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Stephen H. Whiteman, Sarena Abdullah,
Yvonne Low and Phoebe Scott (eds.),
*Ambitious Alignments: New Histories of
Southeast Asian Art, 1945–1990*

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Singapore, 2018

Caroline Turner

Ambitious Alignments is certainly an intriguing title for a study of modern art and architecture from a group of nations, all of which have subscribed to the principles of non-alignment originating in the Asian-African Bandung Conference of 1955. The concept of alignments in the book's title, however, extends beyond the geopolitical and modern regional interconnections in Southeast Asia, such as ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), and also challenges long-held views about the ideological struggles of the Cold War.

Is Southeast Asia based on geography, comprising as it does nations in an arc from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific (with a population of over 600 million people in 2018)? Or is it a construction built on the creativity of those sharing the unique local histories of a region with interconnections of people and culture extending over the millennia? How significant are national perspectives and to what extent do local concerns dominate the art, rather than ideas originating from outside the region? One key concern in Asian art historiography is to fill in gaps in scholarly research for the period between pre-colonial era art and 'contemporary' art (usually accepted as emerging in the early 1990s). This richly researched and illustrated book is a valuable contribution to that scholarship.

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Ambitious Alignments explores histories of art and architecture from 1945–90 in the context of decolonisation, the establishment of new nations, and the Cold War in Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand—a historical time frame when artists and intellectuals in these countries were engaged in critically rethinking art and society. The book comes out of a collaboration between the Power Institute at the University of Sydney, the Institut Teknologi Bandung and the National Gallery Singapore, and involved early-career and senior scholars undertaking new research supported by the Getty Foundation’s Connecting Art Histories Initiative.

There are ten essays organised under five themes: Art for the Nation (Roger Nelson and Chomchon Fusinpaiboon); Circulation and Internationalism (Brigitta Isabella and Michelle Wong); Contested Topographies (Simon S.Y. Soon and Thanavi Chotpradit); Trauma and Affect (Wulan Dirgantoro and Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez) and Defining ‘Art’ in Southeast Asia (Clare Veal and Melissa Carlson). The book opens with an important introductory essay by all four editors (Phoebe Scott, Yvonne Low, Sarena Abdullah and Stephen H. Whiteman). The editors note that the ten essays “refine and develop existing research in modern art and architecture of Southeast Asia, often at the expense of time-worn assumptions and ideological binaries that are legacies of the Cold War (c. 1947–91)” (p. 1).

Culture in Southeast Asia, as all the essays powerfully demonstrate, reflected changing national, regional and international contexts, but also responded to local concerns, “including those, as Tony Day has described, ‘that antedated, outlasted, and never became entirely aligned with the ideologies of either bloc’” (p. 2). Significantly the essays in this volume demonstrate beyond question that Southeast Asian artists were in no way “docile pawns of the super-powers” (p. 2), particularly in their unresponsiveness to the Soviet attempt to convert them to the style of socialist realism, or to attempts by the US government to promote American abstract expressionism.

Southeast Asia was a key area in the ideological struggles of the Cold War: one thinks of the Vietnam War, its extension into Laos and Cambodia, and the killings of suspected communists in Indonesia in 1965–66. As Thanavi Chotpradit points out in her essay on Thailand: “By the second half of 1975, all the countries neighbouring Thailand on the other side of the Mekong river—Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam—had fallen to communist forces” (p. 165). The monuments erected to those who fought communist insurgencies in Thailand, Chotpradit writes, were, however, figurative and reflected Thai “collective values”, despite the fact that “by the early 1950s the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) promoted American abstract expressionism as a symbol of creativity and freedom” (p. 171).

Brigitta Isabella argues in her essay on modern art in Indonesia's cultural diplomacy: "Aggressive attempts to sway emerging postcolonial states were at times suspected as the return of imperialism, thus the rhetoric for Cold War ideological battles was disguised under the affectionate term of "friendship"" (p. 83). "If we look beyond the influence of the superpowers' visual vocabularies to consider their critical reception on the ground, it is apparent that some artists found ways not only to operate outside this sphere of influence, but also at times to work in opposition to it" (p. 84).

Many of the essays are about transnational connections transcending Cold War ideologies and also emphasise local contexts for the practice of art. This is true of Chomchon Fusinpaiboon's study of Thai architect Prince Vodhyakara Varavarn, who studied in England and in his later career, which was undertaken in the context of the close relationship between Thailand and the US, worked to develop a distinctively Thai modern style of architecture. In her essay, Clare Veal shows that in Thailand Sur (Surrealist) photography, in contrast to European Surrealism, "simultaneously reaffirmed conventionalist discourses of art as espoused by Bhira Sri and Theravada Buddhist doctrine regarding impermanence, suffering and *dharmic* truth" (p. 284).

Essays by Isabella on the politics of cultural diplomacy and by Michelle Wong on a series of art exchanges between Manila and Hong Kong (involving artists with an affinity in abstraction) discuss ideas of cosmopolitan, transnational approaches to art in the region. Simon Soon also looks at transnational connections in his very interesting study of Nanyang University in Singapore and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, in terms of their architecture, sites and the history of diasporas. Both Soon's and Wong's essays raise fascinating issues regarding the long histories of cultural exchange between China and Southeast Asia.

The transnational artistic journey of Philippines-born artist Lani Maestro, who left the Philippines for Canada to escape martial law under Marcos, is discussed in Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez's essay under the theme of "Trauma and Affect". The author explores how "affect" might be better understood in Maestro's site-specific works from the 1970s to the 1990s, arguing ultimately as the editors suggest, "for a less politically centred reading of Southeast Asian art" (p. 7).

Roger Nelson, in his study of the paintings of the Cambodian artist Nhek Dim, the most prominent artist of the early Cambodian post-independence period, who trained at Walt Disney Studios in the US, sees the artist's idealised paintings of landscapes and women as "best understood not as "nostalgia", but rather as performing an emphatically modern ideological function" in Cambodia at the time" (p. 43).

The challenging modern histories of several nations are shadows in the background of many essays. For example, Nelson states that: "Modern arts flourished during this era [1955–70], especially under Sihanouk, who was a filmmaker and self-proclaimed "artist" in his own right. However, almost all modern artistic production was halted with the advent of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime [...] which sought to destroy all cultural artefacts of the preceding decades" (p. 21).

The horrific mass killings in Indonesia in 1965–66 and what is erased from history is analysed by Wulan Dirgantoro, who writes: "Despite the self-censorship that appears to have left much of this history unwritten, this essay posits that most Indonesian artists' narratives and image-making still reflected the situation that emerged from the devastating 1965–66 era" (p. 201). Dirgantoro argues that some of the art of Srihardi Sudarsono and A.D. Pirous bears traces and was haunted by this collective trauma of the times, even though their work did not on the surface seem to evidence this. It is not surprising that a whole generation would be traumatised by what Indonesian artist Dadang Christanto, the son of one of the victims, has called "the unspeakable horror". As Isabella notes, the effect of the killings, rapes and imprisonments was "silencing the body of political imagination in art" (p. 86).

It is appropriate that the last essay in the book by Melissa Carlson, "Painting through the Cheroot Haze: Censorship of Female Artists in Socialist Burma, 1962–88", discusses the struggles of women to pursue an artistic career and how they faced being censored, isolated and excluded in the male-dominated Burmese artist community of the time. Carlson points out, however, that Myanmar's latest societal transition may challenge traditional norms to potentially "foster a new image of the female experience" (p. 319).

Carlson quotes distinguished Southeast Asianist Nora Taylor's claim that "the human dimension of art is essential" (p. 295). The research in these essays provides powerful human stories and a fascinating window into the history and society, as well as the art, of an under-researched era.

To return to my point at the beginning of this review on the complexities of defining connectivities and differences in the region of Southeast Asia, there are obviously areas that have not been covered in these essays. In terms of international contacts, Japan is strangely absent. This is despite the fact that recent research reveals that the Japanese had a significant effect on art production in the countries they occupied during the Pacific War. After the war, Japan rejoined the international community and, through government organisations and events such as the Fukuoka Asian Art Shows that began in the late 1970s, gave many Southeast Asian artists their first international experience and was a key player economically and culturally in the region. While it is

never possible to include everything in such a compilation, I do think that essays on Laos, Malaysia and Vietnam would have added to the depth of the collection. The original team of early-career scholars associated with the project included scholars working on those countries; this may suggest future publications. Malaysia, as the work of Redza Piyadasa and T.K. Sabapathy has shown, was a particularly active site of art historiographical reassessment in the immediate postwar years, as the newly independent nation sent artists such as Piyadasa overseas, mainly to the United Kingdom, to undertake advanced study. Phoebe Scott's research on Vietnamese artists in the transition from colonialism and during the era of revolution and war provides an important counterpoint to many of the other histories covered in this publication, in terms of the larger picture of art in Southeast Asia.

Ambitious Alignments is a major contribution to the field and points the way towards both a fruitful method of collaborative research that brings overlapping histories together and to new areas in which such research can be focussed. It should be an essential text for students and art historians.

BIOGRAPHY

Caroline Turner is an academic and curator and currently Adjunct Associate Professor in the Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University (ANU) and Deputy Director of the ANU's Indonesia Institute.