Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

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

Veiga de Oliveira Matos Guilherme, L.

Citation
Veiga de Oliveira Matos Guilherme, L. (2018, April 24). *The third avant-garde : contemporary art from Southeast Asia recalling tradition*. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/62200

Version:	Not Applicable (or Unknown)
License:	Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden
Downloaded from:	https://hdl.handle.net/1887/62200

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page

Universiteit Leiden

The handle http://hdl.handle.net/1887/62075 holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation

Author: Veiga, Leonor
Title: The Third avant-garde : contemporary art from Southeast Asia recalling tradition
Date: 2018-04-24

Recalling Tradition

This chapter introduces the problematic of contemporary art practices that recall tradition, by terming them a 'third object'. It starts by defining contemporary art according to existing definitions and demonstrates how, despite several theoretical attempts, these practices remain outside of existing discourses. Then, it proposes that several Southeast Asian artists continue to work on the recall of traditions without being considerate of the lack of institutional and theoretical territory for their practices due to an inflicted modernism, to an extent that 'a tendency becomes the norm'. I argue that this is done because on the one hand, these artists do not separate the individual and their communal cultural values, and on the other hand, they are as familiar with Western art constructs as with traditional ones. These are cosmopolitan people who demonstrate a critical voice originating in their personal histories, and who feel driven to act as cultural citizens whose identity and status are in constant negotiation.

The chapter evolves to debate the discourse of traditions: no longer fluid and fully functional like in the past when traditions gathered societies together, it proposes that on the onset of independence in Southeast Asian countries (and arguably in many others), traditions' intrinsic value was appropriated by governing elites which have transformed them into frozen entities. This phenomenon was designated by British historian Eric Hobsbawm as 'The Invention of Tradition'. I argue that the process of invention deprived traditions of their avant-garde stance, which artists recover through these practices. But, because traditions' wholeness is largely a fictitious consideration—the invention of tradition builds on fragments—artists, like the governing elites, build their work on fragments of traditions they cherish.

Through their art practices, contemporary artists make, unmake, and remake traditions. Their works provide social commentary on current aspects of reality, while they demonstrate their disregard for patronizing forces of their local academic and artistic circuits, as well as toward an increasingly open art world that regards them as originating from territories historically considered makers of traditions and thus incapable of art making. This processing is done largely by the re-appropriation of the same procedures: artists invent, deconstruct, and reassemble traditions that remain living archives.

1.1 A New Paradigm that Resists Definition: the Third Object

In art, any tendency can coexist with another in the same period.[1]
Kumada Yumiko

Thinking about contemporary art immediately projects us to the art produced 'now', in this instant moment. This is a valid thought but contemporary art seems to be a more specific construction. It is, as Australian art historian Terry Smith defined on several occasions,[2] distinguishable for the existence of three specific traits: firstly, for being contemporaneous, which means it has been produced since the 1980s, up until our time;[3] secondly, for its contemporaneousness, which relates to the fact that it has become an expanded space of enquiry, penetrating several spheres of life (including national identity, tradition and ethnicity and their impact in society, religion and spirituality, as well as gender issues, and preoccupations of political, social and environment nature), ultimately leading to it becoming closer together with life; and thirdly for its co-temporality, manifested through "the coexistence of distinct temporalities, of different ways of *being* in relation to time, experienced in the midst of a growing sense that many kinds of time are running out."[4] As Smith affirmed, "Works of art, before they are anything else, are testimony of these contemporalities."[5] This is what Japanese art historian Kumada Yumiko transmits in the quote above.

In the coexistence of different temporalities resides the most relevant purpose of this dissertation: to analyze a selection of contemporary art works

1 Koizumi Shinya, "Tenshin (Okakura Kakuzo)'s View of Asia and the Position of the Ideals of the East," in *Asia in Transition. Representation and Identity*, ed. Furuichi Yasuko, trans. Stanley N. Anderson (Tokyo: The Japan Foundation Asia Centre, 2002), 238.

2 See Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009) and Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (London: Laurence King, 2011); Jeffrey J. Williams, "The Contemporist: An Interview with Terry Smith," Symploke 22, no. 1–2 (2014): 361–385.

3 Smith explains that the shift from modern into the contemporary art is unmistakable since the 1980s. See Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?*, 5. The 1980s is an important decade because of a series of world events that changed the world order into one of multiple centers. Already in 1979, the Iranian revolution that deposed the Shah Reza Phalavi marked a resistance against Western domination. The year 1989 is equally considered a hinge year, for it was marked by a succession of international events: the *fatwa* issued against Salman Rushdie and his publishers after the publication *The Satanic Verses*; the Tiananmen events in China; the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the arts, 1989 witnessed the first exhibition of art from all over the world, *Magiciens de la Terre*, in the Pompidou Centre in Paris; the third edition of the Havana Bienal, which since its second edition in 1986 represented Third World Countries beyond Latin America and the Caribbean; the first postcolonial exhibition, *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain* took place in the Hayward Gallery, in London. In Southeast Asia, the opening of Cemeti Art House in Yogyakarta in 1988 is significant, as this was the first space to house alternative practices in Indonesia.

4 Smith, 3–4.

5 Smith, 4.

which incorporate the three core meanings of the word 'contemporary' (as defined by Smith): the now, the same time/period, and different times (which result, in his view, from the double force of the processes of decolonization and more recently, globalization). This means that in general terms, the works in question were produced since 1980, articulated their reality (both in time and space), and present attributes from a historical past, many times regarded as 'traditional'.

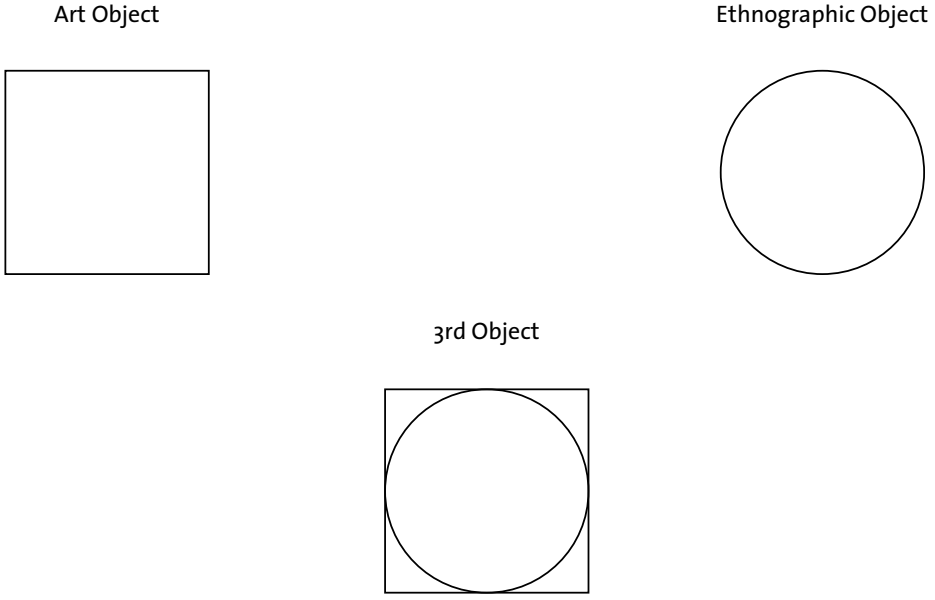

Figure 1.1
Diagram of the Third Object.
Image edited by Leonor Veiga, 2016

The presence of traditional fragments may be experienced as anachronistic, because it provokes an oscillation between different temporalities: past and present, traditional and modern, hand-made and machine-made. And, because, the analysis resides on locations outside the West, which were termed producers of traditional arts. The diagram [Fig. 1.1] summarizes the event: the coeval of binaries—art and craft; art history and ethnography; art museum and ethnographic museum—into one object. How can this be defined, termed, and understood? As American art historian Anna Brzyski recognizes, "we are still experiencing the consequences of the initial segregation"[6] between these two realms. And despite these practices' importance being felt, institutionalization (both at a museum and at an

6 Anna Brzyski, "Introduction: Canons and Art History," in *Partisan Canons* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 6.

academic level) remains underway. The emergence of the 'Third Object' was signaled by Indian postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha:

> In an age in which the global world picture is increasingly identified with the digital impulse of acceleration and immediacy ... many artists today resort to slower traditions of manufacture, such as painting, embroidery, calligraphy, weaving and portraiture. Meanwhile some combine these aesthetic traditions with more contemporary processes, such as video, animation and cartoons. The more traditional forms can be seen as slower, or time-lagged in themselves; and another kind of time lag appears in works that combine the slower and faster forms.[7]

What Bhabha is suggesting is that fast and slow do not have to be equaled with past and present. Instead, these temporalities constitute the material and conceptual dimensions of artworks. So, the interest in 'slow', crafted art does not (always) associate with the celebration of tradition or the revival of the past. In fact, many times artists refute they are using tradition, preferring to address the contemporary aspects imbued in their works.

In the early 1990s, Indonesian artists such as FX Harsono and Heri Dono used *wayang topeng* (masks) and *wayang kulit* (shadow puppets) in various works. They did not intend to reference their veneration for Javanese dances and shadow theatres. Rather they were critically addressing the social and political hegemony around these two art forms. These arts were being used as propaganda by the regime to unify extremely diverse ethnicities of the archipelago (through Javanese culture), but at the same time were being systematized and consequently devoid of their capacity of reinventing themselves.[8] The use of traditional elements for political formulations was very intense in the 1990s. Yet this practice has not ceased, because state-sponsored tendencies toward homogenization and systematization continue. This led Dono to recently reprise one of his historical works, the performance *Wayang*

7 Homi K. Bhabha, "Ethics and Aesthetics of Globalism," in *The Urgency of Theory*, ed. António Pinto Ribeiro (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited and Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2007), 11.

8 The systematization of traditional arts leads to the phenomenon of 'inventing traditions', as described by Eric Hobsbawm. Regarding Javanese *wayang*, the phenomenon can be traced to several moments: the Hindu development in the fifth-century which incorporated the local shadows; the East Javanese period since the tenth-century, which saw resurgence of Javanese elements; and the significant cultural change in the fifteenth-century that caused *wayang* to adapt to meet Islamic iconographic requirements. See Ninus Anusapati, "Wayang in Java: An Ongoing Development Process of a Traditional Visual Art Form" (Second ASEAN Workshop, Exhibition and Symposium on Aesthetics, Manila: ASEAN, 1993), 1–8. More recently in the 1930s, *wayang* witnessed other forms of accommodating the spirit of changing times, such as *wayang revolusi*, when the revolution against colonial independence took place. The process of renewal remains to this day.

Legenda (1988). In the painting *Wayang Legenda Indonesia Baru* (2008) [Fig. 1.2], the Indonesian archipelago is depicted as a large *wayang* 'country': the representation of the islands as shadow puppets alludes to the ongoing and persistent *Javanization* of the country; the green sea—which may denote a relation to 'mother earth' or allude to Islam's hegemony within the republic—unifies the islands; the planes and ships display coexisting modes of living at a variety of speeds. The depiction of traditional *wayang* puppets in a Western style of painting on canvas embodies the problematic of the 'Third Object'.

Figure 1.2
Heri Dono
Wayang Legenda Indonesia Baru
2008 | Acrylic on canvas | 200 x 150 cm | Image courtesy of Walsh Gallery

The 1990s were a decade in which notions of a 'Third Space' were primal, and indicated possibilities residing in the interstices between two places (such as art and ethnography). Bhabha's influential theory of the Third Space generated denominations such as Third Cinema: "The principal characteristic of Third Cinema is really not so much where it is made, or even who makes it but, rather, the ideology it espouses and the consciousness it displays."[9] Devoid of a better denomination, the term 'Third' remained uncontested, but surprisingly it was not applied to contemporary art practices from the same period. This dissertation recovers the term 'Third', albeit for a different reason:

9 Jim Pines and Paul Willemen, eds., *Questions of Third Cinema* (London: BFI Publishing, 1989), vii.

it proposes that the practices of the 1990s (and few from the 1980s) constitute a form of avant-garde—hereafter termed as Third Avant-garde. This project corresponds to a third phase of the avant-garde contestation toward art's institutionalization, and from now on applied toward the taxonomy of fine arts (see Chapter 2).

In 1994, Bhabha proposed the concept of hybridity "as a contesting agency functioning in the time-lag of sign/symbol, which is a space in-between the rules of engagement."[10] While Bhabha's reading of the third possibility as a contesting territory is logical, agreeing with its state of in-betweeness is problematic because it disallows third possibilities to be considered final. In 1996, British art historian Jean Fisher challenged Bhabha's notions of 'hybridity', a term relating to the notion of Third Space. She mentioned the usefulness of Bhabha's model, but contested it based on the problem of the origin that "two discrete entities combine to produce a third that is capable of resolving its 'parental' contradictions."[11] So, she rehabilitated the notion of syncretism, which "has the advantage of implying not fixed elements but a contingent affiliation of disparate terms capable of shifting positions depending on circumstances, and whose boundaries are permeable."[12] While the shifting positions identified by Fisher are noticeable (in Third Avant-garde works), as observed by American anthropologist Arnd Schneider, "syncretism, like hybridity, presupposes an earlier non-syncretic state."[13] Yet, another aspect (besides the question of origins) that renders these early nomenclatures unsatisfactory is, their rootedness in spheres outside of art history (where the Avant-garde may be situated), notably the spheres of biology and religion. To these two designations, another one from the realm of philosophy must be mentioned: synthesis, the act of placing together and terminating the dialectic through an *a priori* process (as Bhabha refers, this is an unconscious behavior), seems the most adequate.

Anthropologists have also contributed with important insights because, they consider artistic production as emerging in a certain social context. This regard originated discourses such as appropriation theory, which seems problematic because it maintains the distinction of art and tradition. Dutch anthropologist Pieter ter Keurs theorized the notion of material complex.[14] Its importance resides in it admitting that physical objects (such

10 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 277.

11 Jean Fisher, "The Syncretic Turn: Cross-Cultural Practice in the Age of Multiculturalism," in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, ed. Zaya Kocur and Simon Leung (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 237.

12 Fisher, 237.

13 Arnd Schneider, "On 'Appropriation'. A Critical Reappraisal of the Concept and Its Application in Global Art Practices," *Social Anthropology* 11, no. 2 (2003): 217.

14 See Pieter ter Keurs, *Condensed Reality. A Study of Material Culture, with Case Studies*

as artworks) concentrate several meanings within them. This theory considers not only the matter and meaning of a certain object, but also considers the changes in time and context that objects undergo, which may originate the presence of traditional materials in contemporary works. Yet, the question remains: can art history provide a designation?

More recently, an approximation to art historical discourses was attempted. In 2003, American art historian Amanda Katherine Rath referred to the terminology used by some Indonesian artists to define their practice: Contextual Art.[15] *Seni Kontekstual* demands artists to be knowledgeable of local conditions (both socially and politically) and acquainted with the visual and material symbols from their cultural context. This useful description falls short for not including these artists' deep understanding of "the sobriety of an analytic discourse"[16] introduced by conceptual art.

In 2011, Smith designated art practices which merge art and ethnography as a 'second current of contemporary art', one that prevails in former colonies and on the edges of Europe.[17] According to him, this current stems from the after-effects of postcolonialism and is "too diverse, uneven, contradictory, and oppositional to amount to an art movement."[18] He acknowledges that these practices "often evoke traditional imagery, but also register the new," and concludes that this "content-driven art [is] concerned above all with issues of nationality, identity and rights."[19] While these are certainly important aspects, as an explanation it remains incomplete because, for one thing, these practices contain a postmodern agency—one which relativizes historical transformations and contests the lapses and prejudices of epistemological grand narratives including nationalism—, and for another, they are part of the postcolonial project, one that "seek[s] instead to sublate

from Siassi (Papua New Guinea) and Enggano (Indonesia) (Leiden: CNWS Publications, 2006).

15 See Amanda Katherine Rath, "The Conditions of Possibility and the Limits of Effectiveness: The Ethical Universal in the Works of FX Harsono," in *Re:Petition/Position* (Magelang: Langgeng Art Foundation, 2010), 4–8.

16 Gerardo Mosquera, "The Marco Polo Syndrome: Some Problems around Art and Eurocentrism," in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, 221.

17 See Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents*, 10–11. Smith separates a diversity of contemporary art practices in three currents: the first current, "Contemporary art," can be found in the Euroamerican world, and in most contemporary art museums. It extends the lessons of Modernism such as the avant-garde project. These are, according to Smith, the most celebrated forms of art today for their fashionable and cutting edge character. The second current, "The Postcolonial Turn," is too diverse in terms of style, medium and content, and geographically disperse to talk about a movement. Made in sites in volatile states of transition, these practices require translation to be negotiated. The third current, "The Arts of Contemporaneity," which can be understood as the art of the millennial generation, is even more global and diverse, and more concerned with the shortcomings of the political struggles of the 1960s and 1970s.

18 Smith, 10–11.

19 Smith, 11.

and replace all grand narratives through new ethical demands on modes of historical interpretation."[20]

In 2013, in the publication *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, the German art historians Andrea Buddensieg and Hans Belting proposed these practices as 'global art', a current within the contemporary.[21] They posit the emergence of 'new' players within the contemporary, and observe their active replacement of "colonial history of world art."[22] Here I am in dissonance, as I do not identify these art worlds as new, nor am I content with placing their practices under the overarching events of the globe. In contrast, I find these practices extremely localized, and thus, do not comply with the heterogeneity of worlds.

It is my understanding that whether these practices constitute art and simultaneously ethnography (this is agreed on), their consequent categorization, as American art historian Susan Vogel advocates, remains a Western issue.[23] Artists work unconcerned with issues of categorization, whereas art historians, puzzled with the coevality of art and ethnography, avoid addressing this unorthodox materiality. To overcome the theoretical bias, art historians have resorted to study the contextual conditions of art production and have largely left the task of categorization and definition to anthropologists. These, in turn, have adapted the institutions where they work—the ethnographic museums—and rebranded them as world art museums.[24]

Meanwhile, Asian authors including Kapur, Poshyananda, and Supangkat concur that since the 1980s, art orientation started containing a postmodern agency: art no longer was devoted to the search of national ideals, but shifted toward the search for a cultural identity.[25] Nevertheless, I observe that these practices remain deterritorialised, deriving from their positioning outside of art-historical trajectories that follow the lessons of Modernism, in which avant-garde must be included. In this dissertation, these practices will be discussed as extensions of Modernism (Smith's first current), that often evoke traditional imagery (Smith's second current) and are primarily concerned

---

20 Okwui Enwezor, "The Black Box," in *Documenta 11_ Platform 5: Exhibition Catalogue*, ed. Heike Ander and Nadja Rottner (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 45.

21 See Andreas Buddensieg and Hans Belting, "From Art World to Art Worlds," in *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, ed. Hans Belting, Andreas Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 28–31.

22 Buddensieg and Belting, 29.

23 See Susan Vogel, "Introduction," in *Art/Artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections,* ed. Arthur C. Danto (New York: The Center for African Art and Prestel Verlag, 1988), 17.

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

25 See Jim Supangkat, *Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond* (Jakarta: Indonesia Fine Arts Foundation, 1997), 78.

with a "search for a sense of locality within situations of constant disruption, dispersal and displacement, their resistant awareness of the pervasive power of mass and official media ... [and] their interest in acting in ways that will improve the situation" (Smith's third current).[26]

To propose these artworks as extensions of modernism is principally to say that they contain notions of novelty and discontinuation of traditional practices. In fact, these artworks have established a novel mode of art making since their emergence in the late 1980s. To this day, despite having populated the international circuit of biennials, these works (still) resist definition, resulting from the ambivalence between what were considered oppositional categories—art and ethnography. This surprising aspect leads to the question: how did two separate domains of knowledge come together in an artwork?

In 1996, Kapur provocatively suggested a hypothesis: "whether is it time for avant-garde initiatives in the non-Western world to place qualifiers around Euro-American art and treat it as ethnographic source material for *their* production."[27] This thought posits Asian artists in a different perspective which has historically been refused to them: as makers of alterity. What does it mean to treat a system of thinking ethnographically? Generally, to Western viewers, West has meant modern, and 'elsewhere' (in Enwezor's words) has meant 'traditional'. In consequence, art from the 'elsewhere' should accordingly be traditional. But developments like Dono's painting question this reading. Artistic practice from 'elsewhere' has historically employed notions and modes of making that have been regarded as belonging to the Western modern paradigm—one which persists in denying its global condition. In fact, the general definition of 'non-Western art' as traditional results from long established discourses within Western museums and academia. So, if Asian artists, as suggested by Kapur, treat Western perceptions and modes of making ethnographically, then it is expected that they devote themselves to the description of difference, which is the realm of ethnography.

Currently, the ethnographic model follows the legacy of Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, author of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), and known as the father of modern anthropology. Malinowski and German-American anthropologist Franz Boas were advocates of fieldwork practice defined by long residence and participant observation. In fact, some artists from Southeast Asia have, in the last decades, followed their academic studies in diasporic contexts—e.g. Nindityo Adipurnomo in Amsterdam, Ninus Anusapati in New York, Dinh Q. Lê in Los Angeles, Maria Madeira in Perth, etc.—, which might suggest that the Western academic system was absorbed

26 Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents*, 11.

27 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), 61.

ethnographically. But there are other circumstances involved: Madeira and Lê were exiled from their countries of origin (having recently returned); Adipurnomo and Anusapati went abroad by choice and after pursuing graduate education in Indonesia.

This difference has implications: according to Australian art historian Melissa Chiu, artists in diaspora have traditionally tended towards a more celebratory relation with the homeland. Oftentimes, this is done through traditional arts, which in turn favors their outdoor fixity, in the form of *clichés* about the homeland culture resulting from the idiosyncrasies caused by memory.[28] Dutch art historian Kitty Zijlmans equally observes that "diasporic cultures tend to be conservative, and given to treasure cultural values, customs, traditions and the vernacular,"[29] which can lead to the 'invention of traditions'. Bhabha explains that this process of identification with the homeland always demands "the production of an 'image' of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image."[30] Their remarks explain why it is different to reinterpret a culture inside and outside its geographical borders; artists that remain inland have a more organic relation to culture, and contribute differently for its evolvement.

Still, Kapur's suggestion goes beyond this possibility. What she is conveying is that artists from Asia, who live in contexts that are by definition bicultural (in the sense of having both Western and Eastern systems of knowledge intertwined for nearly two centuries), and multicultural (in the sense that Indian culture itself is highly diverse, a circumstance that equally happens to Thai or Indonesian cultures), if not a completely constructed reality, may treat the Western art paradigm as if they were observers and its privileged interpreters. Clark affirms that this has happened throughout history. To him, the transfer, albeit intermittent, of Western artistic styles to Asia between the 1850s and the 1930s has had implications, both for art and for art history.[31] He mentions that if the discipline moves beyond the code of origin of Euroamerican styles, it may open the possibility to examine what these transfers meant and which results they had. For Clark, modernity results from the double process of transfer and reception of methods (including the Euroamerican modernist styles). He considers that artistic styles—ranging from academic realism to late impressionism, followed by formal practice, and the introduction of

28 See Melissa Chiu, "Theories of Being Outside: Diaspora and Chinese Artists," in *Contemporary Art in Asia: A Reader,* ed. Melissa Chiu and Benjamin Genocchio (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 342–343.

29 Kitty Zijlmans, "East West, Home's Best: Cultural Identity in the Present Nomadic Age," in *GRID: A Project by Tiong Ang, Fendry Ekel, Mella Jaarsma, Remy Jungerman* (Yogyakarta: Cemeti Art House, 2003), 82.

30 Bhabha quoted in Chiu, "Theories of Being Outside," 343.

31 See John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 16.

critical functions for the art object (which have been termed modernist)—were transferred to the Asian context, assimilated and developed at least until the 1960s in relative autonomy from the Euroamerican centers of their origination. This relative autonomy resulted from restricted information flows, which have lessened since the mid-1990s, when artists from the region started being constant players in international shows. To Clark, these circumstances made Asian artists create a method of work definable by the selection of those aspects they wanted for their investigations. This procedure is commonly referred to as the inherent *syncretism* of Southeast Asian cultures, which have historically been subject to several waves of acculturation, without being fully immersed in them. So, according to Clark, while being transferred, artistic styles underwent change.

Locally, transfer has often been concurrent with modernization and commercialization, and threatened several local aesthetic traditions: despite the permanence of traditional Chinese landscape painting and calligraphy, these impacts prompted the alteration of these genres into more individual manifestations. Yet, the sense of keeping one's identity amid a changing environment shows that artists in the homeland have historically treated Western culture ethnographically. Meanwhile, for artists immersed in diasporic contexts, the ethnographic behavior of being a privileged translator and selector of the transferred knowledge is prone to happen. This circumstance is often referred in literature—that after going away, artists turn into their identity(ies). Indonesian curator Asmudjo Jono Irianto reflects:

> One thing is certain: the attempt to rediscover tradition by young Yogyakartan artists occurred after they had been exposed to the Western hemisphere. But the search for national identity conducted by these artists is substantially different from their predecessors... The artists of the 1990s, however, wished to re-adopt their traditional heritage in order to present themselves internationally as exemplary Indonesian artists with a national identity.[32]

So, Kapur's hypothesis—treating Western art ethnographically—is a behavior that can be detected in the work of diasporic and non-diasporic artists. The anthropological intent of these alterity discourses built in and outside of the homeland may also have other reasons besides contemporary nomadism. Another significant aspect relates to Western education, which was globalized in the colonies (and protectorates) since the nineteenth century. This situation

32 Asmudjo Jono Irianto, "Tradition and the Socio-Political Context in Contemporary Yogyakartan Art of the 1990s," in *Outlet: Yogyakarta within the Contemporary Indonesian Art Scene*, ed. Melissa Larner (Yogyakarta: Cemeti Art Foundation, 2001), 78.

remains unchanged in the postcolonial momentum.[33]

Today in Indonesia, graduate studies in art institutions follow curriculums that can be termed 'Western'. Courses are distributed taxonomically, with little or no connection between them.[34] The curriculum offered to an aspiring artist—be it a painter, a sculptor, a print maker, or a multimedia artist (the most common specializations offered)—is extremely similar to the curriculum of the Fine Arts School in Lisbon. Indonesian artists equally study European philosophers and European art history, though not extensively.[35] They have life-model classes (without nudes), and painting classes are taught with recourse to Western materials such as canvases and acrylics. One might ask: why do such similarities exist when both cultures are so distant from each other? The reason lies in the foundation of Indonesian academies by the Dutch colonial system in the late nineteenth-century.[36] The introduction of a Western educational system also took place in Siam, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, the Philippines and Timor-Leste (with chronological discrepancies, related to the colonizers' agenda). This introduced (and translated) academicism left a 'thin layer' of concepts such as individualism (which would manifest more forcefully during the revolutionary period) and new forms of representation such as linear perspective (in which the artist occupies the center of the image, an aspect that contributed for the awakening of a critical sense of self).

Thus, the postmodern/contemporary shift towards an indigenous art discourse results from a deliberate move away from Euroamerican typifications of modern art discourses. This conceptual movement denotes exploration of how to construct an artistic discourse that uses modern concepts and simultaneously articulates indigenous tastes from one's own cultural background. The procedure, according to Clark, has an 'early' and a 'late' position: the early, characterized by the academic media of oil painting, had local mythologies as subjects matters. This is debated in Astri Wright's book *Soul, Spirit and Mountain: preoccupations of contemporary Indonesian painters* (1994). The late position used modernist

33 In an interview with Indian artists Prasad Raghavan and Aji VN in Rotterdam, in 16 April 2015, both manifested their understanding of art as based on Western perspectives because of education. They added that Western art books present at the library were colored, in clear contrast with black and white reproductions of Indian art books. This aspect contributed for their fascination toward Western art. Meanwhile, they feel the ingredient of 'Indianess' in their work as natural, but maintain it does not constitute an end.

34 See Ninus Anusapati, Memory and Contemporaneity, interview by Leonor Veiga, Yogyakarta, January 12, 2010, 20, http://repositorio.ul.pt/bitstream/10451/2039/3/ULFBA_TES356_ANEXOS.pdf.

35 FX Harsono explained that artistic curriculum in Indonesia only includes one semester of Aesthetics. To him, this is insufficient to incite critical discourse on an aspiring artist. See FX Harsono, Memory and Contemporaneity, interview by Leonor Veiga, Yogyakarta, January 10, 2010, 11.

36 See Joseph Fischer, ed., *Modern Indonesian Art: Three Generations of Tradition and Change 1945-1990* (Jakarta: Panitia Pameran KIAS, 1990), 10.

self-referentiality to foreground the qualities of the materials themselves.[37] Poshyananda also refers the flux of Western artists to the former colonies as a contributing factor and affirms that this circumstance was used by some local powers to legitimize the taste of authoritarian regimes. One such example is the embracement of Western art in the nineteenth-century kingdom of Siam.[38]

Systematic (or methodical) education is a Western invention that in a Southeast Asian context constitutes a legacy from colonization. But now we might ask: what about the legacies of Javanese, Siamese or Chinese art, which originated in the region? Are these local forms of knowledge also integrated in education? In the Indonesian context the answer is yes, and arguably in other locations, such as Pakistan, or Vietnam, local traditions do impact art.[39] But departmental separation is physical; buildings for the departments of Fine Arts (Seni Rupa) and Applied Arts, or Crafts (Seni Kriya) are different, resulting in little communication. Furthermore, not all long-standing traditions enter fine arts institutions: the highly collectable traditional Javanese glass paintings on mirror are only taught in technical schools. This situation maintains hierarchies between traditional arts, a situation Supangkat relates to the preexisting Javanese (hierarchical) taxonomical system.[40] Depending on the craft practiced, an artist operates within layers of categorization of crafts themselves.

The production proposed by the artists in this dissertation, which is the conflation of both academic systems, is not possible to find at an educational level. So how does this happen? I argue these practices stem from an *avant-gardist* spirit that refutes simultaneously the hegemony of the Western canon of art and the conservatism imposed by local intelligentsia. As Clark and Supangkat advance, these conditions contain a historical provenance. Meanwhile, Western academicism remains ongoing.

During the 1970s, the modern Western canon of art was totalizing artistic production in the region. In defiance against the situation, unrelated groups of students from Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and The Philippines rebelled because they felt unrepresented (see chapter 3). It is agreed that the 1970s avant-gardes precepts left a major legacy in the region.[41] I suggest that the theme of the traditional is one such case. Throughout the 1990s,

---

37 See Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, 16–19.

38 See Apinan Poshyananda, "Modern Art in Thailand in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries" (Cornell University, 1990), 23-35.

39 See Salima Hashmi, "Radicalising Tradition," in *Contemporary Art in Asia: A Reader*, 2000, 285–294, where the author exemplifies the contemporary teaching, since the 1980s, of miniature painting, a dying genre, in Lahore. For the Vietnamese case, see Nora A. Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 22–41.

40 See Supangkat, *Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond*, 84.

41 See T. K. Sabapathy, "Intersecting Histories, Thoughts on the Contemporary and History in Southeast Asian Art," in *Intersecting Histories, Contemporary Turns in Southeast Asian Art*, ed. T. K. Sabapathy (Singapore: Nanyang Technological University, 2012), 53.

artists started 'going global', displaying art practices containing traditions, thus invalidating hegemony of taste following the Western paradigm and simultaneously rejecting what Poshyananda calls "the predictable and self-censored art of ethnonationalism."[42]

1.1.1 A Tendency Becomes Norm: the 1990s Up Until Today

Already in 1992, Cuban art historian and curator Gerardo Mosquera observed that Cuban artist José Bedia was making what was then a novelty:

> His work intelligently takes advantage of openings, resources and sensitivities from current art from the centres, to confront us with a different vision. This syncretism also occurs in his technique, effortlessly integrating technological, natural and cultural elements, drawing and photography, ritual and mass-cultural objects, all within the sobriety of an analytic discourse. He also appropriates 'primitive' techniques, but not in order to reproduce their programs: he creates elements with them that articulate his personal discourse and iconography. Bedia is making Western culture from non-Western sources...[43]

Mosquera observes the emergence of the 'third object', a conflation of disparate systems of knowledge that was not provided in any museum or academic studies. The question remains: how did it come to be, and why did this mode of making endure? All these practices constitute transcultural signs; if in the 1990s they responded to ethnographic sentiments related to "conservation, of an art-historical desire for a traditional aesthetic, of national appropriations, of imperialist robbery," their continuation throughout the 2000s shows that "the representational projects are now accompanied by strategies of future survival."[44] In the midst of an increased globalization, and under different political circumstances, artists today equally reflect on aspects of their cultural landscape that have been repressed, ignored, neglected, or undervalued. What all the works offered then and now is what Kapur terms as the works' *cumulative critique*: a rejection of the hegemonic Western model of art and simultaneously the consequences of coercive globalization.[45] This is how avant-garde processes and methods come in, as critical manifestations against established discourses—within and outside the countries of origin.

Generally, avant-garde in Europe and in America is regarded as a rupture

---

42 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), 17.

43 Mosquera, "The Marco Polo Syndrome," 221.

44 Kapur, "Dismantled Norms," 61.

45 See Kapur, 62.

with the past. Meanwhile, contemporary art from Southeast Asia has been disruptive and simultaneously protective of past characteristics. This apparent conservatism originates in a conflation of notions of individuality (inherited from the process of colonization) merged with valued notions of cultural continuity.

Dono's and Harsono's installations from the early 1990s appropriated aspects of Javanese tradition of puppetry [Fig. 1.3 displays the famous Panji masks], and in so doing, they converted theatres into conceptual, politically charged installations because, as Canadian art historian Astri Wright observes, "the Indonesian government [of Suharto] invest[ed] in the past and encourage[d] traditional forms of art in order to counter new ones. So [they] decided to exploit the situation,"[46] by using the exact codes the regime promoted.

Figure 1.3
FX Harsono
The Voices Are Controlled by the Powers
1994 | Wooden masks and cloth | 350 x 350 x 30 cm
Source: *Traditions/Tensions* (exhibition catalogue, p. 158)

Schneider explains the dynamic of appropriating—in these cases, the appropriated materials are simultaneously local traditional arts and the Western mode of art making—as a mimicking process. In its root, the aim is to know more about the other.[47] It seems unlikely that artists in Indonesia, in the 1990s (up until today) that work with *wayang* while making conceptual

46 Gianni Simone, Astri Wright, and Deborah Iskandar, "Contemporary Art in Indonesia: From Solo to Mass, Spiritual to Social," *San Francisco Art Quarterly* (SFAQ) 17, no. 3 (2014): 52.

47 See Arnd Schneider, "Appropriations," in *Contemporary Art and Anthropology*, ed. Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2006), 34.

installations, are trying to understand the West better. Instead, as affirmed by American art historian Thomas McEvilley, they are trying to go beyond narratives of influence, and express this act through whatever blends of Asian and European influences they feel entitled to.[48] These are artists who have a full understanding of Western art, and are merging its notions with local concerns through the reprocessing of their foundations.

This, I argue, is where the ethnographic attitude comes in: alike within the modern art idiom, Southeast Asian artists have gone beyond notions of simple nationalism toward notions of localism merged with globalism. Art plays a leading role in this course: this enterprise does not mean "the adoption of some neutral international style that bleaches out cultural particularities, as it did in the Modernist period. The postmodern invitation is... to balance one's identity with the various global demands of the moment."[49]

That was the situation then—in the 1990s—yet why do these conflated works (that for instance recall *wayang*) persist today through the practice of younger Indonesian artists such as Eko Nugroho, Jummadi, or the duo Indieguerilas today? American anthropologist James Clifford suggests that within these articulated practices resides the possibility of being 'native' in more than one place, to feel rooted, without being localized.[50]

Figure 1.4
Indieguerillas
Tempus Fugit Resistance is Futile
2014 | Mixed media | Dimensions unknown
Source: http://indieguerillas.com/work/indieguerillas-at-art-basel-hk-2014/

48 See Thomas 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.

49 McEvilley, 18.

50 See James Clifford, "Indigenous Articulations," *The Contemporary Pacific* 13, no. 2 (2001): 470.

In 2010, while researching for an article on Indieguerillas' practice, Indonesian artist Agung Kurniawan was debating with himself this same question. Indieguerillas are known to devote their practice to making wayang attractive to younger generations who are increasingly distant from its traditional look. In the work *Tempus Fugit Resistance is Futile* [Fig. 1.4], they juxtaposed atop a skateboard local symbols such as the *wayang* character Petruk (on the left), with global symbols such as a Campbell's Tomato Soup (alluding to Andy Warhol), a Coca-Cola bottle (this one merged with a Hindu deity with multiple arms, commonly used to reference the deity's various powers) and a reference to fast food chain Kentucky Fried Chicken, through the portrait of Colonel Sanders.

As the title mentions, 'time flies', and it is pointless to resist its passage: it is inevitable that *wayang* is abhorrent for younger generations "who readily discard their traditional heritage for the allure of Western/Global" culture.[51] So, traditional elements are present, yet the overall aesthetics relates to pop culture, especially that of computer games. Indieguerillas are actively updating *wayang* through millennial culture. While he recognizes the extreme beauty of this traditional art, Kurniawan posits markets' influence on its contemporary genres, especially because these practices have not ceased after 2000. He found a hegemony of taste since the 1990s—*if it is from Indonesia then it must display* wayang (despite the fact that there are so many other ethnicities in the country)—and remembers that "a lot of curators [in the 1990s] came to Indonesia from Japan, Australia, in search of the 'Other'."[52] Kurniawan and I discussed if *wayang* remained or became fashionable, as in the context of the Bienniale Jogja X—2009, *Jogja Jamming, an Art Archive Movement*, various works on display contained references to Javanese traditional arts (*wayang*, batik and the like). For Kurniawan the use of *wayang* stems from a desire "to approach [an] international arena, [because] for the internationalisation of the work, you need identity."[53] Instead, I propose that for Indonesian artists this persistence meant that *traditions are locally perceived as living archives*.

Certainly, the fashionista reading is plausible because, as Mosquera pointed out, "Many artists, critics and Latin American [and Asian] curators seem to be quite willing to become 'othered' for the West."[54] The preposition *for* is relevant; it posits the local artists as makers of exotic works. It might indeed be market-driven, but how else can an artist maintain being Javanese-Indonesian in a global context? The constant employment of *wayang*—which is one among so many Javanese traditions—nevertheless mirrors the efficacy of Suharto's

51 Ema McGovern, "Ignorance Is Bliss," in *Happy Days* (Singapore: Valentine Willie Fine Art, 2010), http://www.vwfa.net/indieguerillas/essay.html.

52 Agung Kurniawan, Memory and Contemporaneity, interview by Leonor Veiga, Yogyakarta, January 18, 2010, 54.

53 Kurniawan, 54.

54 Mosquera, "The Marco Polo Syndrome," 220.

New Order (1966-1998) preference for this medium. And while a selected few artists actively research Indonesian culture (e.g. Jompet Kuswidananto while researching the Java War (1825-1830), produced several faceless sculptural installations [Fig. 1.5] referencing Javanese *kraton* soldiers traditional attire, one in which various civilizational layers—Buddhist hats, Dutch boots and instruments, Javanese coats made from *tenun lurik*, an important Javanese woven cloth associated with ritual practices—are represented) this artistic approach towards art is uncommon, allowing *wayang*'s hegemony to persist.

Figure 1.5
Jompet Kuswidananto
Java's Machine: Phantasmagoria
2008 | Installation | Dimensions variable | Image courtesy of the artist

I agree that the artworld was receptive and discreetly demanded these fused practices—especially after decades of a hegemonic modernism that tired the art world and its audiences, as observed by Brazilian art historian Ana Letícia Fialho.[55] So, I suggest that preconditions result from a combination of factors: graduate education, the growing international exposure of these artists, and the local material reality. Then, imported goods (such as acrylic paint) were difficult to gather and expensive for students. It is significant that, as recently as 2013, contemporary Timorese artist Gelly Neves confirmed the currency of this factor. It shows that Southeast Asian realities remain uneven.

As Kurniawan admits, the notion of identity is paramount whenever Indonesian artists encounter Western institutions and audiences through art

55 See Ana Letícia Fialho, "As Exposições Internacionais de Arte Brasileira: Discursos, Práticas e Interesses Em Jogo," *Sociedade e Estado, Brasília* 20, no. 3 (2005): 690.

events. Indeed, oftentimes traditions have significantly played a role in this dynamic because they are regarded as honoring particular cultural identities.[56] So, I concur with Kapur when she advances the importance of recapturing the avant-gardist stance that existed in traditional discourses during the decolonizing process. She suggests once more regarding tradition through "a less monolithic, a less formalistic, indeed a less institutional, status so as to at least make it what it was once, a vanguard notion leading to a variety of experimental moves."[57]

To explicate the employment of traditions in contemporary art then, several notions must be taken in consideration: *tradition*, and its impact on contemporary life, *identity* and its constant changing nature in progressing and changing societies, and *avant-garde*, as a procedure permeating these groundbreaking practices which contain aspects that enforce institutional change (within academia and museums). Yet these definitions are not conducive to change without *agency*, here understood as "the capacity of an individual to operate, make decisions and effect choices."[58] In this dissertation, agency is the motor behind artists' creative acts, their right and duty to, 1. Correct traditions' conservatisms, and 2. To talk globally through notions of their local culture.

In line with British anthropologist Alfred Gell, I place "all emphasis on *agency, intention, causation, result and transformation*... [and propose] art as a system of action, intended to change the world."[59] Gell's 'action-centered approach' is more preoccupied with artworks mediatory role than with their interpretation as objects. This procedure serves to countermand much "art criticism [that] downplays... artistic agency... and concentrates on the visual-aesthetic properties of art objects."[60] Yet, in this study the action-centered approach and the visual-aesthetic properties are equally significant. This double regard stems from two causes: first, these works merge disparate systems of thought—art and ethnography. Seen from its visual-aesthetic standpoint, this constitutes a new kind of agency of the artwork, which I termed 'Third Avant-garde'. Second, artists, without whom this material agency would not exist, are also envisioned as *social agents*: they voice individual concerns that have both local and global relevance. Reading agency this way implies that artists overcome difficulties and, through their practice, voice their peers' concerns while inviting them to absorb their messages. I am suggesting that artists be

56 See McEvilley, "Fusion," 19.

57 Kapur, "Contemporary Cultural Practice: Some Polemical Categories," *Social Scientist* 18, no. 3 (1990): 56.

58 Alexandre Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson, eds., "Agency," in *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present* (Malden, MA: Willey-Blackwell, 2013), 265.

59 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 6.

60 Gell, *Art and Agency*, 72.

regarded as fostering relations with local and global audiences: the art objects they produce 'speak' to immediate and distant publics. So, how should we look at these objects? I propose to shift the interpretative gaze toward the materiality of the artwork, one which is intimately tied to traditional arts.

1.1.2 Agency: Cultural Identity and Cultural Citizenship

In the age of a globalized world, the concept of cultural identity is losing geographic pertinence.[61] In contrast, the cultural aspect has never been so important. As affirmed by Jamaican-born postcolonial theorist Stuart Hall, identities are always *in process*, never fully developed:

> Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact... we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation.[62]

Peoples and goods circulate at a rhythm never known before; recent decades made this circulation become available to most populations. Following significant migration waves that occurred after the end of colonial empires when large portions of native populations dislocated to the countries of former colonizers (or after conflicts such as the American-Vietnam War) many southern Vietnamese, such as the artist Dinh Q. Lê in 1979 fled to America, only to return to reside in Vietnam in 1996. Equally, Timorese Maria Madeira was exiled in Portugal after 1975, and later in Australia, only to return to her homeland in 2000. During exile, their identity gained new cultural referents which they articulate in artworks. Clifford advances articulation as the main procedure behind artistic practices that bring to the present "Very old cultural dispositions [which] are being actively remade."[63]

Partly Portuguese, partly Australian, Maria Madeira feels her identity as Timorese. This is the reasoning behind Madeira's canvases where three languages—Tetun (the local dialect, now official language), Portuguese and English—were used to convey messages of despair and hope. In *Reconciliation* (2007) [Fig. 1.6] she collaged several strips of *tais* (now Timor-Leste's national textile) onto the canvas. The crosses she created possibly allude to the Catholic religion that is practiced in Timor-Leste, one of the defining traits which distinguished the Timorese from the Indonesian occupier. Atop this background, Madeira wrote messages in the three languages: words such as *Justice*, *God* and *Ancestors* convey her preoccupations and show her attempt to reconcile with her own history.

---

61 See Zijlmans, "East West, Home's Best," 81.

62 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora (1990)," in *Diaspora and Visual Culture: Representing Africans and Jews*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 2000), 21.

63 Clifford, "Indigenous Articulations," 475.

Figure 1.6
Maria Madeira
Rekonsiliasaun
2007 | Mixed media on canvas with *tais* | 121 x 91 cm | Image courtesy of the artist

Madeira's case aptly illustrates how identities are always in process: as an artist in (forced) diaspora, through language additions she manifests her relation both to the "native land and culture and to the current place of residence,"[64] mirroring a dynamic involving, as Zijlmans argues, "processes as exchange, association and resistance."[65] This affirmation connects to Hall's proposition of two major approaches regarding cultural identity. He states:

> The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture ... which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people,' with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning ... This 'oneness,' is the truth, the essence ... which [an Asian] or diaspora must discover, excavate, bring to light and express... There is, however a second, related but different view of cultural identity. This second position recognizes that, as well as the many

64 Zijlmans, "East West, Home's Best," 81–82.
65 Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 22–23.

> points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute 'who we really are'; or rather—since history has intervened—'what we have become.' ... Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past.[66]

These two propositions—the *essential* and the *hybrid* cultural identity—are many times at play in a single artwork. It is interesting to realize that in post-independence Timor-Leste, in the midst of a global society, artists are actively searching for 'their true identity' as Timorese. It is equally relevant that some Indonesian artists such as Arahmaiani and Harsono, who originate in two distinct ethnic groups in Java (Arahmaiani is of Sundanese ethnicity from west Java, whereas Harsono is of Chinese ethnicity from north central Java) have, after 1998, turned their gaze inwards to understand the nature of their cultural identities. Arahmaiani's search focuses on her position as a Muslim woman and artist in a Muslim-phobic world; Harsono's regard has concentrated on what it means to be ethnically Chinese amidst a society that has historically been repressive toward this ethnicity. Despite the essentialism of these personal projects, both artists feel respectively Indonesian-Sundanese, Indonesian-Chinese, and global.

The Indonesian archipelago is composed by more than 17,000 islands, so ethnical differences are common among its citizens. In fact, this became the motto of the country, *Unity in Diversity*. All islands have different resources, languages, and histories of contact which have had large repercussions on artistic trajectories. Both artists—Arahmaiani and Harsono—were anti-Suharto prior to 1998. Then, first and foremost, they were acting as Indonesians. After the beginning of the Reformation era, they started a personal journey towards the (re)collection of 'pieces' of their identities. Still, their works have retained an avant-gardist spirit in making and reception.

Interestingly, the trajectory of Arahmaiani and Harsono is opposite to that of Lê and Madeira, who remained 'essentialist' during exile, and opened their identity to a hybrid condition after returning home. This discrepancy shows that identities are extremely unfixed, and throughout one's life perception can also change. This leads to Bhabha's proposition of 'cultural citizenship'.

In the Indian Art Summit in Delhi, 2011, I heard Bhabha proposing the concept of cultural citizen. Citizenship is most commonly understood as a set of rights and obligations of a certain individual toward the place where he

---

66 In the Timorese case, depending on which generation the gaze refers to, the plurality of identity might be partially Portuguese (until 1975) or partially Indonesian (from 1975 until 1999). More recently, especially between 2002 and 2013, Timor-Leste became a highly diverse society, since the United Nations Peacekeeping Forces, along with Australian and Portuguese military, have resided in the country.

resides. Undoubtedly a problematic aspect of the age of globalization because, obtaining citizenship is everyday more complex and difficult. Citizenship differs from identity in the aspect that while identities are personal (and thus various identities coexist in one nation-state), citizenships are obtained by legal right. Typically, citizenship is regarded in its social, legal, and political aspects but, Bhabha's interest resides in the context of a global citizenship. He says: "I believe cultural works ignite the issue of the cultural citizen."[67] But how does this come into being?

As noted by American cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo, the system which admits citizens is far from perfect and marginalizes minorities: "nationalism as an ideology simultaneously includes and excludes by defining certain people as full members and others along a spectrum raging from second-class citizens to non-members."[68] This is why some artists' works "demonstrate that citizenship in the national community is a contract in a continual process of renegotiation."[69] The relations between an individual (artist or not) and the power system is oftentimes problematic. This aspect is visible for instance, in Harsono's and Arahmaiani's work: as citizens, their acts contribute for the betterment of their communities—Chinese and women—showing that many times "official citizenship is at odds with cultural citizenship."[70] Thus, they propose the revising of history (and traditions), and proceed to its rewriting. And, as is expected from art, their acts of citizenship break with repetition and convention. Like other artists included in this dissertation, their work demonstrates that acts of citizenship "are also ethical (as in courageous), cultural (as in religious), sexual (as in pleasurable), and social (as in affiliative) in that they instantiate ways of being that are political."[71]

To be consequential, acts of citizenship must find creative solutions. And contemporary art—due to its contemporaneousness, which relates to its expanded field of enquiry—offers much ground for the expression of creative acts. Like acts of citizenship, contemporary art expressions also "emerge from the paradox between universal inclusion in the language of rights and cosmopolitanism, on the one hand, and inevitable exclusion in the language of community and particularity on the other."[72] From here, I suggest, originates the artist as cultural citizen: because she or he find himself in a paradoxical position, she or he decides to participate in community life and voice concerns.

---

67 Bhabha, "Towards a global cultural citizenship," interview by Sachidananda Mohanty, July 3, 2005, http://www.thehindu.com/lr/2005/07/03/stories/2005070300020100.htm.

68 Renato Rosaldo, "The Borders of Belonging: Nation and Citizen in the Hinterlands," in *Cultural Citizenship in Island Southeast Asia: Nation and Belonging in the Hinterlands*, ed. Renato Rosaldo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 6.

69 Rosaldo, 7.

70 Rosaldo, 9.

71 Engin F. Isin and Greg M. Nielsen, *Acts of Citizenship* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2008), 2.

72 Isin and Nielsen, 11.

This is what British sociologist Kate Orton Johnson calls 'Do It Yourself citizenship'[73]—a set of creative acts aimed at changing the status quo.

What does it mean to be a cultural citizen? A citizen must perform duties toward their community; she or he must behave according to an established order. Yet, a citizen is simultaneously an individual with rights within that community. Culture, as remarked by Gell, "has no existence independently of its manifestations in social interactions."[74] In this double-position of rightful citizen and participant, and the need to manifest for culture to exist, originate acts of cultural citizenship through artistic intervention. Artists become social agents, who proceed to a 'do-it-yourself citizenship' gesture to transmit current matters. Their works exercise social agency, and attempt to overcome local and global resistances (this is evidenced through case studies).

So, I propose that acts of cultural citizenship constitute a form of individual agency through which artists address their disquiet and concerns. They examine the increasingly complex articulations of the local and the global and respond through self-made acts—the artworks. The individual drive to perform derives from their identities in process, and from a need to construe fairer relations with the nation and the global art community. In addition, artists refer to the inherent complexity of their identity and act as community voices. This is done largely through the sense of duty originating in their citizenship. So, alike with the political connotation, cultural citizenship is equally a status (that is acquired by law) and a practice (which may be volunteer, like within creative acts).

1.2 Traditions, Museums and Art

By definition, each culture has its own individual traditional resources. Traditions' transition into modernity is related to their classification by modern anthropologists as ahistorical, fixed entities. This lack of historicity granted them a universal value. Yet, the opposition made between tradition and modern was so strongly associated to geographical divisions, that *traditional* knowledge became associated to cultures in the periphery. *Progress* was then associated with cultures in the center, that seemed to have broken definitively with the past. These geographical divisions ultimately extended into the museum realm, which was divided in ethnographic and art museums, paralleling the West for art and the *rest* for the realm of the ethnographic. In consequence, material cultures from traditional societies were perceived as

73 See Kate Orton-Johnson, "DYI Citizenship, Critical Making, and Community," in *DYI Citizenship: Critical Making and Social Media*, ed. Matt Ratto and Megan Boler (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), 141.

74 Gell, *Art and Agency*, 4.

rooted in the absence of rationality and interpreted as inferior. In contrast, material cultures from progressive societies were read as superior, ever changing and varying, and were displayed in modern art museums. In addition, all cultures considered as classic—meaning, contributors to the Western civilization[75]—were introduced into art museums that, in most cases, were termed as national, while they (re)presented disparate areas of the world. Such is the case of the Louvre museum in Paris, where we can find Egyptian art in the same building as the Mona Lisa, both symbolizing European culture.

While traditions were read as fixed, in most cases, traditions do change. Javanese *wayang* aptly exemplifies transformative occurrences. Dutch anthropologist Walter H. Rassers defends it as constituting a ritual ceremony rooted on the spiritual life of tribal people:[76] the arrival of Hinduism caused the tradition to adapt to the new tales (the Indian epics) and, the arrival of Islam caused some forms of *wayang* to disappear (e.g. *wayang beber*, or scroll *wayang*),[77] while the shadow plays witnessed a recoding that persists today.[78] Javanese *wayang* became highly stylized, leading Latvian-American art historian Claire Holt to say that Javanese wayang "is a shadow of a shadow."[79] *Wayang*'s reformulations have not ceased, and remain an important aspect of contemporary art. In consequence, the essentialism that has characterized most of the discourse on tradition must be contradicted. Thus, I concur with Hobsbawm's claim that traditions, more prominently in the modern era, should be understood as 'invented'. They are often 'instrumentalised' by the state, the tourism industry, and local political agendas.

As *wayang* demonstrates, modernization is a recurrent process. Equally, 'traditional arts' have remained frozen within ethnographic museums in the West and 'civilization' museums and theme parks in Southeast Asia. This rehearses the perception we have of them—one which transports us to the realm of the premodern, or simply the non-modern.[80] This is why looking at traditions through the lens of the contemporary artworld seems at first glance a paradox: art is in most cases about the present and possibly comments on

---

75 James Elkins, *Stories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1–38.

76 Walter H. Rassers, P*anji, the Culture Hero: A Structural Study of Religion in Java* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1959), 60.

77 Benedict Anderson, "The Last Picture Show: Wayang Beber," in *Proceedings from the Center for Southeast Asian Studies* (Conference on Modern Indonesian Literature, Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, 1974), 33–55.

78 Anusapati, "Wayang in Java," 5.

79 Claire Holt, *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 123.

80 Some activities like knitting or cross-stitching are not perceived as ethnical or indigenous because they are regarded as patrimony of the Western civilization, thus are just considered old-fashioned crafts. They are nevertheless considered non-modern, even though

the future, and traditions represent the 'static' past. I propose that through the conflated practices this study focuses on, this inherent paradox is broken and argue that this tendency came from those once peripheral centers of production.

1.2.1 Invented Traditions and Traditions-In-Use

What do we mean by tradition? And why would it matter? In 1989, Kapur stated that the persistence of the term tradition within the contemporary alludes to its essentialist nature, but traditions should be understood as highly pragmatic features of nation building. Drawing energy from an imaginary resource (the 'ideal' tradition), the invention of traditions by nationalists was an attempt to restore conceptual wholeness to lost communities.[81] Thinking of traditions solely as symbols of wholeness (material and timewise) is largely a fictitious enterprise. This circumstance stems from the fact that traditions have gained new functions in the modern era.

In 1983, Hobsbawm advanced his highly important theory of the invention of tradition. As he explains, traditions are not necessarily timeless. He instead proposes that traditions "which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented."[82] He recognizes that the phenomenon includes two distinct senses of invented traditions: firstly, those formally instituted by a societal cultural vanguard, and secondly, those emerging from the grassroots of society. Both cases happen whenever societies undergo significant changes and constitute attempts to restore conceptual wholeness to lost communities. For the former, Hobsbawm identified the birth of the modern nation-state as a 'trigger' for the invention of tradition. For this reason it has "been particularly significant in the past 200 years."[83] When nations are *mapped*, inventions take place (a national flag, a national anthem), and conventions are agreed on (e.g. national holidays, national heroes and historical events). Yet, this mapping also introduces some 'ownership' problems, such as who has the right to affirm the invention and the making of certain cultural products. Traditional arts, and notably textiles, exemplify this problem.[84] He equally recognizes the role 'secularization' plays

---

they made a successful transition to the industrial age, which many times does not permit their regard as timeless legacies.

81 Kapur, "Contemporary Cultural Practice," 49.

82 Eric J. Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition,* ed. Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, 20th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

83 Hobsbawm, "Introduction," 5. The formation of modern states continues: Timor-Leste, declared a sovereign state in 2002, is the Southeast Asia's youngest nation; the world's youngest nation, declared sovereign in 2011, is South Sudan.

84 Batik, *ikat* and other kinds of textiles have been exchanged within (Southeast) Asia through sea fare before the arrival of the Europeans in the sixteenth-century, leading to conflicts. Until 2009, when Indonesia was distinguished with batik's intangible heritage ownership by

in the invention of tradition: because life is no longer bound to the community but rather around the nation, rituals tied to national celebrations are formed. So, says Kapur, while traditions "are used... as essential categories... in fact they are largely pragmatic features of nation building."[85]

Kapur agrees with Hobsbawm that traditions, as we know them, have largely been created. Consequently, the word tradition becomes less tied to the premodern that is commonly equated to the primitive: traditional arts exist in developed societies that, despite being premodern, cannot be classified as tribal or primitive. Also, indigenous traditions have migrated throughout time between populations. In this sense, traditional arts and rituals have been exchanged in globalizations prior to the Western one (from the sixteenth century onward).

Tradition, Kapur argues, is a loaded term, not a disinterested civilizational legacy. It is not simply an anthropological phenomenon as it was conceived by Western modernists when they first contacted primitive cultures.[86] Tradition seems to be a badge of authenticity—albeit an anonymous authenticity—frequently used to describe groups or communities. This describing capacity, coupled with their aggregating nature, made them important in the project of the newly founded nation-states. As capital of the past to be preserved in the modern era, traditions are capable of legitimizing social practices which explains why they have been so frequently recourse in transitional moments (such as resistance from colonization or postcolonial nation building). And, because traditions were experienced as revolutionary in transitional moments, they have served the society's cultural vanguard in the course of a struggle.[87]

Both authors distinguish invented traditions from other manifestations: the so-called 'customs' or 'traditions-in-use'. These, in turn, are *in process* and continue to nurture contemporary existence. Hobsbawm notes that customs are not invariant, because in 'traditional' societies life is not so. Custom "does not preclude innovation and change to a point...[but] it must appear compatible or even identical with precedent imposes substantial limitations on it."[88] Kapur notes that post-modern artists engage in the task of making traditions-in-use nurture contemporary existence. Through this involvement, tradition "is turned into a critique and culture into a matter of practice and both together into a civilizational discourse that goes beyond the nation-state

UNESCO, batik was object of a cultural dispute between Indonesia and Malaysia. See Peter Gelling, "Score One for Indonesia in the War Over Batik," *The New York Times*, September 14, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/15/world/asia/15iht-batik.html.

85 Kapur, "Contemporary Cultural Practice," 49.

86 Kapur, 56.

87 Kapur, 49.

88 Hobsbawm, "Introduction," 2.

and third wordlist dogmas."[89]

Traditions, both scholars contend, are polemical categories. And the fact that they have been conceived as an anthropological phenomenon, conceals the fact that they are largely schematic and formalized. This leads to the fact that invented traditions use ancient materials (the past is their resource) of a new type and for novel purposes. This is visible in various forms, which I enumerate below.

First, traditions are frequently equaled to ethnographic collections which were assembled during the colonial era and transferred to Europe. This means that not only the living contexts were destroyed but, that the gaze originating the collection was not neutral. Meanwhile, the attempt to translate these collections from site to museum space allowed the creation of a new context: the exhibition space, which is a context of its own. Most commonly, art museums use the 'white cube' display. In these settings, works appear as if they were created in isolation, outside the sphere of life.[90] Yet, this is equally a usual form of display within ethnographic museums, which have been subject to extreme modifications since the 1990s: from the initial exhibitions containing large quantities of specimens, displays became increasingly minimal. An interesting recent development was the reversal of the white cube into a black space, as famously practiced in the Musée du Quai Branly. Here, French architect Jean Nouvel inserted the collections from the former Musée de l'Homme and the Musée Nationale des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie in the darkness, creating a theatrical atmosphere that continues discourses of the 'exotic.'[91] Meanwhile, some ethnographic institutions started receiving so-called 'non-Western' contemporary art in larger numbers, and thus rebranded themselves as world art museums. These developments mirror necessary revisions and a progressively higher respect for traditional arts, while perpetuating divisions between the West and the 'rest'.

Second, several traditions were systematized during the colonial era (and after). One example is the Balinese *kecak* dance. Today promoted by the tourism industry as a timeless manifestation,[92] but acknowledged by scholars—Western and Indonesian like Supangkat—as a Western invention. In 1930s Bali, German artist Walter Spies choreographed *kecak* dance [Fig. 1.7] when he acted as adviser for the shooting of the now classic American film *The Island of Demons*:

---

89 Kapur, "Contemporary Cultural Practice," 58.

90 See McEvilley, "Introduction," in *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, ed. Brian O'Doherty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 7–12.

91 See Clifford, "Quai Branly in Process," *October* 120, no. Spring (2007): 3–23; Anthony Alan Shelton, "The Public Sphere as Wilderness: Le Musée Du Quai Branly," *Museum Anthropology* 32, no. 1 (2009): 1–16; Enwezor, "Topographies of Critical Practice: Exhibition as Place and Site," *The Exhibitionist* 2 (2010): 46–52.

92 "The Kecac Ramayana" (Ubud, 2012).

> This was the occasion for which he remodeled kecac, to so-called monkey-dance. He increased the number of participants to more than a hundred young men sitting in a circle, and also introduced the figure of the dance-narrator who recites, in the light of a central standing lamp, tales from the Ramayana involving the exploits of Hanoman, the monkey-general.[93]

Figure 1.7
Kecak Dance
Source: http://www.balitoursbooking.com/bali-sight-seeing-tours/denpasar-city-tour/

For this spectacle, which is exclusively performed by men, Spies took the musical accompaniment of the centuries-old sacred *Sanghyang* dance out of its religious realm and developed it into its current form, known as *Kecak Ramayana*. Widely known to tourists by the chorus sound 'cak cak cak', kecak remains a deterritorialised cultural product, unrecognized in relevant publications, such as Holt's *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change* (1967). Probably motivated by the narrative capacities of Javanese *wayang*, which he knew from his long stay in Javanese palaces, Spies introduced the figure of the *dalang*, the master-puppeteer, in the dance. So, most probably the performance that arrived at our time contains only remnants, fragments, from the original ritual dance that he observed. What I argue is that he *chose* some of these aspects for this now curated performance. While provoking 'an invented tradition', his gesture kept certain aspects of Balinese culture alive: the act of choosing is closely related to modern art principles which enable an author the

93 Hans Rodhius, "Walter Spies: A Short Study of His Life and Work," in *Walter Spies and Balinese Art*, ed. John Stowell, Tropenmuseum Amsterdam (Amsterdam: Terra Zutphen, 1980), 37.

capacity to discern what is relevant for him/her. It equally demonstrates how an invented tradition becomes a tradition-in-use because the two concepts alter positions interchangeably.

Third, traditions changed their role in modern societies. The *kecak* story enables the understanding that traditions are not solely part of the past (this case is apt to demonstrate their problematic relation with the tourism industry), and leads to the conclusion that modern societies equally create them. As it appears, "No society is able to live without traditions, and the challenge of modernization is to build and develop traditions of modernity."[94] Hobsbawm advances that the process of the invention of tradition is employed to face a modern challenge: the social voids caused by secularization. A process that gradually took place in Europe having started circa four hundred years ago,[95] secularization is, according to Supangkat, the most important factor for the use of traditions in contemporary art. Devoid of their ritualizing integrity, traditions became idioms which individuals freely use. This transmutation is significant: it means that each person can make judgments and recover ideas from the communal past, and express them in an individual way.

Forth, invented traditions continue to emerge, reflecting changing times and communal interests. In the early 1980s, Bali witnessed the debut of the *ogoh-ogoh* (giant effigies of demonic look) [Fig. 1.8], equally created by groups of young men as part of the annual *ngrupukan* rites which take place in the night preceding *Nyepi* (Day of Silence). These ephemeral sculptures (some of which are biodegradable) are erected one month prior to the event, and displayed, carried, and then transported to the village's temple where they are finally burned. Rapidly accepted by local communities, the Bali Arts Festival does not give any information on its origins, implying a timeless invention.[96]

Both *kecak* and *ogoh-ogoh* demonstrate how new traditions can quickly develop, particularly when they become entangled with religious life. Both *kreasi baru* (new creations), *kecak* and *ogoh-ogoh* reflect government-sponsored intentions. Kapur proposes that these manifestations are commonly implemented by influential members of a society's cultural vanguard, and are many times tied to liberation movements. This may be the case: *kecak* was created when Bali was undergoing cultural rejuvenation, supported by

94 Audrey Cantlie, "The Concept of Tradition," in *Tradition and Politics in South Asia*, ed. R.J. Moore (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1979), 3.

95 See Rita Widagdo, "Some Contemporary Expressions in the Visual Arts of Indonesia" (Second ASEAN Workshop, Symposium and Exhibition, Manila, 1993), 3.

96 Laura Noszlopy, "Ogoh-Ogoh: A 'new Tradition' in Transformation," in *Performing Objects: Museums, Material Culture and Performance in Southeast Asia*, ed. Fiona Kerlogue (London: The Horniman Museum, 2004), 153–54.

the Dutch colonial government that was "yielding, by the 1930s, a positively glowing ideal of Bali as a paradise"[97]; *ogoh-ogoh*'s "rise to prominence ... as a feature of 'Balinese culture' reflects a wider process of homogeneisation that was supported by the New Order regime's (1966-1998)."[98]

Figure 1.8
Two *ogoh-ogoh* effigies being transported by men in *Nyepi* celebrations, in Prambanan, Yogyakarta
Photograph by Leonor Veiga, 2011

Fifth, Hobsbawm also notes breaks and recoveries of traditional practices. He upholds that whenever traditional practices are recovered, after being prohibited or simply abandoned, this implies invention. This is the case of many Chinese rituals in Indonesia, following from the end of prohibitions in 2000. After that time, restrictions were lifted and Chinese could once again profess their religion and use their Chinese names.[99]

British writer T. S. Elliot said that traditions, if exclusively handed down from the prior generation, should be actively discouraged. To him, traditions were a matter of wider significance: they involve a perception of the past, a historical sense of the past's presence in the contemporary.[100] Thus, tradition is a *conflation* of a sense of the timeless with the temporal together. This, I believe, is possible to

97 Adrian Vickers, *Bali: A Paradise Created*, 2nd ed. (Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2002), 113–14.

98 Noszlopy, "Ogoh-Ogoh," 159.

99 The Indonesian national slogan *Bhinneka Ika Tunggal*, Unity in Diversity, celebrates difference among ethnicities. Yet, it is limited to ethnic groups who claim a territory of origin in the archipelago. Being migrants, the Chinese have no claims to any specific territory.

100 See T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, 1920.

associate with their fragmentation, and relates to German philosopher Walter Benjamin foreseeing of the future: the transmissibility of the past would be replaced by its citability.[101] From this constant cycle of construction, destruction, and reconstruction, much of human production is made, and not all has been classified. As Benjamin argues, "for every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably,"[102] many things were actively destroyed. To a certain extent, some artefacts that have been dislocated to museums have been allowed cultural continuation, as Clifford reported in the essay 'Museums as Contact Zones', when a tribe used the space of the Portland Art Museum to perform its ritual ceremony around a worshiping statue.[103] For Clifford, museums seen as contact zones does not immediately imply a dialogue; the relations can be widely problematic, full of pain and contestation. Many traditional cultures suffered brutally from the systematization that led to the destruction of much knowledge (some of which nowadays sees resurgence). To Clifford, the appearance of tradition (and of vanishing traditions) in contemporary art denotes a feeling of a "strong continuity through changing times."[104]

Despite being fragmented, it is precisely traditions aggregating nature that allowed their invention in moments of abrupt social change. So, the crucial element for the invention of traditions has been the *foundation of symbolically and emotionally charged signs* with binding social purposes. Hobsbawm considers them authoritative and vague due to the values they proclaim—such as patriotism, loyalty and duty, concepts he perceives as weak and abstract.[105] He declares that despite much invention, new traditions are not able to fill the gaps resulting from secularization which cornered old traditions and *traditions-in-use*, which bound life and communities together. Still, premodern customs remain and if changes occur, they are slow, slight, and made in accordance to its adherents. Both invented traditions and traditions-in-use *provide clues to history* without being it; in here resides the continuity of the past in the present.

Thus, it is important to distinguish custom, or *tradition-in-use*, and *invented tradition*: as Hobsbawm observes, custom is a living and flexible entity, usually transmitted through social interaction, and has in most societies been transmitted orally.[106] Custom is variable, and it serves as a differentiating marker

---

101 See Hannah Arendt, "Introduction: Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999), 43.

102 Walter Benjamin, "Thesis on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, 247.

103 James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 188–219.

104 See Clifford, 199.

105 See Hobsbawm, "Introduction," 10.

106 See Hobsbawm, "Introduction," 2.

for Third World societies, says Kapur.[107] Customs vary because each person can work on his/her own interpretation. Traditions, on the other hand, were subject to categorization and scrutiny and as a result are more rigid, because their change depends on the agreement of several members of a community or society. Together, traditions-in-use and invented traditions keep fragments of the past alive, since they quote the past in the present. This makes them both *living archives* that evolve and change according to social needs.

1.2.2 Traditions as Living Archives

As argued by Kapur, since tradition relates to the collective, it is in many ways authoritarian and is meant to be followed. Tradition may be regarded as a play of given attributes (handed down, passive, immutable) but its contemporary aspects (or functions), keep it going. It is in the functional aspect, which originates in their customary use by peoples, that we must trace their presence in contemporary art.[108] Functional traditions, or customs, retain a practical value for communities: they are flexible towards change and simultaneously adhere formally to their precedents.

So, how do contemporary artists process these living archives? Artists do not start from the premise to 'reconstruct' historical artefacts. Rather, they transform material objects from historical periods into something new. They operate on the level of meaning, provide a comment on history, and challenge authoritative reconstructions of narratives. Through their works, artists negotiate notions of art and of tradition. Through disparate elements—fragments, quotations—traditions activate difference as well as sameness that articulate artists' multi-angled cultural citizenships, a direct result from a worldwide tendency toward nomadism. Artists "are consciously creating styles that simultaneously honor particular cultural identities and make gestures of mutual incorporation with the Western tradition."[109] As a result, their multi-referential artworks do not mean to be representative expressions of a certain culture, rather they provide the artists' individual interpretation of notions pertaining to the collective. The combination might seem paradoxical at first glance because tradition lies in continuity, and many times it relates to ethnicity (and indigenousness), which alludes to the collective. This situation is radically different to that observed in Western contemporary art, which has developed a discourse of rupture most times related to notions of autonomy and made by individuals.

To arrive at the current situation, a long sequence of events took place:

---

107 See Kapur, "National/Modern: Preliminaries," in *Contemporary Art in Asia: A Reader*, ed. Melissa Chiu and Benjamin Genocchio (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 25–26.

108 See Kapur, "Contemporary Cultural Practice," 51.

109 McEvilley, "Fusion," 19.

the art world expanded, the number of artists increased, more infrastructures—cyclical like biennales, or stable like museums—were developed. In addition to this, artists are more than ever conveying their 'agency', speaking about a constantly changing reality resulting from the process of globalization which promotes deterioration of difference. *Tradition* appears to be a natural locus to refer to such issues; its double-sided *changing* and *static* character allows the artist's agency to be conveyed, because the artist's relation to these issues and to communal values resides in the action itself. So, to analyze tradition, the context in which individuals reason and act has to be regarded to grasp the artist's agency. *Agency*, or the individual capacity to act, embodies the role played by artists in these processes. In coalition with tradition, it is vital to understand the unique relationship of the individual artist to his social inheritance and immediate situation.

Supangkat refers to the advent of a new tendency within art of the 1970s: the colonial project of looking for a national identity, as the revolutionary period waned, lost its force.[110] In its place, the desire to recover one's cultural identity gained momentum. In changing contexts such as these, *invented traditions* and *traditions-in-use* emerge, because their condition of local constructs appears more apt to define an artist's identity than national ones. Thus, values once regarded as incompatible, became sources of expression: community and selfhood, preservation and change, past and future, tradition and modern. These binaries, which seemed opposite, became fuel for critical art in the region as the work of Dono, Indiguerillas, Kuswidananto and many others shows.

In the 1990s, Third World countries, which still maintained agrarian communities, achieved an unprecedented recognition (albeit only on the metropolis). Several fracturing themes such as marginalization, minority, and otherness entered postcolonial and identity politics discourses. In 1988, Indian critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's published the essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'. There, she reclaimed that subaltern communities be heard, otherwise they would remain dependent upon Western intellectuals and scholars to speak about their condition. Notions of center and periphery started to dilute, blurring the still established system of power relations. Here Mosquera made an interesting point about the relations between centers and peripheries. He says that peripheries "have developed a 'culture of resignification' out of the repertoires imposed by the centres. It is a transgressive strategy from positions of dependence."[111] For contemporary art, this culture of resignification contradicts the discourse propagated by Western views, which follows a linear narrative of progress, from traditional to modern and postmodern. In 1995, Kapur alerted for the need of India to theorize its own civilizational constructs:

110 See Supangkat, *Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond*, 71–78.

111 Mosquera, "Spheres, Cities, Transitions: International Perspectives on Art and Culture," in *Belonging and Globalisation: Critical Essays in Contemporary Art and Culture*, ed. Kamal Boullata (London: SAQI, 2008), 89–90.

> It is crucial that we do not see modern as a form of determinism to be followed... to a logical end. We should see our trajectories crisscrossing the western mainstream, and in the very disalignment from it, making up the ground that restructures the international. Similarly, before the west periodizes the postmodern entirely in its own terms and in that process characterizes it, we have to introduce from the vantage point of the periphery the transgressions of uncategorized practice. We should reperiodize the modern in terms of our historic experience of modernization and mark our modernism so that we may enter the postmodern at least potentially on our own terms.[112]

Tradition is usually seen as connected with ethnicity and indigenousness, originating in societies without writing, in which the past is continued and remembered in terms of the present. In contrast, societies with written traditions constantly re-interpret texts instead of remembering them.[113] This is why tradition has been frequently used to describe the way of thinking and living in the premodern era. They have remained in collective conscience as constructions from societies without systematized knowledge because their handing down is done through orality and not based on written texts. Meanwhile, notions of modernity (which has been used interchangeably with Westernization, development, industrialization and progress) have permeated all spheres of knowledge and traditions were no exception. But, rationalism kept criticizing tradition as a mindless repetition of inherited lines of thought and conduct, devoid of individuality and criticality. Thus, tradition has usually been opposed to all those concepts relating to the modern such as the individual, the avant-garde, change, and has been equated with resistance and the past. However, I argue that the act of selecting fragments is extremely linked to modern thinking and to avant-garde practices. So, it appears, many traditions are in fact modern inventions, and as Hobsbawm points out, the older they trace their existence, the more recent they in fact are.

1.3 Making, Unmaking and Remaking Traditions

Drawing on Clifford's assumption that "cultural forms will always be made, unmade, and remade,"[114] this dissertation uses this premise to demonstrate not only that traditions constitute a valid source for the *modus*

112 Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*, ed. Geeta Kapur (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000), 297–98.

113 See Cantlie, "The Concept of Tradition," 13.

114 Clifford, "Indigenous Articulations," 479.

operandi of art, but also the variety of actions an artist may perform on traditions. I propose that more forcefully since the 1990s, traditions started being used critically through methods and strategies most commonly attributed to avant-garde practices. Such an approach within contemporary art denotes that the project of the avant-garde remains unfinished and that local traditions, values, and indigenous ethos correspond to a 'third' layer of avant-garde criticism. And because *tradition is a process* that remains in use today, it can be implicated in contemporary art practices, which may actively transform them.

Whenever the topic of interest is *tradition*, it is in most times associated with ideas of the nation-state and/or ethnic minorities that have survived the process of modernization and remain 'intact' in the present. I refute this reading, and aim to demonstrate that it refers to an 'ideal tradition' (in the platonic sense of the word) and is largely a modern conception. In this case, the notion of tradition corresponds more to a living entity, a current way of making, which fights against fixed narratives arranged during periods of nation building. As shown, Hobsbawm proposed that ideas of *nation-ness* were in most cases fabricated from fragments of the past and vigorously repeated for nation-building purposes. In clear accordance, Kapur confirmed that in India the manipulation of traditions by the ruling elites was and remains a very pragmatic feature of nation building.

Since contemporary artists construe mainly through installations—which consists in a montage of fragments introduced by the historical avant-gardes—they combine fragments from reality. Thus, the focus of analysis resides in traditions' fragmented nature and in accordance with Hobsbawm's observations that the invention process largely depends on certain selected fragments, that after being manipulated and through constant repetition, transpire an idea of longevity and wholeness. Here, the gaze focuses on traditional fragments that individual artists chose to use in their critical discourse. These fragments do contain particularities most commonly associated with traditions. On the material side, handmade crafts and ritualized modes of making are reassessed. On the conceptual side, certain religious rituals, activities such as storytelling of ancient epics are (re)introduced within contemporary life. This gesture entails what Indian social anthropologist Arjun Appadurai named as 'coeval flows' resulting from the globalizing process, and characterized by relations of disjuncture.[115] In addition, attention is given to what Kapur designated as *traditions-in-use* and the dynamics of their relationship with invented traditions.

While some of these heritage components have made the region of

115 See Arjun Appadurai, "Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination," *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (2000): 5.

Southeast Asia famous throughout history, the fixity of the readings has not permitted a critical assessment of the specificities from each nation-state and the region (albeit the reductive character of such an enterprise). In the last twenty years, Southeast Asia as a region has grown in understanding. Resulting from several academic works, today Southeast Asia is regarded and accepted as active participant in modernist and postmodernist enterprises, then *why not also within the avant-garde?*

Nevertheless, the intent to preserve unique craftsmanship skills should not be discarded as a legitimate critical stance towards the effects of computer aided designs and extreme dependency of machine-labor. On another regard, this material legacy explains why various international contemporary artists choose to live in Southeast Asia: American artist Ashley Bickerton (b. 1959, Barbados), and Australian artist Rodney Glick (b. 1961, Perth), are just two examples of artists that reside on Bali because the production of their works profits from the highly skilled craftsmanship available there. This shows how much the artworld demands skill—which remains time consuming, being achieved either through teamwork or through a long individual journey of learning a craft. The maintenance of several traditions and customs, in some cases for exploitative touristic motivations and in other cases for the reinforcement of community ties, remains a source of inspiration for many (local) artists who find in these particularities fascinating aspects for the materialization of their artworks. However, as I will demonstrate, this is not always done for traditions' glorification.

Through contemporary art practices, traditions have been continuously *reprocessed*,[116] understood as the act of selecting fragments, that are later transferred into different (not necessarily new) contexts. Subsequently, they are recombined through three overarching actions on traditions: making, unmaking and remaking.

Generally, contemporary art practices from Southeast Asia can be roughly distributed into three approaches: firstly, there are contemporary artists who can be considered *makers*. Their artworks combine one (or various) traditional crafts with a modern discourse. This combination, added to the critical voice of the artist, situates them in the contemporary, seen as a time of conflation and coexistence of different time lags.[117] This approach is relatable to the phenomenon of invented traditions, while it differs from it for its claim for its aim to break with its inherent artificial constructs. Secondly, there are artists that pursue a bolder activism. Their work proposes to adapt, modernize, even correct, some politically and socially charged traditions. They strategically 'pick and choose' from authoritative traditions those that contain extremely

116 See McEvilley, "Fusion," 9.

117 In accordance with Smith's definition of contemporary art. See Smith, What Is Contemporary Art?, 3–4.

loaded significations, some of which artists find unacceptable. These artists are actively *unmaking* traditions, by means of analysis they *deconstruct* them, ultimately destroying their authoritarian aspects—those that keep several injustices ongoing (in the name of tradition). While deconstruction might seem problematic, in fact for traditions to remain *functional*, it is necessary. The third trend seems to offer traditions new vitality: the *remaking* of traditions bridges these two prior behaviors, by offering to *fixed* traditions, both invented and in-use, new terrains of intervention while fostering new interpretations. The remaking aims to their completion, because there are fragments that were not considered by the invention process. This not only frees the traditions from their authoritative aspects, it recovers their lost vitality, which is, according to Kapur, what makes them functional.[118]

1.4 Conclusions

Traditions, as explained, emerge within contemporary art for several reasons: first and foremost, they belong in the everyday of Southeast Asian artists; second, they contain ingredients of locality that an artist may wish to address to voice some concern; third, they contain an aggregating value which allows communication to their communities. Similarly, Western art manifestations appear in contemporary art first because they are firmly rooted in 'non-Western' communities' understanding of art, a direct consequence of colonialism; second, for the most part, the educational system remains Western-based; and third, because to play in the global sphere, the analytical language of modern art Mosquera identifies allows an artist working with a tradition to be regarded an artist instead of a craftsman. In this combination of factors—the local reality, and a good understanding of modern art precepts—originate contemporary art practices that merge material culture from the realm of the ethnographic and the artistic.

The third object, termed in this dissertation as Third Avant-garde, emerged in the 1990s and remains theoretically deterritorialised. It is my contention that this under-theorization stems from the presence of traditional arts, which are regarded as of the sphere of ethnography, and from the belief that it constitutes a paradox to think of tradition as revolutionary. In fact, the phenomenon of invented traditions constitutes an endorsement of tradition. It always implies a rejection of the immediate past in the interests of something 'purer'. This act can be experienced as a revolution, if endorsed traditions are engaged in cultural praxis, as Kapur proposes. This renders fragmented traditions functional, and means they can contribute to the building of a different future. This is an important aspect, not only within the agency of creative acts, but it is

118 Kapur, "Contemporary Cultural Practice," 51.

a fundamental aspect of the avant-garde (see Chapter 2).

Adopting tradition can (although this is not always the case) put an artist in the position of being avant-garde, as an originator of a different future, and the starter of various possibilities (see Chapter 2). This avant-garde artist acts as an emancipatory hero, who sacrifices his interests in the name of the *arrière-garde*, that is, the group that remains behind or out-of-date, and the one he directs his acts of cultural citizenship toward.

Yet, adopting continuously the revolutionary character of tradition may diminish its avant-garde stance. I recognize this possibility, but propose that the Third Avant-garde works not only on tradition, but simultaneously constitutes a critical response to the European and the American avant-gardes: it includes their elements and processes, and goes beyond their agenda. It is precisely in this inclusion of avant-garde traits—the enunciation of ethnicity, the use of everyday stories and connotations, the blurring of high and low culture, the disruption with established discourses—that resides the Third Avant-garde capacity to reflect on the previous two. As such, the Third Avant-garde proposed could be possibly named local, decentered, transnational, etc., but these adjectives limit the possibilities I aim to broaden. It would frame it as oppositional to the first and the second avant-gardes, instead of displaying the natural connection that it claims with both. As such, the contemporary artists' mission is to proceed with the deconstruction of the avant-garde as much as with the taxonomical system of the fine arts that persists on opposing art and culture, East and West. This is an extension of what has been suggested as treating Western culture ethnographically.