

SOME REFLECTIONS ON ART AND POLITICS IN THE NEW CENTURY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Goh Beng Lan

Department of Southeast Asian Studies
National University of Singapore

Email: seagohbl@nus.edu.sg

With the collapse of art into mass culture, recent debates have tried to recover the critical efficacy of art via a re-conceptualization of aesthetics. Spurred largely by the works of French philosophers such as Alain Badiou and Jacques Ranciere, recent re-thinking has revived hope in the revolutionary potential of art/aesthetics. Among other things it has given rise to globally oriented discourses on art and the creation of a global public/democratic sphere. Yet within such progressive trends lies a sophisticated return to a universalism of thought and action. The arising question here is whether the universality of human emancipation should only be understood in teleological, singular, or transcendental terms? Using recent developments of the urban art scene and its links to the rise of a new public sphere in Southeast Asia, this paper evaluates current debates on the global simultaneity and expediency of aesthetics. It suggests a need to treat aesthetics as an embodied reflective process that reawakens our humanism in the search of political alternatives beyond enlightenment trajectories in a fast changing world where older political frameworks no longer suffice.