

Call for Papers

südostasien 1/2022

Contemporary art in Southeast Asia

Every five years the city of Kassel hosts [documenta](#), the world's most important exhibition of contemporary art. 2022 is going to be a milestone in the history of *documenta* for two reasons. It is for the first time that the artistic direction is from Southeast Asia. It is also for the first time that the show is designed by an artist collective. The Indonesian artist collective [ruangrupa](#) is going to curate *documenta fifteen*, set to take place between June 18 and September 25, 2022.

According to a statement by *ruangrupa*, the upcoming *documenta* aims at linking art with life. *Lumbung* – the Indonesian word for a collectively governed rice barn – symbolizes the vision of the group. It is not a 'theme' they have chosen specifically for *documenta*, but rather a symbol of the values and methods [that shape their art](#). Several [artist collectives from around the world](#) were invited to fill the 'artistic rice-barn'.

For some observers this approach to the *documenta* is too radical, they feel that "their *documenta* is being held captive" by a definition, that does not correspond to their conservative Western understanding of art. These concerns lay bare a colonial legacy where European powers and their artists determine what can be regarded as art in Southeast Asia. There, art was long tied to handicraft serving religious purposes and/or functioned as symbol of status for feudal powerholders. Ethnology arising from colonial understanding treated traditional art with condescension, which still plays a part in the devaluation of the art of indigenous groups and/or ethnic minorities, placing such works of art in ethnological collections instead of art galleries. At the same time the colonial era was an occasion for increasing exchange, where more and more Southeast Asian artists chose to integrate Western techniques, while Western artists adopted techniques from the countries they have visited on their travels.

Colonial power relations endured even after the attainment of independence: for instance, students in Indonesian art schools have mainly been taught Western art since the 1950s. In the era of postmodernism however, renewed interests have arisen to understand "one's own". A search for identity means both a return to pre-

colonial techniques and traditions and reflections on current societal conditions. At the same time the artists themselves are bound by those conditions. That is why we would like to shed light on the current circumstances and collective artistic processes under which contemporary art is being created. We are particularly interested in the role of women and LGBTIQ individuals both as artists and as artistic subjects, whose plight is addressed through artistic production.

Even artists have to make a living. Arts promotion, especially abroad, rests upon homogenous concepts and understanding instead of uncovering specific working conditions under which art was produced. The world of museums and collectors often supports the production of similar works and creates the incentive for subsuming artistic freedom to financial survival. We wish to devote some attention to the living and working condition of artists, particularly to those excluded from major institutional funding.

Artists are always influenced by the environment in which they are working as well as its limitations. Oppressive political regimes often intend on restricting or banning free and critical art. To break the resistance movement, artists were among the first to being arrested and imprisoned following the military coup in Myanmar early 2021. Similar trends are to be observed [in other Southeast Asian countries](#). We would like to show how art is created under such conditions and how it can be used as a tool against oppression itself.

In the next issue we are looking for answers to the following questions:

- What did the historical development of the concept of contemporary art in Southeast Asia look like? What aspects were and are decisive for the definition of art (indigenous cultures, religion, colonial legacies, post- and neo-colonialism)?
- What significance had and have artists collectives and how are they embedded in other societal structures?
- What forms of expression does contemporary art use to reflect on social issues and to suggest alternative societal models for political activism?
- What is the standing of contemporary art in Southeast Asian society for its intended audience? Who is the target audience and what kind of relationship does it have to the artist community?

- What are the conditions for artistic production when freedom of assembly and freedom of speech are considered?
- To what extent can we see a trend to exhibit and promote ‘compliant art’? Are there any instances of self-censorship among the artists?
- What does new canonization for Southeast Asian art mean, manifested for instance in the opening of *Singapore Art Museum* or *Museum Macan* in Jakarta? To what extent can the existence of a canon lead to self-censorship and the production of ‘compliant art’?
- What do economic preconditions mean for the artists? As there is hardly any state funding for contemporary art, many are dependent on Western funding sources – to what extent does this influence the development of their art?
- What role do private funding and collectors play? What motivates collectors?
- What are the expectations of Southeast Asian artists regarding the international recognition of their work through *documenta fifteen*?
- What existing collaborations between artist collectives in Germany and Southeast Asia does *documenta fifteen* build on, or what new networks does *documenta* create?

südostasien:

südostasien gathers voices on and from Southeast Asia on current developments in politics, economy, ecology, society, and culture. Each year through four different thematic focuses, articles on the region and its respective countries as well as their international relations are published on our website.

südostasien sees itself as a pluralistic forum for solidary and critical dialogue—as a space for discussions between actors in Southeast Asia and Germany with knowledge of and proximity to social movements. *südostasien* deals with the possibilities of transnational solidarity work in the face of unequal power relations between the Global South and North. *südostasien* wants to provide food for thought for action in Germany and Europe.

We would like to address these issues in various forms — commentaries, background reports, photo essays, portrait essays, interviews, and reviews of films, books or music on the subject. We look forward to your contributions!

Editorial information:

Media: Please send us photographs of good quality matching the article (at least 1000 px width, at least 300 dpi).

Copyright & Copyleft: Copyright questions should be clarified in advance and the pictures should be labelled (photographer and picture title). Principally, all content is published under a Creative Commons License Attribution (CC-BY-SA 4.0).

Deadline: Deadline for articles (max. 10,000 characters) is December 15th 2021 (in individual cases and after consultation with the editors, a later deadline may be possible). Please submit a short abstract (max. 1,000 characters) to the editors in advance.

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