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Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia, Volume 3, Number 1, March 2019, pp. 13-21 (Article)

Published by NUS Press Pte Ltd

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sen.2019.0001>



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MAY ADADOL INGAWANIJ

The Gender in Southeast Asian Art Histories symposium at the University of Sydney, from which this special issue grew, gave me a few persistent questions to chew over. The topics and themes of most of the presentations reminded me that the longstanding issue of whether gender is, in this context, a euphemism for ‘women and art history’ remains central. The theme as it unfolded in practice made me wonder what effects the more direct framing might have had on the discussions at the symposium itself, and what possibilities might open up for the writings and activities that this timely event will no doubt continue to generate. It made me curious to try resuscitating a few strategies from the feminism of a previous era, to see how they might germinate lines of departure threading into the unknown in the here and now in Southeast Asia. An offspring of Womanifesto as a lazy and quiet all-women gathering with no expectation of productivity, public performance or facilitation of public engagement, and with childcare for those who need it. A ban on the microphone. A sharing session where men who identify as progressive intellectuals, artists or cultural activists are asked to keep quiet and take detailed notes.

One of the things that have stuck with me, as it was close to home, was the frustrated and, dare I say it, somewhat weary way that we encircled the old conundrum about the politics of disciplinary frame of reference. How to decolonise the field, its key texts, curricula and exhibition conventions,

[Southeast of Now
Vol. 3 No. 1 (March 2019), pp. 13–21]

without succumbing to the managerialist logic of diversity, is a harder and more ambiguous task than it sounds in the current climate. These days I think often about the ambivalent value of academic competence as an affordance of intense training abroad in institutionally prestigious English-language arts and humanities programmes. You learn to become conversant with the frame of reference of your discipline, and to become fluent in its language of theorising and its posture of critique. The price of success is the current form of academic conventionality. You get good at demonstrating mastery of the master's language, or—a more ambivalent present-day professional hazard for ambitious academics of the non-West—you have ready to hand the repertoire for repeating an instrumentalised version of postcolonial/decolonial critique. Operating on a day-to-day level in professional academic life, and presenting works from one conference to the next, it is not always easy to differentiate to myself between intellectual disruption, intervention, position-taking and conformist fluency in the language of critique.

How to learn to do otherwise? Instead of declaring intellectual independence from the master's house or demonstrating command of the master's tools, thus running the risk of saying no more than that you possess the institutional academic competence to follow a defined upward path from point A to point B, what could germinate instead by grappling with theories, concepts and ideas as if you are following a labyrinthine winding thread, or drawing a living, continuous, unwieldy line in a process and time that feels like the thickest possible duration?¹ What if, instead of reproducing your training by applying or critiquing 'Western theories' as learned behaviour, you try to learn to live artistically with theories of whatever provenance? What if you try to live by playing with using and misusing whatever ideas, speculations and concepts, originating from wherever and passing through whichever paths, that you have encountered and which have captured your imagination and gripped you in ways you don't quite understand, to push further into somewhere as yet undefined?

Several months before the symposium, I had the privilege of listening to Zoe Butt talk about the sympathies and aspirations animating her curatorial commitments in Vietnam.² She had been invited to speak on the theme of the attachments that impel someone to make and nurture art in Southeast Asia. She chose the term agency to describe the value, that is, the commitment to creating, which guides her activities of supporting artists' practices and growth. With this in mind, I noted with interest that in Sydney, the same term was coming up freely among speakers researching wide-ranging examples of women's artistic and organisational practices, or representations

of female forms in art history, across different periods. None of us were especially concerned to pause over this loose term, or to convey our definition of it, but we used it freely and frequently. I started to wonder what this English-language word, 'agency', might be taken to be a euphemism for. Some kind of feminism? Or a notion of modernity and contemporaneity that intimates a connection of some sort with matriarchy as a residual repertoire of germinative and transmissive practice, condition of possibility, or disposition? Some kind of approach to the notion of having the power to do, affect, make appear, set in motion, become, change? Tracing the range of words, idioms and images that give us greater insight into genealogies, repertoires and apparatuses that engender women's horizon for doing, affecting, making possible and becoming, would be one fruitful way to continue the fundamental historiographic initiative that had already begun in the last issue of *Southeast of Now*. I refer readers to the commissioned terminological essays surveying the coining, adapting or translating of keywords for historicising Southeast Asia's modern and contemporary art.³

To be visible and to be heard is too commonly taken to be the metric of progress for the participation of minorities in the dominant structure, a liberal logic of representation that gestures somehow towards an eventual capacity to change the structure. If agency is taken to be the capacity to affect and to set in motion, whether this is by doing or, perhaps more interestingly, by not doing, to gain visibility and voice in the dominant structure may or may not be the same as its exercising. This is one of the questions that artist Erika Tan's *The 'Forgotten' Weaver* project has left me with. The project's starting point is the artist's search among archival ephemera for the face and named record of a Malay woman brought as an exhibit to the UK to demonstrate her weaving craft in the Empire Exhibition in London in the 1920s. Addressed simultaneously to Britain's legacy of colonisation and to present-day Singapore's domination of Southeast Asian art history through its museum collection and exhibition initiatives, the project's speculative fictionalisation unfolds from two questions. What if Halimah the weaver was the first Malay woman artist to have exhibited in Britain? And what would be her place in the art historical canon produced by the National Gallery of Singapore? So far so straightforward. Yet what puzzled and fascinated me about the expressive form of this fiction is Tan's use of the automated voice in one of the videos to imagine Halimah's speech, and in another video installation, the extravagant staginess of the performance of young female debaters taking contending positions on the question of Halimah's place in modern art historical narrative. I didn't know what to think about the

licensing of such theatricality of enunciation until, in a talk about the project, the artist characterises the debate form as interesting to her, because a correlation need not necessarily apply between the position taken by the speaker and her perspective on the issue at hand.⁴ Does *The 'Forgotten' Weaver* fictionalise Halimah's speaking or not speaking? What values should or could be attached to the restoration of the forgotten weaver's visibility within the institutional structure of this museum, and to the visibility of taking a position within a circumscribed structure of speaking?

Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez's important contribution in this issue proposes women's "maintenance work" as an overdue area of recognition, art historical research, and conceptualisation. "Maintenance work" draws attention to the role played in Southeast Asia by women who pioneered the creation of modern exhibition spaces, organised exhibitions, sustained the infrastructure for artworks to be exhibited domestically and to travel abroad, and who committed their time to the invisible work of archiving resource materials.⁵ Women's past- and present-day operation in the background within the modern/contemporary art ecology of Southeast Asia could be, incontrovertibly enough, inferred as a sign of conformity to the pattern of labour division in patriarchal societies, whereby 'the elephant's hind legs' routinely provide invisible support and affective labour to the maestro, the impresario or the rising star. Yet, even as it is necessary to identify and problematise the actuality of gendered labour norm typifying certain patterns of female labour of administration, assistance, care and curation, permit me to indulge in an exercise in pursuing a counter-intuitive line of thought about the potentiality of women's maintenance work—above and beyond its actualisation in a structure and logic of patriarchal domination. What if invisibility is neither a symptom of her secondary status nor a lack, and agency has less to do with making visible actions and declarative enunciations that lay claim to autonomy, critique or opposition? What if agency means actions or non-actions that are far less invested in idioms of visibility, which potentially work by affecting ecologies, infrastructures and dispositions, that is to say, by affecting those media that maintain the possibility of setting in motion and keeping in play the scope for finding latent capacities in situations and the durational process of experimenting with their realisation, without guarantee of success?

My recent interest in thinking counter-intuitively about invisibility comes out of my effort to keep up with some formidable women thinkers and doers, whose praxis radically complicate the terms of relationship between visibility, invisibility and the idea of agency as purposive act of visible position-taking,

of claiming defined space of autonomy and opposition. Among them are Ida Aroonwong, Ashley Thompson, Erin Gleeson, Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook and Keller Easterling.

Ida is a feminist writer and publisher of the radical Thai-language publishing house Aan/Read, and an unusual kind of political activist in Thailand. In the early part of the decade or so of the country's dystopian political crisis, she founded the long-form reviews journal *Aan!*, which for a while held its ground as a space for complex, politically-dissident writings. She ignored the pestering of some ambitious conformist academics to have the journal registered for impact factor ranking, which would make it pay for them to publish there, and she ran articles that were as long and as demanding as you like, on literature, the arts and the cultural politics of national history. Then, around the time of the 2014 coup, when the journal was at the height of its visibility as the subversive arts publication, she let it go quiet. She could have carried on maintaining a regular supply of three issues of *Aan!* per year, signalling the will to weather a more repressive time by discrete self-censorship and by wagering that the surveillance apparatus as it has become is not as obsessed with persecuting authors and publishers of long-form print publications as dissidents and personalities who post status updates, likes and shares on social media. Were it to continue regardless, the journal would have been doing just enough to hang on to the frisson of dissent for the catharsis of its owner, contributors and readers. Instead, time that might have been spent doing that became time that Ida devoted to the invisible task and the Sisyphean burden of acting as bail guarantor for no-name political convicts. The self-suspension of *Aan!* is an interesting counterpoint to another, no less courageous mode of response that has been more commonly undertaken by political activists, cultural dissidents, and some artists and curators in Thailand since the coup, which in aesthetic and ethical terms, are far more invested in the visibility of symbols and gestures of protest. This is not to pitch the virtue or otherwise of one tactic against the other, which would be redundant in a climate already too sectarian. But it is a kind of hopefulness to invite a pause, a slow indulgence of thought and an intentional suspension of response, a staying with the preference to not do over the ethical imperative to accelerate the production of dissent, to keep making declarations against repression within the cat-and-mouse logic already set. What is agency in times of repression? What tactics nevertheless feed the disposition for creating suspended loops and lines that are radically other to the definition and logic of opposition already built into the structure of repression? And to ask a question more directly pertinent to efforts to

think through strategies of exhibiting, mediating, circulating and creating discourses concerning Southeast Asian contemporary art, which tactics of facilitating non-local exposure and mobility stand a chance of feeding germinative lines experimenting with the creation of radically other praxis and values, and which follow a convention of accruing global art institutional currency to the package called Southeast Asian/Asian contemporary art by classifying works, artists and projects with reference to rhetoric of the participatory, the relational and the political?

Ashley Thompson's writing on the symbolism of the Angkorian sculptural form and territoriality posits another term of relationship between the *yoni* and *linga*.⁶ Problematising the assumption of a relationship of binary opposition between male/female, active/passive, she casts the *yoni* in deconstructive philosophical terms as radical difference, that is, as that which is beyond the terms of comparison with the *linga*, but which relates to it as potentiality. The *yoni* is non-thing and condition of possibility, that which is radically other to and prior to, yet relates in generative and asymmetric terms with the *linga* as the defined statue form and symbol of sovereign territory and self. The *yoni* is not a thing in itself but, as the pedestal, enables the representation of the *linga* as symbol of sovereignty over land as bounded territory. The *yoni* is the unrepresentable that lets the *linga* be what it is by permitting delimitation of form as land—the pedestal as a representation of the unrepresentability of earth, enabling the *linga* to symbolise sovereignty over land. As Thompson further exemplifies, this logic parallels the philosophical conceptualisation of the frame as neither inside nor outside the painting, neither part of it nor not part of it. The frame is the condition of possibility that lets the painting be the painting that it is. This way of thinking the *yoni* as condition of possibility resonates intriguingly with a renewed interest, in the neighbouring fields of media theory, in conceptualising medium in infrastructural terms as the invisible and ubiquitous atmospheric matter that constitutes potentiality for becoming. With a nod to this recent turn in media theory, which returns to an old conception of medium as the elements and as atmosphere, we might play around with thinking about the *yoni* as medium.

The recuperation of an environmental notion of medium departs from those who define it as types of expressive form, or as technological device or intermediary figure for the appearing and vocalising of the message. Medium, as atmosphere, is the intertwining of elemental nature and human elements creating environments and habitats that enable existence, experience, interrelation and action. This understanding of medium draws attention to the unbounded dynamic of interplay between mutually affecting parts, constituting its environmental characteristic as a kind of contingent

ensemble, an apparatus, with certain latent capacities and dispositions, and as an indeterminate duration of interrelation, response and possible change. Medium, in this sense, does the work of enabling and mobilising in the invisible, indeterminate and perhaps even boring way that infrastructure does. Easterling's proposition that we try to get better at "medium thinking", to keep practising "medium design" rather than making declarations of the rightness of our position,⁷ suggests that medium as environment in the above sense are the domains and processes where the capacity and repertoire for mobilisation, enactment and change can be identified, fine-tuned and retooled, and doing so is a sustained matter of making adjustments based on multiple small yet precise judgements in the now of situations. What I found so striking, when I heard her speak about this idea, is the image that Easterling sketches of medium design in everyday practice.⁸ When your kids are screaming and fighting with each other, medium design is to do differently than telling one "stop hitting your sister!" and the other "you do not say that to her!" It is to change the ambient and calm the room by moving the chair, putting the dog in the arms of one, and increasing the blood sugar level of the other. Medium design, it seems, is pleasingly proximate to a mother's maintenance skills.

These are the skills of reading the interplay of elements, of continuously and discretely adjusting parts, and harnessing the disposition to go in this or that direction which would be different from the foregoing path, and risking indeterminacy of outcome. It is mostly background work, but far from a mindless or disembodied one. It is a kind of agency without visibility, the ability to shift things along and change the ambient. It relies on the capacity for attention and for staying fully present in an environment made of knotted incommensurable lines. I make this mental image and think of the praxis of curator Erin Gleeson, of the beauty of the intimate, the small, the sustained, and the care to make space for the possibility of making with and becoming with. These things I began to grasp better from apprenticing with her on putting together a gathering of people to share and to pause over the attachments and hesitations that make art and sustain counter-institutional artistic practices in present-day Southeast Asia, and trying to do so in a way that would give us some distance from institutional academic and artworld conventions and the restricted task of providing accompanying deliverables. I think of the labyrinthine line radically eliding art and life drawn by the anarchic practice of artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, its ultra-femininity of gesture and language, and its wayward staying with the duration of creaturely entwining and becoming.⁹

BIOGRAPHY

May Adadol Ingawanij is Reader at the University of Westminster where she co-directs the Centre for Research and Education in Arts and Media (CREAM). She is writing a book titled “Contemporary Art and Animistic Cinematic Practices in Southeast Asia”, with support from a British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship (2018–19). Her publications include: “Exhibiting Lav Diaz’s Long Films: Currencies of Circulation and Dialectics of Spectatorship” (2017); “Animism and the Performative Realist Cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul” (2013); “Glimpses of Freedom: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia” (2012); “Nguyen Trinh Thi’s Essay Films” (forthcoming). Her recent curatorial projects include *Lav Diaz Journeys* (London, 2017), *On Attachments and Unknowns* (Phnom Penh, 2017) and *Comparing Experimental Cinemas* (Bangalore, 2014).

NOTES

- ¹ The image of labyrinthine lines is a gift to me from several years of reading with my son Serge Bloch's *The Big Adventure of a Little Line* (Thames & Hudson, 2016). Also Tim Ingold's *The Life of Lines* (Routledge, 2015), and Anni Albers's knots and threads.
- ² Presentation at "Fields 2—Attachments and Unknowns", a gathering curated by May Adadol Ingawanij and Erin Gleeson, Sa Sa Bassac, Phnom Penh, Jan. 2017.
- ³ Thanavi Chotpradit, J. Pilapil Jacobo, Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez, et al., "Terminologies of 'Modern' and 'Contemporary' 'Art' in Southeast Asia's Vernacular Languages: Indonesian, Javanese, Khmer, Lao, Malay, Myanmar/Burmese, Tagalog/Filipino, Thai and Vietnamese", *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia 2*, 2 (2018): 65–95.
- ⁴ Erika Tan, "Archival Turns/Transnational Returns", Projek Dialog, Kuala Lumpur, 14 February 2018.
- ⁵ See Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez, "Art on the Back Burner: Gender as the Elephant in the Room of Southeast Asian Art Histories", in this issue.
- ⁶ Ashley Thompson, *Engendering the Buddhist State: Territory, Sovereignty and Sexual Difference in the Inventions of Angkor* (Routledge, 2016), chapter 2.
- ⁷ Keller Easterling, *Medium Design* (Strelka Press, 2018).
- ⁸ "What Time Is It? Technologies of Life in the Contemporary", conference, Sarai-CSDS and Raqs Media Collective, New Delhi, Dec. 2017.
- ⁹ See my article "Art's Potentiality Revisited: Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's Late Style and Chiang Mai Social Installation", in *Artist-to-Artist: Independent Art Festivals in Chiang Mai*, ed. David Teh and David Morris (London: Afterall Books, 2018), pp. 252–63.