

RADIO MALAYA

A black and white photograph of a stone building with a tiered spire and palm trees against a light sky. The building is on the left, and the palm trees are on the right. The sky is a uniform light grey.

abridged
conversations
about art

NUS MUSEUM

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about art**
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It was a chance reading of a publication *The Short Stories and Radio Plays of S. Rajaratnam*, edited by Irene Ng and published by Epigram in 2011 that brought our attention to S. Rajaratnam's 1957 radio play entitled "A Nation in the Making". The play is an intriguing work devised around the notion of ideas, conditioned by aspirations and realities, and the author's self-initiated task of coalescing opinions around a unifying perspective of community and nation. The setting for the play was significant, written and presented during the very period when these opinions were in currency and as such, evolving within a landscape of apathy, skepticism and enthusiasm. Contemporaneous to the unfolding events and the varied responses to them, the play is highlighted here also for its prescient regard to culture, conceived in terms of identity-making informed by geography and history.



its adeptness and skill in the craft of reason and persuasion cannot be emphasized enough within the medium of radio being instrumental in its formal and conceptual articulation. The exhibition in this regard is conceived as discursive encounters of ideas about art and culture in Singapore, having its roots in the late colonial conditions of the post-War. As such "Radio Malaya"⁴ is not referenced here in its institutional terms, that is its role and place in history, but rather to invoke the dialogic play between perspectives, competing or complementary, defined or bifurcating and elusive. The artifactual, as a basis of exhibition making, remains central to the conception of the project, included are objects from the Museum's collection⁵, supported by loans from collectors and artists.

The exhibition follows from the NUS Museum's earlier project "Between Here and Nanyang: Marco Hsu's 'A Brief History of Malayan Art'" (2013-2016), proposing ways that the University's permanent collection – its conception informed by Singapore's period of decolonization – may be read in relation to one of the earliest writing on the art and cultural history of Malaya. The book "A Brief History of Malayan Art"⁶ consolidates Hsu's writings from the early 1960s, a period of transformation that led to Singapore's

short-lived merger with Malaysia in 1963. In it Hsu proposes a cultural history, from the neolithic to the contemporary, which sought the viability of a concept of national culture, one that could accommodate the dynamics of cultural encounters, reshaping older traditions and forging newer practices, while at the same time presupposing a collective struggle to identify such practices to Malaya and Singapore. Nation and citizenship as crucial themes in the decades leading to Singapore's self-rule and eventual independence made the work of commentators and practitioners complex, whether held latent or overt. For Hsu who wrote for the Chinese language newspapers, part of this concern involved negotiating between national and communal identities. Hsu's final invocation "from desert to oasis" proposed a modernity shaped by positions and interactions, optimistic in his prognosis that "Malayan art" in 1963, conceived by choice or accident, is already upon us.

Marco Hsu's cursory survey of Malaya's material and cultural histories has to be appreciated in its relationship to a mass

public as arguments and positions developed over time, published variously during the formative period of the 1950s. In a period significant for creative writers and artists to stake their varied positions on art, society and politics, he was not alone in his belief in the active use of the media to shape public opinions

"A Nation in the Making" was written by S. Rajaratnam prior to his entry into politics, when he was an editorial staff at the Straits Times and was then known as a journalist, fiction writer and playwright. The six-part radio play was broadcasted by Radio Malaya from 11 July to 15 August 1957, at the eve of the formation of the Federation of Malaya.

The play is structured around the themes of history, ethnicity and contemporary politics, organized to address questions of social cohesion, the struggle for an independent and united Malaya and national identity. In the immediate years after the Second World War leading to independence, radio assumed a crucial role in shaping public opinion. His writings can be associated to his reflections and extensive readings into the English literature, Greek and Indian classics, the philosophical foundations of the classics best indicate the rhetoric underpinning of the play

which weaves and addresses diverse positions in an attempt to acknowledge perspectives and persuade. He referenced a range of historical and contemporary sources, utilizing them to establish contexts, identify precedents and issue propositions, devised through character choice. They are among an ensemble of characters introduced to represent at the time, commonly held views and anxieties about race, politics and cultural identity. Rajaratnam clarifies the project of nationalism and the search for converging histories:

Student of Malayan History: Colonialism exposed countries like Malaya to progressive thought and learning. One of these is nationalism and the national state. Now having created the economic institutions appropriate to a national state, it was inevitable that sooner or later the political institutions national state would be created. The emergence of an independence movement, and its victory, were logical and inevitable developments. It was not a question of whether we were or were not



fitted for Merdeka. It was simply that a free enterprise economy could develop further only on the basis of free political institutions. To have withheld independence would have been to invite the breakdown of the whole system that colonialism had helped to create. But it is not enough to win independence. We must learn to hold the independent state together. Nationalism is such a force. But it must be nationalism appropriate to conditions in Malaya.⁸ [...]

Spirit of History: Forgive me if I make it seem too simple. But from my vantage point here, very often such problems are not so serious as they appear to mortals like you [referring to quibbling Malaysians to-be]. It is simply that the growth of civilisation in Malaya is not due to the effect of one race, one community, one group. So if you discover in the history of Malaya the imprint of many civilisations and many cultures; and if you can show that the Malaya of today is what it is, through the efforts not of one race but of all races who may live in it, then you will reveal the binding strands of a Malayan history!⁹ [...]

The play by S. Rajaratnam, shaped by the urgencies of its day should be noted for its attempts in developing economic and social arguments drawn from fiction and academic writings in history, from Rudyard Kipling for his provocation of difference, to the Malayan economist Ungku Abdul Aziz for his prescient observations into the material conditions of then Malaya. To underline such invocations, he summons the Spirit of History and Ptolemy, introduced to discipline a line of inquiry structured along a dialectical interplay between diverse sentiments. At its core is the appeal for a Malaya defined by the "binding strands" of the many civilisational histories that make up its ethnicities and their potentials for an assimilationist ideal, in part through the struggle for a common language that accommodates varied cultural attitudes. S. Rajaratnam builds into his passages stirring exchanges on communal identities between the many characters – lines drawn from the great traditions of India and China, as well as the wave of Islamisation, finding new potentials in a transformative Southeast Asia – remarkable in foregrounding speculations into the unfolding project of national culture. While



the play is driven by a literary impulse as much as an attempt to persuade an anxious public, its implications into what it may constitute such national culture materially is intriguing, forming part of the emerging cultural discourse in which others, including Marco Hsu, were part of. At the University of Malaya, the inception of the University Art Museum earlier in 1955 formed part of this consideration, conceived, according to its founding curator Dr. Michael Sullivan, to develop a collection for the purpose of the teaching of art history, organized along five key collections: (1) Chinese and Southeast Asian Ceramics, (2) Hindu and Buddhist Art, (3) Malaya and the Islamic World, (4) Southeast Asia, and (5) Contemporary Malayan Art. Sullivan had also proposed that the Museum should also have "a representative collection of contemporary art, particularly from Malaya and Indonesia," as a way to reveal the "state of our own culture and of the way Malayan artists are contributing to it."¹⁰ Sullivan – moved by the nascent postcolonial discourses operating within the intellectual and political fields – was in the thick of this transformation, and was then tasked with the role of establishing the art museum alongside an art history course at the University of Malaya. Sullivan's approach was one of locating and cultures in a network of relations alongside the very need to situate its constitutive

necessity. Singapore and Malaya, according to Sullivan, "want the dignity that comes with cultural independence."⁸ T.K. Sabapathy arguably became Sullivan's most significant student, later remarked that Sullivan and his activities "propel the teaching of art and the art museum into the social, private and public spheres, reaching beyond the university."⁹ For Sabapathy, the "intercultural" and "interculturalisation" (transmission and reception) suggested in Sullivan's scholarship and curatorial work prospect a humanist concern in the study of material culture, proposing comparability between aesthetic systems over geographies and periods, and further, their interactions and outcomes. Malaya and Southeast Asia – in being permeable, receptive, and transactive – fascinated Sullivan as settings that mediate and sustain such encounters of exercising choice through continuities and inflections.

Further in his many writings Sabapathy expanded on these prospects. The great traditions of Southeast Asia and the contemporary regard for the cultures of the region's distinct modern states provide a material grounding into this question



where colonial and post-colonial scholarships, while distinct in their objectives, origins and approaches, may offer affinities and relationships – if not reconciliation – if the project of Singapore and Southeast Asian art history is to be rendered meaningful. His practice in writing and curating offers ways of gauging such potentials. These may be read directly or indirectly in relation to his accounting of the historiography of Southeast Asian art, prospecting art to accommodate comparabilities, diverging contexts, and contemporary receptions. His seminal paper isolated for the purpose of this exhibition, "Preliminary Observations On Art Historiography in Southeast Asia", presented at a regional symposium "Towards a Southeast Asian Perspective in Art History and Aesthetics", was written in 1995 during the feverish period of intra and inter regional cultural exchanges across Southeast Asia and the Asia Pacific. He foregrounds the art historiography of Southeast Asia, highlighting scholarships of historians of classical India and pre-colonial Southeast Asia by examining possibilities offered as much as the blind spots. Likewise, he articulates the implications into ways in which the modern and the contemporary may be read meaningfully, as he returns again and again to a fundamental question – "To date not a single perspective or framework for the study of modern

art of the region has been mooted by writers or scholars from this country or the region"¹⁰ – necessary in accounting the art of the region, calibrated to the circumstances of its production and reception. He explicates further:

Be that as it may, by and large we are urged to re-look into ways by which we write the history of art; we are asked, as a matter of urgency, to re-examine motivations which spur such enterprises and the grounds on which histories are built. We are also required to explore methods by which the apprehension of artistic productions can be integrated or connected with other modes of production in order to gain for artists and their practice a sense of rootedness in society. In enjoining participants to attend to all or any of these, the writer/writers of the brief envision the emergence of a Southeast Asian art history with a distinct identity, one which while being different will not be subservient to art historical discourses elsewhere, most especially



from the West and even more especially when studying modern contemporary art practice and beyond. In this connection, I am reminded of Apinan Poshyananda's query, expressed in vivid terms, directed at what it takes to maintain this sense of difference; he asks: must artists and writers necessarily succumb to "the heavy breathings of the Crow-Krauss-Crimp clique" before their views are recognised as valid and authentic?¹¹

The aforementioned texts described above are by no means highlighted to suggest the absence of others that may prompt further complexities. An accompanying gallery guide that consists of texts drawn from other writings, reportages and interviews, completed over the broad period of the 1950s to 1990s are included in the exhibition. These are selected to complement ways through which the NUS Museum's permanent collection may be speculated and rendered as objects whose collecting histories may be associated to Malaya's anxious period of decolonization, and are complicated either by a residual anxiety of becoming or responses to a project that is sustained albeit differentiated across decades following independence. The privileging of such complexities is crucial –

in as far as to acknowledge collections and their institutional histories as material to their readings and surfacing the need to allow re-renderings that are fruitful in their provisionalities of accommodating varied positions, complementary or oppositional. To this end the exhibition is also augmented by loans from artists and collectors, each artwork allowing strands of connections and disruptions, allowing conceptions of the Malayan to interweave and contrast – in their effervescence, reticence and ambivalence.

1. The original typewritten scripts are housed in the S. Rajaratnam Private Archives Collection in the SOAS Library, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. See Irene Ng Ed., *The Short Stories and Radio Plays of S. Rajaratnam* (Singapore: Epigram, 2011).
2. Radio Malaya was formed through the merger of the Malaya Broadcasting Corporation and Pan-Malayan Department of Broadcasting in 1946, headquartered in Singapore. As part of the British post-war programme, the station was conceived to carry out the task of information and enlightenment of the peoples in the colony. Licensing began in 1947 with the critical task of promoting Community Listening. Broadcasting during the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960) was an important tool in winning the hearts and minds of a public, whose diverse wartime experiences and perspectives on the British's post-war role were made complicated by communist insurgencies and its own information offensive. Broadcasts on the subjects like rural development were aimed at vulnerable communities of the kampungs, farms and the



plantation and so-called districts to bring them into closer touch with the government and with progress in the outside world'. With the formation of the Federation of Malaya in 1957, radio services between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur were eventually separated with the establishment of Radio Singapore in 1958, with H.H. Beaman as its Director, adopting Aneta Budjaya Tangga Suan Mary Culture, One Voice as its motto.

3. The exhibition was also considered as an opportunity to display recent donations to the NUS Museum from T.K. Sabapathy, collected by the donor over the course of the 1980s and 1990s as purchases or gifts from artists principally from Singapore and Malaysia.
4. Marco Hsu, Lai Chee Kien trans., *A Brief History of Malayan Art* (Singapore: Miletium Books, 1998).
5. S. Rajaratnam, 'A Nation in the Making (Part I)', in Irene Ng, ed. cit., p. 91.
6. S. Rajaratnam, 'A Nation in the Making (Part II)', in Irene Ng, ed. cit., p. 126.
7. Quoted in T.K. Sabapathy T.K. Ed., *Past, Present, Beyond: Re-naissance of an Art Collection*, (Singapore: NUS Museum, 2002), p. 11-12.
8. Michael Sulam, 'Art & the University Malaya' in *The Singapore Artist*, *Journal of the Singapore Art Society* Vol 1 No 3, March 1950, (Singapore: Singapore Art Society, 1950) p. 4, 6.
9. T.K. Sabapathy, op. cit.
10. T.K. Sabapathy, 'Preliminary Observations On Art Historiography in Southeast Asia', a paper presented at *Towards a Southeast Asian Perspective in Art History and Aesthetics*, SEAMEO (SEIFA) Symposium on Southeast Asian Art History and Regional Aesthetics, 1995, (Singapore), p. 1.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

