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Garden of Forking Paths: *Performance Art Without Performativity*

I

The study of modern art is in the midst of a profound recalibration. Even as we are compelled to rethink where and how we look for its histories, the value of research has surged, and nowhere more than in Asia. Swept along by these currents, efforts to historicise contemporary art exemplify the challenges of that disciplinary rethink. What should be the primary objects of such a history: artworks, artists, exhibitions, or something else? And how have its crucial turns been recorded and remembered? Should we prioritise individuals, groups, or the institutions that validated their currency, often under the imprimatur of nation-states?

Such quandaries have brought the 1990s squarely into focus as a pivotal phase in modern art's formal and geographical dilations, its principal actors now old enough, and established enough to be thinking about their legacy, as a new canonising machinery swings into action. All this has been propitious for Performance Art, despite whatever difficulties it may present for dealers and collecting institutions. Somehow assured of the genre's relevance, of its purchase on the worrying tangles of public life, the global art world has become better at valuing performance, keener to commission it, and more determined to historicise it. While the return of other 1990s preoccupations, like technology and identity, suggests political stasis or failure, performance's retrospective glow is only enhanced by its perceived kinship with dissent, and with an older Modernism's evasion of market forces. But however clear those resemblances, performance—as a mode of visual art—has now traversed so many times and places that they can scarcely amount to any kind of genealogical proof. And though performance was never peripheral to the story of Southeast Asian contemporary art, in either the official historiography of institutions or ground-up accounts of artist-run scenes, its prominence has not always proven favourable to a thoughtful, critical reckoning.

Cheap and immediate, mobile and ephemeral, it appealed for all the reasons it appealed to progressive artists elsewhere: for its knack for provoking censure, for its agility in dodging regulation, and covering its tracks in the authoritarian conditions that prevailed in Asia even once the Cold War had thawed. If it invoked critical postures struck on the backdrop of social democracy (and social change) in the West, Asia's tightly constrained public spheres would be no less conducive to politicisation of the aesthetic. Yet the legacy of resistance has become less clear, as something called 'performativity' has emerged as a mainstream value in contemporary practices with neither political agenda nor anti-market pretensions. In some recent remarks of the Indonesian artist, Otty Widasari, this modulation seems almost unconscious, natural enough in her national context to escape scrutiny.[1] Performance Art is said to have emerged in step with political protests of the 1970s, but is nevertheless the proper precedent for the wider 'performative' culture now reflected in electronic and commercial media.[2] An all-too-familiar *lacuna*: a genre once qualified by formal criteria and its socio-political agenda gives way to a style held to be ubiquitous, but hardly defined; the modish vocabulary of the present permits only hazy connections with the past. The new performativity could well be historicised in relation to Performance Art, but surely, Performance Art's recuperation would also need to be explained as part of this 'performative' trend.

Meanwhile, the welcome afforded performance in Asia's more and more confident institutions calls for even greater caution. It was an obvious keynote of *Awakenings: Art in Society in Asia, 1960s-1990s*, a recent collaboration between national museums in Japan, South Korea and Singapore that made a transparent, summary claim for art's social and political efficacy.[3] Yet on closer inspection, more than one claim was being made here. On a connotative level, performance was an efficient mood indicator, signalling urgency, directness, liveness, the fugitive, etc.; an index of contemporaneity. But it served a denotative function too, giving the exhibition a self-evident practical and iconographical consistency, proving that that contemporaneity was, for all of its appeals to locality, transnational. In other words, performance was a corroborating sign, proof of a certain Cold War *comradeship in time* (Groys) that was demonstrably regional.[4] For observers in this part of the world, the exhibition's continental ambition could not but recall another 1990s habit: the narrative bundling that constituted "Southeast Asian contemporary art" as such, in surveys made by acquisitive institutions outside the regional economy of art-making.[5]

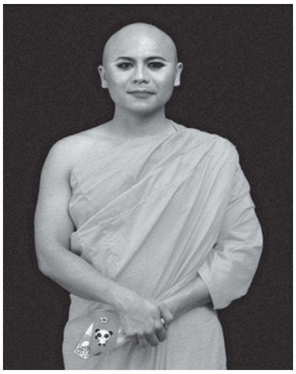
If performance is a key to understanding that period—and few would dispute it—it was not as a defined, self-conscious movement, much less a discipline, but rather as a kind of outlet or escape trajectory from disciplines and from discipline *per se*. One of the few things that had unified Southeast Asian *modern* art was its active depoliticisation by postcolonial states during the Cold War. Once any revolutionary fervour had subsided, national academies built largely on the premises of colonial ones tended towards the measured diffusion of abstract and representational styles and the bureaucratisation of artistic training, divided into 'disciplines'. In societies where the state-institutional aegis guaranteed professional distinction, income and social mobility, departments were naturally averse to cross-media experimentation. By the 1990s, these academic bureaucracies were badly outmoded, as middle classes had grown, paths to foreign study had opened up, and so-called post-studio practice had come to prevail on the international circuit.[6]

Art History still has work to do comparing these national academies and holding them accountable for what they did to artists' competencies in each place. In Thailand the decline is stark: up to a point, modern artists—even those matriculated in the state system which had a near-monopoly from the 1940s—were 'artists' in the general, non-artform-specific sense registered in most Southeast Asian languages. Luminaries of the 1960s and 1970s, academy-trained or not, were autodidacts practicing multiple art forms: Prateuang Emjaroen, Angkarn Kalayanapongse and Chang Sae-tang were poets or musicians, as well as painters; Paiboon Suwannakudt began his creative life as a choreographer. But after the experiments and repressions of the 1970s, which rearranged and hardened academic art-form divisions, most who went through the national school came out practically illiterate, or worse, pretended to be.[7] This 'specialisation' reflects the wider, regional context in which artists would embrace performance—alongside 'conceptual' strategies and photography—in defiance of those divisions, breaking with (and breaking down) the technical orthodoxies of an institutionalised modernism.

II

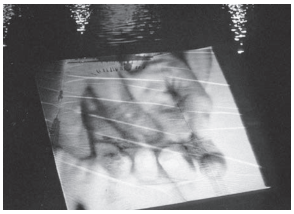
It is this transdisciplinary promise of performance, more than its putative political efficacy, that explains its appeal in independent scenes and its preponderance in Modern Art's becoming contemporary and transnational. Multidisciplinary experiments flourished at the junctions where the region's artists crossed paths in the 1990s, not only the recurring flagship exhibitions like those in Brisbane (Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art) and Fukuoka (Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale), but also lesser-known intersections only now starting to receive their art historical dues. The transnational, biennial platform *Womanifesto*, for example, initiated in Thailand in 1997, was not exclusively a performance platform; yet performance offered women artists a practical latitude to experiment that many men, especially those ensconced in patriarchal national institutions, still did not enjoy.[8]














Such gatherings could of course be historicised as a continuation of the story of Modern Art, its dilation beyond the North Atlantic or, if one prefers, a more geographically neutral history of *formal* dilation carried on here and there, but in any case resembling an older modernist evasion of the market. There are pitfalls in this approach—not least, the twin curses of belatedness and Eurocentrism—however sanguine we may be about the prospects of a 'global' history of modern art, and however attentive to the local stakes of those experiments. But this inclusiveness is *not* what's driving today's demand for histories of the 1990s, which are not so much extending art history's 'modern' as back-dating its 'contemporary'. That is sure to sound like an arbitrary claim—I admit it's a polemical one—but it should help to clarify the stakes of the recent surge in art history's value, so evident in exhibitions, collections and research in this region.

For this 'retroactive' orientation, desire for a history of the contemporary, is quite different from progressive urges to resume or reanimate modernism. Instead, it is conditioned by three realisations: first, of the exhaustion of disciplinary Art History and its failure to take root in places newly subscribed to art's international system and market; second, of the resulting deficits in that system's fiduciary budgets, in the rationales underpinning value or the significance of art works; and third, that 'contemporary' is no longer an innocent, chronological term but an acutely ideological one, a value judgment often conferred or imported from elsewhere. 'The contemporary' is no longer simply the 'progressive' dimension of the modern, if ever it was; no doubt our awareness of its ideological dimension compels its historicisation today. And though Southeast Asia's art histories may increasingly traverse national boundaries, revealing larger continuities (that may be regional, global or translocal), our contemporaneity is sure to be no less multiple than our modernity.

If the regional viewpoint seems less blinkered than national ones, it is nevertheless usually dependent on them. We are often reminded of the arbitrary geography of Southeast Asia, its lack of geological, ethnolinguistic or cultural uniformity, of its gestation in the colonial imagination. We are less often reminded that participation in region has almost always been contingent upon national representation and the elaboration of what Patrick Flores has called "national form," and that Southeast Asia's *facture*, its realisation as a curatorial and exhibitionary construct, has been enacted primarily by states and national institutions, some Southeast Asian, and some not.[9] Still today, in this unreflexive regionalism—let's call it ASEANism—an artist cannot be regional without first being *nationally* interpellated. One becomes Southeast Asian not in spite of one's national affiliation but precisely by virtue of it.

Performance thus lies at the intersection of two dominant narratives. It is an art form whose vitality attests to both a history of regionalism, and a regional history of experimentation. It was in any case the most visible and most energised experimental form when contemporary art took on regional coherence, and therefore takes pride of place in our art historical picture of Southeast Asia, the *lingua franca* of artist-run scenes in the 1990s. Performance gave this geography—which was evidently much wider than ASEAN—a consistency that was not just stylistic but also organisational and economic. It was favoured by the first artists to form ground-up, transnational networks that were to prove exceptionally durable, and which didn't just circulate art works but enabled their production.[10] It is the *only* art form to have had the benefit of such networks. Painting, sculpture and photography still relied on 'diplomatic' circulation; media artists remained isolated; indie filmmakers met at festivals, but enjoyed no regional production loop until much later. There was no regional association of installation makers or video artists. But at this point in our historical summary, the art-form distinctions become harder to define, and for most artists at least, much less important.

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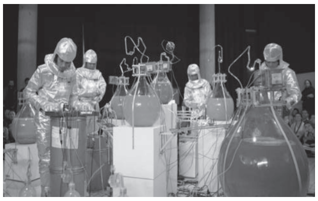

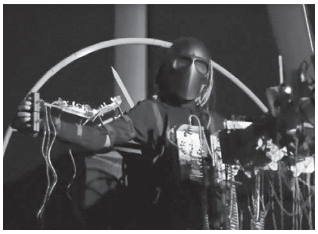

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III

The two names for live visual art, 'Performance Art' and a more inclusive 'performance', were not distinct or severable when artists began to congregate outside the architecture of Modern Art in the late 1980s, nor when they began circulating transnationally in the early 1990s. Performance was an obvious hallmark of their gatherings but for most of those involved, 'Performance Art' was not yet identifiable as a genre or set of techniques, much less as a discipline. One often hears these artists claim that Performance Art didn't really exist, or that they weren't conscious they were making it, at the time.[11] By the end of the 1990s, however, though still untamed by the academies, Performance Art *had* become distinct from the performance taking place for video cameras, and that engendered by socially engaged, participatory and so-called relational projects.

In the last twenty years or so, this distinction has become paradoxically clearer, even as the term "performance" has been applied more loosely, to encompass diverse, contemporary idioms. The 'performativity' engaged in newer genres is less tied to the physical body, and resiles from the activism of the older artist-run groups. Meanwhile, artists who *did* assume the mantle of Performance Art—like Chumpon Apisuk, Iwan Wijono, or Lee Wen—have not been historicised as video or installation artists, though they did employ those media, which are in any case integral to the study and collection of their work. But they were not innovators in those media and indeed, their brand evidently hardened around the live, bodily, unrepeatable séance as the millennium turned.[12]

So what happened to performance? How did it split into these two distinct modes, and why? By the time Performance Art did see itself as such, though regionalist and abidingly artist-run—still deferring the separation of powers embodied by the curator—it had become exclusive and doctrinaire. Restricting itself to the material vocabulary of the body, it began to repeat political gestures that had made sense during the liberalisation of the 1990s, but later came to seem nostalgic and out of sync with international contemporary practice. It gave up, in other words, the *sine qua non* of modernism, that basic vocation *to change art*, a performativity—in an almost Austinian sense of the term—that had been immanent to progressive modern art since Duchamp. In the iconological collage opposite (a '*musée imaginaire*' worthy of a Riegl, or perhaps of a Coomaraswamy), that performativity lies hidden in the mix with Performance Art, across decades and across countries. For in visual terms, there is no telling them apart. It may ultimately be the inflexive, social dimension, and not aesthetic choices, that separates Performance Art from a more expansive and worldly performativity.

Somehow, Southeast Asia cultivated a *Performance Art without performativity*, one indifferent to the global circulation into which the region has so decisively entered this century. When it comes to representation in museums and collections, the horizons and itineraries of Southeast Asia's performance pioneers turned out to be not global but *regional*. Their festivals became quasi-institutional; live actions conceived for a triennale opening could be reified as installations, ripe for collection. But the institutional footing that Singapore, Japan and Australia gave them was to become their ceiling. And ironically, this Performance Art broke ranks with an international contemporaneity just as the performing body was making an epochal comeback, as its Euro-American figureheads were being canonised for bluechip collections and as performativity was becoming ubiquitous, a staple of contemporary art programming. The younger Southeast Asian artists now practising performance alongside other forms are indifferent, if not oblivious, to the legacy of the region's pioneers. The successful ones, at least, are going further, younger, at higher frequency.[13]

Performance will surely remain pivotal for any history, especially a social history, of this region's contemporary art, and particularly if we value art's capacity for nurturing non-parochial forms of community. But that doesn't imply an inclusive community, and nor is Performance Art's history necessarily a history of inclusion. It is for us to decide who among them are really our contemporaries.

Notes

[1] Otty Widasari, 'Indonesian Performance Art in the Performative Generation,' 2019 presentation at Ilmin Museum of Art, Seoul; https://69performance.club/

[2] Cf. the more 'affirmative' uses to which video was put by young artists after *Reformasi*. See Agung Hujatnikajennong, 'Everything True Melts through the Screen' in Amanda Katherine Rath ed., *Taboo and Transgression in Contemporary Indonesian Art* (exhib. cat.), Ithaca, NY: Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, 2005, pp. 51-57

[3] *Awakenings: Art in Society in Asia, 1960s-1990s* was a co-production of the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo, the Japan Foundation's Asia Center, the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul and the National Gallery Singapore. The curatorial statement in the catalogue leaves no room for doubting art's capacity for "revaluation" of, and liberation from, elitist, colonial and otherwise undemocratic forms of modernity. Performance did not dominate the exhibition, but without it that claim would have been untenable. Bae Myungji, Seng Yu Jin and Suzuki Katsuo eds, *Awakenings, Art in Society in Asia, 1960s-1990s* (exhib. cat.), Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2019, p. 11

[4] Boris Groys, 'Comrades of Time', *e-flux Journal*, 11 December 2009. If there is a vantage shared by the organising institutions, it is not that of the enlightened, post-authoritarian museum but that of still meddlesome ministries trying hard to conceal their repressive reflexes. In Japan, we could cite the controversies arising from the vast 2017 survey, *Sunshower: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now*, and the contentious exhibition *After "Freedom of Expression"* pulled from this year's *Aichi Triennale*. The Korean art community is still roiling from revelations of the blacklist, nearly ten thousand strong, compiled under disgraced former President Park Geun-hye. In Singapore, the *Awakenings* catalogue was deemed too "sensitive" for distribution

[5] The primary vehicles of this aggregation were the surveys held in Fukuoka and Brisbane, and from 1996, those mounted in and around the Singapore Art Museum. Recent examples include *Negotiating Home, History and Nation*, 2011, and the Southeast Asian core of the *Singapore Biennale*s

[6] This institutional history may reveal more historical parallels with the socialist Second World than with the North-Atlantic First World

[7] It is hard to name graduates of Thailand's national academy after 1976 who are known for writing. Two that spring to mind, Araya Rasdjamrearnsook (b. 1957) and Uthis Haemamool (b. 1975) both won notoriety, and pariah status in the art system, for their literary engagements

[8] Asia Art Archive, 'Inverview with Varsha Nair,' 2009; https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/interview-with-varsha-nair. A historical resumé was posted online in 2015 at womanifesto.com, while two archival exhibitions have since been mounted, in Bangkok and Sydney

[9] Patrick Flores, 'Turns in Tropics: Artist-Curator', in Nora Taylor and Boreth Ly eds, *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: an anthology*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012, pp. 171-188

[10] The main nodes of these networks were festivals like the Nippon International Performance Art Festival (founded in 1993), Asiatopia in Thailand (founded in 1998), and Singapore's Future of Imagination (founded in 2003)

[11] See e.g., David Teh and David Morris eds, *Artist-to-Artist: Independent Art Festivals in Chiang Mai 1992-98*, London: Afterall Books, 2018

[12] That 'brand' sometimes foreshortened an artists' technical range. Correcting this remains an urgent task for historians. See e.g., Chuong-Dai Vo's reckoning with Lee Wen's writing and drawing in her 'Line Form Colour Action', *Afterall* 46, 2018, pp. 15-25

[13] Roger Nelson, '"Performance is contemporary": Performance and its documentation in visual art in Cambodia', *UDAYA Journal of Khmer Studies* 12, 2014, pp. 95-141