

The idea of "Asia" should not be upheld as representing an oppositional value. Such claims are not only a simplistic reversal of Orientalism but could also lead to the uncritical distortion of the characteristics of Western modernism in binary terms. The counterpart of the fantasy of Asia ends up being the fantasy of the West. This opposition is a convenient formula that anyone can understand, but it is also a dangerous political formula that lacks substantiation. Anti-modernist theories that appeal to a naïve sense of justice often derive from this formula—for example, the popular rhetoric that Cubism is the result of the colonialist exploitation of primitive art (in this case, African art).

When dealing with another culture it is certainly "morally good" to treat it as equivalent to one's own. The problem is that it is easy for oppositionalism to hide behind the virtue of equality. The rhetorical critique of cultural exploitation is inevitably linked to reductive claims that the only acceptable approach to understanding the culture of the other is by assessing it in its original context. If this morality is required of artists as well as of cultural anthropologists doing fieldwork, it becomes virtually impossible to refer to another culture in a work of art. We are reduced to the either/or choice of accepting the other totally or giving up on any kind of communication.

This is the trap into which multiculturalism tends to fall all too easily. A certain multiculturalist says, "The standards for judging art are produced within particular histories and societies, and it is necessary to take the cool, relativistic viewpoint that they are not one or universal." What results from this "good morality," however, is the ideological position that "Western modernism applies only in the West." The oppositional concept of Asia that follows from this conclusion gets turned into a field of repressive discourse. This is because oppositionalism in the name of equality (what might also be called absolutist relativism) in fact entails stifling the ability to imagine the other. When the West is viewed as a monolithic set of incompatible values, those criticizing the West are guilty of the same monolithic thinking perpetrated by the West, only in reverse. The prejudiced viewpoint that reduces the other to a single entity is not confined to the dominant culture, but can just as easily be maintained by the opposition. Without any consideration for the diversity of the West, with all its contradictions, excessive privilege is uncritically accorded to the peripheral status of Asia. Caution is all the more required when this situation is taken superficially as a "new ideology."

If one wishes to take an objective, relative position, it would be better to say that Asian and Western values should not be opposed as if they were entirely incompatible. The standards of judgment created out of a certain history and culture can share the judgments and values of a different culture. Works that seem excellent to us can also be recognized as excellent according to the other's

values, and vice versa. It is precisely because this kind of trust is possible that we accept multiculturalism as a beneficial idea.

I believe that our understanding of modernism has become highly distorted since the convenient term "postmodernism" came into popular use in the 1980s. For example, it is often said that universal values are an illusion produced by modernism. Even if this were the case, it is a fact that many civilizations prior to the modern age also aspired to universalism, so this illusion is not unique to modernism. Also, it is wrong to claim that multiculturalism is anti-modern. The intensification of ethnocentrism, regionalism and the multiplicity of values is also inherent in modernism. If we say that multiculturalism is postmodernism, then postmodernism must also be considered to be an aspect of modernism—modernism being the name given to a massive rupture.

The modernism of Indonesia can certainly be said to have created continuous ruptures in the culture of that country. In art, this situation is vividly illustrated by the dilemma of the PERSAGI (*Persatuan Ahli-Ahli Gambar Indonesia*; Union of Indonesian Artists), started in 1937 under the leadership of Sudjojono. The group promoted the independence of art from ethical restrictions and tradition while at the same time calling from a democratic standpoint for the recognition of the ethical views and tastes of the common people. Another example is the conflict seen in the 1950s and '60s between the realist, expressionist style of the Yogya School, with its strong social consciousness, and the abstract style of the Bandung School, which departed from Cubism in search of ever-greater formal purity. These conflicts and discords were neither caused by cultural immaturity, nor were they the phenomena of trivialized frontiers, but rather they should be viewed as the inevitable aporia implied by modernism. Changing tack, these issues might also relate to how one perceives the particular context of modern Japanese art history. Although the Japanese case is certainly unique in terms of its infrastructure and its stylistic changes, there is a need to evaluate these particularities as issues that are inherent to modernism itself, rather than as a "difference" from the "center."

In a symposium held in Tokyo last year (Contemporary Art Symposium 1994: "The Potential of Asian Thought"), Jim Supangkat compared the Indonesian term *seni rupa* (visual arts), usually understood as the translation of the English "fine art," and the word *kagunan*, a concept of art specific to classical Indonesian culture. He pointed out the complex relationship between the semantic rules of the traditional culture and the genres imported from the West.⁰¹ This situation is reminiscent of that in Japan, where the words *bijutsu* (fine art), *kaiga* (painting), and *chōkoku* (sculpture) were coined to designate art genres introduced at the beginning of the Meiji period. Because these categories eventually

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Jim Supangkat, "Indonesian Contemporary Art: A Continuation" (conference paper presented at Contemporary Art Symposium 1994: "The Potential of Asian Thought," Japan Foundation ASEAN Culture Center, Tokyo, 1994).

02
Ibid., 61.

03
Ibid.

04
Christine Clark, "The Natural City:
Yogyakarta Sculptor Anusapati
Interviewed," in *Art and Asia-Pacific* 1,
no. 3 (July 1994): 74.

absorbed elements of the Japanese tradition, it has become difficult to see the "difference" between the Western and Japanese concepts. For example, when instructors were invited from Italy to open the Technical Fine Arts School in 1876, courses in painting, sculpture and architecture were established in accordance with the Western art system. However, even when this school was closed and the Tokyo School of Fine Arts was established by nationalist idealists, the classifications of painting and sculpture continued to be used without any sense that this was problematic.

It might be most appropriate to say that modernism did promote the idea of universal values based on rationalism, but as a result it also produced unavoidable conflicts (sometimes latent) between particular traditions. If differences exist, they are not differences from modernism, but differences caused by modernism.

Contemporary art in Indonesia actually began in the latter half of the 1970s with the emergence of the New Art Movement. The New Art Movement was a movement of young artists from Yogyakarta and Bandung who organized in protest against the judging of the Second Jakarta Painting Biennale of 1974, which awarded prizes to decorative styles of painting. The protesters published the "Black December Statement," fiercely criticizing the lack of social and political consciousness in decorative art and declaring that it was symptomatic of the lack of creativity in Indonesian art. Attracting the ire of the jury, they plunged ahead on a course of "artistic rebellion." The idea of "new art" they championed went beyond the rejection of decorative art to the discarding of the concept of "fine art" itself, limited to painting and sculpture.

Naturally, this way of thinking required a new definition of *seni rupa*. According to Supangkat, who was personally involved in the movement, the kinds of art favored by its artists were "installations, ready-mades, photographs, found objects and photo-realist paintings."⁰² Generally speaking, it was an anti-formalist movement, making provocative use of vulgar everyday reality. The artists involved threw out the concept of *seni rupa* (the categories of painting and sculpture) and attempted to tear down the barriers between high art and low or popular art.

Many of the artists emphasized social criticism, and works by artists like FX Harsono (three of his works made at the beginning of the movement are reproduced for this exhibition) could be described as political art. According to Harsono (who lived in Yogyakarta in the 1970s and now lives in Jakarta), even though it was organized in 1974 as a protest movement, the New Art Movement arose spontaneously in both Yogyakarta and Bandung, with neither side being particularly aware of the other. They armed themselves with theory after the fact. It was the art

critic Sanento Yuliman, a teacher at the Bandung Institute of Technology, who noticed the anti-modernist tendency common to the two and joined them together under the name of the New Art Movement. Yuliman also provided the theoretical backing for the issues they raised by reexamining the definition of *seni rupa*. As the movement developed, the works of Harsono and others began to take on the character of installations, although their post-sculptural, post-painterly experiments were known at the time as "an alternative idiom" of *seni rupa*. The word *instalasi* (installation) came into common use in the latter part of the 1980s under the influence of overseas trends.

The New Art Movement was often criticized by the conservative art establishment as being derivative of Pop Art, but Harsono says that the artists were more interested in Neo-Dada than Pop. Their aggressive involvement in low art seems closer to the audacious, chaotic quality of Robert Rauschenberg's "combine paintings," which "try to act in the gap" between art and life, than the cool, masterful "icons" of modernity characteristic of Pop Art. Also, the reality of Indonesia was incompatible with the decadent, nihilistic attitude Pop artists held toward a rich consumer society. The kind of found objects used in New York for junk art would be more likely to be salvaged and reused in Indonesia, taking on the sense of *bricolage*. The interest of the New Art Movement artists in low art was closely linked to the problems of poverty in the city, and the maintenance of traditional culture in the rural regions.

I described the New Art Movement as anti-modernist, but what it rejected in modern art was "avant-gardism, the purity of expression, the individualism of the artist, the tendency toward the decorative as acceptable or formal art" (Jim Supangkat).⁰³ At the time, young artists understood anti-modernism as anti-formalism and so had begun to think in post-modernist terms (anti-avantguardism, anti-individualism). As stated above, I believe that the "will to foment discord" exemplified by these artists is in itself an internal criticism of modernism, but in any case, it is noteworthy that this radical spirit of criticism was shared by many young Indonesian artists in the latter part of the 1970s, especially because it roughly coincides with the critical reevaluation of the unique context of art that was then taking place in other countries like Italy, Germany and Japan. If one were to take an ironic view, the anti-universalism raised by postmodernism itself seems to have been "universally" shared by young artists in different cities and countries as a spontaneously arising historical spirit.

At any rate, the issues and methods involved in the New Art Movement—that is, the social and political criticism and the use of the installation format and found objects—would be further entrenched by

the questioning of cultural identity that took place in Indonesia in the 1980s, and continue to be applied to the art of the present day. Three Indonesian artists born around 1960 are introduced in the contemporary section of this exhibition, and I would like to examine the current situation of Indonesian art with particular reference to their work.

Anusapati has been making wood sculptures since he returned to Indonesia in 1990 after studying in New York. To him, wood is more than just a material with plastic possibilities. It is profoundly connected to his views of civilization and of nature. He is an artist who clearly understands the massive power of a block of wood, the effect of contrasting hollows and volumes, and the simple beauty of the surface of ordinary wood, but he treats it as more than a convenient *métier* for sculpture. As he faces the wood, he entrusts his chisel with his ideas about the culture and customs of the place where he was born and raised. That is why Anusapati uses only trees that are native to Java.

His works often take the form of implements or furnishings used in everyday life: for example, boats, wardrobes and percussion instruments. Although they do not always refer specifically to a particular object, the forms have a metaphorical quality that evokes images latent in the memories of ordinary life. Anusapati's primitive forms are related to his dream of bringing back a way of life based on the earth and a simple relationship between people and things that is now disappearing even from farm communities. From a different point of view, this work reflects a quiet and personal response to a society that is destroying nature and older ways of life. That the outward appearance of the work resembles tools and furnishings is, of course, a fiction derived from the unique critical imagination of the artist—a virtual reality that produces a strange sense of ambiguity.

In an interview, Anusapati has said, "These forms simply pop up in my mind. They come from my subconscious world, from the world of my inner self."²⁴ The fact that his work sometimes contains a concealed sensuality may be due to unconscious desires aroused by the spirit of the natural material. Thinking with wood is a way of thinking that, for Anusapati, directly links society and the individual immersed in regional customs.

Nindityo Adipurnomo's current work is based on the motif of the *konde*, a traditional female wig, and a recent example is included in this exhibition. The *konde* is intended for ritual use, as in the wedding ceremony. Its form differs according to the ceremony or ritual in which it is used, and also reflects the age and social status of the wearer. Seeing the form of the *konde* as a symbol of social oppression pervading the history of Java, Nindityo seems to be pushing his unique exploration of Javanese culture through paintings and the

choreography of Javanese dance toward a more profound analysis of the social system.

The work shown here, *Who Wants to Become a Javanese*, is constructed in the form of a mirror stand. Copper vessels in the form of *konde* are attached to either side of the mirror. Inside these partially opened jars one can glimpse wooden models of *konde* and cosmetics like nail polish and lipstick. There is also a carved wooden *konde* attached to the center of the mirror. The title is clearly ironic, but the artist's intention is not obvious. The work is a puzzle, raising questions and inviting different interpretations. Perhaps the elegant mirror stand is a symbol of bourgeois life, wherein a woman constructs herself to meet the social expectations symbolized by the *konde*. This sort of feminist reading is certainly possible. Also, the cosmetics arranged together with the *konde* could be read as showing the conflict between Javanese tradition and Western modernism. Or perhaps one could say that the modernity that has inserted itself into tradition determines the current condition of "gender" in an institutional system of women's clothing and cosmetics.

In any case, this work demonstrates a sense of the objective criticism of their own culture by a generation steeped in postmodernism, and this humorous viewpoint that sees "exoticism" ironically is fascinating. Like Anusapati, Nindityo lives in Yogyakarta, and the quiet flow of time in this ancient capital of central Java seems to form the background for the elegant ambiguity of their works, appearing in each in different ways. But of course this may be a superficial impression, since I have only been studying Indonesian art for a short time.

In contrast, Tisna Sanjaya is a printmaker living in Bandung. He lived in Germany between 1991 and 1995 and his work, mainly etchings, is directly influenced by Neo-Expressionism. These monochrome pictures overflowing with a proliferation of images depict extreme subjects like death, violence and oppression, allegorically portraying the artist and the absurd conditions that surround him. Their imagery may be mythological or theatrical, but the artist is obviously engaged in a struggle with the absurdity of real society. In the dark spaces dominated by some ominous power, figures representing both victims and perhaps saviors are shown in despair and isolation, and yet emanating light. They demonstrate the artist's determination to go on living in the face of oppression.

Tisna also makes frequent use of a skull-like form, which at times appears as a spherical cage that traps shut notions of freedom, and at others as a ghost floating behind a bustling crowd of people. These images are also disquieting. The anonymous darkness looking down on the chaotic conditions in the pictorial space may be the artist's own shadow. Although depicting a swirling, discordant drama, Tisna's powerful imagination does not simply appeal to violent emotion. It is joined to a calm, critical

Author's Note

A number of suggestions for this article were received from direct interviews with Jim Supangkat, Yustiono, and FX Harsono. I would like to thank them for their help.

attitude that views everything through the objective eye of a third party.

These etchings fascinate by weaving a space of intersecting light and darkness out of finely vibrating lines. Tisna observes the dangerous rise of neo-Nazis in post-reunification Germany and the problems caused by modernization in Indonesia though the expressive line of the etching process, but he also succeeds in creating a hard and profound lyricism in a monochrome world. His allegories reveal and accuse, but also find hope in poetic imagination.

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These three artists have all studied in the West,

and undoubtedly this experience has helped them to understand the ambivalent aspects of modernism as well as to achieve the objective powers of observation necessary to see themselves in relative terms. Of course, this kind of consciousness is not the exclusive privilege of people who have studied overseas. Many of the younger generation of Indonesian artists have developed vital forms of expression marked by critical irony, a bold sense of satire and the rich sense of humor unique to this country. Their view of the world, which has escaped a narrow antagonism, should be good news to those who believe in the possibility of sharing the cultural values of others, although, of course, one needs to guard against overly optimistic expectations.

Five Elements: An Abbreviated Account of Installation Art in Southeast Asia

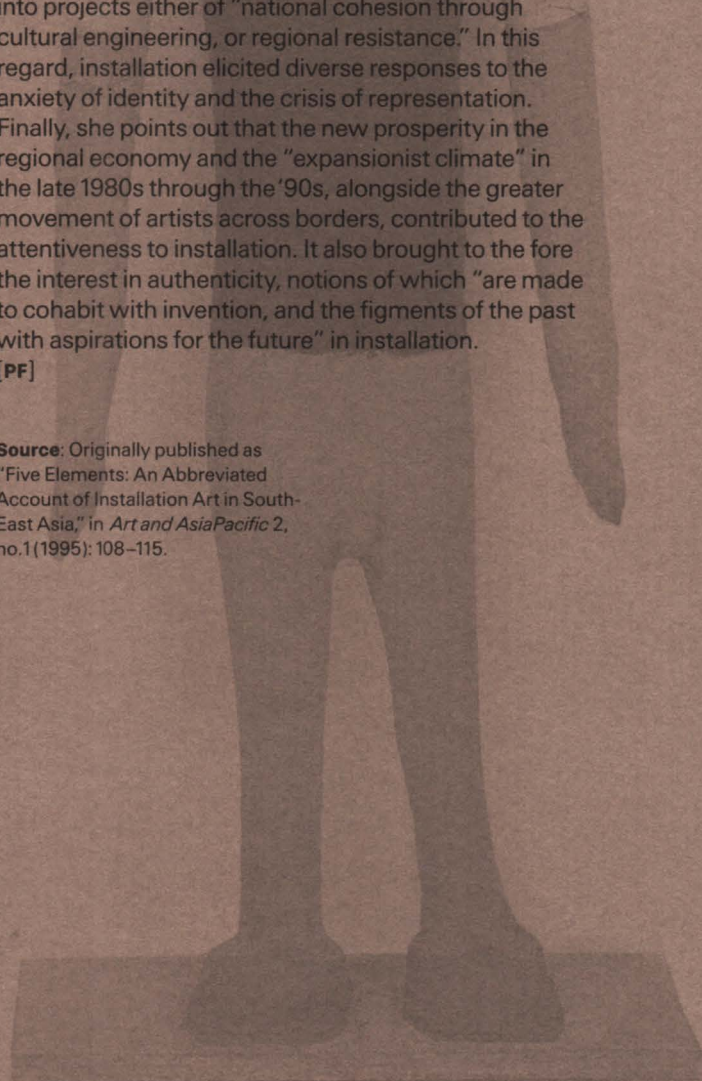
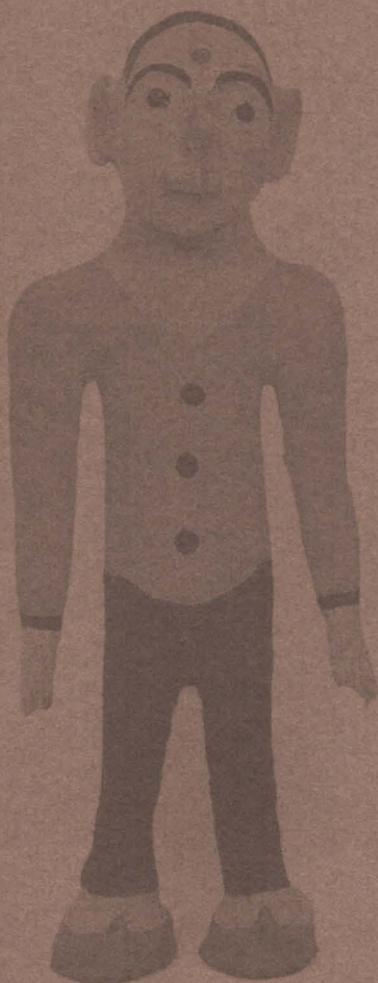
Julie Ewington

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Installation as a term and as a practice is mapped onto a region in this essay. The main problem is to lay bare its origin and its source. Julie Ewington marks the 1960s in Europe and the Americas as a possible ground from which installation emerged, largely through the innovations in collage, assemblage, and Environments. But she also carves out a space for a different emergence in temples, shrines and customary observances in Southeast Asia. She then proposes another layer of a possible trajectory: the "contemporary context of global communications" in which the circulation of ideas, forms and technologies of making art is vigorous. The author offers a tentative historical context for installation in the region in places like the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. She recognizes a dissident aspect in the creative formation of the practice and speculates on why it has inspired artists in Southeast Asia: "immediacy, working with specific sites, the excitements of combining disparate materials, working collaboratively ... economy ... redeployment, in the context of art, of motifs and materials ... indigenization of imported cultural practice." One vital issue that arises from installation is the engagement of the artist with the "indigenous," which may be transposed into projects either of "national cohesion through cultural engineering, or regional resistance." In this regard, installation elicited diverse responses to the anxiety of identity and the crisis of representation. Finally, she points out that the new prosperity in the regional economy and the "expansionist climate" in the late 1980s through the '90s, alongside the greater movement of artists across borders, contributed to the attentiveness to installation. It also brought to the fore the interest in authenticity, notions of which "are made to cohabit with invention, and the figments of the past with aspirations for the future" in installation.

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Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), 72.

02

Somporn Rodboon, "Thai Contemporary Installation," *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 72 (August 1994): 20–21.

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See Rachel Mayo, *Art and Asia Pacific* 1, no. 1 (1993), for a classic statement of the philosophy of the Indigenous Art Movement in the Philippines, and Claudette May V. Datuin's critical reply, "Look Who's Talking Back Now," *Manila Chronicle*, January 30, 1994.

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I was fortunate to hear Yeoh Jin Leng present his research at the ASEAN workshop on indigenous materials, Manila, May 1993.

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The Occident continues to secure itself as subject, the origin and destination of critical discourses, while simultaneously ignoring the processes and mediations—imperialism, neo-colonialism, capitalism, the Western media—that violently brought those differences, those “natives,” those other cultures, into our world, simultaneously shaping and distributing them.
— Iain Chambers ⁰¹

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This is a brief, probably premature—certainly rash—sketch concerning installation art in Southeast Asia. Like installation art, this offering is not a permanent affair. If such disclaimers are theoretical rituals, no custom should be dismissed as empty of meaning. But one must begin to speak, to exchange observations, to essay forward.

Installation is the international artistic currency of the present. But where was it minted? Coinage is notoriously promiscuous, caring nothing for myths of origin, less about destinations. Circulation is its essential aspect. All that is required is the fiction of value, and exchange will occur. Standard accounts suggest installation originated in Europe and the United States, from collage, assemblage and the Environments of the 1960s, as a postmodernist response to the orthodoxies of 20th-century life. Now another powerful narrative insists that a far older lineage exists in the temples, shrines and customary observances of Southeast Asia. Neither story is the entire truth. But both are essential for understanding installation art in Southeast Asia. And in the precise relations between the two narratives can be glimpsed another possibility: the contemporary context of global communications permits and produces remarkable cultural syntheses, from elements of more widely diverse origins than art history (though not traders) had previously imagined.

In the 1990s, the international forum for the arts has at last opened up to Southeast Asia. Installation has its own history in the region, but its renewed international importance in the last decade has been seized upon by Southeast Asian artists, deliberately and with vigor. As Thai art historian Somporn Rodboon suggested recently: “There is no doubt that the influence of installations comes from the West, as well as Japan.” ⁰² At exhibitions and conferences, artists in the region are in contact with colleagues from elsewhere. Publications circulate, such as the one on Andy Goldsworthy I saw passed around in the Philippines in mid-1993. But if Goldsworthy's work reconfirmed artists in their use of natural materials, his works were not their initial impetus.

How may one interpret contemporary installation art in Southeast Asia? Experimentation is necessarily refigured in different contexts. The form was fitfully practiced in the mid-1970s in Indonesia and the Philippines, and about a decade later in Thailand by a small dissident movement. It was definitely a minority practice. But for different reasons in each

country—an abbreviated account risks conflations and oversights—installation is undergoing a renaissance in Southeast Asia. Why is this so? Installation art—even the term itself—has been adopted because it is congenial to the cultural contexts of Southeast Asia. The blurring between art and life sought by postwar American artists is part of the attraction Southeast Asian artists see in installation. If the form itself is transformed by its relocation, installation literally reconfigures social space.

If this development invites a repetition of older mythologies about Western artistic dominance and Eastern derivativeness, it does not usefully account for cultural change. Let me immediately dismiss the idea that installation artists are the fashion victims of Southeast Asian art. A secure future lies in painting, the artistic mode favored by all international elites. Yet installation offers opportunities many artists admire: immediacy, working with specific sites, the excitements of combining disparate materials, working collaboratively and, not unimportantly, economy, if local materials are used. Further, installation permits redeployment, in the context of art, of motifs and materials familiar from social life. While the tag “Indigenous Art” has been coined for it, ⁰³ Southeast Asian installation art is also a fine example of the successful indigenization of imported cultural practice.

1 | Indigenous Sources for Installation

Indigenous cultural traditions in Southeast Asia are being reassessed. Textiles, ceramics, architectural decorations and entire rituals are recognized as invaluable resources for cultural reiteration. This recognition has strongly influenced artists, many deeply involved in the work of historical recuperation: Yeoh Jin Leng's remarkable study of the ceramic heritages of Malaysia is an excellent example. ⁰⁴ A new sense of the past is now bearing on the future. The arts of the postmodern era are taking nourishment from premodern cultures in an outright rejection of Euro-American dominance of contemporary art. Artists in the Philippines have even claimed installation as the quintessential art of contemporary Southeast Asia. This bold attempt to claim artistic legitimacy for contemporary art sees installation drawing on local sources not merely as a counter-assertion to the cultural “authority” of the West, but as a legitimate artistic form. But the reductive formula—if painting is modern, installation must be the child of postmodernity—must be rejected. Reinterpreting indigenous cultural sources is not confined to installation art. In Indonesia, A.D. Pirous, whose paintings are based on the visual environment of his native Aceh, and Heri Dono, who works with Javanese *wayang* traditions, are developing new vocabularies from local idioms.

The nuances of these stories depend on the histories of each country (each region), on the history and resolution of colonization, and on the present

forms of neocolonialism. No single narrative suffices. But the experience of painful modernization has resulted in artistic controversy around the cultural heritage of the region. Installation drawing on indigenous sources is not universally admired in Southeast Asia. It is hotly contested by factions who want entry to the world of international art, but disagree on the terms of acceptance, and who participate in discourses about the appropriate forms of contemporary culture and the modern Southeast Asian nation. This is not a debate between "conservatives" and "progressives." Art drawing on indigenous references may support political opposition to the established regime, or may be invoked in the name of the state.

In the Philippines, artists from the Baguio Arts Guild revere the pre-Hispanic cultures of highland Luzon, a source of oppositional strength to past and present colonialisms. (In 1993, the young artists of the Baguio Arts Guild wanted Ilocano, the local lingua franca, used on their festival banner, instead of Filipino or English.) It seems that the tenuous sense of Philippines national unity demands that artists seek sources of inspiration beyond the dominant social discourses. But the policies of the Sentrong Pangkultura ng Pilipinas (Cultural Center of the Philippines), under the artistic direction of Nicanor G. Tiongson, work for a national identity constructed through a shared lexicon synthesized from all the cultures of the archipelago, attempting to make the very cultural diversity of the archipelago serve nationalism. Thus in the Philippines reiterating the cultures of the past has (at least) two destinations: national cohesion through cultural engineering, or regional resistance.⁰⁵

The case in Thailand is entirely different, though Thai artists also identify with the project of exploring indigenous cultures. Montien Boonma's elegant pavilions at the Adelaide Festival in March 1994 drew on the structure and meditative purpose of the *wat*, in a confident redeployment of the religious and social customs Montien himself, a devout Buddhist, reveres. The value of this cultural heritage has been articulated by Somporn Rodboon, who explicitly compares installations to the ancient arts which created the ambience of Thai Buddhist temples, both, in their different ways, combining many sensory stimuli.⁰⁶ But this reading of Thai cultural history derives from an inheritance which has survived, apparently, the advent of modernity. I have not heard criticisms about the lack of Thai identity in works in contemporary idioms by Thai artists, as I have heard challenges posed to Filipino artists. Thai artists seem to be free of anxieties about cultural identity—or at least the national myth in Thailand supports the sense of national cohesion, effectively muting the voice of regional minorities.⁰⁷

On the other hand, in multicultural Singapore, installation artists draw from the rich cohabiting heritages of the Chinese, Indian and Malay communities, as in Simryn Gill's glorious roll-call of difference and community, a long line of Malaysian

noses cast in tin. In Singapore, the history of modernist repression of socially inconvenient difference has made art involving cultural recuperation especially valuable. Tang Da Wu and S. Chandrasekaran, artists of two different generations and ethnic heritages, are remarkable in this respect. But their work is in a distinct minority in the city-state, where the presence of Chinese traditional arts, Nanyang School watercolor painting and the aggressive pursuit of modern art styles by powerful patrons points to contending traditions and expectations with considerable political support. In Singapore, installation art participates in the delicate balances struck between the communities as much as any other practice in social life.

These installation projects are not without critics. Indeed, nostalgia for the indigenous past and the troubling claims of "authenticity" made for installation art based on local sources are regularly challenged as romantic and parasitical on tradition, inappropriate for a modern society, and artists using the customs of cultural minorities are subject to accusations of cultural imperialism, practiced inside national boundaries instead of across them. Nevertheless the work of artists like Junyee, Tang Da Wu and Montien Boonma has clearly opened up new possibilities for Southeast Asian artists.

2 | Acting Out

As the experience of highly significant impermanent forms is already part of the audience's cultural expectations, it is hardly surprising that installation (and the performances associated with it) offers more congenial forms than painting and sculpture introduced from the West. In the countries of Southeast Asia, oral traditions remain extremely strong, and are immediately available to artists working with non-elite audiences. Performance, in all its manifestations, is at the heart of the arts in the region, whether religious or customary. But this is not performance as a cultural form, but as a social force. Notions of community are far stronger in Southeast Asian societies than the sense of the individual personality which animates the practice of art in Western cultures.

Thus the acting out of shared community beliefs through social rituals is a potent source for artists. Heri Dono's *Kuda Binal*, awkwardly out of context at the 1994 Adelaide Festival, was first performed in Yogyakarta in 1992, when Heri recruited local *becak* drivers to participate in a modern reworking of this traditional trance dance.⁰⁸ This is not a forgotten tradition, but a tool for communication between the artist and the immediate community—an urgent necessity where rapid modernization and economic changes are eroding customary forms of social cooperation. The forms that shared action takes are not immediately apparent: at the Baguio Arts Festival, I came to realize that what had seemed a peripheral activity, the incessant percussion accompanying

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See Nicanor G. Tiongson, ed., *Tuklas Sining: Essays on the Philippine Arts* (Manila: Sentrong Pangkultura ng Pilipinas, 1991), 5.

06

Somporn, "Thai Contemporary Installation," 21.

07

Apinan Poshyananda, *Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1992), 207ff.

08

See Anne Virgo's firsthand account of the performance at the 1992 Yogyakarta Biennial in *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 54 (October 1992): 2.

09

Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 20. First published 1989 by Beacon Press.

every installation, was in fact the very medium and language of social interaction, the shared activity that bound artists from different countries together more surely than speech.

In the Philippines, the sense of community cohesion expressed in *bayanihan* is the highest social good. A series of installations by Roberto Villanueva in 1993 and 1994 drew on this traditional sense of community—works so extensive that they must of necessity be shared. But these earth sculptures and excavations in the form of a human silhouette, drawing on the idea of rebirth and renewal, were also intended as forms of ritual healing at the physical, social and psychic levels. As an artist aware of the professional contexts of installation, Villanueva documents his works, but an essential part of their artistic functioning is not their appearance, however imposing; it is the opportunity that is offered for shared group action by the community.

These installations may be characterized as the intersections of several cultural practices, as the cultures of Southeast Asia are the “busy intersections” of many beliefs, to paraphrase the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo writing about Ilongot rituals in Luzon, Philippines. Rosaldo suggests that “cultures can arguably be conceived as a ... porous array of intersections where distinct processes crisscross from within and beyond [their] borders.”⁹⁹ Rosaldo also suggests this perspective is better able to recognize local perceptions and contexts. A universalist perspective is rejected, the older insistence on integrated cultural wholes abandoned, in favor of addressing intersecting and hybridized elements. Thus contemporary art in the region simultaneously draws from traditional sources, but is also legitimately engaged in the realm of speculation we call art. Indeed, this ambiguity is recognized in the uneasiness with which many Filipino (and other) observers receive contemporary works based on ritual, like those of Roberto Villanueva. Efficacious works are also dangerous works.

3 | The Setting: The New Prosperity

The development of local modes of installation in Southeast Asia may be read as evidence of the new mood of self-confidence in the region, one fruit of peace and prosperity. A growing sense of independent identity in the postcolonial period, whether the result of freedom from actual colonization or from an internalized sense of dependence on European cultures, is an essential aspect of this historical moment in Asia. It is sustained by extraordinary economic growth and the greater international presence of the region's political figures. In this new mood of assertion, the confidence expressed by artists and intellectuals in the cultural heritages of the region is contagious.

With greater prosperity some artists (not all) have access to tools and ideas previously inaccessible. Japanese video cameras, American CDs, English

books, catalogues from Australia: the trophies of the new internationalism are being brought back to the studios. The acceptance of installation in the region has also been stimulated by artists participating in global arts arenas, and, importantly, where previously communication between artists in the region was comparatively limited, now it is growing rapidly. Intellectuals and artists from Southeast Asia are being drawn ever closer to the networks of global artistic exchange.

In the expansionary climate of the late 1980s in Southeast Asia, installation art found a receptive environment. This is a contingent but fortunate conjunction. At the exact moment when many Southeast Asian artists and intellectuals were coming into the renewed confidence of their powers, installation was the international artistic mode made available through expanded global communications and travel. Its flexibility suited Southeast Asian needs and significantly shaped current practice. The irony is that the ubiquity of installation in international currency (in both senses) has fueled appeals to the local and indigenous.

4 | Museums, Continuity and Impermanence

Installation occurs where impermanence meets the museum. Currently in an expansionary mode, museums in Europe, Japan and Australia are playing a key role in presenting installation art from Southeast Asia, and benefactions are now made regularly to ephemeral forms by the appointed custodians of cultural permanence. Yet while the museum's traditional brief enjoins the collection, conservation and research of artifacts, modern curators are acutely aware of the museum's role in recording, sponsoring and preserving cultural practices. Despite the challenges it poses to standard museum practice—the difficulties for permanent storage and exhibition, the expense necessary for ephemeral works—installation is the high-profile cuckoo in the museum's nest, the most-favored artform of the large exhibitions of the 1990s.

One irony of the present situation is that some of the best Southeast Asian installation art is seen in the museums of Australia, Japan and Germany, its achievement seen out of original context. For this reason, the Malaysian artist Liew Kung Yu determined after the 1993 Asia-Pacific Triennial in Brisbane to reinstall his work in Penang, the source of its inspiration. Opportunities are drawing Southeast Asian artists firmly into cosmopolitan networks, so that a new exhibition circuit and group of leading artists is being created, from Fukuoka to Adelaide. This is the inevitable reward of cultural achievement, and is, in turn, the reason for it.

5 | Postmodern Asia?

In Asia, as in Australia and Euro-America, installation and other innovative artistic modes have

been associated with challenges to modernity since the 1960s. But if installation in Southeast Asia challenges the vocabulary of modernity, it is still a matter for debate as to which aspect of the postmodern era it best represents. In a region so culturally varied, where the postmodern era coexists temporally with the premodern and the modern in the astonishing concatenations of daily experience, the appeal to life before the Europeans is a powerful artistic resource and a necessary social and political tool. For the postmodern in Southeast Asia is not only a story about the decay of a modernity which has only partially and fitfully arrived, but must also concern the future. As Homi Bhabha comments:

— If the interest in postmodernism is limited to a celebration of the fragmentation of the “grand narratives” of post-Enlightenment rationalism then, for all its intellectual excitement, it remains a profoundly Eurocentric enterprise.¹⁰

— Can these local heritages be recuperated to conceptions of postmodernity which do not merely mock poverty and educational inequality but are open to productive redeployment in the region?¹¹ Painting is identified with Europe. In Southeast Asia it was, and is, one of the guarantees of modernity. In the 1990s, installation seems to be the paradigm art of postmodernism in Southeast Asia. If the “progress” promised by Western modernity has been shown to be as illusory in Southeast Asia as elsewhere, associated with social disruption, ecological disaster and economic exploitation on a grand scale, painting and sculpture are equally under scrutiny.

Put positively, many artists are searching for artistic forms which they feel embody the cultural

aspirations of their societies. In a region with such complex histories of cultural interaction, it is difficult to judge the “authenticity” of cultural forms. Nevertheless, in installation art notions of authenticity are made to cohabit with invention, and the figments of the past with aspirations for the future. This is not merely the latest reworking of the East–West debate. Nor for the increasingly complex international arena (or arenas) will the old center–periphery model hold. Only through attending to particular connections, exchanges and similarities, which need not be regional but must be substantial, will a useful mapping of contemporary artistic relations be made. The richness of contemporary culture demands it. Southeast Asian artists working in installation are influencing each other and exchanging ideas with Japanese and Australian artists, and are continuing those correspondences. As Homi Bhabha writes:

— The wider significance of the postmodern condition lies in the awareness that the epistemological “limits” of ... ethnocentric ideas are also the enunciative boundary of a range of other dissonant, even dissident, histories and voices—women, the colonized minority groups, the bearers of policed sexualities.¹²

— On the borders: this is where installation art in Southeast Asia is located, where new crossings with indigenous cultural forms will take place. There are no predictions worth recording in the arts save that there are no certainties. But increasing confidence in the rich cultural heritages of the region has opened up a treasure-house for the future in Southeast Asia.

10

Homi Bhabha, “Beyond the Pale: Art in the Age of Multicultural Translation,” in *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), 66.

11

An essential reference is John Clark, ed., *Modernity in Asian Art* (Sydney: Wild Peony, 1993).

12

Bhabha, “Beyond the Pale,” 66.

Glimpses into the Future of Southeast Asian Art: A Vision of What Art Should Be

—
Shioda Junichi

Shioda Junichi is Director of the Niigata City Art Museum. After starting his career as a curator in 1979 at the Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts, he worked at institutions including the Setagaya Art Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo and the Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art Museum. In 1999, he was Commissioner of the Japan Pavilion at the 48th Venice Biennale. He has organized numerous exhibitions including "Real/Life: New British Art" (1998) and "The Gift of Hope" (2000), both at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, and "Connecting with You" (2016) at the Niigata City Art Museum. He is the author of books including *Igirisu bijutsu no fûkei* (2007).

Organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art and the Japan Foundation Asia Center, the exhibition "Art in Southeast Asia 1997: Glimpses into the Future" surveyed contemporary art from five Southeast Asian countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. This essay was included in the exhibition catalogue. Shioda states that although rapid economic development has led to numerous political and environmental issues, multiculturalism is quickly gaining ground in these Southeast Asian countries. The curators sought to consider how artists in these countries reflect these social and cultural conditions. The 17 artists and groups in the exhibition were chosen on the basis of three themes: "From the Crossroads of Culture," featuring artists making works that reference cultural heritage in the wake of modernism; "The Shifting Region of the 'I,'" with artists investigating issues of identity in fluid social environments; and "Artists Making a Social Statement," with artists actively engaging social and political problems. In the work of the Indonesian artist Moelyono, who makes installations in dialogue with the farmers in his village, Shioda identifies an alternative modernism that finds its basis in community, rather than the individuality privileged by Western modernism. Similarly, the Filipino artist Nunelucio Alvarado uses his practice to create solidarity with laborers and farmers and contribute to his community. Shioda sees in such community based practices a parallel to the work of Miyazawa Kenji, who dreamed of building a unique farmers' culture in the villages of Japan's Tohoku region. As for the five-person Filipino art group Sanggawa, whose members maintain individual practices even while collaborating on large murals together, Shioda argues they are opening a new horizon in the relationship between individual and art. Similarly, Navin Rawanchaikul's *Pha Khao Mar* project, handing out the eponymous traditional Thai loincloth to museum visitors and having them use it in their daily lives, receives high praise from Shioda for its attempt to stimulate communication between people through acts of giving. All involved in their communities, these artists seek a way to contribute to society through art. Shioda thinks that it might be possible to see in this a vision of what art should be in the future.

[KK]

Source: *Art in Southeast Asia 1997: Glimpses into the Future*, exh. cat. (Tokyo: Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo / Japan Foundation Asia Center & Hiroshima: Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997), 153–159. Translated by Stanley N. Anderson. Revised by Andrew Maerkle, 2016.

A number of exhibitions of Asian art have been organized in Japan in recent years, eliciting a variety of responses.⁰¹ It would be no exaggeration to say that this has been one of the most heatedly debated subjects in the Japanese art world. The surge of interest in Asian art is not limited to Japan. Similar exhibitions have been organized in Australia and the United States, where they have also been the subject of much critical discussion.⁰² These groundbreaking exhibitions have certainly not exhausted the subject, and they are likely to be followed by many more innovative attempts at presenting the art of Asia. This exhibition is our own attempt at approaching and understanding the art of the region.

Rather than attempting a broad overview of Asian art, we have focused on five countries in Southeast Asia: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. By limiting the scope in this way, we hope to get a closer look at the practices and works of the individual artists in relation to their particular contexts.⁰³ Of course, there is no simple unity between these nations; they differ significantly from one another in terms of history, culture, religion and social conditions. In spite of these differences, however, there are many things they undeniably have in common when compared, for example, with the countries of East Asia. There are similarities in climate and custom, the general outlook of the people, and certain basic elements of history and culture. Although works of art are produced by individuals, individuals are nurtured and conditioned by the environments and the times in which they live, and it is impossible for any work to be completely independent of its time or place. In order to understand the personal motivation of any artist, it is necessary to understand the specific national context in which he or she works.

During the 1990s, the countries of Southeast Asia achieved rapid economic growth. Led by Singapore, but soon followed by Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and then the Philippines, they became one of the most dynamic economic regions in the world. The holding of a meeting in Bangkok in 1996 between European Community and ASEAN leaders demonstrated the rising status of Southeast Asia in international society. The major cities of the region have experienced a building boom, sprouting with new high-rise structures, but growth has also brought serious problems, including traffic congestion, air pollution and growing concentrations of poor people in urban slums. Development has been accompanied by destruction of the environment. Farmers are being forced off their land. There are problems with violations of human rights and political corruption. Rapid modernization has brought material benefits and conveniences, but it has also resulted in upheaval and conflict.

Southeast Asia is marked by cultural diversity. While the indigenous cultures of each country are quite different, there is a general pattern of cultural

mixing across the entire region. Traditional cultures are overlaid by the colonial culture of the West and border-crossing immigrant cultures—especially those of India and China. The urban consumer culture of the United States has had an overwhelming influence in recent years, and an inundation of Japanese youth culture in the form of anime and pop music has further accelerated this cultural diversification. As a result, certain aspects of the previously stable cultural identities of these countries are being seriously shaken. Faced with this chaotic situation, ethnic groups are re-examining their traditional cultures, and individuals are searching for new cultural identities.

This is the unique situation, the concrete reality, in which the artists of Southeast Asia must take their stand. In this exhibition, we wanted to examine the ways in which individual artists have responded to the social and cultural conditions in which they are placed, and how they have linked their artistic expression to these conditions. Of course, one of our main goals is to present the latest results of this process, the current state of Southeast Asian art in the late 1990s. The resulting exhibition should demonstrate the deep commitment of these artists to the reality of their region.

In organizing this exhibition, representatives from the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Japan Foundation Asia Center made two visits to these five Southeast Asian countries, in February and in May 1996, respectively, and interviewed some 100 artists. We also spoke with local critics and curators to obtain their views on the current conditions for art in their areas. We learned a great deal from these discussions and are particularly indebted to Jim Supangkat of Indonesia. On the basis of this research, the final selection of 17 individual artists and groups was made in a meeting of curators from the three institutions, keeping the goals described above in mind. The artists were then divided into three groups according to the principal content or subject matter of their work, as follows:

1 _ From the Crossroads of Culture

Brenda Fajardo, Chandrasekaran, Liew Kung Yu, Montien Boonma, Navin Production Co., Ltd.

2 _ The Shifting Region of the "I"

Agus Suwage, Chatchai Puipia, Eng Hwee Chu, Imelda Cajipe-Endaya, Pinaree Sanpitak, Wong Hoy Cheong

3 _ Artists Making a Social Statement

Arahmaiani, Dadang Christanto, Moelyono, Nunelucio Alvarado, Sanggawa, Semsar Siahaan

The artists presented in Section 1 deal with the particular culture of their own ethnic group in a multicultural environment, putting it into new forms of expression with relevance for the present.

01

Major exhibitions of Asian art including artists from Southeast Asia that were organized in Japan in the 1990s include: "New Art from Southeast Asia," Tokyo Metropolitan Art Space (Exhibition Gallery), Fukuoka Art Museum, Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, Kirin Plaza Osaka, 1992; the 4th Asian Art Show, Fukuoka Art Museum, Hakone Open Air Museum, Akita Integrated Life Culture Hall, Setagaya Art Museum, 1994-95; "Creativity in Asian Art Now," Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994; "Visions of Happiness: 10 Asian Contemporary Artists," Japan Foundation ASEAN Culture Center, 1995; and "Asian Modernism: Diverse Development in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand," Japan Foundation Asia Center, 1995.

02

In Australia, the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane organized the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in 1993 and 1996. In the United States, the first large-scale exhibition of Asian contemporary art, "Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions," was held at the Asia Society Gallery in New York in 1996.

03

In many countries in Asia there are multiple forms of artistic expression with completely different tendencies that are produced and received in parallel as art. They can roughly be divided into four categories: traditional art based on traditional aesthetic principles and techniques; modern art that refers to Western modernism but has become a form of academicism; contemporary art that strives to create experimental modes of expression from a unique perspective that faces up to local realities; and folk art or kitschy "low art," which is created and used by the common people as "people's art." Of course, the boundaries between these categories are not always clearly drawn, and works may combine elements from more than one of them. This is the basic analysis made by Kuroda Raiji in his paper, "Types of Contemporary Asian Art," presented at the public seminar, "Contemporary Art and Asia III: The Asian Art I Love," held at the International Japanese Culture Center in Kyoto in February 1996. This exhibition focuses on what is referred to here as "contemporary art." It does not cover all the countries of Southeast Asia. Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam were not included, the chief reason being a lack of information or difficulty in conducting research directly in those countries.

We deliberately avoided including artists who take a strictly traditionalist position—that is, those who advocate a return to or contemporary reinterpretation of traditional artistic techniques with a narrowly nationalistic intent. Rather, we chose to present artists who include a broad range of cultural phenomena in their subject matter—myths or folktales, religious feelings, traditional tools and implements used in everyday life, kitsch elements of folk culture—and handle it with the language of international contemporary art that developed out of modernism. This is exemplified by the works of Brenda Fajardo and Montien Boonma, for example. It should be noted that in Southeast Asia the cultural identity of ethnic groups does not always coincide with national identity. That the Chinese-Malaysian Liew Kung Yu or the Indian-Singaporean Chandrasekaran should refer to Chinese or Indian culture in their works, respectively, is not a reflection of their national identities as Malaysian or Singaporean citizens so much as it is an attempt to freely transcend the artificial national borders that are the legacy of colonialism. In his case, the Thai artist Navin Rawanchaikul will make use of the *pha khao mar*, a loincloth that is used daily in the context of Thai vernacular culture. He will give away these loincloths to Japanese museum visitors to see how they are used in the context of contemporary Japan. In changing its cultural context, an item that serves as the symbol of one culture will be transformed into something else, demonstrating the variability of culture and the possibility for producing something new through intercultural exchange.

The identity of the individual is threatened by the process of rapid modernization and an influx of foreign cultures. In Section 2, we introduce artists who are devoted to the search for their own identity as they try to find their place in a turbulent and confusing social environment. The caricatured self-portraits of Chatchai Pupia—large faces with mouths twisted into crooked smiles that convey a sense of self-mockery—accurately portray the unstable condition of the self being confronted by people in Southeast Asia today. The uncertainty of the situation in which the individual is placed can also be observed in the remarkable image created by Agus Suwage of a group of severed heads setting out on a journey to seek their bodies. For Wong Hoy Cheong and Eng Hwee Chu, who are both Chinese minorities in the multiethnic nation of Malaysia, the origins and histories of their families are indivisibly linked to their present selves. For female artists, the search for individual identity entails an inquiry into the meaning of being a woman. This issue is examined by Eng, Imelda Cajipe-Endaya, and Pinaree Sanpitak, but in a quiet tone of voice, without unnecessary stridency.

Many Southeast Asian artists demonstrate an active social or political commitment, and treat the social and political problems faced by their countries as artistic subject matter. Artists of this

kind are presented in Section 3. Nunelucio Alvarado and Semsar Siahaan depict the contrast between the lives of the common people and those of the rich and powerful. The five-person Philippine group, Sanggawa, parody and satirize the corruption and foolishness of political and religious leaders. There are other artists, like Dadang Christanto and Moelyono, who make symbolic presentations of the relationship between the people and those in power, rather than directly addressing specific, concrete problems. The installations and performances of Arahmaiani are extremely political, exposing the invisible forces of oppression and restraint that affect women. The works of all these men and women contain strong messages. They open their art out to society rather than restricting it to the ordinary fine arts context.

These categories have only been set up out of convenience; they are not absolute. There are many examples in which a single work fuses a concern with identity, statements about traditional culture and messages of social or political import. Thus, the three categories here are only relative. They are an indication of the comparatively greater weight given to one of three areas—culture, individual identity, or society. Still, we believe that these categories can provide a rough guide for ordering our knowledge of the kinds of problems being dealt with by today's Southeast Asian artists, and understanding how they go about constructing their own forms of expression. They provide a starting point from which to go further.

II | Living in a Community

One of the artists lives in a small village in Indonesia near Tulungagung, some 200 kilometers from Surabaya, in eastern Java. The waves of development have reached this region, and construction of a dam has left one of the villages submerged at the bottom of a reservoir. The farmers who lost their land were not adequately compensated and are now destitute. Due to tourist-oriented development they are no longer able to enjoy the gifts of nature from the mountains and the sea, formerly so abundant. Modernization has disrupted the peaceful order of the farming and fishing villages. The people are being swallowed up by the logic of capitalism, with no chance to object. Moelyono, the artist living in the village, teaches drawing to children and joins the villagers in thinking about and discussing the problems they face. Engaging this reality through his art, he also participates in the practical work needed to change the reality.

Last year, Moelyono made an installation in his village, constructing a horseshoe-shaped embankment at the side of a rice paddy. On it he placed rice husks, jars and farm tools alongside a fiberglass human figure on hands and knees in an arched posture. This figure represents the peasants who were forced to use chemical fertilizer and

then forced to leave their land when they could no longer pay for the fertilizer. This is art for the people of the village. They helped make it, and as they observe the unusual objects placed in the beautiful green rice paddy, they can ask the artist about the meaning of the work and take part in an open-ended discussion about it. This experience raises the consciousness of the villagers. They become agents who can act on reality and create culture. This work exemplifies Moelyono's ideas on the role of art. He believes that an artist should work for the happiness of the community.

In modernist art practice, the artist questions established authority and tradition, rejects them, and attempts to create new values. Freedom and individual subjectivity have absolute value for the artist. It is considered a necessary part of the artistic process for the artist to oppose and rebel against the rules and customs of his or her society or community and the conventional values they embody. Moelyono, on the other hand, feels that the basis of art can be found precisely in the community to which he belongs, rather than in the individual. Instead of opposing the community, he takes the side of the villagers in protesting against the logic of development that violates and destroys the older ways of life of the community. Thus, it must be said that his activities establish a clear distinction with Western modernism.

Commenting on the emergence of modernism in Indonesia, Jim Supangkat says, "This modernism ... is not based in the spirit of the avant-garde—showing a tendency to criticize tradition and the establishment within society for the sake of progress. This modernism, to the contrary, had the purpose of defending the people, including their traditions and cultures, which were under pressure and despised."⁰⁴ Supangkat takes the position that Western modernism is not the sole modernism; it is possible for many different modernisms to exist. From this point of view, Moelyono's approach has a legitimate place in the history of Indonesian modernism.

Moelyono is not the only artist who lives in a tightly knit community and makes art supportive of its people based on strong moral principles. Dadang Christanto, who makes his home in a farming village on the outskirts of Yogyakarta, one of the ancient capitals of Indonesia, creates strong, simple images of the common people who defiantly resist the forces that oppress them. His works include terracotta heads and groups of fiberglass figures. Known for the social awareness of his work, the Jakarta painter Semsar Siahaan has said, "For an artist to take part as an individual in a moral or political movement actually broadens his horizons. It makes not only his aesthetic experience but his creative process more fruitful."⁰⁵ While being careful not to let his work become simple propaganda, Semsar vigorously advocates the need for artists to play an activist role.

The painter Nunelucio Alvarado, who lives in a village in the northern part of Negros in the Philippines, also has deep roots in his community. The main product of Negros is sugar cane, but farmers have difficulty making a decent living due to the instability of the international market. As a member of the Negros artists' group Black Artists in Asia, Alvarado maintains solidarity with the workers and farmers and makes a positive contribution to the region through his creative activities. There is a stark contrast between the poverty and harsh living conditions of the cane field workers and their families and the growing wealth and hedonistic lives of the capitalists.

Alvarado portrays familiar subjects, using garish color and solid forms to create humorous political caricatures. In addition to making his own paintings, he teaches art to young people and has worked together with local farmers to produce colored prints and t-shirts. He has been able to sell these items and use the proceeds to make the farmers' lives a little easier. He has shown an admirable consistency in using his art to serve the community in practical ways.

The community-based activities of Moelyono and Alvarado recall the approach of the Japanese poet Miyazawa Kenji. In the 1920s, Miyazawa, an agricultural technician and devout Buddhist as well as poet, taught at an agricultural school in northeastern Japan, a region known for its bitterly cold climate. He organized what he called the Rasuchijin Society to improve the lives of farmers suffering from poverty and the difficulty of growing crops in low temperatures. He led a self-sufficient life himself, and offered free advice on the use of fertilizer and other agricultural techniques. He also taught poetry, music and art to the young people, and dreamed of building a peasant culture independent of the influences of urban culture. His poems, children's stories and plays were naturally linked to these practical activities.

His basic position was presented in the following passage from "Tenets of a General Theory of Peasant Culture," a lecture delivered at a meeting of his Rasuchijin Society:

— We are all peasants. We are very busy and our work is hard. We want to find a way of life that is brighter and livelier ... Unless the entire world is happy, there can be no happiness for the individual.⁰⁶

— Miyazawa's point of view has much in common with that of Moelyono and Alvarado, although his thought is more abstract, conceptual and introspective than theirs, and does not deal as critically with reality or politics. In terms of the role played by the artist in the community, however, his work in the agricultural villages of Japan has important implications that transcend time and place.

04

Jim Supangkat, "The Emergence of Indonesian Modernism and its Background," in *Asian Modernism: Diverse Development in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand*, exh. cat. (Tokyo: Japan Foundation Asia Center, 1995), 212.

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05

Semsar Siahaan, "Individual Freedom Approaching Creative Society," in *Present Encounters: Papers from the Conference—The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Brisbane, Australia, 1996* (Brisbane, Queensland Art Gallery, 1996).

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06

Miyazawa Kenji, "Nōmin geijutsu gairon yōkō" [Tenets of a General Theory of Peasant Culture], in *Miyazawa Kenji zenshū* [The Complete Works of Miyazawa Kenji], vol. 10 (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1995), 18.

07

Yeyey G. Cruz, "Sanggawa," in *The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, exh. cat. (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1996), 99.

III | Sanggawa or "Working as One": From the Individual to the Community

In art since the advent of modernism, it has been the individual who is the source of artistic creation. Under this paradigm, new forms of expression that are based on individual originality and which have never been attempted by anyone else are given the highest value. There is value in being different. Sameness or similarity is discredited.

The five members of the Filipino group Sanggawa pursue activities directly opposed to this myth of individual originality. The group was formed at the end of 1994 and began working actively in January 1995. It grew out of previous groups, especially ABAY (Artista ng Bayan, or Artists of the People), formed in 1985, and Salingpusa (Junior Players), a group of younger artists. The democracy movement that toppled the Marcos regime and put Corazon Aquino in power in 1986, and the subsequent economic and social confusion, would bring about a major turning point in contemporary Philippine art. During this period of political unrest, artists began making realistic paintings with strong political and social messages for propaganda purposes. The groups mentioned above, ABAY and Salingpusa, were unabashedly political. Another noteworthy trend was the group production of large murals. Painted in public spaces in Manila where everyone could see them, these murals were quite effective as propaganda.

In Filipino, "Sanggawa" means "working as one," and this group defines its goals even more clearly than its predecessors. It is made up of three men and two women, Elmer Borlongan, Federico Sievert, Mark Justiniani, Karen Flores and Joy Mallari. The group plans its works by first holding extensive discussions on the subject, composition and individual motifs that will make up the whole. Achieving a stylistic consistency that makes it seem as if it were executed by one artist, their work is entirely collaborative. All five artists work individually in addition to participating in the group projects, and their personal styles clearly differ from that of Sanggawa. When working together they deliberately create a common style that differs from any of their individual styles. The result is not a suppression of individuality but the formation of a unique Sanggawa style that has its own markedly individual character. The surfaces of their paintings are filled with densely brushed, obsessive detail. They overflow with baroque excess and dynamism. Sanggawa picks subjects that are especially controversial in Filipino society—national elections, the visit of the Pope and the Miss Universe contest. The paintings portray politicians and religious figures who are familiar to everybody in the Philippines. The congested pictorial surfaces have a gay, festive air in spite of the seriousness of the subject matter.

In moving away from the solitary work of the individual and toward community involvement,

the activities of Sanggawa have great significance in the context of artistic development in modern times. According to the art critic Yeyey G. Cruz, "The group's members work on the idea that Filipino culture is 'groupist,' shying away from overt Western individualism."⁹⁷ This is a group of warm, friendly artists, who, like a family, form a community of their own as they work together. The collaborative works that emerge from their democratic human relations demonstrate the illusory nature of Western modernism's insistence on individual creation as an absolute value. While the activities of Salingpusa and Sanggawa recall the Mexican mural movement of the 1920s and '30s, the difference lies in the way the individual members of Sanggawa fuse their identities into a collective effort, in contrast to the special status enjoyed by the stars of the mural movement like Rivera and Orozco. This does not mean that individualism is entirely rejected by Sanggawa. In addition to their group activities, the individual members make and show art done in their own individual styles, all completely different, and they move freely back and forth between individual and group work. The collaborations of Sanggawa are as such always open to the outside world, and they have opened new horizons in the relations between individual and art.

IV | Giving Away Pieces of Cloth: Art as Gift

The project Navin Rawanchaikul has conceived for this exhibition is called *Pha Khao Mar on Tour*. Navin will give away traditional Thai loincloths, *pha khao mar*, to museum visitors, providing them the opportunity to use the loincloths in whatever way they please in their everyday lives. Greeted by an elderly Thai man wearing a loincloth (in the form of an enlarged photograph presented in a light box), visitors will experience Thai culture while watching a video documenting how the cloths are actually used in Thailand. With the phrase *Pha Khao Mar Uncle Pan* also written on the wall in large letters, and boxes containing the cloths stacked in the gallery, these elements will come together in the exhibition space as an installation of sorts, but the conceptual core of the work is the act of passing out the cloths to as many different people as possible. Carried out of the museum by their recipients, the cloths will be used in different ways at their various destinations. Navin will ask the recipients to report back to the museum with photographs and letters describing how they are using the cloths. Originally manufactured in Thailand, the *pha khao mar* will make a literal journey, crossing the ocean to end up in Japanese homes. The concept that structures this work is the mutual exchange between the artist/museum and exhibition visitors through the medium of the cloth.

Works of art may have lost their aura, but they are still bought and sold and owned as assets that have an essential value. They are sanctified

and given authority by being displayed in an art museum. Navin's project is directly opposed to this received approach to art.

Nowadays there is nothing unusual about Southeast Asian products being imported to Japan. Manufactured goods like textiles and clothing, and agricultural and marine products like bananas and shrimp, commonly appear on the market and are purchased by consumers here. The economic ties between Japan and Southeast Asia are too strong to ignore. In this project, however, the manufacture and consumption of the loincloth takes place in an art context, outside the usual routes of distribution. Navin makes us aware of the significance of real-world phenomena by bringing them into the art context. His art opens out toward society. That is why he is presenting this project under the very businesslike name, Navin Production Co., Ltd.

It is noteworthy that the manufactured cloth is given away to visitors free of charge, rather than being sold. It is a gift—an important concept in anthropology. The French cultural anthropologist Marcel Mauss has described ancient and tribal societies in which the social structure is formed by economies that do not conform to principles of equivalent exchange, but are instead based on reciprocal gift giving. He refers specifically to the custom of the potlatch among the native peoples of the Northwest coast of North America and the *kula* gift-exchange system of Melanesia. In the winter, the Northwest coast peoples held large feasts called potlatches to which they invited people from other tribes, and the invited guests then held their own feasts to reciprocate. As these feasts took place one after another, the wealth accumulated over the summer would be entirely consumed. As an extreme display of generosity, some property-owners would even break their most valuable treasures—their copper plates—and throw them into the sea. Wealth was consumed and transferred through the potlatch, and this system of giving property away without thought of profit determined the basic structure of social relationships.⁰⁸

Commenting on Mauss's concept of gift giving, Nakazawa Shinichi writes:

— Giving has the joining power of eros. An uncanny power of joining people at a level beyond individuality operates among people, breaking down the walls of individuation. According to the reports of anthropologists, this power is referred to as the effect of the "spirit of giving." Gifts move between people. When they do, some "thing" visible to the eye is certainly moving, but an immaterial power also moves along with this "thing"... That is, the "spirit of giving" resides in the gift, and as the "thing" moves, this spirit also moves between people... Through giving, people are not exchanging "things." They are creating a

moment when this spirit is stirred up in their hearts and begins moving.⁰⁹

— This spirit of giving certainly resides in Navin's gift of the *pha khao mar*. When this piece of cloth is handed to the visitor, the movement of the "spirit of giving" causes something to move in the heart of the recipient. Extending to the recipient's family and friends, this single piece of cloth can join people, and these connections will in turn feed back to the museum and artist, creating a circuit of communication.

Navin believes that art to date has been overly restricted to visual experience. In previous projects, he has done such things as bottling the water of a river near Chiang Mai and selling it in Bangkok, and starting a driving school. The most important thing for him is to propel his art out into society in order to communicate with people. Discussing a project carried out in 1993–94, *Please Donate Your Ideas for Dispirit Artistic Research*, he says, "I had 3,000 people of various occupations in Chiang Mai, from prostitutes to monks, give me things they thought of as art, and exhibited them together in one place. One person gave me a banana as a joke; another seriously painted an oil painting. A priest gave me a sutra."¹⁰ In this case, Navin received gifts from others. In the current project, other people will receive gifts from Navin. The concept is, I think, more focused than in previous projects, and its effects will have a broader scope.

Navin is not the only artist who makes works based on gift giving, creating connections between people or contributing to society through the exchange of physical objects. A previous example is Joseph Beuys's concept of "social sculpture," such as planting 7,000 oaks in Kassel using donated funds. Another Thai artist, Rirkrit Tiravanija, who is based in New York, uses a similar approach in his project of serving Thai curry to gallery visitors. Yamaide Junya takes "Something They Have in Daily Life" from people in the area where he lives and exchanges these things for "Something They Have in Daily Life" from people in places where he travels. This project can be understood in a similar context.¹¹ In these works, the exchange of gifts is used as a way of expanding the circle of communication and giving art stronger roots in society.

Whether or not the act of giving is directly involved, as in Navin's project, all forms of art are ultimately products of the spirit of giving. The value of art is ambiguous and difficult to calculate. It does not lend itself easily to the market principle of equivalent exchange. It overflows with the power of eros and is more at home in the territory of gift giving. In particular, for the many artists in Southeast Asia who are deeply rooted in their communities and attempt to live with other people, an artwork is a container for a message. It can be thought of as a gift meant for each member of the community. Even where they do not own it, in seeing and experiencing a work people can receive

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Marcel Mauss, "Essai sur le don," in *Sociologie et anthropologie* (Paris: Presses universitaires, 1950).

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Nakazawa Shinichi, "Shin zōyōron josetsu" [Preface to a New Gift Theory], in *Junsui na shizen no zōyō* [The Pure Gift of Nature] (Tokyo: Serika Shobō, 1996), 175–176.

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Ushiroshōji Masahiro, "Artist Interview: Navin Rawanchaikul," in *Bijutsu Techo* 48, no. 729 (August 1996): 110–111.

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In a project for the 7th Asian Art Biennale Bangladesh (November 1995), Yamaide gathered items from people in Oita and traded them for "Something They Have in Daily Life" with people he met at the site of the exhibition. Finally, he "returned the traded objects to the original owners, the people who had offered the things in Oita." *Document: Japanese Artists in the 7th Asian Art Biennial Bangladesh* (Tokyo: Japan Foundation, 1996), 26–33.

the message it contains, have their spirits shaken, and become enlightened. The spirit of giving that resides invisibly in the work is communicated to the viewer and circulates endlessly. At some point in time, it may even move people's hearts and change society. The artists of Southeast Asia believe this as they continue to make their art in the present.

V | For the Art to Come

The art of Southeast Asia is unique. The function of art in society and the role of the artist there seem quite different from what we have seen before in the development of modern art. There are artists like Moelyono and Alvarado whose activities are deeply rooted in the life of the community, and whose expressions are inextricably linked to the improvement or transformation of the lives of the people who live around them. There are groups of artists like Sanggawa who work together, going beyond the limitations of the individual. Through their activities they actually create a small community. There are also works of art that are filled with the spirit of giving and which seek to communicate with people in a community, as exemplified by Navin's project.

Briefly stated, the expression of individuality in a modernist sense is not the most important issue for these artists. Their concern is how to participate in the communities in which they live, how to build a better future for these communities, and what art can do to that end. This also holds for the artists who are involved in the search for their own identities, since they approach the problem of identity in the wider context of family, community and ethnic affiliation. This position is far removed from the thinking of Western modernism, in which absolute value is placed on individual creativity and the artist's task is

to explore a pure and autonomous artistic world.

The relationship between art and society has been re-examined over the course of the 1990s, and many artists are committed to solving the difficult problems faced by societies and people today. The establishment of art's independence from society that occurred in Western modernism is an anomaly in the history of art. As Jim Supangkat says, the Indonesian modernism based on moralism has been proactively engaged with society and the defense of the common people. This can also be said for the modernisms of other countries in Southeast Asia. Many of today's Southeast Asian artists continue the moral attitudes of their predecessors. Placing themselves in their local communities, they find it natural to explore ways to contribute to society through art. Their works reflect difficult social conditions but never lose the glow of hope. This is because their activities are filled with the spirit of giving. The function of art and the role of the artist found in the contemporary art of Southeast Asia provide a glimpse of what art could be—what it should be—in the future.

Like Navin distributing the *pha khao mar*, the Southeast Asian artists participating in this exhibition present their works as gifts to the people of their communities and to the Japanese public. According to Mauss, there are three duties in giving gifts: the duty to give; the duty to accept; and the duty to reciprocate. We should unhesitatingly accept the gifts offered to us by the artists of Southeast Asia. And there is no difficulty in returning the favor. The best way to do this is to try to empathize with and understand these artists and their art. Only then will the spirit of giving which permeates this work begin to circulate between them and us, leading to the kind of true exchange that makes art what it should be.