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The third avant-garde : contemporary art from Southeast Asia recalling tradition

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INTRODUCTION

The Third Avant-garde theorizes and analyzes the postmodern introduction of *traditions* and traditional arts and crafts within contemporary art practices from Southeast Asia. Since the 1990s, the artworld has witnessed an increase of display of multi-temporal works in which past and present coeval. This apparent anachronism is, I convey, these works' most striking and appealing attribute. As spectators, when looking at these works our mind diverges and fluctuates between associations of ethnography and art. Interestingly, these works seem to exist in the sphere of biennials and large-scale exhibitions but are not equally integrated in art museums or in academic books. This reveals a strikingly contradictory aspect: they are present in the most important venues such as the Venice Biennial and yet absent from the institutional system of museum, academia and the archive. Thus, the general aim of this dissertation and the formulated research question inciting it is: *how are these contemporary artworks negotiating definitions of art and tradition?* These artworks (seem to) play with long established notions of museums and academia and notably penetrate the scope of art and ethnography. Equally, they propose new modes of understanding what art is, and demonstrate how diverse art making can be in accordance with the geographical and cultural context of production.

This dissertation distinguishes two sets of postmodern practices that recall tradition: firstly, a current that emerged in the 1980s, remarkably critical to modernism (especially in its formalist attributes), which employs traditions in a rather revivalist attitude; and secondly, a group of avant-garde practices that arose roughly in the 1990s, equally containing a postmodern element, equally rejecting the imposed modernist model, but also opposing 'invented traditions'. This study recognizes the former as an initial attitude toward a search for 'national' cultures but deriving from local culture(s). The latter, which I have termed as 'Third Avant-garde', as a double-reaction. It reacts first against the search for the 'national', which was using traditions 'for their surface value' without equipping them with new vitality, and second, against the totalizing discourse of modernism, that was also manipulating traditions. As a movement, the Third Avant-garde constitutes a new event—born out of the contextual conditions of the places where it emerged, it includes the presence of traditional arts, an (in-depth) understanding of conceptualism,

1. Traditions refer to fluid territories. They do not necessarily coincide with the borders of nation states, which are modern constructions, and used traditions to legitimize and gather populations together.

and a combative attitude towards the imposed models. Its origins must be traced to the mid-1970s, when the double prejudice—both at a state and an academic level—led to students' protests in the Southeast Asian nations that participated in the Western side of the Cold War divide (Indonesia, Thailand, The Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore). The students' claims for intellectual and artistic independence freed from outdated models was, despite their unrelatedness and limited contact, similar in form and content. Each student group wrote statements in which they claimed the need for a new artistic direction. They declared that a research for a cultural dimension should start from one's own references (namely traditional arts); advocated an art practice that was more approximate with life; included those that remained invisible (such as craftspeople) in artistic discourse; and recognized the importance of the medium of installation, considered autochthonous.² These initial considerations would be short-lived and this avant-gardism ended in the late 1970s. It, however, left a mark that would eventually bear fruits in the early 1990s when non-confrontational practices, which had been conjured since the mid-1980s, reached the international arena through several exhibitions, especially in the Asia-Pacific region.³

The reasons for using traditions in the 1990s were multiple: firstly, they constituted a form of protest against the superficial manner traditions were being employed by some local artists; secondly, because as artists witnessed traditions being frozen by totalitarian regimes and boxed in newly constructed museums⁴ they decided to restore their discursive and revolutionary capacities. In this context, I argue, an *avant-garde* emerged. For the first time, avant-garde practices reacted against modernism and its dogmatic attitude. They were equally attentive to the burden of the taxonomical classificatory system that kept art from so-called 'non-Western' countries hostage and classified as 'ethnographic material'.

This avant-garde movement, that I term the 'Third Avant-garde', does

2. See Patrick D. Flores, "First Person Plural: Manifestos of the 1970s in Southeast Asia," in *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, ed. Hans Belting et al. (Karlsruhe: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 224–271.

Author's note: in this dissertation, whenever I paraphrase an affirmation, I precede the quote with "see". For simple quotations, no reference is added.

3. Examples of important exhibitions in the Pacific region: the Fukuoka Asian Art Show since 1984 (it would be replaced by the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale in 1999); the Artists Regional Exchange, in Perth, Australia, since 1987; the Jogja Biennial, which started in 1988, the same year of the opening of Cemeti Art Gallery in Yogyakarta; the Asia Pacific Triennial in Queensland, Australia, since 1993; the Japan Foundation shows since 1995; the Singapore Biennial since 1996, among others. Another contributing show for the emergence of non-Western art in the world stage is the Havana Biennial, which has included a selection of Southeast Asian artists since its second edition in 1996. Interestingly, all participating artists in the Bienal de la Habana of 1986 belonged to the non-Western side of the cold War divide.

4. Some examples are the Taman Mini Park, in Indonesia and the Centre for National Culture, in Manila.

not allude to an avant-garde from the 'Third World', which is now an outdated nomenclature. Instead, the terminology derives from a third premise against the classificatory system of the 'modern art museum', more precisely its neglect of traditional materials which did not contribute to the evolvement of Western art.⁵ The Third Avant-garde tackles this aspect and proposes traditional arts as integrant of radical art.

To the Western eye, the Third Avant-garde's most striking feature is the presence of fragments of traditions. While the presence of traditional materials may be regarded as anachronistic, it reflects the reality of Southeast Asian societies which lived in a context of 'multiple temporalities'. Through fragments from traditional arts the Third Avant-garde practices use material to manifest a contextual reality.

The Third Avant-garde meets the avant-garde premises as defined by German literary critic Peter Bürger in his seminal work *Theory of the AvantGarde* (German edition 1974; English translation 1984).⁶ Bürger defined the avant-garde gesture as a tripartite stance which blurs the divide between 'high' and 'low' cultures, attacks the art institution and academicism, and performs a rapprochement between art and life. These general propositions equally converge in Third Avant-garde works through the presence of traditional arts. Traditions, as mentioned, mirror the multi-temporal reality of Southeast Asian nations. Their employment denotes not only identity and origin (to differentiate from Western mainstream art), but equally serves to reject the locally promoted attitude that reduced vibrant cultures into frozen invented traditions. Similarly, artists used traditions' creative capacities to overcome the totalizing neglect

5. It is interesting that because of Modernism, so-called 'Primitive Art' had already entered the art museum in the 1930s, after being revaluated as an important aspect of modern art. Thomas McEvilley briefly explains this dynamics in Thomas McEvilley, "Exhibition Strategies in the Postcolonial Era," in *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions*, ed. Apinan Poshyananda (New York: Asia Society, 1996), 56–57. The show *Primitivism*, in MoMa, in New York, in 1984, celebrated this narrative, leading to Susan Vogel's critical exhibition *Art/Artifact*, in the Center for African Art, in New York, in 1988.

But for traditional art from societies such as the Javanese, that had its own classificatory system of high and low art, the situation maintained itself unaltered, as these traditional arts remained outside the sphere of the art museum because they had not contributed to the evolvement of Western art. In fact, it is widely known that wayang shows have influenced Brechtian theatre. This discourse is extendable to the avant-garde: in referring to the book *Art Since 1900* (2005), Indian art historian Partha Mitter observed that it failed to enlarge the canon because all the inclusions of Asian avant-garde movements owed their presence more to what their impact on the West was than for their intrinsic worth. In sum, "non-Western artists are brought in primarily on account of their compatibility with the avant-garde discourse in the West." See Partha Mitter, "Interventions: Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," *Art Bulletin* XC, no. 4 (2008): 531.

6. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, 13th ed., vol. 4, *Theory and History of Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

that modernist practices, which bleached out a variety of local culture(s), had performed for decades. Through traditions, Third Avant-garde artists expressed notions of discontent about everyday events and the political conjuncture of their home countries, as well as ridiculed state-sponsored readings of traditional arts as products to promote tourism.

In the 1990's when the Third Avant-garde practices emerged, notions of a 'Third Space' were also unfolding. This opened up possibilities residing in the interstices between two spaces, such as art and ethnography. Yet, the Third Avant-garde is not solely a negotiation between these two realms. In fact, the Third Avant-garde extrapolates Bürger's postulations: it is a locus of contestation of the taxonomical system that divides fine arts and culture. Among other things—such as the (re)introduction of the tension between art and craft—the emergence of these artistic practices has provoked Western ethnographic museums to rebrand themselves as world art museums.⁷ This change is significant—it enables practices that have historically been refused the status of art to be included in its realm.

I want to argue that the Third Avant-garde differs from the two prior avant-garde moments. While it revisits some of their lessons, it equally serves as an extension of what one could call 'the avant-garde project'. If one of the aspects the 'historical' avant-garde was to question was what art was by declaring the readymade as art,⁸ the 'neo-avant-garde' of the 1960s and 1970s questioned whether art had to exist inside the museum institution, and instead reclaimed the world a site for artistic expression. This was done, for instance, through the introduction of practices such as performance art and happenings. In following this line, the Third Avant-garde claims that the division between art and ethnography that framed so-called 'non-Western art', initially in Curio Cabinets and later in museums with the purpose to study mankind and worlds' peoples in anthropological and ethnographic museums, was largely a system complicit with colonialism. These peoples asserted not only their capacity to make art but, they equally claimed that they could do art on their own terms. With the Third Avant-garde, I propose that they also demand their own avant-garde.

Interestingly, avant-garde remained until the late twentieth century largely a Western construct, predominantly white and male. According to Indian art historian Geeta Kapur, the "feminist-led extension of the conceptual

7. See James Clifford, "Thinking Globally: Museums, Art and Ethnography after the Global Turn" (Collecting Geographies, Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2014), <https://vimeo.com/89998837>.

8. The 'historical avant-garde' was not confined to the use of ready-mades as art. It equally suggested the 'object-trouvé'; photo montage and collage; the use of pamphlets to arouse public and call for a 'new world order'; hold public meeting and 'actions'; provoke the (bourgeois) citizen; react against academic art among its gestures. Its mission was to change the world order, fight repression and break with the status quo.

art movement [was necessary] to give the avantgarde some bite in the 1970s.”⁹ Considering this accommodation of women requires that one regards, as I do, that the second avant-garde was an original event, not a derivative copy of the historical avant-garde. Thus, the Third Avant-garde which has arisen ‘elsewhere’ (to paraphrase Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor), comes to claim the rightful participation of the subaltern.

Historically, Western artists have used living knowledge from other cultures acquired through *transfer*.¹⁰ These imports have supported the Western definition of art as a space where the new takes place: from the seventeenth-century Chinoiseries, to the nineteenth-century Impressionist and Symbolist paintings. The appropriative character of Western art has remained undisputed in the twenty and twenty-first centuries. Famously, the ‘historical avant-garde’ introduced African masks into Cubism through Picasso’s work *Les Femmes d’Alger* in 1907 and, in 1989, at the first world exhibition, *Magiciens de la Terre* curated by Jean-Hubert Martin at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. On that occasion, Italian artist Alighiero Boetti showcased world maps embroidered by Afghan people whose manufacturing process he had no contact with. His gesture shows how ‘appropriation art’ has been a recurrent recourse for Western artists. But, it is regarded differently when the appropriating agent is from the ‘non-Western’ world: “The problem... for many Third World artists is that they appropriate from cultures which at the same time are, and are not regarded as their own.”¹¹ In this study, appropriation and reappropriation are understood as critical features of the avant-garde, whenever and wherever avant-garde may occur. Still, I consider the Western model of art making global, and trace its origin to colonialism, at the time when modernism was introduced within colonially-founded art academies. This allows me to propose that Third Avant-garde artists regard Western art ‘ethnographically’.

Due to constraints to evaluate and describe a region as vast as Southeast Asia, the purview will encompass some selected, exemplary cases from five locations—Indonesia, Timor-Leste, Thailand, Vietnam and Macao¹²—examples

9. Geeta Kapur, “Dismantled Norms: Apropos Other Avantgardes,” in *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Caroline Turner (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005), 59.

10. See John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1998), 49–69.

11. Arnd Schneider, “Appropriations,” in *Contemporary Art and Anthropology*, ed. Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2006), 37.

12. I propose Macao as part of this region before 1999 (the period analyzed). This reasoning stems from my experience as a citizen of Macao (1980–1996). Macao was part of the West side of the Cold War, which meant that the relations with Southeast Asia (and Taiwan) defined the dynamics of the city, with large diasporas from Thailand and The Philippines residing in the territory. Similarly, considerable amount of Macao’s inhabitants spent holidays in Southeast Asian countries, except for Indonesia (for Portuguese passport holders). Nowadays, Macao seems to have entered definitively the

that I have researched locally, and in most cases aided by exhibition viewing. As an area study, Southeast Asia is relatively new, dating approximately to the 1950s.¹³ This newness nevertheless does not stop scholars from considering it as whole in which the relation to maritime culture is a primal factor. It is certain that Southeast Asian nations' histories of migration, trade, religion, and political ideas transformed countries differently, which in turn resulted in internalized pluralisms and different preoccupations with local particularities.¹⁴ In accordance, the study of a Southeast Asian avant-garde through traditional arts from the region aptly confirms variations but equally reveals regional commonalities such as the making of the avant-garde through its social functions (or the presence of similar traits in different locations). This is what this study aims to elucidate.

I. THE DEFERRED TEMPORALITY OF THE THIRD AVANT-GARDE

Writing about an avant-garde event that emerged roughly in the 1990s in the 2010s appears contradictory with the presentness of the avant-garde gesture. By definition, an avant-garde work must be, in a sense, untimely; it must be out—meaning ahead—of its own historical moment and more appropriately placed in the future which it envisages. Avant-garde works problematize the 'here' and 'now' and their function is to go a step further. Yet, I argue that this temporal discrepancy constitutes a relevant aspect of the avant-garde: like the other avant-gardes, the Third Avant-garde of the 1990s also experienced "the dialogical space-time of avant-garde practice and institutional reception" through the phenomenon of deferred temporality.¹⁵

The Third Avant-Garde that took place in Southeast Asia emerged concurrently with the increasing presence of Southeast Asian artists in international exhibitions, especially in the Asia-Pacific region. The exhibition of these contemporary practices 'in exile', as Indonesian curator Jim Supangkat puts it, has led to mixed interpretations.¹⁶ This circumstance was famously addressed in the seminal exhibition *Traditions/Tensions*, held at the Asia Society in New York in 1996, and has been reassessed in recent writings by Filipino art historian Patrick D. Flores and Australian art historian Pat HOFFE.¹⁷

area of East Asia. This change shows how classificatory systems remain biased (and are artificial).

13. Donald K. Emmerson, "'Southeast Asia': What's in a Name?," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15, no. 1 (1984): 4.

14. Cynthia Chou, "Reconceptualizing Southeast Asian Studies," in *Southeast Asian Studies. Debates and New Directions*, ed. Cynthia Chou and Vincent Houben (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), 128.

15. Hal Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?," *October* The Duchamp Effect (Autumn, 1994), no. 70 (1994): 11.

16. Jim Supangkat, "The Third Avant-garde," unpublished interview by Leonor Veiga, Leiden, 18 April 2016.

17. See Patrick D. Flores, "Revisiting Tradition and the Incommensurate Contemporary,"

The Asia Society director at the time, Vishakha N. Desai, affirmed that *Traditions/Tensions* aimed to demonstrate how “these highly dissimilar elements [traditional and ultramodern forms] stimulate startling new expressions.”¹⁸ The show, curated by Thai art historian Apinan Poshyananda, demonstrated that tradition should not be opposed to modernity, but rather tradition offers inspiration for creative acts. It targeted overly simplistic dichotomies such as East and West, traditional and modern, centre and periphery.

I believe that many of the works exhibited in *Traditions/Tensions* display the avant-gardist stance that Indian curator Geeta Kapur announced in the exhibitions’ catalogue as the mission of what I term the Third Avant-garde: art practices that could perform a double-dismantle against national conservative forces that held firm to imported notions of high and low art, while disputing Western art’s supremacy.¹⁹ Yet, at the time of their initial exhibition, these works were not identified as such. This circumstance resulted from the fact that the majority of Western exhibitions before *Traditions/Tensions* were developed by Western curators who maintained “preconceived notion[s] of exotica... and [a] desire to rescue authenticity.”²⁰ If contemporary manifestations were shown, they would be introduced through the perspectives of Western anthropology or notions of cultural purity.²¹ As a result, Western audiences, particularly the American one, remained unprepared for the varieties of the “politically oriented, with a bias toward installation.”²² The works’ unconventional appearance—an aspect relating to the iconoclastic attitude towards old art boundaries, such as Asian and Western, High and Low—was highly contrasting with Western imaginations of Asian ‘timeless cultures’. Besides the curatorial blind spot, I argue that the works in *Traditions/Tensions* faced misrecognition because of what American art historian Hal Foster declares as the avant-garde’s deferred temporality, i.e., the temporal distance between making, display, and recognition characteristic of these expressions.²³ For the Third Avant-garde, the main aspect contributing to its under-theorization relates to the presence of traditions.

Broadsheet 41, no. 4 (2012): 234–239; Pat HOFFE, “The Irreverent Contemporary and Radical Tradition,” in *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities and World-Making*, ed. Caroline Turner and Michelle Antoinette (Canberra: ANU Press, 2014), 109–128.

18. Vishakha N. Desai, “Foreword,” in *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions*, 13.

19. See Kapur, “Dismantling the Norm,” in *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions*, 67.

20. Poshyananda, “The Future: Post-Cold War, Postmodernism, Post-Marginalia (Playing with Slippery Lubricants),” in *Tradition and Change: Contemporary Art of Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Caroline Turner (Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1993), 6.

21. See McEvelley, “Exhibition Strategies,” 57.

22. Holland Cotter, “The Brave New Face of Art from the East,” *The New York Times*, September 29, 1996, sec. Art in Review, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/09/29/arts/the-brave-new-face-of-art-from-the-east.html>.

23. Foster, “What’s Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?” 11.

II. AVANT-GARDE AND TRADITION: GENERAL OUTCOMES

Avant-garde's disruptive language is the most used discursive aspect in these practices. But, tradition's presence, as observed, impeded its identification. While its origins can be traced to the 1970s, the Third Avant-garde's most important decade was the 1990s, when it entered the international art world.

The internationalization of Southeast Asian artists within the region and beyond its borders was conducive to the emergence of the Third Avant-Garde. Yet, this emergence was made almost exclusively in exile: these works were sometimes met with indifference and other times with shock in their countries of origin but largely dismissed. The Indonesian (and Timorese) situation widely manifests this, with art shows being closed and/or artists being prosecuted. The outer world, therefore, provided the stage to manifest their existence. But, when reaching foreign audiences, the legitimate value of these practices were not immediately recognized by the global art world. I argue that the main problem resided in the fact that these works were not interpreted as constructing an avant-garde. More commonly, they have been regarded as activist art or political art. One example is Indonesian artist FX Harsono's *The Voices are Controlled by the Powers* (1994), as it has been discussed by Australian art historians Melissa Chiu and Benjamin Genocchio. Chiu and Genocchio focused on the contextual conditions of production in which the work originated.²⁴ Even if theirs is a plausible analysis, if the interpretive gaze is shifted toward the materiality of the artwork then the presence of fragments of traditional arts becomes the work's preeminent attribute.

Another aspect that contributes to preventing calling these practices avant-garde, is their exclusion from art historical narratives. Are these objects works of art or works of tradition? I propose that they do not conform to an evolutionary rhythm *traditional-modern-contemporary*. These works result from a historical blend, defined by the coexistence of modern and traditional. I reject the traditional-modern-contemporary linear progressive narrative because I identify an avant-garde program in these practices: as Portuguese art historian Sérgio Coutinho proposes, the avant-garde is constituted by a common *language* and a common *mission*.²⁵ In the Third Avant-garde, the mission is to wreck the taxonomical system that divides art and tradition. The avant-garde language infused in these manifestations remains militant and combative and the stance behind their production remains one of activism. Yet, I argue that the incorporation of traditional arts confers works with a subtlety

24. See Melissa Chiu and Benjamin Genocchio, *Asian Art Now* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2010), 78–79. Their interpretation follows the reading by Australian art historian Caroline Turner. See Caroline Turner, "Art and Social Change," in *Art and Social Change*, 9.

25. See Sérgio Coutinho, "A Vanguarda Europeia: Entre a 'Globalização' e a 'Unidade Humana'" (Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 2015), 4.

unknown to the prior avant-gardes. The spectator who looks at a woven photograph by Vietnamese artist Dinh Q. Lê from his series *Cambodia: Splendor and Darkness* (1996) cannot but marvel with the image's beauty. The brutality of his message regarding the slave work lying behind the edification of Angkor Wat and the more recent Khmer Rouge genocide, is utterly hidden to the uninformed spectator. The beautification of horror, I propose, is an important feature of most Third Avant-garde works I selected. These aspects—the constant reading of the works as political art, and the unfinished character of the reception—make Third Avant-garde works deterritorialized in art historical terms. This in turn, makes traditional arts remain hostage of taxonomical classificatory systems that do not correspond to the Southeast Asian reality.

The Third Avant-garde has not ceased in the late 1990s, a decade I consider as a twelve-year decade, from 1989 and 2001.²⁶ Instead, it has remained a vibrant reality in the post-2002 era. This continuity of procedure—the use of fragments of traditions—confirms that the avant-garde remains important and relevant, as different problems arise. To understand avant-garde events this way, one should regard the phenomenon as a historical force, bound within aspects of everyday life while recognizing that its novel character always meets resistance, both institutional and popular.

In a way, these fused artworks keep appearing in part because institutionalization remains ongoing. This is why some artists have been criticized of Othering themselves for the West.²⁷ Such accusations were frequent in the 1990s: British art historian Jean Fisher reveals the resistance the art of Brazilian Hélio Oiticica (1937-1980)—a white, male, and Western-oriented artist—met when his retrospective was showcased in Rotterdam in 1992.²⁸ Instead, I concur and follow Brazilian art historian Ana Leticia Fialho affirmations that the world was largely exhausted of Western Modernism, and

26. I propose the 1990s as a long, twelve-year decade (from 1989 until 2001). The two dates seem to mark a specific period between two major events: the end of the Cold War in 1989 and the 9/11 attacks in 2001. From a dynamic of two blocks, the world revolves now around the rise of fundamentalisms. So, the 1990s can be considered an interstitial decade of a longer duration than the habitual ten-year period. The 1990s marked an encounter and opening of the world's civilizations toward each other, but the 9/11 attacks would destroy this notion of meeting, by introducing the globe to a dynamic of multiple centers and multiple hegemonic cultures. If regarded from the standpoint of Third Avant-garde artworks produced in Southeast Asia, then the 1990s should be considered a sixteen-year decade, starting in 1985 when the Pilipino artist Roberto Feleo produced *Pintado* and terminating in 2001, when FX Harsono produced *Wear Mask*. These temporal boundaries are nevertheless open to change, as I gather more information on the subject.

27. See Gerardo Mosquera, "The Marco Polo Syndrome: Some Problems around Art and Eurocentrism," in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, ed. Zaya Kocur and Simon Leung (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 218–25.

28. Jean Fisher, "The Syncretic Turn: Cross-Cultural Practice in the Age of Multiculturalism," in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, 233–34.

thus open to “the discovery” of these startling new expressions.²⁹ To Fialho, the augment of ‘non-Western’ art exposure followed from the collapse of the Iron Curtain. As a result, these practices were immediately catapulted to the realm of large scale shows, especially in Japan, Australia, Singapore, and the United States of America. Unlike with the Asia-Pacific region, the representation in the US has not been conducive to an artist network. The results of the American early enterprise are nevertheless of extreme importance today, with several American galleries representing Southeast Asian artists. At an international level, the ‘non-Western’ world representation began within major biennials and triennials. The Biennale/Triennial circuit has grown exponentially in the past two decades (from the mid-1990s until the mid-2010s biennials appeared all over the world), some of which inspired by the *Bienal de la Habana* and others by the Venice Biennial model.³⁰

An indirect outcome of these fused practices, largely overlooked, is the ascension of several traditional elements to the sphere of ‘high art’. This is something that would have been impossible, as American art historian Thomas McEvilley remarks, in the “colonial or modernist period, [when] the idea of cultural identity became a weapon or strategy used by the colonizers both to buttress their own power and to undermine the will and self-confidence of the colonized.”³¹ But this adaptation remains unfinished; the continual relegation of traditional materials to the sphere of ethnographic museums in the West and ‘civilization’ museums and theme parks in the region, is still the norm. This shows how complex and profound the problem is.

So, it appears, contemporary art practices being made in the postcolonial era have allowed traditional elements to be tentatively uplifted. Oftentimes, this action relates to an artist’s personal choice, because artists self-consciously accept and work on their multi-angled identities. Through their role as cultural citizens,³² they produce work reflecting the various forces conducive for their formation as individuals. Overall, these practices

29. See Ana Leticia Fialho, “As Exposições Internacionais de Arte Brasileira: Discursos, Práticas e Interesses Em Jogo,” *Sociedade e Estado, Brasília* 20, no. 3 (2005): 689–713.

30. Kapur, “Curating in Heterogeneous Worlds,” in *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present*, ed. Alexandre Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 178–91; Jasmine Chohan, “The Havana Biennial: Changing Agendas” (The Courtauld Institute of Art, 2013). Turner affirms that the Asia Pacific Triennial of Brisbane was inspired in the Venice Biennial. Turner, “Asia-Pacific Triennial,” unpublished interview by Leonor Veiga, Canberra, July 5, 2017.

31. McEvilley, “Fusion: Hot or Cold?,” in *Fusion: West African Artists at the Venice Biennale*, Focus on African Art Series (Munich: Prestel Verlag GmbH & Co KG, 1993), 11. McEvilley equals the modern period with the colonial times and I continue this reading. After the withdrawal of the colonizer, the process of self-reflection commenced and a hybrid quality has emerged.

32. Homi K. Bhabha, “Towards a global cultural citizenship,” interview by Sachidananda Mohanty, July 3, 2005, <http://www.thehindu.com/lr/2005/07/03/stories/2005070300020100.htm>.

support the preservation of past legacies while bestowing them with new strategies for continuation.

III. Aims

This dissertation proposes that contemporary art, especially that of the ‘Global South’, has witnessed a tendency of fused practices which merge traditional elements with modern art constructs. The intent is to underline what Australian art historian John Clark proposes in the seminal work *Modern Asian Art* (1998)—that this occurrence in the contemporary does not constitute a new behavior but, rather, continues historical manifestations of selection and adoption of transferred and translated modes of making by so-called ‘non-Western’ societies. As Clark proposes, local circumstances have always penetrated the arts and it should be acknowledged that instead of rejecting modernity, these peoples have historically looked for a creative adaptation. They draw on their own solutions of the cultural resources of their own traditions. In their own terms, they have followed the Western canon, but have not copied it. Instead they have integrated its lessons in their own way. The region’s history of contact with Western modernity is ancient; Clark dates it as far back as the sixteenth-century, when contacts were initiated through exchange of prints and materials. Other possible dates to pinpoint these events have been the 1830s in Indonesia, when Raden Saleh carried out his early excursions in Europe, the 1890s as the emergence of academic training in Bandung, the 1910s in Thailand, when the first attempts toward a Western modernity were construed atop of a preceding period of sinicisation that occurred in the nineteenth century.³³ Examples are abundant, and histories are diverse.

In addition, this dissertation aims to go beyond the usual rubrics of ‘syncretism’ and ‘hybridism,’³⁴ that have characterized the analysis of these objects. While I regard these contributions as necessary steps towards a reflection, I prefer to identify these works as avant-garde because it allows them a strength and a mission that discourses from religion (syncretism) and biology (hybridism) do not seem to match.

Another important aspect that this study intends to demonstrate is that modern and postmodern practices belong as much in these countries as they belong in Europe and the US. I raise the question of belonging to address that it is no longer acceptable to view these geographic centers

33. See Poshyananda, *Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1992).

34. British art historian Jean Fisher advocates a ‘Syncretic Turn,’ in opposition to Homi K. Bhabha’s ideas of hybridity. See Fisher, “The Syncretic Turn.” Similarly, German anthropologist Arnd Schneider prefers the use of ‘originary syncretism.’ See Arnd Schneider, “On ‘Appropriation’. A Critical Reappraisal of the Concept and Its Application in Global Art Practices,” *Social Anthropology* 11, no. 2 (2003): 215–229.

as producers of ethnographic objects or as makers of classical arts, which are displayed in specialized galleries of several museums. Modern Asian art was created from the translocation of a certain form of thinking which was combined with local perceptions. It is precisely in this relationship with the past that tradition comes in, since traditional arts were and continue being practiced today (and their disappearance is not foreseeable, as they will be continuously transformed).

Traditional is an imprecise term, bound in a loaded discourse. It can be applied to antiques made in the past (many of which are displayed in museums), but it also applies to antique objects currently in use. In addition, traditional is also used to refer to objects recently produced in a 'traditional style' and way, a common feature of so-called tourist art,³⁵ and individual creations modified by contemporary artists—those that this analysis focuses on.

Starting in the 1990s, scholarship about worldwide contemporary art that fuses 'fragments of tradition' and 'aspects of modernity' in artworks emerged. This dissertation proposes to reflect and build on discourses elaborated, especially within curated practices which many times fostered academicism through representative artworks. Such a procedure will permit new insights and hopefully answer some questions, while posing others.

The phenomenon of merging contemporary art and local traditions is wider than the region of Southeast Asia—it exists on a global scale. It is interesting that this *tendency* shows characteristics of a movement, although of unrelated people—and this is one of the aspects of its uniqueness. While geographical disparity (practices existing within a network, in various centers) has been a characteristic of the avant-garde, the Third Avant-garde introduces *local idioms* to the discourse, an aspect that equally contributes to the deferral of its identification. So, this study focuses on a selection of Third Avant-Garde practices: those who introduce local traditions, which, through the analytical language of contemporary art, aim to expand social consciousness. These constitute civic practices that at a taxonomical level will ultimately expand the scope of art history and anthropology, by finding the meeting point between the two. This way, boundaries of theorization may be opened and theorization replicated to other world regions.

IV. WORKING METHOD

I refer to my working method as a tripartite system. The first part is mainly local, and I term it 'curatorial anthropology'. This means I have on the one hand devoted some time to experiment making the crafts I am referring

35. The subject of traditional arts' capitalization through cultural tourism is thoroughly covered in John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

to.³⁶ This particular experience provides me with an understanding of the making process behind the artworks and the traditions behind the crafts. On the other hand, I have visited artists' studios and attended several important exhibitions in Europe in Southeast Asia.³⁷ The exhibitions have not only helped me find new artists and artworks for research, they also provided me with a panoramic vision of the Third Avant-garde's impact, especially from the viewpoint of a Southeast Asian representation on a wider scale.

The second part of my process was mainly conducted at Leiden University. It consists in doing archival research, reading literature on the field, locating materials that appear relevant, and writing. These two complementary parts of the procedure are necessary for two main reasons: firstly, I am conducting research on a region which is far from the university I work in, and secondly, artworks made by Southeast Asian artists do not abound in Europe (which lead me to visit several biennials, art fairs, and major shows between 2008 and 2015). Paradoxically, the representation of China, India, South Korea and Japan is much more consistent in Europe, albeit the extensive network created with the region of Southeast Asia by several European colonial powers between the sixteenth and the twentieth centuries.

The third part of my procedure has been to discuss with artists the pertinence of my observations. Except for Indonesian I Wayan Bendi and FX Harsono, all artists have given feedback and useful comments upon my observations. In some cases, the artists gained new insight from them. This is a dissertation about their art works, which I selected, and later analyzed based on curatorial and scholarly literature. Working with living artists is a major advantage: it allows a more comprehensive reading of their intentions.

The resulting text prioritizes artworks and artists over exhibitions practices. This mode of analysis results from the fact that I have not been physically present in several of these events and thus focused on keeping a working relationship with these artists.

V. THEORETICAL FRAME OF REFERENCE

This dissertation revolves around three main concepts: tradition, avant-garde, and agency. Agency in this study is the motor that gives

36. I was between 2006 and 2012 an active batik, tie-dye and *ikat* maker, having taught internationally workshops on these techniques between 2007 and 2014 to children and adults. In addition, I have some notions of *anyam*, a grass mat weaving technique worldwide used for everyday utensils. Other aspects of traditional arts from the region are not foreign to me, as I lived in Macao between 1980 and 1996 and later in Indonesia between 2006-2007 and 2011-2012.

37. I can refer to Yogyakarta Biennial (2009 and 2011), Singapore Biennial (2011), Art Basel and documenta in Kassel (2012), Venice Biennial and Lyon Biennial (2013), Art Stage Hong Kong (2014), several exhibitions in Singapore, Bangkok, Macao, Bali and Yogyakarta between 2011 and 2014, among others.

momentum to the artists' gesture, one which conflates cultural identity with cultural citizenship. This duo corresponds to the twofold dimension that defines an artist as an individual. Through this framework, I read practices that are simultaneously individual and communal, coexist and belong in the art museum and in the ethnographic museum, in art history and anthropology, hopefully leading toward the end of such distinctions.

The text is organized chronologically but supported in specific artworks I selected through exhibition viewing. This approach helps understand the phenomenon's discrepancies, while providing the reader a suitable frame of reference to guide his understanding. There are some artists—e.g. Indonesian FX Harsono, Arahmaiani, I Wayan Bendi, Timorese Maria Madeira, and Vietnamese Dinh Q. Lê—that appear as Third Avant-garde artists during the 1990s and reappear in the period post-2002. So, the chronological narrative appears adequate to communicate the changes that also occurred in their practices, while reiterating their continual use of traditional arts. This is not a linear narrative, but rather a conscious attempt to communicate in a sensible manner.

I refer to the combination of cultural identity and citizenship because an artist with an intention, with a message that simultaneously is local and global, is performing an act of citizenship (in and outside the country). As such, they depart from their own 'national' identity(ies), because it is the one (or more) they know. In any case, the notion of national identity is progressively more fluid, with artists globetrotting to exhibit their (installation) works. So, I both take note of an artist's individuality, and thus notions of identity, selfhood and autonomy come to place, as well as, regard their sense of collectivity—the place where traditions reside within communities that many times artists feel attached to. It seems that for these artists there is no possibility of separating the two spheres of the individual and the collective. In this unique coexistence of factors enters the inquisitive spirit of the avant-garde artist, who breaks with conventions, questions authoritative dogmas, and opens new territories. It is my understanding that this set of occurrences has not yet been studied from the standpoint of traditional arts and the materiality they confer to works.

The duo of the languages employed by the artists—that of traditional culture and that of international art—constitutes the artists' *voice*. This aspect demonstrates important notions of belonging, identity, and citizenship, which signal difference in a globalizing era. In this study, categories of fine arts, tradition, and craft are combined with discursive notions that originated in Western academic perspectives and introduced in the region from the onset of colonization. They have more or less uninterruptedly continued throughout modernization and globalizing trends. This does not mean that the process has been harmonious and continuous; rather, it has been prone to clashes and

hiatus. So, Western academic discourse in this dissertation is regarded as one of the available local languages.

These works apparently transmit the historical dilemma of choice between a need to be modern and a desire to preserve national identity, as Poshyananda observes for the context of modern art in Thailand.³⁸ Nowadays, it is possible to affirm that artists moved beyond the national, and make work to gather a sense of self—often anchoring this intention in traditional values. They use what is familiar to them and to their audiences. What is striking is the fact that while local audiences more promptly recognize the ‘traditional’ ingredients, global audiences relate to the tradition through associations with artefacts residing in ethnographic museums, and more promptly grasp the ‘art’ factor of the work. These possibilities (and their combinations) stem, in my regard, from the artist’s will to relate with local and global audiences.

Regarding the art historical paradigm, these works remain *detrterritorialised* objects, as their placement in art historical discourses is incomplete. In which museum paradigm can these works be accommodated, since they merge notions of ethnography and art? A concern of the Third Avant-Garde is to structure these discourses, anchored by their gradual and increasingly obvious representation in the art world. Pursuing this enterprise is to perform what American art historian Douglas Crimp refers to as the *institutionalization of the avant-garde*, a gradual process that mirrors the initial appearance of works in exhibitions and follows up with their inclusion in museums and academic theories.³⁹ For these specific art practices, the process of representation started regionally, especially in Japan and Australia, and almost concurrently in worldwide periodic art shows, including those that have been largely Western, like the Venice Biennial, the São Paulo Biennial and the documenta of Kassel.⁴⁰ While the growth of possibilities for display has allowed changes in the regional art scene (locally and internationally), only now theorization is catching up, notably through academic journals such as the *Southeast of Now*.⁴¹ Third Avant-Garde works are being collected, exhibited and theorized, and a regional Southeast Asian narrative undergoing development, especially by Singapore-based scholars.⁴²

This art historical research and visual analysis draws from the art historical and anthropological domains, postmodern, and postcolonial studies. I suggest that this combination allows a more comprehensive understanding of

38. See Poshyananda, *Modern Art in Thailand*, 191.

39. See Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum’s Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993).

40. documenta is traditionally written with low case ‘d’.

41. Editorial Collective, “Editorial: Discomfort,” *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* 1, no. 1 (2017): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sen.2017.0000>.

42. Some Southeast Asianists are: Singaporean art historian T. K. Sabapathy; French

the reasoning behind these Southeast Asian practices. To perform the task, I refer to Western and Asian theory: as an example, for the *avant-garde*, I follow the ideas of American art historians Hal Foster and Douglas Crimp for the Western side, and I follow Indian curator Geeta Kapur and art historian Partha Mitter, for the Asian side of analysis. Without considering both realities of academicism, I could not have a full picture of artists' intentions and curators' discourses.

Today, artists share their interests and interpret in a very personalized and individual way manifestations from community cultures existing in Southeast Asia. Thus, artists become individual interfaces between cultures inserted in a globalizing process. It is probable that due to the ongoing globalizing trend, artists feel motivated to construct the artistic self in both global and local idioms. Their work is incomplete without the possibilities opened by the system of fine arts that encompasses scholarship produced by curators, displays in institutional spaces such as museums and the growing global art market, where Southeast Asia has witnessed an increase of attention and importance in the last decade.

VI. PLAN OF DISSERTATION

Chapter 1, *Recalling Tradition*, revolves around the concept of tradition and its emergence within contemporary art practices. It proposes that the unequivocal presence of fragments of traditional crafts, rituals, and customs in contemporary art practices has not yet been conveniently addressed by art historical discourses, albeit the attempts made. These works connect two worlds that were regarded as oppositional and disparate—that of the past and the ethnographic museum, and that of the present and the (modern) art museum—ultimately questioning the system that divided the fields of culture and art. It demonstrates that unrelated artists from diverse locations of the world, including Southeast Asia, reprocess fragments of traditions to make sense of their *cultural identity* and *citizenship*: this is done through an *avant-gardist* discourse that conjures both rupture and continuation. Artists use sources from the two worlds—the academic and the traditional—and thus negotiate the past in the present. Tradition is presented as the material and conceptual aspect of the works, *avant-garde* as the method (or “a formula, or practice,” as affirmed by American art historian Hal Foster⁴³) for their manifestation, and cultural citizenship and identity constitute the motivation for agency leading to social change. It proposes that in the contemporary, traditions are made, unmade and remade through the selection of fragments from traditional art. This enterprise results from the new roles that traditions play in the contemporary: they

curator Iola Lenzi; American art historian Nora A. Taylor; Singaporean art historian Isabel Ching and Singaporean art historian Simon Soon.

43. Foster, “What’s Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?” 26.

constitute a cultural legacy that has undergone changes within increasingly modern and secularized societies.

Chapter 2, *The Third Avant-Garde*, conceptualizes the evolution of the Third Avant-garde. It departs from the theory of the two earlier avant-garde events, proposing that the avant-garde should be first and foremost regarded as a historical force. After finding its contemporary language and mission, it springs to form artistic manifestations aiming at changing the status quo. The Third Avant-garde embodies claims for the end of Western hegemony on this art historical category, and simultaneously opens the discourse toward the accommodation of 'non-Western' practices. To fully illustrate its program and intentions, I provide some examples of artworks by artists from the region. Yet, the intention is not to do a survey-like kind of analysis (because it would always remain incomplete) but rather to identify and define the Third Avant-garde in its various aspects, especially its features, the characteristics of its works, and the agency of its artists.

Chapter 3, *The Third Avant-garde: Early Days (1970s-80s)*, proposes that even though the Third Avant-garde in Southeast Asia happened most prominently in the 1990s, its roots can be traced back to the mid-1970s. At that time, several unrelated artist groups from Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and The Philippines published written statements proposing a rapprochement between art and life. It equally proposes the first Southeast Asian Third Avant-garde artwork: *Ken Dedes* (1975), by Indonesian artist Jim Supangkat.

The chapter evolves to suggest the 1980s as an interstitial decade, in which the radicalism verified in the 1970s undergoes reformulation toward non-confrontational practices. Starting in 1985, works imbued of social preoccupations and grounded upon local sensibilities and histories emerge in the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore. All these works constitute initial manifestations of what eventually will happen more concretely in the 1990s, when local practice and international exposure coincide. The 1980s are extremely relevant because they witnessed initial curatorial undertakings: in Southeast Asia, exhibitions promoted by ASEAN since 1972 kick-started an artistic regional network; in Japan, since 1980, the Japan Foundation and the Fukuoka Art Museum promoted interregional shows which included contemporary practices from Southeast Asia.

Chapter 4, *The Boom of the Third Avant-garde (1990s)*, starts by introducing exhibition practices from the 1990s, when a vast expansion of historical shows in the region, Australia, Japan and the United States took place. More importantly, during this decade, the topic of tradition was paramount: following from the *Third Habana Biennial, Tradition and Contemporaneity*, and the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibitions in 1989, the 1990s observed the continuation of practices and conversely, the introduction of several pioneering

gestures (in an Asian context) by the Fukuoka Art Museum through the *Asian Art Show*, in Fukuoka, Japan; the three initial editions of the *Asia Pacific Triennial*, in Queensland, Australia; the seminal *Traditions/Tensions* in 1996, in New York. The subject was topical but, the lack of temporal distancing deferred the full theorization of artworks. Generally, curatorial projects proposed to demonstrate the contextual circumstances of artistic production in (Southeast) Asian countries but, failed to conveniently address the imbedded avant-garde stance. Thus, by the end of the decade, curators and international venues moved beyond the topic. The chapter posits the Third Avant-garde of the 1990s as a phenomenon clearly differentiated from preceding avant-gardes for its lack of a written manifesto. Artistic practice is not sustained in a program but, rather, is grounded on individual acts of social agency. It is observable that the main theme of 1990s Third Avant-garde works is the local, revealing artists' attempts to communicate with their close community(ies). This, in turn, has resulted in works which are materialized through very localized traditional arts.

To explain the contextual conditions of the Third Avant-garde of the 1990s, I borrow a reading from Supangkat, who proposes the phenomenon as an avant-garde 'in exile'. This circumstance stems from the few available local spaces to present contemporary art, which resulted in the extreme dependency of international venues for works to be presented. Additionally, the Third Avant-garde artist is himself an artist in exile: be it because the country is occupied (like Timor-Leste), and/or the artist had to move to another location so that he could pursue with his investigations, or because the artist lives under a dictatorial regime; the Third Avant-garde artist worked under severe conditions. Thus, one of the attributes of the Third Avant-garde artist is his spirit of sacrifice. To better frame and combine these two aspects—the life of the artist and the life of the curated artwork—I enumerate works by some selected Southeast Asian artists that I have contacted with. By observing their relationship with traditional arts, I suggest that each artist has acted upon the local tradition he related most closely to. This is an aspect of Southeast Asian art: the panoply of references to choose from, and a circumstance that is equally visible in the following chapter 5.

Chapter 5, *The Third Avant-garde Addresses Global Issues* (after 2002) starts by introducing a panoply of exhibitions and literature produced worldwide to demonstrate that Southeast Asian art, including Third Avant-garde artists reached global recognition. Since roughly 2006, regional artists are increasingly getting attention by museums, biennials, art galleries and art fairs. The chapter evolves into displaying facts that prove that the topic of tradition was theoretically reenacted in the 2010s. This temporal gap provided artists, curators, and art historians a necessary distance for an integrated reading. As artists continue to use traditions available—as mentioned, in Southeast Asia,

they are almost infinite—curators have recognized that tradition remains a relevant and topical aspect of local sensibilities. Since 2002, Third Avant-garde artists have experienced new contextual, socio-political conditions that call for creative solutions. The critical stance remains, but the motives differ from the 1990s. Ultimately, what the period 2002-2016 shows is that the avant-garde is indeed a force which bound to the now and aims to project a better future.

The **Conclusion** demonstrates the Third Avant-garde achievements—namely its discursive contribution and its urgency. It proposes the Third Avant-garde is conducive to a new way to understand tradition—as a living archive—as well as the mode of making art from ‘non-Western’ countries. Thus, it demonstrates that the avant-garde, as an art historical category, could be expanded. The Third Avant-garde, with its emphasis on traditions, is used differently by each artist, and this use may change over time (this is the case of Harsono and Arahmaiani, for instance). And thanks to the work of some notable curators, who were attentive to the needs of the artists from their countries of origination, the Third Avant-garde—which is done by cosmopolitan people—fights against the superficial look that postmodernism was advocating for traditions and, equally questions divisions between center and periphery, art and ethnography.

