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Citation

NGOEI, Wen-Qing (WEI Wenqing).(2022). Exhibiting transnationalism after Vietnam: The Alpha Gallery in pursuit of an authentic Southeast Asian art form. *Journal of American-East Asian Relations, 29(3)*, 271-299.
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"Exhibiting Transnationalism after Vietnam: The Alpha Gallery's Vision of an Artistic Renaissance in Southeast Asia," ***Journal of American-East Asian Relations*** **29, no. 3 (2022): 271-299.**[1]

Wen-Qing Ngoei (Singapore Management University)

Abstract

This essay examines the Alpha Gallery, an independent artists' cooperative that Malaysians and Singaporeans established, which staged art shows during the 1970s to spark an artistic renaissance in Southeast Asia. The cooperative's transnational vision involved showcasing Balinese folk art as a primitive and, therefore, intrinsically Southeast Asian aesthetic, while asserting that it shared cultural connections with the Bengali Renaissance of the early 20th Century. Alpha's leaders believed these actions might awaken indigenous artistic traditions across Southeast Asia. Their project underscores the lasting cultural impact of colonialism on Southeast Asia and the contested character of the region. Alpha's condescending view of Balinese folk art echoed the paternalism of Euro-American colonial discourses about civilizing indigenous peoples that persisted because its key members received much of their education or training in Britain and the United States, a by-product of their countries' pro-U.S. trajectory during the Vietnam War. Equally, Alpha's transnationalism ran counter to Southeast Asian political elites' fixation with pressing art toward nation-building. Indeed, the coalescing of nation-states does not define the region's history during and after the Vietnam War. Rather, non-state actors like Alpha's members, in imagining and pursuing their versions of Southeast Asia, contributed to the persistent contingency of the region.

Keywords

Vietnam War, Southeast Asia, regionalism, art and culture, colonialism, U.S. empire, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), Cold War

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Jana K. Lipman and Mark Atwood Lawrence, the guest editors of this theme issue, for their advice and insights. Special thanks also go to the curators and librarians at the National Gallery Singapore, as well as Idelle Yee, the author's tireless research assistant.

[1] This article is part of the journal's theme issue on Southeast Asia after the Vietnam War: https://brill.com/view/journals/jaer/29/3/jaer.29.issue-3.xml

When the Alpha Gallery opened in Singapore in October 1971, its founders—a group of Malaysian and Singaporean painters and printers, along with one architect—told newspapers that the gallery was simply a "meeting place for the exchange of ideas among artists, art lovers, and interested people."[2] But as architect Lim Chong Keat, one of the gallery's founders, explained much later, Alpha had been born of a desire to prevent political elites from co-opting and deploying the work of artists to advance their nation-building goals. He recalled the incident which had inspired the gallery's birth. In 1966, Australian-born Frank Sullivan, the honorary secretary of Malaysia's National Art Gallery, had "scolded" Malaysian painter Khoo Sui Hoe, calling him a "naughty boy" for exhibiting his works in Singapore instead of Malaysia first. Sullivan then had insisted that Khoo send at least one of his paintings to Kuala Lumpur for the National Art Gallery's "possible acquisition" of it. The men who would later found Alpha deplored how Sullivan "lord[ed] over the art scene" and how most Malaysian and Singaporean artists seemed to "kowtow" to him readily. Lim remembers exhorting his artist friends at the time to "make your own galleries," asking them pointedly: "Why do you have to depend on these dictators?"[3]

Five years later, the founders of the Alpha Gallery established it as an independent artists' cooperative. The gallery was a retort to Sullivan and the free hand Kuala Lumpur had given him to determine what constituted Malaysian art and which artists and works should represent the new nation's cultural identity in the National Art Gallery's local and traveling exhibitions. Sullivan's "dictatorial" work, in effect, served Malaysian nation-building. Many artists of Malaysia and Singapore remember him as a "generous patron" and "promoter" of their art, possessing "enormous artistic intuition," but also acknowledge that he could be "dogmatic" and "explosive."[4] How the Australian had attained such influence may have

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[2] "New Art Gallery," *Straits Times*, 13 October 1971, 9; "Preview of Paintings," *New Nation*, 14 October 1971, 2; Ong Choo Suat, "Alpha Planned as Meeting Place," *New Nation*, 16 October 1971, 11.

[3] Seng Yu Jin and Shabbir Hussain Mustafa (eds.), *Suddenly Turning Visible: Art and Architecture in Southeast Asia, 1969-1989* (Singapore: National Art Gallery, 2019), 114-15; National Gallery Singapore, *Another Initial Impetus #0: Lim Chong Keat*, 17 November 2019, p. 14; Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "60 Years Australia in Malaysia, Chapter 4: A Vibrant Tradition of Artistic Exchange," https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/countries-economies-and-regions/60th-anniversary-australia-malaysia/60-years-australia-in-malaysia/chapter4-a-vibrant-tradition-of-artistic-exchange.html (accessed 5 May 2022).

[4] In 1963, Malaya (the federated states of the Malay peninsula) merged with the Republic of Singapore and the formerly British territories of Sabah and Sarawak in Borneo to form the Federation of Malaysia. Singapore would gain full independence from the Malaysian federation in 1965, but the

galled Alpha's founders, Lim especially. Apparently, Sullivan had talked up his stints as a radio news editor and public relations officer for Malaya's government to snag the job of press secretary to Malaya's prime minister in 1958. From that height, he parachuted into the post of honorary secretary of the National Art Gallery's working committee and landed the same position on its Board of Trustees when the gallery officially opened.[5] In any case, Sullivan's nation-building work reflected what art historians consider the "totalizing" cultural policies of authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia, policies that they designed to bend local artists, writers, and other culture-makers toward creating works that political elites expected could coalesce their population's diffuse nationalist sentiments into firm allegiance to the state.[6] In Sullivan, Alpha's founders saw a similar "dictatorial" streak. They opposed his attempt to press art that Khoo or anyone else produced toward the state's nation-building goals.

Thus, it was fitting that "naughty boy" Khoo, the cooperative's first manager-curator, was the one to tell reporters at the Alpha Gallery's inaugural show in 1971 that its goal was to spotlight Singaporean and Malaysian artists who had made a "complete breakaway from images which are normally used to define" either nation. He objected to rural, "touristic" images "like attap huts, padi fields, buffaloes [and] women in sarongs."[7] And, in later interviews, Khoo explained that the cooperative wanted the gallery to be a "space" for "bridging different cultures," for "locals to see works from other countries."[8] Nation-building simply was not on the agenda. Indeed, for the next decade and a half, Alpha would stage some eighty exhibitions of "aesthetic innovation[s]" from within Southeast Asia and beyond, from Japan, Israel, New Zealand, and more, many signaling resistance to the "modernizing drives" of states' nation-building cultural policies.[9]

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federation retained its name. Neil Manton, *The Arts of Independence: Frank Sullivan in Singapore and Malaysia* (Holt, A. C. T.: Hall Arts, 2008), 21-22, 25-26, 34, 36-37.

[5] Ibid., pp. 31, 33.

[6] Patrick D. Flores, "Curatorial Circulations in Southeast Asia," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 11, no. 5 (September/October 2012): 25-26.

[7] Ong, "Alpha Planned as Meeting Place," 11.

[8] National Gallery Singapore, *Another Initial Impetus #3: Khoo Sui Hoe*, 6 November 2020, p. 19.

[9] Maurizio Peleggi, "When art was political," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 50, no. 2 (May 2019): 561.

But, the cooperative's aspirations were not limited to countering the nation-building cultural projects of states like Malaysia and Singapore. This essay argues that the Alpha Gallery nurtured a transnational vision. Its surviving show catalogues, reviews of its exhibitions, and published interviews with its members reveal the cooperative's palpable, if vague, hopes of sparking an artistic renaissance in Southeast Asia. Alpha members would pursue these ambitions from the 1970s through the early 1980s as they curated and staged multiple exhibitions of Balinese folk art (specifically from the village of Penestanan), far and away the gallery's most frequently recurring theme. In Penestanan artists' paintings, the cooperative thought that it had found a pre-colonial and, therefore, intrinsically Southeast Asian aesthetic. Crucially, Alpha's leading lights were convinced that Bali's natural environment, presumed to be rich with primal creative energies, had inspired Penestanan art; and that promoting Penestanan art might somehow stimulate other intrinsically Southeast Asian art forms. In line with this vision of a broader artistic revival with Bali at its center, the cooperative even used its exhibitions to imply that Penestanan art was connected culturally to, and might be inspirational like, the art of the Bengali Renaissance, India's transformative cultural, intellectual, and political awakening between late 19th and early 20th centuries.

If well-intentioned, Alpha's transnational vision for Southeast Asian art also stemmed from the paternalism of its leading thinkers, more specifically their innate sympathy for racist European and American colonial discourses about civilizing the region's backward indigenous peoples. The cooperative's exhibition catalogues framed Penestanan painters as "primitive," "child-like," and "naïve," communicating that their art had to be intrinsically Southeast Asian, since it was supposedly untouched by the modern world.[10] Such descriptions were throwbacks to the West's colonial and "oriental imaginary," characterizing Southeast Asia's indigenous art forms as "ancient," "timeless," and "static" traditions that had fallen behind "Euro-American modernism."[11] By contrast, art scholars such as Nora Taylor and Stanley O'Connor maintain that the region's indigenous art forms are "living art," cultural production that creatively melds ongoing "lived experience" with local aesthetics and interpretations of history, debunking the facile binary of static Southeast Asian tradition

[10] RC-RM175: "Peasant Painters from Penestanan. An Exhibition by the young artists of Bali from the Lim Chong Keat Collection," National Museum Art Gallery presentation, 3-15 July 1979, National Gallery Singapore [hereafter NGS], Singapore.

[11] Nora Taylor, "Introduction: Who Speaks for Southeast Asian Art?," in *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology*, Nora Taylor and Boreth Ly (eds.) (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 2012), 3.

versus the innovative modernism of the West.[12] At any rate, the Alpha cooperative leaned hard into that binary without ever explicitly acknowledging the Western influences of their world view. It would portray its many exhibitions of abstract art, including the works of its own members, as cutting edge experiments in modernist expression.[13] On the other hand, Alpha members always presented their showcases of contemporary Penestanan paintings through a colonial lens, as a pre-modern art form arising from Bali's primordial creative forces.

As we shall see, these colonial attitudes came to shape the worldview of Alpha members because the former British colonies of Malaysia and Singapore chose to remain aligned with London and later, during the Vietnam War, tilted increasingly toward Washington. The broader region, too, mirrored this transition into the U.S. orbit.[14] The consequence was that Alpha's leading artists and thinkers, as elites with their own means or governmental support, received part or all of their higher education and specialist training at institutions in Britain and the United States. They returned to Southeast Asia as new purveyors of old but reinvigorated colonial discourses. It is likely that the civilizing mission which sprang from such colonial discourses inspired the cooperative's transnational vision for a regional artistic renaissance in the first place. Put another way, while Alpha rejected the state-led cultural policies that dovetailed with U.S. Cold War strategies for nation-building across the global South, the pro-U.S. trajectory of Southeast Asian statesmen nevertheless entwined the cooperative's transnational vision with the "oriental imaginary" of Euro-American colonialism.[15]

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[12] Ibid., pp. 3, 8. Here, Nora Taylor draws from Stanley J. O'Connor, "Humane Literacy and Southeast Asian Art," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 26, no. 1 (March 1995): 147-58. See also, John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998).

[13] Newspaper reviews of the Alpha Gallery's exhibitions, such as Ong Choo Suat's "Alpha Planned as Meeting Place," capture the cooperative's representation of its modern and abstract art shows as cutting edge works of art. See also, Violet Oon, "Artists to hold joint exhibition," *New Nation*, 12 May 1973, 11; Rachel Barnes, "Of Artists and their Aspirations: Review of Contemporaries '79," *Straits Times*, 22 September 1979, 3.

[14] Wen-Qing Ngoei, *Arc of Containment: Britain, the United States, and Anticommunism in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

[15] For discussions of how U.S. Cold War policy focused on nation-building in the global South, see Michael E. Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from Cold War to Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

The transnational visions of non-state actors such as the Alpha Gallery's artists and curators are no mere curiosity. Artists, writers, musicians, and other culture-makers are crucial to creating and sustaining nations as well as regional or colonial systems and imperial networks.[16] Nations and transnational orders do not arise from governmental fiats alone but gain coherence and become compelling via cultural production and the ideological work of imagining.[17] Furthermore, the peoples of plural societies like those of Southeast Asia historically have maintained or sought new local and transnational affiliations based on ethnicity, religion, or other categories, sometimes in opposition to the nation-state in which they reside.[18] Little wonder, then, that the authoritarian regimes of Southeast Asia were fixated with turning culture-makers, willing or not, into state actors of a kind. The culture-makers of Alpha, aiming to outflank the pervasive nation-building projects of their moment, sought to promote what they considered an intrinsic Southeast Asian aesthetic that transcended the modern nation-state and gestured at the region's cultural connections to other parts of the world.

It is especially significant that the Alpha cooperative undertook its transnational project in the 1970s, a time when the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), founded in 1967, had not embarked on cultural programs to forge a collective Southeast Asian identity. Only in 1978 did ASEAN establish the Committee on Culture and Information (COCI) to "promote effective cooperation in the fields of culture and information for the purpose of enhancing mutual understanding and solidarity among the peoples of ASEAN."[19] And, while ASEAN "solidarity" may connote a shared transnational identity, COCI's programs have to date routinely categorized Southeast Asian cultural

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[16] Apinan Poshyananda, "Positioning Contemporary Asian Art," *Art Journal* 59, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 12; Pamela Corey, "Metaphor as Method: Curating Regionalism in Mainland Southeast Asia," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 13, no. 2 (March/April 2014): 77-78.

[17] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006).

[18] See Joy Sales's article in this issue for a discussion of transnational activism in U.S.-based Filipinos and the historical roots of opposition to Philippine authoritarianism and U.S. imperialism in Southeast Asia. See also, Sunil Amrith, *Migration and Diaspora in Modern Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Wen-Qing Ngoei, "The United States and the 'Chinese Problem' of Southeast Asia," *Diplomatic History* 45, no. 2 (April 2021): 240-52.

[19] Katherine Fernandez, Nestor Jardin, and Bel Capul, *Bridging a Century: An Information Brochure on the ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information (ASEAN-COCI)* (Manila: National Commission for Culture and the Arts, Philippines/ ASEAN-COCI, 1999), unpaginated.

products—literary, dramatic, visual—within the bright lines of nation's geopolitical borders to ensure that each "national culture [is] represented equally." Unsurprisingly, this approach emphasizes regional diversity instead of fostering commonality.[20] So, if one considers regionalism by nature transnational, then ASEAN's regionalism is somewhat denatured. In fact, scholars acknowledge that ASEAN policies toward culture and COCI programs did not begin to feature "regionalist thinking" until the end of the 1980s and early 1990s.[21] As such, Alpha's transnational vision of Southeast Asia entered a relatively open field for imagining and producing knowledge of cultural connections within the region and beyond.

Recovering the Alpha cooperative's transnationalism also points up what scholars have shown is Southeast Asia's protean nature throughout history and the contribution of non-state actors to its contingent composition, dimensions, and affiliations.[22] This endeavor enriches the study of developments in Southeast Asia from the 1970s onward, a project that scholars concerned with ASEAN developments and the agendas and actions of statesmen presently dominate.[23] Yet, ASEAN was for decades comprised of only five members—

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[20] Manuel Enverga III, "Comparing ASEAN and the EU's implementation of cultural projects: a historical institutionalist analysis," *Asia Europe Journal* 16, no. 1 (March 2018): 66, 70; Sunitha Janamohanan, "ASEAN Culture Week: Issues in the Assessment of Regional Cultural Events," *Asia Pacific Journal of Arts and Cultural Management* 2, no. 2 (December 2004): 142-52. Nation-centric Committee on Culture and Information (COCI) projects include Jovita V. Castro (ed.), *Epics of the Philippines* (Manila: Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 1983) and Subagio Sastrowardoyo, Sapardi Djoko Damono, and A. Kasim Achmad (eds.), *Anthology of ASEAN Literatures: Pre-Islamic Literature of Indonesia* (Jakarta: ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, 1987). Prior to COCI's formation, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-sponsored art shows already followed this mode. See "The art of five nations shows that ASEAN is a reality," *Straits Times Annual*, 1 January 1973, 50-51; "ASEAN mobile art and photo shows for S'pore next week," *Straits Times*, 22 February 1974, 7.

[21] June Yap, "The Art of an ASEAN Consciousness," in *Cultural Connections Volume III: A Special Issue to Commemorate Singapore's Chairmanship of ASEAN 2018*, Thangamma Karthigesu, Tan Chui Hua, Tan Jia Ying, and Genevieve Lim (eds.) (Singapore: The Culture Academic of Singapore, 2018), 26-27; T. K. Sabapathy, *Writing the Modern: Selected Texts on Art and Art History in Singapore, Malaysia and Southeast Asia, 1973-2015* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2018), 15.

[22] Donald K. Emmerson, "'Southeast Asia': What's in a Name?" *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15, no. 1 (March 1984): 1-21; Vicente L. Rafael, "Regionalism, Area Studies, and the Accidents of Agency," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 4 (October 1999): 1208-20; Paul H. Kratoska, Remco Raben, Henk Schulte Nordholt (eds.), *Locating Southeast Asia: Geographies of Knowledge and Politics of Space* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005).

[23] Political scientists and international relations theorists have authored much of the insightful literature on this topic. See, for example, Alice Ba, *(Re)Negotiating East and Southeast Asia: Region, Regionalism, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Evelyn Goh, *The Struggle for Order: Hegemony, Hierarchy and Transition in Post-Cold War East Asia* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012); Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*

Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. The organization represented just a fraction of the region's countries, and the relations between these founding members were often fractious.[24] Furthermore, ASEAN's expansion in the 1990s to encompass the remainder of geographic Southeast Asia was not the only outcome that the region's peoples, particularly non-state actors, imagined. The Alpha cooperative's transnational vision underscores that one cannot reduce Southeast Asia's complex regional history to just the evolution of ASEAN and the mere policies of its statesmen, nor shoehorn it into a story fixated with the emergence of nation-states.

As this article has alluded to earlier, the Alpha Gallery arose from the particular conditions of Malaysia's and Singapore's comparatively tranquil societies and thriving economies, conditions resulting from the decisions of both countries' leaders to feed off Vietnam's tumult and plug their economies into the U.S.-led capitalist order. A combination of exports to American markets, U.S. investments in both countries, profitable military procurements contracts for the Vietnam War (in Singapore's case), and deepening trade ties with the West made Malaysia and Singapore by the late 1960s and early 1970s two of the most prosperous nations of the developing world.[25] This environment ensured that the pro-Western, English-speaking elites of Malaysia and Singapore could access, with some combination of talent, connections, and means, the Anglo-American networks of higher education and museums of fine art, rubbing shoulders with taste-makers and renowned thinkers or icons of the Western world's art scene.

This certainly was the trajectory of prominent Alpha members. Singaporean artist Choy Weng Yang, a founding member of Alpha, won a scholarship to study painting in London and, later on, a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) fellowship that facilitated his research at U.S. institutions like the Guggenheim, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Center

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(London: Routledge, 2001); Donald Weatherbee, *International Relations in Southeast Asia: The Struggle for Autonomy* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

[24] See Mattias Fibiger's article in this theme issue for an examination of how the Sino-Vietnam War affected intra-ASEAN relations and the overall coherence of ASEAN's foreign policy from the view of Indonesia.

[25] Wen-Qing Ngoei, "A Wide Anti-Communist Arc: Britain, ASEAN, and Nixon's Triangular Diplomacy," *Diplomatic History* 41, no. 5 (November 2017): 921; Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], "Malaysia Handbook," 1 January 1972, CIA Freedom of Information Act Reading Room, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79-00891A001100010001-0.pdf (accessed 5 May 2022).

for Advanced Visual Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).[26] Anthony Poon, Alpha's third manager-curator and from Singapore like Choy, had completed his further studies in fine art at several institutions in the United Kingdom in the 1960s and early 1970s.[27] Malaysian Lim Chong Keat also followed this path. Awed by his childhood encounter with the visionary designs of architect Frank Lloyd Wright thanks to his admittedly "privileged background," Lim first studied architecture at the University of Manchester. There, he wrote and spoke of modern architectural design for Malaya in regionalist terms, apparently an early manifestation of the transnational vision he would come to share with Alpha members.[28] He then secured a Harkness Fellowship for graduate studies at MIT. Lim traveled extensively in the United States, taking in the sights and sounds of New York City and Carnegie Hall, confidently "knock[ing] on doors" to speak with all manner of Americans, including Wright.[29]

Effectively insulated from the ravages of the Cold and Vietnam wars while riding high on their shockwaves, individuals like Choy, Poon, and Lim returned to work in Singapore suitably credentialed at the institutions of the old British Empire, the new American one, or both. In a society like Singapore's, where a mostly Anglicized political establishment dominated, well-connected because of international trade and diplomacy, Alpha's leading lights came to act as cultural elites and arbiters for local and regional art and design. (In the present day, Malaysian and Singaporean writers still lionize Lim as the designer of "landmark" and "heroic and powerful" buildings that pioneered modern architecture in their nations.[30]) By the beginning of the 1970s, Alpha's founders already

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[26] "Choy Weng Yang: One of the foremost abstract painters of post-independence Singapore," *Esplanade/ Off-Stage*, 12 October 2016, https://www.esplanade.com/offstage/arts/choy-weng-yang (accessed 5 May 2022).

[27] Yin Ker, "Anthony Poon," *Singapore Infopedia*, https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1356_2008-12-30.html (accessed 5 May 2022).

[28] National Gallery Singapore, *Another Initial Impetus #0: Lim Chong Keat*, pp. 1-2; Mark Crinson, "Singapore's Moment: Critical Regionalism, its Colonial Roots and Profound Aftermath," *Journal of Architecture* 13, no. 5 (2008): 592.

[29] National Gallery Singapore, *Another Initial Impetus #0: Lim Chong Keat*, pp. 1-2; Kara Baskin, "A Legacy of landmark buildings in Malaysia and Singapore: Lim Chong Keat, March '57," *MIT Technology Review*, 29 June 2021, https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/06/29/1025762/a-legacy-of-landmark-buildings-in-malaysia-and-singapore/ (accessed 5 May 2022).

[30] Jennifer Eveland, "Heroic and Powerful," *Skyline: Insights into planning spaces around us* [publication of the Urban Renewal Authority of Singapore], Issue 09 (2008): 41-44; Baskin, "A Legacy of landmark buildings in Malaysia and Singapore."

possessed the requisite contacts, sponsors, and renown to make a gallery after their own hearts, to stage art shows featuring famed and emerging artists from the world over, and to shine a light on their transnational vision for Southeast Asian art. The cooperative had sufficient pull to see that Mrs. S. Rajaratnam, wife of Singapore's minister of culture, graced the gallery's inaugural exhibition in 1971, an event that Khoo described as a "sweet and unforgettable evening" of "quality works" of art, champagne, and "colorful balloons."[31] Perhaps most important of all, the gallery had in Lim a booster of rare and raw magnetism. One of the journalists who covered many of Alpha's shows in the 1970s fondly recalls Lim's "energy and dynamism," confiding that "all of the women of my generation were lusting after him" and that "he still looks 'lust-able,' even in his nineties!"[32]

Importantly, the origins of Alpha's transnational vision stem from the strengthening of U.S. economic, security, and cultural ties to Malaysia, Singapore, and other states of ASEAN from the 1960s into the 1970s. During this period, Alpha's leading thinkers and other regional elites like them coursed increasingly through the cultural circuits of Anglo-American empire and the Western-dominated art scene. These processes, inadvertently or otherwise, seem to have led prominent Alpha members to internalize (or entrench their pre-existing) colonial perspectives of Southeast Asia. For, like the colonial authorities of Southeast Asia in the 19th and early 20th Centuries, the Alpha cooperative also believed that one could find an intrinsic and authentic Southeast Asian art form in the supposedly primitive folk traditions of the region and the cultural products of its rural peoples. This attitude was a variation on the themes of, for example, French colonial discourses on Cambodia that had inspired French scholars to study and partially restore the Angkor ruins and then foist them upon Cambodians as the ancient and purportedly authentic symbol of Khmer culture that France had reclaimed from the jungles.[34]

For his part, Lim Chong Keat zeroed in on a group of painters in Penestanan, Bali. In interviews, he has spoken of visiting Bali in the 1960s, his transformative encounter there

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[31] National Gallery Singapore, *Another Initial Impetus #3: Session 3: Khoo Sui Hoe*, p. 19.

[32] National Gallery Singapore, *Another Initial Impetus #1: Session 1: Violet Oon*, 29 February 2020, p. 8.

[34] For examples of how European rulers portrayed their discovery of ancient sites like Angkor Wat and Borobudur as a service to the colonized, see Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007); John Miksic, *Borobudur: Golden Tales of the Buddhas* (Berkeley, CA and Singapore: Periplus Editions, 1990).

with the Penestanan painters, and his enthusiasm for what he described as their "intrinsic naivete."[35] To his citified eyes, the Balinese villagers appeared to be dwelling in, and putting to canvas, a pristine state of nature, a Southeast Asian art form that had escaped colonialism and the modern nation-building imperatives of the day. He remembers feeling "inevitably" called, there and then, to "promote their wonderful depictions of their culture and environment."[36] Lim would dub them "peasant painters" to capture what he considered the purity of their art, indulging his own nostalgic yearning for some Southeast Asian pastoral already lost to briskly industrializing countries like Singapore.[37] He has claimed that Alpha staged yearly shows of Penestanan art during the 1970s.[38] Alpha would go on to promote its discovery of the "peasant painters" in patronizing tones reminiscent of how colonial authorities once crowed that their civilizing mission had rescued, preserved, and protected their unsophisticated subjects' true cultural heritage on their behalf.

Alpha's earliest exhibition of Penestanan art opened just weeks after its inaugural show, running from December 1971 through early January 1972.[39] Lim had selected all the Penestanan paintings that he thought the debut must feature. Khoo told the local news of the artists' basic goodness of heart. "Each artist doesn't believe in being better than his neighbor," he explained. "They paint, as they work, and socialize, collectively." In tune with Lim, Khoo emphasized the unadulterated quality of Penestanan art, stating that the painters were "completely untrained," that their paintings were created for their "own sake" and concerned with only the simplest things, both mundane and sacred—"rice-planting, religious festivals, and the worship of their gods."[40] Curiously, however, Khoo had lauded the

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[35] Seng and Mustafa (eds.), *Suddenly Turning Visible*, pp. 115-16; RC-RM175: "Peasant Painters from Penestanan."

[36] Seng and Mustafa (eds.), *Suddenly Turning Visible*, pp. 115-16.

[37] RC-RM175: "Peasant Painters from Penestanan."

[38] To be sure, surviving Alpha Gallery exhibition catalogues and news reports indicate there were at least six Penestanan shows that the cooperative organized between 1971 and 1977, and at least three other Penestanan shows that Lim organized alone or with Alpha members for other galleries or museums in Singapore and Malaysia in 1976, 1979, and from the end of 1983 through early 1984. One can find Lim Chong Keat's claim about annual Penestanan shows in Lim Chong Keat, *Pelukis Desa Dari Penestanan Ubud Bali: Lukisan Dari Himpunan Datuk Lim Chong Keat* [*Peasant Painters of Penestana, Ubud, Bali: The Collection of Datuk Lim Chong Keat*] (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1983), unpaginated.

[39] "Bali Art Show," *New Nation*, 6 December 1971, 2.

[40] Ong Choo Suat, "Excellent Shows," *New Nation*, 11 December 1971, 2.

Singaporean and Malaysian artists at Alpha's inaugural show for eliminating "padi fields" and "buffaloes" from their depictions of their home countries.[41] He likely found such images inaccurate or unflattering for rapidly industrializing nations, but clearly thought similar representations of Penestanan were complimentary. Indeed, Khoo like Lim seemed envious of Bali for remaining—or supposedly remaining—unspoiled by modernity (unlike Singapore), and implied that the Penestanan painters drew their artistic abilities unmediated from the very forces of nature.

Once the cooperative had committed to this narrative about the Penestanan painters, it seems that elaborating and upholding it became all important. Soon after the Penestanan debut show, the gallery exhibited the work of Dutch artist Arie Smit, a known mentor of the Penestanan painters, yet made zero mention of that relationship in its catalogue. Instead, the catalogue highlighted Smit's belief that Bali abounded with wild, creative energy. In Smit's words, Bali's "soil is of an excessive fertility, fauna and floral growth is abundant"; its "sky [is] . . . peopled by refined creatures, the sea [surrounding it] a menace"; even "the light is riotous." For Smit, this savage land ensured "peasants are born painters, dancers or musicians."[42] Alpha's focus on Smit's rendition of Bali, omitting that he had trained the Penestanan painters, helped to validate the cooperative's portrayal of the "peasant painters" as instinctive artists who were not constitutive of modern and international encounters.

To legitimate its narrative about Bali's primordial vitality, the Alpha cooperative also tried to connect the Penestanan aesthetic to the Bengali Art Renaissance, an effort to borrow from the latter's gravitas and reputation. In April 1972, right after its Smit showcase, Alpha staged an exhibition of Jamini Roy's paintings. The cooperative drew these compositions from the collections of former British civil servant Austin Coates, Roy's own studio in Calcutta (now Kolkata), and other collections in the United Kingdom. Alpha's publicity materials, including an introduction that Coates penned, called Roy "the Indian maestro." In turn, one Singapore newspaper highlighted Roy's historically and culturally significant role in pioneering modern, "intrinsically" Indian art that "ow[ed] nothing to the West."[43]

For the Alpha Gallery, only six months old at the time, showcasing Jamini Roy's

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[41] Ong, "Alpha Planned as Meeting Place," 11.

[42] Paintings by Arie Smit, 11-22 February 1972, Alpha Gallery Exhibitions: ephemera, October 1971-November 1986, National Library Board, Singapore.

[43] Violet Oon, "Show with Significance," *New Nation*, 29 April 1972, 10.

work was truly significant. His art was most assuredly a critical part of the Bengali Art Renaissance. As Alpha's exhibition brochure and scholars have pointed out, Roy had eschewed Western methods to ensure that his portrayals of Indian life and identity would not be mediated through the lenses and methods of Western colonial culture and its conceptions of modernity.[44] This approach was typical across formally and informally colonized Asia from the late 1800s through the next century. The vanguards of nationalist causes in the wider region were concerned that artists working with the "colonizer's forms" might inadvertently express themselves in the "colonizer's terms" and "implicitly, if not explicitly, ally [their work] with the colonial ruler."[45] Scholars contend that Roy successfully escaped the Western medium as a consequence of his adopting the aesthetic traditions of *patuas,* the indigenous, rural Bengali artists whose signature works were scroll paintings that drew from "traditional legends and chant ballads." Roy was convinced that the *patua* aesthetic possessed a primitivism "untainted by colonial culture." He and the pioneers of the Bengali Renaissance like Rabindranath and Abanindranath Tagore shared this view; they all sought "primeval source[s] of inspiration" in folk art, hoping to use the literary and artistic traditions of the Indian village which they regarded as the "antithesis of the colonial city" to mount "cultural critiques of imperialism." Roy even called himself a *patua* to accentuate his anti-colonial position in the decades en route to Britain's withdrawal from India.[46]

Additionally, Roy's paintings in the *patua* style, many of which featured in Alpha's exhibition, defied what he perceived as "elite culture" and its tendency to inflate the monetary value of so-called high art. He believed this practice had put such art beyond the eyes and enjoyment of "ordinary people," distorting the ways that art and artists could emerge to represent national culture. To oppose this agenda, Roy doggedly depicted mythic subjects and Indian "folk culture and tribal women" instead of well-known figures of Indian history and contemporary affairs. Moreover, he intended non-elites in India to be able to own

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[44] RC-M16-LCK1-15: "Jamini Roy—The Indian Maestro," Alpha Gallery of Singapore presentation, 30 April-10 May 1972, NGS.

[45] Clark, *Modern Asian Art,* p. 242.

[46] Jyoti, "Toward Blurring the Boundaries in Anthropology: Reading Jamini Roy Today," in *Intersections of Contemporary Art, Anthropology and Art History in South Asia: Decoding Visual Worlds,* Sasanka Perera and Dev Nath Pathak (eds.) (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 186-191, 198. See also, Partha Mitter, "Jamini Roy: Negotiating the Global from a Local Perspective," in *Art/Histories in Transcultural Dynamics: Narratives, Concepts, and Practices at Work, 20th and 21st Centuries,* Pauline Bachmann, Melanie Klein, Tomoko Mamine, and Georg Vasold (eds.) (Paderborn, Germany: Fink Verlag, 2017), 195-205.

his paintings, embarking on the mass production of his works and selling them cheaply like local *patuas* did their paintings. Roy also had no quarrel with artists who copied his style and even allowed them to use his signature on their paintings, which confused and irritated art experts since Roy did not sign even his own work consistently. Evidently, he sought to collapse the distinction between high and low art, to erase the boundary that divided the culture of the self-styled elite (and moneyed) class from the popular and accessible. In this endeavor, however, he was not entirely successful since experts continue to authenticate his original works and designate them as high art, while deploring his mimics and the derivative paintings he signed.[47] Nonetheless, it is clear that in adopting the *patua* style and attempting to foil elite agendas, Roy frustrated art experts and critics. If self-appointed political and cultural elites wished to co-opt his work into a grand narrative of the nation, he made it very inconvenient for them to do so to say the least.

The Alpha cooperative appeared to embrace all this about Roy. Its exhibition catalogue highlighted how Roy's attention to the "humble" *patua* style drew from a tradition long "ignored by the intelligentsia and despised by the art world." It noted, too, that Roy's dedication to this "inherited craft" had excited "furious controversy in his own country," which saw his annual exhibitions in Calcutta in the 1940s met with "pages of praise and abuse" in the newspapers.[48] Alpha members also conscientiously steered media coverage of the Roy exhibition toward these themes, ensuring that the newspapers' portrait of "one of Asia's foremost" painters was inseparable from his being "one of the most controversial artists in India for many years."[49]

It seems Alpha staged the Roy exhibition to demonstrate that it pursued cultural goals parallel to those that this towing figure espoused. Roy had opposed emphatically the ways that political and cultural elites sought to co-opt his work for the shaping of India's national identity. He once had refused an invitation from Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (1947-1964) to receive an award in New Delhi. (Then again, Roy passed away a week before the Alpha exhibition and Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi proceeded to name him a

[47] Jyoti, "Toward Blurring the Boundaries in Anthropology," pp. 189, 198-199.

[48] RC-M16-LCK1-15: "Jamini Roy—The Indian Maestro"; Oon, "Show with Significance," 10.

[49] Oon, "Show with Significance," 10.

"national artist.")[50] All the same, the Alpha cooperative must have perceived in Roy's cause something like its own resistance to Sullivan and the nation-building cultural policies gathering momentum in Malaysia, Singapore, and other ASEAN countries. And, in Roy's remaking himself as a *patua*, the cooperative likely saw the legitimation of its own project to promote Penestanan art. Indeed, "peasant painters"—Lim's term for the Penestanan artists—was the exact phrase that Alpha redeployed to describe the *patuas* in its Jamini Roy catalogue.[51] Here, then, was the cooperative's bald attempt to equate the Penestanan painters to the *patuas* of Bengal, to assert that both shared the quality of being primeval, untainted by colonialism, an intrinsic aesthetic of the indigenous.

Tapping the rich traditions and history of the Bengali Renaissance signaled the Alpha cooperative's grander ambitions. More than a quibble with Sullivan and nation-building cultural policies, Alpha's members may have nurtured aspirations, albeit inchoate and unfeasible, for their "peasant painters" exhibitions to do for Southeast Asia what Roy was understood to have done for India—catalyze an artistic renaissance. Why else would the cooperative stage so many Penestanan shows, some of them beyond Singapore? Why would it continually promulgate the value of this purportedly primitive aesthetic, if not to somehow coax into reality a quickening of other intrinsically Southeast Asian art forms across the region?

Indeed, when someone asked Lim to reflect on his abiding interest in Penestanan, he insisted that Bali "was the obvious center of Southeast Asia," home to a "living culture."[52] He did not mean the art-historical concept of "living art" that recognized Southeast Asian folk artists were situated firmly in the present and were bringing innovations to their indigenous culture so as to capture new experiences. Rather, Lim and his colleagues regularly emphasized the "primitive appeal" of Penestanan art, presumably issuing from the "nourishment and energy of [the] environment" in Bali.[53] By this logic, Lim probably imagined Bali's creative energies radiating outward in some vague way to stimulate the wider

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[50] Indranil Banerjie, "Jamini Roy: The 'national artist' who produced timeless works of art," *India Today*, May 31, 1987, https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/society-the-arts/story/19870531-jamini-roy-the-national-artist-who-produced-timeless-works-of-art-798877-1987-05-31.

[51] RC-M16-LCK1-15: "Jamini Roy—The Indian Maestro."

[52] Quoted in Seng and Mustafa (eds.), *Suddenly Turning Visible*, pp. 115-16.

[53] RC-RM175: "Peasant Painters from Penestanan"; RC-M16-LCK1-24: "Peasant Painters from Bali," Alpha Gallery of Singapore presentation, 1-11 March 1974, NGS.

region. He certainly had gestured at this vision elsewhere, emphasizing in one Penestanan art show brochure that his close friend "Bucky-Fuller"—the storied U.S. thinker, architect, and inventor R. Buckminster Fuller—had visited Bali with him and affirmed that Penestanan's conditions were "eternally regenerative." It was with Fuller's particular "phraseology" (Lim's word) in mind that Lim, a self-confessed "Buckian," asserted that the "Peasant Painters . . . exemplify the best in folk art and are an inspiration to the rest of us in Asia and the world."[54] If presumptuous and unsystematic, Alpha's vision appeared to have transnational dimensions, aspiring to map new cartographies beyond the frameworks of elite nation-builders and modern nation-states, to electrify circuits of art and culture in Southeast Asia, if not beyond the region.

That said, Alpha's vision contained a conspicuous paternalism, explicit in Lim's insistence that Bali hosted a "living culture" within which the "peasant painters" of Penestanan produced their "child-like" art. Lim even seemed to think that Alpha must help the Balinese promote their culture since the artists were too "naïve" and "primitive" to do this on their own. The colonial provenance of these perspectives is unmistakable. When the Dutch colonial government incorporated Bali into the Netherlands East Indies in the early 1900s, similar orientalist anthropological and cultural depictions of Bali were already in circulation, portraying the island as a "'living museum' of the Hindu-Javanese civilization" that had survived the advent of Islam. Dutch authorities then had embarked on what they considered an "enlightened" policy to "rescue" Balinese culture from the "onslaught of modernization," resolving to tutor the island's inhabitants in "how to remain authentically Balinese." From the 1920s, Dutch authorities also began promoting Bali as a tourist destination, a move that, thanks to pleasure-seekers' film, photograph, and written portrayals of Bali's supposedly "traditional culture insulated from the modern world," led to it becoming known as the "Island of the Gods" thereafter. Consequently, when the Suharto government planned to "launch mass tourism on Bali" in the 1970s at the recommendation of the World Bank, many Western observers could not help but insist that the "vulgarity or commercialization" of tourism would pollute the purportedly undisturbed Balinese traditions.[55] The colonial view that the people of Bali were essentially living relics unaltered

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[54] Lim, *Pelukis Desa Dari Penestanan Ubud Bali,* unpaginated*;* National Gallery Singapore, *Another Initial Impetus #0: Lim Chong Keat*, pp. 15, 17.

[55] Michel Picard, "Cultural Heritage and Tourist Capital: Cultural Tourism in Bali," in *International Tourism: Identity and Change*, Marie-Francoise Lanfant, John B. Allcock, and Edward M. Bruner (eds.) (London: SAGE Publications, 1995), 44, 46, 48, 66. See also, Michel Picard, "Balinese

by time was alive and well in the Alpha cooperative's exhibition catalogues and comments to the press, and in their likening of the Penestanan artists to "children" innocent of the march of civilization.[56]

Of course, historians have shown that so-called "traditional" Balinese art is not static and that Balinese artists have always pursued innovations. During the first half of the 20th Century, Balinese eagerly took on techniques and advice from European artists such as Walter Spies and Rudolf Bonnet, who had ventured to live in Indonesia. For their part, Spies and Bonnet seemed to care deeply for Balinese art and genuinely wished to help locals preserve their culture. So they strove to select, nurture, and impart new skills to worthy Balinese artists. These activities evolved into the successful promotion, sale, and exhibition of "traditional" Balinese art worldwide.[57] (Bonnet would also invite Arie Smit to join him.) Yet one cannot deny the paternalism in Spies's and Bonnet's efforts. Though without obvious malice, they were self-appointed gatekeepers for what constituted quality and authenticity, selecting which artworks best represented "traditional" (code for pre-modern) Balinese culture fit for the eyes and collections of the West. In its spirit, this paternalism mirrored Dutch authorities' plans to teach Balinese to remain "authentic" and the superior attitudes of other colonial administrators toward Southeast Asia's indigenous cultures.

The Alpha cooperative's paternalistic approach to the Penestanan artists bears more than a passing resemblance to the actions and agendas of Spies and Bonnet, not to mention Frank Sullivan's service to the National Art Gallery. As Lim and Choy would clarify in one exhibition catalogue many years after Lim had introduced the "peasant painters" to Singapore, Penestanan art was neither "typical" of, nor "fit" into, the "traditional Balinese art form" that was "pervasive" in the island.[58] There was no obvious compulsion for this admission, a Freudian slip that evaded the notice of slapdash editors. More to the point, the cooperative had selected for nurturing and promotion a minority artistic style that, unlike the

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Identity as Tourist Attraction: From 'Cultural Tourism' (*pariwisata budaya*) to 'Bali erect' (*ajeg Bali*)," *Tourist Studies* 8, no. 2 (August 2008): 155-73; Adrian Vickers (ed.), *Being Modern in Bali: Image and Change* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies Monograph 43, 1996); Adrian Vickers, *Bali: A Paradise Created* (Berkeley, CA and Singapore: Periplus Editions, 1989).

[56] RC-M16-LCK1-24: "Peasant Painters from Bali"; Gene Teo, "Peasant painters are back again: a second look at artistic culture from Bali," *New Nation*, 2 March 1974, 9.

[57] Adrian Vickers, "Creating Heritage in Ubud, Bali," *Wacana* 20, no. 2 (2019): 250-65.

[58] RC-RM175: "Peasant Painters from Penestanan."

patuas of Bengal, was not even representative of its home province. Rather, the Penestanan style had emerged largely due to the interventions of Arie Smit. Per the "interesting origin" story that Alpha members and Smit himself readily shared with the press, Smit had lived near Penestanan and "coaxed the young lads" of the village, aged between "12 and 16," to "try painting," which quickly won him a "number of proteges" whom he called the "Young Artists." Dimly aware that the "coax[ing]" of "young lads" came across poorly, Smit professed to have "never interfered in the subject matter" that the artists chose to paint and merely "encouraged them to express themselves freely."[59]

However, only whisper-thin lines separated the acts of encouragement, coaxing, and interference. The Museum Puri Lukisan of Ubud, Bali that Ubud royalty co-founded with Bonnet and Spies notes that Smit definitely "taught technique" to the "Young Artists," expressing no qualms that locals ever learned artistic methods from foreigners.[60] But, Lim has maintained a different story. When Smit passed away in 2016, Lim tried to burnish his legacy and obscure Smit's narrative about cajoling the Penestanan villagers specifically into the art of painting; he insisted that Penestanan painting was pure and that Smit "did not impose his western aesthetics on his 'wards'."[61]

Lim's 21st Century obituary for Smit was entirely consistent with the gallery's representation of Penestanan paintings throughout the 1970s. Alpha's catalogues for the "peasant painters" and the cooperative's remarks to the press come across like the irony-free, racist condescension of (neo)colonial rulers; of urban elites gracelessly talking up their "little brothers" from rural Bali. The cooperative's 1974 catalogue for a Penestanan show, for example, waxed lyrical about the "child-like feeling" of the paintings.[62] Speaking to a journalist to promote this show, Lim rehashed popular Western laments that Bali's booming tourist industry threatened to undermine the "freshness" of indigenous art due to "bulk

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[59] Teo, "Peasant painters are back again," 9.

[60] "Young Artist School of Painting," *Museum Puri Lukisan*, https://museumpurilukisan.com/museum-collection/young-artist-painting/ (accessed 1 June 2021); The museum has begun upgrading its page and moved to a new website (https://www.purilukisanmuseum.com/index.html) that is still under construction at the time of this writing.

[61] "Arie Smit | Obituary," Sutra Foundation, 1 April 2016, https://www.sutrafoundation.org.my/arie-smit-obituary/ (accessed 29 May 2022).

[62] RC-M16-LCK1-24: "Peasant Painters from Bali."

orders" for paintings.[63] Did he forget that Jamini Roy had made mass production his *modus operandi*? Lim's paternalism clearly had no room for the Penestanan artists to espouse parallel goals or sophisticated rationales for capitalizing upon tourist demand for their artwork. Indeed, he praised the "twin villages" of Penestanan Kadja and Penestanan Kelod for remaining "unspoiled" and holding "firmly" to a style "distinctive" of an "agricultural community."[64] Though Lim did not use the phrase "living museum," ideas to that effect had rolled trippingly off his tongue.

In 1975, when Alpha organized two Penestanan exhibitions, one a solo show for painter I Ketut Tagen, the press was already well-acquainted enough with Penestanan art to point out that Tagen's work was "child-like in quality." Tagen, when interviewed, was mostly on message, telling the reporter that his particular style (he painted figures without facial features) had developed when he and other painters were "children." Then again, Tagen also implied that Arie Smit had played a critical role and it was Smit's "praise" that had directed his youthful artistic choices.[65] Tagen would make a habit of deviating from Alpha's script. He was no greenhorn, no simple child. His work had toured the United States a few times with Smit's help in the decade before the Alpha Gallery even exhibited his paintings in Singapore.[67] For the moment, though, Alpha's manager-curator Anthony Poon's comments rounded off the news article with familiar themes, stating that Tagen's artwork was "rather crude" but "nonetheless possess[ed] strength," as though his paintings crackled with some raw power.[68]

Not all local art critics went along as easily with the Alpha cooperative's condescending portrayal of the Penestanan artists. When it staged an exhibition for several Penestanan painters (including Tagen) in 1976, one writer at first reiterated the Alpha Gallery's narrative, extolling the artists' "naïve" style and "freshness of approach" and their "joyful" depictions of the "idyllic" life of "dances, cock-fights, ceremonies, and harvests." But the article concluded with a striking observation that Tagen's work clearly had evolved

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[63] Teo, "Peasant painters are back again," 9.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Jennifer Schoon, "The Faceless Figures of Ketut Tagen," *New Nation*, 11 October 1975, 8.

[67] Agung Rai Fine Art Gallery, https://www.agungraigallery.com/bali-painting-artists/i-ketut-tagen/ (accessed 5 May 2022).

[68] Schoon, "The Faceless Figures of Ketut Tagen," 8.

and now demonstrated a "highly-sophisticated" portrayal of his subjects, one of them "as if [seen] from the window of a plane." "Perhaps it is at this point," the critic suggested, "that the label 'naïve' no longer applies."[69] With this opinion in the public eye, could the Alpha cooperative still maintain its characterizations of the Penestanan artists?

In fact, Alpha members' denial of Penestanan's coevalness never wavered. They gamely located other evidence to prove that the Penestanan painters did not live in modern times. When Lim and Choy elected in 1979 to organize a Penestanan art show at the National Museum of Singapore, the exhibition's "Notes on the Artists" stated that one could only "approximate" the "ages of the artists." The "Notes" went on to explain that the "concept of time in Bali is relative," making the artists' "own information often inconsistent and unreliable."[70] Here, again, was the mindset of the colonialist, justifying the subjugation of "others" based on claims of their inherent backwardness, on their having to be dragged (benevolently) into the modern world, without compromising their prelapsarian innocence if possible. It seems that Lim and Choy, as urban elites, had learned little from Jamini Roy's deliberate use of village primitivism to critique the colonial system that the city embodied. Instead, these Alpha founders casually denigrated the Penestanan painters' supposed primitivism, affirming by implication that the city and its dwellers were more advanced and civilized on account of their accurate, modern perceptions of time.

Even so, by the time Lim and Choy staged the Penestanan show for the National Museum, Tagen had already begun destabilizing the Alpha Gallery's depiction of Penestanan. In the Alpha cooperative's second solo show for Tagen in 1977, its slim exhibition catalogue carried Lim's long and meandering write-up (he had penned it two years earlier, it stated) that betrayed a desire to reinforce Alpha's Penestanan narrative, while curiously conceding that Smit in fact had played a decisive part in Tagen's choice to paint figures without faces. Lim kicked off his piece with his "great revelation" upon first meeting the Penestanan painters in the 1960s—their "true child art with all its innocence" had left him in awe. He acknowledged, though, that the best of the painters now had "capitalize[d] on their sales" and earned enough to become elites in their community. They were not children

[69] T. T. H., "Naïve art of the Balinese," *New Nation*, 29 October 1976, 12.

[70] RC-RM175: "Peasant Painters from Penestanan."

anymore, Lim noted, but had become "mature primitive painters," a contrived, ham-fisted effort to reimpose the qualities of "naïve" and "child-like" upon them.[71]

On Tagen specifically, Lim echoed Poon, calling attention to the painter's "crude and compelling strength." Then, in offering more opinions of Tagen—he wrote that the artist was "brash" and "almost arrogant"—Lim returned to his belief that the Penestanan painters lived in a kind of Eden. He first expressed relief that Tagen was "apparently uncontaminated" after his travels to exhibit his work in Singapore and Malaysia, but then stated that he could not be sure of this. His paternalism soon morphed into commingled anxiety and sadness that the "impact of external exposure must be there subconsciously," that Tagen's precious innocence surely was now lost. Lim then proceeded to share an anecdote about how he once "confronted" Tagen about "allow[ing] his name to be used by" another Balinese painter who was mimicking his works. (In Lim's mind, the Jamini Roy show might as well never have happened.) Lim reported that his "accusation[s]" "finally" pushed Tagen to an admission, but there is no proof that the artist was contrite. Lim then stated his frustration with how "this kind of thing apparently does continue to happen." He could conclude only that "we"—presumably all enlightened patrons of such "naïve" artists—must "encourage them to arrive at a level of integrity which becomes meaningful to them."[72] Alpha, in other words, must civilize them.

So, the Alpha cooperative never did elude the long shadow that Frank Sullivan (or, the "dictator" its founders had imagined him to be) had cast. As Khoo had been a "naughty boy" according to Sullivan, so Tagen now appeared a rebellious child in Lim's eyes. Furthermore, Lim's condescending attitude toward Tagen echoed the paternalism he saw in Sullivan's treatment of Khoo. Just like Sullivan, Lim behaved like an overbearing father figure who expected the "kowtowing" of his ward. Indeed, Tagen's subtle defiance may have remained a sore point for Lim. When Lim decided in 2011 to exhibit his private collection of Tagen's paintings in Penang, Malaysia, the catalogue simply reproduced in full Lim's rambling write-up for Tagen's 1977 show, including his original complaint that Tagen's behavior showed how artistic "integrity" was "alien to their [Penestanan] way of

[71] RC-RM276: "Tagen of Penestanan: An exhibition of recent paintings by I Ketut Tagen of Penestanan, Bali," Alpha Gallery Singapore presentation, 1977, NGS.

[72] Ibid.

life." Lim would share no new thoughts on the matter, despite the passage of some thirty-odd years, not even an update about whether Tagen had ever developed any "integrity."[73]

Certainly, there is an important distinction between Sullivan and Alpha. Sullivan had positioned himself as a cultural gatekeeper and tastemaker of art that he judged intrinsically representative of just the Malaysian nation. In contrast, the cooperative strove to pivot away from nation-building projects and pursued a transnational vision with the "peasant painters" at its core. It bears repeating that underpinning Alpha's transnational vision was the speculative belief that promoting Penestanan art might rouse other intrinsically Southeast Asian arts, that Penestanan art possessed this generative power because (as Alpha contended) it had originated in the bounteous natural environment of Bali and, furthermore, shared cultural connections (so Alpha implied) with the primitivist *patua* paintings of Jamini Roy that had galvanized the Bengali Art Renaissance. With this heady glimpse of a regional artistic awakening, Alpha operated like a would-be visionary for arts in wider Southeast Asia.

Yet, Alpha's transnational vision remained nebulous. Beyond strenuously gesturing at the prospect of Penestanan's creative forces diffusing outward, the cooperative offered little insight into what it really meant to invigorate intrinsically Southeast Asian art elsewhere in the region, apart from implying vaguely that primitive artistic traditions might be the connective tissue of whatever pre-colonial Southeast Asian cultures presently slumbered under layers of the region's modern encounters. Moreover, Khoo already had disavowed rural images with respect to representing the cultural character of Malaysia and Singapore, the home countries of Alpha's members, making it unclear what primitive forces Alpha expected Penestanan's art to awaken in either nation. Notably, the cooperative also provided no specifics for operationalizing its aspirations. Staging multiple exhibitions at the Alpha Gallery, annually through the 1970s according to Lim, shining a spotlight on the "living culture" at the "obvious center" of Southeast Asia, was not a structured program for the transnational quickening of other intrinsic artistic traditions.

Yet, this unstructured transnational vision exhibited a life of its own, leading to yet more Penestanan shows beyond the confines of the Alpha Gallery. Lim had by the middle of the 1970s started promoting the "peasant painters" on his own and outside of Singapore. In November 1976, his entire collection of 83 Penestanan paintings went on display in the

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[73] Recent Paintings by I Ketut Tagen of Penestanan, Bali, 23 December 2011–20 January 2012, Alpha Utara Gallery, https://www.my-obe.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Brochure-Tagen.pdf (accessed 5 May 2022).

Penang Museum on Penang Island in Malaysia. In 1979, he and Choy staged a Penestanan exhibition at the National Museum of Singapore. From the end of 1983 through early 1984, Lim also facilitated a major show of Penestanan artworks at the Malaysian National Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur.[74]

Evidence is scant, though, for what cultural impact the efforts of Lim and the Alpha cooperative had upon other folk traditions in the region. The mass production of "traditional" cultural products in Southeast Asia owes more to the steady growth of tourism, which Lim realized by the mid-1970s that the Penestanan painters knew how to navigate effectively. No doubt, the work of the Penestanan painters has remained popular in and beyond Southeast Asia, for which the Alpha Gallery's exhibitions in the 1970s are partly responsible. But credit also must go to Arie Smit, the international interest in Balinese culture that Walter Spies and Rudolf Bonnet had stoked in the past, and the enduring orientalist fascination of tourists and collectors with the so-called "Island of the Gods."

Importantly, Lim and the Alpha Gallery appeared to retreat from their transnational vision as the 1980s progressed. For all Lim's talk about "making your own galleries," he ultimately organized Penestanan exhibitions at the state-run galleries of Singapore and Malaysia even while Alpha remained open. Furthermore, the National Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur was suffused with the history of Sullivan's playing arbiter of Malaysian art; Sullivan's imperious behavior had stirred the cooperative into existence in the first place. But Frank Sullivan had not worked for the National Art Gallery since 1971. And perhaps, now that Lim's pet project, the "peasant painters," was welcome in the Malaysian capital, he believed that he finally had arrived and was a prophet with honor in his home country at last.

Furthermore, the Penestanan show at the National Art Gallery would enjoy the highest of production values. Whereas Alpha's exhibition catalogues always had been slender, characteristic of an independent outfit, the National Art Gallery's catalogue for the 1983-1984 Penestanan exhibition came to more than a hundred pages, filled with glossy photographs of the artists and their works as well as Lim's and Smit's essays which echoed their older pieces and interviews.[75] Interestingly, it was around this time that Lim seemed to drift away from Alpha Gallery activities. Along with his workload as a well-respected architect, he had new responsibilities—the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies at the

[74] Lim, *Pelukis Desa Dari Penestanan Ubud Bali*, unpaginated.

[75] Lim, *Pelukis Desa Dari Penestanan Ubud Bali*, unpaginated.

National University of Singapore had invited him to set up and lead its Cultural Research Program to study and gather material about indigenous architecture in the region.[76] The Alpha cooperative's focus on transnationalism likewise ebbed during these years. The Penestanan painters did not make another appearance at the Alpha Gallery and the cooperative began to concentrate increasingly on exhibiting Malaysian and Singaporean aesthetic experiments in modernism. In 1986, a prominent local art historian declared optimistically that Alpha's shows proved that "modernism is well and alive in Singapore."[77] The gallery would close permanently two years later.

The Alpha Gallery's vision, though unfulfilled and fraught with its members' paternalism, is nevertheless significant to the history of Southeast Asia as region. Compared with ASEAN's narrow focus on nation-centric arts and culture and its hollow approach to Southeast Asian cultural "solidarity," Alpha's speculative transnationalism was decidedly substantive. Members of the cooperative staged no fewer than nine Penestanan exhibitions between 1971 and 1983 and drew similarities between the "peasant painters" of Penestanan and Jamini Roy's *patuas* to cultivate their tentative hopes of an artistic renaissance in the wider region. Of course, it is reasonable to decry Alpha's vision as amorphous and imperfect. Nevertheless, ASEAN, though blessed with more resources and reach than an independent artists' cooperative, offered its peoples nothing that approached a regional cultural project and little to inspire hopes of a Southeast Asian identity which transcended the ideological, military, and economic divisions between pro-West ASEAN insiders and Communist outsiders. As mentioned earlier, ASEAN statesmen did not entertain "regionalist thinking" until the late 1980s and never ceased coaxing cultural production into the restrictive parameters of nation-building. Simply put, ASEAN's story is not equivalent to the more complicated history of Southeast Asia as a region. It obscures how non-state actors like Lim, Choy, and Khoo vigorously resisted nation-centric cultural projects and imagined transnational cultural connections between peoples within Southeast Asia and, with a gesture at India, even beyond the region. The story of the Alpha Gallery is a reminder of the contingent possibilities for Southeast Asian peoples' affiliations that ranged beyond the mere congealing of nation-states, authoritarian regimes' consolidation of power, and the simplistic

[76] Wong King Wai, "Nation-building through comprehensive architecture," *EdgeProp.my*, 30 August 2016, https://www.edgeprop.my//content/865072/nation-building-through-comprehensive-architecture (accessed 29 May 2022).

[77] T. K. Sabapathy, "Modernism is well and alive in Singapore," *Straits Times*, 18 January 1986, 23.

belief that ASEAN's expansion in the 1990s represented the true actualization of Southeast Asian regionalism.

It may seem that the vain strivings of an independent artists' cooperative for an artistic renaissance in Southeast Asia could only have happened in a peaceful and prosperous world, far removed from the turbulent one in which U.S. Cold War interventions destabilized and scorched Indochina. Needless to say, these disparate histories occurred in the same world and were mutually constitutive. As Washington strained to contain communism in Indochina, Britain as well as the U.S.-friendly states of Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines assisted it in diverse ways. The war in Vietnam prompted the United States and these five Southeast Asian nations to build closer political, economic, and cultural relations, creating a smooth segue between the colonial era and U.S. hegemony in the region. Still, it can be difficult to make out the persistence of Western imperialism in Southeast Asia given Washington's humiliating debacle in Vietnam, particularly its chaotic withdrawal as North Vietnamese forces seized Saigon in 1975. But it is certainly discernible in the story of the Alpha Gallery, manifest in its members' easy access to Anglo-American cultural and educational institutions as well as leading thinkers, in their subscription to the orientalist mindset of their colonial rulers, their paternalism, and their infantilizing of the Penestanan painters. That the colonial civilizing mission was lodged within the cooperative's worldview also ironically spurred its members to seek a primeval Southeast Asian art form that colonialism and the modern world supposedly had left untouched. Indeed, the civilizing mission inspired them to go transnational, stirred them to seek cultural connections in the wider Asian region to legitimate their project, and moved them to contemplate a vision for an artistic renaissance in Southeast Asia.