

KÁLMÁN Borbála

A SITE FOR MINDFUL (RE)DEFINITION:

THE INDEPENDENT

CONTEMPORARY ART SCENE OF MYANMAR

MA Thesis in Cultural Heritage Studies: Academic Research, Policy, Management.

Central European University

Budapest

June 2017

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KÁLMÁN Borbála

(Hungary)

Thesis submitted to the Department of Medieval Studies,
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Accepted in conformance with the standards of the CEU.

Chair, Examination Committee

Thesis Supervisor

Examiner

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I, the undersigned, **Kálmán Borbála**, candidate for the MA degree in Cultural Heritage Studies: Academic Research, Policy, Management declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Budapest, 29 May 2017

Signature

Abstract

The cultural sphere in Myanmar was for the past decades dominated by a rigid official discourse, still carved today, during a transitional period, in its unchanged, immobile institutional frame. Not only it is problematic being based on a former military regime's formulation, but it also lacks entire narrative layers, such as a definite artistic segment of the recent past. This absence uncovers the depth to which an intellectual imprint of a whole era has been blocked by censorship from accessing general awareness. Myanmar's current independent contemporary art scene developed underground on its own, rooted in this absent segment, and created an autonomous system to operate in. Through its artistic practices and infrastructure, it represents a genuine agenda coherent with the intrinsic cultural frame and context of Myanmar. The alternative discourse enabled by the scene, being a flexible, and inclusive site, is crucial for free expression, for building curiosity, but also for creating an open dialogue within society's diversity and for allowing narratives, that were consciously or unintentionally deleted by the official discourse, to (re)surface. The study reflects a hypothesis which understands the independent contemporary art scene as a mindful site enabling an alternative discourse within society and which contributes to the (re)definition and (re)access of absent artistic, and so cultural narratives, as well as to the maintaining of the art scene's integrity and continuity. As a result of the research, a mechanism of smart practices based on existing projects is offered as a reading tool for the site, also containing some specific suggestions for potential further development.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank first professor Alexandra Kowalski of the department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, CEU for accepting to be the supervisor of the thesis, and for her patience regarding the unexpected turns of the research. I would also like to thank professor Zsuzsanna Renner and professor Sanjay Kumar from CEU for their advices regarding the nuances of the research.

I wish to thank János Jelen's guidance along the study's unfolding, and his contribution to my deeper understanding of Southeast Asia. I am obliged to Nathalie Johnston for her generosity in sharing her knowledge about the Myanmar art scene and her unconditional help. My deep gratitude goes to Aung Soe Min and Nance Cunningham for their continual support, even from long distance. I would like also to thank all the artists who helped my fieldwork and answered my never-ending questions, and who allowed me to learn about their substantial work. I would like to specially thank Mrat Lunn Htwann for the vision he has, and Flux Kit to have allowed me a special insight into the scene. My gratitude goes also to Franz Xaver Augustin for his tireless and inspiring commitment.

Finally, I wish to thank Julia Fabényi and Krisztina Szipőcs for their collegial support all along the research.

The Survey conducted within the research was partially sponsored by Central European University Foundation, Budapest (CEUBPF). The theses explained herein are representing the own ideas of the author, but not necessarily reflect the opinion of CEUBPF.

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Introduction

“Under socialism, we were completely isolated. The Op Art [Optical Art] movement of the 1960s passed by without us even being aware of it.”¹

The quote is from artist and writer Ma Thanegi: political activist in the 1980s, she served jail for three years after the people’s uprising of 1988 in Myanmar.² Today, she is mostly known for her deep knowledge about Myanmar’s culture that she shares through her written contribution to it. What she finds the most surprising about Myanmar though, is that changes occurred so unexpectedly fast after 2010.³ The first political shift of 2010–2011 after decades of military regime was a few years later reaffirmed through free and fair elections at the end of 2015, generating a new, transitional era.⁴

Significant metamorphoses in a country’s life never leave impact on a single level. It is a disruptive period for society, and for the different communities within one society – for better or worse. Based in Yangon between 2014–2015, as an art historian and curator, it appeared that the so called independent (contemporary) art scene was conveying the visible and palpable signs of a new epoch. My fieldwork started with the simple aim to have a better understanding of the fine art / visual art scene, but with the lack of available material, I was soon interviewing

¹ Weiss, “Interview with Burma’s Ma Thanegi.

² Throughout the study, underlined words, nouns or expressions refer to the glossary at the end of the study where an explanation is provided to the terms: most of these need specification beyond their general definition, especially terminology related to the art scene. The glossary contains definitions that embed the terms and expressions in the context of the thesis, they reflect the author’s perspective. The words are usually underlined only the first time of their usage.

³ The Myanmar Times, “Ma Thanegi Speaks: An Interview with One of Myanmar’s Leading Writers.”

⁴ The term *transition* may be debated in a strictly political context, as free and fair elections were accepted in November 2015, a new government has been in place since early 2016 (in: Nehru and Farrell, Patrick, “Myanmar’s Post-Election Transition - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.”) However, *transition* in the context of the study is not used in a strictly political sense: the study is written only one year after the start of the new government’s activity with still many, unsolved issues in the country, and with the most powerful political force still being the military armed forces (“Burma, Events of 2016 - Human Rights Watch.”; Selth, “Why Myanmar’s Military Is Not Planning a Coup.”). The study considers the country to be in a gradual post-election transition, from a previous epoch anchored in military dictatorship towards a new democratized era, while the ultimate results of transformation on the horizon are still to be awaited.

gallerists, through them artists and other actors of the scene, to gain an overview of its activity.

It was striking that one had to “investigate” in order to find those places and creators. It was an existing scene, active, vibrant and engaged, but hidden, modest and fragile.

Having later directly cooperated with some of the actors of the scene, being involved in some projects as organizer and consultant, allowed me a further insight into the network of independent actors coordinating the scene. The origin of the present research and study ensued from a concern over what the delicate net built by the independent art scene would face when encountering the powerful international art market. Currently, in the sort of “void” generated by the gradual withdrawal of the Censorship Regime (officially since 2012) and the slow evaporation of an autocratic narrative in daily life, “culture” as one, insoluble whole – as it was defined for decades from “above” – began to grow small branches, as nuances come slowly into consideration.⁵ The contrast between Myanmar’s isolated self, prior to the political shift and the context brought by the early global twenty-first century, implicative of an increasing and accelerated experience with the international scene, forecasted a challenging stage.

My approach at the beginning of the present research was to consider the simple facts, or the simple non-existent facts: the consequences of Myanmar not having an operating institutional visual art system or structure that could balance the impact of a greater international exposure that the art scene was to face. Advancing in the research, it became more obvious that the institutional system I was looking for, existed through the alternative infrastructure that the independent (contemporary) art scene has brought to life, and how crucial substance it represented within the cultural sphere in regard of a sustainable approach and a genuine voice in the upcoming period.

⁵ As the structure of the National University of Arts and Culture also suggests. Cf. Ch. I. A. 2.

Research questions, Hypothesis, Outcome

In a later phase, the research questions were then reframed as follows: What are the values of the independent contemporary art scene's art practices and infrastructure in relation to the official narrative in power? How and why a superimposed art historical and heritage approach allows a deeper understanding in this regard? What role can the independent contemporary art scene play within the cultural field and in a broader sense, in society, during this present period of transition? How can the independent art scene maintain its own perspective and why is the scene's sustainability so important if improvements are made at a higher, governmental level in terms of institutionalization?

The study reflects a hypothesis which understands the independent contemporary art scene as a mindful site for an alternative discourse within society and which contributes to the (re)definition and (re)access of absent artistic, and so cultural narratives, as well as to the maintaining of the art scene's integrity and continuity. I argue that as a counterbalance of the encapsulated, immovable and still dominant official set, the independent scene, very much alive, represents a genuine agenda through its artistic practices and infrastructure, coherent with the intrinsic cultural frame and context of Myanmar. The alternative discourse enabled by the scene being a flexible, and inclusive site is crucial for free expression, for building curiosity, but also for creating an open dialogue within society's diversity and allow the narratives that were consciously or unintentionally deleted by the official discourse to (re)surface.

As an outcome, the research to offers a "written photograph,"⁶ a mechanism of smart practices based on existing projects that can serve as a reading tool, a sort of map to the independent

⁶ "Observations enable the researcher to describe existing situations using the five senses, providing a 'written photograph' of the situation under study," Expression mentioned in: Kawulich, "Participant Observation as a Data

contemporary art scene's intrinsic site and its activity. It contains some further, specific suggestions that may complete the working frame and can be developed in the future as potential individual plans of action. The "written photograph" may also be a tool for completing the "spaces of original possibles"⁷ for additional research.

Methodology

Participant observation could be the best term to describe the quality of the conducted fieldwork which served as a basis for the research.⁸ I intentionally superimposed the discourses of art history and heritage to be able to provide a more holistic approach that shifts from a conventional analysis and perhaps brings more questions to the surface than answers. The reason is that except for few texts, the accessible literature in English about the independent contemporary art scene, if taken as a comprehensive attempt to address its activity, accentuates its dynamics in line of a pre-existing regional–global format strictly through a contemporary art terminology.⁹ My belief is that to understand the scene's role and potential in the current cultural, transitional arena, it needs to be detached from an external context and merits an attempt to be visualized in relation to the ground it is connected to. This ground has been shaped for centuries by social and religious order before the latter was disrupted by colonial rule, followed by decades of a dominant narrative imposed by a military regime. In the recent past, the artistic scene has also evolved in its own cultural, social context towards which it had an ambiguous standpoint not being an "authorized voice." The hypothesis unfolding through the

Collection Method.", herself quoting: Erlandson, David A.; Harris, Edward L.; Skipper, Barbara L. & Allen, Steve D. (1993). *Doing naturalistic inquiry: a guide to methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

⁷ Referring to Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed."

⁸ Methodology of Participant Observation, in: Kawulich, "Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method," 2.

⁹ Nathalie Johnston's close insight of the past almost one decade of the Myanmar art scene was a turning point in my fieldwork. Her text (Johnston, "Intuitive Acts: The Evolution of Myanmar Contemporary Performance Art.") about contemporary performance art in Myanmar (accessed November 2016) is one of the few written texts in English that attempts to vindicate pre-conceptions about the Myanmar contemporary art scene and focus on its evolution within its own context.

research is supported by a one-year fieldwork, the constant monitoring of the scene through the media, individual discussions with the independent scene's actors and the feedback of a recent survey; meanwhile the study relies on a personal assumption embedded in a Western academic approach and an undeniable art historical terrain. The research experience cannot level a fully insider approach, and language barrier is an aspect that prevents an access to some nuances enclosed between the layers of other disciplines' research too. The awareness of not being able to probably capture all threads at once is maintained throughout the study, especially as most of the concepts, time-frames, processes have to be further investigated individually; having said that, the angle proposed by the study may contribute to an ongoing dialogue precisely by bringing forward a – potential – semi-external reading.

Sources

The primary source for the study, fieldwork conducted between Spring 2014–Spring 2015, mainly in Yangon but not exclusively, entailed a series of interviews with artists, gallerists, curators, art experts from the country or from the region – either recorded or annotated; some of them were processed in the forms of articles and publications on different media platforms.¹⁰ This is complemented by archival material collected through this period including photo documentation of events and spaces, along with fieldnotes. The secondary literature was partly processed in Yangon – mainly publications nowhere else available. The second phase of processing was undertaken during the research in Budapest. A quantitative survey analysis in a form of a questionnaire was included in the research – the study comprises a subchapter

¹⁰ Gallery guide / short articles regularly published between September 2014–April 2015: Kálmán, “Gallery Guide - Myanmar.”, regular articles on the independent art scene published locally in In Depth Magazine: Kálmán, “My Paintings Are Not Beautiful (San Minn).”; Kálmán, “Show Me Your Hands And I’ll Tell You Who You Were (Htein Lin).”; Kálmán, “A Road Paved by Solid Concepts Meeting Artist Po Po.”, Kálmán, “Red, Black and Back (Aung Myint).”, and on a Hungarian art portal, Kálmán, “Iola Lenzi Interjú I., II. : ‘A Kortárs Művészet a Társadalmi Változás alakítója’; ‘Ellenérzéseim Vannak a Művészeti Piaccaal szemben’ (Iola Lenzi Interview I, II: ‘Contemporary Art As the Driver for Social Change’; ‘I Rather Keep Away from the Market.’”

dedicated to its details and methodology (II.D., App. 1). The outcome as a mechanism of smart practices framed by the last subchapter (III.B.) is embedded in a regional angle through the short cases provided in subchapter III.A.2. The terminology regarding the art scene needs in almost every case clarification as many concepts are being (re)defined now by the scene and remain debatable, hence the necessity of a separate glossary. The web-references are abundant besides academic sources as it is sometimes the only source for English reference.

Theoretical framework

The study's theoretical framework can be attached to two main approaches: critical heritage studies and (contemporary) art history. There is also an additional layer provided by postcolonial and Southeast Asian studies.

In respect for the critical heritage approach of the study, I would like to mention Rodney Harrison and Laurajane Smith. Rodney Harrison defines heritage as a “dynamic process which involves competition over whose version of the past, and the associated moral and legal rights which flow from this version of the past, will find official representation in the present.”¹¹ Two inter-related dynamic forces enter the understanding of heritage according to Harrison, a top-down, official approach, and a bottom-up, unofficial one, constituted by a local level. Critical heritage studies investigate these two processes, the relation between them. The present study wishes to approach as a start the case of the independent contemporary art scene partly through this scheme by understanding these processes framed around the notion of culture, and more properly fine art / visual art in the context of Myanmar. Harrison's suggestion for a new dialogical model aims a broader approach between heritage and the “overwhelming presence of the past”: it “implies an ethical stance in relation to others, and a belief in the importance of acknowledging and respecting alternative perspectives and worldviews as a condition of

¹¹Harrison, *Understanding the Politics of Heritage*, 8.

dialogue, and provides a way to connect heritage with other pressing social, economic, political and environmental issues of our time.”¹² Through this approach, Harrison expects to offer an alternative to the “troubled late-modern” relationship with memory and the modernist binaries of cultural and natural which he finds underlied by the tangible / intangible division. It is in order to complete this frame that the notion of Living Heritage Approach is added independently of Harrison’s approach in the aim of generating a nuanced view of the cultural context relating to the independent contemporary art scene of Myanmar.

Laurajane Smith on her side, nearly a decade before Harrison’s *critical approaches* published her “uses of heritage.” “At one level heritage is about the promotion of a consensus version of history by state-sanctioned cultural institutions and elites to regulate cultural and social tensions in the present. On the other hand, heritage may also be a resource that is used to challenge and redefine received values and identities by a range of subaltern groups.” Smith interprets the notion of a hegemonic “Authorized Heritage Discourse” (AHD) dependent on the specialist bodies’ power and institutionalized “in state cultural agencies and amenity societies.” This discourse is a synthesis of nation-narratives and aesthetic judgment of the expert; it is a self-referential discourse.¹³ The major challenge of the AHD is that it marks out who is entitled to speak in the name of the past.¹⁴ Smith’s approach helps situating the official narrative in regard of the position the independent scene holds.

From an art historical point of view, the study stays within the frames of contemporary art as a field, with a conscious referencing to the Southeast Asian region and to a global context, but not making it the interpretation frame of the hypothesis exposed. The study’s approach is also influenced by personal experience in the for-profit and non-profit institutional art system as art

¹² Harrison, *Heritage – Critical Approaches*, 9.

¹³ Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, 4., 11.

¹⁴ AHD discourse is embedded in some primary documents (conventions, charters) of international institutions (UNESCO, ICOMOS). This aspect – how the AHD provided by these institutions – relate to the Myanmar heritage scene would also be interesting to research, beyond the aspect of living heritage that is proposed in Chapter I.C.

historian and curator, with practice in theory (research) and management. This layer adds a practical filter to the outcome.

As the main approach conveyed by the study is rooted in the disciplines of art history and heritage – the Southeast Asian frame figures here more as a regional delimitation, rather than an attempt to discuss it as a concept, or discuss Myanmar in the Southeast Asian context. Some literature references are embedded in Southeast Asian studies, some in postcolonial studies:¹⁵ these concepts, tightly related to the study, were to be proceeded through these different angles, hence the notion of past, memory, social practices, collective thought and collective memory had to be introduced through a more regional aspect within the general aspect.

The concept of *cultural field* in the study relies on the definition of Pierre Bourdieu's field of cultural production in the sense of approaching the current cultural sphere as a theoretical space in which the study assesses the role and weight of the network of participant actors (agents) and the dynamics of negotiation around artistic practices. It is an attempt to withdraw the artistic scene's autonomous network from the entity of "culture" defined by the official narrative and envision it in the larger context of its position in society, as a site which is currently being "under construction," shaping and forming.

The study engages first, through the set of Myanmar's official institutional frame regarding culture and fine arts, with an absent layer of visual art heritage in this dominant discourse. An attempt to relate this absent layer with social practices is conveyed by the final part of the first chapter, drawing a parallel with the concept of living heritage. The second phase of the study focuses on the mindful and intrinsic aspect of the independent art scene, emphasizing the depth

¹⁵ Based on Chua Beng Huat (Chua Beng Huat, "Southeast Asia in Postcolonial Studies: An Introduction."), Southeast Asia is rather absent in the development of Postcolonial Studies for different reasons, mainly because of the role (former) colonial regimes played in the emergence of new nation-states and because of the conflicts surrounding these processes within the Cold War. Moreover, Myanmar is somewhat also excluded from the Southeast Asian Studies due to its long isolation period and annihilation of its academic scene.

of the discourse provided through the platform it represents. A frame of art theoretical concepts is introduced in this regard for a better perception of the nuances it may carry. Before outlining the mechanism of smart practices that can be considered as drivers of the independent scene's sustainability and continuity, the third chapter starts by outlining a few projects alluding to a possible dissolution of the official narrative, but wishes also to show the problematic side of these in the Myanmar context, through a brief outlook on regional cases.

Chapter I - Superimposed Discourses

The institutional system in place in Myanmar set up by the decades prior to the transitional era remains an almost untouched frame today. The centralized and rigid, bureaucratic state apparatus defines the cultural sphere as well. Its lineage, originating in a leftist, nationalistic post-independence era, soon over-shadowed by the 1962 military coup's agenda, outlined for the past half-century an unusual political context, permeated with Buddhism as part of the official narrative. Referring to Harrison's approach of heritage as a dynamic process with competing versions of the past and associated moral and legal rights flowing from this version, the "authorized" narrative installed by the government decades ago seems to remain floating over the cultural institutional framework.

The National Museum Yangon is a symbolic institution which defines culture according to the official narrative. It represents also a sort of dead-end today, carrying an incoherent statement of "national spirit" if compared to the diversity of the country, and an incoherent formulation apropos what *fine art* should be for, if juxtaposed with the multi-textured, well-alive artistic scene that has been evolving in the recent past. It could be argued that the new government had yet "no time" among pressing issues to deal with revitalizing its institutions to allow a more

nuanced interpretation of “culture”, conveyed today as a blurred entity without much distinctiveness between its constituents. The cultural sphere is not among the government’s priority today which, it seems, has no comprehensive strategy to address its future, or intends to maintain the present official narrative which is also possible. Most of the decisions are happening *ad hoc*, as if the existing frameworks were followed in an accidental way without any definite perspective on the long-run.¹⁶ Most probably fragmented or disjoint could be the term to describe the sphere in terms of field of cultural production: cultural producers / agents from the non-governmental level sustain a broken relationship with the government, having no connection except administrative duties – which at the same time relate to every formal move: the government’s vigilance has not completely disappeared as the study will indicate.

The chapter departs from the official point of view regarding the cultural sphere: the core part of this discourse has been in place for decades and it is according to this discourse that the government is (re)acting, it is to what it is referring to – even though, as section Ch. III. C. points out, there might be a light shift on the horizon. The dominant narrative conveyed through the institutional framework relies on a conservative approach towards the arts and a nationalistic idea of the government’s cultural duties. The study does not aim to give a deep analysis of the former decades’ ideological model but offers as a start an encounter with a symbolic space of the official narrative, the National Museum in Yangon, as well as a panoramic view of the existing museum system. A closer look at the definition of what the official narrative sees as valid culture and artistic production will lead to the appraisal of an absent chapter of visual art in this official narrative, crucial for the present research. The third

¹⁶ Cf. one among so many cases: the contradictory decisions within a few days time banning tourists from climbing stupas in Bagan because of a local scandal and to recalling the ban afraid what impact it would have on tourism, in: “Myanmar Makes U-Turn on Bagan Temple Climbing Ban.” This *ad hoc* aspect is addressed by Ch. III.A.1.

part of the chapter will introduce concepts related to social practices that may form a frame of reference for the visual art scene.

The chapter's objective is to assess two opposite dynamics within a fragmented cultural field, in order to set in a second phase the context to a deeper analysis of the counternarrative of the independent scene.

A. An Authorized Narrative

The subchapter's title refers to Smith's AHD concept. It is the basis on which the study aims to define an authorized discourse implemented decades ago in Myanmar as a homogenized idea. The government and political frame has partly changed since, but as evoked, the discourse within the cultural sphere was not revitalized. Following Smith's approach: the heritage literature considers heritage a symbolic representation of identity. Identity was during the military rule associated with a specific, nationalizing narrative around the concept of a "Union of Burma / Myanmar." "The heritage discourse, in providing a sense of national community, must, by definition, ignore a diversity of subnational cultural and social experiences."¹⁷ By excluding these experiences, the discourse is limiting the critiques and privileging the experts and their values. This combination legitimizes itself, and the values and ideologies it is based on. The study cannot address within the chapter a more detailed idea of the origins and facets of the official, nationalistic discourse of Myanmar but only mentions it to indicate in relation to what sort of homogenized concept of culture and artistic expression is the independent scene acting.

¹⁷ Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, 30.

1. An Official Narrative for Culture

Culture belongs officially in Myanmar to the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture, however there is a separate website in English for Religious Affairs, and for Culture, which forms the basic reference for this paragraph.¹⁸ The vision of the Ministry of Culture is clearly defined: “To fulfill the social objectives of Myanmar by uplifting the moral and morality of the entire nation, national prestige and integrity and preservation and safeguarding of cultural heritage and national character, and dynamism of patriotic spirit.”¹⁹

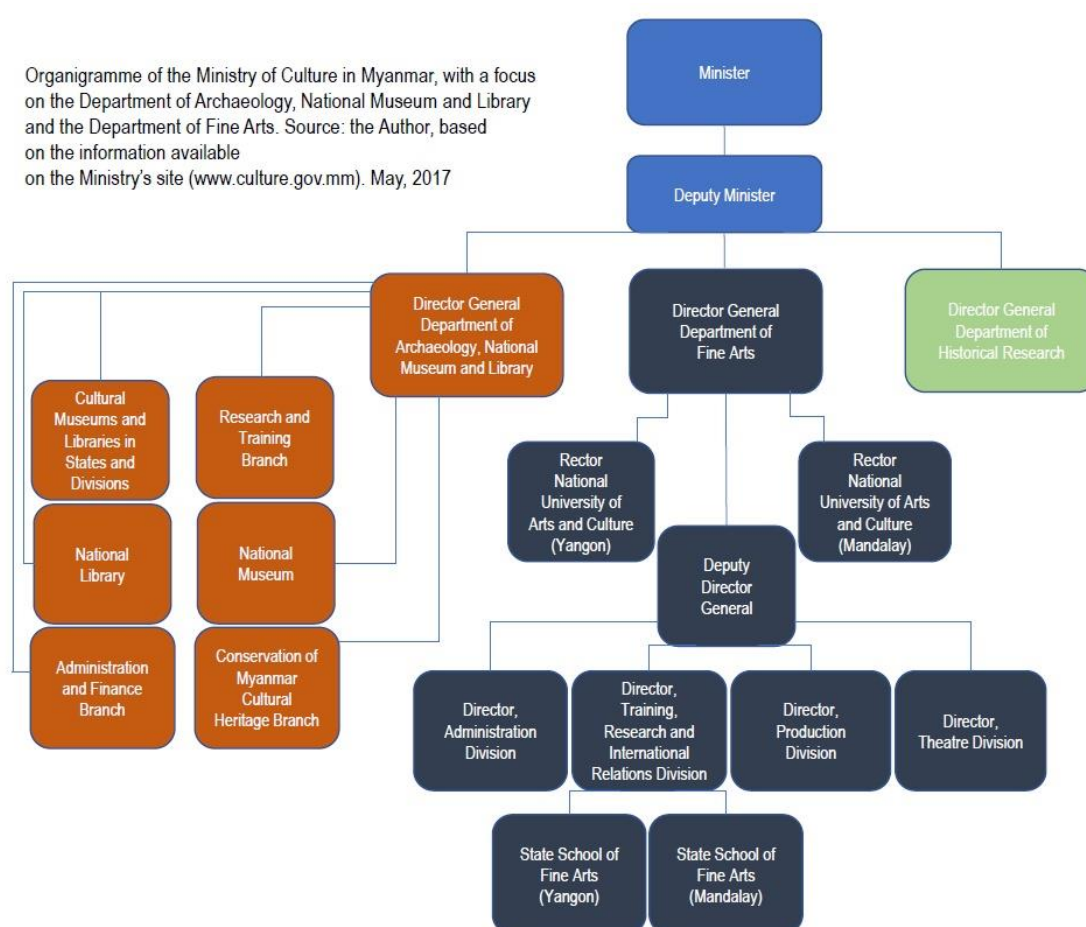


Figure 1. Organigramme of the Ministry of Culture in Myanmar, with a focus on the Department of Archaeology, National Museum and Library and the Department of Fine Arts. Source: the author, based on the information available on the Ministry's site (www.culture.gov.mm). May 2017.

¹⁸ I was indicated through one of the survey (Ch. II. D.) answers that it is called today the Ministry of Culture and Sports but all official website indicate the above used denomination and structure, in: “The President's Office of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar.”

¹⁹ “Myanmar's Ministry Religious Affairs and Culture - Ministry of Culture.”

a. Well-Defined Missions

The Ministry is referring among its responsibilities to the will to “eliminate decadent culture” and “promote morality,” while developing a “union spirit in exposing culture”²⁰; it indicates the government’s clear agenda to being an influential factor on the cultural and artistic scene, holding onto a specific definition of it and excluding theoretically anything other than the approach it validates.

The main function of the Department of Fine Arts is defined as such:

- “• To study, expose and preserve Myanmar traditional performing arts, drama, plays, Anyeint classical dramas and national races' traditional dance and music
- To expose and preserve ten kinds of Myanmar traditional arts and crafts
- To carry out cultural exchange programmers with foreign countries
- To scrutinize (sic) Myanmar fine arts if it is harmony with norms and customs
- To nurture and bring out new generation persons of advanced fine arts through basic painting, sculpture and theatrical training schools and the Universities of Culture”²¹

The study refers at different occasions how these main functions and visions / missions have an impact on the artistic life. What matters here is the very clear definition of what the official narrative wishes to consider as “Myanmar culture” and what is the artistic production that has a valid nature in this narrative. As the Ministry embraces all museums but also artistic education, these institutions echo the above quoted definitions. I wish to underline that the Ministry uses the term “fine arts” to describe this departmental branch, not visual art.

Generally speaking, the Ministry defines as “traditional artistic” forms those artistic expressions that are in line with its understanding of norms and customs, as well as those artistic

²⁰ Ibid.[http://www.culture.gov.mm/About_Culture/Responsibilities/default.asp]

²¹Ibid. [<http://www.culture.gov.mm/DFA/Functions/default.asp>]

endeavors in painting and sculptor that are framed by the universities curricula.²² Regarding censorship, to which aspect part Ch. I. B. of the present chapter will look at, the “1964 Library, Museum and Exhibitions Monitoring Act accompanied changes in leadership and ideology” between the time of its creation, from 1964 until 2012, when its demise was officially declared. Until then, no substantial change was made to it. In August 2013, a revision happened²³ – it is still in vigor, only “selectively and irregularly enforced.”²⁴ The current regulation is more related to administrative processes, but still contains lines such as “7. Exhibiting inappropriate artwork is not allowed.” Both censorship regulations are included in the study as Appendices (App. 2. 1 & 2) – they were published by Melissa Carlson in 2016.²⁵

b. The National Museum Yangon²⁶

As previously mentioned, the National Museum Yangon (NMY) can be considered as a model institution framing the vision and mission of the Ministry of Culture. Having an Art Gallery on its top floor, it is a reference: there is no governmental art museum in the country, hence the picture provided by the NMY about what type of “fine arts” fits its discourse can be taken as a guideline for a broader picture that ruled for decades.

The National Museum Yangon (NMY) holds an independent section within the Department of Archaeology, National Museum and Library. A second National Museum has been recently (2015) opened in Nay Pyi Daw (NMNPD), newly built town, capital of the country since the

²² Another study would be interesting to look into the relation of how traditionalistic art forms were shaped by the governmental patronage and again, how these traditionalistic forms relate to the authorized discourse of the previous era, i.e. how the idea of a ‘united’ nationhood building influenced these expression forms.

²³ Carlson, “Painting as Cipher: Censorship of the Visual Arts in Post-1988 Myanmar,” 150.

²⁴ Email-exchange with a gallerist owner in May 2017.

²⁵ See App. 3., originally published as Appendices of the article: Carlson, “Painting as Cipher: Censorship of the Visual Arts in Post-1988 Myanmar.”

²⁶ “Myanmar’s Ministry Religious Affairs and Culture - Ministry of Culture.”: it is stated as one main function of the Department of Archaeology, National Museum and Library “to establish the National Museum and cultural museums of States and Divisions and collect the Myanmar cultural heritage materials in order to preserve and display. [<http://www.culture.gov.mm/DANML/Functions/default.asp>]

mid-2000s. The new one being almost a replica in its content of the NMY,²⁷ they are discussed together. The NMY has the role to collect, preserve, display artifacts on ancient Myanmar cultural heritage, to conduct research within the field to disseminate it to the public for “upgrading patriotism” and “to protect the displayed objects and collected objects from the danger of natural disaster and pests.”



Figure 2. The National Museum Yangon. Photo: www.eastasy.com

The NMY is an outstanding case within the Southeast Asia region as it was not built under colonial rule like most of its neighbors'. It was founded in 1952 which changes the agenda of its existence. The study wishes to focus on its present aspect gained in 1996 when a new building especially conceived for its

collection was elevated. The government had a definite aim with the museum: to “uplift the dynamism of patriotic spirit,” a clear nation-building agenda. The question is what picture did the Museum (the government) want to convey?

The NMY today has basically the same content displayed ever since its erection in the mid-1990s, in coherence with the Ministry of Culture’s definition– some minor changes were only conducted since, mostly aesthetic refurbishment in 2016. Fourteen halls are dedicated to Myanmar Culture and Historic Periods²⁸: from the *Myanmar Epigraphy and Calligraphy Showroom* to the *Myanmar Prehistoric Period and Protohistoric Period Showroom* through

²⁷ The Museums have no individual webpages, the Ministry’s webpage only contains the Yangon one in which it is still not allowed to take pictures. The “Department of Archaeology, National Museum and Library, Ministry of Culture.” has no mention yet of the NMNPD. Their respective Wikipedia pages are otherwise the only publicly available information, completed with visitors accounts on travelling sites.

²⁸ Reference to the brochure of the Museum from 2014 as no other printed material was available for the research, although the Wikipedia-site of the museum states the same information. “National Museum of Myanmar / Wikipedia.”

the *Showroom for the Culture of National Races*, the Museum encompasses all fields that can possibly fit a national museum. There is also the hall dedicated to the “Twelve National Objectives and National Building Endeavours” which is a governmental motto promoting “Union Spirit” and economic goals for the people. The NMNPD finished in 2015 includes a hall called: “Great achievement of Tatmadaw Government (SPDC, SLORC) and our Leaders exhibition room.”²⁹ There is no doubt hence about the overall message of the museum display and the usage of the museum as a channel to convey the idea of “political unity” that the government formulated before 2011 (the display dates back the opening period of 2011).

“National museums are a particular explicit site in which symbolic and narrative imaginings of territorial nation states are produced and expressed.”³⁰ Eric C. Thompson analyses in his study twelve national museum institutions in seven different Southeast Asian countries to see, how besides constructing narratives of nations, “they also tell stories about what lies beyond the nation.” His visit to the NMY occurred in 2007: “The most extreme exclusion of the world beyond the nation is found in the Myanmar National Museum of Yangon.” The provided maps and narratives of world history, with an account of “the representation of geological and evolutionary history make it appear as if all the events described happened solely within the contemporary territory of Myanmar.” Concerning “ethnological imagination,” the museum in Yangon eschews “any suggestion of migration into the national territory.”³¹ Without having the possibility to merge into details, many elements of the overall exhibition’s narrative are questionable starting with the above stated “facts.” Serious gaps and basic information is missing from the display in its attempt to be a national museum; some archaeological axioms seem also to be blurring data through a language of nationalistic fever.

²⁹ “National Museum, Nay Pyi Daw.”

³⁰ Thompson, “The World beyond the Nation in Southeast Asian Museums,” 55.

³¹ Ibid., 60–61. There are officially 135 registered ethnic groups in Myanmar.

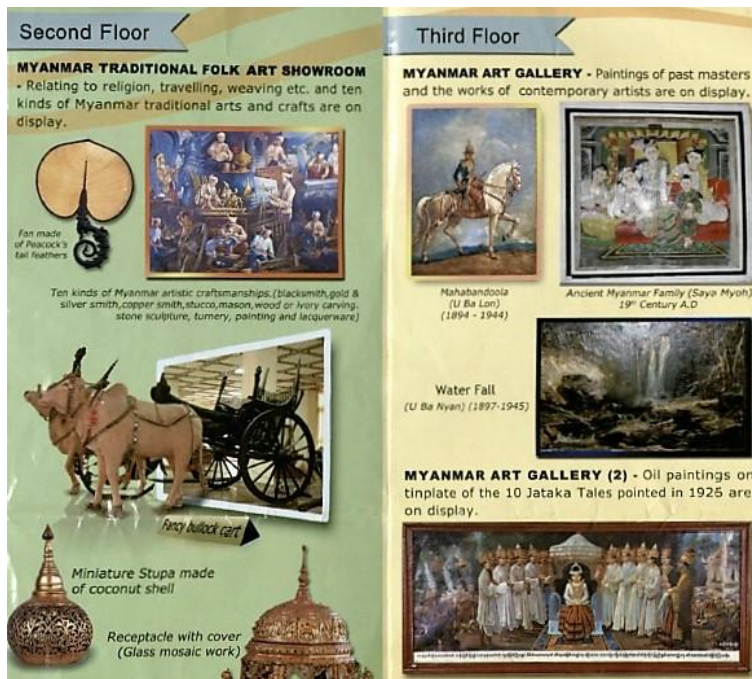


Figure 3. Detail of the National Museum Yangon brochure (2014), a focus on the arts. Source: the author.

The *Myanmar Traditional Folk Art Showroom* on the second floor presents the Ten Kinds of Myanmar Traditional Arts and Crafts, among them the art of painting. The context here is the traditional concept of painting, but as Ch. I. A. 2. highlights, these are the principles on which artistic education still relies on today, completed with the skills

of realistic and impressionistic styles. The Museum offers an interpretation of the art of painting itself on a small label: “The art of painting is the one which illustrates living animals and inanimate objects using different colours. The artists paint the figures of human beings, animals, objects, scenery, designs and cartoons.”³²

On the fifth floor of the Museum, the *Art Gallery* has four entities: copies of ancient paintings from caves, copies of mural paintings from sites like Bagan, a selection of the widely cherished painter-masters of the twentieth century (most of them have a strongly realistic painting style) and a selection of contemporary paintings (usually portraits, life-scenes or landscapes conform to “decent artistic” manners, within the boundaries of above stated painting styles). All coherently “in harmony with norms and customs.”

³² Fieldnote taken in the NMY, 2014

*c. Panoramic Overview of Other Governmental Museums*³³

A general lack of respect towards the sacred places, even vandalism characterized the British presence, continuous on Burma's territory from the mid-nineteenth century. It is only around the turn of the nineteenth-twentieth century that a more balanced approach was adopted resulting in a moderate preservationist approach embodied by inventorying monuments among other activities.³⁴ Nascent archaeological interest led to excavations at Bagan for instance and a series of publications – all from a colonial perspective.

Phayre Museum was one first, minor museum established in 1871 with a very small budget. In 1911 the building was transformed into a hospital, artifacts (coins, stone implements, instruments, ethnic textiles, etc.) were kept in different locations. Two other site museums (i.e. in Bagan) were known but with limited access to public; besides these there were only small repositories sometimes connected to palaces.³⁵ Hence it can be sad that there was no considerable tradition of building colonial types of museums in Burma – the institution of the museum however existed –, those built were to serve mainly archaeological-museum purposes, this is the archetype of today's archaeological museums in Myanmar. That is an additional reason why the NMY's narrative matters so much, as it was not inherited as such from colonial times but was a self-generated one by the government. However, the pre-existing format of the museum was present.

³³ There are maybe a handful of non-governmental "museums" (until the 2015 law - "The Protection and Preservation of Ancient Monuments Law." – no individual could open a museum, only appropriate the name), mostly small ones related to specific communities – but it is difficult to get hold of them, they are mostly arbitrarily called so (although again, terminology is relative). In Yangon, the Motion Picture Museum is a rare example (Kálmán, "The Need For A Collective Voice – Time Travel Inside The Film Museum.")

³⁴ Tunprawat, "Managing Living Heritage Sites in Mainland Southeast Asia," 73–75.

³⁵ Tunprawat, "Managing Living Heritage Sites in Mainland Southeast Asia."; Nu Mra Zan, "Museums in Myanmar: Brief History and Actual Perspectives."

A recent study from a representant of the Department summarizes the museum-landscape of Myanmar following Independence:³⁶ the establishment of the Ministry of Culture in 1952 led to the foundation of the NMY and several other museums.

“[They] can be classified as national museums, archaeological museums, regional cultural museums, and memorial museums.³⁷ Other kinds of museum are now appearing under other ministries and in the private sector in Myanmar.³⁸ There is an urgent need for collaboration between these different museums to form a nation-wide museum organization, in order to work together for the improvement of Myanmar museums, and to facilitate international cooperation.”³⁹

The other museums referred to are for instance the Gems Museum, the Yangon Drugs Elimination Museum, Butterfly Museum – there are not many other museums. The regional cultural museums are static vitrine-like showrooms built up almost the same way, like replicas of each other, following the same pattern deriving from the central dominant narrative of the



Figure 3. Presentation of the Tazaungdaing festival celebration in Taunggyi (Balloon Festival) at the Taunggyi Cultural Museum, Shan State (2014). Photo: Go-Myanmar.com, Flickr account.

former military regime, the museums having been established mainly during that period.⁴⁰ There is a central list of the museums on the site of the Department of Archaeology, National Museum and Library describing one museum with one sentence. The Shan / Taunggyi State

Cultural Museum’s displayed objects: “Divans, swords, fan, chairs by Sawbwa

³⁶ The “Department of Archaeology, National Museum and Library, Ministry of Culture.” website lists the different museums with pictures and short descriptions, basically the same information that is to be found on the Wikipedia sites.

³⁷ Probably referring to the Bogyoke Aung San Museum: the house of Aung San was turned into an accessible place for the public.

³⁸ Probably referring to the U Thant House, founded by his grandson, Thant Myint-U, chairman of Yangon Heritage Trust: [<http://www.yangonheritagetrust.org/u-thant-house>], Accessed: May 24, 2017

³⁹ Nu Mra Zan, “Museums in Myanmar: Brief History and Actual Perspectives,” 19.

⁴⁰ The Union National Races Village park of Yangon is also meant to convey the culture of the main ethnic groups of Myanmar but the ‘open-air museum’ has a very problematic narrative at all layers.

(Shan Chief of former times) which are about years old paintings, coins and traditional costumes of the Shan races.”⁴¹

“In Yangon, private museums will soon appear. The most important weak point is the need for strong museum law and regulations on how to establish a new museum. We would welcome many new museums appearing with momentum.”⁴²

The museum study written in 2016 ends with a conclusion that describes the vague concept of the government’s future plans.

d. (Cultural) Heritage at a glance

The present study’s aim is not to assess cultural heritage management in Myanmar, but to underline the opposite dynamics the visual art scene faces being part of the same field. However, to have a better understanding of why the Living Heritage Approach is introduced in the context of Myanmar, a short paragraph is dedicated to the most visible aspects related to ‘cultural heritage’ within the state narrative.

The term “cultural heritage” is mentioned within the Ministry of Culture as part of the Archaeological Departments functions (same level as the NMY): the “Conservation of Myanmar Cultural Heritage Branch” has to implement policies of preservation, implement plans and projects concerning preservation, record and publish data about preservation, preserve immovable cultural heritage, preserve the “collective items” (movable cultural property), to follow research and to cooperate with international researchers.⁴³ The Department

⁴¹ “Department of Archaeology, National Museum and Library, Ministry of Culture.”; the same information is available on an individual Wikipedia site: “Shan State Cultural Museum / Wikipedia.”

⁴² Nu Mra Zan, “Museums in Myanmar: Brief History and Actual Perspectives,” 35.

⁴³ “Myanmar’s Ministry Religious Affairs and Culture - Ministry of Culture.”; [<http://www.culture.gov.mm/DANML/Branches/default.asp>]

has a separate website where its functions are much more detailed and sensibly, there is a concern to improve the work of the Department.⁴⁴

The notion of cultural heritage is used in the English translation of the webpage as a general term to refer to monument sites, and mostly archaeological or *ancient* sites – however there is no clear definition of what is meant by “cultural heritage.” The Burmese word’s transcription would sound like *Yin Kyay Hmu Ah Mway Ah Hnit* rather referring to something valuable to treasure. In 1998, a new law for *antiquities* was accepted in which the word antiquities was replaced by cultural heritage, referring to national heritage from before 1886. The new law amended in 2009 (changed recently again in 2015) refers as so for national heritage 100 years from present.⁴⁵

Generally, in terms of touristic interest and using a conventional definition of cultural heritage, archaeological sites, mostly ancient Buddhist sites are getting the most attention: Bagan is the most popular, the Ancient Pyu Cities constitute the first nominated site of the country on the World Heritage List (2014). The living religious (Buddhist) sites belong under Pagoda Trustees. In case of an intervention, both cultural and religious sides have to be consulted. (The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture make one ministry.) The Pagoda Trustee Committee is present at every living temple in Myanmar, supervising general maintenance, visitors, in collaboration with the monks and works together on many aspects, but not all sites with the Department of Archaeology.⁴⁶

Maitrii Aung-Thwin points out in 2012 how the previous decade brought criticism over the Myanmar government’s cultural resource management and how patronage of historical and

⁴⁴ “Department of Archaeology, University of Yangon.” The box ‘Department Announcements / Events’ seems rather a call for help.

⁴⁵ For a description of preservation and conservation laws in vigor in Myanmar, see Facchinetti, “Cultural Heritage Management In Myanmar: A Gateway to Sustainable Development.”

⁴⁶ Tunprawat, “Managing Living Heritage Sites in Mainland Southeast Asia,” 129.

archaeological spaces has drawn attention to the disputable heritage policies of the state and its perceived inability to manage its past, as well as “to the ways in which the Burma authorities attempt to build a national community through their control of and identification with the country’s material past (Houtmann, 1994; Marshall, 2002; Philip and Mercer, 2002).”⁴⁷

As the previous paragraph already mentioned, the cultural sphere floats for the moment as one heavy entity from the government’s side although the shape of nascent branches are visible, as heritage industry is slowly infiltrating through tourism and organizations like the Yangon Heritage Trust (YHT).

2. From an Educational Point of View



Figure 4. Classroom at the State School of Fine Arts, Yangon. 2014. Photo: the author

Part of the state institutions regarding culture and fine arts, the education platforms are also due to be mentioned – only the current situation is overviewed.⁴⁸ Universities in Myanmar face a problematic past and an ambiguous relation towards the government. Many were shut down for decades. Since a few years, there is a general improvement but half a century of academic void has to be made up with little resources. As for arts, the possibilities are restricted. The educational system of fine art training belongs also to the

⁴⁷ Aung-Thwin, “Remembering Kings: Archives, Resistance and Memory in Colonial and Post-Colonial Burma,” 56.

⁴⁸ For a thorough overview of the history of the artistic educational institutions in Myanmar, as well as the different academy-attempts and art-clubs formed throughout the twentieth century, see: Ranard, *Burmese Painting: A Linear and Lateral History*.

Ministry of Culture, hence the universities follow the same narrative as developed above.

Children have rare opportunity to have art classes at primary or secondary schools, there are just a handful of little private art schools around the country.⁴⁹ The first accessible art related educational institution is the State School of Fine Arts. The National University of Arts and Culture was established in 1993. Both have a Mandalay branch.⁵⁰

“Art schools are limited in their resources and isolated by their connection to the Ministry of Culture, a powerfully traditional institution which seeks to foster Myanmar traditional arts alone, rather than invest the teachers and students with the greater artistic community throughout Myanmar. Despite many of the artists having studied at the University of Arts and Culture (the first in the country opened in 1993 in Yangon), they work independently of their alma maters; the relationship far too complicated to engage in any meaningful way.”⁵¹

In 2014, after long negotiations, a project initiated by Yangon-based MARCA in collaboration with Asia Art Archive – Hong Kong, and within the local scene in cooperation with Myanmar academics, succeeded in achieving the so-called “Mobile Library” program accompanied by workshop events. Hundreds of foreign art-related books (monographs, exhibition-catalogs, art historical studies, etc.) were stored at the University for a few months-period to which the students had free access. It was a huge step in the University’s history, as it was the first time that foreigners could also take part in the organization of programs at the NUAC campus. The project had one major default, which is rooted in the problematic history of the art scene itself: the books were mainly in English, as translation of such books do not exist in Burmese, which

⁴⁹ Based on separate interviews with artist Po Po (Interview with artist Po Po, Yangon, home-studio of the artist.) and gallery owner Aung Soe Min (Interview with gallery owner and artist Aung Soe Min, Yangon.). They mention that until the 1980s drawing classes and summer arts schools were quite usual in the school system, however not all schools could afford to appoint teachers. Aung Soe Min emphasized that this was also a good system to allow artists to have regular jobs. One example of a private art school is described in a recent article: Downing, “The Mandalay Sculptor with a Passion for Lighting Creative Fires.”

⁵⁰ The Mandalay branch of the University of Arts and Culture was opened in 2001. Its objectives and strategies are the same as the Yangon one. “Myanmar’s Ministry Religious Affairs and Culture - Ministry of Culture.” State Schools of fine Art: [<http://www.culture.gov.mm/DFA/Schools/default.asp>]; National Universities of Arts and Culture: [http://www.culture.gov.mm/Universities/NUAC_YGN/default.asp]

⁵¹ Johnston, “Mobile Library Myanmar / MARCA.”; Kálmán, “Mobilizing the Myanmar Scene (Mobile Library).”

created a language barrier. However, visuals were within reach and directly accessible. During the workshop-discussions related to the three-months event, most teachers' reaction to the lectures on certain contemporary art projects reflected a high interest but also their centrally prescribed teaching curricula.⁵² Although this project was a small-scaled one at a national level,⁵³ it certainly was a landmark in the history of the University campus.

Many artists from today's contemporary scene express their independency by not accepting the teaching of the official institutions. Several of these artists have chosen the path of self-teaching and collective workshop or residency programs as a later paragraph is consecrated to this aspect.



Figure 5. Mobile Library Program at the National University of Arts, Yangon, November 2014. Photo: Flux Kit.

B. An Absent Segment of Art

A visitor curious of the fine / visual art scene in Myanmar will leave the National Museum Yangon without having the slightest idea that there is an independent, vivid contemporary art scene in Myanmar. Peter Howard's classification of heritage fields, dating back to 2003⁵⁴ defines seven separate fields, of which the *Artefacts* one, including "museums, galleries,

⁵² Fieldnote / Workshop organized in the frames of the Mobile Library Program on 27.11.2017, NUAC, Yangon

⁵³ The Mobile Library travelled to other locations too. Johnston, "Mobile Library Myanmar / MARCA."

⁵⁴ Howard's classification represents an era previous to the mainstream shift towards tangible and intangible distinctions, as well as cultural diversity through the UNESCO conventions (2003, 2005)

outdoor museums” and hence museums artefacts.⁵⁵ He also distinguishes the idea of “born heritage” within the process of heritage formation: “the things that are born heritage, which are designated from their very inception to be conserved, we usually call ‘art’”.⁵⁶ The present paragraph refers to fine art heritage but includes also visual art in general. The study wishes to outline a specific segment within the cultural field of Myanmar central for the research.

The previous subchapter revealed an official (dominant) discourse. The present one instead of outlining the visible, attempts to outline an absent entity. The official government narrative regarding the cultural field underlies a nationalistic, political agenda as the previous chapter described. While doing so, it blocks multiple cultural layers out of its discourse and premises, amongst which a particular segment of fine / visual art. This segment can be framed roughly between the end of 1950s to 2010s, until the present. The early part of this segment can be considered as the root of today’s contemporary art scene – not quite as the origin for a completely clear lineage, but certainly inherently connected. After delimiting this very segment, the paragraph attempts to define how its absence also blocks the possibility to reinterpret the recent past of visual art – hence modern and contemporary tendencies of artistic expression in Myanmar – and through that the possibility of considering it a legacy, not only for the artists’ community but also at large, for society. The critical nature of this segment of art also implies that its potential of leaving an intellectual imprint on contemporaneous society is still not possible based on the governmental approach.

As mentioned, there is no institution dedicated solely to arts, or fine arts in the country.⁵⁷ The *Myanmar Art Gallery* within the National Museum Yangon displays a selection of works that

⁵⁵ Howard, *Heritage - Management, Interpretation, Identity*. p.54

⁵⁶ Ibid., 188.

⁵⁷ Arbitrary denomination of so-called “art museum” exists, however they represent smaller (random) private collections, and they are not really public as until 2015 no individual could open a museum.



Figure 6. Bagyi Aung Soe' gouache from the early 1950s (*Shumawa Magazine*)
Source: aaa.org.hk, *Fieldnotes Issue 03*

underlies the definition of the Ministry of Culture of how culture and art should be perceived, so it is at the same time excluding by principle the forms of expression, genres and media that fall outside of its definition.⁵⁸ As the next chapter shows, the independent, non-official art scene that has started to develop from the 1950s onwards to become later the modern era, stood opposite of what the expectations of the official artistic expressions were, the latter advocated by the Censorship Committee from the beginning of the 1960s, after Ne Win took power and

implemented his military dictatorship through the BSPP.⁵⁹ “This doctrine of the “Burmese Way to Socialism” was a curious concoction of the Marxist-Leninist dialectics, anti-western nationalism and Buddhist philosophical concepts”⁶⁰.

Melissa Carlson’s detailed study offers a unique view on how the Censorship regime “shaped the development of Burmese art, not only imposing limitations on artists but also driving them to develop a new artistic vocabulary.”⁶¹ Carlson’s research is the first study to offer a detailed perspective on the activity of the Board and its impact on the artistic community. According to her, there was a strong ideological confusion regarding the delimitation of censorship summarized by the 1964 Library, Museum and Exhibitions Monitoring Act (App. 2. 1.). Most artists recall impossible to satisfy the Board’s expectations not only because the definitions

⁵⁸ From installation to photography through video art, all genres and media used by the independent scene. See glossary for fine art / visual art.

⁵⁹ The 1964 Library, Museum and Exhibitions Monitoring Act, remained valid until 2012. Since, 17 August 2013, it is the Censorship Board’s Rules for Art Exhibitions which is in effect. See App.2.

⁶⁰ Min Ye Paing Hein, “Fighting in the Dark: Ideology and State Formation in Post-Colonial Burma,” 23.

⁶¹ Carlson, “Painting as Cipher: Censorship of the Visual Arts in Post-1988 Myanmar.”

were left very broad, but also because the censors were usually delegate government servants that had no training in art, at all, and much depended on their personal interpretation.⁶²

“In the government’s quest to assert its authority, the censorship of art exhibitions soon resulted in a state-sanctioned genus of artwork that drew on idyllic yet conservative portrayals of Burma. This genus would establish the template for artistic expression for future decades. The content of paintings of this genus defined the cornerstones of Burmese national identity as agrarian, Burman and Buddhist, while discouraging experimental or abstract works.”⁶³

The approach of “maintaining the purity of Burmese culture” cannot be separated from the political agenda of the military government after Ne Win’s coup d’état in the early 1960s, hence the will to keep power over the Union of Burma. “The regime saw experimental art in particular as a step towards modernity. Such art was implicitly critical of past ways of life, and thus not in line with Ne Win’s isolationist policy of ending Burma’s dependence on foreign economies and the influence by foreign culture.”⁶⁴



Figure 7. Censorship Board delegates before an opening at Pansodan Gallery, 2009. Photo: Courtesy of Pansodan Gallery.

Carlson outlines relying on a Censorship Board official who worked under both the military and the semi-civilian government “the board also viewed art as a vehicle to portray an idealized form of beauty.”⁶⁵ Another source mentions in 2011:

“The Myanmar Arts and Artisan Council continues to support only traditional and realist/impressionist art. The specific conditions under which the art community in Myanmar had laboured to transmit knowledge and shape artistic practice according to nationalistic, Buddhist and socialist values resulted in Myanmar painters’ views converging with those of the state vis-à-vis the idea of

⁶² “Nay Myo Say also recalled random configurations of the board made up of officials from six or seven ministries, ‘even the Forest Department whose guys would like paintings of elephants pulling timber’”. Ibid., 129., Several interviews with artists during the fieldwork confirmed the problematic interpretation process.

⁶³ Ibid., 121.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 136.

‘non-conceptual creation’. These artists were said to have firmly adhered to the maxim that ‘Art is Beauty and Beauty, Art’.’⁶⁶

The censors mainly targeted works that were thought tackling politics, religious topics and those that displayed nudes. Regarding exhibitions, until 2011, after asking for permission, the process was quite similar with on-sites visits of selected members of the censorship board: they would be invited for breakfast or tea while going through the exhibition. Once the exhibition got supervised, they handed over (or not) the certificate permitting the exhibition’s opening. If needed, pictures were asked to be taken off.



Figure 8. Although the Modern Art ‘94 exhibition brochure contains it (below), San Minn’s nude (above left) was censored before the opening: in his archives, he marks the censored works with a red star. Photo: the author, 2015. Courtesy of San Minn.

The censored artistic expressions were those considered to be critical in regards of the past way of life and supposing a progressive position vis-à-vis their environment, conveying a critical attitude. In other words those that were different from the approach of copying⁶⁷ or the “traditional attitude” that was prescribed by the law: the academic training relied on copying and drawing on a “tightly rendered syllabus that resulted in students becoming excellent technicians” mainly in lacquerware or commercial advertising.⁶⁸ If the *ten forms of art* is taken as a guideline, the traditional painter was seen more in the

⁶⁶ Ching, “Art from Myanmar. Possibilities of Contemporaneity?,” 437. The official denomination is: The Myanmar Traditional Artists and Artisans Organization. Not long after the article, some initiatives were taken to change the structure of the MAAC: [<http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/lifestyle/881-artists-request-restructure-for-arts-and-artisans-org.html>], Accessed: May 24, 2017

⁶⁷ Copying art works *per se* is an admitted practice – cf. Part Ch. I. C.

⁶⁸ Ching, “Art from Myanmar. Possibilities of Contemporaneity?,” 437.; Sein Myo Myint, Khin Maung Nyunt, and Ma Thanegi, *Myanmar Painting : From Worship to Self Imaging*, 58.

role of an applied artist, rather than someone allowing a personal position through the work and use painting as a medium of expression of an intellectual thought or a feeling.

Even though the censored works were not necessarily censored because of their political content – not all of the artists were using art as a form of resistance,⁶⁹ their work embraced an intellectual content that went beyond the “quest for beauty.” These artists and oeuvres, excluded from the official narrative mainly through the Censorship regime’s practice, were not accessible publicly at the time of their activity, and are still not publicly displayed in the premises of the government. Some of them, like Bagyi Aung Soe, had his moderate illustrations printed in the media, hence his talent was not completely silenced.⁷⁰ However, the core of his works reflecting his intellectual path were censored. Abstract art was even dismissed by more conservative writers of the 1960s calling the artists “A yoo chee pan” (a madman ‘shitting’ all over himself) or pejoratively “seik-daza Baji” (psychological art).⁷¹ Fellow artists accusing them of destroying the tradition of Burmese culture which position was mostly deriving from a fixation to keep external and foreigner influences outside.⁷² Denial of this layer of artistic intellectual is also blocking public awareness to access artworks that are the specific imprint of an era, or more properly, the responses to an era. It is a part of art history that censorship has made non-existent and unexamined in memory. Just as it is lacking from the museum institution, it is also absent from the educational sphere.

⁶⁹ Benini and Galimberti, “A Country in Transition: The Role of Art and Artists in Contemporary Myanmar.”

⁷⁰ Printed media in Myanmar was encountering a boom in the second half of the twentieth century. One of the most iconic newspapers was the *Ludu Daily* which became a strong support of a new generation of writers and artists in the 1950s and 60s, mainly from Mandalay but not exclusively. Sein Myo Myint, Khin Maung Nyunt, and Ma Thanegi, *Myanmar Painting: From Worship to Self Imaging*. The newspaper was shut down by the military regime in 1967.

⁷¹ Ibid. Yin Ker describes it as ‘mad art’ (seik-ta-za-pankyi), which she recalls also being synonymous with abstract art and associates the term with artist Bagyi Aung Soe’s new types of works in the early 1950s. In: Yin, “Modern Burmese Painting According to Bagyi Aung Soe,” 83.

⁷² Yin, “Modern Burmese Painting According to Bagyi Aung Soe,” 83.

Until the end of the 2010s, there was no comprehensive printed literature overviewing the evolution of the visual arts scene, including this segment of this absent past. Major aspects of Myanmar art history have never been written down in books: “The main gap in Myanmar art history is between 1972–1990. People don’t know about the art of that time.”⁷³ There is no place in the country where the comprehensive evolution of the visual art scene can be accessed. A general opinion in the art world is that indeed the works of past artists and present artists should be accessible and the transmission of knowledge should be enabled from generation to generation.⁷⁴ But precisely, the idea of transmitting knowledge and the absence of this segment of artistic expression is what creates this void within the community’s memory. The process of transmission of knowledge is aborted even before being able to enter the memory sphere.

“What is at stake here is not a pacific integration of the missing chapters of the forgotten, excluded and subaltern voices into inherited accounts, but rather a deconstruction and rewriting of those very histories through the irrepressible presence of these other narrations.”⁷⁵

Although the quote is borrowed from postcolonial museum theory context, the subaltern voices can easily be substituted with the *absent segment* of art and the community behind.

This paragraph has intended to outline an absent period of fine / visual art in Myanmar’s past as a segment being blocked from open interpretation. By obstructing it from entering collective memory, there is no interpretation possible from the angle proposed by the artists. Modern and contemporary practices that are here mentioned to be absent are considered to be a *canvas* for intellectual expression and have a role to play as they trespass the “quest for beauty”. They are offering an interface through which they can shape critical thoughts and are means of expression through which these thoughts can be shared.

⁷³ Aung Soe Min, Interview with gallery owner and artist Aung Soe Min, Yangon.

⁷⁴ “Survey Form February 2017, Analysed in Chapter II.D. of the Present Study.”, Fieldwork notes, individual discussions

⁷⁵ De Angelis et al., “Introduction: Disruptive Encounters - Museums, Arts and Postcoloniality,” 3.

C. The Unexamined Past – Lapsed Layers⁷⁶

Having an overview of the official narrative, and an absent segment of fine / visual art heritage that is crucial for this research, the third part of the chapter invites to a brief meditation and an attempt to peel off some of the rigid institutional discourse layers to encounter practices that are more inherent to the social cultural context.

Artist Aung Myint, a pioneer of the independent art scene writes:

“In this traditionally Buddhist country, modern art is in a sense not altogether modern. It is as it were a return to and at the same time a continuation in the present of a particularly Buddhist vision. The reality as we perceive it, is an illusion. The exploration of this way of seeing is abstract or ‘seeing with the inner eye’ as it is expressed in Buddhist Terminology.”⁷⁷

He then alludes to the fact that ironically, the realistic tradition left by colonialism in art prevented the “inner vision expressed in abstract and surrealist art” to reach the general public, “because of a misunderstanding that realist art is the only traditional art.”⁷⁸

This paragraph intends to outline a few essential concepts regarding the cultural context of Myanmar in relation to the notion of past, time, space, memory. The idea of using a living heritage discourse for the cultural context of Myanmar or Southeast Asia is not new: the study does not claim that contemporary art practices should be regarded the same way as living heritage or that it is part of living heritage practices, but to draw an analogy framed by the same social and cultural context. Also, the purpose is not ethnographing contemporary art practices, and not relating them to religious aspects, but putting side by side practice mechanisms in

⁷⁶ The expression “unexamined past” in this present context inspired from: Rao, *Cultures of Memory in South Asia - Orality, Literacy and the Problem of Inheritance*, 71.

⁷⁷ Aung Myint, “Summary of Myanmar Modern Art.”

⁷⁸ “There is a lack of understanding of what ‘modern’ means and the lack of knowledge the presence of ‘modern’ in ancient Myanmar tradition”. Ibid.

different social settings. This emphasizes the fundamental contrast between the conventional forms of museum and or heritage institutions and the social and / or artistic practices.

1. Peeling Layers Off – Where Does it Lead?

a. Sense of Reality, Collective Thought

This subchapter relies on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of sense of reality⁷⁹, and connected to that, collective thought: these concepts are used to refer to different entities, hence their use in this study is in an abstract, philosophical sense. The study introduces the idea of “sense of reality” as defining an intrinsic social order in opposition to external classification systems, or external discourses incoherent with the substance of the order. It can be understood as one social order compared to external dynamics, like the independent art scene towards the official narrative or the cultural context of pre-colonial Myanmar and the colonial rule. The use of this concept does not imply that the cultural context of Myanmar is a culturally homogenous entity, in other words it keeps in mind cultural diversity, but rather wishes to indicate a philosophical set of mind that represents an entity as a social order patterned by the same dynamics in opposition to another social order using a radically different set of concepts.

The specific logic of one system of perception, based upon the fact that “every established order tends to produce (to very different degrees and with very different means) the naturalization of its own arbitrariness,” encounters then “a competing discourse” that it is forced to adopt, hence encounter the different “sense of reality” of a dominant group.

“Moreover, when the conditions of existence of which the members of a group are the product are very little differentiated, the dispositions which each of them exercises in his practice are confirmed and hence reinforced both by the practice of the other members of the group (one function of symbolic exchanges such as feasts and ceremonies being to favour the circular reinforcement which is the foundation of collective belief) and also by institutions which constitute

⁷⁹ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 164.

collective thought as much as they express it, such as language, myth, and art. The self-evidence of the world is reduplicated by the instituted discourses about the world in which the whole group's adherence to that self-evidence is affirmed."⁸⁰

The link between individual practice and collective thought is one aspect that Bourdieu's quote helps to outline. The other is the self-evidence of one group connected through collective thought and practice.

These concepts help find the linkage between living heritage and the connection with social practices and artistic practices.

b. Disrupted Social Continuity

Tony Bennett's article analyzing the relationship between "museums, nations, empires and religions"⁸¹ highlights that one set of museums' development history is related to their implementation as "key cultural and material operators of overseas empires reaching beyond Europe" to create the conditions of governance through museums.⁸² The museum brought order, classification into disorder and had the intention to become an *origo* for the diffusion of ideas and image.⁸³ It was a new concept, as so many others, that came with colonialism.

Burma became part of the British Empire as a province, annexed as a whole in 1886 but with continuous British presence since decades before. The British did not invest so much into education, institutionalization as in India;⁸⁴ nevertheless, the roughly seven decades of British rule in Burma affected the society in a deeply different manner than South Asia. As Maitrii

⁸⁰ Ibid., 167.

⁸¹ Bennett, "Museums, Nations, Empires, Religions."

⁸² Tony Bennett's concept is based on a Foucauldian and Gramscian perspective, and assesses how museums should be understood as reformatory institutions engaged in programs of governance, aiming at regulating forms of behaviour and conduct, in: Harrison, *Heritage – Critical Approaches*, 109. At the same time Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak contests the notion of "repression" for the analysis of the mechanisms and effects of power in Foucault's work calling it too simple – she cites Freud on the difference between *repression* and *interest*. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 69.

⁸³ Prösler, "Museums and Globalization."

⁸⁴ Tunprawat, "Managing Living Heritage Sites in Mainland Southeast Asia," 80.

Aung-Thwin explores in her article, the dismantling of the monarchy – the British exiled King Thibaw and his family – fundamentally altered the crucial institutional, economic and socio-religious networks that structured the pre-colonial State of Burma. It meant a significant change in the (Buddhist) universe, as there was no more monarch to protect and preserve the sanctity and purity of Buddhist religion. “Without the king, common Burmese were thought to have experienced a psychological and traumatic cultural crisis, which engendered an enduring hope that one day, a king of Burma might return (Sarkysianz, 1965; Adas, 1979; Michael Aung-Thwin, 1985).”⁸⁵ The longing of the Burmese for their king was not an act of nostalgia, but a profound wish to return to their social order. The British rule aside of disrupting social order, deeply affected the territorial distribution of many ethnicities – not necessarily in line with the Burmese – which later contributed, after the British left, to the armed conflicts in the country.

As the study points out in I.C.2., the belief system and cultural philosophy in place in pre-colonial era was in complete opposition to the principles forced by colonial rule on society. That affected the sense of time, the relation to the past, also social practices connected to memory.

Perception of time and space are dimensions embedded in the sense of reality of a social order, they are binding institutions. They correlate with collective thought and social practices. If these are altered, the self-evidence of the social order can be deeply affected too.

Bennett was mentioned referring to the “order imposed on disorder” through the institution of the museum. Ashis Nandy, drawing a lineage between the new era of arrogance in Europe’s nineteenth century through the then recent forms of imperialistic dominance, suggests that the new, secular, social-evolutionary theory for claiming civilizing mission instead of

⁸⁵ Aung-Thwin, “Remembering Kings: Archives, Resistance and Memory in Colonial and Post-Colonial Burma,” 54.

Christianization was developed through the new discipline of history, a novel form of consciousness: “it flattened the past of all societies, so they began to look like many edited versions of European paganism and/ or feudalism.” The victory over time and space, i.e. distant lands were then converted into familiar notions to bring back home. The radical changes led to the emergence of new symbols like the museum. The museum, besides arranging all cultures in order, domesticated time. “History tames time in a manner that myths, legends and epics do not [...] it gives certitudes about the past.” As Nandy says, the institution of the museum contributed to ironing out the non-linear concepts of the past in society where linear historiography was not prevalent or was non-existent.⁸⁶

Burma, as a province, experienced colonialism at a different extent than India, however the analysis of D. Venkat Rao offering a radical detachment from the institutional formations brought by colonialism in South Asia and mainly India in the field of humanities is an interesting analogy. D. Venkat Rao “withdraws” during a theoretical experiment the institutional context of the university from the Indian context to explore underneath the pre-colonial mnemocultural formations of India in order to see how deeply the colonial institutionalization affected “the epistemic configurations of the colonized”.⁸⁷ He claims that the “new colonial episteme of representation and objectification [...] found[ed] the archive, museum, the library and the educational institution to circularly validate the ruptural epistemic effect.”⁸⁸ There is little research yet regarding the layers to the extent which colonialist institutionalization infiltrated the narratives in former Burma: the post-Independence period left not much time before the military regime to peel off the extra layers left by the British rule

⁸⁶ Nandy, *An Ambiguous Journey to the City - To the Village and Other Odd Ruins of the Self in the Indian Imagination*, 1–8.

⁸⁷ Rao, *Cultures of Memory in South Asia - Orality, Literacy and the Problem of Inheritance*, 33. “Mnemocultures are cultures of memory that survive and proliferate in immemorial communicational forms of speech and gesture. These cultures move with and live on memory.”

⁸⁸ Ibid., 17–18. Spivak in her *Can the Subaltern Speak?* states: “The clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial a subject as Other”. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 76.

which were right away embedded in the leftist and nationalist agenda of the 1950s. Today's official narrative inherited a major part of it. Laurajane Smith's AHD is not only interesting to mention in regard of the colonial layers of historiography weighing on today's narratives, but also simply looking at the discipline of "history" that can be another terrain of deeply different perceptions.

Michael Aung-Thwin, internationally known Burma scholar, introduces the notion of the "ignored community of interpretation" within Myanmar⁸⁹, whom he describes as individuals with a special knowledge, yet who haven't obtained their degree in a westernized academic institution. Their approach to their own country's history and/or past is very different in regard of their "epistemology" of Burma. These individuals are usually considered unorthodox by the westernized academic field, and have failed entering the mainstream of the country's historiography; they stay on the margins, their publications are mostly in Burmese, accessible only within Myanmar. However, these *people of knowledge*, have gathered their mastery based on traditions, tradition embodying practices of one social order. These individuals represent a "local, indigenous 'community of interpretation'" – they possess local information that cannot be accessed only through transmission of knowledge. Questioning and marginalizing these individuals for not following academic lineage is certainly a mistake, says Aung-Thwin referring to a person of knowledge criticized for a palace-reconstruction: "What is most 'epistemological-centric' about these criticisms is not whether his reconstructions are authentic, but our arrogance in presuming they are not."⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Aung-Thwin, "'Mranma Pran': When Context Encounters Notion."

⁹⁰ Ibid., 215.

The way a society perceives its history, its past is part of it self-evidence: forced into narratives that are incompatible with its practices create disruption in its continuity, which as the next paragraph shows, has a high significance.

2. Past as Embedded in Social Practices

The present segment focuses on one cultural aspect related mainly to Buddhism acknowledging that it cannot be employed to the overall cultural contexts and experiences defining today's Myanmar, neither pre-colonial territory. It is intended to draw a general idea of a cultural context that characterized the region, but in a way still characterizes Myanmar⁹¹ – it is a useful reflection when it comes to assessing a conventional heritage (or artistic) discourse. It allows a glimpse into concepts that enlightens a mechanism of social practices, the role of these interconnections and how the notion of past, social memory, collective thought can be approached other than through traditional historiography. The independent art scene is part of this cultural context, several of the social practices imbibe so deeply daily life that it would be difficult to radically alienate the artistic practices from these, although most are probably being reused unconsciously.⁹²

In traditional, pre-colonial Mainland Southeast Asia, what can be accounted for as heritage was religious or was spiritual in nature.⁹³ As Theravada Buddhism became the major system of

⁹¹ Myanmar's population is deeply religious, and although Buddhism is not practiced by everyone (around 90% of the population says itself Buddhist), the belief system and the social apparatus is based mostly on the social values and concepts mentioned above. The traditional view is permeating most aspects of everyday life and practices.

⁹² Performance art (cf. Ch. II. B.) is connected by Johnston to the vernacular performance tradition – she refers to it as being an unconscious framework for today's artistic expression. She draws analogies between the two mainly by exploring the roots of the genre of vernacular performance, linking it with several ancient tradition-contexts, among them Buddhism, Animism, Astrology. (Johnston, "Intuitive Acts: The Evolution of Myanmar Contemporary Performance Art.") The possible linkage between artistic practices and social practices in the context of a cultural frame heavily imbibed by religious practice and the need of a living heritage approach was suggested during an interview with János Jelen, while mainly exploring how Buddhism conceived the concept of the past and memory (Jelen, Interview with János Jelen, Ph.D., Southeast Asian expert, lecturer and rector of Dharma Gate Buddhist College, Ibid..)

⁹³ This subchapter is mainly based on the following literature: Tunprawat, "Managing Living Heritage Sites in Mainland Southeast Asia."

belief in the area around the fourteenth century, even though not in a canonical way, it penetrated all aspects of people's life, often encompassing Animist beliefs too. Buddhist worldviews have hence impregnated how the traditional populations interacted with past material remains. Ceremonies and acts of merit brought meaning to this heritage, which practices were at the same time the forms of traditional conservation. Heritage management of Buddhist sites in Southeast Asia has been studied by several scholars mainly in the light of intangible heritage;⁹⁴ through the idea of Living Heritage Approach, Patcharawee Tunprawat outlines three main Buddhist concepts that played an important role shaping traditional view: impermanence, no-self and merit. Roughly and simply summarized, these concepts reveal the nature of interaction between the faithful and past material remains: religious buildings, being impermanent, are to be considered a source of merit. Buildings are appreciated for their function and source of merit, not the architectural grandeur. To ensure their function, repair is allowed which also brings merit. This is deep connection towards “heritage” – the faithful taking care of it and restoring it – can be very easily disrupted if the relationship is broken. The concept of time is also essential as it is two-dimensional in Buddhist belief: next to a historical one, there is the concept of “the ultimate dimension.”⁹⁵ The nature of the Buddha is ever-present, in icons, in structures which make them sacred. Traditional Buddhist conservation system wants to maintain the continuity of the spiritual value and not the historical – hence there is little concern for material authenticity. It also prevails for material objects: the principle of a statue of Buddha is not coded in its materiality – the uniqueness of one specific statue itself

⁹⁴ A selection of these: Gyatso, J. (ed.) (1992) *In the Mirror of Memory: Reflections on Mindfulness and Remembrance in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press; Karlström, A. (2005) ‘Spiritual materiality: heritage preservation in a Buddhist world?’, *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 5: 338 – 55; Okada, K. (2005) ‘The relationship between social changes and systems for the protection of diverse types of cultural heritage: examples from Japan’, in *Society and Systems for the Conservation of Cultural Heritage: Beliefs, Peoples and Economy*. Proceedings, Twelfth seminar on the Conservation of Asian Cultural Heritage, Tokyo: National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, 11–31; Peleggi, “The Unbearable Impermanence of Things - Reflections on Buddhism, Cultural Memory and Heritage Conservation (Ch.3).”

⁹⁵ Tunprawat, “Managing Living Heritage Sites in Mainland Southeast Asia,” 36. It “is perceived through the mind and held as an absolute, where there is no time and no space. In a sense, the ultimate dimension is where and when the mind realizes its own true nature or the nature of Buddha”.

– but the spiritual values that are symbolized towards the gaze of the worshipper conveying the ever-presence of the nature of Buddha.⁹⁶ A last concept to add: continuity is a key concept for value, time and function: all relate to the conservation of tangible heritage. The continuity of spiritual value is what can be associated mostly with the idea of conservation (repair), but the idea is not to keep the original state of something. The idea of keeping a symbolic value’s continuity is a conceptual approach to materiality – the study will refer back to this point in Ch. II.B.

Regarding tangible and intangible, the author proposes they cannot be separated in this context, as they interact – the dualistic view objectifies and disparages heritage, whereas by many it is seen as a process.⁹⁷ That’s why it is living heritage management that is the closest concept that can be put in practice, based on community and continuity. The Living Heritage Approach allows “to conserve continuity and to promote an inclusive understanding of heritage which incorporates local knowledge, practices, perspectives, and traditional skills.”⁹⁸

The sort of religious / social practice that is an inherent part of Buddhism can also be defined from a more scientific point of view as “collective procedural memory”⁹⁹ or “collective implicit memory”.¹⁰⁰

“Rituals and traditions, or more generally, procedural memories, can serve as mnemonic tools that shape the collective identity of their practitioners, collectively reminding them of declarative memories. [...] The actions entailed

⁹⁶ Interview with János Jelen, Budapest. Additionally: “In Buddhist devotion, however, this tension is diffused by the replication of images. Aura is thus a feature of both the *authentic* that which was part of [...] and the *replica*, copies of that first icon that are ‘enlivened,’ or endowed with aura through consecration,” in: Peleggi, “The Unbearable Impermanence of Things - Reflections on Buddhism, Cultural Memory and Heritage Conservation (Ch.3),” 61.

⁹⁷ Tunprawat, “Managing Living Heritage Sites in Mainland Southeast Asia,” 17.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁹⁹ Manier and Hirst, “A Cognitive Taxonomy of Collective Memories,” 259.

¹⁰⁰ The linkage between Buddhist religious practice and its scientific formulation as “collective procedural / implicit memory” was suggested by János Jelen, Interview with János Jelen, Budapest.

in a ritual or procedural memory can also create a collective feeling or attitude.”¹⁰¹

Procedural memory also implies a repetition of a practice which, being collectively shared, becomes the essential part of the experience. It is also part of what is to be included in living heritage. Buddhist tradition does not revere objects, edifices *per se*, it is the shared collective experience being transformed to a collective procedural memory that seems much more likely to become “heritage”. In this sense, the relation of society to its “heritage” in regard of edifices, or other tangible aspects of it (statues, etc.) is deeply connected to concepts rather than materiality. This means that the objects are “living” and not part of a distant past, “immobilized” heritage material is not part of the “terminology”.

One last aspect to be mentioned in this regard is the significance of the transmission of knowledge between master and student. It does not relate in tight sense to neither the perception of the past, nor social cultural memory *per se*, only in the sense that it is a deeply rooted aspect of Buddhist teaching and it is also the way living practices are transmitted from one generation to another.¹⁰² “Construction of images and stupas requires the master-to-apprentice transmission of a knowledge that is not mere technical know-how, but a form of spiritual teaching,” advances Peleggi¹⁰³ The process of knowledge transmission has a spiritual dimension too – it is a practice. Hence when it is question of transmission from generation to

¹⁰¹ An additional connection relevant to the use of the body – a main ‘tool’ for the artist in performance art: “Many people follow at least some traditions and rituals without realizing that they are learned, or even that they are rituals or traditions. They view their behavior as natural rather than as a product of experience. In such instances, one might say that the knowledge or learned procedure has become embodied. Embodied knowledge can exert a powerful influence on people’s lives, perhaps partly because it is not explicitly recognized as something learned, instead is taken for granted. Many elements of daily life in our own society—from the clothes we wear, to the foods we eat, to our hygienic habits, to our courtship rituals—represent this kind of embodied knowledge,” Manier and Hirst, “A Cognitive Taxonomy of Collective Memories,” 259.

¹⁰² Venkat Rao on this aspect: “For millennia the survival of the Sanskrit heritage depended on a non-tangible and non-filial pedagogical bond between the teacher and the pupil. This pedagogical bonding [...] [was] the basis of all learning. [...] Colonialism disrupted this heritage precisely by rupturing the pedagogical bond between the teacher and the pupil. Colonialism advanced an alternative pedagogical ideal. That’s why colonialism is analysed as an epistemic violence in postcolonial critiques.” Rao, *Cultures of Memory in South Asia - Orality, Literacy and the Problem of Inheritance*, 63.

¹⁰³ Peleggi, “The Unbearable Impermanence of Things - Reflections on Buddhism, Cultural Memory and Heritage Conservation,” 59.

generation, it can't be replaced by material tools. It is not mere coincidence that the painter master is also called "Saya," a teacher of senior rank or age (Saya Chone).

A strong interdependence in community, the maintaining of continuity, an acceptance of constant change and one of the main aspect – a shared memorial practice is to be retained. The reason for this assessment is to outline some inherent social practices that imbibe social dynamics in today's Myanmar. I believe that these social practices may create a frame for artistic practices within the independent art scene: the artists depart from and reflect on those senses of realities that surround them. It doesn't make their art religious, and again, this reflection was meant to bring forward a certain layer that is defies expired premises-structures and conventional memory institutionalization. The next chapter will assess the practices from the artistic side to meet the above-mentioned concepts.

Conclusion

In Southeast Asia, nationalist agendas have been particularly concerned in channeling by producing collective memory multiple pasts into a dominant narrative in order to define an identity through history and memory. With that in mind, Maitrii Aung-Thwin writes in 2012: "Myanmar (Burma) provides an attractive field for the study of memory and the critique of the national project as domestic, regional, and international commentators connect the debate over the country's political future to the management and interpretation of its pasts (Skidmore, 2004; Fink, 2001; Collignan and Taylor, 2001, Lang, 2002)".¹⁰⁴ The first part of the chapter intended to raise questions around the currently institutionalized narrative within the fragmented cultural and artistic field. The study enlightened visible segments but also absent ones, like a sequence of fine / visual art heritage omitted from social cultural memory's recent past.

¹⁰⁴ Aung-Thwin, "Remembering Kings: Archives, Resistance and Memory in Colonial and Post-Colonial Burma," 54.

The first chapter intended to enlighten how through the concept of living heritage social practices play a basic role in today's society in Myanmar. Outlining the independent contemporary art scene as a site for an organic development for the reassessment of fine / visual art heritage is thought possible as the seeds for growth regarding the development of a genuine, alternative infrastructure countering the official narrative are already spread. The seeds are embedded in a sense of reality in which the consciousness of community feeling, memory and past embedded in social practices are pillars for ensuring continuous creativity.

Chapter II - An Intrinsic Site Shapes Out

The complex discourse layers advanced in Chapter I have already forecasted the independent art scene's substantial value regarding its role and potential within the cultural sphere. The concepts that have been outlined also imbibe the artistic practices. These deploy as intellectual interfaces in society and allow an access to unexamined past periods, engage with socio-political realities, give voice to silenced communities. These are the aspects that the present chapter assesses in a second phase, following a framing of what actually the research demarcates as "independent contemporary art scene". Following a first theoretical phase, a short overview of the autonomous actors leads to the analysis of a qualitative survey conducted with a small number of respondents from the independent scene on their current vision regarding cultural working frame that surrounds them.

The chapter intends to outline the qualities of the independent scene as a counterbalance of the official narrative and marking it as an intrinsic site within the ongoing process of cultural (re)definition.

A. Framing the Scene

1. Footnotes to a “Definition”

The glossary contains a short definition of the independent (contemporary) art scene to demarcate its substance from the beginning. However, for a better comprehension of the study, an additional paragraph allows a deeper insight to the core point of the research. The introduction of the study already outlined a specific personal approach for the research, which prevails also for the present definition, including the use of English language literature. In terms of published reference helping the demarcation of the scene, I would include Isabelle Ching’s article as the most detailed and accurate academic formulation so far of the overall contemporary scene, although the text was published in 2011;¹⁰⁵ since then, some aspects have clearly changed. In this regard, the exhibition *plAy: Art from Myanmar Today* (2010), co-organized by Ching and Yin Ker, another important researcher of Myanmar art is to be mentioned among the few shows dedicated solely to the newest tendencies of the Myanmar scene.¹⁰⁶ The publications and exhibitions of experts and curators like Iola Lenzi, Nathalie Johnston are also pointing in the same direction, as well of those of artist and curator Moe Satt. Other scholars have dealt with the scene in a wider context, such as Nora A. Taylor, one of the major references in the study regarding contemporary art in Southeast Asia. Language barriers have not made it possible to analyze Burmese literature on the scene, although not excessive.¹⁰⁷ As Nora A. Taylor mentions most of the literature in the Southeast Asia contemporary art scene’s is strongly based on personal in-depth research.¹⁰⁸ The mentioned references are all scholars and professionals dedicated to the region since long years (or decades) and have a

¹⁰⁵ Ching, “Art from Myanmar. Possibilities of Contemporaneity?”

¹⁰⁶ Yin Ker’s research on Bagyi Aung Soe, a “trailblazer” of modern Burmese art, reveals how much more there to be researched regarding the Myanmar art scene, especially the second half of the twentieth century and the depth, nuances of the scene at that time. Yin, “Modern Burmese Painting According to Bagyi Aung Soe.”

¹⁰⁷ As Yin Ker noted a decade ago, several article exists in Burmese and publications by fellow artists – mostly narratives, academic research would be needed in many aspects. In: *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁰⁸ Taylor, “Art without History? Southeast Asian Artists and Their Communities in the Face of Geography,” 1.

thorough understanding of the complexity of the Myanmar scene too. In general, departing from the mentioned references, including my approach, as a definition of the core part of the scene here described might *simply* be named as progressive artistic practice. At the same time, the independent contemporary art scene in the context of the present study also includes individuals, collectives that would rather be related to as modern¹⁰⁹ and not so much contemporary period but from the point of view of their position and role, they form integral part of the research. The network of private initiators (individuals, collectives) of institutions / spaces / festivals who are actively contributing to the autonomy of the field are also included.

Creating an exhaustive overview of all actors is not an aim but to highlight the main representatives. Also, I do not wish to draw a too arbitrary line between “conventional” attitude and “progressive, critical” attitude, but allow some permeability between boundaries that are on the one hand not so sharp in the Myanmar context, and on the other hand, as already evoked,



Figure 9. Exhibition spaces are usually for rent, sometimes displaying conventional, sometimes progressive art. On the left, paintings of Kye Myint Saw, on the right installation by Zon Sapal Phyu. Lokanat, Yangon, 2014. Photo: the author

the concepts, terminology, lineage is a constantly changing reality. In this particular time of

¹⁰⁹ In the volume of the English version of Contemporary Art from Myanmar I., not yet published hence quoted from the manuscript, the authors of the introduction – Aung Min and Aung Myint state: “This book argues that the timeline of contemporary Myanmar art starts with the emergence of artists who abandoned the total dependence on the Western art techniques imported and institutionalized by U Ba Nyan, but appropriated some of those techniques in their bid to innovate existing Myanmar art practices. It is a daunting task to come up with a specific date to indicate the beginning of this timeline, but this book, roughly speaking, considers the year 1960 as the starting point and artists such as Bagyi Aung Soe and Khin Maung (Bank) as leading artists of this phenomenon”. Aung Min, “Myanmar Contemporary Art I (Theart.com).” Aung Myint himself has a specific definition of the Modern era. (see glossary and Ch. I. C. 2.)

transformation and (re)definition, some of the artists' paths are unpredictable. There is hence a wide belt within the independent art scene of artists' oeuvres or series of works on the very edge between a unique form of expression or personal, engaged formulation, and a not so distanced position from commercial, aesthetic creation. Yet, there is a sensible edge to what extent the study embraces artistic practices: it is not the technical skill and talent that is questioned, but the position that is behind the work. Hence the works that fall into the category of the sole quest for beauty and aesthetics are not included here. The contemporary position that is included in the definition consciously distances itself from mere realistic copy and the sole quest for beauty. Neither the type of art that was created for commodity reasons (decorative scenes, replicas of existing paintings sold in bigger quantity at markets...) and religious art (in the sense of objects created for worship¹¹⁰). Natasha Kraevskaia mentions ethno-kitsch art based on exoticism and orientalism, and quotes Nora A. Taylor about similar works in Vietnam: "the market for Vietnamese paintings is constructed on Western Orientalist prejudices."¹¹¹ Regarding the Myanmar scene, Ching formulates in 2011 a category of artworks being – due to market liberalization in the previous decade – sold more widely, mainly in realist and impressionist style, to be found in hotel lobbies, government-affiliated agencies, etc. In a way this is the art that was / is the most exposed to foreigners and non research-based foreign-led initiatives, and because it was / is art regarded as unproblematic towards the State, portraying life in Myanmar as timelessly peaceful and accepting, it had / has a better chance to access an international circuit.¹¹² It is to say that there is a general misconception about what contemporary art stands for in Myanmar.

¹¹⁰ In the traditional Buddhist concept, objects produced to obtain the most beautiful pieces are purely dedicated to religion, and are not considered autonomous artistic works. Tunprawat, "Managing Living Heritage Sites in Mainland Southeast Asia," 35. It is only towards the end of nineteenth century that art infiltrated the secular life in Myanmar. Ranard, *Burmese Painting : A Linear and Lateral History*.

¹¹¹ Kraevskaia, "Vietnamese Modern Art: Change, Stagnation, Potential, Strategy," 378.

¹¹² Ching, "Art from Myanmar. Possibilities of Contemporaneity?"

Driven by the respect for colleagues, the lack of financial and spatial resources, the sense of community and by several other factors, many venues work inclusively, allowing a broader embracing of genres – again, a relative term within the current art scene; also, many of the exhibition spaces are for rent, hence there is no strict programming. This does not omit the fact that dedicating any effort for displaying art reaching beyond a conservative approach is in itself already an important contribution. Few are the galleries with a defined profile, but the study comes back to this point later one.

Contemporary art considered in this study could be hence recapitulated as the intellectual concept realized through a different spectrum of media that contemporaneous artists are in a position to express as meditations, responses to contemporaneous or theoretic issues and that their predecessors / colleagues did not touch upon, demarcating themselves also within their own context. It is hence not a copy, an illustration of perceived reality but a reflection, a position engaged with it. The reason of the delimitation comes from the aim of positioning the autonomous dynamic as a sort of driving force within the social context it is embedded in, as a site for mutual (re)definition, intellectual and emotional interaction. This process can lead to a better understanding and knowledge of the cultural layers that shape the multi-textured history of society and can engage the public through curiosity. Contemporary art practice is not understood as a tool serving social purposes, but rather a game-changer engaging social layers,

The term independent or alternative reflects to the idea that the cultural producers / agents included in the scene operate within an autonomous network, mostly in result of private engagement and budget, apart from any governmental influence,¹¹³ either in the form of the

¹¹³ Melissa Carlson mentions two galleries in 2016 (among probably others) that are owned by former members of the military dictatorship: “some of the masterminds behind the old censorship regime are now interested in the commercial side of Myanmar art,” in: Carlson, “Painting as Cipher: Censorship of the Visual Arts in Post-1988 Myanmar,” 153. They are not included in this study..

inner policies or ties to the government. So in a way, it is a non-governmental scene, but independent also refers to the artistic position it represents in relation to the official narrative.

2. Brick by Brick

This segment of the study has an approach that is more inclining towards art history but does not aim to analyze the modern and contemporary art scene of Myanmar in relation to the international art world's discourse through a qualitative definition. It does not aim to contextualize it in terms of artistic dynamics but allows a deeper insight into art historical concepts which contribute to shape the nuances of this site from an external perspective. It also alludes to how “fatal” the misreading of central concepts can be in regard to a scene in (re)definition.

The international discussion around the globalization of the art world, condensed in several volumes¹¹⁴ around 2000s up to 2010s – and not yet sealed –, has also reinforced the debate around the contemporary art scenes of Southeast Asia within the global arena. Grandiose and more nuanced exhibitions have entered the discourse. Yet Myanmar's scene was not much involved in these processes, even at regional level as its isolation until 2011 prevented it to interact essentially with the ongoing dialogue. Around that time, the isolation was not so hermetic as in the late 1980s; a handful of artists could experience international (regional) exchanges, to which process Japan also contributed (Fukuoka Museum). Fragile networks were established, but few international professionals, mainly from Southeast Asia and who already had an interest and knowledge about the regional artistic horizon, had any idea what the Myanmar scene had as potential. The élan of the above-mentioned discussion joined the ongoing debate since the mid-1990s within the Southeast Asia art scene about the concept of

¹¹⁴ see: Belting, *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*. or Belting and Buddensieg, *The Global Art World - Audiences, Markets, and Museums*.

modernity.¹¹⁵ In this aspect, Kevin Chua's reflection in 2011¹¹⁶ – on how to teach contemporary art in Southeast Asia shows how important, still now, it is to reevaluate the terms of aesthetic judgment and the demarcation between modern and contemporary, an idea that is only just starting to be addressed in the Myanmar scene.¹¹⁷ The following paragraph wishes to approach the Myanmar scene from a holistic perspective, framing the fragile nuances of the scene.

a. "Who Gets to Write the Art History of Southeast Asia?"¹¹⁸

The case of the Guggenheim Museum's exhibition in New York (2012) is mentioned as an example of how the interaction between global and local forces within the art world can lead to confusion whereas the potential of its impact is nowhere to be dismissed especially in respect of such a fragile scene than the unfolding in Myanmar.

In 2012 the Guggenheim Museum, one of the world's most important modern and contemporary museums started a new program ('Guggenheim UBS Map Global Initiative') with a first focus on South and Southeast Asia. The aim was to expand its reach in the international art world paired with an acquisition program.¹¹⁹ Although the program had clearly good aspects like acquiring works in its collection and not just a few, the relating exhibition *No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia* received several critiques from professionals and academics. Renown art writer for Southeast Asia, Patricia Chen's main

¹¹⁵ Sabapathy, "Developing Regionalist Perspectives in South-East Asian Art Historiography."; Supangkat, "Contemporary Art: What / When / Where."

¹¹⁶ Chua, "On Teaching Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art."

¹¹⁷ cf. remark above on: Aung Min, "Myanmar Contemporary Art I (Theart.com)." and Modern era

¹¹⁸ Borrowed from an expression of Iola Lenzi: Kálmán, "Iola Lenzi Interjú I., II. : 'A Kortárs Művészet a Társadalmi Változás alakítója'; 'Ellenérzésem Vannak a Művészeti Piaccal szemben' (Iola Lenzi Interview I, II: 'Contemporary Art As the Driver for Social Change'; 'I Rather Keep Away from the Market.'"

¹¹⁹ "The Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative is a distinctive program that creates direct access to contemporary art and education on a global scale. Through in-depth collaboration with artists, curators, and cultural organizations from South and Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East and North Africa, MAP has expanded the Guggenheim's collection with more than 125 new works, and has built physical and digital experiences that bring art and ideas to life.," "Guggenheim - UBS Map Global Initiative."

concern was first the “vast bite” the Museum took with wanting to present ‘two regional constructions’ as one homogenous block, and hence the “shortcut” it wanted to take compared to allowing a truly reflective map of the region(s), creating a worthy academic debate about it. Chen quotes an independent South Asian scholar with outlining the critique: “unless you have [those] cultural references, you can’t pick and choose art.”¹²⁰ Although Southeast Asia is not a unique case in this aspect, it enlightens the sensitive issue when “Westernly academized” curators and institutions touch upon the Southeast (and South) Asian region¹²¹ (or as a matter of fact other non-Western regions) without a proper investigative research and equal involvement of those concerned.¹²²

Chen formulates a crucial point about the impact that a misconception can have:

“‘Is it better to stay away from the region because it is overly large?’ Armstrong asks. I put the same question to the Asian academic community and got a resounding ‘Yes.’ Everything that is put on the world stage by a revered Western cultural institution is quickly accepted as a base point; a feeble attempt would take us backwards. Why not take a smaller but deeper bite?”¹²³

Institutions with such weight should be aware, underlines Chen, of their responsibility regarding canonization. June Yap, curator emphasized that “few have professed to comprehensively encapsulate this vast terrain, generally citing the subject’s complexity”¹²⁴ – the exhibition intended to overcome this “false step”, but as it turned out, *complexity* (cf. Ch.II.A.2.b.) being overlooked can lead to serious misinterpretation.¹²⁵

¹²⁰ Chen, “Making Sense of the Guggenheim’s South and Southeast Asia Initiative.”

¹²¹ I wish to refer back to this statement regarding Biennales in Ch. III. B. 2. f.)

¹²² What has to be however considered is the tendency starting around the new Millennium – plus / minus 5-10 years depending on the regions – when the idea of global art emerged and how this affected the art scene. In can be compared to the waves that was generated by the initiatives of the Japanese UNESCO director-general, Koïchiro Matsuura (1999-2009) for considering a different perspective in the Global North-South perspectives through the notion of Intangible Cultural Heritage. The time-lapse these two phenomena represent are quite parallel indicating a change of perspectives in several fields at a universal level in terms of cultural institutions.

¹²³ Chen, “Making Sense of the Guggenheim’s South and Southeast Asia Initiative.”

¹²⁴ Yap, “No Country: Curatorial Art for Southeast Asia - Curatorial Essay.”

¹²⁵ Chen, “Making Sense of the Guggenheim’s South and Southeast Asia Initiative.”

As an independent researcher of Southeast Asian art and active participator in the Myanmar scene since 2009, Nathalie Johnston's review of the same exhibition highlights another problematic aspect.¹²⁶ Although said to be referring to complexities, the curator omitted the political context from the works chosen from three Myanmar artists but also from other artists too (cf. Ch.II.A.2.c.). According to Johnston, the show seemed to miss an artistic statement and became more of "artist guidebook". Missing "boundary-bending and rule-breaking" works otherwise present in the international exhibition history. Also, it seems the show did not aim to create a dialogue between the artistic practices within the region which could have brought more relevance to the show.¹²⁷ The following closing thought is what has to be underlined:

"The international art world must emphasise the value of sharing histories with heterodox views, by encouraging artists to converse with their surroundings, rather than answer to a homogenous standard. Myanmar artists are now redefining their world and their future, and we must respectfully ask them what they imagine their futures to be through their work."¹²⁸

Johnston's remark points out, exactly, that when omitting certain nuances or contexts – because it does not fit so well or elegantly a certain curatorial preconception to refer to Kee in part Ch.II.A.1.b. – it takes away the possibility of self-definition of the artists in a wider context that they have no means to control.

¹²⁶ Johnston, "Guggenheim Plays It Safe with Asian Artists."

¹²⁷ The author also refers to the fact that the international scene will probably push some artists to "produce specifically for the markets" – it's an important point the study will refer back to in Ch. III. A. 2.

¹²⁸ Johnston, "Guggenheim Plays It Safe with Asian Artists."

As a final remark about the Guggenheim exhibition, I wish to refer to an interview with independent curator and researcher specialized on Southeast Asia, Iola Lenzi. She mentions how artists and curators from Southeast Asia tend to transform some of the already existing works to fit the more “safe” visual language of the Euro-American context.¹²⁹ She takes the example of Tran Luong’s



Figure 10. Installation of Wah Nu and Tun Win Aung – Four Pieces (of White) / 2012 at Guggenheim Museum's No Country... Since the exhibition in the collection of Guggenheim Museum. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York Guggenheim UBS MAP Purchase Fund, 2012. Photo: www.guggenheim.org

performance *Welt* – how its original, raw layout differs from a more ‘sterile’, elegant and aesthetic way it was presented in New York; different readings of the same work can also affect the scene itself. Lenzi refers to an ongoing battling about “who will write the art history of Southeast Asia,” among several visions, there is one main vision emanating of a group of interpreters from outside the region, and of one from inside the region – both advocating for different perspectives. A recent exhibition in Germany including Bagyi Aung Soe, the “trailblazer” as Yin Ker calls him, of modern Burmese art points at the fact that with “limited knowledge of local contexts and limited archival resources, these institutions (and even their local informants) may be hard-pressed to determine what was pivotal or influential in an artist’s oeuvre. From this imperfect vantage, certain forms and narratives will be privileged, while others may be ignored.”¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Kálmán, “Iola Lenzi Interjú I., II: ‘A Kortárs Művészet a Társadalmi Változás alakítója’; ‘Ellenérzéseim Vannak a Művészeti Piacca szemben’ (Iola Lenzi Interview I, II: ‘Contemporary Art As the Driver for Social Change’; ‘I Rather Keep Away from the Market.’”

¹³⁰ “‘Misfits’: Pages from a Loose-Leaf Modernity - Tang Chang, Rox Lee and Bagyi Aung Soe / Hau Der Kulturen Der Welt, Berlin. Curatorial Statement.”

b. Complexity Approached through Ethnography

The idea of *complexity* generated the exhibition at Guggenheim and has also been its trap. I would like here to bring in Joan Kee's position in the question, developed in the introductory text for Third Text¹³¹. Kee referring to Japanese curator Junichi Shioda, points out that the only basis for even thinking about a body of Southeast Asian art is by first admitting the extent of its cultural diversity. "This diversity cannot readily be conformed to the elegance of the nation-state model."¹³² Southeast Asian art seems to be a difficult case from the perspective of the mainstream contemporary art models "which allows for plurality and fragmentation, but not when it threatens interpretive clarity." I would add, that the complexity of Myanmar alone, beyond the Southeast Asia region's, is to be outlined: not because other countries would not be so complex, but as Johnston wrote, Myanmar is in the period of redefining its world, along with its temporal narratives of a universal time.

"... Close attention to the material and physical properties of a given work matters now more than ever. Some might describe this attention as a regressive turn to the kind of formalism partly responsible for denying the contemporaneity of so many artworks, but I argue that such attention makes real that which has otherwise been dismissed as exotic, and thus utterly vulnerable to [...] globality's 'insatiable appetite for excess'."¹³³

The study has suggested not being too arbitrary to the line between conventional and progressive. Referring to the debate around the possible definition of modernity in Southeast Asia, it is important to tie the works to their own realities (sense of realities) – realities that actually the artists document themselves by integrating them in their works.

I suggest that to not overlook the nuances of complexity, the method Nora A. Taylor proposes by asking if the art historian should be considered as an ethnographer contributes to answer the

¹³¹ Kee, "Introduction Contemporary Southeast Asian Art - The Right Kind of Trouble."

¹³² Ibid., 374.

¹³³ Ibid., 380.



Figure 11. Po Po's sketch on the left for Road to Heaven, 1993; on the right, its realization 20 years later (Nirvana), at the Singapore Biennale 2013. Photo: (left) the author, (right): Singapore Biennale website

problematic.¹³⁴ In this approach published in 2011, Taylor focuses on the visual arts scene of Southeast Asia in general, through a study-case of her own experience in Vietnam. She argues that instead only of focusing on the value of visibility, for a researcher, ethnographic methods like interviews or the observation of artists' daily activity can be equally valid than the text or the image in the case of art. If I translate this approach to the context of Myanmar, I propose that personal narratives, which for most evaporated in the general absence of accessible archives, or simply as part of the absent segment of fine / visual art deleted by censorship, may live through methods involving intellectual and participatory observation. These methods help create a more critical survey and acknowledge of the "human dimension" (Taylor) in art in a context where the text is less prevalent. They also help revisit and understand an "unexamined past". Taylor's approach can be debated¹³⁵ but she bases her argument on personal experience gained in Vietnam in the 1990s, a period quite similar to Myanmar today to some extent of course – the study will further discuss the analogies between the two scenes in III.A.2. As evoked previously, the literature about the Myanmar modern and contemporary art scene is based on primary sources. The Burmese publications about art are most often written by artists

¹³⁴ Taylor, "The Southeast Asian Art Historian as Ethnographer?"

¹³⁵ Patrick D. Flores warns of marginalization through undue contextulisation and asks if a too ethnographical approach might divert the attention of the contemporary nature of art., in Kee, "Introduction Contemporary Southeast Asian Art - The Right Kind of Trouble."

or writers, often involving personal experience.¹³⁶ Art historical research usually involves a considerable amount of written material – documentary information, photography archives, published literature. From this point of view the situation is quite problematic in Myanmar, and it's not a matter of language barrier. Given that there is basically no public archival trace to follow for research for the artistic scene, or at least very weak, the personal archive embodied by the artist – his knowledge as memory and his knowledge as practice – becomes itself the primary source. Moreover, individually collected personal archival material is as valuable, especially as it also carries an artistic vision.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Aung Min, "Myanmar Contemporary Art I (Theart.com)." The manuscript contains rather short narrative description of each artists then an overview of the scene. Additional research is needed and material gathering to make a more layered account which process is ongoing at the moment within the scene.

¹³⁷ Several of the artists I personally interviewed hold unique archival treasures – as most artists of the first generation of contemporary artists: collecting articles and small documents was almost the only way for accessing foreign thoughts about art. Artists Phyu Mon and her husband, Chan Aye both cherish notebooks in which they collected articles from the Newsweek or Time magazines, found occasionally, sometimes with years of difference since their publication, at secondhand bookstores in 1970s, which were copies rescued mostly from libraries, foreign embassies. There was also a magazine they remember in Burmese dedicated to cinema, in which Mye Chi Too published about art on the pages of this magazine (almost nobody wrote about new art), introducing in the 1980s names like Jasper Johns, Marcel Duchamp... Interview with artists Phyu Mon and Chan Aye, Yangon, Home-Studio of the artists.

Artist San Minn realized after a while his own oeuvre was dispersing, disappearing. 'Evaporating.' And not only because some confiscated works were not returned by the censorship board or were doomed because of the big 'censored' stamp on its frontside. Paintings were also eaten up by insects, by the climate, and paintings were repainted through time. San Minn then documented his works – what he could, developed the films and classified the prints in a dossier. It's a chance, as many only survived this way, documenting a materially non-existent and unexamined period. Except the black-and-white brochure-catalogues usually printed on bad quality paper for exhibitions, mainly embracing a biography and perhaps a list of paintings, monographs have not been published of the artists, hence it is quite difficult to have an overview of their life work. San Minn, Interview with artist San Minn, Yangon.

Artist Po Po holds precious drawing books: he recorded his artworks on paper. Most of them were land art projects or installations requiring inaccessible technique in the late 1980s and which would have been censored anyway. Amazing projects all locked in a note-book, and for long decades it seemed it is the way they are going to remain. Then Po Po could manage to revise one of them for the Singapore Biennale 2013. The idea had been sitting there for years, and it was time for it to become material. The censorship prevented these works to become true in materiality, but the personal archive helps retrace one of the most exciting creative of Po Po.

In 2014, the new MARCA has received from Ma Thanegi, a respected scholar on Myanmar culture but also painter herself in the 1960s and 1970s, a modest collection of invitations, brochures accompanying exhibitions. Memories kept for herself, but of inestimable value for researchers today.¹³⁸ There are nowhere else publicly reachable.

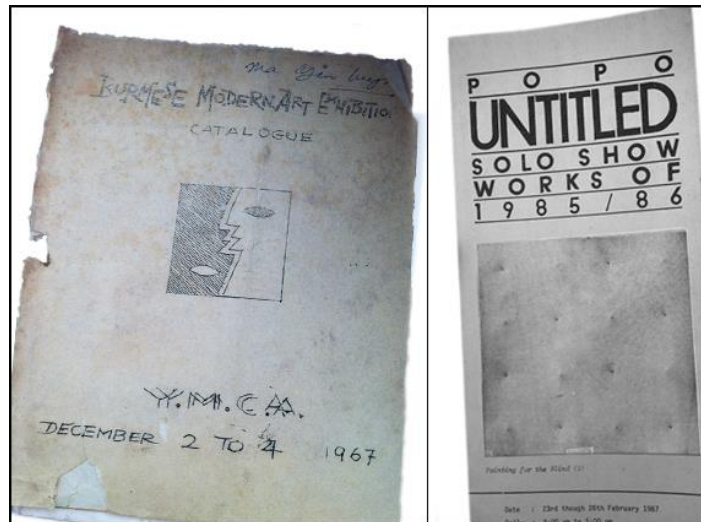


Figure 12. Part of Ma Thanegi's archive – exhibition brochures. Courtesy of MARCA, Yangon

This type of material helps to reconstruct the “spaces of original possibles,” as Bourdieu calls it in the process of the creation of a field: a context that back then seemed self-evident and hence remained unremarked.¹³⁹ Because there are almost no available traces, accounts and no mention of these “possibles” in chronicles and memoirs, the personal archival material is of high importance, completed with the interviews that can help to shift towards a local mode of interpretation, “one that accounts for living culture, living artists and regional differences,” adds Taylor.

Referring to her own research in Vietnam, she adds: “Historical records are held in living archives, in artists’ memories. Those memories are continuously being rewritten, which also prevents Vietnamese art from having a clear sense of its past.” Taylor concludes that instead of seeing *art history* as missing from the field of cultural disciplines in Southeast Asia, it would rather be looked up through the recounting of living artists whose person matters more than his or her work, “or rather, the work mattered because of the artist and if the artist mattered, so did

¹³⁸ MARCA – Ma Thanegi Archive: [<https://myanmarca.org/myanmar-art-archive/artist-archive/ma-thanegi/>]

¹³⁹ Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed,” 31.

the work. This follows the conventional humanist practice of valuing an artist's work because of what we know about the artist.”¹⁴⁰

The Southeast Asian region is not known for its sophisticated institutional infrastructure in terms of visual arts, and even less contemporary art – as the previous chapter has clarified, for several reasons. The role the artist plays within the scene through the acquired knowledge and the practice of his art, as well the frames in which the artist creates a platform to connect with the audience through his or her art is hence crucial. The present study will follow up on this idea in Chapter III through the role exhibitions play as “construction sites” within the region, based on the work of AAA. Ethnographic methods suggested by Taylor allow to view layers of complexity otherwise overshadowed by pre-existing frames.

c. Contemporary Art: an Active Player in Social Changes.

Indonesian art critic and curator Jim Supangkat expressed in the catalogue of the 1996 New York *Traditions/Tensions*, a landmark exhibition for contemporary art in Asia, about his concern regarding “the emphasis on the sociopolitical content” of the artwork, that “will inevitably draw that work into the discourse of the mainstream.” Kee, quoting Supangkat, connects this assumption with the exhibition practice of curators back then who “under pressure to make their shows accessible to a public without basic ‘Asia’ literacy, resort to excessive cultural contextualization or contextualization which appeals to mainstream assumptions or desires.”¹⁴¹ Kee adds that this emphasis has only intensified since in the “free” world, always questioning the social relevance of art.

I would like to refer back to II.2.A.a., in which Johnston was quoted pointing out the need not to overlook these aspects. Of course, Supangkat is right to outline the risk of misinterpretation

¹⁴⁰ Taylor, “The Southeast Asian Art Historian as Ethnographer?,” 485.

¹⁴¹ Kee, “Introduction Contemporary Southeast Asian Art - The Right Kind of Trouble.,” 379.

or overinterpretation within an excessive cultural contextualization. Although I find this perspective relevant, it must not derivate the researcher from having in mind the character of many of the works born under specific circumstances palpable in the region. As a light analogy, the position of the non-conform artistic practices – similarly artistic performance, happenings, documented actions, concept works – from behind the Iron Curtain (Central and Eastern Europe) in the 1960s and ‘70s get compromised if bleached from the surrounding oppressive political context. Without turning this paragraph into an art historical debate, I find it important to define the reason why this approach is relevant in regard to the study.

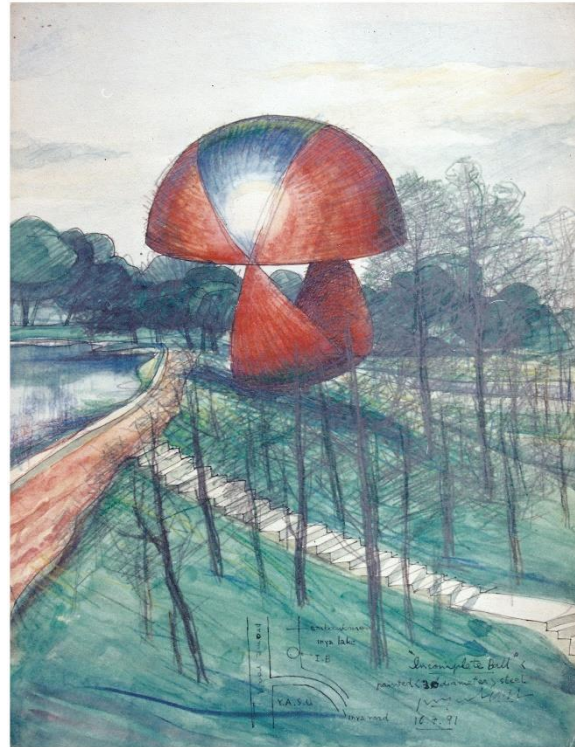


Figure 13. Po Po's sketch for a land art creation in Yangon: Incomplete Ball 1, 1991. It was never realized. Source: Po Po's personal archive, courtesy of the artist.

Researcher and curator Iola Lenzi mentions that for an important part of Southeast Asia, art has become a functional tool for the artists to empower community.¹⁴² Lenzi says a that for a significant number of the artists from the contemporary art scene, works based on principles about society were those through which they could precisely engage these communities. Until recently, the people of Southeast Asia never really felt empowered to decide on national level about politics: art was basically creating a voice for them. In some cases of the change of system, art preceded this process, artists being in the role of forming an intellectual community, going forward as a *means* for empowerment with quite difficult, provocative or even dangerous ideas in their activity. Lenzi argues that the

¹⁴² Kálmán, “Iola Lenzi Interjú I., II. : ‘A Kortárs Művészet a Társadalmi Változás alakítója’; ‘Ellenérzéseim Vannak a Művészeti Piacca szemben’ (Iola Lenzi Interview I, II: ‘Contemporary Art Asthe Driver for Social Change’; ‘I Rather Keep Away from the Market.’”

Southeast Asia art scene is very much concerned with taking part in the social changes which is forming its destiny. It is a point I wish to underline for the next phases of the study: the contemporary art scene, neither in Southeast Asia, nor in Myanmar is solely composed of artists using their art as resistance or as reflecting their clear position in social-political issues. But it is an avoidable part of it.

B. A Mindful Platform

The present subchapter wishes to emphasize how the independent contemporary scene's artistic practices are contributing to the unfolding of a site which is not only an interface to access and revisit an unexamined past but also is a platform addressing sensitive issues and topics that are prevented from entering the official (cultural) narrative, hence the site works as a processor of unexamined concepts, while engaging with a social-political level. Human rights, social injustice, gender questions, freedom of expression, political or religious oppression are among the issues addressed by the site, besides existential questions or the questioning of existence and purely artistic concerns too. The substance processed by the contemporary scene – either through practice or infrastructure – shows well beyond a socially isolated art course that should be seen as a self-justification.

Regarding the idea of reaccessing an unexamined past, the core of artists constituting the modern era, generated a lineage – although not always direct – through which their knowledge and visions were transmitted. The contemporary art scene today has roots in that chapter of art, it reprocesses it, makes way to access it, understand it. Additionally, some artists today consciously revisit ancient techniques, traditional forms adapting them to their vision, creating a cyclical dynamic of elements between different time periods.

The artistic practices reach the public / audience / viewer / participant through a wide spectrum of media – equally used in terms of artistic expression.¹⁴³ Painting, sculpture, installation, photography, video art, performance art, and more. The subchapter discusses only a few examples due to spatial limitation. Some are more prevalent and more present in artists' oeuvres – the type of material used by the artist often depends – simply – on the means he / she can afford at the time of creation, but “one uses the medium that best expresses the artist’s concept of what the artwork is trying to say”¹⁴⁴ – adjusting the media to the content is a common denominator in contemporary practice.

One form of expression that is significantly present in the Myanmar art scene is contemporary



Figure 14. Htein Lin's performance at Ahla Thit Gallery, October 2014. He reflected on the land-grab issues happening in Myanmar. Photo: the author, 2014

performance art, mainly since the mid-1990s. Pioneers in this regard were Po Po, Aung Myint, Aye Ko, Htein Lin, Nyein Chan Su, Phyu Mon and Chaw Ei Thein. Nathalie Johnston’s study about the evolution of Myanmar contemporary performance art is an important study

from 2010 not only because it’s one of the first ones to propose a more holistic context for the contemporary scene and performance art from an insider perspective, but also because her research proposes, based on the solid grounds of primary sources, that performance art is a long-standing tradition in Myanmar which would indicate that “performance art may have arrived in Myanmar in its contemporary form regardless of outside influence.”¹⁴⁵ By assessing

¹⁴³ Johnston, “Intuitive Acts: The Evolution of Myanmar Contemporary Performance Art,” 3.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ She admits though that not all artists shared her view as connecting the present time of performance with past traditions. Ibid.

the evolution of performance practice through the recent past, meeting dozens of artists, made her conclude – while the artists were describing their “stories, influences, the sense of community and attachment to their land, their equal suffering under one rule” – that such experiences and expressions could not be simply taught.¹⁴⁶ According to Johnston, traditional vernacular performance practices (different from traditional royal court dance or colonial import dramatic theatre) created an unconscious framework for the artist who may have imported the language to describe the concept behind the form, but the latter was intuitively existing since long before the language.

Only as a reminder, I wish to refer as an analogy to the link between the sense of reality, individual practice, collective thought – collective procedural memory. Johnston’s suggestion enlightens how deeply the contemporary art scene’s practices can be linked with their relation to the community and inherited continuity. The unconsciously revived practice also leads to the belief that partly based on the social practices evoked through Ch. I .C. 2., *conceptual* thinking in regards of materiality impregnates as much the mindset of the common person than the artist: *conceptual* used in the sense of an artistic, theoretical dimension in which creation seems also an artistic attitude that is more inherent to the scene as it would first seem (in opposition to the cliché of saying artistic practice form Southeast Asia borrows Western tendencies and implements it them in a belated process). Aung Myint’s quote putting in parallel he “inner eye” and abstract art is telling. Performers, painters or installation artists draw elements of composition from their personal archive, be it material or cognitive, based on (emotional) memories. Through the artworks, personal histories resurface, complex cultural layers manifest: interfaces are created through which these profoundly driven inner reactions between the artists and the audience / viewer happen. The thoughts conceived by the artist are

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 1–5.

literary embodied or transferred to conceptual or material levels, and by engaging the audience to encounter thoughts banned from an official narrative, it becomes a cyclical, living act as continuity is ensured. Artists can reach out through their work, basically becoming healers of traumas and binders of communities – art operates as a therapeutic tool. The concept of collaborative art – build community dialogue through art and hence playing a role in forming society – is an existing phenomenon. Htein Lin's Show of Hands is a project as such.

Whether consciously conducted or not, the site generated by the scene gives voice to communities who otherwise are silenced or unheard. Whereas photography is not such a popular genre in the strict form of the



Figure 15. Htein Lin's Show of Hands involves civilians who were former political prisoners: during the performance, he plasters the forearm of each involved prisoner while recording their stories. Several hundreds have already been accomplished the past years. Photo: (above) Flux Kit (Performance at Pansodan Scene, Contemporary Dialogues, Yangon, 2014), (below) the author, 2015

contemporary artistic practice in Myanmar, documentary photography is crossing a fascinating period, especially as more and more opportunities are given for the medium for visibility. Although the classification of documentary photography can be debated in an artistic context, I deliberately mention it as part as the independent contemporary scene as it shares the same structure and faces the same dynamics as the rest of the scene. Myanmar Deitta, a non-profit space dedicated to photography, next to Yangon Photo Festival organized yearly are the two

main forums for photo today. The importance for young – usually self-trained through field-work – photographers to be able to give voice to “invisible people” and stories is inestimable. Photography tackles issues of the LGBT community, atrocities of survivors of armed conflicts, religious tensions – happening at a daily level but remaining unspoken.¹⁴⁷

Referring to Carlson’s study about the censorship: long decades of censorship have generated a certain form of self-censorship, and the feeling of uncertainty – whether the artists’ actions might be misconstrued as against the State¹⁴⁸ – is still not completely gone. Carlson outlines that artists may now “face censorship from powerful segments of the population or what we may call ‘public censorship’, which also seeks to define the boundaries of acceptable artistic expression and further blurs the terms of acceptable depictions of national identity.”¹⁴⁹ That sort of public censorship is mostly today connected with religious issues which – true – are less present in works. It’s part of the process and part of the site’s evolution to push the boundaries further.

“Recycling” – in terms of allowing to enter the cycle – socio-political and sensitive issues, dealing with facts of the past and calling upon deleted segments of social memory, reflecting on traditional techniques are all present layers of today’s independent scene. They allow the past to stay in the present and allow its reception and interpretation, it works as a social engager. The artistic practices are one part of the platform the independent scene offers, the other part being the autonomous infrastructure it brings discussed in the next subchapter.

¹⁴⁷ Public censorship alluded to in this paragraph is the main cause, especially regarding religious topics. The Media is still sharply controlled through the Telecommunication Law (and especially 66.d. article) which can still enter in force based on defamation, see: [<http://frontiermyanmar.net/en/66d-the-defamation-menace>], Accessed: May 24, 2017

¹⁴⁸ Johnston, “Intuitive Acts: The Evolution of Myanmar Contemporary Performance Art,” 24.

¹⁴⁹ Carlson, “Painting as Cipher: Censorship of the Visual Arts in Post-1988 Myanmar,” 150.

C. Initiatives Beyond the Comfort Zone

The following paragraph only mentions the actors, cultural producers who are related to the alternative, independent scene. The list is not intended to be exhaustive however an essential part of it is cited. The frames in which the independent contemporary art scene is approached in a theoretical way has already been outlined in II.A.1. This paragraph serves a complementary regarding a more practical side.

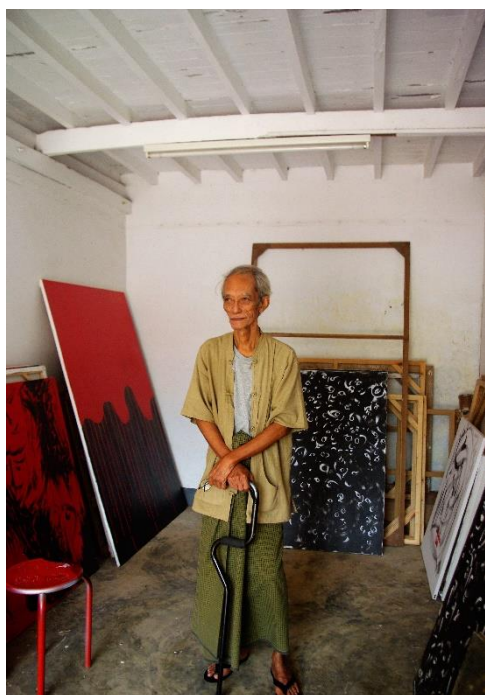


Figure 16. Aung Myint in Inya Gallery (Yangon), among his works. Photo: the author, 2014.

The study differentiates five main autonomous actors / cultural producers categories within the Myanmar independent art scene, mainly concentrated to Yangon, but not uniquely: Mandalay is (and was before too) another important hub but far not as much vibrant as Yangon. The paragraph mainly focuses on Yangon. The glossary contains a detailed description of them.

The first and most obvious category is the one of the active contemporary artist. The second big category of actors are the galleries, private and independent art spaces. The third category of actors is constituted of only few members, the foreign cultural institutes. There is an invisible fourth category, nonetheless important, i.e. those temporal events / projects that are specifically generated by the independent scene, only lasting a few days or which are translated through pop-up places open for a month or so. Finally, the fifth embraces the individual professionals – curators, researchers, writers, organizers – and also a handful of collectives like MARCA or SOCA Myanmar which work like small associations.

What brought to life most of the early spaces – i.e. Lokanat, Inya Gallery, etc. – was the literally non-existent possibility for artists to exhibit their works after the Independence. Some yearly salons were organized though, but they were very general, and artists were usually reluctant to solo shows as went against the grain of modesty. In the 1950s, some exhibitions were organized in the private apartment of diplomats who were the main patrons of the first (pre-)modernists attempts in art – usually the works sold well. After a few years, the artists themselves started to organize exhibitions (i.e. at the City Hall, later under the organization of the Gangaw Village Group at the Rangoon University). In 1967, there is a written record of Bill Small’s auction in his home with more than a hundred works sold. For long decades, the degree of isolation was severe and all small achievements were great steps.¹⁵⁰ Lokanat was only opened in 1971 as the first space dedicated to exhibitions.¹⁵¹

“Imagine a wilderness and isolation so complete as to be almost on another planet: culture and traditions kept intact by isolation, remaining virtually unchanged as they had been for centuries [...] Artists, after all, are born with an instinctive creativity that transcends space, time, connections. How else then would they know the things they do, understand immediately the minds of great modern artists of the world by having only a glance in a picture in a worn magazine?”¹⁵²

The past few years have transformed the scene in several ways. Rental fee for spaces became much more expensive, making it difficult to create one; however the context, and general atmosphere has evolved in favor of being more welcoming for art spaces; administration is still a tough process, but perhaps less endless. The interest for artistic expression is growing – although in small steps and mainly in bigger hubs like Yangon and Mandalay; the means for display and presentation / preservation offer better possibilities – with some simple facts as to

¹⁵⁰ Sein Myo Myint, Khin Maung Nyunt, and Ma Thanegi, *Myanmar Painting : From Worship to Self Imaging*.

¹⁵¹ The long process of establishing Lokanat was the team work of a group of enthusiasts, among them KT. U Tint Lwin, lawyer, who holds since then a small office adjacent to the space, or U Ba Than, as well as U Ye Tun. It became with time a central place for artists’ meeting. KT. U Tint Lwin, Interview with lawyer KT. U Tint Lwin, Lokanat, Yangon.

¹⁵² Quoted by Ching, “Art from Myanmar. Possibilities of Contemporaneity?,” 438.

be able to have constant air condition (electricity) in a space – it helps to protect the works from humidity, and keeping the windows closed from insects while allowing aeration. Also, it seems that the more progressive core of artists also slowly finds its ways towards the public. Between 2014–2015, an ambitious project started. On the bank of the Yangon River, located near a jetty where thousands of passengers are commuting on a daily basis between the two sides, a warehouse was transformed into a gallery, TS1. The project was controversial as the place's profile targeted a wealthier class – collectors, art lovers, celebrities. The jetty is however the crossroads for residents of outside of Yangon, not able afford housing in the city.



Figure 17. A white-cube gallery for contemporary art inside, TS1 operated on a jetty area of Yangon in 2014-2015. Performance of Lwin Oo Maung in October 2014 during Contemporary Dialogues Yangon. Photo: Flux Kit

Some of the most progressive events these past years took place there, and even though at first sight TS1 seemed an isolated island, the staff took the challenge seriously and opened the doors to everyone, reaching out to the possibly widest spectrum of visitors. Several performances took place outside, on the jetty, engaging communication with passers-by and engaging them by at addressing them to give voice to their issues.¹⁵³

Many of the galleries or independent spaces take on responsibilities well beyond the usual tasks of a gallery / space – in many countries, these ‘duties’ belong to big institutions funded by central budget. These responsibilities involve those already listed in Ch.II.B., namely being the advocates – through the artists – of communities without a voice, standing up for justice, human rights, community empowering: they provide the physical space as meeting point with the

¹⁵³ *Attention please!*, June 28, 2014. TS1's one year function permit was not renewed by the authorities. It closed in February 2015.



Figure 18. End screening event for the participants of a photo-workshop organized by Myanmar Deitta. Photo: www.deitta.org

public. They also represent an alternative educational chain, most of the initiatives are free of charge especially for children or youngsters providing them a rare tool. New Zero Gallery has been organizing residency programs, free art education

for children, open lectures besides exhibitions. Others, like Deitta and one of the newest spaces, Myanmar/art organize workshops, usually trying to involve international participants. Pansodan Gallery and Scene is almost unbeatable in the amount and variety of events organized, from documentary film screenings to poetry nights, lectures on cultural topics, concerts, etc. Pansodan aims also to offer regular “museum-like exhibitions.”¹⁵⁴ The owner of New Treasure Gallery, Min Wae Aung owns also a precious collection of “old paintings,” works from the twentieth century mostly but encompassing all important artists from premodern times.¹⁵⁵ The galleries, spaces usually work as pioneers, slowly pushing the boundaries by innovating new types of events, cooperating in the organization of bigger projects. They even ensure works for museum exhibitions abroad, or work as mediator between foreigner curators and other actors of the scene.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Aung Soe Min, Interview with gallery owner and artist Aung Soe Min, Yangon. Pansodan also ‘gives shelter’ to a private collection of artworks (ancient paintings – modern times), an archive encompassing the most various elements, from century old newspapers to maps, documentary material or a huge photo-archival material with photos from the earliest times.

¹⁵⁵ Painter himself, he exactly knew the value of works that for long were less considered interesting. His collection only visible in the basement of his gallery with special booking in advance was kept secret for long. These initiatives among others show how the independent infrastructure is also the spatial dimension into which the absent segment of fine art is slowly getting reintroduced into the present

¹⁵⁶ Chapter III outlines more in details some *smart practices* initiated by the independent scene.

All these spaces and galleries are for- or non-profit venues, but all were started as private initiatives which also means they are non-governmental. By taking on these tasks, well beyond commodity and self-interest, allows them to remain flexible not only in their profile, but also in their programming hence creating step by step an autonomous field of positions.

D. From New Tradition to Curiosity – A Short Survey of the Scene

In the frames of the present research, which focuses on aspects shaping even at the moment of writing, it seemed interesting and useful to obtain, next to the 2014-2015 fieldwork, fresh opinions about the present state of the art scene's working frame, to understand the nuances that might rise from the different actors' vision about the platform they are related to through the specific agenda of the research. I opted to conduct a qualitative survey among the active participants / actors of the independent art scene, aiming at reaching people with a background related to art, living and working on a permanent basis in Myanmar. Moreover, when sending out the questionnaire, I hoped to be able to "invest" the most popular aspects – if not already included – in the set of smart practices. Both Myanmar citizens and Foreigners were asked which also resulted an interesting spectrum of answers. The method used for the questionnaire and the detailed analysis, as well as the questionnaire's full text – English and Burmese – is to be found under Appendix 2. The reason to include here only a summary is due to the significant variety of the answers, the questions being open-ended. The survey is based on 11 respondents, 7 Myanmar citizens, 4 Foreigner residents.

The questions focused on the existing and missing infrastructure within the art scene, the position of the art scene in relation to the government, and on the difficulties – possibilities that the respondents, in relation to their role within the scene, would see important to mention. In general, it was acknowledged that the government does not have too much interest in art, and

that contemporary art, although not part of daily life, should be part of it having the ability to stimulate society and bring curiosity, open-mindedness and help a transition towards a new era. The respondents did not have an adverse or dismissive approach to the idea of improving the connection with the government in order to allow a better infrastructure for the arts scene which should be improved, also within the scene, i.e. the level of galleries, spaces. However, many agree on the fact that most of the engaged initiatives have limited human and financial capacity. Respondents were not at all consentient about the role of the State regarding the financial support of the scene through grants, funding, etc. but the idea of a national art museum to preserve art for the next generations and protect the works would be welcomed. As for its use, the concept of the museum is rather associated by the respondents with a place for valuable things, knowledge, where history is kept – but at the same time the respondents imagine a hypothetical national museum for art that will engage the artists, will be an active place of experience for future generations. The respondents see it as also as a hub for creativity and expression, a place for education and which is also able to protect the works – something very understandable in the difficult climate of the country. The idea of the need of respect for the value of art, and for art in general reoccured several times as well as a general need and conviction of the importance of transmitting knowledge. The idea of experiencing art is also relevant to mention as a concept that surfaced in different forms. Nevertheless, the most recurrent idea, comment, argument was the need to improve art education in every form, at every level, from workshops to an upgrade of teachers' and pupils' curricula. Also, the need to go beyond Yangon and reach out towards the whole country through institutions. (A network of) Organizations, associations are also thought to be initiatives that could support the scene's activity.

Conclusion

The dive the second part of the study offered into the deep layers of the independent contemporary art scene emphasizes the dichotomy characterizing the country's fragmented cultural sphere. It reflects a growing autonomy much closer to what could be called a Bourdieuesque "field of cultural production." The chapter proposed to look at the independent scene as a platform allowing an alternative discourse, a sort of counternarrative that is conveying unheard voices, offering various paths to an unexamined past and envisioning a future maintaining the integrity and continuity of the scene.

The absent art heritage segment – a swallowed part of social cultural memory – is not solely the matter of the artistic community, it is not a phenomenon to be considered isolated. Rediscovering this fine / visual art heritage, opening the layers of cultural diversity, its unsettled histories, the potential of the independent scene creating an organically evolving site contributes to the process of self-(re)definition in the present and can be considered as a theoretic collaborative space open to all individuals of the community as not being framed by one ideology. Contemporary art is the platform where through artist practice and a flexible infrastructure, an engaging intellectual discussion can take place through visual expression, helping gather the artistic capital for the benefit of the community.

Chapter III – "Written Photograph" of a Mechanism

Rodney Harrison mentions as one of the conceptual crises of the heritage discipline¹⁵⁷ the "clash between the nation-building functions of heritage and the wide-spread

¹⁵⁷ The study already evoked the insoluble aspect of culture in the government narrative. Although it may have started to dissolve into different segments, currently, branches are still closely intertwined, so is their destiny. Hence return here to the heritage discipline.

commercialization of the past as heritage, in transnational, postcolonial and multicultural societies.”¹⁵⁸ Harrison suggests that under certain circumstances, if the link between heritage and the nation-state seems to be dissolving, the situation may push the state which feels its authority threatened, to resist to this process by reasserting the control of heritage as part of the development of a ‘national story’, “leading to attempts to develop strong singular national narratives”. As an example, he brings the case when an old political regime is overthrown by a newly established one, with an accelerated nation-building using heritage.¹⁵⁹ In terms of the cultural scene, or related to heritage, artistic issues, it would be difficult at the present moment to prognosticate which way the official narrative would shift.

Was there, is there any intention from the new era’s government’s side to shift directions from the previous official narrative?

I would say that the art scene benefits of no priority today, and heritage issues – if not related to religious or archaeological sites, are mainly related to concerns with tourism. There is rather a general attitude of indifference from the government’s side towards the art scene. It doesn’t mean “no vigilance,” but it also means that slowly the independent art scene can better deploy its autonomy if let. A few informal sources though¹⁶⁰ seem agreeing, that since the National League of Democracy has entered the governmental sphere, it is as if there was a light breeze of change in regards of cultural matters, in Yangon at least, like more permissions to display art in public spaces, more spaces for books which became more easily accessible, and even a rumor that art education could be reincluded in school curriculum – a wish that most of the survey respondents have outlined saying that is only this way that the broken relationship

¹⁵⁸ Harrison, *Heritage – Critical Approaches*, 140.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁶⁰ Informal sources include respondents to the Survey, public policy experts on Myanmar, some actors of the scene, and a recent article Meixler, “Celebrating Art in the City.”, survey respondents (Ch. II. D). The fact that the My Yangon My Heritage festival could take place the way it did is a important proof, especially regarding the use of public spaces.

between the general public and the arts can be sewed. The informal sources mention the fact that several NLD parliamentarians were previously connected to the arts in general, to literature, to poetry (even if not as professionals, hence they certainly have an affinity that no one of the previous regime's members had) and this might be a key to their support for more culture.

The research proposes to next draw a sketch of recent investment projects, approved by the government, that popped up in the media¹⁶¹ in between end of 2016 – first half of 2017, regarding the boosting of the cultural landscape. All are at the beginning of their respective processes, so not yet finalized, nor finished. Considering the previous two chapters, I wish to outline briefly the problematic side of these projects that seem to underline more an *ad hoc* approach from the government's side than a strategically well-thought plan, that would fit a long-term policy framework for the cultural sphere and the visual art scene's future. My suggestion is that these projects, representatives of a general *ad hoc* attitude – that actually thinks these projects as grandiosely value-adders to the cultural / artistic scene without any thought-through argument – might make more harm than good to the art scene; in general, they would only loop a narrative that will not on the long-term serve the integrity of the artistic scene.

Meanwhile, involving an outlook on a few regional examples, I propose that this is a crucial moment for the artistic and in a broader sense, for the entire cultural scene hence the timing of such projects has to be handled carefully. Learning from best, or smart practices, can help avoid scenarios proved to have been mistakes.¹⁶² The alternative discourse originating from the independent art scene's site holds those driving forces, dynamics that – if we look at the parallel

¹⁶¹ The study will refer hereby only to English language media. In terms of reliability, the English media has more liberty than the media published in Burmese, still strictly controlled by controversial 'Telecommunications Act' for penalties for online defamation.

¹⁶² Cf. III.A.2.b. – the case of Singapore and its built heritage management.

drawn with living heritage – can be looked at keepers of those cultural practices that are defying a top-down narrative in this transitional period. I propose that the discourse represented by the scene, through the intrinsic values it represents, can bring a fertile, alternative continuity to the artistic scene, contributing by so to a cultural (re)-definition.

The study will end on introducing a mechanism of smart practices based on already existing initiatives and further elaborating on how these processes favor on longer term the integrity of the scene and operate as a binder of diverse cultural layers. Although it might sound utopist, it seems to me that by consciously reinforcing some of the aspects of the independent scene, it may reach out to a wider community through its alternative discourse.

A. Back to Reality

1. A Lukewarm Breeze

The following paragraph has the intention to mention some of the latest new moves concerning project-ideas and specific plans regarding art-related developments in Yangon, but the projects raise several questions. The following ones are outlined because of their size and potential impact.

Announced in December 2016 during a forum organized by the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, there is a plan is to open for public use the waterfront areas towards the Yangon River on a popular part of Downtown (next to the most famous colonial-time hotel, The Strand): today used merely as an industrial stock places, the idea is to renovate seven large warehouses and convert them into art spaces for public recreation. The main administrative, governmental body behind the project is the Yangon Region.¹⁶³ “Our State Counsellor asked us to look at

¹⁶³ In the announcement diffused by the media, the Yangon Heritage Trust was mentioned as an NGO having lobbied for such an implementation of their strategy, but the idea of opening the waterfront already emerged in 2013.

examples in France and England. We have learned¹⁶⁴ that these countries renovated old train stations and complemented them with modern buildings. These warehouses will become galleries and will be an attraction for tourists. They will display real works of art, like a second Bogyoke Market,” a Ministry official is quoted.¹⁶⁵ The Yangon Heritage Trust’s 2016 strategy mentions that: “sheds 1, 2, 4, 5, 6 and 7 could become major new cultural and arts facilities with space for commercial retail.” And also that: “Myanmar’s first Museum of Modern Art could be located here, along with major new performance spaces for *pwe*, theatres, a recital centre and concert hall.” But that’s all about it. The relevancy of YHT’s short proposal is debatable, the point is to outline how these warehouses are meant to be used: the warehouses will welcome “real works of art, like a second Bogyoke Market”. With all due respect towards the idea of offering new cultural and artistic spaces to Yangon, I am rather concerned of what this implicates within the visual art scene, as the Bogyoke Market works are typically covering the previously mentioned “ethno-kitsch” artistic production. The warehouses were to be launched in March 2017 – in May 2017, there is no sign yet of the opening. A more thought-through action plan generating a truly stimulating place would have probably been better than a replica of an already existing market only reinforcing commodified art.

The second project I wish to mention is the plans announced for the construction of the Zaykabar private museum with owner U Khin Shwe, chairman of Zaykabar Group of Companies. It is to showcase his collection of antiques – about 6000 rare items to be displayed from a collection of several ten (hundred?) thousands of items, from paintings to stuffed

¹⁶⁴ During an interview in 2014 with one of the former researchers of YHT, it was mentioned that there was an ongoing project between YHT and Yangon municipality to mobilize through some travel possibilities the town leader-officials to cities where “old buildings with value” were preserved and good public use was made of them. Many of the officials have rather the idea of Singapore in mind when thinking of an economically successful city – i.e. tower houses, new condos, etc.; the real estate business is one of the fastest growing industries in the country: the point of the YHT was to show them another alternative urban planning than skyscrapers. The person whom I did interviewed could not be reached for permission of reference.

¹⁶⁵ “Strand Road Warehouses to Get New Life as Art Galleries.” For more information on the project in chronological order of publication: Kyaw Phyto Tha, “Rangoon Planning Committee Wants Public Access to Riverfront.”; Kyaw Phyto Tha, “Rangoon to Launch Public Waterfront Area in 2017.”

primates, through royal jewelry. The plan was at the time of the news already approved by the Ministry and waiting for approval from the Yangon City Development Committee. The ambition is great, as the articles mention it could become even the biggest private museum of Asia (!). The articles also mention that the owner was a parliamentarian in the military-backed regime, for ten years on the US's Specially Designated Nationals list. His name was removed one month before the announcement of the museum. Rights group objected and "criticize[d] the lack of transparency in the business landscape and continued involvement in the economy by individuals and companies with military ties".¹⁶⁶ The new law allowing individuals to open a museum dates from 2015.¹⁶⁷ U Khin Shwe sees himself as a heritage savior taking over the tasks of the government ("private sector involvement is required") by buying antiquities that would otherwise be sold to foreign countries, although he admits that his collection was illegal until the recent change in law. The first big private museum will most probably – albeit the value of the rare items – add one more "vitrine-building," "heritage room" to the horizon, as a second (third) "national museum": the display narrative is unlikely to be very different from the model already existing which will be hence reinforced.

For spatial consideration, I am only mentioning the question raised by the growing phenomenon of private museums (in general) in Asia and the imbalanced power it brings to public good. The absent traditional institutional infrastructure in Asia has opened the ground for the private sector to shine through the value it owns – the art sector is seriously involved in this process.¹⁶⁸ With star-architects designing the buildings, these new entities do not want to remain in the shadow. Chris Dercon, former director of Tate Modern, London mentions that

¹⁶⁶ Kyaw Hsu Mon, "Zaykabar Group's U Khin Shwe to Open Private Museum."

¹⁶⁷ "The Protection and Preservation of Ancient Monuments Law."

¹⁶⁸ Larry's List and AMMA, "The Private Art Museum Report - Larry's List." It seems that only just in a decade or so, the economic and social factors have shifted so strongly that radically new models should be thought of as for the operational models of even the biggest museums of the world. Public museums see themselves today challenged by privately funded museums, most of them built in the past fifteen years. The List provides the number of 317 only contemporary private museums in the world.

whereas private collectors make idiosyncratic choices regarding their way of collecting, “public museums cannot afford to give up to them the production of memory and the writing of art history.” The public museum cannot look at objects following the criteria of a return on investment, hence public museums “are an antidote, not a supplement, to private collections.”¹⁶⁹ Besides, the museum in general stands for “expressions of a culture as a whole” which is not the case through a private collection. If public museums disappear in the shadow of private institutions, and the educational role of the public museum is being blurred, the new situation can lead to strong manipulation of the masses. As the study has touched upon it previously, the official narrative displayed through the National Museum is excluding several narrative segments – which why this one is problematic, especially if duplicating the NMY. Private museums may have their advantageous sides: they can create vibrant new platforms of dialogue by precisely taking over some duties or responsibilities when governments can’t or won’t.¹⁷⁰ But then mindfulness, open-mindedness and community engagement is imperative.

The third project is also quite ambitious and even more controversial. It started in 2012, when the renovation rights of the iconic Secretariat (Ministers’ Office) building of Yangon’s Downtown were won by the Anawmar Group, a private company. However, it is a well-known

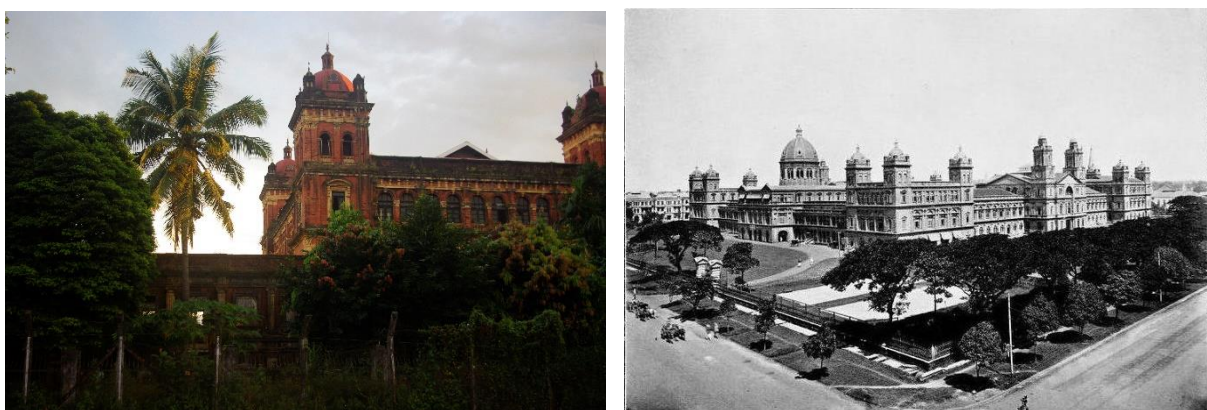


Figure 19. Left: One wing of the huge building of the Secretariat, today completely empty, in the Downtown area, 2014. Photo: the author. Right: the Secretariat in its original form in the 1900s. Photo: Wikipedia

¹⁶⁹ Dercon, “Public Museums Need a New Way of Working with Collectors.”

¹⁷⁰ Most tycoon-investors in Myanmar are thought to be involving cronies of the former military regime. Private money invested in culture “without strings” is almost non-existent; “patrons of the art” are still missing from the arena.

fact that the company is owned by family members of a former general of the military backed government.¹⁷¹ It is the biggest building in all Downtown, it was the former administrative set of British Burma and a location deeply tied to national memory as it is where Aung San was murdered along with other party members in 1947.¹⁷² The right-owners, being “arts and crafts collectors,” said wanting to open a museum, while they also project commercial ventures to cover maintaining costs. Restaurants, offices will be also part of the complex, next to the section dedicated to traditional arts (and / or historical museum, arts and cultural center – the formulation of the exact content varies). The YHT lobbied for the creation of a Conservation Management Plan for the renovation (the rights are owned for 50 years), so the ensure a professional process, but there is no system to monitor if the company follows the plan. The general opinion is however that the building should belong to the public. Without going into in-depth analysis about the obviously controversial situation, it is again the content of the edifice I would like to point out. The aim to have a big part of the building as a “historical museum and arts and cultural center” is appreciable from the perspective of allowing culture a bigger arena, but the content will be defined by private owners who openly stand for putting into the foreground culture that sells well, besides the fact that the content they plan is unknown. In my opinion, the Secretariat building’s cultural content, due to the owners ties, is rather to follow and continue a conservative, official, pre-set narrative than to revisit it and come up with a progressive standing point.

All three projects appear not being willing to reconsider a deeper perspective that could actually be of use to the art scene, not only filling in artificially generated, huge spaces.

¹⁷¹ San Yamin Aung, “Will Rangoon’s Secretariat Be Returned to the Public?”

¹⁷² Father of today’s State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, a revolutionary who fought for the independence of the country, considered a national hero by a major part of Myanmar.

2. Intertwined Areas

Since about roughly a decade, but especially in the last five years, there is a strong interest in Asia for cultural investment, “prompted by the fantasy that culture has economic potential,”¹⁷³ – becoming a sophisticated cultural city for tourists, attracting executives and professionals – a potential for major hubs like Hong Kong or Singapore to overcome a shrinking economy. China is a huge museum investor,¹⁷⁴ but Thailand, the Philippines have also started to align in this aspect.

In this short paragraph I intend to bring into the discussion three states (of which one is a city-state) from the close region: all have been through a radically different path. Nevertheless, I believe all three have aspects that constitute an interesting analogy regarding Myanmar’s present and its independent art scene. Vietnam and Cambodia are already in post-transition period for a while now, so the complexity of their case can be viewed from distance, allowing conclusions at a certain extent. Both are viewed here as examples regarding their transition period, not today’s framework. Singapore is mentioned as being a city-state which is in many ways a model for the region, including Myanmar, but for Myanmar to follow closely its path, however this may even sound unrealistic, would also be misleading.

a. Vietnam and Cambodia – Two Different Realities

Vietnam stepped on the path of its policy of renovation in 1986, starting with the adoption of a market economy, which got completed at the beginning of the 1990s. The *doi moi* period also engendered a transformation in the art and cultural production, mainly starting from the 1990s. Natasha Kraevskaia wrote in 2002 an overview of the transition and its impact on arts in the

¹⁷³ Ho Hing-kay, “Government, Business, and People: Museum Development in Asia.”

¹⁷⁴ Larry’s List and AMMA, “The Private Art Museum Report - Larry’s List.”, p.19 Beijing on its own has 9 private contemporary art museums, Seoul 13.

decade closing the twentieth century.¹⁷⁵ She quotes Birgit Hussfeld who in 1997 divided the Vietnamese art scene into three segments: those who produce work in line with traditions of yesterday's propagandists; those who due to market demands explore stereotypical exotic images of Vietnam and a number of others who do not participate in the research for national identity,¹⁷⁶ moreover, overstepping the limitations of provincial and national, they better integrate into the Euro-American art circuit. Still in 2002, exciting artistic events take place outside of the governmental framework sticking to "mediocre art events". After a long decade, institutions still failed to adapt to the constantly changing art scene while small groups of individuals kept renegotiating the role of art in society. "The enthusiasm of individuals meets the indifference of institutions towards contemporary art trends head-on in a continuously evolving arena of tension."¹⁷⁷ However, the high-aestheticism of Vietnamese art-making was preponderant to artists approaching their works with conceptualism and a social-political consciousness. "This handful of artists who have contributed constructive innovations to the art development of their country are opposed by other local artists who cannot resist the temptations of the market". By the time she wrote the article, the market changed from a being a "fairy with a magic wand to one of the main obstacles on the road of contemporary art development." The market was mainly composed by foreigners, who basically ended up by "dictating" the artists what should be painted, generating a highly destructive phenomenon. "The artists, thus, create fixed representations of the Orient and of Vietnam, which satisfy the uncultivated tastes of the audience."¹⁷⁸ The fear of being excluded by the market enclosed most of the artists in a never-ending loop of self-repetition and one mode of creation. Iola Lenzi reinforces the statement a decade later: "I've seen the market destroy the scene in Hanoi at the end of the 1990s. The market came in so fast, it was like a tsunami, and so many of the young

¹⁷⁵ Kraevskaia, "Vietnamese Modern Art: Change, Stagnation, Potential, Strategy."

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 364.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 366.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 378.

brilliant artists of the 90s never recovered.”¹⁷⁹ Art market turning into a commodity production was only one of the factors for allowing the tsunami: Kraievskaja mentions a set of other obstacles and problems, like the lack of adequate government patronage.

Cambodia’s case is mentioned from the perspective of independent, non-profit art spaces. The early 1990s were a period of drastic changes, through a completely different set as Vietnam, which occupied actually Cambodia for the previous ten years. Art wasn’t as present in the every days: most of the artists of the country were killed along with the intellectuals of the country by the Khmer Rouge. Plus, prior to the 1970s, there was no propagandistic canon through art, the basic ground hence for revival was very different. Researcher of the Cambodian contemporary scene, Robert Nelson underlines the fact that non-profit art spaces usually grow out as in opposition to ageing and inflexible institutional forms. But in Cambodia, as there are no such institutions – none to collect contemporary art, no publisher dedicated to it, no support from the government in any way, no indigenous market for it – there is no such opposition to rail against. What is highly interesting is the possibility for non-profit spaces to shape themselves a new terrain “through experimental approaches and mindfulness of the local context”.¹⁸⁰ For long years, the contemporary art scene was dominated by foreigners – through art spaces / galleries aiming to boost the art scene – which eventually led to some initiatives from the Khmer side as a response, like the Sa Sa Art Projects – named by Nelson in 2012 the only artist-run non-profit space. A year after Nelson’s publication, Pamela N. Corey talked during a MoMA conference in New York about new forms of artistic expression, “as contemporary artists in the country’s capitol have developed their practices against a backdrop comprising various factors set in motion by the transition. These include alternative sites for

¹⁷⁹ Kálmán, “Iola Lenzi Interjú I., II. : ‘A Kortárs Művészet a Társadalmi Változás alakítója’; ‘Ellenérzéseim Vannak a Művészeti Piacca szemben’ (Iola Lenzi Interview I, II: ‘Contemporary Art as the Driver for Social Change’; ‘I Rather Keep Away from the Market.’”); Interview with János Jelen, Budapest.

¹⁸⁰ Nelson, “Non-Profit Art Spaces in Cambodia: Strength in Diversity,” 1.

artistic formation, NGO culture and memory projects, rising clashes over land dispossessions, a growing urban heritage movement, the influence of returnee artists, and the introduction of photography as a new mode of creative critique.”¹⁸¹

The two above mentioned cases point at some similarities with Myanmar, each in a different way. What seems a significant difference in Myanmar is that as the political opening of the country started, a small number of the actors of today’s independent art scene were already operating underground in modest but valid ways. Through the opening-up, with a new set of possibilities they could grow further. What Nelson points at – the possibility of shaping a new terrain through mindfulness of the local context is a direct parallel to the potential of the independent scene in Myanmar.

b. Singapore – an Artistic Dystopia?

As a last entry for this subchapter, I wish to mention Singapore but in a different relation than Cambodia and Vietnam. Singapore works as a model for the Southeast Asia region due to its economical success, especially in the eyes of other postcolonial nations.¹⁸² The transformation of Yangon in the past decade considering the speed at which new buildings grow like mushrooms is one of the results. It is not by coincidence that the YHT emphasized some of the mistakes of Singapore in its 2016 Strategy, as the state-city has made a lot of (unnecessary) regrettable sacrifices in favor of quick development, especially at the expense of built heritage in its center (just as Beijing). In Myanmar, skyscrapers represent the symbols of success, following Singapore’s model.¹⁸³ Besides, since an early stage of its potential economic success, Singapore intended to geopolitically map itself through newly elevated cultural institutions,

¹⁸¹ Corey, “The Conditions for Contemporary Art in Post-Transition Cambodia (Abstract for Conference Panel: Contemporary Art in Cambodia: A Historical Inquiry).”

¹⁸² Chua Beng Huat, “Southeast Asia in Postcolonial Studies: An Introduction.”

¹⁸³ See above for the project of YHT to co-work with Yangon municipality: the idea was to show an alternative for a successful urbanization.

hence to obtain a definite spot on the world cultural map. It's a tendency it hasn't dropped since, just to mention the Singapore Biennale since 2006. Eugene Tan and Peggy Levitt offer a slightly different analysis for this phenomenon. Tan mentions the anachronism of Singapore in many ways, being part of the strong tendency in Southeast Asia allowing foreign capital an important priority in spite of the potential dangers of globalization, hence economic and financial value become a "yardstick for just about everything." Tan emphasizes as a result the problem of the cultural homogenization, as the establishment of an international language of art, or more properly the hegemony of art discourses originating in Europe and America.¹⁸⁴ Peggy Levitt approaches the question from the tendency for new economies to attempt a geopolitical repositioning through cultural institutions. She introduces the example of Qatar, which has a strategic master plan on how to use cultural institutions to reach the role of regional and global player. Singapore, says Levitt looks at Doha as a model. Singapore's aim through solidifying its place in the region is to become a knowledge-based economy, wanting to *create its own citizens*, shaping their mentality. This continues today, with an institutional framework aiming perfection.¹⁸⁵ The bigger question is what to fill all these institutions with? Singapore has implemented "multi-culturalism" (Harrison) in its art policy, being in some ways the mediator or the surrounding countries art scenes, similarly to Hong Kong. It aims to design a sophisticated plan that uses cultural production in order to create national art and a public who can appreciate it. Although unlikely to imagining that it could happen in such a same way, I believe creating a similar top-down cultural enterprise in Myanmar – dreaming perhaps of a same successful cultural investment – would not only be too abrupt and wouldn't make sense for society, but could be also fatal to the existing artistic community if not prepared adequately: a well-planned negotiation period, completed with thorough field research, good practice

¹⁸⁴ Tan, "Museum Politics and Nationalism in Singapore."

¹⁸⁵ Levitt, "Arabia and the East: How Singapore and Doha Display the Nation and the World."

analysis in other countries from the region would be the minimum needed to start such an investment and it is still a question how the government plans to relate to its content.

The case of the M+ of Hong Kong is an interesting parallel. Oscar Ho Hing-kay, early member of the advisory committee for a new cultural district, and responsible for developing M+, recalls the severely complex process of planning the new M+. From how to avoid Western terminology (instead of “modern and contemporary” to art from “twentieth and twenty-first century”) to indicating through the “+” the idea of wanting to be more than a traditional museum, but a cultural forum with an open end, due to the general reluctance of the local public towards museums, having nothing to do with the cultural experience of the general public. Beyond all issues, remained many more questions: who was to run M+? How to rearticulate the content, what should be the language of interpretation? And above all, there was the fear that a major part of the general cultural resources would be absorbed by the mega-project: it would then have created an imbalance of cultural development, making the situation worst for small, grassroots cultural groups. Ho-kay mentions the pressure on government to “seek an ecological totality instead of just focusing exclusively on one huge single project.”¹⁸⁶ It would be difficult to imagine yet a similarly thoughtful process in Myanmar.

The chosen analogies aimed also to emphasize the weight that can have a process of institutionalization (or not, both with its advantages and disadvantages) and the several options that exist. But it is a strategy to be made as even the smaller steps can generate serious backlash *a posteriori*. Nation-branding through heritage, through cultural institutions is happening.¹⁸⁷ It is a necessity to decide on a standard position and strategy in this regard, but it is not a necessity

¹⁸⁶ Ho Hing-kay, “Government, Business, and People: Museum Development in Asia,” 276.

¹⁸⁷ Aronczyk, *Branding the Nation. The Global Business of National Identity*.

to *museumify* and institutionalize per se, in a *l'art pour l'art* manner, to elevate grandiose showcases.

B. A Reading Tool for the Present

The mechanism of smart practices outlined by the final part of the study is conveying an arbitrary selection, reflecting those aspects that, based on personal experience and the present research, taking in consideration the responses given to the survey, I find important to include, to highlight as processes that may strengthen the mindful evolution of the independent art scene in consideration of the context it is working in and which surrounds it. The aim is to convey a position not detached from the ground of reality, an attempt not to overlook, neither to over-contextualize. It is an attempt to superimpose ongoing discourses and find through the layered calque-sheets, those lines that together may shape continuity in regard of the near future, resulting in an intrinsic overall composition. I am aware that the present sketch might not be fully aligned with the general idea of what the independent scene has about its own mechanism, I am not even sure there is a general idea or position advocating a same angle to stand from. Most of the concepts used throughout the study need more clarification, which fact also shows that these notions are in an awakening, or reawakening stage in Myanmar: a dialogue has started, a process of exchange within the arts field to which this mechanism wishes to contribute.

1. Short Method-Frames

The study has so far attempted to outline elements of different narratives creating altogether one possible reading. The last part of the study wishes to serve as reading tool, collecting and highlighting a mechanism of smart practices of the current era: it joins an already existing dialogue which however mostly exists in practice, in an oral form. The present paragraph opts for archiving current, smart frameworks, or instead of *archiving* – the present paragraph rather

molds these smart practices so that they can be reworked, developed later from an already shaped out basis. Similar to a “written photograph,”¹⁸⁸ it is concise, reflects the present and can be easily looked at. It helps orientation in a rapidly growing arena of actors, with different agenda.

I see the aim of the study in encircling those articulation points within the mechanism of the independent contemporary art scene (practices and infrastructure) which reflect well the site’s driving forces in the transitional void that is happening at the moment; within a few years they would certainly need to be reviewed. The mechanism is not addressing directly governmental policy frameworks as irrelevant in the frames of the present study.

I believe that every small, but mindful step, strengthening the integrity of the art scene and in a wider sense, the cultural scene, has the capacity of becoming a landmark in the future.

Before addressing the core part of the subchapter, I would like to mention one last thing. I feel important to emphasize – if until this point the study was not enough clear about it – that the conceptual lineage and frame anchored by the research does not want to claim its exclusivity within the set of discourses. As already tackled, the proposed dynamic is about integrity, which means that the study rather wants to outline the independent contemporary art scene as being a valid representative of an alternative discourse. It can certainly not be assumed, that it is the solely representative of the cultural field. It has the assets of forming a platform encompassing those aspects which can bring new perspectives, that help inclusivity and not exclusivity and also a closer cooperation between different cultural branches. This site exists and needs acknowledgement as a carrier of a social cultural memory imprint.

¹⁸⁸ Kawulich, “Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method,” 2.

The final subchapter relies partly on Best Practice Research, based on the critical review of Arnošt Veselý.¹⁸⁹ The author outlines that there are no defined methods for research of bad or good practice – definitions of these are also quite interchangeable. However, based on Bardach's perspective, he suggests the term of "smart practice" as pointing out to "the existence of a smart or interesting idea in a given practice, one that deserves attention."¹⁹⁰ Also in this case, rather setting a relation of causality implying a phenomenon from causes to effects, it is a mechanism that creates a best framework: "in a complex social world, social phenomena are often intertwined, one cannot tell which one precedes the other."¹⁹¹ The term mechanism has been used – in a different meaning – at several occasions through the study, but the concept here aligns well. Although BPR is usually used in a "closed system," as an institution for instance, I opt to use this method, and within it a smart practice, through the definition of emphasizing innovativeness and transformability.¹⁹²

I mentioned "partly" regarding the usage of BPR as there is no proper implementation of the outlined practice to somewhere, the smart practices will be framed within the mechanism of the scene itself to be reworked – perhaps – later on. It rather can be considered as a source of BPR for other areas in the cultural frame.

For each outlined segment, one or a group of existing practice(s) is put in parallel or in comparison with other related initiatives, or associated with further proposals for the enhancement of its smart value(s). The set goes from a smaller scale towards a more encompassing scale.

¹⁸⁹ The BPR „is based on the idea that instead of formulating an abstract ideal state we want to reach, we should develop what has been or is being implemented and is proven to work somewhere else.” Veselý, "Theory and Methodology of Best Practice Research: A Critical Review of the Current State," 99.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 106.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 107.

¹⁹² Ibid., 102.

2. A Mechanism of Smart Practices

a. *Advocacy of Long-Term Plans*

Several of the survey respondents feel the need to create an independent advocacy group – besides the governmental-related ones like the Myanmar Art Council and Art Fund – that could possibly represent on long-term the interests of the non-governmental actors of the scene. It can be an older, existing frame revitalized taking in consideration the needs of the members but it could be a new one, also incorporating the galleries: its importance would be in setting some guidelines that help the cooperation between the actors, as a sort of forum, but also protect its interests. It would also help more regular meetings to discuss the issues that many of them are facing individually but have no legal frame through which to act. Rodney Harrison refers to the efficacy of “hybrid forums” where professionals, experts and non-experts, government-officials can meet and discuss, such a platform “can help undermine the antagonistic bureaucratic divide between laypersons and experts” and generate new insights, towards a “more dialogical procedure in the heritage arena.” It can be regarded as community consultation which overcomes traditional problems.¹⁹³ In the context of Myanmar it’s difficult at the moment to imagine such forums but perhaps there will be appointed officials who can be contacted with time.

¹⁹³ Harrison, *Heritage – Critical Approaches*, 223. referring to: Callon, Michel. 2011. *Acting in an uncertain world: an essay on technical democracy*. Cambridge: Mit Press

b. Workshops, Lab Work, Residencies // Knowledge-transmission, Alternative Educational Chain, Network-building

The growing number of workshops organized by galleries, art spaces, organizations reflect a clear demand for it, as the survey too outlined (Ch. II. D.)



Figure 20. Workshop at the NUAC, Yangon during the Mobile Library program with the participation of the NUAC teachers, November 2014. Photo: Flux Kit

Expanding this idea, the concept of “lab work,” also mentioned in the survey, is a good form of practice – it’s more connected to a collaborative project idea.

The workshop is a form of sharing and transmitting knowledge that generates a mutual dynamic of giving and receiving

between participants. If they are regular, workshops / lab work can also be seen as an alternative to narrow curricula to universities. The concept of the workshop has many forms, and is quite flexibly adaptable to the conditions – budgetary and administratively equally. Properly elaborated E-learning courses in forms of workshops can also be an option, especially in budget terms.¹⁹⁴

Workshops help building networks, at international or even local level, and improve cultural exchanges. The training format is what might work the best on long-term, where several consecutive phases (days) allow the participants to enter the given topic in-depth. Workshops involving both Myanmar and International leaders are a way to share knowledge about how to move on with the fragmented institutional framework of Myanmar which definitely needs specific knowledge to be able to cooperate on a wider international scale. The Myanmar

¹⁹⁴ Not only posting online videos or documents but creating a built-up teaching tool with it.

cultural scene lacking international, translated material. Voluntary translation of basic material (as MARCA started, or crowdsourced volunteer translations) are valuable contributions. Reaching out to regional universities, artistic organizations for already appraised material that can be easily adapted to the Myanmar context helps set a starting point.¹⁹⁵ Workshops would be interesting also to organize for researchers within the art scene to share material, results.

A wide spectrum of workshop-topics is welcomed currently, mainly focusing to Yangon where the organizers are. Myanmar Deitta gives place – besides thematic ones – to technical workshops in media-related methods. Myanmar/art organizes workshops touching upon social issues, or theoretical ones, but opens the floor to a series of experimental events, like experimental music or photography. I would include here symposium-like events, where *dialogue* is made possible between the different cultural segments or simply within the art scene. Lectures are a spreading form of events but it is quite difficult to gather different interesting perspectives at one short occasion. The Contemporary Dialogue Yangon event, (2014) was one rare occasions which made possible the bridging between literature, art, cinema – “creative industries” of the country. These industries might share the same problems.

Still in this lineage of idea, I wish to include the artist residencies. New Zero Art Space has been the most active perhaps in this regard, but not exclusively. The advantage of welcoming an artist from abroad in the frames of either a one-way or both-way exchange is multilayered, encompassing many of the here above-mentioned aspects. In Myanmar, it mostly works at an individual level and through personal contacts, as the galleries are personalized institutions. However, international institutions should be aware of the huge efforts the private initiatives are making and should consider partnering with them even in an unequitable financial set. The biggest issue is quite simple to frame: money. The actors of the scene have no financial

¹⁹⁵ Chua, “On Teaching Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art.”

resources really. Travel costs are the most problematic (plane tickets) and living costs to provide. Sponsorship is not unseen, but quite few companies with “no strings,” especially in the local sphere, see the potential in contemporary art – usually, big companies’ owners follow a very different mentality of what artists represent (cf. III. A . 1.).

The British Council launched in 2016 an “International Museum Academy” together with the Yangon National Museum with a first step towards digitization and documentation.¹⁹⁶ Fast-forwarded trainings within the existing museums are essential to gap the speed of growing tourism and allow the drafting of a new structure.¹⁹⁷

c. Collaborative Arts // Community Forming, Social Engagement

Related to Ch. III.B.2.b., the community forming of these cooperative sessions helps personal narratives to surface. While several other examples could be cited, Htein Lin’s *Show of Hands* is a perfect one, although being a series of performances. The process of collaborative arts as the international terminology frames it, can also work as a method for engaging silenced communities, or building a stronger relation with the audience and develop a systematic dialogue. Art needs more publicity in the original sense of the word, to make accessible its platform and enable to engage with the public, open up in public spaces, reach out to the public in a more direct way as suggested by one of the surveys. It can also bridge the gap between the

¹⁹⁶ The project has not yet started, only application could be made. [<https://www.britishcouncil.org/cultural-skills-unit/opportunities/international-museum-academy-burma-2017>]

¹⁹⁷ UNESCO has been active in the country at different levels and quite irregularly through the past roughly three decades, but its relation with the government is quite hectic. Since 2012, an project office has been established in Yangon under the Bangkok Headquarter. UNESCO office helped the process for the nomination of the Ancient Pyu Cities, the first World Heritage Site from Myanmar on its list and is contributing in the next processes. Meanwhile, the office works with a small effective and as I see it, in a limited manner. Meanwhile, as Ch. I. C. introduced, it would be necessary for the government to update its approach and draft a perspective in cultural heritage regards. During an interview with Zsuzsanna Renner, it was mentioned that the Central European University’s partnering with three major universities in Myanmar to assist them in higher education reform could provide a channel to engage a discussion about cultural heritage related issues on a wider scale than the single UNESCO presence, to offer a range of alternatives in coherence with needed approach. (Renner, Interview with Zsuzsanna Renner, art historian, South Asia and Southeast Asia expert, visiting faculty at Central European University.)

artistic scene conglomerated in Yangon mostly or Mandalay and include a wider scope of places – only 30% of the population in Myanmar is living in bigger cities. One of the survey’s answer, reflecting on the question whether the artists are well represented towards the government, was affirmative: the contemporary art scene is the platform that conveys towards the government the reality around people, their lives, their troubles. It makes them visible.

d. Crowdsourcing // Accessing an Unexamined Past

There is a general tendency today within the Myanmar scene to create physical archives or create open access to existing ones, small libraries included. The reasons for this urge have been already drafted above, in Chapter I. There is a general motivation for disclosing personal narratives at a “historical level” – Open History Project has recently started its activity in Myanmar.¹⁹⁸ The Pansodan Gallery Collection and Archives – although not yet inventoried – has a wide spectrum of archival material, objects too. The owner aims at making accessible an alternative history than what is told in the books – the official narrative. MARCA is a resource center: it wants to become an accessible off- and online focal point for published material on Myanmar arts, from archival documents to the newest publications. Its partnership with AAA has been evoked earlier concerning the Mobile Library, an apparently small project but I believe a milestone in the art scene. The biggest challenge is translation, which MARCA has started, for foreign researchers to access local material and vice-versa, to have Burmese translations of important foreign publications.¹⁹⁹ The YHT mentions in its 2016 strategy the need of “memory-hubs” throughout the city to recover the suppressed aspects of memory – including archives with this aim.²⁰⁰ The *Sites of Conscience* project, although based on a

¹⁹⁸ Open History Project: [<https://www.openhistoryproject.com/>]

¹⁹⁹ “Myanmar’s cultural and artistic history is strong but nowhere exists a place where that strength is illustrated through collected records, images, and online access. This center aims to provide that collection, along with channels to access and analyze it, ultimately providing the people of Myanmar and the general public a place to explore, provide, and collaborate”. “MARCA - Mission.”

²⁰⁰ “Yangon Heritage Strategy 2016 - Combining Conservation and Development to Create Asia’s Most Liveable City.”

specific aspect of memory aiming to “foster public dialogue on social issues to build lasting cultures of human rights,”²⁰¹ deals with “dangerous memories.” A similar approach of creating a series of pop-up events revisiting problematic issues in a wider frame could be highly engaging and could be an interesting construction to look at. The Myanmar Photo Archives deserves to be mentioned in this paragraph although generated in a non-artistic context: it aims to become a digital platform next to its physical reality. Photographs are deteriorating extremely rapidly in Myanmar due to the climate: Pansodan’s Pansuriya, dedicated also to (vintage) photography. Meanwhile, a crowdsourced platform gathering archival material of different forms could very much contribute in accessing and shaping an unexamined past.²⁰² Oral material can be also very important to collect (the human side of the artist as Nora A. Taylor mentions) in forms of interviews (audio/video). Crowdsourcing would be a fascinating way to create a new perspective in artistic research, making accessible – through appraisal for sensitive material – personal archives.

²⁰¹ Pharaon et al., “Safe Containers for Dangerous Memories.”; Sites of Conscience: [<http://www.sitesofconscience.org/en/home/>]

²⁰² The originally ‘hobby’ photo-archive site initiative Fortepan in Hungary has become the most widely used free photo-archive resource. [www.fortepan.hu]

e. Exhibitions as "Sites of Construction" // Mindful Narratives



Figure 21. Muted Consciousness, exhibition at TS1: the first exhibition in Myanmar to revisit a specific decade from the recent past through the combination of archival material and artworks, 2015. Photo: the author

AAA organized in 2013 a symposium titled *Sites of Construction*: it introduced the idea of exhibitions being in Asia, and more particularly in Southeast Asia, a region in which the “absence of systematic public collections and substantial academic art history departments” dedicated to twentieth and twenty-first century art, exhibitions have become the “primary sites of art historical construction for recent art.” An issue published later on by AAA (Fieldnotes 04) follows up in 2015 by a series of articles grouped under the title *Publics, Histories, Value: The Changing Stakes of Exhibitions*.²⁰³ In line with the symposium several interpretations are proposed as far as the role of exhibitions is, one amongst them: “Each exhibition can be viewed as a proposition for an alternative reality, responding to the limits of what is possible.” This idea alludes to “the potential of exhibitions to intervene into existing structures of knowledge production, disrupt old art histories, and generate new ones.”²⁰⁴ It would be crucial for the art scene to organize bigger scale exhibitions (a series, actually) that could begin by introducing the scene to its own self and a larger public, bringing back at least in theory and partially the absent segment of fine / visual art heritage, reassessing these past decades. Recreating the lost narratives through current exhibitions (i.e. reconstructing exhibitions involving works censored

²⁰³ Asia Art Archive, *Sites of Construction - Symposium; Exhibitions and the Making of Recent Art History in Asia.*; Kim, Nasar, and Wong, *Fieldnotes - Publics, Histories, Value: The Changing Stakes of Exhibitions*.

²⁰⁴ Kim, Nasar, and Wong, *Fieldnotes - Publics, Histories, Value: The Changing Stakes of Exhibitions*, 7.

out) would be an interesting experience of reinterpretation. The main obstacle is the adequate location which is missing yet. A difficult curatorial work is ahead, as it's a sensitive topic to unearth evaporated narratives, and must be approached with great care. Melissa Carlson and Ian Howard organized in 2014 an exhibition uniting the paintings that were once banned by censorship.²⁰⁵ San Minn decided on his own in March 2015 in Yangon's Think Gallery to present those of his works that were banned: "I had the intention to reveal to the 'free to create' younger Myanmar artist generation, how forty years ago a 'different kind of art' was possible, even under the toughest censorship."²⁰⁶ The will to



Figure 22. On 9, Endurance Performance event at Goethe Institut in October 2016. Performance of Nora. Photo: Thiri Lu / The Myanmar Times

possibility to allow more space for

curated shows. In the 1980s-90s, a few shows like the *Rectangular Lantern* (Mandalay) were the early experiments of group exhibitions which aimed to formulate a position within the art scene.²⁰⁷ The *Wild Eye* exhibition first held in 1974, a year of unrest and student protests amidst a group of artist: it is celebrating its 15th edition this year,²⁰⁸ a rare continuity for the Myanmar art scene. The youngest generation is more acquainted with the idea of curatorial practice. The Goethe Institut, which reopened in 2015 after several decades of absence being banned from the country in the 1960s by Ne Win's regime, organized up to now a series of exhibitions that brought fresh air to the scene: the director, Franz Xaver Augustin, an art historian by origin,

²⁰⁵ Nock Art Foundation in Hong Kong, *Banned in Burma: Painting Under Censorship*, 2014. Sokol, "Banned in Burma' Showcases the Best of Myanmar's Censored Art."

²⁰⁶ Kálmán, "My Paintings Are Not Beautiful (San Minn)."

²⁰⁷ *Rectangular Lantern* was organized in 1985 by Chan Aye aiming to introduce modern art in Upper Burma.

²⁰⁸ Lae Phyu Pya Myo Myint, "Artists Go Wild."

embraced the most progressive young artists through curated exhibitions, inviting experts of the scene to cooperate.²⁰⁹ TS1 presented in September 2014 *The Mirror – Reflecting Society* which was a fresh approach among other curated initiatives like the exhibition presenting archival material of the Pansodan Gallery Collection in symbiose with artworks from the same period revisiting the special decade of the 1950s.²¹⁰ A general remark is that many of the exhibitions – whether simply it is the display of the newest works of one artist, or a more complex selection –, tend to last only for one-two weeks. That is usually due to lack of exhibiting spaces, hence only such a short time-frame is allowed. Extending this time could help in attracting more visitors for one show, invest more energy into one exhibition and exploit better its assets. In that regard, some spaces could cooperate to find a good way for a good rotating system. In Myanmar especially, the “sites of construction” represented by exhibitions could offer a myriad of angles to discover regarding the arts and social cultural memory – it is also a way to foster dialogue.

f. From Festivals Towards a Biennale // Embracing the Scene

Several cultural festivals take place now in Yangon:²¹¹ the Yangon Photo Festival organized through the French Institute had for several years as head of the jury committee Aung San Suu Kyi; it advocates boundary-pushing photography, rewarding outstanding photo-documentary stories. The Memory! Film Heritage Festival has the aim to restore and raise awareness for old films of which most have disappeared and extremely difficult to access if they still exist

²⁰⁹ Group show: *Building Histories*, 2014 at Goethe Villa, Yangon; Htein Lin: *The Storyteller*, 2015 at Goethe Villa, Yangon; Wolfgang Laib's exhibition at the Secretariat Building, 2017 in organization of the Goethe Institut; Performance (concert, drawing) Eye Contact between Myanmar and Germany at the National Theatre Yangon, October 3, 2014. Goethe Institut Myanmar [<https://www.goethe.de/ins/mm/en/index.html>]

²¹⁰ *The Fifties: Muted Consciousness – A Selection of the Pansodan Gallery Archives*, January 22- February 22, 2015, TS1 Yangon. Curators: Nathalie Johnston, Aung Soe Min, Borbála Kálmán

²¹¹ There is also the Wathann Film Festival, promoting independent film scene in Myanmar, it is a landmark for young filmmakers, tackling among several other issues, human rights – this is a festival rooted in the initiative of a group of international and Myanmar filmmakers.

somewhere.²¹² The My Yangon My Home Art & Heritage Festival had a quite successful agenda in 2017 involving many actors of the independent scene. The festival initiative seems successful, however as one of the survey respondent pointed out – festivals don't appear to have a lasting impact; also they mostly apply pre-existing organizational formulas, most of them originating in foreign cooperation. What seems however a great initiative is to bring out art to public spaces, a phenomenon this year also embraced by My Yangon My Heritage festival but to which the Beyond Pressure Festival (BP) anchored the main basis.²¹³ BP was founded

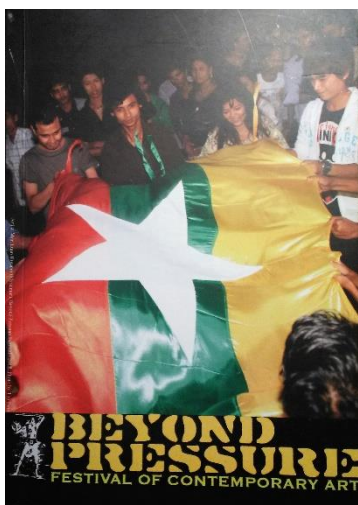


Figure 23 Cover of Beyond Pressure Festival catalogue, 2012

in 2008 by a group of contemporary artists, filmmakers and friends.²¹⁴ BP became a regular event, although not exactly annual. The festival started under censorship time, all performances needed detailed description. Participants prepared with a double layered content, to allow a different reading of the act beyond the officially accepted scenario.²¹⁵ During the first edition, only four out of ten foreign artists could join for administrative problems. The four foreigners had to perform during the dinner with the ten to twelve censorship board officials

at an elegant restaurant in Yangon (in the only big hotel of the time) to be dutifully watched. But even to make that happen, Moe Satt, artist and director of BP had to engage with government officials one year before the event, and took the initiative to educate the officials about what performance art was to gain permission to hold the event.²¹⁶ The second year went a little easier, and the artists could perform in public spaces too. The sixth last edition (2014)

²¹² Kálmán, "The Need For A Collective Voice – Time Travel Inside The Film Museum."

²¹³ Another important art event co-related to this idea is (was?) the Blue Wind International Multimedia Art Festival for women, created partly by Phyu Mon: the first one was in 2009, the last edition was in 2012 with a broad international outlook and involvement. The 2010 edition encompassed poetry too. [www.bluewindart.com], Accessed: May 24, 2017

²¹⁴ The same year, Aye Ko also organized a landmark performance festival – the two events were almost at the same time.

²¹⁵ Interview with Moe Satt, curator, artist, Yangon.

²¹⁶ Johnston, "Intuitive Acts: The Evolution of Myanmar Contemporary Performance Art," 27.



Figure 24. *Beyond Pressure Festival in 2014, installations in public spaces. Photo: the author*

saw an international list of names, and besides being a performance festival, it obtained permission of placing out installations in the People's Park, one of the most prestigious outdoor spaces of Yangon. Many programs were organized in teashops (*Tea Shop Symposium*) – the “cafés” of Myanmar, where everyday life is the pattern – having talks / round-table discussions, screenings of art videos on the screens usually hosting Myanmar soap operas or karaoke-clips. The organizers even involved the Yangon buses in the same way (*Free Video Bus*). “Our intention is to invade the place of advertising area” by art films.²¹⁷ The happenings, performances involved different layers of society and different landmarks of the city, invading actually daily life too. The budget of the festival cannot be compared to other biennale-type of events, most of the capital was (is) in volunteer effort and flexibility, adaptation to the conditions. BP works rather like a “biennale” event than a festival. Iola Lenzi uses the expression of “pulse-taking biennales” in the context of Southeast Asia which I would find more than relevant to describe the activity of BP.²¹⁸ As an analogy stands the case of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale (KMB) in the State of Kerala, India where the set is similar although the host-city is much smaller. The art scenes of both countries differ but not regarding the gap between the relation of contemporary art and daily life. What founded the KMB was the will of artists to create a fresh platform of art and dialogue outside the conventional institutional frames,

²¹⁷ Email exchange with Moe Satt, director of BP on November 29, 2014.

²¹⁸ Lenzi, “Negotiating Home, History and Nation.”

tackling issues that were meaningful to them. The 2016 edition was since its beginnings in the early 2010s the most accomplished one, with several venues besides the main Aspinwall house, a colonial warehouse area by the sea. The Biennale was aimed to be seen in progress, with works shaping and fulfilling while the exhibition was open: it was a way to defy closed linearity. Also, many layers of the city were involved – from taxi-drivers to ginger-drying warehouses. The Biennale is openly aiming to reengage with Cochi's transnational past, in a very direct way, "with the conceptual agenda of performing a critical spatial intervention ... to create works that would resonate with the multi-textured history of Cochin and its contemporary culture."²¹⁹ The KMB is not only relying on artists' budget but through a long process of negotiations, the State of Kerala joined behind in the end. The point of drawing a parallel is to make visible how far the engagement of a bottom-up initiative can lead: the steam coming from deep within the scene is able to be of cathartic impact if meeting the ripe moment. In May 2017, the news of an event in Myanmar surfaced on one of the biggest international social media platforms, leading to the explicit protest from an important number of the actors of the independent art scene. What sparked the deepest concern is the appropriation of the terms "Yangon" paired with "Biennale" in the event title by a group of external organizers: the vision it conveyed mostly relied on a misconception of what the art contemporary was (cf. "unproblematic works," Ch. II. A .1.) and was obviously created in such a short time-frame that worthily preliminary fieldwork, nor consultation with the scene was made possible. "Hubris" was a word used by a participant of the online debate at some point to describe this initiative aiming to implement a "cut and paste" model on a scene that actually doesn't need external patronizing to achieve its goals. The art scene is well and active, looking forward to

²¹⁹ Jeychandra, "Colonial Spaces Postcolonial Narratives: The Exhibitionary Landscape of Fort Cochin in India," 59.

cooperate, create, evolve, but following its own agenda. After all, a city can use only once the term “Biennale.”

The practices forming this mechanism point at an essential direction of direct engagement with the public, with communities. The reading tool the set provides questions the traditional institutional forms by representing an infrastructure that can only live in symbiosis with a central institutional frame if the latter is shaped around those dynamics that actually propulse the art scene.

Conclusion

“Like flowers bloom in absence of the viewers, and like jewels form in absence of absorbers, I created art works in the same way.”²²⁰

A visit to the National Museum Yangon creates apparently a strong contrast with some of the recent news in the media regarding projects to unfold, heralding new types of places for culture and art. A look behind the curtains however disappoints, as neither of the projects seem to revisit the displayed, “vitrinized” narrative in force, incoherent with the substance of the cultural experiences and realities in Myanmar. The trail of an absent segment of fine / visual art led to a deeper merge in the practices of the independent art scene. Working as an intrinsic site for cultural (re)definition, visual wandering, reassessment of the recent past through personal narratives, giving voice to silent communities, the independent contemporary art scene works as a “creative ecosystem”²²¹ through a small network of actors. The survey conveyed among other ideas the importance of the scene to be able to create curiosity, to engage

²²⁰ M5 (artist) respondent to the Survey, “Survey Form February 2017, Analysed in Chapter II.D. of the Present Study.”

²²¹ Fernandez, “In conversation with Nathalie Johnston.”

– not only the public, but to mediate towards the government too, opening a new sort of communication channel. Contemporary art could become “the new tradition.” Its independence is crucial, being a counternarrative, a site for open dialogue; the alternative infrastructure it has produced in the past one decade has the ability to be a new terrain for an “experimental, mindful approach,” its flexibly quickly adapting to the driving forces coming from below. The mechanism that was traced based upon smart practices intends to contribute to an ongoing dialogue by allowing a snapshot of those significant pillars that were already raised by the site through the alternative discourse the scene has generated. Further, specific suggestions were made that may complete the working frame being developed in the future as individual plans of action, such as the crowdsourcing platform for personal archives, the exhibitions revisiting lost narratives, or cooperation through workshops on a wider scale of artistic and cultural heritage management.

As the study unfolded, a most evident feature of a close future was deliberately left out. The question of museums was addressed only from the side of a stagnating official narrative and through projects outlined in the media. It is a general consent, based on the survey, interviews, letter exchanges of the past two-three years and ongoing discussions, that it would be *good* to have an art museum in the country. At least one – as one survey respondent remarks: it is a shame that in a country of 50 million people, there is not even one art museum. Is it necessarily the duty of the State to build the art museum? Should it be the government to shape its frames in light of the issues raised in the study? Wouldn't it be better for the independent art scene to somehow establish an autonomous art space big and stable enough to start more complex projects? But more questions are then to follow: Who will then curate the content? Should it have a collection – whose would it be? Who would finance it on long-term? How could be the audience reached? Uncertainties to resolve, just as in the case of the Hong Kong M+. The role and responsibility of museums are constantly questioned, not only through the postcolonial

context, or within the Southeast Asian context, but also by one of the most important international museum association too, CIMAM.²²² Museums that already exist and operate, have collections to care of, are constantly trying to rethink, transform, adapt themselves. The cultural contexts whom inherited these type of institutions revisit too the entire museum construction. Curator of Kochi-Muziris Biennale, artist Sudarshan Shetty remarks about the Indian art milieu:

“For us it’s almost imperative to re-imagine or re-configure the idea of the museum itself. [...] There’s a palpable difference between outside the museum and inside the museum, the lines are very well-drawn. The question is how do we bring the inside out or vice-versa. As we understand institutions as museums, it’s a colonial legacy we are following and that needs to be democratized, we constantly have to deal with the power-structure, the idea of power – one of these ways is to talk beyond colonial past. [...] I keep stressing the conversation that happens between the exhibited objects rather than the form around.”²²³

The process leading to the institutionalization of an art scene is a considerable responsibility to take. It is not an isolated area, it is a sphere of intertwined areas with direct impact on society.

“Without a strong tradition of philanthropic support for the arts, cultural development in Asia frequently falls into the hands of business people or else the government,” says Oscar Ho Hing-kay referring to the Hong Kong M+ case, adding that usually bureaucracy has no rooms for dreams and visions. “... It nevertheless provides an unprecedented opportunity for innovation – if, that is, we adopt the right approach.”²²⁴

If the institutional frames are generally today questioned on the fields of artistic production, the right approach is the only way to proceed. What is the right approach? It probably starts by admitting first the need of one; serious efforts should be invested in knowing the ground that

²²² “The Museum and Its Responsibilities - CIMAM Annual Conference 2016.”

²²³ Shetty, Interview with curator of Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2016, artist Sudarshan Shetty. Website of the Biennale (KMB): Kochi Muziris Biennale [<http://kochimuzirisbiennale.org/>]. The interview was made in the frames of a study trip to the KMB through Ludwig Museum – Museum of Contemporary Art and the National Cultural Fund of Hungary (NKA – Anna Bagyó).

²²⁴ Ho Hing-kay, “Government, Business, and People: Museum Development in Asia,” 276.

would be affected by any big scale institutionalization. Same goes for the heritage industry, especially in the shadow of economic development which may lead to a series of complex questions to relate to, starting by commodification, and “selling the unsellable,” referring here to G.J. Ashworth.²²⁵ I would again underline that the country is now focusing on Yangon, perhaps Mandalay in terms of art. It is crucial, especially if an institutional system comes into mind, that projects reach out from the town-center and allow the diverse communities to be able to assess their own cultural narratives. A uniform, hegemonic museum narrative doubled by new museums, based on pre-existing formats will only create obstacles for an open dialogue. The study only focused on fine / visual art. Myanmar has a deep connection to literature and poetry which are in many ways tightly bounded with arts. These bondages can be even more supportive to think of the institutional sphere’s future. “Led by consultants from the West, the new museum setting would inevitably follow certain pre-existing formats,” continues Ho Hing-kay about Hong Kong.

Artworks need preservation but also need a further life, in a living and experienceable context. Bleaching out the organic development of an artistic scene, and going further, of a cultural scene, can happen without having the intention – “creative ecosystems” are fragile and to be nurtured. Implementation of pre-existing formats without having a proper risk assessment of their impact is harmful: Myanmar is a country where environmental hazards are serious threats. Threats on the cultural field can be prevented with the right approach.

Myanmar has not only not been able to digest its colonial period, but it is now facing a post-military regime period.

“The idea of the museum as the symbol of a dominant identity, which originates from the certainties of the modern era, is questioned in the postcolonial viewpoint. A new perspective is emerging, which involves a necessary critical

²²⁵ Ashworth, “Heritage and Economic Development: Selling the Unsellable.”

review of the cultural role played by the museum, targeted at a society that has deeply changed and is now global, multicultural and multiethnic.”²²⁶

The museum’s role in the context of Myanmar has to be adapted to those needs that crave for its existence, also because on long-term, some central institutional frame needs to become the gravity point maintaining and nurturing the scene compensating the weight of the private initiatives that may fade away with time.

As Myanmar has gradually opened up, the international attention towards the art scene became a fact:

“I think this phenomenon is mostly positive. [...] However, it also raises questions. Take a tree that brings fruits; you need to wait the right time to collect the fruits. To avoid the fruits to drying, you need natural growth – a lack of support or an exceeding amount of external energy can result a bad influence. You surely must be careful.”²²⁷

Aung Soe Min, in his commitment towards the art scene, works at different layers and on different terrains: he wishes to implement art into various levels of society, launch grassroots projects to grow and spread, like fresh plants. Plants require a fertile and stable soil to unfold, as he explains: “Artists need institutions to reflect the work of the local scene, and show the context that they belong to.”²²⁸

An ecological totality would certainly be resultful, especially as the diversity of the country urgently needs to be addressed. The constellation has changed and a curious audience’s silhouette has appeared. It is too the responsibility of the actors of the independent contemporary art scene to continue building a sustainable site for art’s future and integrity.

²²⁶ Parati, “Performance in the Museum Space (for a Wandering Society).”

²²⁷ Kálmán, “Art As A Basis For The Future – Pansodan Gallery.”

²²⁸ Ibid.

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Glossary

The Glossary contains terms and concepts that are frequently used within the study and / or are important to define for clarification on their usage in the research. They reflect the author's perspective. Alphabetical order is used.

AAA – Asia Art Archive. Independent non-profit organization based in Hong Kong, founded in 2000, dedicated to document and make accessible the most recent art histories of the region, mainly SEA. The archival collection is available online and onsite and is hosting and preserving several artists' archives. It has a wide programming within the region and cooperation with other institutions and holds important research database. www.aaa.org.hk.

armed conflicts in Myanmar. In 1947, the Panglong Conference and Agreement saw the Union of Burma's birth which came into force after the Independence of January 1948. It was still a time when many believed in an upcoming period of equality and inclusive democracy. However, soon civil war broke out that led to inter-ethnic conflicts²²⁹ which together with religious tensions still fuels the ongoing armed conflicts throughout the country. Myanmar has had one of the longest history of civil war / armed conflicts. It is also the last country in the region to have a large non-state militia groups controlling sizeable territories²³⁰. Most ceasefires have been in place for decades, but the clashes between the Tatmadaw, the official armed forces of the country and other forces are frequent. The peace process has been going on for years with little result.²³¹

autonomous actors of the independent contemporary art scene.

The first and most obvious category is the one of the active contemporary artist, representing through a wide spectrum of generations an age-range between 25-70, but with a bigger percentage of artists between 25-50. Just to mention a very few names (the list is not at all comprehensive): Aung Myint, San Minn, Htein Lin, Po Po, Aye Ko, Chan Aye, Phyu Mon, Mrat Lunn Htwan, Moe Satt, Thadi Htar, Phyo Kyi, Zun Ei Phyu, Emily Phyo, Kaung Su, Nyein Chan Su, Aung Ko, Nora, Yadanar Win, Lwin Oo Maung, Ma Ei, Chaw Ei Thein, Ko Latt, Tun Win Aung, Wah Nu, Nge Lay, Thyitar, Zon Sapal Phyu, Ma Ei, Soe Naing, etc. Several of these artists have more and more opportunity to exhibit abroad, being invited to regional, but also international scale events.

The second big category of actors are the galleries, private and independent art spaces.²³² Few galleries / spaces were founded in the 2000s (besides Lokanat, New Zero Art Space was one of the first ones). Since a few years that new privately initiated spaces started to pop up, being still very careful with their exhibitions, however offering a variety of possibilities for (young) artists. Restricting the term gallery to those private enterprises, where artworks can be viewed in a regular interval, in a determined space / location, showing / selling

²²⁹ Thant Myint-U, *Where China Meets India - Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia*.

²³⁰ Thant Myint-U, "White Elephants and Black Swans: Thoughts on Myanmar's Recent History and Possible Futures."

²³¹ "Burma, Events of 2016 - Human Rights Watch."

²³² Generally taken, a gallery is a privately initiated space where artworks are shown and / or sold, the gallerist representing the artist(s) he / she is in contract with or simply works with based on mutual agreement. Several galleries work though quite independently, the gallerist buying several works at once in irregular phases and then selling them through time depending only on his / her 'price rules'. In Myanmar, there is a boom of shops selling decorative paintings and hand-crafted works, but the majority of these shops – calling themselves galleries too – cannot be included in this study.

works of art that are not copies of other existing works or “design” elements, but original works of art from the twentieth century up to today, must be around 15 with sometimes significantly varying quality of art and location (from garden backyard to newly-built locations).²³³ They usually function following a specific structure to the scene. Many spaces were initiated by artists, usually an individual or a group of artists team up to open a gallery to have a space where they can show their works, it sometimes works like a studio). Some of the galleries have foreign owners (about five today). There are only a handful of galleries / art spaces that envision the gallery as a long-term ‘investment’ within the art scene through a definite profile (strategy?) and a strict selection in order to represent quality art, more conform to international standards. Just to name a few galleries / spaces of relevance: Myanm/art, Pansodan Gallery (Pansodan Scene, Pansuriya), Studio Square, New Zero Art Space, Inya Gallery, Myanmar Deitta, River Gallery, New Treasure Gallery, KZL Art Studio, Nawaday Tharlar Gallery, Ahla Thit Gallery. And Lokanat, which occupies a quite specific place as being today one of the oldest art spaces to be open – however, it is functioning strictly as a rentable art space. There was NICA (Networking and Initiatives for Culture and the Arts), but only worked between 2003-2006.²³⁴ The role of these galleries – not only the profiled ones, but also the less conceived ones – is highly significant, as they are basically the only places where contemporary art can be seen publicly (entrance is free). There are small initiatives in Mandalay (Mandalay Contemporary Centre) or elsewhere (Pyin Oo Lwin, sculpture garden of artist Chan Aye) – but most of these are usually very small and ephemeral experiments to shake up the cultural sphere.

The third category of actors is constituted of only few members, the foreign cultural institutes: the British, French, German, institutes mainly, which show a great commitment for visual arts, and through many programs, contemporary expression forms. Their presence in the country is utmost important for the evolution of the art scene, even dating back in time. Each of them tries according to its means to support progressive artistic expression through exhibitions (Goethe Institut / several highly important exhibitions), festivals (French Institute / Yangon Photo Festival) or capacity building (British Council but also festivals / My Heritage My Yangon). Here should be mentioned the Japanese Foundation too as a serious supporter of culture contemporary art.

There is an “invisible” fourth category, nonetheless important, i.e. those temporal events / projects that are specifically generated by the independent scene, only lasting a few days or which are ‘translated’ through pop-up places open for a month or so. However ephemeral these initiatives may seem, they hold a high significance in keeping the scene alive and active (7000 Padauk, Beyond Pressure, Contemporary Dialogues Yangon, Attention Please, My Heritage My Yangon); some of them, by becoming regular events do complete the vacuum of the scene and help boost it and encourage the artists to continue their work. These projects sometimes involve foreign organizers (see Ch. III. B.). Very few conceptually curated art exhibitions take place in Myanmar, i.e. presenting, through an exhibition, a selected content along a definite line of narrative, or thematic. Not one big-scale curated international art exhibition (involving renown names, not even from the region) ever took place in the country for the simple reason there is no adequate space for it (Goethe Institut hosted a few smaller ones). There are some invited artists from abroad to smaller exhibitions but the quality and seriousness of these is questionable in many cases. There is the exception of the open air Beyond Pressure Festival to which more and more international artists are invited mainly creating temporary works / installations in public spaces. Some galleries tend to do more curated shows with time, which means that the exhibition has a multilayered message and tries

²³³ (in terms of spaces, as mentioned, there is less difference made how progressive art they show as the system of exhibition due to the lack of spaces and the rent fees. n exhibitin usually lasts one or two weeks.

²³⁴ Here is what is still available of the concept behind NICA: <http://noemalab.eu/memo/events/nica-networking-and-initiatives-for-culture-and-the-arts/>

to encompass a wider scheme than only displaying the newest paintings of one artist. But all such initiatives matter as they provide opportunity for artists to present their work to the wide audience, make them visible.

Finally, the fifth embraces the individual professionals – curators, researchers, writers, organizers – and also a handful of collectives like MARCA or SOCA Myanmar (School of Contemporary Art, a community based experimental art learning movement group) which work like small associations or non-profit legal entities promoting the strengthening of the scene by mostly volunteer-based contribution. This category is still fragile, as most of the members gain experience only with time and through difficult technical conditions, many of them are practicing artists too.

Bourdieu's Field of Cultural Production. Instead of looking at artworks as an autonomous product, Bourdieu outlines the idea of constructing a theoretical space of positions and the space of the position-takings in which they are expressed, hence places them in a field of interaction. Artistic practice contextualized as a site of constant negotiation. It's a set of structural relations between social positions manipulated by social agents (individual, groups institutions). In the artistic field, this structured set of the manifestations of the social agents, involved in the field forces (as a determined quantity of capital) combines with a field of struggles, creating a dynamic wanting to transform or conserve the field as it is. The autonomy of the artistic field is in relation to the field of power, the more autonomous it is, the more completely it fulfills its logic as a field. The field does not operate mechanically, it operates through relatively uninstitutionalized positions, it is not legally guaranteed, making it is an arena of symbolic challenge.²³⁵

Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) era (1962–1988). The BSPP was found in 1962 by Ne Win's military regime. It was declared after the 'Burmese Way / Road To Socialism' which is an economic treatise projecting development without foreign influence and increasing role of the military.

Censorship Board's Rules for Art Exhibitions. Melissa Carlson argues that in Myanmar, there was no 'highly mechanized', state-funded system for art and propaganda, like Soviet-countries (Central – Eastern Europe included) or China. According to Carlson, it had a quite unique system, "that mirrored in some ways the censorship of 'degenerate art' by Nazi Germany, where restrictions were based not only on the personal politics of artists but also on a state-sanctioned preference for a conservative 'Aryan' aesthetic (see Lauder et al. 2014)."²³⁶ Carlson makes the comparison in terms of the structure of censorship, which was aiming rather than having a specific ideology reflected in the artworks, to censor those artists and artworks that were thought to undermine the conservative idea the leaders had about what art should be like. Censoring an artwork was mainly relying on the personal interpretation of the censor – therefore, there was not really a 'blacklist' of artists, but rather individual decisions. Carlson also mentions that the unelected origins of the regime was to be avoided (no personal cult for Ne Win), and the task was to ensure absence of all commentary about leaders and the government. As an art historical addition, the lack of knowledge of the censors regarding fine arts, i.e. what mainly meant painting at that time, was also due to the prevailing of traditional artistic forms of expression on the territory of Myanmar, especially outside of main towns. Canvas painting, which set foot during colonial times²³⁷, was not so present in

²³⁵ Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed."

²³⁶ Carlson, "Painting as Cipher: Censorship of the Visual Arts in Post-1988 Myanmar," 119.

²³⁷ There is a lack of proper academic research on how canvas painting set foot in the country – Dr. Werner Kraus has been researching for long years how early Burmese art evolved in the context of the region. He points out that

daily life and was subject to distant appreciation because of its linkage to the ‘Western world’. Only once painter masters from Myanmar appropriated the Western visual language and started to pass on this knowledge, not so long before World War II, has it become accepted in a wider circle of artists and ‘art consumers’; there was a time when ‘Western style painting’ became even more fashionable contrary to ‘traditional Myanmar painting style’ that has become almost obsolete.²³⁸ Aestheticizing painting and realistic painting was the most popular genre for this art.²³⁹ This is the basis on which the ‘new rules’ of censorship applied in 1962. So it’s quite possible that not only content-wise was it uncomfortable for the censors to interpret the works (not being able to comply with abstract paintings), but the nature of having the medium of painting for other purposes than aesthetic was an unknown thought.

contemporary art. The terminology – also the English terminology embedded in an international context – is highly debatable for the Myanmar art scene. Besides the definition on its own, within the Myanmar context, the relation of ‘contemporary’ towards the Modern era within the Myanmar scene raises questions. (see Modern era). The art history writing of the past decades is ongoing, but there is a whole ‘absent era’ (Ch. I. B.) which has to be reintegrated into the discussion to be able to set a ‘comforting’ set of relations. However, Ching’s article looking at where to position ‘contemporaneity’ in Myanmar between localized practices and globalized art discourse, gives a layered overview – attempted within the study too – to add some insights into the discussion of ‘contemporaneity’. Chapter II. A. 1. summarizes this attempt.

Downtown. Urban area of Yangon, the biggest city of Myanmar (around five million inhabitants). Yangon / Rangoon was the administrative capital of British Burma: the British set foot in the city in 1852 radically altering the city’s landscape, changing the city soon to the their biggest post of the Empire and a cosmopolitan city around 1900. A gridlock system including all administrative buildings was created, which became the Downtown area. The buildings were then used by military regime which transposed its siege in 2005 to a newly built capital, leaving all important buildings empty. The colonial architecture that also influenced the aspect of living buildings in Downtown remained almost untouched until gradual market liberalization. Still the Downton area reflects a unique built heritage. The Yangon Heritage Trust has dedicated its work to the preservation of the built heritage while allowing a strategy to make Yangon a livable city.

fine art / visual art. In the aim of clarification, the study only looks at artistic production within the sense of fine art / visual art, omitting interest towards applied art and architecture, so art is to be understood as visual art approached from a fine art approach. The Getty Research Institute’s definitions will serve as reference.²⁴⁰ The need to define both terms is due a permeable use of artistic expression forms within the Myanmar terminology (the official

the early histories of the topic were written from a Western perspective which can mislead in many ways and overlook important influences coming from the region: the trade route with China was very significant and Chinese produced paintings for the foreigners to take home. They also produced glass paintings – one of the earliest registered artistic painter, Saya Chone also painted glass paintings and precisely because he could set aside the religious content otherwise always present in art, as art was usually used for religious purposes. But Thailand could have been also very influential, hence the research cannot set aside colonial influence for sure, but the picture is much more nuanced. Lecture of Dr. Werner Kraus at the Goethe Institut, Yangon on December 11, 2014: “The Beginning of Modern Art in Myanmar in the Context of South East Asia”

²³⁸ From Worship to selfimagery

²³⁹ check ranard

²⁴⁰ “Getty Research Institute - Art and Architecture Thesaurus Online.”

narrative for instance only uses 'fine art' and to encompass both conventional forms of art (painting, sculpture) but also the more progressive ones as media art, etc.

fine art. "Genre including physical objects that are that are meant to be perceived primarily through the sense of sight, are of high quality, requiring refined skill in creation, and typically using the media of painting, drawing, or sculpture. ~~It may also refer to architecture and design.~~ Although there is overlap, fine art is generally distinguished from other art forms based on the media, extent of skill, and the level of formal training required. It is distinct from "decorative art" in that the fine arts are art in which the aesthetic or intellectual expression is more prominent than the utilitarian purpose. It is distinct from "crafts," which are handiworks of media such as ceramics, glass, needlework, or any medium other than painting, drawing, sculpture, or architecture. It is also distinct from "commercial art," which is created to serve commerce such as in advertisements or illustration. Avoid using "fine art" in a broader sense, to include the arts of poetry, music, and filmmaking."

visual art. "Genre including physical objects that are that are meant to be perceived primarily through the sense of sight, were created by the use of skill and imagination, and possess an aesthetic that is valued and of a quality and type that would be collected by art museums or private collectors, including drawings, painting, sculpture, ~~architecture, and decorative arts.~~ Performance art is considered a visual art, but the performing arts and literature are not." *The study does not include architecture and visual arts.*

Htein Lin's *Show of Hands*. Pioneer performance artist Htein Lin, who himself had a long painful experience with the military rule, initiated in 2013 an ongoing project that aims to create a visual and symbolic formulation of the atrocities faced by civilians due to censorship. Htein Lin who took part in the 8888 Uprising, was detained in a refugee camp in India for two years; he then escaped, fighting for months as a guerilla in the jungle, then captured and tortured to finally be 'saved' by officials. Years after, working as an artist and actor – originally he was a law student and trained in traditional theatre – officials came to take him away one night in 1998. He was jailed for almost seven years because his name was mentioned in a letter sent by another '88 protester in the context of a possible commemoration for the 10th anniversary of the Uprising.²⁴¹ Htein Lin, who by the way never received the letter, strengthened his artistic skills in prison and came back to the scene as a reinforced painter and performance artist. His street performance in Yangon, 'Mobile Art Gallery/Mobile Market' (2005), with the collaboration of Chaw Ei Thein 'allowed' him five more days of arrest and serious interrogation by police (meaning the use of torture by authorities in most cases). He then left Myanmar for long years to return in 2013 and start his project of *A Show of Hands*. He decided to give voice (literally and individually) to once jailed political prisoners said to have been at least around 3000 between 1988-2012 only, but that's probably just an underestimated number. The project started then and still continues with the aim to reach 1000 individuals: Htein Lin contacts or is contacted by the individuals (from old artists friend to writers, intellectuals...). He sits down with each former prisoner and hoards the forearm of the person while talking to him / her and recording their conversation. A sort of oral histories archive is born through the plasters and the recordings are materialized by several hundreds of plasters ready today. The project was presented in Goethe Institut Myanmar in 2015, *The Storyteller*.

impermanence, no-self and merit. These concepts imply that nothing is eternal – everything changes, while changes are allowed for the better. There is no single permanent self that it is possible to hold on to, hence interdependence is a key concept within community, and it is

²⁴¹ Interview with the artist by the author, Yangon, January 2015

action that provides its meaning. Through practice of virtuous conduct and with acquiring enough merit one can become a higher being in the next life.²⁴²

Independent (Contemporary) Art Scene. Chapter II (A.1., B., C.) is consecrated to an in-depth analysis of the term. Relates to genres of fine art / visual art, contemporary art but also Modern era. The study refers to the scene (in the sense of Bourdieu's field) as a network of mainly artistic (and cultural) producers / agents that work in a non-governmental, autonomous and independent frame and are dedicated to artistic forms of expression that differ from the traditional and official definition. A detailed description of the roles within the scene is to be found under Autonomous Actors. The study is mainly focusing on the contemporary art segment of the scene, but the independent scene comprises also actors related to a more broader definition: as the study evokes, in many cases it's not possible to draw a clear line between 'purely' contemporary and 'else', being it modern or a rentable space also showing more conventional type of art, however the fact that it is also showing more progressive art is notifiable position today.

Literature on absent fine art heritage. Until the thick volume published by Andrew Ranard in 2009²⁴³ and the other 2006 'milestone' publication²⁴⁴ written by art writers from Myanmar, among them Ma Thanegi, there were no comprehensive overview of the recent history of the artistic endeavors and dynamics of the country (neither in Burmese, nor English)²⁴⁵. Actually, both publications were printed outside Myanmar especially as they contain references to works that would have been censored at the time of the publication in the country. Both books are playing safe on what to consider fitting the artistic scene – i.e. many of the most progressive artists are not included, and obviously neither the generation that started to operate around the publication of the books). In 2009, a considerable book (*Myanmar Contemporary Art I*)²⁴⁶ with rich illustration was published in Burmese including all the artists whom the authors (publishing under theart.com name) found relevant to mention as pioneers in the evolution of the past decades' fine art scene. "An exhibition was held at the book launch, inviting younger generation artists to collaborate with older generation artists, in order to celebrate the exchange and timeline of art production throughout the country. The book was censored at the time, and crucial historical context for the images is missing, but the book itself remains an indispensable reference to how artists have been working in Myanmar over the last 60 years."²⁴⁷ The book today is in process of translation and final editing will finally contribute to widening the knowledge about artistic practices that are present only unseen and for most unknown.

Living Heritage Approach – ICCROM. The theme of LH was introduced through a 2003 program by ICCROM while UNESCO was adopting the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage which soon incorporated the 'living heritage' aspect. There are no formal links between the two approaches even if on many aspects there are resemblances. However, UNESCO's focusing mainly on intangible aspects, it defies a holistic view on

²⁴² Tunprawat, "Managing Living Heritage Sites in Mainland Southeast Asia."

²⁴³ Ranard, *Burmese Painting : A Linear and Lateral History*.

²⁴⁴ Sein Myo Myint, Khin Maung Nyunt, and Ma Thanegi, *Myanmar Painting : From Worship to Self Imaging*.

²⁴⁵ There were publications mostly about some specific segments of the art scene, like the one written by Ludo Daw Amar: *Modern Burmese Art* (in Burmese, 1997)

²⁴⁶ Aung Min, "Myanmar Contemporary Art I (Theart.com)."

²⁴⁷ Kickstarter campaign-text of the book to raise funds for the translation of English version "Myanmar Art In Translation: Perspectives Post-Censorship / Kickstarter Program." The book was published at the time by theart.com, a grassroot organization formed in 2007 by poets, film makers and artists. Today, the team referenced as conducting the publication of the book in partnership with MARCA are: Aung Min, Aung Myint and Mrat Lunn Htwann

heritage. The LH aspect of ICCROM is defined as “People-Centered Approaches to the Conservation of Cultural Heritage” within the heritage discussion, being linked to communities and the continuity of traditions and practices. It is characterized by the concept of continuity, especially regarding a site’s original function.²⁴⁸

MARCA – Myanmar Art Resource Center and Archive. Founded in 2014 by artists Khin Zaw Latt, and Zon Sapal Phyu, along with researcher and gallery owner Nathalie Johnston, the center aims to be a bilingual digital resource for Myanmar arts (history and present). It has a physical space in Yangon with a small but international library on arts. It does also workshops, lectures, classes, but mainly provides research material. www.myanmarca.org

Modern art / Modernism. The debates regarding how to look at modernity in relation to Southeast Asian art cannot be completely separated from the idea of multiple modernities that surfaced (partly as a retrospective term) in the context of nation-building in South Asia in the 1980s. Art writer Jim Supangkat in the mid-1990s claims that modernism is not an absolute concept, but a pluralistic phenomenon: he advocates that contemporary art has never been defined and the way the mainstream uses it leads to misinterpretations in ‘Third World countries’, related to stereotypes and exoticism – it prevents T.W. countries to define their development in art, hence their reality of modernism and contemporary art is not adequate. Supangkat suggests acknowledging the term multimodernity, related to different realities of modernity. T.K. Sabapathy in 1996 embraces the necessity of ‘calibrated terminology’ (M.P. Roces) as suitable tools to make justice for art works and allow respect for cultures. Most recently, an exhibition presents three main artists of three respective scenes (one of them Myanmar) to disrupt the dominant genealogies of the ‘modernism family’.²⁴⁹ Regarding Myanmar, although the term *modern art* is frequently used, it is malleable and there is no definite consensus on who relates and how to (pre)modernism and in what time-frame exactly. *The Myanmar Contemporary Art I* volume²⁵⁰ as evoked in the study offers one approach to date the Modern era (Ch.II.A.1.), while artist Aung Myint has his own definition of it (evoked in Ch. I. C). Because an absent segment of art is missing from the mainstream discourse, it is also difficult to see the nuances of Modern art that were accepted or refused by the Censorship Regime in the 1960s. Are the ‘accepted’ artists also modern in the same way, or only those who sought radically other forms of expressions? The study refers to Modern art as the art represented by the artists creating outside the frame of art fulfilling the regime’s expectations, experimenting in other forms than realistic painting with aestheticizing goals.

Myanmar. The country today officially called the Republic of the Union of Myanmar has had different names through the past century, related to its political status. Burma was its colonial name: most of the foreign literature kept (keeps) using this term in the past decades as a form of protest, as the former military regime changed the name from Burma to Myanmar in 1989²⁵¹. The study refers consequently to ‘Myanmar’ as it is the name the most used and accepted today (also used by UN of which it is a member), and also linguistically²⁵² most appropriate – the name has also been kept after the 2015 elections. It is also the term used in the study to refer to people living in Myanmar (Myanmar citizens); Burmese is used to describe the official language.

²⁴⁸ Wijesuriya, “ICCROM - Living Heritage Approach, a Summary.”

²⁴⁹ “‘Misfits’: Pages from a Loose-Leaf Modernity - Tang Chang, Rox Lee and Bagyi Aung Soe / Hau Der Kulturen Der Welt, Berlin. Curatorial Statement.”

²⁵⁰ Aung Min, “Myanmar Contemporary Art I (Theart.com).”

²⁵¹ Cheesman, Skidmore, and Wilson, *Myanmar’s Transition: Openings, Obstacles, and Opportunities*. p.xii.

²⁵² Aung-Thwin, “‘Mranma Pran’: When Context Encounters Notion.”

National Museum Yangon (NMY). After the independence, India returned Burmese artifacts for which it was decided to open a new national museum, as the government intended to promote the idea of a nationalistic unity. The first curator was Daw Nyunt Han studied museology abroad.²⁵³ The museum was then twice relocated, first in 1970 and then 1996. In the 1950s, its foundation met with the reforms of previous colonial institutional framework, like turning the Archaeological Survey of Burma (1899) into the Archaeological Department; the first antiquities law saw light in 1957. In the 1990s, the new inauguration followed a series of renovation at the archaeological site of Bagan, the government aiming to nominate some sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List, having just ratified the WH Convention in 1994 (nothing had happened in the field since 1957). The reasons given behind the relocation of the museum was the expanding collection and tourism: the aim with polishing Bagan's heritage aspect was to boost income through tourism despite the international sanctions in vigor against Myanmar²⁵⁴.

National University of Art and Culture. With an admission of about 250 students each year: its main aim is basically the preservation of 'national culture' according to the objectives listed by the Ministry and the respective Department.²⁵⁵ There is less technique taught than at the State School, and more theory, for fine art, the main fields are painting, sculpture (dance, music and theatre performance also belong to the University). Anatomy is taught from book, there is no possibility to have a live model. The techniques taught are pencil drawing, ink, watercolour and finally oil painting.

political shift / transition of 2010-2011. A gradual liberalization process started in 2010, based on an earlier draft of 'national reconciliation' commitment. The first elections held in 2010 after two decades, and several decades of military regime were not considered democratic and transparent; as a symbolic sign of reform, Aung San Suu Kyi was released in 2010. The 'reins' of government were handed over to a new 'civilianized government' in March 2011. In 2012, by-elections were held, were most seats were acquired by the National League for Democracy (NLD). The new 2008 constitution reserved 25 per cent of the parliamentary seats to the military, which is unchanged in 2017. The period between 2011–2015 is usually referred to as semi-civilian era. In 2015, general elections were held during which the NLD, Aung San Suu Kyi's party won 86% of the contested seats in the national parliament. The Tatmadaw (Military Armed Forces) is still the most powerful today in the country, holding control over three key ministries, and the country's bureaucracy and economy is still dominated by former military officers.²⁵⁶

State Law and Order Restoration Council–State Peace and Development Council (SLORC-SPDC) era (1988–2011). The SLORC was the name of the government which seized power in 1988, it was abolished and reconstituted in 1997 to be renamed SPDC until it was dissolved in 2011.

²⁵³ Tunprawat, "Managing Living Heritage Sites in Mainland Southeast Asia," 118. Without any written reference as a proof, I would suggest the collection contained then the previous Phayre collection, and highly valued treasures like the Lion Throne from Mandalay which only survived because preserved in India.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 120.

²⁵⁵ [http://www.culture.gov.mm/Universities/NUAC_YGN/default.asp], accessed: May 26, 2017

²⁵⁶ Selth, "Why Myanmar's Military Is Not Planning a Coup"; Nehru and Farrell, Patrick, "Myanmar's Post-Election Transition - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace."

State School of Fine Arts. The Yangon branch was established in 1952, the school is today located in one of the most amazing old buildings of the town. A certificate is given after 3 years, and the school stands for the age of 14-17. The conducted courses are: “Aesthetic Art (Fine Art), Commercial Art, Myanmar Traditional Art, Basic carving and sculpting, carving and sculpting animal and human forms, and Myanmar Traditional Kanote (Floral Design) academic subjects of 9th, 10th and 11th Grade”²⁵⁷ Almost the same data – except for the building – are relevant for the Mandalay branch.

Ten kinds of Myanmar traditional arts and crafts: The ten skills’ source is an ancient stone inscription in Bagan, listing “the ten flowers of Art or *Pan-hse Myo*, each poetically referred to as a blossom created from a monk’s hands.” Four aspects have to be mastered to be considered an artist related to being able to stylize kanote / flower (grace), kapi / monkey (movement), nayi / woman (human form) and gaza / elephant (weight), each painter being chosen for his talent in a special subject.²⁵⁸

traditional art. Similarly to other concepts defining the Myanmar art scene, ‘traditional’ can be referencing to different nuances. It usually is connected with either the art that is to be linked with the Ten kinds of Myanmar arts and crafts, either to a conservative view on art relying on a realistic style and mainly aesthetic centered. It is the type of art approved by the official narrative.

Universities. During the 8888 Uprising in the country’s history, it was not the first and only time that civil discontent emerged from students’ circles, namely the Rangoon University (University of Yangon). The ’88 event started with students’ demonstration, and became a nationwide protest which was bloodily ended by the military government implementing new decades of dictatorship. The precise number is unknown, from the official 350 deaths to an estimation of thousands. Following this major incident, not forgetting previous students protests and actions (cf. 1974, U Thant funeral crisis), the renamed Yangon University was mostly closed during the 1990s from fear of having likewise students’ movements; other universities suffered the same destiny. Therefore, the academic field of the country, besides complete isolation from the international arena, also encountered a long time of vacuum.

YHT – Yangon Heritage Trust. Defining itself as an ‘independent center of excellence’, YHT is a non-profit organization that started to work in 2012 on protecting the built (colonial) heritage of Yangon and has become a game changer in the field. It also develops sustainable policy options and is a consultant for the government in many aspects, but deals also with business and civil spheres to advocate heritage protection. From a group of five people, the professional staff has grown out to be of considerable size, undertaking also important researches regarding the city’s history. Their downloadable 2016 strategy²⁵⁹ offers a wide range of perspectives to make Yangon a livable city, and can be even considered as a ‘fire extinguisher’ manual aiming to save as much of the city as possible amidst the construction boom. The chairman, Thant Myint-U is himself a respected historian, he is the grandson of former UN Secretary General U Thant whose funeral process in 1974 lead to violent student protests against the government. He is presently advisor to the President of Myanmar.

²⁵⁷ “Myanmar’s Ministry Religious Affairs and Culture - Ministry of Culture.” [http://www.culture.gov.mm/DFA/Schools/default.asp]

²⁵⁸ Sein Myo Myint, Khin Maung Nyunt, and Ma Thanegi, *Myanmar Painting : From Worship to Self Imaging*, 26.

²⁵⁹ “Yangon Heritage Strategy 2016 - Combining Conservation and Development to Create Asia’s Most Liveable City.”

Appendices

APPENDIX 1 // The Survey

1. Complement of Chapter II. D.

Method

The questionnaire was written originally in English opting for open-end questions to offer a free platform for answers. I expected to reach about 40 people directly, and a further 20 people indirectly which goal was approximatively achieved (the accompanying letter highlighted the possibility to forward the questionnaire). The first group of people was reached on the basis of personal connection (direct or indirect), the rest was random as forwarded by people whom I have reached. The 11 questionnaires that were sent back made possible to handle the survey as a Small Population Study and also a sort of Preliminary Research in the light of the aim of Chapter III. My goal was rather to obtain in-depth responses, with a variety of answers. I do not consider the survey as a representative one.

The questionnaire was sent out around mid-February 2017, with a deadline of mid-March. The questionnaire was finalized after preliminary consultations with the study's supervisor. I decided at an early stage to have the document translated into Burmese²⁶⁰ in order to reach people who do not speak English or feel more comfortable in expressing themselves in Burmese as the answers were also translated, this time from Burmese to English. I felt his step was important as the language can block the nuances in topics where theoretical issues are addressed. I also felt important to inform the respondents about the confidentiality and anonymity that the process of the survey analysis would follow so they feel more comfortable with their answers.

The questionnaire was originally not intended to be specifically addressed to officials from the government – it would have required a different research– and relying on Q2, no government official sent it back. The respondents were aware of the frames of the research, although the emphasis of the survey was rather on the conditions of the institutional infrastructural in fine / visual arts in a more general framework.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the survey mainly consists of highlighting some of the questions and answers that give a general idea of the variety / spectrum of responses. Precise statistics couldn't be made as all answers were very different. The Analysis does not repeat the same answers, it gives in case a similar answers one representative idea.

The first question asked from respondents was if they were Myanmar citizens or foreigners in order to compare if they had the same approach or not working in one scene. Hence there were

²⁶⁰ The translation for survey was sponsored by Central European University Foundation, Budapest (CEUBPF). The theses explained herein are representing the own ideas of the author, but not necessarily reflect the opinion of CEUBPF.

7 respondents with Myanmar citizenship and 4 Foreigner respondents. Upon the 11 respondents, on the Myanmar side, the 7 respondents almost in each case indicated more than one answer, besides being artists, mainly organizer, translator. From the foreigners, there were two gallerists, 1 artist / activist, and 1 art activist / organizer. For facilitating referencing, the Myanmar Respondents were numbered M1-M7, whereas the Foreigners F1-F4 in case of quoting them.

There was a general consent almost in everyone's answer that contemporary art is not playing a major role in the every days' cultural aspect, however it should: people should be more aware of it as it could be of stimulating role. M3 mentioned that even some artists don't know about contemporary art. M7 suggested that contemporary art can be seen as a medium for a transition towards a new ideology, as a transition towards a new era. Also, that contemporary art is able to create curiosity and from that generate new opinions and feelings. M5 outlined that Myanmar society is administered by conservatives, M6 that the general belief is that 'art was for beauty', for relaxing. From the Foreigners, F1, gallerist noted that contemporary art is viewed primarily by other artists, intellectuals, collectors but less by general public – and although festivals were well attended, they didn't seem to create a lasting effect. However, F2 noted that for a small community of artists, it's a major drive for creativity, experimentation and critical thought.

For the role of galleries / spaces, F1 remarked that it was difficult to generalize as the spaces / galleries (some of them are just shopping spaces, other do deeper work) are doing their best, and that although there could be more exciting initiatives, it would be asking too much for businesses to take on large, expensive initiatives as it can have a risky financial outcome. Major projects and granting should be undertaken by artists unions or organizations but these were not active. F3 evoked the limited time and capacity (human and financial) to be able to do more besides the already undertaken tasks, and that most galleries work very hard to cover costs and make a modest living – "it is difficult to devote a lot of time to long term projects that develop the art ecosystem of the country." F4 said: "simply to work with an artistic goal is exceptional," while F2 said most of the gallery initiatives were more interested by business than truly artistic creation. Most M. respondents be happy to see event more alternative platforms for experimentation, workshops on teaching, lectures. M7 outlined that only Yangon was lacking more spaces, but the country at large was nowhere in that respect, even if the situation was better today than in the "dark ages". M5 underlines that most of these existing operations are not of international standard.

The responses were quite consentient about the fact that there is practically no relationship between the art scene and the government but there were different opinions if this relation should be developed in order to allow contemporary art to have a better position. M5 answered that the relationship should be improved in order to leave a broader field for contemporary art, however: "Nothing can be done here in this country without the government or their permission". M3 noted that the government obviously had other priorities than contemporary art and because of the instability of the government, it was not able to take care about art. M3 also sees that there was no one in the government at a high raking place who would understand art. Two F. respondents said that the government does not seem to be opposed to art, even perhaps more aware of it, but there was a long standing bureaucracy which makes events very difficult to organize. They also confirm there is basically no relationship with between the government and the art scene, F1 formulates as: "the government has no discernable interest in art'. M7 that while the government was not well-represented towards the artists, the artists were well represented as they were the ones to notify through their works towards the government the issues at stake, conveying the trouble of people and reflecting on the poor governance of

the country – it is a platform that allows visibility for the problems and that these problems needed solution.

About half of the respondent think that politics and art should be related. Those who think it is or should be related think this connection as mainly one to improve the economical possibilities; those who think it should not, are against the idea of having to use art as a survival in political matters or that the economy of art should be of primary consideration. Some say there is not much connection between the government and the arts. M7 noted that the NLD government had many members closely related to art – former poets, writers – people who understood art and creation and that could mean some change from the government's part.

The duty or not of the State to support the art scene also resulted quite different opinions and also many suggestions in terms of how the State should support the art scene or if not, why not. F1 suggested that the best use of government funds – especially as there are so many other pressing issues in the country - would be if spent on programs that bring art to the public and would bring foreign artists from the region (“from countries with which there will be a natural relationship of equals”) and send Myanmar artists on exchange. There should be also more education, but it would not be the artists' duty but those of educators specialized in art, art historians, curators, etc. Many other respondents outline the need to improve education, improve the system which allows the intellectual development of artists. M6 mentions that the first duty is to improve diplomatic relations to get a better global exposure. M7 thinks that it is not the duty of the State, everyone is responsible for him/herself. M4 stated that it was clearly the duty of the State to help the scene by improving the infrastructure, giving spaces, accessories. M7 suggests that the government should make way for more NGOs to operate in the field of art, and also that art matters should be included in the country's budget as it can give intellectual, cultural and historical development.

For question 10, regarding a possible cooperation, most respondents were sceptic, they made it dependent of the project and the approach the government was adopting. M7 outlined ironically that never that question even came to his / her mind: during the previous government the artists were seen as rebels, deterrents. M7 outlines that the government needs “to understand the need to separate preserving culture, and giving space for new ideology and opinion for contemporary art.”

Taking question 11,12,13 at once: not everyone answered to the question what a museum meant to him / her. In that aspect, I would highlight the answers given by the M. respondents in the light of the study's focus. Some expressions used: “a place where art work live, a place to preserve the heritage of art works”; “a place to show really valuable things which are worthy to study”; “a museum is something that the public can observe easily and experience”; “where there is real knowledge”; “where the history is kept for people”; M6 mentions that all museums in Myanmar are like “heritage show rooms,” dull, without any activity. M7 says: “a space for every people regardless of religion, cast, ethnicity, age, a space for them to learn and see, culture, art, creation, new and old ideology, people and life.”

With the exception of M6, all respondents would think important to have a museum for the preservation of art for the next generations, some stating it is the only way to preserve art. For question 12, the stress was on the idea if the preservation of art should happen through museums: not all answers respond exactly to the question, some just state that it is important to preserve fine art for the next generations. M6 thinks that artists mostly have learnt at school, not in museums and that the museum are only able for “showing” art, they can't provide the educator's role. It's not clear if the respondent refers to the present state of things or he / she would not wish museum-kind of preservation in the future at all. It is mentioned though, that

the institutional structure should be revitalized. Two answers underlie that because there are no museums, a lot of works from the past do not exist anymore, they have been destroyed. M4 says that artists produce the works, the rest is up to the government. All agree that there should be a national museum of art (M6's response is that there is no such museum yet). For the reason why: from the M. respondents answers: so that "later generations will be able to experience Myanmar's art work and feel proud"; so that "artists will be encouraged and people will be able to reach art"; "art is not for individuality, it's regarded a national business"; so we can see all fine art through times at a place then". F4 answers: "to reflect on history, and use it to read the present and make good choices"; F1 thinks it would be good to have one but for the moment there would be not enough funding to create a proper institution and if created, it would probably put pressure on artists to donate works. It would be however important to have a national art museum as private initiatives can always close or sell off the works. M7 underlines the need museums and art institutions in the entire country – a ray of hope is mentioned as rumors go around that art education might be reimplemented in the school curriculum.

Not everyone sees the need to have exhibitions of Myanmar artists abroad, but most of the respondents do. M2 justifies that the already expressed interest of other countries in the art of Myanmar should be maintained so that artworks are kept in one place and other countries researchers come and study the art in Myanmar. M5 says that as an artist, the primary importance is to create works for one's own satisfaction: "Exhibiting the works to others is in the second place. I have works that are not exhibited yet or even destroyed by time." M3 says that now that the international relations are established, it is clear that exchanges should be fostered. All F. respondents emphasize the importance of exhibiting abroad. F4 adds that the basis of contemporary art is the critical effort in creating a piece of art which pushes the boundaries: for this reason, it's sad that commercial, tourist art is sold as contemporary art outside the country by some exhibitions not reflecting the true aspect of the scene. For this reason, it's important to have more possibilities for artists to travel.

Finally, as a summary of questions 15-18, as the responses are varied and in some cases very detailed: respondents mention as difficulties usually to make a living from art, the lack of finances and funding to do any development, missing infrastructure, poor education, F2 and M4 mentions the government / permissions, F3 the lack of valuable scholarships in Myanmar. M5 says "we try harder and harder not to stray from the path we want to walk on". M2 mentions the general unrestfulness in the country. F1 mentions the lack of high standards from all actors' part, the few quantity of professional curators, critics who speak the language which is a strong limitation to "understand much better what the artists have to say and what they hope their audience will see," and the fact that "the market for art professionals in Myanmar is so small, there is hardly any Plan B" for those who work in art. Several suggestions are mentioned on what could be improved, usually reflecting on the mentioned difficulties. A few valuable ideas:

More direct interaction between artists and public; more art in TV and on radio, several mention associations or unions of artists and curators / gallerists who can take over some tasks (grants, space, etc.), more involvement of the artist's personality in festivals, workshops. From the M. there is general concern to foster the idea of unity, change the general attitude, engage a better cooperation between curators, businessmen and government. M5 enumerates several of the mentioned ideas completing them with the need to rewrite the students' curriculum at art institutions to provide broader concepts instead of the more conventional ones, also offer upgrade trainings to teachers, improve the tools with which to study at art institutions, establish courses for critics and curators. One main point is however to be outlined: "the art scene cannot stand with the art people alone. It has its relation with the whole society," reachable with a

stable political order and ‘developed business promise’. The museum could be providing people with the knowledge of true value of fine works. In general there is also the idea of a need for respect for each others work. F4 mentions that small initiatives can make a big difference and that workshops (suggested by other respondents too) can support the development of artists in absence of a proper educational system. M6 mentions rather the need of an Art and Culture center inclusive of several platforms, studio and lab work too.

As a general concern, all respondents mention the essential need for art education at all levels. M7 summarizes art ideology being too far away from the general appreciation, people usually don’t feel related to art all. That’s why the need for education, to support creativity and art education can improve mutual respect between them.

2. The Questionnaire / English and Burmese Versions

a. *ENGLISH VERSION*

Short survey regarding the contemporary fine art scene in Myanmar // February 2017

The following survey is conducted in the frames of a Master Thesis research by Borbala Kalman (also designer of the present survey) at the Cultural Heritage Studies Program of the Central European University, Hungary.

The goal of the present survey is to gather a various number of answers from artists, gallerists, curators, art organizers, etc. – i.e. pro-active members (principally Myanmar citizens, but foreigners as well, living and working in the country) of the contemporary art scene of Myanmar in general.

The idea is to learn about how the respondents qualify the cultural working frame in the country with a specific focus on the situation of the independent contemporary fine art scene, in Yangon mainly. The survey seeks to help understand the actual viewpoints / positions and needs of those actively shaping the art scene (as opposed to those established by other actors such as government officials, non-Myanmar investors, etc...).

The survey will help to complete the research for a thesis which analyzes how the almost non-existent institutional infrastructure in terms of fine art effects the independent Myanmar contemporary art scene. Also, it will contribute to the theoretical outlining of possible pathways for the further unfolding of the contemporary fine art scene, in a way that respects its cultural integrity while seeking to understand what benefits / disadvantages it could gather if expanding its connections to state and private institutions, both national and international. The thesis is expected to be finished in May 2017.

The survey is available in English and Burmese (see attachment) – thank you for responding to the questions in the language you prefer.

Please send back the filled out document (in English or Burmese) before March 15, 2017 to the following address: [***](#)**

If you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask!

Your contribution and opinion is very important for the research, thank you in advance for your time and cooperation!

Confidentiality:

All the data regarding the identity of the respondents of the survey will be kept confidential. No other party than the survey designer (Borbala Kalman) will be seeing the filled out sheets with the names (email addresses) related to them. Questions also seek to guarantee anonymity in so far as only the type of citizenship and profession is required to be given as it is an important data in the questionnaire.

Additional information:

What is the definition of the independent contemporary art scene in this case?

It is the contemporary artistic platform searching for different artistic expressions through various media (from painting to installation, performance art to video art or photography, etc.) than the visual and intellectual world of traditional art forms in Myanmar, in reaction to actual theoretical, social, economic, political or visual related matters, working in establishments initiated through private investment (financial and / or professional knowledge) or working as free-lancers with the aim to remain independent, i.e. not related to the state-related structures.

Why Yangon mainly?

The 'delimitation' does not aim to be restrictive, respondents active in other cities too are awaited to respond. Yangon is outlined as for the moment it is the most vibrant city when it comes to contemporary art.

QUESTIONNAIRE (English). There are 18 questions in total.

1) Are you a Myanmar citizen?

☐ Yes

☐ No (please specify: _____)

2) Which occupation defines you best? (you can tick several answers)

☐ Artist

☐ Curator

☐ Gallerist / Owner or employee of a gallery (please underline)

☐ Art activist / organizer

☐ Art teacher / mentor

☐ Art writer

☐ Other (please specify: _____)

3) Is contemporary art an important part of the culture in general in Myanmar? In what could contemporary art contribute to people's everyday life?

4) What do you think the role of contemporary art in Myanmar is or should be?

5) Do you think private operations such as galleries, showrooms, open studios, etc. are doing enough for art in general in Myanmar? What else do you wish these art operations would help the existing contemporary art scene with?

6) Do you think that your interests as an artist or an art professional are well-represented vis-à-vis the government? Do you think the communication between the government and the contemporary art scene should be improved? If yes, why and how? If not, why not?

7) Do you think the government has artists or a special form of art in mind when governing? Why, or why not?

8) What do you think would help make politicians and the government more aware of the potential of art for the image and the economy of the country? Do you think art should be related to politics in that sense?

9) Do you believe it is the duty of the State (i.e. Ministry of Culture) to help in some ways (grants, fundings) the artists, gallerists, art people? If yes, in what way? If no, why not?

10) Would you take part as an artist or art professional in the organization of an exhibition showcasing contemporary art from Myanmar organized by the Ministry of Culture? If yes, why? If not, why not?

11) What does the concept / idea / notion of “museum” mean to you?

12) Do you think it is important to preserve fine art for the next generations through establishments like museums? Are there institutional structures you find more adequate for the art scene to work with? If yes, what type of structures / establishments would these be?

13) Do you think a national art museum permanently showcasing and dedicated to fine art from Myanmar (professionally selected from older times to contemporary art, without any censoring) in Myanmar would be important to have? Why or why not?

14) Do you think it is important for Myanmar artists to be exhibited and known abroad? If yes, why? If not, why not?

15) What are the main difficulties faced by art professionals (artists and/or organizers) in Myanmar today?

16) Do you think there are best practices or good examples in the functioning of the Myanmar contemporary art scene structure? Thanks for illustrating your answer with one or several examples.

17) What forms of bottom-up cooperation practices do you think useful for the independent contemporary art community to have in order to gain a wider platform for arts within society?

18) If you could change tomorrow anything in the structure of the art scene in Myanmar to make it better, what would you change? Thanks for illustrating your answer with one or several examples.

If you have anything more to add, please do:

b. BURMESE VERSION



မြန်မာနိုင်ငံရှိ အနုပညာလောက အခင်းအကျင်းအကြောင်း စစ်တမ်းမေးခွန်းလွှာ



၂၀၁၇ ခုနှစ် ဖေဖော်ဝါရီလ

အောက်ဖော်ပြပါစစ်တမ်းဟာ ဟန်ဂေရီနိုင်ငံ၊ ဗဟိုဥရောပတက္ကသိုလ်ရဲ့ ယဉ်ကျေးမှုအမွေအနှစ်လေ့လာရေး အစီအစဉ်အတွက် သုတေသီ Borbala Kalman က မဟာဘွဲ့ ယူစာတမ်းမှာသုံးမယ့် ဘောင်ထဲကနေ မေးမြန်းထားတဲ့ စစ်တမ်းဖြစ်ပါတယ်။ Borbala Kalman ဟာ ဒီစစ်တမ်းကို ပုံစံချရေးဆွဲသူလည်းဖြစ်ပါတယ်။

အနုပညာရှင်တွေ၊ ပြခန်းတွေ၊ ပွဲစဉ်သူတွေ၊ အနုပညာဆိုင်ရာ စီစဉ်သူတွေ စတဲ့ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံရဲ့ ခေတ်ပြိုင်အနုပညာမြင်ကွင်းမှာ လက်တွေ့ဖြစ်သန်းနေကြတဲ့သူတွေထဲကနေ ဖြေကြားချက်တွေ အမြောက်အများ ကောက်ယူရရှိနိုင်ဖို့က ဒီစစ်တမ်းရဲ့ ရည်ရွယ်ချက်ပါ။ လက်တွေ့ဖြစ်သန်းနေကြသူတွေဆိုရာမှာ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံအတွင်းမှာ နေထိုင်လုပ်ကိုင်နေကြတဲ့ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံသားတွေထဲက ဖြေကြားချက်တွေကို အဓိက ကောက်ယူနိုင်ဖို့ဖြစ်သော်လည်း ဒီနိုင်ငံမှာနေထိုင်လုပ်ကိုင်နေကြတဲ့ နိုင်ငံခြားသားတွေဆီကလည်း ဖြေကြားချက်တွေ ကောက်ယူရန်ဖြစ်ပါတယ်။

ရန်ကုန်မြို့က လွတ်လပ်တဲ့ ခေတ်ပြိုင်အနုပညာလောကရဲ့ အခြေအနေကို အဓိကဇာင်းပေးပြီး မြန်မာနိုင်ငံမှာရှိနေတဲ့ ယဉ်ကျေးမှုဆိုင်ရာ လည်ပတ်လှုပ်ရှားမှုဘောင်ကို ဒီစစ်တမ်းမေးခွန်းလွှာဖြေကြားသူတွေက ဘယ်လိုအကဲဖြတ်ကြမလဲဆိုတာကို စနည်းနာဖို့ စစ်တမ်းကောက်ယူခြင်းဖြစ်ပါတယ်။ မြန်မာ့အနုပညာလောကကို တက်တက်ကြွကြွ ပုံဖော်နေကြတဲ့သူတွေရဲ့ သဘောထားမြင်တွေ့/ ရပ်တည်ချက်တွေ၊ လိုအပ်ချက်တွေကို နားလည်လာဖို့ အထောက်အကူဖြစ်အောင် ဒီစစ်တမ်းမေးခွန်းတွေကို ရေးသားတည်ဆောက်ထားပါတယ်။ မြန်မာ့အနုပညာ လောကကို တက်တက်ကြွကြွပုံဖော်နေကြတဲ့သူတွေရဲ့ ရည်တည်ချက်တွေ၊ လိုအပ်ချက်တွေဆိုတာ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံသားမဟုတ်တဲ့ ရင်းနှီးမြှုပ်နှံသူတွေ၊ အစိုးရဌာနဆိုင်ရာ တာဝန်ရှိသူတွေလို လူပုဂ္ဂိုလ်တွေက ချမှတ်လိုက်တဲ့ ရပ်တည်ချက်တွေ၊ လိုအပ်ချက်တွေနဲ့မတူပါဘူး။

အနုပညာနယ်ပယ်အရပြောရရင် မရှိသလောက်ဖြစ်နေတဲ့ အင်စတီကျူးရှင်းဆိုင်ရာ အခြေခံအဆောက်အအုံဟာ တခုခုလက်အောက်ခံမဟုတ်တဲ့ မြန်မာ ခေတ်ပြိုင်အနုပညာလောက အခင်းအကျင်းကို ဘယ်ပုံဘယ်နည်းအကျိုးသက်ရောက်မှုရှိနေလဲဆိုတာကို လေ့လာသုံးသပ်ကြည့်မယ့် စာတမ်းအတွက် သုတေသနပြုလုပ်ရာမှာ ဒီစစ်တမ်းက အကူအညီဖြစ်လာစေမှာပါ။ မြန်မာ ခေတ်ပြိုင်အနုပညာလောက အခင်းအကျင်းကို ထပ်မံဖော်

ထုတ်ဖို့အတွက် ဖြစ်နိုင်ခြေရှိတဲ့နည်းလမ်းတွေကို သဘောတရားအရ ကောက်ကြောင်းဆွဲရာမှာ ဒီစစ်တမ်းက အထောက်အကူပြုနိုင်မှာလည်းဖြစ်ပါတယ်။ တကယ်လို့ စစ်တမ်းမေးခွန်းတွေရဲ့ ချိတ်ဆက်မှုဟာ ပြည်တွင်း၊ ပြည်ပ အစိုးရနဲ့ ပုဂ္ဂလိက အင်စတီကျုရှင်းတွေဆီအထိ ကျယ်ပြန့်သွားမယ်ဆိုရင် စစ်တမ်းကနေရလာတဲ့ အားသာချက်/အားနည်းချက်တွေကို နားလည်အောင်ကြိုးစားထားသလို မြန်မာအနုပညာလောကရဲ့ ယဉ်ကျေးမှုဆိုင်ရာ တည်တံ့ခိုင်မြဲမှုကို အလေးထားတဲ့သဘောနဲ့ ဒီကခေတ်ပြိုင် အနုပညာလောက အခင်းအကျင်းကို ထပ်မံဖော်ထုတ်သွားဖို့ဖြစ်ပါတယ်။ ၂၀၁၇ ခုနှစ် မေလမှာ စာတမ်းကိုအပြီးရေးသားသွားရမှာပါ။

ဒီစစ်တမ်းကို မြန်မာဘာသာနဲ့ရော အင်္ဂလိပ်ဘာသာနဲ့ပါ ရယူဖြေကြားနိုင်ပါတယ်။ (ပူးတွဲပါ စာဖိုင်များတွင် ကြည့်ပါ။) မိမိနှစ်သက်ရာ ဘာသာစကားနဲ့ဖြေဆိုပေးတဲ့အတွက် ကျေးဇူးတင်ပါတယ်။

မိတ်ဆွေ၏ ဖြေကြားချက်များကို ဖြည့်စွက်ပြီးပါက ထိုဖြေကြားလွှာကို ၂၀၁၇ ခုနှစ် မတ်လ ၁၅ ရက်မတိုင်မီ [REDACTED] သို့ပေးပို့ပါရန် မေတ္တာရပ်ခံအပ်ပါတယ်။ သိလိုတာရှိရင်လည်း ဒီemail လိပ်စာကနေ လှမ်းမေးလို့ရတယ်နော်။

မိတ်ဆွေရဲ့ ဖြေကြားချက်နဲ့ မိတ်ဆွေရဲ့ သဘောထားအမြင်ဟာ ဒီသုတေသနအတွက် သိပ်ကိုအရေးကြီးပါတယ်။ အချိန်ပေးပြီးဖြေကြားပေးတဲ့အတွက်ရော ဝိုင်းကူပေးတဲ့အတွက်ပါ ကြိုတင်ပြီး ကျေးဇူးတင်ရှိပါကြောင်း။

လျှို့ဝှက်ကိစ္စအဖြစ်ထားရှိခြင်း

ဤစစ်တမ်းကိုဖြေဆိုသူများသည် မည်သူမည်ဝါဖြစ်ကြောင်းဖော်ပြသော အချက်အလက်မှန်သမျှကို လုံးဝမပေါက်ကြားရန် လျှို့ဝှက်ထားမှာဖြစ်ပါတယ်။ စစ်တမ်းကို ပုံစံချရေးသားသူ(Borbala Kalman) တစ်ဦးတည်းသာလျှင် (email လိပ်စာ) အမည်များနှင့် ဖြေကြားချက်ဖြည့်စွက်ပြီး စာရွက်များကို ဖတ်ရှုမှာဖြစ်ပါတယ်။ အခြားမည်သူမျှ ဖတ်ရှုခြင်း၊ သိရှိခြင်းမရှိဘူးဆိုတာကို အာမခံပါတယ်။ ဒီစစ်တမ်းမေးခွန်းလွှာမှာ အရေးကြီးတဲ့ အချက်အလက်တွေဖြစ်တဲ့ ဘယ်နိုင်ငံသားလဲ၊ ဘာအလုပ်အကိုင်လဲဆို တဲ့အချက်တွေကိုတော့ ဖြေကြားပေးဖို့ လိုအပ်တာ အမှန်ပါ။ သို့သော် အဲဒီအချက်အလက်တွေကို သုတေသီတစ်ဦးတည်းကလွဲပြီး တခြားမည်သူမျှ မသိရှိအောင်ထားမယ်ဆိုတာကိုလည်း အာမခံပါတယ်။

ဖြည့်စွက် အချက်အလက်-

ဒီစစ်တမ်းမှာသုံးထားတဲ့ လွတ်လပ်သော ခေတ်ပြိုင်အနုပညာလောက အခင်းအကျင်းဆိုတာကို ဘယ်လိုအနက် ဖွင့်ဆိုမလဲ။

ပန်းချီကစလို့ အင်စတော်လေးရှင်းအထိ၊ ပါဗောမန် အနုပညာလက်ရာကနေ ဗီဒီယိုလက်ရာ သို့မဟုတ် ဓာတ်ပုံ ပညာစတာတွေအထိ) ကြားခံပေါင်းစုံကိုသုံးပြီး အနုပညာမြောက် ထုတ်ဖော်ပြသမှုအမျိုးမျိုးကို ခေတ်ပြိုင်အနု ပညာစင်မြင့်မှာ ရှာဖွေကြရပါတယ်။ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံမှာရှိတဲ့ ရိုးရာအစဉ်အလာ အနုပညာပုံစံတွေရဲ့ အသိပညာနဲ့ မျက်မြင် (visual) အနုပညာလောကမှာတော့ ခေတ်ပြိုင်အနုပညာစင်မြင့်မှာလို ကြားခံပေါင်းစုံသုံး ဖော်ထုတ် တာမျိုး သိပ်မရှိလှပါဘူး။ တကယ်တမ်း သီအိုရီပိုင်းဆိုင်ရာ၊ လူမှုရေး၊ စီးပွားရေး၊ နိုင်ငံရေး ဒါမှမဟုတ် မျက်မြင် ဆိုင်ရာကိစ္စရပ်တွေကို တုံ့ပြန်တဲ့အနေနဲ့ မြန်မာခေတ်ပြိုင်အနုပညာလောက စင်မြင့်က ကြားခံပေါင်းစုံကိုသုံးပြီး အနုပညာလက်ရာမျိုးစုံကို ဖော်ထုတ်နေကြတာပါ။ ဒီပေမယ့် အစိုးရဌာနဆိုင်ရာအဖွဲ့အစည်းတွေနဲ့ ဆက်သွယ်မှု မရှိဘဲ အမှီအခိုကင်းကင်းနဲ့ လွတ်လပ်မှုရှိမြဲရှိနေရလေအောင်ဆိုတဲ့ ရည်ရွယ်ချက်နဲ့ အလွတ်တန်းသမားတွေ အနေနဲ့ လုပ်ကိုင်ကြရင်း ဒါမှမဟုတ် (ဘဏ္ဍာငွေကြေးနဲ့/ သို့မဟုတ် ပညာသည်ပီသသော အသိပညာ) တခုခု ကို ပုဂ္ဂလိက ရင်းနှီးမြှုပ်နှံမှုပြုပြီးတော့လည်း ရှိပြီးသားနေရာဌာန၊ ရှိပြီးသားအဖွဲ့အစည်းတွေမှာ လုပ်ကိုင်ကြရင်း မြန်မာ ခေတ်ပြိုင်အနုပညာလောက စင်မြင့်ကနေ ကြားခံပေါင်းစုံနဲ့ အနုပညာလက်ရာတွေ ထွက်ပေါ်လာတာ ဖြစ်တယ်။

ရန်ကုန်ကိုသာလို့ တည်ပြီးစစ်တမ်းကောက်ရသလဲ။

ရန်ကုန်ကိုတည်ပြီး စစ်တမ်းကောက်ဖြစ်တာ ကန့်သတ်လိုက်တဲ့သဘောတော့ မဟုတ်ပါဘူး။ တခြားမြို့နယ် တွေမှာနေထိုင်တဲ့ စစ်တမ်းဖြေဆိုသူတွေကလည်း သူတို့အလှည့်ရောက်လာရင် ဒီစစ်တမ်းကိုဖြေဖို့ စောင့်နေ ကြပါတယ်။ လက်ရှိအချိန်မှာတော့ ရန်ကုန်က ခေတ်ပြိုင်အနုပညာနဲ့ပတ်သက်ရင် မြူးကြွလှုပ်ရှားမှုအရှိဆုံးမြို့ ဖြစ်တာကြောင့် အခုလို ရန်ကုန်ကိုတည်ပြီး စစ်တမ်းကောက်ရတာပါ။

စစ်တမ်းမေးခွန်းလွှာ

စုစုပေါင်း မေးခွန်း ၁၈ ခုဖြစ်ပါသည်။ မိတ်ဆွေရွေးချယ်သည့် အခြေခံအားတွင် အမှန်ဖြစ်ရန်ဖြစ်ပါသည်။

၁။ မိတ်ဆွေက မြန်မာနိုင်ငံသားလား။

☐ ဟုတ်တယ်

☐ မဟုတ်ဘူး (ကျေးဇူးပြု၍ မည်သည့်နိုင်ငံသားဖြစ်ကြောင်း ဖော်ပြပေးပါ။-----)

၂။ မိတ်ဆွေအကြောင်း အကောင်းဆုံးဖော်ပြနိုင်မည့် အသက်မွေးဝမ်းကျောင်းကိုပြောပါ။
(အဖြေပေါင်းများစွာကို အမှန်ခြစ်နိုင်ပါတယ်)

- ☐ အနုပညာသည်
- ☐ ပြဗွဲစီစဉ်သူ
- ☐ ပြခန်းထောင်သူ/ ပြခန်းပိုင်ရှင် သို့မဟုတ် ပြခန်းဝန်ထမ်း (မိမိအလုပ်အောက်တွင် ကျေးဇူးပြုပြီး မျဉ်းသားပေးပါ)
- ☐ အနုပညာ တက်ကြွလှုပ်ရှားသူ/ စီစဉ်စည်းရုံးသူ
- ☐ အနုပညာ သင်တန်းနည်းပြ/ ဆရာ
- ☐ အနုပညာဆိုင်ရာ စာရေးသူ
- ☐ အခြား (ကျေးဇူးပြုပြီး အတိအကျ ရေးသားဖော်ပြပေးပါ- _____)

၃။ ခြုံငုံပြောမယ်ဆိုရင် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံမှာ ခေတ်ပြိုင်အနုပညာက ယဉ်ကျေးမှုရဲ့အရေးပါတဲ့ အစိတ်အပိုင်းဖြစ်နေသလား။ အများပြည်သူရဲ့ နေ့စဉ်ဘဝကို ခေတ်ပြိုင်အနုပညာက ဘာတွေအထောက်အကူပြုပါသလဲ။

၄။ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံမှာ ခေတ်ပြိုင်အနုပညာရဲ့ အခန်းကဏ္ဍက ဘာလို့ထင်ပါသလဲ။ ခေတ်ပြိုင်အနုပညာရဲ့ အခန်းကဏ္ဍက ဘာဖြစ်သင့်သလဲ။

၅။ ပြခန်းတွေ၊ မည်သူမဆို အခမဲ့ လက်ရာလာလုပ်လို့ရတဲ့ စတူဒီယိုတွေစတဲ့ ပုဂ္ဂလိကပိုင် လုပ်ငန်းတွေဟာ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံမှာ ရှိသင့်သလောက်ရှိနေပြီလို့ မိတ်ဆွေထင်မြင်ပါသလား။ ဒီလုပ်ငန်းတွေကနေ လက်ရှိခေတ်ပြိုင် အနုပညာလောက အခင်းအကျင်းကို အထောက်အကူပြုမယ့် တခြားလုပ်ဆောင်ချက်တွေရှိစေချင်ရင် ပြောပြပါ။

၆။ အနုပညာသည် သို့မဟုတ် အနုပညာလောကမှာ အသက်မွေးဝမ်းကျောင်းပြုတဲ့ ပညာသည် အနေနဲ့ မိတ်ဆွေရဲ့ အကျိုးစီးပွားဟာ အစိုးရနဲ့ပတ်သက်မှုရှိပါသလား။ အစိုးရနဲ့ ခေတ်ပြိုင်အနုပညာလောက အခင်းအကျင်းကြား ဆက်ဆံရေးဟာ တိုးတက်မြင့်မားလာသင့်တယ်လို့ မိတ်ဆွေထင်မြင်ပါသလား။ တိုးတက်မြင့်မားလာစေသင့်တယ်လို့ မိတ်ဆွေအနေနဲ့ ထင်မြင်တယ်ဆိုရင် ဘယ်လိုလုပ်သင့်သလဲ။ ဘာကြောင့်လဲ။ တိုးတက်မြင့်မားမှုမရှိသင့်ဘူးထင်ရင်လဲ ဘာကြောင့် ထင်တာလဲ။

၇။ အုပ်ချုပ်ရေးမှာ အစိုးရဟာ ထူးထူးခြားခြား အနုပညာလက်ရာတစ်ခုကို လျာထားတာ သို့မဟုတ် လျာထားပြီးသား အနုပညာရှင်တွေရှိနေပါတယ်လို့ မိတ်ဆွေထင်မြင်ပါသလား။ အစိုးရမှာအဲဒါတွေရှိတယ်လို့ ဘာကြောင့် ယူဆတာလဲ။ မယူဆပါဘူးဆိုရင်ရော ဘာကြောင့်လဲ။

၈။ တိုင်းပြည်စီးပွားရေးနဲ့ တိုင်းပြည်ရဲ့ ဥပဓိအတွက် အနုပညာရဲ့အလားအလာကို နိုင်ငံရေးသမားတွေနဲ့ အစိုးရ ပိုပြီးသိရှိနားလည်လာအောင် ဘယ်အရာမျိုးက အထောက်အကူပြုမယ်လို့ မိတ်ဆွေထင်မြင်ပါသလဲ။ ဒီသဘော နဲ့ပြောမယ်ဆိုရင် နိုင်ငံရေးနဲ့ အနုပညာက ဆက်စပ်မှုရှိသင့်တယ်လို့ ထင်လား။

၉။ (ထောက်ပံ့ကြေး၊ ရန်ပုံငွေ) စတဲ့နည်းလမ်းတွေထဲ တစ်နည်းနည်းနဲ့ အနုပညာသည်တွေ၊ ပြခန်းလုပ်ငန်းရှင် တွေ၊ အနုပညာလောကသားတွေကို ကူညီဖို့ဆိုတာ နိုင်ငံတော်မှာ(ယဉ်ကျေးမှုဝန်ကြီးဌာနက)တာဝန်ရှိတယ်လို့ မိတ်ဆွေယူဆပါသလား။ နိုင်ငံတော်ကတာဝန်ရှိတယ်လို့ ယူဆတယ်ဆိုရင် ဘယ်လိုနည်းလမ်းတွေနဲ့ နိုင်ငံတော်က ကူညီပေးသင့်တယ် ထင်လဲ။ တာဝန်မရှိပါဘူးဆိုရင်လည်း ဘာကြောင့်တာဝန်မရှိဘူးလို့ ယူဆတာလဲ။

၁၀။ ယဉ်ကျေးမှုဝန်ကြီးဌာနကနေ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံက ခေတ်ပြိုင်အနုပညာကို စင်တင်တဲ့ ပြပွဲတစ်ခု စီစဉ်ကျင်းပတဲ့ အခါ အနုပညာရှင်အနေနဲ့ သို့မဟုတ် အနုပညာလောကမှာ အသက်မွေးသူ ပညာသည်တစ်ဦးအနေနဲ့ ပါဝင် ဆောင်ရွက်လိုပါသလား။ ပါဝင်ဆောင်ရွက်လိုတယ်ဆိုရင် ဘာကြောင့်လဲ။ ပါဝင်ဆောင်ရွက်မှုမပြုချင်ဘူးဆိုရင် လည်း ဘာကြောင့်လဲ။

၁၁။ 'ပြတိုက်' ဆိုတာကို အယူအဆ/ စိတ်ကူး/ နားလည်သဘောပေါက်မှုအနေနဲ့ မိတ်ဆွေအတွက် ဘယ်လို အနက်အဓိပ္ပာယ်ထွက်သလဲ။

၁၂။ ပြတိုက်တွေလို နေရာဌာနတွေကနေ နောင်မျိုးဆက်အတွက် အဆင့်မြင့်အနုပညာလက်ရာတွေကို ထိန်းသိမ်းသွားဖို့ အရေးကြီးတယ်လို့ မိတ်ဆွေထင်ပါသလား။ သင်လုပ်ကိုင်ဆောင်ရွက်လို့ရတဲ့ အနုပညာနယ် ပယ်အတွက် မိတ်ဆွေအမြင်အရ ပိုပြီးပြည့်စုံတဲ့ အင်စတီကျုရှင်း အဆောက်အအုံတွေရှိနေပါသလား။ ရှိတယ် ဆိုရင် ဘယ်လိုအဖွဲ့အစည်းမျိုး/ ဘယ်လိုနေရာဌာနမျိုးတွေလဲဆိုတာကို ပြောပြပါ။

၁၃။ (ဟိုးရှေးတုန်းက လက်ရာတွေကနေ ခေတ်ပြိုင်အနုပညာလက်ရာတွေအထိ ပညာသည်ပီပီသသနဲ့ ဆင်ဆာဖြတ်တောက်မှုမရှိဘဲ လက်ရွေးစင်ရွေးထုတ်ထားတဲ့) မြန်မာအနုပညာလက်ရာတွေကို ရည်စူးပြီး ထာပရ စင်တင်ပြသထားမယ့် အမျိုးသား အနုပညာ ပြတိုက်ကြီးတစ်ခု မြန်မာနိုင်ငံမှာရှိလာဖို့ အရေးကြီးနေ တယ်လို့ မိတ်ဆွေထင်ပါသလား။ ဘာကြောင့် ရှိလာသင့်တယ်လို့ မိတ်ဆွေကထင်တာလဲ။ ဘာကြောင့်မရှိသင့် ဘူးလို့ ထင်တာလဲ။

၁၄။ မြန်မာအနုပညာရှင်တွေအတွက် ပြည်ပနိုင်ငံတွေမှာ လက်ရာတွေသွားပြဖို့၊ ပြည်ပနိုင်ငံတွေကနေ သိရှိလာ ကြဖို့ အရေးကြီးတယ်လို့ ထင်ပါသလား။ ဘာကြောင့်အရေးကြီးတယ်ထင်တာလဲ။ ဘာကြောင့်အရေးမကြီးဘူး လိထင်တာလဲ။

၁၅။ ဒီနေ့ခေတ် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံက (အနုပညာရှင်တွေနဲ့/ သို့မဟုတ် စီစဉ်ကျင်းပသူတွေစတဲ့) အနုပညာလောက မှာ အသက်မွေးသူ ပညာသည်တွေ ရင်ဆိုင်နေရတဲ့ အဓိကအခက်အခဲတွေက ဘာတွေလဲ။

၁၆။ ခေတ်ပြိုင်အနုပညာလောက တည်ဆောက်ပုံရဲ့ လုပ်ငန်းလည်ပတ်မှုမှာ ကျင့်စဉ်ကောင်း၊ နမူနာကောင်း တွေ မြင်ထား တွေ့ထားတာရှိရင်ပြောပါ။ ဒီမေးခွန်းကိုဖြေကြားရာမှာ ဥပမာတစ်ခု သို့မဟုတ် ဥပမာတွေ အများ ကြီးပေးပြီး ရုပ်လုံးပေါ်လာအောင် ဖြေကြားပေးခြင်းအတွက် ကျေးဇူးတင်ပါတယ်။

၁၇။ လူ့အဖွဲ့အစည်းအတွင်း အနုပညာလက်ရာတွေအတွက် ပိုမိုကျယ်ပြန့်တဲ့ စင်မြင့်တစ်ခုရရှိလာစေဖို့ရာ အမှီအခိုကင်းတဲ့ အနုပညာအသိုက်အမြှံတစ်ခုမှာရှိထားရမယ့် အသုံးပြုတယ်လို့မိတ်ဆွေယူဆတဲ့ အောက်ခြေ ကနေ အထက်ကိုသွားတဲ့ ပူးပေါင်းဆောင်ရွက်မှုကျင့်စဉ်ပုံစံတွေကိုပြောပြပါ။

၁၈။ မြန်မာ အနုပညာလောကရဲ့ တည်ဆောက်ပုံကို ပိုမိုကောင်းမွန်လာအောင် မနက်ဖြန်သဘက်ခါ မိတ်ဆွေ အနေနဲ့ ပြောင်းလဲမှုတစ်ခုလုပ်ခွင့်ရမယ်ဆိုရင် ဘာကိုပြောင်းလဲသွားမလဲ။ ဥပမာတစ်ခုသို့မဟုတ် ဥပမာတွေ အများကြီးပေးပြီး ဖြေကြားပေးတဲ့အတွက် ကျေးဇူးတင်ပါတယ်။

မိတ်ဆွေထပ်မံပြီး ရေးသားဖော်ပြချင်တာရှိရင်လည်း အောက်မှာ ရေးသားဖော်ပြပေးနိုင်ပါတယ်ရှင်။

APPENDIX 2 // Censorship Laws

Translation of the Censorship Laws in vigor first from 1964 to 2012 (a) and 2013 – until the present. The translations were published along the original texts in Melissa Carlson's *Painting as Cipher: Censorship of the Visual Arts in Post-1988 Myanmar* (Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia, Volume 31, Number 1, March 2016, pp. 116-172 (Article)), pp.170-171. The following credits accompany the published documents:

- (a) From a photocopied document listing 1964 Art Exhibition Principles as Applied by the Censorship Board (1964–2013), provided to author by Censorship Board official at the Press Scrutiny and Registration Department, Ministry of Information, Yangon, 2 August 2013.
- (b) From a document provided to author by Censorship Board official, Yangon, 2 August 2013.

1. 1964 Law

(Translation) According to the Library, Museum and Exhibitions Supervision Committee, in 1964 the Library, Museum and Exhibitions Monitoring Act was passed permitting the exhibition of art depending on these principles:

- (a) Whether or not the expressions oppose and slander national benefits without supporting national welfare.
- (b) Whether or not there is expression that hurts policies laid down by the government without constructive intention.
- (c) Whether or not there is expression that insults those of the same or different religion.
- (d) Whether or not there is expression that disintegrates national unity.
- (e) Whether or not there is expression that hurts security, law, discipline and peace.
- (f) Whether or not there is expression of improper and untrue ideas that frighten the youth and children.
- (g) Whether or not the exhibition includes expression that is improper in context of time and situation, even if the information is deemed to be true.
- (h) Whether or not there are improper expressions.
- (i) Whether or not the expressions include and encourage criminality, criminals and supernatural cruelties.
- (j) Whether or not expressions oppose Myanmar traditions and culture.
- (k) Whether or not expressions criticize departmental businesses without constructive intentions.
- (l) Whether or not expressions cause someone to lose their personal dignity.
- (m) Whether or not expressions are biased and propagate in the favour of international and other national organizations concerning politics, ideology and personal affairs.
- (n) Whether or not expressions are capable of ruining the moral behaviour of the youth and children.

2. 2013 Law

(Translation) The Censorship Board's Rules for Art Exhibitions, in effect from 17 August 2013

1. The exhibition permit is valid only during the given time period.
2. This permit is not transferable.
3. If loudspeakers or amplifiers are used during the exhibition period, then permission by the authorities must be granted in advance.
4. According to law code 9 of the 1964 Library, Museum and Exhibitions Monitoring Act the exhibition permit can be withdrawn by the registration committee.
5. Artwork that creates trouble or conflict between different ethnicities and religion will not be allowed to continue exhibiting.
6. Artwork that brings about conflict and that is against the law will not be allowed to continue exhibiting.
7. Exhibiting inappropriate artwork is not allowed.
8. Artwork that encourages criminals, cruelty, gambling, drugs and narcotics are not allowed to exhibit.