



CURATORIAL STATEMENT

MADE IN ASEAN

Who is Southeast Asia made of?

We must beg this question of *who* instead of *what*, because decades after Southeast Asian countries' colonial histories the search for a shared identity persists. In 1967 the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was founded as a means of establishing mutual cooperation within the region and since then, it has grown from five post-war countries to ten independent member states. *One Vision, One Identity, One Community*; the ASEAN motto implies seeing, recognising, and belonging.

Fifteen participants from different ASEAN countries — Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Viet Nam — and the UK engaged in participatory photography to reflect on what it means to be Southeast Asian and an ASEAN member citizen in today's world. The main challenge was to reflect on the various ways we might see, recognise, and belong to 'ASEAN-ness' using images of everyday life, nostalgia, and places — almost stripping the grand narrative of geopolitics down to what we can imagine with our very eyes and, by extension, what can be observed by our cameraphones.

The view of a nameless street from one's window, intertwining clotheslines stretched out from the kitchen back door, a cupboard overflowing with chopsticks, spoons, pots and pans, a handful of souvenirs and trinkets tucked away for several years, and memories of travel adventures and childhood games.

The similarities are uncanny yet familiar to our imaginative eyes; the differences only reveal themselves when we speak of them.

While we remain indoors for still an uncertain period of time, we invite you to visit Southeast Asia by imagining with us. Choose any country, any destination, any place. Only, you will need more than your own eyes and senses to explore. This is why we are offering you ours.

MADE IN ASEAN transforms our collective act of imagining into image-making. As the regional integration project *ASEAN Vision 2020* was envisioned to launch this year, our curatorial project offers the public an alternative means of reflecting on the ASEAN's identity-building efforts in the last fifty years.

Who makes the ASEAN? Who makes of the ASEAN? What do we make of the ASEAN?

We can only imagine, for now.

www.aseanvisionproject.com

ASEAN Manifesto

Curated by Kristian Jeff Agustin & Martin Vidanes (Philippines),
Yen Ooi (UK & Malaysia), and Amy Matthewson (Canada & UK)

Five 'founding fathers' from five Southeast Asian countries adopted the 'Bangkok Declaration' on 8 August 1967. The momentous document marked the founding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Since then, the international organisation has grown to ten member countries — namely Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Viet Nam — forming a developing region that is now home to more than 600 million Southeast Asians. For a population so diverse and diasporic, what does it mean to live by a declaration penned and signed by a handful of individuals?

Through a mix of photography, prose poetry, and spoken word, Agustin, Matthewson, Ooi, and Vidanes re-adopt the ASEAN Declaration into today's sociopolitical climate to challenge what is archaic and historic about 'Southeast Asia' as both an identity and a geopolitical bloc. Dubbed 'ASEAN Manifesto', the collaborative performance piece serves as a culmination of several months of paracuratorial experiments curated by Agustin and several other co-curators since 2020 (*MADE in ASEAN* online exhibition).

Thus, this new manifesto aims to push the boundaries of intergovernmental statutes and the so-called Habermasian public sphere in the context of regionalism discourses. Can the ASEAN be a participatory process? What does community and identity building entail when it is replete with public participation? And ultimately, is the nature of our so-called 'ASEAN-ness' participatory enough or entirely imposed by institutions? With the Covid-19 pandemic serving as a backdrop, the curators imagined an ASEAN landscape that is more than the sum of its parts: more than its shared colonial past and the exotic gaze of the West, more than its postcolonial transition to non-interfering nations, and more than its tourism-driven economies and tech-savvy societies. These strands all lead to the contemporary understanding of what might the much touted ASEAN identity mean to its constituents, as well as their individual and collective participation in region-building.

ASEAN Manifesto launched on Sunday, 8 August 2021, to mark the occasion of ASEAN Day.

Crossworld Puzzle

Curated by Kerrine Goh & Andy Chan (Singapore)

Crossword puzzles were derived from the idea that arranging a random group of letters in grids, forming words or phrases either horizontally or vertically, can serve as an exciting word play of intelligibility.

Crossworld Puzzle adopts these word puzzle games as its reference, endeavouring to survey the presence of an 'ASEAN identity' beyond its geopolitical characteristics by means of random images. Much like the popular pastime, in place of incomplete letters are snippets of photographs; each one can only tell a fragment of the whole story. Will completing the pieces form the much anticipated big picture?

In fact, the notion of an ASEAN identity seems detached and improbable for ASEAN citizens. Apart from being bonded by geography, are there any other characteristics, attitudes, and interests that we actually share in common? Perhaps in order to explore this sense of identity that is 'ASEAN-ness', we need to welcome the differences and similarities from one another.

Unfolding as a series of crossword puzzles by assembling a collection of images (instead of words and/or phrases), *Crossworld Puzzle* invites thinkers and viewers to consider the parallels and disparities within the various ASEAN countries. This interactive curatorial project attempts to resemble the ASEAN way of ordering and structuring of things and topics out of an incoherent regional identity. Perhaps there are ways to generate yet another alternative facet of the much touted 'ASEAN identity.'

Anonymised Skies

Curated by Martin Vidanes (Philippines)

Indoors. By the window. Open space. Outside. Above ground. When did we last look up at the sky? What colours fill our gaze with imagination? Is it the colour of fading concrete? The glaring fluorescent lamp of an unfamiliar room? A different shade of indigo bleeding through orange in a foreign land?

Step out, stand still, and through a dark looking glass, move through time, and space, and light.

What does the sky look like from there?

This exhibition of photographs takes crowdsourced images of the sky from different perspectives of peoples across random vantage points in Southeast Asian countries and elsewhere. By plotting different geolocations into a virtual exhibition space made possible by the 'ethernet' of clouds, a potential convergence comes to light. Whether it is the north wind that brought expeditions and explorers to our shores, or the parting clouds ferrying jumbo jets packed with people leaving for greener pastures, the shared experience of what is now ASEAN is glaring, turbulent, and vast.

As the timeless adage goes, 'as above, so below', *Anonymised Skies* poses a challenge to people to find common ground by looking above and beyond. In this unanimous act of seeing the same plot of sky, are we together?

Using your cameraphone as a looking glass, take a picture of the sky from wherever you are. Let your viewfinder frame the boundless and borderless.

Mesa sa Kwarto

Curated by Kristian Jeff Agustin (Philippines)

If ideas are made in the mind, where do they materialise? In any advanced society, the corporeal act of drawing, inscribing, sculpting, and even tasting often takes place on a stable surface, such as a *desk*. Before machinery became as handy as mobile devices, pinning down ideas required a physical substrate upon which ideas are held or pressed against. The desk serves many a purpose in today's 'work-driven' society.

In 2020, numerous workers have been deprived of access to their desk jobs as mass lockdowns shuttered workplaces not only in Asia but also the rest of the world because of Covid-19. Virtual meetings conducted over videoconferencing apps, therefore, made quite the difference — had this pandemic happened decades prior, the physical and social challenges would prove even harder.

Whilst many industries have swiftly realised various workarounds using online connectivity and virtual spaces, the arts sector (especially in Southeast Asia) has yet to circumvent many physical restrictions. Regardless of the global pandemic, however, creative practitioners have long been experimenting to offer new solutions.

Mesa sa Kwarto is a para-curatorial experiment that is designed to expand the now ubiquitous Zoom *gallery view* into a makeshift exhibition space. Here, the desk (*mesa*) in the room (*kwarto*) balances between the material and virtual, execution and concept, offline and online, work and life. The effect is a home-made rendering of augmented reality.

An almost 'retrospective' exhibition, the display of objects is culled from an intimate curatorial collection — with the curator's bedroom serving as both an archive and a repository of artworks, clothes, journals, letters, and souvenirs which have accumulated through the years. The life-size inventory is distilled on a desk, where the objects are weighed, wielded, and written.

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For the *MADE IN ASEAN* online exhibition, curator Kristian Jeff Agustin presents a catalogue of Southeast Asian artefacts and products manufactured in ASEAN countries. As if pre-empting future museums, curators and collectors, these objects are altogether presented as a depiction of the material culture of the 'ASEAN civilisation'. After all, located in the region are some of the most vulnerable nations in the world in the face of pandemics, rising oceans, and world wars.