

# Changing Approaches: Installations Produced in the Malaysian Art World

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## ABSTRACT

*Artworks in the form of "installation art" have become a widespread artistic activity in the current art world. In the context of the Malaysian art, the term has been initially used to describe a few artworks produced during the period of the 1990s (despite being mostly categorised as mixed media). This paper examines the evolution of installation art in the Malaysian art scene and discusses several early works that can be proposed as the early impetus towards installation art in Malaysian artistic practices. Clear historical outlines and assertions on the evolution of installation art demand a different nature of investigation. However, this paper is only limited to examining three concurrent domains or significant turning points in order to give a more lucid insight into the evolution of installation art as an artistic practice in Malaysia. The three domains that this paper will elucidate are (1) the two-dimensional and three-dimensional engagements or contestations during the 1970s, (2) Young Contemporaries Award (YCA) as a platform for installation art engagements and subsequently, (3) emergence of site-specific installation art projects during the late 1990s.*

**Keywords:** *Installation art, mixed media, Malaysian art*

## INTRODUCTION

My research on installation art began when I discovered that installation art is an artistic medium most commonly misunderstood and taken for granted. Art pieces that are hung, assembled and presented in a non-conventional way are often described as installation art. Despite the popular usage of the term, "installation art" has never been systematically explicated and explained in the history and development of Malaysian art. The limited art discourses in Malaysia seem to evade the discussion on the epistemological aspect, which has a great theoretical repercussion in the vulgar usage and adoption of Western terms onto the local art context, albeit in a re-adapted and localised meaning.<sup>1</sup> This sometimes led to the confusion, as well as the misuse of such terms in discussing the works by Malaysian artists and more importantly, in categorising art.

The discussion on installation art within the interest of this paper will problematise and highlight the evolution of installation art in Malaysia. Installation art, in general, is a relatively new genre of art making that involves the configuration or "installation" of objects within a specific space. This "space" could be a gallery space, a room, or even an empty factory hall, and warehouse (indoor or outdoor). The result of the arrangement of various materials in such spaces constitutes the "artwork".

The production of installations in the context of Malaysian art is quite recent. The configuration or "installation" of objects within a specific space was only taken seriously in the late 1990s and early 2000. Several names that were known for their installation works include Zulkifli Yusoff, Wong Hoy Cheong, Susyilawati Sulaiman, and Chong Kim Chiew. These artists also produced drawings and paintings, although they were known for their works that mostly appear to be the representations of installation art. Wong Hoy Cheong, for example, engaged in multimedia practices as well.

Even until today, painting (and to a lesser extent, sculpture and print) is still the most popular medium among Malaysian artists. It is associated with the early development of Malaysian modern art as well as a popular medium among art collectors. In terms of sculptures or artworks in three-dimensional forms, it was only in the late 1960s and early 1970s that a few Malaysian artists began to explore the question pertaining to the formalistic aspects of painting (two-dimensional, 2D) and sculpture (three-dimensional, 3D), which will be discussed later. This came as no surprise as such explorations and questionings of art—its meaning, form, function, and role—have already been pursued since the mid-20th century in Europe and America in terms of academic discourse and the shift of artistic practice.

Within that particular period (late 1960s to mid-1970s), there existed the production of several works that were based on conceptual ideas. Non-painting artworks seemed to take hold in Malaysia, albeit for a brief moment.<sup>2</sup> Although the Malaysian artists have always used painting as a popular medium, they subsequently began to move towards other forms of artistic practices as well. Such a development was influenced by the European and American traditions since many of the Malaysian artists received their formal art education from the United Kingdom, Germany, and the United States of America during the time when high artistic explorations took place in the West. Nevertheless, the historical trajectory of installation art as a medium (or genre) was not clear; the motivation and historical developments were definitely not similar, if not irrelevant, to what was happening in the European and American art scene.

Since its early inception, installation art in Malaysia has been executed within the boundaries of galleries and art institutions. The discussions on the application of media could be traced to the artworks produced in the early 1990s. Eventually, several works produced in the 1970s were repositioned as such even though some of the early works were categorised as mixed media and assemblages. In fact, it was only in the early 1990s that "installation art" or works that were regarded as installation art gained wider recognition and acceptance. Today, installation art has become one of the significant media or approaches used by a few Malaysian artists to convey their thoughts, ideas, expressions, and experiences. Although paintings are still popular among the collectors, we could very well say that installation art is the trend now because following the works produced by Malaysian artists who are active in biennale and triennial circuits. The usage of this approach has indirectly introduced Malaysian artists in the international art world as well.

This paper is an initial attempt to examine and trace the development of installation as a form of an artistic medium in Malaysia. In doing so, it can only observe the selected artworks and events/exhibitions produced by several artists. It must be noted that a complete survey on the installation of this type of artworks produced in Malaysia is deemed improbable because it could not be easily experienced or engaged with after the works were dismantled. The selection of the works under discussion is based upon the availability of documents and evidence of the works either formally published in catalogues or in printed essays (online or offline). Significant artworks are usually documented either through catalogue essays, art articles, or reviews, to list a few.

Therefore, this paper traces the changing approaches of installation art according to three domains or impetuses: (1) the 2D and 3D engagements and/or contestations observed as the early engagement for subsequent artworks that fall under installation art, (2) the Young Contemporaries Award as a site in which several mixed media/installation works were submitted to compete and the term "installation" as a genre was introduced, and (3) the execution of site-specific installation since the late 1990s. Although such tracings could be argued as divisionary and segmented, or "simplified and generalised,"<sup>3</sup> it must be highlighted that it is a necessary measure for providing a foundation for further research on installation art in Malaysia and Southeast Asia in general since the impetus and development of installation art are different from those in Europe and America.

### **INSTALLATION ART: A WESTERN TERM FOR A LOCAL PRACTICE**

Prior to discussion, there is a need to address and explain the term "installation" itself. Such a necessity is due to the obscure nature the term is often adopted and applied in a very generalised way. There has been no definite consensus on the person or period responsible for the initiation of the term. Existing documentation on installation art based on the Western-centric viewpoint points out to the period as early as El Lissitzky's *Proun Room*, or the abstract environment of De Stijl artists, or Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* (Reiss 1999: xxiii). However, the term eventually became obscure due to various other artistic and overlapping practices, such as Fluxus, Earth art, Minimalism, video art, performance art, Conceptual Art, and Process Art (Reiss 1999: xiii). During the time when Western Europe and the United States sought to redefine the role and function of arts, artists began to reject the formalist paradigms and market-oriented production that governed the traditional art medium. This had resulted in the birth of various forms of art making in the 1960s. The terms "assemblage" and "environment", for example, became common in describing artworks in which artists brought together various kinds of materials in a given space, whereas the term "installation" was used to refer to the way an exhibition was hung (Oliveira, Oxley, and Petry 1994: 11).

Eventually, in the context of Western art, installation art became more specific whereby it started to incorporate a range of mixed media constructions or assemblages with the purpose of influencing the way its audiences experience or perceive a particular space within a (temporary) period of time. Due to this, installation art often occupies an entire room or gallery space in which the viewers are usually required to walk around the work in order to

engage and fully contemplate that particular work of art. Installation works also allow viewers to have interactive experience with them in which viewers "enter" and interact with some of the components within the configured space. This type of work offers viewers a different experience from traditional painting or sculpture. In most of these cases, installation art differs from other forms of art because the installation artists are required to create a work that has an interrelationship between the artist, the space, and the viewers. The work may engage several of the viewer's senses, including touch, sound, smell, and vision.

Claire Bishop (2005: 6) explains that installation art is a term that loosely refers to the type of art into which the viewer physically enters, and which is often described as "theatrical", "immersive", or "experiential". However, the sheer diversity in terms of appearance, content and scope of the work produced today under this name, and the freedom with which the term is used, almost preclude it from having any meaning.

In the work of Mark Rosenthal (2003: 26), he argues that installation art has the tendency to be very elastic in its definition. He further explains that installation refers to:

a dedicated space in which one artistic vision or aura is at work, setting forth various kinds of phenomena. Installation may be defined as anything that artists want to do when given a room in which to work, a definition that deliberately creates a broad swath of possibilities.

Similarly with Bishop and Rosenthal, Charles Bestor (2003: 16) perceives installation art as an art that defines, inhabits, and appropriates a space to suit to its own artistic ends. Therefore, there is always a reciprocal relationship between the viewer, the work, and the space in which the artist should treat the entire indoor space as a single situation rather than a gallery for displaying separate works. It can be deduced that installation art is an artistic genre that is either site-specific, or a 3D work that is designed to transform the viewer's perception of space, either temporarily or permanently. However, despite such attempts to define what installation art is, the definition was only established after the maturity of the artistic practice in Europe and America. Thus, what seems to denote the much later emergence of installation artworks in Malaysia, if not in the Southeast Asian region as well, does not necessarily come from the tradition of happenings, assemblages, and performance art of the 1960s in the West.

The evolving definition of installation art reflects the change of the artistic practice itself. Nowadays, installation artworks can be constructed in exhibition spaces such as

museums, galleries, and public or private spaces, and the works can incorporate various materials from everyday items to natural materials. Installation artworks could also include various media and technology such as new media, video, sound, performance, and the Internet. As Bishop (2005: 8) pointed out,

installation art does not enjoy a straightforward development. Its influences has been diverse: architecture, cinema, performance art, sculpture, set design, curating, Land art and painting have all impacted upon it at different moments.

Although installation art practice in Malaysia is not as ambitious or groundbreaking in terms of aesthetics (or anti-aesthetics) compared to the Western practices, an analysis of its development in a local and/or regional context can be an interesting subject of analysis and documentation. To conduct the analysis, I put forth three domains of the evolution of the installation art in the local Malaysian context: first, from the mere contestation of formalistic matters such as 2D and 3D contestations; second, from Young Contemporaries Award (YCA) as an impetus for installation art; and third, from the emergence of site-specific installation art projects and international participation.

## **2D and 3D Engagements/Contestations**

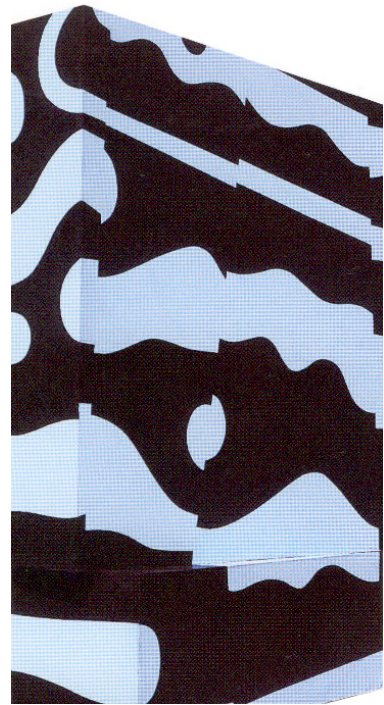
The initial impetus for the development of installation art in Malaysia began from the formalistic questioning of 2D artworks and 3D art forms during the 1970s. This can be seen in three aspects: first, the breaking away from painting convention in Malaysian art such as Redza Piyadasa's *Trengganu Series*, second, the artists' interests in combining both painting and sculpture in works such as Latiff Mohidin's *Langkawi Series*, and third, a shift towards spatial reality as displayed in the works of Lee Kian Seng during the 1970s.

The early questioning of painting or 2D and 3D artworks can be traced to the period between late 1960s and early 1970s with Redza Piyadasa's *Trengganu Series* (Photo 1) and *Marakesh Series* (Photo 2). In the *Trengganu Series*, Piyadasa explored a series of biomorphic patterns painted on a boxlike structure to break away from the predictable cuboid angled standing structure. The dark and light bold stripes appear to flow freely along the planes and yet insinuate a smooth turn at each angle. Piyadasa's *Marakesh Series* (1968–1970),

was also produced on a similar ground. The installation was made of layers of wood in a zigzag formation while the painted structure was made of three parts: one horizontal plane and two vertical planes, which were placed on the ground. Both the *Marakesh Series* and *Trengganu Series* can be observed as Redza Piyadasa's early questioning of the painting's very own perimeter of a formalistic existence of painting—"Is this artwork a painting?" "Do three-dimensionality and the spatial usage make it a sculpture?" "Is this work 2D or 3D?" "Should it be put on the ground or a pedestal?" These questions were persistent among the New Scene artists such as Redza Piyadasa, Choong Kam Kow, Sulaiman Esa, Tan Teong Eng, Tang Tuck Kan, and Tan Teong Kooi at that time. Although such questionings could only be traced in several limited exhibitions such as *The New Scene '69* (1969), *experiment '70* (1970), and *dokumentasi 72* (1972).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the trend for such questionings and explorations was short-lived.

On the other hand, the persistence of combining and exploring both two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality in art can also be traced in Latiff Mohidin's *Langkawi Series* (Photo 3) produced between 1976 to 1979. Unlike the *Trengganu* and *Marakesh* series, Latiff, mostly known for his Abstract Expressionist paintings, explored and expanded his artistic exercise in what Zakaria Ali coined as "wall sculpture" (Ali 1979). This series has both 2D and 3D characteristics. Seen from the front, the work looks like a painting (Photo 3), but from the side, it is the structure of the plane protruded out about three to five inches. In the description of the work, Zakaria Ali (1979) explains,

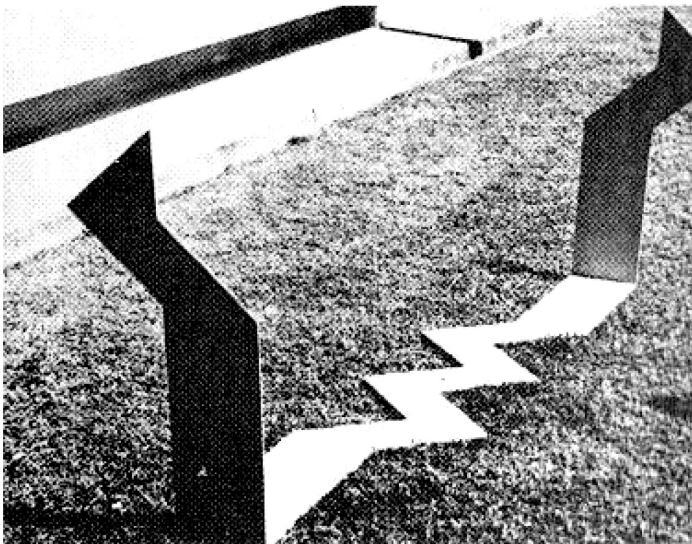
A wall sculpture does not purport to break the barrier between the painting and sculpture. Rather it is the combination of the two, taking



**Photo 1** Redza Piyadasa,  
*Trengganu 3* (1968).  
Acrylic on plywood,  
168 × 154 × 45 cm.  
Source: Piyadasa (2001).

some characteristics of both. Appreciating a wall sculpture depends on knowing what painting and sculpture are supposed to be... A wall sculpture avers the essential aspects of both painting and sculpture.

A wall sculpture exemplifies the exclusiveness of product resulting from an inclusiveness of process. It involves the joined skills of both painter and sculptor, a synthesis of two kinds of sensitivity. It is not surprising that a wall sculpture generates a fluctuation of identities, at times blurring one to clarify the other. Viewed from the front, it resembles a non-representational painting by virtue of its flatness. Viewed from the side, it resembles a styled sculpture by virtue of its depth.



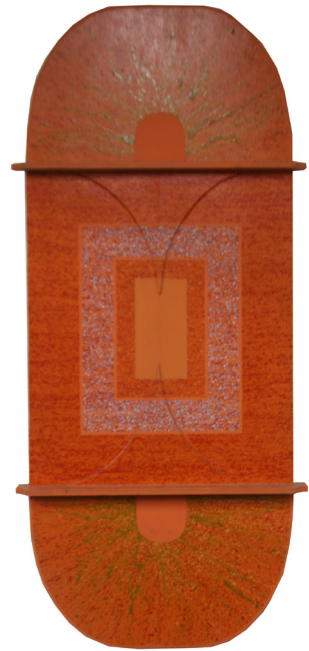
**Photo 2** Redza Piyadasa, *Marakesh Series* (1968–1970).  
Source: Piyadasa (2001).



Whether the usage of the term "wall sculpture" was apt in describing Latiff Mohidin's *Langkawi Series* or not, it must be noted that Malaysian artists also produced sculptural works during the 1960s and 1970s. Several sculpture exhibitions were organised by the National Arts Gallery (now, National Visual Arts Gallery) at that time despite the burgeoning popularity of painting as an artistic medium.<sup>5</sup> Sculptures have always been scarcely produced due to the limited and expensive resources of sculptural materials, such as marble and bronze. Despite these constraints, artists resorted to local materials that are easily accessible, such as wood, metal, and a combination of other materials. Syed Ahmad Jamal's *The Link* (1963), and Anthony Lau's works including *Djin Api* (1959), *Sea Harvest* (1968), *Forest* (1968), and *Ecstasy* (1968) can be seen as sculptural practices that adopted the local materials of wood and metal, instead of marble and bronze.

To link the progression of sculptural practices with installation progression is not something that is rare and contradictory, or perhaps almost natural. As Mark Rosenthal (2003: 25) observes,

To begin with, a sculpture is simply an object whereas an installation consists of many or none... installation multiplies and magnifies the medium of sculpture. When found in a museum, a contemporary installation has a particularly transgressive thrust in relation to expectations about sculpture, and art, in general, for the sanctity and sublime isolation of a sculpted art object, carefully if not extravagantly framed or literally on a pedestal, is absent. In this new kind of art, the integrity of and focus on an individual work are abandoned in favor of a multiplicity of objects, images, and experience, which spew forth without regard for isolation.



**Photo 3** Latiff Mohidin,  
*Langkawi Senja* (n.d.).  
32 × 71 in.  
Muzium & Galeri Tuanku  
Fauziah, Georgetown.

Therefore, it appears not too far-fetched to (1) trace installation as an extension, or (2) question the 2D versus 3D or painting versus sculptural ideas in the context of Malaysian art, especially when the sculptural practice is very limited. Thus, the exploration and contestation between the planes and forms are inevitable in the budding art scene in Malaysia.

Besides Redza Piyadasa and Latiff Mohidin, another artist whose works are significant to be examined within the context of 2D and 3D forms is Lee Kian Seng, a self-taught artist who did not undergo any formal artistic education. Lee Kian Seng initially explored the idea of two-dimensionality and spatial relationship in his work *From the Windows of Red* (1972) (Photo 4 and 5). Safrizal Shahir (2013: 72) posits that Lee Kian Seng's *From the Windows of Red* (1972) was "a fascinating and pioneering attempt to reveal issues of physicality and reality in painting." This painting differs from other conventional paintings in that the surface was painted on both sides and the work suspended from the ceiling, rejecting the norms of gallery exhibition in which paintings are usually hung on the wall. The artist chose this manner of display to enable both sides of the artwork to be viewed concurrently. He explains that the effect of continuation was achieved by "the continued painted images of the rope on the adjoining sides of both canvases, which extends with the actual hemp rope; thus synthesizing illusion and reality where painting meets sculpture" (Lee n.d.a: 2). Though lacking the sophistication and aesthetics visual comprehension in comparison to his colleagues, Lee Kian Seng is not an artist without visions or ideas. Although the subject matter of *From the Windows of Red* painting is a landscape seen through a window, the usage of the window to frame the landscape defies the normal landscape paintings that were often rendered by Malaysian artists. A suspended painted red frame itself insinuates a play on spatial elements, from the interior to the exterior view of a *kampung* house—the views that are common or even cliché among artists during the early years of Malaysian modern art.

Lee Kian Seng expands his exploration further in *Process in Poker Game* (1974) (Photo 6). Again, the artist explores the interplay of 2D and 3D forms. The suspended enlarged poker cards were carved according to the outline of the aces. The 3D heart and spade on the black timber column were positioned aligned with the carved suspended cards, creating an interplay of positive and negative elements as the viewers need to look from the other side of the card to complete the picture. Though this work is small, it can be seen as an initial attempt to encompass forms and spatial elements in art. This somewhat exemplifies Bishop's (2005: 6) explanation on installation art, which is "...a desire to heighten the viewers awareness of how objects are positioned (installed) in a space, and of our bodily response to this." The way these



**Photo 4 and 5** Lee Kian Seng, *From the Windows of Red* (1972).  
Source: Image courtesy of the artist.

works were installed initiated the interplay between the 2D and 3D forms introduced spatial elements as part of the work itself.

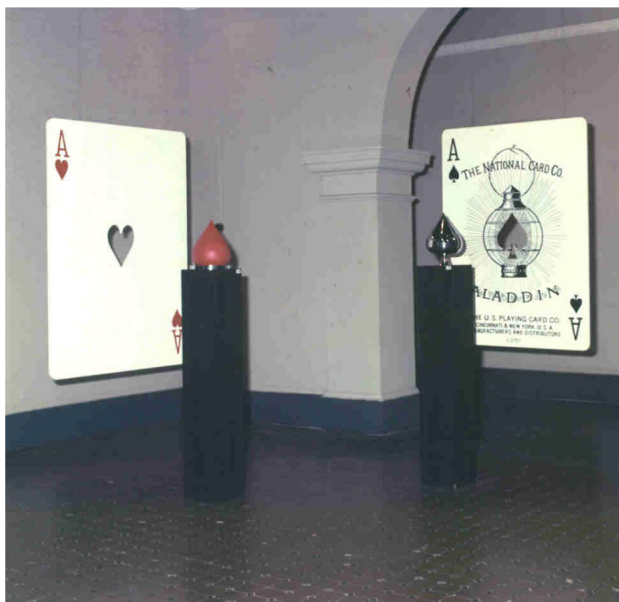
In another work entitled *Resumption and Consumption* (1975), Lee Kian Seng plays with the positive and negative formalistic elements demonstrated in the intended frozen movement of the apples as they appear or disappear from/into the wooden square columns, insinuating a movement effect. Though an "installation" aspect seems to persist—as the carved wooden poles were positioned next to one another in the exhibition space and the viewers were required to walk around the artwork to see the disappearing/reappearing of the apples—no interaction, however, is needed to understand the work. It must be noted that since the work *Resumption and Consumption* was labelled as sculpture (Balai Senilukis Negara 1975)

in the catalogue of the exhibition, the reading of the work as sculpture was also employed. In Siti Zainon Ismail's (1975: 37) article "Seni Tampak antara Lukisan dan Arca," she discusses Lee Kian Seng's work and explains the following:

"Permainan Poker" merupakan satu permulaan yang serius (?), cuba menggabungkan senilukis poster dan *arca*. *Arca* [my emphasis] kayunya berjudul "Permusnahan dan pengembalian" dengan bentuk buah epal diatas permukaan kayu tegak berjajar. Usaha cuba untuk mengutamakan mainan ruang merupakan komposisi penyusunan bentuk-bentuk. Satu bidang dengan design daun terup digantung begitu rupa, tengahnya dilubangi dan di depannya tegak arca yang sederhana dengan motif yang sama "spade" dan lekuk. Pelukis mengemukakan masalah ruang, bentuk dan senihiias dalam karyanya.

The artwork *Process in Poker Game* is the beginning of a serious (?) attempt in combining poster painting and *sculpture*. The wooden *sculpture* [my emphasis] entitled *Resumption and Consumption ...* [is]...in the shape of apples on top of a series of parallel vertical wooden surfaces. It is an attempt to emphasise the spatial area through composition of forms. A plank in the design of a card is hung, the middle part is hollowed and in front of it, stands a simple sculpture with the same motif of a "spade" and its curves. The artist raises the issue of space, form, and decoration in his work. (My translation)

Lee Kian Seng's series of works produced during the 1970s naturally led to the execution of the artist's *Of "Image, Object, Illusion"—Off Series Mechanism* (Photo 7 and 8), a work that he submitted for Open Art and Graphic Print Competition in 1977. Perhaps this is the earliest period in which "installation" was recognised as a category on a work produced by a Malaysian artist. Cecil Rajendra in the exhibition catalogue *Open Art and Graphic Print Competition 1977* wrote in the catalogue and noted the term "installation" (in brackets) that was already used to frame Lee Kian Seng's work;



**Photo 6** Lee Kian Seng, *Process in Poker Game* (1974).

Source: [http://www.leekianseng.com/3d\\_poker.htm](http://www.leekianseng.com/3d_poker.htm)

Here is a painting (installation) that makes a settlement at a number of levels. It speaks of our past, our present and our future. It is loaded with symbolism that teases and invites the viewer to interpretations. Why is the flag reversed? What does the cockroach on the top right of the painting mean? Does it augur ill for our future? It is also a beautifully composed picture that achieves an almost perfect balance between subject matter and media. It is brilliantly executed and well merits the top award.<sup>6</sup>

In a decade in which most of the works produced by Malaysian artists were mostly paintings, *Of "Image, Object, Illusion"—Off Series Mechanism* was described in the catalogue as an installation (albeit in brackets) by Cecil Rajendra, insinuating a suspended meaning.

It was the first work of a kind that required viewers' participation and consideration of space and lighting in its design. The work included a drawing of the Malaysian flag on the canvas, an actual Malaysian flag, a white podium, canvas on the floor, and appropriate lighting to create the shadow effect. Arguably, as the first installation art<sup>7</sup> in Malaysia, this artwork would not be complete without viewers' participation due to its requirement that demands viewers to stand on the podium and pose as if he/she is holding the flag in order to complete the pre-existing painted shadow as part of the work. The interplay of the 2D painting and the suspended flag on top of the small podium can be seen as creating a spatial relationship with the viewer(s) to complete the shadow of the flag painted on the canvas.

### The Young Contemporaries Award (YCA) and Installation Works

Since 1974, the Bakat Muda Sezaman or Young Contemporaries Award (YCA) organised by the National Art Gallery is the main platform for young artists to promote their works. The importance of YCA in the development of Malaysian art is pertinent as the organisation has



**Photo 7** Lee Kian Seng, *Of "Image, Object, Illusion"—Off Series Mechanism* (1977).  
Source: Image courtesy of the artist.

since served as a platform of artistic exploration and experiment and is favoured by young Malaysian artists to test their artistic ideas and breach artistic conventions. This competition has encouraged young artists to produce works that are beyond conventional art trends, particularly by producing groundbreaking works that result in experimental and explorative works. These works have been considered important to the development of Malaysian art in general. Despite the importance of YCA and its aims and visions as stated above, the most popular term during the 1970s and 1980s in describing an unconventional 3D work was mixed media or *media campuran*. The usage of the term "installation" or reference to works as "installation" was only recognised from the mid-1990s onwards in the catalogues written for the YCA.

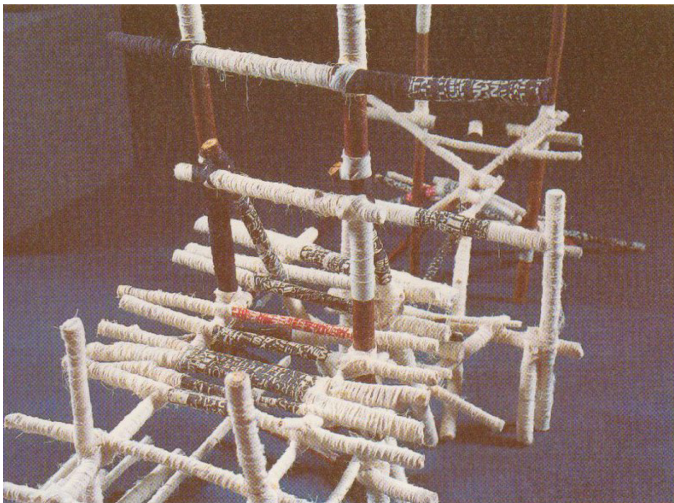
It must be noted that Lee Kian Seng's *Process in Poker Game* and *Resumption and Consumption* won the awards in the 1975 YCA. Subsequent works that seemed to take up spatial elements that insinuated the installation approach were Ponirin Amin's *Alibi Catur di Pulau Bidong* (1981) and Zakaria Awang's *Al Rahman* (1982). *Alibi Catur di Pulau Bidong* dealt with the issue of Vietnamese refugees who arrived at Bidong Island;<sup>8</sup> it was made from an installation of fish net and paper origami. In the subsequent year, Zakaria Awang won the Major Award of YCA with his work *Al Rahman*. Though *Al Rahman* was described as mixed media, Redza Piyadasa, who commented on behalf of the panel of judges, posited the work as "sculptural" in the judges' report:

The judges were unanimous in awarding Zakaria Awang the Major Award for his highly lyrical and delicate *sculptural* [my emphasis] constructions. His attempts to synthesize oriental and western sensibilities is both controlled and complex. The artist's high attempt in technical manipulation and mode of presentation was especially appreciated. Further, his attempts to incorporate Islamic elements in a work such as "Al Rahman" have clearly extended the area of sculptural commitment in this country. (Piyadasa 1982: 4)

The above view reflects that although the term installation art was used in the catalogue describing Lee Kian Seng's work, such artistic practice or inquisition on installation art as a possible form of artistic approach has yet to be embraced by other artists. In the early 1980s, installation works including Zakaria Awang's were reduced to sculptural forms and for

almost a decade afterwards, no installation works have won major prizes at YCA. It was in 1988 when "installation" works reappeared, displaying stiff competition between Tan Chin Kuan and Zulkifli Yusof. The latter had won the 1988 YCA with his *Tanpa Tajuk* (1988), and a year later, both Tan Chin Kuan and Zulkifli Yusof won the 1989 YCA with *Blue Night II* (1989) and *Dari Hitam ke Putih* (1989), respectively. In the following year, Tan Chin Kuan's *The Moral Means Behind The Visit Malaysia* won the 1990 YCA. Zulkifli Yusoff's *Dari Hitam ke Putih (From Black to White)* (1989) (Photo 8) were arrays of connected and tied timber trunks wrapped with fabric, forming a bridging structure that later became his trademark in the 1990s; that could be seen in his subsequent works from the *Power Series* (1991) to *Don't Play During Maghrib* (1997). The interplay of installation, drawing, and painting has constituted his major approach even until today.

As I have discussed elsewhere (Abdullah 2010), Malaysian artists since the 1990s have seemed to be preoccupied with thematic approaches and subject matters concerning the Malaysian middle class, such as the works that promoted social, environmental, and

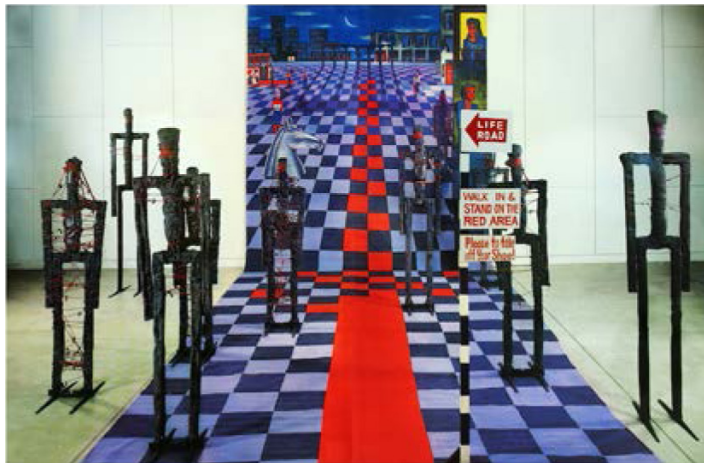


**Photo 8** Zulkifli Yusoff, *Dari Hitam ke Putih (From Black to White)* (1989).  
Source: *Bakat Muda Sezaman*. Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 1989.



gender issues. The artists were inclined to emphasise too much on the subject matter, treating the formalistic considerations as secondary, or to say the least unimportant. This reflects Bishop's (2005: 6) observation that an installation of art is "secondary in its importance to the individual works it contain." Such imbalance of meaning and technique could be seen in Tan Chin Kuan's *Blue Night 11—Tragic 2* (1989) (Photo 9) in which the work highlighted the artist's personal anguish and angst in the early years of his artistic practice. The work is an iron structure resembling a nine human body with different heights and sizes in stylised form standing on and in front of a chequered mat as the focal point of the work.

A condition can be derived from the works of Zulkifli Yusoff and Tan Chin Kuan, or even from the description of Lee Kian Seng's *Process in Poker Game* and *Resumption and Consumption*, and from Latiff Mohidin's *Langkawi Series* and Redza Piyadasa's *Marakesh* and *Trengganu Series*. The condition is described by Rosenthal (2003: 25) in his observation of installation art as multiplying and signifying the medium of sculpture, although such persistence in art making was quite absent during the 1980s due to other nationalistic concerns addressed by a number of Malay/Muslim artists.



**Photo 9** Tan Chin Kuan, *Blue Night 11—Tragic 2* (1989). Mixed media, size varies.

Source: <http://malaysiacontemporaryart.coredesigngallery.com/2013/08/tan-chin-kuan-2/>

The installation art approach received receptive response in the 1990s. This was not surprising because installation art enables a subject matter or content to be the art form itself, thus deemed suitable in conveying issues or socio-concern subject matters as well as a possible "categorisation" that had linked interdisciplinary explorations between different artistic fields. During the 1990s, such explorations were frequent. The interdisciplinary explorations between different artistic fields could be seen as connecting performance and visual arts practices. These include *Bamboo and Glass* conceived by Raja Shahrman and choreographed by Marion D'Cruz (Production of Five Arts Centre) and *Chinese Prayer Altars* by Liew Kung Yu in *Alter Art* (featuring several site-specific and interdisciplinary installation and performance works in and around Fort Canning, Singapore). Other collaborations between visual and performing artists from Five Arts Centre could be seen in works such as *Skin Trilogy* (1995), and *Family* and *Electra* (1998). Such collaborations not only occurred within the performing arts domain but within the gallery context as well. *What About Converging Extremes?* curated by Wong Hoy Cheong at Galeriwan experimented with collaborative works.<sup>9</sup> In such collaborations, artistic works/sculpture/installation become part of the performance art itself.

It must be noted that the subject matters of these works during the 1990s onwards no longer dealt with the formalistic and/or questioned the formalistic engagement of art forms or media. In the 1990s, the subject matter and content of the artworks assumed the "art" form itself. This was also observed by Zainol Abidin Shariff (1994) in his comment on behalf of the panel of judges in the 1994 YCA<sup>10</sup> as he used the term "installation art" in his report and yet, questioned the practicality and reasons of such works if they were not well executed:

And "social context" stands out as a sure bet. Absolutely, this is a significant concern in art, as art and artistic practice do not exist in a social vacuum: artistic meaning is sociologically conditioned. But truth to the self is just as significant. Many of the submissions however, are true to neither. The social is just as superficial theme, often injected for good measure. Consequently, how the social theme is explicated and imbued in the artwork does not come through effectively. For instance, there is no indication that congruity between content and form, meaning and structure, message and presentation, has been seriously considered in many of the works. Especially with the few surprisingly few installation work, it is not clear why the installation form is employed, apart from the fact that it is obviously another way of making statement. But why installation?

In the 1996 YCA, J. Anu (1996: 15) in the judges report, raised a significant question: "How can Chinese classical painting be read beside installation works in 3-D?"; followed by his (1996: 17) remarks that,

the current penchant for installation works has certainly captured the attention of young Malaysian artists. The problem as far as installation is concerned is that too many artists are preoccupied with the very "temporariness" of the philosophy and neglect the considerations of converting a space. Most of the artists have little regard for the more formalistic aspects of art like colour, texture and composition, which above all is crucial to the execution of an installation.

Such observations made by both Zainol Abidin Shariff and J. Anu reflect a very pertinent observation on the types of installation art in Malaysia. The works were not developed and executed with the intention to solve spatial problems as part of the outcome of the work. As highlighted by Bishop (2005: 6), artists may create their artworks in the form of installation by combining more than one piece or element of the artwork but this does not necessarily mean that the artwork should be automatically categorised as installation art because it could just be an "installation of art" rather than "installation art". Installation of art denotes individual pieces of art installed in a space, whereas installation arts are often site-specific and designed to transform the perception of a space.

In the 1997 YCA, categories were finally introduced—painting, sculpture/installation, print/photography, and multi-media/experimental. In that year, the winner for the sculpture/installation section was Ahmad Shukri Mohamed with his *Insect Diskette Series II*, and the overall winner was Susyilawati Sulaiman with her *96 & 97 (Kedai Obat Jenun)* (1997). It must be noted that 1997 was also the year Zulkifli Yusoff's work *Don't Play During Maghrib* was selected to be exhibited in the Venice Biennale.

Since then, especially for the 2000 YCA, the size for the submitted work for YCA was predetermined at a maximum of  $3 \times 3 \times 3$  m. This was perhaps due to the constraint of space as the submissions of installation art increased. Although this signals an acceptance of work that denotes the use of space such as installation art, one can always argue that the (limited) size restraint can hinder creativity. In the "Judges' Report" (Tan 2000: 14) it was asserted again that,

the multimedia and installation works generally fell short of an understanding of how to use their various media in a cohesive way. Very often, artists did not properly address the problem of space (3 × 3 × 3 m constraint) and this resulted in overloading, dissonance and fragmentation. In many cases, the overloading of information rendered works extremely banal and full of clichés, depriving the viewer of the opportunity to react to and interpret the art works according to his/her experience.<sup>11</sup>

Based on these observations, despite the encouragement given by the YCA on works that are posited as installation, the essential matter such as space and how the space can be transformed into an immersive experience was limitedly dealt with in the execution of installation art. This indirectly raises the question whether Malaysian artists understood the basic meaning of execution of installation art during the 1990s.

### **The Emergence of Site-Specific Installation Art Projects**

It was only in 1999 that a well-presented exhibition that mostly included and presented installation art could be seen in a group exhibition by the Matahati entitled *MatahatiPL* at the Petronas Gallery. This was an important exhibition that consisted of several installation arts in the gallery space. A few of the works were in the form of (spatial) installations where the spectator had to confront and experience the work in the context of a larger gallery space. The viewer entered a controlled environment featuring objects as well as light, sound, and projected imageries. The formalism of the composition remained of secondary importance; it was the effect on the spectator's spatial and cultural expectations that remained paramount. Ahmad Fuad Osman's *Balada Hilang Peta* (Photo 10) used actual building materials like sand, soil, steel, and wire installed in some parts of the gallery area. Arrays of paper boats folded from magazine pages were arranged in the space, from the floor to the ceiling, around the mounted soil, steel wires and stones on which stands a *rehal* without a Quran. In another area of the gallery, Ahmad Shukri Mohamed's installation work (Photo 11) filled a large area of the gallery space. Black plastic bags consisting of soil and plant saplings were arranged in a line on the floor, commenting on Malaysians who turned to planting vegetables for their use in their limited area of their urban dwelling. Another member of the Matahati group, Hamir



**Photo 10** Ahmad Fuad Osman, *Balada Hilang Peta* (1999).

Source: *Matahati PL*. Kuala Lumpur: Petronas Gallery, 1999.

Soib, used silk-screen to produce *jawi* script on the ceiling and the floor of the gallery space (Photo 12). The silk-screen frame was arranged as part of the installation, and there were *jawi* texts written on the floor and the ceiling with suspended silk-screens from the ceiling.

Since the end of the 1990s, artists such as Chong Kim Chiew, Sharon Chin, and Shoohe Sulaiman are among those who have significantly produced installation artworks that demand direct engagement from the viewers, and the installation had to be comprehended in a singular totality while mostly being site-specific. The viewers had to survey the work from a distance and have their sense of touch, smell, and sound heightened as they embodied the work as highlighted by Bishop (2005: 6).



**Photo 11** Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, *Urban Garden LIFE* (1999).  
Vegetation, plastics, seedlings, and water spray.  
Source: *Matahati PL*. Kuala Lumpur: Petronas Gallery, 1999.



**Photo 12** Hamir Soib, *Jawi* (1999). Acrylic on the floor, silkscreen, and plaster of Paris.  
Source: *Matahati PL*. Kuala Lumpur: Petronas Gallery, 1999.

Kim Chiew's *Isolation House* (Photo 13) was a site-specific installation that took place in Rumah Air Panas art space. In the exhibition, the whole space was used and turned into a site that explored and highlighted the history of New Villages in Malaya (Takamori 2015). The whole space was transformed into an interior of a house, a space with sand covering the floor area, and names of these New Villages were put up on the wall (Prudential 2014). New Villages or *Kampung Baru* were created by the British colonisers to relocate and control the villagers from the insurgents of the Malayan Races Liberation Army, which was led by the Malayan Communist Party during the Malayan Emergency from 1948 to 1960. To

recreate the feeling of segregation as nuanced by the establishment by these new villages, Chong Kim Chiew rerouted the entrance of the exhibition. Instead of the front door, the ladder hoisted up against one of the houses' window functioned as the entrance for viewers that led to the main exhibition area.



**Photo 13** Chong Kim Chiew, *Isolation House* (2005).

Source: <http://chongkimchiew.blogspot.my/2013/01/isolation-house-2005.html>



Sharon Chin's *Mare Clausum* (2006) (Photo 14), produced for Sharon Chin's solo exhibition entitled the *Fourth World* consists of green construction netting that was sewn as if for a sailing ship, suspended from six pillars also by green rope. This site-specific installation was commissioned for the Australian High Commission Kuala Lumpur, and it was exhibited for three weeks in the High Commission. As a result of this installation, visitors were compelled to encounter or experience the work as they enter the High Commission where they have to walk all the way around the artwork to get to immigration and other offices across the lobby.

In Shooshie Sulaiman's installation *House of Sulaiman and Ah Guat's Shop* (2011), the idea of bringing the outdoor into the indoor space was reiterated again. *Rumah Sulaiman di Belakang Kedai Ah Guat* was a reconstruction of buildings inside the Singapore Art Museum for the Singapore Biennale. The main aim of this art piece is to tell the story of Malay ancestry of the artist's father and his way of life. The space was filled with white wall



**Photo 14** Sharon Chin, *Mare Clausum* (2006).

Source: <http://sharonchin.com/archive/exhibitions/mare-clausum-closed-sea/>

panels and rooftop from a traditional wooden house to invoke the artist's personal memories through her installation of memorable images and parts of her house elements.<sup>12</sup> The space was also filled with a collection of sketches and drawings hung on the walls. This time the artist literally brought in and installed parts of her home and Ah Guat's shop inside the exhibition area. Sheets of rubber, for example, served as the medium for the printed portraits of the artist's father. The construction of the space was inclusive without intimidating the viewers due to the familiar environment, which is the concept of home. This was one of her works that encourages the sense of nostalgic and emotional longing.

Malaysia's representations in the international art scene through various biennales and triennales around the world were mostly represented by installation works. For example, Zulkifli Yusoff's *Don't Play During Maghrib* (Photo 15) was exhibited at the illustrious Venice Biennale in 1997. The theme or advice is familiar among the Malay Muslim household in Malaysia where children are warned not to play outside during dusk as it is believed that



**Photo 15** Zulkifli Yusoff, *Don't Play During Maghrib* (1997).  
Mixed media installation and painting.

Source: Image courtesy of the artist.

spirits wander around at that time. In a way, the subtext is that the dusk is family time as this acts as a reminder to parents who should be responsible for their children and know the latter's whereabouts. Another work, *Rukunegara 1: Belief in God* (2013) was an installation presented at the Singapore Biennale (2013). It was a work that refers to two of Malaysia's national ideologies: belief in God and the need to have faith or spiritual purification, as laid out in the *Rukunegara*. Wong Hoy Cheong's *Re: Looking* (2002), a 27 minute video, was presented as a part of an installation in the 2003 Venice Biennale. *Re: Looking* (2002) created the setting of a living room of a middle-class Malaysian household and staged a fictional history of Malaysia's colonial annexation of Austria from 1683–1955. Through the multi dimensionality of the work that included video documentary, website, installation of objects and images, the artist compiles an account of this fictional colonisation and scrutinised the issue of post-colonial identity in Asia as the colonial history is satirised as an inverted fiction.

Even in the latest installation of the 2016 Singapore Biennale, Ahmad Fuad Osman's *Enrique de Malacca Memorial Project* (2016) (Photo 16) takes up an entire space of the Asian Civilization Museum (ACM) to exhibit his idea of alternative histories of Enrique of Malacca (also known as Panglima Awang). Enrique of Malacca was believed to be a Sumatran who lived in Malacca, when he was enslaved by Ferdinand Magellan in the 16th century. A few scholars and historians speculated that Enrique circumnavigated the world between 1519–1521, as he was part of Magellan's final expedition from Spain to Cebu Island in the Philippines. Positioned as a mocked history, the work, aptly installed at one of the exhibition spaces in the ACM, consists of a single-channel video, nutmeg and clove casts, replica and found objects, oil paintings, and works on paper uniquely installed to adhere to the museum-exhibition format of the ACM. Though the work is not deliberately categorised as installation, the installation nature of the work persisted as the whole exhibition/gallery space was transformed into a formal museum exhibition setting to present the contradictory history and the fictional colonial, postcolonial, and nationalist representations of Enrique as an official form of narrative within the construct of an official space of the ACM.

## CONCLUSIONS

I have discussed the three domains or impetuses of installation art development in Malaysia, especially within the local context. Although such groundwork might appear simplified and generalised, it needs to be laid out so that future research on installation art can be informed

by the basic understanding of how installation art was advanced in the Malaysian context. As I have discussed in the first section of this paper, in Europe and America, the term "installation art" denotes a range of mixed-media constructions or assemblages that we often see as occupying an entire room or gallery space. In the context of Malaysia, it should be understood that these approaches and explorations did not happen concurrently with the West; they were even slightly behind in terms of periodisation. The initial paradigm for European and American artists in producing installation art was based on their rejection of the formalist paradigms and market-oriented production that governs the traditional art medium. This was not the case in Malaysia.

(Spatial) installation art made its mark only in the late 1990s. The discussion of a few works in the late 1990s and early 2000 demonstrates that installation art began to adhere to the understanding of space usage and the interaction of viewers as defined by Bishop and



**Photo 16** Ahmad Fuad Osman, *Enrique de Malacca Memorial Project* (2016).  
Source: <http://www.ahmadfuadosman.com/art/>

Bestor. In fact, most of the works that I have discussed as well as those in the first and the second domains were just executed as simple installing acts, which contested the fundamental formalistic issues of 2D art and 3D art. In fact, some of the works that have won the YCA were only categorised as mixed media. It was only in the late 1990s that installation works that were site-specific took into account the viewer's perception of space, as I have discussed in the works of Chong Kim Chiew, Sharon Chin, Shooshie Sulaiman, and other artists.

Thus, by analysing the three domains, this paper has discussed and traced the development of installation art in Malaysia that was not substantially rooted in the European and American development of installation art. This paper posits that Malaysian artists need to understand the definition of installation art and how it should be executed. If the categorisation of the term "installation art" is to be employed as installation art in a genre of 3D art that is site-specific and designed to change the perception of space, then there is a need to ascertain a definite quality in the site-specific space that is temporary or permanent. It must be noted that an understanding of what is installation art and what is "installation of art" in Malaysia needs to be comprehended because such simple mistakes can be made in labelling artworks in exhibitions and catalogues. Therefore, to create an installation art, artists need to consider and fulfil the characteristics that make an installation art that include form, space, the use of multiple elements, site-specificity, time specificity, size, arrangements of objects, and the interrelationship between the spectator and the artwork, and others. Installations may also include the usage of mixed media from the combination of various daily materials and natural materials to new media such as video, sound, performance, virtual reality, and the Internet. Nevertheless, installation art is more grounded and remains tied to a physical space while not all of the criteria can/should be fulfilled.

It must also be acknowledged here that without the prior explorations of two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality of art during the 1970s and various artworks submitted to the YCA in the later decades, installation art as an artistic practice could not have flourished and be well received in the Malaysian art scene today. Although the evolving production and reception of installation art in Malaysia might not be similar to that in Europe and America,<sup>13</sup> this paper demonstrates that the art has evolved in its local contexts and thus might not even fit into the definition of Western scholars. Nevertheless, the understanding of the term is important in order to help artists and curators in identifying and categorising such works for public display.

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## NOTES

1. For the discussion on the usage of "abstract expressionist" in Malaysia, see Abdullah (2013).
2. For a discussion on the *Mystical Reality* exhibition, see Abdullah and Chung (2014).
3. I would like to thank the second reviewer of this paper for the comments that have enabled me to contextualise these tracings in a more meaningful manner.
4. The *New Scene '69* exhibition was one of the early exhibitions that investigated the aspects of art and artworks in a self-referential way. Besides Redza Piyadasa's *Trengganu Series*, the influence of Hard-Edge Abstraction is demonstrated in Choong Kam Kow's work, which emphasises the hard geometric form, scale, and colour. Tan Tuck Kan's emphasises visual elements as the main aspect in his art and Tan Teong Eng's experimented with optical rhythm in his work.
5. Subsequent exhibition on sculpture can be seen in *Persoalan Tradisi dan Kemodenan: Pameran Seni Arca Kontemporari Malaysia* (1996), *Dimensi: Arca dari Koleksi Balai Seni Lukis Negara* (2000), *Tinjauan Seni Arca Moden di Malaysia—A View of Modern Sculpture in Malaysia* (1976).
6. Excerpted from the Observer's view in exhibition catalogue *Open Art and Graphic Print Competition 1977* published by National Art Gallery Malaysia in 1977 (*Of "Image, Object, Illusion"—Off Series Mechanism* 2016: 1).
7. In an opening speech given by P. G. Lim at the presentation of awards of the *Young Contemporaries 2000 Exhibition* at the National Art Gallery, on 30 January 2001, upholds that the work is the first installation art in Malaysia see YouTube video "Lee Kian Seng: In Memory of My Friend P. G. Lim" (Seng 2013). In the *45@45* exhibition organised by the National Art Gallery, P. G. Lim had also chosen *Of "Image, Object, Illusion"—Off Series Mechanism* to be included in the exhibition that marks 45 years of the establishment of the National Art Gallery, see *45@45* (2003: 92).

8. Bidong Island was officially opened as a refugee camp in 1978 and finally closed in 1991.
9. Among the artists involved in the exhibition were Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Chai Chang Hwang, Marion D'Cruz, Raja Shariman, Ray Langenbach, Simryn Gill, and Wong Hoy Cheong (*What About Converging Extremes?* [1993]).
10. In that year, among the winners were Hasnul Jamal Saidon's *Mirror; Mirror on the Wall* (1994) and Noor Azizan Rahman Paiman's *Mengejar Impian* (1994). Only Zaharin Mohamed's *No Remorse, No Repent* (1994) however, purposely described as *instilasi* [*sic*] *campuran* (mixed installation).
11. In the year 2000, both Yap Sau Bin and Azman Ismail uses the term *instalasi* or installation in the caption of their work.
12. Watch YouTube video, "Behind the Scene: House of Sulaiman and Ah Guat's Shop—Shooshie Sulaiman (Malaysia)" (Singapore Art Museum 2011).
13. It must be noted that this paper does not insinuate that modern art in non-Western countries has to emulate those in the Western countries.

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