

Making Humans Matter In Art: A Southeast Asian Lens

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This research features case studies from the practices of artists, Hoang Duong Cam, Hanoi, Vietnam and Hong Shu-ying, Singapore

Abstract

The age of mass media, AI, machine learning and LLMs (large language models) has considerably diminished concepts of an original visual language in painting and related visual arts. If we regard the visual language as conveying values across humanity, what then does this erosion speak of in civilisation?

In representation, what are artists creating and what are audiences looking at inside the artwork? How can we elucidate human values, and understand the nexus of historical depth, the problematisation of geopolitical identities and aesthetics all at once in 'art'? Referencing examples of contemporary Southeast Asian artists in painting and image making, this presentation suggests a relationship of space in the visual field to consciousness - consciousness, as the wellspring of values. This hopefully facilitates new ontological refraction in an increasingly volatile, cultural environment.

How can Southeast Asian art speak to its region? How can it rationalise the global environment at a breaking point? How can it generate empathy and care, that we might learn to become human again?

Keywords: Southeast Asian, human values, consciousness, history

Menjadikan Manusia Bermakna dalam Seni: Perspektif Asia Tenggara

Abstrak

Era media massa, kecerdasan buatan (AI), pembelajaran mesin, dan LLM (large language models) telah secara signifikan mengikis konsep bahasa visual yang orisinal dalam seni lukis dan seni visual terkait. Jika bahasa visual dipahami sebagai medium penyampai nilai-nilai kemanusiaan, maka apa makna pengikisan tersebut bagi peradaban?

Dalam praktik representasi, apa yang sesungguhnya diciptakan oleh seniman dan apa yang dilihat oleh audiens di dalam karya seni? Bagaimana kita dapat mengelaborasi nilai-nilai kemanusiaan serta memahami keterkaitan antara kedalaman historis, problematisasi identitas geopolitik, dan estetika secara simultan dalam "seni"?

Dengan merujuk pada contoh seniman Asia Tenggara kontemporer dalam seni lukis dan penciptaan citra, presentasi ini mengemukakan adanya relasi antara ruang dalam medan visual dan kesadaran—di mana kesadaran dipahami sebagai sumber utama nilai-nilai. Pendekatan ini diharapkan dapat memfasilitasi pembiasaan ontologis baru dalam lingkungan kultural yang kian bergejolak.

Bagaimana seni Asia Tenggara dapat berbicara kepada wilayahnya sendiri? Bagaimana ia dapat merasionalisasi lingkungan global yang berada di titik kritis? Bagaimana seni dapat menumbuhkan empati dan kepedulian, agar kita dapat belajar untuk menjadi manusia kembali?

Kata kunci: Asia Tenggara, nilai-nilai kemanusiaan, kesadaran, sejarah

INTRODUCTION

Image-making in the 21st century

It is important to set a context for evaluating the visual lexica that proliferates in contemporary image making. In a world now dominated by AI and digitalization, images of all kinds have disseminated with an accelerated pace, forever transforming human consumption and human appreciation. In the arts industry, nowhere is this more profoundly felt than in the need for agency. Walter Benjamin's proposed terms 'surfeit' and 'reification', have resulted in the loss of 'aura' (Benjamin, W., 2008) in an original artwork. How can a contemporary artist, in dealing with surplus imaging now prevalent with advancing technologies, begin to assert an original sentiment? This paper looks at contemporary art examples from Southeast Asia that are evaluating human agency in a time of fracture and the clutter of mass imaging.

METHOD

This paper developed from the creation of new knowledge through the curatorial and the facilitation of large scale dialogue specific to Southeast Asia. From the perspective of the exhibitory, curating strategies provide discursive possibilities in collaboration with practitioners of art. A staged exhibition creates a capsule specific to time and space, coalescing a targetted and intimate experience that links several types of knowledge together that might otherwise remain disparate. From the perspective of large scale dialogues, the pedagogy of events offers more intensified analysis of audience and practitioner interface, allowing for the themes and ideas put forth to be actively discoursed with the possibility of new knowledge without claim, emerging. Over a period of two years, four exhibitions from Southeast Asia were commissioned and dovetailed to two iterations of the UOB-NAFA Southeast Asian Arts Forum held in Singapore. Case studies of exemplars from these 'events' form the basis of this paper and its critical positioning.

Background

In discoursing contemporary practices of painting and image making, we must first acknowledge that photography changed the course of art practice, specific to painting and drawing, but also specific to how humans viewed and recorded the world as representation. Artists since the invention of photography were compelled to consider why they 'made' art, and what they put in art that contained a recorded meaning beyond a pure reproduced image of what they either saw, or imagined. The practice of painting and drawing have conventionally engaged the human's position and perspective, from where they stand as artists or viewers, and the measure of the body as movement, acting, making and engaging in real time, within

space. The self-awareness preserves the self-conscious regard for participation. Self-awareness enter when we question what the artist sees, what we see, and how we might 'see' together. Nowhere is this more significant than in Southeast Asia, where the diversity of cultures and ethnicities simultaneously challenge and aggregate us.

Photography: An Event Horizon

Critical art history has been preoccupied with the challenges of 'new media' arguably since the advent of photography. A hundred and more years ago, specific to artistic enterprise, 'new media' referred to mechanical means of realistic representation, manipulation and communication introduced by the industrial age. Today, according to the Oxford Bibliographies, new media (art)

"... is a comprehensive term that encompasses art forms that are either produced, modified, and transmitted by means of new media/digital technologies or, in a broader sense, make use of "new" and emerging technologies that originate from a scientific, military, or industrial context. Along with its emphasis on the "new," New Media Art signifies an explicit difference - or *différance* - with art practices that make use of traditional, in other words, "old," visual media. Hence, much of New Media Art indicates a concern with and reflection of new media and its ever-changing, complex modes of expression." (Grau, O., 2016)

Photography at its birth however, was the event horizon that shaped new perspectives in the conventions of Western painting. If a mechanical contraption was able to use light and chemical exposures to capture an image in real time of the moment, what would the purpose of any representational painting be? The earliest innovations to redefine painting were noted by the Impressionists, whose practice evolved physically as well as contextually. 'Painting' was moved from the studio to the outdoors. 'Painting' became a series of gestures that interpreted visual phenomena apprehended by human experience. 'Painting' was not or no longer, a provisor for visual information in clear and precise forms. If mechanical means could reproduce a convincing mimesis of visual information, then representational paintings by hand would need to reconsider the purpose of such renderings. In the next hundred years, the visual image and its rubrics would be forever transformed.

The Gesture as Historical: As Time and Space

To extenuate mechanical abilities, the personal gesture has been a hallmark of original form. "Painting is about the world of vision," said George Kubler, while "... history is about duration. Therefore, having paid respect to the parallel of history and painting, we should look at the nature of duration. This I consider as sequence among actions of the same class" (Kubler, G., 2006). Further, in

proposing 5 axioms on the action as it manifest in time and in space, Kubler rationalized their relevance to the “nature of duration.

- I. Similar actions by the same agent cannot occupy the same time. If they do, the recipient is different, and the action also.
- II. No one agent can perform the same action more than once without ageing.
- III. Actions can be only similar but not identical, being different as to agent, or as to time, or as to location.
- IV. Actions repeated undergo change.
- V. The agent changes with each repeated action (Kubler, G., 2006).

Mark making in painting are the actions that with the nature of duration, must necessarily transform as they manifest in space. In this respect, any gesture of painting occupies both time and space, ageing, thus ever changing, without exception. Historicizing painting is the first step in differentiating the painter as agent, the painting (verb) as action and the painting (as noun).

The Gesture in Chinese Ink Painting

For more than a thousand years, the practice of Chinese ink painting rigorously controlled by the swiftness of application articulated the physical and spiritual human journey. The posture of the painter, the handling of the brush, the breathing rhythms and the dispensing of ink onto paper with each move, collectively embodied a contemporary record of time and of space. In the history of Chinese painting, the presentation and the lexica of landscapes contained natural imageries, symbols and the momentous, embodying human thought, human ideas and human reflection (Woon, C., Carlos, E., Patron, P., & Boo, W. Q., 2022). Although much of Chinese ink painting could be aesthetically judged through the experience of studied application, a complex of elements related to the ‘composition’ determines the ultimate value of the work. In what was regarded as a master’s reference, ‘Six principles by Xie He’, the first and fifth principles dictate, “A picture should be inspired and possess life itself” and “In planning the composition one should observe consistency and propriety in the realisation of things” (Van Briessen, F., 1978). More importantly, these principles “refer to achieving excellence in the artwork so that it connects with the creator, nature and the viewer” (Woon, C., Carlos, E., Patron, P., & Boo, W. Q., 2022).

Thus, the composition fundamentals of a Chinese ink painting must incorporate life. Life is not prescribed or absolute. Life (must) flow. It is what manifests, between the known, the rendered and the unknown, unknowable. Here, the concept of 留白, liú bái, literally to ‘leave white’, captures the emptying of all else, inside an ink painting. 留白, liú bái has variously been regarded as negative space or white space. In sum, it is the emptiness. Where there is nothing, the viewer

has an opportunity to insert the human ‘self’, manifesting the unique possibility of meaningfulness in the artwork specific only to that human ‘self’.



Figure. 1 Qi Baishi, Borrowing mountains from nature, no. 11, 1910, Beijing Fine Art Academy.
Source: Beijing Fine Art Academy Documentation, 2025.

Negative Space in Technology; Negative Space as an Agentic ‘Interlude’

In the world of programming, negative space programming is a method used to code what an application should not do. Negative space programming is also known as subtractive programming, writing instructions clearly on what an app should not do or what is ‘not possible’ to run (Double Trouble, 2024). Programming demonstrates, in the definition of the void or the negative space, a clear difference from ‘human processing’. In layman’s terms, negative space programming instructions are prescriptive and are designed to anticipate what may go wrong when from the user perspective, attempts are made to perform an action that has not been coded as a state.

In the digital world, the concept of negative space is a binary with its opposite of positive space. All data is eventually ingested and processed as the binary 1 or 0. Even in 1964, when logician Lofti Zadeh drafted the first form of ‘fuzzy logic’ beyond the binary and exacting logic of 1 and 0, the ‘fuzziness’ of such instructions must be still be represented by values in between 1 and 0. It is safe to conclude for the purposes of this paper, that the inheritors of binary states, including negative programming and fuzzy logic, explicitly demand precise and comprehensive prescriptions in a data driven world of technologies, including the innovations found in artificial intelligence. Further, in programming methods and functions, it is possible to instruct a method with values that do not return anything:

this can be generally referred to as ‘void’ type, or ‘void’ programming. In this respect, the void refers to a series of instructions that ultimately return no value. They exist for the pathway, without a response that can be evaluated.

The emptiness of space symbolises the potential of possibilities. In the world of design, negative or white space has been the subject of myriad discourse in the visual field (Esseku, J. F., 2023). Negative space is necessary to frame, to give focus to, to create a context in which the ‘object’ (of design) can exist. Negative or white spaces suggest many things in the mind of the human consumer. We can conclude that negative space as the absence of any code or identifying elements, leads to an ambiguity that is not well tolerated by the precision of mechanisms of the digital realm. It is this ‘ambiguity’ that is worth examining, as being the last frontier and preserve, of what it means to be human.

What the Ambiguity of Negative Space Provides

This paper has noted above that negative space in Chinese ink painting can often provide a space of reflection. This is clearly differentiated from how space is defined in the Western paradigm. The most common and renowned Western paradigm of ‘space’ arose from the advent of the Renaissance, when mathematical principles were introduced into painting to delineate the spaces depicted in the compositions on a two-dimensional surface whether a wall or a canvas or a panel. This resulted in the use of linear perspective creating the ‘window’ through which the viewer apprehended the subjects and objects of the painted space. Mathematical perspective transformed how walls and flat surfaces were treated, as they became extensions of perceived real spaces, from which the viewer could access the narrative of a painted world. By filling the empty spaces mathematically and defining the space of the narrative, the Western paradigm compels a different experience of space in relation to the self, the space in which the self can be made present or evident.

“...linear perspective proper,” James Elkins has said, “is a way of unifying pictures or pictorial space...”. Elkins adds that the use of perspective created a link between the viewer and the represented, through a ‘window’ “...in which artists and apprentices look through wooden frames at objects.” Elkins concludes in this part, “Most Renaissance authors do not connect perspective windows, either real or imagined, to the mainstream of picture making. Instead they are restricted to a pedagogical tradition that serves to introduce the “real” perspective done with straightedge and compass, and they are associated with optical instruments rather than authentic constructions” (Elkins, J., 1992). Elkin’s scholarship here opines that mathematical perspective that evolved in the construction of ‘pictures’ during the Renaissance was ultimately not cohesively implemented nor uniform in the rules of spatial definitions. The description of space here became a symbol for alterity: the

Kubleresque historicity of the agent moving through time and space. It is reasonable to conclude here, that even during the Renaissance, when forms of spatial unity using mathematical perspective were prescribed with the advent of humanist thought, there remained an ambiguity of how humans experienced existential confrontations suggested by religious architecture and pictorial narratives.

In an address to the Prussian Academy of Sciences in Berlin in 1921, Albert Einstein stated, “How can it be that mathematics, being after all a product of human thought which is independent of experience, is so admirably appropriate to the objects of reality? Is human reason, then, without experience, merely by taking thought, able to fathom the properties of real things. In my opinion the answer to this question is, briefly, this: As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain; and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality” (Einstein, 1920). By completely prescribing space with detailed information, there is literally no more room for ‘thought’ and if we extrapolate Einstein above, for experience to play a part in determining the real-ness (human-ness) of what is present before us.

Extrapolating ‘Negative’ Space in Painting and in Digital Research

This paper examines two artists working in two mediums to propose radical new paradigms of two propositions. The first proposition focusses on painting, and illustrates how negative space manifested can be extracted as a form of visual iconography that yet remains non-prescriptive and ambiguous. The second proposition posits a larger exercise involving the use of technology, excavating processed data and curating the yields to reveal common values through abstract reflections not necessarily based on concrete facts, knowledge and declarations. In both propositions, this paper posits that a palpable negative space creates the lacuna in which meaningfulness transits. In that dimension, there is no possibility to claim or reclaim an absolute value. What exists are a series of movements and overlaps challenging us to sentience.

Hoang Duong Cam: Between Something and Nothing

“ “the mind has no picture the picture has no mind so can we find a picture outside of the mind?” Avatamsaka Sutra” (Hoang Duong Cam, Galerie Quynh, 2006).

The artist Hoang Duong Cam (Cam) was born in Hanoi, Vietnam. Trained in fine art painting, Cam has explored the intellectual possibilities of straddling polarities in contemporary Vietnamese practice. Born in the north before reunification, Cam lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City today. Cam has practiced photography, performance, video making and of course, painting. In a 2018 exhibition at Galerie Quynh, the exhibition describes how “Hoang continues his practice of weaving personal history and larger historical narratives but delves into

the multi-faceted, ever-shifting and ever-colliding nature of borderlines – moving between those pertaining to history, geography, and those dividing rationality from the subconscious” (Galerie Quynh Contemporary Art, 2018). In 2024, Cam amalgamated new work with his previous pursuit from 2018, exhibiting a solo endeavour with “Light permeates the wounds: Hoang Duong Cam”, held at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Singapore. The exhibition offered, “Hoang Duong Cam’s work draws inspiration from elements of literature, music, photography and painting, transcending artistic boundaries. While history is a reminder of past tragedies and complexities, it can also offer hope. Hoang’s art broadens our understanding of disruption, brokenness and creative impetus, resilience that emerges from experiences that compel us to imagine a better world, to help us heal, to make this world better” (Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, 2024). In his methodology, Cam stakes a claim that existence is fragile and reality is somewhat unreliable. As humans, we are constantly skimming the surface of reality as ‘surreal’. Literally, just above the real, dream-like and even bizarre.

In a series of paintings, he creates abstract marks that resemble organic forms and geometric renderings. The eye apprehends shapes that relies on higher cognition to assume recognisable forms, such as angles, mountains, tree branches, squares or spheres.



Figure 2. Lightnings - Ideal forms found in the U Minh forest no. 9, 2024.
Source: Bridget Documentation, 2024.

In truth, the vernacular employed by Cam here is based on the ephemeral lightning: a coming and going, in his own words of marks upon the sky, creating visibility that is everchanging in the atmosphere.



Figure 3. Lightnings - Ideal forms found in the U Minh forest no. 5, 2024.
Source: Bridget Documentation, 2024.

“I felt like I was swinging between creepers in a deep jungle of complex and interlacing connections while doing my research on how and when modernism appeared in Vietnam. It had me thinking about the U Minh forest with its fantastic myths and stories. The name of the forest itself literally means a “dark place”, but the term is typically used to refer to a state of mind, not one in particular but a general state of being misunderstood. It could be chaotic, unclear and confusing... Located in the furthest south of Vietnam, the history of the forest and its nearby residents is very interesting; from the Chinese refugees to the pirates of the southern sea, from criminals of Nguyen’s Dynasty to Vietnam War’s guerillas” (Hoang Duong Cam, 2024).

The U Minh forest is today a protected national park, a 20,000-acre reserve in Kiên Giang province, banking west toward the gulf of Thailand. Cam’s analogy is a literally abstraction of a space that does not define anything, if it defines all things or everything. It is literally the in-between space, of man and destiny; of man and existence; of humanity and depravity; of the establishment of history and lingering contemporary chaos. The gestures used in the lightning works compel us to think of an impermanent state of illumination before our visual field. Cam’s narrative is to remind us of epic events and the aftermath and question human agency. In his statement he continues to discuss events in history and concludes on the scheme, “It was a short-lived enlightenment of modernism that comes and goes, just like lightning in a dark forest” (Hoang Duong Cam, 2024).

With this, we are watchful, anxious even: the paintings are a form of negative rendering of natural phenomena reminding us of a transience that can never be imprinted for posterity.



Figure 4. Bach BWV 950 – Khe Sanh – 2022.
Source: Khe Sanh, 2022.

In yet another series, Cam proposes abstraction from a collection of cut outs: to put it bluntly, a collection of spaces retrieved from extant or found images as being the ‘negative’ space between objects depicted. If two men are shaking hands for instance, it would be the space between their bodies, framed by their gesture, that Cam would extract and impute as a series of layers in his abstract paintings. The result is a complex layering of hundreds of in-between spaces of known and unknown images from mass media and archival sources.

“At Dien Bien Phu,” Cam shares, “all the hills at the Base were named after beautiful French names. This was totally different in Khe Sanh. They name the hills according to the actual height of the hill, which is very practical. For myself, I want to label all the hills in Khe Sanh according to numbered scores by J.S. Bach. I found that the music of Bach would somehow go along with the autobiographies that I read” (Hoang Duong Cam, 2024). The reference to European music, specifically Bach, is not by chance. At the height of the Cold War, the incarnations of cultural diplomacy facilitated a broader diet of Classical work beyond the social realist traditions that fuelled orchestral performances and ballet. The music of Bach is symbolic of an era, but also represents the metabolic evolution of identities from the layman and the proletariat into the world of cultural transcendence. The music provides a backdrop to contextualise ambient audio. It signals further, the palpability of real space, filled with frequencies attuned to structures of composed

music. They cannot be seen, but audibly sensed to lead the mind beyond the purely and precise visual before us.

The works by Cam offer a new perspective on image making. The entire construct of images in painting has turned on its head. As viewers, we are trained to cognitively recognise objects that we know and can assign a name to. We make sense of the world around us in the way images are sent to us to describe what we are meant to see and to understand. With Cam, our viewership is forever transformed. To look at a representation and only focus on the negative spaces between what we have been taught to recognise, perhaps signals a rejection of an dominant and prescribed ideas and narratives. It is to reclaim human agency without preconception of how we want to think and to be. His images are things but also do not represent things as we know them. They are the negative spaces of both sight, sound, logical thought and unbridled imagination.

In the first proposition, Cam has offered a new iconography that is only itself and nothing else: yet compels us to acknowledge that even those symbols dissolve into nothing. When there is nothing, the confrontation of being human, is a condition of moral reflection, in all its discomfort, a condition that cannot be replicated by machines and algorithms.

Hong Shu-ying: 印映 (yìn yìng) Reflections Impressions

The artist and researcher Hong Shu-ying was also a scores librarian for amateur Chinese orchestras. A practicing photographer and artmaker, she contends with found objects and extant sources of knowledge. In her explorations, “her works function as reflections and time capsules, exploring alternative knowledge systems and manners of dissemination” (Hong Shu-ying, 2025).

The case study for Shu-ying is a project exploring blind musician, A-bing 阿炳 whose original name was Hua Yanjun. Born in 1893, A-bing died relatively early in 1950. In his lifetime, A-bing collected, created and arranged numerous compositions and scores, his performances offering a living archive at the time, embodying the historical content of musical notation and the ephemeral losses in live performances.



Figure 5. 再见阿炳 who is abing? (2023).

Source: Found images from Youtube videos (Hong Shu-ying, 2025).

Shu-ying’s project on A-bing is unique in the scarcity of images depicting A-bing in contrast to his renown and his popularity. Scouring the internet, she analysed and extrapolated from videos and performances of A-bing’s music, bringing to the fore impressions of a performer whose legacy was obscure and not

concrete at least, in the visual recognizability of his person and his performances. His form and practice was as a street musician, playing in weddings and funerals, leaving again, speculations over fact, on his actual performances since none would have been recorded live for posterity. Six recordings of A-bing survive, with one largely deteriorated visual image much like an identity card photo, often used as a reference by those seeking to know A-bing's story better.



Figure 6. Found in different videos, the same composition were used in this pair of images; this is likely due to the only oral account of the recording left behind (Hong Shu-ying, 2025).
Source: Bridget Documentation, 2025.

The criticality of Shu-ying's practice resides in the irony of the overwhelming availability of extant data given the many studies and explorations of A-bing not in his lifetime, but a legacy after the fact. This is in stark contrast to the lack of actual recordings and original documentation of A-bing (chinaculture.org, 2008), whether photos of him and his life; or actual performances in audio or video. 印映 (yìn yìng) embodies the negative space beyond time and space. It cannot pretend to be history, as it has no concrete reference point. It cannot pretend to veracity, as at every level, music and performance, imaging and creative explorations remain just one form of interpretation.



Figure 7. Parodies of A-bing found in 'user-made' videos (Hong Shu-ying, 2025)
Source: Bridget Documentation, 2024.

A-bing is celebrated, but he remains a mystery. The project by Shu-ying dares to speculate on how knowledge in its scarcity is excavated and reimagined. In this contemporary world of technology, agency is located not in an ‘original’ idea, but one that attempts to recreate something everyone knew of once, but might have forgotten. In A-bing’s case, so little is known. And what little there is, transits through technology, reinterpreted with different hands and different ideas, creating a body of reflections and impressions, exactly as Shu-ying intends. This capsule ‘archive’ becomes a collection of symbolic values gleaned over thousands of images, thousands of thoughts and bits of musical recordings, the sonification of extant data, converted into a new symphony. It is not possible to conclude that any or all of this, for certain, represents A-bing.

The second proposition signals questions of veracity and the use of technology in mass dissemination of particular sources of information. We believe in what we find. We dare to build on what we know. Yet at the end, we are still in the state of the in-between. Between what is real and known, and what cannot be known because it is not real. The palpable reality lies only in our human agency: an attempt to revive, to re-enact, to embody, an experience as close as possible to what we believe to be the authentic and the real.

Afterthought

In the medium of video production, blank space or black screen has a tendency to produce an awkward anxiety in the viewer. The more visceral reception for video art delivers an immediate reaction to ‘jump’ into the void because blank space or black screen denotes perhaps something has paused or gone wrong, such that we are prevented from the continuity and realised object of what we were meant to view.



Figure 8. From the video, Akar (still photo), by Fitri Ya’akob, 2020 (Akar is available as a video artwork in the Collection of Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts).
Source: Fitri Ya’akob, 2020.

In the video *Akar*, the artist Fitri Ya'akob used black screen and silence in interludes and repetitions that critically evaluated her own medium and expression. The proposed unreliability of technology as a form of communication conveys the technical failures evident in forms of communication whether in image, text or dialogue.

In his short story 'Silence of the Sirens', Modernist Czech writer, Franz Kafka writes, "But the Sirens have a still more terrible weapon than their singing, namely their silence. It has indeed not happened, but is perhaps conceivable, that someone could have saved himself from their singing—from their silence, certainly not" (Dyssebeia, 2013). Richard Misek refers to 'black screen' akin to what is only ever virtual (Misek, R., 2017). In fact, black screen may be the mimesis of absolute nothing, that has no equivalent in reality or experience. It may well be that in the absence, with black screen, with silence, with negative space, human beings are confronting the possibility of death and inexorable nothingness. The fear that one day, there will indeed be silence, and the end of all meaning.

In Southeast Asia, we experience pressure to conform to a post-modernist, global bent in negotiating the world through a predominantly Western paradigm. While there is no debate that concepts and philosophies from the East and Europe have equally influenced civilisation and humanity at large through time, the unstoppable onslaught of technological progress and connectivity has shrunk our world, slowly eroding our unique cultures, compelled to homogeneity and a faceless charge.

Ways of practicing art and the exhibitionary develop oportunitites for new perspectives to tell their own unique stories. These remain plural and dynamic, ever ready for exchange and epistemological transformations.

Why Recapturing Meaningfulness in the Ways Art is Practiced and revisited through the digital experience is critical for reinforcing human agency

This paper has shown through the two practices shared here, a way forward in reasserting human agency, proposing negative space as the space of sentience. It is a space that does not exist, the way it must be coded in precise prescriptions in the world of mass media and technology. It is a space that does not exist, except for when we are in transit: this space is ephemeral, elusive and seldom acknowledged. It is a space that we leave for ourselves, when we have rendered everything else. In an increasingly fractured global environment, the Southeast Asian case studies in reference of Hoang Duong Cam and Hong Shu-ying on 'A-bing' clearly contextualise the relevance of history, geopolitical confluences in common heritage. The ways in which we communicate with each other allude to a world where we find each other through the sensibilities of art and artmaking. In the data driven densities of modern images and modern information, we look for what is

outside of the things we believe we ought to know, to discover what we are yet to know. It is the force of negative space and the nothing, that technological mechanics remain at odds with. Being human, is to learn to accept the discomfort of ambiguity that cannot be defined by codes and numerical values. It is the space in which we are only with ourselves and must confront who we really are. We are reminded not to construe silence for granted. The extent to which silence bears upon us is the extent to which we assert and preserve our humanity. “In Taoist thought, ‘nothing’ represents the practice of ‘moral’, which is knowing one’s external feelings by forgetting oneself, and to think about the ‘hypothetical thinking’ of knowing things” (Woon, C., Carlos, E., Patron, P., & Boo, W. Q., 2022).

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