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## Editorial Introduction In the Making: Experimentation and Experiment in Southeast Asian Art

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# SPECIAL EDITION

*Guest edited by*  
*Amanda Katherine Rath (Goethe University, Frankfurt)*  
*and Wulan Dirgantoro (The University of Melbourne)*

# Editorial Introduction

## In the Making:

### Experimentation and Experiment in Southeast Asian Art

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AMANDA KATHERINE RATH and WULAN DIRGANTORO

The project began from a simple question and a complicated term, *eksperimen*. It was a borrowed English term that had integrated into Bahasa Indonesia and used interchangeably across disciplines and institutions, as well as art circles from the late 1960s to the 1990s. It is and was a term that has carried different connotations across time and space. *Eksperimen* and *eksperimentasi* have been used in Indonesian arts discourse for decades to typically typify works that do not easily conform to conventions and which reside in the space of limbo or threshold or umbrella within which reserved for works that cannot be easily captured by any category labelled ‘traditional’, ‘modern’ or ‘contemporary’.

During our investigations, it has become clear that connotations of ‘experiment’ and ‘experimental’ are not just about the work and materials, but also about the chemistry and sedimented historical layers of the materials themselves, and the histories and knowledge of these in the making of other things. Experiment and experimental art, as far as we have been able to deduce, comes with moral and ethical assumptions and expectations that

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refuse the right of creative practice to separate itself from the community, from its social mission and missive.

This special issue seeks to address the issues and questions around experimentation and the experimental in Southeast Asian arts between the 1950s and late 1990s. Drawing from two conference panels organised by the co-editors during the ICAS (Leiden) and EuroSeas (Berlin) conferences in the summer of 2019, the issue examines the transdisciplinary nature of experimentation in the fields of visual culture, performance, music, poetry and spoken word, and sound in Southeast Asia.

## Mapping Experimental

“All art is experimental,” wrote the American film critic Gene Youngblood, “otherwise it isn’t art.” This is the accepted truism for artmaking. Our conception of this special issue pushes this truism further by asking the question of what makes experimental art/s experimental in Southeast Asia.

Pamela Corey, in her response to the ICAS panel, raised the stakes by highlighting the contrast between experimental practices in Southeast Asia and its European counterparts. Corey cautioned that the remystification of experimental art in Southeast Asia serves a different purpose; that experimental art practices in Southeast Asia take different forms from comparative examples in Europe. Further, she asked the question whether experimentation is only effective insofar as it is a spur, or is attached, to critical discourse that impacts the broader artistic community.

Certainly, ‘experimental’ art is used to trace the development of contemporary art as linked to broader social movements in Southeast Asia, with a particular focus on installation and performance art. For example, Eva Bentecheva’s research on conceptual art practices in the Philippines in the 1960s–70s highlighted how ‘experimental’ practices by Philippines artists such as Roberto Chabet, Raymundo Albano and Judy Sibayan offered scope for artists to advance locally-driven discourses and concepts, as well as subtle forms of criticism under the authoritarian Marcos regime in the 1970s. More recently, the curatorial approach of the *Awakenings: Art in Society (1960s–1990s)* exhibition that travelled to Japan, South Korea and Singapore reaffirms the link between experimental practices, art collectives and social movements across East and Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup>

Responding to Corey’s insightful comments, this special edition seeks to deepen this well-known link by, among others, mapping the terms of reference in various fields to capture the different nuances of experimentation. For example, texts by art critics Kusnadi, Sudarmadji and Sanento Yuliman

indicated that the terms *baru* (new) and *kontemporer* were both about the new, the modern and the recent. The terms *baru* (new) and *eksperimental* (experimental) were simultaneously used to label conceptual and discourse-building in visual artworks and practices in the late New Order period. Kris Ramlan's interview with Indonesian poet and sufist Abdul Hadi WM in this edition emphasises the importance of being attuned to different registers of language in thinking about experimentation in poetry, particularly, its link to visual practice. The documentation from the *Pameran Puisi Konkret III* [Concrete Poetry Exhibition III] exhibition of 1978 that accompanied the interview further points out this deep entanglement between language and visual arts practice.

Historically, experimentation has been in dialogue, intimate and tense, with Euro-American-centric traditions and methodologies of innovation. Contributors in this special issue discuss works by visual artists, musicians, poets and writers from Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and Timor-Leste who engaged with and participated in the experimental (new) art, film, poetry and music scenes in Europe and North America.

For those artists who went to Europe and North America, their prolonged stays meant not only their further integration and contribution to experimental art, music, theatre, poetry and film in Europe and North America, but also a renewed questioning of their identity in and across the different cultural and political contexts of the time. meLê yamomo's paper outlines José Maceda's (1917–2004) sonic experimentations that emerged from the artist's "internal crisis of his European music career and his Southeast Asian context". The internal crisis that yamomo examines in the article was one of the major drivers for Maceda's incorporation of Philippine indigenous sonic elements to free avant-garde musical practices from the influence of European composers. Resonating with Maceda's experimentation, David Albert Peransi's (1939–93) time in the Netherlands and Germany, as discussed in Amanda Katherine Rath's presentation at the conferences, highlighted the drive to theorise experimental practices in Indonesia as shaped by his experience and understanding of European contexts in the early 1970s. For Peransi, *Senibaru* and the 'Ekperimental' not only pushed the boundaries of artmaking of the time but also argued against a perceived rationalization in artistic practice that should remain rooted in its sociability and spiritual origins within the community.

However, one did not necessarily need to travel outside Southeast Asia to experience the debates that preoccupied the modern and contemporary art fields in Europe and North America. Eva Bentcheva's introduction to the *Three Kings* and *Sound Bags* performance and Chloe Ho's article discuss

how experimental practices blur the perceived boundaries of visual art and theatre. In the latter, Ho's examination of Kuning's practice demonstrates the possibilities of *shìjué* theatre to situate visual artists' autonomy within the space of black box theatre in Singapore. The debate and proliferation of different, and often inaccurate, terms to describe Kuning's practice echoed an earlier debate that occurred between proponents of 'theatrical art' and the 'white cube' gallery in New York. As Ho observes, "while New York was geographically and culturally distant from Singapore, its battles were being exported and felt in Singapore".

Relatedly, the interdisciplinary pull between different artistic disciplines is also reflected in several articles and translation pieces in this special edition. Nur Hanim Khairuddin's article is reprinted from her essay that accompanied her solo exhibition at the NUS Museum in 2003. Khairuddin's intricate installation work was inspired by the Malay notion of *semangat*, particularly how *semangat* imbued animate and inanimate objects. At the same time, the works were also drawn from the artist's interest in Hemingway's work and heavy metal music, especially how these seemingly disparate elements captured the political atmosphere of the Mahathir era in Malaysia. In this regard, Khairuddin's article also resonates with Sarena Abdullah and Carmen Nge's discussion about the participation of the punk and underground scene in Wong Hoy Cheong's curatorial projects to disrupt the sanctity of the Balai Seni Lukis Negara in Kuala Lumpur.

We also consider experimental/experimentation in Southeast Asia as a creative site and platform in which artists produce new forms of art to respond to national calls for self-identity. Maria Madeira's article on women's contribution to Timor-Leste's culture is highly instructive in how the notion of experimentation in Timor-Leste contemporary art practices emerged as a response to rebuilding the cultural identity of the youngest nation in Southeast Asia. Their artistic experimentation should be considered against the backdrop of the long aftermath of colonialism in Timor-Leste, post-independence nation-building and the diasporic space, where gendered subjectivity is in constant tension with cultural and political identities.

Importantly, most contributors in this special edition disturb the assumptions that experimental art and experimentation typically took place outside of institutional purview. Nashar's (1928–94) translated essay exemplified this by pointing out how the interaction between visual artists and a theatre performance happened within the spaces of an institution. Katherine Bruhn's introduction of Nashar's *Surat Kepada Seorang Aktor* [Letter to an Actor], together with Sarena Abdullah and Carmen Nge, emphasise the critical role of institutions such as the Balai Seni Lukis Negara and galeriMIA in Kuala

Lumpur and Taman Ismail Marzuki (Ismail Marzuki Cultural Centre), a cultural centre funded by the Jakarta provincial government, as a fertile breeding ground for experimentation in Malaysian and Indonesian visual arts. Bruhn's text reappraises Indonesia's art historiography, which focused heavily on the avant-garde group *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru* (Indonesian New Art Movement) as the driver of Indonesian contemporary art and conveniently forgot how the state-sponsored institution strongly supported the group's exhibitions.

The articles presented in this special issue provide insights into the complexity of experiments and experimentation in Southeast Asia across different periods through their subject's critical engagement with the world around them. Discursively and historically, the concepts and labels of experimentation and the experimental have been deployed and employed to accommodate works and practices combining techniques, temporalities and cultural registers unfitting for established categories of artistic and cultural practices. Such developments have also been commonly accepted as precursors of contemporary art in Southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup> This perception, while apt in some ways, we feel is too generalized and does not tell us enough about the breadth of practices, influences and collaboration in Southeast Asian art. This special edition argues that experimentation and the experimental unsettle such mainstream understanding to provide a more nuanced and complicated narrative.

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## BIOGRAPHIES

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Eva Bentscheva, “From Ephemeral Experiences to Lasting Legacies: Discourses on Experimental Art in the Philippines during the 1960s and 1970s”, *Tate Papers* 32, 2019, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/32/discourses-experimental-art-philippines-1960s-1970s> [accessed 11 November 2022]; Bae Myungji, Seng Yu Jin and Suzuki Katsuo, “Awakenings: Art in Society in Asia 1960s–1990s”, catalogue essay, Tokyo: National Museum of Modern Art, 2018, pp. 218–23. See also Nora Taylor, “Art Without History? Southeast Asian Artists and Their Communities in the Face of Geography”, *Art Journal* 7, no. 2 (2011): 6–23; Isabel Ching, “Tracing (Un)Certain Legacies: Conceptualism in Singapore and the Philippines”, in *Histories, Practices, Interventions: A Reader in Singapore Contemporary Art*, ed. Jeffrey Say and Seng Yu Jin, 2016, pp. 49–59.
- <sup>2</sup> The literature is already extensive. See, for example, Jim Supangkat, “Seni Rupa Era 80: Pengantar untuk Biennale Seni Rupa Jakarta [Visual Arts in the 80s: An Introduction to Jakarta Biennale of Visual Arts]”, in *Katalog Pameran Biennale Seni Rupa Jakarta IX 1993* [The Catalogue of the 9th Jakarta Biennale], Jakarta: Dewan Kesenian Jakarta (Jakarta Art Council), 1993, pp. 13–27; Ahmad Mashadi, “Framing the 1970s”, *Third Text* 25, no. 4 (2011): 409–17; Nora Taylor, “The Southeast Asian Art Historian as Ethnographer?”, *Third Text* 25 (2011): 475–88.