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

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SUMMARY

The Third Avant-garde investigates radical art manifestations in Southeast Asia, which took place around the mid-1980s, when postmodernism started to gain force in the region. It proposes that the advent of postmodernism in Southeast Asia is anchored in the materiality of traditional arts, an aspect that renders it different from its Western equivalent. The dissertation distinguishes two sets of postmodern manifestations: first, practices that use traditions in a celebratory way, and second, another set of postmodern works which use traditional arts in a radical way. This study proposes to regard the employment of traditional arts of the radical kind as manifesting a double dismantle—first, against local patronizing forces that were enforcing artists to practice academic art and Western media (such as painting and sculpture), and second, a distancing attitude from Western art intelligentsia, who acted as ‘owners of the discourse’, and regarded ‘non-Western’ practitioners as followers rather than as trendsetters. To investigate this, the discipline of anthropology was called in, as was the art historical category of the avant-garde. By combining the two approaches—anthropology of art regards the object as related to a certain context, a view I agree with, and avant-garde, which is an essential category for the evolvement of art history as a discipline—I propose that contemporary art from Southeast Asia that reprocesses traditional arts can be regarded as manifesting discontent with local and global (inherited) forces. These radical gestures are novel, and result from practicing art in a certain location and which is bound to a certain socio-political context.

The Third Avant-garde emerged unannounced in the art world in the 1990s, when the meeting of artistic practices and curatorial undertakings occurred. In this period reception proved ineffective; the use of traditions was received as a sign of provenance—‘I am Indonesian, therefore I use *wayang*’—and thus the socio-political messages imbedded in the works were not fully apprehended. The result of this was that the avant-garde’s agency over traditions remained undetected until the 2010s. I argue that this situation stems from the ‘deferred temporality of the avant-garde’—the temporal discrepancy between making and reception that characterizes radical gestures, and that American art historian Hal Foster refers to as one of avant-garde’s most significant attributes.

The dissertation follows the teachings contained in the *Theory of the Avant-garde* (1984) by German literary critic Peter Bürger and combines its insights with those by American art historian Hal Foster and Indian art historian

Geeta Kapur (among others) to propose another avant-garde moment, this time occurring in Southeast Asia. The most striking feature of what I call 'The Third Avant-garde' is the presence of traditional arts, especially if one considers the avant-garde from a Western point of view, where avant-garde marked a break with tradition. Thus, the avant-garde is proposed here as force, linking to the moment of its occurrence—the 'here and the now'—and proposing a different future. These practices can be considered *multi-temporal* works, ones in which past and present coeval. The apparent anachronism (as spectators when looking at these works our mind diverges and fluctuates between associations of ethnography and art) is, I convey, what makes these works most striking and appealing. Interestingly, these works exist in the sphere of biennials and large-scale exhibitions but are not equally integrated in art museums or in academic books on art and art history. This contradictory aspect—their presence in the most important venues such as the Venice Biennial—contrasts with their absence from the institutional system of museum, academia and the archive. These artworks (seem to) play with long established notions of museums and academia, and notably penetrate the scope of art and ethnography. Equally, they propose new modes of understanding what art is, and demonstrate how diverse art making can be—in accordance with the geographical and cultural context of production.

Chapter 1, *Recalling Tradition*, revolves around the concept of *tradition* and its emergence within contemporary art practices. It puts forward a new reality—initially termed as the 'Third Object'—and proposes that the unequivocal presence of fragments of traditional crafts, rituals and customs in contemporary art practices has not yet been conveniently addressed by art historical discourses, albeit attempts were made. 'Third Objects' are works that connect two worlds that were regarded as oppositional and disparate—that of the past and the ethnographic museum, and that of the present and the (modern) art museum—ultimately questioning the system that divided the fields of culture and art. It demonstrates that unrelated artists from diverse locations of the world, including Southeast Asia, reprocess fragments of traditions to make sense of their present-day *cultural identity* and *citizenship*: this is done through an *avant-gardist* discourse that conjures both rupture and continuation.

Chapter 2, *The Third Avant-Garde*, elaborates on the conceptual and theoretical evolvment of the avant-garde. It proposes that when regarded conceptually, it is possible to break with the Western hegemony on the avant-garde discourse—an aspect that has caught the attention of numerous scholars, including Kapur. I suggest regarding the avant-garde generally as a historical force, that after finding its contemporary language and mission, springs to form artistic manifestations that aim to change the status quo of society and art. In order to fully understand the event of the Third Avant-garde, I discuss a number

of examples of important artworks by artists from Southeast Asia.

Chapter 3, *The Third Avant-garde: Early Days (1970s-80s)*, proposes that even though the Third Avant-garde in Southeast Asia has happened most prominently since the mid-1980s, its roots can be traced back to the mid-1970s. At the time, several unrelated artist groups from Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and The Philippines published written manifestos that announced the need for a rapprochement between art and life (which included looking at the diversity of peoples and cultures). It then describes the proposed first Southeast Asian Third Avant-garde work, *Ken Dedes* (1975), by Jim Supangkat, on his student days. The chapter then suggests that since the mid-1980s the radicalism of the 1970s underwent reformulation: through non-confrontational practices, works imbued with social preoccupations and grounded in local sensibilities and histories emerge in Southeast Asia. The 1980s are extremely relevant because this decade witnessed the emergence of curatorial undertakings in various locations in Southeast Asia and Japan.

Chapter 4, *The Boom of the Third Avant-garde (1990s)*, refers to exhibition practices that occurred in the 1990s worldwide. In the 1990s, the topic of tradition was exalted on the *Third Habana Biennial Tradition and Contemporaneity* and *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibitions in 1989, in the three initial editions of the *Asia Pacific Triennial*, in Queensland, in Australia. Generally, curatorial projects proposed to demonstrate the contextual circumstances of artistic production in (Southeast) Asian countries but did not completely address the avant-garde stance that was imbedded in the works through the employment of traditional arts. Thus, the seminal *Traditions/Tensions* in 1996, in New York responded to these limited readings, by giving local experts a voice. Still, the Third Avant-garde remained undetected, due to the temporal coincidence of production and exposure. So, by the decade's end, curators moved beyond the topic.

The chapter equally observes that Third Avant-garde practices clearly differ from preceding avant-garde moments in their lack of a written manifesto. Now, artistic gestures do not follow a group intention, but rather are done by individual artists and contain personal acts of social agency. During the 1990s, the main theme of Third Avant-garde works is the local, which in turn reveals desire to communicate with local community(ies). As a consequence, works are materialized through very localized traditional codes.

The 1990s in Southeast Asia were marked by the persistence of dictatorial regimes. Thus, in many cases, the Third Avant-garde artist acted in exile. To better frame and combine these two aspects—the life of the artist and the life of the curated artwork—I enumerate works by a number of selected, relevant Southeast Asian artists, who I contacted and with whom I discussed these issues.

Chapter 5, *The Third Avant-garde Addresses Global Issues (after*

2002) refers to a panoply of exhibitions and publications that contributed to global recognition of Southeast Asian contemporary art, with artists enjoying attention by museums, art galleries and art fairs. The chapter then demonstrates that tradition, as a topic, has been theoretically reenacted in the 2010s: this temporal gap provided artists, curators and art historians a necessary distance for an integrated reading. Southeast Asian artists continue to use available traditions, and curators recognize that tradition remains relevant and topical for local sensibilities. Since 2002, Third Avant-garde artists experience new contextual socio-political conditions, which call for creative solutions. Whereas the critical stance remains, the motives differ.

The *Conclusion* demonstrates the achievements of the Third Avant-garde—namely its discursive contribution and its urgency. It proposes that the Third Avant-garde is conducive to a new way of understanding tradition—as *a living archive*—and that tradition may be an integrant aspect of art making. Thus, it demonstrates that the avant-garde, as an art historical category, could be expanded. And thanks to the work of some notable curators, who were attentive to the needs of the artists from their countries of origination, the Third Avant-garde fights against established international norms which appear in the majority of art books, and equally questions divisions between center and periphery, and between art and ethnography.