

ArtReview Asia



Richard Lin meets Michael Lin at Art Basel Hong Kong

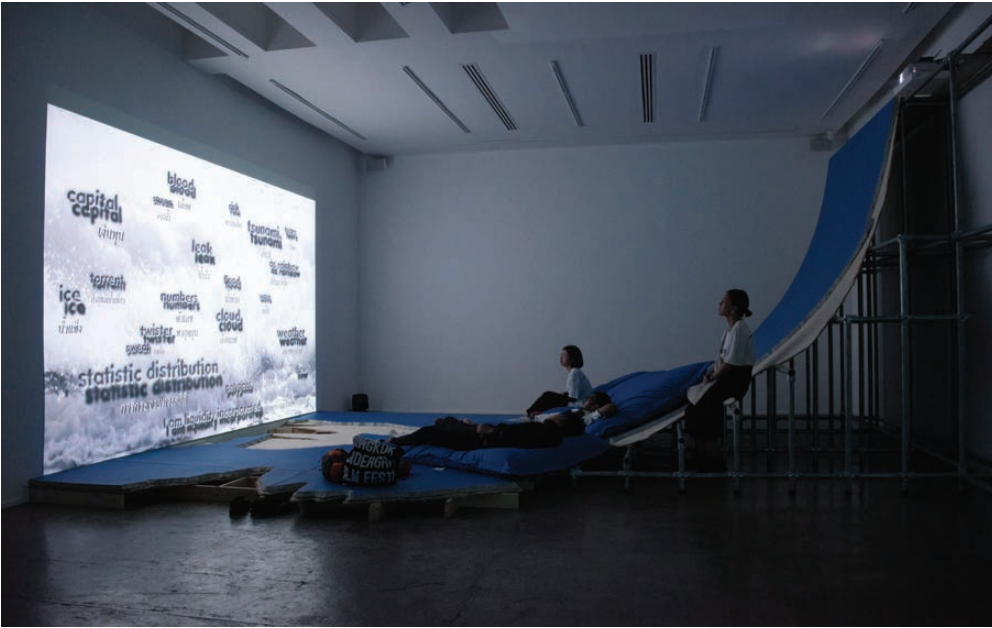
Tishan Hsu and hybrid identities

From the archives: F.N. Souza on how London gave him a raw deal

All Thailand's Biennials

Too much of a good thing?

by Max Crosbie-Jones



Ghost:2561 Hito Steyerl, *Liquidity Inc.*, 2014, single-channel HD video (colour sound, 30 min) and mixed-media installation.
Courtesy the artist, 100 Tonson Gallery, Bangkok, and Ghost Foundation, Bangkok



Thailand Biennale Chulayarnnon Siriphol, *GOLDEN SPIRAL* (still), 2018, video, sound, colour, 18 min.
Courtesy the artist, Doxza art lab and Ghost Foundation, Bangkok

Thailand's biennial epidemic of 2018 – during which the rootsy Bangkok Biennale paved the way for two more largescale biennials and a brief triennial towards the year's end – seemed to many like a serendipitous collision of competing missions. So what if the Bangkok Art Biennale (BAB), helmed by art historian Apinan Poshyananda and backed by Thai drinks giant ThaiBev, and the nomadic Thailand Biennale, programmed by Chinese curator Jiang Jiehong and funded by the Thai Ministry of Culture and host province Krabi, arrived amid military rule and in the runup to long-delayed elections? But for the instigator of the pithiest – and most formally inventive – of these dovetailing events, the new video and performance art triennial *Ghost:2561*, it was no accident. 'I wanted this to happen at the same time as the Bangkok Art Biennale,' Korakrit Arunanondchai told *Garage* magazine a few days in advance of its launch on 11 October. 'The [Bangkok Art] Biennale is a standard exhibition model, and I feel like one kind of art or event always provides a context for another to exist.'

There was an element of pragmatism at play here – the international media flown in for BAB's opening a week later, on 19 October, arrived to find *Ghost:2561* in full flow. And, just as the garrulous artist-curator hoped, the more traditional biennial format threw his exhibition into sharper relief. Conceived in collaboration with the team from Bangkok CityCity Gallery, Arunanondchai's *Ghost:2561* brought a lean selection of video and performance works to ten Bangkok galleries and, like his own busy and sometimes overwrought Gesamtkunstwerks, arrived overflowing with philosophical musings on the contemporary condition. Its curatorial binding agent was animism – a metaphor he said 'felt local and somehow naturalised' – and articulating it were talks, screenings, performances and 'storytellers' – Thai students who had attended a series of workshops led by Arunanondchai and served as 'mediums for the work'. Heightening the spectral quality of videoworks by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Hito Steyerl and Ian Cheng, among half a dozen others, was their slick and immersive staging within each white cube: emerging from the space, you would find yourself in a loose conversation with a 'storyteller' about what you had just seen.

Then, very quickly, the tenor changed. On 2 November, only five days after *Ghost:2561* finished, the Thailand Biennale – works for which were clustered, treasure map-like, in outdoor sites across the Andaman Sea-straddling southern province of Krabi – launched with an ostentatious and nationally televised ceremony. When I travelled to see it in early December, I found the biennial marketed ad nauseam within the province, poorly promoted without. The barrage of billboards began as soon as I turned right out of Krabi airport – a hire car was a must – and, before long, the endless Thailand Biennale advertisements and towering limestone karsts flanking the roads had taken on the comical monotony of a *Flintstones* backdrop. After being cajoled by my guide for the trip, Google Maps, I eventually found myself parking up at one of the venues, where suddenly

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Ghost:2561's brevity and lack of political baggage set it apart as both uncompromised and uncompromising: a succinct show about the mobility and ephemerality of video art and performances

the Thailand Biennale was not so well advertised and the first of many hunts through forests, mangroves or across islands ensued.

Wang Yuyang's *Gone with Wind* (all works 2018 unless otherwise stated), an installation of LED-filled balloons, wilting in the sun; Mella Jaarsma's batik-inspired fishing rods, *Silver Souls*, flailing forlornly off a pier; Félix Blume's bamboo-flute orchestra, *Rumors from the Sea*, reduced to silence by still seas: quite a number of the site-specific commissions I encountered were thwarted – some permanently, some temporarily – by the tropical conditions. Others, including works by Oliver Laric, Lucy Beech, Alicja Kwade and Li Wei, were never realised (but were still listed in catalogues and on websites). Meanwhile, Chulayarnnon Siriphol's *Birth of Golden Snail*, a videowork organisers requested be cut on account of its brief nudity and depictions of Japanese soldiers, was with-

drawn when the Thai artist refused to do so. An official sign announcing its fate greeted you outside the cave that was all set to host it.

Making an often-frustrating trip worthwhile, though, were thoughtful interventions that resonated with their surroundings. Hidden amid the babbling brooks and ancient dipterocarps of Thanbok Khoranee National Park, *Le Musée du Grand Dehors* – a collaboration between Sara Black, Amber Ginsburg and Charlie Vinz – was a fey meditation on the carbon cycle centring around a felled tree, one end of which had been burnt, then poked sideways through an ominous rubber-cloaked hut. In *Football Field for Buffalo*, Takafumi Fukasawa unsettled the human-nature dynamics of Koh Klang, a Muslim-majority island that ekes out a living through ecotourism near Krabi town, by creating a football pitch, replete with footballs, for the local buffaloes and a spectator stand for villagers (this only yards from the daily rooster singing contest). Visible for miles, Map Office's *Ghost Island*, three porous 6m × 6m islands, woven from old fishing nets and salvaged sticks and looking every bit like giant fish traps, rose from the shallow waters of Nopphrat Thara beach, disrupting the local topography and subverting tourist paradise. Kamin Lertchaiprasert's and Suriya Umpansiriratana's *No Sunrise No Sunset* was a hollow aluminium container perched on the edge of a headland and filled with primitive drawings and a lifelike standing figure of an old woman. The contents of this makeshift cave were as bamboozling as the mirrored exterior was dazzling.

In some respects, BAB, staged 800km north, had similar contours. It too was a commodious biennial of uncomplicated mass appeal rather than exclusively academic interest. Nor was it, thankfully, a tribute to *kwampenthai* (Thainess) or a survey of provincial culture. Both it and the Thailand Biennale ceded curatorial control to one man with the cachet to bring an impressive roster of artists and advisers into the fold. Both secured rare access to precious (manmade or natural) sites and courted locations of unbridled consumerism. Both were an unfocused mix of the meditative and the mindless, the swaggering and the camera-shy. And both threw together Thai and international artists, a



Thailand Biennale Kamin Lertchaiprasert and Suriya Umpansiriratanana, *No Sunrise No Sunset*, 2018, aluminium container on Ao Nang beach. Courtesy the artist and Thailand Biennale, Krabi



Thailand Biennale Map Office, *Ghost Island*, 2018, wood and ghost fishing nets on Noppharat Thara Beach. Courtesy the artists and Thailand Biennale, Krabi



Thailand Biennale Takafumi Fukasawa, *Football Field for Buffalo*, 2018, mixed-media and participatory based project, Koh Klang island. Courtesy the artist and Thailand Biennale, Krabi



Bangkok Art Biennale Chumpon Apisuk and Sornchai Phongsa, *I Have Dreams* (still), 2018, video installation. Courtesy the artist and Bangkok Art Biennale 2018



Bangkok Art Biennale Eisa Jocson, *Becoming White* (detail), 2018, mixed-media installation and performance. Courtesy the artist and Bangkok Art Biennale 2018

move that disrupts the construct of Southeast Asian regionalism that has held curatorial sway of late and echoes the international mobility and trajectories of many Thai artists.

A selection of Yayoi Kusama's pumpkins and other largescale sculptures were arrayed around the city's shopping malls, the owners of which, along with main sponsor ThaiBev, footed the bill. Meanwhile, some of the works discreetly concealed in Bangkok's temples felt lost, while others were among BAB's indisputable highlights. For *What Will You Leave Behind?*, a new iteration of a 2012 work, Thai artist Nino Sarabutra paved the circular columbarium beneath the piercing white chedi of Wat Prayoon with 100,000 tiny white ceramic skulls. Visitors winced and giggled and pondered the weight of existence as they crunched under their bare feet. A few kilometres away, Patrick D. Flores's tight curating of works by the likes of Eisa Jocson and Ho Tzu Nyen at venerable antique mall or Place rewarded exploration. Likewise, deep in the bowels of the Bangkok Art & Culture Centre (BACC), visitors with time to spare saw everything from piquant articulations of taboo themes (Chumpon Apisuk and Sornchai Phongsa's forays into the lives and dreams of Thai sex- and migrant-workers were especially memorable) to a live broadcast of Taweesak Molsawat – one of eight performers in the Marina Abramovic Institute's three-week durational performance art showcase *A Possible Island?* – clutching plastic flowers while on his daily ambulation through the city.

Announced well in advance, the paradoxical titles of both the Thailand Biennale and Bangkok Art Biennale – *Edge of the Wonderland* and *Beyond Bliss* respectively – seemed to hint at a sly, self-conscious urge to distance themselves from the hamfisted 'Bring Happiness to the People' campaigns and top-down ministrations of military rule. Yet, neither will be remembered for their rambling articulations of rather asinine themes, nor their mostly superficial engagement with cherry-picked, tourist-friendly sites. The Thailand Biennale, for all its moments of visual enchantment and admirable efforts at decentralisation and engagement (all commissions were locally made), felt precision-tooled to have you travel – and spend – as much as possible (you could almost picture the tourist revenue projections scribbled on flip boards in provincial government offices). And the BAB was no less unsophisticated in its appeal to holidaymakers: 'to position Bangkok as a Venice of the East with an event that would give the Chao Phraya [River] a feeling of the Grand Canal' was an aim trumpeted early on by Poshyananda.

Criticisms such as these ebbed and flowed in my mind as the weeks passed and as I revisited parts of the BAB and sought out some of the 20 locations I'd missed, yet overwhelmingly the media assessments emerging were positive. The *Guardian*, for example, singled out Poshyananda's 'spirit of defiance', the implication being that he had got one over the authorities by sneaking in 'risk-taking artists'

right under their noses. Similarly, *The New York Times* hailed the BAB as having redefined 'what it means to be racy and taboo in Bangkok' and celebrated the fact that 'there has been virtually no backlash from the military junta' – appearing blissfully unaware of the legitimising and tolerant glow that assenting to such an event (as the junta did) might confer upon it and its leader (who, at the time of writing, looks likely to perpetuate his power in forthcoming elections).

The more I pricked the surface of Thailand's public exhibition epidemic, the more complicated – and unsettling – things became. There was no shortage of uncomfortable moments to reinforce the impression: branded sponsor's tents erected in hallowed temples, video artist Siriphol documenting his censorship battle with the Ministry of Culture via a Facebook diary and – most jarring of all – the

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BAB's takeover of the main galleries at the capital's beleaguered BACC as a feud between the independent foundation that administers this publicly funded facility and the junta-appointed Bangkok governor, Aswin Kwanmuang, was playing out. Annual public budgets and opening hours had been cut. Utility bills had gone unpaid. Concerns of a takeover by city-hall bureaucrats and junta members lingered. While the BAB was bankrolled by corporate Thailand, not government, and Poshyananda feigned a distance from the authorities in interviews, the perversity of the situation was hard to shake. Shouldn't the public art centre with a decade of programming under its belt, not some biennial upstart, be the one swimming in cash and experiencing a semblance of untroubled autonomy?

Against this opaque backdrop, *Ghost:2561*'s brevity and lack of political baggage set it apart. It was both uncompromised and uncompromising: a succinct show about the mobility and ephemerality of video art and performances, and about how today's storytelling mediums 'give form and presence to invisible systems', only more accessible and enjoyable than all that sounds. With its curatorial conceit developed from a historical and culturally specific set of beliefs to which the work responded, it was also radically local in a way that the competition emphatically wasn't. In short, *Ghost:2561* was everything the Bangkok Art Biennale and Thailand Biennale proved, in the weeks and months that preceded it, not to be: tenaciously intellectual, grounded in notions and concepts that rewarded concentration and stood up to sustained scrutiny, untainted by the

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instrumentalising forces of state power and corporate strategy. It will be another five years before these three unlikely bedfellows are reunited, and any number of variables could derail one of them in the meantime. However, I hope it happens: the contexts these inaugural events provided one another were arguably their most striking feature. **ara**

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Bangkok Art Biennale Yayoi Kusama, 14 Pumpkins, 2017. Courtesy Bangkok Art Biennale 2018



Bangkok Art Biennale Nino Sarabuttra, What Will You Leave Behind? (detail), 2012, unglazed porcelain, 125,000 pieces, dimensions variable. Courtesy Bangkok Art Biennale 2018