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IN A BIGGER FAMILY.

The difficulty facing art, in the broadest sense of the word, has always been to distance itself from a society that it has to embody. Nonetheless, if it wants to be understood, art has to express society (meaning nowadays the world), but it has to do it deliberately. It cannot be simply a passive expression, a mere aspect of the situation. It has to be expressive and reflective if it wants to show us anything we do not see daily on TV or in the supermarket.

Auge, M. (1995) *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*

Since I moved to Singapore four months before the beginning of Singapore Biennale, my serious problem was how to develop a proper theoretical, social and political framework that can help me evaluate the huge initiative like this collective effort of 27 curators from Southeast Asia. However, I felt my recent research on cultural policy frameworks that influence the (re)construction of national and supranational identities can act as an interesting reflection point. The issues such as the positioning and meaning of international visual arts biennales; the question of social engagement of the arts (*artivism*); as well as political aspects of arts initiatives connected with the issues of national, regional or other form of supranational identity, seem relevant in the context of Southeast Asia.

Ways of seeing?

- *What do you think of Western civilization?*

- *It would be a good idea.*

Mahatma Gandhi

- *What do you think of Southeast Asia?*

- *It would be a good idea.*

#Japundz

When you move away from your place of origin (what is happening with the notion of “home” today?), you become more aware of different levels of identity you carry with you. The difficulty lies in the Eurocentric education system that me, as well as most of the Europeans went through. It positions Europe in the center of the history, and then, as Dipesh Chakrabarty says – “other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called ‘the history of Europe’”. Even if you are aware of the history of intra-European relations, where you could defend the position of Southeast Europe, where I come from, as a region that never contributed to the colonial history of Europe, your identification with the “European values” is not letting you be an “innocent spectator”. Your own network of existing knowledge, experience and “values” starts to become an obstacle of seeing. You need different reference points. Different grid. Or is the grid in place, and you got lost because you expected a different one?

The problem of Biennale as a form and a Nation as a construct

Despite the constant dialogue within the artistic and academic community in Europe about the potentially outdated form of Biennales (and even Quadrennials, like the one in Prague) that represent the collection of national pavilions, they still managed to stay unchanged. It is the Venice Biennale, formed in 1895, which serves as an archetype of these types of events. Although it may seem that in the world of networks and virtual communities of interest, this form lost its place in the world, it actually reflex the paradox position of the nation as a construct in a contemporary society. Instead of getting closer to the vision of nationless global society, we live in a world where nations are entering a certain revival process. But how do you reflect this in the art world? Are there any new national art movements today? Or national art styles? Recent editions of Venice Biennale constantly challenge these forms (such as the work of Susanne Gaensheimer for the German Pavilion on Venice Biennale 2013), but they however remain the same. We can connect this with the notion of

methodological nationalism – where we think about the nation as a natural concept, often not even aware of it, applying it to every aspect of life. Rarely we allow for an alternative angle to this construct – can a nation be seen as an event, a project? Elusive and ephemeral, as any project, with its beginning and its end (the end is the beginning is the end).

Regionalism: new approach or a good application of the existing method?

I would have told them to be careful with their mechanisms of political correctness. For years before it collapsed, Yugoslavia believed it had all the necessary tools for lasting peace, reconciliation and prosperity and brotherhood and unity. Everyone pretended they loved everyone else. And then one day a strongman came and banged his fist on the table and said: “Gentleman, the game is over. Fuck off!” And that was all it took for the whole house of cards to slip into civil wars.

Goran Stefanovski, Heart of the Matter, 2006.

It is not new to think about biennale as an interesting framework to present the new or launch the revival of old social and political ideas. So, if the world really changed can we think through regions and not nations? Or we are just replacing the nation with a region, placing ourselves in the position of a mediator of “inter-Asian dialogues”? Is this inter-Asian approach falling in the same trap like the one from which I came from, not being able to resist the Eurocentricity of the texts engraved through education and experience in me? And is Rustom Bharucha right when he claims that Singapore needs Asia “to balance the loss of local cultures, language, traditions and communities in the interests of global capital and real estate” with the Biennale as a manifestation of a cultural capital of “Asian empires”?

What if... the world changed, and we really feel happy and free? Well, hope brings us here. Lets just hope that the little soap boy will not give us the middle finger before we live up to our dreams.