

MESA SA KWARTO

Southeast Asian exhibition on a 'tiny desk' held in a live Zoom gallery

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Abstract

In 2020, workers had been deprived of access to their desk jobs as mass lockdowns shuttered offices. Videoconferencing arguably offered makeshift, temporary solutions across industries. Curator-researcher Agustin challenged the now ubiquitous Zoom-based communication by way of producing an online exhibition from his very own lockdown workplace. *Mesa Sa Kwarto*, thus, expanded the now ubiquitous Zoom gallery view into a makeshift exhibition space, where the desk (mesa) in the room (kwarto) balances between the material and virtual, offline and online, work and life. The effect can be likened to a home-made rendering of augmented reality. This study offers a critical reflection on how a makeshift physical-yet-online exhibition space can be considered as a potential form of counter-visuality to the alienating and homogenising tendencies of COVID-19 lockdowns, Zoom and social media.

Key words: Asean, Exhibition, Lockdown, Zoom, Pandemic.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on one of the major outcomes of my ongoing practice-led PhD research project titled *Reframing the ASEAN discourse by way of participatory photography and curatorial collaborations*. Having recently completed months long of virtual field work and data-gathering, I sum up here key insights that contribute to our understanding of virtual exhibitions and visual culture studies in the ASEAN region. The ASEAN is short for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and its ten member states are the following: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Viet Nam. The ASEAN was established in 1967, and in the last five decades it perpetuated the notion of an 'ASEAN identity' through mass media coverage, as well as through its member countries' cultural and creative industries such as the art market, cinema, theatre, and tourism, among others. These industries were arguably the most heavily affected by the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and recovery is not yet certain for many Southeast Asian countries in the foreseeable future. While the conduct of my study

only entailed exploring ways of qualifying and understanding what this so-called ASEAN identity might mean especially to Southeast Asians such as myself, the impact of the pandemic has left quite an indelible mark in my methodology in that I had to improvise with new approaches. This improvisation is how *Mesa Sa Kwarto* came to materialise, details of which I share in this short dossier piece.

First, some general information about my PhD research to premise my discussion upon. My sole investigation is regarding the collective image, imaginary, and imagination of Southeast Asian countries grouped as the ASEAN — for many academicians, and primarily economists and politicians, this is what ASEAN identity is vaguely all about. In many ways, it is based on the policy and principle called the ‘ASEAN Way’ (Solidum, 1981; Cockerham 2010) which refers to the consensus-orientated and non-interfering approach to community- and identity-building the geopolitical bloc espouses. Investigating this topic has now led me to understand how ‘official’ (visual) communication regarding the ASEAN discourse is reciprocated by what I call ‘unofficial’ visual culture such as crowd-sourced photographs and social media images (Agustin, 2018). This imperfect reciprocity can shed light, I argue, on what images might ordinary citizens of the member countries produce when they imagine their supposed ASEAN identity, or ‘ASEAN-ness’. I am observing and scrutinising this through participatory photography and visual ethnography methods in response to one of the main research questions of my PhD thesis project. And in this paper, I am also providing possible answers to this line of inquiry, albeit tangentially.

Second, before I delve into the conceptualisation and execution of *Mesa Sa Kwarto*, I must recount some essential details about my methodology and research design. Prior to global COVID-19 travel bans last year, I engaged several participants from various ASEAN countries and the UK (as I am based in Manchester throughout my doctoral studies) who can contribute to this visual culture study. Through snowball sampling as a means of inviting key respondents (Kenney, 2009, p.25), I eventually gathered a group of eleven participants from ten countries, namely: (1) Faizul H. Ibrahim - Brunei Darussalam; (2) Phynuch Thong - Cambodia; (3) anonymised participant (by request) - Lao PDR; (4) Dr Nursalwa Baharuddin - Malaysia; (5) Dr Kathryn Kyaw - Myanmar; (6) Martin Vidanes - Philippines; (7) Andy Chan - Singapore; (8) Kerrine Goh - Singapore; (9) Yammy Patchaya Teerawatsakul - Thailand; (10) Phát Nguyen - Viet Nam; and (11) Freya Chow-Paul - United Kingdom and Singapore — listed alphabetically by country of citizenship/origin/residence. My research design is primarily guided by *The PhotoVoice Manual* (Blackman, 2007) and *Doing Visual*

Ethnography (Pink, 2013), from the conduct of informal interviews and focus group discussion to various photographing activities, photo-elicitation exercises, and monitoring and evaluation. Thus, I am employing mixed methods in my data-gathering which I modified accordingly for a completely online approach. From June until October 2020, I gathered the group every one or two weeks. Zoom videoconferencing served as our main touchpoint and virtual ‘venue’ — not necessarily a consequence of the pandemic but a convenient and inexpensive way to virtually bring together the international participants. The synergy of participatory photography and visual ethnography helped facilitate meaningful conversations among the group, particularly through photo-elicitation or ‘show-and-tell’ games that encouraged each participant to share images or objects during our Zoom conversations. These personal items proved useful in illustrating the ideas of every participant when each talk about what they know of the ASEAN, how they perceive (their) ASEAN-ness, and if they can relate to the much-touted ASEAN identity. The flow and outcome of our conversations unfolded as expected from the visual methodologies used (Blackman, 2007; Pink, 2013).

One of the favourite activities of the participants was the ‘treasure hunt’ (or ‘scavenger hunt’ for some readers) which we managed to play by momentarily leaving our desks and returning with random items — with the Zoom meeting still ongoing the whole time. My only instruction to the participants (who all agreed with the mechanics of the game beforehand) was to look for images or objects in their rooms that might convey or exemplify Southeast Asia or ‘Southeast-Asian-ness’ (or ‘ASEAN-ness’ if they possibly can). They all used their cameraphones to take pictures of these items, and then shared them on-screen. Some of the most unexpected things that the participants showed to the group include a Disney souvenir mug which was actually made in Thailand, a Hanoi-made pop-up card of a fifteenth century European ship, as well as a fancy box of French tea manufactured by TWG, a Singaporean tea brand. These Southeast Asian objects that the participants found in the corners of their rooms served as a representative sample of a lifetime of personal effects, obtained through various means of exchange which obviously include tourism and travel. Seeing how random, found objects in our very homes can apparently be Southeast Asian in provenance, the group came to realise how the region is collectively integral to what Appadurai referred to and theorised as ‘global flows’ (1990, p.301) of deterritorialised cultural products that help shape today’s fluid, hybrid societies. In many ways, Southeast Asia might represent an integral aspect of globalisation, from the region’s exportation of raw materials and manufactured goods and products to its supplying of labour and manpower all over the world. This is how the quaint

idea behind *Mesa Sa Kwarto* came to the fore, eventually emboldening the group to launch it as a public exhibition online. Unable to step outside and view galleries and museums because of the health risks brought about by the pandemic, not to mention the closures of these art establishments, we opted for a ‘tiny desk exhibition’ of Southeast Asian ‘artefacts’ instead.

Gathering relevant items from my personal inventory at home — as lead curator of this ‘paracuratorial’ experimentation — I set up my own collection of artefacts, products, and souvenirs originating from different countries in the ASEAN region: two pairs of wooden chopsticks and a t-shirt fabricated in Cambodia; a souvenir keychain from Malaysia; several denim jeans made in the Philippines; several notebooks, a merlion figurine, and a textile bracelet from Singapore; bath and shampoo bottles, shirts, and a stuffed elephant toy made in Thailand; a handcrafted greeting card and several shirts, undergarments, and trousers made in Viet Nam (*note*: these are only a small selection from the whole archive). Placing these items on a small folding table which I frequently use as my remote work-at-home desk, *Mesa Sa Kwarto* finally took shape. And the research participants acted as the very first guests in this makeshift exhibition gallery, my very own museum of life as a Southeast Asian.

This is *Mesa Sa Kwarto*, a ‘tiny desk’ exhibition of Southeast Asian artefacts during last year’s COVID-19 lockdown. And the only way to enter this museum space is through the ubiquitous Zoom gallery. It is open to the public, admission is free, and it can be accessed on demand: <https://asean2020vision.online/mesa-sa-kwarto> — although, the live video streaming events and curators talk were held from 15 November until 15 December 2020 only. *Figure 1* below is a screenshot of one of the live video footages we made public.

Literally ‘desk’ or ‘table’ (called *mesa* in Filipino) in the ‘bedroom’ (*kwarto*)¹, the exhibition concept does not claim to exemplify or symbolise anything else other than itself. But, more than that, this table is what I share, figuratively speaking, with each and every individual constrained to remain at home, to work remotely, and to view (or access) the outside world only through their computer screens because of the pandemic. Conversely, this is the only view available to our reciprocal gazes as we temporarily rely on videoconferencing software, while we can only imagine what else is left out of the visual frame, left out of the publicly presentable view, or left out of the big picture. And enmeshed in this visual-spatial challenge is my utilisation of audio-visual, cinema, multimedia, and transborder apparatuses that may help readers gain new insights in today’s highly mediated visual culture.

¹ in fact, these are assimilated, borrowed words from Spanish to Filipino — hinting on the colonial histories of Southeast Asian countries in general — the word ‘*hapag*’ is Filipino for Spanish ‘*mesa*’, while ‘*silid*’ is for ‘*cuarto*’)

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Figure 1 – Zoom gallery installation of *Mesa Sa Kwarto*

2 ONLINE EXHIBITION-MAKING

During the months of lockdown last year, the arts sector largely felt the impact of the pandemic; many culture and entertainment spaces were even forced to close indefinitely. Understandably, exhibition spaces are not exempt from the ban. In developing countries such as the majority of ASEAN member states, arts funding is scarce. With tourism as one of the ASEAN region's revenue-generating sectors (ASEAN, 2015), it is not hard to expect small and medium enterprise galleries, and publicly funded museums closing, if not merely coping during the pandemic. Yet, coincidentally, the ASEAN region statistically ranks as a global hub of social media activity and content (McKinsey & Company, 2014; Kemp, 2018), hence the circulation of online images and videos, as well as virtual interactions, keep the vast populations widely (inter)connected. Effectively an integral aspect of what Fuchs referred to as the 'network society' (2011), these 'glocalised' flows of visual information can potentially serve as an opportunity for region-wide, transborder exhibition-making. Inspired by the *Tiny Desk Concert Series* of National Public Radio or NPR Music YouTube channel, my co-curators and I launched *Mesa Sa Kwarto* as an online public exhibition and utilised YouTube and Zoom for our live video streaming. Noticing how many other initiatives in Southeast Asia

offer live musical and theatrical performances², we wanted to offer an alternative: an actual art exhibition experience — as in a typical gallery or museum space — that is rendered *live* and made accessible to any individual working on their desks from home. While this is not a unique concept, as exemplified by several well-funded museums in Southeast Asian countries converting their physical exhibition spaces to digital and online augmented reality and 3D visual experiences, what sets *Mesa Sa Kwarto* apart is its being live and physical at the same time³. Still, I cannot claim to be the first curator to ever stage an exhibition/show outside the conventions and systems pre-determined by art institutions and museums, and inside such a private space not purposefully intended to welcome public viewers and visitors. For instance, Obrist's *Kitchen Show* which he curated for a viewing public in 1991 is widely considered as a pioneer, or rather, *provocateur* of exhibition-making. For Obrist, 'exhibitions [...] can and should go beyond simple illustration or representation [of reality]. They can *produce reality themselves*' (2014, pp.167-168). And the reality that I created and conveyed through *Mesa Sa Kwarto*, aside from showing obvious slices of our lives during lockdown of course, is perhaps about the *virtual* aspect of spaces (in both the physical and abstract sense) that is hinged upon what is visual or what is rendered visible. Here, *Mesa Sa Kwarto* is a virtual/visual reality.

The following sketches (*Figure 2 and Figure 3*) intimate a glimpse of the thinking and translating processes involved in the making of *Mesa Sa Kwarto*. It is hitherto a work in progress in that the curatorial inventory and planning is live and ongoing, accounting for the hundreds of potential objects for public display which are yet stored in my room-as-archive.

Using an LCD projector, I virtually extend the desk (*Figure 2*) as a reflected/projected image on the wall (see *Figure 1* as outcome). With this cinematic apparatus, the image of the desk with the objects displayed on it are reflected back on the wall behind the desk to create a 'Droste effect' or 'mise en abyme' visualisation. The viewers attend a live video streaming on Zoom, where they can only see the Zoom 'gallery view' from their computer monitors; they can opt to turn their cameras on and see their faces also projected onto the visualisation, and thus reciprocate each other's gazes in the same way as if they were physically walking around an on-site gallery space and casually interacting with one another by mere presence. Centre-

² one example is the 'Seasons of Love' cover of theater artists across Southeast Asian countries released over the YouTube channel of The ASEAN Musical Theatre Project (see this direct link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rM2ThNWQ708>)

³ a recording of one of the live video streaming events of *Mesa Sa Kwarto* is still viewable on YouTube (see this direct link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R5lue3XvGM4>), note: the audio was removed to anonymise the external attendees' conversations as well as the occasional mention of their names

stage is the collection of Southeast Asian artefacts, as if viewed from a typical museum pedestal, filling the virtual experience with their material presence and physics.

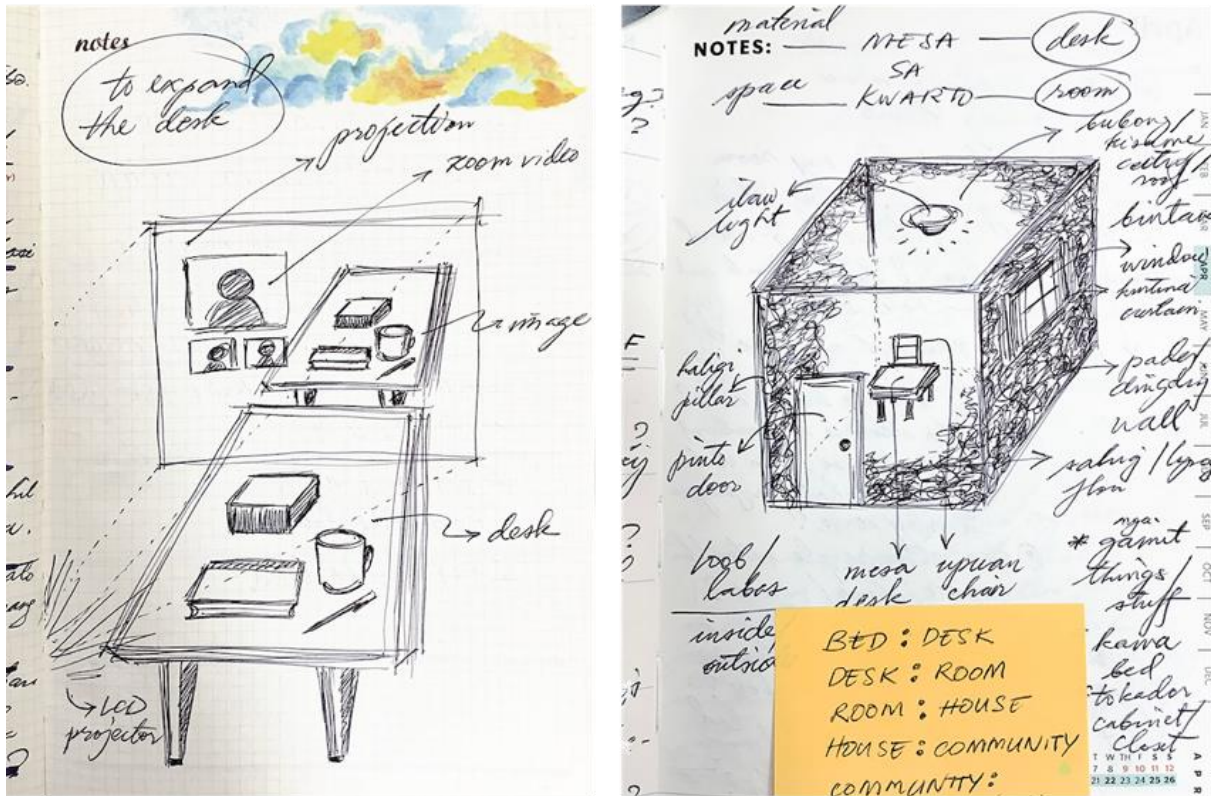


Figure 2 – sketch of the exhibition design conceptualisation

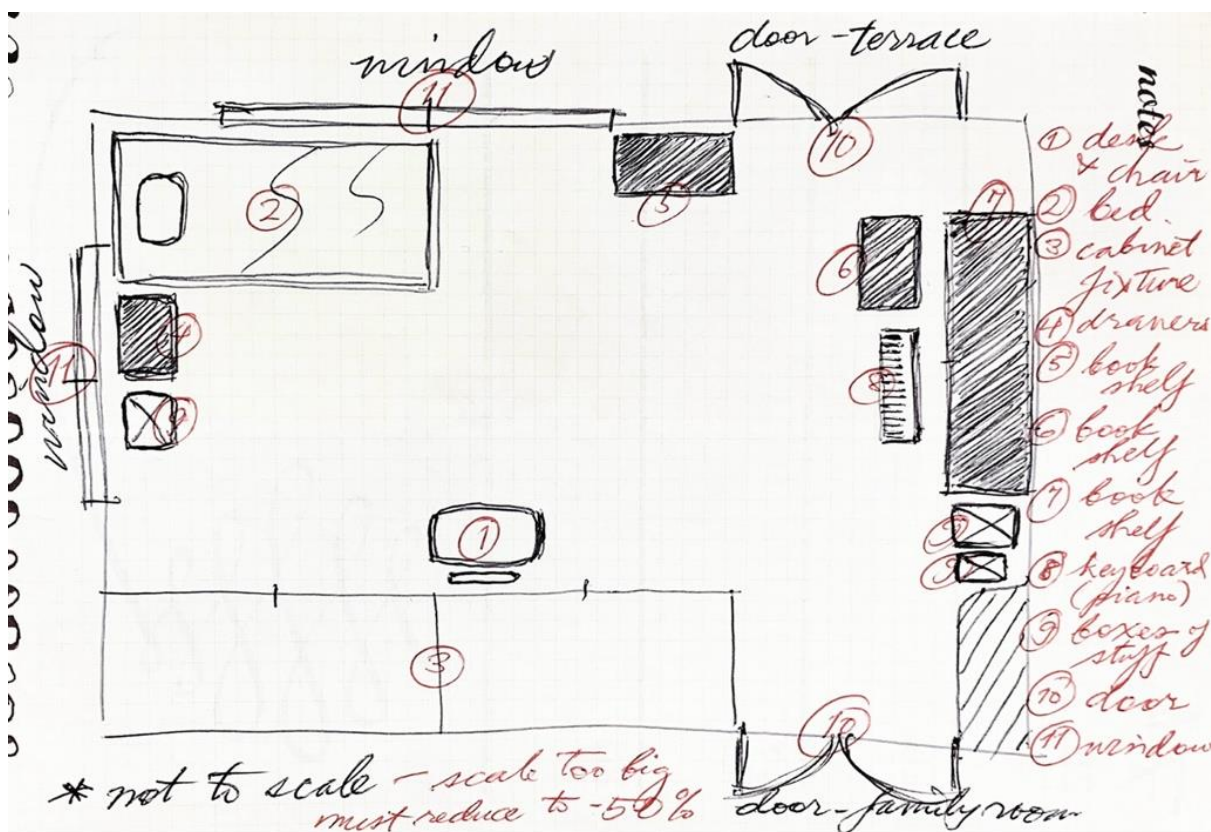


Figure 3 – sketch of my room’s floor plan

Mesa Sa Kwarto is a paracuratorial experiment that aims to expand the Zoom ‘gallery view’ into an actual/virtual — for some, even make-believe — exhibition space. This online exhibition is unique in that it does not follow what many other art exhibitions have already done by converting their gallery/museum shows into online platforms to accommodate (and compensate for) the lack of visiting audiences because of the pandemic. Instead of offering a fully digital environment resembling three-dimensional renderings of 3D game visualisations, *Mesa Sa Kwarto* is simply a physical space, located within an actual room that is situated within a building (a house) with an actual address — in other words, much like galleries and museums, it can be visited by any individual if chances permit. And even when not broadcasted online via Zoom videoconferencing, this very exhibition exists *in situ*, whether or not it is being viewed by an audience (similar to galleries and museums that have closed since the lockdowns ensued). Thus, as a physical installation and, at the same time, a live video performance, the exhibition balances between the material and the virtual, offline and online, work and life. It is augmented reality in the most basic (and home-made) sense, which is something that exhibition venues have already been exploring and implementing to expand the experiences of contemporary audiences.

This is how I experimented on merging both online and offline (or on-site) spaces into one coherent experience, by curating the abstract ideas and concrete objects of Southeast Asian visual culture. Through this paracuratorial experiment, I applied Mitchell's theory that 'visual culture is the visual construction of the social, not just the social construction of vision' (2002, p.170). This led me to explore further other relevant dialectics that became apparent as I implemented my exhibition concept (see *Figure 2* for example). I realised, for instance, that my room during lockdown is no longer an intimate, personal space reserved for resting and sleeping, this function is now solely relegated to my bed as my room split into two areas: a working space and a private space. In effect, the 'tiny desk' in my room is no longer part of my room but is now lending itself to my social and work life, it is now an extension of the outside/public space by way of my computer screen.

Scholarly works by Obrist (2014; 2011) and O'Neill (2012a) both contributed significantly to my understanding of 'curating' as I explored the above possibilities with *Mesa Sa Kwarto*. Curatorial practice, as well as exhibition-making, is not only a product of its socio-cultural and socio-political contexts but must also be an ever-changing practice to maintain its relevance to the society it seeks to represent and serve. And Obrist acknowledged how the Internet has served a crucial role in democratising access to and practices of curating (2014, p.169). This runs along the same lines as what O'Neill suggested as 'paracuratorial' ways of curating (2012b), which might explain how even mere ideas or questions can now be curated as if they were artefacts or physical artworks. The paracuratorial can also account for the changing roles of the curator, from the sole authorial figure to a collaborator — as I have realised through working with the research participants, some of whom also serving as my co-curators. Going back to my research regarding the regional identity of the ASEAN, curating such an indeterminable, intangible concept as ASEAN-ness led me to better understand it by way of perception and performance. Emphasised by Sheikh, the paracuratorial is a critical response to the established consumer-driven economy of curating exhibitions (2017, p.3), which is essentially what this study also aims to show by curating images and imaginations of the 'ASEAN experience' as counter-visual to what is represented by its mainstream, 'official' visual discourse. In many ways, the paracuratorial attempts of this study led to producing 'socially engaged art', defined by Helguera as 'in between more conventional art forms and the related disciplines of sociology, politics, and the like' (2011, p.4). In staging *Mesa Sa Kwarto*, the many realities we are dealing with during months of interminable lockdown came

to the fore as the COVID-19 pandemic continued to rage outside — this is, of course, apart from *Mesa Sa Kwarto*'s artistic and entertainment value as an alternative public exhibition.

As a visual culture experiment, *Mesa Sa Kwarto* plays with the idea of shared spaces and spatial connections in the face of what is digital and virtual, which is all the more made obvious by our lack of physical movement and social interactions during the pandemic. I consider it as a challenge to borders and boundaries and a concession to global/local dichotomies (the theme of the IAMCR 2021 Conference) — in the case of my research project, it is more about regional/national, national/ local, as well as regional/local dichotomies of the ASEAN and ASEAN identity. For a Southeast Asian citizen, such as myself, through the online encounters made possible by this online public exhibition, how rare it is to actually find a space where I can meet with my fellow Southeast Asians! Unlike, say, in the European Union or EU, another regional organisation for instance, where its geopolitical, regional organisation is more formalised and highly systematised (i.e., allowing borderless mobility and EU citizenship legally), the ASEAN as an organisation is practically still in the conceptual stages despite its fifty-year existence. This is one of the realisations that we have learned from interacting and interfacing with our fellow Southeast Asians by regularly 'e-meeting' via *Mesa Sa Kwarto*. Hence, in that very spatial construct of the online exhibition, we were able to experience and express what we have in common — as much as our differences. And that commonality is, perhaps, our critical consciousness of the ASEAN community as a whole. Hence, I remember how Anderson⁴ once theorised something similarly applicable in this context which is the idea of a nation as an 'imagined community':

It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (2006, p.6).

This can prove how and why the notion of ASEAN-ness or ASEAN identity is as much a subject of visual culture as geopolitics alone (Agustin, 2018). For the ASEAN to effectively collectivise as a regional imagined community, its members must not only be able to practically imagine it but also be given a space or venue for them to share this collective imagination. This is how supposedly collective identity can be achieved, recalling Melucci (1995) and his idea of 'cultural laboratories' (1989, p.60), effectively shifting the discourse from the conventionally top-down intergovernmental approach to recognise decentralised and

⁴ a renowned scholar of Southeast Asia among other area studies, Anderson has also experienced living in the region

grassroots participation. And by tapping into Zoom-based interactions, I serendipitously realised that such a cultural laboratory is in the making.

3 CONCLUSION

This paracuratorial experiment has revealed how ordinary citizens of various ASEAN member countries share common threads, from our day-to-day livelihood during the pandemic to our understanding of our identity/ies as interpellated⁵ by the ASEAN discourse. For one, by viewing the selection of exhibited objects, the similarities and differences — as well as the nuances in between — among the ASEAN countries find their way into the collective consciousness of Southeast Asians, myself included. This proved to be a useful means of raising the level of critical consciousness (Freire, 1985) in the ASEAN discourse, outside economics or politics and within the field of visual culture. In effect, what the viewers of *Mesa Sa Kwarto* had experienced is tantamount to the exercise of ‘showing seeing’, the very process described by Mitchell as seeing the world through other people’s practices of seeing (2000, p.166). Only, in the virtual/visual exhibition space of *Mesa Sa Kwarto*, there are no ‘other people’ but instead our imagined *fellow* Southeast Asians meeting us for the first time. This is how the process of ‘identity-participation’, the thesis I am developing in my PhD research, is at play. ASEAN identity must entail identity-participation for it to make sense.

I theorise identity-participation as our very reflexive, self-conscious act of looking at and questioning images, i.e., visual culture, vis-à-vis our imagination/s of our affiliation or belongingness to a community, i.e., our interpellation through visibility — here, I employ Mirzoeff’s definition of ‘visibility’: as a socially imposed ‘authority’ of power (2011, p.4). In other words, identity-participation is the critical consciousness that empowers individuals to choose, or rather opt-in to or opt-out of, their visibility-interpellated perceptions of their identity/ies. Therefore, it is as much an act of ‘counter-visibility’ (Mirzoeff, 2011) for people to achieve conscientisation (borrowing the term from Freire) in this manner. Coming back to Anderson’s (2006) theory of imagining communities, the communal visualisation of the community as a whole as mediated and materialised in cultural products, is essential to the very process of collective imagination and identity-participation. This is what the viewing public of *Mesa Sa Kwarto* have put into practice; by questioning how the image projections make sense to them personally and collectively as they see their individual and mutual act of

⁵ recalling Louis Althusser’s reinterpretation of the Marxist theory of ‘interpellation’ (2001) in *Ideology and ideological state apparatuses* (2001), originally published in 1970



looking at the exhibition, they gain a certain level of critical awareness about the very act of seeing and identifying what the imagery is all about.

* * *

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