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

Veiga de Oliveira Matos Guilherme, L.

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Author: Veiga, Leonor

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POSTFACE

This investigation, *The Third Avant-garde*, results from what I consider a remarkable and unacceptable void in Western theorization, which has wide repercussions in education, academic curricula and museum practices. No matter how much is done to resolve this century-old inheritance that divided world's populations into makers of arts and makers of ethnography, it remains largely undone and unresolved. Art is made in the West, whereas art made outside the West is always preceded by a modifier that locates its origin. This is why we have Latin American art, Chinese Art, or Indonesian art.

I grew up in Asia, more concretely in Macau, between 1980 and 1996. During this time, I contacted Asian communities daily, listened to their languages, visited Buddhist and Hindu temples, Catholic and Protestant churches, and contacted Muslim and Sikh communities. I also saw much beautiful and outstanding art, the kind that historically originated Western imaginations of Asia as a place of luxurious material culture. I grew to admire the splendor and refined character of Chinese, Thai, Indian or Pilipino arts and crafts, and to be interested in their philosophies and collective culture.

Being a Third Culture Kid fascinated with these legacies, I decided to study art. Yet, throughout my academic life, I was struck by what seemed incomprehensible to me—that I was repeatedly studying the arts from Sumer, Egypt, Greece, Rome, and later Europe and America. I kept waiting for the introduction of cultures surrounding me in art historical lessons or even on visual arts curricula. Even if I was in contact with Buddhism every day, I remained ignorant what a Thai Buddhist temple in Thailand implied, and what its architecture denoted. I was surrounded by things I had no access to. But more importantly, I never saw traces of complex, large scale jade or ivory sculptures made in China, or extremely beautiful and intricate embroideries from India in any art historical book. Why was art history not referring to Asia? I also travelled to the West; for instance, I visited important museums such as the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. in 1991. Despite much European and American art presented, again, I saw no traces of Native American or Asian art. Why, alongside art history books, art museums were only showing art pertaining to the European canon, and were neglecting all Asian art, or art originating from autochthonous communities?

Later I understood that these cultures were considered ethnographic—an aspect that for me, was incomprehensible. How could magnificent, highly crafted classical arts from Asia be generally considered as pertaining to the

realm of the uncivilized? Living as I was in a quasi-colonial place where the two cultures coexisted, this was impossible to grasp. After all, during the 1990s, Macau and Hong Kong (and arguably many parts of Asia) were much more high-tech, modernized, and developed than many places in Europe. Certainly, there were many places that seemed untouched by modernity, but the same happens in European locations. Then, what was the difference? Why this discrepancy? If these communities were in fact only making traditional arts—Chinese calligraphy, Indonesian batik, Thai embroideries, Indian ivory sculpture—and these fascinating materials were not considered art, what could I do? Later I learned that maybe I should have opted for anthropology instead of fine art studies if I wanted to understand the material culture of these populations.

This dissertation allowed me to go back to these questions, but instead of accepting that there was nothing I could do, it forced me to find a solution. I remembered what I had witnessed in 1995 and 1996 Macau, when a group of talented artists, mostly Chinese but also Macanese, were making art merging lessons of Chinese calligraphy with Western modernism. The art of Chinese artist Mio Pang Fei remains with me since then. In order to analyse his art, I had to ask: 'What am I seeing?'

Fortunately, in 2006 I returned to Asia, this time to study Arts and Crafts from Indonesia. Later I pursued an MA in Curatorial Studies in Lisbon with a strong focus on contemporary art. This aspect triggered me to trace contemporary expressions of Indonesian artists that worked upon the traditional arts of batik, gamelan and *wayang*. This thesis, entitled *Memory and Contemporaneity: Indonesian contemporary art, a curatorial project*, was fundamental to confirm that, despite the contemporariness of these works, they remained outside of art historical narratives. In 2010, when I went to Indonesia to pursue fieldwork for my MA research, I was criticized for having an orientalist gaze toward the arts I was looking at. After all, I was looking at traditional arts, like so many (Western) curators did since the 1990s. While this is valid, and must be considered a natural attitude coming from Indonesian people, it only proved that my angle was problematic also for them. I had to act upon several considerations and notions of discontent. Meanwhile, living in Europe, I continued to observe the success that the exact same Indonesian artists were getting, by being showcased in high profile exhibitions such as the Venice Biennial, the documenta of Kassel, and curated exhibitions such as *Beyond the Dutch*, at the Utrecht Centraal Museum in 2009, or *The Global Contemporary. Art Worlds After 1989*, at the ZKM Museum of Contemporary Art, Karlsruhe, in 2011. Thus, while they were actively curated, their creations remain(ed) outside art historical books, and confined to catalogues and literature that regard the specificity of local expressions.

The attempts to frame these works in the mid-1990s through notable exhibitions such as *Traditions/Tensions* at the Asia Society, in New York, in 1996, had waned and were eventually abandoned. The topic had lost relevance for academics, museums, and was largely deserted. My mission with The Third Avant-garde was to recover these fundamental insights, and give these artists a territory by defining their work in art historical terms (see chapter 2 for a detailed description of the phenomenon I termed as Third Avant-garde). This meant finding within the discipline already existing categories. Arguably it was possible to create a new category, but the avant-garde revealed to be a force, which emerges unannounced, and provokes necessary major changes, so that theorization can be elicited. To arrive at this solution, I had to unlearn and relearn art history, because this time I was combining it with anthropological insights. While anthropology looks at objects in their social relations, and I find this correct, before the 1960s and the 1970s' studies on the avant-garde, art history looked to objects in isolation and mostly focused on the description of styles and formal attributes. Thus, this dissertation represents a double endeavor: on the one hand, it tries to convey the social conjuncture of the art works' emergence, and on the other hand, it tries to apprehend art historical discourses, and use them to complete this major blindspot I always identified within art historical narratives. Meanwhile, I had to change the way I thought about science-making; Portugal follows the French tradition of descriptive analysis, while the Netherlands applies the Anglo-Saxon tradition, which values critical thinking. This programmatic shift also contributed to personal growth.

The Third Avant-garde revealed itself as an epiphany: deferred like the prior ones, because the avant-garde is not immediately grasped and identified, when I understood the mix the artists were positing, and how they were positioning themselves, it became clear that distance was necessary to trace their artistic gestures. Finally, I had the right to understand the material culture and artistic expression of the communities from where I lived, and simultaneously was giving them a place within the discipline I chose to contribute to: art history. The result pays tribute to existing science developed by talented scholars.

This work will hopefully help change schoolbooks by including art beyond the Western canon on the spotlight, or by looking at art as a pan-human phenomenon without necessarily referencing specific geographical locations of emergence which seem increasingly less pertinent in the context of globalization. Meanwhile, the Third Avant-garde can be identified for other locations. This way, art history might be a discipline where we identify who we are through local concerns, and who we have become through historical global interactions. Only then, we may become more complete and cosmopolitan.

