Recasting Tradition: Heritage and the Everyday as Critical Devices of Contemporary Southeast Asian Art

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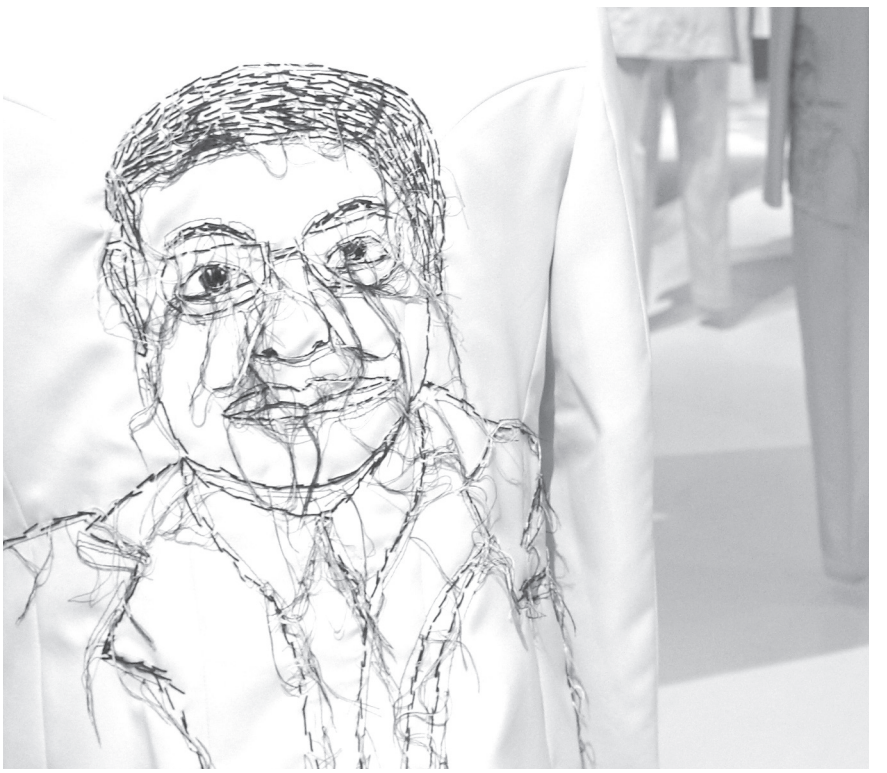

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Contemporary Southeast Asian art's critical preoccupation with tradition has been a salient characteristic of the field for several decades. The issue was prominently flagged by the exhibition *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions,* curated by Apinan Poshyananda in 1996. That groundbreaking New York show, among other points, articulated the frictions arising from the challenge to still-pervasive tradition in globalising, late twentieth century Asia.[1] Today, two decades later, regional artists continue to grapple with this concern and its consequences. What do these artists see in traditional culture still part of everyday life? What aspects

of local heritages do they fit into their practices to create conversations with audiences? What facets arising from the confrontation of tradition and the now do they retain and mine in their art?

This paper explores the way in which selected Southeast Asian artists have referenced tradition in their art——via images, media, techniques, systems——to develop critical perspectives on social realities. Via studied works, the paper considers how practitioners deconstruct, subvert, recontextualise, and otherwise deploy elements of tradition to create pieces able to frame complex questions surfacing in Southeast Asia. The paper shows how these references to tradition operate distinctly from the promotion of national identity. [2] Starting with the reasons and stimuli for regional artists' quest for new expressive languages from the 1970s onwards, the paper traces artistic change and its relationship to cultural heritage. It also examines Southeast Asian art's singular appropriation of elements of tradition which are argued as both expressively sophisticated and easily legible, a critical tool inspiring audience involvement and questioning, rather than an exercise in nostalgia or nationalistic essentialism.

Social change and new expressive languages in emerging contemporary Southeast Asian art

Definitions of Southeast Asian contemporary art, and the nature of the latter's relationship to modern art as it developed in Southeast Asia from the late nineteenth century onward, are not universally agreed. [3] However, most acknowledge contemporary art in Southeast Asia as a rupture from academic painting, with evidence of visual practices altering in genre, approach, and mode of reception as early as the 1970s in the case of some artists. [4] The study of selected works reveals traits characterising these breakaway forms, among others: a critical or discursial outlook on local society and culture; an interest in concept underpinning the aesthetic; and the exploration of materials and iconographies outside art school repertoires,

especially appropriation of objects and images from tradition and the everyday.[5] Though the precise time-frame of artistic renewal that is now termed 'contemporary Southeast Asian art' is still debated——not least as it varies according to geography ——, it is manifest that change was associated with forces beyond the art world.[6] The scrutiny of the linkage between social shift and artistic evolution, post-1970s, makes sense of the region's developing visual languages, with society and culture appearing consistently as expressive themes of art, albeit referenced allusively, rather than described explicitly. Social and economic transformations of recent decades, provoked in part by globalisation and the end of the Cold War, affected all strata of society. Citizens of Southeast Asia, no longer colonial subjects, and emerging from a period of intense national construction where the state left little space for individual aspirations, could now imagine shaping their own destiny.[7] In 1986 Vietnam, doi moi economic reforms that introduced consumerism and the global market altered the way ordinary people perceived their role in society. In Indonesia, political repression under the Suharto regime, followed by post——1998 *Reformasi* (political and social liberalising reforms), fostered an era of social and political awareness conducive to innovation in art-making. In Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines, the arrival of global capital during the pre-1997 Asian Crisis Tiger years contributed to social evolution that influenced culture. It is no surprise then that artists, keenly interested in these disruptions and progressions, and in some cases anticipating them, implemented new visual languages to translate and react to these phenomena. Not only was social change the theme of this art of rupture, the opening provided by changing times also favored expressive experimentation conducive to the introduction of innovative languages. Innovation included conceptual underpinnings and modes of collective engagement conveyed via motifs and processes closely associated with everyday life, including tradition.

During this period, as citizens called for more freedom to decide the future—— through nascent democratic processes or other means, according to political system——, some artists experimented outside the safety of the state——sanctioned mainstream. Such artists are seldom described as "avant-garde" in the literature,

presumably due to the term's loaded Euramerican inflection. However art historian John Clark references an Asian and Southeast Asian socially-critical avant-garde, so following Clark, one could legitimately describe artists discussed in this study as the regional avant-garde. [8]

Whatever their labelling, these artists' practices were enlisted consciously for communicating social ideas, mostly obliquely; or in some cases, when art was not overtly critical, it still broke formally and thematically with art school and national establishment conformity, indirectly challenging power. Did the hint of emancipation that came from the period's social change embolden artists to make freer works responding to society in movement? Or did artists actively seek social progress, their pieces propelling change? Answers vary according to artists examined, but whether precursors or commentators, practitioners called viewers into dialogue. From the 1970s onwards, the enlarged creative terrain that would later be understood as contemporary Southeast Asian art looked beyond the art school for tools of audience interpellation. Keen to express complex realities in their art, and as importantly, interested in their art's ability to connect meaningfully with broad publics, artists pursued an expanded array of building blocks for their practices, and renewing vocabularies with known materials, co-opted elements of local tradition. Among these materials were techniques such as unsigned wood-carving and wood-block printing; media such as hand-made paper, ceramics, textiles, tin cans, discarded packaging, household objects; genres such as puppetry, costumes and masks, suggesting performativity; iconographies and objects with distinctive local connections such as rice-fields, banana trees, water buffalo, elephants, historical figures, farmer women, hijabs, food, mythological creatures, temple architecture, traditional furniture, and more.

Tradition as familiar language for conveying new meanings in art

Social shift, and the simultaneous discomfort and opportunity it engendered, prompted and was the subject of new expressions. Art practices striving to make sense of a world in flux, complex, foreign, uncertain, and exciting, deployed familiar imagery, techniques and media to convey abstract and sometimes contestative ideas. It is apparent, with two decades' hindsight, that taking on multiple intangible concerns in art, in ways distinct from imitation such as that of academic painting, demanded that artists instigate new approaches to communication. Images and methods from tradition and the everyday, available and familiar to viewers and artists alike, could translate unfamiliar concepts and a discursial attitude. Therefore, non-conformist critical approaches on one hand, and well-worn traditional cultural codes on the other, became allies in the development of Southeast Asian contemporary visual practices that even if sharply provocative in their social interrogation, through indirectness defied the censors.

From the 1970s, artists tapped into cultural knowledge provided by tradition. New uses were found for strands of expressive tradition which had been marginalised during the flowering of local modern art, due to being considered of inferior artistic value compared to authored 'fine art' produced in the art schools established by colonial educators. Throughout colonial and proto-colonial Southeast Asia, imported Euramerican artistic precepts often displaced local visual tenets while constructing others. [9] In mid-twentieth century Thailand, for example, the still-life, landscape, and portrait genres of Western academic painting were highly regarded, and those who practiced them considered the period's masters. [10] In Hanoi, after 1925, academic painting on canvas as taught by the French professors of L'Ecole Superieure des Beaux Arts de l'Indochine (EBAI), though anachronistic in European terms, was seen as artistically progressive, while lacquer painting-as-signed-fine-art was pioneered by Vietnamese artists in collaboration with their French teachers. [11] As the Euramerican academy took hold in Southeast Asia, its genres and media overshadowed unsigned modes from tradition, establishing a hierarchy

whereby fine-art enjoyed a prestige no longer attributed to anonymous creative productions from the craft or vernacular architecture repertoire.

At the end of the twentieth century, artists searching for expressive modes to grapple with unfamiliar tensions and openings, do not necessarily discard imported twentieth century 'isms' or painting. However, to articulate confrontation with accelerated change, they expand their creative repertoire, turning to customary local techniques and icons which they weave into learned practices, this layering recalling regional syncretic methodologies. They also depart from imitation, using metaphor——which some might see as reminiscent of the symbolism of religious narrative——to translate difficult-to-describe experiences associated with social frictions. [12] Cultural languages from tradition and the everyday, reconfigured to build contemporary artworks, serve as clues illuminating taboo truths and as facilitators of audience response. Whether this outgrowth from academic convention was deliberate or unconscious, positivist or a reaction against the old order, whether triggered by external or local factors, are variables necessitating case-by-case study. Individual examples notwithstanding, throughout Southeast Asia, ancient and parochial cultural modes, sometimes craft-based, integrated into contemporary art in various ways, strengthened and gave distinctive shape to Southeast Asian creative renewal, while making unfamiliar artistic forms legible to multiple publics.

Not ethnography: tradition for decoding critical intention

Discussing public reaction to Filipino post-modern visual culture in the early 1990s, Philippines art historian Marian Pastor Roces decries the "doubtless conflation of art history and ethnography" that she sees as a popular discursive thread of the period. [13] Yet the "Installation is our art" statement that offends her, past its reductive simplicity, alludes to the easy comprehensibility of installation art derived from the genre's borrowing of well-understood references from vernacular sources. While

some Southeast Asian art of recent decades, including installation, proposes a literal inscription of emblems from tradition that plays to nationalist sentiment, a minority of artists, conversely, deploy such emblems (often transmuted) with critical intention. [14] They appropriate idioms from local heritage, but subverting them, or juxtaposing them with carefully selected imagery or techniques to create tension, practitioners invent alternative codes to produce critical or satirical meaning. Rather than promoting the national agenda through direct transpositions of national iconographies, these pieces instead interrogate authority and the monolithic nation through alteration and recontextualisation of totems. Hanoi artist Nguyen Minh Thanh's (b.1971) 1999 *Rice Field* is one such installation. Thousands of temple joss sticks are installed to emulate the rice paddy of the title, yet positioned upside down, they ironically distort and so query the faithfuls' merit-making, and the stability and predictability of rural agricultural life and cycles. The 'rice field' of upside-down joss sticks is presided over by oversized and stiffly-posed duplicate effigies of a traditional woman farmer, looking down blankly onto the land. The installation, though not ostensibly contestative, plays on elements of tradition——religion, ritual, the rural, dependable woman——to take elliptical critical aim at the socialist national icon of the contented farmer. Through scale, displaced context, and the careful balance of metaphor and the literal, *Rice Field* questions the true nature of rural life in Vietnam and posits rural existence's continuing hardship and dull monotony for women. This in turn suggests post-*doi moi* Vietnam's tension opposing the glitzy, modernizing city, and the backward rural heartland. (fig.1)

Therefore, we may infer that Pastor Roces' misgivings about installation art in the Philippines——her critique applies to wider Southeast Asia——, concerns literal, facile art of simplistic reading. However, a minority of contemporary artists do not embrace cultural tradition as a means of reviving the past, returning to the village, or for promoting national identity. The thoughtful mining of tradition is instead selective, signs and symbols chosen as building blocks of new codes for speaking difficult truths. Tradition's systems, purpose, and place, along with its techniques

and tangible manifestations, serve artists as materials to construct accessible critical significance. As groups and individuals look for their place beyond nationalist discourses, art-makers conceptualise works in dialogue with fast-evolving life. The need in this context is new, but the identification of old visual culture as a reliable art-making tool is not. Contemporary art, arriving at a point of rupture, and breaking with conservative academic rules, builds itself on a commitment to deciphering shifting reality and talking to wide audiences, an active, functional, non-elitist art. The paradoxical and perpetually-evolving contemporary world would mean a role in these new artistic endeavors for selected strands of regional tradition.

Art and collective issues: function, audience, reception

Contemporary regional artists envisage their role promoting rather than merely mirroring change. Audience and reception are intrinsic to art's effectiveness, the interest in community materialised by pieces thematically about, engaging with, or produced with the collective. Pieces distance themselves from art for art's sake, as well as from social realism that often describes the everyday didactically as opposed to harnessing discursial exchange. Contemporary art in Southeast Asia empowers through its probing that triggers critical thought. Though artists may not have made the connection at the time, the relationship they forged between their practice, life, and viewers, in some ways echoed tradition in Southeast Asia over millennia, the village a place where communal ownership, exchange, ritual and material culture, and collective participation merged, and where the local temple was a locus of artistic agency promoting active reception.[15] If the place of this new art at the heart of life recalled ancient cultural topographies, and the means artists employed to innovate were borrowed from various cultural contexts, including pre-modern heritage, the goal was individual critical response. The works offered an opening to plural meanings, rather than a determined path. Thus contemporary art integrating tradition, distorted or not, offers a cogent frame-work for critical dialogue.

Marian Pastor Roces' dubious stance on searches for indigenous roots in Pinoy art notwithstanding, by the 1990s, and in some places earlier, the referencing of motifs, techniques, and media from parochial culture is sophisticated and allusive, the works produced conceptually layered, and most importantly, legible. Multi-sensory and cross-disciplinary approaches, participative strategies of engagement, media, and visual prompts from local heritage, altered or not, provide stable ground in times of cultural dislocation.

Thus, from the 1970s, innovative genres equipped to express new realities appear in tandem with socio-political developments in Southeast Asia. In the last decades of the twentieth century, installation and performance emerge, seemingly answering change, and in turn generating new trajectories.

Engaging the collective: performance, installation, interaction

Installation and performative modes mark contemporary art in Southeast Asia, installation appearing as early as 1970 in Malaysia (Redza Piyadasa's *May 13, 1969,* discussed below), and by 1975 in Indonesia, with the establishment of the New Art Movement, or Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru, hereafter GSRB. [16] The genesis of installation and performance is documented in Western and Japanese art history, but not exhaustively in Southeast Asian art. [17] What then is the origin of installation developing in Southeast Asia from 1970 onwards? Southeast Asian artistic exchange platforms were rare at that time, so cross-regional influence seems unlikely. And in the pre-internet age, outside cultural information infiltrating the Southeast Asian art scene mostly concerned international formalist painting styles, not experimental practices such as happenings, which were frequently a critique of art institutions, few of which existed then in Southeast Asia. [18] Though a handful of local artists returning to the region from overseas (Singaporean Tang Da Wu from the United Kingdom in the 1980s; Hanoian Vu Dan Tan from Perestroika Russia in 1990; Thailand's Chalood Nimsamer from Italy in the 1950s; and Redza Piyadasa from England in

the 1960s) brought foreign ideas, these were moderated on arrival by local conditions. Similarly, if in the late 1980s–1990s non-locals such as Veronika Radulovic and Eric Leroux in Hanoi, and Gilles Massot in Singapore, for example, were conduits of external knowledge, one can argue their input as a small part of a much larger, complex picture of changing contexts that sparked innovation. In Southeast Asia, the cross-regional analysis of early installation and performance argues for a birthing tied to evolving social environments. These dynamic and unstable environments called for a different type of art that dialogued actively with audiences as does space and time-evolving installation. Retrieving selected elements from local culture, namely a connection with the everyday and tradition, and integrating these into new forms, was easy for Southeast Asian artists as they moved away from the academy to develop contemporary art.

Installation, interaction, and critique

The first regional installation may be Malaysian Redza Piyadasa's (1939–2007) *May 13, 1969,* made in 1970. Though art historian T.K. Sabapathy qualifies the piece about Malaysia's 1969 race riots as sculpture not installation, the positioning of a mirror at its base, which involves movement through changing reflected audience presence, suggests a dynamic, evolving work of art resembling installation. [19] Sabapathy, who in 1978 negates the work's social meaning, but later revises this view, reads the mirror as 'extending the imagery into an illusory cavity'. [20] Other art pieces that incorporate mirrors that similarly elicit viewer engagement include Briccio Santos' *Heritage Tunnel* of 2009, and Wong Hoy Cheong's *The Nouveau Riche, the Elephant, the Foreign Maid or the Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie,* 1991, are dubbed 'installation'. And even if not considered an installation artist, Piyadasa, like his regional peers, is polyvalent in choice of media and genre, selecting these for their ability to convey ideas. Thus, if one accepts *May 13, 1969* as installation, one can infer its emergence from a social imperative and desire to use art in a socially critical way, its courting of reception obligatory for its

effectiveness condemning racial violence. Avoiding literal documentation of the May 1969 events, the work presents a visual language designed to elicit reaction from viewers on collective concerns, so demonstrating the ties between social critique coming from local context, the installation genre, and Southeast Asian installation's adoption of familiar signs from the everyday to compose intelligible visual language. Piyadasa's juxtaposition of signs——coffin; Malaysian flag; title providing the riot date; public-integrating mirror——is visually and art-historically innovative. But its methodology is not unfamiliar, its conflation of literal-allusive reference, collective interest, and focus on reception-activation, outward-looking and belying self-reflexive and art-institution-critical discourses pervasive in Euramerica at the time. Piyadasa's material-visual strategy serving socio-political purpose, despite being exceptional in his oeuvre, foreshadows art practices staking new ground around the region. (fig.2)

In Indonesia, five years later, art's call to audience once more signals new practices that are subsequently labeled early regional contemporary art. F.X. Harsono (b.1949), Moelyono (b.1957) and Jim Supangkat (b.1949), with 1975 *Ken Dedes,* among others, experiment with installation. Favored for its easy rapport with viewers from all spheres, the genre in its ordinary material——found or cheap everyday objects; borrowings from traditional culture, familiar to all——, and fabrication——changing, ephemeral——, is ideal for commenting daily life. As Harsono explains, from the middle 1970s onwards, a central motivation for producing installation rather than two-dimensional painting on canvas was to alter his work's relationship with his viewers, and to be able have his art talk to, and include all Indonesians:

> The art I created was for real people, the community from all over Indonesia, not just the Javanese. This art was not for urban elites familiar with art galleries but for everyone; the problems at the time were shared by all Indonesians, so the art needed to reflect that. [21]

Installation, though new in Southeast Asia of the 1970s, and despite Marion Pastor

Roces' reservations re its simplistic assimilation with shrines and rituals from tradition, communicates effectively with viewers. In its public-space siting, mutability over time, tacit rejection of the Western-imported high/low art divide, and fixing of audience as central to artistic intention, installation recalls markers of ancient regional cultural heritage.[22] As explains Nguyen Lantuat in his analysis of Vietnamese Cheo theater:

> in Cheo the public's role is that of co-author of a performance, as well as its commentator and conductor. This canon implies a cross-questioning of the public and helps the actor in his play, representing a natural form of communication between the public and actors, not divided from each other by an artificial 'wall'.[23]

Installation dialogues with audiences formally and conceptually. And when intelligently made, its allusive collage of signs cryptically brings non——elite viewers a forum for the critical disclosure of social contradictions and confrontational environments difficult to impart without censorship through literature, theatre or film. Supangkat's 1975 *Ken Dedes*——combining the reproduced sculptural torso of a well-known classical Javanese queen, and the lower part of a lascivious modern Indonesian woman's body——and Harsono's 1993-1994 *Voice Without Voice/Sign,* some two decades apart, engage audiences, the second through written participation. Yet as visual art, they interrogate viewers rather than stating critique overtly. Supangkat and Harsono are not emulating old ways, but instead searching through visual culture for structures and totems that artfully combined with other visual and semantic elements, can suggest ideas and resonate with the public. Many installations are tactical in their links to tradition: interactive and performative installation, or installation involving the body and audience involvement, new in message and shape, plunder old cultural forms.

Performance

In Thailand, Chalood Nimsamer (1929-2015) is principally known as a leading Thai modernist. But Chalood, like many Southeast Asian artists of his generation, crosses easily from the modern to the contemporary, and back. His *Rural Environmental Sculpture* cycle of 1984, breaking from mainstream practices, is among the first stirrings of contemporary art in Thailand. As artist-theorist Sutee Kunavichayanont writes when discussing Chalood's ideas about art-making and tradition "…Chalood said that folkways themselves are beautiful and harmonious because they occur naturally by conforming to function and people continually practice them until folkways become a tradition…". [24] Chalood as reported here underlines the close relationship between the function of folk expressions and tradition, this functionalism exemplar in images and processes from tradition retained by contemporary Southeast Asian art.

Chalood's rural *Environmental Sculpture* cycle's essential elements include his body, movement, local objects, organic produce (garlic), a rural space, and freedom from convention. These items and attitudes, composed into new creation, harbor ties to ritual performative expressions practiced all around Southeast Asia. These, often linked to animist beliefs, are a reminder of regional religious syncretism and cross-disciplinary material culture, as described by Nathalie Johnston in her research on connections between indigenous forms and contemporary performance art in Myanmar. [25]

Chalood embraces his non-urban origins by labeling himself 'a rural boy' as opposed to 'a Bangkok-courtier'. From this statement one understands that his work's association with pre-modern culture is deliberate, not random. [26] Though performing largely for himself, in this piece the artist connects elements from pre-modern vernacular with artistic innovation, devising contemporary art from locally-sourced icons and gestures. [27]

Along with performance, spectator-engaging or not, interactive art arrives in strength on the Southeast Asian scene some two decades after Piyadasa's *May 13,1969*.

Action and interaction: puppets, costumes, the viewer-actor

Forms incorporating masks, corporal accessories, puppets, effigies, different types of body coverings, and uniforms, characterise contemporary art in Southeast Asia, appearing throughout the region and over decades. [28] These either point to, or directly involve the body, movement/performance, and call to audience. Masks in particular are living, functional objects integral to dance and ritual of folk or court origin, and not assimilated with static sculpture of the Western tradition. Puppets, part of oral living narrative tradition, are of interest for their performativity and for their role as outlets of social critique. [29]

A few years after Harsono and Supangkat's 1975 founding of GSRB, in late-1970s Hanoi, pioneer contemporary artist Vu Dan Tan (1946-2009) creates his *Basket Masks* series. These works, even if swiftly copied by local vendors for the tourist market——this derivation contributing to their misreading——, are ostensibly Vietnam's first contemporary art experiments. [30] Their juxtapositions of codes, however playful, is deliberate in conceptual and formal intention, with semantic and media sources outside the art academy. Tan's masks change Vietnamese art history in their interweaving of plural stories and meanings through visual hybridity, their referencing-but-not-literal-depicting of traditional folk and minority culture, and their mask-form alluding to action, costume, and audience. Due to these traits denoting potential functionality and performativity, *Basket Masks* can be assimilated with installation. These painted masks, simultaneously aesthetic art pieces, functional props, and sensually tactile objects, calling to be handled, are open in reading or discursial, in the way of Southeast Asian contemporary art. With their inherent suggestion of performance and reference to Vietnamese ritual culture,

and their usage of everyday-rattan-objects, along with their folk iconography familiar to all Vietnamese, *Basket Masks* show the artist to be looking outside the art academy's painting-drawing-sculpture trope and conventional imagery as he searches for forms relevant to Vietnam on the move, a decade before *doi moi*. *Basket Masks* also foreshadow Tan's later, fully-resolved lidded-box-installations *Suitcases of a Pilgrim* series, 1994-2009,

Vu Dan Tan, without formal art education, demonstrated expressive independence that was unique in communist Vietnam of the 1980s, where aesthetics was determined by the ideological imperatives of the state. Vu Dan Tan's practice, defying the confines of regime-sanctioned themes promoting national identity and socialist values, meshes imagery and references from all types of culture and information sources, local and foreign, high and popular, and current and historical, to create meaning. But though his art represents Tan's personal pantheon, it also affirms autonomy and the individual, so resonating with broad audiences. Moreover, the artist alludes to Vietnamese traditional minority and village practices in his installations, so providing ordinary publics a bridge into his new formal and conceptual idiom. This semantic mix, carefully gauged by the artist, in its communication of risk, excitement, and freedom, made sense of the rapid shifts engulfing Vietnam after 1975 reunification. Because Tan's pictorial references, however altered, are often everyday—local, and sometimes traditional, his art possesses contextual immediacy that allows it to speak intuitively to Vietnamese of all strata. [31] Tan's pieces are active and beckoning in their formal construction and signs, thus demonstrating a concern for connection with publics that recalls village performance practices involving durational audience-artist exchange such as described by Nguyen Lantuat. Vu Dan Tan's oeuvre, though born of an individualistic spirit skeptical of nationalist ideologies, and original in its aesthetic and conceptual construction, ensures legibility through its recognisable grammar derived from familiar images and codes.

Singaporean Vincent Leow's (b.1961) 1992 *Money Suit* performance ponders

globalisation, a social tension pervasive around Southeast Asia in the 1990s. The piece's subject is new, but its form recalls traditional animistic ritual and is therefore recognisable to all regional audiences. Vietnam's Bui Cong Khan's (b.1972) 2003 double screen video *The Man Makes Rain* uses technology to comment the erosion of Vietnamese traditional vernacular culture. The work's slow, meditative cinematography, competing double sound-tracks, and out-of-sync dual-screen action, achieved through technological mastery, recall shamanistic ritual, so making the tension of rapid cultural change real and immediate for viewers. Indonesia's Mella Jaarsma (b.1960) has for many years tackled paradoxes arising from cultural dislocation and hybridity in Java due to conflicting modernity and tradition. Armors and costumes, some derived from the Muslim hijab, are central to her visual and conceptual repertoire, allowing layered critical discourse through everyday references. Her ideas are sophisticated, but her selection of clothing that engages through familiarity or is worn by audience members, reminiscent of traditional dance and ritual, allows for general reading (fig. 3) Indonesia's, Heri Dono (b.1960) revises wayang kulit puppetry tradition in his political works of the 1990s. Dono, who studied under Javanese wayang master Sukasman, pushes the ancient art in new thematic directions while retaining enough of the original form to ensure audience following (fig. 4) Fellow Jogjakartan Eko Nugroho (b.1977) also embraces wayang for performances on contemporary themes, while another Javanese artist, Dani Iswardana, revitalises wayang beber, ancient improvisational theatrical narrative grounded in painting-on-cloth. In Singapore, an early socially-questioning contemporary art work is Tang Da Wu's (b.1943) shadow-puppet piece of 1988, produced for the Singapore Festival. [32] In this work Tang highlights the plight of foreign domestic helpers in the city-state. The artist's selection of ink drawing, produced live, and puppetry, reveal Tang's interest his media's story-telling capacities that though performativity, can co-opt audiences to more effectively relay social ideas. In Thailand, painter, poet, performer, and musician Vasan Sitthiket (b.1957) repeatedly revisits flat puppetry to engage Thais in debate on politics, the monarchy, and Sangha. Vasan's articulated and painted plywood puppets, similar in aesthetic to Southern Thai shadow theatre Nang, itself related

to Javanese wayang, borrow Nang social function as well as visuals. Just as traditional Nang relays the importance of Thai ideologies in a changing world, Vasan's over-scale effigies, beyond form, are irony-filled, therefore can underscore contentious truths: in this series once more vernacular media is deployed for the sake of direct audience communication and engagement, not nostalgia.

Displacing the high/low art divide: vernacular materials & techniques as conceptual prompts

As we have noted, artists in Southeast Asia exploring new expressive terrain forge allegiances with media and techniques with roots in pre-modern or pre-colonial heritage. In some cases this arises as artists opt for alternative media to oil on canvas, which is spurned for its association with art school rigidity, cultural imperialism, or the commercial mainstream. In other cases, indigenous materials and techniques are appropriated and re-contextualised, especially the hand-made, to trigger viewer recognition. [33] Vernacular languages in this instance prove useful because they yield additional layers of information, acting as idiomatic clues transmitting difficult content. Adopted partially or whole, these media and images from tradition acquire multiple meanings in their new framework and therefore broaden works' discursive scope, enabling art to speak of and to complex reality.

Bangkok multi-media artist Sutee Kunavichayanont's (b.1965) practice from the middle-1990s is emblematic of regional installation art: participative, often evolving physically through use (as is the case of the Breath Donation series from the 1990s that inflates and deflates through audience action), open to critical socio-political reading, and produced from materials, techniques, and gestures from the everyday including tradition——school desks; carving; the wai greeting; elephants; water buffalo; breathing; maps, flags. Sutee's works' form and function are determined by the artists' will to engage viewers directly in a query of social and political choices. In this way, iconography, media, technique, interactivity, and site-

specificity are enlisted symphonically to create installations triggering thinking.

History Class of 2000 and this installation's later iterations evoke the familiar school-room experience.[34] Worn wooden children's school desks are its essential component, each table engraved with an episode from Thai history that has been excised from the official narrative. Sutee's 'history lesson', which re-instates taboo pasts, is potentially subversive in its challenge to the national story-line. Yet the choice of wood-carving to represent erased or contentious historical events alters the work's potentially provocative tone. The wood-carving technique, meaningful to Southeast Asians in its association with local visual heritage, prompts viewer identification and appropriation via memory of village expressions. The desks question Thailand's fraught relationship with the nation's modern political history, but they are not stridently critical, and instead prod viewers to formulate individual response. Moreover, Sutee ensures his audience's physical engagement with *History Class* by enticing his viewers through familiar traditions and actions represented by the anonymous wood carving and paper-pencil rubbings lifted from the carvings. In this way *History Class* builds tension by introducing critique to the class-room where information dispensed is supposed to be unassailable. The installation is all the more effective because its covert critical examination of the place and substance of history in Thai political discourse is undertaken by viewers themselves, through comfortably familiar traditional techniques. (fig. 5)

However variable, materials and processes from everyday sources enrich meaning and expand viewer experience in Southeast Asian contemporary art. Some of these play on literal reference: in his 1998 Tadu Gallery *Farmers are Farmers* series, Vasan Sitthiket employs earth mixed with acrylic medium on canvas to signify rural life. In his 2001 series *We come from the same way* Vasan again draws on earth/paint as the background for his eminent figures of history.[35] But here clay is more allusive in meaning, connoting the benign womb of mother/mother-earth at the moment of birth, before moral paths are chosen by Buddha, Lenin, Kafka, etc..., and Vasan himself.

Materials can also evoke cultural discourses beyond their primary associations. Indonesia's Nindityo Adipurnomo (b.1961) is known for his two-decade ongoing *konde* series which extracts different meanings about morphing Javanese culture from the traditional Javanese hair piece konde of ceremonial dance. [36] Adipurnomo's deconstruction of the konde characterises Southeast Asian contemporary art's integration of traditional cultural signifiers that removed from their original context, create alternate implications that can be decoded through the icon's primary sense. Through this re-framing, Adipurnomo elicits the critical examination of established cultural signs and the confrontation of modernity and tradition in Java.

As well as iconising the *konde*, Adipurnomo uses materiality and manufacturing processes to underscore changing cultural systems and gender politics in twenty-first century Indonesia. In the early 2000s the artist pursues his borrowing from Javanese pre-modern culture, developing a series of over-scale *konde* in woven rattan *Hiding Rituals and the Mass Production.* The choice of rattan, a hand-crafted artisan material familiar to all Indonesians, makes the work's conceptual layering accessible. In addition, cooperating with craftsmen to produce the work, Adipurnomo presents artistic practice as a collective endeavor of anonymous communal fabrication, part of village life and linked to adat, ancestral custom. [37] Rattan's fragility and call for laborious, repetitive workmanship, are additional conceptual clues that in articulating ideas of impermanence, meditative repetition, and non-linear time, give extra weight to Adipurnomo's questioning of Javanese culture in transition. (fig. 6)

Though Adipurnomo's selection of material and production method do not necessarily indicate a repudiation of the classical Western art academy's divisions and restrictions, like in Sutee Kunavichayanont's *History Class, Hiding Rituals* defies the Western academy's imported 'high art'/'low art' divide as well as highlighting the associated urban/rural dichotomy prevalent in much of Southeast Asia. And though Adipurnomo is perhaps not as concerned with this high/low split and its

effects as some artists in Thailand or the Philippines, his over-scale, fraying rattan *konde* can be read as a query of rural tradition and knowledge eroded by Indonesia's modernisation/urbanisation and resulting homogenisation.

Other media associated with anonymous or folk craft rather than fine-art are a hallmark of contemporary art in Southeast Asia. Paper, printing, and textile figure prominently in pieces by artists of all genders.[38] Thai artist Jakkai Siributr's (b.1969) tales of political and religious dislocation are all the more potent for his refined needle-work, the tension built between raw subject matter and fragile hand-embroidery adding to his art's critical thrust. Clay too is a frequent material of contemporary Southeast Asian art. Practices involving ceramics emerge around the region: in Thailand, with Montien Boonma's (1953-2000) ready-mades and Pinaree Sanpitak's (b.1961) *Breast-Stupa-Cookery* ceramic moulds; Singapore, where Jason Lim (b.1966) combines ceramics and performance to make conceptual works steeped in Buddhism and local culture; and Indonesia, Dadang Christanto's (b.1957) *Violence I,* using friable, unfired clay to speak of the vulnerability and disposability of the individual.

In 1990s Hanoi, Truong Tan (b.1963), Nguyen Van Cuong (b.1972), Nguyen Quang Huy (b.1971), and Nguyen Minh Thanh (b.1971), with others, visited the Bat Trang kilns outside the capital to paint and fire ceramics. While for some artists the pre-potted porcelain vessels functioned like paper or canvas, others developed a deeper relationship with the medium, thinking of its semantic possibilities beyond decorated pots. Specifically, Nguyen Van Cuong's 1999-2001 80-vase *Porcelain Diary*, via its composition over three years and diary form, brings notions of time, space, and documentation into play, along with ideas suggested by ceramic's wider connotations in the Vietnamese context. Hitching the ancient medium to concept, so using the porcelain vase's cultural implications to expand beyond pictorial narrative, the artist cites his interest in Bat Trang's collectivist ethos and craft heritage among other reasons.[39] The series' imagery couples locally-familiar emblems——traditional architecture, religious totems, farming tools——with scenes

of depravity and erotic tableaux, including semi-nude women in lascivious poses, hypodermic syringes, predator business-men, and animal-headed monsters from folk mythology, to convey the grotesque and frightening reality of Hanoi life under the city's slick veneer of *doi moi* modernity. Dispelling any sense of literalness however, the artist plays simultaneously on associations of form and semantics to negate his dark vision, de-stabilising the viewer to heighten his work's power. For despite its libertine sexuality, *Porcelain Diary,* as a sequence of porcelain vases, alludes to temple accessories or bourgeois interiors. Moreover, conceptualised as a 'diary', the series also suggests innocent girlish habits. Simultaneously salacious and refined, Porcelain Diary provokes via its obscene iconography, its socially-critical significance amplified through Cuong's choice of the ancient, noble, and culturally-charged ceramic medium. (fig. 7)

Bui Cong Khanh also relies on ceramics for conceptual punch above pictography, his underglaze blue and white vessels fired traditionally at Bat Trang conjugating multiple social references——farming, urbanisation, cultural politics, Vietnam-China politics——to disclose the contradictions of 2000s Vietnam.

While expressive genres and techniques linked to tradition find their way into the contemporary, themes with roots in ancient regional heritage are also favored by Southeast Asian artists taking new paths.

Faith and women: expanded readings

In syncretic Southeast Asia, old belief systems continue to influence culture. In contemporary art, emblems of faith are borrowed, transformed and re-contextualised to shed light on changing society. Vietnam's Nguyen Minh Thanh's previously——discussed *Rice Field* presents a seven-day over—scale portrait of a rural woman presiding over a carpet of joss-stick suggesting rice paddy. [40] The work can be read as a homage to woman, Thanh's portraits of his mother——the

"iconic figure" described by Natalia Kraevskaia——, in this installation a universal symbol of fortitude and dependability. [41] *Rice Field* also evokes the stoic female figure, the installation's repeated, unchanging image of woman translating the reality of the monotony and hardship of farmers' daily life in contrast to the existence of their city sisters, post——*doi moi*. Exploiting varying brush techniques to underline the tension between women's quest for individual emancipation and rural woman's assigned place, difficult to transcend, Thanh paints his subject's unsmiling face with individualised, naturalistic tenderness, while depicting her ordinary farmer-woman clothing as stiffly stylised. Scale too translates conceptual intent as the monumental piece, with its parterre of joss-sticks like an over-grown alter, articulates the sacredness of mother/woman as a larger-than-life institution. In this work viewers observe how two linchpins of ancient Southeast Asian societies, woman-as-anchor, and the sacred, find new meaning as social interrogation in contemporary art. (fig.7)

Religion preserves a deep influence on ethical codes and social practices. In Vasan Sitthiket's philosophical *2001 We come from the same way,* Buddhist tenets underpin the sequence's positing of moral choice and responsibility in politically and socially-evolving Southeast Asia. In *Blue October* of 1996, Vasan's repeated use of gold leaf squares adorning figures of his ice-blue canvases narrating Bangkok's infamous 1976 Thammasat University student massacre, denotes the Buddhist merit of the young student-martyrs. There is nothing traditional *per se* in Vasan's integration of patches of gold leaf overlaid on the painted figures, but this familiar referential device allows the penetration of complex debates of the meaning of good and evil on the shifting ground of contemporary Thailand. Vasan, like his Southeast Asian counterparts, conveys intangible ideas through aesthetics, in this case the warm patches of gold contrasted with the paintings' frigid, electric blue ground that in their contradiction, translate questions about ethical alternatives. [42] Choosing the gold badges of Buddhist ritual understood by all Thais, Vasan provides viewers a way into abstract ideas about ethics and a critical perspective on the past that are more psychologically vivid than the mere

description of historical events. (fig. 8)

Filipino artist Norberto Roldan (b.1953) juxtaposes emblems of animist tradition and Catholicism as a way of commenting the effects of history on his country's late millennium social and political paradoxes. He also probes the nation's cultural and religious hybridity resulting from colonialism, posing it as both virtue and frailty. His multi-work sequence *Faith in Sorcery, Sorcery in Faith* weaves small glass potion-phials, traditionally employed to ward off sprits, into a Christian cross configuration. The wall-installation can be understood from distinct vantage points as either marrying, or opposing pre-Christian and Christian references. The reading of the work is both metaphoric and literal, the visual collision of animist trinkets and the installation's Christian cross pattern creating tension. If ambiguous, Roldan's installations nonetheless lean toward a critique of power and self-serving religious hypocrisy used to control the Filipino masses. Pinoy artists, both modern and contemporary, have consistently trained their eye on Christian iconography, integrating it into their images. However, Roldan is pioneering in his departure from description, his questioning stance characteristic of wider Southeast Asian contemporary art's elliptical, context-driven conceptualism. Another Philippines artist, Santiago Bose (1949-2002), also saw his country's hybridity as a critical conduit. According to art historian Pat Hoffie, Bose described himself as "a born-again pagan": "...(Santi was) committed to the resurrection of the past as a way of showing how and where Filipino culture had survived intact. Metamorphosed, but idiosyncratic and intact...". [43]

Hoffie's statement elucidates Bose's awareness of pre-colonial cultural traditions and how even altered, they weave into contemporary life. We can also infer that Bose, aware of historical culture in camouflage, used it to critical end in his practice.

Burmese/Vietnamese trio Aung Ko, Thein Chaw Ei, and Richard Streitmatter——Tran are direct in their reprise of Buddhist iconography. Their 2008 site-specific Singapore Biennale *September* Sweetness is a small——scale Burmese Buddhist pagoda

manufactured from sugar. Representing protest movements led by the Burmese Sangha, the piece, like Roldan's described above, manages simultaneous literal and allusive stances. Evolving physically as its sugar stupa disintegrates in rain and sun, the installation's first reading is of the demonstrating monks' failure. However, more cryptically, and over time as it melts, the sugar structure hints at the altering face, but not substance, of faith confronted with political repression. In whatever way it is analysed, *September Sweetness* attests once more to Southeast Asian contemporary practitioners' reliance on entrenched cultural symbols to speak about social issues.

Many other regional artists explore faith——related ideas: Thailand's Manit Sriwanichpoom's 2009 *Masters,* through photographic games of scale and distortion, Michael Shaowanasai's (b.1964) *Portrait of a Man in Habits no.1,* and Kamin Lertchaiprasert's (b.1964) *Bhat-mâché* three-part Buddha sculpture, through Buddhist iconographies ponder the larger socio-cultural landscape. Aung Ko's (b.1980) burning ladder performance of 2006 *H.u.m.m.m.,* can be read as an act of defiance. The meditatively repetitive durational piece, inspired by Burmese ritual and Buddhist funerary practices, counters oppression by implying that customs deeply embedded in tradition are a hidden but resilient strength of the people. Singaporean Jason Lim's (b.1966) *Just Dharma,* a performative ceramic installation comprising hundreds of porcelain lotus-flowers suspended and later shattered on the ground, also indirectly suggests challenges facing contemporary regional faiths. Though the lotus is a Buddhist symbol, *Just Dharma* has universal reach beyond Buddhism, alluding more loosely to change and spirituality everywhere.

The mother-figure or woman-as-power is another towering theme of contemporary Southeast Asian art with roots in traditional culture. [44] The mother-son-child relationship is repeatedly revisited by regional artists as a means of tackling communication issues, loss of community values, rural independence, and the self-sufficiency of the land, among other topics. In Thailand Chalood Nimsamer iconises woman-mother in an ongoing, life-long opus. Vasan Sitthiket, beyond his

general interest in woman as nurturer and agent of power, returns consistently to mother and grandmother in his art. Singapore performance and installation artist Amanda Heng elicits cultural loss through her *Another Woman* series portraying the artist with her mother. In Vietnam, Truong Tan and Nguyen Van Cuong's 1996 *Mother and Son,* an early recorded performance piece, portrays the mother-son bond vital in ancient regional culture to critically evoke larger social frictions. [45] Nguyen Van Cuong and Nguyen Minh Thanh scrutinise the mother—idol specifically, while they, along with Nguyen Quang Huy and Vu Dan Tan, iconise woman more generally, Tan identifying her alternately as Amazon warrior or Venus, Huy celebrating her coded mystique, and Cuong depicting her erotically simultaneously as dominatrix-heroine, and fallen-victim of his socially critical allegories. [46] In Indonesia, Heri Dono develops an androgynous protagonist that in his/her gender ambiguity ——sensual, red female lips, male genitalia——references Javanese mythology. Dono's effigy, if inspired by the pre-modern, in its amalgam of contradictions and swapped identity, materialises the day's shifting, surreal Indonesia. Gender play also features in Nindityo Adipurnomo's 2000s photographic series *Portraits of Javanese Men.* [47] Here the faces of his male subjects are obscured by konde. The feminine-looking knots of hair sensually masking the male sitters' faces suggest an exchange of attributes between the sexes that hints at the mixing of pre-modern gender roles.

Contemporary Southeast Asian artists examined in this paper do not re-state tradition in their works. Rather, they re-consider cultural heritage from where they extract ideas, processes, codes, and icons to conquer new artistic terrain. Approaches and themes with sources in regional tradition, carefully selected and modified, are integrated into contemporary practice as conduits of critical discourse about society, culture and politics, accessible to all strata of the population. It may be tempting to see regional artists' interest in heritage as related to nineteenth century Western romantics' return to pre-modern forms. However, this Euramerican impetus was primarily a reaction to the technological speed and progress of the industrial revolution and mass-production. In Southeast Asia however, the phenomenon evolves from regional cultural tradition itself where persisting, centuries-old syncretic attitudes validate the layering of old ideas with new. In this connection, aesthetics and material culture combine to extend socially critical function as the pragmatic need for legible idioms arises when visual art becomes a channel of citizen voice in the post nation—building era. The association between art and social purpose, resurgent after decades of experimentation with imported media and Euramerican formalist pictorial discourses, comes to the fore as artists toy with innovative expressive languages that can make sense of the turn of the millennium's confusing yet promising new social order.

Tracing and decoding local heritages re-contextualised in contemporary Southeast Asian art establishes linkages that allow the understanding and relativising of the impact of imported modernisms on recent Southeast Asian art history. This investigative work confirms the value of analysing Southeast Asian visual art beyond the discipline of art history, in broad temporal terms, and from a local cultural perspective.

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1 *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions* was a travelling exhibition put up at the Asia Society, New York that included then-recent art from Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Korea, and India.

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3 See Michelle Antoinette's *Reworlding Art History- Encounters with Contemporary Southeast Asian Art after 1990,* Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2014, p. 30, for various relationships between modern and contemporary art in Southeast Asia.

4 There are relatively few studies devoted exclusively to Southeast Asian contemporary art, see above Michelle Antoinette's *Reworlding Art History,* that covers Indonesian, Singapore, Malaysian and Filipino art post-1990, but omits Thai and Vietnamese art. Selected curated exhibition catalogues with essays examining traits of contemporary regional art include *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions,* Asia Society, New York, 1996; *Asian Modernism Diverse Developments in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand,* The Japan Foundation, Tokyo, 1995; and *Negotiating Home History and Nation: two decades of contemporary art in Southeast Asia 1991-2011,* Singapore Art Museum, Singapore, 2011, the most recent exhibition comparing art from Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines.

5 See Iola Lenzi, "Negotiating Home History and Nation", in *Negotiating Home History and Nation: two decades of contemporary art in Southeast Asia 1991-2011,* Singapore Art Museum, Singapore, 2011, where a synthesis of traits and themes across the region, and over several decades is proposed.

6 Date-lines vary by a few decades, from the 1970s to the 1990s, according to locus.

7 This was the case, even in Thailand that had never been formally colonised.

8 John Clark, *Modern Asian Art,* Craftsman House, North Ryde, 1998, pp. 231-232, and 290-291.

9 This is true in colonised Southeast Asia as well as in non-colonised Siam and later Thailand, where Bangkok's art academy was founded by Italian Corrado Feroci and run largely in the European way.

10 Such as Thai painters Fua Haripitak, Misiem Yipintsoi, Sawasdi Tantisuk, and Tawee Nanthakwang among others.

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18 "Happenings", or interactive, performative, ephemeral pieces, were developed in Euramerican centres from the 1950s onwards and typically critiqued the art institution, while installation and performance in Southeast Asia, if socially critical, is not necessarily anti-art institution.

19 Author interview with T.K. Sabapathy, Singapore, June 2012.

20 T.K. Sabapathy, *Piyadasa An Overview, 1962-2000,* National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, 2001, p. 32.

21 Author interview with FX Harsono, Singapore, January, 2011, and Jakarta, June 2012.

22 See Marian Pastor Roces,(1993), pp. 47-51. Also HD Evers and Rudger Korff eds., *Southeast Asian Urbanism, The Meaning and Power of the Social Space,* ISEAS, Singapore, 2000, p. 67 & p. 111 on Southeast Asians' relationship with public space.

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27 Author interviews with Chalood Nimsamer, Silpakorn University, Bangkok, February 2012.

28 Masks, body coverings, body paint, puppets and uniforms appear from the 1970s until now in works by Vu Dan Tan, Truong Tan; Bui Cong Khanh (Vietnam); Arahmaiani, Heri Dono, Mella Jaarsma, Krisna Murti, Dadang Christanto, Eko Nugroho, Restu Ratnaningtyas (Indonesia); Jason Lim, Jeremy Hiah, Vincent

Leow, Tang Da Wu (Singapore); Josephine Turalba (Philippines); Nge Lay, Aung Ko (Burma); Vasan Sitthiket, Jakkai Siributr, Michael Shaowanasai (Thailand); Simryn Gill (Malaysia), among others.

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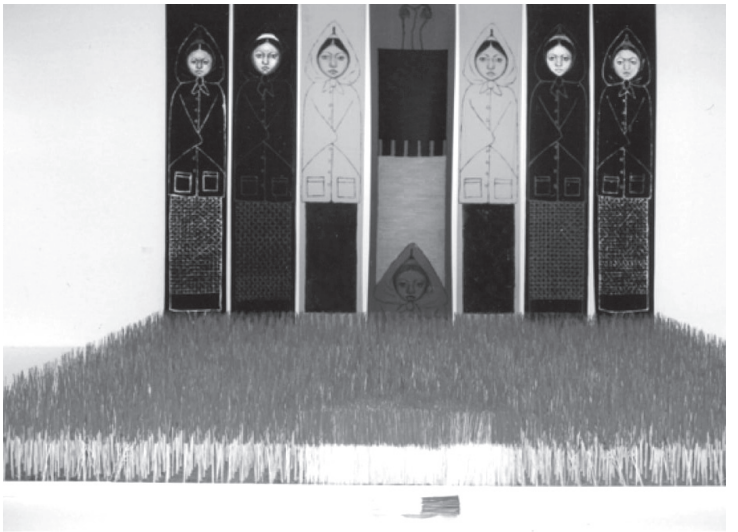

figure 1

Nguyen Minh Thanh
Rice Field
painted textile
joss sticks
1999

figure 2

Redza Piyadasa
May 13, 1969
installation
1970

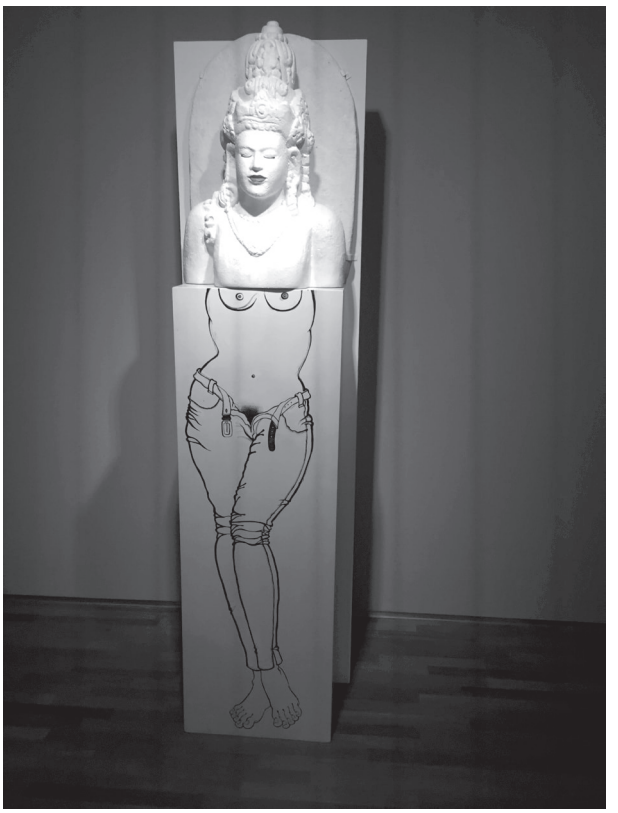

figure 3

Jim Supangkat
Ken Dedes
installation
1975

figure 4

Chalood Nimsamer
Rural Environmental Sculpture
photographic documentation of performance
1982

figure 5

Bui Cong Khanh
The Man Makes Room
two-channel video
2003

figure 6

Mella Jaarsma
The Follower
costume installation with embroidered badges, part of a series of performative body covering
2002-2010

figure 7

Henri Dono
Flying Angels
kinetic installation
1996

figure 8

Sutee Kunavichayanont
History Class (Thanon Ratchadamnoen)
participative desk installation
2000

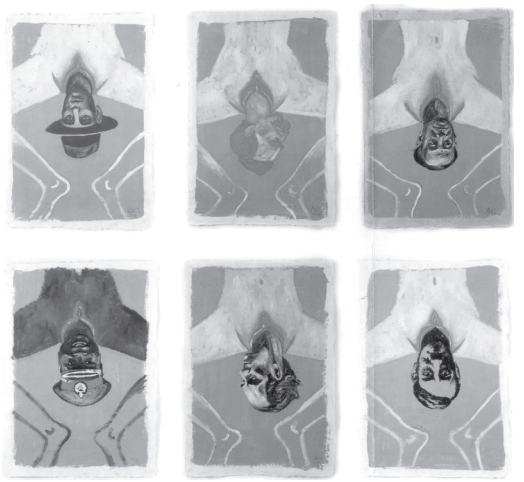

figure 9

Vasan Sitthiket
We come from the Same Way
acrylic and earth on paper, series
2001

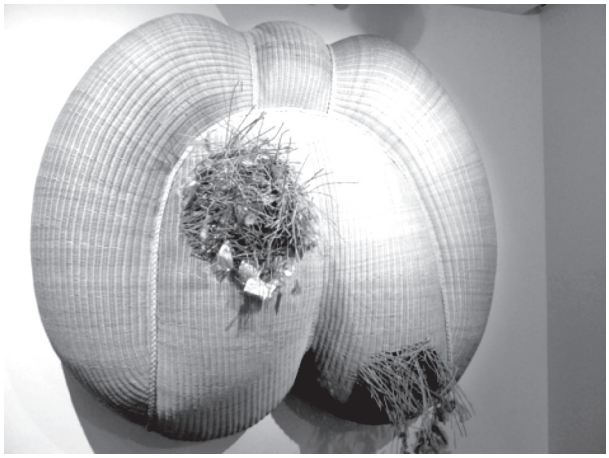

figure 10

NinditYo Adipurnomo
Hiding Rituals and The Mass Production 2
rattan, paper, hair
1997-1998

figure 11

Jakkai Siributr
Rape and Pillage
installation
39 Thai civil service uniforms hand-embroidered with portraits
2013

figure 12

Nguyen Van Cuong
Porcelain Diary
hand-painted polychrome porcelain
series of 80 vases
1999-2001

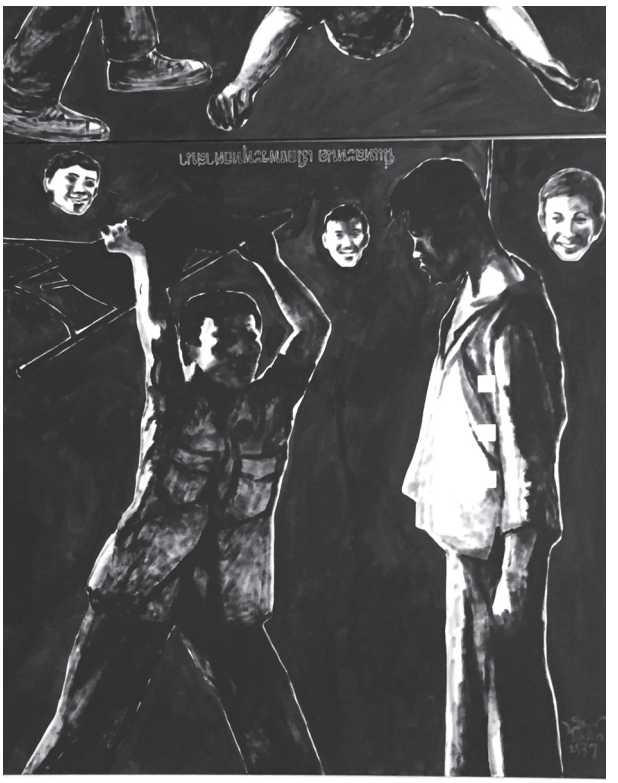

figure 13

Vasan Sitthiket

Blue October

acrylic and gold leaf on canvas, series of 20 paintings

150 × 150 cm each

1996

figure 14

Norberto Roldan
Faith in Sorcery, Sorcery in Faith
wall installation, small glass phials, part of a larger series
1999

figure 15

Chaw Ei Thein, Aung Ko, Richard Streitmatter—Tran
September Sweetness
outdoor sugar installation, time-based and exposed to the elements, erosion
2008

figure 16

Manit Sriwanichpoom
Masters
photographic series, 18 pieces
2009

figure 17

Amanda Heng
Another Woman
photographic series
1996

figure 18

Vu Dan Tan
Amazon
metal costume installation, one of a series
2001

figure 19

Nguyen Van Cuong
My Mother is a Farmer
ink on do paper, one of a series
2002