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Clare Veal

One of the perceived characteristics of contemporary art is its heterogeneity, which results in a resistance to singular aesthetic, ideological, political, geographical or social frameworks. For many art historians, this multiplicity presents a challenge that requires agile theorisation. Michelle Antoinette's *Reworlding Art History: Contemporary Southeast Asian Art after 1990*¹ aims to answer this demand through a study of the ways in which Southeast Asian artists have entered into contemporary art circuits within and outside the region, as well as some of the key themes explored by these artists. In doing so, Antoinette posits Southeast Asia as a paradigmatic example of the ways in which a “reworlding” of contemporary art has challenged the Euramerican-centric nature of art markets, worlds and histories.

Antoinette's definition of “contemporary” art in Southeast Asia rejects a strict periodisation that would clearly distinguish it from “modern” art. Indeed, she contends that “modern art may coexist alongside contemporary art in Southeast Asia, as elsewhere”.² Yet, at the same time, she frames the 1990s as being a watershed moment in the advent of the contemporary. This focus on the 1990s contrasts with some previous studies of contemporary art in the region, which locate its foundations in the 1970s and 1980s.³ Antoinette acknowledges the significance of developments in this earlier period by referencing Malaysian artists Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa's 1974 exhibition *Towards a Mystical Reality*, the establishment of the Kaishan group in the Philippines in 1976 and the activities of the *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru* [New Art Movement] in Indonesia from 1975–79. Within these examples, she finds “precedents of the Southeast Asian contemporary”⁴ as manifested in an artistic tendency towards a “questioning of ‘internationalism’” as a

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hegemonic framework for art practice, particularly in its preoccupation with the fashionable styles of abstraction and formalism, a consequent turn to social and political context, and an insistence on reflexivity as a part of the very constitution of art".⁵

Despite her recognition of these earlier practices, Antoinette posits that since the 1990s there has been "a gathering density in contemporary Southeast Asian art [that] has been confirmed...by its parallel institutionalization (museum collections and art exhibitions, art writing and scholarship) and commercialization (interest by art markets and private collectors) as well as by the concurrent development of contemporary art and its histories worldwide".⁶ In this sense, the 1990s are given relevance through reference to an external (western) "art world" that began, during this time, to recognise "Other" and "peripheral" art worlds.⁷ As she states, by the "early 1990s...externally based art curators, collectors, and institutional officials began to circumvent the direction of government institutions by travelling to Southeast Asia to meet contemporary artists independently".⁸

Here, Antoinette's titular use of the term "reworlding" makes clear the reasoning behind her focus on the acceptance of Southeast Asian art by international audiences as a marker of the contemporary. "Worlding", according to Antoinette, implies a formulation of the world from a particular perspective. As she argues, prior to the late 20th century, "the assumed 'worldly' currents of modern and contemporary art...presumed Euro-American authority on the subjects and left much of the world *out* of the 'world picture' so to speak, in the story of modern and contemporary art".⁹ From this perspective, "reworlding" becomes a way of apprehending processes of "worlding" from critical perspectives, at once registering the "distinct shift in thinking about the world from Euro-American models and practices of world-making to non-Euro-American perspectives" while signalling "that even Euro-American patterns of world-making draw on other worlds".¹⁰ Such a perspective is also reflected in John Clark's writings on the topic of "worlding" in which he similarly affirms the 1990s as a time during which one could observe "...the application of interpretative frames to art discourses that are visible in a global perspective across cultural and temporal zones...that have been occluded, by Euramerican domination, as derivative or different from those in Euramerica".¹¹

Antoinette's deployment of the term "reworlding" thus implies the widespread recognition (and not merely the existence) of mutually imbricated processes of localisation and globalisation, as well as the agency of artists to negotiate these forces. Here "reworlding" becomes a "tactic"¹² deployed in order to move beyond the two dominant approaches that she understands as having characterised the curation and writing of non-Euramerican art:

first, one that derives from the understanding that "...global art and its history [is] a distribution and application of homogenous and essentialist Western art theories that become 'universally shared'"¹³ and second, a culturalist approach that "...runs the risk of anthropomorphising the art object, reducing it to a mirror of Southeast Asian cultures".¹⁴ Antoinette therefore maintains the critical potential of reworldings as a way of disrupting this binary formation, viewing such tactical practices as "imaginaries that assist in decentering Euro-America but also in disrupting homogenising and essentialising narratives of Southeast Asia itself".¹⁵

Antoinette's text comprises of seven chapters, which are organised into three parts. The first of these parts, "Preliminary Encounters", is an extended review of current approaches to the contemporary, the region of Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian art histories. By reviewing the existing literature on these various topics, Antoinette locates a central problematic of contemporary Southeast Asian art as situated in the representation of "difference" in a global context. Here, there appears to be a paradox in simultaneously acknowledging the specificity of the context in which an artist works while also resisting the reduction of artistic practice to identity politics. Antoinette specifically criticises the tendency for international exhibitions of contemporary art to commoditise the exotic nature of "the other" by emphasising sociopolitical readings of works. As she states, this has produced an "excessive dependence on culturalist discourses in art interpretation" that have "...been used to discursively map and/or ethnicize Southeast Asian art (in which some artists choose to operate and others are inadvertently typecast)".¹⁶ Drawing from Terry Smith's theorisation of the contemporary, she also rejects the idea that similarity and difference are mutually exclusive in favour of a methodology that aims to "...think the difference and connection of contemporary Southeast Asian art at once".¹⁷

In practical terms, this involves intervening into notions of cultural rigidity in order to foreground an understanding of identity as process, as well as highlighting the affective dimensions of works as a means of asserting a kind of common human experience through art. For example, in her reading of Simryn Gill's *Self-Seeds*¹⁸—in which toy wheels are added to tropical seed pods that then become a dynamic installation that moves across the gallery floor—Antoinette links the physical trajectories of the seeds to "the cultural politics of migration as a concurrent movement between locatedness and detachment"¹⁹. Antoinette draws attention to the work's problematisation of the notion of cultural roots, found in the reference to "seeds" in its title. Indeed, the literal movement of the seeds produces an affective, corporeal engagement between the viewer and the work, while making clear that "searching for

one's cultural roots or 'seeds' in pursuit of cultural identity misses the point of cultural identity as being something in *process* and *production*"²⁰.

Antoinette's theorisation easily convinces a reader of the relevance of Southeast Asia to her broader efforts towards the reworlding of art histories; efforts that are inherently linked to the postcolonial condition as a "critical inheritance".²¹ However, the length dedicated to this effort seems to reflect the difficulty that the contemporary poses to conventional art historical tools and methods. An anxiety over not completely resolving the issues of adequate theorisation also manifests in some repetition between the prologue and the first chapter, resulting in a muddying of the discussion's main points amongst which the reader struggles to stay engaged.

This is, however, countered by compelling analyses of Lani Maestro's work, *a book thick of ocean* (1993)—a participatory installation consisting of a small wooden table upon which is placed a large book that, as is revealed to the audience as they leaf through its pages, is furnished with unidentifiable photographs of the ocean—and Yee I-Lann's *Sulu Stories* (2005)—a series of photo-montages representing dramatisations of tales about Sulu, a geographical area located between Malaysia and the Philippines. Both of these works, for Antoinette, act as illustrative metaphors for the dynamic and complex nature of artistic subjectivities in Southeast Asia and their negotiation with the rest of the world. For example, in her discussion of *a book thick of ocean*, Antoinette states:

... this work is less about identifying the Philippines and more about the complexities of identity-in-becoming—not only of the artist's becoming but also of our own in affective and self-reflexive relation to her artwork. In this sense, *a book thick of ocean* is possibly about oceans everywhere but possibly, too, the invocation of a vast space of repeating, endless void in which to contemplate our being in the world is of little relevance to Oceanic things and is, rather, a personal revelation of the human condition and spirit.²²

Here, as elsewhere in the book, the author demonstrates an ability to communicate the affective dimensions of individual works through evocative visual analysis.

The second part, "Locating Southeast Asian Difference", addresses the formation of Southeast Asian geographies as interpretive exhibitory frameworks within and beyond the region, as well as their associated political and social implications. Here, Antoinette contrasts cartographies of "Southeast Asia", created via the instrumentalisation of art for diplomatic or political purposes, with those produced by independent and grassroots arts organisations.

This comparison could have been strengthened through a discussion of the cartographies of the region produced through exhibitions and institutions initiated prior to the 1990s, and how they might have differed from contemporary regional approaches. For instance, other examples could have included the use of art as diplomacy in the Bandung Conference of 1955, or the establishment of the Bhirasri Institute as an independent arts space in Bangkok in 1974. Within this section, Antoinette also discusses the framing of Asia and South-east Asia in an international context. This continues her critical investigation of the prevalence of ethnographic curatorial approaches that reductively interpret artists and their works through the cultures from which they are thought to emanate.

This would have perhaps been the ideal point from which to interrogate the map of Southeast Asia produced through *Reworlding Art History* itself, particularly given the author's focus on artists from Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, to the exclusion of those from other countries in the region. In the book's preface, Antoinette accounts for her choice by stating, "[t]his configuration of Southeast Asia intends to force a recognition of the impossibility of fixing the region's boundaries and coordinates and the impracticality of totalizing perspectives".²³ Yet, taking into account the author's emphasis on maritime Southeast Asia, the text might have also benefited from including some reflection on how its theoretical approach, as well as the dominant themes it outlines, might be reinforced or challenged through the inclusion of artists from mainland Southeast Asia. In particular, as Isabel Ching has demonstrated, the development of contemporary art in Myanmar in a context of isolation might indicate the "limits of contemporaneity as a connective and comparative modality".²⁴ Indeed, the nuances of this particular case could have complicated Antoinette's emphasis on the contemporary as a product of "the cross-currents of local, regional and transnational, and international identities that are imaged and imagined by artists in new globalizing art contexts"²⁵. Specifically, what is missing in Antoinette's argument is how one might understand the development of contemporary art in situations where the cross-currents between different interpretative scales are frustrated in ways that reveal disjuncture rather than synchronicity.

Antoinette's focus on the affective and formal qualities of works as a counter approach to the reductive nature of ethnographic or politically-focused readings means that the third part of her book, "Counterpoints: Southeast Asia in Practice", produces the most compelling case for using Southeast Asia as a critical framework for understanding contemporary art. This includes discussions of the tension between the apparent permanence of fixed national and regional identifications and the possibilities offered by cyber-geographies,

international mobility and cosmopolitanisms. From a temporal perspective, the rewriting of memory and history, particularly the uncovering of personal and traumatic pasts, also challenges sedentary understandings of identity, while offering the possibility of connection with those who have experienced violence in other geographical and cultural contexts. The physicality of the body and its implied presence through abstractions that render "...it only partially visible or sometimes even as an invisible or ephemeral presence"²⁶ provide another mode of connectivity. By positioning the body as a "critical geography of identification—a 'corporeography'",²⁷ Antoinette advocates moving beyond racialised interpretations of its form towards an understanding of its use as a "contested site of meaning" that is "open to a variety of inscriptions". Referencing the ubiquitous nature of the body as a defining aspect of human experience, Antoinette also understands its use by Southeast Asian artists as "a site of connective potential, engaging with the bodies of others in dialogue with the self through an aesthetic or affective relation".²⁸

In *Reworlding Art History*, Antoinette's use of Southeast Asia to illuminate the praxis of "world making" in contemporary art is significant for its assertion of the region's relevance to art history at the present historical juncture. The author's close readings of the works of individual artists effectively illustrate how one may realise the possibility of thinking sameness and difference simultaneously. In many cases, Antoinette's evocative descriptions of the affective qualities of various works are able to achieve this aim more adeptly than the text's lengthy theoretical discussions. In this sense, while the book contributes to understandings of the specificity of the Southeast Asian situation, it will also be of interest to those working on contemporary art and its reworlding more generally.

BIOGRAPHY

Clare Veal is a lecturer in the MA Asian Art Histories programme at LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore. She undertakes research on Southeast Asian photography, art and visual culture, with a particular focus on Thailand. In 2016, she received her PhD from the Department of Art History and Film Studies at the University of Sydney for her thesis entitled "Thainess Framed: Photography and Thai Identity, 1946–2010".

Veal was the subeditor for "Asian Art" for the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism* (2016) and has contributed papers to *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* and *Trans-Asia Photography Review*. From 2015–16, she was a participant in the Power Institute's "Ambitious Alignments: New Histories of Southeast Asian Art" research programme funded by the Getty Foundation.

NOTES

- ¹ Michelle Antoinette, *Reworlding Art History: Contemporary Southeast Asian Art after 1990* (Amsterdam: Brill, 2014).
- ² Ibid., p. 21.
- ³ See, for example, Ahmad Mashadi, "Framing the 1970s", *Third Text* 25, 4 (July 2011): 409–17 and Patrick D. Flores, *Past Peripheral: Curation in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: NUS Museum, 2008).
- ⁴ Antoinette, *Reworlding Art History*, p. 19.
- ⁵ Ibid., pp. 25–6.
- ⁶ Ibid., p. 25.
- ⁷ Ibid., p. 30.
- ⁸ Ibid., p. 31.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 41.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ John Clark, "The Worlding of the Asian Modern", in *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions*, ed. Michelle Antoinette and Caroline Turner (Canberra: ANU Press, 2014), p. 68.
- ¹² Antoinette, *Reworlding Art History*, p. xli.
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 44.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p. 50.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. xli.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p. 46.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p. 45.
- ¹⁸ Simryn Gill, *Self-seeds = Itsekylväytyviä: Studio K*, 11 Sept.–8 Nov. 1998 (Helsinki: Kiasma, Nykytaiteen Museo, 1998).
- ¹⁹ Antoinette, *Reworlding Art History*, p. 288.
- ²⁰ Ibid., p. 291.
- ²¹ Ibid., p. 41.
- ²² Ibid., p. 67.
- ²³ Ibid., p. xliv.
- ²⁴ Isabel Ching, "Art from Myanmar: Possibilities of Contemporaneity?", *Third Text* 25, 4 (July 2011): 440.
- ²⁵ Antoinette, *Reworlding Art History*, p. xli.
- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 402.
- ²⁷ Ibid., p. 401.
- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 481.

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