

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BEB-22

28892 Top of the World  
Laguna Beach, CA 92651

Larger Than Life

25 December 1983

Mr Peter Bird Martin  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
Wheelock House  
4 West Wheelock Street  
Hanover NH 03755

Dear Peter

Monuments have traditionally been mankind's most enduring communication, his most successful form of immortality. Artists die, rulers are deposed, religions fade, civilizations crumble, but monuments remain, mute eulogies of praise, damnation or simple affirmation of what is, what was, what is now no more. In them, men and women have embodied their hopes, their beliefs, their lusts, their grief. See a monument and you see a culture, a message waiting to be read.

Once, most monuments served the future, one of the few permanent ways to pass on cultural information across the generations; many, in fact, took generations to build. Past civilizations mobilized their citizenries to construct Stonehenge, the Pyramids, Borobudur, the Ka'aba, cathedrals, mosques, temples, shrines, obelisks, stellae. Religious foci, these monuments maintained some form of continuence: too big, ~~too~~ labor-intensive, they could not be easily ignored or forgotten, at least for a century or two. Though their meaning or function might change with the passage of time, their mere existence assured a modicum of recognition, a thread of memory. Contemporary memorial parks, commemorative plazas, anniversary halls and other permanent or semi-permanent creations function, at some level, in the same traditional manner. Reminders from the past, they reach towards the future.

In the modern era, though such traditions of permanence continue, they have been gradually usurped in volume by a new genre of environmental communication, a genre that serves the present: the temporary monument. Such creations, unlike their antecedents, are not meant to last forever: they have a limited "economic life," an "ideal lifespan," a predetermined cycle of existence; when the allotted period is up, they come down, to make way for more contemporary designs. Instant homes, ready-made skyscrapers, pre-fab environments, these are monuments current and easily replaceable, well suited to the modern epoch of instantaneous communication, technological change and cultural displacement. The late Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes are characteristic of this modern trend; modularly designed, they can be easily assembled and disassembled as need dictates. Shorter-lived are Malaysia's commemorative gates (described in BEB-11), rebuilt annually with new designs, new messages. Most current, perhaps most relevant of all are the gigantic, environmental process art pieces of Cristo, an artist whose corporate-financed curtained valleys, wrapped islands and enigmatic running fences last not centuries or decades, but years, months, sometimes hours. Holograms may one day provide even more up-to-the-minute art monuments, more current, less substantial still.

The work of modern environmental artists, however, is limited communication. One of a kind, esoteric, they can be appreciated only by an elite, aesthetic cognoscenti, the lonely avant-garde. Popular acclaim, in fact, is often grounds for artis-

---

Bryn Barnard is an Institute Fellow studying visual communication in Southeast Asia. His current interest is billboards.

tic criticism; proletarian acceptance is somehow suspect, intimating a dearth of intellectual substance. Witness the harsh comments reserved for the likes of Andrew Wyeth.

A more mundane genre of temporary monument is also more ubiquitous and thus, more influential. Common, banal, everyday, the billboard is the most temporary monument of all.

Heir to the theatrical and political banners used since Medieval times, popularized in the United States and Europe as environmental adjuncts to print, radio and television campaigns, billboards (also called outdoor boards or, in the British-speaking world, "road hoardings") are monuments denuded of all monumental functions but one: communication. Though the billboard structure is often permanent--a scaffolding of wood or metal--the billboard message lasts only a month, two months, at most a year or so. Hand-painted or machine printed either directly on the board or on sheets wallpapered to a wooden or metal support, billboard messages can be easily changed. Now found throughout the world, they are particularly popular in developing nations, where the electronic media are still in their infancy or too expensive for the masses. In countries where illiteracy, geography or the lack of a widely understood language inhibits communication, purely visual billboards provide the comprehensible message that radio, television or the print media cannot. Here, for governments and advertising agencies, billboards are a powerful and cost effective mass communication tool.

Billboard communication in the developing world is most advanced in four of the nations of Southeast Asia--Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Thailand. Still primarily rural and agricultural, with one or two incipient mega-cities each and a large, poor, young, semi-literate, fast-growing populace, this region depends heavily on billboards, both to inform and persuade. Emphasizing the verbal as well as visual, they serve as both a reinforcement to the widespread electronic and print media and an environmental extension thereof, reaching those audiences either too remote or too poor for TV and radio or too illiterate for newspapers and magazines. As with all advertising, no one can say if billboards really work but Southeast Asian governments and advertising agencies take no chances, using them to inform and persuade the public on all manner of topics and on all manner of supports: buildings, trees, boulders, bridges, pedestrian overpasses, even homes. Though billboards are used for a wide range of informational purposes, three main categories are most apparent: political billboards, advertising candidates and incumbents, government policies or national themes; commercial billboards, advertising products or services; cinema billboards, advertising current and probable movie attractions.

These different billboard types are produced with varying degrees of skill, in different sizes and in a wide variety of styles, depending on the country, the function and the length of planned usage. Political, commercial and cinema billboards are each separate traditions and tend to be produced in different styles, often by different billboard production companies.

Each billboard type, in each country, is a reflection of the historical,

economic, technological and artistic development of its host culture, an oversized mirror of strengths and weaknesses. Malaysia and Singapore, for example, have become experts in small (4x8 meters--13x25 feet), conceptually sophisticated, high quality photographic and graphic machine-printed billboards. They are also notorious for stiff, uninspired painted movie art work, slapdash and amateurish. Indonesia and Thailand, on the other hand, do little billboard printing. Instead, each of these countries has evolved a number of their own, distinctive painted billboard traditions, highly detailed and realistic. Thailand is best known for her gigantic (20x40 meters--62x125 feet) painted cinema ads, similar in style to Malaysian-Singaporean produce, but of infinitely higher quality. Thai commercial and political production is also painted, also high quality, but less impressive than Thai cinema art. Indonesian cinema ads are small (4x8 meters), realistic, detailed, but of lesser quality than the Thai product. Indonesian commercial boards vary in size from modest (4x8 meters) to gargantuan (20x40 meters) and are inevitably airbrushed, photo-realistic creations. Indonesian political boards are always hand painted, always big (10x20 to 20x40 meters), covering a wide variety of art styles, from photo-realism to expressionism.

Cinema billboards are the only Southeast Asian billboard type to display any regional stylistic similarities. Despite differences in execution and finish, most Southeast Asian cinema boards are similar in coloration, layout and image choice. Cluttered, gaudy, painted montages are the rule throughout the region; jammed with actor portraits, action poses, monochrome and full-color figure combinations, garish edge lighting, exclamatory, boldly lettered titles, they look remarkably similar from country to country. This is partially the result of necessity of course: movie ads, as a rule, usually show actor portraits and scenes as teasers, attention getters. But Southeast Asian movie billboards go beyond such utilitarian concerns. Stylistically, they are not unlike the brightly-painted American cinema posters of the 1930's and 1940's. Most, in fact, are almost identical to current Indian movie advertising, a cinematic poster and billboard style that takes much of its inspiration from earlier Western products.

This Southeast Asian-Indian movie billboard similarity is not really very surprising: Indian Hindi and Tamil films have been popular in the region for years, particularly so in Malaysia and Indonesia. With an output of more than 370 films per year (more than one movie opening per day), India has plenty of hits to export abroad. Most are melodramatic fantasy romances that weave together Hindu myths, Western stereotypes, song-and-dance numbers, and the imaginary, troubled lives of upper-caste, wealthy Indians. Backed with dance, music, fights, action, excitement, these chromatic extravaganzas are the apotheosis of escapist entertainment. As earlier Indian folk drama (the Parsi theater of the 19th century) once influenced the development of indigenous Southeast Asian folk theaters (such as the bangsawan and possibly the Indonesian ludruk), so too has current, popular Indian film influenced the evolution of the regional industries in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia: the "Hindi style" has become a powerful model for Southeast Asian film music, film acting, film posters and film billboards. Indian movie music has even spawned a popular Malay derivative, dangdut (an onomatopoeic word, imitating the tabla drum sounds so characteristic of most Hindi and Tamil movie songs). Change in the Hindi billboard style is slow. Conservatism, conven-



1.



2.



3.



4.



5. An Indian cinema billboard in New Delhi.

1. 20 meter (66 foot) high cinema billboard erected on the side of a downtown Bangkok office building. The grid pattern indicates separate canvas panels.
2. A group of Indonesian cinema billboards on unstretched canvas near Puncak, a hill-resort near Jakarta. Most are 4 meters (13 feet) high.
3. A Malaysian cinema billboard at the Ruby theater, Tampoi, Johor state. Unstretched canvas boards such as this are common outside of Kuala Lumpur. Billboards in the capital are stretched and of slightly better quality. This board is about 5 meters (16 feet) high.
4. A Singaporean cinema billboard at the Cathay cinema in the downtown area. Roughly painted and ill-proportioned (note the tiny hand holding the rifle) the board is 6 meters (20 feet) high.

tion and the continued importation of this fare has kept the Hindi style alive but static, even as other Southeast Asian art forms evolve with the times.

Oddly, even the other Asian film giant, Hong Kong, has also adopted many of the stylistic quirks peculiar to Indian film billboards. Though Hong Kong's kung fu martial arts film output is prodigious (and the primary fight choreography model for both Southeast Asian and Indian films) this British colony has not yet developed a distinctive style of movie billboard art work; most billboards display the same cluttered montages, the same gaudy colors, the same garish edge lighting as the Indian product; execution and finish, however, are no better than that found in Malaysian and Singaporean movie billboards (the similarity may not be completely coincidental: cinemas in both the colony and Malaysia-Singapore are mostly Chinese operated, billboard art is mostly an in-house affair, and art personnel are mostly semi-skilled) Apparently, neither the talented socialist-realist painters of China nor the fine editorial illustrators of the colony itself have found their way into the movie billboard industry. Though Hong Kong movies are a major regional influence, their billboard artwork remains unremarkable.

Thai movie boards, the apical Southeast Asian cinematic billboard form, are quite remarkable for two qualities: refinement and size. Like most Southeast Asian cinema boards, Thai billboards are derivative of movie posters, the "one-sheet" art produced for street level advertising on movie house facades and other buildings. The Thais, however, often rearrange poster layouts for billboard production, enlarging a single figure to twenty-five meters (80 feet) or more, juxtaposing actor portraits in a different way, replacing poster portraits with other likenesses taken from movie stills, or merely changing color schemes. Indian film posters also occasionally enlarge one or two figures; the Thais, however, make it a habit. The execution shows skill and precision, reflective of Thai excellence in other arts. The style is distinctive: though likenesses are precise, most are not photo-realistic. Instead, the painting has a soft, ethereal quality, somewhat like the figurative work of the American illustrator, Andrew Loomis. Bright colors and red or yellow edge lighting are Thai favorites.

The origins of the Thai penchant for gigantism are unknown. Often covering an entire side of a three or four-story building, the boards are just as large as the portraits of Mao seen in Peking, the pictures of Lenin in Moscow, the Che Guevara icons in Havana--yet Thailand has had little Eastern bloc involvement. Socialist-realism, the art-in-the-service-of-the-state ideology of the Second World, is absent here. Painted portraits of the Thai monarch and consort abound, as do pictures of the Thai military leadership (the latter have ruled the country since the 1930's), but these fill modest picture frames, not building walls. Even during Rattanakosin, the 1982 Bangkok bicentennial, no oversized political paintings were seen, save for a few portraits of Thai rulers past and present, these barely two meters (6.5 feet) in height. The gigantic Buddhist applique banners occasionally unfurled in Tibet and Bhutan are possible antecedents for current Thai cinema billboard art--Thai Theravada Buddhists have had much contact with their Tantric cousins to the north--but how the sacred cloths of the Himalayas might have been transformed into the banal images of Bangkok is anyone's guess.

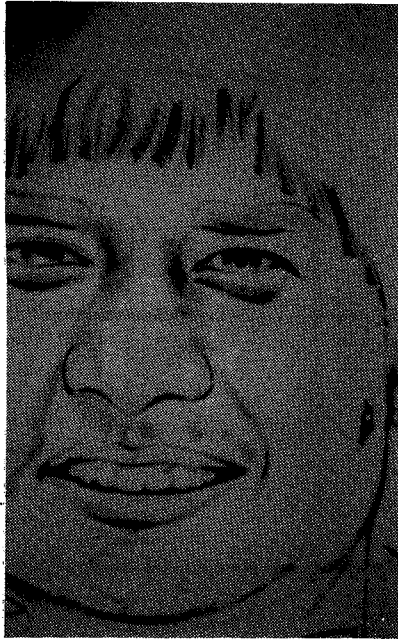
Whatever their origins, Thai cinema billboards thrive today. Production techniques are much the same in most Thai billboard studios. First a number

of large canvas-covered stretcher bars (as many as four per billboard) are prepared with a ground of white house or automotive paint. Then, a grid is drawn in proportion to a much smaller, gridded pencil layout, a method that has been used in Western painting since medieval times. The layout images are scaled up to the full size boards using not pencil, but black paint and a sumi-style watercolor brush. Photographic reference is used for likenesses and detail. Different artists specialize in portraits, bodies, buildings. Automotive paint is the most common medium, applied with big 20 centimeter ( 9 inch ) brushes, smaller filberts and flats or occasional, smaller sumi implements. A single board usually takes two weeks to produce from pencil to finish. A team of artists can paint all the billboards needed for a single movie in a month or so.

Prices differ from studio to studio, but most charge by the square meter. Four Art, one of the best known Thai cinema and commercial billboard studios, charges about 198 baht (\$9.00) per square meter on cinema boards, slightly more for commercial boards (the latter, which must sometimes stay up for a year or more, are painted on sheet metal panels). An average cinema board, 6x18 meters (20x60 feet) runs 75,000 baht (\$3400). Employees (of whom there are eighty) are paid around 3000 baht (\$136) per month, more for especially skilled artists. A profitable business. Boards also bring a tidy income to the building and land owners that rent their walls and roofs to the cinema advertisers. Even the Thai government gets a cut: advertising taxes must be paid on most billboards. Boards, however, remain the property of Four Art and after a film or ad run are reclaimed to be painted over and reused again and again and again.

Four Art also produces human-size "wall art" (fine art is rather too kind a term), but the studio works are no match for their larger brethren. The Four Art galleries in downtown Bangkok contain a pastiche of styles, from Impressionist to Renaissance to Pop, to Op. Most are painted by the same artists that do the bigger billboard ads. Most, alas, are no better than the mass-produced art-mart variety found in the catalogs of budget department stores in the West. Prices, however, are far from budget: a glistening, wide-eyed nude, 1x1.5 meters (3.3x5 feet), may run \$500, a same-sized, Monet-style landscape, twice the price. An unfortunate departure, if the emptiness of this musty, over-stocked gallery is any measure.

Indonesia is Southeast Asia's other painting virtuoso and, like Thailand, tends towards gigantism. But why painting and why gigantism in two countries with little in common save membership in ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, of which Malaysia and Singapore are also members), some Chinese influence and an Indic Hindu/Buddhist heritage? Casual analysis, in fact, reveals more differences than similarities: Indonesia is an island nation, a polyglot archepelegic society of 158 million, 90% Muslim, sprinkled with bits of Christianity, Hinduism and residual animist belief. Thailand, on the other hand, is a mainland nation of 50 million, ethnically and linguistically more homogenous, 90% Buddhist with pockets of Islam and Christianity and animism. Both nations,



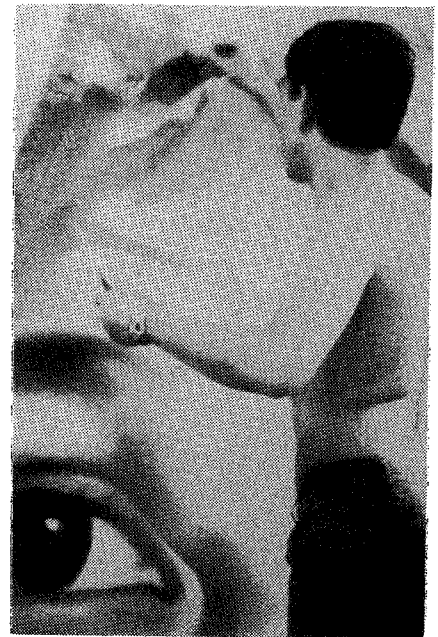
6. Initial grid and drawing are done with black paint and a small sumi-style brush; Four Art, Bangkok



8. A Four Art face specialist.



7. A palimpsest: Al Pacino, gun in hand in a scene from The Godfather, shares canvas with Chen Hui Mien and Wang Chong Pang, protagonists in the Hong Kong thriller, Godfather's Fury; Four Art, Bangkok



9. Large areas are covered with house-paint brushes; Four Art, Bangkok





10. Painting in cadmium yellow edge-lighting, a Thai favorite; Four Art, Bangkok.



11. Cartoon bodies are often combined with realistic likenesses in Thai cinema billboards; Four Art, Bangkok.



12. A finished billboard, 20 meters (66 feet) high, for the Thai teen film, Priot; Bangkok



13. A popular Thai washing detergent: high-quality Thai painting on a miniature scale; Bangkok.



however, are "great traditions," historic centers of power, wealth, literature and art. Like the Burmese and the Khmers, the Thais and Indonesians have built successive kingdoms and empires: in Thailand, Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Thonburi and Rattanakosin (Bangkok); in Indonesia the Javanese Shailendra, Mataram, and Majapahit empires, the Sumatran-based Sri Vijaya and other island kingdoms elsewhere in the archipelago. Often drawing from China and India for cultural succor, the civilizations of Thailand and Indonesia developed into the polar foci of Southeast Asia, exacting tribute from their neighbors and evolving unique, complex, sophisticated art, music, dance, drama and architectural traditions. They, in turn provided cultural sustenance to other smaller traditions on the periphery: the Malay Peninsula, Borneo, Mindanao, the Visayans.

The ascendancy of Western colonial power from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries doused but did not extinguish the cultural fires of Thailand and Indonesia. Each suffered different fates: Indonesia was colonized by the Dutch, island by island, culture by culture, finally incorporated, in toto, as the Netherlands East Indies; Thailand, conversely, managed to stave off colonial ambitions by playing off one Western power (Britain) against another (France) and modernizing quickly. Western influence meant exposure to Western ideas, Western science, Western history and, eventually, Western art. Traditional Thai and Indonesian art was usually religious in nature, usually flat and decorative, with little regard for Western-style Renaissance perspective or other illusory three-dimensional devices. Color, form and iconography were religious conventions, rigidly prescribed.

Dutch ships are thought to have brought European paintings as gifts for Indonesian rulers as early as 1637; seventeenth century European visitors to Ayutthaya may well have brought similar works as gifts for Thai kings. By the nineteenth century, both countries had accomplished painters, trained in the Western style. Raden Salleh (1816-1880), a Javanese prince, was Indonesia's first significant Western-trained landscape painter. Lauded in Europe, he was heavily influenced by Delacroix. In Khong, a painter who lived during the reign of King Rama IV (1851-1868), was one of Thailand's best known early Western-style painters and a fan of the Italian Renaissance. At first isolated, these and other early Western-style painters eventually gained followings, proteges, successors, surviving on the patronage of the courts and the well-to-do.

In Thailand, Western art styles gained popularity, but were not formally taught until the twentieth century. Only then were art academies and art associations established to provide art education outside of royal and wealthy family circles. Thailand eventually established a system of primary, secondary and post-secondary education, which included art training. Silpakorn University was established for advanced art training. Western-style painting, sculpture, etching, lithography as well as traditional Thai mural art are now taught at Silpakorn and other Thai art academies. The system produces competent draftsmen and painters and some well-known practitioners of the graphic arts. The illustrators in particular are in demand throughout Southeast Asia, especially for work as architectural renderers. That Thailand also has a respectable billboard industry is but another facet of a highly developed art culture.

Indonesia evolved a number of art associations in the early years of the twentieth century, but had not a single, specialized art academy prior to World War II. The colonial school system did provide art education, however; draftsmen and copyists were trained, usually for work as teachers. Private schools, such as the Taman Siswa system on Java, also provided art education. The Western style art produced in the pre-war years was mostly romantic, tropical landscape and genre scenes, the subject of much criticism by Indonesian nationalists, who claimed such art was "colonial." The Japanese occupation of World War II and the post-war Revolution (the foiled, five year Dutch attempt to regain control of their former colony) did much to change the character of Indonesian art, however, and was the wellspring from which modern Indonesian political and commercial billboard art evolved. Though occupying Japanese forces ravaged the Indonesian economy, they encouraged the development of nationalistic, propagandistic art. A cultural center, the Keiman Bunko Sidhosyo, was established on Java, and artists were encouraged to submit paintings to stimulate recruitment for grim projects such as the Burma railroad (these exhibitions did not always get the response hoped for: Affandi, now the doyen of Indonesian painting, is said to have submitted a work for the Burma railway exhibition, rejected by the authorities for its depiction of a group of skeletons in a dark, dismal landscape). Traditional Japanese art made little impact in Indonesia during this period; most of the Japanese artists that accompanied the occupying forces were themselves already influenced by Western art styles.

With Japanese defeat, Indonesia declared her Independence (August 17, 1945). The subsequent Revolution eventually established the Javanese town of Yogyakarta as the center for Indonesian Republican forces and Indonesian nationalist art. ASRI, Indonesia's premier art academy, was established here in 1950. Other art centers, less nationalistically oriented, developed in Bandung (home of the Institute of Technology, another art school) and the eventual national capital, Jakarta. In Yogyakarta during the Revolution, artist groups such as the Pusat Tenaga Pelukis Indonesia (Center of Indonesian Artists' Strength), Seniman Indonesia Muda (SIM--Young Indonesian Artists) and Pelukis Rakyat (People's Painters) produced anti-Dutch posters for distribution behind enemy lines. Documentary, "revolutionary" paintings were also produced. SIM, under the leadership of Sujosono, developed into a dogmatic purveyor of socialist-realist art, the only "acceptable" art form. These beliefs were shared by the People's Culture Institute, an organization sponsored by the growing Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI--Indonesian Communist Party). During the 1950's, numerous members of Pelukis Rakyat were sent to China, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe under the sponsorship of the People's Culture Institute. Possibly as a result of this exposure, Pelukis Rakyat became one of the first Indonesian art organizations to promote gigantism as an artistic device. Hendra, leader of the group, supervised the creation of a 2.5 meter (8 feet) portrait of Gaja Mada, prime minister of the ancient Majapahit empire, as well as a group of 1.75 meter (6 feet) sculptural reliefs of Indonesian colonels. Large for the time, they would soon be dwarfed by the huge, nationalist sculptures constructed at the behest of Indonesian president Sukarno.

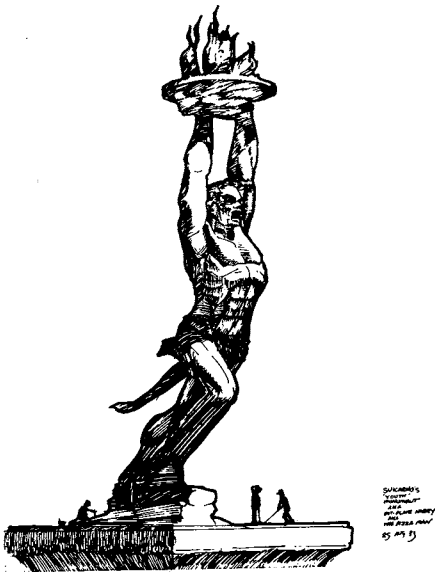
A revolutionary leader and Indonesia's first president, Sukarno was a riveting speaker, an expert demagogue, a masterful politician. A lover of easily understood

concepts to rally the people, he was one of the progenitors of the five-principled national philosophy, the Pancasila (Faith in God, Nationalism, Humanism, Social Justice, Democracy). His Manipol-Usdik doctrine (1945 Constitution, Indonesian Socialism, Guided Democracy, Guided Economy, National Personality), an extension of the Pancasila, was also the official basis for a nationally-based art, an art that served the state ideology. Sukarno's nationalist art aspirations produced a host of socialist-realist permanent monuments. Scattered across the capital city, these Brobdignagian homages to Youth, Farmers, the Liberation of Irian Jaya and historical figures like Gaja Mada, were produced in slabby concrete and bronze. Ham-handed, over-muscled, straining, pointing, rending, these aggressive creatures were Sukarno's attempt at an instant national mythology. Buttressed by an annually-produced crop of socialist realist billboards (heirs to the Yogyakarta paintings and posters of the Revolution), they harkened to the glories of the past, the accomplishments of the present, the imagined accomplishments of the future. These were heady days for Sukarno: the Dutch defeated and expelled, the fledgling Non-Aligned Movement in full swing, the nation fragmented but struggling towards unity. Such monuments, a bit hackneyed now, seemed in tune with the times.

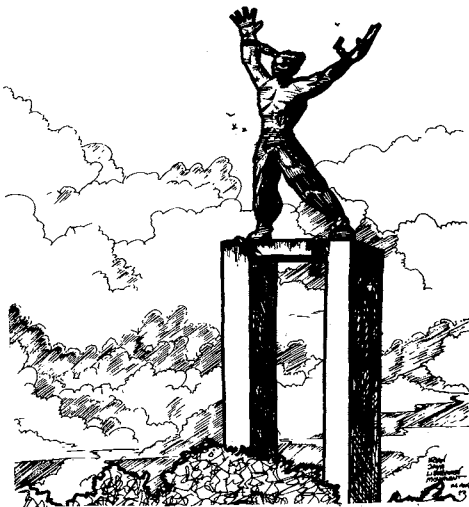
The crowning achievement of Sukarno's monumental building spree was the National Monument, Monas, a gigantic modified obelisk of white marble, rising from a wide, flat white marble base, topped by a gold-plated flame. This modern rendition of an ancient Hindu power sign, the phallic lingam-yoni, was as much symbolic of the linking of male and female energies as it was the national spirit. Once the emblem of the Hindu deity Shiva, Sukarno is reported to have joked that Monas was, in fact, symbolic of his own, inexhaustable virility and that of the nation. Appropriately, then, this final, monumental extravagance is widely known by the pejorative, foreign appellation: Sukarno's Last Erection.

Sukarno is gone now, eased from power soon after an attempted PKI coup in 1965 (he died a few years later). Though his billboards vanished with Guided Democracy, his permanent monuments remain. The New Order government of his successor, Suharto, erects permanent monuments as well, but less socialist-realist than those of the Guided Democracy years. Mrs. Ibu Tien Suharto's theme park, Taman Mini Indonesia Indah (Beautiful Indonesia in Miniature Park), the concrete replicas of thirteenth and fourteenth century Javanese temple gateway architecture erected at village entrances throughout Java, the (martyred) General Yani home-museum, these are typical of New Order monuments, evoking past glory as a basis for current grandeur. Abstract, non-representational monuments are also constructed these days, evokative of little else than their own form.

New Order temporary billboard monuments, however, are well within the socialist-realist style, continuations of the nationalist art of the Sukarno era. Billboards are put up throughout the year in the main streets of Jakarta and other Indonesian cities, either commemorating an historical event (such as the 1945 Revolution), supporting a policy, or lauding the President for his Leadership. Suharto is often portrayed here as a sort of mythic figure, leading his cabinet, guarding his multi-racial flock, trimming the economic bush, or inspecting the national produce. Hand painted and big (often 20x40 meters-65x132 feet), the boards follow the socialist-realist conventions espoused by SIM (though the annual billboard murals erected in Jakarta by the Department of Information are somewhat expressionistic, rather like the work of Mexican mural painter Diego Rivera). When foreign



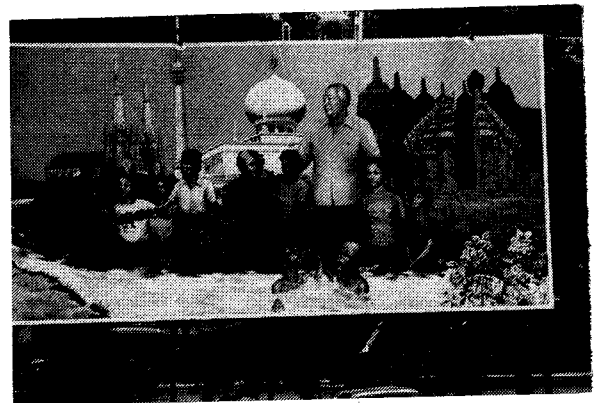
14. Sukarno's Youth monument, often called "Hot-Plate Harry" and "The Pizza Man" by resident ex-patriates; Jakarta.



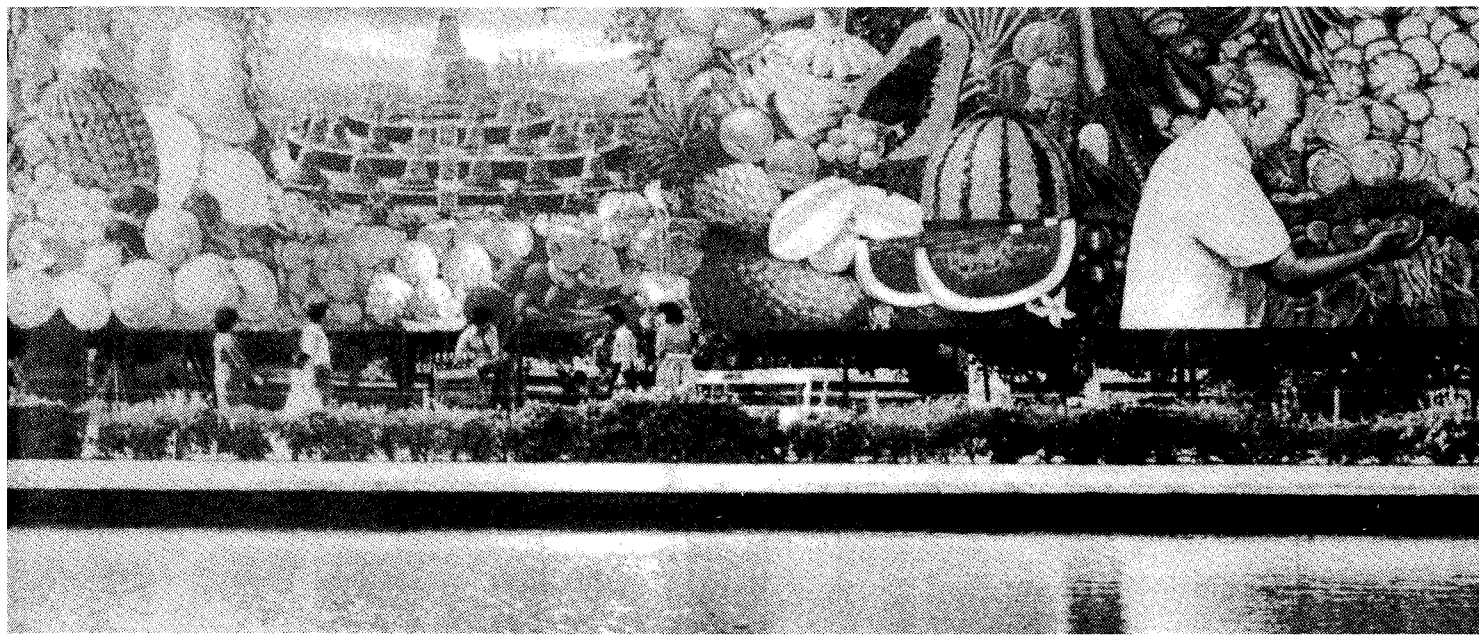
16. The Irian Jaya Liberation Monument, erected to commemorate the incorporation of that once-Dutch territory into independent Indonesia; Jakarta.



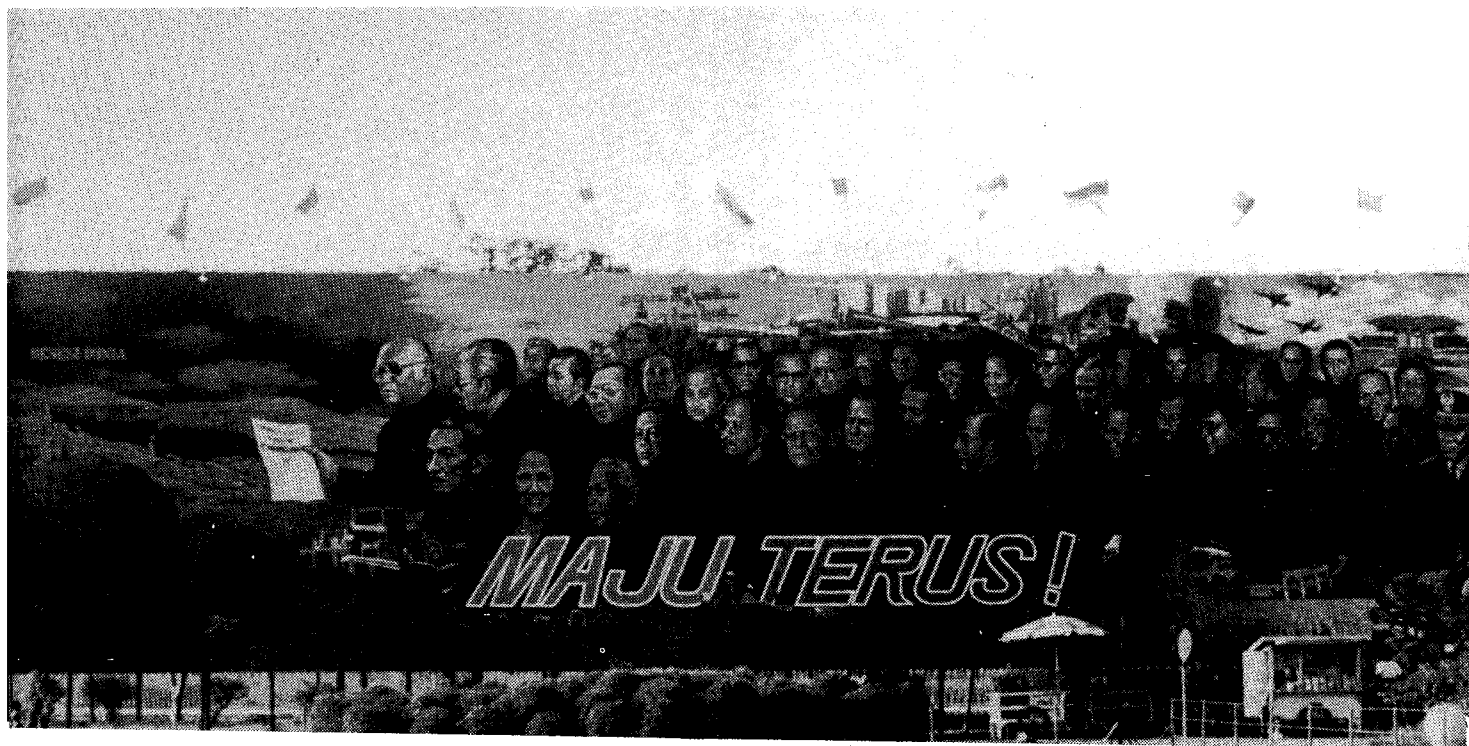
15. Hanuman, the Monkey God, kneels atop of arc of concrete. Like Youth, he provides a home for birds. Locals and foreigners alike usually call him "The 7-Up Man," a reference to his high position and the shape of his concrete platform; Jakarta



- 17.A New Order billboard, depicting President Suharto, clad in a casual sarung, guarding a group of multi-ethnic, multi-religious Indonesian children. The Buddhist Borobudur, a Hindu Balinese split gate, a mosque and the National Cathedral form the backdrop. Displayed in Jakarta during the 1983 National Day celebrations the board is about 10 meters(33 feet) high.



18. President Suharto inspects the nation's Produce as viewers are advised to "Stop Import"; Borobudur is inset; a billboard erected for National Day celebrations, 1983; Jakarta. 10 meters (33 feet) high.



19. President Suharto leads a bevy of Indonesian political leaders onwards to Progress, past the dark clouds of the Resesi Dunia (World Recession). Maju Terus! ( 'Keep Progressing or Keep Developing)is used here as a sort of battle cry. Erected for National Day 1983 in Jakarta. 10 meters (33 feet) high

envoys arrive in Jakarta, smaller portrait boards are erected on the main streets of the capital, dual boards of Suharto and his guest if the latter is unmarried or alone, quad boards including the foreign spouse and Ibu Tien if the guest is accompanied.

Indonesian commercial billboards are similar to their political cousins in size and realism. Few, however, are hand painted. Instead, the airbrush is the most common commercial billboard tool. The process is laborious, involving the projection of the required image (usually a photograph or printed poster) onto paper, tracing the image onto a prepared aluminum board, then airbrushing the required tones, gradations and flat areas through templates cut from newspapers and masking tape. The Thai grid method is rarely used. A single 4x8 meter billboard may take several weeks to complete. Larger boards, 30x40, may take a month or more. An Indonesia-wide campaign with thirty or more billboards distributed to Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi and other major islands may take four to six months to produce. Understandably, the most successful billboard companies--Aries, Gergeet, Nagamas and Billboard Indonesia--charge high prices for their work and are often booked months in advance. Square meter charges range from 45,000 rupiah to 55,000 rupiah (\$46.00 to \$56.00). A single large board, 10x20 meters (33x66 feet), could easily run 11,000,000 rupiah (\$11,300). The high initial costs are somewhat balanced, however, by the long life of Indonesian billboards. Unlike United States billboard ads, which often run for only a month or two, Indonesian commercial billboards usually remain unchanged for six months to a year or more. Products advertised are basics--soap, margarine, toothpaste--and low cost luxury items like hair tonic and deodorant. The Indonesian market is conservative and brand-loyal; most products benefit from the long exposure. Some Indonesian city dwellers benefit more directly, by renting out their land for billboard scaffoldings. Renters in Jakarta can make as much as 35,000 rupiah (\$36.00) per square meter of billboard space per year, or as much as two million rupiah (\$2000) per year for an average-sized board (sixty square meters). Not bad for a country where the average per capita income is around \$380 per annum.

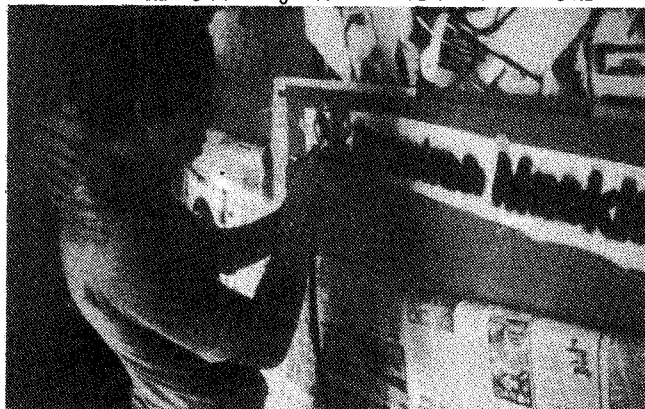
Indonesian movie boards are smaller in size than either commercial or political billboards; 4x8 meters is usually the maximum. Few last longer than a month. The style is Hindi, the technique broad and gaudy--gaudier even than Thai cinema work, with plenty of sweaty reflections, glint and gloss. Day-glow colors are an Indonesian favorite. The boards are mounted over cinema facades or on trucks that run through the countryside and city streets, blaring the latest Bioskop (moviehouse) offering from roof-mounted speakers.

Malaysia and Singapore are the only two Southeast Asian nations that do much billboard printing, painting only their movie billboards, and these, crudely. The disparity between painting and printing here is the result of culture and history. Long on the cultural periphery, the Malay Peninsula never developed the extensive art culture long extant in Thailand and Indonesia. The Malay arts were decorative, sophisticated and refined like those of their neighbors, but, alas, confined to the small, riverine sultanates that dotted the Peninsular coastline, pockets of culture. The Portugese in the sixteenth century and the Dutch in the seventeenth

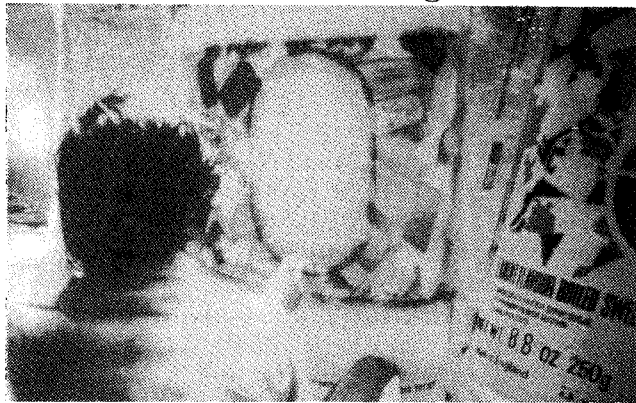




20. An Indonesian commercial billboard on a Jakarta pedestrian overpass. The tag line reads "A healthy Day is a Blue Band Day." Blue Band is a brand of Margarine marketed by Unilever. This board is some 50 meters (165 feet) long.



21. Spray painting through a newspaper mask; Aries Studio; Jakarta.



22. Airbrushing a facsimile vegetable can; Aries Studio; Jakarta.



23. An airbrushed instant noodles package facsimile; Aries Studio; Jakarta



24. Detail of National Cassette player logo. Even on this 4 meter board, a 10cm (4inch) logo is carefully rendered. Aries Studio

century made the first colonial inroads to the Peninsula, vanquishing in turn Malacca, once the most glorious of the Malay sultanates. It was the British, however, who, three centuries later, finally incorporated the Peninsula and Singapore into their Empire, administering the region, more or less as a unit, from India (Singapore, along with Malacca and the island of Penang were Crown Colonies; the Peninsula was a hodge-podge of Federated and Un-Federated Malay States). Education was never a high priority in the British Empire; art education less so. The colonial educational system introduced to the region in the early years of the twentieth century, basis for the current Malaysian and Singaporean educational systems, gave little emphasis to the arts. Contemporary education follows suit. Thus, by the mid-twentieth century neither Malaysia nor Singapore had developed the Western-style painting traditions already evolving in neighboring Indonesia and Thailand.

The earliest known group of painters on the Peninsula were not indigenous Malaysians but Chinese immigrants who arrived in the 1940's. Trained in the style of traditional Chinese painting taught at the academies of Amoy and Shanghai, they practiced their art in Malaysia and Singapore, but gained few adherents. It was not until 1951 that a Malaysian, Tay Hoo Tat, received a formal European art education. Mohamed Hussein Enas, the Peninsula's best known realist portrait painter of this period, was an Indonesian, also trained abroad. The only art institution of any note to develop in this early period was the Nanyang School, in Singapore. Government art patronage did not come until many years later, long after Independence.

Independence did come (for Malaysia in 1957; for Singapore, after a brief period of unification with Malaysia, in 1965), as did patronage. More and more Malaysians and Singaporeans traveled abroad for education; others developed their talents at home. Today, Malaysia and Singapore have no dearth of talented artfolk; internationally renowned painters like Ibrahim Hussein and Chuah Thean Teng are proof of that. Both countries also have exceptional cartoonists; Malaysia's Lat and Singapore's Morgan Chua (now art director at the Hong Kong-based Far Eastern Economic Review) are well known inside the region and out. In the last decade or so, Malaysia has also seen the rise of a whole class of local Malay cartoonists working in a newly emerging class of Malay language, MAD magazine-style periodicals. Much of the work challenges the American original.

What Malaysia and Singapore still lack, however, is a strong tradition of realistic illustration that might serve as a springboard for quality, realistic billboard painting. Few modern Malaysian or Singaporean fine artists are realists, and the region has but one major realistic illustrator, the airbrush artist Stan Lee.

Few art schools emphasize realism in their curricula. The MARA Institute of Technology offers the best practical art training around, but coursework here is designed to train graphic designers and art directors (as well as other applied art practitioners), not illustrators. The Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) offers fine art instruction, and has fairly complete art history training. Studio art classes here, however, begin where Impressionism left off; emphasis is on design, color, expression and concept; light, form, shadow, perspective and technical excellence are touched on but briefly, the baggage of the past, the straightjacket of the salons. Local arts, like batik, also receive short shrift.

Graduates of USM go on to teach in primary and secondary schools, carrying their university-trained prejudices with them throughout the system. Graduates of teacher training colleges are little better. This attitude prevails at all educational levels, parried only by private academies like Nanyang in Singapore and the Malaysian Institute of Art in Kuala Lumpur. These, under-funded and ill-equipped, have little clout. Nor can most cinematic billboard painters afford the luxury of an Academy art education, to say little of the more prestigious University fare. Most billboard painters learn by apprenticing at one of the movie house studios, following the styles practiced by their seniors. Occasionally, a talented billboard painter emerges from this system. Most, however, are mediocre. Whether the grid or projection enlargement system is used, likenesses are often inaccurate, brushwork hurried, coloring naive. Commercial billboard studios have more lenient deadlines and can produce better work. In fact, recently some high quality airbrush billboards have been produced, with detail approaching photo-realism. With the rise of high quality printing, however, the future of painted Malaysian and Singaporean billboards looks uncertain.

Once upon a time, all billboards in Malaysia and Singapore were hand painted. Labor costs were relatively low in the past and printing technology crude; no alternatives were available. Since Malaysian and Singaporean Independence, however, both countries have evolved into archetypal consumer societies, posed for industrial takeoff. They now have the good fortune of being the two most developed nations in Southeast Asia, with the highest GNP per capita, the most sophisticated advertising, the best photographers, the most advanced print technology. Malaysian and Singaporean printing is thus a happy tale, a story of talented art directors, artists and print-men that yearly win clutches of awards at international ad fetes like Cannes and Cleo. Rising labor costs and the inadequate painting skills of local billboard artists make printing a more desirable alternative, except in the tight-deadline, low-output cinema. Year by year, printed boards become more common, filling most of the new spaces built by local media agencies, like Pearl and Dean.

Printing does pose some problems for equatorial advertisers, however. Printing depends on ink and ink fades quickly in the harsh tropical environment. Four-color boards, exposed to the direct sun, are bleached to blue-and-white ghosts in a matter of weeks. Even sun-resistant inks last but a month or two. Thus, printed boards must usually be replaced often to retain full color saturation. Moreover, since printed boards are capital intensive, clients must have the wherewithal to mount large campaigns if economies of scale are to cover the initial costs of color separations and printing plates. Only large, international advertising agencies like J. Walter Thompson, Leo Burnett and Lintas, or established local firms like Johan Design Associates have the reputation and talent to attract such big money clients. Smaller firms, smaller clients must rely on painting.

Political billboards usually rely on verbal messages in Malaysia. Simple declaratives are the most common fare: Discipline and Harmony, Courtesy Is Our Way Of Life, Leadership By Example, Drug Trafficking is a Capital Offense are typical examples of this style. Hand lettering is sufficiently advanced in Malaysia for either printing or painting to suffice. Those billboards that make use of visual buttressing (cartoons or graphics) are invariably printed.

Singapore has few political billboards, but more than makes up for this lack with an overabundance of printed political posters. Usually bold imperatives with photographs or cartoon visuals, the posters command the citizen to Speak Mandarin! Make Courtesy Our Way of Life (the Malaysian version one-ups this directive)! Keep Our Nation Clean! Such insistent messages are indicative of the authoritarian tendencies so apparent in this small, island nation.

One other Asian nation, Japan, offers an instructive comparison with the Southeast Asian billboard complex. Like Thailand and Indonesia, Japan developed a sophisticated art culture long before the first contacts with the West. And, like Thailand (but not Indonesia), Japan was never colonized, surviving through diplomacy and modernization. After the Meiji Restoration, the Japanese quickly adapted to things Western, including Western art. Lithography and etching are the best known examples of this successful assimilation: the Japanese graphic arts, revitalized by Western contact, are now some of the most creative and innovative on earth. The Japanese also took to Western painting; though traditional styles remained vital, the Japanese developed a complex of Western-style painting and realistic illustration now much admired throughout the world. Japanese billboard art, like that of the Thais, benefited from this exposure.

Like Malaysia and Singapore (but unlike Thailand and Indonesia), more so in fact, Japanese modernization brought in its wake a high GNP per capita, consumerism, sophisticated advertising, high-quality photography and printing and rising labor costs. In time, hand-painted billboards became uneconomic; printed billboards became the norm, though in Japan, both photography and illustration were used. Only in cinema, where tight deadlines, small output and the need for vernacular type remained constants, did painting survive as the prime billboard medium. Thus, today, like Malaysia and Singapore, Japan prints most commercial billboards but sticks to painting in the cinema; like Thailand and Indonesia, however, the painting is realistic, accurate, precise.

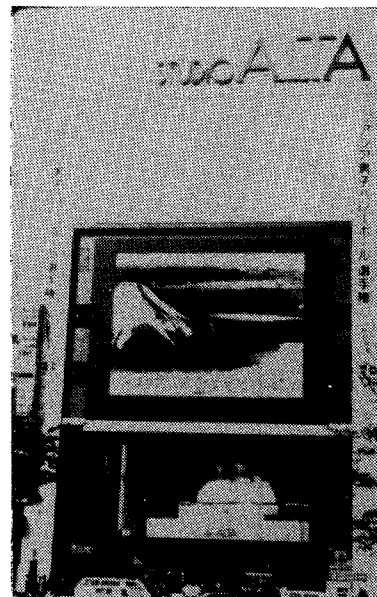
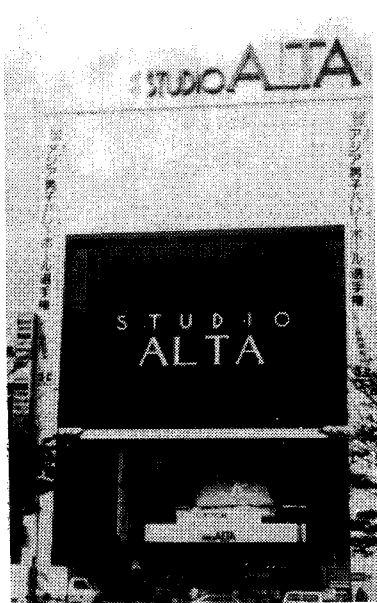
No Southeast nation has yet matched the Japanese in their most current billboard innovation; The twenty meter high audio-visual video screens that trumpet ads across Shinjuku in downtown Tokyo are yet to be seen in Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Singapore or Jakarta. Perhaps it is only a matter of time: Malaysians have already installed the other Japanese favorite, ceiling-mounted, closed-circuit shopping mall television sets.

Billboards show no sign of disappearing from the Southeast Asian landscape, No First Lady has yet called for a Campaign of National Beautification, leveling the billboards in her wake. No city council has determined them a nuisance and ordered the boards razed. No advertiser, no politician, no movie house operator has yet found a better way to get his message seen, cheaply and effectively. The billboard will remain in Southeast Asia, shaping the attitudes, the beliefs, the cultures, the arts, the economies of the region, a mold of society, and its mirror.

Sincerely,



Bryn Barnard



25. Video billboard in Shinjuku, Tokyo, Japan. Incorporating both audio and visual modes, the board runs rock video songs, news and advertisements.



27. A printed military recruitment board in Roppongi, Tokyo, Japan.

26. Two hand-painted cinema boards in Shibuya, Tokyo, Japan.

List of Illustrations

1. Thai cinema board, Bangkok; BEB
2. Indonesian cinema board, Puncak; BEB
3. Malaysian cinema board, Tampoi; BEB
4. Singaporean cinema board, Singapore; BEB
5. Indian cinema board, New Delhi; BEB
6. Thai billboard underdrawing, Bangkok; BEB
7. Thai billboard underdrawing/painting palimpsest; BEB
8. Face painter, Bangkok; BEB
9. Painting with a house brush, Bangkok; BEB
10. Painting in edge lighting, Bangkok; BEB
11. Cartoon bodies, Bangkok; BEB
12. Finished cinema board, Bangkok; BEB
13. Thai detergent box, Bangkok; BEB
14. Sukarno's Youth; sketch; magic marker on bristol board; BEB
15. Sukarno's Hanuman; sketch; magic marker on bristol board; BEB
16. Sukarno's Irian Jaya Liberation; sketch; magic marker on bristol board; BEB
17. New Order billboard, Jakarta; BEB
18. Suharto and produce; Jakarta; BEB
19. Suharto and politicians, Jakarta; BEB
20. Blue Band margarine board; original of soccer player painted by BEB for Citra: Lintas Advertising Jakarta; billboard by Aries Studio, Jakarta.
21. Spray painting, Jakarta; BEB
22. Airbrushing, Jakarta; BEB
23. Airbrushed noodles, Jakarta; BEB
24. Detail of National logo, Jakarta; BEB
25. Video billboards, Tokyo; BEB
26. Cinema billboards, Tokyo; BEB
27. Recruitment billboard, Tokyo; BEB

Sources

- Anderson, Benedict "Notes on Contemporary Indonesian Political Communication" in Indonesia (1974).
- Holt, Claire Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change. Ithaca: Cornell University Press; 1967
- Khewhok, Sanit; Curator, National Gallery of Thailand, Bangkok: personal communication

-----

Received in Hanover 1/16/84