

NO COUNTRY: CONTEMPORARY ART FOR SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

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“That is no country for old men,” begins William Butler Yeats in “Sailing to Byzantium,”¹ a poem from 1928 that was inspired by the magnificence of the culture and arts of the Medieval empire, with its ancient Greek origin, while lamenting its neglect and end. Here, Yeats contrasts the universal passion of the human spirit, which aspires to immortal achievement, with the subject of loss effected by inevitable fleshly dissolution and the diminution of cultural knowledge over time. His reflections on the cusp of impermanence and vitality, and on the convergence of morality and consciousness, are rendered in a contemporary context by Cormac McCarthy, who excerpts from Yeats’s poem the title to his novel *No Country for Old Men*,² which was adapted into a keenly paced film by Joel and Ethan Coen.³ And just as Yeats’s young quickly become “dying generations,” McCarthy’s off-kilter characters race through a West Texas border town, battling against each other and against time, intermittently interrupted by flashes of insight on the truths of life, death, and the journey between the two.

No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia draws from this intertextual journey of title and theme (from poem to novel to film and finally to exhibition), the ideas of transmission, translation, and adaptation across place, time, and form, that characterize the histories, cultures, and knowledges of the region. By considering and presenting these cultures, their representations, and the identities of their peoples, as a continuous horizon rather than as defined by the discrete nation-states of contemporary formulation, *No Country* proposes an understanding of the region in terms of relationships of intermingling and mutual influence past and present, within and beyond the region.

There have been numerous exhibitions examining the region and its constitution, but few have professed to comprehensively encapsulate this vast terrain, generally citing the subject’s complexity. With a history of empires that seem to have been all but forgotten (or else relegated to mnemonic historical abbreviation), the specter of European expansionism and colonial experiences that continue to haunt the region, and the bittersweet recollections of the turbulent dawns of these nations over the past century, to suggest that a representation of South and Southeast Asia could be anything but complicated would be an understatement. In developing this exhibition I admit to a similar caveat, for how could the region be encapsulated within a singular position, and to what purpose? While it may be the lingua franca of global politics and capitalist economics, the contemporary cartography of nation-states

represents but one perspective on the region’s constituents. This ubiquitous taxonomy overlooks the fact that the concept of nation itself is fairly new, as a form distinguishable from earlier republics, kingdoms, empires, and other confederations,⁴ and as such its definition, and the identities it prescribes, must be interpreted in the context of its historical specificity.

Our contemporary understanding of the world has in the meantime expanded beyond nation to incorporate the concept of the global, characterized by unhindered flows, and focused on relationships of interconnectedness and a sense of borderlessness between nations. As art historian and critic David Joselit has observed, this global view cuts across different spheres—he connects the “globalness” of art to global politics (and cultural diplomacy), global markets, and neoliberal ideas, applicable to Asia and beyond.⁵ The insertion of globalization into the schema of aesthetic analysis would appear to mark a shift away from the broad theses of modernism and postmodernism, in its more inclusive compass. Yet this global outlook does not wholly eschew the developmental progression and differentiation characteristic of the earlier modalities, as art as “global currency” is neither constant nor uniform in its circulation.⁶ Writing about the exhibition *The Global Contemporary: Art Worlds After 1989*, art historian Hans Belting and curator Andrea Buddensieg instead suggest that globalization engenders a “hectic competition [of] mapping . . . whereby the new regions of art first struggle for their definition.”⁷ Thus while appearing inclusive, globalization’s geographic project inevitably defines other forms of territorialization.

This conceptual (and at times physical) process is performed on preceding forms of territorialization, complicating and competing with them. Regionalism, with its recourse to selective solidarity and differentiation, retorts globalization, a response that is familiar in the earlier gauntlet of Asian modernisms in art.⁸ But regional consolidation has its variants too, from the classic modernist configuration of East-West continental division to other forms of regional confraternity such as 1955’s Bandung-based Asian-African conference⁹ with its aspiration to cultural exchange in the wake of early postcolonial nationalism in Asia, as well as, more recently, the economic and political consolidation of BRICS.¹⁰

These forms of regionalism nevertheless confer and reinforce the sovereignty of the nation-state as much as does globalization. Even the apparent “third way”¹¹ offered by transnationalism, globalization’s transcendentalist stepsibling, defaults to the same



aussi, en tant que sentiment, l'amour ça m'a toujours semblé être le lieu d'un conflit, un conflit entre d'un côté quelque chose de très égoïste, ou on accorderait la priorité à son sentiment et à la satisfaction des désirs qui vont avec, quitte à détruire la chose ou la personne qu'on aime . . .

fig. 1. Arin Rungjang. *The reality is . . . I only did all this to get close to you* (detail), 2010. Mixed media with audio, dimensions vary with installation. Installation view: Gallery G23, Bangkok, 2010

This multipart installation includes among its elements a painting, a drawing, a page from the newspaper *Le Monde Illustré*'s report on Napoleon III's presentation of a royal Thai crown to King Rama IV on June 29, 1861, and an audio recording, excerpted above, of a conversation on the subject of love between the artist and his former partner. Conflating historical and contemporary encounters, the work highlights the desire for and disintegration of relationships across cultural and national boundaries.

atomization via nations (albeit in different language). The tectonic shifts of geopolitics arguably dispute the ideal of national identity as distinctive, enduring, and determinedly separate. But the borders of South and Southeast Asia have had their share of upheaval, including the partition of South Asia, the shifting borders of Thailand during European expansion, the fragmentation and reintegration of North and South Vietnam, and the ongoing contestation of the territories of Kashmir and the Philippines. Given the emergence of nation-states such as Bangladesh in 1971, and Papua New Guinea and East Timor more recently, it seems reasonable to expect that future social, political, economic, and cultural forces will continue to transform this geography, turning these apparently solid boundaries into air.

From amidst the shifting geopolitical divisions of South and Southeast Asia however, arises the customary call for synthesis of cultural identification in the concept of the “Asian,” a form of regionalism that is nevertheless highly evasive when closely examined. In the 1996 exhibition *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions* in New York, curator Apinan Poshyananda chose to allude—decorously—to the problem of “Asian” representation and its coincident resistance via the insertion of a punctuation mark. The significantly mute but chafing edge of the forward slash appears to reinforce his thesis that any attempt to ground Asian identity or representation in tradition and its fusion (with the implication of chronological authenticity, or in Vishakha Desai’s terms the “privileging of the pre-modern”¹²), cannot but “slide around like warm grease.”¹³ Yet in spite of the lack of definitive traction of “Asian” identity, there remains a seductive clamor for “Asian-ness” as a form of representation and confraternity to be defended. The persistence of allegiance to the concept of “Asian-ness” ironically demonstrates how the concept of Asia, which was historically defined negatively as Other to the West,¹⁴ would appear an apparently insurmountable cultural horizon for East and West alike.

Acknowledging the historical specificity of globalization, regionalism, and the nation-state in its focus on South and Southeast Asia, the exhibition *No Country* is not framed as a descriptive or prescriptive representation of the region’s aesthetic expressions and developments. Rather, its title subverts the logic of the nation-state as the unit of representation in order to create latitude for dialogue about it. This is a dialogue that relies on the uniqueness of national, regional, and global constitutions—that is, the inherent assumptions and contradictions of expected finitude of identity and existence prescribed by these boundaries—in order to exceed its

representation. It is in the ambivalence of the articulation of nation that critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha discerns its conceptual power, an ambivalence that is not limited to nation, but which extends to conceptions of region, and for that matter “Asian-ness.”¹⁵ Critically for the cultural sphere, this ambivalence is paradoxically what allows and accounts for a richness of expression—even contradictory expression—that produces continuities across space and time, as well as between occasionally proximate peoples.

Referencing philosopher Hubert Damisch’s region-defying book *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting*,¹⁶ a semiotic reading of the form and symbol of the cloud in Eastern and Western art, Ho Tzu Nyen’s installation *The Cloud of Unknowing* (2011) presents an amorphous sensorial narrative in which images and sounds, bound by their association with the subject of the cloud, are reinterpreted in a manner to which neither perspective can lay exclusive claim, and which thus sets the artwork free from these representative discourses. As an exhibition that contributes to the Guggenheim Museum’s collection, *No Country* offers a selection of artworks that possess dialectical character, in that while endeavoring to forge community in the region, they also engage with the complications of the identity and representation of those entities that go by the name of nation.

NATION

From the region’s Occidental designation as the East Indies to the establishment of its geopolitical boundaries in the wave of nationalism over the past century, the borders of South and Southeast Asia are the consequence of myriad factors. These include geographical features and assets, human sociability and the formation of communities, colonial aggregation and expansionist foray (from within and without the region), and intercolonialist compact and domination. The corollary of these opportunities, constraints, and interventions is the definition of national interests—the desire for ownership of resources, the preservation of cultural practices and beliefs, and the necessity for self-administration and jurisdiction. Thus lingering in the declarative affirmation of nation are the vestiges of past and present conflicts and resistances.

In cultural production in general, and in contemporary aesthetic practice in particular, the definition of nation and its problematic boundaries are, according to art critic and historian Geeta Kapur, continually being reworked. This act, Kapur suggests, is one of both invention and self-subversion.¹⁷ Within Shilpa Gupta’s evocative

vitrine [1:14.9](#) (2011–12), the fraught historical partition of South Asia is transformed into a poetic encounter. The work's hand-wound ball of thread represents the fenced border between India and Pakistan, signaling the intimate relationship shared by these neighboring nations. Gupta's simultaneously tangible yet metaphoric expression prompts reflection on both the historical cleft and its future. Representing a different approach to the division of South Asia, Amar Kanwar's [To Remember](#) (2003) is a tribute to and reminder of Mahatma Gandhi's attempts at reconciliation within South Asia, and Gandhi's nonacceptance of theological homogeneity as the basis of South Asian nationalism. The result of the demurral of this proposition is the intractable separation of August 1947, which remains a thorny subject. Significantly, while both Gupta's and Kanwar's artworks highlight the detrimental ramifications of conflict, this recognition may contain its resolution.

Optimistically extending the outcome of the division further afield is Navin Rawanchaikul's panoramic historical and geographical navigation in [Places of Rebirth](#) (2009), a painting that traces the artist's Thai ancestry through pre- and post-partition South Asia. In a dense narrative of places, persons, and memories, the artwork recognizes the violent split but also conveys (or hopes for) historical mollification. For those from the region, the migratory operation undertaken by Rawanchaikul's forebears recalls with familiarity the lineages that, historically, span multiple territories. What these migratory histories bring vividly to mind are the multiple centers that have flourished within the region, that is, the routes of exchange and trade that regularly plied its breadth and which drew different groups together. In recognizing how these divisions and connections have been critical to the formation of the region, situating its artworks requires transcending any preoccupation with contemporary nationhood as a limit to our understanding of the lives it encloses within its borders.

Yet having decided or been compelled to constitute, the history of the formation of a people and the development of a nation's sustainability come under scrutiny, and this determinative teleology of nationhood is as irresistible as it is suspect. Ade Darmawan's [Bagaimana Mendjadi Kaja](#) (2012, fig. 2), which was first shown at Ark Galerie in Jakarta, consists of a collection of objects that the artist amassed over time from second-hand shops and flea markets. The installation, which approximates museological display and analysis, challenges the curious viewer with its agglomerative wealth of overlooked discoveries, and underscores their archaeological

potential by drawing correspondences between objects and categories. Among the work's elements are publications, magazines, and instructional books on subjects—religion, economy, lifestyle, science, and history—that, while seeming diverse, illustrate how the establishment of nation presupposes an Althusserian interpellation,¹⁸ which calls a nation and its people into being through the power of ideological nomination. Speaking from the Pakistani side of the 1947 South Asian border is Bani Abidi, whose wryly observant multi-component artwork, [The Boy Who Got Tired of Posing](#) (2006), looks at the ascription of Pakistan's precolonial founding. With its numerous popular iterations in film, image, and imitation, the personification of the pioneer of state narrative is presented as having reached a point of extreme reductiveness and exposure.

Besides facing external challenge, the unity of nation within South and Southeast Asia espoused by official narrative is disputed by the fact that the delineations of nation (numerous as they are) barely reflect the multitude of communities and groups populating the region. Khadim Ali identifies with Afghanistan's Hazara minority, many of whom have moved to reside in neighboring Pakistan. In [Untitled, Rustam Series](#) (2010–12), the artist, inspired by the tradition of miniature painting, remarks on the conditions of the country by portraying not the folk hero of the Persian *Shahnameh* (Book of kings), that his title references, but the ordinary form of demons. In this, he alludes to those who have latterly usurped Rustam's name and reputation for valor and heroism in order to justify violence.

As suggested by curator Peter Weibel, under globalization, an intensification of difference occurs, through either repetition or emphasis.¹⁹ Although the differences between nations serve to shore up their political borders from without, within the nation, such difference poses a threat. While ethnicity and cultural characteristics may identify a community, philosopher Ernest Renan describes the politicization of these features as a chimera, cautioning, "Be on your guard, for this ethnographic politics is in no way a stable thing and, if today you use it against others, tomorrow you may see it turned against yourselves."²⁰ The violent consequences of difference to which Renan refers are not limited to ethnic schism, but include other forms of exclusion, such as political, social, and economic division. Such threats to cohesion surface in Kanwar's [A Night of Prophecy](#) (2002), which records chants, songs, and lyrical texts in eleven languages from Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Nagaland, and Kashmir, which have in common a sense of disillusionment and anger.

Besides its aforementioned ambivalent nature, the quandary of

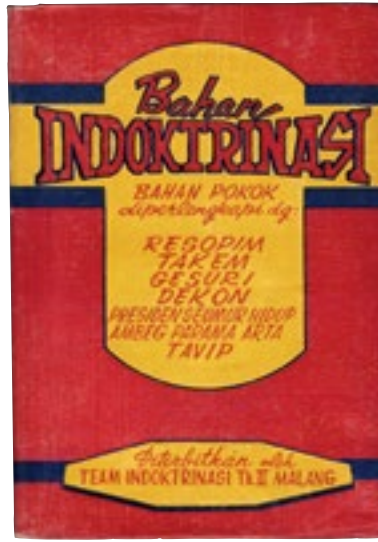


fig. 2. Ade Darmawan. *Bagaimana Mendjadi Kaja*, 2012. Books, magazines, and other documents, vitrines, wooden tables, and ink, dimensions vary with installation. Installation view: Ark Galerie, Jakarta, 2012. Courtesy the artist

Bagaimana Mendjadi Kaja was presented as part of the artist's solo exhibition *Human Resource Development*, which comprised objects, images, and conceptual formulas referencing the development of the nation of Indonesia since its independence. The work features vitrines containing popularly circulated titles past and present that expound on means to achieve national, economic, religious, and personal success.

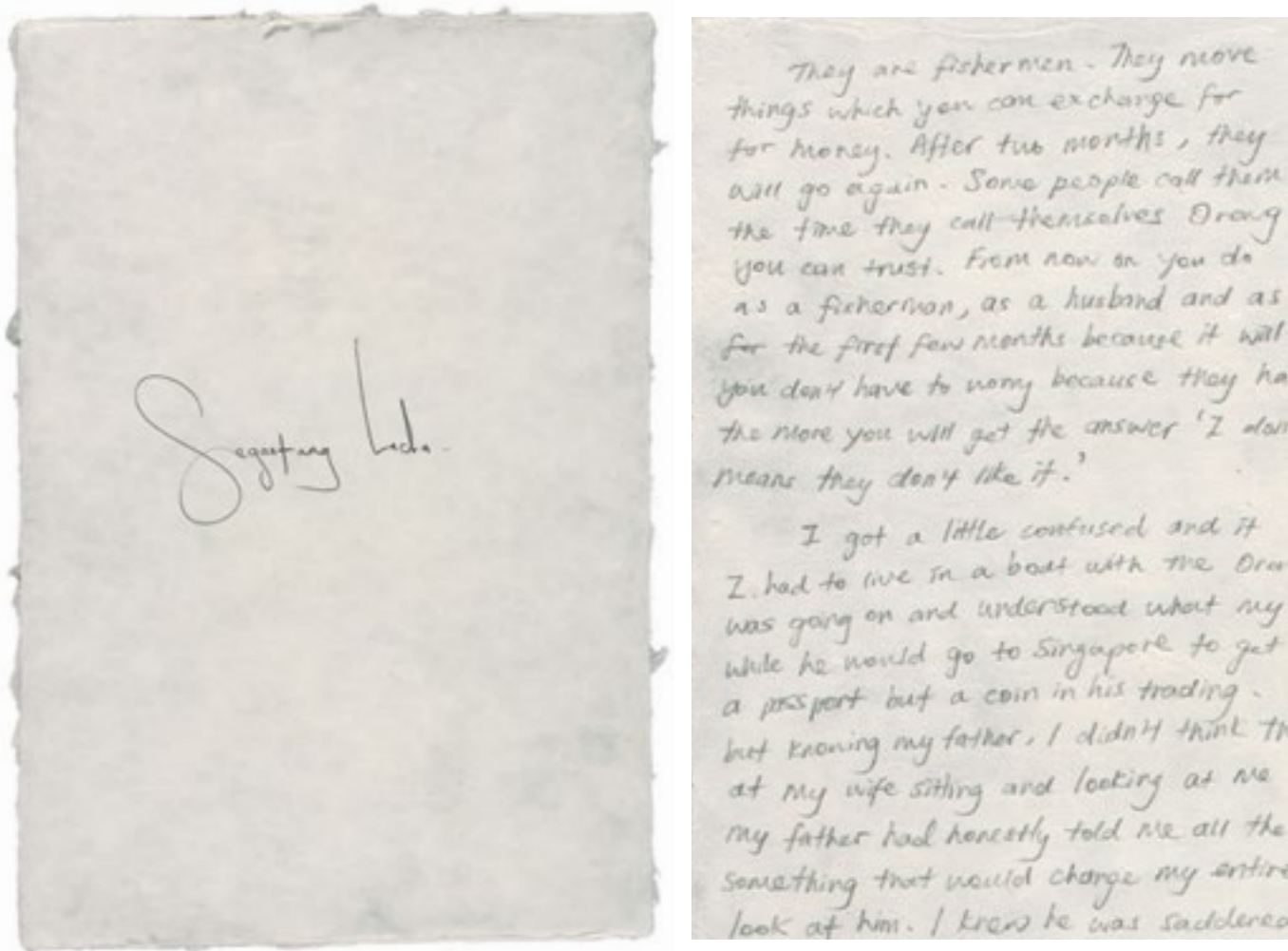


fig. 3. Zai Kuning. Pages from *Segantang Lada* (2009). Part of *Riau*, 2009. Video, drawings, map, book, table, chair, and ink on paper, dimensions vary with installation.

An extract from the book *Segantang Lada* reads: "I knew how much she missed all her family, the river, the sea, stones, trees, crabs, and how much she wanted to go back and live as before. She was heart-broken, just like my mother, and it was the most painful thing for me because I was too helpless to bring her back to where she came from."

establishing unity in spite of heterogeneity is one of the paradoxes of nation. In Vincent Leong's pair of photographs [Keeping Up with the Abdullahs 1 and 2](#) (2012), the artist portrays Malaysian minorities in what appears as a proposition of amelioration, which in its apparel-based concession of solidarity renders a complex subject lighthearted. While the donning of cultural sign may appear a superficial representation, at a deeper level the work suggests that the effectiveness of any endeavor in embracing difference can only be measured by its effort. Historical difference is often invoked in determining cultural distinction, and within a climate more accepting of historical revisionism, the accentuation of these marginalized histories becomes more common, even in contemporary art. Yet the opportunity for the dissemination and visibility of such alternative narratives depends largely on the magnanimity of those less marginal, rather than necessarily on the nature of the content itself. The question that remains is whether the proliferation of such histories and narratives contributes to the escalation of irreconcilable difference, or to a more heterogeneous understanding thereof.

Zai Kuning's narrative *Segantang Lada* (2009, fig. 3), which the artist developed from his travels through the Southeast Asian Riau Archipelago, weaves an account of the region's Malays and their pre-national past. It focuses on the native Orang Laut ("sea people"), islanders who were conjoined, rather than divided, by the sea. The protagonist of his story observes his Orang Laut wife's resistance to association with the land, to which she replies, "There is no reason for me to touch the ground. Everything I need and need to do is here." Through historical fiction, Zai provides a necessary reflexive antidote to the progressive state narrative of the modernization and development of the island of Singapore. At the same time, he contrasts the contemporary attachment to land and its division with the alternative of the passage and movement of the sea as the foundation of identity.

Unlike the ordinary historian, the artist-as-historian enjoys, according to art historian and critic Mark Godfrey, a "methodological freedom and creativity without sacrificing rigor."²¹ This aestheticized freedom, which enables a demonstration of the ambiguities of historical account without contradiction, is apparent in the film [Doghole](#) (2010), Wong Hoy Cheong's reenactment of detentions by the Kempeitai (military police of the Imperial Japanese Army) during the Japanese occupation of Malaya. The work supplements the first-person account of the harrowing experience with fictional and animated embellishments, producing a complex and provocative

ambiguity that, ironically, speaks more to the nature of historical and human conditions than would a factual record. Yet what is produced in the transformation and elaboration of historical fact is not history per se. Rather, as Joselit suggests, such aesthetic practices generate "informational or *documentary* value,"²² and an expanded aesthetic experience that requires "narration" for its context, and which encourages the viewer to "search" further for its context.²³

In this sense, the artist as chronicler of nation and its contradictions provides less a direct knowledge, than an opportunity for reflection. In the photographic installation [Counter Acts](#) (2004), Poklong Anading's subjects are obscured by the very light that makes the visible encounter possible. The details of his image are thus perceived not due to the light but through shadows. Even then, what is revealed under the glare of the lightbox is destined to fade over time. In a similar manner, the category of *nation* conceals its true nature. Having dismissed ethnicity, race, and other anthropological justifications as the bases of nation, Renan is, however, reluctant to expunge the concept altogether. Attempting to uncover the heart of the matter, he suggests that nation may be a "spiritual principle," comprising both "the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories" and a "desire to live together,"²⁴ which is in essence a sense of community that is presupposed in the ideas of nation and region.

COMMUNITY

Convivial as the notion of a global community sharing a global culture may seem, and even as the flows of capital and commodity, beliefs and practices, ideas and peoples within South and Southeast Asia are the basis for historical and contemporary relations, the realization of such community appears unlikely under the disparate conditions of globalization, with its regulation of borders and emphasis upon difference and asymmetry. Instead, the problems of immigration, fundamentalism, and secession appear to have been exacerbated.²⁵ However, the human desire to form communities persists, and has historically been embodied in the idea of communism. In a 1986 essay, philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy describes communism—an idea that he suggests dates back as far as the fourteenth century²⁶—as "an emblem of the desire to discover or rediscover a place of community at once beyond social divisions and beyond subordination to technopolitical domination, and thereby beyond such wasting away of liberty, of speech or of simple happiness."²⁷

This desire for community is highlighted in Tuan Andrew

Nguyen's uncanny sculpture [Enemy's Enemy: Monument to a Monument](#) (2012), in which the artist co-locates religion and sport, both platforms for communitarian bonding. Rendered in sculptural relief on a classic American Louisville Slugger baseball bat is the arresting figure of Thích Quảng Đức, a venerated Buddhist monk, who in 1963 performed self-immolation to protest religious repression. In the region, the ideology of communism and the idea of community have both been instrumental in bringing groups, races, and nations together in coalition.²⁸ This desire to find correspondence even in conditions of acute difference is dramatically presented in Reza Afisina's [What . . .](#) (2001), a video performance in which the artist confronts both fundamentalism and its perceived stereotypes by reciting verses from the Gospel of Luke of the Christian Bible²⁹ that convey Jesus's warnings against hypocrisy, and which stress the importance of truth and confession. Originating from a predominantly Muslim country, this work underscores the sharing of beliefs and values by different religions and, in its scenes of raw violence as the artist repeatedly strikes himself, emphasizes the importance of empathy and compassion to mutual understanding.

While manifestations of communist ideology have differed across the region, it has nevertheless been viewed as a means for amity. On September 28, 1977, control of Japan Airlines flight 472 was seized by a group that dominated global hijacking in that decade, the Japanese Red Army. In Naeem Mohaiemen's video *1977: United Red Army (The Young Man Was, Part 1)* (2012, fig. 4), an unexpected relationship develops between one of the hijackers and Air Force Chief Mahmood, the two finding sympathy for one another in the course of the lengthy and tense negotiation. The flight, which was commandeered en route from Bombay, was brought to what the hijackers had assumed was the "friendly Islamic Republic of Bangladesh," a new nation that had recently emerged from its separation from Pakistan. Interleaving audio transcripts from the negotiation with televised footage of the hijack, Mohaiemen's work cautions against easy narratives and readings of historical events—the consequences of which impacted both the extent of the success of the hijackers and, to a greater degree, the people of Bangladesh, in addition to counseling on the precariousness of utopic projects.³⁰

Globally, the popularity of state communism seems to be on the wane, with a few exceptions in the region such as Vietnam and Laos and, in fragmented form, India's "Red Corridor."³¹ However,

the *ideology* of communism appears a little more resistant, variously returning as spectre,³² hypothesis,³³ and postscript.³⁴ Advocates for its reconsideration differ in their propositions, which range from the material to the theoretical, from suggesting that communism's vision of "a different collective organization is practicable,"³⁵ to focusing on the development of the ideology's "conditions of existence,"³⁶ or identifying "experimental practices that are either founded upon the 'hypothesis of communism' or [that] confirm its truth."³⁷ Such attempts run contrary to Jean-Paul Sartre's characterization of communism as "the unsurpassable horizon of our time,"³⁸ an impossibility that Nancy rejects.³⁹ This challenge to the ideology's contemporary relevance becomes the subject of a critical yet spirited project by the Propeller Group, [Television Commercial for Communism](#) (2011–12). The ongoing work follows the efforts of advertising company TBWAVietnam as they brainstorm ideas to "re-brand" communism, and the resulting one-minute commercial. Through their campaign to "market" the ideology, the work hints at a new and paradoxical contemporary relationship between capitalism and communism. In his exposition of Soviet communism, critic and philosopher Boris Groys suggests that the value of the ideology is its ability to reveal the inherent paradox of capitalism, a paradox that is transformed through dialectical materialism into a site for dialogue and exchange—in the process enabling a "total" understanding of life.⁴⁰ This sense of understanding and achievement of a holistic existence through community combines, according to Nancy, the essence of being with its sociability.⁴¹

Such sociability is notable among the region's numerous artist communities. The origins and purposes of their communitarianism range from the sharing of practices (The Artists Village in Singapore, Nhà Sàn Đức in Hanoi, New Zero Art Space in Yangon), to the development of projects that reach a wider community (Stiev Selapak in Phnom Penh, Concrete House in Bangkok, Open Circle by artists Sharmila Samant and Tushar Joag in Mumbai, Britto Arts Trust in Dhaka, ruangrupa in Jakarta), and the addressing of broader issues that produce community (ISAD in Indonesia). Many of these groups have extensive networks and links within the region, with groups involving performance art practice—given the form's considerable mobility and palpability—being the most interwoven. In places with limited art infrastructures, or where art is subject to state scrutiny, gatherings such as these provide vital support and visibility to its members



fig. 4. Naeem Mohaiemen. *United Red Army (The Young Man Was, Part 1)*, 2012. Color video, with sound, 70 min.

Using edited audio recordings of negotiations that took place during the 1977 hijacking of Japan Airlines flight 472 to Bangladesh, alongside its local and Japanese TV news coverage, Mohaiemen has pieced together a narrative of the international event that also provides a glimpse into the early period of Bangladesh's independence after its separation from Pakistan in 1971. In the exchange between hijacker and chief negotiator, and in the events that ensue as the hijacking is brought to an end, the work hints at political and social conditions under the military regime.



fig. 5. Chumpon Apisuk. *Standing*, 2011. Performance view: Musrara Mixed Festival, Jerusalem, 2011

In this ongoing series of performances, which began in Dresden in 2000, the artist uses an umbrella (variously symbolizing the performance of a service, protection, and shelter) to establish a public space with which viewers can engage. This work by the founder of Concrete House in Bangkok began as a statement on the lack of local community spaces and their importance in engendering and supporting relationships.

and their efforts. And while these appear as practical reasons for congregation, it is the relationships within these communities that ensure their survival. For many mentioned here, the act of gathering is not only directed at the development of the practices of its individuals; it is also, to paraphrase Nancy, intended to produce the artists' own essence as their work *as community*⁴² in "an identity by plurality . . . with the living body of the community,"⁴³ a dissolution of the self that becomes a "compearance (com-parution) of finitude."⁴⁴ Such practices are significant to an understanding of the region, not merely in how its artists produce, perform, or participate in communities, but also in how their practices exceed mere representation, creating instead a discourse of representation.

A figure in profile, its contour familiar in Truong Tan's oeuvre, stretches across a canvas, apparently crucified. A length of rope, a device that recurs in the artist's practice, is wrapped around its middle in a modest nod to polite society. Produced in the wake of Vietnam's reformation (Đổi Mới), the painting's title [What Do We Want](#) (1993–94) succinctly poses the artist's question to his community. Here, the subject of constitution comes full circle, just as the lure of the "sensual music" of life's bounty in Yeats's poem is met by the unrelenting approach of death by compressed-air cattle gun in McCarthy's novel and its film adaptation. *Constitution* implies the desire to constitute, and the articulation necessary to realize it. According to Groys, it is the "linguistification of social power relations [that] gives to every individual human the possibility of contradicting power, fate and life."⁴⁵ Arguably, this simultaneously elaborative and deconstructive capacity⁴⁶ also exists in artistic expression, with art having the potential for discursive revelation of the paradoxes within the relations and desires of life.

There are many ways in which to define a region and its people; the narratives of nation and border offer but one. As philosopher Jacques Rancière suggests, the exceptionality of art production is its transformation of the community's self-presentation.⁴⁷ It is this opportunity for reflection—as community, nation, or region—on its alternatives that the artworks in *No Country* present. The rigid stalk of the rattan common to Cambodian rural life is transformed into fluid lines in Sopheap Pich's sculpture [Morning Glory](#) (2011-). A drawing in space of the ubiquitous and banal plant generally considered a pest by gardeners, it is however, for the artist, a reminder of its importance, as wartime staple, to the survival of the Cambodian people. Just as the

paradox of life is in death, the paradox of borders, ends, limits and finitude, is the inalienable possibility of their negation.

Where you went out the back door of that house there was a stone water trough in the weeds by the side of the house. A galvanized pipe come off the roof and the trough stayed pretty much full and I remember stoppin there one time and squattin down and lookin at it and I got to thinkin about it. I dont know how long it had been there. A hundred years. Two hundred. You could see the chisel marks in the stone. It was hewed out of solid rock and it was about six foot long and maybe a foot and a half wide and about that deep. Just chiseled out of the rock. And I got to thinkin about the man that done that. That country had not had a lot of time of peace much of any length at all that I knew of. I've read a little of the history of it since and I aint sure it ever had one. But this man had set down with a hammer and chisel and carved out a stone water trough to last ten thousand years. Why was that? What was it he had faith in? It wasnt that nothing would change. Which is what you might think, I suppose. He had to know bettern that.⁴⁸

Notes

1. William Butler Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium," in *Collected Poems: Yeats* (New York: Picador, 2003), p. 193.
2. Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* (New York: Vintage, 2005).
3. *No Country for Old Men*, 2007, dir. Joel and Ethan Coen, U.S.A. (color, 122 min.).
4. Ernest Renan, "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?" (What is a nation?), lecture delivered at the Sorbonne, March 11, 1882, in Homi K. Bhabha ed., *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 9.
5. David Joselit describes art as a "paradigmatic object of globalization," David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 3, 5–6, 84.
6. Joselit also qualifies this by suggesting that while art shares currency's quality of circulation, it is however "never fully monetized." Ibid., p. 84.
7. Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg, "Introduction," in *The Global Contemporary: Art Worlds After 1989* (Karlsruhe, Germany: ZKM Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, 2011), p. 6.
8. Wang Hui, "The Politics of Imagining Asia: A Genealogical Analysis," in Kuan-Hsing Chen and Chua Beng Huat, eds., *The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 67.
9. The Asian-African Conference held in April 1955 in Bandung, Indonesia, was convened by Burma, Ceylon, India, Indonesia, and Pakistan and involved the participation of 24 countries.
10. The term "BRIC" was coined by Goldman Sachs in a report forecasting emerging markets, referring to Brazil, Russia, India, and China. This report was performed in relation to the possible expansion of the G7 consortium; with the addition of South Africa in 2010, the term became "BRICS". See Jim O'Neill, "Global Economics Paper No. 66: Building Better Global Economic BRICs," Goldman Sachs GS Global Economics Website, November 30, 2001, <http://www.goldmansachs.com/our-thinking/archive/archive-pdfs/build-better-brics.pdf>. The BRICS countries have since organized four summits.
11. The concept of a "third way" as an alternative to dualistic conceptual conditions was a position articulated at the 1955 Bandung conference, which sought "non-alignment" in international politics; it is also used more generally in reference to alternatives beyond existing options—in this case between regionalism and globalization.
12. Vishakha Desai refers to the tendency of an anthropological approach to the region, in Apinan Poshyananda et al., *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions* (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1996), p. 13. In relation to the questionable notion of a developmental progression from tradition to modernity as social evolution, Marguerite Fisher cites the anthropological writings of Adolf Bastian in the mid-nineteenth century, noting that Bastian's "conviction [was] that there was no difference in innate mentality between civilized and primitive man. [Rather than] geography, material conditions, and other environmental influences determined the form taken by ideas and institutions." Fisher observes these ideas too in Philippine nationalist José Rizal's novels. See Fisher, "José Rizal: Asian Apostle of Racial Equalitarianism," *The Journal of Modern History* 28, no. 3 (1956), pp. 259–60.
13. Apinan Poshyananda, "Roaring Tigers, Desperate Dragons in Transition," in *Contemporary Art in Asia*, p. 26.
14. Wang, "The Politics of Imagining Asia," p. 67.
15. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration*, pp. 3–4.
16. Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002).
17. Geeta Kapur, "Dismantling the Norm," in Poshyananda, et al., *Contemporary Art in Asia*, p. 61.
18. Louis Althusser argues that ideology interpellates by "constituting" subjects in a "concrete" manner that has material consequences, even while not appearing to do so. Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 173–75.
19. "One effect of globalization is that encounters between different cultures, religions and languages, as well as of different ethnic and national identities have intensified." Peter Weibel, *The Global Contemporary*, p. 4.
20. "The truth is that there is no pure race and that to make politics depend upon ethnographic analysis is to surrender it to a chimera." Renan's argument is less that race and ethnicity does not produce difference, but that its difference politicized becomes dangerous: "nowadays, a far graver mistake is made: race is confused with nation and a sovereignty analogous to that of really existing peoples is attributed to ethnographic or, rather linguistic groups." Renan, "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?" pp. 8, 14–16.
21. "(Coming) to historical representation outside the context of academic history, and aware of the critiques made of this discipline, the artist as historian is able to work with a methodological freedom and creativity without sacrificing rigor." Mark Godfrey, "The Artist as Historian," *October*, no. 120 (Spring 2007), pp. 169–70.
22. In Joselit's thesis, such contemporary artworks function as "documentary objects." Joselit, *After Art*, pp. 11–12.
23. He describes it as a "performative mode of looking through which the single image and the network are visible *at once*. In other words . . . [a work that] . . . requires *narration*." Ibid., p. 39.
24. Renan, "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?," p. 19.
25. The relationship between these issues, nation-state, and globalization is complex, and includes their relation to other subjects including labor costs and labor migration, the capitalization of culture, cultural competition and cultural loss. The paradox of globalization is that while it appears to unify, it in fact differentiates as mentioned by Weibel earlier in the text. Alain Badiou makes the further link between the problem of immigration and globalization in "The Communist Hypothesis," *New Left Review*, no. 49 (Jan/Feb 2008), p. 38.
26. "'Communism' is a word with a strange history. It is very difficult to trace its origin. Nevertheless, it is certain that the word 'communist' existed already in the fourteenth century. It referred to 'people having in common a property belonging to the category of "main morte"—that is, not being subject to the law of heritage.'" Jean-Luc Nancy, "Communism, the Word (Notes for the Conference)" in Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek, eds., *The Idea of Communism* (New York: Verso, 2010), p. 145.
27. Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Inoperative Community," in Claire Bishop, ed., *Participation*, (London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), p. 54.
28. Gaik Cheng Khoo states that in multicultural, colonial, pre-independent Malaya, for example, the Communist Party of Malaya had regiments comprising of members of different racial groups in spite of the colonial attempt to play up communism as racially driven. She describes the "inter-ethnic leftist cooperation" of AMCJA (All Malayan Council of Joint Action) and PUTERA (Pusat Tenaga Rakyat) as having "transethnic solidarity," a subject that is highlighted in the 2007 film *10 Tahun Sebelum Merdeka* [Ten Years Before Independence] by Malaysian filmmaker Fahmi Reza. Khoo, "Filling in the Gaps of History," *Cultures at War: The Cold War and Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 2010), pp. 257–59.
29. Luke 12:3–11.
30. The political context to the 1977 hijack, according to Naeem Mohaiemen, is the often overlooked history and effects of the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 (that has been relegated to "Third India-Pakistan War" by external media). He highlights the lacunae found both in the narratives of the 1971 war, as well as in accounts of the violence that led to and followed Bangladesh's independence, in particular "debates about the death toll, definitions of genocidal action, examination of targeted populations, and the question of war crimes trials—for both the Pakistani army (a symbolic demand at this time) and their partners inside Bangladesh (a practical demand with impact on current politics). [He continues] what is still missing are more fluid narratives, less focused on 'settling' political questions than on leaning more towards structuring a new synthesis." Naeem Mohaiemen, "Waiting for a Real Reckoning on 1971" in Iftikhar Dadi and Hamad Nasar, eds., *Lines of Control: Partition as a Productive Space* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Herbert Johnson Museum, 2012), p. 53.
31. Consisting of largely marginalized communities in the eastern region, is India's "Red Corridor," where organized movements known as the Naxalite (referred to as Maoists in politics) are based. Partha Chatterjee discusses the Naxalite in relation to other separatist movements, and the unity of India as a nation, in "India's Divide: Economic Growth and Marginalized Groups," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 14, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2008), p. 142.

32. Nancy, "The Inoperative Community," p. 54.
33. Badiou, "The Communist Hypothesis."
34. Boris Groys, *The Communist Postscript*, trans. Thomas H. Ford (London: Verso, 2009), pp. 18–19.
35. Badiou, "The Communist Hypothesis," p. 35.
36. Ibid., p. 37
37. David Riff, in Riff and Dmitry Vilensky, "From Communism to Commons?" *Third Text* 23, no. 4 (2009), p. 466.
38. Nancy, "The Inoperative Community," p. 54.
39. Ibid., p. 59.
40. "Communist revolution involves exposing, confirming and materializing the suspicion that behind the illusion of an open society are hidden the closed spaces of a manipulative and conspiratorial power located in obscure paradox." Groys, *The Communist Postscript*, pp. 29, 41, 43.
41. "*Communism* is togetherness—the *Mitsein*, the *being-with*—understood as pertaining to the existence of individuals, which means, in the existential sense, to their *essence*. . . . *Community—koinōnia, communitas*—emerges at times of profound social transformation or of great turmoil including the destructions of a social order. . . . Such a deconstruction makes clear, or pushes into the foreground what was hidden under or inside the construction: that is, the togetherness of people (even the togetherness of people with other being such as animals, plants, even stars and stones). Before and out of the Greek—occidental—moment, the togetherness comes first. We call this a 'holistic society,' supposing that such society understands itself as a *holon*, that is a whole." Nancy, "Communism, the Word (Notes for the Conference)," p. 147.
42. Nancy, "The Inoperative Community," pp. 54, 55, 59.
43. Ibid., p. 60
44. "Co -- mpearance is of a more originary order than that of the bond. . . . It consists in the appearance of the *between* as such: you *and* I (between us)—a formula in which the *and* does not imply juxtaposition but exposition. . . . Community is the presentation of the detachment (or retrenchment) of this distinction that is not individuation but finitude compearing." Ibid., p. 67.
45. Groys, *The Communist Postscript*, pp. 126–27.
46. Godfrey argues that it is art's deconstructive tendency that gives it its capacity for "transforming conditions of impossibility into possibility," Godfrey, "The Artist as Historian," pp. 170–171, referencing Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 201.
47. "(Art production) unites the act of manufacturing with the act of bringing to light, the act of defining a new relationship between *making* and seeing." Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Gabriel Rockhill, 2004), p. 44.
48. McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*, p. 307.