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CONTEMPORARY ARTS IN AND FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Minna Valjakka

Introduction: arts, rights, and envisionings

Every person has the right, individually or in association with others, to freely take part in cultural life, to enjoy the arts and the benefits of scientific progress and its applications and to benefit from the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or appropriate artistic production of which one is the author.

(ASEAN Secretariat 2013, 10. Article 32)

[A]rt is also found to replace the missing political arena and recreate a space of sociability through ‘imagined worlds’. Art establishes then a sense of community with the public in an alternative space where the political power cannot intervene – imagination. By the use of allegory, metaphor and a coded language, complicity with the public is created. Art can also be a *refuge*, a means of survival, because it recreates a forbidden, lost past as well as projecting a missing future.

(Preda 2012, 64)

Regardless of limited possibilities and supplies, creating art became a lifeline for Burmese artist Htein Lin (b. 1966) during his detainment in Insein, Mandalay, and Myaungmya prisons in 1998–2004. Artistic practices kept him busy and held despair at bay. As Htein Lin explained in an interview, he took part in the democratic uprising of 1988, but since 1995, he had fully concentrated on arts and, in particular, on painting. All the same, he was imprisoned as a presumed opposition activist. As a political detainee, obtaining suitable materials for painting, collaborating to create poetry books, and sharing his works with fellow prisoners worked as acts of defiance and gave him a meaning to exist. Once, supported by his two cellmates, Htein Lin managed to persuade the guards to allow him to organise an art exhibition in their cell. Diverging from normal procedures, the guards agreed to open all the other cell doors simultaneously and allow the 40–45 detainees to attend this event for three to four hours. The day before the exhibition, Htein Lin created invitations for each cell on tiny pieces of paper. In the morning, the

prisoners prepared themselves for this special occasion by taking showers and getting as groomed and dressed up as possible. He fondly recalls the exhibition and is proud to have organised it because it allowed the prisoners ‘to feel like we are civilized – even if we are in prison’ (Htein Lin, interview with author, 5 August 2021).

This affective and inherent significance of the arts and the envisionings they offer – even in dehumanised conditions where human rights are nonexistent or severely restricted – confirms Caterina Preda’s (2012) perceptions of the many roles art takes on in contributing to civil society, even under authoritarian regimes. Htein Lin’s artistic oeuvre created during his imprisonment highlights the arts’ possibilities to do so even in the most unlikely locations. His continuing artistic engagement with civil rights and ongoing injustices elucidates the need to examine in detail the continuously changing conditions and forms of agency of contemporary arts and artists in relation to the transformation of civil societies in Southeast Asia. As Preda (2012, 58) asserts, through imagination and ‘by its autonomous stance, art provides a fictional space ... to transcend the oppressive surrounding reality’, even if that might be only briefly in a prison cell, as was the case with Htein Lin’s art exhibition, or through co-created handmade books of poetry circulated from one detainee to another. Providing ‘a space of sociability’, art can become a vital method of survival, or as Preda (2012, 64) further asserts, ‘a *refuge*’. While (re)creating alternative envisionings for an impermissible past or future, the arts’ power lies in their ability to provide (im)material tools of resilience to cope with the unjust realities of the present.

When mirrored against the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration’s reference to arts and culture in Article 32, quoted above (ASEAN Secretariat 2013, 10), Htein Lin’s artistic practices highlight core questions of the arts as a part of shared human rights. Still, whether citizens can freely enjoy and benefit from arts is, by definition, controlled by the changing perceptions of the (in)appropriateness of arts in each society. A long tradition of artists, cultural practitioners, and multidisciplinary collectives with (in)tangible artistic practices addressing societal injustices and oppression across Southeast Asia test the acceptance of arts. Concerns of the people and their rights were voiced already during the colonial period. They were particularly raised through literature, poetry, music, and visual arts (such as painting, theatre, and woodblock prints), which were displayed, shared, and performed both in private and public spaces by a great diversity of actors and agents. In the post-war period, informed by postcolonialism, heightened awareness of diversified methods of socio-political participation through arts and culture gained further ground among transnational networks eager to enhance knowledge exchange and reach broader audiences. Simultaneously, the new nation-states were also keen to employ arts to foster national identities and to support their preferred political ideologies. Through allegories, symbolism, and de-/reconstructed myths, arts in general, but especially visual art (e.g., monuments, sculptures, and paintings) became a powerful way to legitimate new power and challenge colonial legacies. This development, in turn, enhanced the possibilities for arts and artists not only to dismantle such narratives but also to provide other kinds of envisionings, even though arts remain a primary target of censorship especially in authoritarian conditions.

The reverberations of the radical 1960s sparked socio-politically sensitive artistic engagements also in Asia.¹ International cultural and political tendencies – avant-garde, social realism, punk, democratisation, pacifism, anarchism, and communism, among others – inspired experimental protagonists from all domains of arts and culture. They started to explore novel artistic practices, collective strategies, and innovative venues to

advocate for socio-political and cultural issues important not only for their local and regional peers but also for transcultural communities. Questioning the hierarchic fascination with ‘fine art’ that ‘Western’ art-historical canons established became one of the defining features of both modern and contemporary art across Asia. Such aspirations continue to inform various aims to decolonise perceptions of arts today.

Given how local and national cultural policies have inevitably shaped each art movement and art form (e.g., music, literature, theatre, and performance art) in each Southeast Asian country, they all have their specific trajectories in relation to political ideologies and civil society discourses and distinct resonances with transnational flows. Each art form has its own strategies of distribution to multiple transnational (counter-) publics, tactics of aesthetic negotiation to avoid censorship, and methods to encourage civic participation. These all depend on how the art form manifests at all levels of creation, distribution, and evaluation. Furthermore, as Htein Lin’s art exhibition in a prison cell indicated, the temporality of many artistic practices, lack of documentation, and ephemerality of affectiveness add to the challenge of analysing the socio-political impact of arts. Because of these difficulties, the intricate interrelations of arts with civil society have not yet been properly recognised and conceptualised. Therefore, I suggest, it is likely that arts in general, but visual arts in particular, have more meaningful positionalities and effects for unfolding and restructuring civil societies in Southeast Asia than has been previously acknowledged. Consequently, a detailed historical analysis or a generalised theorisation of multiple art forms and their contribution for civil society across the region is neither a feasible nor a meaningful approach here. Rather, with a focus on contemporary arts with selected case studies from Myanmar and Singapore, I investigate what kind of changing modes and positionalities contemporary arts take – and are allowed to have – in the cultivation of civil societies across Southeast Asia, in Asia more broadly, and in international interrelations.

My study is primarily informed by art historical and socio-political studies on arts’ possibilities to enhance societal and political change, including Preda’s insights on the roles of art in the shadows of repression, with a specific focus on civil society discourses. Izabel Galliera’s (2017) research in the post-socialist contexts of Eastern Europe provides primary inspiration for the theoretical framework. She finds that socially engaged arts, with the help of curatorial and institutional practices, translate the subversive and emancipatory potential in ‘social capital’ into ‘cultural capital’, ‘symbolic capital’, and ‘political capital’ to generate a viable civil society (Izabel Galliera 2017, 10–11, 24–32). As ‘the result of complex negotiations and contentious dynamics, unfolding among artists, curators and funding institutions’, art projects generate ‘inclusive public spheres as democratic forms within emerging civil societies’ (Izabel Galliera 2017, 2). I intend to unravel such currencies and their both local and translocal characteristics in Southeast Asian contemporary arts. By extending the analysis also into the realms of global contemporary art worlds, I wish to provide a topical and locally situated framework. This study is grounded in my long-term multi-sited research in the region and beyond. Interviews and informal discussions with a range of professionals and volunteers involved in arts in Asia, Europe, and North America have provided fundamental insights for the analysis.

Whereas Myanmar and Singapore significantly differ in terms of governance, religions, cultural policies, and infrastructural support for arts, they both demonstrate the importance of adapting versatile and multidisciplinary artistic tactics and approaches for aesthetic articulations of sensitive issues, such as the freedom of speech. My focus on these two distinct geopolitical localities in Southeast Asia highlights the

interconnectivities and collaborations that enable viable rhizomatic networks of arts at multiple stages of civil society in (semi)authoritarian circumstances. As I have proposed elsewhere (Valjakka 2021), these organic informal networks include and extend beyond artists, art institutions, foundations, non-profit organisations (NPOs), private citizens, officials, curators, audiences, scholars, and art critics and while doing so establish temporary spaces and spheres to re-negotiate the interrelations among contemporary arts, the state, political discourses, people, and civil society.²

In the growing presence of (in)direct forms of advocacy through arts, political censorship, and instrumentalisation of arts, I propose that a more comprehensive investigation of the intricate dynamics and the multi-layered forms of shared agency among multidimensional arts networks would contribute to a nuanced understanding of how contemporary arts and artists actively create in and for civil societies. Instead of seeking fixed definitions of the arts or their roles within or in relation to civil society, we can better understand the power of contemporary arts through attention to changing interrelations among partially overlapping – and occasionally even contradicting – positionalities, enacted simultaneously across spaces, roles, practices, and strategies. By examining forms and levels of agency, how arts transgress national borders, what kind of potentiality contemporary arts have, and what challenges they face in diversifying socio-political citizenship, I aim to contribute to discourses on contingencies and conceptualisations of civil society, rights, and civic participation especially in multi-ethnic societies with varying political ideologies.

Arts and civil societies: discourses and practices

When society is experiencing revolution and citizens, new to empowerment, are striving to build civil society and establish more egalitarian structures, art can rise to the challenge of illuminating and driving change, rather than merely describing disturbing realities. Conceptual approaches in Southeast Asian art operate to make sense of and sometimes activate this re-ordering world, their corralling of allusion and subtext providing structure to works that fulfil a public calling.

(Lenzi 2014b, 23)

There are several reasons why the arts, in their form and production, provide a site from where we can observe and experience aspects of political life that we cannot possibly achieve in any other way.

(Negash 2004, 188)

To comprehend the current diversity of artistic positionalities in and for civil society, any analysis needs to be contextualised amid intricate geopolitical histories and their multi-layered impressions on the arts. Yet, the task of general theorisation of the arts' fluid roles in between and for the state, the political, and citizens is complicated by the scarcity of scholarly studies explicitly addressing these questions within the framework of civil society. Notwithstanding studies in the social sciences on, for instance, civil society (Alagappa 2004; Ogawa 2018), civic spaces (Douglass, Ho, and Ooi 2008), transnational activism (Avenell and Ogawa 2022), and student activism (Weiss and Aspinall 2012), attention to the contributions of arts remains rare. It therefore seems as if the political and social studies do not yet recognise the arts and artistic agencies,

such as museums, galleries, and artists, to exist within the core domain of civil society in the region.

An informative exception is Koh and Soon's (2018) consideration of 'independent local theatre space' as a profoundly political form of civil society in Singapore. This insight provides an opening towards acknowledging the essential role of arts as a privileged medium to convey knowledge of and for political life, as Negash (2004) asserts. In her study of arts during authoritarian regimes in Chile and Romania, Preda (2012) discusses the necessity to examine both the various roles of arts and their related mechanisms and strategies. Arts can be employed as an instrument of the regime or against it. In the first case, dictatorial regimes use both positive (enforcing) and negative (suppressive) mechanisms to ensure the creation of preferable art. Policies for arts and culture may come in different guises, ranging from depoliticisation to censorship and from persecution of artists to officially commissioned encomiastic art. To work around these policies and to deconstruct the 'officially constructed reality', artists have employed a multitude of artistic strategies to ensure primary roles for art to critically reflect, to expose violence, and to provide refuge from surrounding circumstances and even serve as a replacement for politics (Preda 2012).

In authoritarian conditions, subversive artistic practices may be confined to small circles of like-minded supporters. The socio-political impact of a specific artwork or event hence remains limited. But if we accept that social movements are an inherent part of civil society, the historical long-term importance of varied forms of arts and their collaborative efforts in recreating political discourse and space becomes quite evident, as demonstrated, for example, by civil rights movements in the United States (Reed 2019) and the *minjung* movement in South Korea (Park 2019). In addition, new forms of socio-political participation in the 21st century are further diversified by innovative 'protest art' and more broadly through 'art activism', 'participatory art', 'collaborative art', and 'socially engaged art'. Among these partially overlapping tropes of arts, those most closely related to civil society are often the varied artistic and creative practices created as forms of resistance, manifested especially as interventions in public spaces (see, e.g., Lee 2017). Yet, the arts' potential to contribute to civil society is not to be reduced to the purview of antagonistic confrontation. My long-term interdisciplinary engagements with contemporary arts in East and Southeast Asia have made it clear that there is more than meets the eye if we care to look beyond the streets and media narratives.

In the realms of visual arts and research on these, the long historical interrelations with civil society, and with human/civil rights in particular, are most clearly acknowledged in the world of theatre in its multiple forms and contexts (see e.g., Frame 2006; Becker, Hernández, and Werth 2013; Rashid 2015). Practitioners, scholars, audiences, and representatives of varied NGOs perceive community theatre, often emerging as independent groups outside the institutional theatre, as invaluable for fostering socio-political participation and, hence, a more inclusive civil society (van Erven 2001; Chong 2011, 115–118, 123–127, 135). In the 21st century, thanks to technological innovations, documentary films are another pertinent form of visual arts that civil society organisations (CSOs) and activists employ as an advocacy and pedagogical tool. These films often focus on human rights issues and interrelated social injustices (Hjort and Jørholt 2019).³

While a plethora of studies examine modern and contemporary arts in terms of political and societal change in the 21st century, surprisingly few studies of art history explicitly address arts' connection to civil society. Existing studies and exhibitions on Asian and Southeast Asian art and art movements with their international trajectories

provide invaluable groundwork for understanding the aesthetic strategies of and socio-political conditions for contemporary arts and their possible iconoclastic and subversive practices.⁴ With conviction that arts have the power to facilitate socio-political transformation, art historians, curators, and artists often call attention to the possibilities for how ‘art can rise to the challenge of illuminating and driving change’ (Lenzi 2014b, 23). Yet, however undeniable the socio-political potential of contemporary arts, it is also unquantifiable. Therefore, scholars, art critics, and curators often cannot prove causality or fully theorise contemporary arts’ contribution to civil society. In their groundbreaking study, Turner and Webb (2016), for instance, examine in great detail how contemporary Asian artists, through their artworks displayed in art institutions, address human rights issues as citizens and worldmakers. What remains missing is analysis of socio-political parameters that shape these artistic activities and what kind of reactions they cause in or outside contemporary art circles.

Kapur (2007) discusses such interrelations in her studies of Indian art through concepts of secular and citizen artists and how they intertwine in contemporary art practices. Drawing on Chatterjee’s (2003) distinction among state, civil society, and political society,⁵ she asserts the importance of ‘a more situational idea of citizenship, making it imperative that we acknowledge historical dilemmas of identity and advance specific instances of radical partisanship within the nation-state and outside of it, within civil society and across the more volatile ground of the political’ (Kapur 2007, 422). Amidst the transformative conditions of Indian democracy under a forceful state, artists have employed varied methods to ‘take political dissent beyond the protocol of civil society’. This has further led them to seek how to ‘be both inside the nation and outside the state in their interpretative rendering of the political’ (Kapur 2007, 426). By joining forces with activists, intellectuals, and citizens, artists can take multiple roles within civil society, vis-à-vis the state, in the public sphere, and within the political arena of India.

These modalities of artistic citizenship have gained growing attention with expanding fields of public art and beyond (Elliott, Silverman, and Bowman 2016), but their findings do not yet adequately explain the multiple fronts where arts interact with civil society. While contemporary arts’ possibility to contribute to civil society development often originates from an artist’s or an art collective’s envisioning, layers of shared agency by curators, museums, non-profit art organisations, art institutions, galleries, collectors, citizens, and (social) media further enhance and disseminate these effects. Hence, besides investigating artists’ roles and intentions, questions of how and to what extent related forms of agency may (or may not) reshape civil society discourses beyond circles of art enthusiasts and in relation to official policies, international art markets and CSO are relevant for future studies.

Moreover, *other professionals* besides artists also initiate contemporary arts projects and practices within and for civil society. The commonly perceived role of the artist as the core figure of artistic resistance should be adjusted to consider the increasing impact of shared agency and citizenship. For this to happen, not only do we need to extend our focus beyond artists, but we also need to take account of structures, affinities, and alliances. Many informal community groups, non-art-focused NPOs, INGOs, and IGOs (e.g. Greenpeace, Oxfam, and United Nations organisations), and transnational companies both support and commission art projects to advocate their own agendas related to the betterment of rights and improved living conditions in Southeast Asia. At the same time, an independent art gallery may exhibit and sell an artist’s works to financially support their dedication to advocate human rights,

or to donate the profits to charity. These intricate realities further problematise possible preconceptions of civil society and its agents as non-commercial actors, shaped by leftist politics, based on anti-capitalism, or demanding democratic political reformation as artist-citizens. Instead of focusing either on art activism in public spaces or on professional artists and their works in art institutions, I propose a more comprehensive approach based on an acknowledgement and critical investigation of multi-layered, translocal shared agency and its dynamics infiltrating throughout and in between the state, public space, the political arena, (art) markets, art institutions, NPOs/INGOs, and civil society.

Myanmar: political contraventions and reverberating artistic insurgencies

During his imprisonment in 1999, Htein Lin was to meet the Head of the International Committee of the Red Cross. To express the grim conditions of his confinement, Htein Lin took a bar of soap, the weekly ration for two prisoners, and, with a piece of bamboo from his sleeping mat, created a fraught human detainee that the representative agreed to smuggle out (Fig. 3.1). In 2007, while living and working as an artist in London, Htein Lin discovered that this soap carving was displayed at the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum in Geneva.⁶ He received an image of it, but it was not until 2014, after resettling back in Yangon for a year, that Htein Lin started to consider producing a work based on the original design. He persistently sought out Shwe Wah soap, a memento and a signifier of his childhood under the socialist government – an era of limited knowledge, brainwashing, and propaganda that rendered everyone a prisoner (Htein Lin, interview with author, 5 August 2021).

For his first solo exhibition, *Story Teller*, held at the Goethe-Institut in Yangon in 2015, Htein Lin created an installation, *Soap Blocked*, of more than 1,000 human detainees

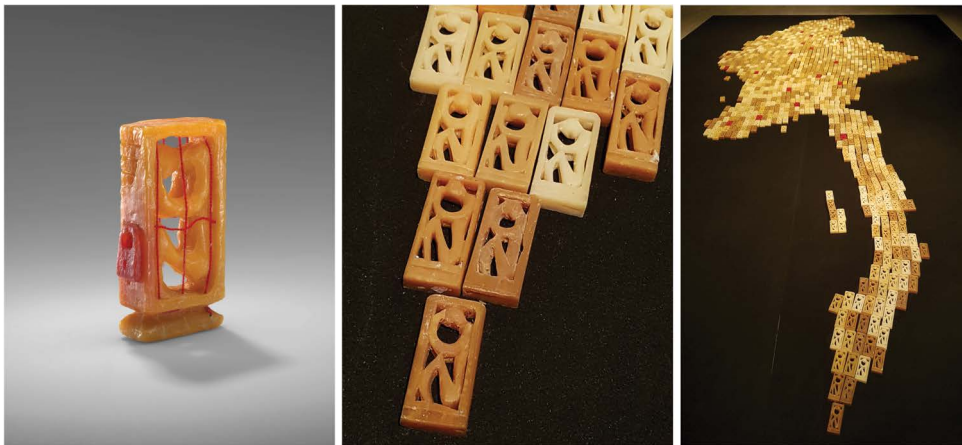


Figure 3.1 On the left: Htein Lin, *Prisoner object: carved soap figure*, Mandalay Central Prison, Myanmar, 1999. In the middle and on the right: a detail and an installation view of Htein Lin's *Soap Blocked* at Singapore Art Museum in January 2017.

Source: Left: Collection of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum, Geneva. MICR/COL-1999-115-1. Middle and on the right: Collection of Singapore Art Museum. Photographs by the author.

arranged as a map of Myanmar on the floor and placed the poster of the first soap figure on the wall. A second edition reached more international audiences at a group show, *Silent for a While: Contemporary Art from Myanmar*, exhibited by the 10 Chancery Lane Gallery in Hong Kong in 2016. Due to limited space in the gallery, this installation, entitled *Soap Block*, had only around 450 pieces. After the exhibition, the M+ museum acquired the installation, leaving the artist with the option to recreate another from the remaining pieces. Later the same year, a third edition of 1,345 pieces was displayed in the Fifth Singapore Biennale, attaining more global audiences and ending up in the Singapore Art Museum's permanent collection. In varying shades of ivory, ochre, and red, the carefully carved detainees each crouch slightly differently in the tightly confined space of their prison cells, conveying to viewers both personal and shared conditions of mental and physical imprisonment. Displayed this time together with the poster and six books relating to the socialist era, the affective aspects of the installation vibrate between past and present, suppressed and uncensored freedom of expression and existence (Fig. 3.2). According to the curatorial statement:

Soap Blocked returns to the original moment of the artist's desperate, clandestine plea. The installation maps and reflects the experience of thousands of political prisoners in Myanmar in recent decades. The work amplifies autobiographical resonance into a starkly visceral monument to the collective helplessness that was experienced under socialist military rule.⁷

These soap figurines demonstrate the multi-dimensional possibilities for how creating, sharing, and displaying art can be actions defending humanity, which extend from the emergence under restrictive circumstances to varying manifestations and impermanent positionalities across different spatio-temporal and institutional contexts. The account of *Soap Blocked*, its origins and gradual unfolding can be taken as an allegory of the struggles of civil society in Myanmar and the arts' locally grounded but also transnationally linked modes of documenting, commemorating, and advocating for issues that lie at the core of civil society discourses. Relying on translocal networks of shared agency for creation, preservation, collection, display, and viewing – by individuals, non-art-focused NPOs, private galleries, and local and regional art institutions – the work has the potential to affect people and to remind them of the realities of authoritarian conditions under which political expressions are constrained, but arts may still provide means to reflect, document, criticise, and advocate.

Through migration, international support, and locally emerging civil society with its art spaces in Myanmar, and mirrored against the military coup d'état in spring 2021, *Soap Blocked* epitomises many of the roles, challenges, contingencies, and forms of agency that contemporary arts take on at the personal, communal, institutional, and societal levels today. By actively using the resources available, artists create temporary spaces for socio-political discourse. The material fragility and everydayness of every soap detainee also bears witness to the urge for freedom, representational politics, and human rights in the shadows of varying political ideologies and levels of censorship in Myanmar, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Through intertwined reverberations of social, cultural, symbolic, and financial capital by varied agencies, pieces of ordinary soap gain significance as symbols of political capital in an authoritarian context and beyond because the artworks are collected by two art institutions in East and Southeast Asia and the first figurine is permanently displayed in Geneva.

Even if Htein Lin did not create the first soap figurine until 1999, during his imprisonment, it was born out of the ramifications of the revolutionary struggles against the authoritarian socialist regime in 1988. Whereas the suppression of the movement led to confinements, exiles, and more severe censorship also for arts and artists, socio-economic reforms in the 1990s ushered in a transitional phase in governance, civil society and arts, and their interrelated challenges to re-formulate regional and international relations. The changing spatio-temporal conditions for, and composition of, the emergent civil society during transitional decades informed by humanitarian crises, religious tensions, and ethnic alignments have garnered detailed academic attention (see, e.g., Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2004; James 2005; South 2008; Fink 2009; Stokke, this volume). Yet, as McCarthy (2018) elaborates, even more research is needed to exemplify how modern civil society may evolve under military rule regardless of suppression, how the military may co-opt traditional elements (e.g., Buddhist *sangha*), and what kind of impact these processes may have on the post-military period. Political liberalisation and progressive change since 2011 raised hopes for democratisation and enabled growing translocal partnerships, which were not always unproblematic (see Cheesman, Skidmore, and Wilson 2012; Fink and Simpson 2018).

Political shifts have profoundly shaped the modes, places, and norms of and for arts in general. Whereas Myanmar is praised for its Buddhist (or ‘traditional’) arts, the emergence of modern, Western notions of art has not been unproblematic. Despite varying restrictions and presumed isolation, artists in Myanmar have established diversified strategies to manifest themselves not only as modern and contemporary artists but also as citizens and activists, in and beyond national borders. At the end of the 1970s, but more particularly in the 1980s, regardless of the lack of resources, funding, institutions, infrastructure, and official support, artists started to establish their own spaces, collectives, and informal meetings (Galloway 2018). Gaining and circulating information and ideas on arts, also from abroad, relied on personal connections and informal networks. Social capital was the key to gaining and developing cultural capital, the knowledge about arts and artistic discourses.

To some extent, an interest in addressing issues raised by attempts at modernisation aligned with nascent notions of civil rights and hence connected with an aspiration for socio-political change, even if arts could not gain political capital. The 1990s were defined by strict censorship but were also marked by a gradual opening to international art worlds and markets. This led the artists to seek new artistic methods (e.g., performance art), both to address local and international audiences and to maintain the integrity and identity of their artistic expression. The beginning of the 21st century brought support from regional and international foundations for collaborations and knowledge exchange in arts, some of which the 2007 Saffron Revolution temporarily interrupted. For instance, in 2003–2007, Jay Koh and Chu Chu Yuan managed an independent, non-profit resource development centre, Networking & Initiatives for Culture & the Arts (NICA) in Yangon. However, already by 2008, many new activities and local NPOs, such as New Zero Art Space, had been launched, marking a turn towards a more viable local art scene.⁸ The gradual flow of financial support from foundations and the international art market started to enhance both social and cultural capital by building local and translocal networks of arts.

Reforms towards more civilian governance in 2011 introduced new possibilities and challenges for all forms of arts (Diamond 2017). Participating in international exhibitions and bringing international artists to Myanmar became more feasible, but different types of censorship emerged, too, from powerful public factions such as religious groups (Carlson 2016). Artists’ freedom of expression was continuously at stake,

in particular for those interested in voicing socio-political concerns. Some exhibitions which were not possible to organise in Yangon were instead moved abroad, for instance to Hong Kong (Carlson, interview with author, 26 August 2021). Yet, in resonance with the political transition, contemporary arts gained a more prominent role. Together with economic growth and supported by international galleries and NGOs/NPOs, the local art scene started to diversify and strengthen. More art exhibitions and events were organised and some diaspora artists returned. Flows of financial capital for and in arts grew, and contemporary arts became more closely aligned with civil society discourses.

As an example, since re-opening in Yangon in 2014, the Goethe-Institut provided a free and open space for artists to explore artistic languages with nonconventional ideas. According to then-director Franz Xaver Augustin, it was a great pleasure and privilege to support the artists at an intriguing time of building towards a more open society. Besides consolidating art exhibitions, the institute hosted open discussions about the role of arts alongside a focus on supporting civil society through education and access to knowledge and information (interview with author, 18 September 2021). Augustin shares the notion with Rolf Stehle, the former director of the Goethe-Institut in Malaysia, of how artists and activists encourage citizen participation, which is closely related to democratic processes in the region: ‘Artists and activists give aesthetic or discursive input creating critical discourse, which is a precondition of change. They serve their communities and support the creation of stable civil societies’ (Stehle 2017, 9). Besides many other local, regional, and international CSOs, the Goethe-Institut increasingly supported and engaged with local and international arts in Myanmar, establishing new spaces to do so.

Yet, the presence of regional and international NPOs and NGOs can have both a positive and a negative influence on arts. Together with arts and artists, they may become part of the problem. In the worst case, although unintentionally, contemporary art projects may enhance traumatic memories of societal injustices and trigger new conflicts, especially if created amid tensions among ethnic and religious groups in public space and without careful consideration of specific circumstances of the location. Kelly Flynn, head of a programme at a dedicated multi-donor fund for peace support in Myanmar, emphasised these complex questions of risks and challenges relating to the work of NPOs and NGOs (interview with author, 22 August 2021). To what extent, she asked, may their own agendas interfere with and even reformulate local needs, or cause more issues – also in terms of arts? Although arts are continuously used for seeking reconciliation, mitigation, and empathy worldwide for unprivileged and mistreated communities,⁹ implementing arts ‘from above’ or ‘outside’ can cause further tensions, too. Hence, in her donor role, Flynn employed a detailed reviewing system for all arts initiatives. Only after due consideration of the possible benefits and risks of the art project for the people it was planned for would the fund decide whether to support an initiative. More times than not, they declined public-serving art-based project proposals because the possible harm to local people was far more evident than positive outcomes (Flynn, interview).

The military coup on 1 February 2021 re-ruptured socio-political conditions again. It stimulated an unprecedented number of people to engage with artistic and creative practices on the streets to resist the regime and to demand their rights. Drawing inspiration from previous and current social movements and their radical creativity (e.g., from Thailand and Hong Kong), Generation Z in particular passionately employed the symbolic capital of arts and creativity to advocate civil disobedience and to gain international attention (e.g., the three-finger salute from *The Hunger Games* as the international gesture of resistance) (Jordt, et al. 2021).

The social and cultural capital that the older generation of artists had gained throughout years of personal involvement in arts provided inspiration and support for winning political power for the people and defending the emergent position of civil society in spring 2021. International art exhibitions, auctions, and events were launched to create attention and raise ideological, political, and financial support for those resisting the military coup. Several local cultural professionals and art organisations joined forces to write an open appeal ‘to support us in our fight for democracy’ (PEN Myanmar 2021). Some artists also sent their politically sensitive artworks abroad, while some have surreptitiously kept documenting injustices. They are finding new methods to maintain, circulate, and safeguard the arts, defying the continuous risk of imprisonment or exile. New forms of symbolic resistance have manifested in all forms of arts, and regardless of ongoing suppression, artists have not been completely silenced. Htein Lin is actively involved as the chair of the Association of Myanmar Contemporary Art (AMCA), the establishment of which was planned to be announced on the same day the military seized power. He summarised: ‘in 1988 we were fighting against socialism and military rule that we had experienced. But now, the battle is about what we fear we might lose’ (Htein Lin, interview with author, 5 August 2021).

Singapore: depolitisation of arts and subtle strategies

Htein Lin’s *Soap Blocked* has clear political and critical tonalities, but exhibiting the work in Singapore caused no major challenges even if the local art scene is known to be under close government scrutiny. According to local curator Louis Ho, the majority of Singaporeans are familiar with the repressive history of Myanmar’s military government, so the work was not considered too sensitive. Instead, most local viewers seemed to appreciate the aesthetics rather than the politics that the work expressed (interview with the author, 5 August 2021). These notions closely resonate with Lee’s (2017, 74–79) observations that whereas art biennales provide platforms for experimentations with new audiences, they may also mute the political significance of artistic practices. However, it is often claimed that arts in Singapore are allowed to be critical of other countries’ conditions but not of their own. The limitations for artistic expressions’ political aspirations have inspired artists and supporters of arts to adopt specific tactics and strategies (Valjakka 2021). For instance, creating art in prison was a deliberate decision for Htein Lin to survive, while the imprisonment of Seelan Palay (b. 1984), a Singaporean artist, turned into an unplanned yet inherent part of his commemorative performance, *32 Years: The Interrogation of a Mirror*, in 2017 (Fig. 3.2).

Palay spent two years charting his performance, its particularities, and possible repercussions under existing socio-political conditions. His multi-layered symbolism, which borrowed from the political, symbolic, and cultural capital of three sites and their histories, and from metanarratives of Singapore (e.g., the Singapore Tourism Board slogan, ‘Passion Made Possible’), cannot be fully unravelled here. Suffice it to summarise that the spatio-temporal aspects of the work bring together Palay’s personal lived reality, current political discourses and practices that maintain what he perceives as ‘a Kafka-esque’ society, and socio-political histories that are erased from sight, such as imprisonment without a trial. The number 32 refers not only to the number of years of Singapore’s longest confinement and house arrest, of Dr. Chia Thye Poh, but also to Palay’s own age at the time of his performance (Seelan Palay, interview with author, 5 October 2019; see also Palay 2022).

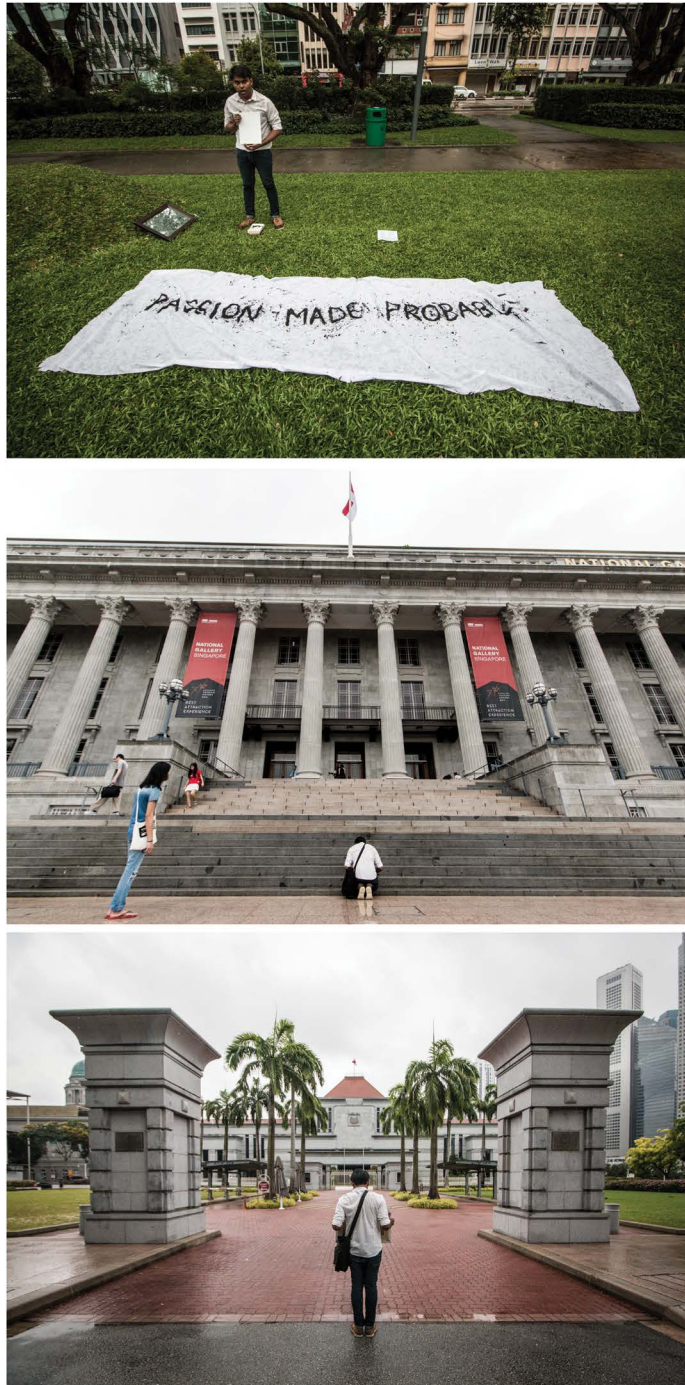


Figure 3.2 Seelan Palay, *32 Years: The Interrogation of a Mirror* (2017). Above: [part 1](#) in the Speakers' Corner. In the middle: [part 2](#) at the National Gallery. Below: [part 3](#) at the Parliament House.

Source: Courtesy of the artist.

Palay was licensed to hold a speech at the Speakers' Corner, a zone in a public park reserved for Singaporeans to speak out after registration, but he also planned to extend his performance beyond this permitted area for civic participation to the stairs of the National Gallery and to Parliament House – without knowing for sure the repercussions of his performance. At Parliament House, he refused to follow the security guards' request to leave and was duly arrested by the police. Palay could not anticipate the state's response, but for him, the state was an active co-performer. This became evident when the state decided to charge him and found him guilty of participation in 'a public procession without a permit' under the Public Order Act. Palay was fined and the state destroyed three objects from the performance it confiscated. Instead of paying the fine, which to Palay would have meant accepting the verdict, he chose to be jailed for two weeks (Palay, interview; Palay 2022). While the performance itself lasted only for around 2 hours, the media coverage of the trial, social media reactions, and the imprisonment prolonged the spatio-temporal effects far beyond what he originally intended. Palay's carefully considered bodily gestures, the exact locations where he stood or kneeled, his drawings on a mirror, specific books and quotations he included, and a banner all deliberately draw upon the political, cultural, and symbolic capital of the state within these varied sites. However, instead of merely reflecting these tangible sites back with his mirror, Palay transformed them into his personal artistic language that he first left open for audiences (art circles, the people, and the state) to interpret as they preferred.

Imprisonment was not the ultimate aim of Palay's performance, but it became the key point the public noticed: the sudden realisation of limited rights related to arts, and to citizenship in general, raised interest in the status of civil society in Singapore. The varying modalities and historical phases of civil society and how these have shaped specific notions of citizenship are beyond the scope of this chapter,¹⁰ but to investigate the arts' positionalities, four major aspects require highlighting. First, the People's Action Party (PAP) has carefully cultivated civil society, especially since the revival of the concept itself in the 1990s, with selected means and rhetoric comprising what Lee (2010) identifies as 'gestural politics' that seemingly aim to encourage civic participation (e.g., in the Speakers' Corner). Lee discusses in detail how the Singapore government has redefined and constrained civil society for its own ends. Therefore, 'the gesture of civil society is more pertinent than its substance': citizens are kept 'away from *real* political activities such as political lobbying, protests, campaigning, or even politically induced violence' by allowing them to busy themselves with apparently civic pursuits (Lee 2010, 72–85). Secondly, intertwined with nation-building, the PAP has encouraged citizens to understand citizenship as a privilege, defined by the responsibilities of and pride in being Singaporean instead of civic rights (Chua 2000, 63; Lee 2010, 86–87). Thirdly, in an environment that emphasises ethnic harmony, as Chua (2003, 31) elaborates, 'severe limits [are] placed on civil society organizations with exclusive ethnic constituencies, whether Chinese, Malay, Indian or Eurasian, in a constitutively multiracial polity'. Fourthly, arts and culture are ideological sites to cultivate civilised and cultured citizens in this multi-ethnic and multireligious society (Chong 2011, 16–47). These circumstances lead to the paradoxical situation in which 'every discourse on civic and/or civil society in Singapore is highly politicized, for the act of depoliticization, if at all possible, is always-already political' (Lee 2010, 85). Hence, Singapore provides an interesting case study for examining how contemporary arts renegotiate new modes and space for envisionings amidst limitations confronting both civil society and arts.

Singapore's specific history as a colonial port and its multi-ethnic population, with specific cultural heritages, artistic bequests, and related values, shape perceptions of arts' socio-political roles and purposes. Since most of the population is ethnic Chinese, major socio-political events in 20th-century China have had repercussions for Singapore's cultural politics and arts, too. For instance, Chinese theatre groups acknowledge that addressing socio-political issues through theatre emerged with the May Fourth Movement in Beijing in 1919. This historical trajectory continues to shape their current perceptions of the role of the theatre today (Chong 2011, 119; Kok Heng Leun, interview with author, 3 August 2021). Since World War II, artists and politicians alike have increasingly recognised arts' possibility to permeate and mobilise people. While some artists and cultural workers have been inspired by the societally transformative power of leftist movements around the world, the banning of communism and the censorship of related cultural productions from 1960s onwards have shaped arts and their de- and re-political positionalities in the past and today, as Palay's performance also indicates. Standing still and holding a mirror in a park would be considered an apolitical gesture in many neoliberal societies, but in the Singaporean context, authorities interpret it as an illegal political assembly.

The PAP's aspiration to transform Singapore into a Global City for the Arts, announced in 1991, and articulated in Renaissance City Plans in 2000, 2005, and 2008, make clear the aims of promoting arts and their socio-economic role. These cultural master plans have guided structural, cultural, and policy transformations, including mitigating censorship and developing world-class infrastructure for arts (Chong 2011 29–47; Lee 2016). This has not been a linear or homogenously evolving advance across artistic fields. Scholars and practitioners debate whether official censorship has become more lenient or not in the past decade. Changing parameters, depending on site, topic, form, and practice, provide opportunities and challenges. For instance, if artworks are displayed to be sold in a commercial art gallery, there is no need to apply for the licence demanded of public, non-commercial art exhibitions. Private galleries thus have more leeway to show artworks with socio-politically sensitive topics.

Nonetheless, Singapore is commonly known, especially among arts-sector professionals, for its 'governmentalisation of culture' (Lee 2010, 8). Besides enforcing laws and regulations, Singapore's government employs funding to monitor arts and civil activism. A myriad of contemporary arts programmes and projects have been initiated not only to support the art scene but also to improve local living conditions and both local and international tourism. Because maintaining social harmony is a top priority, the financial resources poured into the arts do not necessarily enhance freedom of expression but strengthen an appropriate expression of arts, as the ASEAN human rights statement at the beginning of this chapter also recognises. In places, this has resulted in depolitisation of arts and avoiding directly addressing race, religion, and other political issues defined by 'out-of-bounds' markers. It is quite a challenge to survive as a contemporary artist, art collective, or space without the art grants governmental institutions control. Therefore, preserving one's artistic integrity versus voicing political criticism at the risk of losing future funding opportunities is a concern many artists share. Some may prefer to evade unwanted attention from the government. Even though this can be interpreted as a form of self-censorship, it could also be seen as strategic manoeuvring that leaves possibilities for other than antagonistic means to create affects. Some artists prefer to work independently and without governmental funding, but many employ fluid positionalities in relation to the state, the political, and civil society, depending on which method works best for the specific artistic project (Valjakka 2021). Given the

socio-political conditions of contemporary arts, employing directly confrontational methods is not always the most effective approach. More subtle methods may enhance socio-political changes more successfully.

Such artistic positionalities, working gently within and for a more multivocal civil society, are not uncommon in Singapore. An illuminating example of long-term engagements is BRACK, an independent art group that has evolved from a Singapore-based platform into a collective of socially engaged artists in Southeast Asia. As a platform, BRACK was working with civil society groups and artists to create spaces for people to come together, whereas at the time of writing, its focus as an art collective has shifted to questions of how artists can use their artistic and often embodied practices to challenge existing worldviews. Hoping that participation through unconventional modes of interacting and sharing could raise new channels for understanding and empathy, the aim is to work within and along civil society. To investigate questions of identity, self, and community, the focus lies on forms and acts of gathering through collaborative artistic practices. Co-founder Alecia Neo's (b. 1986) projects focusing on care practices, *Between Earth and Sky* (2018) and the ongoing *Care Index*, launched in December 2020, (Fig. 3.3) further illuminate these aims (Alecia Neo, interviews with author, 18 August 2021; 5 March 2022; see also BRACK 2022).

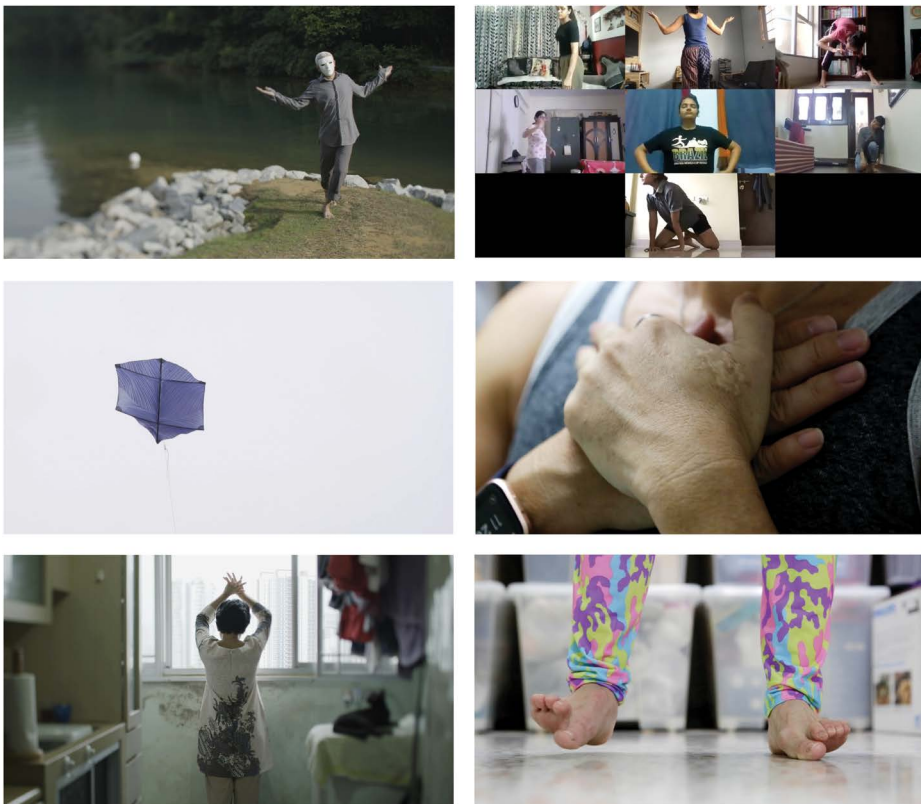


Figure 3.3 On the left: Alecia Neo, *Between Earth and Sky* (2018). On the right: Alecia Neo, *Care Index: Dance Nucleus Element Residency. The Listening Biennial* (2022).

Source: Courtesy of the artist.

Regardless of social norms and somewhat ambiguous regulations, the rights of the LGBTQ+ communities, migrant workers, and other vulnerable minorities, such as the homeless, have been addressed both in contemporary arts and by civil society groups, emerging both within and parallel to civil society. Yet, negligence towards and stigmatisation of those with mental disorders and their caregivers are still less acknowledged parts of human rights and social justice discourses. Through varied artistic methods, including movement workshops, performances, and co-creation of kites, the year-long project *Between Earth and Sky* (2018), created in collaboration with artists Sharda Harrison and Ajunta Anwari, and nine caregivers for people with mental illnesses in Singapore, aimed to address these issues. The artists directly shared their social, cultural, and symbolic capital with caregivers, who then recreated ways of self-expression appropriate to their own personal needs for reflection, experiences of caregiving, and related emotions. *Between Earth and Sky* restored hope and faith among the people involved. It enhanced caregivers' abilities to seek and make known their personal situations and to generate understanding and solidarity within the group and with multiple audiences. The collaborative manifestations of the project were further shared in numerous formats in art galleries, movie theatres, community spaces, and in an NPO for caregivers, all of which lends symbolic capital to the project and the caregivers' contributions. The main aim of the *Care Index*, performed in online and on-site workshops in Singapore, in the region, and beyond, is to continue to collect and examine the multitude of embodied everyday gestures of care and whether they can be shared with broader communities across national borders (Neo, interviews; see also Neo 2022).

For Neo and BRACK, caring is at the core of an equal and inclusive civil society. What these art projects relating to care, healing, and solidarity among and in between individuals, communities, and networks indicate is the relevance of subtle artistic gestures to enhance knowledge exchange on practical issues of civil rights and participation; they also provide accessible methods and spaces for people who do not have the means to participate in political debates on these matters. While doing so they also resonate with Preda's (2012) findings regarding how arts can replace politics. Alecia Neo acknowledges being aware of the art projects' limited impact on socio-political change. What they can do is open up new perceptions and layers of understanding on how to prioritise issues for political debates, although in the end, other groups and representatives need to pursue changes in policies.

Mediations and reverberations

Temporarily occupying key physical spaces is symbolically powerful in the processes of shaping institutional sites of power. The 'capital' in social capital can thus be conceptualized as a collective asset employed by its participants to bring forward a dissenting yet inclusive civil society.

(Galliera 2017, 11)

Contemporary arts and their social capital can be employed both for and against civil society. As Galliera (2017, 10) reminds us, social capital bears both positive and negative connotations, and its emancipatory potential is not self-evident. In a similar vein, Lee (2017, 85) elucidates how the political power of street protests is not 'inherently signalling progressive change' and that their 'social currency and cultural capital' can be employed for even contradictory political aims when, for instance, mediated through

artistic practices on the global art scene. Indeed, the potential of contemporary arts to secure permanent and tangible societal change, even if created within and for civil society or in the name of resistance and subversiveness, is disputable. Yet, regardless of the risks brought about by multi-layered shared agency and its modes of dissemination to varied audiences – who might not be able to recognise the intertwined aspects of political, cultural, and symbolic capital of the artistic and curatorial processes – contemporary arts continue to reshape the sites of and places for civil society in Southeast Asia.

While new cultural policies, (self-)censorship, and instrumentalisation of arts are the three main modalities with direct impact on contemporary arts across the region, contemporary arts and artists are not only passive or reactive partakers. Instead, as these case studies reveal, through varied artistic tactics and strategies, artists employ available materials, informal (trans)local networks, and spaces to create possibilities, even ephemeral ones, to address and advocate for socio-political issues. They show how any site, from a prison cell to an international art museum and from a park to an online workshop, can be transformed by arts and through affective aesthetics as a space, at least temporarily, for civil society. These complex and contested processes often rely on multidimensional social, cultural, and symbolic capital to recreate new modes of political capital, especially for those who lack access to political arenas. Hence, the contemporary arts actively reformulate their own dynamic and fluid socio-political positionalities that are not only inevitably and actively interrelated with, but also, to some extent, autonomous from the state, civil society, and political society. This ‘interpretative rendering of the political’, as Kapur (2007, 426) articulated, is not only taking place ‘both inside the nation and outside the state’, but also through translocal collaborations. Modes of civic participation outside or in the margins of democratic institutional settings are becoming ever more significant, especially in (semi)authoritarian contexts. Regardless of contested circumstances, contemporary arts provide innovative platforms for such participation through alternative envisionings of the future.

Some artists remain sceptical about the possibilities of contemporary arts to raise concrete support for civil society because contemporary art scenes are not strong enough and only a small section of the population in Southeast Asia is interested in contemporary arts. Yet others are more convinced that the cumulative affects kept alive by continuous mediations and reverberations through time and space will gradually create a more significant position for contemporary arts in and for civic participation and discourses of more equitable societies. Consequently, some are keener to define themselves as dissidents and citizen artists, while others are more reluctant to be seen as activists, even if they take part in a politically informed exhibition or project. Besides personal perceptions, varying socio-political conditions and situated understandings of citizenship explain these differences to some extent. For instance, some Singaporean artists are not comfortable with the denotation of ‘citizen artist’ because of the ways in which the government has employed the arts and ‘cultural citizenship’ for national identity building. Currently, notions of citizenship and citizen resonate with nationalism – an ideology that artists do not wish to promote.

The forms and scope of contemporary arts created within or for civil society are not necessarily distinctly subversive or antagonistic. Not all contemporary arts are political and not all political arts contribute to civil society. Therefore, a more holistic analysis is needed, one that is locally grounded but opens up to multi-scalar regional and international trajectories and includes multivocal shared agency in, of, and for contemporary arts created within and for civil society. By documentation and commemoration,

contemporary arts have the power to side with understanding and sympathy and to prevent amnesia. By means of criticism and (in)direct advocacy, artists not only sustain hope and courage but also provide alternative platforms and tools for people to voice injustices and seek reconciliation. Across Southeast Asia, contemporary arts continuously substitute for a socio-political arena even under (semi)authoritarian conditions and for people lacking possibilities for political participation.

Notes

- 1 For a recent discussion of the socio-political impact of the ‘radical 1960s’ in Asia, see Derichs and Ali (2021).
- 2 For a preliminary study on art(s) and ecosystem(s) in Indonesia, see Valjakka (2020).
- 3 A range of organisations, activists, and film makers organise international film festivals and events annually. For more information, see e.g., Human Rights Film Network (2021) and World Movement for Democracy (2021).
- 4 See, e.g., Guillermo (1987); Taylor and Ly (2012); Ade and Ching (2016). On some of the most illuminating exhibitions, see Lenzi (2014a); Igarashi and Kuroda (2018); Bae, Seng and Suzuki (2019).
- 5 See Chatterjee (2011) for a more comprehensive discussion.
- 6 The Museum has a collection of more than 360 prisoners’ objects in the ‘Defending Human Dignity’ area of the permanent exhibition *The Humanitarian Adventure*.
- 7 From the author’s fieldnotes.
- 8 For illuminating art-historical studies, see Galloway (2018) and Aung Min (2017). For a detailed analysis of the censorship of arts in different eras, see Carlson (2016) or Fink (2009, 209–225). Ching (2011) elaborates the challenges for emerging contemporary arts from the mid-1990s until 2011.
- 9 For instance, Oxfam International (2021) has organised Rohingya Arts Campaigns to raise both empathic and financial support for refugees across the border with Bangladesh.
- 10 For analyses see Koh and Ooi (2004); Lee (2010); Soon and Koh (2017); Koh and Soon (2018).

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