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

Veiga de Oliveira Matos Guilherme, L.

Conclusion

Ideology disrupts. It closes our eyes.
Instead of finding boxes to put things in,
we tried to find things to put in boxes.[1]
Henrique Barros

The Third Avant-garde was a journey toward finding a frame for Southeast Asian contemporary art practices that recall tradition. As the frame proposed, the Third Avant-garde expands a category that largely remains untouched and resistant to (r)evolution: the previous, mostly male, white, and Western avant-garde. Despite Hal Foster's reassessment of the neo-avant-garde, Kapur's and Partha Mitter's attempts to open it to 'non-Western' peoples, the avant-garde remains a 'sacred' locus of artistic production.

As Portuguese epidemiologist Henrique Barros notices, 'boxes' are not used to accommodate things: we have art, we have tradition, and we have craft, and objects such as a painting, a leather puppet, or an embroidery are put inside. The occurrence of the 'Third Object'[2] disintegrates these divisions because it is simultaneously art, tradition, and craft. Thus, when considering art history's available boxes—style, movement (the so-called 'isms') and the avant-garde—and asking the question incited by the Third Object—'what am I seeing?'—our mode of thinking changes from 'this is art', 'this is ethnography', and we arrive at 'this is both'. This study proposes that to look at new resistance models, such as the Third Object, we should look at the materiality of the objects, which is revealed in the presence of fragments of traditional arts. This dissertation argues that this occurrence constitutes the Third Avant-garde's hallmark. Only then, avant-garde's features (according to Bürger) can be traced—the blurring of high and low cultures, the attack on art's institutionalization, and the relation with everyday life. While these features are present in all previous avant-garde episodes, *premises change according to time, place, and circumstance*. In its blurring of art and ethnography, in its negotiation of different traditions of making (the traditional and the analytical) and in its addressing of the individual and his/her community(ies), the Third Avant-garde meets avant-garde's major achievement: the introduction of new regulations and resistance models.

---

1 Henrique Barros quoted in Miguel Carvalho, "Homens Vítimas: A Face Oculta Da Violência Doméstica," *VISÃO*, November 17, 2016, 51.

2 See Chapter 1, *Recalling Tradition*.

As with its earlier manifestations, the Third Avant-garde emerged in contexts of real political disjuncture. Thus, its features must be acknowledged as tied to notions of discontent born out of complex situations. The (Third) Avant-garde must be comprehended as a force imbued with a conscience of its own time; then, after electing its contemporary language and mission, propels a deferred change in the course of art history. This is why expanding the avant-garde may solve the problem: the avant-garde performs the blurring of categories, works on uncategorized and unorthodox objects (which in turn question art's institutionalization and stimulates deferred theorization), and connects art with (contemporary) life.

As shown, traditions are largely invented. They are often recent (we can even trace their birth date, as shown for Balinese *kecac* and *ogoh-ogoh*) and tied to notions of nationalism. Interestingly, during the Indonesian (and Indian, as Kapur notes) nationalist revolts in the colonial era of the mid-twentieth century, traditions were experienced as revolutionary because they contained a sense of difference with the colonizer. Later in the 1970s, Southeast Asian (but not exclusively) post-colonial totalitarian regimes promoted traditions as fixed entities, thus precipitating a recapture by regional artists. The significance of the 1980s up until today (because conditions of disjuncture keep emerging) resides in a programmatic change: from the formation of national discourses, artists moved toward generating a cultural identity, that in the 1990s, would help them negotiate their position in an increasingly globalized world. This meant attacking local and global discourses on traditional arts, and simultaneously working beyond Western and local conceptions of art. As such, this international, postmodern, and post-colonial tendency does not constitute a movement, nor does it conform to an evolutionary rhythm 'traditional-modern-contemporary'.

Traditions are largely modern constructs; distinguished from traditions-in-use or customs (whose vitality contributes to cultural praxis and for the shaping of cultural identities), during the modern era traditions were formulated as the 'other' of the modern. This gesture of categorization has concealed traditions as fragmented entities that rely on the modern concept of quotation. So, in the postmodern era, fragments of traditions are being reenacted, initially for their surface value (this is postmodernism's celebratory stance), and, after, for their critical value (this is the Third Avant-garde). Affirms Kapur, "a sensitive handling of living traditions helps maintain the sense of a complex society which informs and sometimes subverts the modernisation that the very institution of the nation-state inaugurates (and the market promotes)."[3] It is through the recovery of traditions' inherent critical value that

3 Geeta Kapur, "Dismantled Norms: Apropos Other Avantgardes," in *Art and Social Change: Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Caroline Turner (Canberra: Pandanus Books,

the avant-garde emerges and acts upon this polemical category. Thus, when Third Avant-garde artists build on traditions, they use them as analytical tools, they operate in them, and show that the "Western assumption that assertions of 'traditions' are always responses to the new may exclude local narratives of cultural continuity and recovery."[4] This is why Clifford mentions that "the pure products go crazy,"[5] and instead we should assume "that cultural forms will always be made, unmade and remade."[6]

For this dissertation, the discipline of anthropology was called in as the two disciplines, art history and anthropology, meet within Third Avant-garde practices. Through them, the art/culture divide Clifford identifies as "two avenues [that] are still separate zones of valuation and display" for non-Western constructs,[7] is being combated. The greater outcome is that the binary art museum/ethnographic museum is losing pertinence. To quote Crimp, we are *On the Museum's Ruins*.

As mentioned, Third Avant-garde practices emerged in various places, and were performed by unrelated artists—in the 1960s Latin America, and in the 1970s Southeast Asia (a period which I came to represent by the seminal work *Ken Dedes*), through non-confrontational gestures that started in the 1980s in many parts of Asia and Africa. Since the 1990s, Third Avant-garde practices achieved prominent recognition. This is what I called a 'boom'. The main difference of Third Avant-garde practices since the 1980s (at least in a Southeast Asian context) is the absence of a written manifesto that characterized earlier events. Now, amidst more professionalized conditions, artists widely left these aspects to curators that closely accompanied their production. In many cases, these first generation of curators (among which Poshyanada and Supangkat), were themselves practicing artists who changed their space of intervention by being in the forefront of international curation.

After the seminal *Traditions/Tensions* in New York, in 1996, the issue of tradition ceased to be topical. The world was left with largely ineffective and incomplete discourses towards Third Avant-garde practices, especially because art historians left these artworks deterritorialised. In the meantime, anthropologists grasped the momentum[8] and continued theorization. Theories such as *appropriation* gained new impetus (even though distinctions between

2005), 49.

4 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 15.

5 Clifford, 1.

6 James Clifford, "Indigenous Articulations," *The Contemporary Pacific* 13, no. 2 (2001): 479.

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

8 Art has always been a topic of discussion among anthropologists through the sub-discipline *Anthropology of Art*.

art and tradition were maintained), *material complex* (which is attentive to changes in perception according to time and place), and *agency* (which examines the mediatory role of artworks, while it considers both artworks and artists as social agents of this mediation) came to the fore. These scientific contributions have resulted, as Clifford notes, in ethnographic museums rebranding themselves as 'world art' museums. These changes are significant because they elevate practices that have historically been refused the status of art to its realm, and have equally fostered the (re)reading of ethnographic and civilization collections through contemporary artworks.[9]

Still, when talking to artists such as Dinh Q. Lê, or curators such as Indonesian Alia Swastika, they express discomfort and discontent every time 'non-Western' contemporary art is exhibited inside ethnographic museums in the West and in 'civilization' museums and theme parks in the region. All Southeast Asian artists with whom I spoke expressed their preference to be exhibited within art institutions, albeit acknowledging the difficulty inherent to such recognition. Their fondness is at odds with museums' institutionalization, because art museums remain boxed in their own conventions. Meanwhile, they have actively embraced the post-2001 opening that biennials, art fairs and commercial galleries have manifested towards their practices, and thus are increasingly renowned.

As shown throughout the chapters, Third Avant-garde manifestations ground themselves in material fragments of traditions. Traditions are simultaneously appropriated and reappropriated; they perform avant-garde's methods of montage, collage, decontextualisation, and the ready-made. In their mission of wrecking the taxonomical division between fine arts and traditional arts they blur the two, always imbued with a motivation to perform social agency. This is why the avant-garde is relevant; its true radicalism is manifested in its capacity to bring back the notion of art making as part of social production. So, the avant-garde constitutes a politicized aesthetic with social and disciplinary implications, and this aspect justifies the need for a deeper, and 'third' rupture with modernism. Now, the disruption is performed through traditions, and coupled with an intensified critique of art's institutionalizing forces.

From here, the Third Avant-garde emerges outside the West (and/or through practices by 'non-Western' artists residing in the West), and is made by those communities that have been designated traditional, unchanging and ritualistic in their modes of action. Equally, the Third Avant-garde is produced by choice, to convey social agency, and according to one's individual

9 Leonor Veiga, "Anke Bangma: 'Renewal Can Also Be Found in Reinterpreting the Historical.,'" *Leiden Arts and Society Blog* (blog), September 20, 2016, http://www.leidenartsinsocietyblog.nl/articles/anke-bangma-renewal-can-also-be-found-in-reinterpreting-the-historical.

histories. This in turn may lead to the reversal of categories and gender roles: practices traditionally made by women such as *đan lát* (weaving grass) and batik, are made by men; museum curation and *dalang* storytelling, which are traditionally male territories, are penetrated by women. And, in continuum with earlier avant-garde movements, oftentimes Third Avant-garde artists lose individuality, because their works are made by artists and artisans alike (sometimes they are even aided by computers, something that denotes how traditions adapt to times).

Mirroring Southeast Asia's diversity, Third Avant-garde manifestations accommodate all local expressions possible, and the multitude of results within. For instance, *wayang* denotes freedom to act socially as well as freedom to act upon traditions, which are increasingly secularized by Third Avant-garde interventions. If this study (also) aimed at showing variety of Southeast Asian traditions, it equally recognizes that the making, unmaking, and remaking of traditions provided Third Avant-garde artists with an opportunity to learn about their (local) cultures, while their artworks kept offering a space for self-questioning and/or self-assertiveness.

In continuum with former avant-garde artists, postmodern Third Avant-garde artists also claim that originality, authenticity and purity of traditions are produced by the museum (art and/or world art museum alike) and continued by the discursive structures of the two disciplines (anthropology and art history). Thus, they act upon what was regarded as a polarity, Western 'modern' art and Eastern 'traditional' arts, and reshuffle both by making, unmaking and remaking them. This provocation is nevertheless natural for Third Avant-garde artists, as they belong to communities that have been subject to several waves of acculturation. They actively show how their reality is shaped, and provide useful information to convey its non-linearity, operate on the level of meaning, and show the complexity of their locus of production, while providing a comment on history. In short, Third Avant-garde artists are inherently cosmopolitan beings, who "live tenaciously in terrains of historical and cultural *transition*."[10] They often find themselves "in the interstices of the old and the new, confronting the past as the present."[11]

"Cosmopolitanism is infinite ways of being";[12] it may be traditional, modern, and contemporary; it includes past and present, and possibly announces a different future, like the prior avant-gardes. Third Avant-garde artists show resilience too, and can articulate the past in the present, revealing the burden attached to notions of (inter)national constructs (such as art and tradition), comment on the injustice of traditions, and express their discontent

10 Sheldon I. Pollock et al., "Introduction: Cosmopolitanisms," *Public Culture* 12, no. 3 (2000): 580.

11 Pollock et al., 580.

12 Pollock et al., 588.

with current occurrences and all forms of dogma imposed on them and their society(ies). And it is through the presence of fragments of traditions that blunt messages (which are paramount of the avant-garde since its 1917 inception with *Fountain*) are conveyed. In the Third Avant-garde, those bold messages demonstrate a subtlety that was unknown of before. This is what I called 'non-confrontational' practices.

The Third Avant-garde protest thus not only connects art with (contemporary) life, it continues the unfinished character of the avant-garde in a radical way, which had yet to be fully carried out. The initial attempts of the 1970s rapidly waned, in many cases because these artist collectives were silenced by authorities). Through traditions, the Third Avant-garde (which came into being in its full expression in the 1990s, as a result from the meeting of artistic and curatorial practices) provides unorthodox notions of art and tradition, and by questioning their validity, instigates a debate on the (inter) national attachment to these heritage constructs. To do so, in their works, Third Avant-garde artists quote fragments of those traits and symbols which were regarded as (their) cultural emblems: 'I am Indonesian, therefore I use *wayang*'. What was necessary to make this radical move was to learn how to apply the lessons of the avant-garde and transport it to traditions. And this process, as argued in chapter 4, has largely been incomprehensible because the emergence of the works was concurrent to their global display. During the 1990s, Third Avant-garde artworks were largely received as manifestations of continuity with the past, and devoid of a radical stance. Meanwhile, traditions were not taken as a fundamental ingredient of the present. This is why *Traditions/ Tensions* of 1996 was important: it promoted the reading of traditions in the midst of a changing world, it identified their fragmentary nature, and the spirit of contestation they contained. What failed to be discerned was the *radicalism* of these gestures, an aspect this dissertation aimed to accomplish.

While Third Avant-garde artists were actively playing with what was perceived as two antagonistic forces, initially they were shamed. On the one hand, they were accused of 'othering themselves' for Western consumption. And on the other hand, they were condemned for copying the West, because they were appropriating notions of the exotic that the West itself had created through Orientalist discourses, which remained active in collective Western and Eastern consciousness on the onset of decolonization. To quote Kitty Zijlmans, they were "wrong both ways".[13] Moreover, in their countries of origin, the situation was no different: they were not understood, either because they were using a medium that was perceived as flawed for lacking originality (like batik for Brahma Tirta Sari, or textiles for Siributr), or because people did not

13 Kitty Zijlmans, "An Intercultural Perspective in Art History: Beyond Othering and Appropriation," in *Is Art History Global?*, ed. James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2007), 290.

grasp the analyses they performed, and the modern art language that they were imbuing traditions with. As a result, it was difficult to make their space in the artworld, but it has happened, because curators, mostly local, have beenvery attentive and active.

Among its consequences, the Third Avant-garde has introduced another important and largely ignored aspect of art making: decoration, possibly the last taboo of art. Art demands craft but abhors decoration, which is regarded as superfluous, and minor. Yet, not only artists such as Wiharso, Lê, and Siributr use decoration freely and abundantly (this is a major disparity with their Western counterparts), it is largely within decoration that the time lagged or temporal dimension of these slow crafted artworks resided. In addition, the discursive sense of time introduced by modernity is destabilized. By working on premodern forms and methods, the vitality of these constructs is reenacted. And, because fragments from traditions diverge from place to place, and are elected by artists according to their individual preoccupations, different aspects are selected, leading to great variety. Thus, in his double role of heroic and anarchic artist, the Third Avant-garde artist is an inventor as much as he is a continuator. He or she is an individual who (re)shuffles, (re)formulates, and (re)positions what history has provided, while acting upon his or her current moment. Through social agency, they proclaim the right to use all elements at their disposal, even if that means going against established discourses. Thus, Third Avant-garde artists show that the combination of art and tradition is valid, and that these two forces are not oppositional, but rather mutually enrich each other. So, it is fair to propose that just as painting and sculpture found new spaces of intervention in the modern era, by being relieved of their earlier functions of indoctrination, so can traditions. I find this positive, because avant-garde is promoted by art history as art's most esteemed and illustruous category. As John Clark mentions, "The notion of being avant-garde gives the artist confidence as a member of a new intelligentsia marked by access to the new wave of progress that would change the world."[14] This recognition is relevant for artists that, despite being constantly asked to represent their cultures in high-profile exhibitions across continents, are still cornered by art history. As such, giving them this space is not only needed, it is urgent.

An avant-garde work acts in the 'here' and 'now'. It must be out—meaning ahead—of its own historical moment, more appropriately placed in the future, which it envisages. Avant-garde works problematize the status quo; their function is to go a step further. The selection of artworks presented in this study (which is limited by my own capacity to meet artists and see artworks) demonstrates not only artists' refusal to make art along Western

14 John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 231.

constructs, but equally it conveys unsettling realities of collective trauma and pain, which artists express through familiar codes. What makes an impression in the works of Roland, Lê, Madeira, Harsono, Mio, Siributr, and Arahmaiani is the messages of genocides and human rights abuses, all through local examples. Their works transcend the national and speak globally. An example is Siributr's *78*, which was motivated by the Rohingya crisis. And what makes an impression in the work of Supangkat, Piadasa, Mio, Bendi, Wiharso, Jumaadi, BTS, Lertchaiprasert, and Yonathan is the cornering they felt as members of their societies for no other reason besides the values which they held, and their questioning of local dogma, including 'how art should be made'. Their introduction of traditional arts within contemporary art practices is not contradictory to artmaking, but rather demonstrates (individual) resilience in making "postmodernism in our own terms," as Kapur suggests, before the West defines it.[15] Using traditions, Kapur suggests, is vitally important because "it is what renders us distinguishable."[16]

Third Avant-Garde artworks selected for this study, from Supangkat's *Ken Dedes* to Jumaadi's *Life and Death of a Shadow,* convey locality through traditions, as much as they report on issues of (inter)national relevance, including economic downfalls, corruption, and genocide. This is what makes the Third Avant-garde so unique: the impact of these manifestations is equally significant for nearby and broader communities, because its formal features (including the use of ready-mades, slow crafting and assemblage) are merged with the documentation of regional histories that know no borders. But as Flores observes, while "the avant-garde [is] a valorized rubric of transformation... The new life will not come."[17] No matter how much social engagement is put into an artist's practice—take Roldan as an example—the consequences of these acts are null.

The Third Avant-garde is thus a highly cosmopolitan avant-garde, that plays with what is no longer possible to define as antagonistic forces: the local and the global. In an increasingly globalized world in which distances are shortened, Third Avant-garde practices enable (local) artists a comment

15 Geeta Kapur, "When Was Modernism in Indian Art?," in *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (1995), ed. Geeta Kapur (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000), 297–98.

16 Kapur, 297–98. Many other artists could figure this study. I am aware that this selection mirrors my own organic trajectory, thus it should not be considered final. This study emphasizes the possibility of meeting the artwork and the artist, and this is a difficult endeavour especially because I was located in the Netherlands, where Southeast Asian contemporary art representation is deficient (like in the rest of Europe). In this respect, internet has proved to be an extremely useful tool and a major player, as it reduced distance.

17 Patrick D. Flores, "'Total Community Response': Performing the Avant-Garde as a Democratic Gesture in Manila," *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* 1, no. 1 (2017): 15–18.

on their reality(ies). This is done by uniting local symbols with a universal language that has been transmitted to them through (a globalized) education since the colonial period. As Jean Fisher notes, their practice

> [C]oncerns agency—the ability to initiate a swerve away from the conventional pathways of thought, to engage with, and open up different ways of thinking ethically and collectively that are responsive to the way each part is intricately woven into an indivisible wholeness. This can only happen if all entities are included as equal participants in the conversation.[18]

This is, in my opinion, what happens in Third Avant-garde works: the conflation of elements is balanced, and there is no sense of making one discourse more relevant or more prominent than the other. Following their inherent complexity, Third Avant-garde works must be analyzed considering all possible elements—the traditional, the modern, and the contemporary alike. So, Third Avant-garde works not only continue Duchamp's initial claim that art is a value, construed in and by the (art) museum, they also continue its open-ended discourse. This, in turn, makes Third Avant-garde practices contain a potential to change, not only the course of theorization but equally to ruin the modern art museum *a step further*. This is the Third Avant-garde's direct achievement: it resolves the dialectic, as much as it precludes progress by means of understanding and resolving what were regarded as binary sets of oppositions of us and them, high and low art, West and East, art and ethnography. And as Thomas McEvilley detects,

> [I]t is not the individual who speaks... but Language that speaks through the individual. In the same sense, it is not the individual who makes images, but the vast image bank of the individual... the artists [is] a channel as much as a source, and negates or diminishes the idea of Romantic creativity and the deeper idea on which it is founded, that of the Soul.[19]

McEvilley's remark confirms that artists largely make Third Avant-garde works unconsciously. And while this study aims to go a step further into the understanding of other ways of art making, the Third Avant-garde (which was theoretically deferred because of its coincidental emergence with postmodern

18 Jean Fisher, "Thinking, Weaving: Another Approach to Cosmopolitanism," in *All Our Relations: 18th Biennale of Sydney*, ed. Catherine de Zegher and Gerald McMaster (Sydney: The Biennale of Sydney, 2012), 87.

19 Thomas McEvilley, "On the Manner of Adressing Clouds," in *Capacity: History, the World, and the Self in Contemporary Art and Criticism* (Amsterdam B. V., 1996), 226.

practices) claims that we need to look at artistic practice "simply [as] a process of bringing out into the open all modes of expression."[20]

Thus, we must continue to display and theorize, as much as the artists must keep producing artworks. And, as Mio Pang Fei suggested for his Neo-Orientalism, this is a task for future generations. Because, as Flores quotes in this affirmation by Bürger, the avant-garde "remains an alternative we must continue to suggest."[21]

20 McEvilley, "On the Manner of Adressing Clouds," 225.
21 Flores, "'Total Community Response,'" 18.