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The GREAT NON-MALAYSIAN Portrait
The Cultural Politics of Difference from the Malaysian perspective

A thesis paper submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts

in

New Media and Digital Arts

By

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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read
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ABSTRACT

My thesis investigates the production of art in terms of modes of representation. It argues that representation of art in Malaysia is structured by its cultural politics of difference. Specifically, in this thesis I examine the artistic practice of three Malaysian artists - Reza Piyadasa, Ismail Zain, and Niranjan Rajah: and in turn reflect upon my own experience as an artist and curator, adapting to a particular mode of representation. Finally, with "the great NON-MALAYSIAN portrait", I attempt to highlight the theoretical underpinning that reveals my dialogue with the ideas and politics of these artists.

DEDICATION

I would like to express my endless appreciation to my mentors, Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjan Rajah for being my inspiration. With that, I would like to dedicate this thesis for them, as this would not be possible without their foregrounding theoretical works that was done prior to my engagement with the Malaysian art scene.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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The basis for Malaysian politics of difference

In 1972, a prominent and reputable Malaysian artist- Redza Piyadasa[1] presented an artwork titled "The Great Malaysian Landscape" (fig.1). In this work, Piyadasa highlighted the context of art production.[2] It is part of series that he was developing during the seventies, in an attempt to critique the Malaysian artistic practice and to re-position the Malaysian identity through art. This is achieved by reflecting on local politics.[3] Piyadasa realized that within the rapidly shrinking world of art discourse, grand narratives such as art history could no longer be confined within the single categorization by style; instead it should accommodate diverse voices reflected upon specific context of art production.[4]

By examining "The Great Malaysian Landscape", what became obvious is Piyadasa cunningly highlighted the mode of presentation by labeling the materials that surrounds the artworks such as the frame, title, image, signature and surface. According to the artist, this method or mode of presentation originates from the western ideology of art and aesthetic study, an ideology that has been injected into the Malaysian art, culture and

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[1] Beverly Yong, a Malaysian curator writes, Redza Piyadasa is a well-known Malaysian artist, critic, historian, curator and provocateur. His career, so much of it spent making, criticizing, documenting, teaching, promoting Malaysian art. His body of works consistently attempted to forge broader, more critical and rigorous ways of seeing and thinking, and a formidable collection of critical and historical writing on Malaysian art and beyond.

[2] Speaking about Redza Piyadasa's work "the great Malaysian Landscape", Yap Sau Bin explains "This is a succession of propositions, of unveiling the myth in painting, in sculptural forms, the structures of art objects and leading to the investigation of the cultural and social context of the production of art."

[3] Yap Sau Bin further elaborates about Redza Piyadasa's work as "…the intention of articulating an eastern/localized aesthetic as an artistic practice"

[4] David Craven argues that '...if art history can no longer periodise... cultures by stylistic categories... [the] discipline nevertheless must deal critically with the 'visual languages' and discourses of nation-states and national institutions... suggesting a replacement of traditional art historical periodisations of style with a sense of the visual languages of nations"

society. He was certainly aware of the cerebral conception of art, rooted from the religious crisis of the west.[5] His awareness is clearly reflected in "The Great Malaysian Landscape" as the western frame of contextualization is emphasized - to force the viewer to realize the means of understanding an artwork is through its borrowed methodology, one that does not fit coherently with the Malaysian cultural context.[6]
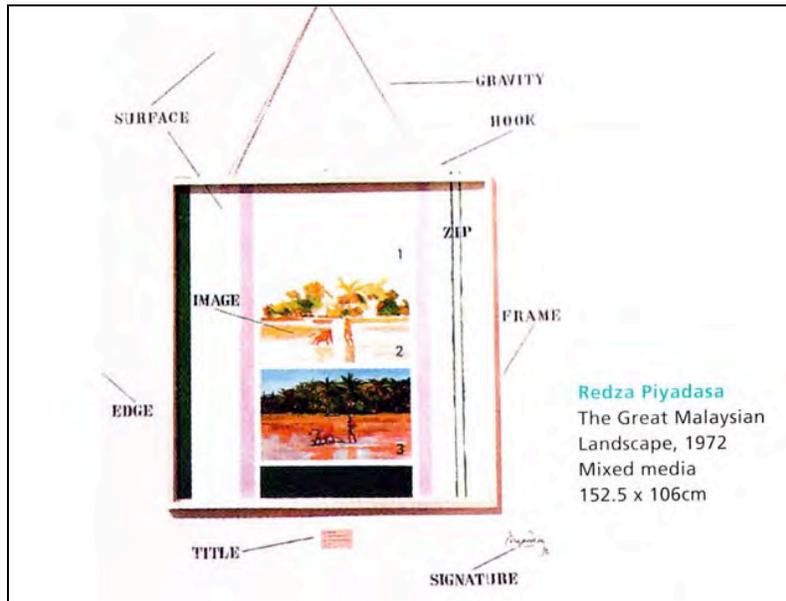
Fig. 1
"The Great Malaysian Landscape" by Redza Piyadasa, 1972
Courtesy of national Art Gallery of Malaysia

Undeniably, this specificity of the Malaysian cultural context is revealed through the use of a landscape painting as a material for the creation of his artwork. The painting is done by an anonymous-local Malaysian artist that richly reveals the typical Malaysian

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[5] The famous Anthropologist, Alfred Gill explains "We have to recognize that the aesthetic attitude is a specific historical product of the religious crisis of the Enlightenment and the rise of the Western science, and that it has no applicability to civilizations, which have not internalized the Enlightenment as we have."
[6] Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa writing about their Mystical Reality work stated, "Clearly, the link with a traditional culture is all but severed today as far as the plastic arts are concerned. What with 20th century scientific and psychological advancements, the serious Asian modernists have been left with little choice but to lean heavily on a modern art tradition that has its origin in the western scientific and intellectual climate"

narrative tradition. This narration is uncovered by having the same painting in 3 stages – from blank canvas to basic outline and finally the complete drawing of landscape, all placed vertically one on top of another. Piyadasa intentionally revealed the process of painting done by an unknown author to depict art practice in traditional culture.

Art practice in traditional culture, often the product of inter-generational and fluid social and communal creative processes - reflects and identifies a community's history, values, cultural and social identity.[7] While lying at the heart of a community's identity, art is also perceived as 'living' in traditional culture – constantly recreated as traditional artists and practitioners pass on their skills and knowledge to the next generation. Therefore, creativity is marked by a dynamic interplay between collective and individual inspiration. With this dynamic and creative process, it is often difficult to know what constitutes independent creator – a single author. As such, the anonymous character of the landscape painting, framed in a process-oriented format is a key point that lies at the heart of "The Great Malaysian Landscape".

Overlapping this philosophy in Piyadasa's work, the sense of uniqueness and originality that stands as pillars of value in the modern art context is weakened. It revokes the special status of the singularity in authorship that represents elitism in art. Piyadasa was critiquing the form of representation that creates a hegemonic understanding of art, as

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[7] World intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) describes Traditional cultural expression/folklore as a practice handed down from one generation to another, either orally or by imitation, reflect a community's cultural and social identity, consist of characteristic elements of a community's heritage, are made by 'authors unknown' and/or by communities and/or by individuals communally recognized as having the right, responsibility or permission to do so, are often not created for commercial purposes, but as vehicles for religious and cultural expression, and are constantly evolving, developing and being recreated within the community.

envisioned by the system it operates – the euro-centric modernist system of value. This is clearly stated in his manifesto titled Towards Mystical Reality:

> *"Ours has been a total dependence on a system of aesthetics that derives its impetus from western philosophical considerations. Malaysian artists have, as a result, not been able to come up with a viewpoint of reality that differs from that being adopted by western artists"* [8]

Being highly allegorical, Piyadasa's drawings, collages and installations critiques the institutionalized modes of representation. He broke away from the rigid formalism that was the standard in Malaysia during the 60's by utilizing different forms and materials to articulate his idea of an art. Unfortunately, the assumption of Piyadasa's criticism, which is based on binary model, often with a mission of a self-fulfilling prophecy in finding cultural authenticity, continued to be projected upon the former colonizer. Such critique was due only to the fact of a vacuum in representation that continues to haunt post-colonial states such as Malaysia. The modern Malaysia is perceived to exist in a state of conflict with the western counterpart based on profoundly distinct cultural values. This in turn perpetuates an on-going effort by the Malaysian artists to seek and locate the imagined cultural accuracy that would supposedly fill the vacuum in representation. [9]

Discourse on cultural accuracy and ingenuity provide the resources to express dissatisfaction, forge identities and fight inequalities. It forms a vast terrain for the

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[8] Piyadassa, Redza and Esa, Sulaiman, Towards a mystical reality, National Art Gallery of Malaysia, 1974, p.4

[9] The curator for the recent "Takung" exhibition, Hasnul Jamal Saidon explains the Malaysian artistic scene as such "Therefore, the production of cultural objects that connotes ethnicity and identity (modern and modernized pre-modern) is increasingly becoming a form of myth factory…meaning produced by such "modern myth factory" are in reality not natural, but can be changed according to the desire to control and dominate docile cultures (to gain consensus)."

exercise of power, especially by the non-western counterpart. This is obvious as the politics of difference in Malaysia is crucial in the formation of national identity, through the articulation of cultural legitimacy, validated by artistic practice.[10] The debate on cultural authenticity is based on historical agency that shapes cultural identity, a self-justifying mantra. Conversely, as identity move across time, scale and context, their mobility links distinct subjects, artifacts and environment. Culture, as the proper scrutiny of historical evidence would show, are marvelous hybrids: they have never been pure, self-consistent entities. Historically, they have evolved through exchange and synthesis, through the encounter of different races, religions and philosophies.[11] The truth has more to do with fundamental differentials of economic and political power than with cultural differences. As such, the whole notion of cultural authenticity is an imagined ontological foundation for the politics of difference as being pursuit to revitalize the so-called "traditional" art practice.

This is an astonishing but self-evident and embarrassing observation on my part. I must admit that the current discourse in Malaysian aesthetics stems from the binary perspective of worldview. As I struggle with the label of being a "Malaysian artist", my efforts to understand the politics of difference in Malaysia lead me to the conception of "the great NON-MALAYSIAN portrait". Proceeding from the work of the late Redza Piyadasa, I searched for an alternative theory and philosophy of art, one that can accommodate better

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[10] In the plenary meeting of National cultural congress held on August 20th 1971, Prof. Ungku A. Aziz proposed that the "Art for Art Sake" attitude evident in contemporary Malaysia should be changed to "Art for Society". As Syed Ahmad Jamal has recorded "He stated that the creators had been given full freedom to create, and that the country should now pay attention to art as an element in the economic and political development of the nation.

[11] Prof. Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney writing about culture explains Culture is hybrid by its very nature. The old vision of culture as a hermetically sealed entity and therefore pure is what derailed anthropologists for a long time.

the hybrid-culture of Malaysia. Furthermore, the present post-colonial experience of Malaysia engaged with the global media made me to re-evaluate the earlier politics of difference gestured by Piyadasa through his artistic practice. With this in mind, my hope is to express an understanding that reflects the contemporary Malaysia as being experienced by the younger generation of new media artists such as me.

A Leap forward

It is impossible to talk about the media art practice from the Malaysian perspective without acknowledging the works of the late Ismail Zain. Zain's artistic experimentation with computer technology during the eighties introduced the functions semiotics to the Malaysian art scene. Compared to Piyadasa, his ideas were fresh, new and open as he addressed the terrain of post-modernism.[12] Zain led the way in conceiving the potential of computer for arts in Malaysia. Although he was not the first to apply digital imaging technology, he was, without doubt the first in the region of South East Asia to produce a consolidated body of work in the new medium. Between 1984 and 1988, Zain had produced his 'Digital Collage' series. With this body of digital prints and with the accompanying writings, he constructed the conceptual framework for the absorption of computer technology into the Malaysian contemporary art. He reflected on that significant point of departure in the modernist trajectory, when Rauschenberg explored the flatbed of printmaking as an extension of the collage, as he states:

> *"A computer is more like the flatbed in a printing press than a stretched canvas or a piece of paper…a computer is able to deliver from infinite sources, manipulating a vast, mixed, heterogeneous array of images and artifacts not compatible with the pictorial field of conventional painting…. and it is very fast"*[13]

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[12]Piyadasa, writing for Ismail Zain catalog acknowledges, Zain as such "In these experimental works of Ismail Zain's, what comes through his celebration of vision of art and culture that transcends myopic and parochial visions and limitations. He is a more all-encompassing view of the world and of humanity in all its differentiated complexities and manifestations". This in fact reflects the postmodern approach that tends to critique a linear, single objective knowledge.

[13] Zain, Ismail interview by Noordin Hassan, Redza Piyadasa (ed.) Ismail Zain Retrospective Exhibition 1964 – 1991 [catalogue]. Malaysia: National Art Gallery, 1995, p. 64

Zain revealed his grasp of the subtle semiotic consequences of the digital image in his distinction of the manual photo collage from a computer generated. The computer allowed him to dissolve the oppositional or structural aspect of the play of signs and to develop what he called 'user friendly' images. In Zain's Digital Collage, images and texts from varied sources are merged in order to release their latent meanings. "Al Kesah" (fig.2), for instance, is a playful yet critical response to the penetration of global mass media into the local culture and consciousness. In this collage, Zain puts an image of characters from the famous American Television serial "Dallas" together with the backdrop of a traditional Malay house. On the surface, Zain smartly reiterates images from pop cultures to speak about the mass consumption of culture through electronic media. Simultaneously, by looking at these images, one is confronted with juxtaposition of values and cultures, thus forcing the viewer to be critical of ones own value judgment in relation to the other.

The subtle, semiotic approach of Zain differs from the harsh, conceptual criticism of Piyadasa. The way in which the focus on "otherness and difference" that is often alluded by Piyadasa's work seems to have little concrete impact as an analysis or standpoint that might accommodate the nature and direction of postmodernist experience, since much of his theory has been constructed in reaction to and against high modernism. Conversely, Zain's approach in reiterating elements of pop culture - brings together the oppositional binary into single image that is easily accessible by everyone. He dealt with the question of how to absorb the new technologies meaningfully into the local situations.

Fig. 2
"Al-Kesah" by Ismail Zain, 1988
Courtesy of national Art Gallery of Malaysia

Arguably, Zain is perceived to be the leap from Piyadasa's approach in addressing the politics of difference in terms of representation. With the compression of identity that has already taken place within the spectra of globalization, Zain's efforts transcended and diffused symbolism in the contemporary culture. This differs from the straightforward binary criticism as it teaches us the value of not knowing (difference) rather than fearing the unknown (other). More importantly, it reveals the ways in which we might receive and understand certain elusive and conditional meaning, rather than a specific-singular interpretation being imposed on all context and conditions, in order to create oppositional

political meaning, legitimacy and immediacy.[14]

Nevertheless, the logic of cultural binary was also pervasive in Zain's outlook. As much as he was enthralled by the new digital medium, Zain was also wary of it. He was very critical of the growing western hegemony of mass media and yet intrigued by the potential of the computer to deconstruct this power. He argued,

> *"the kind of universalism which is the outcome of instant information calls for a greater challenge, particularly for the consumers of this information like us, to adopt a more critical posture."[15]*

This of course, was very difficult to achieve but in taking steps towards this goal he developed an adaptation of Kenneth Frampton's model of critical regionalism.[16] Extending this, Zain proposed that new media practitioners in developing countries like Malaysia should adopt a 'critical regionalism' as an approach in the context of the speed of communication technology. Consumers of information, such as the people of Asia, have to assert themselves in terms of their differences, while participating in the commonalities engendered by this medium. Indeed, Zain's contribution for the Malaysian art scene was timely and important as it preludes the cultural transformation that took the

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[14] Rajah, Niranjan "Bara Hati Bahang Jiwa" National Art Gallery of Malaysia, 2002, p.10

[15] Zain, Ismail interview by Noordin Hassan, Redza Piyadasa (ed.) Ismail Zain Retrospective Exhibition 1964 – 1991 [catalogue]. Malaysia: National Art Gallery, 1995, p. 64

[16] Frampton writes of how, in the field of architecture, local versions of international culture develop from the interaction of specifically local climates, culture, myth, and craft, thereby resisting being totally absorbed by the global sweep of architectural modernism. While this modernism was an overwhelming international movement, there is a record of resistance. There were various reactions and localizations. Kenneth Frampton refers to this process as "Critical Regionalism". His model has been used in cultural theory. Cheryl Herr has applied 'critical regionalism' to develop a comparative method for cultural studies in which global processes are seen as mediating otherwise disjunctive local processes. There is a broad international framework, but there are also separate, distinct, indigenous or local aspects. Cheryl Temple Herr "Critical Regionalism and Cultural Studies: From Ireland to the American Midwest" University of Florida press, 1996

country by storm during the nineties. More importantly, he theorized a framework that was later applied by the next generation of Malaysian artists.

The cultural transformation in the nineties

Malaysia was confronted with globalization and the essential need for a knowledge-based society as a key survival need to confront the emergence of global capitals and information technology. With this in mind, in 1991, ex-Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Mahatir Mohammed revealed Vision 2020 during a presentation to the Malaysian Business Council. Dr. Mahathir explained that the ultimate goal for Malaysia is to be a fully developed country by the year 2020. Being a strong advocate for the under-developed and third world countries, he had a very Asian[17] outlook on the term "development." He defined it as becoming a fully developed nation in not only economic but also political, social, spiritual, psychological, and cultural realms.[18]

Many mega plans and projects were set in motion to make the leap from a third world to a first world country, notably the conception of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) that stretches from Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur to Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang, covering the towns of Putrajaya[19] and Cyberjaya.[20]

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[17] I am referring to the concept of "Asian values" by Kishore, Mahbubani, Permanent Secretary of Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs that came into vogue in the 1990s, based on the belief in the existence of Asian countries with unique set of institutions and political ideologies which reflected the region's culture and history. This was part of the reaction towards the globalization process, as a regional alliance for cultural and economical purpose was seems necessary to control the forces of globalization.
[18] Mahathir Mohammad, "The Way Forward" *Vision 2020*,
<http://www.pmo.gov.my/website/webdb.nsf/vALLDOC/BA7051FF90767AD848256E84003129CA>
[19] Putrajaya is the Administrative Capital of the Federal Government of Malaysia. Termed as Malaysia's first Intelligent Garden City, Putrajaya is a vital development catalyst - as the nerve centre of the nation and an ideal place to live, work, conduct business and engage in sports and recreational activities. Situated within the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), the development of Putrajaya marks a new chapter in the history of modern city planning in Malaysia. It is set to be a model garden city with sophisticated information network base on multimedia technologies. "About Putrajaya" i-*putra.com- Putrajaya community portal* < http://www.i-putra.com.my/about_putrajaya.cfm>
[20] BBC online news reports "Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohammed, has opened a new multimedia garden city known as Cyberjaya which he says will be the nerve centre of the country's high-

Seven flagship applications were formulated to leapfrog the nation to a state of readiness to confront the rapidly approaching information age. The applications were electronic government, multipurpose cards, smart schools, Tele-health, Research and Development Cluster, E-business, and Technopreneur Development.[21] These applications were devised to create a multimedia paradise for creative trendsetters and users of multimedia technology with a hope that Malaysia would one day set the benchmark for the ICT industry in the South East Asian region.[22] Various government bodies worked in collaboration with both local and foreign agencies to implement the flagship program of accelerated socio-economic development of Malaysia.

With the implementation of these flagship applications, the citizens of Malaysia were faced with confusing and alarming transitions. The existing lifestyle and cultural practices of the Malaysian society was confronted with rapidly changing conditions. The introduction of ICT to the Malaysian public caused new demands and requirements, thus altering the status quo of an individual living in a metropolitan city such as Kuala Lumpur. This new phenomena lead to a paradigm shift and even to some extent created a cultural shock to the older generations. The easy access to software, due to the wide

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technology development. The latest of Malaysia's prestigious mega-projects will have cost an estimated $15bn by the time it is completed in the next millennium. Designed to be the Malaysian answer to Silicon Valley, it will be intelligent, high-tech, low density and environmentally friendly." "Cyberjaya opens for e-business" *BBC News, UK- World: Asia-Pacific*, 8 July 1999 < http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/388795.stm>

[21] Sohaimi Mohd. Salleh "The Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) and e-government initiatives in Malaysia" *GIT/GITI Research Bulletin 2002-2003*, Graduate School of Global Information and Telecommunication Studies, Waseda University, pp. 135-148.

[22] Indeed this became a reality when Malaysia was appointed as founding director of the Asean ICT Centre at the 6th Asean Telecommunications and IT Ministers Meeting (Telmin), which was held in Brunei on September 2006. Energy, Water and Communications Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik speaking about this says "This is a significant milestone for Asean and signals the start of a new period of development in ICT across the South-East Asian region." "Recognized for our ICT efforts" *thestar.com.my,* 4 January 2007.

spread practice of selling pirated copies, caused the nation to quickly absorb knowledge on operating telecommunication technologies effectively in a short period of time.[23] The introduction of the "one house one computer scheme"[24] by the Malaysian government has enabled every citizen to purchase a computer using his or her provident fund and be connected to the World Wide Web. The unification of identity card, driving license and passport to one single chip embedded card called "MyKad"[25] forces every citizen of Malaysia to adopt, understand and utilize the technology that has been introduced to them. A cultural transformation caused by the introduction of telecommunication technology in Malaysian society is seen as a necessity to face the new global economy.

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[23] Stuart Ong writes that the threat of piracy seems to grow greater by the day in Malaysia. Illegal copies of software, songs and movies are easily available along the roadsides, sold by large numbers of makeshift stores. Despite efforts by software makers and law enforcement officials to stem software piracy, an estimated 63% of all software used in Malaysia in 2003 was pirated, according to the latest survey by the Business Software Alliance (BSA) and IT research firm IDC. Stuart Ong, "why piracy is everyone's problem" *thestar.com.my*, Thursday 5 May 2005 < http://star-techcentral.com/tech/story.asp?file=/2005/5/5/itedit/10787793&sec=itedit>

[24] Under a "One House One Computer" campaign introduced in 2001, contributors to the mandatory Employee's Provident Fund (EPF) were allowed to withdraw a certain percentage of their pension savings to buy personal computers. Steven Patrick "Return of the EPF computer scheme?" *thestar online*, 6 January 2009 < http://star-techcentral.com/tech/story.asp?file=/2009/1/6/technology/2913123>

[25] Will Knight writes "The world's first national smart card scheme to store biometric data on an in-built computer chip has been introduced in Malaysia. The cards are compulsory for Malaysia's citizens and are encoded with a copy of the owner's fingerprints" Will Knight, "Malaysia pioneers smart cards with fingerprint data" *New Scientist Print Edition*, 21 September 2001 <http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn1331>

Malaysian Media Art in the late 1990's

It was during the late nineties when Niranjan Rajah started exploring the Internet as a medium for artistic practice. He was the first person in Malaysia, and perhaps even in South East Asia, to critically engage the Internet as a medium for art practice, making him a pioneer of Internet art in Malaysia. Adopting the conceptual framework set by Zain, he created an Internet art piece entitled "*Failure of Marcel Duchamp/Japanese Fetish Even!*"[26] (fig.3). His work was an online parody of Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés*, (fig.4) which was completed in 1966 and installed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.
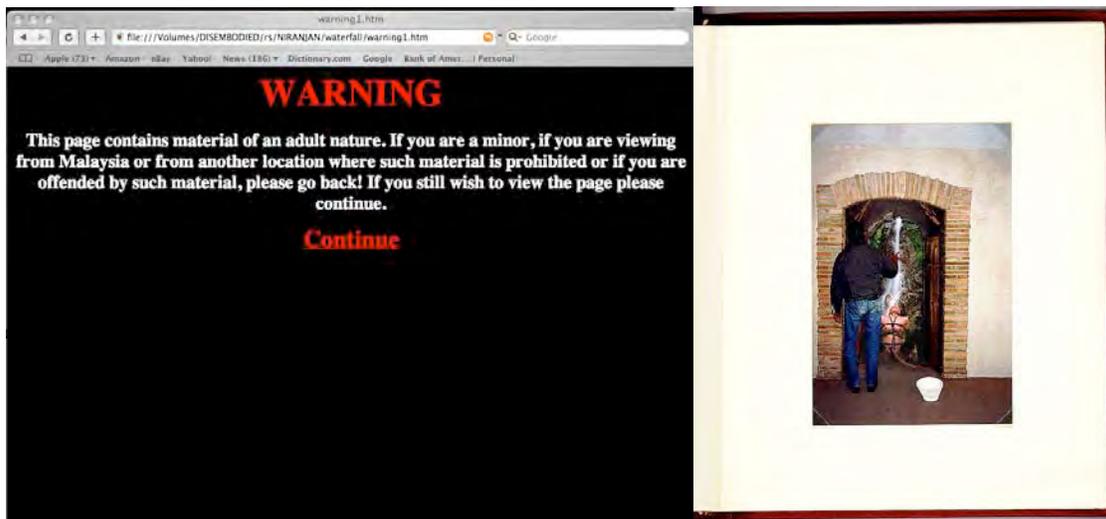
Fig. 3
"Failure of Marchel Duchamp, Japanese Fetish Even!" by Niranjan Rajah

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[26] The work was first presented as part of a paper titled 'Locating the Image in an Age of Electronic Media' (Rajah, 1996) at the Conference of ISEA 1996 in Rotterdam. It was presented again that year in an exhibition titled 'Explorasi' at the Gallery Petronas, Kuala Lumpur and then in 1997 in the '1st Electronic Art Show' at the National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur.

With *Étant donnés* the viewer is invited into a room that had been closed off by a large, wooden door set in an arch of bricks. The door could not be opened, but there were two holes at eye level luring the viewer for closer inspection. Peering through the holes, one could see a well-lit landscape with naked woman laying in the foreground as her legs splayed towards the viewer (Fig.5). The scene was not accessible by any means other than by peeping through the holes.[27] In Rajah's parody, the viewer encounters a website with an image of a wooden door similar to the Duchamp's piece. When a visitor clicks on the image, a warning text appears stating the work contains sexually explicit image and he or she is given an option to turn back. If the visitor decides to proceed, the image of the door would open to reveal a fetish, Japanese woman in a pose similar to the *Étant donnés*.
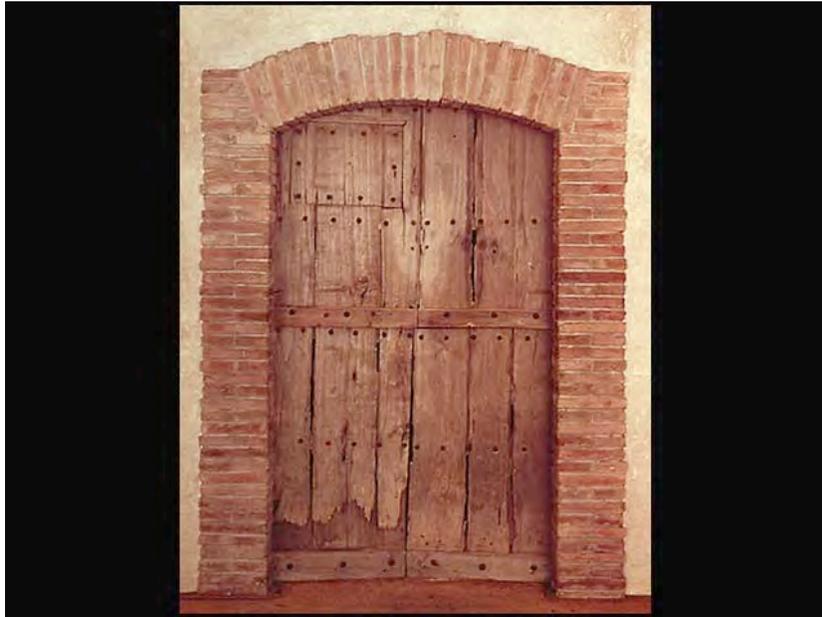
Fig. 4
Etant donnés, 1946, Marcel Duchamp, Installation detail: view of the front door

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[27] John Philips, "Etant donnes" <http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/elljwp/duchamp.htm> (20 September 2005)

Fig. 5
Etant donnés, 1946, Marcel Duchamp, Installation detail: image of the naked woman

On a global scale, people accessing it from different cultural and political contexts would read the image differently. A viewer in San Francisco, for example, would likely see it as an art piece rather than a pornographic material. In this work, Rajah attempts to mark the cultural constituencies in the supposedly unbounded territory of the Internet. The global platform created by Internet media is smartly used by Niranjan to address cultural policies of Malaysia, forcing the democratic space of the Internet to engage with the specifics of Malaysia's cultural constituency.[28] His awareness of the difference in cultural perspective is obvious in his decision to host the work on a server located in Germany. Had it been put on a server in Malaysia, it would have been removed from public access as many works before and since have been.[29]

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[28] By Cultural Constituency, I am implying on the social and cultural markers such as Islam as the National religion and Bahasa Melayu as the official language and this is incorporated into the construction of Malaysia's Constitution.
[29] Gina Fairley writes about the recent censorship of Vienna Parreno and Krzysztop Osinski's collaborative

The 'trans-cultural aspect' is heightened when the site is presented on internet terminals installed in Malaysian art spaces (at the Petronas Gallery as part of the Explorasi and at the National Art Gallery as part of the 1st Electronic Art Show, both in 1997), so surfers can decide whether or not to access 'inappropriate' content and transgress cultural taboos and, possibly, national obscenity legislation while they are under public scrutiny. An individual accessing the work from the comfort of his home would look through the images freely as any stigma about looking at pictures resembling pornographic material would not be an issue. However, when displayed in a public space, the work raises a different issue, forcing the audience to engage cautiously due to the immediacy of social pressure. Accessing the work in the gallery space causes discomfort, as the viewer would have to share the space with others thus allowing for public judgment.

It is no doubt that Rajah developed his artistic enquiry by adapting the theoretical framework of Zain. Nonetheless, what is intriguing in Rajah's approach is his criticality of such framework by acknowledging the way in which information technology has altered collective as well as individual experience engaging with cultural difference. Although Rajah credits Zain as his predecessor,[30] his approach in addressing the politics

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pieces entitled Self (mark1) and Self (mark2) from the traveling exhibition Open Letter when it was shown in the National Art Gallery of Malaysia. The exhibition took place from February 2006 and was open for public for the next two months. The Malaysia's National arts institution decided to remove a collaborative piece titled "Mark 01" and "Mark02" by Vienna Parreno and Krzysztop Osinski from the exhibition. The artwork was in the form of two photographs of the artist Vienna Parreno being nude, turned back and locating herself in several places around Philippines. Gina Fairley, "Protocol 101-Open Letter" *A visual dialogue between South East Asia and Australia gets censored in Malaysia*, 15 March 2006 <http://www.kakiseni.com.my/articles/reviews/MDgzNg.html> (12 February 2006)

[30] Rajah, Niranjan, *Post-Traditional Media: Art Culture and Technology in the Wake of Postmodernism,* The Canadian Anthropology Society – American Ethnological Society (CASCA-EAS) Conference, Toronto, 2007

of difference challenges the one-dimensional critique that reinforces cultural binary. His discourse deconstructs the idea of "authenticity" in culture by eradicating the vacuum in representation, but instead suggests a process of continuous adaptability that repudiates the search for originality in culture, as he explains:

> *"...I feel that the significance of this new medium is not so much that it has brought progressive social change but that it has set bar for adaptability and survival in the political economy. Anwar Ibrahim's Reformasi movement, the Obama campaign and the Indian outsourcing industry all being outstanding examples of the successful Internet adaptations of politics and economics"*[31]

This certainly brings a radical difference compared to the earlier works of Piyadasa and Zain as he openly addresses the denial of cultural interdependency by looking at the unique sensibilities and culture that arise from subjective experience. I would argue that the crux of Rajah's theory resides in the opening up of cultural criticism by absorbing subjectivity into politics of difference. This perhaps is obvious in his Internet piece as the work becomes simultaneously accessible to every individual, from any cultural and political context. An adequate response to this concern of accessibility in global media is by emphasizing the significance of "the authority of subjective experience."[32]

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[31] Sitharan, Roopesh, *Relocations: electronic art of Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjan rajah* [catalog], Universiti Sains Malaysia, 2008

[32] By "authority of subjective experience", I am expanding on the term "strategic essentialism" coined by Indian literary critic and theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. While much has been written in recent years on the emergence of postmodernism, its attributes and qualities, the recent emphasis on subjective and existential "truth" is the most important for the purposes of this paper. Simply put, for something to be "true" in today's society it must be true to the subject, it must be something that the individual has managed to grab a hold of, meditate on, and experience in terms of its operative effects in a real and personal way. Without this sort of existential experience, no concept or position, no matter how logical or wonderful is true.

The great NON-MALAYSIAN portrait

The great NON-MALAYSIAN portrait" (fig.6) comes from the accumulation of philosophy and theory of Redza Piyadasa, Ismail Zain and Niranjan Rajah. This is adapted in literal, analytical and conceptual sense as the installation is divided into three components. In this respect, examining these components highlight the theoretical underpinning that reveal dialogues with the ideas and politics of these artists. The layers of meaning and subtle invocation in the artwork are meant to express the conditions of the postmodern society in Malaysia. The work generates a space for critical exchange with the audience, while creating art that reflects the cultural politics of difference from the Malaysian perspective. It is also reflective of the habits of function, forms of artistic expression and aesthetics that inform a subjective experience in adapting a particular mode of representation – as artist, curator and academic.

Fig. 6
"The great NON-MALAYSIAN portrait" by Roopesh Sitharan

The artwork itself is made from a computerized surveillance system and custom-made software. Meanwhile the installation consists of a huge LCD screen mounted on a wall horizontally; similar to the way a painting would be hung on a museum wall. The LCD screen is then garnished with a huge, golden frame to enclose the edges of the screen. The golden ornamental border that surrounds the LCD screen effectively creates similarity of having a huge masterpiece painting, elegantly hung on a museum wall. A tiny surveillance camera is mounted unto the frame. This is then secured by having a stanchion in front of the screen, to distance the viewer from getting too close to the art object. The setting creates a typical museum experience, just like how a person would look at a painting, a portrait to be precise.

From a distance, a viewer will only see a blank-white surface on the LCD screen, but as the person moves closer, the viewer's movement is captured through the surveillance camera and revealed in a form of a black silhouette that emerges on the screen. Details such as color, tone and figurative recognition are stripped away from the silhouette. Meanwhile the piece becomes really provocative when the viewer gets really close to the display. As the viewer moves closer to the screen, a video will emerge in the "head" section of the silhouette. This video is a close-up shot of a face enacting several expressions, with attributes of a tanned, male figure. The video is displayed in a square shape, overlaid on the silhouette. The custom made software identifies the face of the viewer looking at the LCD screen and accurately correlates the video with the head section of the silhouette that represents the viewer. This creates the impression of

forcefully imposing a figurative identity upon the viewer. The video moves along with the movement of the viewer's silhouette on the screen – as the viewer move around the exhibition space.

Returning to the analysis of "the great NON-MALAYSIAN portrait", it is divided into three components, namely "the title of the artwork as well as the golden frame", "the video of a brown tanned, male figure" and "the silhouette of the viewer". In a simpler term, these will be referred as "the frame", "the representation" and "the participation".

THE FRAME

The very first striking aspect of the installation is the glittering golden frame that screams out for attention from the audience. As an allegory to the representational of a painting, "frame" essentially becomes a conventional mode of formal rhetoric practiced by institutions to contextualize and legitimize an artwork – be it in a literal (museum, art gallery, white cube, exhibition space) or conceptual form (artist, curator, art critic, art collector). As these institutions achieve a cosmopolitan world-view and an international cultural circuitry, they become unconstrained by national boundaries or cultural difference to achieve standardization. Such standardization is only achievable with a universal adaptation of aesthetic understanding and validation.[33] The effect of such universalism oftentimes encourages a kind of historical and conceptual carelessness in the relationship to specific historical traditions and cultural localities.

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[33] Alfred Gill explains "We have to recognize that the aesthetic attitude is a specific historical product of the religious crisis of the Enlightenment and the rise of the Western science, and that it has no applicability to civilizations, which have not internalized the Enlightenment as we have."

Standardization establishes its rule by imposing ill-fatting names and tendentious terms of value to areas of unfamiliar foreign "reality" (Malaysia including) that were purportedly modernized and rationalized in order to introduce them to the larger art history. [34] Without a choice, the cultural policies and modernization efforts of Malaysia are adopted from the west, to keep itself at pace with the world at large. Through the penetration of such understanding to the realm of Asian art practice, non-western artists are compelled and sometimes are even required to adopt the modernist values that are perceived to be the gatekeepers for fame and success in the global art market, becoming a prerequisite even for a simple discourse in art.

As a point of argument, it is precisely for such reasoning that the glittering frame becomes necessary for the validation of an art piece, be it in the literal (the beautiful, golden frame for aesthetic validation as an artwork than merely a LCD screen on the wall) or conceptual form (the exhibition was held in the Museum of History and Art, Santa Cruz). Returning to Piyadasa, it was such institutional critique that was being revealed in his "great Malaysian landscape". Such critique enforces binary politics of being the insider and outsider of the modernist system of value. On the contrary, by engaging with such criticism from the postmodernist perspective, what becomes obvious is the context of such criticism itself. In the postmodern context, a wide variety of political perspectives that emerged, gave rise to a fragmented, heterogeneous political view that have little common content and often contradicted one another. This aspect is visible in the way the piece is named. It is called "The great NON-MALAYSIAN

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[34] Niranjan writing for CIPTA catalog states "Indeed, nationalist economic and cultural policies, the world over, are rapidly giving way to the imperatives of transnational capital and aforesaid media"

portrait"- moving from "landscape" to "portrait", it intentionally moves away from the representation of ideology (binary politics) to subjectivity (fragmented political views). The title forces a viewer to acknowledge how one can be defined by the context of representation as being framed by the artwork through the display of the silhouette. The frame has simply revealed itself as a fertile source for open criticism by subjective interpretation of anyone.

THE REPRESENTATION

There are two modes of representation that happens in "the great NON-MALAYSIAN portrait". On one level, the viewer is being represented in the form of a silhouette on the screen. Meanwhile, a male, tanned subject is being represented through the facial expression videos. These two representations collide as the facial expression is imposed on the silhouette. It is a form of a dynamic collage that brings together two distinctive attributes into a single platform of display. Arguably, the display affirms the core mechanisms of social values through the construction of meaning in an image and its maintenance by contemporary culture. This argument is supported by how people experience the merger of the silhouette and the video as tempering with their identity. The act of seeing entails split-second operations of categorization and organization that are in themselves reflexive, unconscious judgments of sorts – the reckoning of difference.

This perhaps is an obvious link to the works of Zain, as how he constructed his artwork by bringing together different values through digital collage. At this juncture, the great

NON-MALAYSIAN portrait might be seen as a direct correlation with the Critical Regionalism as suggested by Zain. By adapting Kenneth Frampton's Critical Regionalism into media theory, Zain constructed his criticism by claiming the forceful global (universal) needs to be critically engaged by the stationary local (other). In his approach, Zain assumed that the local is static and the global is dynamic, as media technology alleviates the spectrum between universal civilization and the particularities of place. Critical regionalism, simply requests the recognition of a static local, often in the form of imaginary found in cultural authenticity. This recognition must mediate the difference by 'deconstructing' the eclecticism of the acquired "other" through the assimilation of universal construct.

Ironically, the artwork also successfully reveals a form of interdependency between the viewer and the tanned, male subject. By examining this interdependency that evokes a sense of tempering with identity - the most immediate issue that becomes apparent is the attempt to objectify the viewer's presence (the use of the audience body to display the image). Such act of objectification reveals the assimilation process of the "other" through the universal construct as being theorized by Zain in his adaptation of Critical Regionalism. This assimilation is justified through the cannon of postmodernism that claims for interdependency in today's global society. However, by addressing the tension between the viewer and the artwork – "the great NON-MALAYSIAN portrait" metaphorically speaks of the "dynamic" local by exposing the subjective authority of the viewer. In contrast to Zain's approach, the artwork emphasizes the interaction between the screen and the audience, to appropriate individual's resistance towards objectification

with their own "subjectification" exercises and practice. This emphasis on interaction critiques the postmodern approach by revealing the dynamic and subjective nature of the local is equal to the global.

THE PARTICIPATION

A very crucial component for the creation of the artwork is the participation by the audience, to interact and be invested in the piece. The silhouette functions as one of the essential attribute that is crucial for the success of the piece. Interestingly by participating in the conception of the piece, people begin to engage with varied social ramification. Among things that attract people's attention, the issue of subjectivity was quite urgent, especially in the appearance of the silhouette that mimics and reacts to their movement in the exhibition space. Arguably, the sense of subjectivity of an individual appears as a result of being subtly invoked by the realization of a complex set of intersecting values. One main point of reference in this argument is that the situation fostered by artwork reduces the forms of identity in real life to mere images floating freely in transmission and exchange on the screen. The audience is stripped away from any attributes of themselves, other than the shape of the silhouette.

Human classifications such as ethnicity and gender are constructs in that they are not essential qualities of being human but merely a gathering of characteristics made into something that is singularly definable. Indeed, the understanding of culture is also built upon a construct that is socially defined as well as idealized by images perceived through

media. In the contemporary cultural and political milieu, cultural difference becomes pertinent when one participates with the other, outside the comfort of his or her cultural residue. Rajah dealt with these issues through his Internet artwork. He critically examined the potentials of culture clash, by having people from diverse cultural background to participate in his critical examination of the Internet medium. This perhaps addresses the realization of complex sets of intersecting values that is being grasped by the viewer by participating in the creation of the great NON-MALAYSIAN portrait.

But identity has become a complex formation of personal and subjective experience, constantly being constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed. Such process makes identity as fluid, heterogeneous, playful, and malleable – just like the silhouette. Merely than the clash of values, the sterilized silhouette of the audience calls upon critical examination of subjectivity and the formation of dynamic identity that are not fixed by cultural context as suggested by Rajah. The currents of postmodern existentialism critique the objective authority of culture in defining identity of an individual. And as being seen in the piece, with the sterilized-subjectivity (the same silhouette for all participants), it becomes difficult to define an indisputable, concrete basis for identity formation. Identity is easily reduced to be just one of many "identities" that are subject to ontological and philosophical criticism. In this perspective, differing from Rajah's approach, the piece suggests that every aspect of subjectivity is dynamic, as it requires the context of its participation to be critically examined and understood.

Epilogue

The scope of work that was undertaken during the thesis investigation was focused primarily to the Malaysian context. While three major component of "the great NON-MALAYSIAN portrait" is analyzed and articulated, there is one particular aspect of investigation that is left undiscovered – the unfolding of "NON-MALAYSIAN". On the surface, the artwork might be perceived as imposing strong political ideology on the audience, but then again, when the artwork is critically examined with the context of the exhibition (the US to be precise), one starts to ponder…who is the great NON-MALAYSIAN that is being portrayed here? At this particular point in the thesis, it is hoped that the reader sees this crucial exposition of the artwork as the bridge that connects the author with the particularities of the cultural politics of different, in the current postmodern context of Malaysia (within and without). Not to mention the ideological issues concerning the relationship with Redza Piyadasa, Ismail Zain and Niranjan Rajah.

In the context of the Malaysian society, race and ethnic distinction is crucial for the formulation of the Malaysian constitution. The society functions by recognizing each citizen's race and ethnic identity in order to distinguish between the Malay and the Non-Malay residents. Consequently such identification allows for certain group of citizens to gain benefits from the government.[35] This is due to the social contract that was agreed

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[35] At independence the Malaysian economy was held almost 29 percent by the Chinese; less than 2 percent by the Malays, who were largely outside the money economy; less than 1 percent by the Indians and about 69 percent held mostly by the British and other foreigners. (Malaysia introduced the 20 years 1070-90 New Economic Policy in late 1969. The NEP pledged to eliminate the identification of race with economic

upon by the different races in Malaysia to gain independence from the colonial ruler.[36]

Such formulation of cultural politics of difference has been the backbone for the modern Malaysian society as every aspect of citizenship and sovereignty is based on the distinction between the Malay and the non-Malay. Meanwhile the multicultural society that consists of three main races, namely Malay, Chinese and Indian has introduced different cultural practice to each other. These diverse cultural practices overlap, exchanges and become intertwined overtime while the races mingle and live communally as a single nation.[37] Such "artificial" equilibrium is achieved when the non-Malays (mainly Chinese and Indians) acknowledge and accept the special privileges of the Malays as part of being accepted as a Malaysian citizen.

Returning to "the great NON-MALAYSIAN portrait", the tanned, male subject carries a specific identity and ideology that shifts according to the context in which the work is being presented. If the work is being presented outside Malaysia, the meaning of the work becomes as a criticism towards the hegemonic framing of the cultural politics in the art world. To be precise, the work described itself as a representation of an ideology (the definition of art and aesthetic study) that originates from the West, thus the tanned, male figure is forced to be acknowledged as a NON-MALAYSIAN simply because the frame

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function and place of residence; eradicate poverty irrespective of race, color and creed; and ensure that the Malays and other indigenous races own control and manage at least 30 percent of the nation's corporate economy by 1990. Fernandez, Joe. *Revisiting Malaysia's Social contract,* 01 July 2008. <http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1295&Itemid=159>

[36] The contract, a simple unwritten arrangement fostered between Malays and non-Malays by the founding fathers, brought about a rare unity among the multiracial peoples of British Malaya and expedited the advent of independence on 31 Aug 1957

[37] I am referring to Nobel Laureate in Economics winner as he writes about Malaysia as such "Malaysia's success should be studied both by those looking for economic prosperity and those seeking to understand how people live together, not just with tolerance, but with respect and working together. Stiglitz, Joseph. *Malaysian success story provides inspirational lesson for all*, 20 September 2007. <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2007/09/20/2003379625>

defines it as such. Although this criticality differs from the approach taken by Redza Piyadasa, Ismail Zain and Niranjan Rajah, nevertheless it expands on their ideological and political view of the art world order and perceived as being nationalistic.

On the contrary, if the work were to be presented in the Malaysian context – the identity and ideology of the tanned, male figure immediately changes, as the image would be recognized as representation of an ethic Indian. This identification would then make the work as a critical scrutiny of the "artificial" equilibrium in the Malaysian society. To simply put it, the work denotes a non-Malay subject (the other) claiming for equality in citizenship by being at par with the Malay counterpart in term of rights and privilege of being a Malaysian. This claim is intensified with the title of the piece, being named as "NON-MALAYSIAN' as the brown tanned, male ethic Indian is forced to accept his status as a second class citizen (the non-Malaysian) in spite being a legit holder of the Malaysian passport. Such claim is very pertinent with the current condition of the Malaysian society. With the cultural transformation induced by media technology during the nineties, citizens today boldly challenge and question the constitution that was configured during the independence.[38] The urgency of such social empowerment was apparent in Malaysia during the recent general election.[39]

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[38] The Malaysia Surf Magazine reported, "Over the last few years, the same level playing field has reached the area of human discourse. Individuals have created and occupied space in the area previously the sole domain of traditional media. Through the use of medium like blogs and related new media tools, they have become increasingly important voice in society."
Will the Internet decide the next election? Malaysia surf magazine, issue 08, March 2008
< http://www.surf.com.my/cms/>
[39] Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said remaining silent was no longer an option. He acknowledged that the Government had overlooked the need to engage the new media, which was a new dimension in shaping public opinion, in the recent general election. Shahanaaz, Habib "Government to engage bloggers in cyberspace" *thestar.com.my*, 28 May 2008
<http://www.thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2008/5/28/nation/21376112&sec=nation >

There is a specific reason as to why these questions, issues and concerns are the driving force behind the investigation of this thesis. At this juncture, it is crucial to reveal that the male, brown tanned subject that is central to investigation of the artwork as well as the thesis is the artist (author) himself. By fully acknowledging my subjectivity in this thesis, I can at least make claim that this research expresses my experience as an artist, curator, Indian, Malaysian, immigrant and many other temporal modes representation as a contemporary subject living in today's postmodern conditions. In other words, as I draw closer to addressing some needed conclusion on the value of the artwork, as well as finding value in this thesis for such evaluation, the work ultimately remains open to new thoughts and alternate perspectives based on subjective interpretation.

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APPENDICES

Roopesh Sitharan in conversation with Niranjan Rajah
July 15th 2008

Roopesh Sitharan: Could you briefly explain how you started your career as an artist?

Niranjan Rajah: I had always loved drawing but it was during my time studying law in the UK, that I developed a deep attraction to the visual arts. I spent more time going around art galleries and reading books on fine art history and technique than anything else. I drew and painted late into the night and watched Open University programmes on art in the early mornings. I travelled extensively in Europe with the sole purpose of visiting galleries and studying art. By the time I had completed the academic portion of my law studies, I had realized that I would not be suited to or excited by a professional training and career in Law. I went back home to Malaysia and took a teaching position at Stamford College, and in time I became involved with some artists from ITM (Institut Teknologi Mara). I still remember with relish my long conversations with Ahmad Shukri Elias at his fledgling Kiara Gallery in Subang Jaya. I was thrilled to find that my knowledge of art was adequate to engage these professionals. Riaz Ahmad Jamil and Tengku Sabri Tengku Ibrahim were amongst those that I engaged deeply. I wrote the exhibition notes for Kiara Gallery's ITM retrospective, Pameran Motivasi and eventually showed them my own work that I had been pursuing. I had woven huge canvasses out of ready gummed packing paper and incorporated a wax resist watercolour technique. It was important for me to create the very material substrate of my painting. I was delving deep into Asian philosophy and responding to the Malaysian contemporary artists whose work I was studying and contextualizing in my writing. I was attempting a rather improbable merger of the detached spirituality of the Asian tradition with the personal expression and psychic extroversion of Western modernism. Serious though this engagement was I still did not see it as a professional activity, I just did it as a necessary aspect of my life, and of my very being. My artist friends persuaded me to submit some of this work to the National Gallery's Annual Open Exhibition and to my surprise a drawing was accepted. I didn't look back after that. Although my work was steeped in the Malaysian idiom - the regional abstractions of Latiff Mohidin and the humanist ethos of Zulkfli Dahlan, I felt I needed to expand horizons. I packed up to go back to London to pursue my newfound ambitions in art.

RS: What made you to adopt the WWW as a medium for your artistic practice?

NR: This is a long story - Within two years in London I had worked up to a successful two-man show at the Horizon Gallery, an important Indian Art venue in London run by the Indian Arts Council UK, an organization set up by James Thurairajah Tambimuttu. I was on the verge of embarking on the path of becoming a successful Indian painter in the UK, but despite everything I felt dissatisfied with the institutional response to my work. My work was being contextualised in a way I didn't like. I refused to let out any further works without an accompanying statement defining its context – naively, I had become a conceptualist. I applied and was accepted into the Goldsmith's College MA in Fine Art. Completing this program I found myself identifying closely with critical practice and installation art wherein context became part of the work. I incorporated text, appropriated images, themes, history and the site itself into my work. The text accompanying the work was no longer explanatory but became part of the work. I had taken a very radical position at Goldsmiths and while I produced strong work that derived a lot from that genre, I was clearly not willing or perhaps not able to engage with that particular market system. I had taken a Nationalist position resisting not only the hegemonic Western modernist narrative but the deceptively liberating postmodern usurpation that equally smothered the Asian narratives that were so hard fought in each individual context. I had become enamoured with the art and theories of Redza Piyadasa – a Malaysian Conceptualist whose seminal work "What is a Model, And what Models are we talking about'' (titled after Kubler), I championed in my final dissertation. Finishing the MA, I returned to Malaysia taking a post as lecturer at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) in Kuching. This was an IT oriented University created as a part of then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed's Technology agenda. I was introduced to the WWW, and most significantly, I met Hasnul who was already teaching there and in the early stages of developing an art and technology agenda initially envisioned by the visionary artist and theorist Ismail Zain. Hasnul encouraged me to consider the new media and I quickly realized that the new user friendly, ubiquitous, hypertextual, multimedia Internet was a medium that I had been waiting for – more and more my installation works had been yearning for a transcendence of materiality, geography, narrative hegemony and context – and this transcendence is what the WWW appeared to offer, even embody in its very ontology. I made 'Failure of Marcel Duchamp' in 1996. It was exhibited at the Petronas Gallery and also presented at the ISEA conference in Rotterdam in that year.

RS: Do you consider WWW as central to your work now?

NR: No not now, and in a way it was never the main thing, even in the late 1990's I was curating non media art and making photographic work like 'Telinga Keling', now in the Balai's (National Art Gallery) permanent collection. More than making art I had been theorizing the junction of art, culture and technology. I have always seen art as a deeply meaningful, even a sacred and rejuvenating practice. I have taken more of an interest in traditional sacred art forms and have from the beginning worked at the junction of tradition and technology. I am about to embark on some new research with my long time collaborator in India, Dr. Raman Srinivasan of TATA Consultancy services. The Internet is a part of this engagement. Still, I believe that what I once saw as a potentially revolutionary medium has been so only in the sense that human civilization has had to adapt to its potentials – it has not as yet had an impact on the fundamental human values. Certainly I had a utopian vision of this medium, all entangled with mid 1990's Malaysian hubris but the post financial crisis landscape put to rest this techno-nationalism. I acknowledge some of the criticisms of my posturing on the Internet in the 1990's. I remember the biting critique of Hasnul's and my views of this new medium by artist, theorist and friend Ray Langenbach. He wrote to us questioning what he saw as a missionary desire to romanticize or redeem digital communications - a medium which he implicates with historical ties with Taylorist and Fordist modes of modern mass commodity fabrication and the development of American military communications. He saw our arguments as mimicking Mahathir Mohammed's strategy of appropriating the rhetoric of the local centre-left to criticize the very global capital markets to which he was nevertheless committed. While we have always called for a critical approach – indeed, I had written about continuing to apply Ismail Zain's interpretation of 'critical regionalism'; Ray is right about our early enthusiasm and about the Internet. Today I feel that the significance of this new medium is not so much that it has brought progressive social change but that it has set a new bar for adaptability and survival in the political economy. Anwar Ibrahim's Reformasi movement, the Obama campaign and the Indian outsourcing industry all being outstanding examples of the successful Internet adaptation of politics and economics! So I work with the internet but it is not central to my work.

RS: Now that WWW has changed so much since its early days of inception, how do you see the development of technology influences your practice?

NR: I continue to keep up with the social and ontological implications of the technology. In the 1990s, the open structure of the Net as well as the increasing affordability of Internet access made participation possible on an unprecedented scale. This is where I entered the scene with my

analysis and enactment of the virtual geography and the multimedia remediation potentials of the www. As the net has developed, web pages have turned into collaborative annotation and editing systems, often implemented as web logs, which enabled mass collaborative authoring. This is what is called 'Web 2.0'. This term represents a change of thinking about how the web applications of the future should be developed. Web 2.0 applications involve the ability to get updates of fresh, useful multimedia data and an openness to external applications of that data. Web 2.0 consists of RIAs (Rich Internet Applications) like AJAX, Flash technology bring desktop functionality to internet and SOA (Service Oriented Architecture) has enabled mashup feeds, rss, web services, and the consequence of the change in technology is the harnessing of the collective experience and a shift of focus to open participatory publishing from proprietary authored publishing. I now work with You tube video, recycling this wealth of readymade media. There are huge intellectual property issues and the corporate media is closing down the republishing of proprietary content but for now You tube is a ubiquitous and annotated archive of world media from the 20th century. Just look for something and it is most likely there. I wanted the train scene from Satyajit Ray's Pather Panchali as I remembered some interesting audio around the electric pylon encounter that precedes that scene - It was there. Check out an old pop star you used to like in your younger days and you will find footage that you would have loved to have viewed in those days but never got the chance, particularly in a trans-geographical situation. Its like a back to the future ontology – memories you would love to have had but never knew were possible come alive – it is vey personal and nostalgic. Indian mythological cinema and saint films from the 1970's – they are all there. I see this as an intriguing phenomena rich with possibilities. Video reflux is an application built on the You tube resource in terms of 2.0 possibilities. This is how I am thinking these days.

RS: You are based in Vancouver currently; do you still see yourself as a Malaysian artist?

NR: You know this is a very difficult question. The best way to answer this is to say that I do – simply because I am a Malaysian citizen and I am an artist. You know Neil Diamond is doing some good work again and topping the charts these days. I used to be a huge fan of his early work ….. "I am I said …. I am said I" KL is home but I guess "it aint mine no more". You know I had this problem well before coming to Vancouver – which by the way is very "fine" though its not a "sun shines all the time" kind of place. Sorry I cant help this Neil Diamond stuff Ha !... I am KL "raised" but not "born" – Though my father was born in Seremban, I was born in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. I came to live in Malaysia at age 2. Then I left for London at age 17 and spent many years

as a student there. My early adult life and career as an artist were forged there. And then when I returned to Malaysia and did all the important internet and theoretical work, I was based in Kuching, Sarawak – where West Malaysians like me need a work permit and are never allowed to really feel at home. Identity is a complex thing but while my identity as an artist is connected to this complication, I think the answer to your question is a little more practical. While I worked as a artist in the late 1990's, I certainly was a Malaysian. I literally dropped out for the last 6 years while striving to set up in Vancouver – but now I am settled as an assistant professor at the School of Interactive Arts and Technology (SIAT), Simon Fraser University; and am in a good position to reconnect with my former identity. You know, Canada is my home now and circumstances have not allowed me to return for six years but now thanks to your curatorial endeavor and art historical memory – I am back on the scene – My old work is remembered and my new work is being recontextualized – relocated even, as Malaysian – Yes I am happy to announce that I am still a Malaysian artist!

RS: Why is the "context" so important to your work?

NR:I have begun dealing with this in answering your question on how I moved to the WWW as a medium for my art. The artist operates within an ecology – a context. And I was not happy with the way the context I found myself in was locating me. First of all, I saw myself as a Malaysian Indian, but in the UK it was difficult for me and my work to maintain this identity. I was too quickly cast as an Indian artist. More pertinently, what I hadn't understood was that I had been directed to a very specific 'Indian' platform or avenue of success while other arenas had remained closed to me. More than being marginalized as an Indian Artist, I was upset by the naivety or complicity required of the artist in terms of the institutional placement of his or her work. I wanted to understand this better – I found that postmodernist discourse had started dealing with this conundrum and found the criticality, reflexivity and self consciousness of thought very much to my liking. Still this was yet another defining context and I realized that if I settled in this one it would be a resignation of sorts also. I realized that for my work to remain alive, it would have to start indexing its own contextualizing parameters. At SIAT, SFU I am developing a Post Traditional Media Lab that investigates and develops a framing mechanism that will deal with what I hail as the end of postmodernism. This will enable a better reading of the kinds of hybrid cultures that have emerged throughout the world in the 20th century - cultures that merge tradition with technology in weird and wonderful ways, but that have been misplaced and misunderstood by the framing discourses of modernism and post modernism. I am developing a

'post-traditional media theory' that enables the indexing of moments of change, while at the same time, enabling the recognition of the persistence and plurality of traditions. This theory treats modernity as yet another tradition and enables media technology to be seen as moving across all cultural contexts freely, engaging with them on their own terms. In my art work this primacy of context remains a given.

RS: You have served as a curator for several important exhibitions in Malaysia and abroad, how do you negotiate your role as a curator and artist?

NR: This is a good question for me, one with artistic and ethical implications – I do not see any difference in the way I work to produce my art from the way I bring together a show. I guess this is the post modernist legacy that I buy into – I see fragments and I build wholes, flows and possible movement and readings – so a found object and another artist's work are the same except that as a curator of the works of others you are obliged to negotiate the placement of the element with its creator. With an object you are a little bit freer to do what you will – but on a more metaphysical level – an inert object has its insistence – its ontology and like an artist – it wont work with you unless you satisfy its preconditions! So yeah, different but the same from a creative standpoint. From an institutional view there are problems of curators including their own work in exhibitions! You know what I mean – you are a pro – there are certain conventions and ethical boundaries – yet in practice artist/ curators select their own work, work of their protégés, work or their predecessor and so on. Hasnul and I did this in the 1990's – it is a bootstrap kind of thing – you are pulling the thing together and you are a part of the thing itself – what do you do – leave the main elements of a narrative or pattern out simply because its you – perhaps one should – all I can say is that this is about curatorial culture – artist collectives work very differently from grand museums of record where big money is exchanged! Still in the middle there is a grey area – I think the separation is very much a function of maturity of the particular art ecology. When there is a good pool of curators, theorists, historians and critics to understand and engage with artists the separation happens naturally.

RS: Your works sometimes tend to be very intellectual and demand some basic knowledge of art history and theory for an audience to read your piece, how do you see this scenario?

NR: This is where the postmodern defragmentation of categories comes in again – to me the elements of history and theory are my medium – if you don't know this stuff you are left out. In

view of this I always present modes of access to the context – I was doing this in my installation work with take away texts – quotes, statements and so on – the thrill of the early WWW for me was that this new hyperlinked medium lay all contexts open to connection. I moved my installation practice to the Internet. I believe that all art requires some work and what I offer is the opportunity for the viewer to engage directly with the contextual knowledge. The modern artist presents an alienated or esoteric form that is given a place in art culture by remediating critical texts. These are very specialized and difficult but the wider public does not have to look into it. They simply accept the status of the work and accept or reject its presence in the gallery as a signifier of its value and meaning. This mediatory structure has, in my work been dispensed with – no offence to you as my curator – but to gain a presence in the internet the work must be self locating – easy to achieve with hyperlinks. That is how I looked at it in the 1990's – today I am not so sure – you cant escape the gallery if you are making 'art' and work always benefits from interpretation and contextualization. So I appreciate any readings and placement of my work outside of the net. I am not today going to say – you just need a wiki and the interpretations will all happen online – but perhaps I should!

RS: Where do you get your inspiration/ideas for your work?

NR: Well this is a deep question and a difficult one for me, as I have huge dry spells when it comes to inspiration – it seems to well up and erupt in cycles for me. Ultimately I feel that all expression is a question of finding or connecting with what is already there – The traditional model of art and artistry is founded on this understanding. While there is no doubt that particular artisans were recognized for having greater ability – the intellectual property was collectively owned, not just by the craft community but by the community at large. I could not proceed with my work without Ananda Coomaraswamy, Marcel Duchamp, Ismail Zain and Redza Piyadasa. Also, with the Internet, there is someone whom I failed to acknowledge in the pioneering days of E-ASEAN and the 1st Electronic Art Show – simply because I did not connect his contribution to my Internet art concerns. This is the father of the radical Internet journalism in Malaysia - Sang Kanchil or MGG Pillai. I have come to realize now in the blogger era, that his contribution to Malaysian Internet culture was a significant enabler for a lot of the Internet scenarios that have followed, including my early works. These guys have done all the important work and I am just picking at the edges, coming up with readings and applications. You know I think art must be deep and yet I love the popular and the immediate – it is a contradiction that has been quite productive for me. One of the parameters of my work is the rejection of big 'Art'. While I support

the need for national and regional narratives and heroes. I do this as a form of resistance to more powerful and overwhelming perspectives that have impinged on our local scene. As an artist I am inspired by small things – throw-away way things even, things that are ready made, that come together and come apart and dissolve into the context from which they emerged. One of the guiding creative principles I apply is something I heard as a child. We used to have some *kathaaprasangam (musical story telling)* records by the great Tamil musical discourser Thiru Muruga Kirubanantha Vaariyar. And somewhere between a joyfully mocking song about Neil Armstrong's calling to the moon and the retelling of some portion of the Rayamana – he gives the most profound expression of creation and dissolution – a structural mode that has crept into my bones, my being and my practice as an artist – *ondrum ondrum seanthal osai varum; ondrum ondrum pirinthal osai varum!* If one thing and another come together there will be resonance, If one thing and another come apart there will be resonance! That's it!

RS: Do you have any advice for artists who might be interested in exploring the WWW as a medium for artistic practice?

NR: No I do not. I really have, throughout my career, been skirting the issue of art as professional practice – always turning on to a new form or medium just when I had found my groove and broached the threshold of recognition in the old one – there must of course be deep psychological readings of this trait but at the conscious rationalizing level – I would say that ultimately art for me is a kind of sacred quest and not a mode of production. In traditional culture this was the instutionalized function of art. Today personal genius and expression are part of a modern or postmodern secularization of that sacred flow. I see all my work in this light, as expressions on a personal path of discovery. Though I seem overly theoretical and socially oriented at times, the formative process is located deep within. So while I still do champion the WWW medium as a rich vehicle for critique, expression and communication – I think setting out to make art with the Internet undermines true potential of both art and the internet – its social and ontological possibilities. Think of it as the whole 'picture' not just as a medium! Learn from non art uses of the Internet and even try to bring an artist's perspective to these non-art situations. Artfully or critically construct a communications scenario. Bring art to the Internet, don't put the internet on a pedestal – in the gallery. This could be a critique of my own attempts at Internet art and of the present show even … and there you go – I said no but have given some advice none the less!!

Documentation images

the great NON-MALAYSIAN portrait installation at the museum of art and history, Santa Cruz

May 15th 2009

interACTIVATE
ucsc digital arts and new media program
2009 master of fine arts thesis exhibition

Part I: April 17–May 14
Rupa Dhillon
Roopesh Sitharan
Melanie k Stewart

Part II: May 29–June 24
Troy Allman
Miki Yamada Foster
g. craig hobbs
Lindsay Kelley
Joshua McVeigh-Schultz
Nada Miljković
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