



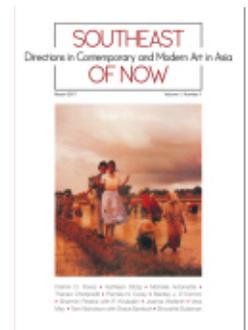
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Editorial: Discomfort

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Editorial: Discomfort

It was in the storage grounds of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) in Siem Reap, Cambodia that the idea of establishing a journal for discussion of art in Southeast Asia was first uttered aloud. A sprawling facility dotted with both local and European trees as well as dilapidated modernist villas, the primary function of the EFEO here is the storage of thousands of Angkorean and post-Angkorean artefacts collected from various sites, as well as some repatriated from former colonial repositories in France. It is a facility that is not open to the public and not widely known outside of specialist circles. Yet its rooms of precisely organised (if imprecisely catalogued and archived) objects—thousands of Bodhisattva feet here, hundreds of Chinese bowls there—are filled with treasures whose appeal would extend far beyond the realm of archaeologists and Hindu-Buddhist scholars. These fragments of objects, and the various discourses (including of de/colonisation, connoisseurship, archaeology and commerce) that placed them in this institution, might offer points of intersection for scholars of 19th- and 20th-century colonial historiography and knowledge formation, students of curatorial and archival practices, artists interested in repetition and materiality, watchers of markets and, perhaps most strikingly, others outside of these overlapping specialist circles: enthusiasts and members of the general public.

The complexly layered histories of the objects in the EFEO, as well as the diversely intersecting publics who engage and make meaning from these objects, seem to us a fitting metaphor for the project that is a journal of contemporary and modern arts that are related to the region we call Southeast Asia. Works of art in, from, of and around this region also have often had confounding histories, and appeal in various ways across a broad range of audiences.

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Since that first dreaming-out-loud declaration of a desire for a journal dedicated to contemporary and modern art in Southeast Asia, an editorial collective gradually formed, consisting of junior and early-career scholars, and an advisory board of senior scholars was invited. Our interests diverge but we share a commitment to the need for an editorially independent forum for the rigorous discussion of the histories of the arts in “Southeast Asia”, encompassing both that which we call “modern” and that which we call “contemporary”.

We felt it important that the journal look back in various ways, as well as look to more recent artists, artworks, discourses and events of various kinds. Many of us in the editorial collective have worked both in curatorial contexts as well as on scholarly research, and we are attuned to the importance that exhibitionary and related moments have played in the formation of much of our field. Yet we share a certain wariness: we feel that many discussions that pass for contemporary art discourse these days could benefit from being framed more historically. We believe that a journal that straddles the two shifting, fluid and overlapping cultural domains of recent practices, from the 19th century (and before) to the present (and after), might enrich and expand on both sides of these conversations. It is our hope that such a journal might challenge us to think about modernity and contemporaneity more broadly. Not only were many of the artworks, practices, visions and ideas that are today classified as modern once thought of as contemporary, but what is considered contemporary art of Southeast Asia also has to be understood discursively in relation to the modern.



After over a year of discussion, consultation, research and preparation, we launched our website on 1 March 2015 (southeastofnow.com), originally envisaging it as a platform for an electronic journal available online. A declaratory text articulated our concerns:

[T]he global discourse of contemporary and modern art remains stubbornly asymmetrical, with many contexts for discussion oriented to the North and the West, and also to the new and the now.

... Resisting the pressure to be always up-to-date and forever new, the journal instead values the historicising of recent practices, from the 19th century (and before) to the present (and after). We further announce our purview as Contemporary and Modern Art—a reversal of the usual order—in a deliberate gesture to destabilise assumptions

of a teleological progression from a time (or times) referred to as the “modern” to one (or many) we call the “contemporary.”

We were also grappling with notions of regionality, cognisant on the journal’s role in making sense of Southeast Asia as a region: “its borders, its identity, its efficacy, and its limitations as a geographical marker and a conceptual category”.

Much of the intellectual groundwork for the journal was conceived over countless conversations over the Internet and through collegial networks enabled by present-day scholarly mobilities. This speaks volumes not only of the “deterritorialising” technological enablement to which we owe the realisation of this journal, but also of differently located perspectives that come to cross each other through specific channels and connections. The question of how to be “looking and listening closely to the discursive spaces in, from, and around the region” will therefore continue to challenge and guide our journal’s presentation.

The title *Southeast of Now* is proffered as a provocation to linear notions of space-time, of departures and arrivals. Its movement is elliptical and dispersed, never allowing the certainty of an “imagined temporal centre: that of the now” and intending to “announce a need to problematise outmoded conceptions of centre and periphery”. It was with this playful disquiet in mind that our first call for papers was themed “Discomfort”.

Exploring “discomfort” as “a vehicle in the thinking of art histories and curatorial discourses connected to localities within the region known as Southeast Asia”, we invited contributions from scholars working in and between all disciplines and fields of inquiry, as well as from archivists, artists and curators.

In putting together this first issue, we found ourselves returning to a few recurring subjects of interest during our early discussions as an editorial collective:

- the desire to engage with the continuities and discontinuities of visual knowledge systems from a premodern or early modern past;
- the need to reflect critically on the historical legacy(s) of colonialism or other types of neocolonial formations, which attends to the larger question regarding the power of narrative;
- the search for theoretical apparatuses to provide explanatory accounts of modernism, neo-traditionalism and the avant-garde as these phenomena have emerged on this side of the world;
- the resolve to hold accountable the other structures shaping our

historiographies, primarily emerging through artistic practices and communities, archival systems, exhibitionary logic and museological forms, as well as the discursive limits these fields of knowledge engender; and

- the investigation into the temporal and geographic character of art history, critical of the innocently linear or questioning of a national/regional framework, in order to inflect our understanding of the past through the lens of the present.

These interests have solidified into a commitment over repeated discussions that have steered our editorial decisions. We hope for a journal that can be experimental and open to different voices and methodologies yet at the same time, remain a journal that “takes its time” and allows readers and contributors the space to “respond in their own time” rather than rush these discourses out as “urgencies”. On a related note, we hope to foreground research which balances the careful and considered with the visceral and the embodied.

In this inaugural issue, we present four articles, an extended interview and a selection of unpublished archival materials. Notions of lineage recur in several of the contributions that follow. Patrick D. Flores’ article explores notions of the avant-garde in the Philippines, considering the role of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos’ cultural policies and events in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s in light of oppositional practices which resist the Marcos’ agenda while, perhaps, also adopting strategies which are rewarding of certain comparisons. In Pamela N. Corey’s interview with Stanley J. O’Connor, the foundational figure of studies of Southeast Asian art history in the United States reflects on shifts in the discipline over several decades. Thanavi Chotpradit’s article on the artistic legacy of the revolutionary People’s Party in 1930s Thailand considers ways in which these historical materials have been reanimated in the discourses and actions of more recent political groupings. And Kathleen Ditzig’s article on the First Southeast Asian Art Conference and Competition, held in Manila in 1957, revisits an event often cited as formative in the presentation of art that is framed regionally, rather than nationally.

The cross-regional concerns in Ditzig’s article are taken up, in a different and more comparative mode, in Michelle Antoinette’s article on contemporary artists working in Malaysia and Indonesia. O’Connor’s reflections in Corey’s interview also stress shifting ways in which the region has imagined itself and been constructed in scholarly and other institutional discourses. By contrast, both Chotpradit’s and Flores’ articles are framed in national rather than regional terms. The functions of the nation are of great interest to each

of these scholars, and a comparative frame of analysis—across geographic locations as well as historical moments and modes of practice—has activated much of their insight. The selection of unpublished archival materials from the Sri Lanka Archive of Contemporary Art, Architecture & Design in Jaffna, is similarly contained by a single state. Yet in each of these contributions, discussions based within one nation's borders intersect both explicitly and implicitly with issues from many other locations: within, across and beyond the region as a whole. Our decision to invite the Sri Lanka Archive to contribute to this inaugural volume was made, in part, out of a desire to trouble the geographical delineation of "Southeast Asia". Recognising how Southeast Asia as locality carries fluid meanings across historical time and political (and other) contexts, we aim to gesture towards the productive potentials of scholarly and other exchanges with research on material culture beyond its current borders as they are conventionally understood.

The second issue of *Southeast of Now* will continue with the theme "Discomfort". Contributions will include an article by Yin Ker that asks how Myanmar artist Bagyi Aung Soe's (1924–90) practice may engender a re-thinking of methodologies and the construct of "art" based on Euro-American historical experience, and a translation of a text by S. Sudjojono which, originally published in 1948, has striking resonances through the decades since and today. This forthcoming issue will also include articles and reviews which are presented as offering some historical insight.



Why a journal? And if a journal, why an unabashedly scholarly journal, filled with articles rather than lists or images, assisted by institutions of teaching and learning rather than display, and following the conventions of double-blind peer review?

Although we on the journal's editorial collective are as cognisant and critical of problems in the academic publishing system as any other group of researchers, such concerns were eclipsed for us by a shared desire for there to be a place where scholarly research on modern and contemporary art in Southeast Asia could be published and read. Together with our peers, teachers, students and friends, we find inspiration in a swelling tide of important, intelligent, insightful thinking and writing being done in this field. But we also feel a certain frustration that such scholarship has hitherto generally had no choice but to seek refuge in journals dedicated to other disciplines: often to area studies, or to an art history that is epistemologically and institutionally rooted outside this region.

Along with an apparent absence of a publication specialised in contemporary and modern arts of this region, another reason for this flight of scholarship relates to the rarity of university support for art historical and other scholarship of contemporary and modern arts in this region. The state of university scholarship on art history and related fields in the region, which is often at odds with the interests and achievements of scholars themselves, is an important reason for our insistence on *Southeast of Now* being a *scholarly* journal, albeit one that also hopes to engage wider readership. It is necessary for us, and for our contributors, that the journal satisfy academic requirements of scholarly and pedagogical endeavour.

Several attempts over recent years to establish a journal of modern and contemporary arts in Southeast Asia—some remaining only as rumour, others materialising to considerable excitement, only to later recede due to various reasons—have convinced us that we are not alone in perceiving the value of such a venture.

With thanks

Editorial collective, *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia*

(Isabel Ching, Thanavi Chotpradit, Brigitta Isabella, Vera Mey, Roger Nelson, Simon Soon, Vuth Lyno)

Recently Completed Doctoral Theses

If you have recently completed a PhD research thesis in art history, visual culture, cultural studies, art theory, film history, architecture history or related studies, we would like to share your work with our readers in the Editorial. We are keen to promote research that demonstrates sustained historical/critical inquiry and to grow a collegial network. Write to us at southeastofnow@gmail.com.

“Revolution Versus Counter-Revolution: The People’s Party and the Royalist(s) in Visual Dialogue” (2016)

Thanavi Chotpradit, Birkbeck, University of London (UK)

The People’s Party (Khana Ratsadon) or the monarchy: which one is the true begetter of Thai democracy? The people or the King: who possesses sovereign

power in Thailand? The thesis “Revolution Versus Counter-revolution” explores these core questions of Thai politics through an examination of the dynamism of the People’s Party’s visual culture. It argues that People’s Party’s memorials, monuments, architecture and artwork are deeply embedded within a struggle for political legitimisation. They are “sites of memory” or *lieux de mémoire* that take on a performative role in the rivalry between the two ideologies: constitutionalism/democracy and royalism.

“The Artist in the City: Contemporary Art as Urban Intervention in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, and Phnom Penh, Cambodia” (2015)

Pamela N. Corey, Cornell University (USA)

This thesis examines the development of contemporary art in Vietnam and Cambodia by introducing new ways of visually analysing the city as a site of experience and field of representation. While certain parallel historical events guide the comparison of the present, the larger argument is framed by a rigorous engagement with the politics of place and possibilities of built space. As such, I let the detailed stories of two cities relate how artistic practices represent complex affiliations with city and nation, as well as a form of social and creative labour with ties to past forms of modernism. Contemporary art is thus accounted for as a historical episode, discursive category and socio-spatial intervention in the urban and national landscape.

“Modernisation of Building: The Transplantation of the Concept of Architecture from Europe to Thailand, 1930s–1950s” (2015)

Chomchon Fusinpaiboon, University of Sheffield (UK)

This research goes beyond the importation of “modern architecture” to Thailand by fundamentally questioning the “modern” concept of “architecture” in Thai society between the 1930s and the 1950s. It argues that the transplantation of the modern concept of “architecture” from Europe to Thailand by the first generation of Thai architects who were trained in Europe was a systematic yet complex and hybrid process that modernised the traditional concept of “building” as perceived in Thai society. At the same time, traditional practices, rituals and beliefs related to buildings were not completely eliminated but were transformed and mingled with “architecture”. Accordingly, the modern concept of “architecture” modernised the traditional concept of “building” but the latter also indigenised the former in many respects.

“Women Artists: Becoming Professional in Singapore, Malaya and Indonesia” (2015)

Yvonne Low, University of Sydney (Australia)

This thesis argues for a re-evaluation of women’s contributions in nationalist and modernist art discourses and the inclusion of women’s creative and intellectual development in the male-dominated professional art spheres of Singapore and Malaysia (then Malaya) and Indonesia. In examining the cultural and ideological challenges of professional women artists, the thesis demonstrates how women’s absence in colonial and anti-colonial histories is implicated by the nature of their struggles for women’s emancipation and their politicised positions, and by the restrictions they faced when participating in anti-colonial liberation movements and national politics within the public sphere. By re-examining the roles women artists played, the research identifies the structures that restricted their participation, and the ways in which subsequent historiography reproduced their absence in historical narratives.

“From Commissions to Commemoration: The Re-creation of King Chulalongkorn and his Court, and the Thai Monarchy through Westernised Art and Western Art Collection” (2016)

Eksuda Singhalampong, University of Sussex (UK)

This thesis aims to complicate the narrative of King Chulalongkorn’s iconic role as the civiliser by way of investigating his visual representation operating within the mechanisms of Westernisation. The study discusses how Chulalongkorn presented and represented himself and his regal power and consequently changed and shaped Siam’s visual and material culture as well as its kingship through royal portraiture, architectural programme and Chulalongkorn’s European art collection. This thesis also contributes to an ongoing dialogue on the relations between the monarchy, memory and national identity through an investigation of the Chakri dynasty’s celebratory exhibitions. The issues of visual representation and its impact addressed in this thesis are arguably as bound up with issues of national identity and national politics.

“What is Left of Art?: The Spatio-Visual Practice of Political Art in Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines, 1950s–1970s” (2016)

Simon Soon, University of Sydney (Australia)

This thesis considers the critical strategies introduced by left-leaning art movements from the 1950s to the 1970s in the politicisation of art. Within the

successive periods of nation-building and resistance to neo-colonialism, the cultural left sought to rethink received discourses and institutions of modern art in order to engender a different aesthetic paradigm and public. I have identified three domains of practice for productive and critical inquiry. These are the organisation, the text and the street where art is constituted as a spatio-visual practice in relation to modern experiences of public spaces. The research characterises the terms of artistic production as inherently spatial through which the political and ideological pressures that shape the artistic modernities of post-war Southeast Asia can be made visible.

“Thainess Framed: Photography and Thai Identity, 1946–2010” (2016)

Clare Veal, University of Sydney (Australia)

Throughout the reign of King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX, r. 1946–2016), photography gained significance as a means to construct and articulate national identity. That the monarch’s photographic image could be simultaneously an indexical representation of a historical personage and the iconic image of a divinely legitimised king meant that the medium’s “reality effect” was invested with ideological significance. Yet, in some cases, photography’s representative power could be seized upon to subvert the hegemony of this nationalist discourse by pointing to its limits and exclusions. This thesis historically articulates the photographic formation of a conventionalised nationalist discourse based on notions of “moral Thainess”, mapping the boundaries between what is representable and un-representable, and identifying possibilities for difference and multiplicity beyond its limits.

“Faces of Cambodia: Buddhism(s), Portraiture and Images of Kings” (2015)

Joanna Wolfarth, University of Leeds (UK)

In the late 12th century the face dominated the visual landscape of the Angkor Empire, appearing at the Mahāyānist Bayon temple in the form of monumental “face towers”, a distinctive architectural-cum-sculptural feature of the reign of Jayavarman VII. Together with statues apparently sculpted as a physical likeness of the king, this artistic output probed the conceptual contours of the face and the scope of portraiture. Since the 12th century the face, primarily in a four-faced configuration, has continued as a uniquely Cambodian trope, cited and revived in changing politico-cultural contexts. This thesis addresses questions of the face and portraiture within a multi-layered Buddhist-Brahmānic complex and aims to counter hegemonies which persist in art historical scholarship on the Bayon.