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Histories

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Editorial Introduction:

Gender in Southeast Asian Art Histories

YVONNE LOW, ROGER NELSON AND CLARE VEAL

[I]n a supremely ambivalent gesture, the future Buddha leaves behind the many subaltern women who literally define his princely existence to seek a new transcendent state. Is this a protofeminist act or simply another in the apparently limitless reinventions of phallogentrism? Women are, to begin with, so many foils—the condition of possibility—for this model man to surpass himself in obtaining perfection. – Ashley Thompson (2017)

Thompson's provocative questioning of the various ways one might interpret the Gautama Buddha's story—both as a service and/or a disservice to feminism—opened the three-day Gender in Southeast Asian Art Histories symposium, hosted by the Power Institute at the University of Sydney in October 2017. In her intellectually ambitious, methodologically experimental and ideologically committed keynote lecture, Thompson rehearsed arguments from her forthcoming book, to treat the symposium attendees to a gripping feminist reading of the historical unfolding of the Buddha's story in a range of Cambodian and other Southeast Asian contexts, from the Angkorian and Pagan empires to the contemporary period.

This special issue of *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia*, on the topic of gender and its intersections with art history, emerges and extends from numerous discussions held during that

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symposium. The event in Sydney was co-convened by Yvonne Low, Roger Nelson, Clare Veal and Stephen H. Whiteman, with invaluable support from numerous staff at the Power Institute and elsewhere in the University of Sydney. This special issue is co-edited by Low, Nelson and Veal (with Veal also hereafter joining the *Southeast of Now* editorial collective), and is the first in a series of occasional issues to be edited not by the entire collective, as in the journal's first two volumes, but by a smaller group of researchers. As co-editors, we warmly thank our co-convenor and all participants from the Sydney symposium for their contributions to our thinking here.

While we were inspired by the symposium in Sydney, this issue is emphatically not a conventional conference proceeding; we did not aspire for it to be a comprehensive record or to limit it to only or even chiefly the matters discussed there. Rather, as editors we have taken the Sydney event as one among several points of departure. A number of contributors to this special issue were presenters in Sydney and have substantially reworked their research for publication here. Several other contributors did not attend the symposium, but have been invited to contribute their work as it complicates, extends, challenges or even productively contradicts and undermines the conversations that took place during the event.¹

Just as this publication is not a proceeding of the Gender in Southeast Asian Art Histories symposium, it also refuses the possibility or presumption of attempting to be 'comprehensive' in any other way. It is not and does not seek to be a survey of the 'state of the field'. It does not seek to indicate key directions in current research on 'women artists' or on sexual difference as it figures in the making, circulation or interpretation of the contemporary and modern arts of Southeast Asia. It is not a 'reader' or a 'primer'; it does not attempt to offer an overview of feminist and/or gender-based and/or woman-centred scholarship on Southeast Asian art. In this regard, it will not aid the reader to gain a sense of 'mastery' over this domain of work. This is not, then, a polemical publication; it does not posit a programme for future research or announce a political position from which such research could or should be undertaken. It gathers some voices, among many, saying some things, among others.

We as editors position this publication as a partial, provisional and 'first' step—one in a continuing series of discursive gestures. We announce it as provisional and 'first' with full awareness of and gratitude for the important scholarly, artistic and curatorial work that precedes it and makes the contributions that follow possible. As editors, we also envision this publication as one of an ongoing series of events, discussions, publications and other fora for research and its presentation. As we work to prepare this publication, we

also plan—along with Juthamas Tangsantikul—a series of workshops to be held in conjunction with and hosted by Chulalongkorn University’s CommDe (Communication and Design) programme, which will be held in April 2019 in Bangkok. Titled *Gender in Southeast Asian Art Histories and Visual Cultures: Art, Design and Canon-making?*, this event will be accompanied by an exhibition of archival materials relating to the *Womanifesto* series of programmes, which have been held biennially in Thailand since 1997. Following the event in Bangkok, a different iteration of that exhibition will travel to Sydney, to conjoin another research gathering at the University of Sydney, co-convened with Catriona Moore. This event will attempt to gather ideas and possibilities for the establishment of a research network that utilises a digital platform for scholarship on gender, sexual difference, ‘women artists’ and related topics in Southeast Asian art histories. We hope that this ongoing, independent digital platform—which will welcome partial support from a number of institutions in the region and internationally—will take form and facilitate a conversation that we cannot yet imagine.

In proclaiming itself to be the ‘first’ event of its kind, the *Gender in Southeast Asian Art Histories* symposium, as well as the ongoing project that includes the present publication, announced itself as ambitious, if not interventionist in its approach. Although the claim to be the ‘first’ should be viewed as instrumentalist—a way of securing funding and interest—it may also be understood as indicative of a discourse that is both patriarchal and Euro-American, within which ‘mastery’ and ‘originality’ come to designate intellectual validity.

This view has the potential to occlude important work by feminist and other scholars who have intervened in, redefined and problematised the terms and conditions in which Southeast Asian art histories have been written. For instance, in addition to foundational publications by scholars such as Astri Wright, Khin Mya Zin and Flaudette May Datuin, whose essays and monographs on Southeast Asian ‘women artists’ remain important resources,² as well as the new research conducted by the ten scholars who presented at the symposium, there have also been numerous events that offer fertile grounds on which we all continue to work. These include the previously mentioned *Womanifesto* series of exhibitions and projects; the symposium *Women Imaging Women*, organised by Flaudette May Datuin and Patrick D. Flores at the Cultural Centre of the Philippines, Manila in 1999; as well as the exhibition *Text/Subtext*, curated by Binghui Huangfu, at Earl Lu Gallery, LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore in 2000, among many others.

With this and other recent histories in mind, *Gender in Southeast Asian Art Histories* may claim to be the ‘first’ only in the sense that it aimed to

further expand the discourse on gender in the work of Southeast Asian artists beyond that related to ‘women’s art’ and ‘women artists’. Instead, discussions at the Sydney symposium, and in this publication, focused on theoretical issues including representation and aesthetics, as they relate to the reality of women’s historical and contemporary situations in Southeast Asia, and to other manifestations of gender and sexual difference in artistic practices and cultural formations in this region.

The Sydney symposium followed three thematic trajectories, which we conceived as an organisational framework that might facilitate wider engagements with questions pertinent to the histories and contexts of the region. These three trajectories were informed by the papers submitted for presentation and comprised of: writing women into art histories; picturing gender in texts and images (including paintings, films and photographs, among others); and the politics of the feminine in visual cultures.

It is clear to us that uses of the term ‘feminism’ and definitions of ‘Southeast Asia’ as a region have both been fraught, as has been the relationship between them. In *Women Imaging Women*, a clear definition of “feminist aesthetics” in Southeast Asia (in that case dealing specifically and solely with the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand) was avoided, in order to distinguish between ‘absolute and formulaic propositions’ and an ‘active practice of making and remaking art, making and remaking claims for the category of woman, and making and remaking women accountable in shifting spaces.’³ The slipperiness of these terminologies is complicated by perceptions that “feminism” (when imagined as a Euro-American-centric ideology) has little relevancy, or even worse, repressive potentialities when applied to the region. As controversially argued in the work of scholars such as Anthony Reid and Barbara Watson Andaya, the delineation and definition of particularities shared in the geographic region now called ‘Southeast Asia’ has partially rested upon perceived pre-colonial commonalities in the treatment of women and their social position, upon which exogenous, phallogocentric structures were then superimposed.⁴

Ashley Thompson’s research moves beyond Andaya’s and Reid’s inversion of the patrilineal/matrilineal binary, towards deconstructionist readings of sexual difference in premodern Southeast Asia. In her formulation, the discursive construction of ‘Southeast Asia’ has been intrinsically related to sexual difference. Yet here, the region also offers a means of problematising neat, binary oppositions. Two examples given in Thompson’s most recent monograph, entitled *Engendering the Buddhist State: Territory, Sovereignty and Sexual Difference in the Inventions of Angkor*, include the mandala form of territorial organisation, which she suggests renders as untenable any absolute

distinctions between insides and outsides; and second, the prominence of powerful 'women', whose very power and presence has manifestly not been mutually exclusive with the existence of powerful 'men'.⁵

The methods employed as part of Reid's and Watson Andaya's claims for Southeast Asia as a coherent region distinct from South Asia, as partially based on the more privileged position of women here, also point to several other concerns that we face when taking up the region as an object of study. Their emphasis on the specificity of the 'local' and 'indigenous' can be viewed, in part, as a reaction against earlier understandings of the region as shaped by Indic and Sinitic civilisational influences, the former being perhaps most famously outlined in George Coedès' *Indianized States of Southeast Asia* (1944) and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's *History of Indian and Indonesian Art* (1957).⁶ Yet, as argued by scholars such as Thompson and Craig J. Reynolds, an emphasis on either the uniqueness of the region as a cohesive entity, or conversely on its position as 'minor India', does not get us very far.⁷

If we understand South Asia and Euro-America as embodying problematic positions of imagined influence within Southeast Asian art history, then a related issue here is the scepticism with which artists and art historians working within and on Southeast Asia have tended to view the term 'feminism'. Our experience of this, also described in Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez's essay published here, is that very few artists have been willing to label themselves 'feminists', with either a view that the term does not apply to them as 'Southeast Asian artists', or that it functions to flatten interpretation and diminish the complexity of their works, which may engage with issues beyond that of gender. Perhaps this situation relates to that articulated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her argument that the "subject of feminism is produced by the performative of a declaration of independence, which must state itself as already given, in a constative statement of women's identity and/or solidarity, natural, historical, social, psychological."⁸

As editors, we share a desire to optimistically affirm the importance and potential of feminism as one term for and one strategy of establishing productive solidarities between women, trans people and others, while at the same time recognising intersectional feminism's role in acknowledging the differences within and between women, trans people, non-binary people, and other gender identities and formations, in order to avoid static definitions of gendered experience.

Our attempt to register multiplicities in gender relates to our desire to honour the instabilities and plurality of Southeast Asia as a region and a discursive construct. In considering the complexities of the question of the region's uniqueness, we might also reference the problematics of how

Southeast Asian gendered experiences have been chiefly defined through comparison with a supposedly normative Euro-American subject, or indeed a supposedly normative 'male' subject, both of which are imagined as remaining static and the same. Or we might question issues of language and translation, which might seem to facilitate the inclusion of gender in Southeast Asian art histories—whatever that inclusion might entail—without ever problematising the structures through which its (imagined?) exclusion has been founded and perpetuated.

The most deceptively simple questions—which have yet to be adequately examined—are: why and how should histories of gender in Southeast Asian art be written? And to whom are they addressed? Contributors to this issue offer provocative and insightful perspectives on the writing and reading of such histories.

It is from this process of reading (and re-reading) art historical narratives that Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez extrapolates a dissatisfaction with the discipline's phallogocentric tendencies. Here she argues for the need to consider the contributions of 'other' cultural practitioners in the making of Southeast Asian art history, alongside and behind the work of artists, curators, writers and others who have typically figured in the majority of previous accounts. Here Legaspi-Ramirez extends her recovery work to encompass that of female cultural workers, chiefly artist-organisers who have played a critical role in shaping possibilities for narratives of practice, but whose contributions have hitherto been largely omitted from a kind of art history that conventionally privileges objects and makers. Drawing on a range of archival materials not previously studied, the article traces the lives and works of Purita Kalaw Ledesma (1914–2005), artist-organiser-writer, and Lydia Villanueva Arguilla (1913–69), fictionist-gallerist-critic, to offer an alternative and more encompassing narrative of the production and reception of modern art in the Philippines.

In another excavation of 'forgotten' histories, Eksuda Singhalampong undertakes an incisive examination of court portraits of Siamese royal women, thereby tracing a history of female empowerment in 19th-century Siam. Central to Eksuda's account of this moment in which women renegotiated possibilities by and for themselves, is the introduction of photography to the Siamese court, a technology that was employed in service of the nation's ambitious modernising project. Through contextual and visual analyses, Eksuda demonstrates how photography afforded courtly women a powerful means to define their public image, whether they chose to conform with particular societally-defined feminine ideals, or else assert their subjectivity in constructing themselves in the image of a modern 'new woman'.

In her efforts to recover the stories of several generations of women that outline their contributions to the arts of the Kamasan village in Bali, Siobhan Campbell's article draws primarily on oral histories and empirical analysis. By offering a counter-narrative to canonical male-centric narratives of Balinese painting, Campbell delineates accounts of female painters who have circumvented hierarchal structures and achieved self-determination through their participation in both 'traditional' and 'modern' processes—vis-à-vis formal art school training, membership in art collectives, engagement with art collectors and patrons, and exhibitions. To this end, in making gender a subject of analysis, Campbell's article provokes a reassessment of the terms and criteria through which particular art forms have been and can be represented discursively in art history.

Taking a different approach, Wulan Dirgantoro posits a feminist theoretical framework for interpreting the art of Indonesian women artists. Her article tests the relevance of Euro-American feminist approaches as a means to actively re-read the use of the Indonesian female body in the works of women artists from several generations. Discursive strategies of correction and interrogation are creatively employed to examine how the power dynamics of culture can be read through their inter-discursive entanglements, and to recover the socio-historical contexts in which the written and visual representations of women have been produced.

In each of these double-blind, peer-reviewed articles, the authors have foregrounded significant new research that not only brings to light histories of female contributors and female empowerment through visual representation, but also offers new approaches for writing 'other' kinds of subjectivities into and challenging the normative assumptions of Southeast Asian art histories.

It is with this desire in mind—to consider the historicity of art writing and also of the female voice therein—that we have invited Patrick D. Flores to contribute an article in tribute to the legacy of preeminent art historian and critic Alice Guillermo (1938–2018), who sadly passed away this year. In Flores' sensitive and thoughtful account, we revisit the academic career and writings of this prodigious and talented woman. Flores was taught by Guillermo, and his article, while historicising and analytical, is also written from a personal and necessarily subjective position—indeed, an intimate place—of admiration and homage.

Like many of the authors included here, Flores is centrally concerned not only with the object of his study, but also with the terms in which it can be written. Terms, including terminology and more broadly the textures of language, have been taken up by May Adadol Ingawanij in her text published here. We invited Ingawanij to write something that might illuminate the

tropes or questions that recur in other contributions in this publication, and which also arose during discussions at the Gender in Southeast Asian Art Histories symposium (at which she presented a paper). Ingawanij has approached this task through and with *terms*, highlighting here the importance of language and voice in the articulation of a feminist programme, as well as in the investigation of various and varied formations of gender in the histories and practices of arts and culture in this region. Central to her discussion is the ambiguity with which the notion of agency is used, and the various other ways in which we might conceptualise this term and the possibilities of doing and not doing that it implies. That Ingawanij's comments expand from discussion of the symposium to questions of methodology and training, and decoloniality and beyond, is an instantiation of the centrality of sexual difference to modes of thinking and working far beyond those reflexively concerned with women artists or similarly specialised topics.

Given the growing recent focus on non-object-based exhibition histories of the contemporary, including that of the Chiang Mai Social Installation (1992–97),⁹ it is timely to also consider the significance of feminist exhibitions that emerged during the same period but which have hitherto received much less attention and/or have been categorised as exclusively about 'women artists' and thus not of relevance to a wider discourse focused on questions not directly related to gender. Included in this issue is the translation of several short essays and creative writings first published in the Thai-language catalogue for Tradisexion (1995), a feminist, woman-centred exhibition held in Bangkok. This catalogue included brief commentaries on the exhibited works from the artists involved in the exhibition, as well as fictional and reflective essays from women writers. Many of the artists involved in this inaugural exhibition became part of the founding organising group for the first international biennale of its kind, Womanifesto (1997–present). Womanifesto's histories and significances have yet to be adequately studied. This is despite the fact that this series of programmes predated subsequent biennales and transnational exhibitions, and that the events' organising group maintained a strong commitment to using feminism and the concerns of women artists as frames for its exhibitions and related events. The decision to include two recollection essays by artists and co-founders, Phaptawan Suwannakudt and Varsha Nair, might thus be seen as a first step towards gaining a better understanding of the socio-historical contexts that led to Womanifesto's impetus and significance for Southeast Asian art histories.

Arahmaiani's "Balancing Feminine and Masculine Energy" is a beautifully illustrated text, which may be viewed as a reflective essay that takes stock of the artist's practice over the last two decades. Here she considers her

experimentation with a range of media and different modes of expression, while also extrapolating her subjective views on power and gender relations that have underscored the conceptualisation of much of her work. As she justifies the need for ecological activism in her writings and art, it is clear that the essay makes an unapologetic, intersectional appraisal of class, ethnic and gender conditions that continue to structure the lives and social realities of the communities with which she has collaborated in her recent projects.

We have also included in this publication three review essays, each of which points to further expanded possibilities—indeed, necessities—for continuing research.

Soumya James, a participant in the Sydney symposium, offers a careful and considered reading of the edited volume *Rethinking Visual Narratives from Asia: Intercultural and Comparative Perspectives* (2013), which highlights the many generative possibilities for exchange between art historical scholarship focused on the premodern and work addressing the modern and the contemporary. James is a specialist on ancient South and Southeast Asian art history, and her presentation at the symposium instantiated a claim in our announcement of and call for papers for that event: that scholars studying premodern objects and cultures and those working on modern and contemporary arts could and should be engaged in greater dialogue. Her review essay similarly indicates that research and writing on premodern forms of narrative may open illuminating possibilities for work examining narrative in more recent contexts.

Wong Bing Hao's book review insists on the value of non-binary methodologies for interpreting art, culture, gender and the intersections between them. Wong's account of recent studies focused on the interchanges between art and politics in *Contemporary Arts as Political Practice in Singapore* (2017), highlights the rich potentials of a trans-subjectivity, as well as the shortcomings of 'either/or' positions, which Wong suggests are unable to register complexity and difference with the necessary aesthetic and political nuance. While most of the contributions to this publication deal primarily with women and women artists, Wong's review essay reminds us that a concentration on women may also overlook and elide other gender formations and identities, and may risk perpetuating binary understandings of gender that replicate the very structures they may seek to oppose.

Qui-Ha Hoang Nguyen's film review draws together accounts of transnational popular culture, Vietnamese independent cinema and feminist subjectivity. Her account of *The Way Station* (2017), directed by Hong Anh, traces in detail various female characters in the film and reads their fictional experiences in light of recent discourses on women's bodies in Vietnamese

and diasporic contexts. Qui-Ha's review essay indicates the rich potential for analyses of cultural forms not typically encompassed within the discipline of art history. She also reminds us of the ways in which representations of various identities matter.

To this end, we would like to conclude with a remark made in our announcement of and call for papers for the Gender in Southeast Asian Art Histories symposium two years ago:

Studies focused on gender in Southeast Asian societies have emerged, in recent decades, in approximate concurrence with the development of regionally focused Southeast Asian art histories [...] [T]here has to date been insufficient intersection between these two fields.

We cautiously hope that the various contributions we have gathered in this publication have, at the very least, shed some light on the manifold potentials for such intersections.

We have chosen to feature an image of Phaptawan Suwannakudt's artwork on the cover of this special issue for several reasons. While Phaptawan's writing is included in this issue, her artwork is not discussed in detail, and the specific work featured on the cover is not addressed at all. In this, we move away from the pattern set by previous issues of the journal, in which the cover typically reflected the contents in a more literal, direct and perhaps formulaic way, which can be seen to conform to phallographic hierarchical norms. Phaptawan's work often straddles the traditional and the contemporary contexts of artistic production (including their gendered constraints). In this, she is certainly not alone. Yet it is important to note that we have not chosen to feature her work on our cover in order to cast Phaptawan as in any way representative of the figure of a 'woman artist'. The 'living' sculpture of the artist's late mother, shown on the cover, cannot be archived (because of the centrality of the ephemeral sense of smell to the work); moreover, the work cannot be definitively dated, because it is in a sense a new work each time it is shown or encountered, and it constantly changes as the plants wilt and change over time. In this way, we feel that this work can be understood as quietly defying structures of (object-centred) consecration and canonisation. In a way, it speaks very subtly to the manifold but key themes in the pages that follow.

NOTES

- ¹ Papers were presented in Sydney by Chanon Kenji Praepipatmongkol, Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez, Eksuda Singhalampong, May Adadol Ingawanij, Roger Nelson, Soumya James, Tina Le, Wulan Dirgantoro, and Yvonne Low. Qui-Ha Nguyen's paper was scheduled for presentation but she was unable to attend. For further details about the symposium, see <http://www.powerpublications.com.au/gender-in-southeast-asian-art-histories/> [accessed Jan. 2019].
- ² See for instance, Astri Wright, "Lucia Hartini, Javanese Painter: Against the Grain, Towards Herself", in *Studies in Southeast Asian Art: Essays in Honor of Stanley J. O'Connor*, ed. Nora A. Taylor (Ithaca: SEAP Cornell University, 2000); Khin Mya Zin, *Myanmar Women Artists*, trans. Pann Hmone Wai (Yangon: Ye Aung Sarpay, 2009); and Flaudette May Datuin, *Home, Body, Memory: Filipina Artists in the Visual Arts, 19th Century to the Present* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2002), among other texts by these authors.
- ³ Flaudette May V. Datuin and Patrick D. Flores, ed., *Women Imaging Women: Home, Body, Memory, Papers from the Conference on Artists from Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam* (Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1999), p. 22.
- ⁴ See Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450–1680* (New Haven: Yale University Press), p. 6; and Barbara Andaya, *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006). This perspective was perhaps first outlined by George Coedès who identified the "importance of the role of women and of relationships in the maternal line" as one of the "characteristic traits of [a] pre-Arayan [Southeast Asian] civilization". George Coedès, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, trans. Susan Brown Cowing (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1968), p. 9. This approach has been critiqued in several texts including Ashley Thompson, *Engendering the Buddhist State: Territory, Sovereignty and Sexual Difference in the Inventions of Angkor* (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), p. 82.
- ⁵ Ashley Thompson, *Engendering the Buddhist State*, pp. 10, 17.
- ⁶ See George Coedès, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*; and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art* (New Delhi: Shri Devendra Jain for Munshiram Manoharlal, 1972).
- ⁷ See Ashley Thompson, *Engendering the Buddhist State*, p. 11; and Craig J. Reynolds, "A New Look at Old Southeast Asia", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 54, 2 (1995): 425.
- ⁸ Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 112.
- ⁹ See David Teh and David Morris, ed., *Artist-to-Artist: Independent Art Festivals in Chiang Mai 1992–98* (London: Afterall Books, 2018).