

General

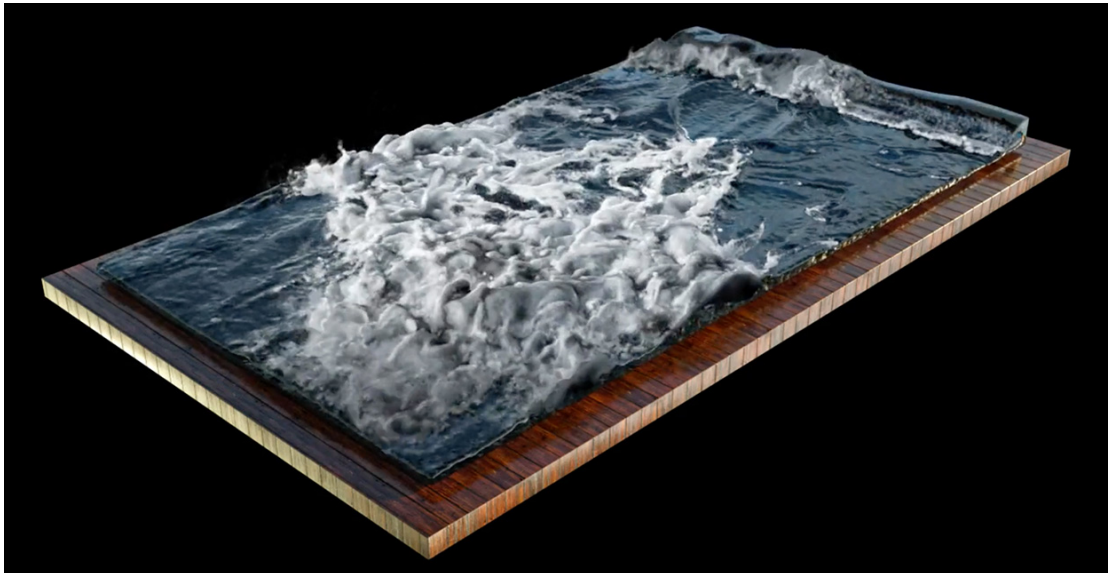
A Dream of Diagonals

Interview with Ho Tzu Nyen

Renan Laru-an

Essay – June 16, 2017

Early this year, the first volume of the multimedia project *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia*, a platform for ongoing research, a matrix for generating future projects and an oracular montage machine was launched at the Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong. Compiled and conceptualized by Singaporean artist Ho Tzu Nyen in collaboration with Sebastian Lütgert and Jan Gerber, Yasuhiro Morinaga and Bani Haykal, it gathers ‘narratives of shape-shifting and amorphous characters, ideas, and genres’¹ and for the past few years, it has worked as a finite resource and a node for continuation of Tzu Nyen’s artistic projects. The dictionary is divided into twenty-six terms – some of them annotated, for instance, in the case of *G for ghost*, *ghostwriter*, *gene z. hanrahan*. The perpetual sense of inscription, of perennial inflection and contamination in a server containing some 5,000 online video clips and 300 feature films on and about Southeast Asia brings the reader into an interface of displacement despite the abundance of signs.



O for Ocean, Opium.



N for Nation, Narration, Narcosis



Q for Queen

Tzu Nyen makes films, installations and theatrical performances out of historical and philosophical texts and artefacts. His work has been presented at the Guggenheim Museum (New York, 2013), Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (Bilbao, 2015), Mori Art Museum (Tokyo, 2012) and the 54th Venice Biennale (Venice, 2011). His films have premiered at Cannes Film Festival and the 66th Venice International Film Festival.

This interview ² attempts to pierce through 'a stretched [artistic] self', a skin that attempts to comprehend the vastness and delirium of a region, during a time of aggressive economic integration and efficiency, growing populism and conservatism and the relapse into an internationalist gaze on Southeast Asia. How do we receive and read a community of terms, of articulations, of interconnections? To enter Tzu Nyen's dictionary, the exchange below locates some points of apprehension that a dictionary usually evokes, while taking the chance to review some familiar and neglected terms and conditions in composing a constellation of signs and meanings. It, then, proceeds to the movement of entries, how they are being inducted into the dictionary and what they could mean as artistic positions.

Renan Laru-an: What is the genesis of the project The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia?

Ho Tzu Nyen: The project originated with a question: what constitutes the unity of Southeast Asia? Southeast Asia is a region of profound heterogeneity that has never been unified by a common linguistic, political or religious substrate. From the early 2000s I began collecting a series of concepts, anecdotes, motifs and biographies from my various readings about Southeast Asia. Gradually, these fragments appear to me like threads by which I could perhaps weave together a map of Southeast Asia, albeit one that is torn and tattered, full of gaps and ghosts.

When one reads and / or views the approximation of 'critical', 'dictionary' and 'Southeast Asia' with each other, a double sense of parsing and reprising occurs. Initially, how did you approach the velocity of these terms?

The dictionary promises totality but on the other hand, to be critical is to take up a position. This contradiction is re-enacted in the very name 'Southeast Asia' – a region that is not one.

Could you also elaborate on what I could sense as a triangulation of the uncountable, limits, and seriality in the Critical Dictionary?

A lot of what I do is about setting up various creative processes with the collaborators, and enabling each one of them to operate in relative isolation and freedom. To choreograph their various productions, I created a series of parameters that everyone worked with, and these parameters are what you are perhaps describing as 'triangulation'. I see it more like growing something. In the first manifestation of the dictionary, segments of these video materials were annotated by Bruce Quek and Kin Chui according to a list of keywords that the programmers generated out of my notes and writings on the twenty-six terms. An algorithm, created with Jan Gerber and Sebastian Lütgert performs a 'live' selection of the annotated clips and overlays them with a library of Southeast Asian music created by Yasuhiro Morinaga, and a library of vocals performed by Bani Haykal.

Like the keywords that compose the title, the terms in the Critical Dictionary don't quite add up. They speak to a 'strange kind of a whole' or even a strange belonging to constraints. I am curious about some entries in the dictionary with multiple terms. How do we read them, and would it make any difference if they would be truncated under a single-entry heading? What is the place of reading in forming a relationship with the dictionary? How does this form of reading (access) translate into viewing or looking when a term is expounded in your artwork?

One example of these multi-term entries is 'H', which stood for 'Humidity', 'Hydrography', 'Hydraulics' and 'Hydrology'. It is a well-known fact that Southeast Asia contains some of the most humid places on Earth, and 'Hydrography' describes a mode of historical construction that privileges the sea, as an engine of distributing people, language and ideas. 'Hydraulics' referred to political systems that operated by the application of pressure upon water, from the large-scale irrigation of the early *padi* (paddy) empires on Mainland Southeast Asia to the practice of establishing choke points upon riverways by chiefs in Archipelagic Southeast Asia. 'Hydrology', which deals with state changes in the water cycle, and describes a kind of analytics needed to map out the systems of control in the 'air-conditioned nightmare' that is Singapore – an island state whose modern 'founder', Lee Kuan Yew described the air conditioner as the most important technological invention of the twentieth century. All four terms under 'H' are related to water, a substance that in Southeast Asian cosmologies is a kind of lubricant for metamorphosis. This is why in the midst of crossing rivers, certain tigers of the Indo-Malayan world can dissolve into human shape.

When you presented some of the terms in the public programme of From Bandung to Berlin: If all of the moons aligned (SAVVY Contemporary, 2016), I sensed that these entries do not necessarily change past constructions of the term 'Southeast Asia', or the terms that make Southeast Asia. You described them as 'metamorphic' or 'somewhat indeterminate'. They are always recalcitrant towards Southeast Asia. I thought that this process introduces the region as a situation, and therefore, in Isabelle Stengers' words: 'giving a situation that gathers the power to force those [which] are gathered to think and invent.' Could you highlight and discuss some of these terms, which amplify their movement from deconstruction?

To think the unity of the region is a question both historical and ontological, leading to a host of other questions, for example, the question of how an entity is to be delineated, or the relationship between an 'inside' to an 'outside'.

Under 'T', we have the entry 'Tiger', which sums up the history of tigers in the Indo-Malayan world over the last one million years or so. Tigers scattered across the Sunda Shelf before it broke apart into the area known as Southeast Asia.³ Approximately 10,000 years ago, when the first humans arrived, they chose to settle at the edges of forests, which is also the habitat of tigers. This proximity led to an intricate relationship between the two species. The tiger was regarded as kin, or as a vehicle for ancestral spirits, and stories of humans who can turn into tigers and vice versa abound. During the colonial era, these myths, along with tigers disappeared. But in the middle of the twentieth century, tigers would make their return as metaphors in the shape of certain figures on the fringes of civilization such as bandits, Japanese soldiers and Communist guerrillas.

Under 'L', we have the entry 'Lai Teck', a biographical account of the triple-agent Secretary General of the Malayan Communist Party. Lai Teck was one of fifty plus aliases that he was known by, and very little is known about him today, except that he was of Sino-Vietnamese origin, and had worked for the French, British and Japanese secret services, while leading the Communist party. Almost a century of Southeast Asian geopolitics is folded into the life of this nameless shape-shifter, who is also a model for a particular mode of Southeast Asian subjectivity. Quite a number of the terms I worked with had some kind of metamorphic propensity, or manifested some kind of indeterminacy, but what interests me with the dictionary is the intersection and resonance that occurs between these terms.

Recently, I read a scholarly attempt to lay the ground for the history of mathematics in the Philippines – and in turn, how this understanding of mathematical and scientific abstraction relates to Southeast Asia. ⁴ The author, Ricardo Manapat, noted a developed system of enumeration in geometric concepts and cosmological tools used in a pre-historic archipelago and in existing indigenous practices. The vibrant commerce in Southeast Asia is a productive reference here. The trading of commodities enabled 'a region that is not one' to work within a system of weights and other measures of volume, which is not attuned to the notion of exactness and precision, problematic for the decimal system. Following the operational coming together of 'dictionary' and 'critical', a notion of 'total fragmentary' is invoked here, which resonates with the arithmetic system I was describing: the measure of volume only divided between wholesale and retail. This dichotomy of measure adds on the complexity of what had been called 'a non-mathematical' practice, especially in the case of counting numbers. As noted by the scholar Manapat: 'Old Tagalog and ... Old Malay, did not subscribe to the notion of mathematical infinity but instead had what is called "limit numbers" or numbers beyond which one stops at counting.' Could you share how you have allocated / are allocating weight in the entries of the dictionary?

This notion of 'non-mathematical' practice is a fecund way of elaborating a specifically

Southeast Asian practice without the spectre of comparison, and without 'lack'. I think immediately about O. W. Wolters' thesis about how the rulers of early Southeast Asian empires viewed their domains as non-Euclidean Mandalas that were constituted not by fixed geographical boundaries, but as dense networks of influence and efficacy.⁵

I like this enmeshing of the cosmological with the pragmatic task of counting. I'm thinking here about my counter-intuitive, maybe quixotic attempt to generate a dictionary of Southeast Asia almost entirely on my own, rather than to work on it as an anthology. As for your question about allocation in the dictionary, my ideal state is to become completely irrelevant, because every single term will be resonating so profoundly with every other.

I think that there is something in stretching oneself to engage with the vastness of a region, which is a way of stretching beyond one's skin, while also swerving the dictionary away from the encyclopaedic dream of totality.

There is a thrill in the collision of capture and release in the immaterial network that the project shows, especially in the first encounter with its contents. How crucial is it to do this project in this site of capture (say, in the form of a dictionary) and release (say, in the promise of criticality)? How does this network accommodate the coordinates you are (re-)composing, overlapping already on the regimes of knowing and reading you just called in to perform?

The dictionary ingests images and reconfigures them in new constellations, along with new soundtracks. This perpetual reconfiguration makes the dictionary into a kind of oracular montage machine for me. It sometimes composes sequences of exquisite intensity that seem to give me answers to questions I didn't even know I had. I use the dictionary as an aide to plug into a virtual Southeast Asia. It is a generative matrix from which a multitude of timelines can emerge. Here, the process of '(re-)composing' and 'overlapping' is somewhat built into the architecture, or perhaps anti-architecture of the work itself. The format of the dictionary was something that I began with, in order to depart from.

Is this departure for restitution or recuperation of vectors? I am throwing this exhausted question at the height of appropriating technologies of restitution and recuperation for homogeneous power. The cannibalization of social spheres reaching us every day has never been so intense. How do you see ingestion as a form of doing?

I guess one can imagine the whole process to be akin to that of an Amazonian cannibal in the sense described by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro – to physically ingest the enemy's point-of-view, as a way to incorporate their perspective, to relate, but also to relativize one's own point-of-view, to shift oneself out of one's skin.⁶

The ingestion of online materials is fieldwork in the image-sphere, and as for the exhausted question of restitution and recuperation, we posit the continued and unexhausted possibility of swerves and the continued production of new vectors. Rather than positing 'perpendicular architectures' or repeating the tired tropes of horizontal 'fields of resistance', I would like to dream of diagonals.

The gathering of entries seems to register or propose another architecture of signs and meanings. On the other hand, these articles reach out to familiar procedures of meaning-making as alternative indices of articulation. How does the (your) notion of 'artistic position' figure into the tensions of semiotics and measures of an epistemic community? Can we consider the twenty-six vectors in the dictionary as 'artistic positions'?

Absolutely. The dictionary is the transmutation of these twenty-six into lines of force. It is a compound of plastic forces that take the form of a virtual Southeast Asia.

Although I draw a lot from academic sources, what concerns me as an artist are ultimately still issues of form and plasticity, except that my chosen material is a system of audio-visual signs. With each of the twenty-six terms in the dictionary, my intention is to transmute a historical anecdote, a biography or an anthropological idea into a line of force, and in this sense, you are right to describe the twenty-six terms as vectors.

The image of vectors crossing in different lines of force delivers a picture of dancing concentric circles. They are schizophrenic without adherence to straight lines. The inherent materialism of an artistic position requires codifying transmutation and introduction of forces. Would this codification calcify forms of plasticity and virtuality? Or, shall we accommodate a promiscuous relationship between them?

The image of dancing concentric circles now rings bells in my mind. It makes me think of R ' ; where we have the term 'Resonance'. This is a strange entry, because it doesn't seem to define anything, and rather it takes the form of a proposed experiment – that gongs from various parts of mainland and island Southeast Asia be gathered together and struck at the same time. The collective overtone that emerges is an expression the metallurgical differences that have gone into their fabrication, yet they come together in a relation of resonance rather than reason.

The composition of the *Critical Dictionary* takes place at the level of the algorithmic, which is to say that rather than making a single, sequential flow of images, we are trying to create a system in which an endless number of films can be made, all of which are somewhat sculpted, but cannot be pre-determined. Our hope is that it will open up to monstrous, aberrant and yes, promiscuous lines of forces that can escape ossification, and give birth to strange, new mutants.

Renan Laru-an (1989, Sultan Kudarat) is a researcher working curatorially from the Philippines and in Southeast Asia. In 2012, he founded DiscLab | Research and Criticism (2012–2015), a multidisciplinary platform and 'virtual' organisation for critical writing, theory, discursive activities and research on Philippine contemporary art as well as visual and network culture. He is currently the Public Engagement and Artistic Formation Coordinator at the Philippine Contemporary Art Network (PCAN). Laru-an studies 'insufficient' and 'subtracted' images and subjects at the juncture of development and integration projects through long-term inquiries, such as *Promising Arrivals*, *Violent Departures* (ongoing), *Herding Islands*, *Rats and the Anthropocene* (2015), *Lightning Studies: Centre for the Translation of Constraints, Conflicts and Contaminations* (CTCCCs) (2016), and *The Artist and the Social Dreamer* (2017). He has (co-)curated festivals and exhibitions, including the 6th Singapore Biennale: *Every Step in the Right Direction*, Singapore (2019); the 8th OK. Video – Indonesia Media Arts Festival, Jakarta (2017); *A Tripoli Agreement*, Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah (2018); among others. His independent scholarship has been supported by the Foundation for Arts Initiatives, the National Commission for Culture and the Arts and numerous curatorial residencies and fellowships.

Footnotes

1. Quoted from Asia Art Archive's press release, www.aaa.org.hk.
2. This interview was conducted between November 2016 and April 2017.
3. Sunda Shelf is a southeast extension of the continental shelf of Southeast Asia. Read a short introduction to Sunda Shelf here: en.wikipedia.org. Ancillary literature about the extinct tigers in Southeast Asia can be found here: www.academic.oup.com.
4. Ricardo Manapat, 'Mathematical Ideas in Early Philippine Society,' *Philippine Studies* 59, no. 3 (2011), www.philippinestudies.net.
5. See O. W. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Ithaca, NY: Seap Publications, 1999).
6. See Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *From the Enemy's Point of View: Humanity and Divinity in Amazonian Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

This text was downloaded on June 19, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
www.onlineopen.org/a-dream-of-diagonals-an-interview-with-ho-tzu-nyen