IVAN PERIES AND THE OUTRIGGERS TO ASSOCIATION – AN ESSAY TO IAN GOONETILEKE[1]

We are not masters of our own production. It is imposed on us.
Henri Matisse[2]

Introduction

Like his book, *43 Group: A Chronicle of Fifty Years in the Art of Sri Lanka*, Neville Weereratne's chapter on Ivan Peries is an uninspired collage: an incoherent collection of photographs, biography, quotations of others' writings about the painter (half the entire chapter) and just one and a three-quarter paragraphs on the actual paintings, or texts. Remarkably, it makes no argument about the work as a whole, although the later paintings are discussed in a short paragraph, one symptomatic of the dogged, obstinately anti-political, stiflingly anti-intellectual aestheticism – a reduction of "art" to form and feeling, the disconnection of art from politics and the social – that dominates Sri Lankan English art criticism, including from the left. Hagiography ("holy-writing") in the strict sense, this is a criticism that rejects its name, refuses to be critical; in its account, the best Sri Lankan painters never painted badly. But even George Keyt, surely, couldn't always have been picture perfect? In fact, one could call the last few decades – yes, decades – of his production banally repetitive – the work of art *as* mechanical reproduction. Like batting for a draw, it takes no risks. Apart from the refreshing recent writing of Jagath Weerasinghe, our English art criticism cannot contemplate so much as a single negative statement about its object; so doing would amount, no doubt, to blasphemy. Filial to its enlightenment roots, it doesn't, either, defile the eternal, ethereal purity of art by finding politics in it; Weerasinghe, again, being the exception. Unsurprisingly, it says "no entry" to the (poststructuralist) critique of aesthetics:[3] even though modernist Sri Lankan painting – Peries, certainly –

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[1] It was in Ian Goonetileke's Maharagama house that I was first introduced to modern Sri Lankan painting. Like many things Ian taught me, this particular lesson took a long time to be learned – decades, in fact. I know he wouldn't agree with many of the statements here. Indeed, I cannot account for how Ian, who introduced me, when I was a pre-undergrad research assistant at the Marga Institute, to the Marxist reading of literature – Caudwell, Lukacs, Williams – could forget his Marxism or just politics when writing on art. I like to think, though, that he'd appreciate the spirit of this essay. My thanks to Manel Fonseka for permission to reproduce images from *Ivan Peries, 1938-88*.

[2] Pleynet, 1984: 61.

[3] See, most directly, Derrida (1987); but also the Barthes, Kristeva, Lyotard, Pleynet and Nochlin cited here.

instantiates a similar critique in its production, "solicits" precisely such a response from its reader.[4] Our painting maybe of its moment; its commentary, though, is grappled by hoops of steel to the ideology of aestheticism, one that emerged in eighteenth-century, colonial Europe.[5] Take that Weereratne paragraph:

> The highly textured, almost monochromatic compositions of his last years were a logical development of his tendency to simplify to the point of austerity – one might even suggest, like Beethoven's String Quartets – depending on a distilled palette and consumed in a deep nostalgia. The austerity is monastic and surely was derived from Ivan Peries' great affection for the work of Piero della Francesca and Fra Angelico. But there is also more than a mere vestige of sensuousness in the paintings, in the linear movement that inhabits the paintings which, as in El Greco, is yet innocent of all guile and artfulness. This is precisely what gives the paintings that feeling of the timeless dispassionately observed and expressed in sensual images which are entirely within our own experience. If the images have a touch of the melancholy, that is the poetry we are called upon to contemplate.[6]

Like every painter, Peries learned from others: not just della Francesca, Angelico and El Greco, but Matisse, Cezanne and many more, as Senake Bandaranayake and Manel Fonseka point out in their essential account; and even from some who didn't

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[4] On the question of the text's solicitation of the reader, a Derridean notion, see Mowitt (2002).

[5] It bears mention here that, to Kant, the barbarian, while capable of judgment, is incapable of taste, being seduced instead by its inferior, charm. One possible response to this is to assert, like Weereratne: I have taste, too. A more properly postcolonial one is to demonstrate, as in the (unpublished) work of Tony Brown, that the very discipline of aesthetics is constituted by the exclusion of the barbarian – an exclusion necessary for the discipline to found/find itself. Which produces the question: is the aesthetic a category the postcolonial should claim? For a postcolonial reading of the Kantian subject, as such, one turns, of course, to Spivak (1999).

[6] Weereratne, 1993: 119. In a strong reading, it is possible to find Angelico's frescoes – unlike his lush altarpieces commissioned by upper-class patrons – monochromatic and austere; though economic is perhaps the better term. However, by eschewing the colors blue (lapis lazuli), vermillion and gold – all expensive paints, signifying opulence, if not exploitation – for browns, mauves, etc in his frescoes, Angelico was also making an anti-elitist statement. Monasticism and anti-elitism are not synonymous.

paint, like Lionel Wendt.[7] To the reader, however, the critical question concerns not the atelier, but its production: does Peries cite others in his? If so, following what imperative – merely to imitate or as a postcolonial rewriting of canonical western texts (one might think here of Michael Ondaatje's rewriting of *Kim* in *The English Patient*, or Amrita Sher-Gil's *Self-portrait as Tahitian*)? For instance, Peries called two of his large "panels" *The Bathers* (1949, 1960).[8] Many post-impressionist texts have the same title; one of Cezanne (1906), which recites el Greco's *The Vision of St John*, is a cortical modern painting, credited with enabling cubism, if not actually inaugurating the twentieth century avant-garde. How exactly does Peries collaborate, in the robust sense of that term, with Cezanne? Do we learn something about his painting from noting this "influence" – or is so doing, effectively, name-dropping? For, while Peries might have been inspired by Angelico, to call his palette monastic is to simply misread it. Apart from this, placed immediately following a paragraph citing Bandaranayake on the Sri Lankan inspiration of Peries's work, Weereratne's references are unexpected.[9] They could suggest that Peries is European, not Sri Lankan in inspiration, an implied criticism of Bandaranayake's position. This, by the way, is another symptom of Sri Lankan English art criticism: it agonizes over the question of originality/authenticity; on the Sri Lankanness of our postcolonial painting.[10] Nevertheless, produced without what a composition teacher would call proper transition, or relation to the preceding content, it does not enhance the coherence of Weereratne's writing, makes reading him most demanding. Attending to the movement of the paragraph will make this clear. Its first sentence finds that Peries's later austerity, derivative – a charged term, opposed as it is to original – of Europe, is signified by a limited range of color; though readers familiar with his work might point out that this was always the case, that such a palette characterizes even his early paintings.[11] Towards its end, the same sentence finds

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[7] Bandaranayake and Fonseka, 1996 (hereafter, *IPP*). Weereratne's failure to mention Cezanne and Matisse, not incidentally, can't be attributed to chance or ignorance (he was Peries's student, after all). He finds it relevant to a discussion of their painterly production to note that most of the '43 Group were Christian. Thus it is no coincidence, either, that among the Peries texts he reproduces is *Christ by the Sea*. Peries emerges in *IPP* as a painter of the secular.

[8] *IPP*: Plates 24, 36.

[9] The Bandaranayake reference, from a 1969 text, is not cited; indeed, Weereratne hardly ever follows bibliographic norms. This includes the failure to mention dates of the paintings he reproduces.

[10] Sometimes, though, our painters are seen in an Asian frame; but never in a global one. This is like saying a cricket team is good enough – New Zealand comes to mind – to make the semi-finals of the world cup, never to actually win it.

[11] See, for instance, one of his earliest, *Portrait of the Artist's Mother* (1939); *IPP*: Plate 1.

something "consumed in a deep nostalgia." It is not clear, however, whether this refers to the "austerity" of the paintings, its cause, the "tendency to simplify" – another charged term – or to their "monochromatic composition." The object of the nostalgia is also left unspecified: we are not told what the paintings are nostalgic for. Sri Lanka is the answer that suggests itself, since Peries lived in Britain for the better part of his adult life. If that were the case, though, the reference to his derivative European inspiration would be even more incoherent; and Bandaranayake's reading, correct.

Peries's austerity is described as "monastic," despite which there can be detected some "sensuousness in the paintings." This is a conventional, with the grain understanding of monasticism, as opposed to sensuousness. More perplexing is the statement that the latter is "yet innocent of all guile and artfulness," a rather unusual understanding of sensuousness: as, usually, "guilty" of or characterized by cunning, if not outright duplicity. This itself borders on the monastic. Even if curiously conceptualized, the notion – sensuous monasticism or monastic sensuousness – is central to Weereratne's interpretation of Peries (a painter he clearly disliked, despite the comparison to Beethoven):[12] it gives the paintings a "feeling of the timeless," makes them universal (as opposed, presumably, to narrowly Sri Lankan).[13] Such a judgment is ironic, if not self-contradictory: their very monasticism, or retreat from the secular world makes them typify that same world; one that, ultimately, or essentially, is not marked by time (and, therefore, place). The deployment of terms like timeless, a category of universalism, situates Weereratne's own epistemological palette, to use a concept catachrestically, as canonical, conservative, elitist;[14] and also, of course, colonialist. (Macaulay's (in)famous 'Minute on Indian Education' (1835) is the exemplary statement, to the postcolonialist, of this association.) Given

[12] The difference in his account of George Keyt, for instance, makes this unambiguous. Keyt's texts (which, despite their debt to Matisse, Cezanne, Braque and Picasso, are not called derivative) have "a sensuous lyricism that warms the heart and creates a spell of beauty and delicate passion." (Weereratne, 1993: 112) This, of course, is the very opposite of monasticism – which isn't, presumably, heartwarming or magical. One should also note the aestheticism of the statement: comparing painting o magic disallows an intellectual, or political, response to the paintings.

[13] The whole phrase, by the way, states that Peries actually observed timelessness – something that might be of interest to physicists.

[14] This claim is another characteristic of Sri Lankan English art criticism (as it is of the western). Professor S. B. Dissanayake – in the course of a rant against abstract, political 1990s painting that he says he doesn't understand – articulates an extreme take: "all works of art, to whatever age they belong are essentially the same." (George Keyt Foundation, 1998. There's no page number.) The statement is oxymoronic: Dissanayake doesn't get 1990s painting precisely because all art is *not* the same.

which his resort to a term from that same palette, the reader's "experience," to close the argument – in every sense – is almost predictable. The reader herself may not have experienced monastic sensuousness, or sensuous monasticism, but has surely seen – experienced – other, similar "sensual images" and so can relate to, appreciate, the paintings. To Weereratne's palette, an inability, incapacity to do so is the consequence of a lack, both of experience and its effect, its intimate if ineffable product, taste. The move underlines the aestheticism, the repression of politics and ultimately the elitism of this method of treating painting: it turns on taste, that most esoteric, tactile, indefinable of concepts, which, as Kant reminds us, distinguishes insiders, true lovers, connoisseurs of art, of beauty, from pretenders; something held to be impossible without a particular – refined, almost always classed – experience. That is to say, to the aesthete a Biso Menike or Fathuma Beebee cannot casually stroll into a gallery – or The Gallery – and expect to experience art, for taste is like a birthright, something in your DNA, not something acquired or taught.

The final sentence of the paragraph makes further demands on the reader: it introduces to the discussion of the paintings, again unexpectedly, two entirely new terms – poetry and melancholy. To this point, Weereratne has called Peries's texts many things (without elaboration): monochromatic, nostalgic, austere, monastic, sensuous and timeless; their melancholy alone makes them poetic. The relation between melancholia and poetry isn't self-evident; and isn't elaborated, either. But Weereratne's claim is a strong one: touched or marked by melancholy, the paintings are not just like poetry, or analogous to it, but are poetry.[15] So, one might wonder (not just of Weereratne, but of aesthetics, which authorizes the claim): why does a painting need to be unlike itself in order to be valued? Isn't it enough that a good painting – by whichever criteria one may decide – is a good *painting*? By now, though, only an intrepid reader would expect clarity from Weereratne; or an explanation why melancholy and not, for instance, nostalgia – the two aren't homonymous – makes the paintings poetic.[16] Nevertheless the claim, the comparison of painting and poetry, provides a literary critic with an opening, a point of entry. Although, it should perhaps be stressed, the methodological imperative of this essay – opposed to the disciplines of aesthetics and art history – is to read, not "contemplate" – another Kantian term – Peries's paintings; or, better, texts. Four in particular, that effectively announce, or constitute, a break in his corpus: *The Return* (1956), *Homage to Lionel Wendt* (1945), *Untitled, 1956* and *Untitled, 1966*.[17] Like

[15] Music isn't granted the same status in this schema: Peries's austerity makes his production like Beethoven's, but not actually music.

[16] In psychoanalytic terms, melancholy is the refusal to acknowledge the loss of the object; in the case of nostalgia, the loss is acknowledged, but its (impossible) return, desired.

[17] *IPP*: Plates 3, 15, 30 and 61, respectively; hereafter, *R*, *H*, *U56* and *U66*.

many of his later paintings, they stage the difficulty of association, a term that imposes itself on this essay, one it is compelled to use under erasure given some of its, ahem, associations.[18] Its paleonymy is, if not opposed, not necessarily allied, either, to the concepts signification and dissemination, though allied to the Freudian "free association" and the predicate of society in Marx.[19] (In *Capital*, Marx conceives or, more exactly, if not poignantly, "imagines" socialism, as a mode of production, as a "free association of men.") Nevertheless, despite its paleonymy – but, then, which word can claim to be free of abuse – its significations enable one to discuss, through a single concept, Peries's abiding concern with the difficulty of the common, that which is not assumed but, shared, worked towards (not from), *made*, whether as community, partnership or fellowship. His texts don't take the social for granted, produce it as a coherent, unproblematic whole; rather, they draw attention to its difficulties, to the outriggers (minor figures/players) of Sri Lankan association. This essay – not, I feel obliged to admit, one I expected to write – was moved, provoked, by a single, outstanding, Peries painting, *The Return*; it "bruised" me, to take a term from Roland Barthes.[20] In turn, *R* directs the reader to the other Peries texts, including many not discussed here. The singular painting around which this essay turns, *R* was produced – another coincidence? – in that pivotal, dissociative year, 1956: when Sinhala nationalism unambiguously asserted its dominance over the Sri Lankan polity; which Tamil nationalism – and, all too briefly, the organized Sinhala left – in turn resisted. A year or, better, politico-epistemological moment, captured precisely by its emphatically exclusivist soundbite, "Sinhala Only." Produced against that moment, *R* is a dense – if discreet – punctuation of its itinerary by a founder of the '43 Group (with whom, by the way, Weereratne himself exhibited).

The most celebrated members of that male institution – Keyt, Wendt, Justin Daraniyagala, Peries – produced stunning, innovative work and, as is now well known, the group itself determinedly introduced modernist painting to Sri Lanka in

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[18] OED, "associate": "One who is united to another by community of interest, and shares with him in enterprise, business, or action; a partner, comrade, companion." "Association": "The action of combining together for a common purpose"; "the condition of such combination"; "a body of persons who have combined to execute a common purpose or advance a common cause"; "union in companionship on terms of social equality; fellowship, intimacy"; "the action of conjoining or uniting one person or thing with another."

[19] Barthes, however, uses it in exactly this sense: "reading disperses, disseminates...with the logic of reason...mingles a logic of the symbol. This latter logic is not deductive but associative: it associates with the material text...other ideas...images...significations." (1986: 31)

[20] This text, clearly, has bruised others: apart from Weereratne, Dharmasiri (1988) and Fernando (1959) also reproduce it. *IPP* contains an account by Peries on its facture.

the face of powerful opposition from a conservative, realist, colonial art establishment.[21] However, it is also necessary to insist, from the perspective of our moment, that the group's staging of Sri Lanka in its artistic production – Keyt and, to a lesser extent, Wendt are exemplary – was profoundly complicitous with both orientalism and the problematic of Sinhala nationalism; even if their work – certainly Wendt at his most provocative – cannot be reduced to such nationalism, exceeded its reach.[22] Most significantly, the production of Keyt and others was in a troubled relationship with nationalism's form of choice, as it were, realism. This is evident from even the most casual browsing of the production of contemporary Sri Lankan realist painters.[23] Nevertheless, the dominant strand of the group – Keyt, of course, and Wendt, but also Richard Gabriel and Aubrey Collette – is culturalist;

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[21] On this, see Dharmasiri (1988), Fonseka (2000) and Weereratne (1993). Although, as Anoli Perera (1999) points out, one has to keep in mind that the group was privileged: many of its members were upper-class, educated in Europe and had easy access to the public sphere.

[22] It should be stressed that I do not see Keyt or Wendt as straightforwardly nationalist, racist – or, to use the more common Sri Lankan term, chauvinist. Keyt's painting is enormously complicated and, given his engagement with (northern) Indian art, perhaps better called characteristic of the problematic of anticolonial "South Asian" nationalism, a concept without a referent except maybe in his work! But his painting, poetry and translations can also be read – like many of Wendt's photographs – as fellow-travelers of the Sinhala nationalist project of conflating Sinhala and Sri Lankan. In this connection, it is worth noting that Keyt's production doesn't acknowledge Tamilian (or, for that matter, Mughal) painting. In his cultural criticism, Sri Lanka is named a Buddhist country. (See George Keyt Foundation, 2001) So, it is no surprise that the Sinhalese is the universal, unmarked, subject of his production; the Tamil is always named (cf *Tamils by the Sea*, etc). Weerasinghe (2005) is the only writer in English to remark upon Keyt's orientalism. As for Wendt, it is no coincidence that the two photographs of his that Weereratne reproduces are of a Buddha statue and a Kandyan drummer; non-Sinhalaness is effectively marginalized in his production. However, as Fonseka (2000) takes pains to excavate, and importantly insist, he photographed the urban working class and exhibited such production; but those pictures are not included in his sole book, published posthumously (Wendt, 1950) or in its second, revised edition (Lionel Wendt Foundation, 2000 – hereafter, *LWF*). On the problematic of anticolonial nationalism and its complicity with orientalism or eurocentrism, see Chatterjee (1993); on the distinction between anticolonial and postcoloniality, Ismail (2005).

[23] The canonical realist Sri Lankan painter is Gate-Mudaliyar A. C. G. S. Amarasekara. A sense of his concerns is essential to grasp both the difference – the formal innovation – and similarity – culturalism – of Keyt (and others). Sri Lankan English art criticism's insult of choice of Amarasekara is "sterile academicism." However, one has to be interpellated by the most formalist aesthetics not to see the thematic continuities, links, between Amarasekara and Keyt.

and, with the exception of Wendt, resolutely anti-urban;[24] its epistemological palette, derived from what postcolonial studies has enabled one to call almost copybook-orientalized notions of tradition, woman and the rural (the objects least uncontaminated, to anticolonial nationalism, by Europe).[25] It doesn't find association, coming together, to be difficult, a problem; it treats the social as something to be assumed, as a coherent whole. Against this strand, the corpus of Ivan Peries stands apart, in stark contrast.[26] Besides a critique of realism, it shares nothing of significance with Keyt, the '43 Group's iconic figure, the canonical modern Sri Lankan painter, our art's Arjuna Ranatunga.[27] Keyt's patriarchal – if not simply sexist – and culturalist/nationalist texts solicit an affective, aesthetic, often emphatically libidinal, response from their ideal or, better, conscripted reader (which partly helps explain their popularity);[28] Peries's paintings – some of which are explicit responses to, rewritings of, Keyt – a "pensive" one.[29] An opposition to aestheticism and culturalism, a questioning of nationalism and patriarchy, constitute cardinal elements of his production.

Or, rather, that is the case with the second part of his corpus, which could be dated – but the calendar is never a reliable signifier of emergence – around 1956: for it is joltingly different from the first. Some of the early paintings – art history calls

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[24] As Weerasinghe points out, Sri Lankan painting didn't come to terms with the urban till the 1990s. (Weerasinghe, 2001) He calls the production till then "fundamentally pastoral and bucolic." (Weerasinghe, 2005: 182)

[25] Martin Russell (1950) argues similarly about Keyt; consistent with Russell's orientalism, he finds Keyt's ruralism – or authenticity, as he calls it – the strength of the work. On the orientalism of colonial ruralism in the Indian instance, see Inden (1990).

[26] A similar claim could be made of Justin Daraniyagala. Alas, too few of his paintings are accessible to make it persuasively. Upon his death in 1967, Lakdasa Wikkramasinha called him, somewhat enthusiastically, "perhaps the greatest modern painter modern Asia has produced...[It] was...proposed to erect a permanent museum to house his paintings and other works, including a quantity of his writings. Nothing, of course, has happened, except that now, four years after his death, he has become very much the possession of a dwindling, affluent minority of...Art Fanciers...He has been made inaccessible to the poor people of this country to whose culture, especially in the Low country, he belonged." (Wikkramasinha, 1971, 'Foreword') It is significant that Wikkramasinha, who cites Keyt often, reserved this accolade for Daraniyagala. The volume, by the way, includes a lovely cameo by a hitherto unknown Sri Lankan poet, one 'H. A. Tileke.'

[27] There are four books on Keyt: Russell (1950), Halpe (1977), Goonasekera (1991), George Keyt Foundation (2000); and many articles. No other Sri Lankan painter has received anywhere near the same attention.

[28] The conscripted reader of a text could be understood as one who reads only with its grain, or script.

[29] Barthes, 1982: 38.

them landscapes and panels – are ruralist; predictably, almost banally so; culturalist in their "zography."[30] If not for the difference in line, they could have been conceived by Gabriel.[31] Peries's portraits are naturalist; as are the "nudes." However, as far as I can tell – and I am relying here on Bandaranayake and Fonseka's indispensable book – those "genres" disappear from the second part of his corpus, around the mid-1950s. *IPP* contains just one later portrait, in 1979; one or two "still-lifes"; no panels; no nudes or, one might say, he stopped denuding women; and arguably no landscapes. (*Moonscape* (1979), is more iterative of *Nuwara Eliya* (1979), than different.[32] Landscape, by definition, respects the specificity of its object. One expects, that is, to find a hill or a tea-plucker – not the same as a working-class UpCountry Tamil – in a representation of Nuwara Eliya.) This alone demands an accounting. But the difference isn't limited to the genre or "type" of texts.[33] The faces of the men and women in the later paintings are hardly ever detailed, calling the subject into question – another element of its modernism. The faces, bodies, poses of these figures are not directed at the reader; as a

[30] Derrida (1981) takes the term from Plato, who opposes the painter to the poet. A supple term, it is deployed here in an anti-aesthetic spirit. Likewise, "reader" as opposed to "viewer," etc. This essay cannot entirely avoid the vocabulary of aesthetics; and doesn't have such an aspiration, either. It does, though, work with the belief that among the tasks of *reading* painting – not to be confused with "practical criticism" – is not to reinforce the (modern) subject, feeling and the capacity to judge or appreciate beauty (taste) being among its strongest foundational structural elements; or its object, conceived as discrete, as "art" – an ideological, not a descriptive, term. (For an excellent, non-reductive, Marxist critique of the category art, see Hadjinicolaou, 1978.) Following from that, changing the latter (i.e. text), calling the subject-object opposition itself into question, necessitates, as far as possible, a different set of terms. As the OED reminds us, at the Greek root of aesthetics is "affect." To those who would insist that, unlike writing, painting is visible, that one literally sees the object, the response is easy: if that is the case, doesn't one "see" words, too?

[31] Gabriel's production is overwhelmingly informed by nineteenth-century orientalism. Weereratne (2000), himself no stranger to the ruralist palette, reproduces several instances. The humans in these scenes are associated with, inseparable from, nature: lush trees, also cows, goats, roosters, birds – exemplary orientalist pastoral.

[32] *IPP*: Plates 96, 97.

[33] Typology, like any taxonomy, is ultimately incoherent. By what logic is a "nude" not a "portrait," or a "landscape" not a "still life"? Why are some paintings classified with reference to their material surface – e.g. frescoes – and others by their "content"? Couldn't the Sigiriya figures – or Van Gogh's many *Shoes*, for that matter – just as well be called portraits? The concept of the text, of course, was articulated in response to the problem of genre (amongst others). In the context of literature, for instance, one could ask: by what coherent logic is whatsisname's *Richard III* classified as a history, *Anthony and Cleopatra* a tragedy, *Julius Caesar*, a Roman play and *King Lear* a "late" one?

Jacqueline Rose might put it, they are not made available to the viewer's gaze.[34] The figures themselves are characterized by abstraction, not culturalist (or marked by a particular ethnicity). The later part of the corpus is, in a word, anti-aesthetic. Thematically, it addresses the difficulty of association, puts the subject into question, even attempts to come to terms with woman as subject. Sometimes in their very size, the paintings embody, as it were, this concern with the outrigger, the minor. This development – if it amounts to one – cannot be ignored by the responsible reader. The texts themselves impose such an obligation upon, demand such an accounting from her. Seeking to come to terms with the change, one can perhaps notice the elaboration in this, later part of Peries's production – as with any good painter – of what Marcelin Pleynet calls a "system."[35] If nationalism – which cannot proceed without the subject – celebrates association, coming together, seeks a certain unity of populace and purpose, Peries's later work stages its difficulty, tensions, exclusions. It attends, calls our attention, to the outriggers to association.

To say this is not to suggest that Peries was a transparently or diaphanously "political" painter. He isn't a Thamotharampillai Shanaathanan, whose pensively blended zographic palette insistently directs our attention, not so much to the horrors of war as such, although a universalist reading of his production is no doubt possible; rather, it protests the cardinal moment of our postcolonial itinerary: the systematic, institutionalized, corporatized, ultimately banal brutality of Sinhala nationalism and its oppression of Sri Lankan Tamils.[36] He isn't a Jagath Weerasinghe, whose production interrogates the Sinhala nationalist script, both politically and zographically. In just one text, by just one brilliant move – the deceptively simple and by no means prudish inscription of a brassiere over a desexualized, deaesthetecized, blue-painted Sigiriya figure – Weerasinghe "discovers" by covering, recites Keyt: rewrites his appropriation of those figures as accomplice to a culturalist and patriarchal nationalism.[37] And even Keyt's early production, it is critical to remember, was self-consciously anticolonial.[38] (Not

[34] Rose (1986); she knows, of course, that the concept of the gaze is opposed to reading textually. The question this conceptualization of the gaze doesn't address is how, if the viewer is essentially fixed or determined by the gaze, it is possible to read against the grain – as a feminist, in this instance, if the image is patriarchal or (hetero)sexist.

[35] Pleynet (1984). "System" is conceived in opposition to the aesthetic notion of style.

[36] His paintings can be accessed at shanaathanan.blogspot.com. See, most particularly, *Grandma's Courtyard II* and *Krishna*. The latter rewrites both Edvard Munch's *The Scream* and Keyt's reduction of Krishna to a sexual, non-martial subject.

[37] The painting can be accessed at bayvon.com. There is more to be written about it, of course; as of his work generally.

[38] See Russell (1950), Archer (2001), Goonasekera (1991). As Nihal Rodrigo reminds us, Keyt refused an OBE in 1950. (Rodrigo, 2001: 37)

surprisingly, though, he overlooked the postcolonial brutalities of Sinhala nationalism.)[39] Peries's paintings do not make transparent political statements. (To remain consistent with the unavoidably anachronistic analogies, his production is most fruitfully compared with Nelun Harasgama's. In her elongated, often single or dissociated human figures, she recites his, makes explicit his politics – and hers.)[40] Rather, it is argued here – Matisse makes a similar claim – that, if Sri Lanka is the singular script Peries was produced by, it must leave its mark on his "own" texts. In turn, his texts mark, punctuate that script, uncovering which is the task, obligation, of the responsible reader: to produce, in the Althusserian sense of a "symptomatic" reading: to locate, and so transform, something already in the painting.[41]

Not surprisingly, then, the reading that follows works – or plays – with Bandaranayake/Fonseka's interpretation of Peries's production as "a prolonged mediation on his native Sri Lankan experience";[42] and, perhaps surprisingly, a statement of Keyt. The texts discussed here are only those reproduced. Limiting the essay thus has its obvious, manifold and almost disabling disadvantages: some cardinal texts will inevitably be unacknowledged; brushwork, ignored; color, sometimes mistaken.[43] However, it enables working around the appalling but unavoidable hurdle facing all criticism of postcolonial Sri Lankan painting: that most of its texts are inaccessible, in private collections, a very few of which have been reproduced, whether in books, postcards or online.[44] These images, at least, are

[39] But not, as Rodrigo again reminds us, the repression of the 1971 JVP rebellion; though he apparently destroyed all but one of those paintings. (Rodrigo, 2001: 38) Keyt could only make solidarity with Sinhala suffering.

[40] Harasgama's paintings can be accessed at bayvon.com. Her colors, while not really bright, are brighter than those to be found in the painters of what Weerasinghe has termed the "90s trend." (Weerasinghe, 2001) If this signifies, especially in her landscapes, a certain aestheticism, nostalgia for that moment when Sri Lanka produced itself as an untroubled tourist paradise, when its painting – Keyt, Gabriel – could use color unreservedly, celebratorily, her figures – often literally painted into a corner – interrupt that desire, such cathexis. Her reading of her own production is troubling: they seek, she says, to capture a time "when life was more beautiful." Her texts, though, signify quite differently.

[41] Althusser, 1997: 34

[42] *IPP*: 9. Curiously, they fail to suggest what precisely of Peries's "Sri Lankan experience" is treated in his production. Merely asserting something does not make it so.

[43] The color of Peries's *Thambakke, 1961* (*IPP*: Plate 44), for instance, is significantly brighter in *IPP* than in George Keyt Foundation, 1998, where it is titled *Nude, 1961*.

[44] The George Keyt, Lionel Wendt and Sapumal Foundations, all committed to and working dedicatedly towards the public accessibility of art, do not have websites. In this connection, it is striking that post-1990s painters, with an explicitly anti-elitist politics, have their work online: see, for instance, bayvon.com, theertha.org. Of course, such a move is

accessible; although it might be noted that Bandaranayake/Fonseka's book, the result of much dedication and sheer hard work, not to mention commitment to mundane but essential professional norms like proof-reading, is now out of print. Without it, Peries would largely be accessible only to an even smaller elite. The Keyt statement – the canonical Sri Lankan painter, he will keep interrupting this essay – is from 1946: "True painting is not description, as there is another language for that...It is emphasis, in its most unequivocal form, of line, color and shape. But to those not literate in it, painting is as meaningless as any other foreign language."[45] The statement signifies Keyt's elitism, aestheticism and desire for mastery – as a language, painting is not like any other: it is "unequivocal," without ambiguity, transparent. No critic working with deconstruction could share these positions. Or the suggestion that the concepts line, color and shape are outside language and the only elements of a painting that matter – this represses their "subject-matter." The post- structuralist/colonialist finds Keyt a tarnished accomplice. After all, no literate critic reads poetry today by focusing on rhyme, meter and such categories of aestheticism; or a novel – a fiction, something made – by pretending that its characters are real people. Nevertheless, the formulation could be read, albeit strongly, as holding that painting is structured like a language, if not system of signification; has a singular semiotics, the units – zographemes – of which are not homogenous;[46] not words, but line, color, shape, etc; making its texture – at the risk of producing a wildly original statement – very different from that of a novel or poem. Though painting cannot dissociate itself from language, as Keyt himself reveals, in calling it a language. Phrased differently, understanding painting as text, or semiotically, doesn't mean it is a book, just structured *like* one or, more precisely, a language (signifying system). In so far as it is like a language, it could be read analogously, by attending to its signifiers, its constitutive elements and their structure. However, it is critical to notice that Keyt understands painting as a foreign, not native language: not a mother-tongue, a script the speaking subject is born into, learns virtually without effort, but one that is other, acquired, needs study. Reading painting, to Keyt, demands a particular literacy. (This distinguishes his aestheticism from Weereratne's; to Keyt, a Biso Menike could learn, or be taught, to understand art.) To a literary critic like myself, it means coming to terms with difference – semiotic, epistemological difference; working with the productive problem that, in that famous last instance, painting is irreducible to words. From

overdetermined by the question of class and the availability/accessibility of computers and the web in Sri Lanka, even in the university.

[45] Keyt, 1977: 81.

[46] This term is deployed otherwise than Derrida, as analogous to narrateme (constituent element of narrative).

which it doesn't follow that painting cannot be written about. By that same logic, one could only "talk" cricket, for instance, by "playing" it.

"The Return"

Weereratne's chapter on Peries begins with a paragraph that also requires close attention:

> The problem with Ivan Peries was that he could not be dismissed with a convenient critical phrase or be put out of the way with an easy tag. He was mercurial and so too did his work have that quality. Until the last years of his life...[his] paintings had the air of a whim or fancy...All sorts of things stimulated his imagination: color...shapes...mystery, as in the deep forebodings of the sea and the rumblings of a monsoon equally full of awe, as in the painting known as *The Return*. There is stark realism in the anxiety with which the family awaits the return of the men gone out to sea.[47]

The opening statement signifies both Weereratne's dislike of Peries and his reluctance to make it explicit. Peries "could not be dismissed with a convenient critical phrase." This suggests that the work, at the very least, was substantial, if not complex – surely strengths in any painter. To Weereratne, however, it was a "problem"; one left, in a manner characteristic of his writing, unexplained. Which raises many questions. What, exactly, is the "problem" with Peries? Why might Weereratne want to dismiss him or put him out of the way?[48] In the first place, how or why is he in the way? Because, it is implied, he was mercurial, unpredictable. But that begs yet another question: how does his personality, character, or any other element of his biography affect our reading of his texts – which are not unpredictable? Implying criticism without articulating it makes Weereratne's argument not cohere (incoherent). As does his claim that the early and middle paintings, while having "the air of a whim" – something impulsive, slight, thoughtless – were also, simultaneously, "deep," profound, weighty. Further questions emerge with his interpretation of the boat: that it contains fishermen out to sea – in the middle of a monsoon: the painting makes it clear, as we will see, that its scene cannot be so taken.

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[47] Weereratne, 1993: 113. One might point out here that realism is a literary or painterly device; in that sense, Peries's paintings are not realist.

[48] Weereratne was Peries's student; it was, he says, like being a "mediaeval painter's apprentice." (Weereratne, 1993: 121)

R is painted (somewhat monochromatically?) in shades of ochre, predominantly in dull yellow and dark brown. It is critical to insist here that brown does not, in and of itself, in its essence, signify the monastic, if not more generally the somber. As Barthes responds to a position like Wassily Kandinsky's, it is also the color of butterscotch ice-cream;[49] and hoppers;[50] and – why not ? – a grassless pitch, one good for batting. *R*'s scene depicts a minimum of semi-abstract figures with geometric conciseness or economy; its non-realist, geometrical staging solicits the reader's intellectual, not affective, response. The bottom half has two humans, on a beach with two trees – one a trunk; the top – sea, boat, sun, sky. The figures have very few "adjectives" – qualifiers, details. Anybody familiar with Sri Lanka would identify the trees as coconut and the boat as a catamaran (outrigger): a craft constituted by a big and a small log bound together, a dissociated association. Although the "same" information is available, so to speak, to everyone who has encountered a postcard by Dominic Sansoni.[51] While at first glance it signifies the rural, the scene is not ruralist – it doesn't draw upon those familiar tropes, lush "tropical" color, make a statement about the rural condition; and is at a great remove from the monastic. It is possible, in a generous spirit, to hold with Weereratne that the two human figures – he thinks they constitute a family – await the return of fishermen at sea, in that catamaran. However, the scene cannot be persuasively understood as staging the monsoon or "anxiety" on the part of its humans about the fate of fishermen. The sea immediately around the boat is calm, as is half the sky – both are painted in lighter shades; the catamaran is not produced as being in trouble. (Though it could signify trouble itself.) The picture also depicts the face of just one of the two humans; that, too, in profile, abstractly – as color, shape without adjective (expression). It doesn't solicit the reader's affect; colloquially put, she is not requested to feel his pain. (Unlike, for instance, with A.C.G.S. Amarasekara: the subject of *The Devil Dancer's Daughter* is exaggeratedly startled by the appearance in the room of a supernatural, but real – the sourceless flame casts a shadow – object.[52] The conscripted reader will empathize with her reaction; the one reading against the grain might be bruised by the fact that the offspring of someone who works with the supernatural is nevertheless shaken by it.) This cannot be stressed too much: Peries's paintings make one think. (Even Bandaranaike/Fonseka, who

[49] Barthes, 1988: 106. Strangely enough, Kandinsky (1977) is unable to account for brown in his schema.

[50] The contention is not facetious; Barthes argues persuasively – and anti-aesthetically – that painting can be productively analogized to cooking.

[51] The boat and trees, of course, perform very different signifying functions in Peries and Sansoni.

[52] For a reproduction, see Dharmasiri 1988: 9.

have made the argument, prefer to highlight their affect.) Most critically, the second man's gaze isn't directed at the boat – which it surely should be if the scene represents his anxiety. Indeed, any compelling reading of this text must address that detail, of the man not facing the boat, the other man – or the reader, but downwards. The detail, in fact, that initially bruised me: why is that face turned away? Advanced here, then, is not just an alternative reading of *R* from Weereratne, *though – and I want to stress this – many are possible*. This one, I contend, is more responsible by the text, its detail:[53] its signifiers or zographemes – figures, colors, shapes – and its structure – their organization, their relation to each other – in the context of the particular painting, of the rest of Peries's production (as canonized, for want of a better term, by Bandaranayake/Fonseka) and of the other texts it cites.[54]

R's human figures are both subaltern and arguably male. One, standing on the beach, with his back to the reader, has short-cropped hair, a characteristic element of Peries's males – as are his naked torso and sarong. The other, drawn in profile, with slightly longer hair, is also bare-chested and saronged; s/he crouches on the ground – like many of Peries's females, including in *U56* and *U66*. This introduces an element of gender ambiguity to the scene (and isn't the only Peries text to make, as it were, gender trouble);[55] but the hair on this figure is not nearly as long as of the other females. It, too, then, is best read – if not with as much conviction as the first, but the bare chest makes the conclusion inevitable – as male. (A seventies feminist reading of this scene is tempting, especially given the texts to come; but would not be responsible by *R*.) The couple could, of course, be a (part of a) family. The standing male is straight, erect, like the coconut trunk paralleling him; again iterating its shape, rectangular and elongated – a citation of el Greco that, in this context, emphasizes the figure's zographic nexus with the tree;[56] and without much detail apart from a little shading. His shape emphasizes the fact, already clear from the abstract figures, the oversized sun and boat, that *R*'s scene is not realist or

[53] On the importance of detail to reading, see Barthes's 'The Reality Effect,' in Barthes (1986); also, 1982.

[54] The term is used with a great deal of caution, and perhaps even inaccuracy. Keyt, and to a lesser extent Peries and other members of the 43 Group, dominate the art market; they have been canonized as artists. But there isn't a canon – in the sense of a group of authoritative and public or popular *texts* – of postcolonial Sri Lankan paintings. If his work isn't reproduced more widely, Daraniyagala, for instance, is in danger of getting not museumized but placed in the basement, as Wikkramasinha lamented. Of course, who can tell what the future might do!

[55] The reference, of course, is to Butler (1990). In Peries's *The Wedding* (Weereratne, 2000: 211), it isn't at all clear that the two figures depicted are male and female; they could be either – or both.

[56] There are three Peries paintings titled *Homage to el Greco* (IPP: Figures 5,6; Plate 7).

naturalist. Placed exactly at the center of the picture, he occupies most of its vertical plane; and, unlike the other, is depicted in distinct, almost straight lines, in colors that carefully distinguish him from the adjoining figures: his torso is dark, the sea adjacent to it, light; his sarong, light, with the adjacent sand, dark. These elements of the painting make him, unambiguously, *R*'s cardinal figure, perhaps the one who has returned – and maybe not from the sea; but we do not have enough information, yet, to hold so persuasively. The second man is not misshapen, or shaded, is significantly smaller, occupies much less space crouching at the right of the scene, towards its edge or periphery; the lower part of his legs and arms are not depicted. He is drawn in curved lines, in shades lighter than the first: these colors, shapes, are not as distinctly outlined; they almost fade into the surrounding colors, figures – the sand and tree – signifying clearly that he is a catalytic figure, but one strongly interpellated by the land, "his" place. Like the other man, he is connected to a tree, but differently – this one not parallel, at a right angle to him – by the balance, geometry, structure of the scene: the color of his sarong is the same as the trunk, which he fades into; the ends of his figure (feet, hands) are not depicted, like the end/top of the tree. Which, not coincidentally, has fronds – suggesting the possibility of shade, comfort, rest; in a word, home. In contrast, the first man – the trunk parallel to him is bare – becomes, relatively, something of an outsider, or outrigger. This reinforces the reading that he is the one who has returned, perhaps to a place and a person or community he was intimate with, interpellated by, but is now dissociated from. The disconnect between him and the other man is emphasized by the dark brown strip of sand that divides the lighter colored sand the two are on – suggesting that they are not of the same place. Or, rather, that they were once associated; they share an identity – both, not incidentally, are clothed alike: bare-chested and saronged – but are now apart. The slanted tree forms a barrier between the two, enhancing this distance; as does the second man's face being turned away. The standing man may have returned; but he is not welcomed.

Consistent with its geometric economy, the straight lines and rectangular shapes mentioned above, *R* is divided into two almost exact halves: land/bottom and sea-sky/top. The bottom half is shaded, has depth; the top is flat. The sea in *R* is a thin, rectangular, vertical strip, most of which – that adjoining land – is calm, not mysterious, painted in a light shade, with an even thinner dark rectangular strip on the horizon; no waves disturb the stillness of either part (as they must if the scene depicted a monsoon). Without sounding too much like a statistician, one might point out that it occupies about an eighth of the space of the painting. That is to say, the sea is not central to *R*; or, at least, not as significant, not given as much zographic space, as the land and sky. Emphasizing the flatness of this half of the text is two figures, much larger in proportion than a realist or naturalist staging would require: the sun and boat. The outrigger is between the men, suggesting that fishing connects

them. Since catamaran signifies class, this would make the two subaltern. The boat, in other words, highlights the fact that the text is social (in the Marxist sense): something made, the product of labor-power, it signifies socialized production, appropriation, exploitation. (Saussure, as we know, brought to our attention that the sign, as such, is always already social; it could not signify, exist, without "association." Thus it could be said about painting: everything material in it is made, social; as are its signifiers – also made (fictional, unverifiable), also social, if in a different sense.) This negates the possibility of a purely psychologistic reading of *R*; or, at least, a responsible one. The sea/fishing simultaneously disconnects the men: the boat is a dark color, signifying trouble, a difficulty. A similar dark, and therefore dangerous, shade is used to depict the cloud and strip of sand separating them. Those four units of the painting – cloud, part of sea, boat, part of land – then, are linked, to be read together: their common, deep shade makes the distance between the two – if pictorially small – substantial, of grave consequence; a considerable obstruction, not something that could be surmounted easily. The straight lines that emphasize the rectangularity of the standing man/subject and the parallel trunk give him a hardness, rigidity, almost an inflexibility. The setting sun – dusk – obviously signifies that something is about to end. Almost all its elements, then, make *R*, and here this reading rhymes with Weereratne's, pessimistic; its structure and signifiers reinforce each other.

Nevertheless, we must remember that the painting is titled, even though it need not determine, or overdetermine, our reading; and is grafted onto the text, both a part of it and apart from it, literally and semiotically: it supplements zographemes with words. (Painting cannot escape language.) *R* is not called "the anxiety of fishermen," or "the parting," which would signify a definite, if not necessarily final, dissociation, but "the return." The signifier – to deploy the now old-fashioned opposition – maybe a scene of the rural, if not also subaltern, but the signified is a concept, if in zographic form. By definition, as it were, a concept has no referent, it cannot be touched. (Think world peace, the unconscious, zero, tomorrow; return is like those words.)[57] *R* maybe literally "about" the subaltern everyday, but it doesn't represent (speak for), or make a statement of, the subaltern condition: it renders, to use Gayatri Spivak's important distinction catachrestically, "visible," not "vocal."[58] Some, I grant, would find this problematic, perhaps even a usurpation of the subaltern. In this reading, the painting deploys – appropriates, if you insist, but why wouldn't so doing be appropriate? – subaltern figures to stage a scene of return or re/turn/ing. The standing man has come back to a person/place he once was

[57] It should be stressed that this is the case with all concepts: "as Spinoza has...put it, the concept dog cannot bite." (Althusser, 1997: 105).
[58] Spivak, 1988: 285.

interpellated by and – even if we cannot know why – is now dissociated or delinked from. Reconnection, if not reconciliation, it suggests, is difficult. However, though it may look unlikely, the possibility is not foreclosed: the sun hasn't actually disappeared; the sand the men are on are not drawn in the rigid, rectangular shapes of the boat and trees, and neither is the crouching man; they are all in curved lines, suggesting, to use the art historical term, movement, flexibility. The prospect is kept open that he might move, turn his body and face towards the other; might relent, forgive. On the other hand, he might not. We don't – can't – know what he will do. For painting, despite the strong art historical argument to the contrary, cannot narrate a story by itself;[59] a Wesak pandal is unreadable to someone unfamiliar with its reference – information the pandal solicits, but doesn't provide. (In that sense, it could be argued that every painting is a "still life.") It works, as Keyt insisted, with other elements; not just signs different from words, but signs structured unlike in narrative. Given its title, *R* may imply a before: to return is to have turned previously; however, the before will always remain implicit. As a singular painting, *R* has no narrative beginning or end; and therefore no middle. We cannot know why the erect, standing man (re)turned, why the crouching man's face is turned away. We would if painting actually was unequivocal, as Keyt asserted; but that claim is untenable. The suggestive, non-didactic, pensive force of *R* as a painting lies here: it stages, puts on dis*play*, a problem – the difficulty, uncertainty *and necessity* of returning (to the scene turned away from, of dissociation, the scene it cannot depict).

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Writing of the three Peries paintings titled *Homage to el Greco*, Bandaranaike/Fonseka call our attention to the "tension between the clam, flat, uncluttered areas of picture space in the middle of the painting...and the surging, spirited movement...that occupies the upper and lower areas." (*IPP*: 13) They find this tension "obtain[ing] right through the fifty years of" Peries's production. Following their lead, one can notice many such tensions or, as I prefer, oppositions, in *R*; indeed, it is structured by opposition (dissociated associations): dark/light, bottom/top, flatness/depth, periphery/center, distinct outline/fading line, straight lines/curved lines, inclined tree/straight tree, erect-standing man/bent-crouching man, insider/outsider, cardinal figure/catalytic figure, land/sky-sea. This element of its zography, too, must have some consequence to our reading. Now it is a deconstructive truism that the two elements of a binary are not equal; one of the terms prevails – like the logs of a catamaran. (Sinhala, for instance, doesn't take its

[59] For an argument against this position that draws upon semiotics, see Marin (1988). However, while he promises to locate a hierarchy within the units of the text, one that structures a narrative, Marin is compelled by the rigor of his own argument to identify the reader-viewer, not the text itself, as the agent of narrative production.

sense by itself; it also signifies the dominant, not-Tamil and/or Muslim.) *R*'s oppositions are no different: the erect man, the cardinal figure at the center of the scene, dominates the zographic space. However, in a significant reversal, he is the outsider. (If it were a ruralist text, this wouldn't be the case: the depiction of an outsider would disrupt that scene, provide a position of critique. That is to say, a ruralist painting cannot contain an outsider. If it did, it would not be ruralist.) Given the gravity, as it were, of *R*'s staging, dark is privileged over light. Most importantly, the land, bottom half of the picture, and its figures, overdetermine the sea-sky and its figures; something highlighted by the fact of the painting itself being drawn in shades of ochre – the color, of all *R*'s zographemes, most commonly associated with the beach. This, of course, is consistent with one figure on the land being cardinal; of the sea/boat and sky being relatively insignificant. However, as just stated, the force of this text lies in its refusal to be didactic; in its staging, displaying a problem rather than resolving it. Thus, the other man, while depicted, crouching, on its periphery, is also on the land, the bottom half of the scene, drawn in curved lines. He is a catalytic figure, not the erect man's object; the painting turns on his turn. The land, sea and sky are colored in both dark and light shades. All *R*'s figures may not be equally significant, but they are not equally insignificant, either. The oppositions do not work in parallel. This is consistent with its displaying the difficulty of association, its dilemmas, rather than taking sides, as it were. Here, as elsewhere, the structure of the text reinforces its thematic.

Nevertheless, the careful reader would have noted that two – or is it three – cardinal oppositions are not depicted in the scene. As stated before, *R*'s human figures are both subaltern men. In the context of the rest of its elements, it is striking that they do not take their sense in zographic opposition to others. Pierre Macherey has taught us to ask the question of what is not in the text; often, if not always, it is as important as what is.[60] *R*'s scene obviously doesn't depict a woman or an elite. However, given that it is structured by opposition, we know from deconstruction that both are signified, present in the signifiers man and subaltern. Woman, to make that most predictable, if not by now clichéd, of statements, is the differance of man; subaltern, of elite. However, if one asks the question of the culture or, to use current but not unproblematic term, ethnicity, of the men – one cannot write Sri Lanka responsibly in this moment and repress ethnicity – the lack of adjectives makes identifying, naming it tricky. The coconut tree, though ubiquitous in Sri Lanka, signifies a southern landscape – as opposed to the northern palmyrah.[61] But it

[60] Macherey (1978).

[61] It is no accident that Rajan Hoole et al. titled their book *The Broken Palmyrah* (Hoole, et al. 1990). The OED on the etymology of catamaran is worth noting: "Tamil *katta-maram*

doesn't necessarily, inevitably, follow that the men are therefore Sinhala. It could be argued – and this, I think, is the most responsible reading by the text – that the sarong, the common male Sri Lankan garment, worn by both men, signifies ethnic neutrality. Put differently, the cardinal figure of *R* is staged as the universal Sri Lankan subject: as unmarked by gender and ethnicity; but – and I know this is inexact – not class;[62] such is the grain of the text. Deploying a subaltern, not elite, figure to stage the subject as such is an unexpected and enabling reversal: it calls the subject into question. As does the refusal to be culturalist (or ethnicist). Though some, no doubt, would find this problematic, too: demand "fuller" representation, inclusion. Something, it should be stressed, not required by this essay: the depiction in that scene of a pottued and/or head-covered woman, a man with a thambige-thoppiya and/or in a verti, is not the (identity) politics it works with or seeks to advance. But the other move, the repression of the woman, is all too familiar to feminism. She is rendered invisible; present in the text only by a trace, her absence. In the later part of his corpus, Peries's treatment of gender cannot be reduced to a simple matter of excluding, or objectifying, women. *R* directs its reader to other texts where this isn't the case.

"Untitled, 1966"

A recurrent trope in Peries's paintings is two dis- connected/associated figures. *U66* is the most economic, concise instance (in *IPP*): it contains no "background" detail, hardly any adjectives, just two abstract figures, a woman and a man, clothed, drawn in profile – in the same (white? cream? hard to tell from the reproduction) blank space; but simply, absolutely, maybe even resolutely, turned away from each other. The lack of adjectives and title give the reader very little direction; one could call it an exemplary instantiation of the theory of the text. The woman is the cardinal figure: at the center of the painting, depicted much larger than the other. Leaning forward, away from the man, she is not sexualized: not in the depiction of her body or her pose; not in their lines, either – which, while curved, have to do with her crouched posture, is not overdetermined by a libidinal imperative. (In contrast, think Keyt's women; they are always sexualized.) Her only adjectivized elements – she is painted almost entirely in gray – are in her face: her brown hair; eyes, a brown speck in a slightly darker gray than the rest of her shape; and nose, even darker, in brown.

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tied tree or wood (*katta* tie, bond; *maram* wood)." The Tamil isn't simply excluded by this text.

[62] The concept of subalternity in *Subaltern Studies*, a rewriting of Gramsci, was necessitated by the inadequacy of orthodox Marxism to supply the terms necessary for a persuasive analysis of socio-economic relation in the colony (or perhaps just India). For its definition, see Guha (1994).

It could be said, if a little mischievously, that – although turned away from him and the reader – she can see that he stinks. Her countenance and posture imply a reaction against, if not a critique of, the man. He is depicted in straight lines, standing, erect, like the cardinal figure in *R*; suggesting, of course, masculinity. His barely visible face and hair are painted brown; torso, grey; the bottom of his body, dark brown (its rectangular shape suggesting a sarong). The dissimilar colors of the man and woman heighten their difference.

U66's scene, then, is one of almost complete dissociation. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the man, the catalytic figure, is not, as it were, out of the picture. Without him – without the relation between their stances, their zographic difference – *U66* wouldn't signify both a staging of patriarchy and a critique, however discreet, of it. If his smaller size, and shading, gives the painting depth, signifying distance, he is drawn alongside her, well within its periphery. That is to say, he is staged as both associated with her and dissociated. Something highlighted by his feet disappearing into hers. Drawn in straight lines, there isn't any suggestion that he is moving away. His right hand (detail) is turned towards her, making a hint of a gesture of reconciliation. But he is also, literally, the broken figure (another difference): unlike the woman, whose body is drawn in connected brushstrokes, he is in four parts – back of head, face, torso, sarong – with the tiniest of spaces in between. (A citation, perhaps, of Matisse's "blue nudes"? A rewriting: here, a man, not a woman, is both broken and clothed.) The questions arise: what do the blank spaces signify? Why is he broken? Is the cause to be located in a prior act of the man – or of the woman? Of the woman as a consequence of the man? Why, in contrast, is she whole? The painting, to repeat, cannot provide such information, cannot narrativize its before. We will never know. Her pose and posture, though, is most suggestive of the statement it makes: she is not crouched, submissive; her torso is almost erect. She is not staged as his object. If we can't know the cause of her discomfort, submission is not her response to it. *U66*, while clearly "about" gender relations, may not make a transparently feminist statement; but it doesn't constitute a masculinist, patriarchal one, either. It doesn't objectify or sexualize the woman, the cardinal figure of its scene; it requests the reader to be pensive, address her zographically embodied demands.

But what is the significance of the blank space, the one lacking detail or "background." Why are these two figures depicted, as it were, nowhere? How does one make sense of nothing? What could nowhere be opposed to? That last question is loaded, structured to suggest its own answer: somewhere; a particular space. That is to say, not depicted in *U66*, or absent from it, are diaphanous signifiers of the social. The painting doesn't contain a tree, a boat, a house – any of the usual figures of what one can now, somewhat confidently, term Peries's system. No signifiers of

the rural – or urban, or any combination thereof, that would enable locating the scene. The woman and man appear to be in "pure," abstract space. This might suggest, even encourage, a psychologistic reading. But just the fact of the two humans drawn together produces a social nexus: *U66* stages a problem with the system of gender. And does so unexpectedly: situating the scene in blank space removes the pair from the private and/or the public spheres, both spaces with a serious stake for feminism. One response to such a move would be to call it irresponsible: the woman is a figure, something made, not a sociological individual. With painting, anything is possible, everything could be depicted. Human figures can be elongated. The supernatural can startle a devil dancer's daughter. On the other hand, it could also be argued that *U66* self-consciously stages a failure. That Peries couldn't conceptualize woman as subject in the public or the private sphere, both spaces marked by patriarchy; and that he attempted to do so in the abstract. But he doesn't succeed there either. The man, or more accurately the system of gender he is a metonym of, if the non-dominant figure in the scene, is zographically associated with the blank space. That is the significance of the blank, broken spaces of his own figure. He leaves his mark even on nothing. *U66* may desire to produce the woman as subject – somewhere, "nowhere," somehow; but it finds such a staging "beyond figuration" – given the fact of patriarchy.[63] In this reading, the painting stages a critique of it: the woman refuses, literally and figuratively, to unbend, turn, concede, reconnect or reconcile with the man – who also won't turn, remains standing, erect, although marked, broken, disabled; his subjectivity is split – by his complicity with the systematic, institutionalized oppression of women that feminism has given the name patriarchy. Association, here, isn't difficult simply because reconciliation in itself is difficult; it has an inescapably gendered level. *U66* suggests that the question of re/turn/ing, of the subject, cannot be adequately thought by repressing the woman.

"Homage to Lionel Wendt"

Disconnection is not a staging Peries reserved exclusively for human figures. Even his trees move apart: in *Homage to Lionel Wendt* (1945), the text read in this section; in *The Wave*, (1955), *Brown Hill* (1974), *Wave II* (1981) and others.[64] *H*'s scene is colored overwhelmingly in dull, somber shades of gray, very slightly bluish in some parts, yellowish in the rest. It depicts two coconut trunks on the beach, the sea and sky. (There might be a sun, but it is difficult to tell from the reproduction – and, not being realist, Peries's figures on land often don't have shadows, even with a sun in the picture; the shape could also be a cloud.) Like *R*, the scene is

[63] Kristeva, 1980: 247.

[64] *IPP*: Plates 34, 89, 128.

geometrically, economically structured; that is to say, one notes in this early text the emergence of an identifiable system. The sea and sky take about three-quarters of the picture. The sky is a rectangle, divided obliquely, by a stark straight line, into two equal trapezoids (trapeziums, in U.K. English), one dark, bluish-gray, the other light, yellowish. The sea is in shades of the bluish-gray; the beach, in the yellowish. The zographic space itself is dominated by the thin, long – elongated – trunks in its foreground. This suggests, very strongly, an analogy with the elongated humans in his other paintings. That is to say, Peries isn't simply mimicking el Greco. By elongating his humans, making their shape iterate that of coconut trunks, the citation takes a Sri Lankan imperative. The trunk on the right half of the picture is erect, more or less straight, just slightly off the center. The second begins towards the bottom left, moves at a forty-five degree angle towards it, gets close, then turns away acutely at the top of the scene, where the sky is dark. The two figures, that is, almost meet, come close to connecting, but don't. The movement of the one trunk towards the other suggests a relationship getting ever closer, then stopped, permanently interrupted. The possibility of association is raised, only to be rejected: at the exact center of the picture is sea and sand, figures devoid of life. In color (somber gray), structure and content, *H* mourns a loss. As Freud reminds us, mourning requires the acceptance of the loss of the object; and is thus to be distinguished from nostalgia and melancholy. It was Peries's response to the death at a young age of his friend and linchpin of the '43 Group. That *H* mourns Wendt's passing, parting, without sentimentality is clear from the depiction of the trees: they come close, then separate. A sentimentalist treatment might have kept the trees in parallel, suggesting that the intimacy of the association would not change, despite death. But mortality here imposes, increases distance; *H* accepts the finality of the loss.

What logic, though, makes it appropriate to honor Wendt by painting coconut trees? Two possible readings suggest themselves, different but not opposed. By the logic of Peries's system, the trunks – not signifiers, here, of the rural – are related in some way to humans. In this instance, they are metaphors for the relation between two men; they suggest – the erect one emphasizes this claim – in and of themselves, and in their movement, a sublimated homoerotism in *H*. (The painting would signify very differently if one of the trees was not the same as the other.) Wendt's (homo)sexuality, as they say, was well known, certainly to his friends. But the careful reader doesn't need that information; the consistency of Peries's system makes this level of the text fairly clear. A remarkably complex painting, *H*'s homage (from the Latin "homo," man) is not only to the man but the work. As Bandaranayake/Fonseka point out, the two members of the '43 Group, given their shared interpellation by the rural, also had objects in common. Wendt often

photographed beachscapes: coconut trees, the sea, fisher-huts and catamarans (which he called outriggers).[65] It is beyond the concern of this essay to actually read Wendt, but one picture from his only published book requires mention. 'Alone at Noon,' (*LWF*: 63) is a scene with two trees (not coconut in this case), an overturned boat at its left foreground, half a cadjan hut on the right edge and, in the middle, sand and sea. The beach occupies most of the space. At its horizon, almost but not quite at the exact center of the picture – that is to say, just slightly decentered – is a tiny, miniature figure, a man crouched over (turned away from the hut). In terms of pictorial space, he is insignificant/minor; and yet is its cardinal figure. Unlike Wendt's more descriptive, if not ruralist, titles – 'Fronds,' 'On a Coconut Estate' – this one is conceptual. Once again, the signifier maybe rural, but the signified is aloneness – to be distinguished from loneliness. Its thematic rhymes with that of Peries. The painter, that is to say, cites the photographer, recites his work; not only in object-choice, but thematic concern. Most crucially, through color: *H*, as stated above, is in shades of gray; its color stages, iterates, that of a black-and-white photograph. The pensive force of Peries as a painter emerges in details like this. Simply drawing a scene Wendt was fond of photographing would have been, ultimately, predictable; could have been explained away as an acknowledgement of a common thematic; the dismissive term derivative might even have been used by an unsympathetic reader. With this particular blend of color, however, Peries, as a painter, honors the singular achievement of Wendt, as a photographer, with zographic brilliance.

The homage is not restricted, though, to a single painting. From the beginning of his artistic production to its end, Peries acknowledges Wendt. Or, more precisely, recites him: where Wendt usually photographed whole coconut trees, Peries more commonly depicted trunks; where, in 'Alone at Noon,' Wendt's cardinal figure, though alone, is of his place, associated, Peries' texts call the nexus with place, association itself, into question. In the intertext of the paintings and photographs, the corpus of the '43 Group as a whole, usually – misleadingly, irresponsibly – described as a collection of very different artists without common purpose, acquires a powerful, if heterogeneous, substantiality. It emerges as not just a group, but an association. An association of men; who dominantly, it appears from their texts, conceived the subject as male and heterosexual; but not, as in many of Wendt's photographs, and this singular Peries painting suggests, always or exclusively so.

[65] See *LWF*: Plates 59, 63, 75, 78, 79. There are no palmyrah trees in this book.

"Untitled, 1956"

Unlike *R, U66* and *H, U56*'s scene has many figures: in its left half is (a part of) a hut, a clay pot and four subalterns – two women, two men, all depicted in profile, on the beach; the right half of the picture is dominated by five coconut trunks – four standing straight, erect, one bent to the right, at an acute angle to the rest. The other figures are the beach, sea and sky, with the sun and a boat in the left-middle. *U56*'s color, too, is very different from the Peries texts discussed so far: the shades of ochre are brighter, distinct; there is more dark brown and orange, mostly in the sky; three of the human figures wear red. This section, which doesn't read the whole painting at the length it deserves, focuses on one of the women – crouched, on the ground, by herself, somewhat autonomous. The others stand; two of them, a woman and man, drawn distinctly but together, hold hands with the third, a man, who faces them. The standing woman is slightly shorter than the men. The three are rectangular in shape; their hands merge into each other, constituting them as a group, a community, an association. The depiction suggests a farewell: that the man on the right is about to leave them, turn away. (Though we'll never know for sure; painting, like any system of signification, is not unequivocal.) At the left bottom of the scene, pictorially closest to the standing woman, is a dissociated figure, the minor, outrigger to the community – the crouching woman. Her posture – she too is bent rightward – iterates that of the angled tree. (This, perhaps, is the place to state that I do not know if Peries staged this deliberately, meant to suggest the comparison. A pensive, intellectual painter, he probably did; but I can't know and really don't care. Peries's intention is irrelevant to reading, which is not about knowing – or the production of knowledge.) Drawn alongside her is an object that appears often in Peries's texts, usually near women – a clay pot. The questions arise: how are the woman and the pot linked? What (dis)connects the two women? Not to mention, of course, the woman-outsider and the rest of the group. Before getting there, it is necessary to address another. Peries's production is structured, balanced with great care; his system makes us relate its human and coconut tree figures. In which case, how does one account for a text containing four subalterns and five trees? Is there one tree too many or something/someone missing from the scene?

Or, of course, is there another figure in the left part of the scene that would supplement, in that sense complete, the group of four (or three plus/minus one)? Such a reading seems to be the most responsible by the text. The figure in question, then, would either be the boat or the hut. Zographically, the boat, the more linear figure, drawn on the same vertical plane as the trees, is – perhaps – the one that completes the group of standing figures; suggesting, therefore, that the group itself is brought together, associated, by a relationship to the sea, maybe fishing. In turn, this figure that both relates to and differs from the humans, the boat – or, more

precisely, what it signifies metonymically – would be an element in the dissociation of the crouching woman. As said before, the figure or object she is linked to is the pot; she is also the person closest to the hut, the home, the domestic sphere. In this context, the clay pot – not in itself, but together with her (posture) – would signify use value, labor, domestic labor, more particularly. (As opposed to the production of commodities, exchange value, signified by fishing.) Put differently, one woman in *U56* is linked to the private sphere – and not, crucially, as an object of male desire, but as a subject of labor (as opposed to labor-power). She is staged, that is, as a person who works (but not as a working-class person). The other, standing woman, whom the crouching woman is zographically closest – and opposed – to, is drawn alongside a man; again to make the obvious point, she is linked to the men – they are all standing, drawn in a rectangular shape. This woman, then, is associated with patriarchy; depicted smaller than the men, in a lighter colored skirt – diminished, its object. *U56*, that is to say, doesn't depict women in a simple or straightforward fashion; doesn't signify an easy opposition between women and men. Its women are singular: different and the same. However, both its men are depicted similarly: they stand, are drawn in straight lines, are in white shirts (tops) and red sarongs (bottoms). The latter is also the color of the bending woman's skirt (bottom). Zographically, she is linked to the other woman, whom she is closest to within the picture, and to the men (by their commonly colored clothes). Like the standing man in *R*, she is not an outsider, like the crouching man there (the bottom of) her figure, too, fades into the earth – unlike the rest of *U56*'s figures, which are distinctly outlined. She is the most connected to, interpellated by, (the) place.

If that is the case, if she is linked to the woman and the men, what makes her an outrigger to the group, connected but distanced? Following our reading, the three standing or vertical figures are associated with the other vertical figure/object in that part of the scene, the boat (an upright sail is its dominant element), fishing; she is linked to a different object, the pot. While the pot, in the context of this scene, may signify domestic labor, it doesn't always do so in Peries. In *Thambakke*, for instance, the naked woman drawn with her back to the reader, her face and torso in profile, holds a pot against her hip. Its shape iterates, with almost geometric exactitude, the shape – the curves – of the woman's buttocks and hips, if not also of her breast. As an adjective it is libidinal, emphasizes the woman's sexuality. In *U56*, the curved torso of the bent woman is iterated, if at all, loosely by the pot. Her face is turned away from the group and towards the hut, the domestic/private sphere, highlighting her difference; which is not produced as related to sexuality – the lines of her figure, and posture, do not signify the libidinal. Yet, it is crucial to notice, she isn't depicted inside the house. Women's labor, in *U56*, is not staged within the private sphere; in a significant reversal, it is brought outside, literally into view, foregrounded; identified as an element of her alienation, dissociation from the

group, or community – which refuses, in this scene, to acknowledge her/it. In turn, her figure, its position, disrupts the geometric order of the group, the community – which literally marginalizes her, the working woman. She is both associated with the community and produced as outside it, linked, not staged as strictly autonomous – like the catamaran. Her subjectivity, that is, cannot be thought except in relation to that of the others, but it is not overdetermined by the group, either. Association, it is suggested here, cannot be thought productively without coming to terms with, attending to, difference.

(Re)Turning To Sri Lanka

Like any other text, painting is both marked by the social (text) and marks, or intervenes, within it. The postcolonial itinerary of Sri Lanka is deeply scarred by the brutality of nationalism: Sinhala nationalism's desire to hegemonize the Sri Lankan social, its determination to dominate, often violently, those who resist; a desire and violence iterated, in turn, by Tamil nationalism towards those who resist it. Inevitably, Peries's production is woven with this text. It cannot but be marked by the question of nationalism, or association predicated on domination, a brutal or violent relation to difference. As said before, it doesn't, itself, mark the script it is produced by with the emphasis of a Shanaathanan or Weerasinghe; it doesn't stage its dissent, its protest, transparently. Nevertheless, in its second or later part, after Peries finds his system, it insistently draws the reader's attention to the cardinal failure of postcolonial Sri Lanka: the failure to produce inclusive, enabling, association or community, an egalitarian common, or at least one attentive to difference, a thematic concern that dominates Peries's production, beginning around – but, as said before, the calendar is at best an unreliable signifier – that pivotal year, 1956. Thus the significance of its zographic detail, its dissociated figures, its outriggers: the man with his face turned away from the other in *R*, the trees moving away in *H*, the woman dissociated from the man in *U66*, and the group, in *U56*. They signify this signal Sri Lankan failure. So, in a very different sense, does Keyt's production. It cannot, of course, avoid the Sri Lankan text. But, unlike Peries's, Keyt's is written with the dominant, effectively celebrates (Sinhala) nationalism – doesn't see it as signifying a Sri Lankan failure. Peries's production, in contrast, interrupts this script, calls attention to the fissures of community, the outriggers to association, asks its reader to conceive a common without domination.

The importance of the dissociated – in a sense, uncommon – figures to his texts is not that they are simply depicted as marginal/ized, minoritized, but that they are, sometimes literally, central, pivotal, to their signifying force, the statements they make, if implicitly. Exemplary here are the women in *U56* and *U66*. Their figuration, as argued in the reading above, is not reducible to the critique of

nationalism. Peries puts patriarchy into question as a system of gendered oppression. The woman in *U56* isn't a part of the group, is apart from the group, associated with domestic labor. Such labor – one could call it the gendered production of use-value, without exchange value – consigns, confines, her to the margin of the painting, (op)presses her, keeps her down, makes her unable to stand, on equal footing, with the others. But Peries doesn't simply surrender to the abject script of patriarchy. He stages the woman not inside, but outside, doesn't depict her as merely confined to the private sphere; she makes a demand on the public, or at least desires to – on her own terms, with and without the pot. Such desire and its difficulty, its binds, are staged even more emphatically through the dominant figure of *U66*. Here, the woman is both subject, at the center of the painting, and isn't – unable to stand, be like the man; or, perhaps, she refuses to turn to him, submit to patriarchy. Peries could, of course, have depicted both similarly, given them the same zographic space and detail. In not so doing, he not only stages gender difference, calls patriarchy into question, but makes the reader ask: should woman's desire be like the man's, similar, if not homonymous? Wouldn't such desire, to be not the dominant but a subject, too, only iterate the very terms, the structure, of patriarchy? It may not be a transparently feminist painting, or make a diaphanous statement, but in so doing, this text rhymes, remarkably enough, with the radical strand of recent feminism, that which questions the very production of gender difference.[66]

Through these figures, these texts also pose a more general question of association – thus the necessity of the term to this essay. *H*, literally in its depiction of the trees coming together then moving apart, metaphorically in its sublimated homoeroticism, depicts its uncertainty, its tensions. *U56* calls our attention to estrangement, minoritization. *R*, a most subtle, dense, if not actually magnificent painting, stages not just the difficulty of going back to, confronting the scene of separation, but the necessity of doing so. No parting, it suggests, is necessarily permanent. A return maybe met with a rebuff, but that shouldn't foreclose its possibility, the necessity to confront – challenge, but also adjoin, face – the other. By now, it shouldn't surprise any reader of this essay that, in this reading, Peries's production, *The Return* especially, have something important to teach those of us preoccupied with the question of peace in Sri Lanka. They enable us to think anew the difficulty of forgetting, of working through – and I use these terms in the Freudian sense – estrangement. Simply put: it is difficult, yes, but should not therefore be abandoned. Tamil nationalism, it suggests, however estranged – *made* an outrigger to Sri Lankan association – it maybe, must return to the scene, the place, of provocation. And Sinhala nationalism, it insists, cannot continue to turn its face and, more insultingly, its back, to the other it estranged, minoritized, pushed

[66] I am thinking here, mostly, of Butler, Scott and, of course, Spivak.

away. More than that, one cannot responsibly ask of painting; that it bruises, provokes thought, questioning, is enabling enough. And it is quite beside the point to complain that *R* doesn't include, or in some transparent way enable the reading of, the Muslim and other minoritized subject-positions. One cannot require of any single text that it would represent the totality of the social; such desire would, of course, be totalitarian in impulse. Peries's painting enables us to conceptualize anew, keep returning to, the problem of association, the necessity to work through estrangement, think community without domination. That makes him a truly remarkable painter of our postcolonial present. If George Keyt could be called the Arjuna Ranatunga of our painting, then Ivan Peries is its Muttiah Muralitharan: different, difficult to read, pensive, brilliant, unique.

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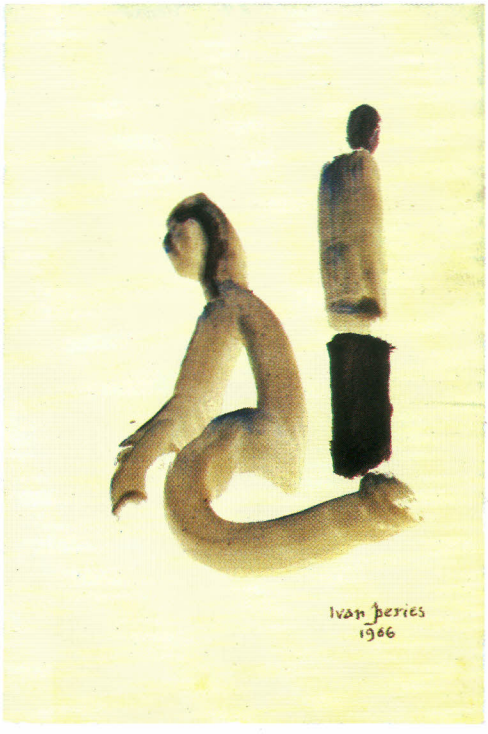
QADRI ISMAIL

Untitled 1956



Untitled 1966

The Return

Homage to Lionel Wendt