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

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The Boom of the Third Avant-garde: (1990s)

The 1990s, witnessed the old world order change into a decentralized reality. So, I consider this time a twelve-year period as following the events of 1989, and the feeling of proximity ended abruptly in 2001 with the 9/11 attacks. This suggestion may be regarded as Western-centric, but I argue that 1989 was eventful in other parts of the world, and that it was a hinge year for art worldwide. 2001 serves as a temporal indicator for a new Southeast Asian reality that starts in 2002 (see Chapter 5). If the Third Avant-garde constituted a complete discourse—which I maintain it was, due to its unorthodoxy, deferred in art historical terms—during this decade, it emerged as a 'boom'.

The 1990s were a crucial decade. While attempting to "catch up" with a developed West, Asian cultures strove to preserve their cultural heritage, and in most cases resorted to standards of cultural purity that resulted in "invented traditions".[1] Kapur's call for a double dismantle was effectively met. During this time, artistic and curatorial practices converged, making this tendency known to the world. While artists negotiated their local cultural sensibilities and personal histories by means of investing in the traditions that allowed them a contributing voice, curators showcased these works in real time, especially in international events. By doing so, they fostered new frameworks to promote dialogue with (inter)national audiences. Immersed in a cycle of constant growth, and engaging with various communities worldwide, Southeast Asian artists integrated art and culture in a single artwork, and curators extended their gesture through exhibitions. But the process proved tortuous and Third Avant-garde practices were largely met with mixed interpretations. In addition, Third Avant-garde gestures proved confusing also because of the absence of written manifestos. Instead of the communal voices that characterized the 1970s and 1980s, the Third Avant-garde was effectuated by individual artists and curators who supported their work.

The decade equally witnessed the emergence of several important exhibitions, such as the Asia Pacific Triennial of Brisbane, in Australia (since 1993) and *Traditions/Tensions*, at the Asia Society of New York, in 1996. The two exhibitions focused on the relation between tradition and the contemporary, but they conveyed contrasting readings of what tradition meant in early globalization days. After Traditions/Tensions, the theme ceased to be topical.

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1 Apinan Poshyananda, "Roaring Tigers, Desperate Dragons in Transition," in *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions*, ed. Apinan Poshyananda (New York: Asia Society, 1996), 26–27.

4.1 The 1990s (1989-2001): An Avant-garde Without a Manifesto

During the 1990s, Third Avant-garde practices appeared in full force in Southeast Asia and abroad. The radical gestures tested in the mid-1970s were continued throughout the 1980s by means of non-confrontational gestures which reflected a unprecedented social engagement. As such, the tone remained activist, but artists' concerns changed toward the betterment of the life of local communities. Dono's *wayang* works aptly show signs of this tendency. Meanwhile, painting had abandoned the universalism of modern art and turned postmodern by means of quoting fragments of tradition: artists started employing traditional elements, often uncritically.

In the 1990s, tradition was a topical element of discussion, and addressed within several important curatorial practices. The interest in discussing a polemical category such as tradition was stimulated by Jean-Hubert Martin's 1989 show *Magiciens de la Terre*, in Paris. The curator included all the world's regions in the show, and in the catalogue each country was placed as its own center, but as critics remarked: "Works that attempted to conflate various traditions—Indian and European for instance—were not included; only works that arose directly from their own tradition, without incorporation of external elements were shown... This had the effect of reconstructing or reinforcing old boundaries that are now dissolving."[2] Writing in 1996, Thomas McEvilley's remark of the curator's outlook toward the purity of each tradition was enforced by the fact that *Magiciens* and other exhibitions appointed Western curators that "had little familiarity with the traditions involved".[3] In 2013, Kapur noted that "*Magiciens* was based on an (ethnographic) anachronism...[which] set up a binary of the *indigenous* and the *avant-garde*... between *individual agency* (of northern artists) and *timeless consanguinity* (of artists from the south)"[4] and had largely dismissed what was then designated as 'hybrids'. Their remarks have, in my opinion, been addressed by Third Avant-garde artists more forcefully throughout the 1990s, when large-scale international shows took place in the West, especially Australia, the US and in (Southeast) Asia. Also in 1989, the Third Havana Biennial, *Tradition and Contemporaneity,* addressed the urgency of this connection (in reality, a tension) in the context of the Third World to demonstrate that "Our contemporary art is fought for within this dialectical relationship."[5] The Havana Biennial was the first

2 Thomas McEvilley, "Exhibition Strategies in the Postcolonial Era," in *Traditions/ Tensions*, 57.

3 McEvilley, 57.

4 Geeta Kapur, "Curating in Heterogeneous Worlds," in *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present*, ed. Alexandre Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson (Malden, MA: Willey-Blackwell, 2013), 178.

5 Luis Camnitzer, "The Third Havana Biennial," in *Making Art Global (Part 1): The Third*

biennial forthrightly dedicated to radical 'Third World' art (which Gerardo Mosquera notes was part of Cuban tradition since the early twentieth century). This initiated the display of contemporary art from the global south: "Thus the Bienal created a new space, acting as a gigantic 'Salon des Refuses' that involved most of the world, born from a spirit of action."[6] When it began in 1984, the Havana Biennale's first edition only displayed Latin American Art. It was in 1986 that its anti-imperialistic rhetoric was further realized by including artists from Africa and Asia, a move that paved the way for the presentation of the subaltern. Havana's most renowned edition is the third: in 1989 it was decided to include artists with 'Third World' backgrounds residing in Europe and North America. In so doing, the danger of westernizing the biennale was evident, but it had a positive effect on opening up the discourse towards minorities' art who would largely become responsible for the emergence of multiculturalism. These advancements made Kapur say: "To this day, all Southern biennials owe a debt to Havana for advancing the potential of a decentralized art world; for proposing that alternative avant-gardes do not need to affix a 'neo' to gain acceptance in the canon."[7]

It is within this context of contrasting curatorial strategies with the same aim—to open the discourse to 'non-Western' art—that Southeast Asian Third Avant-garde practices emerge in the 1990s through some important exhibitions in the Asia-Pacific region. The Asia Pacific Triennial (APT) that opened in Brisbane, Australia, in 1993 is a case in point. The first three editions curated by Australian art historian Caroline Turner functioned as a trilogy that aimed at connecting Australians with Asia.[8] Australian curators partnered with the Fukuoka Art Museum, a museum which had advanced contemporary art from Asia since 1979.[9] Turner mentions that the first edition, *Tradition and Change*, referred to tradition in a broad sense but, the published collection of essays with the same title established it as the exhibition's concept. Advised by Malaysian artist Redza Piadasa of the need to engage local expertise to countermand flawed curatorial practices by Western curators, the Australian team followed the procedures tested by the FAM's teams and worked collaboratively with local advisors, such as Supangkat and Sanento Yuliman from Indonesia, and Apinan Poshyananda from Thailand.[10] These exhibitions

Havana Biennial 1989, ed. Rachel Weiss (London: Afterall Books, 2011), 215.

6 Gerardo Mosquera, "The Third Bienal de La Habana in Its Global and Local Contexts," in *Making Art Global*, 74.

7 Kapur, "Curating in Heterogeneous Worlds," 181.

8 The trilogy was compounded by *Tradition and Change* (1993); *Present Encounters* (1996) and *Beyond the Future* (1999).

9 The first exhibition including Southeast Asia countries was *Asian Art Show Part II: Contemporary Asian Art Show*, in 1980.

10 Caroline Turner, Asia-Pacific Triennial, unpublished interview by Leonor Veiga, Canberra, July 5, 2017.

were revelatory of Southeast Asian practices, but their viewing in foreign contexts prevented Third Avant-garde works from being fully comprehended. In retrospect, Australian art historian Pat Hoffie observes that the first three editions of APT created a "discursive space within an imprecisely defined region where two impulses—that of tradition and of change—collided and morphed."[11] This in turn, resulted in an uncritical reading of traditions, which relegated their use to the realm of "memory, history and place," whereas change was perceived as associated with the "here and now."[12] With this remark, Hoffie recalls McEvilley's observation that oftentimes the artist's "aim is invalidated or countermanded by the additional aiming that a curator gives the work in exhibiting it."[13] Because curators were unfamiliar with contexts of production, the traditional appeared to foreign audiences (curators included) as a mere sign of identity and provenance. Traditions' cultural agency remained undetected.

In my opinion, the incomplete reading by curators of the three editions of APT—which included the use of materials and themes that were indigenous to their regions—not only prevented them from identifying the critical and potential of traditions, it equally deferred the definition of a specific avant-garde trend in these artworks. Hoffie notes: "the insistence on indigenous materials and themes in the work practice of a number of artists from the Philippines [and other countries, as shown] had, for at least a decade, been embraced as part of a resistance to the aesthetic and economic demands of an international art world dominated by Western values."[14] Writing in the twentieth anniversary of the APT, Patrick Flores also observes that the category of tradition complicated a project that aimed to be contemporary. He asks: "Is tradition not change and, therefore, not contemporary?... Or is the contemporary forged in conjuncture of 'tradition and change', an assemblage that may well be cognate of the Asia-Pacific?"[15] The idea that tradition had a location or a region was in his opinion, a continuation of Orientalist discourses and equally behind Poshyananda's seminal *Traditions/Tensions* of 1996.

During this decade, important exhibitions took place. In Japan, the 1989 *3rd AAS*, titled 'Symbolic Visions in Contemporary Asian Life', was a turning point on curatorial practices. A growing sentiment of dissatisfaction emerged: on the one hand, Asian nations started to criticize the FAM for being

11 Pat Hoffie, "The Irreverent Contemporary and Radical Tradition," in *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities and World-Making*, ed. Caroline Turner and Michelle Antoinette (Canberra: ANU Press, 2014), 111.

12 Hoffie, 111.

13 McEvilley, "Exhibition Strategies," 55.

14 Hoffie, "The Irreverent Contemporary," 113–14.

15 Patrick D. Flores, "Revisiting Tradition and the Incommensurate Contemporary," *Broadsheet* 41, no. 4 (2012): 235.

the sole owner of discourse,[16] and on the other hand, the FAM's team growing unease with local choices originated a reform in the museum's curatorial strategy. Three main aspects were reassessed: one, taking responsibility for the selection of artists from the representative institutions and further evaluate them in Japan; two, selecting the works according to a theme (a strategy introduced in the 2nd edition of the AAS) without the preoccupation of outlining each country's current artistic situation; and three, to reduce significantly the number of artists of each country to a maximum of seven, thus giving the possibility of greater exposure to outstanding artists.[17] Raiji Kuroda observes: from 1994, year of the *4th AAS*, titled 'Realism as an Attitude', two additional procedures adjoined: to invite artists over so that they produced large-scale works, and to abolish national classifications.[18] In 1992, the FAM was involved in the seminal New Art from Southeast Asia 1992, organized by the Japan Foundation. This exhibition cast light on seventeen third-generation practitioners whose installations revealed layers of "folk culture" openly displaying strong non-Western tendencies.[19]

In 1993, Supangkat curated the 9th Biennial of Jakarta. There, he showcased unconventional media such as installations, a gesture that triggered an intense debate in Indonesia. The alternative stance of works presented by artists such as Dedi Eri Supria, Dadang Christanto, Mella Jaarsma, Nindityo Adipurnomo, Anusapati and Heri Dono was met with skepticism. Yet, soon they were constant presences in APT, *Traditions/Tensions*, and in every international exhibition. Their growing exposure overseas contrasted with few local possibilities. For this reason, in March 2016, Supangkat suggested that Indonesian contemporary art (of the radical kind) was developed 'in exile'.[20] Not only did these practices get little or no attention in Indonesia (in this regard, Cemeti was an exception), artists had to be careful in how to convey strong political messages. An artist who suffered direct consequences from her bold criticism is Arahmaiani, against whom a *fatwa* was issued in 1993. Supangkat's observation pertains to an atmosphere of censorship but it can be extended to the significant number of artists that in the 1990s lived in exile. So, not only did the Third Avant-garde affirmed itself *in exile*, the Third Avant-garde artist of the 1990s equally suffered from exile conditions. Writing

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

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

18 Raiji 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), 146.

19 Hideki Nakamura, "The Self-Awareness of Human Beings in Flux," in *New Art from Southeast Asia 1992*, ed. Yasuko Furuichi, trans. Janet Goff (Tokyo: The Japan Foundation, 1992), 13.

20 Jim Supangkat, Ken Dedes, upublished interview by Leonor Veiga, Leiden, March 7, 2016.

in 2005, Turner mentions: "We do need then to acknowledge the significance of historical contexts... Indonesian artists, for example, have over the past decade produced a powerful body of work opposing human rights abuses in their country, and have often faced personal danger in so doing."[21] Their testing of the limits of tolerance and free-speech must be acknowledged as an act of bravery and commitment. To avoid the scrutiny and censorship of authorities, artists resorted to the use of "codes, symbols and signs to convey veiled and indirect political messages in their work,"[22] or what I proposed as non-confrontational practices.

The main difference of the Third Avant-garde from the earlier two events is the absence of written manifestos. While artists possessed strong convictions regarding their production, they left the mission of its dissemination to the curators, who engaged in numerous exhibitions, but also conferences and debates. Roldan observes:

> By exploring the use of indigenous materials, traditional references, and contemporary imagery, I intend to project a proud Asian character in my work while breaking away from deeply rooted Western influences. It is likewise a conscious effort to make a statement of protest against the West, which, in many ways, contributed in institutionalizing unjust and oppressive systems in our land.[23]

Regionally, the 1990s were marked by the 1997 upsurge of the Asian economic crisis: the Thai baht crisis spread an economic depression in the entire region, lead to Suharto's downfall in 1998 and the 1999 independence referendum in Timor-Leste. 1999 equally marked the handover of Macao from the Portuguese administration to the People's Republic of China. With the end of the casino monopoly in 2002, Macao would change its strong ties with Southeast Asia toward East Asia (this is a personal reading of the situation).

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21 Caroline Turner, ed., Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2005), 9.

22 Melissa Chiu and Benjamin Genocchio, *Asian Art Now* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2010), 78.

23 Norberto Roldan, "Norberto Roldan," in *New Art from Southeast Asia 1992*, ed. Yasuko Furuichi (Tokyo: The Japan Foundation, 1992), 125.

4.2 Artists in Exile

4.2.1 Mio Pang Fei: Making Neo-Orientalism[24]

Mio Pang Fei's work deserves to be exhibited as a rare example of a deliberate move towards cultural encounter.[25]
Sílvia Chicó

Born in Shanghai in 1936, Mio Pang Fei has lived in Macao since 1982. Although this is not usually the case, he could be regarded as an artist in exile. Mio's migration circumstances resemble those of a refugee, even if the reasons leading to him leaving Mainland China relate more to those of an economic migrant. He recalls: "If it was not for the art, I would not have left [China]."[26] Mio's education was overtly Western until 1966, when the Cultural Revolution cut all contact with the West, and Western modernism was abruptly disrupted. This event changed the course of his career, and provoked the beginning of a personal journey into Chinese cultural heritage. From 1966 onwards, Mio made a deliberate choice—Neo-Orientalism. This is a form of expression which would fuse the two traditions, Western modernism and Chinese traditional painting, but this project was deferred until 1985, when he exhibited for the first time in Macao. Today, after facing many obstacles which served to postpone Neo-Orientalism, Mio is considered an exceptional artist, in Macao, Mainland China, and overseas. Recognition from Mainland China followed his inclusion in several international group shows, and more importantly his first solo exhibition in Shanghai and in Beijing, in 1992-1993.[27] On this occasion, the Chinese art critic Shui Tian Zhong (at the time Director of the China Art Research Institute) recognized:

> Mio's post-abstract art is a very special phenomenon. It makes us realize how much an artist can achieve if he has intimate knowledge of both traditional Chinese art and modern Western art.[28]

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24 Special thanks to Cristina Mio U Kit, Mio Pang Fei, Pedro Cardeira, and Joana Ling for their valuable insights.

25 Sílvia Chicó, "II," in *Exhibition of Paintings by Mio Pan Fei*, ed. António Conceição Júnior (Macao: Fundação Oriente, 1992), 24.

26 Pedro Cardeira, *Mio Pang Fei*, Documentary (Inner Harbour Films, 2014), https://vimeo.com/96661921.

27 Mio's exhibition (1992-1993) toured from his hometown Shanghai to Beijing. Between 1990-1993, Mio was present in several group exhibitions: Taichung Museum of Fine Arts, Taiwan (1990); *5th Asian International Arts Exhibition*, Kuala Lumpur (1990); with Carlos Marreiros, Brussels City Art Gallery, and Cultural Exhibition Hall in Lisbon (1991); *6th Asian International Arts Exhibition* Fukuoka City Art Museum (1991); *1st International Art Expo*, Hong Kong (1992); *7th Asian International Arts Exhibition*, Bandung (1992).

28 Shui Tian Zhong, "Mio Pang Fei and His Neo-Orientalism," in *Mio Pang Fei* (Macao:

His first years in Macao were difficult; busy with several odd jobs to sustain his wife and daughter who remained in Shanghai, he did not paint. In 1985, Mio met Sun Xi Kun, of Macao's Yiyuan Calligraphy and Painting Association, and showed him photographs of artworks he had left in Shanghai which had been rejected by border officials when he entered the territory. Sun directed him to António de Conceição Júnior, at the time director of Camões Museum. After looking at Mio's photographs, Conceição Júnior approved an exhibition one month later. Mio soon found his artworks had perished: kept inside a plastic bag, all his neo-orientalist experiments from the mid-1970s were irreplaceably damaged because humidity had glued several works together. Hence, his Neo-Orientalism as a practice starts in 1985. As a project, the origins of Neo-Orientalism date back to the 1950s, when Mio was still a student in the Fujian Faculty of Arts, leaving with an excellent academic record. The curriculum at the school was Western and while he did paintings in Soviet style, he soon realized he was not learning European art after 1850. He remembers asking the teacher 'What happened after 1850?' to which he was replied 'Nothing'. He soon discovered that post-Courbet and post-realist art were followed by Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Cubism, Matisse, but nobody mentioned it: "It was forbidden in China."[29] So, he ventured into self-learning Western art movements:

> The libraries had little to offer; as a result he had to piece together fragments of information. Once, in an architectural magazine, he came across the picture of an European villa in which through the window he could see a modernist painting on the wall, as small as a postage stamp. He copied it and put it in his files. A few days later, he was able to infer from another source that the tiny painting he had copied was a work by the Swiss painter, Paul Klee.[30]

Mio's education in modern Western art remained fragmented until 1986, when he toured several European museums, supported by a scholarship from the Macao Cultural Institute (ICM) partially organized by architect Carlos Marreiros (b. 1957, Macao) [Fig. 4.1], himself an important Macanese artist.

Macao Polytechnic Institute & Macao Foundation, 1999), 359. Shui Tiang Zhong (b. 1935, Lanzhou, China) is a researcher and former director of Graduate School of Fine Arts of China Academy of Arts, and a renowned art critic from China.

29 Cardeira, *Mio Pang Fei*.

30 Xue Yao Xian, "Entering Purgatory: A Brief Biography of Mio Pang Fei," in *Mio Pang Fei*, 1999, 232.

Figure 4.1 A and B
Mio Pang Fei Studio Visit
A) Mio Pang Fei close to a painting from *Water Margins* series
B) The architect Carlos Marreiros
Photograph by Leonor Veiga, 1996

Upon his graduation from the Fujian academy in 1958, with China already immersed in the Great Leap Forward period (1958-1961), Mio was assigned a job at an exhibition hall in Fujian Province where he worked designing posters. During this period, he continued his secret study of Western modern art. Once he decided to make a living from art he, in 1962, returned to Shanghai where he lived a double life, studying Western modernism and painting abstract art while hiding at home at night. He remembers: "I first started thinking along the lines of Neo-Orientalism in the early 1960s at the time of the Cultural Revolution in China."[31] He would paint and immediately destroy the work. This is the reason for his choice of the easily perishable Chinese rice paper and opaque watercolor as a medium. Except for later paintings, all his production between the 1960s and 1970s was destroyed (mostly by the artist), or damaged. The only remains are archival photos he used in the 1990s to repaint some works.

In 1966, during the early days of the Cultural Revolution, Mio was once hauled before a crowd within the Red Guard struggle sessions—a form of public humiliation and persecution. Mio was held in captivity for forty days.[32] After being tortured, visibly scared, and fearing hostilities, he destroyed his entire production: "Of course, I destroyed the artworks because I couldn't keep them. Even ordinary paintings were denounced, not to mention

31 Mio Pang Fei, "Neo-Orientalism," *Review of Culture*, no. 30 (1997): 175; Mio Pang Fei, "Neo-Orientalism," in *Above & Beyond: Neo-Orientalism Art Exhibition Mio Pan Fei*, ed. Joey Ho Chong I (Macao: The CAC–Círculo dos Amigos da Cultura, 2012), 78.

32 Rie Yamanaka, "The Special Era," in Path and Adventure: Works by Mio Pang Fei, *The 56th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia 2015* (Macao: Macao Museum of Art, 2015), 27.

mine."[33] Subsequently, Mio was put to work in a factory to 'be educated' and he stopped painting. "It was too dangerous," he recalls.[34] He thought more than he practiced. Seeing the work by Huang Binhong (1865-1955) made him hopeful that finding a path of abstraction within Chinese traditional painting was possible: "There was something abstract in it... but how to develop a Chinese abstract art?"[35] He intended to create a modern path for Chinese art, while respecting its particularities: "Chinese paintings have to be done step-by-step."[36] His program substantiates the fact that Chinese artists (and others) retained aspects of their cultural legacy while selecting imported ones. John Clark equally defends this behavior, describing processes of *transfer* from one culture to another as a *four-step process* of reception, assimilation, selection and translation.[37]

Not practicing art, Mio searched for a path to follow. So, he asked master Liu Haisu (1896-1994), a renowned painter in both Chinese and Western traditions, for guidance. Liu advised him to take Chinese calligraphy and traditional painting lessons (a practice he maintains). In the 1960s, Liu proposed the 'endless variation' concept that became a Shanghai school principle. During this tumultuous period, Liu's integrity represented a haven of stability for Mio, who came to realize this as an essential quality of an intellectual. Under his influence, and in virtue of the barriers that impeded his study of Western art, Mio immersed himself in studying the calligraphy and painting of China [Fig.4.2]. So, between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s, under Liu's supervision, Mio studied traditional Chinese art: he started with seal characters, moved on to official script, and running hand. Then he studied painting of the four major schools of the Yuan or Mongol dynasty (1271-1368) tradition—this includes the southern tradition, the Han tombs murals, and folk art.[38] Still working in the factory, at night Mio began experiments in which he blended Chinese and Western techniques (e.g. abstract art with calligraphy ink). This phase led to what would become Neo-Orientalism since the mid-1970s—his personal pursuit toward making a Chinese modern art anchored in Liu's prime guidance. He believed that he was starting something new that needed to be continued.

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33 Cardeira, *Mio Pang Fei*.

34 Cardeira, *Mio Pang Fei*.

35 Cardeira. Huang Binhong was a painter and art theorist who, faced with the challenge of a new society in 20th-century China, incorporated fresh ideas into traditional Chinese painting. Trained in ancient modalities, some of his painting techniques, especially his experiments with the effects of light and his autonomous use of brush and ink, converged with those of Western Impressionism and Modernism.

36 Cardeira.

37 John Clark, Modern Asian Art (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 49–69. In his analysis, Clark distinguishes transfers according to colonial modalities.

38 Xue, "Entering Purgatory," 235–36.

Figure 4.2
Mio Pang Fei
Untitled
Chinese ink on rice paper | Installation | Dimensions unknown
Source: still from *Mio Pang Fei,* https://vimeo.com/96661921

Figure 4.3
Mio Pang Fei
Nightmare
1975 | Gouache | 368 x 68 cm
Source: *Above and Beyond* (exhibition catalogue, p. 35)

In 1975, while Mio was professor at an art academy in Shanghai, he conceived *Nightmare* [Fig. 4.3], an abstraction with Chinese calligraphy outlines. *Nightmare* "integrates Western and Chinese culture flawlessly," says Pun Kim Ou, who mentions: "At that time, the character of Mio's art began to be shaped."[39] Without formal permission, Mio moved with his family to

39 Pun Kim Ou, "Above & Beyond: Neo-Orientalism Art Exhibition by Mio Pang Fei," in *Above & Beyond*, 30.

the art school where he was teacher, empty at that time due to summer holidays. There, he continued his experiments, blending Chinese and Western techniques, mixing materials such as oil with ink and water, trying to discover a suitable primer to enhance his artworks.[40] Years later, in December 1982, Mio crossed the border alone to Macao. And it is here that his Neo-Orientalism gained full expression, establishing itself as practice and as theory: in 1997, Mio published the essay 'Neo-Orientalism' in the *Review of Culture*. His choice for this terminology stems from the belief that its predecessor Orientalism had superficial knowledge of the East. So, Neo-Orientalism also acts as a correcting theory that fills Orientalism's theoretical gaps. He advances:

> 'Neo-Orientalism' is an examination of Eastern culture from a Western perspective. It absorbs and reforms tradition, transforming it into artistic language. It uses calligraphy, signs, brushstrokes and colour (ink) of Oriental art. It contains the 'vital spirit' of Chinese tradition, is filled with the inspiration of enlightenment and it is expressed through Western concepts. It uses the most effective media, materials and methods, such as displacement, separation and reconstruction, to arrive at many different layers of meaning. It is filled with a concern for humanity and the meaning of life. Orientalism, as a global art form, will bring East and West together in cultural harmony, engineering a new path to enlightenment and thus challenging the superficiality of today's popular art. It is an art bridging the gap between past and present. It is destined to become the common spiritual expression of mankind in the future.[41]

His choice for a Western examination is relevant as it allows a distance from the object of study. Yet, he affirms, his theory does not use the European perceptions of the past which based Orientalist readings of Asia through "preconceived notions of Asian culture."[42] Instead, says Shui, it "demonstrates a greater respect and understanding of oriental culture... the neo-orientalist begins with a profound understanding of Asian culture and then, seeking to surpass ethnicity, adopts certain Western aesthetic ideals in an attempt to revitalize oriental art."[43]

Mio conceives Neo-Orientalism as "more than just a cultural attitude, but also a cultural strategy."[44] As an artist, he was confronted with a dilemma, whether to consider his art by historic or personal considerations. If using art

40 Cardeira, *Mio Pang Fei*; Xue, "Entering Purgatory," 237.
41 Mio, "Neo-Orientalism," 1997: 181.
42 Mio, 178.
43 Shui, "Mio and His Neo-Orientalism," 359.
44 Luo Yi Pin, "Realm of Poetic Mind: Mio Pang Fei and His Neo-Orientalism," in *Above & Beyond*, 17.

historical discourses, he had to regard himself either as a Western modern artist or as a Chinese traditional artist.[45] Thus, he created Neo-orientalism to eliminate limitations of ideological nature. His contribution for art historical discourse is revolutionary: the cultural perspective of Neo-Orientalism contains a response from the East towards the contradictions originated by the West. He posits it as a new language, which merges two cultural influences and, resides above nationalisms. He equally declares it a global form of artistic practice bridging East and West, past and present. Mio envisions that while this theory sustains his art, it also guides and upholds the practice of contemporary artists in the East. But he alerts: "Creating Neo-Oriental art requires study and practice of both Oriental and Western culture."[46] This condition originates in his analysis of contemporary culture, Western and Eastern. He equally witnesses changes in Asia, now withholding a more significant political and economic role. So, he finds this as the propitious moment for Asian culture to claim its righteous place and assert its identity. By East, Mio refers primarily to China, because "China alone has maintained a cultural tradition spanning five thousand years."[47] He recognizes that exchanges with the West had an effect in Chinese culture since the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, but notes that due to the strength of local culture, there was little impact. This situation changed during the Opium Wars, when Western ideas of economic reform, politics, philosophy, science, art and literature gained importance in China. He posits: only in the 1980s "Chinese artists re-discovered the dignity and the individuality they had lost during the Cultural Revolution."[48] Yet, he declares the postmodern attempt by Chinese artists (both inside and outside China) as 'suicidal', because it "seeks to rebel further, again defining a new cultural attitude... with 'anti-cultural' content."[49] Simply put, postmodernism can be putatively overruled by "Neo-Orientalism [that] seeks to... adopt a more rational cultural and social stance."[50]

Because official art lost its authority and audience, present generations find themselves in a difficult position. Mio recognizes that Chinese culture is in need of transformation and declares that this will not be done through official art but rather through a "new cultural system... [which] cannot be established if Chinese painters do not understand and practice traditional art."[51] He explains:

> Tradition is a fact. Some people consider it an overburdening presence, but I personally see it as an enlivening influence.... Change transforms

45 Mio, "Neo-Orientalism," 1997: 175.
46 Mio Pang Fei, "Neo-Orientalism," in Mio Pang Fei, 1999, 354.
47 Mio, "Neo-Orientalism," 1997: 176.
48 Mio, 176.
49 Mio, "Neo-Orientalism," 1999, 352.
50 Mio, 352.
51 Mio, "Neo-Orientalism," 1997, 180.

> tradition into a relevant entity. Studying and analyzing the styles from the past from a modern perspective permits them to be revaluated and reassessed. Tradition can teach us many things once it has been redefined according to new concepts.[52]

Shui observes that while "other Chinese 'new wave' artists are saddened by the East-West divide in the world of art... and feel trapped in a no-man's land formed between the two cultures... Mio Pang Fei... moves comfortably and confidently between the two kinds of art..." and praises the practicability of his attitude, "because no matter how novel or shocking a creation may be, in reality that creation is almost always rooted in more than one culture."[53] Mio, in turn, mentions that his involvement in the modernist movement has always been slight, but he always rejected being confined by Chinese cultural traditions:

> I personally, am not inextricably bound to modernism, nor am I bored by traditional Chinese culture. I stand against a vast Chinese cultural background, above nationalism, and there I decide the nature and content of my art, which is modern and even western. This is my response to the alternative given by history, and I call it 'Neo-Orientalism'.[54]

Mio's supranational positioning denotes refusal to be domesticated, that we know is characteristic of the avant-garde artist, while his act of cultural citizenship is one which envisions generating new artistic interventions beyond inherited schemes and traditions. He recognizes that rigidity in form and style remain the biggest problem with Chinese painting, and thus "attempts to reorganize chaos through... spontaneous techniques, such as dripping, calligraphic reliefing and collage.... His gestural expression is rooted in the desire to overcome the inertia and passive contemplativeness of Chinese culture."[55] To him, Chinese art must learn "the ideas and techniques of Western art... [or] Finding modern expression would then become an impossible task."[56]

"Neo-orientalism did not fall from the sky," admits Chinese artist and art critic Chen Chuang Luo.[57] The artists' gestures break free from the nationalizing quest of Chinese oil painting, and instead find their mission in the quest to extend and develop Chinese styles. Mio's explorations, Chen

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52 Mio, "Neo-Orientalism," 1997: 178.

53 Shui, "Mio and His Neo-Orientalism," 358–59.

54 Mio, "Neo-Orientalism," 2012, 76.

55 Eurico Gonçalves, "Mio Pang Fei–The Audacity to Be Modern in the Orient," in *Mio Pang Fei*, 1999, 254.

56 Mio, "Neo-Orientalism," 1997: 180.

57 Chen Chuang Luo, "Neo-Orientalism: The Trend of Chinese Oil Painting towards the 21st Century," in *Mio Pang Fei*, 1999, 376.

contends, build on preceding generations such as Liu Haisu, Lin Fengmian, and Zhao Wuji—who ventured into the art of oil painting grounded in Chinese culture. Chen is suggesting that Mio's Neo-Orientalism already has ancestry. And interestingly, Mio does not see himself as the last neo-orientalist: this is a legacy for the future, which requires an artist observing the world from the vantage point of a contemporary Chinese, informed by historical legacies and possessor of a universal perspective on things. In line with this thinking, Chen announces that "Neo-Orientalism will be the trend of modern Chinese oil painting in the twenty-first century."[58] As if concurring, Mio advances:

> I propose this is a job for several generations. Neo-Orientalism is not a model. It is an idea. People should use it to develop different models. You should walk your way. We have different thoughts and we live in different environments. So, we will probably develop different solutions within Neo-Orientalism. As such, there is no model. It is unlike Impressionism that had a model to follow. [Neo-Orientalism] is just guidance, an idea.[59]

An aspect of Neo-Orientalism, beyond knowledge of the two systems Mio which Mio finds essential to the pursuit of this endeavor is the value of abstraction. Abstraction, he says, allows "expressing my longing for Oriental ideas and humanity... [It] forms the essential style of Neo-Orientalism in the language of modern art."[60] So, he concludes: "If dialogue is to be achieved between art from the East and the West, then it will undoubtedly be based on the recognition of abstract elements."[61]

Mio is frequently recognized as an avant-garde artist. This is evident in Chinese art critic Dong Xing Bing who divides artists in two groups: the creators and the perpetuators (or more specifically the pioneers and the perpetuators), reading of Mio's avant-gardism as *innovation within continuation*. To him, perpetuation is the basis for creation, thus every creation finds its origin in perpetuation. In this sense, being an avant-garde artist does not denote creating something in a vacuum, but instead to create new paths for existing realities. This is precisely what Neo-Orientalism proposes.[62] In sum, Mio's avant-gardism searches for a meeting point between tradition and the contemporary and is tied to a continual dismantle of Chinese painting traditions' through abstraction. Chinese art critic Li Chao agrees; he says that while Mio's art gives both feelings of familiarity and unfamiliarity due to its methodological search on Western abstract art, Mio has effectively explored new paths for Chinese art.

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58 Chen, 377.
59 Cardeira, *Mio Pang Fei*.
60 Mio, "Neo-Orientalism," 2012, 90.
61 Mio, "Neo-Orientalism," 1997: 181.
62 See Dong Xing Bing, "The Abstractionism of Abstract Art," in *Mio Pang Fei*, 1999, 324–25.

Water Margin Series (1990s)

Water Margin is probably Mio Pang Fei's most effective Neo-Orientalist demonstration. Developed as a series of works throughout the 1990s, *Water Margin* constitutes his own review of the thousand-year-old Chinese classical novel *Tales of the Water Margin* (Shui Hu Zhuan).[63] This story from the late northern Song Dynasty is part of Chinese collective consciousness. It describes a peasant rebellion of 108 men who start a revolt against the government in the Liang Mountains, by the Yellow River. Their intent is to rob from the rich to give to the poor, to kill corrupt bureaucrats, redistribute the wealth, etc. Eventually, the Chinese Emperor grants them amnesty. The group of men unites through a justice based on principles of loyalty and brotherhood. But, as the story develops, these fundaments are corrupted. As a result, every one of the 108 heroes has his own tragic story, making *Water Margins* a bloody story of rape, death, betrayal, loyalty and justice. Mio used some of the marsh's bandits, including the educated man Wu Yong (or Wu Song) [Fig. 4.4, pp. 157], the warrior Lung Chun-yi (or Lu Junyi), and the monk Luo Tsu-sun (Lu Zhishen). Through them, he questions mankind's slaughtering and metaphorically addresses his own reflections on the human condition and the meaning of life. This thinking process on humanity would lead him to develop another Neo-Orientalist series, *On Human Condition*, after 2000.

These three paintings demonstrate different stroke possibilities: when applying calligraphic gestures to figural representation, the Chineseness of traditional classic painting is implied, yet this constitutes a new form of representation. The three depictions of Wu Yong show common attributes: the hair and apparel, his hand gesture in sign of command, and his pose, with a right foot to the side, are all similar. This is Mio's way to communicate with a vast Chinese audience by applying codes that are known to them. His representation is completely new. The drawing scale, but more importantly the size of brushstrokes that reminds one of Spanish artist Antoni Tàpies's (1923-2012) paintings. What Mio is doing is not a simple rejection of tradition, as the painting is very Chinese in form and content. Instead, he is actively transporting the viewer to the realm of mural art, graffiti, and etchings made into archaeological sites by disrespectful contemporary men or tourists, which degrade a fading, yet present past. While these works may live in isolation, Mio presented them alongside others within a large-scale installation entitled *Bandits of Marsh* [Fig. 4.5]. Fig. 4.5 A shows part of the installation: a large-sized mural painting is sided by wooden planks resembling bamboo slips (another traditional art form), and a central floor installation contains wooden boxes, plaster hands and lamps.

63 *Water Margin* (Shui Hu Zhuan) is also translated as *Outlaws of Marsh*, *Tale of the Marshes*, and *All Men Are Brothers*. See "Water Margin," Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, 2015. Interestingly, all these different nomenclatures entitle Mio's installations.

Figure 4.4 A, B, C
Mio Pang Fei
Wu Yong of Shui Hu
1996 | Mixed media on wood | 200 x 135 cm (each)
Photographs by Leonor Veiga, 1996

Figure 4.5 A
Mio Pang Fei
Bandits of Marsh, Water Margin Series
1996 | Installation view
Source: *Path and Adventure* (exhibition catalogue, p. 42)

The portraits series of the heroes inhabits the walls on the side [Fig. 4.5 A]. Separate by long scrolls of textiles, each hero is given its own throne and space for the viewer's contemplation. The longest painting of the installation [Fig. 4.5 B] reports their story, now viewed as 108 heavenly stars destined to the noble tasks of implementing divine commandments, and upholding justice, by rescuing the deprived and subduing the corrupted. "One cannot but accept that this theme is universal in its significance and that it touches

on social connotations," says Portuguese artist António Andrade.[64] The social commentary is imbedded, and the choice of an impactful theme show Mio's angle—the human side of the story. This is substantiated by the central installation [Fig. 4.5 A], where several hands, out of the grave, come to surface claiming for justice. Mio says that the installation also refers to those who supported the 108 heroes. Close to the longest painting of the installations, there is an empty chair [Fig. 4.5 B] referencing the empty throne of general Chao Gai, who died before the 'Grand Assembly of the 108' took place. He nevertheless remains present as a spiritual guardian of the outlaws, and ceremonial sacrifices are made in his honor.

Figure 4.5 B
Mio Pang Fei
Bandits of Marsh, Water Margin Series
1996 | Installation view
Source: *Path and Adventure* (exhibition catalogue, p. 42)

Showcased in Macao in 1996, this large-scale installation comprises several media, including paintings with calligraphic strokes, ready-made items, cloth scrolls, lamps and altars. The *Bandits of Marsh* was also displayed at the Shanghai Art museum in 1999. On the occasion, Feng Yuan, Director of the China National Museum of Fine Arts, said that without dispute, Mio's works are contemporary in form, yet contain a deeply traditional Chinese spirit.[65] Reviews were good; Andrade expressed that the program of these paintings was the most inspired by a local artist in Macao to date:

64 António Andrade, "On Mio Pang Fei's 'Tales of the Water Margin' Paintings Series," in *Mio Pang Fei*, 1999, 344.

65 Feng Yuan and Ung Vai Meng, "Preface," in On Human Condition, Artworks by Mio Pang Fei, ed. Hou Seng Chan (Macau: Macau Museum of Art, 2004), 7.

> Everything about this exhibition is amazing: the program, its organization, the association of the painting with the text, the vocative installation on the death of heroes and its dimension, the civil courage, the aesthetic quality, the technical and conceptual maturity, everything![66]

During the 1990s, as Mio worked on this series, the installation evolved. *All Men Are Brothers* (another possible translation for the novel's title) [Fig. 4.6], shows scrolls and hanging hands claiming justice surrounding the empty general's chair. The malleability of the installation is also consistent with the artist's intent "to go against the trends by carrying out his belief that ideas can be put into aesthetic practice."[67] Through the variations within *Water Margins*, "he has managed to both deconstruct and integrate, to combine painting with installation; and to amalgamate intricate and diverse abstract forms with Chinese calligraphy."[68] *Bandits of Marsh* serves for him to analyse the culture he inherited, and the Chinese through a markedly contemporary display. In all its elements, this installation demonstrates the extent to which history can penetrate modern art, as its Chinese components are present both at a conceptual and material level. In so doing, and in accordance with his Neo-Orientalist principles, Mio transcended Western modernism and Chinese traditional paintings.[69]

Figure 4.6
Mio Pang Fei
On Human Condition–All men Are Brothers
2000 | Installation view | 575 x 985 x 98 cm
Source: *Above and Beyond* (exhibition catalogue, pp. 60-61)

66 Andrade, "Mio's 'Tales of the Water Margin'," 343.
67 Andrade, 345.
68 Luo, "Realm of Poetic Mind," 17.
69 Ai Qing Fen and Li Sheng Wu, "Mio Pang Fei and His New Orientalism," in *Mio Pang Fei*, 1999, 366.

4.2.2 Maria Madeira: Claiming Timor-Leste

I don't know how this happened. But I can guarantee to you that I could never run away or chase myself from my roots.[70]
Maria Madeira

Born in Timor-Leste, Maria Madeira (b. 1969, Gleno) and her family were uprooted from the country in 1976. Throughout her exile,[71] and probably resulting from it, Madeira celebrated the culture of Timor-Leste. For example, she sang in Coro Loro Sa'e (Rising Sun Choir) as a teenager, to overcome her longing. Later, in the 1990s, during her exile in Australia, Madeira became more overtly political, voicing internationally her love for the country. Without hesitation, she began making politically and socially charged art through Timor-Leste's traditional arts, most notably through what would become recognized as Timor-Leste's national textile fabrication, the *Tais*—woven pieces of cloth, dyed with natural dyes, and used ritually in the entire country. This inclination was instinctive; defending Timor-Leste's cause was not a choice, it was a duty. Her artistic practice contrasted with the country's inexistence: it was urgent to preserve "a culture that was being destroyed and dismantled through genocide."[72] Timor-Leste being an independent state is now a reality, but for decades this seemed impossible. This country's story is the living example of a community's resilience and refusal to disappear in the hands of a brutal occupant, Indonesia. Today, Madeira affirms her love for Indonesia and recognizes that Indonesia and Indonesians "suffered from our cause."[73] She prefers to point the responsibility of atrocities at the military and the New Order. In September 2014, Madeira was the first Timorese artist invited to exhibit in the important Taman Ismail Marzuki, in Jakarta (TIM).[74]

In my opinion, the Third Avant-garde approach I recognize in Madeira's work is unique for its grounding on cultural emblems from a non-existing country. Through her activity, she actively helped build Timor-Leste's national culture, an aspect that renders her singular. Throughout the 1990s, Madeira's source material was solely comprised of fragments from memories, materials she guarded, and news broadcasted in international media. *Children of Timor* [Fig. 4.7] shows one example of a 1990s work in which she voiced her preoccupation with the wellbeing of Timorese children: she applied onto the canvas a newspaper portrait of a young boy while framing him jailed within a net made from fragments made from *tais*.

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70 Maria Madeira, Festival da Lusofonia, interview by Filipa Queiroz, June 10, 2011.
71 Madeira was exiled in Portugal (1976-1983), and in Australia (1983-2000).
72 Madeira, Maria Madeira's Art, unpublished interview by Leonor Veiga, Dili, July 3, 2011.
73 Madeira.
74 Madeira, *Ina Lou: Maria Madeira* (Jakarta: Taman Ismail Marzuki, 2014).

Figure 4.7
Maria Madeira
Timor Oan
1994 | Mixed media with *tais* on canvas | Dimensions unknown
Image courtesy of the artist

Timor-Leste's Struggle for Independence

Our victory is just a matter of time.[75]
Nicolau do Reis Lobato

Situated in the Indonesian archipelago's East Nusa Tenggara region's most eastern point, Timor-Leste is Southeast Asia's youngest nation (it was declared sovereign on May 20 2002). Located in a region known for its global contacts, Timor's history includes Chinese and Malay presences dating back to the thirteenth century. The arrival of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century brought Catholic faith to the territory (it remains dominant today). Nevertheless, the Timorese still hold fast onto their traditional animist beliefs, thanks to a post-World War II policy that combined direct and indirect rule.[76] Timor remained under Portuguese occupation for circa 450 years until Estado Novo, Salazar's dictatorship, fell in April 25, 1974:

75 *Resistir é Vencer!* (Dili: Resistência Timorense Arquivo & Museu, 2012), www.amrtimor.org. Nicolau dos Reis Lobato (1946-1978) was Timor-Leste's prime minister from November 28, to December 7, 1975. Upon the arrival of the Indonesian military, Lobato and some FRETILIN (Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor) leaders fled into the Timorese hinterland. He was killed by the Indonesian military in 1978, and made into a national hero. Today, Dili's airport is named after him.

76 *Discover Timor-Leste* (Dili: Ministry of Tourism, 2013), 5. According to this publication, the combination of direct and indirect rule (managing the population along the lines of traditional power structures rather than by using colonial civil servants) left traditional Timorese society almost untouched.

> In 1974... 'the transition to democracy' in Portugal had a sudden impact on all of its colonies. A decolonisation process began in Timor; in august 1975 a civil war broke out ... on the 28th November, Timor-Leste proclaimed unilateral independence from Portugal. Ten days later, on December 7, 1975, Indonesian troops invaded.[77]

It is significant that Timor-Leste's independence from Indonesia is equally tied to the end of Suharto's New Order regime. Suharto's resignation in 1998, amidst a severe social and economic crisis, is viewed as the turning point for Timor-Leste in its fight for independence. It was Suharto's successor, Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie (b. 1936), who served as interim, that requested a referendum to the Timorese.[78] Held on August 30, 1999 and monitored by the United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET), a staggering percentage—78.5% of the population—opted out but yet, the motion was passed. Pro-integration militia gangs and the Indonesian military responded with extreme brutality, destroying most of the country's infrastructure (circa 80% of the capital Dili was destroyed), and claiming about 1,400 lives from a population already devastated by extreme suffering. In October 1999, Indonesia recognized the result, and the United Nations (UN) acted as a caretaker through a transitional administration—UNTAET—until full independence in 2002. After the first free elections in 2001, the country's constitution was written.[79] At midnight on May 19, 2002, the new flag of Timor-Leste was raised, and the national anthem was sung. Timor's long fight for freedom was finally over.

Timor's struggle for independence is marked by a history of oppression. During Japanese occupation in World War II (1942-1943), around 50,000 Timorese died.[80] But the most oppressive campaigns were in 1978 at the hands of Indonesian occupants. After "'clean-up' operations (*Pembersihan*), in March 1979 the Indonesian military announced that Timor-Leste had been 'pacified'."[81] In the first four years of Indonesian occupation, Timor lost about 150,000 people, and nowadays it is believed that during the 24 years of occupation, an estimate of 200,000 people died, 300,000 were exiled and 600,000 displaced (today, the population of Timor-Leste is estimated on one million people). Human rights abuses perpetrated by Indonesian military included violent

77 *Resistir é Vencer!*

78 The referendum gave the population choice between greater autonomy within Indonesia, or full independence.

79 Michael Leach, "Longitudinal Change in East Timorese Tertiary Attitudes to National Identity and Nation Building, 2002-2010," *Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* (BKI) 168, no. 2–3 (2012): 223.

80 Leach, "Difficult Memories: The Independence Struggle as Cultural Heritage in East Timor," in *Places of Pain and Shame: Dealing with "Difficult Heritage,"* ed. Keir Reeves and William Logan (London: Routledge, 2009), 147.

81 *Resistir é Vencer!*

killings, enforced starvation, and violence against women.

All the suffering the country endured during successive occupations kept Timor-Leste united until independence. Yet, as observed by Australian political scientist Michael Leach, "Since independence, maintaining this unified sense of a common national identity has proven a more challenging task."[82] Major 'fault-lines' have arisen, especially between the two generations of nationalists'—the older, that were "instrumental in the rise of East Timorese nationalism in the 1960s and early 1970s,"[83] and which is largely Portuguese-speaking, and the younger, responsible for *in loco* resistance during Indonesian occupation, and largely Indonesian-speaking. The most dramatic result of these tensions was the "April 2006 crisis, the political-military crisis (often referred to as the 'east-west' conflict within the army, police and between *Lorosa'e* (eastern) and *Loromonu* (western) youth gangs in Dili."[84]

International attention to the Timor plight started in 1991, after two American journalists and an Australian cameraman covered the Santa Cruz Massacre. Present in the local, their tape was smuggled to Australia, and broadcasted globally. This massacre is believed to have taken at least the life of 270 people, mostly from the underground civilian resistance (dominated by youth and student groups). On November 12, 1991, the population was gathering to mourn the death of Sebastião Gomes, an 18-year-old pro-liberation student who was killed inside the Motael church on October 28, 1991. About 3,000 students gathered in the cemetery, but the Indonesian army was there and fired at them. In dedication to the massacre victims, the Timorese have recognized November 12 as a national holiday only since 2004. While this event's and site's significance for the independence struggle "cannot be overstated,"[85] says Leach, the government's neglect in monumentalizing the massacre—for instance, through a memorial monument—contrasts, not only with annual on-site informal commemorations with votive candles on the cemetery's front gate, but also with monuments erected in remembrance to 1999 killings (e.g. massacre sites of Suai and Liquiça, when following the independence referendum in 1999, 260 people were killed). Writing in 2009, Leach observed: "it is surprising that there is still no formal monument on or near the Santa Cruz site, or elsewhere in Dili."[86] By 2012, a monument had been erected but it caused controversy:

> [It] was installed without consultation with the 12 November committee led by Gregorio Saldanha; and there is still no progress on a memorial

82 Leach, "Difficult Memories," 145.
83 Leach, 145.
84 Leach, "Longitudinal Change," 223–24.
85 Leach, "Difficult Memories," 158.
86 Leach, 158.

> at Santa Cruz itself, despite a government-announced design competition co-sponsored by the 12 November committee in 2010.[87]

Contrarily to tradition, the monument itself contains no inscriptions: everyone guesses this is a memorial to the massacre, because it depicts the massacre's most mediated image. The sculpture depicts two men, one nurturing and comforting a wounded compatriot, and recalls famous Pietà depictions of Mary holding Jesus after crucifixion [Fig. 4.8]. This monument is located far from the cemetery; instead it was placed close to the church of Motael (where Gomes died). Leach concludes that the neglect to address the youth's participation in the *funu* (fight)—notably through the Santa Cruz's memorial—shows a "pattern of misrecognition relat[ing] strongly to other cleavages in post-independence politics, which contributed directly to the crisis of 2006."[88]

Figure 4.8 A and B
A) The Memorial of Santa Cruz, in Dili
Image by Leonor Veiga, 2013

B) Santa Cruz Massacre November 12, 1991
Source:https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PasfPrn5S90

It is this combination of human rights abuses and her exile in Australia that led Madeira to reference the Timor plight in her work. Until self-determination in 1999, Timorese art was practically confined to wall art scattered on public or private spaces, most of which against Suharto's regime. While in Timor propaganda posters, banners, painted canvases and images of resistance flourished, Madeira worked in exile. In this respect, I suggest taking 1996 as a hinge year for the Third Avant-garde in Timor-Leste.

The Genesis of 'Movimentu Kultura'

Timor-Leste's Third Avant-garde also acquired a nomenclature: Movimentu Kultura. I propose this tendency surged in the mid-1990s, both

87 Leach, "The Politics of History in Timor-Leste," in *A New Era? Timor-Leste after the UN*, ed. Lia Kent, Sue Ingram, and Andrew McWilliam (Canberra: ANU Press, 2015), 53.
88 Leach, "Difficult Memories," 159.

within and outside the territory. Yet, this designation was deferred until 2013, when I did field work in Dili and spoke to César, leader of *Sanggar* Dejukdill. I enquired about the reason behind the persistence of references to Timorese traditional culture in the practice of his studio's members. His response: "This is Movimentu Kultura."[89]

In 1996, the Indonesian artist Yahya Lambert (b. 1972, Bandung), who lives in the territory since 1982 (due to *transmigrasi* policies), displayed the first painting on *tais* ever shown in the Becora Culture Centre in Dili. Shortage of available canvas led to this development; New Order regime officials' promptly considered this occurrence an "alternative and distinctly East Timorese medium of art."[90] It can be argued that here a *tradition was invented*: the regime formally instituted a cultural happening that used "ancient materials to construct invented tradition of a novel type for quite novel purpose."[91] Hobsbawm also proposes these invented traditions establish themselves with great rapidity, in a matter of few years. This too, would prove correct for painting on *tais*. A major cause for this event's continuation relates to post-independence Arte Moris School, where students were encouraged to paint on *tais* cloth. Traditionally, *tais* cloth are used as a garment, but they came to be used in traditional ceremonies (like weddings and funerals) and were later accommodated within Catholic ceremonies.[92] *Tais* cloth are solely made by women; as with other traditional textiles from Southeast Asia—e.g. embroideries from Laotian Hmong tribes—women who demonstrate greater skill marry better. Thus, *tais* not only are an important element of Timorese symbolic universe, they equally embody local social relations. Their use in contemporary art discourses denotes increasing secularization. Through this classificatory mechanism—an alternative and distinctly East Timorese medium of art—Indonesia's 27th province gained a regional repertoire that distinguished it from other East Nusa Tenggara region communities (*tais* are widely present here, and points of commonality, including designs and motifs exist). *What was new was the gesture to paint on tais*. In this regard, Lambert continued experiments in *Sanggar Matan* (Eye Group), the oldest in Timor, which he founded in 1996 (still existing).

Also in 1996, Madeira exhibited for the first time in Perth's Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA). She presented a historic solo exhibition, *East Timor—Land of Crosses*. The exhibition was granted wide attention by Australian

89 César, Movimentu Kultura, unpublished interview by Leonor Veiga, Dili, April 7, 2013.

90 Barrkman and Conceição Silva, "A Contemporary Art Movement Timor-Leste."

91 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), 6.

92 See Fernanda Ximenes, "O Tais: Desde Os Primórdios à Contemporaneidade" (Timor-Leste: Memórias e História da Antropologia, Timor: Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa'e, 2012), 1–14, http:/www.historyanthropologytimor.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Ximenes-TAIS.pdf.

media, as the local community had grown in sensitiveness toward Timorese cause after the Santa Cruz massacre. Madeira's showcased two important installations in which she used Timorese traditional emblems: *270+ Massakre Santa Cruz Nian* and *Silensiu Folin Hira?* were direct references to two of the most tragic events Madeira learned from exile.

Figure 4.9
Maria Madeira
270+ Massacre Santa Cruz Nian
1996 | Mixed media with *kaibauk* | 350 x 350 x 30 cm
Image courtesy of the artist

In *270+* [Fig. 4.9], Madeira directly addresses the estimate number of East Timorese murdered in the massacre. The lack of clarity of the exact number of victims (addressed as 270+), is shocking to Madeira, who envisions the '+' as a possible rise to 279. In this installation, she enshrined each victim by representing them through a traditional *kaibauk* (a crescent-shaped crown which is used in ceremonial apparel, both for women and men) which was placed on the top of a black squared cross. The cross not only symbolises the Catholic religion of the mourners, it equally addresses the artist's discontent with media's lack of precision regarding the number of victims. The laying of the 270 crowns on a cross reminds viewers that the massacre took place in a Catholic cemetery, while recalling the need for international aid. Australian journalist Ron Banks says: "When massed together on the floor of PICA they resemble a graveyard echoing the death of Timorese at hands of the Indonesian military."[93] *Silensiu Folin Hira?* (Silence at What Price?) [Fig. 4.10] is another impressive installation, in which her approach is more brutal. It shocks for its straightforwardness and crudeness, yet a certain softness remains. This aspect derives from message's concealment.

93 Ron Banks, "Protest in Paint," *The West Australian*, June 25, 1996, sec. Arts.

Figure 4.10
Maria Madeira
Silensiu Folin Hira?
1996 | Mixed media with nails and *tais* | 200 x 100 x 40 cm
Image courtesy of the artist

Through this work readymade work with *tais*, Madeira addressed the brutal death of the young East Timorese Fernando Boavida on December 27, 1992:

> During his interrogation he was made to lie on a plank of sharp nails, while another plank was laid on top of him. A heavy tyre was placed on top of the second plank. When Fernando failed to give his torturers 'satisfactory answers', another tyre was added. Fernando lost consciousness and died, three days after his arrest (Amnesty International to United Nations, 13/7/1993).[94]

The installation shows a bed of nails, covered by a full-length *tais* cloth. The integrity of the *tais* denotes it represents the body; this is a ritual practice for the deceased in Timor-Leste.[95] It equally shows that Madeira conceives *tais* cloth as sacred. Her approach contrasts with her fellow compatriots, including Lambert, who use them secularly. In my opinion, this difference stems from her exiled circumstance. To this day, she does not paint on *tais*, but rather applies fragments in her work.

These two 1996 events in Lambert's and Madeira's works, possibly happened simultaneously. While Lambert explored a local alternative, "*tais*, instead of canvas, which was scarce... Madeira's work began to incorporate

94 Madeira, "List of Works 2003-2011" (Dili, 2011).
95 See Ximenes, "O Tais," 11–12.

fragments of tais, emblematic of her culture."[96] This is why I propose that Movimentu Kultura emerged in two streams, both within and outside the country's borders, and they share similarities, such as the presence of *tais*. Since independence in 2002, Movimentu Kultura has aggregated all practitioners, from senior artists who sustain a solo practice, to younger ones who live in *sanggars* (artist communities) that proliferated in the country's main cities.[97]

4.2.3 Dinh Q. Lê: Negotiating Archives and/with Memories

Vietnamese-American Dinh Q. Lê (b. 1968) was born in Hà Tiên, south of Vietnam, next to the Cambodian border. Born during the height of the American-Vietnamese conflict, Lê's family was directly affected by the instability and violence that erupted following the American dropout of Vietnam in March 1975.

In May 1975, the Khmer Rouge regime founded the Democratic Kampuchea, a region on the south of Cambodia. Despite having cooperated during the American-Vietnamese conflict, by 1975 the Khmer Rouge feared that Vietnam would become the dominant force in the region. To preempt an attempt by the Vietnamese, in 1975 the regime began a war against Vietnam, which was marked by an attack on the Vietnamese island of Phú Quôc. This invasion would be followed by another in 1977 and on this occasion Lê's hometown was invaded and many people were killed.[98] As his father feared for the family's safety—"My father, once the headmaster of a school, and my mother, a dealer in gold and dollars, were considered capitalists" by the Vietnamese regime—they escaped by boat to Thailand, and lived in the refugee camp of Songkhla for one year.[99] In 1978, as the crisis in the region was striking, the UN forced the US to open their Southeast Asia immigrant quotas. An enormous amount of 'boat people' that fled Vietnam was relocated to other parts of the world and in the fall of 1979, Lê's family was transferred to California.[100]

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96 Barrkman and Conceição Silva, "A Contemporary Art Movement Timor-Leste."

97 Senior artists generation includes Gabriela Carrascalão (b. 1949, Dili), Manuel Justino "Bosco" Alves do Rego (b. 1965, Dili), Angelino "Gelly" Neves (b. 1971, Dili), Maria Madeira (b. 1967, Gleno);,Yayah Lambert (b. 1972, Bandung) and Sebastian Silva (who is no longer active). Younger artists, contacted inside studios are around 30 years old (or younger). The group includes Iliwatu Danabere, Tony Amaral (b. 1884, Dili), Ino Parada (b. 1983, Dili), Cesario (b. 1983, Los Palos), Casimiro (b. 1981, Los Palos), Abe (b. 1984, Ossu) and Alfeo (b. 1984, Los Palos). Madeira and Lambert, in different ways, bridge the two generations.

98 Allan deSouza and Dinh Q. Lê, "Interview," in *Dinh Q. Lê: The Headless Buddha* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies, 1998), 4; Dinh Q. Lê and Carolee Thea, "Elephants and Helicopters: Dinh Q. Lê with Carolee Thea," *The Brooklyn Rail*, September 3, 2010, sec. Art, http://brooklynrail.org/2010/09/art/elephants-and-helicopters.

99 Lê and Thea, "Elephants and Helicopters."

100 Thu-Huong Ha, "Forty-One Years Ago, the US Took a Big Gamble on Vietnamese Refugees," *Quartz.Com*, accessed April 30, 2016, http://qz.com/670921/

In the US from the age of ten, Dinh Q. Lê was practically educated in the American system. He started to study computer science but was soon bored: "I took art and art classes and began making art."[101] It was while studying his Bachelor of Fine Arts in Santa Barbara that he began to think more critically about the wartime experiences of his youth and how they framed his American life. His first socially engaged work, The Destruction Was Mutual (1988), was a site-specific work made from photographic archival images from the Vietnam war that he illustrated with Vietnamese statistics: '800,000 South Vietnamese children lost one or both parents,' or '2,000,000 Vietnamese were killed in the war'. This body of work was done in protest for what he felt was a one-sided view of the conflict in university classes he attended. On the following year, he started weaving images as a form of mediating his multilayered identity and dual citizenship, and chose the informal education he had acquired in Vietnam to do so: *đan lát* (weaving grass), an art based upon old plaiting techniques. This has granted him attention from his tutors, who recognized in this reprocessing a viable way to negotiate his cross-cultural roots: being a Vietnamese-American meant that he was constantly changing positions, as if in transition.[102] This mode of acting left a mark: "There is a whole generation of artists of color in America that look at traditions. My teacher showed my work to them. I would like to think that they were influenced by my work."[103]

Lê's career has been marked by dissatisfaction with written history; his woven photographs (4.12—4.14, see further on) dispute historical revisionism(s). His works conflate opposing views of Southeast Asian history, especially relating to the conflict between Vietnam and America. He explains that like many other Southeast Asian artists, he feels an urge to produce the archive:

> There is an urgency to report, because the Cold War allowed the governments [in the region] to be dictators that defined what the populations could or not know. We still have a communist government in Vietnam—a remnant of the Cold War—with the power to sensor voices. That is why I see the artists of the region desperately trying to keep these [Cold War] stories, because the generations that went through them are dying.[104]

A resident of Vietnam since 1997, Lê openly defends free expression and constantly challenges the Party's version of Vietnamese history. What is

forty-one-years-ago-the-us-took-a-big-gamble-on-vietnamese-refugees/.

101 Lê and Thea, "Elephants and Helicopters."

102 Melissa Chiu, "Interview with Dinh Q. Lê," in *Vietnam: Destination for the New Millenium, the Art of Dihn Q Lê* (New York: Asia Society, 2005), 21.

103 Lê, Splendour and Darkness, unpublished interview by Leonor Veiga, Leiden, April 14, 2016.

104 Lê, Splendour and Darkness.

problematic for historians (who mainly work for the state, and thus must follow rules) becomes artists free-space of intervention: they address those stories that censorship renders prohibited. "Contemporary art language has a certain freedom,"[105] observes Lê. He explains that the Western idea of 'art for art's sake' is not applicable for a Vietnamese context, where theory and practice are not separated. As art is about life, crafts and politics can coexist in an artwork.

Plaited Arts and the Contemporary

While living in Vietnam as a child, Lê watched his aunt weave grass mats. Not only he learned how to weave by looking, he would also assist her in mat-making.[106] This is the traditional practice he introduced to the art world: *dan lát*. Even if the artist refers to his education as grass mat weaving, the craft has a wider scope. It includes everyday utensils, like baskets and ritual objects, some of which with narrative functions. "Basically, basketry construction is like flat weaving."[107] The practice of plaited arts (or plaited basketry) is one of the oldest art forms of the world, dating back possibly 10,000 years.[108] Reported all the way back to the Neolithic age, these objects, their function and meaning are seldom studied by specialists. Conversely, they are practiced in disparate locations including the southern regions of the US, Central America and South America, East Africa and Southeast Asia (inland and insular Southeast Asia).[109] French anthropologist Bernard Sellato postulates that the functional character of the objects, as well as the perishable nature of the materials are the main reasons for their reduced visibility. These aspects tie the objects to their craft status (as opposed to art). Plaited art objects are regarded as fragile, because of the organic materials in which they are produced, and they are objects of daily use. This double circumstance leads to the consideration of plaited arts as "the humblest of crafts."[110] Czech art historian Jan Mrázek observes: "Art objects are permanent and static; nothing perishable may become an art object."[111] This

105 Lê, Splendour and Darkness.

106 deSouza and Lê, "Interview," 7; "Dinh Q. Lê," *The Days of Yore*, 2011, http://thedaysofyore.com/2011/dinh-q-le/; Lê and Thea, "Elephants and Helicopters."

107 Jane Patrick, "Tapping Ancient Roots: Plaited Paper Baskets," *Arts and Activities,* December 2011, 16, www.artsandactivities.com.

108 Patrick, 16; Bernard Sellato, "Art and Identity in the Plaited Arts of Borneo: An Introduction," in *Plaited Arts from the Borneo Rainforest*, ed. Bernard Sellato (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012), 4.

109 John M. Goggin, "Plaited Basketry in the New World," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 5, no. 2 (1949): 166; Sellato, "Art and Identity in the Plaited Arts of Borneo," 4; Susi Dunsmore, "Traditional Basketwork Techniques in Borneo," in *Plaited Arts from the Borneo Rainforest*, 54.

110 Sellato, "Art and Identity in the Plaited Arts of Borneo," 4.

111 Jan Mrázek, "Ways of Experiencing Art: Art History, Television, and Javanese Wayang," in *What's the Use of Art? Asian Visual and Material Culture in Context*, ed. Jan Mrázek and Morgan Pitelka (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 277.

is a fundamental reason for considering Lê's work avant-garde—through his practice, the artist defies these classifications.

In 2012, an extensive volume on Borneo's plaited arts was published, *Plaited Arts from the Borneo Rainforest* and in 2015, the Honolulu Museum of Art revaluated plaited arts through a curatorial undertaking, *Shifting Values of Plaited Power*, which covered plaited arts from the Pacific region.[112] Sellato observes: historically, academic studies have prioritized ethnic arts made from 'noble materials' (bronze, stone, jewelry) and hardwood statuary and "This was true of exhibition catalogues as well."[113] Yet, he admits: the inferior quantity of literature dedicated to plaited arts may result from the fact that these objects do not age and are torn apart by use. The interest in plaited arts sparked in the 1970s, when shortage of antiquities and other 'precious' objects redirected Western collectors attention, especially in the US and Japan. But, he observes the 1990s upsurge of interest in Southeast Asian basketry.[114] I hypothesize that Lê's work originated this new dynamic.

Southeast Asia is one of the world's most prolific zones for basketry production, where almost all known techniques can be found.[115] It is believed the technology arrived there from the southeastern coast of China circa 2500 years ago.[116] Today, this art form reveals analogies in the whole region, a circumstance deriving from the abundance of rainforests: plaited arts are found in insular Southeast Asian locations such as Timor, Borneo, Sulawesi and the Philippines, but also in inland Southeast Asia, namely Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Made from simple plant materials, such as rattan or bamboo (ferns and grasses are also used), the plant choice is directly linked to the context of production—it results not only from local availability, but also reflects the coastal or inland locations of its makers. Other aspects, namely the ease of processing and dyeing, are also taken into consideration when choosing materials. Sometimes, rattans and bamboos are applied in walls, ceiling panels, footbridges, rafts, but also in heavy-duty carrying baskets, objects commonly made by men. Decorated objects and household mats—like the ones that Lê learned to weave—are normally made by women.

The knowledge of basketry creation encompasses three aspects: first, botanical expertise of the local plants and their uses, second, technical expertise related to the processing and dyeing of the fibers, and third, knowledge of decorative patterns. Transmission is made through word and gesture and it

112 "Shifting Values of Plaited Power," Honolulu Museum of Art, 2015, http://www.honolulumuseum.org/art/exhibitions/14795-shifting_values_plaited_power/.

113 Sellato, "Art and Identity in the Plaited Arts of Borneo," 4.

114 Sellato, 4.

115 Sellato, ed., "Plaited Arts from the Borneo Rainforest," in *Plaited Arts from the Borneo Rainforest*, 9.

116 Sellato, "Art and Identity in the Plaited Arts of Borneo," 10.

is both *vertical*—from elder to youngster, within the household—and *lateral*, through contact between communities. Many times, transmission leads to reinterpretations which include new materials, such as plastic [Fig. 4.11] or new motifs.[117] Today, this traditional practice is facing serious threat, due to material shortage and as other traditional art forms, it relies on its habitat, the rainforest. And across Southeast Asia the depletion of habitats by massive fires or their flattening to give space to farming or the construction of dams is unstoppable. Yet, the introduction of new materials proves the technique's resilience.

Figure 4.11
Plaited basketry made with plastic (detail)
Source: www.dreamstime.com

Lê's work can be placed within this tendency of reinterpretation, but it goes beyond the mere inclusion of new materials, in this case, photography. In his hands, the woven object loses its traditional utilitarian function and gains further narrative capacities. Lê started weaving photographs while he was in art school in 1989, when he combined images of himself with some of the most iconic pictures of Western art he viewed at the school's library. He recalls: "I literally wove myself into Italian and Flemish paintings I was so enamored with."[118] This was his way to negotiate and reconcile the idea of being a Vietnamese-American interested in this kind of art. The time was ripe; multiculturalism was becoming widely accepted at an institutional level. He would garner attention "in the late 1990s for his 'photo-weavings' that interlace journalistic images from the Vietnam War with the skewed renderings of the conflict created by Hollywood."[119] A few years later, in 2003, this body of work was showcased at the 50th Venice Biennial curated

117 The origin and name of the motifs relates sometimes to the surrounding nature, the name of a craftsman, and to the devices they represent, like a hook. See Sellato, "Art and Identity in the Plaited Arts of Borneo," 26.

118 Lê and Thea, "Elephants and Helicopters."

119 Denise Tsui, "Dinh Q. Lê," *Art Asia Pacific,* 2016, http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/Almanac2016/DinhQLe.

by Francesco Bonami: *Dreams and Conflicts—The Viewer's Dictatorship*, in the show "Delays and Revolutions"[120] (see Chapter 5). The fact that he uses a contemporary medium (photography) has allowed his work to be placed outside of the stigma of 'craft', but initially he was regarded as "a minority artist who uses what is seen as an ethnic technique."[121] While recognizing that craft may be one of the work's pitfalls, he reminds us:

> I don't think my work has such an ethnic label. It's able to cross borders because, essentially, I am using photography. The technique of weaving is old, but the medium is contemporary—that jarring difference brings it art acceptance. My work has also been reprinted in FiberArts magazine and I've been included in a quilt show, as well as photography and painting shows. I'm glad it can cross those boundaries.[122]

Lê explained the importance of weaving for contemporaneity, and reminded me that it constitutes one of the earlier forms of languages known: weaving is "the father of binary structure that we have in computers nowadays."[123] Despite its correspondence with a timeless structure, Lê's application of *đan lát* is unique and borders an invention. Technically, his work relies heavily on the 'star motif' (also called flower, fruit or tiger foot print motif[124]), but his compositions do not follow the primacy of the material and object's function. Instead, Lê's woven photographs follow the primacy of the image.[125] As a result, the star motif appears in different shapes (tall, short, narrow, wide), as shown in Fig. 4.12. Here, we see a photograph of a boy who was killed at Tuol Seng prison during the Khmer Rouge regime, interwoven with reliefs of Angkor Wat temple, in neighboring Cambodia. Sometimes the motif is contained inside the image, other times it fills backgrounds. As a result, there is little resemblance between his woven photographs and the mats he learned to weave with his aunt as a child:

> When I went back to Vietnam [in 1996], I asked my aunt and others to work with me on the weaving. They couldn't do it because the weaving I do is completely different now from how they do it. They work with fairly rigid patterns whereas my patterns are based on the

120 The show was presented in the Giardini, in the Italian pavilion, and curated by Francesco Bonami and Daniel Birnbaum. "Dreams and Conflicts. The Viewer's Dictatorship," Universes in Universe, 2003, http://www.universes-in-universe.de/car/venezia/bien50/e-dreams-conflicts.htm.

121 deSouza and Lê, "Interview," 6–7.

122 deSouza and Lê, 7. Lê's work was covered by American textile artist Jeff Glenn, on *FiberArts* 5, March 1992, p. 18.

123 Lê, Splendour and Darkness.

124 Sellato, "Art and Identity in the Plaited Arts of Borneo." 25-26.

125 In traditional plaited arts, décor follows function, and function follows material. Here, the relation is reversed: image determines the motif.

> images, on what I want to come through. They couldn't work that way. I gave up after a while (laughter).[126]

To this day, Lê weaves his photographic series on his own. In addition to using photographs he prepares, he also uses found images retrieved from the Internet. His weavings have changed throughout time, both in scope and technique. His early works used more complex motives but later, he realized that the complexity of patterns interfered with his loaded messages and contributed to the already convoluted and time-consuming technique. "As I get busy, everyone keeps telling me that I should hire people to do the weavings for me." But his weavings rely and depend on a very personal employment of the technology because of "the spot-on decision to bring forth or hide images."[127]

Cambodia: Splendour and Darkness (1994-1999)

Undoubtedly one of Lê's most compelling series, *Cambodia: Splendor and Darkness* is compounded by a black-and-white body of work made from archival images of heritage sites he visited in his first trip to Cambodia, in 1996. This trip awoke his suppressed memories of his hometown's 1977 invasion.[128] As part of his creative process and method, Lê frequently photographs places he visits. On this voyage, he photographed two sites, Tuol Seng prison's archives and Angkor Wat temple figures. Only later did he decide to weave these pictures together. He realized the two sites share a violent history: Tuol Sleng was one of the prisons of the Khmer Rouge, and Angkor Wat was evidence that the "Angkor period Cambodia, depended on a hierarchical system of serfs and slaves to build the great stone edifices that have survived to today."[129] In the work, Lê is asking the viewers to think beyond the UNESCO narrative of Angkor as a heritage site renowned for its beauty and scale.

On Fig. 4.13, one of the famous tower-heads of the Khmer temple of Bayon in Angkor Wat appears in the background sprinkled with twenty-seven portraits of Tuol Sleng inmates. Tuol Sleng was a high school that was converted into a prison and torture chamber and is today the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide. It is believed that around 14,000 inmates were tortured to death there, and only half a dozen were known to survive.[130] The genocide,

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126 deSouza and Lê, "Interview," 6-7.

127 Lê, "The Artist as Maker," interview by Leonor Veiga, Leiden, April 11, 2014.

128 Moira Roth, "Of Memory and History: An Exchange between Dinh Q. Lê and Moira Roth," in *Dinh Q. Lê: From Vietnam to Hollywood*, ed. Christopher Miles and Moira Roth (Seattle, WA: Marquand Books, 2003), 13.

129 Robyn Maxwell, in *Sari to Sarong: Five Hundred Years of Indian and Indonesian Textile Exchange* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2004), 72.

130 Seth Mydans, "The World: Khmer Rouge Photography, Smiles Were Rare," *The New York Times*, 1999; Seth Mydans, "Out from Behind a Camera at a Khmer Torture House," *The New York Times*, 2007.

perpetrated toward the population between 1975 and 1979, is believed to have caused the death of 1,7 million Cambodians (the prison of Tuol Sleng remains one of the most important archives of these massive killings, and most of the pictures result from the work of a single photographer, Mr. Nhem En).[131] When in 1996, Lê connected the two sites/periods of Cambodian history through woven images, he did not immediately realize the relation between the two, even if in present time they are linked through tourism. Through the combination, the artist asks the viewer not to look at splendor without realizing that it comes at cost. While at the temples, he "constantly came back to this horror [of the prison's impact and its archival remnants]. It was an extreme of emotions, and so the work is pretty much about the contrast between the two places, their contradiction and their coexistence."[132]

Figure 4.12
Dinh Q Lê
Cambodia: Splendor and Darkness
2005 | C-print, linen tape | 160 x 120 cm
Image courtesy of the artist

All woven images [Fig. 4.12—4.14] from the temples and from the inmates, appear in a frontal angle, in what could be understood as an accusation of human rights violations. Yet, while the inmates who were photographed before execution seem tense and troubled, the deities appear serene, as seen in figure 4.13. In Fig. 4.14], the movement of Angkor Wat reliefs is opposed to the stiffness of the full-sized body portraits of two young boys of different ethnicities, side

131 Mr. Nhem En was the chief of six photographers at Tuol Sleng and photographed the prisoners before they were sent to interrogation. He is believed to have photographed 7,000 prisoners. Mydans, "Out from Behind a Camera at a Khmer Torture House."

132 deSouza and Lê, "Interview," 4.

by side (I am considering that each portrait was one photograph). The fluidity of the carvings, with its dancing deities, once again contrasts with the rigid body language of the two youngsters, while the full woven image weight is distributed in two halves—the white top, corresponding to the boy's portraits, and the dark bottom, in which the carvings become predominant.

Figure 4.13 and 4.14
Dinh Q Lê
Cambodia: Splendor and Darkness #3
2005 | C-print, linen tape | 160 x 120 cm
Image courtesy of the artist

One of the aspects Lê recalls from his trip to Cambodia is the omnipresence of Angkor Wat's five towers, bordering what he considers 'an obsession'. He notes that images are everywhere, showing stereotyping. When the Angkor Wat temple complex became a world heritage site in 1992, for Pol Pot (1925-1998) Khmer Rouge leader, it symbolized the victories and magnificence of the glorious Khmer kings. During his time, Angkor Wat's large scale was conveyed as a symbol of a glorious past that the regime urged to return to. Thus, by mixing the monuments with regime's victims, Lê attempted to "turn these monuments into memorials"[133] of the slaves who perished during its construction, while he questioned the amplified narratives of history and their integration in modern nation building. Hence, through *Splendor and Darkness*, Lê's warp and weft was transformed into socially and politically charged art, or

133 Roth, "Of Memory and History," 15.

what American art historian Moira Roth called "obdurate history"[134]—a history that will never disappear.

Dinh Q. Lê's Woven Photographs: a Third Medium

American art critic Christopher Miles considers that Lê makes "anxious tapestries."[135] This is an interesting observation, which relates both, to the narrative capacities of the work, and equally refer to its technical features. Lê's photographic weavings are not prone to easy codification: with its overlays and superficial material manipulations, they act more as painting than photography. The combination is not only unique because of the resulting image, but from the creation of a new medium—a 'third medium', between photography and painting, between painting and mat weaving. His work confronts issues of history and identity in a personal and political way. His weavings force the spectator to engage with these distortions through images of war, conflict and destruction. As Miles mentions, Lê has "hit a way of working that function[s] as both an effective method and a powerful metaphor"[136] to address mythological and historical representations, while conveying his own experiences. In addition, through these works, he articulates the voices of victims. His negotiation is obtained through the pairing of familiar and unfamiliar codes, images versus craft:

> [T]hese majestic and anxious tapestries offer a glimpse into the artist's process of weaving his own personal history within a larger fabric of history and myth, but they also ask you, indeed compel you, as a viewer to consider your own interwoven status. It is difficult to look at one of these pieces without becoming in some way a participant.[137]

The complexity of Lê's works also results from the sources he uses, which combine personal, historical and fictional imagery. His photo weavings open new possibilities for the living memory of traumatic events, precisely because they are coupled with images of ancestry and heritage. As Miles affirms, his use of photographs relates to photography's inner capacity to stimulate the sensitivity in the viewer, even if he has not personally experienced these facts. His large-scale compositions resemble pixelated images; the viewer oscillates between warp and weft and mentally combines the two in the hope to get a coherent image. By weaving these photographic documents, Lê refuses the alleged preciseness of the photographic medium, while he emphasizes that

134 Roth, 15.
135 Christopher Miles, "Dinh Q. Lê: Anxious Tapestries," in *Dinh Q. Lê: From Vietnam to Hollywood*, 5.
136 Miles, 7.
137 Miles, "Dinh Q. Lê: Anxious Tapestries," 7.

history is constantly being created and is in constant revaluation. The result is that multiple images fight for dominance of the overall composition, as they reveal and hide one another. This is where Miles finds the anxiety, on the internal dispute between elements. This disruption caused by the weaving also relates to the grid ordering system, which is challenged. Viewers can either enter the narrative or refuse to do so, as they look uncomfortably to a challenging composition.

As in an epic, Le's woven images are not chronological or obedient to the units of drama—time, place and action.[138] Australian film theorist Laleen Jayamanne explains that in the epic mode time gains a certain kind of freedom impossible in drama because of drama's need to connect everything into one causal, central narrative line. The epic, on the other hand, has the power to create differential rhythms, multiple centers and does not need to converge in one main story. This disjunction destabilizes time discourses—because of the premodern manufacturing of weaving—and is *attuned with fluctuating meanings*.[139]

Lê's Third Avant-gardism consists of introducing a humble craft made by women, i.e. an outsider from the anthropological realm, into art and it equally appropriates loaded images freely. Photography appealed to him because of its contemporary twist, and because it felt more universal than (Western) oil painting. Yet, it is a limited medium, as photography can capture moments but, is unable to transmit the whole story. This is an aspect that is overcome by the weaving process. As through weaving, at least in part, narratives are completed. Lê's post-2002 work continues this quest, but due to his move to Vietnam in 1997, his post-2002 production also implies the Vietnamese side of the question. Further into the 2010s, his work started to address humanity's lack of collective memory (see chapter 5).

4.3 Artists under Dictatorships

4.3.1 I Wayan Bendi: Contemporary Batuan Style from Bali[140]

Balinese art has continuously been considered a separate field of knowledge within Indonesian art history, especially since the inception of modernism in the early twentieth-century. Indonesian curator Asmudjo Jono Irianto recognizes the situation: "Indonesian modernism and Balinese modernism are commonly seen as two distinct and separate events."[141] Australian

138 See Laleen Jayamanne, *The Epic Cinema of Kumar Shahani* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 10.

139 Jayamanne, 19.

140 I would like to thank I Wayan Bendi and Bagus Darma Putra for their time and availability.

141 Asmudjo Jono Irianto, "Tradition and the Socio-Political Context in Contemporary

cultural historian Adrian Vickers addresses two reasons for this circumstance: first, between the 1950s and the 1970s Balinese art became closely subordinated to tourism, and second, due to the presence of tradition, it remains difficult to distinguish traditional and modern Balinese art.[142] Indonesian art historian Hilda Soemantri explains that Balinese art evolved differently from modern art in Java, as a result of the strong traditional background and the unique artistic capabilities of Balinese people, and this instigated separate analyses. She adds, "Conversely, Balinese art did not affect that of Java or the rest of Indonesia as a whole."[143] While Soemantri's discourse recalls other discourses of modernism that exclude 'non-Western' practices from the avant-garde, it allows me to analyze a Balinese avant-garde event separately.

There are other aspects disallow an easy examination of Balinese art. For one thing, "What is often presented as art of Bali... is art depicting Bali by visitors and expatriates."[144] As well as the fact that most narratives of Balinese art has been written by Western scholars. Miguel Covarrubias, Margaret Mead, and Claire Holt were the first; John Darling, Adrian Vickers, Jean Cocteau are very important contemporary names. While this does not constitute a problem *per se*, it demonstrates that the situation persists: foreigners work on Balinese art, while Indonesian specialists remain focused on Java. The consequence has been that Balinese art in general—and the Batuan style in particular—remains separated from the broader scope of Indonesian art. While this cannot be addressed here to the fullest extent, I argue that the contact between the two streams, albeit intermittent, remains overlooked. I Nyoman Ngendon (1903-1946), one of the founders of the Batuan style, and a highly skilled artist (also in Western representation techniques) who was curious and open to foreign influence.[145] As the main teacher of the 1930s generation, he enjoyed close relations with foreigners, namely German artist Walter Spies (1895-1942) and Dutch artist Rudolf Bonnet (1895-1978). Ngendon explained to his peers how foreigners painted, and what they would buy.[146] His role was so important that after I Nyoman Patera's death in 1935, he became Bonnet's representative in the Pita Maha association in 1936. During the Japanese occupation (1942-1945), Ngendon moved to Yogyakarta, Java, where he had intense contact with

Yogyakartan Art of the 1990s," in *Outlet: Yogyakarta within the Contemporary Indonesian Art Scene*, ed. Melissa Larner (Yogyakarta: Cemeti Art Foundation, 2001), 66.

142 Adrian Vickers, "Balinese Art versus Global Art," *Jurnal Kajian Bali* 1, no. 2 (October 2011): 34–36.

143 Hilda Soemantri, ed., Visual Art, *Indonesian Heritage* 7 (Singapore: Archipelago Press, 1998), 7.

144 Vickers, "Balinese Art versus Global Art," 22.

145 Klaus D. Höhn, *Reflections of Faith. The Art of Bali: The History of Painting in Batuan 1834-1994*. (Wijk en Aalburg: Pictures Publishers, 1997), 45.

146 Bruce Granquist, I*nventing Art: The Paintings of Batuan Bali* (Denpasar: Satumata Press, 2012), 47.

Javanese painters Affandi and Sudjojono (both would later live on Bali and represent it through their 'Indonesian' eyes).[147] He equally met Sukarno, who would become Indonesia's first President. After the Japanese capitulation in 1945, the struggle for independence from the Dutch (re)gained momentum. Ngendon returned to Batuan with strong feelings of nationalism. He helped the rebels set up literacy schools, became leader of a group of independence fighters, and in 1948 was brutally executed in public.[148] In my opinion, Batuan style's recurrent manifestations of themes such as the Independence War since the 1950s originate from Ngendon's nationalistic legacy.

Since that time, the contact between Indonesian artists from different islands has grown; the number of Balinese studying in the academies of Yogyakarta and Bandung has increased alongside art structures' development.[149] However, the divergence remains. Supangkat's pioneering book, *Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond* (1997), by Supangkat, contains an analysis of nationalism within modernism. Yet, it does not give references to modern art styles emerging in Bali, despite his support of I Wayan Bendi's practice and his interest in Balinese modern and contemporary artistic expressions. Consequently, when looking at the catalogue of the 1993 exhibition in Amsterdam, *Indonesische Moderne Kunst*, artists from Bali figure alongside artists from Java, but the catalogue texts do not contextualize Balinese works, and the discourse is monopolized by Javanese events.[150] Thus, it can be said that Balinese art has been constantly asked to represent the country, but has failed to penetrate the broader narrative of Indonesian modern and contemporary art. I suggest that the major difference between the two streams is perhaps not the introduction of tradition, but rather the Balinese constant reemphasis on *regionalism within nationalism*.

In *Traditions/Tensions* in 1996, Poshyananda included Bendi's work, with Supangkat's acknowledgement, in the Indonesian representation; a bold move, not often repeated. Bendi, alike the other artists, was included in the exhibition because:

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147 *Bendi: Pelukis Kontemporer?* (Ubud: Arma Museum, upcoming); Höhn, *Reflections of Faith*, 51.

148 Hildred Geertz, *Images of Power: Balinese Paintings Made for Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), 18–19.

149 Because of their older inception, Javanese academies (especially Yogyakarta and Bandung), receive most Balinese students. This has resulted in the Balinese academy being regarded as of lesser importance. Yet, the current reputation of Javanese cities largely relates to a greater presence of alternative art spaces, where artists and curators develop a world-renowned contemporary art scene. Nevertheless, the last five years have witnessed Bali's resurgence as local avant-gardism (re)appears within a community tired of exploitation of natural resources and land for the sole profit of real estate developers.

150 Ken Vos, ed., *Indonesische Moderne Kunst: Indonesian Painting since 1945* (Amsterdam: Gate Foundation, 1993). The catalogue features renowned specialists, including Supangkat, Helena Spanjaard, Astri Wright and Kusnadi.

> Bendi's paintings question the transformation of Balinese culture into a culture industry as well as the division between fine art/high art and tourist art/low art. This dichotomy produces contradictory readings of material culture of Bali.[151]

This is a very important observation concerning the boundary between fine art and tourist art, and it is not exclusively bound to Bendi's work. American art historian on Africa, Ruth B. Phillips, observes that while markets are essential to tourism industry, the products sold usually integrate features belonging to buying cultures. This, she says, makes them intercultural objects which blur boundaries between cultures, that high art and museums strive to maintain.[152] This has been an important aspect of Batuan style since its inception. From this perspective, Bendi appears as an avant-garde artist who disrupts art practices that serve the tourist, and instead empowers the Batuan style through local Balinese constructs.

What is the Batuan Style of Painting? Is it an Invented Tradition?

Batuan tradition is kept alive.[153]
Richard Horstman

Writing in 2014, Richard Horstman's words appear to enunciate that the Batuan style of painting underwent a near-death. Developed before World War II, the Batuan style has been handed-down from generation to the next, and always in relative proximity with foreigners. Since its early days, the style had moments of intensity, dismal, and revival. There are three main periods of vitality since its inception: First, the 1930s (precisely 1932, the date of the style's emergence, marked by the first produced painting *Tropical Forest*, by I Nyoman Ngendon[154]) in which paintings were defined by a single narrative model, compositions were black and white, and a significant portion of the image was devoted to black space. Second, the 1950s, when new colors were introduced, and the style underwent a multi-narrative period (sometimes bordering encyclopedic narratives), evolved to crowd the totality of the surface—initially with vegetation, and later with smaller stories (this is Bendi's trend)—and formal teaching began. Third, the contemporary, post-1990s, in which a variety of personal styles is visible and clashes with growing orthodoxy increase. Today, many options are viable, and some works do not immediately remind

151 Poshyananda, "Roaring Tigers," 39.

152 Ruth B. Phillips, "Why Not Tourist Art? Significant Silences in Native American Museum Representations," in *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements*, ed. Gyan Prakash (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 111–14.

153 Richard Horstman, "Batuan Tradition Is Kept Alive," *Jakarta Globe*, August 23, 2013, http://jakartaglobe.beritasatu.com/features/batuan-tradition-is-kept-alive/.

154 See Höhn, *Reflections of Faith*, 6; 44.

past's practices.[155] For the present discussion, the third period is the most relevant, because it coincides with Bendi's practice. This is even though his training, and particular features of his practice (the presence of many colors, and multiple narratives) can be traced to the style's second phase, in the 1950s [Fig. 4.15]. The image shows the east coast of Bali being invaded by a large boat, and the islanders in revolt. Yet, in closer inspection, the work shows many other kinds of actions (which I will describe later).

Figure 4.15
I Wayan Bendi
Revolusi
1991 | Acrylic and ink on canvas | 146 x 266 cm
Source: *Traditions/Tensions* (exhibition catalogue, p. 124)

In the late-1990s, German author Klaus Höhn wrote the monograph *Reflections of Faith: The History of Painting in Batuan 1834-1994* (1997). He was motivated by what he considered an art at risk. Interestingly, it was during this difficult period that Batuan emerged as a contemporary art style through Bendi's participation in several overseas exhibitions. In a matter of a few years, Bendi participated in the 2*nd Asian Art Show*, at the Fukuoka Art Museum (1985), within the 'Art of Bali' section; in the travelling *Pameran Kebudayaan Indonesia di Amerika Serikat 1990-1991* (Festival of Indonesia in USA, 1990-1991); in the *Indonesische Moderne Kunst* (Indonesian Modern Art), at the Oude Kerk Amsterdam (1993); in *Traditions/Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia*, at the Asia Society New York, and *The Power of Imagination: Balinese Paintings*

155 I am referring specifically to the final images in Höhn's book. See Höhn, 179–91.

from Batuan, in Warsaw, both in 1996. However, his inclusion in both modern and contemporary art exhibitions, as well as national/regional exhibitions is symptomatic of the confusion 'post-traditional' art causes when exhibited according to Western art classifications.[156] It equally transpires how national divisions and associations were continued outside of Indonesia.

Vickers advocates that when the Batuan style emerged in the 1930s "Balinese painting underwent a radical transformation... and was genuinely modernist in that it involved experimentation and searching for new styles and modes of art."[157] Its origins coincide with the construction (or 'invention') of Bali as a paradise and as a living-museum.[158] This impetus of this in the 1930s was nevertheless lost after World War II (after 1946), mostly through the direct interference of Dutch artist Rudolf Bonnet. French writer and film and theatre maker Jean Cocteau and Indonesian art historian Sudarmadji call this circumstance 'The Bonnet Manner'. Höhn also contends that for the Batuan style, Bonnet is more problematic than Spies, as he attempted to set himself as teacher and intermediary, representing his own European version of art, and transmitting it to the Balinese.[159]

Figure 4.15 A (detail)
A helicopter flies over and we see a westerner avidly taking pictures of Balinese warriors adorned with the Indonesian flag and holding traditional daggers, the *keris*
I Wayan Bendi
Revolusi
Source: *Traditions/Tensions* (exhibition catalogue, p. 126)

Vickers notes Bonnet's lack of interest in modernism and his preference for the colonial mentality of Western artists that viewed Bali as idyllic—what

156 See *Bendi: Pelukis Kontemporer?*
157 Vickers, "Balinese Art versus Global Art," 35–36.
158 Vickers, *Bali: A Paradise Created*, 2nd ed. (Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2002), 18; Adrian Vickers, "When Did Legong Start? A Reply to Stephen Davies," *Brijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde* 165, no. 1 (2009): 4; Vickers, "Balinese Art versus Global Art," 35–36.
159 Höhn, *Reflections of Faith*, 21.

Sudjojono, "derisively called 'Mooi Indië' or 'Beautiful Indies' art."[160] He remarks that despite the interest by Batuan artists to depict interaction between Balinese and Westerners, Bonnet actively discouraged the topic. So, Vickers says: "The Pita Maha story doesn't include Balinese who want to be modern."[161] For Hildred Geertz, the absence of Westerners in Batuan was "a strong taboo... held until the 1980s"[162] when Bendi became one of two artists who started depicting Westerners. Such interferences, according to Vickers and Holt, resulted in a loss of modern impetus since the 1950s, when painting was put at service to Sukarno's agenda.[163] In addition, during the 1950s the image of Bali as a paradise became fixed through its promotion as a tourist destination and as a presidential vacation site—an image that would serve Balinese tourism industry well.[164]

Figure 4.15 B (detail)
The Ramayana couple, Rama and Sita, appears surrounded by *kecak* male dancers who sit on a circle in the floor while tourists, left and right, take pictures of the scene. Meanwhile, women carry offerings to the temple.
I Wayan Bendi
Revolusi
Source: *Traditions/Tensions* (exhibition catalogue, p. 126)

160 Vickers, "Balinese Art versus Global Art," 37.
161 Vickers, 42.
162 Geertz, *Images of Power*, 17.
163 Claire Holt, *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 180.
164 Vickers, *Bali: A Paradise Created*, 226–32.

Most authors—e.g. Höhn, Vickers and Granquist—agree that Westerner's interference on the Batuan's emergence is overemphasized. Only Geertz goes further by affirming it as a new art which "did not draw directly on older Balinese painting styles... Batuan paintings were novel in manner even when they depicted old folktales and myths."[165] In addition, even if its rules are traceable, a canon for Batuan paintings has not been defined. Granquist explains this impossibility; to him Batuan paintings are "Non-ritualistic [and] based on a non-dogmatic set of guidelines."[166] This is one of the styles' legacies, since its inception: the possibility of individual agency. It is within this context that Bendi surged as paradigmatic.

Inner and *Outer* Aspects of the Style

The Batuan style is an extremely singular style of painting. It results from a combination of *inner* aspects which render it intrinsically Balinese (geographical and ideological roots; local fluxes that contributed to its invention and maintenance; morphology; ornamentation; and spatiality) and *outer* aspects which contain much of its global history (relation of Balinese artists with foreigners resulting in the debut of secular art in Bali; its reliance on foreign purchasers.[167] In regards to the inner features of the style, Batuan paintings did not appear in a vacuum: the village is renowned as a cradle for the arts, a locus of famous *dalangs* and Brahmana priests.[168] *Kamasan/Wayang* style directly relates to the East Javanese style which decorated the surface of the walls of the temples (in Java) since the 14th century. These paintings served ritual purposes and are used inside the temple's interior. Due to their inherent functionality, and fragile materiality (made in cotton cloth), they are constantly remade. Under Dutch patronage, since the late 1920s, several campaigns took place all over Bali; Kamasan artists were commissioned to work in various Balinese village temples, spreading the style. Batuan was one of such locations.

Batuan springs from the *Kamasan/Wayang* style of painting but it breaks with some of thise conventions. For one thing, *Wayang* was traditionally practiced by the Brahmana priestly caste (those with names prefixed with *Ida Bagus*), the Batuan style was, since its inception open to non-priestly castes. *Wayang* depicted sacred stories and Batuan introduced everyday life (Geertz argues contact with Western-style pictures on paper triggered their curiosity). Finally, *Wayang* is recognizable by its white backgrounds, Batuan is recognizable by its black backgrounds [Fig. 4.16 and 4.17].

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165 Geertz, *Images of Power,* 1.

166 Granquist, *Inventing Art*, 96.

167 Granquist, 38.

168 Batuan is famous for its dance arts: gambuh ensembles (classic dance opera), wayang topeng actors (mask dance), and legong dancers (dance of the divine nymphs). See Höhn, *Reflections of Faith*, 27.

Figure 4.16
I Wayan Suparta
Goddess Saraswati
2016 | Acrylic, ink and natural stone color on cotton | 77,5 x 99 cm | Location unknown
Source: https://www.novica.com/itemdetail/?pid=218281

Figure 4.17
Ida Bagus Togog
Ranghda in Dance Pose
1936 | Ink on paper | 40 x 26,5 cm
Volkenkunde Museum, Leiden
Source: http://www.rmv.nl/collections

Regarding composition, Batuan's most identifiable characteristic is its density. Scholars[169] agree that compositions are crowded, but they have different readings for the reasons. Looking at the Mead-Bateson collection, Geertz describes Batuan paintings as intricate, often referencing Balinese anxieties. She proposes these pictures must be read as personal documents which mirror Balinese beliefs of the mystical powers of sakti (mystical power). Formally, there are variations: the blank/black space of the 1930s, a reminiscence of the Wayang style, disappeared in the 1950s (though today all options are possible). Writing in the 1960s, Holt formulated a hypothesis over the crowdedness I find applicable to Bendi's practice: "perhaps the Balinese artists who live inland, where no grand vistas or far horizons open to the eye, are more prone to crowd their paintings than those that live by the sea."[170] In her understanding, within a Batuan painting, no single element is allowed to dominate the visual field. This obliges the spectator to let his eye wander while observing a piece. There is no station-point, no position of the

169 I.e. Geertz, Holt and Granquist
170 Holt, *Art in Indonesia*, 187.

imaginary viewer, and this aspect disallows Batuan artists to use perspective. In fact, whenever artists apply these notions, they do it in a rather cavalier way. Here resides a Balinese way of painting that constitutes *a journey, a process, rather than a method*.[171] Besides horror vacui, love for detail is detectable [Fig. 4.15 B]. All elements are outlined; each shape is enclosed and defined; each outlined form holds transitions from dark to light; and darkness and light are manipulated to make an optical effect. This is evidenced in the treatment of nature: mountains, trees, foliage and water are represented in a stylized way.

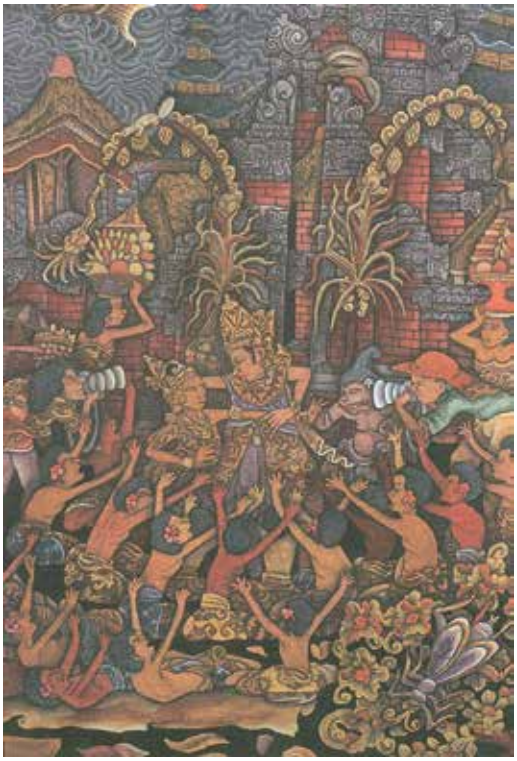

Figure 4.15 B (detail)
The Ramayana couple, Rama and Sita, appears surrounded by *kecak* male dancers who sit on a circle in the floor while tourists, left and right, take pictures of the scene. Meanwhile, women carry offerings to the temple.
I Wayan Bendi
Revolusi
Source: *Traditions/Tensions* (exhibition catalogue, p. 126)

Batuan's geographic location also impacted the style's development. Batuan is located within a cluster of villages in Southern Bali, on the main road between the capital Denpasar, and the village of Ubud [Fig. 4.18]. This main

171 Granquist, *Inventing Art*, 75–84.

road divides Batuan in two halves and since the 1930s, artists have opened shops on both sides of the street. The style's singularity derives from Batuan's location in relation to touristic circuits—neither cosmopolitan like Ubud or Denpasar, neither provincial like Kamasan.

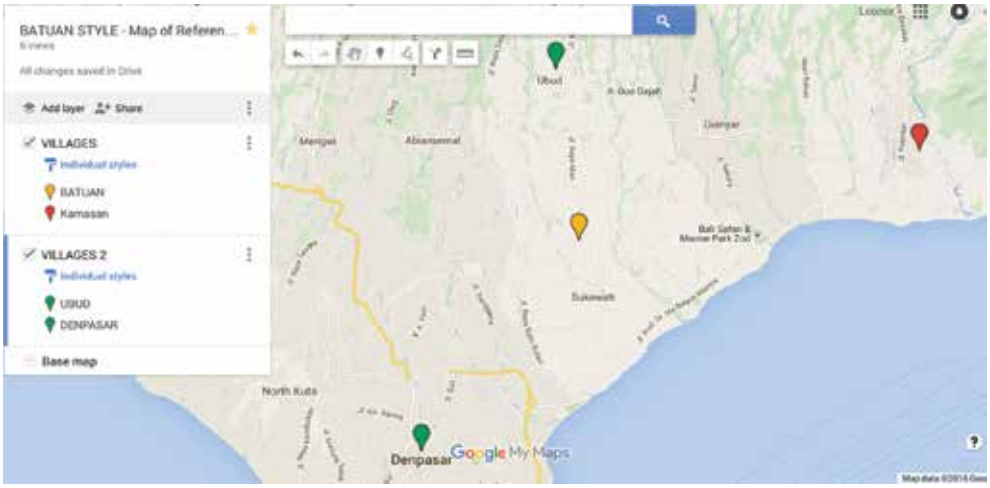

Figure 4.18
The location of Batuan (yellow) in relation to Denpasar and Ubud (green) and Kamasan (red)
Source: Google maps. Edited by Leonor Veiga, 2013

Because of the villages' relative isolation, Western attributes have been embraced to a lower extent, than that in Ubud. Batuan remains more 'sketchy', less detail-oriented, with overcrowded compositions along the Balinese aesthetic criterion of *ramè* (joyful crowdedness). As there is no direct source of light and gradations are done in layers, separated by heavy lines which divide the composition, contributing to the painting's organization. Composition is organized from the bottom upward, a strategy called *memedeg*, in which elements are arranged one over another or juxtaposed [see Figs. 4.19 and 4.20]. *Memedeg* finds its roots in *wayang kulit* performances, especially in the way puppets are layered atop each other during the shows. In decorative terms, the style can be considered traditional and overelaborate: every part of the painting is intensely ornate in shades and gradation tones. All overlaps, even within a certain object are shaded, in an attempt to create depth.

An aspect most authors do not address, but piqued my curiosity, is the overarching dominance of a single color on a canvas. Many compositions, including Bendi's, contain a predominant shade of green, ochre, or blue [Fig. 4.21]. This harmony contrasts with the multiplicity of colors incorporated in the Ubud style [Fig. 4.22].

Figure 4.19 A and *B*
I Wayan Bendi's initial work phases: the drawing is organized according to *memedeg*, from bottom up
Photograph by Leonor Veiga, 2010

Figure 4.20
I Wayan Bendi (left) and I Made Surya Dharma (right) close to a complete sketch, before the colouring phase.
Photograph by Leonor Veiga, 2010

Figure 4.21
I Wayan Bendi
Photograph by Leonor Veiga, 2010

Figure 4.22
I Ketut Soki
Rice Harvest | 1980 | Oil on canvas | 50 x 40 cm
Photograph by Leonor Veiga, 2010

In terms of the style's outer aspects, authors agree it emerged from the cohabitation with Westerners—expatriates, researchers and tourists—on the island. Granquist affirms that the style is first and foremost "made to sell," most notably to tourists.[172] Here, Geertz agrees, declaring the 1930s paintings precursors of today's tourist art.[173] During the 1930s, there were Westerners in Sanur, Ubud and Batuan.[174] They "helped promote the art to newly-arrived tourists, and provided insights into the techniques of the West."[175] Yet, "only the artists of Batuan experienced the direct influence of two other foreigners... [the] anthropologists, Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead."[176] The couple's presence for about two years was crucial for the style, as thanks to their commissions, production increased. Their ethnographic interest led them to date and take notes on many specimens—a record that, with few exceptions, had largely one

172 Granquist, *Inventing Art*, 40–41.
173 See Geertz, *Images of Power,* 1.
174 Spies and Bonnet lived in Ubud since 1927 and 1928 respectively; Theo Meier lived in Sanur since 1933; the British-American couple Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead stayed in Batuan between 1936 and 1938 and returned for a brief visit in 1939.
175 Vickers, *Balinese Painting and Sculpture from the Krzysztof Musial Collection* (Warsaw: Polish Modern Art Foundation, 2016), 9.
176 Granquist, *Inventing Art*, 52.

absentee: themselves. Introduced to Batuan artists by Spies, the couple collected samples reflecting the backgrounds of painters (priestly or non-priestly castes, including dancers and musicians). Interestingly, they treated 'ethnographic material' as art: "the anthropologists refused to buy any pictures that they knew were copies."[177] This forced Batuan artists to stop duplicating, try out new ideas and possibly contributed to the major shift in the secularization of content.

Batuan Art as Avant-garde: the Global and the Individual

In my opinion, the two most relevant aspects of Batuan which have maintained since its inception pertain to Bali's increasing global positioning in the world, as well as each individual artists' agency. These two contrasting forces, coupled with the traditional elements of *memedeg*, crowdedness (*ramè*) and love for detail, make Batuan often regarded as a traditional style. Although, it is more rightfully explained as a *transcultural art form* that crosses tradition and modern. These aspects are important to understand Bendi's contemporary uniqueness. Granquist declares: "surprisingly, this 'traditional art form' was actually a result of globalization. Its catalyst was provided by people outside Bali."[178]

Höhn recognizes Batuan is simultaneously modern and *traditional*, in the sense that to this day the Balinese "have not made a break with tradition necessary,"[179] continuing the master-apprentice education methodology and working in groups (*sanggars*). Two learning stages are necessary: First, *ciplak*, when the apprentice learns technical skills (how to handle ink, pen and brush), and Second, the *meniru* phase, in which the apprentice replicates his masters' works. Traditionally, after mastering these two phases, the artist can innovate. In this regard, Bendi belongs to one of Batuan's most radical lineages.[180]

From its inception, the Batuan style should have been regarded as a *modern style with traditional ornamentation*. Its development so attests; the first Batuan black and white creations have little in common with Bendi's art in size, color, and theme. What remains from the past is stylistic, especially in terms of gradation. In my opinion, the Balinese artists' resilience in transforming the style within the traditional language of the culture has been confounded with excessive conservatism and traditionalism. As a result, the modernity and avant-gardism of Batuan remains overlooked. Like the avant-garde(s) proposed, Batuan paintings broke with elitism in art making and reception, changing these relations both locally and globally. All these ingredients make the Batuan an exemplary 'Third Avant-garde' style and I Wayan Bendi is one of its major contributors.

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177 Geertz, *Images of Power*, 17.
178 Granquist, *Inventing Art*, 30.
179 Höhn, *Reflections of Faith*, 19.
180 Granquist, *Inventing Art*, 105.

I Wayan Bendi (b. 1950, Batuan): Batuan with Political Commentary

I Wayan Bendi comes from a family of Batuan painters. His brothers and his son I Wayan Eka Budi (b. 1968) are contemporary artists. Bendi's family has been, since the style's beginning, one of the most radical lineages of the Batuan School due to their active encouragement for individual expression. Bendi started to paint in the Batuan style in 1963. He went through the usual apprentice period, having assisted his father, I Wayan Taweng (1926-1996), and uncle, I Ketut Tomblos (b. 1917). Still, Bendi is largely self-taught.[181] His *parcours* is classical: "His first works were mono-subject, black and white pieces not unlike those made by his father... and uncle, the famous I Ketut Tomblos, [one of the founders of the style] in the Pita Maha heyday."[182] Taweng, Bendi's father, strongly insisted that his students discover their own vision. As a student of Ngendon, Taweng kept from his master a decidedly independent inclination. And as a teacher expressed it by only teaching his students basic techniques, and how to work with materials. Then students were encouraged to discover for themselves how to proceed. In addition, he actively forbade his students to imitate his forms.[183] Bendi's short second learning phase, *meniru*, originates in Taweng's teaching style and may elucidate why Batuan artists accuse him of being 'too sketchy'. Nevertheless, when compared to his son's practice, Bendi's work appears as very detailed, due to his miniaturist style.

Bendi can be considered an ambassador of the style. He emerging locally in the 1980s, and in the early 1990s, he catapulted to international prominence. This renders him singular, as he is one of the few Balinese artists practicing a 'traditional' style *in his own terms* that penetrated international contemporary art circuits. Yet, for the same reason—Batuan lineage—he remains outside of Indonesian contemporary art circuits, which mostly incorporate Balinese artists residing in Java. Bendi's self-owned museums serve as his platform to channel his art to the world.[184] In Bendi's hands, Batuan paintings continue their historical and global interactions.

Bendi started painting everyday life scenes throughout the 1970s. Eventually, he mixed Balinese life—cockfights, markets, offerings, and dances—with that of tourists, providing a comment on a reality in transition. Initially, in line with Batuan's tradition, his style was naïvist, with no gradations and paying little attention to realism. He would later develop it into unconventional and impossible representations of reality, demonstrating that Batuan remains obstinate against a strict rational and realist approach, a reason why Granquist affirms the impossibility of a canon. While some artists turned to

181 Poshyananda, "Roaring Tigers," 38.
182 *Bendi: Pelukis Kontemporer?*
183 Granquist, *Inventing Art*, 115.
184 I visited the original museum in 2010 and 2011, and the current museum in 2014.

perspective—introduced by Spies and Bonnet—in order to facilitate their work, Bendi positioned objects in space according to his needs: "masks would be painted anywhere he needed suitable, fish would be painted outside the water, a surf board would be made to look like a mask, lintels would be decorated with primitive masks, flags and writing would be anywhere he liked."[185]

The standard account of Pita Maha is that Balinese artists depict 'everyday life' but do not comment on 'history'. In contrast, Vickers observes that Bali has always had painters of history: in the 1940s and 1950s revolution against the Japanese and the Dutch were popular topics and under Suharto's repressive regime (especially in the 1980s and 1990s) Balinese painters who remained interested in politics learned to hide direct messages. After the Reformation era (post-1998), artists resumed to be more explicitly political. Vickers concludes that: "The Pita Maha image never quite succeeded in smothering the stream of history painting."[186] In the 1990s, Bendi has shifted to express social and political commentary, albeit in a hidden fashion. Any political content was concealed through allusion. Works referencing political history such as *Revolusi* (1991) [Fig. 4.15], in which he depicted the independence war between the Balinese and the Dutch, could more freely express his political views. This was a nationalist topic was accepted by Suharto's regime. Poshyananda observes the painting's agency:

> In his series called 'Independence War' or 'The Fight for Independence' (1991), I Wayan Bendi arouses a similar mix of indignation and nationalistic feeling through his adaptation of traditional Balinese painting. Simultaneously, Bendi's paintings raise critical issues regarding the 'selling' of culture through tourism in exotic Bali... Bendi depicts a panoramic view of Bali in calamity and chaos... [These paintings] serve to remind viewers... of [historical] incidents... [Meanwhile] Bendi includes the sightseers as an integral part of Balinese life...[187]

Many things are happening in this painting. The Dutch and Balinese engage in a dialogue while Balinese religious creatures fight in the sea [Fig 4.15 C], as well as an allusion to the puputan events of 1906 and 1908 [Fig. 4.15 D], in which Balinese sacrificed themselves to death.[188] We can propose that implicitly, through history, he is reminding the Balinese to fight for freedom again, adapting the story to the message he tried to convey.

185 *Bendi: Pelukis Kontemporer?*
186 Vickers, "Balinese Art versus Global Art," 42.
187 Poshyananda, "Roaring Tigers," 38–39.
188 Vickers, *Bali: A Paradise Created*, 60.

Figure 4.15 C (detail)
Two Naga (dragon-snakes) populate the sea, while unarmed locals and Dutch armed officials have an argument. The Dutch are identified by the standing flag.
I Wayan Bendi
Revolusi
Source: *Traditions/Tensions* (exhibition catalogue, p. 126)

Figure 4.15 D (detail)
A helicopter flies over and we see a westerner avidly taking pictures of Balinese warriors adorned with the Indonesian flag and holding traditional daggers, the *keris*
I Wayan Bendi
Revolusi
Source: *Traditions/Tensions* (exhibition catalogue, p. 126)

If, historically, Batuan paintings provided a lens to understand how the Balinese felt in a modernizing world, Bendi's recent works (after 2000) provide a window for self-reflection. More openly political after Suharto's fall, he frequently comments and references global events, including endemic corruption, famine and terrorism (see Chapter 5).

4.3.2 FX Harsono: the Mask as Voice of Resistance

As one of the Black December protesters and founding GRSB members, FX Harsono has voiced his concerns through art since the 1970s. He continues this practice today (see Chapter 5). During the 1990s, voice became the main theme of Harsono's work. He used a Javanese cultural icon to convey this: the Panji mask.[189]

This practice began already in 1994, with his first solo show in GalNas (National Gallery of Indonesia),titled *Suara* (voice). He displayed an installation work referencing the theme. Harsono employed voice not to express his condition, but rather to make known the silencing of Indonesian people as a transversal reality. Amanda Katherine Rath observes:

> Harsono uses art to criticize oppression of not only 'his own middle class and artistic/intellectual formations, but also that of other groups and classes which have been marginalized: workers, ethnic minorities and women. Harsono's concern and ethical position and site of commentary is 'oppression as a condition.'[190]

The installation *Voice of the Dam* (1994) [Fig. 4.23, pp. 197] was made after he went to Madura (East Java) for research. This work is comprised of local objects (Madurese apparel, chilly plant, mosque window, pots and decorative panels) that were 'voiced' with the support of microphones and three vases 'airing' interviews to local population. Made to verbalize the Sampang community's concerns (who were scheduled for relocation to make room for a dam), this work contradicted the official rhetoric referring the local need for water supply. In fact, protesting voices among the local community led to the execution of some of its members.[191] Harsono interviewed members of the population "and asked them what happened in the place in 1992 and 1993."[192] He made audible voices of contestation expressing relations to land, space and memory, in a journalistic fashion.

Harsono's work *The Voices are Controlled by the Powers* (1994) (which I will return to) also falls into the theme of voice by responding to another government-related matter—the closing down of TEMPO magazine by the New Order regime following the exposure of corruption scandals. At the time, Harsono notes, Indonesia had three government-sponsored newspapers,

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189 The Panji is not the only cultural icon Harsono utilized: in the 1990s he also used the *keris* (Javanese dagger), and chairs. Nevertheless, I find in Panji's deconstructions' a relevant exercise.

190 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.

191 See Masters, "This Is History: FX Harsono," *Art Asia Pacific*, no. 85 (October 2013): 120—21.

192 Masters, 121; Rath, "The Conditions of Possibility," 10.

TEMPO, *Sinar Harapan* and *Detik,*[193] a promiscuity that conditioned media's informative role. His works emerged within a cultural framework that has "long valued understatement, allusion, covert and indirect expression of all kinds, and finely pointed paradoxes, the ability to allude to and not directly state one's message has become an accepted convention."[194] These principles (which became conventions) forced artists to display messages through metaphor. We can read that Harsono, by addressing 'high' Javanese culture's main features, expressed feelings of justice that the New Order had appropriated.[195] Within this rubric of voice, framed by Western art historians as 'political art',[196] Harsono deconstructs Javanese culture and the Panji mask is its protagonist [see Fig. 4.25]. Between 1994 until 1998, in at least four installations, Harsono used this mask—sometimes coupled with other icons—to unveil his disaccord with Javanese (high) culture dominance in Indonesia.

Figure 4.23 D (detail)
FX Harsono
Voice of the Dam
1993 | Installation with Madurese artifacts and clothes, chilli trees, water pots, microphones, and voice recordings | Dimensions variable
Source: http://archive.ivaa-online.org/artworks/detail/10731

The New Order regime of General Suharto framed art differently from his predecessor Sukarno, observes Spanjaard: "During the Orde Baru government, the development of art and craft was promoted to strengthen

193 Masters, "This Is History," 120.
194 See FX Harsono, Memory and Contemporaneity, interview by Leonor Veiga, Yogyakarta, January 10, 2010, 8, http://repositorio.ul.pt/bitstream/10451/2039/3/ULFBA_TES356_ANEXOS.pdf.
195 Virginia Matheson Hooker and Howard Dick, "Introduction," in *Culture and Society in New Order Indonesia*, ed. Virginia Matheson Hooker (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1993), 5.
196 See Matheson Hooker and Dick, 5.

Indonesian identity."[197] The politically left-oriented years of Sukarno (1950-1965) witnessed the stimulus of socially engaged art; "After 1965, socially engaged art was discredited."[198] Suharto's depolitisation policies endorsed non-figurativeness, gave ample room to abstract arts (notably in Bandung) and traditional arts, which were considered less problematic. Within this context, Javanese 'high art' became predominant:

> While the prescriptive attitude of New Order cultural policies has succeeded in creating a recognizable national culture, vitality and creativity can only be sustained by recognizing the richness of the plural traditions of Indonesia's ethnic groups. The traditions of Java, Bali, Sumatra, Sulawesi, and parts of Kalimantan are rich not only in artifacts and oral material but also in written documentation which is centuries old. The political dominance of the Javanese, however, has meant that Javanese culture has received more prominence than most others.[199]

Javanese culture is not alien to Harsono. Raised in Blitar, in a Chinese Peranakan enclave in northeast Java, he would come to live in Yogyakarta, the capital of Javanese culture during his studies. Both his grandmothers were of Javanese descent, a clear indication of mixed origins, and he would also eventually marry a Javanese woman.[200] In 1966, he was further 'Javanized' when he changed his name to FX Harsono.[201] In 1977, Harsono conceived *This Century's Sacrifice*, an installation work resembling a Javanese celebration, as part of the GRSB exhibitions. He laid a woven grass mat on the ground and disposed four earthenware vases containing offerings. Instead of the traditional rose petals and traditional cakes, these vases were filled with colorful plastic toys shaped as planes and weapons.[202] Harsono was directly addressing locals, who were familiar with these codes. His use of found objects denoted endemic violence, grounded in local Javanese constructs. His astute knowledge of the culture allowed him a way to address Suharto's repressive power. This is what Anderson defines as "symbolic speech,"[203] a gesture of interpretation of the

197 See Chapter 2, *Political Art*, in Chiu and Genocchio, Asian Art Now.

198 Helena Spanjaard, *Artists and Their Inspiration: A Guide through Indonesian Art History (1930-2015)* (Volendam: LM Publishers, 2016), 83.

199 Matheson Hooker and Dick, "Introduction," 4.

200 FX Harsono, Are you Peranakan?, unpublished interview by Leonor Veiga, Lisbon, November 8, 2016.

201 See Hendro Wiyanto, "FX Harsono and the Development of His Work (1972-2009)," in *Re:Petition/Position*, 131.

202 Wiyanto, 76.

203 Benedict Anderson, "Cartoons and Monuments: The Evolution of Political Communication under the New Order," in *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 157.

current political situation through public monuments, rituals and popular culture. Instead of using large constructs, Harsono opted for the 'Javanese culture hero', proving his understanding of its idiomatic value.

Panji, a Javanese Epic?

> *— I would like to know, why does the Panji mask look like this?*
> *— It has to do with Javanese character. They avoid confrontation, they reach a compromise. In* wayang*, they don't finish the war. It continues next time.*[204]
> *Leonor Veiga and Iwan Tirta*

Panji is a love story related to the initiation rites of two youngsters, Raden Panji and Candra Kirana, who undergo several trials before marrying. According to Dutch anthropologist Walter Rassers's analysis of its theme, it is "a myth covering the spiritual life of the whole tribe."[205] Its main characters, Panji (sun, right clan) and Kirana (moon, left clan), are twin brothers who were separated at early age.[206] Marriage impediments reflect a possible incestuous relation.

The Panji is extremely important for Javanese culture. It reveals fundamental aspects of the country's ancestral peoples and the art of *wayang*, which are reflected in Indonesian nationalism. It is on this aspect that Harsono builds. Panji stories originate in the "East Javanese period which began in the tenth century."[207] Its main character is the prince Erlangga.[208] Several authors, among which is Dutch anthropologist Josselin de Jong, propose that the East Javanese period was time of a cultural revolution, in which a rejuvenation of Javanese elements took place, and now assuming the new forms of Hindu culture.[209] To further this, Dutch philologist Hans Ras hypothesizes that the tale was written between the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when an intense cultural activity coinciding with the prominence of Wisnuism (the cult of god Vishnu, Wisnu in Javanese) in Java and the invention of many *kakawin* (narrative poems), took place. Yet, he reminds us: the Panji as it is known

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204 Iwan Tirta, Memory and Contemporaneity, interview by Leonor Veiga, January 3, 2010, 3.

205 Walter H. Rassers, *Panji, the Culture Hero: A Structural Study of Religion in Java* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1959), 4–5.

206 Johannes Jacobus (Hans) Ras, "The Panji Romance and W.H. Rassers Analysis of Its Theme," *Brijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde* 129, no. 4 (1973): 416; 434.

207 P. E. de Josselin de Jong, "The Malay Archipelago as a Field of Ethnological Study," in *Structural Anthropology in the Netherlands: A Reader*, ed. P. E. de Josselin de Jong, 2nd ed., Translation Series 17 (Leiden: Foris Publications, 1983), 175.

208 The king Erlangga is an incarnation of Wisnu—from Vishnu, in Javanese Wisnu—who divided his kingdom between his two sons, Kediri and Jenggala, reason why Kirana represents Kediri and Panji represents Jenggala. See Ras, "The Panji Romance," 437; Francine Brinkgreve and Itie van Hout, "Java: Gifts, Scholarship and Colonial Rule," in *Indonesia: The Discovery of the Past,* ed. Endang Sri Hardiati and Pieter ter Keurs (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde / National Museum of Ethnology, 2005), 109.

209 Jong, "The Malay Archipelago," 177.

today also results from Islam's influence since the early sixteenth century.[210] Notably, the Panji poem decorates the walls of the temples surrounding "Mount Penanggungan, just north of Mount Arjuna, in East Java."[211] From here, and considering the emergence of new styles, Holt concluded that the story spread throughout Southeast Asia, to other regions of Indonesia, and to Malaysia, Thailand and Cambodia.[212] Holt adds that Raden Panji, prince of the Janggala kingdom, could be considered the "Javanese Arjuna, the ideal noble prince, unconquerable in battle and irresistible in love."[213] While this is untrue, Suharto's New Order embraced this reading—of Panji as a virtuous, polite and moral man—and used it as an Indonesian symbol.

The tale revolves around the life of Panji, his disappeared bride (Princess Kirana), and his efforts to find her. An impostor, Durga, comes to replace Kirana, and soon Panji resumes wedding preparations. Meanwhile, Kirana who is alone is the forest, is advised by gods to go to the palace disguised as a man to stop the marriage. Before leaving and vanishing in the forest again, she writes him a note revealing the situation. Panji then rushes to the forest to find his real princess. The climax of the story is reached when Kirana—now ruler of Bali, a monarch renowned for his courage, as well as for his feminine embroidery skills—and Arjuna encounter each other in the battlefield as two men. After injuring Panji, she reveals her identity and the couple reunites.[214]

Figure 4.24
Mask of Raden Panji
After 1940 | Unknown materials, possibly wood and natural dyes | 19 x 14,5 cm
Object number TM-1772-645, Collection National Museum of World Cultures, Leiden
Source: http://collectie.wereldculturen.nl/default.aspx?lang=en

210 Ras, "The Panji Romance," 442–43.
211 Ras, 420.
212 Holt, *Art in Indonesia*, 274–75.
213 Holt.
214 Holt.

In Java, Panji stories most commonly serve as themes for *wayang topeng* (or *wayang gedog*[215]) plays—a kind of theatre performed by human characters covering their faces with a mask [Fig. 4.24]. Even in war scenes, Panji's smiling and serene mask stays present. "[P]ractically all Javanese masks have taut faces, tapering toward a delicate chin, sharply ridged and pointed noses, and relatively small mouths."[216] From all the *topeng* characters, Panji is the most known: it presents an overall peaceful expression, the narrow eyes look down, and the smile is composed. Because of the nobility of its character, the Panji has been considered the most *halus* (refined, pure) of all characters. Harsono used this mask most consistently, even if in some cases he equally introduced more *kasar* (worldly or coarse) characters, which are easily recognized by opposite attributes: round, wide open eyes (as in defiance), and with an upturned and protuberant nose.

To conclude, the Panji is a love story (of agricultural relevance) that unites two sides of tribal clans, which has spread in the wider Southeast Asian region. It is a rite transformed into a play which started by integrating Hindu repertoire's influences,[217] becoming a counter-current (a kind of avant-garde) alongside Indian repertoires, during a fecund cultural rejuvenation in East Java.

Harsono: the Panji Mask as Idiom

Between 1994 and 1998, Harsono used the Panji mask insistently. The idiomatic quality of this mask—a symbol easily recognizable by Javanese people, tourists and museumgoers (internationally)—is behind his choice. In his hands, the mask surprisingly acquired a tremendous capacity to address politically charged messages. While this body of work may not be fully comprehended, the agency of its political message is effectively conveyed, and has become a curse: Harsono's avant-garde gestures are frequently reduced to political art practices.[218] Comprised by one-hundred masks, *The Voices Are Controlled by the Powers* (1994) [Fig. 4.25] is a floor installation in which he used various characters (including prince Panji) as ready-made materials to represent the silencing of TEMPO journalists and, in effect, readers. In an interview, he recalled:

> The idea came about 2 or 3 weeks before my solo exhibition, in 1994... I was making work about the New Order. The political concept of New Order is very Javanese. Suharto was from Java and he always used

215 The functional meaning of both words, *topeng* and *gedog*, is mask. Nevertheless, the origin of the term *gedog* is unknown.

216 Holt, *Art in Indonesia*, 154.

217 Jong, "The Malay Archipelago," 176.

218 Chiu and Genocchio, *Asian Art Now*, 78.

> Javanese philosophy to repress people. So, that is us, the people, but we can't control our mouth. All their voices were controlled by the power. The people could see their mouth talking, but they could not express what they were thinking. That is why I used Javanese masks.[219]

Possibly his most famous work, *The Voices Are Controlled by the Powers* was showcased in *Suara*, at GalNas, Jakarta, in 1994, in Galeri Cemeti, Yogyakarta, and in 1996 both at the seminal *Traditions/Tensions* in New York. The work consists of one hundred masks which he bisected under the nose displayed atop a black squared cloth. The installation is distributed in two areas: the eyes and foreheads around the edges of the cloth, and the mouths and chins at its centre. Thus, it appears as if perhaps the eyes are looking at the mouths in a controlling fashion, or that they are looking toward each other, in a manner that suggests surveillance. This work, which was made to protest the banning of *TEMPO* magazine in 1994, was again exhibited in Harsono's 2011 solo show *FX Harsono: Testimonies*, at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM). For this occasion, the work was remade.[220]

Figure 4.25
FX Harsono
The Voices Are Controlled by the Powers
2011 (remake of the 1994 original) | Installation with one hundred masks and black clothe | 350 x 350 x 30 cm
Image courtesy of the artist

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219 Harsono, Memory and Contemporaneity, 8.

220 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpFeWp-XNE8, accessed May 2016. Because the 1994 specimens deteriorated (tropical weather does not favor survival of perishable materials), Harsono went to a shop in Bantul area, in Yogyakarta, and asked the same mask maker to sell him one hundred new masks.

Figure 4.26
FX Harsono
The Voices Are Controlled by the Powers
Source: *Re:Petition/Re:Position*, p. 209

Mosquera values a certain "sobriety of [art's] analytical discourse"[221] in practices such as those I term Third Avant-garde. In fact, sobriety is one of Harsono's hallmarks. In this work, sobriety is achieved through a set of binaries: black/white, eyes/mouth, inside/outside, mask/cloth, all contained within the square's geometrical perfection. Rath posited an interesting hypothesis:

> [T]he structure of this piece seems very much like a Javanese cosmological map in which the center representing the heavens, the powers of kerajaan and the king, as well as the awesome void of nothingness into which we will all be absorbed. Now, I am not certain to what extent Harsono used this form for its cultural foundations. But as a possibly unconscious gesture, Harsono has chosen two objects from a cosmological and historical/mythologized temporality of the Javanese (Hindu order). Harsono states that he chose this square within a formal device to mirror a conference room hence; this formal devise obviously can be read from a number of different vantage points.[222]

I find Rath's interpretation compelling. It is very likely that Harsono unconsciously addressed Javanese cosmology: while he cannot be considered a Javanologist, his immersion in Java's cultural landscape is major. Yet, I

221 Gerardo Mosquera, "The Marco Polo Syndrome: Some Problems around Art and Eurocentrism," in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, ed. Zaya Kocur and Simon Leung (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 221.

222 Rath, "The Conditions of Possibility," 10.

interpret the square as a jail—an extremely guarded locale, common in highly policed environments. Overall, this is a disturbing piece, and it is appropriate to say that the work has not lost relevance: the dominance of Javanese culture in Indonesia, especially within the circles of the political elite, military and state officials persists. In addition, these masks are omnipresent in tourist shops, brochures, and tourist-oriented traditional villages.

In 1997, for his participation in Cemeti's exhibition *Slot in the Box*, Harsono performed *Destruction* [Fig. 4.27 A, B, C].[223] The gallery had invited Indonesian artists to respond to "new order's electoral fraud through such diverse forms as installation and performance art."[224] *Destruction* is both a very aesthetic and aggressive work; this affect is obtained by the intimacy of Harsono's face paint, his impeccably ironed and tailored suit, the presence of fire, and the minimalism of the installation of chairs and masks. The destructive character is visible in Harsono's evident unease while handing the chainsaw. After the performance, the wooden remains were collected, and the video recording was screened in a small television.[225]

Destruction took place in a famous semi-public field in Yogyakarta, the *Alun-alun Selatan*—the southern open space of the kraton (the local equivalent of the Greek agora), inside the Sultan's Palace. The Javanese palace contains two open square spaces—the northern and the southern—which have historically had different functions. To this day, this area of the ruler's residence stages several everyday life events: in 2010, some Jogja Biennal[226] works were exhibited here; in 2011, I attended there *wayang kulit* public performances showcased to celebrate the fifth centenary of Islam's arrival in Java. This location is highly promoted among tourists. They enjoy the local folklore that says that anyone who passes blindfolded between the two twin-trimmed centuries-old banyan trees (visible in Fig. 4.27 B and C background) wins luck. Regarding the local art scene, this square is located in the proximity of the *kraton* fortification southern exit. Cemeti Gallery lies precisely in this street, Jalan Panjaitan [Fig. 4.28].

223 The exhibition *Slot in the Box* took place between 6 April and 31 May 1997.

224 "Fx Harsono: Testimonies Part 01," April 20, 2010, http://www.designboom.com/art/fx-harsono-testimonies-part-01/.

225 *Performance Art: Destruction,* by FX Harsono, 1997, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QxMcKm74lRU.

226 The Biennial of Yogyakarta, but not exclusively, follows Dutch scripture, Jogjakarta, which is often shortened to 'Jogja'.

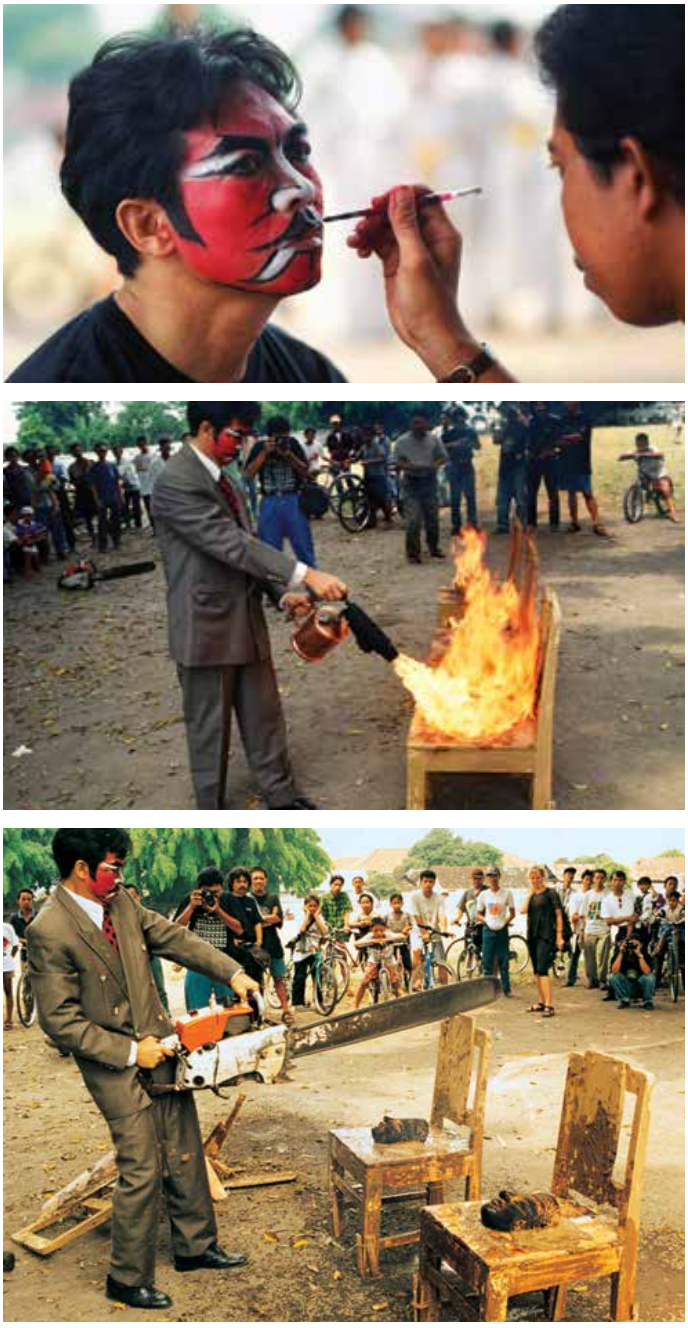

Figure 4.27
FX Harsono
Destruction
1997 | Performance and documentation | Video 6' 18"
Images courtesy of the artist

In the performance documentation, the totality of the work can be accessed: Harsono starts by having his face painted as Ravana by a local artist (Ravana is Ramayana's evil character who abducts Sita as an act of vengeance for having cut off the nose of his sister Shurpanakha). Then, Harsono dresses as a white-collar worker, with shirt, suit and tie. He then places three Panji masks on the top of three wooden chairs and sets fire to them. Finally, with a chainsaw too powerful for its task, Harsono destroys the burnt masks and chairs. Here, the masks represent powerful faces as the three parties Suharto allowed to contest the elections—"his own golkar party, the islamist united development party (PPP), and the democratic party of Indonesia (PDI)."[227] Chairs serve to denote attachment to power. Historically, chairs "often function as the symbol of power, as its familiarity is used in terms such as *kursi kekuasaan* (the chair of power) or *kursi jabatan* (the chair of prestige)."[228] For artists participating in Slot in the Box, it was intolerable that chairs had been distributed and popular vote was of no consequence. In the following year, Suharto's regime fell. On his use of chairs, Harsono remarks:

> Our ability to evoke chairs as the symbol of a ruler is not merely an ability to interpret a symbol, but the ability of our imagination to find symbols to articulate an accurate social critique.[229]

In retrospect, doing this performance was an act of courage. Taking place during *minggu tenang* (silent week)—a New Order convention prohibiting any meeting of more than five people at the time, one week prior to elections[230]—Harsono feared consequences:

> When I made that performance, I was very worried about the police... If the policemen had seen it—also there were a lot of passers-by that came and stayed—I would have had a problem... During minggu tennang, people could not make activities or gather in groups... and in this work I was criticizing the government.[231]

The combination of the public's presence, location of choice, and tradition's destruction were sufficient ingredients for an arrest.

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227 "Fx Harsono: Testimonies Part 01."

228 Enin Supriyanto, *The Temple: Pacifism Monument of S. Teddy D.* (Bantul: Art Merdeka Publisher, 2009), 13.

229 Wiyanto, "FX Harsono (1972-2009)," 110.

230 Seng Yu Jin, "Exposing the Unseen: Strategies of Conceptualism in Indonesian Art," in *Re:Petition/Position* (Magelang: Langgeng Art Foundation, 2010), 213.

231 Harsono, Memory and Contemporaneity, 9.

Figure 4.28
Section of Yogykarta's map
The main square, *Alun-Alun Utara* is marked blue; *Alun-alun Selatan*, where Harsono held his performance, and Galeri Cemeti are marked red.
Source: Google Maps; Edition: Leonor Veiga

In the following year, Panji gained yet another meaning: it became the signifier to express those who went missing. In the work *Disappeared* (1998) [Fig. 4.29], Rath explains, the Panji icon "serves a universal function" of claiming the memory of regime victims.[232] Harsono's intention to fill historical gaps will returns his post-2000 practice (see Chapter 5). This installation is equally comprised by two halves: the wall, which includes six screen prints in two rows of three, and the floor, where forty-six Panji specimens lay on the ground. Once again, Harsono plays with polarities: wall/floor, paper/wood, white/black, order/disorder. The connecting element is his intervention on the masks that appear blindfolded (need for anonymity). The blindfolding procedure is common in featuring public photographs to protect victims of abuse as well as defenseless people, such as children. The masks substitute lost faces, a clear reference to its idiomatic potential. The newspaper attached to the masks relates to the need to report their disappearance.

232 Rath, "The Conditions of Possibility," 11.

Figure 4.29
FX Harsono
Disappeared
1998 | Installation with photocopy paper, forty-six burned masks and newspaper | Dim. variable
Image courtesy of the artist

Here, Harsono is addressing the New Order's responsibility to counter terror, while disguising its own terrorist gestures. Similarly, it reveals normalization, as the regime considered all Indonesians instruments of its own doctrine. The vanished people, through Panji, represent virtue, grace and kindness, just like in the story. But the surprising effect is that they are victims of such conceptions. Harsono's experimental moves with Panji were practically abandoned after *Disappeared*. Yet, between 2001 and 2003 the symbol returned in the form of smaller entries (there is no longer the physicality of his installations) especially in photo etchings, silk-screen prints and photography artworks.

Wear Mask (2001) [Fig. 4.30, pp. 209] was produced in the aftermath of violence against ethnic Chinese between 1996 and 1998. The mask serves as a protective disguise, hiding the artist's identity. In the image, Harsono rides a bicycle and the mask serves as his shield against endemic violence.[233]

233 Wiyanto, "'Displaced': FX Harsono," in *Displaced: FX Harsono* (Jakarta: Galeri Nasional Indonesia, 2003), 43.

Figure 4.30
FX Harsono
Wear Mask
2001 | Photo-etching on paper | 62 x 57 cm
Source: *Re:Petition/Re:Position*, p. 11

Harsono's experiments with the Panji reduce official significations—virtue, grace and humility—to rubble. From here on, Panji serves to voice censored journalists, disappeared people and political elite. It becomes an icon to express silencing, murder and power. These are strong, yet simple notations. They demonstrate the idea that by looking at the same symbol repeatedly, the visual artist becomes the maker of new significations. The Panji, from having its meaning regulated, becomes a *floating signifier.* Harsono's use of familiar materials expresses his will to relate (see Chapter 1). Interestingly, the works originating from the period 1993/8—2001/3, result in very aestheticized installations, where the sobriety of conceptual art merges with longstanding tribal traditions. Ultimately, Harsono comments nationalistic representations which derive from a state-sponsored "official culture [that] draws heavily from elements of 'high' Javanese culture, or has appropriated Javanese traditions and invested them with new meanings."[234] The use of the Panji story is a case of appropriation that "affirm[s] the dominant, state-defined image of Javanese culture," leading Harsono to actively "challenge and subvert it."[235] This is why he coupled 'voice' as a theme with notions of identity and citizenship. It is these aspects which define his minority status as an ethnic Chinese.

234 Matheson Hooker and Dick, "Introduction," 7.
235 Matheson Hooker and Dick, 10.

4.3.3 Arahmaiani: Dismantling Patriarchalism

Something I consider important in Javanese culture
is the critical thinking.
Most of the traditional culture has elements to support this.[236]
Arahmaini

Indonesian artist Arahmaiani (b. 1961, Bandung) has an extensive body of work in which she defies the overpowering patriarchalism that affects Indonesian society. In the 1980s and 1990s, she established herself as a pioneer in the field of performance art in Southeast Asia. Beginning during the New Order, her work has used *fragments* of tradition to express her criticism toward a repressive culture:

> Javanese believe in harmony, non-confrontation, discretion, especially if you are a woman. If you look at Javanese culture, it has developed throughout time with critical elements present, but always suppressed by the ruling powers. This is important even for today. I have been promoting and reminding other people that this critical culture has always been present in Java. This is what I do.[237]

The New Order regime (1965-1998) had its ideas of women's role in society. According to the Australian scholars Virginia Matheson Hooker and Howard Dick, the New Order emphasized women's dual role: "the government seeks to define women's private as well as public roles by stressing that women are primarily wives and mothers, but they should also serve the nation as skilled or semi-skilled professionals."[238] Indonesian women, most which live within a Muslim society, have always been empowered through work. An important case is that of women who historically made batik to generate additional income for their families' livelihood. Muslim Indonesian women have since the mid-1960s founded women's mosques and women's associations to kick-start independence in religious affairs and emancipation in social and educational fields, recognizes Dutch anthropologist Josselin De Jong.[239] During the New Order, and especially in the 1990s, Indonesian women occupied leadership positions, most notably in the cultural field (as museum directors, for instance). But contemporary artists constitute a case of needed emancipation, as women artists remained just a few. Indonesian art historian M. Dwi Marianto recalls:

> Arahmaiani's experience of being under military house arrest in 1983 while studying at the Bandung

236 Arahmaiani, Memory and Contemporaneity, interview by Leonor Veiga, Yogyakarta, January 24, 2010, 71.
237 Arahmaiani, 71.
238 Matheson Hooker and Dick, "Introduction," 11.
239 See Jong, "The Malay Archipelago," 180.

> Institute of Technology helped shape her views. Arahmaiani was arrested while creating an installation work in the street with three other friends because the artwork was considered subversive.[240]

Indonesian art critic Carla Bianpoen says that Arahamaiani's defiance toward "any form of repression or hegemonic power structures probably goes back to the childhood."[241] Thanks to Arahmaiani and the curators that convey her messages (she famously was "under death threat by the radical Muslims" on one occasion,[242] in 1993), the art of Indonesian women has crossed borders since the early 1990s. She left a mark on Southeast Asian art that overrides solely the region, having been included in historic exhibitions, such as the seminal *Traditions/Tensions* (1996) in the Asia Society of New York, the travelling *Cities on the Move* (1999) curated by Hans Ulrich Olbrist and Hou Hanru, *Global Feminisms* (2007), in the Brooklyn Museum of New York, and *In and Out of Context* (2016), also in the Asia Society of New York.

Her driving force has been to rescue the criticality of Javanese culture,. She regards the culture as unified but divided in "two versions—the supported and the suppressed."[243] Her reading meets avant-garde premises which act on the here and now towards building a better future. She always departs from archival research; because of her interest in history, she tries to trace the origins of antagonisms. Reluctant to be termed a feminist, she confirms her works are largely based on her own experiences. Therefore "she has approached art as a form of political activism, and shaken up orthodoxies of faith, gender and class in a country that has experienced increasingly political repression and bloody religious sectarianism," says American art critic Holland Cotter.[244] She makes accusatory works towards many societies, not exclusively her own. And she addresses global conflicts with ease. Much of her work causes disturbance, both within and outside Indonesia, proving that her work affects local and global concepts of women, and particularly Muslim women.

During her early career days in the 1990s, Arahmaiani frequently travelled overseas. Going out meant questioning the society she was brought up in, and she found sources of knowledge in Indonesian traditional culture. She then directed her focus toward the legacies of Buddhism, Hinduism,

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240 M. Dwi Marianto, "Arahmaiani (Iani)," in *The First Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, ed. Suzanne Grano (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery Publishing, 1993), 81.

241 Carla Bianpoen and Heather Waugh, *Indonesian Women Artists: The Curtain Opens* (Jakarta: Yayasan Seni Rupa, 2007), 46.

242 Arahmaiani, Memory and Contemporaneity, 73.

243 Arahmaiani, 72.

244 Holland Cotter, "Arahmaiani: 'Fertility of the Mind,'" *The New York Times*, January 31, 2014, sec. Art in Review, http://www.nytimes.com/events/art/galleries-chelsea/arahmaiani-fertility-of-the-mind-17188.html.

and animism in Indonesia, and how they affected her position as a Muslim woman in Indonesian society. While she addressed herself as Muslim, defining Indonesian Islam presented challenges, both in and outside of her country. This stems from, as Clifford Geertz notes, the fact that Indonesian Islam "has been, at least until recently, remarkably malleable, tentative, syncretistic, and, most significantly of all, multivoiced."[245] Poshyananda's writing for *Traditions/ Tensions* in 1996 confirms Geertz's affirmations: "Arahmaiani confronts the interpretation of morality within the context of the confusing and contradictory Islamic society she inhabits."[246] Her analyses were sustained by in-depth immersions: initially, she devoted time to study traditional dance—especially Balinese, Javanese and Sundanese[247]—coupled with peregrinations to locations she identifies important. She accessed features of Indonesian society by immersing herself in Balinese Hinduism and we see that these findings were revealed in the performance *Handle Without Care* of 1996.

Arahmaiani is not the only artist mentioning partisanship of the national, but she is significant for addressing gender inequality. While researching traditional Indonesian culture since the 1990s, she found that differentiation of the gender is largely a modern construct with no parallel to ancient times.[248] This is what informs her work.

Retrieving Gender Parity

Arahmaiani finds that classical Javanese culture (and its materialization in monuments for instance) philosophically coordinates a balance between feminine and masculine energies, but she recognizes this character has been lost. In a recent writing, she remembers the past when "These seemingly opposing poles [we]re considered to be an inseparable unity."[249] She affirms that balance between dichotomies is not achieved by choosing one of two options (the modern approach). Instead, she argues it is mandatory to embrace ancient philosophical teachings' holistic approach.

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245 Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 12.

246 Poshyananda, "Roaring Tigers," 43.

247 Arahmaiani is of Sunda ethnicity. The Sundanese are mainly concentrated in West Java, and their culture differs from Javanese, rooted in Central Java. In their mannerisms, the Sundanese are different from all other ethnicities from the archipelago, having their own cuisine, religion, rituals and arts.

248 Arahmaiani, Dismantling Patriarchalism, unpublished interview by Leonor Veiga, Leiden, June 7, 2016.

249 Arahmaiani, "Menolak Tragedi Kekerasan / Rejecting the Tragedy of Violence," trans. Suzan Piper, *KOMPAS*, March 12, 2016, http://print.kompas.com/baca/2016/03/12/Menolak-Tragedi-Kekerasan.

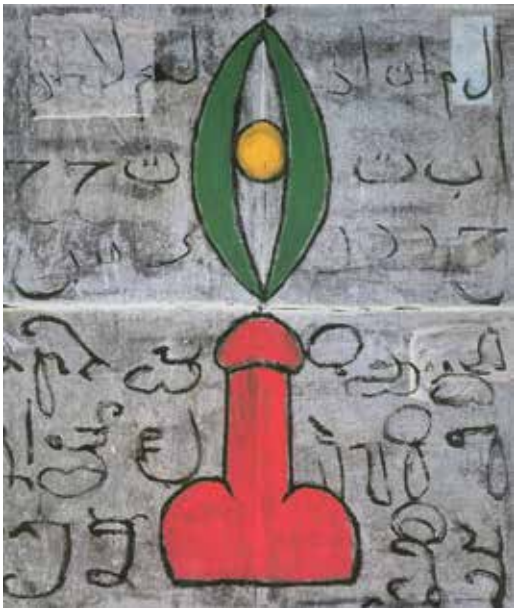

Figure 4.31
Arahmaiani
Lingga-Yoni
1993/4 | Acrylic on canvas | 182 x 140 cm
Image courtesy of the artist

Lingga-Yoni (1993) [Fig. 4.31] is one of Arahmaiani's most important works. Here, she addresses oppositions through a provocation: the symbol's traditional order was reversed to a *yoni-lingga*. She observes this work has been receiving growing international attention since her exhibition *Arahmaiani: Fertility of the Mind*, at Tyler Rollins in New York, in 2014.[250] Recently, she revisited it and applied contemporary insights. Lost for many years, the work is nowadays housed the recently opened Museum MACAM, in Jakarta.[251]

The usual representation of lingga-yoni as an object of worship "makes it a perfect parallel to the tree of life," says Hans Ras.[252] A symbol of sexual union, *lingga*'s tip rises from its most sacred part—the *yoni*—usually taken to represent women's genitals. Indonesian batik expert Hardjonagoro (1931-2008) equally addresses *lingga-yoni* as a symbol of unity, with the father sky visualized in the *lingga*, and the mother earth visualized in the *yoni*.[253] In 2010,

250 Arahmaiani, Lingga-yoni, unpublished interview by Leonor Veiga, Leiden, June 20, 2016.
251 Jewel Topsfield, "New Modern: Australia's Aaron Seeto Leads Indonesia's Embrace of Contemporary Art at Museum MACAN," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 14, 2017, sec. World, http://www.smh.com.au/world/new-modern-australias-aaron-seeto-leads-indonesias-embrace-of-contemporary-art-at-museum-macan-20170714-gxb7de.html.
252 Ras, "The Panji Romance," 450.
253 K.R.T. Hardjonagoro, "The Place of Batik in the History and Philosophy of Javanese

Arahmaiani explained why she devoted attention to this symbol:

> You know about the lingga-yoni, right? Lingga is a phallus. You see it in many temples. In Candi Sukuh, in Temanggung, you see the most naturalistic form of lingga-yoni. I have been going to temples, looking at this symbol that lies on the entrance floor. This is a brilliant conception: in Candi Sukuh we can see the changing of the position of the lingga-yoni when we go in and out. And commonly, lingga is always on the top and yoni is the supporter, always. The yoni is the woman, of course.[254]

She says the traditional significance of *lingga-yoni* has been manipulated through its representation: instead of symbolizing unity between genders, it has been taken literally to signify male dominance. Present in the seminal *Traditions/Tensions* exhibition, in 1996, this work was so controversial in Indonesia that Arahmaiani was sentenced to death by the radical Muslims (the future Islamic Defenders Front, or IDF[255]). There were various reasons for this punishment: firstly, the naturalism with which she represented male and female genitalia, secondly, the combination of Arabic inscriptions with symbols of copulation, and thirdly, for reversing the traditional order. The painting's blasphemous content for the Muslim group resided in the combination of "Malay-Arabic Palawa scripts with sexual organs."[256] She corresponded the union of male and female in color, through Javanese philosophical precepts: red meaning earth and fertility, thus positioned below, was associated with men; green, the synthesis of monca-pat compass colors—mankind—was attributed to women.[257] Not only were women placed on the top, they were also positioned as central. The color combination may denote other aspects, such as red's association with war and green's association with life. Arahmaiani is actively asking men to be supporters, and by extension, the neglected.

Included in the *2nd Asia Pacific Triennial* (APT2), in Brisbane, Australia, the performance *Handle Without Care* (1996) [Fig. 4.32] is another hallmark of Arahmaiani's career. In this performance, she appears dressed as a modern

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Textiles: A Personal View," in *Indonesian Textiles*, ed. Mattiebelle Gittinger, trans. Holmgren (Washington, D.C.: The Textile Museum, 1979), 231.

254 Arahmaiani, Memory and Contemporaneity, 71.

255 Arahmaiani, Dismantling Patriarchalism. The Islamic Defenders Front (IDF) was formalized in the dawn of Reformasi Era, in August 1998. Notably, some of its members, now more moderate, occupy positions in the Indonesian government.

256 Poshyananda, "Roaring Tigers," 43.

257 J. L. Swellengrebel, "Some Characteristic Features of the Korawasrama Story," in *Structural Anthropology in the Netherlands*, 89. There are other readings on Javanese interpretations of colors. See for instance, J. E. Jasper and Mas Pirngadie, *Indonesian Batik Designs* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2006).

version of a traditional Balinese deity, in a defiant gesture. Why is this? Arahmaiani is referring specifically to the interpretation of Ken Dedes's story by historical narratives. She considers that the *Pararaton* script has nullified the deity's importance, meeting Supangkat's observations (see Chapter 3). Both Supangkat in 1975 and Arahmaiani in 1996, claim a revision of Ken Dedes's story. Yet, Arahmaiani also points to the fetishization of Ken Dedes: in the story, Ken Arok murders her husband and forces her to marry. Already pregnant from her first husband, Ken Arok re-impregnates her. Ken Dedes was considered a powerful woman because whoever married her or was born from her womb would become ruler of the world. So, Arahmaiani addresses her status as trophy and her role as submissive.[258] By manipulating a gun, she is correcting the story: if Ken Dedes had been armed, the outcome would probably have been different. This Balinese queen recaptures the importance and power Ken Dedes (and women) have been refused. Her reading of state-sponsored interpretations contradicts the New Order's notion of a 'great past'. It equally rejects women's status today as sole passive members of society whose main role is supporting their husbands.

Figure 4.32
Arahmaiani
Handle Without Care
1996 | Performance
Image courtesy of the artist

258 Arahmaiani, Dismantling Patriarchalism.

Handle Without Care invites women to hold power in their hands and without restraint. Made in the continuation of her performance *Nation for Sale* (1993)—made to accuse the burdens of tourist culture, which objectify women—this classic queen references tourism through "This already iconic costume; you see it in tourist brochures."[259] Thus, she wears sunglasses and a belt around her waist where usually tourists guard money and other utilities. Her defiant attitude is revealed through the camera she holds on her left hand (only the string is visible in the image) and the gun she holds on her right hand. This gun—a fake gun, a toy that replaces the local *keris*, a traditional dagger—is also part of Balinese and Javanese traditional costumes. The gun she holds is long, in a reference to the male dagger (its feminine version is short and exclusive for the woman "to kill herself, when she is desperate,"[260] after her husband dies). So, in this performance, Arahmaiani is empowering women. The crown symbolizes her status, as much as it refers to the responsibilities deriving from powerful positions. In all, the costume communicates with local and global audiences, whom she addresses. With Arahmaiani, the *lingga-yoni* and the Balinese are (re)manipulated: these symbols show that she denies the positioning of women as passive and subordinate members of society, while conveying her refusal to be non-confrontational. Her observations on women's empowerment continue in the installation *Etalase* (1993/4) [Fig. 4.33], one of her most polemical works. It was equally presented in *Traditions/Tensions*, but was deemed problematic and removed from the show. Like with *Lingga-Yoni*, Muslim radicals issued a death threat in her name because of it.

Figure 4.33
Arahmaiani
Etalase
1994 | Display case containing personal photograph, icon, Coca-Cola bottle, Al-Qur'an, fan, Patkwa mirror, drum, box of sand, and pack of condoms | 95 x 147 x 67 cm
Image courtesy of the artist

259 Arahmaiani, Memory and Contemporaneity, 71.
260 Arahmaiani, 70.

Etalase is an assemblage of found objects. It is made up of a nineteenth-century Western vitrine (probably a colonial antique), inside which she strategically positioned items of consumer culture. She recalls:

> I show you: this is an Al-Qur'an, and next to it there is a box. In 1993, the biggest condom factory in Southeast Asia was in Indonesia. This was during Suharto's time; the factory belonged to his family... He had a family program in Indonesia—families were supported to have two children... So, I put the box next to the Al-Qur'an. The radical Muslims were upset... They were upset with the combination and gave me a death threat... Anyway, when this piece was brought to New York by Apinan it also had a problem. The Americans didn't want it in the show. This piece causes problems with people's feelings. But this was not because... of the Al-Qur'an next to condoms, rather because of the combination of the Al-Qur'an and Coca-Cola.[261]

The work ridicules Western methods of preserving valuables, which are safeguarded inside cabinets protected inside institutions (such as museums). To move the idea forward, she performed the gesture of 'keeping for posterity', items which she found representative of current values. The work's title derives from the French word *étalage* (display case), possibly a remnant from the short period of French domination of Indonesia (1808-1811). If Arahmaiani was addressing the currencies of her time, why did she display them inside a museum vitrine? The vitrine is an object known for its preservation capacities but looks fragile in its integrity. I believe that she is simultaneously indicating the strength and the transversality of Western methods of archive and display while conveying its limitations and fragility(ies). I also identify subtext in her choice of what is safeguarded. Each object refers to a category: Al-Qur'an represents religion; condoms indicate sex; Coca-Cola denotes commercialization and globalization; a photograph of the artist voices the beauty myth; a Buddha statue represents spirituality; a Patkwa mirror (used in China for protection against evil forces) indicates superstition; a Fan (a Japanese Samurai fan containing a weapon inside) conveys a culture of violence masked by beauty,;a drum represents music; and finally a box with sand refers to the commercialization of land.

In this work, Arahmaiani is voicing her right to decide what to include for posterity. First, by recognizing that displays "are not passive containers, but are active vehicles in producing, sharing, and giving meaning to popular understandings of the past,"[262] she affirms her empowered position as producer of heritage. She is conscious that "heritage... is inseparable from the displays

261 Arahmaiani, Memory and Contemporaneity, 73.

262 Steven Hoelscher, "Heritage," in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon Macdonald (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 203.

that represent it."[263] Second, aware that museums and canons are inseparable constructs, by placing those selected items inside the vitrine, Arahmaiani actively invests in canon formation, which "has always been determined by the interests of the more powerful."[264] Third, through *Etalase* she claims—as a woman artist from Indonesia—her rightful position to the authority commonly refused to women and especially 'non-Western' women. Her gesture corroborates American art historian Carol Duncan's definition of the art museum as ritual, a place which is not neutral, but instead "a dramatic field... a stage setting that prompts visitors to enact a performance of some kind" whether they recognize and describe it as such, or not.[265] Not only has Arahmaiani reproduced the museum's preservation and education role, she exposed its ritualistic stance.

On the occasion of *Traditions/Tensions*, Poshyananda observed: "As a Muslim woman artist, Arahmaiani has placed herself in a challenging position."[266] Arahmaiani's legacy stretches the borders of feminist discourses, for she has also pioneered socially engaged performance in Indonesia and in the region. Arahmaiani's avant-gardism stems from her relationship with the everyday, with a special incidence of women's subordinate position in (Indonesian) society. Furthermore, her avant-gardism acts upon local idioms, which have been read literally—the *yoni* supports the *lingga*, the queen is an instrument of the king, the exotic dancer conveys a paradise created, the objects inside the museum convey power relations—framing women's role as non-confrontational members of societies (undergoing change). Her post-2002 artistic production continues these intents, but freed from Suharto's New Order, she starts looking within and globally (see Chapter 5).

4.4 *Traditions/Tensions*, Asia Society in New York, 1996 and the Abandonment of the Topic of Traditions by Curators

Some participating artists of *Traditions/Tensions* figure into this study;. At the time, their radicalism was detected but not defined in art historical terms and the selection presented here is nevertheless confined to those I know. In my opinion, Poshyananda's gesture with *Traditions/Tensions* was so effective in demonstrating the circumstance of multiple temporalities that (Southeast) Asian nations lived on during the 1990s that after this exhibition the topic was largely abandoned. By 1996, the theme of 'tradition' had been tried by Western curators in Europe and Australia, by Japanese curators attentive to (Southeast)

263 Hoelscher, "Heritage," 204.

264 John Guillory, "Canon," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study,* ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 234.

265 Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995), 1–2.

266 Poshyananda, "Roaring Tigers," 43.

Asian developments, and it had been equally explored by its own practitioners. Poshyananda's project aimed at demonstrating that tradition should not be interpreted as the opposite of contemporaneity. To do this, he selected work of artists that are inspired by traditions or use traditions to redefine and renegotiate their identity. He observed that, as societies undergoing intense transition toward globalization and industrialization, (Southeast) Asian nations lived intense "dislocations... disorientation and cultural dysfunction in capitals and megacities where cultural heritage and tradition are under threat."[267] He traced two major responses through traditions' employment: first, those artists that express nostalgia or resistance towards a 'poisonous' West (such as Bendi) and secondly, those that react negatively to the stereotypical notion that Asian nations must use traditional elements for their work to be of importance (such as Harsono or Mio). This double burden, says Poshyananda, "has been a source of inspiration for them to work against the cultural grain."[268]

I believe that many of the works that were showcased in *Traditions/Tensions*—such as Arahamaiani's L*ingga-Yoni*, Bendi's *Revolution* and Harsono's *The Voices are Controlled by the Powers*—display the avant-garde stance that Kapur suggested in the exhibitions' catalogue. That is, practices that performed a double-dismantle against national conservative forces that held firm to imported notions of high and low art and were equally tendentious against political art (specially in Java and Bali, where the ambience was one of intense scrutiny), while disputing Western art's supremacy (through local traditions). Yet, at the time of their initial exhibition, these works that I came to term Third Avant-garde were not immediately identified as such. This circumstance results from the fact that the majority of exhibitions organized in the West before *Traditions/Tensions* were developed by Western curators who maintained "preconceived notion[s] of exotica... and [a]desire to rescue authenticity."[269] Whenever contemporary manifestations were showcased, they were introduced through Western anthropological perspectives and in relation to notions of cultural purity.[270] As a result, Western audiences, and particularly the American one, remained unprepared for the varieties of the "politically oriented, with a bias toward installation"[271] kind presented in *Traditions/Tensions*. The works' unconventional appearance—an aspect

267 Poshyananda, "Preface," in *Traditions/Tensions*, 16.

268 Poshyananda, 16.

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

270 See McEvilley, "Exhibition Strategies," 55.

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

relating to the iconoclastic attitude towards old art boundaries, such as Asian and Western traditions of making, High and Low art—was highly contrasting with Western imaginations of Asian 'timeless cultures'.

Reviews were positive; in the exhibition's catalogue, McEvilley's text praises the exhibition for its Asian organization in a Western context (the US), and for its address of Asian-American audiences that remained cornered by museum shows. He equally designated the exhibition as a trigger for a different future, in which former "colonized societies come to experience themselves as their own centers (again), their arts will serve the function of both integrating them around expressions of their won selfhood and evincing new attitudes toward the West."[272] *Traditions/Tensions* was "the first rigorous manifestation of the manifold languages at work in Asian art through the 1990s"[273] says Kapur, because the category was put to work as part of the new, and art historical discourses were effectively problematized. And while the sample was effective and representative of three Asian regions—South Asia was represented by India; Southeast Asia was represented by Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines; East Asia was presented by South Korea—in my opinion, Lê's photo weavings are the most noticeable absence from the show. This situation probably relates to his nationality: Vietnam belonged to the Iron Curtain countries which were not considered by the curatorial scheme. Nevertheless, his photo weavings clearly display the tensions between past and present, and were topical in their criticism toward Western and (Southeast) Asian discursive narratives that the show addressed.

I contend that *Traditions/Tensions* marks the end of the topical relation between tradition and contemporaneity. The practices do not cease; what ends is the intent to understand and problematize the coevality of traditional and the contemporary. Theoretically, as a polemical category, tradition is again reassessed after 2010. During the interlude of the 2000s, it was read by scholars as part of political art expressions—an aspect which is effectively true—but originates from readings which prioritize the contextual conditions of art making. In my opinion, curators and art historians framed the works this way to avoid referring to other polemical categories such as craft and decoration (also taboos in the art world). The negative consequences are that on the one way, traditions' agency remained undetected and their avant-garde stance deferred, so that the Third Avant-garde works' accommodation within art historical discourses remained incomplete. In this regard, it can be said that artists were more successful than curators, as they maintained their practice without having in consideration questions of categorization and, their works continued to feature the growing network of biennials that boomed since the 1990s. Through

272 McEvilley, "Exhibition Strategies," 59.
273 Kapur, "Curating in Heterogeneous Worlds," 179.

Third Avant-garde practices, whether indoors or in exile, whether within art circuits or anthropological circuits, traditional arts effectively became part of the vocabulary of contemporary art.

4.5 Conclusions

This chapter offers a sample of Southeast Asian Third Avant-garde practices from the 1990s which I had contact with, either by exhibition viewing, or by talking with the artists. It starts by suggesting that during 1990s, artistic practice and curatorial practice coincided in time and space, both in Southeast Asia and abroad. As these were the early years of the current globalization, with multiculturalism in its hey-day, these artistic practices were welcomed, especially overseas. Yet, because these artists were members of societies undergoing dictatorships, their works were taken as manifestations showcasing notions of identity and origin. Instead, the locality of the codes they used reflected their will to relate to their audiences (both local and global) while kept their strong messages of discontent undetected by authorities.

The deficient reception of these practices stimulated responses such as *Traditions/Tensions* in 1996, in New York. In that same year, the Singapore Art Museum showcased *Modernity and Beyond: Themes in Southeast Asian Art*, curated by T. K. Sabapathy. This exhibition continued the emerging field of Southeast Asia (which had been tested by the Japan Foundation and the FAM through *New Art in Southeast Asia 1992*), but its focus on modern art was new. In 1997, the FAM presented *The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia: Artists and Movements*. While these exhibitions announced the emergence of the field, they proposed and highlighted Southeast Asia as a fluid region, one that has been touched by several waves of acculturation which arrived by sea. Equally attentive to the question of tradition, works by regional artists were interpreted as demonstrative of a historical agency of negotiation between new imports and old modes of making.

The artists of this chapter are divided by their personal, political circumstances, immersed in dictatorial regimes or exiled from them. Their arts differ as much from, as they resemble each other: resulting from a different relation with their own locality, the tradition used changes, but they coincide in the use of capacities that modern art language introduces (mostly through installations in which these traditional arts gain a totally new existence). These are practitioners to whom the two streams of thought are equally important and familiar, and who perform their blend with ease, as suggested in chapter 1.
The Third Avant-garde came to be because of the conflation of artistic practice, (inter)national curatorial and institutional attention. Without these coincidental factors, these practices would not only have been deferred in art historical terms, they could have not yet achieved recognition.