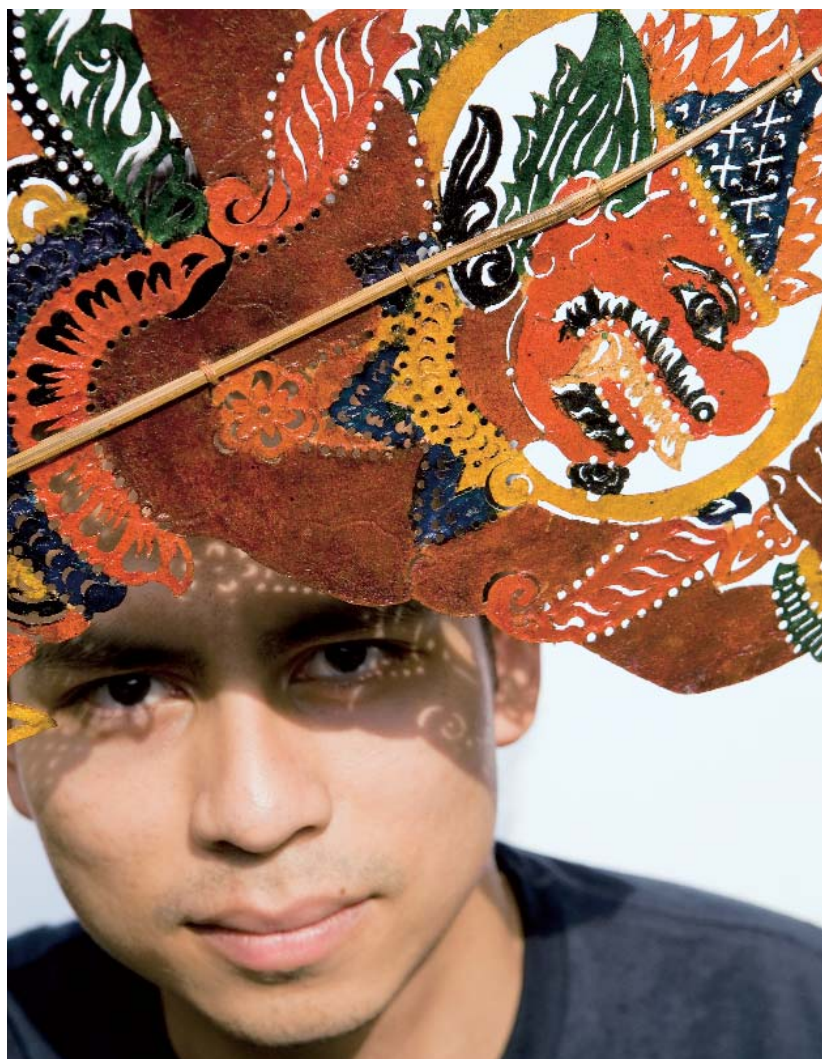


ART SCENE

BY JENNIFER GAMPELL



SHADOW PLAY *Wayang kulit* puppeteer Fahmi Fadzil, above.
Left: A notice board at the Five Arts Centre.

Alternative Reality

From experimental theater to pioneering choreography, Kuala Lumpur is finding its place on the regional arts map

“THE ARTS DARE THE MALAYSIAN PUBLIC AND YOUNG

gallery people to imagine a future beyond what they’re told they can be or do,” says Pang Khee Teik, the feisty programming impresario at Kuala Lumpur’s Annexe Gallery Studio Theatre. Pang is one of a handful of creative young Malaysians dedicated to putting the city’s alternative art scene on the map—a map too often reserved for works coming out of larger Asian capitals. But today K.L. nurtures one of the most vibrant (albeit small) artistic communities in the region. And if current trends are

anything to go by, there’s a lot to look forward to.

Whether you call it avant-garde, experimental, underground, or alternative, the city’s art scene is nothing if not eclectic. It currently converges at the Annexe, which, on its Facebook page, is described by Pang as “the next stage in the evolution of Kuala Lumpur.” Opened less than two years ago on the top floors of a renovated low-rise behind historic Central Market, the funky space is a hive of activity.

The Annexe’s three interconnected galleries and studio are rented out—or sometimes donated—for contemporary programs in the visual arts, theater, dance, film, music, poetry, fashion, and book launches. Held over two days earlier this year, “Collision Weekend” exemplified the type of events the place is attracting. The lineup included an art bazaar and alternative book fair, a Chinese indie music revival and Malaysian rock tribute, various dance workshops, and a series of forums and

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presentations for World Press Freedom Day. When I attended the late-May opening of “Out of Line,” an exhibition of works by 15 young Malaysian artists, numerous people in the crowd enthused about the quantity and diversity of Annexe events, which can sometimes include four or five activities in a single week.

If the Annexe is the physical crossroads of the K.L. arts scene, Kakiseni.com is its counterpart in cyberspace. Given the serious lack of print-media alternatives across the city, culture mavens in Kuala Lumpur rely on the Internet to keep themselves up to date about unusual or experimental art events. *Off The Edge*, a magazine described by locals as the city’s answer to *The New Yorker*, has a limited distribution, while at the other end of the spectrum, *Time Out K.L.* isn’t exactly a paragon of cultural edginess. Launched in 2001, Kakiseni remains the only online or print resource dedicated exclusively to the arts in Malaysia. In addition to listing both mainstream and offbeat events in K.L. and Penang, the comprehensive English-language Web site features articles, reviews, and profiles of up-and-coming artists.

Like many of his contemporaries, Pang, who headed up Kakiseni from 2004 until he became program director for the Annexe in 2006, considers the late Krishen Jit and his wife Marion d’Cruz to be the parents of Malaysian experimental art. In fact, Pang believes that he is where he is today thanks to a chain of serendipitous circumstances that began with a “Choreography for Non Choreographers” workshop he took with dancer and choreographer d’Cruz a number of years back.

Born in 1939, Krishen Jit enjoyed a prodigious theater career as a director, actor, writer, reviewer, teacher, and scholar. Until his death in 2005, Jit encouraged experimentation with traditional and contemporary theater, while also using the arts to bridge Malaysia’s deep linguistic and socio-cultural divisions. In 1984, he and d’Cruz founded the Five Arts Centre collective, which today continues its pioneering work in drama, dance, and children’s theater, among other activities.

Directly or indirectly, many modern Malaysian artists have been inspired by Five Arts. Actor, director, and playwright Namron is one of the rare experimentalists in contemporary Malay-language theater, and credits much of his success to Jit. “I have a problem with rules,” says Namron, who goes by a single name. “Social and political rules make you feel uncomfortable. But so do theater rules.” Disgruntled with theatrical practices in his native state of Perlis, Namron was among Jit’s first students at the new National Arts Academy



CREATIVE ENERGY **Pentas Project founder Loh Kok Man**, above. **Top: The Annexe is the current nexus of K.L.’s alternative art scene.**

in K.L. in 1994. “Krishen inspired me to do more and be experimental,” he recalls. In 2000, Namron started Alternative Stage as a platform for experimental small-cast plays with sociopolitical themes. One of his first shows was *DeDe*, a deconstructed Shakespearean dialogue between Brutus and Cassius from *Julius Caesar*.

For his Project Wayang, shadow puppeteer Fahmi Fadzil, also from Five Arts, contemporizes the traditional art of *wayang kulit* using everyday objects instead of leather puppets. At one K.L. branch of Borders bookstore, Fadzil recently presented what he calls a “Wayang Buku,” moderating an imaginary dialogue between two books: a memoir by



Malaysia’s former prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, and an anthropological tract penned by a British colonialist.

Mark Teh joined the Five Arts collective after graduating from high school in 2000, and today works in documentary theater. His performances use texts from official government documents, academic treatises, and newspaper interviews. To connect with younger generations, Teh tours his performances at colleges and universities, as well as at the Annexe—in October he’ll stage a documentary to mark the 60th anniversary of the start of the Malayan Emergency, a 12-year war of independence led

by Malayan Communist Party guerillas.

Trained as an engineer and graphic designer in Canada, Yap Sau Bin switched gears in 2002 and founded the Rumah Air Panas (“House of Hot Water”) with a group of friends, hoping to develop it into something similar to the Five Arts Centre. Yap rented rooms in a small suburban house for performance and studio space, but was forced to abandon the address in 2005 due to organizational and financial difficulties—a common problem for struggling K.L. artists. His encyclopedic knowledge of the local art scene stems from his ongoing MappingKLArtSpace project, which showed at the 2007 Venice Biennale. Using Google Maps, Yap documents art spaces dating from the 1970s to the present.

One of the more recent art collectives



established in K.L. is the Pentas Project, formed in 2005 by artist Loh Kok Man with the intention of encouraging dialogue and creative collaboration among the city's often disparate Chinese-, Malay-, and English-language performers. In 2006, Loh joined Namron and Jo Kukathas (who founded the groundbreaking Instant Café Theatre in 1989) on *Break-ing (Ji Po) Ka Si Pe Cah*, a mostly nonverbal performance that's been staged in K.L. and Singapore. He also collaborates on other conceptual

stage projects with contemporary *butoh* (an avant-garde Japanese dance form) performer and set designer Caecar Chong. In their 2007 production *The Lost and the Ecliptic*, the stage set itself was a performer, animated by light and sound. Some accuse Chong and his *butoh* mentor Lee Swee Keong of being too traditional, yet their shows have drawn official disapproval in K.L. because of the G-strings they boldly don on the stage. Undeterred, Chong organized Malaysia's first-ever *butoh* dance festival this July, which included workshops, performances, and a *butoh* jam.

Despite the volume and scope of their output, most people in the industry don't have the luxury of creating art full time, and have taken on other work to pay the bills. Yap, Namron, Loh, and Teh teach at various K.L. universities and art academies, and Namron relies on the occasional movie or TV role. Fadzil runs a design studio. And in addition to dancing, teaching, photography, and running a child-focused playhouse, Chong also works in a small design firm.

Finding suitable and affordable venues is another perennial problem for the K.L.

arts community, though more spaces are showcasing alternative works than before. Valentine Willie Fine Art, the city's premier private gallery, focuses on important contemporary regional talent and also showcases experimental art seven times a year in its Project Room. The new curator at the government-run Galeri Petronas is also warming to experimental art, exhibiting pieces from an increasing number of cutting-edge artists like Lee I-Lann, who recently sold one of her trenchant digital photomontages for US\$38,000 at Christie's Hong Kong. Unfortunately, a financial Sword of Damocles today hangs over the Annexe, whose corporate owner requires a return on investment. But this is nothing the K.L. art community hasn't seen before.

"You can always transfer a buzz to a different location," says indie filmmaker and author Amir Muhammed, who took to writing full time after two of his documentaries—*The Last Communist* and *Village People Radio Show*—were banned in Malaysia. "Before the Annexe, the place where people used to hang out was underground, literally [in the tiny Actor's Studio Box, which flooded in 2003]. Find other avenues—that's what keeps things interesting." ☺



SETTING THE STAGE From top: Pang Khee Teik at the Annexe, which the program director describes as "the next stage in the evolution of Kuala Lumpur"; a *butoh* production by dancer and set designer Caecar Chong.