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Queering Postnational Tendencies in Contemporary Art from Thailand

BRIAN CURTIN

Prologue

Any number of different approaches to Thailand as an object of study and general interest can be said to intersect at a recognition of the pre-eminence given to *surface appeal* within the range of Thai societies. Peter A. Jackson coined the epigrammatic term “regime of images” to discuss how appearances are widely monitored and policed within the country; among others, he quotes the earlier scholarly work of Rosalind Morris, who wrote of Thai modernity’s “overinvestment in appearances” and Penny Van Esterik’s claims for “The real is hidden and unchallenged. The surface is taken for real.”¹ To this we can add more recent references such as Koompong Noobanjong’s *The Aesthetics of Power: Architecture, Modernity, and Identity from Siam to Thailand* and Philip Cornwel-Smith’s *Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture*.² Koompong traced the way in which historical meanings of Thailand’s major architecture have been inscribed and re-inscribed by successive administrations and military juntas as a means of avowing authority rather than the coherence of political ideologies these forms would otherwise serve. Philip Cornwel-Smith’s populist account of Thailand’s famed capacity to appropriate and hybridise influences—across the range of visual and material culture—perceives the

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resulting patina as indicative of a distinct cultural essence. Here we can also acknowledge Maurizio Peleggi's noting that the Thai tourism industry, that has grown exponentially since the 1990s, flattens real aspects of a country into instantly recognisable images; in the example of Thailand, the particularly compelling visual qualities of the gilded and the exquisite are common.³ And the writer Lawrence Osborne observed: "It is constantly remarked that the Thais are rather formal and proper in their day-to-day lives (...) but it could be said that it is this very surface reticence which frees the deeper, more private self (...)." ⁴

How might this recognition of the pervasiveness of intensely visual experience be explained for Thailand? Jackson traces the centrality of aesthetics to historical practices within Buddhism and animist beliefs, and forms of power that emerged with the local expediency of projecting "civilised" images to the world during the colonial era.⁵ As is so often reiterated, Siam shook but officially remained free of the imperial hands of Britain and France. The characterisation of the "regime of images" as a significant form of Thai power finds succinct reflection in, for example, Benedict Anderson's observation that contemporary political turmoil in the country caused the Thai Royal Court to create "[a] media campaign that would have made Kim II Sung blanch".⁶ Lawrence Chua has written of the historic relationship between the appeal of ethereal aesthetics and fascism in Siam/Thailand, exploring a cultural exaltation of the "spiritual" and "beauty" as rooted in the earlier popularity of Mussolini's ideas among political elites here.⁷ Here we could recall how Jean Baudrillard, Walter Benjamin and Susan Sontag shaped the pleasures of surface effects as disarming and depoliticising.⁸ However, and furthermore, the gendered qualities of aesthetics as a means of representational stereotypes and social regulation have been highlighted by Rachel V. Harrison's studies of Thai literatures.⁹

From the social impact of historical contingencies to political and also market economies, the wide reach and very mobility of a valorisation of *image-appearances* in Thailand is demonstrated by this survey of writings. In summary, we can note a determined move from *material* to *immaterial*. That is, perceptual engagement or recognition is powerfully instrumental for trumping structural understanding, whether to do with an abstracted palliative to material conditions or questions of the politics of forms (Koompong, Peleggi), the potential incoherence of diversity and contradictions (Cornwel-Smith) or the repressions surely entailed by public uniformity and conformity (Osborne). With this in mind, I want to ask: what role do, or can, contemporary Thai visual artists play in this pervasive culture of *image-appearances* that is so socially instrumental?

Introduction

At the time of writing this article in 2016, Thailand was under military rule since General Prayuth Chan-o-cha seized power in 2014 and appointed himself *de facto* leader of the country. General Prayuth's rule continues political turmoil from a decade that has seen two popularly elected governments officially dissolved. And major public protests during this time resulted in a military crackdown in 2010 where 91 died and hundreds were injured.

General Prayuth's coup d'état is the 12th since 1932, a watershed year in Thai history when Siam's long period of royal absolutism ended with a bloodless takeover by a small group of French-educated civilian and military figures. Since that time the emergent nation—named Thailand in 1939—has seen over 30 prime ministerial appointments (including acting and reappointments) as the decades unfolded with government infighting, volatile relationships between civilian and royalist groups, failures of democratic policies, the shifting status of the “free world”, the growth of communism in Southeast Asia and shape-shifting tendencies for nationalist rhetoric, amongst manifold other pressures.

The official reasons for the most recent coup reflect the justifications of the earlier ones: in shorthand, the necessity to remove an allegedly corrupt government and “return” Thailand to a “natural” state of harmony, rhetoric that would have grown with the invention of tradition as modernity's fraternal twin in the 20th century.¹⁰ However, the subtext and consequences of the current coup distinguish this period. The reigning monarch of Thailand at the time of writing was Rama IX Bhumibol Adulyadej. In the lead-up to his passing in October 2016, fears for the socio-political infrastructure after his death intensified speculations on the motivations of the current junta. Rama IX was genuinely revered within the country and it can be said without hyperbole that this reverence was maintained by the ancient belief systems of Devaraja and Dhammaraja, Khmer or Indo-Buddhist notions of god-king and righteous kingship that, like the modernising Siamese monarchs from Rama IV Mongkut (1804–68) onwards, positioned him as both a guiding hand and complexly above the fray. Rama IX's successor, Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn suffered bad international press and was reported as not tied to the current formation of the military and Bangkok's moneyed elites to the same extent as his father. The junta of General Prayuth is shoring up the power of Thai royalty with accelerated cases of *lèse majesté*, re-entrenching various institutions to maintain vested interests, rewriting the constitution and restructuring parliament to pre-empt the possibility of a return to the type of administrations that were freely elected since the turn of this century.¹¹

In this article, I aim to write a context for recent and emergent visual and conceptual art practices in Thailand through highlighting this contemporary political narrative in relation to the culture of image-appearances as it intersects with “Thainess” (*khwampenthai*)—a driving force of Thai nationalism which functions to control, regulate or displace contradiction, antagonism and disparity. The article proposes a contemporary irrecoverable context of “postnationalism” through exploring how a number of artists reflect or trace the impossibility of securities in the intimate relationship between the culture of image-appearances and nationalist interest; indeed, avow a critical ambivalence or incoherence concerning the very possibility of control or regulation. Postnationalism is shaped in terms of the pressures that contemporary Thai artists can mount on their discursive framings, and such framings—that include Thai historiography and art criticism—are therefore examined for limits and possibilities.

The use of the term “postnational” is not, however, strictly a question of periodisation: of course, types of contemporary art can be recuperated to nationalist interest and aspects of this article may be applied retroactively. But comparisons with artists who emerged in earlier eras will suggest contemporaneous or temporally particular terms for contextualising. In this respect, the political narrative I have sketched out offers *particular* terms; “queering” is evoked in view of its chameleon quality that shifts between a loose category of non-normative identities and a critique of categories of identity per se, or a study of the very relationship between identity and norms. “Queer” can be understood as a verb-like conceit that foregrounds questions of fluidity, uncertainty, incoherence, strangeness et al. for any object of study.¹² Moving in this direction, as Graham L. Hammill writes, queerness is not about self-representation as such but particularity as a problem that attends the limits of social thought.¹³ And particularity is here pursued as my concern tracing the challenges and distinctions of contemporary Thai artists within an ongoing political meltdown and national context that has been described as the most repressive for Thailand since the 1950s.¹⁴

On “The Thai Regime of Images”

Jackson’s account of the “regime of images” as a distinct mode of “Thai power” is useful, beyond the explanatory succinctness of its reach, for the assertion of a national distinctness, and consequently raises questions about the applicability of critical theories developed in and for other socio-cultural contexts. Claims for Thailand’s purported exceptionalism—largely emerging from the fact that Thailand is the only country in Southeast Asia that was not

formally colonised—have long since been critically noted and sporadically addressed with a central insight that the claims for exceptionalism have been, and are, politically expedient among elites here.¹⁵ Here it is useful to revisit one of Jackson's central examples of the problems or limits of Anglophone critical theory with regard to the Thai context in order to emphasise the dynamic at stake and note how such may be overcome.

Jackson argued how Judith Butler's famed theory about the performativity of identity—how identity norms are socially constructed to acquire the appearance of “natural”—is actually inverted in Thailand. That is, while Butler would claim subversive potential in the self-conscious demonstration of socialised norms as such, within Thailand, constructedness is their very *raison d'être* and therefore does not possess the ideological support of “nature” or, moreover, the supposition of the expression of an inner essence. Here the repetition, or performativity, of norms is precisely what allows them to accrue authentic value and hence surface produces “depth”—as Chua and others suggest—and critical questions of the fact of normativity are relatively neutralised. The radicalism of Butler's claims becomes the opposite for Thai regimes of power, according to Jackson's account.¹⁶

The potential to pursue a more productive relationship between the Thai context and the interest of Butler's writings is skirted in Jackson's account due to a central concern with local difference. For example, we can point out that Butler's argument for exposing norms as socially constructed has already been debunked as, at best, a modest aim in terms of “western” cultures. Leo Bersani argues that Butlerian implications of subversion mean little more than undermining generally accepted principles. It is, or was, as it is, an open question as to how denaturalising socialised norms would necessarily subvert their force.¹⁷ Further, we can note that Butler—in elaborate qualifications further to the widespread impact of the now canonical book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*—ultimately argued for the repetition of norms *differently* than already shaped, as a means of upending or expanding beyond the constraints of normalised notions of identity.¹⁸

Butler's theory of the performativity of norms drew on, among others, J.L. Austin's inquiries into how language, or utterances, can be parsed to different affects, and also Louis Althusser's notion of *interpellation* as the practice of how societies “hail” individuals into given categories of identity. Summarily, she claims that categories of identity preexist the subject, or individual, but while the terms of the categories are by definition constraining, they are also enabling insofar as such can be performed in a manner that potentially produces expanded or alternative meanings. Famously, Butler declared there is “no do-er behind the deed” hence the distinction between performativity

and performance. Or, in a word, preexisting meanings influence the possibilities of their use, but use may not be understood as determined, thus raising questions of subjective agency and contextual legibility.

Following from insights that the maintenance of “Thai” identities is shaped by the production and regulation of a culture of image-appearances and intersects with issues of power, examples that highlight the significance of this revised engagement with Butler might be useful when particularly controversial, that is, examples which allow us to consider pressures on maintenance and, furthermore, also allow us to think in less transhistorical or fixed terms. The media images of a police-organised re-enactment of a murder scene from the arrest and trial of the migrant workers Zaw Lin and Wai Phyo for the murder of two British tourists in 2014, and the 2015 deadly bomb blast in central Bangkok that was followed almost immediately by a clean-up campaign, comparatively produce questions of the effectiveness of the performative gesture, or how the performative may be contested in terms of context and legibility.

Photographs of the bomb blast demonstrate a canny understanding of what it means to manipulate public perception in spite of the criticism that the clean-up negatively impacted the process of gaining evidence. This urgent clean-up signals, to an international audience, through the images, that Thailand was attacked in an exceptional incident by an external force and that the authorities are efficient in maintaining and protecting the country’s sovereignty.¹⁹ In this respect, they are comparable to media images of 9/11 or the murderous attacks on Paris in 2016. That is, there is conventional precedent and a given context. Photographs of the re-enactment of the murder, however, are comparatively or conventionally strange—neither legible in demonstrating police efficiency, nor, as would be the aim otherwise, affirming that the accused possess knowledge of the practice of killing. Even if such “truths” are not fully at issue—the “regime of images” often values the security of sheer visual captivity—the images singularly fail to perform their aim: persuading the viewer that Thailand is effectively managing the problem. In the first instance, this is a consequence of the change of context: re-enactment is typically for the purpose of a live audience but photography turns this performativity back into itself, to now be examined or studied as something else. Within an international context, Clare Veal has deftly characterised a shift from “imagined communities” to “imagined worlds” for contemporary times: from Anderson’s famous formulation of how one believes oneself to be collectively part of a nation to Arjun Appadurai’s ideas about the expansion of a range of possible selves due to the rise of visual economies such as the digital.²⁰ Here the images of the accused destabilise the performative

aim of affirmation. Following from Veal, Appadurai would characterise this possibility as postnational insofar as forms of understanding beyond the dictates of the nation-state can be exceptionally fostered. The culture of image-appearances in Thailand may be thought of in less secure terms, opening ambiguity and disallowing an aim to assuage or distract from the world of “public truths” and ideological utility.

National Discontents

Chatri Prakitnonthakan succinctly commented that Thai art history has been written under a singular epistemological framework, and one that is formed in nationalistic terms.²¹ This finds reflection in the major Anglophone text *Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* by Apinan Poshyananda. Apinan approached modernism in loose terms, drawing out the intrinsic ambiguity of the term to argue for Thai artists’ negotiation of foreign influence in terms of “local” knowledge, values and styles. However, the actual lack of a coherent “local” or “Thai” stylistic language raises questions about his methodological impulses and assumptions; where artists employ particular cultural emblems or social references, we might wonder about their genealogy beyond the declared frames. Nowhere are artists imagined as complicating these very frames despite the diversity of their practices.

Questions of cultural essentialism and discourse are introduced by John Clark’s discussion of Thailand, in which he traces histories within constructs of nation, geography and history. This has a corollary in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s notion of provincialising Europe and other ideas of critical regionalism and theories of decoloniality.²² At issue, to paraphrase Ara Wilson, is “(...) the political problem of Western-centrism, especially the ways that knowledge (...) is intertwined with national, racial and global power”.²³ Clark later explains, what it means to unlink modernism in Asia from a seemingly inevitable imbrication in “western” origins and frameworks, but ultimately argues that an alternative modernism is not particularly traceable unless key aspects of its definition are shifted, for example, with regard to democracy and autonomy.²⁴

Between these examples, the promises and problems of cultural relationships, genealogies and distinction are highlighted; questions of difference and comparability, and the pursuit of histories and knowledge as imbricated in power and language. Paul Gladston summarises the challenge of thinking about “contemporary art” in respect to the problems of the dynamic of an essential, spatially bound national-cultural identity or the opposition to such exceptionalism that risks universalising. Such, of course, are the concerns that underline the above. Gladston proposes an examination of points of

interaction and resistance that allow for multiple discursive positions and the refuting of individual or hierarchical authority.²⁵ Such a method has the important impact of troubling the dichotomies suggested by Apinan and others, often serving, for example, now tired frameworks such as global/local. A 2015 exhibition of contemporary art from Southeast Asia at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, for example, was titled *Secret Archipelago* and inexactly framed a wide variety of artists as supplying the interests of an indigenous heritage to a disinterested European audience. The tropes of civilised/nativist, modernity/traditional surely haunt this. Moreover, we can note that the themes of many prominent Thai artists—religion, political violence, nationalism—are hardly reducible to strictly “local” concerns; the 1990s and 2000s saw Thai artists Rirkrit Tiravanija and Surasi Kusolwong establish international reputations as part of a transnational mode of art making, driven partly by the mantles of relational aesthetics and post-production created by the critic and curator Nicholas Bourriaud. But beyond the pressures of what it has meant to represent modern and contemporary art from Thailand, the frames sketched above are arguably and particularly straining under the interest of more recent and emergent art practices within the country.

An illustration of this strain can be found in aspects of the critical reception of two of Thailand’s most prominent artists, Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook and Pinaree Sanpitak, who happen to be female. Their works are loosely based in local emblems and contexts: from Araya’s meditative engagement with corpses or avowal of the voices of Thai farming communities to Pinaree’s use of forms and references to Buddhist architecture and ritual symbols in immersive and often fabric-based installations. Their practices, however, are also relevant to sources in both Anglophone and French feminist theories: societal constraints on female desire; explorations of female experience; biography; critiques of sexism and religion; and abstractions of difference, liminality and corporeality.²⁶ We can wonder about the controversies at stake when published essays on their work dismiss “any particular feminist doctrine” as relevant,²⁷ or suggest that an artist has been “claimed by a feminist camp” without providing examples or explaining the politics of feminism, of whatever stripe, and how the interests of gender, aesthetics and representation can be sufficiently circumscribed by an ominous characterisation of a “gender agenda”.²⁸ Here we can also note, via Gladston, that the “uniqueness” routinely claimed for these artists, also claimed here, moves in two directions but nevertheless dovetails on questions of power and identity: between “western” gendered constructs of genius and claims for Thai exceptionalism, already noted above as often a politically strategic resistance to critical engagement. The potential of Araya and Pinaree to be understood as destabilising

both—between their engagements with multiple voices, collective and structural inequality, and states of physical experience—is neutralised as their works are held to speculative and descriptive interest. This risks its own and the artists' critical marginality as merely reflective of given, and arbitrary, conditions rather than an active engagement with social realities and an expanded impact on critical theory.

Imagining Thainess

David Teh intelligently characterises the interest of contemporary art within Thailand as exhausted due to the intersection of the cyclical and violent nature of Thai politics and the didactic, appropriative strategies of government bodies that support culture.²⁹ As contemporary art has been yoked to official administration, artists have been framed with Thai-cultural clichés at national and international levels. From more recent examples, *Traces of Siamese Smile: Art + Faith + Politics + Love* at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC) in 2009 decontextualised multiple histories of visual and conceptual art or *Gondola al Paradiso Co. Ltd.* at the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009, which ironically played on traditional tourist clichés of the country but to audiences that have surely long since lost any interest in such.

However, we could quickly exchange “art” for “art criticism”. Such a characterisation raises questions of the methods available to art criticism insofar as to respond to events of this type by remaining within their declared ideological terms is to capitulate to a certain logic: a “success” or “failure” rather than a critique of the conditions that can co-opt art to national agendas, or an exploration of the very limits of co-option. Here it is notable that another exhibition within the purview of “exhaustion”, *Imagine Peace* at the Bangkok Art and Cultural Centre during 2010, was explicitly critiqued by way of skirting questions as to its performative function to instead indict the exhibition's weaknesses as political art.³⁰

Imagine Peace was organised as an exercise in national unity further to deadly street protests during the unelected government of Abhisit Vejjajiva. And for all its naiveté and instability, it is a clear example of the culture of image-appearances aiming to function performatively in terms of the declarative title. The quality of the artworks neither secures nor undermines that aim (or could it?) as the gesture of “imagining peace” is held to act within the public sphere, tangibly shaping its curatorial rhetoric. Returning to the points highlighted above, we can ask: how could the performative function here be understood as turning back on itself, failing to assuage or displace the problems, contradictions, disparities and violence? It might

be possible to trace close readings of the artworks to that effect within an expanded vocabulary which, as noted above, has been arguably inhibited. Or, more summarily—following Teh’s intuition of “exhaustion”—we can treat the performative here as flailing. This would permit a mapping of a context that allows for the pursuit of instability in the cultural policies of an authoritarian government in tandem with insisting that such policies should not exist. This context is the intersection of Thainess and the culture of image-appearances and, to paraphrase Jack Halberstam in his cultural study of failure, exhaustion might carry the implications of a “(...) refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power (...)”.³¹ “Exhaustion” may signal the pressure of changed world contexts, as noted above, and could perhaps be understood in terms of a terrible anachronism, shaped by the contemporary terms of General Prayuth’s junta. These terms are the increased and explicit repression as actual signs of weakness in the current socio-political fabric.

A comparison with a later exhibition—which also allows for a fragmented topography rather than the implications of a uniform assessment of the “art scene” in Thailand—after another round of street protests in 2014, *Conflicted Visions* at WTF in Bangkok, is instructive in this respect to challenges to the normative logic of performativity.³² The curatorial premise of *Conflicted Visions* was that of an impartial relationship to the political divisions within the country, and the exhibition brought together Thai artists of avowedly different political affiliations. Plain-clothes police was hired for the opening night event due to advance warning that such impartiality suggested tacit support for the so-called Red Shirts, the vernacular name for the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) and supporters of the deposed prime ministers Thaksin Shinawatra (2001–06) and Yingluck Shinawatra (2011–14). *Conflicted Visions* acknowledged a polarity or split in the national consciousness, staged it neutrally and inevitably promised an engagement with artworks premised on ideas of difference.

Noting the potentially violent consequences of a public avowal of differences reminds us of the stakes involved in denying or downplaying this, as *Conflicted Visions* operated with terms opposite to *Imagine Peace*, rejecting rather than affirming national unity. But between both we can discern a distinctly contemporary condition: “exhaustion” and/or rejection at the very intersection of Thainess and the culture of image-appearances, or as art can avow such. To examine recent and emergent artists’ practices against this backdrop, I would argue, provides a productive means to move beyond the deadlock or polarity—instrumentality or opposition—that the above curatorial efforts represent dialogically with the practices themselves and map a more complex, indeed queer, view of visual art and Thai politics than seems to be

imagined, and is, arguably, imaginable. These exhibitions therefore need to be understood not as arbitrary curatorial conceits but in terms of discursive production therefore demanding questions of how relations between artists and Thainess have become possible and what the stakes are in imagining otherwise.

Between Nationalism and Postnationalism

Thainess has been, in its own peculiar essence, historically heterogeneous.³³ Invented during the rule of Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram (1897–1964, hereafter Phibun), a central figure in the bloodless 1932 coup d'état that began the continuing process of establishing Thailand as a viable constitutional democracy, the ideology shifted through the dictatorship of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1908–63) by drawing on the historical character of the Siamese kings' use of the interrelationship between Buddhism and divine kingship.³⁴ Between both leaders, we can see its “modern” or “traditional” uses: for Phibun, Thainess supported the revolutionary nature of the 1932 coup while for Sarit, it was used as part of a process of discrediting that earlier period, supporting accusations of communism.³⁵ Chai-anan Samudavanija has argued how state power and national identity in this period became conflated also as the consequence of the emergence of an economically powerful and independent bourgeoisie who were ethnically Chinese and largely tied to their homeland, and would eventually become Thai citizens. The former was therefore elevated as superior to society itself—after all, the unelected coup leaders of 1932 had no broad base of support and so on—and leaders and elites could mandate “Thai” as well as “un-Thai” sensibilities and conduct.³⁶ This continues to this day in, for example, General Prayuth's “12 Core Values” for daily recitation by Thai schools, which reflects Phibun's famous cultural mandates that sought to “civilise” Thailand and included the dictum: “Thai people must never reveal anything to foreigners that might damage the nation. These actions are a betrayal of the nation.”³⁷

The very heterogeneity of the idea of Thainess, its malleability, is reflected in a number of key artists' work that might debate its shape but not effectively displace its purported necessity. Manit Sriwanichpoom's photography, for example, has consistently engaged the flux and problems of local politics and Thai society. His series *This Bloodless War* (1997), originally exhibited as large prints on a central Bangkok roadside, restages iconic images from the Vietnam War and the bombing of Nagasaki as a timely response to the so-called “Tom Yung Goong Crisis” or Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, which began in Bangkok. As Peleggi astutely points out, this meltdown confronted

FIGURE 1: Manit Sriwanichpoom, *This Bloodless War #1–#3*, 1997. Gelatin silver print, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist

the historic interest of Thailand to assimilate and adapt foreign or outside influences.³⁸ Here the Thai subject is portrayed as a victim of consumerism and the murderous power of financial corporations which, framed by recognisable media images of world disasters, suggests or heightens the disaster of that assimilation. His famed *Pink Man* series (1997–) offers an unambiguous indictment of consumerism as the eponymous figure is seen as merely “shopping” amidst the monuments of history, tradition and modernity. A critical reading of this series could highlight the gender and ethnicity of the figure, who appears to be Chinese, and therefore question the usefulness of the figure as focal point for an everyman. But we might also surmise that within the discursive culture of image-appearances, a clear polarity—here

FIGURE 2: Vasan Sittikhet, “For the Nation’s Identity”, *Blue October* series, 1996. Mixed media on canvas, 150 × 150 cm. Courtesy Numthong Gallery

decadent consumerism and its more worthy others—forecloses such hence the lack of critique in this regard for Manit's practice.

Vasan Sittikhet's career of agitprop, emerging in the 1990s, has drawn on exposing and confronting brutality and corruption in the country, typically addressing already prevalent imagery and ideas also derived from iconic imagery. His series *Blue October* (1996) comprises expressionist paintings based on the infamous photographs of the brutal military and paramilitary murder of student protestors in 1976 at Thammasat University, a protest organised against the official return of an exiled dictator. Pointing to the relative tendencies of Thainess, Vasan's practice mostly disavows or defaces the symbols and agents of authority in their manifold forms, from cultural emblems to political figures; in one installation he repeated "I am not Thai" as part of a video self-portrait.³⁹

A series of sculptural works by Sutee Kunavichayanont treats national symbols as objects to be inflated by audience participation and is comparable to Manit's and Vasan's work insofar as it stays within the terms critiqued: the underside of official versions, whether the destruction wreaked by globalisation on an economically vulnerable country or the violence beneath a formally Buddhist culture. Metaphorically, we are given polarities of empowered/disempowered or strong/weak, which can be chosen between; whether one

FIGURE 3: Sutee Kunavichayanont, *The White Elephant*, 1999. Latex rubber, air balloon, hose, 120 × 257 × 38 cm. Courtesy the artist

version or another, rallying symbols or rhetoric for national unity are not in themselves called into question. In this respect these artists suggest the same “arguments” as political elites, however variable: for Manit, Thailand is a defenceless and corrupted country set against greater powers, and Vasan’s strategies of indictment and defacement are already enfolded within the culture of image-appearances: attack the image and not the context which shapes its significance.

Against these examples, artists who have come of age in more recent times, and practices that are maturing in the contemporary time span can be read in far more ambivalent terms towards Thainess, or notions of Thai identity and inherent nationalism. Pisitakun Kuantalaeng’s *Unfinished History Project* (2012–), for example, steps back from any direct commentary on Thailand itself as the installation invites audiences to create random connections between world historical events, politics and meaning. We can discern the national exhaustion that Teh wrote of but in more productive terms—that is, an exploration of how meaning is produced rather than merely consumed—but now resistant to a coherent recuperation to nationalist discourse or agendas. For Pisitakun to raise questions about how history is written and by whom, and refuse the very possibility of an answer is, for Thailand, a notably radical gesture, gaining its particular power within the context of current Thai politics.

FIGURE 4: Tada Hengsapkul, *Human Experiment*, 2011. Giclée print on matte paper, 61 × 91 cm. Courtesy the artist

FIGURE 5: Tada Hengsapkul, *Ice and Herself (Contentment)*, 2013. Giclée print on glossy paper, 61 × 76 cm. Courtesy the artist

Tada Hengsapkul's photographs can be loosely linked to the qualities of irony and mockery from the practices of Manit, Vasan and others, but with the assertion of a type of regional expression that is a condition of post-nationalism, that is, a move away from exclusively national identification.⁴⁰ Tada has photographed a young milieu in his home city of Korat in northeast Thailand—the power base of support for the governments of the Shinawatrass—acting up and acting out in often vulgar display of their bodies. Here those bodies may avow a bawdy aesthetic in order to announce distinction from the so-called Bangkok mainstream, which is perceived as slick, urbane and modern, but they also skirt a categorical otherness within near-dystopian scenarios that evoke but not strictly avow such differences.⁴¹

Jakkai Siributr broaches one of the pillars of Thai national identity: religion (the others are monarchy and nation). Originally trained as a textile artist, his works use embroidery, constructed textiles and weaving and often employ esoteric patterns from yantras, ancient designs that currently support economies of trade and superstition. The mix of this pattern with icons of contemporary consumer culture bespeak a continuum rather than contrast,

FIGURE 6: Jakkai Siributr, *Come to Me*, 2011. Sequins, machine stitching on fabric, 210 × 215 cm. Courtesy Tyler Rollins Fine Art, New York

and seductive surfaces claim the compelling interests of the “regime of images” where excess and vulgarity threaten to overwhelm more devotional or contemplative qualities. There is a reflection of conflict and difference but a refusal of ultimate or essential surety, and a disturbing possibility to rethink sacrosanct cultural and social relationships.⁴²

Each of these examples resists, plays with and confuses the possibility of the type of polarity addressed by the earlier artists. Tulapop Saenjaroen is a young Thai artist who acutely engages the performative at the intersection of the culture of image-appearances and Thainess. In 2013, in London, he hired four non-Thai singers to learn and perform the Thai national anthem to visitors, including a rendition in their own musical genre. Tulapop later screened a film of the performance to an audience at a university in Bangkok, which I organised. As the hair’s breadth of difference between homage and

FIGURE 7: Tulapop Saenjaroen, Siamese Smile Contest, 2010, live. Courtesy the artist

détournement became evident—as the singers struggled to master the un-aspirated tones of a foreign language and giggle at their ineptitude—members of the audience shifted uncomfortably. The tension dissipated when one viewer volunteered this remark: “The woman did it best.”

Another performance-event of Tulapop’s was to arrange a Siamese Smile Contest for a public forum at Bangkok’s famous Chatujak Market in 2010. The public was invited to compete in a smiling marathon for a cash prize. Tulapop’s photograph of the winner, who smiled continuously for 172 minutes, betrays nothing of the irony of claiming monetary exchange value for a tradition considered to be culturally unique and therefore precious.

But the participants here can be exonerated from suggestions of cultural offence insofar as we can discern Tulapop’s canny understanding of the local importance of the role of the performative in avowing gestures of Thai cultural distinction and difference, that is, to bring into being what it purports to shape. However, the artist also demonstrates a type of failure to properly fulfil the performative by shifting its context; here it is an image of itself, baldly commodified and not serving the displacement of the problems, contradictions and sometimes violence that is its usual function. The material strain of the smile challenges its immaterial affects as the labour of its efforts

becomes visible, becoming an ambivalent icon of a cultural cliché rhetorically testament to its very existence and therefore to be examined as such.

Conclusion

When I wrote my draft of this article in mid-2016, controversy broke out in Thailand further to the distribution of an open letter from a collective named Cultural Activists for Democracy (CAD), with hundreds of signatories. The letter was addressed to the Gwangju Museum of Art in Korea and protested the inclusion of works by Sutee in an exhibition occurring under the mantle of “Asia Democracy, Human Rights and Peace” and commemorating the Gwangju Uprising of 1980.⁴³ Sutee’s installation, titled *Thai Uprising* (2013–14), was claimed by CAD as related to the widespread “Bangkok Shutdown” demonstrations that had been mobilised in response to accusations of corruption in Yingluck’s government, and called for intervention. General Prayuth’s coup followed soon after. Counter-claims from and on behalf of Sutee argued that his support for this protest movement was only partial, reiterated Yingluck’s alleged corruption and accused CAD of being “sympathisers” for her. A smear campaign was also conducted against the artist.⁴⁴

The shift from the details of CAD’s letter to a defence of Sutee’s public image is telling in terms of the culture of image-appearances, including the insinuating use of a term like “sympathiser”. This underlines the fact that both CAD and Sutee essentially accused each other of the same—supporting democracy or corruption—and was testament to a gap of sufficiency in art criticism to address questions beyond speculation about intention or, in this case, affiliation. Or it highlights the lack of methods for interpreting iconography and parsing relationships to and within Thai political culture. The gap would be filled, as it were, with more persuasive arguments about the role of art and artists within governing contexts and the possibility of accounting for what a challenge to or a support of those contexts actually is, at the level of the artworks and their curatorial framing.

As nationalism can be defined as participation in ideas about national sovereignty, engaging the official concerns of the nation, and exploring the promises and problems of modernity as a synonym of the nation-state, we have a clear means to link the relationships of artists’ practices, such as Manit, Vasan and others, to questions of Thainess and the role of the culture of image-appearances within.⁴⁵ Richard Kearney writes of postnationalism as “[...] need for identity and allegiance [to] be gradually channeled away from the exclusive focus of the nation-state [...] to supplementary levels of regional and federal expression”.⁴⁶ Here, and further to the earlier reference to

Appadurai, we can also consider manifold forms of contemporary pressures on issues of national identification.

The national “exhaustion” marked by Teh is indicative of the repetitive attempts to yoke artists to national interests in changed world contexts, but examples such as *Imagine Peace* also allow us to think of the very reach of an ideology of Thainess that can determine its critique, reflected in *Conflicted Visions*. The incident of controversy about Sutee highlights limits through reactionary forms of indictment or accusations and counter-accusations of complicity.

A range of artists, from Pisitakun to Tulapop, reflect on possibilities beyond these. They have an acute understanding of the regulatory role of image-appearances and challenging their performative affects by refusing the possibility of displacing or controlling contradiction, disparity and antagonism, due to the impossibility of recognising the polarities that would support such image-appearances. If the practices of Mani, Sutee and others can be understood as representing the limits of social thought, the practices of the others are the particularities that can attend to such thought. In turn, the demand for a nuanced, more critical, criticism is evident: it is necessary to parse the interests of “national” and “postnational”, what these terms and contexts do and can mean, and amplify them to more expansive and persuasive consequences.

BIOGRAPHY

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NOTES

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