

Article

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Political Context in Southeast Asia 'Stepping In – Stepping Up'

par Chumpon Apisuk, director of SEAPAS/Asiatopia

> Bui Cong Khanh

Chumpon Apisuk nous soumet un compte rendu d'une discussion sur la situation de l'art performance en Asie du Sud-Est, dont le *Southeast Asia Performance Art Symposium* s'est tenu à Bangkok du 25 au 27 novembre 2005. L'idée de ce symposium était de réunir des organisateurs, critiques, artistes et autres « académiciens » de l'art action dans cette région en effervescence artistique. On y a traité de politique, de culture et d'incidences sociales reliées à l'art performance, comme c'est souvent le cas.

Les participants ont été d'accord sur la transcription de cette rencontre posant le rapport de l'art performance dans son contexte politique, ici spécifiquement celui de l'Asie du Sud-Est.

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This dialogue took place at the Southeast Asia Performance Art Symposium (SEAPAS) in Bangkok from November 25th to 27th 2005. The symposium was organized in parallel with the 7th Asiatopia Performance Art Festival. The purpose of the symposium was to promote exchanges among performance artists, events organizers, critics and academics. As well as an opportunity to experience some of the most innovative performances happening in the region today, the meeting encouraged the exploration of changes in traditions and political, cultural and social trends which are inter-related and affect the development of performance art.

This session on "Political Context in Southeast Asia" features *Senator Kraisak Choonhawan*, a long time advocate for art and culture in Thailand and *Lee Weng Choy*, a critic, activist and art administrator who is presently the co-director of The Substation contemporary art center in Singapore. The session was facilitated by artist-critic *Josef Ng*. The text has been approved by both speakers and is edited by *Virginia Henderson*, a coordinator of SEAPAS.

Introduction

Josef Ng (Singapore/Thailand). Before starting the session, I should give a brief insight to Asiatopia as a participant in the first festival and as someone involved in the organization of the many regular subsequent Asiatopia festivals. I think Asiatopia was conceived to focus on performance art, gathering talent and inviting artists in the region as well as from the West to come to perform and to give some commentaries on what they are doing right now in the practice.

When I first started to work with Chumpon as a co-organizer of the second *Asiatopia*, we talked about including foreigners and adding some sort of artists' talks in between these performances. We did this for the second and third *Asiatopia*. Performances came first and then we talk on the last day. In the third *Asiatopia* we had the talks on the first day in a morning half-day session before the performances and the talking almost took over the whole three days of the festival. However, it wasn't an entirely good way to talk or to network about performance art practice in Southeast Asia or in Asia particularly.

This *Asiatopia* has a separate component, which is this symposium where we are right now. We are putting the symposium on during the daytime and then the *Asiatopia* performances immediately afterwards in the evening. I think by putting this together we attempt to create a situation which explores, at the same time, the product and the production of performance and the research that is being done in the field.

We want to look at the questions and answers related to these in-between spaces – of how performance art acts socially and politically in Southeast Asia and how performance art acts within yourself, in your body. With this separation between performance and talk we want to foster some sort of relationship and access where we create and to know more about theory and practice of what performance art represents or is all about in Southeast Asia.



> Mideo Cruz et Iwan Wijono



> Lee Weng Choy et Senator Kraisak Choonhawan

Before going to the first topic, let's think about some concepts of performance art and the social politics of using the process of production for the activity of what I would call

P A P – pollute a position. I think a lot of times in Southeast Asia performance art is to pollute a position of the state, a position of institution, a position of policy or body. I would love to go around right now to say hello to participants and artists and ask them, 'Are you here to pollute a position?' Are you here to do P A P? We are here to P A P. We are here to pollute a position through this seminar, through art festival performances.

A few more questions that I hope we can think about it during the next three days. What about context? This is not only about performance art alone but it is about performance art in context. Performance is all about the present, the presence, and the here and now. What quality of attention in conversation? Could performance art promote the practice through movement? And what kinds of mechanisms can make such attentive conversation over the next three days and reinforce our own by listening to the ideas of others? This session reinforces that our gathering is not just about the networking that we highlight more attentively for the next three days. As you have noticed, most of the participants we have invited are actually themselves organizers of performance art festivals in our own region. So we want to reinforce not just the practice but learn more about what we are actually doing by hosting the performance art festivals. What they are all about? Why performance art? Why not other radical art, not performance art?

So, bring it back to performance art and insights about performance art and politics. The first session we have is a sort of facilitated dialogue, which is rather like conversations in between conversations. We have guests who are not performance artists and who share some similarities. Lee Weng Choy from Singapore not only writes and manages an art center, but is also involved in civil society-oriented activities. He will emphasize some of the activities he is currently undertaking in Singapore. Senator Kraisak Choonhawan will also advocate some of his activities in regard to art and culture, animal conservation and environmental and more. Without further delay, it is my pleasure and privilege to invite Senator Kraisak to start the session.

Senator Kraisak Choonhawan (Thailand). Thanks for the opportunity to be here. It's very good for the project to invite a politician to speak on art. The organizers do believe I have something to say! You might think differently when I finish! I have to start with a statement which is important – and for many artists too – the fact that I lived abroad for 26 years of my life. The topic of my talk is 'the state and art and culture'.

State policy though art and culture in other countries from Argentina to the US and in Europe, is something that is engrained. In fact it is a culture of every state to have a policy to support modern and contemporary arts and other traditional histo-

rical arts. But it is very different in our region. The only country that has led the way I think it is Singapore. That started in 1980 and culminated quite high in 2000 with the creation and building of the Esplanade. I was quite taken aback when I looked at other countries that were trying to catch up. Anyway, Malaysia has come a long way and we appreciate that they have a modern art center coming up on the way. They hold baroque music, which is fascinating – you find all sorts from all over the world playing music. It is something I think we should all attend one day. We could learn a lot and appreciate that too. Other countries I find are still very weak in their policies towards modern art and contemporary art, including Philippines and Indonesia for that matter. But they do come up with a good policy.

My aim as a politician has always been to push the Thai government for a policy to support, in concrete terms, art and culture. I find that for the past 20 years – this did not just start with the Art Center of Bangkok, we started a long time ago but – we've never succeeded. Now, I understand why. It is because contemporary art is too challenging politically to Thai politics. Basically everybody says we are a country like the Philippines which had democracy before others, before Malaysia, before Indonesia, and other countries. But nevertheless it's freedom with limitations. And contemporary art is so radical in a way that it threatens the very existence of the state – at least that is what politicians would say.

And where is contemporary art in Thai politics? I will not mention Indonesia or Philippines or other countries in case people not think it is proper! But nevertheless in Thailand, it seems to be so important that every government maintains this contradictory ideology of the nation. Even when we were a democracy, we called ourselves (nation, religion and monarchy) and recently, since we introduced the new constitution, they added (people), last! My list is different.

Nevertheless, what we have is this: contemporary art in Thailand really came into the scene in the 70s when there was a student revolution. It was really revolution – you had millions of students coming out to revolt against the state and they were suppressed three years afterwards in a way which so horrific it just bombed your mind. Just down the road here they were hanging people on the trees and raping the student activist women, killing them, butchering, just three years afterwards. Particularly during these three years, the modern artists – I would call them 'modern artists' – spent all their energy painting anything that they wanted and there was just an explosion of freedom. After all, we have thousands of artists studying fine art in different universities. But they've never been provided with any real freedom. You need a free society for them to be able to express something freely and you need space provided. They were not. So, what happened was that all of these paintings, which were quite crude in the way but quite strong, supported the students' movement. It became a socialistic movement, people's movement, farmers'

movement, women's movement, etc. The artists, the best ones who are very socially conscious, just went crazy painting and music took a different dimension, a very social dimension in a way. Even composers who were supposed to do classical compositions were doing quite radical pieces – "blood can't be washed", something like that. I'd say, 'Christ man, take it easy! We don't want a massacre like this. We have to find a peaceful way'. But nevertheless the state therefore has always succeeded to mitigate any reform, to mitigate any real freedom for the people. They always argue that the people are not ready, saying, 'Look at these artists! They are irresponsible! How can they paint stuff like this!' For instance, Thawan Duchanee, who is now famous but he was already famous then. When he drew testicles in a Buddhist temple, they wanted to kill the guy. I mean the guy is so apologetic, he just wanted to test in one particular painting. Anyway, he is a millionaire now! Nevertheless, that's why it is so absolutely difficult for us to push the government to see the value of modern and contemporary art – because society in fact is ruled and controlled by these very conservative and reactionary people.

So, mostly the trend that came out was a commercial trend. The commercial trend just went wild – painting smiling Thailand, paddling on the river. It's perfect; it's so nice; my god, the sky is so beautiful! The buffalo's so clean! And the child is riding on the buffalo – he's probably in debt up to his neck but – he looks so happy! These are so-called acceptable style. But these are not even displayed anywhere.

You have a modern art museum but you can't even see it because there is no real life. And the curator doesn't care whether you go in or not – they almost dismiss you. I'm really very sad. I don't know much about art, but my life has always been pulled into social art activities. Protest here – protest there – and I can't help but to be part of it. The first people who would join me in my car to go to a protest site – protesting against a dam or protesting against a power plant or protesting against the killing of environmentalists or protesting against government human rights violations, for example recently in the south – are the artists. They are the ones who bring the guitars and amplifiers and start painting and performing and attracting people. The message has always been: 'organize, organize, organize.' We are here to attract you to listen to music, to tell all of you to empower yourselves, to organize yourselves, to fight for yourselves, to fight for freedom. And this is why I'm so close to artists. It's not because I like the work so much, because sometimes I really think, 'How come you can't draw!' But this very group gives me courage. And the group can expand and expand. It does not contain one particular group, but it has splinters of other people who spend their time trying to perfect their abstract paintings, their performances, their music, and others.

When the issue is a big one, you would find the hundreds of Thai artists participating in one way or another – with photographs, painters or in any way

or technique that they are skilled. So this led us to a collective decision that I should be the representative to push for the Art Center of Bangkok. I worked for four years for the governor of Bangkok and he is a good friend of mine. He said, 'What do you want to do?' I said, 'I want to do art and culture.' 'Oh, yes, then you do art and culture but at the same time you have to be responsible for the garbage in the city too.' I said, 'Yes, but the two are not compatible.' So, that's why when he mentioned the pollution, that's the mentality of the governor. It is not the same thing. I had to spend so much time trying to clean up the city, trying to recycle the garbage, like they do in Singapore and other big cities, trying to mitigate, trying to slow down the pollution of the land, trying to find the correct techniques for hazardous waste. It takes so much time. So, by the time the fourth year came around, the art project was finished, with Jan here helping and Pipat, another friend of mine working for me. But because I didn't have time to push it politically, we didn't succeed very well. In fact, when we did the Terms of Reference from the art project, it was delayed almost indefinitely because some of the administrators decided to get into some huge corruption on the construction of it. So, it could not be allowed. There were more and more delays, until the next governor, who was elected by a landslide, came in. And he happens to be a fascist – a fascist is easily elected in Thailand. This guy is a true believer in fascism and he just stopped the project altogether and made it into a project for a commercial center and a car park instead.

That particular incident integrated the artists in Thailand to protest for four solid years. For the first time in my life, I saw artists organize among themselves – led by Chumpon and others – to protest on a very consistent way. Hundreds of artists, everybody in all the universities, all the professors, all the freelance artists worked together and produced thousands of protest paintings and they were spread all over the front of the Bangkok Metropolitan Office, which is quite impressive. I mean really polluting the place with protest. And finally they had the guts to take the governor to court and the court accepted the sue case. So, now the governor might end up in jail for not building the Art Center. When the governor elections came about four years later, the artists were organized and they encouraged a vote for art. The artists said to all the people going to vote for any governor candidates, 'If they do not have a policy on art and culture particularly on the art center, don't vote for them.' So, the Bangkok people were made conscious of this suddenly. It gave them an education and the campaign became an educational one, a learning one for the Bangkokians. Finally the candidate who won, agreed with us and now we have an Art Center. But it goes to show how difficult it is. This is just an example of life, and it's in fact a good lesson for all artists – that you have to be together, you can't just be an individual, you can't be relying on your confidence alone. In society you have to work in unison, at the same time. You have to collaborate for a common good for the general public.

So, what has art come to now in Thailand? You will have modern art, but can we have freedom to show an exhibition without some of the pieces coming out?

In the past four years, events in Thailand have taken a toll. We've had probably one of the biggest national natural catastrophes – but much smaller than Indonesia or Sri Lanka or India for that matter. Nevertheless, 10 000 people dead in one day! This had never happened in Thailand. We've never had a government that is so bent on repression coming from the democratic process than the one we're seeing now. Mr. Thaksin put about 3 000 people to death in his suppression on drugs, mostly done by police killings. We've never had a government that has flung open very single door and even the floors of Thailand to foreign investments through free trade agreements. No more negotiation; no more caring for the farmers; no more caring for the small scale industries. He opened up Thailand to the United States, Australia, Japan, every country, with only business and his own family's business in mind. We are feeling tremendous impacts now in Thailand from globalization – much wider and more intense than other countries in Asia alone.

Artists have been coming out as a reflection of all that. Groups of artists who are very disturbed by Mr. Thaksin are coming out with very strong statements. It's reflecting what is going on in the country and how the people are suffering, in spite of the positive trends that are happening. I'm not so sure if the Governor of Bangkok will allow the freedom that we think it should be. We do not think that it could be that easy. So I think another stage of revolution is necessary. I must say that you are welcome here and your performances and your work here will be and have always been an inspiration to Thai artists. Your techniques, many times, have been superior to the Thais. Your statements and your aspirations are a very necessary input to Thailand and among the Thai artists. I hope that Asiatopia will get more attention in the future. At least Asiatopia has very high recognition from the Ministry of Culture already, so this is one step. Unfortunately one man who is not here is Dr. Apinan, the Head of Department of Contemporary Art and Culture from the Ministry. He understands our work and supports the freedom of expression in our work. So, my talk here draws to a close end (as I'm running out of coffee!). From a politician to artists, I salute you and I wish you a good festival. It's always been meaningful and quite profound and I always enjoy you people being here. Thank you.

Lee Weng Choy (Singapore). Josef introduced the Senator and I by saying we share some similarities. Yes, neither of us are "performance artists"; but Senator Kraissak is a major public intellectual, and at best I'm just a minor one. The Senator said something important. He talked about the importance of standing up and being counted. He remarked about how very often when there are protests in Thailand, a lot of people will come, that there is strong feeling that people have of stepping up and being counted.



> Ahlien Z. H



> He Chengyao



> Kai Lam



> Chaw Ei Thien



> Noppowan Sirivejkul

In contrast, Singapore has the most impoverished public life in the region. It's interesting that we have a major art center, The Esplanade, we have a lot of money that the government is pumping into the arts, but we have no public life. If I may be polemical, I'd say the art that is produced by this cultural policy is "art by the government, for the government". It's a real problem because you are then seen internationally as a place where there is a lot of investment in the art and there is a lot of government attention to it. But most of this attention is to very specific kinds events. For instance, in 2006 Singapore is hosting the World Bank and the IMF annual meetings, and it is for that reason that we will have the first Singapore Biennale.

From what I heard, every time you have a World Bank or WTO meeting, or something like that, you have a lot of activism on the side. A lot of NGOs take that occasion to gather and have meetings amongst themselves. So, will this happen in Singapore? I haven't yet heard of any regional NGO initiatives that are going to descend on Singapore. And at this point, I haven't heard much either about the local activity that is beginning to organize to counter the World Bank or counter the Biennale. But I'm not the most informed person about all this. What I do know is that we're organizing something at The Substation.

But let me backtrack and talk about what I do. I have a day job working at this art center, The Substation. To run an art center, you need someone who is exceptionally focused on institution building – someone who really has the drive and imagination for developing institutions. This is where we are impoverished in Singapore. We don't have visionary leadership for institution building. There was arguably an exception: the founder of The Substation, Kuo Pao Kun, who passed away a couple of years ago. He was a dramatist, an activist, a real inspiration to artists and intellectuals, and most

importantly, to a larger public beyond the arts community. In some ways I think of him as the first and last public intellectual from the arts. This impoverishment of public life, the weaknesses of our public and independent institutions, this is one of the defining problems about Singapore.

Apart from the day job, I'm an art critic, a "public intellectual" of the minor variety. And what this means to me is not necessarily entering into public life with a great deal of force, but sometimes with a certain kind of slowness. I think that's also very important – interventions into public life have to be in many different registers. It's not always more important because it is a larger public; smaller publics are also very important. One of the tasks of the intellectual is that she or he provides context to the conflicts and controversy of the day. We talk about location – but not in order to represent our country, not to say I'm from Singapore and this is the Singapore essence. Not to speak FOR Singapore – governments do that, and that's the problem. Of course as an intellectual, you speak from a location, from a place, with all its complications. But you don't represent it as such. I use the word, "intellectual" in its widest sense: artists, writers, curators, activists. I believe the project of doing intellectual always has to do with articulating some specific

city. But at the same time, once you speak of this specificity, where do you go from there? You find the intellectual's task is to talk about local symptoms. And in this case I will be talking about the death penalty.

The death penalty is, for me, an exemplary symptom of the problem of public life in Singapore. What I hope to do by talking about this local symptom is, in some way, to make a universal crisis out of it. By talking about this problem in Singapore, I can then talk to the situation in Thailand; I can talk to Indonesia; I can talk to the Philippines, Malaysia and so forth. Even though we each have our specific and local contexts, we can speak across contexts – it may not be easy to translate different contexts, but the point is to make that commitment to this project of translation.

A couple of days ago, I met the Senator and Josef, and we all talked about how we would develop this session. Josef asked me, "Why are you interested in the death penalty?" Let me reiterate my answer. In and of itself, the question of the death penalty is crucial. May I assume that we in this room are opposed to that kind of state cruelty, so I won't need to go into that. But also at a symbolic level, if there is resistance to the death penalty, then there is resistance to the absolute power of the state: the state's power to kill. And in "democratic" societies, the state doesn't kill in its own name, but it kills in the name of the people. Therefore, opposition to the death penalty becomes a very important check on the state's power.

In the case of Singapore, they hang the condemned. Having for the first time in my life met someone who was hanged – Shanmugam Murugesu was executed on May 13th 2005 – having, at his last rites, touched his body, and having gotten to know his family, I've realized the extent of the violence of execution. Hanging is not clean and simple. Of course no execution is – lethal injection is not particularly good either – I don't recommend it – or any form of execution.

In Singapore, you do not have protests or demonstrations. In February 2003, the whole world was protesting the United States' invasion of Iraq – thousands of people gathering in cities like London and Washington, all over the world. A few people showed up in front of the American Embassy in Singapore and they were promptly arrested because they didn't have a permit. Following which, there were a number of small gatherings, vigils and readings to mark protests against the war. At the end of March, The Substation held a Peace Concert – we applied and got permits at the last minute. About 700 people showed up during the course of the evening; we conjecture that this may have been the largest anti-war event in Singapore history. Somewhat pathetic in international terms, but I suppose, not bad for Singapore. The Peace Concert was the climax of these various events. But there was no momentum after it. The organizers were exhausted and there was no follow up.

In 2005, the death penalty became a much more visible public issue, and mainly because of a few contingent circumstances. Shanmugam was

convicted of trafficking a kilo of marijuana – half a kilo will get you killed in Singapore. It was his first offence of any kind. In drug trafficking cases, the death sentence is mandatory. There are no mitigating factors. If you get convicted, you automatically get sentenced to death. There is, however, some room for bargaining. From what I've been told by the lawyer in Shanmugam's case, sometimes the amount of drugs gets knocked down below the death sentence limit. But if that negotiation fails, and appeals of the conviction fail, then the last chance is clemency granted by the president. But the president is advised by the cabinet, and cabinet is, in turn, advised by the attorney general's chamber. So the people who are prosecuting you and sentencing you to death are the ones who are advising the cabinet and the president.

(Allow me to digress with an anecdote about how the Singapore's justice system is not fail-safe: There was a case that involved a man who was arrested, charged with a murder and though he insisted upon his innocence, was convicted. About a month before his execution, the prisoner's family managed to get a reputable lawyer in a last effort to save his life. His trial lawyer, a public defender, had said to him "Hey, I take one look at you and I know you are guilty". This new lawyer found that it was glaringly obvious that the man could not have committed the murder and he was released.)

When I refer to Shanmugam's lawyer, I'm referring to his counsel at the clemency stage, not at the trial or even the appeal stage, but at the final stage. The lawyer, M Ravi, was brave to take on the case and to be outspoken about it. More remarkable, however, was how Shanmugam's family was outspoken about the whole thing. It's virtually unheard that a family would step up in public and protest the death penalty; most of the time there is a great sense of shame, and families want to recede from any public scrutiny.

There have been more executions in Singapore since May 13th. At the end of 2005 was the high-profile execution of a young Vietnamese Australian for heroin trafficking. It was also his first offence.

Even if the overwhelming majority in Singapore supports the death penalty, I believe there is the possibility that the death penalty can slowly become less popular in Singapore, and that activism against it more visible and accepted. Among the arts community there is not much protest against the death penalty, or there's apathy about the issue. This is a scandal. But people from all backgrounds are beginning to show up and support activism against the death penalty. As much as it is important for lawyers to present the best possible legal arguments against the death penalty – and Ravi has done some very important work in that regard – it's essential for artists and civil society activists – for everyone – to develop the public culture of "I have to be present physically at these events, I have to be counted". Signing an Internet petition isn't enough. You've got to show up in public. People have to begin to realize the value of being present in public.

When it comes to the death penalty, I think there is a better chance for this kind of public education than, for instance, with the issue of censorship, which I'm also very concerned with. The death penalty, once people are exposed to the reality of it, are much more moved than by something as abstract as freedom of speech. People have responded better to the campaign against the death penalty, because they recognize that governments can be extremely strict and pass life sentences, but that executions – killing – is outright cruel.

It's my hope that anti-death penalty activism in Singapore will become much more visible. Visibility in this case is important. It generates more participation. Anti-death penalty activism can contribute both to its specific cause, but also the larger cause of developing a larger public culture for activism.

Discussion

Lee Weng Choy. The Senator just asked me if I can speak like this in Singapore. By and large, yes. Of course the audience would be this size (about 50 plus persons). That's the problem. In certain publics you can say a few things, but it doesn't then resonate with a larger public. These small publics are fragmented from other publics. The public doesn't have a full sense of who it is. An academic friend jokes that there are only about 400 liberals in Singapore – it's the two "jumbo jet" theories of Singapore: about 400 elites run the country, which would fit in one airplane, and the other plane gets the 400 liberals. But I disagree with him. I think there is maybe like 5 000 liberals. I mean, it's not much but it's much more than 400. But you don't see each other and it's like – to evoke psychoanalysis – like a child that looks in the mirror and has not passed the mirror stage. The child only experiences her life as fragmentary sensations. It's still all disconnected. There isn't yet an image of a whole body. Likewise, the Singapore public doesn't have an image of itself.

I really like Singapore actually. I think it's a really sane society, in the way. Because I think my country is a little bit insane. So, when I go there, I don't think about the death penalty. Your city is so clean and you got rid of all the slums, and the harbor is impeccable, you have really nice cafés... I really enjoy myself. So when you mention this death penalty, I'll have second thoughts now when I go to Singapore. I better not pack anything illegal!

Last year I was asked whether the death penalty should be from shooting. In Thailand, they would use this special machine gun set up and they just tie the prisoner in front of the machine gun and fire a whole cartridge into his body, from the back. So I went to the prison where they execute people and they cannot get rid off the blood and guts in all over the place. It's very gory and it's extremely barbaric. So last year they decided to change from that system to the lethal injection and they asked me, as a senator, to vote whether you would prefer injection or the same method of shooting. My immediate reaction is to say 'No' to the public execution. But they did assure you that the prisoner, the condemned man, would be put to sleep first, and then slowly, he would just sleep and die, so it's painless. Well, nothing is painless. The moment before you get the injection or the days before are torture, it's terrible. Only about 47 of us rejected it out of 200 senators. The Lower House passed unanimously. Nearly 500 of them agreed to keep the death penalty and the change of method.

In Thailand, most cases do not actually get to court; most cases do not get to injection. As I told you earlier, they just drag you out and shoot you. If you are suspected of drugs or if you have any record of drugs and the prime minister says, 'We want to get rid of drugs', every provincial governor will compete on how many drug cases they have arrested, without any implications upon the officials, many of them who are involved in drugs trafficking. They just shoot the suspects and most

> Kosit Jantratip



of them are very young with only one or two times convictions. The big dealers, as you said, can go freely to Singapore and are in fact laundering money. These are the very ones who are running the big construction businesses, banking, hotels, businesses inside Burma, of whom our government and particularly our prime minister is dealing with very closely business wise. So, in a way, this suppression in any form – may it be in the so-called legal state form or the extra-judicial one – is really a huge hypocrisy in our societies. You just invite me to Singapore. I want to sit in some of your sessions and I want to go have good noodles afterwards!

Lee Weng Choy. Maybe I can make a comment about how much, Senator, you like Singapore, because I will definitely invite you to come down – maybe for our event in September 2006 when the World Bank is around. But this is also the perversity of the situation. I mean I don't for a minute regret that I can walk around the entire city and feel safe. Some times I see young thuggish-looking people in various places, but I look at them and think, "Yeah, right". I'm not worried; I've walked around rough neighbourhoods in America. Of course, Singapore's not utopia. But it is a highly functioning society. And so precisely because of this, I'm arguing for a strong sense of justice. There is a healthy NGO movement, relatively speaking, for domestic workers – who are mostly from the Philippines. I asked one of the activists, "All your demands are so reasonable, why won't government accede to them?" "Because Singapore workers themselves don't have this kind of protection", was her reply.

Iwan Wijono (Indonesia). In our society in Indonesia, the death penalty can happen not only under the government. It can be done by other groups in society – by the local mafia, under the floating mass of certain communities there. They are educated but they play on the broken social system. I mean, the death penalty can happen anywhere because we have different religions, different ideologies. We have one system, one rule, one ideology for the big country, as Indonesia. There have been so many death penalties. Prisoners can be kept in jail for many years. Maybe they will think that the family is going to give money to the government to release the prisoner. And the death penalty can happen outside the system in society. This is another story about this chaotic culture, chaotic political society. Myself, I want Indonesia to be like Singapore – one system, one rule, one ideology. Prisoners can get the death penalty for any crime, including political crimes, in our society.

Another opinion from the floor. The death penalty can happen almost spontaneously. It's like violence in our blood. Take for example the case of a pickpocket in the street. If a pickpocket gets captured, suddenly people may beat the guy to death. That's why I say, it's almost spontaneous. It's our euphoria of freedom, but at the same time we think that the system is really unreliable. We

do punish people by ourselves. Even an advertisement of cigarette captured that image. It says that everybody can be the judge, so why do we need a legal system? It's an advertisement for cigarettes! So maybe that's why we need more art forms which are a little bit entertaining – to make people calm!

Daravuth Ly (Cambodia). You are talking about lynching, mob lynching. It happens in Indonesia and it happens a lot in Cambodia too. That is, I think, the result of a sense of absence of justice, which might not be compared to a judicial system – they could be two different things. That example is striking.

In a society like Singapore, when you reach a point where everything is controlled, you obtain this sense of safety or everything is ruled. In other extremes, societies like in Indonesia and Cambodia, people need a sense of justice and they cannot rely on the system because it doesn't provide it. So people basically execute the suspect. Sometimes, and I have witnessed this myself, in the market it's like a conspiracy. Imagine: someone starts it by saying that a thief stole my purse. You can feel the atmosphere growing within the market and most of the time it's not founded at all, and the suspect can be you, mistaking something and then the whole mob gets on you and executes you. The police don't intervene. So this is a very difficult thing to talk about but I understand exactly what you're talking about and of course you are in a very specific situation to talk about that too, because you are outside-inside.

So, what can we do? Is there a limit to protest? Is there something that we can set up or open up, in terms of a government, from a government perspective? It may be understandable that the government doesn't want to open the society, because then there would be chaos. I'm not saying it should be, but the whole idea here is whether it can be through arts, whether through justice the system – and how far? What model of society and how to balance? Singapore is modern for a lot of Asian societies. A friend of mine calls it 'intense care unit.' You don't even need to go to Singapore, you just go to the airport and it's enough. You must understand that for a lot of people it is a dream, especially in this troubled time.

Lee Weng Choy. It's interesting to hear the contrasting situations that have come up in this dialogue. I couldn't just have said what I said. It had to be layered with all the other responses. What I want from Singapore is that I don't want the state to be weak. The problem with Singapore is that you have a single man, a party, a state, a nation – that centralization of power. What you need are "in-between spaces", spaces between the party and the government, the government and the state. I want the institutions to be strong, but they also have to be clear about their limits. The state, ideally, is the public thing. It's the people, it not the government. I do believe in strong states and a strong sense of justice. I think that's quite important that

people have that sense of trust, you don't do it your own; that there is a sense of justice, a sense of a public system. I also believe that the system has to have very strong checks upon itself and that's what is lacking in Singapore. It's lacking in contemporary America too, so of course this is not unique to the island city-state where I live.

In the 80s and the 90s, in American universities especially, you had the culture wars, contests over the politics of representation – for example, African Americans had to be represented in the literature curriculum, and so on. Back then, I wasn't very patient with all that, because politics in the universities were not politics in the society. But now when the American universities are under siege, it's as the last vestige of the strong public independent institutions. The mainstream media in the US is hopeless. My point is that we need to recognize these important public institutions, and we need to bolster them up. Because these institutions often play a crucial role in providing checks and balances on state power.

Ray Langenbach (USA/Malaysia). It's almost as if we have a pincer formation in this. There are two issues that I want to bring up. One is how this relates to the individual work of art. What is that? What is the work of performance and what is its play? Is it a distillation of the social condition into a device which in some way opens up that larger context? Or is it actually part of this larger context and simply another behavior among other behaviors, which need to be analyzed in the same way that you would analyze other behaviors. So, the issue of showing up is, I think, very interesting because it actually takes it out off the role of this distillation of other behaviors. It says that activism is a separate motion from the artwork and that the artwork and its metaphorical devices do not necessarily address. But the artist needs to address. So that is one issue.

The other issue is this sort of pincer formation that has happened. Because as we all know the United States are carrying on torture around the world. Now I heard that maybe it was happening here in one of the secret torture prisons here in Thailand. I don't know about that and they deny it. But that's an interesting question. The United States deny that they have it. But this is precisely the pincer formation. We have a global condition now, in which there is an ethos which is coming out with the US actions in Iraq and elsewhere, and has been going on for some decades, in which there is a loosening all of these protocols of proper treatment of those whose societies either dismiss or decide that need to be punished. So, from the global to the local and also from the local to the global – it's the same issue. What happens in the market place in some ways relates to the global condition. It is precisely that form of unjust justice based on false intelligence that is being carried out on a daily basis... ■

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