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INFRASTRUCTURES

NARRATIVES IN MALAYSIAN ART

VOLUME

3

EDITED BY BEVERLY YONG,
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General Acknowledgements

The *Narratives in Malaysian Art* project pays humble tribute to the legacy of those who dedicated their lives to the development of the Malaysian art scene. This third volume centres on the institutions, groups, projects and personalities who have contributed to this development over the decades and those who are working towards its future. It acknowledges the work of champions and advocates, patrons, organisers, art managers and workers, publishers and writers, gallerists and dealers, and of course, artists, who have helped create policies and platforms for and conversations around art in Malaysia.

In its effort to include a wide range of representative voices from different sectors of the art scene, the construction of *Volume 3* has involved a very large number of people over the course of perhaps three years. For the four roundtable sessions organised in conjunction with the volume, and transcribed here, we thank the host institutions, formal and informal, for their support, as well as the roundtable committees, moderators and participants for their time and input. We also thank all those who have participated in the interviews and surveys conducted. It has been a rich experience and a privilege to hear their many stories and perspectives.

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Art Criticism versus Art Writing: The Malaysian Situation

SARENA ABDULLAH

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in *Kemanusiaan: The Asian Journal of Humanities*, 19:2 (2012).

Since the 1990s, the changes in Malaysia's cultural domain have been very significant. In recent years, the Malaysian art scene has become an ongoing and thriving art initiative that is constantly changing. Additionally, the advent of globalisation and cyber technologies, particularly the Internet, has influenced and directed energies in the arts and artists in very different directions. Since 2006, the prices of works of some Malaysian artists have soared with the general international demand for Asian works. Some Malaysian artists have gained international recognition, winning commissions from Japanese and European museums, and being invited to participate in prestigious biennales around the world.

While there are many positive developments in Malaysian art, the state of Malaysian art is quite different from that of Euro-America, where the art world comprises of people who are involved in the production, commission, preservation, promotion, criticism, and sale of art, and consists of a formally structured network of artists, critics, dealers, galleries, museums, collectors and educators who engage with the realm of art on various levels. In Malaysia, the roles of these parties are quite limited. Most importantly, there is inadequate public awareness among Malaysians of the appreciation of modern art in particular, as the education system in general neither supports nor encourages the arts and cultural fields. In terms of writings and documentation, only limited forms of "art writing" have persisted.

Serious scholarly research and analysis in the field of Malaysian art history and criticism have not developed as progressively and have not been regarded as as important as the development of Malaysian art itself. The lack of such text in terms of quantity and quality is a source of grievance and discontent among those involved in the Malaysian art scene.¹ This is unlike in Euro-America, where writings on art called "art criticism"

and "art writings" proliferate in tandem with works of art, written and published under different contexts and to answer different needs.

"Art criticism" is a form of writing which analyses and evaluates works of art based on judgment and evaluation. This form of critique has never been produced significantly in Malaysia. Although the various art writings discussed in this essay can be loosely identified as art criticism, my stance in using the term "art writing" instead of "art criticism" to designate the literature is anchored in the fact that art writings that have been produced in Malaysia lack the critical aspects of judgment and evaluation that are essential to art criticism.

So, what is art criticism and why, despite the progressive unfolding of Malaysian art in the last 20 years or so, does this particular genre of writing not emerge accordingly in the Malaysian art world? Noël Carroll explains that art criticism is the act of criticising artworks, although it is not limited to giving opinionated agreements on what is a good art exhibition and vice versa.² It involves analysing artworks, which includes describing, classifying, contextualising, elucidating, interpreting and, most importantly, reasoned evaluation of the artwork or the series of artworks under discussion. Art writings are subjected to different categories, depending on the type of analyses or critique that the author offers. For example, an art critic is "a person who engages in the reasoned evaluation of artworks"; they can be an academic, journalist or art writer who essays their evaluation with well-supported reasons. James Elkins, in categorising art criticism in America, classifies different types of art criticism as follows – catalogue essays, academic treatises, cultural criticism, conservative harangues, philosophical essays, descriptive art criticism and poetic art criticism.³ With the exception of catalogue essays, none of these types of art writing has emerged substantially in Malaysia.

Published materials on Malaysian art are limited to essays and articles written for exhibition catalogues, newspaper sections, magazine sections and online publications.⁴ These publications largely embody generalised and formal analyses of a series of artworks, reporting on arts events, personal interviews, and profiles of artists. Despite their variety, these writings fail to incorporate an essential component of art criticism, namely critical discussion of artworks based on value judgements and evaluations. These literatures also neglect to offer proper historical, social and political contextualisation of the artworks or exhibitions that are being discussed.

Catalogue essays, for instance, simply narrate the artists' self-declared subject matter rather than compare any potentially invidious assessment between one artist and another. As a result, curatorial activities and curatorial essays consist largely of a "neutral" gathering and discussion of artworks according to themes and genres.⁵

There are several reasons why art criticism has not developed in parallel with the development of art in Malaysia. First, as mentioned earlier, the structure of the Malaysian art world is not complete. Art as an important field of knowledge has not been promoted and supported in an education system that is founded on the National Economic Policy,⁶ in which the weight of science and technology presses on every level of Malaysian life, pushing away the artistic and cultural realm from government policy and the popular consciousness. In Malaysian education policy, there is a huge emphasis on students to major in the sciences rather than the arts. Art programmes at tertiary level are quite limited and it was not until the 1990s that we witnessed the burgeoning of public and private art and design schools. However, this development has not addressed the predicament of art writing in Malaysia, as undergraduate programmes at Malaysian art schools are exclusively studio-based. "Writerly" subjects such as art history and art theory only exist as elective or compulsory courses to supplement studio programmes. To date, there is no systematically developed field of art historical research in Malaysian art schools, let alone art history or art criticism as a major. Consequently, those who enrol in local art schools or in liberal arts programmes are not exposed to researching and writing about art. The effects of this handicap are especially evident in postgraduate theses and dissertations that lack a critical understanding and analysis of art. Most MA and PhD researchers concentrate on documenting primary sources and lack the analytical and theoretical insights to augment the quality of their research and analyses.

Second, criticism is a genre that is almost non-existent in Malaysian art writings; if there is any (perhaps the weekly art column in *Business Times* from 1992 until 1996 by Redza Piyadasa is an exception), it is quite unsustainable, and to date there have been hardly any serious art critics with a consistent column in local newspapers or magazines, and a limited number of writers/journalists who specialise in art criticism and reviews. Those who do engage in art criticism and general reviews are often individuals who occupy multiple positions of being an artist, art historian, curator, academician or arts manager. Some notable

names in this regard are the late Redza Piyadasa (artist, art historian, curator, writer), Nur Hanim Khairuddin (artist, curator, writer), Hasnul J. Saidon (artist, curator, museum director, academician, writer), Wong Hoy Cheong (artist, writer), Beverly Yong (arts manager, curator, writer), and Snow Ng (writer, curator, arts manager) and a few others. The only exception is Ooi Kok Chuen, a journalist and arts reviewer who has been consistently writing about Malaysian arts in a major newspaper. Perhaps it is not uncommon in an art scene where writings and writers on art are scarce, for the non-literati to be compelled to take up the pen – artists turn into writers, private gallery owners into curators and writers on art; artists run private spaces/galleries, gallery owners/curators become art historians, and art writers turn into artists, etc. Such multiple positions defy the unwritten rule that art critics should not be friends with artists, should not accept their favours, and should not receive payments for catalogue essays from commercial galleries for whom they are writing.⁷ Unfortunately, with the multiple roles of writers involved directly in the Malaysian art scene, such criteria for the art critic as a detached observer and intellectual cannot be met.

Third, there is a question of whether the role of an art critic is well understood by Malaysian artists and the public in general. Boris Groys claimed that the figure of the art critic emerged at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century.⁸ According to him, the art critic is not a representative of the art world but strictly an outside observer whose function is to judge and criticise works of art in the name of the public. Therefore, judgments that are made by any art critic must bear no obligation to the artists. The value of criticism should be both "educative and constructive" and must be free of special biases and fair in its evaluation besides emphasising the value of a particular work or an event in a larger context, which can be done by comparing the artwork with previous similar work or other works by the same artist.⁹

While the most important aspect of criticism is judgment, opinions on what is good, bad or ugly can be uncalled-for in Malaysian society. Writing on criticism in Malaysia, *Art Corridor* editor Ming Chua notes that, "Not only was a passing commentary on a piece of art work impossible, it is perceived as wrong".¹⁰ In the Malaysian art scene, it is not fully understood that art critics should speak for themselves and must be conceived as private citizens with a singular opinion striving to be heard among competing voices and opinions – to decide whether something is worth seeing or not.

In the Malaysian context, where the assertion of judgment by an art critic is rare and good academic papers on art are limited, the role of explaining or contextualising art automatically falls to writers and curators instead, through art catalogues and other publication opportunities. Bigger and more established galleries can exert more influence on the way artists' works are presented to the public through these writings if they have enough money to produce colour catalogues and commission writers to provide 3,000-word essays on exhibiting artists.¹¹ Since the 1990s, when the number of galleries in Kuala Lumpur started to increase, those in a curatorial position, or gallery owners in general, seem to have had the upper hand as prime mediators of contemporary art in Malaysia. On top of that, the Internet now offers an important platform for publishing writings on gallery websites, websites dedicated to art, web groups, and social networking websites such as Facebook, and blogs.¹²

The foregoing discussion suggests that the term "art criticism" does not accurately describe the types of writing that have been produced and published on Malaysian art. The term "art writing" is in fact more appropriate to describe the various ways and writerly positions that are used to discuss art in Malaysia.

In a country that is lacking in the development of art history and criticism as an academic discipline, art writings in art catalogues and various essays or reviews, reporting in local newspapers and magazines, interviews and conversations published online are indeed resources that document artistic activities in Malaysia at present. But do these art writings need to be mere formalistic analyses or reporting on art events? They certainly do not. Although these writings aim at a general readership, it does not mean that they should just be simple explanations of the formal qualities of an artwork or biographies of artists. It helps to have knowledge of art history, the fundamentals of art criticism and knowledge of various theories of art. Instead of producing "art writings" that merely depict artworks, writers should also engage with the contents and contexts of the artworks. Doing so will help the public better understand the importance of these works. For example, art writings should bring to light the context, in terms of the history, local influences, and social and cultural milieu of each work. The critic must assume a degree of detachment and write in the interest of the public. Critical comments and opinions about the artwork must be based on facts and not personal biases. Although rooted in a different trajectory, art writings in Malaysia form a crucial segment of Malaysian art

and need to be improved, for they form the archives that will eventually help us to understand the past, the immediate present and the future of the history, culture and art of Malaysia.

- 1 Sarena Abdullah, 'The predicament of "art writings" in Malaysian art', *sentAp! 3:9* (2010).
- 2 Noël Carroll, *On Criticism*. New York: Routledge 2009, pp. 13-14.
- 3 James Elkins, *What happened to art criticism?*, Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press 2003, pp.16-73.
- 4 It must be noted here that the discussion on art writings in this paper does not include peer-reviewed essays that are related to academic art history such as those published in local academic journals. The influence of the papers published in these journals on the local art discourse could not be determined as they are usually practice-based inclined and are not engaged in critical discourse. Also, due to their limited circulation and the specificity of the topics discussed, the papers are largely inaccessible to the general public. Academic books on modern and contemporary arts are also limited and therefore will not be discussed in this paper.
- 5 Unfortunately, the state of curatorship too is like the state of art writing in Malaysia. There is no professional expert that has managed to redefine art exhibitions in Malaysia - as a result, many exhibitions tend to be repetitive and quite limited in the way of presenting artworks to the public. In the end, art exhibitions tend to be a cluster of works assembled in a gallery premise, usually connected by a very loose theme. A very loose theme often results in a very loose and not well-supported essay.
- 6 The goal of the NEP was to increase Malay economic ownership from around 3% in 1971 to 30% over a 20-year period, through massive government effort and interventions in order to bring the *bumiputera* into the modern urban economy.
- 7 Eleanor Heartney, 'The crises in art criticism', in Raphael Rubenstein (ed.), *Critical mess: Art critics on the state of their practice*, Lenox, MA: Hard Press Editions 2006, pp. 101-107.
- 8 Boris Groys, 'Critical reflections', *Artforum International*, 36:2 (1997).
- 9 J. W. English, *Criticizing the critics*, New York: Hastings House Publishers 1979, p. 3.
- 10 Ming Chua, 'Literature, criticism and the fine arts: Can we handle it?', *Art Corridor* (July-Sept 2003), pp. 15-17.
- 11 Most smaller galleries invite other art writers to contribute with a minimal payment ranging from RM200 to RM500 for a 1,000 to 1,500-word essay for an exhibition. More prominent galleries or institutions on the other hand, pay up to RM1 per word for a 3,000 to 3,500-word essay.
- 12 To examine online writings (usually published as blogs) and the use of the Internet as a platform to disseminate information on the arts really calls for a separate study.

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