

The Photographic Conditions of Contemporary Thai Art

當代泰國藝術的攝影情狀

Clare Veal

克萊·維爾

Lecturer, Masters of Asian Art Histories, LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore
新加坡拉薩爾藝術學院亞洲藝術史研究所講師

Abstract

This paper takes as a point of departure, Rosalind Krauss' essay 'The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism,' in which she describes the relationship between photography's indexical function and its position as the example *par excellence* of Surrealist artistic practice. In the same way, this paper examines changing attitudes in Thailand towards photography's artistic status and presumed indexicality as paradigmatic examples of a transformation from the modern to the contemporary. Photography's crucial role in this shift is located in key alterations to the medium's functions and perceptions of its artistic legitimacy. On the one hand, the acceptance of photography as an art form reflects developments in imbricated networks of legitimation, occurring with the rise of international education and exhibition opportunities in the post-Cold War period. On the other hand, the conditions of photography itself, or rather its ontology, produce a conceptualisation of the contemporary as manifested in a desire for proximity with difference. In examining works by a number of contemporary Thai artists, I argue that photography's visualisation of the 'optical unconscious' allows one to fulfil this desire for contemporaneity, while also pointing to the limits of representation as a means of asserting coevality.

Keywords: contemporary Thai art, contemporary Southeast Asian art, Biennales, photography, documentation

摘要

羅莎琳 克勞斯 (Rosalind Krauss) 在〈超現實主義的攝影情狀〉(The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism) 文中描述了攝影的指示功能 (indexical function) 與其位置, 為超現實藝術實踐做了最佳舉證, 本論文以此為基石, 同時檢視泰國當地對於攝影的藝術位置與被預設的指示性質在態度上的改變, 作為從現代到當代的典範移轉之例子。從作為藝術表現的媒材到被認可為藝術, 攝影在此一轉變中扮演了重要的角色, 一方面, 攝影以藝術形式被接受反映了在合理性的層層重疊網絡之中的發展與隨之而來在後冷戰期間國際性的教育與展覽機會的提升; 另一方面, 當用渴望追求不同來標注自身, 攝影的情狀——或其本體論——將當代給概念化。藉由檢視許多當代泰國藝術家的作品, 本文主張攝影將「光學無意識」(optical unconscious) 視覺化, 讓人可以滿足對於同時性的追求, 並點再現出作為主張同時性的方法有其侷限。

關鍵字: 當代泰國藝術、當代東南亞藝術、雙年展、攝影、記錄文獻

Introduction ¹

Historically, photography in Thailand has had a tenuous relationship with discourses of fine art. The medium has never been offered as a major within the curriculum of the country's premier art school, Silpakorn University, and it is not included in the National Exhibition of Art.² Yet recent years have seen a veritable explosion of photography's presence: one of the country's best-known artists is photographer Mani Sriwanichpoom, annual photography festivals are now held in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, and Bangkok boasts several commercial galleries dedicated to the medium.³ In addition, the first two exhibitions held at MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum (established in Chiang Mai in 2016) were retrospectives of works by Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Kamin Lertchaiprasert, both of which featured their respective photographic works. Similarly, survey exhibitions of photographers practicing in the 1980s and 1990s, including Pramuan Burusphat, have been held recently at Bangkok's only public institution for contemporary art, the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC).

This paper pursues the relevance of these transformations to the theorisation of both photography and contemporaneity in the Thai context. The following discussion will thus proceed along two interrelated lines of enquiry. To begin simply, if we understand the contemporary as a historical moment, then photography's increasing viability as an artistic practice can be attributed to quantifiable transformations in networks of artistic legitimisation that proliferated in the post-Cold War period. Here, photography highlights shifts in imbricated institutional and professional networks. Yet a conceptualisation of the contemporary as merely a series of institutional transformations is limited in the sense that it upholds a system of periodisation within which the recognition of photography as art in Thailand and Southeast Asia appears as a peripheral and belated inheritance.

1 In the following text, I have used the Royal Thai General System of Transcription for Thai terms, except in the case of proper nouns, where I have used conventional spellings. In accordance with Thai convention, individuals are referred to by their first name, and are organised alphabetically by their first name in the list of references.

2 Occasionally photographs have been included in the National Exhibition of Art, but as 'prints' instead of 'photographs.' See for example, the inclusion of Pramuan Burusphat's composite photograph *Kandoenthang [Travel]* (1980), which was exhibited in the 27th *National Exhibition of Art* in 1981. See 27th *National Exhibition of Art*, 1981, np.

3 These include Kathmandu Gallery, owned and operated by photographer Mani Sriwanichpoom; RMA Institute, owned and operated by photographer Piyat Hemmatat; and Serinda Gallery.

The title of this paper, ‘The Photographic Conditions of Contemporary Thai Art,’ points to another, more demanding objective. In Rosalind Krauss’ 1981 essay, ‘The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism,’ she describes the relationship between photography’s indexical function and its position as the example *par excellence* of Surrealist artistic practice.⁴ For Krauss, the photographic became a way to reconcile the expansive range of artistic forms produced under the banner of ‘Surrealism.’ In an analogous way, photography and its use by Thai artists promises a framework through which their contemporaneity may be apprehended. This examination is premised on the reproductive characteristics of photography. However, it is not my intention to advocate a formalist notion of medium-specificity.⁵ In fact, such a position is particularly problematic given long-standing debates over photography’s definitions and functions—issues that have become even more ambiguous with the advent of the digital.⁶ These debates have, however, given rise to a vision of photography as a medium founded upon the uneasy perpetuation of a number of binary relationships: ‘presence’ and ‘absence’; ‘fixity’ and ‘transience’; ‘art’ and ‘index’; ‘natural’ and ‘magic’; ‘revelation’ and ‘concealment.’⁷ My aim in this text is to examine the processes through which these contradictions, or what I will term ‘the ontology of the photographic,’ came to fulfil a desire for contemporaneity as manifested in curatorial strategies and artistic practices. I use the word ‘desire’ here in a critical sense, as a way of indicating that Terry Smith’s notion of the contemporary as, “distinct temporalities, of different ways of being in time” is, in fact, only comprehensible through the work of the imagination.⁸ From this perspective, contemporaneity becomes a state of be-coming, its perpetuity indicating the limits of its complete realisation.

Photography’s Pre-Histories

How might the relationship between contemporary art and photography in

4 See Krauss, 1986, pp. 91-119.

5 See for example Greenberg, 1973, pp. 3-21.

6 For a more detailed discussion of these issues see, Batchen, 2001, pp. 109-127.

7 Ibid. p. 11. S. M. Smith, 2013, pp. 4-10.

8 See T. Smith, 2009, pp. 3-4. On the role of the imagination in the formation of the contemporary see Appadurai, 1996, p. 22.

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Thailand be formulated in relation to the medium's pre-histories? As I suggested in my introduction, a revealing way of addressing this question is through a discussion of photography's position vis-à-vis discourses of fine art. The establishment of Thailand's first art school, Silpakorn, by the Italian artist Silpa Bhirasri (Corrado Feroci) in 1933, cemented distinctions between fine art and photography already entrenched through King Chulalongkorn's (r. 1868-1910) preference for academic oil painting.⁹ Bhirasri based the school's curriculum on that of an European art academy; a model with no place for photography.¹⁰ Indeed, Bhirasri understood photography as being directly opposed to the creativity of artistic practice,¹¹ a position that was in accordance with his wider view that art and technology are diametrically opposed.¹² Photographers who endeavoured to overcome the medium's artistic exclusion thus sought to efface its technological nature and emphasise their own creative interventions. This was exemplified in the preference for Pictorialism within the Royal Photographic Society of Thailand (RPST), established in 1951.¹³ Enigmatic techniques adapted from European surrealist photography were also popularised by the Society as another means of intervening into the photograph's 'reality effect.'¹⁴

For the most part, prior to the 1980s, endogenous networks of legitimisation facilitated photography's recognition as an art form. Of key importance to this endeavour was the development of the RPST's synonymity with officially sanctioned notions of national identity. This association was underlined in 1958, when the organisation came under royal patronage, and was further emphasised by the explicit encouragement of nationalist subject matter in themes for its annual competitions.¹⁵ The standardisation of subject matter within the RPST was clearly linked to photography's importance to the Thai state's promotion of a national identity based on the three pillars 'nation, religion

9 Silpakorn was established in 1933 as the School of Fine Arts (*Rongrian Prunit Silpakam*). In 1943 it was accorded university status and was renamed 'Silpakorn'.

10 See, Poshyananda, 1992, p. 31.

11 See Bhirasri, 1965, p. 15.

12 See Bhirasri, 1963, p. 17.

13 See Piboon Musikpodok, 1962, np.

14 See Veal, 2018, np (forthcoming).

15 For a more detailed analysis of the RPST see, Veal, 2015, pp. 270-290.

and monarchy.¹⁶ Yet, RPST photographers could circumvent endogenous restrictions and increase their prestige by evidencing that their work could garner international accolades and support.¹⁷ For example, in exhibition catalogues, members would list recognitions by overseas photographic clubs and organisations including the International Federation of Photographic Art (FIAP).

Institutional transformations

It is evident from this brief history that the mobilisation of exogenous networks in order to circumvent endogenous limitations on artistic photography in the 1980s was not an unprecedented phenomenon. However, during this later period, institutional transformations—including an increase in Thai artists pursuing overseas education, a proliferation of international and regional exhibition opportunities, as well as a privileging of certain types of photographic practice within those exhibitory circuits—expanded sources of exogenous legitimization. Transformations in the educational sphere allowed a larger group of students to study overseas, primarily in the U.S., during the 1970s. For many of these individuals—including Itthi Khongkhakul who completed his PhD at Illinois State University in 1979, and Pramuan Burusphat, who completed his MFA at Texas State University in the same year—their overseas education was facilitated by U.S. scholarship programs initiated during the Cold War. For both Pramuan and Itthi, studying in the U.S. was the impetus behind their interest in photography, as educational opportunities for the medium were largely absent in Thailand.

Upon returning to Thailand in 1980 Pramuan took up a position at Srinakharinwirot University, where he taught the photographer Mani Sriwanichpoom. In 1983, Itthi and Pramuan became founding members of the Faculty of Applied Arts at Chulalongkorn University, where Pramuan developed a curriculum for artistic photography based on his experience in the U.S. This course proved invaluable to local photographers unable to study overseas, because it exposed them to avant-garde photographic techniques and produced a sphere of legitimisation beyond that offered by the RPST. However, due to

16 For more details see, *ibid*, pp. 260-299.

17 My use of the terms 'exogenous' and 'endogenous' in the discussion that follows derives from, Clark, 2010, p. 20.

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a lack of exhibition and work opportunities for graduates, very few became professional artistic photographers.¹⁸

Nevertheless, both Itthi and Pramuan had a substantial role in expanding the range of exhibition opportunities for ‘artistic’ photography in Thailand. These included their curation of the Thai photography section within the ASEAN Exhibitions of Painting and Photography, initiated in 1981. As Pramuan stated in his essay for the exhibition’s third iteration: “The First ASEAN Exhibition of Painting and Photography... marked, for the first time, any real interest in the topic of photography as art in Thailand.”¹⁹ However, the effect of these opportunities on photography’s artistic status was uneven. While Pramuan later posited that the opportunity to meet other photographers from Southeast Asia had an impact on his perception of artistic photography beyond the limitations enforced upon it in the Thai context,²⁰ Manit Sriwanichpoom argued that his participation had a limited impact on his artistic practice because the exhibition, as a form of cultural diplomacy, tended to reinforce national borders.²¹

While the ASEAN exhibitions included Pictorialist photographs by a number of well-known members of the RPST, they also included photographs that diverged both aesthetically and conceptually from these works.²² Itthi, for example, took pains to differentiate his photographs from works produced by RPST members; the “beauty” of his works, he contended, is in their conceptual richness as opposed to their subject matter.²³ Certainly, this was apparent in the increasingly abstract nature of his works. Similarly, Pramuan’s writings on artistic photography emphasised the importance of an individualistic approach to creative practice,²⁴ an attitude that was manifested in his preoccupations with explorations of the self.

18 Interview with Manit Sriwanichpoom, Bangkok, 23 September 2015.

19 See Pramuan Burusphat, 1993, np.

20 Pramuan Burusphat, email correspondence with author, August 2015.

21 Interview with Manit Sriwanichpoom, Bangkok, 24 September 2014.

22 The difference between these two groups of works—salon photographs and ‘contemporary’ photographs—was highlighted by Pramuan in his essay for the 2nd ASEAN Exhibition of Painting, Photography and Children’s Art. See, Damrong Wong-Uparaj and Pramuan Burusphat, 1991, p. 247.

23 See, *Now and Then*, 2001, p. 2.

24 See Zhuang, 2017, p. 14.



Fig. 1 Pramuan Burusphat, *Autobiographical Images* #25, 1978, Kwik Print, 36×56 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

Creative photography

The new artistic photography, epitomised by Itthi and Pramuan's work, came to be recognised under the term 'creative photography' (*phapthai sangsan*). In 1984, the Bangkok Pictorialists Circle together with an independent committee, which included Itthi as its Vice President, organised a competition for works that adopted this photographic style. The terminology used in the essays for the competition's exhibition catalogue provide a picture of how this new form of photography was conceptualised. Specifically, several authors emphasised that 'creative photography' should be understood in terms of its "strangeness" (*khwamplaek*), "newness" (*khwammai*) and its "originality" (*khwamkhitrioen*).²⁵ In the Cambodian context, the Khmer words for 'strange' and 'new' have been used similarly to describe performance art as a way of distinguishing it from other forms of performance. As Roger Nelson argues, the use of these terms indicates that, "...it is not 'foreignness' that attracts the artist to performance, but rather the form's

25 See *The First Creative Photo*, 1984, pp. 6, 35 and 36.

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‘newness’ and ‘strangeness’.”²⁶ A similar situation is found in Thailand, where ‘creative photography’ promised a type of cosmopolitanism, within which a specific approach to media was formulated as the result of privileged access to the ‘new’ and ‘strange’.²⁷ In this sense, creative photography’s position within a wider field of conceptual art practice appears logical, despite assertions by some artists to the contrary.²⁸

According to Apinan Poshyananda, conceptual art in Thailand developed as a tendency amongst a group of artists returning from overseas in the early 1980s, including Chumpon Apisuk and Kamol Phaosavasdi.²⁹ Apinan’s translation of the term ‘conceptual art’ as *sinlapa ruapyot* (literally assemblage art, or all-inclusive art), is not only a direct etymological reference to the Thai word *khwamkhitruapyot* (concept) but also signifies the importance of the material qualities of ‘conceptual’ works. In this sense, Apinan’s use of the term *sinlapa ruapyot* has analogies with Piriya Krairiksh’s description of many ‘conceptual’ artists’ practices in terms of their use of media associated with conceptual art in the United States, specifically installation and performance.³⁰ This was despite the argument posed by some of these artists that their practice should be understood in terms of its indigeneity.³¹ While a discussion of the literature on the ‘Southeast Asian-ness’ of installation and performance is outside the scope of this paper, I nevertheless wish to point to the non-Euramerican lineage within which these practices might be situated.³²

26 See Nelson, 2014, p. 108.

27 The recognition of this fact goes a long way towards de-privileging Euramerica as the ‘source’ of such stylistic innovations. As John Clark states, “The real task of our inquiry is to examine what those qualities meant in the discourse to which they were transferred and where other-cultural origination was frequently just a marker of the new.” See Clark, 1998, p. 16.

28 While Pramuan notes the influence of American conceptualism on his practice, he does not view his work as ‘conceptualism’, instead citing artists such as Montien Boonma and Kamol Phaosavasdi as the pioneers of conceptual art in Thailand. See Zhuang, 2017, p. 18. As will become clear below, I am using the term ‘conceptual art’ here in a very limited sense. Rather than engaging with the complexities of locating ‘conceptualism’ in Southeast Asia, I am using the term primarily to describe changes in the treatment of the art object. For a more comprehensive discussion see, Sabapathy, 2017, pp 232-245.

29 See Apinan Poshyananda, 1999, p. 146.

30 See for example Piriya Krairiksh’s essay for the USIS-sponsored exhibition, *Thai Reflections on American Experiences*, which analysed the works of various artists—including Apinan Poshyananda, Kamol Phaosavasdi, Pramuan Burusphat, Itthi Khongkhakul and Chumpon Apisuk—using a formalistic approach, entirely attributing their development to their interactions with American artists and artistic styles. See *Thai Reflections*, 1986, pp. 6-17.

31 Piriya’s approach was criticised by Wibun Lisuwan and several of the artists included in the exhibition. For example, Pricha Arjunka stated, “I went to America, but I already had a sense of myself. I had many teachers in Thailand... who had a great influence on all of us.” See Wibun Lisuwan, 1985, p. 36.

32 The ‘indigeneity’ of installation as a distinctly ‘Southeast Asian medium’ gained particular purchase in the Philippines. For example, in 1981 Raymundo Albano wrote that the “natural born” nature of installation should be seen as an alternative to the “alien intrusion of [the] two-dimensional Western object.” Raymundo Albano [1981], as quoted in, Flores, 2011, p. 207.

In Thailand, this includes the display of billboards, created by the United Artists' Front of Thailand (UAFT), along Ratchadamnoen Avenue in 1975,³³ the experimental theatre troupe, Crescent Moon (established in the 1960s) which included Chumpon Apisuk as a member, as well as the practice of the Sino-Thai artist Chang Tang, whose gestural paintings influenced his students' interests in time-based and experimental creative processes.³⁴

In this sense, it is more productive to think of the term 'strange' as a means of opposing Thai patronage systems' preferences for works that reflected a conservative nationalist ideology based on the three pillars of Thai-ness.³⁵ This inclination towards what has been termed 'neotraditionalism' followed a period of relative freedom from 1973-1976. During this short interim, artist groups, including the UAFT and the Dharma Group, allied themselves with student organisations who, emboldened by their success in ousting the military dictatorship led by Praphat Charusathien in October 1973, frequently rallied against U.S. neo-imperialism and for the rights of workers and the country's rural populations. The massacre of protesting students at Thammasat University on 6 October 1976, and the military coup that followed, ended this critical era in Thai art history. What resulted was the establishment of a Thai art department at Silpakorn and the consequential privileging of painters whose work dealt with 'Thai' values.³⁶

Given this confluence between visual production and nationalism post-1976, discourses understood as existing 'outside' this system would often include exogenous styles and approaches, while not being limited to them. For example, when Pramuan stated that "photography's political potential rests in its universal appeal", this may have been a way of asserting a position that was opposed to the RPST's narrow, nationalistic interests, rather than an indication that his works should be understood in terms of their 'foreign' influences. Similarly, speaking of his time studying in the United States, Pramuan described the freedom afforded by working in the "democratic" medium of

33 See Soon, 2016, np.

34 Interview with Chumpon Apisuk, conducted by John Clark in Nonthaburi, 6 January 1993. See also, *Mystory*, 2003, p. 9.

35 These patronage systems were dominated largely by the Court, successful members of the political-military class and Sino-Thai owned banks. For a more detailed account see, Clark, 2010, pp. 126-129.

36 Clark, 1998, p. 85.

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photography in what he perceived to be a less oppressive context.³⁷ This gesture towards the ‘international’ (as opposed to the ‘foreign’) meant that the distinction between self and other was not necessarily a matter of identification for these artists but was instead one potential way, existing among several others, to operate outside endogenous artistic restrictions.

In this sense, the ‘strangeness’ of the exogenous was used to address specific situations within Thai art contexts. Specifically, the rise of conceptual art may be linked to the establishment of the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art in 1974, a non-profit public gallery without a permanent collection.³⁸ The financial instability of the Institute encouraged transient, event-based exhibitions as a means of collecting revenue from audiences, a situation that also resulted in the employment of several artist-curators.³⁹ Amongst these was Chumpon Apisuk, who curated the *Wethi Samay (Contemp-tre)* exhibition series (1986-7) and the *Folk-Thai-Time* exhibition (1986), which featured works by Pramuan. These exhibitions provided photography with artistic legitimacy by situating it within a broader field of conceptual art practice: not only did photographic works feature autonomously among the performances, music, art and writing shown as part of these exhibitions, they were also often used as part of installation and performance pieces as a mixed media element, and gained particular importance as a form of archival documentation for transitory works.

The inclusion of ‘strange’ and ‘new’ artistic forms in both the *Creative Photography* competition and the Bhirasri exhibitions, led to criticisms from members of mainstream artistic institutions, including Silpakorn and the RPST. For example, Chao Chongmankhong, the President of the RPST, argued in the *Creative Photography* competition catalogue that the quality of “creative photography” should be judged according to the principles set out by Pictorialism.⁴⁰ Similarly, in Wibun Lisuwan’s review

37 See *Thai Reflections*, 1986, p. 32.

38 On the funding of the Bhirasri Institute see, Anupong Chaiyariti, 1988, np.

39 Patrick Flores links institutional developments, including the Bhirasri Institute, to the rise in transient artistic forms, particularly installation, in Southeast Asia after the 1980s. See Flores, 2008, p. 105. On the use of ‘event’ exhibitions as a way of raising funds for the Bhirasri Institute see, Paisal Theerawongwisanuporn in *Mystory*, 2003, p. 14.

40 See for example, Chao Chongmankhong, 1984, p. 35.



Fig. 2 Pramuan Burusphat, *Conceptual Art: Folk-Thai-Time*, 1986, Type-C Print, 10×61 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

of the fourth *Wethi Samay* show at the Bhirasri Institute in 1986, he detailed the cool reception that the show received from older artists and members of the art community.⁴¹ Moreover, critics asserted that the works in this exhibition demonstrated a lack of taste and craftsmanship, labelling the use of new media forms a “foreign fashion”.⁴² This, combined with the closure of the Bhirasri Institute in 1989, cemented the lack of exhibition opportunities and patronage support for photography in Thailand, a situation that may have contributed to the departure of both Pramuan and Itthi from the country in the 1990s.⁴³

Proximity and Distance

Pramuan and Itthi’s failure to find local patrons for their creative photography may be productively compared with the later successes of artist-photographers such as Manit Sriwanichpoom, in order to highlight transformations in networks of artistic legitimization from the 1990s onwards. Both groups of artists exhibited overseas, yet

41 Wibun Lisuwan, 1986, p. 37.

42 See for example, Rodboon, 1997, np.

43 Itthi returned to Thailand after a four-year period in New Zealand between 1994-1998. In recent years Pramuan’s work has come to the attention of local collectors, including Eric Booth. This is likely due to Manit Sriwanichpoom’s curatorial efforts aimed at ‘rediscovering’ practitioners of photography in Thailand, which has focused on establishing their significance to national art histories. See Manit Sriwanichpoom, 2015.

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Itthi and Pramuan's participation in exhibitions in the United States and Italy were not sufficient enough to affect their ability to sell works in Thailand. In contrast, Mani's participation in international biennales has significantly improved his prestige within endogenous art worlds. For example, prior to participating in the 24th *Bienal International de Sao Paulo* and the 1st *Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale* in 1998, Mani's work was included within the lineage of experimental and conceptual practice previously described. This was exemplified in his active role in alternative exhibitions including *Huay Khwang Mega Project* in 1996. From 2000, however, his participation in group and solo exhibitions at prominent private galleries in Thailand increased radically and his works were purchased by a number of Thai collectors including Disaphol Chansiri and Eric Booth, as well as regional institutions including Singapore Art Museum and National Gallery of Singapore.

The key difference between these two groups is their respective approaches to the question of (national) identity. Given Itthi and Pramuan's efforts to find an alternative visual discourse to that advocated by the RPST and Silpakorn, the question of identity in any collective sense was not given much purchase in their works. Furthermore, with the exception of the ASEAN exhibitions, their Thai nationality was decoupled from their participation in international shows. By way of contrast, Mani's work embodies what David Teh has characterised as an "ironic critique of nationalism", a theme that came to dominate Thai art from the 1990s.⁴⁴ For example, *Mani's Pink Man on Tour* (1998) series presented stereotypical images of Thai touristic kitsch together with the vulgar figure of 'Pink Man,' using a digitally-enhanced, garish colour palette. The extreme flattening that such aesthetic devices produced was intended to critique the facile and superficial commercialisation of Thai culture for a foreign gaze. However, the presentation of this series in international biennales sometimes represented, paradoxically, a re-exoticisation of the artist himself as a privileged 'representative' of his national culture of origin, something that became apparent in the widely-held presumption that the artist himself was 'Pink Man,' when this was not the case.⁴⁵

44 See Teh, 2011, p. 602.

45 As Hal Foster argues, when "ethnographic approaches" are adopted in art-making and curatorship, "...the artist stands *in* the identity of a sited community, he or she may be asked to stand *for* this identity, to represent it institutionally. In this case the artist is primitivized, indeed anthropologized in turn: here is your community, the institution says in effect, embodied in your artist, now on display." Foster, 1996, p. 198.



Fig.3 Mani Sriwanichpoom, *Pink Man on Tour (Amazing Rice Field, Northern Thailand)*, 1998, C print mounted on aluminium, 50×60 cm. Image courtesy of Kathmandu Gallery.

Mani's example indicates the reification of a national/ international dichotomy which often collapsed the critical distance required to appreciate the irony of his critiques of nationalism.⁴⁶ While international audiences might appreciate the artist's 'socio-political' position, as Jim Supangkat has recognised, this also had the potential to reaffirm the distinction between self and other, formulated as the politically 'developed' and 'undeveloped.'⁴⁷ In this regard, photography was eminently suitable to the requirements of the Biennial model, its ontology intersecting with the desire for contemporaneity in several ways. In particular, photography's documentary and archival legacy historically

46 See Clark, 2006, p. 230. See for example the presentation of Mani Sriwanichpoom's work, curated by Apinan Poshyananda, in the 'National Representations' section of the 24th *Bienal de Sao Paulo* in 1998. Lagnado and Lafuente, 2015, pp. 50–1.

47 See Supangkat, 1996, p. 80.

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aligned with the ethnographic approach that seemed to dominate both artistic production from Southeast Asia and curatorial strategies for dealing with it.⁴⁸

Yet, the relationship between photography and ethnographic curatorial and artistic approaches is more than simply a historical hangover. Rather, if we understand the desire for contemporaneity as, “an appeal to move from extreme isolation to total proximity... and to do so instantly, constantly, for eternity,” then the ontological conditions of photography are convergent with this desire.⁴⁹ As Walter Benjamin recognised, photography’s revelatory potential lays in its ability to make “new worlds visible beyond the limits of natural human sight” or, in other words, the power to visualise what he termed the “optical unconscious.”⁵⁰ It is this “impossible conjunction of transience and fixity,” or the “‘space of a single minute’ in which space *becomes* time and time, space,” that aligns photography with the desire for contemporaneity.⁵¹ Specifically, the simultaneous compression of both space *and* time into a still image allows one to apprehend difference, whilst maintaining the distance required to formulate it as one’s Other. This is precisely the function of photography that was drawn upon in colonial contexts in order to ‘typicalise’ individuals as representations of particular ethnographic categorisations within physiognomic and phrenologic archives.⁵²

This union between the desire for contemporaneity (as manifested in simultaneous convergence and differentiation) and the photographic was materialised in what Nora Taylor has termed, “performances for the camera” in Southeast Asia from the 1980s onwards.⁵³ In these cases, photographic documentation allowed artists to incorporate the poetics of place and located-ness into archival records of their performance works, which could then be displayed in radically different contexts. In works like Wasinburee Supanichvoraparch’s *U.P.O* series (2012), referencing the rural by situating craft in

48 For example, Pamela Corey has described the use of photography by Cambodian artists as a means of conducting ‘field work’ in relation to urban space. Corey, 2013, pp. 117-118. In some cases, works by Southeast Asian artists are framed ethnographically even when they do not see their works in these terms. On a critique of this curatorial approach see, Antoinette, 2014, pp. 163-166.

49 See T. Smith, 2009, p. 3.

50 See S. M. Smith, 2013, p. 4. Benjamin, 1979, p. 243.

51 See Batchen, 2001, p. 11.

52 See Sekula, 1986, pp. 3-64.

53 See Taylor, 2011, p. 50.



Fig. 4 Wasinburee Supanichvoraparch, *U.P.O (Unidentified Permanent Object) 12*. 2012, ceramic object and photographic documentation of performance, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist,

agrarian landscapes was a strategy clearly aimed towards achieving this effect. Exhibiting photographic documentations of performances contextualised in relation to place could, in this way, maintain the tension between convergence and divergence required by the biennale model. For example, in the presentation of Maitree Siriboon's *Dream of Beyond Part 2* (2010), as part of the Lock Route public art program during the 2017 Singapore Biennale, the markers of the artist's Isaan (Northeast Thailand) identity are inscribed through the presence of a white buffalo and the *phao khao mar* (a multi-coloured,



Fig. 5 Maitree Siriboon, *Dream of Beyond Part 2*, 2010, photograph light box, 300×450×50 cm. Exhibited as part of Gillman Barracks' public art showcase *LOCK ROUTE*, 2017. Photo credit: Gillman Barracks.

chequered cloth that has been used in Thailand since the 11th century) around his waist. Yet these conspicuous signs of otherness are catapulted into the space of the audience, through a synchronicity between the hay upon which the buffalo lays and the natural landscape in which the image is displayed.

Evidencing mobility

Photography's ability to reformulate time and space played an important function in the realisation and archival documentation of performance and site-based works in Southeast Asia in the 1980s and 1990s. Despite this, photographs did not replace the physical movement of artists undertaking performance or installation works in person. As Nora Taylor has argued, these circulations allowed for the advancement of networks of "interlinking communities and modes of exchange between artists in the [Southeast Asian] region."⁵⁴ The proximity and interconnectedness that such networks imply would also seem to fulfil the desire for contemporaneity, to the extent that an artist's practice may extend from its situational specificity as it is brought into physical proximity with those working in other contexts.

Writing of the increased mobility of artists and curators with the advent of the contemporary, Miwon Kwon has pointed to the romanticism that accrues around nomadism. In so doing, she draws parallels between the dissolution of fixed meaning

54 See *ibid.*, p. 47.

in contemporary art practice and the physical and psychic transience required of arts professionals in globalised art worlds.⁵⁵ Kwon's statements regarding the aggrandizement of the artist-subject who is "‘liberated’ from enduring ties to local circumstances," does not hold for Southeast Asian artists whose work, when displayed on international stages, is generally interpreted in terms of their biographical affiliation.⁵⁶ Yet, as David Teh has identified, "charisma, experimental and heterodox practice, sustained itinerancy and the moral currency of withdrawal" are shared currencies that link Thai (endogenous) and global (exogenous) networks of circulation.⁵⁷ In such a situation, the peripatetic lives and careers of Thai artists act as confirmation of their contemporaneity via their ability to vacillate between proximity and remoteness with ease.

The value associated with an artist's physical mobility is in itself a manifestation of the desire for contemporaneity. In the case of Southeast Asian artists, presence at illustrious contemporary art events might confirm participation within these exogenous networks of legitimation. Nevertheless, as we have seen, this participation is frequently dependent on a rendering of difference as identity, typically through the frame of the 'nation.'⁵⁸ The reverse is also true, to the extent that exogenous legitimation and recognition can have a positive effect on the endogenous perception of the quality and significance of the works of Thai artists.⁵⁹ Again, in this respect, photography plays an important role: the act of documentation provides a way to convert the professional wanderings of an artist into cultural capital. At times this is relatively straightforward, as in the case of archival photographs of temporary installations and performances at international exhibitions, which can be re-displayed later in other contexts. But as indicated by the 2011 photographic exhibition held at ARDEL Gallery of Modern art and entitled *Once in Venice*, this type of documentation can also become an artwork in and of itself.

55 See Kwon, 2004, p. 31.

56 Ibid. p. 31. Antoinette, 2014, p. 162.

57 Teh, 2017, p. 147.

58 David Teh has reflected on this issue in, Teh, 2017, pp. 5-9.

59 Ibid. p. 137.

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Fig. 6 Preecha Thaothong, *Artist in Venice no. 2*. 2011, digital print 76.2×56.7 cm. Image courtesy of ARDEL Gallery of Modern Art.

In many of the photographs shown in this exhibition, we find series of representations nested within other representations *en abyme*. For example, in a photograph taken by Preecha Thaonthong, *The Artist in Venice No. 2* (2011), the artist Thavorn Ko-Udomvit is shown passing in front of his photograph *Utilitarianism* (2010), which also features him as its subject. The image presents a reunion of the artist with his work in the context of the Venice Biennale, a moment that is captured and transformed into an artwork for display to audiences in Thailand. The visual confusion created between the artwork, which appears to spill over its frame, and the artist himself, produces a porous boundary between these representative levels. The outcome of this is a kind of co-temporality between the presentation of the work at national and international levels as a form of idealised circulatory logic whereby the local and global intersect with one another whilst maintaining their distinctions. Such a separation is also clear in another set of photographs by Hassapop Tangmahamek, which show the photographer Dow Wasiksiri photographically recording the travels of artists including Mani Sriwanichpoom and Tawan Duchanee. These works emphasise the act of documentation, with Dow the photographer appearing in colour and the rest of the scene in black and white. This focus immediately gives primacy to the viewer in Thailand, who may be substituted for Dow, highlighting the significance of these artists' mobility as understood from endogenous perspectives.

The mythologisation of an unfettered relay between the national and the global is also found in Navin Rawanchaikul's *Fly me to Another World* (1999-2006). Using photographs, news clippings and comics, this exhibition and its catalogues document a semi-fictionalised story of the overseas travels of a Thai artist, Inson Wongsam, on a scooter in the 1960s and 1970s. Here, Inson's travels are given valence through comparison with Navin's own participation in international exhibitions, and yet the distinction between the national and global is never problematised.⁶⁰ As Pandit Chanrochanakit contends,

Navin's installation glorified Inson's heroic journey. However, we need to be aware

60 Thanom Chapakdee points to the importance of nomadism in both the content and form of Navin's works. See, Thanom Chapakdee, 2006, p. 24. On this point, see also Teh, 2017, p. 135.

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Fig. 7 Hassapop Tangmahamek, *Trying*, 2011, digital print 50.6×76.2 cm. Image courtesy of ARDEL Gallery of Modern Art.

that the audience saw Inson's story through Navin's comic narrative...Inson's voice was absented (sic) from telling the story of himself, since all the installations and narrative were narrated by Navin.⁶¹

Indeed, despite Navin's description of Inson's international achievements, the catalogue ends with a letter confirming the latter's receipt of the title of National Artist in 1999, and the exhibition's subtitle, "The unforgettable story of a Thai artist who made his dreams come true", reaffirms Inson's national affiliations.⁶²

61 See Pandit Chanrochanakit, 2006, p. 51.

62 Inson's travels overseas paralleled the circulation of the exhibition itself, which travelled to Guanrene, Italy (1999), Basel, Switzerland (2000), Dijon, France (2000), Pescara, Italy (2000), Tokyo, Japan (2000), Fourchambault, France (2001), Lamphun, Thailand (2003-5), and Bangkok, Thailand (2006), before returning to Lamphun, Thailand (2008). The importance of this return was highlighted in Worathep Akkabootara's interview with Inson, in which he asked "Why did you decide to come back to Lamphun when you were already living in the art capital of the world?" See Rawanchaikul, 2008, pp. 38-50.



Fig. 8 Navin Rawanchaikul, *Fly with me to another world*, 2008, mixed media installation, dimensions variable. Exhibited as part of *Fly with me to another world*, Dhamma Park Foundation, Lamphun, Thailand, 2009. Image courtesy of the artist.

Limits of contemporaneity

Although these techniques of duplication appear to fulfil a desire for contemporaneity which is able to maintain the primacy of nationalist affiliations, this photographic mode also points to the limitations of that desire.⁶³ If, as Simon Soon has argued, photographs of transient artistic events are insufficient as art historical objects because they “speak as documents without narrative,” then a photograph’s revelatory potential is limited by its very nature.⁶⁴ Returning again to the work of Navin Rawanchaikul, the apprehension of these representative limits (and the resultant conception of the impossibility of true contemporaneity) is achieved through a dissolution of the distinction between fiction and reality.⁶⁵ This is clearly seen in Navin’s use of comic books to unsettle any objective certainty that might be found in readings of photographic truth in the archival and documentary dimensions of his works. The continuous problematisation of the photographic image’s claims to objectivity is also heightened through a reincorporation and re-fictionalisation of Navin’s previous works in his later projects. For example, photographs of his comic book, produced for the *Fly with me to another world* project in 2004, later appeared in his ‘photo novel’ *Long Heart*, which was published in the artist’s book, *Navin’s Sala* in 2008. In this case, photography assures its status as an art object, but one that is constantly displaced through documentations within documentations *ab infinito*. Through this process, even art worlds and the artist’s position within them are mythologised through his large-scale paintings of various art communities. Here, self-parody operates as a means of frustrating the desire for contemporaneity, replacing what is thought to be ‘real’ proximity with a critical simulacrum.

A similar means of frustrating the desire for contemporaneity was articulated in the exhibition *Substanceaboutnonsubstance*, organised by Navin and the performance artist Kosit Juntaratip in 1995 at the Goethe-Institut, Bangkok. Consisting entirely of

63 In her analysis of the artistic practice of the Burmese artist Po Po, Isabel Ching outlines the limitations of the ‘contemporary’ as an analytical framework: “...it is also worth considering the limits of contemporaneity as a connective and comparative modality: can we afford to consider the contemporary without history and contemporaneity without the movement of consciousness between disjunctive times and spaces?” Ching, 2011, p. 440.

64 See Soon, 2016, np.

65 On the role of fiction in Navin’s work see, Thanavi Chotpradit, 2008, pp. 210-215.



In another corner, Long finds a tiny model of the Lambretta scooter that the legendary Thai artist Inson Wongsam once rode from Bangkok to Rome. Heart finds herself thinking about the power of art as she listens to the unbelievable story of the young man who made this solo trip more than forty years ago. Long, himself an up and coming artist, explains the value of art to Heart while at the same time expressing his sincere love for her.

Fig. 9 Navin Rawanchaikul, Section from *Long Heart*, a “photo novel extraordinaire”, published in *Navin’s Sala: Navin Production’s International Life & Art Magazine*, 2008, artist’s book, 416 pages. Image courtesy of the artist.

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Fig. 10 Kosit Juntaratip, *Happy Birthday*, (24th July in 1994), 1994, Kosit's blood on canvas (bio material), 180×240 cm. Ideal Art Gallery, Bangkok, Thailand. Image courtesy of the artist.

photographic archival documentation from the artists' performances and installations, Kosit's works in particular, demonstrated a preoccupation with the relationship between corporeality and image.⁶⁶ For example, his work *Happy Birthday (24th July in 1994)* (1994), consisted of a performance in which the artist recreated a photograph of himself and his girlfriend using his own blood applied to a canvas in the form of Ben-Day dots. The resultant image was then photographed and re-displayed as archival documentation for the Goethe-Institut exhibition. This performance of reduplication mimics the photographic process itself:⁶⁷ the subject in his or her corporeality is transformed into an object, with the potential for infinite future replications.⁶⁸ As with Navin's work, Kosit's use of photography to produce a *mise en abyme* displaces the originary subject, transforming the presencing function of photography, which is so vital to the desire for contemporaneity, into one of loss and mourning.

At the same time, by mimicking photographic processes, Kosit also provides a way out of this bind. In his 2003 exhibition *Kiss* at the Academy of Visual Arts, Leipzig, Germany, the artist created an installation consisting of images of iconic kisses. These included a reproduced photograph of his own kiss with the blow-up doll Lily Ovary—undertaken as part of a performance in 1994 in which he married her—together with recreations of photographs by Robert Doisneau and Alfred Eisenstaedt. These large-scale images were produced by downloading photographs from Google, printing and redrawing them using a camera obscura, scanning the resultant images and redrawing them again using Adobe Illustrator, before finally printing them as digital photographs. In addition, during the exhibition, audience members were invited to re-draw the kiss images once again, thereby adding another stage to this chain of reduplications. In expanding the photographic process to the point of redundancy in this way, Kosit allows the photograph to gain signification “independently of its object.”⁶⁹ As Craig Owens has argued, the use

66 See *Substanceaboutnonsubstance*, 1994, np.

67 Kosit makes this connection between photography and his hand-reproduction of images. Interview with Kosit Juntaratip, Chiang Mai, 1 May 2013.

68 My argument here follows that made by performance artist theorist Amelia Jones in her adoption of Jacques Derrida's notion of the 'supplement' to argue for the deferral of the 'presence' of the body, even when it is experienced in reality: “Seemingly acting as a 'supplement' to the 'actual' body of the artist-in-performance, the photograph of the body art event or performance could, in fact, be said to expose the body itself as supplementary, as both the visible 'proof' of the self and its endless deferral.” See Jones, 1997, p. 14.

69 See Owens, 1978, p. 88.

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Fig. 11 Kosit Juntaratip, *Kiss*, 2003, digital photography and audience participation on Kiss colouring, dimensions variable. Academy of Visual Arts Leipzig, Germany. Image courtesy of the artist.

of *mise en abyme* thus “endows...photographs with an apparatus for self-interpretation; their structure, defined by the juxtaposition of two images of the same motif, gives rise to the commentary on the conditions of the photograph itself.”⁷⁰

Conclusion

Why might Kosit’s commentary be important when thinking about the relationship between photography’s documentary function and the desire for contemporaneity? Writing about the ethno-geographic curatorial approach that has dominated biennales, Lee Weng Choy and Larissa Hjorth have argued,

The impulse to map is overdetermined by many agendas, but one of them—to command a privileged view from above—is precisely about having the power to see

70 See *ibid.*, p. 88

it all and render distance and difference abstract. What is notable about the impulse to map in ethno-geographic terms is how it reveals a desire to control or contain ‘cultural difference’ into categories.⁷¹

A way of countering such an abstraction of time and space, they argue, is to allow audiences “co-habitational time” with artists, curators and other participants, by making the processes, debates and conversations, through which the exhibition comes into existence, public.⁷² A similar argument may be made about photography, in that photographs also tend to hide the processes through which they are made, instead inviting a view that they are produced by their subjects.⁷³ Following the logic of Lee and Hjorth’s argument, by introducing a narrative structure that reveals the processes of a photograph’s creation, the desire for contemporaneity might finally be realised.⁷⁴ Rather than positioning the artwork, or indeed the artist, as a means to apprehend difference through the technologies of proximity, this narrative allows for a view of the artwork as a process of transformation and negotiation that refuses ossification. It is also the point at which we may return to the aims of the conceptual photographers in Thailand in the 1980s and their early efforts to find a place for photography amongst critical art practices. Indeed, in the Thai context where photographs, no matter how obviously manipulated, are often viewed as seamless icons of their sacred subjects, a focus on the processes through which a photographic image comes into existence immediately opens up a space outside conservative nationalist discourses.⁷⁵

In proposing photography as a ‘condition’ of contemporary Thai art, I have not aimed to dismiss the significance of other mediums, or prioritise the photographic aspects of specific works. Rather, I have attempted to use photography and its transformations in Thailand over the past 40 years as a lens through which some of the

71 See Lee and Hjorth, 2014, p. 153.

72 See *ibid.* p. 153.

73 On the obfuscation of the photographic process by photographs themselves, see S. M. Smith, 2013, p. 103.

74 Alvarado, 2001, p. 151.

75 On the iconicism of images of the Thai king see, Veal, 2015, pp. 122-140; and Clark, 2011, np. Several Thai photographers have pointed to the influence of such images on their own use of photography. Interview with Manit Sriwanichpoom, Bangkok, 24 September 2014. Interview with Kosit Juntaratip, Chiang Mai, 1 May 2013.

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incomprehensible and contradictory dimensions of the desire for contemporaneity may be apprehended. Photography is particularly productive to this endeavour because its radical transformation, particularly in comparison to other artistic media, highlights distinctive changes in networks of legitimation that we may frame as a shift from the modern to the contemporary. More importantly, photography, when understood ontologically, allows one to brush up against the edge of the contemporary, its ability to document the optical unconscious appearing as a fulfilment of the desire for proximity and difference, while also pointing to the representative limitations of coequality.

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