



**Imagining Utopia:
Figuring an Asian Neighbourhood**

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IMAGINING UTOPIA: FIGURING AN ASIAN NEIGHBOURHOOD

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The essay attempts to identify aspects of problems that continue to confront art managers and curators who practice exhibition-making in contested territories perceived as critically determining a political construction such as Asia, a site and space for representation. The proposed exhibition, which initially propelled this research, was called United States of Asia (USAAsia or US of Asia) and was primarily intended as a parody of a foolhardy mythic imaging of shared agendas whereas skewed power dynamics continue to prevail. Amongst the most prominent problems plaguing the proposal development phase of US of Asia was the dearth of resources lent to the key task of on-the-ground research as opposed to the mere assemblage of 'international spectacle' or superficially celebratory parading of national colours.

Keywords: Curation, Mapping, Transcultural Research, ASEAN Economic Community (AEC)

Let me begin by saying that I think it telling that this late in the day, when we are supposedly amidst the Asian century, the discourse on art emanating from the persistently nebulous region that is Asia comes belaboured with all sorts of caveats. Therefore, instead of launching straight through to discussions about what sort of art and how attendant researches proceed in East/West/North/South and Central Asia, we find ourselves still first having to deal with the questions: Where is Asia? Is Asia imaginable beyond the parameters of the powerhouses China and India? In 2012, I found myself doing research with two

co-curators (Isabel Ching and Arianna Gelli) on a curatorial framework for the Osage Foundation's Liverpool Biennial proposal "United States of Asia." Also at this juncture, the Yogyakarta Biennial had set upon drawing the contours of their biennale framework around countries ringing the equator and thus expanding away from more traditional formulations of what and where Asia was. Thus was the intrepid tenor of curatorial work at the time. More so, the foregoing questions were pegged in no small part to Central Asia putting up its own pavilion at the Venice Biennial (the oldest and most established European biennial platform).

Perhaps today, two years after the work has started, the palpable anticipation, at least within academe, of dramatic shifts engendered by the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015 can already be felt. Even more patently, the Philippine artworld is abuzz about news regarding the country's preparations for its own pavilion at Venice. Admittedly, such developments and underlying contexts continue to reek of unrequited bids at visibility and encoding. Nonetheless, these continue to, and understandably so, operate in the realm of dealing with "others" even while dismally disguising a grievance. As someone shifting from social development research to art studies, the core texts I initially accessed as part of the research acquainted me with the contours of what cultural anthropologist Arnold Azurin calls the Battle of the Textbooks, couched in the still festering debates about what haven't or aren't being taught schoolchildren about their pasts. Azurin's comment took my mind to a parallel failure to share memories in the fields of art history and criticism given that critical literature on the art of this intractable region that is Asia continues to be dispersed across many archives. A case could be made for instance about how too few artists and researchers find access to critical accounts on the following: how talk amidst a generation of Asian writer-curator-critics involved in seminal exchanges from the 1980s onward (i.e., Apinan Poshayanda, Alice Guillermo, Somporn Rodborn, and Jim Supangkat.) was still very much about redressing crusty wounds of effacement and assertions of alter-modernities; how extant mainstream art histories are still mostly wanting in terms of dispelling the idea that the region was tabula rasa before Western colonization, and how the battle is continuing in regard to conjuring Asia away from a reductive association with temples and ancient kingdoms if not merely derivative art aspiring to be modern.

In light of this lack of closure over recent pasts, one should not then be too hard put to surmise why a significant number of artists from latter generations (born in the 1970s onward) now adamantly refuse to over-explain themselves or frame their work singularly within postcolonialism whereas what may primarily

interest them are questions having to do with gender, urbanism, cosmopolitanism, or the working out of more individuated tropes. What does seem to characterize some practices is that artists doff their hats to postcolonialism as contextualizing discourse, yet remain justifiably suspicious of its capacity to colonize and propensity to reduce art to a blunt, instrumentalized tool. This scenario, of individuals making art, partaking of art, and doing commentary on it existing on parallel tracks (of production, engagement, and theorization) continues to pain my practice as both writer and curator about and of contemporary art. In one sense, this is where the curatorial trigger for infusing a parodic tone to United States of Asia could be located. As three curators coming out of different contexts, we first tried to ask ourselves about the most problematic aspects of the project title which we had merely inherited. Amongst us then, the provocation points were: Why should a notion of the US (obviously USA) even need to be a point of reference? Was there a point in imagining such a thing as a united Asia? What is the benefit of still pegging the discussion around states when the core of power have obviously migrated elsewhere across political limits?

One should point out of course that discursive fervour over notions of utopia already comes with a steady momentum built over decades of transnational networking, done for instance through initiatives such as the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennials and the Asia-Pacific Triennials of Contemporary Art (APT), to name just two of many other platforms that have emerged. An accounting of APT in an Australian publication (*Broadsheet's* special issue on the APT) constitutes utopia as a place that is nowhere. Yet on a personal level, my utopia with regards to USAsia was really, at the very least, about seeing independent but conceivably parallel tracks converge to some degree. And this to my mind was at the heart of USAsia primarily being about proposing a platform for collaboration and exchange, not only among those who theorize on and those who produce art, but also across generations of artists and those who would not otherwise be brought into an encounter 'with natural neighbours'. One does not have to go too far back to see that there is a generational disconnection between those artists and cultural workers who participated in the cultural exchanges that occurred in the 1990s and those who arguably owe their mobility across the transnational artworld to the hyperactive biennale-triennale and art fair circuits. While certainly not the first and only undertaking of its kind, USAsia, a project which took root under the watch of Singaporean curator now National Art Gallery Director Eugene Tan as he was then engaged with the Osage Art Foundation previously, was an instigation of encounters that attempted to transcend the tenacious neurosis of situating Asia within a global contemporary.

The following is an excerpt from the USAsia exhibition proposal which originally consisted of twelve collaborative projects at the time when its terms were still being negotiated or the Liverpool Biennial, one of the pioneering international art platforms that avowedly set out to contextually nuance encounters with art by seriously giving thought to the activation of public sites and the engagement of host communities¹:

This project will not stick to the idea of equal representation among nationalities nor fixed geographies. The boundaries of Asia will be proposed as fluid, porous and provisional, and yet charged.

USAsia aims to allow space, movement, and possibility in attempted re-castings of this issue of assumed power shifts which continue to take shape today amidst expectations of an Asian century. While the idea of a 'united' Asia is an impossibility in the minds of many, not least due to problems such as developmental disparities, historical violence, and internal rivalry, among others, the fears over the rise of Asia remains real and palpable. As the predatory geopolitics of economic blocs and multinational corporations further get in the way of more reciprocal, ecologically healthy relationships, USAsia is posed as critique of (Asian)-centrism, exclusivism and expansionism which arise from a tendency among reigning paradigms of Asian regionalism to resist and criticize Euroamerican-centrism. This project could also be taken as a warning to be careful not to reconstruct colonial relationships or effect self-marginalization.

One of the aims here is, precisely, to provoke and to get various publics to re-consider carefully the limits of the nation-state as a basis for their notion of the world and Asia in particular. The project, by also invoking notions of reciprocity, explores interchange as the first basis of hospitality; where exchanges between parties/individuals can only be affected by some degree of agency or through a willingness to engage... With a skeptical eye turned upon the assumption of blithely congenial unions, twelve individual groups of artists have been asked to question the notion of unity, to go back to the premises of hospitality, to that give-and-take that presumably preconditions the receiving of an 'other' into one's own 'homeground'... The reference to an imaginary union is an overt taunt. It goads both artists and visitors to negotiate around contentious and divisive matters, and critically tackle the threat of 'totalisation', other ambivalent upshots, and kneejerk-isms.²

USAsia was personally instructive in that it highlighted how difficult it is to argue for complexity and how one must gird oneself for productive failure. For despite the very real inroads enabled by technological developments in global transportation and communication (primarily via the Internet), what Azurin notes in his essay “The Quest for the Asian Community: Turning Old Battlefields into New Seedbeds” as “the quest for a keen sense of neighbourliness and transborder kinship” (Azurin 2006, 31) requires infinitely more border crossing with a litany of cultural faux pas inevitably made along the way. Elsewhere, curator-cultural theorist Marian Pastor Roces has issued warnings against giving in to the impulse to mutually exoticize. In *Community of Asia: Concept or Reality*, she enjoins everyone “to leave paradise” (Roces 2006, 41) in all its euphemistic manifestations—Malaysia Truly Asia, Amazing Thailand, and Its More Fun in the Philippines—artificial havens or buffers against the choppy waters of difference and dissent.

How these transactional dilemmas relate to USAsia, with its implied problematizing of key terms tied into what erstwhile Liverpool Biennial Artistic Director Lewis Biggs pointed to as “the end of the American century”—underlines how notions of ‘united’ and ‘Asia’ bore down upon us as curators in the project. And the crux was that in our home cities within Asia, localized versions (in our case Singaporean, Chinese, and Filipino) of no touting signs abound but are summarily ignored. Yet touting of course, in its more benign form, could easily be taken as mere assertion of a muted voice amidst a raucous throng. Any public commuter confronted by a barker operating in a bus-jeepney-FX depot can attest to this. I think however, that within the constantly questioned borders of Asia, our greatest disability is ignorance to shifting subject positions. Unfortunately, as it still happens within encounters between artists and related agents within Asia, patronizingly projected nuances still get summarily subdued in the race to keep up, as Thai curator Ark Fongsmut pointed out in his talk occasioned by the exhibition *Nuova (Arte) Povera* in Hong Kong, 2012.³ Fongsmut’s particular observation was framed within tropes of globalisation, cultural flattening, and the rise of the “New Poor.” In extrapolating from Fongsmut’s insight, we could add that the perpetuation of such ignorance, coupled with a distrust of totalizing frames of ‘knowing or perhaps more accurately, knowing it all’ appears to feed the artists’ discomfort with the otherwise self-referential as being strong-armed into extending into the social, but essentially unfamiliar. I would say that is the traversing of that crevasse, between ‘being’ and ‘being made to represent’ that taunts curators to keep treading this however fraught course. In looking beyond exhibitions,

and the tracking of other tactile evidence that demonstrate exchange, I myself, as writer-researcher-curator resolutely look forward to plodding through these various spheres of cultural work precisely because so much of the above problematique remain unresolved.

A few short hours after the Regional Perspectives Forum launched in Hong Kong to publicly present USAsia, it became crystal clear to us three curators of USAsia that the project was not going to get off the ground. Depending on whom you would be speaking to, USAsia's stillborn fate could be traced to a spectrum of reasons ranging from Liverpool's own institutional wranglings, Osage's misgivings about financially supporting the project frame and components, to the curators' (in other words, our) failure to produce a tenable proposal. At that point, USAsia was framed as a response to the Biennial overarching theme of 'hospitality,' thus the proposal had consisted of enabling an arguably ambitious platform that would enable projects to be undertaken within a shared space in one of the floors of the Biennial-rented edifices. It was, in other words, an exercise of give and take (foibles included) among artists from very diverse territories such as Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Myanmar, Singapore, and Hong Kong. The collaborations were meant to test the premise that artists might, through art, negotiate the vagaries of origin, site, difference, as well as affinity. Like most such truncated jabs at transcultural exhibition-making, it may have been the tenuous yet precious networks that had been established during research and planning that proved invaluable and productive for the artists and curators. At the end of the day, and despite the obvious pitfalls, this was proof of an earnest desire to establish not only a sense of place but the pursuit of a desire to belong and get along in the midst of real vulnerabilities and clear disparities in discourse and historical linkage, economy / survival capacity, and language.

These latter preoccupations similarly figure prominently across even more in the context of the looming 2015 launch of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), loosely patterned after the European Union, as it underpinned another exhibit, called WE = ME ASEAN Art Exhibition and Symposium, held in Thailand in 2013 at the Art Centre, Silpakorn University Wang Thapra. Conversations that ensued in this event reveal how AEC's anchors of comparably more fluid territorial borders and economic synchronization hold even more urgency particularly for those working out of Bangkok given its stature as an ASEAN core hub. In an attempt to further illustrate the difficulties in this negotiating of Asia, we can turn to the practice of curation as possible indicator

of how unevenly operative collaborations may be construed. This following section is informed by the aforementioned August 2013 exhibit-conference at the Art Centre, Silpakorn University.

As an intimate gathering of artists, art managers, academics, and curators from Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, and China (in effect, ASEAN plus one), WE = ME proved insightful despite misgivings about token representation, and the productivity of expending energies on thinking upon how the AEC might influence the future art and cultural encounters of in these sites. What this exhibit and attendant roundtable essentially highlighted were several issues regarding art within the ASEAN negotiations of tradition and change; the appropriation of others' traditions that might effectively lead to the morphing of cultural forms into what is perceived as contemporary; censorship stipulations that compel artists to become more sensitized to the public reception of their work; the rechanneling of state subsidy to a tourist-oriented "traditional" art; inter-territorial exchange in light of language diversity, unequal economic development, discrepant art histories, and the seeming disparate conceptions of "global" and "contemporary"; the potential of self-education through artist-initiated training and exchange; aggressive explorations of interdisciplinary practice and the more imaginative use of spaces; and, education initiatives as "second-life" options for the dead-end nature of time-based/temporal exhibits. It seemed too that it was again, Fongsmut who was also at this event, who had the most poignant way of summing up the conversations in light of the impending AEC and other proposed "unities": "the management of the future must be management among equals" rather than a jockeying for position as THE center of culture",⁴ he said.

One issue that was left unresolved is the way in which these proposed panaceas of diversity platforms still leave present curators and art managers negotiating within an uneven terrain—the main problem being their de facto mode of relying on personal and professional networks rather than being enabled to more keenly invest in the crafting and digesting of critical research forged from intensive and grounded encounters with art-makers and thinkers as opposed to parachute visits and untriangulated referrals. It is here where the primary role of transcultural research becomes significant amidst the current purgatorial state of affairs—with potentially diminishing opportunities in an impending restructuring of research grant facilities such as in the case of the Nippon Foundation's Asian Public Intellectuals vis-à-vis the continuing aggressive stance of Euro-American institutions such as that represented by the Guggenheim MAP initiative. Without

belabouring the point, we call to mind how research, curation, and publication, whether done independently or enabled by institutional largesse, figure actively as modes of knowledge production, and thus critically weigh into agenda-setting and the trafficking of ideas across territories. It ought to be quite obvious that the curatorial research for instance that would be required for a project like USAsia becomes heavily dependent upon the accessibility of data, and this in turn is determined both by the entrepreneurial energy of researchers as well as the vetting and priority-setting that occurs in research-oriented institutions. Having been an Advisory Board member of the Asia Art Archive for instance has made me privy to programmatic decisions like the shifting of research focus to Central Asia and deliberately take a keener look at performance histories. If the AEC, or any other “Asian” formation, is to ensure that not only the political gains of a more fluidly functioning region of trade will be enabled come 2015, then all invested parties will need to thoughtfully and aggressively address the contestations and complications arising from competing perspectives and interests, and longer-sighted use of resources beyond trite diplomatic rhetoric and hollow spectacles of congeniality.

Notes

This essay is an expanded version of a talk delivered as part of the “Regional Perspectives Forum” held at Osage Kwun Tong, Hong Kong in April 2012. The author was one of three curators approached by Osage Foundation to put together a proposal (United States of Asia: Combustible Chemistries) that would frame an Asian exhibition to be pitched as a component of the then upcoming Liverpool Biennale. Research for this proposal was undertaken from 2011 to 2012.

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- 1 The proposed collaborations were to have occurred between the following artists and curators: Varsha Nair and Sharon Chin, Neo-Angono Artists Collective and Taring Padi, David Medalla with Stephanie Syjuco and Michael Arcega, Nge Lay, Cheo Chai-Hiang and John Low, Pratchaya Phinthong, Ho Tzu Nyen and Louie Cordero, Manit Sriwanichpoom, Tozer Pak and Luke Ching talking to Lawman, Kingsley Ng and Tuguldur Yondonjams, and Ruangrupa.
 - 2 Excerpt from the collaboratively written exhibition proposal for United States of Asia which was a curatorial project presented to organizers of the Liverpool Biennial 2012. The curators who worked on this proposal include the author, Isabel Ching and Arianna Gelli.
 - 3 The Nueva Arte Povera exhibition, curated by Ark Fongsmut, included the following artists: Krit Ngamsom, Kentaro Hiroki, Dusadee Huntrakul, Boonsri Tangtongsin, Prateep Suthathongthai, Pisitakun Kuantalaeng, Lek Kiatsirikajorn. The exhibition ran from 17 March to 19 April 2012.
 - 4 Quotation comes out of extemporaneous roundtable discussion in which Ark Fongsmut was one of the participants. The discussion was a segment of the WE = ME ASEAN Art Exhibition and Symposium held in Thailand in 2013 at the Art Centre, Silpakorn University Wang Thapra.

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