

# eyeline

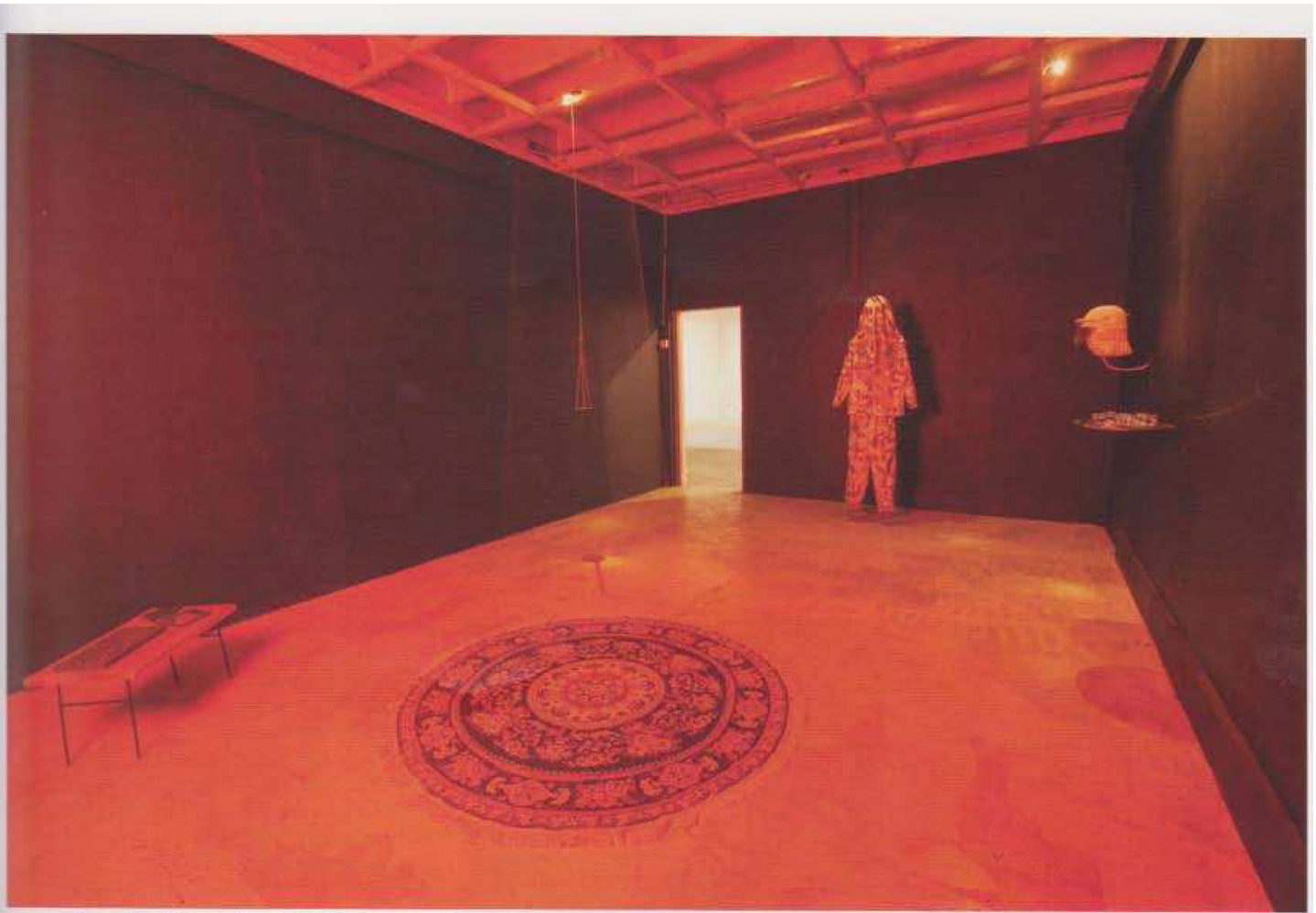
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Leonardiansyah Allenda, *Chapter 0*, 2013. Installation comprising rug, pendulum, costumes, fluorescent lamp, helmet, weight scale, cups, zirkun, water, calculator, table, dimensions variable. Jogjakarta Biennale XII.

# ON THE BIENNALE TRAIL:

ISTANBUL, SINGAPORE, JOGJAKARTA | BHARTI LALWANI

## Absent Does *Not* Mean Present: Istanbul

Following the public protests which snowballed into a country-wide stand against a broader infringement on civic rights, the anticipated 13th Istanbul Biennale opened in September 2013 and ran only a month till 20 October. It spanned five venues—SALT Beyoğlu, ARTER, Galata Greek Primary School, Antrepo 3 and 5533, bringing together a selection of established and emerging artists to assess and re-evaluate the relevance of such platforms at a time when political, civic and corporate interests clash?

'Mom, am I Barbarian?' was the terrifying yet introspective theme of the exhibition, borrowed from a quote by Turkish poet Lale Müldür. The word

'Barbarian' itself carries complex connotations of the 'other', reinforcing notions of exclusion and, in the context of global malcontent, the marginalisation of the citizen; thus relegating the citizen as the unruly outcast. In her curatorial outline, Fulya Erdemci emphasises the relationship between art and the public domain through her original intention to pick venues that represented urban transformation, such as Gezi Park, Taksim Square, Tarlabaşı Boulevard, Karaköy and Sulukule neighbourhood. But after the events of 31 May, this was not possible, which meant that the Biennale had to be held in the private domain. Fine. The curatorial choices of artworks, though, should not have been all that affected. But what this critic encountered was an incoherent disarray—videos that have already featured previously in other biennales, photographs of displaced people among ruins, text-heavy works and installations which made little sense. It was clear that for Erdemci, the viewer's perspective did not take precedence.

SALT Beyoğlu had the weakest selection of three artists, with the fourth being an exception. Delhi-based Amar Kanwar's film *The Scene of Crime* (2011) underpinned idyllic images of grasslands of Odisha in eastern India as the battleground for local communities versus government and corporations. Similar films from Kanwar's ongoing series 'The Sovereign Forest' have been featured in Documenta 13, Kochi and the Sharjah Biennial. As they did in Kochi, this artwork could have been expanded to include



Elmgreen & Dragset. *Istanbul Diaries*. 2013. Installation view, 13th Istanbul Biennial

Kanwar's compliment to these films—poetry, images, grains of rice, all presented as 'evidence' from the 'scene of crime'—for the better engagement with the viewer. As I write, a tremendous typhoon has hit Odisha. Where in pre-colonial times forests acted as natural cyclone barriers, today the area lies unprotected from even further devastation.

ARTER offered a slightly broader range of works, however only two made an impression. Australian artist Angelica Mesiti's *Citizen's Band* (2012) is a combination of four videos which document musicians who perform outside of institutional structures—in a Brisbane taxi for instance. Having seen it in Kochi and Sharjah, I viewed it again because this is one of those rare works of art that delve into the purity of the creative act. The Algerian Mohammed Lamourie sings in the Metro—not for the audience, not for the applause and definitely not for money, but simply because he must! This work, which stirs me every time, brings into question our own *raison d'être*; why we do what we do and where we choose to display/suppress our individuality. Another was a video by Brazilian Cinthia Marcelle who also featured in the recent Sharjah Biennial. *Confront* (2005) kept me on the edge of my seat as first two, then four, then six, then eight fire-torch jugglers blocked vehicles from moving ahead at traffic lights once they turned green. The act of juggling, often played out to amuse, here, in the middle of the street, became a formidable act of transgression, while the players were still vulnerable to oncoming traffic. As the title suggests, Marcelle illustrated the power of protest.

In order to provide historical markers to current unrest, Erdemci made a fine decision to include about nine works from the 1960s and '70s (performances engaging the public, political posters, etcetera), but it was disappointing that she did not connect them to contemporary practices. In fact some of the most poignant statements in this Biennale hailed from that era, such as Gordon Matta Clark's *Splitting* (1974), which would have been well placed in the same venue as *Domain* (2011), an installation by Martin Cordiano & Tomas Espina, of a living room within which every object was

subtly fractured. The earliest work included was a remarkable ethnographic film from 1955. The *Mad Masters* by Jean Rouch which documents possession ceremony in Accra, whilst exploring representations of the colonised and the coloniser. Meanwhile, international biennale art-stars Thomas Hirschhorn and Elmgreen & Dragset were included. Hirschhorn attempted a daft collage of photograph and text of performances in public space; Elmgreen & Dragset regurgitated an old idea in *Paris Diaries* (2003, repeated in 2008, Frieze), desperately forcing a connection to the Gezi Protests. However expressing oneself on a desk in the private domain is hardly a political act.

Only one work at Antrepo came close to this formal and conceptual coherence. Claire Pentecost's *Soil-erg* (2012, previously shown at Documenta 13) which would have tied in nicely with Amrita Kanwar's video at SALT, explored food politics, its production, distribution and relation to geopolitics. The installation which proposed handmade soil as currency, radiated warm aesthetics that drew one in. Forty-three drawings, mimicking banknote



clockwise from top left: Angelica Mesiti, *Citizens Band*, 2012. Four channel video installation. High definition video, 16:9, PAL, surround sound, duration 21mins 25secs; Amar Kanwar, *The Scene of Crime*, 2011. Single channel video in HD, colour, sound; Cinthia Marcelle, *Confront (Confronto)*, 2005. Video, 7'50". From the series *Linus Mundus*; Jean Rouch, *The Mad Masters (Les Maîtres Fous)*, 1955. Gordon Matta-Clark, *Conical Intersect*, 1975. Installation view; Claire Pentecost, *soil-erg*, 2012. Courtesy the 13th Istanbul Biennale

surrounded soil ingots, and featured historical and contemporary philosophers, writers and artists who have contributed to the understanding of the connections of humans to the larger ecological systems, whilst pointing out how these systems have been not only commodified by corporations but also cut off from our lives. More artworks that

propagated a meaningful dialogue through such subtlety, could have been selected. Few artworks made any inspired attempt at furthering a relevant and timely discussion on this socio-political crisis which affects us—the 99% in every country who can relate beyond national boundaries. No, instead we got Gonzalo Lebrija's *Lamento* (2007), a minuscule sculpture of a helpless and powerless man who simply looked away instead of rising to the occasion.

This was a privately sponsored event that echoed hollow ideology, as Erdemci redundantly stated "...I believe that by withdrawing from urban public spaces, thus marking the presence through the



HOW DOES ONE BEGIN TO CONTEXTUALISE A BIENNALE IN TIMES OF SOCIAL UNREST; HOW DOES ONE ASSESS AND RE-EVALUATE THE RELEVANCE OF SUCH PLATFORMS AT A TIME WHEN POLITICAL, CIVIC AND CORPORATE INTERESTS CLASH?



Martin Cordiano and Tomás Espina, *Domain (Dominio)*, 2011. Courtesy the 13th Istanbul Biennale.

sence, we can contribute to the space of freedom, to the creative and participatory demonstrations and forums instigated by the Gezi resistance'. Artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's solo show at Borusan Contemporary Istanbul, in contrast, was a far superior exhibition which, in its understated simplicity, examined the role of the individual versus the potency of a global collective, encouraging audience participation instead of relegating one to being a passive onlooker.

This established Biennale, that has always had an edge, has indeed missed a timely opportunity to highlight the collusion between media, government, its military and big corporations—which have trampled on citizen's basic civic rights on a global scale. As Hito Steyerl made the connection between arms dealers and the art world in her new video-work at Antrepo 3, she highlighted how the sponsor of the Biennale, Vehbi Koç Foundation, was the philanthropic arm of Koç Holdings, a subsidiary of a rich manufacturer of weapons (which Erdoğan's government may have used against the protesters). Closer to home, TATA Steel, the main sponsor of the Jaipur Literary Festival, argued for Salman Rushdie's right to free speech in 2013, while quashing tens of thousands of villagers, who are branded

'Maoists', with the help of paramilitary forces deployed in the forests of Dantewada, in a bid to exploit the mineral-rich land.

Meanwhile, we are being fed propaganda which essentially convinces the citizenry that they need not be alarmed at being spied upon, think critically or ask questions. In fact, we need not participate in democratic deliberation at all. Instead we are to be amused. And it would seem that the format of the Biennale—a non-profit platform where culture is meant to take risks—is now a safe, polite and politically contained zone. Evidence of this can be seen in the stark difference between Sharjah Biennial's 10th and 11th editions. With the beginnings of Arab Spring, the former extended solidarity through a spontaneous boycott against the Gulf Cooperation Council, which sent its troops to suppress the uprisings in Bahrain, and demanded fair working conditions for migrant workers at the Abu Dhabi Louvre/Guggenheim outposts. The latter edition was a manicured affair. An extended local community project, under the guise of a biennale which offered art as amusement. It is disheartening that Fulya Erdemci finally opted to retreat into her studio instead of daring to claim the public sphere through her artistic discourse, while protests ranging from Tahrir Square (Egypt), Pearl Square (Bahrain), Zuccotti Park (New York), Puerta del Sol (Madrid), Syntagma Square (Athens) to Taksim Square (Istanbul) demonstrated a creative ownership of the public domain.

Emerging biennales in Asia should seize this opportunity to connect to the larger discourses and threads locally, regionally and internationally which tie us to our shared and precious ecology and connect us, despite geo-political agendas; the first edition of Kochi-Muziris Biennale has shown immense potential; Singapore's 4th edition this year moved away from the international blockbuster formula and focused solely on Southeast Asia; Biennale Jogja, which in its first 2011 edition focused on India, now in its 2nd edition examines its relation with Egypt and the Arab World. The Art as-citizen cannot remain insular and the Biennale could look far beyond enthralling. What is the purpose of art if not for raising difficult questions and going against the grain?

### Too Many Cooks Spoil the Laksa: Singapore

In my previous review of a Singapore Biennale (written for an Indian art journal back in 2011), I concluded that the city-state would do better by keeping a regional focus rather than putting together an assortment of international names. This opinion was based on having seen the two-decade survey exhibition *Negotiating Home, History, Nation* (NHHN), which ran as a parallel event at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) that year. Guest curated by critic and lecturer in Southeast Asian art, Iola Lenzi, in close collaboration with the th

Director of SAM, Mr Tan Boon Hui, this exhibition was the largest ever survey of Southeast Asian Contemporary Art in Asia or elsewhere, seen within its own context rather than in relation to China, India, or the West for that matter. Established within the canon of robust and diverse Southeast Asian art practices, NHHN stood out not only for its quality of discursive artworks—which in bold form dealt with contentious gender and socio-political issues—but also because of the extensive research it entailed as relayed in the exhaustive essays in the accompanying catalogue. NHHN, therefore, became this writer's reference for Southeast Asian (SEA) art. According to Lenzi, the reference-point for NHHN itself are other canonic survey shows such as *Traditions/Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia* (1996) curated by Apinan Poshyananda and the Fukuoka Triennales (Japan) and Asia-Pacific Triennials (Brisbane).

So, after lobbying for a Southeast Asian-centric biennale—we got it. But did Singapore Biennale's (SB's) fourth edition, under the potent if vague theme 'If the World Changed', offer a close examination of current SEA practices or did it offer an eclectic buffet?

Opening to a press conference on 24 October 2013, the presiding curator among twenty-six other curators from around Southeast Asia, Tan Boon Hui began by admitting knowledge gaps within the institution's curatorial core. In order to learn about current art practices, seven SAM curators were attached to other counterparts from Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar and Malaysia and divided into country-groups. And this divide and incoherence can be clearly seen through the Biennale, which is spread across seven venues within the same district; and for some unclear reason there were a few artists included from outside of SEA.

At the National Museum (NM) Ken + Julia Yonetani's *Crystal Palace* is a striking arrangement of thirty-one antique chandeliers (denoting thirty-one nuclear nations) refitted with uranium glass beads which, in the darkened room, pick up the UV lighting and glow an ominous green. Not from SEA but having been specially invited by Tan Boon Hui through the Open Call for proposals, the artists related to the theme directly and reflected our anxiety post-Fukushima. In the same room was Singaporean Grace Tan's *Moment*—a special commission in the form of a lumpy green tangled mass. The accompanying text written by one of the SAM curators stated that the work was 'informed by Tan's pursuit of a deeper meaning of the self [which artwork isn't?] ... The glowing installation embodies humans' instinctive nature to make and create. The hand underscores the intention of making—making hope, meaning, memory, connection'. This unfortunate gap between concept, execution and description revealed itself at various

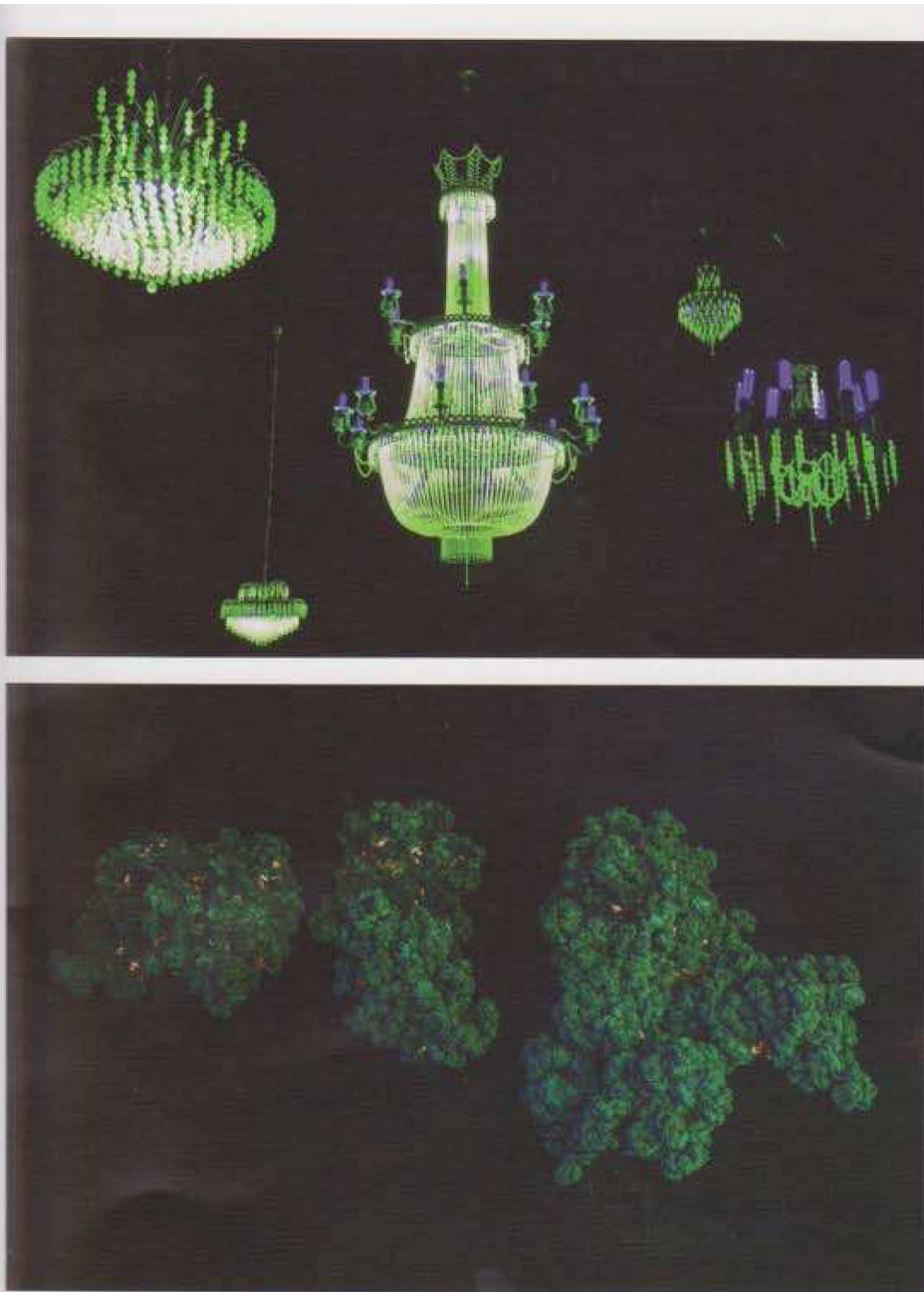


clockwise from top: Boo Junfeng, *Happy and Free*. 2013. Video installation; 5:00 mins. Collection of the artist. Singapore Biennale 2013 commission; Kiri Dalena, *Monument for a Present Future*. 2013. Single-channel video and mixed media installation (wood, clay and stone), dimensions variable. Collection of the artist. Singapore Biennale 2013 commission; Eko Prawoto, *Wormhole*. 2013. Bamboo installation, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist. Singapore Biennale 2013 commission. Images courtesy Singapore Art Museum.

points in the Biennale, signalling an absence of curatorial vision and direction. In and around the same venue were works that were utterly void of any meaning by artists such as François Roche (Paris), again a special commission where the intent had nothing to do with the result. But perhaps the most disappointing work, and also possibly the most expensive commission, was Sydney-based Singaporean Suzanne Victor's *Rainbow Circle*. Repeatedly referring to the execution of the work as a process of 'suffering' during her public-talk, Victor had intended to create a circular rainbow 'as an artefact within the museum of artefacts'. Occupying the rotunda of the NM, a prime spot in the Biennale, all that could be seen at the time of writing, was a badly executed waterfall being mopped up every two minutes by a museum ward, which in itself could have been viewed as a time-based, Singapore-centric performance. Victor, a prominent artist who has made some meaningful works in the past (one of which was included in NHHN), should have left this one to Olafur Eliasson who has created experiential rainbows since 1993.

Speaking of experiential, Indonesian architect/artist Eko Prawoto's *Wormhole*, a trio of interconnected bamboo huts occupying the pristine exterior of NM, succeeded in its evocative form which invited viewers into its cool environs to contemplate on internal shadows, as the sounds of Singapore dissolved in the background. Over at SAM and SAM at 8Q were a variety of works which, barring a few exceptions, seemed incoherent and offered little that could be considered insightful or had any clear concept. Singapore's commercial artist, Kumari Nahappan, who usually makes sculptures for local high-rises, piled kilos of lush red saga seeds against a red wall; the set up photographed beautifully, but what's new here? Kumari has been piling up saga seeds for a while now. At this point I ached for stronger SEA artists whose works involve public participation—a key strategy in SEA art practice, often underpinned by a sound concept. As I encountered further works, what became apparent was the absence of concept, context or curatorial direction.

Outside of SAM at 8Q was *Toko Keperluan/A Shop for Your Needs* (2010, 2013) by Indonesian artist Anggun Priambodo. On sale were some items such as paper-masks and plastic toys. Recreating a shop in a Biennale has been done to death, so once again, what's new here? SAM curator Tan Siuli offered a



from top: Ken + Julia Yonetani, *Crystal Palace: The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nuclear Nations, 2012-2013*. Metal, UV lights, uranium glass, 31 pieces, various dimensions. *Crystal Palace*: (Armenia), 2012. Paulsen Collection, Sydney, *Crystal Palace*: (Pakistan), 2012 and (Germany), 2012. The Gerie & Brian Sherman Collection, *Crystal Palace*: (Japan), 2012. Collection of Belinda Piggott & David Ojerholm. All other pieces collection of the artists; **Grace Tan, *Moment*, 2013**. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist. Singapore Biennale 2013 commission. Images courtesy Singapore Art Museum.

facetious explanation of 'rapid urbanisation', 'consumerism' and 'globalisation'. The artist on the other hand, echoed his special buzzword 'consumerist trap', but failed to explain further. According to Siuli, she picked the artist, let him invent his own response to the theme and then picked the appropriate space for the resulting work. *Toko Keperluan*—a shop that is not an uncommon sight around the region, is perhaps an exotic sight in super-urban Singapore.

Thankfully there were a couple of interesting works. Boo Junfeng's karaoke video *Happy and Free* (2013) was a fresh presentation of what could have well been Singapore's history had it not been expelled from the Federation of Malaya in 1965, leaving the island-state as a reluctantly independent republic. In this alternate historical timeline, the 1963 Merger is being celebrated with the upbeat singalong anthem 'Happy and Free', the expulsion never happened and everyone is 'Happy' and 'Free'—which brought me to reflect on those words. In 2012, Singapore was ranked least happy

nation in the world by the United Nation's World Happiness Report. Well the State saw to that and by 2013, we were ranked top happiest in Asia! Now, being 'Free' is another discussion altogether.

Kiri Dalena's *Monument for a Present Future* was one of the few installations which offered some contemplation. Thoughtful, layered and relevant to the current global collusion between corporations, media, government and its military, this work has a global resonance. However, it need not have been accompanied with a shaky video-piece. And here was another problem, a number of insipid works, one of which even had the nerve to describe its process as 'cultural activism' in the accompanying text, attempted to look 'cutting edge' by including a video. Yet another annoyance was looking at pedestrian artworks executed by students. The root of this lies in the recent shift in Singapore's cultural policy, post the 2011 elections, which is obvious in the recently changed Departmental title from *Ministry of Information, Communication and Arts* to *Ministry of Community, Culture and Youth*—clearly it is all about the local and the communal and not about the art or the pluralism at its core. The Peranakan Museum, for instance, showcased the student project-based commission of ceramics by local artist Hazel Lim. The Peranakan is a stunning repository of artefacts that actually represent hybridity between the Chinese, the Malay, Arab and Indian cultures through centuries of trade. This fluidity of an ever-evolving cosmopolitanism of contemporary relevance can be seen, not through any of the Biennale artworks displayed here, but through the incredible museum collection of ceramics, furniture, fashion, cuisine and ritual which have come to proudly define Singapore's unique heritage as an amalgamation of foreign cultures.

Tan Boon Hui acknowledged the unevenness of what I saw but explained that through this edition, they wanted to generate a number of enquiries into the ideology of a SEA biennale and whether 'naive' or 'outsider' art can be regarded within the context of contemporary art in the region. Although SB 2013 is definitely a step in the right direction and Tan Boon Hui should be lauded for taking this bold step, veering away from the internationalism which has characterised the Biennale since its inception in 2006, the absence of curatorial direction, or a non-understanding of the word itself, is a major concern especially since, in the entire region, Singapore is the only country that has state-funded institutions and is in an opportune position to act as a credible, transparent and ethical lighthouse for collecting, curating and exhibiting the region's contemporary art. All the right ingredients are there, just get a competent chef to cook the Laksa!

#### Death by Encounter: Jogjakarta

In November 2013, Biennale Jogja established its second international edition 'Indonesia Encounters

the Arab Region: Not a Dead End'. Two years back positively reviewed (*Eyeline*, #76) the Yogyakarta Biennale Foundation's first international edition 'Shadow Lines: Indonesia Meets India', which invited artists from both countries with Indian curator Suman Gopinath. The aim of the foundation to present a biennale every alternate year with a country or region bearing proximity to the equator. Since Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in Southeast Asia, it is only fitting that the Biennale provides a meeting point between artists from the Arab region and Indonesia, with Islam being an obvious entry point into a wider geo-political discussion—and at a time when the Arab region has been rife with tension.

Though Islam subsequently became the dominant religion of Malaya and Indonesia, the history of Southeast Asia attests to the inculcation of religious practices from centuries old Hinduism, Buddhism, Sufism and Islam with its own diverse forms of animism, the worship of ancestors and the ritual elements. This 'syncretic' mix of religion with ancient traditions, is still found today in parts of the Indonesian archipelago. This overlapping and layering of religion and tradition contests the notion of 'pure' Islam. The Islamic beliefs of the Javanese elite seemed to have been much closer to Hindu-Buddhist practices than to orthodox-Islam, and it seems that such environments encouraged religious reformers to take action. However, in the 19th century, two major reform movements occurring in the Middle East—Wahhabi and especially Modernism—had a direct impact on Indonesia and, once the Suez Canal opened, the number of *Hadjis* (those who made the pilgrimage to Mecca) from Indonesia rose significantly and those who returned began to consider orthodoxy the 'proper' mode of worship and dress, regarding their centuries old rituals with superstition. But syncretism, or the conceptual approach to take in assorted beliefs in order to weave a unified cultural fabric, has parlayed into the ethos of contemporary literature and art practices. The question is, did this biennale serve to communicate such intricate history and address current political tension in Egypt and elsewhere through artistic discourse?

Indonesian curator Agung Hujatnikajennong partnered with Sarah Rifky from Egypt with a selection of thirty-five artists; sixteen from Indonesia and the rest from Yemen, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Oman, out of which at least six participated in the Sharjah Biennial earlier this year. Rifky appeared after her second residency in Jogja last July and, apart from a single mention crediting her as the co-curator, there is nothing else to substantiate her part in the curatorial process. The curating of the biennale and the responsibility for the participating artists then came to rest on Agung Hujatnikajennong who did his residency in Sharjah during their biennial in March 2013. Although referring to the story of syncretism and Islam in Indonesia in his



IT WOULD SEEM THAT THE FORMAT OF THE BIENNALE—A NON-PROFIT PLATFORM WHERE ONE IS MEANT TO TAKE RISKS—IS NOW A SAFE, POLITE AND POLITICALLY CONTAINED ZONE.



from top: Basim Magdy, *Investigating the Color Spectrum of a Post-Apocalyptic Future Landscape*, 2013, 80 slides and slide projector dimensions variable; Ahmed Mater, *Golden Hour*, 2011. From Desert of Pharan series. Fineart Latex printer and matt 200g unbleached printing paper. Edition of 3 + 1 AP, 245 x 325.5cm, Jogjakarta Biennale XII

curatorial essay, Hujatnikajennong employed the 'mobility and migration' trope, making commerce and consumption key points of focus, while confessing that no curatorial directive was given to the artists. He also did not expound on how the selected artists would provide further articulation within the scope of this Biennale. But we had some big names on show.





project proposals under the purview of Committee Chair, Yustina Neni, offered a far more exciting presentation.

All in all, a safe Biennale with safe works, where few addressed the harsh realities of ongoing political protests or democratic deliberations in the Arab region or in Indonesia itself. I skipped the talks and symposium in favour of studio visits, but on the flight back from Jogja, I bumped into one of the symposium's keynote speakers and advisor to the recent Singapore Biennale, T.K. Sabapathy. Not only did the symposium not start on time, but it was also *not* a symposium but a brainstorming session, and the keynote speaker himself was not made aware of that. This Biennale, initiated with much earnestness, is at risk of being little more than a privately funded opportunity for collectors, curators and artists, in that order, to network on a CV-enhancing platform. Flying in that same evening as I departed were about twenty representatives from the Tate, while another contingent from the Mori Museum was due to arrive two days later, to be courted by local collectors and curators, while *Art Forum's* representative had already flown in from LA in order to photograph various personalities (*not* the artwork) for the glib 'Scene + Heard'. It is all very international now, pity no one actually looks at content. ■

clockwise from top: Magdi Mostafa, *Transparent Existence*, 2009. Sound and light installation, dimensions variable. Wael Shawky, *Al Araba Al Madfuna*, 2012. Video still. Video, black-and-white, sound, 21min 21sec. Images courtesy of the artist and Steir-Semler Gallery, Beirut/Hamburg. Eko Nugroho, *Taman Berbulan Kembar (Garden with Twin Moon)*, 2013. Resin sculpture, plastic flowers, Muslim women praying clothes, dried flowers, embroidery, mural, dimensions variable. Jogjakarta Biennale XII.

The 13th Istanbul Biennial was held from 14 September to 20 October 2013; the Singapore Biennale from 26 October 2013 to 16 February 2014; and Jogjakarta Biennale, from 16 November 2013 to 6 January 2014.

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At the National Museum, Basim Magdy (Egypt) presented *Investigating the Colour Spectrum of a Post-Apocalyptic Future Landscape* (2013), a dull slide show of colour tinted barren landscapes, his imagination of a possible future. Magdi Mostafa (Egypt) set up a light and sound installation inside a massive black box at the Langgeng Art Foundation. It did not function, but visitors emerged within seconds with their eyes stung by toxic paint fumes. *Al Araba Al Madfuna*, a film by Wael Shawky (Egypt) previously shown in the Sharjah Biennial, also featured here. Dubai based UBIK (Vivek), who did his residency in Jogja had done some research into a time when communal violence unravelled in Indonesia. UBIK's enquiry into the communist purge of 1965 led him to appropriate a variety of objects such as boy-scout patches, found signage and photographs.

Ahmed Mater's photographic series *Desert of Pharan/Room with a View*, previously circulated in Kochi and Sharjah Biennials, made an appearance here, and was juxtaposed well opposite veteran Indonesian artist FX Harsono's *Purification* (2013). While Mater's images of the Kaaba (Mecca), as seen through the windows of luxury hotel rooms around it, illustrate exactly how religion is being commodified, Harsono's installation gives a reflection on syncretic Islam and displays Hadj souvenirs which are manufactured in China and sold in Indonesia. Harsono's research took him to Cirebon, located on the North coast of Java, where he documented a Brai ritual. Here, the priest leads the Muslim prayer ceremony which, according to the artist, dates back to the 15th century when Islam was adopted and combined with Hindu and Chinese rituals. This syncretism is also reflected in the installation of Indonesian artist Leonardiansyah Allenda's *Chapter 0*. A pendulum, an oriental rug, a tea tray and a camouflage costume, among other things, that were arranged under a red lighting, gave off an air of mystery. The artist disclosed, however, that the work is about the complexity of his family's Arab and Chinese heritage. Indonesian art star Eko Nugroho's arresting installation had perhaps a few too many distracting elements in it, but included one magnificent embroidered tapestry depicting the Sword of Islam, and spelling out HYPOCRITE. However, Nugroho's, Harsono's and Allenda's works, among numerous others, could have done with some editing, or should have been guided into formulating their concepts with tighter precision and cohesion, but of course there was no curatorial directive. In fact the Parallel Programs which invited exhibition, performance or

**Culture in the making**  
**'Making History'**  
 Colombo Art Biennale  
 31 January – 9 February 2014

The Colombo Art Biennale (CAB) opened its third edition on 31 January 2014. What was initiated in 2009, as a small local event for Sri Lankan artists, has now expanded quite substantially to include artists from the adjoining countries and those further afield. 'Imagining Peace' (2009), the theme of the first biennale, was launched at a time when peace was unexpectedly achieved after twenty-six years of civil conflict. The inaugural biennale was followed in 2012 with the explorative theme 'Becoming'. Co-curator Suresh Jayaram, publicly mused in his catalogue essay on how 'normal' Colombo appeared to be, as there were fewer barricades, as well as significant 'building activity', which suggests 'a buoyant economy'. In the event of forward looking nation-building, how does one address post-war anxiety, and how can artists temporarily provide an alternate language to communicate such tension? These were questions raised by the curators then and that still remain unresolved as we attend the 2014 biennale. However, I would have posed the question differently: How does a curator formulate a biennale in a post-war country where the art scene is still nascent and operates in the absence of formal criticism; and where the audience for contemporary art and performance as yet needs to be developed?

Facilitated by a heady mix of Sri Lankan and international curators, Chandraguptha Thenuwara, Neil Butler (UK) and Amit Jain Kumar (India) were selected to develop the third biennale theme 'Making History'. Complimenting this team was Sri Lankan theatre practitioner Ruhanie Perera who curated the live performances – and panel discussions. Curators Butler and Thenuwara acknowledged the intrinsic relationship between artists, their work, and the public, interpreting those interests in their joint catalogue essay. Amit Jain declared it to be 'A Biennale of the People, for the People' as his essay title.

CAB led with live performances, taking art to the street with Bandu Manamperi and Adrian Schvarzstein, or bringing performance into the exhibition space to respond to the artworks, with dance/theatre practitioners such as Venuri Perera and Thomas Pritchard. Manamperi's *Iron Man* performance out on Park Street Mews, saw him taking off his formal shirt and trousers, meticulously ironing out the wrinkles and donning the outfit again. The image of the artist ironing his clothes in various stages of undress was photographed in front of various public monuments in Colombo, and was shown at the JDA Perera Gallery along with other biennale works. Performing as he does, half-dressed in front of grand neo-baroque buildings—the Town Hall, Old Parliament Building, and Colombo National Museum—Manamperi critiques these formal structures, which are representative of history and national identity, through an informal and highly personal domestic activity out in the public sphere. Satirising these lauded monuments through his simple performance, the artist, as a lone actor, contests the authority of the established power structures which dictate decisions regarding democracy, ethnic divide or even art history.

Complimenting this narrative were four works by Pala Pothupitiye. *History Maker* (2014) was a large monument of a nondescript male holding a degree and in full graduation regalia which partially covered his exposed lower half. Placed behind this were



clockwise from left: Gihan Karunaratne, *Ghost*, 2012: Google GPS digitally generated map on giclee print, 841 x 594mm. Photograph Chamara Wijesinghe; Mahbubur Rahman, *Replacement*, 2014. Leather from used army boots, fabric, military uniform, embroidery; Dhanushka Marasinghe, *Conceal of Marks*, 2012. Video loop, 04.08min.



two paintings *History Maker I* and *II* (2014) which appropriate ready-made maps of India that have a South-North orientation. Through a mishmash of ideas and techniques, a figure in graduation cap and gown, was painted into the map. The concept was to illustrate 'colonial education', according to the artist, but what he meant exactly by that remained unclear. In a city where so many public monuments are dedicated to men, I could not help but wonder if Pothupitiye was making a mockery of the dominant patriarchal frame. What worked quite beautifully in terms of form and concept was his *Jaffna Map*. The focal point of the Sri Lankan civil war and ethnic tension, Pothupitiye drew on the Jaffna islands, transforming them into a tiger (for the LTTE) and a lion (Sri Lanka); the islands mutated into fearsome beasts, each reaching out to consume the other.

Pushpakumara Koralegedara's *Illuminated Barbwire* (2014), with twinkling lights and transparent plastic tubing imitating the form of barb-wire, was intended to highlight a history of violence. However, the tubing, as a soft, transparent and almost invisible material could barely convey a sense of tension. Perhaps the result would have been different if actual wire was used, bringing together two different forms to convey two very divergent ideas at the one time. Along the same lines was Pradeep Chandrasiri's installation of a table and two chairs surrounded with coal, *Things I told, Things not heard and things I tell now*, (2014).

Layla Gonaduwa's *The Silverfish* (2014) had an extremely strong and potentially contentious subject, which could have been presented better. Single-handedly tackling the legitimacy of war, history, religion, racial and ethnic stereotypes, through the subversion of an historical document, Gonaduwa contested the authenticity of the Mahavamsa (The Great Dynasty), a chronicle of Sri Lankan origin documenting the rulers and their subjects, between the 6th century BC to 4th century AD. Including the beautiful and familiar form of the silverfish as an

agent of decay, the document was reproduced and presented on a table riddled with holes. Key junctures in the record were subtly altered, to challenge the supposed canon, thereby raising doubt on a text that is considered sacred in Sri Lanka. Audiences who read Gonaduwa's altered text might wonder if history has been misinterpreted.

*Conceal of Marks* (2012) by Dhanushka Marasinghe, another strong work, was a roughly four minute video loop of a man in army boots leaving his footprints in the sand, then gently concealing them with a rake, in turn leaving its own marks behind. Metaphorically addressing the erasure or alteration of history, Marasinghe proposed a scrutiny of historical revisionism through a layered and elegant approach. It is through the inclusion of such works that the curators of CAB took calculated risks. And there were many other artworks that stood out, showing multiple perspectives on history, which varied from the national to the personal. Nina Mangalanayagam explored her half Danish and Tamil identity through a set of nuanced photographs of a family wedding, some relaying palpable tension; Liz Fernando's quiet publication-as-artwork recalled her father's childhood memories of his hometown before the civil war, through photographs and anecdotes. Gihan Karunaratne, on the other hand, took the conversation beyond Sri Lanka to highlight the globally relevant topic of contested public spaces. Seemingly banal-looking maps with architectural markers of central London were coloured and outlined into zones in which protesters could be contained. Looking at these mappings, theatre practitioner Jake Oorloff commented on how theatre and art could address social or political issues by presenting a narrative far removed from the local or the familiar. Indeed, as artist Olivier Grossetête's cardboard *People's Tower* came toppling down at the Independence Square on the final day, I wondered if its political implications had been considered.

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