TRaNS: Trans -Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia (2022), **10**, 19–38
doi:10.1017/trn.2021.4

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Inaugurating the "White Passage": *Art '76*

Hera*

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
*Corresponding author. Email: hera.ellipsis@gmail.com

(Received 9 April 2020; revised 5 October 2020; accepted 25 February 2021)

Abstract

Within an art exhibition, the disposition of space is fundamental in experiencing artworks. A study of the exhibition space as discourse enmeshes art within a framework of relationship and processes instead of viewing art as an isolated and autonomous object. This paper features the case study of Art '76, the inaugural exhibition of Singapore's first large-scale institution of art, the National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG). The NMAG's opening in 1976 had been much anticipated by artists and the art audience since the 1960s, it was also an important milestone in the National Museum of Singapore's process of modernisation and revitalisation. During Singapore's post-independent period, the National Museum began to redefine itself as a civic museum focussing on Singapore's history and culture, shifting away from its previous incarnation of a research-focused colonial institution, the Raffles Library and Museum. Singapore was not alone in exploring the role of modern art in nation-building, as neighbouring Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia and Thailand also began to moot for their own institution of modern art around the same period of time. Art '76 and the NMAG represent a case of distinct spatial typology that arose out of unique institutional and socio-political dynamic in post-independent Singapore. In analysing the legacy as well as the relationships and contentions that shaped the spatial articulation of Art '76, this paper studies existing visual and oral archive, as well as critically evaluating the concepts of space as a subject of historical study.

Keywords: Southeast Asian Art; Exhibition History; Space; Museum; Modern Art

> "The seventies was a time of Singapore developing its museum knowhow. At NMAG I tried to create a big white-shed. I came to this realisation after a study trip in USA with over twenty curators, with US State Department funding—what Singapore wanted was white walls with [lighting] tracks and power points on the floor for vitrines".
>
> —Constance Sheares[1]

The *Art '76* exhibition opened on 21 August 1976, ceremoniously inaugurating the beginning of Singapore's first large-scale institution of art, the National Museum Art Gallery (NMAG). The NMAG was located within the National Museum of Singapore's rear wing. *Art '76* also marked the occasion to unveil eight newly renovated galleries and their accompanying facilities[2] that comprised the venue of NMAG. In the quote above, Constance Sheares, the then curator of art,[3] described her vision of the NMAG as a "big white-shed" in an interview with curator Shabbir Hussain Mustafa (Low and Mustafa 2015: 2). Indeed, the eight galleries within the NMAG had adopted certain formal characteristics

[1]Low and Mustafa 2015: 2

[2]The NMAG also include a theaterette with a stage and changing rooms, a conference room and an office space for the Singapore Arts Council.

[3]Constance Sheares was engaged as the Curator of Art and graduated from Courtauld Institute of Art at the University of London. She began working for the National Museum of Singapore to plan the NMAG in 1973.

© The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Institute of East Asian Studies, Sogang University

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press

associated with the white cube, such as predominantly white walls and ceilings, and a gallery design that strived to seem as neutral as possible to allow the artworks to be the main focus.

The National Museum of Singapore was previously a colonial institution that predominantly contained a research collection that underwent a modernisation and revitalisation programme during the years leading up to the opening of Art '76. Thus it is important to consider how the revitalisation programme seized the opportunity to remodel the colonial institution into an expression of the nation-state's ideologies and aspirations—a civic modern museum that contributed towards Singapore's budding cultural identity. Furthermore, because the white cube (O'Doherty 1976) is part of the vernacular that arose from the historical conditions preceding its tentative beginnings in the US in the 1930s, and subsequently dominated as a normative standard in the 1960s, it is relevant to explore the implications of this import into Singapore's first state-run art institution and how the artworks inhabit the NMAG gallery spaces that resulted from a dense fabric of ideologies, collaborations and contentions.

Mustafa notes that Sheares' evocation of "the big white shed" is perhaps a sort of "tropical" adaptation of the white cube (Low and Mustafa 2015: 2). The word 'shed' also implies an outhouse or storage structure that is more rudimentary or open to the surroundings. Perhaps 'shed' also refers to a particular initiation period of, in Sheares' words, "Singapore developing its museum knowhow" (Low and Mustafa 2015: 2). Yet, in terms of its physical structure, the rooms of the NMAG were neither slight nor open; it was a solid build-up that effectively walled in and insulated one from the tropics with its air-conditioning that produced its own microclimate.

The NMAG is located at the rear wing of the National Museum, which is a long section behind the rotunda. A floor plan from 1904 shows the initial space allocation prior to a major renovation that began in 1972. Initially, the ground floor was divided into rooms for the curator, taxidermist, the library and the museum store. The first floor shows the long rectangular plan divided into two rooms and a larger rectangular space.

After a major renovation,[4] galleries 2–7 on the first floor, as described in the Art 76' catalogue, "provide for a continuous run of exhibition space and an uninterrupted flow of traffic for a distance of approximately 124.2 metres". This continuous corridor on the first floor of the museum housed galleries 2–6, which were the focal point of the exhibition and displayed artworks that were specially chosen from the *Art 76'* invitational selection process.

Prior to its association with museums, 'gallery' referred to a passageway, covered or partly open, and a long portico. A gallery that consists of a long passageway or a series of connected rooms is one of the most enduring archetypes, a feature commonly found in civilian buildings and palaces as early as the Renaissance period. This presents the possibility of a continuous space that is uninterrupted in the middle by pillars. It also allows for the incorporation of a continuously unfolding narrative through the exhibits. Some famous examples of galleries of art in the form of passageways include the rooms of the Uffizi Gallery, the Louvre and the Dulwich Gallery. The NMAG followed this tradition but also followed closely the tenets of the modern gallery aesthetic exemplified by the MoMA. An alternative to the spatial metaphor of the "great white shed" is to consider the NMAG as a "white passage". Technological advances of the 1970s enabled a hermetically sealed interior articulation within its previously colonial shell. With the advent of air-conditioning, it was possible to create large-scale, climate-controlled enclosures. Where the Uffizi, the Louvre and Dulwich galleries had initially relied on windows and skylights, in 1976, the NMAG opted for ceiling lights and track lights, as written in NMAG's opening catalogue, "natural lighting cannot be depended upon and is generally damaging to painting and other artworks" (Hooi and Sheares 1976).

There are several challenges in analysing the legacy of *Art '76*. Exhibitions are cherished for providing a personal encounter with works of art and much of their merits lie in the realm of this artistic experience. Exhibitions are often temporary and permanent displays often change, therefore an analysis of their legacy, cumulatively and individually, remains a challenging undertaking. Rooted in or mediated by material practices, the disposition of space is fundamental to an art exhibition; the entanglement

[4]See page 23, *The exclusion and inclusion of time*, for more information about the National Museum Wing Building prior to its 1973 renovation.

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press

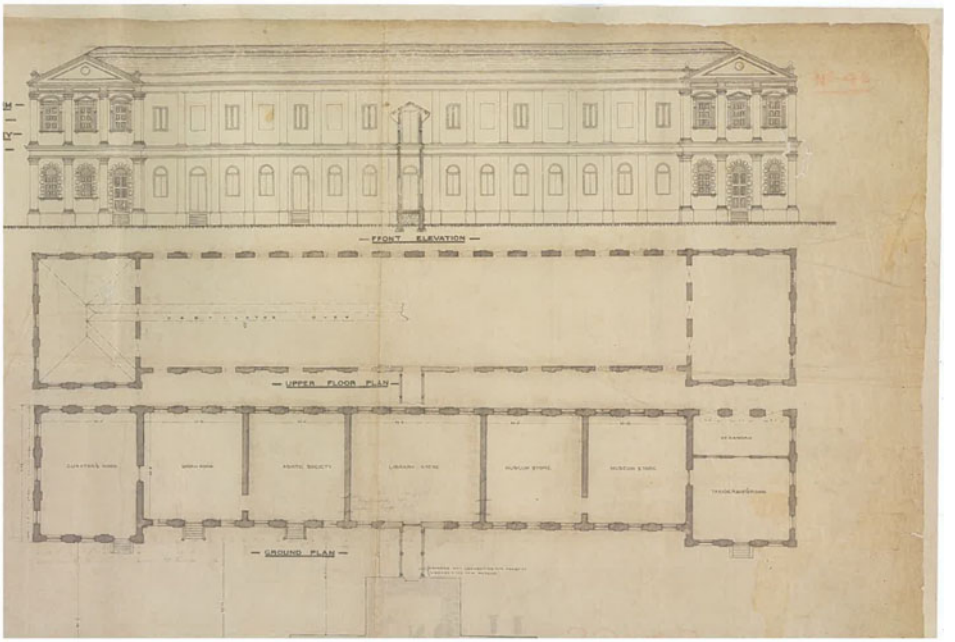


Figure 1. A construction floorplan of the Raffles Museum extension building, which would eventually be used for the NMAG. Image courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

between space and the exhibition is especially pronounced in *Art '76* as an inaugural exhibition that launched the galleries and facilities of the NMAG.

Considering the term exhibition as a concept and format, Martha Ward notes a particular milestone in the development of exhibitions as a format: "The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were also when our modern usage of the word 'exhibition' developed. Though not exclusively used for art, it did refer generally to showing publicly" (Ward 2005: 320). The Paris Salon, which began in 1667, was regularly held beginning in 1737 and was open to the public. Once its regularity and publicness were established, the Paris Salon became an influential institution that validated its exhibited works of art. Initially started as an exhibition showcasing the works of recent graduates from Écoles des Beaux-Arts, the Salon paved ways for an artist' success through patronage connections.

There exists a wide range of premodern and non-European modes of display, such as colonial expositions, temple wall murals or sculpture gardens; without eschewing the pluralistic roots that affect the wide range of exhibitionary modes in existence today, this essay considers the Paris Salon model as a significant lineage of an early institutional model that art societies adopted in pre- and post-war Singapore (Clark 1998: 175–9; Seng 2017: 215–216). One of the earliest art societies, the Society of Chinese Artists, was initially named 'Salon Art Society'. Kwok Kian Chow considers the activities of the art societies as "marking the beginning of art institutions in Singapore" (Kwok 1996: 16) and notes that the Singapore Art Society is another significant art society.

Following the salon-type exhibition format adopted by the art societies, Seng Yu Jin notes a subsequent shift to "internationalist exhibitions that promoted specific styles, media and ideologies sourced from around the world" and that "began in the 1950s and 1960s across Southeast Asia" (Seng 2017: 218). Ahmad Mashadi also addresses the artistic developments in Southeast Asia from the 1950s that were "affected by an increased access to Euro-American artistic models and an eventual shift towards 'internationalism', expressed through the pervasiveness and institutionalisation of abstraction and formalism as dominant modes of expression". (Mashadi 2011: 409). This trajectory between Salon type exhibitions to 'internationalism' as an institutional mode is well represented in the Art '76 exhibition by the

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press

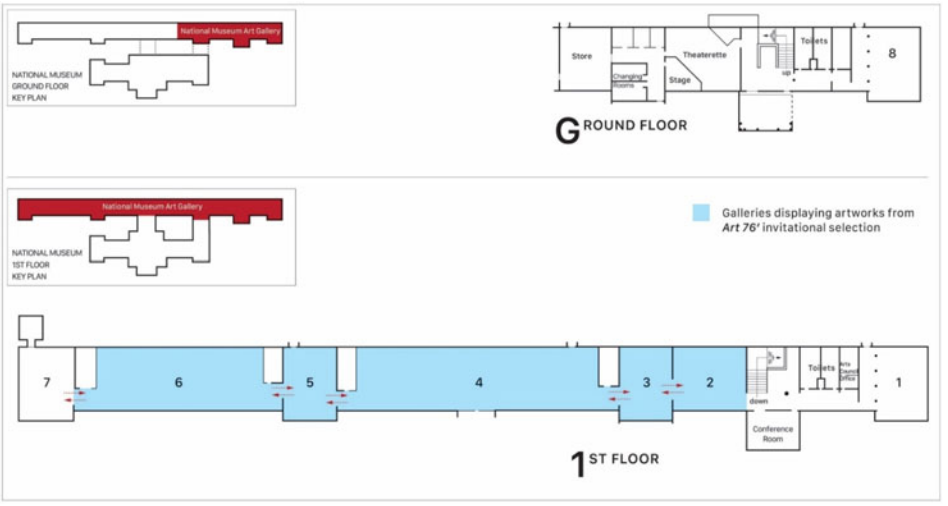


Figure 2. Map showing the location of the NMAG within the National Museum of Singapore, highlighting the continuous passageway of galleries on the first floor.
Image © Hera 2019, drawn based on a plan for the NMAG in the NMAG opening catalogue (Singapore 1976).
First floor plan also shown in Figure 6.



Figure 3. A photograph of NMAG's Room 4, or Room of the Early Pioneers.
Image source: NMAG Official Opening Catalogue (Hooi and Sheares 1976).
Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board
Image also shown in Figure 6.

gallery display idiom that favours the hanging of such abstract formalist paintings and the abundance of the 'Non-Figurative Painting' category of works[5] in the exhibition.

[5]See pages 16–18 for the selection of works and their categories.

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 4. The Grand Gallery of the Louvre, painting by Hubert Robert, 1796.
Image source: Wikimedia Commons (Robert 1805)



Figure 5. Photograph of the Dulwich Gallery interior
Image source: Wikimedia Commons (White 2018)

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Of particular interest to this paper, and departing from the roots of seventeenth-century European exhibitions, is the *Yaji* (雅集) ritual that originates in China, a mode of display and sharing that is more congenial to other formats, such as scroll paintings and leaf albums. Tsong-Zhung Chang and Shiming Gao consider the *Yaji* garden event as a model of viewing experience with a distinct genealogy that differs from the modern fine art museum institution and white cube gallery (Chang and Gao 2018). The format refers to a gathering of friends in private spaces, especially gardens for discussing literature, scroll and album paintings, and various aesthetic objects. Chang and Gao write about some fundamental differences between the *Yaji garden* experience and the modern art museum exhibition: "…the success of a *yaji* experience is contingent on the gathering, therefore the success of the event depends as much on the dynamics generated by the participants as in the art being displayed. For the museum, the emphasis is on its function as an edifice of material display." (Chang and Gao 2018: 261). Artforms originally intended for vernacular display rituals stood out awkwardly as they are subsumed into the hegemonic white cube like exhibition space, as seen in the case of the scroll paintings displayed in *Art '76*.[6] Locally, they are reminders of othered artistic milieus in a homogenising "internationalism" mode that would encounter multiple challenges almost immediately during the decades of the 1980s and 1990s.

Reflecting on the general trajectory of contemporary exhibitions, Lucy Steeds notes that the word "contemporary" in relation to art initially can be traced to exhibition titles "made in distant locations but sharing the current time". She also elaborates on the implication of studying exhibitions of contemporary art: "Consideration of contemporary art's exhibition means prioritizing its becoming public—its moments of meeting a public, or rather, plural publics. … More broadly, the disparate experiences and dissonant discussions of art that emerge in the moment of exhibition are a basis on which the cultural realities of our places and our times are negotiated in relation to other cultural realities" (Steeds 2014: 13). Meanwhile, June Yap considers the notion of the global within the aesthetic expressions of Singapore artists' works. She argues that "[f]or aesthetic interpretation, however, the global is not merely significant in a historical capacity. It also articulates the definition of the contemporaneity of art, for Singapore and also the region." (Yap 2017: 319). In Yap's essay, the global within aesthetic expression not only refers to a fixed notion of the whole world but also having the characteristics of "movement or flow, of commensurability and as free or unconstrained" (Yap 2017: 320). Yap also explains how "globalisation is not just about geopolitics, it is also a discourse of interests and a way of seeing" (Yap 2017: 326). Whereas Yap identifies the notion of the global within the contemporary, Steeds frames her arguments on the desire to relate distinct cultural realities in contemporary exhibitions. Regardless, in both cases, it can be deduced that the contemporary arrives with a shift in geographical and spatial imaginings.

The term space may sound deceptively simple it is often taken for granted that its meaning must be obvious and universally understood. However, the conceptualisation of space shifts across time, culture and languages; the implication of this is not merely semantic but also has an effect on one's world view. Accordingly, it is important to consider some implicit understandings of space and the frameworks that engender lively discussions on space and thus spaces in exhibition history.

Whilst the nature and understanding of space has been heavily debated, quantity and emptiness are some of the most pervasive conceptual tools to describe space. One of the most notable models of space as a quantity is the Euclidean Space, a three-dimensional space described by three coordinates. The model of space as empty, absolute and independent of matter can be traced to Newton's *Principia*, which was first written in 1687, this idea of an absolute space is a radical conceptualisation. In *Principia*, Newton actively argues for the elimination of human perception in defining space (translated here in 1999 from Latin into English by I. Bernard Cohen and Anne Whitman):

> "Although time, space, place and motion are very familiar to everyone, it must be noted that these quantities are popularly conceived solely with reference to the objects of sense perception. And this is the source of certain preconceptions; to eliminate them it is useful to distinguish these quantities into absolute and relative, true and apparent, mathematical and common."(Newton 1999: 409)

[6]See Figure 6, Room 2 and 3 on page 9. See also page 18.

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Considered simple enough to be understood in its derivative form, the idea of space as an absolute and as quantity continues to be reinforced today through elementary physics and mathematics. This, in turn, constitutes much of our almost intuitive understandings of space. Its unquestioned manoeuvre generates a range of implications; Doreen Massey, in her book *For Space* (Massey 2005), describes a long association of space with stasis, closure and representation (13). Massey argues that space is often conceptualised as devoid of temporality, and this connotationally deprives space of its most challenging characteristics—contingency, temporality and simultaneity.[7]

Alternatively, she lists the following propositions towards defining space:

> "First, that we recognise space as the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny. … Second, that we understand space as the sphere of possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity… Multiplicity and space as co-constitutive. Third, that we recognise a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made… Perhaps we could imagine space as simultaneity of stories-so-far." (Massey 2005: 9)

Massey's propositions are taken as guiding principles in analysing the spatial articulation of Art '76 in terms of context, collaboration and process.

Socio-cultural and Political Context Surrounding *Art '76*

As early as the 1950s, there was a growing art exhibition scene in Singapore that was dominated by the activities of art societies, such as the Singapore Art Society, but there was a lack of specialised venues for the production, showing and circulation of visual art. Towards the 1970s in Singapore, the spaces for art exhibitions were increasingly specialised; simultaneously, the works of art within these spaces gradually became decontextualised from the other realms of life outside art.

Prior to the 1970s, many of the constant venues for showing art are mostly multi-purpose halls for hire within buildings belonging to the Singapore government or independent associations. For instance, the British Council exhibition hall was an important venue in the 1950s. In 1953, five artists organised an exhibition after their trip to Bali, this exhibition is now considered a landmark event in the formulation of the Nanyang style of painting. Other venues frequently used for art exhibitions include the Chinese Chamber of Commerce or the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). These government and independent association buildings mostly served other functions and advocacies while supporting the arts on the side; they provide some basic equipment and surfaces for displaying art. For instance, the British Council Exhibition Hall provided stands that could be moved around, and the lighting normally depended upon the ceiling and hanging lights or daylight coming from opened doors and windows (see Figure 9).

Apart from these multi-purpose halls, there was a venue that dedicated a limited section for the display of local art. The University of Malaya Art Museum, founded in 1955 showcased monumental art in the Hindu-Buddhist tradition and archaeological artefacts of Malaya, Southeast Asia, China and India; the museum also had a collection called 'Contemporary Malayan Art', shown within a partitioned area of the gallery, which consisted of works by artists such as Cheong Soo Pieng, who was still active at the time. The University of Malaya Art Museum moved to a larger venue in 1958 due to the limited space. Photographs from an exhibition opening in December 1958 show a series of movable display walls and showcases, as well as ceiling lights which gave an even wash (see Figure 10). 'Contemporary Malayan Art' was a relatively small section amongst the wide range of Museum displays; hence, another venue was required for exhibiting and collecting the growing number of local artists and artworks.

[7]In For Space, Massey also outlines several areas of the debate on space. This often led to what Foucault refers to as the "long history of denigration of space" (Foucault 1980: 70). Massey argues that there is a tendency that representation is often equated with space itself, as can be seen in the works of Henri Bergson (Massey 2005: 20). She also highlights the political implications and alignment pertaining the conceptualisation of space, often evaded as a claim for truth or inevitability and perpetuated by hegemonic groups throughout history. She also acknowledges that her propositions resonate with recent politics that are committed to anti-essentialism. (Massey 2005: 10).

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press

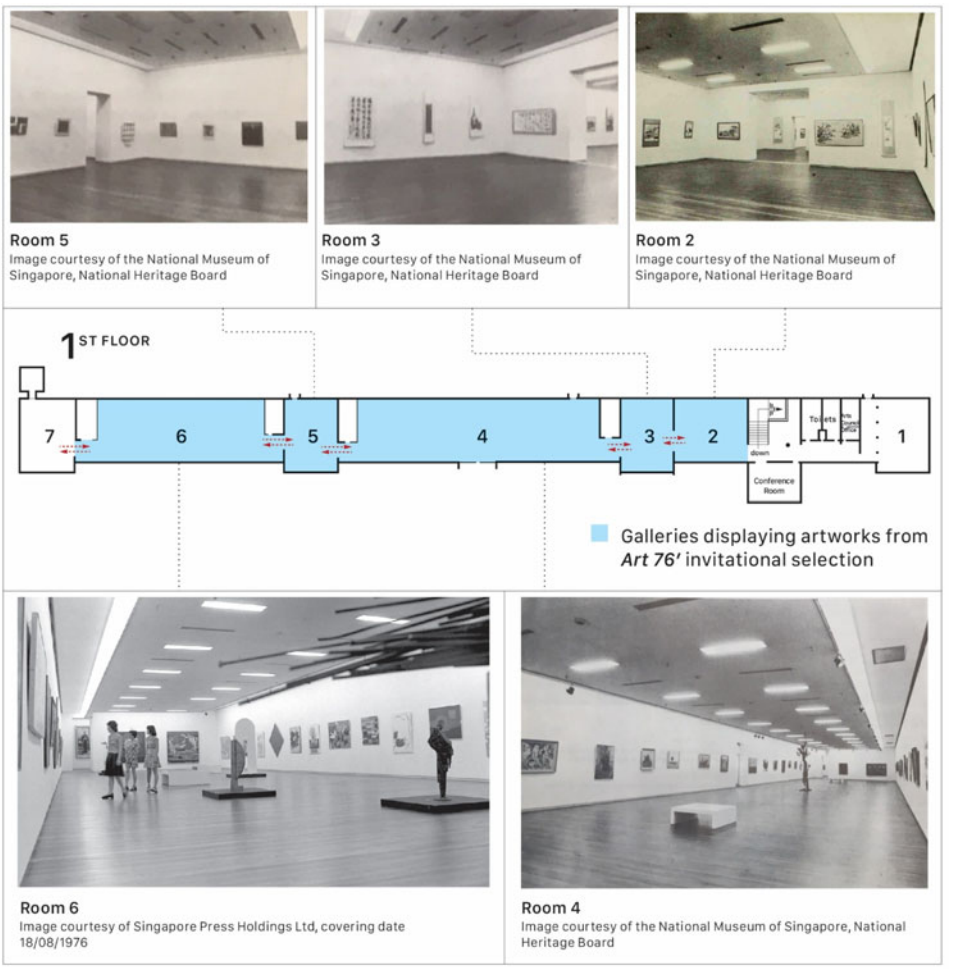


Figure 6. Diagram showing photographs of the gallery rooms corresponding to their location on the floorplan.
Image © Hera 2019

Recognising the need for more specialised gallery spaces, the Singapore Arts Council was set up in 1967 to establish a national gallery of art; although this would only come to fruition in 1976. Hedwig Anuar, the director of the National Library, noted in 1967 that the 'exhibition room' in the National Library building, then a popular venue for hosting art exhibitions, was actually a lecture hall used for diverse purposes. She explained that "[a]rt lovers and artists will only have their special requirements catered for when an art gallery is established" (Anuar 1967). Furthermore, the president of the Singapore Art Society Ho Kok Hoe and the regional representative of the British Council T.F.S. Scott also publicly called for the establishment of art galleries in 1968[8] and 1965,[9] respectively.

In line with Singapore's growing art scene, many private art galleries were set up towards the 1970s, and they increasingly replaced multi-purpose halls. The Alpha Gallery was an important art space that held its inaugural exhibition in 1971 and was active throughout the 1970s and the 1980s. Although it is a small and intimate venue, the gallery was able to host exhibitions of renowned artists due to the network of friendships amongst the Alpha Artists, the gallery managers and one of the gallery's influential supporter, architect Lim Chong Keat (Seng and Mustafa 2019: 108). The Alpha Gallery interior consisted

[8]1968. "Wanted: An Academy of Arts." *The Straits Times*, 26 May 1968, 4.
[9]1965. "Call for art galleries." *The Straits Times*, 21 February 1965, 3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of white walls with simple furniture and a combination of ceiling and adjustable spotlights. Moveable walls also allowed for layout changes.[10]

The 1970s also saw the beginning of major corporate collections of art. Large corporations, such as United Overseas Bank (UOB) and The Development Bank of Singapore Limited (DBS), acquired artworks to display in their new building's concourse, lobby and offices. Collecting art was an important cultural aspect of these banking institutions (Choo 1979). UOB held annual art exhibitions since 1981as part of its patronage. Plaza Singapura, a newly opened mall in 1974 that was then managed by DBS Land, commissioned sculptures by Ng Eng Teng in front of its facade and held several art exhibitions. With the patronage of corporations towards acquiring and exhibiting works of art, commercial buildings, such as shopping centres and office towers, became common art exhibition venues from the 1970s onwards.

The growing number of private and corporate art galleries, as well as the arrival of the NMAG in the 1970s, gave artists more specialised gallery spaces to host their art exhibitions. In particular, the NMAG provided unprecedented opportunities locally due to the large scale of its galleries compared to private enterprises. Artists also noted that the large-scale venue was unprecedented in Singapore; it enabled the display of large-scale sculptures that were previously challenging to exhibit and store due to a lack of suitable venue. Sculptor Ng Eng Teng notes, in a newspaper article published just prior the opening of *Art 76*', that "[u]p to now, the works of local artists here [are] on a modest scale, catering mainly for people who live in flats. With the enormous halls in the gallery, we have to expand our dimensions" (1976).

The NMAG was considered the first instance of the state's major investment in the arts infrastructure, and the Government Funds had contributed $100,000 for the renovation and conversion work itself. A large portion of the building fund ($1,148,816) came from the Singapore Arts Council, which was considered a society registered under the Societies Act (Hooi and Sheares 1976: 6). Apart from funding from the Singapore Government and independent societies and individuals, the USA State Department also contributed towards travel grants for the National Museum and NMAG staff for a study trip to the USA to acquire some knowledge and skills to run a museum. Amongst the staff members that embarked on the trip, Constance Sheares, the then curator of art, decided to adopt the white cube gallery traits seen in MoMA's galleries as she deemed necessary for the establishment of an art museum in Singapore. Choy Weng Yang, who had gone for a study trip through the UNESCO Fellowship at the MIT Center for Advanced Visual Studies, was also a proponent of the tenets of the white cube gallery and would later join the NMAG as the Head of Design.

The 1970s saw a period of transformative political changes amongst the newly independent Southeast Asian nations. It also coincided with the Cold War, a period of geopolitical tension between the USSR and the USA, with both factions extending, amongst others, cultural support to gain dominance in this ideological war. The impact of these purposeful supports in the form of funding and exchange was deeply felt in the development of modern art institutions in Southeast Asia. When the NMAG opened in 1976, other newly independent nations in Southeast Asia were also mooting for their own institution of modern and contemporary art around the same period: Indonesia's Taman Ismail Marzuki (TIM) Art Centre had opened earlier in 1968, the Cultural Centre of the Philippines (CCP) opened in 1969 and the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art (BIMA) in Thailand opened in 1976. These institutions obtained a large portion of their funding from the state, except for the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art, which was founded by a group of individuals including citizens and ex-pats. Significantly, the presence of US support in the form of funding or training programmes also loomed behind CCP[11] and BIMA.[12]

[10]Photographs of the Alpha Gallery can be found in the Alpha Gallery exhibition catalogues, such as the Jamini Roy exhibition catalogue, back cover (Coates 1972).

[11]In the Phillipines Free Press, journalist Quijano de Manila traced the controversial fundraising and funding management of the CCP by Imelda Marcos. Amongst the significant fund contributors was the war damage fund for education authorized by the US Congress (de Manila 1969).

[12]In an interview with Apinan Poshyananda, it is noted that the BIMA was funded by the Rockfeller foundation. The US government also sponsored an exhibition of Thai artists who studied in the US. (Poshyananda *et al.* 2019: 244).

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press

When *Art 76*' opened, the National Museum was undergoing a series of revitalisation and restructuring processes that continue to shape the NMAG. The National Museum was previously known as the Raffles Museum and was a colonial institution. In 1960, soon after Singapore acquired self-governance, the Raffles Museum was renamed the National Museum. Previously, the museum had a large Zoological and Anthropological Collection, which was part of a larger network of scientific collections in the region, and research knowledge that would converge in the British Natural History Institutions. Not all objects within the Zoological Collection were able to be put on display, mainly because the Zoological Collection had two types of specimens: (1) mounted specimens, often on display and of interest to members of the public, and (2) scientific specimens, which formed the majority of the collection and were used for the scientific study (Tan 2015). Following Singapore's independence in 1965, the National Museum's mandate was redefined as a place of learning and enjoyment for the public—a "civic asset" (Art 76 catalogue). In 1972, The National Museum's administration was transferred to the Ministry of Culture; meanwhile, The Zoological Collection was then transferred out[13] so that the National Museum's display could be redirected towards history, culture and the art of Singapore.

In his book, *Of whales and dinosaurs: The story of Singapore's Natural History Museum* (2015), Kevin Y.L. Tan notes that towards 1965 there were already public calls for the government to "modernize" the museum because it was beginning to look dated and old (123). For this reason, as well as to accommodate the change of focus in the museum's collection, the National Museum began a remodernisation process in 1974 that included major renovation work in three phases. The first phase was a conversion and renovation of the rear wing into an art gallery, the NMAG. The inauguration of the NMAG thus represents part of a larger modernisation process for an entity that was considered outmoded and associated with the colonial administration. The aim was to transform it into a relevant and assertively public museum that would play an important role in establishing a collective national identity within a newly independent Singapore. This shift would have a significant bearing on the exhibition-making process of the *Art 76*'.

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson notes how the census, the map and the museum were instrumental in how the colonial state imagined its dominion (Anderson 2006: 163), similarly this "political museumizing" (183) was adapted by the post-independent nations in their own validations. In Singapore, the NMAG's inauguration was carried out in tandem with a modernising process that refocused the museum's collection towards local history, culture and art. In the NMAG official opening catalogue, it was noted that, prior to this modernisation process, the museum had been colloquially known as a "Si Keng", implying that it was a house of dead things (Hooi and Sheares 1976).

Art institutions play a defining role within the art world. Elizabeth Mansfield defines institutions fundamentally as "organising principles" (Mansfield 2002: 2), through which beliefs and conventions could form and be circulated, thus providing communal stability, history and identity. This definition suggests that the institution may have a physical form or remain intangible. One manifestation of the art institution is the museum of art: a hegemonic space that is organised and operated on behalf of the community or the nation. The publicness of the art museum, together with its significantly larger resources, makes it one of the most readily recognised forms of art institutions. At its most effective state, the art museum can establish its institutional ideologies, defining within the art landscape its centre, peripheries and boundaries. Museums can also be an important repository, directing its resources towards storing and preserving collections with a scale and commitment that is difficult to achieve individually. The establishment of the NMAG marked the beginning of the important process of collecting works by local artists on a national level. The NMAG's acquisition programme alleviated artists of the burden of storing larger works in land-scarce Singapore. It also provided an avenue for exhibiting works, thus making them accessible to the public. The growing collection was also a ripe opportunity for the growth of artistic discourses.

[13]The natural history collection, now referred to as the Zoological Reference Collection (ZRC), was transferred to the Science Centre in 1972 and later to the National University of Singapore in 1988. The collection is managed by the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum, which is currently both a public museum and a research institution.

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 7. Minister for Culture Jek Yeun Thong touring *Art 76'* soon after its official opening in Room 6.
Image source: Ministry of Information and the Arts collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore, covering date 21/08/1976, Image no.: 19980002550-0113.

Inside *Art 76'*

The diagram below shows a floorplan of the gallery with corresponding photographs of the different rooms. Works within the exhibition were categorised according to five groups[14]: (1) figurative paintings, (2) non-figurative paintings, (3) Chinese paintings and calligraphy, (4) watercolours and prints and (5) sculpture. These five categories were distributed into five galleries—sculptures were found in both Room 4 and Room 6, whereas Chinese paintings and the calligraphy category were given two smaller rooms, Room 2 and Room 3.

A range of exhibition photographs has been gathered to study the gallery interiors within the *Art 76'* exhibition. Despite conscientious attempts, most of the photographs found were taken before the exhibition opening itself. This presented some limitations. For instance, the NMAG opening catalogue showed photographs depicting all eight galleries, but these images (Figure 3 and Rooms 2, 3, 4, 5 within Figure 6) were taken some days before the opening to allow for time to design and produce the catalogues that were distributed on the opening day. Another photograph by *New Nation* photographer Philip Lim (Room 6 within Figure 6, also shown as Figure 8) was taken three days prior to the exhibition opening. Only Figure 7, a photograph from the National Archives of Singapore, was taken after the official opening. One inconsistency is that the photographs taken before the exhibition opening do not show the presence of artwork labels, but the photograph in Figure 2.6 shows the Minister for Culture Jek Yeun Thong reaching out to read a small artwork label for Thomas Yeo's painting *Spirit of Wing*. Thus, the spatial analysis in this paper bears in mind the changes that may occur in the gallery setting.

Art 76' served as a selection ground for the National Collection artwork acquisition. The works in the exhibition were later acquired, albeit through the donation of artworks from the artists. Regardless, the exhibition was considered a milestone in terms of the state's support. In particular, the scale of the gallery enabled the interior display of larger sculptures. Constance Sheares remarked in the catalogue that "[s] culpture has not yet assumed a dominant position in the visual arts in Singapore due partly to the lack of access to proper facilities and partly to the relative costliness of the materials" (Hooi and Sheares 1976). Singapore artists who wanted to explore the medium of sculpture at the time faced many logistical challenges in terms of display, fabrication and storage. The *Art 76'* exhibition featured

[14]An account of the selection process and categorisation will be detailed from page 15–18.

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press

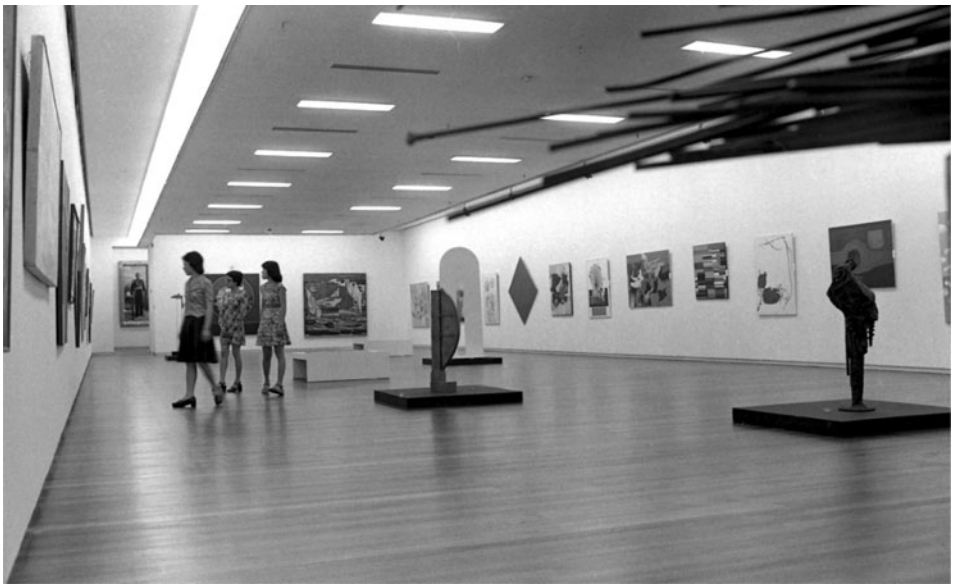


Figure 8. Room 6 of NMAG, showing some of the sculptures displayed in the exhibition Art 76'.
Image courtesy of Singapore Press Holdings Ltd, covering date 18/08/1976.

only six artists who presented sculptural works: Joseph McNally, Kim Lim, Tan Teng Kee, Iskandar Jalil, Ng Eng Teng and Teo Eng Seng. Unlike paintings and prints, which were wall-bound in this exhibition, the sculptural works were able to occupy the voids in the middle of the gallery rooms. They also diverted the visitor circulation, which would otherwise only be concentrated along the walls of the gallery. Figure 8 shows Room 6, with sculptures and seating that were rhythmically positioned throughout the gallery. Shown in the innermost part of the gallery is Kim Lim's geometric steel sculpture *Day*, with another of her bronze sculptures, *Pegasus*, in front of it. Joseph Mc Nally's *Cyclops* can be seen towards the foreground on the right while the photograph only captures a section of Tan Teng Kee's *Space Sculpture No.1* at the top right corner of the photograph.

Collaborations, Negotiations and Contentions in NMAG's Spatial Design

In mapping out the collaborations, negotiations and contentions that underlie NMAG's spatial design, this paper examined accounts of several historical actors that were heavily involved in the planning process of the gallery and the *Art '76* exhibition. Aside from visions and ideals, the making of an exhibition space is subject to large and small factors that tip the scale in the decision-making moments. In the particular case of the NMAG, bureaucratic structures, interactions between individuals and budgeting measures carry significant gravity.

Art '76 was an invitational show with a selection process. The selection committee of *Art '76* assessed the works of notable artists who were invited to submit their artworks, narrowing down the 234 works entered to 150 works by 92 artists. Each artist had a maximum of two works on display, so the exhibition could include as many artists as possible. The exhibition also showcased the "present state of art" at the time. By this time, there were local precedents of the invitational selection process; many art societies, such as the Society of Chinese Artists, followed a selection process where a panel of esteemed individuals judged the entries. In an interview with T.K. Sabapathy, Curator of Art Constance Sheares mentioned that the inaugural exhibitions and several others that she curated also had a selection committee: "All these exhibitions had a jury. … the proposal came from me. I said, 'I'd like to do this'. But there was a selection committee again" (Sheares 2016: 4). This was an organisational process implemented to share both the responsibility and the possible criticisms towards the act of selecting artworks during the early period of establishing Singapore's museum of art.

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 9. *Fifth Exhibition of Local Artists* in 1954 held at the British Council Exhibition Hall, showing artworks hung on movable panels. Digitised by National Gallery Singapore Library & Archive with kind permission from Cheong Leng Guat. RC-S20-CSP2.2-26.

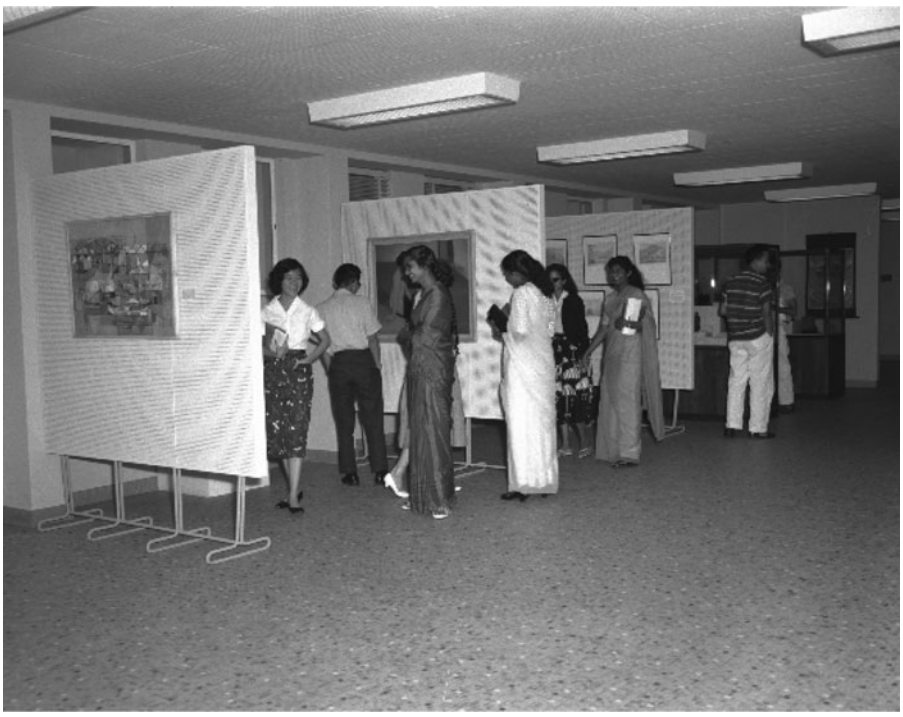


Figure 10. University of Malaya Art Museum exhibition opening in December 1958.
Image source: Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore, covering date 18/12/1958, image no: 19980001955–0003.

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The NMAG's status as an appendage of the National Museum—thus being a department of the Ministry of Culture—had implications on its organisation and vision as an institution. The NMAG was bureaucratically challenged; making decisions within the museum was a complicated process because the National Museum was part of the Ministry of Culture, and thus, many decisions were subjected to the approval of the Ministry. Its funds were in turn controlled largely by the Finance Ministry, which unfortunately placed the development of the Museum as a low priority. Rajamogan notes that, "[i]n such a situation, the flexibility, initiative and incentive most necessary to carry out museum activities were seriously lacking" (Rajamogan 1988: 60).

In her curatorial text, Sheares writes: "A sound evaluation of the present state of art can only be achieved through an objective study of the varying contemporary trends" (Hooi and Sheares 1976). A selection team was formed for the vetting of the artworks, and the committee included Liu Kang, Lim Chin Teong, Koh Boon Piang, Christopher Hooi[15] and Constance Sheares. The selection process aimed to include as many artists as possible, thus each artist was limited to a maximum of two selected artworks. With regards to the selection of works, it is also noted that "The National Museum Art Gallery will attempt a judicious selection of works of art from the region to show how art changes in time in both the social and artistic context. Its judgement on works of art is based on present-day standards which may change considerably in future years" (Hooi and Sheares 1976).

This neutral approach is relatively conservative, considering the wave of critical exhibitions[16] happening around Southeast Asia in the 1970s, such as the Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (GSRB) group exhibition in TIM in 1975, Indonesia (Seng 2017: 223) and the Artists' Front of Thailand's (ATF) outdoor showcase at Rajadamnern Avenue in 1974 (Seng 2017: 225). Both exhibitions advanced a socio-political critique against a hegemonic institution (GSRB) or government (ATF). In contrast, *Art 76*' as an inaugural exhibition of a budding institution focused on a universal, formalist approach that avoided an incoming critique.

On the organisation of artworks in the gallery, Sheares writes that "[t]he works [were] divided into five sections for the purpose of homogenous systematic viewing". 'Homogenous' and 'systematic' indicate an impartial process, whereby no personal preference is indicated towards any single work within the exhibition. It recalls the previous practices of the Raffles Museum, which systematically organised its natural history collections according to taxonomical or comparative arrangements. A systematic viewing experience is undifferentiated and encourages a flow, whereby a visitor comes in, looks, moves to the next work, stops and looks, and then, continues walking procession-like across the white passage.

Reflecting upon the modern art gallery spatial model, Brian O' Doherty regards the space of the art exhibition as not neutral but embodying its own unique ideology. O' Doherty's essays were initially published in *Artforum* in 1976 and subsequently through his book *Inside the white cube: The ideology of the gallery space* (O'Doherty 1999). He describes a white cube gallery space as an enclosed expanse of white walls, with controlled lighting and ample space to isolate individual works of art. He writes, "[a] gallery is constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church. The outside world must not come in, so the windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light. … In this context a standing ashtray becomes almost a sacred object, just as a firehose in a modern museum looks not like a firehose but an aesthetic conundrum" (O'Doherty 1999: 19). O' Doherty rejects the apparent neutrality of the gallery space and considers the codified ideologies behind such spatial presentation, which reinforces the transformative power of the gallery and confers the status of art on the exhibits. The idioms of the white cube gallery, which arose from the specific context in Western modern art, were applied in *Art '76* as a unifying framework to the different genres of artwork in the open call.

Two of the genres in the *Art '76* open call, Chinese calligraphy and Chinese paintings, have a long history of development independent from the tradition of Western modern art. Chinese calligraphy and painting have been presented in a variety of formats; some of which, such as the horizontal

[15]Christopher Hooi was the director of the National Museum of Singapore from 1973 to 1981. Previously, he was also the Curator of Anthropology in the museum between 1957 to 1967.

[16]Seng Yu Jin writes about the emergence of critical exhibitions in the 1970s that happened through out newly independent Southeast Asian nations such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. He considers the critical exhibition as an exhibitionary mode that "challenged dominant categories of art, envisioned a new role for art in society, and proposed new ways of thinking and making art."(Seng 2017: 217)

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press

scroll and the leaf album, were not meant for wall display. The *yaji* (雅集), a private gathering to enjoy art and performances, is a more appropriate occasion for the sharing of works within an intimate distance. In a *yaji,* participants are also able to handle artworks and are expected to express their response to the artworks. Chang and Gao write about the spontaneous mode of engagement: "Unlike the emphasis of the modern museum of passive visuality, *yaji* is a tactile, immersive experience: the Chinese traditional painting format of hanging and rolled scrolls, which requires handling by the viewer, is indicative of the spirit of tactile corporeal involvement. The demand on both host and guest to articulate their aesthetic response dispels passive spectatorship and conspires instead to bring the 'aesthetic moment'" (Chang and Gao 2018: 262–263). However, this interactivity is difficult to achieve in the context of a modern civic museum that is open to a great number of public visitors, especially considering the possible damages sustained by the artworks through handling. Photographs of Room 2 and Room 5 of the NMAG show that the Chinese painting and calligraphy works, seem to have excluded the horizontal scroll and the leaf album format that required closer engagements to appreciate. Instead, most of the selected works are vertical scrolls or framed, which are both more congenial for wall display. Moreover, they did not upset the homogenous systematic viewing experience. Apart from the Chinese painting and calligraphy works in Art 76', Kim Lim's sculpture *Day* also prefers the outdoor context because it is an investigation of how daylight and the atmosphere affects the perception of a sculptural form. These artworks, with their multiple display proclivities, provide contentions on the idioms of the white cube gallery, which is partial to certain viewing experiences and formats.

There are existing testimonies on the design process of the NMAG galleries. They provide an insight into the exhibition-making process of *Art 76*' as well as the negotiations towards the spatial articulation of the NMAG. Upon being appointed Director, Christopher Hooi consulted architectural professionals from the Public Works Department (PWD). His plan included an extension building at the back of the Wing Buildings that would occupy parts of the Fort Canning Hill. The building was a solution to the lack of amenities; in particular, the exhibition holding areas that allowed for the temporary storage of the components of the exhibits before they were set up and spaces for the staff's research library and a Singapore History Gallery. In an interview, Hooi recounted his consultation process: "I was thinking with all these requirements why not sit down and work out all the requirements and then get the co-operation and help of the PWD. … They actually produced a sketch plan and the details were so good that with a bit of polishing up we could have called for tenders for a new building. I was thinking of a new building behind the existing Museum building encroaching some parts of Fort Canning" (Hooi 1992).

Hooi also recounted how the renovation plan and the addition of the new building were then divided into phases, of which only some came to materialise under his directorship: "… I put the plan to the Ministry who came back with an interesting reply saying that it will cost about 12 to 19 million dollars—too expensive. So he said it should be divided into three phases. … Eventually by the time I left the thing was shelved"[17] (Hooi 1992).

Nevertheless, the Public Works Department (PWD) provided the architecture renovation plans of the NMAG, and the first phase of the renovation and modernisation work proceeded. Christopher Hooi included facilities, such as the theaterette with its changing room and the auditorium to accommodate various performing arts activities as well. Subsequently, the NMAG hosted talks, lecture demonstrations, film shows, music recitals, poetry and dance, albeit on a more modest scale compared to the visual arts exhibitions.

The NMAG official opening catalogue mentions the appointment of Choy Weng Yang as the Head of Design in preparation for NMAG and as a process of modernising and revitalising the National Museum: "The particular attention paid to having good displays and attractive publications began with the appointment of the Head of the Exhibition and Design Unit in January, 1975 and the increase in the number of Artists form one to three in 1974"(Hooi and Sheares 1976). In a recent interview I conducted with Choy, he highlighted several of his design contributions to the NMAG that were unveiled in *Art 76*':

[17]Between 2003 to 2006, more redevelopment work was carried out, including building restorations as well as an annex building that extended partly into Fort Canning Hill. Local architecture firm W Architects designed the annex as well as an atrium and a glass rotunda.

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> "I designed the conference room, the round table. Everything had a design, some was appreciated, others were taken for granted. I even designed the benches. … I learned from foreign museums, they had benches every now and then for people to sit down. But I was super cunning. I designed it as a square, so that you can sit on it, but sometimes we could put sculptures over it, so it served as a display stand as well. The benches were white because I was conscious of bright colours interfering with the artworks" (Choy 2018).

In the same interview, Choy also described the artwork installation process with art installers, who would work based on some simple and specific guidelines that he gave. They were experienced installers who had been working for the museum prior to Choy's employment and would carry out the work effectively and swiftly. Paintings were hung around eye level and were spaced regularly and generously.

Although the PWD's involvement with the renovation work had begun through discussions with Hooi as early as 1974, the Curator of Art Constance Sheares and Head of Design (subsequently also Curator of Art) Choy Weng Yang also recalled their involvement with negotiations on the interior of NMAG's gallery spaces. Choy Weng Yang, in an interview with Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, recounted the following incident:

> "…one day as NMAG construction was still going on in 1975, Hooi suggested the three of us[18] walk around. The architect responsible for the renovations was from Hong Kong[19] and he showed us some wall colours that he was considering for the galleries—they were deep tones—and I immediately mention that the proposed colours would not work. I said, 'Look, it's the painting that's important'. He then asked me to suggest a colour, and Constance and I decided on white. Another shock I received was the floor. The architect had already chosen his favourite carpet colour—light pink or something like that. Having gone through the Museum of Modern Art in New York I said, 'No matter which colour you choose, the whole gallery will be ruined. With carpets, you are competing with the painting'!" (Mustafa 2016: 47).

The above anecdote illustrates the complex dynamics between museum staff and the architect in the process of negotiating the final design of the space. In this case, the architect had been responsible for an ongoing long-term design process and received the above comment and intervention. In the interview, Choy further continues: "Later on, fortunately, there were some budgetary issues; we did not have enough money, so they kept the exposed wooden floors! Constance and I went around and I said, 'What's wrong with this?' There were a few cracks on the floor. I recall that she responded, 'This effect is quite good, let's just fill the cracks'"(Mustafa 2016: 45). An added circumstance of the budgetary limitation tipped the scale towards Choy and Sheares' vision of a gallery whose central purpose is to hang paintings and to allow visitors to focus on the artworks while the surrounding wall and floor finishing recede into the background.

Brian O' Doherty, in the book *Inside the White Cube* (O'Doherty 1999), comments on the role of the wall as a display surface as paintings become the focal point. He writes, "If paintings implicitly declare their own terms of occupancy, the somewhat aggrieved muttering between them becomes harder to ignore. …We enter the era where works of art conceive the wall as a no-man's land on which to project their concept of territorial imperative. And we are not far from the kind of border warfare that often Balkanizes group shows" (27). Indeed, within the NMAG, the white walls did not merely allow visitors to focus on the artworks; instead, they become valuable real estate. "Homogenous systematic viewing" from this perspective is also a guiding principle for territorial settlement on the amount of space given around the individual pieces of 140 paintings and drawings displayed along the NMAG walls.

The contentions towards NMAG's spatial design would continue during and after *Art 76'*, especially through the visitor's use of the venue, and resulted from the exhibition organisers. For instance, with regards to the way visitors moved around in NMAG, Choy Weng Yang recalled that "[t]he visitors

[18]The three individuals are Choy Weng Yang, Christopher Hooi and Constance Sheares.

[19]The identity of this specific Hong Kong architect in charge of the renovation is still unknown. He had been working for the PWD during the National Museum's 1974–1976 renovation.

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press

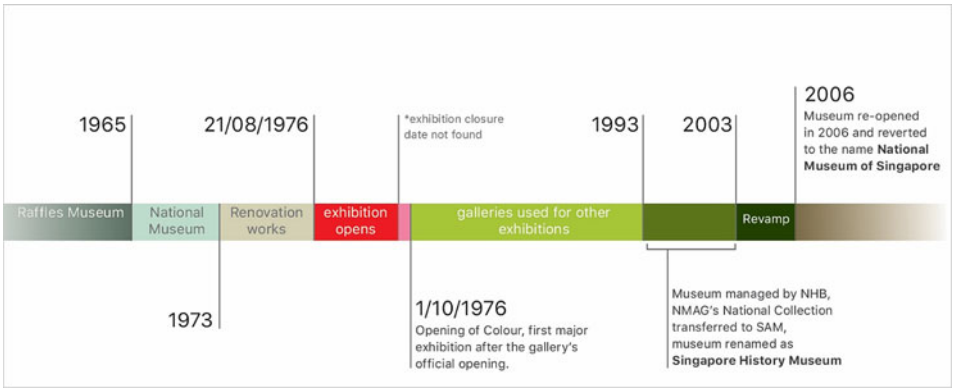


Figure 11. A timeline of events at the site of the National Museum building before and after the opening of *Art '76*

normally walked quite fast, so we spaced the artworks out. Later on, during my time, we developed large letterings, so the visitors stayed longer" (Choy 2018). Rather than having a single author, the spatial articulation of *Art 76'* and indeed other exhibition spaces resulted from a continuous process of contentions and negotiations.

The Exclusion and Inclusion of Time

To see the spaces of an exhibition as a process is to recognise that all exhibitions are a form of intervention into an environment that has a much longer lineage—a passage within a wider history of relationships. As the inaugural exhibition of NMAG, *Art '76* can be seen as an important event marking a milestone in the National Museum of Singapore's process of modernisation and revitalisation that occurred since 1974, which in turn was spurred by Singapore's nation building and search for national identity since the 1960s. The NMAG inherited the extension building that was completed in sections in 1906, 1916 and 1926. Initially, the exterior and interior were built in the Neo-Palladian style. The images below show the upper level of the library extension, which was later converted into the NMAG.

Under the renovation programme, sections of the rear wing were repurposed into a modern structure, visually and functionally. Singapore's tropical atmosphere has a high level of humidity, and its temperature also fluctuates significantly as the day gets hotter with the mid-day sun. Temperature fluctuations and humidity pose challenges to the conservation of artefacts and artwork, so air-conditioning and dehumidifiers were used to insulate objects within the museum from the climate outside. Windows, which were previously valued for air circulation, were not a necessity anymore, apart from providing visual interest. Indeed, the windows that were previously present in the library extension wing of the NMAG were sealed and painted over to increase wall surfaces for the display of artworks. Apart from windows, Neo-Palladian elements that previously existed in the building, such as the ornamental ceiling cornice, the Ionic columns in Figure 12 and the tympanum above the door in Figure 13 were removed. Apart from benefiting artefact and artwork conservation, climate control also attracted visitors to the museum through the provision of physiological comfort—a symptomatic prelude to Singapore's transformation into an "air-conditioned nation"[20] as extensive interior spaces, shopping centres and the politics of comfort began to bourgeon from the late 1970s into the early 2000s.

There was an emphasis on the currency of *Art '76*, evident through its interior spatial design and several other components. Firstly, its exhibition title highlights the year of the exhibition 1976, and secondly, the open call selection process only considered works that were created within the past two years prior to the exhibition and that had not been exhibited before. The museum was undergoing a major change from

[20]Referring to Cherian George's comment "…think of Singapore instead as the Air-conditioned Nation—a society with a unique blend of comfort and central control, where people have mastered their environment, but at the cost of individual autonomy, and at the risk of unsustainability". (George 2000: 15)

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 12. The library extension wing of the National Museum (image taken c1916.), which would be renovated into the NMAG in 1973
Image courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

being an encyclopaedic museum to a national cultural and historical museum. Spatially, parts of the structures were repurposed, conserved and excluded where necessary in the interest of creating a contemporary aesthetic of a post-independent Singapore.

Following *Art '76*, many more exhibitions and programmes were staged in the NMAG. It was soon apparent, however, that Singapore's growing art scene would require more space and infrastructures. The NMAG remained as Singapore's only large-scale art venue for more than two decades, despite facing challenges in its role as Singapore's foremost institution of art. Its lack of autonomy persisted until the establishment of the National Heritage Boards in 1993, a statutory board formed through the merger of the National Archives, National Museum and Oral History Department. This allowed the National Museum of Singapore to make decisions more autonomously, rather than being subjected to direct state intervention.

Apart from its administrative structure, there were also criticisms regarding the NMAG's role as an institution of art. In an article originally written in 1989, art historian T.K. Sabapathy writes that, although the NMAG has secured some success, its policy of renting out gallery spaces on a first-come-first-served basis meant that "the Gallery [had] surrendered its role to determine the nature and quality of exhibitions and uphold the standards of work on display in its premises" (Sabapathy 2018: 249). He also noted that the annual acquisition budget, which was $25,000 in 1989, was inadequate. This situation would soon change by the end of the 1980s.

In 1988, The Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA) was formed with the goals of providing recommendations to make Singapore a culturally vibrant society and considering Singapore's long-term arts and cultural development. The Committee of Visual Arts (CVA), part of the ACCA, wrote in its Committee of Visual Arts Report about the lack of infrastructure for the arts, stating in the *Committee on Visual Arts Report* in 1988 (Singapore, 1988) that "[s]ince 1976, when the National Museum Art Gallery was established, no major physical facilities for art exhibitions have been built" (24). The NMAG remained as a nexus of institutional artistic activity until the opening of the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) in 1996. The CVA recommended the establishment of a "fine arts gallery in the former St Joseph Institution" (Singapore 1988: 6). In 1996, Singapore's first dedicated museum of art, the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), was inaugurated with one of the largest budgets in the region. The collection of artworks in the NMAG was then transferred to be managed by SAM and NHB until the establishment of the National Gallery of Singapore in 2015.

The successors of the NMAG, the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), which was opened in 1996, and the National Gallery of Singapore (completed in 2015), both have spaces that follow the model of having cutting-edge interiors housed in conserved colonial buildings. Through the frame of colonial heritage,

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 13. The library extension wing of the National Museum (image taken c1916.), which would be renovated into the NMAG in 1973
Image courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board

there is a pattern of recycling and appropriating architecture symbolic to the British regime that may be functionally congruous (e.g. the Raffles Museum was renamed the National Museum of Singapore) or requiring heavy-handed renovations to create a useful museum building (old Saint Joseph Institution used as the site of the SAM and the old Supreme Court remodelled into the NGS). Both SAM and NGS were set up in a postmodern era where artists had been experimenting with display settings that deviated from the sterile setting of the white cube–like spaces; thus, the gallery designs of both SAM and NGS are no longer singularly focused on the white cube experience. To date, all three museums continue to engage architects and exhibition designers who would experiment with various exhibition designs and display iterations in a bid to create exhibitionary spectacles that would attract worldwide audiences.

As a case study, the *Art '76* exhibition marked a unique moment within the exhibition histories of Southeast Asia, where visions of modernity and nation-building crystallised as Singapore's first major institution housing the National Collection of art. Throughout the late 1960s and the 1970s, this development presents a nascent institutional and bureaucratic subjectivity that contrasts and resonates with other visions of modernity in neighbouring Southeast Asian nations, which in their post-independent pursuit of nation-building, began to consider the role of art as being nationally and institutionally situated.

Acknowledgement. I would like to thank Laura Miotto for her valuable mentorship, as well as the anonymous reviewers for their insights. The NHB-NTU Grant, provided by National Heritage Boards of Singapore, had been a great enabler during my research process. I am also indebted to the the staff members of the National Archives of Singapore, National Gallery of Singapore Resource Centre as well as the National Museum of Singapore Resource Centre who have been very helpful in my search for archival images—without these valuable documentations a research on the spaces of historical exhibitions would have been unimaginable.

Bibliography

1976. "Artists hail gallery at National Museum." *New Nation*, 23 August, 4.

Anderson, Benedict. 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Anuar, Hedwig. 1967. "Art in the National Library." *The Straits Times*, 8 April, 12.

Chang, Tsong-Zung, and Shiming Gao. 2018. "Yaji garden: Art under the sky." In *The Future of Museum and Gallery Design: Purpose, Process, Perception*, edited by Suzanne MacLeod, Tricia Austin, Jonathan Hale, and Oscar Hing Kay Ho, 259–276. London: Routledge.

Choo, Ai Leng. 1979. "The cultural aspect in the banking business." *Business Times*, 24 November, 7.

Clark, John. 1998. *Modern Asian Art*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Coates, Austin. 1972. *Jamini Roy the Indian Maestro*. Singapore: Alpha Gallery.

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press

de Manila, Quijano. 1969. "Parthenon or Pantheon? The first lady answers the blast on the Cultural Center by Senator Aquino." *Philippines Free Press* **2**(3): 72.

George, Cherian. 2000. *Singapore: The Air-conditioned Nation: Essays on the Politics of Comfort and Control, 1990–2000*: Singapore: Landmark Books.

Hooi, Christopher George Liang Yin, and Constance Sheares. 1976. *National Museum Art Gallery Official Opening*. Singapore: Ministry of Culture National Museum of Singapore.

Kwok, Kian Chow. 1996. *Channels & Confluences: A History of Singapore Art*. Singapore: National Heritage Board, Singapore Art Museum.

Low, Sze Wee, and Shabbir Hussain Mustafa. 2015. "Some introductory remarks." In *Siapa Nama Kamu?: Art in Singapore Since the 19th Century*, edited by Low Sze Wee, and Shabbir Hussain Mustafa 8–29. Singapore: National Gallery Singapore.

Mansfield, Elizabeth. 2002. *Art History and its Institutions: The Nineteenth Century*. Hoboken: Routledge.

Mashadi, Ahmad. 2011. "Framing the 1970s." *Third Text* **25**(4): 409–417. doi: 10.1080/09528822.2011.587686.

Massey, Doreen. 2005. *For Space*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Mustafa, Shabbir Hussain. 2016. "We made space: In conversation with Choy Weng Yang." In *Earth Work 1979: Tang Da Wu*, edited by Charmaine Toh, 39–48. Singapore: National Gallery Singapore.

Newton, Isaac. 1999. *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*. Translated by I. Bernard Cohen and Anne Whitman. California and London: University of California Press. Original edition, Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica, 1687.

O'Doherty, Brian. 1976. "Inside the white cube: Notes on the gallery space, Part I." *Artforum* **14**(7): 24–30.

O'Doherty, Brian. 1999. *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Poshyananda, Apinan, Yu Jin Seng, and Jia Yun Cheng. 2019. "Interviews: Apinan Poshyananda." In *Suddenly Turning Visible: Art and Architecture in Southeast Asia (1969–1989)*, edited by Seng Yu Jin, and Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, 241–248. Singapore: National Gallery Singapore.

Rajamogan. 1988. "The National Museum in historical perspective." BA Honours, Department of History, National University of Singapore.

Robert, Hubert. 1796. The Grande Galerie of the Louvre. *Wikimedia Commons*. Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Hubert_Robert#/media/File:Hubert_Robert_-_Die_Grand_Galerie_des_Louvre.jpg (accessed 9 June 2019).

Sabapathy, T.K. 2018. "The need for a real art gallery." In *Writing the Modern: Selected Texts on Art & Art History in Singapore, Malaysia and Southeast Asia*, edited by Ahmad Mashadi, Susie Lingham, Peter Schoppert, and Joyce Toh, 249–251. Singapore: Singapore Art Museum.

Seng, Yu Jin 2017. "Cultural wars in Southeast Asia: The birth of the critical exhibitions in the 1970s." In *Charting Thoughts: Essays on Art in Southeast Asia*, edited by Low Sze Wee, and Patrick D. Flores, 214–231. Singapore: National Gallery of Singapore.

Seng, Yu Jin, and Shabbir Hussain Mustafa. 2019. *Suddenly Turning Visible: Art and Architecture in Southeast Asia (1969–1989)*. Singapore: National Gallery Singapore.

Singapore, Committee on Visual Arts. 1988. *Committee of Visual Arts Report Singapore: Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts*.

Steeds, Lucy. 2014. *Exhibition, Documents of Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Tan, Kevin Y. L. 2015. *Of Whales and Dinosaurs: The Story of Singapore's Natural History Museum*. Singapore: NUS Press.

Ward, Martha. 2005. "What's important about the history of modern art exhibition?" In *Thinking About Exhibitions*, edited by Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Narine, 318–327. London and New York: Taylor & Francis.

White, Ethan Doyle. 2018. The Interior of Dulwich Picture Gallery in the London Borough of Southwark. *Wikimedia Commons*, 19 January. Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Interior_of_Dulwich_Picture_Gallery.jpg (accessed 7 January 2021).

Yap, June. 2017. "Undoing the global: Contemporary art of Singapore." In *Charting Thoughts: Essays on Art in Southeast Asia*, edited by Sze Wee Low, and Patrick D. Flores. Singapore: National Gallery Singapore.

Interviews

Choy Weng Yang, interviewed 14 November 2018, Hera, Singapore.

Christopher George Liang Yin Hooi, interviewed 30 Nov 1992, Daniel Chew, Singapore.

Constance Sheares, interviewed 11 June 2016, T. K. Sabapathy, Singapore.

Cite this article: H (2022). Inaugurating the "White Passage": *Art '76. TRaNS: Trans -Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* **10**, 19–38. https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.4

https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2021.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press