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**Bienais do Sudeste Asiático: interações locais e globais**

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**Image:** Martha Atienza Our Islands 11°16'58.4 123°45'07.0E, 2017, video. Courtesy of the artist.

## Southeast Asian Biennales: Local and Global interactions\*

Bienais do Sudeste Asiático: interações locais e globais

Leonor Veiga\*\*

### Abstract

This text aims to give an overview of existing biennials in Southeast Asia. By adopting a national perspective, it describes the genesis, the continuation (or not) and the programmatic character of regional biennials. The text proposes that the idea of perennial exhibition can be traced to the 1970s, when the ASEAN started to promote regional events, in an attempt to create unicity through culture. As this project lost vitality, it was substituted for biennials in Southeast Asia and in the Asia-Pacific region. According to the reasons behind their genesis, some biennials that were established in Southeast Asia follow the biennale model while others follow the model of resistance biennales. This shows variety and regional independence toward the global world.

### Keywords

Southeast Asia. ASEAN. Asia-Pacific. Biennials. Biennials of Resistance.

### Resumo

Este texto procura fazer um balanço das bienais existentes no Sudeste Asiático. Adotando uma perspectiva nacional, descreve a gênese, a continuação (ou não) e o caráter programático de exposições bienais na região. O texto propõe que a ideia de exposição recorrente remonta aos anos 70 quando a ASEAN começou a promover eventos na região, na tentativa de criar unicidade através da cultura. À medida que este projeto perdeu vitalidade, foi substituído por bienais na região do Sudeste Asiático e também na região Ásia-Pacífico. De acordo com as razões por detrás da sua gênese, as bienais que surgiram no Sudeste Asiático seguem o modelo global e outras seguem o modelo de bienal de resistência, mostrando variedade e independência regional face ao mundo global.

### Palavras-chave

Sudeste Asiático. ASEAN. Ásia-Pacífico. Bienais. Bienais de Resistência.

Today, the word biennale is commonly used to describe art events of regular recurrence, ambitious scale and international participation. These generalities have been shaken since the outset of the COVID-19 crisis since the Chinese New Year of 2020, causing the postponement of many worldwide events, or their happening with restrictions. Even documenta, set to take place in 2022, is now grappling with uncertainty pertaining to the opening of its forthcoming edition<sup>1</sup>.

Worldwide, some perennial shows were postponed, while others took place without the usual presence of artists and international public. Despite much unsureness, in December 2020, the curatorial team of the 2021 Istanbul Biennial was announced<sup>2</sup>. It includes Australian art historian David Teh, who researches modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art, German curator Uta Meta Bauer, professor at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, and Indian artist and filmmaker Amar Kanwar. After the appointment of Indonesian art collective ruangrupa to curate documenta 15<sup>3</sup>, this was the most significant appointment of Asian art agents for an international biennial. These nominations, paired with a substantial Asian representation within the annual ranking of the most influential people in art<sup>4</sup>, confirm the global importance of Asia in today's contemporary art world and demonstrate Asian artists and curators' capacity to build events and establish networks internationally. This is, in my opinion, the culmination of a slow process of self-determination that art historians Charles Green and Anthony Gardner trace back to the 1990s, the decade of "Asian Biennialization" (Gardner; Green, 2016: 111-43). According to them, in the 1990s Asian biennials showed capacity to bring an aesthetics of regionalism to the forefront, albeit with a reduced global reach. This article builds on their discourse, but it focuses on Southeast Asia, a region that has its own dynamics within the Asian history traced by Gardner and Green.

Within the global circuit of biennales, Southeast Asia's small representation is varied in reach and agency. Some biennales were planned to be local, while others were conceived to be regional or part of the international biennial circuit. Other biennales changed their course: in 2011, the Biennale of Yogyakarta moved beyond its initial local reach toward a transregional approach. Some biennales were started by artists, others by governmental agencies, a difference that matches the aforementioned local or global agenda. This article traces these differences historically while suggesting that Southeast Asia has its own biennial agency. The emergence of biennales in Southeast Asia does not follow the norm; it can be chronologically situated in three distinct phases: 1) between the 1970s and 1990, when the ASEAN shows created a regional dynamic of perennial exhibitions and "biennales of resistance" were formed in Indonesia and the Philippines; 2) the 1990s, when Southeast Asian art started to be exhibited regularly, especially in the Asian-Pacific region; and 3) after the 2000s, when once again several Southeast Asian biennales were formed.

### **The Making of Southeast Asia through Perennial Exhibitions in the Asia Pacific Region**

The existence of biennales and perennial exhibitions in Southeast Asia has a long past. In 1957, the First Southeast Asia Art Conference and Competition, organized by the Art Association of the Philippines (AAP), took place in Manila<sup>5</sup>. At the time, the "exhibition was envisioned as a vanguard and cultural event due to its representation of Southeast Asia as a cultural region" (Ditzig, 2017: 41). Alongside it, the exhibition promoted the conference "Art in Southeast Asia and Today's Problems" at the Philippines Women's University. This model, of exhibition and conference, would take hold in the region to this day. The rubric of Southeast Asia was recuperated in 1968, at the 1<sup>st</sup> ASEAN Exhibition in Jakarta, featuring artists from Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines (*Ibidem*: 62). ASEAN's prolific exhibitionary agency through the 1970s and 1980s procured to affirm relations based on a perceived shared history (Soon,

2013). “In effect, these exhibitions were crafted to convince Southeast Asians of a Southeast Asia that had cultural relevance” (Ditzig, 2017:63).

As observed by T. K. Sabapathy, the ASEAN art exhibitions, symposiums and workshops in a regular fashion launched a dynamic of regional perennial art events unequalled elsewhere in the world (Sabapathy, 2018: 265). To him, these ASEAN initiatives made art and artists mobile and allowed for the meeting of art agents and artworks, something that would have been impossible if undertaken by an individual or any single institution in the region. Yet, by 1993, Sabapathy considered that “the ASEAN show and convention has become increasingly flabby, directionless and is looking extremely lethargic and tired... artworks chosen for display are polite and good-looking...but scratch them a little and they are superficial and pretty empty” (*Ibidem*). This decline, he concluded, led to the emergence of new gameplayers, especially in the Asia Pacific region: “Australia, for instance, has entered into the play aggressively and with burning purpose. The Asia Pacific Triennial recently convened in Brisbane provides useful lessons. Yes, it was a blockbuster event” (*Ibidem*). In 1993, the Asian Pacific Triennial (APT) was already the third large-scale, international and perennial exhibition to open in the Asia Pacific region with a clear focus on Asian Art. Before it, the Fukuoka Art Museum (FAM) launched the Asian Art Show (AAS) in 1979/80<sup>6</sup>. Set to take place every five years, the Asian Art Show was the first initiative by a museum that procured to understand Asian art. After the Asian Art shows of 1980 and 1985, in which a large amount of artists was displayed, the FAM, considering its “rather passive [role] in the curation”, decided to reform its exhibitions (Kuroda, 1994). So, since the 3<sup>rd</sup> AAS of 1989, the museum decided to reduce the number of artists, to choose them in accordance with a proposed theme, while maintaining the national classification, that was eventually abandoned in 1994. To overcome censorship from authorities (which, in 1989, says FAM curator Raiji Kuroda, was explicit for China), the FAM established a network of specialists inside and outside Japan that mutually helped each other. One year prior to the event in preparation, the museum sent ‘inspection teams’ to the countries they were researching, a procedure that the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum (FAAM) maintains until today when it organizes a triennial<sup>7</sup>. This strategy increased the knowledge Asian artists had of each other and was considered a “historic move” by Malaysian Redza Piyadasa (1939-2007) (Piyadasa, 1989: 20). In 1990, the Japan Foundation started to promote several exhibitions in Tokyo that aimed to represent and legitimate (Southeast) Asian art (Sonn, 2013). Following the FAM, the Japan Foundation used in-house curators which were aided by national representatives. So, when planning to open the APT, Australian curator Caroline Turner was advised by Piyadasa to follow these research procedures (Turner, 2017). Following this procedure, he argued, would allow each country its own artistic agency. Apart from Piyadasa himself, during the 1990s Apinan Poshyananda from Thailand, Jim Supangkat from Indonesia, Geeta Kapur from India and T. K. Sabapathy from Singapore were frequently consulted by Japanese and Australian curators hunting for contemporary art, thus supporting the Japanese and Australian intention “to define contemporary art *across the region* and to generate a very substantial cross-cultural dialogue between artists, curators and academics” (Gardner; Green, 2016: 113). In my opinion, these four institutional bodies – ASEAN, FAM, Japan Foundation and APT – created a dynamic of perennial shows that would enable the formation of biennales in Southeast Asia. The most prominent aspect relating to this legacy relates to the fact that, to this day, all existing perennials shows in Southeast Asia remain concentrated in the ASEAN founding member countries: Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. Slowly, since 1972 (year of the opening of the Jakarta Biennale) until 2018 (year of the opening of three biennales in Thailand), these countries started to promote their own events, an aspect that remains untouched to this day<sup>8</sup>.

### **Biennialization, biennales of resistance and visual art organizations**

When considering biennales, scholars distribute them in two groups: 1) those that follow the tradition of 19<sup>th</sup> century shows and are associated with the phenomenon of 'biennialization' (Gardner; Green, 2016; Jones, 2010: 68)<sup>9</sup> and 2) those that provide with a counter model to this tendency, and have been named 'biennales of resistance' (Marchart, 2014). The first relate to what Gardner and Green suggest that in an Asian context is a direct consequence of the AAS, APT and many other biennales that were formed in Asian since – namely Taiwan (1992), Gwangju (1995) and Shanghai (1996). In their opinion, these exhibitions “altered regional expectations of the spectacle that constitute contemporary art” and as a result were “early warning signs of the biennialization’s link ... in favor of an ecumenical and almost populist spectacle” (Gardner; Green, 2016: 137). Caroline Jones, who refers to biennialization as “biennial culture” (Jones, 2010), shows that this tendency continues many of the 19<sup>th</sup> century world exhibitions attributes, especially in the biennials links to tourism, urban development and “openings for multinational capital investment and new geopolitical ambitions” (Jones, 2010: 69). Their pessimistic view is, in my regard, not matched in a Southeast Asian context: while it may indeed have influenced how Asian biennales present contemporary art, this model is not ubiquitous in Southeast Asia. Its expression pertains, in my opinion, solely to some biennales, all of which formed since the year 2000: Singapore Biennale (2006), Kuala Lumpur Biennale (2017) and the Bangkok Art Biennale (2018).

On contrast, in Southeast Asia, several biennales emerged from the need to promote unrepresented art from the centers of production (against state-promoted art). This counter model, which has been called “biennales of resistance” (Marchart, 2014) and can be related to the Salon des Refusés of 19<sup>th</sup> Paris, has a wide expression in the region to this day. According to Oliver Marchart, biennales of resistance (of which the Habana Biennale is an important example) anticipated developments that have now migrated to the biennales of the center: abolishment of nationalities, extinction of prizes, and integration of diasporic artists living in the West in the shows (Marchart, 2014: 267). These changes, as well as the integration of major international conferences into the structure of the events established the biennial of resistance as a discursive environment (Marchart, 2014: 272). Due to their geographic location, biennials of resistance are equally designated as biennales of the periphery. In a Southeast Asian context, these peripheries also exist within a single country, and have enabled the formation of regional biennales.

In tandem with the expansion of the two models – biennial and biennial of resistance – several small visual art organizations sprung worldwide since the 1990s (Bilbao, 2019). In many cases, these organizations developed as alternative to mainstream museums and galleries. In Southeast Asia, small visual art organizations such as ruangrupa and Cemeti in Indonesia, and the Black Artists in Asia in the Philippines, have equally to be acknowledged as gatekeepers for the internationalization of Southeast Asian contemporary art. The region also presents small independent art spaces which are many times attached to a restaurant or a café with a good wi-fi connection. This “art-café” model has enabled the continuity of several local art spaces – which in turn serve as a window to the local art community, that finds more spaces to show their art production – while enabling the creation of new publics for art. In addition, the art-café model has permitted these organizations to run independently to state sponsored institutions.

### **Indonesia: the formation of biennales amidst protests**

The first Southeast Asian country to host a biennale was Indonesia. This circumstance sprung from a combination of two factors: the lack of infrastructure to display contemporary art and an intense academic life in the art campuses of the country. In Indonesia, the biennales of Jakarta (since 1972) and Yogyakarta (since 1988) originate in the discontent of younger generations of artists who had their

access restricted to the annual events. Slowly, these biennales of resistance migrated toward the international, without losing their peripheral agency. Indonesia's importance within Southeast Asia was also achieved through a constant international representation in overseas exhibitions: in 1953, Affandi (1903-1990), considered the father of expressionism in Indonesia, exhibited in the São Paulo biennale (Supangkat, 2005: 2020). After a long temporal gap, in 2003, Heri Dono (1960-), the most globalised artist from Indonesia, was invited to participate at the *Arsenale*, in Hou Hanru's *Zone of Urgency*. To this day, he remains the only Indonesian artist to participate at the biennale's exhibition (Haupt, Binder, 2015). Also in 2003, Arahmaiani (1961-), the most renowned woman artist from Indonesia, was represented in a parallel event with a solo exhibition. Since 2013, Indonesia founded its pavilion in Venice. Indonesian artists have equally been represented in Habana and in the Asian regional biennials, especially Fukuoka, Gwangju, and the Yokohama Triennale (which opened in 2001). Equally, Indonesian curators have participated in world events, as advisors and curators: Jim Supangkat acted as advisor and curator for the Japan Foundation in 1992, for the APT 1993, 1996 and 1999, the São Paulo biennale of 1996 (23a. Bienal de São Paulo, 1996); ruangrupa, now set to program the upcoming documenta edition, have equally participated in the Singapore Biennial in 2011, in the São Paulo biennale in 2014, and were artistic directors of Singapore Biennial in 2015.

The institution of the Jakarta Biennale began as the Grand Exhibition of Indonesian Paintings in 1972<sup>10</sup>. Even if the term 'biennale' only started to be used in its 5<sup>th</sup> edition in 1982, it achieved this status after the student protests of December 1974. Then, the rejection of their works in favour of established artists, resulted in the formation of two distinct shows: one for artists below 36 years old which allowed for some experimentation, and another for the officially accepted styles, made by senior artists. This strategy was, according to American art historian Amanda K. Rath, a "means of creating and maintaining a hierarchy at the institutional level of the types of works deemed worthy of representing the nation" (Rath, 2011: 32-33). The Jakarta Biennale is many times remembered through its 9<sup>th</sup> edition, in 1993. It was this edition that broadened the spectrum of art from painting to *seni rupa*, or visual art, therefore allowing for the inclusion of installation art. Jim Supangkat (b. 1948-), the exhibition's curator was knowledgeable of postmodern trends in Euro-America, which he had been following since his formative years in the Academy of Bandung and as a member of the Indonesian New Art Movement (which lasted from 1975 to 1979). In 1993, Supangkat deliberately opted to showcase Indonesian radical art, with a special attention to installation art. This project was done precisely after the first APT, of which Supangkat was the national advisor for Indonesia, which led him to repeat some artists and artworks (Rath, 2011: 42). To this day, the Jakarta Biennale owes its experimental character to the 1993 edition. After much debate around Supangkat's declaration that Indonesian artworks demonstrated a turn toward to the postmodern and as such showed artists' independence from the modern art canon – a debate that lasted 6 weeks in the press –, the subsequent 1996 and 1998 editions turned again into painting and sculpture. In 1998, due to the revolutionary process that would result in the downfall of Suharto's New Order, the Jakarta Biennale was discontinued. In 2006, when a new boom of Indonesian art was starting to take shape, the Jakarta Biennale made a comeback. Albeit with an increased international participation, to this day, the Jakarta Biennale continues to showcase a majority of Indonesian artists, thus retaining its national focus.

The Yogyakarta Biennale has equally a long history. Starting as the Yogyakarta Painting Exhibition in 1983, it became the Biennale Painting Yogyakarta in 1988. The aim was to provide the possibility of viewing the best artworks of the past two years to perform a barometer of the artists' creativity. Until 1992, a jury selected and awarded the best artists. However, in 1992, an alternative biennial or experimental arts emerged on the day before the opening of the Biennale Painting of Yogyakarta. It was organized by artists who did not agree with the selection process which only permitted the genre of



painting and artists over 36 years of age (Samboh, s.d.). At this time, Indonesian was immersed in a painting boom which did not allow alternative art to find commercial viability (Supangkat, 2015: 222). On the same year, the Cemeti Art Gallery was also founded in Yogyakarta. Quickly, it started to serve as a gatekeeper to researchers that arrived from Fukuoka and Brisbane.

Since its inception and until 2011, the Yogyakarta Biennale positioned itself to promote experimental art, especially from Yogyakarta, as a way to maintain the importance of its art academy, the Institut Seni Indonesia. In 2011, after a 10<sup>th</sup> edition dedicated to the theme of *Art Archives Movement*, the Yogyakarta Biennale decided to change its course and reach a wider international scope. In a “quasi-Habana” agenda that can be traced back to the Bandung Conference of 1955, the organization resorted to widen its local gaze from Yogyakarta to the Equator line until 2022. The Equator project experimental character has been markedly transcultural: its editions – India, Arab region, Nigeria, Brazil and Southeast Asia – promoted encounters and exchanges, something which is paramount of biennale shows. Significantly, the meeting with the neighbouring Southeast Asian nations aimed to demonstrate the region as more than the political construct of the ASEAN, but rather focused on shared experiences between communities. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, it remains unclear whether the 2021 edition will take place.

Indonesia also counts two other short-lived biennales, the Bali Biennale, set to promote the island’s specific art (another form of localism within the country), and the CP Biennale, an international art event which was founded by Supangkat and Indonesian entrepreneur Djie Tjjanan in 2003. It was discontinued by Supangkat’s own initiative in 2005, after Islamic protests over an artwork. This event shows how protests have determined the inception or closure of local art events and how difficult it remains to foster events of private initiative in the country. So, in an Indonesian context, internationalism has been attempted after 2003, when the CP Biennale was founded, and re-established through the Equator series.

### **The Viva ExCon: a biennale of resistance in the Philippines**

Despite being the first Southeast Asian nation to have a pavilion in Venice in 1964 – through the private initiative of Purita Kalaw Ledesma, an art critic and founder of the Art Association of the Philippines, and without government support<sup>11</sup> –, the Philippines would discontinue its participation until its return in 2015. In this respect, the country follows the Southeast Asian trend, that to organize its national pavilion after the 2000s. Every edition is subject to a call for curators, which is open to national (foreign practitioners may also apply in collaboration with national citizens)<sup>12</sup>.

While the Philippines was a pioneer when it attempted to create a Southeast Asian discourse, this founding member of the ASEAN remains outside of the international discourse of biennales. Yet, a biennale of resistance, the Viva ExCon, took hold in the country. Like Indonesia, national infrastructure is scarce and concentrated in Manila. And like Indonesia, the Philippines has its art schools distributed in many regions. The Philippines is comprised by three main islands regions – Vissayas, Mindanao and Luzon (where Manila is located). Vissayas, a renowned region for its historical ties with Europe, has been since the 1980s the center of a resistance towards Manila’s artistic hegemony. It was in Visayas that the Black Artists in Asia (BBA) were formed in 1986, during the late years of Ferdinand Marcos’s rule. In 1990, the BBA established the Viva ExCon (the Vissayas Islands Visual Arts Exhibition and Conference), in Bacolod City. Viva ExCon aims to establish a network between the central islands, by connecting its art communities<sup>13</sup>. Thus, throughout its years, the biennial has travelled the region and has been staged in several locations. In 2020, the biennale returned to its original location, Bacolod. The COVID-19 crisis led the organization to stage its conference as an online event.

The Viva ExCon has two main areas of concern: 1) traditional crafts and 2) modern and contemporary art<sup>14</sup>. In the *Rationale* of the opening 1990 event, it is written: “The conference in particular hopes to address the fundamental issues like the significance of a distinct Visayan vision vis-à-vis the national cultural perspective”<sup>15</sup>. Its main objectives have remained unbated: 1) to showcase contemporary art from the region, 2) to promote artistic practices that reflect the islands historical traditions and 3) to encourage experimental and collaborative art practices between artists from the Visayan region. Viva ExCon’s focus on peripheral art practices from the Philippines is significant; it shows that insular countries live on the variety between the traditional and the contemporary, and that regional discourses lead to alternative views of national and regional significance.

### **Singapore Biennial: the Southeast Asian ‘survey’ biennale**

The Singapore Biennial was, until 2017, the only international biennial event of Southeast Asia (after the end of CP Biennale). The Singapore Biennial started in 2006 as an initiative of the National Arts Council, who equally organised the 2008 edition. Since 2011, the National Arts Council commissioned the organisation to the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), which opened its doors in 1996. Following the ASEAN, the SAM was the only regional institution to continue shaping the formation of a Southeast Asian contemporary art identity through exhibitions including *Modernity and Beyond, Themes in Southeast Asian Art* (1996), curated by Sabapathy, *Telah Terbit (Out Now): Southeast Asia Contemporary Art Practice During the 70s* (2006), curated by Ahmad Mashadi, *Negotiating Home, History and Nation: Two Decades of Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia, 1991-2011* (2011), curated by Lola Lenzi, among others. These shows, as well as the Singapore Biennial, continue the notion of a Southeast Asian regionalism which “conforms to [Singapore’s] official self-imagining” (Teh, 2020: 351), a regionalism that keeps “contemporary art from Southeast Asia (...) as always, set within larger ‘Asian’ and ‘global’ contexts” (*Ibidem*). Argues Teh, after the first two worldly “accessible spectacles” curated by Fumio Nanjo in 2006 and 2008, when the SAM took over the direction of Singapore Biennial in 2011, a greater emphasis on Southeast Asia became evident. However, he laments that Southeast Asian art was shown as a survey, in a “colour-by-numbers approach to ‘the region’” (*Ibidem*: 353). In that regard, Teh suggests embracing Patrick Flores’s 2019 approach, one which paid attention to the peripheries of the region by including Timor-Leste, Brunei and Laos, while showing distance from the unreflexive, quota-approach of the 2011, 2013 and 2016 editions.

All six editions of the Singapore Biennial have worked with one relevant artistic director (since 2013 the artistic director is Southeast Asian). These artistic directors in turn, have worked with several Southeast Asian curators. Albeit at times confusing, this curatorial strategy demonstrates that, through its biennale, Singapore is creating an independent group of curators who may represent Southeast Asia internationally. Meanwhile, the fact that every edition counts with a large Southeast Asian participation indicates that the biennale continues the tradition of advancing a Southeast Asian regionalism through its exhibitions (*Ibidem*: 354).

### **Malaysia: a suspended biennale**

In 2017, the National Art Gallery opened the Kuala Lumpur Biennale (KUL). One of its main features is the representation of all ASEAN member countries (Timor-Leste remains outside of the ASEAN after its 2011 application<sup>16</sup>, and thus was not a participating nation<sup>17</sup>) as well as China, South Korea, Japan and India. The KUL was launched as “a mega-scale international contemporary art program organized by the National Arts Gallery of Malaysia”<sup>18</sup> to “invigorate the local cultural sector via the ‘Biennale’ brand and amplify Kuala Lumpur’s position on the global cultural map”<sup>19</sup>. These ambitions – the mega-scale



and the attempt to invigorate the cultural sector – show that Malaysian authorities understand a biennale event as a benchmark for national projection. Such national agenda would make one expect a 2019 edition. Yet, as it was scheduled to start in September 2020, the event was cancelled in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 crisis<sup>20</sup>. It remains uncertain whether this major regional event will make a comeback.

### **Thailand: from global to local**

Thailand's immense power during the 1990s through its star-curator Apinan Poshyananda has only recently been felt home. Contrarily to the other countries, in biennale terms, Thailand went from a global prominence to a local one. After becoming an art historian in Cornell, Poshyananda became the leading Thai curator, effectively opening the path for Thai artists overseas. His intense curatorial activity in the 1990s, which includes the Sydney Biennales in 1992, the APT in 1993, the Johannesburg and Istanbul biennales in 1995, and the Asian section of the São Paulo Biennale in 1998, made his position change in the world, where he started to be envisioned as an "international curator from Thailand" (Flores, 2008: 50-51). In 2003, Apinan was selected as commissioner of the first Thai Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, which makes the Thai participation the oldest from Southeast Asia in Venice.

While Thailand did not form its own biennale, Thai curator Gridthiya Gaweewong and artist Rirkit Tiravanija organized an international show in Vietnam: *Saigon Open City*. The two-year long project launched in Ho Chi Minh City stemmed from the notion that "[t]he concept of the Biennale is past". Instead of a biennial show, the duo promoted a long-term project that comprised art and cultural events that mirrored Vietnam's history (art) phases: Liberation, Unification and (Re)construction (Gaweewong; Tiravanija, 2007). As the *Saigon Open City* aimed to promote a platform for local artists, it partnered with several local art agents and art institutions. This experimental project only had one edition, and it is unclear to the author if it does deserve the recognition of biennale given by the Biennial Foundation<sup>21</sup>.

It was only in 2018 that Thailand would start hosting not one biennale, but three<sup>22</sup>. Even for anyone used to follow the artworld's frenetic biennale calendar, this occurrence came as a complete surprise. Thailand's three biennales embody the main tendencies of the region's events (biennial and resistance biennial), while reflecting the national "outcome of a long gestation within three existing, long-standing divisions in the Thailand art world" (Galligan, 2021). Each event has its own public, which are as distinct as the biennales' emergence. According to Irish art historian Brian Curtin, these events were created without having knowledge of one another.

The Bangkok Art Biennale (BAB) opened to promote Bangkok as a city of the contemporary art world. As American art historian Gregory Galligan explains, it "derives directly from the life, work, and career of a major Thai curator, Apinan Poshyananda (...) [who] has skillfully employed his charismatic personality to successfully rope in major corporate and government (municipal, not national) support (...) [In a Thai context], Poshyananda is a creator of the biennial as spectacle, or what one major global critic calls 'festivalist' biennials" (Galligan, 2021). In tandem with BAB, the Thailand Biennale (TB) was "conceived and executed as a vast social development and global (tourism oriented) public relations venture" (*Ibidem*). The TB changes location and travels the country's touristic areas in order to promote idyllic destinations as also cultural destinations. To Curtin, "in terms of the implicit agenda of both biennales – cultural tourism – the fact that BAB is based in Bangkok and TB is a roaming event in rural and provincial areas (the next one in 2021 is in Korat) makes perfect sense. They complement each other in this respect". However, from an international point of view, "there is a sense that BAB and TB are merely playing 'catch-up' with an already tired biennale model" (Curtin, 2021).

Finally, the ‘guerilla’ Bangkok Biennial (BB) (*Ibidem*). This constitutes a biennial of resistance, as a discursive platform to contradict the BAB and the TB. Italian art historian Loredanna Pazzini-Paracciani agrees: the BB “is an extremely experimental anti-establishment event, which pushes the boundaries of what a biennale should be. This is very good for Thailand” (Pazzini-Paracciani, 2021). Galligan adds: “This biennial is the most daring, experimental, cutting edge, and even ‘post-human’ and open-ended project, as it seeks to disperse the curatorial function among as many players as possible”. The BB has no hegemonic curator, which could lead to it pushing the tired biennale model in other directions. If it follows the history of other resistance biennales from Southeast Asia, the BB will become a longstanding regional event. Galligan says: “The people behind this venture(...) are the most experimental around, and the least likely to tolerate spectacle or national development ideology as are found in BAB and the Thailand Biennale” (Galligan, 2021).

And when asking about their future recurrence, Curtin postulates: “So long as biennales prove their worth on the GDP, they will remain” (Curtin, 2021). Galligan disagrees: “BAB will fade away (...) No young curator here at the moment possesses the kind of personal, professional, official, scholarly, charismatic and independent qualities as Poshyananda, and none has the power to marshal the formidable corporate support or government cooperation. It will simply fade away, as he himself is not (...) training anyone (...). The TB may survive as a kind of sad, government-sponsored spectacle. It is not currently as independent an art venue as it needs to be” (Galligan, 2021).

### Conclusion

Southeast Asia biennale organization and representation shows signs of inequality. As a region, Southeast Asia has all its biennial events concentrated in the countries that comprised ASEAN’s early days: Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia and The Philippines, an aspect that I suggest results from the ASEAN’s prolific exhibitionary agency through the 1970s and 1980s. Yet, from these five nations, only two have generated long-standing biennales – Indonesia and the Philippines – followed by Singapore, which started its biennale in 2006, Malaysia and Thailand. This concentration may be regarded as a result of the neoliberal agenda that these events are commonly attached to (Gardner; Green, 2016). Yet, I suggest that this is not the case because the promotion of local art demonstrates alternatives to the neoliberal agenda that promotes biennales as part of the tourism culture and as a means to promote national prestige.

In Southeast Asia, the regional sentiment is one of moving beyond this dependency of Western referents toward the creation of a regional model of biennale making. For the moment, this has meant that most of the curators that organize the shows remain Asian, and if possible, Southeast Asian. There seems to be no controversy in this aspect, especially in Singapore. In addition, Southeast Asia’s geography seems to have contributed to the insular character of some of its biennales, especially in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand. Not all Southeast Asian biennials follow the premises that are commonly attached to the concept of biennale: regular occurrence, ambitious scale, and international participation. Albeit the recent Yogyakarta move toward the Equator, several Southeast Asian biennales were founded with the intent to promote contemporary local and regional art as well as to oppose the concentration of art in the main capital cities (Viva ExCon and the Thailand Biennial are case points). And while international participation in the region and overseas has shown signs of increasing while the events mature and its agents acquire experience, it remains second to the need to promote regional artists, especially in Singapore, and local artists, especially in the Philippines and Indonesia.

Also, one could think that the region's biennales are all of regional and international magnitude. This is again not the case, as many biennales result from the input of small visual art organizations which try new formats such as the Bangkok Biennial. So, this essay demonstrates Southeast Asia as a locus where biennials and perennial exhibitions happen, but where the biennial as an event does not always follow the phenomenon of "biennialization" that regards these events as part of corporate, neoliberal culture that dominates the artworld since the 1990s.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> “Documenta 15 Faces Possible Postponement”, *ARTFORUM*, January 13, 2021. Available from: <https://www.artforum.com/news/documenta-15-faces-possible-postponement-84898>.

<sup>2</sup> “Istanbul Biennial Announces Curators For 2021 Edition”, *ARTFORUM*, December 10, 2020. Available from: <https://www.artforum.com/news/istanbul-biennial-announces-curators-for-2021-edition-84621>.

<sup>3</sup> “Indonesian Artist Collective Ruangrupa to Curate Documenta’s 15th Edition,” *FRIEZE*, February 12, 2019, Available from: <https://www.frieze.com/article/indonesian-artist-collective-ruangrupa-curate-documentas-15th-edition>.

<sup>4</sup> “Power 100”, *Art Review*, December 3, 2020, Available from: <https://artreview.com/power-100/>.

<sup>5</sup> The Artist Association of the Philippines was promoting annual art events since 1948. In 1957,

<sup>6</sup> The Asian Art Show (AAS) was constituted by two parts. Part I, that was inaugurated in 1979, focused on modern artists from India, China and Japan. Part II took place in 1980 and focused on contemporary art. Part II saw an increment of ten countries, which allowed to cover the continent’s art panorama of the time. The success of these two exhibitions dictated the museum’s future and led to the maintenance of the AAS every five years. Since the second edition, each exhibition was given a main theme. In 1999, the 5<sup>th</sup> AAS was discontinued and gave place to the 1<sup>st</sup> Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale, which had the last edition in 2014. See “History of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum”, n.d., <https://faam.city.fukuoka.lg.jp/en/about/history/#b>.

<sup>7</sup> The Fukuoka Asian Art Museum was established in 1999. Then, the Asian Art Show was discontinued and gave place to the Fukuoka Triennial of Art.

<sup>8</sup> According to the Biennial Foundation website, the only Southeast Asian country which is not a founding member of the ASEAS to have an exhibition that is considered a biennial event is Vietnam. In 2006, the Saigon Open City opened in Ho Chi Minh. The show was an initiative of Thai curator Gridthiya Gaweewong and Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija. It has since been discontinued.

<sup>9</sup> Biennialization, as a phenomenon is criticized because its dominance frequently overshadows the art that it is supposed to showcase.

<sup>10</sup> The exact date of the Jakarta Biennale founding is not clear for the author. The Biennale Foundation directory mentions 1968; other archives and dissertations mention 1972. See <https://www.biennialfoundation.org/biennials/jakarta-biennale-indonesia/>, [https://www.academia.edu/24831216/DATA\\_CATALOGUE\\_for\\_GSRBI\\_Indonesia\\_New\\_Art\\_Movement\\_Research](https://www.academia.edu/24831216/DATA_CATALOGUE_for_GSRBI_Indonesia_New_Art_Movement_Research) and Amanda Katherine Rath, "Contextualizing 'Contemporary Art': Propositions of Critical Artistic Practice in Seni Rupa Kontemporer in Indonesia" (PhD thesis, Cornell University, 2011), 31.

<sup>11</sup> "PH at the Venice Biennale: A Comeback after 51 Years", May 8, 2018. Available from: <https://bluprint.onemega.com/philippine-participation-venice-biennale/>.

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.philartsvenicebiennale.com/about/>.

<sup>13</sup> *Don't Even Bring Water: Viva ExCon / Capiz 2018* (Capiz: Viva ExCon, 2018), 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Viva ExCon / Capiz 2018*, 189.

<sup>15</sup> "Visayas Islands Visual Arts Exhibition and Conference", *Black Mail* 3, n. February (1990).

<sup>16</sup> See <https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/what-will-it-take-to-admit-timor-leste-into-asean/>.

<sup>17</sup> See "KL Biennale 2017", My Creative, n.d., [http://www.mycreative.com.my/news\\_events/kl-biennale-2017](http://www.mycreative.com.my/news_events/kl-biennale-2017).

<sup>18</sup> See "KL Biennale 2017".

<sup>19</sup> "The 1st Kuala Lumpur Biennale To Open In November," Biennale Foundation, August 2017, <https://www.biennialfoundation.org/2017/08/the-1st-kuala-lumpur-biennale-to-open-in-november/>.

<sup>20</sup> See <https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/culture/2020/03/23/kul-biennale-2020-the-nation039s-biggest-art-event-cancelled-amid-public-health-concerns>.

<sup>21</sup> Since 2009, the Biennial Foundation monitors the biennales and organizes their networking.

<sup>22</sup> The Bangkok Biennale ran from July 1 until September 30, 2018; the Bangkok Art Biennale ran from October 19, 2018 and February 3, 2019 and the Thailand Biennale, in Krabi, ran from November 2, 2018 to February 28, 2019.

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