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CONTEMPORARY VISUAL ART MAGAZINE

The predicament of
"ART WRITING"
in Malaysian Art.

Merebut identiti
Budaya massa.

OUR country RIGHT or
WRONG ??

Where Art Happens
(Finale)



a Malaysian artists

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CONTEMPORARY VISUAL ARTS MAGAZINE

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THE PREDICAMENT OF "ART WRITINGS" IN MALAYSIAN ART

Sarena Abdullah

I would like to begin my essay by referring to the article written by Kelvin Chuah and Izmer Ahmad entitled "Predicaments and Promises: Reflections on Art Writing in Malaysia and Singapore". The article was published online at Asian Art Archive¹ in August 2010. In this short but valuable essay, the writers touched upon several key points regarding the state of art writings in Malaysia and Singapore that I wish to discuss further here albeit focusing only on the realm of Malaysia's current art development. The essay pointed out that although art writings appear to be in abundance as can be seen in various publications of exhibition catalogues, there is still the lack of serious critical writings on art. This point noted by the authors is not an altogether new issue. It had been discussed previously by the panel members of the exhibition *Vision and Idea: ReLooking Modern Malaysian Art*,² through a short essay by Eddin Khoo³, and during my personal conversations with several artists. In the online essay, however, the authors argued that this is especially true in terms of criticism and extensive analysis that is needed to investigate the birth of modern art in both countries. They also indicated that one of the key factors to the lack of critical writings is the fact that most writings are composed based on studio practice. As such, these writings only emphasise the practice perspectives but neglect the historical and positioning aspects of artworks especially in view of the larger geographical or cross-disciplinary contexts.

1. See Kelvin Chuah and Izmer Ahmad, "Predicaments and Promises: Reflections on Art Writing in Malaysia and Singapore," *Asian Art Archive* (2010). http://www.aaa.org.hk/newsletter_detail.aspx?newsletter_id=884&newsletter_type=archive (accessed Nov 4).

2. The panel members were T.K. Sabapathy, Krishen Jit, Redza Piyadasa and Zainol Abidin Ahmad Shariff. In 1994, the panel members of the exhibition were in agreement that no one person or group had seriously ventured into investigating the dynamics of modernism in Malaysian art since the publication of *Modern Artists of Malaysia*. See T.K. Sabapathy and Redza Piyadasa, *Modern Artists of Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1983).

3. Eddin Khoo, "The Problem of Writing Malaysian Art," *Art Corridor*, July-Sept 2003.

The essay offered a refreshing take on a mundane but vital predicament of our art situation – a situation that I would like to further problematise in the context of Malaysia's art development during the last two decades. In the essay, the authors used the term "art writings" to refer to any kinds of writings on art in Malaysia and Singapore. The term "art writings" (for the lack of better term), has been used persistently and casually not only in essays and art-related articles, but also during conversations and formal as well as informal verbal discussions on art.

What are generally understood as "art writings", especially in Malaysia, are any forms of writings on art or artists specifically composed for exhibition catalogues published by either the national art institution or private institutions such as the various established private galleries. "Art writings" can as well include curatorial essays that delineate the curatorial strategies and describe the historical narratives or thematic issues underscored by art exhibitions. This kind of essays is commonly meant either for group shows, retrospectives, invitational shows, competitions or shows of recent acquisitions of collections. "Art writings" are also made for specific artists to be featured in the catalogues of their solo shows. Besides curatorial essays, "art writings" or writings on art appearing in exhibition catalogues can also be authored by writers who have been predetermined or selected by the curators or the publishing galleries.⁴ "Art writings" can furthermore be extended to magazine or newspaper articles, and formal or informal promotional reviews, in prints or online, that usually cater for the general public readership. Other types of "art writings" include articles in arts and culture magazines like *Dewan Budaya* and *Dewan Sastera*, in entertainment and art magazines like *KLue* and *Off the Edge*, in the columns of local newspapers that generally highlight and promote art events or

4. It must also be noted that not all exhibitions are accompanied by a catalogue, and not all catalogues contain accompanying essays. This depends on the organisers' or art galleries' financial resources. Flyers and pamphlets are very common and cheaper alternatives to catalogues.

exhibitions, and even in this journal-magazine itself. Although a few art magazines are published specifically for art aficionados, such publications remain unsustainable as their readership is rather small and their market limited. Gallery websites, blogs by artists, art groups or writers, Facebook profiles, and online sites like kakiseni.com (now defunct) and Arteri are currently playing a bigger role in disseminating information on arts events and reviews, providing extensive and diverse networking possibilities particularly online. Though this development is most welcomed, it has subsequently created a need for a different niche of writing since it accommodates a different kind of readership.

Apart from these "art writings," there are academic papers or publications on art printed in conjunction with certain conferences, seminars and art events. Local journals that engage in the discourses of arts, culture and design have also issued some writings. However, the quality and influence of their fields and discourses is debatable, and the consistency and quality of these papers is dubious. Moreover, since these sorts of writings serve a more specific readership, their approach appears more academic

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and profound. Their materials most likely aim at the academic sphere. Due to their limited circulation and access, they are largely inaccessible to the general public. Then, the most consistent and comprehensible source of writings of Malaysian art can be obtained mostly from exhibition catalogues, magazines, newspaper columns and online sources, or what is loosely described as "art writings."

Though all efforts in documenting art, in Malaysia especially, are commendable, I would like to problematise these "art writings" as the sources for the understanding of the contexts and conditions of art productions specifically those conceived within the last two decades. I am not at all suggesting that these writings are invalid or unimportant sources of information (these "art writings", conversely, have been very informative and perhaps the only sources of reference available). But I would like to discuss here how such "art writings" can also be partial.

Nevertheless in this case, we cannot put the blame squarely on writers, artists, galleries or publishers. "Art writings", particularly in Malaysian context, are simply writings on art because the disciplines of Art History, Art Criticism and Curatorship here have not yet matured into a discourse separated from studio practice. Euramerican universities, in contrast, offer a separate degree programme for each of these majors. The dire state of urgency of art writings and scholarly engagement with contemporary art, thus, could be seen as the outcome of the non-existence of Art Historical and Criticism scholarship in Malaysia. Art History is treated merely as an elective or otherwise a compulsory subject to complement a Fine Arts major. Either in MARA University of Technology (UiTM), Science University of Malaysia (USM), University Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) or in private institutions, Art History does not stand as its own major, nor does it have its own department. At Undergraduate Degree and Diploma levels, major in Fine Arts with studio specialisation is being offered, but not Art History. Even though degrees in Arts are also being offered at Master's and Doctorate levels, theses produced by students are often deficient in critical understanding and analysis. They even do not seem to apply Art Historical or Visual Studies multidisciplinary approach that is vital in generating good theses or dissertations. Most MA and PhD researchers fully rely on the method of documenting primary sources. They lack analytical and theoretical insights that can help augment the quality of their researches and then help position their findings in the larger geographical or cross-disciplinary contexts.

Since 1990s, however, our artistic practice has evolved, and more art institutions, either government or private, have churned out so many graduate and practicing artists. Still we find ourselves reading "art writings" composed by artists, writers and even art proprietors who in fact occupy "different sites of power."

In a situation where there are not many well-trained art writers, critics, researchers and curators, we find that this void is being filled up by artists or art practitioners themselves. As a result, as mentioned by Kelvin Chuah and Izmer Ahmad, writings on art are mainly conceived from the perspective of studio practice, as in the case of early modern art in Malaysia and Singapore. This method might be acceptable at that time when the art society consisted of only a handful of people and the only writings with some historical positionings were the ones written by T.K. Sabapathy.

Since 1990s, however, our artistic practice has evolved, and more art institutions, either government or private, have churned out so many graduate and practicing artists. Still we find ourselves reading "art writings" composed by artists, writers and even art proprietors who in fact occupy "different sites of power." They actively produce artworks, write about art, curate and promote art all at the same time, leaving grey areas in between roles. Such feat is not conducive, nor it is ethical. Artists serve as writers, private gallery owners act as art curators and writers, artists run private spaces/galleries and sell other artists' works, gallery owners/curators assume the role of art historians, and art writers turn into artists, and so on. In a situation where the number of qualified writers, art critics and art historians is limited, these multiple roles are no doubt inevitable – some artists are not only producers of art, but also disseminators and writers of art. As Pakhrudin explains, "There was some self promotion, ... but you didn't have a choice when there was no existing art writing."⁵ Nonetheless, I would like to argue that how simple this solution may be to rectify the problem of the lack of documentation in Malaysian art, this multiple-role scheme can create some conflicts of interest that need to be resolved as our art field matures and expands.

5. Pakhrudin Sulaiman's interview with Adeline Ooi and Jason Tan, "State of the Art 2006," *Off The Edge*, Jan 2007, 39.

Such conflicts of interest, especially as regards the "different sites of power" and the multiple roles not exposed in the writings, emerge when artists write and discuss their own works without highlighting their actual positions, either as artists or as curators. Gallery-published catalogues featuring endorsement writings (by usually paid, or underpaid, writers) can also be misleading as the writers simply gloss over the works they are paid to write about. This type of writings can generate biased appraisals or discussions of artworks, which sometimes are not up to the standard even in the minds of the writers themselves. We notice that not only artists but also art proprietors and patrons write about art or publish books and catalogues on art. It can always be argued later that whatever they write or publish often tends to be a devout attempt to promote and raise the market values of certain artworks in their collections in order to sell them later in the secondary market.

Although any attempt to discuss art is very much appreciated, I have deliberated here that the multiple sites between the people involved in writing "art writings," either art writers, artists, art proprietors or art institutions that commission those "art writings", can have some bearing on the assessment of artworks (though we cannot deny there are some writings that have been very ethical and neutral as to their positionings). This is especially so because in reality an artwork is a commodity with monetary value.

Since the 1990s there has been a rise of interest in contemporary Asian art in Europe and North America. The proliferation of international art exhibitions and forums, for instance, The Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane, the Kwangju and Cheju Biennale in South Korea, the Asian Art Show in Fukuoka, and the Regional Artists Exchange (ARX) in Perth, has contributed to the growing interest in modern art from Asia. Besides those art events just mentioned, several exhibitions on Asian contemporary art have also been held in New York. *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions* and *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, for example, were both organised and co-organised by the Asia Society in New York. Even Malaysian artists have begun to participate at International biennales like the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial, Gwangju, Singapore, Shanghai, and the Asia Pacific Triennial. This is another urgent reason to improve the quality of our "art writings."

At home in Malaysia, there is also an increase in art activities as evident, for example, in the rise (and even fall) of so many private galleries such as Valentine Willie Fine Art, Pelita Hati, Galeriwan, NN Gallery, XOAS Gallery and Wel-Ling Gallery, to name a few. Moreover, there seems to be a growing number of independent art platforms or collectives such as

Matahati, Rimbun Dahan, Rumah Air Panas and Lost Generation Space. These alternative spaces enable dialogue with digital media, performance, and installation in the context of fine art practices. This trend certainly leads to a conducive and supportive environment to develop our art further.

With the surge of such burgeoning activities, interests and support in art, there is a pressing need to bring the quality of "art writings" to the next level. This could be achieved by equipping ourselves with the knowledge of art historical and critical writing, and with a general understanding of the various theories of art. Instead of producing "art writings" that merely depict artworks, we must write with a proper art historical or cross-disciplinary approach in order to document the changing tendencies in art. "Art writings" should not only describe the works formalistically and with self-created jargons without any effort to explain the meanings behind the works. On the contrary, "art writings" should focus on the contents and contexts of the artworks to help the public understand their importance. "Art writings" should deal with a more meaningful perspective in the light of the works' own contexts and historical, geographical, social and cultural conditions, preferably by way of an understanding of art historical, theoretical, critical and curatorial scholarship.

In-depth "art writings" are important as we do not only need to document but also to understand the past, the immediate present and the future of the history, culture and art of Malaysia. History and culture, for example, help to give us a sense of identity, informing us of who we are, where we are from and where we are going. Like various markers of history that surround us daily, above all architecture and monuments, works of art likewise have been proven to be reliable sources of reference or reflection for us to understand the culture and the society they represent.

With the recent interests in Asian contemporary art, systematic and academic studies of Southeast Asian art are still being developed from the perspectives outside the region, such as Japan, Australia and the United States. Important as these are, it is nevertheless necessary for similar studies to be made from within the Southeast Asian region with Southeast Asian Insights, and in the case of Malaysia, with a Malaysian insight. Therefore, there is a need to improve "art writings" to a more systematic and critical level, either historically or cross-disciplinarily. These "art writings" can be the tools that are very much required to counter the argument that modern art in Asia is mostly derivative and mainly utilises the worn-out ideas of Euramerican art.

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