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Review Essay



The Spirit of Things in Southeast Asia

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Julius Bautista (ed.) *The Spirit of Things. Materiality and Religious Diversity in Southeast Asia*. Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Publications, 2012, x + 220 pp. ISBN 9780877277583. Price: USD 31.95 (paperback).

Nora A. Taylor and Boreth Ly (eds) *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art. An Anthology*. Cornell: Southeast Asia Publications, 2012, xviii + 262 pp. ISBN 9780877277569. Price: USD 31.95 (paperback).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these two collections on art and the spirit of things in Southeast Asia share a sense of encounter, movement, dynamism, and translation. An attunement to the materiality of art and things and the transformations these undergo and occasion in everyday practice and performance marks both, as does a sense of the inherent cosmopolitanism of an area comprising one of the planet's two largest archipelagos, an area 'that happens to be called "Southeast Asia"' (Taylor, p. 9). If *The Spirit of Things* highlights the delimiting role of the nation and the demands of citizenship within religiously plural landscapes, *Southeast Asian Art* offers a shifting sense of 'area' that is not defined by national borders—an area that, importantly, includes the Southeast Asian diasporas commonly excluded from nationally circumscribed artistic traditions.

Bautista and Reid's introduction to *The Spirit of Things* lays out the book's central proposition, namely, how religious materiality can be productively analyzed in dynamic relation to key forms of social and public movement:

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'locomotive sociality' or the actual movement of things of devotion in the production of religious piety, for instance, as portable objects on pilgrimage or amulets that nestle close to bodies in war (p. viii); things trafficked for purposes of exchange or commerce in 'pious economies,' and things that remain in place, concentrating and patterning the kinetic energies that emerge around them, whether those of persons, collectivities, or spirits (pp. viii–ix). In this book the tension between things in motion and the designs of nation-states are seen as enhancing the materiality of things as they surface as stakes within fields of competing religious discourses. A central aim of the collection is to investigate religion 'beyond belief' as it is realized in everyday practice. Contributors have an eye for the materiality of conventional religious objects like altars and deity statues but also religious ephemera and things like cars that may seem expressions of crass materialism in some circumstances but in others become morally charged artifacts reflective of their owner's piety.

The first essay of twelve, 'Icon, Iconoclasm, Art Commodity: Are Objects Still Agents in Vietnam?', explores the ongoing discomfort and 'reluctant iconoclasm' vis-à-vis such things as popular Vietnamese religious altars or antiquities that are valued collectibles in an accelerated market economy but figure in cautionary tales where the statues' agency retaliates against unworthy dealers and buyers. In highlighting the uncertainty that animates such things this essay is exemplary in documenting the inevitable incompleteness of modernity's project articulated in Communist anti-superstition campaigns, among other places. Chapter 2 is another compelling essay that considers how middle-class Malays navigate between the desire for commodities productive of social status and the need to 'halalize' such commodities in their public performances as pious Muslims. Here, too, uncertainty underlies the question of what constitutes 'balanced consumption' when it comes to cars as both objective manifestations of status and bodily prostheses of their owners that publicize the piety that, by implication, would also characterize the private space of the car owner's home. 'A Spirit Medium as Architect: Caodism's Visual Theology', the book's third chapter, comes with photographs of the lavish temple interior. The author argues persuasively that given Caodism's inherently visual theology, its religious pantheon is revealed first visually and only thereafter is it articulated in words. This allows for a relatively open, ambiguous set of repertoires capable of incorporating elements from different religions and enabling an array of engagements rather than a more exclusionary doctrine-based theology. Chapter 4 looks similarly at the role of buildings along with images as potent emblems of ethnic and national identity within a process of state-driven Burmanization. Chapter 5, 'Holy Water and Material Religion in a Pilgrimage Shrine in Malaysia,' details how the materiality of water—its malleability, portability,

and accessibility—‘afford’ the ‘plural materialities’ of St. Anne’s water, offering practitioners of different religions a way to bypass doctrinal differences.

Materiality also figures centrally in Chapters 6 and 7. While Chapter 6 shifts attention away from the ritual that consecrates Buddha images to their prior fabrication where different persons, materials, material qualities, and the like converge in ways that highlight locality and embedded traditions. Chapter 7 follows things that continually migrate between different contexts where they act as ‘effect-producing forms.’ “Dressing for Modern War in Old-Fashioned Magic” traces the circulation of traditional Thai protective amulets in the Vietnam War where young Thai men, who initially tolerated these tokens of their families’ concern as they headed for war, came to reassess their import and efficacy. Crucial factors in this change emerged from the international arena of war in which American soldiers admired and sought after the amulets that young Thai first skeptically dismissed, and the meta-discourse in print media and photographs testifying to the amulets’ powers and efficacy. Chapter 9 focuses on the concentration of persons and potency around a house altar in Indonesian Borneo. Chapter 10 argues convincingly how productive it can be to focus on the performative recitation and materiality of a scroll at the heart of a temple-based celebration of a Thai prince as opposed to an approach that bypasses the image or sees it simply as an illustration of the more primary scroll text. Similarly, Chapters 11 and 12 foreground the physical interaction and intimacy that is a key component of devotion in relation here to, respectively, the religious images of the dead Christ in the Philippines and statues seen as Gods’ bodies in Singapore. A dead Christ image is kissed and fondled, figures as a dead relative in family photographs and may have as many as 40 sets of clothing. Chapter 12 pays careful attention to the power of form and mimesis, suggesting convincingly that while personalized statues help to keep the ancestors close, more abstract spirit tablets hold them at bay.

Nora Taylor’s introduction to *Contemporary Southeast Asian Art*, ‘Who Speaks for Southeast Asian Art,’ accomplishes some important ground-clearing work as this initial question gives way to the more open-ended one of ‘who relates to Southeast Asian Art?’. Moving beyond the limiting role of geography in defining Southeast Asia, she is more concerned about rethinking notions of the ‘modern’ that are not beholden to Western perspectives and to carve out a space for a Southeast Asian art history that has been subject to exclusion, by Southeast Asian studies and art history alike. A key point of departure is a statement by Benedict Anderson, who argued that ‘the future of Southeast Asian studies [may] depend on Southeast Asians themselves’. One of the most innovative and productive contributions of this anthology is its ‘curatorial’ approach in which essays foreground the role of artists, curators, art histories, exhibitions,

and performative modes of artistic presentation in laying the ground for a SEA art history. What the book reveals with such breadth is an emerging infrastructure for artistic endeavor. The editors have consciously chosen this approach, claiming that ending the anthology with an interview intentionally leaves the reader with an open-ended feeling. One looks forward to more of this exciting endeavor.