
A recent conference and exhibition in Chiang Mai, Thailand, explored the impact of globalisation on Southeast Asian artists and their artwork. Kerstin Duell, who attended both events, shares her views on the exhibition 'Identities versus Globalisation?', and the conference 'Debating the Politics of Culture, Identity and Globalisation'.

Culture, Identity and Globalisation in Southeast Asian Art

Globalisation appears like a huge stream that intrudes, overflows and in the best case fertilises societies around the globe. How Southeast Asian artists deal with this stream of information and rapid growth of visual culture will determine their survival, cultural significance, and expansion beyond the region.

A wide range of issues linked to the construction of identity in this increasingly globalised world were discussed and displayed during the conference "Debating the Politics of Culture, Identity and Globalisation" and the art exhibition 'Identities versus Globalisation?' in February in Chiang Mai. Both events were skilfully organised by the Chiang Mai regional office of the German Heinrich Boell Foundation, an institution affiliated with the German Alliance 90/Greens Party. Since its inception in early 2000, the Heinrich Boell Foundation has worked at the merging issues of art, gender and development politics in Southeast Asia.

The exhibition featured nearly sixty artists from Southeast Asian states and their more than one hundred works on defining, expressing and defending their identity in a globalised world. The conference brought together these artists with journalists, researchers and political scientists mainly from Southeast Asia as well as South Asia, Europe and North America. Over three days, very lively discussions ensued: Art and identity construction within the framework of socio-political dynamics and transitions, censorship and in some cases foreign domination were tackled from very different, and sometimes

opposite angles. The artwork displayed and the controversies that emerged revealed scepticism, criticism or hesitant optimism at best towards globalisation and "progress".

Choong Kam Kow, director of the Malaysian Institute of Arts, voiced the insecurity and even fears experienced by many over the possibly diluting effect of globalisation on individual and national cultural identity. Looking at Asia as a region, he touched on the implications surrounding the very survival of Asian social structures and values in the face of globalisation.

While the negative effects and the inevitability of globalisation are very well known, the question remains whether they outweigh the positive developments. Some of the pros and cons from developmental, economical and political viewpoints were provided by interesting presenters, such as Nicola Bullard, co-director of Focus on the Global South; Markus Balser, author and journalist; and Khaled Ahmed, consultative editor with *'The Friday Times'* in Pakistan. From an artist point of view, Farah Wardani, editor of the Indonesian 'Carbon Art Magazine', stressed the positive effects of internationalism in interdisciplinary creative processes, which allow like-minded people to connect with the global art scene. At the same time though, she pointed at the danger of marginalisation of artists having to defend themselves on the global art market.

The two workshops during the conference dealt with religious fundamentalism, ethnic identity, regional and Thai-Burmese relations as playing fields of identity politics.

Art as an Expression of Identity

Art is an articulation of existence through visual strategies that captures one's being in a particular moment. Artwork is the embodiment and expression of the artist's identity, yet this artwork also creates a new identity for the artist at the same time. While in modern times, art is seen as the creation of an individual, the individual cannot escape the influence of his or her particular society, time, Zeitgeist and so on.

Identity, then, is only partly constructed, and art can function to express both the process of construction and the struggle with externally induced aspects of identity. As a channel of identity con-



Conference
Photo: Kerstin Duell



Exhibition
Photo: Kerstin Duell



Farah Wardani,
Editor, Carbon Art Magazine
Photo: Kerstin Duell

Nearly sixty talented artists from ten Southeast Asia countries are participating in the exhibition, "Identities versus Globalisation?", which is organised by the regional office of the Heinrich Boell Foundation, following the predecessor "The End of Growth?" exhibition.

The exhibition, shown at the Chiang Mai Art Museum between February 7th and 29th 2004, is scheduled for a tour (the National Gallery in Bangkok, May 8th – 28th, 2004 and the Dahlem Museum, Berlin, October 22nd 2004 – January 16th 2005). Exhibition curator Dr. Jorg Loschmann has been working with the artists, other curators and partners, in identifying and presenting relevant works.

The Heinrich Boell Foundation has been initiating efforts in the region with reference to the formation of identity in the context of modernisation and globalization, and the theme of this exhibition arose as these concerns influence intellectual and artistic endeavours in this part of the world. The exhibition demonstrates the growing function of visual arts in offering glimpses into the social uncertainties and significance felt here, and it examines questions about how people think of themselves and their societies, and how the individual is perceived by and relate to the community – the wider world.

The event in Chiang Mai was complimented by an international symposium "Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation" and a conference "Debating Identity and Globalisation". These activities provided the artists, curators, art critics, administrators, managers, specialists, journalists, archivists, educators, and the general public to discuss the issues.

In Berlin, the exhibition will offer Germans and other Europeans to discover how inhabitants of the East are responding to the phenomenal economic growth, increasing commerce and trade, and rampant tourism.

At the 'Monument of Round Trays'
2003, Installation
Ly Hoang Ly, Vietnam
Photo: Kerstin Duell



White Love, Love White
2003, Installation
Norberto Roldan,
The Philippines

struction, art can mirror personal conflicts of different loyalties and identities on the individual, religious, ethnic and national level. As an agent of change, art can document and criticise the artists' particular environment which is shaped by contemporary ideologies and polemics, socio-political systems, religion and the like.

Historically, the development of art has played a substantial role in the construction of national identity. However, as Erica Tan (a Singaporean artist living in London) said, artwork is context-based rather than nationality-based. Shifting artwork to a different context exposes it to new interpretations. Ultimately, identity is more about strategy, she stated.

Several artists presently live and work in countries other than their origin. While multiple identities and heritage in the 'Diaspora' do not present a new development in history, globalisation has increased this trend.

Art and Globalisation

Ideally, globalisation means reaching out and encompassing the globe by breaking down vast cultural, geographical, ideological and technological differences. Hence, the notion of a 'global village', that is a world shrunk in size due to speed and infrastructure. Powerful images can be transmitted via TV and the Internet to everybody who has access to this technology. This very access, however, presents the limits of globalisation: access to technology, internet, electricity and English literacy. People without that access remain voiceless and unseen. The installation "From the Perimeter" by the Vietnamese Dinh Quan Le, therefore, shows photos on wooden stalks with parts of faces to remind the world of the "unheard and unseen others". Enlarged mouths are calling out, and huge eyes are staring at the onlooker in an impressive reflection of their muteness and our deafness and blindness.



Photo: Kerstin Duell

In 'Protest', Manit Sriwanichpoom (Thailand) sets out with a similar intention to document the politically marginalised and even discredited. His series of photographs shows the weekly demonstrations in front of the Government House in Bangkok between April 2002 and April 2003.

Inherent to the concept of globalisation is a notion of a centre from where this movement originates. Arguably, this very scattered 'centre' is the 'Western world' that includes Europe, North America, and Australia-New Zealand. As modernisation conveys Western values of individualism, democracy, and a capitalistic market economy, modern art is, similarly, dominated by



*Refugee Only
2002, Installation
Mella Jaarsma,
Indonesia*

Western aesthetic concepts, values, concerns and products.

Artists have not been the only ones resenting the Western domination in all spheres. Counter-movements have emerged to what Farah Wardani calls a 'totalitarian grip of globalisation', and Roshan Dhunjibhoy a 'net around people forcing them to march in the same direction and dictating ONE way of happiness and entertainment that everyone has to adopt'. At the same time, Western institutions also facilitate and support local art infrastructures and local contexts, just like the Heinrich Boell Foundation has done with the organisation of this conference and exhibition.



*From the Perimeter
2003, Installation
Diah Quang Le, Vietnam*

For artists, this increasingly globalised world provides on the one hand great opportunities in terms of learning, inspiration, networking and interchange with other artists as well as a much wider audience/public. Entering the international market may, on the other hand, lead to marginalisation. This is especially the case with artists from developing countries who are notoriously under-represented in international art fairs and exhibitions held in Western countries.

Norberto Roldan's installation "White Love, Love White", a life-size photo of the execution of a Filipino insurgents by a Filipino collaborator under the supervision of an American soldier drastically depicts the love-hate relationship of Asians and "Whites". The label of a Filipino whitening agent further exaggerates the "Whiteness".

Transforming Identity in the course of Globalisation

Immense changes in the socio-economic structures due to development, modernisation and mass media have given rise to the emergence of new societies and new options of identity construction. While there are increased opportunities in every aspect of life, a crisis of values and loss of tradition also exists. Where, then, do Southeast Asian artists place themselves in the face of expanding visual culture and in the information age induced by capitalism and globalisation and the double standards inherent in it? They are struggling to come to terms with identities that accommodate the tensions between tradition and modernity, rural and urban life, centre (the

Photo: Kerstin Duell



West) and periphery, minority and majority, inferiority and superiority, race, gender and so on.

Throughout the discussions, many artists agreed that the first level of identity remains the human being as an individual without any notion of nationality. Therefore, a strong separation and, hence, choice between 'the East' and 'the West' is pointless. It would be more fruitful to adopt or reject some aspects of both. "The more we talk about identity the more we get lost. It's just art - a fusion between East and West, and we are artists," said a Malay artist.

However, the fusion has to be a conscious choice. Choong Kam Kow warned that an adoption of Western values without evaluation, examination and discrimination could only lead to a decline of other cultures and values. Local identities, social obligations and cultural missions should not be forgotten.

Eddin Khoo a Malaysian poet, writer and translator, criticised the "bastardisation of culture, and disenchantment and dispossession of history in Southeast Asia". He reminded the audience that "there are vast points of reference, but we create many categories for us out of fear".

Art and Identity Politics

Art mirrors and reacts to socio-political realities. It has been patronised, celebrated, utilised and suppressed by political and economic actors. State policies effectively shape an artists' environment, freedom of expression and make art the ownership of either a small elite or of the masses – two extremes that prevent the diversification of art. In the latter case, art tends to be subjected to mainstream aesthetics and themes, and tailored to commercial needs.

Traditionally, the arts have flourished under private and state patronage while at the same time the dependence on those in power was resented in varying degrees. Today, roles and dependencies of artists vis-a-vis the respective ruling political and economic class range from opposition to documentation to support. Especially in the face of political realities in Southeast Asia where many countries are undergoing various stages of political transitions, artists are very conscious and wary of politics.

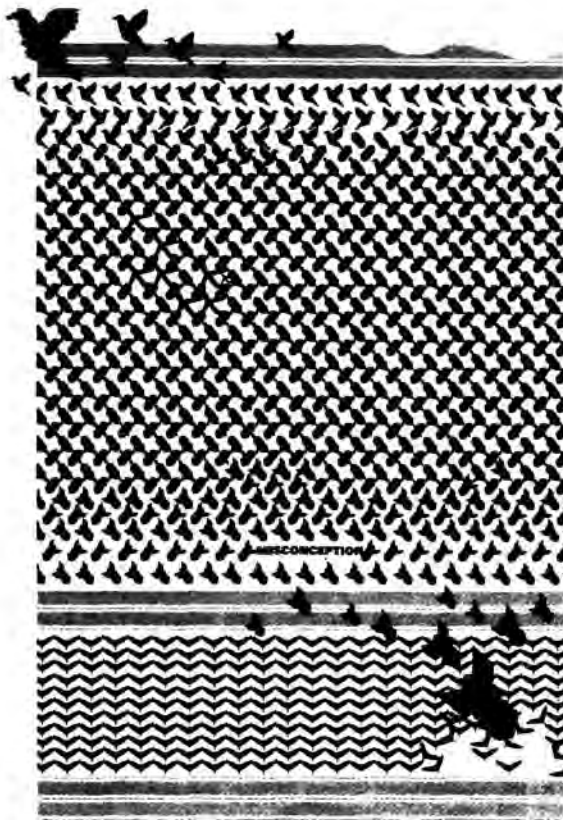
*Eddin Khoo,
Malaysian poet
Photo: Kerstin Duell*



*The Hidden Faces of the
New Generation
2003, Video Installation
Minh Phuong, Vietnam
Photo: Kerstin Duell*



Photo: Kerstin Duell



Misconception
2002, print on canvas
Zaid Omar, Malaysia

During the conference, there was a strong emphasis on Islam and several of the pieces of art dealt with the struggle of preserving a Muslim identity in an increasingly hostile environment. In 'Misconception', Zaid Omar, a Malay, used a traditional Muslim pattern and its now hybrid meanings: the pattern dissolves into birds signifying peace that fly away at the top of the canvas. At the bottom of the print, the pattern slowly disintegrates into planes and then bombs.

The conference and the art exhibition displayed the vast cultural, ethnic and religious diversity present in the ASEAN region. Regional notions about globalisation carry a deep ambiguity that is clearly reflected in the artworks and statements. The tension between the fear of marginalisation as developing countries on the one side and the opportunities created by 'open spaces' and the overcoming of limitations and barriers in a globalised world remains to be resolved. It is not a question of preventing globalisation but of regulating it to benefit all.

Kerstin Duell studied Southeast Asia, Latin America and Political Science in Berlin, and completed an MA at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Currently, she is on a PhD scholarship for international relations at the National University of Singapore. She has worked for the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation (Berlin) on issues connected to Afghanistan, and for UNESCO's World Heritage Centre (Paris) concerning Burma. Kerstin spent more than a year in Bangkok, working as a researcher and photographer on Burmese issues; her latest research documents HIV/AIDS projects for children in Cambodia and Thailand. She has also held solo photographic exhibitions at UNESCAP and the Goethe Institute (Bangkok), and her photographs on Buddhism and socio-political topics have been published in several newspapers and magazines.