

Singapore, is a geographic hub linking trade between Europe and Asia, and it is the economic center of the Nanyang islands. In terms of art it has the attributes of a tropical atmosphere and a complex ethnic consciousness. These attributes are especially excellent factors in the exchange of culture between East and West and the creation of Nanyang art.... [Our purpose] is nothing less than to use these especially excellent factors to promote artistic exchanges between East and West, in order to develop a new art that is characteristic of the Nanyang region."⁹⁹ He cites four points as the excellent factors inherent to Singapore: 1) its role as a hub in East–West trade; 2) its position as the economic center of the Nanyang islands; 3) its tropical atmosphere; and 4) its multicultural ethnic consciousness.

In 1949, the year before Lim made this statement, the Communist regime had taken over China, and the overseas Chinese who had made their way to Nanyang in order to escape the Sino-Japanese War and the Chinese Civil War no longer had any home to which they could return. On the other hand, with new countries establishing independence and embarking on new frameworks of nation building in Southeast Asia after the Japanese defeat in World War II, Singapore and British Malaya would repeatedly flirt with each other and with their neighboring territories in their search for a new national framework. (Consider the Federation of Malaya's independence in 1957; the British granting Singapore self-government in 1959; the merger of Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak into the Federation of Malaysia in 1963; Singapore's separation and independence in 1965...)

Under these conditions, the Nanyang Chinese who originally saw themselves as belonging to the Chinese sphere of culture came to discover a new "home" for themselves within the framework of Nanyang. That is, they had to find their own identity in Nanyang. There was a need to discover themselves within the Chinese–barbarian hierarchy, or rather to seek a national identity in the "savage other" of Nanyang. In essence, there were multiple, contradictory aspects to the Bali field trip, as the four leading artists were searching for themselves, and a new home, even as they sought out the savage other.

As already mentioned, Cheong Soo Pieng went to Sabah and Sarawak after the Bali trip. These areas, which are now East Malaysia, would potentially have been part of the same country as Singapore. Even as they were the savage other, they were also part of a shared identity for the citizens of the would-be nation-state of the Federation of Malaysia. Cheong must have felt a need to reposition the exotic and sensual other as being part of the "nation," and ultimately he made work that was more subjective and formalistic than that of Gauguin.

He brilliantly turned into painting the paradox of finding the image of oneself in that of the other. After he completed the highly finished paintings mentioned above, *Iban Girls* and *Balinese Girls*, Cheong would borrow from Gauguin to produce the

impressionistic works *Pair of Women on the Beach* (1955, National Art Gallery of Malaysia [fig.18](#)) and *Tropical Life* (1959, National Art Gallery of Malaysia [fig.19](#)). With its pair of half-naked women on the beach, the former is in the Gauguin style, as is made clear by the placement of a wooden bowl of bananas in the lower left foreground of the picture, just as in *la Orana Maria*. Here it appears that, rather than a scene from Bali, Cheong was attempting to create an archetypical "Nanyang" landscape on the basis of his travels to Bali and East Malaysia, but also one that did not belong to any place in particular. The composition of *Tropical Life* features an elongated arrangement of figures, so that at first glance the work recalls Gauguin's *Where Do We Come From*. But instead of the philosophical questions and symbolic language of Gauguin, one senses here Cheong's warm gaze directed toward fellow nationals, as opposed to one that is exoticizing or sexualizing or savage.

Now we have examined the reception of Gauguin in Southeast Asian modern art through some of its definitive works. There was a wide-ranging reception of Gauguin across all levels, from themes and style to symbolism. What should be added here is that for the pioneering generation of a nascent Southeast Asian modern art, the South Seas painted by Gauguin provided the model and the sanction of Western art for the use of familiar customs and scenes in their own paintings, and it was also a guarantee that such paintings would be accepted into the institutional framework of "art."

This reception of Gauguin was an extension of the construct that put the painter on the side of civilization and turned the subject into a savage other. But behind this reproduction of the other was the nationalistic demand for the formation of a national identity and the creation of a national culture amid aspirations to cast off the colonial system and establish a new multiethnic and multicultural nation-state. The artists working in this context had to overcome the image of the exotic and sensual woman catering to foreigners' taste, and Gauguin's formative approach, which was the paradigm of art for them, provided an ideal mode for that purpose.

That is, the inherent problems and expression of Southeast Asian modern art can be found in the way that the image of other and self were indivisibly linked, and the Gauguin-inspired field trip in search of the "savage" was part and parcel of the discovery of the "nation" in the formation process of the nation-state.



fig.19



fig.16



fig.17

fig.16
Cheong Soo Pieng, *Iban Girls*, 1953, Collection Shell Singapore (from *Nanyang 1950–65*, 2002).

fig.17
Cheong Soo Pieng, *Balinese Girls*, 1954, Collection Shell Singapore (from *Nanyang 1950–65*, 2002).



fig.18

fig.18
Cheong Soo Pieng, *Pair of Women on the Beach*, 1955, Collection National Art Gallery, Malaysia (from *The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia*, 1997).

fig.19
Cheong Soo Pieng, *Tropical Life*, 1959, Collection National Art Gallery, Malaysia (from *The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia*, 1997).

Postcolonial Perils: Art and National Impossibilities

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Patrick D. Flores

See p. 5 for author bio.

The essay tries to grasp the complexity of art as a mechanism or modality through which the nation is rendered. It veers away from the tendency to regard art merely as a derivation or a function of its historical or political context; or the translation of the latter in aesthetic form. It rather argues that art, with its aspirations to autonomy and at the same time its sensitivity to the social world around it, is pushed and pulled by interests that expect its agency to perform identification with "culture" and "society" in a certain way. In the milieu of Southeast Asia, the practice of art is necessarily Western, the notion having been formed in the West. But inevitably it is also postcolonial, transforming the Western in complicated ways. In the same impulse, the non-Western, or the local or the colonial, is thoroughly mediated as well. The mediation may yield hybridity as opposed to civilization. The essay stresses, however, that the binary between hybridity and civilization must be transcended. It is in this desire to transcend that three concepts are foregrounded. These concepts are intimacy, improvisation and suffering, and they reference the postcolonial procedure to surmount the local-foreign duality so that a more intricate relationship can be made to play out between forces in a postcolonial setting. Art as constitutive of the postcolony is not reduced to merely representing the afterlife of the colony that is the nation, which is always burdened by an elusive identity. It is instead seen as co-producing, improvising and suffering the foreign with which it has become so intimate that it is able to offer reflexive representation of difference through the very means of colonial tutelage.

[PF]

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This reflection dwells on how art becomes politically formative in sensing the emancipation of the postcolony and the longing for the nation in Asia. It extends this theme to discuss how such modernity refunctions what is presumed to be a non-Western tradition and consequently to intimate the foreign and the global in crafting contingent identifications. This sensing may elude the conventional wisdom of "aesthetics" as the coveted technique of materializing the "word" through "art," which is possessed in the long term by the state and its culture as a measure of autonomy. This sensing is highly mediated in social practice, embedded in the desire for representation, and may be constantly incipient, never settling, always stirred by both the loss of authenticity and the resolve of the self to prevail among others. Surely, in the schema of "world art," the postcolonial is more than a critique: it is an entitlement to a different sensitivity to what is material.

In colonial times in Southeast Asia in the 19th century, two paintings evoked a condition of revision. In 1857, the Indonesian Raden Saleh (c.1811–1880) painted *The Arrest of Diponegoro* (1857), not to record the capture of national hero Pangeran Diponegoro, a prince of Yogyakarta who rebelled against his family and Dutch benefactors, but to rectify the depiction in Nicolaas Pieneman's *Subjugation of Diponegoro* (1830), in which the dissident figure is cast in a tableau of humiliating submission. Diponegoro waged a war from 1825 to 1830, styling himself as an Islamic stalwart and a revivalist of authentic Javanese values; his apprehension by General Hendrik Merkus de Kock was a tribute to Dutch control over the archipelago that commenced in 1602. A scholar comments that "Saleh's Diponegoro is not a subjugated warrior, he is a cheated person, a victim of Dutch treachery" and that the painting "is a caricature, a bitter commentary on Dutch colonial rule."⁰¹ Here, the artist reciprocates the disappearance of dignity in the official commemoration with defacement, with Diponegoro's captors slightly disfigured and his head held high.

In 1884, a gold medal was conferred upon the Filipino Juan Luna (1857–1899) at the Madrid Exposition for his *Spoliarium*, a historical canvas that portrays the scene at the chamber in the Roman Colosseum where dead or dying gladiators are despoiled. Luna's fellow expatriates in Europe cherished this triumph of a native subject being acknowledged in Spain through his achievement in art, and at the same time discerned in the painting an allegory of the suffering of the Philippines under Spain, which encroached on the islands in 1521. It was a critique that enabled them to prefigure the colony elsewhere and the postcolonial as universal: in Rome, the former master of Spain that was the erstwhile Hispania, and in the painter-patriot Luna, who was hailed in the inflated oratory of his confreres as a genius who "knows no country."⁰²

In these instances, art renders the political through the reflexivity of representation. It demonstrates the self in history, resisting its location in hegemonic historiography. It also ensures that alterity can be transcended through sheer mastery of the civilizing narrative. Not only is the world on hand through art, it altogether finds an exceptional form in the European academy.

The modality of staging this history is central. The role of artist-geniuses such as Saleh and Luna is resonant, and their acumen to exceed the demands of naturalist documentation is exemplary. We glean an equivalent articulation in the career of the autodidact aristocratic Indian painter Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906), whose oeuvre and life animated aspirations for a nation beyond the British Empire, which possessed India in 1757. An academic painter with no formal training, he was sought by both the Raj and the Maharajas, and reconfigured Victorian salon protocols to ratify an Indian past of epics and classics as well as of princely courts. Reared in a constellation of inspirations, from European Orientalism to folk theater, he would conjure a prospect of an essential India as a sovereign polity across its vastly discrepant ethnic terrain. This imaginary was to be condensed in the image of a *Galaxy of Musicians* (c.1889), where a "national/cultural synthesis" is projected onto a mother nation of composite feminine types: "a group of eleven oriental women representing different regions of India (including muslim nair tamil parsi anglo-indian women) makes up a perfect anthropological vignette."⁰³

There are many strains in this scheme of art and nation as a result of the shift from colony to postcolony in Southeast Asia, with the postcolonial inscribed as a sign of a national emergence or the consciousness of the self as opposed to otherness. Representation, as has been mentioned, unravels as an artifice of presence, a reality effect, lending itself well as a testament to fracture from which implications about technique, education, talent, value and a heightened awareness of the world and the history accruing to it could be drawn. To represent and to be represented is a stake in the inalienable privilege to make manifest, to appear and materialize, to risk being exposed, to contrive an image, and ultimately to dispel belief in the image and to sometimes self-consciously tear it apart.

In the cases of Saleh, Luna and Varma, the postcolonial in its discrepant guises aspires to the Enlightenment project of modernity, of the emancipatory potential from all impediments to human amelioration. Art—specifically, the aestheticization of public life and the ritualization of collectivity in national melodramas of *bildung*, as well as the exercise of critique and reflexivity in contemporary expression—feeds into a representational disposition or structure of feeling. The latter may well be the very politic of art and its immanent coloniality. This exhibitionary aesthetic leads us to a modality of theorizing on the postcolonial that may be able to veer away

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Werner Krauss, "First Steps to Modernity: The Javanese Painter Raden Saleh (c.1811–1880)," in *Eye of the Beholder: Reception, Audience, and Practice of Modern Asian Art*, ed. John Clark et al. (Sydney: Wild Peony, 2006), 48.

02

Patrick D. Flores, "'Nature Intervenes in Strokes': Sensing the End of the Colony and the Origin of the Aesthetic," *Filozofski Vestnik* 28, no. 2 (2007): 235–251.

03

Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000), 168.

04

Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 209.

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05
Ibid.

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06

Achille Mbembe, "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 62, no. 1: 3.

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Ibid., 29.

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08

Ibid.

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Fenella Cannell, *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 209.

from the more familiar themes of imitation, diffusion, syncretism, adaptation and mimicry. The irresistible trope that this reflection foregrounds at a very provisional level is intimacy: it inflects the affect of the postcolonial in various practices, this sensing of the world and intuiting its importuning art.

First, the postcolonial reduces the scope of the national, its unknowable and sometimes radical particularities, into a finite patrimony. The Latin American critic Néstor García Canclini discusses this through the National Museum of Anthropology of Mexico, contending that in the museum, culture assumes a monumental effect through the "agglomeration of miniatures," with the "simulated 'infinite' of the museum" functioning as a "metaphor of the infinitude of the national patrimony... [and] also of the capacity of the exhibition to include it."⁰⁴ This alteration between monumentalization and miniaturization is related to "linguistic operations dealing with alterity" as these are "'ritual acts of the 'metabolization of the other,'" making it "'soluble,' digestible, when, in the same act in which its grandeur is acknowledged, it is reduced and becomes intimate."⁰⁵ The task of the museum in national formation, and the typologies it spawns in the disciplines of fine art and ethnology, for instance, has been pervasive in postcolonies, as tellingly traced by the histories of national museums instituted by colonial administrations that instilled self-surveillance and self-regulation through an exhibitionary habitus.

Second, the postcolonial engages in what the African theorist Achille Mbembe calls a "distinctive style of political improvisation, by a tendency to excess and lack of proportion as well as by distinctive ways in which identities are multiplied, transformed and put into circulation."⁰⁶ This effects a banality within the hegemonic relationship, so that the grotesque and the obscene ultimately cease to be a sign of ascendancy on the part of authority and a gesture of resistance on the part of the object, but rather a source of powerlessness for both. Mbembe argues that while there is agency to be galvanized in the Bakhtinian moment of the carnivalesque, this play nourishes an intimacy with power that encourages "illicit cohabitation" by virtue of the fact that competing interests share the "same living space." He tempers the politics of hope that postcolonial theory has held out with the scenario of the masses partaking of the "madness and cloth[ing] themselves in cheap imitations of power so as to reproduce its epistemology; and when, too, power in its own violent quest for grandeur makes vulgarity and wrongdoing its main mode of existence."⁰⁷ This disempowerment results in "situations of powerlessness that are the situations of violence par excellence."⁰⁸

Third, the postcolonial calibrates an idiom of suffering through intimacy. In the Catholic culture of the Philippines, intimacy translates into an internalization of Christ's passion in which the subject

becomes a co-sufferer, an intimate: the self is transformed, as it were, by bearing the same cross of the redeemer. An ethnography of a peninsula south of Manila is instructive in the way it scans various revelations of this intimacy, from customs of bereavement to transvestite beauty pageants to amateur singing competitions. With regard to the latter, it tries to understand how a contestant sings "Autumn Leaves" with so much sentimentality, when the loss that is signified in it apparently makes no immediate sense in the tropics. But the anthropologist reasons that the "idea of loss itself does; in singing a song, part of whose meaning escapes one, one evokes, among other losses, the sadness at not having completely understood, at being excluded in relation to a cultural register which, if one masters it, can open the doors of possibility and change one's life."⁰⁹ For a country of a million migrants and countless more leaving every day for work and resettlement, and still others dreaming of the same chance to depart so that they may survive and conceive of a future, the nation has truly become elsewhere.

In these provocative explications of the postcolonial within a transdisciplinary frame, the postcolonial navigates between the ludic and the melancholic, a mastery of the colonial code that admits both idiosyncrasy and wistfulness over the vanishing of the integrity of a local moral world and an anticipation of another beyond the dispossession of the present. We discern excess and diminution. On the one hand, there is vulgarity, or at the very least, impropriety; on the other, there is sacrifice and selflessness.

A theory of intimacy is challenging, ingrained in affective practice, in sensing a more robust dialectic of liberation and independence, in freeing the "world" and its "art" from the tropes of culture and representation. It addresses the problematics of reification and alienation and at the same time assures the recovery of the self and the other intimations of the modern promise, belated though its arrival may be. There is, therefore, a vacillation here between a return to a perceived non-Western, non-colonial sphere that guarantees only idealization and an "inclination outward," and an after-empire discourse, which disrupts the advance of linear history and frustrates a lapse into the primitive. Indeed, something more sanguine must be lying between civilization and hybridity.

This essay ends with examples from the neo-traditional strain in Japanese art, or *nihonga*, which mediated Western-style painting in the early 20th century so that it could converse with a past in the context of the modern, and later critique this past and finally critique itself, and inevitably reach the watershed of reflexivity in the contemporary. Tsuchida Bakusen's *Serving Girl at a Spa* (1918) would hover between what has been identified as mediation and "productive mistranslation," to use Walter Benjamin's intriguing phrase: "the exotic South-Sea

figure within a luxuriant color scheme, and the Japanese bathhouse girl who Bakusen simultaneously inserts from a long Japanese discourse of vernacular imagery in the European discourse of exotic plenitude."¹⁰ Japanese contemporary art would follow this through when it rediscovered nihonga as a lasting force in its will-to-form, attested to by the works of Matsui Fuyuko and Murakami Takashi. The latter dares to even assert that Japanese art is bound to a Superflat aesthetic, which embraces screen paintings and manga, or Japanese comics, where "space has turned Super Flat and the eye is but a spectral, *anime* sign."¹¹

Another facet of this neo-traditional procedure is cut from the angle of post-socialist, diasporic art from China through the work of Shen Jiawei, formerly a farmer, soldier, border guard and propaganda painter for Mao's Cultural Revolution (1966–76). In 1989 Shen migrated to Sydney, where he painted the mural *Third World* (2002), which painstakingly accounts for the faces of revolutionaries and potentates in the dated Third

World league, so to speak. This is from an artist reared in the ways of rendering the abstraction of ideology intimate to the masses through "art for people's life," in the parlance of the party; and in the current incarnation of his practice, he collects personages of power in a family portrait of sorts. It recalls the Maoist doctrine of the 1970s that China should be a vanguard of the developing countries. It mingles Western oil painting, the totalitarian persuasions of the mural, and the parody of the swarm of icons of a world of nations, with Mao pointing his finger at the dead Che Guevara and his arm clutched by Imelda Marcos, who hoists one golden shoe from her fabled collection of thousands. Around them is a motley gathering of phantom figures, from Idi Amin of Uganda to Pol Pot of Cambodia to Osama Bin Laden of the "Axis of Evil." It is part paeon, part kitsch, part pre-posterity that has wrought what may well be failed nation-states, failed colonialisms, failed nationalisms, and, in fact, a failed international in an era of postcolonies caught up in global intimacies.

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John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Sydney: Craftsman House & Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 80.

11

Azuma Hiroki, "Super Flat Speculation," in *Superflat*, ed. Takashi Murakami (Tokyo: Madra, 2000), 151.

In Search of a Lost Totality: Teaching Asian Modern Art (in Japan)

Kuroda Raiji

Kuroda Raiji is an art historian and curator. He is currently Chief Curator and Executive Director of Operations and Management at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. Exhibitions he has researched and organized while working at the Fukuoka Art Museum (1985–99) and Fukuoka Asian Art Museum (1999–present) include the first retrospectives of Kyushu-ha (1988), Neo-Dada (1993), and Collective Kumo (1997), and solo exhibitions of Rasheed Araeen (1993), Lee Bul (2001), Lionel Wendt (2003) and Long Chinsan (2011). He also co-curated the 1st Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale (FT1, 1999), FT2 (2002), FT3 (2005), FT4 (2009) and FT5 (2014). In 1991 and 1995, he served as Commissioner of the Japanese section of the fifth and seventh editions of the Asian Art Biennale Bangladesh, respectively. In 1995 he was awarded the Japanese Contemporary Art Encouragement Award from the Japan Arts Foundation, and in 2013 he was awarded the Kim Bokjin Prize in Korea. His most recent book is a collection of short essays on Asian modern and contemporary art, *Behind the Globalism: Sketches on Contemporary Asian Art 2009–2014* (grambooks, 2014).

This essay is based on a paper that was presented in English at the international symposium, "Locus Redux: Speaking Across Contexts, Learnings and Negotiations in Writing and Teaching on Art," held in 2012 at the Yuchengco Museum in Manila. Kuroda Raiji states that art education in Japan focuses on Japanese and European art, and that there are barely any teachers or students of Asian modern art. He questions how it is even possible to teach the average person about Asian modern art when there are no textbooks available on the subject in Japanese. He cites a biased understanding of modern art as an important reason for the lack of recognition for Asian modern art in Japan. When modern art was brought to Japan from Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it was viewed solely as a technical/stylistic innovation, which limited its understanding in Japan. He states that in raising awareness of other forms of modernity, such as "modernity as resistance," it might be possible to appreciate Asian art in the context of social change in Asia. In Kuroda's assessment, although the elite "modernity as style" and the democratic "modernity as resistance" exist in parallel in Asian modern art, only the former receives all the attention. He argues that this is due to art critics, historians and curators concentrating their attention on existing, saleable works that can be discussed in relation to Euro-American history and thought. But there are practices that have been overlooked by this art-historical viewpoint. These include things like printed matter and murals from places like India and Korea, or even cartoons in popular magazines. Kuroda says that it is a mistake to disregard their broad social impact just because they were used for political aims or not saved for posterity. He states that the modernity of Asian art was realized variously as technique, as style and as resistance, which he illustrates in a chart. He concludes that it is only when we can understand the modernity of Asian art as the composite of diverse ideas and practices that Asian art history might finally be able to constitute a part of Asian social history.

[KK]

Source: Adapted from a paper presented in English at the international symposium "Locus Redux: Speaking Across Contexts, Learnings and Negotiations in Writing and Teaching on Art," Yuchengco Museum, Manila, May 19, 2012.

Final Art Fileの巨大なギャラリー空間



トスヘースも回りきれないほど増えた。国立博物館、大学美術館や私立美術館も近代美術の作品を所蔵して展示も充実しており、現代美術の展覧会も盛んに開いている。商業ギャラリーも、香港アートフェア・アート・トハート

水 谷竹秀「日本を捨てた男たち」フィリピンに生きる「困窮邦人」(集英社)の二巻をちろっと読んでみたのは、(きの)の日本脱出の準備のためではなく、(きの)の「Panama」(タカログ語で「海」を意味する)という非営利団体が主催し、マニラに日本文化センターをもつ国際交流基金がメイン・スポンサーとなっている。フィリピン美術教育の歴史を振り返ると、ほぼこの発表は、1950年代後半から、フロートレス(フロッティング)によるフィリピンでの美術館の歴史、シンカポール大学美術館のシャピル・フセイン・ムヌタファによる同美術館での様々な実験の紹介だったので、アン美のコメントをほとんど読まない私の発表は場違いだ。英語リスニングの練習の作品は

1 | Art History Education in Japan

This paper is mainly based on my knowledge of Asian modern and contemporary art obtained through my experience as a curator of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. However, having recently taught at a university in Fukuoka,⁰¹ I have gained a new perspective on the current conditions for Asian art in Japan—a positive sense that it might be possible for the general audience in Japan to have a better understanding of modernity in Asian art, and that the number of students who want to learn about Asian artistic movements outside of Japan might increase as a result.

The subject of my course at the university was the history of Asian modern art outside Japan. Ironically, however, the course title provided by the university was “History of Western Art,” as part of the “History of Cultural Representation” courses. As this exemplifies, many universities in Japan do not include the history of Asian modern art in their curricula. The most common courses on art history at the college level in Japan are: 1) traditional Japanese art of the pre-Edo periods, followed by modern Japanese art of the post-Meiji periods; 2) European art—mainly post-Renaissance Italian art, Flemish art, 19th-century French art, and so on; and 3) traditional Chinese and Korean art. It comes as no surprise that the last group of courses are offered far less frequently than the first two, and that the number of scholars (and, hence, students) of Asian art, aside from that of East Asia, is minimal. Compared with the numerous scholars, students and researchers of Japanese and European art, the total of those working on Asian art other than that of Japan is extremely small. In fact, other than Kyushu University’s Ushiroshōji Masahiro, who was previously chief curator of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, there is hardly anyone who currently teaches Asian modern art.

As a result of this absence of Asian modern art in Japan’s education system, there are no Japanese-language textbooks available for students. A few books on Chinese and Korean modern art history have finally been published in Japan recently,⁰² but there are none on Southeast and South Asian art. Art museums in Japan have published catalogues pertaining to exhibitions of modern art from Southeast Asia, East Asia, Vietnam and Mongolia,⁰³ and the Japan Foundation has also published exhibition catalogues, such as *Cubism in Asia*,⁰⁴ which are achievements of valuable inter-Asian collaborative research. However, these catalogues are neither on sale at bookshops nor printed in large quantities, meaning they are available only at the specific museums that published them and a limited number of libraries. Publications on Asian modern art in English include those by the University of Sydney’s John Clark,⁰⁵ numerous anthologies on a diverse range of regions and periods in the history of Asian art, and catalogues for exhibitions that cover inter-Asian

modern art, such as “Realism in Asian Art,”⁰⁶ organized by the Singapore Art Museum and the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea, which are all instructive in gaining a wide knowledge of Asian art. But again, these are not easily accessible for students. Then, how can museums in Japan—including the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum—teach Asian modern art to a general public who cannot read English (or other Asian languages) or get hold of these publications?

2 | The Absence of “Asian Modern Art” in Japan—Why?

These problems in teaching/learning Asian modern art result from the Japan–Europe dualism pervading the Japanese university pedagogy of art, leaving no room for “Asian modern art” to enter the curriculum. Another factor in the lack of education of Asian modern art, aside from that of Japan, is the scarce opportunities the Japanese audience have to encounter the important achievements of modern art from other parts of Asia. That is to say, although there has been a recent increase in exhibitions of Asian *contemporary* art, the number of exhibitions of Asian *modern* art is still significantly fewer. Unfamiliarity with Asian modern art is further exacerbated by the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum’s location: the very museum which has a permanent display of Asian modern art is located on the periphery of Japan. A more general reason for the recent unpopularity of Asian art in Japanese society could also be the introversive (and sometimes nationalistic as well) tendency of the younger generations, as suggested by the recent phenomenon in which 70 percent of the populace in their 20s are reportedly satisfied with their current lives—with a corresponding decrease in the number of Japanese students seeking to enroll in universities abroad. If this is true, it would mean that members of the younger generations are satisfied with their own preoccupations based on the biased information they find on the Internet, and are complacently enclosed within their own environments, which consist solely of their circles of friends and family members. They do not dare to face the harsh realities of other Asian societies or accept the historical responsibilities of their nation.

A more conceptual reason that is of equal importance may be the biased understanding of modern art in Japan. As is the case with other countries in Asia, modernism in Japanese art has mostly been understood as a technical and stylistic innovation imported from Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, the very spirit of modernity originally included connotations of the quest for emancipation from feudalism, dictatorship, colonialism and patriarchy. The exploration of freedom and equality as a human right is a collective effort in European and non-European cultures alike. Despite this, a narrow and limited understanding

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Seinan Gakuin University, September 2011 through January 2012.

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Kim Young-na, *Kankoku kindai bijutsu no hyaku nen* [A Hundred Years of Korean Modern Art], trans. Kanbayashi Tsunemichi (Tokyo: Sangensha, 2011); Kim Hyesin, *Kankoku kindai bijutsu kenkyū: Shokuminchi ki Chōsen bijutsu tenrankai ni miru ibunka shihai to bunka hyōshō* [Study in Korean Modern Art: Domination of Other Cultures and Cultural Representations Seen in the Chosun Art Competition During the Colonial Period] (Tokyo: Brücke, 2005); Lu Weirong, *Chūgoku kindai bijutsu to Nihon* [Chinese Modern Art and Japan] (Tokyo: Akashi Shoten, 2007); Lu Weirong, *Chūgoku kindai bijutsushi ron* [Essays on Chinese Modern Art] (Tokyo: Akashi Shoten, 2010).

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For East Asian art, see Shizuoka Prefectural Museum of Art, ed., *Oil Painting in the [sic] East Asia: Awakening and Development* (Shizuoka: Shizuoka Prefectural Museum of Art, 1999); Rawanchaikul Toshiko and Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, ed., *China Dream: Another Flow of Chinese Modern Art* (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, 2004); Rawanchaikul Toshiko and Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, ed., *Toward the Modernity: Images of Self & Other in East Asian Art Competitions* (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Asian Art Museum et al., 2014). For Southeast Asian art, see Furuichi Yasuko and Nakamoto Kazumi, ed., *Asian Modernism: Diverse Development in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand* (Tokyo: Japan Foundation Asia Center, 1995); Ushiroshōji Masahiro and Fukuoka Art Museum, ed., *The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia: Artists and Movements* (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Art Museum, 1997); Ushiroshōji Masahiro, ed., *50 Years of Modern Vietnamese Art: 1925–75* (Tokyo: Sankei Newspaper Co., 2005). For other Asian regions, see Tokyo Station Gallery and Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, ed., *Modern Paintings of Mongolia: Its Origin up to Today* (Tokyo: Sankei Newspaper Co., 2002).

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The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, and the Japan Foundation, ed., *Cubism in Asia: Unbounded Dialogues* (Tokyo: National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo/Japan Foundation, 2005).

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John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1998); and *Asian Modernities: Chinese and Thai Art Compared, 1980 to 1999* (Sydney: Power Publications, 2011).

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Joyce Fan and Kim Inhye, ed., *Realism in Asian Art* (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore & Gwacheon: National Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea, 2010).

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Ushiroshōji Masahiro, "Realism as an Attitude: Asian Art in the 1990s" in *The 4th Asian Art Show Fukuoka*, exh. cat. (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Art Museum, 1994), 33–38.

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Oh Yoon, *Marketing V: Hell* (1981), private collection.

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Kim Mikyung, *Hanguk ui silhom misul* [Experimental Art in Korea] (Seoul: Sigon Art, 2003).

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KuroDalaiJee, *Nikutai no anākizumuru: 1960 nendai nihon bijutsu ni okeru pafōmansu no chika suimyaku* [Anarchy of the Body: Undercurrents of Performance Art in 1960s Japan] (Tokyo: grambooks, 2010).

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Christopher Pinney, "Photos of the Gods": *The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 68–69.

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Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-Garde 1922–1947* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 84–90.

of modernity as a style was born from the elitist notion shared only among the socially, culturally and economically privileged who had the means to study Western art. However, it is obvious that the kind of modernity described above merely constitutes a fraction of modernity in Asian art. If we examine two other modes of modernity—modernity as technique/technology and modernity as resistance (including Ushiroshōji Masahiro's "Realism as an Attitude," see pp. 24–29)⁰⁷—we can expand the notion of Asian art history to understand it as part of expansive social transformation in Asia (see chart).

My thoughts above derive, first, from the Japanese audience's quick dismissal of the masterpieces of Asian modern art as either epigones or local versions of modern art based on the European paradigm, with which they are overly familiar (it must be said that Western art lovers have the same tendency regarding modern Japanese art, but the Japanese audience is oblivious to this). Secondly, I think our task of teaching should not consist only of conveying knowledge or information from Euro-American culture, but should also encourage people's awareness that Japanese culture is *part of* Asian culture. For this, we need a new viewpoint that will enable us to better understand Asian modernity more holistically among neighbors who live in similar social, historical and cultural situations.

3 | Parallel History

The parallelism between modernism as an elitist style and modernity as democratic resistance is often found in the history of Asian modern art. It is surprising that modernist oil paintings from the early 1930s in Shanghai, represented by the Storm Society (*Jielanshe*, active 1931–35), were contemporaneous to the woodcut movement advocated and promoted by Lu Xun and artists in the same city since 1931.

A more bewildering example is the parallel between monochrome painting (*Dansaekhwa*) and People's Art (*Minjung Misul*) in 1980s Korea. O Yun (1946–1986), one of the leading artists of early People's Art, depicted a monochrome painter as a criminal in hell, standing before a mirror and being shown the sins of his life.⁰⁸ Likewise, experimental tendencies in Neo-Dada, Pop Art and performance from the late 1960s and early '70s in Korea, which had been neglected as transitional between Informel painting and monochrome painting, have only recently become a subject of art historical research,⁰⁹ with the achievements of that research being displayed in exhibitions. However, it must be noted that this re-evaluation occurred much later compared with People's Art, which has now been recognized by the more democratized government.

In Japan as well, the minimalist tendency that came to be known as Mono-ha (School of Things), which emerged in 1968—an iconic year of worldwide contestation by students and citizens—is now discussed as an important art movement. However,

Mono-ha and other minimalist tendencies now appear to be detached from the contemporaneous popular culture and political movements in comparison to the street performances of collectives such as Zero Jigen (Zero Dimension, active 1963–72),¹⁰ for example, which, despite being neglected by mainstream art historical discourse until recently, occurred during the same period in Shinjuku, the mecca of counter-culture in Tokyo at the time.

These examples of parallelism in contemporaneous art practices disclose the long prevailing attitudes of art critics, art historians and museum curators who spotlight only physical works—which are therefore saleable and collectable—and admire art which they can easily discuss in relation to Western art history and theory.

4 | The Formation of a National Consciousness via Print Art

Print art is another example of Asian art that has often been marginalized in the understanding of modernity derived from the above-mentioned biased view of art history.

The prints by Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906) can be understood as a convergence of technical innovation (realistic depiction and print technology), style and resistance in Asian modernity. Varma is known for his portraits, historical paintings and mythological paintings commissioned by the maharajas, rulers of the Indian princely states, but from 1895 he also gained pan-Indian popularity through mechanical reproductions of his paintings (oleographs), which promoted notions of "Indian-ness" and the spread of national consciousness. Sometimes incorporating allegorical resistance to the British rulers through conventional subjects from the *Mahabharata*,¹¹ his images were also appropriated in embroidery, postcards and interior murals. Varma's Japanese counterpart—in terms of mastering the techniques of oil painting without having attended a Western art school—is Takahashi Yuichi (1828–1894). Takahashi advocated the supremacy of oil painting, setting up a private school and proposing the establishment of an art museum, but he has never enjoyed the same degree of admiration as Varma. Although Takahashi's most famous work, *Salmon*, is often reproduced in history textbooks, I cannot imagine the painting encourages children's sense of national pride in the way that Varma was able to achieve through print media.

Varma is not an isolated example of an artist who bridged technical innovation with popularity. At Visva Bharati, an art college founded in 1901 by Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) in Shantiniketan, India, artists Nandalal Bose (1882–1966) and Benodebehari Mukhopadhyaya (1904–1980) encouraged their students to paint murals as art for the people—to create art for the public sphere.¹² In Sri Lanka, muralist Maligawage Sarlis (1880–1955) also produced European-style prints of Buddhist motifs

with subjects depicted in classical Sri Lankan attire and accessories, supposedly as part of the Buddhist revivalist movement. If murals are also public in terms of scale, then it follows that print art is public in terms of quantity. The co-existence of these two public media is also found in Korean People's Art. Woodcut and linocut prints were reproduced in newsletters, brochures, flyers and book covers; numerous large hanging paintings (*korge kurim*) and banner paintings (*kippal kurim*) were created often in collaboration with students and laborers for political demonstration and rallies, and thus called "on-site art" (*hyunjang misul*).

I do not mean to argue that political art is superior to the "fine" art of elitist modernism, but it would not be appropriate to ignore the enormous social effects these forms of visual culture had in the public sphere only because they were used—or abused—for political purposes or were ephemeral and often destroyed or confiscated.

We can explore the importance of mass reproduced and ephemeral media—excluded from "art" history and/or unpreserved due to their low value—in modern Asian art in the less political, more vulgar images carried in popular magazines, created by both painters and professional cartoonists. In China, popular magazines such as *Shidai manhua* (Modern Sketch, 1934–37) and *Shanghai manhua* (Shanghai

Sketch, 1936–37) had cartoons which were highly modern both in terms of style and subject matter, conveying a different reality from that represented in the oil paintings or woodcut prints of the same period. Ni Yide (1901–1971), one of the leading artists of *Jielanshe* (The Storm Society), later participated in the creation of an anti-Japan propaganda mural in Wuhan; Liang Baipo (1911–1987), another *Jielanshe* member, became a magazine cartoonist with her partner, Ye Qianyu (1907–1995). She presented the lives of women in the modern city in *Honeybee Girl*, carried in *Libao* magazine in 1935, and thereafter painted anti-Japan propaganda murals. These examples illustrate the situation whereby, in the social climate of the time, "modernity as style" was inevitably caught up in the wave of "modernity as resistance." A similar example of a descent from high to popular art in Japanese modern art can be seen in the artist Yanase Masamu (1900–1945), who showed prominent talent in modernist, avant-garde (Mavo), cartoons and proletarian art alike.

5 | To Understand the Totality of Asian Modernity

To repeat, modernity in Asian art was manifested variously as technique, style and resistance. The accompanying chart may seem to be arranged in chronological order from top to bottom, but there

Chart of Asian Modern Art

| | | | | |
|---------------------------|---|---|--|--|
| A Modernity as Technique | 1 | Technical Realism by oil, etc (perspective, chiaroscuro) | Traditional workshop by artisans (fusion with traditional paintings) | -Trade Painting [China] -Company School Miniature [India] -Saya Chone et al. [Myanmar] |
| | | | Art education in Western style | -Academicism [China, India, and Vietnam] |
| | 2 | Technical Realism+ Printing/Photographic Technique | Academism + popularity by printing = Nationalism | -Raja Ravi Varma [India] -Sarlis (print/mural) [Sri Lanka] |
| B Modernity as Style | 1 | European Modernism | Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism | -Storm Society (<i>Jielanshe</i>) [China] -Group 43 [Sri Lanka] |
| | 2 | Modernism + Nationalism | Revival and recycling of traditional art | -Bengali School [India] |
| C Modernity as Resistance | 1 | Realism + Nationalism | Depiction of the indigenous reality and people | -PERSAGI [Indonesia] -People's Art [Korea] (Reality and Utterance) |
| | 2 | Popular Art / Printed Picture | Print reproduction and popularity | -Woodcut Movement [China] |
| | | | Political struggle at rallies and street demonstrations, etc | -Kaisahan [Philippines] -People's Art (On-Site Art) [Korea] -Taring Padi [Indonesia] |
| | 3 | Direct Action | Anti-institutional art | -Street Performance [Japan, Taiwan, Korea, etc] |
| | | | Engagement in community issues | -Dispatch Art [Korea] etc |

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In Raden Saleh's *The Arrest of Diponegoro* (1857, collection Istana Negera, Jakarta), the artist comically depicted the faces of the Dutch officers who captured the rebellion leader Diponegoro as too large for their bodies; in Juan Luna's *Spoliarium* (1884, collection National Museum of the Philippines, Manila), the artist focused on fallen gladiators in the Roman Colosseum.

were, in fact, two or three modes of modernity that co-existed. Technical modernization is ongoing even to this day, and resistance can be found even in the early stages of modern art in Asia, in the academic paintings of the Indonesian painter Raden Saleh (c.1811–1880) and the Filipino painter Juan Luna (1857–1899),¹³ for example. Moreover, there are no clear distinctions between these three modes. For example, if the oil paintings of Xu Beihong (1895–1953) or Fernando Amorsolo (1892–1972)—both known for their academic style—are disseminated as reproductions, their images can spread beyond the limited circle of privileged art lovers to become icons representing a nationalistic spirit for the common people. Likewise, a watercolor by Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951), *Mother India* (1905, collection Rabindra Bharati Society), and a linocut by Nandalal Bose depicting Gandhi's Salt Satyagraha (1930, collection National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi), both became icons of Indian nationalism through print reproductions.

In contrast to those in white, the parts of the chart that are shaded gray represent practices that are either less discussed or sometimes entirely ignored by the art historical discourse centered

on the stylistic development of surviving unique objects and their analysis in relation to Western art history, while those in bold letters represent arts made of cheap and/or ephemeral media. If we try to understand Asian modernity as consisting of a series of composites of elements such as realism and nationalism, isolated experimentation and popular dissemination, professional and amateur art, high and low art (or subculture), the original and reproduction, the permanent and ephemeral, then art history can be a part of the social history of Asia.

I emphasize the necessity of understanding this structure of modernity and its differing layers for deconstructing the cultural hierarchy within Asia—for forming a commune that extends beyond cultural and historical differences and hierarchies—in the hopes that this solidarity can overcome the hierarchical relationship between the original and its epigone. Despite recent trends toward optimistically celebrating Asian contemporary art's supposed borderless-ness and globalization while consuming and abusing art for business purposes, this, I believe, will contribute to the increase and growth of scholars and students who are willing to teach and learn Asian modern art as "our" own social history.

Essay 14

Insular Visions: Notes on Video Art in Singapore

David Teh

David Teh is a researcher based at the National University of Singapore. His curatorial projects include "Platform" (2006), "The More Things Change" (5th Bangkok Experimental Film Festival, 2008), "Unreal Asia" (55. Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, 2009), "Video Vortex #7" (Yogyakarta, 2011) and "TRANSMISSION" (Jim Thompson Art Center, Bangkok, 2014). His writings have appeared in *Third Text*, *ARTMargins*, *Afterall*, *Theory Culture & Society*, *LEAP* and *The Bangkok Post*, and his new book, *Thai Art: Currencies of the Contemporary*, will be published in 2017 by MIT Press. He is also a director of Future Perfect, a gallery and project platform in Singapore.

The essay at the outset ponders a problem of context: How to historicize video art in Southeast Asia? It is attentive to the question not only of history but also of historiography: How is a particular aesthetic practice like video rendered present in time and space? How is this presence made to matter in social discourse? The space that is Southeast Asia, according to David Teh, has been shaped by "deep hybridity" and resists typification. In spite of this high level of mixture and eccentricity, he nevertheless risks speculative propositions on the "distinctive formal, historical and political parameters" of video art in Southeast Asia. The temporal framework in which video art plays out in this essay is the Cold War and beyond; and the running logic that runs through the project of video making is a complex articulation of "tradition" that serves as "pretext" and "screen" through which a modernist gesture is performed. Teh identifies aspects of the said parameters and inflects them theoretically. First is medium-specificity in relation to the interface of video with other forms like performance. For Teh, it might be more productive to deploy the term "remediation" instead of medium-specificity to address the production of a particular video form in the region. Second is the orality that animates video, a procedure of channeling or a "social process of mediumship" in which music, storytelling and spiritual traditions constitute the video form. Lastly is the response of video to authoritarian systems that partly morphed from postindependence nation-states in Southeast Asia. It is against this background that Teh makes an initial foray into the situation of video in Singapore, a country negotiating the tension between political constraints and economic affluence. He approaches it from the perspective of psycho-geography, annotating the history of video in Singapore in the context of hypermodernity and alienation, on the one hand, and its historical and geographic specificity as an island in the global world, on the other.

Source: First published as "SEA STATE: Notes on Video Art in Singapore," in *Moving On Asia 2004–2013*, ed. Yeran Jang and Kim Jihye (Seoul: Alternative Space LOOR, 2012), 440–445. Revised for this publication by the author, 2016.

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ASIA Z

01

Parts of this text appeared previously in David Teh, "Recalibrating Media: Three Theses on Video and Media Art in Southeast Asia," in *Video, an Art, a History 1965–2010*, exh. cat. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2011).

How should we begin to historicize video art in Southeast Asia? The region itself is hard to define, comprising a wide spectrum of mixed modernities, from economic laggards slow to emerge from postwar socialist experiments to the hypermodern financial services hub of Singapore. Originally a figment of the imperial–military imagination (British, Japanese and US American), what we now call Southeast Asia is a creature of World War II and the Cold War. But the area was linked up in other configurations, bridging the Chinese, Indian and Arab worlds for centuries before the Europeans arrived, leaving a deep hybridity unique to the region, but one that is far from uniform. Southeast Asia may now be carved up into nation-states, but its art history cannot be.

The region's video art may seem far removed from this past, having only emerged since the end of the Cold War, in a period marked by quickening global and intraregional exchange, both economic and cultural. But conspicuous examples prove otherwise, revealing how media practices have been shaped by those conflicted modernities, and how much video-makers still draw upon local cultural resources. Few may be traditionalists, yet fewer still ignore their heritage altogether. In fact, tradition is often the pretext—we might say the *screen*—for the most modern of gestures. Hence, Arahmaiani's *I Don't Want to Be Part of Your Legend* (2004), an eerie, feminist revision of an Indian epic (the Ramayana) that is part of the DNA of narrative throughout the region. Similarly, in Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's *Two Planets* series (2008–09), we observe what happens when an oral culture confronts the stuff of a literary art history. Villagers from the artist's neighborhood in northern Thailand sit before reproductions of masterpieces of early modern painting. As they try to make sense of the images, and frequently digress, art history is demystified—its meanings refreshed—as it becomes a pretext for idle gossip and bawdy jokes.

Such works remind us that with globalization, what might be shared between cultures is not simply technology and capital, but also *experience*—the sense of nature and community, the struggles of work, the pressures of social norms. These sympathies no doubt underwrite the appeal, and the legibility, of video art from diverse and distant places. And yet these societies, even as they are increasingly shaped by video culture, also sketch new contours for the medium itself—determining what it can and can't communicate, what it can and can't do—and we must therefore pay close attention to the cultural contingencies of each place. Video is not the same medium everywhere.

The following thoughts emerged in an earlier essay occasioned by a touring show of media art from the collection of the Centre Georges Pompidou, entitled "Video, an Art, a History 1965–2010," hosted by the Singapore Art Museum.⁰¹ In the exhibition catalogue, I offered three "theses" about video art in

Southeast Asia. My intention was not to generalize about this sprawling field of activity, much less to lay down exclusive regional criteria. Rather, my propositions were speculative, designed to guide the study of video art in this region by identifying some distinctive formal, historical and political parameters. The present text offers a chance to revise my thoughts and try, with those parameters in mind, to describe Singapore's somewhat unusual position in this regional frame. For while its video art is decisively conditioned by the island's geo-political surroundings, it also departs from some prevailing aesthetic trends in the region.

Video in Southeast Asia: Towards a Regional Theory

The first of my theses was that *video is (and is not) film*. The notion of "medium specificity" was a guiding principle of much Euro-American video art, bolstering its claims to experimentality and its rejection of narrative and other cinematic conventions. But while this formal predisposition can be discerned here and there in Southeast Asian video, it is by no means prevalent, and to assume the same antagonism with film would be a mistake. Having been exposed to the video art of the 1970s, pioneering artists like Apinan Poshyananda and Lee Wen were aware of the medium's specific traits, but these were less important to them than video's integration with other art forms, especially performance.

Artists trained in the 1990s and since, in increasingly cross-disciplinary environments, are perhaps more mindful of the medium's specificity, but are just as unlikely to confine themselves to it. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Chris Chong and Ho Tzu Nyen, for example, while attentive to the distinctions between film and video, explore the characteristics and the genres of both. This suggests one way that a theory of video might be recalibrated for this part of the world: to emphasize *remediation*, rather than medium specificity. In the Malay world (which includes Singapore), we could start with video's rechanneling of various performance traditions, especially those of the theater. Not only have these traditions survived and absorbed colonization and modernization, they also point to a shared, pre-national heritage that bridges mainland and insular Southeast Asia. This prehistory has shaped even modern, mass media in locally specific ways. For understanding video's place in this genealogy, a regional theory of remediation will be more fruitful than any formalist approach.

My second proposal concerned *video as an oral medium*. While McLuhan's global vision of a neo-tribal social connection is still a matter for debate—revived now by the "social web" and portable media devices—in Southeast Asia video's oral capacities are especially pronounced, and do more to shape the medium's use here than in

places where print literacy has prevailed. Despite the rationalization of communications during and since the Cold War, oral transmission is still preponderant in everyday life. Important dialogues occur face-to-face; telephone and voice remain more tangible, and binding, than text or email; memories are embedded in narratives, more than in objects. All this suggests that video should be seen not primarily as a channel, but as a channeling—a social process of mediumship.⁰² Its amplitude as a medium rests on its valence among older, oral forms: music, storytelling, dance, dramatic and spiritual traditions. While none of these emerged from the 20th century unscathed, they still draw from wells of cultural meaning and artistic ingenuity that are pre-national, indigenous and cross-cultural. As film studies struggles in the straightjacket of national cinema, video studies will open up the pre-national histories of the moving image, and perhaps discover some regional coherence.

The third thesis was about *the long shadow of authoritarianism*. Whereas video art had emerged in the West along with upheavals in bourgeois civil society, its emergence in Southeast Asia has been in dialogue—though not always directly—with authoritarianism. This is perhaps the only structural condition shared throughout the region, from the “soft” authoritarianism of Singapore or Malaysia; through the strongman cronyism of the Philippines under Marcos, or Indonesia under Suharto; to the repressive militarism of Myanmar or the post-socialist bureaucracies of Vietnam and Laos. The Cold War saw media power jealously guarded by government and the military, forces that still shape the program of video to this day. History, insofar as it took the form of moving images, thus conformed more to the official than to the popular imagination. It streamlined cultural and political differences, and in many cases effaced them altogether. But media power has lately been decentralized—in some cases rapidly—with the arrival of corporate and supra-national channels such as cable, satellite and the web. And decentralization has coincided with the mass dissemination of digital video, with exciting results. Citizen journalism has taken root online, challenging the official picture even where there is no free press.⁰³

For artists, however, the state’s stranglehold had long cheapened the moving image’s epistemological value; and they now seem disinclined to restore it, even where that grip has been relaxed. Few use video to compete with, or correct, the official record. Instead, they pursue a new *immediacy*, characterized by improvisation and play, by found and “mixed” realities. The exemplary case is certainly Indonesia since the fall of Suharto in 1998 (*reformasi*), where video art’s development has been inseparable from a wider flourishing of DIY culture, activist media collectives and community video initiatives.⁰⁴

Video in Singapore: A Different Drummer

If Southeast Asia’s art history is immature, its video art history is embryonic. Developing a historically informed discourse will demand the resources of other, related histories. Yet cinema studies in the region offers little; it has been slow to widen its focus from the national–industrial core. Singapore’s film historiography is a case in point, and especially impoverished: local production evaporated after the country’s accidental independence in 1965, and since, a strong nationalist imperative has favored blindness to both the rich film heritage it shared with Malaysia, and its close industrial and cultural affinities elsewhere in East Asia.⁰⁵ Indeed, perhaps the most striking feature of Singapore’s moving image history is that it was *always transnational*. Awkward attempts to nationalize a Straits Chinese aesthetic—as in Kwok Kian Chow’s would-be canonical art history of the mid-1990s—would make even less sense with film history.⁰⁶ Since the 1990s, though, local production has restarted in earnest, attracting state investment and encouraging an energetic community of independent filmmakers and researchers.⁰⁷

Along with this renaissance came a flourishing of experimental film and video, including some quite sophisticated forays into both formalist and narrative video art. Notable practitioners may loosely be divided into three groups: filmmakers with a penchant for experiment like Victric Thng, Eva Tang, Royston Tan and Malaysian-born Sherman Ong; those more firmly rooted in the visual arts like Tan Kai Syng, Ho Tzu Nyen, Michael Tan, Charles Lim, Michael Lee and UK-based Erika Tan; and those with closer ties to performance art and experimental theater including Choy Ka Fai, Loo Zihan and, before his marked turn toward cinema history in 2005, Ming Wong.⁰⁸ Thematically, their work covers all the chief obsessions of Singaporean contemporary art: hyper-modernity and the built environment; alienation and changing social *mores*; postcolonial identities and multiculturalism; and across all three groups, the exploration of performance and the performative body. But much of this activity—while it articulates intercultural anxieties shared across the region—in fact distinguishes Singaporean video from its regional counterparts.

As elsewhere, the affordability of DV cameras and desktop editing platforms has had a dramatic impact, but the outcomes have been quite different to those in other countries. In general, Singaporean artists strive for higher production values; their work tends to be neither observational, nor spontaneous; and they are more likely to work with specialist and professional technical crews, in contrast with the explosion of grass-roots collective and DIY video-making in Indonesia, and with the more personal, auteurial spirit prevailing in Thailand. These distinctions may be attributed in part to Singapore’s affluence. Those emerging in the 2000s have

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See Rosalind C. Morris, *In the Place of Origins: Modernity and its Mediums in Northern Thailand* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000).

03

For examples from two very different national contexts, compare the escapades of Singapore’s Martyn See with the clandestine video journalism of the Democratic Voice of Burma: Martyn See, *Singapore Rebel*, accessed May 2016, <http://singaporerebel.blogspot.com>; and Anders Østergaard, *Burma VJ: Reporting from a Closed Country* (2008), film, 1:26:34, posted to Vimeo by Anders Østergaard, accessed May 2016, <https://vimeo.com/33160416>.

04

See Krisna Murti, *Essays on Video Art and New Media: Indonesia and Beyond*, trans. Marjorie Suanda (Yogyakarta: IVAA, 2009).

05

At time of writing (2012), Wikipedia’s account of Singapore cinema began in 1991; see “Cinema of Singapore,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinema_of_Singapore. For a more thorough chronology see Raphaël Millet, *Singapore Cinema* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2006).

06

Kwok Kian Chow, *Channels & Confluences: A History of Singapore Art* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 1996).

07

Notable publications include Millet’s *Singapore Cinema*, the Asian Film Archive’s promotion of Rajendra Gour as Singapore’s first “indie” filmmaker, and Ben Slater’s *Kinda Hot: The Making of Saint Jack in Singapore* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2006).

08

It is notable that Singapore’s pavilion at the Venice Biennale was devoted to video work in both 2011 (Ho Tzu Nyen’s *Cloud of Unknowing*) and 2009 (Ming Wong’s *Life of Imitation*, which won a Special Mention Prize from the Biennale’s jury).

09

Eugene Tan, "Singapore: Too Contemporary for Art?," in *Contemporary Art in Singapore*, ed. Gunalan Nadarajan, Russell Storer and Eugene Tan (Singapore: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 2007), 24.

enjoyed relatively easy access to art schools in the West. Overseas experience has strongly informed the work of Ming Wong, Ho Tzu Nyen, Erika Tan and Tan Kai Syng, who practice and exhibit more abroad than at home. We should also note the state's programmatic investment in training and development, equipment and production in the cultural industries. Digital animation was particularly encouraged, with generous incentives attracting high-profile corporate players like Lucasfilm, which opened its Singapore studio in 2005. Yet this commercial activity has had scant impact on video practice beyond the art schools; if anything, it probably turned serious artists away from animation.

Another salient feature of Singaporean video art is sensitivity to the island's historical and geographic peculiarities. This may be surprising, given Singapore's awkward relations with neighboring countries and its blinkered devotion to the future. (Art history in particular has been comprehensively suppressed and still lacks institutional footings, a cause of growing embarrassment to those promoting Singapore as a cultural and educational hub.) But artists clearly feel a responsibility to broaden and question the narratives—and illuminate the historical blind spots—propagated by the state, although certain sensitive issues are still scrupulously avoided. Most artists draw somehow on documentary aesthetics, though artfully, as in the automatic videography of Tan Pin Pin's *80 km/h* (2005), a 10-year time-lapse indexing the island's rapid urbanization. The stand-out here is surely Ho Tzu Nyen, whose theatrical deconstruction of Singapore's foundation myths, *Utama—Every Name in History is I* (2003), traced the uneasy seam between colonial and oral histories. The work subtly sketched the precolonial political geography into which Singapore was born, but which the paranoid state still prefers to conceal. Ho is not the only artist putting video to this task. Choy Ka Fai's research-based installation, *Lan Fang Chronicles* (2010), surveyed an area in West Borneo (now part of Indonesia) that was the seat of a 107-year republican experiment by Hakka Chinese from the late 18th century. Almost science-fictional in its breadth and detail, this was not a subversive exercise, and yet it threw an oblique, critical light on Singapore's own imperfect political order and diverse, diasporic foundations. Charles Lim's video practice shows how Singapore's national imaginary—and its impressive built environment—are in fact structured by a hydrosphere and maritime geography that have been erased from everyday experience. Lim's ongoing *SEA STATE* project stems from the earlier geo-informatic investigations of *tsunamii.net* (2001–05), his celebrated collaboration with Woon Tien Wei and scientist Melvin Phua. With their transnational scope and studiously unromantic aesthetic, such projects suggest that the underlying program of video is a kind of documentary materialism, reinscribing Singapore's geophysical surroundings in the insular national imaginary.

Body, Voice, Authority

Returning to our three theses, we begin to see how Singaporean video art does and does not fit in with a Southeast Asian video aesthetic. The city-state probably generates more medium-specific work than its neighbors, yet seeing video in historical perspective as an "intermedia" form, a more complex picture emerges. Though they remain important records of artistic engagement with the medium, few of Lee Wen's or Amanda Heng's performance videos could be described as video art. Indeed, there are few connections between the Artists Village—the genesis of "contemporary" practice in Singapore in the 1980s, to which performance was central—and the generation of video-makers that emerged in the 2000s. And yet, the special bond between video and performance seems to be still intact, and especially strong in the work of Singapore's most successful artists. This persistence suggests not only the special and enduring currency of dance and theater, but also video's position in a genealogy of moving images where film and video are just two kindred mediums among others, in no way opposed.

I have suggested that Southeast Asian video is marked by an affinity with oral forms of transmission, but in Singapore this affinity is less apparent in video works made for gallery contexts. Such work tends to lack the immediacy and spontaneity found elsewhere in the region. Shots are usually set up, narratives usually scripted. The camera's role in public space is no doubt conditioned by the state's regulatory zeal, and a national allergy to the unplanned; and it yields a deliberately neutral videographic mode and an equivocal editorial posture that are quite peculiar to Singapore. The documentaries of Tan Pin Pin are exemplary of this staged orality, marked by a careful effacement of any authorial or editorial stance. Most of her work is not video art as such, but her use of the medium speaks volumes about the spatial and political constraints within which Singapore's artists toil. Video-makers are keenly attuned to the ironies and absurdities of "soft" authoritarianism, and are in this sense descendants of the non-oppositional critique with which Eugene Tan characterized the conceptualism of the 1990s. ⁹⁹

Critical responses to broadcast culture have been a mainstay of video art, from Nam June Paik's experiments and the video activism of the 1960s and '70s, through Bill Viola's *Reverse Television* project in the 1980s, to the convergent online video channels of today. In Southeast Asia, artists have largely been locked out of state-controlled infrastructure, but this has not stopped them from undertaking structural and generic engagements with TV, such as Apichatpong's *Windows* (1999) and *Haunted Houses* (2001), Tad Ermitaño's *Cathode Jam* (1992) and Jompert's grass-roots community media project, *Neighbors* (2000). In Singapore, the state still retains a tight monopoly on broadcasting, but

ironically, this has afforded video artists some limited access. Ho Tzu Nyen's *4x4—Episodes of Singapore Art* (2005)—at once reflexive national history of art and postmodern portrait of the artist and his tenuous place in Singaporean society—is shot through with implicit critique of the state, yet was aired on the government-run Arts Central TV channel.

Notwithstanding the limitations on political expression, Singapore's contemporary art is conspicuously historical, and nothing if not discursive, traits that may be traced to the pioneering conceptualism of artists like Tang Da Wu and Cheo Chai Hiang. Moreover, art's *own* history, and

art discourse, rank amongst its chief concerns, a reflexivity hardly widespread in the region. As a form favored by many of the country's leading artists, digital video has become an indispensable tool for public intellectual reflection. And, paradoxically, it is video's affinity with the stage and the staged, rather than the real, that lends it its critical amplitude—an amplitude not enjoyed by photography, which remains mired in a social realism more consonant with state agendas. Video art opens windows onto the vexed psycho-geography of an island whose past and future are inescapably regional, however insular its present.

The Shifting Art–Historical Field for Southeast Asia: Tradition, Modernity and “The Contemporary”

Michelle Antoinette

Michelle Antoinette is a researcher of modern and contemporary Asian art, based at the Australian National University (ANU) in the Centre for Art History and Art Theory at the School of Art. From 2017, she is researching new public participation in Asian art and museums, supported by an Australian Research Council (ARC) Fellowship. From 2010–13 she was an ARC Postdoctoral Fellow at ANU researching the growth of regional and international networks of contemporary Asian art and museums. She has been Convener and Lecturer at ANU for courses on Asian and Pacific art and museums. Her previous and ongoing research focuses on the contemporary art histories of Southeast Asia, on which she has published widely. She is author of *Reworlding Art History: Encounters with Contemporary Southeast Asian Art after 1990* (2015) and co-editor with Caroline Turner of *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities and World-making* (2014).

This essay is adapted from the first chapter of the author's book, *Reworlding Art History: Encounters with Contemporary Southeast Asian Art after 1990*, published in 2015. It is a sprawling survey of positions and practices that aims to reworld the discipline and knowledge of art history through an analysis of contemporary Southeast Asian art in the 1990s and beyond. Michelle Antoinette plots out an art-historical field for the region and regards it as shifting, constantly unsettled and remapped by the contentious claims of tradition, modernity and the contemporary. She initiates the discussion by rethinking the relationship between tradition and modernization and creates a conceptual space in which modern and contemporary art in Southeast Asia could be seen in the context of this relationship and not in the vise of dualism. This complex relationship surfaces as a common ground between tradition and modernization as well as between the modern and the contemporary. Sustaining her argument are the views of what she calls the first-generation of scholars credited with “pioneering attempts to activate and inspire new methods and perspectives, reflecting especially these scholars’ own locales, but some also considering the region as a whole.” In charting the world of the contemporary in Southeast Asia, Antoinette looks into turning points in the history of the shift from the modern to the contemporary. These include the flashpoint of the 1970s, the time of “initial ruptures ... with modernist traditions” and the discourse of the postmodern; the emergence of the artist-curator; the turmoil of the socio-political context; the increasing demands for internationalism; and the institutionalization of practice and discourse, on the one hand, and the consolidation of the art market, on the other. The locus of this investigation is the 1990s, which in Antoinette’s imagination unleashed an “unprecedented degree of energetic engagement with contemporary Southeast Asian art.” It was a hectic and turbulent time of global circulation, assertive representation of local subjectivity and intense commitment to cross the boundaries of the different social worlds of art.

[PF]

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