



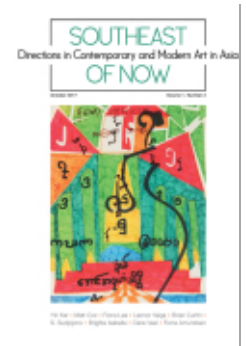
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Editorial: Discomfort

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Editorial: Discomfort

What comfort might there be in discomfort? Might the sensations of being at ease and ill at ease—for the scholar, the artist, the curator, the reader—be as inextricable as is history from historiography, as the “southeast” from the “north” and the “west”, as the “now” from the past, and the yet to be?

In deciding on the theme of “discomfort” for this inaugural volume of *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art*, we hoped that the openness of the term to multiple interpretations might give rise to many understandings and responses. In part, this was a practical consideration: how many writers and researchers were out there who might respond to our call for proposals? As it turned out, the response far exceeded our expectations, in quantity and in quality, and also in the diversity of interpretations of this amorphous thing, “discomfort”. This encourages us as we plan for future volumes of this journal, which will continue to be published twice yearly, in print and online.

Yet despite our receptiveness to multiple readings of the term “discomfort”—and our curiosity as to what responses the prompt might elicit—we also had in mind some more specific concerns. In our call for proposals, we wrote:

Cognisant of the historical burdens and future possibilities of regionalism as a framework, “discomfort” locates this source of tension and anxiety as a productive register to explore various discursive stakes, propelled by new urgencies, orientations, and motivations; and therein perhaps discover some comfort, even if merely within shared discomfort.

The concept of regionalism is a notion we take to be of great significance in recent discourses of the art of Southeast Asia; it is also a notion we understand

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to be especially fraught. The region we call Southeast Asia—its geographical boundaries, its internal borders, its deployment as a concept, and its politicisation and consequent instrumentalisation—gives rise to discomforts both in terms of methods of research and objects of inquiry.

The contributions gathered in the current issue demonstrate that indeed the “tension and anxiety” that regionalism gives rise to can be a “productive register”. Moreover, the contributions suggest that questions of regionalism may be approached not only through comparative analysis, but also through studies focused on single nations, localities or artists.

Yin Ker’s essay on Bagyi Aung Soe (1923–90) ambitiously aims for nothing less than “to remedy art history’s ineptitude with respect to that which transcends form and negates logic”. Through a lavishly detailed account of the role of Buddhist tenets in the Burmese artist’s practice, Yin demonstrates the necessity for theoretically and linguistically inventive approaches to the study of the modern and contemporary art of this region, synthesising “tools of thought” proposed by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009) and André Leroi-Gourhan (1911–86), among others. The article draws on the author’s many years of research in Myanmar, including for her doctoral study. Its publication here follows an acclaimed exhibition at Berlin’s Haus der Kulturen der Welt [House of World Cultures], which included Bagyi Aung Soe’s rarely seen works on paper, one of which also graces the cover of this issue.¹ While focused almost exclusively on a single artist’s practice, Yin’s article is richly suggestive of the possibilities for methodological innovations informed equally by regional discourses, including those of Buddhist thought, and by exogenous theory, from a broad range of disciplines.

Also focused on a single artist are the two new translations included in this issue, both of texts authored by S. Sudjojono (1913–85), which were previously unavailable in English. Yet, in the scope of their hyperbolic prose and through their unexpected resonances with issues still current in contemporary artistic practice and discourse, these two short pieces may prove generative not only for the study and appreciation of this Indonesian artist, but also for the new insight they lend to existing narratives of modern Indonesian art and to early postcolonial rebuffs to European views of Southeast Asian modern art.

Brian Curtin’s curatorial intervention is not focused on a single artist but on a single nation. Yet its investigation of the tropes of the “queer” and the “postnational” in Thai contemporary art may offer effective mechanisms for more regional thinking too. Curtin investigates the relationship between a cultural valorisation of “Thainess” and contemporary art, considering recent artistic practices in relation to political meltdown and conflicts. His article

considers contemporary art as a queer state, a challenge towards the culture of image-appearance and nationalism in the Thai “postnational” context. It will be followed in vol. 2, no. 1 of *Southeast of Now* with a review of David Teh’s recently published monograph on Thai contemporary art.

Just as Curtin uncouples the concept of “queer” from exclusively having to do with gender or sexuality, Leonor Veiga proposes to unshackle the notion of the “avant-garde” from its hitherto associations with Euro-American artistic practices. Her article boldly proposes a theory of a “third avant-garde”, consisting of artists from several locations across Southeast Asia whose works have risen to prominence since the 1990s. Veiga engages deeply with discourses of the avant-garde in other geographical contexts, often reading against the grain of canonical European and North American theorists through an analysis informed by numerous interviews she has conducted with Southeast Asian artists over a period of several years.

Just as Veiga reclaims the concept of the avant-garde for Southeast Asian contemporary art, Michelle Antoinette’s recent monograph has taken up the celebrated concept of “worlding” as a frame for an exhaustively detailed comparative study of practices since the 1990s. Clare Veal’s sharp and succinct review of *Reworlding Art History: Contemporary Southeast Asian Art after 1990* (2014) finds much to value in Antoinette’s approach, while also questioning the author’s decision to focus on artists from maritime Southeast Asia, largely to the exclusion of the mainland areas of the region.

Fiona Lee also finds a good deal to celebrate in artistic responses to recent street protests in Kuala Lumpur. Her analysis focuses on three very different artists, and is especially revealing of the interplay between the textual and the visual—an approach informed by her background in literary studies. Lee’s conclusion that “artistic productions, even when used explicitly for political resistance, are shaped by—and not in spite of—neoliberal capitalist conditions” is one that will be discomfiting, but may also be essential for coming to grips with the feted increasing economic integration of Southeast Asia and its implications for the study of both art and resistance in the region.

Lee’s article includes an unintended echo of recent events in Kuala Lumpur. She contends that in the Malaysian context,

... the removal of a controversial artwork following its negative reception, despite the lack of a legal injunction to do so, has become an almost regular occurrence. Without having to be explicitly invoked, repressive state laws have produced a culture of policing and censorship amongst different stakeholders within the arts community.

While work was underway on preparing this issue of *Southeast of Now*, an artwork by Pangrok Sulap was removed from the exhibition *Escape from the SEA*, a project hosted by the National Art Gallery and Art Printing Works (APW) in Kuala Lumpur, and initiated by the Japan Foundation as part of its Curatorial Development programme.

Thanavi Chotpradit's article in vol. 1, no. 1 of *Southeast of Now*, titled "A Dark Spot on a Royal Space: The Art of the People's Party and the Politics of Thai (Art) History", has also taken on an unexpected resonance with recent events since its publication earlier this year. On presumably 6 April 2017, the People's Party Plaque in downtown Bangkok—a focal site of discussion in Thanavi's article—was illegally removed by unknown persons in the middle of the night and replaced with a new one. While the motivations for its removal remain subject to unsubstantiated rumour, this action demonstrates the highly contested nature of the art of 1930s and 1940s Thailand, as argued in Thanavi's article.

Fiona Amundsen's contribution in this issue also centres on a contested public site: the abandoned Syonan Jinja, a Shinto shrine in Singapore. Amundsen is a practising artist as well as a university lecturer, and her contribution here troubles the discomfiting format of a conventional scholarly essay by presenting artistic research. Her video work, *Machine Wind* (made in collaboration with Tim Corballis in 2015) complicates the complexities of memorialisation of the Japanese occupation of Singapore during World War II. The remembering, forgetting, contesting and reasserting of memories is presented in the juxtaposition of images and voices. Amundsen explores a piece of Singapore history that has been left behind, physically and metaphorically.

Finally, Matt Cox's article on the painting of prostitutes in modern Indonesian art destabilises the oft cited narrative of "the postcolonial mythology of the heroic and authentic anti-colonial modern artist". By reassessing the use and portrayal of so-called "base" women by Sudjojono and his contemporaries, Cox uncovers the discomfiting act of self-primitivising as a means to create new masculine subjectivities within the prevailing social structures that were both colonial and Javanese.

With thanks

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

(Isabel Ching, Thanavi Chotpradit, Brigitta Isabella, Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez, Yvonne Low, 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.

“The Javanese Self in Portraiture from 1880–1955” (2017)

Matt Cox, University of Sydney (Australia)

This thesis examines changing understandings and representations of the Javanese self in painted and photographic portraits spanning 75 years, from 1880–1955. During this period, Indonesian modern art followed a trajectory from its 19th-century beginnings within the domain of exclusive privilege, through the socially engaged Persagi painters, to the opening of the first national art school. In doing so, this thesis demonstrates three observations. First, the early history of Indonesian modern art is plotted in terms of cooperative relationships between Javanese and Dutch men. Second, while appearing conservative and pro-Dutch, these Javanese artists were critical in initiating a discourse on modern art and in establishing a position of cultural nationalism. Finally, the conjunction of these two points reveals that the history of modern Indonesian art began much earlier than previously believed and, more significantly, that it was attached to the ideas and institutions of cultural and national self-determination at a very early stage of its development.

“Modernity and Contemporaneity in ‘Cambodian Arts’ after Independence”

Roger Nelson, University of Melbourne (Australia)

This study of “Cambodian arts” since national independence understands modernity and contemporaneity as conceptually coextensive categories, rather than as periodising markers. Through detailed analyses of different artworks and their contexts—centred on painting and the visual arts and also comprising architecture, performance, cinema and Khmer-language novels—this thesis proposes that modern and contemporary “Cambodian arts” are defined by coeval new and old forms, intersections between media, and an intertwining of art and ideology. Based on archival research, the thesis focuses primarily on the years 1955–75, while also making trans-historical comparisons by interspersing more recent art practices into its discussion.

“Dress and Visual Identities of the *Nyonyas* in the British Straits Settlements; Mid-Nineteenth to Early-Twentieth Century”

Thienny Lee, University of Sydney (Australia)

This thesis examines the identities of the Straits Chinese women in the former British Straits Settlements from the mid-19th to the early-20th century. The Straits Chinese were the Straits-born Chinese who were British subjects; their women were often called *Nyonyas* during the period under study. For that reason, the identities of Straits Chinese women are frequently assumed to be the same as that of *Nyonyas*. This thesis challenges that assumption and argues that the *Nyonyas*, unlike their men, did not become Straits Chinese women until a later point in time. In other words, their identities switched from being *Nyonyas* to being Straits Chinese women, consequently revealing an identity gap between Straits Chinese men and women before the switch in identities took place among *Nyonyas*.

NOTES

- ¹ The exhibition “Misfits”: Pages from a Loose-leaf Modernity featured the artists Tang Chang, Rox Lee and Bagyi Aung Soe, and was on show at Berlin’s Haus der Kulturen der Welt from 21 Apr. to 3 July 2017. The exhibition was curated by David Teh in collaboration with Yin Ker, Merv Espina and Mary Pansanga.