

# CONCEPTUAL STRATEGIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN ART

## a local narrative

### introduction

In his review of the Southeast Asian art exhibition of 2010 *Making History* Tony Godfrey, the author of *Conceptual Art*, assesses works by Alwin Reamillo (b.1964), Mella Jaarsma (b.1960), Vasan Sitthiket (b.1957), Tang Da Wu (b.1943), Nge Lay (b.1979), Green Zeng (b.1972), and Bui Cong Khanh (b.1972) as difficult to read, "... its (the exhibition's) weakness is the indirect allusions that they (the artists) use to make their point...". Yet it is emphatically the case that the practices of these acknowledged regional talents are marked by conceptual strategies, their visual languages chosen accordingly.<sup>1-3</sup> Godfrey frames his review with a survey of history painting, an academic genre instrumentalised by nineteenth century Europe's nationalist agenda. Had this respected art historian not perceived these artists' elliptical tackling of history not for the sake of history, but as a means of socio-political and cultural critique? If a specialist of Conceptual art, though noting these pieces' 'indirect allusion', judged them overly cryptic, what then was the nature of Southeast Asian conceptualism, and how could the genealogy of conceptual approaches in Southeast Asia be written? Surely conceptualism, by definition coded, demands some contextual analysis on the part of the viewer? Had these works failed on concept, or had Godfrey, an expert of Duchamp, omitted local context? Was the Southeast Asian frame referenced by Jaarsma, Reamillo *et al* so local as to be undecipherable? Did these works rooted at home, not also succeed in transcending home to speak universally?

Turning the cultural telescope around, how legible would Duchamp's iconic signed urinal have been to a Southeast Asian in 1917? With their complex, millennia-old syncretic cultures and with witty play part of everyday life, Southeast Asians are surely initiated to conceptual thinking.<sup>4</sup> Thus not immediately deciphering *Fountain* or *Bottlerack* would have been about a lack of context. If gleaning context determines the successful reading of conceptual approaches wherever the art is birthed, then conceptual strategies in Southeast Asia legitimately have their own history, independent of Euramerica's Conceptual art, even while sharing the latter's primary departure point as a 'response to', or 'critique of', a standard reflex in all cultures. Assuming local origins for regional conceptual modes suggests an exploration of conceptual strategies in Southeast Asia on their own terms, the quest for sources, rationales and characteristics on home-ground the starting place. Thus, only the detective work's conclusion will determine possible commonalities and cross-overs with Euramerican Conceptualism. This investigative process is related to the lead taken by the Queens Museum of Art's seminal 1999 *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s*, in particular Apinan Poshyananda's catalogue contribution referencing artists' knowledge of

Beuys, but also asserting the autonomy of regional conceptual practices.<sup>5</sup> That exhibition's approach, in its differentiated understanding of globalism, recognition of local conditions and histories, broad view of dematerialization, and acceptance of non-homogenous institutional critique, offers a welcome perspective on conceptual modes of non-Euramerica.<sup>6</sup> The mission here then, before establishing parallels or even beginning to speak of *displacing* or *adding on to* as does Okwui Enwezor, is to start with the art itself and from there capture the nature and possible antecedents of conceptual tactics employed by Southeast Asian practitioners, thus affording what John Clark calls a self-disentanglement involving Asian contextualization.<sup>7-8</sup>

### the core place of conceptual strategies in southeast asian contemporary art

Some forty years after the beginning of Southeast Asia's contemporary art revolution, even as the field is today under-construction as a patchwork of scholarship, curated exhibitions, and criticism, conceptual strategies embraced by a significant body of regional artists emerge as a defining attribute of contemporary regional art. Indeed, notwithstanding exceptional precursors discussed below, it can be argued that conceptual approaches constitute a key attribute of the contemporary even as many artists slip seamlessly back and forth between modernist and contemporary languages. The distinction between modern and contemporary in Southeast Asia, an often fraught issue of labeling rather than chronology, is beyond our scope here, this study proposing the late-1980s-early 1990s as the emergence period of the contemporary, while also noting precocious examples that pre-date the more general frame, artists in some centres initially on their own exploring this new expressive perspective.<sup>9</sup> As early as the 1970s-1980s pioneers of the contemporary Redza Piyadasa (1931-2007) in Malaysia, Indonesia's Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (GSRB, the Indonesian New Art Movement) proponents FX Harsono (b.1949), Bonyong Murni Ardhi (b.1946), and Jim Supangkat (b.1949), Vu Dan Tan (1946-2009) in Hanoi, Cheo Chai-Hiang (b.1946), Tang Da Wu (b.1943) and Amanda Heng (b.1951) in Singapore, Chalood Nimsamer (b.1929), Montien Boonma (1953-2000), Kamol Phaosavasdi (b.1958) and Vasan Sitthiket (b. 1957) in Thailand, and Filipinos Brenda Fajardo (b.1940), Imelda Cajipe-Endaya (b.1949), Jose Tence Ruiz (b.1956), Santiago Bose (1949-2002), David Medalla (b.1942), and Roberto Chabet (1937-2013) among others, produce works that are not art for art's sake, didactically social realist, or monolithically descriptive, but instead weave together disparate semantic and visual codes to allude to and query rather than state.<sup>10</sup> This novel idiom also surfaces as a means of assembly, opening discursive channels with audiences. Trail-blazing expressive

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methodologies rely on ideas as motors. Images and story-telling are still omnipresent and fundamental, but their meaning is multiplied and linkages subverted through conceptual play.

With several decades' hindsight conceptual modes that rely on local codes, story-telling, materials, aesthetic appeal and audience involvement seem tied to Southeast Asian artists' expanding view of art's place in the world. More affirmative than reactionary, artists of this period turn their gaze outward, a reflexive scrutiny of art and the art world not a preponderant concern. As the 1970s dawned, more so the 1990s, the region's bigger socio-political picture drew artists' critical attention, their practices responding to social shift. Some moreover sought to accelerate and amplify that shift through their work. And even when artists assailed the definition of art and art platforms, it was seldom for the sake of ambushing these proper.<sup>11</sup> Rather, the initiative was designed as an attack on institutional systems as symbols assimilated with residual colonial attitudes to culture, or with repressive regimes using conservatism to quash dissent. Widening art's scope, and countering closed structures, some of the reasons that motivated the creation of aforementioned GSRB, was the larger objective.<sup>12</sup>

#### **conceptual strategies and social change**

If contemporary art and conceptual approaches form a symbiotic pair, the connection between conceptual modes and Southeast Asian art's contestative attitude grounded in place and time is equally essential. As artists use their practice as a critical tool, the conceptual foundation of works becomes geared to function with pieces articulating plural discourses to wide audiences, all the while avoiding direct confrontation with power. This 'reacting to' can be traced to the late twentieth century's great social, cultural and political shifts. The sea-change in visual expression that begins as early as the 1970s in some locales, later termed 'contemporary art', did not appear from nowhere. The catalysts for artistic revolution came at least partially from beyond the art world. As artists break new ground, social and economic transformations dominate public life, creating new aspirations and vulnerabilities. In Thailand the Vietnam War brought a growing middle class and changed ideologies; In Vietnam reunification in 1975 and *doi moi* in 1986 yielded progressive alteration of the social fabric.<sup>13</sup> In Indonesia of the 1990s, even as the Suharto regime hardened politically, its liberalising financial policy helped the dynamics of dissent that eventually toppled the dictator. In the Philippines People Power revealed the potency of the collective. The complexity of these new social and cultural constructs was unprecedented, as were the options of change they promised. The empowerment of ordinary citizens was a tantalising possibility. As opportunities

for shaping the future arose, artists experimented outside the mainstream. From the 1970s, conquering the enlarged terrain that would later be labeled contemporary art, they looked beyond art school rules, in place since the importing of modern art. Expanding from the academy's formal and thematic teachings, they sought alternative intellectual and processual anchors for their art, concept-based idioms responding to new realities.

Artists were keen not only to assimilate new social and cultural openings, but to champion their advance in their work. As old orders eroded, first-degree pictorial description was inadequate for articulating the times. In this environment of uncertainty and extension, practitioners no longer envisaged their production as static, self-contained, and separate from audiences, so devised multi-stranded communication strategies to cope with instability. The visual and material remained, but forms and languages were determined by the need to present ideas that sometimes competed or came from unrelated registers. Artists embraced all varieties of signs, time, space, and audience exchange, no reference off-limits, all in the interest of developing a way of speaking on different planes, about opposing notions, all at once. Pieces with fresh formal and methodological typologies were generated from the urge to advance and debate multiple evolving truths and abstract ideas, nuanced interpretations of the difficult-to-grasp everyday replacing a single image. Function and form collaborated, conceptual means operating to deliver ideas and make them compelling for the collective that could then answer. This was idea-based art for the idea-storm that assailed Southeast Asia from the 1970s. And pragmatically countering repression, conceptual tactics defied state control, still pervasive all around the region. Art, no longer literal, could now tackle sensitive social and political taboos, conceptualism's elliptical grammar having the added advantage of shielding from the censors. As explains Hanoi curator-artist Tran Luong "...We did not think about any sort of Western 'ism', we made art that contested the system but that did not say things directly, this would have been too dangerous. Yes, we did think audiences could understand if the authorities did not..."<sup>14</sup>

#### **conceptual strategies and collective concerns and purpose**

As new visual directions were charted, involving the collective and the idea of a working art gained traction. By 1995 Jim Supangkat had already pinpointed this aspect of the contemporary even though at the time the *modern VS contemporary* labeling issue seemed to muddy the picture.<sup>15</sup> Japanese curator Junichi Shioda picks up this strand in 1997 in his discussion of Moelyono (b.1957) among others, distinguishing Southeast Asian practices such as Moelyono's and the Western "...What they

are concerned with is how to relate to the community (...) how they can build a better future for that community, and what art can do for that purpose....".<sup>16</sup> Thus art did not necessarily seek to describe the collective, but rather engage the group around socially-based ideas to make sense of flux. Languages and context have evolved, yet Shioda traces collectivist impulses back to the functionalism of traditional cultural interventions; he also describes Christanto and Moelyono's "symbolic presentation" of power relationships rather than a literal one.<sup>17</sup> Questions of sources notwithstanding, the connection between this interest in collective challenges, and artists' conceptual approaches, is at the heart of developing contemporary practices.

A quizzing art beyond the merely representational changes the role of publics from passive spectators to engaged participants. Creative production, art before all else and not defined solely or even primarily as activist, has agency. Artists mobilising viewers through their work create pieces that probe, so initiating paths that each can prolong to discover new and individual connections. For many artists, audience involvement is closely related to shared social discourses, art's content, as previously noted, derived from tumultuous social contexts. However, whatever their primary thematic sources, works are not boxed into a single, parochial frame, the most successful pieces offering numerous levels of reading, so speaking to wide audiences at home and abroad.

In Southeast Asia, the artist/artwork/audience trope is developed not for the sake of promoting a collective relationship or identity, but for conveying information and provoking thought through involvement. The art object is not abandoned, the participatory practices of Vasan Sitthiket, Sutee Kunavichayanont (b.1965), Prapat Jiwaraagsan (b.1979), Paphonsak La-Or (b.1981), Pisitakun Kuantalaeng (b.1986), along with those of other Thais and Southeast Asians considered in this study demonstrating critical intention through the tangible -materials, icons and siting, the body and action. Practitioners don't convene audiences as an experiential end-in-itself, but rather are driven by social objectives wherein audience-inclusiveness is a means of co-opting resistance.<sup>18</sup> Their works, often interrogating power, aim for impact beyond specific site and moment. Such art, difficult to slot into any 'ism', and differing from Nicolas Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics, continues practices concerned with audience that first surfaced in the 1970s-1980s led by Redza Piyadasa's *14 October 1969* discussed below.<sup>19</sup> A comparative analysis with Relational Aesthetics is beyond the scope of this paper, but in view of Southeast Asia's social and political history of the post-colonial period and the resulting focus on personal and collective emancipation, regional participatory art, emblematic of and responding to major societal shift, legitimately calls for scrutiny within the larger Asian historical and sociological frame.<sup>20</sup>

Returning to the centrality of reception, Sutee Kunavichayanont's inflatable latex installations of 1990s post-Asian Crisis are illegible without the public's breath donation, the act of inflating allowing viewers, Thai or not, to perceive content and context.<sup>21</sup> Sutee and his peers are not summoning participation for the participatory process itself, but to alert audiences to

ideas and trigger thinking response and action. FX Harsono's 1977 pile of rice cracker guns *Apa yang Anda Lakukan jika Krupuk ini adalah Pistol Beneran* (*What would you do if these crackers were real pistols?*) operates through peoples' written response to Harsono's question, this answering indispensable to meaning and purpose. Bui Cong Khanh's *The Past Moved*'s proposed anticipated nostalgia that triggers resistance can only be conveyed through audiences' infiltration of the mock-photo studio. Alwin Reamillo's piano works interweaving the artist's past with Pinoy social history acquire impact through being played.<sup>22</sup> Tran Luong's various *Moving Forward and Backwards* collaborative teeth-cleaning performances, whether staged in Phnom Penh or Beijing, dispense commentary on cross-national histories through the action of their tooth-brushing participants.<sup>23</sup> Goldie Poblador's (b.1987) olfactory installations, their finely - executed hand-blown glass adding visual appeal to the tactile, are ineffective without a smelling, touching public. Countless contemporary pieces are incomplete or mute without the audience involvement integral to their design. Others, even not calling on viewer intervention to render them complete, already incorporate viewer contribution: a key component of Mani's (b.1961) *The Election of Hatred* is the anonymous vandalising public responsible for the original election posters' defacement. Vu Dan Tan's mid-1990s *Suitcase of a Pilgrim* series, 'borrowing its display cases from Hanoi's illicit street hawkers, absorbs the peddlers' transgressive behavior as an invisible but foundational conceptual element of the work.<sup>24</sup> People and public affairs, if sometimes allusively drawn, are consistently rooted at the heart of conceptual art in Southeast Asia, art and life intertwined as always, but in an ever wider range of ways.



Tran Luong  
*Moving Forward and Backwards*  
Tooth brushing performance,  
Phnom Penh, 2006, Stills from  
video, 2009

Though insistence on active audience reception is an innovation of the contemporary, and as we have seen, tied to art's social vocation, the artist-audience pact is not in its most basic character a novelty in the wider cultural landscape of Southeast Asia. Tracking reception, part of art's function, also serves to displace the art-school-defended preoccupation with medium, the latter now rendered subservient to concept. Pre-modern artistic expression is rife with forms geared to audience, some, particularly the improvisational, revolving around a contributing public. Sacred and lay ritual, various types of *wayang*, other puppet and shadow puppet

forms, and Cheo theatre in Vietnam, among others attest to this ancient connection between culture and collective exchange. Though methodologies and goals of viewer engagement are new in contemporary art, knowledge of participative genres from tradition can explain their easy embrace by artists attracted to their communicative potential, as well as a predisposition to installation and performance, even as audience recognition and acceptance vary.<sup>25-26</sup>

In this regard, costume, mask, puppet, uniform, and face/body-paint works that inherently suggest performance and hence audience involvement in topics at hand, crop up across the region over decades. Eliciting the body, action, role-playing and the multiple perspectives of the receiving-refracting public, such works parley these seemingly traditional references for their accessibility, these expressive devices often the raw material of conceptual idioms.<sup>27</sup>

Malaysian/Australian Simryn Gill's (b.1959) 2000 photo portrait series *A small town at the turn of the century* is performative in ethos, its sitters masked as if ready for ritual. Solemn single and group compositions, the frames display their subjects with fruit helmets obscuring their face, so erasing ethnic identity. In the context of Malaysia's Bumiputra pro-Malay policy, the figures' fruit masks, in their pull between incongruity and naturalism, query the comfortable entrenchment of Malaysia's majority bias. Meaningful in racially-sensitive Southeast Asia, the series steers shy of the didactic due to its mask form's encoded perpetually altering view-point. Nge Lay's (b. 1979) eerie 2010 mask-subverting-gender photographic portrait series *The Relevance of Restricted Things*, Lee Wen's (b.1957) *Yellow Man*, Mella Jaarsma's (b. 1960) many costume series, Nindityo Adipurnomo's *konde* mask photos, Heri Dono's *Wayang Legenda Indonesia Baru*, Bui Cong Khanh's (b. 1972) *The Man Makes Rain*, Jakkai Siributr's (b. 1969) *Rape and Pillage*, and Vu Dan Tan's 1970s basket-masks, along with his millennium cardboard and sheet metal costumes, and so many more, through their formal construction either suggest or altogether prompt audience participation. If initially local in reference, their universally-legible performative connotations provide access to all.



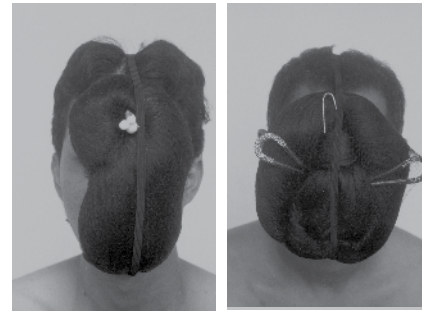
Heri Dono  
*Wayang Legenda Indonesia Baru*  
Functional wayang kulit shaped as islands of Indonesia. 2000



Vu Dan Tan  
*Fashion series*  
cut-out cardboard suits  
2000-2009



Jakkai Siributr  
*Rape and Pillage*  
Thai civil service uniforms, embroidery, sound  
2013



Nindityo Adipurnomo  
*Portraits of Javanese Men Series*  
Digital print and retouched  
photography, 40 cm x 60 cm  
2001-2004  
Image courtesy CAH & the artist

In Singapore, Tang Da Wu's (b. 1943) late-1980s performative pieces engage audiences on social and political ideas through allusion, role transposition and mixed dramatic and visual techniques that communicate on different levels. Tang covers his face with white powder, a liberating mask that frees him to adopt other identities in a way reminiscent of traditional Asian theatre. In his meat cleaver intervention staged in Shell Theatre during the 1988 Singapore Festival, Tang alters his voice and footwear to signify his double roles as the harsh employer violently assailing a leg of lamb/maid, and the subservient domestic helper. As described by Lee Wen present at the time, Tang repeatedly alternated perspectives in the course of the performance, audiences compelled to identify and respond.<sup>28</sup> A second piece, performed at SJI and also part of the 1988 Singapore Festival, again shines a light on the treatment of foreign domestics in the city-state.<sup>29</sup> This work is about the plight of foreign maids falling out of buildings due to unsafe window and roof-washing tasks. Mixed-media and performance, this piece, in its combination of expressive languages including shadow-puppetry, story-telling, and Chinese ink, brought allusively-stated social critique to a plural audience. Indeed, if Tang's juxtaposition of genres created an innovative language, it remained legible and accessible to all as viewers recognised its vernacular roots. These actions, with their roving vantage point, not only convey the complexity of a Singapore perched between the first and developing world, but also implicate audiences in these discussions.



Tang Da Wu Performance with Chinese ink, shadow puppetry, 1988  
courtesy Koh Nguang How

These are among Singapore's first locally-slanted socially-engaged works exhibiting conceptual strategies. Certainly Cheo Chai-Hiang's 1972 minimalist pink neon tube 5' x 5' (*Singapore River*) -or its set of production instructions- is, or is among the city-state's first documented works of Conceptual art for its provocative take on conventional Singapore painting's representation of the Singapore River as well as the country's nation-building mythology.<sup>30</sup> But the latter is markedly different

from the oeuvre of Tang Da Wu, or from works such as Redza Piyadasa's *May 13, 1969*, Harsono's 1975 *Paling Top*, and Supangkat's *Ken Dedes* that challenge the social and political status quo as well as the formal.

Thus viewer intervention can be both a goal and conceptual building block, art in Southeast Asia sometimes incomplete without a receiving party. But if the oscillating perspective brought by audience involvement provides a vital non-material element, creators remain faithful to materialised expression. As they operate radical artistic change in their constructing, interpreting and disseminating of information, Southeast Asians continue to tell stories through sensory languages.

### **conceptual strategies, media and material**

Artists pioneer modes of engagement while maintaining materiality and narrative. In Southeast Asia, due to relatively recent encounters with Western art, there is seldom a particular ideological impulse to react against and so repudiate an ancient cultural predisposition to formal accomplishment.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, far from forgetting past cultural inscriptions, practitioners claim vernacular techniques, imagery, media, materials, and approaches to serve in revolutionary ways. Some of these, outside art school curricula, are tactically harnessed to ensure legibility, their familiarity facilitating audience connection.<sup>32</sup> Their selection, eschewing the literal, is driven by an interest in accessibility of layered and often abstract ideas. Though in some cases choices stem from a will to discard oil on canvas and its links with perceived cultural hegemony propagated by colonial art schools, painting's association with art-establishment control, or with the commercial mainstream, many are enticed by alternative genres for their wealth of meaning, even before their re-contextualisation. Some indigenous materials, signs and techniques, including the hand-made (paper, ceramics, wood-block printing, woven rattan, wood carving, textile) close to village or folk culture, are employed not for their nostalgic connotations of pre-modern life, but because even once re-configured and re-contextualised, their rules of application modified or entirely forgotten, they yield additional layers of information, idiomatic bridges facilitating the mediation of challenging content. Adopted as entire or partial systems, with multiple significances in their new framework, they broaden works' conceptual reach, enabling art to speak of and to complex reality. But such strategies of deliberate appropriation, transformation and rule-changing should not be confused with neo-traditionalism or assimilated with essentialism.<sup>33</sup> When in the early 1990s Marian Pastor Roces decries the "doubtless conflation of art history and ethnography" that she sees as a popular discursive thread of the period, she is pointing to the public's uncritical endorsement of art's simplistic integration of clichés of tradition.<sup>34</sup> When Natalia Kraevskaia lambasts installation in Vietnam in the noughties, she is targeting work of poor expressive quality that screams its weakness all the more for its thoughtless incorporation of folk/national/exotic elements.<sup>35</sup> In Southeast Asia as elsewhere there are accomplished practitioners and the rest, whose plodding, literal quoting of emblems from past and present makes for vacuous art. Sutee's seminal *History Class* cycle is decipherable not only for its come-hither desk form but for its wood-engraved imagery which as village vernacular is familiar to audiences and thus instrumental in their grasping of his

perspective on Thai political history.<sup>36</sup> There is nothing essentialist about Sutee's intelligent reliance on carving for subtly translating difficult ideas, this contextually-sensitive tactic most conceptually sophisticated and thus ensuring the art's transmission of meaning.

Regional artists do not abandon aesthetics and formal rigor as they develop new methods to prod audiences on the paradoxes of late twentieth century existence. Nor do they necessarily quit painting, many exploring mixed-media and performance even as they continue to favor oil.<sup>37</sup> The root-change resides in the way aesthetics are used, academic rules losing their primacy, rather than a wholesale art-world switch from canvas to installation and performance. In Southeast Asia performance and installation are markers of the contemporary, but it is less about trading one mode for another, than artists' rejection, subaltern to conceptual imperatives, of orthodoxy and singularity of medium, technique and genre. Though art schools in the region, following European models, long continue to be divided into separate medium-specific departments -painting; printmaking; sculpture etc...- contemporary artists increasingly see their work as defined by critical necessity rather than medium. For Southeast Asian artists do not have six hundred years of painting history to contest, so positivistically see the expanding array of media as a tool, not a distraction or a thing in itself. They may also recall regional material culture's broad, cross-disciplinary identity that, as outlined above, includes performative genres and others excluded from Euramerican art school curricula. As early as 1975 the GSRB manifesto put forward such ideas, Brita Miklouho-Maklai translating them as follows "In creating works of art, banishing as far as possible images having the special elements of art, like the elements of painting drawing. The totality of art exists in one category, visual elements which can be linked with elements of space, movement, time, etc. Thus all the activity which can be categorized in Indonesian art, although based on different aesthetics, for example, that which originates from traditional art, are in this way included in the concept, considered legitimate as living art. ..."<sup>38</sup> Two decades later Tran Luong states "... In the 1990s I was not specially against painting. I gravitated to *do* paper for a while and then started to get interested in performance. This seemed quite natural to me, there was so much to say. With performance I could say so much more and get audiences interested in those ideas that would have been impossible to express in painting, they were too complex and intangible and subversive. Installation and performance worked for artists and audiences...."<sup>39</sup>

Neither the pioneer contemporaries of Southeast Asia, nor the later generation stumble upon the material prompts of their conceptual methodologies by chance. Sutee Kunavichanont's school desks and carving for *History Class*, Vu Dan Tan's illicit Hanoi cigarette vendors' glass-lidded boxes for *Suitcase of a Pilgrim*, Heri Dono's wayang kulit, Nguyen Van Cuong's (b.1972) *Porcelain Diary* vases, Montien Boonma's ordinary ceramic bowls, Brenda Fajardo's divinatory tarot as a canvas of Pinoy history, the Aquilizan's rubber slippers as mascots of servitude and freedom, Jakkai Siributr's handkerchiefs in his 2011 political chronicle *Evening News* all corroborate thinking material choices. Whatever their genre of predilection, many straddle techniques and modes without

inhibition. This exploration of disciplinary cross-over occurs less for the sake of formal adventure than as a quest for communication devices able to deliver complex ideas to many. Conceptual need, derived from art's social content, drives formal developments.

### conceptual strategies and aesthetics

In Vasan Sitthiket's *Blue October* aesthetic sensibility and concept operate in tandem. The 1996 series is a twenty-canvas twenty-year commemoration of one of modern Thailand's most demented episodes of state-sponsored butchery, the 1976 Thammasat University student massacre. But Vasan has not simply painted the victims. Instead, he has appropriated the black and white images from October 1976 newspaper reports documenting the incident, then reproduced the clippings in large-scale, preserving only assailants and victims, devoid of background detail in a way reminiscent of Thai Buddhist murals.<sup>40</sup> This minimalist pictorial treatment, combined with the semblance of neutrality derived from the press-recorded history that is the paintings' referential source, gives the canvases a terrifyingly remote iciness. This frigidity is heightened by Vasan's use of the purest, luminous blue, concocted with natural indigo suspended in medium which appears all the cooler for the sporadic addition of small squares of warm gold-leaf, badges of merit apposed to the victims. Thus Vasan produces tangible evidence of the massacre, while also provoking cold detachment in the viewer, contradicting initial sympathy. The series, beyond honoring the dead, is equivocal, the sincerity of facile pathos challenged by its questioning of citizens' commitment to the lessons of history. Associated Press image-borrowing is the work's central conceptual foundation on which rest questions about memory, history, and responsibility. Vasan's second conceptual pillar are the gold-leaf badges, appropriated from Buddhist merit-making practices. Text too provides grounding, each painting's Thai title *For the State Security, For the Morality of Human Beings, Thailand is Land of Barbarians etc....* inscribed upside down on the canvas, so obliging viewers to contort themselves uncomfortably to read, thus underscoring the historical event's unfathomable absurdity and human wastage.

*Blue October* is far more than memorial and description, its spare composition, radiant blue-gold palette, and grand narrative scale underlining, by contrast, the ugliness of apathy and absent civic engagement. The series plays on conceptual and representational registers simultaneously, so delivering not just the graphic horror of brutality, but the more insidious violence of Thailand's repressed historical memory. Originally shown in the commercially-low-profile Sunday Gallery in Bangkok's crowded, general-public Chatuchak Market, *Blue October*, in its scale and form, and in its visibility and direct appeal to the public, again recalls traditional mural painting. *Blue October*, nearly twenty years old, with its pondered meshing of beauty and reference, can transcend the specificity of Thai history to speak on a universal humanistic register.

Innumerable works of Southeast Asian art are unabashed in their conjugation of aesthetic seduction and conceptual construction, the more visually appealing the more hard-hitting their critical discourse. Isabel

and Alfredo Aquilizan's (b. 1965 & 1962) 2007-2008 *Address* room-sized cube of personal chattels, perturbingly neat in its evocation of uprooted diasporic domestic helpers or others, is compellingly good-looking; Roberto Feleo's (b. 1954) glass-domed Pinoy histories modeling historical atrocities are fetchingly encased like the rarest fine jewels; Chaw Ei Thein, Rich Streitmatter-Tran and Aung Ko's (b.1980) *September Sweetness* 2008 commemorates bloody repression through the poetically-dissolving sugar model of a Burmese temple; FX Harsono's *Burned Victims* performance video is visually engaging despite its murderous subject; Tran Luong's *Red Scarf* performances, intensely violent and physically and psychologically disturbing, are undeniably aesthetic; Nguyen Van Cuong's *Porcelain Diary's* tales of sodomy, bondage and moral decay are masterfully composed into visually delectable tableaux; Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's (b. 1957) *Thai Medley* is refined in its presentation of death and morgue-held corpses; Montien Boonma's *Venus of Bangkok* is a raw, beautiful expression of the urban sex trade; Goldie Poblador's exquisite hand-blown glass perfume bottles are irresistible even as they contain her stenching social commentary; Manit Sriwanichpoom's *Horror in Pink* is terrifying yet visually-perfect; Heri Dono's *Flying Angels* are lyrical in flight, yet trenchant in their defiance of repression as they slam into the net barring their ascent to freedom. Pioneer contemporary Vietnamese artist Vu Dan Tan, whose oeuvre consistently associates formal and sensual splendor with a critical subtext, encapsulates this approach with the pro-active words from Dostoyevsky that caption many of his works "beauty will save the world".



Isabel and Alfredo Aquilizan  
*Address (Project: another country)*  
balikbayan-box cubed personal effects  
room-installation, 2008  
courtesy the artists  
(Left)

Montien Boonma  
*Venus of Bangkok*  
multi media installation  
1991-1993  
(Right)

While the establishment of connections between conceptual strategies and social critique in contemporary Southeast Asian art leads to a referencing of pre-modern cultural practice, the modern too fostered such affiliations. By the 1970s the region boasts a well-embedded modern tradition allying art and life. Twentieth century Southeast Asian artists are often progressive torch-bearers, marrying their practice to the defense of social and nationalistic ideals, particularly acute in the late colonial and early nation-building periods: Sudjojono and Hendra in Indonesia, Juan Luna in the Philippines, Nguyen Phan Chanh in Hanoi among the best documented. Moreover, if art and social critique serve one-another in the twentieth century, traveling back further in time, one discovers in the oeuvre

of Southeast Asia's first modernist Raden Saleh (1811-1880) the association of political critique and conceptual devices. Raden Saleh's *The Arrest of Diponegoro* of 1857, in its choice of images and layering of coded meaning displays conceptual strategies in the service of collective ideologies that anticipate related tactics in Southeast Asian contemporary art.

Though Saleh's oeuvre is generally slotted into the Romantic tradition, his *Arrest* stands out for its allusively delivered critical reading of history.<sup>41-42</sup> The socially enlightened and cosmopolitan Javanese prince, who frequented Europe's circles of power from 1829 to 1851, was familiar with mid-nineteenth century Europe's progressive ideologies as well as with the history painting genre and its function. His *Arrest*, described as proto-nationalist by Saleh scholar Werner Kraus in his exhaustive and illuminated analysis of the work, is interpreted as a voice-piece of dissent pointed at the Dutch colonial administration.<sup>43</sup> But Saleh's *Arrest* is not an earnest tract in the history painting or social realist tradition. Instead it engages in resistance indirectly. Presumably familiar with the 1835 history painting by Dutchman Nicolaas Pieneman picturing the Dutch triumph over the Javanese in 1830 that ended the Java War, Saleh apparently appropriated and reworked Pieneman's painting, retaining subject and basic composition while increasing scale (Saleh's canvas is 112 x 179 cm to Pieneman's 77 x 100 cm). But Saleh's version adulterates the Dutch picture's title and pictoriography, the latter's didactic imperialistic message undermined by the injection of iconographies garnered from the local repertoire. Saleh shows the Dutch officials arresting the Indonesian rebel leader with enlarged, slightly grotesque heads derived from Javanese mythological representation. As explained by Werner Kraus "... the 'error' is not an 'error' but a message: the heads of the Dutch officers are the heads of *raksasas*, monsters..."<sup>44</sup>. And for anyone doubting Saleh's intention, Kraus points out the absence of the Dutch flag in Saleh's version: "...Raden Saleh has 'forgotten' the Dutch tricolor altogether..."<sup>45</sup>. Saleh's subversion would have carried clear critical meaning to local audiences, his sourcing within vernacular visual tradition facilitating the communication of his painting's rebellious ideas. The tweaked title of the work, Pieneman's 'subjugation' changed by Saleh to 'arrest', also refuses Dutch supremacy, so supporting the Javanese painter's guerrilla agency. Saleh boldly gave the painting to the Dutch monarch, who, with other Dutchmen, seemingly failed to decode its encrypted defiance. *Arrest* shows Raden Saleh using an allusive approach to implant contentious information legible to Javanese audiences but not to Dutch ones. Saleh's strategy involves conceptual play, his parochially-legible coded imagery a means to communicate with the collective in a non-descriptive way. The day's political context, its effect on national pride, and a will to be heard in an oppressive environment, not formal experimentation, had propelled Saleh onto new expressive terrain led by concept. The artist's irreverent handling of history painting is a collateral result, the essential being to use the re-contextualisation of known icons to resist Dutch imperialism.



**Raden Saleh**  
*The Arrest of Diponegoro*  
oil on canvas, 112 x 179 cm  
1857, Museum Istana, Jakarta



**Nicolaas Pieneman**  
*The Submission of Prince Diponegoro to General De Kock*  
oil on canvas, 77 x 100 cm  
1835, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

Just as Southeast Asian contemporary art enlists aesthetics, sign-systems are carefully sought out for their ability to further meaning. Thought, not chance, is a preponderant in these artistic choices.

The visual seduction of Vasan's *Blue October* is a first sensory layer under which a cerebral second, his appropriation of newspaper images, is revealed. A third layer comprises his adorning of victims with gold patches, a transposition of Buddhist symbolism that for Thais has immediate and visceral communicative impact. Vasan's construct, deploying familiar references in non-familiar contexts to assail selective amnesia and consolidate response to barbarity, ensures the sequence's intellectual grounding and effectiveness, conceptual methods for the sake of social progress. Another Thai artist begins on the same referential terrain: Manit, like Vasan, in his 2001 *Horror in Pink*, if unabashed in his appeal to the eye, bases his photographic sequence on a shocking iconographic manipulation of the same 1976 black and white press images used by Vasan. As in *Blue October* the literal and metaphoric are integrated, Pink Man photographs engaging viewers critically on the idea of important histories supplanted by the facile rewards of consumer society. Again, as in *Blue October* the horrific comes from a re-use of known imagery which is then made compelling, Manit's flawless weaving of good looks and concept imposing hard truth on a dissipated public.

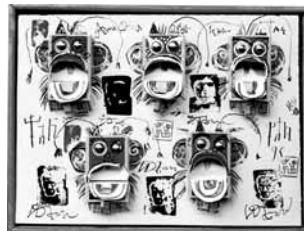
Sutee Kunavichayanont too mines these Thammasat images in various *History Class* iterations, illustrating how contextually-meaningful icons tied to events operate as seeds for the development of myriad conceptual approaches. In the same vein, Sutee's opting for wooden desks as his *History Class* canvas is not random. Familiar to audiences everywhere, the worn desks, along with their village-reminiscent chiseled narratives, prompt a recognition and reassurance that facilitate viewer engagement with the installation's ideas. Vu Dan Tan's *Suitcase of a Pilgrim* series, begun in the mid-1990s, further illustrates artists' thinking appropriation of locally-understood cues. Though curators in Berlin showing this work in 1999<sup>46</sup> exclude the orange glass-lidded boxes in their catalogue images, these are in fact intrinsic to *Pilgrims'* concept. Borrowed from Hanoi street vendors clandestinely selling small goods such as cigarettes in the years after *doi moi* when the limits of private commercial enterprise were being tested, the containers functioned as the vendors' portable display cases. However they were also slim and light enough to be snapped closed at a moment's notice and slipped under arm as the hawker fled the authorities. Tan's exploitation of these boxes as protective shells for his cut-out



effigies deliberately integrates their challenge to regulations and call to citizen empowerment-through-action into his art. International audiences unfamiliar with Hanoi life in the 1990s may not grasp this reading, but the tension the cases impart as they restrain and order Vu Dan Tan's otherwise irrepressibly free sculptures, is palpable.



Vu Dan Tan  
APT 2 installation shot  
1996, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane



Vu Dan Tan  
*Suitcase of a Pilgrim*  
recycled cut-out and painted packaging,  
lidded vendor's box, 1998

Prior to *Suitcase of a Pilgrim*, in late 1980s Hanoi, before Vietnam had even begun to reap the cultural and economic rewards of *doi moi*, Vu Dan Tan began producing his *Festival Banner* series. Gouache on *do* paper or alternately newsprint, the sequence spans some six years 1989-1994, images produced in mini sets, a few at a time, in periodic spurts. Unlike anything before, these pictures, like diary entries straddling drawing and writing, made when events inspired, chronicle Vietnam's evolving urban/cultural landscape with an unknown yet inclusive iconographic language. Tan's hieroglyphics resemble blown up or truncated Chinese characters, Christian cross motifs, stylised insects with antennae waving, woven cane chair seats, abstracted shamanistic masks, oil lamps paired with the words *Hoa Ky* relating to the American war period when oil lamps provided light during night-time black-outs, and geometric decorative devices reminiscent of minority textiles.<sup>47</sup> And when on newspaper, they incorporate highlighted advertisements for newly-available consumer goods, or sometimes play with article titles. In their vivid colouring, varying scale, changing texture of paint alternately crisp and dry, or wet and blurred, and dense, frieze-like compositions, these are the sacred cloths of new Vietnam's ritual life. Far more than decorative, these mock ritual weavings are instead early manifestations of Vu Dan Tan's playful but studied handling of emblems referencing the everyday, village life, and those outside Vietnam's social-political system (Christians, minorities). The artist's vigorous markings jump energetically off the paper, and though mimicking abstraction, still considered subversive by Hanoi's Art Association until 1992, in fact reveal conceptual brio as Tan distorts, re-orders and re-contextualises specifically-chosen totems to project the essence of a confused but also wildly promising Hanoi on the cusp of change.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to imagery, the series, in its banner form, suggests a siting in the public domain, touching on the exploration of the blurred boundaries between private and public zones, psychological and physical, that will characterise Tan's later work.<sup>49</sup> With his personal mascots bearing the Fou Zan Tan or Fou Jean Tan crest (a simultaneous play on notions of signature and Tan's role as the French royal entertainer *fou* or provocative court jester) Vu Dan Tan hints at alternative hierarchies and social

structures, so flirting with critique of the status quo.<sup>50</sup> Further, as a body of flags, which even if altered inevitably allude to the collective as represented by the state, as well as contesting the repression of the individual in broad philosophical terms, foreshadows the tensions that will increasingly cleave public and individual interests as market capitalism takes hold in 1990s Vietnam. Beyond Vietnam, this series anticipates so many later Southeast Asian works of art critiquing nationalism, its navigation of personal, urban and democratic space an oblique way of questioning institutional authority. Looking forward to Tan's oeuvre to come, these visually electric pieces tell their independent story but also fit together to compose a larger whole. In their linkage of signs, allusion to evolving popular culture, and defense of marginality, Vu Dan Tan's *Banners*, in their intrepid proposing of a new order, constitute the early green shoots of Vietnamese contemporary art.

Second and third generation Southeast Asian artists continue this tradition of interplay of codes and stories about collective realities. Cambodian Vandy Rattana's (b.1980) *Khmer Rouge Trial* of 2009 employs a documentary mode to raise critical ideas about witness, memory, history, justice, judgement, reality and time. His 16-image series captures Cambodians watching Khmer Rouge trials in real time via television screens located outside the courtroom. Thus, by framing the trials from beyond the proceedings' physical space, the legal hearings themselves removed by some four decades from the events they reference, through a double displacement of view-point on the Khmer Rouge activities, the artist creates a psychological distance from events that allows viewers to penetrate their meaning on multiple planes, amplifying the more obvious emotional and civilisational ones. Alteration of vantage point, as well as the set's grid-like display that counters narrative sequentiality, take the series beyond documentary photography.

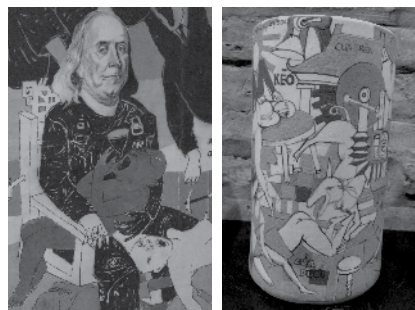
Saigoner Thao Nguyen Phan (b.1987) enters her subject through a still-life composition of jewel-like crystals. These 'crystals', human kidney stones ceremoniously displayed on and under gleaming glass, tell of separation and loss through their allusion to body-purged-but-now-precious organic detritus. This story, materialised through exhibition in the gallery space, knits into a second narrative, far more taboo, and not directly on show. The latter, recounted on small postcards casually forgotten on a corner of the glass table, is about a Mekong Delta farmer digging up a large and special rock on her own land and having it confiscated by the authorities. This stone is then put on display as communal property in the local town. The farmer attempts to recover her stone through the courts, but is unsuccessful. Elliptical yet clear, Thao's parallel tales intersect in their push and pull between private and public space, and the powers disputing control over the one and the other. Only through conceptual dance with its game of allusion could a simple table, crystals, and a few glass vessels illuminate and contextualise the paradoxical reality of Vietnam today.

Manit's 2011 *The Election of Hatred* is a visually grandiose take on the multiple meanings and demands of democracy. Restrained in construction, the piece is a series of colour poster-scaled photographs of defaced



election banners from Thailand's 2011 national poll. Manit's lens, neutral, has captured the scarred images of candidate portraits from various political parties, their faces framed close-up to convey an unsettling intimacy. Via simple appropriation and three-stage re-presentation of the vandalised posters, Manit confronts Thais, all of whom familiar with the initial and second-stage destroyed candidate images, with a third more thoughtful reading of the campaign slogans as seen through his shutter. Do these candidates compose a system owned by the people? Or conversely, do they run the people? *The Election of Hatred*, even when reduced to a few images, agilely communicates the many contradictory and not always wholesome ideas that underpin supposed democratic structures. The work shows how citizens, in theory controlling their destiny through the ballot box, despite disillusion, still want to put their faith in a system. They simultaneously vote for and destroy their politicians as told by the defacement of their effigies. Manit's series, in disclosing this contradiction, embodies Thailand's insoluble polarisation. Pairing conceptual legibility and billboard visuals, *The Election of Hatred*, introducing notions of hope, cynicism, substance, packaging, violence, individualism, herd instincts, and much more, transcends the Thai context to address global citizens on the tense push and pull of individuals confronting the state.

Paintings on *do* paper by Hanoian Nguyen Van Cuong toy with icons of violence, eroticism, greed and tradition lifted from a mixed local-global repertoire. In his fractious juxtapositions Cuong evokes the chaotic energy and sordid underbelly of 1990s Hanoi. Presented with classical compositional virtuosity, Cuong's mascots -Ben Franklin as mafia overlord-four-toed mythological creature, traditional architecture, hypodermic syringes, women in bondage, street loudspeakers, crows and besuited karaoke lounge predators- in their new associations translate the hope and despair of late twentieth century Vietnam. In addition to imagery, Cuong's selection of medium and production methodology can also increase meaning. His 1999-2001 *Porcelain Diary*, an extensive set of cylindrical vases painted over several years, chronicles turn-of-the-century life. Ancient ceramics' wider sociological significance in the Vietnamese context furthers concept. Thus Cuong, deploying porcelain's cultural implications, expands from pictorial narrative, citing his interest in the kiln village Bat Trang's communitarian ethos and non-signed-craft heritage.<sup>51</sup> *Porcelain Diary's* iconography, like that of Cuong's *do* painting, couples parochial emblems with scenes of depravity to reveal a frightening urban life under the city's veneer of new modernity. Dispelling any whiff of literalness however, the artist plays simultaneously on linkages 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 reassuring domesticity and altar tables, and conceptualised as a 'diary', cultured literary habits.<sup>52</sup> Salacious and refined in the way of Marquis de Sade, if *Porcelain Diary* provokes via its raw imagery, it is all the more effective for Cuong's choice of the demurely bourgeois ceramic vase as medium and support.



Nguyen Van Cuong  
*Couleur du dollar* (detail)  
acrylic, gouache and ink on *do*  
paper, 1997  
courtesy the artist  
(left)

Nguyen Van Cuong  
*Porcelain Diary*  
polychrome porcelain vase from  
series, 2001  
(right)

### conceptual strategies, the urban stage and performativity

Moving outside the physical and structural confines of the gallery and art school can consolidate art's critical function. Art inhabiting public space -or zones not specifically identified with the state and its organisations- becomes more accessible physically and psychologically so acquiring voice. Location, selected as an ally of concept, can engender additional readings. Much of Sutee's installation is designed for street intervention. Sutee installs *History Class* outdoors at the foot of Bangkok's Democracy Monument to ensure full public exposure. Its location clarifies concept by associating knowledge of history and citizens' potential political empowerment. Likewise his Bangkok-street-parading inflatable latex 2000 *Siamese Breath* brings ideas about exclusion, history and changing world orders to a non-art audience. Vu Dan Tan's 1999-2000 Cadillac two-continent production-street-performance *RienCarNation* engages with United States and Hanoi geographies as a means of political and cultural comparative critique; Lee Wen's *Yellow Man* performances take on different meanings according to intervention locales; Malaysian Wong Hoy Cheong (b.1960) places his 2005 minaret *Fastigium* arrestingly and inescapably on the roof of the Guangdong Museum for the whole city to experience. The piece, firmly anchored in geographic and historic context, in its reference to Muslim minority status in China, is a reverse indicator of Malaysia's bias in favor of its Malay-Muslim majority *vis à vis* the Chinese minority, the installation thus allusively yet forcefully critiquing the majority-minority dichotomy that has defined the country's politics for most of the post-colonial period. Doubtless *Fastigium* accrues particular significance from its siting in Guangdong, a centre of Islam in ancient China. These works and many more derive specific tenor from locus. In fast-urbanising Southeast Asia where urban-rural tension is among artists' core critical themes, and in a region of Asia where civil society and the *res publica* are barely nascent, it is no surprise to find art conspiring to use place as a tool of expressive expansion.



Vu Dan Tan  
*RienCarNation*  
Cut-out car (Cadillac)  
1999,  
performance in  
Cadillac, 2000



Wong Hoy Cheong

*Fastigium*, bamboo and netting minaret, on Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangdong, China, 2005 (second Guangzhou Triennial)

Cross-disciplinary approaches, hybrid manifestations and multi-media languages tie in with shifting ideas of physical and psychological space. Installation and performance, markers of the contemporary in Southeast Asia, develop out of this opening, interesting artists for what they can achieve in space, time, or back-and-forth exchange with audiences, incubating ever-evolving narratives through viewer interaction over time. Even artists faithful to a single medium venture out. Manit Sriwanichpoom, however committed to photography, in his ongoing *Pink Man* series incorporates the performative pink man component, so altering his images' point of view and their relationship with the viewer, the latter compelled to enter their story rather than observing from outside their frame. Vast murals and public-place posters by Nguyen Van Cuong, Truong Tan (b.1963), collectives Apotik Komik with Popok Tri Wahyudi (b.1973), and Taring Padi (founded 1998), exposed for no more than a few days, further than their imagery-as-object, in taking over the street, represent action and the critical opposing of private and public space. Yet however much they re-tool and re-order, the thing itself, whether object or the performing body, is materialised and serves concept. These forms, whether born *sui generis* from the local context, or their evolution facilitated by awareness of currents outside Southeast Asia, display artist's predisposition to the genre, function often spurring formal novelty.<sup>53</sup> Interactive, durational modes, sharing some idiomatic kinship with traditional expressions, in their contemporary incarnation, respond to art's developing sense of purpose and focus on plural publics.<sup>54</sup> Practitioners soliciting audiences on matters of public interest often encroach on public space.

The beginning of this new ethos drawing on viewers and public domains can arguably be traced to Redza Piyadasa's 1970 *May 13, 1969*. The piece, possibly Southeast Asia's first audience-immersing sculpture-installation, is thematically centred on Malaysia's May 1969 Sino-Malay sectarian violence. Its social reading deliberated by art historian TK Sabapathy over years, the work, though designated as sculpture, would seem to stretch beyond sculptural self-containment, the mirror at its base suggesting Piyadasa's courting of audience through reflected presence.<sup>55</sup> This de facto viewer integration would take *May 13* into the realm of installation as defined by both Western and Asian discourses. Accepting the work as installation, one can infer its formal genealogy from a strong social imperative and need to articulate critical meaning, its quest for reception tied to its effectiveness denouncing racial violence. Avoiding literal narration or documentation of the May events, Piyadasa has invented a visual language designed to engage the collective on concerns

of the collective. The artist's juxtaposition of signs -standing coffin; Malaysian flag signifying nation; title as historical prompt; audience-inviting mirror at coffin's base- heralds the close connection between conceptual approaches, art's critical function within the collective as expressed through reception-activation, audiences' expansion into communal areas (geographic and social), and political ideologies.



Redza Piyadasa

*May 13, 1969*  
installation, 1970  
(original destroyed, remade in 2006)

In Indonesia, from the 1970s, art in active dialogue with publics announces the innovative practices that are later labeled regional contemporary art. FX Harsono and Jim Supangkat, among other GSRB members, experiment with installation, a fluid collage of materials which also assembles signs that advance layered, indirectly-stated associations. Supangkat's well-known *Ken Dedes* of 1975 specifically illustrates this mixed formal and semantic dexterity. Describing new directions of his mid 1970s production, acknowledged as early contemporary art in Indonesia, FX Harsono says "...this new type of art easily talked about the social, political and cultural problems of all Indonesians. It alluded to the problems we all had not just elites in Jakarta. It assembled everyone, belonged to everyone. Its elements were real, so could talk better about real issues though it did not literally describe... And it was in real space sometimes, not always in the gallery..."<sup>56</sup>

In late 1980s-early 1990s Singapore Tang Da Wu, Vincent Leow (b. 1961), Gilles Massot (b. 1955), and others' performative interventions outside the gallery engage in approachable and mutable exchange with broad publics, their amalgamation of disparate codes a forum for the critical disclosure of the tensions arising from people confronting systems. In Singapore's urban frame such intercessions have additional significance. Though their genesis is the result of various factors, these mediations of community-accessible zones can be read in relation to the city-state's post-independence public housing reassignment campaign whereby populations were moved from *kampung* or Malay-style villages to high-rise tower blocks in so called 'new-towns'. This evolution in Singapore's urban fabric altered conceptions of public and private areas as well as social structures and relationships with authority.<sup>57</sup> Whereas the *kampung*, run on notions of shared, non-private loci, were forums of collaboration, the Housing and Development Board apartment blocks, however benign in their social engineering, in practice fostered separation, their expanses for group assembly limited.<sup>58</sup> These issues were sketched indirectly by Singaporean Matthew Ngui (b. 1962) in his 2003 viewer-integrating *HOME at Sculpture Square* installation which through 1961 archival images of the Bukit Ho Swee fire aftermath (a fire that some have alleged was set deliberately to clear the *kampung*), and slogans from 2000s Singapore's 'Global City' campaign, cryptically exposes Singapore

social policy over decades.<sup>59</sup> Tang Da Wu, for his part, consistently grapples with the social repercussions of urbanisation in his banana leaf works and others. Installation, and especially performance in Singapore not only develop dialogue between artist, art, and public, they also reclaim the communal, creating a shared, fluid and open arena accommodating the nurturing of civil society.



Matthew Ngui  
*HOME at Sculpture Square*  
Room installation, various media, 2003  
Courtesy the artist

In other parts of Southeast Asia, break-neck speed urbanisation fuels artists' critical reaction all the more, the city perceived not just as a geography, but as a place of centralised institutional control dominated by political or entrenched bureaucratic, urban elites. Chalood Nimsamer and Aung Myint (b.1946) are important figures of Thai and Burmese modernism respectively. Exemplifying regional art's bucking of linear progression in expressive modes, both cross seamlessly back and forth from straight first-degree representational or abstract-formalist art to multi-layered conceptual tactics that revolve around multiple reference systems.

In the Thai countryside, Chalood performs his 1982 *Rural Environmental Sculpture*. Breaking radically from mainstream practices of the day in purpose, visual strategy and form, the work can be identified as early contemporary art in the Kingdom. Through its innovative play with body, movement, time and found rural objects organic and hand-made, it endorses the non-Bangkok canvas and as such can be read as undermining the dominance of Bangkok's control structures and establishment.<sup>60</sup> The performance and its relics, documented through colour photography as an object-draped Chalood's slow dance in a rural clearing, alludes to but does not reproduce village ritual practices secular and sacred. Free from the constraint of literal representation, advocating the blurring of private and public space as well as a critique of Bangkok's usurpation of the village and its codes, and suggesting at least theoretical audience presence, *Rural Environmental Sculpture* presents hallmarks of regional conceptual tactics.<sup>61</sup>

Aung Myint shows the same versatility of form and discourse, performances such as his 2010 *The Intruders* and paintings of the same period relating to maps, revealing a tense superposition of descriptive and allusive cues that open discussion on Burma's evolving mores, competing individual and group interests, and tussle over the country's future played out from both inside and outside its borders. In up-country Burma, Aung Ko's ritualistic durational burning ladder performance *H.u.m.m.m.* of 2007 involves the entire village in a symbolic purging and invasion of the river, the artist planting the flag of ownership for the collective. His later *In Transit* three-rider bicycle and three-channel video installation,

audience-inclusive, also marries time, space and public, but this time instability, not confrontation and erasure, are the themes.<sup>62</sup>



Aung Ko  
*In Transit*  
interactive three-seater bicycle, 2014  
three channel video, 2011

Across Southeast Asia, art's penetration of physical space brings about a covert penetration of civic space both facilitated and explained by conceptual approaches. The city, if often an object of critique, can also be a foil to or in cahoots with the individual in opposition with the system. Performance, a creature of communal zones and time, more than about body and movement, can promote the expansion of the zones of social congregation that nurture civil society.

Public-involving installation that imposes viewer action especially serves the critical function that singularises contemporary Southeast Asian practice. Even works sourced manifestly in the self such as those of Pinaree Sanpitak, Nguyen Minh Thanh, Nge Lay, Truong Tan, Lee Wen, Amanda Heng, and Alwin Reamillo among others manage inclusive reach, bringing the personal onto public terrain to bind audiences, thematic, iconographic and material choices ensuring readings on collective affairs. Devices of all kinds are employed to integrate viewers and art as complex ideas, impossible to communicate in literal ways, are imparted through participation. Wong Hoy Cheong's 2006 *Chronicles of Crime* black and white photo sequence, presented as an installation in a darkened room each frame lit with a rudimentary prison-style shaded bulb, steers the viewer back and forth between reality and fiction. Also concerned with such crossovers is Bui Cong Khanh, both his 2010 *The Past Moved* and 2012 *Saigon Slum* pulling audiences into a physical investigation of the liminal zones where fact and fantasy are confused as the pieces delve into urbanisation, exclusion, abuse of power, and empowerment of the individual against the state. *The Past Moved*, constituted of life-scale charcoal drawings of a shabby, soon-to-be-razed Saigon neighborhood, is configured as a 3-D photo-studio. As viewers sit to be photographed in the mock street-set, they project past onto present, perceive alternate futures, and anticipate erosion not yet occurred. Thus the piece, a magnet for atmospheric selfies, obliges audiences to experience vital tensions opposing certainty and illusion relevant in Vietnam and elsewhere.

Thailand's Paphonsak La-or's 2013 *Loss of Hearing* entices the public to bed in the gallery space, audiences inevitably perusing books as

they lounge. Paphonsak's books conceal and reveal deletions on page 112. Alluding to the Thai Criminal Code's draconian Lèse Majesté laws in its section 112, these neatly defaced pages, in their deliberately unthreatening bedroom setting, cryptically propose dialogue on unchecked institutional abuses in the Kingdom. Effective for its clean conceptual construct, *Loss of Hearing* uses prompts from the everyday to confront audiences with absences and implicate them bodily in the consequences of the rules of public life.

Sutee Kunavichayanont's practice from the middle-1990s onward defines Southeast Asian participative installation. Sutee's works answer socio-political and cultural imperatives, the tension opposing nationalism and individual freedom a particular focus. Form and language develop around concept, the artist's involvement of audience a core element of his art. Iconography, media, and site are enrolled holistically to provoke thought. Among the most iconic of his audience-centric pieces is the before-mentioned *History Class*. Begun in 2000 with *History Class (Thanon Ratchadamnoen)*, the series is conceptualised as a sequence of evolving iterations that structured as an unnumbered composition of school desks incorporates variables of time and space that speak of the elasticity of conceptual methods, the set growing in size over decades as the artist documents additional taboo episodes of Thai history with additional desks. Inviting and legible, *History Class* is exemplar of Southeast Asian contemporary's socially-grounded conceptualism. In effortlessly commanding audience involvement, publics seduced by its participatory presentation as they make rubbings from its engraved historical scenes, some excised from the national narrative, the artist prompts critical perspectives on state power, nationalist ideologies, history's authorship, and the individual's claim to empowerment.

In all versions of *History Class* (the most recent the 2013 *History Class Part 2* including 23 desks tracing Thai history through 2013), Sutee appropriates public domain images and texts referencing historical events, including nineteenth century European satirical vignettes, topographical prints, Thai political speeches, anthropological literature, and more. Through its mandated rubbing and take-away action, the installation metaphorically and physically puts viewers in charge of their own history, so constituting political intervention. The piece builds tension through its introduction of contradictory ideas: the class-room as zone of passive absorption of nationally-sanctioned ideology *versus* the viewer challenging national ideologies as he or she lifts taboo histories in the form of rubbed images from the carvings. This deliberately developed pull, experienced by *History Class* 'students', sharpens participants' critical judgement of the place of history in civil-society-building and rendering the work irresistible to all, effects connection via a carefully-chosen array of locally and globally-meaningful signifiers and processes.

These works, though generated from home discourses, speak to plural audiences. Amanda Heng's *Let's Chat*, an ongoing participative performance work begun by the Singaporean artist in 1996 links strangers in conversation around a table, informally drinking tea and tailing

bean sprouts. Communication and language have been a preoccupation of Heng for many years. Particularly scrutinised by Heng is Singapore's 1979 'Speak Mandarin' campaign, a government policy promoting language standardisation in the city-state's Chinese-dialect-speaking communities that has since come under fire for its hindering of intra-generational communication and erasure of culture. Through *Let's Chat's* simple and everyday domestic activity, the artist brings participants to raise their own questions about exchange, identity, tolerance, minorities, the meaning of community, and individualism far beyond Singapore.

Multi-media Lee Wen, like Heng a pioneering figure of performance in Southeast Asia, is interested in performative and interactive methodologies for the human body's ability to create direct ties between artist, audience, work, idea, time and space. His *Ping-Pong Go Round*, first developed for the 1998 Melbourne exhibition *Construction in Process VI (CIP)*, combines the donut-shaped ping pong table, physical action, multiple players, exchange, and subversion of the rules of ping pong as its conceptual platform. The transformation of the rectangular table into a circular one, inspired by a tyre-shaped conference-room table, is open to many readings. Possibly decrypted as an extension of Lee's *Yellow Man* performances which loosely build dialogue between insider and outsider perspectives on identity and culture, *Ping-Pong Go Round* can be viewed as consolidating this in-out tension into a single force embodying endless balance and solidarity overriding the individual-celebrating aspect of the game.<sup>63</sup> Engrossing action-visuals and provocative formal distortion are here allies in the translation of the contest pitting collective values against individual interests. *Ping-Pong Go Round* touches lightly on current social issues in Southeast Asia, but also on philosophical questions relevant to all.

These many discussed works distinguish themselves in the Southeast Asian contemporary canon not for their medium, but for the way artists use expressive languages to effect communication with audiences.

### conceptual strategies and texts of the nation

When public words such as national anthems, pledges, recognisable state propaganda, and constitutions are appropriated, or when questions are components of works, art infiltrates the public domain and actions response. Roslisham Ismail's (b.1972) *NEP*, the acronym for New Economic Policy, an ongoing intervention since 2009, is a literal representation of Malaysia's euphemistically phrased racially-biased laws favouring the Malay-Muslim majority in the multi-faith country. But in its scale and composition of Malay, Chinese and English street stickers advertising the services of money-lenders (forbidden by Islam), the vast wall piece covertly reveals the hypocrisy of Malaysian policy. Tay Wei Leng's (b.1978) 2013 sound composition *Integration II* is simple in construction, Singapore-based foreigners invited by the artist to recite the National Pledge with its call for unity, racial harmony, democracy and equality. The piece's garbled meshing of voices distorts the pledge's lofty words so reducing intelligibility and simultaneously robbing it of earnestness and jingoism. This erasure, the installation's essential

conceptual support, obliquely questions the sincerity and effectiveness of Singapore's adhesion to grand principles, among which equality between communities, thus exposing the city-state's climate of increasing xenophobia. Bui Cong Khanh's 2012 *Commitment Culture* is a pair of wooden doors from which the artist has carved out one of various Communist social tracts determining Vietnamese citizen behavior. The letters from the carving, piled randomly nearby, beckon viewers to write a new social contract. This simple spelling of new words, initiated by the public, in its subversion of state regulation, offers empowerment in its conquest of civic space. Lee Wen's 1999-2000 *World Class Society* video installation shows Lee speaking to the camera endlessly vaunting the means to, and merit, of being 'World Class', as Singapore aspires to be, or already is according to her marketing people. The piece also includes a survey, viewers solicited to define 'World Class'. Lee's delivery, bombastic melting into monotonous, and civil-servant get-up, combine humor and sharp critique, the work pinpointing Singapore's insecurity-tinged national chauvinism. FX Harsono's previously mentioned *Apa yang Anda Lakukan jika Krupuk ini adalah Pistol Beneran* (*What would you do if these crackers were real pistols?*), like Vasan's 1994 *108 Questionnaires for Thai People*, from the National Gallery Bangkok's seminal 1995 *I Love Thai Culture* exhibition, assails with antagonistically raw questions on social, cultural and political topics that shift responsibility for public affairs to viewers. These works are not sanctimonious but rather solicit reaction, and however verbally astute, do not forget formal virtuosity: whether Khanh's Chinese antique doors that insidiously penetrate domestic quarters, Lee Wen's charismatic declaiming screen persona, Harsono's seductive mound of edible gun-crackers, or Vasan's elegantly rhythmic sequence of hand-made-paper black-on-cream mono-prints, all orchestrate text and object to heighten impact.

Michael Shaowanasai's (b.1964) *Sangha-Dharma-Buddha* of 2007 and his King-Queen word portraits, ongoing from 2006, deploy words describing Thailand's pillars of power - monarchy, Buddhism, nation - to challenge the State, bringing audiences with him in his guerrilla raid on the status quo. Prapat Jiwaragsan's 2013 *Non Chronological History* is a slide-projected sequence of names of Thai historical figures who have come to prominence since the nation's 1932 transition from absolute to constitutional monarchy. Conceptually minimal, the piece is compelling as the neutral white-light roster of names rolls on un-prefixed with title (taboo in protocol-mindful Thailand) and randomly sequenced so that kings follow martyred communists and plotting generals. Sound amplifies concept, the mechanical slide-change rattle crisply announcing every name in the same manner, the uniformity of the clicks reinforcing absent hierarchy. Austerely appealing in its bare-white-cube room, this text-work understatedly challenges conventional readings of Thai political history.

Language is central to Singaporean Tang Mun Kit's (b.1955) 2013 paper sequence *The Other Singapore Story*. Combining ink vignettes with snippets of text, *TOSS* is both pedagogical and allusive in its tour of Singapore political history in the nation-building period. Reminiscent of Victorian illustrations, the delicate black and red drawings are in stark contrast with their titles *Operation Coldstore* or *Internal Security Act* (ISA) referencing

incidents or laws involving political control in the city-state.<sup>64</sup> Tang's marriage of innocent story-book-style imagery with cues from Singapore's lexicon of political discourse echoes the city-state's reality-image tango. This is not language-play for the sake of clever repartee, but for critically staking out the intellectual foundations of public institutions. Words, altered or not, when plucked from the public domain, occupy shared space and are accessible to all, so providing fertile ground for growing the *res publica*.

## conclusion

A review of the many definitions given Conceptual art is beyond the scope of this paper, which is not a comparative study and aims instead to discover Southeast Asian art's locally-nurtured conceptual methodologies and traits. That regional artists are aware of the work of Joseph Beuys, Marcel Duchamp, and others is not in contention, nor indeed the possible unlocking of ideas further to this exposure. That there are areas of intersection in the mechanics and characteristics of Conceptual art on one hand, and Southeast Asian conceptual strategies on the other, is certain, namely critical spirit, concern with the everyday, and interest in viewer perspective.<sup>65</sup> However conceptual tactics, intrinsic to contemporary Southeast Asian art, in their varied expression, alliance with media, non-repudiation of aspects of tradition, and ties with art's political function in the nation-building era, serve to apprehend the world in a broader, more fundamental way than Conceptual art does.

As well as not fitting into a set of types, Southeast Asian conceptual practice, because it does not tout itself as a break from hundreds of years of painting, is not centrally concerned with the question 'what is art?' beyond transcending the distinct and sometimes relatively recent imported high/low art divide that has vexed Southeast Asia since the establishment of European art schools.<sup>66</sup> Nor is it 'reflexive', or representing 'a state of continual self-critique'.<sup>67</sup> Writing in *The Jackdaw* magazine in 2013, theorist Michael Paraskos advanced that current Conceptualist art retains the forms of historic Conceptual art but is almost devoid of ideas.<sup>68</sup> This is revelatory of the difference between conceptual practices in Southeast Asia, and in Euramerica. Indeed, Southeast Asian conceptualism, not provocative for the sake of provocation and by definition the bearer of ideas, as we have seen displays a great variety of formal characteristics (or none at all since form serves concept). Moreover, in Euramerica, painting is often opposed to Conceptual art, while in Southeast Asia, conceptual practices and the language of painting are not mutually exclusive. Aestheticism, iconographies, vernacular techniques, and materiality, not obstacles to be spurned, act as repositories of meaning beyond the descriptive so help deliver concept, artists exploiting them as entry points for actively engaging audiences with ideas on collective issues.

Duchamp's specific influence on Southeast Asian art deserves rigorous scholarship in its own right. Not the object here, it is recalled that as Duchamp was unveiling *Fountain* in New York, Southeast Asians were simultaneously encountering modernist painting, academic painting, Euramerican abstraction, Futurism, Dada, and genres such as landscape, still life and the nude, along with the 'modern' in the wider



social and political sense. At the time, for Southeast Asians with little experience of non-Asian art, Duchamp is unlikely to have stood out from the rest. Meanwhile, Raden Saleh's *The Arrest of Diponegoro*, half a century old in 1917, had already shown that a cerebral juggling of references could be home-born.

Southeast Asian artists today continue to use conceptual tactics and the expressive languages these engender to contest and question. Critique is the starting point of Southeast Asian conceptual modes, just as critiqued Duchamp to create *Fountain*. However, broadly comparable birthing circumstances do not imply a Southeast Asian conceptualism derived from Duchamp. In Southeast Asia, where Chinese and Indian philosophical thinking have deep roots, and where syncretism has permitted the appropriation and sophisticated transformation of ideas for two millennia, a mining and combining of disparate codes and concepts is not culturally alien. Representational art and more specifically painting, in Southeast Asia a relatively recently-imported learning opportunity rather than the culmination of six centuries of visual expression as in Europe, is difficult to reconcile as the essential counter or reactionary basis for late twentieth century regional artistic practices.<sup>69</sup> When society is experiencing revolution and citizens, new to empowerment, are striving to build civil society and establish more egalitarian structures, art can rise to the challenge of illuminating and driving change, rather than merely describing disturbing realities. Conceptual approaches in Southeast Asian art operate to make sense of and sometimes activate this re-ordering world, their corralling of allusion and subtext providing structure to works that fulfill a public calling.

The relationship between conceptual strategies and the socially contestative vocation of contemporary Southeast Asian art must be acknowledged. Art historians, notwithstanding their appreciation of Goya and Manet, are mindful of Euramerican art's dislike of functionalism, and are reticent about this connection because they worry that an activist bent negates works' fundamental artistic character. Yet visual and material culture have always been bound up with life in Southeast Asia, and a century or so of Modernisms, description or pictorial illusionism, and formalism would surely not rob regional art-makers of their interest in that linkage. With turn of the century Southeast Asia experiencing some of the most radical changes in its history, how could artists avoid responding in their work. Allusive thinking and coded expression could fuel the freshly-minted conceptual languages of the contemporary. Harnessed to the realities of the here-and-now and the ambitions of the collective, they are a central force and attribute of regional contemporary art.

Conceptual strategies in Southeast Asia can't be disassociated from cultural and socio-political critique, individual-versus-state-tensions, and a move beyond art school-inculcated practices. Their formal and intellectual playfulness colludes with rather than contradicts their social mission. Investigating conceptual tactics in regional art is important because they constitute a key marker of the contemporary.

Conceptual art of Euramerican origin shares a basic critical ethos and interest in freedom with conceptually-slanted contemporary Southeast Asian art. But it is apparent from the study of regional art that Southeast Asian conceptualism is first and foremost evolved from and answering to local conditions.

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#### Iola Lenzi

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- 1 Tony Godfrey, 'Making history', *C-Arts*, volume 14 (Jakarta-Singapore. 2010) : 74-79 on *Making History: how Southeast Asian art reconquers the past to conjure the future*, Jendela Gallery, Esplanade, Singapore, May-June 2010, curated by the author.
- 2 Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon Press. 1998).
- 3 *ibid* Godfrey 'Making History', *C-Arts*: 79.
- 4 Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450 - 1680*, Silksworm Books, Volume one (Chiangmai. 1988): 228 - 235 on high literacy in Southeast Asia in the age of commerce and its incidence on sophisticated improvised, witty and ironic written courtship exchanges between the sexes in all classes; Volume Two (verso. 1993): 36-137 on non-fatalistic attitudes and the pragmatic juggling and adaptation of beliefs in Southeast Asia.
- 5 Apinan Poshyananda, "'Con Art" Seen from the Edge: The Meaning of Conceptual Art in South and Southeast Asia', *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s*, exhibition catalogue (Queens Museum of Art. 1999): 143-146. distinguishes between overseas Thais' importing of Western conceptualism to Thailand, and Thailand-based artists who develop conceptual strategies in response to local contexts; 144. affirming first generation Indonesian contemporaries' schematic knowledge of Western 'isms' such as Conceptualism
- 6 Luisi Camnitzer, Jane Farver, Rachel Wiss 'Forward', and Stephen Bann 'Introduction', *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s*, exhibition catalogue (Queens Museum of Art. 1999).
- 7 Okwui Enwezor, 'Where, What, Who, When: A Few Notes on "African" Conceptualism', *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s* (exhibition catalogue, Queens Museum of Art. 1999): 109-110.
- 8 John Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, Craftsman House, G+B Arts International, (Sydney. 1998): 232 on the advisability of avoiding 'high postmodernist' theory from Euramerica for the decoding of socially critical art in Asia and the necessity instead of its Asian contextualisation.
- 9 The Singapore Art Museum exhibition *Negotiating Home History and Nation* defends this time-frame. Iola Lenzi, 'Negotiating Home, History and Nation', exhibition catalogue *Negotiating Home, History and Nation: two decades of contemporary art in Southeast Asia 1991-2011* (SAM Singapore. 2011): 11; also :13-27 traits of a contemporary canon in Southeast Asia, conceptualism and story-telling.
- 10 The practices of Chabet and Medalla in the Philippines, and Cheo Chai Hiang in Singapore, especially in the early period are more closely related to Euramerican Conceptualism, different tendencies emerging within Southeast Asian art
- 11 Koh Nguang How, an assistant curator at Singapore's then National Gallery, affirms the institution's friendliness toward experimental and sometimes socially-critical art. Author's interviews with Koh, Singapore, June 2013, published *Concept Context Contestation- art and the collective in Southeast Asia*, exhibition catalogue, BACC (Bangkok. 2014).
- 12 Agung Hujatnikajennong, 'The Contemporary Turns: Indonesian art of the 1980s', exhibition catalogue *Negotiating Home, History and Nation: two decades of contemporary art in Southeast Asia 1991-2011*, Singapore Art Museum, (Singapore. 2011): 86-87.
- 13 In the case of artistic change in Hanoi, scholars disagree on causes, see Nora Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi an Ethnography of Vietnamese Art*, NUS Press, (Singapore. 2009): 18.
- 14 Interviews with Tran Luong, Hanoi, November 2011.
- 15 Jim Supangkat, 'The Emergence of Indonesian Modernism and its Background', *Asian Modernism*, exhibition catalogue, Japan Foundation, (Tokyo. 1995): 212
- 16 Junichi Shioda, 'Glances Into the Future of Southeast Asian Art: A Vision of What Art Should Be', *Glances into the Future - Art in Southeast Asia 1997*, exhibition catalogue (Tokyo: The Japan Foundation. 1997): 154-155, 158.
- 17 *ibid.*, Shioda, 154-155.
- 18 Sutee Kunavichayanont raises the proto-exotic aspect of works by foreign-based Thai artists and suggests the difference between their practices and those of artists working at home, in Sandra Cate, 'Thai Artists, Resisting the Age of Spectacle', Nora Taylor, Boreth Ly eds., *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art an anthology* (Ithica: Cornell University Press. 2012): 72-73.
- 19 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les Presses du Réel, Dijon, 2002. Also, Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells participatory art and the politics of spectatorship* (London: Verso. 2012): 209 on Rirkrit Tiravanija's art's propelling 'convivial and open-ended participation into the artistic and institutional mainstream', and more generally performative-crowd-involving works of the 1990s. A comparative analysis of practices framed as Relational Aesthetics by Bourriaud and art studied here is outside the scope of this paper. Though it may prove rewarding to draw analogies between the functional mechanisms of one and the other, beyond methodological parallels, critical intention of the participatory practices of Thai and Southeast Asian artists considered in this study, on one hand, and those from Bourriaud's sphere on the other (including Rirkrit), differ notably. In the latter case the art object is often abandoned as audience participation is summoned for the sake of assembly and the experiential; conversely, region-based artists author pieces driven by political and social objectives wherein audience-inclusiveness is a means of co-opting resistance rather than an end in itself.
- 20 *ibid* Poshyananda, *Global Conceptualism*, on different Asian arts from 1970s onward evolving out of local context not emulating Western art: 146; *ibid* Clark: 232.
- 21 Iola Lenzi, 'Formal cues and historical clues in the art of Sutee Kunavichayanont' (originally from *Inflated Nostalgia, exhibition catalogue, Atelier Frank & Lee*, Singapore, 2001) *Next Move*, exhibition catalogue, Earl Lu Gallery, Lasalle-SIA College of the Arts, (Singapore. 2003): 122 & 126-129.
- 22 Iola Lenzi, 'Making History', *Making History: how Southeast Asian art reconquers the past to conjure the future*, exhibition catalogue, Jendela Gallery, (Esplanade: Singapore. 2010): 3-4 on these pieces by Bui Cong Khanh and Alwin Reamillo.
- 23 The Cambodian version of the project dates to 2006, the Tiananmen Square, Beijing version to 2007. Iola Lenzi, 'Heroes and Promise: intersecting currents in new art from VietNam', exhibition catalogue, *Intersection Vietnam : new work from North and South*, (Singapore & Kuala Lumpur: VWFA, 2009): 1-2.
- 24 Iola Lenzi, 'Urbane Subversion: empowerment, defiance and sexuality in the art of Vu Dan Tan', *12 Contemporary Artists of Vietnam* Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers. 2010): 18-20.
- 25 Iola Lenzi, 'Lost and Found: tracing pre-modern cultural heritages in Southeast Asian contemporary art', *Connecting Art and Heritage* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers. 2014): 120-127
- 26 Artists across the region report variable public attendance and reaction to performance.
- 27 *ibid* Reid, *Age of Commerce*: 202 on the accessibility to commoners of court entertainment which if grander than village festivals, was similar in form. Fred W. Clothey, *Rhythm and Intent (Ritual Studies from South India)* (Blackie & Sons Publishers: Madras. 1983): 2-5 on the relationship between ritual practices, audiences' identity in the community, and invocation of history.
- 28 interviews with Lee Wen, Singapore, 28 January 2014.
- 29 interviews with Koh Nguang How, Singapore, June 2013.
- 30 Louis Ho, 'Void, Riverine and Otherwise', *Iconoclast*, exhibition brochure, (Singapore: Sculpture Square. 2013): 4-11 for a full analysis and contextual positioning of this work.
- 31 *Ibid* Clark: 49-51. on modernism's transfer and different receptions and adaptations in Asian art.
- 32 *ibid* Lenzi 'Lost and Found': 118.
- 33 *Ibid* Clark: 71-72 for discussions of tradition, its opposition to modernity, neotraditionalism, and essentialism.
- 34 Marian Pastor Roces, "Ethos Bathos Pathos: Contemporary Art Practice in the Philippines," *Art Asia and Pacific*, Sample Issue (1993): 47-51
- 35 Natalia Kraevskaia, *from nostalgia toward exploration: essays on contemporary art in Vietnam* (Hanoi: Kim Dong Publishing. 2005): 31-33 on the literalness of exotic/national visual markers in Vietnamese installation.
- 36 *ibid* Lenzi "Formal Cues and Historical Clues", *Next Move*: 122-126 on *History Class (Thanon Ratchadamnoen)* and *History Class (White Man's Burden)*
- 37 Artists such as Lee Wen, Tang Da Wu, FX Harsono, Sutee Kunavichayanont, Vasan Sitthiket, Arahmaiani, Heri Dono, Truong Tan, Nguyen Van Cuong, Nguyen Quang Huy, Bui Cong Khanh, and others, however media-versatile or known for performance, do not spurn painting.
- 38 Miklouho-Maklai, Brita L., *Exposing Society's Wounds: Some Aspects of Contemporary Indonesian Art Since 1966* (Adelaide: Flinders University Asian Studies. 1991): 113.

- 39 Interviews with the artist, Hanoi, November 2011.
- 40 for a related discussion of the conceptual basis for 'unnatural' depictions of figures and minimisation of background detail in Thai Buddhist murals see Sandra Cate, *Making Merit, Making Art A Thai Temple in Wimbledon* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. 2003): 48-49.
- 41 Werner Kraus, *Raden Saleh The Beginning of Modern Indonesian Painting*, (Jakarta:Goethe Institut. 2012): 50-51 and 66-67 on Saleh's different place in Javanese and European art history, the broadness of the Romantic school, and whether or not Saleh was a Romantic in his own Javanese context.
- 42 Ibid Clark: 241. on Raden Saleh's nationalist discourse in *The Arrest of Diponegoro*.
- 43 Werner Kraus, "Raden Saleh's Interpretation of the Arrest of Diponegoro : an Example of Indonesian proto-nationalist Modernism", *Archipel*, vol. 69 (Paris. 2005): 259-294 for an exhaustive analysis of the work and its political context.
- 44 *ibid.*: 285.
- 45 *ibid.*: 286.
- 46 *Gap Viet Nam*, Haus Der Kulturen Der Welt, exhibition catalogue (Berlin. 1999): 34-35 where Tan's sculptures are illustrated without the boxes; versus Queensland Art Gallery's APT2 1996 where they are included, *ibid* Lenzi 'Urbane Subversion': 20, on the incomplete documenting of the work in Berlin.
- 47 Natalia Kraevskaia, 'Folk art and Modern art', *from nostalgia towards exploration-essays on contemporary art in Vietnam* (Hanoi: Kim Dong Publishing. 2005): 57 on Tan's basket/masks' appropriation by the tourist market; on the mask's significance see Iola Lenzi, 'Venus in Vietnam: woman and the erotic in the art of Vu Dan Tan and Nguyen Nghia Cuong', *Venus in Vietnam*, exhibition catalogue (Hanoi: Goethe Institut. 2012): 23.
- 48 Natalia Kraevskaia, "Collectivism and Individualism in Society and Art after Doi Moi", in *Essays on Modern and Contemporary Vietnamese Art*, Singapore Art Museum (Singapore. 2009): 106.
- 49 *ibid* Lenzi, 'Urbane Subversion' : 20-26.
- 50 *ibid* Lenzi, 'Urbane Subversion' : 26.
- 51 Interviews with Nguyen Van Cuong, Hanoi, December 2010.
- 52 *ibid* Lenzi 'Lost and Found' : 132.
- 53 *ibid* Lenzi 'Lost and Found' : 120-124.
- 54 Denys Lombard, 'The Concepts of Space and Time in the Southeast Asian Archipelago', Geoff Wade, Li Tana eds., *Anthony Reid and The Study of the Southeast Asian Past* (Singapore: ISEAS. 2012): 95. on Southeast Asian traditional concepts of non-linear and non-mobile time and the future as contained in the present.
- 55 Art historian TK Sabapathy writes extensively about this work: TK Sabapathy, *Piyadasa An Overview*, 1962-2000, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, 2001, p. 32; also TK Sabapathy, 'Intersecting Histories. Thoughts on Contemporary and History in Southeast Asian Art', exhibition catalogue, editor TK Sabapathy, *Intersecting Histories-Contemporary Turns in Southeast Asian Art*, (Singapore: ADM NTU. 2012): 54 Sabapathy initially does not accept the work's social reading, but later reverses this view. He sees the work as sculpture not installation and does not infer audience inclusion from the mirror, interviews with the author, Singapore, June 2012.
- 56 interviews with FX Harsono, Jakarta, June 2012.
- 57 Shi Ming Yu, Sun Sheng Han L.L. Sim et al., 'Public housing and ethnic integration in Singapore', *Habitat International* 27 (2003) 293-307. NUS, Singapore : 299. vaunting the racial mixing advantages of HDB but also describing their ambition to "check the influence of forces such as communism"
- 58 Roxana Waterson, *The Living House An Anthropology of Architecture in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Oxford University Press. 1993): 191 on the amalgamation of public and domestic space in traditional village organisation; Evers HD, Korff Rudiger eds., *Southeast Asian Urbanism, The Meaning and Power of the Social Space* (Singapore: ISEAS. 2000): 111 on Malay concepts of space, public space, and the absence of boundaries between private dwellings.
- 59 Iola Lenzi, "Political Art in Singapore" (London: *Asian Art Newspaper*. March 2004).
- 60 Interviews with the artist, Silpakorn University, Bangkok, May 2012, Chalood repeatedly asserts his identity as a 'country boy', 'not from Bangkok'.
- 61 *Ibid* interviews Chalood, the artist does not specifically remember the presence of an audience watching his performance.
- 62 Goethe Institut, Yangon opening exhibition, February 2014, derived from *Aung Ko's Village*, Esplanade, Singapore, May-June 2011; Iola Lenzi, 'Mapping protest with poetry: conceptualism and community in the art of *Aung Ko*', *Deep SEA*, exhibition catalogue, Primo Marella Gallery (Milan. 2012): 14-27; Iola Lenzi 'In Conversation with Aung Ko and Nge Lay', *C-ARTS*, Singapore/Jakarta, vol. 15 (2010): 62-66 for a discussion of the reasons for these performances' village locations.
- 63 Lee Wen explains his attraction to the game "...because it is 100 years old, borderless, not elitist, and not demanding in physical strength so can be played by men and women together. (...) It was everywhere, so suited my idea...". Interviews with the artist Singapore, January 2014.
- 64 Geoff Wade, "Operation Coldstore: A Key Event in the Creation of Modern Singapore", in *The 1963 Operation Coldstore in Singapore: Commemorating 50 Years*, eds. Poh Soo Kai, Tan Kok Fang, Hong Lysa, Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (Selangor-Kuala Lumpur. 2013): 15-69 for an exhaustive analysis of Coldstore and its impact.
- 65 *ibid* Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* : 15-16.
- 66 *ibid* Godfrey: 7 who summarises Conceptual art as conforming to one of four forms: "...a readymade (...), an intervention (as a means of drawing attention to context such as the museum or the street); documentation; words ...".
- 67 *ibid* Godfrey: 12.
- 68 Michael Paraskos, 'Anarchy in the UK', *The Jackdaw*, Jan 2013 HYPERLINK "<http://enqui7024.wix.com/michaelparaskos#!articlejackdawanarchist/clsy>" <http://enqui7024.wix.com/michaelparaskos#!articlejackdawanarchist/clsy> last accessed 20/04/14 "...Conceptualism as it is practised today is pretty vacuous and empty of concepts..."
- 69 *ibid* Clark: 16 on the time-spaced implantation of Euramerican languages and genres in Asia and varying degrees of exposure according to geography and social strata.