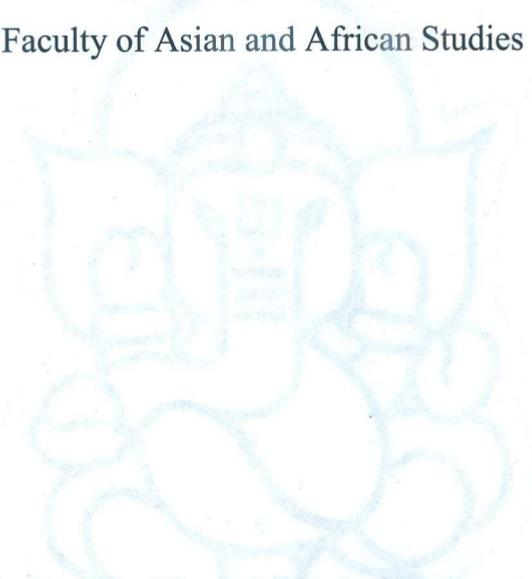


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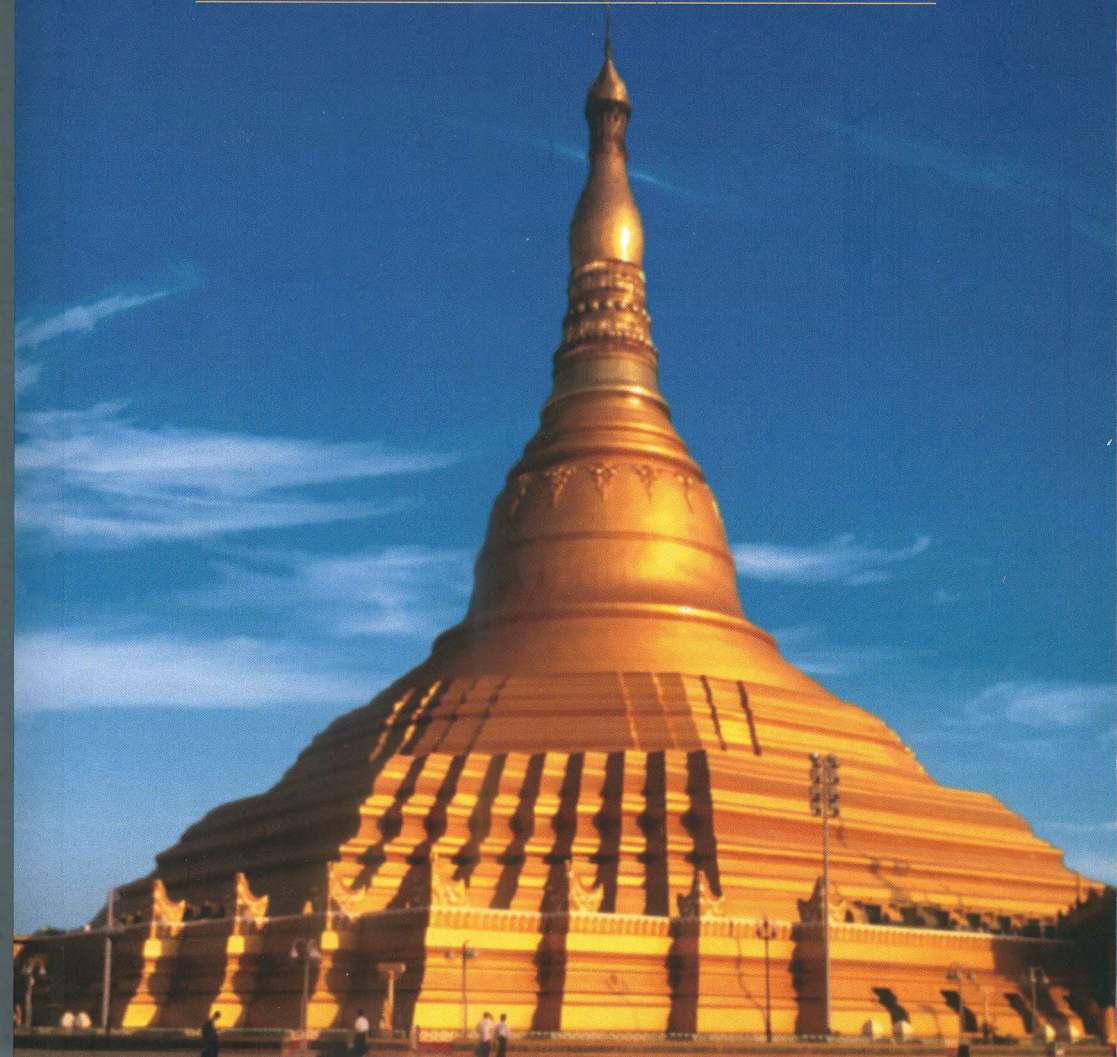
**Intercivilizational Contacts
In Southeast Asia:
Historical Perspectives and
Globalization**

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МЕЖЦИВИЛИЗАЦИОННЫЕ КОНТАКТЫ

В СТРАНАХ
ЮГО-ВОСТОЧНОЙ АЗИИ

ИСТОРИЧЕСКИЕ ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ И ГЛОБАЛИЗАЦИЯ



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GLOBALISATION AS A MOTOR OF NEW VISUAL ART LANGUAGES IN TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY SOUTHEAST ASIA

From the 1990s onwards, the impact of globalization has been especially marked in Southeast Asian art, which in response has altered its themes, methodologies, and function. In this paper the authors argue the relationship between globalisation and key shifts of contemporary art practices in Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia at the turn of the millennium. Initially characterising historical episodes of globalisation as a framework, the authors show how art from countries with different political systems, languages and religions nonetheless exhibits comparable traits. In conclusion, this analysis demonstrates globalisation as a pivotal driver of new critical methodologies in Southeast Asian visual art.

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ГЛОБАЛИЗАЦИЯ КАК ДВИГАТЕЛЬ СОВРЕМЕННЫХ ЯЗЫКОВ ИЗОБРАЗИТЕЛЬНОГО ИСКУССТВА В ЮГО-ВОСТОЧНОЙ АЗИИ

С 1990-х годов влияние глобализации особенно заметно в искусстве стран Юго-Восточной Азии, изменившем свою тематику, методы и функцию. В данной работе демонстрируется связь между глобализацией и ключевыми сдвигами в современном искусстве Таиланда, Вьетнама и Индонезии. Рассматривая исторические этапы глобализации, авторы показывают, как искусство стран с различными политическими системами, языками и религиями, обнаруживает, тем не менее, сопоставимые черты. В заключение демонстрируется роль глобализации как основной

движущей силы новых методов в изобразительном искусстве
Юго-Восточной Азии.

INTRODUCTION

By its very definition, globalisation, more than any other socio-economic-political phenomenon of recent decades, has been shared by diverse social strata and populations in emerging and developed economies alike. Artists of Southeast Asia, from the 1990s onward, saw the structure of their dedicated institutions and their patrons alter in direct or indirect response to globalisation. As significantly, the themes, methodologies, reach, and function of the practices of some artists evolved specifically in reaction to impacting forces unleashed by globalisation, which is used as a lens through which they scrutinise home society. In this paper the authors argue the relationship between globalisation and key shifts marking selected contemporary art practices in Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia at the turn of the millennium. Initially the authors take stock of the characteristics of successive historical episodes of globalisation relevant to their discussion of artistic practices. Then, to frame the analysis of selected artworks, authors consider Southeast Asia's historical context, along with regional circumstances influencing local cultural baggage that pre-disposes Southeast Asian artists to understand and appropriate incoming culture. In the paper's last part authors appraise selected 1990s' artistic discourses that are advanced as triggered by the incidence of globalisation. Through their selection of Vietnamese, Thai and Indonesian examples, they demonstrate that chosen artists from these countries reacted in similar ways to the forces of globalisation, despite different political systems, languages, and religions. This brief analysis of artworks allows the authors to conclude the central importance of globalisation in late twentieth century Southeast Asia as a driver of critical methodologies in visual art.

Remarks on globalisation's history and relevance to Southeast Asian visual practices

Considering influence in the context of a broader discussion of modern globalisation's impact on culture, we recall that scholars of this late twentieth century phenomenon — the most recent globalising forces dating to the 1970s and coinciding with technological advance and diminishing trade and labour barriers in many countries — often reference the relative character of globalisation's novelty. Indeed, historians have identified precursors of contemporary globalisation as archaic globalisation, proto-globalisation, and modern globalisation.¹ In this connection, specialists highlight the remarkably modern features of the first two iterations which occurred pre-1800s, notably stressing the importance of cities, the role of migration and diasporas, labour specialisation, the extensive spread of beliefs (in the era of archaic globalization), and the novel rise of cosmopolitanism during proto-globalisation.² Historian A. D. Hopkins provides the following synthesis of contemporary globalisation:

“Virtually all accounts of globalization recognize its quantitative significance and multi-dimensional character. It is widely agreed to be a process that transforms economic, political, social and cultural relationships across countries, regions and continents by spreading them more broadly, making them more intense and increasing their velocity”³.

Others bring attention to globalisation's material, spatio-temporal, and cognitive dimensions.⁴ The common constituents

¹ Globalization in World History. Edited by A. G. Hopkins. London: Pimlico, 2002. – 278 p.

² Hopkins A. D. Introduction: Globalization – An Agenda for Historians // Globalization in World History. Ibid. P. 4–6.

³ Hopkins A. G. The History of Globalization – and the Globalization of History? // Ibid. P. 16

⁴ Held D. and McGrew A. The Global Transformation Reader. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.

of globalisation more often articulated in literature are definitions of the term introduced by Scholte and characterized as (2000): *internationalisation*, the growth of international exchange and interdependence through trade and capital investment between countries; *liberalisation*, international economic integration in order to remove governmental restrictions to the economy, and to create an 'open' space; *universalism*, the synthesis of cultures through the spread of ideas, objects and experiences throughout the world; *modernisation*, the spread of modern social structures and practices; and *de-territorialisation*, re-configuration of geographical order, and transformation of spatial organisation of social relations whereby social space and organisation are no longer defined by territorial places.⁵

For our discussion of globalisation's impact on culture, and more specifically visual art in turn-of-the-millennium Southeast Asia, the most relevant of the above-listed traits are universalism — with its tendency to homogenisation within cultural frames, and de-territorialisation of culture, which advances the confluence of cultural items, styles and movements. The recent growth of cultural contacts and exchange which stimulates various types of multi-directional borrowing and adaptation (in visual art: media-based, iconographic, iconological, conceptual, among other varieties) necessitates the critical analysis of the manner, conditions, and appropriateness of the borrowing in specific contexts.

Cultural borrowing and its implications according to locus

Borrowing across cultures — an obvious repercussion of globalising forces — is universal and historical, as old as the

⁵ McCaskill D., Leepreecha P., He Shaoying. Globalization, Nationalism, Regionalism? And Ethnic Minorities in the Greater Mekong Subregion: a Comparative Analysis // *Living in a Globalized World. Ethnic Minorities in the Greater Mekong Subregion*. Chiang Mai: Mekong Press, 2008. P. 22.

movement of human civilizations. The great ceramic art of China's Yuan and Ming Dynasties, of global art historical primacy, was tributary not only to Persian technical knowledge, but to forms derived from Middle-Eastern metal-wares.⁶ In the early twentieth century, in Paris, seminal painters Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque collected tribal statuary from black Africa which triggered new ideas prompting them to produce Cubism. Cubism would then have a central place in the artistic revolution that was twentieth century Western modernism.⁷

Cultural appropriation from one period to another is common as well, revivals of older styles and artistic ideologies as frequent in Europe as in Asia. The Renaissance, fourteenth century Europe's return to Greek and Roman classicism, is amongst the most salient borrowings in art history, as well as in the broader world of ideas. China too has a well-documented tradition of artistic revisiting over millennia, archaistic works of art — paintings, bronzes and ceramics — drawing inspiration from art of the past. Indeed, in the case of China, formal re-appropriation of the ancient has a canonic function.⁸

The origins of ideas, icons, and languages of art are not always clear, the freer and more porous their geographic and cul-

⁶ *Krahl R.* Chinese Ceramics from the Meiyintang Collection, V. 2. London: Azimuth Editions, 1994. P. 11; Also *Chiang Han Hua J.* Crossing Culture in the Blue-and-white with Arabic or Persian inscription under Emperor Zhengde, paper submitted for 'Crossing Cultures: China and the Outside World'. Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong, School of Humanities Department of Fine Arts, 2007.

⁷ "Primitivism" in 20th century Art- Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern. Rubin W. ed. New York: MOMA, 1984. P. 18–19.

⁸ *Krahl R.* Ibid. pp. 107, 216 on Qing Dynasty porcelain revivals and quotations of archaic bronze forms and Song wares and *Wang-Go Weng.* Chinese Painting and Calligraphy A Pictorial Survey. New York: Dover Publications, 1978. P. XVII, on fifth century Chinese theorist Hsieh Ho's remarks about transmission of tradition in painting through copying older works.

tural environment, the more likely they are to mutate and re-emerge from one zone or period to the next, losing their initial identifying markers in appearance and ethos. Furthermore, cultural transfer can be a messy or even violent business, one culture resisting the integration of another, registering opposition by either refusing to acknowledge it, or taking in totems of the foreign wholesale as a form of critique. Frederic Jameson, a scholar of late twentieth century globalisation who has paid particular attention to the potential for unequal balance of so-called cultural exchange from zones of greater economic clout to zones with less developed economic muscle, has underlined the risk of loss of cultural independence surfacing with such types of trade, despite the potential for balanced, equal-footed give-and-take. Jameson's reservations are not unfounded, but as we shall see through analysis of examples, artists from Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia, with clear understanding of the implications and risks dogging foreign borrowing in the age of globalisation, can also adopt critical attitudes toward the very act of appropriation that then becomes apparent in the work of art. Indeed, as we shall see, certain artists, selective in their appropriation of emblems from foreign sources, and more importantly, sophisticated in the usage of these signs, interweave them with local images, techniques and concepts to create an art with local relevance, critically examining home situations on their own terms.⁹

In such cases, analysed explicitly in part three, and denoting artists' cultural confidence, assimilation is seamless, home cultures receptive to new concepts and visual repertoires, the latter rapidly understood, digested and adapted on the receivers' terms.

⁹ *Jameson F. Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue // The Cultures of Globalization. Edited by Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998. P. 55 where Jameson sets out his basic argument for globalisation as a communicational concept that potentially allows multi-directional flows among cultures though he is skeptical of this balance in practice.*

The foreign, through critical awareness, selective choices, and appropriateness, is integrated in a deliberate way suited the needs of home scrutiny.

In recent decades, globalisation has accelerated and deepened knowledge of non-local culture, fast and affordable communication, cheap mass-travel etc... facilitating circulation networks, and erasing borders. This rapidity and brutality of contact and penetration has sometimes provoked institutional reaction against foreign cultural influence, cultural protectionism frequent, particularly in contexts — such as evoked by Jameson — where outside cultures are perceived as hegemonic and so assumed to weaken local ones, once clearly-defined national cultural boundaries now challenged. This can be particularly true when strong nationalist ideology is deployed to cement young states. In France, where the State considers the English language — and by extension American mass-culture — a threat to French language and culture, laws governing radio broadcasting stipulate that at least 40% of aired songs must be in the native tongue during prime hours.¹⁰ Whether this cultural manipulation fulfils its aim of ‘protecting’ French, is debatable. And though the subject is beyond the scope of this paper, it is historically apparent that institutional interference with outside cultural influence, over time has little positive impact and possibly a detrimental one on local artistic expressions.

Particularities of the Southeast Asian historical context

In Southeast Asia, cultural infiltration and adaptation have been defining characteristics of artistic expression over millennia. Ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse, the peoples of the region forged their respective indigenous cultures from

¹⁰ On cultural authenticity confronted to outside influence: *Looseley D. Pelchat* amendment to the 1994 Broadcasting Reform Act on foreign radio content in France // *Popular Music in Contemporary France: Authenticity, Politics, Debate*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2003.

the seeds of Malay, Chinese and Indian ones, with additional European, Arab and other influences as well, according to geography and period. From the earliest times, cultural penetration characteristic of globalisation was prevalent, highly developed pre-colonial maritime trade routes binding insular and maritime Southeast Asia and linking the region to the world beyond. Geographically vast and developed “Asian maritime worlds” embraced “a loose geographical unit wide open to the outside”¹¹ that was characterised not only by European presence in Asian waters, but by strong intra-Asian contacts which prove the extensive history and depth of infiltration of forms of globalisation originating beyond the Western world. As a result of a trade-induced outward-looking mentality, intra-regional migration, and a syncretic attitude to arriving faiths, in Southeast Asia cultural permeability has been a vital regional force for thousands of years.

Moreover, in the modern period, Southeast Asians were subjected to colonisation in name or spirit — in the case of Siam historians reference “auto-colonisation” as a means of avoiding colonial subjugation¹² — new ideologies arriving with the European imperialists. Thus, it can be argued that in many ways Southeast Asia experienced the cultural effects of globalisation centuries before the term was coined.

¹¹ *Masashi H.* Introduction: Framework and Methods of Comparative Studies on Asian Port Cities in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries // *Asian Port Cities 1600–1800. Local and Foreign Cultural Interactions.* Edited by Haneda Masashi. Singapore: NUS Press, 2009. P. 2–3.

¹² *Jackson P. A.* The Ambiguities of Semicolonial Power in Thailand // *The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand.* Edited by R. V. Harrison and P. A. Jackson. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010. P. 41 for a discussion of the meaning of Thailand’s crypto-colonial or auto-colonial status.

Yet, despite Southeast Asia's openness to cultural exchange and ability to absorb and adapt the foreign, late twentieth century globalisation, and its associated accelerated communications, perturbed the fabric of cultural life in Southeast Asia. Visual artists were affected and indeed, as we shall see, could, as a result, develop new ways of making art. In the next section we explore how new methodologies and visual approaches were achieved by selected artists in Vietnam, Indonesia, and Thailand.

Globalisation's late twentieth century impact on art in Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia

The end of the Cold War and the economic expansion provoked by 1990s globalisation were important drivers of the modernisation of traditional Southeast Asian societies such as those of Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam. The growth of the middle classes in Thailand and Indonesia, already apparent from the 1980s due to various factors including improving education, accelerated in the 1990s. In Vietnam, *doi moi* — translated as “renovation”, this policy signaled the Communist Party's shift from a centrally and state-controlled economy to a market economy — officially inaugurated in 1986, and later the 1994 lifting of U.S.-led economic sanctions — in place since the end of the second Indochina War in 1975, spurred economic gains and ordinary citizens' prosperity.¹³ Globalisation, which furthered the integration of these countries' economies into the larger global economic orbit, amplified cultural infiltration through the arrival of goods, people and information from outside national borders. Technological progress, part of globalisation, improved Southeast Asians' access to global knowledge, the proliferation

¹³ Beresford M. Vietnam: the Transition from Central Planning // The Political Economy of South-East Asia: Markets, power and contestation. Ed. Garry Rodan et al., third edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. P. 205–208 for an explanation of *doi moi*, economic renewal that brought a market economy to socialist Vietnam.

of cheap communication technologies thus reducing national boundaries between cultures and peoples of Southeast Asia, as well as the world beyond.

From intensifying globalisation came the liberal markets that prompted consumerism, a phenomenon until then not much visible in these countries. Even in Vietnam, where the political system remained socialist despite the initiation of directed market capitalism, consumer goods and the slick images of capitalist consumption assailed the physical space and public consciousness. These shifts inevitably affected artists' practices in Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam. Moreover, foreigners had greater access to information about Southeast Asian visual art, creating markets for the latter's commercialisation that affected regional countries' art worlds, especially those of Vietnam and Indonesia.

Visual artists of Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam were sensitive to globalisation's shifts, which were perceived and used very differently by each one. Many responded by embracing international art currents that became more familiar to them due to improved information from the art world's supposed "centres" New York, London and Berlin.¹⁴ In 1990s Vietnam for example, some painters explored abstraction and surrealism. These stylistic vocabularies were attractive to painters as they had been taboo for many years due to the communist regime's preference for socialist realism; these styles were embraced because they were perceived as part of the larger global art discourse, rather than local or parochial. Another facet of global opening was linked to marketing. Numerous artists were enticed by the commercial opportunities presented by the repercussions of globalisation. Indeed, Vietnamese, Indonesian and a few Thai

¹⁴ *Boitran Huynh-Beattie*. *Post doi moi international reception of Vietnamese contemporary art // Eye of the Beholder Reception, Audience and Practice of Modern Asian Art*. Edited by John Clark, Maurizio Pellegi, TK Sabapathy. Sydney: Wild Peony, 2006. P. 275.

painters active in the 1990s promoted their canvases in the art galleries and auction rooms of Hong Kong and Singapore.¹⁵

But not all artists followed the commercial route. A small coterie saw the dramatic social shifts of globalisation in different terms. Rather than as a means to commercial success, they viewed globalisation's challenge of the status quo as content for their art, and as a conduit for layered social perspective revolving around indigenous systems.¹⁶ They engaged with shift, creating works that examined systems critically, seeing incoming culture from various vantage points, and through their art appraising its effect on local reality which was now open to oblique probing. As they embarked on this process of interrogation of home reality through art, they deployed new artistic languages that went beyond the conventional description of painting. Via installation, uses of alternative media, and performance, these practitioners explored among many consequences of global opening two distinct but sometimes intersecting themes: urban-rural tensions; and consumerism's and capitalism's impact on people and social structures. This was a sophisticated, often conceptually-based, multi-media and sometimes multi-disciplinary art that is identified as emerging contemporary art in Vietnam and Thailand in the 1990s.¹⁷ In Indonesia, where

¹⁵ Taylor N. A. *Painters in Hanoi: An ethnography of Vietnamese art*, second edition. Singapore: NUS Press, 2009. P. 133; P. 112–114 on painter Dang Xuan Hoa's commercial success.

¹⁶ Lenzi I. *Margins and Mainstream: how globalisation changed visual art in 1990s Hanoi*, 2015, Nanyang Technological University, unpublished paper.

¹⁷ On the relationship between conceptual approaches and social critique in Southeast Asian contemporary art, Lenzi I. *Conceptual Strategies in Southeast Asian Art: a local narrative // Concept Context Contestation: art and the collective in Southeast Asia*. Edited by Iola Lenzi, exhibition catalogue. Bangkok: Bangkok Art and Culture Centre, 2014. P. 10–25. P. 17–18.

breakaway formal and conceptual art languages had already appeared in the 1970s, artists in the 1990s, deriving new frames and references from global forces penetrating their culture that allowed greater political challenge, consolidated and built-on what had already been achieved two decades before into a larger, more visible movement of critical practice.¹⁸

The urban-rural dichotomy seen through contemporary art of Vietnam, Indonesia, and Thailand

The influx of foreign capital, triggered by accelerating global economic integration in the 1990s, provoked building booms in Jakarta and Bangkok. Construction and renovation also began in the Vietnamese capital, Hanoi's streets, previously dominated by silent bicycles, were overtaken by noisy motorcycles and then cars. This evolution altered the physical landscapes of these cities. Bangkok and Jakarta became car-choked megalopolises in less than a decade, and large slums mushroomed on the outskirts of these agglomerations. In tandem, the social fabrics of these cities altered as rural populations converged on them in great numbers to find work. In capitalist Indonesia and Thailand, a new class of urban poor emerged in Jakarta and Bangkok as rural migrants traded the certainty of the agricultural cycle for precarious lives in the shadow of gleaming tower blocks. In Hanoi, conservative social customs began to be challenged.

This speedy and ill-prepared modernisation process that imported many trappings of Occidental modernity to traditional Southeast Asia in a short time-span, proved culturally shocking. The process, though it had started more gradually in the 1970s in Jakarta and Bangkok, still took Indonesia and Thailand by surprise; and in the case of North Vietnam, closed to the West for nearly half a century, the modernising forces confronting the country created unfamiliar tensions. As has been noted above, a

¹⁸ Ibid.

majority of Thai, Indonesian and Vietnamese artists exploited the commercial opportunities deriving from globalisation's facilitation of a more internationally integrated art market, becoming wealthy through their art sales. However, a few artists instead marshalled their artistic practice to comment the complex cultural and societal contest of modernity *versus* tradition in their respective societies. In particular, the new urban-rural tension was explored as a means of shining a light on inadequate social policies responsible for the negative effects of change linked to incoming forces. It is no coincidence that examples of such works, critically but allusively referencing social frictions arising out of unfamiliar economic paradigms influencing society, even as they were maintained outside state-controlled art spheres, are now considered the foundation of early contemporary art in Southeast Asia.¹⁹

In Thailand, a much-exhibited example of such works is the 1991–1993 *Venus of Bangkok* by Montien Boonma (1953–2000). This installation, composed of discarded, rough, building-site garbage (bricks, wooden crate, sand, jagged scrap metal, red bucket) through its juxtaposition of rough and “unaesthetic” materials, somewhat menacing in their formal disposition and sharpness to the touch, and the piece’s reference to Western art’s established canon of beauty “Venus”, suggests through the irony of its title, that “Venus of Bangkok” is in fact a discarded and ugly Venus, the antithesis of the desirable classic aesthetic embodied by Venus. *Venus of Bangkok*’s intimidating formal

¹⁹ Lenzi I. *Negotiating Home, History and Nation // Negotiating Home, History and Nation: two decades of contemporary art in Southeast Asia 1991–2011*, editor Iola Lenzi, exhibition catalogue. Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2011. P. 13–27 on defining the discourse and canon of Southeast Asian contemporary art from the 1970s onwards. Antoinette M. *Reworlding Art History Encounters with Contemporary Southeast Asian Art after 1990*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014. P. 29–31 on official and non-official art in 1990s Southeast Asia.

aspect is further accentuated by the squashed red metal bucket recalling female genitalia and via this device alludes to fresh, hopeful young girls arriving from their rural village in merciless Bangkok where they become domestic cleaners or even prostitutes. Montien Boonma is best known for his formally poetic, multi-sensorial immersive installations that through audience experience convey spiritual lift. Thus *Venus of Bangkok* stands out in Montien's oeuvre as singularly critical of the ugliness of urbanisation as a consequence of globalising Thailand's ill-prepared reception of globalisation. Other Thai artists also critically comment various forms of dislocation — social, cultural, economic — of globalisation in their art, focusing on the confrontation between urban and rural life. These works are not a reactionary pining for a romanticized rural past, but rather subtle critiques of the ways in which change is affecting social balance. Sutee Kunavichayanont's (b. 1965) series of latex, inflatable installations of water buffalo (*The Myth from Rice Field*, 1999) and elephants (*The White Elephant*, 1999) of the late 1990s, known as *Breath Donation series- Depletion-Inflation* underscores the artist's concern for the abrupt social and cultural shifts engulfing Thailand as a result of the country's economic integration into the global economy further to late twentieth century globalisation. Vasan Sitthiket (b. 1957) is another Thai artist who critically probes the political and social repercussions of globalisation on rural culture through art, his exhibitions *I Love Thai Culture*, (National Gallery, Bangkok, 1995), and *Farmers are Farmers* (Tadu Contemporary Art, Bangkok, 1998) developing entire bodies of work engaging this theme. Among the most salient pieces from these two series, the installation *Committing Suicide Culture: The Only Way Thai Farmers Escape Debt* (1995) that displays stylised cut-out effigies of suicide victim Thai farmers hanged from a red-white-and-blue (the colours of the Thai flag) frame, offers a violent, graphically disturbing interpretation of this theme.

In Indonesia too certain artists deploy their practice to provide critical thinking on the effects of modernising, globalising local culture. Artist-critic-curator Jim Supangkat's (b. 1948) *Ken Dedes* from 1975 attests to the established nature of the concern about tensions derived from cultural infiltration precipitated by Indonesia's global opening. The piece, which juxtaposes a replica of a sculpture of the ancient Javanese queen Ken Dedes from Indonesian pre-modern heritage, with the two-dimensional image of a modern, Westernised Indonesian girl's legs showing her blue-jeans unzipped to expose part of her crotch, is both literal and metaphoric in its reference to the implications of modernisation and urbanisation in Indonesia. In Vietnam, Hanoi artists outside the officially endorsed mainstream produce art critically examining transforming traditional rural society the turn of the millennium. Three works among others in different media can be cited here: the 1996 performance *Water Buffalo* by Truong Tan and Nguyen Quang Huy; Nguyen Minh Thanh's 1999 Berlin installation *Rice Field*; and Nguyen Van Cuong's late 1990s-early 2000s ink on paper series *Me toi la nong dan* ("my mother is a farmer"). None of these three works takes a particular position in relation to change resulting from globalisation and indeed, the pieces are not explicitly about modernisation of Vietnamese society. Instead, through their play of images alluding to rural life in various ways, contrasted with images and techniques, artists bring a questioning, critical viewpoint to the fore. Truong Tan's literal and therefore sensorially brutal impersonation of a subservient human buffalo harnessed to a plough provokes reflection about the evolving meaning of rural life and customs in 1990s Vietnam; Minh Thanh's wistful, huge-scaled, repetitious portraits of his mother looking down on a field of joss-sticks understood as rice paddy, evokes the austere hardship and monotony of rural life *despite* the city's glitzy transformation into a rural playground for nouveau-riche urbanites; and Cuong's stooped effigy of his (and all

Vietnamese peoples' mother) under the glaring light of a Hanoi night club, the image enshrined within a border recalling the style of merit certificates handed out to good students and obedient citizens by Communist Party officials, alludes to the way 'new Vietnam' perceives and treats its rural labour force that feeds the country. The underlying critique of these works is apparent, yet the critique is not directed at outsiders' hegemonistic imposition of Western culture, but rather, through suggestive images, invites viewers to think for themselves about the implications of global forces' encounters with facets of Vietnamese life.

An especially didactic work of art addressing the urban-rural dichotomy at the turn of the millennium in Hanoi is Nguyen Minh Phuoc's participative installation *Sleep Walking*, produced for *Green, Red & Yellow*, a Vietnamese multi-media art exhibition held at Goethe Institut, Hanoi, in 2003. This room-installation jolted viewers by tangibly contrasting reality and hope in the wake of changing economic conditions in Hanoi resulting from globalisation: in the centre of the room a video shot from life is playing, depicting poor laborers waiting to be hired as temporary workers in the capital where they have migrated from the provinces in search of jobs; the raw realism of the documentary film clip contrasts with the articulation of these same men's hopes and expectations which the laborers are invited to inscribe on the walls of the room during the exhibition opening. Through this sharp juxtaposition Phuoc questions the growing social divide and injustice of rapid urbanisation in Hanoi, asking audiences to actively consider issues of social gains and losses in the face of modernisation, as well as exclusion and "otherness".

Consumerism, capitalism and contemporary art

As discussed above, during the early and mid-1990s, foreign capital and investment poured into Thailand and Indonesia, resulting in the expansion of consumption and money borrowing. Consumerism was a novelty, especially in societies where a

majority of the population had previously had little disposable income, where relatively few consumer goods were available to purchase, and where the social ethos revolved around restraint and sustainable usage of resources, Buddhism in particular advocating material detachment (practiced officially in Thailand and historically in Vietnam). In communist North Vietnam, where available resources had been channeled into the war effort until 1975, where poverty characterised the post-war period due to national rebuilding and American-instigated trade sanctions, and where communist ideology forbid material excess, this negative attitude to material possessions was even more marked such that Vietnam's 1986 *doi moi*'s opening to global commerce that exposed the North Vietnamese to consumerism, was more shocking and swift in Hanoi than Jakarta or Bangkok. Though for different reasons, and until the Asian financial crisis of 1997 — a symptom of and arguably caused by Southeast Asia's 1990s profligacy, ordinary Southeast Asians experienced the globalising world through mass market material goods.

In Thailand in 1997, as the economy was overheating and mega-malls were opening all over the capital, photographer Manit Sriwanichpoom (b. 1961) gave birth to his iconic *Pink Man* — just as the Asian Financial Crisis that halted Southeast Asia's consumerist party erupted. Creating a series of images via photomontage, Manit integrated his *Pink Man* — a live performative persona of a corpulent Thai man dressed in the loud pink of shopping mall billboards and wielding an empty pink shopping cart, thus representing the selfish, hedonistic consumer — into pre-existing images to produce incongruous, sometimes shocking visual and semantic juxtapositions. These iconographic collages, in addition to providing sharp commentary on Thailand's turn of the twentieth century fascination with materialism, instant gratification, and capitalism, through the trope of incoming cultural influences ascribed to globalisation, interrogate Thailand's ability to assimilate and usefully implement the progressive aspect

of modernity. Mani's 1997 *the Bloodless War* series transforms famous Associated Press images documenting the second Indochina War, including the world-famous black and white shot of a naked Vietnamese girl running screaming from a napalm attack. Mani adulterates this image which in his version shows well-dressed middle-class Thai protagonists running for their life clutching their branded shopping bags. This series, with Mani's 2001 *Horror in Pink* series — addressing globalising Thailand's collective amnesia of historic institutional violence in the face of citizens' struggle for democratic rights, namely the 1976 Thammasat University Massacre, are among the most disturbing of Southeast Asia's works of contemporary art, their violence derived from their reference through visual contrast to the disconnect between the fight for social justice, and infiltrating vacuous consumerism brought by globalisation in the 1990s. Still in Thailand, Vasan Sitthiket and Sutee Kunavichayanont engage critically with social ills and regime authoritarianism, consumerism used as foil to underline citizens' apathy and refusal of responsibility for social inequity.

In Indonesia, female multimedia artist Arahmaiani (b. 1961) also takes issue with cultural tensions emerging from globalising Indonesia of the 1990s. In her 1996 body performance piece *Handle Without Care* she confronts coca-cola culture and Javanese tradition in literal and metaphoric ways.²⁰ In her 1994 archival-style installation *Etalase*, she deploys objects symbolising seemingly conflicting aspects of Indonesian social practices in a museum-style vitrine. This disjointed patchwork of Indonesian cultural icons — representing Islam, Buddhism, mass consumer culture, contemporary Western sexuality — are paradoxically assembled both in mute dialogue, and separated, each inhabiting its own space. In this way the artist critically translates

²⁰ See: The 2nd Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, exhibition catalogue. Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1996. P. 81.

the simultaneous discomfort and appetite that greet globalisation's forces in the Indonesian context.

In Vietnam Vu Dan Tan, Truong Tan, Nguyen Quang Huy, and Nguyen Van Cuong, among others, grapple in their art through the 1990s with the critical significance for Vietnamese society of incoming consumer culture resulting from *doi moi* economic renovation that integrated Vietnam's economy into the global fold. Starting with Vu Dan Tan in 1992, all four artists appropriate paper currency as a medium of art, using either real paper money — painted-over Vietnamese Dong or American dollars in the case of Nguyen Quang Huy and Truong Tan, or facsimile paper money with invented iconography in the case of Vu Dan Tan and Nguyen Van Cuong. In all versions, these artist's tangible subversion of money through artistic intervention permits an indirect interrogation of the many concepts attached to money, some of which are problematic in communist Vietnam. In this way artists explore money as a tool of communication and exchange between citizens; as a symbol of national and institutional power; as a representation of capitalism, especially the US dollar; and as an emblem of international movement of people and ideas, this last of special significance in Vietnam which in the early to mid-1990s had only recently opened to foreigners as well as easing restrictions on own citizens wishing to travel outside the country. Thus Tan, Cuong, Huy and Truong Tan took over the information already contained in polysemic paper currency and through their artistic intercessions, created new meanings rich in critical implications about then-new social and philosophical phenomena associated with money's arrival in Vietnam: trade, greed, competition, value, equality, corruption, and individualism.

Of the four artists, Vu Dan Tan and Nguyen Van Cuong return most consistently and inventively to money as a medium and concept, Tan from 1992, Cuong from 1997. Tan playfully devises currencies of the world in which he integrates global

musical, literary and cinematographic icons, as well as figures from world politics. *Money's* championing of global circulation of culture, amongst other things, can be read as an oblique critique of nationalist discourse's intellectual and cultural limitation, especially relevant in Vietnam where the state has determined cultural output since the revolution.²¹ Cuong's money, an extension of the artist's *Franklin* series of 1997–1998, is equally parochially focused. Referencing Benjamin Franklin, the American inventor and statesman who adorns the US \$100 bill, it directly alludes to the dollar and hence to the arrival of capitalism and Americanisation in Vietnam. Mixing images from local life — bulldozers, ancient temples, farmers, water buffalo, nouveau-riche business men, and sometimes self-portraits — with the formality of the greenback articulated through the artist's crisp monochrome drawing, Cuong's money comments the relationship between old customs and new Vietnam, their confrontation but also their accommodation. Finally, Tan and Cuong's expression of their ideas via paper currency allows the artists to directly involve ordinary Vietnamese in questioning the implications of capitalism and the shift in social order it brings.

Therefore these money works, through artists' use of familiar and utilitarian paper currency, translate a range of critical ideas that would be difficult to evoke through simple visual replication. Vu Dan Tan's, Cuong's, Huy's and Truong Tan's money pieces are examples of a new artistic languages, identified as contemporary art, born in Hanoi of the 1990s out of the necessity to express complex realities stemming from the effects of globalisation.

Other noteworthy series of images, conveyed in painting and installation-performance, reveal Hanoi artists' interest in thought-provoking discourses coming out of globalisation.

²¹ *Kraevskaia N. Money for all times and Lenzi I. The art of the court jester: Vu Dan Tan's money series // Money for all times, exhibition catalogue. Hanoi: Salon Natasha, 2010. P. 17–19 and P. 10–12.*

These are Vu Dan Tan's 1999–2000 *RienCarNation – Icarus*, and Nguyen Van Cuong's ink on traditional paper series of 1997 and 1998, *Karaoke*, and *Franklin*, mentioned above.

Conclusion

What is commonly understood today as *globalisation* is only the most recent iteration of a process of exchange and movement of ideas, people, and objects that has been a feature of human civilisation for thousands of years. In Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, homogenisation and de-territorialisation have been particular markers of recent globalisation. However, the technological communications revolution that has accompanied today's globalisation has speeded the process and carried it more or less simultaneously to the centres of economic power — New York, Hong Kong, London, Tokyo, — and to countries of emerging-economy-Asia, such as Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam. As a result of this abruptness, and the radicalism of the changes wrested on the still traditional, rural cultures of Southeast Asia, globalisation has yielded significant tensions particular to Southeast Asia. These in turn have prompted artists to deploy new creative languages as a means of commenting the complexity of local reception of globalisation.

Thus Southeast Asian practitioners, mixing techniques, media, iconography and non-visual information from multiple sources in response to social and political issues raised by globalisation, have developed a discursial approach that invites audiences to join in their interrogation of the status quo. These works then offer empowerment unknown in conventional painting vocabularies. In Southeast Asia, where citizens' democratic rights are not always assured, this type of art then takes on a functional role providing progressive ideas about power and society.

Globalisation has undoubtedly played a central part in altering artistic practices in Southeast Asia in recent decades. But contrary to what is frequently asserted, and as demonstrated

with this selective survey, artists have reacted critically to the phenomenon's local impact to create new aesthetics and meaning — using change around them as inspiration and content — rather than producing variations of foreign art to express the new.²² Southeast Asian artists have in this way developed idioms mixing local forms, iconographies and techniques, and now locally-significant imported references, to translate the complexity of home social shift. This validates once more the notion of decentered or multiple modernities capable of artistic renewal from within.²³

²² Artists engaging social issues in their work were the minority across Southeast Asia in our considered study period. However, it is these artists who are increasingly understood as the art historical canon. See: *Lenzi I*, *Negotiating Home, History and Nation* // *Ibid.* P. 13–27. On the idea that artists of Vietnam required knowledge of foreign art to innovate see *Boitran Huynh-Beattie*. *Ibid.* P. 275, where the author states: “After *doi moi*, Vietnamese artists prepared themselves to receive outside influences, which gradually gave way to the common desire to catch up with international art movements”.

²³ *Clark J.* *Modern Asian Art*. North Ryde: Craftsman House, 1998. P. 49–69. Clark sees Asian art's importation of Western (Euramerican) modern art as activated by the Asian artist and therefore an importation on the receiving culture's terms, eliminating the notion of dominant and dominated cultures.