

Introduction Contemporary Southeast Asian Art The Right Kind of Trouble

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In the past decade, contemporary art has become one of art history's most urgent questions. What is it? From when do we consider something contemporary as opposed to modern? More importantly, how can it be discussed within a historical framework? The latter question is especially critical in light of art's globalisation. Those involved in the contemporary art field must face the imperative of inclusion as denoted through the geographical expansion of art's boundaries; witness, for instance, the extraordinary attention paid to the international biennale circuit outside Euro-American metropolises. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to describe contemporary art from the 1990s as global art, defined as the expansion of the artworld so as to include specific places or localities. That this project remains well under way is evidenced by the continuous stream of books, exhibitions, conferences, lectures and special journal issues (including this one), whose purpose it is to direct attention to previously overlooked parts of the geopolitical world.

In focusing on Southeast Asia, this special issue of *Third Text* does not intend merely to affirm consensus views regarding art's globalisation. Rather, it seeks to complicate and, in the best-case scenario, to trouble ongoing discussions regarding the nature and interpretation of contemporary art. As a point of departure that might resonate with other discussions of contemporary art, Patrick Flores, the co-editor of this issue, suggested that this issue be framed around the idea of contemporaneity, a word that has gained increasing currency as both a presumptive replacement for postmodernity and even 'contemporary' itself. In the initial call for papers we described it thus:

... as a condition, an epoch, a paradigm and even as a placeholder replacing the similarly contested notion of postmodernity, contemporaneity forces artists and writers to rethink what they perceive as the present as never before. Those who write about contemporary art, for example,

seem increasingly possessed by a desire to periodise even the most recently produced artworks, going so far as to distinguish between 'early' and 'late' contemporary art.¹

At the risk of terminological oversimplification, 'postmodernity' turned on an unprecedented level of permissibility, reframed that which was previously understood as derivative, and therefore inferior under a modernist regime of judgement, into gestures of appropriation that facilitated a worldview predicated on fragments, rather than unities, essences and monoliths. Notions of the 'contemporary', as invoked in the 1990s, often referred to globalisation, globalism or the global turn. This may be briefly defined as a newfound consciousness of the 'outside' as seen from the purported 'inside' of what had previously been described as the international artworld. It relates closely to what Arjun Appadurai continuously referred to as the lean 'outward', where 'history leads you outward, to link patterns of changes to increasingly larger universes of interaction'.² Taking this outward-boundedness further, those discussing contemporaneity direct their attentions instead to the connections between fragments, each presumed to be ontologically equal to one another.

We are finally on the right track, it seems. Except that the connectivity mentioned only covers a small fraction of the world's artistic production, perhaps even less than what Jean-Hubert Martin, the curator of 'Magiciens de la Terre', the 1989 exhibition long cited as a major benchmark in the artworld's 'global turn', allegedly described as 'one hundred percent of exhibitions ignoring eighty percent of the earth'. The connectivity upon which contemporary art now prides itself omits certain kinds of work made in areas or within contexts perceived as non-conducive to the open expression of an individual subjectivity. Official art made at the behest of dictatorial governments, or art from non-democratic and illiberal states is rarely included in books, exhibitions, conferences and other vehicles through which the field of contemporary art takes shape.³ From where he stood, the international artworld, according to critic and curator Jim Supangkat in 1996, appeared divided between artworks that were from 'developed' and democratic states, and those that were not.⁴ This creates a quarantine effect, one reinforced in the 'developed world' by those anxious to preserve their status. As Hans Belting said of 'Wanderlieder', an exhibition of Eastern and Western European art held at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1991, 'There was little opportunity for comparison ... [Western art connoisseurs] to protect their own superiority, would retreat into a smile in order to keep their own standards and expertise'.⁵

Also excluded on similar grounds is art created for religious purposes, or art that references religious imagery in a non-ironic way, as is the case with many works from the Philippines that reference Catholic iconography. The exclusion of religious art from the contemporary art field presumes an iconoclasm, which in turn suggests that the postmodern free-for-all is a smokescreen. For art to be contemporary, it must appear to be the product of free will unmediated by any external power, whether religious or secular in nature. If religious content is discussed, it is treated as 'just one more thing to study'.⁶ It is as if the discussant in question was trying to put as much critical distance

1. Patrick Flores and Joan Kee, 'Draft Call for Papers', unpublished email, 24 July 2009

2. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996, p 74

3. One exception is the Bienal de La Habana, established in 1984 as a counter to what some in Cuba saw as the 'comprador' approach of the other major Latin American visual art exhibition, the São Paulo Biennale. See Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2009, p 154.

4. Jim Supangkat, 'Multimodernisms', in *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions*, Asia Society, New York, 1996, p 80

5. Hans Belting, *Art History After Modernism*, Caroline Saltzweid and Mitch Cohen, trans, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2002, p 59

6. James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, Routledge, New York and London, 2004, p 18

7. Mulk Raj Anand, 'Chairman's Welcome Address', *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 36, September 1990, p 12
8. C J W-L Wee, "'We Asians'? Modernity, Visual Art Exhibitions, and East Asia', *boundary* 2, vol 37, no 1, 2010, p 92
9. According to Singapore-based critic and curator Zineng Wang, there has been a sizable increase in the number of lots of modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art, from approximately eighty offered by Christie's and Sotheby's in 2005 to over 280 offered in 2009 by both houses. This number does not include parallel sales of contemporary Southeast Asian art by other auction houses whose sales are conducted out of Singapore and Jakarta. Zineng Wang, unpublished paper, accessed 2 March 2011.
10. I thank John Batten for pointing out the high prices paid for certain Southeast Asian artists. On the market for Vietnamese art in the 1990s, see Boi Tran Huynh, 'Post *Doi Moi* International Reception of Vietnamese Contemporary Art', in John Clark, Maurizio Peleggi, and T K Sabapathy, eds, *Eye of the Beholder: Reception, Audience, and Practice of Modern Asian Art*, Wild Peony, Sydney, 2006, pp 275–277.
11. But as critic and curator Eugene Tan, formerly of Osage Gallery, one of the few galleries to have outposts in East and Southeast Asia, mentioned, there has been increased interest among collectors in Taiwan. Email correspondence with the author, 1 March 2011. While still far below the levels of interest shown in contemporary East Asian works, US interest also seems poised to rise, according to Tyler Rollins, whose eponymous gallery in New York is one of the

between herself and the work as possible, in order to avoid facing admittedly difficult questions raised by works intended to be used in religious practices, such as belief and wonder.

In some ways, the contemporary artworld under the sign of the global is less inclusive than it was when it was previously configured under the aegis of the international. During the 1960s, when biennials and other large-scale recurring visual arts events were so plentiful as to justify the use of words such as 'globalism', inclusiveness was mobilised by some event organisers to compete for precedence. Established in 1968, the Triennale India sought to compete with its better-known counterparts in Venice and Tokyo by actively embracing what the Euro-American art world considered as its periphery. Mulk Raj Anand, chairman of the Lalit Kala Akademi, wrote in his welcome address to the inaugural Triennale:

... many Asian, African, and socialist countries have not been able to establish a platform where the desired images of the oldest and youngest continents (youngest in the sense of secular achievement in the arts) may be seen together with the achievement of the dynamic west.⁷

The shortcomings of the Triennale India and other exhibitions based on national delegations have been discussed extensively. Yet the effort to cover as much of the world as possible has a certain idealistic appeal missing from present accounts of contemporary art. As a heuristic, contemporaneity fails to account for the omission of entire regions from these accounts, even when the credibility of the latter partly depends on their inclusion of artworks formerly deemed as marginal by reason of their cultural origins.

Contemporary Southeast Asian art is a textbook illustration of this. The idea of a 'contemporary Asian art' notwithstanding, Southeast Asia is enfolded within a larger East Asian imaginary, and this is borne out by the relative absence of contemporary Southeast Asian art from exhibitions, museums, collections and, perhaps most importantly, university curricula.⁸ This is especially true in the global marketplace where contemporary Chinese art commands precedence over any of its counterparts in Southeast, or for that matter, East Asia, despite the recent increase in auction lots devoted to contemporary Southeast Asian art.⁹ Despite the very high prices paid for works by established Filipino and Indonesian painters in auctions held in Hong Kong during the early 1990s, or the commercial success of Vietnamese artists in the wake of the economic reforms known as *doi moi* in Vietnam in the late 1980s, contemporary Southeast Asian art has yet to gain its bearings in the marketplace.¹⁰ Moreover, the market remains comparatively regional, with few buyers from Europe or the US.¹¹

Many gallerists, curators and critics who work with art from the region contend that the relative lack of commercial interest is directly tied to the comparatively lower level of economic development of many Southeast Asian countries. There are also historiographic reasons. T K Sabapathy points this out in his discussions of Ananda Coomaraswamy's history of Indian and Indonesian art written in 1927 during a period of resurgent nationalism in India, and of George Coedès's *Les États hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie*, the foundational text on Southeast Asian history, first published in 1944. Sabapathy contends that both

few commercial venues specifically devoted to contemporary Southeast Asian art in the US. Conversation with the author, 11 February 2011.

historians made the visibility of Southeast Asia contingent on that of India, an act which he further added was 'tantamount to propounding a colonial doctrine'.¹² The impact of this model has reverberated far beyond Southeast Asia as Nora Taylor observes; within US academic circles, Southeast Asian art has long been considered a sub-division of South Asian art.¹³

Related too is the participation of some Southeast Asian governments in the Non-Aligned Movement, the organisation founded in a Soviet-weary Belgrade 1961 as an attempt to steer a middle course independent of Cold War binaries. That such non-alignment failed to realise its purpose attests to the prevalence of Cold War worldviews. Small wonder, then, that the visibility of artworks in histories of postwar art is directly proportional to the extent to which their sites of origin are imbricated within Cold War binaries. Art from Vietnam tends to enjoy greater visibility, for example, than art from Indonesia and Myanmar, states most involved with promoting the cause of non-alignment.

An even more fundamental reason for the invisibility of contemporary Southeast Asian art is its complexity. Without discounting the complexity of other regions, the idea of Southeast Asia is made impossible by the overwhelming diversity it encompasses. The sheer number of religions practised in the area alone – including, but not limited to, Catholicism, Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism – undermines any efforts to produce a comprehensive survey. As curator Junichi Shioda pointed out, the only basis for even thinking about a body of Southeast Asian art is by first admitting the extent of its cultural diversity.¹⁴ This diversity cannot readily be conformed to the elegance of the nation-state model. To cite some cases in point, it makes little sense to speak of a 'Laotian' or a 'Cambodian' art when artistic production centres more squarely on localities that have little connection with, or are outright antagonistic to, large-scale conceptualisations of nation, class, ethnicity and culture. Indeed, it might even be said that contemporary Southeast Asian art exemplifies the degree to which contemporary art can be defined by its turn towards the local and away from the national and international.

The nation-state model is moreover insufficient for dealing with populations more committed to sustaining the idea of a given cultural heritage rather than to any particular government or nation. The Chinese diaspora throughout Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore and other sites, for example, is bound more to the preservation of a certain cultural heritage than to the countries in which it lives. Known loosely as the 'Nanyang', or literally 'southern ocean', the mobility and cultural allegiances of members of this Chinese diaspora connote a model of regionalism outside the political models that emerged during the Cold War or economic models as denoted by co-operative configurations such as ASEAN, established in 1967. Patterns of associations like these have prompted commentators like Sabapathy, one of the most influential art historians in the area, to advocate regionalism over nation-state models as the lens through which to consider contemporary Southeast Asian art.¹⁵

Yet localities are irrevocably mixed, embodying a quantity and quality of connections that extends far beyond multiculturalist logics of inclusion whereby another locality is simply added to an extensive catalogue of cultures and on which many narratives of contemporary art are based. It

12. T K Sabapathy, 'Developing Regionalist Perspectives in Southeast Asian Art Historiography', in Caroline Turner and Rhana Devenport, eds, *The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1996, p 16

13. Nora Taylor, 'Introduction', in Nora Taylor, ed, *Studies in Southeast Asian Art: Essays in Honor of Stanley J O'Connor*, Cornell Southeast Asia Program, Ithaca, 2000, p 9

14. Junichi Shioda, 'Glimpses Into the Future of Southeast Asian Art: A Vision of What Art Should Be', in *Art in Southeast Asia 1997: Glimpses Into the Future*, Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo and the Japan Foundation, Tokyo, 1997, p 153

15. Sabapathy, op cit

might even be argued that the invisibility of contemporary Southeast Asian art is precisely due to the fact that it problematises the arithmetic bent of multiculturalism which, as Homi Bhabha once noted, presumes 'the creation of cultural diversity and a containment of cultural difference'.¹⁶ At the very least it makes contemporary Southeast Asian art overly difficult from the viewpoint of prevailing models of contemporary art, which allows for plurality and fragmentation, but not when it threatens interpretative clarity. The invisibility thus comes across as an expression of discomfort with the plurality of Southeast Asian art, to which commentators respond by choosing to subsume all of Southeast Asia into the singular idea of an 'Asia'.

Ironically, the reification of 'Southeast Asia' as a distinct rubric within the contemporary art field tends to flatten the art on whose behalf it purports to advocate. The patterns of patronage and support underwriting this reification belie another contest for the centre, one in which 'Southeast Asia' becomes another means through which a particular institution, city, or even nation might establish and extend its cultural authority. Since the early 1980s, when the idea of a distinct contemporary Asian art started to gain momentum, most of the important exhibitions, symposia, books, lectures and other events specifically focused on contemporary Southeast Asian art have taken place in, or have been otherwise funded by, institutions in the well-to-do countries of Japan, Singapore and, to a lesser extent, Australia.

From the early 1980s, Japan's economic power has allowed for the affirmation of an Asian regionalism that paradoxically reproduces the centre-versus-periphery dynamics that, until the 1990s, excluded non-Euro-American art from the so-called international art world. One might trace this, as critic C J Wan-ling Wee does, to Japanese imperial ambitions as encapsulated in Okakura Tenshin's famous declaration of 1903, 'Asia is one'. Wee argues that the resurrection of this statement upon the occasion of the first part of the 'Asian Art Exhibition' at the Fukuoka Art Museum in 1979 suggests 'an inability to transcend or obviate the older moment of the modern'.¹⁷ Established partly in the wake of Japan's rise to economic superpower status, the Fukuoka Art Museum and its attempts to promote a discrete body of contemporary Asian art coincided with the efforts of the Japan Foundation, an agency for cultural exchange established by the Ministry of Foreign Relations in 1972.¹⁸ That many of the most prominent exhibitions and conferences inclusive of, or based on, contemporary art from Southeast Asia have been funded by the Japan Foundation suggests an attempt to reframe contemporary Asian art around the putative idea of Japan as centre even if such an intention was never made explicit.

Certainly the events hosted by the Foundation are far more inclusive and equitable than the models outlined in the histories of Coomaraswamy and Coedès. Yet the trace of this model remains, as pointed out by Kuroda Raiji, the present chief curator of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, which, since 1999, has assumed the organisation of what was previously known as the 'Asian Art Exhibition'. As he observed in 1994, while a curator at the Fukuoka Art Museum, a 'serious problem arises' when 'cultural, geographical and political classifications' are conflated so that it obviates the physical and psychological mobility of artists and artworks.¹⁹

16. Homi Bhabha, 'The Third Space', in Jonathan Rutherford, ed, *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1990, p 208

17. Ibid, p 115

18. For an outline of cultural exchange practices in Japan during the 1970s and '80s, see Kishi Seikō, 'Bijutsukanga "ajia" to deautoki' (When the museum encountered 'Asia'), in Hirano Kenichirō, ed, *Sengo nihon no kokusai bunka kōryū* (International cultural exchange in postwar Japan), Keiso Shobo, Tokyo, 2005, pp 246–247.

19. Kuroda Raiji, 'Practice of Exhibitions in Global Society by Asians, for Asians and Some Associated Problems', in Jean Fisher, ed, *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, Kala Press in association with the Institute of International Visual Arts, London, 1994, p 144

Similar concerns may be raised about initiatives taking place in Australia where multiculturalist imperatives helped facilitate the inclusion of art from around the putative Asia-Pacific region. Held at the government-funded Queensland Art Museum since 1993, the Asia-Pacific Triennial has been an important venue for many contemporary artists from Southeast Asia whose opportunities for overseas exhibition were less plentiful than those offered to their East Asian counterparts. Yet its initial organisation according to national categories provoked criticism from numerous commentators, including Sabapathy, whose discussion of Coomaraswamy and Coedès published in the catalogue for the second edition of the Triennial in 1996 was intended as a response to these models.

In the new millennium, the Singapore government has devoted much attention towards establishing Singapore as *a*, if not *the*, centre for contemporary Southeast Asian art. Despite the government's predilection for imposing constraints on freedoms of expression, its attempts to reify Singapore as an artistic regional centre have been partly successful due to its affluence, the widespread use of English, the lingua franca of the contemporary global artworld, and to the introduction of laws and policies designed to encourage investors and collectors. Additionally, the state has poured considerable monies into the construction of an artistic infrastructure as evidenced by the Singapore Art Museum, which also doubles as a significant centre through which contemporary Southeast Asian art becomes historicised, and the establishment of the Singapore Biennale in 2006. Yet some of these efforts have been criticised as modernist spectacles that reflect belief in the existence of a telos and, more crucially, in the suppression of alternative multiple times that might compromise the achievement of the final end.²⁰ According to such critiques, contemporaneity might itself be regarded as a model of development based on linearity and progress as well as the forgetting of what has taken place before.

The eventual aim of commentators like Sabapathy, Wee, Kuroda and others, however, is not so much critique (or, in Kuroda's case, confession) as challenging their audiences to consider artistic production in multiple places without reverting to models based on antagonistic binaries. How do we write history productively, that is, in ways that do not repeat the us-versus-them thinking that for so long has compromised, perhaps even permanently, the possibility of actualising a truly global artworld? How do we comment in ways that facilitate, rather than hinder, the realisation of the ideals with which the notion of a global artworld is associated? While these questions could readily apply to any number of fields, contemporary Southeast Asian art compels its writers, curators, historians and practitioners to rethink the contemporary so as to keep sight of its contradictions. 'Southeast Asia' may be a remnant of Cold War-era area studies, but as a heuristic it has the potential to cause trouble in an area of enquiry in great need of it.

This special issue of *Third Text* seeks to cause such trouble by asking its contributors to focus on the whys of how – why do we write, curate, teach and promote contemporary Southeast Asian art in the ways that we do? The issue assumes urgency when we think about what Patrick Flores calls the 'presumptive impasse between what might be described as

20. Lee Weng Choy, 'Authenticity, Reflexivity, and Spectacle; or, The Rise of New Asia Is Not the End of the World', *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, vol 12, no 3, Winter 2004, pp 643–666

“historicity” and “contemporaneity”, a bind whose immediacy becomes all the greater when refracted through the lens of the global, defined now as an imbricated series of localities’.²¹ If there is a history of Southeast Asian art, it remains firmly wedded to the premodern, almost as if Southeast Asia lay beyond the reach of contemporaneity. The impasse is acutely palpable when refracted through the idea of a Southeast Asia where the vast array of languages, cultures, religions and local histories and the disparate rates of their circulation significantly frustrate any attempts to resolve the impasse.

The practical implications of this situation are demonstrated in Kevin Chua’s analysis based on teaching a survey course of modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art. When Chua asks ‘how much modern and contemporary Euro-American art is needed for the teaching of modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art’, he is, in effect, asking what happens when two very different kinds of historicising processes intersect: when one particular brand of modernism framed under the aegis of the avant-garde comes into contact with another based on the perceived tension between modernity and tradition, a tension with special ramifications for Southeast Asian art, long historicised as if somehow incompatible with the modern or the contemporary.

Thomas Berghuis considers the impasse by anticipating an ‘art as yet to come’. He joins a growing cluster of voices that urge another approach to contemporary art, one based not on reportage of *au courant* practices or even on revisionist interpretations of art as-has-been, or what Miwon Kwon calls ‘the task of figuring out what and how art of the present forces a rethinking of the stories that described what happened in the past’, but on what art might do for a future yet to happen.²² For Berghuis, the study of contemporary art is vested in agency, or what can be done now. It is perhaps why he chooses to focus on the activities of *ruangrupa*, the Jakarta-based artist collective. If artist collectives like *ruangrupa* in Indonesia continue to enjoy a certain premium in a burgeoning history of contemporary art in Southeast Asia, it is because of their potential in envisioning a society not ordinarily possible through state channels. The emergence of groups like the New Art Movement in Indonesia from 1974, the Artists’ Front in Thailand, also in 1974, and the *Kaisahan* in the Philippines in 1976 was in response to the institutions and events organised by authoritarian governments that appeared suspect in the eyes of those for whom the nation-state stood only for the interests of an elite few.

Yet collectivism does not necessarily mean consensus, as Pandit Chanrochanakit discusses through what he calls the ‘de-formation’ of Thai democracy. Here ‘de-formation’ refers to a process of undoing, one in which artistic collectivisms aligned with opposing political camps play an instrumental role. Pandit further complicates the discussion by examining the role of the middle class in constructing the relationship between art and politics. While socioeconomic class has been addressed in dyadic terms between an oppressed underclass and over-privileged elites, the role of the middle class, whose precarious situation in societies calibrated to extremely accelerated rates of change reflects the equally precarious condition of art intended as a means of political intervention, has, until now, been neglected.²³

21. Patrick Flores, email to the author, 8 July 2009

22. Miwon Kwon, ‘Questionnaire on “The Contemporary”’, *October* 130, p 14

23. For a discussion of the impact of social origins and artistic production in Asia see John Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, University of Hawai’i Press, Honolulu, 1998, pp 117–173

Implicit in Pandit's article is a call to consider questions of 'how' as a matter of refiguring norms, interpretative methods and standards of judgement. Although connoisseurship and attendant issues of quality are routinely dismissed as the remnants of an exclusionary past, the consistent exclusion of many parts of the world from the alleged global free-for-all indicates judgement, not acceptance, as a core premise of contemporary art. This differs from tolerance, which in the context of contemporary art refers to an increased availability of real and discursive space for that which was once only shown and discussed under extremely limited conditions. In fact, the culture of tolerance underwriting contemporary art in its present manifestation has led to even more stringent kinds of judgement. Fuelled by a vigorous market, judgement is often passed according to narrowly construed definitions of form that focus exclusively on the material and physical manifestations of the work. The contemporary now may not only be the new modern, as Terry Smith suggests, but might actually be the apotheosis of what the 'old' modern hoped to achieve.²⁴ Beneath the seeming anarchy of a multidirectional contemporary artworld lies a desire for a universal paradigm of contemporary art, the imposition of which would be nothing less than authoritarian in nature.

The threat of such authoritarianism is especially pronounced with regard to contemporary art in Southeast Asia, a particular domain characterised not only by an almost inexhaustible diversity of ethnicities, classes, religions and political orientations, but also by different levels of receptivity to any given stimulus. The condition of being present is most vividly expressed as a function of shifting rates of action. Under these circumstances, the position of those charged or otherwise empowered with the capacity to interpret works takes on extreme significance, an issue addressed by Lee Weng Choy with regard to the practice of criticism (especially important for contemporary art, and for contemporary Southeast Asian art, where the vast bulk of writing tends to be outside the conventions of history), Ching with regard to curation, as well as Taylor, Flores and Chua with regard to history.²⁵

The position of the interpreter begs special attention too, given the enormous impact of ethnographic practices on the historicisation of Southeast Asian art generally. Ethnography, that branch of anthropology involving the study of human cultures, has, as Taylor points out, enabled art history to shift towards interpretations that emphasised difference, imminence and contingency as opposed to more traditional models of art history based on containing works within various schematic categories. She also notes that ethnographic methods like direct site visits and oral interviews with artists and other artworld constituents are often the only source of evidence in places without libraries, archives, museums and other repositories of sources, as was the case in 1990s Vietnam. Likewise, ethnographic methods are utterly crucial when conducting research in authoritarian countries where private activity must often take place in secret, or at least sufficiently outside the scope of government surveillance. Most importantly, ethnographic practices demand a certain attention to the importance of ethics in research involving live subjects. In making a case for ethnography, Taylor both suggests the possibility of envisioning a possible history of contemporary art outside art history as well as offering a reminder that any study of contemporary

24. Terry Smith, 'Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity', *Critical Inquiry* 32, summer 2006, p 686

25. Perhaps the most comprehensive study of curatorial practices in Southeast Asia is Patrick Flores, *Past Peripheral: Curation in Southeast Asia*, NUS Museum, Singapore, 2008.

art begs close scrutiny of the behaviour of those involved in its production.

If Taylor, like Berghuis, is thinking about an art history 'as yet to come', Flores focuses on predicaments of the present. What to do, for instance, with the problem of having to operate in a world that still persists in regarding contemporary Southeast Asian artworks as relics of the past, specimens of a larger cultural present, or metaphors of sociopolitical circumstance – anything but contemporary art? Concerned with the selectively exclusionist nature of a so-called global artworld, Flores wonders whether ethnography reinforces the marginalisation of contemporary Southeast Asian art by unduly emphasising context at the expense of the artwork, which he describes as an anxiety born of the contrast between the 'aesthetic' and the 'anthropological'. In his view, undue contextualisation might subsume the artwork and thus reinforce the comparative invisibility of contemporary Southeast Asian art.

This last point is of special concern, not just for contemporary Southeast Asian, but also for East Asian, and other non-Euro-American artworks generally. The terms under which inclusion takes place are predicated on allegory or metaphor, whereby the work in question is read exclusively as an illustration of the sociopolitical context in which it is assumed to operate.²⁶ Writing for the catalogue of 'Traditions/Tensions', the landmark exhibition of contemporary Asian art that took place in various venues in New York in 1996, Jim Supangkat expresses concern that 'the emphasis on the sociopolitical content' of the artwork 'will inevitably draw that work into the discourse of the mainstream'.²⁷ A practising curator, Supangkat was indirectly referring to exhibition practice in which curators, under pressure to make their shows accessible to a public without basic 'Asia' literacy, resort to excessive cultural contextualisation or contextualisation which appeals to mainstream assumptions or desires.²⁸

The emphasis seems to have only intensified in recent years as critics, curators and historians based in the 'free' world incessantly question the social relevance of art-making. The ensuing aporia has allowed for the inclusion of artworks by those perceived as exiles, freedom fighters or reactionaries, as Isabel Ching notes in what she perceives as the valorisation of exiled Myanmar artists in overseas exhibitions. She adds that the stakes escalate considerably when the art in question is made in a place where the right to creative expression is subject to extreme control. International audiences might actively desire visual depictions of what they imagine is resistance to a state they believe to be morally bankrupt, but the capacity of artists to fulfil this demand is seriously circumscribed by a fairly arbitrary system that often understands visual form in radically different ways from those specialising in its creation. Ching implicitly objects to the extraordinary paucity of interpretative methods used to discuss art whose presence affirms consensus views of the present as being irrefutably global in nature – in short, non-Euro-American art, or art produced by artists who travel so often and extensively as to be considered nomadic. Accordingly, such art is nearly always subject to interpretation that focuses on aspects perceived as characteristic of globalism, namely, the relationship of an artwork to a particular locality, usually one far removed from familiar Euro-American metropolises. The situation almost parallels that described by Leo Steinberg in his

26. This proclivity is very much in evidence in the reception of non-Euro-American works; regarding artistic production in East Asia, see my article, 'Trouble in "New Utopia"', *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, vol 12, no 3, winter 2004, pp 667–686.

27. Supangkat, op cit, p 80

28. This dilemma is summarised by Ien Ang's description of the difficulties of curating exhibitions of Asian art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, in Ien Ang, 'The Predicament of Diversity: Multiculturalism in Practice at the Art Museum', *Ethnicities*, vol 5, no 3, 2005, pp 305–320.

classic text *Other Criteria* some forty years earlier. Responding to what he saw as the excesses of critics like Clement Greenberg who championed a certain brand of formalism in the name of rigour, he wrote that 'their self-righteous indifference to that part of artistic utterance which their tools do not measure' was tantamount to a model of engagement that could only be described as 'interdictory' or even dictatorial.²⁹

Shrouded in rhetoric extolling the virtues of collaboration and relational aesthetics, the world of contemporary art now may seem more democratic, or more open than it was when *Other Criteria* was published in New York in 1972, amidst a critical mass of demands calling for greater inclusion of women and non-white artists. However, the unexamined insistence on validating certain kinds of art according to their place of origin and what we might extrapolate of its cultural context may sometimes be as 'interdictory' as the most extreme brand of Greenbergian didacticism. Characterised by its occlusion of aesthetic questions, this insistence can certainly be read as a deferred reaction to a particular brand of formalism as it was thrust upon particular works of art in the period during which the 'modern' appeared to fade into the 'contemporary'. It might very well be, as Supangkat argued in the catalogue to 'Contemporary Art of the Non-Aligned Countries', the 1995 exhibition that took its cue from the Non-Aligned Movement, the result of perceiving contemporary art as both a contradiction and an extension of 'Modernist art'. The acknowledgement of cultural context 'was merely a consequence of the contradiction between Modernist and contemporary art in the Euro-American context, and far from being an awareness of the condition of Third World art'.³⁰ In addition, the insistence on viewing artworks exclusively through their potential to enact social change might also be regarded as an admission of guilt, and perhaps even shame. It seems absurd, decadent and even morally reprehensible to consider the aesthetics of a given work made in times and places beset by constant turmoil. Reading the artwork as a metaphor of social context sometimes comes across as a compensatory gesture, intended to make up for the limitations of artworks as instruments of social change.

Yet if there is one aspect of contemporaneity which needs emphasising, it is that complacency should perpetually give way to discomfort. It is for this reason that close attention to the material and physical properties of a given work matters now more than ever. Some might describe this attention as a regressive turn to the kind of formalism partly responsible for denying the contemporaneity of so many artworks, but I argue that such attention makes real that which has otherwise been dismissed as exotic, and thus utterly vulnerable to what Flores in another article has called globality's 'insatiable appetite for excess'.³¹ It does so in part by forcing the issue of comparison in ways that make real both the incommensurability and commonality between artworks that lie at opposite geographical, political or aesthetic ends.³²

On the matter of dialogue, we might also think about re-establishing the terms through which inclusion takes place. Artworks from outside the Euro-American mainstream are acknowledged primarily on grounds of cultural difference as inferred from the national or ethnic background of their creators, or the site of their production, a mode of recognition

29. Leo Steinberg, 'Other Criteria', *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1972, p 64
30. Jim Supangkat, 'Introduction I: Multiculturalism: Reflections for a Discourse among the Non-Aligned Countries and Background of the Exhibition', in Edi Sedyawati, A D Pirous, Jim Supangkat, and T K Sabapathy, eds, *Contemporary Art of the Non-Aligned Countries: Unity and Diversity in International Art*, Balai Pustaka, Jakarta, 1997, p 22
31. Patrick Flores, 'Presence and Passage: Conditions of Possibilities in Contemporary Asian Art', *International Yearbook of Aesthetics*, vol 8, 2004, p 55
32. For a fuller explication of this argument, see my essay, 'The World in Plain View: Form in the Service of the Global', in Suzanne Hudson and Alexander Dumbadze, eds, *Contemporary Art: Themes and Histories, 1989 to the Present*, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, Massachusetts, 2012, forthcoming.

exemplified by 'Magiciens de la Terre' and other similarly-themed exhibitions. While discussions of cultural difference have done much to undermine art history's predilection for unitary and unified narratives, it has also compromised the very ideal which it purports to uphold, that of an interconnected world. Moreover, if one of the unique challenges implicit in the idea of contemporaneity is the need to identify one's contemporaries so as to intervene in the process of historicisation, now might be the right time to consider similitude, rather than difference, as our epistemological point of departure. Thinking of the world in terms of similitude leads us to consider the world as a concrete form as opposed to a rhetorical abstraction.

Speaking practically, this might entail closer examination of comparisons in order to redress what Kuroda Raiji pointed out over fifteen years ago as the tendency of national and cultural identifications to obviate the mobility of ideas. We might look, for instance, to other historical relationships based on acts of exchange, morphological correspondence, or similar circumstances of conception, such as the resemblance between Imelda Marcos's Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) and the Sejong Cultural Center erected by the South Korean government under Park Chung-hee, a military strongman who not only had a background and ideological orientation comparable to that of Ferdinand Marcos, but who also declared martial law in South Korea in 1972, as did Marcos in the Philippines. Another case study might be one that draws from one of the initial catalysts of the Non-Aligned Movement, the Afro-Asian Conference held in Bandung in 1955, or one that compares the 1962 Saigon International Festival that brought the artworks of various Asian countries with the 1966 World Black Arts Festival hosted in Senegal by Léopold Senghor. Thus, instead of exclusively acting as historicity's other, the idea of contemporaneity could help us trace new patterns of affiliation that might directly link parts of the world formerly connected only through events, institutions or persons based in Euro-American metropolises.

The act of comparison thus gives rise to another kind of regionalisation, one in which geographic affiliations matter less than the recognition of contingency, where sites are configured as being connected, but not beholden, to each other. It is perhaps this mode of reorganisation that is needed in order to underscore the relevance of contemporary Southeast Asian art in a world still enamoured of centres and peripheries. Such regionalisation may then allow for the production of histories of contemporary art deliberately anachronistic to a global art history whose linear sense of time as evidenced by its relentless expansion paradoxically threatens to gloss over the very concerns that made the idea of globalism so necessary in the first place.

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