Imagining the Contemporary ASEAN Discourse by way of Participatory Photography and Curatorial Collaboration

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PhD 2022

Imagining the Contemporary ASEAN Discourse by way of Participatory Photography and Curatorial Collaboration

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A practice-based thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of Manchester Metropolitan University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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2022

Abstract

Through creative practice-as-research, this study contributes to the regional identity discourse of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), more than fifty years since its founding. Whilst the ten-country bloc's leaders have always alluded to a shared sense of regional identity, ordinary citizens are often left out of the picture except at specific touchpoints, such as during widely mediatised annual intergovernmental summits or locally organised 'parade of nations' in schools. In recent years, however, the notion of 'ASEAN identity' is increasingly being shaped by public discourse. This shift is not only concomitant with current social movements – such as decolonisation, human rights, and racial equality – but it also coincides with the widespread use of polymedia across the region. Accounting for these observations, the curator-researcher collaborated with 16 international participants (who are based in different Southeast Asian countries and the UK) in producing paracuratorial experiments that convey 'ASEAN-ness'. Almost two years of data-gathering entailed an online exhibition in late 2020 as well as a public performance in mid-2021 – rendering the research practice accountable to the general public. As demonstrated in this study's complementary use of participatory photography and curatorial collaboration, the ASEAN imaginary emerges as a multi-faceted picture of Southeast Asians' shared sense of community. However, this kinship is contingent only on the reciprocity of their vision, hence visual culture proves an essential aspect of ASEAN's regional identity discourse. This practice-based PhD research offers various intersections between area studies, cultural studies, curatorial research, and visual communication, which could prove useful for scholars conducting participatory research in Southeast Asia – or across the Global South. Whilst the key contribution of this study is specific to critical discourses relating to an understanding of ASEAN-ness, it is also generally applicable to the development of collaborative practice-based methods utilising photography, exhibition design, and art production.

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for Beccy, Sian, and Jane

as the fates would have it

i. Acknowledgements

Working on this doctoral thesis under the immense pressure of a worldwide pandemic made me realise that the people who have imparted their brilliance with me throughout my PhD life deserve more accolades than simply being mentioned in this acknowledgement. While we have yet to see each other in person again, for now this would do. Humbly, I dedicate this extensive piece of work to each and every one of them. And I thank them for shaping my academic life and inspiring me to do better.

With fond memories, I acknowledge the teaching and research faculty at Manchester School of Art and at the Postgraduate Arts and Humanities Centre (PAHC). I dedicate this written thesis to my three PhD supervisors, Dr Beccy Kennedy, Dr Sian Bonnell, and Ms Jane Brake, and thank them for their invaluable mentorship since I started my PhD journey at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) – most especially during our virtual meetings despite the obstacles brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. I also thank Professor Andrew Hunt, Dr Fionna Barber, Mr Alnoor Mitha, Dr Nikolai Duffy, Dr Myna Trustram, Ms Kate Johnson, Dr Cathy Coombs, and Ms Anne-Marie Walsh for their collegial support outside my supervisory team.

My deepest gratitude goes to my thesis examiners, Dr Danielle Child (MMU) and Mr Reuben Keehan (Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art QAGOMA), and Professor Steve Miles (MMU) as independent chair, for all their invaluable feedback during my viva and continued guidance to improve upon my research.

I am grateful to the Office of the Vice Chancellor for the three-year scholarship award, making my PhD studies possible in the UK before and during the pandemic. And for generously sponsoring my participation in various academic conferences and symposia from 2019 until 2023, I thank the Research Support Awards (RSA) of the Graduate School, the Art and Performance (A&P) Research Hub, and PAHC.

I also acknowledge and thank the International Communication Association (ICA), International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), and the Nordic Summer University (NSU), and fellow

academics and members who had generously given me their feedback during the ICA, IAMCR, and NSU conferences where I presented various facets of my research topic in the last four years. I am also ever grateful for the generous travel grants I had received from the ICA, the Academy of Global Humanities and Critical Theory (AGHCT), the Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association (MeCCSA), the Association for Cultural Studies (ACS), the Metrobank Foundation (MBFI), as well as the Philippines' National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA). The funding support I received from these organisations undoubtedly paved the way for my successful academic career outside the walls of my university.

I would also like to acknowledge the Transcultural Leadership Summit (TLS 2021 Edition) organisers, and Zeppelin Universität Germany as its host university for granting me – and my co-curators – the opportunity to expand the curatorial contributions of this research project in Europe. The generous sponsorship *The ASEAN 20/20 Vision Project* received from TLS helped cover the maintenance costs and related operational expenses of our online exhibition. I thank the TLS 2021 team led by Tobias Grünfelder, Svana Liv Burger, Elena Paß, and Jessica Schwengber, as well as my former colleague Ross Lap-kin Cheung for making this international collaboration possible.

Without my constant collaborators, my practice-based project would not have been possible. I thank Dr Amy Matthewson and Yen Ooi for the creative ideas and curatorial contributions they both kindly lent this project (especially during our *ASEAN Manifesto* collaboration); my co-curator Martin Vidanes and our graphic design collective *People Are Visual* (with Shekinah Pensica) for patiently assisting me in building and designing the information hub (www.aseanvisionproject.com); and Beverly Lumbera for her painstaking assistance in the cataloguing of photographs since 2017.

I thank all the research participants and volunteers who helped in the careful translations of the curatorial statements of our online exhibition in various ASEAN languages, especially our translation contributors, Noor Hamizah Mohamad Basir and Crall Marck Bait (Bahasa), Olida Inthavong (Lao), and Dr Wendy Wing Lam Chan (Cantonese).

My deepest gratitude likewise goes to my co-participants at the NSU - Circle 7 for helping me reflect on key aspects of the project in 2019; my dear friends/colleagues Dr Jason Cabañes, Dr Cecilia Uy-Tioco, Dr Wendy Chan, Dr Angela Wang Dan, and Ms Florisa Norina Carada for their practical inputs and theoretical insights (and, of course, for always encouraging me to never give up) before I even started my PhD in the UK; my friends in practice-led research, namely Clara Cheung, Kit Hung and Dr Erica Ka-yan Poon; as well as my former colleagues at the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), at Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) School of Communication and Academy of Film (HKBU AF), and Academy of Visual Arts (HKBU AVA), at the European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School of ECREA (our Milan cohort in 2017), at the Vargas Museum of the University of the Philippines-Diliman (UPD), and at PhotoVoice (especially Matt Daw, Helen Cammock, and Liz Orton) for all their valuable critique, feedback, and mentorship when I was still conceptualising this research undertaking.

This international project would not have been possible without the contributions of the first participants and volunteers from the first workshops leading to the ‘Manila Pilot Project’ (2017) at the Vargas Museum: Beverly Lumbera, Dempster Samarista, Detsy Uy, Earl Paulo Diaz, Erick Divina, Ginelle Petterson, Jessica Buen, Joe Rivera, Kevin Ross Nera, Khalelha Añouevo, Martin Vidanes, Maxin Laurel, Patrick Jacobe, Randel Urbano, Ryan Reyes, Shekinah Pensica, Veronica Fuentes, and Zionelle Vargas.

Throughout my writing and organisation of this thesis, I have relied on my research assistants, each of whom I now thank profusely for their various contributions: Jeff Alvin Vizconde and Louie Geronimo, as well as my sister Jenny Kris, and my brother Jeffrey Noel. I also thank, again, Joe Rivera, for supportively listening to my ideas and helping me improve through the years.

With profound admiration, I also thank my former mentors, Professor Patrick D. Flores, Professor Emilie Yueh Yu Yeh, Professor Cherian George, Professor Colin Sparks, Professor Marquard Smith, Professor Harriet Evans, Professor Nico Carpentier, and Professor Marjorie Evasco for inspiring and guiding me since I first imagined this ambitious research work.

Lastly, I thank my loving family, especially Pa and Ma, for being very patient and ever supportive throughout my student life – it's finally done!

I do hope I make you all proud.

ii. Overview of creative practice-as-research

This PhD project is presented as an online exhibition and information hub via: www.aseanvisionproject.com* – launched as *The ASEAN 20/20 Vision Project* and currently maintained as a digital archive online.

Made in ASEAN, the project's main curatorial collaboration, is a virtual gallery of photographic images integrated with other interactive features. This 'umbrella' collaboration is composed of smaller, yet more focused, curatorial collaborations, namely: (1) *Mesa Sa Kwarto* in 2020, (2) *Anonymised Skies* in 2020, (3) *CrossWorld Puzzle* in 2020, and (4) *ASEAN Manifesto* in 2021.

This overview includes the curatorial statements of each collaboration as well as direct URLs to the specific sections of the online exhibition.

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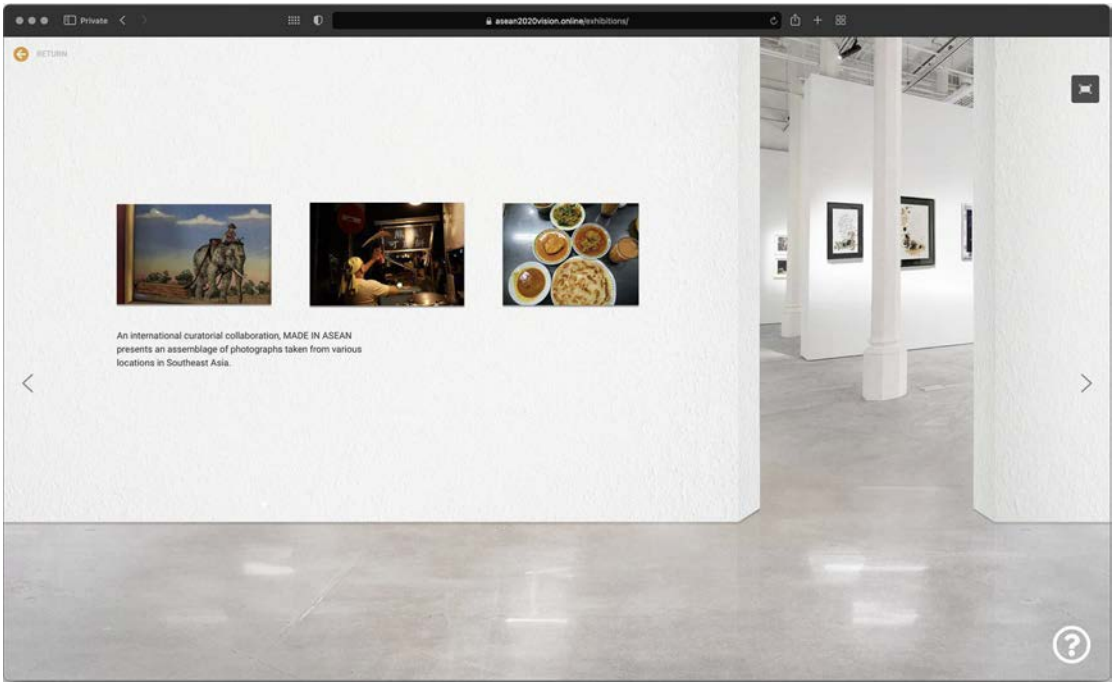
* publicly available URL of the website: https://asean2020vision.online/project-information



MADE IN ASEAN

15 November – 15 December 2020 and onwards

Co-curated by Kristian Agustin (Philippines), Martin Vidanes (Philippines), Freya Chow-Paul (UK/Singapore), Kerrine Goh (Singapore), and Andy Chan (Singapore)

Curatorial Statement (by Kristian Agustin)
https://asean2020vision.online/exhibitions

Who is Southeast Asia made of?

We must beg this question of *who* instead of *what,* because decades after Southeast Asian countries' colonial histories the search for a shared identity persists. On 8 August 1967 the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was founded as a means of establishing mutual cooperation within the region and since then, it has grown from five post-war countries to ten independent member states. *One Vision, One Identity, One Community;* the motto of ASEAN implies seeing, recognising, and belonging.

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

The view of a nameless street from one's window, intertwining clothes-lines stretched out from the kitchen back door, a cupboard overflowing with chopsticks, spoons, pots and pans, and a handful of souvenirs and trinkets tucked away for several years, as well as memories of travel adventures and childhood games. The similarities are uncanny yet familiar to our imaginative eyes; the differences only reveal themselves when we speak of them.

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

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

fifty years. Who *makes* the ASEAN? Who *makes of* the ASEAN? *What do we make of* the ASEAN?

We can only imagine, for now.

MESA SA KWARTO

20 – 29 November 2020

Curated by Kristian Agustin (Philippines)

Curatorial Statement (by Kristian Agustin)
https://asean2020vision.online/mesa-sa-kwarto

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

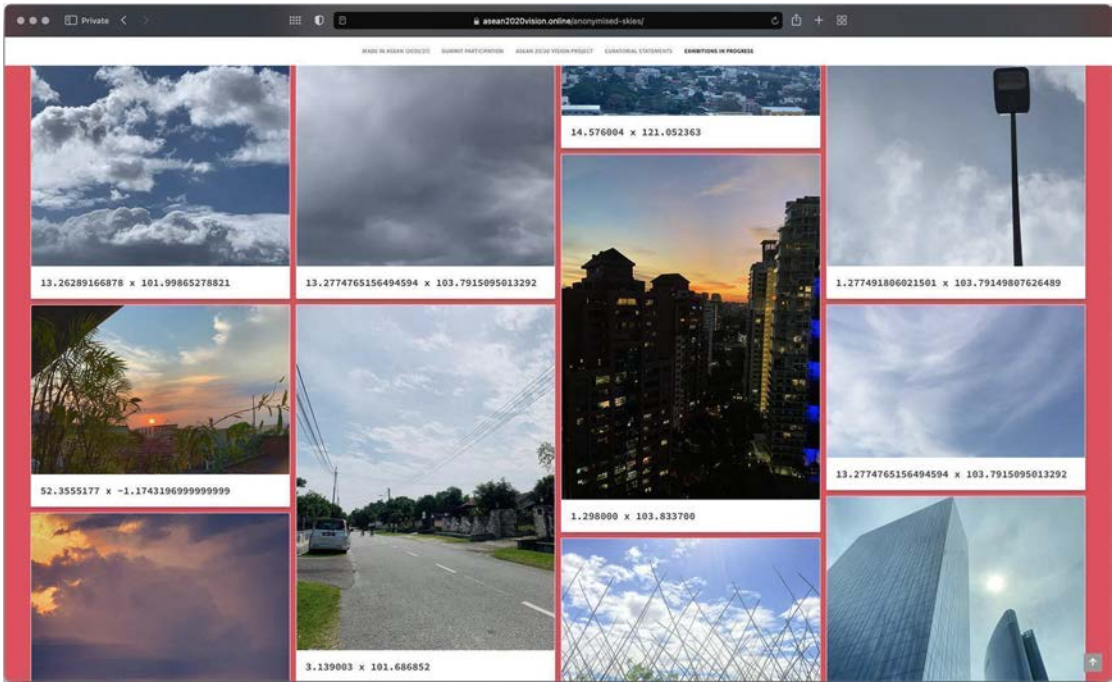
In 2020, numerous workers have been deprived of access to their desk jobs as mass lockdowns shuttered workplaces not only in Asia but also the rest of the world because of Covid-19. Virtual meetings conducted over videoconferencing apps, therefore, made quite the difference – had this pandemic happened decades prior, the physical and social challenges would prove even harder. Whilst many industries have swiftly realised various workarounds using online connectivity and virtual spaces, the arts sector (especially in ASEAN) has yet to circumvent many physical restrictions. Regardless of the global pandemic, however, creative practitioners have long been experimenting to offer new solutions.

Mesa Sa Kwarto is a paracuratorial experiment that is designed to expand the now ubiquitous *Zoom gallery view* into a makeshift exhibition space. Here, the desk *(mesa)* in the room *(kwarto)* balances between the material and virtual, execution and concept, offline and online, work and life. The effect is a home-made rendering of augmented reality. An almost 'retrospective' exhibition, the display of objects is culled from an intimate curatorial collection – with the curator's bedroom serving as both an archive and a repository of artworks, clothes, journals, letters, and souvenirs which have accumulated through the years. The life-size inventory is distilled on a desk, where the objects are weighed, wielded, and written.

* * *

For the online exhibition, curator Kristian Agustin presents a catalogue of Southeast Asian artefacts and products manufactured in ASEAN countries.

As if pre-empting future museums, curators and collectors, these objects are altogether presented as a depiction of the material culture of the ‘ASEAN civilisation’. After all, located in the region are some of the most vulnerable nations in the world in the face of pandemics, rising oceans, and world wars.



ANONYMISED SKIES

30 November – 15 December 2020 and onwards

Curated by Martin Vidanes (Philippines)

Curatorial Statement (by Martin Vidanes)
https://asean2020vision.online/anonymised-skies

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

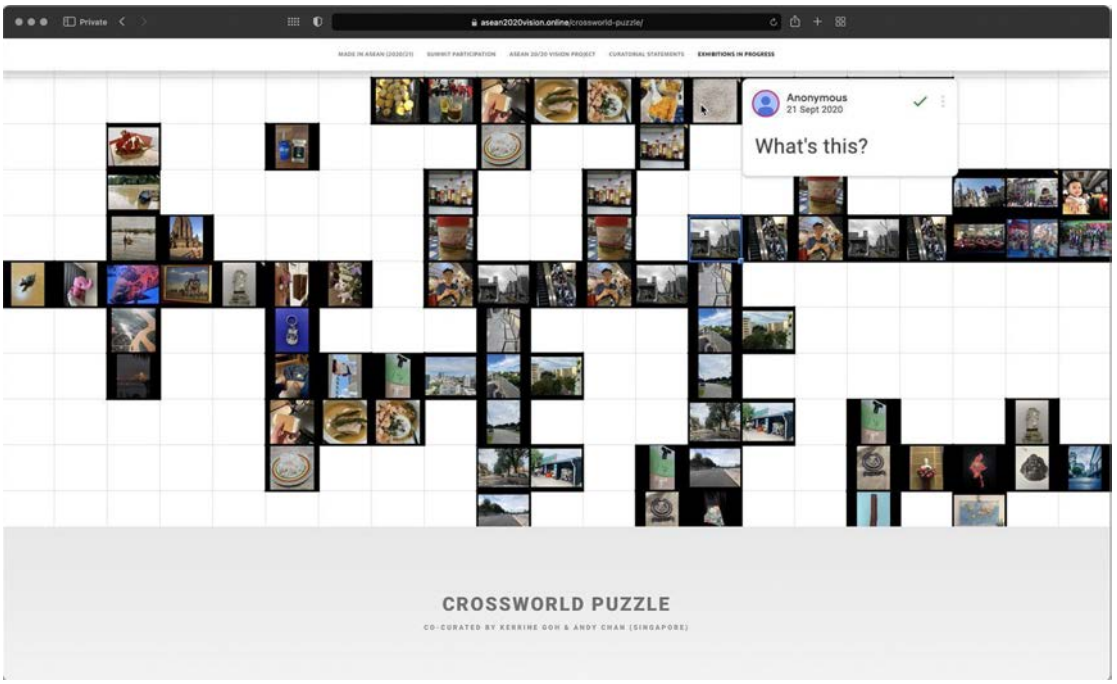
Step out, stand still, and through a dark looking glass, move through time and space, and light.

What does the sky look like from there?

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

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

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



CROSSWORLD PUZZLE

5 – 15 December 2020 and onwards

Co-curated by Kerrine Goh and Andy Chan (Singapore)

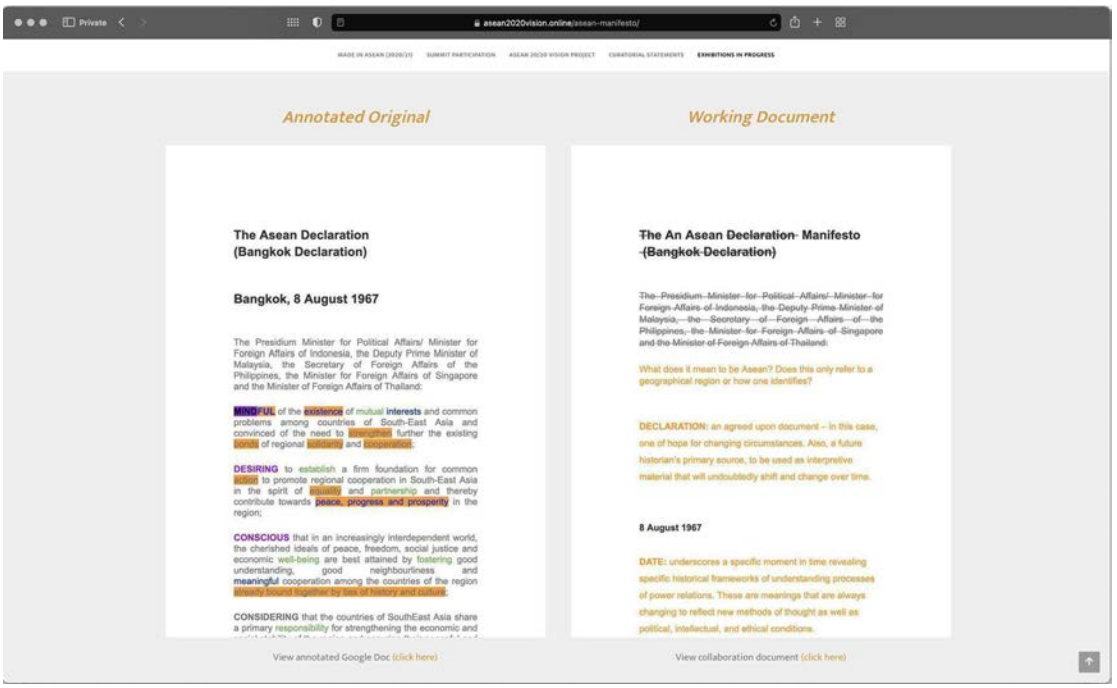
Curatorial Statement (by Kerrine Goh and Andy Chan)
https://asean2020vision.online/crossworld-puzzle

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

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

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

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



ASEAN MANIFESTO

8 August 2021 (ASEAN Day)

Co-curated by Kristian Agustin (Philippines), Amy Matthewson (Canada/UK), Yen Ooi (Malaysia/UK), and Martin Vidanes (Philippines)

Curatorial Statement (by Kristian Agustin *et al.)*
https://asean2020vision.online/asean-manifesto

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

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

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

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

iii. PREFACE: Where are you from?

It's almost like a guessing game whenever I get asked about *where* I am *from.* Are you Chinese? Korean? Japanese? Where are you really from? Of course, this typically happens when I am in the UK – or anywhere in Europe – and, in all honesty, I do understand why. Considering what I vaguely know of those people who pose these questions, I believe that it is not always because of ignorance or racism.

I find it easier to assume that people are simply curious or generally clueless. Still, I wonder why it is quite rare to encounter someone who would ask me whether I am *Vietnamese* or *Thai,* or even *Singaporean* instead of readily assuming that I am East Asian. Perhaps, more than just my physical appearance, it's observably the lack of Southeast Asian representation in mainstream media that puts me in this predicament.

It must also be a question of *visuality.* For centuries, Southeast Asia has always been imagined, represented, and visualised in ways other than its own. According to *Condition Report,* a three-year international curatorial project about Southeast Asia, 'as a regional conception [it] did not exist as a self-explanatory location, but came into being through an accumulation of histories' (Japan Foundation Asia Center 2017). By posing the very question *What is Southeast Asia?,* the international undertaking challenged artists and curators across the region to participate in shaping its contemporary visual culture. In 2017, I was facilitating a participatory photography pilot study at the sidelines of Vargas Museum's *Almost There* (one among the international exhibitions of *Condition Report)* when I myself grappled with exactly the same question. In 2018, I began working on this practice-led thesis by carrying out the legacy of that project, as well as other similar efforts before it. My aim was to offer an alternative perspective to the existing constructs of the region by encouraging Southeast Asians – whether back home or in the UK – to actively participate in the imagination of our place in the world. Because only through our own lens can we reflect on our ties of history as a people. And it is not because we are bound by just our geography. It is much more than where we are from.

CHAPTER I

Imagining a Region, Regionalising an Imagination: An Introduction to Southeast Asia

Interlinked with one another, then, the census, the map and the museum illuminate the late colonial state's style of thinking about its domain [...] thus shaped the grammar which would in due course make possible 'Burma' and 'Burmese', 'Indonesia' and 'Indonesians'. But the concretization of these possibilities – concretizations which have a powerful life today, long after the colonial state has disappeared – owed much to the colonial state's peculiar imagining of history and power.

– Imagined Communities by Benedict Anderson (2006:184-185)

In this chapter, I first draw a general picture of how the collective imagination of nations and regions acts as the premise of my research. Then, I explain how these imaginary constructs have always been closely tied to the work of the curator and how I see contemporary regionalism being rooted upon the colonial-era politics that gave the curator the crucial role in branding a nation or, more specifically, in representing a community of people. I also recount my personal background and experiences as a Southeast Asian – from the lens of my being Filipino – as well as the many regional structures through which I had navigated in the past to make sense of my identity/ies. Through the exposition of these ideas and narratives, I am able to illustrate the main purpose of this study.

Furthermore, to underpin my practice-led output as this study's main contribution, this introductory chapter is immediately followed by a thorough discussion of my methodology (Chapter II). My creative practice-as-research approach serves as the main rationale for this purposive structuring, which is outlined in more detail in the concluding section of this chapter (Section K). In this introduction, I only offer a *focused overview* of relevant literature while identifying, quite sufficiently, the strands of knowledge this study ultimately

aims to enrich. Hence, I invite the readers to refer to my comprehensive review of literature (Chapter V) for further clarification on the concepts and theories I raise in this introduction whenever necessary. I do recommend considering how I developed and delivered the overall plan (Chapter II and III) before referring to its theoretical contributions (Chapter IV), as well as implications and relevance (Chapters V and VI).

A. Imagined nations and imaginations

Living many years researching in Southeast Asia, Anderson (2006)[1] aptly described nations as 'imagined communities'. Indeed, nations are not only products of their own histories, but they also emerge from the collective imaginations of the people that comprise them. Numerous struggles in the past had been fought for the sake of building, expanding, and/or suppressing nations; hence, their narratives can convey meaningful stories and symbols even today. These histories, imaginations, and struggles are almost always, encapsulated by artworks, icons, material culture, relics, and visual texts. While these 'images' allow us to invoke a nation, as well as nation-ness and nationalism, Anderson (2006:24-25) only concentrates on the novel and the newspaper as the 'two forms of imagining' that once served as 'the technical means for 're-presenting' the *kind* [sic] of imagined community that is the nation'. Of course, in several of his scholarly works, Anderson also accounts for iconography, emblems, and maps as (re)presentations of the imagined community; however, much like the novel and the newspaper, these forms of imagery are not necessarily the collective handiwork of a nation's people.

Images do not just happen to shape a nation and its history. They are curated – decided upon, hand-picked, selected – by persons who are either *in power* or *appointed by those in power.* The authorial visionary may turn the characteristics of a place into a 'symbolic economy' (Tsui 2009:10; see also Zukin 1996:133; Bourdieu 1984:101,345) which can be reified, represented, and thus reproduced. For scholars in the fields of governance, international relations, or public diplomacy, this process pertains to 'nation branding' or

[1] A prominent scholar of Southeast Asia, Benedict Anderson originally published this book in 1983; he cited various examples of why Southeast Asian nations can exemplify his theory of 'imagined communities' (Anderson 2006).

'place branding' (Mazumdar 2021; Sevin & Ayhan 2021; Choi & Kim 2016; Hong 2014; Pamment 2014; Anholt 2011). Branding a nation or place can either be the means to something or the outcome. Today, these systematised efforts are not necessarily practised separate from the cultural sector. *Nation branding* is a new term for an old project[2] in that it is *visuality* in the making.

National identities and symbols are truly irresistible curatorial subjects. Thus, in the 21st Century, nation branding efforts are typically integrated with the creative industries. These include local exhibitions (Carroll 2021; Tsuda 2021; Krenn 2005), international biennials and triennials (Nägeli 2021; See 2021; Kennedy *et al.* 2014), transnational exchanges and residencies (Bjola 2021; Carroll 2021; Surowiec 2021; Asialink 2007; Asialink 2004a-b), tourism and travel (Chheang 2013; Agustin 2012; Ness 2003), and 'culture festival' circuits[3] which include film and music festivals (Hubbe 2021; Begum 2015; Johnston 2015). However, these strategies did not always fall within the remit of the creative or cultural sectors of society. Some of these mass spectacles can be traced as far back as 17th Century Europe, as exemplified by private collections in the grand estates of high-ranking aristocrats (George 2015:2). Curating was not always a creative endeavour. In Medieval Europe a curator acted as an overseer of the Church; or in Ancient Rome, the curator was an official of the empire. In short, for centuries it was primarily a function of power and an expression of privilege to curate, to design, and to envision.

The genealogy of the curator is burdened by a long history of fulfilling the Western enterprise of colonialism. In 1884, the *Exposición Nacional de Bellas Artes* – i.e. 'National Exposition of Fine Arts' – held in Madrid, Spain awarded Filipino painters for the first time and, in so doing, it prominently

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[2] I borrow from Mirzoeff's (2011:2) definition of 'visuality' as follows:

> *Visuality* [sic] is an old word for an old project. It is not a trendy theory word meaning the totality of all visual images and devices, but is in fact an early-nineteenth-century term meaning the visualization of history. This practice must be imaginary, rather than perceptual, because what is being visualized is too substantial for any one person to see and is created from information, images, and ideas. This ability to assemble a visualization manifests the authority of the visualizer.

[3] In Southeast Asia, these include the *ASEAN International Film Festival & Awards* (AIFFA 2021), *The 3rd ASEAN PR Excellence Awards* (APRN 2021), the *Movie and Art Exchange Programme - JENESYS* (ASEAN 2019), the *International Southeast Asian Film Festival* (ISEAFilmFest 2015), and the *SEA ArtsFest* (SOAS 2013), to name a few examples. Even the Southeast Asian Games (SEA Games) and other sport competitions fall under this.

signalled the shifting discourses of imperial, colonial, and national identities of that era (Flores 2011:84-85). That historic exposition is just one among several others during the turn of the century, where ideologies of national identity-building – *imperialism* vis-à-vis *egalitarianism* – were distilled out of the artistic-curatorial realm.

Another well-known example is the *British Empire Exhibition 1924* which opened to millions of spectators in Wembley, London. It offered the international public a treasure trove of British colonies more vividly than just illustrated maps and postcards. One could even imagine that it devised the blueprint of today's *theme parks,* although instead of storybook attractions the colonial exposition offers a work of non-fiction. There, the great empire's subjects were displayed as a commodified spectacle – tickets were sold for admission. It was widely regarded as a lucrative success.

Indeed, today's curatorial practices can hardly be detached from Westernisation, something that continues to persist in the so-called 'global' art market (Reilly 2018:103). The argument that cultural spaces, especially museums, merely 'replicate' imperial power structures in more current ways (Raicovich 2021:43) rings true especially if we consider how nations, with their identities and symbols, served curators of the past and present.[4]

But if nations left their indelible marks through cultural artefacts and products, then the same should be said of regions. Many scholars and, even more so, curators had already dedicated much of their time into (re)building, (re)interpreting, and (re)presenting nations; hence, in this exploratory study, I wish to take a further step to understand an even larger force that hitherto overshadows national consciousness – and identity. *How were our national boundaries drawn? Why are some borders uncompromising, while others blur? If these demarcations disappear, what are we left with?* These curious questions continue to make relevant the traces of colonial visuality from a 'hauntological' perspective (Fisher 2014).[5] Regions are shadows of empires. We can almost summon the spirit of bygone empires by way of regions.

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[4] As in any curatorial work, the imagination of the subject is an expression of its discursive formation (Foucault 2010;1981).

[5] in which the 'ghost' of a past phenomenon continues to haunt the ontology of presence (Derrida 1994:166); see also Chapter I: Section E for my explanation of this 'hauntology'

B. Charting the course from nations to regions

Regions are geographic constructs that are essential to the formation of an empire – logistically stretching out to organise colonies, naming each its own. Anderson (1998:3) indicates that the naming of the region of Southeast Asia 'not surprisingly […] came from outside'. In more recent literature, however, curator Flores (2015: para. 1) proposes a 'psycho-geographical imagination' instead: the *North* and the *West* being 'ascendant, more prone to power, and closer to the imagined center' as opposed to the *South* as 'peripheral and dispossessed' and the *East* as 'timeless and far' (see Chapter V: epigraph). These regional terms intrigue me for the reason that imaginary cartographies can also prompt our imaginations of identity/ies in today's world: *northerners, southerners, western-ness, eastern-ness.* Their intermingling often signals a sense of exotic nostalgia: *east meets west,* on the other hand their parting may be symptomatic of a power struggle: *north-south divide.*

Regions' inherent *volatility* exemplify the forces that constantly shape them. The Balkan Wars, the Arab Spring, the South China Sea, and recently Brexit – from Europe to Asia, these are just a few examples that call attention to the far-reaching tremors of regional politics. However, I do not necessarily intend to make a case for these processes in this study; besides, as a curator whose specialism is art and culture studies, I am in no position to make any clarifications as to whether this study strictly falls within the framework of *regionalisation* or of *regionalism,* two distinct ideological processes (Hoshiro 2019) more relevant to area studies, or international political economy, even the social sciences. Scholars who previously contributed to the enrichment of these discourses (Anderson 2006; Acharya 2000; Hall 1991; Nye 1968) had already paved the way for what we now know: regions are *geopolitical constructs* that continue to define the way people and their communities are shaped as (trans)national subjects – enabling trade relations, multilateral exchange of goods and cultural products, cross-border mobility, and so on.

In this study, what I am emphasising is how curators, galleries, and museums have always operated within the contexts of regions (Reilly 2018: 25; see also Kennedy *et al.* 2014; Ray 2019; Sabapathy 2018) and thus, their practices are essential in our historical and contemporary understanding too.

Further, more than just assembling countries according to their geographical proximities as seen in contemporary museums of history and archaeology, curating a region entails piecing together the *absent presence* or *present absence* of it. *Why does one region end where another begins? What key markers of 'region-ness' can we identify to group any number of countries together? And how rigid or flexible can the criteria for identifying regions be?* This pondering may be moot from the perspective of the West; its centuries of gazing upon the whole world led to the categorisation of nations into their regionalities, after all. From the vantage point of Southeast Asia, however, the matter remains a puzzle.

Perhaps one of the earliest scholarly writings of Southeast Asia, Buss' (1958) account of the regional grouping offers a very Western vista. This text earnestly projects how Southeast Asia is predominantly visualised *by* and *for* the West. Supplementary to Buss' first-hand narrative, another early work propounds that there was barely any sense of 'Southeast Asia' in the region, whether as a cultural or geopolitical community, prior to European imperialist expansion (Wang 1986a). Most available archival information on Southeast Asia – for instance, in the UK's prominent libraries – are country-specific; in other words, discourses of Southeast Asia are more often framed from within a constituent country's vantage point. Southeast Asian historians Sabapathy (2018) and Zhuang (2016) emphasise that nation-centric accounts facilitate knowledge differently than regionalist perspectives. The same can be said of curatorial pursuits.

Southeast Asia is thus a productive syncretism of various perspectives because it can break 'overly simplified' dichotomies such as 'East' and 'West', 'We' and 'the Other', 'our culture' versus 'their culture', hence we learn more about the region's cross-cultural complexity (Mahadevan 2012:5). Moreover, the construct of Southeast Asia is more nuanced, even 'flexible and adaptive' (Mahadevan 2012:6); in short, it can be used as a *lens* in itself and a *mirror* of itself. To solve the proverbial puzzle I mentioned earlier, we must account for the region from an *emic perspective.* This entails reflecting on what the region truly means regardless of its conventions – beyond the colonial gaze and the nation-centric framing.

C. What is Southeast Asia? What is ASEAN?

As a specific region of the world that feels outdated and current at the same time, Southeast Asia is just one among several other *geopolitical landscapes* that are easily taken for granted – as if their sole purpose is for categorisation, a practical means of dividing the globe into identifiable sections. However, we must recognise how historically important Southeast Asia is in that it largely sustained the colonies of Europe, through the spice and labour trade. Thus, the way Southeast Asia was imagined in the past is best exemplified by its colonial maps, versions of which were drawn by the British, Dutch, French, Spanish, and Portuguese – much later on by the Americans (US), not to mention the Japanese. 'Visualizing the plantation' is how Mirzoeff (2011:50) refers to a 'regime of taxonomy, observation, and enforcement to sustain a visualized domain of the social and the political that came to be known as "economy" [...] a delineated space [...] centered on surveillance'. Apart from placing the colonies under surveillance through cartography (Mirzoeff 2011: 56), European empires' use of colonial maps almost act like photographs of their whole territorial claim. Collectively representing vast lands, properties, and resources, maps rendered visible the extent of oversight and ownership asserted by monarchies – at times, even their competing claims.

Understanding that Southeast Asia has long been entangled with Western Europe and, in the last century, North America, I find it even more difficult to imagine the region entirely stripped of its (post)colonial heritage. Instead of exposing an 'authentic' identity that renders visible the region for what it genuinely is (which is impossible), in this study I am more interested in 'unburdening' the region – by 'burden' I mean the hauntings of Southeast Asia's past. This is only possible by imagining both its *presence* and future. And knowing how 'Southeast Asia' in itself is not necessarily a Southeast Asian invention, my focus henceforth shifts towards the Southeast Asian-led bloc which is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Although the regional organisation, which was founded in 1967, can be regarded as yet another Westernised framework – with its democratic, laissez-faire, and neoliberal principles – of looking at the region, it nonetheless created a new construct that can be decoupled from the burdened concept of Southeast

Asia. As ASEAN is plainly an organisation, it behaves in ways similar to other regional blocs such as the Arab League or LAS (1945), CARICOM (1973), EU (1993), ASEM (1996), AU (2001), PROSUL (2019), and USMCA (2020), among others.[6] Nevertheless, ASEAN's five founding nations – Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand – initiated the establishment to solve their own issues by facilitating internal conflict resolution[7] and trade partnerships. While for some scholars it may appear like a mimesis of the EU bloc, the establishment of ASEAN transpired much earlier (see this discussion in Chapter V: Section A).

Indeed, ASEAN as an imagination of Southeast Asia may be imperfect and not necessarily free of the region's (post)colonial burdens, but it is still a good point to start and build anew. It is a 'new' imagination, after all. And it is arguably original in its own right – no other trade bloc is an exact replica of ASEAN. For these reasons, I believe that the ASEAN imaginary can work as a *tabula rasa* for the curator – not in terms of a totally 'clean slate' but with regard to the new ideas and images that it can bring forth. Encapsulated by the question 'What is Southeast Asia?' (Japan Foundation Asia Center 2017), the challenge of curating the region can be laborious, philosophical, and even uncomfortable (Sabapathy 2018:291; see also Wolters 1994:16). Summed up in Japan Foundation Asia Center's (2017) *Condition Report:*

> Southeast Asia is, on the whole, historically understood to be where a diverse range of cultures and ethnic groups exist … in other words, "Southeast Asia" as a regional conception did not exist as a self-explanatory location, but came into being through an accumulation of histories.

With this vivid thought experiment, I begin my exploration of Southeast Asia by imagining it not only as a geographical region, but also as a visuality that is replete with historical significations.

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[6] the League of Arab States (LAS), is composed of 22 Arab states; the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) has a membership of 15 countries; post-Brexit, the European Union (EU) counts 27 countries; the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) brings together 21 countries from Asia and 20 from Europe; the African Union (AU) integrates 55 nations; the *Sistema de Cooperación sobre aspectos de información operacional y de Propiedad Industrial* (PROSUL) has 13 affiliated Latin American countries; and the United States, Mexico, Canada Agreement (USMCA) is only composed of the three countries

[7] Much like the United Nations (UN), which was established and organised to ensure a global rebuilding of international relationships after World War II, the ASEAN trade bloc was key to resolving the *Konfrontasi* armed struggle (Wey 2016) between still warring nations in Southeast Asia during the Cold War.

This study's inception can be traced back to my direct involvement in the international exhibition of Vargas Museum in 2017, *Almost There;* it was one among a series of curatorial projects under *Condition Report* (as cited above) which gathered prominent art practitioners in the region. The setting proved convenient for my initial explorations of this topic; as I mentioned in the *Preface,* I was a visiting researcher at the Vargas Museum (a constituent museum of the University of the Philippines) when I had been contracted to assist in the international undertaking as a social media coordinator. For four months, I engaged in meaningful conversations with the artists and curators – Southeast Asians and Japanese – who were collaborating in *Almost There.* Their propositions of reimagining the region as 'almost there' inspired me to respond by way of my participatory photography intervention at the site of the international gathering. This culminated in a public forum and curatorial walk-through aptly titled *Photographing the ASEAN: PhotoVoice as research method, Southeast Asia as visual culture* (Agustin 2018).

Returning to the question 'What is Southeast Asia?' thus amounts to a search for something much bigger than just a definition. It's as if the question is now *asking for new imaginations,* going even further than the *raison d'être* of the region. In other words, the question is stimulating conceptualisation by seeking answers other than what is already obvious – or, perhaps, what is truly impossible to uncover.

If the region were to be something other than the haunting of its past (i.e. Southeast Asia), then what *else* is it? This study explores whether or not ASEAN fits the mould. Thus, an important goal which shaped this study was to re-visualise the map of Southeast Asia through ASEAN. As a diverse and populous region, the expanse of it often eludes its inhabitants, not to mention its visitors. Yes, we may be aware of our neighbouring countries in principle, but to grasp the whole region that we are supposed to belong to is not yet second nature to us. *How, then, do we imagine each of our fellow ASEAN members?* The task at hand is to imagine our whole community by identifying who we are co-imagining our region with (Acharya 1997:342-343; see also Anderson 2006:6). Therefore, in this study I develop and put into practice a new approach that visualises ASEAN for Southeast Asians. At the same time,

I must personally familiarise myself with our region by learning more about what it means to be Southeast Asian. Throughout the research journey, I do this while also drawing from how others before me already asked questions of the same nature (Sabapathy 2018; Japan Foundation Asia Center 2017; Acharya 2000; Anderson 1998; Wolters 1994).

D. My personal experience of ASEAN

Aside from visualising Southeast Asians' personal perspectives and stories, I must also reflect on what the region means to me. By my autoethnographic (and reflexive) account of my 'Southeast Asian-ness', I draw parallels and tangents between me and my fellow Southeast Asians. This also aligns with my reflexive methodology (through practice-based approaches; see Chapter II: Sections B and C) that set out to paint a picture of what the experience of Southeast Asia is from a personal vantage point of a Southeast Asian local.

For an ordinary ASEAN 'member citizen' such as myself, it is not hard to grasp the concept of my membership: *I am a citizen of a Southeast Asian country therefore I am Southeast Asian; by extension, because my country is a member of ASEAN, then I must identify with this very membership as well.* In fact this is what has always been ingrained in most Southeast Asian locals' upbringing throughout our primary, secondary, and higher education. Acharya (2017:25) counsels, however, that some nuances must be clarified:

> An important clarification: ASEAN identity is a reflection of Southeast Asian identity, but is not identical to it. Southeast Asia's regional identity anchors ASEAN's institutional identity. ASEAN is not a region; Southeast Asia is. ASEAN identity is more recent, more artificial, and more dependent on political and strategic forces than Southeast Asia's. Southeast Asia's regional identity is more enduring than ASEAN's, although the loss or weakening of ASEAN will adversely impact on Southeast Asian identity. But the key point here is that one cannot understand the nature of and prospects for ASEAN identity without considering the wider context of Southeast Asian identity within which it is nested.

But throughout this study, I occasionally fall into the trap of labelling ASEAN a 'region' (often as a matter of convenience) despite Acharya's insistence. This is because I reflect the same confusion experienced by many other citizens across the vast ten-country membership, in spite of our education. Among all the current member states of ASEAN, to date I have only ever been to three: the Philippines (as I am a Filipino citizen), Singapore (where I was previously

employed by an intergovernmental organisation), and Thailand (for tourism/ leisure while working on this study).[8] In immediate succession, these three countries served as 'ASEAN Chair' for consecutive years[9] (2017, 2018, and 2019) – about the time I was planning for and starting my PhD studies. It was no coincidence really, as I have always been wondering what ASEAN meant to me personally since I first learned about it in school. Even at a young age, children are already introduced to intergovernmental organisations such as the globally prominent United Nations (UN). In school, we commemorated these organisations, including ASEAN, through cultural events which usually entailed crafting *flag mock-ups* of different countries and performing in their *'national' costumes*. Carroll (2021:76-77) refers to these youth programmes as examples of 'cultural diplomacy' (see also Tsui 2009:11). I grew up with these odd yet fond memories of ASEAN, although little did I truly know about its history or purpose; I was merely instructed to take part in it. If ASEAN stands for 'One Vision, One Identity, One Community' – which is the much-touted ASEAN motto (ASEAN 2008) – then it must be a good thing, as I had always been told. I even vividly remember the excitement I had when I was selected as a 'Local Youth Interactor' to welcome the delegates of the 30th *Ship for Southeast Asian Youth Program* (SSEAYP) in our university,[10] as it was also the first time I would be meeting students from various Southeast Asian countries and, unexpectedly, from Japan.[11]

It was only when I moved to Hong Kong in 2014 (and lived there until 2017) that I started doubting the way Southeast Asia is grouped (aside from geographical factors) because the cosmopolitan city of Hong Kong offered as

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[8] These countries are three out of the five founding nations of ASEAN, the membership of which has now expanded to ten member states. Although, at the time of writing this thesis, the membership of Timor-Leste was being anticipated (UN News 2022:online).

[9] Serving as ASEAN Chair in succeeding years were Viet Nam for 2020, Brunei Darussalam for 2021, and Cambodia for 2022 – thus, since I started my PhD in 2018, I have experienced a total of five ASEAN Chairs already (that's half of the ASEAN membership).

[10] The University of the Philippines (UP) in Diliman, my then university, hosted the local youth programme which was held at the UP Bahay ng Alumni in October 2003.

[11] SSEAYP was eventually renamed as the 'Ship for Southeast Asian and Japanese Youth Program', in formal recognition of the Japanese government as its main initiator and funder since its establishment in 1987; although not a member of ASEAN, Japan is active in international relations and trade cooperations within the region (case in point is *Almost There)*.

much a ‘Southeast Asian’ milieu despite being indeed part of China. Similar to Japan, China has strong socioeconomic influences and shared histories in the region and now Korea, with its widespread pop culture, captures markets across Southeast Asia (which Japan’s pop culture used to dominate decades prior). In other words, these ‘East Asian’ countries have always been quite intertwined with Southeast Asian countries. And this is something that I have often been reminded of whenever I am queried by fellow academics in some major international conferences. This exemplifies some of the burdens of the construct that is the ‘Orient’, as in the Western imagination (Said 1979) that first lumped together countries of Asia as either the ‘Far East’ or the ‘Middle East’, among other regionalisms. Ironically, academia has also contributed to perpetuating these imaginaries, as exemplified by scholars’ serious use of the term ‘Southeast Asia’ in their monographs and publications (Anderson 1998:3-4), among many other region-specific examples. Therefore, these arbitrary boundaries of regions prove problematic in that history has shown that they can be drawn and redrawn. And to make borders and boundaries even blurrier in today’s world, increased globalisation by way of digital media and the Internet is contributing to the reshaping of regions – not to mention countries – more mutably and rapidly than just trade and travel. Not only are geographical borders and territorial boundaries conceptually and materially fluid and even precarious (Wilson & Donnan 2012; Wilson & Donnan 1998; Robertson 1995), but communities also practically overlap or permeate one another (Dean 2005) depending on the affordances of communication/media technologies, cultural products, or exported/imported goods.

E. From hauntings to imaginations

For me to make sense of the hauntings of regions, I must transform them into imaginations and images – albeit not the most concrete of ways in grasping a region’s *hauntological* existence. Here, I must emphasise that while Derrida’s (1994) theory of hauntology recounts Marxist ideology in light of communism ‘haunting’ Europe, I instead treat the colonial past of regions as *the haunting* while using Southeast Asia as my *lens* and *mirror.* Therefore, Fisher’s (2014: 23-27) retro-futuristic notion that what is ‘no longer, but which *remains* [sic]

effective as a virtuality' aptly describes the haunting of regions in this manner. This is because hauntings are experienced despite the absence of the thing itself, which merely recurs as 'a spectral element that is more real than its corporeal counterpart' (Glazier 2017:2). Hence, I believe that it is impossible for me to 'recover' what is now both absent and abstract (Lacan 1993:167). Conversely, provided that there may still be extant artefacts such as colonial maps and cultural objects or other technical means that potentially serve as referents of the 'spectre' of Southeast Asia (Anderson 1998), I am practically unable to access or afford these *revenants* to produce a satisfactory project of curatorial value during my limited time undertaking my PhD.

Hence, while Southeast Asia as a haunting is an obvious subject of this study – as in the many other spectres it can summon, e.g. colonialism and decolonialism, race and ethnicity, diaspora and cultural hybridity, among others – I must nevertheless consider it a thing of the past, or in other words, a 'past haunting'. Building on how Anderson had already made substantial contributions in this subject, from tracing the region's hauntings and spectres (Anderson 1998:3-8) to accounting for (re)presentations of imagined nations (Anderson 2006:163-164), I now trace a new path.

However, it being a thing of the past does not necessarily mean that I will cease to acknowledge – or even encounter – its existence, much less its potentialities. To do so will only perpetuate what Raicovich (2021:10-11) refers to as the 'myth of neutrality'. Instead of assuming an objective stance by relying solely on archival and empirical artefacts and symbols, I should, as a curator, be aware that I may also rely on the imagination as a methodology (Schwarte 2009:65). In the absence of the thing that haunts (i.e. Southeast Asia), all that remains for me to contend with is my imagination of it. This is why I feel that 'Southeast Asia' is the region's haunting as 'past', and 'ASEAN' is its future imagination (in the form of a haunting as 'future') – I say 'future' because the present is obviously transitory.

Henceforth, I am pondering the question:[12] *how do I intuit the region's image if its presence is mere 'virtuality'* (borrowing from Fisher 2014)? For Huppauf and Wulf (2009:13), the process must entail 'an active involvement

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[12] see also Chapter I: Section I for the specific research questions

of the viewer's imagination in order to make visible what is contained in them [referring to non-representative visual constructions] only as a potential'. As a consequence, for regional consciousness to take root, first it must be made 'concrete and palpable' (Sabapathy 1983:16). However, we must be cautious because, as articulated vividly by Suvrathan (2019:90-91), 'in our attempts to reconstruct past lifeways we frequently tend to create sanitised images that ignore the messiness and disorganisation of real life'.

Thus, Southeast Asia can return as either a haunting or an imaginary. In effect, this makes it possible for me to (re)turn to the image of Southeast Asia from the abstract to the perceptible. Only, as I repurpose Anderson's (2006) theory of the 'imagined community', and even his own concept of the 'spectre' of Southeast Asia (Anderson 1998), the imagination of a nation and, similarly, a whole region must involve not just one individual account but a multiplicity. Hence, this makes the task of imagining more cumbersome and almost unwieldy for both this study and my practice as a curator.

Nevertheless, if there is one applicable thing that I have learned from my being involved in previous curatorial projects,[13] all of which responded to different *region-nesses* in Asia, it is my realisation that the imagination (of the curator) must be *performed* (as in a curatorial project, such as an exhibition) in order for the *imaginary* to take shape – for now, I am using 'imaginary' in a similar way as how Sontag (1977:154) refers to the 'image-world'. This very performance could enable people, including the curator himself or herself, to comprehend what is abstracted in the realm of the imagination. And this very process is important for such an imaginary construct as identity, even more so for a region-wide identity expression.

Not to merely reiterate Acharya's (2000:2) view in that little has been done to practically or theoretically qualify our regional identity – especially by academics and culturalists – yet in a previous publication I contended that economists, politicians, and even scholars tend to refer to ASEAN identity as if it is something that is readily empirical or even visibly recognisable (Agustin

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[13] Before undertaking this research project, I have worked under several international exhibitions that focused on themes about region-ness, namely: *Ties of History* (2018, Philippines), *Almost There* (2017, Philippines), *Twelve Hundred Miles Apart* (2015, Hong Kong), *Nullah No La* (2015, Hong Kong), *Urban Exotic Dilemma* (2015, Hong Kong).

2018). Unlike, for instance, nation-specific terms such as ‘Filipino identity’ or ‘Singaporean identity’, both of which *interpellate*[14] their respective citizenries, ASEAN identity is ambiguous enough to include (or exclude) almost anything Southeast Asian.[15] Thus, stretching the bounds of nationality as a construct to something as encompassing as *regionality* proves a challenge for the very reason that the act of self-identification is already lacking the ‘self’ per se – what is a *regional self* to begin with?

I ask this because, as I elucidate in this study, the notion of a region does not have an inherent referent, unlike the perception of the self that is like a gaze into a mirror (Lacan 2006). Therefore, the construct of a region could hardly imagine itself, and neither could its group of fragmented ‘selves’ (i.e. the people of a region) perceive their population as a whole in each of themselves. What I purposely illustrate here is that the very act of imagining one’s regional identity thinly stretches even Anderson’s (2006) theory of the imagined community – it only pertains to a nation’s members self-identifying their shared membership. In short, the region is too wide a scope for its supposed individual members to imagine their shared belongingness to a regional kinship. Even Sabapathy’s (2018:292-293) reasoning to consolidate the varied perspectives of Southeast Asia indicates a fragmented view of the regional self into his proposed curatorial themes such as ‘personal/cultural identity’, ‘cultural iconoclasm’, ‘power and hegemony’, among others.[16]

F. Curating and imagining the region

In this curatorial research, what I am in fact dealing with is an abstract idea – *Southeast Asian-ness.* Despite being abstract, this ‘region-ness’ or ‘regional identity’ is nevertheless considered by society as a real experience; several large-scale surveys even offer empirical factors that determine the existence

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[14] Used here as theorised by Althusser in *Ideology and ideological state apparatuses,* originally published in 1970 (Evans & Hall 2001:317-323).

[15] ‘Southeast Asia’ is even vaguer because it is a geographical construct that can vary its meaning depending on the contexts of its usage, although interchangeable with ‘ASEAN’.

[16] Sabapathy’s (2018:292-293) list of proposed themes also includes ‘gender/sexuality’, ‘revitalisation, reinvestment of traditions’, ‘urban/natural environment and transformation’, ‘popular culture/counter culture’, and ‘religious, spiritual aspirations’.

of such an abstract idea (ASEAN 2018; Intal & Ruddy 2017; Thompson *et al.* 2016; Phua & Chin 2015; Roberts 2009; Thompson & Thianthai 2008). And, as indicated by each of these quantitative studies, ironically the idea exists as a multifaceted experience. In other words, what I am imagining and, in turn, curating can neither be captured nor concretised as one thing. Perhaps it is because it is constantly in transition, or perhaps because it is never in just one place. Unlike researchers who have immediate access to empirical data and material objects, I am examining a tentative imagination of my subject while also probing and testing it by attempting to visualise the imaginary of it without knowing what the actual, referential image is in the first place – or if such an image even exists.

I am curating an abstract idea which is so vast, that even authentically or faithfully representing rather a partial piece of it cannot sufficiently serve as a genuine representation of the whole thing. I am curating a vague concept of Southeast Asia which, as I have learned, is so mutable; any changes in our local, national, or regional politics could render irrelevant the progress I have made so far. Such an imaginary of region-ness has versions and possibilities as numerous as its group of ten countries that comprises over 32,000 islands and an estimate of 673 million local population to date (United Nations 2022). Hence I am dealing with not only an accumulation of our abstract ideas and mental images across the region but also the lived experience of Southeast Asians, whom I will never meet. In my creative practice-as-research approach, even the curatorial praxis must transform. Instead of curating its presence by means of what is available to me, I must curate its *absent presence* and *present absence* by way of the imagination.

However, it is not entirely abstract or ambiguous if we were to consider the hundreds of photographic images of ASEAN ‘crowdsourced’ across social media platforms in the last ten years. These online images can be regarded as fragments of Southeast Asians’ imagination of their regional community as opposed to how it has always been shaped by powerful visualities – whether bygone empires of the West or current supranational structures within South-east Asia. Thus, my curatorial role in accomplishing this study has something to do with making sense of the region’s visual culture, from policy-led visions

of its leaders (i.e. government officials, civil society leaders, business elites and economic decision-makers) as exemplified by *ASEAN Vision 2020*[17] to the grassroots-level discourses elicited by the photographs of ASEAN circulating its regional spaces through digital media. Given the convenience of Internet access nowadays, I rely on mostly digital forms of visual culture to obtain an overall picture that compensates for the lack of empirical, on-the-ground, and tangible subjects. In effect, I must also consider that the ASEAN imaginary is merely a *supra-* or *trans-*national construct that can only exist collectively and simultaneously in interconnected planes of data and media (see Chapter V: Section B). As photography is nowadays one of the most important tools of visual culture – although the same can be said of other epochs – it may also prove useful in conceptualising or challenging our own identity construction (Agustin 2018) especially when the mere idea of 'identity' evokes something that is the 'visual construction of the social' (Mitchell 2005:343).

Curating visual culture in Southeast Asia, as this study demonstrates, is inextricably linked to reflecting on our own identity/ies. This is because it is quite impossible to separate our identity from our lived experience in that our material conditions of existence also define, influence, and even reflect who we are. But, at the same time, it is also not very easy for us to grasp our own constructs of identity if these were too abstract, almost rendered invisible by other more obvious constructs that we would simply take the rest for granted. In *Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire,* Akala (2018) argues how, for some people their racialised identities are typically neglected as if it has nothing to do with what they can or cannot achieve in life. Conversely, some are only ever treated through their race. In short, some identities are sharp, while others are hazy. *How much more if the identity we are supposed to be identifying has nothing to do with race, gender, and class? How then do we account for such an abstract idea of region-ness?*

For now Southeast Asia's *referent* is being signalled by pictures of ASEAN populating social media – this is a *visual construction* of our social experience as Southeast Asians across the region. As I briefly discuss in the

[17] The ASEAN-wide policy that outlines the blueprint for the year 2020 in its regionalisation process, especially its economic/developmental and sociocultural targets (ASEAN 1997).

succeeding section (Section G) and then expand in the methodology chapter (Chapter II), the curatorial task entails an exploration of existing images of what I refer to as 'ASEAN-ness' through visual (auto)ethnography. This so-called regional identity, I hypothesise, must also manifest in visual culture especially when it has something to do with the discourse of ASEAN-ness – the imaginary concept concomitant with the geopolitical process.

In the context of our 'lived experience', it is not an impossibility to find such regional expressions of identity/ies in everyday life (Castells 2010a:6; Ahearne 2000:153-157). And because performing our individual or collective identity/ies is partly what forms our everyday life, then *image-making through photography* can augment our experience of visualities. In the curatorial parts of this research, photography is practised as a tool for documenting our social activities as well as environments which can shed light on our shared day-to-day habits as Southeast Asians. Accordingly, cameraphones are our most immediate tools for *image-making* – arguably one of the most commonplace 'everyday' practices in ASEAN cities where social media activity has been regarded as statistically significant worldwide (McKinsey & Company 2014; see also Kemp 2021). Our images exemplify both the practice and politics of everyday life as we live through it; and through our daily use of photographic media we personalise our awareness of the environment and the mundane – just to suit our social, lived experiences (de Certeau 1984:xv). According to Highmore (2002), there is no end goal necessary for the practice of everyday life to be political as this is constantly embedded in the ways we exercise our agency on a daily basis.

In addition, Highmore (2002:19-20) also insists that *the practice of the everyday* – in which, again I must add, our use of cameraphones becomes our own tools for documenting and representing our lived experiences – *has an aesthetic function.* In short, our 'aesthetic agency' is not separate from the way we now visually construct our society at large. And with our society being dominated by spaces of the economic and the political (Lefebvre 1991), then many socioeconomic and sociopolitical factors could also be rendered visible by our day-to-day image-making, creative or not.

Through our collective and individual 'ways of seeing' (Berger 1972),

we could further develop our understanding of our own belongingness in such a regional kinship. Therefore, our participation in such a study is key to our intervention in the discourse of ASEAN. Not only can we build upon what I would call the 'official' discourse, which is largely shaped by economists and politicians since ASEAN's founding in 1967, we can also respond to crucial questions about what it truly means to be part of ASEAN. In this manner, this study addresses why the search for our so-called 'ASEAN identity' persists even today (ASEAN 2022:online; see also Acharya 2017; 2000; 1997), in spite of five decades' worth of imaging and imagining ASEAN through various forms of visual culture – from broadcast and print media to art exhibitions, filmmaking and photography (Mashadi 2018; Frith 2009; Banerjee 2004; Tan & Mahizhnan 2002; Manilerd 1998; Lim 1981). These cultural products all prove instrumental in propagating what I would refer to as ASEAN's 'unofficial' discourse (see Chapter IV: Section B; and Chapter V: Sections B and C), and useful in reproducing the official discourse (Agustin 2018).

G. Overall practice-as-research framework

Southeast Asia's imagination may be abstract, but it can be concretised by way of practice. Performing our *Southeast Asian-ness* is one way of realising it – through art, images, and other representations. But the question is, *which identifiable version of Southeast Asian-ness must we perform?* Accounting for the multiplicity of perspectives is a mammoth task, therefore, I must first explicate my practice-as-research framework (briefly in this section and in more detail in Chapter II) to further clarify the rationale of my undertaking.

Through the creative practice-led methodology of this study, I reflect on how Southeast Asians imagine Southeast Asia through image-making. Hence, I take a different route to complement previous imaginations of the region, such as the regional organisation (ASEAN), the *ASEAN Declaration, ASEAN Day* national costumes, Southeast Asian art and artefacts, and Southeast Asia-wide exhibitions and festivals, among others. In a way, this project also reiterates an argument made by art historian Sabapathy (1983:16) long ago:

> [ASEAN exhibitions'] implications continue to lie dormant. [...] The interpretation of these exhibitions in terms of issues and aspirations collectively shaping modern art practices have yet to be suggested. Had these been cultivated, two of the three aims

> framing ASEAN exhibitions – namely, the promotion of a regional consciousness, and the provision of a basis for the comparative study of trends and developments – would have been articulated and tested, and have gained possible currency.

The practice-led aspects of my study, as well as this written thesis, respond to Sabapathy's argument by offering ways of imagining our regional identity (and awareness of ASEAN in general). My research primarily uses a 'mixed methods' approach to participatory photography which, in turn, enables me to build a collaborative curatorial framework that would prove very useful for our imagination of Southeast Asia. As 'no visual image or practice is essentially ethnographic by nature' (Pink 2013:73), the emic perspective espoused by *participatory action research* and *socially engaged creative practice* would help me address my questions and aims (Sections I and J of this chapter). Moreover, enabling the Southeast Asian participants to picture images of the ASEAN imaginary while speaking for themselves not only acts as a form of 'autoethnography' (Ellis *et al.* 2011), but also serves as an effective counter-balance to the ubiquitous clichés, labels, and stereotypes we have always endured, whether outside or within the region.

As I have observed in the last decade, photographic media can serve as visual evidence of ASEAN's shifting regionalism discourses. From images of the 'official', such as mainstream photographs of annual ASEAN summits, to images of the 'unofficial', many of which are propagated by way of social media. Crowdsourced with popular 'hashtags' such as *#ASEAN, #ASEANality, #ASEANationality, #ASEANasOne, #ASEANWay,* and *#PeopleofASEAN, et cetera,* the identity discourse of ASEAN-ness is no longer as monolithic as when it was first imagined fifty or forty years ago. Even official government channels and mainstream media make good use of these highly popularised hashtags to gain public attention and connect to their stakeholders today. Thus, the discursive processes embedded in these media exude 'visuality'; Foster (1988:ix) originally describes this as a social experience and practice while Mirzoeff (2011:4) later on defines it as a socially imposed 'authority' of power. As such, delving into this discussion of visuality is a necessity for my own understanding of why visual culture is 'not just the social construction of vision' but also, reciprocally, the 'visual construction of the social' (Mitchell 2005:343). Building upon these theories of visual culture, and to contribute a

framework of knowledge within the study of Southeast Asian visual culture, this thesis underpins the argument that it is not so much about photographic images, whether taken individually or viewed collectively, but the taking of photographs that might elicit our imagination of region-ness. In other words, our collective identity may be imaged or visualised not through the substrate of the photographic medium but through our 'mind's eye' – it is more about our 'practices of looking' (Sturken & Cartwright 2009:9). This involves how we perceive the imaginary of the social field as Wulf (2009:174) explains:

> When we discuss images today it is important to remember that representation and mental images of social life are key aspects of both the individual and collective worlds of images and of social imaginary.

Thus, this study is designed to uncover how might the notion of identity at the regional level be accepted or challenged at the grassroots level, in response to previous scholars who have devoted their focus on the identity discourse of ASEAN-ness. In this *small-scale* yet *ASEAN-wide* study, I hypothesise and develop a theory of '(visual) identity-participation' as a conscious process of collective reflection (see Chapter IV: Section C). This process necessitates a negotiation between our individual and national identities vis-à-vis what we consider as our *region-ness.* According to Jameson (1991:409):

> a growing contradiction between lived experience and structure, or between a phenomenological description of the life of an individual and a more properly structural model of the conditions of existence of that experience', especially when the institutional or organisational and grassroots perspectives are juxtaposed.

Hence, looking at a community's practices of looking can be truly revealing. As a curator, these phenomenological descriptions in the form of artefacts and images interest me because they are my clues to piecing together the imagination of ordinary citizens, like myself, within the whole ASEAN space. Therefore, the participatory approaches and curatorial components of this research are intended to elicit similar discussions (see Chapter III).

At the outset, I invited research volunteers by way of challenging them *to imagine their ASEAN-ness.* It was effective in motivating each individual who agreed to participate; they were keen on uncovering their identity/ies whether as an ASEAN member citizen or as someone merely identifying as Southeast Asian (whether by ethnicity, mixed heritage, or upbringing). Briefly put, throughout the onsite-turned-online fieldwork which entailed (a) a pilot

study, (b) online data-gathering, and (c) curatorial collaboration from 2019 until 2021, as well as through our co-presenting in academic conferences in 2021, we altogether engaged in image-making and exhibition-making make sense of and render visible our Southeast Asian identity/ies in relation to the mainstream discourse of ASEAN-ness. I engaged the research participants in asynchronous conversations where we used photographs to voice out our ideas and opinions. When we found it quite challenging to take a photograph of something actual – because some of our ideas are either abstract or not yet formed – using found objects or even employing different photographing techniques proved useful in our conversations. We eventually used different curatorial approaches (in multiple groupings) to extend our conversations and analyses. By taking pictures of our everyday life and co-curating the images to portray our differing and synonymous ideas about being part of such a *regional kinship,* we were rendering our imaginations visible for each and everyone to appreciate, examine, and scrutinise. More importantly, we are looking at it from a reflexive point of view. Hence, as a group we were able to critically think about our notions of ASEAN-ness because our images reflect back to us our ways of imagining.

Since this study entailed primarily visual methods, the conversations and interactions among the research participants were, therefore, necessary in shedding light on how participation contributes to regional identity-building discourse in Southeast Asia. The *ASEAN as an organisation* per se does not necessarily include the Southeast Asian public as actual or 'formal' members – *formality* in the sense that it requires legal and documentary substantiation, such as citizenship and residency. As ordinary citizens, we are excluded from 'official' ASEAN duties. However, the fact that the organisation serves as an overarching representation of ten nations, then leaving us – ordinary citizens – out of the big picture is not without implications. When we are relegated to the role of mere spectators despite the discourse evoking/invoking 'collective identity' (Agustin 2018:166), what we are then left with is a gap. By initiating and increasing the levels of participation in the ASEAN process – through this research undertaking – Southeast Asian individuals can eventually, albeit arduously, shape the discourse to their own accord.

In summary, I illustrated how our awareness of ASEAN-ness and our regional kinship as ‘member citizens’ are essentially mediated by images of ASEAN, from the official media coverage of high-profile annual summits to country-specific tourism campaigns, among others. These images are vastly circulated in social media networks across and beyond the region, involving each and everyone who participates virtually in the regionalism discourse by simply looking at these images and producing their own photographs in turn.

H. Summary of key concepts

I have just broadly laid out the research framework and methodology of this practice-based thesis while, at the same time, identifying gaps in knowledge. At the outset, I drew linkages between the construct of Southeast Asia as a region and the role of the curator in the imagination of such a construct. Then, I interrogated the concept of a regional identity as something that is typically used referentially to the experience of it. Additionally, I explained how image-making and curatorial methods can be useful in this line of inquiry, especially as I intend to produce images of **Southeast Asia from the perspective of Southeast Asians.**

In summary, I identified the following key concepts and gaps which my literature review (see Chapter V) further accounts for:

1. **Southeast Asia and ASEAN** as two different constructs of the same geographic region, the former alluding to the colonial-era oversight system and the latter a recurrence of the region in the contemporary field of geopolitical cooperation and multilateral trade relations (see Chapter V: Section A);
2. **the ‘official’ versus the ‘unofficial’ discourse**, both of which pertain to what I observed as the shifting discourse from the exclusively elite to the general public (see Chapter V: Sections B and C); the former being the institutional and policy-driven discourse that is contingent on mainstream media acting as a mouthpiece, and the latter referring to the sporadic discourses rendered visible through social media images which I deem as merely mirroring the official discourse (see Chapter V: Sections D and E);

3. **the discourse of 'ASEAN-ness'**, which needs more attention within visual culture studies; as well as the **'unofficial' ASEAN discourse** in social media as a key driver of the region's visual discourse exemplified by photographs imagining not only Southeast Asian peoples and places but also ASEAN identity (see Chapter V: Sections B and C);
4. **(visual) identity-participation**, which is what I am developing as a visual culture theory of collective identity performance, as expressions of direct or indirect participation in the different discourses of ASEAN regionalism; here I theorise (visual) identity-participation as a self-conscious awareness of one's '*interpellated*-ness'[18] (see Chapter IV: Section C; and Chapter V: Section F); and
5. **curatorial collaboration**, a socially engaged approach that counters the colonial canon of curatorship I identified earlier in this introduction; this entails 'paracuratorial experimentation' by way of a practice-as-research approach which proved an essential method to accomplish this research through participatory and collaborative means (Chapter V: Sections E, F, and G; see also Chapter IV: Sections A and B).

I. Research questions and sub-questions

Premised by my rationale for undertaking this research as well as the gaps I already identified, the following research questions (RQ) offer a framework of what my research exploration accomplishes:

1. How do Southeast Asians imagine ASEAN, as well as our belongingness and identity in relation to this region?
2. In what ways can images and image-making serve as productive tools for visualising the collective imagination of Southeast Asia?
    a. How can participatory photography render visible our individual and collective imagination/s of Southeast Asia?
    b. What is the role of curating images in this imaginative process?
3. Why is it necessary for photography and curatorial methods to involve participatory methods when imagining Southeast Asia?

[18] Borrowing from Althusser's definition of 'interpellation' (Evans & Hall 2001:317-323).

For the first research question (RQ1), I do not intend to provide an all-encompassing account of the 'how' since this is not a behavioural study of Southeast Asian participants. Instead, the question expresses my curiosity about the collective imagination of Southeast Asia; by asking *the 'how',* this study underpins the processes of arriving at a meaningful discovery. Thus, my second question (RQ2) focuses on my exploratory experimentation of images and image-making for the purpose of evincing current imaginations of Southeast Asia. Finally, I conclude my exploration with a critical analysis of the participatory aspects of my methodology, my decision to use participatory methods, and 'participation' as a factor by responding to my third research question (RQ3).

J. Research aims of the curatorial project

Premised by the above, I have three key aims in conducting this practice-led research, also addressing the gaps in knowledge that I have identified:

1. to make an original and significant contribution to both the **official** and **unofficial** discourses of ASEAN regionalism by means of images and image-making (visual culture);
2. to challenge existing and predetermined representations of Southeast Asia by exploring, problematising, and ultimately understanding the ways images and image-making can serve the purpose of imagining ASEAN through participatory means; and
3. to develop a theory of **(visual) identity-participation** by analysing the complementary methods of participatory photography and curatorial collaboration as a possible means of enriching (public) participation.

K. Structure of written thesis

This written thesis serves as my reflexive account of the main creative output of my PhD, now digitally archived in *The ASEAN 20/20 Vision Project* website (www.aseanvisionproject.com). As my main contribution to knowledge, this website will remain accessible to the public in the next five years (subject to my fundraising efforts). Hence, while this written thesis is complete and fixed, my creative output will continue to change in the coming years – as I did not

envision it as a static piece of work. Hence, I try my best to offer a written documentary account of my creative output as comprehensively as I can for the readers to picture its current state as I was wrapping up this project.

In conducting participatory and collaborative research, I must remain entirely open to allowing the process to take certain directions that I would not have initially anticipated. In other words, my methodology largely steered the direction and scope of my literature review. As I explain in Chapter II, at the outset the concept of ASEAN-ness feels like an 'invisible elephant', much less the ways in which it can be defined or described. Hence, in order for the readers to gain full appreciation of the so-called *elephant in the room,* I must first explain *how* I will approach the creature. This rationale is beneficial not only for me (as the researcher) and the readers, but also for all the research volunteers. Therefore, my research design (i.e. the structure of this thesis) is key to understanding the theories that I will later elaborate.

To better appreciate my written report, I remind the readers that this introductory chapter merely offers an overview of the themes and theories of the study, many of which only emerge during the *participatory photography* and *curatorial collaboration* stages of my investigation. Thus, the succeeding chapters are purposely organised; this introduction (Chapter I) is immediately followed by a discussion of the creative practice-as-research methodology (Chapter II) to convey how I put into practice my personal interrogations of Southeast Asia by way of participatory and collaborative approaches; after describing the overall plan, I then discuss the creative outputs (Chapter III) and research findings (Chapter IV). The readers may choose to proceed to the concluding chapter (Chapter VI) at this point.

For more in-depth understanding, I invite the readers to refer to the strands of knowledge I examine in my review of literature (Chapter V). The relevance of this study in various fields are also identified in this chapter.

This study concludes with a summative discussion of my contributions to knowledge and pedagogy, as follows: **contribution to socially engaged research methods** (Chapter VI: Section A.1.); **contribution to communication and media studies** (Chapter VI: Section A.2.); **contribution to collective identity-building and participation theory** (Chapter VI: Section A.3.);

and **contribution to curatorial practice in ASEAN** (Chapter VI: Section B).

Contributing to knowledge, however, is not the only path being carved out by this study. While Southeast Asia is heavily influenced by its countries' individual and collective colonial histories, my research also shows my deep interest in how we can move forward and develop our own culture-specific methods of curating Southeast Asian identity/ies and visual culture, as well as our own structuring of pedagogical institutions (i.e. schools and museums) by acknowledging our cultural complexities and hybrid identities – as I move on from the works of prior scholars of *culture* and *identity* such as Appadurai (2013), Geertz (1983; 1973), and Hall (1980), to name a few. Therefore, in writing this work, I try my best to refer to non-Western, local, and occasionally indigenous perspectives as a counterbalance to the academic field and base in the UK where I am also conducting my research – if only to address what Reilly (2018:105) interrogates as Western systems of knowledge, privilege, and visuality. Thus, an important goal of my practice-led approach is to de-centralise the (re)production of Southeast Asian-ness and pave the way for its *potentialities* – reflecting the diversity and multiplicity of our population.

This is a crucial juncture in the contemporary discourse of (Southeast) Asian representation, especially in the wake of the prejudices and brutalities which many of us have faced throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. And this is something that I feel will continue to persist as long as disinformation and misinformation are proliferated across various media and visual culture. Just to illustrate, mainland China's swiftly rising economy in recent years has been perceived by the West as a threat to the *geopolitical status quo.* Hence, it is also not surprising why some East Asians and Southeast Asians are branded together as merely 'Chinese' when only Western orientated identity politics still dominate today's discourses of region-ness. The old adage 'as above, so below' might as well be our cautionary tale.

I started writing this thesis at the onset of the global pandemic brought about by SARS-CoV-2. Because of the rising cases of Asian hate (especially *Sinophobia)* across mostly Western countries, I realised that this eye-opening project tangentially responds to the question of someone's identity, origin, or roots. Many (East) Asians have endured this pandemic-induced hate in the

last three years, as if the fault is ours alone, as if we were the source of the virus. Recalling Acharya's essay *Asia is not one* (Acharya 2010), I find it still perplexing to see many Southeast Asians being labelled or lumped together as 'Chinese' out of distaste or fear of the novel coronavirus[19] that is still being framed as originating in Wuhan, mainland China. Naturally, the violence was also felt in Southeast Asian countries; a case in point is the misplaced public animosity in the Philippines towards the Filipino-Chinese (but this was also due to the years of brewing political and territorial tensions between mainland China's government and the Philippine government). Giving me some added impetus to pursue this research, this experience alone already demonstrate the baggage of region-ness that I felt the need to unpack.

* * *

Some parts of this written thesis were published as an article in 2021 for *Animus* (Inter-American Journal of Media Communication),[20] as well as submitted as *extended abstracts*[21] in the conference proceedings of the ICA in 2023, 2022 and 2021, and the IAMCR in 2023 and 2021. All the previous texts were appropriately revised and partially rewritten to reflect the latest knowledge and to comply with ethical standards of the university.

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[19] For instance, I had several unfortunate experiences in Manchester – apparently Wuhan's 'sister city' since 1986 (Wuhan Culture and Tourism Bureau 2021:online) – where I had been labelled 'corona' by mostly white men and discriminated against just for wearing a face mask as early as January 2020. In 2018, I started my PhD studies in the UK and I do still feel that, apart from London, Manchester is the most welcoming and open-minded city in the UK.

[20] titled *Mesa Sa Kwarto: Southeast Asian exhibition on a 'tiny desk' held in a live Zoom gallery (Animus:* Revista Interamericana de Comunicação Midiática - Brazil, 2021)

[21] *Adapting participatory photography from on-site to online in ASEAN's visual (auto)ethnography* (IAMCR Visual Culture Working Group, 2023); *Is photography still quintessentially visual? A case study of photographic practices in Southeast Asia* (ICA Visual Communication Studies, 2023); *One vision, one identity, one community: reinterpreting the ASEAN declaration through image-elicitation and visual ethnography* (ICA Visual Communication Studies, 2022); *Mesa Sa Kwarto: a tiny desk exhibition of Southeast Asian artefacts via Zoom during lockdown* (IAMCR Visual Culture Working Group, 2021); *Identity-participation in ASEAN through curatorial collaborations: a participatory approach* (IAMCR Participatory Communication Research, 2021); and *Looking for and after ASEAN: Southeast Asians caring about regional community building during the Covid-19 pandemic* (ICA Visual Communication Studies, 2021)

CHAPTER II

Addressing the (Southeast Asian) Elephant in the Room: Mixed Methods Through Practice

> *[T]he object of the show and tell performance is the process of seeing itself, and the exercise could be called showing seeing […] Visual culture is thus made to seem strange, exotic, and in need of explanation. The assignment is thoroughly paradoxical, of course. The audience does in fact live in a visible world, and yet has to accept the fiction that it does not, and that everything which seems transparent and self-evident is in need of explanation.*
>
> *– Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture by W.J.T. Mitchell (2002:176)*

Since I work within a practice-based curatorial context, my overall research design necessitated a mixed methods approach, including (a) a **pilot study**, (b) **online data-gathering**, and (c) **curatorial collaboration,** all of which unfold sequentially. This approach mirrors what Blain and Turner (2020:207) identifies as the three 'concentric circles' of collaboration in terms of artistic practice and practice-as-research: (1) the **inner circle** which comprise the artists/participants as main collaborators; (2) the **middle circle** where the main collaborators rework their practice in a new context to enable them to interact with other collaborators or relevant players outside the inner circle; and (3) the **outer circle** that allows the collaborators to share their practice outside their immediate network. Moreover, this research design followed the 'triangulation method' to ensure a credible means of obtaining data and to verify them by comparing three approaches, investigations, or sources as in a social science experiment (Silverman 2010:277; Kenney 2009:134). This approach enabled me to assess my research questions in three, cumulative attempts while also maximising the advantages of any of my three methods and 'neutralising' any of their 'liabilities' (Kenney 2009:134). Because this study was intended as an artistic or creative endeavour rather than a socio-

logical or scientific experiment/procedure, my triangulation method acted merely as a value added measure. However, this does not imply that my research conduct demonstrates less rigour than a behavioural or social science experiment; what I am trying to clarify at the outset is that all the methods I employed, while borrowing from qualitative methods, are only measurable by their own, emic standards rather than by other disciplines' metrics. While my study set out to substantiate the identity discourse of ASEAN – as what prior quantitative, empirical research had already done – it does so by offering a complementary perspective, exemplifying real-life visual culture, to previous research efforts.

As I mentioned in the introduction (see Chapter I), this thesis project recognises the contributions of prior surveys especially when it comes to stressing the importance of identity construction as an aspect of ASEAN integration (ASEAN 2018; Intal & Ruddy 2017; Thompson *et al.* 2016; Phua & Chin 2015; Roberts 2009; Thompson & Thianthai 2008). Although these public opinion polls can stand the meticulous test of scientific *reliability* and *validity,* using the same method in my investigation of photographic media may prove unproductive. For one, I cannot settle for how Southeast Asian locals might simply perceive photographic images, much less reducing their responses to numerical values. Because interpreting photographic images elicit so many factors, my method should be in-depth rather than statistical. Instead of simply asking if respondents identify with what ASEAN stands for (as in the statistical surveys), my method asks participants to reflect on our own identities qualitatively. Thus, the curatorial expositions produced for this study acted more like venues for the public to engage with each other. The meaningful conversations elicited through creative practice-as-research are key to gaining a deeper understanding of what the aforementioned surveys already found out – even continuing their legacy.

In the succeeding section, I explain how I purposefully used the pilot study as a means of testing my two other methods. Testing participatory photography as a means of answering my first research question, *how do Southeast Asians imagine ASEAN, as well as our belongingness and identity in relation to this region?,* entailed an initial exploration of possibilities as to

how my data-gathering must be conducted. Hence, I learned that my data-gathering should not be just about collecting photographs of the participants. Instead, it necessitates focus group discussions – to employ the 'voice' aspect in 'photovoice' (Kenney 2009:100) – and visual (auto)ethnography exercises which put into practice my second question, *in what ways can images and image-making serve as productive tools for visualising the collective imagination of Southeast Asia?*

Thus, in this chapter, I also explain how I modified and repurposed the 'photo novella' method of Wang and Burris (1994; 1997) into a more flexible approach that allows the participants not only to imagine through pictures but also to 'vocalise' their imaginations by way of other techniques or even with the absence of images. In a way, this study also modifies the strict definition of 'photography', i.e. 'tracing' (graphing) with 'light' (photo), in that I broadly use the term to also refer to digital image-making using cameraphones.

Furthermore, I likewise provide in this chapter an overall picture of how the outcomes of my (online) data-gathering proved useful in my third method – curatorial collaboration. This third phase of the research was where I mostly responded to my third and final research question, *why is it necessary for photography and curatorial methods to involve participatory methods when imagining Southeast Asia?,* by showing how the participatory photography component of the research conduct was insufficient without extending the roles of the participants to curators. Only through the outcomes of our collaboration was I able to substantiate the necessity for my methodology to turn to participatory means. If I were to use one of the most memorable metaphors that came up during our focus group discussions: it's as if we are addressing the 'Southeast Asian elephant in the room'. It has always been there as a haunting or imaginary, and the only way for us to view this elephant in the room was by means of creating images of it, part by part, picture by picture. Only then could we palpably see what such an elephant looks like. And this creature of our imagination has many metamorphoses that we must be open to any possibilities – even if we would end up not uncovering an elephant but rather an entirely different animal. It is for this reason that the whole research design is practice-based, experiential, and creative.

Image 1: *Photo of an elephant plushie when I visited Chiang Mai, Thailand at the beginning of my fieldwork to interview locals, two months before the Covid-19 lockdown started KJCA © 2019*

Acknowledging my limitations in terms of time and resources while still accounting for the regional scope of this research, I aimed to engage at least one participant from each ASEAN member country – not as a representative sample but rather a gesture of inclusivity. In addition, for me to gauge that each research participant already possessed a 'good enough' awareness of ASEAN, plus to ensure that they can communicate well with the group, I also identified the following inclusion criteria:

1. the prospective participant must have travelled to at least one other ASEAN country and must be able to correctly identify an ASEAN member state other than their own country;
2. they had been born more or less between the years 1981 to 1998,[22] the so-called 'millennial' generation, so that they will expectedly have about the same level of awareness of (and education on) ASEAN.
3. the prospective participant must have access to a mobile phone[23] (preferably one with a digital camera) and stable Internet connection; they must also be comfortable using online modes of communication; and
4. the prospective participant must have a relatively good proficiency in *speaking* (but not necessarily written) English.[24]

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[22] For the age range, I used *Defining generations: where Millennials end and Generation Z begins* (Dimock 2019), a study published by the Pew Research Center about generations relative to mine (i.e. millennial); however, for our curatorial collaboration, I also included participants who were born around 1977 until 1979 in the interest of inclusivity and because they did volunteer to participate in the study.

[23] I consider this 'good enough access' (see Uy-Tioco 2019:161).

[24] A good command of the English language is essential for the purposes of this research not because I am conducting my study in the UK, but because it is the *lingua franca* of ASEAN member states. However, I acknowledge that this criteria may skew my research findings to reflect certain biases and inequity. For one, my level of written and spoken English is near 'native' proficiency as well as a handful of the participants who are either British citizens or Canadian, or in higher education. Even for an English-speaking country such as my country, the Philippines – our laws are all written in English and government proceedings are mostly conducted in English, not to mention our Americanised education system – the use of this *lingua franca* forms our biases and certain feedback loops: because of our grasp of English as a second language, we also tend to think in 'American' or 'Western' ways; unfortunately, at times, we perceive our neighbouring countries' low proficiency in English as a liability.

A. Pilot study

Guided by the outcomes of the aforementioned region-wide surveys, I took essential cues and questions from each publication to initiate a pilot study. Apart from serving as a practical means of testing my assumptions (Kenney 2009:132), the pilot study would eventually prove useful in determining the projectile of my creative practice. For instance, one approach that I explored during my planning stage was to ask exactly the same questionnaire that was used by some of the surveys. Some questions proved too unwieldy to even be put into practice, whether in photography or as a curatorial exercise – such as 'in general how familiar are you with ASEAN?' (Thompson *et al.* 2016:54), 'will life for you be better once ASEAN becomes one community?' (Phua & Chin 2015:online), or 'how would you feel if your country were to leave ASEAN?' (Intal & Ruddy 2017:19), among others. Eventually, I only used questions that are effective in image-elicitation, such as [how] 'do you identify with people in ASEAN? (Phua & Chin 2015:online) and 'what do you think of your country's membership in ASEAN?' (Intal & Ruddy 2017:17), in formulating my first research question.[25]

In 2017 I conducted a similar pilot at the Vargas Museum, in Manila, with 12 Filipino participants – a.k.a. the 'Manila Pilot Project' (Agustin 2018). Using the *photovoice* method, I asked the participants to take pictures (i.e. 'photo') to express their feelings and thoughts (i.e. 'voice') through 'photo-elicitation' alongside focus group discussions (Rose 2016:307-310; Banks & Zeitlyn 2015:92-94; Pink 2013:92; Kenney 2009:52-53). This method can be used for questions related to community and identity – as shown by another similar project, *Shutter Stories* by Cabañes (2017; 2016; 2013) who delved into Indian and Korean migrant stories in the Philippines.

However, I also incorporated 'visual ethnography' approaches (Rose 2016:273-282; Pink 2013:49-53; Kenney 2009:150-151) to modify the photo-voice method. For instance, instead of focusing on an advocacy, an issue, or even my research questions, I utilised photography as a reflexive process of rendering visible the everyday visual cultures that Southeast Asians share –

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[25] (RQ1) How do Southeast Asians imagine ASEAN, as well as our belongingness and identity in relation to this region?

a process that is open-ended and with plenty of room for interpretation. This approach was beneficial in that the act of taking photographs without exact prompts puts into practice our 'embodied knowledge' in more 'haptic' ways (Nelson 2013:56-57), even allowing the process to steer the conversations among the participants without any predefined objectives.

As detailed in Kenney's (2009:132) visual methods, the main purpose of the pilot study is to test various observation techniques and questions, as well as to adjust the research design while in a less structured phase. Thus, the planning of this study began as early as June 2019 when I started inviting my initial contacts from the Philippines and Singapore through word-of-mouth for a two-month pilot study. Since I recently had been involved in two international exhibitions by Southeast Asian artists and curators, *Almost There* (Vargas Museum 2017) and *Ties of History* (Vargas Museum 2018), I made use of the network already within my reach.

First, I contacted the previous participants of the 'Manila Pilot Project', which I facilitated in the sidelines of *Almost There* (Agustin 2018), for them to share among their own circles a participant invitation I prepared. To make it visually appealing, the 'Call for Participants' invitation was designed with a cropped image[26] of *Les Indes Orientales et leur archipel,* a colonial-era map (Bonne c.1770). I chose this obsolete map because, as I already premised in the introduction (see Chapter I: Sections E and F), I wanted to invoke both the haunting and imaginary of Southeast Asia. In the first place, the invited volunteers had no idea what the pilot study was about, hence what I could only do at the early stages of our coordination was to elicit from them quite a feeling of historical awareness, curiosity, or nostalgia.

The conduct of the pilot study commenced directly after obtaining the ethical approval[27] of the university. Volunteering participants were asked to sign informed consent forms. The first five participants came from different ASEAN countries, some of whom were based in Manila at the time, namely:

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[26] full title: *Les Indes Orientales et leur archipel: Assujettie aux observations astronomiq(u)es combinees avec les itineraires anciens et modernes, et avec les routes des navigateurs;* via: https://www.geographicus.com/P/AntiqueMap/SoutheastAsia-bonne-1770

[27] The MMU Arts and Humanities Research Ethics and Governance Committee granted a favourable ethical opinion with effectivity from 17 May 2019 until 17 September 2021 via MMU's EthOs.

(1) Rodrygo Harnas Siregar - Indonesia; (2) Katrine Hong - China/Philippines; and (3) Prach Gosalvitra - Thailand (they were expats then working in Manila); in addition (4) Freya Chow-Paul - United Kingdom/Singapore; and (5) Viet Nam - Phát Nguyen, who participated remotely as they were based in their respective countries. One essential alteration of the photovoice method that I had to make was to allow the participants to attend at any time and from anywhere, given that some who are based in a different country could not physically attend the sessions. What this factors in is a certain level of research 'validity' (Silverman 2010:275) by enabling the participants to behave without removing them from their daily routine (i.e. by minimising the artificial setting). After all, the project eventually brings in other international participants, so at the outset my pilot study should be able to test this scenario.

Another crucial modification was the use of cameraphones and video-conferencing; it helped shift the power dynamics to reach a certain balance between the facilitator and the participants (almost all photovoice projects in the past use point-and-shoot cameras that were only given, sometimes even gifted, to the participants onsite). The use of personal cameraphones also made the process even more personal, immediate, and second nature to the participants; because their mobile phones are *personal,* then it is no longer 'unnatural' for them to take pictures of mundane things and banal experiences unlike using point-and-shoot cameras. And by modifying the method to build on not only photo-elicitation but also visual (auto)ethnography methods, the pilot study then evolved into a more well-rounded and flexible activity. I applied the same throughout the (online) data-gathering; this I discuss further in the next section (Section B).

The research participants who were currently based in Manila (namely Hong, Gosalvitra, and Siregar) attended in person, while the two others only participated over Skype and Zoom (Chow-Paul and Nguyen). This was prior to the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, which eventually proved that, indeed, it can be done. And because of the conflicts in our schedules as well as other practical limitations, the only focus group that I was able to form was with a small group of three (Hong, Gosalvitra, and Siregar). Meanwhile, the online interview sessions with Chow-Paul and Nguyen were held asynchronously.

Image 2: *Photo of power lines in Bangkok or Manila*
Prach Gosalvitra © 2019

At the beginning, I asked all of them the same set of questions and, after giving them a few days to take photographs, each of them responded by showing their photographs and explaining each of the images by adding their captions or explaining them through 'show-and-tell' – resembling the image elicitation method that aims 'to improve communication' among the participants (Kenney 2009:52-53). We repeated the process several times for nearly two months, and thus every iteration allowed me to ask further questions or clarifications contingent on the images each of them were able to produce. We also responded to each other's photographs by comparing similar images. One of our most interesting conversations was elicited by an image of entangled power lines (see *Image 2).* The participants seemed to be in agreement that the 'convoluted' or 'messy' power lines are undeniably a recognisable feature of the urbanisation in ASEAN cities.

During our photo-elicitation, the participants gradually realised that they *needed* to take more pictures to get a better picture of Southeast Asia – I observed that this usually happens after seeing what their co-participants had visualised, as if the images provide them the impetus to respond by means of their own images as well. This accumulative process practically involved piecing together subjects or themes they are attempting to visualise. This is what I would casually refer to as photographing the 'Southeast Asian elephant in the room' during our conversations.

Indeed, the participants share some awareness that – as in the idiomatic expression 'elephant in the room' – it does exist and yet we are unable to talk so much about it nor perceive it unless we start taking photographs of it (i.e. to render it obvious). Plus, it's also quite humorous for the group to refer to *elephants* because these animals are endearing to Southeast Asians – as elephants' natural habitat includes some rural areas of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Thailand.

Because of this open-ended method, the initial guide questions which I prepared significantly changed during the pilot workshops as I engaged with the participants. They also raised interesting questions that we eventually used as guides for taking pictures. In this manner, we collaboratively refined

the questions and the methods while I tested each approach during our every interaction – the pilot study was very productive in that aspect.

As I continued to engage with the participants during the pilot, the overall methodology became clearer to me. More importantly, I drew insights from the online interactions we had with the two other participants who were joining remotely – as if I was anticipating how I would eventually transform my data-gathering to purely online means with a bigger group of participants (partly due to Covid-19). I valued the participants' inputs and suggestions in shaping the research process, as if they were my co-researchers – this lent me good observations for me to develop a theory of (visual) identity-participation, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter IV (Section C).

While I found the sample size of three participants for the focus group quite small, when complemented with the separate semi-structured in-depth interviews the overall effect proved promising. (The key advantage of a focus group is its potential for various interactions among participants, dialogues, and even sideline interactions, among others.) The focus group also allowed all the participants to exchange photographs among themselves in real time, while I could step back and simply observe – although I did interact with them more frequently as if I were just a 'co-participant'. On the other hand, while the semi-structured interview would have some downsides in a participatory study, I found the method very useful in preparing me for the future in case some of the participants would not be able to attend a focus group session and instead opt for a one-to-one conversation (which is not only realistic but also more inclusive). The semi-structured interviews also afforded me more insights to fine-tune my guide questions. More importantly, this one-to-one method facilitated the giving of constructive feedback and even criticisms as it is more confidential and private than, say, being in a group of strangers.

The focus group discussion, on the other hand, had better continuity in that holding a series of sessions with the group aided their improved critical awareness and shared understanding of ASEAN-ness. The regular meetings also enabled me to try different approaches – as well as tentative insights which I have learned from the semi-structured interviews – in every session with the same set of participants who could regularly give me their feedback.

Our focus groups also permitted me to show some of the photographs of the participants who were only joining remotely; the participants' candid reactions definitely helped in my participant observation. With that, I assessed that both methods when used to facilitate participatory photography could have certain advantages and disadvantages but, when used complementarily as I did, they produce synergistic outcomes.

Through the pilot study, I was able to plan my data-gathering as I had been anticipating a larger group of participants – details of which I discuss in the succeeding section (Section B). As the techniques I had been developing throughout the pilot study entailed the taking of as many photographs as the participants deem necessary (a process that will be repeated during the online data-gathering), it proved essential for me to have an 'edit' of photographs to facilitate our conversations in the future. Furthermore, I also remained open to exploring any sensible forms of assemblage or bricolage of images/media, including performance-led approaches which during the pilot we considered although not necessarily implemented.

The results proved to be very meaningful and productive as compared to having a cohort of only Filipino participants the year prior (Agustin 2018), because having an international outlook offers more of a flavour of ASEAN-ness than just capturing the local taste. Although, if the 'Manila Pilot Project' were to be replicated in all ASEAN countries/capital cities then it would offer more complementary outcomes. Anyway, based solely on the preliminary results teased out by the conduct of the pilot, I inferred that, indeed, our ways of imagining Southeast Asia must involve visualising the region because it is a process that is hardly separable from visual culture. While the pilot study insufficiently addressed my first research question,[28] at the very least what I did confirm were my initial assumptions that photographs could serve as effective visual tools to learn more about how we imagine our region. While there are many other ways to visually convey our sense of belongingness and identity, producing images using our cameraphones is by far one of the most accessible and self-explanatory. The pictures taken by the participants

[28] (RQ1) How do Southeast Asians imagine ASEAN, as well as our belongingness and identity in relation to this region?

throughout the pilot study did hint at a shared imagination of the region which is largely mediated by ASEAN visual culture. It is through the framework of ASEAN that we are perceiving the social experience of Southeast Asia.

However, by the time we completed the pilot study, I had yet to define what I meant by the concept/method which I presently refer to as ‘curatorial collaboration’. In the summer of 2019, my participation at the Nordic Summer University[29] (NSU Circle 7 – Artistic Research: Performing Heterotopias) lent me the opportunity to explore and formulate what I refer to as ‘paracuratorial’ (O’Neill 2012a; O’Neill 2012b) experiments in lieu of a definition of ‘curatorial collaboration’ (see Section C). I used the various participant images taken during the pilot to ‘perform’ an ‘embodied knowledge’ workshop participated by my fellow summer school participants – most of whom are Europeans. At the time I was experimenting on my role as an *animateur* rather than a curator – I eventually realised that this exercise is also curatorial. The ‘para’ in this ‘paracuratorial’ experimentation accounted for the improvisations and imaginations I had to allow to shape my artistic explorations. Even with non-Asians I realised that the pictures contributed by the pilot participants could convey stories effectively; this allowed me to picture how curating images, i.e. not just displaying the pictures, can impact perceptions of others about the region. Thus the curator as ‘animateur’ facilitates more creatively and is guided by creative workshop pedagogies such as improvisation and play, meditation and movement, and performative visualisation (Animarts 2003; Ledgard 2003). This curator-as-animateur approach did help deepen my understanding of my curatorial role throughout the project. This also meant identifying opportunities for curatorial collaboration in the latter part of my fieldwork – I explain these further in the next section.

[29] The Nordic Summer University has been holding ‘study circles’ in different disciplines for more than six decades; some of its previous circles had been facilitated by prominent figures such as Niels Bohr and Johan Fjord Jensen.

B. Online data-gathering

Taking into account key insights from the pilot study, I improved upon them when I conducted my fieldwork in 2020, for my main data-gathering. The main plan was to expand participatory photography into visual (auto)ethnography, which is a combination of visual methods that ultimately would lead us to a reflexive process of understanding our identity/ies in relation to the ASEAN discourse of region-ness. Thus, while the 'pre-trial' (Kenney 2009: 183) of a pilot study tested how I could approach my first research question, this time the second research question[30] also came to the fore.

However, because the 'imagination' is not always self-explanatory, the method of focus group discussion entailing photo-elicitation exercises would be advantageous in that I could facilitate a discussion about the 'imagination' with the participants. Therefore, unlike in the pilot where I was more flexible, for the main data-gathering I aimed to prioritise the focus group method to, first, aid my facilitating a shared understanding of the 'imagination' among the volunteering participants and, second, to help me gain a more informed participant observation. Kenney (2009:183) emphasises two key points about focus groups which I did observe:

> One, the interaction occurs among group members rather than between the moderator and the group. Because they interact with each other, participants give valid answers rather than socially correct responses… two, the moderator limits the discussion to a few issues and concerns… [that eventually] encourages participants to give specific, detailed answers, which should contribute to new knowledge.

Thus, implementing a series focus group sessions where I can test various participant observation approaches eventually aided my analyses of what images and image-making can contribute to the discourse of ASEAN-ness – through the lenses of the participants, thus strengthening the validity of the outcomes of my data-gathering.

With all the ethical considerations in place (the university had to re-review and affirm an earlier ethics approval granted to my project because of the Covid-19 impact), and this time considering that the planned face-

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[30] (RQ2) In what ways can images and image-making serve as productive tools for visualising the collective imagination of Southeast Asia? (How can participatory photography render visible our individual and collective imagination/s of Southeast Asia? What is the role of curating images in this imaginative process?)

to-face method had to be converted to online means, I proceeded with my online data-gathering. As a Covid-19 measure, all invited participants were asked to fill out the informed consent forms online.[31] Because I already did implement online means of data-gathering during the pilot study, I had the confidence of conducting everything virtual. Indeed, it is possible to bring an international group of participants together despite the obvious geographical and logistical challenges. Our frequent use of and reliance on messaging apps and also one-to-one and group video calls via Skype or videoconferencing via Zoom during the pilot study not only prepared me to expect the same scenarios during my online data-gathering but also helped reaffirm both the external 'reliability' and the 'validity' (Silverman 2010:275) of this mediated approach. Because of the instrumental role played by online digital media, especially in bridging gaps and bringing the participants closer together, I am in effect accounting for and taking into practice what I theorise as an *ASEAN virtual space* or *network society* which I explain in more detail in Chapter V (Section B; see also *polymedia* in Section E).

Again, based on the insights I formed during the run of the pilot study, I modified the participatory photo-elicitation method from its photovoice underpinnings (Blackman 2007; Wang 2006) into online 'showing seeing', a show-and-tell activity I borrowed from Mitchell (2002:176-177). Instead of just taking pictures and *talking about* those pictures, I would also ask the participants to find other ways of *imagining* ASEAN-ness – from found objects at home to images in their cameraphones (those saved in their photo galleries), to any unusual ways of visualising their ideas. What I retained from the *photovoice method,* however, is the value of 'voice' in the visual ethnographic process. Aside from pertaining to the actual audible vocal sound of speech (i.e. 'tell' as in 'show-and-tell'), *voice* in this context also refers to one's self-identity and representation, as theorised by previous scholarly accounts of photography and digital storytelling (Cabañes 2017; Couldry 2010). Thus, the process is comparable to what Freire (1985:160) refers to as 'conscientization' as an intrinsic exercise of one's consciousness.

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[31] Since I conducted my fieldwork during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, online means of obtaining the participants' consent were granted by the university; their informed consent were collected through Google Docs.

Normally, in a photovoice project, apart from the images 'seen' by the participants – images that they themselves decide to capture as photographs – what is also revealed by their experience of seeing enables them to realise their own voice/s. In my experience facilitating photovoice projects, images are submitted with captions or recorded explanations. The participants may voluntarily do this or simply follow the instructions of the facilitator, the latter is more of the norm. The way I modified this convention in my online data-gathering necessitated different ways of image-making apart from just using a traditional point-and-shoot camera; the participants were free to use their cameraphones to take photographs and record videos, and even voice clips or sounds if needed, and they could also exchange images among the group through instant messaging (during the intervals of the focus groups) and by means of videoconferencing (during the actual focus group sessions). In this manner, I integrated in the process the 'voice' aspect – instead of separating it by merely using their captions or labels as accompanying information to the pictures they produced. In short, their visualised interactions would already exemplify the 'photo' and 'voice' aspects, the 'show' and the 'tell', and more importantly, the participatory aspect of the process. Hence, I still refer to this modified method as 'participatory photography' in general – to align with the same tradition as photovoice but in a broader sense because the method is, practically speaking, *participatory image-making*. However, I do not intend to also confuse the readers and other scholars by referring to this method in a new way, i.e. 'participatory image-making', because the method nevertheless relies heavily on photographic images. And honestly, I did intend to develop a methodology that is more aligned with photovoice traditions – 'updating' or 'upgrading' it to be more enmeshed in the use of digital media. I explicate some of the important concepts and theories in relation to this, such as 'polymedia' and 'participatory media', in Chapter V (Sections B, D, and E).

It was an ambitious project to begin with; my goal was to invite at least **one participant from each ASEAN member state**. Theoretically speaking, I broadly defined this criteria as either nationality (or citizenship), origin (birth or heritage), current residence and even self-identification (for members of

the diaspora)[32] because I did not want to impose a strict qualifying factor of what being 'part of an ASEAN member country' means. After determining this as an essential requirement, I then invited participants in the same way as I did during the pilot study – by contacting my network (now including the pilot study participants) and even expanding my outreach by means of *snowball sampling* (Kenney 2009:25). Some of the prospective volunteers did not eventually join the study but instead invited or recommended someone else from their own circles.

Apart from the snowball sampling method (Kirchherr & Charles 2018), I likewise used the selection process of *Almost There* (Vargas Museum 2017) and *Ties of History* (Vargas Museum 2018) as a benchmark. According to the artists and curators whom I exchanged conversations and ideas with, some of them personally expressed their interest to the curator, some were chosen purposefully, and some were already involved in the conceptualisation stage. These I learned more about when I was hired as an interview coordinator to record video interviews of the artists who explained how they became part of the curatorial project, indicating curator Flores as their main contact point and/or common acquaintance.

Hence, I realised that I did not have to ensure that my 'sample' is indeed representative of the whole population of Southeast Asia; no grouping could be 'representative' of a moving target – as I narrated earlier. And for the curatorial aspects of the research, the subjectivities would most probably add to the whole progress anyway; unlike a statistical survey which merely accounts for *yes or no* and *scalable* answers (hence these factors could be represented by numbers), a creative undertaking such as this project would definitely 'cross-fertilise' the participants' ways of thinking (and seeing) as much as they would 'cultivate' the whole curatorial process reciprocally.

All invitations were sent via email and coursed through my contacts who forwarded it to their circles. Because the project called for volunteers from all the ten ASEAN countries, *ideally one per country* was expected – yet the study would still proceed even if not all ten countries were tapped

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[32] This inclusion criteria had to be flexible in order to motivate participation and to refrain from excluding individuals who may identify as Southeast Asian or ASEAN citizens regardless of their nationality, origin, and even ethnic/indigenous background.

as long as the total number of participants would add up to around ten. More or less, ten is already a reasonable number if I were to use prior research on photovoice as my basis (Kenney 2009: 183; Blackman 2007:46; Wang 2006: 149). Ten is also the *current* number of ASEAN member states, and I would personally aim for around the same number of participants.

Among the 30+ prospective volunteers (see *Image 3),* only a few did not respond and nearly half sent their regrets. Eventually, eleven individuals agreed to participate after signing the informed consent document through Google Docs (in lieu of a physical form due to Covid-19). At this time not all ASEAN member countries were represented.

Participating in the focus groups were: (1) Faizul H. Ibrahim - Brunei Darussalam; (2) Phynuch Thong - Cambodia; (3) an anonymous participant from Lao PDR; (4) Dr Nursalwa Baharuddin - Malaysia; (5) Dr Kathryn Kyaw - Myanmar; (6) Martin Vidanes - Philippines; (7) Andy Chan - Singapore; (8) Kerrine Goh - Singapore; (9) Yammy Patchaya Teerawatsakul - Thailand; (10) Phát Nguyen - Viet Nam; and (11) Freya Chow-Paul - United Kingdom/ Singapore (note that Nguyen and Chow-Paul previously participated in the pilot study, while Vidanes was a participant in the 'Manila Pilot Project' back in 2017). Not everyone, however, joined the conduct at the same time.

I informed each volunteer that they may decide when to opt-in or opt-out of the project. In fact, only in the middle of our progress did a volunteer from Cambodia join the study – this is because he replaced the two other Cambodian volunteers who tentatively considered participating, eventually begging off. All of the pilot study participants were invited to join or listen in but eventually half of them decided to leave after each contributing a number of images. Thus, the opt-in opt-out setup ensured that the project is not only inclusive but also true to the spirit of participation (see how I define participation in Chapter V: Section E; see also Chapter IV: Section C).

About half of the participants were already acquainted with each other through some international youth conferences they attended in the previous years (this is a consequence of the snowball sampling method). This proved to be an advantage in that there is a balance between familiarity vis-à-vis not having prior acquaintance among the volunteers – as if resembling a natural

setting where getting acquainted with people is not entirely artificial or forced.

All the volunteers agreed to be involved without receiving any payment (in cash or in kind) for their contributions. We also agreed on how they would be credited throughout and *beyond* the project – our anonymous participant consented that the project can reveal their country as long as their identity is concealed. All the volunteers understood that any photograph that they would contribute could have a life of its own outside the study – as in any participatory photography project. When any digital image is posted online, there is no way of retrieving it or even mitigating the consequences, if any (Banks & Zeitlyn 2015:125; Rose 2016:363).

Before we began our online focus groups, some of the participants requested that I show some examples of images to guide them, so I used examples from the pilot study. Some were also interested in how I will eventually be using the photographs and we discussed the possibility of curating a public exhibition of all the images gathered throughout the study.

The actual conduct of the study, i.e. the videoconferencing sessions and participatory photography workshops, started in June 2020 and initially ran weekly, then eventually slowed down to bimonthly meetings. Our main 'venue' was via a virtual Zoom meeting – not necessarily a consequence of the pandemic but a convenient and inexpensive way to virtually bring together the international participants.

Image-making was employed in our online data-gathering in several ways: (1) participants attended weekly Zoom sessions and I asked them to respond to a list of prompts I prepared, such as questions about ASEAN-ness (eventually they would help me list prompts for our future meetings), and they would momentarily leave their desks to take pictures of 'found' objects around their home[33] or the environment; (2) they checked their email weekly for the list of ideas of what pictures to take and share in our next Zoom meeting – in our first few meetings these were mostly my suggestions; (3) the participants themselves suggested ideas for what pictures they could take next or on how to be creative in taking pictures of more abstract ideas; and (4) they engaged in a simple show-and-tell activity, i.e. photo-elicitation, where they showed the

[33] It was the best most of us could do during the lockdown.

group each of their photographs,[34] more often than not this motivated another participant (even several of them) to respond with their own photographs of – surprisingly – a similar subject or snapshot. This proved a welcome progress, and one good example is our 'treasure hunt' activity where we took pictures of found objects around the home. We called it *treasure* hunt (reminiscent of the game) because we were looking for 'meaningful' objects that could convey our everyday life as Southeast Asians – here the *meaning* of the found object is more valuable than itself, hence the 'treasure'. Two participants ended up taking pictures of their cupboards (see *Image 4* and *Image 5)* to show how, apparently, Southeast Asians have a way of 'keeping' our cupboards messy:

> There's something I'd like to ask Andy if he feels comfortable answering. At some point, like… is this organised? … And if so, who organised them? Because, I mean, it could just be random, obviously, of whatever's free. But this whole concept as well is, to me, very Singaporean or even Asian. Well, in England, everything's away in cupboards and drawers, everything's tidied away. You wouldn't find things out like this. (Chow-Paul, Zoom meeting, 12 July 2020)

> I thought this would be maybe a bit unique to Southeast Asia because we are not – we are function over fashion … We need so many tools to cook so many different things … Answering Freya's question, are these things intended? Or where they are supposed to be? Because after you use them, you wash them. And then it drips to the sink. Yeah. And these are objects that we commonly use on wet things like you need to peel stuff, you need to wash them, the eggs and noodles. (Chan, Zoom meeting, 12 July 2020)

> I rent a room in a house here in Singapore. And I was basically the newest person for the longest time. And all of the space in the kitchen was taken up except this one corner. So, all of my stuff just had to fit there. And this is literally beside the sink … I just dumped all of my utensils in there, and then just beside it, if you go a little bit beyond, that's going to be the sink. So, right after I dry things because I absolutely hate doing dishes, after I've washed something, I'll either hang it above the sink if there's a hook available. (Vidanes, Zoom meeting, 12 July 2020)

As shown, this reciprocal conversation by way of images was set in motion by the method of photo-elicitation. For the next 10 to 15 minutes, the responses unfolded from merely reacting humorously on the two pictures of cupboards to exploring how this shared sense of having 'messy' cupboards must be an everyday life experience of Southeast Asians. Interestingly, the conversations expanded to our views on the *economy, geography,* and even the *politics of*

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[34] They simply bring their cameraphones closer to their webcams (see *Image 4).*

food and *Asian food preparation,* with occasional hints of *gender issues.* This whole reflective process was, in effect, the outcome of our visual (auto)ethnographic lenses that went beyond just 'mere documentation' (Banks & Zeitlyn 2015:112; see also Reilly 2018:224-225).

Facilitating this reciprocal photo-elicitation in our focus groups notably helped in fostering a participatory atmosphere and structure throughout our online data-gathering. On the other hand, the visual approach to (auto)ethnography also proved beneficial in encouraging the participants to be aware of their surroundings and follow the cues of their co-participants – again, here a reciprocity ensued as each of us started clueless of what to do so we had to gauge one another's cues. In indigenous Filipino behavioural psychology or *'sikolohiyang Pilipino'* (Enriquez 1992), we refer to this as *'pakikiramdam'*, an empathetic sense of feeling one another, which I believe is quite applicable to our common behaviour as Southeast Asians. Although, visual (auto)ethnography is neither always 100% participatory nor successful because I had to facilitate the participants occasionally, as I realised that they needed prompts especially in the face of anything abstract – as if they were grappling with something while blindfolded. This is why photo-elicitation, again, was quite beneficial in that when a metaphorically 'blindfolded' participant manages to take hold of a clue (say, by taking a photograph of an aspect or detail of their imagination we are all grappling with), it snowballs to other clues elicited by other images taken by the rest of the participants.

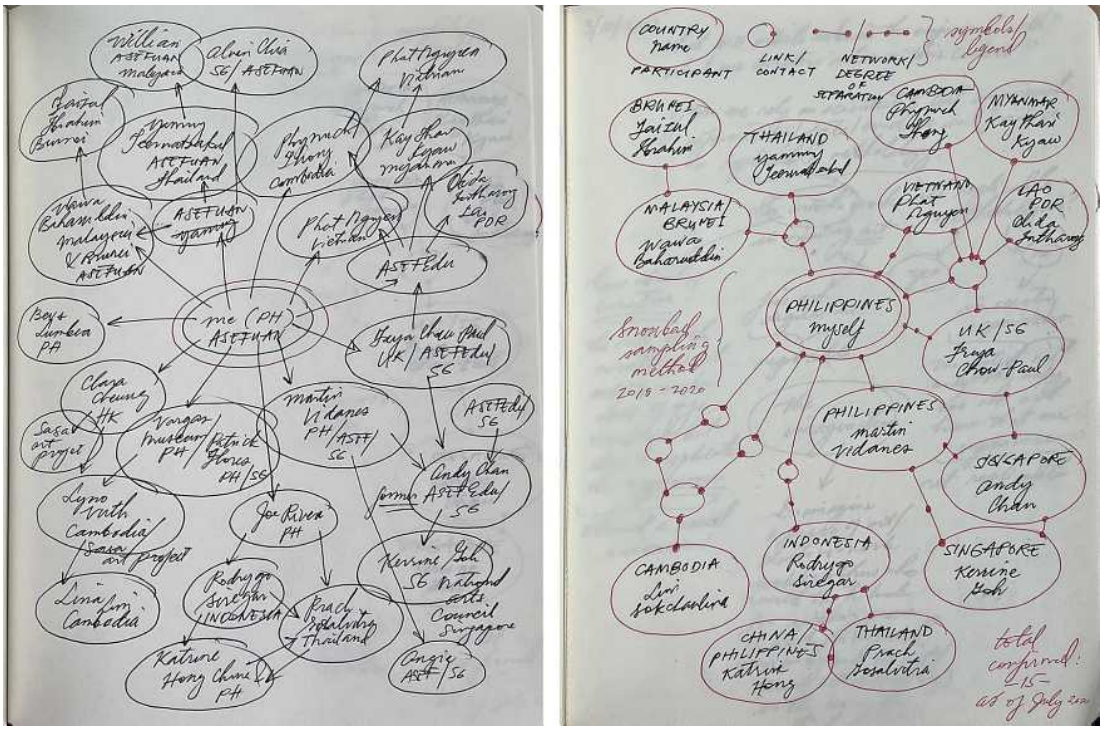

Image 3: *Tracing my contact points for prospective participants*

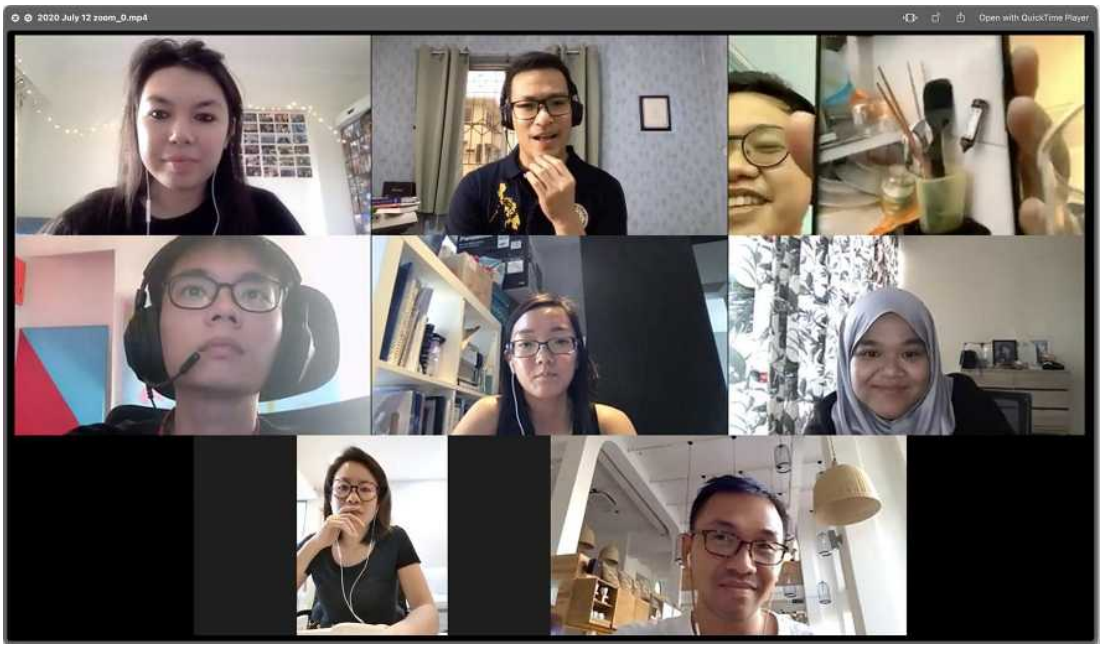

Image 4: *Photo-elicitation during our focus group via Zoom (top right corner: a participant shows a picture of his cupboard through his cameraphone's photo gallery view)*

Image 5: *Photo of a cupboard*
Andy Chan © 2020

Not all participants were simultaneously present during every Zoom meeting, hence each current session, as facilitator I had to briefly recap and relay all of our previous conversations (using their photographs) to keep all the participants updated. This was not detrimental to our visual ethnographic process; on the contrary, it facilitated a 'simultaneity' (Anderson 2006:24) which allowed us to carry over previous conversations and account for the imaginations of those who were not present because we had with us the evidence of each and every one's inputs in the form of pictures. Altogether these images accumulate into a representation of the *simultaneity* of our co-imagining and collective imagination. Furthermore, not to be construed as a lack of regularity or even rigour, the meetings were not always held unanimously. This relatively 'open' setting and schedule embraces what I theorise as the essence of (public) participation (see Chapter IV: Section C; see also Chapter V: Section E). For one, the absence of some participants in a session is reflective of both the *participatory* and *voluntary* nature of the research process. Thus, the consistent role of the researcher-facilitator, i.e. to relay and build upon the key points made during prior conversations with participants, is essential only to keep the conversations going (in fulfilment of the research project). Each photograph submitted by every participant was very useful in this aspect because altogether they served as visual records of our previous conversations which could be interpreted in many ways, and that depends on the composition of the current focus group and the milieu which unfolded. Because the participants were free to opt in-and-out of any session at any time, the photographs that came out of a previous session they missed would effectively serve as an inspiration or even a starting point for them to gain awareness of what they could expect or talk about when they join the next session.

As I explain in my review of related literature (see Chapter V: Section E), the photovoice method, and participatory photography in general, is not without criticism but for the purpose of this study, there are elements from the method that are suitable and also very beneficial for data-gathering, thus the necessity for modifying the method to suit the research. Likewise, some well-known and enduring criticisms of ASEAN informed my research design; from

being regarded by some Western scholars as an ‘imitation community’ that acts without substance as a mere ‘rhetorical shell’ (Kassim 2009:25) to the regional association’s prevention of outright critique among its member states (Nem Singh 2009:12). Here, I devised a critical methodology by encouraging the participants to critique: (a) how the notion of regional identity had been presented through what I call ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ images; (b) how these images had ever since been represented; and (c) how they, as participants, would accept or challenge the said discursive (re)presentations by way of their own imaginations. More importantly, to actually lead the project into a much more participatory process as compared to many other photovoice or photo-elicitation studies, I truly valued the inputs of the research participants from start to finish. In many ways, they contributed to improving the research practice I had employed from the pilot study in 2019 until present.

By building on our verbal and visual exchanges about ASEAN-ness in different contexts, we eventually understood amongst ourselves that our very challenge and goal in this project was to critically reflect on *our practices of seeing, recognising, and belonging.* In other words, as I already mentioned earlier, it is not so much about the images but instead more about what our image-making activities symbolise.

All the photographs presented during our Zoom video meetings were collected and saved in a secure online server provided by the university. And by September 2020, i.e. three months since we began, we started our ‘editing phase’ which was essentially going over all the image files we had collected amongst ourselves, then selecting which images we wanted to include in our intended curatorial work – the idea was an *online exhibition* because of the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions. This editing process is an essential aspect of this study’s *paracuratorial* approach as I explained earlier; it would eventually help us formulate the ‘curatorial collaboration’ phase through ‘paracuratorial experimentation’ which could enable the participants to pursue and test their assumptions in their own, distinct ways. In short, the main idea of this collaborative exercise was to minimise my influential/intellectual role while enabling the participants to express their ‘para’-curatorial ideas – ‘para’ because not everyone understood at that time yet that what they actually were ideating fall

within the contemporary definitions of curating. As I expound in the following section, separate curatorial groups were formed by various participants who were interested in curating their own imaginaries. This is one of the primary contributions of this study – a methodological innovation to the practice and theory of participatory photography as a (para)curatorial praxis.

By the time our online data-gathering was completed, I could already see how my research questions were addressed. What I had realised is that Southeast Asians identify and behave towards the region in relatable ways, and visual culture plays a consequential role in this behaviour. This could be confirmed in the visual data that we cultivated – the 'material' products of our shared imagination. Therefore, having now materialised our mental images of Southeast Asia into photographs, we could already confirm that images and image-making can be impactful – as far as we can perceivably communicate – in our reflection of the collective imagination of Southeast Asia. While I am not necessarily attempting to tell whether an image effectively represents the idea or feeling that a person wants to convey, at least what I observed was how photography could be helpful in appropriating as closely as possible what is being imagined. However, the point that I need to emphasise here is that such an abstract imagination is only possible when *all the images are collectively visualised*. This visual collectivity, I hypothesise, is made possible because of ASEAN's regionalisation process in that the experience of one country is now mirrored in another. Hence, our shared experiences are familiar and recognisable, and hardly alienating to any one of us in the group.

The approaches I explained here for my visual data-gathering helped me ascertain how impactful images and image-making are in visualising the collective imagination of Southeast Asia (in response to my second research question). While I still would need to test this assumption through one last method in my triangulation approach, at this point what already concretised was a workable *visual-ethnographic* picture of our community (Pink 2013:7-10) which in the succeeding method my co-curators and I would be (re)interpreting to provide the public a 'descriptive-explanatory-interpretive account' of our ideas (Kenney 2009:151).

C. Curatorial collaboration

Before I expound on 'curatorial collaboration', the third phase in my creative practice-as-research approach (see also Chapter IV: Section A; and Chapter V: Sections E and F), I briefly return to the main idea of my thesis. As I already elaborated, what I am looking at is how the imaginary of Southeast Asia, by way of ASEAN's regionalism discourse, haunts us in new, visual ways. As the nature of imagining a region is a *communal* act, and by virtue of this collective awareness there are a multiplicity of perspectives that I still must account for, my third research question[35] is not immediately addressed by simply looking at photographic images of Southeast Asia. In other words, what I intended to achieve in this final phase of my fieldwork was to substantiate *the importance of (public) participation* alongside the (public) production of images – be it a single photograph taken by any individual or an international exhibition. While we already have a theory of 'countervisuality' (Mirzoeff 2011:24) as the right to one's *autonomy from visuality,* what I am contributing to this discourse of *decentring of sight* is that, apart from it being never an individual act (Mirzoeff 2011:25), countering visuality must also engender true participation in order to avoid the monopoly of one's imagination and vision. I discuss these terms in my findings and literature review (see Chapter IV and Chapter V).

Thus, I stress the importance of participation apart from just accounting for a multiplicity of perspectives, to put into practice a countervisual approach. I draw some parallels between the methodology of curatorial collaboration and Freire's (1985:160) 'conscientization' in that true participation must engender not only empathy through reciprocity but also a feeling of conscientious co-ownership. This *Freirean* theoretical basis is how my creative project is still very much an offshoot of the photovoice tradition and of other *participatory action research* methods. Applying this to my own practice as a curator has some practical and theoretical implications (note that I expound on this in the following chapters, Chapter III and Chapter IV). For one, collaborating with the volunteers did not only temper my authoritative role as lead curator or even PhD researcher. Rather, it also levelled the dynamics of power and balanced

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[35] (RQ3) Why is it necessary for photography and curatorial methods to involve participatory methods when imagining Southeast Asia?

relationships among the group of participants. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that my role is diminished – especially as a PhD researcher who must be able to defend my very own contributions to knowledge; instead, what our collaboration achieved is the 'recognition that the subjective and individual are still as important as the intersubjective and [the] collaborative' (Doğantan-Dack 2020:53) by levelling the roles between the researcher-facilitator and the volunteers-turned-participants, plus the participants-turned-curators.

Thus, with the right mindset and shared values, it eventually led us to *consensus-building* – one of the main tenets of the *official ASEAN process.* I say 'right mindset' to emphasise that the persons involved throughout this undertaking did not assume/instigate any underlying *agenda* or *politick* prior to and during their participation; in short, they truly understood the value of their involvement as part of a PhD-level research undertaking. Despite the dissension and nuances that we had encountered along the way, consensus-building aided us throughout the process. Hence, we were able to determine whether we had been imagining Southeast Asia at the same level and, as a consequence, whether or not our individual visions (i.e. mental images, photographs, visual explanations) actually approach or even resemble the nature of our collective imagination. For that reason, we realised the necessity of collaboratively curating the extent of images we had gathered.

Through the photographs produced during the online data-gathering, we had taken our first steps into translating our collective imaginations (and individual mental images) of Southeast Asia into visual data. Accounting for our conversations and non-verbal inputs during the focus groups, our visual data will serve as units of analysis in what I now refer to as 'paracuratorial experiments'. By *experimentation* I follow the same logic of Till (2020) in that historically the term is not used exclusively in scientific enquiries; as early as the 1600s, artists and creative practitioners have already been using experimentation as a method alongside empirical approaches such as 'discovery, invention, hypothesis, fact, evidence' (Till 2020:vi). Melucci's (1995; 1989) theorising of collective identity-building even necessitates what he describes as 'cultural laboratories' (Melucci 1989:60) which could be likened to how we 'experimented' with ideas during our focus groups.

As outlined *Table 1,* the paracuratorial experiments serve as building blocks of the *curatorial collaboration phase* that entailed extending the engagement of some of the participants – as co-curators who would be volunteering to help sort out the image files. They would become even more involved and responsible for the curatorial aspects of the project; in other words, the work is as much their own as it is mine. This approach put into practice Blain and Turner's (2020:225) 'concentric circles' of collaboration, as previously cited, which demonstrate how 'collaborators were able to retain a sense of agency while also producing a discordant but coherent shared aesthetic', even more so expanding the potential impact of the study.

To consolidate our smaller efforts into a larger one, as lead curator I set up an online space for a virtual gallery – anticipating that we would eventually need a venue to publicly launch our work (more on this in the following section; see also Chapter III: Section B). Facilitating the paracuratorial experiments via this online hub worked very well; this is not only because it is a consequence of the pandemic but instead because we were physically based in separate countries. This online hub is still viewable online.[36]

I account for each of these paracuratorial experiments more comprehensively in Chapter III, where I also delve further into the outcomes of every experiment and shed light on the themes that would emerge – as indicated in the last column of *Table 1*. These emerging themes eventually serve as my puzzle pieces for synthesising three strands of creative practice-as-research in my research findings: **collaboration in artistic practice and research** (see Chapter IV: Section A), **imagining and image-making** (Chapter IV: Section B) and **'visual' identity-participation** (Chapter IV: Section C).

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[36] via the URL: https://asean2020vision.online/exhibitions

Table 1: **CURATORIAL COLLABORATION**			
Paracuratorial experiment	**Title of activity and location**	**Curators**	**Exercises and themes**
#1: photography as performance (curator as animateur)	**NSU Circle 7 – *Performing Heterotopia: Absence and Silences*** (Roosta Puhkeküla, Estonia) 28 July – 4 August 2019	None (myself) *participated by NSU Circle 7 summer attendees (international)	psycho-geographical mapping, identity as performativity, real life improvisation, parade of nations performance
#2: 'tiny desk' exhibition (curating personal archives)	***Mesa Sa Kwarto*** (Zoom/website: https://asean2020vision.online/mesa-sa-kwarto) 20 – 29 November 2020	None (myself)	exhibition displays, augmented reality, makeshift displays, white cube, live artist/curator talk experience
#3: online exhibition-making (curating as editing)	***Made in ASEAN*** (online/website: https://asean2020vision.online/exhibitions) 15 November – 15 December 2020 and onwards	Andy Chan (Singapore), Freya Chow-Paul (UK/Singapore), Kerrine Goh (Singapore), Martin Vidanes (Philippines)	exhibition displays, augmented reality, virtual exhibitions (especially adapted because of Covid-19 pandemic), virtual white cube
#4a: crowdsourcing images of the sky as psycho-geographical mapping (also curating as participant observation)	***Anonymised Skies*** (online/website: https://asean2020vision.online/anonymised-skies) 30 November – 15 December 2020 and onwards	Martin Vidanes (Philippines)	cartography, mental images mapping, psycho-geographical mapping, abstract, imaginary
#4b: Imagining and interacting through play (also curating as participant observation)	***CrossWorld Puzzle*** (online/website: https://asean2020vision.online/crossworld-puzzle) 5 – 15 December 2020 and onwards	Andy Chan (Singapore), Kerrine Goh (Singapore)	pedagogy, coding/ research methods, archival methods, cataloguing, play, puzzles

#4c: crowdsourcing images (curating as participant observ-ation)	***Photo Voices: Southeast Asia/ Elsewhere*** (online/website: https://asean2020vision.online/asean-photovoices) 15 November – 15 December 2020 and onwards	None (automated or digitally curated)	crowdsourcing images on social media, open/public participation
#5a: visual essay and/or performance poetry (curating as authoring and co-authoring)	***Mother Tongue*** (performance: https://asean2020vision.online/#mother-tongue) 15 December 2020	Yen Ooi (Malaysia/UK)	manifesto, declar-ation, discourse, words, language, commemoration
#5b: visual essay and/or performance poetry (curating as authoring and co-authoring)	***ASEAN Manifesto*** (live streamed online via the website: https://asean2020vision.online/asean-manifesto) 8 August 2020 (ASEAN Day)	Amy Matthewson (Canada/UK), Yen Ooi (Malaysia/UK), Martin Vidanes (Philippines)	ASEAN manifesto/ declaration, official discourse, text, ASEAN Day event/ commemoration

Going back to my participation at NSU's Circle 7 in Tallinn, Estonia – there I first tested my method of paracuratorial experimentation (see Section A-conclusion,of this chapter). I performed my first paracuratorial experiment as *curator-animateur,* by facilitating a performative improvisation of imaginary cartography: I asked the volunteers to map themselves according to their countries of origin within a spacious hall; they had to consider each other's proximities to accurately position themselves in the imaginary map; then we meditated on this *psycho-geographical exercise* while I also located my own position in the 'world map' the volunteers just built; most of them were from European countries, and they occupied the whole hall to map themselves, leaving almost no space for me – it was one of the most insightful activities that we enjoyed during the summer practice. This thought-provoking *improv* is what I identify in *Table 1* as paracuratorial experiment #1: photography as performance (curator as animateur).

Then, building on the insights I gained, I developed with the research participants several paracuratorial experiments during our focus groups (see *Table 1)*. Syncretistically, these paracuratorial experiments would serve as my third methodical approach which I refer to as *curatorial collaboration.* The approach required image-making methods from producing an assemblage of everyday objects (paracuratorial experiment #2), to a digital bricolage of images and media (#3 and #4), to a socially engaged performance (#5).

To develop the paracuratorial experiments, we gathered all the photographs taken during the focus groups. I invited everyone who were interested in viewing, and eventually curating, the images to help me draw out some workable themes. Some of the pilot study participants also became involved again or agreed to contribute additional images and ideas to our ongoing edit of pictures. At the same time, I was also in conversation with two additional participants (one is originally from Malaysia and is now based in the United Kingdom and another is originally from Canada, with a mixed Chinese and Latin American heritage, who is now based in the UK as well), both of whom at that time prospectively agreed to participate upon looking at the images. They both complete the group of participants (see *Table 2)* from the pilot to the public engagements.

Table 2: **LIST OF ALL PARTICIPANTS**		
#	**Participant**	**Country / National Identity / Residence**[37]
1	Brunei Darussalam	Mr Faizul H. Ibrahim
2	Cambodia	Mr Phynuch Thong
3	Canada/United Kingdom	Dr Amy Matthewson
4	China/Philippines	Ms Katrine Hong
5	Indonesia	Mr Rodrygo Siregar
6	Lao PDR	anonymised participant[38]
7	Malaysia	Dr Nursalwa Baharuddin
8	Malaysia/United Kingdom	Ms Yen Ooi
9	Myanmar	Dr Kathryn Kyaw
10	Philippines	Mr Martin Vidanes
11	Singapore	Mr Andy Chan
12	Singapore	Ms Kerrine Goh
13	Thailand	Ms Yammy Patchaya Teerawatsakul
14	Thailand	Mr Prach Gosalvitra
15	United Kingdom/Singapore	Ms Freya Chow-Paul
16	Viet Nam	Mr Phát Nguyen

Countries/nationalities represented by multiple participants:	
Singapore, ASEAN	(n = 3)
Philippines, ASEAN	(n = 2)
Malaysia, ASEAN	(n = 2)
Thailand, ASEAN	(n = 2)
United Kingdom	(n = 3)

[37] These are flexible criteria in the interest of inclusivity.

[38] Upon signing the informed consent form, the participants were also given the option of anonymity and non-participation at any stage of the research conduct; majority of them consented to be credited with their full names and respective countries; one anonymous participant agreed to be identified with their country as long as their name/identity is anonymised.

From October to December 2020, the regular meetings of the group were reduced to just the four participants-turned-curators and myself. This decision was unanimous: first, during the final sessions of the focus groups, all the participants agreed to show the images they contributed publicly by means of an exhibition; second, three out of the four volunteers proposed ideas for two separate paracuratorial experiments while another offered to help curate and design the final online exhibition gallery. Their initiative to be our curators exemplified how the study fulfilled its intended trajectory towards participating to attain 'voice' – also indicating *conscientisation* as mentioned earlier. While I did not expect all of the participants to be directly involved in curating, at the very least this trajectory was affirmed by the paracuratorial experiments proposed.

After gathering all the photographs, some participants became more actively involved in the succeeding activities. Chan, Chow-Paul, Goh, and Vidanes volunteered to collaborate in *Made in ASEAN,* our paracuratorial experiment that takes inspiration from tangent initiatives and resources such as: *Museum of Half Truths,* a diasporic exhibition showcasing a speculative curatorial undertaking (Museum of Half Truths 2020:online); *Object-Stories,* a PhD-level curatorial research that features digital storytelling (Kwan 2020; Object-Stories 2018:online); and *Human Library* which is a documentary of people as anthologies (Human Library 2022:online). As said, we envisioned our collaboration as an online public exhibition.

What is mainly crucial at this stage was the co-curators' collaborative process of selecting and synthesising all the gathered image files to produce the virtual public exhibition. Hence, ensuring that the participatory nature of our study was preserved was one of the main tasks of the participants-turned-curators. (It was a wise decision not to be alone in curating the project. And this is why the method is called curatorial collaboration.) We did understand that they must balance their curatorial inputs with what they had learned from their previous discussions with their co-participants. At the same time, the administrative or artistic decisions that they would come up with could also serve as *a counterbalance to my role.* In a way, my co-curators had to act on behalf of their other co-participants whose ideas, opinions, and photographs

they must speak for and on behalf of during the ‘editing phase’.

Here, ‘editing’ does not pertain to ‘photo-manipulation’, but rather to the selection process and the trimming down of the number of photographs, achieving a ‘cumulative effect of the individual shots [that] cannot merely be reduced to its constituent parts’ (Banks & Zeitlyn 2015:24). So, apart from just giving the co-curators a venue to affirm their previous contributions and decisions, this curatorial process also exemplified the snowballing of their participation. This unusual approach to curating an exhibition is one of the strengths of this project, I believe. Formerly playing the role of participants, the co-curators were already (almost intimately) familiar with all the images generated by the study, as well as the countries (and locations) where all the images were taken in, the captions or verbal explanations (based on the participants’ inputs) that accompanied each photograph, and the themes that emerged from the conversations about the images during our focus groups. Each curatorial decision that they would make was therefore participatory in essence and conscientious of their co-participants’ contexts. Their decision, more importantly, was a direct consequence of their access to the ‘location of the participatory process’ and the ‘(proto-)machine’ (i.e. the digital archive), which are two essential elements in Carpentier’s (2017:118) theorising of participation (see Chapter V: Section E). Thus, as co-curators they came to understand the delicate and nuanced role that they played; the outcome thus evidenced their being cautious about (mis)representing the voices of their co-participants while, at the same time, still adding new meanings – or even reinforcing existing ones – into the collection of images.

As co-curators, they also took the lead in deciding which images must be included in or excluded from the exhibition – what I observed re-emerging as one of the more conventional (or rather traditional) roles of the curator, i.e. a gatekeeper of the archive/collection. A salient reason was on practicality; recalling key inputs of their co-participants during the previous focus groups, the co-curators decided that showing all of the images submitted during the study could be ‘info overload’ for the general public. Besides, we did agree that showing dozens and dozens of photographs could be too unwieldy for us to even convey the meanings we identified. In short, they were cautious

in overwhelming our potential audiences with too many photographs that the essence of the project ends up diluted and the exhibition a failure.

Moreover, it was about strategy; recalling highlights of the previous photo-elicitation sessions, the co-curators wanted to recreate those 'light bulb' moments for the public to appreciate, hence some images must be specifically selected and juxtaposed. Lastly, the editing process should add value rather than just show a comprehensive display – best exemplified through Banks and Zeitlyn's (2015:24) analogy that the output is much like a 'well-edited film […] the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, just as a well-written ethnography cannot be treated merely as a series of free-standing observations'.

During the editing of the images, various themes were recounted by the co-curators: *cultural values and local customs, capitalism, diaspora and expat life, inequalities, international diplomacy and relations, environment, food, livelihood, politics, religion, social media, symbols, technology, transportation,* and *tourism* (see also Chapter III). They also ensured that all ten ASEAN member countries must be included in the photographs, hence some photographs taken by their co-participants in their previous travels to other countries in ASEAN were included to fill some gaps. All the selected images were exhibited through the virtual gallery co-designed by Vidanes, made available online on the project website.[39]

A final consideration that was decided upon by the co-curators was how to receive feedback from the viewing public (i.e. website visitors). Giving the audience an opportunity to have a say in what ASEAN identity is when they look at the exhibition of photographic images was also consequential to furthering the ASEAN discourse. Thus, a feedback form was added on the virtual exhibition gallery by embedding a Google Forms survey. Seven live Zoom sessions were also scheduled from 15 November until 15 December 2020; the Zoom link was published on the website and an email invitation was sent to all the previous and current participants (which they could share with their own contacts) to attract potential attendees to the live sessions.

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[39] via the URL: https://asean2020vision.online/exhibitions

These live Zoom ‘webinars’ were hosted by the co-curators with the intention of an open-forum type of public engagement.

Other online means of gathering public feedback and participation were also employed on the exhibition website, by means of two additional paracuratorial experiments. One is the automated *Photo Voices: Southeast Asia / Elsewhere* which invited website visitors to participate by uploading their own images as contributions. It was *automated* in that the form/website sorts out the uploaded images into an interface that *randomly displayed* them (we were tentatively toying with the idea that in the absence of a curator, the platform can ‘self-curate’).

The other one is Vidanes’ *Anonymised Skies* which asked the public to take photographs of the skies of ASEAN and add them onto the image ‘feed’ displaying all the submitted snapshots (also completely automated, however it is being managed by Vidanes as a *moderator-curator)*. These two feedback mechanisms ensured that responses are not always sent in the form of words but also by means of visuals too.

Upon completing the final leg of my fieldwork through my method of curatorial collaboration, I could now affirm that I had already responded to all of my three research questions in practice. For the details, the outcomes and findings chapters of this written thesis are where these research questions are addressed more extensively (Chapter III and Chapter IV). Through our para-curatorial experimentation that eventually led to our curatorial collaborations, we demonstrated how we imagine our own region, as well as how we convey our sense of regional identity and kinship. In short, the online exhibition and the other curatorial outputs exemplify the ‘how’ in various *experiential* ways through visual culture.

What’s more, were were able to show that images and image-making do the function of visualising our own individual and collective imaginations of ASEAN-ness. Apart from the taking of photographs using our camera-phones, our curatorial collaboration aided our critical reflection. Finally, we also reaped the benefits of participation in our image-making and curatorial approaches because the whole process became a shared act that called for our consensus – in spite of dissenting views, managing power dynamics in

the group, and picturing the multiplicity of our views. These observations and realisations were, of course, precursory to what I would eventually conclude from my analyses and participant observation of the whole process. And from a practical standpoint, I could now see the overall validity of my methods.

What is now made clearer to me is how our curatorial collaboration, with the online exhibition as its main outcome, significantly aided my observations and research enquiry. Without our paracuratorial experiments, I would have been merely left with a set of images that lacked the curatorial rigour that this kind of research demands. It was only by way of curating these images that we had verified our initial assumptions or disputed some of our sweeping claims at the beginning of the pilot study or the focus groups. In addition, the curatorial process proved essential in my practice-as-research because it is where I can now see how I had succeeded and failed – and in a few ways we did fail, which was quite insightful in the creative process because we did learn from those experiences too. For one, my original intention to organise a travelling exhibition (or simultaneous onsite exhibitions in Manchester and in several places in Southeast Asia) 'failed' not only because of the Covid-19 pandemic, but primarily because that plan necessitated a bigger team and/or organisation to physically implement it. Another example of a 'failure' is when some of our paracuratorial experiments lacked public participation which we did not anticipate, such as the automated *Photo Voices: Southeast Asia / Elsewhere*. We realised that because this experiment required a very large number of public visitors to upload their own photographs on the website, it somewhat lacked the appeal when a visitor would only see merely a handful of images uploaded and so they would be discouraged right then and there to upload anything. Perhaps it was also the 'self-curating' intent of the said paracuratorial experiment that failed – in other words, it was impersonal and it did not add any value because there was absolutely no person curating it. For failures like these, Raicovich (2021:62) reminds us that:

> Failures, particularly public ones, can be spaces of growth and learning for cultural institutions (indeed for all of us) as long as they are accompanied by an accountability which their publicness engenders. Plus, revealing these vulnerabilities through open discussions is far more interesting and illuminating to the public from a pedagogical standpoint, and further disrupts the fiction of any neutral position.

For that reason, publicising the online exhibition and each curatorial collaboration significantly helped us in making sense of the digital archive of images that came out of our participatory research undertaking. In short, the process of exhibition-making was more enactive and formative rather than summative; it is not merely an end-product where we just display what we photographed. Similar to what artist Bruguera and curators of diaspora and immigrant culture refer to as ‘arte útil’ (Gogarty 2017:119), the main function of this online exhibition was to serve as a visual interface of our very public discussion as we made repeated attempts to put together pieces of ASEAN like a puzzle, the whole image of which we have never even seen before.

Exhibition-making must be a collaborative, participatory image-making process; it was our path to the summit of the mountain where we could finally admire and appreciate what we went through. And the whole scenery that we are now able to visualise from a bird’s eye view is our very own imaginary of ASEAN-ness. This ASEAN imaginary, while abstract, is based on our shared experiences which links back to the kinship experienced by the wider public. More importantly, it is a way of connecting with the public with accessibility in mind – the online exhibition serves this purpose by engaging our audiences in ways that do not use academic jargon. As for my research aims, it was an impactful means of communicating the outputs of my research to non-experts or ordinary audiences.

All the relevant information, including the names of all the participants (except for one who did request to remain anonymous) plus their personal writeups, including our research outputs were made available to the public via the project website, which we called *The ASEAN 20/20 Vision Project* in commemoration of *ASEAN Vision 2020,* the official policy document that was unanimously signed by all the member countries on 15 December 1997 and was due to launch in 2020.

In the following chapter, I describe in more detail each of the para-curatorial experiments. I also relate how each undertaking contributes to my overall research practice and how altogether they address my aims and research questions.

D. Research design overview

The following table (see *Table 3)* outlines an overview of the research design. Two complementary methods, (1) participatory photography and (2) curatorial collaboration, are further broken down into different methodical approaches ranging from sociological techniques to creative practice-as-research. At the outset *(Phase 1),* the pilot study served as the pre-trial of the overall research design by implementing a mix of methods: photovoice (sociological), show-and-tell (a combination of sociological techniques and creative practice), and performance (creative practice). These were then implemented with more rigour in the succeeding rounds of fieldwork. To produce substantial primary research data, *Phase 2* entailed mixed sociological approaches, mainly the qualitative methods of focus group discussions through photo-elicitation and visual (auto)ethnographic observation. After sufficient online data-gathering, the research entered *Phase 3* where my creative practice-as-research took centre stage. At this stage, my practice-led research involved the production of artistic work that substantiated my curatorial practice. And because it is built upon a mix of sociological procedures, I gained confidence in the study by attaining *external (ecological) validity.* The way the study was conducted indeed replicated or, at the very least, resembled how in real-life scenarios the participants would be engaging in asynchronous, mediated, and online interactions with images. Most importantly, I attained *qualitative reliability* by confirming the recurrence of themes, even behaviours, throughout the three phases – affirming my triangulation method.

Also shown in *Table 3* are the number of research participants who had been engaged in each phase: five participants (n = 5) during the pilot study, eleven participants (n = 11) for the online data-gathering, and sixteen participants (n = 16) in the curatorial collaboration. Note that the total of 16 participants for the whole duration of the research counts some individuals' multiple involvement in various stages of the research.

Table 3: **RESEARCH DESIGN**		
PARTICIPATORY PHOTOGRAPHY		**CURATORIAL COLLABORATION**
PHASE 1 **n = 5**	**PHASE 2** **n = 11**	**PHASE 3** **n = 16**
pilot study	**online data-gathering**	**curatorial collaboration**
pre-trial: (1) photovoice (2) show-and-tell (3) performance	**focus group:** (1) photo-elicitation (2) visual (auto)ethnography	**paracuratorial experimentation:** (1) photographing as performance/performativity – curator as animateur (2) 'tiny desk' exhibition – curating personal archives (3) online exhibition-making – curating as editing (4a) photographing/crowd-sourcing images of the skies of ASEAN as psycho-geographical mapping – curating as participant observation (4b) imagining and interacting through play – curating as participant observation (4c) crowdsourcing images – curating as participant observation (5a) visual essay and/or performance poetry – curating as authoring and co-authoring (5b) visual essay and/or performance poetry – curating as authoring and co-authoring

CHAPTER III

Curating Images and Imaginations of Southeast Asian Locals: Fieldwork and Outcomes

I want to claim the right to look. This claim is, neither for the first nor the last time, for a right to the real. It might seem an odd request after all that we have seen in the first decade of the twenty-first century on old media and new, from the falling of the towers, to the drowning of cities, and to violence without end. The right to look is not about merely seeing. It begins at a personal level with the look into someone else's eyes to express friendship, solidarity, or love. That look must be mutual, each inventing the other, or it fails. As such, it is unrepresentable. The right to look claims autonomy, not individualism or voyeurism, but the claim to a political subjectivity and collectivity: "the right to look. The invention of the other."

– The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality by Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011:1)

Explained in the previous chapter, this study is an exploration of ASEAN's imaginary. The methodology that emerges out of this exploration fills in the gaps in knowledge in relation to our understanding of Southeast Asia from a curatorial standpoint, and in relation to the ASEAN discourse of collective identity-building as framed by the region's visual cultures. In this chapter, I delve into photographic media as ideological tools (Sontag 1977:173), as well as theories of 'interpellation' (Althusser 2001), the reciprocity of seeing (Berger 1972:9), and how I put into practice these theories in the curatorial 'praxis' I developed (Kenney 2009:97; Freire 1972).

The visual experience of looking at images involves different layers of feelings and ideas towards the subject, hence the visual experience can be a reflexive act. And because our visual experiences are social experiences, then they can be co-opted. Here, I am using Mirzoeff's (2011) explanation of 'visuality' as a theory of power to lay the foundation of this research undertaking as a 'countervisual' contribution to the discourse of Southeast Asia. For Mirzoeff (2011:24-25), 'countervisuality […] is the claim for the right to

look … [which] is never individual'. By way of participatory images this study is claiming our 'mutual' *right to look,* and through curatorial collaboration the study participants *discursively* participated in (re)claiming our imagination of Southeast Asia. In the following reports, I account for what Mitchell (2005: 343-344) identifies[40] as essential tenets of visual culture:

> Visual culture is not limited to the study of images or media, but extends to everyday practices of seeing and showing, especially those that we take to be immediate or unmediated.;
> [...] We do not live in a uniquely visual era. The "visual" or "pictorial turn" is a recurrent trope that displaces moral and political panic onto images and so-called visual media.;
> [...] Visual culture is the visual construction of the social, not just the social construction of vision; and
> [...] The political task of visual culture is to perform critique without the comforts of iconoclasm.

Therefore, it is essential that visual culture research must engage or challenge 'visuality' in relation to the disciplines of aesthetics and art history, as well as media studies (Mitchell 2005: 339,356). This is where theories of 'everyday life' (Highmore 2002; Lefebvre 1991; de Certeau 1984) intersect with my own art practice-as-research. This chapter is premised upon these theories.

Throughout our curatorial collaboration, I occasionally reminded my co-curators that the photographs produced for this study must be met with the same careful eye or critical lens as in any meaningful conversation – or as in any authored text. The most important thing for us to consider was that these photographs must not act as end goals or products. Our photographs are not manifestos, solutions, or truths – visuals are insufficient substitutes. Instead, our photographs function as our *technical means* of building on the imaginations of our fellow collaborators, past and present. These images keep our conversations 'ongoing' every time they are viewed by those who are *interpellated* by our imaginations. Anderson (2006:24) sees this overall process as 'simultaneity', an intersection of cumulative efforts that enables previous members and new ones to engage in the process of co-imagining. Thus, to engage Southeast Asians (as well as the international community in general) in the discourses our images had elicited, this study turns to various

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[40] This is cited from Mitchell's (2005:343-344) 'eight countertheses on visual culture' in response to 'ten myths about visual culture'.

asynchronous means of visual communication, i.e. virtual exhibition gallery, live video streaming, and interactive games.

Under the main online exhibition *Made in ASEAN,* our curatorial efforts led to smaller outputs, namely *Anonymised Skies* by Vidanes (Philippines), *CrossWorld Puzzle* co-curated by Chan and Goh (Singapore), and *Mesa Sa Kwarto* which I myself curated. Additionally, the performance piece *ASEAN Manifesto* was co-curated by Matthewson (Canada/UK), Ooi (Malaysia/UK), Vidanes, and myself. These curatorial outputs supplemented the main collaboration by enabling the co-curators to represent their own ideas creatively and outside of what the group had already achieved. This way, we all were able to convey our own challenges to or critiques of the whole undertaking independent of each other. This also served a beneficial purpose for my *participant observation,* as I considered them as comparative experiments in relation to one another. Each expressed the autonomous vision of my co-curators, especially those who worked on their own without my intervention, Vidanes in *Anonymised Skies* and Chan and Goh in *CrossWorld Puzzle.*

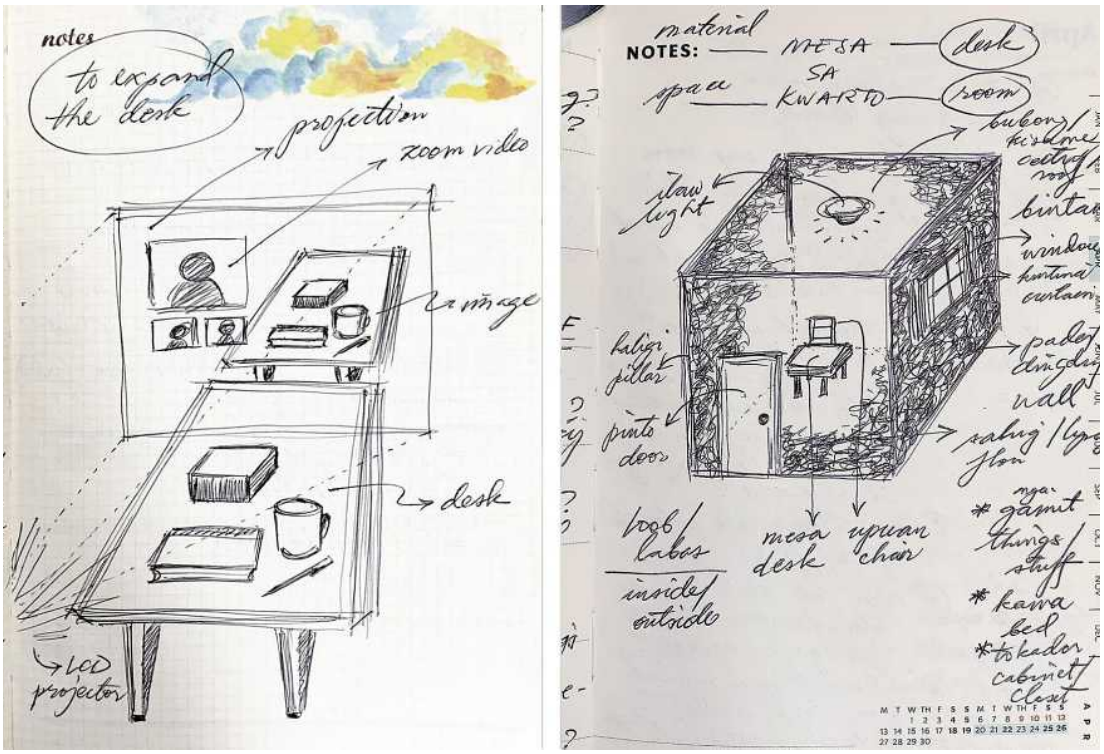

Image 6: *Sketch of the 'tiny desk' concept and design*

A. *Mesa Sa Kwarto:* a ‘tiny desk’ exhibition

Mesa Sa Kwarto was publicly launched online on 15 November 2020 as a transmedia exhibition that opened to the public via Zoom. Here, I recount the practice-as-research approach that led to the staging of this paracuratorial experiment into a public ‘showcase’. In addition, I unpack and examine the various concepts and theories that emerged out of the project, and indicate the potentialities ushered in by this paracuratorial experimentation as one of our *makeshift exhibition experiences* during lockdown.

Throughout the participatory photography sessions, I noticed that one of the favourite activities of the participants was our ‘treasure hunt’ which we managed to play by momentarily leaving our desks/devices – i.e. the Zoom video meeting still ongoing the whole time – then returning with some items. My only instruction to the participants (who all agreed with the mechanics of the game beforehand) was to look for images or objects around their rooms that might convey or exemplify Southeast Asia or ‘Southeast-Asian-ness’ (or ‘ASEAN-ness’ if they possibly can). As previously demonstrated, some of the participants contributed to our *treasure hunt list* by thinking of objects that we could potentially find. We indicated not too specific descriptions such as ‘an object on your desk, or within your reach’ (see *Image 7),* to more anecdotal prompts such as ‘something unique to your country’ *(Image 8)* or ‘a souvenir from another ASEAN country you visited’ *(Image 9).* Interestingly, most of the objects photographed by the participants were in fact made or *manufactured* in ASEAN (see *Images 10, 15-17).* They all used their cameraphones to take pictures of these items, and then shared them on-screen. Some of the most unexpected things we found include a Disneyland souvenir mug which was actually made in Thailand *(Image 10)*, a fancy box of ‘French tea’ produced by TWG *(Image 16)* which is a Singaporean tea brand, and a Hanoi-made pop-up card resembling a Spanish galleon *(Image 17)*.

These objects that the participants found in the corners of their rooms almost serve as a representative sample of a lifetime of personal effects, all collected through various manners of exchange which would include tourism and travel. (The activity reminded me of the sending of postcards and other forms of ‘mail art’ by Michael Leigh and Hazel Jones which ended up in an

archival exhibition at Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections Museum, titled *Curious things: a glimpse into the international mail art archive of Michael Leigh and Hazel Jones* which ran from 2019-2020 when I was still working on my review of literature in the university).

What sets *Mesa Sa Kwarto* apart was that our 'archival' collection of objects was not located in one gallery space; but through our conversations over Zoom, we were able to look at each other's collection of items as we 'exchanged' images of them. Practically speaking, the *physical archive* was located simultaneously in different places at the same time – although the Zoom view of *Mesa Sa Kwarto* would only show my room. Conceptually, it is quite similar to previous research projects that accounted for and pictured diasporic objects as interpersonal histories (Kwan 2020; Pechurina 2020; Object-Stories 2018). The material culture that we had stored in our rooms also comprise the visual culture that contributes to our ongoing imagination of ASEAN-ness. Because of the 'everywhere-ness' and 'elsewhere-ness' of material culture, it all the more became apparent to the group how ASEAN indeed exists. It exists as symbolic and symptomatic of the social lives of these objects (Douglas *et al.* 2002; du Gay 1997; Baudrillard 1994) that only found their way into our rooms and homes because of our various cultures' interconnectedness (see also Kwan 2020; Pechurina 2020; Appadurai 2013). Through these objects, we could palpably sense the presence of ASEAN as simultaneously shared by different country perspectives. And as objects that form part of our material culture they could also be 'gathered'. In this practice, the space for gathering is, borrowing from Augé (2008:86-89), a 'non-place' which is something that today's *supermodernity* makes possible through the Internet and 'polymedia' (see Chapter V: Section B).

The following photographs are just some of the examples of the said *physical archive* that underpinned *Mesa Sa Kwarto.* While these objects are separately located across the ASEAN – in the participants' rooms/homes – they form a picture of the archival collection I drew from in curating *Mesa Sa Kwarto.* Hence the archival collection is both digital and physical at the same time. *Mesa Sa Kwarto* signals its presence both online and offline.

Image 7: *An object on your desk, or within your reach*
Yammy Teerawatsakul © 2020

Image 8: *Something unique to your country*
Faizul Ibrahim © 2020

Image 9: *A souvenir from another ASEAN country you visited*
Phat Nguyen © 2020

Image 10: *A souvenir from another ASEAN country you visited*
Freya Chow-Paul © 2020

In this paracuratorial experiment, visual ethnography vividly facilitated meaningful conversations among the group, particularly through the method of photo-elicitation executed as ‘show-and-tell’ games that encouraged each participant to share images or objects during our Zoom conversations. These personal items proved quite useful in illustrating the ideas of every participant when each talked about what they know of the region and how they imagine or perceive (their/the objects’) ASEAN-ness:

> My mom is from Malaysia also, from the most northern part, bordering Thailand – Hat Yai. It borders Hat Yai. And… So, I also have relatives in KL. And sometimes we visit Penang, even Johor. Like, at least in Malaysia and Singapore and some Southeast Asian countries I have visited. Their homes have this kind of setup. (Chan, Zoom meeting, 12 July 2020)

> But for Thailand, we actually produce a lot of Chinaware. Like that kind of stuff. Not only for Disney but also for Moomin … So, basically, I think almost all of the Moomin mugs were made in Thailand. So, I went to Finland to buy the Moomin mug which was made in Thailand and brought them back to Thailand with a very overpriced strategy that they did. (Teerawatsakul, Zoom meeting, 12 July 2020)

> I wanted to share tidbits of things that I know but beans that have grown around our country, ASEAN. So, maybe an identity that might emerge someday or economically. [...] Rice is obvious because I feel like if there's anything that everyone shares commonly, it's rice, right? At all costs, the same in a lot, lots of ways because if you go abroad somewhere, you… (Ibrahim, Zoom meeting, 23 August 2020)

> But cutlery, in this context, I would also bring up, because everyone in England is really annoyed if I try to eat with a spoon. And to me, it’s logical. If you have rice, if you have something that’s soupy or has gravy, eat with a spoon! It makes so much sense. But no, spoons are only for dessert. I’m like – ok try eating rice with a fork. It’ll go everywhere. It’s just so long and inefficient. (Chow-Paul, Zoom meeting, 23 August 2020)

Seeing how random, found objects in our very homes could apparently be Southeast Asian in provenance, the group came to realise how the region is integral to these very global exchanges. In my literature review (Chapter V: Section C), I explain how this illustrates what Appadurai (1990:301) theorises as ‘global flows’ of deterritorialised cultural products that help shape today’s fluid, hybrid societies. ASEAN regionalisation might even resemble economic and sociocultural implications of globalisation (Severino 2006:98), from the region’s exportation of raw materials and manufactured goods and products to its supplying of labour and manpower all over the world (see Chapter V:

Section B). This is not only unique to contemporary processes in ASEAN, but also traces as far back as the Indo-Roman trade (Ray 2019:241).

As we were unable to step outside and view galleries and museums because of the health risks brought about by the pandemic, not to mention the widespread closures of these art establishments, we instead opted for a 'tiny desk exhibition' of Southeast Asian 'artefacts' and I volunteered to use my desk (in my room) as our exhibition 'venue'. This was how the quaint idea behind *Mesa Sa Kwarto* came to the fore, eventually emboldening the group to launch it as a public showcase online.

My rough sketches (see for example *Image 6 and Image 11)* intimate a glimpse of the thinking and visualising processes involved in the making of *Mesa Sa Kwarto.* At the time it was publicly shown via Zoom, the 'tiny desk' exhibition was still *a work in progress* in that the curatorial inventory and its display was live and ongoing, accounting for the hundreds of potential objects which were yet stored in my *room-as-archive.* Selecting relevant items from my personal inventory at home, I displayed a collection of artefacts, products, and souvenirs from ASEAN countries: *two pairs of wooden chopsticks and a t-shirt fabricated in Cambodia; a textile bracelet from Laos; a souvenir key-chain from Malaysia; denim jeans made in the Philippines; some notebooks and a merlion figurine from Singapore; bath and shampoo bottles, shirts, and an elephant toy plushie made in Thailand; a handcrafted greeting card and several shirts, undergarments, and trousers made in Viet Nam* (*note:* these were only a small selection from the whole archive). Placing these items on a small folding table which I frequently use as my remote work-at-home desk during the pandemic, I eventually saw *Mesa Sa Kwarto* taking shape. Then, the participants acted as the first 'visitors' in this makeshift exhibition gallery, my very own museum of Southeast Asian life. Eventually the *Zoom link* was launched on the website for public access.

Inspired by Kaprow's curatorial look on participatory video art (1993: 150), I set up my screen-driven installation in my room. Using a portable LCD projector, I virtually extended the desk as a reflected/projected image on the wall (see *Images 12 and 13*). With this *cinematic apparatus,* the image of the desk with the objects displayed on it was reflected back on the wall behind

the desk to create a ‘Droste effect’ or ‘mise en abyme’ (Whatling 2009:online) visualisation. The viewers attended a live video streaming on Zoom, where they could only see Zoom’s ‘gallery view’ from their computer monitors; they could opt to turn their cameras on and see their faces also projected onto the visualisation, and thus reciprocate each other’s gazes in the same way as if they were physically walking around a physical gallery space and casually interacting with one another by mere presence. Centre-stage is the collection of Southeast Asian artefacts, as if viewed from a typical museum pedestal, filling the virtual experience with their material presence and physics.

Likewise inspired by the *Tiny Desk Concert Series* of National Public Radio/the NPR Music YouTube channel[41] (NPR 2022:online), I curated *Mesa Sa Kwarto* as an online public event and utilised both YouTube and Zoom for its live video streaming. Noticing how many other initiatives in Southeast Asia offered live musical and theatrical performances during the pandemic,[42] we wanted to offer an alternative: an actual art exhibition experience – as in a typical gallery or museum space – that is rendered *live* and made accessible to any individual working on their desks from home. While this is not a unique concept, as exemplified by several well-funded museums in Southeast Asian countries that converted their physical exhibition spaces to digital and online augmented reality or 3D visual experiences, what set *Mesa Sa Kwarto* apart is its being live *and physical* at the same time.[43]

The outcome of this artistic production can thus be regarded either as an assemblage of unrelated, everyday found objects collectively transformed into a mixed media installation ‘broadcasted’ using Zoom’s gallery view. As a socially engaged media artwork, visitors move beyond simply taking a look to practically interacting with one another.

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[41] see the YouTube channel of NPR Music via the URL: https://www.youtube.com/c/nprmusic

[42] one example is the cover of *Seasons of Love* by theatre artists across Southeast Asian countries; see YouTube channel of The ASEAN Musical Theatre Project via the URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rM2ThNWQ708

[43] A recording of one of the live video streaming events of *Mesa Sa Kwarto* is viewable on YouTube via the URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R5lue3XvGM4 (NB: the audio was removed to anonymise the external attendees’ conversations)

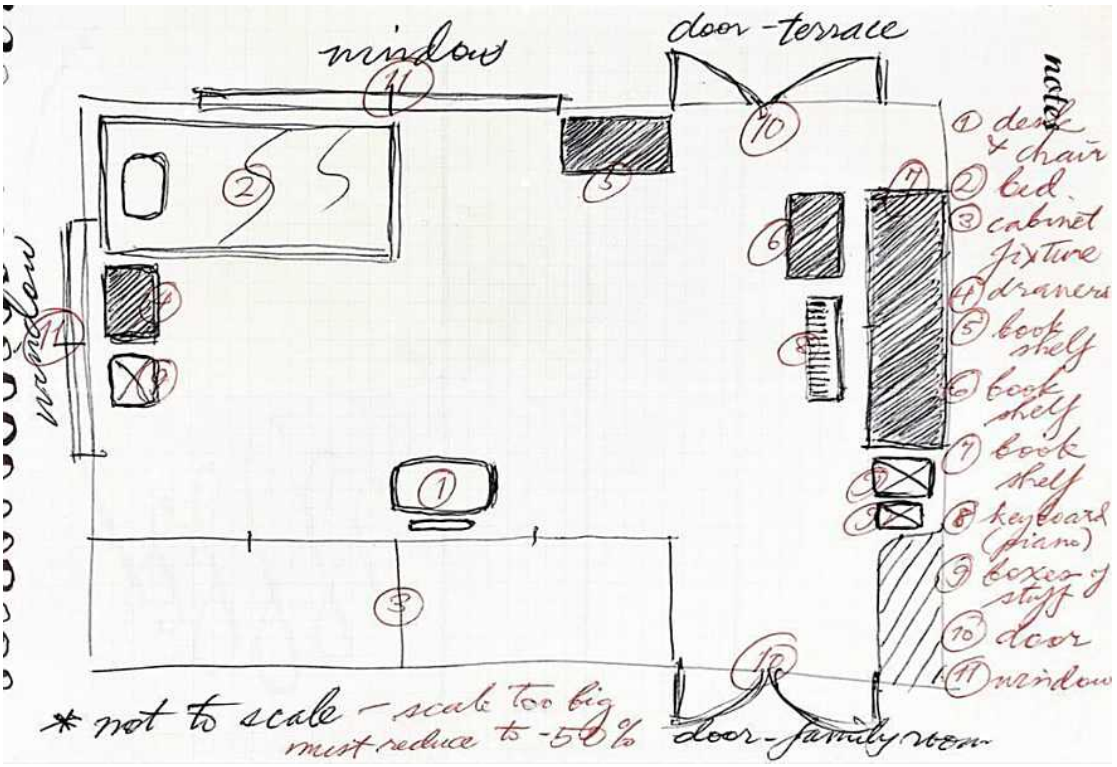

Image 11: *Sketch of my room's floor plan (number 1 is my 'tiny desk' in the room)*

Image 12: *'Mesa Sa Kwarto', a 'tiny desk' exhibition*

Image 13: *'Mesa Sa Kwarto' live-streaming via the Zoom gallery view*

Honestly speaking, I cannot claim to be the first curator to ever stage an exhibition/show outside the conventions and systems predetermined by art institutions and museums, and inside such a private space not purposefully intended to welcome public viewers as actual visitors. As I recount in my literature review (Chapter V), the example of Obrist's *Kitchen Show* which he curated for a viewing public in 1991 is still widely considered as pioneering and even provocative. For Obrist (2014:167-168), 'exhibitions […] can and should go beyond simple illustration or representation [of reality]. They can *produce reality themselves'*. As such, the reality that I created and conveyed through *Mesa Sa Kwarto,* aside from obviously showing slices of our lives during lockdown, of course, was perhaps about the *virtual* aspect of spaces (in both the physical and abstract sense) that is hinged upon what is visual or what is rendered visible. Indeed, *Mesa Sa Kwarto* is a *virtual* reality as much as it is a *visual* reality.

As in the themes I identify in my methodology (Chapter II), conceptualising a 'tiny desk' exhibition was one of the initial paracuratorial experiments through which I explored and reflected on the material culture of ASEAN-ness. Because the ASEAN imaginary is a social experience, then curating personal 'archives' makes a lot of sense in achieving my goal of transforming such an experience into a 'display' in a spatial (or visual) language that could be easily understood by the public as an exhibition. And because the display is staged over Zoom, the *mediated experience* also resembles both the communication and media aspects of the regionalism discourse. Curating it on my own lent me sufficient insights and enough leeway for me to illustrate what I personally understand about my ASEAN-ness. Moreover, the undertaking also afforded me a public venue to put into practice a commentary on the Southeast Asian art market, i.e. exhibition, gallery, and museum experiences of ASEAN.

As one of the key contributions of my practice, *Mesa Sa Kwarto* was a 'tiny desk' exhibition of Southeast Asian artefacts that had been shaped by the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. Hence, the only way for a visitor to enter the venue is through the *gallery view* function of Zoom.[44] Literally a 'desk' or

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[44] the recurring Zoom meeting link was posted on the website on 15 November 2020 for public access (as well as the schedule of each live streaming); see the page and video recordings via the URL: https://asean2020vision.online/mesa-sa-kwarto

'table' (i.e. *mesa* in Filipino) in the 'bedroom' (i.e. *kwarto* in Filipino)[45], this public exhibition concept does not claim to exemplify or symbolise anything else other than itself – *a desk in the room*. However, this very desk could also symbolise what I share with each and every individual constrained to remain at home, to work remotely, and to view (or access) the outside world only via their computer screens because of the pandemic. Conversely, this was the only view available to our reciprocal gazes (Belting 2009) as we temporarily relied on videoconferencing software – while we could only imagine what else is left out of the visual frame, left out of the publicly presentable view, or left out of the big picture. And enmeshed in this *visual-spatial challenge* is my utilisation of audio-visual, cinema, and multimedia apparatuses that may now help readers gain new insights in today's highly mediatised visual culture.

As one of the main contributions to knowledge of this research project, this 'tiny desk' exhibition is unique in that it did not follow what many other art exhibitions had already done – as I mentioned earlier – by converting their gallery or museum shows into online platforms to compensate for the lack of visiting audiences during the pandemic lockdown. It did not offer a fully digital environment resembling three-dimensional (3D or 360-degree) renderings of game-like, immersive visualisations.[46] (Of course, candidly speaking, I did not have sufficient funding and resources to employ similar innovations). Instead, *Mesa Sa Kwarto* was just a peek into an actual physical space, located within a room that is situated within a building or property with a physical address – appropriating and subverting the colonial collections of royals. My tiny desk can practically be visited by any individual if chances permit. In short, even when it is not live-streamed, *Mesa Sa Kwarto* still exists *in situ.* Whether or not it is viewed by an audience it is an art exhibition, no different from the art galleries that have closed since the lockdown. Thus, as a physical installation and, at the same time, a live video performance this mini-curatorial project

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[45] These are, in fact, assimilated or borrowed words from Spanish to Filipino – hinting on the colonial histories of Southeast Asian countries in general – the word *'hapag'* is Filipino for Spanish *'mesa'*, while *'silid'* is for *'cuarto'.*

[46] Some examples of 3D or 360-degree virtual exhibitions that opened during the pandemic include the Chinese Heritage Centre in Singapore (CHC 2020); Singapore's IRAS Gallery (2020); Chinese Arts Now's *Two Temple Place Digital Exhibition* in the UK (CAN 2021); and more recently Haroko Studio's 360-degree virtual tours (2022).

straddled the material and the virtual, the offline and the online, even work and life. It is augmented reality in the most basic sense – a home-made one. This is how I experimented on merging both online and offline (or onsite) spaces into one coherent experience, by curating the abstract ideas and concrete objects of Southeast Asian visual culture.

Through this paracuratorial experiment, I demonstrated how 'visual culture is the visual construction of the social, not just the social construction of vision' (Mitchell 2002:170). This also led me to imagine relevant dialectics that became apparent as I conceptualised the experiment – bed and desk, desk and room, room and house, house and community, community and individual, individual and bed, among others. I realised, for instance, that my room during lockdown is no longer an intimate, personal space reserved for resting and sleeping; this function is now solely relegated to my bed as my room has split into two areas: a working space and a private space. In effect, the 'tiny desk' in my room is no longer part of my room but is now lending itself to my social and work life; it is now an extension of the outside/public space by way of my computer screen.

As a visual culture experiment, *Mesa Sa Kwarto* relates with the idea of shared spaces and spatial connections in the face of what is digital and virtual, which is all the more made obvious by our lack of physical movement and social interactions during the pandemic. I consider it as a challenge to borders and boundaries and a concession to global/local, regional/national, national/local, as well as regional/local dichotomies of ASEAN and ASEAN identity. For a Southeast Asian citizen, such as myself, through the online encounters made possible by this online public exhibition, how rare it is to actually find a space where I can meet with my fellow Southeast Asians! Unlike, say, in Europe or the EU bloc, another regional organisation, where its geopolitical, regional organisation is more formalised and systematised (i.e. allowing borderless mobility and EU citizenship legally), ASEAN as an organisation is practically still in the conceptual stages despite its fifty-year existence. This is one of the realisations that we had learned from interacting and interfacing with our fellow Southeast Asians by regularly 'e-meeting' via *Mesa Sa Kwarto.*

Hence, in that very spatial construct of the online exhibition, we were able to experience and express what we have in common – as much as our differences. And that commonality is, perhaps, our critical consciousness of ASEAN's community as a whole.

Through *Mesa Sa Kwarto,* I was also able to tease out some possible answers to my research questions, as outlined in the introduction (Chapter I: Section I). First, by using familiar objects to elicit images and imaginations of Southeast Asia, I effectively engaged members of the international public to consciously reflect on what Southeast Asia means to them. This contributed a response to my first[47] and second[48] research questions in that the 'how' entails the practice of curating a visual/virtual experience that is reflexive and provocative. While the curatorial process was only partially participatory in that as sole curator of *Mesa Sa Kwarto* I merely executed the ideas of the focus group participants into an online 'tiny desk' exhibition, the experiment still demonstrated the necessity of participatory methods in contemporary curatorial practices. Resembling the imagination of a 'community museum/ exhibition' (De la Paz 2011:159-164) or 'constituent museum' (Byrne *et al.* 2018:12; Hernández 2018:129), *Mesa Sa Kwarto* was not produced by an institution but instead initiated by an ordinary ASEAN citizen. And in spite of the 'tiny desk' exhibition resembling the neutral aesthetics of the so-called 'white cube' (a familiar feature of modern gallery and museum spaces), the experience was still very different in that it had practically been viewed and visited through videoconferencing (e.g. Zoom), in effect blending or merging into the personal space of the viewer (i.e. in their room through their desk-top computer). Viewers could also ask questions and discuss among themselves what the displayed objects may mean to them and how each item, or collectively, relates to their imagination of Southeast Asia because the Zoom meeting room acts as a *typical working space.* The hallowed experience of

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[47] (RQ1) How do Southeast Asians imagine ASEAN, as well as our belongingness and identity in relation to this region?

[48] (RQ2) In what ways can images and image-making serve as productive tools for visualising the collective imagination of Southeast Asia? (How can participatory photography render visible our individual and collective imagination/s of Southeast Asia? What is the role of curating images in this imaginative process?)

the ‘white cube’, which puts artworks on a pedestal, is thus subverted and made ordinary, mundane, or banal.

Mesa Sa Kwarto partially resolved my study aims in that the discussions revolving around the ASEAN-ness of the objects displayed on Zoom contributed to both the official and unofficial discourses of what our ASEAN identity means. In Chapter IV (Section C), I delve further into how this paracuratorial experiment figures in the theory of (visual) identity-participation, which I have been developing as one of my main aims.

B. *Made in ASEAN:* online exhibition and virtual gallery

Made in ASEAN is an online exhibition that opened on 15 November 2020. It showcased not only photographic images culled from this study but also live engagements such as curator talks, exhibition walk-throughs, and interactive games that ran until 15 December 2020 (all were held over Zoom). After the exhibition run, the virtual gallery remained open to the public indefinitely.

Co-curated by Chan and Goh (Singapore), Chow-Paul (UK/Singapore), and Vidanes (Philippines), this online exhibition served as the ‘main event’ of the project – ‘featuring’ all the other paracuratorial experiments in the sidelines or, in the words of the curatorial team, as ‘side exhibitions’ (namely, *Mesa Sa Kwarto, Anonymised Skies, CrossWorld Puzzle)* because they ran alongside the main exhibition. Altogether, these initiatives contribute towards an *arte útil* or constituent museum experience that the public can participate in. In this section, I only focus on the exhibition of digital images (i.e. virtual gallery) to discuss what the curatorial output attained and what we learned during the production of this *entirely online experience.* My discussion of the other ‘side exhibitions’ follows this section; although I already expounded on *Mesa Sa Kwarto* in the previous section because, as a paracuratorial experiment, the ‘tiny desk’ conceptually and chronologically preceded our curatorial collaboration *Made in ASEAN.* Moreover, *Mesa Sa Kwarto* served as the ‘physical archive’ upon which the virtual experience of *Made in ASEAN* is based.

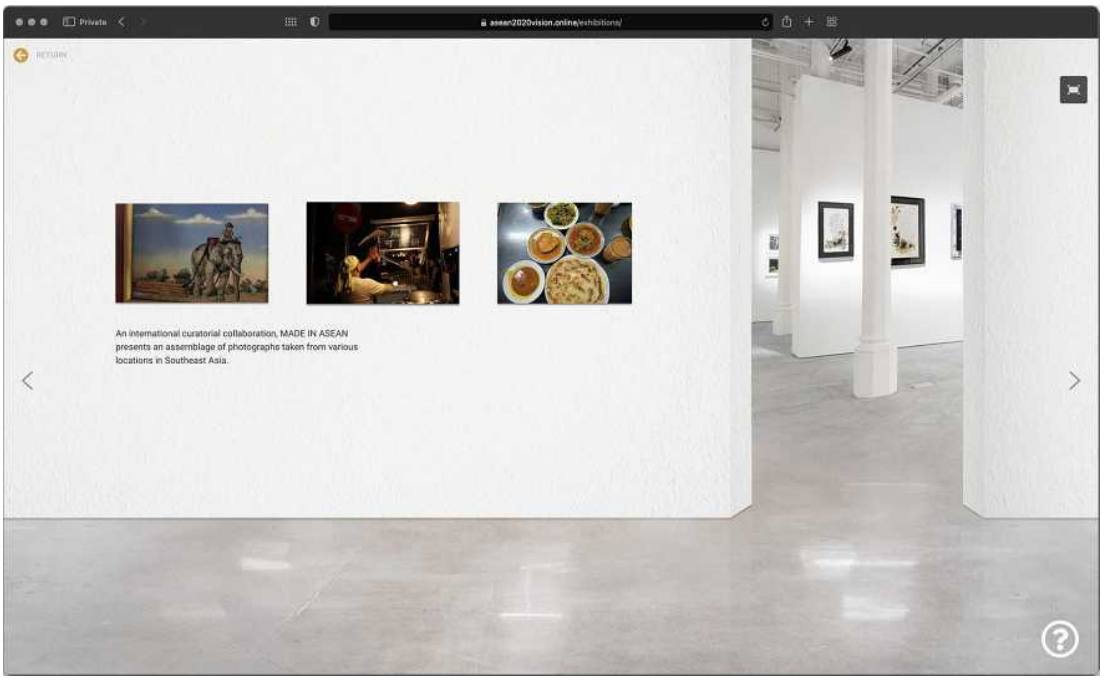

Image 14: *'Made in ASEAN' virtual gallery*

As I recounted in my methodology (Chapter II), during the latter stages of our online data-gathering I had already discussed with the participants my intention to publicise the outcomes of our participatory photography sessions (i.e. the photographs they produced). This information did nudge some of the participants who come from the arts sector (or creative industry background) to imagine the output as an online photography exhibition.

For instance, Goh, who works at the National Arts Council Singapore, related her interest in using the images to curate her own project alongside Chan. Similarly, Vidanes, who is employed at Reed Exhibitions as a designer, volunteered to assist in the creation of a website. Meanwhile, Chow-Paul, who facilitates youth projects at Asia-Europe Foundation, offered to serve as co-facilitator in our online curatorial collaboration. This is how the co-curators of *Made in ASEAN* opted to collaborate in the lead-up to launching the online exhibition (around October 2020). As co-curators, they had different personal and professional interests in the project; for example, Goh wanted to enrich her experience in curatorial work and exhibition-making during the pandemic – as there was a sudden halt of art projects at the onset of the lockdown. On the other hand, Chow-Paul saw it as an opportunity to widen her knowledge in international relations and public diplomacy.

While we remained flexible at the outset to take on different roles and responsibilities in curating *Made in ASEAN,* eventually I observed that each of my co-curators naturally gravitated towards different ways of contributing to the project based on their strengths. For instance, Vidanes assisted me in designing and moderating the website, practically helping me convert my initial plan of having onsite, physical exhibitions into an entirely online format (again, due to Covid-19). Meanwhile, Chow-Paul led most of our curatorial discussions, especially in analysing the images and reminding everyone of their co-participants' contributions. From an arts management and culture sector perspective, Goh shaped the inputs from the focus group discussions to suit the curatorial purpose of *Made in ASEAN.* Lastly, Chan provided some essential digital and technical assistance alongside Goh and Vidanes. Thus, each became involved much longer than the rest of their co-participants, and

without prior monetary compensation.[49] Hence, apart from co-curating and co-editing our selection of images, each of them identified tasks and factors that I would not have possibly accomplished on my own. Each co-curator's role exemplified the participatory nature of the project in that they voluntarily contributed to the different curatorial stages, from planning to execution, to feedback gathering. The process, therefore, assured me that the decision to collaborate in curating the online exhibition is the most appropriate approach for the project to achieve its participatory aims.

In the 'making of' *Made in ASEAN,* one of my main roles as the lead co-curator was to offer some guidance (I had the most years of experience in curating and exhibition design). Hence, I intimated some learnings that I drew from my being involved in two international exhibitions, *Almost There* (Vargas Museum 2017) and *Ties of History* (Vargas Museum 2018) – which I already explained (see Chapter I). Objectively speaking, both are good examples of how a curatorial undertaking could be used to foster what Sabapathy (2018: 275) refers to as a 'regional outlook' instead of merely offering what I refer to as a 'parade of nations' approach; photography scholar Zhuang calls this the 'nation-centric approach' (Zhuang 2016:14). When 'circumscribed by national boundaries' (Sabapathy 2018:275), an exhibition could barely be productive in enriching our perspective of ASEAN-ness. In devising *Made in ASEAN,* we knew that while 'Southeast Asia' is a significant subject for our curatorial project, focusing on ASEAN achieves a much clearer framing – hence the title is not *Made in Southeast Asia,* but rather *Made in ASEAN.* (The readers may be interested in how I further differentiate the two in Chapter V: Section A). In addition, even as first-time curators, presenting an exhibition about ASEAN is something that the study participants could be comfortable or even confident with because each of them grew up not only learning about it but also performing aspects of it. Their experiences mirror my own education on ASEAN membership as well (recall Chapter I: Section D). In several ways, perhaps our shared formative years led us to imagine ourselves as 'made' in the image of ASEAN – hence, our title, *Made in ASEAN.*

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[49] However, to formally recognise their extra work and diligence, I applied for conference funding for them to participate in the conference proceedings of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) held fully online in 2021.

Image 15: *'Made in' hem tag for clothing (Made in Cambodia, designed in France)*
Martin Vidanes © 2020

Image 16: *'French tea' by TWG (Singapore brand)*
Yammy Teerawatsakul © 2020

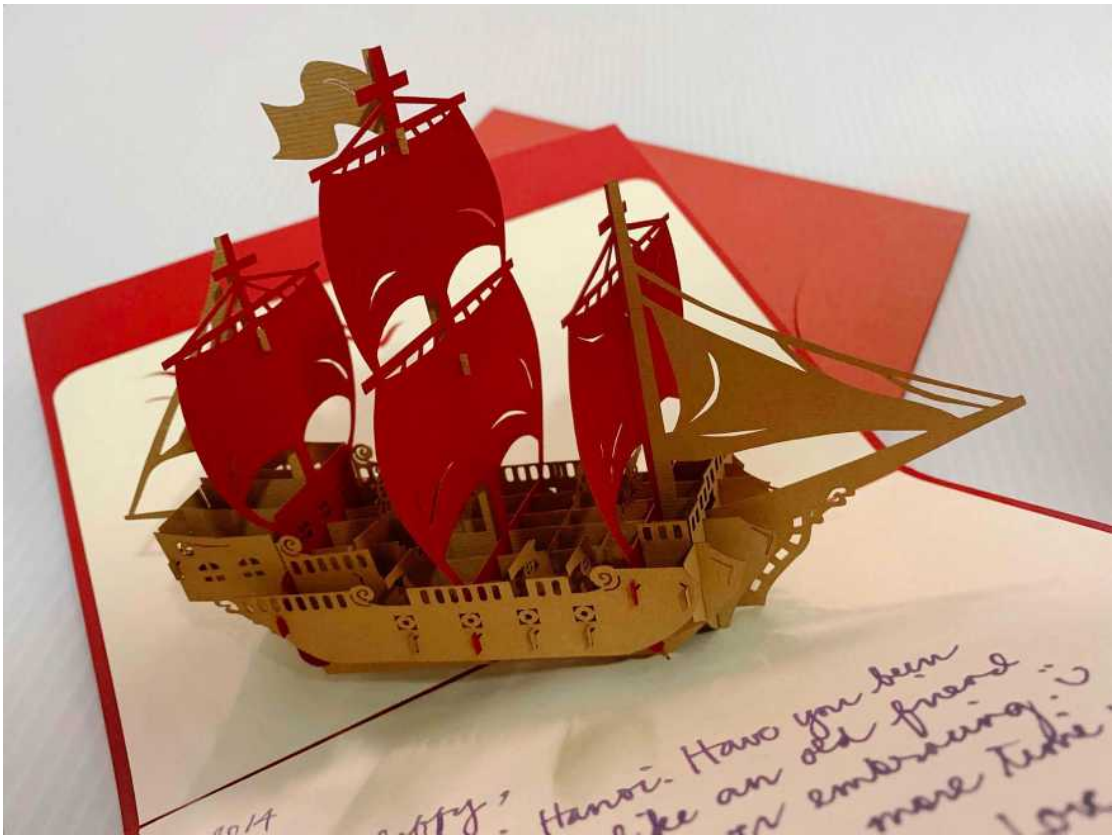

Image 17: *Hanoi pop-up souvenir card*
KJCA © 2020

Therefore, we curated *Made in ASEAN* as a visual discourse that frames Southeast Asians' collective imagination of the ASEAN imaginary as an assemblage. Choosing the title with particular attention to ASEAN or ASEAN-ness being 'made' calls attention to regionalism as a process of production. ASEAN is where culture, ideas, and products are constructed – *hand-made, man-made, self-made*, and so on. I believe that our coming up with this idea ties beautifully back to the provenance of the everyday, found objects that we took photographs of and included in our co-editing *(Images 7-10, 15-17)* – calling attention to ASEAN as a geopolitical trade bloc where, apart from China and other countries in the Global South, the manufacturing of goods comprises an important segment of the world's transnational and regional economies.

As exemplified by the pieces of clothing to the local tea brand, to the handcrafted (post)card (see *Images 15-17),* these personal items bring quite a feeling of nostalgia. After all, Southeast Asia 'used to be' known as a region that pivots between European empires and the Americas – as if recalling its role in exporting labour, manufacturing goods, and producing raw materials from the bygone colonial times until present. Vidanes' personal snapshot of the clothing tag of a Hong Kong brand, i.e. 'Made in Cambodia, Designed in France', even illustrates how material culture is a product of diaspora and hybridity, fueling the flux of peoples that blurs the boundaries of identity/ies (Pechurina 2020; Appadurai 2013; Hall 2003; see also Hall 2000). Meanwhile, Teerawatsakul's photo of the fancy tea boxes almost poses as a response to Chow-Paul's photograph of the Disney mug, recalling how the trade of tea and similar herbs and spices is hardly a monopoly of China in the region (as these products are traditionally attributed to China). The pop-up card of a European ship, which was a souvenir sent to me by a friend, brings to mind not only Viet Nam's long history with the French but also (speaking as a Filipino) Spain's enduring establishment of the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines. These enduring legacies are hitherto reminiscent of the way the region's East-West heritage had been carved. Yet what was 'made' (i.e. the past) could never be undone and so we could now only appreciate the image of Southeast Asia from the perspective of an observer – similar to a

gallery or museum visitor who views still life artefacts. Only, what we were viewing are our shared national, regional, and personal histories.

Moreover, aside from the ‘making of’ these constructs, from ideologies to commodities, we likewise explored what is ‘make-do’ or ‘make believe’ or ‘makeshift’ during the Covid-19 pandemic. As compared to what is already in the past (i.e. the ‘made’), these are the things that we can still experience in the present. In other words, we can still exert our influence over things that are in flux. Our curatorial statement, therefore, sheds light on the ‘making do’ or ‘making believe’ of Southeast Asia as never truly completed. Even what is ‘makeshift’ is expected to ‘shift’ into something else – a temporary solution – and these are the things that we can always participate in. The exhibition title *Made in ASEAN* signals the ‘made-ness’ of ASEAN’s identity in itself; such a construct teeters between the theoretical and the practical.

Curating *Made in ASEAN* during the Covid-19 lockdown pushed our search for meanings. By regularly interacting online, we engaged with what was already a given (i.e. the pandemic) while, at the same time, we practised our own hand in things. Hence, our virtual meetings were not only productive but also meaningful. Just like how the ‘founding fathers’ of ASEAN imagined their own version of Southeast Asia in spite of their postcolonial subjectivities – I discuss this in the section on *ASEAN Manifesto* (Section D) – through the online exhibition we imagined another version of ‘ASEAN’, and that is a ‘work in progress’. In a way, by being incomplete, the artistic practices in the form of curated works that we were tapping into act as a product of the ‘dissensus’ that Rancière (2010:140) refers to as the crux of politics and art. In short, we could offer neither lessons nor solutions but only discourses.

While I mentioned in my methodology (Chapter II) that setting up the online focus groups was not necessarily due to the pandemic – as everyone lived in separate countries anyway – we nevertheless collaborated with each other while Covid-19 served as both an agent and a backdrop. Some of the photographs that we selected in fact picture our everyday life during lockdown (as several were photographed from the view of our windows). Some even noticeably lacked crowds of people. (See *Images 18* to *21.)* Participating in the midst of the global pandemic also meant that some of our exciting and

innovative ideas had to be set aside for us to make progress – obviously our way of *making do* and even *making believe.* However, producing makeshift solutions did not necessarily mean that we were settling for the mediocre; in fact we acknowledged that because of the pandemic, it was a necessity for us to manage our expectations and work within our means – while taking care of our families. For instance, instead of holding a travelling exhibition, which is what I originally intended, we had to settle for virtual means instead. (Note that some participants did volunteer to organise or support the physical staging of the travelling exhibition in case that the lockdown situation would be lifted.) Hence the eventual output that is *Made in ASEAN* emerged as a unique format of exhibition-making.

Through *Made in ASEAN,* we realised how the regional imaginary of ASEAN-ness could only be rendered visible by bringing together multiple vantage points. This necessary juxtaposition of different images is not even for the purpose of comparing or contrasting. Rather, it is necessary for the collective image to coalesce, and then emerge. This collective image is not even the whole in and of itself, it is yet another perspective to add to the multiplicity of views. Knowing how our practices of seeing always shift and how the act of seeing and the faculty of sight (or optics) can be fleeting, we curated *Made in ASEAN* to crystallise our shared imagination at that point of our lives. We made use of exhibition-making as a practical means of communicating, documenting, recording, and storing our ideas for the wider public to appreciate and eventually engage in.

Co-curating the online exhibition effectively helped us keep track of both our constant and changing ideas since we first started our focus group discussions. When asked why we chose to photograph and or include the images in our selection, the participants had various points to make:

> For me, it was whether any person from ASEAN would see it, and say yes, that is ASEAN... or whether the photo is something that I would see in a museum or a gallery for its appeal… (Chan, Zoom meeting, 6 September 2020)

> I selected some of the photos that I felt, like, I wanted to travel to these places. (Goh, Zoom meeting, 6 September 2020)

Image 18: *(Everyday) Life during Covid-19 lockdown*
Freya Chow-Paul © 2020

Image 19: *(Everyday) Life during Covid-19 lockdown*
Kathryn Kyaw © 2020

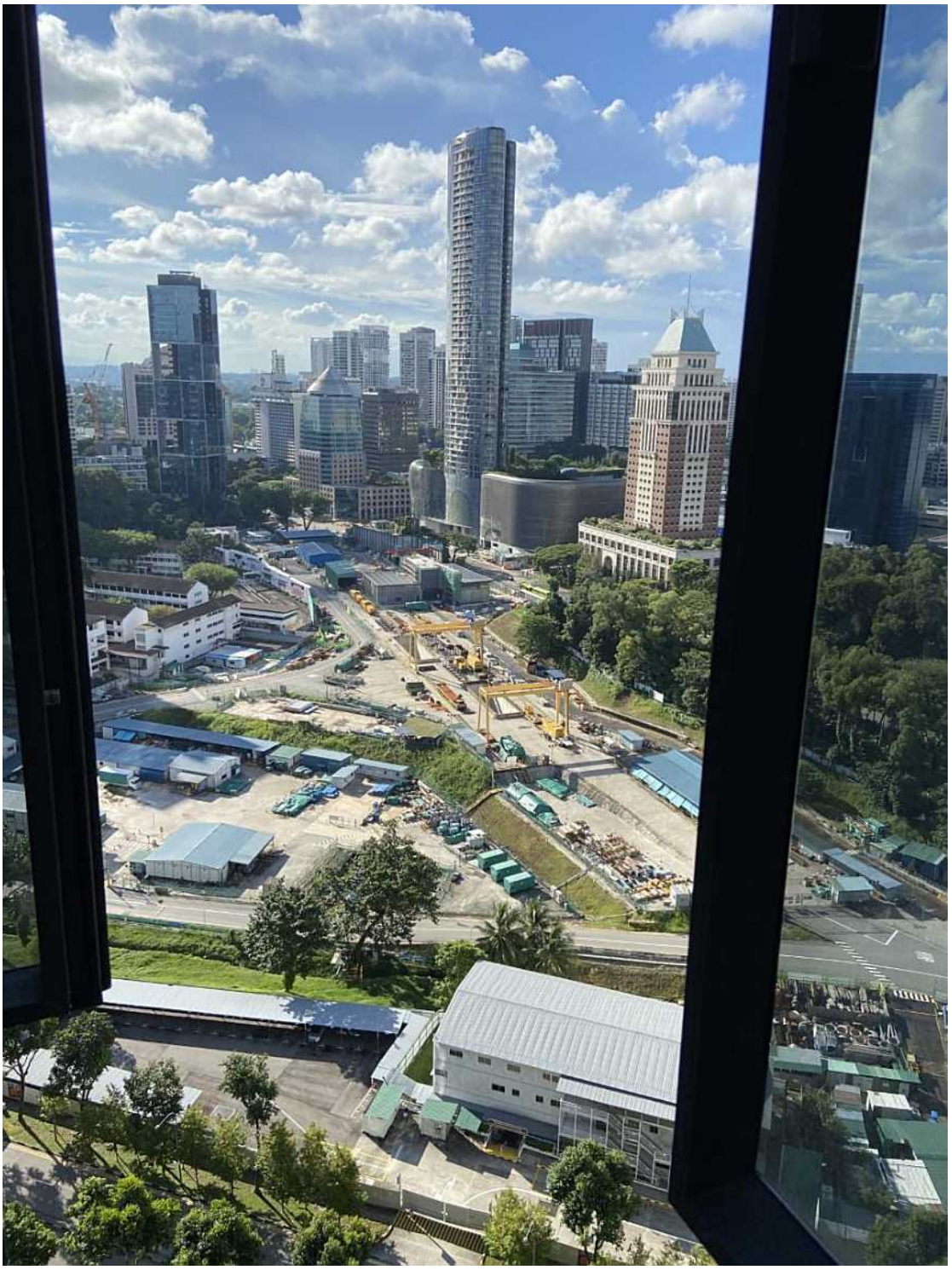

Image 20: *(Everyday) Life during Covid-19 lockdown*
Kerrine Goh © 2020

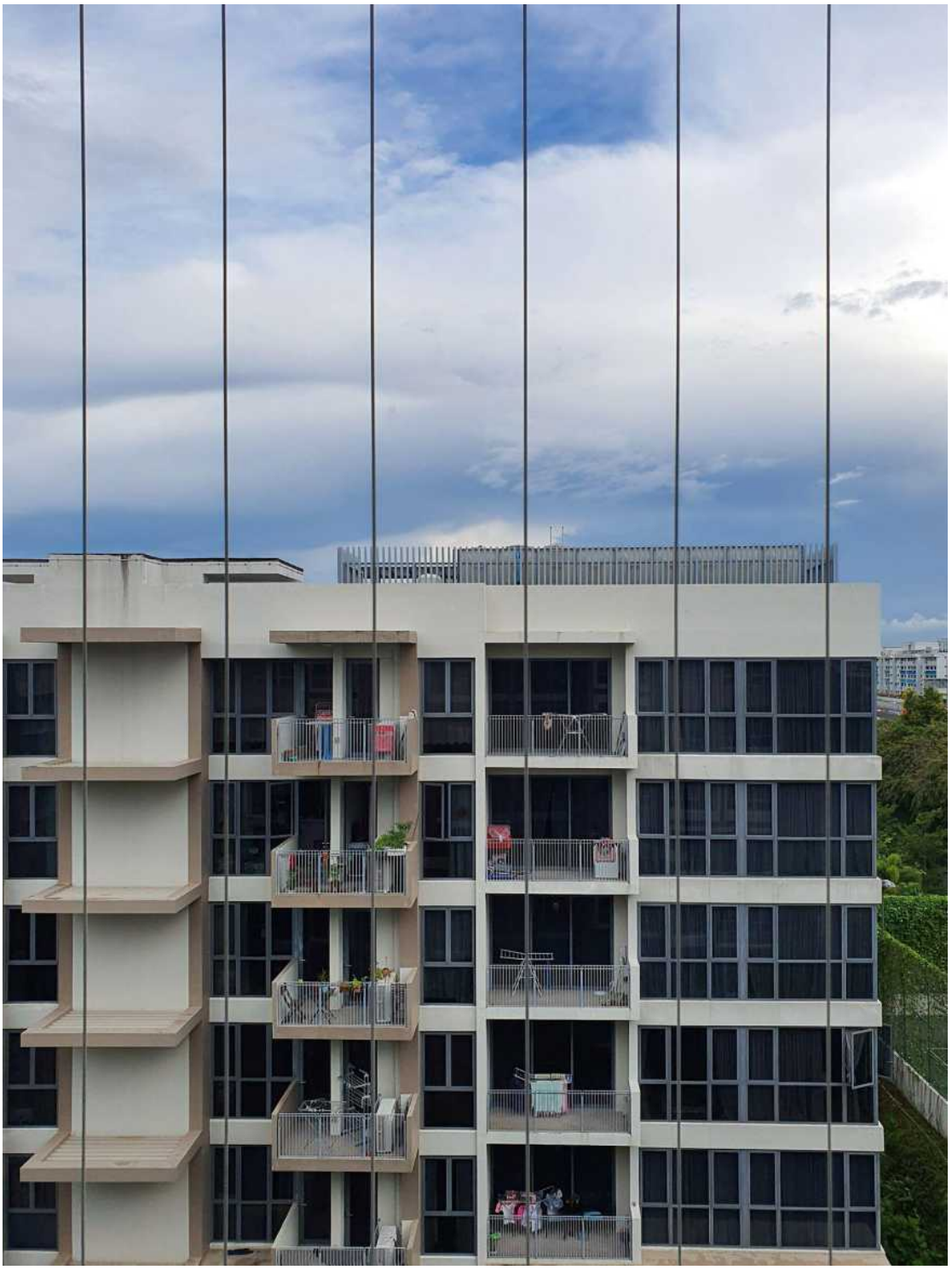

Image 21: *(Everyday) Life during Covid-19 lockdown*
Martin Vidanes © 2020

While each of us had personal opinions as well as reasons for choosing and curating the photographs, what we shared were our identification of certain themes. These themes we easily attributed to certain sets of images, such as the theme of ‘sharing food’ as a cultural trait:

> I think the things that were standing out to me were like the meals and people coming together in those moments, so all the messiness of it is very, I don’t want to use the word ‘unique’ but different at least. (Chow-Paul, Zoom meeting, 6 September 2020)

> These photos that stood out during our conversations in the last month or so… like, I sort of flashed back to topics that emerged from our conversations, like ideas of food, of space... (Vidanes, Zoom meeting, 6 September 2020)

Some images convey culture-specific activities or local customs, such as a few photographs of traditional artefacts and street scenes. Other images depict capitalism, entertainment, and tourism, as exemplified by the photographs of branded goods and souvenir items. For several pictures showing diaspora and expat life, those were taken by the participants who were at the time living or working in an ASEAN city other than in their own country.

Additionally, other themes that clearly emerged were elicited by some images that show issues related to the environment, inequality, and of course Covid-19. A select few portrayed international relations and public diplomacy, as well as politics and religion. Each of these themes we identified was not specific to ASEAN in that one could even argue that these are different facets of a contemporary modernised society. However, what I want to emphasise is that how collectively our curatorial team sifted these themes out of the whole selection. Perhaps, after months of discussions about ASEAN, we were at a point when it was already quite second nature for us to identify these themes. Or, perhaps still, without any idea or imagination of what the region is in the first place, the only conceivable images of the region that we could picture at that point were its different socioeconomic functions, from the cultural to the political. In other words, perhaps the images simply revealed to us what we were already familiar with.

Despite the project having a strong art and culture flavour, what I still noticed was the lack of images that rendered visible the art sector of ASEAN – except for the occasional arts and crafts. Unlike all the other Southeast

Asian themed exhibitions that came before *Made in ASEAN,* our curatorial focus mostly zeroed in the region's sociocultural and sociopolitical aspects instead of its arts sector. Thus, the co-curators practically conveyed what the images of their co-participants have imagined: the functions of ASEAN as an organisation and regional community outside of the art world – despite the task at hand operating as an artistic endeavour. This is not only reasonable but also understandable because, from the very beginning, I did not ask the participants to create art but instead reflect on the ASEAN regionalisation process. Perhaps the only art orientated or creative industry related topic that had been included was the tourism sector (see *Images 9, 10,* and *17,* which are photographs of souvenirs). In developing countries such as the majority of ASEAN member states arts funding may be scarce, but tourism spending is almost always a priority.

With the tourism sector as one of ASEAN's main revenue-generating industries (ASEANStats 2018:online; ASEAN 2015:online; Chheang 2013: 24-25), it is not hard to expect small and medium enterprise galleries, and publicly funded museums closing, if not merely coping during the pandemic. During the early months of lockdown in 2020, the arts sector largely felt the impact of the pandemic, and many cultural and entertainment spaces were disrupted or even forced to close indefinitely (UNESCO 2021; Olah 2020; Travkina & Sacco 2020). As many exhibition spaces were affected, we had the idea of offering an alternative instead; thus, *Made in ASEAN* transformed from a mere website catalogue of images to a good example of *arte útil* that used digital information and platforms (Gogarty 2017; Aikens 2015). In a way we offered 'really useful knowledge' (Aikens 2015) by presenting it as an art experience despite the lack of gallery and museum spaces during the global pandemic, and an alternative to paid online shows that other venues offered.

When combined, ASEAN statistically ranks high globally in online and social media activity (McKinsey & Company 2014; Wilson 2014). Hence, the circulation of online images and videos, as well as virtual interactions, keeps the vast populations widely (inter)connected. Thus, the region as an inter-connected space of data, information, and media re-emerges as a 'network society' (Fuchs 2008; 2007) by means of 'polymedia' (Madianou and Miller

2012:14). These are made more apparent by ‘glocalised’ visual culture as we demonstrated in *Made in ASEAN.* The ‘virtual gallery’ stitched together some recognisable galleries across different ASEAN countries.[50] For this interactive design, I was ably assisted by Vidanes, whose experience in website design proved beneficial alongside his curatorial contributions. We both decided how to visually represent the exhibition space in a way that was not too costly and time consuming – by means of a ‘digital bricolage’. While ‘bricolage’ per se is defined as, according to Sturken and Cartwright (2009:78), a ‘mode of adaptation in which things (mostly commodities) are put to uses for which they were not intended and in ways that dislocate them from their normal or expected context’, what *Made in ASEAN* offers is a ‘make do’ or ‘makeshift’ exhibition, reverting to how the ‘bricolage’ was originally used (Lévi-Strauss 1962:30). Thus, the assemblage brings together different experiences that allow for the construct of ASEAN to virtually materialise: a user-friendly website leading to a slideshow of images that resembles the real-life spatial proportions of an actual gallery space. Notice, still, that we also designed the virtual space in the likeness of the so-called ‘white cube’ (see *Image 14)* to impress upon the observer that what they are looking at is an actual gallery space. Without the white cube as an easily recognisable exhibition format or template, it would have been more difficult to achieve the illusion of an actual gallery space.

[50] via the URL: https://asean2020vision.online/exhibitions

Image 22: *Event poster for the exhibition launch and virtual gallery*

To promote the virtual gallery, we disseminated a poster (see *Image 22)* and wrote our curatorial statement[51] in English – ASEAN's *lingua franca* in both official and unofficial regional discourses. We translated our curatorial statement in various ASEAN languages[52] – hoping that we would connect to an even wider Southeast Asian audience. In a way, I was reminded by what Reilly (2018:105) identifies as 'the regional specialist's understanding' not only of the socioeconomic and sociopolitical contexts of our curatorial work but also 'the local languages within which the works are being produced [as] invaluable and can broaden the sample base of artists from which to choose'.

To make our curatorial statement more accessible, Chow-Paul volunteered to record an audible version.[53] It lent the virtual gallery quite an aural experience – if a viewer listens to the audio clip while viewing the exhibition, they may imagine more vividly the virtual space they are now experiencing. Because a virtual gallery has much more sensory limitations as compared to a physical space, complementing the visual with sound makes the experience more spatial. Thus, aside from the audible curatorial statement, we likewise included an *audio guide* titled *Medi(a)t(is)ation*[54] which was inspired by the performance piece (paracuratorial experiment #1: curator as animateur) that I presented at the NSU's summer practice in 2019.

In terms of translating the curatorial statement to local languages as I mentioned above, the move was initiated by the co-participants during our focus groups (i.e. prior to our curatorial collaboration) to offer the public a counter-perspective to ASEAN's official use of English. It was a compelling idea in highlighting the culture and diversity of the region, which not only demonstrates the way the co-participants and co-curators understand the

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[51] The curatorial statement is downloadable via the URL: https://asean2020vision.online/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/MADE-IN-ASEAN-Curatorial-Statements-2020-2021.pdf

[52] via the URL: https://asean2020vision.online/#translate

[53] Listen to the audible curatorial statement via the URL: https://asean2020vision.online/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/MADE-IN-ASEAN-Curatorial-Statement.mp3 (3 minutes, 6 seconds total running time)

[54] Listen to the audio guide via the URL: https://asean2020vision.online/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/MADE-IN-ASEAN-Meditating-Southeast-Asia.mp3 (5 minutes, 55 seconds running time)

regional community but also how the use of local dialects and languages can act as an 'empowering' gesture (Nowak 2020:831; see also Reilly 2018:105). This use of language as a complementary tool alongside the visual is one ideation that we further explored in *ASEAN Manifesto,* a paracuratorial experiment turned performance piece that uses spoken word poetry together with the photographs exhibited in *Made ASEAN.* Inspired by *Mother Tongue,*[55] a poetry piece contributed by Ooi (Malaysia/UK), our use of languages and speech counterbalance the dominant form of visual texts of the exhibition.

What our *Made in ASEAN* collaboration did exemplify is how curating, editing, and exhibition making can be an entirely collaborative process. Thus, the outcomes of this paracuratorial experiment proved satisfactory in that we were able to produce a virtual experience commensurate with our initial plans of staging an onsite exhibition. It entailed various displays from photographic media to video and motion graphics, as well as audio guides, all of which can still be repurposed or restaged in physical spaces such as an actual exhibition gallery, if future opportunities emerge.

We also measured the success of the online exhibition by looking at the numbers of visitors throughout the one-month exhibition run of *Made in ASEAN*. According to Google Analytics, the website reached an audience that surpassed our targets had it been staged in a physical exhibition gallery space. The total 'unique pageviews'[56] from 15 until 30 November 2020 had reached 536; although we take note of the average time on the page which is merely less than 3 minutes (see *Image 23)*. These statistics increased from 1 until 15 December 2020, counting 811 'unique pageviews' and an average of 3 minutes and 18 seconds time spent per page on the website (see *Image 24)*. These statistical averages must be interpreted carefully with intelligent assumptions because they do not imply that all our website visitors looked at the virtual gallery for only 3 minutes. This is because data can be skewed by the sheer volume of website visitors; this means that the majority of viewers browsed the website quickly. This in turn brought the average viewing time

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[55] listen to the audio recording via the URL: https://asean2020vision.online/#mother-tongue

[56] unique pageviews are theoretically representative of the total number of unique users that viewed the specific page of the whole website during a specific period of time; see also how Google Analytics works via: https://support.google.com/analytics/answer/12159447?hl=en

to around 3 minutes or less despite a good number of viewers, say around 50 visitors, staying for longer than 3 minutes, or perhaps around 20 viewing the virtual gallery for more than thirty minutes to around an hour as opposed to hundreds of visitors staying for just a few minutes.

To better understand these statistical insights and the specific count of website visitors, we looked at the pre-launch and post-event numbers from 13 November 2020 to 10 January 2021 on our Google Analytics report (see *Image 25).* The report logged a total number of 672 users – the individually unique website visitors – and an average session of 5 minutes. And looking at the dates way beyond our exhibition run, we were able to gauge an even more accurate reporting. My safest assumption was that the 30 to 50 guests we *personally* invited through email and social media actually stayed longer to view the virtual gallery while around hundreds of users who chanced upon the links on our social media announcements and paid/boosted adverts (i.e. ads boosted on Facebook) merely stayed below 3 minutes, thus pulling the total average viewing time lower as shown in the Google Analytics reports (see *Images 23-25).*

In total the website has already garnered about 9,043 views since its launch – two years since the online exhibition and live events.

Image 23: *Screenshot of the Google Analytics record of the project website, showing the number of views from 15 until 30 November 2020, first half of the one-month exhibition run; the 'exclude ADMIN' parameters indicate that the statistics discount my personal viewing of the website*

Image 24: *Screenshot of the Google Analytics record of the project website, showing the number of views from 1 until 15 December 2020, latter half of the one-month exhibition run; the 'exclude ADMIN' parameters indicate that the statistics discount my personal viewing of the website*

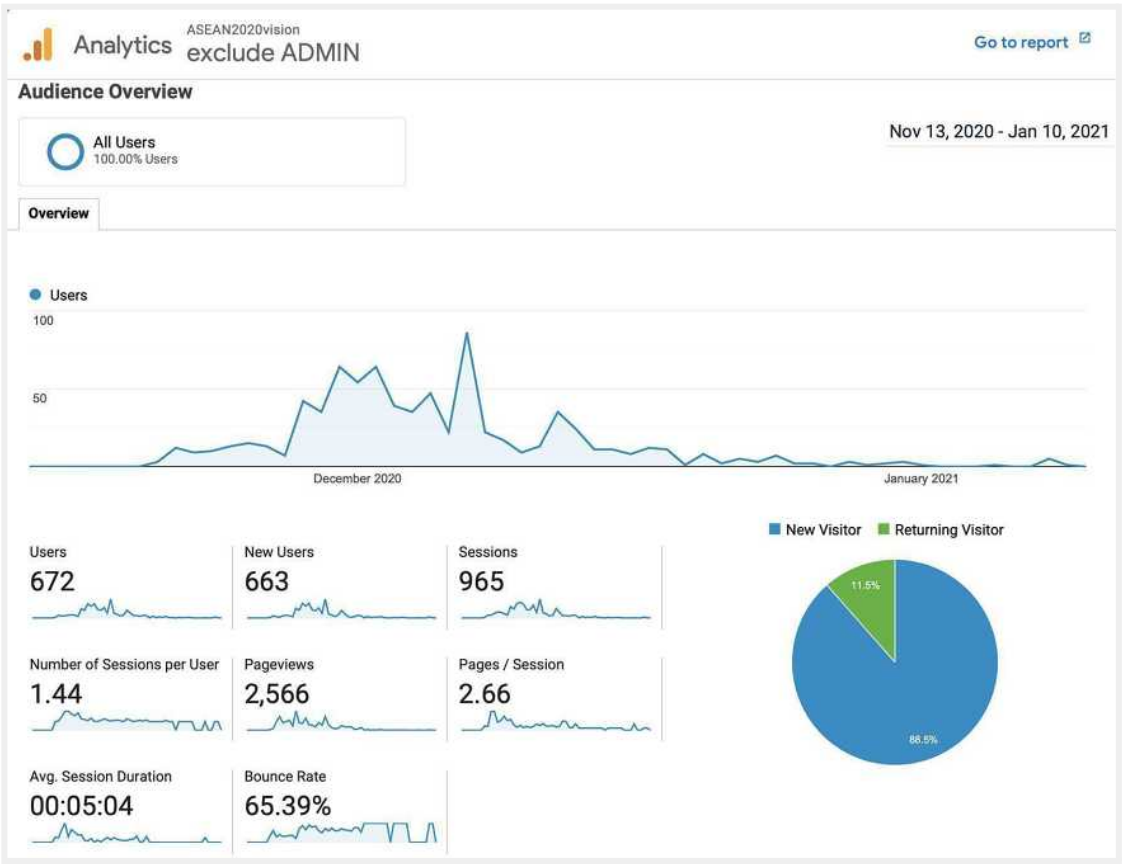

Image 25: *Screenshot of the Google Analytics record of the website, showing the total number of visitors (users) from pre-launch (13 November 2020) to post-event (10 January 2021); the 'exclude ADMIN' parameters indicate that the statistics discount my personal viewing of the website*

As I said earlier (see Chapter II: Section C), the curatorial team had intended various means for the viewing public to leave their feedback. Upon checking the Google Forms, however, only one response was received as compared to a number of submitted photographs via *Anonymised Skies* and even *Photo Voices: Southeast Asia / Elsewhere*. Receiving image uploads from occasional visitors through *Photo Voices: Southeast Asia / Elsewhere*[57] was exciting despite the underwhelming outcome – as I already discussed (see Chapter II: Section C). It is an automated form, hence a 'self-curating' platform which we used as a means of receiving contributions and feedback in the form of images from our viewers. They can also opt to add captions alongside the images they upload, which is what Chow-Paul considered as a useful crowdsourcing function for this type of online exhibition:

> Unrelated to curatorial formats … but I think an interesting outcome especially if something like this, if we go with them / the public using our photos would be asking a question of was there something you were looking for that you couldn't find? Or something along this line of we as a group have been discussing for so many weeks and have produced all these photos but an individual out of this group still couldn't find what they were looking for when they were trying to define ASEAN. Like… how are our / or how narrow or broad are our perspectives? Have we covered all of the bases? (Chow-Paul, Zoom meeting, 30 August 2020)

Even with only a less than expected number of photographs uploaded by our website visitors, altogether their 'visual feedback' shows how some members of the public perceived – or even understood – what *Made in ASEAN* is for or about. They reciprocated the way we rendered our imaginations of ASEAN through the curated photographs in our virtual gallery. This *very public means of reciprocity* is essential in my understanding of the way Southeast Asians are imagining their region-ness and regional kinship which is what my first research question[58] is trying to explore.

Curating *Made in ASEAN* helped us reflect on the ways we construct our imaginations of and visualise ASEAN in ways that can be very similar or contrasting. While the photographs do not necessarily provide answers as to how we imagine our belongingness and identity in relation to ASEAN, as a

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[57] View all image submissions via the URL: https://asean2020vision.online/asean-photovoices

[58] (RQ1) How do Southeast Asians imagine ASEAN, as well as our belongingness and identity in relation to this region?

visual culture it creates an impact. As I intend to shed light on my second research question,[59] by making the curatorial process collaborative and the exhibition participatory (i.e. through the crowdsourcing of images) we truly accounted for multiple perspectives that I, personally, would not even have encountered had I curated the exhibition on my own or simply interviewed respondents, or asked photographers to just contribute images without going through the participatory and collaborative image-making process that I used as a core method throughout this research. Therefore, in answering my third research question,[60] in terms of the necessity of participation, I can argue that the outcome would be more satisfactory as a visual (auto)ethnographic account of the community rather than a mirroring of what the mainstream or 'official' ASEAN discourse already portrays.

This is how I am also able to contribute new knowledge to ASEAN regionalism (see Chapter I: Section J), by using visual culture in enriching our critical understanding of ASEAN's 'official' and 'unofficial' discourses. In Chapter IV, I further discuss various concepts that helped shape and, at the same time, insights that emerged from *Made in ASEAN;* these include how existing representations of Southeast Asia(ns) were challenged by our imagination and visualisation of the region.

C. *Anonymised Skies* and *CrossWorld Puzzle:* imagined intersections

Two curatorial collaborations that ran alongside the online exhibition *Made in ASEAN* served as supplementary activities – options for the viewing public. The first one, Vidanes' (Philippines) curatorial project *Anonymised Skies* which launched on 30 November 2020, was a paracuratorial experiment that asked the online public to take pictures of the skies from wherever they are, then upload them to contribute to a photo gallery of sky images across Southeast

[59] (RQ2) In what ways can images and image-making serve as productive tools for visualising the collective imagination of Southeast Asia? (How can participatory photography render visible our individual and collective imagination/s of Southeast Asia? What is the role of curating images in this imaginative process?)

[60] (RQ3) Why is it necessary for photography and curatorial methods to involve participatory methods when imagining Southeast Asia?

Asia *and elsewhere.* The second, *CrossWorld Puzzle,* with its live sessions running from 5 until 15 December 2020, served as an interactive ‘game’ for the public to imagine the convergence of different lives in ASEAN countries. Co-curators Goh and Chan (Singapore) used the game to explore creative ways of picturing ASEAN as a region through participatory photography and online collaboration. Following their launching events, *Anonymous Skies* and *CrossWorld Puzzle* remained open to the public indefinitely. In this section, I provide a glimpse into my conversations with the three participants-turned-curators while accounting for the outcomes of their separate paracuratorial experiments. I also assess the concepts and theories that contributed to the differences and similarities in the implementations of *Anonymised Skies* and *CrossWorld Puzzle*, and further shed light on some prospects relevant to the emerging practice of curating online images.

At their paracuratorial experimentation stages, both efforts informed my newfound understanding of photography (especially digital photography) as a visualisation tool aside from a documentary technique. And as a tool for visualising, it could prove instrumental in capturing and *performing* abstract concepts because it can render the immaterial visible or palpable, such as how *Anonymised Skies* visualised the seamlessness of the skies of ASEAN, which envelops all the countries and peoples of Southeast Asia, or how in the game of *CrossWorld Puzzle* players can piece together ‘elements’ (or ‘units’) of ASEAN-ness to form a bigger picture. Both initiatives emphasise that curating images is essential to enriching our roles from mere observers to active participants in the ASEAN discourse.

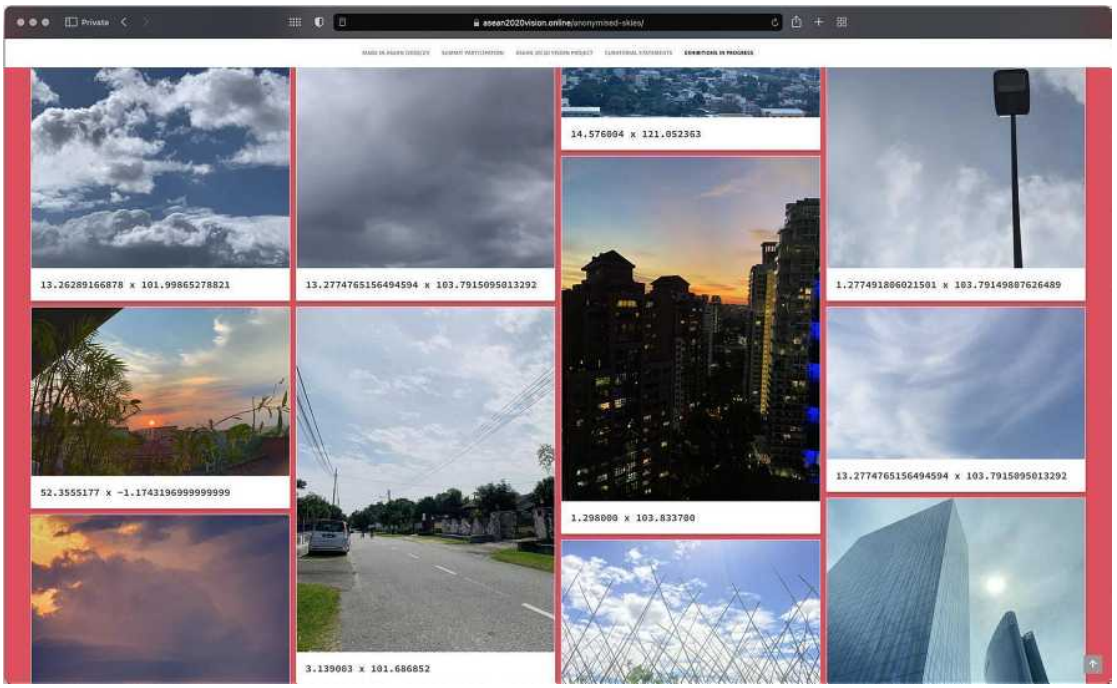

Image 26: *Screenshot of 'Anonymised Skies'*

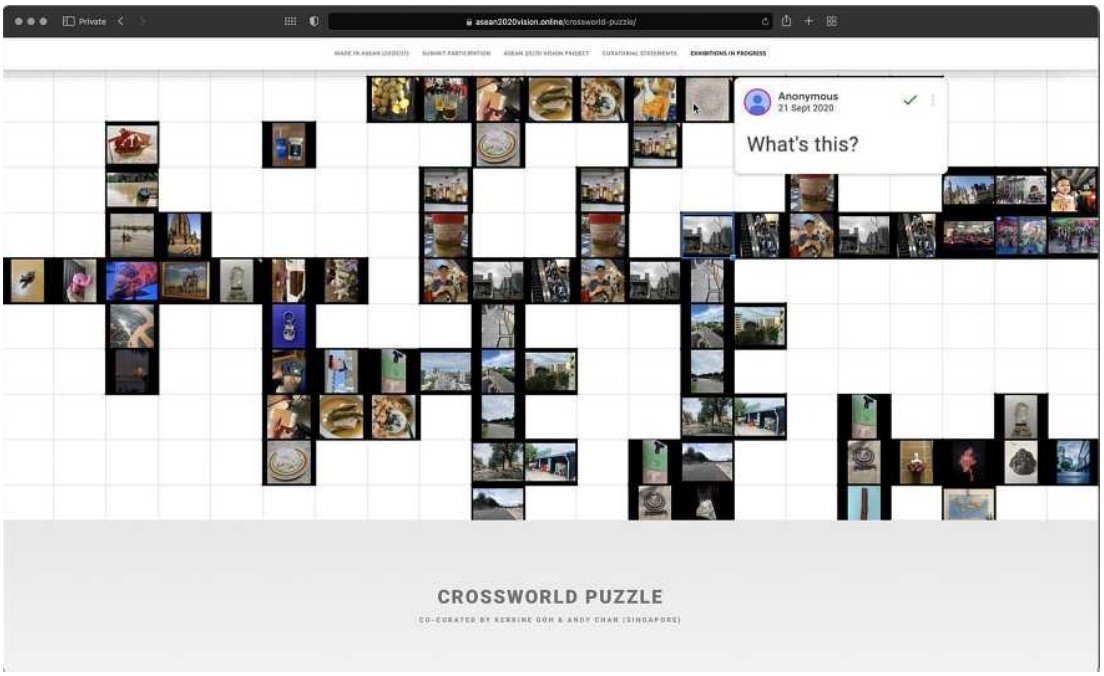

Image 27: *Screenshot of 'CrossWorld Puzzle'*

In *Anonymised Skies*, Vidanes imagined a continuous, panoramic view of the vast sky that blurs and, at the same time, defines the whole expanse of Southeast Asia. However, since his *individual field of vision wa*s quite limited – not to mention the pandemic lockdown all the more limiting our individual views – he needed to engage the public to contribute by simply *gazing up at the sky.* By locating their specific coordinates while taking pictures of the sky, through the online form on the website, Southeast Asian locals – regardless whether they are residents or just visitors – pieced together the same view of ASEAN. Vidanes envisioned this *reciprocity* as a participatory means of redrawing the whole map of Southeast Asia – even extending its geographical reach. In his curatorial statement,[61] he posed a unique challenge to 'find common ground by looking above and beyond:

> So, I actually wanted to pick your brain about the medium I am proposing on my own side exhibition, should it be video or should it be photo, because the original idea I had was to get people from different ASEAN countries on a Zoom meeting at a particular time and just have them point their cameras to the sky, then just record that. So that you're literally looking at what the sky, the colours of the sky, looks like across the ASEAN at the same time. Just to show the variance in colours, the deepness or the saturation or lack of saturation of the blues, the reds, whatever else but I'm thinking that that might be tricky logistically, so maybe either just ask people to take photos of the sky at a very specific time or shoot a 30-second video clip of the sky at a very specific time, say, 3:14pm. (Vidanes, Zoom meeting, 6 September 2020)

> Yeah, and also video, you can always screencap. But, I think, the challenge of the video is that it needs to come with some instructions. It cannot just be pointing to the sky or else we will just see the sky, you might want to suggest panning left or right, or maybe use the rule of thirds to show the view… For me, I think, it all boils down to what you want. For example, if you ask everyone to take photos at a particular time, like, say, 8 o'clock, it means different things in different time zones. Or maybe not just 8 o'clock but like sunrise or sunset, what you'll get is a series of different times and time zones. Or do you want to standardise? (Chan, Zoom meeting, 6 September 2020)

In such a unanimous act of seeing the same plot of sky, Vidanes effectively asks: *are we together?* In other words, Vidanes experimented on an ASEAN imaginary that is 'made one' (or unified) despite the borders, rifts, and seas within the geopolitics of the region. He also called attention to the crucial role

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[61] The curatorial statement may be downloaded via the URL: https://asean2020vision.online/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/MADE-IN-ASEAN-Curatorial-Statements-2020-2021.pdf

of crowdsourcing images to account for different perspectives across the different demographics and geographical vantage points which are rendered possible by the Internet and handheld digital technologies. He used the term ‘ethernet of clouds’ which describes ‘cloud’ technologies that make possible the closer interactions of people in a vast regional area (apart from alluding to the actual physical manifestation of clouds in the skies). Altogether, this offered an interesting perspective in that the convergence of sky images can also be regarded as an ‘intersection’, which was the main idea that inspired both Goh and Chan in *CrossWorld Puzzle.*

Using the photographs as puzzle pieces in an interactive online game, the Singaporean co-curators put into play/practice how we picture ASEAN as a region, and if there are any commonalities in the ways we imagine it. As in the game of crossword puzzle, each row and column correspond to a theme as a common link between themes is represented by an intersection:

> I was thinking of doing something like a visual crossword but I haven't really thought of how to do it logistically because I’ve seen some overlaps in some of the pictures that form very nice intersections, and that’s why I thought of the idea of a crossword. But the interactive element I am not too sure how to do it. Because the clues can come about in the form of asking the participants to give their own photos or it can be prompts in the form of phrases or words, but it can be both as well. I might be using Google Slides because it can be easy to use, especially when shifting the images. (Goh, Zoom meeting, 6 September 2020)

Thus, *CrossWorld Puzzle* served as an ‘interactive’ activity for the public to imagine the convergence of different lives in the region – a counterbalance to the other features of the online exhibition which were barely interactive at all. Transforming *images* into *intersections,* the popular word game was in effect used as a method for imagining ASEAN-ness in practical, step-by-step ways. Thus, the visual ‘play’ builds on or makes sense of various photographs we had taken from places across Southeast Asia – from snapshots of cities, to local cuisines, to shops and souvenirs. Viewers were invited *to look* at the clues scattered here and there and, at the same time, *to solve* them piece by piece – or rather *picture by picture.* In a way, Goh and Chan modified or even innovated participatory photography through a didactic game. Also, unlike in traditional crosswords, participants were invited to fill in this crossword with *their own images.* Thus, it can also serve as a pedagogical tool in educating

the public about ASEAN in a way that transcends language barriers across the region – Southeast Asia has over a thousand dialects and many people are unable to understand English (more on this in Section D).

Unlike Vidanes' imagined 'one-ness' (i.e. ASEAN-ness or the idea of an ASEAN regional community) that is representable by one borderless sky spanning the region, Goh and Chan offer their paracuratorial experiment as an exercise of critically challenging the idea of ASEAN-ness as one-ness. In their curatorial statement, they emphasise that 'the notion of an ASEAN identity seems detached and improbable for ASEAN citizens'.[62]

Such an idea of region-ness that the three co-curators were searching for in both *Anonymised Skies* and *CrossWorld Puzzle* is reminiscent of what Barthes (1977:33-35) previously refers to as *visual rhetoric,* using the notion of 'Italianicity' (i.e. in a piece of advertisement) to demonstrate how identity might be visually theorised. While I am not necessarily pursuing a semiotic analysis of ASEAN-ness in this study, the manner by which the co-curators used images as signifiers of a certain region-ness contributes immensely to my understanding of Southeast Asian-ness as a symbol and a myth.

Moreover, it is also worth mentioning that what Vidanes, Goh, and Chan were able to capture is a renewed interest in the 'hyperreality' of an imagined 'simulacrum' (Baudrillard 1994:80-81) in the form of region-ness. Among Baudrillard's (1994) three orders of simulacra, ASEAN-ness can be considered in a constant flux across all three. From the actual photographs of the skies to everyday life images as seen in *Anonymised Skies* and *Cross-World Puzzle,* the image of ASEAN-ness in both paracuratorial experiments does not necessarily represent reality but instead imagines – or 'precedes' – one. Again, I return to my earlier argument, upon which this whole research is premised, that photographs are not necessarily representational but rather performative. Through crowdsourcing images and curating them, the three co-curators are not merely documenting what ASEAN looks like but, instead, are performing our imaginations of ASEAN-ness. These two paracuratorial experiments – much like *Mesa Sa Kwarto* and *Made in ASEAN* – thus render

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[62] The curatorial statement may be downloaded via the URL: https://asean2020vision.online/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/MADE-IN-ASEAN-Curatorial-Statements-2020-2021.pdf

visible our imaginations of ASEAN through public participation. Thus, the role of crowdsourcing images to view the 'imagined intersections' of ASEAN is a clever way of using bricolage as a means of creating something new. It is a constantly changing bricolage of ASEAN-ness that resembles our everyday life in the region that is in a constant flux. The image is never permanent; it is temporal and can only be pictured from various vantage points that intersect.

> I think in a way, it's also kind of how you describe that travel book idea where you open it up and then you're asking, "where do you think you are?" And that's sort of how the experience was. I think, for me, at least, when I think about it because for a few weeks, you meet with a group of people who, mostly I don't know. And then they'll show me slices of their every day and say, "wait, where's this person from again?" Oh, okay. Because it looks familiar, or, okay. So that's what it looks like there. And then, it's kind of that, like flipping through a book and you don't know where you're going to land. And then get little glimpses here and there, even if it's not the whole picture. (Vidanes, Zoom meeting, 27 September 2020)

This type of digital bricolage is participatory in that it changes and grows the more people add to it – forming a different view of ASEAN, contributing to our *psycho-geographical mapping* of the region in terms of the physical (images) and the thematic (intersections). This puts into practice what we now know about ASEAN while we still grapple with its known 'unknowns', and unknown 'knowns', and unknown 'unknowns'. Adding images to the never-completed imagination is an expression of our 'right to look', and in the words of Mirzoeff (2011:28), it is an act that goes beyond the our mere assembling of images:

> Countervisiality is not [...] simply a matter of assembled visual images, but the grounds on which such assemblages can register as meaningful renditions of a given moment. Thinking the genealogy of visuality and its countervisualities produces both a sense of what is at stake in present-day visualizing and a means to avoid being drawn into a perpetual game in which authority always has the first move.

Thus, Vidanes, Goh, and Chan had attempted something remarkable and as significant as my research in their separate paracuratorial experiments. And that is to demonstrate our ways of imagining ASEAN-ness by rendering in visual terms what Mirzoeff (2011:1-2) refers to as 'unrepresentable' and 'too substantial for any one person to see'. Moreover, in inviting the public to also participate, the co-curators fulfil our 'right to look' by dismantling the notion that the image – such as ASEAN-ness – only comes from a singular vantage point. After all, this singular vantage point has been the crux of Southeast

Asian imagination for decades – as I have discussed in my introduction – through technologies of cartography, mapping the colonies, archiving and cataloguing it as a curatorial subject, teaching it as an ideology to support Euro-American pedagogy, and the like.

Both paracuratorial experiments serve as good examples of 'showing seeing' as I mentioned earlier, as if visual culture is 'in need of explanation' (Mitchell 2002:176). Much like a psycho-geographical exercise, *Anonymised Skies* asks the public to take a look at the sky and refer to it as the 'skies of ASEAN' as if it is the first time one has seen it. On the other hand, similar to a didactic tool for people across all ages, *CrossWorld Puzzle* asks players to think critically about the images of ASEAN and find meaningful connections in them depending on their own experience of everyday life in ASEAN. More importantly, the participatory and *very public* exercise of curating ASEAN was a means to highlight our accountability as well as expose our strengths and vulnerabilities for the public to judge and scrutinise (Raicovich 2021:62), the whole process vividly recounted by Chow-Paul as follows:

> I think what would be interesting is giving an audience member the opportunity to have their say in what ASEAN identity is … if they connect identity with food, for example … or if they associate identity with community, or with symbols or all the categories that we've looked at perhaps… 'cause that's something that's come out of our conversations so much that it's so complex and it means something different to everyone … that you kind of need to give them that option, rather than imposing like this is what we think ASEAN identity is. [...] and trying to understand identity in all of these different images … that's definitely going to overwhelm everyone. (Chow-Paul, Zoom meeting, 27 September 2020)

Recalling her statement above, I now realise that perhaps what she meant was not necessarily about democratising the platform or giving everyone an equal chance to curate the exhibition – because it is impossible to do so, and like how I explained in my methodology of online data gathering (Chapter II), it is not a representative sample that this study leverages. And with such an 'unrepresentable' extent of imagination as the ASEAN imaginary, a handful of co-curators or even our crowdsourced images cannot visualise it, not even through photography and photographic media with their illusion of indexicality and representability. Instead, the function that the interactive online collaborations *Anonymised Skies* and *CrossWorld Puzzle* are both serving is to offer

perspectives countervisual to what the main exhibition, *Made in ASEAN,* and even *Mesa Sa Kwarto* are both portraying. This is what Chow-Paul meant by giving the public options, thus underlining how the co-curators' countervisual perspectives are a necessary form of 'dissensus' (Rancière 2010:201) as well as 'agonism' (Mouffe 2013:79) of the curatorial canon I primarily discussed (see Chapter I: Section F).

While these two paracuratorial experiments were heavily influenced by my research as well as my role as curator, Vidanes' *Anonymised Skies* and Goh and Chan's *CrossWorld Puzzle* still transpired outside my control. The co-curators used the paracuratorial experiments to pose counter-arguments to the imagination of ASEAN-ness that I might have imposed over our other efforts. Furthermore, by enabling the members of the public to submit their own images and even play the game, the co-curators are emphasising that, indeed, there is a choice. Like the symbolic 'ASEAN skies', there is open-endedness in the ASEAN discourse because despite the finality and finite-ness of the official statements and structures of the regional bloc, the process is still incomplete and ongoing. And like the intersections one can create and discover in *CrossWorld Puzzle,* the regionalism discourse has many exciting and unexpected tangents and turning points. Returning to the image of the 'Southeast Asian elephant in the room', one can never know what ASEAN is, but by participating in it, they may be able to find and fit their own pieces of the puzzle. This is how the paracuratorial experiments demonstrated how Southeast Asians can imagine the region as well as our belongingness and identity in the ASEAN discourse, a fitting response to my first research question.[63]

To perform this act of imagining ASEAN, the online exhibition asked the public to participate using photography, which is core to the curatorial process. The two paracuratorial experiments, thus, addressed my second research question,[64] while also exemplifying an answer to my third research

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[63] (RQ1) How do Southeast Asians imagine ASEAN, as well as our belongingness and identity in relation to this region?

[64] (RQ2) In what ways can images and image-making serve as productive tools for visualising the collective imagination of Southeast Asia? (How can participatory photography render visible our individual and collective imagination/s of Southeast Asia? What is the role of curating images in this imaginative process?)

question,[65] by engaging with and utilising visual culture. Both *Anonymised Skies* and *CrossWorld Puzzle* also shed light on how the method of para-curatorial experimentation might contribute to challenging predetermined representations of Southeast Asia by offering new ways of imagining and visualising the region outside its conventionally understood representations such as its symbols and maps, not to mention the images it perpetuates in mainstream media (see Chapter V: Section D).

D. *ASEAN Manifesto:* participating in a 50-year-old document

The five 'founding fathers'[66] of ASEAN signed the 'Bangkok Declaration' on 8 August 1967 (Severino 2006:389). This momentous document formalised an 'association' of then five Southeast Asian nations – it was at the helm of the Cold War, the Viet Nam War and Indochina War, and the *Konfrontasi.* Soon, the association expanded to ten members: (1) Brunei Darussalam, (2) Cambodia, (3) Indonesia, (4) Lao PDR, (5) Malaysia, (6) Myanmar, (7) the Philippines, (8) Singapore, (9) Thailand, and (10) Viet Nam.[67]

For such a diverse – and diasporic – population, *what does it mean to live by the unanimous declaration penned by just a handful of individuals?* It might be impossible to respond to this rhetorical question, but this para-curatorial experiment assumes that the 1967 declaration is due its reckoning. In the midst of Covid-19, the South China Sea territorial dispute, and other impending wars, *how does the declaration withstand tumultuous geopolitical tides that currently mirror the era when it was first drafted?*

The last paracuratorial experiment[68] of this research project launched on 8 August 2021 to commemorate the anniversary of ASEAN – on 'ASEAN Day'. A mix of transmedia art, spoken word, and prose poetry, I co-curated

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[65] (RQ3) Why is it necessary for photography and curatorial methods to involve participatory methods when imagining Southeast Asia?

[66] Adam Malik (Indonesia), Narciso Ramos (the Philippines), Abdul Razak (Malaysia), Tharat Khoman (Thailand), and Sinnathamby Rajaratnam (Singapore) are considered as 'founding fathers' of ASEAN.

[67] At the time of writing, Timor-Leste is already being considered as the 11th member state (UN News 2022:online).

[68] The recording of the video launch is viewable via the URL: https://asean2020vision.online/asean-manifesto/

ASEAN Manifesto with Matthewson (Canada/UK), Ooi (Malaysia/UK), and Vidanes (Philippines). We adapted and reinterpreted the nearly 55-year-old declaration to challenge what is archaic and historic about 'Southeast Asia' in relation to contemporary discourses of region-ness and regional identity. At the same time, we highlighted aspects of the old piece of document that still resonates in today's society. This conveys a 'simultaneity' of past and future members in 'communion' with those imagining the community in the present (Anderson 2006:24).

The collaborative performance piece visualises the ASEAN region as a continuous process of interrogating the region's past (colonial histories), present (regional integration), and future (the imaginary). As for the curators/ performers, this 'future' serves as an invitation for the public to look beyond intergovernmental statutes in the context of ten countries forming one co-operative bloc and instead view ASEAN as a *Habermasian* public sphere (Habermas 1989). Thus, it imagines how the *ASEAN Declaration* – like other similar manifestos – must neither remain as a relic of the past nor a static piece of document for it to recurrently become relevant to an ever-growing, transforming society. After all, it was written with the imagination of *only five* founding countries; whereas the membership has now, as said, grown to include ten states – eventually adding its eleventh member.

As I briefly mentioned earlier, prior to the conceptualisation of *ASEAN Manifesto,* Ooi contributed the poetry piece *Mother Tongue* (performed as a spoken word video art).[69] As she noted similar themes between *The ASEAN 20/20 Vision Project* and her work on Chinese diaspora and identity/ies, her granting us *Mother Tongue* added another layer into our thought-provoking experiments (note that the work precursored the experiment which I identify in Chapter III: Section C as 'curating as authoring' or 'as co-authoring').

To keep the decades-old document as animated and aspirational as before, *ASEAN Manifesto* served as a paracuratorial experimentation that necessitated revisiting/revising the original document and repurposing it as a contemporary manifesto. Despite initially lacking the theoretical underpinnings of what a manifesto is or should be, we co-curated the piece by merely rely-

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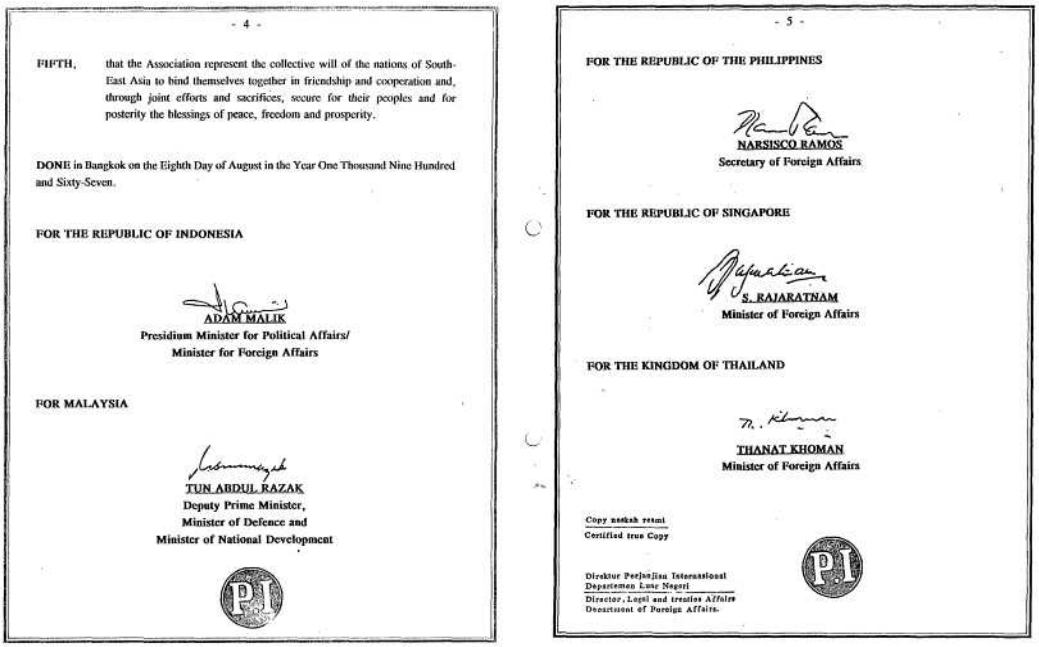
[69] For the audio recording, visit the URL: https://asean2020vision.online/#mother-tongue

ing on the photographic inputs of our previous co-participants. Guided by the digital archive, we went back to this old piece of writing and carefully selected the most crucial words and visions in the very text to craft a ‘new’ manifesto for the public. In a way, we worked synonymous to how Ulmer (1994) frames a manifesto as something that responds to an old way of seeing by proposing new ways of moving forward much like presenting a ‘social identity’ based on ‘collective imagination’ (Stroupe 2004:online).

Guided by visual (auto)ethnography (Rose 2016; Banks & Zeitlyn 2015; Pink 2013), we designed our own method by using *performance* as our key approach to image-elicitation, i.e. to elicit images by way of performing words and sounds alongside visualisations. The rationale for this blended mix was to allow some flexibility (hence, enabling creativity) in our exploration of various visual cultures of ASEAN – from photographs to its sign systems and other abstract notions of identity, e.g. the ASEAN motto: ‘One Vision, One Identity, One Community’. The exploration first started with my co-curators looking at crowdsourced photographs of ASEAN on social media. Then, we accounted for the participant images gathered throughout my fieldwork without making comparisons with what we had already seen online. This process of looking at and immersing in photographic images was how we performed our visual (auto)ethnography of ASEAN. After immersing ourselves in this spectrum of images, we conversed through a series of informal focus group discussions by imagining a society as seen through our collection of photographs. As if building a jigsaw puzzle to render visible a collective imaginary of ASEAN, we interpreted how we visualise the region by accounting for different themes portrayed in all of the images. Visualising themes such as *capitalism, culture, diaspora, diversity, economy, environment, food, religion, politics, technology, tourism,* and *urbanism,* among others, we found some connections between the images and the *ASEAN Declaration.*

Performing *ASEAN Manifesto* as the final paracuratorial experiment entailed its own methodology – through a blended mix of archival work and visual (auto)ethnography which spanned about three months of collaborative engagement with the participants-turned-curators, who also performed the piece (alongside me).



- 4 -

FIFTH, that the Association represent the collective will of the nations of South-East Asia to bind themselves together in friendship and cooperation and, through joint efforts and sacrifices, secure for their peoples and for posterity the blessings of peace, freedom and prosperity.

DONE in Bangkok on the Eighth Day of August in the Year One Thousand Nine Hundred and Sixty-Seven.

FOR THE REPUBLIC OF INDONESIA

ADAM MALIK
Presidium Minister for Political Affairs/
Minister for Foreign Affairs

FOR MALAYSIA

TUN ABDUL RAZAK
Deputy Prime Minister,
Minister of Defence and
Minister of National Development

- 5 -

FOR THE REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPINES

NARSISCO RAMOS
Secretary of Foreign Affairs

FOR THE REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE

S. RAJARATNAM
Minister of Foreign Affairs

FOR THE KINGDOM OF THAILAND

THANAT KHOMAN
Minister of Foreign Affairs

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Direktur Perjanjian Internasional
Departemen Luar Negeri
Director, Legal and treaties Affairs
Department of Foreign Affairs.

Image 28: *Select pages of the ASEAN Declaration of 1967 showing its five signatories*

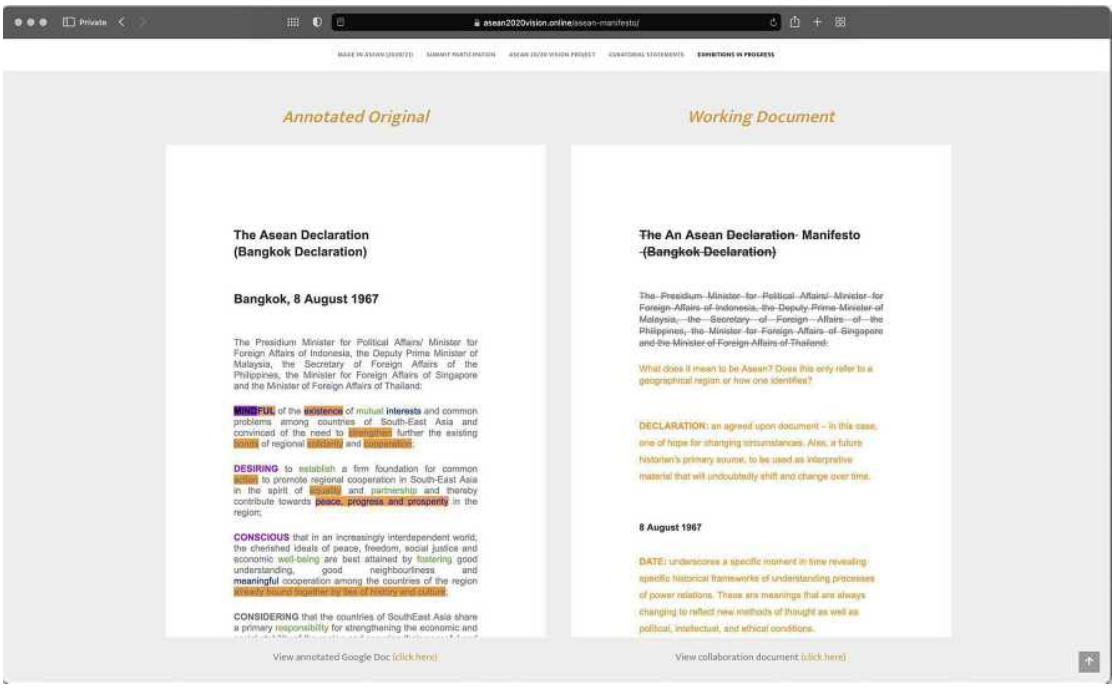

Image 29: *Screenshot of the working collaboration document for 'ASEAN Manifesto' which eventually served as the script for the spoken word poetry + visual essay performance that launched on ASEAN Day (i.e. foundation day of the ASEAN).*

The informal focus group discussions (via Zoom meetings, WhatsApp messages) enabled the participants to use image-elicitation in exemplifying their own interpretive view of the 'official' ASEAN process. We used Google Docs as a *co-working space* to edit, revise, and write the new manifesto.[70] The eventual outcome of the paracuratorial experiment[71] was another digital bricolage that provoked the public to critically consider their awareness of the principles of ASEAN regionalism. However, unlike the previous paracuratorial experiments which similarly involved assemblage-making, *ASEAN Manifesto* transformed the bricolage into a *socially engaged provocation.* And although this output necessitated less hands-on public participation as compared to our other curatorial collaborations, it still served as an inclusive exercise for members of the public to reconsider what they already know about – or how they realistically imagine – the essence of ASEAN.

While in our previous curatorial collaborations we mostly used visuals, in *ASEAN Manifesto* we remixed language, visual text, and speech to ascribe meaning to the numerous images we already produced. Complementing the open-endedness of the previous exhibitions is our manifesto's relative use of *language specificity.* Similar to Ooi's *Mother Tongue,* a performance poetry that utilises language and textual meanings to elicit an agenda or argument, *ASEAN Manifesto* conveys our interrogation of the 1967 *ASEAN Declaration* through words. It is a declaration of *our co-imagination of ASEAN-ness* which we would like to claim as a counter-perspective to the original declaration our forebears signed in Bangkok in 1967. This intertextuality is at the core of the manifesto's significance – hence the use of images and words as references to ASEAN's past, present *and presence,* as well as future. I recall a previous conversation during our online data-gathering:

> You can also play with that idea of, aside from being a reality, because the question running behind the photographers' minds when they were taking the photographs to try to define the ASEAN, then I think it becomes, like, you have your… this is what the ASEAN means to you, governments, and then this is the/our response. This is what it means to us. Because that stuff you are talking about is quite far away from

[70] The collaboration document (with the annotations intact) may be accessed via the URL: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1aoIJx1Er0flefPZvRXCIlBcu8NUF_8nk/edit.

[71] The recording of the performance piece was uploaded on YouTube, viewable via the URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulXQIrVE-q0.

> us, even if it impacts us somehow, so this is how we see the ASEAN, like this shared experience of an ASEAN member from our end. (Vidanes, Zoom meeting, 6 September 2020)

> I just want to raise the point that no one is right or not right, doesn't mean that only the government or only the people are right about this. But it's like, when you say, it's like a response. Because some of the pictures actually are quite, as in, it is definitely true that some ASEAN nations need development, need economic development. So, I mean, like, this picture, some pictures also say the same thing. So it's not really about one side that is wrong but it's merely putting it out there. (Chan, Zoom meeting, 6 September 2020)

In addition, *ASEAN Manifesto* also serves as our commemoration or *memorialisation* of ASEAN's foundations – and founding. Hence, we decided to launch it on a historically important date, on 8 August 2021, to mark the very occasion of *ASEAN Day.* Our intention was to use the manifesto as a retrospective piece of performance art – something that could serve as an alternative to the *official events* spearheaded by the association in the same month. We wanted to create an impact on Southeast Asians' ways of thinking about how regionalism and regional organisations affect our everyday lives.

Again, I emphasise that our use of language and text is so important in this collaboration even though the only way to co-author it was through our use of English as a *lingua franca.* Our manifesto captures the discourses that we engaged in throughout the process; in short, the intertextual output acts as a record of our verbal/written exchanges, which admittedly no amount of picture-taking would be able to depict. Ideally we wanted the final outcome to be translated in different ASEAN languages – similar to how the curatorial statement of *Made in ASEAN* was also translated – but all the participants who helped translate it had completed their participation by this time. This, we thought, could instead be done in the future.

Despite the missed opportunity of translating it in various Southeast Asian languages, in writing and performing *ASEAN Manifesto,* it did become clearer to us that *language* has an implication in the imagination of ASEAN. At first, I thought my project would only revolve around non-verbal matters and mostly visual culture, but this paracuratorial experiment proved contrary to what I imagined. By relying on English, the co-curators still enacted or

facilitated their newfound critical awareness of the region within the framework of an *internal language,* an emic system of understanding the ASEAN.

Matthewson and Ooi (2020:online) propounds that 'postcolonialism still victimises the ethnic through language'; we can see why hitherto growing contemporary movements in Southeast Asia (not to mention the rest of the world) are all aiming to decolonise pedagogy in universities, museums, and other ideological structures. Even our deliberate attempts of using indigenous dialects to subvert colonial, imperialist languages that have always shaped the region is a direct consequence of *language as power* – i.e. nominating a regional language from within the ASEAN membership to serve as our new 'common tongue' can pose a challenge and be met with criticism (Azmi 2022) because one country proposing its own language as a *lingua franca* can be construed by another country as a political move.[72]

Hence, I am reminded of what was described by one of the participants during our focus group discussions:

> I remember when I attended an ASEAN conference in 2015 in Malaysia, where some of the delegates asked about the 'universal' language of the ASEAN … they even suggested to have a similar language for all ASEAN countries… (Kyaw, Zoom meeting, 2 August 2020)

On that account, regionalism is thus a question of language-led understanding. In short, for ASEAN to be a product of our own imagination, and not just the imagination of a handful of people, we must communicate our own place in it on our own terms. Thus, Williams' (2005:243) argument that 'the centrality of language and communication as formative social forces' is key to how we might understand the fabric of our society by way of the material and textual representations of it, such as through 'lived culture' or even 'recorded culture' (Williams 1961:70). And our cultural exercises must enable us to encapsulate our views as if constantly engaging in a *two-way* communication:

> It's a conversation. So, if the government responds, let's say if this is a conversation, then the government can respond, like, for example, why we need this kind of policy, why there's a need for ASEAN integration. Then, the community a.k.a. us, can have a better understanding. (Chan, Zoom meeting, 6 September 2020)

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[72] For this example, I refer to the news article 'Malaysia's call for Asean to embrace its national language irks critics and Indonesia' (Azmi 2022:online).

Rancière (2009:34) asks, 'what did the demonstration demonstrate, exactly?' Our manifesto entailed a very self-conscious, reflexive act of looking at images and imaginations of Southeast Asians' regional kinship. Moreover, it elicited a critical consciousness that renders visible our ideological/political 'interpellation' (Althusser 2001). Returning to Anderson's (2006) imagined communities, as each member of a country (or, in this case, a region) will never come face to face with their fellow-members, the whole community is only contingent upon their shared (i.e. collective) imagination. Thus, *ASEAN Manifesto* demonstrated how the nature of this collective imagination is not only visualised but also *verbalised* through images, media, and symbols. We would even argue that curatorial practices in the future must engender *participatory discourses,* no matter how authorial and auteur-like curators of the past and present are in producing great works that shaped our shared experiences. Art and media practice and production would also have to shift from what exists as local/national categories to the regional, the more our creativity is contingent on interlinked digital interfaces and virtual spaces.

The fourth and fifth articles in the *ASEAN Declaration* indicated how the framers of the half-century old document vividly envisioned the future of Southeast Asia:

> FOURTH, that the Association is open for participation to all States in the South-East Asian Region subscribing to the aforementioned aims, principles and purposes. [and]
> FIFTH, that the Association represents the collective will of the nations of South-East Asia to bind themselves together in friendship and cooperation and, through joint efforts and sacrifices, secure for their peoples and for posterity the blessings of peace, freedom and prosperity. (ASEAN 1967)

In *ASEAN Manifesto,* what we effectively performed was to address the said tenets by way of this proposition:

> ACKNOWLEDGE that there are no such things as ideals of peace, freedom, social justice and economic well-being for a membership that is so vast,
> [and] ASPIRE to be thoughtful, open-minded and engaging in learning about differences and valuing them.

Our proposition merely exemplifies how a society that existed fifty years ago had already evolved into another version of itself, one that is not only more current but also sensitive to the changing tides. Intergovernmental or multi-lateral agreements like the famed 1967 declaration are more than just policy

documents; they serve as blueprints for societal advancement too. Thus, *is it too far-fetched to see a document that is truly inclusive and participatory?* In contemporary society, we can identify certain substitutes. From public-led petitions or so-called 'signature campaigns' – often political in nature[73] – to social media threads, i.e. hashtags, trending content, or viral posts/threads. However, like declarations and manifestos, these only act as mere arbiters of sociopolitical imaginations. Two most recent examples are (1) *The Public Service Media and Public Service Internet Manifesto*[74] which is 'a collective work of communication scholars and media practitioners that calls for the safeguarding of the existence, funding, and independence of public service media as well as the creation of a public service Internet' as endorsed by the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR 2021:online); and (2) *Millennial Manifesto,*[75] which is intended by the Global Shapers Community, i.e. The Davos Lab-World Economic Forum, 'to capture our vision for the future and the steps that our generation and the next generation must take to leave behind a world better than the one we inherited' (Hamza 2021:online). Given these notable examples, perhaps what sets our manifesto apart is how it calls attention to the imaginative and even performative aspects of such a document. While for now, *ASEAN Manifesto* merely serves as a thought-provoking performance piece, one could just imagine if it were officially endorsed, adopted, and ratified.

While *ASEAN Manifesto* vividly conveys our critical awareness of the regional organisation, oftentimes our views can sound overly idealistic. In co-curating it, we discussed how 'harmony' could also be used as an ideological apparatus against dissent and eventually realised that in *ASEAN Manifesto,* our collective imagination of the region does not subvert this 'harmonising' one-ness (or region-ness) – we merely call attention to its nuances. Even

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[73] A recent example is the petition to 'Urge Hong Kong to release all political prisoners and safeguard human rights' lodged at the UK Government & Parliament website via the URL: https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/601971 (citing the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984, taking effect in 1997 upon the transfer of Hong Kong to China.)

[74] The manifesto and rationale (and the signature campaign) can be viewed on the IAMCR website: https://iamcr.org/clearinghouse/psmimanifesto.

[75] The manifesto and rationale is viewable on the World Economic Forum (Global Shapers Community) website via: https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/08/millennial-manifesto.

though I cannot attest to the social impact of this curatorial collaboration, in our attempt to elevate our practice into *arte útil* we realised that the critical awareness we eventually achieved is equally important. '[R]evealing these vulnerabilities through open discussions', according to Raicovich (2021:62), 'is far more interesting and illuminating to the public from a pedagogical standpoint, and further disrupts the fiction of any neutral position'.

Although the very essence of *ASEAN Manifesto* lies in its performative aspects, as a creative output it can also be regarded as an archivable aspect of our paracuratorial work. In other words, it can benefit from being viewed at a later date, more statically, rather than as a live, collaborative performance art. This mirrors the original signing of the *Bangkok Declaration* in 1967 that is now encapsulated in one iconic black-and-white photograph alongside the tangible signed document. At this point, this is how I addressed my first[76] and second[77] research questions: the performance and poetry of the manifesto as a paracuratorial experiment conveyed our contemporary view of Southeast Asia, be it our belongingness to the region or our identity as a people. At the same time, the photographic images that accompanied our words – the text of the manifesto – facilitated the visualisation that the manifesto provokes. Similar to the previous paracuratorial experiments, our performance of this manifesto disrupted the existing imagination of Southeast Asia as pictured by ASEAN's founding fathers through a dissensus (Rancière 2010:201-202) engendered by our curatorial collaboration.

Because our manifesto aims to speak for our fellow Southeast Asians, it was only fitting that we launched it publicly. By making this initiative public, we are making ourselves accountable to our audiences – regardless of their nationality. Whether we succeeded or failed is not necessarily our concern, instead we promoted 'spaces of growth and learning for cultural institutions […] accompanied by an accountability which [our] publicness engenders' (Raicovich 2021:62). In this way, our open-ness compensates for the lack

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[76] (RQ1) How do Southeast Asians imagine ASEAN, as well as our belongingness and identity in relation to this region?

[77] (RQ2) In what ways can images and image-making serve as productive tools for visualising the collective imagination of Southeast Asia? (How can participatory photography render visible our individual and collective imagination/s of Southeast Asia? What is the role of curating images in this imaginative process?)

of public participation, which is necessitated by my third and final research question[78] – although, as I would argue in my theorising of (visual) identity-participation (see Chapter IV: Section C), the public's *interpellation* during our performance of *ASEAN Manifesto* can be indicative of their participation. Even though *ASEAN Manifesto* primarily aimed to bring to the fore our collective voice, it also exposed the honesty and myth perpetuated by the photographs that we selected for our public performance.

* * *

In this chapter, I discussed how my paracuratorial experiments led to the five main curatorial collaborations that comprised the overall practice-based and public contributions of my PhD research. I can, therefore, see how my study and use of photographic media in analysing regional identity can potentially appeal to art, culture, and media scholars, many of whom still experience a dearth of method orientated literature.

I discuss in the following chapter my theoretical contributions not only in fields of art, culture, and media, but also in the social science disciplines – particularly in terms of the study of regionalism, regionalisation, and regional identity. Hence, I deem it important to emphasise the interdisciplinary nature of my research practice as a valuable contribution to knowledge. Recalling my two other research aims, I elaborate in the succeeding chapter my means of arriving at a theory of (visual) identity-participation by way of *collaboration in artistic practice and research* and *imagining and image-making.*

[78] (RQ3) Why is it necessary for photography and curatorial methods to involve participatory methods when imagining Southeast Asia?

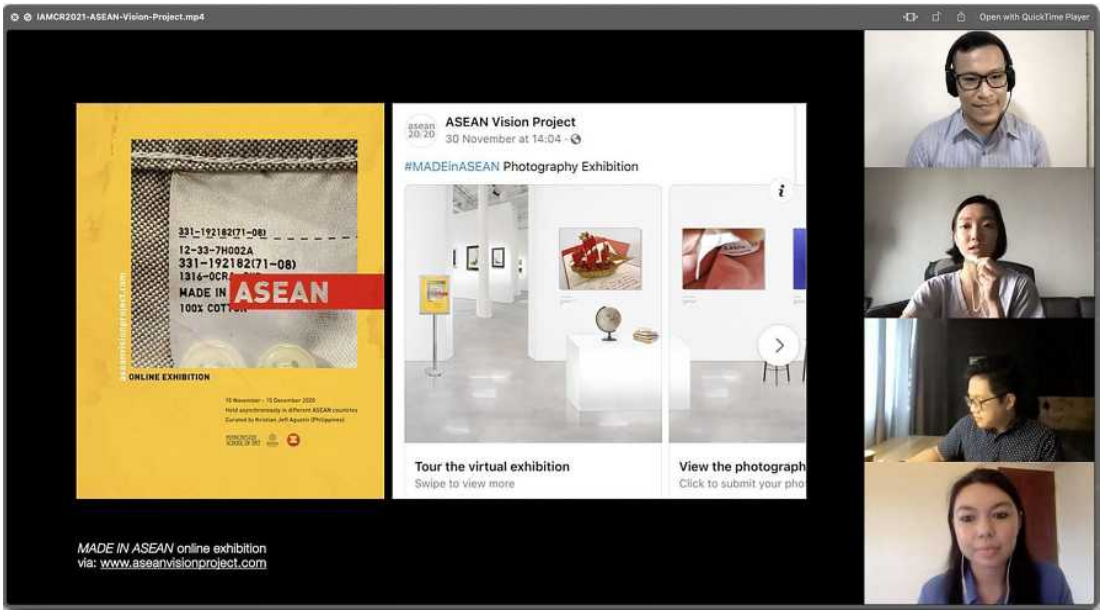

Image 30: *Screenshot of the co-curators attending an international conference*

CHAPTER IV

Collaboration, Imagination, and Participation in ASEAN: Research Findings

I am not advancing anything new or devastatingly original; we have in our individual ways pondered over notions/conceptions of Southeast Asia as a region. We may have advanced these notions, occasionally and tentatively. This is unsatisfactory. We should move towards constructing systematic, continuous approaches. How do we see ourselves as a region? How do we set about mapping, articulating and projecting the region as a discrete entity? Answers to questions such as these cannot be merely loose anthologies of national historical accounts, unrelated and autonomous. Unless, that is, we abandon the very idea of Southeast Asia as a regional construct. As far as I know, histories that have been written on Southeast Asia are histories by those from the outside.

– Writing the Modern by T.K. Sabapathy (2018:291)

Here, I expound on the three strands of my creative practice-as-research to demonstrate how I theoretically and practically contribute to the imagination of Southeast Asia today. First, I recount the outcomes and significance of collaboration in artistic practice and research, as exemplified by the socially engaged paracuratorial experiments which significantly honed my research methods. Second, I discuss how imagining and image-making can prove essential to my curatorial practice for it to serve its research function. Lastly, I delve into how I theorise *(visual) identity-participation,* a praxis of the imagination that might explain how Southeast Asians participate in the discourse of regional identity-building.

Of course, as I mentioned earlier, this research undertaking does not necessarily provide answers. Instead, it repurposes the question ‘What is Southeast Asia?’ as a conundrum for the exploration of future research and creative work. This chapter offers practicable ways for these prospects.

A. Collaboration in artistic practice and research

Because the experience of region-ness is contingent on the multiplicity and synchronicity of our perspectives (as demonstrated by each of our curatorial collaborations), 'collaboration' therefore needs to be defined further in this study and to do so, I must first explain how it became a methodology of my creative practice. As for Blain and Minors (2020:4-5), collaboration in artistic practice can be interrogated as follows:

1. What is collaboration […] and how do the differences in its definitions affect the resulting arts practice? Is collaboration reliant on a hierarchy or can there be an equal partnership between collaborators?
2. What models of collaborative research practice have been developed and how do they help us critically assess the process?
3. What ethical issues emerge during the making of collaborative work? For example, who owns the work? How is a collective authorship documented and acknowledged?
4. What are the modes of dissemination? Or rather, how are the practice, research and practice as research outputs shared with a wider audience both within and beyond the academy?

This research was specifically designed to test and offer a new methodology that might help us better understand – or paint a picture of – Southeast Asia. But instead of offering a 'solution' to the question *What is Southeast Asia?* (see Chapter I: Section C), my foremost contribution to the discourse is to constellate a visual culture approach that will pave the way for more scholars of the region to carry on. In this methodology, I supplemented participatory photography with curatorial collaboration. Instead of merely implementing a typically facilitator-led 'photo-elicitation' or 'photovoice' method – involving a group of participants who follow a set of instructions – I purposely dedicated most of my fieldwork to collaborating with the research participants with the aim of *co-creating* and *co-curating.*

Hence, I can confidently say that the imagination of ASEAN-ness as demonstrated by our curatorial output accounts for an *emerging consensus* among the co-participants and the co-curators. Our consensus-building, in the form of curatorial collaboration, mitigated the hierarchies and inequalities we experienced throughout our cooperation. For one, as the lead curator *and* privileged researcher, my role exemplifies the hierarchies and inequalities of such an academic undertaking. Moreover, having a handful of participants volunteering to co-curate the online exhibition – while the rest of the group

conclude their hands-on participation much earlier – also exposes what is inevitably the authorship of only a select few. Hence, by way of several collaborations, meaning there is not just one curatorial perspective being (re)presented, we were able to put in place a means of determining the consensus with some level of objectivity. And this was achieved because each perspective acted as a counterbalance to the rest – theoretically an expression of dissensus.

As I did learn from the paracuratorial experiments, the multifaceted experience of ASEAN is key to our understanding of it. Sabapathy (2018) cautions that it is 'unsatisfactory' to advance conceptions and discourses of Southeast Asia without following through in terms of practice. 'How do we see ourselves as a region? How do we set about mapping, articulating and projecting the region as a discrete entity?' Sabapathy (2018:291) asks by way of challenging scholars of Southeast Asia to go beyond what ASEAN has always settled with. I responded by practically doing the seeing, the mapping, the articulating, and the projecting of Southeast Asian-ness. And I acknowledged that as an individual Southeast Asian myself, my personal perspective lacks what I described earlier as a multifaceted understanding. For this reason, my investigation called for multiple emic perspectives to cross-fertilise my own research. This is how I put collaboration into practice. And since I had been informed or inspired by various theories of Southeast Asia's identity and region-ness, I pushed their assumptions, conceptions, and notions even further by way of art production.

Rancière (2010:140) relates art with politics by emphasising the key element of dissensus as 'the very kernel of the aesthetic regime: artworks can produce effects of dissensus precisely because they neither give lessons nor have any destination'. To this I would argue that our way of consensus-building does not necessarily mean the lack of dissension; on the contrary, the manner by which we achieved a consensus is only by way of addressing each member's dissenting opinion and even abstention. Still, dissension in itself (or even abstention) without critical thought could be unproductive when it is done for the sake of simply opposing or, even worse, antagonism. On the

other hand, without any critical awareness the process of consensus-building is mere rhetoric, equally unproductive.

Through our exercise, we mirrored the ASEAN's official process of 'consensus-building' (Acharya 2004:252; Acharya 1997:328-329) which is achieved by the organisation and its member states by way of informal and practice-led decision-making processes. This is widely known in the region, according to Acharya (1997:329), as the 'ASEAN Way':

> [it] is not so much about the substance or structure of multilateral interactions, but a claim about the process through which such interactions are carried out. This approach involves a high degree of discreetness, informality, pragmatism, expediency, consensus-building, and non-confrontational bargaining styles which are often contrasted with the adversarial posturing and legalistic decision-making procedures in Western multilateral negotiations.

However, this principle of governing the region is not without criticism (Tobing 2018:153-155; Nem Singh 2009:12; Higgott 2003:415). Politicians, especially those from authoritarian member states, often use the 'ASEAN Way' to justify the lack of dissent or even to dismiss issues that may cause dissent. As our normative convention, the principle drives ASEAN politics in one direction but as an ideology per se it is supposed to facilitate discourse and debate.

As such, in our curatorial collaboration *ASEAN Manifesto,* two of our co-curators related their nuanced observation of the 50-year-old declaration:

> …this is why I started to dissect the words. I was struggling to understand the aim and the purpose. Is it an overall blanket declaration? Like, 'hey, we're just all friendly and we're buddies and we're going to cooperate'. Or is there an intent behind it? If there's an intent, what is the intent? And how do we cater the language and the declaration to fit that purpose? But this declaration just felt very… because for lack of a better word, 'fluffy', like what's the purpose here? Is it just because you need a declaration? (Matthewson, Zoom meeting, 15 April 2021)

> …you won't find a utopian way or a correct way of doing anything. But adding kindness and compassion, doesn't that just make it a little bit better? Like at least we can stomach it, right? […] because I think politics and the issues of humanity… with being, I don't know, racist, selfish, you know, all the negatives that we can think of. They'll never go away because humans are humans in that sense. But if we can learn to be compassionate and the way we treat them, I think that makes a massive difference to how we live in general. (Ooi, Zoom meeting, 15 April 2021)

These two observations exemplify the critical awareness elicited from the collaborative process fostered throughout this study; beyond simply mirroring ASEAN-style rhetoric, our collaboration all the more improves upon ASEAN's

principles of consensus-building. Mouffe (2013; 1999) argues that ‘agonism’ in the form of difference and/or conflict is productive in democratic political discourse, and this is especially true when ‘antagonism’ is transformed into ‘agonistic pluralism’ (Mouffe 1999:755). Consensus, therefore, serves as a negotiation of ‘voice’. Here, voice describes not only our ‘human capacity’ to speak but also refers to a process of giving an account of ourselves, of our place in a community (Couldry 2010:10), regardless how diverse or heterogeneous these ‘places’ collectively amount to being.

In this study, collaboration serves as a crucial component of image-making, in the same way as how consensus-building is to mediating voice. This is how we were able to co-curate a socially engaged exhibition that is not only familiar but also relatable to Southeast Asian locals even if it put to the test or even challenged the ‘official’ ASEAN discourse of regional identity which is the dominant view. A practical application of the theory of ‘counter-visuality’ (Mirzoeff 2011:25) which should free the subject from a totalising vision, the exercise of collaboration establishes the autonomous imagination of each individual seer. It may be counterintuitive, yes, but only through this autonomy can an individual achieve critical consciousness (Freire 1985:160) regardless of the collective vision. This is demonstrated in our collaborative process of co-curating a visual culture project that gradually encouraged the participants-turned-curators to elevate the identity discourse from ‘I think’ to ‘we think’. Thus, the socially engaged voice encapsulated by the curatorial collective is neither a singular reflexive account of one individual nor a unitary view that is representative of the participants’ account of themselves in the ASEAN imaginary. Instead, it is a cross-pollination of stories and voices that may enrich other individuals’ experiences of ASEAN, regardless if they are part of the research or not.

For instance, the ‘tiny desk’ exhibition of *Mesa Sa Kwarto* is practically a collaboration not only between the research participants and the curator. Rather, it is also a co-creation by the live audience whose presence (through Zoom videoconferencing) is crucial to the overall experience. In short, their presence is an expression of their participation in the discourses laid bare by this paracuratorial experiment.

In *CrossWorld Puzzle,* the collaboration between the co-curators and the live audience is much more obvious in that the online participants play a visual game to piece together what is being curated – the puzzle itself. And in *ASEAN Manifesto,* while there is no public participation involved in both the live and recorded performances, the element of collaboration transpires between the co-curators and ASEAN's 'founding fathers' who penned their consensus as a public declaration.

Through artistic collaboration, this study produced an interactive and open-ended 'digital bricolage' that continues to ask the public to consider the ASEAN imaginary. Here I refer to 'bricolage' as a make-do or do-it-yourself art installation (Sturken & Cartwright 2009:78); only in this project everything is made virtual using online, digital media. As with digital images, the creative product does not claim to represent 'true reality' but an 'imaging' of such a reality. Encapsulated by the digital bricolage, our pluralistic view only paints a mediated and negotiated picture of what our Southeast Asian-ness means. By arguing this, I reiterate Mouffe's (2013:79) view that instead of merely showing reality, a 'counter-hegemonic intervention' must essentially be able to 're-articulate a given situation in a new configuration'. The role of public participation is, therefore, vital to this re-articulation because the curatorial team would admit that our consensus may not necessarily reflect Southeast Asia's real conditions of existence; only through public consensus-building and dissensus-enabling could our own collaboration better attain its social aims and impact:

> I'm just thinking… because they're not very interactive. I kind of want to – I kind of like the idea of giving the audience or the public a choice. Because when you're in a normal exhibition, people don't get to choose which works they want to see first and things like that. But right now, it's by default that they're only seeing the person who is presenting. I'm not sure how to do that. (Goh, Zoom meeting, 30 August 2020)

> Going back to this whiteboard idea, I quite like how we chose three to five photos and made a collage. Maybe we ask the audience; give them access to the folder; or put the photos somewhere and then, I don't know… I'm just thinking if you have all the photos in one place and then they would have to arrange them… if you give them the folder and then say 'make a Google slide or something' and then you'll just have more and more slides. (Chow-Paul, Zoom meeting, 30 August 2020)

In summary, the critical reflection of my co-curators as exemplified above is indicative of their increasing understanding of collaborative art practice and

its ‘dissemination’ (Blain & Minors 2020:5). Despite the obvious limitations that we encountered (i.e. funding and timing) and lack of a best solution, by acknowledging the essential role of the wider publics, we were able to imagine the possibility of a continuous and reciprocal means of regional identity-building. In this study, the specific manner of communication among the curators and participants upon which meaningful outcomes started to emerge is by way of collaboration.

B. Imagining and image-making

As my practice-based research is designed to better understand how South-east Asians in general – apart from the participants-turned-curators – perceive the ASEAN discourse, limiting my scope within the visual rhetoric of *ASEAN identity* or *ASEAN-ness* was unexpectedly very productive. Although, this delimitation was purposeful (see Chapter I: Section C; Chapter V: Section A). Recalling Williams’ (1961:70) theorising of culture, my approach exemplified how visual culture can also encapsulate ‘lived’ culture, ‘recorded’ culture, and ‘traditional’ culture. Because visual culture includes the production of images and media, these products are also ‘material’ culture (Hall 2016:39; Williams 2005:63). Hence, image-making by way of digital media, i.e. photography, is key to my analysis of our cultural identity. By arguing that this cultural identity is as much a question of visual culture than geopolitics alone, I demonstrate that at the core of ASEAN’s regional identity-building is the visual process of communication and visual use of languages as exemplified in this study.

Through this process, even a transnational group of participants could engage in a creative exercise of visually constructing the social aspects of ASEAN and identifying with the outcome (such as our collective imaginary of ASEAN-ness). This entailed the sharing of ‘inside information’ which might explain why our shared experiences were ‘ineffable’ in that ‘others cannot understand them unless they have had them themselves (Clark 1996:110). In other words, it is through the social forces among the co-participants (and later on the co-curators) that their imagination of Southeast Asia’s cultural identity materialised into images. For the same reason that communication

is central to sociocultural formation (Williams 2005:243), it can also render visible aspects of culture by way of language, media, and other communicative products.

A key argument I am making in this research is that the accumulation and circulation of images in media can ideologically shape a community's visual culture. Supposing how this is as much applicable to a small, localised community as to a much larger society, I investigated in my curatorial undertaking how it also applies to a regional grouping of discrete countries with distinct histories. As I sufficiently established in the introduction as well as throughout my methodology (see Chapter I and Chapter II: Sections B and C), I deviated from prior studies' use of statistical methods and social media for this investigation. Rather, I vicariously explored my assumptions through the complementary methods of participatory photography and curatorial collaboration, and engaged with a group of international participants whose shared region-ness is the only factor that ties them together as one group.

Because it was expected that images would mean differently from one participant to another, I focused on the collective imagery instead. Observing the emerging visual culture throughout the process led me to discern that, indeed, an imaginary such as ASEAN-ness can hardly be differentiated and dismantled into separate pieces with discrete contexts. The whole is, indeed, more than the sum of its parts. Hence, the ASEAN-ness of the photographs curated throughout this study is a product not only of the collective imagery but also of our collective consciousness or *imaginary* of Southeast Asia – which in practice influenced each of our individual 'takes'. Indeed, only by immersing oneself in the 'psycho-geographical' (Flores 2015) experience offered by the curatorial collective can one virtually identify and visualise the ASEAN-ness we are imagining. This 'immersive experience' – practically speaking, the intersection between the 'psychological' and the 'geographical' – reconciles our imaginations of ASEAN as an identity (psyche) and as a locality (geography).

Recalling Chapter I (see Section B), apart from being laborious or even uncomfortable, grasping *what Southeast Asia is* – or, say, any regional construct for that matter – must be a philosophical task. Hence, at specific

junctures this study carefully teeters between philosophy and practice. In this regard, I also focus on a few examples upon which I applied my philosophical insights, by putting the said ideas into practice.

In my paracuratorial experiment *Mesa Sa Kwarto,* I used the Zoom 'gallery view' – an actual *functionality* of the free videoconferencing software – as a *point of entry* for international live audiences to view my 'tiny desk' exhibition. I created this unique visual experience practically by 'expanding' their view to include a projected image of themselves onto an art installation in my room. Without the videoconferencing platform and LCD projector as imaging tools, the only other way for the international 'visitors' to enter the virtual space that is situated within the intersection of my room and the image of the Zoom meeting is to travel to my location and experience it by viewing the installation in person. Hence, the image-making process of *Mesa Sa Kwarto* is an application of the cinematic projection of an image, the index and location of which is in question (Doane 2009:165; Doane 2007:143). It also revisits the concept of 'archive fever' (Derrida & Prenowitz 1995) as our increasingly dependent use of digital media technologies continues to shape our understanding of what is archivable. At the helm of the Covid-19 pandemic, this online exhibition was unique in that it did not follow the way many galleries and museums around the world offered a solution by using digital technologies to fully convert their exhibitions and shows into digital spaces and accommodate (even compensate for) the absence of visiting audiences. Most notably, the typical solution elsewhere was to digitally visualise archivable objects for the general public to appreciate, examine, and even manipulate. In *Mesa Sa Kwarto,* instead of offering an entirely digital environment resembling three-dimensional renderings of 3D game visualisations, I merely integrated the digital (image) and the physical (place) in order to mitigate the alienating qualities of purely computer-generated experiences/images. Since computer imaging and digital photographs have no *indexicality* in nature, much less the imagination of ASEAN-ness, the 'live broadcast' serves as an anchor point. Hence, the paracuratorial experiment is a practical contribution to our developing knowledge of augmented reality

and imaging technologies, from photography and moving pictures to digital media. I can see it as a useful resource within a post-pandemic world.

I further explored the outcomes of *Mesa Sa Kwarto* in our curatorial collaboration *Made in ASEAN.* In this virtual public exhibition, we practically experimented with the paracuratorial method of editing images (i.e. image-making) and displaying them (i.e. exhibition-making). We sifted through our growing digital archive into a curated collection of individual photographs of our everyday experience of ASEAN-ness. Because each photograph evinces not only our individual process of 'showing seeing' (Mitchell 2002:166) but also of 'showing *being'*, what we are in effect editing are not only images but rather our *micro-curations.* Not to be confused with the 'paracuratorial', these micro-curations are acts of choosing, framing, idealising, or even obscuring and reducing our interpretations – to convey a whole. Hence, whatever we excluded or included in our edit and exhibition of images reflects on the keen awareness of our purpose:

> While the project requires mutual interest [in the ASEAN] if we want people to be involved, it also requires some interest in photography. Because it is aimed at the general public to raise awareness about ASEAN, to give them a more complete view of ASEAN, rather than just seeing or visiting a tourist site for instance, it is not easy for us participants to just take photographs of anything, the topic is too broad, like, the photographs could be about anything… and choosing what to show is a challenge because we already know everything about [our own lives] and so we may think it's just normal and we don't see it ourselves… (Thong, Zoom meeting, 5 December 2020)

Consequently, each of our micro-curations that led to co-editorial decisions, i.e. in terms of framing and displaying a personal or shared experience, thus contributed to our piecing together of our overall participatory imagination within the discourse of ASEAN-ness. Moreover, as we iterated in the online exhibition, we exemplified various asynchronous processes (e.g. of editing) that involved qualities not only of (re)presenting or (re)negotiating but also of evolution. As such, the hitherto 'exhibition in progress' encapsulates our evolving consciousness, identity/ies, and geopolitical affiliation/s. Thus, one could suppose that the entire exhibition is neither a photography exhibition nor an exhibition of photographers. On the contrary, it is a discursive *and material* contribution to the official ASEAN discourse, only through unofficial,

informal, yet participatory practices. Hence, it is not only a disruption of but also, more accurately, an expression of our 'dissensus' (Rancière 2010:201) towards the colonial canon of curatorship I already discussed (see Chapter I; see also Chapter III). It also entails the 'agonistic pluralism' (Mouffe 2013: 755) of our countervisual perspective to the monolithic discourse of region-building imposed by the exclusive ASEAN process. 'By criticising the socially, culturally, politically, or economically imposed hierarchies of values,' for Groys (2008:16) 'art affirms aesthetic equality as a guarantee of its true autonomy'. Similar to *Mesa Sa Kwarto,* the outcomes and reception of *Made in ASEAN* captures what a community-led or constituent-led exhibition should be (Byrne *et al.* 2018:12-13; Hernández 2018:129; De la Paz 2011:162-164) not only because of its digital format or display structure but rather its participatory aspects too. Because our co-curatorial consideration of ASEAN was never static, our *arte útil* approach potentially sets a standard for such a fluid and ongoing discussion of ASEAN-ness.

Speaking about public participation in ASEAN, Goh (our participant from Singapore) *agonised* about the lack of transnational interaction in the region, apart from tourism – even tourists' interactions with locals are often merely transactional. Indeed, tourism is one of the drivers of the region's capitalistic sociocultural development. For this reason, it necessitates an entirely different discussion, i.e. cultural economy, outside of the scope of my research. However, Goh's argument shaped our practice of imagining the region through image-making nonetheless. Because of the inevitable social divides and inequalities within Southeast Asia, we aimed to include as many perspectives as possible in our curatorial collaboration. For instance, in Goh and Chan's *CrossWorld Puzzle,* they experimented with creativity and play to bridge more meaningful, transnational interactions among Southeast Asians – as if compensating for such a lack which Goh observed. Repurposing the widely familiar board game of crossword to use images as text in solving the 'ASEAN puzzle' worked effectively because visual cues and clues can be (re)interpreted in countless ways, depending on who is playing – bringing to the fore their discursive backgrounds. In this playful manner, the theoretical underpinnings of our curatorial collaborations were distilled in relatable

imagery to ordinary members of the public. Before this exercise, ASEAN visual culture was predominantly reliant on touristic images broadcasted by mainstream media or circulating mostly in ASEAN-tourism orientated social media channels. *CrossWorld Puzzle* therefore subverted (albeit through a playful and user-friendly dynamic) the typical touristic imagery traditionally associated with ASEAN-ness – undoing more than thirty years[79] of visual rhetoric Southeast Asian locals were already too familiar with. Moreover, it offered a meaningful conversation about our real conditions of existence as Southeast Asians.

Another research participant pushed the idea even further by crowd-sourcing snapshots of the skies from different Southeast Asian countries. In *Anonymised Skies,* Vidanes' approach was to convey the imagery of ASEAN without relying on images of tourism or everyday life. What I learned from this very visual and vicarious exercise is that the function of photography is not necessarily an imaging technology used to convey *pseudo-* or even *quasi-indexical* signs of ASEAN-ness – note that we were exclusively using digital photography and dealing with digital images. Instead of simply using these visual media to convey an image of ASEAN, Vidanes' use of crowdsourced images put into practice the essence of public participation. After all, taking pictures of the sky does not necessarily produce recognisable images of Southeast Asia in that images of clouds and skies may look the same from, say, the vantage point of Latin America. In other words, what is in fact more meaningful is that the *exercise of photographing the sky* did appeal to those being *interpellated* by the visual exercise. In other words, this paracuratorial experiment involving *psycho-geographical mapping* is not really about what is being mapped or how the mapping is being done. Instead, it is all about eliciting public participation.

As such, only by way of participation can the region better shed light on its members' similarities and differences, as well as the overlaps and intersections of these nuances. Participatory photography can render visible

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[79] I count from the very first ASEAN-wide official forum held in the Philippines to tackle the role of cultural efforts and media products in the shaping of ASEAN's cultural identity. In the conference proceedings, mainstream media and tourism were identified as essential drivers of the region's visual culture (Anand & Quisumbing 1981).

these factors in order for the community to see the nuances in their shared experiences and spaces (Wang 2006). As related by our co-participants, our collaborative and participatory use of photography can evince what is hidden or reveal what is already obvious:

> It is [more about] what we usually miss seeing ... for we would not know about these nuances unless someone tells us about them or shows us. (Goh, Zoom meeting, 6 September 2021)

> It feels like an unfiltered view of someone's phone gallery, like it's just stuff we took… and then forgetting about these so that when one day I scroll up and down the photo gallery on my phone, I see them, and they feel like bits and pieces of my usual activity or reality saved in my phone. (Vidanes, Zoom meeting, 6 September 2020)

> Whether it's looking at the past, present, or future, I think it's all pretty much the present state of ASEAN, the 'what is'... I don't feel the same way you guys do, I don't really see that something is really lacking, but I am just, okay, this is it, this is just stating it. Putting it out there, yes, this is ASEAN. (Chan, Zoom meeting, 6 September 2020)

By regarding the collective imagery, the nuances of the ASEAN imaginary as perceived from one member country to another are made visible – although not readily conspicuous or obvious. However, by maintaining the highly visual presentation of the online exhibition, such as keeping the captions of the photographs to a minimum, other viewers' own conscious imagination and volition are not necessarily curtailed. That is to say, the participatory nature of the exhibition mitigates the authority of visuality and, hopefully, ensures the autonomy of numerous countervisual perspectives. As curators who professionally work in the art world, we do this often by minimising our framing of the images through explanatory texts among other means. The same could be said of the participants' consensus:

> Just to keep it visual, because when you have captions, they kind of lead people to think in a certain way, like you're framing their thought processes. (Goh, Zoom meeting, 6 September 2020)

> We leave it to the imagination. (Vidanes, Zoom meeting, 6 September 2020)

As hitherto perpetuated by institutions and mainstream media in the region, the 'official' visual rhetoric of ASEAN's regional identity – although noble and aspirational in nature – undeniably frames the imagination of the general public from an authoritative vantage point. The participatory and collaborative

method exemplified by the online exhibition, therefore, is a viable counter-visual approach if our purpose is to *unlearn* such an official framing 'which does not leave much space for critique' (Agustin 2018:165). Without similar collaborative, participatory measures in place, members of the public are left to their own devices in the face of an imposed visuality. Not that it is absolutely essential that we must use expert, critical lenses – because that is not the point of this exercise – but, rather, without enabling the ASEAN publics to *see for themselves* the ASEAN imaginary will probably remain the same as it has always been for half a century now. A static piece of document. A blueprint.

As I observed and proposed in prior studies, the 'unofficial' ASEAN discourse of crowdsourcing images via social media only perpetuates the official discourse (Agustin 2018:164-166; Agustin 2017:40-41). This is why the contribution of this research is neither within the locus of democratising the production of images nor of mass-producing images, but instead it is about the collaborative and participatory use of photographic media and other image-making technologies. As Cabañes (2017:3; 2016:34) argued in his participatory photography research of diasporic populations, photography is a helpful tool for mediating voice (see also Couldry 2010; 2008; Silverstone 2005; 2002; 1999).

As public access to *everyday* communication technologies becomes more of a basic human need – a right rather than mere privilege – the vast proliferation of photographic media in everyday life comes as no surprise. No wonder that today's engines of society are driven by a culture concomitant with images (Sontag 1977:178). Images, digital or not, including the apparent realism of photography, do allow individuals and groups to identify with each other as part of a community. Recall how Anderson (2006:6) beautifully frames his definition of 'imagined communities':

> It is *imagined* [sic] because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.

We can assume that this is an ideology in practice: *to have an idea of the community one belongs to.* And if a regional community exists as a mere 'ideoscape' (Appadurai 1990:299) of ideas and images that link a certain group of peoples regardless of their geographical boundaries and socio-

political divides then what better way to understand behaviour, culture, and identity than *to view the images they produce?* This serves as the basis for the argument that photographic practices exemplify, if not capture, the imagined ASEAN community (Agustin 2018). And who better to imagine this than Southeast Asian locals ourselves? As one of our participants-turned-curators evocatively explains within the context of the study:

> I guess ASEAN identity will always remain a big question mark … and in our quest for this identity, we go through all these interactions and realise that maybe people see ASEAN identity from different levels, such as how politicians would see it from an economic perspective while common people would typically see it from the local or tourist perspective. I guess this project conveys what common people would see as ASEAN identity (Chan, Zoom meeting, 6 September 2020)

Hence, this study also relies on the reflexive aspect of taking pictures. The act and art of photographing cannot be thought of as perfectly detached or random; first, one must decide what subject to take a picture of – and that very conscious thought process is, with the right mindset, one step closer to critical awareness and reflexivity. For the participants of this study, the taking of pictures implies asking what it means to be an ASEAN citizen in principle or what it means to be Southeast Asian in general. This reflexive questioning stimulates an active process of 'conscientization' (Freire 1985:160), which explains how we collectively achieved a new level of critical consciousness with regard to our ASEAN identity. To be clear, at the outset there was no expectation that we would achieve critical consciousness by way of social action and public intervention. Instead, I intended to produce a work that is countervisual to existing and predetermined representations of Southeast Asia – by way of an approach that is as participatory as possible.

Hence, the way the participants reflected on their identity by 'picturing' themselves as part of a region is demonstrative of their reflexive participation in the ASEAN process, its official discourse that often leaves ordinary citizens out of the big picture (Agustin 2018). Despite our limited collaborative effort, individual citizens of ASEAN countries should find similar ways of taking part in imagining our regional community to shift the exclusivist or top-down ASEAN discourse into something much more commonplace and even de-centralised. When the general public is unable to participate in the official

meetings and annual summits of ASEAN, then what venue is left for them to perform as *member citizens?* Apart from being member citizens *in principle,* there must be other ways. Currently what we are being offered are regional exercises such as cultural festivals and even sporting events, such as the ASEAN Film Festival, ASEAN Music Showcase Festival, and the Southeast Asian Games (SEA Games). But these are only a handful of initiatives. This study, therefore, begins to fill the gap by shedding light on what the ASEAN imaginary might look like from the grassroots perspective.

Picturing our lived experience, all the photographs of everyday life produced by the research participants – from the banal and mundane to the extraordinary – are given a new meaning and value. As Mitchell (2002:171) emphasises, 'it is not just that we see the way we do because we are social animals, but also that our **social arrangements take the forms they do because we are seeing animals** [emphasis added]'. Hence, this research project cannot stress enough the importance of enriching the visual culture of the ASEAN apart from – or in conjunction with – its diplomatic, economic, geopolitical, and societal discourses.

C. Theorising (visual) identity-participation

The way images can so insidiously *interpellate* us exemplifies how we are conditioned by state apparatuses to imbibe an ideological worldview as if on our own volition (Althusser 2001). We accept and internalise the meanings of images easily because they appear to be obvious and natural, speaking to our identity/ies so intimately that we could just embrace them. In this study, the practice of socially engaged curating served as my way of testing and nuancing what is ideological in our images of ASEAN.

Unlike the co-curators who can readily make meaningful associations between the selection of images and the idea of ASEAN-ness, the viewing public may not necessarily form immediate, meaningful judgements about the online exhibition as a whole. After all, the co-curators are already quite familiar with the individual images and their stories, while the public would naturally bring in their strong nation-centric lenses (see Chapter V: Sections A and C). And not to overwhelm first-time viewers with the number of images

or extent of possible meanings, the online exhibition was curated to be open-ended. In this manner, the open-endedness serves as our invitation for the audience to partake in the simple act of looking at our images. In hindsight, I observed that this curatorial approach became impactful in that it enabled any person to maintain an inquisitive mind as they explored one curatorial collaboration to the next one. For instance, in *Made in ASEAN* or *CrossWorld Puzzle,* encountering a photograph for the first time might entail the question: *what is this image about?* In effect, one might also ask: *what is this exhibition about?* This curious and mindful attitude when one views images could even bring anyone closer to exercising a Freirean critical thinking in the form of reflexive consciousness. According to participant-turned-curator Vidanes:

> It prompts the question of what is it? Or who are we in the ASEAN? I think it is closer to your original question of, is there an ASEAN in these photographs? Can you assign meaning from these? Or can you imagine an ASEAN after having gone through each of [the photos] rather? (Vidanes, Zoom meeting, 6 September 2020)

As such, we used the virtual public exhibition to animate a viewer's journey of awareness about ASEAN-ness, from a limited nation-centric view to a basic recognition of the ASEAN regional community, to a level of critical awareness as the viewer scrutinises *why or how the exhibited images are of ASEAN* and not otherwise. More importantly, this journey goes one step further by means of giving feedback through Google Forms or submitting an image contribution through the automated feed of *Photo Voices: Southeast Asia / Elsewhere.*

Because each individual photograph might mean differently from one person to another, the public exhibition must move on from mere image elicitation to something like 'imagery-elicitation'. In one of our curatorial meetings, Vidanes supposed that when all the photographs are seen as a whole, the collective 'imagery' constructed is indeed that of the ASEAN *and nothing else like it.* However, it is not only a question of what is being elicited by such an imagery of ASEAN-ness, but also of the *interpellated* subject. As suggested by Vidanes, only by going through the collection/exhibition of photographs can anyone virtually – even vicariously – experience what Southeast Asia is like in the raw, (and borrowing his analogy) as if to glimpse into someone else's cameraphone for unfiltered images. Thus, for any Southeast Asian to

see these images, beyond mere *interpellation* a certain act of participation ensues in the mere act of looking. This exercise of participation is enacted in the recognition of oneself – one's sociocultural identity, heritage, and history – within the imagery. And such a process must also call to mind yet another individual's mutual familiarity or relationship with the same imagery despite the sheer differences between every individual experience.

Borrowing Anderson's (2006:7) words, an individual can imagine their community despite the 'actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each' and that the imagined community is 'always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship'. Of course, Anderson was conceptualising the 'nation' in his terms but hypothetically speaking he was describing a non-homogenous community too. In other words, one can still strongly identify with one's own community despite its inherent heterogeneity. As such, I argue that the key essence of participation is that it assumes that each individual experience may be replicable but the individual who is experiencing the same is always unique. Thus, conceptually, this is no different from what was previously and sufficiently theorised by Western and Southeast Asian authors: 'communion' as a mutual partaking (Anderson 2006:6); 'einfühlung' or empathy to describe the act of 'feeling-into' (Bourdieu 1984:3); 'com' (i.e. with) plus 'passio' (i.e. suffering) to describe 'compassion' (Kundera 1984:18-19); and 'kapwa' as a psyche of the 'shared inner-self' (Enriquez 1992:52); as well as 'we-feeling' (Acharya 2017; Baviera & Maramis 2017; Thompson & Thianthai 2008).

Theorising participation *per se* may seem like a grey area at this point, but what is important to remember is that it is a question of what Carpentier (2017) refers to as a 'discursive-material knot'. According to Carpentier (2017: 94), the term in and of itself 'is an intensively political-ideological notion, which is intimately linked to the multitude of discourses on democracy that circulate in different (Western) [sic] societies'.[80] Additionally, he also clarifies that 'at the same time, the participatory process also has material dimensions, which

[80] note that the notion of participation is hardly separable from democracy even in a study of Southeast Asia; however, another scholar, Rodan (2018), looked into how we might see participation being applied in Southeast Asia's non-democratic societies (i.e. authoritarian states) by employing 'consultative and particularist modes of participation' (Rodan 2018) instead of the ladder of participation (Arnstein 1969) which is more familiar to Westerners; an earlier study referring to the same modes was co-authored by Jayasuriya and Rodan (2007:779-780)

are entangled with [...] discursive components' (Carpentier 2017:108).

Therefore, recounting how I related material culture with images (see Chapter III: Sections A and B), there is a link between the discursive formation of an individual and the images they produce as much as the discursive production of images influencing individuals. Every individual member of an imagined community engages in a 'communion' by way of **participating in** 'fiction' (Anderson 2006:26) – although Anderson was, in fact, referring to nationalist literature such as the colonial Philippines' epic poem *Florante & Laura* (1861) by Francisco Balagtas, the revolutionary novel *Noli Me Tangere* (1887) by Jose Rizal, the Mexican novel *El Periquillo Sarniento* (1816) by José Joaquin Fernandez de Lizardi, and the Indonesian published series *Semarang Hitam* (1924) by Mas Marco Kartodikromo. In the same vein as collectively reading fiction, looking at images could also spark participation as we now know. While each of the said literary works incited nationalist movements in their respective countries, images are as effective. Whether we are looking at an iconic photograph or watching a (digital) film, according to Anderson (2006:36), 'fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity'.

Because of its political-ideological and material dimensions, the very act of looking at the imaginary of ASEAN-ness – as contemporarily framed by mainstream media and our own collection of photographs in this study – is participatory, or rather the first step towards participation. True, we should refrain from using *participation* as a 'floating signifier' (Carpentier 2017:86); however the exercise of looking at images and acting/non-acting in the face of them is as much symptomatic of participation as it is a question of it – for now this argument is, at best, merely limited to the visual culture exercise of curating regions, as this study demonstrates. In the online exhibition, some look and see themselves within the imaginary because they can truly relate with the collective sense of identity as ASEAN member citizens. Others may be looking through their national identities (as ASEAN member countries) to affiliate themselves with ASEAN. Throughout my participant observation, what I recognised was a bit of both – as well as the occasional 'comparing and contrasting' of each other's countries. Therefore, there is critical and

reflexive awareness in our mutual imagination of our sense of belonging. And because the act of looking at images could elicit a certain level of conscientisation, it takes us a step closer to collective identity-building:

> We have all experienced self-identification throughout the conversations and pictures, like, okay, we're ASEAN... but at the same time, if you look at the pictures of our everyday slice of life, it's both exclusive and inclusive… some may be shared in other countries, yet some can just be exclusive to a particular country. So, it's like a bit of both. (Ibrahim, Zoom meeting, 18 September 2020)

> Everyone has individuality, so we can start by choosing the photos that are more individual to each of us, because it depends... then, after we look at people's individualities, then we can see the connection, and that's the ASEAN identity that we are talking about every week… then connections further appear at a much bigger scale. (Teerawatsakul, Zoom meeting, 18 September 2020)

On these accounts, the raising of our critical consciousness through image-elicitation is a consequence of '(visual) identity-participation' which I theorise as is the reflexive, self-conscious act of looking at and questioning images (i.e. visual culture) vis-à-vis one's imagination of one's affiliation or kinship to a community (i.e. one's interpellation through visuality). It is an individual's critical awareness that enables them to choose how to perceive their own self *despite of* or *in the face of being interpellated*. And through this process of conscientisation a person recognises that one's identity is optional, not innate, and thus not just taken for granted. It is as much an act of 'counter-visuality' (Mirzoeff 2011:24) for people to achieve critical consciousness in this manner.

The communal visualisation of the whole community as mediated and materialised in cultural products, is essential to the very process of collective imagination and (visual) identity-participation. This is what the viewing public of *Mesa Sa Kwarto, Made in ASEAN,* and *ASEAN Manifesto* have put into practice. By questioning how the pictured ASEAN-ness makes sense to them personally and collectively, they gained a certain level of critical awareness about the very act of seeing and identifying what the imagery is all about. This is a similar experience of participants/players in *Anonymised Skies* and in *CrossWorld Puzzle*. In exploring the potential intersections of images to illustrate unique but relatable narratives or themes pertaining to ASEAN identity, their being *interpellated* by the images was made participatory and,

thus, so was their act of looking. Huppauf and Wulf (2009:16) expounds:

> The imagination transforms the world that surrounds individuals into an inner world and projects the inner world into the outer world. It transforms images, creates differences and makes the new emerge. [...] As a human condition, it is subject to cultural and historical change expressed in a manifold of entangled material and mental, individual and collective images. It not only produces images; rather, it shapes figures of social interaction. It shapes social constellations in rituals and gives shape through its ludic potential. The imagination produces images of scenes, corporealizing them and, thereby, contributing to the orientation of societies. Its images are representations of something and, at the same time, also presentations of itself. Its context offers hints of how its mediating position between presence and absence, past and future can be understood.

When put in the context of ASEAN regional identity-building, *the imagination of region-ness* is a question of participation for it is such a vague construct that is not readily experienced in everyday life, unlike *nation-ness.* Therefore, participation is key to imagining it. I theorise that *(visual) identity-participation* is how members of a community can participate in their regional identity, and in this invocation of their participation they are opting in (conversely, they can also opt out) the process:

> So, it's almost as if… there isn't even an identity? Or is it forced out of being part of this political-economic framework that we're forcing an ASEAN identity on all of the citizens. Or is there an actual communal identity? Like, what came first? Can you separate the two out? Is there an identity already established, therefore it makes sense to have a political framework? Or is it the other way around? (Chow-Paul, Zoom meeting, 23 August 2020)

> It kind of feels like there are different stages to these memberships. So, like the first picture is kind of like production, and then the last picture, you kind of end up becoming someone like them. And then in the middle picture you're accepting everything that comes along with this membership. (Goh, Zoom meeting, 23 August 2020)

ASEAN identity is something that we can participate in, as member citizens of a regional geopolitical bloc. And our direct or indirect participation is key to our awareness and understanding of it. This shared participatory experience of co-imagining the region can all the more push the boundaries of our lived experience especially when limited by our digitally mediated experiences such as via mobile screens and social media environments. Like our social relationships, participation is as much a continuous process; and today we rely on mediated experiences not only to manage our (social) relationships (Madianou 2015:1-2; Madianou & Miller 2012) but also to opt-in and opt-out

of social processes. In other words, our participation in the ASEAN discourse by way of looking at images cannot be untangled from our constant, day-to-day use of media.

Although the extent of images gathered throughout this study seem to lack many other facets of ASEAN life – as if something was always missing no matter how many images there possibly are, as some of the participants noted[81] – what is important is that there is always room for interpretation. To reflect the countless ways of imagining ASEAN, constant participation in the ASEAN discourse is crucial, if not essential. I would even argue that there is added value in photographing ASEAN outside what this study has already accomplished to continue evoking our self-awareness and self-reflection in understanding our regional identity. I cannot stress enough how the nature of this imagination is not only visualised but also concretised and performed by means of images, media, and participation. Participation in visual culture is the realisation of images' material conditions of existence.

That said, as the imagination of ASEAN region-ness shifts from the official, elite discourse to the wider public, it must be understood as having a conversation – as passionately emphasised by the participants of this study. This participatory study is just one example of the many ways a conversation can form between the intergovernmental apparatus and the local citizenry.

Through photographic images, this project has practically contributed a participatory response to the official pronouncements of ASEAN identity, albeit on a small scale. Ideally, the next step is for Southeast Asian scholars to collaboratively implement the rigorous approach we already developed on a much larger scale, and this must involve various groups from all the ten countries. That prospect would finally serve as a complementary qualitative research undertaking to the quantitative investigations conducted across ASEAN countries in the last ten years and act as an impetus for the ASEAN community's collective identity-building efforts for the next decades to come.

* * *

[81] This could be connected to sliding signifiers and issues with the differences in our usage of language and interpretations of meanings.

Invoking the strict words of a prominent Southeast Asian art historian at the start of this chapter (see epigraph), again I elicit the postcolonial hauntings of our region as its *absent presence* and *present absence.* Indeed, Sabapathy (2018:292) further reveals that:

> In proposing that we embark upon constructing regionalist perspectives, I am not advocating totalising visions; neither am I envisaging 'region' and 'regionalist' as closed, sufficient and self-referring notions. I have no doubts that the configuration of Southeast Asia is subject to historical contingencies or imperatives as much in the modern era as it has been in the past.

Certainly, I also believe that ASEAN regionalism cannot engender the same unitary or totalising view of Southeast Asia, Thus, what I propose is a *regional imaginary* instead of a *regional identity*. And as demonstrated in this study, the ASEAN imaginary is a multiplicity of visions.

CHAPTER V

Theorising Southeast Asia in Terms of Visual Culture: A Review of Literature

> *Commonplace is the notion that the south lies at the opposite of north, which is supposedly ascendant, more prone to power, closer to the imagined center. The south is cast as peripheral and dispossessed, gathered at the perceived fringes of province on a map of asymmetries. Such a curious psycho-geographical, or geopolitical, imagination yields another antinomy: the west and the east, bearing more or less equivalent valences as north and south. In this attempt at reducing the world to polarities and verticalities, the west is modern and everywhere and the east is timeless and far. Exceptional is the situation in which the south and the east cohere to form the coordinate of the southeast, possibly a double negation: not north, not west. This is a productive locus: that which is not the center, twice.*
>
> *– South by Southeast: A Possible Coordinate by Patrick D. Flores (2015: para.1)*

Throughout this thesis project, I touch upon various concepts and notions of Southeast Asia's regional imagination such as *ASEAN-ness, ASEAN identity,* or *ASEAN imaginary,* as well as the much-touted 'ASEAN Way'. Considered 'mystical' by some (Sudo 2003:156), these evocative terms served as my starting point in imagining and theorising ASEAN. In recent decades, many already attempted to propose and understand the concept of region-ness that Southeast Asia always evokes, from academics to journalists not only from Southeast Asian backgrounds but also from other Asian countries and even Western cultures (Acharya 2017; Lee 2018; Baba 2016; Jönsson 2010; Manea 2009; Jones 2004; Hall 2001; Hall 1994). And during the 37th ASEAN Summit (held on 12 November 2020), the ASEAN Secretariat finally adopted and published a much clearer definition:

> ASEAN Identity is a process of social construct defined by balanced [sic] combination of "Constructed Values" and "Inherited Values" that will strengthen the ASEAN Community.
> [...] The constructed values of ASEAN Identity are reflected in Article 2 of the ASEAN Charter, regarding Principles, namely: respect, peace and security, prosperity, non-interference, consultation/dialogue, adherence to international

> law and rules of trade, democracy, freedom, promotion and protection of human rights, unity in diversity, inclusivity, ASEAN Centrality in conducting external relations. These principles are considered to be shared and common values. The ASEAN members agreed to uphold these principles which are identified as the ASEAN Way. (ASEAN 2020a:2)

No matter the effort, these statements are easily misconstrued as mere rhetoric. On 22 September 2022, the regional organisation convened a 'symposium to discuss efforts to foster ASEAN Identity' (ASEAN 2022: online), which is hardly news given that the regional quest for its identity may already be considered an *old project.* For one, the various public opinion polls conducted across the member states in the past already indicate the long and winding search for ASEAN-ness. Hence, it is quite surprising that academics and politicians are still stuck in this discourse. Although, admittedly, these surveys pursued what has never been done before, to use evidenced-based methods in explaining what constitutes the so-called (self-)awareness of ASEAN member citizens.

Scrutinising the vague concepts of *region-ness, regional identity,* and even the *region as myth* is nothing new (Mahadevan 2012; Aiello 2012; Aiello 2008; Hall 1997; Geertz 1973). Barthes' (1977) semiotic work on 'Italianicity' is one of the earliest examples, although not necessarily about region-ness. More recently, Aiello's (2008) extensive dissertation on transnational identity in contemporary Europe is, perhaps, just one of the best examples in this subject. Thus, my own research is intended to examine the regional notion of an ASEAN identity as Southeast Asia's visual culture and, conversely, the concept of regional identity as exemplified by the region's visual culture. And to be more specific, I effectively limited my scope to photographic media in examining the visual culture of our diverse and populous region. In this study, I account for photographic media, arguably today's most prevalent visual technology in Southeast Asia as exemplified by the very high usage statistics of cameraphones and social media in the region as indicated by prior statistics (We Are Social 2021-2023:online; Kemp 2021:online; Kemp 2018:online; McKinsey & Company 2014:online). Likewise, I also acknowledged the rich history of traditional photography in all the ten countries (Zhuang 2016:12) which extends to the now *everyday-ness* of Southeast Asians taking pictures of themselves.

In this chapter, I first differentiate Southeast Asia and the ASEAN bloc (Section A) before pursuing other relevant works of scholars from disciplines such as communication studies and social sciences – not necessarily outside visual culture studies. Here, I explore how the ASEAN community might even exemplify a 'network society' by imagining the region across online linkages and social media. By considering an aspect of the region that is not limited by geography or divided by geopolitical lines, I distinguish the online 'ASEAN community' from the larger Southeast Asian society as another possibility (Section B). This path of enquiry leads me to various apparatuses and frameworks of collective identity-building in and of the region, upon which I saw gaps in knowledge as well as opportunities (Section C). Building upon these, I finally focus on photographic media to frame my study of visual culture.

The interdisciplinary literature available in this niche subject is quite sparse but undoubtedly useful in my creative practice-as-research (Section D). Underpinning the participatory potential of photography, my examination of literature entails theories of participation and voice. These affirm my new-found understanding of practice-based research alongside my quest for our expression of regional identity (Section E). Finally, I return to the curatorial canon upon which this thesis is premised (see Chapter I: Section C) to test my hypothesis about curating visual culture, which importantly includes what I refer to in this study as socially engaged curatorial practice (Section F).

I conclude this chapter with a brief discussion on imagining ASEAN's region-ness as my synthesis of the various literature and theories I found relevant (Section G).

A. Southeast Asia is and isn't ASEAN

I set out this study by recalling the colonial history of Southeast Asia, hence this section follows-through by accounting for postcolonial and contemporary discourses. However, before moving on, I must quote this lengthy exposition for the Guggenheim by Flores (2012:online):

> Consider the complexity of the category "Southeast Asia" as a kind of theater. On one level, it is a stage on which a great tradition is idealized, the spectacle of a storied past juxtaposed with the speed and density of current urban life. The rubric also once embodied a theater of operations for various 19th and 20th century imperialisms, in which the empires of Europe and America extended their dominions

> across the world. One might think of it too as a present-day platform for both the marketing of goods and the migration of people and things.
>
> Southeast Asia is also a specific locale or region within Asia, the latter part of its name being the main coordinate. This “southeast” is a distinct category, not merely an allusion to traces of the great traditions of India and China, or the spiritual legacies of Hinduism and Buddhism. Southeast Asia is neither India nor China–and certainly not the West–but manifests significant inheritances from them, as may be seen in the monuments of Angkor in Cambodia, Borobudur in Indonesia, Ayutthaya in Siam (now Thailand), and the colonial churches of the Philippines.

Within these two paragraphs, Flores encapsulates the extent of historical literature one must sift through to imagine the sheer importance of the region in the crux of history. Here, we see indelible traces of previous empires being invoked to further capture the global significance of Southeast Asia. Flores (2012:online) continues:

> Southeast Asia may further be regarded as a geopolitical field, the scene of colonial expansion by the Portuguese in Eastern Timor; the British in Malaya, Burma, and Northern Borneo; the Dutch in Indonesia; the Spanish and Americans in the Philippines; and the French in Indochina (Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos), with Siam as a buffer state. In an earlier time, the region was vaster, encompassing parts of China, India, and the Pacific. Southeast Asia may also be seen as a place where religions such as Christianity and Islam have undergone localization, exemplified by the only Catholic nation in Asia, the Philippines, and the world’s most populous Islamic country, Indonesia.

Again, Flores already performs the task of picturing Southeast Asia for us; it is a region so diverse that many prior and future scholars would almost always find it a challenge – sometimes even a deterrent – to encompass in one research effort. Nevertheless, many have tried and succeeded only by separating each distinct country-specific history before consolidating them again as mere anthologies (Sabapathy 2018:291). Still, the epic narrative of Southeast Asia prolongs, albeit not unexpectedly, as Flores (2012:online) encapsulates:

> Links may be drawn from this colonial phenomenon to events ranging from the Cold War era that began in the late forties to the post-independence period, which spanned the rise of authoritarian states and the struggle for representation and justice, through the 1990s; the Vietnam War; the Asian financial crisis of 1997; and increasing terror and counter-terror operations after 9/11. The establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967 clarified the status of Southeast Asia as a geopolitical, not merely geographical, category – a distinction that remains in place.

No wonder the question ‘What is Southeast Asia?’ (Japan Foundation Asia Center 2017) is as persistent as the changing of the times. There are two

different historical contexts that define Southeast Asia and the ASEAN organisation in distinct ways; first is the colonial construction of the region as summarised (Flores 2012:online) , and second is the half-a-century intergovernmental regionalism project that is the *Association of Southeast Asian Nations.* Although often referred to as the same geographical region, which is popularly acceptable, one cannot completely represent the other. In our current world map, the region of Southeast Asia clearly demarcates eleven countries[82] although, historically speaking, its cultural perimeter can relatively blur the boundaries of Southeast China and even stretch as far as the northernmost parts of Oceania[83] to denote the 'Asia-Pacific' region.

Southeast Asia is often framed by each country that is geographically and geopolitically bound within it. Sabapathy (2018) and Zhuang (2016) refer to these as nation-centric accounts as opposed to regionalist perspectives. Among the regionalisms I had surveyed (Legge 1992; Wang 1986a-b; Buss 1958), not one could offer a satisfactory discussion of *region-ness, regional identity,* or even *regional imagination.* Unfortunately, it might be unavoidable to study Southeast Asia without entailing an enumeration of nations (I refer to this as 'parade of nations'); the same challenge is highlighted in Zhuang's work (2016:14-15). Although mere conjecture, it might also explain why many journalists and scholars in the past had merely touched upon 'regional identity' while refraining from investigating it more concretely (Acharya 2000:2) – and that is also because using the construct of either a nation-centric approach or regionalist lens would only prove ambiguous, moreso contestable. Although it has been argued before that 'European power and influence in the region was "highly varied" and its force "very uneven", except in one significant deed: the establishment of international boundaries in Southeast Asia' (Osborne 2013, in Villanueva & Manalo 2017:92), the literature I scrutinise in this study compel me to maintain that Southeast Asia is an entirely European construct. This is not to forget what Anderson (1998:3) recounts in his in-depth study of Southeast Asia:

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[82] This count includes Timor-Leste, in addition to the ten ASEAN member countries already mentioned.

[83] This includes Australia's Christmas Island and Cocos (Keeling) Islands.

> As a meaningful imaginary, it has had a very short life, shorter than my own. Not surprisingly, its naming [Southeast Asia] came from outside, and even today very few among the almost 500 million[84] souls inhabiting its roughly 1,750,000 square miles of land (to say nothing of water), ever think of themselves as "Southeast Asians."

In the same page, Anderson (1998:3) also discusses when the geographical construct was cemented as a terminology:

> Southeast Asia, as such, emerged as a significant political term only in the summer of 1943 with the creation of Louis Mountbatten's South-East Asia [sic] Command, an offshoot of the more traditional India Command. But this command was based in Kandy, and its territorial responsibilities included both Ceylon and the Raj's Northeast Frontier (neither in "Southeast Asia" today) and excluded the Netherlands Indies (till July 1945), as well as the Philippines. Yet the naming clearly was a response to the fact that for the first time in history a single power – that of Hirohito's armies – effectively controlled the entire stretch between British Burma and the Hispano-American Philippines.
>
> It was at almost exactly the same time that academics began to use the term seriously, above all those from the two Anglo-Saxon maritime imperial states.

As intimated by these writings of Anderson (1998) and Flores (2012), the construct already bears the brunt of world history.

The ASEAN organisation, on the other hand, is a product of multi-lateral peace and trade processes. It is a subject more explored in diplomacy, international relations, and political economy. Hence, while 'Southeast Asia' is encumbered by its (post)colonial baggage, the regional organisation is a more contemporaneous discussion. I say this while acknowledging that the contemporary is not a neutral and transcendent notion that is unaffected by contingencies (Sabapathy 2018:291). But as compared to the spectre of Southeast Asia, the ASEAN bloc as a contemporaneous subject is much clearer and more determinable.

Referring to ASEAN's institutions and processes, in other words, its 'hardware' according to Kassim (2009:25) 'are easier to define and construct'. From its five founding nations – represented by the five 'founding fathers' – the ASEAN trade bloc now holds a membership of ten states[85] that rely on intergovernmental cooperation to effectuate its regional governance. Each

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[84] At the time when Anderson wrote his book, the total population of Southeast Asia was much lower than today's approximately 673 million population (United Nations 2022).

[85] The current membership include Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Viet Nam; however, at the time of writing this thesis, Timor-Leste was announced to be included as the 11th member state (UN News 2022:online).

year a member state takes a leadership role as 'ASEAN Chair', and this is automatically done by means of an agreed rota among the national governments of its member countries. Citizens of each country are considered as ASEAN member citizens by virtue of their country's official membership in the regional organisation. These official processes and many of its diplomatic and organisational procedures are in accordance with the *ASEAN Charter* (ASEAN 2008) which was only adopted in 2008, four decades apart from the signing of the *ASEAN Declaration* of 1967 which established the regional bloc in principle.

Thus, *contemporary* ASEAN discourse arguably spans the period from the time its charter was ratified until present day. Today, the discourses are generated by – and in relation to – its 'three pillars': (1) ASEAN Economic Community, (2) ASEAN Security Community, and (3) ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. These are the three major areas of concern highlighted by the community-building affairs of the regional organisation, and thus they often engage not only diplomats and government officials but also academics, entrepreneurs, and even creative practitioners and cultural managers. Given that the ASEAN organisation is a legal entity per se, it can therefore officially act not only through its pillars but also in partnership with other entities such as the ASEM, EU, or UN, just to name a few current examples. The ASEAN Secretariat, headquartered in Jakarta, Indonesia is the trade bloc's main point of contact.

Of course, because ASEAN is a legal entity, as an organisation it does not exist without controversy, some of which I account for in Chapter II (see Section B). Generally speaking, these criticisms could be folded into three threads, as exemplified by a few accounts. The first thread of criticisms is in relation to its derivative character in that it merely copies or imitates others, i.e. the EU bloc (Lim 2010; Kassim 2009; David & Smith 2002; Higgott 2003; Higgott 2000). The second thread is related to the previous criticism in that the processes are merely rhetorical, often regurgitating its member states' politics (Murti 2016; Katsumata 2009; Severino 2009; Sudo 2003; David & Smith 2002). These two threads then lead to a third thread which pertains to its being undemocratic and often dismissive towards human rights conflicts

such as the ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis in Myanmar or the South China Sea territorial dispute, among other pressing sociopolitical concerns (Rodan 2018; Tobing 2018; Davies 2012; Desker 2009; Nem Singh 2009). I noticed that many of these issues were accounted for around the 2000s and 2010s as those were the decades that the region was rattled by the Asian financial crisis, the SARS pandemic, and South China Sea maritime tensions. Being sensitive to these concerning dilemmas and how ASEAN behaves in the face of these challenges is also essential to my understanding of ASEAN's 'soul' (Kassim 2009:25) as an aspect of its imagination.

Moreover, I am also aware that even regional organisations could also prove volatile. They are subject to change and dissolution. Two cases in point are the two prominent regional trade blocs of the Americas, NAFTA and UNASUR. The former was replaced or substituted by USMCA in 2020 and the latter while still existing has been challenged in 2019 by the new bloc PROSUL as a replacement. Perhaps another glaring example is the case of Brexit, something that shook even the firm foundations of the EU bloc.

My succinct profiling of ASEAN above already offers a more feasible scope and delimitation for this study which is a relatively short-term research undertaking. As an 'area studies' topic for instance, literature on ASEAN-ness or region-ness in general within the disciplines of art, culture, visual studies, and related disciplines is scarce (Sabapathy 2018:275; Taylor 2011:478) than when compared to the social sciences,[86] not to mention the number of ASEAN-sponsored publications. Moreover, returning to Kassim's (2009:25) analogy that ASEAN is Southeast Asia's 'hardware', since its *ideology* or 'software is more elusive', it is precisely the same aspect of the ASEAN discourse that this study makes a significant contribution in.

[86] for example, see Lamey (2021), Lee *et al.* (2021), Acharya (2018), Lee (2018), Koh (2014), Lai *et al.* (2014), Quayle (2013), Kim (2011), Cockerham (2010), Kassim (2009), Jones (2004), Hall (2001)

B. ASEAN as a network society

Regionalism does not exist in a vacuum. Globalisation as a factor can also affect the processes transpiring within a region. Thus, countries in ASEAN are constantly inundated with global flows of information, which complicates my study of identifying Southeast Asian visual culture. In my introduction, I succinctly recounted how the influences of European society had spread outside the continent, eventually reaching Southeast Asia, among other regions, and vice versa. While these 'global flows' (Appadurai 1990; 2000) of culture, ideology, and politics had been kickstarted during the so-called 'Age of Exploration', the tectonic ripples persist even today. However, despite the extent of theories already explaining globalisation and global flows of culture/information (Brown & Labonté 2011; Hopper 2007; Sassen 2007; Brown 2006; Hay & Marsh 2001; Appadurai 1990), it is still difficult to frame and, thus, it can prove challenging in my research given my limitations.

On the other hand, regionalisation, as an economic process that is tied to the ideology of regionalism (Hoshiro 2019:200), does manifest some aspects of globalisation but is relatively manageable in that it is contained in a regionally smaller area of the globe – although I would not argue that regionalisation is globalisation but only smaller. The regionalisation that is enacted by ASEAN is one example. It has ten member states[87] to date, plus one country-observer[88], hence, I only need to look at these countries to determine my scope and limitations.

Nevertheless, unlike the construct of Southeast Asia, the definitive apparatus of ASEAN does not threaten to obscure the site and scope of my study. However, it does not necessarily mean that the immediate task of theorising ASEAN is a simple and uncomplicated one. On the contrary, the ASEAN organisation per se is arguably 'not the region' (Acharya 2017:25). And if one were to regard it as a concept or feature of the community rather

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[87] Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Viet Nam

[88] The country of Timor-Leste is geographically part of Southeast Asia but only considered by ASEAN as an 'observer' that has yet to qualify for membership.

than the region, then they must also bear in mind the multifaceted-ness of its (con)temporalities and (counter)visualities.

Although at the outset I guided the readers of this thesis to make their own assumptions with conscious volition, I believe that I hardly let anyone suppose that the whole study merely accounts for the legal entity that is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations headquartered in Jakarta, Indonesia. Likewise, I am quite sure that every research participant who volunteered in and contributed to this study clearly understood that the very intention of the guided experience is to imagine the region as a transnational society rather than an intergovernmental organisation alone. Besides, even if a volunteer initially held the latter assumption, after going through our series of focus group discussions and participatory photography exercises, they would have eventually achieved a much better comprehension of the subject. Hopefully this level of understanding, in addition to their imagined constructs, of the region does not also exclude the institution. In other words, our usage of the term 'ASEAN' as synonymous to the Southeast Asian region is anything but arbitrary or convenient; it is not done to deliberately exclude other nations identifying as Southeast Asian (i.e. Timor-Leste). This research undertaking cannot be misconstrued as exclusivist for this pragmatic delimitation.

The ASEAN organisation, including its three pillars and the ASEAN Secretariat itself, not to mention countless publications of academics and journalists, have time and again used the nomenclature 'ASEAN region'[89] even loosely to occasionally refer to the Southeast Asian region. Permit me to argue this without citing any source as there are too many to even account for – after all, one Google search would lead to various articles proving my case. Thus, ASEAN is distinct in and of itself.

Collectively, by engendering these views, what is being constantly produced is a kind of discourse (van Dijk 1997; Foucault 1981; 1972) that could ultimately shape not only society's knowledge production but also, more importantly, our individualised worldview. In this study, I frequently refer to an 'ASEAN discourse' to broadly refer to this meaning-making system of

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[89] even ASEAN's official website (ASEAN n.d.:online) uses this term, see for example the URL: https://asean.org/about-us/asean-milestone/

the trade bloc – and by extension, its constituents – by way of its collective knowledge, rhetoric, and texts. And since I am by no means specialising in ASEAN regionalisation discourses, much less discourse theory, I only use the word 'discourse' as a descriptive term without intentionally diluting its theoretical significance.

Returning to my usage of the term 'ASEAN region' – if I may borrow de Saussure's (1983) semiotics – as a signifier it *obviously* lacks a 'signified'. I say this even after I offered a justification of my incessant use of the term because it is precisely where my whole practical and theoretical exploration revolves around. To reiterate my first research question, *how do Southeast Asians imagine ASEAN, as well as our belongingness and identity in relation to this region?,* what I am interested in understanding is the (visual) ways that individuals might see through their 'mind's eye' what the signifier 'ASEAN' is signifying. Hypothetically speaking, this should be the 'region'. And since the 'region' is intended to be the discovery or experience this study sheds light on, then 'region' is what is being clarified or defined. Thus, there is neither an existing nor sufficient definition of 'ASEAN region' that I could summon at this point. This precisely reflects upon Acharya's clarification that 'ASEAN is not a region' (Acharya 2017:25).

Because this research project takes upon the task of accounting for, again, other (con)temporalities and (counter)visualities of ASEAN, then what else is there to consider but the community it evidently signifies? Notably, the *ASEAN Charter* (ASEAN 2008:1-3) encompasses this in the following preamble:

> WE, THE PEOPLES [sic] of the Member States of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as represented by the Heads of State or Government of Brunei Darussalam, the Kingdom of Cambodia, the Republic of Indonesia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, the Union of Myanmar, the Republic of the Philippines, the Republic of Singapore, the Kingdom of Thailand and the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam [...] HEREBY DECIDE [sic] to establish, through this Charter, the legal and institutional framework for ASEAN, AND TO THIS END [sic] the Heads of State of Government of the Member States of ASEAN, assembled in Singapore on the historic occasion of the 40th anniversary of the founding of ASEAN, have agreed to this Charter.

This unequivocally demonstrates that ASEAN is a collective community. Although arguably, we can regard this declaration as a mere formality, thus not necessarily *realpolitik.* For ASEAN to thrive as a discourse, apart from

the ‘official’ and the academic, it should also take root within the public sphere. Hence, the contemporary ASEAN discourse must include not only official documents and policy statements at the intergovernmental level but also unofficial texts at the grassroots level. On that account, the mass media and visual culture of Southeast Asian nations play an integral part in shaping both the official and the unofficial, from broadcast media to advertising (Frith 2009; Tan & Mahizhnan 2002; Manilerd 1998) to tourism (ASEANStats 2018; ASEAN 2015), to geopolitical cyberculture cooperation (MFA Thailand 2022; US Mission to ASEAN 2021; Banerjee 2004), among others. These distinct but overlapping factors serve salient roles in the dissemination of ASEAN’s official discourse. At the same time, these sectors are also quite efficient in disseminating or facilitating ‘unofficial’ discourses of ASEAN. As opposed to the ‘official’ discourse in general, collectively the ‘unofficial’ are matters not referring to the governance and organisation of ASEAN. These may include adverts, entertainment, film festivals, music gatherings, sports events, and tourist photographs, *et cetera.* Visual culture plays an integral part in all of these activities.

Because citizens of ASEAN countries do not yet enjoy the mobility afforded to, for example, citizens or permanent residents of the European Economic Area (EEA) to use the EU bloc as a *convenient* example, many of the said activities virtually necessitate defining a space for the diverse ASEAN publics to interact as one community. Here I am trying to use an analogy of a ‘public sphere’ (Habermas 1989:118) as ‘a space for political freedom and equality [including] all forms of institutions and scopes which provide context for the citizen’s activities’ (Haryatmoko 2005:397). One way that I ‘trace’ this space in my study is by considering an ASEAN community that transcends geographical territories. I do this, however, with one key contention in mind: that the Internet is ‘not a public sphere’ (Dean 2003:98-100) – this likewise applies to our relative understanding of social media. As the ASEAN discourse comprises many different forms and messages within the public sphere, we must also account for both and differentiate between the ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ (Zeisel 2006:177-178)[90].

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[90] see also the earlier works of Fuchs (2008; 2007) and Castells (2004; 1996)

One example of how we can look at the regionalism discourse as a public sphere is through the 'unofficial'[91] ASEAN Facebook community, as well as its several ASEAN photography competitions organised over social media, among other online activities (Agustin 2017a). Outside government intervention, unofficial efforts such as these are 'naturally and organically' grown (Arndt 2005:xviii) by certain groups of a community to bridge cultural gaps within the region – virtually forming a transborder, transnational venue. These groups can be likened to what Melucci (1995; 1989) described as 'cultural laboratories', which are decentralised social movements that may contribute to a common goal (Melucci 1989:60). For any citizen to use social media as the main platform where they can express their interest in ASEAN, they must recognise first the regional kinship that the cultural laboratory of their chosen social network is fostering. The 'unofficial' ASEAN discourse, thus, comprises these emerging online, social media driven public spheres (Castells *et al.* 2006; Rafael 2003). I say 'emerging' because I consider the unofficial discourse a rising awareness,[92] not necessarily an 'enlightenment of the political public sphere' (Habermas 1989:118). Therefore, the ASEAN community manifests not only as an officiated geopolitical membership but also as a more complex space or system of society, exemplifying not only collective identity-building but also network society models.

Castells' (2010b; 1996) model of an 'Internet constellation' (Castells 2010b:375) and Fuchs' (2015; 2008; 2007) network society model[93] although seemingly out of fashion, are practically useful analogies in understanding ASEAN as a *networked community.* While regional community-building is facilitated by the transborder flow (i.e. import and export) of commodities and culture, the way the Internet can digitally connect every member country

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[91] Eventually called the 'ASEAN Youth Organization' Facebook community, the page was initially created by students in Thailand on Facebook to promote awareness about ASEAN in their school; it eventually expanded to a community of youth from different Southeast Asian countries with more than 275,000 followers at the time of writing. The page is still available via: www.facebook.com/pg/ASEANCommunity

[92] Zeisel's (2006) description of public environments identifies three types of public messages: official, unofficial, and illegitimate, the latter including graffiti and vandalisms (Zeisel 2006:177-179).

[93] see also Fuchs' (2007:74) concept of 'transnational spaces'

is all the more instrumental in blurring the borders of the geographic region. However, while a network society serves its 'trans-mediative' purpose for a regional community, it also perpetuates in the virtual realm the existing forms of divisiveness, exploitation, and oppression experienced in real life. In short, contrary to what was before an aspirational imaginary of the so-called 'cyber-space', online communities are not unaffected by their material conditions of existence, rather, they are an extension of these. Any online community can, thus, be understood as a virtual manifestation of its real-life counterpart. In other words, an ASEAN community cannot exist as a purely 'cyber' or 'digital' experience.

Many contemporary scholars of digital and mobile communication, as well as 'polymedia' refer to the affordances these media technologies bring, especially in enhancing diasporic engagement and empowering the deprived (Uy-Tioco 2019; Cabañes 2017; Arora & Scheiber 2017; Madianou & Miller 2012). Photographic media and visual culture are of course integral to these social media platforms, and the ASEAN population is observably dependent on and expedient in terms of their usage. Nearly a decade ago *The Selfiest Cities in the World* was published by TIME as a 'definitive ranking' based on big data analysis (Wilson 2014:online); this news was quite exciting for us Southeast Asians because among the top 100,[94] several cities are actually in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and, at the top of the list, the Philippines.

Disparate ASEAN institutions, governments, and peoples spanning the vast region can simply tap different forms of online media environments to interact with each other and engage not only in community-building but also, more importantly, in collective identity-building. However, despite social media's potential, it is still impossible for every individual to meet or even know of each other within the community. In this study, image-making and exhibition-making serve the purpose of filling this gap. After all, the ASEAN community remains imagined (Anderson 2006:6; Acharya 2009:9), only this time it is by way of 'mediated' (Livingstone 2009; Madianou 2005; Silverstone 2005) or, even more accurately 'mediatised', experiences (Hjarvard 2013; Livingstone 2009; Couldry 2008).

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[94] Reportedly, the Philippines ranked first while three out of the top ten are ASEAN cities.

Hence, today what replaces classic examples representing imagined communities (e.g. the novel, popular literature, legacy media, propaganda images) are social media platforms, which are *typically visual tools,* hence the number of prior studies that illustrate how social media can serve as tools for *mediatising* imagined communities (Weiskirch, 2019; Kavoura 2014; Theodorelis-Rigas 2013; Craig 2012; Gruzd *et al.* 2011).

As Noble (2018:13) calls for our understanding of how these 'algorithmically driven platforms are situated in intersectional sociohistorical contexts and embedded within social relations', I acknowledge social media's usability while, at the same time, I refrain from overstating its contributions. For this reason, my study veers away from the technological deterministic stance of prior literature in ASEAN by emphasising that our use of photography and participatory media is only as good as our creativity and imagination. What is more important is how we rethink our ways of understanding our community. Besides, the ASEAN discourse in itself – whether offline or online, official or unofficial – serves as a common ground for the different communities and entities of Southeast Asia to commune and convene beyond local, national, and even geopolitical interests. An *avenue* for its member countries' regional discourse and a *venue* for all the region's citizens, ASEAN can be considered as a region, a community, and a discourse of the said region or community. As Appadurai (2000a:48) also expounds:

> As groups migrate, regroup in new locations, reconstruct their histories and reconfigure their ethnic projects, the *ethno* [sic] in ethnography takes on a slippery, nonlocalized quality, to which the descriptive practices of anthropology will have to respond. The landscapes of group identity – the ethnoscapes – around the world are no longer familiar anthropological objects, insofar as groups are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogenous.

In summary, whether seen as a network society or not, the imagined grouping of ASEAN does not only include its discrete nations or territories, but also its virtual communities. In this study, I pose this as a matter of choice, between the contemporaneous, the now, and the prospective.

C. Theorising collective identity-building

Today, the number of ASEAN-labelled accounts on social media[95] reminds us of how Southeast Asians hardly neglect talking about ASEAN-ness as another layer of their being *interpellated*[96] by the official ASEAN discourse. Seeing the online community of ASEAN 'netizens', I suggest that it is one of the ways that signals the shift of discourse from an exclusive discussion that involves diplomats, politicians, economists, entrepreneurs, to a conversation that concerns actual members of the wider public. Despite the lack of attention on the regional identity discourse of ASEAN-ness, some scholars still push for more research in this direction. For example, Evers (1980:2) proposes that 'South-East Asianism [sic]' must be 'recognized and analyzed' and its breadth and diversity must not deter researchers. Archarya (2000:4) also argues that '[w]hile some may dismiss it as a mere "academic" question, the "regionness" of Southeast Asia is a matter of considerable significance for its states and societies'.

Previous postgraduate research works[97] already examined ASEAN's regional identity but these works, I must admit, are not situated within visual culture studies and thus lack critical approaches of, say, a comparable study by Aiello (2012; 2008). In *Visions of Europe: The semiotic production of transnational identity in contemporary European visual discourse,* Aiello (2008) rigorously explains the construct of a European social identity by means of social semiotics and visual analyses. Using yet again the EU bloc as a point

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[95] Based on my own count since I started writing this thesis, there are around a hundred Facebook pages, a dozen Facebook groups, and hundreds of Twitter accounts associated with the moniker 'ASEAN'.

[96] Recall Althusser's reinterpretation of the Marxist theory of 'interpellation' in *Ideology and ideological state apparatuses,* originally published in 1970 (Evans & Hall 2001:317-323).

[97] Some theses that discussed ASEAN's regional identity building efforts include Chumongkol's (2017) doctoral dissertation *Imagined ASEAN Identity in Thai Television Programs* (National Institute of Development Administration); Igboanusi's (2017) master's thesis *The Challenge of Cultural Identity on Regional Integration: A Case Study of ASEAN Community* (Siam University); Rattanasevee's (2014) doctoral thesis *Explaining the Dynamics of Regional Integration: Democratisation, Identity, Institutions, and Leadership in the Case of the ASEAN* (University of Bath); Hoa's (2013) master's thesis *Vietnam and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC): Prospects, Challenges and Opportunities* (Victoria University of Wellington; and Zuo's (2009) doctoral thesis *Research on the Evolution of ASEAN Identity-constructing and Higher Education Policy during the Process of ASEAN Integration* (East China Normal University); these studies are only discussing 'regional identity' within the paradigms of economics, geopolitics, and social sciences.

of comparison to assess ASEAN is not my intention; although one post-graduate dissertation already made a case that this could also be productive (Lim 2010). The point is that I also identify a gap in our current knowledge of ASEAN's identity construction within the fields of art, cultural studies, media studies, and visual culture. Hence, this study fills the gap in knowledge by situating itself in the said disciplines as well as by complementing the effort of all these previous scholarly contributions. And since I am mainly interested in photography, this research is dedicated to our understanding and practice of this particular visual culture in Southeast Asia.

The earliest key literature about how ASEAN's media industry (Anand & Quisumbing 1981) probably helped construct its regional identity discourse is from the pioneering seminar 'Problems and Progress in Cultural Development in ASEAN' (held in Manila, from 2 to 7 June 1980). For the first time, it was a welcome gathering of prominent academics, anthropologists, economists, historians, journalists, lawyers, and media practitioners across Southeast Asia – with the concerted purpose of sharing culturalist perspectives (Siddique 1981). During the seminar, it was suggested that the film industry could largely contribute to Southeast Asian locals' appreciation of their regional cultural identity because of its international reach (Lim 1981:199-214). More than a decade later, some studies eventually recognised the impact of broadcast and print media in serving the purpose of the trade bloc (Tan & Mahizhnan 2002; Manilerd 1998).

In the context of the present, from what I have observed in the last three years alone, the speculations provided by these outdated writings have suddenly become recurrent because of digital media and online streaming. Social media and bite-size entertainment even drive content production in the region. However, from what I also observed from social media communities with the biggest followers, typically the sharp focus of the unofficial discourse is tourism in the region – unfortunately, a very 'nation-centric' approach. It is not surprising, though, if seen as a socioeconomic effect 'of algorithms and artificial intelligence' (Noble 2018:13). Since many locations in the region are internationally popular as tourist destinations, the region is typically imagined and *imaged* from the profitable angle of tourism. The global tourism industry,

after all, is a key driver of the region's national and local economies – in terms of regional policy-making, tourism is undeniably one of ASEAN's priority sectors (ASEAN 2015).

Despite the variety of cultural activities and creative production across the trade bloc, and even with the regional influence of media and tourism in general, there is still a knowledge gap especially when it comes to our critical awareness and understanding of the notion of ASEAN identity – echoing the argument raised by Saihoo (1981:126) four decades ago:

> …so far mass media reports have not brought out a clear ASEAN picture that proves its real meaning and worth to the public... without adequate information and convincing explanation, the public will have little chance to develop an idea of a common ASEAN identity and sense of community that transcends their individual national values.

The fault, as opined by Saihoo, is in the message. As I already mentioned, traditional media or mass media and their products are often localised and at most nationalised, thus seldom regionalised. However, I am also not making a case for simply regionalising the media efforts of ASEAN member states, it does not necessarily guarantee that the public will better understand the regional identity discourse through *regional media.* There are now media networks that have established regional presence – for example, the BBC, Al Jazeera, and Reuters, among others – and more often these outlets only serve as aggregators of nation-specific news. Unfortunately, when a news network is perceived as a mere mouthpiece for a multinational corporation, then it also fails the public's eye (Chan 2021). Probably the best that these regionalised networks could do is, again, to use the lens of comparative politics, international relations, and international political economy to offer the public a sense of region-ness. On the other hand, social media and online groups dedicated to the ASEAN process have been more helpful; they allow various individuals from different Southeast Asian countries to virtually interact with each other in more direct and innovative ways.

Ultimately, the message of a collective ASEAN identity, whether seen in official or unofficial discourses, often poses many contradictions. It's as if Southeast Asian citizens are compelled to form a strong understanding of their shared sense of region-ness in relation to their national identities while in their everyday life they are only discursively shaped by their nation-ness.

More often than not, from our restricted view, what we are witnessing are two seemingly opposing forces: on the one hand the economic development of each ASEAN member country relies on multilateral movement of commodities and people, but on the other hand, the diplomatic ties among the ten countries are also buoyed by their national politics and propaganda. Hence, we must look beyond these 'financescapes' and 'ideoscapes' (Appadurai 1990:298). Here I used Appadurai's (2000; 1990) 'global flows' framework to illustrate the interconnected and overlapping transboundary features and moving parts of a dynamic region. The imagined community is, therefore, in constant flux and almost unpredictable. Thus, to account for the ways we might engage in collective identity-building, we must look at the material production of this process. These are the 'technoscapes' and 'mediascapes' proposed by Appadurai (1990:297-299).

This is where my creative practice-based research intervenes to fill the gaps in our awareness of the multiple facets of ASEAN-ness. Creative efforts by way of communicative media – not to mention the technologies of trade and travel – help integrate individuals and communities within the region (especially during the restrictive scenario of the Covid-19 pandemic) to allow for a meaningful exchange of cultural ideas and products. These do not only help us formulate our understanding of a community in constant flux but also provide us a means for interacting with the community as *everyday participant-observers.*

To delink a nation-centric mindset, which still contributes to the formation of these aforementioned dichotomies, we may consider that 'nationalism is a deceptive category' (Spivak 2010:46). Exploring the dichotomy between the cultural and the civic, Spivak (2012) recounts the regional project called the Group of Eight (G8)[98] to exemplify how might regionalism entail a sense of both cultural and civic identity – note that the G8 does not necessarily hold a membership of geographically bound countries. On the other hand, we may also consider decentring nation-ness by considering cultural products and media production as essential to a community's hybridisation as well as

[98] An intergovernmental forum of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, United Kingdom, United States, European Union which was grouped together in 1997 and reverted back to Group of Seven (G7) after Russia was disinvited and suspended in 2014.

(g)localisation (Straubhaar 2007:143-151). Straubhaar (2007:13) exemplifies television shows and broadcast media to illustrate the circulation of cultural products and the reach of the creative industries help shape many diasporic[99] communities and (their) cultural identities. My final case in point is, probably, the incommensurability of one region to another, or one region to a nation, or one nation to another. For instance, Sidaway (2002:98-99) underlines the excessive replication of the EU bloc's 'Western prototype' of statehood in the Global South, thus leading to the weaknesses of some states, illustrating that *there is no us-them formula* for nation-building, much less imagining a region as one community. Thus, when either a nation-centric framing (Zhuang 2016: 14) or an entirely regionalist perspective (Sabapathy 2018:291) leads to contradictions and paradoxes, we can instead take a step back to consider or challenge other dichotomies that might not immediately seem obvious.

D. Photographing region-ness

Zhuang's (2016) *Photography in Southeast Asia* is probably one of our most comprehensive written works on contemporary photography. He consolidates an in-depth discussion of Southeast Asian countries' photographic practices – from art to documentary, among other renditions. For instance, his glimpse into each country's pictorial legacy can help us gain a comprehensive appreciation of the role of Southeast Asians in enriching image-making practices around the world, which is seemingly neglected or overlooked by the overtly Westernised lens of art history. In the final pages of his monograph, Zhuang (2016:445) asserts that:

> photography has been *embedded* [sic] in the global and regional flows of peoples, photo supplies, visual trends and cultural resources since its inception. This makes the writing of photography irreducible to a purely nation-centric or regional framing. [...] Nevertheless, I wish to invoke the imaginary of "Southeast Asia" as a posture of solidarity with others who have been made "peripheral" by centres of power.

Indeed, the epic account illuminates our picture of Southeast Asia through Southeast Asians' practices of photography, whether cross-border, domestic,

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[99] To cite a recent example of a television show's impact on a regional community, here are a couple of headlines: 'EU prepares to cut amount of British TV and film shown post-Brexit' (Boffey 2021:online) and 'The thought is unbearable: Europeans react to EU plans to cut British TV' (Connolly 2021:online).

or fringe. This proves helpful in my own practice and study of photography in that Zhuang's work already lays the foundation for our understanding of the *accumulative effect of images* (Pink 2013:172-173) across Southeast Asia as well as in terms of the *socioeconomic and sociopolitical contexts* (Acharya 2000:2) of these images. More evidently, Zhuang's work already set the tone of *confronting* the imposed regionalities and representations of Southeast Asia which is the same challenge that my research journey embarked upon (see, for instance, my aims in Chapter I: Section J).

The notion of ASEAN-ness has always been concomitant upon the 'official' ASEAN discourse (Agustin 2018), aptly summed up by the motto of 'One Vision, One Identity, One Community', espoused in the *ASEAN Charter* (ASEAN 2008:online). To better understand how this is accepted/challenged outside the official discourse, alongside various economic and geopolitical perspectives it is also crucial to view it from a visual culture perspective as I have advocated before (Agustin 2018; 2017a). In 1976, ASEAN's leadership signed the *Declaration of ASEAN Concord II* (ASEAN 2012:online),[100] more popularly known as the Bali Concord of 1976, with the following promise:

> The Community shall nurture talent and promote interaction among ASEAN scholars, writers, artists and media practitioners to help preserve and promote ASEAN's diverse cultural heritage while fostering regional identity as well as cultivating people's awareness of ASEAN.

Thus, as early as the 1970s and 1980s, collaborative initiatives from the cultural sectors and creative industries have contributed to the efforts of the ASEAN integration (Lim 1981:199-214). These include ASEAN-themed photography exhibitions such as the 'ASEAN Exhibition of Painting, Graphic Arts and Photography', the 'ASEAN Travelling Exhibition of Paintings and Photographs', and the 'ASEAN Exhibition of Paintings and Photography' (Mashadi *et al.* 2018), to name a few. More recently, say, in the last decade, photography competitions, film festivals, trending music videos, and even sporting events have continued to help promote awareness of the ASEAN discourse across the ten countries. As more photographic images and video content are now generated and crowdsourced across social media networks

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[100] via the URL: https://asean.org/speechandstatement/declaration-of-asean-concord-ii-bali-concord-ii

(Zhuang 2016:444), these also contribute to shaping not only the visual culture of the region but also the unofficial ASEAN discourse.

While the official discourse has continuously inspired and produced academic and media texts spanning over five decades, on the other hand, scholarly interest in the unofficial discourse (especially its visual turn) is still inadequate. This is one glaring gap that my study of photographic images and exhibition-making effectively fills in. And because photographic media contributes so much to the unofficial discourse, I must rely on photographs and iconic images to observe the shifts in the overall ASEAN discourse alongside the trajectories of its representation. From 'official' images like the photographs of annual ASEAN summits (see *Image 31)* to 'unofficial' images such as those taken, uploaded, and shared by online users, it is becoming more obvious that ASEAN's identity discourse is hardly monolithic unlike decades ago. Recalling how Zhuang (2016:14-15) describes how Southeast Asian visual culture is traditionally 'nation-centric', I could see why, in effect, social media images break this pattern. Regional participation in the ASEAN discourse elicited and facilitated by social media can prove instrumental in understanding our collective identity-building efforts. Social networking sites can transcend the borders of the member nations and allow more real-time interpersonal exchanges within the region (Castells 2012)[101] despite their technologically deterministic algorithms.

I must emphasise that this study is not merely driven by *visual culture* emerging as an exciting interdisciplinary field in the 21st Century – but, on the contrary, my research pursues the imagination of ASEAN-ness (and its visual culture) as a productive locus upon which I can build upon. My study, thus, fills in a gap in knowledge which is the lack of scholarly attention (especially of Southeast Asian academics) and public understanding (across the region) of imaging and image-making as functions of an imagined community.

The purpose of 'photographing the ASEAN imaginary is not only to produce images. In this curatorial project, I also put into practice an essential function of photography that can be rather overlooked; photography functions

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[101] Although some would disagree citing capitalism as social media's only motivation (see Fuchs 2015; Dean 2013).

as a medium. In short, the (im)material photographic image is as much a medium as the (digital) camera. Whether serving the purpose of aesthetics, creativity, performativity or some powerful truths – credibility, reality, surveillance, visuality, among others – it must function as a medium (Cabañes 2016; see also Guillermo 2001; McLuhan 1964). However, I must emphasise that I am not necessarily following McLuhan's technologically deterministic view of media (McLuhan & Fiore 1967). Instead, I take cue from Cabañes who applied Couldry's (2013; 2012; 2008) and Silverstone's (2005; 2002; 1999) frameworks of mediation. Silverstone (2002:761-762) defines mediation as:

> …the fundamentally, but unevenly, dialectical process in which institutionalised media of communication (the press, broadcast radio and television, and increasingly the world wide web), are involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life.

And, building on that, Couldry (2008:380) enriches our understanding of mediation in that:

> any process of mediation (or perhaps 'mediazation') of an area of culture or social life is always at least two-way: 'media' work, and must work, not merely by transmitting discrete textual units for discrete moments of reception, but through a process of environmental transformation which, in turn, transforms the conditions under which any future media can be produced and understood. In other words, 'mediation' is a non-linear process.

Thus, Cabañes argues that 'to express voices that productively fuse institutional and everyday life photographic practices' (Cabañes 2017:2) we can use photography as both a personal and public medium (Cabañes 2017:15). While Cabañes used participatory photography to substantiate this claim, my approach is hinged upon visual (auto)ethnography through mixed methods (see Chapter II) to account for a larger, international community. Of course, there is no one correct way of using photographic media for the purpose of understanding aspects of sociocultural integration. This is demonstrated by various practitioners not only in Europe (Ewald 2015; Fairey 2015; Luvera 2010; Spence 1990) but also, more importantly, in Asia (Young 2021; Habibi 2017; Cruz 2014; Ng 2015a-b; Vuth 2015; Wang *et al.* 1996). Therefore, we cannot simply neglect or inadvertently overlook the influence of photographic cultures, images, and media pertaining to and perpetuating the discourse of ASEAN-ness we occasionally encounter in our everyday life.

Tangentially, this project began as a response to the iconic image of ASEAN leaders traditionally performing the popular 'ASEAN handshake' (see

Image 31[102] as an example). Diplomats, politicians, and state leaders form a human chain by interlinking their arms, typically photographed during the news coverage of annual ASEAN summits or intergovernmental meetings. Curiously, this iconic image is anything but new, much less 'Southeast Asian'. Walter Lang's 1956 motion picture *The King and I* (see *Image 32),* adapted from the stage musical of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, also portrays exactly the same handshake being used in the context of Southeast Asia. The film imagines a kingdom set in Thailand where an English teacher introduces herself to the king's children in the song-and-dance scene *Getting to know you.*[103] While no one could ascertain how ASEAN's diplomatic hand-shake came to be, it is quite curious to know that Hollywood popularised this gesture about a decade prior to the founding of the association. Before this iconic handshake became the most recognisable image of ASEAN, it was always the visual rhetoric of clichéd tourism images of exotic Southeast Asia – a product of the Western gaze, of course, which can be traced back to the European colonial history of the region.

One of the participants, Chow-Paul (a British-Singaporean citizen) recalls attending cultural programmes for the youth; during these gatherings youth members often participate by representing their national identities by way of costume and performance – which is similar to my own recollection (see Chapter I: Section D). And yet, there is a deafening lack of academic interest in ASEAN's visual culture. While it is already outside the scope of this study to discuss the iconographic performance of Southeast Asian leaders, through participatory photography this study contributes instead to the discussion by offering a countervisual imagery. Instead of photographing the political elites, this study is challenging Southeast Asians to imagine ourselves, through the ordinariness and banality of our lived experience; aside from pointing our cameraphones towards our everyday lives to take selfies, let us also imagine one another's faces.

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[102] 'Southeast Asian leaders emphasize economic strength in face of U.S.-China tensions' as reported by Tanakasempipat and Wongcha-um (2019) via Reuters.

[103] The dance is attributed to American choreographer Jerome Robbins; this scene was also revisited by Singaporean artist Ho Rui An in his installation art/performance piece at *Almost There* in 2017 (Vargas Museum 2017).

Image 31: *34th ASEAN Summit in Thailand photographed by Reuters (23 June 2019), the last in-person summit before the Covid-19 pandemic forced ASEAN to hold the succeeding summits online*

Image 32: *Getting to know you, The King and I (1956)*

E. Participatory photography and voice

At this point I must explain how participatory photography is theoretically framed for the purpose of this research project. Since there are many uses of photography that are not at all participatory, identifying what participation is could help us distinguish the participatory dimensions of one photographic practice from another. For instance, documentary filmmaking such as street photography may generally be acceptable for depicting crowds of people and outdoor scenes, but random people being unilaterally subjected to the gaze of the director or photographer is hardly participatory. On the other hand, even if a compelling majority of people consent to their being surveilled by some facial recognition camera technology in a democratic government, the masses' blanket assent is not necessarily tantamount to their participation especially when it comes to the handling and usage of their biometric data. Even participatory photography, photovoice, or similar methods that were purposefully designed to empower and support marginalised communities are not infallible.

Among the many criticisms of this method, many are iterated within the fields of community development and social work, or even public health. In the last two decades, for instance, scholars identify the following: pressing ethical issues in relation to managing sensitive personal information or the uncontrollable distribution of digital photographs (Brigham & Kharbach 2020; Brigham *et al.* 2018; Noland 2006), power imbalances and group dynamics issues (Warne & Gillander Gådin 2019; Nykiforuk *et al.* 2011; Gotschi *et al.* 2009), lack of rigour of representability and representation (Evans-Agnew & Rosemberg 2016; Kabranian-Melkonian 2015; Halilovich 2013), raising un-realistic expectations and leaving the researched community almost empty-handed (Johnston 2016; Denov *et al.* 2012; Nykiforuk *et al.* 2011; Castleden *et al.* 2008), public exposure and harm (PhotoVoice 2014b:online; Kenney 2009:113), inconsistencies as a qualitative method (Guell & Ogilvie 2015; Hergenrather *et al.* 2009), and the list goes on. I would argue that rather than debating about the ethics of photography as a (pro)social medium, what is more productive for this research is to clarify why many ethical dilemmas emerge from our usage of the term 'participatory'. Carpentier (2012) warns

that without a definition, ‘everything becomes labelled participation, which makes the concepts rather difficult to use for academic purposes’ (Carpentier 2017:87).

At the outset I generally defined participation as our direct engagement and interaction within a group and its discourse; however, I must also emphasise the many facets of participation to operationalise it as a useful research method and scholarly praxis before I link it back to our use of photographic media. Although I acknowledge the pioneering contribution of Arnstein (1969:216) in theorising the hitherto popular ‘ladder of citizen participation’, I must move on from the hierarchical view of participation that this framework and many others espouse. While the said perspective is quite useful for a multitude of other studies contextualised in democratic societies, the same view is incommensurable within the context of non-democratic communities such as some authoritarian and communist states in the region – see related studies on this by Rodan (2018) or Jayasuriya and Rodan (2007). For this reason, I believe that participation must fundamentally entail conscientisation (Freire 1985) and, thus, one’s participation is not better or higher than another’s. For instance, I would argue that full citizen control without critical awareness and reflexive consciousness is not necessarily participation but instead mere groupthink or herd mentality. Conversely, I do believe that even the simple act of looking at media images and visual texts (e.g. propaganda images) constitutes a certain degree of participation whenever the *interpellated* subject becomes aware of their *interpellated-ness* – although I understand that this may be easily criticised as a view that may diminish a person’s agency. Therefore, the context-specificity of participation can lead us to its practical and theoretical complexities and nuances. For now, while the aforementioned propositions are still debatable, perhaps a caveat from Carpentier (2017:86) can serve as a starting point:

> One of the main problems with analyzing the concept of participation and participatory practices is the fluid nature of participation. [...] Participation’s meanings are very much embedded in different democratic discourses, which have turned it into a floating signifier.

To avoid falling into the same trap, I formulate a reasonable framework of participation that can effectively accommodate the methodology of this study. And instead of a hierarchical ladder, I imagine a spectrum. I trace this so-

called spectrum between Carpentier's (2017) two formulations of a definition: on the one hand, participation can be simply understood as the 'structuring logics of co-decision making' (Carpentier 2017:115); meanwhile, on the other hand, '[p]articipation requires human beings accessing the location of the participatory process, and interacting with each other and with (proto-) machines' (Carpentier 2017:118). Note that there are no two extremes encompassed by this spectrum, only one is a broader definition than the other. This 'definitional anchorage' (Carpentier 2017:87) helps in stabilising the theoretical underpinnings of participation throughout this thesis. More than a floating signifier, participation effectively serves as an overarching method for image-making (i.e. participatory photography) and exhibition-making (i.e. curatorial collaboration) in creative practice-as-research as demonstrated in this study. Furthermore, the co-curators involved in the process exemplify and even personify the shared access and decision-making available to the research participants since they joined the project. The (visual) discourse and images (i.e. digital files), as well as the online, participatory media used throughout are, in effect, serving the purpose of '(proto-)machines' (Carpentier 2017:118). Knowing that anyone and everyone can take the opportunity of co-curating the outcomes of the participatory photography phase – the outcomes including the discussions, photographs, *et cetera* – a participant can then choose to extend (or end) their participation during the curatorial collaboration phase.

We must always remember that the nature of participation is hardly continuous, predictable, or even uniform. This is ostensibly reflected in the practical variabilities of any participatory research undertaking. I add this important facet to my own framework of participation to also account for different *and valid* paradoxes that we may encounter in collaborative and collective decision-making such as abstention, disappearance (or absence), silence, and withdrawal. These *undeniably human acts* may be counter-intuitive to our now deeper understanding of participation, but they can also subtly indicate whether or not individual participants are behaving of their own conscious volition. Using photography as a (visual) communication medium to elicit and/or express participation, therefore, does not minimise

its paradoxes. On the contrary, photographic images can even call our attention to these nuances.

Photographing an abstract concept such as the ASEAN imaginary, much less its identity or region-ness, is not a straightforward exercise. This might even alienate individuals who have yet no grasp of what ASEAN is (or of the technique of photography). Participation mitigates these circumstances especially when the participatory process fosters knowledge-sharing and capacity-building. Hence, participatory photography is not only a useful method for the purpose of this study but also a uniquely appropriate tool that affords the study participants a way into the known 'unknowns' and unknown 'knowns' as well as the choice of discovering, picturing, and realising them. Thus, photography can be utilised as a participatory medium. However 'un-participatory' some technologies are – cameraphones, messaging apps, social media, videoconferencing software and websites – depending on their context-specific usage and social affordances, they can be considered as participatory media. Nevertheless, to avoid using participation as a floating signifier, we must understand media usage as 'mediation'[104] as theorised by Cabañes (2017; 2016; 2013). In the context of the diasporic populations of Southeast Asia, we can refer to Madianou and Miller's (2012:14) theorising of 'polymedia':

> we now turn to the combination of all these different media and the way this constitutes the emergence of a new communicative environment. Polymedia thus has to be understood as more than a sum of its parts as it represents a qualitative shift in the relationship between media and its social context.
> A theory of polymedia shows how the existence of multiple alternatives within an integrated communicative structure leads to a different environment for relationships themselves. This recognition extends our focus to the social and emotional consequences of choosing between a plurality of media (rather than simply examining the particular features and affordances of each discrete medium). [...] We start by introducing a theory of the relationship as an intrinsically mediated form.

In their study of Southeast Asians' everyday use of different communication technologies, mobile devices, and social media altogether, Madianou and Miller (2012) argue that users navigate these platforms to suit their communicative and relationship needs (Madianou 2015; Madianou & Miller 2012).

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[104] see also Couldry (2013; 2012; 2008), Livingstone (2009), Madianou (2005), Silverstone (2005; 2002; 1999)

‘Polymedia’ therefore ‘shifts our attention from [...] discrete platforms to an understanding of media environments’ (Madianou 2015:1). In other words, ‘polymedia’ is not a combination of discrete communication technologies that merely fuse together to create a virtual experience. In the same vein, I use ‘participatory media’ to refer to the participatory potential of a combination of digital devices and online technologies. As these media overlap, ‘[w]hat emerges then is a complex environment of multiple, evolving social media that combine with other platforms, older and newer’ (Madianou 2015:1). In other words, the participatory in ‘participatory media’ does not necessarily signify the medium or technology itself because these can be used contrary to participation. Participatory media are the participatory affordances and usage of these devices. Thus, participatory media can be accessed by any-one at all – be it the ‘ordinary person’, the ‘citizen’, the ‘owner’, and/or the ‘leader’ (Carpentier 2017:97-107). As users of media, we should be the ones who make our own decisions as to how we participate, in spite of the impositions or restrictions concomitant with any medium. With this logic in mind, we can use photography in a way that facilitates – instead of impedes – participation.

Apart from its usefulness as a participatory medium, photography has another quality that can prove reliable in people engagement especially at the international (i.e. regional) level. As an image-making medium, it could be helpful in transcending some of the existing language barriers of a region as culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse as Southeast Asia. For one, images (and visual culture) may serve as a functional counterbalance to what some scholars observe as a lack of an internal *lingua franca* among ASEAN nationals (Lee *et al.* 2021; Kirkpatrick 2014) which results to the predominant use of English as an ‘external’ language (Lee *et al.* 2021:2). I say this without advancing an utterly idealised or romanticised assumption; as Buckingham cautions, ‘data from visual research cannot be seen as transparent evidence of inner mental processes, any more than language can’ (Buckingham 2009:648).

What I am proposing is how photography can serve as an effective communicative and pedagogical medium among Southeast Asian locals.

Because of this hypothetical usefulness, there is no denying the appeal and viability of participatory photography in Southeast Asia. In the last decade, participatory photography projects in the region have increasingly involved international participants, whether charity-led (Save the Children 2022; Save the Children 2018; PhotoVoice 2015; PhotoVoice 2014a; PhotoVoice 2007) or community-initiated (Kiling *et al.* 2022; Kunaviktikul *et al.* 2022; Sari *et al.* 2021; Papa 2019; Agustin 2017b; iMekong 2016; Iskander 2015; Cruz 2014; Ha 2014; Vietnam News Agency 2014).[105]

Apart from the aforementioned social affordances of photography, this study also uses participatory photography to tackle the mediatised imaginary of ASEAN as photographic images, not to mention other visual experiences such as the online exhibition. This approach is especially useful because translating the 'mental image' – something that is perceived by the 'inner eye' (Huppauf & Wulf 2009:13) – into a visual requires a (visual) medium. And because mental images could also be elicited when looking at photographs (Sontag 1977:167), then imagining the mediated imaginary (and conversely, imaging the mediated imagination) is never a linear process. This is why the mediated (i.e. photographed) image of ASEAN-ness does not necessarily precede our collective imagination of it.

Furthermore, photography merely acts as our medium of capturing or freezing the oscillation between the imagination and the image. Thus, more than just a means of making the regional identity of ASEAN 'concrete and palpable' (Sabapathy 1983:16), what photographic practices can afford us is a communicative space where we can engage with our own collective imagination and interact with our fellow image-makers. Nevertheless, I must also reiterate prior scholars' argument that creative and visual methods are not necessarily more accurate or more honest than other empirical observations (Cabañes 2013:37; Buckingham 2009:648). The trajectory of this research is, therefore, not towards the authenticity or phenomenology of an experience of ASEAN-ness. Neither it is about the representability of ASEAN-ness or its

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[105] However, most of these undertakings are country-specific and rather unrelated to ASEAN regionalism. Thus, my research project is probably the first to conduct an ASEAN-wide participatory photography project using 'polymedia' – from cameraphones, instant messaging apps, to online videoconferencing – for the benefit of an international group of participants.

photographic representation/s. It is, more than anything, about mediating voices of Southeast Asian locals.

Following how Cabañes (2017; 2016; 2013) already framed Couldry's (2010) definition within the context of participatory photography practice, here I must also reiterate that the way I define voice in the context of this research is that it is a process. Voice is a process because people use it to 'giv[e] an account of themselves and of their place in the world' (Couldry 2010:10). And for the reason that any research output, visual or otherwise, 'creates positions from which it is possible for participants to speak, to perform or to represent themselves' (Buckingham 2009:648), then the production and dissemination of photographic images in a visual ethnographic study as this exemplify the mediation of research participants' voice/s. This was clearly demonstrated by Cabañes (2013) in using photography as a participatory storytelling tool, he even evinces how an individual account emanates from the collective, and vice versa.

As such, participatory photography is less about representability and representation through images and more about the conscientious, ethical process of eliciting active participation and mediating voice (Evans-Agnew & Rosemberg 2016:1021). While documenting or representing true, objective reality is something that is often (inaccurately) associated with photography, the added dimension of participation in our usage of this medium takes it even farther from the scientific truth and, arguably, much closer to *realpolitik.* Participatory photography is, thus, not so much about the indexicality of the image than the relatability of the image-making process itself.

Photographic images circulating across the region therefore contribute to the constant mediation of voices, which has implications in our local and national participation in relation to the ASEAN regionalism process. However, because the dominant discourse of images only focus on those who are in power, the meanings and symbols being mediated in Southeast Asians' lived experience of ASEAN are hitherto of the official discourse. Therefore, it now comes as no surprise to see the unofficial discourse of crowdsourced images merely resembling the dominant narrative because the process of mediation is tantamount to what Michell (2002:175) explains as the 'visual construction'

of the social:

> As go-betweens or subaltern entities, these images are the filters through which we recognize and of course misrecognize other people. They are the paradoxical mediations which make possible what we call the unmediated or face-to-face relations that Raymond Williams postulates as the origin of society as such. And this means that the social construction of the visual field has to be continuously replayed as the visual construction of the social field, an invisible screen or lattice-work of apparently unmediated figures that makes the effects of mediated images possible.

Since the ASEAN regionalism process is hardly face-to-face or unmediated, then our (direct) participation in this discourse requires mediation. Whether image-making and photographic practices are participatory or not, because we constantly encounter them through our mediated experience of daily life, then they can inform our analysis of the mediated ASEAN discourse, visual or not. This study, therefore, contributes to our understanding of how photographic images offer a visual discourse of Southeast Asia that is not only relevant but also central to the construction of its regional identity.

Using participatory photography as a means to mediate voice, this study follows the path of other socially engaged photography practitioners – some of whom I already mentioned earlier – such as Cabañes (2017), Fairey (2015), Ewald (2015), Luvera (2010), and Spence (1990). As seen in their practices, participatory photography can involve collective engagement and self-critical learning, as it is a way for individual participants to progress from 'I think' to 'we think' (Agustin 2018:166). Building upon Freire's (1973:137) pedagogical theory of 'coparticipation', one of the key contributions of my practice-led research is not only harnessing image-making as a collaborative research practice but also using experimental art practice for the purpose of collective identity-building (or collective image-making). I do this with some awareness of a certain pitfall Cabañes (2016:16) underlines:

> That said, the discussions between the photography scholars and the migrant participants about whether a story can be told photographically serve as a warning against overly reifying this particular affordance.

By inviting ordinary citizens (i.e. as opposed to individuals who work within ASEAN institutions) and involving them in this participatory research process, I am making a clear distinction in terms of the voice/s I wish to identify (with). For *interpellated* and *mediated* subjects of the ASEAN discourse, what this project affords us is an opportunity to exercise our right to express ourselves

in relation to the international politics of the regional organisation that governs but excludes us. Of course, to be realistic, I iterate an argument I made before in saying that one cannot overestimate 'the capacity of one project to immediately alter a very well propagated identity discourse' (Agustin 2018:167).

F. Curating (ASEAN) visual culture

The social affordances of photographic media are what makes it a viable discourse to contend with. Yet as an archival, cultural, or historical means of reflecting on Southeast Asia, photography is not without limitations. Referring to the near monopoly of art historical institutions in controlling photographic discourses across the region, Zhuang (2016:443) relates:

> To re-imagine and re-contextualise photographic practices, I had to look for the photographic in writings on cultural studies, anthropology, art history, media ethics and the politics of representation, amongst others. One of the problems in Southeast Asia is that much of the current research is generated from materials provided by museums and galleries, which operate from the limited agenda of framing photography as high art.

That is to say, we are left with a gap in knowledge when it comes to framing the discourse/s of Southeast Asian region-ness within the practice of photography alone. Moreover, while I leverage the strengths of photography as an investigative tool and participatory method, I cannot solely rely on it alone. This goes without saying that other/future scholars of Southeast Asia may find the discourse/s of photographic practices in Southeast Asia limiting as Zhuang (2016) already testifies to; I daresay however that we can repurpose and utilise the knowledge production already established by museums and galleries across the region. Institutions of Southeast Asian art, culture, and heritage (e.g. museums, galleries, universities) are rich resources that we can tap into despite the limitations of their work in relation to collective or regional identity-building. One strength that I could recover from this field is art research and its corollary which is artistic practice-as-research. Curating art is one such practice.

For one, taking a 'curatorial turn' O'Neill (2007) might prove useful in consolidating photography and other image-making practices as a contemporaneous facet of ASEAN discourse. In Sabapathy's account of Guillermo, a

fellow renowned Southeast Asian art historian, both assert the view of Southeast Asia as a self-determining region with its own art and aesthetics while arguing the urgency of 'consolidating curatorial strategies' (Sabapathy 2018:290) to advance Southeast Asia's perspectives of regionalism. And in O'Neill's (2007:244) account of international exhibition-making in the form of biennales and biennials, we learn that:

> Exhibitions are, therefore, contemporary forms of rhetoric, complex expressions of persuasion whose strategies aim to produce a prescribed set of values and social relations for their audiences. As such exhibitions are subjective political tools, as well as being modern ritual settings, that uphold identities (artistic, national, sub-cultural, "international," gender- or race-specific, avant-garde, regional, global, etc.); they are to be understood as institutional "utterances" within a larger cultural industry.

Thus, more than expositions of art, what transcultural, transdisciplinary, and transnational exhibitions embody are the social construction and production of ideologies. However, while ASEAN-ness is one such example of an ideology that can benefit from this curatorial turn, the lack of consistent curatorial attention in this regional identity-building exercise and the creative/curatorial opportunity it is concomitant with (Sabapathy 2018:391-394) has always been staring us in the face.

Despite numerous intra-regional curatorial efforts that began in the 1980s and 1990s, many of which include photographic practices (Mashadi *et al.* 2018) – e.g. the *ASEAN Exhibition of Painting, Graphic Arts and Photography,* the *ASEAN Travelling Exhibition of Paintings and Photographs,* the *ASEAN Exhibition of Paintings and Photography,* the *International Exhibition on ASEAN Contemporary Art,* and even the *Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* – the ASEAN bloc hitherto seems to be lacking a sophisticated visual discourse of ASEAN-ness. This gap is addressed by this study not only by means of knowledge production (i.e. written discourse) but also by way of art/curatorial production. In other words, this research project takes a 'curatorial (re)turn' – a return to previous curatorial efforts that purposively instigated ASEAN discourses. And by enabling the 'participant-practitioner' (Buchloh 2001:82) alongside the 'viewer-spectator' (Buchloh 2001:87) to act as creators/curators of socially engaged art, this curatorial (re)turn ultimately serves its 'arte útil' (Gogarty 2017:118-119) function by taking the ideology into practice within the reach of public discourse.

Hence, the function of curating per se becomes important when the task at hand requires ideology-building. According to O'Neill (2012a:56-57), instead of a forced process, it is a 'constellation' of various factors:

> Rather than forcing syntheses, this constellation (an always-emergent praxis) places together incommensurable social objects, ideas, and subject relations in order to demonstrate the structural faults and falsities inherent in the notion of the hermetic exhibition as primary curatorial work. The curatorial, conceived of as a constellation, resists the stasis of the curator-artist-spectator triumvirate and supports more semi-autonomous and self-determined aesthetic and discursive forms of practice that may overlap and intersect, rather than seeking a dialectic (image) or oppositional presentation (form). [...] a more juxtaposed field of signification, form, content and critique. The constellation, in this sense, is an ever-shifting and dynamic cluster of changing elements that are always resisting reduction to a single common denominator.

Bringing together various creative practices and perspectives into a cohesive or coherent idea is 'an important aspect of a curator's role' (George 2015:13), and thus I would argue that it requires taking a step back and taking an outsider's perspective as to an art form or aesthetic experience. Unlike the artist who creates (and therefore is bound to) the art itself, the curator can bring in external prospects by 'act[ing] as catalyst for other projects, programmes and collateral events, even spin-off exhibitions that may be inspired by another curator's ideas' (George 2015:13).

The curator, therefore, becomes essential in creating or facilitating socially engaged experiences because not only do they change from one context to another, sometimes they even lack the need for artists: from Bourriaud (2002) who highlights the involvement of the viewer-spectator in participatory art; to Kester (2011; 2004) who prioritises the context of art-making over the artistic content; to Bishop (2012; 2006) who suggests diminishing the authorial role of the artist; to Coessens *et al.* (2009) who emphasises play as a participatory approach to the production of art; one can learn that there is really no formula for social engagement. For instance, a social experiment that does not necessarily entail any art production can still require curatorial methods. In fact, the 'big tech' industry is a field where the 'curatorial' takes on a new meaning; George (2015:18) expounds:

> There is a rapid rise in the number of curatorial roles related to **social media and the web** [sic]. Increasingly, web users access the vast amount of information available online through mediated search engines (such as Google, Bing, Yahoo) where the number of previous 'hits' on a subject search will bring that particular subject higher on the results page. [...] In every case, someone has to select, or

> curate, the content of these websites, much as a magazine editor will select articles for each publication.

It goes without saying that any individual can curate information from images to writing, and from content to experience (Obrist & Raza 2014:169), not only because of today's changing communication and media landscape but also because society never ceases to produce ideas and information. Hence, the function of curating also acts as a 'conduit for ideas' (George 2015:13) which is why ideology-building projects such as this research undertaking can also benefit from what O'Neill (2007) describes as the curatorial turn.

Without an existing model that can serve the social engagement purpose of this study, experimenting with different curatorial approaches could help in determining the best possible practice-based research strategy that could potentially engage Southeast Asians. Despite drawing its essence from positivist or scientific disciplines, 'experimentation' is what I refer to as paracuratorial in that the methodological process entails a 'speculative' (Cox in Coessens *et al.* 2009:1) artistic process. This is compatible with how O'Neill (2012a) theorises the 'paracuratorial' as an extension of the role of the curator and an expansion of the curatorial method – beyond the archival, the editorial, and the ideological. That is to say, the *para* in 'paracuratorial' is not necessarily contrary to the essence of curatorial work because as a 'terrain of praxis' the paracuratorial 'operates within the curatorial paradigm and retains a destabilizing relationship with it via (para-)texts, sites, works, and institutes' (O'Neill 2012a:55). I contribute to this theorising of the para-curatorial by associating it with 'experimentation' anew.

However, to develop a 'new' methodology that uses the paracuratorial as an 'experimental' approach is *experimental in itself* and not entirely new. Borrowing from Groys (2008:22), the 'new' is 'not something merely different but rather, a reaffirmation of the fundamental aesthetic equality of all the images in a historically given context'. Moreover, for Kennedy (2014:216) 'each precarious new edition' of these international biennials or triennials – and if I may add, even the 'festival circuit' – are already under scrutiny for the reason that they 'have to stand for something worthwhile and desirable but also for something unique'. Experimenting with and speculating about ideas, questions, or themes – for instance, the immaterial notion of identity (i.e. its

mental image or collective imaginary) – as opposed to curating tangible artefacts or physical artworks are increasingly becoming a paracuratorial function especially in today's digitally mediated and mediatised world (Couldry 2008) as I already recounted earlier. As a scholar, I must allow this study to 'ride the current', so to speak, if only to understand the zeitgeist of such a curatorial (re)turn. In a way, my approach is a calculated risk, one that I must take in order to resume the work of curating ASEAN visual culture – as intra-regional curatorial efforts had already trailblazed in the 1980s and 1990s – thus, filling in the gap left open by these aforementioned efforts. In a way, I am working within the frameworks and parameters set by curators of the past, who used the art world as an instrument of *worlding* the ASEAN imaginary.

Indeed, the paracuratorial is a critical response to the overly institutionalised system of curatorial work, but it still behaves within the set of rules prescribed by the art market. Till (2020:vi) contends that experimentation 'is not *per se* [sic] at issue in the legitimisation of creative practice as research'. He recounts how art practices since the Renaissance have been using experimentation as a practice-led creative approach, and through which artistic experiments that the geometry of perspective, the opera, and more recently (Braque and Picasso's) Cubism and (Schoenberg's) Serialism were even serendipitously 'invented' (Till 2020:vi-vii). My paracuratorial experimentation is intended to serve as a venue for the research participants to produce images and at the same time to curate these images through a collaboration among the group. Thus – recalling Melucci's (1989:60) concept of 'cultural laboratories' (see Section B of this chapter) – the 'laboratory' of creative ideas begins in a paracuratorial experiment and leads to curatorial collaboration. At this point, I must raise an important caveat: not all collaborations entail positive results, such as how imbalanced power dynamics within the collaboration can lead to the co-optation of knowledge or, even worse, the commodification of the outcomes of the research (Doğantan-Dack 2020:40). To mitigate this scenario in this research project, I am not only extending and sharing the curatorial responsibility with the research participants, but also building trust and good relationships (Pink 2013:114) that would form the basis of our collaborative endeavours – a conscious adherence to partici-

patory methods. Hence, the collaborative outcome of the research has its own sociological significance, thus putting my role as 'artistic researcher firmly on a par with non-practising scholars' (Doğantan-Dack, M. 2020:53).

Curating is not only a product of its sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts but must also be an ever-changing praxis to maintain its relevance to the society it seeks to represent and serve (Raicovich 2012; George 2015; O'Neill 2012; Obrist 2011). Thus, the paracuratorial can also account for the changing roles of the contemporary curator, from the sole authorial figure to a collaborator – as I have realised through the working relationship elicited among the research participants of this study. More importantly, the para-curatorial can act as a critical response to a consumer-driven economy of mainstream exhibitions (Sheikh 2017:3) which is a product of the curatorial canon I describe in Chapter I (see Section C). Thus, this study offers a way of curating an emergent geopolitical discourse that is 'countervisual' to what is already represented by the mainstream narrative of ASEAN's regional integration. As such, the paracuratorial attempts of this study culminates in the production of socially engaged exhibition-making as 'in between more conventional art forms and the related disciplines of sociology, politics, and the like' (Helguera 2011:4). This is where my artistic practice intersects with my research method: participatory photography and curatorial collaboration work effectively as tools for social engagement because both elicit 'care' – from the Latin root word *curare,* to care, to curate (Fisher 2013) – alongside the sense of co-ownership among the participants being engaged. Hence, curating social engagement is useful in the 'construction of a community or temporary social group through a collective experience' (Helguera 2011:9). This approach to curating is appropriate for this study about ASEAN identity because not only is it an intangible object or a construct of ideas but also because it is a constellation of various factors from cultures and identities to nations and politics. How else can such a confluence of elements be curated in a traditional gallery or museum setting but by means of challenging what is conventional?

To challenge the curatorial canon or even the convention of main-stream exhibition-making (Reilly 2018:22-23) that I am drawing knowledge

from in producing this research, I largely depend on this study's research participants because their being 'outsiders' to the industry of exhibition-making, so to speak, is essential to the counter-ideological discourse of this scholarly undertaking. For one, this art/curatorial practice-as-research entails a process where 'participant and producer are equals' (Buchloh 2001:87) in that the research participants' decisions are central to the socially engaged experience/s being curated. Furthermore, the way the socially engaged experience is contingent on the emerging discourse is not far from what Reilly (2018:30) describes as 'exhibition-as-polygogue', which is based on 'an interplay of many voices, a kind of creative "barbarism" that would disrupt the monological, colonizing, centristic drives' (Aiken 1986:298) of prevailing traditions in curating and exhibition-making that I already mentioned. This, in itself, can be considered paracuratorial if we follow O'Neill's (2012a) logic that it is not necessarily contrary to the (established) curatorial paradigm but instead a productive praxis within it. After all, Rancière (2010) reminds us of the dissensus that the experience of art can bring – which is not necessarily counterproductive to the curatorial paradigm.

As in the previous chapter (see Chapter IV: Section A), where I give an account of the essence of consensus/dissensus in social engagement, I argue that ensuring that the same process is reflected within the para-curatorial process itself can essentially achieve what Reilly (2018:30-31) describes as a 'relational approach' to the curatorial praxis:

> A relational approach to curating presents art as if it were a polysemic site of contradictory positions and contested practices. This focus goes beyond a mere description of discrete regions and cultures; it transcends the "additive" approach, collapses the destructive center-periphery binary, and is essentially postmodern in nature: it is textual, dialogic, and "writerly".

The way this thesis elicits such a relational approach, therefore, exemplifies the 'social turn' (Bishop 2006) within the curatorial praxis itself in order for the research participants to relate to the project. Thus, a reciprocity between the curatorial and the social is hopefully maintained; this is to achieve a sense of balance between the practical and the experiential in that on the one hand our work is a participatory process and on the other hand it must be understood by the public (and even the participants themselves) as *art production* and not, say, *citizen journalism*. Simply put, this research takes

a ‘curatorial (re)turn’ to make sense of the socially engaged participatory image-making processes nested within it.

Embedding artistic, curatorial, and performative process orientated practices within sociopolitical discourses has, of course, been done and iterated before by pioneering practitioners like Joseph Beuys, Guy Brett, Claire Bishop, Allan Kaprow in the Western hemisphere, or David Medalla, Gabriel Orozco, and Rirkrit Tiravanija in the Global South, to name a few notable examples (O’Neill 2012b; Bishop 2006; Bourriaud 2002; Buchloh 2001; Kaprow 1993; Brett 1986). The range and variety of socially engaged works they produced enable us to think that making art is as much a participatory experience or participatory performance as it is creating an aesthetic experience. While I build upon their legacies, I also set my own work apart by offering a replicable method of sociocultural engagement – this is how I envision my artistic practice-as-research to contribute to our understanding of art, culture, and society. My practice-led research practically serves as the blueprint for this approach, which I hope can prove useful not only to art practitioners but also to curators and researchers who may eventually find my methodology relevant in their socially engaged practices.

G. Imagining region-ness

Prior to conducting this study, I identified the dearth of scholarly precedent regarding ASEAN’s regional identity discourse especially within the field of art and visual culture. That is not to say that Southeast Asian scholars have completely neglected the issue since the initial progress that started in the 1980s and 1990s had eventually dwindled.

In the last decade, asynchronous yet cumulative regional integration efforts resumed in various fronts, resulting in several international surveys and transnational exhibitions. Notable among these recent efforts include *Singapore Biennale 2019* (Singapore Art Museum 2019), *Ties of History* (Vargas Museum 2018), and *Almost There* (Vargas Museum 2017), not to mention the series of international exhibitions funded by and organised

under Japan Foundation's *Condition Report*[106] (which includes *Almost There),* a three-year collaborative project across Southeast Asia that began in 2015 (Japan Foundation Asia Center 2017). These curatorial projects signalled the hitherto emergent discourse of region-ness within the (Southeast Asian) art world, paving the way for a renewed interest among artists and curators to generate discourse.

While *Almost There* 'involved the effort to imitate but not to repeat, to belong but not to assimilate, and to share the experience with mutual investments' (Flores & Kyongfa 2017:online), in other words a (curatorial) return to previous efforts that were almost left behind in bygone decades, *Ties of History* focused on more concrete steps to curating region-ness through 'the sensitive process of artistic transformation and maturity [while] affirm[ing] artistic practice to be not fully formed but rather emerging from situations of constant forming' (Ties of History 2018:online). Additionally, while it is not necessarily focused on Southeast Asia's regional integration process, *Singapore Biennale 2019* 'pivot[ed] on Southeast Asia' with its theme of 'hope' and 'change' that extends to the rest of the world (Singapore Art Museum 2019:online).

Following the contributions of these international projects, my practice-based research adds to and builds on (re)current innovations in the field by way of *Made in ASEAN,* an online exhibition that entailed concentric efforts namely *Mesa Sa Kwarto, Anonymised Skies, CrossWorld Puzzle,* and *ASEAN Manifesto* (as I recount in Chapters III and IV).

I would argue that the practical and theoretical contributions of these smaller yet still international efforts in my curatorial undertaking are commensurable to many other transnational, national, and local curatorial and cultural initiatives recently emerging and ongoing across the ten-country region, even though they are inadvertently excluded by this study's remit due to the limited time and resources available, not to mention the scale of my 'radar' of investigation. Thus, I also put my work 'under scrutiny by the rest of the art world'

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[106] The curatorial collaborations were held from 2015 until 2017 in the following cities/ locations of ASEAN member countries: Jakarta, Surabaya, and Yogyakarta in Indonesia; Kuala Lumpur and Penang in Malaysia; Manila in the Philippines; Bangkok and Chiang Mai in Thailand; Hanoi in Viet Nam; Phnom Penh in Cambodia; Vientiane in Laos; and Yangon in Myanmar (Japan Foundation Asia Center 2017).

(Kennedy 2014:216) in order for it to contribute to advancing the fields of art, curatorship, and visual culture.

While the collaborative artistic practice-as-research aspect of this study serves as an inclusive venue for transnational collaboration among Southeast Asian locals (i.e. the research participants), the emerging imagination of region-ness being rendered contemporaneous by its curatorial outcomes poses a recurring challenge in relation to our understanding of (regional) identity construction. This challenge is recurring in that it is a classic question of what is (not) being curated, in other words, who or what is being included and excluded. I am reminded of Hall's statement about how 'European identity' merely exists because it is rendered visible against an 'other' (Hall 1991:18), such as Asia, the East and the South, and the then so-called 'Third World'. Hall (1991:18) expounds:

> Europe's external relations with its Others has been central to the European story since its inception, and remains so. The story of European identity is often told as if it had no exterior. But this tells us more about how cultural identities are constructed – as 'imagined communities', through the marking of difference with others – than it does about the actual relations of unequal exchange and uneven development through which a common European identity was forged. [...] **As Europe consolidates and converges, so a** [sic] similar exercise in boundary maintenance is in progress with respect to its Third World 'Others'.

To use Hall's words in our framing and shaping of Southeast Asia, 'the same contradictory process of marking symbolic boundaries and constructing symbolic frontiers between inside and outside, interior and exterior, belonging and otherness' (Hall 1991:18) is becoming more apparent. That is to say, the imagination of region-ness could be as divisive as the birth of a nation.

Flores and Mihulet's (2015) exhibition titled *South X Southeast,* and Flores and Becker's (2019) *Present Passing: South by Southeast,* signalled a re-orientation of the dichotomy previously posed by Hall. Held in Hong Kong, both international exhibitions drew parallelisms between the experience of Southeast Asians and Southeastern Europeans. For instance, in *South X Southeast,* Flores, Mihulet and Le (2016) propose that:

> The exploration of the Southeastern condition from a spatial perspective has politicized the visuality stemming from this realm, usually zeroing in on the model of revolutions, social distress, the repressed body or the shifting conditions of the self.

By using the ‘Southeast’ as a transforming condition of existence, not only do the curators trace the possibilities of mutual experiences and region-ness shared by artists of Southeast Asia and Southeastern Europe, but they also locate it in a financial powerhouse of a country (i.e. Hong Kong, in the South-east of China), the political stability of which is hinged upon its transitioning from the West (British colonial rule) to the East (China).

The possibility advanced by these curatorial projects is one that frees Southeast Asia from its innate burden of acting as the mere ‘other’, whether of Europe or Asia, or of China even. The idea that the ‘South-East’ can be brought forth as a shared imagination is one that can also set the art world free from its recurring tropes. I recall Kennedy’s (2014) discussion of the biennial and triennial circuits in relation to a hitherto nationally or regionally burdened signification (i.e. ‘Asia’). According to her (Kennedy 2014:217), we must constantly interrogate themes of nation-ness or region-ness by:

> orienting and disorienting it in relation to the representation of national identities at art biennials – which still appear to be an expanding phenomenon in the art world, one that is sometimes referred to as biennialisation.

All the more does this ring true today, given that most mainstream exhibitions and expositions are according to Reilly (2018) ‘only interested in including postcolonial Others as long as they speak of their Otherness [...] instead of constructing a new and inclusive discourse for art’ (Reilly (2018:104). In this study, I carefully take these insightful lessons to heart by moving away from the unproductive dichotomies that had all along been perpetuated by bygone curators – the *West* and the *Orient,* the *Empire* and the *Indies,* and even the *EU-ASEAN* geopolitical dichotomy. Instead of imagining Southeast Asia as the other (or, conversely, imagining the ‘other’ of Southeast Asia), I instead imagine its region-ness through ASEAN, the *currency* of its contemporaneity. It confronts its own haunting, as if through a looking glass, seeing its mirror image as familiar but no longer of itself. It is ‘free’ although it remains just an imagery, therefore an imaginary.

On 15 December 1997, three decades after the founding of the association, a declaration was unanimously signed by its member states. A document that can be regarded as an intergovernmental ‘manifesto’, *ASEAN Vision 2020* envisions and outlines the future of Southeast Asia

as a ‘concert of nations’ (ASEAN 1997) that is committed to economic cooperation, mutual understanding, and regional unity. As attested to by the signatories:

> We envision the entire Southeast Asia to be, by 2020, an ASEAN community conscious of its ties of history, aware of its cultural heritage and bound by a common regional identity.
>
> We see vibrant and open ASEAN societies consistent with their respective national identities, where all people enjoy equitable access to opportunities for total human development regardless of gender, race, religion, language, or social and cultural background.
>
> We envision a socially cohesive and caring ASEAN where hunger, malnutrition, deprivation and poverty are no longer basic problems, where strong families as the basic units of society tend to their members particularly the children, youth, women and elderly; and where the civil society is empowered and gives special attention to the disadvantaged, disabled and marginalized and where social justice and the rule of law reign. (ASEAN 1997)

These three key tenets arguably set ASEAN’s blueprint for the year 2020 and beyond, the same year that saw the launch of our online exhibition *Made in ASEAN* – despite a global pandemic. Unfortunately, it was the same year that the regional organisation lost touch on its promise – the declaration brushed aside as mere aspirational talk.

In light of the international public health crises brought about by Covid-19, not to mention other probable geopolitical roadblocks, ASEAN’s priorities have observably been changing (ASEAN 2020b:12-13). For instance, during the 37th ASEAN Summit[107] proceedings, there was hardly any mention of (or even allusion to) *ASEAN Vision 2020.* Instead, ASEAN’s leadership invoked its *ASEAN Community Vision 2025* as an integral policy document in line with its commitments (ASEAN 2020b:14,29,45,51). Nevertheless, as Guerrero (2010:58) contends, ‘ensuring the commitment of the member countries to move the process forward’ is the challenge that the ASEAN bloc has yet to overcome. Therefore, on top of the theoretical contributions of this curatorial study, it also served as our citizen-led contribution to the said vision of our forebears. In effect, our work concretised what they could only have imagined, albeit outside their economic or political formulations. If the regional integration is fundamentally for the benefit of Southeast Asian locals rather than our leaders alone, then the countervisual exercise elicited by this research

[107] The annual summit was held in Ha Noi (Viet Nam serving as ASEAN Chair) from 12 to 15 November 2020 during the pandemic; *Made in ASEAN* launched on 15 November 2020

project must serve as a resounding contribution in this regionalism discourse. According to Helguera's (2011:9) theorising of *socially engaged art,* what our ultimate purpose should be is to form relationships by way of:

> A: The construction of a community or temporary social group through collective experience; B: The construction of multi-layered participatory structures; C: The role of social media in the construction of community; D: The role of time; E: Assumptions about audience.

In fact, the curatorial outcomes of *Made in ASEAN* take into practice all the above, especially through the project website which we utilised as our social media – thus removing the predetermined algorithms of mainstream social networking sites and similar platforms. The online interactive exercises also helped us learn more about our audiences, although our outreach remained modest given our obvious limitations. And while the vision of ASEAN-ness is contingent upon the bloc's successful socioeconomic integration, I use this study to leverage participatory art, curatorship, and exhibition-making as a site of sociocultural integration if only to test an assumption through a socially engaged experiment. That said, I am reminded that 'the more globalised the art world becomes, the more essential it is that we support and nurture independent cultural initiatives and exchanges among diverse stakeholders' (Tsui 2009:12). Ultimately, this study resolves that imagining region-ness through visual culture is arguably an effective means of realising and supporting the community that the leadership of ASEAN seeks to imagine.

CHAPTER VI

Imagining the ASEAN Community: Emerging Themes in Contemporary Southeast Asian Curatorial Praxis

[I]t is perhaps more productive to re-imagine Southeast Asia as the appendix, deployed in solidarity with communities and narratives anywhere in this world that face the prospect of being rendered peripheral, bringing occasional pain and annoyance to these unilateral and reductive attempts. As a critical stance, the imaginary of Southeast Asia becomes available, in terms of our experiences and subjectivities, for concerned parties elsewhere to speak against the powers-to-be.

– Photography in Southeast Asia by Zhuang Wubin (2016:445)

Belabouring the colonial and postcolonial constructs of Southeast Asia, I set out this thesis to interrogate how its spectres still persist in today's contemporary arts and culture landscape. Drawing examples from visual culture, I demonstrated through socially engaged creative practice how the concept of ASEAN-ness could take the place of the burdened imaginary of the region. However, I also cautioned how such an imaginary of ASEAN threatens to be un-participatory in both the geopolitical and sociocultural construction of the regional imagination because it seems to be a project solely accessible to and representative of the ruling elites – mainly the political and business leaders of ASEAN member states.

To unlearn the existing visualities of Southeast Asia and uncover what lies beneath, I pursued a practice-based approach which offers a countervisual narrative to the contemporary discourse of ASEAN's vision. Without any preconception of what I would ultimately find, I opened my eyes to various perspectives offered by my research collaborators, the 16 Southeast Asian participants who lent their time and vision to this

three-year study. They are students and professionals who were at the time not necessarily well-versed in the ASEAN discourse, but are experts in their own right: curators, data analysts, designers, doctors (two PhDs and one MD), educators, engineers, entrepreneurs, performers, photographers, and social workers. In various contexts they are my peers, and collectively we represent Southeast Asians locals at the periphery of the ASEAN regionalism process – although because of our higher educational attainment and access to international networks, admittedly, we may be considered as another type of 'elites' in the region. Nevertheless, participating in a reflexive research undertaking (participatory photography) proved not only introspective but also self-critical. This process helped us remain sensitive to the differences and similarities we recognised amongst ourselves and in relation to the wider Southeast Asian population. Nothing short of a soul-searching exercise, our countervisual account of the ASEAN imaginary rendered visible our common understanding of the region despite coming from separate vantage points. Learning from our newfound critical awareness of ASEAN, I am convinced that we were able to foster a shared consciousness of what constitutes our ASEAN-ness, albeit not articulated through words. Hence we sufficiently addressed the main question[108] of this research by way of visual ethnography, the digital archive of which was presented as an online exhibition.

More than just launching it as a publicly accessible website without the academic jargon, the online exhibition also opened a virtual space of possibilities. We utilised it as the transnational 'location' of our participatory undertaking. In other words, it served as the main venue for our creative process, an integral factor where we concretised our abstract ideas. In this manner, we were able to better articulate our response to the main research question: through the five paracuratorial experiments that ranged from a solo onsite/online exhibition to a co-curated virtual gallery. Each curatorial collaboration entailed analysing, challenging, and envisioning the contemporary ASEAN identity discourse through socially engaged practices.

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[108] (RQ1) How do Southeast Asians imagine ASEAN, as well as our belongingness and identity in relation to this region?

As the product of our own consensus-building (evoking values of the so-called 'ASEAN Way'), the online exhibition allowed us – and especially me as the researcher – to observe, understand, and ultimately evidence how our participation in the ASEAN discourse is effectively mediated by visual culture. Thus, apart from realising my creative practice-as-research, I also fulfilled the task of responding to my second and third research questions[109] by 'showing seeing' (Mitchell 2002:176) how photographic images are a direct outcome of the several ways we took into practice our imaginations, from image-making to exhibition-making.

The ASEAN 20/20 Vision Project website now serves as an information hub[110] to continually engage the general public in the contemporary imagination of Southeast Asia. This is a substantial contribution, practical and scholarly, to the ongoing regional identity discourse of ASEAN – with new perspectives framed and nuanced by ordinary Southeast Asian locals themselves.

In this final chapter, I discuss the overall trajectory of my practice-based research. I also identify the potential of my research contributions in interdisciplinary visual culture studies.

A. Contribution to knowledge and pedagogy

Although various literature from the disciplines of economics, international relations, public diplomacy, and social sciences already demonstrate how well-researched the ASEAN trade bloc is, this research project contributes new knowledge by building on and continuing the work of Southeast Asian culturalists (Sabapathy 2018; Flores 2012; Acharya 2000; see also Anand & Quisumbing 1981). This study particularly responds to Sabapathy's (2018) and Acharya's (2000) enduring wishes for more Southeast Asian scholars to

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[109] (RQ2) In what ways can images and image-making serve as productive tools for visualising the collective imagination of Southeast Asia? (How can participatory photography render visible our individual and collective imagination/s of Southeast Asia? What is the role of curating images in this imaginative process?); (RQ3) Why is it necessary for photography and curatorial methods to involve participatory methods when imagining Southeast Asia

[110] I aim to put forward funding grants and start fundraising activities to ensure that the project website is sustainable in the coming years for the benefit of the wider Southeast Asian public.

pursue the topic of ASEAN's regional identity in more qualitative approaches. Thus, the practice-based components of this PhD project has expedited our discussions of *ASEAN-ness, ASEAN identity-building,* and even *ASEAN regionalism* which were seldom explored within the context of Southeast Asian visual culture. And by doing so, this study offers new ways of understanding the discourses of regional identity, regionalism, and regionalisation within the praxis of art and cultural studies.

More specifically, the curatorial practice developed throughout this undertaking provides creative, replicable methodologies that are alternative to the dominant approaches (e.g. public opinion polls) typically used by the ASEAN organisation and its partners. Hence, my main scholarly contribution is primarily beneficial to art curators, educators, and practitioners who are interested in identity discourses and participatory research in Southeast Asia – not to mention other non-Western, postcolonial regions of the world. Moreover, this initiative also paves the way for more opportunities for Southeast Asians to participate in intra-regional conversations and collaborate ideas at the grassroots level through socially engaged art practice.

Considering the potential research impact of this undertaking not only in Southeast Asia but also across the Global South, I am optimistic that academics, educators, and practitioners alike would consider these contributions in three ways:

A.1. Contribution to socially engaged research methods

First, consider updating socially engaged, photographic research methods – participatory photography, photo-elicitation, and photovoice, among others – through the methodologies of *paracuratorial experimentation* and *curatorial collaboration*. Researchers and practitioners can better ensure that research/project participants would also have the opportunity to assume the role of co-decision makers by extending the visual (auto)ethnographic process to include separate yet parallel participant-led creative collaborations instead of the usual consolidated output or campaign. Indeed, participatory photography projects (especially photovoice campaigns) typically conclude in an exhibition of photographic images or similar collective visual efforts

with the intention of communicating, educating, or integrating the rest of the community or the general public (Save the Children 2022; Save the Children 2018; Agustin 2017b; iMekong 2016; PhotoVoice 2015; PhotoVoice 2014a; Cabañes 2013). However, this formula can – and must – change not only to account for the multiplicity of views among the participants but also to ensure that the participatory process does not fall into the trap of a generalising or totalising perspective of a unified undertaking. Alongside its main purpose of collective identity-building, participatory image-making must equally stimulate discourse and dissensus for the process to truly account for participation. As practically demonstrated in *Made in ASEAN, Mesa Sa Kwarto, Anonymised Skies, CrossWorld Puzzle,* and *ASEAN Manifesto,* the asynchronous involvement of the participants-turned-curators in the process of co-curating the images can reveal the nuances of their co-decision making – especially in representing and mediating their co-participants' individual/collective voices alongside their own.

Curatorial collaboration, thus, proves to be a complementary measure to traditionally facilitator-led methods of visual (auto)ethnography because it ultimately enriches the participatory process. From the paracuratorial experimentation stage to the process of exhibition-making, the participants and co-curators are immersed in a cumulative learning-by-doing exercise. Thus, it can also serve as a pedagogical tool in that the method of curatorial collaboration acts as a means to educate the participants as co-curators about the direct, indirect, and potential implications and impacts of their participation. In effect, this complementary methodology better ensures *conscientisation* – adhering to a Freireian pedagogy – among the collaborators.

Aside from innovating participatory research methods, another pedagogical application of this study puts into practice its social relevance in the regional identity discourse of ASEAN-ness. Moving away from the typical 'parade of nations' approach (which I account for in Chapter I: Section D) and annual 'photography competitions' (see Chapter I: Section G, and Chapter V: Section D), this study initiates new ways of educating citizens of ASEAN member countries – especially the youth – about our civic and cultural roles in the ASEAN process. These include creative methods such

as *paracuratorial experimentation, interactive digital activities, exhibition-making,* and *digital storytelling,* among others.

A.2. Contribution to communication and media studies

Second, consider how the study not only utilised but also integrated various communicative digital media throughout the research process – an innovation in participatory action research and visual (auto)ethnography that is arguably long overdue given our technologically mediatised contemporary lives. By replicating or, at the very least, resembling how the participants of the study use online media platforms and digital images in everyday life, this curatorial project contributes to communication and media studies with an enriched theorising of the relationship between *polymedia* and *visual culture.* Accounting for polymedia aids better understanding of visual culture for the reason that, in various aspects of our lived experience, *polymedia is* visual culture – from our daily use of cameraphones, social media apps, and video streaming services, *et cetera,* to our overall dependence on graphical user interfaces (GUIs) in sustaining society's ever-growing computing needs.

By adapting onsite participatory research methods (and curatorial approaches) to online means, this study accounted for the realities of how we now rely on digital and mobile communication – as all of humanity has already experienced throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. But traditionally, participants were handed point-and-shoot cameras and interviewed using photographic images. This process can occasionally create an unnatural setting where individuals who normally have no familiarity or interest in photography are suddenly asked (or even required) to take pictures as part of their participation. Using polymedia enables them to engage in participatory visual (auto)ethnography in relatively more convenient and accessible ways. It can also mitigate the limitations and/or restrictions experienced dissimilarly by different individuals.

Through the curatorial output of this study, various techniques of image-making apart from just participatory photography were demonstrated. The participants used their mobile phones to exchange pictures, record audio and video clips, react to conversations using animated stickers, emojis or

GIFs, and so on. In contrast to conventional participatory photography and visual (auto)ethnography methods, the online conduct of my research can exemplify *external validity* and *ecological validity.* This approach assures the participants that they would only be using familiar communicative tools they already use in real-life settings (which is also reassuring for the researcher). More importantly, it also ensures the researcher that the group – even though they are deliberately gathered and asked to interact in artificial scenarios – would behave naturally throughout the research process because they are everyday users of the communicative tools being tapped. While my study is artistic and qualitative (i.e. neither positivist nor scientific), I still emphasise these crucial factors when investigating the image-making behaviours of individuals and communities in relation to their identities. The main reason is because these are hardly unrelated to their online, technologically mediatised lives. Therefore, apart from contributing to the disciplines of art and visual culture, the rigour of the methods and outcomes developed throughout this study is equally useful to communication and media studies.[111]

A.3. Contribution to collective identity-building and participation theory

Third, consider how this research substantiated the reciprocal relationship between *identity* and *participation.* Although limited in scope, this study emphasises how *identity is not only performative but also participatory* (i.e. visual identity-participation). Before embarking on this research journey, there was barely any awareness or understanding of what ASEAN-ness might mean as an expression of Southeast Asians' identity/ies. This is because all of the performativities and visualities that emanated from the discourse of ASEAN identity lacked public participation; as already said, it was predominantly an exclusive discussion concerning the region's political and business leaders. Hence, while the notion of ASEAN's regional identity was promoted at the diplomatic or intergovernmental stage, it was hardly *imagined* at the grassroots level. By way of this participatory research, various expressions of ASEAN-ness were visualised in commonly understood themes.

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[111] As evidenced by the academic interest my paper presentations about this topic have generated in the annual ICA and IAMCR conferences since 2020.

Despite my desire to explain the lack of public participation in the identity-building discourse of ASEAN, the limitations of this study do not allow me to go any further. Thus, I could only speculate why citizen engagement in ASEAN is not the same as democratic participation in, say, Western Europe and the US. Without substantial resources and reach, I could not investigate this as compellingly as the previous large-scale surveys conducted across the ten member countries. However, what truly guided me in the process of my investigation (and participant observation) was to rely on theories that were mostly penned by British, European, and North American authors in this study's non-Western, culturally-specific setting. Therefore, what truly helped counterbalance my dependence on these predominantly Western theories of participation were the individual contributions and collective voice of the research participants as mediated by their own photographic images and curatorial imaginations.

Finally, while some ASEAN countries were built on communist, even authoritarian principles, I must also emphasise that the participants did not perceive one structure of government better or more superior throughout the study. Thus, *participation* in itself can be challenging to define because it can be relative to different standards across varying sociopolitical ideologies. In a way, this had already been addressed by some Asian scholars who used Asian-centric models of participation theory rather than Western democratic principles (Rodan 2018; Tong & He 2018; He 2008; Jayasuriya & Rodan 2007; Tong 2000; Huang 1993). Still, the fact remains that the theorising of participation in the ASEAN process is wanting – unless this kind of scholarship already exists but only written in Southeast Asian languages, and thus I am unable to access them.

In summary, this study contributes to identity studies and participation theory by illustrating how (visual) identity-participation encapsulates people's lived experience of online images. Hopefully, the methodology I designed and developed through creative and collaborative means can inform future research not only about the discourse of regional identity in ASEAN but also with regard to other identity discourses.

B. Contribution to curatorial practice in ASEAN

Through curatorial collaboration, this study foregrounds notions and themes of *nation-ness* and *region-ness* as frameworks of identity-building. As themes they have always been integral to the work of international biennials (including triennials) and cultural festivals, some of which even relying on 'Asian-ness' as counter-ideology to the Western roots of the biennale formula (Kennedy *et al.* 2014). However, I am one with other Asian scholars who are constantly reflecting on the implications of such tokenism. I recall, for instance, Tsui's (2009:12) perspective:

> In today's art world, there is no lack of platforms for arts and cultural exchanges, with biennials and international exhibitions regularly taking place in key city regions. Yet, these platforms often operate in the international battlefield dominated by Euro-American discourse, market system and resource structure. Recent developments in the art sector in Asian countries, both commercial and non-commercial, have been built upon existing structures controlled by key institutions, art fairs, biennials and art professionals from Europe and the United States.

Admittedly, the curatorial contribution of this research undertaking was only made possible because of the scholarship I obtained from the UK and my keen British supervisors – not to mention another factor, which is the lack of funding opportunities and institutional support within ASEAN for these types of arts-based research. While it satisfies me to see my practice-based PhD research eventually contributing to knowledge, I must always critically reflect on how my theoretical contributions translate to practical outcomes. Tsui's (2009:12) interrogation, thus, rings true:

> So, as these Asian countries plug into the international art world, the predominant power structures are only further strengthened and extended. How effective can they really be in their attempts to enable a paradigm shift, to negotiate a shift in the balance of power or genuinely nurture arts development, both on local and international levels?

After careful consideration of such a cautionary challenge, I could only offer a counter-perspective. Although very gradual, an active *decolonial* process is instigated by these cumulative efforts, and it takes time for any palpable transformation to be perceptible to the public. Despite being established in 1967, ASEAN took nearly two decades until practitioners and scholars of art, culture, and media started to discuss the identity-building implications of having a unified regional community. Moreover, it took nearly four decades before any large-scale empirical study was initiated to evidence the empirical

factors of ASEAN-ness. In other words, instead of focusing on how slow these practitioners and scholars moved, I consider their actions reasonable because certain processes take quite a long time before they can even be substantially measured. Undoubtedly, these previous efforts paved the way for this study; thus the practical and transformative outcomes of my research only comes to the fore when it is regarded alongside what others before me have already contributed to decolonising the discourse of Southeast Asia.

If there is a sense of urgency that this study signals, then it must be the renewal of curatorial practices in Southeast Asia. This curatorial (re)tun is not only gestured but also substantiated by this research undertaking despite the colonial and Western burden of curatorship as a discipline (as I recount in Chapter I: Section C). Co-curating with my fellow Southeast Asians helped me shed light on this topic, especially in terms of how the curatorial canon might be decolonised by way of participatory action. While this thesis did not necessarily complete our picture of ASEAN-ness, as one research participant pointed out, perhaps that is better left to our imagination.

i.v. POSTSCRIPT: What is Southeast Asia?

In closing, I wish to return to this question – **the 'elephant in the room', so to speak.** I pose the same challenge again not because I barely learned anything new since I had started this research journey, but because it serves as a constant reminder for us to reflect upon. Southeast Asia is a constant meditation on the ruins of empires, and the emergence of new world orders, all pivoting on hitherto the same stage. This is perhaps why the question still lingers. Southeast Asia is an-age old tale not about people but of their place in the world. Hence, my practice-led study offered an alternative perspective, and that is to consider the *ASEAN imaginary* in place of Southeast Asia. However, the ASEAN region in itself is not a solution to what is being asked; it merely directs us to more relevant ways of asking the same question.

This thesis journey was bookended by two phenomenally successful films: *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022). I truly appreciate today's filmmakers who are striving for better Asian representation in mainstream media. Still, these two films lend more visibility to the Chinese diaspora despite being top-billed by Southeast Asian actors. Needless to say, Southeast Asians still have so much ground to cover in cultivating a name for ourselves. Aside from living separate yet parallel lives, Bruneians, Cambodians, Filipinos, Indonesians, Laotians, Malaysians, Myanma (Burmese), Singaporeans, Thais, Vietnamese – and soon, Timorese – are called upon by ASEAN to imagine for ourselves what it means to belong to one community. Only part of this contemporary ASEAN vision has been uncovered by my research and, as I write these words, I am hoping that more Southeast Asian researchers will explore more facets of the same, invisible elephant. Hopefully, our concerted efforts permeate outside of academia, and into the lives of those who still search for a better place. After all, Southeast Asia is still a scene of hardship for many of our peoples.

As I have practically demonstrated in this participatory research, the ASEAN community should not only reflect on the imagination of its leaders for it to make sense. **The imagination must emanate from *who is being imagined* lest Southeast Asia reverts to its old spectres.**

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