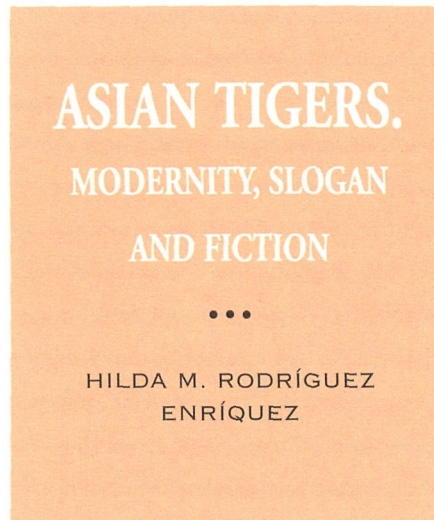


According to the Japanese scholar Shiraiishi Talashi, the term Southeast Asia was in fact used in 1940 and gained recognition in the fifties as part of US policy towards Asia, though since 1980 it has not had the same meaning as in the past, that is to say in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it was linked to China's closed-door policy [1] and that nation's sea power in the area. Later, in this century, Asia's sea power was taken over by Britain, thus altering the region's map and the order of things.

In this new situation Japan, for example, set itself the task of building a "civilised nation" during the Meiji era (1868-1912) and shedding itself of the so-called Chinese sino-centric order and of British hegemony. This process Japan underwent differed from what occurred in the South East once the slogan of "rich nation and strong army" was established, bringing with it industrialisation, the strengthening of the education system and the setting up of modern state institutions, etc. [2]. The presence of the colonising nations in the Southeast Asian countries naturally gave rise to unequal development in each country, and the modernisation process therefore behaved differently, depending on the models established by colonial power, as did the manifestations of nationalism. Despite these distinctions and divisions in the map of the region, and irrespective of the more local responses to the complex colonisation processes, it is nevertheless possible to conduct examinations focusing on nuclei or sub-regions, thanks to the evidence of certain similar features, and the presence of common symptoms and a distinctive reaction to the phenomenon of modernisation, which has manifested itself in terms of monolithic discourse. Notwithstanding this acknowledgement, I wish to stress that the colonial presence in that part of the world was a varied as the colonising nations themselves, and it is thus not valid to believe in the existence of a



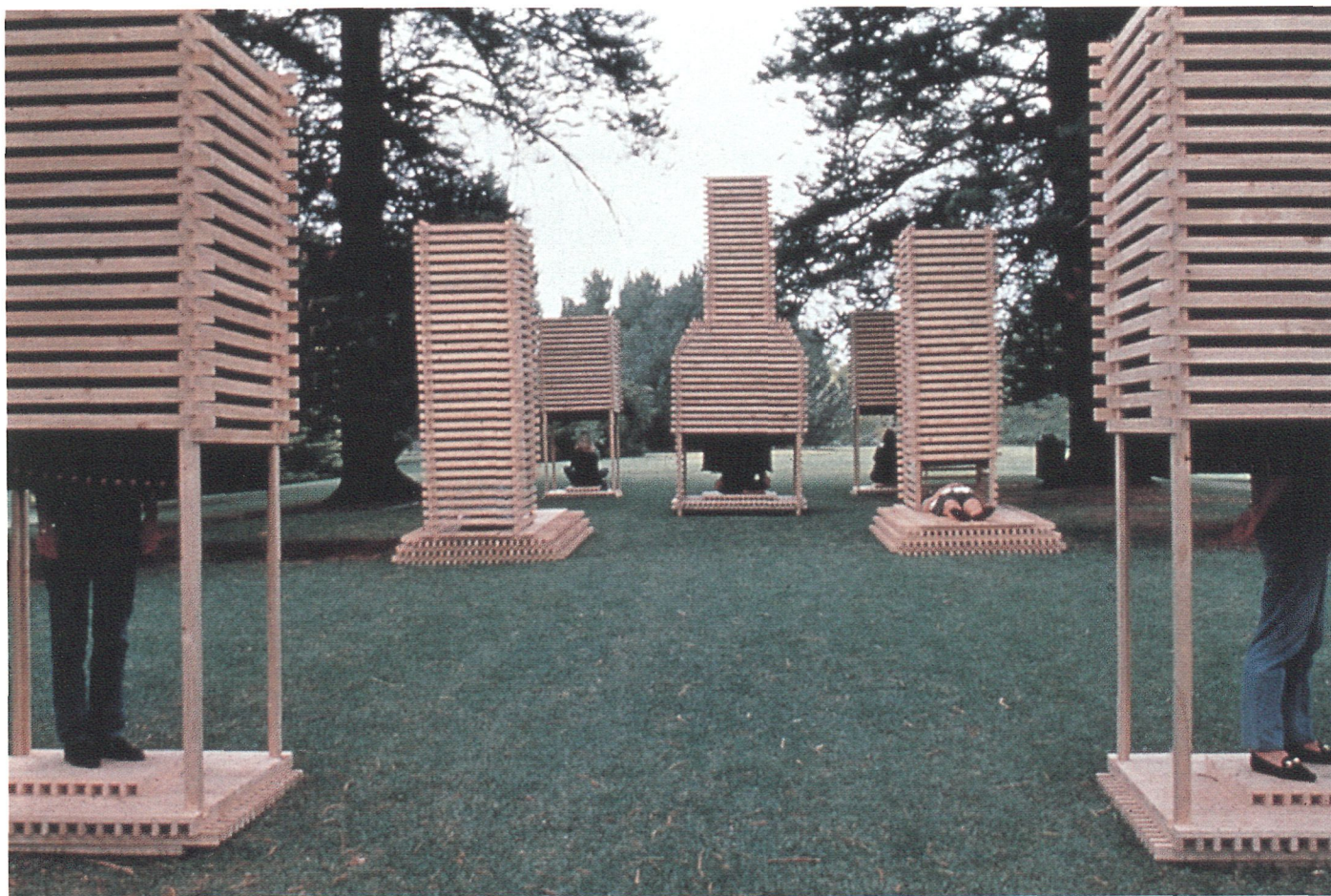
single Asian model, since this would lead us to emphasise the criterion of stereotype, a false notion of homogeneity and conventional regionalism.

Having made this observation, I nevertheless want to come back to the idea that the dark side of emerging modernisation has already been glimpsed in most countries, with new dilemmas appearing such as heavy concentration of population in urban areas on top of the already existing unresolved problems: as a result, rural communities have been breaking up quickly, thereby weakening the role played by farm production. We are well aware of the ecological disasters, the increase in environmental pollution and social degradation in terms of plundering, impoverishment, prostitution and drug addiction, which have shattered the system of spiritual values with unforeseen consequences. But this speedy process of material development has not only turned out to be incoherent: it is also extraordinarily vulnerable and short-lived. The constant devaluation of the currencies and the volatility of the stock exchange, to mention just some of the symptoms of the early crisis, have given rise to the also emerging programme of palliative measures for these countries' economies. The tigers are not only in danger of extinction as a species: the ambiguity of the term, coined to describe a distinctive phenomenon that was

apparently strong and resistant over time, has become evident behind another work of fiction and deceptive extrapolation of moulds.

While it is equally true that most Southeast Asian countries, in response to the imbalances caused by the dizzy socio-economic changes, display a persistent interest in preserving their cultural heritage, and many religious and cultural expressions are still in use, as well as ones from pre-colonial thought, it should be noted that many actions aimed at recuperating tradition have become manifestations of nostalgia if not inventions of models of genuineness, while the west continues with its latent tendencies to classify and impose its system of values. From the latter emerges the underlying traumatic flavour in the validation of processes of blending with elements that supposedly belong to the west, and hence the fact that the East/West dichotomy, to which the critic Jim Supangkat also refers in a number of texts, lingers on like a ghost that has been watching over the "positive" areas of a hybridisation that came about with the "contamination" and ethnic and cultural mix.

While I do not intend to commit "heresy" in a study which would oblige me to faithfully cite historical events and to conduct a more substantial analysis of socio-political processes, I do need to take certain liberties in order to address matters directly linked to artistic production. I am thus limiting myself to the fact that, in a way, the return and/or restoration of certain traditional forms is displayed as a sort of defence from the obvious crises and losses that rock the very structures of social groups and whole countries. It should, however, be pointed out that this resistance emanates from several points or directions: one sort comes from the state; another is mainly championed by artists; and one apparently spontaneous manifestation originates from the most popular social



Montien Boonma (Tailandia). *Room*. 1994.

strata. Each process, undoubtedly, entails different levels of response, different areas of predominance and avenues of recognition, but these processes also contain implicit re-inventions of new models or “other” models.

Another study would have to be carried out in order to decipher what is happening in the application and establishment of these models, given the complexity of the paths, the appearance of pseudo-products, the intervention of commercial factors and the extent to which typifying is used as a joker as a last resort to represent characterisation and recognition strategies.

Some authors insist on the idea that art in Southeast Asia has been oriented to a search for identity, though this supposedly vital exploration has become ambiguous in that it has been qualified by some versions of fiction. One of them

is borne out by the aspiration of states and the proclamation of the well-known slogans “Unity in Diversity”, “Harmony” and “Homogeneity”. Perhaps then, given many artists’ awareness of these schemes that have been created, it is not strange to find works displaying critical reflections on what should be considered the paradigm of identity. Such questioning in fact attempts to invalidate the stereotypes promoted and sold by officialdom, which have contributed to consolidating the seductive image Asia represents for the West. It is evidently not easy to dismantle a formula whose codes are still trapped in the myth about the mimesis of western modernism, the slogan which exports imperfectibility and the fiction of eternal exoticism [3].

Notwithstanding the existence of harmful phenomena and criteria which hamper the identification of what is licit

or valid, there is – as I see it – somewhere between sham and fiction a conscious action in an important area of artistic production, which uses an archaeological method that incorporates radical visions of rethinking, revision and borrowing from tradition.

All in all, and bearing in mind considerations about what is really derivative and reactions taken to an extreme, in the form of stereotyped masks, many artists are attempting to set cultural symbols in a new context, giving them a new semantic and conceptual dimension, once they have become essential discursive components of contemporary commentary. Even if these symbols are subverted, they become devices for necessary change which are interesting to analyse.

The recurrent utilisation of local, indigenous materials is a familiar feature,



Roberto Villanueva (Philippines). *The dream weaver*, 1992. Installation.

owing to their common use in daily life, in the expressions of vernacular rural and popular communities, in religious tradition, in rituals or ceremonies and as a prolongation of the concept of identification with nature. Through them artists allude to ecological issues, connote values that are steeped in myth, evoke experiences of different social groups and recreate local memory, or juxtapose them to the symbolic world of the contemporary context with a clear political and social orientation aim.

These elements appear mainly in *installations and performatory actions*, the latter being also very closely linked to tradition, in that dance and theatre are part of the legendary heritage of their cultural substrata. In these cases, the body becomes the territory of existential, emotional conflicts [+], a transmitter of

knowledge, of individual and collective experience, of spiritual values: they are even bearers of a content which transgresses conceptions and taboos that are present in the primary structure of traditions or philosophical thought and occasionally clash with current social behaviour.

Artists such as Junyee, Santiago Bose, Roberto Feleo, Imelda Cajipe-Endaya, Alfredo Juan Aquilizan and Roberto Villanueva, from the Philippines, Chandrasekaran of Singapore and Montien Boonma of Thailand, or the Indonesian artists Nyoman Erawan, Dadang Christanto and Andar Manik could be cited as paradigmatic examples of those who use local materials and elements of tradition as an essential part of their oeuvre, displaying notable topical diversity. Others such as Heri Dono,

Arahmaiani, Marintan Sirait and Nindityo Adipurnomo from Indonesia draw from wayang or other types of corporal expression and dance with a strong presence in their cultures, to analyse and make satirical, ironic and critical comments which unveil part of the false image that has been woven around what is traditional.

It is not pointless to stress that many artists from different Asian countries, particularly the South East, have questioned the limits of their work and its representational frameworks, amid countless categorisations and the hardships of the post-colonial period and the transition. Their quest, in this case, is not the explicit and external revelation of what could differentiate their oeuvre from, or link it even more closely to, the West; they are concerned more with the

inner workings of aesthetics, with the essence of artistic production itself and its overt role as a vehicle for problem-raising concepts. Hence the fact that the borrowing from elements of tradition has served even to deconstruct these traditions in order to incorporate them into a mixed, hybrid and flexible fabric.

Asia has not been unreceptive to western influence either: as the Japanese curator Takehata Akira would say "...Asian and western values should not be opposed as though they were entirely incompatible..." [5]. One has only to ascertain the capacity for give-and-take in consonance with the historical mobility of human experience (such is the case of the Filipino artist Agnes Arellano, whose subjects tend to be seen from the angle of religious and mythological, literary, local or universal legacies, exploring ethical and/or spiritual issues with clear autobiographical references).

What is reprehensible is the failure to understand what should be taken to be interactions, adopting as something natural the imposition of systems of values, a concept which has also been a vehicle for the false, idyllic and superficial evaluation of one culture above others, if not the most effective instrument for belittling and simplifying the cultures of the so-called periphery. From these manifestations of underestimation, it should be recalled that, as part of the intentional endeavour to preserve what is considered original and genuine, –comments Poshyananda– many western museums have carried out "archaeological rescues" which in fact amount to bare-faced plundering, and have proposed museographic projects that continue to be distorted [6].

The Thai critic Apinan Poshyananda has repeatedly noted that in recent times the idea of promoting traditions has triggered an exaggerated desire to protect the past from contemporary change. He comments that this stance can be seen in museums and

cultural institutions, too, and translates into "...pre-conceptions and fixed terms ... (thus) collections tend to reinforce idyllic visions of the ancestral past, of cultural sources, heritage and nationality..." But they also "... reflect the capacity of a dominant power to subdue, plunder and triumph over vulnerable subordinates... (and show how) ... collecting the artefacts of the cultures and traditions of other peoples has contributed to the perception that power grants licence to exploit, abuse and devastate..." [7].

The exhibition "Contemporary Art in Asia. Traditions/Tensions", of which Apinan Poshyananda was curator, shown in several US institutions in 1996, could serve as an antidote to the aforementioned extremes.

The exhibition set out to demonstrate –as Poshyananda comments– that tradition should not be interpreted as the antithesis of contemporary life and showed through heterogeneity and cultural differences that, ultimately, these reveal individualities and peculiarities in the process of adaptation to, and



Imelda Cajipe-Endaya (Philippines), *Filipina DH*, 1995. Installation.

assimilation of, the traditions and the languages, means and poetic art of the feared and desired western world. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the showing –according to Poshyananda– was that it enabled the viewer to realise that for many artists traditions are sources which stimulate creation and can even be redefined or transformed into active means of provocation [8]. But he also left the door open for dialogue about cultural differences, borrowing and authenticity, ethnic and religious problems, and the frank responses of the artists to violence, control, the consequences of post-colonialism, clichés, etc. [9]. This is perhaps the part that most interests me of the levels of response in which modernity, fiction and tradition come into play, because it strikes a possible balance between exasperated proclamations in the attempt to recognise the functionality of cultures.

It is a pleasure to come across criteria such as those of the critic, artist and curator Thomas McEvilley, who considers that the Traditions/Tensions exhibition was a project devoid of prejudice about tradition and points out that the reality of dissolving the borders and increasing hybridity is accepted as a recognised situation [10]. Of course, it would be useful to add that recognition of the dissolution of borders and hybridity is also a response to the necessary adaptation of centres and their relative coherence with, and loyalty to, the multicultural stance they claim to champion. It is curious to note that the project of deterritorialisation is dissolved into the complex universe of international relations, while balkanisation and fragmentation persist and, in the sphere of the visual arts, are expressed in retaliatory manoeuvres. But the most interesting aspect of Mc Evilley's reflections, to my mind, is his question "...how will western observers adapt their vision to the objects created and shaped

by circumstances that are completely different from theirs... ? [11].

First of all I would like to pose the same question with a slight "change of focus" [12]: have Asian observers – and why not those of Africa and the Middle East – had to adapt their vision to the objects created and shaped by circumstances completely different from theirs ? It is just that, for the purpose of saving this question from any unproductive dogmatism, I would prefer to aspire to recognise a casuistic appropriation of what humanity contributes to itself by dint of universal progression.

Irrespective of the possible answers Me Evilly has found, I believe that the actions of recent times – some found in the very limits of subordination, others aimed overtly at removing prejudices and objectively specific in penetrating the boundaries established by extremes – trigger a necessary result that is related to the changes in contemporary views of art, to the same extent that conceptions of the organisation of events and exhibitions change and the wish to exchange is enriched by the knowledge and understanding of something that exists regardless of centrist or peripheral classifications, by values that take expressions beyond what their place of origin could pre-establish.

Whatever the case may be, the most important thing should be the possibility of producing a work in consonance with specific concerns about contemporary life, the complexities of contexts. All this does not have to be caught up within the boundaries of national maps; rather, like a complex plot, it can provide discourses and common narratives, even when a particular event or episode, a seemingly extemporaneous experience, is taken as a pretext.

#### NOTAS

[1] Shiriashi Takashi: "The Modern in Southeast Asia", from *Asian Modernism Diverse Development in Indonesia, The*

*Philippines and Thailand*. The Japan Foundation, Asia Center, Japan, 1995, p. 257.

[2] *Op. cit.*, p. 258.

[3] Catalogue for *Contemporary Art of the Non-Aligned Countries*, 1995, Jakarta, Indonesia, April-June, pp. 6-7. Rediscussed by Hilda María Rodríguez in "La espiritualidad del Oriente. Síndrome de la diferencia", in *Atlántica Internacional*, Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno, July 1997, p. 856. Also, reflections on confrontation between East and West may be analyzed in essays by: Jim Supangkat, "A brief History of Indonesian Modern Art", in *Tradition and Change. Contemporary Art of Asia and the Pacific*, Brisbane, Queensland University Press, 1993, p. 47; "The Emergence of Indonesian Modernism and Its Background", in *Asian Modernism, Diverse Development in Indonesia, The Philippines and Thailand*, The Japan Foundation, Asia Center, Japan, 1995, pp. 204-213.

[4] Hou Hanru, Consultant to the Rijksakademie van Beeldende, Amsterdam, published in *Third Text, Art and Asia Pacif, Flash Art*, etc.

[5] Tachata Akira: "Art as Criticism", in *Asian Modernism Diverse Development in Indonesia, The Philippines and Thailand*, The Japan Foundation, Asia Center, Japan, 1995, p. 280.

[6] Apinan Poshyananda: "Roaring Tigers, Desperate Dragons in Transition", from the *Tradition/Tensions* catalogue, 1996, p. 29. These reflections by the author also discuss commentaries and criteria dealt with by Anderson, "Census Map. Museum", in *Imagined Communities*, Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern" and "On Collecting Art and Cultures", in *The Predicament of Culture*, Sally Price, *Primitive and Civilized Places*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989. Annie Comber, "Inventing the Postcolonial: Hybridity and Constituency in Contemporary Curating", *New Formations*, 15, winter 1992, pp. 39-52. And Craig Clunas: "Oriental Antiques/Far Eastern Art", *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 2, autumn 1994, pp. 318-55. In this essay, Apinan Poshyananda comments on the criteria vis-à-vis "...reinterpretation of productions in the East does not mean its destruction... as expressed by the French writer and painter Eugène Fromentin, who, for Poshyananda, does not take observations distorted or used out of context into account.

[7] Preface to the catalogue *Traditions/Tensions. Contemporary Art in Asia*, Asia Society Galleries, New York 1996, p. 15.

[8] *Op. cit.*, p. 15.

[9] *Op. cit.*, p. 27.

[10] Thomas McEvelly, "Exhibitions Strategies in the Postcolonial Era, from the catalogue for *Traditions/Tensions. Contemporary Art in Asia*, Asia Society, New York, 1996, p. 53.

[11] *Op. cit.*, p. 59.

[12] Taken from the title and conception of the curator of the *Cambio de foco* exhibition, Anteamérica, Banco de la República, Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango, Colombia, October-December 1992. (Project curated by the critics y curators Carolina Ponce de León, Gerardo Mosquera and Rachel Weiss).

## TRADITION VERSUS MODERNITY IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY INDONESIAN ART

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HILDA M. RODRÍGUEZ  
ENRÍQUEZ

Although the axiom that Indonesia has a many-faceted culture may sound commonplace, it is prompted by the fact that there are more than three hundred ethnic groups with different traditions and five hundred dialects. Likewise, there are many religions, including Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity, although Islam has been recognised as the predominant religion ever since its introduction in the 12th century. Indeed, Muslims constitute a majority of the population in this country.

To this vast multiplicity of ethnic groups and religions was added the Dutch presence in the 17th century, in the form of a "civilising" power represented by the army and scientific expeditions.

In addition to the structural transformations in power relations, the influence of Western culture weighed heavily on the "indigenous" cultures: in this case, colonisation by the Netherlands produced many expressions of a hybrid culture. Of course, in art also, new concepts and techniques were adopted,