

Artists and Institutions: Institution for the Future

Introduction

Recent global changes in cultural funding policies have prompted us to reconsider where these changes will lead us and how we may need to redefine our work and activities. We see more and more institutions adopting corporate models while other institutions that function differently, providing space for reflection and acting as laboratories, are disappearing. This makes me wonder: What kinds of institutions do we need, or do we hope to foster for the future?

The above-mentioned changes were prompted by economic crises in the Western hemisphere and seem to have permanently embedded themselves into discussions and negotiations within the region of Asia. Moreover, because of a lack of institutional infrastructure for contemporary art, it is a challenge for artists and cultural workers to continue our work. These conditions not only affect local discourses, which in many cases remain weak, but also their presence within the global context.

Of the young nation states that came into being in the mid-twentieth century, most of them had a long colonial history and went through many different stages in the process of developing their national identity. Here, the development of institutional structures at various levels also included those that pertain to culture. Malaysia became independent from Britain in 1957, and North and South Vietnam were re-united in 1976, while China proclaimed itself a Republic in 1949, just to name a few. Although these countries have taken very different paths toward development over the past three decades, the field of contemporary art practice continues to be marginalized in most of them.

In a recent discussion I had with scholar Dorothea Von Hantelmann about the issue of institutions, she stated that a new type of institution could inevitably create a new kind of ritual, which she calls the “exhibition ritual.” Although the idea that new types of institutions can create new types of rituals might be true in the Western context, I would say that the situation is much more complex in places where we hardly have any institutional structure to begin with and where new institutional models don’t focus solely on exhibition making.

Artists who are themselves acting as institutions within parts of Southeast Asia, by their proposals to construct new institutional models, also manage to circulate their work within international systems (like the networks of the biennial, triennial, and other institutional/museum exhibitions). This fact

reveals itself as a common thread for many of the artists who will be discussed here. Again, the complex issue of the roles of these artists both globally and locally re-emerges and proposes a possible way to understand their strong involvement and ability to build local institutional infrastructures.

This text will not discuss the market forces in the region that have increased the international exposure for a number of contemporary artists but failed to introduce a more constructive dialogue between the local and global contexts; instead, it will investigate local initiatives and platforms for the production of greater discourse within the region. I see these types of activities as being crucial in establishing a local knowledge that will in turn also contribute to global knowledge. The discussion will take the exhibition *Institution for the Future*, which I curated and which was presented at the Chinese Arts Centre as part of the 2011 Asia Triennial Manchester 2011, as its point of departure, providing an in-depth introduction to the conditions of contemporary art in the region in order to better understand the cultural and social context for production.

In recent years, because of the lack of any institutional involvement, artists and curators working in their respective, specific localities have taken charge of the construction and definition of the narratives attached to their practice. Their actions involve strategies of self-historicization, the development of discourse, the establishment of platforms for knowledge production and exchange, and self-education about independent publishing. It is common that individual artists, artist collectives, or groups of curators are the organizers of projects, and, in doing so, they have created small-scale institutions beyond and outside of the institutional system of the state. These spaces provide important access to information and have strong peer-to-peer relationships as well as developing a public space for discussion.

Some of these practices could be discussed in terms of modes of institutional critique that have developed over time into new institutional models. It is important to note that institutional critique requires engagement with an institutional structure and its position of power, a structure that didn't exist in many places in Asia during the development of their local avant-garde movements, and today in many respects this is still the case. On the other hand, in some of these countries the existing state systems were institutional in nature, including the cultural sector, and this contributed to artists to establishing their own spaces and nurturing their own small groups of followers and audiences. This process of institutional critique is geared towards larger ideological systems and values, often times without any direct confrontation towards the government on the part of the artists.

Institutional critique in most of the countries in South and Southeast Asia cannot be considered or defined according to conceptions of institutional critique in the West—Daniel Buren and Hans Haacke in the 1960s and 70s, Renée Green and Andrea Fraser in the 1980s and 90s, and, more recently, with writers such as Stefan Nowotny and Simon Sheikh. Institutional critique in Asia is more of a reaction to existing institutional frameworks or existing conditions such as with the National Art Gallery of Kuala Lumpur Young Contemporary Artist Award, Vietnam's significant lack of

institutional infrastructure, Singapore's state-funded system, and China's disconnect between institutional structures and the working artists they are supposedly intended to serve. Many of these institutions not only fail to exhibit contemporary artists' works, but, most importantly, they fail to provide any sort of discourse or access to history, whether through books, exhibition-making, or other kinds of reference material.

Within this environment, many artists, out of frustration, have been driven to establish a new type of system that would exist parallel to the state's cultural apparatus, with the recent possibility of collaboration between artists and state. These new positions that are taken up by artists can be understood as a form of institutional critique that does not necessarily have an academic presence as it is rarely discussed in academic circles because of a lack of any theoretical grounding around these issues.

This text will not attempt to map out this region according to individual contributions, but, instead, will present certain activities that operate on a similar level as institutional frameworks and will discuss three more or less distinctive modes of working within the region: artists' collectives as institutions; artist-funded institutions; and curatorial initiatives that have proposed new ways of thinking about the organization of knowledge and resources.

Institutional Critique and Its Different Manifestations Through Artistic Practice

I will begin with the case of Malaysia and its contemporary art scene.

Malaysia developed an early presence with the involvement of the National Visual Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur, which in the early 1970s established the annual Young Contemporary Artist Award. The Gallery also hosted different artists and engaged with commercial galleries, and collectors organized exhibitions, all of which contributed to the construction of a narrative around contemporary art in Malaysia. The Young Contemporary Artist Award was first presented in 1974 and still exists today with a format in which artists submit their project proposals to the museum to be juried. If accepted, the work is then presented in an exhibition at the National Visual Art Gallery. After 2000, the award morphed into a biennial event and still serves as an important exhibition opportunity for young artists coming out of art schools. While the Young Contemporary Artist Award was an early platform for the support of young artists in Malaysia, the institution, at the same time, imposed rigid rules for artist participation, such that eventually many artists opposed and reacted to the institutional failure to produce more constructive ways of involving artists in establishing a local art scene. One of the more notorious critiques of this rigid institutional framework was in the work of Roslisham Ismail (aka Ise), who, in a work titled $3 \times 3 \times 3 = 27m^3$ (2004) directly opposed the museum's rule that works presented to the gallery should be no more than $3 \times 3 \times 3$ metres in size. The artist met the required dimensions proposed by the gallery with boxes filled with newspaper and invited friends to come and destroy the boxes right before the opening of the exhibition. The destruction of the sculpture that was $3 \times 3 \times 3 = 27m^3$ was documented and in turn shown at the opening as a video installation with two screen projections.

Roslisham Ismail (aka Ise),
3m x 3m x 3m = 27m³, 2004,
 2-channel video, 10 mins.
 Courtesy of the artist.



Yap Sau Bin, *Youthful
 Contention Not () to Detach
 from Parental Eclipse*, 2000,
 installation, 3 x 3 x 3 metres.



Yap Sau Bin, *Youthful
 Contention Not () to Detach
 from Parental Eclipse* (interior
 view), 2000, installation, 3 x 3
 x 3 metres.



Aspects of institutional critique are also present in the work of Yap Sau Bin, who joined the Rumah Airpanas artist collective in 2003. Sau Bin's work for the 2000 Young Contemporary Art Award, which was titled *Youthful Contention Not () to Detach from Parental Eclipse* (2000), took the museum size rule outside, where he constructed a room without a roof exactly 3 x 3 x 3 metres in size and perfectly white inside. The room was constructed out of wood and very quickly was damaged by rainy weather, so it was removed, leaving only the trace

of the floor 3 x 3 x 3 metres. Yap Sau Bin's works are generally responsive to their sites, and this way of working not only confronts the larger art institutions, but also the galleries, exhibitions, and other entities that evoke further institutional aspects that inform the system within which the artist exists. Among other younger artists working within this vein of institutional critique is Chi Too, who confronts not only art institutions but also other institutions that structure society and social behaviour.



Ise's work from the early 2000s, which openly confronted the museum's rules, found little support from the local art scene, and many were critical of his actions. But this turned out to be an important point of departure for the artist as he then began to change his working strategies by presenting himself as a quasi-institution through various project initiatives that he continues with today. *sentAp!* magazine, a quarterly English-Bahasa publication on contemporary art started by Ise and curator and artist Nur Hanim Khairuddin, was established in 2005 and acted as an illegal publication without a proper ISBN number until they were invited to participate in documenta in 2007. *sentAp!* is still today the only bilingual publication with a focus on the Southeast Asian region, and Ise stated in a 2012 interview in Shanghai about *sentAp!*'s future and role in society: "We are actually in the early stages. In twenty years, this magazine will be very important as an archive, but now people don't look at it as important." Similar initiatives in independent publishing in Southeast Asia are *Karbon Journal*, by ruangrupa in Indonesia, and a recent online artist journal titled *PDF* started by Shanghai-based Hu Yun, Li Mu, and Lu Pingyuan.

sentAp! magazines on display at Chinese Arts Centre, Manchester, 2011. Courtesy of Chinese Arts Centre, Manchester.

Another of Ise's initiatives, the Parking Project, arose from the lack of interest in Malaysian art by practitioners and curators doing regional research. Parking Projects is more loosely defined than those organizations that receive regular funding or have formal programming, and is open to residency opportunities for artists and curators visiting and doing research on the Malaysian art scene. The Parking Project has no funding, so it assumes the role of a host providing accommodation to artists and curators who are planning to visit Kuala Lumpur as well as offering an introduction to the local art scene.

Very similar in its role and ways of operating is the artist collective Rumah Air Panas (RAP), also in Kuala Lumpur. This collective was established in 1997 by Liew Kung Yu and Puah Chin Kok, and from 2000 to 2003 the directorship was held by Chuah Chong Yong. But the actual artist collective known today as Rumah Air Panas was formed in 2003. RAP's mission

statement explains how the collective “aims to explore and coalesce the visual arts and other cultural practices through collaboration in exhibitions and projects, and documentation and exchange of ideas in discussion. The members of RAP support an independent, aware, and concerted artistic practice in engaging the artistic community and the art public.” In 2006, an important transition took place in RAP’s working methodology as, on the one hand, they gained legal status as a registered artist collective, while on the other, they lost their venue which consisted of a bungalow, outdoor workshop area, artist studios, and living quarters, as it was earmarked for acquisition by the government for a highway construction project.

Kok Siew Wai, *Face(s)*, 2002, video installation, 7 mins. Courtesy of the artist.



Vincent Leong, *Run, Malaysia, Run!*, 2007, video, 4 mins. Courtesy of the artist.



Since then, the shift that occurred after the loss of their own space pushed RAP towards a new way of working, and the collective has been experimenting with a parasitic strategy of organizing events, talks, workshops, and projects in which they collaborate with other institutions, and through such collaborations actually try to change the institutional framework from within. An example would be a recent talk of mine that took place in Kuala Lumpur that was organized by Rumah Air Panas but hosted by the National Visual Art Gallery. These kinds of collaborations open up very important possibilities for redefining institutional frameworks. One of RAP’s members, Yap Sau Bin, described it “as a soft target in Malaysian contemporary art system.”¹ RAP doesn’t receive funding

for its projects, nor is there any fixed annual plan of activities: instead, it utilizes a format open to all sorts of possibilities and chances that come their way through their professional network.



Open institutional critique in Indonesia effectively began in December of 1974, also known as Black December, when members of the younger generation that belonged to the Group of Five—Hardi, FX Harsono, B. Munni Ardhi, Nanik Mirna, and Siti Adiyati—became dissatisfied with the jurying process and conservative attitude demonstrated in the exhibition titled Grand Exhibition on Indonesian Painting, which took place at the Jakarta Art Council at Taman Ismail Marzuki. On the final night of the exhibition, during its closing ceremony, the artists sent a wreath of condolences to the Jakarta Art Council and distributed a petition. The artists wrote: “Our

A wreath offered as a statement of condolence to the death of Indonesian painting by December Hitam artists, 1974. Courtesy of FX Harsono.

Condolences for the Death of Indonesian Painting.” This move has come to symbolize the beginning of a resistance movement that continued throughout the 1970s in Indonesia through the organized activities of the New Art Movement (which included some members of the Group of Five) and the Pipa collective.



The notion of institutional critique through artists’ actions in China is an issue that has been explored by Xiamen Dada, an artists’ collective formed in the mid-1980s. One of the collective’s key figures is the artist Huang Yongping. On November 23, 1986, members of Xiamen Dada gathered in front of Xiamen Cultural Palace and burned all the artworks that they had exhibited in that very museum just a month prior. After this event, Huang Yongping stated: “Artworks for

Xiamen Dada burning works in front of Xiamen Cultural Palace, November 23, 1986. Courtesy of Huang Yongping.

artists are like opium for people. If you don’t destroy them, you will never live in peace.”² In December of 1986, Xiamen Dada organized an exhibition at the Fujian Art Museum, but they didn’t show the works that they had planned; instead, they moved in construction materials they found around the museum building and exhibited this detritus. After the exhibition Xiamen Dada stated: “This is a delimited, aggressive, and continuous event. . . . The fact that these objects are flooding the [Fujian] art museum clearly

Exhibition view at Fujian Art Museum, December 1986. Courtesy of Huang Yongping.



Last Supper, 1988, performance at Shanghai Art Museum.



shows that it's an action of attack. And what is being attacked here is not the audience, but their opinions on 'art.' Likewise, it is not the art museum itself that is under attack, but the art museum as an example of the art system. . . ."³ Then, in 1989, for the China Avant-Garde exhibition in Beijing, Xiamen Dada proposed to move the museum from its original location using pedicabs. This exploration of institutional critique was interrupted after the 1989 Tian'anmen incident but remains present in Huang Yongping's practice today. Early

encounters between state institutions and the avant-garde movement in China, such as the *Last Supper Performance* at the Shanghai Art Museum in 1988, and China Avant-Garde, in Beijing, in 1989, created interruptions but slowly were reinstated beginning in the mid-1990s (although the presence of institutional critique was somewhat absent). A certain notion of critique would remain present in individual artist's works but was focused more on the exhibition as ritual than institutional critique.

Huang Yongping, proposal for the China Avant/Garde exhibition, 1989. Courtesy of Huang Yongping.



With regard to curatorial practice, in 2000 an exhibition was held titled *Fuck Off* (the Chinese title more closely translates as *Uncooperative Attitude*, but *Fuck Off* had more effect, especially for an English speaking audience), curated by Ai Weiwei and Feng Boyi, the premise of which was an open call for artists who did not wish to collaborate with the institutional system (the exhibition was a satellite show of the Shanghai Biennial in 2000).

More recently, an exhibition curated by Nikita Cai in 2011 at the Guangdong Times Museum titled *Museum That Is Not*, further pushed the limits of curating as institutional critique and attempted to explore and initiate discussion around institutional critique today (which to this day doesn't really exist in China). One work in this exhibition, *Museum*



and *Me*, by Liu Ding, explored different relationships within the art system—from the relationship between artist and museum through individual relationships determined by the field of art. A recent work

Liu Ding, *Museum and Me*, 2011, 2-channel video installation, 85 mins. Courtesy of the artist and Guangdong Times Museum.



by Li Ran titled *Beyond Geography*, presented in the 2012 Shenzhen Sculpture Biennale as a kind of Discovery Channel mockumentary, is witty but ultimately straightforward in its criticism of our art historical narrative and reliance on Western reference

Li Ran, *Beyond Geography*, 2012, HD video Installation, 23 mins., 9 secs. Courtesy of the artist.

material. The artist Hu Yun, with his *Focus on Talent* (2012) project hosted by the Today Art Museum, criticizes the consumption of so-called young artists with a huge neon light installation titled *Another Hundred Years* (2012), which was placed at the gallery entrance. The neon spells out: “7 hours of young Chinese contemporary art,” referring to the gallery hours of the museum. Then there is the *Hu Xiangqian Art Museum* (2010–ongoing), that consists of public performances in which the artist utilizes his body as a museum and shares his collection by describing the works that are stored in his mind. Although Hu Xiangqian’s point of departure for the development of this body of work grew from a very simple idea involving language and the desire to describe works of art through the use of didactics, I propose an interpretation of the ongoing project as institutional critique of the museum and market system in China.

Opposite top: Hu Yun, *Another Hundred Years*, 2012, installation, neon, eighty 35mm slides, slide projector, 30 x 570 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Opposite bottom: Hu Xiangqian, *Xiangqian Museum*, 2011, performance at Chinese Arts Centre. Courtesy of the artist and Chinese Arts Centre, Manchester.

In 1988, the artist Tang Dawu established an artist village in Singapore, which for many years was the only place that showed performance and installation art. The National Art Council blocked funding for what became known as The Artists Village after Josef Ng’s 1994 public performance, in which, with his back to the audience, he pulled at his pubic hair, and an image of his naked back was then distributed by the media that resulted in a huge controversy. In reaction to the government’s decision, in 1995 Tang Dawu dressed in a black jacket with yellow words written on the back, stating “Don’t give money to the art” and handed a message to then President Ong Teng Cheong, who was visiting an exhibition titled Singapore Art, declaring: “Dear Mr. President, I am an artist and I am important.” Ho Tzu Nyen, in his most radical gesture, *Episode 3*, explored this important event by providing a more complex assessment of Tang Dawu’s performance that took place in front of the ultimate symbol of state authority by questioning why authorities actually allowed this piece to take place in front of them.

From Institutional Critique Toward Self-Organization

Early forms of institutional critique in many countries, such as Vietnam, were soon replaced with more constructive examples of artists organizing themselves in ways that reflected institutional structures and that would come to replace existing state institutional systems. But today state funded museums remain isolated from the contemporary art context and in

7hours Young Chinese Contemporary Art



many localities usually serve as venues that galleries rent for the artists' so-called museum exhibitions. This is not only the case in China, but also in Indonesia, Malaysia, and other countries.



Entrance of Salon Natasha, mid-1990s. Courtesy of Natasha Kraevskaia and Vu Dan Tan.



Left: Salon Natasha, detail from the exhibition Lithography featuring Vu Dan Tan, 2010. Courtesy of Natasha Kraevskaia and Vu Dan Tan.

Right: Thinh Le, light performance during the opening of the exhibition Lightplay, 2002. Courtesy of Natasha Kraevskaia and Vu Dan Tan.



An example of this is Salon Natasha, established in 1990 by Natasha Kraevskaia and artist Vu Dan Tan, which was the only independent art space in Vietnam during the 1990s that showed contemporary art.

Nhasan Space, Hanoi, 2008. Photo: Biljana Ciric.

During that time the space was established in their home, which was also used as Vu Dan Tan's studio. As part of their directive, Salon Natasha created a space for the exhibition and exchange of ideas between like-minded artists. Another more loosely organized group in Vietnam that still exists today in Hanoi is Nhasan Studio, which was founded in 1998 by Tran Luong and antique restorer Nguyen Manh Duc. Nhasan Studio, after Salon Natasha, was the most important gathering place for local artists and for many years the only venue where they could exhibit their work. Today the Nhasan Studio program is run by representatives of the younger generation of artists, Nguyen Manh Hung and Nguyen Phuong Linh, but as a result of financial trouble and tight policing by the local government, the program has been inconsistent in recent years. Contemporary Art Center, established in Hanoi in 1997 with support of the Ford Foundation, under the artistic directorship of Tran Luong and administrated by the Vietnam Arts Association, was an attempted collaboration between artists and the state apparatus. This collaboration lasted until 2003, when Tran Luong resigned from his position because of government restraints.

In the 1980s, artists in mainland China were very active in organizing exhibitions, but this was interrupted by incidents in 1989, thus providing a brief encounter between contemporary artists and state institutions. In the 1990s, artists continued to reorganize their work through more temporally minded forms of exhibition making rather than within organized spaces. The tradition of artists organizing exhibitions, particularly in Shanghai, could be read as a certain strain of institutional critique that existed actively until around the mid-2000s. Artist-initiated spaces began to appear in 1993 with the Borghes Libreria Institute for Contemporary Art, which first functioned as a bookstore and then in 2003 became an art space in Guangzhou. Also, in 1998 the BizArt Center in Shanghai opened, with other spaces to follow, such as DDM Warehouse, which was established in 2000. These are just a few examples. Of these early spaces, the only one still active is the Libreria Borges Institute, while the others have either closed or transformed into some other institutional venture.

Tisna Sanjaya, *Football Print*, 2010, football, paint, paper. Installation view at the Ruangrupa exhibition *Decompression*, 2010, National Gallery, Jakarta, curated by Agung Hujatnikajenong, Farah Wardani, and Reza Afisina.



Stable Institutional Models Initiated by Artists After 2000

After 2000, and in specific countries such Vietnam, Cambodia, China, and Malaysia after 2005, more stable institutional structures began to appear on the art scene. By stable institutional structures I am talking about those that have planned programming, institutional funding sources, publishing branches, educational platforms, and physical spaces for their own programming and mounting of exhibitions. In most cases, these institutions were established by artists in the region, such as ruangrupa, founded in 2000 in Jakarta; San Art in Ho Chi Minh City, founded in 2007 by artist Dinh Q Lei; 12 Art Space in Kuala Lumpur, founded in 2007 by artist Shooshie Sulaiman; Sa Sa Bassac, founded in 2009 in Phnom Penh; Arrow Factory, established in 2008 in Beijing; the Observation Society, established in 2009 in Guangzhou; and the very recent initiative Video Bureau in Beijing, founded in 2012 by artists Fang Lu, Zhu Jia, and the director of Libreria Borges Institute in Guangzhou, Chen Tong.

All of the above-mentioned institutions provide a more or less stable institutional framework in these different locales. Depending upon the different contexts, these institutions adopt very different roles within the local art scene, from an educational role of assisting young artists, such as the case with San Art, or the role and commitment adopted by Zoe Butt, who joined the institution as co-director and curator. San Art established



Installation view of San Art, May 2011. Photo: Phunam. Courtesy of San Art, Ho Chi Minh City.



Malcolm Smith, ex-director of Australian Centre for Photography in Sydney, and currently working as artist, arts manager, and curator in Yogyakarta, Indonesia conducting the workshop Almost Everything About Grants, Residencies, and Funding for Art, April 2012. Courtesy of ZeroStation, Ho Chi Minh City.



the San Art Laboratory residency for local artists, for which the artists get to stay in Ho Chi Minh City working on their independent projects, sharing ideas with their paired talking partner who could be an artist of any genre or a professional from a different field. Their reading room is an important part of San Art's commitment to the public, and San Art is working with local artists in order to provide basic professional experience for recent graduates through exhibitions of their work and by gaining professional

experience on very practical levels as well. A recently opened space in Ho Chi Minh City is Zero Station, created by curator Huy Nguyen Nhu which provides a platform for artists to experiment, and, as Huy said himself, is very much process-oriented.

DIA/Projects in Ho Chi Minh City, established by Richard Streitmatter-Tran in 2010, operates on a slightly different premise, with a focus on building a professional library with around two thousand publications. DIA/Projects serves as the artist's studio and, at the same time, as a public space, and it seems more comfortable defining itself as a para-institution rather than an institution proper, particularly with the aim of remaining modest in scale and its activities being flexible.

What many of these spaces have in common, in one way or another, is their involvement in the archiving aspects of the local art scene, which could be seen as one of the first attempts towards constructing a self-history. However, at the onset, very few mentioned anything about acting as a platform for collecting and archiving primary material with the specific intent of making such materials available for future research. San Art, as Zoe Butt stated, is “an archive just by its very existence and history.”⁴ San Art, in collaboration with the Asia Art Archive, initiated a project on archiving alternative art spaces and their activities in Vietnam, including Blue Art Space, from Ho Chi Minh City, and Salon Natasha, from Hanoi. 12 Art Space in Kuala Lumpur is in the process of creating an archive of individual artists working in Malaysia and has devoted a series of exhibition projects related to their practice. And Video Bureau is producing an archive on video art in China, examining specific artists as case studies.



Video Bureau, Beijing, 2012.

This shift toward an interest in archives in South and Southeast Asia can also be found earlier in Indonesia, back in 1995, when the Cemeti Art Foundation established the Indonesian Visual Art Archive, officially changing its name to IVAA in 2007. These initiatives or archival institutions, although rare in the region, have today been incorporated into artist-initiated spaces as part of their mission and contribution to the re-definition of the local context through archiving and research.

These individual institutional research initiatives still lack any support on the local level from state institutions, and, at the same time, are practices

that for many practitioners in the local art scene seem rather new and perhaps less important at this point. But their fragmented efforts provide the basic foundation for understanding art practices that have been evolving over the last few decades and, perhaps more importantly, will undoubtedly do so for generations to come. One of the more specific institutional formats devoted to archiving and research in China will be the new OCT Terminal Space that will open in Beijing with a mission of collecting such primary material.

A slightly different and earlier encounter with more stable institutional structures occurred in Indonesia around 2000, after the fall of the Suharto regime. Ruangrupa, an artists' collective, was established in 2000 around an institutional structure that consists of an artist's residency program, workshops, publishing activities, and a small gallery space for young artists to exhibit. Kun Ci Cultural Studies Center, established in 1999, focuses on critical cultural studies and public education, to name just a few of their activities. These institutions, although already in existence for over a decade, rarely have the opportunity to disseminate their work outside of Southeast Asia, with the exception of ruangrupa, which has been more successful at this as a result of exhibiting as a collective in international exhibitions.

State Funding of Infrastructure and Independent Initiatives

More stable funding infrastructures and state funding policies in some locales create very different conditions for artists who wish to maintain their independence. One example of this can be seen in Singapore, where the current state of contemporary art practice is an interesting case study. Rem Koolhaas noted about Singapore: "It is pure intention: if there is chaos, it is *authored* chaos; if it is ugly, it is *designed* ugliness; if it is absurd, it is *willed* absurdity. Singapore represents a unique *ecology* of the contemporary."⁵ The government in Singapore is attempting to position the city as the artistic center of Southeast Asia. The Singapore Art Museum is the only professional institution supporting and systematically collecting contemporary art from the region. The National Art Gallery, due to open in 2015, will also have a focus on Singapore and Southeast Asia. The Singapore Biennial and Art Stage Singapore art fair are part of the main targeted activities in Singapore, while an upcoming project at Gillman Barracks will bring some twenty international galleries to Singapore, with another new art center planned for the same area.

Open Studio at Grey Projects Annex on Niven Road, Singapore.



On the other hand, most of the artist-run spaces in Singapore have ceased being active or have highly irregular programming. Although artists have funding opportunities and the National Art Council is very generous in supporting its artists, there haven't been any new artist-driven initiatives, which tells us a great deal about the local artistic ecology. Jason Wee, founder of Grey Projects and an artist based in Singapore, when pressed on this issue, stated:

The national art agencies are consolidating program and funding protocols, which also means that they are centralizing control of art spaces. It does not only affect artist-run spaces, but museums as well. Unfortunately, Grey Projects is the only artist-run project left with its own space. There are others but they are for most purposes defunct or closed. Post-Museum is now a roving occasional program with no space, and Your Mother Gallery is only rarely programming. A new outfit SCYA is focused on providing commercial art opportunities to its pool of young artists, and has no space. It is a problem, the state's quiet and insidious control.⁶

Currently, Grey Projects and Studio Bibliotheque seem to be the only artist initiatives doing projects on a more regular basis.

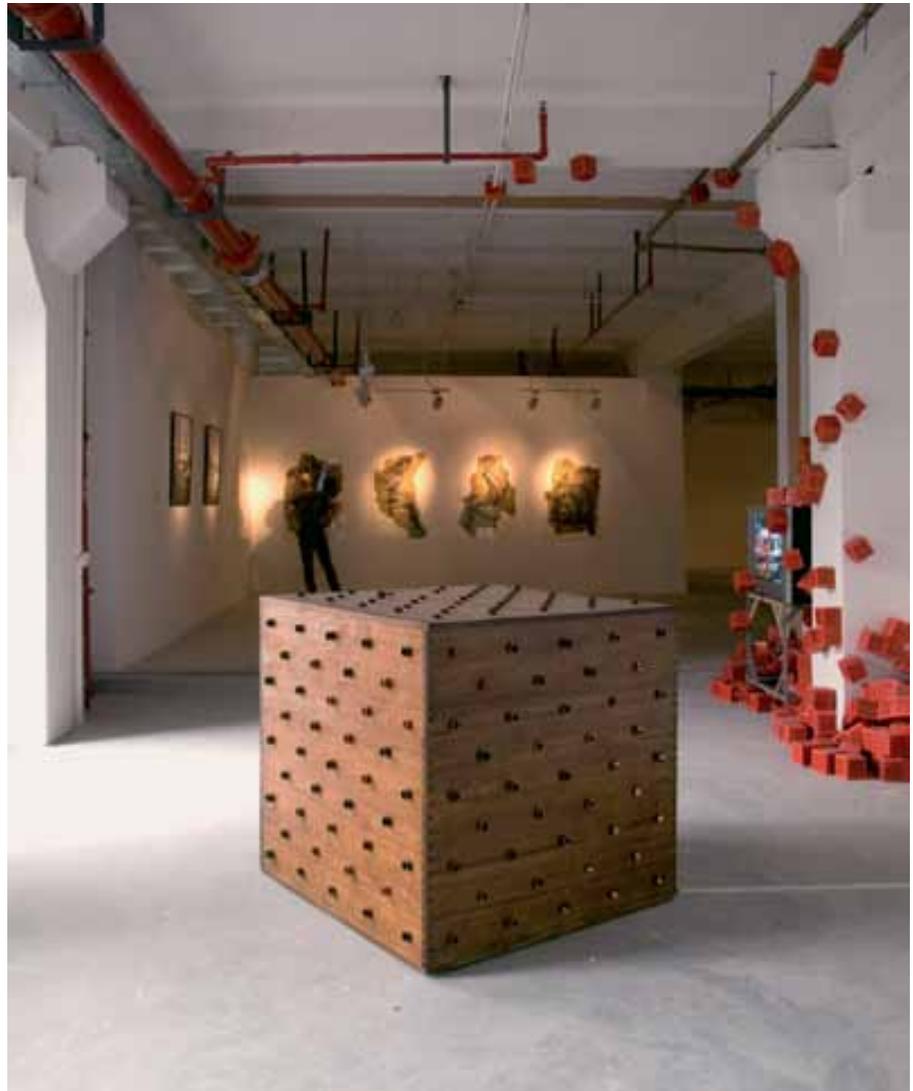
In Taipei, the Taipei Contemporary Art Centre (TCAC), initiated by artist Jun Yang in 2008 as a research proposal for the Taipei Biennale and also shown in the exhibition *Institution for the Future*, started as an initiative to build an art centre independent from government funding. In March 2012, TCAC concluded its first phase. It received its space for free from a local real estate company with a two-year contract that has now expired, and TCAC is facing a major transition. Meiya Cheng, an independent curator, stated that TCAC will apply for a new space from the Taipei City government and fund-raise for programs in order to maintain their independent status, thus proposing a new way for all of them to work.

Curatorial Involvements in the Self-Historicization Process

Rogue Art, an art consultancy agency initiated by Beverly Young, Adeline Ooi, and Rachel Ng in Kuala Lumpur, proposes a new way of working that exists between the role of the independent curator and institution. Rogue Art provides services to galleries and collectors while proceeding with academic research-based projects and their own exhibition curating. *Narratives in Malaysian Art* is their publishing initiative in four volumes, in English and Bahasa, that looks at the early 1940s, or pre-Merdeka period, all the way through to today. This publishing initiative grew out of the lack of discourse in contemporary Malaysian art as well as the lack of publications relating to it. Rogue art, as initiator of the project, has secured funding for the project through fund-raising drives targeting local collectors as well as institutional support, and there are a number of local writers, curators, and researchers working on it. *Narratives in Malaysian Art* is a long-term project and will provide insight into the critical discourse of the local art scene, representing a new way of working together.

A similar approach can be found in the Shanghai Archival Project, an archival initiative I started after curating the exhibition *History in the Making: Shanghai 1979–2009*, which had already involved the archiving of the history of exhibitions in Shanghai from 1979. Related research that I am conducting over the next year will further expand the initial regional research on the history of exhibitions and entails working with professionals from different locales, thereby creating points of contact across the region, opening up

History in the Making:
Shanghai, 1979–2009.
Exhibition view with Ni Weihua
and Chen Yanyin. Courtesy of
Biljana Ciric.



Cover of Patrick D. Flores,
*Past Peripheral: Curation
in Southeast Asia*,
(Singapore: NUS Museum,
2008).



existing narratives of different histories, and developing the foundation for future comparative research on the history of exhibitions.

One of the important reference books focused on curatorial practices in the region is *Past Peripheral: Curation in South East Asia*, a book authored in 2008 by Patrick Flores. In a recent talk, scholar and curator Reiko Tomii suggested that the more global we want to be, the more local we must go. This is an important point of departure in the process of making many histories visible and available.

Many of the institutions and individuals mentioned in this text have contributed their own texts for this special issue of *Yishu*, all working towards creating a greater understanding of the global context through

their local involvement and hoping to find point of connection among professionals in the region.

Their slow visibility within global scene, for better or worse, actually allows for independence, whether in work or in the consideration of ideas that are not going to be merely consumed by an overly produced and producing art world. Instead, hopefully, they contribute to the production of local knowledge and help to open up existing narratives that will surely reveal that we are facing many histories and many futures as well.

Institution for the Future hopes to continue discussions about individuals as institutions that could lead to creating new habits and rituals in our societies that in turn will open up possibilities for creating new models of working and new practices.

I would like to thank Keith Wallace and Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art for their support over the years, as well as to all the other writers and colleagues contributing to this issue. Special thanks to Yap Sau Bin, Parking Projects, Zoe Butt, Tran Luong, and Richard Streitmatter-Tran for their time spent sharing information and ideas with me.

This article shares the title of the exhibition Institution for The Future, presented as part of the Asia Triennial in Manchester in 2011 and curated by Biljana Ciric in collaboration with the Chinese Arts Center. Artists in the exhibition include: Hu Xiangqian, Roslisham Ismail (aka Ise), Yang Jun, Michael Lee, Vandy Rattana, Ruang Rupa, and Richard Streitmatter-Tran. Institution for the Future showcased artists' collectives and small, independent, para-institutions from various Asian countries that are actively engaged in their local arts scenes and that attempt to contribute to the development of an arts infrastructure in their regions. This publication attempts to continue the discussion by expanding it to the global level.

Notes

¹ Yap Sau Bin in conversation with the author, May 8, 2012.

² Huang Yongping, *House of Oracles: A Huang Yongping Retrospective* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2005), 13–14.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Zoe Butt in e-mail conversation with the author, May 26, 2012.

⁵ Rem Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* (New York: Random House, 1997).

⁶ Jason Wee in e-mail conversation with the author, May 21, 2012.