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In This Issue

- 5

Features

- Marc James Léger: Afterlifethoughts on Engaged Art Practice: ATSA and the State of Emergency
- Rebecca Zorach: Art and Soul: An Experimental Friendship between the Street and a Museum
- "Gertrude Stein" et alia: Guerrilla Girls and Guerrilla Girls BroadBand: Inside Story
- Anna C. Chave: The Guerrilla Girls’ Reckoning

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 5

Table of Contents

- 6

Art Journal

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About Issues, Page 6

The Guerrilla Girls’ Reckoning

Carol Bove: To Rescue Time from Photography

Nora A. Taylor: Art without History? Southeast Asian Artists and Their Communities in the Face of Geography

Free Time

Joe Scanlan: Free Time: An Introduction

Dexter Siniver: A Note on the Time

Carol Bove: To Rescue Time from Photography

Pierre Huyge: Museum Time: Joe Scanlan Talks with Pierre Huyge

Mary Heilmann: [Un TK]

Contents

Features

- Marc James Léger
- Afterlifethoughts on Engaged Art Practice: ATSA and the State of Emergency
- Rebecca Zorach: Art and Soul: An Experimental Friendship between the Street and a Museum
- Gertrude Stein et alia: Guerrilla Girls and Guerrilla Girls BroadBand: Inside Story
- Anna C. Chave: The Guerrilla Girls’ Reckoning

Reviews


In This Issue

- 5

Kay Siegel

In This Issue

- 6

Kay Siegel

In This Issue

- 7

Nora A. Taylor

In This Issue

- 8

Joe Scanlan

In This Issue

- 9

Dexter Siniver

In This Issue

- 10

Carol Bove

In This Issue

- 11

Pierre Huyge

In This Issue

- 12

Mary Heilmann

In This Issue

- 13

Marc James Léger

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 14

Kay Siegel

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 15

Nora A. Taylor

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 16

Joe Scanlan

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 17

Dexter Siniver

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 18

Carol Bove

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 19

Pierre Huyge

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 20

Mary Heilmann

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 21

Marc James Léger

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 22

Afterlifethoughts on Engaged Art Practice: ATSA and the State of Emergency

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 23

Rebecca Zorach

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 24

Art and Soul: An Experimental Friendship between the Street and a Museum

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 25

Gertrude Stein et alia

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 26

Guerrilla Girls and Guerrilla Girls Bookland: Inside Story

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 27

Anna C. Chave

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 28

The Guerrilla Girls’ Reckoning

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 29

Reviews

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 30

Nicole R. Fleetwood

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 31

Black Art/West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 32

Eva Diaz

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 33

Barry Bergdoll and Leah Dickerman

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 34

Bauhaus 1919–1933: Workshops for Modernity

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 35

Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 36

Busbeau: A Conceptual Mold

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 37

Philipp Oswalt

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 38

Busbeaus Cantons

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 39

1901–2009: Cansessions and Contemponts

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 40

Jeffrey Salterick

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 41

Robin Schuldenfrei

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 42

Bauhau Contract

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 43

Fusing Henry Doyce

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 44

Dushe and Mydunus

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 45

Ulrike Müller

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 46

Busbeau Wamr

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 47

Art, Handcraft Design

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 48

Sheila Peppe

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 49

Elissa Aulcher

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 50

String, Eith

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 51

The History of Art and Craft in American Art

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 52

Glenn Adamson

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 53

The Craft Reader

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 54

Glenn Adamson

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 55

Thinking Through Craft

Table of Contents

In This Issue

- 56

Nicole R. Fleetwood
The critic Lee Weng Choy once described Singapore as an “ahistorical society that seems to live only in the present tense, and claims no need for the past, let alone a sophisticated consciousness of history.” In Lee’s view, Singapore suffers from a case of postmodernity. But to deny it history is vaguely reminiscent of a time, during the period of colonialism, when all Southeast Asians were denied a history as well as a present. When colonial explorers came to the “lands below the winds,” as they called the region between China and India in the late nineteenth century, they found Chinese writing systems and Indian religions, and concluded that the inhabitants of the lands lacked original culture, or that whatever culture they did possess was not theirs. The colonial explorers felt this gave them the right to patronize the locals and take possession of their artifacts.

With the colonial era long gone, where does the West stand a century later in relation to Southeast Asian culture? Singapore may not have a history, but it is one of two countries in Southeast Asia, along with Thailand, to have a pavilion at the Venice Biennale. It is also the home of the only art museum devoted exclusively to Southeast Asian art. Since the field of modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art history has developed in the postcolonial era, scholars have focused their attentions on individual countries within the area rather than the region as a whole. Studies of the evolution of modern art from colonialism to the 1990s in Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, the Philippines, and, most recently, Myanmar, have been published based on dissertations and intense in-country field research. Many of these texts argue for the recognition of “other modernities,” and the abandonment of hegemonic notions of Western modernity. Artists, however, have begun to move beyond this opposition of East versus West and engage in an inter-regional conversation. While scholars at American universities may care whether these artists were recognized and accepted by Western institutions of modern art, it has become much more important for artists to participate in community projects that cross, and indeed eliminate altogether, the borders that colonial maps had so eagerly drawn. The creation of ASEAN, the Association of South East Asian Nations, in 1967 may have seemed like an artificial concept, one that defied the very essence of postcolonial nationalism, but over time, it appears, at least in terms of the development of modern and contemporary art in the region, that creating bridges between different Southeast Asian nations is not only essential to the fostering of artistic creativity but also much more fitting to the nature of Southeast Asian culture and geography.

This is not everyone’s opinion. In a rather biting critique of the most recent installment of the Asia-Pacific Triennial in Brisbane, Australia, this past winter, the Ho Chi Minh City–based Australian writer, artist, and curator Sue Haju deplored the artificial grouping together of artists from the Mekong region. Haju claimed that using the term “Mekong” was a curatorial strategy that did not reflect the way in which Southeast Asian artists perceive their own sense of place. She contends that no artist she met in Southeast Asia felt affinity with any place other than his or her own nation. This is not my experience, however. In my own research, I found quite the opposite. If anything characterizes Southeast

Nora A. Taylor

Art without History?
Southeast Asian Artists and Their Communities in the Face of Geography

operates on a large budget and has successfully lured artists from Southeast Asia.

Asian artists, it is their affinity with their close neighbors. This is especially true in the twenty-first century as cross-border, transnational exchanges that defy categorization become more frequent. Southeast Asian artists, who are little noticed by curators in Europe and America, do not need validation from the West, necessarily, nor do they need to be “mapped” onto the contemporary art world. The idea that Southeast Asians lack “identity” dates to the colonial period and has been perpetuated by the art market. The first sales of modern and contemporary Southeast Asian paintings at Sotheby’s in Singapore prominently featured the works of European artists who had traveled to the region in the early part of the twentieth century, some of whom founded art schools that later became national art academies after independence from colonial rule. In the 1990s Sotheby’s sales catalogues, German, Swiss, Belgian, and Dutch artists were labeled under the rubric of Indo-European painters, among them Walter Spies (1895–1942), Theo Meier (1908–1982), Adrien Le Mayeur de Merprés (1880–1958), and Rudolph Bonnet (1895–1938), who lived in Bali, to name a few, as well as Victor Tardieu (1865–1937), Joseph Ingimundur (1896–1971), and André Maires (1898–1987) who lived in Indochina. The problem is not so much the label per se, but rather that European artists are included in these sales at all. The irony is likely lost on the auctioneers, but the presence of these artworks in the sales indicates how fluid or, rather, imprecise the definition of modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art had been in the 1990s. Not that auction houses are by any means the sole measure of accuracy of interpretation or representation of artists in art history books, but in the case of a still-developing field such as Southeast Asian art history, it is rather unfortunately taken as “the only truth.”

For lack of scholarship in the field of modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art, buyers, and dealers, certainly, but curators and educators as well, take the information provided by these catalogues as factual. This may be changing, but in 1996, there were very few scholarly studies of these artists on which students of art history could rely. The other irony of the situation is that collectors of these so-called Indo-European paintings, according to experts that I spoke to at Sotheby’s and now Christie’s, where the sales continue, are predominantly wealthy Indonesians for the works made in Bali, and overseas Vietnamese for the Indochinese ones. This may be a case of retribution or a manifestation of retaliation for colonialism, whereby wealthy citizens of former colonies demonstrate their power to “buy back” what was taken from them, or else simply to show off their status as nouveaux riches, on par with those who patronized these artists during the colonial period—something that the natives could never do.

The demand for modern and contemporary art from Southeast Asia has risen over the past decade both within Southeast Asia and internationally, and galleries specializing in art from the region have been appearing in cities around the world, including New York. The first gallery in the United States to show artists from Southeast Asia exclusively opened in Oakland, California, in 1997. The gallery, called Pacific Bridge and founded by Geoff Dorn and Beth Gates, was more than a commercial space; it also offered residencies and sponsored talks and workshops. The gallery closed after a few years, but the founders continue to act as agents for the artists they represent and have curated several exhibitions of Southeast Asian contemporary art in California. In 2006, Tyler Rollins opened a gallery in Manhattan specializing in artists from Southeast Asia. The gallery operates on a large budget and has successfully lured artists from Southeast Asia to the “white cube setting.” Rollins is counting on the fact that awareness of contemporary Southeast Asian artists is growing in the United States. Individually speaking, outside of their national boundaries, Southeast Asian artists have never been as visible in biennials and international exhibitions as in the past few years. The Asia Society in New York has held two major retrospectives of work by Southeast Asian artists since it began collecting and exhibiting contemporary art in the late 1990s. The Thai artist Montien Boonma (1959–2003), curated by the Thai art historian Apinan Poshyananda, several years after the Asia Society held its breakthrough exhibition of contemporary art from Asia, held in 2005 and is now the first artist of Vietnamese descent to have a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art. Projects 93: Dinh Q. Le, June 30, 2010–January 24, 2011, Museum of Modern Art, New York, curated by Klaus Biesenbach.5. See the list at www.aaa.org.hk/onlineprojects/bitri/en/didyouknow.aspx. The Farmers and the Helicopter, 2006, three-channel video installation and helicopter sculpture, video created in collaboration with Phu-Nam Thuc Ha and Tuan Andrew Nguyen, installation view, ARKO, Seoul, 2008 (artwork © Dinh Q. Le; photograph by the author)
Australia, in December 2009, mentioned earlier and curated by Richard Streitmatter-Tran, an artist based in Ho Chi Minh City, and Russell Storer, curator at the Queensland Museum of Art, included the artists Sopheap Pich (born 1971), Vandy Rattana (born 1980), and Svay Ken (1938–2008) from Cambodia; Manit Sriwanichpoom (born 1961) from Thailand; Tun Win Aung and Wah Nu (born 1975) from Myanmar; and Bui Cong Khanh (born 1972) and Nguyen-Hatsushiba of Vietnam. For this project, Streitmatter-Tran researched artistic production in three countries bordering the Mekong River, Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia, plus Myanmar. His goal was not necessarily to find commonalities among the artists, but rather to reshuffle the deck and redraw the map so that artists could be considered outside the confines of their national boundaries. In Brisbane, the project was well received and gave participating artists an opportunity to express their views on identity politics. At a round-table discussion, several of the artists from Myanmar openly spoke about the conflicts in their country and the adverse condition for artists.

Earlier, in 2008, Streitmatter-Tran had collaborated with the Burmese artist Chaw Ei Thein on an installation for the second Singapore Biennale; the work, titled September Sweetness, was a pagoda made with five tons of melted sugar and commemorated the monks who rose against the military dictatorship in Myanmar in 2007.

The list of artists from Southeast Asia who have gained the attention of curators worldwide is growing every day. The Singapore Biennale, held for the third time March 13–May 15, 2011, has been successful in uniting local artists with international artists. The 2009 edition featured seventy artists, with twenty-three from Southeast Asia. It was the oldest biennial at Southeast Asia’s oldest biennial is the Jakarta Biennale, held since 1982. The show predominantly features artists from Southeast Asia, but its curatorial program also includes themes related to the region by artists from elsewhere. For example, the 2009 edition highlighted the themes of trade, migration, and colonialization. Unlike the first two Singapore Biennales, which were curated by Fumio Nanjo, director of the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, the Jakarta Biennale is not managed by a "star curator." Rather, it is organized by a large committee from the Jakarta Art Council. It may not necessarily have goals as ambitious as other biennials, and it usually falls under the radar of art audiences on the international circuit. However, it does aim to stimulate art production and generate art publics within Southeast Asia.

Artists from Southeast Asia may have earned new platforms for showing their work internationally in recent years, but critical recognition is one thing, and scholarship is another. Only a few of the artists mentioned above have received scholarly attention. The scholarship of modern and contemporary art began with country surveys and only gradually has moved to monographic studies of artists. Curatorial trends have, at times, also followed this pattern, with artists initially lumped together by country and then given individual retrospectives later. But the two paths, scholarly and curatorial, have not always been synchronized. At times, scholarship led the way with museums and galleries following suit, and at other times, it has been the other way around. Examples include the invitation of Apinan Poshyananda to curate the first exhibition of contemporary Asian art hosted by an American museum institution, Traditions/Tensions at the Asia Society in 1996, following the publication of his 1992 book Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. The decision by the Asia Society Galleries director at the time, Vishaka Desai, to hire a curator from Thailand and include Thai art in its survey of contemporary art from the continent no doubt was informed by Poshyananda’s scholarship, for no gallery or museum was carrying work by the artists who were included in the show. Conversely, there have been cases where an exhibition of an artist’s work has generated a scholarly article. One example, among many, is the Filipino artist Manuel Ocampo’s exhibition at Track 16 Gallery, the film made about him, and a subsequent essay by Patrick Flores in the journal Puspin.

When considering cases where Southeast Asian artists have been exhibited, it is tempting to critique the ways in which they have been “othered” in the exhibition process. Many exhibitions of Asian artists in the West since Traditions/Tensions at the Asia Society have similarly tended to emphasize “difference,” and situating artists’ works within their sociocultural contexts, whereas exhibitions of these artists in Southeast Asia simply focus on their work. One example of the former is another show by Apinan Poshyananda, Thai-Tanic: Thai Art in the Age of Constraint and Censor at Ethanol Cohen Fine Arts in New York City in 2003. The art-

ists were presented as representative voices of political dissent in Thailand. These artists show regularly in Thailand as well in a variety of contexts—not without controversy. But they are rarely...

17. F.X. Harsono is a descendent of Chinese immigrants who were forced to change the family name upon their arrival in Indonesia. The artist stated that he had forgotten how to write his own name in Chinese characters. During the course of the show, he sat at a desk writing his name. In a review of the exhibition, Lenzi wrote that his work “serves to mark the difference between engaged art that takes risks, looks forward, and aims for change.”

As elsewhere, Southeast Asian artists, naturally, have depended on curators to attract audiences. Along with the rest of the world that has seen the rise of the “star curator,” Southeast Asia has also produced its share of big names. Aside from Pochyananda, mentioned earlier, who earned his PhD in Southeast Asian art history from Cornell University, a number of regional curators have been shaping the course of Southeast Asian art and moving it into a variety of directions by promoting avant-garde and experimental practices and pushing artists out of the commercial galleries into public spaces, biennials, triennials, and international museums. The Hanoi-based artist Tran Luong (born 1961) is an example of an independent curator who has mentored young artists in Vietnam and facilitated artistic exchanges between Vietnamese and international artists. Most notably he has organized performance-art workshops in Singapore, Hanoi, Bangkok, Kunming, and Norway, in addition to relentlessly promoting the cause of Vietnamese experimental art abroad. He epitomizes the concept of the artist as curator, as his own creative process centers on challenging his country’s cultural policies and demanding artistic freedom. He has used his exhibitions as forums for speaking against censorship, corruption, and lack of intellectual liberties. His exhibitions carry his voice, mediated through the work of other artists. For that, he is not always popular, but he continues to push his agenda forward and has been immensely influential among the younger generation of Vietnamese artists.

A number of artists of Vietnamese heritage who grew up in the United States have relocated to Ho Chi Minh City and transformed the local art scene. Aside from Streitmatter-Tran and Nguyen-Hatsushiba, the list includes Sandrine Lloqueurt (born 1975), Tuan Andrew Nguyen (born 1976) and Phu-Nam Thuc Ha (born 1974), mentioned earlier as collaborators with Dinh Q. Le. Lloqueurt, Streitmatter-Tran, Nguyen-Hatsushiba, and Hoang Dung Cam (born 1974), an artist from Hanoi who relocated to Ho Chi Minh City in the 1990s, formed the artist collective Mogas Station. The collective made its first appearance at the...

2006 Singapore Biennale with a mock art journal. Its members also appeared at the 2007 Venice Biennale, where they presented a video in one of the cafés. Llouquet and her partner, Bertrand Peret, are also behind the initiative called Wonderful District, a project to link artists to the community in a series of talks and public art installations.

Curating has become the primary means for opening avenues of research in Southeast Asian art and thinking critically about creative conditions for artists in the region. Curators have moved the discussion beyond national borders and are thinking thematically across geographical lines. Flaudette May V. Datuin, an art historian at the University of the Philippines, organized a series of exhibitions, workshops, and artists’ talks on the theme of trauma and its impact on women. Titled Trauma Interrupted, the series began in 2005. Trauma refers not only to war and its aftermath, including the wars in the Pacific and Vietnam, but also domestic violence and suffering caused by injustices toward women. For the project, Datuin selected artists primarily from the Philippines, but other artists in the region share similar stories with the women represented in the show. This kind of cross-border, cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural thematic curatorial project allows artists to meet and interact with one another on different grounds than as representatives or ambassadors of their own countries to the rest of the world. Indeed, Datuin’s curatorial project and her scholarship have brought attention to the ways in which women artists from places like Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam have contributed to feminist causes and our understanding of feminism.

Several inter–Southeast Asian projects have also successfully brought together artists from the region without delegating them to stand for their countries. Asiatopia and the Future of Imagination are performance–art festivals that take place in Thailand and Singapore respectively. These festivals offer artists the opportunity to learn from one another and are less about demographics than about exchange. Seiji Shimoda, the director of the Nippon International Performance Festival in Japan, has been inviting performance artists from Southeast Asia for decades. He has traveled to Myanmar and Vietnam to conduct workshops for budding performance artists and inspired interest in the medium. Performance artists from Singapore such as Jason Lim (born 1966), Lee Wen (born 1957), Amanda Heng (born 1951), and Tang Da Wu (born 1943) have been performing at festivals around the world, not so much as ambassadors of their countries than as ambassadors for the art form. In Hanoi, Luong has been organizing performance festivals to connect with other artists in the region. Since performance requires physical presence and participation, the festival events draw artists together in ways that exhibitions of paintings or sculptures cannot.

Performance art has become immensely popular in the past few years in Vietnam mostly because it offers artists the opportunity to travel and interact with audiences both within Vietnam and abroad. It is also a means of becoming known among a larger public. Unlike performance artists in the United States or Europe who often use video and film to document and project their projects, performance art in Southeast Asia is event-based and offers artists an immediate viewership. Performance events often take place in alternative or artist-run spaces that are operated by young artists outside official art circuits. Luong epitomizes the artist as curator idea. His charisma inspires artists to participate in his projects,
which become his mode of expression. He is also disillusioned with his country’s politics and uses performance events to draw attention to what is sorely lacking: an infrastructure for contemporary art practices.”

Interregional projects have also arisen between China and Southeast Asia with the creation of the Ho Chi Minh Trail program. An offshoot of the Long March Project based in Beijing, it is an interactive, community-collaborative art project involving artists from China, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. In Beijing, the project was originally led by Zoe Butt, who has since relocated to Ho Chi Minh City to develop projects with the artist-run nonprofit art space San Art, founded by Dinh Q. Le and Tiffany Chung. Community art projects are not new to the region. In 2004, France Morin initiated Quist in the Land: Luang Prabang, a follow-up to her previous Projeto Axe Brazil of 1997–2000. Quist in the Land is based on the notion of contemporary art as a socially grounded practice. Based in Luang Prabang, Laos, the project entailed collaborations between eleven international and three Laotian artists from 2004 to 2008. The international artists included three from Southeast Asia, Nguyen-Hatsushiba, Dinh Q. Le, and Tiravanija, three others from Asia, Cai Guo-Qiang, Shirin Neshat, and Shabazia Sikander; the Americans Ann Hamilton, Janine Antoni, and Alan Sekula, the German Hans-Georg Berger, and Marina Abramovic. “Each artist created works with local people, including artisans, monks, and art students. These alternative modes of curating and exhibition thrive on the inclusion of local communities of artists. Their benefit to these communities, however, is debatable. On the one hand, they provide exposure of contemporary art practices to artists in the periphery, but they could also be mistaken for charity projects by artists from the “First World” toward those in the developing world. While it is true that the project involves artists with world reputations, one could argue that it has brought international recognition to the region and therefore acts more as an equalizer than a divider.

Another curatorial project that prompted cross-regional discussions was curated by the artist-scholar-curators Yong Soon Min and Viet Le. Titled TransPop: Vietnam Korea Remix, the exhibition examined the legacy of war and trauma on Korean and Vietnamese societies through the lens of popular culture. It also looked closely at the influences of Korean culture on Vietnamese contemporary society as well as the waves of migrations from Vietnam to Korea. The artists participating in the show were all born in the 1960s and 1970s and grew up amid economic hardships and postwar trauma. Their works are engaged in conversations about modernity, popular culture, and contemporary life in Korea and Vietnam, but they also speak of intersections of history between these countries and the United States. This kind of project offers a different perspective on region, identity, and history. The paths of contemporary art can be seen as coming not from the West, but across the Asian continent. Japan has also been influential in reconfiguring art histories and art trajectories within Asia. Since it was founded in 1979, the Fukuoka Art Museum has been hosting contemporary Asian art events, notably the Asian Art Triennial. In addition to collecting modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art, the museum, renamed Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in 1999, has been organizing exhibitions that have also served to connect artists from Japan and from the continent. The exhibitions of Southeast Asian art have included a 1992 show of new art from Southeast Asia, a 1997 show titled The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia, 15 Tracks: Contemporary Southeast Asian Art in 2003, and 50 Years of Modern Vietnamese Art: 1925–1975 in 2005.

Aside from galleries in Southeast Asian national capitals that represent their country’s artists, a few have also taken on artists from neighboring countries. Several commercial galleries have developed curatorial projects of their own that have served not only to bring attention to rising artists but also to act as links to the community. Valentine Wills, for example, a gallery based in Kuala Lumpur with branches in Denpasar and Singapore, has represented artists from Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam, and is actively involved in building artistic exchanges through diverse exhibition programs. Galleries in the region have also been mentoring young artists and helping them connect with one another. This includes sponsoring artists’ talks and discussions. In some cases, the lines between commercial galleries and artist-run spaces are blurred, as the galleries have served
Artists gather at Nha San Duc, Hanoi, Vietnam, 2009 (photograph © the author)

Rirkrit Tiravanija with the staff of Sunny's Café at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, January 2008 (photograph © the author)

22. Sandra Cate, “Thai Artists, Resisting the Age of Spectacle,” ibid.

as art advisors and curators rather than dealers. Similarly, artist-run spaces have acted as agents for younger artists, securing clients and negotiating exhibitions with international museums. In Vietnam, spaces such as Nha San Duc in Hanoi and San Art in Ho Chi Minh City have acted as liaisons between collectors and buyers, curators and museums. In Singapore, the Substation has acted as a forum for experimental art practices, and in Indonesia, Centre has created a space for artists and critics to research contemporary art practices and create works without government interference. In Ho Chi Minh City, a number of spaces for readings, lectures, and exhibitions have recently opened, such as Wonderful District, Zero Station, Salón Himiko, and Rich Stimmer-Trau’s Dia Projects. These are grass-roots projects that are fitting to Southeast Asian circumstances because most of these countries, aside from Singapore, lack the proper infrastructure for art to thrive on an official level. It takes individual initiatives to get things moving.

Increasingly, these projects are defining Southeast Asian art. In an interview with Grant Kester, the Singaporean artist Jay Koh reflected on what characterizes Southeast Asian art. He commented that it was the networks that artists were creating with their neighbors that created the art of the region. Perhaps, like ancient trade and navigation systems, the art is in the exchange. If one cannot speak of a Southeast Asian art proper any more than one artist can stand for the whole region, one can say that Southeast Asia’s lack of such singular identity is its trait. To attempt to define modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art as derivative of or as a reaction against Western art is missing the point. Some participatory practices have their origins in Southeast Asia. Aside from Rirkrit Tiravanija, who inspired the term “relational aesthetics,” other Thai artists have become leading players in the world of socially engaged art practices. The scholar Sandra Cate identifies this “turn toward the participatory” as rooted in Buddhist practices that invite interaction between objects and audiences. The relevance and currency of this attitude was startlingly clear just this past spring, when mil-
lions of Thai citizens took to the streets to demand greater democracy and transparency in the political process. More than in any population in Southeast Asia, the Thai people are long accustomed to actively involving themselves in their country’s governance and social movements. Pinaree Sanpitak is an example of an artist who has invested social meaning in objects through participation, whether through the evocation of Buddhist thought or gender identification. Her Noon Nam pieces—large organza silk pillows in the shape of breasts—invite the viewer to jump in and be cuddled by the comfort of the bosom. For some time she has been working with the idea of the breast as stupa, or Buddhist shrine, developing the idea that the breast, like Buddhism itself, acts as a spiritual soother.

Any concerns that Southeast Asian artists have somehow missed the stages of the evolution of contemporary art in the West or that their geographical situation, on the margins of mainstream art practices in Europe and America is to the artists’ disadvantage, are laid to rest by the community projects in which many of the artists are involved. Like their counterparts in Europe or America, the community projects are not simply forms of social activism. Norwithstanding Luong’s dissatisfaction with his government and defiance of cultural censorship in Vietnam by organizing performance projects, the artists are presenting these projects as works of art. The works go beyond mere relational aesthetics, which sees the work of art as an event prompted by the encounter between an artist and a public; the works are the necessary consequence of artists’ environments, in the specific context of Southeast Asia. Art speaks of place, but when a place is imposed on art, in the case of a constructed geography, then the art makes the place. Scholars of Southeast Asia have long tried to find commonality among the people of the region to justify the way in which colonial scholars mapped it. But as area studies have currently been under attack for segregating the study of non-Western cultures, it is important not to overgeneralize what makes Southeast Asian art Southeast Asian. Yes, one could easily speak of exotic fruit, noodle stands, Buddhist monks, and ethnic minorities in attempt to qualify Southeast Asian art. But as I see it, the geography of Southeast Asia is about people. As they move across the globe with increased frequency, it is to better see the world as a movable place that has no fixed vantage point. Artists in Southeast Asia are taking advantage of their intangible borders and their flexible histories as nomadic sea-farers and Chinese migrants, and making art that reflects the porous nature of their heritage.

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