

**Unravelling Malaysian Subjectivity:
Political Identification and Bodily Experience in New Media Art**

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I confirm that all work presented in this dissertation is my own, and that all references to other sources have been cited accordingly.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a stylized initial 'R' followed by a horizontal line that ends in a small arrowhead.

Roopesh Sitharan

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Abstract

In this thesis, I attempt to unravel the Malaysian subjectivity with regards to the racialized body, as well as in relation to the new media art practice. A Malaysian subject is formally identified with racial identity in order to distinguish between the Malay and rest of the citizens. It is an identification that aims to classify the Malaysian population into racial groups, but never manages to represent the subject in its totality. Due to this, every Malaysian is burdened with a racialization of body that informs their individual lived experience. This research attempts to probe into this lived experience. It argues that this discrepancy between the lived experience and racial marking leads to an epistemological uncertainty that informs the Malaysian subjectivity. Adapting the work of Deleuze and Guattari on machinic assemblage, as well as Bernard Stiegler's idea on 'Technics and Time' the current thesis tries to discover what it means to be a Malaysian – to think beyond the mere racial body. By treating the body as an assemblage process, necessarily employing influences from external forces in order to come into being, I examine how contemporary Malaysian new media art practice is entangled with the production of Malaysian subjectivity. The research is located within my own subjective approach as a key ingredient for the unravelling of Malaysian subjectivity. It is my contention that such an enquiry on the subjectivity, effectively, cannot develop as long as it tries to emulate a positivist and objectivist model of research. I assert that only through critical reflection gained by my new media art practice can I account for an epistemological uncertainty central to the experience of bearing the racial identity as a Malaysian.

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INTRODUCTION

Context

“Roopesh! You have to choose a side. There are no two ways about it, if you call yourself a Malaysian,” I was admonished, as we drove towards Kuala Lumpur Central Station after my event at the National Art Gallery of Malaysia. I hitched a ride in her car immediately after my presentation at ‘Balai’.¹ My thoughts still lingered over the words I had spoken to the crowd of familiar faces. This was not my first event. I had hosted several presentations in Balai before, yet this time instead of coming to a conclusion, I had left things, unresolved. It differed from my usual approach of delivery as I did not present an objectivist formulation of my thoughts. Today, I had articulated a new media art from the coherency of my lived experience - a profound approach in reading new media art practice; consisting of the unfolding play of representation irreducibly bound with the experience itself.² My practice has become a reflection to the conditions of the subject that I am, as a Malaysian, an Indian, a non-Malay and a practitioner of art. I do not have, nor can I offer a conclusion to my experience – reducing everything into a theoretical nugget neatly fitted for the Malaysian art narrative, or simply the Malaysian narrative. Consequently, I ended my presentation with a certitude - by confessing to the exuberant state of a constantly precarious terrain of identity that I struggle with as a Malaysian; a shaky sense that I share with my fellow Malaysians. This is not the conventional ending that one would expect from an art seminar organized by the National Visual Art Gallery of Malaysia.

But immediately after I declared my uncertainty, I found myself given an ultimatum, asked to choose, to decide, to invest in a particular strand of identification. This demand did not come from a stranger but an accomplice, a friend that I used to conspire with for

¹ By ‘Balai’ I am referring to the National Visual Art Gallery of Malaysia, an official institution set up as the custodian for Malaysian art under the Malaysian constitution. Iola Lenzi, *Museums of Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Archipelago Press, 2004), pg.66.

² “In sum, the image can no longer be restricted to the level of surface appearance, but must be extended to encompass the entire process by which information is made perceivable through embodied experience. This is what I propose to call the digital image.” Mark B. N Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004), pg.9.

my ardent aspirations. She³ has her own gallery and has accomplished a great deal; representing Malaysia at various international art events. Our affinity is, in fact, grounded in Malaysia, and as citizens, we are invested in the betterment of our art scene. I seriously tend to her advice for I am convinced she knows the ground well, much better than I do. My retort to her insistence is obvious for I know where my affinity abides – I know where my discourse is placed. Nevertheless, I hesitate to give her an answer. I am unable to proclaim my kinship. I am torn by the demand imposed upon me. The point of contention here is caused by my return and the so called ‘interruptive’ presence. I am seen as an outsider, residing outside of Malaysia and returning occasionally only to comment, critique and conjure my thoughts regarding the Malaysian art scene. I am merely an observer and not a partaker of the things that I enunciate! Certainly I am frantic to declare my alliance yet I hold back – not because I am uncertain of my stance but between her and me there is ever an unuttered compliance; a peculiar consent we abide by that stops me from coming forth. We and all Malaysians flutter around it without openly declaring anything; yet it is subtly proclaimed every time I am hailed.

Roopesh - it was my name she hailed! Does hailing⁴ someone by their name bear any actual significance? I know this calling stamps me with a specific recognition of ‘who I am’. In this act, I am told of my identity, and with it, I am sanctioned as a subject.⁵ I deliberately turn, in fact, I promptly answer - wanting the assurance from her of my subjectification. She does not overtly declare this, nor do I. Nevertheless in my response, I allow myself to be reckoned as a subject. While it might seem that I am deliberately seeking the endorsement, I insist that this approval initiates a marking independent of my doing.⁶ I did not achieve this; instead, it was given - just like the dark skin, brown eyes

³ I have deliberately decided not to name ‘her’ to avoid any particularity (personality or character) in encounter as the cause or reason for my articulation. The use of the pronoun (she) instead of a noun (naming the person) is done to establish the encounter as generic, something that I experience whenever I meet any Malaysian. Nonetheless ‘she’ here might bring up my gendered body, or bodily identity as a male. While the issue of gender in Malaysian society, particularly in the Malaysian art scene is a topic that demands research on its own (and this is not the focus of this thesis).

⁴ My use of hailing here refers to Althusser’s idea of interpellation where he claims Interpellation is the constitutive process where individuals acknowledge and respond to ideologies, thereby recognizing themselves as subjects. Louis Althusser, “On Ideology” in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (London: Verso, 2014), pg.190.

⁵ Following the words of Althusser “the existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing” - I extend this statement to include identity because I argue hailing is an act of “addressing” people and offer them a particular identity which they are encouraged to accept. Ibid. [4], pg.264.

⁶ While Butler argues for the possibility of disobedience to interpellation and I certainly agree to such a posture, here I argue that there is a peculiar marking that comes along with the Malaysian interpellation of

and black hair that are part of me. When I am hailed, and in the subsequent acknowledgement as a subject, I am forced to accept ‘who I am’ – not as in revealing some essence of me to the other reducing my irreducible self to the scale measured of me;⁷ conversely it is the relation with the other that fixes me with an ‘epidermal’⁸ marking – I become an object to be conjectured as a subject.⁹ My opaqueness¹⁰ is installed with a sovereign subject through the inescapable racial identity that I perform as a Malaysian. By being hailed I become a distinct Malaysian, or a Malaysian ‘Indian’. Through affinity, thus, I am made ‘epidermally’ different to her.

Therefore, when I am hailed by her (or any other fellow Malaysian), when I respond, between me and the other, an unspoken discomfort is evidenced; an occurrence concealed by the overbearing alliance in identification that I (we) have come to accept. The opaque ‘self’ comes against the performance of ‘epidermal schema’ that we stage among ourselves.¹¹ Sovereignty is not a generic identification. It is not an object catered for all subjects, fixing a sameness of sharing a particular nationality indicted by the nation-state. There is more to this hailing than the mere recognition of camaraderie. It is an object that orders me in a peculiar taxonomy of citizenry, in fact, plotting a contour for my opaqueness. This predicament posits me within a veil and invariably reveals a secondary-sight (never the first) of being sanctioned. This does not mean I am ignored, or not established as a subject. In fact, my comrade’s insistence for the alliance is demonstrative of my visibility to her. What I am getting at by this secondary-sight is a peculiar operation

which I am given no control over my conformity to it. Judith Butler ‘Gender is burning: Question of Appropriation and Subversion’ in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pg.122.

⁷ As Glissant describes it ‘In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgement. I have to reduce. Édouard Glissant and Betsy Wing, ‘For Opacity’, in *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), pg.122.

⁸ This term is adapted from Fanon’s argument where he coins the term to describe the imposition of racial identity based upon his skin color as perceived by the white gaze. Frantz Fanon, ‘The Lived experience of the Black’, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), pg.92.

⁹ I share this sentiment with Fanon, as he says “I came into this world anxious to uncover the meaning of things, my soul desirous to be at origin of the world, and here I am an object among other objects.” Ibid. [8], pg.89.

¹⁰ Opacity here follows Glissant’s definition where he explains it as a pure surface without interiority. Ibid. [7], pg.191.

¹¹ Here I reverse the act of resistance articulated as performative by Judith Butler. Instead of me resisting, I feel the resistance due to the very operation of my identity in its normative state. Ibid. [6], pg.122.

of rights¹² – the distinction between Malay and non-Malay that denominates me less¹³ within the commonality of our Malaysian nationality. Unknowingly, she reaffirms her privilege through the call of the alliance, conditioning my experience as being dramatically different to hers – I am a second-class Malaysian citizen and termed an outsider - just like her accusation that I am currently bound to withstand.

Thus, when asked whether I am from Malaysia, or just another snobby, pseudo-critical commentator, I hesitate to answer. Because I must take into account the weight of my answer – for my alliance yields me its designation, exclusively when I let myself abide by the representation policy marking me a non-Malay. Such a policy makes my lived experience conditioned by the epidermal marking that retains my difference from her, an official racial marking placed upon us. However, my predicament as a Malaysian differs from how Fanon uses epidermalization. I could relate to Fanon’s anguish and emotional account of what it means to be the ‘Other’ for we share the same odour of the colonial stench.¹⁴ A stench that causes disunion – a radical difference between how I perceive myself and how others define me. Just as Fanon felt, I am pressed by the ‘normative’ marking of race left by the colonial legacy through the discourse on the body, thereby informing my supposedly ‘racialized’ identity. There is truth to this commonality of experience that I share with Fanon, for I am also fixed as a ‘Malaysian Indian’ just as Fanon is fixed as a ‘negro’ by appearance. The central concern for Fanon is the inscription of blackness onto his skin, and in taking up his argument, I cannot but acknowledge that I am an embodied subject – an embodiment, which is defined not by me but by how others gaze upon me.

¹² I have picked on Johan Saravanamuttu’s argument that “Malaysia’s policy of Bumiputera rights may be considered the obverse of the contemporary multicultural discourse and practices which put the accent on minority rights. Here it would seem that the accent is on the majority community or communities that have become socially constructed as Bumiputera. Unlike the usual minority rights issues, political rights or political discrimination is not the issue here. Instead, rather uniquely, the argument is that the economic backwardness of the Bumiputera confers a privilege to receive affirmative action in various areas ranging from holding administrative posts and scholarships to emplacement in educational institutions.” Johan Saravanamuttu, "Conflict and Compromise in Inter-Religious Issues in Malaysia," *The Israel Journal of conflict resolution, special edition: Inter-civilizational Conflict: Can It Be Moderated?* 1, no. 1 (2009): pg.92.

¹³ By ‘less’ I am talking about the special privilege granted to Malays by the implementation of Bumiputera rights.

¹⁴ My reason in making a comparison with Fanon is due to the history of colonialism and its influence/impact on the current socio-political living in Malaysia.

But there is an exception to the commonality that I share with Fanon. I bring up Fanon here not only to seek solidarity for my articulation but also to extend his critique - by noting that not every experience of racial identity is construed equally given the circumstances of a subject. For Fanon, racial identity comes to limit the possibilities of his particular sense of self or subjectivity as apparently felt by him. The concept of identity is best understood as a restraint to the heterogeneity of subjectivity inherent in the wider discursive field, with the purpose of providing a singular sense (regardless of how futile this might be) of who a subject is and where he/she belongs. While identity (in general) works this way, the embodied sense of identification or racial identity insists on attributing fixed sets of meaning to subjects, based on appearance, enforcing such artificiality as the norm and quintessentially natural to the body. As Fanon laments, the marking of blackness is an inescapable prison¹⁵ that defines him – it is a prison because blackness, in fact, is not circumscribed by any trait or essence of himself. Instead, it is determined by colonial legacy. This is the most powerfully presented restraint among all forms of identification - an embodied meaning of the visual not at the disposal of an individual that appears but is strenuously determined by the history of representation.

Skin colour demonstrates limiting the possibilities of Fanon's identity, or how he wants to identify himself and such racialization of the subject can only produce resistance (from within) for there is no differentiated self - outside of such markings. This is acutely demonstrated by Fanon through his work but here I want to deviate from Fanon in considering my predicament. My extension of Fanon's argument operates differently and is specific to the circumstances by which I am bound, but I am not after an adequate form of 'another adequate form' of signification for myself. I am not resisting - if so I would have rebutted my friend - nor am I claiming a unique/different identity either - if so I would have argued with her - but I am unable to answer. I am silent, attributing to the fact that my skin tone is always open to the possibility of becoming a Malay, despite my marking as a 'Malaysian Indian'. It is ever this possibility of becoming, not resisting, nor creating that makes the Malaysian case peculiar and specific to my experience. It is this sense of potentially becoming the same with the rest (due to the uncertainty inherent in

¹⁵ Fanon's lamentation that, "The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man. Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself. His metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him" Ibid. [8], pg.90.

the Malay) – although in appearance I am marked to be different - this uncertainty comes before me, stops me and has me buckling under the urgency of needing to labour for change yet at the same time valuing the uniqueness of being Malaysian.

But this is not something I repeat to myself, something that I recite to myself because I am confronted with the actualization of such potentiality. Rather, none other than she who questions me bears the mark of this. Fanon's argument stands witness to the long history of the negative, primitivistic, and orientalist frame of prejudiced representation that burdens a subject, especially bodies that are non-white coded, specifically with racial stereotypes and barbarism – what he calls epidermalization. While this racial identity might still operate with the same intensity, it bears a different inheritance in Malaysia. She is the substantiation of this difference, an exception to Fanon's argument. Yes! She is Malay but her body carries the racial history of a Chinese - she was assimilated¹⁶ into the Malays through the possible legalities sanctioned by Malaysia, the same legalities that stop me, stop all (any) Malaysians from becoming a Malay.¹⁷ In this sense, the epidermal is not to 'fix a preparation (body)¹⁸ with a dye',¹⁹ instead, it's a representational policy that uses the 'dye' to purposefully distinguish a Malay and non-Malay.

Malaysian citizenship and the examination strategy

Historically, the constitutional definition of Malaysia's citizenship is composed of a set of descriptions that existed prior to the independence of the country. It defines a claim of belonging through the assertion for entitlement attested with the presence, or of living in a particular colony for a certain period of time. This is then corroborated with other demographical particulars of the individual, such as place of birth, occupation, length of stay - to substantiate the claim for naturalization, or becoming a citizen of the particular state under the colonial rule.²⁰ After independence, citizenship was written into the

¹⁶ For further reading on assimilation, especially related to my identity as Indian Malaysian, please read Punitha Sivanantham and Kumaran Suberamaniam, "Cultural assimilation among Malays and Indians in Malaysia," *Journal of Indian Culture and Civilisation* 1, no. 1 (2014): pg.203-217.

¹⁷ The specifics of these legalities I discuss in chapter 01.

¹⁸ The word 'body' here is my insertion to the famous words of Fanon.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* [8], pg.89.

²⁰ This description of citizenship is based on the cessation of the Straits Settlements from the Indian administration from April 1867 thereby conferring legislative authority to the Legislative Council of the

constitution of Malaysia with a similar tone, in fact, as an adaptation from the previous definition. The constitution of Malaysia states in Part III, Article 14 that – “Subject to the provisions of this Part, the following persons are citizens by operation of law, that is to say: (a) every person born before Malaysia Day who is a citizen of the Federation by virtue of the provisions contained in Part 1 of the Second Schedule; and (b) every person born on or after Malaysia Day, and having any of the qualifications specified in Part 11 of the Second Schedule.” This clause in the Second Schedule clearly outlines the various circumstances of being born in Malaysia, such as before independence, before and after Malaysia Day²¹ or having a Malaysian father during the time of birth.

These conditions in the Malaysian constitution reflect the right of the state to impose particularities of the citizenry, and it is rightly so for it is an essential attribute of sovereignty. It is a fundamental (legal) binding act between an individual and the state that calls for an affinity; whereby the individual forges an alliance with the state and in return, the state is obliged to protect the individual. The sovereignty of the state is not in dispute here for I am able to proudly proclaim myself and I do so consciously - as Malaysian; only because the very same principle constitutes me as a sovereign subject. Nor am I seeking to reconsider the philosophical meaning of citizenship with my explication of the constitution for there is no subject without citizenry. This does not mean that subject did not exist prior to modern states, although the privilege of autonomy that I enjoy comes from the radical freedom granted to me by the state, with the condition of self-imposed limitations that abide by the figure of a peculiar subjectification, endowed with the right to live freely and equally with other subjects. I am persuaded to curtail my freedom (without necessarily eradicating the violence) so that I might encounter the other through the consent of a shared sovereignty, of equals as a nation.

Straits Settlements. Citizenship is then constituted as “any person, whilst actually residing in the Colony, may present a memorial to the Governor in Council, praying that the privileges of naturalisation may be conferred upon him.” Ordinances began to be promulgated and published with the establishment of the Straits Settlements Government Gazette on 1 April 1867. Mercy Selvaratnam and Hulwana Mohd Labib, "Basic Information for Legal Research in Malaysia," *Doing Legal Research in Asian Countries, Institute of Developing Economies (IDE) Asian Law Series 23* (March 2003): pg.69.

²¹ Malaysia Day is held on 16 September every year to commemorate the establishment of the Malaysian Federation on the same date in 1963. It marked the joining together of Malaya, North Borneo, Sarawak, and Singapore to form Malaysia.

However, I do want to point out the obvious in this default predicament that I am legally bound by. My citizenry is determined by the ‘space and time’ of my appearance in the world. The citizenry is determined by the circumstances of the ‘space and time’ in which I was born. It could be argued that this ‘space and time’ is an arbitrary, common factor, which determines an individual’s citizenry in the world. However, my appearance is predetermined by another law catered specifically for a Malaysian. As per Article 160, it must be determined if I am a Malay (or not) according to the description written in the constitution of Malaysia. My existence in space and time is, thus fixed by another law that marks me with a racial distinction to differentiate (or associate) myself with the Malay. As I appeared in a certain space and time (I am recognised as Malaysian) and I occupy a certain identity – as a Malaysian Indian – and it is with this identification that I am hailed to be interpellated as a subject. Calling me Roopesh marks my racial distinction (a non-Malay) as I am a Malaysian. In this predestined position, I operate in time and space, I operate in the world, I operate as a subject in Malaysia, I operate as a Malaysian. And it is in this position that I encounter the others, my identity always comes prior to me (as a subject) – a violence that precedes my presence.

Recently, a close friend of mine, currently a member of the Selangor State Assembly and the very first woman to become a speaker for the state decided to sidestep this violence. A controversy broke out as she tried to register her newborn child as just “Malaysian” when asked for racial identity. Given the mixed origin of the child, because she is Chinese and has an Indian partner, they decided to avoid the racial marking by putting “Malaysian” in the birth registration form under the category of race. Her stance, in fact, garnered huge support²² from the public. However, by law, they were forced to register the child with their choice of race – Chinese or (but not ‘and’) Indian, and never Malaysian. Registering as a ‘Chinese’, she later filed an appeal to the prime minister to reconsider the registering of her child as Malaysian, which came to no avail. I admire her effort; it takes courage to face the state with such principles. There is nothing wrong in this, for such efforts are necessarily an important reminder of the struggle for equality. It is a labor for acceptance, of being equal beyond the difference we ‘might’²³ inherit. A

²² All the comments by the public can be read at "Lawmaker fails to register child as 'anak Malaysia' (Malaysian child)," Malaysiakini, last modified June 9, 2011, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/166396>.

²³ I say ‘might’ here because of the questionable nature of inherency in difference that each racial sector in Malaysia argues for.

strategy that addresses the violence of racial identity inherent to a Malaysian – a strategy to circumvent the violence, even perhaps to permanently eradicate such markings for future generations. With hope projected ahead of the present moment, there are plenty of such efforts that have (and still are) being carried out to remove (or go beyond) racial identity in Malaysia.

Granted I do see the reason for the struggle and while this thesis might seem to align with such an effort, it nonetheless does not pursue the same end. Instead of gesturing at a possibility that awaits a future unfolding, welcoming the arrival of a ‘new Malaysian’ by overthrowing racial identity (or living in harmonious acceptance of racial difference) - the thesis simply inverts the chronology implied by such effort. It tries to examine how a Malaysian is inextricably connected in relation to complimentary and tension with race. Such ‘connection’ does not entirely correspond to the logic of citizenship, and may even resist or refute such subjectification. There is an apparent anxiety that becomes obtrusively visible when race is mentioned - the risk of reinforcing race in its place as a worthy object, even when criticizing such a ‘category’ yet unknowingly accommodating it as an essential something. In this perspective, any project addressing the task of dismantling, or challenging race is bound to participate in the object it attacks; a failure is inevitable. Caught up endlessly in trying to do what we desire with race, just as my friend did with her newborn (and I could quote various other efforts here), it seemed any argument on being Malaysian is complicit with racial inscriptions. Thus indicating the deliberate inverted approach herein, – from describing what we do (or desire to do) with race, to what race is doing to a Malaysian. To put it differently, the argument presented here is directed towards a ‘doing’ that has been (and still is) taking place within a Malaysian person; given the strain of possibilities caused by an encounter with fellow Malaysian, as a subject operates in the predestined state of racial identification.

Of course, the risk is not done away with by this inversion, and the aim is not to eradicate the risk, but to reposition the risk away from my desire to speak (ignorantly exploitative) - by trying to create a supposedly neutral space to articulate, intellectually and critically about being Malaysian. This is not a strategic maneuver to evade the risk, nor to deny my desire to speak but instead to openly declare a dissonance caused by the risk, or speaking in a state of ‘*antre*’ - to consider how ‘doing’ becomes a facticity for a Malaysian subject through an encounter; as an effect of racial reification. Racial identity is not then

something that we do to a Malaysian, but something a Malaysian does, or to be more precise, what allows Malaysian to be done. It is a state of indeterminacy resulting from the situation of which a subject is made an overdetermined object. In this regard, what is at stake is not what the subject is saying, or desiring (of which any utterance is by default burdened with risk) but instead the act of ‘saying’ itself, or to be accurate in its inability to say something (anything) the subject simply asks.²⁴ This idea of asking is the only means of deconstructing the specific meaning of the stifling or unreal propositions imposed upon subjects by the nation state. It is a gesture from a position of impossibility, and in this, you don’t make a declaration because anything you say turns into reification; thus you can only question – not to seek answers but to disrupt the existing mode of answering.

This is why the chapters are posed as questions, an ‘asking’ that I impose in the circumstance of being a Malaysian subject. As these circumstances are evidently visible in the chapters, the questions are not imposed by me upon myself (akin to a personal diary or internal dialogue), but instead, the asking is evoked by encounters inferred in time and space as Malaysian. What is Malaysian? What are the scenes? What it does? What we do? These are questions that parlay encounter with ‘subject’, ‘context’, ‘medium’ and ‘practice’ given the particularity of time and space as experienced by a Malaysian new media artist. All the questions use the adjective ‘what’ to introduce the nouns of space and time – ‘Malaysian’ and ‘scenes’ for space, followed by ‘it does’ and ‘we do’ for time. Simply put, in this thesis I re-pose the question of Malaysian as a bodily experience, a question of revealing a ‘doing’ that asserts that I cannot have a final or absolute articulation of what it is. Instead, it is an ongoing and unfinished process of subjectification that orientates the body in a specific way, affected by how they encounter each other in space, something that I am made critically aware through my new media art practice. Therefore, no final solution is evident to define a Malaysian subject and I would extend this claim to argue that if any such solution is offered, such a subject immediately

²⁴ While I am aware of Spivak’s argument by utilizing Derrida’s blankness ‘*the thought is.....the blank part of the text*’ as a method for the production of a theory for subaltern, however, I argue that a similar blankness (or silence) is not applicable in response to the inability to speak because Malaysians are not subaltern. They are duly acknowledged as citizens by the nation state. In this inscription, Malaysians are already part of the nationalist narrative and signified in a particular history. Spivak Gayatri Chakravorty, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pg. 89.

ceases to be what it claims to be - for being Malaysian is inherently enduringly precarious state of being.

It might seem that I have been defeated, or I have defeated myself early on in my effort to establish some kind of coherence for a Malaysian subject. In my defense, the evasion of an absolute definition of a Malaysian subject is driven by my wariness in the act of theorizing, and I would argue that any theoretical explanation of a Malaysian subject merely demonstrates the extreme tension between theory and lived experience. This conviction underpins a cautious approach to the thesis, largely because I am agitated by the convention of theory in unknowingly coming to speak on behalf of others, in this case, an intellectual attempt to define a (all) Malaysian. In doing so, any explanation that I propose would only produce a sense of determinism as if I am outside, looking in – an act of objectifying, uttering with a coded familiarity through a discourse prominently dominated by intellectual and academic elites. But this does not mean I am skeptical about theory, and in refutation towards any form of intellectual work. Conversely, my point here is far more modest in accepting that the question of ‘Malaysian subject’ is a furcated procedure, and can only be approached through a reflection on the habits of being - that continuously disrupt meaning as they evoke irreducible and fertile potentialities.

Therefore, I embrace the predicament of possible defeat to establish an open-ended approach to the discrepancy between two oppositional spheres (theory and lived experience) that never quite amalgamate into definitive meaning. By open-ended I am pointing at an articulation that lacks any form of symmetry between living and theorizing, subsequently exhausting its own premise of conceptual framing, or what I call ‘doing’. I assert this exhaustion is vital because the emphasis here is to avoid at all cost the formulation of a ‘counter-ideological system to racial identity’ that defines a Malaysian subject, whereby unknowingly getting involved in the argumentative logic imposed by the binary. The binary proposition, such as insider and outsider (bumiputra and pendatang) outlined by racial marking underlines a danger of mimetic relation to the essentialist belief in racial identity. Conversely, what is required is an articulation, which is theoretically adequate while being both tolerable to and critical of the lived experience. Such an approach does justice by refusing to be confined and disappearing into the cause of any particular identity struggle. This is why I am after a critical-theoretical account capable of embracing a chiasmic articulation - an act of thinking of a subject as in an

encounter, rather than sequentially. Let me now summarize each chapter to show the disruption of a Malaysian subject through the encounter, making a ‘doing’ possible and yet this disruption holds a promise of potentiality that consolidates a Malaysian subject.

The first chapter starts with the question of ‘what’ is Malaysia instead of ‘who’. This is a deliberate choice of word to displace the question as well as the position to question. In this displacement (and not replacement) of interrogation, identity is deconstructed but not with the intention of a poststructuralist attack on the discursive construction of identity but based upon the lived experience, of my bodily encounter as a foundation for a discursive subjectivity that also includes and considers identity as a component that informs, dispositions and reorganizes my subjectivity in relation to the other - a consolidation of my racial identity as Malaysian Indian. Here the ‘Malay’ racial marking reinforces the difference in identifying a Malaysian subject, yet the arbitrariness of Malay as a racial marking upon the body disrupts the reinforcement of such bodily distinction – making the ‘doing’ possible. Here the Malay, in fact, encounters my body.

This is followed by the question, ‘What are the scenes?’. While the first chapter establishes encounter as a crucial event for the articulation of ‘doing’ – this chapter follows this articulation by highlighting the temporal characteristic of the encounter. I can never grasp that I live in the immediacy as I am living through space and time but it only comes in the form of reflection, subsequent to the event of living. As such, the ‘doing’ is never present in the writing but only appears as a description of an event. Therefore, this lack of ‘doing’ in the articulation is addressed by having the encounter in and through the writing – a consolidation of my writing (and me as a writing subject). This is achieved by having two other practitioners alongside mine, namely Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjana Rajah as part of my writing. We discuss the scenes we operate - as practitioners of new media art and as Malaysians. Here, the others encounter my writing.

Meanwhile, the third chapter starts with the question of ‘What it does?’. ‘It’ here stands for the term New Media as it operates in the Malaysian Art landscape. The chapter reviews the theories and debates of new media, especially in the context of Malaysian art history and theory. These findings are used to prove the ability of new media to cause a particular suspension of epistemology to the discourse of visual culture in Malaysia. The objective is to connect the particularity of the artist’s art practice (as well as other case

studies that have been included as part of this thesis) with the Malaysian doing, and to demonstrate art practice as a site for the manifestation of Malaysian doing. Here, new media encounter my articulation.

Lastly, the fourth chapter probes other new media art practitioners in Malaysia. By asking ‘What we do?’ I encounter the works of Ismail Zain, Niranjan Rajah, and Hasnul Jamal Saidon. These scholars are specifically chosen because of the nature of their work, the manifestation of their struggle in trying to articulate the ‘doing’ through practice, is similar to mine. Here I articulate the ‘doing’ through my encounter of their works – the consolidation of my thoughts in practice. Their thoughts are examined, by having their writing and art works historicize - not to describe nor to inscribe but to enable me to demonstrate an invocation of new media art practice - outside the norms of accepted art practice. Using all these as an example, this chapter attempts to identify moments in art practice that demonstrate the bifurcation of race and subject (the doing) in the Malaysian context. Here, their thoughts encounter my practice.

Methodology and Theoretical framework

I approach these questions by conducting an analysis of history, but not with an end in mind, seeking a purpose, as in a turn to teleology. Here, it is vital to explain what the thesis does not intend to do when I say history. Firstly, history must not be thought as a chronicle of the past in order to make sense of the present, like having a ‘purpose’ - engaging with a canonical (national) discourse which constitutes the subject it selects as a product of a post-colonial state; thereby contributing to the legitimization (and the critique thereof) of an exclusive identification. Secondly, when ‘end’ is eradicated in reference to thinking about history, what it establishes is an endless and aimless progression, –which goes nowhere because it cannot come to a sensible stop through the means of an imagined-consensus, which in turn becomes an impoverishing filter for the totality of subject possibilities. History is as heterogeneous as it was and ever will be.²⁵

²⁵ My argument for the heterogeneity of history stems from my lived experience, as it is suppressed to give way to a formal construction of history – following Spivak’s argument “The unrecognized contradiction within a position that valorises the concrete experience of the oppressed, while being so uncritical about the historical role of the intellectual, is maintained by a verbal slippage.” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,

With this in mind, I move from metaphysic to genealogy,²⁶ not to make sense of what it means to be Malaysian by looking at the past, nor to strive for a 'better' Malaysian to emerge. Rather the point is to deviate from finding cause to exposing contingency – to ask what sort of external conditions determine the subject (as I am told), for only by doing so can I destabilize what seems natural to reveal the construct of which the 'doing' (as I experience it) may be articulated.

But how can one approach such heterogeneous history? Does this question not undermine nor resist its relevancy as a testament to the lived experience. On the contrary, it is precisely the lived experience that comes to implode history from within, from its stature as a monolith of the past. By claiming heterogeneity, I am not dismissing the occurrence of events that might have happened in the past, as if these events never occurred - instead I seek diversification in the account of the event; subsequently rendering null any particular narrative as the official story of the past. Through implosion I want to think of history in terms of subjectivity²⁷ – a constantly changing signification of events that make any attempt to speak of it as the 'true' account of the past to be problematic. What happened during my journey to the Kuala Lumpur Central Station is my account of the event, and this might (or might not) differ vastly from her version. Despite the encounter between us (a shared event), the recalling of it might vary and it is this variance that I am after, not the event itself. If history is to be approached effectively through subjectivity, and if it must be made available to clear the norms by which 'subject' is constituted for me, then the only possible way to do so is by inserting my biography in and through the thesis – for personal history of subjectification and genealogy of dispossession is only accessible through biographical²⁸ means. This framework guides the bordered construct

"History," in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999), pg.256.

²⁶ I am adapting Foucauldian's sense of genealogical approach to history where he deploys Friedrich Nietzsche's genealogical analysis of the development of morals through power as a starting point for developing a method that includes an examination of complex power relations between institutional practices, bodies and systems of thought. For further reading refer Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) and Michel Foucault and Robert J. Hurley, *The history of sexuality. Volume 1, Volume 1* (New York: Vintage, 1990).

²⁷ My argument for subjectivity is based on the inability of history to be completely objective, as in, abstain from being tainted by the historian's view of the event, as supported by E.H.Carr "In the first place, the faces of history never come to us 'pure', since they do not and cannot exist in a pure form: they are always refracted through the mind of the recorder. It follows that when we take up a work of history, our first concern should be not with the facts which it contains but with the historian who wrote it." Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (Camberwell, Vic: Penguin, 2008), pg.19.

²⁸ As I join authors described by Philippe Lejeune as "Telling the truth about self, constituting the self as a complete subject – it is a fantasy. In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way

of the four chapters in this thesis in a way that reinforces the biographical necessity for the investigation – in and through my account of the lived experience.

It must now be obvious that I am the main provocateur for the thesis and the reason for utilizing my subjectivity is to bring a peculiar abrasion to academic research. I do this to avoid the presupposition of my argument from becoming a new phase for national and theoretical articulation on the Malaysian subject. I assert that research on a Malaysian subject needs to account for an epistemological uncertainty, which is central to the experience of bearing the identity as a Malaysian. Having a multidisciplinary approach to question Malaysian identity is certainly not new, especially in the context of Malaysian art history and theory; however, all approaches reiterate a peculiar method of knowledge production. It creates an impersonal norm and procedure of constructing a grand narrative and the political will to proclaim an absolute truth regarding the history (and practice) of Malaysian art, subsequently informing the discourse on Malaysian identity. Such a study conforms to what has been said about identity, an essentialist reiteration that keeps Malay/non-Malay separate; and alienating my lived encounter with fellow Malaysians from the academic discourse on what it means to be a Malaysian. I overturn this approach through the assertion of ‘I’. In other words, my method of writing displaces the positivism in knowledge production. I do this by discussing Malaysian identity in tandem with experiential art practice as well as issues of new media philosophy to examine the intersect of new media art practice with the production of subjectivity.

From the point of view of politics in Malaysia, the way in which ‘I’ is emphasized and rewritten in this thesis rebuffs a number of deficits regarding the conception of Malaysian identity and subjectivity. The major difference that this PhD seeks to make visible is the articulation of a cacophony between political identification and bodily experience, in which the ideas of incompleteness and contingency are evident through the various experiences grounded not only in my practice but chiefly through other Malaysian new media artists who precede me. In this way, it is hoped that this thesis will open up Malaysian studies to a potential range of philosophical debates. For as tempting as it may

prevents it from existing. Perhaps, in describing it, I in turn took my desire for reality; but what I wanted to do, was to describe reality in its reality, a reality shared by a great number of authors and readers.” Philippe Lejeune and Paul John Eakin, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pg.131.

be, I must admit there is no definite way of exhausting that which is incomplete. My emphasis on ‘incomplete’ is not simply meant to point out something is missing and thus in dire need of completion. Conversely, incomplete serves as a reminder of the limit of articulation, generating all the more reason for lived experience (and meaningful art practice) to be included as part of research processes as it is predicated on exclusion from the usual approach in the discourse on Malaysian (art) history. Such an approach is driven by uncertainty – the threat of dissolution and negation as opposed to recognition of a subject.

With this in mind, the only cohesion that the thesis can put forward in fact derives from my narration as I formulate a place of enunciation by crisscrossing discourse on Malaysian art history and new media theory. My struggle here is to explicate the lived experience – or simply put, to articulate from the position of limitation and speculation through my practice. To do this, the research had to follow certain paths of theoretical and philosophical probing specific to the needs of the theorizing subject. Although the thesis does provide a brief history and overview of certain aspects related to Malaysian art history and new media theory, this is not the aim. I must clarify the necessity for insisting on lived experience as part of the thesis. Identity politics is central to the discourse on Malaysian art history, which is clearly evident with reference to some of the canonical texts that have come to define the official narrative of Malaysian Art.

Arguably, the compulsory text that must be referred to in any study of Malaysian art history is the seminal essay by Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa titled “Towards Mystical Reality”.²⁹ Their argument posits a very post-colonial stance by calling for a mystical dimension in art making – a claim intended to be in opposition to the western notion of Art. While this is an important text that opened up Malaysian art to conceptual art practice, it, more importantly, gave rise to the urgency to claim a unique identification for Malaysian artists. Similar assertions and arguments were also corroborated by other important writers, artists and art historians such as T.K. Sabapathy, Krishan Jit, Zakaria Ali and Zainal Abidin Ahmad Sharif. Some of the early texts on Malaysian artists by T.K.Sabapathy in particular, mark the beginning of modern art in Malaysia. Identity

²⁹ Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa, "Towards a mystical reality," in *Raja'ah: art, idea, and creativity of Sulaiman Esa from 1950's-2011*, ed. Nur Hanim Md Khairuddin (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: National Visual Art Gallery, 2011), pg.111.

politics is central to his process of historicizing Malaysian modern art. All of these efforts are undeniably important works for the building of national identity, especially for a nation-state that just achieved independence. However, it also functions as a restrictive framework that one must negotiate when dealing with Malaysian art history. Even when history is challenged - while the argument might introduce new methods of understanding a specific practice - the analysis implicitly tends to revolve around the claim of a pioneering presence for a particular racial identity.³⁰

Essays from exhibitions during the nineties such as 'Vision and Idea'³¹ and 'Rupa Malaysia'³² can be posited as canonical works to establish an exclusive story for Malaysian art in the region. The importance of these works is based upon the schematic ordering of Malaysian artists featured prominently with the conscious recognition of racial and cultural diversity that challenge (and adhere) to national identity. In all these efforts of historicizing identity, especially racial identity is dominant. New Media on the other hand, especially in the realm of Malaysian art is never given a real footing on its own terms. While artists do utilize technology, especially digital technology in the production of their work, and there are several works that employ technology for the creation and dissemination as well as access to the artwork – the articulation around these works has always been a mere advancement in the production process, or as a tool. I argue that this is because the effective power of identity politics is considerable, in part because of its capacity to infuse a content-driven tendency in any discourse on Malaysian art, rather than consider new media artworks as a critical reflection on how experience is influenced (and transformed) due to the changes in the medium we communicate.

However, this is not always the case. Ismail Zain is hailed as a pioneer of Malaysian new media art because of his critical examination of the influence of technology in art practice.

³⁰ For further reading on examples of this, refer essays by Sarena Abdullah and Simon Soon. While both of these essays may differ in the area of research, yet the presence of identity politics is the basis for the articulation.

Sarena Abdullah, "Absenteeism of Malaysian Identity in Art in the early years of Independence," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies (JATS)* 15, no. 1 (December 2010) and Simon Soon, "Fabric and the Fabrication of a Queer Narrative: The Batik Paintings of Patrick Ng Kah Onn," *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific*, no. 38 (August 2015).

³¹ T. K. Sabapathy and Krishen Jit, *Vision and Idea: Rethinking Modern Malaysian Art* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994).

³² *Rupa Malaysia: A Decade of Art, 1987-1997* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: National Art Gallery of Malaysia, 1998).

He extends his criticality to studying how technology contributes to the development and understanding of art, culture, and society in Malaysia. Indeed others, before him, have utilized technology for art before him,³³ however his solo show titled 'Digital Collage' in 1988 stands as an important landmark in Malaysian art history, particularly for this thesis as it introduces the idea of the possible dissolution of identity caused by technology. This was followed by a retrospective of his work in the year 1995 that presented a diverse body of his work such as writing, artwork as well as lectures on Malaysian art. His effort was followed by Niranjana Rajah and Hasnul Jamal Saidon³⁴ in their various bodies of work on new media. Their most important contribution is the curation of a major exhibition in 1997 titled, '1st electronic art show'. The exhibition was a consolidation of artworks that utilized technology and it established a narrative for new media art practice, parallel to the canonical discourse on Malaysian art.

The contribution of these three artists is crucial and significant in that they cannot be overlooked in any discussion regarding new media art in Malaysia. Accordingly, I engage in extensive discussion with them in/through my writing - not in terms of reading (their) narratives but in pointing out and assessing the crisis in a discourse on Malaysian subject through my reflection on subjectivity. While their efforts successfully inserted new media art as part of the Malaysian art discourse, this was only achieved by operating within the set parameters of identity politics inherent in the discourse. I argue that they are well aware of the parameters and even critical of it, yet their struggle was dictated by the urgency of the moment - to establish an official presence for their practice, for new media art. Ismail Zain referred to critical regionalism³⁵ in framing a discourse for media related artworks while Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjana Rajah argued for a return to Eastern, or Asian values as a basis for articulating new media practice in Malaysia. Identity, especially an antagonistic gesture seeking a difference in the identification, is thus imperative in their struggle.

³³ Kamaruzaman Md. Isa is the first recorded artist in Malaysia to utilize computer technology for the purpose of creating an artwork. His digital print was exhibited in 1983 as part of a Faculty show where he was working at as lecturer. Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjana Rajah, "from mass media to multi media," in *1st. Electronic Art Show* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1997), pg.7.

³⁴ Niranjana and Hasnul's background and profile is discussed in the literature review.

³⁵ Critical Regionalism is an idea conceived by Kenneth Frampton in which he argues that local manifestations of international trends in architecture develop in an interaction with the local climate, culture, myth and craft. Ismail Zain adapts this idea to suggest that Malaysians should assert ourselves in the global technological progression in terms of our difference, while participating in the commonalities engendered by new media.

Today, several contemporary practitioners, writers, artists, art critics, and researchers are examining the phenomena of new media art. Art discourse in Malaysia is so diverse and dispersed at present, that it is almost impossible to proclaim with certainty any particular strand of discourse as canonical or an official narrative.³⁶ Yet identity politics linger through this messiness. Perhaps the closest study that comes to my approach is the book by Ismail Abdullah titled 'Seni, Budaya, Media dan Konflik Jati Diri' (Art, Culture, Media and conflict of Authentic self).³⁷ While this book does address media technology-induced 'identity conflict,' which is explored through media-based artworks (film and photography), yet it reiterates the need for nationalistic allegiance to face the globalization ushered in by media technology – in short, the necessity of an identity for a Malaysian. This thesis is situated within this disburbed trajectory of discourses, especially debates and arguments on identity in Malaysian art history – that had contributed so much to animate the contemporary art scene in Malaysia. While the encounter with Malaysian art history is inevitable in this thesis, it is certainly not there to reaffirm the question of identity lodged at the core of Malaysian art.

A certain anxiety inevitably arises when looking at new media studies and this can be attributed to various trajectories of discourse that exist within the field. Competing viewpoints, arguments and debates are constantly emerging across various fields related to technology. Considering this thesis is dictated by the concerns of the theorizing subject, (namely I) the focus here is on art practice that deals with new media,³⁸ rather than new media in the broadest sense. In staying as close as possible to the aims of this research, the thesis focuses specifically on ideas developed by Bernard Stiegler through his conception of 'Technics' followed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's exploration on subjectivity to discuss the relationship between new media and subjectification. These philosophical and theoretical bearings help navigate my new media art practice to systematically explore what I propose as the underdeveloped relationships between the formation of a Malaysian subject and critical new media philosophy. I contend that this

³⁶ Refer Sarena's argument on the Malaysian art scene. Sarena Abdullah, "Art Criticisms Versus Art Writings: The Malaysian Situation," *kemanusiaan* 19, no. 2 (2012): pg.63-78.

³⁷ Ismail Abdullah, *Seni Budaya Media Dan Konflik Jati Diri* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka, 2009).

³⁸ By new media I am referring to contemporary techno cultural milieu propelled by information and communication technology (ICT) that persistently questions the metaphysical framing of being and becoming of a subject. This shall be discussed further in chapter 02.

coupling has never been done in the research of Malaysian art, although the impact of new media in the social sense is explored by social science and media studies. Building on ideas of subjectivity by Deleuze and Guattari as well as by adapting Bernard Stiegler's argument of 'technics', this thesis seeks to develop an argument for Malaysian subjectivity by problematizing and intervening identity through a series of lived experiences in contemporary art practice.

Inevitably before I end, it is imperative that I introduce the potential partiality caused by my constant presence. I, as the central-biographical figure for the research, do not intend to indulge in an assumption that my life has greatly influenced the world. Such an assumption, in fact, would result in an inherent distortion to the research. This is because 'I' comes to bear all subjects that call themselves Malaysian, but such a claim overlooks the incommensurability of such representation. My articulation here involves not a representation but a projection of unity in uncertainty³⁹ caused by the differential totality of subjects called Malaysian. 'Uncertainty' is the central figure here. It entails a horizon where identity crumbles and vitality is worked otherwise. What it suggests is an expression of uncertainty made possible only by acknowledging the limits of a given identity. This movement to illuminate the Malaysians from the margin is never stable, nor is it unified as it is constructed on increasingly fragmented, unstable and contested ground with the margin constantly changing, expanding and transforming. Embedding the subject with articulation in and through this thesis; or my presence, my voice, the 'I' is a manifestation of a substantial uncertainty, or a matter of taking a position that constantly negates re-capture, or re-colonization of articulation by the vocabulary of identity that operates within the parameter of being Malaysian. Therefore, 'I' is not embraced to present all subjects that would call themselves Malaysian. Rather, it derives from the uncertainty of being Malaysian – one among many that could only be critically examined through articulating the lived experience.

³⁹ Following a recent comment made by Farish A. Noor in an event called KataKatha; Southeast Asian conversation on Culture and the Arts, Syar S. Alia reports "The first was the region's fluidity and what historian Farish A. Noor dubbed 'productive ambiguity' where Southeast Asians were non-passive, self-aware recipients of the constant migrations of new cultures and traditions. Our adaptability, appropriations, flexibility, and resilience made us into antennas receiving, producing, and replicating signals." Farish A. Noor, "KataKatha: Southeast Asian Conversations on Culture and the Arts | Syar S. Alia," Syar S. Alia | Writing | Editing | Arts Administration, last modified January 1, 2016, <http://syarsalia.com/katakatha-southeast-asian-conversations-on-culture-and-the-arts>.

Literature Review

This dissertation locates the subjectivity of a Malaysian in the context of the political development and art narrative of Malaysia. These two contexts are interrelated as national legislation has a direct correlation to the art and cultural policies. These policies heavily influence the writing of Malaysian art history and define the role of art institutions in Malaysia. I argue, that this correlation is premised on the obligatory use of art for nation-building, in particular for the advocacy of cultural practice based on a particular race as a significant trope for reinforcing the Malay identity in the production of personal, multicultural and national identities. With the introduction of economic policies that favor technological development in the nineties, such reinforcement of cultural policies based on racial politics was greatly challenged by the spread of information and telecommunication technologies. This brought significant transformations in the way Malaysians interact with one another, as well as with other global communities. This thesis is premised on new media art practice that critically examines and reflects upon such transformations in the formation of Malaysian subjectivity. The literature review gives an overview of the contextual background for such art practice which renders such racial politics unsustainable in the realm of new media.

Malaysia has always been a land occupied by foreign bodies. In fact, this is reflected in the uncertainty of the Malay origin, as many theories have been proposed regarding the migration of Malays to the peninsula of Malaya. Academicians such as Peter S. Bellwood (Bellwood 1995), Geoffrey Benjamin and Cynthia Gek Hua Chou (Bejamin 2002) argue for the migration theory in which they propose that Malays originally moved here from elsewhere. Bellwood, in particular, argues for the theory of 'out of Taiwan' in which he draws from the concept of Austronesian to trace the origins of Malays through language originating from Taiwan. Meanwhile, Mohamed Anwar Omar Din (Omar 2011) argues that Malay is a race conceived in the 18th century by the expansion of the Malay identity with the end of the rule by the Sultans as Peninsula Malaya, which was occupied by colonial Britain. He proposes that Malay is a form of identification initially meant to differentiate the Sultans and their subjects. Such a strict application of identity was disrupted with the arrival of the British who demanded for the locals to fortify their sovereignty through an affinity with the Sultans.

This was even acknowledged by the British through the naming of the peninsula as *Tanah Melayu*, or Malay Land (Fernandez 1999), thus favoring the Malay as the natives of the land (Palmer 1957). In this way, the British occupation reinforced the Malay racial identity. Fernandez further explains that the common early history written by the British regarding the Malays became foundational texts for the understanding and claim of Malay civilization in the region. However, such a claim of artificiality regarding the origin and racial authenticity of the Malay is also greatly challenged. In the journal essay titled '*Legitimacy of the Malays as the Sons of Soil*', Anwar and the rest of the authors (Anwar 2012) dispute all the claims regarding the inaccuracy of Malay origin to reinstate the place of Malay as the natives of Peninsula Malaya. The important point to highlight here is that Malay racial identity is always precarious and disputed (Milner 2008), and yet it is highly politicized to mobilize the Malay community in the peninsula (Frisk 2011).

According to Carolyn V. Prorok (Prorok 2015), such politicization of racial identity was crucially important during the decolonization and creation of the independent, modern nation-state of Malaysia. This is because the struggle for independence was instigated by the introduction of the Malayan Union proposal after the Second World War to rebuild Malaya from the economic damage caused by the war (Alexander 2006). The proposal faced huge objections from the Malay community based on two factors: The diminishing of the Malay sultans' sovereignty and the granting of citizenship to all residents of Malaya, regardless of their status as immigrants (Verma 2004). The reason for the proposal was to resume control over resources by recovering social order as the war left deep-seated hostilities between the Malay and Chinese that was caused by the Japanese occupation (Kheng 2002). The Malayan Union was an effort by the British to establish a common Malayan identity for different racial groups (Tong 2010). This generated intense nationalism among the Malays to oppose the proposal and subsequently led to the formation of the United Malay National Organization (UNMO) with the main aim of preserving the position of the sultans and mobilizing the Malays to oppose the Malayan Union (Lau 1990). It was this formation of a Malay nationalism that propelled the struggle for the independence of Malaya.

Malaysia gained independence from the British in 1957 through an election won by the Alliance coalition. The coalition that was mandated to govern the newly-born nation consisted of three race-based parties, namely the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and Malayan Indian Congress (MIC).

These parties came together through a prior agreement between them that states “the non-Malay parties accept Malay political hegemony in exchange for citizenship rights” (Kheng 1999). This was the foundation for the Malay dominance in the politics of Malaysia and the implementation of policies that are pro-Malay such as *Bumiputra* rights – a ‘special position’ of the Malays under the constitution of Malaysia. With such an outcome, the inter-racial tension, especially between the largest racial minority groups – the Chinese and the Malays were neither addressed nor rectified.

During the 1969 general election, the Chinese expressed their political frustrations by supporting non-Malay parties which had campaigned against such pro-Malay policies. The ruling Alliance returned to power but with a reduced majority. The celebration of this reduced majority with provocative slogans such as ‘Malays may return to their Villages’ and ‘Kuala Lumpur now belongs to the Chinese’ (Teik 1971) stirred anger among the Malays leading them to engage in riot and violence. While it is argued by Alex Lee (Lee 1971) that the cause for such a reaction from the Malays was due to economic and educational disadvantage, Shamsul A.B. (A.B.1995) draws a parallel between the 1969 racial riots and the racial clash in 1946 during a brief interval after the Japanese surrendered and the return of the British to Malaya. This parallel between 1946 and 1969 incidents expose the unresolved racial tension left by the British upon their exit from Malaya.

The outcome of the riots on 13 May 1969 was the implementation of policies specifically catered for the needs of modernizing and aiding the Malays. Crucially, it provided the state with the opportunity to move more aggressively for the hegemony of the Malay politics through the ideology of the Malay special rights as *Bumiputra* (Mariappan 2002). Two years after the racial riots, in 1971, the National Cultural Policy (NCP) was introduced to regulate the multiculturalism of Malaysia as a solution for the racial riots. The policy’s main aim was to establish a national culture and common identity based on the Malay culture. However, such a move tends to be essentialist in its approach and in conflicts with the diversity of Malaysian society (Hilley 2001). A year later, in 1972, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was implemented to actively increase the share of Malay ownership in the economic sector while concurrently transforming the rural Malay into a modern, cosmopolitan subject (Mutalib 1990, Kheng 2002). All these policies resulted in the transformation of the Malays from rural settlers to urban middle-class residents. In

terms of the arts, many Malay artists were sent overseas to be formally trained and returned to promote the Malay culture through modern art adhering to the policy promoted by the state. This expression of the Malay identity and culture through art witnessed its heights in the eighties, especially with the proliferation of the Malay culture through tourism, arts and crafts, museums, performances, films and many other cultural activities (Gomes 1999).

The nineties saw some alterations to these policies. Francis Loh Koh interprets these changes as “cultural liberalization, the withdrawal from public debates of ‘sensitive’ issues, and the privatization of ethnicity...to be located in (the) context of economic liberalization, rapid growth and the replacement of the NEP with the NDP (National Development Policy)” (Koh 2002). The major difference between the NEP and NDP is the decline of the public sector, which was replaced by an emphasis on privatization for the redistribution of wealth among Malaysians. In-wŏn Hwang argues that such a transformation is merely a reintroduction of *Rukun Negara*, or National ideology and the NEP that was introduced earlier (Hwang 2003). However, with the introduction of NDP, the ex-prime minister of Malaysia Dr. Mahathir Mohamad articulated ‘Vision 2020’ in which he introduced the idea ‘Bangsa Malaysia’. While ‘Vision 2020’ is an ambitious plan to transform Malaysia into a technologically and scientifically proficient country to attain the status of first world nation; this was followed by another aim of ‘Bangsa Malaysia’ in shaping a multiracial nation attaining excellence in terms of culture and morals (Goh 2002). Such policies brought cultural and economic liberalization along with large-scale infrastructure transformation for national development based on information and telecommunications technology (ICT) (Griffiths and Chinnsamy 2013).

Art in Malaysia operates within this political context of Malaysia. Chuah and Ahmad argue that art in Malaysia needs to be thought of differently to the West due to the late arrival of modernity and the irrelevance of Western art narrative in the context of the region. They state that art in Malaysia is ‘submerged by political and economic priorities’ (Chuah and Ahmad, 2010). The political development of Malaysia is entrenched with issues of discerning the ‘other’ from the *bumiputras*, in the same manner, the history of modern art in Malaysia is enmeshed with the presence of other in the narratives. Claims of many early painters and artists were always framed within the context of racial identity such as Chinese or Malay to lay claim as the pioneer of modern art in Malaysia. Sarena

Abdullah for example, states that there is a lack of a particular Malaysian identity in art due to pluralism inherent in the society from the early years of independence (Abdullah 2010). She even asserts that early artworks were driven by racial interest. As stated in the introduction, seminal essays from writers such as Syed Ahmad Jamal, T.K. Sabapathy, Redza Piyadasa, Krishen Jit, Sulaiman Esa and Zainol Abidin Ahmad Sharif usually take a critical stance against western aesthetics. However, in doing so, they place art within the context of the political, social and cultural history of nationalism, centered particularly on racial and religious credentials.

But there are some critical negations against such framing of discourse in art. ‘Some misconception in Art writing in Malaysia’ by Jolly Koh (Koh 2006) refutes abstract expressionism by questioning the basis for the claim of originality in Malaysian modern art. As nineties ushered in policies to transform the nation into a technologically advanced and industrialized first-world nation, the penetration of ICT into cultural practice creates what Hasnul calls ‘pulp-modern, a self-inflicted implosion in its obsession to destruct every trace of claimed authorities’ (Hasnul 2005). I argue this is a consequence of the racially-bound policies that were enforced prior to the cultural liberalization that came through the introduction of ICT to Malaysian society.

This destructive infliction was reflected by writers and practitioners such as Ooi Kok Chen, Michelle Antoinette, Ismail Zain, Niranjan Rajah, Hasnul Jamal Saidon, Wong Hoy Cheong and Ray Langenbach. Hasnul Jamal Saidon’s “Dah nasib Badan! Menghadirkan diri dalam era Electronic dan Siber” (It’s the fate of the Body! To be present in the era of electronic and cyber) (Hasnul 2000) and Niranjan Rajah’s “Nation, national culture and art in an era of globalization and computer-mediated technology” (Rajah 2000) acutely describe the transformation that was occurring during the nineties. Malaysian art from the nineties onwards has always been in a state of flux with the urgency to address, respond, contextualize, understand, articulate and pro-actively react to the imperatives of profound changes brought about by information technology, according to local and regional cultural terms (Antoinette 2003).

The artists examined in this thesis operate within this context. Ismail Zain was born on 6th May 1930 in Alor Setar, Kedah, a northern state in Malaysia. He gained his early education to qualify as a teacher at the Malayan Teachers’ Training College, Kirby, England. Upon completing his teacher’s training in the arts, he returned to Malaysia and

worked for a year as an educator before returning to England to further his studies. From 1961 to 1966 he went from Ravensbourne College of Arts to Slade School of Fine Arts. During this time, he improved on his art practice as he was exposed to Western art history and theory. Upon returning to Malaysia in 1966 he briefly worked as a lecturer before taking up a role as an Inspector of Schools with the Ministry of Education. Crucially from 1972 to 1975, he became Director of the National Art Gallery of Malaysia.

This was the time when NCP and NEP were introduced. At that time, the National Art Gallery was the one and only official institution assigned to implement policies related to art and culture. Zain then went on to become Director of Culture at the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports in 1975 and finally retired in 1985 after serving as Director-General for the National Film Development Corporation (FINAS) from 1982 onwards. Zain was directly involved in the shaping and implementation of cultural policies during crucial moments in the history of Malaysia. As such his practice reflects the breadth of knowledge and experience that he had gained over these transformative years. He passed away in 1991 just when vision 2020 was being introduced by Dr. Mahathir Mohamad.

Meanwhile, Hasnul Jamal Saidon was born in Teluk Intan, Perak in 1965 and received his initial diploma in painting from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) from 1984 until 1988. UiTM is a higher education institution upgraded from a training center in 1967 to train and create professional bumiputras. This is one of the key educational bodies aimed at transforming the Malay community as it only admits bumiputra student. Hasnul is a product of the NCP and NEP as the social engineering that came about after the 1969 riot came into full force during his studies in the eighties. During his time in the university, he was exposed to Ismail Zain when he was a visiting lecturer for one of Hasnul's subjects. Upon completing his studies, Hasnul joined Centerstage Performing Arts for a year before pursuing his studies in the United States in 1990. His undergraduate studies at Southern Illinois University (SIU) and Masters of Fine Arts in electronic art from Rensselaer Polytechnics Institute (RPI) saw him spending three years in the United States.

During his time in the US, he moved from painting to new media art practice as is evident in his selection for postgraduate studies which focused on technology-based art. By the time of his return in 1993, Malaysia was in the midst of a radical transformation geared towards becoming a knowledge-based economy. The basis for such an ambition is driven by the importation of ICT infrastructure in the administration and social development of

the nation. Upon returning he was well equipped with the necessary knowledge to examine such a transformation through art practice and his practice was aligned with the national agenda to promote technology-based cultural practices. Initially working as a lecturer with UiTM in 1993, he then moved to University Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) to become the Head of the Fine Arts department from 1994 to 2000. He met Niranjan Rajah during his time in UNIMAS. In 2000 he joined the Center for Advanced Design (CENFAD) for a year before moving to Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in 2001. Currently, he is serving as Associate Professor of New Media in the School of Arts at USM.

Niranjan Rajah was born in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, in 1961. Initially, his grandfather came to work and live in the then British Malaya in 1905. His father Deva Rajah was born in Seremban, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia in 1928 and left for Jaffna when he was seven years old. He grew up and married in Jaffna before returning to Malaysia in 1963 with two kids – Niranjan Rajah and his sister Shyamala. This transitory background of his early childhood, as well as his family history with strong ties to Malaysia, greatly influenced his fidelity towards Malaysia. While his early schooling years were spent in St. John primary and secondary school in Bukit Nanas, Kuala Lumpur, at the age of 17 he left to further his studies in the United Kingdom (UK). Initially, he studied Economics and Law at the University of Westminster while practicing art in London. Later he pursued his passion for art by joining Goldsmiths College and completing his MA in Fine Arts in the year 1993. His return to Malaysia was ushered by a teaching job at UNIMAS in 1995. It was during this time that Niranjan first met Hasnul. Although his art practice was focused on painting and conceptual art, he was later introduced to new media by Hasnul.

During their time together in UNIMAS, they achieved many milestones in establishing the practice of new media art within the official narrative of Malaysian art history. I argue that this was partially helped by the national agenda geared towards ICT and its utilization to leapfrog the nation towards becoming a fully industrialized nation by 2020. Some of the crucial landmarks of their collaboration is the conception and presentation of the first electronic art show in 1997 at the National Art Gallery of Malaysia which laid the theoretical foundation for future new media artists. Their online project initiatives such as E-Art ASEAN which served as an online platform for the exchange of information, ideas, and discussion among new media art practices in the ASEAN region. Crucially this

platform serves as evidence of a parallel development to what was happening in the West such as the founding of Rhizome.org and the Eyebeam Art and Technology Center in New York. They also contributed to the establishment of the electronic arts program in UNIMAS. Nirranjan, also arguably the first internet artist in the region, created and presented online during the early years of the mass proliferation of the internet. During the nineties, he was also a board member in various national and international organizations on art, science, and cultural research. Nirranjan left for Vancouver, Canada in 2002 and is currently serving as Assistant Professor at the School of Interactive Arts and Technology, Simon Fraser University, Surrey, Canada (SIAT).

Question ONE: What is a Malaysian?

Introduction

“To be a Malaysian is to be no less a Malay, a Chinese, an Indian, a Kadazan, a Murut, a Dayak, an Iban, and so on...”¹

It has almost been seven years since I moved out of Malaysia. I have had the opportunity to understand the existence and function of other nation-states (in particular the United States and United Kingdom) that made me realize the “existence” of Malaysia.² Modernizing states, as observed by Ernest Gellner, require building of nations.³ Therefore, being a citizen of Malaysia, I carry the red passport with the official emblem of the Malaysian nation-state in it. My name, date of birth and nationality is clearly printed, alongside my race as “Indian”. These aspects are what I believe build my national identity.

I was never able to understand the association of race with my nationality and this vivid association puzzled me, leaving me with unsettled reckoning, and an irritation with being Malaysian. Perhaps it is because I am made painfully aware of my race whenever somebody asks me which country I belong to. I avoid the question for as long as I can, instead asking the person to guess my nationality. This then prompts the person to list every country from the South Asian region (based on my appearance), all of which I

¹ This enticing philosophical formulation of being Malaysian was formulated by former Penang Chief Minister, Lim Chong Eu during a meeting at Cultural Congress, Chinese Town Hall, Penang on 27th March 1983. Lim Choon Sooi, *Towards the Future: Selected Speech and Statements of Lim Chong Eu 1970-1989* (Penang: Oon Chin Seang, 1990), pg.122.

² Here I am implying that Malaysia is a modern nation-state which practices democracy. This does not mean that I am unaware of my identity as a Malaysian but instead I am admitting my ignorance of knowing Malaysia (and as a Malaysian) as a political entity, a construct that is necessary for the formation of any national identity.

³ Ernest Gellner in his book *Nation and Nationalism* argues that nationalism arises as a response to uprooting modernization that undermines traditional systems. Nationalism’s mission is to dispense new forms of loyalty and identification with the nation-state. Hence, nationalism is a political response to a functional imperative: territorial and social mobility make necessary the construction of a collective identity that operates to uproot the individual as an anchor and steering compass for new territorial associations. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism, 2nd Ed* (Cornell University Press, 2008), pg.74.

would patiently deny. I shrug sheepishly since they have always failed to identify me as a Malaysian, and on top of that when I finally reveal my nationality, the immediate reaction is that I do not look like a Malaysian. This leaves me feeling deeply anxious – how should a Malaysian look like? Who is a Malaysian?

While the question of who is a Malaysian is an on-going debate in the Malaysian political and socio-cultural scene,⁴ it must be noted that these debates in contemporary Malaysian politics reflect distinct and historically contingent factors that have shaped its curious development.⁵ Here I must point out that my attempt to plot “who” is a Malaysian is a futile attempt. To start off, I must acknowledge that my comparison with other nation-states (especially these so-called developed nations of the West) has made me realize the fallacy in my very own point of examination by asking: “How should a Malaysian look?” This is perhaps due to the perceived success of Western nation-states in integrating diverse peoples and fostering cultural and material development. The linguistically and culturally homogenous nation-states of the advanced West are often portrayed as examples, which the newer nation-states must aspire towards, and with which they are compared to and judged.⁶

To avoid such patronizing comparisons, I believe the question should be asking “what”, instead of “who”, is a Malaysian. In this chapter, I am **not** attempting to seek out and clarify the identity of a Malaysian in terms of racial politics which conform to smooth and cohesive nation-building dreams and ideologies. Rather, my aim is to examine various meanings of “Malaysian” by dismantling the race index and showing what this index does to the formation of a Malaysian subject. In a rather paradoxical point of departure, I propose that the exploration of “what” constitutes a Malaysian is only possible through the careful dismantling as well as intact functioning of the race marker.

⁴ A prominent example includes debate on the concept of 1MALAYSIA promoted by the nation-state in various media, see "Forum: Mass Media Media Towards 1Malaysia," South-South Information Gateway, last modified September 28, 2010, <http://www.ssig.gov.my/blog/2010/09/28/forum-mass-media-media-towards-1malaysia/>.

⁵ Following Jomo’s argument: “However, the democratic agenda for any particular society cannot be pre-determined a priori. Rather, it should take into account the society’s history, culture and other specific conditions in order to be relevant and feasible.” Jomo Kwame Sundaram, *Deepening Malaysian Democracy With More Checks and Balance: Malaysia Critical Perspectives* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan: Malaysian Social Science Association, 1996), pg.74.

⁶ See Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

I admit that at the core of being Malaysian is the marking of race, or specifically the indexing of the Malay race;⁷ to differentiate the Malay from the others (including immigrants).⁸ In discussing what it means to be Malaysian, the distinction between the Malay and non-Malay races figure prominently and is a crucial configuration for the foundation of Malaysian politics. The persistence of Malay/non-Malay indexing extends beyond politics and popular imagination into academia, where it flourishes across diverse fields. In studies on culture and society in Malaysia, for instance, such markings are not always consistently treated as a discursive category. Even when they speak from a multicultural, postcolonial or postmodern viewpoint, and even as they succeed in shedding light on certain social aspects of Malaysia, they often unintentionally end up reproducing the very essentialist belief about these markings - to be more precise, race that they seek to undercut.⁹ I see this problem persisting unevenly in all major domains in which scholars of Malaysian Studies produce knowledge.

The operation of race in defining a Malay

Race, as clearly pointed out by Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, is a physiognomic marker, which defines the so-called 'racial' traits, which supposedly reveal the inner life of the population and/or individual members within it. Race designates populations and their

⁷ By this I do not mean Malaysia practices an "apartheid" sort of politics, but instead it strives to place the Malay as an identity of Malaysia's modernity, as explained by Muhammad Ikmal Said: "Unlike western nationalism, Malay nationalism does not attempt to carve out a politically autonomous area for itself. Rather, it is a project that seeks to build a Malay political roof over the structures of the modern state." Muhammad Ikmal Said and Zahid Emby, *Malaysia, critical perspectives: essays in honour of Syed Husin Ali* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan: Malaysian Social Science Association, 1996), pg.38.

⁸ By immigrants, I am referring to the colonial order of things that was established based on racial classification for governmental purposes in the flux of mass migration that was perpetuated by labor demands. This is when the hardening of racial identity such as Indian, Chinese and Malay occurred. Charles Hirschman, "The making of race in colonial Malaya: Political economy and racial ideology," *Social Forum* 1, no. 2 (1986): pg.356.

⁹ I am referring to Joel Kahn's opinion when he expresses: "a certain skepticism towards the cultural essentialism that appears to lie behind both traditional approaches to the phenomenon of ethnicity, nationalism and the like, and the claims of those players on the stage of cultural politics who 'speak for' one or another cultural group, however defined." Joel S Kahn, *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), pg.15.

individual members as superior or inferior in terms of reason, culture and civilization.¹⁰

Talking of race, Eze explains:

“The rise of Enlightenment race speech is an expansive transition from the racialization of the West to a racialization of the world. This progression represents a transition from, relatively local “racial” conflicts within Europe to the European replication and intensification of the adaptive practices of racialism in other parts of the world to which Europeans ventured...later world manifestations of race were more cosmic, as “racial” conflicts structured and governed the very idea of secular history and universal progress. Whereas in earlier cases of race conflicts, European monarchies and royal families struggled to impose themselves on European populations through assertions of pedigrees and “purity of blood”, in the global cases of race conflict, similar reasons and processes were produced, but this time in the name of “civilization” and “whiteness” of Europeans.”¹¹

This unravelling of race is perhaps best played out in the Malaysian context with the sharp and overtly used rhetoric of conserving and helping the Malay race. It is crucial to unravel the functioning of this physiognomic marker and its fusion with nation-building efforts that would lead to the uncovering of a Malaysian subject. It must be obvious by now that the frame of reference “Malaysian” is somewhat problematic, precisely because it is bound by the rationality of a plural society with distinguishable, albeit artificial race distinctions such as Malay/non-Malay that co-exist in a single national space, within the nation-state of Malaysia. This reaffirms the Malaysian self-conception (as defined by nation-state) and its source to locate the so-called Malay race in the twisted inter-racial relations.

The primary focus of modern philosophy is to study “man” or humankind. As Eze claims, this need to understand humankind led to the development of anthropology. As anthropology matured into a separate field of study, it started categorizing varieties of humankind, especially as the non-European encounters occurred. This categorization process which stemmed from its philosophical mission led to the function and definition of race. One crucial aspect of this functioning of race is its physiognomic marker. At the root of anthropology’s inception is the marking of a “physical” anchor. This physical anchor, or the “body” in my formulation, is treated as the core component which differentiates one race from another. In the Malaysian context, such markings are crucial

¹⁰ Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, *Achieving Our Humanity: The Idea of a Postracial Future* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pg.10-12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pg.33.

to the conception of nationhood.¹² Originating as a British colonial invention, the very essentialist idea of a Malay race led to the formation of a Malaysian Federation.¹³ Quoting Frank Swettenham's description of a Malay:

*"The real Malay is short, thick-set, well-built man, with straight black hair, a dark brown complexion, thick nose and lips, and bright intelligent eyes. His disposition is generally kindly, his manners are polite and easy...In his youth, the Malay boy is often beautiful, a thing of wonderful eyes, eyelashes, and eyebrows, with a far-away expression of sadness and solemnity, as though he had left some better place for a compulsory exile on earth. Those eyes, which are extraordinarily large and clear, seem filled with a pained wonder at all they see here, and they give the impression of a constant effort to open ever wider and wider in search of something they never find. The Malay girl-child is not usually so attractive in appearance as the boy...When fifteen or sixteen, she is often almost interesting; very shy, very fond of pretty clothes and ornaments, not uncommonly much fairer in complexion than the Malay man, with small hands and feet, a happy smiling face, good teeth, and wonderful eyes and eyebrows-the eyes of the little Malay boy. The Malay girl is proud of her wealth of straight, black hair, of a spotless olive complexion, of arch of her brow...of the curl of her eyelashes, and of the dimples in cheek or chin."*¹⁴

The above description adequately depicts how the anthropological method was applied in categorizing peoples of the colonial empire. In fact, nothing better demonstrates this categorization than the label "Indian" in my identity card.¹⁵ This method is official, as all Malaysians (must) carry his or her identity card in order to distinguish (or associate) oneself with the Malay.¹⁶

¹² Simon Smith explains the upholding of the Malay race by means of Malay ascendancy such as the Raja remaining sovereign for the shaping of nationalism even after the independence of Malaya. Simon C. Smith, "'Moving a little with the tide': Malay monarchy and the development of modern Malay nationalism," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 34, no. 1 (2006): pg.34.

¹³ As stated by Wan Hashim: "It was the colonial policy that created the problems of communalism, tension and racial conflict in Malaysia today." Wan Hashim Haji Teh, *Race Relations in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia), 1983), pg.3.

¹⁴ Frank Athelstane Swettenham, *Malay Sketches* (London: John Lane, 1895), pg.5.

¹⁵ By this, I am making reference to Hope Lewis's argument where he states "race and racism are also linked to the dimensions of economic, social, and cultural rights, and the right to sustainable human development." and by this, I am saying that race is part and parcel of modern society. Hope Lewis, "Transnational Dimension of Race in America," *Albany Law Review* 72, no. 4 (January 2010): pg.999.

¹⁶ The identity card indicates the race categorisation of a person by stating his/her race index such as Chinese, Indian or Malay. I argue that this official marking does not only mark the race, but it also allows for the segregation between the Malay and non-Malay.

The Malay 'Doing'

The pursuit to examine “what” is a Malaysian must start with unravelling what “Malay” means. The goal here is not to describe, or reproach the Malay in terms of the dominant system of categorization and re-establish its role as a key ingredient for Malaysia, but rather to engage the Malay by exploring what it does through this process of physiognomic marking. In order to truly engage with the Malay, the marking of the body as fixed by race must first be displaced in order to participate in a revolutionary body shaped by the Malay itself. Specifically, I want to explore the friction caused by the formalities of race discourse in its attempt to link nationality with Malay political solidarity. This link is inherently conflicted because race, being part of a very hegemonic system excludes the attributes of the Malay body which it seeks to identify and engage with.

In fact, the realization and utilization of the “language of race” became prevalent only with the coming of colonial power, as shown by the bewildering diversity of accounts and contradictions in tracing “Malay” prior to its coming. There are many versions of history and facts, all of which are biased towards the various assumptions of the researcher trying to authenticate the origin of a Malay race.¹⁷ Antony Milner in his book about Malays expresses this concern vividly:

“Just who is ‘Malay’ and what it is to be ‘Malay’ remain open questions, and an attempt to establish a narrative over time for the ‘Malay people’ would confront profound disjuncture. Which of the many constituent ‘Malays’ should be given prominence, how do we disentangle one narrative from another, how can we convey lines of continuity where there appears only ruptures? But while such concerns frustrate the task of giving an account of the ‘Malays’, it is this diversity and contention that makes ‘Malay studies’ so interesting, and ought properly to be our central concern.”¹⁸

These contradictions and ruptures belong to an unavoidable terrain which one must navigate while studying the Malays. However, it is inappropriate to attribute the

¹⁷ See Shamsul A.B., "A History of an Identity, an Identity of a History: The Idea and Practice of 'Malayness' in Malaysia Reconsidered," in *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity Across Boundaries*, ed. Timothy P Barnard (Singapore: Singapore University Press, National University of Singapore, 2004), pg.148.

¹⁸ Anthony Crothers Milner, *The Malays* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell Pub, 2008), pg.16.

contradictions to a lack of historical or official evidence. The ruptures lie not only in its geographical matrix (the scope of people being studied span the entire Nusantara region),¹⁹ but also in religious and linguistic divisions enhanced by differences in the customs and ways of life. But this is not the end of the crisis - as the “recognition” of cleavage and rupture in defining the “Malay” reveals the very blanket use of the term to simply cluster people.²⁰ This is prevalent in scholarly debate, in which the very definition of “Malay” changes from one scholar to another, simultaneously negating any consensus in specifying what exactly a Malay is.

At this juncture, unravelling the Malay isn’t merely challenging the basis for formal or official race identification. More importantly, it poses a fundamental question of epistemology. The very tool of articulation that allows for the enlargement and reduction of the category “Malay” disrupts the very attempt to anchor the “Malay” body. In other words, given that the language of race articulates “Malay” in its various guises, in terms of cultural and geographic roots that came dispersed from elsewhere (can be anywhere), it is precisely this attempt at a “blanket” definition of Malay that becomes the source for its ‘doing’. Johann Friedric Blumenbach describes the Malay as such:

“Tawny-coloured; hair black, soft, curly, thick and plentiful; head moderately narrowed; forehead slightly swelling; nose full, rather wide, as it were diffuse, end thick; mouth large, upper jaw somewhat prominent with the parts of the face when seen in profile, sufficiently prominent and distinct from each other. This last variety includes the islanders of the Pacific Ocean, together with the inhabitants of the Marianne, the Philippine, the Molucca and the Sunda Islands, and of the Malayan peninsula. I wish to call it the Malay, because the majority of the men of this variety, especially those who inhabit the Indian islands close to the Malacca peninsula, as well as the Sandwich, the Society, and the Friendly Islanders, and also the Malambi of Madagascar down to the inhabitants of Easter Island, use the Malay idiom.”²¹

Being credited as one of the early anthropologists to conceptualize the Malay race, Blumenbach’s index is all-inclusive in using the term “Malay”, while (unknowingly)

¹⁹ I am referring to the modern use of the term, especially in the Malaysian context whereby it covers the region called Malay Archipelago that span Southeast Asia and Australia. Alfred Russel Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago, The Land of the Orang-Utan and the Bird of Paradise; a Narrative of Travel, with Studies of Man and Nature* (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), pg.1.

²⁰ See Tom Harrison, "The Malays of south-west Sarawak before Malaysia: a socio-ecological Survey," *Modern Asian Studies* 7, no. 02 (1970): pg.27.

²¹ Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, "On the Natural Variety of Mankind," in *The Idea of Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Tommy Lee Lott (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 2000), pg.29.

embedding the epistemological instability of the race marker within itself. The loose and broad use of the term Malay to mark and identify the body in accordance with the ambitions of anthropology with the aid of a philosophical critique, constrains the ability of the marking to weld with the body. Indeed, the term Malay remains evasive and open to varying interpretations, despite efforts to contain it within distinct boundaries.

Anthropology is characterized by its obsession with knowledge and its anxiety about the loss of reliable epistemological coordinates.²² As such, the central (and often futile) quest of anthropology represents an attempt to penetrate the unknown and return to a world of certainty and stability. This quest of returning is what I perceive as the ‘doing’ of the Malay. If I were to speak in racial terms, the Malay is the ‘doing’ – the movement between the unfamiliar (body) and the solidity of the seemingly firm epistemological underpinning (race). This ‘doing’ represents an obstacle for epistemological certainty, - not in the way that Malay is race and body simultaneously,²³ but instead in its ability to move between these two polarizations that should have been resolved by the very use of the “language of race”.

There have been many attempts to refine this epistemological uncertainty in defining a Malay. For example, N. B. Dennys explains in his descriptive dictionary of British Malaya:

“A brown-complexioned race, with lank hair, speaking the Malay language, is found in greater or lesser number all over the Archipelago, from Sumatra to New Guinea, and from Peninsula to Timor. It is, however only in Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula and islands adjacent to its coast, and in Borneo that they exist in large numbers, and have a distinct independent nationality, for everywhere else they are found only as settlers or sojourners among indigenous population. With the exception of a few wandering negritos, they form the entire population of the Malay Peninsula and its adjacent islands, and their number here has estimated at about of a million. In this number, however, is no doubt included many not of the original Malay stock, but who, adopting their language, manners and religion, came, in process of time, not to be distinguishable.”²⁴

²² Guy Hunter, *South-East Asia--Race, Culture and Nation* (London: published for the Institute of Race Relations [by] Oxford U.P., 1966), pg.66.

²³ Various scholars have discussed this in terms of identity switching, swapping, oscillation, inter-change and so forth in the Malaysian context. Mohd. Aris Hj. Othman, *The Dynamics of Malay Identity* (Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1983), pg.12.

²⁴ Nicholas Belfield Dennys, *A Descriptive Dictionary of British Malaya* (London: 'London and China Telegraph' Office, 1894), pg.216.

The glitch in physiognomic marking was realized early on by the colonial rulers, as a more concrete base was urgently needed to stabilize the definition of Malay.²⁵ Demonstrated by Dennys through his writing, the anchor was placed on language, manners and religion, all of which became a pathway for consolidating what it means to be Malay. In contemporary terms, this apparatus is translated as *bahasa*, *raja* and *agama* (language, royalty and religion). These three apparatus are actively referred to as pillars in contemporary studies to prove the legitimacy of the Malay's origin.

Whatever the strategy, the conception of Malay as expressed in cultural terms contributes to a specific kind of categorization built around the logic of interiority and exteriority. The rhetoric of inclusion is highly operative in this particular description as the physical attribute comes with cultural anecdotes such as customs, language and ways of life to stabilize the term "Malay". It also indicates the mutation of the race marker, whereby the physical is stretched to include cultural factors in categorizing people with the hope of achieving epistemological certainty. Antony Reid in his influential studies on Malay elaborates on the confusion of exterior and interior when he explains that the ability of the Malay to assimilate people from diverse origins by adapting various beliefs and cultures into its own allowed for the instability of the Malay, or what I define as its body.²⁶ I argue that this ability to remain unfamiliar (by the assimilation of various bodies) is what makes the (Malay) body, concurrently enabling the Malay 'doing' possible. The function or meaning of body no longer depends on an interior truth or an exterior appearance, but on the particular assemblages it forms with other bodies.²⁷ It is crucial to vindicate the functioning of the Malay body so that we could acknowledge the Malay, or specifically, its doing.

²⁵ During the colonial period, the urgency for classification was mainly to achieve political stability for economic reasons. J. S Furnivall, *Progress and Welfare in Southeast Asia: A Comparison of Colonial Policy and Practice* (New York: Secretariat, Institute of Pacific relations, 1941), pg.33.

²⁶ Antony Reid, "Understanding Melayu (Malay) as a source of Diverse Modern Identities," in *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity Across Boundaries*, ed. Timothy P Barnard (Singapore: Singapore University Press, National University of Singapore, 2004), pg.7.

²⁷ I am thinking about the concepts of a book as an assemblage introduced by Deleuze and Guattari. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pg.11.

The Malaysian ‘Doing’

What do all these mean in terms of being Malaysian? This is the most important question that this chapter attempts to address. To answer this, the argument must move from a colonial entanglement to the post-colonial conditions of the current moment. As explained earlier, the objective is to explore “what” rather than “who” is Malaysian, - to move from knowing (identity) to doing (ability). Since so far, the chapter has explored how the (Malay) body works and how it enables the performance of the Malay, with careful manoeuvre through the conception of “Malay” by the nation-state, I hope to begin mapping out the ‘doing’ of Malaysian as an experience by any Malaysian subject (and this includes Malays as well). By adapting the work of Deleuze and Guattari on machinic assemblage, I attempt to discover what it means to be Malaysian – to think beyond the mere racial body (to understand the doing of Malay in the enabling of Malaysian). The work of Deleuze and Guattari is perhaps the best tool for research as it is practically a language-machine which can help in articulating the concept of a Malaysian.

Quoting from *A Thousand Plateaus*:

*“As an assemblage, a book has only itself, in connection with other assemblages and in relation to other bodies without organs. We will never ask what a book means, as signified or signifier; we will not look for anything to understand in it. We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities, in which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed, and with what bodies without organs it makes its own converge. A book exists only through the outside and on the outside. A book itself is a little machine”*²⁸

This particular concept of the body as a machinic assemblage is useful for the task of rethinking the Malaysian body. It is a concept that unravels the modern fantasy of the body as a stable, unified, bounded entity, and gives a language to the multitude of connections that bodies form with other bodies. By exploring what happens to the subject when the body becomes a multiplicity, the chapter explores how to productively approach Malaysian, and argues for a specific ethical rethinking of the use of the term “Malay”

²⁸ Ibid., pg.4.

according to its 'doing'. This strategy has implications not only for social policy, but also for how Malaysians understand their present and future selves.

First and foremost, in order to conjecture what might be Malaysian, and to form some notion of its doing, I am left with no choice but to operate within the stratified politics of the nation-state as I juxtapose the doing of Malay with the doing of Malaysian. I argue that this is necessary, as it is impossible to trace the Malaysian without the anchor of Malay - the same way the nation-state had to form a tangible base to make immediate sense of the Malaysian ambiguity.²⁹ This base was formed during the independence of Malaya,³⁰ especially with the Malay Nationalist Movement that stopped the Malayan Union³¹ from coming into effect. The story of Malaya's independence is rather unique.

Drawing from the works of Liah Greenfeld, I want to point out the difference between civic nationalism and ethno-nationalism.³² While the former talks about a nation formed around the idea of participation (which means that in principle it is open to any participation towards its formation), the latter is shaped by a specific group of people that supposedly inherit common traits of identity that are neither acquired nor given. Greenfeld sees the concept of nation-developing in terms of a sovereign people. Although this concept is closely tied with the emergence of democracy, she also argues that a unique kind of sovereignty also emerged that formed the nation in its distinctiveness and not its participatory civic character. In the case of Malaysia, this distinctiveness is built on the resentment of the Malay instigated by the idea of civic nationalism introduced by the British through the proposal of a Malayan Union. The reaction towards the Malayan Union that introduced liberal citizenship to everyone residing in Malaya galvanized the ethno-nationalism of the Malay.

²⁹ Quoting from Khoo Boo Teik's book "For most of the period since 1957, when the Federation of Malaya became an independent nation, the question was probably perplexing to its people and the answers unsatisfactory." Boo Teik Khoo, *Beyond Mahathir: Malaysian Politics and Its Discontents* (London: Zed Books, 2003), pg.15.

³⁰ I am using Malaya here because Malaysia was only formulated in 16 September 1963 with the inclusion of Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore. Singapore was later expelled in 1965. Malaya was the term used by colonial ruler to indicate the peninsular before the independence. Zakaria B. Haji Ahmad, *Government and Politics of Malaysia* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1987), pg.7.

³¹ The Malayan Union is famously known for its policy of granting automatic citizenship for any occupants of Malaya - either born or residing in Malaya before 15 February 1942. *Ibid.*, pg.5.

³² Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992), pg.11.

Dissatisfaction, tension and insecurity relating to racial identity in general and Malay identity in particular, played a major role in the progression towards independence. The fear of losing out to others by unjustly stripping Malays of their inherent rights as natives of the land became the catalyst for Malay nationalism. The sense of inferiority of the Malay overwhelms the concept of civic nationalism introduced by the British, interweaving the question of racial esteem with nationalism. In this situation, civic nationalism was hailed as a necessary principal for the coming together of a nation resulting in the self-determination of a particular race stemming from considerable resentment towards others who are abiding within. This is the distinctiveness of Malaysia and accordingly, it is the ethno-nationalism that shaped Malaya's independence. What is important here is the essentialist distinction (between the Malay and non-Malay) which marked the birth of Malaya as a nation. The rules pertaining to the formation of Malaysian are so particular that they may stand out as the most distinctive feature of the Malay, set against the other – the reconfiguring of Malay as race while becoming a 'Malaysian'.

With this in mind, officially the pillars of Malay self-identification are recognized as *bahasa, raja dan agama* or language, the royalty, and religion (Islam).³³ Actively promoted by the state, they form the basis of national culture and the powerful ideology for *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay ascendancy). Here the meaning needs to be inverted to observe these particular apparatuses in relation to the doing of the Malay, instead of using it to freeze and stabilize the Malay itself. When discussing religion, in particular Islam, one should keep in mind that religion is added (along with various other religious doctrines and culture) and does not originate inherently.³⁴

My point here is not to invalidate the importance of Islam or to argue for its dismissal in exploring the Malay. On the contrary, by focusing on its interior, I want to highlight the Malay way of adding and assimilating as opposed to merely replacing.³⁵ This aspect of interiority is what I call Malay subjectivity which is unique to the Malay. All other apparatuses that are now being used to substantiate Malay origin prove this claim, in particular the ability of language (Bahasa Melayu) to undergo phonetic, semantic and

³³ Shamsul A.B., "'Malay' and 'Malayness' in Malaysia Reconsidered: A Critical Review," *Communal/Plural: Journal of Transnational & Crosscultural Studies* 9, no. 1 (April 2001): pg.70.

³⁴ Lily Zubaidah Rahim, "The Road Less Travelled: Islamic Militancy in Southeast Asia," *Critical Asian Studies* 35, no. 2 (June 2003): pg.209.

³⁵ Ibid.

morphological assimilation as it borrows from other languages³⁶ and the Malay customs (*adat*)³⁷ that are arguably vague in contemporary terms.³⁸ All these result in an imprecise episteme that is expressed as “Malay anxiety” about the lack of permanence – a fear sometimes expressed in the saying “Malays shall not perish from this Earth!”³⁹ It should be clear by now that Malay subjectivity abides in its very doing.

On the contrary, in the often volatile racial politics of Malaysia, the Malay subject must necessarily withstand certain demarcations to take on something far beyond what the community would like to achieve for itself.⁴⁰ Such a formation must work out a definite relationship with other subjects (the non-Malays) who as citizens also make their own legitimate claims to rights and resources within the nation. As mentioned earlier, the core problem lies in the bifurcation of civic-nationalism and ethno-nationalism. Antony Reid clarifies this basic structural problem in nation-building in the following excerpt:

“Southeast Asian nationalisms sit interestingly within this dichotomy. Since all the anti-colonial nationalisms espoused a territorial definition of the nation – in every case accepting the arbitrary colonial boundaries rather than some ethno-cultural unit – they must lean towards the civic idea that all within their borders are equally members of the nation...But anti-colonial movements in Southeast Asia tended to gain more popular support in opposing foreign control than in seeking broader democratic rights, and always contained a populist edge that was opposed to the ethnic outsider, whether the target was European, Chinese, Vietnamese (in Cambodia and Laos) or Indian (in Burma).”⁴¹

This of course has been the fundamental contradiction of the Malaysian political order: reconciling the hegemony of a single racial group with the wider demands of the national project. For all its historically compelling arguments, Malay ascendancy cannot but nullify the central ideal of modern nation-states based on the equal distribution of civic

³⁶ Wignesan T, "The extend of the influence of Tamil on Malay language: A comparative study" (Paper presented at 8th World Tamil Studies Congress, Tanjavur, India, January 1995).

³⁷ *Adat* refers to customs and traditions of the Malays, divided into two as general and royal customs that supposedly reflect the worldview by its practice in everyday life. Alwi bin Alhady, *Malay Customs and Traditions* (New York: AMS Press, 1962), pg.3.

³⁸ The debate of defining *Adat*, especially as written in the constitution versus practiced by the Malays is an on-going discussion among scholars in Malaysia. Hj. Othman, *The Dynamics of Malay Identity*, pg.8.

³⁹ In Bahasa Melayu, the saying is “*Takkan Melayu hilang di dunia.*” M. Bakri Musa, *The Malay Dilemma Revisited: Race Dynamics in Modern Malaysia* (Gilroy, CA: Merantau Publishers, 1999), pg.111.

⁴⁰ By this I am implying that the Malay community is somewhat burdened by the ambitions of the nation-state to attain the status as a developed (first world) country. Mahathir Mohamad’s speech at the National Congress on Vision 2020, Kuala Lumpur, 29 April, reprinted as Mahatir bin Mohamad, "Our Vision 2020 Wins Over Nations," *The Star*, April 30, 1997.

⁴¹ Reid, "Understanding Melayu (Malay) as a source of Diverse Modern Identities", pg.3.

rights and obligations among the citizens.⁴² It is in this conflicted interest of the modernization process that I believe the Malaysian body emerged. This body encodes properties of one argument (of race) while participating in the event of (universal) civic liberty transformation. Of course, the argument encoded by this body may bear a variety of thematic roles, depending on the racial marking it bears.⁴³ However, it is always the prominent argument that remains consistent, and the argument is predicated on the subject's race. Indeed, for the Malaysian body, the engagement with capitalist modernity is a complex mixture of rejection, accommodation, and revivalism.

The Malaysian body

For Deleuze and Guattari, the subject is nothing more (and nothing less) than a particular way in which bodies have become organized and stratified in the post-Enlightenment social world. In order to comprehend the 'human' body, the social world reduces the complexity and chaos of an ever-changing multiplicity of bodily flux to discrete categories of meaning and constancy. Bodies become ordered and delimited according to hierarchical binary presuppositions: human/animal, man/woman, healthy/unhealthy, lawful/criminal, hetero/gay, and in the Malaysian case Malay/non-Malay. Binaries that bodies never fully correspond to:

No real body ever entirely coincides with either category. A body only approaches its assigned category as a limit: it becomes more or less "feminine" or more or less "masculine" depending on the degree to which it conforms to the connections and trajectories laid out for it by society... "Man" and "Woman" as such have no reality other than that of logical abstraction.⁴⁴

⁴² By this I am not suggesting that other (Western) nations have in fact reached the ideal of a modern nation-state 'based on equal distribution of civic rights and obligations among the citizens'. Instead, this is measured against a constitutional ideal in the abstract and not in the reality, with the acknowledgement that any abstract ideologies constantly undergo changes.

⁴³ Refer political organization such as Hindraf (for Indians), DAP (for Chinese), Perkasa (for Malays) that contest for political legitimacy for specific racial rights. Daniel P.S. Goh and Philip Holden, "Introduction," in *Race and Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore*, Philip Holden et al. (London: Routledge, 2009), pg.5.

⁴⁴ Brian Massumi, *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari* (Cambridge, Mass [u.a.]: MIT Press, 1992), pg.86.

By identifying “Malaysian body” as a basic strategy to engage its doing, the analysis highlights certain particulars concerning Malaysian topology within the terrain of the nation-state. The key point here is that any citizen abiding within the sovereign state of Malaysia is Malaysian, while race, especially the marking of Malay, is essentially fixed and necessary for being Malaysian.⁴⁵ In Malaysia, therefore, we expect “any” Malay to be Malaysian but not “any” Malaysian to be Malay. For both colonialists and Malay nationalists, the construction of the Malay as “bumiputra” (sons of the soil)⁴⁶ was to enable this peculiarity of insertion and distinction of Malay. It follows that the distinction (of *bumiputra*) invariably entails the othering of the “non-Malay” as the “cause” of Malay deprivation. This othering shapes the contour of the “new” Malay subject and the highly racial nature of its national politics – what I would call “the logical abstraction”.⁴⁷ Most fundamentally, the process has provided the state with the crucial ideology for its complex pro-Malay policy regime, concurrently tying the Malay body fatefully to Islam. This gives the subject its discursive energy and contemporary relevance, for the major ideas of the fate of the Malays – and of Malay nationalism itself – have always depended on the relative position of being Muslim that co-exists within the framework of being Malay. This coupling of Malay with Islam, is clearly described by Miller:

“The emergence of Muslim politics in Malaysia is therefore tied to the issue of Malay nationalism that arose at that [colonial] ⁴⁸ time, and to the deep and indelible connection between Malay identity and Islam. Indeed, Islam, along with Bahasa Melayu (the Malay language), has been called the chief component of Malay identity. The Malay nationalist movement served to move Islamic issues to a central role in Malaysian political life and in 1946 produced a powerful, organized political force that remains a key player in current Malaysian politics.

Islam, as one of the key characteristics of Malay identity, has served as both a mobilizing and polarizing force in Malaysian politics since independence in 1957...The underlying reason for the political emphasis on symbolic actions and gestures over substantive ones can be traced to the pluralistic nature of Malaysian society, which informs the nature of the Constitution and the political party coalition structure in parliament. In a highly pluralistic society like Malaysia, where Islam has played an important role in the state since its inception, symbolism has been an important mechanism for expressing Muslim identity.”⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Refer 1971 Cultural Policy of Malaysia, conceptualized in the aftermath of 13 May 1969 racial riot, Malay culture is made as the core for the Malaysian culture. Mahyuddin Ahmad, "Between desire and hope: ethnic relations and the notion of bangsa Malaysia in Gadoh," *Kajian Malaysia* 29, no. 1 (2011): pg.77.

⁴⁶ For further discussion on *Bumiputra* refer Husin Ali S, *The Malays, Their Problems and Future*, pg.4.

⁴⁷ By logical abstraction, I am referring to the earlier mentioned Brian Massumi’s text. Massumi, *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari*.

⁴⁸ My insertion

⁴⁹ Erica Miller, "The Role of Islam in Malaysian Political Practice," *Al Nakhlah - Online Journal for issues related to Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization*, no. 4 (Fall 2004)

The coupling of Malay-Muslim (body to interiority) is not something new.⁵⁰ However, we must bear in mind that although Malay (as defined by its doing) is not relevant to any representational system (especially to the logical representation of race), it does play a key role in the analysis of the nation-state structure. Malay, as argued earlier, exists in its ability to penetrate the unfamiliar and return to the known.⁵¹ This is made possible only by sustaining the unfamiliarity of the Malay (body).⁵² In the context of a modern nation-state, where race is injected and applied throughout, a rather absurd conflict occurs where the crux of the Malaysian doing abides. In the fight for permanence, the unfamiliarity of the Malay (body) needs to be sustained in order to mark its racial identity. This paradox is overcome by reckoning the unfamiliar as part of the Malay (race) index. This I believe is where the application of *bumiputra* becomes important to uphold the Malay identity. The Malaysian then sustains this epistemological uncertainty that is deemed necessary for the existence of the Malay (body), while not being able to become one. Referring to Husin's articulation of *bumiputra*:

*“The term bumiputra has gained special legal meaning, especially since the formation of Malaysia. Previously the term was generally used in reference to the Malays, to distinguish them from Chinese and Indian immigrants who are not the sons of the soil. Now the term legally includes Malays, as defined by the constitution, the indigenous or bumiputra groups of Sabah and Sarawak, and the aborigines of the Peninsula. Socio-culturally, they and the immigrant groups from various parts of the Archipelago are regarded as belonging to the same Malay stock. But a large number of the indigenous groups in Sabah and Sarawak, like the majority of the aborigines in the Peninsula too, are not Muslims. Many are animists, and there are many more Christians than Muslims among them”*⁵³

Thus, the Malaysian (body) is not merely a formal location for the articulation of race and nationality, but may, where necessary, be associated with a particular function. I argue that in the function articulated by the Malaysian (body) rests the Malaysian doing.

⁵⁰ Historical findings show traces of Islam found in the development of mosque architecture, legal institutions and other means that indicates subtle cultural syntheses in Malay as early as the 14th century. Ismail Serageldin, "Introduction:Regionalism," in *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development & Regional Diversity*, ed. Martin Frishman, Hasan-Uddin Khan, and Mohammad Al-Asad (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), pg.72-76.

⁵¹ It must be noted that my use of “Malay” here presupposes the argument I made earlier in tandem to an anthropological framework which differs from the constitutional definition.

⁵² Here the term Malay (body) is used as suggested by my argument based on the physical attribute that problematizes anthropological definition.

⁵³ Husin Ali S, *The Malays, Their Problems and Future*, pg.5.

Interestingly, the Malaysian (body) encodes uncertainty through an assemblage⁵⁴ as permitted (and necessitated) by the Malay (body). In that sense, I feel privileged to be Malaysian, since it is set apart from the usual epistemological constraints (race and nationality) by actively moving between the Malaysian (body) and the Malay (body) or what I call the “doing of a Malaysian”. Nonetheless, the conception of *bumiputra* implies the uncertainty of Malay body as part of epistemological stability to distinguish the Malay from other races especially for political and economic reasons.⁵⁵

Islamicization of the Malay body

Meanwhile, Malaysia is regarded as a success story by other Muslim nations due to its high rate of economic growth and political stability.⁵⁶ This success owes much to the alignment of Islam with capitalism, strongly influenced by the pragmatic interpretation of Islam that enables the inclusiveness of Islam in economic programs.⁵⁷ According to Khoo Gaik Cheng, such pragmatism makes Islam in Malaysia ‘peripheral’ as compared to being at the centre.⁵⁸ Based on the observation of Lily Zubaidah Rahim of the inadequate Arabic language literacy among Malay-Muslims, Khoo argues that this reflects a sense of disempowerment, or ‘theological insecurity’ that leads to the practice of Islam as merely ritualistic, or for outward appearances. What becomes apparent here is that Khoo’s observation is based on the asymmetry between the subject (interior) and body (exterior) of the Malay. Such an outward practice of Islam was reinforced and regulated with strict adherence during the renewed focus of interest on Islam by the government during the late 1970s and increased to an unprecedented level in the 1980s.

⁵⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Pg.4.

⁵⁵ Rustam makes a point in his research where he explains that Malaysia (as a nation) is far from developing its own culture, but instead it’s a mix as the specificities applied (such as Malay, *bumiputra*, Chinese, Indian or even Western) by the nation-state only operate for a modern-capitalist assertion. Rustam A. Sani, "The role of Translation in Creating a Modern Intellectual Tradition in the National Language: Some thoughts on the Malaysian Case," *Tenggara* 21, no. 22 (1987): pg.33-41.

⁵⁶ Following Shamsul’s observation “To the developing world, Malaysia is a success story and a model of Third World development. To the Muslim Bloc, Malaysia is a successful Islamic nation and one that is rich and kind enough to assist other struggling Muslim nations.” A.B., Shamsul. "Identity Construction, Nation Formation, and Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia." In *Islam in an Era of Nation-States: Politics and Religious Renewal in Muslim Southeast Asia*, edited by Robert W. Hefner and Patricia Horvatich. Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997, Pg. 220.

⁵⁷ [59] pg.221

⁵⁸ Khoo, Pg.113

Simultaneously, Malays on the ground were well aware of the government's effort to substantiate their Islamic identity by resolving the idea of Islam as a way of life with capitalist economic practices. The state itself stands at the forefront of the Islamicization process, with significant consequences for the organization of public life in Malaysian society. As observed by Khoo, contemporary Malays identify themselves more as Muslims than as Malays of diverse economic, cultural and regional backgrounds. To be a true Muslim, theoretically one has to put Islam above everything else, and brush aside any form of behaviour, or practice that is contrary to Islam. This is achieved through an affinity with the global community of *Ummah* rather than the local reality. Accordingly, Khoo concludes that such restraint became the reflective answer to the excesses of rapid modernization. This shift from being Malay to being Muslim also pre-empts philosophical anxiety about one's cultural-political identity (in particular, the Malay/Bumi dilemma faced by the new Malay middle class).⁵⁹

Concurrently, the Malay is further stratified through the strategic belittling of the Orientalist⁶⁰ conception of the lazy Malay by the nation state, which also portrays the Malay culture as superstitious and backward.⁶¹ As such, the Malay (body), burdened by colonial stereotypes ironically perpetuated by postcolonial state discourse, is seen as unreliable and inappropriate in the national pursuit of industrialization. To address this problem, the Malay subject is appropriated and re-created through Islam to accommodate the demands of labour for capitalism. Khoo explains that this social engineering is meant to compensate for the lack of 'rationalization' in pre-Islamic Malay. The Malay is made to align with the episteme of Western Europe by the nation-state to create a concession between the Malay and the neo-liberal, global capitalism. No one can put it better than Dr. Mahathir himself who noted the following in his book:

⁵⁹ As expressed by Ahmad Hussein "the immediate concern of the Malays is to protect their communal interests. Islam and ethnicity were entangled in a complex web of relationships. The 'ethnic reality' helps increase Malay identification with Islam generally, and yet it creates a new dilemma for them: how would Malay-Islam reconcile Islamic universal doctrines with demands of ethnic nationalism?" Syed Ahmed Hussein, *Muslim Politics in Malaysia: Origins and Evolution of Competing Traditions in Malaysian Islam*, (FGD Occasional Paper No. 15. Braamfontein, South Africa: Foundation for Global Dialogue, 1998).

⁶⁰ Edward W Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), pg.1.

⁶¹ Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (Routledge, 1977), pg.2.

*“The successful propagation of Islam throughout the world had its bases in the organization and discipline of Islamic society, compared with the unenlightened society before it, and the readiness of Muslims to conform to organization and discipline”*⁶²

The lazy Malay (body) is disciplined and organized through Islam, transforming it into a force of productive labour ready for foreign investment. Islam was favoured by the state for it allowed Malaysia to be seen as an epitome of moderate Muslim governance in the eyes of Western counterparts. Foucault explains a subjection of body is not only through ideology and violence, but also through physical intervention and subtle alteration.⁶³ Such subjection of a Malay body through Islam is prevalent in Malaysian society. Through her acute observation, Khoo expands on Foucault’s argument to demonstrate various ways in which the Malay-Muslim exhibits and makes his/her Islamic identity publicly visible. She claims that this is done through acts such as wearing a particular dress (marking on the body) and routine rituals such as strict adherence in attending prayers five times a day. The idea of a Muslim is ultimately normalized to a Malay body through such practices and routine social acts.⁶⁴ This, according to Khoo makes Islam not a matter of personal belief but an act of public performativity. Expanding upon the idea of ‘Malay Panopticon’⁶⁵ by Peletz where he explains that Malays (and Malaysians) feel as if they are living under a watchful eye (that could potentially turn anything they say and do against them), Khoo describes this as constantly living under a ‘disciplinary apparatus’. As such, the state strategically uses Islamic symbols and idioms to articulate the Malay in the modern Malaysian society.

Malaysian and the Malay-Muslim

In the attempt to discover what it means to be Malaysian, the chapter throws light on what is considered to be the very mechanics of a Malaysian, especially with regards to Malays – to expose my subjectivity as a Malaysian. But the moment I engage with myself, I

⁶² Mahathir bin Mohamad, *The Challenges of Turmoil* (Subang Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, 1998), pg.136.

⁶³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), pg.55.

⁶⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pg. 81.

⁶⁵ Michael G Peletz, *Islamic Modern: Religious Courts and Cultural Politics in Malaysia* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), pg.235.

realize my own limitations. I am made aware that I am not Malay (or Muslim) to articulate the position of a Malay-Muslim. Nonetheless, I argue as a Malaysian I partake in the performance/doing – an act of assemblage as I encounter the Malay body that constantly negates any epistemological base to articulate what it means to be Malaysian.

The works of Deleuze and Guattari are used to make my performance visible in this chapter. However, it would be unfair to assess the issue of subjectivity if the discourse inadvertently articulates the worldview of the other. Michel Foucault cites a passage in Borges that quotes a “certain Chinese encyclopedia” in which it is written that animals are divided into the following: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tamed, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in present classification, (i) innumerable, (j) frenzied, and many others.⁶⁶ Foucault presents this fabulous classification in order to reveal to us the stark impossibility of thinking within another system of thought. Foucault shows us that the knowledge we possess, and which in turn possesses us, derives the very possibility of its existence from configurations within the prevailing space of knowledge. In other words, the nature of what we know is determined by the structures organizing it, and coded within this, are the dominant values and beliefs. Foucault is mentioned here not with the intention to reject ‘any’ constructs of thought systems; on the contrary, I am advocating the embrace of what is complementary to that construct in that mind and thought that are contextual.

This is where the philosophy of Islam comes in. The reading of Dr. Al-Attas is to apprehend the contextual. Just as I have adapted Deleuze and Guattari in my efforts to understand the doing of a Malaysian, I insist it is necessary to reflect upon my articulations with reference to a Malaysian-Islamic philosopher to comprehend my irritations, not because I want to understand, but because I am a part of it. What I am referring to as the ‘contextual’ is the contemporary politics of Malaysia where it is viewed as multiply and differentially anticipating the future of Malaysia. A contemporary Malaysian subjectivity comprises an encounter of bodies that radically challenge racial identity. This situation is driven mainly by ideology of race and religion in the imaging

⁶⁶ Michel Foucault, *The order of things: an archaeology of the human sciences* (London: Routledge, 1997), pg.xv.

of a nation state.⁶⁷ It is this situation within which Islam is perpetually used by the state to imbricate the Malay, and for the most part, has uncritically been implicated to any Malaysian that I propose as the contextual.

Quoting from the Malaysian philosopher, Dr Al-Attas:

*“The individuals within the generations that comprise it, whether male or female, have already established their identity and recognized their ultimate destiny; the former through recognition and conformation of the covenant, and the latter through affirmation and realization of that covenant by means of sincere submission to God’s will and obedience to His law such as is enacted in Islam. The man who brought to us the Holy Quran as it was revealed to him by God, who thus brought to us the Knowledge of our identity and destiny, whose own life is the most excellent and perfect interpretation of the Holy Quran so that his life becomes for us the focus of emulation and true guiding spirit, is the Holy Prophet, may God bless Him and give him peace! By his teaching and example he has shown us the right and true practice of Islam and Islamic virtues; he is the perfect model for mankind not merely for one generation, but for all generations; not merely for a time, but for all time. Indeed, we say that the concept of a perfect model can fulfill its true meaning only if he who is thus described, such as Muhammad alone is, embodies within his self all the permanent human and spiritual values necessary for man’s guidance in life, whose validity is such that serve man not only for the span of his individual lifetime, but for as long as man lives in this world. So every generation of Muslims, emulating his example, passes on the way of life he patterned to the next in such wise that no gaps nor crises of identity occur between them, but that each preceding generation guides the next by confirming and affirming his example in their lives”*⁶⁸

In the Islamic discourse, as outlined by Dr. Al-Attas, the imprint of the internal (subjectivity) and external (body) is vital for an individual.⁶⁹ Referring to the quote, the need to establish one’s identity and destiny reveals the very kernel of reconciliation, along with the coming together or unification of body and subject to form a cohesive oneness

⁶⁷ Following Yaacob Harun’s observation as he explains “However, with Islamic revivalism and the continuous efforts taken by the government and other related agencies to uphold Islamic principles in politics, economy, education, and others, the status of Islam and its ideal in Malay society is very much enhanced. Until the process of Islamization of Malay culture is complete, Malay could not wholly be regarded Islamic neither could Islam be wholly regarded the basis of Malay culture and identity.” Yaacob Harun, "ISLAM AND MALAY CULTURE," Yaacob Harun, last modified May 24, 2009, <https://yaacob.wordpress.com/2009/05/24/articles-on-culture/>.

⁶⁸ Syed Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1995), pg.84.

⁶⁹ Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas, *The Nature of Man and the Psychology of the Human Soul: A Brief Outline and a Framework for an Islamic Psychology and Epistemology* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1990), pg1.

of individuality. We can see the evidence of this individuality with the act of submission⁷⁰ or what I perceive as “freedom of choice” that indicates the existence of subjectivity within Islamic teaching. The stability of this individuality rests on submission to Islamic teachings, as exemplified by the Holy Prophet. This illustrates that the discourse on subjectivity, especially when it relates to the preservation of identity (and in this case, I am thinking about the Malay), is usually accompanied by its imperative twin discourse, the discourse of internal morality and external obedience.

The process of Islamic rationalization saw the reworking of the existing Malay (body) into a recognizably Islamic one. In summation, in order to exist based on Muslim interiority, one must relinquish his or her existence as a Malay body. The presence of the rationalized Malay as fixed by Islam collides with the Malay (body) as recognized by the logic of race. In that collision, there is subsequent demand for “assemblage” which destabilizes the Malaysian subject formation – with regards to how Malaysians produce, mediate and represent their thinking. This in turn causes the Malaysian to misunderstand himself/herself by not knowing it in the first place. Worse, they become strangers to their own being - I become a stranger to myself.

In the urgency caused by this collision, I identify the relevance of the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari. Indeed, bodies tend to desire their own order and organization. In other words, bodies make their own movements toward stratification and limitation, and toward reassuring constancy. Stratification is the way in which bodies actively and strategically put themselves together in order to have a political social voice. A body becomes a subject in order to interact successfully in the social world. I must accept an identity and a particular way of organizing, otherwise I will be incomprehensible. I must reduce my own fluid of complexities to discrete categories. Languages, institutions and systems of thought all demand it. But there is a slight difference between the Deleuzian approach to the approach taken by Dr. Al-Attas. If I were to follow the logic of modernization, and accept the “assemblage” structure, which is the stratification of the body, then a Malaysian as a bodily entity is emphasized, for in Malaysia it’s the marking

⁷⁰ Quoting from Dr. Al-Attas, he explains: “Submission in the sense described above means conscious, willing submission, and this submission does not entail loss of freedom for him, since freedom in fact means to act as his true nature demands.” Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas, *Islām, Secularism, and the Philosophy of the Future* (London: Mansell Pub, 1985), pg.58.

of race that is prevalent. Conversely, as explained by Dr. Al-Attas, in Islam the spiritual holds utmost importance, and in the process of perfecting this interiority, the stratification of body is not imperative as required by the demands of modernization.⁷¹ This is clearly mapped out in the following excerpt:

“In Western civilization generally, because its conception of justice is based on secular foundations, it follows that its conception of knowledge is also based upon similar foundations, or complimentary foundations emphasizing man as a physical entity and rational animal being, to the extent that it admits of what we have referred to as the second kind of knowledge as the only valid “knowledge” possible. Consequently, the purpose of seeking knowledge from lower to higher levels is, for Western civilization, to produce in the seeker of a good citizen. Islam, however, differs in this in that for it the purpose of seeking knowledge is to produce in the seeker of a good man...Thus we see that, already in this most fundamental concept in life - concept of knowledge - Islam is at variance with Western civilization, in that for Islam (a) knowledge includes faith and true belief (iman); and that (b) the purpose for seeking knowledge is to inculcate goodness or justice in man as man and individual self, and not only merely in man as citizen or integral part of society: it is man’s value as real man, as spirit, that is stressed, rather than his value as a physical entity measured in terms of the pragmatic or utilitarian sense of his usefulness to the state and society and the world”⁷²

This separation between one privileged formation (the demands of Islam for the formation of the Malay’s interiority) and other aspects in the event of this formation (the demand for assemblage as part of the stratification process of the body) carve a peculiar form of Malaysian subjectivity - counter to the demands of the less privileged formation of a modern nation-state, while at the same time attaching itself as a nation through the logic of race. This is why, as stated in the constitution of Malaysia, a Malay is defined as “a person who professes the Muslim religion, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay *adat* (customs) and is a Malaysian citizen.”⁷³ The ambiguity of the definition is obvious, as rightly put by Mohd. Aris Hj. Othman:

“It must be emphasized that the category Malay which is created by the Federal Constitution is not, in an anthropological sense, an ethnic category but rather a slot constitutionally created to fit people from various ethnic groups such as the Malays themselves, Chinese, Indian and Others who are Muslim citizens of the country.”⁷⁴

⁷¹ By this I do not mean to suggest that the ideal of Islam is attained at the expense of the body. Islam clearly strives for a spirit-body balance. What this means is that the body formulated by modernity is in conflict with the ideals.

⁷² Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, pg.79-80.

⁷³ The Federal Constitution of Malaysia, Article 160 (2).

⁷⁴ Hj. Othman, *The Dynamics of Malay Identity*, pg.9.

The concept of Malay, although in principle originating from anthropology and thus carrying the burden of race, does not abide by the particular-discernible episteme of identity. This vagueness in identity is substantiated in the very law of Malaysia that clearly allows for assemblage to take place. The assurance of stability is supposedly rooted in Islamic philosophy which provides the grid of organization to maintain the connections a body can make with other bodies, thus reducing its potential for difference. This interiority is not shaped dynamically in regard to the conditioning of the external (body); instead, the body goes through a process of “emulation” whereby the sample of interiority is passed from one generation to another through the very embodiment of that spirituality. This “emulation” is to be understood from the worldview of Islam that is not based on sensible experience of the world but instead comes from the revelation of the ultimate truth. The perfected way of living out the truth is to be practiced by imitation. Dr. Al-Attas explains this clearly when he distinguishes Islam from other religions of the world as he explains:

“Revealed religion can only be that which knows itself from the very beginning; and that self-knowledge comes from the Revelation itself, not from history. The so-called ‘development’ in the religious traditions of mankind cannot be applied to Islam, for what is assumed to be a developmental process is in the case of Islam only a process of interpretation and elaboration which must of necessity occur in alternating generations of believers of different nations, and which refer back to the unchanging Source. As such the worldview of Islam is characterized by an authenticity and a finality that points to what is ultimate, and it projects a view of reality and truth that encompasses existence and life altogether in total perspective whose fundamental elements are permanently established.”⁷⁵

Ironically, it is the very same Islamic philosophy that fuels the uncertainty of Malay when it collides with the ideology of being a Malaysian, of being modern, of belonging to a nation-state, and of Deleuzian assemblage. Although by law one must be Muslim in order to be Malay, by discarding the body (or specifically the Malay body), it creates a tension between the duality of body and subject. Body as a “becoming” (assemblage) is officially recognized while subject as a “being” (solidified) is also recognized. This is the remarkable irritation of being a Malaysian. A non-Malay constantly has the potential of

⁷⁵ Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, pg.42.

becoming Malay (in body), but at the same time he/she can never become Malay (in subject). This also works vice versa, as a Malay constantly has the potential of becoming Malaysian (in body), but at the same time he/she can never become one (in subject). This causes the racial index to infuriate and replace those external markings with congeries of subjectivities in close rapport with one's own existence.

The connection between Deleuze and Guattari's concept on subjectification and Dr. Al-Attas's articulation on Islamic philosophy work as instruments through which one might better evaluate the doing of a Malaysian. Comparing and contrasting these two philosophies will serve to dispense the potency of secular and religious thought⁷⁶ parallel to the civic- and ethno-nationalism that functions as veins for the formation of a Malaysian subject. By this, it is by **no** means suggesting that these philosophies reflect each other and are replicas of philosophical articulation with different epistemological foundations. Instead, what must be taken seriously here is the repercussion of Islam to the non-Malay and Malay alike (or Malaysians in general) that would reinforce the solidification of race as the basis for their identity. The risk of my argument in deciphering what it means to be Malaysian accommodates easily into a binary interpretation mechanism according to which the conflicts in Malaysia may be read as a clash between race and subjectivity, dissolving into the violence of inarticulate ideology, or what I call the irritation that arises due to the nation-state's fault in politicizing race.

It is possible for someone to read this chapter as an exploration of the possibility to merge with the Malay by claiming the attributes of the Malay body. The logic of exteriority and interiority might seem as a strategy articulated to undo the distinction between the Malay and non-Malay, or to question the legitimacy of the Malay as a racial identity. This prospect of undoing racial identity comes with the risk of a more imperilling reflex that must be seriously considered when thinking about such a potentiality. The irritation of being Malaysian that was mentioned earlier could play out in a two-fold manner. The chapter attempts to use the irritation as a source for deconstructing racial identity with the

⁷⁶ By saying "religious thought" I am referring to Dr. Al-Attas's explanation "The concept couched in the term *din*, which is generally understood to mean religion, is not the same concept of religion as interpreted and understood throughout Western religious history. When we speak of Islam and refer to it in English as a "religion", we mean and understand by it the *din*, in which all the basic connotations inherent in the term *din* are conceived as gathered into a single unity of coherent meaning reflected in the Holy Quran and in the Arabic language to which it belongs." Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, pg.41.

aim of unravelling Malaysian subjectivity. Beneath this attempt there is a striking paradox, for this very same irritation could also manifest in a form of a peculiar reflex of conserving the Malay identity. The irritation caused by the uncomplimentary nature of Islam and Malay could potentially cause a reflective consolidation of Islam as Malay. If Islam is to be taken as being synonymous to the Malay following the teachings of Al-Attas, what it leads to is a ‘Muslim reflex’⁷⁷ that could lead to a permanent marginalisation of non-Malays.

This is a response to the fear of the imminent demise of a Malay as the possibility of others laying claim on it emerge through such pejorative articulations of the Malay. Arguably what comes out of this scenario is Muslim subjectivity, and this I fear could easily go along with ethno-nationalism. This is significant as the reason for making Islam part of Malay,⁷⁸ in particular the forming of subjectivity with the attendant complexities of the body. The ability of Islamic philosophy to stratify the assemblage, or the animal aspect of man⁷⁹, the carnal nature of a being, and the body is complementary to the anxiety deeply ingrained in the Malay. By complementary, I am pointing at the aptitude of Islam to elucidate “the becoming” by constantly striving for the ideal. In other words, Islam is able contain the ‘impermanent’ anxiety within the Malay while it disciplines the Malay body. With the potential of Islam to solidify the body through the “emulation” of the truth in practice, especially through essential-ideological means perpetuated by the nation-state. It enables the incorporation of Islam as an official currency that supposedly maintains the identity of a Malay subject, while enabling the Muslim reflex.

This difference between the Malay-Muslim and Malay-Malaysian is played out in the politics of Malaysia by two dominant Malay-based political entities. The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) are major political

⁷⁷ The idea of Muslim reflex was first introduced by Niranjan when writing for my solo show catalogue. In this he argued that the danger of threatening Malay identity in a secular society could cause them to adapt Islamic principles that would relegate the non-Malay to the fringes of Malaysian politics. Niranjan Rajah, "Contextualising Fermentations," in *Roopesh Sitharan "Fermentation - A Solo exhibition of New Media Art"* (Penang: Muzium dan Galeri Tuanku Fauziah, 2009), pg.11.

⁷⁸ By this I am not adhering to the rhetoric of nations-state in formalizing Islam as part of Malay, and subsequently Malaysian. Instead I am interested in the ability of Islamic philosophy to accustom itself to the complexity of the Malay body as well as Malaysian subjectivity, then later being utilized as an ideological tool for promoting racial segregation.

⁷⁹ Syed Muhammad Naquib al- Attas, *Islām and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation (ISTAC), 1993), pg.25.

parties that represent the Malay race. UMNO is in coalition with other parties such as Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) that represent the Indian and Chinese races respectively. Together they form the National Front (BN) as the governing coalition that rules the country. PAS on the other hand is an independent party that exclusively represents the Malays. While PAS have been in alliance with other opposition parties in the past, it faced a downfall when it proposed to implement the Islamic criminal code, or *Hudud* as part of the Malaysian law. The implementation of the *Hudud* law would imply an Islamicization of the political, social and public spheres as well as the state institutions in Malaysia. A move from a secular to religious state would take place, and that would have significant consequences for the future of democracy in Malaysia. More importantly there is no room for the non-Malay in this formation citizenry, as PAS privileges Islamic teaching for the governance of the nation-state. In this space, only a Muslim, and specifically a Malaysian Muslim can survive, without there being any room for tolerance or negotiation with other ideologies, such as an all-inclusive, racially diverse Malaysian.

The challenge here is to be vigilant, and admittance of the potential threat this articulation might impose on a Malay, leading to a point of no return - a defensive reflex that could cause reaffirmation of racial identities among Malaysians. Thus, the effort here is to negotiate an articulation of a convergent whole while avoiding the reflex of a threatened majority. Simply put, Muslim subjectivity excludes Malaysians, but Malaysian subjectivity includes the Muslim. It is with this assurance that the subjectivity of a Malaysian is the prime principle for whom the idea introduced in this chapter serves as a predication. For as long as any Malaysian asserts himself/herself as a subject of these ideas, it cannot be conceived as something that is disparate to any racial identity of a Malaysian.

Question TWO: What are the scenes?

Introduction

Although the first chapter examines the meaning and operation of a Malaysian, by deconstructing the ideological tenet of the race rhetoric (Malay specifically) under ‘nation-state’, its purpose is not to critique the identity delimitation. Instead, the purpose is to expose the very ‘doing’ of a Malaysian subject through the restrictive confinement of an identity and its operation. Such ‘doing’, regardless of how eloquent the framework (of knowledge) is, it still seizes this framework through unpredictable encounters and launches the necessary asperity for the formation of a Malaysian subjectivity. Although the attempt is to articulate Malaysian subjectivity through this thesis, this very act of writing is disrupted by an inability – not in the sense of inefficiency in writing¹, but more in terms of the shortcomings of articulation that convicts of an absence; the ‘doing’ is non-appearance as the chapter is written.

It is driven by a conviction of the complexity of Malaysian subjectivity - to decisively explicate as it is, and not to advocate as it should be. This is instigated by the works of Paul Sullivan as he explains:

*“In complex subjectivity, there is more of a recognition of the thinking, feeling and desiring subject than in fine-grained discourse analysis. It is the contact that the person makes with broader cultural forms that tend to inform analytical practice. The aim of this kind of analysis is to expose mechanisms of governance of subjectivity.”*²

This is where identity in politics creates a fixed, rigid and stable form of the Malaysian subject. On the contrary, instead of offering solutions or finding alternatives, the task at hand is to explicate and expose the cause and causality of such a fixture in the formation of subjectivity. Accordingly, it must be recognized that the ‘doing’ forms Malaysian subjectivity. Malaysian subjectivity, which relies upon an encounter,³ is always in

¹ English is not my first language and I am bound by this, following criticism by Anna Wierzbicka “Like any other language, English too, has its own built-in culture-specific forms of attention - and native speakers of English are often blind to them because of their very familiarity.” Anna Wierzbicka, *Imprisoned in English: The Hazards of English As a Default Language* (2014), pg.4.

² Paul Sullivan, *Qualitative Data Analysis Using a Dialogical Approach* (London: SAGE, 2012), pg.41.

³ “The beginning of the living of a life as a person is not just a matter of having crossed a biological threshold. Nor is it a matter of having crossed a threshold into self-awareness or maturity. Instead, it is a matter of having crossed an intersubjective threshold. It is when there occurs an intersubjective encounter

conflict with the articulation of subjectivity for it demands a constant disruption of any form of delimitation in meaning. How is it possible to proceed when subjectivity escapes the boundaries of articulation? How to conceive of it (subjectivity) when what is conceived is without ‘encounter’ at the moment of conception (articulation)?

This might lead to a pessimistic view of helplessness, unable to conceive any form ideation regarding Malaysian subjectivity for it is bound by the limit of articulation. But this blunt stoppage is only ‘deemed’ inescapable based on how the author conceives of himself in writing (as I write), for if the author sees himself as a sovereign (writing) subject, then by default he is trapped by his own doing.⁴ But if he musters the courage to encounter ‘the encounter’ in his writing, then he will move from himself – a shift from assurance (that reinforces a false sense of sovereignty) to a confessing encounter (that surely consists of the other). A move here does not refer to a move away from (or eradicating) the author, but instead, it’s a move from writing (describing) to analysing through writing, by acknowledging that subjectivity operates dialogically with and through networks of relationships with others in writing.⁵ It is this move that convicts the recognition not of an identity⁶, but of subjectivity in writing as a process of active meaning made through the encounter.

This does not mean that the other is seized through the conception of the encounter, or writing by becoming a component of the scheme of the transformation of which the author enjoys and suffers his subjectivity. The attempt for theorization here is not an externalization of a ‘prior representation’ (or a description of the encounter as experienced by the author), nor is it a process of thematic ordering of the other, a way to define the other by articulating subjectivity. The encounter here operates as an overflow of the author’s ideas and conceptions. It is a process of submitting to the other through

that the terms of that encounter are confirmed as subjectivities or persons.” Stan van Hooft, *Life, Death, and Subjectivity: Moral Sources in Bioethics* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pg.132.

⁴ This realization comes from the words of Mark Hansen as he explains, “Whatever comes to be (observed) owes its term of being to systems within its environment. Autonomy can never be solitary.” Bruce Clarke and Mark B. N. Hansen, *Emergence and Embodiment: New Essays on Second-Order Systems Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), pg.6.

⁵ following the words of Mikhail Bakhtin “Logical and semantically referential relationships, in order to become dialogic, must be embodied, that is, they must enter another sphere of existence: they must become discourse, that is, an utterance, and receive author, that is a creator of the given utterance whose position it expresses.” M. M. Bakhtin et al., *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, and Voloshinov* (London: E. Arnold, 1994), pg.184.

⁶ By identity here I am referring to authorship, or the subject that is writing this chapter.

recognition by acknowledging the conviction of deprivation in the articulation - the necessary asperity⁷ for Malaysian subjectivity.

This might seem as if Malaysian subjectivity is inherently restricted by an encounter or bound by signification. But I argue that the encounter here operates as the enabler of subjectivity. Following Deleuze's thought, the other is not expressing the possibility of a world; conversely the other is the very possibility.⁸ The aim here is to develop a framework that is critical of the writing - an internal critique shaped by an encounter that can possibly go beyond to become a substance accommodating the needs of Malaysian subjectivity. Simply put, I write by deliberately exposing Malaysian subjectivity as dialogical⁹ and the encounter with the other reveals the context¹⁰ in which such an encounter occurs (which I call 'scenes').

Indeed to think through the 'doing' is to acknowledge self-indulgence¹¹ (articulation) along with self-confrontation (encounter) to manifest the act of 'doing' that occurs at the moment of engagement, which is an instance that is much needed in examining Malaysian subjectivity, especially by making the scenes visible for scrutiny. Conversely, by proposing a dialogical take on subjectivity, it might appear that an oppositional binary is prevalent and necessary for any articulation of Malaysian subjectivity. What appears to

⁷ I am referring to the 'doing' or the epistemological uncertainty that makes Malaysian subjectivity as I presented in chapter 01.

⁸ Following Gilles Deleuze's expression of the Other, "The Other is in this tired world, and yet, through its attitude and its gestures, its soft step, its calm breath and its ease, it can express a world in which there is no tiredness. This is what the Other is: the expression of a possible world." Gilles Deleuze, "DESCRIPTION OF WOMAN: for a philosophy of the sexed other 1," *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 7, no. 3 (2002): pg.18.

⁹ My use of dialogical refers to Paul Sullivan "...Subjectivity viewed dialogically, is social, relating to self as well as to others. This kind of subjectivity is also complex in so far as it emerges and draws from a network of history, tradition and power." Sullivan, *Qualitative Data Analysis Using a Dialogical Approach*, pg.43.

¹⁰ As explained by Judith Butler "Yet the subject who might grieve is implicated in a loss of autonomy that is mandated by linguistic and social life; it can never produce itself autonomously. From the start, this ego is other than itself; what melancholia shows is that only by absorbing the other as oneself does one becomes something at all. The social terms which make survival possible, which interpellate social existence, never reflect the autonomy of the one who comes to recognize him or herself in them and, thus, stands a chance to be within language." Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1997), pg.196.

¹¹ Here I equate self-indulgence as an act of monologue, and my reason to be critical of this is to be explicit in the act of writing regarding the encounter, the necessary presence of other for the formation of my subjectivity. This follows the works of Mikhail Bakhtin as he explains "Monologism ... denies that there exists outside of it another consciousness, with the same rights, and capable of responding on an equal footing ... the other remains entirely and only an object of consciousness and cannot constitute another consciousness." M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pg.293.

be 'locked' in the encounter; or the other must appear to encounter and disrupt the racial identity, concurrently informing the subjectivity.

As I have argued in the earlier chapter, a Malaysian possesses the potential of becoming a Malay (in the body), but at the same cannot become so (in the subject) either. This also works vice versa, as a Malay can constantly become a Malaysian (in the body), but at the same time can never become one (in the subject). I argue that encounter makes Malaysian subjectivity possible but not with the intention of challenging the dominance of identity assertion (by nation state); for if the objective is to pursue such a cause, it will bind any relations in the oppressor-oppressed logic. This, in turn, would reduce the articulation to similar violence like that of the nation state. This I perceive has been 'locked' in the encounter. My exertion here is not to be seen as reacting against the constraints of my sense of being a Malaysian, but instead to act (articulate) in the circumstances of such confinement.

For this to be effectively articulated, subjectivity must first be acknowledged by moving it into the text, and not expressing through it.¹² As mentioned earlier, such 'moving' is achieved by the conviction in the act of writing of the deprivation in the articulation. It is essential to see the inability to articulate Malaysian subjectivity without encounter (in writing) and using such visibility to reveal the uncertainty inherent in Malaysian subjectivity. Additionally, the goal is to enable others to disregard the oppositional stance and to together recognize the uncertainty revealed through the 'scenes' that stretch beyond the logic of binary. This does not mean that a Malaysian and a Malay are a single entity, but the difference can now be articulated beyond the confinement of a given 'scene' while at the same time, also abiding within. This would enable the differences to be perceived otherwise.¹³ This is necessary to uncover Malaysian subjectivity as only

¹² Here I am following the trails of Spivak when she talks about Subaltern as she utters "Derrida's criticism moves us into the text, Foucault's in and out." Spivak Gayatri Chakravorty, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pg.297.

¹³ My take of different follows the work of Gloria Anzaldua on new consciousness, - "At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once, and at once, see through serpent and eagle's eyes. Or perhaps we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory." Gloria Anzaldua, "La Conciencia de la Mestiza: Towards new consciousness," in *Borderlands/La frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007), pg.79.

through this method of encounter in ‘writing’, the scenes can be exposed.¹⁴ It will lead to a shift from unified sovereignty to disbursed subjectivity that creates meanings; a mandatory severance in articulation tantamount to the operation of Malaysia and its New Media art.

It is with such a framework that this chapter is set out to encounter Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjan Rajah. It is a manifestation of struggle, of voicing, and of the encounter. Their presence here is not to consolidate the presence of the other in the articulation of Malaysian subjectivity. Instead, it reveals a certain sustention: the contradiction and heterogeneity where the possibility of uniting the separate occurs in Malaysian subjectivity. Accordingly, as they sustain the bifurcation, they operate as curator, theorist, artist, Malay, Indian, Malaysian, Bumiputra, and as non-Bumiputra within Malaysia. They are uniquely different: in their very own chart, in their very own struggle, in their very own construct, in their very own momentum. The contradiction here does not get incorporated, nor is the thesis trying to balance between these discrepancies. On the contrary, it is the ‘doing’ that makes a Malaysian subjectivity a source of intense uncertainty by constantly breaking any form of unitary identity.

Perhaps it might seem that having the encounter in the writing is a deliberate move to seek some form of recognition to articulate Malaysian subjectivity or to stratify particular identities (as artists, curators, or Malay, non-Malay). Identity is purposefully evoked to emphasize that the ‘scene’ is not a space, as in something that is potentially neutral and void, but instead it is a place that someone occupies in the world; a ground that operates in the realm of the social and in the politics of living.¹⁵ It is here, living in the world of ‘supposedly’ set meanings (or fixed identity) that encounter occurs, creating the meaning of subjectivity. It is what Ann Pellegrini calls a ‘double bind’.¹⁶ The tension here revealed

¹⁴ As per the words of Fred Moten “... wherein the call to subjectivity is understood also as a call to subjection and subjugation and appeals for redress or protection to the state or to the structure or idea of citizenship as well as modes of radical performativity or subversive impersonation are always already embedded in the structure they would escape.” Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pg.2.

¹⁵ “The central phenomenon, at the root of both my subjectivity and my transcendence towards others, consists in my being given to myself. I am given, that is, I find myself already situated and involved in a physical and social world – I am given to myself, which means that this situation is never hidden from me, it is never around about me as an alien necessity, and I am never in effect enclosed in it like an object in a box.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception* (London: Routledge, 2002), pg. 419.

¹⁶ I am speaking of double binding from the perspective of being reluctantly forced to come to terms with the identity imposed on me (Malaysian Indian). Conversely, such a struggle informs my subjectivity for such rigid delimitation of identity makes the ‘doing’ possible. As Ann Pellegrini explains “The double bind of the colonized is that she/he must seek recognition from those most resistant to recognizing her as a

through the particularity of practice (new media art), given the specificity of the operational space (Malaysia); as I call it ‘scenes of New Media’ and ‘Scenes in Malaysia’.

Framework for writing through the encounter

The encounter of Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjan Rajah with the author took place on a particular fixed date and time over skype across 3 different continents. This is due to the location of the interlocutors - Niranjan in Vancouver, Canada, Hasnul in Penang, Malaysia and the author in London, England. An official letter of invitation was sent to Hasnul and Niranjan and was followed up with emails as well as phone conversations to set up the time and date for the encounter. The letter and email conversation can be found in appendix 06 and appendix 07. The letter explains the objective of their involvement and how their voice would contribute towards the argument of the thesis. This encounter took place virtually, as the emphasis was on their voice to confront the argument rather than the physical interaction between the participants. Because of the initial decision to present the thesis in writing (rather than practice-based), it was then decided by the author for the encounter to be incorporated as a chapter.

The conceptual framework for the writing through an encounter is based on the ‘doing’, or the movement between unfamiliar and solidity. This is also the foundation for the framing of the ‘scenes’. Such movement occurs when Malaysians encounter each other in their racially marked bodies. During an encounter, a Malaysian subject is simultaneously coerced into an identification with a racialized body and discursive potentiality. This leads to an exhortation, or what I call irritation to constantly aspire for the ideal ‘Malaysian’. A Malaysian is a subject under the imperative of what he/she is, and at the same time, is prevented from approximating the ideal. The encounter that occurs over skype is set out to embody this exhortation of a Malaysia subject. Voice is used to reveal both the lack and its opposite. In other words, the encounter that took place over Skype is meant to expose through conversation the lack what is unfairly attributed to a Malay, as well as the plenitude of aspects that adequately fulfil the desires of a

subject in the first place” Ann Pellegrini, *Performance Anxieties: Staging Psychoanalysis, Staging Race* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pg.99.

Malaysian. To translate this in the realm of the virtual demands preparation. The premise of the chapter and careful review of relevant literature was essential to develop topics of discussion that are clear, concise and designed to instigate the necessary discussions. Accordingly, the conversation that took place over skype was guided, recorded, transcribed and edited to fit the structure of the chapter, along with the needs of the arguments.

Hasnul and Niranjana were selected to participate in this encounter for two reasons. Firstly, both of them are new media arts practitioners who have dealt with the issues of identity and subjectivity through their art practice. They have also worked together for many years, thus enabling a safe and open atmosphere for critical exchange to take place between them. Secondly, they represent the lack and plenitude that was essential to instigate 'doing' to be revealed through conversation regarding their practice and the country of Malaysia in general. The racial identities of Hasnul and Niranjana by default facilitated the need for the exhortation to be openly voiced during the encounter. Meanwhile, the author's role is to be a reflective instigator by keeping track of everyone's influence on the setting, to bracket biases and to monitor emotional responses. This is because the task of the author is to incorporate the encounter that took place over Skype as part of a chapter in the thesis. Knowing the limitations and needs of the thesis, it was necessary for the author to participate and facilitate the encounter.

The encounter occurred in several stages which includes:

Pre-encounter: the scheduling of the interview over one to two hours to conduct the encounter at a convenient time for everyone, followed by establishing certain conceptual ideas and the scope of discussion in advance with the participants. The scope covers not only the reading and articulating of their practice within current Malaysian art history and theory (along with all its apparent issues) but also includes the negotiation of their subjectivity (as Malaysian) that is made visible through practice, artworks and various forms of expression. This is to encourage Hasnul and Niranjana to encounter their past and current works and practices.

Encounter: developing and sharing a comprehensive agenda during the discussion. This is achieved by initiating critical reflection and exploration of self during the conversation over Skype. Such criticality of self is focused in the context of Malaysian subjectivity, particularly through the practice of new media art. This inevitably leads the discussion to

include social politics of Malaysia. This is then expanded to explore power structures, the market economy and how it dictates the art world as well as identity politics that is debated in contemporary Malaysian society.

Post-encounter: securing all the necessary audio recordings needed to transcribe the encounter. In this process, the author carefully examines, edits and includes the appropriate aspects of the encounter to be incorporated in this chapter. The author then encounters the recording by punctuating the inscription with his own analysis. He edits and provides appropriate context, scrutiny and critical reading of the conversation in his writing while the encounter that took place over skype is inscribed through writing.

Subjectivity

The term subjectivity must be clarified in relation to how it is being articulated in the thesis. Subjectivity as a term is closely connected to the field of psychoanalysis; nevertheless, it is not necessarily abiding by the strict logic of internal ‘psychogenetic’ stages, as it might be evident from the argument for the ‘doing’ as a crucial ingredient for the unravelling of Malaysian subjectivity. With this in mind, subjectivity is adopted from Felix Guattari’s work. His critical analysis and examination on the production of subjectivity allow for the working of ‘encounter’ by citing the influence of an external force. In his words, as he provides the definition of subjectivity:

“The ensemble of conditions which render possible the emergence of individual and/or collective instances as self-referential existential Territories, adjacent, or in delimiting relation, to an alterity that is itself subjective...”

The condition of production sketched out in this redefinition thus together imply: human inter-subjective instances manifest by language; suggestive and identificatory examples from ethology; institutional interactions of different natures; machinic apparatuses (for example, involving computer technology); incorporeal Universes of reference such as those relative to music and the plastic art. This non-human pre-personal part of subjectivity is crucial since it is from this that heterogenesis can develop.”¹⁷

Guattari’s take on subjectivity emphasizes the external factors. He is critical of the Freudians ‘internally’ restrictive approach to the formation of subjectivity and he

¹⁷ Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pg.9.

proposes that the opposition to psychoanalysis, is the influence of non-human/pre-personal. This distinction or a variation that is presented by Guattari is crucial for articulation; especially in the scenes that have been conceived in presenting the ‘doing’ by the encounter. A particular non-human/pre-personal element resides in the practice of new media art (scenes of New Media) - following Guattari’s definition ‘*machinic apparatuses (for example, involving computer technology)*’. However, before proceeding further, an implicit premise must be made visible. In reading Guattari, a particular form of subjectivity is conceived, a process of duality that distinguishes between subject and object. This is what Guattari calls ‘alterity’ that is specific to subject, and that is external to it as a condition for subjectivity.

In this framework, ‘machinic apparatuses’ or technology operates in three different ways. Firstly, it becomes a concept that is created by and belongs to me – a construct that I built. I create technology which is external to me, it is thus not a part of my biological evolution. Secondly, as my creation, it serves my purpose to dominate nature (here technology becomes a tool that I use to shape my environment as I desire). Thirdly it can be understood as a pure concept, a theoretical gesture that I made a parallel with me (or my signification) that serves as an alterity. In all these approaches, the ‘machinic apparatuses’ remains external to me while residing within my conception. By this, I do not mean to restrict ‘machinic apparatuses’ to myself as this will halt it as ‘alterity’ but the very gesture of ‘alterity’ is only relevant and present to me.

It might seem that the adaptation here is driven by a desire to articulate subjectivity in a particular way. It may also mean that I am adamant to make visible the ‘doing’ by aligning the right theory to accommodate my desire. Here Guattari might seem the right fit to reiterate ‘encounter’ as necessary for Malaysian subjectivity. While Guattari’s definition of subjectivity might seem to work seamlessly with the argument. However, the intention to deliberately point out the ‘seamlessness’ is to depart from Guattari and to consider technology in the presence of the ‘other’. In other words, the conception of subjectivity, especially through ‘machinic apparatus’ is castigated by the argument of ‘encounter’ for the insertion of ‘other’ in the writing of this chapter. This concentration creates a radical puncture in the ‘residing within my conception’ of the ideation for subjectivity. This reflection is vital in the discussion of Malaysian subjectivity for it is here that the ‘doing’ is articulated through practice.

While I accept other ‘non-human pre-personal parts of subjectivity’ mentioned by Guattari, nevertheless I argue that technology is a peculiar part of subjectivity that de-centers ethics from me (or from human-centered) and this indeed is a challenge. I realize this by my (our) practice, the practice of New Media Arts¹⁸ - the use of computer technology for artistic practice - the adaptation of ‘machinic apparatuses’ for creative enquiries. It is this distinction, a discrepancy between new media with other parts of subjectivity that I corroborate as two separate ‘scenes’ – the blocks that I have conceived for the writing of this chapter.

New Media

The term New Media must now be clarified to substantiate the argument of subjectivity. Bernard Stiegler, defines new media as a form of defining subject in terms of/as technical objects. The use of the term ‘technics’ by Stiegler covers techniques, technology as well as objects produced by these means as such it extends to the practice of New Media Art.¹⁹ He starts off with a massive claim that technics have been repressed by philosophy as an object of thought, and declares that technics is the unthought.²⁰ With this claim of ‘unthought’, he liberates technics from the confinement of a hierarchical order – between rational subject and ideological form, or between -autonomous action (subject) and representation (sign). In this order the subject will always have presupposed technics and as such technics remain the tool conceived by the subject (This results in the positivists’ outlook towards technology).

Conversely, with this bold claim of unthought, Stiegler argues to reconsider human as the technological, instead as the creator thereof. Referring to the works of Andre Leroi-Gourhan who puts forth the idea occurrence between human appearance and the use of

¹⁸ “In studies on new forms of art ...we will see, for example, movement-images and time-images constituting the seeds of the production of subjectivity. We are not in the presence of a passively representative image, but of a vector of subjectification. We are actually confronted by a non-discursive, pathic knowledge, which presents itself as a subjectivity that one actively meets, an absorbent subjectivity given immediately in all its complexity.” Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*, Pg.25.

¹⁹ Micheal Lewis, "Of a Mythical Philosophical Anthropology: The transcendental and the Empirical in Technics and Time 1," in *Stiegler and Technics*, ed. Christina Howells and Gerald Moore (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pg.65.

²⁰ Bernard Stiegler, "Introduction," in *Technics and Time: The fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1998), pg.ix.

the tool. Stiegler extends this idea to claim that human evolution through means ‘other than life’, is made possible through a pairing with the evolution of technological objects that are exterior to the subject. Returning to the idea of the tool, it is here that Stiegler substantiates his argument by claiming that tool or a technical object has the ability to record and transmit the memory of its use. My document being typed on this computer screen this very moment becomes a record of my action of typing on the keyboard, and thereby it operates as a form of memory of my act of typing. Thus, technology becomes a condition for my reference to the past through the ability to record and transmit my act.

But Stiegler goes on to claim that such an ability of technology to refer to the past, which becomes an important aspect of interference that breaks the linear progression of events. In other words, the ability to position oneself temporality outside the linear progression (interfered by technology) becomes the very means for subject to experience time. This interference by technology is crucial, for, through this process, the self becomes the self-conscious, or technical constitution of consciousness, as for how Stiegler puts it by ‘exteriorization’; a foundation of temporality made possible by technology. He explains:

“There is today a conjunction between the question of technics and the question of time, one made evident by the speed of technical evolution, by the ruptures in temporalization (event-ization) that this evolution provokes, and by the processes deterritorialization accompanying it. It is a conjunction that calls for a new consideration of technicity. The following work aims to establish that organized inorganic beings are originarily – and as marks of the default of origin out of which there is [es gibt] time – constitutive (in the strict phenomenological sense) of temporality as well as spatiality, in quest of a speed ‘older’ than time and space, which are the derivative decompositions of speed. Life is the conquest of mobility. As a ‘process exteriorization’ technics is the pursuit of life by means other than life.”²¹

Stiegler then concludes that humans can experience the self only through technology, and therefore, humans are technological. In this way, human as a form of technics expands the definition of new media. This is not meant to stretch or create a new definition of the term, but more importantly, it defines the collapse of the distinction between ‘self’ and ‘new media’. This collapse releases the articulation of new media from the clutches of positivists, of considering new media as merely a tool for artistic production. Arguably, new media art practice becomes the very means for the production of subjectivity. At this juncture, Stiegler’s argument is at odds with the adaptation of Guattari’s definition of subjectivity. While Guattari acknowledges the necessity to give due credit to New Media

²¹ Stiegler, *Technics and Time: The fault of Epimetheus*, pg.17.

as part of subjectivity, nevertheless it is considered one component out of many that reinforce his argument to consider subjectivity as heterogeneous. This is clearly argued by Guattari,

“Should we keep the semiotic productions from mass media, informatics, telematics and robotics separate from psychological subjectivity? I don’t think so. Just as social machines can be grouped under the general title of Collective Equipment, technological machines of information and communication operate at the heart of human subjectivity not only within its memory and intelligence, but within its sensibility, affects, and unconscious phantasms. Recognition of these machinic dimensions of subjectification leads us to insist, in our attempt at redefinition, on the heterogeneity of the components leading to subjectivity”²²

Meanwhile, Stiegler presents the idea that subjectivity is only possible by means of technics. It might seem urgent to resolve this conundrum, nevertheless, this is deliberately assembled for it is in this entanglement that the argument for the ‘scenes’ is framed. It is here that the ‘Scenes of New Media’ and ‘Scenes in Malaysia’ come full circle.

This conundrum needs to be located in the question that is centred on the human and the challenge thereof. The conviction that was revealed at the beginning of this chapter, i.e. the questioning of the absence of ‘doing’ caused by the other is invested in the author being a Malaysian. Nevertheless, there is another form of conviction lead by the practice of New Media arts - one that decentres the author from a position of questioning. To clarify this, a distinction must be drawn between ‘originary technics’ and the particularity of digital technology. While in the technics as defined by Stiegler, a subject abides in a coupling with the technology of his/her creation that evokes consciousness, I argue that in digital technology the process is reversed and accelerated. This is following Mark Hansen’s argument on the transformative acceleration instigated by digital domain:

“...analysis will have to become performance, a creative experimentation with the possibilities for our future technogenesis. For if the adoption of technologies and the technical expansion of primary retention becomes central, then technologies cannot be restricted to the status of things that we deploy or even to that of a repository for tradition (tertiary memory). Rather, insofar as they directly expand our embodied capacities to act on ourselves, on others, and on the world, technologies can only be adequately 'understood' in their very exercise as transductive correlates of human becoming.”²³

²² Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, pg.4.

²³ Mark B. N. Hansen, "'Realtime Synthesis' and the Différance of the Body: Technocultural Studies in the Wake of Deconstruction," *Culture Machine*, Vol 6, last modified 2004, <http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/rt/printerFriendly/9/8>.

In the creative inquiry through the practice of new media arts, a radical difference is perceived between the possibilities of digital technology and technics. I agree with Steigler's conception but I would nevertheless extend his idea to consider the operation of new media - especially in the articulation of subjectivity specific to Malaysia. The operation of digital reveals to be autonomous. Simply put, with digital technology 'technics' has become operational on its own.

This does not mean to impose another form of subjectivity tantamount to a human, to equate technology as the other. On the contrary, what I am arguing for is the non-restrictive operation of technology that breaks free from the confinement of 'logos' (or symbolism, language, and culture). Again, quoting Mark Hansen when he speaks of such liberty:

*"for once media technology has usurped the role formerly held by culture of providing the common, the global media system can no longer be localized and specified through its cultural configuration or use. Rather, it can form the ground for new, to-be-invented forms of collective life precisely because of its resistance to the kinds of empirical specification championed by today's cultural studies practitioners."*²⁴

In this liberty, the progress, gesture, and operation of technology become erratic and unpredictable. Here signification breaks down – human is no longer the measure of technics. This is not because human is helpless or a slave to technology, but because human is no longer the center of enquiry. It is this de-centering that comes to the fore in the practice of new media arts, and it will be prevalent in the 'scenes' that follow. At this point, a question can be posed - how might this be different from an encounter?

In an encounter, subject encounters the other in its strangeness and vice versa. In this, me/you/other subjectivity comes forth, or disruption of a worldview that informs subjectivity, which in turn returns the self differently to me as a Malaysian. With technology, the subject not only encounters the other but also perpetually creates a memory and acceleration of time that destabilizes the logos (and in this, the subject is forever seeking to be identified). It is in this crucial point that new media collides head-on with the nation-state, and it is in this collision where I demark the 'scenes' – articulating new media art practice in relation with the nation-state.

²⁴ Ibid.

The framework of scenes, or as I call it ‘scenes of New Media’ and ‘scenes in Malaysia’ might seem to be in oppositional directions, but yet it is still located within the discussion of a Malaysian subject. Adding on to that, it must be acknowledged that human-driven ethics is not completely eradicated by the insertion of Stiegler’s argument to articulate new media art practice. In this instance, it is still driven by the author for I am the subject that writes and thereby articulates the arguments. But the crucial difference that I want to point at is the partial displacement of ethics from myself to the system due to our practice of new media arts. This demands a different form of ethics - one that makes me critical of the process that takes place between technology and subject. This is essential to comprehend my (our) subjectivity as I (we) practice, live and identify as a Malaysian. It is this intermingling between Malaysia and new media that enables modes of interaction with various manifestations of ‘doing’ in our practice.

The term ‘doing’ as conceived in the first chapter is the ‘*movement between the unfamiliar and the solidity of the seemingly firm epistemological certainty*’.²⁵ In the discussion of the Malay race in which the unfamiliar is ‘body’ and the certainty is ‘race’. While race as an identity is fixed by the nation-state, unfamiliarity occurs with the encounter of ‘other’ racially marked bodies. It is this configuration that makes the ‘doing’ inform Malaysian subjectivity. This ‘doing’ is inherently a conception that works in relation to these tenets. Nevertheless, in the new media art practice, the tenet changes whereby the encounter is between body and medium. In this configuration, the ‘doing’ is accelerated as both are in unfamiliar territory (both poles are impermanent, influencing each other and originating from me).

What I coin as ‘unfamiliar territory’ is ‘virtualization’²⁶ for Mark Hansen. Hansen argues for a new conception of the body’s relation to image and its affects. Through the concept of ‘virtualization’, he claims that bodies that encounter digital image do not experience the contact with the world through the usual modes of techniques, forms, and aesthetics. Instead, they gain such experiences via affect and sensation. Crucially his argument departs from the idea of thoughts as external and differentiated from the image – the mind/body duality. On the contrary, he offers a new way of understanding digital apparatus as a new embodied experience that filters the information we received

²⁵ Refer chapter 01.

²⁶ Mark B. N Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004), pg.146.

regarding the world around us. ‘Virtualization’ is the subject’s experience converged through technological substrates as a conventional and integral part of a new embodied presence.

This corroborates with the conception of human as always already technological, to follow Stiegler’s argument. It is in this coupling of medium/body²⁷ that critical reflection emerges – not because of the new media art practice, but due to the acceleration of ‘doing’ instigated by new media that aggravates subjectivity. The intention to bring these two configurations together is not to illustrate but to expose the ability of ‘doing’. This is done, not only to inform my subjectivity but also to speak back in reverse by reflecting my subjectivity to me.

²⁷ This coupling is addressed in neocybernetic argument as presented by Mark Hansen “Neocybernetic system theory radicalizes the constructivist epistemology inscribed within the first cybernetics by shifting to an autological rather than ontological theory of form. In neocybernetic theory, the form/substance dichotomy is superseded by the distinction between form and medium. Putting form and medium together, neocybernetic goes beyond classical ontology’s impasse – is it form, or is it matter, nothing, or everything? – before the oscillation of being and nonbeing.” Clarke and Hansen, *Emergence and Embodiment: New Essays on Second-Order Systems Theory*, pg.4.

Scenes of New Media

With regards to the artists' approach towards subjectivity in their new media practice, Niranjan Rajah (NR) and Hasnul Jamal Saidon (HJS) explained that their initial encounter with computer technology was an important part of their journey:

“NR: My first, major interrogation of subjectivity and identity has to do with the emerging of the Worldwide Web²⁸ and Netscape browser²⁹ – the newly meshed interface of computer networks. Also, the digital representation that was accelerating – the rate we could make images, by images I mean any kind of representation made possible for any signs to be captured, produced and distributed. These realizations were quite stunning for me and it happened in a very simple way.”

“HJS: My notion of an artist was deconstructed when I left Malaysia to pursue studies in the United States. Everything about my education was experimental and radical. I was very nervous about using technology due to my previous training. I was so naïve, not knowing what was going on but in retrospective, I see it as a necessary change for me. I was forced to acknowledge the use of technology and be critical of it.”

Crucially their encounter with computer technology brought about a ‘realization’ of their identity as an artist and this has made them critical of their practice, context, and surrounding. For Hasnul, it was a journey that had its path inward towards self-discovery. Meanwhile, for Niranjan, it was an exploration of materiality or physical presence in the world.

“HJS: I had to embrace the change caused by this inherent characteristic of new media and accept its influence in art-making. This became a catalyst for

²⁸ World Wide Web, or better known by abbreviation www is a system that enables the linking of various information through a hypertext document that is accessed via the Internet. Berners-Lee T. and Cailliau R. C.N., "WorldWideWeb: Proposal for a HyperText Project," World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), accessed April 3, 2014, <http://www.w3.org/Proposal.html>.

²⁹ Initially known as Netscape Navigator, the name was later changed to Netscape Browser when it was taken over by Microsoft Windows. It is application software that retrieves, presents and renders information on the World Wide Web. Debashis Aikat, "The Story of the Netscape Browser," UNC School of Journalism, accessed April 5, 2014, ibiblio.org/team/history/evolution/browser.html.

some sort of realization as I was struggling with notions of art, creation and my identity as an artist.”

“NR: In terms of my work I started seeing new media as a vehicle that changed my perception. The new infrastructure that was emerging was actually providing an articulation that I was trying to bring forth in my installation practice. So here I get to my first point of realization - of my identity as an artist through the Internet. It became apparent to me that the strategy I was struggling to achieve in the material was suddenly present in the new medium and it involves dematerialization.”

The encounter here exposes a ‘realization’ by Hasnul and Niranjana, during a particular moment in their lives. A moment contingent with the embodied experience and cognitive signification (such as practical skills of producing and understanding art) that disarray their norms of understanding art practice. This is deeply reflective of the moment in the 1990s where information processing technologies such as mobile phones and personal computers evolved from oddities to an essential. Technology became a ubiquitous part of everyday life. Talking about that era, László Z. Karvalics explains that the term ‘information society’ came to define that particular moment as technology was increasingly pervasive in its reach across the world making it possible for people to easily connect with one another. A sense of optimistic and democratic liberation was ushered with such radical-technological transformation.³⁰ The realization expressed by Hasnul and Niranjana is to be read against this backdrop.

Ronald W. Langacker distinguishes between the effective and epistemic conception of reality as “*Epistemic relations are those which hold at the level of knowledge, and thus involve conceptions of reality. By contrast, effective relations hold at the level of reality itself*”.³¹ I argue that this encounter that characterises Hasnul’s and Niranjana’s realization reveals a shift from epistemic to effective cognition. This corroborates with Stiegler’s

³⁰ In the words of László Z. Karvalics “Because of the latest “wonders” of the ever-accelerating technological revolution, and to the media reporting of these wonders, by the mid-nineties, the “acoustics” of the concept of information society were defined by increasingly stronger links with technology, and not by sociological or sociotheoretical models. For a while, the European Union’s political practice interpreted and used the concept in a way that was completely alien to its meaning almost declaring that the liberalization of telecommunications was equal to information society itself. They then, by transposing the hardware-software-internet complex, expanded it to include all the tools of informatics.” Z. Karvalics László, *Information Society Dimensions* (Szeged: JATEPress, 2009), Pg.16.

³¹ Ronald W Langacker, *Investigations in Cognitive Grammar* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009), Pg.291.

argument on two occasions. Firstly, these telecommunication technologies were not newly invented when it was discovered by Hasnul and Niranjana but the encounter caused a transformation on the level of thinking, or as how Stiegler says 'the unthought'. When the unthought is suddenly being thought, it transforms the outlook towards technology. Secondly, this shift from episteme to effective relation to reality also transforms the conception of technology from merely a tool to the formation of humanity itself. Again, referring to Karvalics, information society that came to define the nineties is described not based on the norms of socio or political models of reading a society but was driven by technological nature of information, and it was occurring on a global scale. This shift to 'effective cognition' become apparent when Hasnul and Niranjana describe their practice;

"HJS: I apply new media principles in my art production to investigate pre-modern artistic paradigms, particularly dealing with time and space. Referring to one of my works called 'in precious garden', I adapted Ismail Faruqi's³² Cultural Atlas of Islam³³ to explore the compatibility of Islamic principles with new media. Concepts such as 'modular', 'non-linear', 'interdependent', 'interactivity', 'micro verses macro', 'flux', 'multiplicity', 'simultaneity' seemed attuned. The work consists of an hour-long video converted into three different time orientations. I had one video as the original one-hour version; the second is compressed to five minutes, followed by another of thirty-five seconds. Basically, I used the mathematical equation in Islamic art to create fractions in time."

Hasnul's focus on time and space harken to Stiegler's idea of externalization whereby technology becomes an embodied criticality. Humans are the technological by means to inscribe time through the technical inscription of cultural objects. This is what Hasnul is interrogating by using Islamic art to create fractions of time – the very ability to gauge time.

³² Professor Isma'il Raji al Faruqi is a scholar of Islamic studies who has contributed vastly to the understanding of Islam. His investigation of Islam through various aspects of living such as ethics, politics, cultures, education, science, and economic has made a significant impact on the inter-faith and inter-culture dialogue, especially those that involve engagements between the East and West. Imtiyaz Yusuf and Isma'il R. Al-Faruqi, "Introduction," in *Islam and Knowledge: Al Faruqi's Concept of Religion in Islamic Thought : Essays in Honor of Isma'il Al Faruqi* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), pg.1.

³³ Isma'il R. Al-Faruqi and Lois Ibsen Al Faruqi, *Cultural Atlas of Islam* (New York: Macmillan, 1986)

“NR: Before my encounter with new media, I was pursuing critical enquiries of dematerialization. In practice, I was trying to create a space in which object, representation and spectacle were lumped together – to collide and create a sense of dematerialization. I found this already present on the Internet – a dematerialized space. What happened in the era of new media is that it became less important to develop the material. I was able to concentrate on the process that opens up various critical and philosophical questions, rather than worrying about creating an object. This is why the thrust of my whole practice is lack of work or lack of production.”

The realization of Hasnul and Niranjana is hinged upon a particular break in their conception of reality. It is an acknowledgment by them of an encounter with the ‘unthought’. Jessica Benjamin notes *“Such acknowledgementrequires a different understanding of both...symbolic representation and of the intersubjectivity of the analytic situation, each understanding furthering the other.”*³⁴ Benjamin’s description here involves an encounter between two human subjects. However, encounter here must be considered differently as it is between human and new media.

To put it differently, the realization of Hasnul and Niranjana is only possible through intersubjective experience. However, this intersubjectivity is beyond the conception of a human subject. In this situation, there is no guarantee of counter recognition from one end of the encounter because new media does not abide by the logic of symbolic representation. Instead, it is sovereign in its perpetual creation, manipulation, destruction, and recreation of the symbolic order. New Media is the ‘Other’, or the ‘dematerialized space’, as described by Niranjana. It is an autonomous space of complete strangeness and foreignness. Arguably, Niranjana’s critical investigation of dematerialization has to do with being Indian-Malaysian.³⁵ New Media has come to embody the dematerialization. Accordingly, Niranjana pursues his critical enquiry on the problems of identity with the alternative platform.

³⁴ Jessica Benjamin, "The Primal Leap of Psychoanalysis, From Body to Speech: Freud, Feminism, and the Vicissitudes of the Transference," in *Storms in Her Head: Freud and the Construction of Hysteria*, ed. Muriel Dimen and Adrienne Harris (New York: Other Press, 2001), Pg.53.

³⁵ This is based on an unpublished seminar paper by Niranjana Rajah titled ‘Performing the Readymade: The Failure of Marcel Duchamp/Self- Portrait of the Artist as a Model’ where he attempts to address the question of post-colonial (postmodern) identity as Indian-Malaysian and the difficulties of forging a truly international critical art practice. The paper was written in 1993, prior to his move back to Malaysia in 1995.

Hasnul, on the other hand, seeks to articulate the ‘unthought’ by finding similarities between New Media and Islamic principles. This is done by looking at ‘Time and space’ – the ‘Other’ for Hasnul. Returning to Benjamin, as she noted recognition of the Other demands a ‘different understanding’. It is this ‘different understanding’ that is being practiced through his art. The intersubjective in Hasnul’s case is examined through the lens of Islam and is related to the identity of being a Malay. ‘In The Precious Garden’ (ITPG) is a work created by Hasnul as part of his MFA thesis exhibition at RPI. While the detail of this work is examined in chapter 04, the point to note here is that this is an expression of Hasnul’s sense of rupture with identity. As he explains,

“I became more sensitive to my own personal positioning in regards to the complex webs of languages and discourses, sign system and its apparatus, as I negated myself in complex webs of multiple binary contexts (as in local/global, Western/Eastern, White/Non-White, Me/Others, Malay/Non-Malay, privilege/non-privilege, Muslim/Non-Muslim and many more) ITPG reiterated my early encounters with the reading of ruptures – my effort in searching for a temporal reconciliation with the ruptures in me.”³⁶

Following chapter 01, Islam has come to define and discipline a Malay. In New Media, this principle is challenged because New Media allows for the Malay to rediscover the Islamic identity through the reinterpretation of various theories³⁷ as opposed the rigid definition of the nation-state. Both Niranjana and Hasnul are instigated by New Media, although their response towards this provocation differs. This is because it is dictated by their racial identity. The break in the conception of reality affirms a particular moment in time, specifically the nineties as experience, expressed and examined by Hasnul and Niranjana. However, their instigated criticality was channelled accordingly with a purpose in mind. I argue that this purpose gives structure to facilitate the ‘doing’. In other words, the fluidity of new media that allows the practice to venture into various processes of making and articulating art is driven by their lived experience. Speaking of this, Niranjana explains:

“NR: When I arrived in Malaysia, it was akin to Kampung! (village).

Interestingly I found my place within this scenario and I saw the role of art in a positive way, especially after joining Unimas. Bringing all my baggage of global themes and aesthetics, I identified through my purpose. In other words, new

³⁶ Hasnul Jamal Saidon, "Journey Across Borders: Electronic Media and Performance," in *Relocations: Electronic Art of Hasnul Jamal Saidon & Niranjana Rajah*, ed. Roopesh Sitharan (Penang: Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 2008), pg.66.

³⁷ As Hasnul explains “My ruptures came through rather sporadic and flirtatious encounters (especially throughout the 90’s) with an odd combination of postmodern condition and theories, Eastern mysticism especially Sufism and Taoism, cybernetic paradigm and Quantum Physics.” *Ibid.*, pg.65.

media made me to discover a purpose for Malaysia and I believed in it. Of course, by participating I am also a player in the local art scene. But I saw myself as someone instilling a critical approach into our art scene.”

And Hasnul’s response to Niranjan’s reply echoes the similar sentiment:

“HJS: Although I didn’t realize it then, my practice was driven by questions of production. I think it would be safe to say we were motivated by the ability of new media to dissolve form. I see them as a necessary dissolution of identity and I engage this through my practice. You can see me being cynical with identity through my works such as ‘Mirror, Mirror on the Wall’. It was my way of teasing the Malaysian art scene. I was basically responding to the kind of environment that I was immersed - strongly motivated by Niranjan’s provocative questions. All these now stand as a testament of our critical reflection towards the scene and the circulation of identity, and perhaps it is an investigation of subjectivity.”

The purpose of Hasnul and Niranjan, especially as they are working together is clearly visible in the diverse body of works that they produced. ‘Purpose’ here operates as an act of positioning – a determination to situate themselves as well as New Media in the existing structures. It is seeking a spot in a particular order, be it the narrative of Malaysian art history or the socio-political framework of the Malaysian constitution. Brian Massumi explains *“Implicit in the determination of a thing’s or body’s positionality is a certain set of transformations that can be expected of it by definition and that it can, therefore, undergo without qualitatively changing enough to warrant a new name. These possibilities delineate a region of nominal defining – that is, normative- variation.”*³⁸

This ‘normative-variation’ is evident in their efforts. While in UNIMAS, Hasnul and Niranjan were persistently seeking a place for critical art inquiry amidst the technological development that was taking place all around them. Together they explored the latency of art within the national technology agenda that was set for commercial and administrative purposes. The significant outcome of their effort was the first electronic

³⁸ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), pg.9.

art show at the National Art Gallery of Malaysia in 1997.³⁹ It marks a crucial point in the trajectory of Malaysian art history. They introduced a new lexicon to present media works through their curatorial effort for the show. The transformation was visible because this lexicon was founded on Malaysia's own roots of cultural traditions that align with their theories and understanding of New Media phenomena. Undeniably, this exhibition stands as a monumental event but it is an act of locating electronic arts in the Malaysian art narrative. It is a re-conditioning of the 'doing' to normatively define the regulatory operation within the parameter of history.

Nevertheless, I argue they are well aware of this 'positioning'. The distinction between epistemic and effective relation is clearly articulated by Hasnul when he speaks of 'practice driven by the questions of production'. While as curator, writer, and educator they engage in the act of positioning but in their personal practice, the 'externalization' remains persistence.⁴⁰ For example, the work 'Mirror, Mirror on the Wall' is a video work by Hasnul done in 1994. It is a single channel video-loop that cuts between an animated, winking Van Gogh and Hasnul's struggle with impinging red lines. The work embodies a perennial criticality with his practice of art, a sort of 'doing' externalized through the creation of artwork. As a loop, all you see is a constant struggle of the artist against the cynicism of the Western model of Art history and theory as signified by the image of Van Gogh. The details of the work shall be examined in chapter 04, but the emphasis here is the act of production or 'externalization' brought into question through this piece for it mirrors the 'doing'.

Although this awareness of 'positioning' is also visible by Niranjana's practice, it differs from Hasnul's approach. Niranjana speaks of his practice as a performance:

³⁹ The exhibition presented video and animation works, computer installations, print media, CD-ROM projects, VRML and virtual works, real-time performance and Internet art. Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjana Rajah, *Pameran Seni Elektronik pertama* [catalogue]. (Malaysia: National Art Gallery of Malaysia, 1997).

⁴⁰ Hasnul explains during an interview with the author for his solo show "I was not really into shaping electronic art scene in Malaysia before. I was more interested in knowing and exploring. I was also not really interested in any particular kind of national agenda, even though I have to admit that I found it can be practical when it comes to applying for project grant or financial support." Roopesh Sitharan, *Relocations: Electronic Art of Hasnul Jamal Saidon & Niranjana Rajah* (Penang, Malaysia: Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 2008), pg.25.

“NR: With new media, I had a burst of realization, of the connections and gestures that are suddenly made available. I translated this realization into an embodied performance during my time in Unimas. I created a persona of myself while negotiating my existence. What I did when I arrived at Unimas was that I totally formalized my persona, to put on the identity as an academic. Now to negate this persona, I had a long hair. I know this might look insignificant but it’s an important part of my practice. This is how I embodied my practice. You could also say my perceived presence, as an Indian in a Malay environment.”

Body is a crucial substance that carries the weight of race, especially in Malaysia. Niranjana is well aware of the liminality that exists between body and identity that informs his subjectivity. His act of negation against the formalistic image of an academic must be counted as a performance piece that personifies the ‘doing’. ‘Doing’ as articulated in chapter 01 is a process of tacit knowledge. As a reason, I argue that it could only be articulated at the level of subjectivity. Niranjana makes a direct translation of his ‘realization’ - e.g. Niranjana translates “connections made available by technology” using his body (or what I would call trying to emulate the ‘doing’). A discrepancy in this correlation must be emphasized to differentiate in the ‘doing’ of New Media and a Malaysian. This has to do with the context of his performance.

Niranjana’s performance was done in University Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), a public university in East Malaysia. He started his academic career as a lecturer in arts management for the Faculty of Applied Arts. It was here that he had his long hair. The context of Sabah and Sarawak, or better known as East Coast of Malaysia differs from Peninsular Malaysia. This is because the states of Sabah, Sarawak (East Malaysia) and Peninsular Malaysia, all have dissimilar socio-cultural practices and different political histories.⁴¹ In particular, the identity politics of West Malaysia does not apply in East Malaysia because such politics does not accommodate the sheer diversity of ethnicities, faiths, languages, and lifestyles.

So, the performance does not necessarily reflect the similar kind of ‘doing’ as argued in chapter 01, or even as expected by Niranjana since the politics of Sabah and Sarawak, do

⁴¹ Lee Poh Ping, "Stability in racial divided Societies: Malaysia," in *The Accommodation of Cultural Diversity: Case Studies*, ed. Crawford Young (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press in association with UNRISD, 2002), pg.30.

not adhere to the definitions of racial identity as practiced in peninsular Malaysia. As a matter of fact, context is very crucial for the ‘doing’ for it is engrained in a particular reciprocity between identity politics and body. The peculiarity of political charge carried by a body strictly coincides with the ‘doing’, and therein lies the discrepancy in ‘doing’. While for New Media, a contextual basis of socio-political thought is not necessary to drive its ‘connections and gestures’ made available to a subject, or what I call as New Media ‘doing’ – however it is not the same for a Malaysian. ‘Doing’ as presented in chapter 01 is specific to the experience of a Malaysian from the peninsular. ‘Doing’ of New Media on the hand has a far-reaching significance that scales up to the level of collective human experience.⁴²

While as individuals, Hasnul and Niranjana had their own ways of practicing their art and criticality in practice, however as a duo they were operating in the local – Malaysian art scene. Since the beginning of the career in the early nineties, they have seen many changes to the local art industry. Speaking of this they explain;

“HJS: What we have today is practice without substance. This is based on my experience as the chief judge for the recent Bakat Muda.⁴³ I find it very important for us, especially in Malaysia to nurture criticality in practice. I know this might sound pretty cynical but we were not bothered about race. One of the characteristics that emerged from our practice is that identity is not a critical part of our partnership. This is because of the sort of practice that we were pursuing –new media goes back and forth between object and dissolution. This instils criticality in us, to recognize that identity is just another form of objectification. We had substance that was actively deconstructive of the sort of restriction imposed by identity.”

⁴² By this I am referring to the ability of New Media to facilitate connections and gestures online without any limitation and prejudice based on subject’s appearance or location. Following the claims by Warf and Grimes “The Internet is neither inherently oppressive nor automatically emancipatory; it is a terrain of contested philosophies and politics.” Barney Warf and John Grimes, "Counterhegemonic discourses and the Internet," *American Geographical Review*, April 1997.

⁴³ Bakat Muda Sezaman (young contemporaries’ competition) is a biennial event held by the National Art gallery of Malaysia to encourage artists below 40 to participate and gain national exposure. Local art experts from various fields serve as judge and the chief judge for the recent 2013 competition was Hasnul Jamal Saidon. Zanita Annuar and Sulaiman Esa, *Young Contemporaries in Review: 1974 - 1997* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1999), pg.21.

“NR: In my view, we need to look back and build our strength from what was done previously. There is no historical imperative and this is part of the ‘doing’ of our art scene – a constant state of amnesia and rearticulating. People who come back to dig things up are an oddity. Hasnul and I were odd at that time and the way you are working seems to be unusual.”

“HJS: Roopesh, did you read Simon Soon’s essay on the web 2.0?⁴⁴ He wrote about the current generation of new media artist. He claims the current generation is heavily invested in the practice and practical application of new media. This, he elaborates, creates a sense of empowerment that stretch beyond art and goes into politics and culture. He had works such as activism and community-based project that was instigated by the new media. This is the ‘doing’ of new media that you were referring to. It contributes towards the new forms of subjectivity – such as community building, creating critical awareness, and empowering activism.”

The Malaysian art scene has seen tremendous changes since the nineties. The rise of collectors from the local and international circuits has transformed art into Art or as a high-value commodity. I have argued elsewhere regarding this situation:

“In examining Malaysian contemporary art; the art that gains value (especially monetary value) among collectors and institutions are the ones that are strongly bolted with the logic of this system. Creation of an object is a must when it comes to producing art, and the significance of an object is dictated by the preference of the patron. Such firm hold on practice dictates the production as well as the definition of contemporary art...Now it may seem that I am imposing a harsh assessment on the system, but as my gesture might suggest, what I perceive to be operational is a skewed notion of contemporary art – a restrictive formula that churns a particular ideology of art - feeding the needs and demands of the market.”⁴⁵

Art in Malaysia is heavily dictated by the capitalist system. Such a system only allows for a restrictive ideology concerning art, especially fine arts to flourish. It creates a lexicon to structure and regulate art objects accordingly. The genre is essential for such commercial activity. Hasnul’s lament illustrates a confinement of contemporary art practice that limits the possibilities of art. Irit Rogoff notes *“Artistic practice is being*

⁴⁴ Simon Soon, "Notes on Art and Web 2.0," *Sentap!*, August 2, 2010

⁴⁵ Roopesh Sitharan, "Egalitarian in Practice: New Media and Contemporary Art," in *Young Malaysian Artists New Object(ion)II #YMA2U* (Kuala Lumpur: Galeri Petronas, 2013), pg.26.

acknowledged as the production of knowledge and theoretical and curatorial endeavours have taken on a far more experimental and inventive dimension, both existing in the realm of potentiality and possibility rather than that of exclusively material production."⁴⁶

What is happening in Malaysia is the opposite. This inventive dimension that explores potentiality requires criticality which is absent in practice. Instead, the emphasis is on the creation of art object because the infrastructure of Malaysian art economy operates as a link between two service sectors – namely the cultural and the commercial. This is an instance of the encounter between body and capitalism. Artists operate as labour for the demand and supply of neo-liberal capitalism. I argue that 'Doing' is subdued for the sake of economic benefit in the arts. This stands opposed to Stigler's notion of the 'unthought'. In this instance, creator precedes art, a position that presupposes art within which it forms a positivist outlook towards art.

New Media has been a vital ingredient for Hasnul and Niranjana in disrupting this positivist notion of art. Simon Soon illustrates this disruption in his article on Web 2.0. It was written in response to my article regarding the 1st internet Art in Malaysia in which I discuss Niranjana's internet art. His response is a clear indication of some of the ways in which 'doing' of New Media has come to occupy and transform contemporary art practice. The 'unthought' here is expressed in a sense of Soon's optimism ushered by Web 2.0, chiefly with the ubiquitous, user-generated nature of the internet. Recently Simon has written an updated version of this article for the 10th anniversary of the *Sentap!* Publication. In this, he reflects on the optimism of the past and the current predicament of New Media on Contemporary Art. This shall be examined in chapter 03.

⁴⁶ Irit Rogoff, "Irit Rogoff: From Criticism to Critique to Criticality," Eipcp.net, last modified 1, 2003, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0806/rogoff1/en>.

Scenes in Malaysia

This section of the discussion is concerned with the contextual premise of Hasnul and Niranjana's practice, particularly in Malaysia. Identity and its politics is a pretentious and sensitive subject with relation to the art practice in Malaysia. Hasnul explains the aspects of this sensitivity related to his practice and the way he theorises it:

“HJS: I am concerned with the way a particular language becomes a system of control. It dictates meanings, forms demarcation and creates artificial distinctions. By language, I am referring to institutionalized forms of practice, and this includes race, religion, identity, politics and even the art system that we have. Through my practice, I mutate the language. I mess with the language to evacuate its meaning. The idea is to negate any kind of fixed language that freezes meaning. I accomplish this by subverting the illusion. It's your own creation actually and new media is critically reflective to the forming and working of illusion. It makes me vigilant and awake to illusion. My level of engagement with new media is to negate, provoke, and reformulate identity”.

Race as a method of ordering society is deeply influential in the demography and politics of Malaysia. Malay identity was formally set through bureaucratic and civic institutions during the colonial administrative period. Inherited from the colonizer, the political expediency of 'race' reinforced a sense of identity when 'Malay' was defined constitutionally during independence. Here, one must note that 'identity' figures centrally for Malaysian citizenry. Identity, especially when racially defined involves the social construction of a bodily marked originality as a basis for a community. Responding to Hasnul's comment, Niranjana reiterates this necessity for racial identity in the social construction of a nation:

“NR: I completely agree with what you are saying Hasnul, however, we are bound by identity – regardless how awakened you are! We need some clothes for this subjectivity. Some sense of 'who' we are. If you can be 'constantly' critical of its artificiality then its good but most of the time we can't.”

The analogy of 'clothes' used by Niranjana and 'language' by Hasnul converge with Eze's argument regarding race as a physiognomic marker. In both of these analogies, the race

is reckoned as an invention and not an attribute of the subject. Identity as an invention is a not novel discovery by Hasnul and Niranjana. Postcolonial, postmodern and feminist theorists have intensely scrutinized identity, especially for its inadequacy of representing a subject. Hasnul is aware of such scrutiny when he encounters ‘language as a system of control’. He explains:

“HJS: My worry is total identification with your clothes! We have to be aware that the attire is not us but unfortunately, we tend to get confused. I am fine with people enjoying their clothes but not to claim the clothes as us - then we get into all sorts of trouble. For me, it might still be useful for many pragmatic reasons but it will never be us.”

But in the discussion, both of them express a particular discrepancy between the operation and artificiality of identity specific to their experience as a Malaysian. They have eventually accepted and lived with criticality and their discussion exposes the experience of living with an identity that is physically tangible yet profoundly symbolic. In the thesis, I use the term ‘doing’ to describe this experience. Both Hasnul and Niranjana are critical of the racial identity used as a conservatism of the Malay. Even though there is an underlying suspicion towards identity, their response is not contentious. This is evident when Hasnul says:

“HJS: I don’t look at it as confinement but instead it’s an act of negotiation. For me, identity is just an illusion created by language.”

I argue that ‘negotiation’ is a gesture of privileging what distinguishes the physical and the symbolic instead of dispelling the symbolic of its incompatibility with the physical. Dispelling (and accepting) is merely a political response (that carries a structure of a binary), towards identity. It is this kind of a response, that Hasnul is cautious towards making. Therefore, Hasnul and Niranjana savour the displacement of a subject caused by the discrepancy between lived experience and racial identity instead of opposing such a discrepancy. This savouring is due to their practice wherein new media art the symbolic float freely, allowing for a displacement or an act of ‘mutation’ as defined by Hasnul to be reconceived as potentiality. In this way their approach is worldly, acknowledging subjectivity through experiential approach rather than the latent meaning.

However, it could be argued that such an act of mutation is merely an act of modification that inevitability reinforces identity by sustaining the affinity with the ‘clothes’, or an act of essentialism. The pragmatic reason pointed out by Niranjana could lead to the ‘autonomy claim’ and trap of solipsism in order to device political affinity that regulates society. While Hasnul does offer a solution with his ‘negotiation’ idea, it is difficult to imagine this ‘negotiation’ without an example. When pushed on this, Hasnul responds;

“HJS: My answer to essentialism is the ‘Interfaces’ project. We hold our cultural and national identity strongly. From a pragmatic view, you can certainly argue for its defence. However, it is an artificial construct, or a product of objectification. Through the project, we played around with this process of ‘objectifying identity’. It became palpable that identity is not fixed but instead very fluid and dynamic. New media was provoking subjectivity, especially by intermediating national identity and physical appearance – a connection between body and new media.”

The project “Upload:Download” or better known as “UD” was conceived to probe, play with and tease this capacity to reflect upon the stable notions of identity. It is an experimental online project that was initiated by Hasnul and myself during Hasnul’s residency at Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in Japan from October to December 2003. While the project will be examined in depth in chapter 04, the mention of the project by Hasnul is pertinent and relevant here. The project is based on the collaborative process of uploading and manipulating portrait photos of people living in the ASEAN⁴⁷ region. The project was open for anyone to participate online, and the aim was to download and manipulate photos that were uploaded into a stereotypical face of a particular nationality of ASEAN. Through this process, the recognition of nationality by facial attributes was critically questioned. It is an embodiment of the encounter through practice. In this instance, the body (or the physical face) is coupled with the New Media, causing a perpetual manipulation of the physical attributes. I argue that the reflection was only possible through the connection between medium and body.

Meanwhile, Niranjana also offered his example;

⁴⁷ ASEAN means Association of Southeast Asian Nations which consist of Malaysia, Laos, Indonesia, Cambodia, Brunei, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

“NR: In terms of my work, let’s say my Telinga Keling – I was playing with the idea of perversely imposing identity⁴⁸ on my body. I deliberately wanted to assert my identity because what else do I have? I don’t want to walk around naked and so I have to deal with my clothes! I do want to acknowledge the signifiers, colors of life and what might consist the system. I want to create a conversation about it all the time and new media makes it possible.”

“Telinga Keling” (Keling Ears) is a self-portrait photographic work that was produced by Niranjana as part of an exhibition in 2002. In this work, Niranjana experiments with the name and form of a traditional Malay sweet by superimposing an image of traditional Malay cakes over his ears. Keling is a derogatory term used to identify Indian-Malaysians among the Malaysian crowd. While the origin of the word is debated by various scholars, however, it is a slur in the idiom of the everyday language. By juxtaposing the visual (his self-portrait with the traditional Malay sweet over his ears) and the title (telinga Keling), Niranjana emphasizes the correlation between the physical and the symbolic, or the language. By doing so, the coupling of body and identity is amplified to the level of perversion. The capacity to reflect is overloaded with the description and visualisation of a racial slur. Essentialism is deliberately utilized as a medium for the creation of the work. Telinga Keling signifies the ‘Malaysian doing’ - to expose Malaysian subjectivity by questioning the normalization of discrepancy between body and racial identity. These works shall be examined further in chapter 04.

Their practice is driven by their critical reflection upon the operation of new media in the context of Malaysia. This characteristic of new media and its effects on the nation-state is acutely observed by both Hasnul and Niranjana. Expanding from their practice as a basis, they elaborate their observation as:

“HJS: Malaysia at the moment is interesting but threatening. There seem to be two very disparate structures – one appears to be firm and other is very fluid. These structures coexist in Malaysia. I am referring to the nation state and new media. The nation state wants to be missionary as usual and is stagnant

⁴⁸ Identity here denotes being Malaysian Indian

underneath. Meanwhile, new media flows naturally as it allows various possibilities to emerge.”

‘Missionary’ because of the performative language that the structural meaning of Malay allows and ‘stagnant’ because it is still bound by the old rhetoric from a borrowed definition. The correlation between flow and possibilities is in stark contrast to the constitutional identity compartment that defies bodily experience. The flow here indicates the free transformation of sign and symbols. Identity in the new media allows for the body to be bereft of structural delimitation formally linking medium/body.

“NR: The network is constantly present across time and space because it connects everything but we keep closing it off. In Malaysia at the moment, the Internet is used to build barriers. Secondly, corporations close it in its totality when trying to secure the market. This is the kind of relationship that you encounter today. As far as I could see in relation to new media and Malaysia, art today belongs to spin-doctors on the Internet. They are creating havoc, beauty, ugliness, and craziness (which is the work of an artist) than we ever did, or even any new Malaysian artist is doing. This makes Malaysia a very exciting place. People are putting on clothes, taking off clothes, we don’t know who is wearing whose clothes, and we can’t identify who is speaking or who is listening. I see this as a de-linking instead of abrasion of identity from the body. What I realize is that certain people are de-linking quite radically in Malaysia, without even realizing that they are doing it. In Malaysia today new media has become the dominant player in the identity of a Malaysian. Politically this is affecting the future. For me, this is positive because all the things that couldn’t be spoken before are now out.”

With digital technology, interaction took place without any form of restriction or structural delimitation of identification and expression. Such unrestrained communication led to the growth of diverse online media and vibrant societies that operate outside official structures. What Niranjana calls ‘spin-doctors’ operate in this outside realm of ‘flow’. Here everything, whether official or unofficial flows freely, inadvertently revealing all the ‘ugliness and messiness’ that comes with a structure that carries less interaction. Politics in Malaysia is a delicate act of balancing between media and politics. This does not mean a fundamental change has occurred within the deep structure of Malaysian politics.

However, new media does place new challenges on the existing social structures by introducing new tactics and avenues for political dissent. Hasnul puts it as a necessary deconstruction in the political language:

“HJS: Perhaps this is exactly what we need – a real change, the deconstruction of language due to the collision of new media and nation state making it unreliable. When you rely heavily on a structure based on its historical relevancy and hereditary reasons, such dependency might not hold over time. People believe that such a long withstanding structure is stable and firm but it’s not. Instead, we have a clash between lived experience and inherited presence. You see it especially in the online media.”

Hasnul’s concern here is not the law that identifies and defines race for all Malaysian subjects, but rather the performative language that such a law enables to claim, regulate, and ascribe subjects in the name of racialized bodies. Niranjana, on the other hand, expresses a different sort of concern that comes out of this collision between new media and the nation-state:

“NR: What I don’t have a clue about is how this is going to turn out in terms of the back and forth movement – between the nation state and new media - as well as the historical evolution that will come out of this. People are not taking advantage of this situation - to go forward but instead, they are going in circles. This is causing us to stagnate and when we do, new media dominates or becomes even more aggressive. On that note, just to go deeper on my personal experience of Malaysia - one thing that has changed is the politicization of religion.”

While the basis for the operation of the Malaysian state is secularism, this system is tweaked to accommodate the Malay. The constitution defines a Malay as ‘a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language and conforms to the Malay custom. This definition is enshrined in Article 11 alongside the freedom to practice one’s faith. It is a fundamental contradiction in the constitution of Malaysia as the constitution sanctions a Malay as Muslim. Through this contradiction, both religion and politics are brought together on one hand, and on the other, there is also an exclusion of certain citizens. Malay identity is officially coupled with religious belief, which operates

in ways that threaten the secular state or the politicization of the religion. However, Niranjana offers a solution based on his experience from the past:

“NR: Back then religion was clearly understood as a dress and behind the dress we are all same in nakedness. That sense was strong. Especially the Malays would put aside religion more easily to deal with the human. So for example if you’re in their home during a prayer time, your difference is accommodated. You are not seen as an alien that smears the sacred space. On that human-sacred dynamic the Malays used to be able to cope with difference. Meanwhile, the ‘other’ as in the non-Malay – are used to coping with the dominance of the Malay. During those days, the non-Malay was less resentful. There was a sharing in spite of the divergence of the sacred space.”

To speak of this is only possible if you are standing in a secular space. ‘Malaysian’ is an identity of being part of a nation state, while Malay is a racial identity of being part of a communal group. Such communal identification also applies to others through identities such as Malaysian-Chinese and Malaysian-Indian. In both of these instances, the ‘Chinese’ and ‘Indian’ are inherited labels that supposedly reveal the original past, and marks a distinction of the Malay identity, as this is an enforced identity established by the Malaysian law upon its citizens. I argue that such differentiation is applied with a contamination of the ‘Malaysian’ that comes prior to the racial identity, or what I call as ‘doing’. In this contaminated space or a secular space of the nation, the ‘Other’ is able to engage and negotiate for a possible convergence through national identity and sovereignty. Niranjana further explains the current predicament with the new media:

“NR: Now that we came together but instead we could occupy our own space in close proximity to the other. This proximity became more and more distanced as I was growing up. But now the Internet has brought us all together again and what has emerged is this horrible space of abuse. This then moves back to the real space with things like ‘you cannot say Allah’.”⁴⁹

⁴⁹ This incident refers to a legal battle between a Catholic weekly newsletter called Herald and Ministry of Home Affairs over the use of the word ‘Allah’. Initially the ministry confiscated the newsletters and banned the use of ‘Allah’ by non-Muslims in their Malay language publication. The Catholic Church challenged the ministerial order through court. While the High Court decided in favour of the Church in 2010, but it was later overturned on appeal in 2013. This controversy over the use of ‘Allah’ stemmed religious contestation in the country, especially between Muslim and non-Muslim. For further information on this

However, a Malay not only exists as a racial identity (among many other identities) in the secular state of Malaysia, but it also serves as an official emblem of Islam. A threat of contamination to the Malay is a threat to Islam. This does not mean that the religion of Islam is in danger of being marginalised because the secularist framework guarantees freedom of any religious practice. On the contrary, secularism puts the Malay at risk of contamination and Islam becomes the absolute protector of Malay identity even at the cost of impinging disproportionately on the rights and freedoms of others. The operation of New Media disrupts this fine balance between the Malay-Muslim and Malaysian identities in Malaysian politics. I call this an encounter between New Media and the nation state.

This creates the Malay-Muslim reflex whereby the Malay completely discards the other to claim his right and place in the land as a defensive reflex for an imminent threat. If the path of reflex is to be followed, then what gets manifested is a perversion of Islam that performs not only in the form of a structural language of control and domination but also of public and private space of citizens by curbing the movement of Muslim liberals. Niranjana gave a fine instance of the non-Muslim who is unable to use the word ‘Allah’. This is a legal battle over the use of the word ‘Allah’ between a Catholic Church and the Ministry of Home Affairs. This incident signifies the ‘fine balance’ playing out in a secular state. In the end, the court decided the word ‘Allah’ will be banned from being used by Catholic Herald’s Publication, stating that if others use the term it could confuse Muslims and lead them to conversion from Islam. What is implicit in this judgement is that conversion is deemed as a threat not necessarily for the Muslims, but crucially for the Malays. While Niranjana was commenting on the position of Malay and Islam in the Malaysian society, it nevertheless is spoken as a non-Malay, in response to which, Hasnul interrupts:

“HJS: Speaking as a Malay in regard to what you said – the Malay community is not homogenous as well. It is very fragmented and fractured. We have different opinions and perspectives on various things. It is not precisely what

issue refer Jaelyn L. Neo, "What's in a name? Malaysia's "Allah" controversy and the judicial intertwining of Islam with ethnic identity," International Journal of Constitutional Law 12, no. 3 (2014).

you might say 'satu wajah' (single, unified entity) anymore! I don't think such an idea is workable now except if you want to align to a particular political party or ideology. Then perhaps such a symbol might help hold the oneness. But having said that, I think even political parties must realize that Malay is not homogenous. There are many different ways to define Malay – through various means of expressing, practicing and living.”

Hasnul discusses two distinct problems intrinsically hidden in the definition of Malay. Firstly, the incompatibility of the Malay with its description in the constitution. By this, he meant the ideological unity of Malay achieved through the solicitation of religion. Islam is taken to be synonymous with Malay, but these two concepts are not complementary to one another. This does not imply that a Malay cannot be Muslim. On the contrary, the restrictive interpretation of Islam by the nation-state reduces the diversity inherent in a Malay. And he goes on to say:

“HJS: If you start to structure Malay very rigidly then it becomes extremely difficult. What is happening now is accurate to what Niranjana has said. There has been an over-politicizing of religion and race. This is an antithesis to a spiritual form of elevation. To make matters worse, even the spiritual individuals who are meant to elevate people from becoming too confined are bound by the total identification to such structures.”

This leads to the second problem of a narrow and restrictive view of Islam. The Islam officially endorsed by Malaysia is the *Sunni* school of thought. Shi'ism was declared a diversion from true Islam in 1996 by the Islamic Council of Malaysia, effectively subjecting to punishment by law of any promotion of *Shia* religious interpretation of Islam. The conversion was not allowed and the *Shia* Malays were monitored by the Malaysian intelligence and security agents. There was a moment of synergy between these two schools of thought. However, speaking about this rupture Maszlee Malik elaborates, “*Nevertheless, the honeymoon period of this symbiotic form of Islam theology only lasted until the early 21st century, when in the wake of the global internet revolution, a consensus which had previously been arrived at disintegrated.*”⁵⁰ The discussion

⁵⁰ Maszlee Malik, "Theology in Malaysia: Between the Mainstream and the Periphery," *Hikma: Journal of Islamic Theology and Religious Education* 4, no. 6 (2013): pg.52.

between *Shia* and *Sunni* here is not to indulge in the details of various strands of Islamic teaching in Malaysia, but to demonstrate the repressive interpretation of Islam by the state. Additionally, Maszlee's findings also reveal the crucial role of not only new media but also all the state-controlled traditional media played in this repression through various policies and acts.⁵¹ This I argue is due to the disruption in the balance between Malay-Muslim and Malaysian. The threat that was imposed by such disruption is responded with a strict reiteration of Malay identity through a regimented teaching of Islam.

In all this, Niranjana's suggestion, and consideration of the non-Malay is vital for the opening up of Malay 'doing'. His approach is to allow various interpretations of Islam as a way forward for Malaysians to surpass their racial identity.

"NR: Finally, the most promising thing that I have seen on the Internet recently is Kassim Ahmad's⁵² move to reinterpret the Hadith. The Muslim and Malay community's idea of 'interpretation' is by handing down the truth from one individual to another. The Muslims in Malaysia are particularly constrained by this practice and they should start opening up. Of course, it is very dangerous for the Malay hegemony but it could also be the way forward."

This is perhaps possible because of the interaction that could happen between Malay and non-Malay when Islam is able to engage in a theological exchange with others. Rather it frees the Malay from the institutional rules of Malaysian politics that would by default advocate for the political liberation of all Malaysians from racial identity.

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Kassim Ahmad is a controversial figure in Malaysia. He has been detained under the Internal Security Act for being affiliated with socialism and communism and well known as the founder of Anti-Hadith movement. Central to this movement is the reevaluation and reinterpretation of Hadith as the basis for the Islamic Law as practiced by Malaysia. At the age of 81, he was charged in the Syariah court for insulting Islam during a speech at a seminar. Maizatul Nazlina, "Former Activist Kassim Ahmad Charged with Insulting Islam," The Star Online, accessed April 15, 2014, <http://www.thestar.com.my/News/Nation/2014/03/27/Court-Kassim-Insul-Islam>.

Question THREE: What it does?

Introduction

The question of “what is it” or more specifically, what is “new” in “new media” operates as a measurement in which we use our reasoning and faculty of senses to define a particular phenomenon caused by new media. In this method of enquiry, the subject that questions is stable and external to what is being investigated, a passive yet critical observer whose conscious intentions are more or less irrelevant to the phenomenon itself. Only by “objectifying” the phenomenon, is the subject able to provide a satisfactory answer; for the probing of “newness” in new media is a calculation of a progression as sensibly experienced by the subject fixed in a position, a reflective toss to define and mark the “new” by comparing and contrasting to what is “old”. In this limelight, any answer provided in response to the question directs attention to ways in which the subjects’ position is reiterated as authoritative – an enunciating subject who comes prior to the articulation. My aim here is not to dismiss this positioning of a subject altogether. But instead, to offer an explanation of the phenomenon in the light of the apparent “fleeting nature” that is so often attributed to new media by approaching new media art as a transformative force that decenters a subject.

To do so, the chapter must make a similar strategic maneuver as that presented in Chapter 01 – from asking “what is it” to looking at “what it does”. In doing so, the phenomenon is conferred with a power over everything else, including the positionality of the subject that is affected by it. This is contradictory to the generic inquisition which looks for definitions of things through explanatory descriptions to articulate causes instead of its “doing”. However, the term “new media” is not dismissed with such an approach for it is widely used throughout the thesis to portray a particular sort of art practice. Such a description is not meant to identify and categorize an art practice, just like plastic art. Conversely by approaching the term “new media” through its “doing”, the chapter highlights the phenomenon; to be precise, an occurrence of indeterminacy that transpositions a subject from an autonomous, unified and a stable position to dissent, or what I have referred to in the previous chapter as “to agitate”. This is caused by affective intensities induced by new media in art practice that operate as a form of discursive resistance to any form of signification. In other words, the expression “new media art

practice” in the context of the thesis does not imply a taxonomy in practice but instead, a divergence in positionality; a “doing” that carries political valence in the context of Malaysian art and politics.

Such enforced criticality on the term “new media” is essential for the thesis especially in the context of Malaysia. This is because, in Malaysian studies, the term has been framed as somewhat of a pin board, a holder to be precise, of various enunciations of identities in an attempt to gauge what is happening to Malaysian society by means of observing and reflecting on the phenomenon it instigates. Yeoh Seng Guan explains it thus: “*With good reason, the emerging field of new media has therefore attracted the growing attention of researchers because it is viewed as creating new spaces for alternative voices that provide the focus both for specific community interests as well as for the contrary and the subversive.*”¹ These alternative voices might operate as the necessary dissent to the official voice of the nation-state. Nevertheless, these voices still function as symbols that depend on existing semiotic structures to define their meaning and function.

Simply put, alternative voices are identities that abide by the logic of binary politics – insider/outsider. I am not against such voices of dissent; in fact, any opportunity for resistance is rare in Malaysia since all channels of expression are heavily guarded by the nation-state.² But what troubles me is the general tendency of Malaysian researchers to treat new media under a positivist outlook, or as merely a platform for the emergence of such marginal identities. “New media” as a term has become what I call a “reverse tautology”.³ It has been used, reused, over-used and abused in Malaysian studies to the extent that it has been exhausted of its meaning if any. What this means is that the “term” has become a malleable rhetoric used easily as an additive with other theoretical structures in exploring (and explaining) the contemporary Malaysian experience.

¹ Yeoh Seng Guan, "Representation, cultural mediation and power in Malaysia," in *Media, Culture and Society in Malaysia* (London: Routledge, 2010), pg.2-3.

² Fausto Barlocco, *Identity and the State in Malaysia* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), Pg.50.

³ Oxford dictionary defines tautology as “the saying of the same thing twice over in different words, generally considered to be a fault of style”. By reverse tautology, I am inverting the meaning of the term “tautology” by focusing on the unnecessary repetition of a term (word) using dissimilar meanings that effectively say the same thing. "definition of Tautology," Oxford Dictionaries Online, accessed April 28, 2012, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/tautology?q=tautology>.

Nation-building through technological progress

No doubt there have been radical changes to Malaysian society since independence. The implementation of long-term plans of modernization for the country was made possible by having six consecutive prime ministers from the same ruling coalition. Especially during the nineties with the introduction of Vision 2020 and Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), the government steered the country towards globalization and technological changes that have altered the socio-economic landscape of Malaysia. Notably, such changes are marked by the liberalization of information that has transformed the common perspective on Malaysian politics. Ideologies perpetuated by the nation-state were greatly challenged by the proliferation of various perspectives, opinions, and voices of dissent as the expression was freed from the strictly controlled media environment of the nation-state to unregulated online communication.⁴ I argue that researchers in Malaysian studies have difficulties in keeping up with such changes as online media is approached from a functionalist perspective. Such a perspective does not take into consideration the underlying intrinsic changes that occurred at the level of subjectivity. Instead, it is focused on the instrumental operation of new media by assuming that it simply exists in the political landscape. Changes induced by new media are treated merely as a change in the positionality of a sovereign subject and/or nation-state, alongside their relation thereof.

Unknowingly, this outlook of “positionality” aligns well with the agenda of the nation-state. Rosyidah Muhamad argues that the main reason for the introduction of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)-related policies in the nineties was to compete in a globalized world.⁵ The aim was to position Malaysia on par with other developed countries of the West. Speaking about the government’s approach to globalization, the ex-deputy prime minister of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim explains:

“We must approach globalization from a position of strength and confidence. Globalization has done us good service, particularly in the economic sphere, a sphere in which the table has been turned, with the dominator fearing the loss of his domination. The precise reason why globalization has become a buzzword in Europe and North America is that it is set to change their economic fortunes.

⁴ The government decided not to control nor censor the internet because they were worried such restriction would deter investment and discourage innovation in the sector. Jason Abbott, "The Internet, Reformasi and Democratisation in Malaysia," in *The State of Malaysia: Ethnicity, Equity, and Reform*, ed. Edmund Terence Gomez (London: Routledge, 2006), Pg. 80.

⁵ Rosyidah Muhamad, "The development of ICT and its political impact in Malaysia," *Journal of Borneo Social Transformation Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015).

Since the rise of the Atlantic societies, Asia has had to adjust itself to external elements and these centuries have prepared Asians to accommodate externally induced changes.”⁶

Meanwhile, ex-prime minister of Malaysia, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, speaking about the MSC also reiterates similar rhetoric on the need to attain the status of a fully developed nation as he says:

“At that time, England launched the Industrial Revolution but America won it. Why? Because the technology could be moved to an environment much more conducive to realizing its full potential. Malaysia has come late to industrialization, and this has given us the will and skill to make sweeping changes that others cannot because we have much less to lose. The MSC provides all the critical components required to create the perfect environment to achieve the promise of Information Age.”⁷

Both arguments are based on the logic of “comparison”, a binary that comprises them and us. By reinforcing such a dualistic structure of identification, the oppositional stance is justified to oppose the West. I argue that such a stance is a strategy of positionality on a macro-level by the nation-state that ironically reflects the sort of positionality expressed by voices of dissent within the nation-state of Malaysia. This correlation between the macro and micro levels of politics reveal the underlying, inherent purpose of policies that have always been followed through since independence.

As explained in the literature review, the nineties saw some radical socio-economic shifts as new policies were introduced by the government to move the country towards an accelerated progression in attaining the status of a first world nation by the year 2020. 28th February 1991 marks an important day in Malaysian history as it was the moment when Vision 2020 was unveiled by the ex-prime minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad during a conference hosted by the Malaysian Business Council. In a paper presented by him, titled ‘Malaysia - The Way Forward’ he elaborated on the government’s intention to transform Malaysia into a fully industrialized nation by the year 2020. In his speech, he explained that the vision encompasses all aspects of Malaysian society, which include the economic, political, social, spiritual, psychological and cultural dimensions.

⁶ Anwar Ibrahim, "Globalization and Cultural re-Empowerment of Asia," in *Globalisation: The Perspectives and Experiences of the Religious Traditions of Asia Pacific*, ed. Joseph A. Camilleri and Chandra Muzaffar (Petaling Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia: International Movement for a Just World, 1998), pg.2.

⁷ Mahatir bin Mohamad, "Global Bridge to Information Age," *New Straits Times*, January 16, 1997.

The achievement of such an all-encompassing transformative effort demands the implementation of various initiatives and projects. In line with social and cultural transformation, the idea of '*Bangsa Malaysia*' (Malaysian nation) was introduced. The aim was to establish a generic identity for the nation that would seal a common goal and shared destiny among all Malaysians. Importantly, this was deemed necessary for addressing the racial cleavage among Malaysians that could cause political instability, thus hindering the government's vision. Through '*Bangsa Malaysia*' the rhetoric of political loyalty was firmly established as the policies were implemented. Meanwhile, in terms of economic progress, the aim was set to transform Malaysia into a knowledge-based economy by creating a technological environment that would attract leading technology companies and investors.

The Multimedia Super Corridor (better known by the acronym MSC) was established in 1996. The corridor is an area that covers approximately 15km by 50km which stretches from the Kuala Lumpur Business District to the Kuala Lumpur International Airport. The corridor also hosts Cyberjaya – a town that aspires to be the Silicon Valley of the east⁸, and Putrajaya – a new federal administration district. Both of these newly-established cities played a powerful symbolic role in articulating the national identity in the progressive limelight of Vision 2020. Significantly, to attract foreign investors, the government established the Bill of Guarantee in which Article No.7 explicitly ensures that Internet content will not be censored. In short, MSC functioned as the demarcated open space for the development of technological infrastructure to host tech-based companies in Malaysia.

Such an approach to nation building through technological progress is followed by another demand to equip society with the necessary knowledge and provide the essential workforce for such an industry. Accordingly, Malaysian society was introduced to various programs by the government to “construct an ostensibly national version of an information society and economy.”⁹ Even the nation's governance was turned into an electronic administration as ICT applications were widely used to network and integrate

⁸ Nicole Kobie, "Cyberjaya: Malaysia's Failed Silicon Valley is Trying to Reboot," WIRED UK, last modified April 5, 2016, <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/malaysia-cyberjaya-silicon-valley-smart-cities>.

⁹ Tim Bunnell, *Malaysia, Modernity and the Multimedia Super Corridor: A Critical Geography of Intelligent Landscapes* (Routledge, 2004), Pg.124.

public services across various ministries.¹⁰ Crucially for the thesis, the introduction of the MyKad must be highlighted as it was a smartcard that was issued to every citizen of Malaysia and contained information on the owner's racial identity and religious belief.

Currently, the MyKad serves as a key to managing access to government and private services in Malaysia. Such an innovation in governance and technologically driven liberation entangles a Malaysian subject with increasingly sophisticated and complex new media technologies in which the instantaneous interaction and open communication between subjects unsettled demarcated stable entities and contexts. This is where ideologies and official narratives are challenged by the proliferation of dissenting voices as explained earlier.

Nation-state and the positionality of a subject

However, technology is not new to the operation and formation of a nation-state. As expressed by thinkers such as Adam Smith in the eighteenth century and more recently by Benedict Anderson¹¹ who describes the connection between nationalism and the printing press, the evolution in technology such as the progress in the method of communication has facilitated social and political change that directly influence the way in which a society organizes itself. In that same manner, it is inherent for changes to be instigated by new media in the present and the future as technology develops further. But a critical consideration must be made to articulate the changes induced by new media because of reasons mentioned earlier in the paper. There is a distinction in the operation of new media compared to previously existent technologies. The reason for focusing on "new media art practice" is to unearth this "distinction" through the phenomenon of subject-decentring as experienced in practice. I argue that such an examination on the level of subjectivity can only be ascertained through art practice and not through any other usual method of researching of which I shall elaborate further later on.

¹⁰ For detail reading of every aspect of e-government, refer Noore A. Siddiquee, "E-Government and Innovations in Service Delivery: The Malaysian Experience," *International Journal of Public Administration* 31, no. 7 (June 2008), doi:10.1080/01900690802153053.

¹¹ I am referring to 'The wealth of nations' by Adam Smith and "Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism" by Benedict Anderson.

Returning to the correlation between the voices of dissent and the government's ambitions for the nation with vision 2020, these two levels of politics (micro and macro) reflect an entanglement that speaks of a deeper truth in terms of the racial identity that pervades any level of politics in Malaysia. Speaking of Vision 2020, especially in terms of wealth distribution, Beng-Lan Goh writes:

*“Despite these new departures, Vision 2020 has not abandoned the commitment to wealth distribution along ethnic lines. This was reflected in a recent controversy over a press statement by Chinese businessman who, in his capacity as deputy chairman of the National Economic Consultative Council (NECC), spoke about proposals on lowering the Malay quota in certain industries. His remark sparked adverse reactions among the Malay political and business community, leading to the public reassertion by the Prime Minister, Dr. Mahatir, that the Malaysian government ‘will not back down, not even by one step, in defending the Malays...’ As in the past, Vision 2020 is still strongly aligned with state-implemented policies and reforms that reflect government’s own vision of future.”*¹²

I argue that the assertion of ex-prime minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad speaks of the government's inability to abandon racial politics as the distinction between the Malay and the other is constantly reinforced and retained. It is a foundation which overwrites policies that would operate otherwise. In this respect, the concept of *Bangsa Malaysia* that was introduced prior to Vision 2020 will certainly lead to ideological contestation and debates over such a collective identity as it does not reflect the government's approach in implementing economic policies and wealth distribution within Malaysia's multi-racial society.

In many ways, the new policies that were introduced during the nineties and the grand vision that was envisaged for Malaysia is an extension, or a follow up from the New Economic Policy (NEP) that was introduced in 1970. Focused specifically on addressing the economic imbalance between different races in Malaysia, the NEP is a concerted effort by the Malaysian government to elevate and improve the Malay standard of living by setting aside a large proportion of corporate wealth and employment for the Malays. Vision 2020 is a response to such a racially focused policy, given the trend of globalization that was pervasive in the nineties. Tham Siew-Yean argues that *“consequently it would be more accurate to describe Malaysia’s approach toward globalization as one that sought not ‘close’ but selective integration with the world*

¹² Beng-Lan Goh, *Modern Dreams: An Inquiry into Power, Cultural Production, and the Cityscape in Contemporary Urban Penang, Malaysia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2002), Pg.52.

economy. In other words, Malaysia integrated up to the point where it was useful for the country to do so...”¹³ This limit of usefulness is dictated by the permitted threshold of interference as globalization permeates local and racial politics in Malaysia.

But Dr. Mahathir Mohamad was not naïve in declaring such an underlying premise openly for his Vision 2020, which is premised upon a rivalry with the West, a shift of identifying the “other” - from local to the global that advocates a sense of unity among Malaysians against its past colonial masters. He explains that “*In this era, we need strength from being colonized in a new way. This strength does not mean military form, although, to a certain extent, it is needed. The strength we need is the strength that comes from political stability, economic health, social justice, efficient administration, the acquisition of knowledge and sophisticated technology which is no less than the developed country.*”¹⁴ These different aspects of strength operate as an ambiguous rhetoric, free from any racial sentiment that would benefit any Malaysian regardless of their racial or religious background.

However, the two statements of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad that I quoted are essentially contradictory in nature and lean on an inexact position taken by the government regarding racial equality in Malaysia as promised by the vision. Voices of dissent exist in this imprecision of the government’s positionality whereby various oppositional perspectives get proliferated online seeking impartiality in politics within the racialized society of Malaysia.¹⁵ These online voices of dissent were certainly inflamed further by the internal split when Dr. Mahathir Mohamad sacked his Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in 1998 causing disunity among the Malays.¹⁶

While I acknowledge that there is a correlation between political turmoil in the nineties and the wide acceptance and utilization of online media among Malaysian society, the intent of this chapter is not to identify the methods and ways in which new media was

¹³Tham Siew-Yean, “The impact of Globalization on Malaysia,” in *Globalization in the Asian Region: Impacts and Consequences*, ed. Chris Nyland and Gloria Davies (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2004), Pg. 63.

¹⁴ Quote from Tim Bunnell’s essay in Tim Bunnell, "Multimedia Myths and Realities: Contesting Technological Utopianism in Malaysia’s Multimedia Super Corridor," in *New Perspectives in Malaysian Studies*, ed. Mohd. Hazim Shah, Jomo K.S., and Kai Lit Phua (Bangi, Selangor Darul Ehsan: Malaysian Social Science Association, 2002), Pg.282.

¹⁵ My argument is based on the pioneering work of online journalism by M.G.G. Pillai where he started online mailing-list called *Sang Kancil* (Mouse Deer) in 1996 to discuss current affairs of Malaysia that was not allowed in mainstream media due to its sensitivity and anti-establishment views.

¹⁶ In 1998 Anwar Ibrahim, then the Deputy Prime Minister to Dr. Mahatir was sacked

used in the context of Malaysia. Instead, the aim here is to underline a fundamental premise by which new media was treated, and accepted by both - the society and the government alike, that heavily influenced the way new media is perceived today. Regardless of the political alignment, the official or unofficial use of online media and the societal transformation that was inducted by technology – all these aspects reinstate the “positionality” of a subject by treating new media as a tool to restore, negate and even create a new Malaysian subject.

In this way, Vision 2020 was formulated to utilize technology as a tool for progression without realizing its potential. Similarly, the voices of dissent utilize online media as a tool without understanding its cultural implications and various technological devices such as MyKad were introduced not to introduce new forms of belonging but to reestablish existing frames of identification. Picking up from Stiegler’s argument and Chapter 02 of the thesis, it is clear that the criticism is valid, for the subject presupposes technics in its “positionality” and as such technics remain a tool conceived by the subject, resulting in the positivist outlook towards new media.

New Media and the displacement of the subject

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun speaking about new media explains:

“Unlike its predecessor, the term “new media” was not accommodating: it portrayed other media as old or dead; it converged rather than multiplied; it did not efface itself in favour of a happy if redundant plurality. The singular plurality of the phrase (“new media” is a plural noun treated as a singular subject) stemmed from its negative definition: it was not mass media, specifically television. It was fluid, individualized connectivity, a medium to distribute control and freedom. Although new media depended heavily on computerization, new media was not simply “digital media”: that is, it was not digitized forms of other media (photography, video, text), but rather an interactive medium or form of distribution as independent as the information is relayed.”¹⁷

Chun’s description distinguishes new media from all previous media. This distinction is hinged upon a specific operation of new media that is defined in terms of “connectivity

¹⁷ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "Introduction: Did somebody say New Media?," in *Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*, ed. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Thomas Keenan (New York: Routledge, 2006), Pg.1.

and interactivity” that espouses a mediated computational encounter with the subject. Previous media such as the newspaper and television operate as “representational” mediums that convey symbols in which a subject encounters and comes to recognize ‘the self’ through cultural and social semiotics according to the particularity of its distribution context. For example, I would view a movie on a television and be able to relate and understand what is being conveyed visually by the cultural and social association that I make with what I encounter.

While such previous media certainly have their footing in terms of cultural and social influence, even political transformation as pointed out earlier with the connection between printing presses and the formation of nationality; nevertheless it is still bound by logos¹⁸ centered around the rational, Cartesian subject. Such representational forms of communication present the subject as unified and stable by reinforcing a clean and proper body that appears homogeneous in a way that limits the encounter between body and medium. It is a media that regulates symbols and signs for mass distribution to reach as many people as possible. Chun points at this peculiar characteristic of previous media where she says *it (is) not mass media, specifically television*.¹⁹

With new media, the information perceived through interactivity and connectivity also encounters the subject through such existing semiotics structures or logos. But at the same time, it is also relayed through algorithmic computation systems in which it is autonomous and outside the sense of human perception. Such a computational ability also allows for the relay to be integrated with all previous media such as text, video, and sound into which it is able to conceptualize a new interactive interface of the encounter between information and subject. Such parallel operation of logos and computation systems in the encounter is evidenced in the very basic, literal act of me writing this thesis using a word processing software.

While my choice of writing in a particular language (English) operates through a linguistic and semantic structure (logos), enabling me as the author to communicate with the reader and express my ideas and arguments, this is only possible by the working of a

¹⁸ By this I am referring to Logocentrism as explained by Derrida where he points of characteristic of texts, theories, modes of representation and signifying systems that generates a desire for a direct, unmediated, given hold on meaning, being and knowledge. Elizabeth Gross, "Derrida and the Limits of Philosophy," *Thesis Eleven* 14, no. 1 (1986): Pg.27.

¹⁹ Chun, "Introduction: Did somebody say New Media?," Pg. 1.

parallel computation language in the background of my word processing software that translates my somatic input on the keyboard into alphabets and words on the screen. The software is even able to suggest corrections for my writing (as I write) according to the semantics of the English language by cross-checking my writing with an online database. Accordingly, I argue, that with the rapid progression of computational ability in ICT, such autonomy must be taken into serious consideration in examining the operation of new media for such an ability heavily dictates the way in which encounters occur while concurrently destabilizing the position of a subject.

This is because with rapid progression of ICT in recent years - both in terms of its technical ability as well as its mass appeal, life, in general, has become completely reliant on a digitally-supported existence in which everything we do is either integrated or supported by a technological device. Interactivity and connectivity is now such a part and parcel of living that it has become a norm in the everyday operations of humans. In this scenario, terms such as ‘Big Data’²⁰ become common as more and more people connect and interact via technological devices, demanding that the system is managed by a self-regulatory process. This self-automated and administered system causes a slippage in logos whereby our encounter and capacity to grasp information is unable to keep up with the speed and vastness of information that is directed at us by the system. Such an acceleration disrupts the uniformity of a subject by undermining the presence of the body as a crucial component for the operation of ‘logos’ to connect and reinforce a subject and its existence in the world. Speaking about this, Franco “Bifo” Berardi explains:

“It is in this way that meaning can be totally forgotten, but information can continue to move. When more signs buy less meaning, when there is an inflation in meaning, when the info-sphere accelerates and your attention is unable to keep up, what do you need? You need someone who makes things easy for you. It’s a problem of time... In this situation, we need to reactivate our ability to connect language and desire, or the situation will become extremely bad. If the relationship between the signifier and the signified can no longer be guaranteed by the presence of the body, we lose our relationship to the world. Our relationship to the world will become purely functional, operational—probably faster, but precarious.”²¹

²⁰ “Big Data technologies is a new generation of technologies and architectures designed to economically extract value from very large volumes of a wide variety of data by enabling high-velocity capture, discovery and analysis” Borko Furht and Flavio Villanustre, *Big Data Technologies and Applications* (2016), Pg.5.

²¹ Franco “Bifo” Berardi, "Time, Acceleration, and Violence," *e-flux*, no. 27 (September 2007), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/27/67999/time-acceleration-and-violence/>.

As I have argued in Chapter 02, this scenario is what I call - a coupling of medium/body in which critical reflection emerges. The connection between body and subject is severed by the acceleration, or reconceptualization of time in which the subject is unable to utilize the body for the signification of a subject's presence in space and time. As Franco says, the *body becomes purely functional, operational – probably faster, but precarious*.²² It seems precarious because the positionality of the subject is threatened by the detachment of subject/body. I argue that this is an important peculiarity in articulating new media that must be applied in examining the Malaysian scenario, for the displacement is akin to the “doing” that is inherent in any Malaysian subject and it is reflected through new media art practice.

Returning to the focus of the chapter, the point here is to emphasize that “new media”, as practiced by artists presented in this thesis, demonstrate new media art practice in terms of a “doing” that causes affective intensities. Such an approach towards examining new media art practice demands the study to move away from the positivist and functionalist approach of the new media as prescribed by the nation-state, to the adaptation of Stiegler's argument on technics to consider new media as a form of apprehending subject in terms of or as technical objects. This is why the choice of having my act of writing as an example is deliberately repeated from Chapter 02 to extend the argument and place it within the context of Malaysia, especially in the operation of new media and the nation-state that would underline the displacement of a Malaysian as a sovereign subject.

Referring once again to Franco - *it's a problem of time* for technics records memory and creates temporality of time in which a subject becomes self-conscious. Such an “exteriorization” becomes “a problem” with new media due to its self-regulatory ability to conceive time autonomously outside the logos. But this does not mean all other forms of media that came prior to new media are not an “exteriorization” that creates a temporality of time. In fact, it is precisely this ability of previous media that was utilized by the nation-state to perpetuate certain forms of identification among subjects. Nationalism was born through such “exteriorization” in which printing press created a temporal time that was able to unify subjects across time and space through the dissemination of information giving rise to the realization of potential agency inherent in a subject through affinity in identification.

²² Ibid

But the problem arises when such examples are used as a foundation for examining new media which, firstly, there is an oversimplification of any media to the level of a tool and secondly, there is an affirmation of positionality of the person examining and the subject affected by such operation of media as a device. Arguably, Benedict Anderson²³ and Adam Smith²⁴ were indeed hinting at the ability of media to constitute consciousness but their study falls short of Stiegler's because it was focused on the formation of identity rather than subjectivity. Adapting Stiegler's argument, Mark Hansen clearly articulates this distinction of focus by articulating the operation of new media in constituting time as he explains:

*“Notwithstanding its double break with twentieth century's time-based media (double in the sense that it is neither time-based nor yet another medium), digital technics is all about time, which is to say, all about new modes of measurement and artifactualization of time in our world today. And because the human is necessarily involved in any invocation of the world as 'our' world, digital technics is furthermore all about our changed human relation to the artifactualization of time. To summarize the conclusion of my current work on twenty-first century media, digital technics impacts the experience of time in a way that is, in large part, outside the frame of media: the digital inscription of time today occurs at an infrastructural level and at temporal scales that are beneath the threshold of consciousness and perception, and also of the various media – cinema being the most significant – that extend their retentional and memorial agency.”*²⁵

In this argument, Hansen makes an important observation regarding new media that differs from previous media. The claim of being completely *outside the frame of media* indicates a clear dissimilarity in terms of the conception of time between old and new media. With previous media, the subject is privileged as time is experienced by a synthetic operation that necessarily involves a human form of semiotics perception. With new media, time is decoupled from the bodily signification causing the collapse of the distinction between time and space as perceived by a subject. This is why Hansen states that *“time today occurs at an infrastructural level and at temporal scales that are beneath the threshold of consciousness and perception”*.²⁶ Being below the limit of consciousness

²³ I am referring to Benedict Anderson's publication in 1983 titled 'Imagined Communities: Reflections and the Origin and spread of Nationalism'.

²⁴ I am referring to Adam Smith's publication in 1776 titled 'Wealth of a Nation'.

²⁵ Mark B.N. Hansen, "Technical Repetition and Digital Art, or Why the 'Digital' in Digital Cinema is not the 'Digital' in Digital Technics," in *Technology and Desire The Transgressive Art of Moving Images*, ed. Rania Gaafar and Martin Schulz (Bristol: Intellect, 2014), Pg. 73-74.

²⁶ Ibid.

indicates that time operates outside the semiotics of human perception in which it functions purely on machinic protocols that detach time from the activity of signification.

But the subject is not completely eradicated by new media. Instead, the machinic protocol dethrones subject from its positionality as it operates on the level of subjectivity (as explained by Guattari in Chapter 02). Specifically, I am referring to the “non-human pre-personal parts of subjectivity” that involve “machinic apparatuses” in which new media art practice abides. Such a decentering of the subject manifests in the form of affective intensities in practice, or what I express as agitation in practice. By affective intensities, I am referring to expressive manifestations of embodied experience that are revealed through various channels of production inherent to the operation of new media. But this should not be simply taken as another form of artistic expression as defined in the discourse of art history. Simon O'Sullivan defines affect by referring to Brian Massumi, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari as such:

“Affects can be described as extra discursive and extra-textual. Affects are moments of intensity, a reaction in/on the body at the level of matter. We might even say that affects are immanent to matter. They are certainly immanent to experience...As such, affects are not to do with knowledge or meaning; indeed, they occur on a different, asignifying register. In fact, this is what differentiates art from the language”²⁷

In the context of the thesis, this *reaction in/on the body at the level of matter* is caused by the coupling of body/media in which it could only be expressed in art. Any other channel of manifestation could easily be trapped by the bearings of logos to formulate *knowledge* and conceive *meaning* through means of signification. But this does not mean that works of new media art produced by the artists represented in this thesis are completely unreadable. Instead, as Charles Altieri explains, new media art practice is a combination of “*corporeal responsiveness with a corresponding imaginative dimension*”²⁸ in which it stimulates thoughts by sustaining the sensation that thrusts the audience into an encountered and embodied mode of critical inquiry. In doing so, the works provide visual indices of complex embodied experiences by transducing, condensing, and rearticulating the racial sensibility that permeates Malaysian society

²⁷ Simon O'Sullivan, "The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking art beyond representation," *Angelaki* 6, no. 3 (December 2001): Pg.126.

²⁸ Charles Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), Pg.2.

The positionality of the subject in Malaysian art discourse

In the context of Malaysian art practice, several efforts were made in response to such a displacement of the subject by new media. Although he passed away before the announcement of Vision 2020 and the implementation of MSC, Ismail Zain was well ahead of his time. He acutely demonstrates an awareness and criticality of the possible utilization of new media by the nation-state for the development of the country and the intrinsic characteristics of new media in affecting individuals entrenched in such efforts. Writing with such awareness, he situates the conundrum in the form of two factors – the first being the inherent complication that comes with the progression of technology and the second being the effects of such progression on consciousness. He argues that such efforts of nation building through technological progression would inevitably lead to the possibility of a radical change – both on the macro level of the nation-state and the micro level of the individual Malaysian as he explains:

“Two factors explain this position, the first is the development of technology, which is so rapid, that affects us and the second mentioned by McLuhan as “electric circuitry” and “instant information” that in turn influence our consciousness of such rapid change today.”²⁹

Arguably, I would interpret that his first factor addresses the macro level of national and cultural politics as his brief yet poignant comment that such rapid development of technology “*affects us*” indicates the challenges that lie ahead when Malaysian society is confronted with various foreign cultures, especially from the West, ushered in by the connectivity brought by such technological progress. Conversely, his second factor speaks of a transformative change that could occur at the level of subjectivity which I argue relates to his idea of “tradition” as will be presented in Chapter 04. These two factors decisively articulate the argument of this chapter of bringing together new media and nation-state to expose “what it does” to the positionality of a Malaysian subject. Crucially this is even reflected in his works that will be discussed in the next chapter whereby his use of semiotics, especially cultural and social signification in the form of collage to visualize the sort of embodied experience of a Malaysian when a subject

²⁹ Quoting from Ismail Zain (My translation – the original transcript is in Malay) Ismail Zain, *Ismail Zain: retrospective exhibition 1964-1991* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1995), Pg.105.

encounters new media.³⁰ His digital collage is relevant and contextual to the moment of his practice in which the norms of media during his period were television and radio, or mass media. The pictorial selections for his digital collage represent the prevalence of mass media during the eighties in the Malaysian mediascape.

While it could be argued that “tradition” is a form of alternate positionality for a subject when new media dethrones the subject from its position, it will also be argued in Chapter 04, that the articulation of tradition by Zain aligns with the idea of “unthought” as claimed by Stiegler. In spite of this, Ismail Zain did propose a positionality for the nation-state in the landscape of global politics through his concept of “critical regionalism”. In this proposition, he adapted Kenneth Frampton’s idea from the architecture where he argues for the importance of local culture for the development of international trends. Similarly, Zain suggests that we should retain our local heritage as we are increasing participation in the commonality enshrined by the rapidly growing information and telecommunication technologies. However, the decentring of a Malaysian subject did not come into full force until the nineties. It was only during the period of Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjana Rajah that such a displacement was vastly felt among the Malaysian society.

Hasnul and Niranjana’s response to such a decentring is the first electronic art show.³¹ Curated collaboratively by both of them, today this exhibition stands as an important, documented index of the heyday during the nineties in which MSC and Vision 2020 were the buzz words for the nation. To illustrate their sentiment at that moment, I would like to pick a statement from their curatorial essay:

“It is essential that we engage with the pressing critical and theoretical issues that are latent in the new technology so that we can stake our claim on convergence. Instead of being overwhelmed by the inflow of Western values via supposedly value-neutral technologies, we are in the position to approach the new tools critically, and to deploy them in the service of a cultural transformation conceived on the basis of our own traditions and our own needs.”³²

Their response to the decentring of the subject is to reclaim an alternative, critically negating and specifically local “positionality” with regards to the sort of disintegration of

³⁰ This visualization of embodied experience is based on Hasnul Jamal Saidon’s description of Ismail Zain’s work titled ‘Phantom F4’ in Hasnul Jamal Saidon, "Facing a Guru, Again," in *SentAp!: A Decade*, ed. Nur Hanim Khairuddin (Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia: Teratak Nuromar, 2015), Pg.51.

³¹ Hasnul J. Saidon and Niranjana Rajah, *1st Electronic Art Show* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1997).

³² *Ibid.*, Pg.29.

identification that was occurring as the subject was being rapidly destabilized from its position. Thus with the 1st e-Art show they took a post-colonial stance by fixing their position in reference to the retrieval of traditions such as *wayang beber* in Java, *par* in Gujerat, *etoki* in Japan and so on, where the integration of painting and performance is used as the basis for a somewhat non-Western understanding of New Media.³³ In all honesty, their articulation does not necessarily dismiss Western values as was pointed out in a critique by Ray Langenbach.³⁴ I argue that Lagenbach's critique is a response to their "positionality" in which they place new media within a particular set of identification and reclaim technology as primarily similar to the workings of tradition. Through this reworking of new media, they were able to assert a positionality for the subject and such an affirmation ironically aligns with the assertion of a nation-state in implementing technology-based economic policy as a stance against the West. With this, they are using the particularity of time and space to fix the displacement of a subject in the peculiarity of ideology.

Meanwhile, there are other salient responses by young, more recent and contemporary thinkers that attempt to remedy the displacement of a subject by reflecting on the ability of technology as a tool that empowers subjects and communities in the political landscape of Malaysia. In an article by Simon Soon, he demonstrates an acute sense of awareness of the applicability of New Media as an extension for expressing dissent against authority. He argues:

"Recent creative engagement with the Internet is no longer predicated solely on the reflexive practices that picture the structural framework of the medium. It has instead looked at how the internet can be utilized as a platform for participation, collaboration, and information access. Consequently, many practitioners and creatives do not consider their work as 'Internet art', rather they look at Web technology as a creative arsenal" ³⁵

By acknowledging the liberalization of information on the internet, Soon articulates a positionality for a subject through the ability of new media to relay voices of dissent. While Hasnul does incite Soon's article in Chapter 02 as a form of practice that reflects the "doing" of new media, Soon's articulation still retains a certain form of positionality for the subject. Following the argument presented earlier in the chapter, these strategies

³³ Ibid., Pg.28.

³⁴ for the full inscription of the critique refer appendix 03.

³⁵ Simon Soon, "Notes on Art and Web 2.0," *Sentap!*, August 2, 2010, Pg.28.

of art practice that perceive new media as “*creative arsenal*” is treating new media merely as a tool to express voices of dissent. Soon’s argument treats new media with a positivist outlook and in doing so reaffirms the positionality for Malaysian subjects regardless of whether these subjects are marginalized or are simply anarchic. In doing so, Malaysians are still bound by the politics of Malaysia that perpetuate signification of identity through the race. After 11 years, Soon reflects on his earlier writing regarding the internet and the promise of utopianism that came with it as he expresses:

“How enmeshed we are today in reality that has collapsed the virtual and the world can see in the way Smartphones dominate how we entertain ourselves, interact with each other as well as pursue to retract from this entrenched connectivity unless one is to completely retreat from the world at large. Under such circumstances, where creativity is spoken in such unabashed and naked profit-centred terms, artists and creative thinkers are required to radically alter the terms of their engagement.”³⁶

Soon’s call for a radical alteration in terms of engagement with new media speaks of the perversion of capitalism by its transformation of new media as a tool for profit-making. Internet today is used for commercial purposes, i.e. online marketing and e-commerce. Soon’s approach here articulates the displacement of the subject as a potentiality that could induce a change in identity politics. However, when he frames such potentiality as a tool that empowers the subject, the potentiality of new media became constrained by the positivist frame as mere utensils. Indeed, on one hand, new media is the ideal place to investigate new modes of existence (and resistance) that places technology at the core of identity politics in Malaysia. On the other hand, such resistance can only be performed by reaffirming an oppositional positionality to the normative mode of existence.

I am not renouncing positionality through my critique here for I still exist as a Malaysian Indian and there is no other possibility³⁷ as a subject under the sovereignty of Malaysia. On the contrary, the purpose of this chapter is neither to undermine anyone’s belief in their struggle for recognition nor to question the purpose for the deployment of such positionality in Malaysia. Such an approach would merely contribute to an already contradictory collection of opinions that seem to undermine any particular identity for the

³⁶ Simon Soon, *SentAp!: A Decade*, ed. Nur Hanim Khairuddin (Notes on Art and Web 2.1, 2015), Pg. 112.

³⁷ Following W.V. Quine’s famous slogan “No entity without identity” where he postulates for entities of a given kind requires for its legitimacy that there be a criterion of identity for them. I extend this to the inevitability of being identified to be known as a subject, specifically as an Indian Malaysian to be known as a Malaysian. W. V Quine, *Ontological Relativity, And Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), pg.23.

benefit of a peculiar group living under the rubric of Malaysian politics. The vital challenge I argue is not the seeking of ways to circumvent positionality, but instead to understand the **duress** of bearing such positionality as the ultimate facticity of the subject's embodied experience - constantly devising racial identity to escape from the possibility of decentring.

Through new media art practice, such possibility of the positioned subject in Malaysia art discourse could be articulated. New media art practice critically reflects the very integration of new media with a body that both releases and constrains a subject in a particular positionality through the encounter. It is what I call a sort of 'doing' - a constant shift between the supposedly definitive meaning predicated by identity and the potentiality my body releases when combined with new media. Body is crucially granted its constitutive semblance in art practice as a worldly presence for my individual, peculiar, lived experience, or what I call - 'affective intensities'.

New media art practice insinuates the fracture of positionality when digital image amalgamates with embodied experience. Simply put, the excess that I subdue to operate in the everydayness is radically re-introduced through my art practice as a creative force that enables me to articulate myself as a subject living with its own excess.³⁸ It is with this incitement that practice is heavily considered as a crucial component for the thesis (as will be examined in the next chapter). It brings the precarious positionality caused by the detachment of subject/body to the very heart of the enquiry – not to clear the uncertainties but to act as a cue for a more profound question of what such dethroning of positionality depicts about the Malaysian identity.

³⁸ This predicament of new media and art practice is well articulated by Anthony Downey for the exhibition *Uncommon Grounds* as he asks "How, that is to enquire, do you represent such events in a digitized visual continuum where images circulate in an apparently context free, groundless, circle of self-reference and media-based hysteria? This is not, I should observe, an attempt to rehearse the all too weary defeatism of a Baudrillardian-inspired belief in the referential bankruptcy of images and the devolved authority of reality (conflict) in the face of a simulated reality (the representation of conflict); rather, it is to argue that the last two decades—broadly commensurate with the rise of digital technology and ready access to it—has seen a dilemma in representational strategies that has subsequently found considerable purchase in the context of artistic practices, with artists being called upon (and often putting themselves forward) to make sense of events as they unfold." Anthony Downey, "Introduction," in *Uncommon Grounds. New Media and Critical Practices in the Middle East and North Africa* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2014), pg.14.

Question FOUR: What we do?

Introduction

Where does one begin to write about Ismail Zain, Hasnul Jamal Saidon, and Niranjan Rajah? Examining their body of works demand dedication and perseverance propelled by a certain urgency. An urgency of not knowing or to put it differently, of discovering a peculiar ‘doing’. It was a desperate attempt to articulate, to frame, and to define New Media art practice within the Malaysian context. Which, thus necessitated a very practical approach for a very obvious problem: why isn’t new media art gaining any momentum in the scene? Why is the practice of new media art difficult to understand? How does one theorize such art practices?

These questions were initially answered by the encounter with Niranjan’s text¹ but it was Hasnul who emerged as the presence of the significant ‘Other’. For only, he was deemed to be carrying out a similar practice and approach to New Media art practice analogous to the author. The evidence of his practice is familiar with what it does to me and the realization of the doing emerged with this affiliation with the Other. It would not be possible to perceive the ‘doing’ without Hasnul, for an artist cannot call his/her practice into question without the Other.² The very first meeting between Hasnul and the author ended with a heated debate and exchange of arguments. While there were conflicting views as regards the actions of new media artists, nevertheless there was a shared sense of commonality, a shared passion that agitates.

While Hasnul does mark the author’s entry into the Malaysian context of new media discourse, it was nevertheless obvious that the discourse itself had its own course of trajectory and history, one that coercively conformed to the formality of Malaysian history (and identity) as required by narrative that is obligatory for the functioning of the

¹ By this I meant the written theoretical works of Niranjan that was available online when I was searching for an answer.

² “A calling into question of the same – which cannot occur within the egoistic spontaneity of the Same – is brought about by the Other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics. Metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the Other by the Same, of the Other by Me, is concretely produced as the calling into question of the Same by the Other, that is, as the ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), Pg. 43.

nation-state. The Malaysian art narrative is constrained and indentured by this conformity. This, in fact, establishes the limits of telling that abides by the logic of deciphering a particular national narrative in the arts. As such Hasnul and Niranjan's efforts in the Malaysian art are recognized based on their contribution towards the official-progressive narrative of the nation-state as well as the region of South East Asia.³

'Doing' it is not necessarily the same as what is being informed by the official narratives. The articulation of 'doing', in this case, does not help create a substantiated art history for the legitimacy of new media art practice to become part of the Malaysian saga. Therefore, the concern here is not with how to be included but with what constantly gets excluded, which leaks and thereby causes permutations to what is known as new media practice in Malaysia. Such an investigation of practice demands an alternative interpretation that tracks across practice marked by difference and division. This marks an important discrepancy between encounter in a racialized body and encounter in practice. Encounter with fellow Malaysian rather enacts the Malaysian subjectivity by operating as an abrasion to any form of racial identity. Encounter with fellow Malaysian practitioners of new media art operates as an arbitration between Malaysian subjectivity and an affinity in practice, or what I call 'doing in practice'.

To simplify, this chapter aims to track meaning outside the fixed categorical norms of language, nation, history, style, and practice. It is an effort to seek speculative possibilities and exploratory relations articulated through the very 'doing in practice' which is specific to the operation of new media. Indeed, it is this sort of new media art practice that brews an agitation, not allowing an 'assimilation' in a particular narrative by manifesting the 'doing' through/with the practice. It is a meticulous operation of agitation that performs a sense of constant negation from what is the norm, official and accepted as a conventional art practice in Malaysia.

³ Redza Piyadasa validates the practices of Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjan Rajah in the Rupa Malaysia show as he praises "The roles played by two electronic artists, Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjan Rajah, both teaching at the UNIMAS, in articulating the need for experimenting in electronic art in this country, have been most significant indeed. Their continuing efforts to champion electronic art or 'E-Art' have made the small UNIMAS art department notable for its contribution to electronic art within the Southeast Asian region." Redza Piyadasa, *Rupa Malaysia: A Decade of Art, 1987-1997* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: National Art Gallery of Malaysia, 1998), Pg.61-62.

Encountering Ismail Zain

The examining of Ismail Zain's work must include his writings. This is because Zain's intellectual work is crucial to understand his approach to art-making in Malaysia. I argue his intellectual endeavour is, in fact, compatible with the 'doing', or with the ontology that creates a perpetual seeking for stability. It is a constant reformulation and reconfiguring of epistemology according to the absentness of ontology. An absentness that follows the shift from 'contingency' to 'being' is affected by Ismail Zain in his practice. Answering to Noordin's question, Zain replies *"Not just now, but it has always been the culture, for want of a better word. Not so much culture in an anthropological sense, of tribe, of race, of indigenous world-views, but in an ontological sense – created not by men in their historical contingencies, but by Man in his very being."*⁴

Zain's ontological quest for the 'culture' presents a pursuit of questioning his very existence in the world, rather than a study of the world that exists independently of him. It is an ontological quest that negates any epistemological foundation, or a perpetual state of seeking. I define this as the 'doing' which gets manifested in our practice (our doing), in individual artworks (my doing) and in everything we do in the Malaysian art scene (Malaysia doing). While this demarcation might seem to delineate the 'doing' according to the particularity of its context (me, we, us), nevertheless the intention here is not to diversify the doing. Instead what I call 'doing' is only possible with the presence of these aspects, specific to the practice – whereby these contexts dictate the manner of the encounter between identity and subjectivity that presents the possibility of 'doing'. By having excerpts from his writing to accompany the study of his works, the chapter emphasizes the importance of theory in Zain's work to gain an understanding of what new media art practice meant to him and the future generations of new media art practitioners that he has inspired. Accordingly, the analysis starts by examining Zain's definition of 'tradition' – a key concept that comes to define his approach to art and technology.

"The effort to save tradition from becoming obsolescent and then totally extinct should not be seen only from the perspective of the importance of history. Moreover, if tradition is defined as the transmission of inner quality of being, and

⁴ Nordin Hassan, "Nordin Hassan interviews Ismail Zain," in *Ismail Zain: retrospective exhibition 1964-1991* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1995), Pg.65.

not a mere physical expression or manifestation, then its integrity and coherence must be analyzed from perspectives other than historical. However, the most popular rationale offered to justify the effort of saving tradition is to view it as a cultural obligation to ensure the continuity of history. In general, this notion accepts the fact that every kind of cultural manifestations, from artefacts produced to make life easier through to artistic forms of expression, must be saved at all cost because they contain values that can contribute to the next phase of enculturation. The philosophy of causality, which rests on the relations of cause and effect, often serves as the basis for historical and anthropological thoughts that shape the patterns whereby various perceptions can be made regarding the ending or final outcome of the existing condition.”⁵

Ismail Zain’s excerpt on “tradition” must be explored beyond the rationale of history because his analysis is critical to the operation of language. He acknowledges the semantics of the language in capturing the meaning of the word ‘tradition’. He argues ‘Tradition’ connotes negativism by being irrelevant and irresponsible in the context of the justification of progress. I interpret this as becoming a secular and modern society. By implicitly pointing out the phenomenon of ‘causality’, he critiques the deeply ingrained philosophical division between reason and theology in European society as becoming the universal vision of human politics, or in another word the secular society. Wilkson notes *“the difference between the English and the Malay conception of religion evinces itself even more clearly in the case of persons indifferent to their creed. Where theology represents only one branch of knowledge, it may be ignored; where it represents all morals, science, and civilization, it can no more be shaken off than race or nationality”*.⁶ Accordingly, Ismail Zain’s struggle here is with these universal conditionings that come to define the meaning and purpose of ‘tradition’, bearing the entire burden of European thought upon a Malay Culture. He explains further;

“It kind of resembles the Aristotelian linear logic that admits that everything has a beginning and an end, and its progress throughout different phases can be explicated. The phrases “new breath”, “renewal” or “modernisation”, which we often hear mentioned nowadays to rationalize the separation from tradition, are rooted in the reality of the development and advancement nurtured by historical awareness.”⁷

⁵ The original excerpt is in Malay and this is my translation. Zain, "Masa Depan Tradisi – dikhususkan kepada pengalaman Kuno di Malaysia 1978," Pg. 86.

⁶ R. J Wilkinson, *Malay Beliefs* (London: Luzac & Co, 1906), Pg.7.

⁷ The original excerpt is in Malay and this is my translation. Zain, “Masa Depan Tradisi – dikhususkan kepada pengalaman Kuno di Malaysia 1978,” Pg. 86-87.

In this excerpt, Zain signals an evasion, a departure from the known, the capturing of linearity in history (and even language) - to the unknown, the act of circumvention, a quest for alterity, to the undefined and the unrecognized. He puts forth a critique of the Aristotelian linear logic that dictates a beginning and ending for everything and one is able to dissect and examine linearity for the growth demarcation. Such linearity operates as an inescapable restriction in the name of progress and modernity. Zain rigorously attempts to break such linearity by enforcing the absoluteness of the Other in articulating 'tradition'. But why 'tradition'? What does 'tradition' have to do with his practice? Here the author shares an affinity with him through the identification of tradition, of the context of Malay, of the existence of Malaysia. By our given acquaintance as Malaysian⁸ that we accept and embrace with our differences in expression of its meaning and reflection. But it never was as simple; this identity is not as easy as being uttered. This is obvious as Ismail Zain struggles to articulate what he meant by tradition while evading the conventions of such a term. In the same manner, we embrace and acknowledge that Malaysian identity is ambiguous. It is with such ambiguity that we operate, enabling the doing. It is in the coming together, in the affinity through difference that the prevalence of ambiguity comes forth. Returning to his critique of history, Zain elaborates;

*"As an ideology, history is orientated towards the future. Therefore, an experience that defies this ideology is considered ancient or retrograde. In this context, ancient often refers to something outmoded or outdated, which is fairly consistent with historical thinking. Fundamental experience is largely thought of as primitive or preliminary. From historical perspective, what is important is an end, or a desired Utopia, and not a beginning. Thus, historical awareness is prepared to see the annihilation of ancient experiences because it does not believe that ancient experiences have the potential to begin anew."*⁹

'Tradition' is bound by the given ideological constraint of history that defines the way we experience our past. Nevertheless, seeking an authentic formulation for 'tradition' beyond the limits of history is a futile attempt. There is no beyond, no outside for at the point of articulating, framing, historicizing, we become the norms of what is known, of

⁸ Said explains the relationship between an intellectual and the nation "Every individual intellectual is born into a language, and for the most part spends the rest of his or her life in that language, which is his or her principal medium of intellectual activity... although one of the main points I am making here is that the intellectual is obliged to use the national language not only for obvious reasons of convenience and familiarity but also because he or she hopes to impress on the language a particular sound, a special accent, and finally a perspective that is his or her own." Edward W Said, "Holding Nations and Traditions at Bay," in *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), Pg.20.

⁹ Zain, "Masa Depan Tradisi – dikhususkan kepada pengalaman Kuno di Malaysia 1978," Pg.87-88.

which it is not. In this sense, the strategy is not to seek beyond but to remain inverted in practice, to endure as a pure negative, the continual state of being unknown - coherent with Malaysian subjectivity. Such a formulation of identification becomes the basis for the new media art practice. Moving on to speak about art, Zain explains that art in 'tradition' differs completely to the norms of definition and function of modern and contemporary art. However, he finds the operation of art in 'tradition' parallels to the operation of electronic media as he explains;

*"...art is not part of the exercise of observing nature. Therefore, placing the artefacts of this tradition in an anti-environment, such as museum, does not help to consolidate the artefacts' real functions. Ironically, electronic media acts as an environment to a wide range of sensual experiences by embedding individuals in a temporal environment. Thus, creating an anti-environment to electronic technology requires extending awareness towards the technology itself. To expose tradition, itself an environment, by means of electronic mass media, such as radio and television, is also to create an environment that has some affinities with the milieu in which the tradition exists."*¹⁰

Here Zain explains the meaning of art in tradition; the amalgamation of man with nature for art is not an exercise of observation of the environment that demands a separation from life. Art in the context of the 'tradition' as argued by Zain is a sacred reflection of the conditions and experience of life. In Zain's conception, art does not exist for its own sake. This notion of art presents a radical difference from the post-Renaissance European art that has now come to define art universally. Inadvertently the ideology of modernism in art is totally inconceivable in tradition. Carol Duncan explains modernism in art as;

*"Secular truth became authoritative truth; religion, although guaranteed as a matter of personal freedom and choice, kept its authority only for voluntary believers. It is secular truth – truth that is rational and verifiable – that has the status of 'objective' knowledge. It is this truest of truths that helps bind a community into a civic body by providing it a universal base of knowledge and validating its highest values and most cherished memories. Art museums belong decisively to this realm of secular knowledge, not only because of the scientific and humanistic disciplines practiced in them – conservation, art history, archaeology – but also because of their status as preservers of the community's official cultural memory."*¹¹

¹⁰ The original excerpt is in Malay and this is my translation. Zain, "Masa Depan Tradisi – dikhususkan kepada pengalaman Kuno di Malaysia 1978," Pg. 94.

¹¹ Carol Duncan, "The Art Museum as Ritual," in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Pg.424.

Ismail Zain negates this definition of art as secular knowledge by being very scrupulous in describing the role and function of art. He redefines art to be seen beyond the contemporary meaning, beyond the known presence and norms of operation in Malaysia.¹² In other words, he critiques art institutions for its tampering with the function of art. The museum's function to historicize objects followed by the premise of presentation - such as a white wall, objects presented behind a secured glass cabinet and the excerpt alongside the object to educate the viewer transfigures any sort of art in tradition as artifacts of ethnographic research. These formal, restrictive affairs of the institution do not match with the art of Zain's conception.

For Zain, it is 'anti-environment' and it does not contribute towards the pertinence of art in tradition - its function of bringing together subject and object. Art in tradition is not a vehicle for the expression of personal emotions and reactions. On the contrary, art is subordinated to tradition and is never in dissent from it. Thus, the creator is not apart from the creation, for the creation of art is to reveal the sacred and not express the intimate. To translate his argument in terms of his practice and quest for cultural ontology, this would imply the meeting of aesthetic subjectivity and artistic identity. Correspondingly, an important relation must be highlighted in conjunction with Zain's argument – the particular conception of art by Zain is made possible only with a corresponding argument of 'tradition'. Zain's argument establishes a correlation between the undoing of 'tradition' and the redoing of 'art'.

Correlation between Ismail Zain and Bernard Stiegler

Speaking about technology Zain explains;

“On the other hand, electronic media creates time. Time is not made up of isolated individuals but individuals who deeply engage and involve with one another. Based on this basic similarity, there is a possibility of introducing or presenting tradition and the fundamental sacred experience intrinsic to it if awareness can be extended to the technology itself.”¹³

¹² for the norm operation of art in Malaysia, and its problems, refer discussion in chapter 02.

¹³ The original excerpt is in Malay and this is my translation. Zain, "Masa Depan Tradisi – dikhususkan kepada pengalaman Kuno di Malaysia 1978," Pg. 95.

This production of time by technology coincides with Stiegler's argument on technics in enabling the subject to experience time. Zain realizes that technology has the inherent ability to create time and this allows it to formulate a peculiar environment with its own sets of rules that dictate the human experience. This ability to conceive time differently negates the stable, modern, rational subject and this I believe is where Zain perceives the correlation between technology and art in the conception of tradition, or the unthought. At this juncture, the thesis must lay claim to an important contribution of Ismail Zain in the articulation of new media. Zain wrote the essay where the excerpts were taken from in 1978.¹⁴ Meanwhile, Bernard Stiegler published his essay on 'time and technics' in 1994. Stiegler's idea has been the foundation for the rethinking of the relationship between humans and technology. Zain, on the other hand, identified the operation of new media way ahead of Stiegler through his correlation between tradition and technology.

Stiegler, in fact, constructs his thesis upon the release of technics from the repression of philosophy as an object of thought. He proceeds to claim that technics is the unthought. In the same manner, I argue tradition as presented by Ismail Zain is just as the 'unthought'. While in Stiegler's argument he presents the ability of tool, or technical object to record and transmit memory, or what he calls as 'exteriorization' - Zain presents tradition as a transfer of "inner quality of being" through a different kind of technic. Zain elaborates "*Inner technology, or what is called tradition as a transfer of a quality within depends on the transfer of information in technical practices of oral tradition.*"¹⁵ For Stiegler, it is the tool created by humans and for Zain, it is the oral tradition. Both of these techniques come to record memory and positions a subject in a temporality outside the linearity of progression. An interference that causes self to become self-conscious, or as for how Zain calls it "inner technology".

Despite my claim of similarity between Bernard Stiegler and Ismail Zain, there is an obvious discrepancy in their method of articulating and utilizing the 'unthought'. Stiegler's three-volume thesis start with volume one titled, "Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus". As evidently visible in the title, in this volume he refers to a

¹⁴ The essay was initially presented as part of Workshop for 'Wayang Kulit' practice organized by Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport (KKBS) from 23 to 26 April 1978.

¹⁵ Zain, "Masa Depan Tradisi – dikhususkan kepada pengalaman Kuno di Malaysia 1978," Pg. 90.

particular Greek myth of Prometheus and Epimetheus as well as draws upon works of other philosophers to build his argument. He refers to Martin Heidegger, AndrŹ Leroi-Gourhan, Gilbert Simondon, Bertrand Gille, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Pierre Vernant in order to outline and develop his theses. While his argument was examined in chapter 02, the reason to discuss these references is to highlight Stiegler's heavy dependence upon the Western philosophical tradition in order to build his systematic enquiry. Such manner of reliance is only possible by consenting to an underlying epistemological underpinning that enables him to critique, examine and extend a particular chain of thought, or philosophical enquiry for his theses.

On the contrary, Ismail Zain's point of departure starts from a post-colonial stance. Zain's argument is not built upon a particular myth or philosophical trajectory prior to his ideas. Conversely, he had to carve out a space for his claims outside the norms of Western philosophical history and epistemology. It is an articulation of resistance alongside the reconfiguration of a particular, repressive, analytical structure. 'Tradition' is that space carved out for his claim of outside, and in that way, I claim it is the 'unthought' - not because it is overlooked but because it does not comprehend within the rationality of Western thought. This is different to Stiegler for his argument overturns the history of philosophy to reveal an inherent suppression of technics as a mere tool. Stiegler project is aimed at directly exposing the workings of technics by pointing out the distinction between episteme and tekhnē.

Zain's project, on the other hand, problematizes the episteme, in particular, the structural as well as theoretical approach to reading the Other. The specificity of epistemology reference is not only obscured in the methodology but also accepted as the universal style of reasoning which marginalizes the Other by default. Tradition is a victim of such marginalization for it is judged by rules specific to another context with an unfamiliar logic. In short, Zain's enquiry is not a preoccupation with a component in the language of articulation in the manner in which Stiegler is after the reconfiguration of technics in philosophy. On the contrary, he focuses on the particularity of philosophy that is Eurocentric and the effects of such underpinnings on theory. Zain's pursuit, thus redirected, will inevitably problematize the process of theorizing and finally the very idea of the other. Approaching the structural rather than the component, such criticality on the

level of framework allowed Zain to explore his idea of tradition, or the unthought in various forms of technics.

This is why the articulation of Ismail Zain and Stiegler operates in reverse to each other. Stiegler comes to the unthought in the manner of technic, but Ismail Zain comes to technic in the manner of unthought. As mentioned earlier, oral tradition is one form of technic that brings about the 'inner transmission of being', or what Stiegler calls 'exteriorization'. But more importantly, he also discusses art and electronic technology as technics for the workings of tradition. This explains the understanding of modernism in art and its wide acceptance, which is contrary to Zain's conception of art. And speaking about the technology he explains "*Disclosing tradition, which itself is an environment, through electronic media such as radio and television that also create its own environment reveals some similarities with the situation in which a tradition is lived.*"¹⁶ I argue the rethinking of art and technology in terms of tradition is reflective of his own subjectivity. And I would extend my claim to say this is how Ismail Zain reconciles his 'doing'.

This is based on the way Zain argues for tradition. In his argument for 'tradition', there is no mention of religion (in general) nor Islam (in specific). Without the "disciplinary apparatus", then tradition is transformed into something that relates to the Malay, and not a Muslim. Such investigation of tradition in the context of Malay inevitably stems from the 'Malay doing' as argued in chapter 01. Tradition in the context of Malay is the unthought because there is no epistemological stability as it moves between the unfamiliar body and certainty of race. Thus the 'Malay doing' is the 'exteriorization' that breaks the linear progression of events and positions itself in a temporality, giving rise to Malaysian subjectivity. It is this similarity of 'exteriorization' or production of subjectivity that Zain calls upon technology and art.

Digital Collage

Ismail Zain is well known for his intellectual endeavours. In his body of works, he always insists on exploring intellectual possibilities through art practice, rather than the

¹⁶ Zain, "Masa Depan Tradisi – dikhususkan kepada pengalaman Kuno di Malaysia 1978," Pg. 94-95.

expressive manifestation. In this distinction, reading his works in terms of an autobiographical claim in order to uncover some personal or intimate aspect of him is truly preposterous. In truth, one must read Ismail Zain in a speculative manner, a necessary conjecture - for he is well aware of the surrender that occurs with artworks over time as it becomes part of discourse - irrespective of the critical, rigorous or antagonistic nature of the work. Zain's awareness of such a capitulation is reflected in his body of works. This enforces some gist of critical self-awareness upon anyone who attempts to read his practice.

Ismail Zain has produced a large array of works in different mediums as avenues for his explorative impulse. The works are a testament to the intellectual inquiries he pursued through various identities in the Malaysian art scene. This diversification leaves traces of numerous forms of work such as writing, theatre production, painting, digital collage, event production, policy-making, administration and many others. In fact, both in terms of art practice as well as identity, this body of work does speak of his critical awareness towards the artificiality of taxonomy. Amalgamating his whole body of work through theory would thus mean to delimit not just the diversity inherent in his creative production, but also to circumscribe Zain's criticality towards any form of structural analysis.

Taking this as a guide, the aim of looking at his works is not to narrate his range of practices and historicize Ismail Zain. Instead, the thesis attempts to focus on particular works that embody Zain's criticality – works that specifically betray the integrity of a self-contained modern subject and disrupts the tendencies of self-verifying identity structures. Accordingly, only one particular series of work is examined, i.e. a particular series that enables him to embody his agitation with the delimitation of meaning. Not that his other works don't reflect his tendency for critical enquiry but this particular medium allows for such interrogation, or what I call as 'doing' to be channelled and sustained through the medium itself. A medium that sustains an ontological absence reflective of the ingrained uncertainty in a Malaysian. Zain's creation of artworks through this medium sustains the polarization between literal and arbitrary dichotomies that frame his agitation in a grounded analysis based on the Malaysian scenario.

The probe of such a dichotomy also exposes the distance between Zain and the author. As stated earlier, a gist of my self-awareness comes forth in encountering Ismail Zain through his works and writings. I cannot dismiss an awareness of my articulation, of my deliberate attempt to theorize his practice. Acknowledging this, I am after a medium that cannot be treated merely as a tool for expression or demonstration, but demands an awareness (and reconfiguring) of its environment of production, creation, and presentation of culture in accordance to its time.¹⁷ In fact, a medium that demands constant negation and articulation, an ontological pursuit and in the practice of Ismail Zain – for him, in his time it was a digital collage.

Ismail Zain's interest in computer technology saw an early start but his time as the Director-General of the National Film Development Corporation (FINAS) in 1984 reaffirmed his tendency towards technology. In a position as an administrator for mass media such as film, he was compelled to seek an avenue; to discover new and efficient ways of operating and disseminating information. With the introduction of computers, the tendency towards media technology is easily perceivable. The nature of media technology in dealing with time-based information made it all too easy for Zain to adopt the medium as his practice. The core of it all is the ability of the medium to play with meanings and symbols. This is a reflection of his arguments in semiotics (such as tradition) that are deeply ingrained in the notion of modernity and progress. Speaking of computer technology Zain explains:

*"It's like dealing with a completely different picture surface. A computer is more like the flatbed in a printing press than a stretched canvas or a piece of paper. This is to say a computer is capable of delivering from an almost infinite sources and manipulating a vast heterogeneous array of cultural images and artifacts (data, in computer parlance) that had not been compatible with the pictorial field of conventional painting. And it's very fast."*¹⁸

This is because of the computer's ability to store, retrieve, manipulate and send information. Using a computer involves interpretation and manipulation of information presented in the form of recognizable symbols and signs. Such transactions of information allow the computer to operate as a symbolic machine that not only controls signs but also

¹⁷ Both doing and media technology is not medium specific, but it is culture-based, making it constantly negating any fixed normative to it. Ismail Zain speak of this "I also don't have to define what I do in relation to a given medium but rather in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms. In fact I have an urge to do some of the stuff that I am doing right now a stage later if conditions are right for it." Hassan, "Nordin Hassan interviews Ismail Zain," Pg.66.

¹⁸ Hassan, "Nordin Hassan interviews Ismail Zain," Pg.64.

operates by means of signs. In other words, the computer was able to create 'time' through storing, retrieval and manipulation of logos. Zain was aware and very critical of the natural tendency in humans to create signs and as it becomes 'tradition' through the progression of 'time'. This is because the use of sign was very prominent among the Malaysians, especially with oral traditions such as rhymes (pantun), proverbs (peribahasa) and idioms (pantun) in the Malay language that expresses meaning through semiotic forms. The computer was able to ground his criticality by its inherent purpose of dealing with information that creates and manipulates 'time' in the form of signs.

At that moment in the Malaysian art scene, the use of computers for art practice was also seen as radical. This is because computers were seen in a very positivist outlook, or a tool incapable of capturing artistic expression. Works that were produced using computers were seen as sterilized objects that lacked direct-physical contact with the creator of images, or signs. Computers were, in fact, considered to be mediating machines that hindered the ability of an artist to express and transmit his inner psyche, as he/she could with a canvas. This was contrary to Abstract Expressionism that was dominant in the Malaysian art discourse during that time. This radicalism of the medium in art practice fits his approach conveniently. The mediation of technology (and the emphasis towards the mediation) invigorates the cerebral approach of Zain towards semiotics - both an object of study as well as redefining his practice that deals with 'time' and 'tradition'.

Despite all these, Ismail Zain's most important reason for the adaptation of media technology is because it enabled him to contemplate and articulate the Malaysian situation. Media technology has the ability to reflect the modern Malaysian subject and its conditions (doing) through the play and circulation of information globally that disrupts the cohesiveness of a subject in time and space. Writing about Ismail Zain practice, a renowned Malaysian artist Redza Piyadasa elaborates:

“During the next four years, until the Digital Collage exhibition of 1988, Ismail entered into a very private world of exploration that was to constitute his most serious effort to come to terms with culture of the post-modernist world – truly an extraordinary achievement for an aging artist. In the process, he was to break new ground, producing computer-generated works dealing with highly complex ideatic underpinnings. This part of his experimentations were undertaken very privately and was known only to the few of us with whom he chose to share his

*discoveries and test his ideas. At that time, I found it all somewhat confusing but am better able today to understand what he was trying to do.”*¹⁹

The acknowledgement of the ‘doing’ in the experimentation of Ismail Zain, his practice, and perception are quite apparent. His sensitivity to the changes occurring to the social, political and cultural landscape of Malaysia and his observation is reflected in/through/by his practice. Sarena Abdullah writing about Ismail Zain’s practice explains:

*“Besides the fact that Ismail Zain uses the computer and printer instead of the conventional paint and canvas to produce these series must be noted and how Ismail brought forth the subject of the impact of globalization of Malaysia must be remarked. It must be noted that the Malay/Muslim influence on the artistic and aesthetic interest of Malay artists are still very strong during 1980s – therefore, to have one artist introduced the aspects and impacts of globalization in the form of computer artworks are significant. Ismail highlights the impact of global popular mass-culture and pop culture on the Malay consciousness.”*²⁰

Arguably such reflections on Malay consciousness were sustained with the critical distance held during his practice with his approach that is not aligned with the norms of practice in the Malaysian art. The particularity of the ‘doing’, or what is being coined as postmodern²¹ here was acutely grasped by Ismail Zain that was later unveiled as a digital collage - as part of his solo exhibition. There are several prominent pieces from this show that are now part of the national visual art gallery’s collection. At that moment when it was created, it was perceived as a pioneering work of art that entailing cutting-edge technology. However, close observation would reveal the heightened sense of awareness being reflected in the artworks, that simultaneously question the norms of art practice. This double fold; making work that embodies a sense of criticality that seeps through artwork to critique the meaning and method of making an artwork (a transformation from theory to practice – or as how Zain puts it, from nature to culture) is openly acknowledged by Ismail Zain in many instances.

¹⁹ Piyadasa, "Ismail Zain, the Artist," Pg.51.

²⁰ Sarena writing about Ismail Zain’s practice explains Sarena Abdullah, "Ismail Zain- The Ambivalence Approach and His Shift Towards The Postmodern," in *Art and Design International Conference - AnDIC 2012* (Shah Alam, Malaysia: UiTM, 2012), Pg.29.

²¹ “The term ‘Postmodern Situation’ or Situasi Percamoden was used in describing the social and cultural changes among the Malays who form the “new” Malaysian middle class. The term denotes how Malay society seems to be both fragmented and rooted in multifaceted cultural influences such as tradition, Islamic beliefs and modern or progressive ideals at the same time. This is the result of the cultural and social changes due to the drastic modernization efforts imposed on them since NEP. Consequently, the Malays are faced with a situation in which traditionalism, Islam and modern ideals coexist, sometimes peaceably and sometimes discordantly, and these contestations are reflected through new symbols, social and cultural practices.” Sarena Abdullah, "Thematic Approaches in Malaysian Art since the 1990s," *Journal of Southeast Asian studies (Jati)* 16 (December 2011): Pg.99.

‘Digital College’ was done in 1988 at the National Art Gallery of Malaysia;²² this was the one and only solo show by Ismail Zain. The exhibition consisted of computer prints in A4 size that were framed and hung on the walls. Curatorially these framed A4 computer prints were shown in a similar manner to the presentation of a painting. Notably, the curatorial decisions were made by Zain himself for his solo show. The white cube was seriously taken into consideration in the presentation method and accordingly, the computer prints were treated just as any form of modern art. This is because Zain was aware that meaning for a particular object, especially art is not constrained to the act of picture-making alone, but also involves everything that you do to frame it as an object of art. Zain acutely used every repository of art symbols, through presenting the show in a high-profile institution and choosing to present in the conventional method. These symbols served as tools to evoke potential antithetical meanings to the norms of art and society in Malaysia.

Meanwhile, the A4 prints were done using a Macintosh SE HD SC computer. This model of computer was introduced by the Apple²³ in 1987, just a year before ‘Digital Collage’. It would have been the latest model of computer technology available for Zain at that moment in time. Along with the basic software that was meant for office use, the computer also came installed with a desktop publishing package called Pagemaker. The package worked in combination with a laser printer named Apple LaserWriter. This combination was a key component for the digital revolution in desktop publishing and used by Ismail Zain to produce his A4 prints for the digital collage.

There were 13 A4 computer prints produced by Zain for the show and they were black and white. This is because the commercial laser printer in 1987 was only able to support black and white printing. Additionally, the internal display of the computer and its operating system could only support 2-bit dithering grayscale which makes it impossible to view any colour on the computer screen, nor to print any images in colour via hardware. However, Zain did physically hand-colour 8 of those black and white prints using

²² The institution has been renamed as National Visual Art Gallery

²³ Apple Incorporated, or better known as Apple is a technology company that design, develop and sell electronic goods such as smart phones, laptop, computer and many other. Their most prominent invention is the personal computer equipped with user interface that made computer technology accessible to everyone.

gouache. He used image editing software called Mac Paint which was part of the PageMaker package. The interface of Mac Paint replicates the conventional tools used by artists to produce paintings. Icons such as paint brush, paint bucket, pencil, eraser, etc. that have become the conventional display in current image editing software such as Photoshop and Illustrator were inspired by Mac Paint.

Zain was able to create artworks that combine his digitally hand-drawn images that were done using the mouse, text inserted via image editing software as well as ready-made prints from mass media that were scanned and imported into the computer. All these elements were assembled via Mac Paint software and the final composition was finalized on the computer screen before it was printed. His choice of A4 size is also reflective of the standard international paper size (approximately 21cm by 30cm) that has now become the common printing size for computer users. The printing of these digitally produced images forges a very different material reality. The combination of pixels, or the smallest visually representational dot on the screen creates a grainy effect on the printed images. This was a deliberate aesthetic choice from Zain because I argue it was the most minimal, dematerialized as well as a non-representational form of a sign that introduces a new form of the semiotic structure without physical substance. A digital structure that is easily malleable and not bound by space and time, or to extend Zain's argument the sign is not restricted by a given structure that limits its meaning and purpose as he argued for the term 'tradition'.

Autonomy of an art object based on materiality is deeply unsettled with Zain's approach of art-making via computer technology. With images disembodied from material and stored as digital information, the real is displaced by the simulacra. In this case, the physical print is the copy and the immaterial information is the original. The digitization allowed for copies to be printed limitlessly causing what Benjamin calls as loss of "aura".²⁴ The aura of conventional authenticity and originality of an artwork based on the uniqueness of materiality. Zain is well read and knows Benjamin's argument on the reproduction but he challenges this argument by physically hand colouring over the printed images. In examining all the hand coloured digital prints, what becomes obvious

²⁴Walter Benjamin, "The work of Art in the age of mechanical reproduction," in *Illuminations* (London: Random House, 2011), Pg.211.

is the manner in which the colouring is done. The colours are not freely smeared over the prints but instead is done in specific sections of the image that seems to be constrained by the lines of prints. This is a mechanization of the expression or the freedom of physicality as impressed on the materiality of an artwork that defines aura. The digital, reproducibility is utilized to signify the material or the original. In a way, he was ahead of his time in hinting at the possibility of digital technology coming to control the mundane, everydayness of our lives.

This mechanization of the artist's hand is also visible in the composition of the prints. The three different elements that were mentioned earlier (digitally drawn images, text, as well as images from mass media) were arranged in a peculiar order. More importantly, some of the compositions had an arrangement of pixels that was done with great care and detail. This is a labour-intensive work that demands concentration, repetition as well as patience. The meticulous process of composing the pixels is reflective of the mastery in handling the computer mouse. This process of creating an image is a challenge to the modern aesthetic. Greenberg speaks of the correlation between physical movement in space and time that corresponds to the malleability of the material to embody artistic performance.²⁵ In the digital, the artist's performance is mediated by the operation of a computer that translates the physical movement into digital codes. Having pixels visibly and painstakingly arranged in sequence connotes the very basic binary codes of computer processor instructions. This binary code operates on a different set of rules, outside the boundaries of space and time as experienced in the corporeal.

Collage is a term that carries plenty of art historical reference. A term that was widely used by two prominent art maestros, Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso that came to define a particular technique in the history of modern art. It was a term they applied to describe a process of combining various objects such as paper, texts and even portions of other artworks on a canvas. These materials were glued on top of each other to form an assemblage. In this form of art production, the process and concept were emphasized over the product. Zain's idea of naming his solo show by bringing together Digital and Collage is with the awareness of this history. The naming of the show as 'Digital Collage' reflects

²⁵ Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *The New Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock (A Dutton Paperback. New York: Dutton, 1973), Pg.214.

not the history per se but the natural tendency of making the association in our mind. Metaphorically he is combining the old method and new material – bringing two contradictory concepts that reflect the operation of the Malay language. Speaking of Digital Collage he explains:

“It’s a very difficult word to use because it is already so well-entrenched. But I needed a word to describe the juxtaposition of the iconic images, which by most accounts is what I do. The term’s derivative is not as a technique, going back to Picasso, Kurt Schwitters and so on. But what happens in our mind most of the time. It’s how borrowed fragments of the signified can be summarized in one form of many characteristics. The practice is pretty ancient. The Malay pantun, for example is a very good example of this, especially if you only look at the first two lines of the quatrain. We don’t call them ‘pambayang maksud’ or ‘the foreboder of purpose’ for nothing. The juxtaposition of unrelated imageries, which echo with nuances and promises, sometimes capriciously, in these two lines is the kind of thing I mean.”²⁶

While Zain does adapt the process of assemblage for his prints, however, the glue here is the computer that brings the material together, or what I call digital assemblage. In the process of digital assemblage, the computer transforms the material to the particularity of its environment. Akin to our individual subjective thoughts that dictate the meaning we perceive in the world. Here the medium dictates how, and what is being assembled. The medium is crucially important in deciding the process and the concept. I would argue that Digital Collage as a title is also a witty play on the Eurocentric tradition of art by hinting at the defunct structures of modernism while subtly hinting at the possibilities of constructing new ones as ushered by technology. These possibilities are explored through the critical juxtaposition of images that not only serve to reflect the past conditions of Malaysian but also the future danger and potentiality awaiting with the coming of technological progress.

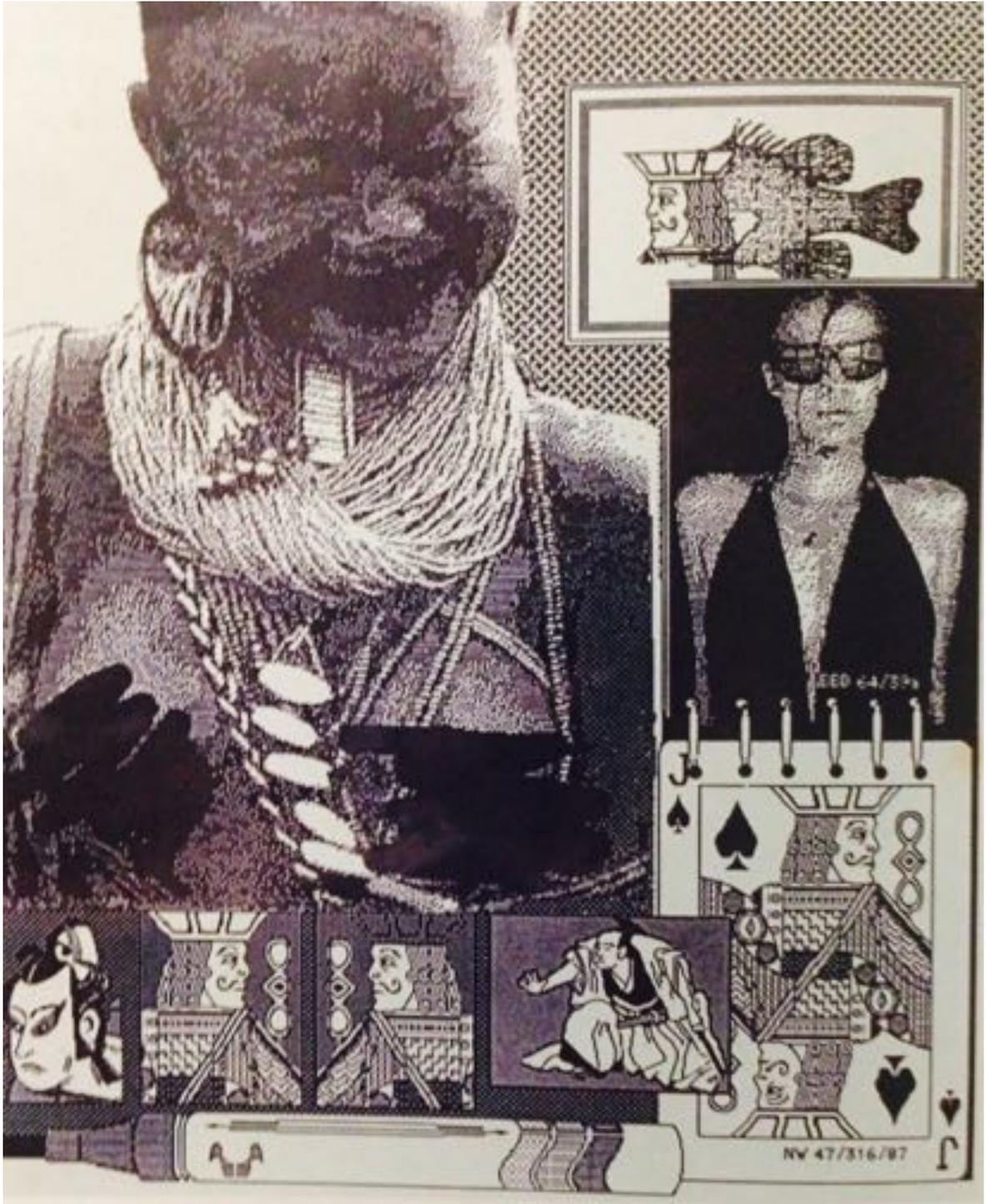
Magic Marker (Pic.01)

Magic Marker is an example where Ismail Zain brings to the forefront his argument on tradition and culture. In this particular artwork, he directs the attention of the viewer to the absurdity of censorship in contemporary Malaysia. The sagging breasts of a Meo tribeswoman are blacked out, or censored to supposedly enable it to be culturally acceptable in the Malaysian context. Such censorship is then juxtaposed with a modern,

²⁶ Hassan, "Nordin Hassan interviews Ismail Zain," Pg.66.

slick and supposedly highly cultured image of a fashionable model. The play on the image, or to be precise the semiotic interlink that occurs between the modern and the tribal, assembled through a particular aesthetic choice of blacking the breast (that imitates the act of censorship) and the top worn by the model creates a discourse on modernity. This questions the consequence of being modern - the price of being civilised at the expense of a particular-previous culture or tradition.

Meanwhile, the image of the 'Jack of Knives' from a deck of cards is placed alongside that of a Japanese samurai but with the Jack's back turned away from the samurai warrior (in what seems to be a deliberate act of ignoring, or perhaps even denying the sophistication of Japanese culture by the imperial play). These disparate images are brought together to create a sharp juxtaposition for the indulgence of the Malaysian public, or specifically, it was created within the context (in response) to the surroundings where Ismail Zain was practicing. While these images might symbolize a global approach towards art-making, nevertheless these images also destabilize the meaning of progress (as in modernity dictated by globalization) by questioning the influence of the colonizer that has permutated to the norms and traditions of a person living in Malaysia. The connotation of tribalism (or the immediate perception of such) through the image of a tribeswoman with her jovial expression causes a Malaysian subject to reconsider what is tribal in our context, in our culture. This critique is pushed even further with the expression of the tribeswoman and the idea of censorship – hinting that a cultured and civilized society is unknowingly dictated to by a particular ideology that was inherited from the allegedly superior civilization.



Pic. 01
Magic marker
1988, computer print
30cm by 21cm

Al Kisah (Pic.02)

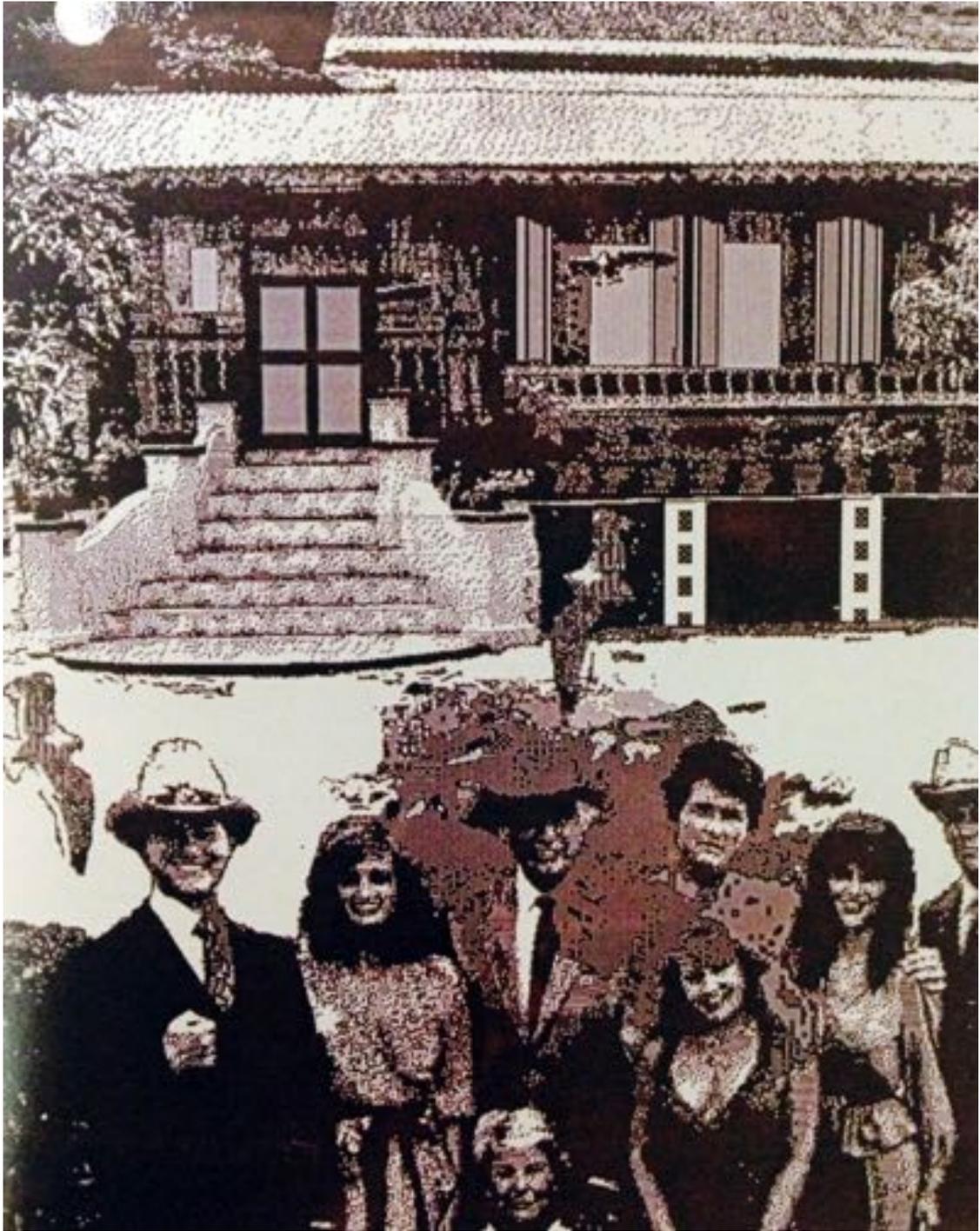
In Al Kisah, which means “story/narrative” the artwork is as simple as bringing together two very recognizable images from popular culture into a single frame of presentation. The presentation is divided into two grounds, as in the foreground and the background. The method of foreground and background is generally used to create depth and highlight in the visual cue, where the emphasis is given to the foreground and the background is treated as a stage - for the contextualization and enhancement of the character that performs in front. In this instance, the foreground is filled with characters from a celebrated American soap opera series called ‘Dallas’.²⁷ It consists of characters that perform as a family unit for the particular show, thus the image of them together functions as a family portrait. While visually this might signify a perfect, happy family but on the contrary, the Dallas series actually revolves around controversies among the members of the family that are deeply dysfunctional. This ideal yet the polemic image is supported by the background image of a traditional Malay house. Again, another direct and stark contrast between these two grounds, that are related in function (the family portrait) and meaning (the traditional Malay house). The symbolic meaning of a Malay house is central to the individuation as well as the societal function of a subject.²⁸

It is a crucial element in the formation of a Malay identity, whereby every aspect of the house is constructed in consideration with the inhabitant (human) and the surroundings (nature). It also functions as an icon, a symbol for the customs and traditions of Malay and these customs are translated into the form of motifs, decorative patterns, architectural design, and function. In this artwork, Zain knowingly places the entrance image of the Malay traditional house as the background. This entrance is seen with stairs going up the elevated Malay house that is supported on stilts. The decorative symbols on the door, windows and stilts are stripped away and left with a flat tone. There are also other elements of nature such as a bird, plants and the moon seen together with the Malay house. These components are meant to depict a house in a natural environment. The diluted impression of the Malay house coincides with the appearance of the foreigners in the

²⁷ The 1980 episode of Dallas ‘Who Done It’ remains the second highest rated primetime telecast ever. Wesley Hyatt, *Television's Top 100: The Most-Watched American Broadcasts, 1960-2010* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2012), Pg.169.

²⁸ “The architecture of Malay houses cannot be dissociated from the Malay way of life.” Abdul Halim Nasir and Hashim Haji Wan Teh, *The Traditional Malay House* (Kuala Lumpur: Institut Terjemahan Negara Malaysia, 2011), Pg.10.

foreground, a sort of strange pervasion that is slowly seeping in amidst the common environment; a hegemonic process might be suggestive here. It must also be noted that Dallas was broadcast in Malaysia and well received by the masses. Being aware of such mass consumption of media, Zain's juxtaposition here questions media technology that operates as a cross-cultural mediator, as sort of a cloaked entertainment kitsch that is made easily consumable through media technology as it subtly transforms the very culture it invades.



Pic. 02
Al Kesah
1988, computer print
24cm by 19cm

My friend Lisa (Pic.03)

'My friend Lisa' consists of two planes of the image – the foreground and the background. The foreground is divided into four sections – lower right, lower left, upper right and upper left. The face of Hollywood actress Liza Minelli is placed in the lower right corner and next to it is an image of a frog on the lower left. This is followed by an image of a moth on the upper left and an image of a butterfly on the upper right. Liza Minelli's image dominates the composition as the image of her face is proportionally bigger than the rest of the images that occupy the foreground. A viewer would immediately be drawn to the image of the actress when looking at this artwork, and will slowly start noticing the other elements that surround the actress. Because of this, the symbolic meaning of the non-human images is heavily dependent upon the dominant image of the actress. Naturally, one would be prompted to compare the human and non-human, especially the dominant face of the actress with the other elements that surround her.

The lower and upper sections in the foreground operate in correlation with each other. This is indicated by the butterfly at the top right corner, just above the image of Liza Minelli. In close observation, one will notice it is an image of a boy riding a butterfly with strings attached to its tentacles. This composition signifies a leisure ride whereby a butterfly is used as a riding vehicle and it has no agency over its body. Meanwhile, the moth next to it is completely untouched and it seems as though it is waiting still. Just below the moth is the image of a frog. The frog, on the other hand, seemed like it is in motion, climbing up the image. There are various semiotic correlations occurring simultaneously in this artwork. Being placed just above Liza's head, one cannot help but associate the image of a butterfly flying over fame and popularity. Firstly, the butterfly without agency forces one to question the agency of Liza Minelli as an actress. Does she have control over her image that is widely circulated in mass media? Is she bound to sustain certain persona as a famous Hollywood actress?

Meanwhile the image of the frog climbing up seems to suggest that it is moving towards the moth. This indicates perhaps that the moth might become food for the frog. There are two characters in this reading – a predator and a victim. Also since the image of the frog is beside the actress, one might tend to associate the frog with mass media. The frog beside Liza recalls the fairy tale of the 'frog prince'. With a kiss from a beautiful princess, the frog transforms into a handsome prince. The frog needs Liza and vice versa. Simply

put, the frog and Liza are connected to conjure a meaning of pop culture and its alluring mass appeal. Simultaneously the frog as a predator also alerts us to the danger and risk factor of such allure. In this instance, the question arises as to who is the victim and who is the predator? Are we all victim of consumption? Is mass media feeding us, making us still and numb without realizing the encroaching danger of cultural invasion? Finally, the background is filled with a motif that is indicative of a fence in a traditional Malay house. This is a brilliant yet subtle placement of image by Ismail Zain. Indirectly he proposes these struggles, invasions, as well as victimization, is happening just at the doorstep of Malaysian society.



Pic.03
My friend Lisa
1988, computer print (hand coloured)
30cm by 21cm

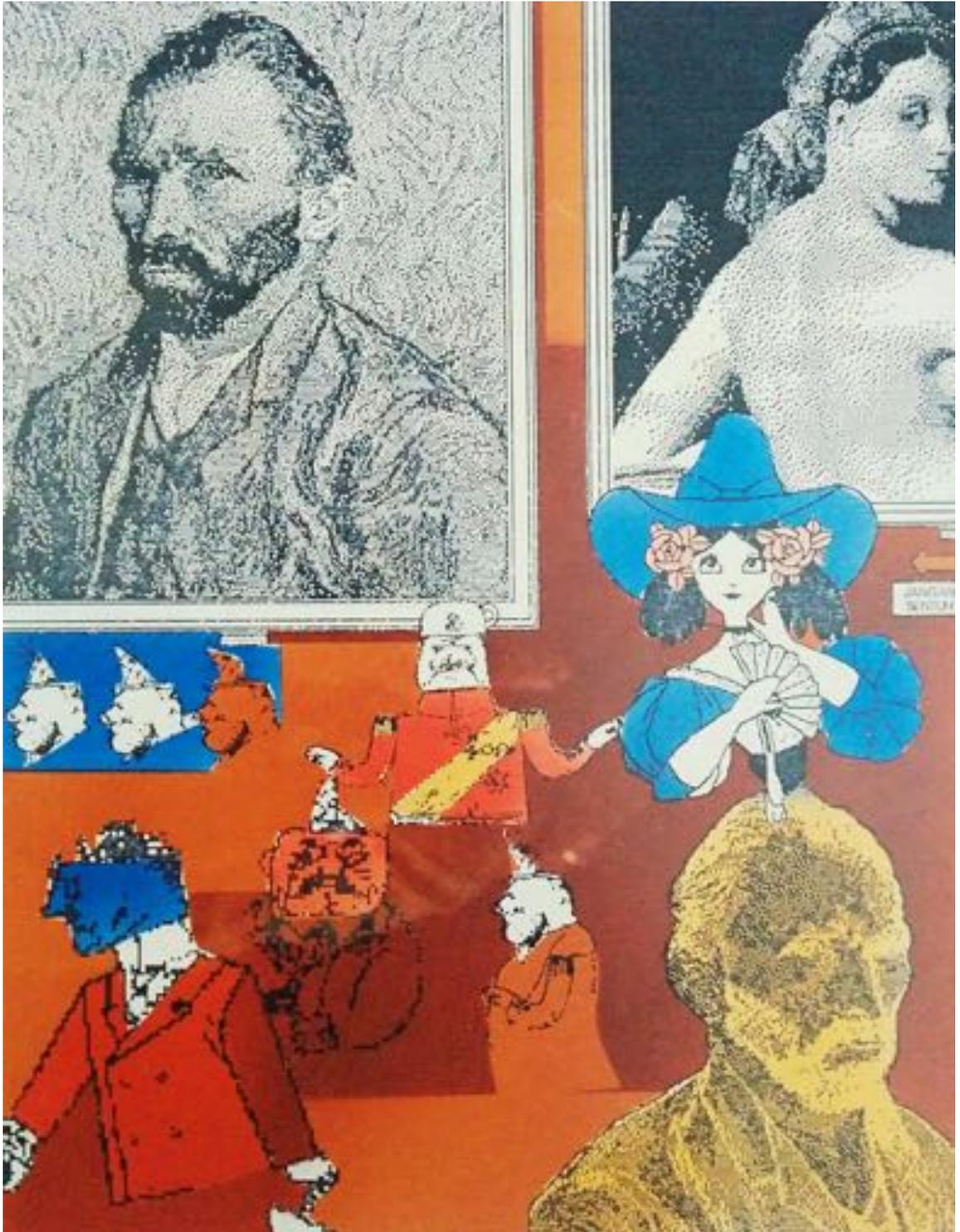
Vincent (Pic.04)

Vincent is one of the 8 pieces of black and white digital prints that Zain hand-colored using gouache. Zain also includes two prominent, Western-canonical works of art in the composition of this particular print. The 'self-portrait' by Vincent Van Gogh and 'Grande Odalisque' by Jean Aguste Dominique Ingres. These two works are placed next to each other at the upper section of the print and left in black and white. The composition suggests an interior of a museum. This is clearly indicated by the sign stating 'Jangan sentuh' or do not touch just below the image of 'Grande Odalisque'. Meanwhile, there are also some computer drawn images on the lower section of the prints. These drawn images signify the caricature of a typical English lady, a British general, a man with a coat. It seems as if these characters are in the museum space and all of them are with their backs to the artworks. There is also a duplicate image of Van Gogh's self-portrait on the lower right corner.

Zain had the composition hand colored with accuracy and precision. Certain sections were deliberately left blank without any filling to reveal the whiteness of the paper. I argue these sections of white symbolize the foreignness of the West or the racial difference that dominates the colonial discourse. Just as rest of his Digital College, in 'Vincent' there are various modes of semiotic association at play. Firstly, the status of High Art is critiqued by the difference in the visual representation of Van Gogh's 'self-portrait'. While the image of self-portrait on the top is in black and white, the duplicate on the lower right is colored. The black and white portrait is presented within a frame indicating it is a work of art meanwhile the duplicate of the lower right is frameless as if Van Gogh is a character in the museum space. This implies value in modern art that holds aesthetic contemplation as the one and only esteemed manner of engaging a work of art. The purest and highest contemplative nature of modernism is opposed to the operation of art in the 'tradition' as argued by Zain. The colored Van Gogh is stripped from his prominence as an artist, as well as the status of an artwork. In this way, the colored Van Gogh is a coming together of object and subject, or audience and creator.

Meanwhile, the composition also does not conform to the Renaissance perspective. The placement of the characters, along with the presentation of the artworks does exemplify an interior of a museum. However, there is no linear vanishing point that gives the illusion of depth and receding elements in the composition. The converging line that meets at a

vanishing point is eradicated. Zain is aware that such application of perspective represents Western thought in measuring and ordering the world in the rationality of a grid. It is an objectification of the world for the measurement of space, time and experience. In this way, a work of art is meant to be an expression of the realistic natural scene as externally perceived by the artist, an acute observation that is depicted as accurately as possible. Instead, Zain flattened the perspective and shifts the aesthetic from an external point of view to a multi-layered viewpoint. There is no space between the lower and the upper sections in the composition. Simply put, in 'Vincent' there is no sense of depth to the pictorial image of the museum where the viewer can sense a gap between the characters and the artworks on display. In this way, a viewer is invited to a dynamically shifting position without any particular guide of viewing that enables the viewer to become subjectively part of the scene.



Pic.04
Vincent
1988, computer print (hand coloured)
30cm by 21cm

Encountering Hasnul Jamal Saidon

At this very moment, the author returns to the encounter. I have worked with Hasnul. We found our affinity in the struggle to seek a substitute to the given predicament of Malaysian modernity. He works in contrary to the pervasive structures of racial subjectification. Accordingly, he operates in the Malaysian art scene in various ways; seeking (and even suggesting) an alternate epistemology to that which is given, the operation and impinging restriction of identity. Here the author must return to the initial irritation and significant Other in practice. The initial encounter of writings and followed by polemic rendezvous concerning what we do. The author must convene with Hasnul Jamal Saidon. Once again, it is not me that should utter the moment of expression of such “doing” for it is only operationally possible with the encounter hence the reason for the presence of the Other in writing as Hasnul speaks:

“My ruptures came through rather sporadic and flirtatious encounters (especially throughout the 90’s) with an odd combination of postmodern condition and theories, Eastern mysticism especially Sufism and Taoism, cybernetic paradigm and Quantum Physics. I refer to them as my ‘catalysts of ruptures’ that have significantly shattered (among constructed notions of many things) my previously deepest held conviction in ‘modern art’. Through postmodern, I began to develop a suspicion in the repressive expansion of the ‘meta-narratives’ of history (read Western). As a result, I radiated towards ‘little narratives’ (even those so-called radical or irrational ones) and was keener in developing new ‘knowledge’ that could help to ‘deconstruct’ (or even destruct) the claim of power, hegemony, dominance, and control in such narratives.

I became suspicious of the suppressive use of certain ‘meta-languages’ (as in the global media) as an instrument of analysis or ‘objective’ interrogation of lesser peripheral languages (object language or text –a community for example). I became more aware of the repressive role of certain sign systems in social formation, designed to control individuals through Repressive State Apparatus and Ideological State Apparatus (ISA, no pun intended). I became more sensitive to my own personal positioning in regards to the complex webs of languages and discourses, sign system and its apparatus, as I negated myself in complex webs of multiple binary contexts (as in local/global, Western/Eastern, White/Non-White, Me/Others, Malay/Non-Malay, privilege/non-privilege, Muslim/Non-Muslim and many more).”²⁹

This is an excerpt from a recital, a performance of Hasnul that was executed when he was abroad. This enactment indicates an acute sense of endorsement, an open admittance to the state of self, of being awakened from the bounds of structures that affix identity in

²⁹ Jamal Saidon, "Journey Across Borders: Electronic Media and Performance," Pg.65-66.

accordance to ideological play in the social and political strata. He is seemingly critical of himself. An apparent awareness of the existence of structures. Such an awareness is not unique or sudden for it was previously revealed through 'Digital Collage'. This is peculiar to the Malaysian context, for, in his words, the expression reveals a play of "Malay/Non-Malay, Muslim/Non-Muslim, privilege/non-privilege". These are identical to the expressions of Ismail Zain in his practice. But Hasnul differs from Ismail Zain for his elements of comparison have some form of ontological bearing that irritates him, while Zain deliberately dilutes such underpinnings. This I perceive as an epistemological uncertainty (doing), and not manifestation (or revelation) of the ontological absence as indicative of Zain's practice.

This discrepancy in their approach towards the 'doing' is symptomatic of the passing of time. Ismail Zain was 53 years old in 1988 when he did his 'Digital Collage'. Conversely, Hasnul Jamal Saidon was 26 years when he started his electronic arts Master's program at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in 1991. There is a generational gap between them. Hasnul would have been 23 years old when Digital College was presented at National Art gallery of Malaysia. However, Hasnul was well aware of Ismail Zain's presence in the art scene even before then as he was a lecturer for Hasnul during the undergraduate years at Technology MARA (UiTM). The association between them is evidently visible through heaps of tribute and praise that Hasnul credits to Zain. In fact, Hasnul was the first person to officially claims Zain as the pioneer of electronic arts in Malaysia, and arguably even in the region of South East Asia. When asked about Zain, he says:

*"I have to note here that my encounters with him even went beyond the classroom, including hanging out and sleeping over at his house to see his 'digital' and wet studio, serving one of his minions to construct his digitally designed set for Nordin Hassan's play 'Cindai', or just playing the role of willing punching bags for his witty and intelligent jabs, throw to wake, tease and make our lazy brains work a bit, mostly centered at Centerstage Performing Arts in a rented bungalow at Bangsar. Ismail Zain has stirred and opened several special paths within my own 'neural innernet', a gift that I will cherish forever. He had left a massive lingering impact towards my own personal growth."*³⁰

The way in which Hasnul described his 'encounter' with Ismail Zain is tantamount to the argument of the 'doing' that occurs between practitioners of new media arts. It is similar to the 'doing' that occurs when the author encounters Hasnul. The connection between

³⁰ Hasnul Jamal Saidon, "Facing a Guru, Again," in *SentAp!: A Decade*, ed. Nur Hanim Khairuddin (Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia: Teratak Nuromar, 2015), Pg.51.

‘encounter’ and ‘doing’ that lies at the root of the argument for this chapter. As presented earlier, here, there is an occurrence between ‘my doing’ (subjectivity) and ‘our doing’ (identity) subsequently evoking a sense of agitation that negates any form categorical norms. Hasnul speaks of an impression Zain has left on him that “stirred and opened several special paths within” – this I argue is ‘his doing’ or Hasnul’s search for self-referential existential territories, his subjectivity. This search is the basis for the earlier quote of ‘rupture’ taken from Hasnul’s recital during his time in the United States. It is a sense of agitation instigated by this encounter that happened prior to his departure.

‘Our doing’ on the other hand is the shared sense of affinity that was found based on the utilization of media technology for art practice in the Malaysian context. While the affinity was not prevalent during the initial encounter however it could be argued it was affirmed when Hasnul embarked for his Master’s studies on electronic arts. By then he would have been well exposed to Ismail Zain’s articulation and his utilization of technology for art practice. Hasnul’s artwork is deeply influenced by his encounter with Ismail Zain. An encounter with Zain’s thought and philosophy has shaped Hasnul’s way of perceiving, understanding and relating to the world. But this does not mean Hasnul simply emulates Zain, but rather it is an agitation.

By agitation, I am referring to the mediation between subjectivity and identity that gets expressed through Hasnul’s artwork. This mediation occurs on the basis of affinity between two subjects, or fellow practitioners. Here it is between Hasnul and Ismail Zain. If this affinity is to be understood as emulation, this simply means Hasnul savoring all that is in Ismail Zain and discarding everything which is in excess of this relation. This is simply an act of conservation that sustains a particular identity. Instead, if the affinity privileges the difference between Hasnul and Ismail Zain in the relation, then it is an act of transformation that fundamentally augment a subject’s worldview. It is this privileging of difference that agitated a subject. When we encounter, we do not merely savour each other in our specificity of practice, instead, we create new association around the affinity with the peculiarity of our individual totality, or what I call as ‘doing’.

Returning to Hasnul’s recital when he says “*I became more sensitive to my own personal positioning*” – this is an agitation that figures centrally in the expression of Hasnul, and it is even more indispensable to his practice. Hasnul is aware of Zain’s argument on the

tradition, or the ‘unthought’ and the subsequent correlation with the technics. With ‘tradition’ freed from its ostensible structural fixity, what is left is the rewriting of ‘tradition’ that can be open to the demands of a Malaysian subject. For Hasnul this demand derives from a deeply temporal sensibility of his bodily position in the world. Hasnul embraces this demand enthusiastically because tradition which is defined in this way is broadly collective as he articulates from a narrowly personal position. It is this demand that is explored by Hasnul through technics. In other words, Hasnul’s new media art practice attempts to anchor ‘tradition’ through the visual and conceptual reflectivity of seeing himself as a result of externalization by technology.³¹

Ways of perceiving the world change over time, especially as time and its perception are dictated by the transformation induced by technology. As Stiegler hints, the dimension of technology to unfold and evolve new forms of time over its progression – proportionately the changes in the strategy of enquiry is also governed by the transformation that has occurred to the technics. Indeed when Hasnul started exploring new media in the early nineties, the prominent medium was no longer two-dimensional surface of digital prints but time-based video. The aesthetic of video however still relates to the language of collage in which strategies of processing time and the recombination of audio and visual evoke a similar visual language of semiotic play. It extends the meaning of collage by critically considering time itself in the creation of the artwork. For Hasnul this directly correlates with the tradition as the ‘unthought’ considering the circuitry of cultural at that moment in time. I argue that Hasnul’s choice of video, instead of digital prints for his practice is due to various modes of representation, especially screen-based that has come to heavily mediate culture in society as experienced by him. He explains:

Video became a mediated representation of my journey across borders – within and without. The borders suggest multiple readings and meanings – such as artificial demarcations or boundaries within my thoughts and memories, within my body, within my emotion, between various artistic disciplines, between nation-states, race and ethnicity, religion, culture, history and even gender”³²

³¹ Writing about history of video art in Malaysia, Adeline Ooi and Beverly Yong explains “For Hasnul, the virtual nature of video and other digital media marries well with Eastern philosophy, and with Islam, reflecting a concept of reality as illusion, as a coding of the mind. . . His work with video has mostly been a form of self-deconstruction.” Beverly Yong and Adeline Ooi, "Languages and Locations: Video in the Malaysian Art Context," in *Reactions - New Critical Strategies*, ed. T. K. Sabapathy and Nur Hanim Khairuddin (Kuala Lumpur: RogueArt, 2013), Pg.234.

³² Hasnul Jamal Saidon, "Exhibition Thematics" in *Relocations: Electronic Art of Hasnul Jamal Saidon & Niranjana Rajah*, ed. Roopesh Sitharan (Penang: Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 2008), Pg.54.

While video art, in general, has a long history dating back to the 1960s with works from Nam Jung Paik, Andy Warhol, Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Bill Viola and many others, just to name a few. In the Malaysian context, it is marked by a particular moment in 1989. Video entered into Malaysian art when Liew Kung Yu used the medium as part of his installation piece called "A Passage Through Literacy". Yong and Ooi claim that the emergence of video art in Malaysia is largely due to the "experimentation and interdisciplinary" nature in practice that happened during the 80s and early 90s.³³ However, the proximity of Ismail Zain's 'Digital Collage' and Kung Yu's use of video is too obvious to be ignored. I argue the leap from Digital Print to the use of video for art practice is merely a delayed occurrence waiting to happen as Zain himself commented on the influence of such screen-based technology through his prints.

Possibly it could be said that Kung Yu's use of video was dictated by the functionality of a video to merely record and playback a particular moment in time. It was treated as a tool for the creation of a conceptual work. In his installation, Kung Yu used the video to integrate a documentation of a particular performance as part of his installation work. I suspect the criticality towards the medium that was hinted by Zain though his digital prints were quickly grasped and explored by Hasnul in his own art practice. This is a 'doing' of new media art – an affinity in practice explored through the peculiarity of an agitation. It is possible, that given time, Zain would have moved from print to video even in his own practice, but unfortunately, he passed away in 1991.

It is in this moment of passing away that Hasnul started exploring and utilizing video for his own practice. This does not mean Hasnul is a video artist and bound to use the only video for his practice. In fact, it is quite the contrary as his practice drew from various mediums and genre such as performance, installation, theatre, music and a diverse range of cross-disciplinary cultural practice and theoretical discourses. Having said that, my encounter here with Hasnul focuses on his video works, in particular, his Post-Colon anthology, followed by the works that were mentioned by him in the previous chapter. This is because his early video works crucially mark the transition from an ontological quest in Digital College to an epistemological search in tradition.

³³ Yong and Ooi, "Languages and Locations: Video in the Malaysian Art Context," Pg.231.

Post-Colon

Post-Colon is an anthology of short videos that was done in 1993 when Hasnul was at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, New York. The anthology is made up of single-channel videos stored in the form of video cassettes that are meant to be screened via a television set. These videos were produced using magnetic videotapes that store information on analog signals and in a linear method. What this means is that during the editing process one cannot access a particular piece of information stored in the tape randomly. The tape has to be fixed unto a head to access the information and this access operates sequentially, from the start to the end point of the tape. If a particular section is to be accessed, it could be done by rewinding or forwarding the tape accordingly.

This analog way of operating leaves physical traces captured during the process of developing, screening and storing the video over time. It is a haptic medium that degenerates over time. Post-Colon reveals these physical traces such as unnatural color decay, grainy and jitter images as well as white noise that comes to interrupt the playback of the video. These unintended effects of video art built over time have become portal of cultural history and memory. Almost every detail of such mishaps could potentially stand as a document and layers of added mediation in the presentation of the video art. In other words, it has become an aesthetic that has come to define video art. Meanwhile, the method of presentation as a single channel reflects upon the technology and ideology of television in general. The choice of having the video in a Phase Alternating Line (PAL) format reflects a particular moment of standardization in television broadcast around the world. PAL is an analog color encoding system that is meant for analog television. This dictates the size of the videos in Post-Colon. PAL video dimension is 720 pixels by 576 pixels, a 4:3 ratio. This is totally different to the 1280 x 720 pixels, a 16:9 ratio commonly viewed on youtube.

These are some of the visual aesthetics that are prevalent in viewing Post-Colon 20 years after its creation. The naturally occurring aesthetics that are visually dominant in viewing Hasnul's video art does count as an encounter that reveals the material and experiential attributes of the work. More than that, these attributes reveal the mediation of Hasnul's expression from a particular moment in time or a capturing of 'time'. As the author encounters Hasnul through these video works, these aesthetics force one to not only

articulate the content of the video works but also to acknowledge the historical and cultural context of the production.

Voice in the Midst (Pic.05)

This is a 4-minute video piece that combines various elements such as video recordings still images, sketches, voice recording, background music and even fingerprints. The video starts with a still image of a fingerprint overlaid by a video of a hand movement. This fades in and out of a video over the still image is made to look seamless through the use of monochromatic colours and transition effects. The video of a hand movement is then replaced with what seemed like a shot of the artist's mouth as he attempts to say something. This is followed by a growling voice in the background. It is as if the artist is attempting to say something but nothing can be made out of it. Meanwhile, the background image of the fingerprint is replaced with old, black and white photographs of what seems like landscapes, the interior of a house, a group of people and even a couple. Simultaneously the video of the mouth gives way to a gesture of scribbling on a paper. This video of scribbling slowly attempts to scratch away the photographs in the background. At one point, the presentation alternates between the mouth, scribbling and the photographs. It seems as if the artist is attempting to say something while the background images are slowly scribbled away with the pencil. In spite of the scribbling, the old photo is still visible. Finally, the whole composition gives way to a film grain. This transition is very rigid as the presentation does not fade out to the grainy effect, instead it is marked but an abrupt cross dissolve.

The speculative nature in describing the elements and narrative of the video must be recognized. This is because there is no clear indication of the elements in terms of its signification with the features described outside itself. This problem also persists in terms of trying to recognize a readable narrative when viewing the video art. It became obvious that the method of analyzing the content is deliberately challenged. Hasnul's theme and its structuring method provoke issues relating to content, representation, and meaning. Following Digital Collage, the technological means of production, especially related to the production of time and its form is critically examined in relation to cultural specificity. Here the video questions cultural heritage, identity and even perhaps Hasnul's own sense of past, but the crises is not simply represented through video. Instead, it is expressed

through the involuntary experience of abstraction by the viewer made out of intrinsic form with little or no attempt at pictorial representation or narrative content.

Abstraction here has come to define the 'unthought', or the exploration of 'tradition' not through the norms of historical linearity. Hasnul is very critical of this linearity as it is reflected in the disruption of cinematic narrative that frees the viewer from the artificiality of time. With the use of moving images alongside still photographs, Hasnul combines the temporality of medium (video) and the materiality of the image (photographs). In other words, time combines with substance, and more importantly, the ability of the medium to shape time is utilized as a material for an epistemological inquiry into the definition of substance in terms of its cultural meaning and relativism. I argue video is favored by Hasnul because it does not carry any ideological baggage as other forms of well-recognized art practice such as painting and sculpture. By utilizing the seamless play of transition, effects, and integration of various medium, Hasnul was able to destabilize the visual language to reveal the implicit structure that defines the ordering. For Hasnul 'tradition' by reference to a personal experience is essential, akin to the 'inner technology' or what I could call subjectivity. "Voice in the midst" manifest this subjectivity not with the intention to signify with the viewers' experience, but a call to view art anew, a 'doing' by moving in and out of signification, akin to a helix of semiotics that revolves around the axis of time.



Pic.05

Voice in the midst (post-colon series)
1993, single channel video

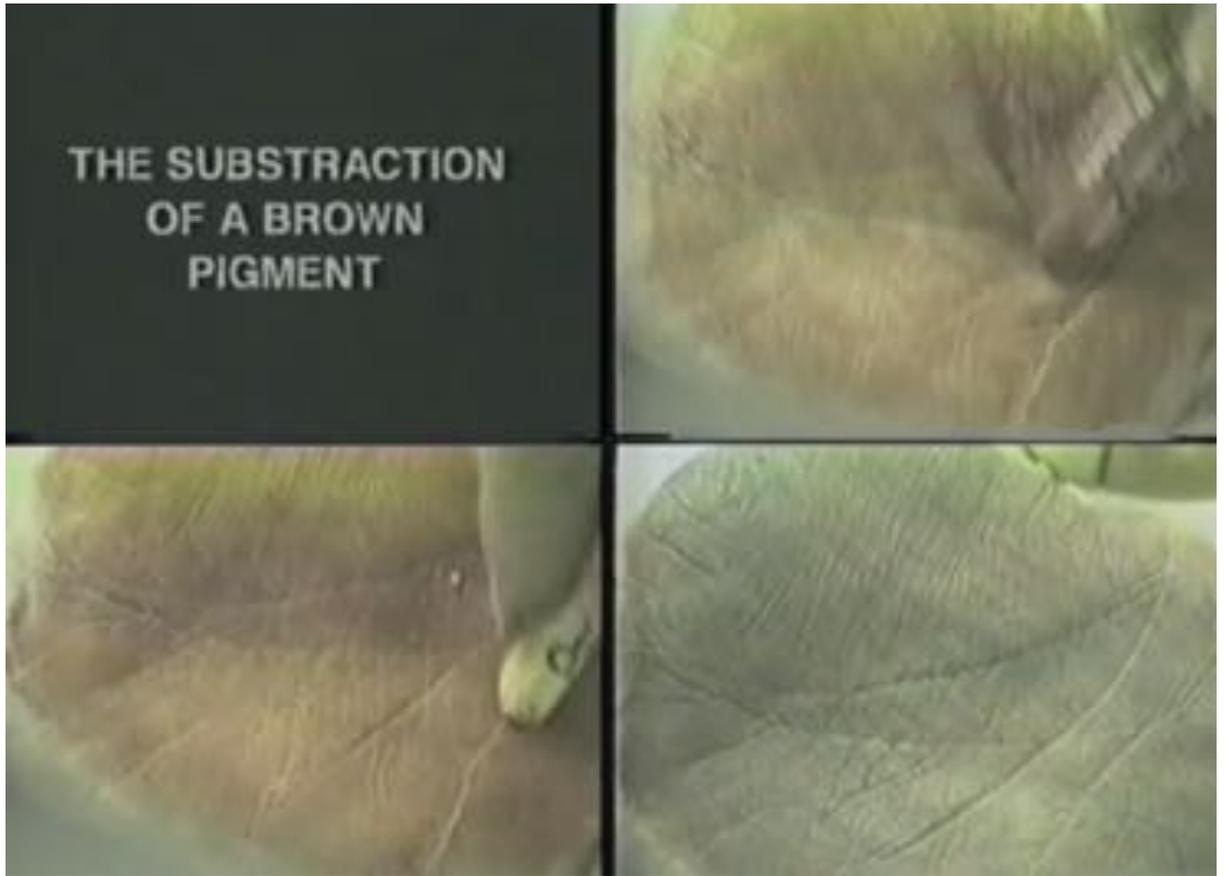
The Subtraction of a Brown Pigment (Pic.06)

This is a 2:30-minute video of an act performed by Hasnul. The clip starts with a fixed shot of the palm of his left hand. The camera remained fixed in the same position throughout the entire duration of the piece. After the initial-brief moment of showing the palm, it fades out and in as he begins to colour his palm with a brown wax-crayon stick. This is then followed by consecutive fading out and in as he continues to colour his palm with yellow, purple, green, orange and finally white wax-crayon sticks. These colours are applied one after another and by the time he starts applying the white wax-crayon the palm has become completely black and the colouring of white does not make any difference to the tone. As a final act, Hasnul then wipes off the colours that he has applied to reveal as somewhat a discoloured tone upon his palm.

This is a straightforward video that documents an act by Hasnul, something he did upon his body. However, this video is not only seen as a source of the informational document but it is also an extension that adds layers to the symbolic performance enacted by Hasnul. In this piece, Hasnul literally attempts to eradicate his skin tone. He does this not by reducing but by adding more colours to his skin. By adding to subtract Hasnul is not after a process of purification. Subtraction here does not signify a negative connotation, as in to dispose of a skin tone with the intention of seeking an authentic tone. Instead, subtraction here symbolises an act of resistance or a defiance towards the colour brown that has come to represent and identify him in a particular racial characteristic. Choosing to add as a strategy to resist is akin to the 'Malay doing'. By increasing the amount of colour on his skin, there is an increased chance of him colliding with other tones or racial markings. Such a collision will not only saturate the supposedly specific trait of a person based on appearance, but it will also trouble the structure that orders a subject in the manner of racial identity.

But Hasnul acutely performs this 'doing' instead of representing it pictorially. His choice of using video adds another layer in the play of such signs. Just as how Zain's utilization of semiotics correlates with the operation of computer technology, in the same manner, the 'technics' here corroborates a phenomenological reference inherent to any living subject. Simply put the video is akin to a perspective, of a subjective judgement of an individual over other during an encounter. The appearance of skin and its manipulation thereof, especially as Hasnul is imposing such an alteration upon himself reflects the bias

that is inherent in our gaze when we look at others and its artificiality bound by belief and values of our very own invention. More crucially this gaze is now externalized through the use of video technology in mass media that has come to circulate and normalize values based on racial identity. This critique of mass media is inherent in all of Hasnul's video art with the choice of PAL format for his production.



Pic.06

The subtraction of a brown pigment (post-colon series)
1993, single channel video

Colors (Pic.07)

Colors is a 1.30-minute video that consists of two-layered compositions combined as a single channel presentation. It has a background of a pixelated image that slowly becomes visually perceivable over the duration of the video. Meanwhile, the foreground consists of running text, from the bottom scrolling upwards that pronounces certain statement concerning the changing image in the background. The video starts with a scrolling text in the foreground pronouncing “I can clearly see the colors”, followed by a list of colors, namely red, black, white, yellow and brown. This list of colors is typed in the colors it claims to represent, for example, ‘white’ is written with a white font color and ‘brown’ is written with a brown font color. After a brief pause, the text scrolls upward giving way for another new set of text to move upwards and replace the earlier text.

This scrolling occurs 11 times and each time the text would appear with additional adverbs such as ‘maybe’, ‘perhaps’ and ‘think’ that reflect a sense of doubt about the earlier assurance of what is being perceived in the background. For example from ‘I can clearly see the colors’ to ‘I think I maybe see the colors’. Meanwhile, as these groups of text keep scrolling up one after another, the background composition slowly changes from the pixelated image into the visually perceivable picture. The connection between the background and the foreground becomes clear and comprehensible over time. The video comes to an end with the statement indicative of being very unsure and uncertain of the colors revealed by the image in the background as the image finally unveils a fetus. The uncertainty of the statement is sustained till the end of the video for the description is never able to identify any concrete notion of skin tone, or racial identity for the fetus.

The strategy of using two layers of composition for this video art speaks of the gap that is inherent between an object and its image. In other words, the crux of the piece lies in the process of mediation and its uncertainty. As argued in the earlier chapters, identity can never come to represent a subject in its totality. This inability of an image to represent in totality is scrutinized and exposed on several levels of mediation by this video. Firstly, Zain’s argument of the term ‘tradition’ and its limitation by language is explicitly demonstrated here. The text that describes the background image is constantly shifting and is never able to describe the visual in language. Secondly, such an inability is also due to the inherent nature of the background image that is constantly changing. Following the argument of ‘assemblage’ in chapter 01, the changing images of the background

reflect the nature of subjectivity shaped by the operation of the body as an assemblage. The uncertainty of body and the supposedly firm epistemology of language is symbolised by these two layers. There is a back and forth movement that occurs between these two layers and as I have argued elsewhere this is a 'doing'.

Thirdly, the technology is also represented through the visual by the choice of having pixelation as a method of choice to obscure the background image of the fetus. This transformation from pixel to the fetus is akin to the 'technics' in shaping or conceiving a subject. Technology here becomes the aesthetics and indexicality of a subject from the abstract. I argue that the slippage between foreground (language) and background (subject) is most of the time overlooked in the transcoding of identity in the history. In this video art, Hasnul points at that slippage by emphasizing the role of technology over language in the process of subjectification.



Pic.07

Colors (post-colon series)
1993, single channel video

In the precious Garden (reading of a silenced Wisdom) (Pic.08)

This is an installation work that was done in 1993. It was part of Hasnul's final MFA thesis show at Rensselaer Polytechnics institute. This work was conceived with reference to Islamic scholar Ismail Faruqi's³⁴ cultural atlas of Islam³⁵ that he co-authored with his wife. The artwork also incorporates various sources from different texts such as poem taken from As-Sheikh Abdul Kadir Al-Jailani, Jallaluddin Rumi, Al-Ghazali, and Liu I-Ming as part of the installation. There are two components to this installation, namely video, and written works. Both of these components address the scientific reading of fetus formation in the womb. The video is a 60-minute composition of Hasnul's personal interpretation regarding life's journey before time. Meanwhile, the chosen poems are handwritten on white circular cloth in 12 sections divided equally from the center of the circle. This circular cloth is placed on the floor to form a base for the installation. Also, there are 3 television sets placed at equal distance from each other at the radius of the base.

Conceptually this work addresses the notion of fractions by bringing together the idea of fractions in Islamic art and the divisions in the human egg that splits into double to form a fetus. This concept of fractions is applied both to the video and the written work. The original one-hour video is duplicated and compressed to five minutes. This five-minute video is also duplicated and compressed to thirty seconds. These 3 videos are played back on the television sets placed at the radius of the white cloth. The viewer encounters 3 video channels of the same source material that plays concurrently but at a different velocity. Meanwhile, the written poems are also copied in a smaller font size and placed at an equal distance closer to the center, in the respective sections of the circle. This is then repeated once again, with even more smaller font size and placed even closer to the center of the circular cloth on the floor. In this way, the circular cloth of the floor visually manifests written poems that repeatedly spiral out from the center.

This is an early experiment by Hasnul in probing the compatibility of new media with tradition. While Hasnul's pursuit of 'tradition' is a continuation of Zain's argument,

³⁴ Professor Ismai'il Raji al Faruqi is a scholar of Islamic studies that has contributed vastly to the understanding to Islamic religion. His investigation of Islam through various aspects of living such as ethics, politics, cultures, education, science, and economic has made significant impact in the inter-faith and inter-culture dialogue, especially that involves engagement between the East and West. Imtiyaz Yusuf, "Introduction", *Islam and Knowledge: Al Faruqi's Concept of Religion in Islamic Thought*. (ed) Imtiyaz Yusuf, I.B.Tauris, 2012, p.1.

³⁵ Ismail R. al Faruqi and Lois Lamya al Faruqi, *The Cultural Atlas of Islam*, New York: Macmillan, 1986.

however, he differs from Zain in his approach towards tradition, both in theory and practice. For Hasnul, tradition is not only to be acknowledged as the ‘unthought’, but such an acknowledgement must also be ‘rethought’ in terms of its signification encoded in the ‘politics of culture and identity’. Simply put, practice for Hasnul is to transfer the deconstructive force of the ‘unthought’ from the rhetoric of theory into contexts where the difference is very much at issue in the real world.

There are two aspects to this approach in practice – firstly the difference in context and secondly the oneness of existence in the real world. These two aspects are reflected in the installation through the themes of human development (oneness) and the principle of Islamic Art (difference). ‘Tradition’ as the ‘unthought’ is a transmission of inner quality of being related to a shared humanistic endeavor that goes beyond logos. Such endeavor is represented through the themes of human development that relates universally to every human being. Conversely, such universal occurrence is also interpreted through various cultural and religious lenses. Such diversification in interpretation is represented through the principle of Islamic Art. However, Hasnul also includes poems from other religion such as Taoist to reinforce the shared humanistic endeavor in the practice of ‘tradition’ that speaks to the human race as a whole. These two aspects are held together in practice through the exploration of time and space inherently compatible with the operation of new media.

The exploration of time and space is visible in the execution of the installation. The video is utilized as a medium for the fragmentation of time while the written poems on the white cloth are used for the division of space. Time is compressed with the 60-minute video made in 5 minutes and followed by 30 seconds. Space is divided into 12 sections, followed by the writing of poems that reduce in size as it spirals in towards the center of the circular cloth on the floor. While time and space are literally examined through the installation, the content of the video and written work does contain themes of human development. In other words, the literal division of space and time embody the oneness of humanity. Hasnul’s approach to this installation is to return to this sense of oneness intrinsic to any tradition while being aware of the politics of difference that might entail with the utilization of tradition in practice, or time and space.

According to Hasnul, this work explores ideas such as ‘modular’, ‘non-linear’, ‘interdependent’, ‘interactivity’, ‘micro versus macro’, ‘flux’, ‘multiplicity’ and

‘simultaneity’. These ideas are adapted from Islamic principles, specifically by referring to a section on Islamic Art in Ismail Faruqi’s Cultural Atlas of Islam. While the adaptation of these ideas is not necessarily for the purpose of exploring new media, however when these ideas are applied in execution of time and space it naturally reveals the coherency with new media. The utilization of time and space for artistic creation becomes a mirror that reflects the similarities between new media and Islamic principles; concurrently re-inscribing tradition within the specificity of a subject’s experience. For example, the collision between video and written text in the installation does not necessarily present a cohesive narrative or reading of the work. But with the play of time and space, it instigates an awareness of the spatial and temporal relations between objects, events and the audience. This awareness is the unfolding of a viewer’s presence to themselves in the temporal relations between constitutive elements of the work and its content. While Hasnul offers Islamic principles to gauge this awareness, however, the installation itself is open to multiple readings and formation of meaning.



Pic.08
In the precious Garden (reading of a silenced Wisdom)
1993, video and sound installation

Mirror, mirror on the wall (Pic.09)

This particular video art marks Hasnul's return from the United States after the completion of his studies. Initially, this video was produced as part of an installation that consists of a bridal dais, mirror and a television monitor. Presented as an entry work for the 1994 Malaysian Young Contemporaries competition at National Art Gallery of Malaysia, it won a minor award and established his footing in the local art scene. Since then, just the video alone has been widely exhibited as an art object bearing the same title of the installation. The analysis here is focused only on the video because it bears a prominent pointer in Malaysian art history, more so as an early video art by Hasnul Jamal Saidon.

It is a short video piece with a duration of 2 minutes that plays in a loop. This loop is a transition between an image of a text etched on a wall stating 'mirror, mirror on the wall', followed by an animated portrait of Vincent Van Gogh and a scene of Hasnul struggling with impinging red lines around him. The image of Van Gogh is taken from his 'self-portrait' painting done in 1889 and currently exhibited at Musée d'Orsay, Paris. By using the self-portrait painting of Van Gogh as a basis, he then animated the portrait to visualize a winking and smiling Van Gogh.

These three different scenes are stylized in a 'color burnt' effect that provides the aesthetics coherency between these 3 disparate visuals. The transition between the text, Winking Van Gogh, and Hasnul's struggle operates as a particular narration that follows the visual language of cinematic viewing. Inevitably one will make the connection between one visual to another as if cutting from one scene to another that sustains the continuity of a story as being viewed on the television. In many ways, this work is a direct adaptation of Ismail Zain's work titled 'Vincent' that was produced as part of Digital Collage. The static image of Van Gogh's portrait is now transformed into an animated, cynical expression that comes to tease Hasnul. However, this animation represents a deeper extension of Zain's critique towards Renaissance perspective. The compositional critique of Zain that was signified through a multi-layered viewpoint is proliferated into two trajectories. Firstly through the narration that uses cinematic language to engage the viewer, but does not abide by the classical narrative structure of exposition, climax, and resolution. Since the video is a loop, there is no beginning or end in this narration, just as

there is no depth with a vanishing point in Zain's composition. But this unfolding of 'no depth' operates not on the spatial but continuously unfolds in temporal-spatial relations.

Secondly, through the speed of recording or playback, through the editing as well as through the use of transition this critique of Renaissance is expressed. These are elements that are medium-specific that come to bear a great deal in the perceptual experience of looking. With the Digital Collage, a viewer looks at the surface but with the video, the subject looks into the electronic moving image. This looking into dictates the expression as both a sign and symbol that one reveals on the surface but also a depth made out of brightness of the light and its duration. This 2-minute loop video consists of 2 different variations of the winking Van Gogh animation, 4 different variations of speed rate in the playback of the struggle scene, followed by 4 different slight variations of color tone. These variations not only effectively convey the narration of Western art history impinging upon the non-Western artist, but it also extends Zain's identification of the static, contemplative nature of modern art to reach beyond the museum. These variations disrupt our viewing of the video akin to the disruption of the contemplative nature of experiencing modern art.



PIC Pic.09

Mirror,mirror on the wall

1994, single channel animation video

Encountering Niranjan Rajah

Meanwhile, Niranjan Rajah delves straight into the issues of epistemology in his personal practice. Drawing from Hindu ancient sacred art, he highlights the problems of engaging the uncertainty evoked by media technology, especially in relation to the circulation of the image in the virtual environment. The critical discourse on the virtual and image has been central to Niranjan's practice throughout the nineties. Some of the key events where his practice was presented were in ISEA 1996 as part of a paper presentation titled "Locating the Image in an Age of Electronic Media". Also in an exhibition titled Explorasi at the Gallery Petronas, Kuala Lumpur followed by the 1st electronic Art Show in 1997 at the National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur. His practice is not only conceived in the form of artwork but also through various theoretical writings as well as curatorial and administrative roles. But then, yet again, I insist, he must profess, must utter. Must speak for himself - of his very own "doing" that instigates a particular sort of searching through practice. One that is rigorously examined by him, as he sings away by responding to Neil Diamond's song "I am, I said" (Niranjan's response are in bold)

"I am an artist and theorist educator based at the School of Interactive Arts and Technology, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada. I continue with a gloss on the lyrics of Neil Diamond's 1971 classic, I am, I said –

*LA's fine, the sun shines most of the time
Actually, Vancouver is really rainy, but when the sun comes out this can be
'the best place in the world!*

*And the feeling is 'lay back'
It's so **'west coast' – no buzz!***

*Palm trees grow, and the rents are low
Northern rainforest - lush, green, lots of mist and moss; Rents are **F..K..G
outrageous!***

*But you know I keep thinking about, Making my way back
Memang betul! (your right)
Well, I'm New York City born and raised
Actually, I was born in Jaffna but KL is my place
But nowadays, I'm lost between two shores
Uh huh!*

*LA's fine, but it ain't home
Yup!*

*New York's home, but it ain't mine no more
I don't Know I don't know...*

*I am, I said
To no one there
And no one heard at all
Not even the chair
I am, I cried
I am, said I
And I am lost, and I can't even say why
Leavin' me lonely still³⁶*

Niranjan uses his encounter with Neil Diamond's song to illustrate his 'doing', and in that same manner the author encounters Niranjan to expose the 'doing in practice'. Niranjan expresses his agitation casually through the response, of the collision between subjectivity and identity that drives his "doing in practice". But the anatomy of this particular agitation of Niranjan differs to Hasnul. For Hasnul it was an encounter with Ismail Zain that enables him to seek self-referential existential territories based on Malay identity. This is driven by Ismail Zain's argument of 'tradition' that decenters Malay from official identification based on historical and national narratives. This is Hasnul's doing (subjectivity) that collides with our doing (identity) or the affinity that we share as fellow practitioners of new media art. While Niranjan also participates in this affinity that we share in practice - for Hasnul, Niranjan and the author have met, and worked together on several projects, including this thesis. However, for Niranjan, the encounter is with the nation state that enables his "doing" based on his identity as a Malaysian-Indian.

Niranjan's encounter with a fellow Malaysian evokes not only his 'doing' but along with it a sense of allegiance to the state. This is because his citizenry was earned and not given. Niranjan was born in Jaffna, Sri Lanka and obtained his legal status as a citizen of Malaysia later in life. He was not born as a Malaysian. Being born in Malaysia demands the state to have a compulsory association into which a subject becomes normalized without the need to give active allegiance to the state. However, this differs if the subject is not born in Malaysia and seeks citizenship as someone belonging to a different state. In this situation, the subject must demonstrate loyalty to the state through which the state could govern and inscribe its relationship of subjection to its subject.

³⁶ Niranjan Rajah, "Contextualising Fermentations," in *Roopesh Sitharan "Fermentation - A Solo exhibition of New Media Art"* (Penang: Muzium dan Galeri Tuanku Fauziah, 2009), Pg.72.

According to Butler subjecthood could only exist through a paradoxical condition of simultaneous mastery and submission.³⁷ It could be argued that such mastery and submission is inherent to any Malaysian, and it entails a necessary vulnerability to racial identity in order to become a subject of Malaysia. This is the paradoxical condition through which the ‘doing’ occurs. In ‘doing’ the submission comes against the mastery of the subject over its body, especially when the body is submitted to a particular delamination of meaning based on racial identity. In this way, ‘bodily experience’ is essential for the thesis as it makes possible the articulation of response to such forced submission in the unravelling of Malaysian subjectivity. As someone who is born Malaysian, the phenomena of ‘forced submission’ is given and accepted as the inherent condition of my sovereignty as a Malaysian. It is in this normality of given that I attempt to articulate the ‘doing’. But for Niranjana alongside the ‘doing’, his submission also equally comes into play as a corollary of his earned citizenship. When asked whether does he still considers himself as a Malaysian while abiding in Vancouver, Niranjana replied:

“You know this is a very difficult question. The best way to answer this is to say that I do – simply because I am a Malaysian citizen and I am an artist. You know Neil Diamond is doing some good work again and topping the charts these days. I used to be a huge fan of his early work “I am I said I am said I” KL is home but I guess “it ain't mine no more”. You know I had this problem well before coming to Vancouver – which by the way is very “fine” though its not a “sun shines all the time” kind of place. Sorry I can’t help this Neil Diamond stuff Ha !... I am KL “raised” but not “born” – Though my father was born in Seremban, I was born in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. I came to live in Malaysia at age 2. Then I left for London the age 17 and spent many years as a student there. My early adult life and career as an artist were forged there. And then when I returned to Malaysia and did all the important internet and theoretical work, I was based in Kuching, Sarawak – where West Malaysians like me need a work permit and are never allowed to really feel at home. Identity is a complex thing but while my identity as an artist is connected to this complication, I think the answer to your question is a little more practical. While I worked as an artist in the late 1990’s, I certainly was a Malaysian. I literally dropped out for the last 6 years while striving to set up in Vancouver – but now I am settled as an assistant professor at the School of Interactive Arts and Technology (SIAT), Simon Fraser University; and am in a good position to reconnect with my former identity. You know, Canada is my home now and circumstances have not allowed me to return for six years but now thanks to your curatorial endeavor and art historical memory – I am back on the scene – My old work is remembered and my new work is being recontextualized –

³⁷ Judith Butler, "Contingent foundations: feminism and the question of 'postmodernism'," in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (New York: Routledge, 1995), Pg. 45.

*relocated even - as Malaysian – Yes I am happy to announce that I am still Malaysian artist!*³⁸

Through his reply, it can be noted that Niranjan is acutely aware of his ‘earned’ legal status as a citizen of Malaysia. The experience of living in West-Malaysia and his comments upon the re-contextualization of his work by the author reveals an epiphenomenon of his citizenship which has gained prominence in Niranjan’s life over his time living outside Malaysia. His relevancy to Malaysia had to be demonstrated either by him or someone else on his behalf to sustain his fidelity to the state. This deliberate ‘show’ of allegiance illustrates that earned citizenry and given citizenry are analogous, yet distinct and parallel experiences. For Niranjan being Malaysian demands a construct of his own conditions while a born Malaysian does not have an existence that lies outside or prior to given formation. I perceive this demand on Niranjan as an externalization of the ‘Malaysian doing’ – the movement between a Malaysian body and the racialized Malay body that affirms the tension of duality between body and subject. To simplify, what happens at the level of subjectivity for a Malaysian is now something that must be consciously acted upon by Niranjan to reiterate and confirm his nationality.

This is why Niranjan’s encounter with a fellow Malaysian is not simply a matter of ‘doing’ but also a conscious acceptance of the interpellation by the nation state. The ideology of nation state negotiates with the ‘doing’. This negotiation means coming to terms with the identity as a Malaysian-Indian while being invoked by the ‘doing’. Niranjan expresses this negotiation implicitly, but sometimes also explicitly through practice, albeit looking at tradition to critically reflect and examine conditions of possible eclipse and subversion of identity politics in Malaysia. I argue Niranjan uses tradition to open up new possibilities of defining Malaysian. Given that Niranjan’s ‘doing’ is bound by a negotiation or an acceptance of his racial identity; tradition, as conceived by him, comes from his position as an Indian. But he goes further to explore the perennial philosophy in tradition that claims a singular, united metaphysical truth.³⁹ This is in line

³⁸ Niranjan Rajah "Roopesh Sitharan in conversation with Niranjan Rajah" in *Relocations: Electronic Art of Hasnul Jamal Saidon & Niranjan Rajah*, ed. Roopesh Sitharan (Penang: Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 2008), Pg.44.

³⁹ Clinton Minnaar explains that perennial Philosophy “is both absolute truth and infinite presence. As Absolute Truth it is the perennial wisdom (*Sophia perennis*) that stands as the transcendent source of all the intrinsically orthodox religions of humankind.” He further explains that it resides as an immanent and

with Zain's conception of 'inner technology'. In this way, he proposes to rethink Islam from the perspective of tradition as the 'unthought' that frees religion from its function as a disciplinary apparatus for the Malay. Speaking about this Niranjana explains:

*"I am not saying tradition has to take over the role of leadership. This is just a possibility to me. I think tradition and traditional forms are embedded in the modern national struggle anyway. Actually lets get to the core. I don't see why government can't be based on religion. But it needs to have a good mechanism to engage and articulate across a broad and diverse spectrum in post-traditional worldview. So, if you look at the idea of personal interpretation of Islam, ijtihād...in Malaysia, this is regulated for Malay nationalistic reasons... bureaucratic, controlled interpretation...Malay unity is entwined with Islam. If you fragment on interpretation of Islam, you fragment the Malay base. However, I feel that if Islam wants to become the umbrella for governance, then we all have to be able to speak about Islam...non-Muslims even. The Perennial philosophers, Syed Hossein Nasr, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Titus Burkhardt, Rene Guenon, most of them are Muslims! They have already done the work, you know. All religious forms have their social orders and social structures. If we can mix and match under the main, the dominant paradigm...if we can listen and study together, I think it's possible. Just like today. We have religious diversity under secular rule. We can have secularism and other religions under one dominant religion. You know, like Islam in Spain....a lot of things were going on. This is fine with me, but if we're not able to do that, then I don't want to play."*⁴⁰

Niranjana's emancipation of religion from disciplinary apparatus is not out of his 'doing' alone, but because of the 'Malaysian doing', however irreconcilable it might be with the nation state, yet it is necessary for the retention of his subjecthood as a recognizable and thus viable Malaysian. Niranjana does not eradicate his racial identity through this approach, instead he maneuvers to find prospects of negotiation and reconciliation with the Malay through the undoing of Islam by way of tradition as the 'unthought'. As he discussed in chapter 02, Niranjana wants to "*acknowledge the signifiers, colors of life and what might consist in the system...to create a conversation about it all the time and new media makes it possible.*"⁴¹ It is in this maneuver that his practice of new media art abides. The ability of new media to transcend materiality in encounter enables Niranjana to explore perennial philosophy in tradition.

underlying presence within all religions. Clinton Minnaar, "Introduction," in *The Underlying Religion: An Introduction to the Perennial Philosophy*, ed. Martin Lings and Clinton Minnaar (Bloomington, Ind: World Wisdom, 2007), Pg. xii.

⁴⁰ Niranjana Rajah, "Keling Maya, Post-Traditional Media, Malaysian Cyberspace and Me: Aliran Semasa, Khazanah, Ipoh, July 2013" in *Sentap!: A Decade*, ed. Nur Hanim Khairuddin (Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia: Teratak Nuromar, 2015) Pg.73.

⁴¹ Chapter 02.

Niranjan returned from London in 1995 and started working at Unimas with Hasnul Jamal Saidon. During that time Malaysia was driven by an agenda of a technological revolution as the way forward for the country. With the launch of vision 2020 in 1991, and followed by the inauguration of the Multimedia Super corridor in 1996, the country was set for transformation from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy. In the context of Niranjan's new media art practice, it is sufficient to say that these governmental agendas focused on technology aided Niranjan's aspiration to reconfigure Malaysian by means of tradition. The slew of technological induction was rapidly changing the cultural and social landscape of Malaysia. Particularly social interactions, or 'encounter' was rapidly being mediated by ubiquitous computing that replaced the notion of time and space with instantaneous diffusion.

As argued in chapter 02 this is the autonomous operation of 'technics' - a diffusion beyond our perception. The interaction was occurring in a dematerialized space aided by communication and electronic technologies that were easily made available to any Malaysian. Perhaps the most significant of the technologies that were introduced to Malaysian society, and the world, in general, was the internet. It democratized information by freeing it from the materiality of dissemination and simultaneously altered our perception of the world. A dematerialized space where information is accessed, altered and dispersed induce subject in a structure different from what is known.

This leap to the unknown caused by dematerialization of space became a fertile ground for Niranjan's exploration of perennial philosophy in tradition. Technology's demand for a new configuration of 'encounter' corresponds with Niranjan's approach to religion beyond representation - in the case of Malaysia its utilization as a disciplinary engine. The tradition was 'rethought' by Niranjan in the lines of poetics, aesthetics, and cognition in new media that presents an opportunity to recognizes the transcendental unity of all religion in perennial philosophy. Niranjan explains:

*"It appears that while representations in new media can be 'simulacra' in the extreme, the rapid exchange of representations is taking us beyond representation itself. If, as I have argued, modes of representation reveal differences in consciousness, the recent radical turn towards 'communication', must mean that we are on the threshold of a more literally 'collective' consciousness."*⁴²

⁴² Niranjan Rajah, "Two Portraits of Chief Tupa Kupa: The image as an Index of Shifts in Human Consciousness," in *Art, Technology, Consciousness Mind@Large*, ed. Roy Ascott (Bristol: Intellect, 2000), Pg.83.

Elsewhere he elaborates further:

*“This ancient understanding of the relativity of realities might help us comprehend more completely the implications of the Internet for human consciousness. Indeed, it is crucial that Computer Mediated Communication is not construed, simply, as the technological manifestation of postmodern theories, and that virtual reality is not understood as the metaphysical backlash of a materialistic Western civilization. As Internet technology becomes universally available, its potential must be realised in terms of a multiplicity of cultural paradigms, particularly in terms of the living sacred paradigms of the East.”*⁴³

Throughout Niranjana's time in Unimas, he has done plenty of theoretical works to ground his argument on the resemblance of new media with the spiritual ontology of perennial philosophy. This has manifested in various forms of output such as talks, teaching, paper presentations, curations, academic writings and creation of artwork. He was even part of the CAiiA-STAR⁴⁴ international research community invested in the creation of new knowledge based on transcultural and transdisciplinary perspective on art and technology. In the same manner of encountering Hasnul, my encounter here with Niranjana focuses on his internet works, followed by the works mentioned by him in chapter 02.

This is because his internet works express his 'doing' through couching the practice of new media arts in terms of a tradition. This is a follow-up of Zain's work on Digital Collage, and also an extension of Stigler's technics specific to the condition of being a Malaysian. Comparatively between Hasnul and Niranjana, they both enthusiastically pursue a redefinition of a Malaysian by overcoming the constituting forces of a racialized body. While 'tradition' coupled with new media does offer a path of metaphysical enquiry by which the subject can be reworked, however, Niranjana's pursuit differs to that of Hasnul's. It is my contention that this difference is factored by the discrepancy between "Malay doing" and Malaysian doing".

For Hasnul tradition is pursued simply by an act of willing submission to his own needs, anxieties, and desire driven by the discrepancy between body and race. In doing so he is reworked through his new media art practice in which the resignification of Malay

⁴³ Niranjana Rajah, "Sacred Art in A Digital Era or The Internet and The Immanent Place in The Heart," in *Reframing Consciousness*, ed. Roy Ascott (Exeter: Intellect, 1999), Pg.60.

⁴⁴ The name CAiiA-STAR represents an integrated research platform between CAiiA - the Centre for Advanced Inquiry in the Interactive Arts at University of Wales College Newport, established in 1994 and STAR - the Science Technology and Art Research Centre in the University of Plymouth, established in 1997. CAiiA-STAR is a world-wide research community, founded and directed by Roy Ascott, whose innovative structure involves collaborative work and supervision both in cyberspace and at regular meetings in the UK and abroad.

through tradition becomes open for discourse. For Niranjan, the affirmation of racial identity remains physically circumscribed in his pursuit. This difference must be performed to reckon with the Other in the transcendental unity of tradition. However, this affirmation is not essentialized but externalized by his new media art practice to engage in perennial philosophy through which he participates in discourse with the Malay. Tradition can represent Malaysian within a certain context of singularity, but it can never resolve the discrepancy between the 'Malay doing' and 'Malaysian doing'.

Failure of Marcel Duchamp/Japanese Fetish Even! (Pic.10)

This is an internet art build with what seems a basic and crude ability of the internet by today's standard in making links with hypertext from one webpage to another. Such simplicity is due to the age of the work that is being accessed 20 years after its creation at the time this is being written. Conceived in 1996 by Niranjan Rajah, this work was first presented as part of a poster presentation titled 'Locating the Image in an Age of Electronic Media'⁴⁵ at the ISEA⁴⁶ 1996 Conference in Rotterdam. It was presented again that year in an exhibition titled 'Explorasi' at the Gallery Petronas, Kuala Lumpur and later in 1997 as part of '1st electronic Art Show' at the National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur. The work was hosted on a server located in Germany and is made accessible online via the shared web address with Academy of Fine Arts Art Leipzig. Currently, this internet art is not accessible online as the hosting and sharing of the website address has been stopped by the academy. Also, its online presence and relevancy with the argument of its creation have passed as internet and telecommunication technology progressed rapidly in the 20 years that have passed. The work was briefly hosted and presented online as part an online extension of ISEA 08, Singapore satellite exhibition called 'Relocations: electronic arts of Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjan Rajah' in 2008. This analysis is based on an offline version of the work.

⁴⁵ Niranjan Rajah, "Locating the Image in an Age of Electronic Media," ISEA Symposium Archives | ISEA International, last modified May 13, 2016, <http://www.isea-archives.org/isea96-john-law-drawing-on-the-brain-an-art-science-collaboration-2-2-2-2-2-2-2/>.

⁴⁶ ISEA stand for Inter-Society of Electronic Arts. Founded in the Netherlands in 1990, it is an international non-profit organization fostering interdisciplinary academic discourse and exchange among culturally diverse organizations and individuals working with art, science and technology. The main activity of ISEA is the annual International Symposium on Electronic Art (ISEA). The symposia began in 1988.

'Failure of Marcel Duchamp/Japanese Fetish Even!' starts with an index page, or an initial information page with a black background and white text stating the title of the work, followed by a statement just below that says "a web installation by Niranjan Rajah". The word 'installation' and 'Niranjan' is underlined and colored in red. Below this statement are the names of graphic designer A. Rasyidan and Webmaster Mika Seitsonen. Then right at the bottom, there are three words in capitals stating 'TEXT', 'THANKS', and 'LINKS'. These words are in red as well. The text that is in red indicates it is linked and navigates the viewer to different pages. The three links at the bottom go to pages that it represents, 'TEXT' links to the poster-essay that was presented at ISEA 1996, 'THANKS' list people who helped create the work and 'LINKS' list several sites that are contextual to work such as Philadelphia Museum of Art, Marcel Duchamp, ISEA, Etant Donnes and Junichiro Tanizaki.

The actual work is accessed by clicking on the link 'installation' that is red and underlined. Once clicked, the viewer is directed to a webpage with an image of a red leather-bound album with golden stripe border around it. The height of the image goes beyond the dimension of the browser window and this forces the viewer to scroll up and down to view the album as a whole. To proceed, the viewer then needs to click on this image of the album and it directs to the next page with an image of that same album opened with a square image at the center. This image is grainy and textured as though it has been veiled by semi-opaque linen. One can vaguely make out an image of a person standing, facing backward, and looking at an arched entrance similar to Marcel Duchamp's Etant Donnes.

When clicked further, the veil is removed and you can easily make out that it's the artist (Niranjan Rajah) with his back towards the viewer as he stands facing an entrance similar to Duchamp's Etant Donnes. Also, a urinal pan is placed next to him, just at the entrance of Etant Donnes. Looking closely, you make out that the artist is holding his fingers out to block the pair of peeping holes for the prying of Duchamp's work beyond the door. Clicked further, the next page reveals a bold, red 'warning' text followed by white text on a black background that says "*This page contains material of an adult nature. If you are a minor, if you are viewing from Malaysia or from another location where such material is prohibited or if you are offended by such material, please go back! If you still wish to view the page please continue.*" The viewer must proceed at their own discretion

and when the click the 'continue' link, the door is opened and an image of a naked Japanese fetish woman is revealed with an image of a waterfall in the background.

This work is an online parody of Marcel Duchamp's *Étant Donnés*, which was completed in 1966 and installed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art posthumously in 1968. With *Étant Donnés* the viewer was invited into a room that had been closed off by a large, wooden door set in an arch of brick. The door could not be opened, but there were two holes at eye level luring the viewer in for closer inspection. Peeping through the holes, one would have seen a well-lit landscape in which a naked woman lay in the foreground with her legs splayed towards the viewer. The scene was not accessible by any means other than by peeping through the holes. In Niranjana's parody, the viewer encountered a webpage with an image similar to Duchamp's work. This similarity is a deliberate choice by Niranjana to stress the contrastive experience of viewing an artwork that is significantly altered by the nature of the medium in which it is presented. In Duchamp's work, the individual must be present physically in the museum space and peep through the hole to view the work. By peeping the viewer literally objectifies what is seen and in doing so reinforces his corporeal presence as a unitary seeing subject.

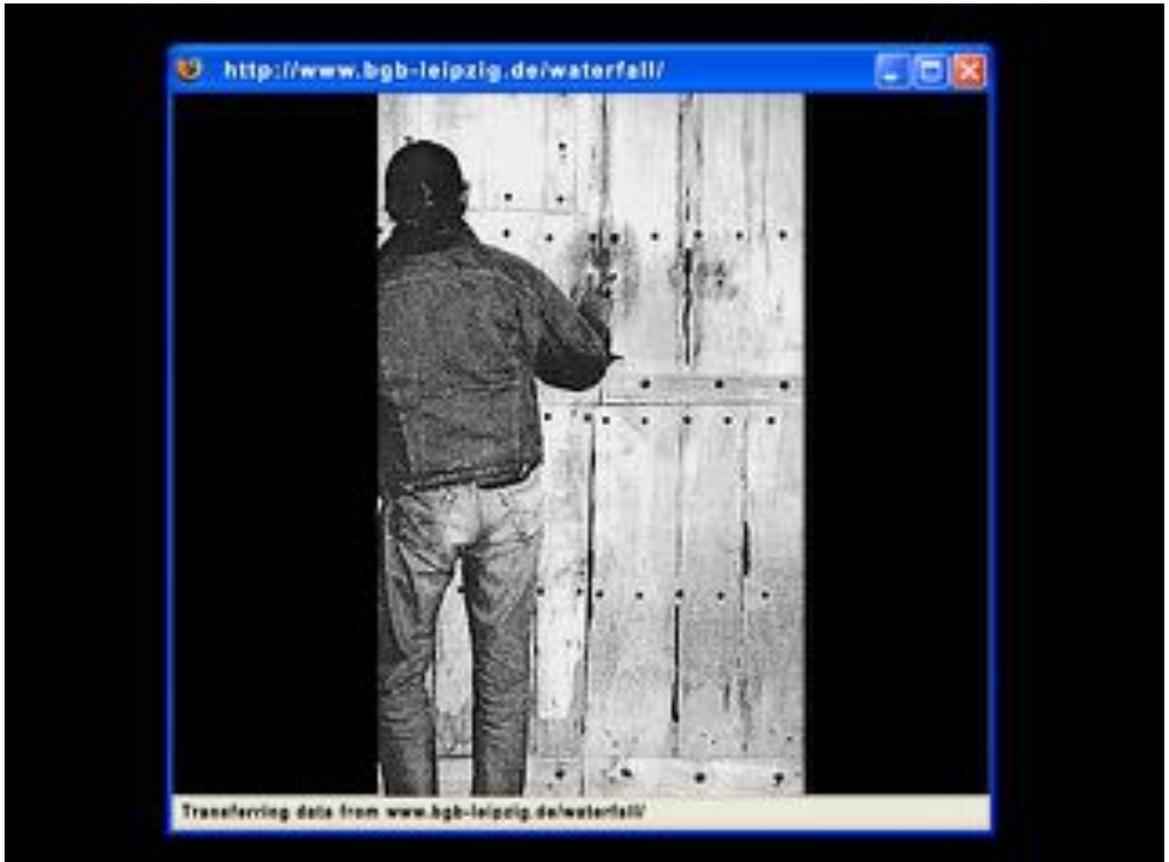
But with Niranjana's artwork, this experience is replaced by a banal encounter with an online image that is democratically accessible and instantaneously available via computer screen. Niranjana appropriates Duchamp's work by transposing the installation in the form of a readymade image. This turn of installation into readymade is signified by the placement of the urinal pan on the image of the *Étant Donnés* entrance. The privacy of peeping is displaced by the imminence presence of the image. Such speed and ease of access replace the corporeal experience with a saturated simulation where the distinction between real and image collapse. For Niranjana, such a collapse elevates Duchamp's critique of the popular peeping show devices that emerged in the early days of cinema (moving images), arguably could be said as the beginning of pornographic films. Today internet porn is immense and even racially categorized with Japanese porn being one category that's accessible online. Niranjana's fetishising of the Japanese nude female points to the beginning of such online porn industry.

Niranjana is also critical of new media, especially not falling into the trap of technological positivism. He purposefully locates the hosting for the work in Germany to impose the particularity of culture and tradition upon the imminent presence of the image. This is

achieved by presenting erotic content that is unacceptable to the Malaysian society in the exhibition space when it was presented in Petronas Gallery and National Art Gallery of Malaysia. He pinpoints the cultural boundaries in the supposedly unbounded terrain of the Internet. By doing so, Niranjana flips the utopian view of the Internet as being a democratic and global platform to be bound by the cultural constituencies.⁴⁷ This intention allows for the audience to access “malicious” content in a public space, transgressing cultural taboos and even perhaps the national obscenity legislation. This I believe is an act of critical resistance from Niranjana of the cultural hegemony that could possibly be a way reasserting implicit prejudice and biases through the shift in the ontology of the 'image'.

This is referenced in the title of the artwork that points at the failure of Duchamp and Japanese Fetish. These failures denote fetishism of 'image'. When Duchamp presented his installation in the exhibition space, it was meant to operate as a critical take on the peep show. However, the installation was taken as an assertion of aesthetic will in Art while porn industry flourished with the development of moving image technology. In the same manner, what seems like a simplistic internet art by Niranjana could be likened to that of 1880s' peepshow devices installation by Duchamp that marked the beginning of moving image porn. As Duchamp predicted the progression of pornography alongside the progression of moving image, Niranjana also predicts the progression of internet porn with the growth of accessibility on the internet. Failure of Duchamp is the transformation of his criticality into the mere aesthetic. Failure of Japanese Fetish is the growth of Japanese porn unto itself becoming globally renowned through the accessibility granted by the internet. Duchamp's critique is extended by Niranjana to critically point out the neo-Orientalism in porn as racial categories become a point of leverage for new media to launch new energetic assertion of imminence.

⁴⁷ By Cultural Policy of Malaysia, I am implying on the social and cultural markers such as Islam as the National religion and Bahasa Melayu as the official language and this is incorporated into the construction of Malaysia's Constitution.



Pic.10
The Failure of Marcel Duchamp/Japanese Fetish Even!
1996, internet art

La Folie de la Peinture (Pic.11)

This internet art, just like the ‘Failure of Marcel Duchamp/Japanese Fetish Even!’ was built on crude page links with hypertext that navigates the viewer from one webpage to another. Although its structure, in essence, is built on basic HTML⁴⁸ programming, it does integrate several multimedia components such as GIF⁴⁹ animation, video and audio as part of its presentation. Created in 1998, this work was first presented at the ISEA 98 conference in Liverpool/Manchester and at the Virtual Triennial, Third Asia-Pacific Triennial, Brisbane in the same year. It was also presented at ‘Converging Currents’ exhibition at Petronas Gallery, Kuala Lumpur in October 1999 and finally at the Substation, Singapore in the year 2000. After a gap of 8 years, the work was recreated for a two-man show as part of ISEA 08, Singapore satellite exhibition called ‘Relocations: electronic arts of Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjan Rajah’. It was online for the duration of the exhibition. Currently, the work is offline and its copy is not available on the World Wide Web. Just like any other time-based media, the arguments and ideas presented in this work have passed with the growth of internet technology, especially ubiquitous computing that freed the virtual network of the internet from personal computers to any device, in any location, and in any format. To note this change in technology is particularly important because the work also consists of a physical component in the form of an installation in a gallery space.

‘La folie de la Peinture’ starts with an index page with a similar interface to that of ‘Failure of Marcel Duchamp/Japanese Fetish Even!’. The initial information page has a black background with the title of the work followed by a statement ‘Another Web installation by Niranjan Rajah’. This time the word ‘installation’ and ‘Niranjan’ is in yellow and underlined to indicate it is linked. The page also consists of the usual “TEXT, THANKS, LINKS” at the bottom of the webpage that would direct the viewer to pages with relevant content. When the viewer clicks the ‘installation’ link, it goes to the next page with an image of a labelled wine bottle. This is a scanned image of a wine bottle

⁴⁸ HTML stands for Hypertext Markup Language, a standardized system for tagging text files to achieve font, colour, graphic, and hyperlink effects on World Wide Web pages. HTML describes the structure of a web page semantically and originally included cues for the appearance of the document.

⁴⁹ GIF stands for Graphics Interchange Format, a lossless format for image files that supports both animated and static images. In particular, an animated GIF contains within the single file a set of images that are presented in a specified order to create the illusion of moving image.

that Niranjan drank. The label is printed with the artwork of Eugene Delacroix's 'Liberty Leading the people'. Meanwhile, the size of the image is larger than the window of the browser forcing the viewer to scroll up and down to have a full view of the whole bottle. A black square is placed at the center of the label, followed by the word 'zip' at the bottom. These two anomalies on the label of the wine bottle serve as clickable links. The link 'zip' leads to a webpage with an image of what seems like a small red square copied many times to create one, single, long, vertical image. The viewer has to scroll from left to right to view the complete image, and as the page is scrolled the artist is embedded in the center of the image with his back turned towards the viewer. The posture of the artist suggests that he is pissing on the red squares. And by clicking on the artist, the viewer is directed to Failure of Marcel Duchmap/Japanese Fetish Even!

Returning to the bottle, if the viewer decides to click on the black square, then it leads to another image of Niranjan standing with folded arms and black sunglasses. An animated GIF of a spinning mosquito coil is located at the center bottom of the image. The animated GIF is a clickable link and it would lead to a set of photographs. These photographs are black and white and represent a documentation of an installation that was done by Niranjan during his time at Goldsmiths College in 1992. There are four photographs in total and each photograph represents a different angle of the installation. The navigation of the site is set in such a way that each photograph is viewable one at a time but all photographs are linked to each other. Initially, when the viewer loads the page, one angle is revealed and there would be several red texts stating 'eye' placed over the photograph. Click any of the 'eye' and the viewer would load the next photograph taken from the point of view of the position where the 'eye' was placed in the previous photograph. There are also several clickable spots as well in the photographs that would load the video and close-up images of objects placed in the installation. When 'La folie de la Peinture' is presented in a gallery space, it would be viewed on a computer terminal accompanied by objects from the installation. Some of the objects are exhibited as in the original installation, others in a vitrine.

This internet art has deeply embedded critiques of modernist aesthetics achieved by the signification of images with a discourse on art history and theory. This is in line with Ismail Zain's Digital Collage in using semiotics and juxtapositions of images as an artistic strategy for critique. Adapting a similar method, Niranjan uses the image of Eugene Delacroix's artwork 'Liberty Leading the People' as a label for a wine bottle to refer to a

significant moment in the second French revolution where King Charles X was overthrown. More than the historical reference, the artwork also operates as an icon of French romanticism in the discourse of art history. These two representations – one in the form of a cultural reference and the other in the pursuit of authentic oeuvres are affected by the overlay of the black square box on top of the image, followed by the word ‘zip’ at the bottom of the label. What might seem as a digital alteration of an image is a deliberate concealment of Delacroix’s painting, however, the choice of the ‘black square’ and ‘zip’ is not merely an annexation of an image for critique. These two overlays of image and text on top of Delacroix’ painting is an act of placing an icon on an icon.

The black square refers to Ad Reinhardt’s ‘abstract painting no.5’ that was done in 1962. Reinhardt’s work on his signature black paintings focused exclusively on resisting the rational interpretation of the painting, instead he pursued mystical ideas of negation arising from his appreciation of Eastern art and religion. The text ‘zip’ on the other hand refers to a series of works created by Barnett Newman where he deploys vertical lines in his paintings to characterize the spatial structure of the painting by separation of color. He called these vertical lines ‘zip’ and it remained a constant feature in his work throughout his life. He was a major figure in abstract expressionism, but more crucially his works are existential in tone and content. He treats the ‘zip’ technique as a device to create an enveloping experience of color when viewing the work. His aim was to suspend the separation of subject and object by treating the painting just as an encounter with another person to reflect spiritual humility.

The superimposition on the label of the wine bottle is explicitly composed with the intention of communicating a sense of locality, presence, and contingency alongside the critique. Locality emerges by the gesture of these two modern artists in referring to Eastern art and philosophy, and Niranjana uses the inherent meaning of these ‘Western’ arts to index ‘tradition’. Presence is by the correlation of the black square with his skin color that poses a question of the agency for the other in the political revolution. Contingency is by his acute choice of icons to lay over another icon. In using art history against itself, Niranjana proposes the discourse for the other does not start with an isolated yearning but with a possibility to accommodate difference within. Such accommodation of difference is also crudely represented with the method of imposing Reinhardt and Newman’s work upon Delacroix. Visually one can easily make out the artificiality of imposing one image upon another. By artificiality, I am referring to the purposefully left

‘unpolished’ composition that highlights digital technique and its flexibility in representing an icon’s online. Reinhardt is represented by an image of his work, Newman with text, and Delacroix by the scanned image of the wine bottle that Niranjan drank. These different methods of imaging and representation question the ontology of image in new media.

The image of Niranjan alongside a GIF animation of a spinning mosquito coil appears once the black square is clicked. Both of these images signify a single meaning to highlight the peculiarity of context in practice. The mosquito coil is Niranjan’s response to the universalization of technology and art. The spinning spiral mosquito coil is the logo of a best-selling insect-repellant in Malaysia and it could only be recognized by a Malaysian. Such specificity that evokes ambiguity or non-relevancy in other viewers is embodied by Niranjan with his sunglasses. In doing so, his gaze is hidden akin to obscuring someone’s identity. The ambiguity of meaning in artwork due to the context of practice, or cultural difference at large is now an interface that must be confronted by the accessibility available through technology. That interface is represented with the image of Niranjan himself, remaining obscure yet intrusively available. Clicking the animated mosquito coil leads to a page with a set of documentation photographs. Installation is bound by the immediate experience of the viewer in the actual space of the exhibition. Once the work is taken down, one can only access the piece through documentation; photographed images of the specific installation. The images stand as evidence in validating the ‘eccentric presence’ of the piece as this claim sometimes even consumes the actual documentation shot to become a part of the ‘object-hood’ of the installation and even the art itself.

With 'La Folie de la Peinture', images are brought into the limelight as Niranjan questions the appearance of the documented images amidst the connectivity of the computer-mediated communications. Niranjan poses these questions regarding installation art, its documentation and the circulation of such images by adapting Zain’s technique of juxtaposition. This strategy is applied not only for the composition of images and interfaces for the web pages but also in terms of the method of presenting the work. This internet art was presented in a gallery space alongside objects from the previous installation art. When engaging with the internet art in a gallery space, a viewer will engage the artwork in 3 strands of experience. Firstly the internet art with its medium-specific operation and aesthetics on the computer screen. Secondly, the online

photographs of previous installation art that resembles some of the objects found in the show itself. And thirdly the partial reinstatement as well as the presentation of objects from previous installation art. The juxtaposition of these 3 tiers as a single experience of viewing 'La Folie de la Peinture' forces the viewer to look for correlations between the physical installation and its virtual representation. Such correlations are instigated by the documented photographs from the previous installation. Photographs become the interlocutor that brings these 3 strands together. Photographs do not only become an account of a past event but in doing so metonymically stand-in for the discrete art object as well. This tension between real and the sign becomes even more amplified with new media.

The metonymy interchange between real and the sign is encapsulated through the 'theoretical' symbolism in the title of the piece. 'La Folie de la Peinture' translates as 'The madness of painting'. While 'folie' has many meanings in French, here it is a reference to Bernard Tchumi's 'red cubes', or 'folies' at the Parc de la Vilette in Paris. Done in collaboration with Jacques Derrida and hailed as the first piece of deconstruction architecture, it was meant to be a park which has no coherent meaning. While it operates as a strong defiance of modern architecture, however, such defiance has come to represent avant-garde in the 20th century. In the same manner, photography has defiantly come to replace the position of painting for the representation of the real. Photography as a documentation has no coherent meaning on its own. Nonetheless, installation art and photography that started off as defiance to modern aesthetics have now become the aesthetics of postmodern. With the title, Nirajan brings together the recorded conventions of Tchumi's 'red cubes' and photography to express the sort of absurdity this has caused to the 'uniqueness' of art. Crucially with new media, the fluidity of articulating remote experience of the image, moving image, text and sound leaves its own massified condition unindexed within this absurdity. This will make it increasingly difficult to differentiate the actual from the oneiric. Yet another madness, but not a leap from postmodern aesthetics, rather a severance in the conditions of subjectification.



Pic.11
La Folie de la Peinture
1998, internet art

Video Reflux (Pic.12)

Video reflux is a site-specific internet installation that was done in 2008. After a long hiatus of 10 years from creating internet art, Niranjana produced this work in collaboration with Caleb Buxton as part of a commissioned project for the ISEA 08 satellite exhibition.⁵⁰ Invited and curated by the author, this piece marks the return of Niranjana to producing new media works, especially an updated version that reflects the rapid transformation of telecommunications and information technology in the past ten years since 'La Folie de la Peinture'. 'Video Reflux' is a video wall developed by a database-driven YouTube sample library manager. The database and sample library are built using open source tools and it was hosted online on a server running free and open software. However, the video file format, sample editor and interface for gallery presentation are developed in a proprietary format – namely Flash.⁵¹ In this work, Niranjana grabs 100 footages from YouTube based on keyword searches such as 'Pruitt Igoe', 'Saddam Hanging', 'Hindu temple demolition', 'Chile Military Coup', 'Anwar', 'Mahathir' and 'Tamil Tiger suicide bomber'. The outcome is revealed in the form of a wall projection, filled with 100 small windows of video arranged in a 10 by 10 grid. The videos play continuously in a loop and the search is reset every 5 minutes to update with newer videos that are relevant to the keyword search.

This work reflects a departure from his previous works that were done prior to the turn of the century. The utopian dreams ushered by the Internet such as decentralization of information flow, the empowerment of ordinary people and the very nature of the network to be anarchic and creative, or to use Niranjana's word 'madness' was overturned in the past 10 years since his last work. When the work was presented in 2008, the online media landscape was viciously contested by corporate interest. Huge media conglomerates such as Google and Facebook were clamoring for a share of the online space driven by the ability of the medium to mediate communication beyond the constraints of time and geography. In fact, the independently operational and user-generated content driven video-sharing website YouTube was taken over by Google in 2006. It was in such a

⁵⁰ I am referring to 'Relocations: Electronic Art of Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjana Rajah' exhibition.

⁵¹ Adobe Flash is a multimedia software platform used for production of animations, rich Internet applications, desktop applications, mobile applications, mobile games and embedded web browser video players. Initially developed by FutureWave Software, it was later acquired by Macromedia in 1996, followed by Adobe in 2005. Adobe plans to stop the support for the platform from the year 2020 onwards.

situation that Niranjana created this site-specific internet art. It marks a radical turn in his articulation, especially on his insistence to deconstruct the narrative in art history through the transcendental nature of the medium beyond space and time is replaced with a bleak expression of constraint.

‘Video Reflux’ was developed by Niranjana and Caleb in Canada for an exhibition in Singapore. The work requires customization of the video’s window size to fit the dimension of the wall where the work is being projected. The distance between Niranjana and the curator was overcome by the availability of the work online that made it possible to tweak the work through live feedback between them. However, this aspect of online presence was not integrated as part of the internet work. Simply put, the URL⁵² for the artwork was only shared between Niranjana and the curator, and this is contrary to his previous internet works. As such the online presence was only used for the purpose of technical need. In fact ‘Video Reflux’ was bound by the specificity of the gallery space as it was displayed as a projection rather than an access point on a computer terminal. This projection was also dictated by the physical space of the gallery in terms of its customization of the window size and overall display dimension. Even the videos pulled from the YouTube website were dictated by the keyword searches of the artist. ‘Video Reflux’ situates itself within the climate of increasing copyright controls and corporate capture. Communication and information technologies that started out with various promises of a radical alteration in the media and societal ecosystem of the state are now essentially controlled by global-corporate entities.

Tradition, especially as defined by Zain must resist the enclosure of its meaning by neo-liberal capitalism and force itself visibly as a critical presence in the possible technological hegemony of culture. Niranjana expresses such an encroachment as well as resistance thereof in this site-specific internet art. The assertion of site-specificity for the work is a maneuver that performs and manifests such closure of the internet. The openness of online technology is bound by the physicality of the space. Conversely, this physicality, specifically the gallery space in Singapore speaks of a peculiar locality of culture and tradition. This peculiarity is manifested through the choice of words for the

⁵² URL stands for ‘Uniform Resource Locator’. It is akin to an address on the internet that specifies a location of a webpage on a computer network.

search criteria. With words such as ‘Mahathir’ and ‘Anwar’ for search criteria, it speaks of videos specific to the contextual premise of the region, in particular, Malaysia.

‘Mahathir’ and ‘Anwar’ denote two prominent politicians of Malaysia - Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad and Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. Both of them were⁵³ in a longstanding rivalry when Anwar was fired from his government post and imprisoned for six years back in 1999. This led to the formation of the People’s Justice Party that opposes the ruling government. 14 April 2008 marked the official return of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim to the political front as the opposition leader. His return was widely publicized over online media, and accordingly sparked a response from Mahathir. It is this specificity of politics in Malaysia being emphasized through the choice of words for the search criteria. By projecting online videos of Anwar and Mahathir commenting, placed side by side with their voices transgressing each other, Niranjana laid bare the new realities of the networked world. Where the online network is open for voices of difference and dissent to emerge, yet its structural operation is implicitly bound, or in this case of the artwork, it is bound by the limits of the space and Niranjana’s search criteria.

Meanwhile, the choice of using videos from YouTube speaks about the reverberation of information that has been perpetuated by video technology. It is a response to the massive accumulation and circulation of the video caused by the new ability to share, recycle and appropriate this medium over the Internet. Such a re-appropriation of the information over the internet, without limit or boundary, transforms video from quality into accessibility. In fact, it is accessibility in excess that leads to saturation and finally a decay in the medium as suggestive in the title ‘Video Reflux’. Just like his previous internet art where he makes acute semiotic connections with past works of great art, Niranjana indicates the ‘reflux’ by revisiting Nam June Paik’s video wall structures. In Nam June Paik’s practice, he uses piles of television sets as a structure to form pyramids, arches or video walls of multiple channels.

Extending such a ‘wall’ to online media Niranjana speaks of readymade video content for a portable video wall. Such ‘readymade’ and ‘portability’ made available by new media signifies the end of modern and postmodern. Niranjana’s argument for the ‘tradition’ outside the framework of western aesthetics still remains in this work. Here he argues for

⁵³ This rivalry is written in the past tense to indicate the enmity between these two politicians was resolved at the time this was written.

the dissolution of video's figurative power. By projecting the videos unto the wall, he subverts the viewers' normal visual relation with the familiar, intimate computer screen. Meanwhile, the ability to share, recycle, appropriate, annotate and re-contextualize becomes apparent in the constant changing of videos in projection. These are signifiers that advance Niranjana's argument for the tradition, especially philosophical enquiries in the line of examining the ontological meaning and purpose of the image in technological mediation. Finally, the authenticity of video as the representation of the real is also suspended. I argue that such a suspension echoed in 'Video Reflux' is analogous to the 'tradition' as the 'unthought'.



Pic.12
Video Reflux
2008, site-specific internet installation

Telinga Keling (Pic.13)

This is a work done in 1999, and it was first presented as part of a group show at Petronas Gallery, Kuala Lumpur. It is a 2D chromogenic print made of two different visual indexes superimposed to become a single composition. The first is a close-up photographic shot of Niranjan's face that encompasses the area from his chin to his forehead. The second consist of two images of a traditional Malay delicacy known as *kuih denderam*, or *kuih peniaram*, and is, in fact, the same as the traditional Tamilian delicacy known as *athirasam*. The delicacy is also colloquially referred to as *kuih telinga keling*, especially in the East Coast of Malaysia. The artwork is configured by a visual arrangement of these two-visual cues. The two images of the delicacy are placed in a position that covers the ears of Niranjan in the close-up shot of his face. It is as if the delicacy replaces his ears, but this is done in such a crude way that the artificiality of the delicacy being placed on top of the photograph is visually comprehensible. The title of the work takes on the name of the delicacy as being described in the East Coast of Malaysia. The name *telinga keling* means Keling Ears.

In this artwork, Niranjan takes on a critical approach to the social coding inherent in the idioms of the Malay language. Keling is a word deemed to be derogatory and offensive to Malaysian-Indians and has been a perennial issue for the Indian community in Malaysia. This is because the word 'Keling' is used by non-Indian Malaysians to demean a subject from the Indian community by essentializing the person with certain behaviors as inherent traits. The word is usually used as an idiom in the Malay language to describe an action that is stereotypically descriptive of the Indian community in Malaysia. While terms such as *Mabuk Keling* which means 'Drunk like a Keling' and *Akal Keling* that translates as the 'mind of a Keling' is widely used to describe a general expression of being intoxicated and forgetful, however it also depicts the signification of the Malay language that reiterates a supposedly habitual negativity associated with the Indian race. For this reason, the term Keling is perceived to be very offensive to a Malaysian-Indian and it is seen as a racial slur to this particular community. It is utterly abhorred by the community today and the inclusion of the word 'Keling' in the Malay dictionary was even contested in the Malaysian court of law.⁵⁴ Such official negation of the word implies

⁵⁴ Yoon Szu-Mae, "Police reports lodged against Rais, TV3 over Keling Issue", Malaysiakini, last modified January 29, 2008, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/16621>.

the use of the word 'Keling' and its derogatoriness as specific to the conditions of Malaysia. It is the repercussion from the deployment of policies that reiterate racial differences which concurrently undercut any unification of Malaysian subjects under the banner of nationality.

Being completely aware of the word's offensiveness, Niranjana intentionally composes his ears as a local delicacy to unveil a commonly veiled racial sentiment towards the Indian community. The bringing together of the two words – Telinga (Ears) and Keling is based on the appearance and tone of the delicacy. The signifier, in this case, is the bodily part of a Malaysian-Indian, to be specific the ears and the signified is the supposed complexion of the skin and the contour of the ears. Such specific, bodily identification of a race is used to describe a traditional Malay delicacy. The insertion of the delicacy in the close-up shot of Niranjana's face is a reiteration that serves to assert such language of representation. The face here becomes a blank page in which meaning is inscribed pervasively to emphasize the recognition that language constructs Malaysian subjects as the bearer of racial marking, rather than the maker of such markings. In doing so, Niranjana is not after a new meaning for his identity as a Malaysian-Indian, but rather to effectively block any automatic acceptance of such racial slurs by effectively representing the semiotics of race in language through visual criticism.

Niranjana's strategy has always been the insertion of his body in the creation of an artwork. This was seen even in his internet art where such an insertion carries serially conceived themes, cryptic ideas and personal narratives that emulate the operation of the medium. With the 'Telinga Keling' such a critical insertion of the body as an image insists exclusively on the body as both a sight for spectacle and a site for projection. With 'Telinga Keling' Niranjana's face is used as the substance to expose the operation of racial essentialism by transforming his bodily flesh into an image. The face is not here to imply the Otherness upon the viewer, but an aesthetic object that asserts rather than denies or avoids the racialized body of a Malaysian subject. It is possible for Niranjana to be vulnerable to the charge of essentialism in forcing the objectification of his body upon the viewer, however, I argue this is a calculated risk. This act of self-reduction exposes the overdetermination of body as a signifier for racial identity, thereby significantly altering the viewer's relationship to it by the means of excessive spectacle and pervasive projection.

The choice of having his very own face, rather than someone else reveals an act of staging oneself as the model for the artwork. In doing so Niranjan shifts from a creative artist to a passive object. This shift attends to the construction of a Malaysian-Indian as the other reformulated through the concept of race. However, Niranjan's facial expression with his eyes opened wide akin to an angry gaze reveals his awareness of the radical alienation from language and all the symbolic systems in which a Malaysian subject is represented. The expression on his face speaks of the objectification of his body rendering visible his negation and the limitation of the image in representing a subject in totality. The alternating visual movement between his facial expression and the delicacy enacts the difficulty and paradox of being an Indian-Malaysian. I argue this alternating movement enacts the 'doing' as argued in chapter 01. Visually the work plays on the connection between language and existential actualities. This connection is not merely visualized in the artwork, instead, Niranjan's expression is a performance that declares his impulse to insist precisely on the non-determinacy of the image that he created. It is a staging that deliberately negates such orchestration from within. His gaze redirects the inquiry away from him to the apparatus of the state and its operation. In this way 'Telenga Keling' by Niranjan is focused on the accepted norms of identity that often conceals its repressive force upon the subject.



Pic.13
Telinga Keling
1999, Photographic Print

Encounter in practice

Lastly, I must end by probing into my own practice that reflects my encounter with Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjan Rajah. This is because ‘doing’ as an agitation in practice that negates any form of signification cannot be articulated in the traditional notion of top-down, objectivist approach of the macro perspective theory. It requires a micro-political, subjective dimension that is contextual, experiential and circumstantial where the subject is situated and produced. Simply put, theorizing ‘doing’ in practice requires the insertion of the subject’s embodied experience that constantly devises through an encounter with the other. Accordingly probing new media art practice must be imbued with the author’s subliminal affective disruption and resonances in practice by an encounter with other practitioners that so decisively influence the conditions of being a Malaysian new media art practitioner. In this way, the chapter does not presuppose any form of identity (such as Malaysian artist) but reiterates that practice is a process of ‘doing’, an event which always negates delimitation and is ever open to forces that construe it by means of interactions with the other.

My encounter with Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjan Rajah outlines modalities of affinity in new media art practice as we are agitated by the attrition of ‘doing’ through our practice. In this sense, my practice does not necessarily derive from a sense of compatibility with their theoretical ideas and concepts. Nonetheless, my practice does make reference to them in which an affective correlation could be established. This demonstrates the transitory nature of theorizing through practice that operates as a form of disruption to any form of classification in practice. Such a transitory nature is uncovered by tracking genealogy in practice. Firstly by looking at Ismail Zain, followed by Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjan Rajah. It is clear from this line of enquiry in practice that what motivates them is the desire to contest certain ‘contextual’ accounts of how, in their time, identity politics have been thought to operate. They were gripped by their embodied presence in a peculiar moment - to portray an account and critique (through practice) of the ways in which Malaysians form their political opinions and judgement regarding race. The context or presence in time differs from Ismail Zain to Hasnul and Niranjan.

It is a generational gap between them, and in the same manner, there is a generational gap between Hasnul, Niranjana, and myself. This generational gap reveals the contextual moment of Malaysian politics and the transient nature of our practice as per the medium we work in. Ismail Zain was hailed as a “visionary of Malaysian computer art”⁵⁵ by Hasnul and Niranjana. This was appropriated given the works that were done by Ismail Zain during the early years of personal computing. It was a time prior to the introduction of telecommunications technologies such as the Internet to Malaysian society. His ideas were built on a prediction of the future that offers a critical pathway by considering ‘tradition’ as a buffer to encounter possible transformations in the socio-politics of Malaysia as induced by technological progress. Hasnul and Niranjana, on the other hand, were experiencing such a transformation during their days in Unimas. They experienced the transition from the pre-internet era to the radical changes of easy communication and flow of information caused by telecommunications technology. Such an unruly force of change demands not a prediction but a clear direction. Their practice illustrates the theorizing of ‘tradition’ through practice, especially by referring to Islamic and perennial philosophy as a solution.

Coming to my practice, my instant of new media art was not a moment of predicting a possible future, nor a moment of offering solutions amidst the radical changes. It is a moment in the post-internet era that I began my practice. I seriously began to focus on new media art practice in 2001 after the completion of my Bachelor’s degree. I first encountered Hasnul in 2003 during an art camp excursion and Niranjana in 2006 for the Master’s thesis research. My practice was immersed in the norms of socio-technological conditions of Malaysia. In my moment of practice, it was not a crisis of identity that urgently needed to be addressed. This is because the artificiality of identity became apparent in the norms of information circulation regulated by the multidimensional field of new media. An identity that marks a stable and knowable subject began to falter as new media constitutes subject in a heterogeneous host of significations. While ‘tradition’ as envisioned by Zain, and grounded by Hasnul and Niranjana as a past reference of a theoretical structure, however, I was concerned over the pragmatism of their approach in the identity politics of Malaysia. In other words, the predicament of destabilizing identity

⁵⁵ Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Niranjana Rajah, *1st Electronic Art Show* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1997), Pg.12.

could possibly evoke the utilization of ‘tradition’ as a form of identification in the name of national fidelity. This translates as affirming the racial identity of a Malaysian subject in the wake of globalization ushered in by telecommunications technology.⁵⁶ Simply put, as a practitioner living in the era of global communication, identity quickly became irrelevant and the experience of displacement caused by encounter became the urgency for articulation. As such my practice is focused on the production of subjectivity.

But this does not mean a rejection of practitioners that came prior to me or to declare an irrelevancy of their practice in contemporary art and politics in Malaysia. On the contrary, the intention here is just the opposite, for ‘tradition’ as the ‘unthought’ is a starting point for the articulation of displacement. ‘Tradition’ is not a responsiveness that describes a subject’s position, disposition or comportment towards the other but a mode of understanding a relational framework within which ‘doing’ is possible. ‘Tradition’ articulated through our practice of new media art is a form of technics that conceives time differently while undoing the notion of a stable subject. Such undoing is an event in our practice, and at points reflected upon as it unfolds in the form of concepts and artworks that we create. Zain, Hasnul and Niranjana’s efforts are significant for the rethinking of displacement as experienced by the next generation of new media artists such as myself. Through their works, the lack of an assured self-presence caused by new media is developed as a threshold that generates and transmits affects in/through our practice. By affect, I am situating our practice within a shared analysis of embodied forms of sense-making, an agitation which extends beyond the consumption of symbolic meaning. It is in this affectivity, and not theorizing that I share my affinity in practice with Ismail Zain, Hasnul Jamal Saidon, and Niranjana Rajah.

Finally linking up with the description of ‘encounter with fellow practitioners’ as presented earlier in the chapter, I assert that affectivity is ‘doing in practice’ - a mediation between subjectivity and identity. While subjectivity is construed by my bodily encounter, identity, on the other hand, is dictated by my contextual presence. In this way,

⁵⁶ Writing about this for an exhibition catalog in 2005, Hasnul explains “Malaysian art scene in the past 15 years, especially during the 90’s has been predominantly preoccupied by changing realities brought by globalization, capitalist free market liberalism, information revolution and digital technology...discourse has been fueled by issues related to diasporas, imperatives of multiculturalism and pluralism, crisis of representation, cultural alienation, cultural authority and contestation...” Hasnul Jamal Saidon, *Takung* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery Malaysia, 2005),Pg.19.

my practice is an expression articulated from the embodied experience and the physical, political and historical context of that experience. The artworks presented in this epilogue is a selection of works that express such contextual encounters - with diverse semiotic narratives and signification of identity as I moved from one place to another, occupying various identities and encountering various subjecthoods.

In my practice 'doing' circulates through the encounter between body-subjects as it draws attention to the existing social, politics and economic structures. In this instance, the contextual diversity in practice opens up the 'doing' to the question of subjectification far from representing a restrictive interpretation of experience that only relates specifically to me. The displacement I experience empathizes with the other in the encounter as it irradiates the inability of identity in signifying a subject. Maurice Merleau-Ponty explains subjectivity is indifferent to identity in which it is not static nor does it fix a subject in a particular positionality. On the contrary, it goes forth and opens itself to the other.⁵⁷ This opening up to different contextual encounters makes 'my doing' a relation to the world where I not only embodied but also embedded in a shared presence with the other.

UploadDownload

This was a project done in collaboration with Hasnul Jamal Saidon. Initially, the project was conceived as part of Hasnul's residency program at Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in Japan from October to December 2003. His proposal for the researcher in residence consists of many research agendas, and included with it was an experimental project called 'UploadDownload' in collaboration with me. The aim of our project was to get participants from different countries in the region of South East Asia to engage in a series of encounters via an online platform. UploadDownload consists of 4 sub-projects involving four different elements of multimedia that correspond to four different ways of marking a subject. Namely interFACES for images of a face, BranconTEXT for animation of brands, CITYstream for videos of dwelling spaces and finally soulBITS for sounds of spiritual well-being.

⁵⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), Pg.490.

The idea was to have participants upload an element of multimedia that corresponds to their identity, nationality, personality, and specificity of location onto an online database. This is then followed by downloading and digitally manipulating an element that was uploaded by participants from a different country to reflect the stereotypical notion of their sense of recognition. The manipulated element is re-uploaded for any participant to access and manipulate further. The database was available online and accessible to anyone on the internet. So far only interFACES – the collaboration that deals with the image of participants' faces has been launched. In this sub-project participants were required to upload an image of their face, or portrait onto a database. This is then followed by downloading a portrait of a participant from another country and digitally manipulating that image to portray stereotypical features of a nationality that resembles the person manipulating. For the purpose of the residency, the collaboration was orchestrated to engage in a series of live, continuous manipulations of images that compound such facial identifications of a subject. In 2003 the collaboration took place between Japan and Malaysia when Hasnul was in Japan during his residency. In 2004 the collaboration took place between Thailand and Malaysia when I was in Bangkok to participate in Bangkok New Media art festival. The project also won second place in the 2007 ASEAN New Media Awards. Currently, the project is offline and pending a possible future relaunch.

This project is an outcome of our shared sense of agitation in practice, or what I call 'doing in practice'. The discrepancy between body and subject especially as espoused in our art practice became the instigator for the conception of this collaborative project. The intention behind this project was not for a creation of an artwork, but rather to articulate, and possibly externalize the agitation in which the account of 'encounter' could be used as an apparatus for critical reflection. This is why the project does not portray the conventions of artwork creation. There is no object, no authenticity and no authorship per se in this collaborative project – all of which stands as identity markers for an artist. These elements that operate as pillars of modernism in the art are completely ignored and even subverted. Instead what is seen is an explicit acceptance of identity's precarious state in comprehending a subject.

The act of collaboration or the literal manipulation of digitized faces of participants focuses on the circulation of meaning and ideas online that have material consequences. These acts of manipulation are influenced by existing social and economic structures.

During the collaborative process, these structures collide to replace identity as a simple correspond to the body with a more dialectic causal point of reference in which technology both shape our perception of and refer to a causal feature of the world. As argued in chapter 02 it is a coupling of medium/body. Referring to Stiegler, it is a 'technic' of externalizing subject from itself, and as technology becomes an ideal way to control and regulate social communication such externalization becomes autonomously circulated, free from the clutches of the subject that is externalized. The systematic, autonomous nature of information and communication technology results in a new associated ensemble with the human that influences the process of subjectification. In the everyday interaction with technology such an association is overlooked as a norm but with the project, the norm is deliberately brought to the level of the perverse to invoke a conscious recognition of such an ability in new media.

Several artworks were created in spite of the nature of the project that defies traditional form and conception of art practice. These art objects were created by utilizing the manipulated images of portraits for the sake of gallery exhibitions and presentations, especially when the project was recognized by the ASEAN-COCI (Committee for Culture and Information) and was commissioned for the exhibition. Hasnul and I have created individual works to represent the project in a gallery space. Hasnul did an installation that projects the manipulated portraits onto a pool of water contained in a mandala-like tray. When a viewer looks at the pool of water, his or her reflection falls over the manipulated portraits (Pic.14). By adapting Buddhist symbolism of the temporal state of reality and renunciation, Hasnul acutely points out the ephemeral of identity and the disparity between body/subject as the viewer's face is encroached with the images when it is looked at. Crucially the artwork makes reference to 'tradition' as argued in this chapter.

Meanwhile, I created a digital print that is made by overlaying all the original, un-manipulated portraits that were uploaded onto the database (Pic.15). The final print was a fuzzy, layered and opaque portrait that held certain features such as the position of the ears, mouth, and eyes to indicate it is a portrait of a human, yet it was completely unrecognizable in terms of identification such as gender, race, nationality, and ethnicity. Through this digital print, the presence of body overshadows any marking of identification. Such willful portrayal of the body at the erasure of identity is a way to unhinge subject from identity and in doing so the body is released to intermingle with other bodies freely. When a viewer looks at the artwork, he or she is naturally inclined to

make out any particular person or associate any identification with the various layers of portraits. Such an inclination is the 'doing' – the movement between the unfamiliar of the body as it is freed and the struggle of the viewer to recognize any of the portraits that are layered to the level of unrecognizable assemblage.



Pic.14

UploadDownload: INTERfaces
Artwork by Hasnul Jamal Saidon
2008, video projection, site-specific Installation



Pic.15

UploadDownload: INTERfaces

Artwork by Roopesh Sitharan

2009, Digital Imaging, C-print

Wink (Pic.16)

This is a 2.40-minute single channel video loop that I created in 2008 as I was working towards my Masters of Fine Arts at the University of California, Santa Cruz. The video consists of 2D animation and a live video shoot. It starts with a close-up clip of my face as I stare at the viewers, blinking occasionally. This shot is cut to a close-up still image of George Washington on a banknote of the USA. This is then followed by a return to the previous clip of my face and cut to a close-up still image of a Mahatma Gandhi on a bank note of India. Again it returns to the clip of my face and cut to a close-up still image of Tunku Abdul Rahman on a bank note of Malaysia. This whole cycle is then repeated for the second time with the banknote figures animated to wink. I left Malaysia in 2003 to further my studies in the United States. In my 5 years leading up to the creation of this work, I encountered various people from diverse backgrounds and cultures as I had the opportunity to travel nationally and internationally. This encounter radically unseats my sense of identity as a Malaysian-Indian. The context of my encounter as I moved from Malaysia to the United States was essential in shaping my experience of identity displacement. The transformative nature of identity became apparent as I was typically identified as an Indian nationality from South Asia among other foreigners abiding in the United States. Racial stereotyping was rampantly applied in any association that I made with others.

This video art is directly inspired by Hasnul's 'mirror, mirror on the wall' and Niranjana's 'Telinga Keling'. This is obvious in the aesthetics of the video, especially by my choice of the facial shot and animated winking. Crucially it marks a transition in critique – from specific to art and Malaysian racial identity to questions of economic migration, nationality and its imposition on the choices that one makes regarding identity. In short with this video I attempt to shift Hasnul and Niranjana's critique from a question of identity to subjectivity. This was particularly potent as I was in a position of privilege to make choices regarding the associations - I want to make an identity that I want to uphold since I was situated beyond the confinement of Malaysia's racial narrative. The winking of portraits on the banknotes operates as a teasing, an allure of various aspects in the positionality that I occupied – such as the economic advantage of being in the West, cultural baggage of being labelled as a South Indian and of course my fidelity to Malaysia that paradoxically defines my predicament as a Malaysian-Indian. This sense of privilege

to make choices that was suddenly given to me incites critical affects upon me in ways my body could potentially be transitorily defined by according to the context in which I appear.

But my response to these alluring choices was bleak, calm and indifferent as my facial expression does not reveal any changes or reaction to any of the winking portraits. Niranjan in his 'telinga keling' gave a daring gaze to the viewer as if challenging, even threatening them to incite such a racial slur upon his body. I subvert this gestural connotation by retaining an anonymous, or neutral expression. By doing so my body becomes porous for these different allures, including the viewer's gaze. To put it differently, my impartial expression is a site for contending inscription of various contextual positionalities that sets the condition for a possible rapport with the viewer. The video draws the viewers into the work by a passive, harmless and contemplative stare in which the language is not objectified and pushed to the level of perversion simultaneously alienating the viewer; instead language becomes a matter of subject-dependent, or subjective in the manner of which signification is open to various interpretations just as the viewer's judgment of me staring at them. This is my way of circumventing the possible accusation of essentialism found in 'Telinga Keling'. 'Winking' is a communicative process rather than a critical and subversive stance in which interpersonal judgement, contextual meaning, and cultural protocols are acknowledged contingent to encounter with the other.



Pic.16
Wink
2008, single channel video

The Great non-Malaysian portrait (Pic.17)

This artwork is an interactive installation done in 2009 as part of the final MFA thesis project. It was exhibited at Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History and was later presented by Nur Hanim Kahiruddin as part of an overview presentation of contemporary Malaysian art for the Asian Art Forum in 2010. A computerized surveillance system and custom-made software were used to create the installation. It consists of a huge LCD screen mounted on a wall horizontally; similar to the way a painting would be hung on a museum wall. The LCD screen is then decorated with a huge, golden frame to enclose the edges of the screen. The golden ornamental border that surrounds the LCD screen effectively creates the impression of having a huge masterpiece painting, elegantly hung on a museum wall. A tiny surveillance camera is mounted on the frame. This is then secured by having a stanchion in front of the screen, to distance the viewer from getting too close to the art object. The setting creates a typical museum experience, just like how a person would look at a painting, a portrait to be precise.

From a distance, a viewer will only see a blank-white surface on the LCD screen, but as the person moves closer, the viewer's movement is captured through the surveillance camera and revealed in the form of a black silhouette that emerges on the screen. Details such as color, tone, and figurative recognition are stripped away from the silhouette. Meanwhile, the piece becomes really provocative when the viewer gets really close to the display. As the viewer moves closer to the screen, a video will emerge in the "head" section of the silhouette. This video is a close-up shot of a face enacting several expressions, with attributes of a tanned, male figure. The video is displayed in a square shape, overlaid on the silhouette. The custom-made software identifies the face of the viewer looking at the LCD screen and accurately correlates the video with the head section of the silhouette that represents the viewer. This creates the impression of forcefully imposing a figurative identity upon the viewer. The video moves along with the movement of the viewer's silhouette on the screen – as the viewer moves around the exhibition space.

This work is my response to a well-known work created in 1972 by a prominent Malaysian artist Redza Piyadasa titled 'The Great Malaysian Landscape' (Pic.18). Piyadasa incites post-colonial critiques in art practice by labeling the materials of an artwork such as frame, title, image, signature, and surface to highlight the inherent

Western mode of presentation that defines what art is. His criticality is acutely reflected in the title of the piece whereby his focus on 'landscape' hails the colonial mode of signifying power through art in the form of scenic paintings of the conquered land. As such, Piyadasa's work essentially built upon the binary politics of colonizer and colonized to express an institutional critique of modernism in art. While I totally agree with him, however, such binary politics seemed outdated in the context of globalization ushered in by information and communications technology. I referred to concepts and ideas by Niranjana Rajah and Ismail Zain to update his critique with a contemporary technological milieu.

The naming of the installation as 'Great Non-Malaysian Portrait' is divergent from Piyadasa's title. By naming it 'portrait' instead of 'landscape' I shift the focus from the institutional critique that is bound by the cyclical relationship of subject entrenched in binary politics to the subject itself. This is evident with the two modes of representation rendered in the artwork. On one level, the viewer is being represented in the form of a silhouette on the screen. Meanwhile, a male, tanned subject is being represented by the facial expression videos. These two representations collide as the facial expression is imposed on the silhouette. It is a form of a dynamic collage that brings together two distinctive attributes into a single display. With this, the binary of outsider and insider, other and me is expressed as a vibrant singularity that aggravates the discrepancy between body and facial recognition, or identity.

The work affectively overwhelms the perception of identity as the body is stripped from any form of recognizable marking and imposed with a smearing of a crude digital video. My inspiration for this aspect of the work comes from Niranjana's 'Failure of Marcel Duchamp/ Japanese Fetish Even!' in which he exposes new media as a platform of reckoning difference as information is open for accessibility by anyone from anywhere regardless of their context of accessibility and its political implications. The work also literally manifests Stiegler's argument on 'technics' as the computer system regulates the 'logos', or the signification of viewers concomitantly constituting a mindfulness in and through the technology of their very existence in the exhibition space.

Meanwhile, the glittering golden frameworks allegorically to emphasize the conventional mode of formal rhetoric practiced by institutions to contextualize and legitimize an artwork. Such standardization is achieved by overcoming cultural discrepancy and

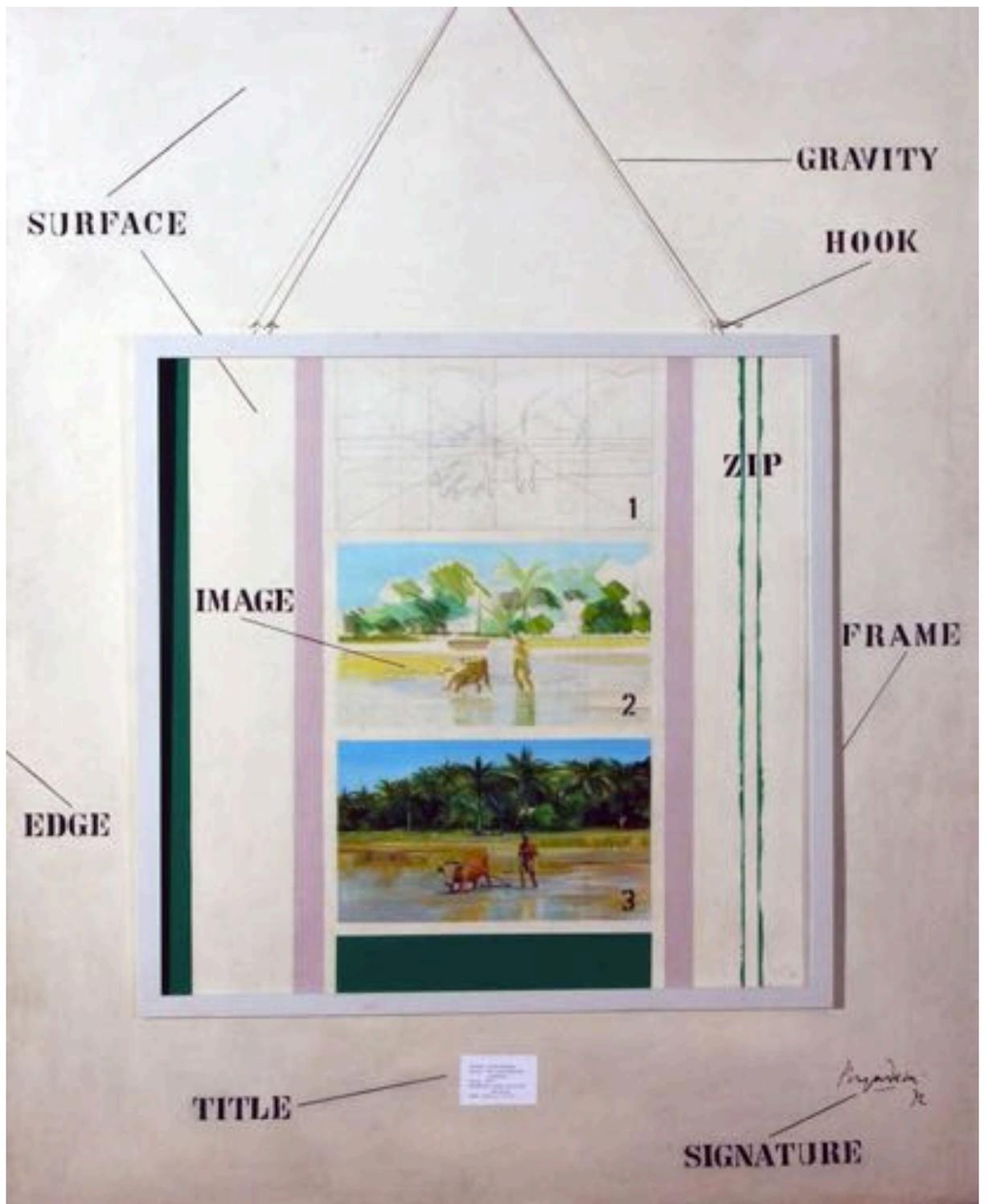
historical traditions. Ismail Zain's argument on 'tradition' was crucially important for the aesthetic decisions in the conception of the work. The frame is a deliberate choice to visualize his critique through the work. This is done by adapting the conventional mode of art presentation to represent an unconventional form of artwork. The silhouette and video are intangible and temporal forms of the image that emerges through a symbiotic process of creation between the viewer and computer system.

In this process, the dichotomy between object and subject, or viewer and art object is indistinguishable parallel to the argument of Zain regarding art in tradition. There is no special status for art, nor a unique structure that supports the creation of objects outside the utilitarian use of materials. It is also time-based as the work is dictated by movement in time/space rather than a position, or situatedness in time and space. My adaptation of Zain's conception moves Piyadasa's argument from a critique of historical narrative to contextual perspective subjected to complex, multiple and shifting relations in the social and cultural field.



Pic.17

The Great non-Malaysian portrait
2009, computerized surveillance system, custom-made software,
site-specific installation



Pic.18
The great Malaysian Landscape
 1972, mixed media

Who am I? (Pic.19)

This is a 4.30-minutes single channel video produced in 2012. Created in the aesthetics of vox-pop, or ‘on the street interview’ – the work comprises a series of answers by members of the public as I ask them to guess my nationality based upon my appearance. The work is done crudely with basic video recording devices and the shots are focused on the audience’s facial reaction as they guess my nationality, naming one country or another that stereotypically resembles people from particular country or region based on my physical attributes such as skin tone and speech. The interviewer or myself is never revealed throughout the whole duration of the video as the participants continuously keep guessing by looking at the person behind the camera. In doing so my appearance is totally hidden and abstracted from the viewer of the video and they will have to imagine my bodily presence based on the descriptions and random guessing of the participants on the screen. My deliberate choice of abstaining from appearing in front of the camera while imposing questions on the public is a performance that I enact. With this performance, the video becomes a prosthetics extension of myself, akin to ‘technics’ that externalize the projection of a subject upon the other.

There are two layers of projection that coincide with one another in this video work. Firstly, the public’s projection in the video and secondly the audience’s projection as they view the video. These projections operate as an affective force that has a disciplinary impact upon the abstracted body in the encounter. What is crucial here is the stratification of the body by the imagination and desire of the other beyond the control of the embodied subject. Because of this, my body occupies an underprivileged position within and beyond the video in which the work serves as an enterprise that exploits the image produced by the gaze of the other in trying to expose how the other sees me. It is precisely this kind of exposure that leads the work away from questions of identity and nationality, and urges instead that the work be considered as concerned with matters of ‘subjectification’, specifically in the context of the thesis it reflects the ‘doing’. Reading the answers by the public through the prism of ‘subjectification’ affords a perspective from which identity is not ignored, but amassed to the level of saturation. To have recognized the ‘saturation’ by addition of identities recalls a homage to ‘The Subtraction of a Brown Pigment’ by Hasnul Jamal Saidon. It is important to acknowledge that his initial work is the necessary preamble for the criticality instilled in my art practice.

Meanwhile, the projections exposed in the video work also underline layers of mediation that occur in regulating identity upon the subject. The answers by the interviewees are mediated by language, while the recording of the answers is simultaneously mediated by video technology. Such mediation is bound by biases and an impoverished view as it could never transcend nor be independent of the contextual premise of any subjective worldview. While the answers expressed in the video reveal the worldview of the participants, in the same manner, the editing of the video exposes my viewpoint. This indicates that ‘encounter’ could never take place unmediated in an impersonal and non-social space. It also reflects my embodied encounter with various subject positions that seem entirely in keeping with my experience of an increasingly pluralized identity as I make frequent transitions from one context to another. With such transitions, I am made intensely aware of the arbitrariness in the mediation of even the most intimate ‘subject’ definition. ‘Who am I?’ is a question that signifies this arbitrariness in the inevitable mediation and I express this signification by restraining from imposing any judgmental comments to the guessing and suggestions of identity dispersed by the interviewees upon my body. In this way, the work demonstrates that subjectivity could only exist in the actualization of the subject through encounter inevitably taking place in the contextual premise.



Pic.19
Who am I?
2012, single channel video

CONCLUSION

Summation

Throughout this thesis, I allude to a Malaysian subject that insistently disentangle the relationship between representation and experience. I argue that representation (or identity) has been granted immense primacy and that it has come to bear substantial influence over any discourse concerning Malaysians (this includes art and artists). This dominating power of representation, especially racial identity, always produces an ‘Other’. Malaysia is a nation that has the ‘Malay’ racial identity written into its legislative framework. As such, it’s citizens are encouraged, especially at a national level, to celebrate their respective racial identities as a key feature of being a Malaysian. The purpose for doing so is to accommodate differences (Malay and non-Malay) in ways that collude with the dominant forms of identity politics of the nation state. Racial identity as a legislative policy of Malaysia inadvertently denies the lived experiences of such identification.

Being situated in such predicament, all these symptomatic corroborations of a Malaysian subject defined by racial signification has produced in me an overwhelming and rebellious aspiration to puncture the organization of such reality. It is this aspiration that gets manifested in these chapters. My intention here is not to destroy¹ any definition of a Malaysian subject; on the contrary it is an act of diffraction² from the tremendous power of racial markers in defining a Malaysian. Accordingly, the chapters map a ‘doing’ that negates the ‘legislative-racial identity’ during an encounter with fellow Malaysians. Simply put, each chapter presents a process of losing control over signification (both my racial identity as well as its articulation) as a means of making potent connections (with fellow Malaysians) that exceed identification. This is evident in each chapter:

¹ This intention is clear in my introduction, as I stood silent when asked of my affiliation by a fellow Malaysian.

² By diffraction I am referring to the definition given by Donna Haraway “Diffraction does not produce “the same” displaced, as reflection and refraction do. Diffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction. A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the effects of difference appear.” Donna Haraway, “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others,” in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), pg.300.

– Chapter one presents the process of losing control over the *semiotic* determinism of race (subject) during an encounter thereby revealing a *dissonance* within the Malaysian body. It examines the dimension of embodied experience that is contrary to the racial identity of a Malaysian subject. Specifically, by looking at the construction of Malay racial identity, the chapter exposes the inadequateness of racial identity as a strict, official standard of identification for all Malaysians.

– Chapter two presents losing control over the *linguistic* articulation (context) of an encounter thereby expressing an *amorphous* practice of new media art by Malaysian artists. This is achieved by destabilizing the positionality of the author in the thesis to expose the tension between theory and practice. By including the inscription of a discussion between the author and other-fellow practitioners, the chapter operate in a discordant fashion consequently functioning as an expression of dissentious lines in articulation.

– Chapter three presents losing control over the *interpretive* channel (medium) of an encounter whereby new media mirrors the *radical* potentiality of a Malaysian subject. It probes the operation of new media that displaces a Malaysian subject from the controlled representation of the nation state to the elusive transmission in new media. By looking at various articulations of new media in the Malaysian context, the chapter uncovers the affect that emerge through new media art practice; intimately critical and reflective of the racialized body.

– Chapter four presents losing control over the *cultural* meaning (practice) provoked by an encounter thereby foregrounding an *irrational* condition for a Malaysian identity. This is indicated by the instances of creative inquiries on the Malaysian subject in new media art practice. By analysing the works of prominent-Malaysian new media artists, the chapter highlights the nonconformity of their practice to the conventional modes of racial and cultural identity.

It might seem that racial identity and ‘doing’ are not analogous. In fact, the arguments in the chapters that lead to this conclusion might suggest an incompatibility. But this does not mean it is in opposition to each other; it is rather frictional. It is frictional because the analysis of representation, specifically the identity of a ‘Malaysian’ is not obliterated, nor

opposed with the ‘doing’. Instead, the subject that carries such an identity is invigorated with the potentiality of the ‘body’ that recognizes that Malaysians are living not only through the relationship with the given sovereignty of a nation state, but also with an intrinsic unrepresentability. ‘Doing’ operates as a provocative residue that gives meaning to that which escapes signification - an apparatus that plays a crucial role in the unravelling of Malaysian subjectivity.

Belonging to a community

When ‘doing’ is declared as an essential attribute of a Malaysian subjectivity – or as I call it, losing control over a racial identity, the political implication of this claim becomes obtrusively urgent. First, I must come to a certain acceptance if I were to consider my argument seriously. My articulation puts me in a certain position³ in the world. It is an identification and thus I declare that I am part of a community, a Malaysian and from such a position I speak. The difficulty that confronts me is that this position is already given, and more importantly I am not denying it. I do want to be identified,⁴ not only as myself, but together with all those who call themselves Malaysian. But I make this declaration by arguing for an elision of such identification, with serious consideration of the body in such marking – the default racial identity that comes with being Malaysian.

By saying this I am not after a fixed and stable sense of identity, a matter of taking a position as a sovereign subject in Malaysia – instead due diligence should be given towards the ‘becoming’ of a Malaysian. My association as a Malaysian is conceived in terms of a ‘doing’ that involves a body in a constant process of becoming that outruns any account of racial marking given to it by the socio-politics of Malaysia. I am not renouncing my racial identity through my claim here for I exist as a Malaysian Indian and

³ As explained by Peyman Vahabzadeh “Identification (and thereby decision) refer to a situation in which certain thematized experiences set content for an identity.” Peyman Vahabzadeh, *Articulated Experiences: Toward a Radical Phenomenology of Contemporary Social Movements* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), pg. 79.

⁴ referring to my introduction, as I am still a comrade to her as Malaysian.

there is no other possibility⁵ for me as a subject under the sovereignty of Malaysia. Consequently, the duress of bearing such an identity becomes the ultimate facticity of my subjective experience during an encounter with fellow Malaysian. It is a becoming, or a constant shift between the supposedly definitive meaning predicated by identity and the potentiality my body releases - exuberantly forming and enfolding my subjectivity. I argue this is specific to the condition that can only be experienced by a Malaysian subject.

Now that I have openly confessed that I am a Malaysian Indian, and the thesis is not in any way attempting to obscure or endorse this position, at least not in the way promoted by the nation state. The elevation of articulation from being restricted to such position is crucial to the thesis as this is the reason I pursue the unravelling of subjectivity. I achieve this not by claiming that the subject is transcendent; on the contrary it is grounded through the problem of bodily marking as defined by the nation state. By this I am not exploding the body through a conceptual gimmick in pursuit of subjectivity. On the contrary, I argue that the body is crucially granted its constitutive semblance as a worldly presence for my individual, peculiar, lived experience.

This is because subjectivity is not formulated by overcoming lived experience in order to reveal some coherent, internal subject, sovereign and absolute. Conversely, my subjectivity is formed by my encounter with the surroundings which are already in existence prior to having me as a subject. Simply put, instead of the world defining my body, I overturn this by considering the body as a crucial instrument to my grasp of the world. In both instances, the same world exists, but the world seems very different when it is conceived through lived (bodily) experiences. This difference in the world I perceive, is not because the world has changed, but because I am not under the control of the world.

It is precisely this losing control that became apparent in various encounters as I operated in the world. The chapters in the thesis account for the moments of losing control while I am positioned as a Malaysian Indian. It is a subjectivity driven by the 'doing', the cacophony between bodily experience and the identity of a subject as a Malaysian – and

⁵ Following W.V. Quine's famous slogan "No entity without identity" where he postulates for entities of a given kind requires for its legitimacy that there be a criterion of identity for them. I extend this to the inevitability of being identified to be known as a subject, specifically as an Indian Malaysian to be known as a Malaysian. W. V Quine, *Ontological Relativity, And Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), pg.23.

it demands different and alternative modalities of existence, not a subject formed by racial signification but by critical resistance to official modes of identification.

Creation of Self

As I reach the end of my thesis, and having gone through this arduous personal journey of unravelling a Malaysian subjectivity, I am compelled to turn and look at her. Even now, despite everything, my friend whom I have left in the introduction continues to exert her ultimatum upon me. You have to choose a side, she demands! Is there a possibility for me to reply? If so, how would I answer her now? What has changed? In response to my articulation of this 'doing' as a way of unravelling a Malaysian subjectivity, what remains is the political possibilities such process might bring forth for Malaysia. What happens to a Malaysian subject when his body is released from its racial identity through the mechanism of assemblage?

'Doing' might seem like a crucial intervention that challenges the hegemonic stratification of the Malaysian subject according to race, specifically with the legislative definition of the Malay racial identity that becomes the basis for all other racial identification. The Malay is the centre of Malaysian politics. Subsequently, 'doing' proliferates outward and effects any Malaysian that comes in contact. If the path of intervention is pursued, what might be suggestive of the 'doing' is that the Malay has come to embody difference. That is to say the Malay is to be understood as a common identity that incorporates any form of racial distinction among Malaysians. At this point, I could create myself, I could claim myself as a Malay, inserting myself with such difference and boldly reply that I am also a Malay.

This is tempting for I certainly do want to declare my alliance with her and this does give way to such a possibility. However, I have to be cautious of my claim. If I were to utilize 'doing' in such a way, then what I would have done is to over-determine the Malay in its deployment on the other. It is an act of filling up the Malay. Malay has become constant, a symbol that signifies a difference that is inherent of Malaysian society. Malay has

become Malaysian. If this is so, then my thesis concludes by consolidating the Malaysian subject, imbricating my positionality as difference. But my conviction stops me as my practice tells me I cannot adhere to this because if I do then I betray the founding impulse of ‘doing’ that instigated this journey. I lose control not of being Malaysian, but as Malaysian. There is a distinction to these two positions. Losing control of being Malaysian means I am being filled up with difference at the level of subject while remaining intact – at this point I could have easily replied to her. But losing control as Malaysian means I am made aware of something that escapes me, a void leaving me broken at the level of the subject and this is why I was silent when confronted by her. It is a void⁶ that makes the ‘doing’ perpetual, a constant movement, a becoming Malaysian that leads to an erosion of the disciplined racial body inevitably leading to the revaluation of Malaysian in subjectivity.

As my efforts in articulating this thesis have shown, there is no way to definitively capture Malaysian subjectivity. I extend this proclamation to state that the void left in this endeavour can never be reconciled for it holds together the tension of articulation and lived experience. With my friend, what is left is to acknowledge in silence the incompleteness in us caused by racial identity, the incompleteness of a Malaysian, a partial Malaysian from which unravels my subjectivity, our subjectivity, Malaysian subjectivity. This incompleteness that leaves a void is neither death nor an absence, but rather an opportunity to re-assert the partial Malaysian as a potentiality that opens up possibilities for new politics.

Essentially the identity of a Malaysian subject is dictated by the societal power relation between the Malay and non-Malays. Yet throughout the dissertation I have arduously argued that this relation can be modified by acknowledging the body is much more than a passive recipient of official identity. It is my modest conviction that the potentiality of a Malaysian abides in this simple act of acknowledgement. An acknowledgement instigated by the unravelling of the Malaysian subjectivity. This acknowledgement does

⁶ “...if there is no escape, no excess or no remainder, no fade-out to infinity, the universe would be without potential, pure entropy, death. Actually existing, structured things live in and through that which escapes them.” Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), Pg.35.

not manifest in the normative form of reactionary clamour but as an inaction activism⁷ (just as how I stood silent when I encountered her) that calls for the rethinking of a Malaysian subject as an ethical political positioning. Such positioning evokes an awareness of the contested and constructed nature of racial and cultural identities to which a Malaysian is seen as belonging. Against this background, there is no political perspective to be derived from a commonly shared struggle against any inequality among Malaysians.

Instead what emerges is the moving away from the existing model of identity politics that sees the other as a threat to the new politics of acceptance in which the encounter with the other is regarded as fundamental for the identification of a Malaysian subject. By this new politics I am not offering an escape from all previous entanglements with racial identity, but rather the beginning of a struggle to no longer be governed and no longer govern oneself in such identity politics. A struggle that reflects the impossibility of beholding a Malaysian subject if it is postulated by racial identity.

⁷ I am drawing my inspiration from Ghandian politics - a strategy of nonviolent resistance, or *satyagraha* by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi that was later emulated by Martin Luther King which advocates a lucid, compelling case for nonviolent direct action as the most effective means for advancing change in a society.

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Appendix 01

Invitation for a closed session of online discussion

Dear Prof. Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Asst. Prof. Niranjan,

It would be an honor to have both of you for an evening of online discussion, as part of my research and information gathering for the completion of my PhD dissertation. This discussion will serve as a chapter that will contribute towards the completion of my PhD thesis. Before going any further, it is best to explain the premise of my research.

My research is titled 'Unravelling Malaysian subjectivity through new media art practice'. The thesis examines Malaysian subjectivity - specifically, it investigates the formation of a Malaysian by treating the subject as an assemblage. By having new media art as a point of entry, this thesis determines if new media art practice in Malaysia might engender an epistemological uncertainty reflective to the modes of subjectivity inherent to a Malaysian. This is achieved by probing into the author's art practice as well as several, pioneering new media art practitioners. The key term for the thesis is the term 'epistemological uncertainty', that I articulate as 'the doing' in the context of the thesis. This uncertainty is argued as a necessary trait and strength of new media – a constant state of negation from any sort of existing form of articulation (modernity) that is reflective to the socio-politics of Malaysia – and clearly understood, negotiated and unraveled by the New Media art practitioners in Malaysia.

The objective of the discussion is to consolidate your voice as part of the thesis, especially looking at New Media art as being initiated with/thorough your practice in the 'context' of Malaysia. The 'context' covers not only the framework of reading and articulating your practice within the current Malaysian art history and theory (along with all its apparent issues) but also includes the negotiation of your subjectivity (as Malaysian) that is made visible through your practice, artworks and various forms of expression that is well articulated.

Thus, the discussion will serve as a crucial aspect for the strength and argument of the thesis. It will be incorporated as chapter 02, titled 'What is the scene?' Any publication of the discussion will only be pursued with prior permission from both of you, thus you can treat the discussion as strictly closed and discreet between us. I hope to have an open, critical, productive and tangible discussion. Once again, thank you for considering taking part in this academic exercise. I will get in touch with you regarding the technicality of online discussion as we proceed further. Hope to have you on board!

Sincerely,
Roopesh Sitharan
PhD Candidate, Department of Visual Culture,
Goldsmiths College, University of London

Appendix 02

some pointers/framework for discussion

Hi there bosses,

I am glad we finally got this going, and I am sure this will be helpful for all of us in the long run. I really want to get your voices officially documented as part of an academic research (rather than the usual catalog-compiling and exhibition-making - and we also have done that).

So the time is set:

SATURDAY (22 February 2014)

TIME: VANCOUVER (6am)----->LONDON (3PM)----->PENANG(11AM) - I am giving an hour's head start, so that we can anticipate any technical problems. Hope this is OK!

Framework:

The central thesis for this discussion is to articulate a critical reflection and exploration of SELF. Remember the area that I am researching is Malaysian Subjectivity, particularly through the practice of NEW MEDIA art. So the keyword here is SELF + NEW MEDIA, and I inherently perceived this as just different sides of the same coin when it comes to both of you!

To clarify what I mean by subjectivity:

I intend to tease out the meaning of the everyday life experience of a Malaysian through the study of New Media - in order to establish a theoretical basis for 'a subjectivity-oriented theory of New Media'.

Thus, my question will cluster around this theme - in uncovering your subjectivity; as in your strategy, politics, views and especially your expression that gets manifested through your practice. Here are several points to keep in mind:

- 1- This focus of subjectivity is explored through the discussion of New Media as being perceived, explored, understood and expressed through your practice, and by that I include not only your practice as an artist, but also various roles that you have excellently performed in your career. This expands further to investigate about the negations of New Media to existing terms and norms, multiplication of New Media practice into various fields, dissonance with the art world economy, etc!
- 2- The discussion of New Media must inevitably be located within a certain context. This demands that we include the social politics of the Malaysian scenario. This context starts from the art world of our local scene and must be located within the larger social structure of the Malaysian political landscape. Expanding this further for the exploration of power structures, the market economy and how it dictates the art world, identity politics that is debated by contemporary society, the sense of entitlement versus the claim of legitimacy of nationhood.
- 3- While these discussions will give valuable insight, information and context for my research, I am also hoping to push our discussion further to think about self in terms of critical theory, specifically I am looking at it in terms of epistemology and ontology, of course cosmology is included and I anticipate this naturally revealing itself in the course of the discussion.

SO to recap, the core discussion is on SUBJECTIVITY, and this is explored through NEW MEDIA and SOCIO POLITICS of Malaysia (this is the framework in a nutshell).

To give a brief idea/preparation, here are some guidelines:

- 1- Have artworks that you have done in mind that might best demonstrate your practice
- 2- Use the artworks to have a discursive exploration of the context and issues that matters to you, regardless whatever that might be!
- 3- Be ready to elaborate on theories that you might relate with your practice
- 4- Be open for various questions, especially ones where I might want to dig further to understand what you're trying to do

Hope this is helpful and gives a clear indication of the purpose and direction for our discussion. At the end of it, this piece of documentation will be very valuable information to understand you as a person.

Let me know if you have any further questions!

Appendix 03

This citation is from an email sent to E-ART ASEAN ONLINE in response to an article wrote by Niranjan Rajah for Art Asia Pacific journal. The response is in the personal collection of Niranjan, as part of his E-Art Asian online documentation. He discussed this critique with me during an interview that I conducted as part of my curatorial effort for a duo show called 'relocations' that showcased Niranjan and Hasnul. The evidence of him mentioning this critique is in the excerpt of the interview as part of the catalog publication. I was later given access to this personal email of Ray to Niranjan. To refer the mentioning of this email, check Roopesh Sitharan, Relocations: Electronic Art of Hasnul Jamal Saidon & Niranjan Rajah (Penang, Malaysia: Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 2008), Pg.45.

Ray Langenbach's critique

"What is for me the most interesting theoretical problematic in your writing and in other recent articles, is your missionary desire to romanticize or redeem digital communications - a medium which has such strong historical ties with Taylorist and Fordist modes of modern mass commodity fabrication and the development of American military communications. You have pieced together a surprisingly "liberal" (in the most critical sense of that word) ideology that supports your view of your own work as critical and anti-hegemonic, when in fact, it fits snugly with the main thrust of current global info-commodity production. You have chosen to make use of the advanced modes of electronic R&D that capitalism has to offer - choosing one of the most capital-intensive media of artistic production available. Is it due to your niggling awareness of what this clear economic and academic privilege implies about your own class status that makes you want to theorize the medium itself as structurally critical and resistant? While a critique of the larger structures of global capitalism and continued Western economic imperialism is proper and necessary, you attempt to make that critique from a platform constructed just barely to the left of Bill Gates' crotch. Perhaps you think that taking such a position will save your own work from the onus of your own critique. Your arguments curiously mimic Mahathir's long-standing strategy of appropriating the rhetoric of the local centre-left to criticize the very global capital markets in which his administration has historically been a committed player."