

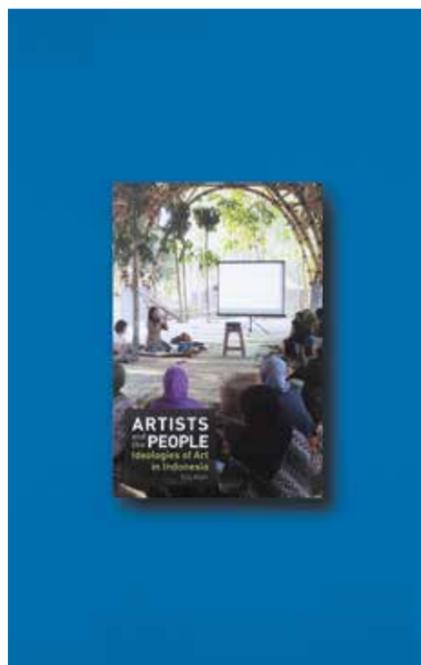


# TO GUIDE AND TO DESERT

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER CHUNG

## ARTISTS AND THE PEOPLE: IDEOLOGIES OF ART IN INDONESIA

By Elly Kent  
Published by National University of  
Singapore (NUS) Press, Singapore, 2022



With the Indonesian collective ruangrupa leading documenta fifteen, the international art world was plunged into methods of creative production that are more horizontal, more decentralized, and more communal than ever executed—or expected—at such a grand scale. As people who convened in Kassel returned to their home bases, recounts of their whirlwind summer made the rounds, and one critique that was generously given was that “there’s nothing there,” in reference to the show’s limited object-based works and large, empty spaces.

Elly Kent’s *Artists and the People: Ideologies of Art in Indonesia* came at just the right time. The four-chapter publication contextualizes why many artists in Indonesia “choose to work directly with people.” Driven by Claire Bishop’s exclusion of Asian art in her landmark *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and Politics of Spectatorship* (2012), a text

familiar to many Indonesian artists active today, Kent untangles how participatory, community-based art in the country was conceptualized “in Indonesian terms.” She begins by introducing the custom of artist-led *gotong royong*, or communal labor, through the practice of Tisna Sanjaya, whose Covid-19 care-package drives and community center in Cigondewah are parts of his oeuvre. “In a country where there is no real social safety net aside from family and community, *gotong royong* is often the lifeline that keeps vulnerable individuals and communities from the brink of disaster,” with artists “often among those compelled to fill these gaps.”

In the first chapter, Kent cites essays by art critic Sanento Yuliman on broadening perspectives for “legitimate” forms of art beyond collectible objects. The second chapter examines *turba*, the practice of “going down below [to the people],” which began in the 1950s when artists were encouraged to work, eat, and sleep “on the same mat as the *rakyat bawah* [lower class]” by the left-leaning Institute of People’s Culture to produce socially relevant work. Recent applications of *turba* focus on direct engagement between the artist and a community, such as in I Made Bayak Muliana’s *Plasticology* (2008–) project, where he holds workshops that teach children about plastic waste and upcycling. The penultimate chapter is about the rise of socially engaged art around *kerakyatan*, or populism, in Suharto’s New Order, when Indonesian art was dominated by abstraction. Kent’s final chapter returns to *gotong royong* and examines the role of communal labor in “both the oppression and empowerment of the Indonesian people,” given that it exonerates the government from its responsibility to take care of its constituents.

*Artists and the People* is best as a slow read, especially for those not previously familiar with Indonesian art. Kent’s intricate descriptions of multiple works steeped in their specific situations and her mapping of connections between artists requires ample time and energy to absorb. But once it has been thoroughly digested, *Artists and the People* proves to be a key instrument in understanding the Indonesian art scene’s rich collectivity. It’s not that there’s nothing there, we just have to know where to look.

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## CHINESE ART SINCE 1970: THE M+ SIGG COLLECTION

Edited by Pi Li  
Published by Thames and Hudson Ltd.,  
London; and M+, West Kowloon Cultural  
District, Hong Kong, 2021



As a visitor to M+’s inaugural exhibition of the M+ Sigg Collection, “From Revolution to Globalisation,” and a reader of *Chinese Art Since 1970: The M+ Sigg Collection*, I can say that the two are rich, complementary experiences still awaiting fuller integration. The wealth of textual and contextual information in the weighty collection catalogue stands in contrast to the visually impactful but relatively text-lite, history-skirting exhibition experience. But the former is far too heavy—weighing in at 3.55 kilograms—to carry around the galleries, say, if one wanted to know more about a particular artist or moment in recent Chinese art history.

*Chinese Art Since 1970* features all 324 artists whose 1,510 artworks comprise the M+ Sigg Collection, from examples of socialist realism through works of the early 2010s. The 48-page timeline offers a guide to events of the last 50 years that shaped the art and culture spheres

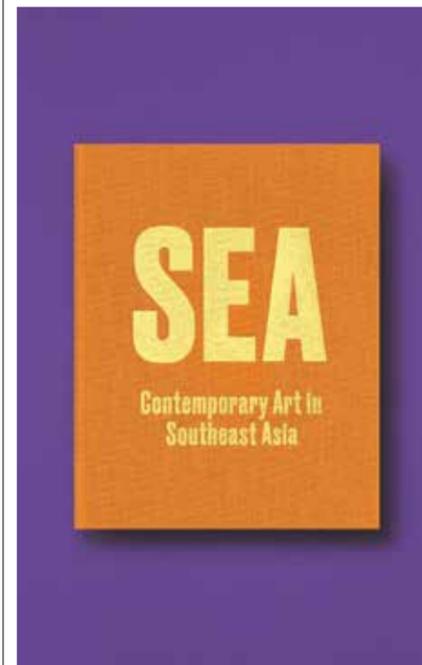
in China, while essays by M+ curators and invited contributors highlight the many key practitioners from the last few decades. Uli Sigg’s own reflection, “Why I Collected What I Collected,” explains his approach (and its potential, admitted limitations) beginning in 1990 to adopt a more institutional mindset in mapping the wider scene rather than focusing on masterpieces. For Sigg, the canon of Chinese art has still not yet been written. Similarly, as Pi Li, Sigg senior curator at M+, surveys the ideological tensions undergirding late 20th century art in China in his essay “Chinese Art: Object or Method?,” he finds the larger story of Chinese art one still awaiting integration into a global art history.

All of this is compelling material for future historicizations of the collection, though I wonder how useful the book is as a reference for exhibition-goers or library-readers, particularly in regard to noncanonical artists. The entry on Cang Xin—a randomly chosen example—is simply: “born 1967, Heilongjiang/works Beijing” with a single photograph of a person floating in a pond of lily pads, titled *Man and Sky as One - Lotus* (2002). Is this the same Cang Xin who participated in the East Village collective’s iconic performance *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* (1995)? Are they a photographer or performance artist? Why did Sigg collect this lone photograph? Even a single sentence noting the artist’s milieu, or a reference to the entry on the East Village scene on pages 272–273, could have pointed the reader to this artist’s place in the collection’s historical narrative. Does Shi Xinning, whose painting of Mao looking at Duchamp’s urinal adorns the cover of the Sigg Collection catalogue first published by M+ in 2015, not even merit a cursory sentence? A catalogue staking a claim for noncanonical and unwritten histories could offer more potential information. The real boon will be when 543-pages worth of material is available to the exhibition-goer, merging the experiential and the informational in a manner highly achievable in today’s world.

HG MASTERS

## SEA: CONTEMPORARY ART IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Edited by Ute Meta Bauer, Karin G. Oen,  
and Tan Boon Hui, with contributions by  
14 writers  
Published by The Institutum, Singapore;  
and Weiss Publications, New York/Berlin,  
2022



In June, my social-media feeds went ablaze with photos depicting the bright orange and gold-embossed cover of *SEA: Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia*. Many of the compendium’s 64 featured artists, collectives, and art spaces were proudly announcing its release, suggesting their sense of ownership over the publication. This is undoubtedly a triumph for the editors—Ute Meta Bauer, Karin G. Oen, and the late Tan Boon Hui—who had set out to put the practitioners directly under the spotlight, unlike the existing array of books lensed with themes and theses formulated by curators and researchers.

Going back to basics in this sense, *SEA*’s structure works against the titular geographical conceit, underscoring the idiosyncrasies of the creative agents rather than any contextual connections between them. The discrete overviews of the artists’ outputs are ordered alphabetically according to the subjects’ names. No

more than 500 words in length and each illustrated with a handful of artwork images, these texts condense the artists’ interests and formal approaches, outline project examples, and touch on exhibition history and biographical background where possible. With this organizational format, if readers want to draw comparisons across the pages or with other artists on a global scale, the onus is on them.

As such, *SEA* functions best as a directory. Those who have been immersed in the region’s scenes will likely already be familiar with the artists represented, but whether for draw readers or a curious audience who is unfamiliar with the names, the book provides an abundance of (re)entry points to further research. The summary on the art space Sa Sa Art Projects (SSAP) was one that brought me to at least three Google searches, including for more details on the cited community-centric public projects, “Snit Snaal” (2012) and “Village Festival” (2014)—apparently an exhibition of young artists, and a music, art, and performance event, respectively. That is not to say that the introductions fail to communicate key points. The relevant entry nails the nature of SSAP as “a responsive organism” whose programs, while initially anchored to a building that has since been demolished, have adapted “to the changing contexts within the contemporary arts and its communities in Cambodia,” addressing varying needs. Elsewhere, the inclusion of Po Po, who I understood to be an early contemporary artist in Myanmar, made me wonder about what is known of the cusp between the modern and the contemporary in the Burmese context.

In *SEA*’s introduction, Bauer and Oen call the compendium “radically incomplete,” a counter to colonial encyclopedic ventures. Not only is it incomplete in its brevity but also by default as a document of its time—a testament to the current knowledge and understanding of Southeast Asia’s contemporary art, which is subject to change. Still, *SEA* is a publication that readers will likely return to again and again—for inspiration, and for closer appreciation of a breadth of artistic ideas.

CHLOE CHU