



MULTIPLE MODERNITIES

An Art History of 'The Asian Modern'

JOHN CLARK

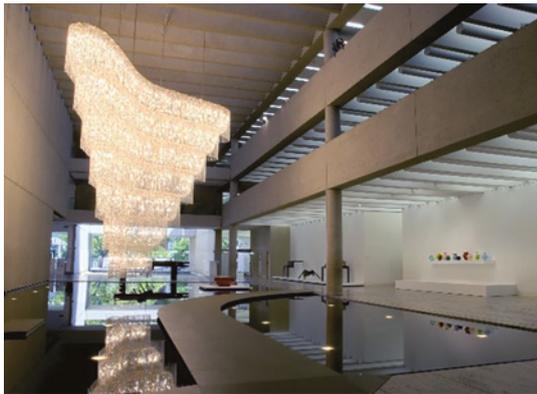
THE HABITUAL DEFINITION of modernity in Euramerican art was one of a stylistic transcendence: modern and—going further and self-reflexively—modernist art was a stylistic discourse whose questions and solutions went beyond the purposes of any given or inherited pre-modern position. Modernity continually re-invented the 'new', going beyond the teleology of the artistic and intellectual environment where its goals first developed. Modernity was a discourse of antecedence and formal innovation which assumed the sovereignty of the discourse itself and of the discourse maker. But, looking at many Asian contexts, these sorts of ends-oriented compulsions have been avoided because of different social contexts where the burden of inventing the new—the key teleological necessity of the Euramerican modern—does not apply. They are driven by many kinds of purposive invention other than those of artistic style, such as their ability to reformulate the customary, to alienate elite mannerisms in favour of a different regime of images in the counter-propaganda effects of the avant garde, or even to go into a various types of inner emigration seen under the oppressions of many regimes or in war-time situations.

For art, a special situation exists by the 1990s with an end to the privileged material art object and of the art object constituted by this void as the result of the individual

experience of artists. The horror of war destruction in Asia or the drip-feed trauma of broken or irrelevant art education and privileging systems, such as one finds from Japan to Thailand in ways yet to be examined in any depth, are a far more important set of questions for art objects and their makers than all the most fluent and elegant transmissions of Duchamp, naming procedures, or display of yet-to-be finished works. But just as significant might be the end of a privileged public (the audience of salons, art societies, or closely tied avant garde groups), to be replaced by the numerically much larger concatenations in search of broad representativeness or spectacles. These audiences can now include a complete horizontal cohort rather than, as in the past, a vertically stratified class or interest-fractionated series of mini-publics.

The replacement of a reciprocating audience, able for itself to identify art works in a complex aesthetic discourse partially constituted by them, itself finds a replacement in a spectacle-seeking mass and the corresponding rise of small one-off contract groups. These can sometimes function somewhat like an old-fashioned avant garde group linked by a manifesto, which looks at art works as diagrams for an idea or a lifestyle or its critique (figs 1 and 2), or the direct, sometimes brutally materialist embodiment of life values.¹

▲ Detail, fig. 8,
p. 43.



◀ **Fig 1.** (upper left) Gu Dexin *Plastic Pieces-287*, 1983–85, burned plastic.

IMAGE: JOHN CLARK

◀ **Fig 2.** (upper right) Gu Dexin 1998.11.07 installation at *The Corruptionists*, 1998, Beijing, pig brains.

IMAGE: JOHN CLARK

◀ **Fig 3.** (lower left) Ai Weiwei *Boomerang*, 2006, Queensland Art Gallery.

IMAGE: NATASHA HARTH APT V 2006, REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION.

◀ **Fig 4.** (lower right) Ai Weiwei, *Chandelier with restored Han Dynasty lamps from the emperor*, 2015, NGV International.

IMAGE: NGV INTERNATIONAL, REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION.

This broadening at the top of the art world but lack of integrated specialisation at the bottom, with coteries still separated, almost in headless detachment from the mass, has inevitably privileged the function of the interpreter/selector who stands as the sole figure able to integrate value systems with the works chosen for exhibition, usually by the interpreter/selectors themselves.

In some ways whose mutual impact is by no means clear, the change in the function of the curator—often called ‘independent’ but in fact highly dependent on a close network of old museums, new biennial and artists’ not-for-profit exhibition spaces—has occurred together with changes in the units which constitute international society.² These units have increased in the range of national, international, and transnational fields in which they operate. Again the permeability of national boundaries due to the end of explicit colonialism, the end of the cold war, the interpenetration of trade, and the motility of air transport, have provided the contingent context for art works, artists, and art mediators to come into contact. But it has also provided a context where the differential structures of the modern, its multiplicities, can be apparent

to those taking part in these circuits in a way which was ideologically or materially ruled out under colonialism, or under cold war ideological clashes. Of course, the modality for domination and forced transfer between different kinds of modernity may have changed but new forces and structures of influence and domination have entered, particularly in the rise of global exhibitions which almost directly parallels the rise of global circuits of art production and sale (figs 3 and 4).

Furthermore the burgeoning perception that there were other kinds of modernity and modernism to be found across world art apart from the Euramerican ones, may have skewed the way in which those kinds of modernity might be understood and rather narrowed them into regional groupings such as ‘Modern Latin American Art’, ‘Modern African Art’, and here, ‘Modern Asian Art’. In other words, the over-concrete condensation of these different worlds of modernity in art due to the need to resist and perhaps convert habitual Euramerican interpretive discourses, may have denuded understanding of the several kinds of modernity which are found within any one of these broader collective categories.

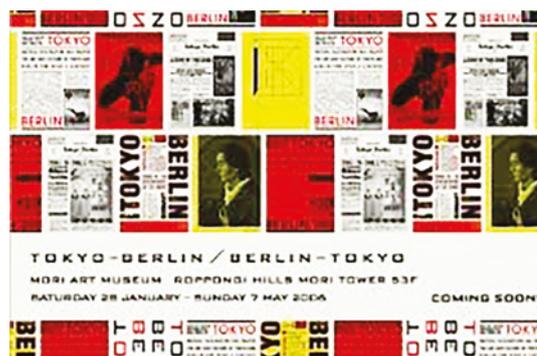
► Fig 5. *Tokyo-Berlin/Berlin-Tokyo*, 2006, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo.

IMAGE: MORI ART MUSEUM

Such over-concretisation may also have led interpretation away from understanding the particularity of issues and conceptual languages across them. I am thinking how it would appear to have been only in the last ten or so years that the conceptualisation of time across different art discourses seems to have been taken up by art historians, despite many issues having already been foreshadowed in the 1930s and 1940s.³ Presumably one of the motors which drives the multiplicity of modernities is the kinds of time which they encapsulate, and if we are to step away from the Euramerican ideology, then we would expect the linearity and structuring of its temporal successions also to change. This may well, however, not be an intellectual issue as much as one of the conservatism of habitual art historical methodology, the cultural narrowness of the range of its chosen art works, and probably indeed the restricted social training of some of its art historians.

“ If art history is to abandon exceptionalism the question arises, whose exceptionalism?”

Much of that conservatism is also evident in what is considered as prior to modernity and how it is linked through to the present, including the notion of contemporary as some higher plane of the modern. In art-historical fact much that precedes the modern already conditions how we construct it. Recent reconstructions of the actual interactions between art discourses in the past before modernity, say in Mongol China, force the art historian to interpret cultural flows and binary relations between art discourses and cultural domains as unstable and thus to question the readability of the circulation of objects and individuals and their identity.⁴ If the Modern is multiple so are its pre-histories and post-histories. What seems to be ignored, perhaps lost, in the transnational is what Musillo describes as ‘the local knowledge of



artistic traditions, which were significantly transformed by means of painting translations over the centuries, [and] is lost into avant-gardes of colonial aftertaste.⁵

The inheritance from the customary or pre-Modern history (often called ‘tradition’) shows as an issue of binary set ups—East/West; Germany/Japan; Paris/Tokyo, Berlin/Tokyo (fig. 5)—an interpretation which allows for imperfect diffusion models based on styles which never quite perfectly transfer to the site of reception. This can be seen in exhibitions like *Asian Realism*,⁶ and *Asian Cubism*,⁷ where suppressed hybrids are emplaced in stylistic genealogies which always originally ‘belonged’ to Europe. All the old tricks of privileging Euramerican origination make us forget, as one must never cease to remind the audience, to look for what is hidden beneath the overlaps. That is the presence of an incommensurable in-between, rather like a Lacanian *vel*.⁸ All of this un-seeing or non-seeing is still tightly institutionalised in the disciplines of art history.

There are also a few additions to this litany of art historical tropes which can be made from historiography. Let me just re-insert two issues I have mentioned elsewhere.⁹ If art history is to abandon exceptionalism the question arises, whose exceptionalism? Many Asian art cultures have been on the oppressive receiving end of Euramerican art historical understanding quite simply by insisting that their models and art historical realities are different from Euramerica, and that Euramerican universalism is the exception. Denying exceptionalism per se is to ignore cases where accepting it may be required because of local cultural authority.

Some anthropologists have even suggested comparativism is no longer a defining paradigm and should be replaced by 'styles of comparison',¹⁰ due to a shift prompted by a postcolonial requirement to engage the specificity of emergent cultural landscapes. So the notion of multiple modernities, because it is inevitably comparative may have to defer a kind of sovereignty to the emergent contexts from which these modernities arose. The paradigms can be established later for comparative use at a secondary level.

ARTISTS' NOTIONS OF OPENNESS AND RECIPROCAL RELATIONS

Before returning in conclusion to the issue of circulation it might help to look at a remarkably frank and useful interview with a contemporary artist which identifies, if also presents the problems of, multiplicity. I refer to the recent 2019 conversation between Rirkrit Thiravanija and Apinan Poshyananda which is easily available online for public reference.¹¹

Rirkrit and Apinan met in 1988 when Apinan was doing his doctoral research at Cornell and Rirkrit worked as an assistant in the Robert Longo studio. In the age of global motility, of various forms of modernity emerging between different cultural contexts, this small fact tells us that modern Asian artists are very mobile, may transcend their cultures of origin via extensive foreign travel and education, and may have friendships with other people from their own art world of some longevity. Within the modal space of modernity there is indeed for each artistic life a roughly 50 year history for each contemporaneity. This also sets contemporaneity within a dependence on long term relationships mediated by foreign sites. In art cultures establishing a notion of the modern in Asia, an ideational precursor which both reflects and is the occasion for modernity itself, the feature is present since the mid-nineteenth century. It indicates that the later speed, cheapness, and relative frequency of foreign travel (with, in Rirkrit's case, triple domicile in New York, Berlin, and Chiang Mai, as well as epistolary contact via physical post, telegraph and recently internet) shows only a speeding-up of a process which was there

from the earliest Asian modernities. Rirkrit in conversation displays a smoothness without social friction, even if he often mentions hard work and preparation for many of his staged cooking events, as well as the need to maintain some variation on the comedic to distance himself from over-involvement with art works and their projection in exchange with the audience. Indeed he says he wants to stay away from art but takes as his analogy a reversal of Duchamp, the re-enlivening or re-binding to the attracting halo of the ready-made—he wants to bring 'art' back into the 'everyday', its objects, its acts.

His amateur affections are pottery and fly-fishing: the one the pursuit of Japanese tea masters, the latter of colonial aristocrats, neither of which he mentions. But both involve an aesthetic of non-involvement or detachment and the tracing of marks on a pottery or watery surface. His demeanour looks and sounds like the transcendence through the everyday one may, in a different field, associate with a recital pianist, say Alfred Brendel. But the everyday egalitarianism he proposes and the reciprocity of exchange during food ceremonies—the artist prepares and offers food, the audience offers acceptance of the relation—contains no acknowledgement of privilege. One can also think he might mistake the category of openness for the category of freedom and liberation, both of which elsewhere have been ruthlessly exploited in their own interest by the rich and powerful. Certainly his spoken discourse lacks a sense of tragedy known or personally experienced, that is of sacrifices made in the cause or resistance against the status quo. He habitually deals with the everyday, but this is an openness now normalised not the product of contestation and pain. As a survival strategy in a bitter world Rirkrit's non-attachment may work as a psychological position for those able to distance themselves from attachment, but most people don't live in that world, do they? But perhaps, more positively, Rirkrit points to a modernity of ease—*rajalila-asana*—an unabsorbed and unattached effortlessness found within some types of Asian modernity, (fig. 6) as much as the aesthetic of resistance

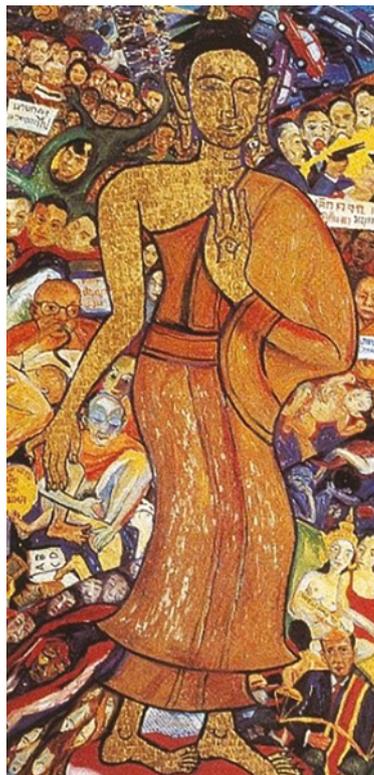
► **Fig 6.** (left) Rirkrit Thiravanija, at Hirshhorn exhibition, *Who's afraid of Red Yellow and Green?*, 2019.

IMAGE: SUPPLIED BY THE AUTHOR.



► **Fig 7.** (right) Vasan Sitthikhet, *Buddha of Bangkok*, 200 x 400 cms, 1992, [after Bloody May] as shown at APT I, 1993, Queensland Art Gallery.

IMAGE: REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION FROM THE ARTIST.



and expressionist excess also found in the work of Rirkrit's compatriot, Vasan Sitthikhet (fig. 7).

CIRCULATION AND MULTIPLE MODERNITIES

Turning finally to the problems of circulation, these involve inter-state and, within art cultures, inter-sectorial circulation, bilateral or unilateral display between states, and curatorial selecting in and selecting out. All of these procedures are the domain of taste and taste coteries, so appraisal is not a neutral assessment against some presumed gold standard of quality as much as a selectorial or political choice. If indeed we allow that curators often think they know the gold standard they can deduce, experience, or enact between works is one not initially found by their variegated audiences. It seems that Asian modernities are based in one art culture first and then in links or commonalities discovered for other cultures. This is more the case the nearer we get to the 2000s when there are a plethora of museums of contemporary art and art biennials or triennials throughout Asia where these works can be brought into comparison. However, I would guess up until the most recent editions of documenta (an exhibition of contemporary

art which takes place in Kassel every five years) and certainly of the Venice Biennale from about 2003, the comparators have still been Euramerican, or the educational experiences of Asian artists overseas, not, or only rarely, between Asian art cultures themselves. Indeed the major exhibitions of Huang Yongping in Paris and Cai Guo-Qiang in New York and Xu Bing in Taipei (fig. 8) are the first major positioning of 'Modern Masters' between different Asian and Euramerican sites.

Yet from around the late 1980s through into the early 1990s the modality of display between state or city actors, whether bilateral as in Paris-Tokyo or Tokyo-Berlin, has masked the conditions of multilateral display and the fact that the flow of art works and appraisals was mostly uni-directional. It is only from the exhibitions in Fukuoka and Brisbane in the early 1990s that the material presence of an Asian Modernity became evident in international flows. But by that time, and despite the still frequent use of the term 'independent curator' the selection of art works for inclusion was implicitly institutional if now embodied in the multi-site virtual circuit of Biennials in Asia. Linked by the flow of works, artists, and art curators this circuit itself



◀ **Fig 8.** Xu Bing *Five Series of Repetitions—Field*, 1987, woodblock print on paper 54.5x68.7 cms, Taipei Museum of Fine Arts retrospective, 2014. IMAGE: TAIPEI MUSEUM OF FINE ART

constituted a multivariant institution but one crossing multiple sites and state boundaries. Such multivalence eviscerated the local as the kernel or art production and conceptualisation. Without a transnational presence, in reverse, art could neither become fully national nor inter-national. The transnational was supposed to define practice everywhere. This situation placed inescapable pressure on the notion of an Asian modernity despite its clear interpretive value since the 1930s. Modernity was present only as either distributed or as concentrated cores, and the core was shut off from its branches of distribution.



◀ **Fig 9.** Jakarta art patrons and their shoes, at an exhibition in December, 2010. IMAGE: JOHN CLARK

Art works, their makers, and their distributors move around circuits where they seem to gain value as a condition of moving. They take stored value as capital with them on such circuits since they appear to present the cultural capital of where they come from, but also a speculative capital is generated because of where they may be presumed to go, both further in the circuit and thereby further in added value. Switching takes place between the circulation of art and the producer as cultural capital and circulation of art and the artist as an occupier of a market site of opportunity and for producing work. Given the investment in art educational and distributional systems, the careers of artists, the speculative value of art works as commodities and the decorated display of their consumers (fig. 9), we can expect that Asian modernities are accompanied by rather specific structures which are not found in Euramerica or are only tangentially analogue to the Euramerican ones.

Unfortunately these Asian circuits of circulation have yet to be studied in any depth

► **Fig 10.** (upper left) Qin Warriors from Shanxi History Museum as exhibited at National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, September, 2019.

IMAGE: NUMTHONG SAETANG, REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION.



► **Fig 11.** (upper right) Cai Guo-Qiang *Murmuration* at National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, September 2019.

IMAGE: NUMTHONG SAETANG, REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION.



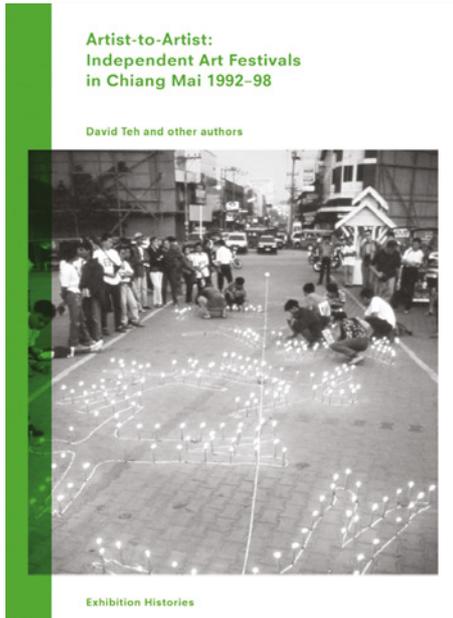
► **Fig 12.** (lower left) Womanifesto Workshop 2001. Courtesy Womanifesto Archive, Bangkok.

IMAGE: WOMANIFESTO ARCHIVE, REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION.



► **Fig 13.** (lower right) Cover of Chiang Mai Social Installation book, *Artist-to-Artist: Independent Art Festivals in Chiang Mai 1992-98*, David Teh and others, 2018.

IMAGE: AFTER ALL BOOKS, LONDON, REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION.



but we may expect there to be very specific and differentially modern structures there.

It is probably too soon to speculate on fashions inside Asian art worlds which may bring about structures of modernity, especially the functions of art works as signs. But the notion that modernism in the world, like modernism in the studio, involves a shift from fashion being a parasite on art, to art being a parasite on fashion, can be seen all over art which functions as a simulacrum, or semiotic substitute for an actual art object, particularly in Japan in the work of Morimura Yasumasa or Nara Yoshitomo, for example.

The generalised appeal of this work may be adduced from the number of their local followers as seen across Biennials in Asia. But here, like the massive audiences for the Andy Warhol/Ai Weiwei [2015/16] and Tomb

Warriors/ Cai Guo-Qiang [2019] (figs 10 and 11) shows in Melbourne, we may be facing a new phenomenon. That is the spectacularisation of mass taste has globalised out of different types of modernity into a collective local, that is a modern art which sits within a local culture with its own definitions of modernity even as it corresponds to a newly globalised, transnational taste in spectacle, mediated by modern mass-consumption now extended from goods to images and back again. Digitalisation has made the motility

of art works and actors turn back on the very categories it had once used to distance itself from the everyday.

To re-auratise the objects of daily life after they return from the newly sanctified status of ready-mades, à la Rirkrit, perhaps the various kinds of modernity need to break up the concept or sensibility of 'nowness' which implies a prior consent to ideological conformity and reinforces the political parading of formal associations by a small coterie of curators and like-minded artists across the globe. This re-auratisation is a deliberate occupation, if not usurpation, of the position hitherto occupied by the avant garde.

For the Asian modernities which still maintain a local as core there aren't very many choices. Ignorance and silence seem to be increasingly unavailable except for those with formalist concerns, those who wrap themselves with 'tradition', and some of those who deploy digital or other new technology. The whole structure of relations between different cognate modernities in Asia and the more distant, formerly hegemonic modernities such as those of Euramerica, is becoming tighter and more rigid. Artists can now acknowledge themselves across different coteries conceived transnationally, but once they come back to

local or kernel cultures they seem in the 2010s to have to either rediscover a classicism available only to them, or a kitsch populism. These situations were better in the 1990s (figs 12 and 13), when artistic experimentation, sometimes with the exhibition format itself, could continue between artists relatively autonomously from the mainstream art world, such as the Womanifesto exhibitions in Thailand,¹² or the three iterations of Chiangmai social installation, 1992–1998.¹³ ¶



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1. For a recent overall view of Gu Dexin's work see Abigail Ashford, 'Gu Dexin's Aliens and the Ambivalent Aesthetics of Cuteness', *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 18:5 (2019), 87–99.
2. For a first description of these units see my essay 'An Australian Creative Space: where is Australian-Asian art now?', in 2006/*Contemporary Commonwealth*/, ed. by Diane Waite (Melbourne: Australian Centre for the Moving Image & National Gallery of Victoria, 2006), pp. 26–33.
3. See Henri Focillon, *La Vie des Formes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1943); George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962); Keith Moxey, *Visual Time: The Image in History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).
4. 'The model of the nuptial between the two reigns [Venice and Tartaria] puts in doubt the stability, and thus the readability of the circulation of objects and individuals and their identity': see Marco Musillo, *Tangible Whispers, Neglected Encounters: Histories of East–West Artistic Dialogues, 14th–20th Century* (Milan: Mimesis International, 2018), p. 196. Musillo also cites Deleuze: 'Becomings are not phenomena of imitation or assimilation, but of a double capture,

- of non-parallel evolution, of nuptials between two reigns': see Gilles Deleuze with Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 2 [originally published in 1977; translation originally published 1987].
5. Musillo, *Tangible Whispers*, p. 201.
6. See *Realism in Asian Art*, ed. by Kim Inhye and Joyce Fan (Gyeonggi-do Gwacheon-si: The National Museum of Contemporary Art/Singapore: The National Art Gallery, 2010).
7. *Cubism in Asia: Unbound Dialogues*, cur. and ed. by Tohru Matsumoto, Kenjin Miwa and Katsuo Suzuki (Tokyo: National Museum of Modern Art and The Japan Foundation, 2005).
8. Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1977), p. 211.
9. See John Clark, 'Comparativism from Inside and Outside: Not only a Matter of Viewpoint' [review of *Comparativism in Art History*, ed. by Jaś Elsner (London and New York: Routledge, 2017)], *Journal of Art Historiography*, 17 (2017), online, 14 pp.

10. Susanne Küchler, 'Comparativism in Anthropology: Big Questions and Scaled Comparison—an Illusive Dream?', in *Comparativism in Art History*, ed. by Jaś Elsner (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 130–144 (p. 131).
11. Rirkrit Thiravanija's conversation with Apinan Poshyananda of 25 September 2019 at the National Gallery of Singapore under the auspices of the Beyeler Foundation is to be found at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9noK0mIUHQ>>. A slightly earlier online interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist in June 2019 under the auspices of Beyeler Foundation is at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZDsQoVZIoU>>. In this Obrist mentions he has interviewed Rirkrit almost annually 21 times over the last 26 years. There is also a video with Rirkrit speaking at the Hirshhorn exhibition in 2019 at <<https://hirshhorn.si.edu/exhibitions/rirkrit-thiravanija-who-s-afraid-of-red-yellow-and-green/>>.
12. On Womanifesto see an essay by one of its founders Varsha Nair, 'Womanifesto', *Art AsiaPacific*, 26 (2000). This group activity has also been the focus of an exhibition, *Archiving Womanifesto*, at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok and in a different shape at Cross Art Projects in Sydney from October 2019.
13. See David Teh et al., *Artist-to Artist: Independent Art Festivals in Chiang Mai 1992–1998* (London: After All Books, 2018). See also the earlier book, David Teh, *Thai Art: Currencies of the Contemporary* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2017).