

# CURRENT PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA RESEARCH



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# **Reframing the ASEAN discourse by way of participatory photography: The Manila pilot project**

*Kristian Jeff Cortez Agustin*

## **Abstract**

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is known for its official photographs, taken during its annual summits and regular meetings. Since its founding 50 years ago, the 10-country bloc has invested in community- and identity-building by promoting its vision of a regional identity that is common or unique to Southeast Asians. In the last 10 years, three big surveys have been conducted to account for the public perception and recognition of ASEAN integration; however, what the data merely show is the lack of agreement and clarity among ordinary ASEAN citizens regarding the notion of “regional identity”. Through participatory photography, this visual essay aims to put into perspective what Southeast Asian locals might feel about this issue, starting with a pilot project conducted in Manila. From November 2016 to April 2017, a total of 12 participants participated in the Manila pilot project by taking photographs and taking part in several workshops for the purpose of critically reflecting on their “ASEAN identity”. Collectively, their photographs serve as a testament to how participation in the region-building efforts of the ASEAN is as relevant and valuable as the official discourse itself. Select photographs are featured in this visual essay to demonstrate how the participants found their own voice by way of collaborating and engaging in what Paulo Freire called “we think”.

**Keywords:** Southeast Asia, regional identity, participation, photography, photovoice



## 1. Introduction: The visual construction of identity in contemporary ASEAN discourse

Donned in their best diplomatic outfits or national attire, Southeast Asian state leaders would traditionally shake hands with each other while forming a human chain with their arms crossed and hands linked – this is how the ASEAN annual summits or official meetings are best pictured – signifying the much touted “ASEAN handshake” and conveying “One Vision, One Identity, One Community” (the official ASEAN motto). Simply *googling* the keywords “ASEAN”, “ASEAN summit” or “ASEAN handshake” would almost always lead to online images of this iconic picture photographed over the years. This “official” tradition has undoubtedly permeated the public consciousness for decades now by way of the media, especially international news agencies; thus, it has become an undeniably visual rhetoric that has helped communicate the affairs of ASEAN, as much as its aspirations, ideals and policies to its publics and stakeholders alike.

Despite these official photographs being highly iconic and widely recognizable, the sense of regional identity is not always shared among the citizens of the 10 ASEAN member countries, as revealed by three region-wide public opinion polls, which were only conducted in the last 10 years: (1) the ASEAN Foundation’s *Attitudes and Awareness Towards ASEAN: Findings of a Ten-nation Survey* (Thompson & Thianthai, 2008); (2) The Straits Times’ *Are We A Community?* online survey (Phua & Chin, 2015); and (3) the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies’ *Do Young People Know ASEAN? Update of a Ten-nation Survey* (Thompson, Thianthai & Thuzar, 2016). For instance, while the 2014 survey accounted for the increase in public awareness or “we-feeling” regarding the ASEAN integration since the first-ever survey was conducted in 2007, comparing the data between the two surveys also confirmed the need to prioritize identity-building efforts that involve the general ASEAN publics (Thompson, Thianthai & Thuzar, 2016: 182-183). The 2015 survey, on the other hand, delivered seemingly contradictory results concerning the question of a “common identity” (Phua & Chin, 2015), with 65.9 per cent of the respondents identifying with people in ASEAN and 52.7 per cent disagreeing with the idea that people in ASEAN share a common identity. While these surveys did not necessarily deal with visual culture, they are indicative of how an “imagined community”, borrowing from Anderson (2006), tends to “imagine” itself.

As exemplified by the iconic picture of the ASEAN’s annual summits, it can be argued that official photographs – which I also refer to as “official images” here – generally and constantly promote a sense of “regional identity” that often lacks public involvement or grassroots representation. Generally speaking, these images only reflect a top-down approach to Southeast Asian identity construction; the

**Figure 1.** © Martin Vidanes (2017). Caption by Martin Vidanes: “A foreigner seated alone by the bar, in a busy restaurant where patrons are enjoying ‘authentic’ Japanese food– or as authentic as we can get in Manila. Isn’t it funny that while we belong to ASEAN, we are all connected by something that is not ours? Something we were taught? Something we didn’t ask for?”



photographs only focus on those who are in power. Moreover, they communicate an official discourse that celebrates the notion of regional identity as something that is harmonizing or unifying, and which does not leave much space for critique. And while online platforms and social media have been instrumental in the increase of photographs taken and uploaded by ordinary citizens – which I consider “unofficial images” – the visual discourse emerging from these social networks often resembles the official discourse if one were to compare the official images with the thematic content of crowd-sourced photographs (Agustin 2017: 40-41); for example, the Facebook page formerly and unofficially called “ASEAN Community” (created in 2011 by a group of students from Thailand to informally raise awareness of ASEAN) is now officially the “ASEAN Youth Organization” page, which continues to promote “ASEANality”, which started as an online photography contest (ASEAN, 2013; Planet Foto Indonesia, 2013). In other words, despite picturing everyday life, grassroots concerns and ordinary citizens, these unofficial

photographs echo the harmonizing tendencies of the official discourse and lack critical reflection about ASEAN.

For a geopolitical bloc that has prevailed for 50 years, despite the many economic and political crises it has faced, perhaps returning to the question of identity is not only long overdue but also more relevant than ever. Thus, this visual essay, a critical and reflective work as posited by Banks & Zeitlyn (2015: 139-141) and Grady (2008: 29-30), pursues an enquiry into how photography might help in re-constructing or challenging the notion of regional identity in the case of ASEAN.

## 2. ASEAN identity construction by way of participatory photography

I chose participatory photography as a method for engaging locals and exploring with them the various ways they might critically reflect on their supposed “ASEAN identity”. Often, ordinary citizens are left out of the big picture that ASEAN wants to project; they often play the role of mere spectators of the regionalization process, despite the ASEAN discourse invoking their supposed “collective identity” as members of this regional community. It is as if some members of ASEAN publics are experiencing what Freire once called a “culture of silence” (1985: 72-73; 1970: 97), which brings about a culture of dependency instead of empowerment among general Southeast Asian publics. Thus, borrowing from Habermas (1970: 144-146), the public’s lack of communicative power or “voice” might impede mutual understanding and promote social inequalities and repression. Through increased levels of participation, society at large might either experience critical consciousness or what Freire would call “conscientization” (1985: 160) which, in turn, could contribute to what Habermas (1989: 118) envisioned as the “enlightenment of the political public sphere” by way of democratic participation. It is, therefore, important that the methodology for this project is a participatory process.

Participatory photography can entail a process of collective, critical and reflexive analyses (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015: 145; Rose, 2016: 331-330), as it is a way for individual participants to progress from “I think” to “we think”, or in Freire’s (1973: 137) words:

The thinking Subject cannot think alone. In the act of thinking about the object s/he cannot think without the co-participation of another Subject. There is no longer an “I think” but “we think.” It is the “we think” which establishes the “I think” and not the contrary. This co-participation of the Subjects in the act of thinking is communication. Thus the object is not the end of the act of communicating, but the mediator of communication.

By inviting ordinary citizens to this project and empowering them throughout the process, perhaps they could find the leeway to express themselves when engaging in the “we think” about their identity as interpellated subjects of the ASEAN discourse. In a way, the project is an opportunity for them, as members of broader ASEAN publics, to exercise their right to express themselves and become involved in the politics and transformation of society in relation to ASEAN. Of course, despite the Manila pilot project’s ambition, we should remain modest, and not overestimate the capacity of one project to immediately alter a very well propagated identity discourse.

Guided by photo-elicitation methodologies, as elucidated by Banks and Zeitlyn (2015: 89-93), Blackman (2007: 42-48), Pink (2013: 96-101) and Rose (2016: 314-332), I designed and organized a participatory photography project in Manila, which ran from November 2016 to April 2017. Following the ideal group size of 5-15 participants recommended by Blackman (2007: 46), I invited a total of 12 participants – a peer group of young professionals, male and female, aged 26 to 33, all of whom have travelled to at least 2 countries in ASEAN – by way of snowball sampling (Kenney 2009: 25) into the project. I also organized 4 major whole-day workshops and several smaller meet-ups, which the participants made good use of, to exchange information and learn more about current events in line with ASEAN’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary activities and events held in Manila (as the Philippines was the current chair and host). We also decided to have a Facebook group where we could continue with the exchange.

The three major surveys (Thompson, Thianthai & Thuzar 2016; Phua & Chin 2015; Thompson & Thianthai 2008), mentioned above, helped me formulate guide questions for the participants. For instance, as I was more interested in the visual culture aspect of community-building and identity construction, I formulated general questions such as “Do you feel that you are a citizen of ASEAN?”, “How do you feel about this identity?”, “Do you identify with other Southeast Asians and do you feel like you share with them a common identity?” and “What similarities might you have with other Southeast Asians?”, among others.

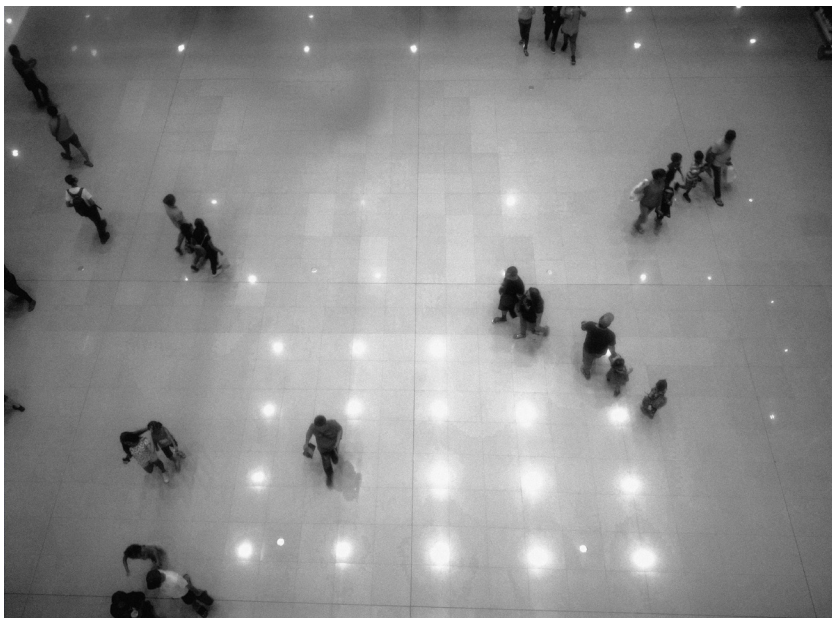
By then inviting the participants to use their camera phones in responding to the initial questions above – and to several more follow-up questions that we together formulated and raised during our workshops – they were able to use photography effectively in putting forward their own way of envisioning and picturing ASEAN, which manifested differences and similarities from one another. I observed throughout the whole process their way of agreeing and arguing with each other, which helped each of them shape not only their individual opinions but also their collective understanding of what their “ASEAN identity” might mean. In effect, again borrowing from Freire (1970), by way of producing photographs, the participants do not only produce images as text (i.e. the “words”) but the act of producing

these images and, at the same time, exercising action and reflection, contributes to “transform[ing] the world” (Freire, 1970: 75) for these participants. This approach allowed the invited participants to “put [their] idea[s] into practice” (Kenney, 2009: 97). More importantly, participatory photography helped them, as representatives of general ASEAN publics, to bring their own experiences and personal contexts (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015: 133; Pink, 2013: 95) into the research process.

The specific photographs selected to be included in this visual essay were also the result of a concluding workshop with the participants, where they were personally involved in the captioning, curating and editing of all the photographs

### 3. Photographing ASEAN

*Figure 2. © Detsy Uy (2017). Caption by Detsy Uy: “The easiest way to explain ‘Southeast Asia’ is just to point to it on the map, where concerned countries lie geographically close to each other. This is not different from how ASEAN is trying to invoke an ‘imagined community’. If we look more closely – be it at any Southeast Asian country – the convenience of mapping the region is disrupted by a more fragmented experience of people going their own way and just minding their own business. Simply put, we do not really consider ourselves part of ASEAN in everything that we do.”*





***Figure 3. © Shekinah Pensica (2017). Caption by Shekinah Pensica: “I took this photo on my way to the office. It’s an everyday situation for commuters in Manila and we get so used to it and sometimes fed up of the stress, going to and from work, that there’s no point in trying to remember it visually. These ways of transportation are similar to those of our neighbouring countries in ASEAN. We see a lot of these similarities among us but achieving regionality seems to be a tad out of reach.”***





*Figure 4 (on the left). © Jessica Buen (2017). Caption by Jessica Buen: “Although this photo was taken in Manila, for other major cities of ASEAN this image is not unusual. Conspicuous electric cables often draw my attention and this is something that I find interestingly common among Southeast Asian cities.”*

*Figure 5 (below). © Erick Divina (2017). Caption by Erick Divina: “I feel like ASEAN is merely a marketplace that allows us to exchange our goods with one another. At the end of the day, it seems as if it is only driven by commercialism. Perhaps we should remind ourselves that usually when we go to a marketplace, we are in search of things that are of value.”*





*Figure 6. © Beverly Lumbera (2017). Caption by Beverly Lumbera: “This is a picture I took inside the train on my way to university. It gets stickier during rush hour. Sometimes, I don’t feel like I’m a citizen of my own country because I have no space here. How can I be an ASEAN citizen when a lot of the time it feels like I’m not even Filipino?”*



## 4. Conclusion

This visual essay hopes to argue, as exemplified by the photographs of the participants, that photographing ASEAN should also be a participatory exercise, in order for it to be relevant. While the notion of a regional identity has always been concomitant with the official ASEAN discourse, it is refreshing to see a more local perspective – framed and nuanced by the participants themselves. It is even more revealing to see how the photographs somewhat demonstrated what the latest of the three big surveys surmised:

We can expect that as the ASEAN Community project, especially the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), becomes a more concrete reality, there may be more dissension over the value of ASEAN. (Thompson, Thianthai & Thuzar, 2016: 183).

Perhaps, this “dissension” is not only an important reality that ASEAN integration is facing but also a challenge in itself that ASEAN must acknowledge and address. While the region has always hailed the “ASEAN Way”, traditionally, the region’s core principles of non-intervention and consensus-building in international relations and regionalization (Quah, 2015; Cockerham, 2010; Acharya, 2007) in its official discourse, there is no denying that the grassroots perspective is equally compelling. Amid pressing issues such as Southeast Asia’s refugee crises and territorial disputes, among others, perhaps the question of ASEAN “identities”, in the plural sense, is key to better understanding why the region is the way it is today. In the words of Kahn (1998: 2):

[N]o nation in the region can credibly claim cultural homogeneity. Everywhere, the evidence of cultural diversity is overwhelming, if only because it is forcibly brought to our attention either by political élites, or by the spokespersons for groups disempowered by race, culture, religion, gender or distance from the political centre.

Thus, the more the political centre insists on one “official image”, the more reason there is for us all to encourage participation and use our many eyes.

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### **Biography**

Kristian accomplished his Master of Arts (MA) degree in Visual Culture at the University of Westminster, London in 2012, and obtained his Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree in Interdisciplinary Art Studies from the University of the Philippines, Diliman in 2006. He joined the summer school of ECREA in 2017 while undertaking his PhD studies at Hong Kong Baptist University School of Communication. Apart from being a researcher, Kristian is also an artist specialising in calligraphy, film, photography, poetry and theatre. In 2002, he co-founded the advocacy performing arts organisation *Sirkulo ng Kabataang Artista* (Circle of Youth Artists) at the University of the Philippines, Diliman, and hitherto serves as its Artistic Director.

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