

How Did the Guggenheim's "MAP Global Art" Show Get So Lost? Blame the Bankers

by Ben Davis

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The Propeller Group, "Television Commercial for Communism," 2011-12, color video, with sound, 1 min.
(© The Propeller Group. Photo courtesy the artists)



Aung Myint, "White Stupa Doesn't Need Gold," 2010/ © Aung Myint. Photo courtesy the artist

The Guggenheim's newly opened [“No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia”](#) is a rapaciously forward-thinking show — it represents “a new curatorial model” (according to the museum's deputy director Nancy Spector) and “proposes a reevaluation of the region and its countries” (according to show curator June Yap). But in some ways, it also harkens back to the golden age of radio. Much like the [touring “BMW Guggenheim Lab” initiative](#), the “Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative” of which the new show is a part puts one in mind of such old-timey corporate-sponsored fare as [“The Bell Telephone Hour.”](#)

The Guggenheim’s meaty Gutai survey is the far more significant event, by any artistic measure. With less than 30

works, the UBS MAP exhibition is a pipsqueak, tucked away in one of those obscure side galleries of the Frank Lloyd Wright building. For the museum's bosses, however, one guesses that the UBS project is the more important endeavor, as it is above all about forging a new paradigm for enticing corporate partners.

"No Country" is the first of a trio of events funded by and co-branded with the scandal-plagued Swiss bank (which was recently [fined some \\$2 billion](#) for [its star role](#) in the mind-boggling chicanery of the LIBOR rate fixing scandal, and is currently [in the U.S. government's crosshairs for abetting tax evasion](#)). The next installment will survey Latin America, followed by the Middle East and North Africa. As it is defined here, "South and Southeast Asia" includes countries as diverse as giant India, the world's most populous democracy; Singapore, a tiny and cosmopolitan citystate that has been described as an "authoritarian democracy;" and Myanmar, only just now haltingly emerging from one of the world's longest surviving military dictatorships. This would seem to be little different from lumping the United States, Iceland, and Cuba together into some kind of regional survey. Actually, it might be worse: All in all, the region explored by "No Country" encompasses more than 2.5 billion people. That's about 40 percent of the world's total population.

The only — repeat *only* — way that the show's focus makes any kind of sense is through the corporate lens of spotlighting juicy new "emerging markets." "In the past we focused on brand positioning and hospitality," UBS sponsorship head Björn Wäspe recently [told the IEG Sponsorship Report](#), specifically with regard to the frontiers opened by the MAP initiative. "Those are still important, but today it's also important that we generate business." UBS has opened its wallet as a sponsor, and the Gugg has in return given them exactly the kind of show that is most useful to their needs.

I would feel a lot better about the show's progressive rhetoric about fighting Western-centric bias if it didn't appear to be actually about promoting whatever non-Western culture rich white guys in suits were currently courting. I mean, we're all intelligent enough to figure out why it is *these particular regions* that were chosen and not, say, Central Asia, the Caribbean, and East Africa, right? In case you missed this subtle logic, at last week's press kickoff, a UBS rep helpfully explained that the MAP project focused on "dynamic regions where UBS has significant interests." The bank, he said, would like to "influence some of the most important growth markets through the support of contemporary art." And so on.

Well, fine. What a sponsor wants is one thing; what talented professionals do with that brief is another entirely. You can sense a bit of a tug of war even in the title (“No Country”) which essentially acknowledges the absurdity of making a regional survey that encompasses such a vast section of the planet (the whole thing [researched and pulled together in less than a year!](#)) Walking the press through the show, curator June Yap stressed that each artist was chosen for the way that she or he defied national stereotypes. Yet “hybridity” and “nomadism” are their own kind of contemporary curatorial stereotypes, and the over-reliance on such tropes only raises the question it seeks to head off, which is what this particular cluster of artists is doing together at all. Essentially, the curatorial premise of “No Country” appears to be, “Huh?”

Aung Myint has a ruggedly elegant gold-flecked painting in the show. A text explains that this artist is a pioneer of contemporary art in Myanmar, and that the white dome at the center of this image depicts a historically important landmark. Singaporean artist Tang Da Wu has an odd construction incorporating strangely proportioned tables and found objects. It becomes legible only when one realizes it references a Chinese fable, and the forms are supposed to resemble a nursing baby goat. Both works are fascinating. But what's one got to do with the other? Anything? Nothing? For the average museum-goer, how can throwing them together into this kind of hodgepodge not result in reducing them to one stereotype of a common “Easternness?” Doesn't this promote exactly the Western-centric bias that we are supposedly cutting against?

Such weaknesses aren't really the artists' fault. They're just pawns here. As a show, “No Country” is both confusing and underwhelming — but there are fine individual works within it. The Vietnam-based Propeller Group's project for which they commissioned a marketing firm to create a video to help them rebrand Communism won't be new to anyone who saw last year's “The Ungovernables” at the New Museum, but it's a clever work. Thai artist [Navin Rawanchaikul](#) has [already appeared in several international biennials](#), but his billboard-sized painting, inspired by colorful Bollywood graphics but telling his own personal story of migration, still feels fresh.

In fact, a solo presentation of almost any of these artists would have been more satisfying, and more culturally illuminating, than what we have here. Instead of a celebration of these particular traditions of art, you are left feeling as if, once again, UBS has rigged the game.