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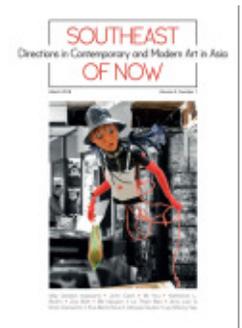
*Thai Art: Currencies of the Contemporary* Atreyee Gupta by  
David Teh (review)

Atreyee Gupta

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# David Teh, *Thai Art: Currencies of the Contemporary*

Atreyee Gupta

What are the cultural, economic and aesthetic currencies of Thai contemporary art and how do Thai artists articulate a distinctive purchase on both the national and the supranational simultaneously? “The challenge,” Teh writes, “is to open the contemporary as a terrain of contest, energized by specific local, national, regional, and global constituencies, often all at once.”<sup>1</sup> In *Thai Art: Currencies of the Contemporary*, the work of contemporary Thai artists and the reception of their work in Thailand and elsewhere becomes the critical locus to both interrogate and confront the contemporary. The use of the word “currency” in the book’s title is not merely fortuitous. If, on the one hand, the word invokes a sense of the present, on the other hand, it points towards the interlinked fields of local and global cultural and economic exchanges that constitutively shapes the production and reception of contemporary art. In process, the assumed dialogical relationship among the place called Thailand, the notion of “Thainess” and the figure of the Thai artist are opened up to enquiry. Teh’s discussion on the Singapore-born artist-activist Jay Koh’s scribbled message to Rirkrit Tiravanija occasioned by the installation of a 1:1 model of Tiravanija’s New York apartment at the Kolnischer Kunstverein in 1996 is exemplary in this regard. Teh recalls, in retrospect, his own ambivalence to Koh’s message: “Greetings, younger brother. Your Process art sounds good, but what about the ‘process’ in your [Thai] society? The women and poverty?”<sup>2</sup> “Rirkrit may have always been ‘Thai,’ but no one is born a ‘Thai artist,’” Teh notes.<sup>3</sup> The dialectic between contemporary artistic practice and national belonging hereby invoked at the very onset animates the discussions that follow.

No doubt the book is an important contribution to the ongoing debates on the contemporary from Southeast (and South) Asia, where the nation

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(sometimes supplanted by the region) has had an especially sharp dialectic presence as a critical counter-pressure to neoliberal economic structures mobilised by postcolonial nation-states. To the author's credit, the book does not set out to attenuate the dialectic but to hold it in traction. This, in itself, presents its own challenges. The author deploys a range of spatial and locational lenses—local, national, regional and global—to invoke a complex of scalarity whereby the “local” sometimes supplements the “national”. Consider, for instance, the author's take on recent art exhibitions in Southeast Asia supported by international cultural organisations: “Cities on the Move” ... and “Here and Now” ... exemplified key shifts in the way contemporary art was being presented internationally. Both brought together *local and international*, established and emerging artists.”<sup>4</sup> The relationship of the “local” (rather than the “national”) to the “international” that is highlighted here, and throughout the book, perhaps demands further discursive unpacking. For the mobilisation of the terms—each with its own discursive scope and scale—remains somewhat opaque. One can sense the author's discomfort, both with the limits of the national and all that is repressed within its form. Teh insists that:

If we can't take nation out of the picture, we can at least insist on looking at its distortions, blind spots, and dynamic margins. In taking this approach, Thai contemporary art will be a most illuminating guide, as it illustrates the transition from an identitarian construction of artistic subjectivity—typically couched in terms of the ‘imagined’ national community—to a more qualified, individualist, and post-national one, informed by professional more than ethno-political affinities.<sup>5</sup>

Post-national commitments withstanding, the narrative of contemporary art that Teh charts is emphatically particularised. So much so that the particular trajectory that the book tracks could have only transpired in the geopolitical terrain that we now recognize as Thailand, although arguably its “many forms of resistance to state hegemony” are “stubborn reminders” of a political geography that predates the nation.<sup>6</sup> To flag this surplus, Teh proposes the term *preternational* by which he means “a field defined in relation to the nation, yet not reducible to its terms or its logic”.<sup>7</sup> Is the local, for Teh, then a figure of the *preternational*? And how does the *preternational* interpolate the inter-national?

A very particularised triangulation of the modern, the contemporary and the place of the international remains central to the book. We could even say that this obdurate particularity is where the strength of the book lies. The modern, Teh writes, was “imported” to Thailand as “a mere vocabulary, without substantive modernization of attitudes or institutional structures”. If the artists

of the 1970s “struggled to do justice to the actual transformations evident in society”, then the contemporary, Teh argues, “will have to consider carefully *what it has meant to be modern* in Thailand”.<sup>8</sup> With agility and insight, Teh moves in and out of conventional ambits of contemporary art. Chapter 1 begins with a 1950s equestrian statue of the 18th-century ruler Taksin that stands at the Wong Wian Yai roundabout in Bangkok. The anachronistic sculpture by the Italian artist Corrado Feroci (Silpa Bhirasi) allows for a mediation on movement, mobility and circulation. The chapter’s explicit aim is to historicise the circuits and circulation of Thai contemporary art, and it does so extremely effectively. Note the impulse to historicise. Note also that this historicising move is grounded, not in a deliberation on form or creative practices as might be anticipated but on a conception of movement manifested as a historical consciousness in a particular place over time.

Building on the historical consciousness already activated in the previous chapter, Chapter 2 takes up the developmental model of sustainability and Thailand’s sufficiency economy as a lens to interrogate agro-pastoral imaginaries in Thai contemporary art, both at home and abroad. In Chapter 3, the early modern narrative form of *nirat*, marked as it is by “an enduring poetics of distance” offers a way of interrogating “artistic mobility and the currency of distance” in contemporary art and extrapolating differing ideations of “nation and national space” that arise within it.<sup>9</sup> Here too *nirat* serves as the symbolic matrix of historical consciousness that allows Teh to tease out complex conceptions of proximity and distance articulated, or in some instances disarticulated, by artists. Likewise, in Chapter 4, *baramee*—broadly conceived as the dual operation of charisma and withdrawal—sets the stage for a discussion on relational art while Chapter 5 returns to allegories of sovereignty and regionalism after globalisation. Never simplistic and always granulated, the chapters are a lively read.

Ultimately, the book’s conceptual rigour comes from an embeddedness in what is best described as a politics of place. Teh realises all too well that place is not given but constituted through human activity. At no given time is place empty of historical memory; rather, a relationship to place is shaped by a dense matrix of all that has already transpired in it. Consequently, *Thai Art* seeks to historicise the contemporary. For Teh, this work of historicising involves a confrontation with the modern, not to recentralise it but to produce a “counterhistory of the modern” for the contemporary:

It’s not that the contemporary is any less a product of modernity, even of national modernity; nor are we likely to find many ‘clean breaks’ separating the national modern from a global contemporary. But a

history of the contemporary cannot simply be soldered onto a given history of the modern—least of all as successive, nationally defined modules—in an age when the determinants of artistic formation, practice, and discourse so clearly exceed national bounds.<sup>10</sup>

What Teh proposes in its stead is a practice of reading against the grain. Rereading the modern, in other words, from the perspective of the contemporary.

Here, however, rereading does not belong to an archaeological impulse. Neither does Teh seek to uncover lost histories of modernism nor does he propose a reconfigured relationship to the modern. As Teh acknowledges, the link between modern art and the modern state in Thailand begs further analysis and, to some extent, underwrites the contemporary's conflicted relationship with the modern. Certainly, the seepage between the modern and the contemporary in many Southeast and South Asian contexts has received substantive scholarly scrutiny in recent years. As some have noted, the 1970s marked a crucial break in the art and history of several Southeast nations.<sup>11</sup> This is true of South Asia as well. Scholars of Southeast Asian art have also returned to the 1970s to draw out a terminological lexicon that might productively recalibrate the "imagination of the national, the international, and the global".<sup>12</sup> Teh's project, however, is differently oriented. Teh insists on a history that does not bracket off the modern by way of periodisation but resituates the international within the modern as an unclaimed, even *untimely*, sign of the contemporary.<sup>13</sup> In doing so, he reactivates histories of internationalism in Thailand in a way that simultaneously complicates the genealogies of the contemporary as such. This is a crucial interjection, one that, arising out of particular *currencies* of the contemporary, challenges easy histories of contemporary art as a global phenomenon.

## BIOGRAPHY

**Atreyee Gupta** is Assistant Professor of Global Modern Art at the History of Art Department at the University of California, Berkeley. Her research interests include artistic and intellectual histories of 20th-century South Asia; the intersections among the Cold War, the Non-Aligned Movement and artistic practices; and global modernisms. Her essays have appeared in books, exhibition catalogs and journals such as *Art Journal*, *Third Text* and *Yishu*. Currently, she is completing a monograph on abstraction in interwar and postwar painting, sculpture, photography and experimental film in South Asia. Other projects include *Postwar: A Global Art History, 1945–1965* (co-edited with Okwui Enwezor and Ulrich Wilmes).

**NOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> David Teh, *Thai Art: Currencies of the Contemporary* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017), p. 4.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- <sup>11</sup> See Ahmad Mashadi, “Framing the 1970s”, *Third Text* 25, 4 (2011): 409–17.
- <sup>12</sup> Patrick Flores, “Towards a Lexicon of Inclinations: Words Forming Worlds in Southeast Asia”, *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas* 3 (2017): 51.
- <sup>13</sup> Teh’s example is the Sino-Thai conceptual artist Chang Sae-tang, who has now gained prominence within contemporary global exhibitionary circuits but whose concrete poetry received scant attention during the artist’s lifetime precisely because the works found no referent within the 1970s’ cultural worlds of Thailand.

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