ABSTRACT

This study sets focus on problem of identity and melancholia which are framed in works of Southeast Asia contemporary art. Art works become main media to utter criticism of disrupted daily circumstances that slowly put the voices of the marginalized identity in burden. We start from acknowledge of liberating art space therefore it will be able to the acknowledge of art as bridging entity from the non-philosophy and philosophy framework. The acknowledge assists this writing in the placement of art as media of criticism so it won’t be stationed at acknowledge of art as an art. Then we determine Julia Kristeva’s suffering and melancholia theory as comparison analytics tools of the art works which took specific theme of cultural identity per region. In particular, we analyze the works of Southeast Asia contemporary artists as they took place at Bangkok Art Biennale 2018 in Bangkok, Thailand from October 19, 2018 – February 3, 2019. Comparison of every works assist us to the conclusion which strengthens our quest from earlier stage of exertion the art works as media to vocalize the social issues, conflict of identity, and minority oppression in the development of Southeast Asia contemporary art.

KEYWORDS: Aesthetics; Southeast Asia Contemporary Art; Cultural Identity; Melancholia

INTRODUCTION

Art development in Southeast Asia sets new perspective of understanding the definition of art world especially in global scope (Kerlogue, 2004, 7). Many art researchers express their appreciation to Southeast Asia culture work beyond legacy Ancient Hindu era. Fiona Kerlogue in Arts of Southeast Asia (2004) categorized Southeast Asia in two approaches, organizationally – country member of ASEAN – and culturally (8).

Culturally, Southeast Asia countries divided in several regional such as geographically which distinguishes maritime and continental region. Maritime region includes Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Continental region includes Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam (Kerlogue, 2004, 9). Language differentiation is divided from the roots of the Austronesian language group which emigrated from Southwest China and brought their belief
and tradition, also Tai group of languages hold influence in continental region (Kerlogue, 2004, 9). All Southeast Asia countries have the same influence from Hinduism and Buddhism which came through ancient kingdoms in the region. However, this same influence not particularly developed the culture in Southeast Asia countries into the same. Distinction on geography landscape, language, and conflicts in every country shaped the social alteration on culture and society development. As proof in art works, the tradition pattern of every country may be acknowledged by their artistic and symbolic expression (Kerlogue, 2004, 9).

Southeast Asia artists have unique ability to adapt the idea, technic, and material in the process. Earlier influence came from India and China which then underwent eclectic process with local tradition. Until now, process which involves tradition never been static and always updated with current development as the matters to promote local tradition (Kerlogue, 2004, 13). This approach reveals new understanding in western culture. Southeast Asia, in term of classic to modern – if follow the pattern of western art history – often presenting the concept of harmony, balance of nature, contrast and symmetry, repetition, contrast of light and shade which are all elaborating human life (Kerlogue, 2004, 14). Examples of the artwork can be seen at Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Figure 1. Baked-clay pots painted with swirling designs (300 BC to AD 200) founded in The Prehistoric site at Ban Chiang, Northeast Thailand in 1966.
(Source: Kerlogue, 2004, 7)
There is confusion in distance between art and everyday life. If compared with the understanding of western art, many of Southeast Asia art works may be categorized with the definition of craftsmanship and decorative art (Kerlogue, 2004, 20). Tradition and social class division of every ethnicity also take influence in their way to appreciate the art. This influence still can be seen in the development of contemporary art in Southeast Asia. The elements of state repression and social class are influential additional factors in the process of artistic creation of Southeast Asia artists—who continue to incorporate elements of tradition in each of their works. Contemporary art from Southeast Asia is starting to be involved in various art exhibitions in museums, biennale activities, and art markets in Europe (Oetker and Podeschwa, 2016, 9). In the 63rd issue of Jahresring (2016), Brigitte Oetker wrote that the presence of artists from Southeast Asia in the contemporary world art scene raises questions about how the process of contemporary art from Southeast Asia was formed.

The difference in the process approach of the art of Southeast Asia contemporary artists with European artists in general makes the work of Southeast Asia contemporary artists more unique to be discussed. In general, the works of Southeast Asia contemporary artists dwell on the issue of local identity, tradition, and criticism of colonialism and state conflict (Oetker and Podeschwa, 2016, 9). The process of production and exhibition of these works develop interconnection in the process of globalization, making them easier to introduce their work to the wider world. There is a change in the curatorial approach in the world of art in the world that opens liberated art space while integrating awareness of issues over the history of colonialism, ecology, social and geopolitics. Curatorial space in Southeast Asia contemporary art eliminates the distance of interpretation between artists, works, with connoisseurs of art. Contemporary artwork Southeast Asia artists were able to invite the audience into the groove anthropological arts, state, and historical per region.

Figure 2. Rooster carved on house in Tana Toraja, Sulawesi, Indonesia. Combination of black, red, and white carries symbolic significance.
(Source: Kerlogue, 2004, 15)
Diversity of tradition in every region is depicted in art scenes, infrastructures, and conditions of cultural production (Bauer, 2016, 13). Therefore, there needs to be a space that liberates Southeast Asia contemporary art in the development of the world of art globally.

We had the opportunity to directly observe how the liberated art space interacts with the issues typical of Southeast Asia contemporary art at the Bangkok Art Biennale 2018 (BAB 2018). Based on these observations, we write this research as an effort to determine aesthetics position of Southeast Asia contemporary art as the voice of melancholy and cultural identity.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses an interdisciplinary approach which includes the cultural and aesthetic philosophy of contemporary art. The first method we used was collecting data and observing the works of Southeast Asia artists curated in the Bangkok Art Biennale 2018. Observations carried out on 2 – 4 November 2018 in Bangkok, Thailand helped us collect documentation of works, in addition to the Bangkok Art Biennale 2018 catalog—both in the form of books and from the website of the Bangkok Art Biennale 2018.

We set data limit by selecting specifically artists from Southeast Asia. The work of the Southeast Asia artists involved in BAB 2018 was then selected again according to the theme related to the issue of cultural identity and melancholia. After phenomenologically looking for findings from each work, we analyzed using a cultural criticism approach, understanding the space of artistic creation, and aesthetic philosophy.

DEFINING ART SPACE: BANGKOK ART BIENNALE 2018

Bangkok Art Biennale 2018 (BAB 2018) is the first international contemporary art event held in Bangkok, Thailand. Quoting the statement of Thapana Sirivadhanabhakdi, Chairman of BAB Foundation, BAB 2018 ambition is to become a world class contemporary art event while gathering tourists and art connoisseurs to support communities around the exhibition area (BAB Catalog, 2018, 5). Tourism in the BAB 2018 target is part of a relations strategy that seeks to develop the economy to the level of small communities. The existence of a relationship exchange in this event is in line with the concept in art marketing that accommodates in addition to the economic exchange as well as social benefits (Chong, 2008, 113).

The space for artistic creation in BAB 2018 is not limited to the process of enjoying artwork alone. There is an ecological introduction to the area around the exhibition venues. There is a gesture to be introduced through this international event, which is about Thai contemporary culture. The extensive use of the art space is characteristic of Southeast Asia curatorial. Visitors who come to BAB 2018 will experience the nuances of Thai tradition and culture—represented by the city of Bangkok—and this becomes our companion interacting in the process of enjoying art (Flores, 2016, 31).

Curatorial also plays an important role in the process of forming the space for Southeast Asia contemporary art. The liberation in interpretation relations is an exceptional gesture of self-reflexivity (Flores, 2016, 31). Unlike the concept of curation in Western art, Southeast Asia contemporary art is an alternative in the world of art. There is a reflection on the interaction of incommensurate modernities with liberating socialities—related to relations, expressions,
infrastructure that encompasses the world of art, artists' workshop space, collaborative work and everything related to processes in the world of art (Flores, 2016, 32). The work that emerged from Southeast Asia contemporary artists was then heavily involved in the area of social movements. There is an agenda and human desire that is inseparable from desire for culture and particularity. This was later interpreted by the western art as a transcultural or "exotic" form (Flores, 2016, 32).

The argument of "Western versus Non-Western" as the power of knowledge must be criticized, including in the world of Southeast Asia contemporary art. We cannot read contemporary Southeast Asia art using an approach to the knowledge of the Western art. Ontological classification will frustrate efforts to make space for local knowledge—meetings with local art creation experiences. The theme promoted by BAB 2018 is one of the efforts to present subjective experiences—which in turn being able to accommodate the value of local knowledge from Southeast Asia contemporary artists.

BAB 2018 takes the theme Beyond Bliss. Based on BAB 2018 Guide Book, the conditions of the times are full of experiences of distortion, delusion, and fear—seen from terror, chaos, natural disasters, pollution, overpopulation—making people lose the meaning of happiness in life (12). Communities are treated constantly with disruptive events that encourage people in life to be determined on media consumption and daily headlines. As a result, humans lose their confidence and ability to read the future—to fall on insecurity and panic (BAB, 2018, 12).

_Beyond Bliss_ is the state of neither happiness nor sorrow. The curatorial direction in BAB 2018 is to maximize the physical experience involving human sensory sensors. These sensory simulations will connect with our minds so that longing for happiness arises. However, the more we want that happiness, the more we will enter the condition of despair—as a result of unhappiness. _Bliss_ itself is a superlative condition that transcends the concept of happiness. The theme of BAB 2018 seeks to challenge both artists and art connoisseurs to interpret life happiness. They will contemplate the unattainable happiness in life. Desire in the search for happiness will remind us of the excitement and tranquility of comfort zone in life. Bliss is bleak as we see the relations of suffering, survival, sorrow, discrimination, and diaspora (BAB, 2018, 13).
Figure 3. Map of BAB 2018 venues.

Figure 4. Siam Discovery, one of the BAB 2018 venue.

Figure 3 gives an overview of the distribution of BAB 2018 venue locations. Maps provided both in the BAB 2018 website and catalog also provide information on how to reach locations using public transportation. The distribution of the venue for BAB 2018 shows curatorial efforts to use Bangkok as an art space that is related to each other. Visitors will feel the condition of the city of Bangkok and make it unite in the aesthetic experience of each individual. In Figure 4, one of the
BAB 2018 venues is located in a crowded area of a shopping center. Dense traffic conditions and full activity around it become an aesthetic experience.

Utilizing urban planning in the making of BAB 2018 space curation provides a boost of aesthetic experience that enriches the knowledge of the individual body (visiting art connoisseurs). When entering the venue where works are exhibited, a sensation from alternative knowledge will be interconnected with previous individual knowledge. BAB 2018's venues are not just a backdrop for the works on display. They are integrated into the process of seeking the meaning of work. Visitors are made a path full of symbols so that they have a contemplation room for the theme proposed by BAB 2018, Beyond Bliss.

SOCIAL ISSUES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA CONTEMPORARY ART

Southeast Asia contemporary art has a lot of potential to move in the social sphere. Patrick D. Flores specifically examined examples from the Philippine art movement in the 1970s that had the potential to make art as a cultural and social identification (Flores, 2017, 32). The influence of post colonialism and state hegemony can be a factor that drives social movements through art. Artists have a stake in questioning the question of people's cultural identity.

In Figure 5, the work of Eisa Jocson illustrates the real situation of the Philippine migrant workers exploited at Disneyland Hong Kong. This contradictory situation illustrates the construction of migrant workers who are discriminated in other countries without guaranteed proper employment. These migrant workers must repeat the activity in order to describe "happiness" in the playground as Disney characters. This happiness is not part of the lives of migrant workers because of the alienation over their work.
The work of Sherman Ong in Figure 6 is a series of videos that focus on human conditions related to their personal time space. Narrated in the form of a documentary narrated by the first person. This video is actually a fiction based on a real story (not the real character who tells). The focus of the issue on the work of Sherman Ong is about social culture from diaspora, transborder communities, transcultural identities, myth and memories. The film seeks to lift gaps in history between regions of the country and geographical and social conditions that influence the formation of individual identities behind each character's story.

Alain Badiou in his book *Manifesto for Philosophy* (1999) wrote that art is capable of producing truth that goes beyond the realm of theoretical or practical knowledge. The truth that is conveyed through art is inseparable from the event—being part of the order of the event (Badiou, 1999, 36). The truth in art will be connected to the world. The examples in Figure 5 and Figure 6 show that the story that became the inspiration had merged into the truth presented through art. Art does not become an object for philosophy to be reflected. Compatibility between philosophical operation and a non-philosophical operation only can be done by using art-specific procedures at artwork.

We can see one form of contemplation on artwork in Figure 7, the work of Nge Lay of Myanmar, *The Check Point* (2018). This work is in the form of a local size Longyi with a variety of sizes that is shaped like a female vagina (as the entrance to the contemplation room) and then visitors are welcome to sit and meditate. This work is an interpretation of discrimination against women. Nge Lay raised the issue of women's body and mentality. Many community leaders—
whatever their work and nature—come through women's bodies. Nevertheless, women are still in a subordinate position in various layers and systems of society. This work uses a longyi(s) traditional skirt that represents indigenous women. Efforts to present the truth of culture and the subordinate conditions of women in the culture of society make this work related to our knowledge in the process of appreciation of works.

![Image of a traditional skirt]

**Figure 7.** The Check Point, Nge Lay, Myanmar, 2018.

The works of Southeast Asia contemporary artists in BAB 2018 address social issues that are close to the daily lives of artists. Empathy is presented through the marking of works so as to be able to vocalize things taboo to be discussed in daily conversation. Seen from the works in Figure 5, Figure 6, and Figure 7 are some examples of works that raise social issues that can open up public awareness of social problems that occur.

**THE MELANCHOLIA VOICE OF REPRESSED IDENTITY**

Social issues presented through Southeast Asia contemporary art works in BAB 2018 converge on the nuances of suffering and melancholia. The process of the artists presenting the sound of melancholia is a difficult work. Julia Kristeva in her book *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1980) illustrates that writing melancholia is an effort to present abyss of sorrow as a noncommunicable grief (3). This effort often makes us lose interest in words, actions, and life itself. However, the trigger for the desire to present Melancholia's voice will enrich the process of artistic creation. Without Melancholia, there will be no desire in each action – merely just a transition to action (Kristeva, 1980, 4).
Figure 8. Embryo 1-10, Tul Hirunyalawan, Thailand (2018). Nudescape photograph 80 x 120 cm. Source: http://www.bkkartbiennale.com/project/embryo-1-10/ accessed 15 April 2019

Tul Hirunyalawan's photography work in Figure 8 is a creation that depicts embryos that are between paradise and the abyss. This work describes the memory of an embryo before given birth. The condition of melancholia depicted in this work is a representation of the meaning of happiness which will eventually be forgotten after were "born". In melancholy conditions, we are reminded of situations that have happened but are often overlooked because we just run it. When depression is present, there is even a sign of the meaning that has ever appeared again. Awareness of the meaning that is present when depression is a shadow that comes to the surface (Kristeva, 1980, 5).

Kristeva saw the condition of melancholia is presented as a balance of life. She questioned about "living a meaningful life". When the "meaning of life" is lost, does life then disappear? So that the condition of melancholia balances diversity in life (Kristeva, 1980, 7). Artists who struggle in this condition are contradicting the meaning of the symbols that surround their lives (Kristeva, 1980, 9).

In the works of Southeast Asia contemporary artists exhibited in BAB 2018, the conditions of melancholia are present in works that seek to question social meaning through symbols. The work of Arichama Pakapet in Figure 9 illustrates the symbol of her life as a moslem in Thailand. Arichama is incorporated in the Muslimah Collective group, which tells about their daily lives as a hope for peace in the area where they live - the southern region of Thailand. They tell stories that are not widely known by those with different identities. This hope they describe through works that origin from their melancholia conditions as a minority in Thailand. Without awareness of minority identity and their lives, discriminatory attitudes will emerge. Through works that vocalize minority issues, knowledge is conveyed. In this situation, the melancholia conditions of the artists are included in the work and then spread in the knowledge of those involved in the art appreciation process.
The condition of Melancholia has reached at the identification of relations between subjects with things or situations that repress them. The more we hate the situation—and into melancholy conditions—the more we are bound to that thing or situation. Complaints against oneself would be a complaint against another (Kristeva, 1980, 11). We must be able to distinguish whether what we complain is "Thing or Object". "Thing" does not have a significant relationship with us. It is only a center of attraction (Kristeva, 1980, 13). "Thing" does not have a word that can be signified and only becomes a desire that is present just like that. While "Object" can be involved in the process of sign meaning.

Artwork must be able to enter the meaning area. If it only becomes a "Thing", it will be difficult to interpret. The melancholia conditions of Southeast Asia contemporary artists in BAB 2018 succeeded in making them "Object" involved in the process of meaning. For example, in Figure 10 and Figure 11.
Heri Dono's work *Genetic Manipulation* (2017) in Figure 10 is a form of criticism of censorship and suppressive cultural policies. While in Figure 11, the work of Kray Chen from Singapore *A Parade for the Paraders*. Kray Chen's work takes on the issue of Singaporean identity, especially regarding militarism. Both of these works show an attitude of humor in response to cultural repression that occurs in each of their countries. Heri Dono criticized restrictions on
expression while Kray Chen criticized military uniformity. If the ideas of the two artists stop at the "Thing" categorization, then they will not be able to present the work included in the process of meaning. Complaints over issues that repress their consciousness will only revolve around the area of ideas that have no meaning. Their success of making the work present as an "Object" in Kristeva's melancholia understanding lead their knowledge move in the transfer of knowledge of the art connoisseurs who appreciate their work.

The inability of the subject to understand the condition of melancholia comes from the fear of "the lost"—or later Kristeva define as death (Kristeva, 1980, 25). Logically we cannot understand death, moreover present it. Death has no awareness, so what is most likely to be present is speculation. Witnessing death can lead us to the conditions of melancholia. The existence of castration fear makes us shadowed by the choice of fear of losing it or fear of achieving the condition (death). This death drive will awaken us to a situation that was previously unimaginable—we will be affected of the situation.

Sriwan Janehuttakarnkit from Thailand described the condition of death in her work Consider Myself (in Figure 12). This 2018 work is a human and bone painting series that pronounce suffering issues. The longing for happiness often put humans in selfishness position and then becomes the cause of suffering. This condition of melancholia made Sriwan describe human images and bones as a form of emptiness and death in achieving complete happiness. The paradox in Sriwan's work is a reminder of the life cycle. The religious element strengthens the voice of melancholia in Sriwan's work.

Figure 12. Consider Myself, Sriwan Janehuttakarnkit, Thailand (2018. Oil on Canvas, 200 x 200 cm. Source: http://www.bkkartbiennale.com/project/consider-myself/ accessed 15 April 2019
CONCLUSION

The process of knowledge transfer and meaning of Southeast Asia contemporary art in BAB 2018 is inseparable from criticism of the great narrative in understanding the art world globally. The tendency of the Western art to put position of Southeast Asia contemporary art in "exotic" areas makes it difficult for them to understand the aesthetic element as an alternative point of view. We must be able to see the elements of each work not only from the media used. In this case, there are need of opened mind in understanding the various conditions that involved the process of artistic creation of Southeast Asia contemporary artists. The voice of melancholia in every contemporary Southeast Asia art work in BAB 2018 enriches our knowledge of diverse cultural traditions. Curating approach which make the exhibition space merge with the city of Bangkok become one of the richness in the process of meaning. We are not halt at work in particular. There are situations that merged in space and time in the process of appreciation of the work. The success of Southeast Asia contemporary artists in BAB 2018 presents their work is evidence of their struggle in the conditions of melancholia. Every story about cultural identity inherent in their work is able to become a transfer of experience and knowledge to others. They are able to make the creation of art as a bridge over theoretical and practical problems in life. In general, they do not direct art connoisseurs to accept their meanings. In fact, these works will continue the next process of meaning—that is to be in the stage of awareness of art connoisseurs or other artists.

Social issues which repressively make us afraid to talk or imagine in everyday life, present in each work. When the work is in our consciousness, there is an empathy that is triggered—and brings us to the same position: melancholia. Thus, Southeast Asia contemporary artists have succeeded in making art as a medium of contemplation on social issues, issues of cultural identity, and cultural repression that has been hiding in our consciousness so that we involve into the interconnected meaning and interpretation which move aesthetically.

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