

# NATION, RELIGION, DEATH: THE BRIDGE BETWEEN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND TURKEY

*The Roving Eye: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia at ARTER, Istanbul*  
[Curated by Singapore-based Southeast Asia specialist Iola Lenzi. On view from 17th September 2014 - 4th January 2015]  
By: Bharti Lalwani



ARTER, a well-regarded private art institution run for the Turkish public in Istanbul recently hosted *The Roving Eye: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia*. Pioneer as well as later generation artists from Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Singapore, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam and Malaysia featured.

Curated by Southeast Asia (SEA) specialist Iola Lenzi, this is apparently the first and largest regionally comprehensive curated exhibition (at the time of writing) to show at an institution outside of Asia. *Roving Eye* is also the third in a trilogy of SE Asian contemporary art exhibitions curated chiefly by Lenzi and based on her nearly two decades worth of research and scholarship: *Negotiating Home, History, Nation: Two Decades of Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia, 1991-2011* and *Concept, Context, Contestation: Art and the Collective in Southeast Asia*.

Both exhibitions were curated in collaboration with Southeast Asian curators and deliberately sited within regional institutions so establishing SEA scholarship and art historical canon in Singapore in 2011 and Bangkok in 2013, respectively. The art was naturally legible to audiences in Southeast Asia. Where *Negotiating Home, History, Nation* (NHHN) was an ambitious exhibition charting the region's art practices over two decades, *Concept, Context, Contestation* (CCC) further teased out SEA artists' conceptualist bent examined within the ambit of Southeast Asian history. This was not to deny or refute external artistic influences (predominantly from the West) but to explore locally-rooted discourses that shaped practices and defined traits central to the region's art. Generalizing about Southeast Asia could be dangerous of course and as such the region cannot be viewed as a monolith wherein diverse contexts are uncritically lumped. This, Lenzi has been cautious of. In her various essays over nearly 20 years, she has cogently factored in Southeast Asian countries' shared political awakening in the latter half of the 20th century and its implications on regional art history.

And herein lay the potential risk of taking Southeast Asian art out into the world for a European and predominantly Turkish audience through *The Roving Eye*. As argued by the premise of previous exhibitions, if much of Southeast Asian contemporary art erupted from its volatile socio-political circumstances, would such art be legible to an audience unfamiliar with Southeast Asia? Through her scholarship, Lenzi has firmly asserted the universal appeal in the ideals championed by Southeast Asian artists - would the public response towards *Roving Eye* prove her wrong?

Furthermore, the exhibition opened in Istanbul the same week that Turkish hostages were released by ISIS. Given the tense political turmoil unfolding on Turkish home-front since Arab Spring, and at the Turkey-Syria border, I wondered how contemporary art from a far-away region would possibly connect with Turkish public, let alone offer them a branch of solidarity in their fight against Erdogan's authoritarian regime. However, on the opening night, if the packed reception of performances by Vietnamese artist Bui Cong Khanh and Singaporean Jason Lim were anything to go by, *Roving Eye* was exceptionally well-received. In addition to these performances at ARTER, Indonesian artist Melati Suryodarmo was in the midst of her 5-hour durational performance at another venue just a short walk away. Effortlessly drawing the crowd into ARTER was Lee Wen's 'Ping Pong Go Round' (2014), visible from the street-front to passers-by, encouraging and leading them to discover other artworks. Lee's un-intimidating form of the ping-pong table, skewed to a round donut shape, bends the rules of the game that here accommodated one player at the centre and a variable number of players on the table's outer circumference. Through interactive playful exchanges, viewers

come to realize how impossible it is for a single player from within to fend off those on the outer ring. Arriving to the artwork's conceptual core through participation, *Ping Pong* begins to unravel points of contention between the interests of the centred individual versus the collective on the outside. As the exhibition title suggested a restless oeuvre, *Ping Pong* functions in a way that enables participants to switch viewpoints and play out the precarious equilibrium with multiple partners to its logical consequence. The inside-outside dichotomy can also be read from a perspective wherein social or political exclusion gives way to imbalance, hostility and tension. Reading this work through participative performance is but one of many key conceptual tactics to decode art from SEA, and as such a third of this exhibition included interactive artworks. Courting audience reception through this strategy were recently made or newly commissioned artworks by Alwin Reamillo, Josephine Turalba and Isabel + Alfredo Aquizillan from the Philippines; Tawatchai Puntusawasdi and Sutee Kunavichayanont from Thailand, among others.

Beyond *Ping Pong*, the next prominent artwork was Alwin Reamillo's grand piano that too urged visitors to interact and in doing so read into the hints embedded in Nicanor Abelardo Grand Piano Project (2010). The grand piano held clues to Reamillo's Philippine heritage on a personal, cultural and national front whilst addressing the wiping out of family businesses across the region throughout the 1990's due to trade liberalization. However, the work provides nuanced reading into Philippine's cultural history with the referencing of Nicanor Abelardo, a Filipino composer and teacher in early 20th century. A prodigious talent grounded in tradition, Abelardo was also educated in modern forms of music, making hybrid compositions that resonated with local culture. The history and cultural impact of Abelardo may not be known to many outside the Philippines and Reamillo's artwork may not be legible at all. Besides there was an absence of wall-text throughout *Roving Eye* which was fine as text can often come in the way of enjoying any exhibition. But its visually arresting form, at once familiar and strange, allows the viewer to stay with the work long enough to decode its subtleties. Affixed before its keys, was a video documentation of the artist-restoration of this grand piano originally built in the United States around the 1940's. Additional sculptural elements included wings, which relayed signs and symbols altering the piano into a transcultural object. These appropriated elements imbued the work with memory, as a witness to colonization and collaboration, capable of producing harmony and/ or dissonance. Reamillo felt this work would resonate with the cultural formation of Istanbul as, "Manila was after all a Muslim settlement before the conquistador Miguel Lopez de Legaspi established it as the colonial capital of the Philippines in 1565", he explained, "making Philippines the longest colonized nation in Southeast Asia." Even if the audience

does not know of Philippines history, Reamillo's artwork could be enjoyed on its formal notes.

Aspects of colonial influence and post-colonial frictions are illuminated with impressive rigour by artists both young and old in *The Roving Eye*. As NHHN and later CCC amply demonstrated, recurring themes of the last 40 years of SEA art encompassed social injustice and inequality, ethnic conflict and moral corruption. Due to the political and economical shifts of their time, these particular themes are understood as austere preoccupations of Southeast Asia's pioneer artists who saw themselves playing a clear social role as critics - not merely reflecting the reality of their times but actively questioning their public on the consequences on their inaction or apathy. However, judging by artworks made by younger artists in *Roving Eye*, Lenzi once more presented social critique as a central trait of Southeast Asian art. That consequent generations too fell within such discursive framework was easily deduced from assessing works of younger artists such as Bui Cong Khanh (Vietnam), Yee I-Lann (Malaysia), Wei Leng Tay (Singapore), Jakkai Siributr (Thailand) and Josephine Turalba (Philippines). This unbroken contestative string continues to unwind as young artists confront diasporic anxieties, cultural hybridity, divisive capitalist policies, environmental pillaging and the hypocrisy entrenched within civil society.

Through 'Fortress Temple' (2013-14) for instance, Khanh subverts classical Chinese porcelain in form and aesthetic to explore colonization of Vietnam by China that goes back thousands of years. Resembling innocuous Ming vases, Khanh's work is at first glance beautiful and evocative in its classical blue-and-white imagery of cloud-kissed mountains, lush foliage and pagodas. On a close look however, this romantic and innocent landscape reveals covert military ambitions as cannons and projectiles lurk under the shrubbery or emerge from the pagodas. Further is the confusion if these ceramics should be read as 'Chinese' or 'Vietnamese' craft. This ambiguity is less present in his other ceramic pagodas on display next to the vases. 'Fortress Temple No. 1,2,3,4' (2013) are two sculptures with respective twins that were submerged in the South China Sea for a length of time. One, a pagoda with projectiles menacingly aiming outwards and the other, a distorted, misshapen temple-structure that lay horizontally whilst its less pristine counterparts submerged and later retrieved from the ocean pose problematic questions of ambiguous national borders, cultural hegemony and ownership. Were these ancient-looking relics the heritage of China or Vietnam? And here unravelled a point of contention, ancient and contemporary especially when understood in the context of China's latest moves aimed at infringing upon economic zones of SEA countries. On a more nuanced note, Khanh was also subverting the temple-pagoda - a sacred space of enlightenment, an equivocator of peace. Khanh prompts the viewer

to enquire how such religious sites are discreetly distorted or even overtly co-opted to channel hostility. This is a sophisticated example of contemporary art from Southeast Asia that transcends its local context and traditional craft-vernacular effortlessly connecting with global issues to contest deception, imperial aggression and egregious violation of the rights of a disadvantaged collective. All done without taking a 'political', 'activist' or sanctimonious stance. On the other hand, Khanh's performance 'Hymne National' (2010) on the opening night was clearly political though couched in formal allusions. The fluidity of perspectives that *Roving Eye* suggests was clear. The public stood transfixed as Khanh, stripped to his briefs, then solemnly sang Vietnam's national anthem. Simultaneously, his French counterpart, a woman, sang the anthem of France while painting the lyrics onto Khanh's body. As their anthems conflicted and contrasted in rhythm, one overpowered the other reflecting a fraught relationship between two countries - one subjugated, the other its colonial master.

Imperial conquests and subjugation were further explored by I-Lann's subdued photographic prints 'Picturing Power' (2013) in tandem with Turalba in 'Scandals' (2013-14). As I-Lann's critiqued colonial legacy through appropriation of archival images of white imperial masters mapping indigenous folk, planning their annexation on a variety of tables, Turalba grounded this violence in rich aesthetic. Her playful interactive installation included footwear entirely made of bullet cartridges and shell casings. Though deliberately uncomfortable and downright painful to walk in, the sandals and adjacent adulterated ethnographic photographs of colonized Filipinos now wearing these shoes, scrutinized relations between the oppressor and the oppressed. This artwork was most popular with the Turkish public seeing as how a number of viewers tried on the footwear, putting themselves in the shoes of these ancient peoples of the Philippines who were conquered, their identities effaced. Experiencing painful pinprick sensations from artworks of such rich aesthetic, the public uncomfortable in movements were thus stumbling between uneasy dualities. Again these artworks of immense beauty have to be experienced, the legacy of violence in Turalba's work therefore understood through participative performance. *Roving Eye* was curated in a way that expressed a lucid thread running through over 40 artworks spread out across four floors. Where previous SEA exhibitions NHHN and CCC seemed chaotic, cramped with many historically significant artworks viewed without the luxury of space, ARTER elegantly framed many masterful works, where even the niches in the stairwell of the building were utilized for I-Lann's works - which I shall discuss later. At no point through viewing the exhibition from basement to other floors did *Roving Eye* appear repetitive or overwhelming. When one needed to take a break, one could rest on Tawatchai Puntusawadi's 'Ferry Benches' (2014). Skewed in a way that seemed stretched in perpetual motion, Tawatchai made

these benches while in residence in Istanbul, taking his cue from local ferries that transport people through the Bosphorus from Europe to Asia. This was yet another artwork that appealed to be experienced through one's body. As these benches made for awkward seating, one felt ungainly, tilting off-centre, the form conveying instability (cultural or otherwise).

Naturally, identity and dislocation are one of the many themes tackled by artists in *Roving Eye*. A subject of concern not exclusive to Southeast Asian artists, the difference lies in their originality of expression. As Lee Wen's 'Ping Pong Go Round' (discussed earlier), allowed the public to traverse multiple viewpoints - a central premise of *Roving Eye* - so do works by younger artists: Ise Roslisham and Chris Chong Chan Fui from Malaysia, artist-collective Vertical Submarine and Tay Wei Leng from Singapore. Roslisham bridged SEA and Turkey by engaging two Malaysian families living in Istanbul and adapting to a foreign city through the ingredients they kept in their fridge. Visitors opened the doors of three such refrigerators to discover social conflicts, isolation or assimilation through ingredients that may be local to one culture but exotic for another. Cane sugar and coconut milk for instance. Similarly, Wei Leng and Chris looked at skilled foreign workers from South Asia or China living harmoniously in Hong Kong and Malaysia. Given the student-protests in Hong Kong that began a few weeks after *Roving Eye* opened, it was especially prescient of Lenzi to include Wei Leng's photoseries 'Out of Place' (2014) for the Turkish public to consider. Frictions between Chinese Mainlanders living in Hong Kong and Hong Kong-dwellers have long been broiling even without the recent political interference from Beijing. Wei Leng, a Singaporean Chinese diaspora based in Hong Kong delicately presented photographs of educated individuals from China in their homes living ordinary lives in HK. Accompanied with audio, snippets of their conversations were also heard. As the images unravelled, it became difficult to ascertain if these people were actually outsiders or insiders, foreign or local, a threat or an asset to civil society. As such a chauvinistic rhetoric of "them" versus "us" seemed so obviously absurd. The notion of ourselves as international citizens who may or may not identify with our countries of origin reiterates globalism (different from globalization) as an ancient phenomena. Millennia-old cultures and religions were constantly evolving through a world-wide network of exchange. Istanbul is the perfect city that exemplifies such historically robust multi-culturalism, its art, architecture, dialects, literature, ceaselessly influenced by Asia, Europe and Africa.

But what would a socially engineered city look like - where its many dialects were banished and its citizens' identities eviscerated and reshaped by the authority of the nation-state? A patriarchal nation-state where one cannot contest the singular version of political events since the 60's? Vertical Submarine obliquely provided a glimpse into

such a world by creating an optical installation-room. 'Mirrors and Copulation' (2014) held an ordinary study table, a lamp, a ceramic vase - all mundane household objects reflected by a mirror on the wall. On moving around the room, however, what came as a shock was that the mirror did not reflect my own image. The visual trickery of course lay in the fact that an identical room was set up beyond the mirror frame. One wall held clues to Singapore's controversial language-policy of the late 70's that stipulated Mandarin as the unifying speech for its Chinese population. In the process, the policy on one hand, reportedly incapacitated the subsequent generation from communicating with their elders, while on the other, marginalized its minorities. Many viewed this policy as a means to curtail dissent as the process eviscerated the strong identities of multilingual Chinese communities that communicated and published opinions in one of four dialects. The dialects in themselves transcend narrow ethnic identities as it embraces words from Malay for instance. Turkey has its own history of language politics but if accessing this artwork and its Singapore-specific context difficult, then it could be read through its formal cues. Reading it simply through its visual prompts, it is still a stunning yet disturbing work wherein all immediate surroundings - except the individual - are reflected. Or imagine the shock of finding another person reflected instead of yourself. On a number of levels, this work can be understood to be about censorship - Censorship of the citizenry, the dis-empowering of the individual and violence of an invisible kind against the collective where individuals and communities are forced to conform. Since the protests at Gezi Park, the astute Turkish citizenry, young and old, from all walks of life, have been active in reclaiming public spaces, contesting state-authority and violence of a more forceful nature. I have no doubt they would have understood this work.

Turkey may well find its inverse reflection in Southeast Asia and so before the exhibition opened, I spoke to Lenzi about why the exhibition theme made particular sense in Istanbul. As per the curator, "Turkey, like Southeast Asia, has for centuries been an especially porous place of traffic, with people, ideas, and goods from everywhere circulating freely. For this reason among others I felt that the Turkish audience would be disposed to viscerally understand Southeast Asian artists' particular manner of play with concept and form, the way they deal with different registers all at once. In terms of content, there are clear parallels as well: Turkey today is grappling with issues familiar to us in Southeast Asia: tensions between state secularism and religion; nationalist discourse masking authoritarianism; youthful civil society institutions and democratization processes; a shockingly rapid transition from traditional social structures to more liberal ones. Thinking about all this I have selected specific works to build an exhibition that I hope will resonate with the Turkish audience."



Arter, the roving eye, photo credit copyright murat germen 2014 20



Vertical Submarine, 2014, mirrors and copulation, variable sizes, Photo Credit of Murat German .

Indeed. As Turkey faces radical political transformations under Erdoğan's regime under which secular ideals are decomposing, Islamization of education is state-sanctioned, and critics face brute oppression, the Turkish public could find many artistic mediations on nation, religion and death in *The Roving Eye*. If Erdoğan had apparently become nostalgic for the former Turkish-Islamic empire then the Turkish public would certainly have found correlations and antidotes in artworks by Southeast Asian artists.

Thai artist Sutee Kunavichayanont's 'History Class II', a set of wooden school desks, innocently enticed viewers into sitting down and making colorful rubbings. Belying this innocence, it's etched surfaces revealed pictorial depictions of tortures, hangings or propagandist quotes from Thai history. Most of the text etched was in Thai script but for the first time, translations were made available in Turkish and English making Sutee's messages accessible to the public. This set of desks featured in CCC in Bangkok while an earlier version was exhibited in NHHN in Singapore. Its presence in the *Roving Eye* anchors this trilogy of exhibitions and is perhaps the most salient work emblematic of the region's artistic traits. *History Class* (series initiated in 2000) footnotes the most contentious events in Thai History - 1930's transition from Absolute to Constitutional Monarchy, the brutal massacres of the 1970's, the reportedly corrupt regime of Prime Minister Thaksin

Shinawatra (lusted from power in 2006). Till today, key events such as the Thammasat Massacre of 1976 have not been entered into school history textbooks and so through his etched desks Sutee combats mass amnesia and politically motivated historic revisionism.

Though this seminal piece is Thai-centric, the classroom setting, now extended with 'Blackboard Drawing I & II' (2014) taps into our deeply ingrained childhood experiences of passive learning. Formally and conceptually, Sutee rouses us to enquire who authors history and how might one challenge state-authority. As visitors sat at these desks, making colorings, taking home chapters of censored events, they have already been co-opted by the artist. Like other interactive exhibits on view, *History Class II* relies on the active reception of its audience and their willingness to trigger subversions within the artwork. Conjunctive to *History Class*, were Michael Shaowanasai's pair of neon street light-boxes on ARTER's facade (*The Untouchables II*, 2014) and Malaysian Yee I-Lann's decadent gold-framed photographs of wilting flowers pinned onto politician's breast-pockets (*Orang Besar* series: YB, 2010) along ARTER stairwell. While Michael's street-lights spell out 'King' and 'Queen' (in Thai) within oval frames reducing the Monarchy - an emblem of Thailand - to cheap hollow plastic symbols that can be switched off in full public-glare, I-Lann ornately emphasized failed promises of those in power.



Another senior Thai artist and photographer Mani Sriwanichpoom underscored the changing public perception of the Monarchy through a series of photographs. 'Waiting for the King' (2006), 14 photographic prints, captured Thai people waiting for a glimpse of the King. Just like I-Lann's 'Picturing Power' photoseries, this was an easy piece to miss if one was not paying close attention. As Thailand was the only Southeast Asian country not to be formally colonized by Western imperialists, Mani questions if Thailand's folk evaded subjection at all. Thailand's political and economic record since the transition of absolute to constitutional monarchy in 1932 would suggest otherwise. Simply reading into the body language of Thai public captured in these photographs, one could sense an unease, a tense impatience, an irritation rather than reverence as they await their King - a sure sign of transformations in Thailand. This work, in black and white is understated yet formally elegant in its composition and refined in its implication. Broadening critiques on modernity, globalization, socio-economic advancement and its entailing implications were Indonesian pioneer artists Krisna Murti and FX Harsono. Murti's three images (*Viewing Perkiwati*, *Street Theatre*, *The Last Photograph*, 2010) revealed the artist himself dressed alternately as a man and a woman in traditional Indonesian theatre-play costumes replete in batik and gold embellishments, wearing in some instances expressive Wayang masks. In the first image, he stands in an urban space against a giant hoarding advertising a major Western brand, in front of a devastated landscape in the second, and poses away from a group of hijab-wearing women in the third. Harsono, for his part, illustrates through a three-channel film 'Purification' (2014), a syncretic ritual prayer dating from the 14th century which incorporates aspects of Hinduism and Islam, the local manufacturing of Hajj souvenirs in Indonesia and lastly, a street-demonstration of fundamentalists demanding an Islamic revolution. Where Harsono highlighted religious syncretism through Brai rituals, Murti sharpened the contrasts between harmonious hybridity and rigid fundamentalism. As the former documented the mass-produced Hajj souvenirs implicating religion's influence on commercial enterprise and local politics, Murti attested to the deforestation and pillaging of the naturally resource-rich earth of Indonesia. This takes place by displacing ancient inhabitants of the land, its ecology and natural balance disrupted for the long term but purportedly justified for the nation's economic gains. Religion in itself is not a proponent of violence and of this, the young Thai artist Jakkai Siributr's 'Transient Shelter' (2014) was a stunning reminder. A multi-medium installation of military and civil uniforms embellished with talismans offered a layered account of how power-politics, institutional corruption appear to work in tandem with religious zealotry. Photographs of the artist himself posing in these hybrid costumes, along with a video-work added further nuance. On one level of reading, *Transient Shelter*

addressed the subversion of Buddhism. The nobility and political elite of Thailand, even certain Thai monks, are notoriously known for their superstitious practices and materialistic attitudes. The Sangha has been mired in scandal for many decades now unable to function in a more open society. Protective yantras and holy amulets can reach high value on the commercial market as these trinkets and fetishes are believed to make the wearer invincible - in consequence emboldening the individual to abuse their position of authority. The political machinations and violence etched in Sutee's desks are underpinned here in Jakkai's embellished jackets. Reading into the uniforms alone offered a shrewd criticism of how the universal teachings of Buddhism have been limited and subordinated to nationalist ideology. Turkey could well take caution from countries such as Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia and Malaysia where religious fervour sways its political players.

As facets of religion are commercialized instead of serving progressive ideals, this comes across clearly in the works of FX Harsono and Jakkai Siributr. But Jakkai goes further in addressing this mockery of religious practices by extending his own personal connections with Thai aristocracy. Turning to funeral memory-books published by members of Thai nobility to honour the recently deceased, Jakkai examined its uncritical value and image-varnishing by modelling himself in poses similar to the deceased person's photographs. This aspect is not made obvious but interested viewers could refer to the catalogue essays to further access the art. Funeral books, published in the early 20th century, are filled with venerated accounts of the individual's greatness. Some instances are outright fiction and this uncritically or rather low tolerance for the truth is explored by Jakkai as he wears his embellished jackets and poses formally. Performative and shifting between reality and fiction, the artist's portraits were experienced together with a film that depicted one of his decorous suits flowing in a stream. But the sound of water was substituted with that of a crackling funeral pyre. This added a dimension of temporality and impermanence echoing Buddhist precepts on the spiritual rather than on the material, consumerist world.

Again, as Sutee's desks critiqued revisionism, Michael Shaowanasai's street-light signage devalued the legitimacy of Thailand's King and Queen. Jakkai made apparent the parallels between Buddhist hierarchy and uniformed/ civilian bureaucratic order that has sporadically governed Thailand since 1932. The viewing-public was in turn compelled to actively interrogate the role of religious or civil authority as an unquestioning collaborator, complicit in legitimising political and military repression in the task of nation-building. A further thought for my reader: Non-violence is Buddhism's central tenet yet nations that strongly identify with Buddhism have had an irascible history of violence that cannot be ignored or remain unchallenged.

Levelling this dangerous playing field was a masterful work by Thai artist-activist Vasan Sitthiket that I do not believe has been exhibited since it was first shown at Numthong Gallery, Bangkok, in September 2001. 'We come from the same way' (2001) was a series of 10 paintings and one of handful, precious works in this exhibition from a formative period of Southeast Asian history. Among the heroes and villains being birthed are Mandela, Suharto and Pope John Paul II who is considered largely responsible for the spread of AIDS epidemic due to his outmoded and misinformed preaching.

And here Roving Eye returns to the question of individual responsibility and consequences. As the quashing of civil liberties and environmental destruction are justified under the cover of nation-building, and religious representatives are unmasked as complicit players in political manoeuvrings: what of the collateral damage wrought on ordinary people? Some of the oldest works in this exhibition serve as caution, urging introspection on part of the viewing public. Heri Dono's 'Political Clowns' (1999) made a year after the overthrowing of Suharto was wildly popular with the sharp Turkish public as they understood the animated sculptures' inferences. From Vietnam, were works by pioneer conceptual artists Vu Dan Tan and Nguyen Van Cuong. Whilst Tan's mobile display boxes expressed solidarity with the vagrant, the refugee through its form, Van Cuong illustrated the influence of the foreign American dollar on rapidly eroding local cultural values.

From 1996, was Dinh Q. Le's 'The Quality of Mercy', and 'The Texture of Memory' (2000). Both works put the viewer front and centre. The first recreated the Khmer Rouge torture cell with the eyes of the victims level with those of the audience, so traversing victim-hood, unblinkingly quizzing the viewer of his or her moral position. The second is a white-on-white embroidered cloth-portrait of Pol Pot's victims. Again interactive, the piece demanded the public outline embroidered eyes, nose and mouth with their fingers, so donating their DNA through sweat, salt and dirt, to make the dead visible. A taboo subject, Turkish audiences could find a parallel to this mass genocide in the pages of their own history. The unclaimed dead were reclaimed in Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's 'Thai Medley' from 2002. Greatly disturbing at first, the film displayed the artist at a mortuary, humming to a number of dead bodies as though performing last rites. A little time spent with this film rewarded the viewer as the artwork took a on a gently lyrical, poetic reclaiming of forgotten souls.

Southeast Asian artists' empathy for their collective and their ability to trigger introspection on the viewer's part are qualities that never cease to inspire. As a critic, this pathos is what I have searched for in contemporary art internationally - and rarely found. Most artworks' interactivity should not be misunderstood as a mere gimmick, nor should the works' political stance be misinterpreted as 'protest' or 'activist' art. Though these tags are currently trending in the international

market-sphere, many SEA artists refrain from being labelled as such. Speaking of the market, Roving Eye did not include popular auction-vetted artists. I imagine this upsets a number of vested interests. Lenzi clarified, "At this juncture in Southeast Asia, contemporary art that is historically relevant and the market are different entities. I am interested in the former not the latter."

As for the pre-emptive accusation of 'broad-brushing the region', one only need take the trouble of examining the scholarship produced by Lenzi since 1995. Working collaboratively with other SEA institution and independent curators on NHHN and CCC, Lenzi's exhibitions have built scholarship around the region's art through the inclusion of essays by other practitioners in the field. NHHN catalogue alone included seven essays. The Roving Eye, though solely curated by Lenzi, retains this collaborative spirit. Apart from her curatorial essay, the generously illustrated catalogue includes instructive writings on Philippines by Flaudette May Datuin, on Thailand by Leigh Toop and on Indonesia by Karim Raslan.

Just in case some artworks were not legible, Lenzi took the precaution of issuing a guide-booklet in English and Turkish. But evidence of Roving Eye resonating with Turkish audiences visual and emotionally, lies in the fact that this was ARTER's most successful show to date, drawing in a record high of over 15,000 visitors in its opening fortnight. As majority of art took on authoritarianism, social constructions, religious fundamentalism, they may well have reflected ongoing situations in Turkey. That SEA art has indeed established solidarity with a region halfway across the globe is certain from gauging public-response. Erudite and tightly curated with a thoughtful selection of artworks, this critic found The Roving Eye to be an elegantly presented exhibition that asserted SEA artists' plural views in a manner that was most sophisticated. Much credit ought to be given to the private institution as well, seeing as how it bypassed the hot market-bed of Chinese contemporary art in favour of more provocative but less-exposed Southeast Asian art. ARTER, run by consummate professionals, had kept its doors open not just for the public but also for children displaced from Syria, who have been spending their time playing on Lee's Ping-Pong or Alwin's piano and mostly coloring away on Sutee's desks, instead of being out on the streets during winter. Now imagine this art is powerful enough to urge them to become agents of their own fate.

#### ABOUT THE WRITER

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Bui Cong Khanh Fortress Temple 2