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Writing the Modern: Selected Texts on Art & Art History in Singapore, Malaysia & Southeast Asia, 1973–2015. By T.K. Sabapathy. Singapore: NUS Press, 2018. 448 pp.

Rare is the opportunity to be treated to “a history of an art historian’s work” (p. 15) in Southeast Asia. Rarer still if this history is arrayed in the form of an anthology of writings that span more than four decades. *Writing the Modern*, more than a tender work of homage, is also an anthology of significant value for readers interested in the historiography of modern and contemporary art in Southeast Asia.

Edited by Ahmad Mashadi, Susie Lingham, Peter Schoppert and Joyce Toh under the auspices of the Singapore Art Museum, where Sabapathy played a central role in shaping its regionalist institutional vision from its early years, the publication compiles Sabapathy’s past writings into four broad themes: (1) The Southeast Asian Artist in relation to Art History; (2) A Mind for Method, and an Eye for Medium, Material and Form; (3) Art Institutions and the Exhibition; and (4) Regionalist Perspectives on Southeast Asian Art. In doing so, the publication has excavated a broad catalogue of writings belonging to a wide range of categories and genres, with a singular sustained and unswerving zeal to engage with the serious study of art in all its possible forms.

The wider art public beyond Singapore and Malaysia would have recognized Sabapathy as the scholarly pioneer of a regionalist perspective, capturing an epoch of “(re)calibration of positions in response to the unfolding dynamics between geography, state, region and regionalisms, and their mobilisation of culture and scholarship” (p. 17). Here, rather than spotlighting his more well-known and widely circulated essays such as “Developing Regionalist Perspectives in

Southeast Asian Art Historiography” (Sabapathy 1996), the anthology offers a broader and more refreshing selection of formative texts (“Premises for Critical Studies of Modern Art in Southeast Asia”), refracting the very ontology of region through the lens of Malaysian art history (“Vision and Idea: Afterthoughts”), and diasporic concepts such as Nanyang (“O No! Not the Nanyang Again!” and “The Nanyang Artists: Some General Remarks”). This juxtaposition of regionalities brings renewed emphasis to perspectives in the plural and offers much more rewarding tracking of a thinking process than the elevation of a singular canonical text.

In many senses, Sabapathy’s regional perspectives developed out of a sustained engagement with institutions of art and culture, ranging from various forms of advocacy for a state art gallery that culminated in the establishment of the Singapore Art Museum in 1996, to parallel efforts at engaging with regional colleagues through various ASEAN initiatives, and also later efforts to revive the university art museum at the National University of Singapore. The collection of writings here locates the art historian in an engaged position of adviser, interlocutor, curator and knowledge bank. Rather than see these arenas as antagonistic to the true scholastic vocation of art history, in the absence of sustainable institutions for related academic research, the “expositional imperatives” (p. 29) of exhibition offer a refuge for scholastic undertaking even as curatorial forms of knowledge production bring new perspectives to the study of art.

Given his stature as a doyenne of Southeast Asian art history, not enough credit has been accorded to T.K. Sabapathy for many discipline-bending forays. This is partly because of Sabapathy’s persistent plea for disciplinary rigour. It is from Sabapathy’s scattered body of writings for the press found in sections 1 and 2 of the anthology that we get a sense of Sabapathy’s versatility as a writer. Here, his brilliance truly shines like a multicoloured kaleidoscope. If his notes and thoughts that orchestrated the profiling of a range of artistic practices are cursory and tentative at best, they are still worthy as documents that could potentially be playfully historicized in the age-old culture of Chinese literati commentaries. Such a

cross-cultural comparison and affinity easily aligns with the ceaseless explorations essaying forth from Sabapathy's pen. These writings are also valuable to revisit because they compose a tender portrait of a wide-eyed explorer who is writing with honesty and gusto as a confidant and friend of the artists.

Through the years, Sabapathy's writing has consistently remained accessible, lucid and devoid of the scholarly conceit that many academic writings tend to suffer from. For his audience is not simply an academic one, and the fluidity and reach of Sabapathy's writings testify to an undertaking that is akin to public art history even before such a field ever found a name for itself. One must not forget the chasm that an art historian trained in the great traditions of art must cross in order to find a home in the quicksand of modernity. While something of that past endured through the crystalline quality of Sabapathy's writings, therein also lie an art historian's multiple reinventions in the liquid modernity of the late twentieth century.

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Music and Recording in King Chulalongkorn's Bangkok. By James L. Mitchell. Bangkok: Silkworm Books, 2022. xviii+342 pp.

This valuable new book is unprecedented. The early years of Thai music recording history are almost entirely unresearched beyond scattered magazine articles and a few dissertations in Thai. The author is an ethnomusicologist whose careful scholarship often addresses