West suggests that there is perhaps a need for this part of the globe to contemplate and implement a new form of appreciation and treatment in the realm of arts.

Gridthiya Gaweewong submits an e-mail conversation between Thailand's artists Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Rirkrit Tiravanija on Art, Film & Etc. Malaysian indie film-maker Abror Rivai provides basic knowledge in understanding short films. Indeed, both project the importance and relevance of film as an alternative medium for contemporary art production.

The review segment touches on exhibitions held in Malaysia in the past several months. Foremost are Hijaz's review of Noor Azizan Paiman's Sky Kingdom II and Gina Fairley's essay on works by three artists who recently concluded their residency programme at Rimbun Dahan.

Best for 2006.

# Positioning Malaysia's Postmodernism

Sarena Abdullah

SINCE mid-1980s and more pertinently since the 1990s, there is a shift in the Malaysian art world as works about non-Malay/Islam subject and the usage of different media enter the Young Contemporary Awards (Bakat Muda Sezaman), held by the National Art Gallery Malaysia. More and more artists begin to abandon painting and sculpture and adopt or incorporate new approach and media in their work by using installations, performances and electronic media such as videos, cameras and even computers. There is also a shift in artistic pursuits especially based on interest-oriented issues such as consumerism, environmentalism and gender. Some works even question civic issues, such as social justice, freedom of expression, human rights and democracy in Malaysia overtly.

Perhaps with these developments one would start to assume that postmodern art is here. This essay however, will demonstrate that the issue of post-modernity through the advent of postmodern art form in Malaysia are somewhat more complex and demand a thorough and overall cultural, political and even within economic understanding. As Malaysia's modern art itself has never been properly defined and positioned in its local cultural context, describing some works produced by Malaysian artists to be postmodern would surely provoke repercussions and definitely invite many questions. This essay is not suggesting that all Malaysian contemporary art (in this essay it refers to art produced since the 1990s) are postmodern but it merely suggests that if we were to consider art with such characteristic above as postmodern, we must be able to conjure up to at least these three features or positions – first, postmodernism as a form of critique, second, postmodernism as a social and economic event and third, postmodernism as an artistic style and it must be totally understood that this discourse has a Western origin.

Before we discuss this further, it is essential to look up and understand how the term came to its being and the context of its usage within the Western academic discourse. It must be noted that in the heart of the modern west is the Enlightenment ideals. In Europe and the United States, the idea of the humanity unity, the individual as the creative force of society and theory, the western superiority, the idea of science as Truth, and the believe in social progress were decisive. This culture however, is in a state of crisis and the debate of the postmodern captures at least certain aspects of the various social changes and cultural turmoil especially in France and the United States and to a lesser extent in the Great Britain, Germany and Australia.

There is no common juncture or an agreement on what the term "post-modern" means as the term has been used for different purposes and applied to many different things. The attempt to search for a single, essential meaning of the term perhaps would be an oversight to the discourse itself. The prefix *post-* means *after*, and the word *modern* derived from the Latin word *modo* means "of today", current or *up-to-date*. Generally however, the "postmodern" reveals the discontinuity with the earlier phases of the modern period in Western societies. This discontinuity is apparent and regarded by theorists signaling an "end" of the modern or new phase within the modern itself. The signs of modernity however,

have not actually disappeared. Traits such as free market, secular culture, liberal democracy, individualism, rationalism and humanism remain. If in the West, modernity is in crisis, in most part of the world, "modernisation" or "development" is still the main social goal. The Third World for example, absorbs modernising technologies and ideologies through new machine technologies, modes of industrial, transportation, building technologies and modern infrastructure and facilities. Thus, the both ongoing modernisation process and the effect of multinational capitalism happening simultaneously in Euro-America invites a different discourse in discussing the postmodern condition happening simultaneously in developing countries.

In discussing postmodernism in the arts and cultural field, one has to understand the form of postmodern critique suggested by those deemed as postmodernists. Jean Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida for example, made major contributions in postmodern theory. Lyotard defines postmodernism as the "incredulity towards meta narrative." In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, he uses the term to describe the changing domain of science, literature and the arts in the advanced countries since the end of nineteenth century. Lyotard's main concern is knowledge and the problem of its legitimacy in advanced societies such as how the form of knowledge came into being, who controls and had access to them and how they become accepted as valid. He argues that scientific knowledge is made possible by a universal, grand or master narrative and exposes the idea of universality underlies these grand narratives. Thus, postmodernism is heralded when these grand narratives lose their credentials and all the little narratives proliferate.

Michel Foucault's theory on the relations of power also aligned him with postmodern critique. Like Lyotard, Foucault is suspicious of any claim of universal truth. Foucault attempts to locate and analyse "the genealogy of the modern subject," or the discourse and practices dealing with the subject, knowledge and power especially in the context of the treatment of marginal social groups such as the criminal, the insane and the sexually deviant. He demonstrates how shifts in discourses and power become constituted through the order of knowledge, categorisation systems, beliefs, and practices. He claims, "the subject is objectified by a process of division either within himself or from other" and the modern society is operated largely by this increasingly integrated, extensive and scientific exclusions. For Foucault, the notion of the self in actually bound up and inseparable from the workings of structures and institutions. Thus, none of us actually can escape from the exercise of power through these structures and establishment. Power circulates individuals and their actions and practices and power is not merely something that individuals, groups or classes exercise but the discursive formations are networks of power within which we are all enmeshed. Knowledge too is not neutral. Foucault asserts that knowledge did not "slowly detach itself from its empirical roots, the initial needs from which it arose, to become pure speculation subject only to demands of reason.... Where religions once demanded the sacrifice of bodies, knowledge now calls us to the sacrifice of the subject of knowledge."

Influenced by the structuralist themes, postmodern critique claims that knowledge or discourse has its own condition of "textuality". Therefore it is concerned with the question of establishing meaning and proposes the destabilisation of meaning. The never-ending signs for example, deny any discourse an authoritative and final meaning and Jacques Derrida's deconstructive readings of texts express this semantic flux. He argues that no concept is self-sufficient or exists independent from the generative process of differentiation and the meaning of texts can be plural and unstable. Therefore, meaning is partial in a very diverse ways and can never be fully achieved as it is both divided internally and deferred in time. Postmodernism operates similarly with deconstruction but the difference is that it rejects the idea of things having a single basic meaning and it unsettles the binary positions – such as male/female, Occident/Orient, *sane/insane* dominant in structuralism. The postmodern reverse the binary order by elevating the inferior above the superior term and dissolve the conceptual field by foregrounding the elements of undecidability.

Since the postmodern is deeply suspicious of the idea of "universal history" or metanarrative and argues that human direction does not necessarily follow a historically and politically determined direction, it has opened up new possibilities for the Others who are viewed as marginal and trivial in the grand narrative of universal history. In the art, postmodernism has generated a new wave of interests on non-Western art. Whether this interest is genuine or still falls under the Orientalist perspective is still open to questions. But in Euro-America, postmodern critique had been adopted by almost every discipline from the social sciences, humanities, philosophy, art, architecture, literature, music, cultural studies, geography and of course art history. A whole new approach in the academic field had also been undertaken such as cultural studies, feminist studies, women's studies, and queer theory.

The second position that we must not ignore is the fact that postmodernism in Euro-America happens as a social and economic event brought about mainly by the spread of mass industry. Fredric Jameson proposes that postmodernism is the cultural logic of the current stage of capitalist growth and he implies that everything produced within it is postmodern in character as they are inherent representations of their historical circumstances. It is in the current stage of multinational capitalism, also known as "consumer", "late" or "post-industrial" capitalism that he argues postmodernism persist as a dominant culture. The growth of international market in images and information, global telecommunications networks and media marks the complete commodification of physical and human nature. Representations and data have become commodities, the cultural has become economic and the economic and political turned into so many forms of culture. Jameson argues that postmodernism is the periodising concept that serves to correlate the emergence of these new formal features in culture emerged in the late 1940s or early 1950s for the United States and late 1950s for Europe.

What about the developing countries? If Jameson proposes that postmodernism is the cultural logic of late-capitalist growth, can the cultural changes brought by the late-capitalism in the Third World be categorised

as postmodern? Can the changes on culture and lifestyles be counted as postmodern as these countries participate in the late-capitalism as the producers of multinational products and not directly as consumers? Postcolonial state like Malaysia was thrust directly into the processes of modernity through capitalism, internationalisation, economic growth and development. If in Euro-America, the economical chronology has reach late-capitalism, Malaysia's modernity or modernisation process is not even complete and its capitalism is even planned through the New Economic Policy (NEP).

Malaysia's move towards modernity has a slightly different outcome. Even though Malaysia's state-driven move to modernity has produced dramatic new social outlook, class changes and political landscapes, these transformations have not brought about the growing commitment to freedom, individualism, human rights and democracy. Instead they have been both a growing commitment of state authoritarianism in which the democratic legitimacy outlook somewhat masks the fact that coercion had been used as a state strategy. Institutionally the Malaysian system qualifies as a democracy but observers and analysts yet, hesitate calling Malaysia a democratic country. This does not fit into the postmodern late-capitalist theory of Jameson or even the Western modernisation form. On top of that, Islam plays a major role in the country even though Malaysia is not an Islamic State and since the 1970s, Islamic resurgence takes place simultaneously with Malaysia's development process.

As I have highlighted above it is very obscure to discuss Malaysia postmodernism as Malaysia's modern social and economy transition has not been resolve or will never be resolve according to the linear development set out by Enlightenment thinkers. Then how would postmodernism as an artistic style in which the relation of culture (arts) and the politics are always intimately tied seems to make its mark in Malaysia?

If Jameson implies that everything produced within it is postmodern this will lead us to the issue of cultural excess. Jameson argues that postmodernism ought to be understood as a "cultural dominant," a notion that allows for "a range of every different, yet subordinate, features" rather than a single style or mode. He underscores that this historical period should not be understood as enormous, single, bounded entity, but as the presence and coexistence of a variety of alternative and competing features. In other words, not everything is "postmodern" but postmodernity acts as "the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses ... must make their way."

Jean Baudrillard's postmodernism too pointed towards the issue of cultural excess. Baudrillard argues that postmodernism is applied to a cultural condition in the advanced capitalist societies since the 1960s, characterised by an abundance of disconnected images and styles in television, advertising, commercial design, and pop video. Baudrillard's conception of postmodernity is founded upon these three principle ideas – simulation, hyper-reality and implosion. He suggests that all kinds of representation have submerged the reality and the postmodern world is a world in which the model of production has been replaced by the cybernetic model of simulation. In this new era, labour is no longer a force or

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production but is one sign among many and commodities no longer contain use-value as defined by Marx but must be understood as signs as defined by Saussure.

Thus, postmodernity is said to be a culture of fragmentary sensations, eclectic nostalgia, simulacras and superficiality. In amidst of the abundance signals, the traditionally valued qualities of originality, coherence, meaning, depth, and authenticity are abandoned or dissolved resulting in no simple, direct relationship between reality and its expression either in words or in pictures. Baudrillard describes the media culture to be consumed by what he calls "an effect of frantic self-referentiality" and the image "bears no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum." Unlike the previously modern societies which are organised around the production and consumption of commodities, current postmodern societies are organised around simulation and the play of images and signs, denoting a situation in which codes, model and signs are the organising principle.

In the arts, postmodernism generally is seen as a specific reaction against the established form of aesthetic modernism. Art historians usually locate the origins of modernism in the Paris of the mid-19th century with the development of impressionists and post-impressionist painting. It is a period in which art pursued new goals and broke free from all traditions of representation. Art begin to be heralded for its own sake and should be valid for its own terms and experimentation, innovation, individualism, progress, purity, and originality.

Clement Greenberg saw modernism as a continuous, self-critical tradition concerned with "purely optical experience" beginning with Édouard Manet and the Impressionists. If the Impressionists depict their surroundings by capturing an 'impression' of what the eye sees at a particular moment. Greenberg insists that modern art progresses through the struggle of artists coming down to the barest essentials of art in order to achieve the level of art's genuine quality with an urge towards "purity" or dissociation from other arts. Paintings call to the fact that they were just flat surfaces made of paint on canvas. This resulted in a progressive emphasis on the flatness of the picture surface and the rejection of any form of illusionism through abandoning shaded modeling and perspective, emphasising brush stroke, using harsh colours rather than subtle tonal change, stressing lines, using geometrical forms, simplifying forms.

Postmodernism abandoned this project. Things changed for example, representations of human figure made a comeback and photography and media-based work regained limelight in the mid 1980s. The term "visual arts" is employed to describe works that crosses fields for example, work that comprises painting and yet it is blurred into sculpture or made into an installation with the advent of various new media, such as photography, computers video and television and unorthodox material.

The question is how artists should respond to mass culture became to be very persistent. If previously modernist art simply believes that art is essentially independent, self-governing and are intrinsically different from all other sort of objects, this is not so in postmodern art. Andy Warhol's works on Marilyn Monroe can be read as a piece of modernist criticism, a picture of a film star, or an advertisement or altogether at once. In 1960s he began making pictures based on mass-produced images such

as newspaper advertisements and comic strips, then in 1962 of Campbell's soup cans and later on, pictures of Coca-Cola bottles and made sculptures/installation of Brillo soap-pad boxes. His lengthy series of screen-printing of Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, Elizabeth Taylor, and other celebrities allowed infinite replication. In keeping with this outlook he used clippings of 'dehumanised' illustrations from the mass media as his sources, turned out his works like a manufacturer, and called his studio 'The Factory.' Warhol's art is open to plurality of experiences and understandings. Against the modernist notion that art is capable of defining itself, Warhol's impure plural coding recognises that the meaning of art and definition of art depend on where it is seen, who sees it, and what mental tools they use in order to read it.

Postmodern art rethinks the relationship between art and popular culture and reconsider the differences between works of art and consumer goods. It upheld that all cultural production is involved in a complex social relation and artists are apart and inside society and criticises aspects of culture from within. Postmodernism exists as an unsteady territory between modernism and popular culture and questions the activity of representation and draws attention to the codes and discourses through which they do so. Therefore, the interest in postmodernism has generated interests in popular culture and cultural production such as film and video, writing, architecture, visual arts, photography and design.

As I have point out earlier, a different shift begin to happen in Malaysian art around mid-1980s and it has become more pertinent since the 1990s. Now why does this happen at this point of time? Why does the so-called "postmodern style" infiltrate the mainstream art? What kind of aesthetic strategies that these new budding Malaysian artists derived from postmodern critic? What are the elements of postmodern discourse that attracts these artists? If we attempt to see Malaysian postmodernism as a specific reaction against the established form of aesthetic modernism, we are going to face a block because the works produced are not about corrupting the Greenbergian modern art, meshing the high and low cultural demarcation or deal with the popular culture and its endless imaginings. Even though, the "postmodern art" and changes happening in Malaysian culture can be seen as an upshot of the postmodern conditions through the globalisation process but does postmodernism really manifests in Malaysia? If so, how? Whether one likes it or not, a different strategy must be taken in positioning this latest trend in the Malaysian art world. The Malaysian contemporary art must properly define and position Malaysian not only in the international art world but most importantly in its local political, economy and cultural context. This development must be addressed not only urgently but requires perhaps a postmodern critique altogether. ■

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