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**Sopheap Pich, *Caged Heart*, 2009**, wood, bamboo, rattan, burlap, wire, dye, metal farm tools, installation view, Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York, 2009 (artwork © Sopheap Pich; photograph by the author)

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

**Nora A. Taylor**

The critic Lee Weng Choy once described Singapore as an “ahistorical society that seems to live only in the present tense, and claims no need for the past, let alone a sophisticated consciousness of history.”<sup>1</sup> In Lee’s view, Singapore suffers from a case of postmodernity. But to deny it history is vaguely reminiscent of a time, during the period of colonialism, when all Southeast Asians were denied a history as well as a present. When colonial explorers came to the “lands below

the winds,” as they called the region between China and India in the late nineteenth century, they found Chinese writing systems and Indian religions, and concluded that the inhabitants of the lands lacked original culture, or that whatever culture they did possess was not theirs. The colonial explorers felt this gave them the right to patronize the locals and take possession of their artifacts.

With the colonial era long gone, where does the West stand a century later in relation to Southeast Asian culture? Singapore may not have a history, but it is one of two countries in Southeast Asia, along with Thailand, to have

a pavilion at the Venice Biennale. It is also the home of the only art museum devoted exclusively to Southeast Asian art. Since the field of modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art history has developed in the postcolonial era, scholars have focused their attentions on individual countries within the area rather than the region as a whole. Studies of the evolution of modern art from colonialism to the 1990s in Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, the Philippines, and, most recently, Myanmar, have been published based on dissertations and intense in-country field research.<sup>2</sup> Many of these texts argue for the recognition of “other modernities,” and the abandonment of hegemonic notions of Western modernity. Artists, however, have begun to move beyond this opposition of East versus West and engage in an inter-regional conversation. While scholars at American universities may care whether these artists were recognized and accepted by Western institutions of modern art, it has become much more important for artists to participate in community projects that cross, and indeed eliminate altogether, the borders that colonial maps had so eagerly drawn. The creation of ASEAN, the Association of South East Asian Nations, in 1967 may have seemed like an artificial concept, one that defied the very essence of postcolonial nationalism, but over time, it appears, at least in terms of the development of modern and contemporary art in the region, that creating bridges between different Southeast Asian nations is not only essential to the fostering of artistic creativity but also much more fitting to the nature of Southeast Asian culture and geography.

This is not everyone’s opinion. In a rather biting critique of the most recent installment of the Asia-Pacific Triennial in Brisbane, Australia, this past winter, the Ho Chi Minh City-based Australian writer, artist, and curator Sue Hajdu deplored the artificial grouping together of artists from the Mekong region.<sup>3</sup> Hajdu claimed that using the term “Mekong” was a curatorial strategy that did not reflect the way in which Southeast Asian artists perceive their own sense of place. She contends that no artist she met in Southeast Asia felt affinity with any place other than his or her own nation. This is not my experience, however. In my own research, I found quite the opposite. If anything characterizes Southeast

1. Lee Weng Choy, “Citing and Re-Siting,” *Art Journal* 60, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 24.

2. See, for example, Apinan Poshyananda, *Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1992); Astri Wright, *Soul, Spirit, Mountain: Preoccupations of Indonesian Contemporary Painters* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1993); Nora A. Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004, rep. Singapore: NUS Press, 2009); Ingrid Muan, “Citing Angkor: Cambodian Arts in the Age of Restoration, 1918–2000” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2001); Patrick Flores, *Painting History: Revisions in Philippine Colonial Art* (Manila: University of Philippines Press, 1998); and Andrew Ranard, *Burmese Painting: A Linear and Lateral History* (Bangkok: Silkworm Press, 2009).

3. Sue Hajdu, “Missing in the Mekong,” *Contemporary Visual Art and Culture Broadsheet* 38, no. 4 (2009): 267–69.

Asian artists, it is their affinity with their close neighbors. This is especially true in the twenty-first century as cross-border, transnational exchanges that defy categorization become more frequent. Southeast Asian artists, who are little noticed by curators in Europe and America, do not need validation from the West, necessarily, nor do they need to be “mapped” onto the contemporary art world.

The idea that Southeast Asians lack “identity” dates to the colonial period and has been perpetuated by the art market. The first sales of modern and contemporary Southeast Asian paintings at Sotheby’s in Singapore prominently featured the works of European artists who had traveled to the region in the early part of the twentieth century, some of whom founded art schools that later became national art academies after independence from colonial rule. In the 1996 Sotheby’s sales catalogues, German, Swiss, Belgian, and Dutch artists were labeled under the rubric of Indo-European painters, among them Walter Spies (1895–1942), Theo Meier (1908–1982), Adrien Le Mayeur de Merprès (1880–1958), and Rudolph Bonnet (1895–1978), who lived in Bali, to name a few, as well as Victor Tardieu (1867–1937), Joseph Inguimberty (1896–1971), and André Maire (1898–1985) who lived in Indochina. The problem is not so much the label per se, but rather that European artists are included in these sales at all. The irony is likely lost on the auctioneers, but the presence of these artworks in the sales indicates how fluid or, rather, imprecise the definition of modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art had been in the 1990s. Not that auction houses are by any means the sole measure of accuracy of interpretation or representation of artists in art history books, but in the case of a still-developing field such as Southeast Asian art history, it is rather unfortunately taken as “the only truth.” For lack of scholarship in the field of modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art, buyers, and dealers, certainly, but curators and educators as well, take the information provided by these catalogues as factual. This may be changing, but in 1996, there were very few scholarly studies of these artists on which students of art history could rely. The other irony of the situation is that collectors of these so-called Indo-European paintings, according to experts that I spoke to at Sotheby’s and now Christie’s, where the sales continue, are predominantly wealthy Indonesians for the works made in Bali, and overseas Vietnamese for the Indochinese ones. This may be a case of retribution or a manifestation of retaliation for colonialism, whereby wealthy citizens of former colonies demonstrate their power to “buy back” what was taken from them, or else simply to show off their status as nouveaux riches, on par with those who patronized these artists during the colonial period—something that the natives could never do.

The demand for modern and contemporary art from Southeast Asia has risen over the past decade both within Southeast Asia and internationally, and galleries specializing in art from the region have been appearing in cities around the world, including New York. The first gallery in the United States to show artists from Southeast Asia exclusively opened in Oakland, California, in 1997. The gallery, called Pacific Bridge and founded by Geoff Dorn and Beth Gates, was more than a commercial space; it also offered residencies and sponsored talks and workshops. The gallery closed after a few years, but the founders continue to act as agents for the artists they represented and have curated several exhibitions of Southeast Asian contemporary art in California. In 2008, Tyler Rollins opened a gallery in Manhattan specializing in artists from Southeast Asia. The gallery



**Dinh Q. Le, *The Farmers and the Helicopter*, 2006**, three-channel video installation and helicopter sculpture, video created in collaboration with Phu-Nam Thuc Ha and Tuan Andrew Nguyen, installation view, ARKO, Seoul, 2008 (artwork © Dinh Q. Le; photograph by the author)

operates on a large budget and has successfully lured artists from Southeast Asia to the “white cube setting.” Rollins is counting on the fact that awareness of contemporary Southeast Asian artists is growing in the United States. Individually speaking, outside of their national boundaries, Southeast Asian artists have never been as visible in biennial and international exhibitions as in the past few years. The Asia Society in New York has held two major retrospectives of work by Southeast Asian artists since it began collecting and exhibiting contemporary art in the late 1990s. The Thai artist Montien Boonma (1953–2000) had a solo retrospective in 2003, curated by the Thai art historian Apinan Poshyananda, several years after the Asia Society held its breakthrough exhibition of contemporary art from Asia, *Traditions/Tensions*, which included artists from three Southeast Asian countries. The Vietnamese artist Dinh Q. Le (born in 1968) had a solo show there in 2005 and is now the first artist of Vietnamese descent to have a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art. *Projects 93: Dinh Q. Le* consists of the work *The Farmers and the Helicopters*, a three-channel video and a helicopter hand-built from scrap parts by the farmer Le Van Danh and a mechanic, Tran Quoc Hai. The artist made the video in collaboration with Phu-Nam Thuc Ha and Tuan Andrew Nguyen. The helicopter stands for the “vision of a better life” for farmers and how to transform memories of the war into community building projects.<sup>4</sup>

The Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong lists five artists from Southeast Asia among its top twelve Asian artists featured in world biennials and triennials.<sup>5</sup> They include three from Thailand, Rirkrit Tiravanija (born 1961), Navin Rawanchaikul (born 1971), and Surasi Kusolwong (born 1965); Heri Dono (born 1960) from Indonesia; and Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba (born 1968) from Vietnam. The Mekong section of the Sixth Asia-Pacific Triennial in Brisbane,

4. *Projects 93: Dinh Q. Le*, June 30, 2010–January 24, 2011, Museum of Modern Art, New York, curated by Klaus Biesenbach.

5. See the list at [www.aaa.org.hk/onlineprojects/bitri/en/didyouknow.aspx](http://www.aaa.org.hk/onlineprojects/bitri/en/didyouknow.aspx).



**Richard Streitmatter-Tran and Chaw Ei Thein, *September Sweetness*, 2008**, sugar, installation view, Singapore Biennale, 2008 (artwork © Richard Streitmatter-Tran and Chaw Ei Thein; photograph by the artists)

Australia, in December 2009, mentioned earlier and curated by Richard Streitmatter-Tran, an artist based in Ho Chi Minh City, and Russell Storer, curator at the Queensland Museum of Art, included the artists Sopheap Pich (born 1971), Vandy Rattana (born 1980), and Svay Ken (1938–2008) from Cambodia; Manit Sriwanichpoom (born 1961) from Thailand; Tun Win Aung and Wah Nu (born 1975) from Myanmar; and Bui Cong Khanh (born 1972) and Nguyen-Hatsushiba of Vietnam. For this project, Streitmatter-Tran researched artistic production in three countries bordering the Mekong River, Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia, plus Myanmar. His goal was not necessarily to find commonalities among the artists, but rather to reshuffle the deck and redraw the map so that artists could be considered outside the confines of their national boundaries. In Brisbane, the project was well received and gave participating artists an opportunity to express their views on identity politics. At a round-table discussion, several of the artists from Myanmar openly spoke about the conflicts in their country and the adverse condition for artists. Earlier, in 2008, Streitmatter-Tran had collaborated with the Burmese artist Chaw Ei Thein on an installation for the second Singapore Biennale; the work, titled *September Sweetness*, was a pagoda made

with five tons of melted sugar and commemorated the monks who rose against the military dictatorship in Myanmar in 2007.

The list of artists from Southeast Asia who have gained the attention of curators worldwide is growing every day. The Singapore Biennale, held for the third time March 13–May 15, 2011, has been successful in uniting local artists with international artists. The 2008 edition featured seventy artists, with twenty-three from Southeast Asia. In 2006, only nineteen artists out of ninety were from the region. Southeast Asia's oldest biennial is the Jakarta Biennale, held since 1982. The show predominantly features artists from Southeast Asia, but its curatorial program also includes themes related to the region by artists from elsewhere. For example, the 2009 edition highlighted the themes of trade, migration, and colonization. Unlike the first two Singapore Biennales, which were curated by Fumio Nanjo, director of the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, the Jakarta Biennale is not managed by a "star curator." Rather, it is organized by a large committee from the Jakarta Art Council. It may not necessarily have goals as ambitious as other biennials, and it usually falls under the radar of art audiences on the international circuit. However, it does aim to stimulate art production and generate art publics within Southeast Asia.

Artists from Southeast Asia may have earned new platforms for showing their work internationally in recent years, but critical recognition is one thing, and scholarship is another. Only a few of the artists mentioned above have received scholarly attention. The scholarship of modern and contemporary art began with country surveys and only gradually has moved to monographic studies of artists. Curatorial trends have, at times, also followed this pattern, with artists initially lumped together by country and then given individual retrospectives later. But the two paths, scholarly and curatorial, have not always been synchronized. At times, scholarship led the way with museums and galleries following suit, and at other times, it has been the other way around. Examples include the invitation of Apinan Poshyananda to curate the first exhibition of contemporary Asian art hosted by an American museum institution, *Traditions/Tensions* at the Asia Society in 1996, following the publication of his 1992 book *Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*.<sup>6</sup> The decision by the Asia Society Galleries director at the time, Vishaka Desai, to hire a curator from Thailand and include Thai art in its survey of contemporary art from the continent no doubt was informed by Poshyananda's scholarship, for no gallery or museum was carrying work by the artists who were included in the show. Conversely, there have been cases where an exhibition of an artist's work has generated a scholarly article. One example, among many, is the Filipino artist Manuel Ocampo's exhibition at Track 16 Gallery, the film made about him, and a subsequent essay by Patrick Flores in the journal *Positions*.<sup>7</sup>

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

6. The 1992 *Modern Art in Thailand* is cited above in n. 2. See also Apinan Poshyananda, et al., *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions*, exh. cat. (New York: Asia Society, 1996).

7. The film was *Manuel Ocampo: God Is My Copilot*, dir. Philip Rodriguez, City Projects, 2004. Patrick Flores, "Catholic Capital: Consuming Manuel Ocampo," *Positions* 12, no. 3 (Winter 2004): 687–710.

ists were presented as representative voices of political dissent in Thailand. These artists show regularly in Thailand as well in a variety of contexts—not without controversy. But they are rarely considered spokespeople for political dissatisfaction in their country. This situation is common, and not necessarily unique to Southeast Asia. Vietnamese artists are often exhibited as survivors of the war that took place decades ago and often complain that they don't have a chance to unburden themselves from the associations made between their art and their country's history.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes this association does not necessarily originate from Westerners as was the case twice in ten years with exhibitions of Vietnamese art in California. In 1999, a traveling exhibition of 100 works by Vietnamese artists titled *A Winding River* was subject to protests by the Vietnamese overseas community when it was shown at the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana, California.<sup>9</sup> The protesters were critiquing the Hanoi bias to the show and objected to the display of what they considered to be art made by communist party members. More recently, a 2008 exhibition also drew anger in the Vietnamese community over a photograph that showed a young woman with a T-shirt emblazoned with the Vietnamese flag, looking out into the distance. Community members considered this an affront to their political views even though the photograph in question was taken by a Vietnamese American artist, Brian Doan, and was not intended to be patriotic in nature. Quite the contrary. The artist has proposed that it was meant to ask questions about the nature of symbols. He stated that the photo is a comment on fashion, pop culture, and disaffection in a contemporary Vietnam: "She lives in a communist country, but look at her. She is looking away, dreaming. She wants to escape Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh is next to her, but communism is no longer in her. She wants to dream of other things."<sup>10</sup>

Like their predecessors during the colonial period, Southeast Asian artists did not become known because they were "discovered" by Western art institutions. The biases and prejudices of Western-centered art historians have nonetheless given visibility to artists from countries such as Vietnam only when the scholars have had use for them "over here," rather than "over there."<sup>11</sup> Major exhibitions and writings about artists from Southeast Asia took place there before the artists were noticed in the West. In Vietnam, national exhibitions have taken place every year since the Vietnamese Fine Arts Association was founded in 1957. Similar exhibitions have taken place in the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. In Cambodia, a country devastated by war and genocide, a different set of challenges emerged. While artists were active in the period succeeding colonialism, all creativity stopped when the Khmer Rouge regime took power in 1975. Artists became targets of repression, along with intellectuals and cultural workers, and most were tortured and executed; only a handful survived massacre. In 1999 an American, Ingrid Muan, and a Cambodian art historian, Ly Daravuth, whose family had escaped to France, founded Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture, an institution dedicated to recovering Cambodia's lost cultural heritage and training a new generation of artists. Unlike the school that Georges Groslier founded during the colonial period to teach Cambodians to relearn their lost craft, Reyum focuses on contemporary art and encourages artists to come up with their own modes of expression. The emphasis is on rehabilitation and recovering what Ingrid Muan called "the legacy of absence."<sup>12</sup>

Individually, all Southeast Asian countries have spent the decades following

colonialism developing national art forms and supporting their artists in varying degrees with varying definitions of what constitutes modern and contemporary art. Pan–Southeast Asian art exhibitions were rare until the late 1990s, when a number of events helped to create dialogue among artists from different Southeast Asian countries and provide institutional structures that allow artists to meet and find common ground. The first such event was the growth of ASEAN, founded in 1967, with the addition of Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar from 1995 to 1999. Exhibitions of ASEAN artists took place in Kuala Lumpur in 1997 and 1999.<sup>13</sup> And prizes for top ASEAN artists were awarded in Singapore through corporate sponsorship in 1999. The second significant event was the opening of the Singapore Art Museum in January 1996. After decades of rapid economic growth, the Singapore government decided that it should serve as region's cultural hub. It poured millions of dollars into creating art and history museums, cinemas, and concert halls. Local critics dismissed the government's patronage of the arts as expensive and "hollow." Singapore's cultural policies have been strongly criticized by cultural critics, such as Weng Choy mentioned earlier, because of the government's censorship practices and its lack of depth in its cultural displays. But it is perhaps precisely for that reason that it was and is the perfect place for a Southeast Asian art museum. Although in the beginning it arrogantly promoted itself as a voice of authority in a region that is still economically challenged, and although its location in Southeast Asia's richest country is still resented by its neighbors, strangely echoing colonialist policies, the museum has played an important role in bringing together artists from the region in a relatively nation-neutral way. Its inaugural exhibition in 1996, *Modernity and Beyond*, was the first comprehensive survey of modern Southeast Asian art to be exhibited in the region.<sup>14</sup> It is still the only pan–Southeast Asian art museum in the region.

The museum is still embroiled in Singapore's bureaucratic quagmire and periodically suffers from flawed policies, shifts in leadership, weak programming, and lack of vision. Still, it has succeeded in creating a number of milestone exhibitions and has proven itself an invaluable resource for international curators and collections in the region. It can now more positively claim to have an impact on the integration of Southeast Asian artists on the stage of world contemporary art. Among its other influential exhibitions have been *Vision and Enchantment: Southeast Asian Paintings* (2000), and, more recently, *Cubism in Asia* (2006) and *Realism in Asian Art* (2010).<sup>15</sup> Another pan–Southeast Asian art exhibition, curated by Iola Lenzi, opened in March 2011. Titled *Negotiating Home, History, and Nation—Two Decades of Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia*, the exhibition presented influential works by artists from the area since the 1990s. Lenzi, who is based in Singapore, has been a leading art critic and curator as well as patron of regional artists since the mid-1990s. She has helped Thai, Vietnamese, and Indonesian artists gain prominence and exposure. In 2008, she exhibited works from her personal collection of contemporary Southeast Asian art at the Alliance Française in Singapore.<sup>16</sup> The Singapore Art Museum has been honoring artists from the region with solo exhibitions for the past few years, especially since 2009 and the appointment of a new director, Tan Boon Hui. In April 2010 it mounted a major retrospective of work by the Indonesian artist FX Harsono (born 1948). The exhibition, *Testimonies*, included a 2009 piece, *Rewriting the Erased*, that revealed ele-

8. Conversation of Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba with the author, Ho Chi Minh City, December 2007.

9. Meridian International Center, *A Winding River: The Journey of Contemporary Art in Vietnam*, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: Meridian International Center, 1997), 17; "Exhibit of Vietnamese Artwork Arouses Anger among Immigrants," *New York Times* (Santa Ana, Orange County, July 8, 1999).

10. Brian Doan, quoted in Richard Chang, "Photo Set Off Little Saigon," *Orange County Register*, January 30, 2009, also available at [www.michaelpdo.com/Brian%20Doan.htm](http://www.michaelpdo.com/Brian%20Doan.htm).

11. See Nora A. Taylor, "Why Have There Been No Great Vietnamese Artists?" *Michigan Quarterly Review* 44, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 149–165.

12. See Ingrid Muan and Ly Daravuth, *The Legacy of Absence: A Cambodian Story* (Phnom Penh: Reyum, 2000).

13. Karim Raslan, *ASEAN Masterworks*, Kuala Lumpur, exhibition held in conjunction with ASEAN Summit 1997; and *12 ASEAN Artists*, exh. cat., ed. Valentine Willie (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 2000).

14. T. K. Sabapathy, ed., *Modernity and Beyond: Themes in Southeast Asian Art*, exh. cat. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 1996).

15. For the first, see Ahmad Mashadi, ed., *Vision and Enchantment: Southeast Asian Paintings*, exh. cat. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2000).

16. The exhibition was *Beasts, Breasts, and Beauty: Contemporary Southeast Asian Art from a Private Collection*, May 6–29, 2008, Alliance Française de Singapore.

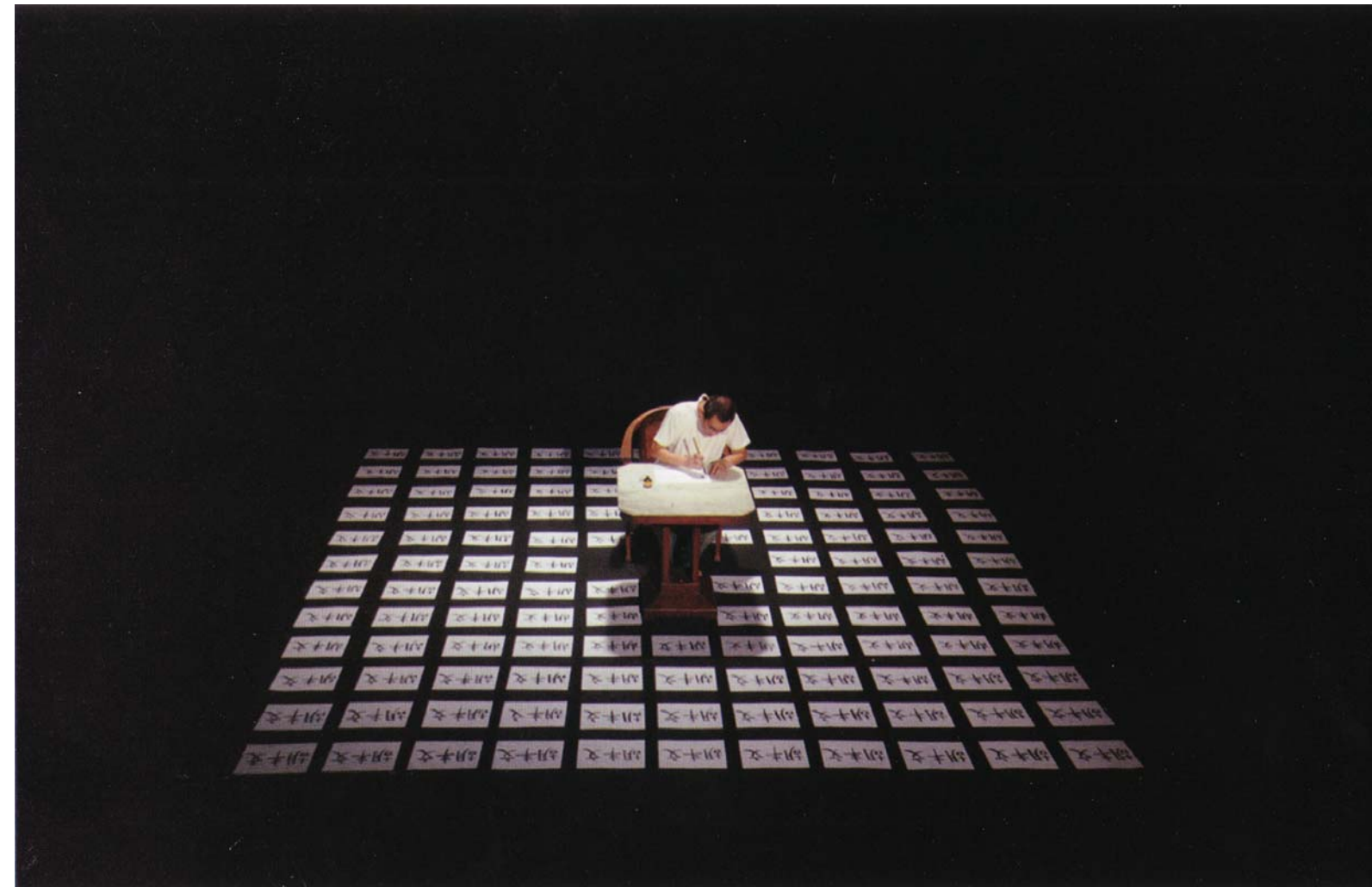


**Manit Sriwanichpoom, title of work TK, year of creation TK,** installation view, Alliance Française de Singapour, May 2008 (artwork © Manit Sriwanichpoom; photograph by the author)

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

As elsewhere, Southeast Asian artists, naturally, have depended on curators to attract audiences. Along with the rest of the world that has seen the rise of the "star curator," Southeast Asia has also produced its share of big names. Aside from Poshyananda, mentioned earlier, who earned his PhD in Southeast Asian art history from Cornell University, a number of regional curators have been shaping the course of Southeast Asian art and moving it into a variety of directions by promoting avant-garde and experimental practices and pushing artists out of the commercial galleries into public spaces, biennials, triennials, and international museums. The Hanoi-based artist Tran Luong (born 1961) is an example of an independent curator who has mentored young artists in Vietnam and facilitated artistic exchanges between Vietnamese and international artists. Most nota-

17. Iola Lenzi, "FX Harsono at SAM: How Exhibitions Can Build the Canon," *C-Arts 13* (March–April 2010), available online at [www.c-artsmag.com/betac-artsmag/index.php/articles/view/121](http://www.c-artsmag.com/betac-artsmag/index.php/articles/view/121).



**F. X. Harsono, *Rewriting the Erased*, 2009,** installation and performance. Installation collection of Singapore Art Museum (artwork © F. X. Harsono; photograph provided by Singapore Art Museum)

bly he has organized performance-art workshops in Singapore, Hanoi, Bangkok, Kunming, and Norway, in addition to relentlessly promoting the cause of Vietnamese experimental art abroad. He epitomizes the concept of the artist as curator, as his own creative process centers on challenging his country's cultural policies and demanding artistic freedom. He has used his exhibitions as forums for speaking against censorship, corruption, and lack of intellectual liberties. His exhibitions carry his voice, mediated through the work of other artists. For that, he is not always popular, but he continues to push his agenda forward and has been immensely influential among the younger generation of Vietnamese artists.

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

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

Curating has become the primary means for opening avenues of research in Southeast Asian art and thinking critically about creative conditions for artists in the region. Curators have moved the discussion beyond national borders and are thinking thematically across geographical lines. Flaudette May V. Datuin, an art historian at the University of the Philippines, organized a series of exhibitions, workshops, and artists' talks on the theme of trauma and its impact on women. Titled *Trauma Interrupted*, the series began in 2005. Trauma refers not only to war and its aftermath, including the wars in the Pacific and Vietnam, but also domestic violence and suffering caused by injustices toward women. For the project, Datuin selected artists primarily from the Philippines, but other artists in the region share similar stories with the women represented in the show. This kind of cross-border, cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural thematic curatorial project allows artists to meet and interact with one another on different grounds than as representatives or ambassadors of their own countries to the rest of the world. Indeed, Datuin's curatorial project and her scholarship have brought attention to the ways in which women artists from places like Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam have contributed to feminist causes and our understanding of feminism.<sup>18</sup>

Several inter-Southeast Asian projects have also successfully brought together artists from the region without delegating them to stand for their countries. *Asiatopia* and the *Future of Imagination* are performance-art festivals that take place in Thailand and Singapore respectively. These festivals offer artists the opportunity to learn from one another and are less about demographics than about exchange. Seiji Shimoda, the director of the Nippon International Performance Festival in Japan, has been inviting performance artists from Southeast Asia for decades. He has traveled to Myanmar and Vietnam to conduct workshops for budding performance artists and inspired interest in the medium. Performance artists from Singapore such as Jason Lim (born 1966), Lee Wen (born 1957), Amanda Heng (born 1951), and Tang Da Wu (born 1943) have been performing at festivals around the world, not so much as ambassadors of their countries than as ambassadors for the art form. In Hanoi, Luong has been organizing performance festivals to connect with other artists in the region. Since performance requires physical presence and participation, the festival events draw artists together in ways that exhibitions of paintings or sculptures cannot. Performance art has become immensely popular in the past few years in Vietnam mostly because it offers artists the opportunity to travel and interact with audiences both within Vietnam and abroad. It is also a means of becoming known among a larger public. Unlike performance artists in the United States or Europe who often use video and film to document and project their projects, performance art in Southeast Asia is event-based and offers artists an immediate viewership. Performance events often take place in alternative or artist-run spaces that are operated by young artists outside official art circuits. Luong epitomizes the artist as curator idea. His charisma inspires artists to participate in his projects,



**Tran Luong, Welts, year of creation TK,**  
performed at ARKO, Seoul, Korea, January 2008  
(artwork © Tran Luong; photograph by the author)

18. Flaudette May V. Datuin, "Women Imaging Women: Feminine Spaces, Dissident Voices (Categories for a Feminist Intervention in the Art Histories of Southeast Asia)" in *Text and Subtext: Contemporary Art and Asian Women*, exh. cat., ed. Binghui Huangfu (Singapore: Earl Lu Gallery, 2000), 16–31.

which become his mode of expression. He is also disillusioned with his country's politics and uses performance events to draw attention to what is sorely lacking: an infrastructure for contemporary art practices.<sup>19</sup>

Interregional projects have also arisen between China and Southeast Asia with the creation of the Ho Chi Minh Trail program. An offshoot of the Long March Project based in Beijing, it is an interactive, community-collaborative art project involving artists from China, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. In Beijing, the project was originally led by Zoe Butt, who has since relocated to Ho Chi Minh City to develop projects with the artist-run nonprofit art space San Art, founded by Dinh Q. Le and Tiffany Chung. Community art projects are not new to the region. In 2004, France Morin initiated *Quiet in the Land: Luang Prabang*, a follow-up to her previous *Projeto Axe Brazil* of 1997–2000. *Quiet in the Land* is based on the notion of contemporary art as a socially grounded practice. Based in Luang Prabang, Laos, the project entailed collaborations between eleven international and three Laotian artists from 2004 to 2008. The international artists included three from Southeast Asia, Nguyen-Hatsushiba, Dinh Q. Le, and Tiravanija, three others from Asia, Cai Guo-Qiang, Shirin Neshat, and Shahzia Sikander; the Americans Ann Hamilton, Janine Antoni, and Alan Sekula, the German Hans-Georg Berger, and Marina Abramovic.<sup>20</sup> Each artist created works with local people, including artisans, monks, and art students. These alternative modes of curating and exhibition thrive on the inclusion of local communities of artists. Their benefit to these communities, however, is debatable. On the one hand, they provide exposure of contemporary art practices to artists in the periphery, but they could also be mistaken for charity projects by artists from the “First World” toward those in the developing world. While it is true that the project involves artists with world reputations, one could argue that it has brought international recognition to the region and therefore acts more as an equalizer than a divider.

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



Interior of San Art, Ho Chi Minh City, 2009 (photograph © the author)

*Art* in 2003, and *50 Years of Modern Vietnamese Art: 1925–1975* in 2005.

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

19. See Nora A. Taylor, “What’s Art Got to Do With It?” *C-Arts* 11 (November–December 2009): 22–25.

20. See *The Quiet in the Land: Luang Prabang*, ed. France Morin and John Alan Farmer (New York: Quiet in the Land, 2010); and Valerie Cassel, France Morin, Apinan Poshyananda, Mari Carmen Ramirez, Caroline Turner, and Igor Zabel, “Beyond Boundaries: Rethinking Contemporary Art Exhibitions,” *Art Journal* 59, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 4–21.





Artists gather at Nha San Duc, Hanoi, Vietnam, 2009 (photograph © the author)

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



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

Increasingly, these projects are defining Southeast Asian art. In an interview with Grant Kester, the Singaporean artist Jay Koh reflected on what characterizes Southeast Asian art.<sup>21</sup> He commented that it was the networks that artists were creating with their neighbors that created the art of the region. Perhaps, like ancient trade and navigation systems, the art is in the exchange. If one cannot speak of a Southeast Asian art proper any more than one artist can stand for the whole region, one can say that Southeast Asia's lack of such singular identity is its trait. To attempt to define modern and contemporary Southeast Asian art as derivative of or as a reaction against Western art is missing the point. Some participatory practices have their origins in Southeast Asia. Aside from Rirkrit Tiravanija, who inspired the term "relational aesthetics," other Thai artists have become leading players in the world of socially engaged art practices. The scholar Sandra Cate identifies this "turn toward the participatory" as rooted in Buddhist practices that invite interaction between objects and audiences.<sup>22</sup> The relevance and currency of this attitude was startlingly clear just this past spring, when mil-

21. Grant Kester, "Interview with Jay Koh and Chu Chu Yuan," in *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology*, ed. Nora A. Taylor and Boreth Ly (Ithaca: Cornell University SEAP Press, forthcoming).

22. Sandra Cate, "Thai Artists, Resisting the Age of Spectacle," *ibid.*

lions of Thai citizens took to the streets to demand greater democracy and transparency in the political process. More than in any population in Southeast Asia, the Thai people are long accustomed to active involvement in their country's governance and social movements. Pinaree Sanpitak is an example of an artist who has invested social meaning in objects through participation, whether through the evocation of Buddhist thought or gender identification. Her *Noon Nom* pieces—large organza silk pillows in the shape of breasts—invite the viewer to jump in and be cuddled by the comfort of the bosom. For some time she has been working with the idea of the breast as *stupa*, or Buddhist shrine, developing the idea that the breast, like Buddhism itself, acts as a spiritual soother.

Any concerns that Southeast Asian artists have somehow missed the stages of the evolution of contemporary art in the West or that their geographical situation, on the margins of mainstream art practices in Europe and America is to the artists' disadvantage, are laid to rest by the community projects in which many of the artists are involved. Like their counterparts in Europe or America, the community projects are not simply forms of social activism. Notwithstanding Luong's dissatisfaction with his government and defiance of cultural censorship in Vietnam by organizing performance projects, the artists are presenting these projects as works of art.<sup>23</sup> The works go beyond mere relational aesthetics, which sees the work of art as an event prompted by the encounter between an artist and a public; the works are the necessary consequence of artists' environments, in the specific context of Southeast Asia. Art speaks of place, but when a place is imposed on art, in the case of a constructed geography, then the art makes the place. Scholars of Southeast Asia have long tried to find commonality among the people of the region to justify the way in which colonial scholars mapped it. But as area studies have currently been under attack for segregating the study of non-Western cultures, it is important not to overgeneralize what makes Southeast Asian art Southeast Asian.<sup>24</sup> Yes, one could easily speak of exotic fruit, noodle stands, Buddhist monks, and ethnic minorities in attempt to qualify Southeast Asian art. But as I see it, the geography of Southeast Asia is about people. As they move across the globe with increased frequency, it is to better see the world as a movable place that has no fixed vantage point. Artists in Southeast Asia are taking advantage of their intangible borders and their flexible histories as nomadic seafarers and Chinese migrants, and making art that reflects the porous nature of their heritage.

Nora A. Taylor is the Alsdorf Professor of South and Southeast Asian Art at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is the author of *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art* (University of Hawaii Press, 2004, and University of Singapore Press, 2009) as well as numerous articles on modern and contemporary Vietnamese art. Her exhibition projects include *Changing Identity: Recent Work by Women Artists from Vietnam*, for International Arts and Artists Organization, 2007–9, and, with Heather Lineberry, *Breathing Is Free: 12,756.3; New Work by Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba*, for the ASU Art Museum and Betty Rymer Gallery at SAIC.



**Pinaree Sanpitak, *Noon Nom*, year of creation TK**, installation view, Alliance Française de Singapour, May 2008 (artwork © Pinaree Sanpitak; photograph by the author)

23. See Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 11.

24. See Vicente L. Raphael, "The Cultures of Area Studies in the United States," *Social Text* 41 (Winter 1994): 91–112.