

## SPECIAL FEATURE 03

# Undoing Regionalism in Southeast Asia



Mella Jaarsma, *Asal - Floating Images*, 2005  
batik, military costumes, embroidery and aluminium dimensions variable    Courtesy of the artist

### Text by June Yap

The question of regionalism has slid back onto the table. It probably had never left, but in recent times it has reared its head again, with the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Economic Community scheduled for 2015 gaining discursive momentum with its nearing deadline. While largely an economic and political plan, the sense of the region having some significant force again, appears real and imminent, recalling the epoch of the Asian Dragons or Tigers, led by expanding markets and industrialisation of their time. Interest in the region of Asia is certainly not recent, the speed and impact of contemporary Chinese and Indian art upon the international art scene, their respective economic

growths facilitating, a not so distant past. Southeast Asia on the other hand while riding on the coat-tails of these transformations has appeared to be slower on the uptake and its bounty, however the increasing presence of art from this part of the region in art fairs, exhibitions and other platforms are of import, not to mention the individuals contributing to its visibility.

The consolidation of a regional aesthetic discourse even prior to this has not been lacking, the foundations of which have been laid by many artists, curators, art historians and institutions that have in their own ways attempted to forge networks of understanding and exchange. The question of regionalism however lingers, what does it imply, and how does it contribute to local discourse and

aesthetic developments? The quest for a regional front often appears in an analysis of the different-yet-related practices and aesthetics of the region, fashioned into nationalist discourses with varying introductions of dominant or marginal aesthetic highlights. The Venice Biennale, ostensibly the most popular nationalist platform for contemporary art is an interesting site in which one may watch nationalism play out within each pavilion, case in point the sense of exciting radicalness that pervaded the Polish pavilion of 2011, with its presentation of Israeli artist Yael Bartana. At Venice, Southeast Asia has had its sporadic forays, helmed by Singapore and Thailand, with artists from Indonesia, Malaysia and Philippines making appearances in its main and collateral exhibitions; that is till 2013, when Indonesia comes on stage this time as a national pavilion, and Singapore, a hiatus. In spite of intermittent participation, these episodes are arguably important in the visibility of the region and thus their regional brethren, if claimed regional association is by any means true.

The history of regionalist discourse in art may be traced in recent times back to the modernisms or modernities that have been theorised, and that leave their modernist narrative mark on contemporary aesthetics. In as much as these served well in locating regional practices, the trope of hybridity that characterises the definition of modernisms of the region has some limits, not that these aesthetic explorations, pairing local and other, have not been stimulating, however their assumption of happy conjunction, and implication of chaste cultures and ramifications have perhaps not been fully plumbed to reveal the inherent contestations and conflict that occurred in the production and promotion of these artworks. In addition, the attribute of a tension of distinction and correlation, both inter-regional and nation-to-nation, couched upon tradition and history as criterion of authenticity and value, tethers contemporary art practice, restricting its production and exchange, and where tourist and market exoticism has had a hand in keeping the local 'local' enough. Though that is not to say that differentiation by reason of locale, history and politics, and even indigeneity, does not have its place and is crucial to

art practice and its context, but that we may need to think also of purposeful regionalism in relation to the project and politics of globalisation, and in turn how these two relate to other apparently fractious developments of initiatives, response and impulse within the region as rejoinders to the former two.

In the midst of still evolving economies and developing infrastructure in the arts, contested borders, cultural overlap and traumas unaddressed, is there a cultural regionalism that may be spoken of? The perennial problem of observations of the region as a whole, is imagining that there is such a regional perspective, that there exists an objective vantage point to view the region. The narratives of modernities and nation one would imagine would balk at such concomitance. Yet disparate perspectives from different parts of the region does not quite make a region. In its place perhaps may be hazarded the proposition of neo-conceptualist tendencies as a means to corral the nations involved. Certainly the formalism of conceptual art has had its visitation, and beyond that a neo-conceptualist dematerialisation of form and the production of alternative symbolic vocabulary and meaning, that has become more common within the region. Such tendencies have also played their part in the transformation of aesthetic expression into a modality for the trafficking of ideas, giving voice to the estranged, and in suggesting change. But it is enough, and does it side-step the crux of regionalism? And before it would appear that the question of regionalism has been edged off in its entirety here, it is assured that this is not the case. On the contrary it is a particular understanding of regionalism that is being undone. The subject of regionalism instead, if it should be deemed relevant, might do well to expand in a few respects, suggested here via three artworks.

Dutch-born, Indonesia-based (though 'based' does injustice to her almost 30-year residence there) artist Mella Jaarsma's *Asal - Floating Images* (2005) presents the form of the 'shelter' distinctive in her practice with the motifs of cloud and water shared in Persian Timurid and Chinese paintings, and in the Mega Mendung batik motif of the sultanate of Cirebon. The term 'asal' referring to a question

often asked of the artist ‘Asal dari mana?’ or, where are you from, with the etymology of asal denoting authenticity, that the artist is constantly up against defending. That regionalism implies encapsulation, and with it an implication of authenticity, is the first problem.

Cambodian artist Svay Sareth grew up in a refugee camp in Thailand returning to his birthplace of Battambang in the early 1990s. In *Hunter* (2008) a work in iron of an image depicting a group of hunters in the French village of Larôn, as he traversed the countryside, that reminded him of encounters of soldiers in the forest while accompanying his father as a child, is beaten into the metal surface using the numeric characters of metal movable type. In Sareth’s work, and for the artist at that moment, histories collide — Cambodian, French and otherwise without distinction. To contextualise Sareth’s work necessitates a sensitivity to the subjective chronologic rationale and tendency for historical filtering that takes place in regional discussion.

Finally, in Vietnamese artist Le Quang Ha’s *The Night Dogs* (2012), canine shapes, of dogs and flying beasts, charge out from the dark, slavering and fangs bared, undisputedly confrontational. The metaphors that Le Quang Ha employs in his works are generally understood as social critiques and appear barely concealed in their allusion. Yet recognising the implications of their accusation, it just circumspectly falls short of being entirely explicit. One irrefutable shared experience of the region is the proscription of narrative, and the artwork invoked here suggests through these shape-shifting figures that the somewhat shifty nature of the question of regionalism obscures the more present question, not of what regionalism might involve and entail, but whom it is being produced for.

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Svay Sareth, *Hunter*, 2008  
carving on iron, 140×70cm  
Courtesy of the artist



Le Quang Ha, *The Night Dogs*, 2012  
oil on canvas, 195×155cm  
Courtesy of the artist