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

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The Third Avant-garde: Early Days (1970s-80s)

This chapter evaluates the contribution of the 1970s and the 1980s to the formation of the Third Avant-garde. It proposes that an avant-garde emerged in the mid-1970s in the Southeast Asian countries aligned with the Western nations during the Cold War—Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. This event was unconventional in its provenance, scale, form, and timing. Regarding provenance and scale, it was confined to the urban centers of these five Southeast Asian nations and made exclusively by young generations of artists who were studying in local academies or abroad. In terms of form, all these manifestations used the important avant-garde feature of the written manifesto.[1] And in terms of timing, the striking similarity is the advent of these radical groups in the mid-1970s, specifically between 1973 and 1976.

The avant-garde of the 1970s does not fully relate to the Third Avant-garde boom that would come to characterize the 1990s. One notorious difference is the absence of the written manifesto of the latter. However, it can be said that it announced its preoccupations, including: the freedom to choose local forms of expression, including indigenous forms; the resistance to state and academic patronization that promoted the procurement of a national identity through Western models in detriment to an art that conveyed life; the artist as a free-thinker, freed from the task of making beautiful representations of an idealized reality (e.g. 'Mooi Indië' painting in Indonesia); and the procurement of a cultural identity through local modes of making. The similarity of the claims between the avant-gardes has been observed by Southeast Asianists working on the construction of a Southeast Asian art discourse. Subsequently, the chapter proposes *Ken Dedes*, an installation made in 1975 by Jim Supangkat, as the earliest Third Avant-garde manifestation known. I suggest *Ken Dedes* because it constitutes a breakthrough in Indonesian art and simultaneously talks about Southeast Asian history, which is the reason for its current inclusion on the Southeast Asian contemporary art collection housed in Singapore.

In the 1980s, Southeast Asian artists turned to social preoccupations and non-confrontational activism surged. They used traditions to demonstrate the variety of peoples and modes of making. This decade equally witnessed the first steps toward internationalization, especially within Southeast Asia and the Pacific: a series of rotating events, especially those promoted by the ASEAN and in Japan, kick-started a regional network between regional artists.

1 The Singaporean case is slightly different, but it can be included in this trend.

3.1 The 1970s (1973-1979): Artists' Steps

To exemplify the early days of the Third Avant-garde, I am going to guide my study through the writing of Singaporean art historian T. K. Sabapathy and Filipino art historian Patrick D. Flores.

Sabapathy is one of the first Southeast Asianists, and most probably the first residing in the region. His is one of the longest academic contributions for a local acceptance of Southeast Asia as a field of enquiry, and since the 1990s he has been very active in conjuring and creating a network of specialists in the region (this endeavor has bared fruits in recent years, with an increasing network of specialists based in Singapore). Sabapathy's activity as a curator is key to historicizing the region's modern and contemporary art. His seminal exhibition *Modernity and Beyond: Themes in Southeast Asian Art* (1996) remains one of the most comprehensive contributions Southeast Asian scholarship to this day.[2] One of the aspects that did not escape his analysis was the presence of traditions in art practices. In addition, Sabapathy has been an active academic in Singapore since the 1980s, which means his activity is marked by an extensive collaboration with Singaporean museums and universities. Another aspect that makes his work relevant is his extensive studies on individual artists.

The choice for Flores relates to his interest in the region, traceable through important publications such as *Past Peripheral: Curation in Southeast Asia* (2008), but most importantly for his preference for the theme of the avant-garde in recent years.[3] Flores' analysis of a Southeast Asian avant-garde in the 1970s has focused on its attributes and on its collective stance. He has enumerated the avant-garde of unrelated groups from the region through their written manifestos. The manifesto as a text itself, is a prominent characteristic of the Avant-garde and something which rendered the historical avant-garde so important. Interestingly, one of the Third Avant-garde's particularities is the absence of a written manifesto. Like the neo-avant-garde (and the transnational avant-garde of Oliva), the Third Avant-garde has relied on the written works of curators and art historians who have established a close relationship with artists through curatorial practice. The consequence is that historicization remains deferred, perhaps resulting from the lack of temporal distance that characterizes the immediacy of the relationship between artist and curator.

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2 See T. K. Sabapathy, *Modernity and Beyond: Themes in Southeast Asian Art* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 1996), 7.

3 See, for instance, Patrick D. Flores, "First Person Plural: Manifestos of the 1970s in Southeast Asia," in *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, ed. Hans Belting et al. (Karlsruhe: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 224–71; Patrick D. Flores, "'Total Community Response': Performing the Avant-Garde as a Democratic Gesture in Manila," *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* 1, no. 1 (2017): 13–38.

The choice for these two authors does not invalidate the importance localized specialists for each country (including Supangkat for Indonesia and Poshyananda for Thailand) remain the most significant contributors toward the delineation of a Southeast Asian avant-garde project. Their work communicates commonalities, such as the importance of the idea of the modern (in which the avant-garde must be placed) and the relevance of the *local* in artistic manifestations. They, nevertheless differ in one aspect: for Sabapathy, Singapore has equally contributed to a regional avant-garde discourse, while he discards the Thai event, a reading which Supangkat follows.[4]

3.1.1 The Emergence of an Avant-garde in Southeast Asia through its Social Fucntions

In the mid-1970s, most countries of Southeast Asia were under the control of dictatorships. The region was divided in two blocks, reflecting the Cold War divide. On the West side of the Cold War, Indonesia and the Philippines had established longstanding dictatorial regimes with Suharto's New Order and Ferdinand Marcos enduring presidency (1965-1986). In these countries, the chiefs of state constructed 'sanctuaries' of national identity—the Cultural Centre of the Philippines (1966) and the Taman Mini in Indonesia (1975) are two examples—meant to convey national identities, uniting extremely diverse populations under one single banner.[5] These constructions were modern in form, and their content based on inclusion/exclusion systems of categorization was mirrored at an academic level. The situation for Singapore and Malaysia was somewhat different. Following from the separation in 1965, both countries dedicated the next decades to the betterment of life conditions of their citizens.[6] In Malaysia, the Barisan Nasional coalition government instituted the New Economic Policy (NEP), which concentrated its efforts toward the needs of the Bumiputera (or indigenous) peoples who were offered a degree of 'positive discrimination' against the Chinese. These measures served to counter racial antagonisms.[7] In Singapore, Lee Kwan Yew's People's Action Party (PAP) fostered a program of nation building, while maintaining economic ties with Malaysia aimed at the nation's survival. Simultaneously, Yew advanced a regional agenda: in 1963, Singapore held the first edition of the Southeast Asian Cultural Festival—conceived and timed for the inauguration of the National Theatre of Singapore. Observes Sabapathy, this gesture "signaled Singapore's claim that it was a formative site for showing, representing Southeast Asia (and Asia) as a cultural field."[8] Singapore's culturalgenda for the region has not ceased ever since.

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4 Jim Supangkat, Ken Dedes, unpublished interview by Leonor Veiga, Leiden, March 7, 2016.

5 See Flores, "First Person Plural," 227.

6 See Peter Church, ed., *A Short History of South-East Asia*, 4th ed. (Singapore: John Wiley & Sons, 2006).

7 See Church, 95.

8 T. K. Sabapathy, "Intersecting Histories, Thoughts on the Contemporary and History in

From the end of World War II until 1973, another member of the West side block, Thailand, lived under several unchallenged military dictatorships—commonly called the 'strongman' era—which were marked by US patronage and aid, a relation that enabled a great deal of social and economic developments. But, by the early 1970s, the educated young precipitated the downfall of the regime.[9] Student protests originated political activism, affecting even the Buddhist *sangha* (or monks) and resulted in horror. "In October 1976, the military resumed power, unopposed, and permitted right-wing organisations to torture and kill student radicals gathered at Thammasat University in Bangkok."[10]

The Cold War divide between two blocks equally contributed for the enforcement of dictatorial regimes: fearing the expansion of communism, these countries (Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines) signed the foundation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967. This event, in conjunction with local realities, supported the emergence of a regional avant-garde through its social functions. As suggested by Kapur, if understood as a force, the avant-garde emerges in moments of social disjuncture, which we can see relevant here. It is interesting to note that the phenomenon of the 'invention of tradition' finds the exact same reasons for its emergence. So, I hypothesize, that these national building projects (by means of dictatorial regimes), and aimed at modernizing nations toward an increasing Westernization, were coupled with governments' sponsoring of invented traditions (in Kapur's words, a civilizational hubris).[11] These in turn, were classified and placed within buildings and parks such as the modern sanctuaries referred to. Sabapathy mentions: "there were movements featuring modern and traditional arts in the region in the 1960s and the 1970s. These were largely... diplomatic enterprises springing from ambitions for representing emerging states and claiming regional prominence as well as worldly status for them."[12]

Following the Late Modern developments in Europe and America, within each academic mentioned above, painting was a persuasive medium.[13] The mode of making favored towards formalism resulted in regional artists' attempts to conjure an avant-garde: they openly claimed resistance and

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Southeast Asian Art," in *Intersecting Histories, Contemporary Turns in Southeast Asian Art*, ed. T. K. Sabapathy (Singapore: Nanyang Technological University, 2012), 49.

9 See Church, *A Short History of South-East Asia*, 172.

10 Church, 172.

11 See 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), 48.

12 Sabapathy, "Intersecting Histories," 48–49.

13 Supangkat, Ken Dedes.

rejection against official art made in a Western style. Thus, they proposed a new turn into local art forms, which were cornered by the imported 'High Art' establishment. As a result, the 1970s witnessed the emergence of the avant-garde manifesto: unrelated artists from Singapore in 1973, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand in 1974, and the Philippines in 1976, published writings in which they expressed the desired new trajectory for artistic practice. They proclaimed "the necessity of the new and the urgency of the now."[14]

In 1973, Singaporean artist Cheo Chai-Hiang wrote from London to his Singapore-based colleague Ho Ho Ying the seminal text 'Written for the Occasion of the 8th Modern Art Exhibition', where he surveyed artistic practice in Singapore. Cheo advanced that the art of the 1970s should embrace "[o]ther media, formats and technologies [which] are capable of producing images that are visually far more compelling and seductive." Painting, he insisted, was an "inconsequential register."[15] Cheo's new paradigm advocated "the rejection of formalism, inclusion of the personal, an emphasis on the process, and use of indigenous materials."[16] He equally proposed that a work "need not be determined as 'finished' for it to qualify as art... [and] may be created collaboratively."[17] Sabapathy observes while Cheo's text is not precisely a manifesto, he nevertheless claimed the need for change, because he recognized that modern art had failed, declaring the 1970s a "testing time for artists."[18]

In 1974 Malaysia, the artists Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa inaugurated the exhibition *Towards a Mystical Reality* in the National Agency for Language and Literature in Kuala Lumpur. The project, which included a written manifesto and a set of co-authored installations, was advanced as "A documentation of jointly initiated experiences by redza piyadasa and sulaiman esa."[19] Objects such as two half-emptied bottles of Coca-Cola were exhibited in pedestals and accompanied by captions describing their temporal and spatial emergence. Despite the introductory text in the catalogue by Krishen Jit rendering their work as "nothing less than a revolution in Art,"[20] and the public gesture of Salleh ben Joned of placing a copy of the publication on the floor and subsequently urinating on it (this can be interpreted as a performative act), the exhibition *Towards a Mystical Reality* largely met public indifference.[21] a"It is the publication that is remembered and esteemed until the present,"

14 Flores, "First Person Plural," 227.
15 Sabapathy, "Intersecting Histories," 36–37.
16 Iola Lenzi, "Negotiating Home, History and Nation," in *Negotiating Home, History and Nation: Two Decades of Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia 1991-2001*, ed. Iola Lenzi (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2011), 4.
17 Sabapathy, 38.
18 Sabapathy, 39.
19 Sabapathy, 39.
20 Flores, "First Person Plural," 240.
21 See Sabapathy, "Intersecting Histories," 40.

discerns Sabapathy.[22] Their manifesto declared the artist as a maker of ideas, advanced a trajectory for Malaysian art freed from Western influences, and a call to turn attention to Oriental sensibilities which nurture and emphasize "the 'spiritual essence' rather than the outward form!"[23]

In 1974, the Artists' Front of Thailand was formed. Its embodied political agenda was tied to the sentiments of the period between 1973 and 1976, which, according to Poshyananda, signal the beginning of activist art in the country.[24] In 1975, the group's manifesto was published. It started with a reflection of social power relations declaring that for centuries the powerful few had deprived most the population of satisfactory life conditions. Its interest in traditional arts was evidenced in its various proposals:

> To reform Thai traditional arts for the 'big groups of little people'... To change public attitudes towards traditional arts' use from serving imperialist capitalists or elite individuals to serving the 'big groups of little people'... To treasure the good traditional arts throughout Thai history for the public... To promote the application of the traditional arts treasured in the world to social and mankind development.[25]

Thai students promoted a reading of traditional arts according to Thailand's current political and social circumstances, thus declaring the need for art to connect to life, and far "from the death machine of the state and the art establishment."[26] However, on October 6, 1976, students from the Thammassat University "protested against the return to the country of Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, who had been in exile in disguise as a Buddhist monk,"[27] originating what became known as the '6th October Massacre'. On that morning, students were shot, beaten, burnt, and their bodies mutilated. "According to the official count, 46 people died in the attack but the number of deaths has been questioned."[28]

In December 1974, the *2nd Jakarta Biennial of Painting* opened in the Taman Ismail Marzuki (TIM).[29] Following from the rejection of their paintings which tended "toward geometrism and abstractism"[30] from the prized

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22 Sabapathy, "Intersecting Histories," 39.

23 Piyadasa and Esa quoted in Flores, "First Person Plural," 258.

24 See Flores, 260.

25 Artists' Front of Thailand 1975 manifesto quoted in Flores, 262.

26 Flores, 263.

27 Thanavi Chotpradit, "Revolution versus Counter-Revolution: The People's Party and the Royalist(s) in Visual Dialogue" (University of London, 2016), 131.

28 Chotpradit, 131.

29 The TIM is an institution that houses the Jakarta Biennial committee, etc. It remains an important place for art events. At the time, it was the only place housing exhibitions in Jakarta.

30 Supangkat, *Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond* (Jakarta: Indonesia Fine Arts Foundation,

paintings, a group of students from the academy in Yogyakarta sent a floral wreath adorned with the message "Our Condolences to the Death of Indonesian Painting."[31] They contested the overall tendency toward decorativism, which they interpreted as mirroring the "judges' concept of Indonesian identity."[32] The incident, which became renowned as December Hitam (Black December), was received as a shock by the local art world. The effects of the radical gesture were immediately felt: the group of signatories was punished with expulsion from the art school.[33] The Black December Manifesto stated the diversity of Indonesian art and called artists to offer a spiritual direction based on humanitarian values and oriented towards reality so that Indonesian art could achieve a positive identity.[34]

On the wake of the events, the students from Bandung academy (among which was a young Supangkat) met with their fellow colleagues from Yogyakarta (among which was a young Harsono) and formed the Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (GRSB), or New Art Movement Group. In 1975, the GRSB exhibited for the first time at the exhibition hall of TIM, and presented works which could not be classified as painting, sculpture, and/or drawing.[35] For Supangkat, the group's collaborations in 1975, 1977, and 1979 is considered the debut of contemporary art in Indonesia, one which "was concerned over the various social issues in the midst of a very non-democratic condition."[36] In 1979, they published the manifesto entitled 'The Five Lines of Attack of the Indonesian New Art Movement' in which they openly rejected the concept of High Art which cornered popular and traditional forms widely present in the country. They equally posited that art existed beyond the categories of painting, sculpture, and drawing, as well as the primacy of concept over form and intellect over skill, and declared the need for a (re)searching attitude (which would allow the development of more individual styles) and the obligation to be attentive to the history of Indonesian art as well as the exigency to be attentive toward reality.[37] The movement was dismantled in 1979, even if in 1987 some of its members organized another joint exhibition, *Pasarya Dunia Fantasi* (Fantasy World in a Supermarket), in which collaborative work was tested.[38]

In 1976, the Kaisahan Group, formed by some students in the Philippines, issued their declaration of intentions. Their manifesto declared the group's

1997), 68.

31 Hendro Wiyanto, ed., *Re:Petition/Position* (Magelang: Langgeng Art Foundation, 2010), 70.

32 Supangkat, *Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond*, 68.

33 Sabapathy, "Intersecting Histories," 43–44.

34 Flores, "First Person Plural," 230.

35 See FX Harsono, Memory and Contemporaneity, interview by Leonor Veiga, Yogyakarta, January 10, 2010, 5, http://repositorio.ul.pt/bitstream/10451/2039/3/ULFBA_TES356_ANEXOS.pdf.

36 Supangkat, *The People in 70 Years* (Magelang: OHD Museum, 2015), 45.

37 Flores, "First Person Plural," 232–33.

38 See Supangkat, *Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond*, 78.

commitment to "the search for national identity in Philippine art."[39] That meant, first, that local expressions should distance themselves from Western orientations that tended to maintain Filipinos hostage of foreign tastes and foreign ways of making. They recognized the importance of pursuing the endeavor of finding a national identity but declared its social commitment: art should be "firmly based on social realities and on a critical assessment of our historical past so that we may trace the roots of these realities."[40] To this day, this Manila-based collective is credited with having launched the social realist movement in the Philippines.[41]

This short account shows that the similarities within the region's movements "undeniably demonstrate the influence of conceptual art, minimalism and Pop Art that appeared in the 1960s to the 1970s in the late modern era, in Europe and in the United States."[42] These student groups of avant-garde artists proposed to correct the situation by engaging more with grassroots populations and communities: they declared a new art and no longer believed in the coding of art as painting or sculpture, and stated that these categorizations had to be vehemently discouraged in art production. Instead, they proposed continuing the journey toward a national identity, but through communal values. This intended move away from Western-oriented culture also reflected their willingness to remain independent countries, not hostage of new forms of imperialism.

The commitment toward searching more adequate expressions of national identity—through traditions in Thailand, the Phillippines and Indonesia, and through conceptualism in Singapore and Malaysia—does not denote, says Flores, "nostalgia, but [it rather constitutes] a 'critical assessment' of the 'present' and the 'historical past'."[43] Appearing in all manifestos, this commitment was armed by a rejection of invented traditions, seen as idealized projections of the past that had little relation with the reality of these grand national narratives. The work of Jim Supangkat, *Ken Dedes*, is a good example of an artist's opposition to the appropriation of traces of history by the nation state, while he reintroduces social commentary, an aspect that had been lost after the neo-avant-garde.

Most artists belonging to these groups were already immersed in ideas from outside, an aspect that related from their overseas education (this is the case of Piyadasa and Sulaiman). As such, they were already highly acquainted with post-modern practices. Even the student Supangkat who conceived

39 Flores, "First Person Plural," 237.
40 Flores, 237.
41 Norberto Roldan, Langgoni Nine, interview by Leonor Veiga, Lisbon, January 22, 2018; Flores, "'Total Community Response,'" 31.
42 Supangkat, *The People in 70 Years*, 38.
43 Flores, "First Person Plural," 239.

Ken Dedes was acquainted with American art, making installations since his early days he was probably influenced by the information and magazines his grandmother who lived in San Francisco regularly sent him. And through Supangkat, installation art emerged in Bandung, as a means to reject art schools' conservatism. While in Yogyakarta, Harsono kick-started a minimalist tendency in painting.[44] Supangkat was also concerned about the primacy of Western art history and the lack of Indonesian art history and theory at school.[45] Together with GRSB artists, he rejected formalism that made art for the eye, and integrated elements previously considered non-art (found objects, photographs, images from the mass media) into the discourse. He equally disagreed that Indonesian identity was only represented by traditional 'high' arts that Suharto's regime proposed (e.g. *wayang* theatre and *ikat* weaving). So, he decided to follow Indonesian art critic and professor at the Bandung Institute of Technology Sanento Yuliman's concept of a coexistence of two realities that would be eventually outlined in the essay 'Two Fine Arts: High and Low' (1984). In consequence, the art produced in this period embodied the confrontation of modernism and tradition, to integrate an expressive language that allowed voicing of socio-political ideas. These artists proposed to make ideas, not solely forms: they viewed art as a space for a development firmly rooted in social realities, reflecting society's true conditions. *Tradition*, with its local identity effect, appeared to them as a privileged space to criticize Western ascendency. These groups equally rejected elitism in art and promoted art through self-discovery: artists should not follow the demands of the teacher. Instead, they should focus on getting their own individual style.[46]

These 1970s manifestos were vehicles of agency. They were a mode to address audiences that set the foundation of contemporary art, by promoting a consciousness of the current world and eliciting a simultaneous clear, local response. They marked a shift away from formal conventions and embraced change: many instances were sparked by engagements with aspects of Dada, Conceptual, and Pop art, although the degrees of their impact are different. These 1970s insights involving approaches to art making were, in many ways, anticipatory to what came in the 1990s: the rejection of formalism, the inclusion of the personal, the emphasis on the process, and the use of indigenous materials. These are all criteria that can be termed as avant-gardist in this context.

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44 Supangkat, Ken Dedes.

45 Ingham, "Powerlines: Alternative Art and Infrastructure in Indonesia in the 1990s," 179-180.

46 Flores, "First Person Plural," 231.

3.1.2 Proposing the First Third Avant-garde Work: *Ken Dedes* (1975)

Figure 3.1
Jim Supangkat
Ken Dedes
1996 (artist's reconstruction from the 1975 original) | Mixed media| 61 x 44 x 27 cm
Image courtesy: National Heritage Board, Singapore

Figure 3.2
Marcel Duchamp
Fountain
Installation view
Dimensions Unknown
Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz
Source: http://icons.canalblog.com

I suggest that *Ken Dedes* (1975) [Fig. 3.1] be considered among the earliest and most prominent manifestations of the Third Avant-Garde in Southeast Asia.[47] This is for two compelling reasons: firstly, Ken Dedes monopolized the critical discourse about the GRSB exhibition, an outcome which Supangkat claims was unintended. *Ken Dedes* was placed by GRSB members at the exhibition's entrance, a decision that transformed it into "some kind of statement"[48] and was interpreted as expressing the group's positioning against Suharto's nationalistic discourse. Secondly, the work itself relates to the rewriting of history. It aptly demonstrates the paradoxes and shortcomings of national/regional frames and invokes the ongoing debate about whether it is reasonable to continue inherited Orientalist discourses which regard the Hindu-Buddhist era as the height of local and regional

47 I am aware that other artists of GRSB and from the region used traditional arts in their installations, but access to this information is scarce. Locally, *Ken Dedes* became so influential due to the polemic it caused that it practically monopolized discourse on GRSB's early activity.
48 Supangkat, Ken Dedes.

civilization(s). The work's formal similarities with Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) [Fig. 3.2]—an object of everyday life resting on the top of a wooden plinth—make it plausible to say that Supangkat's radicalism departed from it but, went beyond it by integrating a highly important local and regional symbol from Indonesian and Southeast Asian history.

The original statue of Ken Dedes [Fig. 3.3] was produced during the kingdom of Singosari (1222-1292 AD), which was spurred by the marriage of Ken Dedes with Ken Arok. Singosari was the predecessor of Majapahit, the most powerful empire in Southeast Asia to date. It remains in the realm of hypothesis that this statue constitutes a commemorative effigy of Prajñāpārāmita, the Buddhist goddess of transcendental wisdom, and regarded by Dutch Orientalists as its most refined depiction dating from the East Javanese period (10th—14th centuries).[49] In popular belief, the statue is believed to depict Ken Dedes, a queen known for her transcendental beauty, and daughter of an important Mahayana Buddhism clergyman.[50]

Figure 3.3
Prajñāpārāmita statue, found in East Java, is believed to be the portrayal statue of Ken Dedes
Singosari period (1222-1292 AD)
National Museum of Indonesia
Source: http://www.wikiwand.com/id/Prajnaparamita

49 "Ken Dedes, the Javanese Princess," Singosari: the origins of Majapahit, accessed December 10, 2016, http://singosari.info/node/1047.

50 Museum Volkenkunde, "3.6 Prajnaparamita and Other Buddhist Deities," Singosari: the origins of Majapahit, 6, accessed March 27, 2015, http://singosari.info/en/node/1049.

The creation of *Ken Dedes* in 1975 is significant for its resonances with contemporaneous debates. The original thirteenth-century statue was at the time of Supangkat's creation, housed in the Museum Volkenkunde, in Leiden, the Netherlands. And during this time, Indonesian demands for its repatriation were intensifying. The statue was eventually returned in 1977 and is now housed in the National Museum of Indonesia, in Jakarta.[51] The postcolonial claim for its return transpires notions of nation building albeit perpetuating Orientalist discourses that value Singosari's art as classic.

As a student in art school who "read history books on the side,"[52] Supangkat aptly employed Ken Dedes's bust to manifest his discontent with a lack of postcolonial revisionism, as the historical figure's importance remained largely confined to her role as Ken Arok's wife, and not as the true enabler of Singosari. Supangkat was discontented with the program of Bandung's academic study that enforced the copy of old statues devoid of critical analysis. His work accuses the New Order's intrumentalisation of a "great past."[53]

Supangkat's analysis included the idea that as historically important, their marriage represents the coming together of Hindu and Buddhist Javanese sects—Ken Arok was a Shivaite Hindu and Ken Dedes was the daughter of a Mahayana Buddhist clergyman—that enabled Singosari. This union was fundamental for the subsequent formation of the powerful Majapahit kingdom. In today's tradition, Majapahit is considered the origin of modern Indonesia, having been elevated to national narrative and doctrine.

But history is partial. Historical records, most notably the *Pararaton* (also called *The Book of Kings*, written after 1489, well into the Majapahit period) kept Ken Dedes in relative obscurity. Half of *Pararaton* is dedicated to Ken Arok's life (first king of Singosari, between 1222 and 1227, in East Java) before marrying Ken Dedes, leaving her in relative obscurity. The partisan nature of the manuscript has also caught the attention of Indonesian artist Arahmaiani, who writes and investigates the subject. Arahmaiani affirms Ken Arok as a commoner who reached the highest status by killing Ken Dedes's husband and marrying her. In addition, she observes his current position as a national hero, while Ken Dedes, despite being labeled important, was transformed by history into a mere supporting character: she is described as a trophy, and as a special woman because whoever is born from her womb will be king. So, Arahmaiani concludes, "She is seen as equipment to produce leaders.... the woman is positioned as a sub-ordinate, unless she supports a man to make

51 Marieke Bloembergen and Martijn Eickhoff, "Exchange and Protection of Java's Antiquities: A Transnational Approach to the Problem of Heritage in Colonial Java," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 72, no. 4 (2013): 907.

52 Jim Supangkat, Ken Dedes's repatriation, interview by Leonor Veiga, Lisbon, September 8, 2017.

53 Supangkat, Ken Dedes.

him strong."[54] From these considerations Arahmaiani made a performance in 1996, *Handle Without Care* (see Chapter 4).

Supangkat's gesture claims her rightful status:

> In my vision, Ken Dedes was a powerful woman, because she was attractive... I made Ken Dedes to talk about the power of women. She was clever and an intellectual from a high caste. She started Singosari and in my view, she set Ken Arok to power. Then history wrote about him.... But it's unfair, how can a lower-ranked man become clever and important? It's to make an epic of the story... her importance is negated as much as his importance is highlighted... I saw the statue and thought she must have been a very intellectual woman. She was represented as a knowledge goddess.[55]

Supangkat's "interest stemmed from gender issues...[but] the work was analysed as a critic to traditionalism, which I didn't intend. [Prominent Indonesian art critic] Kusnadi said the work humiliated a 'great past'."[56] Initially, Supangkat's placing of the image of the deity atop an unrefined pedestal on which he drew a woman in a provocatively sexual pose was received as blasphemy. Yet, in retrospect, this gesture can be understood as embodying a double stance, addressing both local and international discourses. Locally speaking, the depiction of the suggestively posed woman underneath the image of Ken Dedes is an allusion to the *Pararaton*'s report, in which Dedes's glowing pelvis is said to have been revealed by a gust of wind.[57] In international terms, by placing the thirteenth-century style bust above the plinth adorned with an image of 1970s fashions (the existing work updated the fashion to the 1990s), Supangkat literally positioned the national above the international. Viewed in these ways, *Ken Dedes* demonstrates an unsubordinated position toward Westernisation, which is a common attitude within artists of the 1970s and equally of the Third Avant-Garde. So, the work performs the double dismantle that Kapur proposed: it defies local invented traditions (including national building discourses) while also refuses subservience to international models of art making.[58]

With this appropriation, Supangkat equally suggests that Indonesian women have been neglected from the construction of Indonesian society and its history. The effectiveness of his gesture resides in the usage of this national symbol; avant-gardism is brought by his rejection of an 'invented tradition'.

54 Arahmaiani, "Seeking the Traces of Prajnaparamita" (Yogyakarta, 2014).

55 Supangkat, Memory and Contemporaneity, interview by Leonor Veiga, Yogyakarta, January 14, 2010, 37.

56 The heated debate between Kusnadi and Sudarmadji (who authorized the exhibition in TIM) went on for some time in newspapers.

57 See Museum Volkenkunde, "3.6 Prajnaparamita and Other Buddhist Deities."

58 Kapur, "Dismantled Norms," 67.

The work refers to fetishisation of female gender, regarded as subservient, both intellectually and sexually: in line with the *Pararaton* script, Supangkat depicted Dedes's pelvis, which in the context of an Islamic society immersed in Javanese non-confrontation values was considered rude.

This fragmented artwork also constituted a critique toward the medium of sculpture. Within Indonesian academia, students learned from pre-existing models, handed down through the narrative of the excellence of classical culture, often uncritically.[59] The bust represents the sculpture of Hindu tradition still made on Bali, the bottom part projects one into the space of the museum and pop-art's comic strip formats. All these aspects clashed with the political context of Suharto's New Order (1966-1998), which revered the Majapahit age as a source of ideological continuity and legitimacy.[60] The conflict between the two halves makes the piece surprisingly dialectical; as opposing forces from the past and present show how a society in transition debates with itself the willingness to keep its own values and identity, and simultaneously embraces change. Suharto's regime continued its programmatic depolitization of life, while it homogenized the nation through Javanese constructs.[61]

Kusnadi saw *Ken Dedes* as a work that tarnished Indonesian history and visual culture and, considered the copy an act of cultural vandalism. Sudarmadji, in the artist's defense, asked "why would he mention copying and not look at it [the ready-made] as an art medium?," adding that the artist did not vandalize the original since it remained in the Netherlands. For Sudarmadji, Kusnadi's views were too old fashioned (Kusnadi was one of the juries impeding young artists' participation in the 1974 Jakarta Biennial that originated the Black December 1974 protest, and resulted in the GRSB formation). So, he said that albeit Kusnadi's extensive travelling to foreign countries to see art (including the second edition of the São Paulo Biennial), this didn't guarantee him an understanding of or a capacity to anticipate art's developments. For Sudarmadji, Supangkat's copy of the statue was not merely a copy, rather he reaffirmed its contemporaneousness: "that's the media, the language form of the now," criticizing his opponent, who was so fixated in a past that he could not understand media art disclosure.[62]

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59 The construction of Javanese classical culture as resulting from the Hindu-Buddhist period dates from the eighteenth century, when Stamford Raffles wrote his History of Java. This discourse would be continued by Dutch scholars, and recast as Southeast Asian art by the influential work of George Coèdes, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1968).

60 See Flores, "Ken Dedes," in *Beyond the Dutch: Indonesia, the Netherlands and the Visual Arts, from 1900 until Now*, ed. Meta Knol, Remco Raben, and Kitty Zijlmans (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers and Centraal Museum Utrecht, 2009), 146–47.

61 See Supangkat, "Two Forms of Indonesian Art," in *Modern Indonesian Art: Three Generations of Tradition and Change 1945-1990*, ed. Joseph Fischer (Jakarta: Panitia Pameran KIAS, 1990), 158–62; Supangkat, *The People in 70 Years*, 12–52.

62 Sudarmadji and Kusnadi, "Kusnadi Dan Sudarmadji Soal GSRBI," *Http://Hyphen.Web.Id*

Ken Dedes symbolizes artworks consciously made within an art discourse framework (in a Western sense) but produced with vernacular languages. And, as in most cases, these works use fragments from traditional sources originating in their societies. The work then performs the reprocess of several elements as it represents disjunctures of the time (which remain ongoing), where past and present coexist but whose totality is denied. The operation of montage articulates materials as the artist's idea. For the avant-garde artist, *material* is just material, it can be a crafted material, that the artist gives a new context. *Ken Dedes*'s bust served as material: it references historical facts, but it establishes new associations springing from the artist's combination. As Bürger defended, the avant-garde work is constituted by a series of adjoined fragments that ultimately will posit meaning. Thus, the avant-garde work is no longer an organic whole, but rather a combination of fragments.[63] In consequence, the avant-garde work does not hide its artificiality: it is clearly man-made and proclaims it. That is why montage is one of its founding principles, and installation becomes a much-utilized medium. Installation's elements, in every avant-garde artwork including *Ken Dedes*, have a high degree of autonomy. Here resides the different receptions it can lead to.

During the 1980s, these radical intentions as articulated in Supangkat's *Ken Dedes* were continued, though found in different forms and degrees of intensity. According to Supangkat, Indonesian painting became mainstream and highly valuable commodity. The art market experienced a boom, which led to the emergence of political art in the fringes of more commercially oriented activity.[64] Like artists in the Philippines or Malaysia, Indonesian artists started a searching for a societal identity.[65] The Third Avant-Garde that would boom in the 1990s was born from this evolvement.

3.2 The 1980s (until 1988): The Emergence of Non-Confrontational Activism

The 1980s in Southeast Asia were marked by three main aspects: first, the commencement of institutional steps toward a Southeast Asian artistic identity. This decade witnessed a crescendo of exhibitions, conventions, and publications on Southeast Asian art. One aspect that led to the effectiveness of these initiatives was the travelling nature of the events. To demonstrate preoccupation with equal representativeness, ASEAN nations rotated hosting the regional exhibitions. Despite the evident growth, these were

(blog), 1975.

63 See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, 13th ed., vol. 4, Theory and History of Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 82.

64 See Supangkat, "Art and Politics in Indonesia," in *Art and Social Change*, 218.

65 See Supangkat, *Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond*, 78.

still early days, and amateurism was evident. Masahiro Ushiroshoji, then Chief-curator of the Fukuoka Art Museum (FAM), recalls his experience when organizing the seminal Asian Art Show, Asian Artists Exhibition Part II, in 1980:

> [W]hen it came to organizing the exhibition, we had no alternative but to rely completely on the countries that were participating in it. We recklessly set out to organize an exhibition without having any background whatsoever and it was all we could do just to solve the problem of how to bring contemporary art from the 13 countries to Fukuoka. Hence we entrusted the selection of artists and works to the art museums, government agencies, and artists' associations in the participating countries. At first, most of our effort was exerted finding reliable partners in other countries to handle the task.[66]

To demonstrate the lack of references available to the Japanese curatorial teams—an aspect that renders the Fukuoka (Asian) Art Museum (FAAM) pioneers in discourse-making—, he defines the period 1979/80 until 1989, when the FAM showcased the 3rd Asia Art Show, as a "Journey without a guidebook."[67] To him, the 1989 edition marks the beginning of a genuine dialogue between the FAM and Asian nations.[68]

Second, the decade was significant for the commencement of new attitudes towards artistic practice, especially in its space of intervention. Social preoccupations penetrated artistic discourse and art became a locus of activism. Publicly, the force of the radical movements of the mid 1970s waned but, the contestation against depolitization remained. Artists concentrated their efforts in procuring a societal identity, more in touch with the reality of local peoples and the conditions they lived in.[69] This new inclination, affirms Supangkat, was felt among "the educated upper class society, who were

66 Masahiro Ushiroshoji, "The Birth of the Asian Art Museum: The Asian Collection and Two Decades of Asian Art Shows," in *Asian Art*, trans. Janet Goff (Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, 1999), 6.

67 Masahiro Ushiroshoji, "How to Look at Asian Art: From the Collections of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum," in *Asia Collection 50: From the Collection of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum*, trans. Martha J. McClintock (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, 2000), 4. The *Asian Art Show Part I* took place in 1979 and its focus resided on modern art from India, China and Japan. Its reception was so positive that the Fukuoka team set to promote a second encounter, this time turning the gaze to contemporary practices by young artists that had not been showcased. *Part II* amounted 13 countries, five of which from Southeast Asia (Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and the Philippines). By 1989, the Fukuoka Art Museum (FAM) had collected such a significant number of post-1980s contemporary art, that it was partitioned and the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum (FAAM) came to exist.

68 Masahiro Ushiroshoji, From FAM to FAAM and Beyond, interview by Leonor Veiga, trans. Fumio Iwamoto, Fukuoka, November 20, 2017.

69 See Supangkat, *Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond,* 78.

making an effort to get in touch with the grassroots, the traditional group of people and the almost 'uneducated' society."[70]

Third, installation art widely replaced modern sculpture (which was practically abandoned since the late 1970s).[71] While installation's first steps originate in the 1970s, in the early 1980s it was assessed as "'developmental art' [aimed at] stimulating public minds and at the same allowing the artists to question and investigate their work. [This would lead toward a] 'total community response'."[72] The new technology, says Flores, proved to be a key vehicle for mediation between audiences and the 'new' and 'now' that characterized the post-colonial spirit of Southeast Asian nations. It equally served "as an index to the local... taking bits of both the gritty and the cool, the authentic and the self-conscious, the 'anthropology of the far' and the modernity of the familiar through the performance of the ethnographic and the universal."[73]

3.2.1 Non-Confrontational Practices in Southeast Asia: Some Examples

As mentioned, during the 1980s, Southeast Asian artists resorted to installation art. Flores notes that this disposition relates to a sense of entitlement to 'Western' modes of making (albeit the recognition of installation as vernacular, and thus part of a "certain authenticity of local expression perceived from a postcolonial perspective."[74]) Equally, artists' "insistence on socially relevant art clearly indicated [their] desire to communicate, indeed to reconnect with their 'immediate community'."[75]

In Indonesia, where depolitization was growing under Suharto's rule, Harsono—one of the participants in the Black December uproar of 1974, who was expelled from the Yogyakartan academy after the Black December hearings[76]—continued to demonstrate a spirit of contestation and call for justice. He turned to the environment and particularly, its depletion. Harsono

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70 Supangkat, 80.

71 This observation results from the study I conducted at the FAAM in November 2017. By analyzing the museum's holdings, this trend became noticeable, and covers all Southeast Asian nations: the sculpture atop a pedestal which was paramount until the late 1970s practically disappears since the early 1980s.

72 Flores, "'Total Community Response,'" 25.

73 Flores, 26.

74 Flores, 25–26.

75 Kristina T. Subido, "New Art, Old Meanings," in *3rd Asian Art Show: Symbolic Visions in Contemporary Asian Life* (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Art Museum, 1989), 247.

76 Jim Supangkat, "FX Harsono," in The First Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, ed. Suzanne Grano (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery Publishing, 1993), 15; HG Masters, "This Is History: FX Harsono," *Art Asia Pacific*, no. 85 (October 2013): 118. After the expulsion, he moved to Jakarta, studied graphic design, and established his own company in 1984. Supangkat notes that aside his graphic career, Harsono remained involved in art by joining experimental exhibitions. Through them, his activist side transpired.

recalls, "From 1985 onward, I started to make works based on research."[77] He nurtured genuine preoccupation with grassroots people, which he envisioned as "the victims of development," leading him to play a double-role of artist-activist.[78] A relevant work from this period is *Plywood Fence and Our Forest* (1982) [Fig. 3.4], presented in the Parangtritis beach in the South of Yogyakarta.

Figure 3.4 and 3.4 A (detail)
FX Harsono
Plywood Fence and Our Forest
1982 | Text, screen print on plywood | 600 m in total length; each plank 120 x 15 cm
Source: Tyler Rollins Fine Art

The installation was compounded by numerous wooden planks on which he printed statistics of environmental devastation: in one of the planks it can be read "every minute 13.6 hectares of world's tropical forest are destroyed."[79] Amanda Katherine Rath notes that the artists called these expressions under the term *Seni Kontekstual* (Contextual Art), a disposition that "should be able to bring across awareness about the plight of society and their suffering through artistic means."[80] One of its defining aspects, which distinguishes contextual art from Euro-American conceptualism, is the employment of local materials imbued with culturally specific meanings. Singaporean curator Seng Yu Jin notes: "Dematerialization of art did not occur in Seni Kontekstual,"[81] because the result is obtained largely through the agency of these (local) materials. This process of

77 Masters, "This Is History," 119.
78 Wiyanto, *Re:Petition/Position*, 98–99.
79 Wiyanto, 99.
80 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*, 4.
81 Seng Yu Jin, "Exposing the Unseen: Strategies of Conceptualism in Indonesian Art,"

recontextualizing materials borders Dada experiments, while at the same time, it differs from it through the novelty of local ingredients. This triad of aspects, a research-approach method; an attention to contextual conditions; and the role of artist-activist, had lasting effects in Harsono's career, and it could be said that all the experiments of these formative years are felt in his current practice.

In 1987-8, the work of Heri Dono (b. 1960, Jakarta) around Indonesian *wayang* surged. His attempts, alongside with those of Anusapati (b. 1957, Surakarta), focused on 'making simple', i.e. producing a critical discourse around the notion of 'low art'. The discourse these two artists (among others) elicited attempted to demystify the local situation of neglect that traditional arts faced by pointing to the fact "that the actual traditional culture has been marginalized, not only by high art, or Western art, modern art and international art, but also by the (locally formed) concept of 'traditional culture' itself."[82]

Figure 3.5
Heri Dono
Wayang Legenda
1988 | Performance | 2 screens, 2 *dalangs*, 60 unique puppets
Source: Tyler Rollins Fine Art

In 1987-8, Dono conceived his seminal work *Wayang Legenda* [Fig. 3.5]. Here, he represented the country's islands as puppets to allude to the 'Indonesianization/ Javanization' that Suharto's government had invested so heavily in. Looking at the work through the lens of *wayang* (as an art form), Dono broke several rules:

in *Re:Petition/Position*, 207. Seng follows German-born Uruguayan artist and academic Luis Camnitzer's conception of non-Western conceptual art. He proposes that Latin American conceptual art did not eliminate the object as Euro-American conceptual art did, but instead focuses on the significance of local and regional contexts while challenging a seamless global history of art as a singular master narrative. Yu Jin, 203.

82 Supangkat, *Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond*, 84.

1. The full set of sixty *wayang* characters he created were larger and rougher than the traditional ones (the first aspect being a result of his guru Sukasman, with whom he established a give-and-take relationship[83] and the second his own aesthetics which can be seen as a sign of rebellion); 2. It contained non-traditional and cheap materials such as cardboard and bamboo; 3. Some of the characters came from a lower stratus of society; 4. The tale he appropriated (and gave a new course) is Batak, from Sumatra; and 5. The performance was acted by two young dalangs from Yogyakarta.[84] All these elements make *Wayang Legenda* significant, leading Dutch art historian Helena Spanjaard to consider it a key-work that "contain[s] the essence of a new direction in the artist's career."[85] In fact, Dono's work has not only influenced his career path, but has served as motor for the expression of many other Indonesian artists.

Also in the 1980s, a new realism emerged as one of the dominant forces within Indonesian painting. Under the auspices of the government who saw in these expressions a display of nationalism, the Indonesian art world experienced a boom of 'beautiful paintings' which "continued the search for a national identity."[86] This art was successfully being sold in auction sales. But, at the same time, a counter tendency emerged, photorealistic paintings most notably by artist Dede Eri Supria (b. Jakarta, 1956). His genre has been described as surrealist, however Australian art historian Brita Miklouho Maklai takes it further and considers that Supria "uses some of the techniques of surrealism... to dismantle the constructions of Indonesian culture and offer a new perception of society."[87]

As Indonesian alternative practices were mostly directed toward the wellbeing of society and aimed at improving human life, in occupied Timor-Leste, a similar tendency was taking place. Deriving from strict isolation, art practice in the area was almost confined to political graffiti and murals which started appearing in the derelict walls and street facades of Dili, Baucau, Suai and Lospalos. This "phenomenon of critical expression" remained restricted until self-determination in 1999, but contributed to the construction of a critical self that would bear fruits after independence in 2002.[88]

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83 Christine E. Cocca, Post-wayang, unpublished interview by Leonor Veiga, Lisbon, November 2, 2016.

84 Amanda Katherine Rath, "Shadow Stories: Wayang in the Work of Heri Dono," *Prince Claus Fund Journal The Future is Handmade: The Survival and Innovation of Crafts*, no. 10 (2003): 48; Helena Spanjaard, "Angels and Demons: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly," in *The Dono Code,* ed. Helena Spanjaard and Wouter Welling (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2009), 17–18.

85 Spanjaard, "Angels and Demons," 17.

86 Supangkat, "Art and Politics in Indonesia," 222.

87 Brita L. Miklouho-Maklai, *Exposing Society's Wounds: Some Aspects of Contemporary Indonesian Art since 1966* (Adelaide: The Flinders University of South Australia, 1991), 85.

88 Joanna Barrkman and Abílio Conceição Silva, "A Contemporary Art Movement Timor-Leste," in *From the Hands of Our Ancestors*, ed. Joanna Barrkman (Darwin: Museum and Art

In Thailand, Poshyananda observes, the 1980s saw the emergence of postmodern practices. He acknowledges that if the postmodern condition was being experienced by Thai society, it was being done through a transformation of traditions.[89] Yet, he notes that most Thai artists who created artworks invoking traditional Thai scenes did it without a satirical impulse. In this respect, Montien Boonma (1953-2000) can be considered one of the first Third Avant-garde artists of Thailand. His international recognition began in the 1980s, when he exhibited several installation works fusing aspects of Thai Theravada Buddhism with conceptual sensibilities. Poshyananda states: "Boonma's use of Thai consciousness in shaping his installations serves the need for the construction of national imaginaries in the context of international events, like biennials and triennials."[90]

In 1987, Piyadasa conceived of a series of Pop-like (or Pop-inspired) works in which the subjects of attention were the ethnic Malay-Chinese minority people of Malaysia [Fig. 3.6]. Historically knowns as Peranakans, these multi-ethnic communities are spread in the entire region of Southeast Asia, most notably in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. What strikes the observer is the combination of century-old imagery with the international aesthetics of American artist Andy Warhol's colored prints. Piyadasa comes from a minority group—the Sinhalese who originate in Sri Lanka and are mostly Theravada Buddhists—in multiracial, Muslim Malay majority Malaysia. So *Baba Family* (1987) evidences his concerns of assimilation, references his own experience of marginalization, and calls for full integration of minorities. In a 2004 interview with Danish academic Malene Grøndhal at the University of Malaya he said:

> I am still an outsider... In a bus stop most people will look and think "Ah, he is an Indian from India", you know?... I think the richness of Malaysia is its truly Asian flavor... We are rare... You have Chinese newspapers, you have Tamil newspapers, you have Malay newspapers... You open the radio in the evening and there is news in Tamil, there is news in Chinese, in Malay... Which other country has that?... [That is why] I approach my art not as [means for] self-expression; I approach my art more as a sociologist.[91]

Gallery Northern Territory, 2008). Barrkman says: "these expressions echo the nation's rock art heritage, which was similarly painted on walls."

89 Apinan Poshyananda, "Modern Art in Thailand in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries" (Cornell University Press, 1990), 576–77.

90 Apinan Poshyananda, "Contemporary Thai Art: Nationalism and Sexuality à La Thai," in *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions*, ed. Apinan Poshyananda (New York: Asia Society, 1996), 108.

91 Redza Piyadasa, *Malaysian Notes by Redza Piyadasa*, interview by Malena Grøndhal, December 12, 2004, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=glFLhpVka5I.

His work must be contextualized as a response to "the rise of a new Malay ethnic supremacy [that] led to a 'movement among Malay artists that explored the question of cultural identity'."[92]

Figure 3.6
Redza Piyadasa
Baba Family
1987 | Photocopy on colored paper | 101.3 x 75.8 cm
Collection of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum | Image courtesy of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum

The 1980s in the Philippines were marked by the continuation of Marco's rule, one in which censorship went hand-in-hand with human rights violations resulting from the Martial Law years (1972-81). Born out of the assassination of Benigno Aquino Jr. in 1983, the Concerned Artists of the Philippines (CAP)—a broad coalition of filmmakers, visual artists, writers, musicians, film and theater actors and cultural workers—was formed in Manila. The group's founder filmmaker Lino Brocka, a social activist who was "often vocal against censorship and other restrictions,"[93] went to Bacolod City (capital of Negros

92 Kataoka Mami, "Sunshowers in Southeast Asia: A Premise for an Exhibition," in *Sunshower: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now* (Tokyo: Mori Art Museum, 2017), 282.

93 John A. Lent, "Southeast Asian Independent Cinema: Independent of What?," in *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema: Essays, Documents, Interviews*, ed. Tilman Baumgärtel (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 13.

Occidental[94]) where he spoke to the local artist community.[95] Bacolod artists decided to establish the delegation of CAP-Negros. The two groups shared the same manifesto but, their membership differed and each group reflected the quests of its local of insertion.

In the late years of the Power Revolution (1983-1986), several Bacolod artists, feeling uncomfortable with what they perceived as propaganda for the National Democratic Front, broke away from CAP-Negros and formed the Black Artists in Asia (BAA). Although the core membership of the BAA came from the CAP-Negros, these artists aimed to establish their own legitimacy as a visual arts organization with its own cultural, social, and political agenda. In retrospect, CAP-artist Norberto Roldan (b. 1953, Roxas City) observes:

> After twenty-five years, I can say that we [CAP-Negros] served the propaganda machine of the National Democratic Movement. When Cory Aquino rose to power in 1985, in 1986 the Black Artists in Asia was formed as a way out of the Concerned Artists and be recognized. We are historically grounded as a response to history... The nomenclature BBA is a reference to the island, it is a metaphor: people know there are no Blacks in Asia! We wanted to acknowledge the initial inhabitants of Negros. The Spanish decided to call the island that way—Negrito, which alludes to small people of dark skin. We wanted to make them a tribute.[96]

In 1980, Roldan moved with his wife at the time to Bacolod. Like his birth-island of Panay, Negros is part of the region of Visayas, the entry point of the Spanish colonizers in the sixteenth-century. As the husband of a six-acre sugar-farm owner, during his seven-year stay Roldan resorted to academic life. He admits his personal involvement with the century-old sugar industry developed by the Spanish changed him: "When I came to Bacolod, I was politically naïve. No activist blood in my veins. But slowly I was politicized."[97] What he found was an ingrained feudal system, because "for the ones working in the sugar farms, life never changed."[98] In 1989, with his marriage nearing the end, Roldan resorted to self-imposed exile in Sydney.

Between 1986-92, Roldan conceived a series of twelve textile-based

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94 The Island of Negros is part of the region of Visayas, in Central Philippines. Visayas is known for its cultural traditions, customs and local languages and compounded by Panay, Negros, Cebu, Bohol, Leyte and Samar. The region's history is marked by a long narrative of (colonial) exploitation that left strong marks on its peoples and lands.

95 Roldan, Langgoni Nine.

96 Roldan.

97 Dodo Dayao, "Past Lives, Lost Time and Future Rituals," *Rogue Magazine*, July 2017, http://rogue.ph/lost-time-future-rituals-journey-artist-peewee-roldan/.

98 Roldan, Langgoni Nine.

works in which the homage to the island of Negros is intertwined with local politics. First exhibited in Negros in 1986, the series was showcased in Roldan's first international solo show, Images of the Continuing Struggle, in Artspace Sydney, in 1989. The Japanese curator Tani Arata observes: "Near the end of my research in the Philippines, I discovered a work by Norberto Roldan... I came across a textile collage at the Second ASEAN Travelling Exhibition of Painting and Photography."[99] In November 2017, I saw *Langgoni Nine* (1989) [Fig. 3.9] in the FAAM. The work captured me for its silence and loudness.

Figure 3.7
Norberto Roldan
Langgoni Nine
1989 | Textile | 157.5 x 97.5 cm
Collection of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum | Image Courtesy of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum

Langgoni Nine reports a tragic episode that took place in Southern Negros on May 14, 1984. These were Marcos's last years; demonstrations against the "absolute power that Marcos would secure upon the declaration of Martial Law in 1972" were recurrently smashed with assassinations.[100] The

99 Arata Tani, "Norberto Roldan," in *New Art from Southeast Asia 1992*, ed. Yasuko Furuichi (Tokyo: The Japan Foundation, 1992), 68.

100 Flores, "'Total Community Response,'" 20. It is estimated that 75.000 people died between 1972 and 1985. History remembers the Escalante Massacre of September 20 1985 in Negros, when protesters sought to demonstrate against the 13th anniversary of the Martial Law,

Langgoni massacre is one such incident. Mistaken as communists, ten young men playing basketball were abducted by the army, tortured for days, their bodies were herded in a military truck and un-loaded in the town's public plaza. "Luckily, one man was able to escape and tell the whole story," he adds.[101] The piece aptly critiques state-sponsored violence under the martial law. His medium of choice, *patadyong* textiles, a traditional woven textile used by women in the Visayas region of the Philippines, also features in the dark history of Negros. Nicholas Loney, an English trader who settled in Iloio in 1851, became British Vice Consul in 1856, and is remembered as the father of sugar industry in the region (it would become the second wealthiest of the country after Manilla), is equally remembered as responsible for the wrecking of the local textile industry.[102] Loney exported sugar to Europe and imported cheap British cloth from Manchester, in England, to the islands of Negros and Panay. The availability of a cheaper alternative affected local demands for patadyong textiles and eventually slowed down their production. *Patadyong* textiles are multi-purpose garments that serve covering, ritual practices, and celebratory purposes. Today, the local fabrication of *patadyong*—ready-made material used in *Langgoni Nine*—remains confined to small communities and is a commercially unviable product.[103]

Roldan's gesture not only serves as reminder to the decline of the weaving industry in Visayas, it constitutes a deliberate political gesture that aims to stimulate revisionism. He concedes that his art was deeply affected by these formative years, thus remaining active as an organizer for his community (the Green Papaya Art Projects in Manilla is one of his long-lasting initiatives) and as an artist. Roldan's recognition as a leading Southeast Asian artist is exemplified by his frequent presence in historical shows, including the seminal *New Art from Southeast Asia* at the FAM in 1992, Singapore based Iola Lenzi's acclaimed *Negotiating Home, History and Nation: Two Decades of Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1981-2010* (2011), June Yap's *No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia*, in Singapore and New York (2014) and *Sunshower: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now*, in Tokyo and Fukuoka (2017). His practice continues the BAA 1993 manifesto, which announced artist's participatory role: "We hold that artists are citizens and must concern themselves not only with their art but also with the issues and problems confronting the country.

escalated in violence and thirty were killed. See Carla N. Canet, "Martial Law Victims to Stage Protest vs Marcos Rule," *SunStar Bacolod*, September 15, 2016, sec. Local News, http://www.sunstar.com.ph/bacolod/local-news/2016/09/15/martial-law-victims-stage-protest-vs-marcos-rule-497799.

101 Roldan, Langgoni Nine.

102 Mark Segador, "Nicholas Loney, Lonely and Forgotten," *Iloilo I Love*, 2011, http://iloiloilove.com/nicholas-loney-lonely-forgotten/.

103 Roldan, Langgoni Nine.

We stand for freedom of expression and oppose all acts tending to abridge that freedom..."[104]

3.3 Institutional Steps in the Asia-Pacific Region

As mentioned, the 1980s were a time in which institutional steps in the form of establishing a greater network for the exposure of regional artists took place. This is evidenced not only by the increasing number of events, but equally for the greater number of publications and conference gatherings in which Southeast Asian art was discussed.

In this period, Japan recognized its responsibility as a promoter of culture and thus decided to host international exhibitions. Its growing interest in Asia results from its long-standing experience as an international player and simultaneously the understanding that it "can no longer depend its sense of values on the adoration of the West... We can no longer ignore the new art of China and Southeast Asia, countries with high economic growth."[105] The *Asian Art Show* (AAS), organized in 1979 by the Fukuoka Art Museum (FAM) to mark its birth, is born out of this recognition. The *Asian Art Show, Part II: Contemporary Asian Art Show* that took place in 1980, would be "the first ever attempt to at a global level to offer a comprehensive introduction to contemporary art in the Asian region... of unprecedented scale featuring nearly 500 participating artists from 13 countries from Pakistan eastwards, including Japan."[106] Five Southeast Asian countries were featured: Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia. The success of these two editions dictated the museum's future, leading to the show's recurrence every five years. Titled generally Asian Art Show, each subsequent edition was given a main theme. The 1980 AAS was accompanied by a symposium entitled "What must be done for the future of Asian tradition and art which have been changed under the influence of Western art?" As Mr. Michiaki Kawakita noted, in Japan modernization coexisted with Japanese traditional elements and "in this way, traditional things were allowed to be influenced by the new and new things swallowed nuances from tradition."[107] During the symposium, Piyadasa noted that Malaysian artists of all ethnicities had, at least since the 1930s, started searching for a Malaysian identity through traditional art forms. Mostly beginning in watercolor, these works would evolve into modern forms after 1945. And as many artists went overseas to study, the 1960s and

104 Roldan, "Norberto Roldan," in *New Art from Southeast Asia 1992*, 125.

105 Raiji Kuroda, "Exhibiting Art Shows for Asians, by Asians, and Some Associated Problems" (INIVA Symposium: A New Internationalism, London, 1994).

106 Ushiroshoji, "The Birth of the Asian Art Museum," 4.

107 Michiaki Kawakita, "Keynote Speech," in *Asian Artists Exhibition Part II: The Contemporary Asian Art Show* (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Art Museum, 1980), 11.

1970s witnessed a growing interest in cultural forms, especially in the practice of artists who had studied in Paris, London and New York. To Piyadasa, this was a symptom that Malaysian artists "had decided to go into modern art with problems peculiar to the country."[108] Yet, he admitted that the process was unfinished and thus, criticism and theorization had to continue and be divulged. He noted that the ignorance that (Southeast) Asian artists had of their counterparts' practice was problematic, thus the Fukuoka Art museum "historic move" was of extreme value.[109]

The Japanese attention to the problem of tradition would be formally embodied in the *2nd AAS*, in 1985. Held under the theme 'Cultural Identities in Asian Art', the exhibition focused on artists actively engaged with protecting existing cultural identities.[110] According to Soejima Mikio, Acting Director of the FAM at the time, the show's focus was an inheritance of the of the 1973 resolution passed in Bulgaria at the 7th Congress of the International Association of Art (IAA), a UNESCO organization which "would put into effect all the projects aimed at encouraging protection of cultural identity possessed by each country." He adds: "The fact that such statement sprouted from a system composed of artists alone calls for much attention," because it signifies that artists "bravely stood up to give visual expression to their traditions and philosophy."[111]

The *AAS*(s) enabled the creation of a network of specialists inside and outside Japan that mutually supported each other. But, this working method of 'collaborative curatorship' came with its own limitations: "we were rather passive in curation," admits Raiji Kuroda, Curator of the FAM.[112] This passivity resulted partly from local governments' interference in the selection process, as "Even if one found an excellent curator he/she had to be acceptable to the government of the country."[113] In addition, recognizes Ushiroshoji, the collaborative also provoked generational conflicts between curators since the older generation focused on the possibility of encounter, while younger curators were more concerned with the show's overall quality.[114] As a result, for the 1989 edition of the AAS, the FAM adopted new curatorial strategies (see Chapter 4).

Meanwhile, since 1981, major ASEAN cities received displays of Southeast

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108 Piyadasa, "Malaysia," in *Asian Artists Exhibition Part II*, 20.

109 Piyadasa, 21.

110 *Outline of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum* (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, 1999), 23.

111 Mikio Soejima, "Cultural Identities in Asian Art," in *2nd Asian Art Show*, Fukuoka (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Art Museum, 1985), 9.

112 Kuroda, "Exhibiting Art Shows for Asians."

113 Kuroda, "Practice of Exhibitions in Global Society for Asians, by Asians and Some Associated Problems," in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, ed. Jean Fisher (London: Kala Press, 1994), 145.

114 Ushiroshoji, FAAM and Beyond.

Asian art.[115] Travelling exhibitions of photography, sculpture, painting, and other media were increasingly present in the founding ASEAN countries. In 1987, the *Artists Regional Exchange* (ARX) was founded in Perth, Australia. The ARX was an extremely relevant step toward the expansion of Third Avant-garde practices, as it created contacts between artists from Southeast Asia and Australia. It equally contributed to the establishment of the Asia-Pacific Triennial in Queensland, Australia, in 1992. The ARX is especially significant for artists; Harsono acknowledges his participation in ARX3 in 1992 as a step into an increasing international exposure. In this show, he showcased the installation *Power and the Oppressed*, probably his first work revolving around the theme of power through ready-made materials pertaining to Javanese culture.

In 1988, after his return from London in 1986, Singaporean artist Tang Da Wu (b. 1943, Singapore) established the The Artists Village (TAV). The initiative lasted only fourteen months in its physical installations at Lorong Gambas. In March 1990, the government claimed the building for military use. As observed by Singaporean artist and the country's most reputed art archivist,[116] Nguang How Koh's (b. 1963, Singapore), from this moment the TAV became a nomadic initiative and in 1992, it became an Art Community. Despite its short-lived existence, the TAV is regarded today as a "hotbed of activity in Singapore's art history."[117] Koh's significant number of contributions to TAV's archive, including correspondence and invitations, are today objects of scholarly and curatorial scrutiny, having been showcased in the travelling *Sunshower* (2017).

In Indonesia, the opening of the Cemeti Art Gallery in Yogyakarta in 1988 is a significant event both for the country and the region. Cemeti positioned itself as a space devoted to expose and promote collective understanding on alternative art (including Third Avant-garde gestures). At the time of its foundation, it constituted a response by Dutch artist Mella Jaarsma and her Indonesian husband Nindityo Adipurnomo to the increasing marginalization of non-commercial art. In Indonesia, the painting art boom was confined to commercially-oriented galleries, solely attentive to decorative and formalistic painting and Indonesian masters. Cemeti established a new trend in Indonesia: it "dared to present works in a different vein from mainstream tendencies of the time (the decorative and the Surrealist)."[118] As conceptually-oriented art remained unrepresented and underground, Cemeti accommodated and

115 See Simon Soon, "Maps of the Sea," Search: Southeast Asian Art Resource Channel, accessed April 10, 2013, http://search-art.asia/attachments/files/MAPoftheSEA.pdf.

116 See "Koh Nguang How: Singapore's One-Man Museum," *BBC News Asia*, January 28, 2017, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-38754054.

117 See Vera Mey, "Koh Nguang How in Collaboration with Lim Shengen," in *Sunshower*, 92.

118 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), 74.

represented it, while giving opportunities to young artists. This gallery inspired the birth of similar projects in Jakarta and in Bandung during the 1990s—an aspect that captured Roldan's attention when he founded the BAA.[119] Nevertheless, its most important contribution for Indonesian art has been the effectiveness with which it actively established a network with artists and institutions overseas. Rapidly, Jaarsma and Adipurnomo became gatekeepers of Indonesian contemporary art abroad, and Cemeti became the institution that overseas curators contacted when in search for Indonesian contemporary expressions.[120]

The results of the 1980s were more forcefully felt in the 1990s, the fundamental decade of the Third Avant-garde. Especially since the hinge year of 1989—the year of the Third Biennial of Havana, *Tradition and Contemporaneity*, the all-globe show *Magiciens de la Terre* in the Pompidou Center in Paris, and the first postcolonial show, *The Other Story* in the Hayward Gallery in London—international attention toward 'non-Western' art became prominent but equally a site of political correctness. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the protests of Tiananmen in Beijing, and events such as the fatwa issued against Salman Rushdie because of his publication *The Satanic Verses*, marked the beginning of a new decade, one in which openness and tensions went together. It is in this decade that international exposure for Southeast Asian artists became a definite reality, especially through the introduction of a new player: the United States.

3.4 Conclusions

The origins of the Third Avant-garde can be traced to the mid-1970s, when student protests emerged to face the indoctrination that regional artists were subjected to. With an iconoclastic and unsubordinated attitude, young artists from the region defied the establishment through exhibitions and demonstrations. More importantly, through written statements, they declared their intention: the need for a new route for Southeast Asian art. As Sabapathy observes, "The tone in all of these manifestations was militant and combative; the stance was that of activists."[121]

Through the diminishment of their force, and after the dismantlement of these groups, the activist tone remained throughout the 1980s. In this decade, while artists went underground and started non-confrontational

119 Roldan remarks: "I was looking at models like Indonesia where distinct dynamics in the art scene are recognized not only in Jakarta but also in Bandung, Yogyakarta and even in Bali." See Roldan, Interview Questions for Norberto Roldan, interview by Gina Jocson, March 30, 2012.

120 It is telling that English curator Shaheen Merali referred this institution to me in 2006, before my first trip to Indonesia.

121 Sabapathy, "Intersecting Histories," 44.

practices imbued with messages of discontent, the local art system remained attentive to the needs of a capitalistic market which consumed paintings showing no tendency toward a critical position. As a result, various artists groups were formed and, alternative spaces such as Cemeti opened their doors. In the process, Southeast Asian artists were increasingly exhibiting abroad, especially through annual exposés organized by the ASEAN and the FAM. This, in turn, allowed them to establish a network, exchange ideas, and created a space of familiarity. During the 1990s, Southeast Asian artists would increasingly meet within important events organized in Japan, Australia, and in the emerging biennials of the region.

The avant-garde of the 1970s proposed to look at indigenous manifestations. Yet, not many of these works are known to me. So, I propose Ken Dedes as the first Southeast Asian Third Avant-garde manifestation because, not only does it constitute a cornerstone for the formation of a conscience for the future Third avant-garde discourse in Indonesia, but it equally talks about the tradition of Southeast Asian history which regards the Hindu era as the region's most important expression of magnificence. The fact that Supangkat adjoined to a symbol of classic culture a body of a provocative contemporary woman, denotes the transitional states that Southeast Asian societies found themselves amidst increasing modernization. We can see here that the work does not solely talk about Indonesian reality and Southeast Asian history, it equally proposes that in a Southeast Asian context the new emerges in the middle of ancient symbols and the now is expressed through them—and this is one aspect that the Third Avant-garde aptly demonstrates.

The 1980s can be proposed as an interstitial decade from two aspects: first, due to lack of knowledge, the FAM promoted the initial attempts of 'collaborative curating'. This working method was characterized for relying on local expertise consecrated by local authorities. The system would be questioned after the *2nd AAS* in 1985 and eventually abandoned in 1989, when the third edition took place. Second, during the 1980s, artists turned toward social preoccupations. Immersed under dictatorial regimes, they resorted to non-confrontational practices, in which local life and traditional arts gained prominence. Yet, the effectiveness of Third Avant-garde gestures only reaches maturity during the 1990s, when practice and overseas exhibitions supplied artists with an effectual visibility.