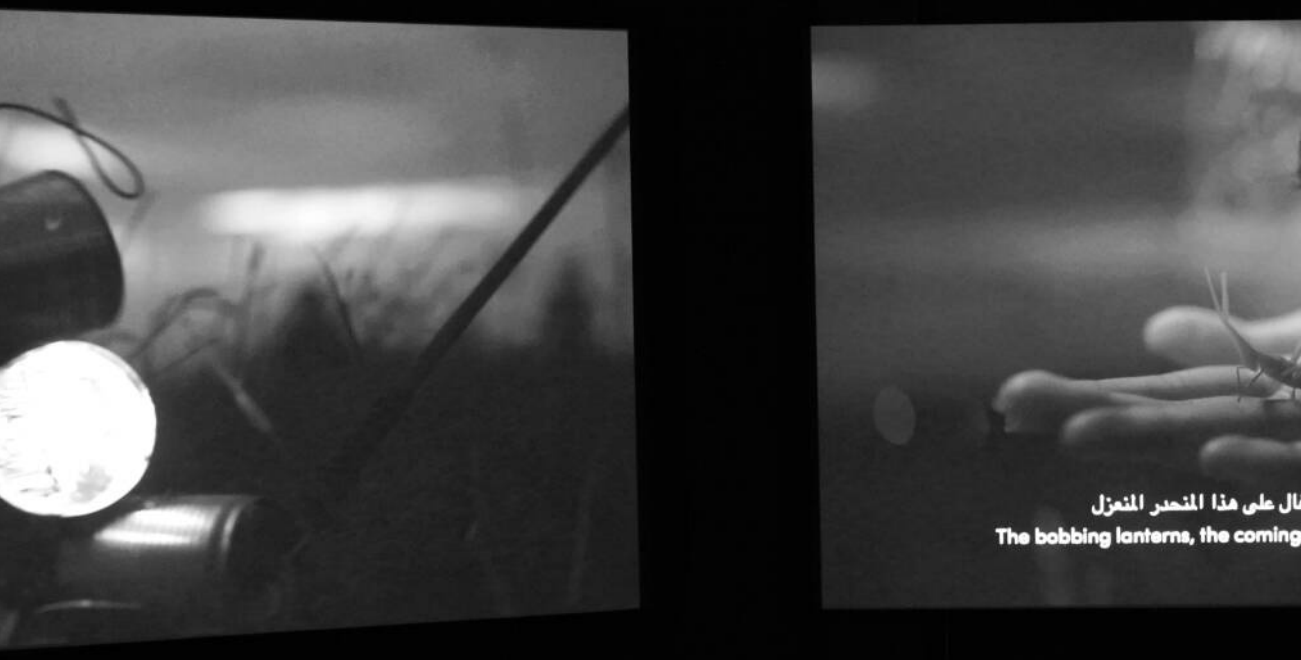
THE ANECDOTE
Mark Philip Bradley and Lee Weng-Choy

Kuala Lumpur-based art critic Lee Weng-Choy and University of Chicago historian Mark Philip Bradley are working on parallel projects that explore the conditions of contemporary art practice in Southeast Asia. Here they discuss how Walter Benjamin's notion of the anecdote and the recent archival turn by visual artists together offer generative questions for their own thought and writing.



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Thao Nguyen Phan, *Mute Grain*, 2019. Three-channel video: 15 mins, color, sound; ed. 5 + 2AP. Installation view, Sharjah Biennial 14, 2019.

LWC — Mark, recently you shared with me a proposal for a project you're working on, about the "global South" and the "making of our times." It got me thinking more about my own approaches to writing about contemporary art. For over twenty years, I've written about art and culture from a perch in Singapore, but I wouldn't describe my work as covering or specializing in Southeast Asia. I'm more interested in reflecting how we represent the region than attempting representations of it myself.

If I may start our conversation by sharing an anecdote, but one without names or dates—which, I suppose, is anathema to a certain kind of historian. If I really wanted to chase down the facts, I probably could. But I want to relay it in this form, as if telling a joke, even though it's not. So, a renowned artist, who's around eighty, is about to do a major retrospective, and, as part of the whole project, wants to recreate a performance she did from fifty years ago. She tries doing all the moves—there are lots of fast, repeated movements—and, since she's not young anymore, it's tiring, and, you know, difficult, to say the least. She starts having doubts. She calls up a friend, an esteemed dance choreographer, who's about the same age. The artist explains her situation, asking her friend if she has any advice, any tips to share. Her friend says: Yes. Just practice.

When I was young, I wanted to be a physicist. I had this notion that physics was the best way—not just for me, but for anybody—to understand the universe and by extension, our own little world. After a few semesters in upstate New York, I had a change of mind, and switched schools, courses and coasts. As a teenager, I wasn't much of a reader. Yet somehow, during my sophomore year, I decided I wanted to write a book. It would take a number of years of flailing about before I found a focus; that happened in my late twenties, soon after I moved to Singapore from the US. I realized then that what I wanted to write is art criticism. I chose "criticism" because I did not study art history but philosophy, literature, and theory, and felt that that word best described my own approach to art. Decades later, and here I am in Kuala Lumpur, and, among other things, am very, very slowly trying to put together a collection of essays on artists—the pandemic's not helping, and I've stalled on the project. The book will be called, *The Address of Art, and the Scale of Other Places*. Besides being about a number of artists I admire, it's also an attempt at addressing the world at large.

What I thought I could touch on here, in our co-writing collaboration, are these questions of "address" and "scale." I like "address" because it refers both to "location" as well as to how one "speaks" to an audience or about a topic, and "scale" is not just about size but also precisely about relations—about how one fits into a context, space or place. Mainly, though, I'd like to make a case for art criticism as a *practice without methodology*.

MPB — We are thinking along parallel lines. You want to write about art informed by your philosophical engagements. As a historian, I want to write history, but as I do I want to borrow from new methods developed in the world of art practice. There has been a lot of talk in the art world about an archival turn and developing research-based practices. As I understand it, many art schools now require an engagement with research as part of the MFA process. I began to encounter some of this work as I started my own research on the history of the global South. The emergence of Southern visual artists as critical players in the making of contemporary global culture is a part of the project, more particularly a case study of Southeast Asian artists. So I began to travel to exhibitions and biennales in the region to see some work and started talking with artists and curators. Perhaps because I am a historian, I was immediately taken by what artists are doing with history in their work.

Take for instance Thao Nguyên Phan's 2019 *Mute Grain*.[1] It explores the famine that gripped northern and central Vietnam in 1945 and killed as many as three million people. The famine has not played a major role in the ways in which most historians have told the history of modern Vietnam. In that sense, Phan is taking an event out of the shadows to show the central role it played in the lives of so many Vietnamese families at mid-century. Some of the materials Phan is working with are oral histories with survivors

conducted by Vietnamese historians in the 1950s. We hear those voices, and they are powerful. But at first this dimension of *Mute Grain* appears to work in more familiar ways, familiar at least to historians. Oral history is part of our more conventional tool kit. But in Phan's hands, it is layered into something far more complex. Borrowing from Vietnamese folktales and chronicles, she crafts a narrative of a young woman who becomes what the Vietnamese call a hungry ghost unable to pass on to the next life after she dies from hunger. Phan visually narrates this story in a kind of magical realist style that is both simultaneously beautiful and quietly offers fundamentally new ways of understanding the everyday meanings of the famine. Weng, to use one of your terms, Phan addresses her audiences in ways historians often seem unable to do. I want to try to think about how to get where Phan gets in her work in my own. My hunch is that your notion of scale, or fitting into a context or space, may be a generative way of starting to get there.

LWC — I'm so glad you mentioned *Mute Grain*. I encountered the work at the 2019 Sharjah Biennale. Our mutual friend, Zoe Butt, was one of the Biennale's three curators, and Phan's work was part of Zoe's assembly of projects. I worked with Zoe on her all-day March Meet symposium, and during my short visit to Sharjah, didn't get a chance to properly look at Phan's three-channel video and installation. I must find a way to see it again. From what you say, it sounds like *Mute Grain* is a great example of an artwork that can help us think around the concepts of "address" and "scale." Although, for me, when it comes to my own chosen examples, they don't so much *illustrate* my ideas about art writing; rather, I hope they can function to *test* those ideas.

One way to articulate this idea I've put forward, of art criticism as a practice without methodology, is through a discussion of the use of anecdote. Art historian James Elkins has talked about the excessive citation of Walter Benjamin—there was a time when it seemed like every other article on contemporary art would mention him, regardless of whether the text was referring to art from Western Europe, East Africa, North America, or South Asia. I too have been guilty of this, but, in my defense, I still maintain that Benjamin has been especially helpful for me in thinking about visual culture in Singapore. When I was based there, I regularly wrote about how the island city-state has imagined itself as an amalgamation of the best from the East and the West—the inheritor of the great traditions as well as the latest technologies—and that, by offering itself as a paradigm of "New Asia," it staked a claim as being part of the avant-garde of the next stage of global capitalism. It was in this context that I cited Benjamin's critique of progress and conventional historiography (which presumes a cumulative and progressive narrative). There's that quote from his *Arcades Project*: "Anecdote brings things closer to us in space, allows them to enter into our lives. Anecdote represents the extreme opposite of history—which demands an "empathy" that renders everything abstract. Empathy amounts to the same thing as reading newspapers. The true method of making things present is: to imagine them in our space (and not to imagine ourselves in their space)."[2]

In one particular essay, I contrasted promotional material from Channel NewsAsia—the Singapore television network with ambitions of becoming the CNN for "Asia"—with a discussion of some productions by TheatreWorks and two artworks, one by Amanda Heng, and the other by Simryn Gill.[3] I don't have the space to get into a description and discussion of the artworks here, but let me share this image of CNA's Asian-news-by-Asian-reporters-for-Asian-viewers branding-cum-ideology. There was this TV commercial from the early days of the channel: a picture frame hovered over a blank white screen, inside which flashed different images of "exotic" Asian women, such as the Padong of Burma who wear brass rings around their necks. And the tagline? "It takes one to know one." I've argued that these orientalizing and self-orientalizing gestures have been pretty standard practice for the mainstream media and government in Singapore. *Pace* Benjamin, you could say that to imagine ourselves in an Other's space is to colonize that Other space. Whereas with some artists, like Heng and

Gill, their work often includes gestures that invite the Other to inhabit "our" space, which can then radically open it up. The suggestion here is that anecdote can be a useful approach for encountering difference, precisely because it opens up our perceptions of Others, rather than framing Others through our own narratives.

Of the world's regions, Southeast Asia is perhaps the most evenly divided in terms of archipelagic and continental land areas. In another essay of mine, which offered reflections on curating in Southeast Asia, I took up these tropes of islands and continents to discuss how curators have intentionally or inadvertently attempted to represent the region.[4] I suggested a pedestrian view from the ground is like an anecdotal one, while an airborne view from above is thematic. Moreover, an island perspective is akin to an anecdotal one, and the continental view is thematic. When you're on an island, you need only walk around and signs of the sea are never far from sight. But for a proper sense of a continent, you have to imagine looking out from a plane window to appreciate its extent. And, after some thorough surveying, when you see a pattern across a continent, then you may have a persuasive argument for a theme. In comparison, what happens in one island may not apply to the next: an anecdote does not offer enough evidence for a general tendency. Instead, sometimes what it does offer is an example of an exceptional specificity. But how often have you come across a text where an anecdote is recruited merely to illustrate an already constructed argument, which, sadly, happens all too often in exhibitions and essays that aim to make representations about Southeast Asia, or any other region or community. A set of observations becomes overgeneralized and a certain feature is then asserted as the defining characteristic of artistic practices of some group, containing and reducing the complex diversities and disparities of the region within a singular framework.

How many times have you seen a show, or read an essay, where the artworks were used mainly to demonstrate the curator's or critic's theme or argument? In such cases, the theme and argument speak at the art. But the job of the curator or the critic is not to speak *at* but *to* art. The preposition matters: the "to" invites a conversation, as opposed to the one-sided broadcast the "at" insinuates. What makes a conversation is not the talking but the *listening*. And I like to think of the practice of art writing and criticism as a practice of listening. I don't think I'm an especially skilled listener, but I am a committed one. And one of my favorite spaces for listening is the anecdote. As for "address" and "scale," I suppose one could say that my preferred modes of address stay close to the ground; I'm interested in the conversational, the lateral, the adjacent. I'm less interested in looking and speaking from above, as if I could presume to survey the entire field or represent what's happening in the scene. It's not that I don't consider big themes or issues—I regularly do—but I typically approach these through the scale of the personal, and tend to eschew the global. I don't think the accumulation of anecdotes I collect should ever build up into something larger, like a methodology, a system of thought. As a critic who still reads and thinks a lot about theory, I'm not trying to be like a physicist, and chase after some unified field theory of the universe of art. So, rather than drawing conclusions, my own penchant for using anecdotes in criticism is to interrupt the tendency to generalize through a close reading of specific cases—to prompt debate and discussion by challenging assumptions, rather than propping up positions. For Benjamin, anecdote could lay bare the writing of history as a reconstruction, not of the past, but of a present. For me, writing about art, I have found that anecdote can offer ways of interrupting our habits of constructing narrative closures, and instead, anecdote can remind us to keep the story open-ended, and multifarious.

Art criticism is not something I would consider a discipline—an example of which is art history. It's a mongrel practice, like art making. If you want to become an artist, you simply start making art; likewise, to become an art critic you start writing about it. And there are so many ways and different methods to try and experiment with. In both cases, making art, writing about it, it's not easy, but you keep practicing. Yes,

Vandy Rattana, *Monologue*, 2015. Single channel HD video: 18:55 mins, color, sound. Co-production Jeu de Paume, FNAGP.

in many cases, critics and artists do go to school, but these excursions into the academy, while recommended, are not required. When I think of how anecdote insists on the particular, I also think of anecdote as a form of, or rather, a particular instance of practicing. To get back to my opening anecdote about the senior artist and the advice to "just practice." When it comes to my own writing, I don't think "practice makes perfect." Sometimes you practice not to get better, but simply to practice. And to repeat. And sometimes to repeat with a difference. I recently read a wonderful interview with the Arabic novelist Elias Khoury. He said that repetition is central to the way he thinks about literature: "Repetition is, I might say, a way of insisting that every story contains many stories inside it. The same story can be told in any number of different ways, of course. My novels try to suggest this richness, even though I can tell only a limited number of versions. In other words, I'm a student of Scheherazade—I don't tell the story, I tell how the story has been told."[5]

MPB — "The true measure of making things present is to imagine them in our space." Yes! And I see where you want to go with Benjamin's notion of the anecdote and the kind of work it can do to fundamentally shift our perspectives. Your discussion immediately reminded me of the work of Vandy Rattana. In a sense, he brings what you term an "island" perspective to the contemporary epigones of the past in mainland Southeast Asia. I first encountered Rattana's work at Patrick Flores's Singapore Biennale in November 2019. It was a video piece titled *Monologue*.[6] I will confess it took me some time and thought to situate what he was doing, and in truth, I think I am still trying to take in the full implications of his method. As you will see, I am less willing to give up on method *qua* method than you are!

In *Monologue*, we initially see a landscape in northwestern Cambodia with a rice field in the center of the frame surrounded by a grove of mango and palm trees. The landscape functions in the film in some of the same ways you ascribe to island perspectives. It is a windy day, and we can hear the wind, sometimes quite loudly, rustle through the leaves and branches against what is a bright and brilliant sky. Rattana finds the field by following a hand-drawn map his father had made for him. It plots the location of the grave of his sister, who died before he was born. She rests between two beautiful mango trees, though Rattana does not quite know where. "Here?" he speculates as the camera pans around the space. "Or . . . over

there?" And "why," he asks, "am I constantly thinking about you?"

The camera sits in the space between the two trees, and Rattana talks to his sister in almost stream-of-consciousness style. "They are Pum Sen mango trees," he tells her, just like the ones at the family house in Phnom Penh. "They are sour when still green but when mixed with fish sauce they are exquisite and pair wonderfully with grilled fish." He also tells his sister about the rice farmers working the fields in front of the mango grove. The scent of the mango promises a good harvest this year. He wonders if his sister's body helped fertilize the fields we see the farmers cultivating.

Rattana's only direct memory of his sister is a photograph, in which she is "motionless all the time." He has never "seen her crying in the photograph." "Why," he asks, "do you cry now?" The afternoon begins to fade, and Rattana collects a bamboo branch, some fragments of soil, and a mango tree branch from her gravesite. We see the items spread out on a white cloth, white the color of death in Cambodia. As *Monologue* ends, the sun slowly sets between the two mango trees.

About halfway into the almost-19-minute *Monologue*, we come to realize it is telling another kind of story, too. Rattana's sister, he relays in passing, is among 5,000 people who are buried in the rice field. What he never directly says is that they are part of the estimated 1.7 to 2.5 million victims of the genocidal Pol Pot regime that ruled Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. "The year 1978 showed itself here," Rattana tells us as the video opens but that is as far as he goes to situate time and place. For most Khmer viewers, that is enough.

I am struck by how *Monologue* works so differently than many of the more official sites of historical memory about the Pol Pot era in Cambodia. Cheung Ek, just fifteen kilometers outside of Phnom Penh, is among the largest mass graves that make up what are often called the Khmer Rouge killing fields. It is now a tourist site. There are skulls on view and reenactments of killing for spectators. In Phnom Penh, the Tuol Sleng Museum occupies the site of the S-21 prison where 20,000 Cambodians were detained and tortured by the Khmer Rouge in what was a network of similar torture centers across the country. It was established by the Cambodian state to chronicle the history of the genocide. Tuol Sleng is a complex site, and one, like the museums and memorials on the sites of the Nazi death camps at Auschwitz and Dachau, that can be a difficult place for visitors.

Art, in a manner of speaking, has a prominent place at Tuol Sleng. Some of its walls are covered with paintings by Van Nath, a celebrated Cambodian artist and one of a handful of survivors of the prison. The paintings recreate scenes of torture. There are also striking black and white photographs of victims. When each prisoner first entered S-21, they were individually photographed by their captors. Some of these photographs are displayed at Tuol Sleng, but more controversially a group of them were shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1997 where the line between the photographs as aesthetic objects and the documentation of terror was sometimes blurred.[7]

I don't mean to say that *Monologue* offers a more important or deeper historical truth than do official sites such as Cheung Ek or Tuol Sleng. But they have proved so central to the ways in which the genocide is remembered in contemporary Cambodia, operating as a kind of Bourdieusian doxa, that these sites often make it difficult for scholars and publics to find alternative or adjacent ways to make meaning of the recent Cambodia past. In a sense, the grave of Rattana's sister is more commonplace than those better-known sites of memory. There are thousands of unmarked mass graves from the Khmer Rouge era around Cambodia, often on the same kind of fertile agricultural land where Rattana's sister is buried.

Monologue does not strike me as aimed so much at recovering a transcendent historical meaning for these ubiquitous spaces, although at moments Rattana goes in those directions. Most often he invites us into a singular space, and his own efforts to grapple with the interplay of the public and private meanings he finds in it. Rattana, for example, makes clear that his father and mother are still living and that the bamboo, soil, and mango branch he collects at his sister's grave are meant for

them. But he chooses not to say how it is that his father and mother survived the Pol Pot years when his sister did not. He also tells us in the early 1980s "desperate men" started to dig up the graves, "seeking their fortune" only to find "the putrid smell of newly unrecognizable remains." He talks about these men with empathy. Nonetheless, he asks his sister, "did they dig in your place too?" Through the choices Rattana makes in structuring his elliptical narrative and in the arresting visual landscape he places around it, *Monologue* constantly pushes viewers to think hard about the meanings of the past and the present.

As you can tell I have a strong appreciation for the work. But I also think it offers a method, one that can potentially travel from the visual arts back to people like me who write history in more conventional ways. I am still struggling to find the right words to describe it, but there is something about the intimacy running through *Monologue*, a sensibility more fully appreciated by watching the film in its entirety, that points toward an entirely original path forward in making sense of the past.

LWC — Mark, I'm very grateful for the receptivity you've shown in this dialogue. Grateful for the conversation in the first place. Though the point isn't about whether you and I are converging in agreement or not, but that after I put something out there, you take it and really go with it. I've been speaking abstractly, and in response, you've offered concrete readings of artworks. Again, at stake here is that these examples, or anecdotes, if you will, of Vandy Rattana's and Thao Nguyên Phan's works, they do not illustrate, so much as test the concepts and arguments we've been discussing. I suppose one could say that anecdote can be a particular form of address—in how it both speaks to something, and, also, how it locates something, somehow—a particular form like a method, an approach. I'm all for the plurality and proliferation of methods; my position is that I'm skeptical when someone, explicitly or inadvertently, claims that these pluralities build up to a systematic methodology.

I have a deep respect for the work historians do, to recover the past, so to speak. I suppose, as a critic who's mainly interested in contemporary art, I don't quite bear the same weight of that responsibility. But I am committed to speaking and listening to the past, because I recognize that to speak *of* or *from* the present always entails exactly that.

MPB — I share the skepticism, Weng. I want to close out my side of the conversation with one more anecdote. An old friend, an editor, told me a long time ago that it was best to avoid landing a piece of historical writing in the present. The danger, she said, is that you hope what you write has a long shelf life, and you never know how the "now" will read five, ten, or twenty years on. You and I aren't strictly writing history here, so the admonition may not be completely germane. But we are writing about history, and I think it is critical to remind future readers of the moment in which we are doing so. We are in the second year of a global pandemic, one which has put pressures on all of us in different and often very difficult ways. In our case, the pressures are more modest, but they are still present and worth noticing. We had started to build an intellectual friendship as we met and talked in Hong Kong and Kuala Lumpur before the pandemic came down about the concerns that drive each other's work around contemporary Southeast Asian art. I am grateful to the Gray Center for allowing us to continue that conversation in this form. I look forward to a time when we can again do the same in person.

NOTES

1
Thao Nguyên Phan, *Mute Grain*, 2019. Three-channel video, black and white, sound. 15:45 minutes. Commissioned by the Sharjah Art Foundation.

2
Walter Benjamin, quoted in Richard Sieburth, "Benjamin the Scrivener," *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. Gary Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 13–37.

3
Lee Weng-Choy, "Authenticity, Reflexivity & Spectacle: or, the Rise of New Asia is not the End of the World," in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005; Second Edition, 2012), 338–353.

4
Lee Weng-Choy "Metonym and Metaphor, Islands and Continents: Reflections on Curating Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia," in *Charting Thoughts — Essays on Art in Southeast Asia*, ed. Low Sze Wee and Patrick Flores (Singapore: National Gallery Singapore, 2017), 336–347.

5
Elias Khoury, "The Art of Fiction No. 233," *The Paris Review*, 2021, https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6940/the-art-of-fiction-no-233-elias-khoury (accessed 18 July 2021).

6
Vandy Rattana, *Monologue*, 2015. Single channel HD video, color, sound. 18:55 minutes. Co-production Jeu de Paume, FNAGP.

7
Lindsay French, "Exhibiting Terror" in *Truth Claims: Representation and Human Rights*, ed. Mark Philip Bradley and Patrice Petro (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 131–55.