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## ANTARA: In-between Language and Art

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### Abstract

In the context of communication, especially dialogic and generative approach to expression of culture, the concept of Art can seem as the best mode of conveyance. Such enunciation of culture through Art is substantiated by capturing all the sufficient properties of the subject of Art through language. Simply put, language is employed to describe, comprehend and communicate ideas represented in Art by having concrete sets of communicative principles that governs meaning. This paper argues such governance of meaning by language limits the potentiality of Art. It proposes the inherent obscurity in defining Art operates as a radical deconditioning through which any attempt to fix the representational meaning of Art by language is resisted. Specifically, the paper considers such resistance with the use of word 'ANTARA' as an exhibition concept in which works that were shown are inextricably bound by the mutual conditionality relation between language occurrence and specificity of cultural expression.

**Keywords** Communication; Language; Art; Cultural expression

### Introduction

Writing about Art today, especially contemporary art in Malaysia is inextricably caught up with the conceit of an unspoken rhetoric that merely imposes art with value for commodification. This happens covertly by capturing value through meaning - given the discourse of art in our community is driven by the over imposed nature of art market and academia in formalizing (and measuring) the meaning of art by writing. Now there is nothing wrong with discourse for it is the nature of knowledge to constantly unveil new interpretation of reality to render a better understanding of what we experience, and in this case the encounter with art (Ortega y Gasset, 2012). However, such aptitude of knowledge is exploited by art market to be utilized as a predatory mechanism

whereby any apparent dissidence in commodification inadvertently turned into a discourse that supposedly propels art. What this means is that art is embellished with a vainglorious moment of objectification through writing - a mere spectacle that operates as a simplistic, distorted (and arguably a safe) reading of a cultural reality that we experience.

In this way writing is employed to make art a commodity of cultural artifact, simultaneously abdicating art's responsibility as a vanguard of rigorous cultural mirror and replacing it with superficial actualization of knowledge, claiming it as an embodied cultural value of art. Such operation of value through writing constrains the viciousness of art by the logic of language. Arguably it is this logic of language that enables the exteriority of meaning in art and opens up the possibility for commodification. As such, the meaning of art and its commodification in writing should not be seen as two separate entities. Rather than meaning (discourse) and commodity (market) existing independently of each other, the argument here is that art's meaning is constructed only with reference to its commodification (Towse, 2011). So instead of meaning being a direct reflection of art's potentiality, how we understand art is determined by the interplay between language and commodity.

To simplify, what is presented here is a deliberate rejection of the rigid separation between institutionalized discourse and capitalized value. Such rejection makes the quest for undoing certain assumption possible – of the very idea that writing is an objective probing that discovers, talks and validates art. In doing so, the reverence given for art discourse, including writing this very paper for a particular journal (International journal of Multimedia) and in a specific language (English) hypothetically ignores, conceals and even marginalize all other possible interpretations of art that are not encapsulated within the context of this publication's assessment. Indeed, to point out such ignorance the paper cautiously looks at the operation of language (and its cultural specificity) to reveal the constrain that language imposes on art.

### **Deviating from inherent Biases**

The reason to point out the correlation between 'discourse' and 'market' is to consciously avoid the trap of hiding within the secured sense of scholarly reading/writing of art. Academic discourse aims at interpreting (or decoding) art as an act of communication expressed through symbolic forms (DeMarrais & Robb, 2013). The simplification of art as symbolic forms reflects the persistence of capitalism to continually objectify art so as to mark the monetary value for the labour of producing art. This 'monetary' value establishes a certain convention of discourse in the Malaysian higher learning institutions, especially in defining contemporary visual culture (Roopesh, 2013). This is even more so as academia becomes an intense, competitive business of recruiting students reasoned by the logic of neoliberal consumerism (Saltman, 2014). Everything is valued and measured

in market terms that imagine knowledge as products and students as consumers – as such, to earn as an artist becomes the driving force in defining how art should be taught, discoursed and defined in academia.

While the correlation between capitalism and art has an established history of criticism in art (and this deserves an in depth study on its own), the point here is to probe a specific condition within this correlation whereby the evaluation of the work of art takes place according to a restrictive criterion of language. All those involved in Malaysian contemporary art are familiar with the conventional methods of presentation such as museum show, curator's talk, lecture, screening, staged event, publication before a presumptively neutral audience. Under these conditions, the evaluation of artwork takes place according to a specific communicative means of educating the audience about the work of art that they are experiencing (Saidon, 2010). In the context of the ANTARA exhibition, the presentation took place at E-Gallery of Multimedia University. Apart from the intrinsically linked technological settings, which, as such, may be considered as a standard in a university driven to produced technocrats – there is also an absolute rule as to how the works should be validated. This of course is done through discourse, specifically through this publication of a special issue to establish the exhibition as an endeavor of knowledge production (Niedderer, Biggs & Ferris, 2006).

As the effort of writing this essay demonstrates - publication of writing on art has become a significant component for the acknowledgement of art (and its practice) by academia. This is because publication rectifies the suspicion of the pretension of art system by stratifying the instrumental and scientific view of the world as per the demand of academic institution. Simply put, publication structures and organizes art in ways that adhere to the demand for research evident so as it could be judged by peers and acknowledged as a discipline of study. This is done by communicating such evident through language. After all, journal publication is not just a matter of publishing some writing on art per say, but it involves complying to certain rules of engagement (2019), whereby the writing has to be rigorously and painstakingly scrutinized by experts in the field to ensure that it makes a unique and original contribution for the advancement of knowledge in the respective field. Arguably this might be suitable for the field of scientific research given it is driven by epistemological system of thought to substantiate reliable knowledge based on objectified reality (Vveinhardt & Andriukaitiene, 2018). But art scrutinizes the systemic limits of such approach, or to put it differently, questions the ontological nature of reality. Therefore, any publication on such art innately operates as a form of objectification of reality that only reflects a narrow range of perspective calibrated based on some fundamental, but hitherto overlooked principles.

While such narrowness of perspective caused by principles could be probed through various means (such as the format of publication, the method of its peer reviewing, the selection process, the choice of experts

and many others) - this paper utilizes the basic requirement as the premise for criticism towards writing about art as an academic discourse. Specifically, it looks at the use of language as the necessary communicative tool to validate art as a body of knowledge. What is daunting in this procedure is that such communication is only made possible with a presumption that art could (and would) concur to the rules of language in being able to describe what it is through writing (King, 2008). Language is essentially a means of communicating an idea to a group of people who shares the cognitive processes in the use of that particular language. However, when such cognitive processes are applied to describe about art, it falls short of encapsulating the properties of art. This is because art as a human activity is devoid of any essence when compared to other activities of human. It is merely a concept that mirrors the human intellect with the probability of manifesting as an entity, or object in the physical world. This is why an art object could manifest in any shape, form or idea.

Referring to Morris Weitz's claim that it is impossible to define art due to its nature being extensible in scope and changeable over time (Weitz, 1956) - it must be emphasized that such extensibility and changeability in art is not reflected through the formalities of writing for the special 'Antara' publication as part of International Journal of Creative Multimedia.

Perhaps the simplest way to demonstrate this is by asking the age-old provocative question of 'What is Art?'. It is well known that no answer thus far has been able to sufficiently accommodate the meaning of art per say, nevertheless the question stands as a testament for a particular tenet of art. What becomes obvious is that art negates definition and in doing so it remains open and free from any prescriptive and limitative delineation in ways that could deviate from its very nature. This does not mean art is incomprehensible, and if it might seem so then the argument here might have unknowingly mystified art and perhaps even accentuate a dogmatic take on art. On the contrary, what the malleability of the term does is that it negates any certainty in an entity that corresponds to this term and in doing so points out the reciprocal meaning that arises from the constant process of negotiation between competing concepts. As such, art cannot merely be engaged in a descriptive manner but in ways of critical reflection.

Given this premise, writing on art is not simply a matter of expressing an opinion (or criticism) supported by visual observation that leads to the development of an interpretive thesis or argument. Instead it is an act of using conventional terms of a particular language so that it could be recognized by a community that obey to that particular linguistic norms. It involves adhering to an accepted 'language game' – and in this case the use of English for a journal publication. Framed as an academic journal the publication might impose a stature of an unbiased knowledge pillar, however the problem is that languages are loaded with terms and expressions that are culture specific. Language is not neutral and an uncritical acceptance of certain language as

norm for knowledge sharing creates a center - English as standard language for publication; and periphery: other languages as different, distinct and particular.

Writing about this, Descaries (2014) explains “The resulting dynamic can be summarized by the saying ‘publish or perish’. In the context of neoliberal globalization, the saying should be updated to ‘publish in English or perish,’ whatever the linguistic, cultural, disciplinary, and geographic conditions shaping knowledge production may be. There are at least two angles from which to discuss the effects of this precept. The first is that of resource concentration. The second is the English language's imposition of itself as the language of science.” Such dominance of English leads to the marginalization of researchers, especially art practitioners that deal with lived experience of a society, its belief, emotion and values – all of which is expressed through their native language.

By now it would be obvious that the essay is notoriously resistance to the confines of language, and subsequent ignorance in accepting the inherent biases that comes along in writing about art as an academic discourse, especially in English. Please do not take this as a disgruntled and provocative criticism of academia, instead the impulse to write this article comes from a reflection of an art practice undertaken at the intersection of post-colonial stance and critical methodologies in writing / practicing art. The case to be made here is to shift the emphasis of viewing art as an object to be studied through the representationalist paradigm. In doing do, academia often contentiously performs a snobbish reading of art as an act of communication expressed in conventional symbolic forms. What is important is to think about art in relation to societal dynamics and experience, or in other word how art reflects social relations which “is what it is in many per-modern societies where object is essentially an occasion for or an accoutrement to ceremonial participation...” (Dissanayake, 1995). Seeing art this way transforms our way of engaging with an art object - from fixed representation of the world to an intimate conduit that reflects everyday practices and forms of life.

### **Writing the unreadable**

The ‘Antara’ exhibition is an extension of the 2018 Gwangju International Invitational Exhibition that took place at Asia Culture Centre, Gwangju, South Korea. It is a collaborative effort between the Korean Society of Media & Art and Multimedia University, whereby both organizations agreed to host an art show in their respective countries to support the Gwangju International Invitational Exhibition. While ‘KOSMA’ is the acronym for the South Korean organization, the counterpart in Malaysia is called ‘ANTARA’. Meanwhile ‘Gait of Light’ is the theme for 2018 version of the collaborative exhibition. The exhibition took place from 11<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> November 2018 in South Korea and 12<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> February 2019 in Malaysia. Both shows had works by

artists from various parts of the world selected by panels from respective institutions through open call submissions.

Sakthi Koodu which means 'give me power' in Tamil is a video work that was created for the Antara exhibition. The work was shown both in Asia Culture Centre, Gwangju, South Korea and Multimedia University, Malaysia. It is a short video piece with a duration of 20 seconds that plays in a loop. This loop is made up of mashes of several video excerpts taken specifically from various devotional Tamil movies. In line with the theme of the show called "The Gait of Light" the work addresses the posture of a Hindu devotee towards light. Although there are many nuanced differences according to geographical locations and within traditions of Hindu followers, prevalence of light for a Hindu believer is utmost important as a symbol of victory of light over darkness, knowledge over ignorance and good over evil. In this video work, the darkness of the screen is deliberately punctuated by high contrast colors (of light) that shine through, simultaneously revealing the contour of human face. The on / off revealing of the face, or broadly speaking of a human speaks of the temporal aspects of apprehension.

Video as a medium operates to reveal the temporality and immediacy of encounter. The term 'encounter' used here must be interpreted from two aspects. Firstly, the encounter of a Hindu devotee to light which reveals the limits of humanity (or making humane / humble) at the moment of exposure. Such exposure to light symbolically makes one realize the temporality of life and the immediacy for victory over darkness. Secondly encounter must also be thought from the aspect of an audience encountering the video work. The time-based aspect of video captures the temporal aspect of experiencing media-based art object.

The video can only be comprehended when an audience spends time with the work – not by just contemplating akin to staring at a painting, but literally going along the journey of a particular narrative, changes, and punctuation of senses (audio visual). Video invites the viewer to "a bodily experience of conceptual propositions and imaginary worlds of memory and anticipation" (Morse, 1990). This could never be encapsulated through symbolic interpretation or analysis which usually is the norm for which academic paper tend to profiteer from.

Crucially the contour of face that emerges from the punctuation of light in the video reveals Sivaji Ganesan. He is a well-known, award winning senior actor in the Tamil Film Industry, also known as 'The Marlon Brando of India' (Muthiah, 1987). The face emerges as some clips from the movie 'Thiruvilaiyadal' was recycled for the creation of Sakthi Koodu. The movie was released on 31<sup>st</sup> July 1965 to a great commercial success. It tells the story of Lord Shiva's appearance on earth in number of disguises to test his devotees. The

movie is also credited for the resurgence in mythological cinema. Perhaps it might seem obvious that such detail explication of the visual cues is meant to explicitly point out the relevancy of the video work with the theme ‘Gait of Light’. However, there is a dilemma in doing so.

This depth of media relevancy to a particular culture, language and society is intimately tied to the locality of knowledge as expressed and communicated with a particular language (in this case it is Tamil). Such precision of meaning is notoriously difficult to describe. For that reason, art can only fully define itself for it exists in its own time and space; and cannot be confined to the specifics of discourse. What this essay does at best is to express the limits of writing or writing to state that certain things are (best left) unreadable. In doing so, we as academics do at best is to engage in the process of trying to impose meaning, but in truth what we do is to explore what art is and how it engages us as audience, researcher, or simply as human beings. As the acronym ‘ANTARA’ implicitly gestures when read in the Malay language, which means ‘in between’ – this essay humbly come closest in conveying the sense of inevitable, inexorable limit that is crucial in art research; for so often ignored, the dimension of cultural relevancy in a meticulous moment of engagement is the parameter art needs to function, subsequently negating any sort of definition.

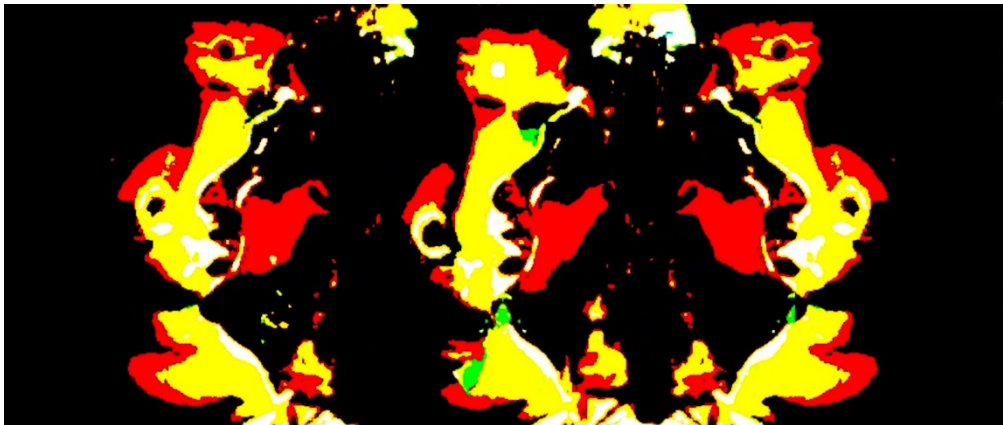


Figure 1 Still Excerpt 01 from “Sakthi Koodu” Video



Figure 2 Still Excerpt 02 from “Sakthi Koodu” Video



Figure 3 Still Excerpt 03 from “Sakthi Koodu” Video



Figure 4 Still Excerpt 04 from “Sakthi Koodu” Video



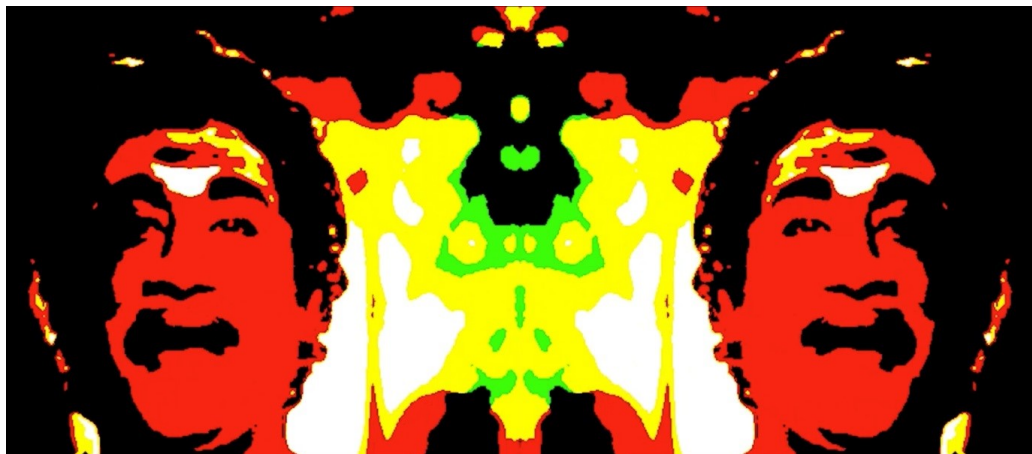


Figure 5 Still Excerpt 05 from “Sakthi Koodu” Video

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