

Thai Identities as Scened in Twenty-first Century Contemporary Thai Media Art

Prapon Kumjim* (Thailand)

Abstract

The context of this discussion is framed around the much anticipated 2018 opening of two major international contemporary art biennales to be hosted in Thailand for the very first time. First to open will be the Bangkok Art Biennale in October 2018 and Thailand Biennale at Krabi will follow in November 2018. Undoubtedly the international contemporary art biennale spotlight will bring crowds of multinational contemporary art enthusiasts to Thailand in 2018. But before we can begin to understand artworks by overseas artists we must first attempt to understand Thai identities within the scope of contemporary art. Therefore, twenty-first century contemporary media art practices will be discussed with examples from seven contemporary Thai media artists whom have been selected to elucidate the complex jigsaw-like and multifaceted transformations of Thai identities through recent history.

Keywords: *Thai identity, Thai identities, Contemporary Thai Media Art, Political History, Deep South of Thailand, Thai Contemporary Art*

* Prapon Kumjim, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. email: prapon.k@chula.ac.th.

Introduction

The contextual parameter of this discussion is framed around the much anticipated 2018 opening of two major international contemporary art biennales to be hosted in Thailand for the very first time. First to open will be the Bangkok Art Biennale, in October 2018 (Biennale, Bangkok Art 2018) and Thailand Biennale at the beautiful seaside province of Krabi will follow in November 2018. (Culture, 2018) Both biennales have involved communities of leading international curators and artists to be exhibited alongside Thai artists. Interestingly notions of contemporary art in the academic sense of globalized visual sensibility remains very much separated from the comprehension of mainstream mass media in Thailand. Undoubtedly the international contemporary art biennale spotlight will bring crowds of multinational contemporary art enthusiasts to Thailand in 2018.

Considering the long list of prolific contemporary Thai media artists whom are actively producing artworks locally and internationally. I have deliberately selected a small number of artists to discuss their artistic practices and how their artworks elucidate aspects of Thai identities. Most of the selected artists have been interviewed by the author especially for this publication.

The following sections will be a range of what may appear as non-linear or illogical subheadings but this is part of my deliberate intention to convey the complex jigsaw-like and multifaceted transformations of Thai identities through recent history alongside contemporary Thai media artworks. The Twenty-first century time-frame refers media artworks that has been produced since year 2001 onwards.

Brief History

The Thai kingdom was established in the mid fourteenth century. Known as Siam until 1939, Thailand is the only Southeast Asian country never to have been taken over by an European power. The Siamese Revolution in 1932 was a bloodless transition (also known as coup d'état) and was led by several key members of the military whom had changed the Kingdom toward a constitutional monarchy. Most constitutional monarchies have a parliamentary system. For instance, countries such as the UK, Australia, Japan and Malaysia have a monarch who is the head of state and the elected Prime Minister as the effective head of government. However the contemporary constitutional monarchy in Thailand has co-existed with both elected governments and military dictatorships.

Even though Thailand was never colonized by any Western countries, we cannot overlook the symbolism that colonization had for Thailand as the colonization of South East Asia reverberated through the entire region. South East Asian regional concerns impacted on Thailand especially during the 1940s as the country moved towards political, cultural and technological modernization. Since the late nineteenth century, several generations of privileged Thai nationals have been educated overseas and have returned to Thailand or have migrated to Europe, North America and more recently, Australia. This history explains a long tradition of elitist Thai-Western international networks that have existed for several generations. In this chapter, I am interested in the shaping of contemporary Thai identity and the semi-colonial status that uniquely positioned Thailand within South East Asia.

The British expatriate art critic, Steven Pettifor who moved to Bangkok in 1992 referred to the Kingdom of Thailand as a fiercely proud and independent nation (Pettifor, 2003). In *Flavours: Thai Contemporary Art* (2003), Pettifor discussed how Thailand managed to retain self-rule in a turbulent region which witnessed the might of European colonialism in the neighboring Southeast Asian region.

In the nineteenth century Siam waged a delicate game of diplomacy, holding several Western states at bay, while Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines were divided up by European overlords. (Pettifor, 2003:10)

However, the Thai curator and art historian Apinan Poshyananda warned against the ‘murk of Euro-centric supremacy’ (Curtin, 2005:112), in an interview with critic Brian Curtain that examined Pettifor’s publication, and perceptions of Thai identity from abroad. Poshyananda explained that there is not a strong local interest in contemporary Thai art and many Thai artists depend on international recognition. Contemporary Thai art did not have much international interest until Thailand was represented at the Venice Biennale for the first time in 2003 and in the annual Asian Contemporary Art Week in New York City, which commenced in 2002. The international success of Poshyananda’s curatorial practice and Thai artists such as Rirkkrit Tiravanija, Navin Rawanchaikul, and the late Montien Boonma had by the latter part of 1990s also raised international interest in contemporary Thai art and cultural identity.

In order to understand contemporary Thai culture from a historical context, I turn to Asian cultural theorist Peter A. Jackson who has explained in *The Thai Regime of Images* (2004) that in the 19th century, under the threat of colonization, Siamese elites began a process of ‘civilizing’ the appearance of the state and its population. This was done by systematic propaganda and enforced by the military and police. This entailed reshaping public displays of Thai civilization for foreign consumption through dress, public behavior and manners, but interestingly did not reshape the inner lives or traditional values of the people. Jackson (2004a) and Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul (1994) both agree that the 19th century regional colonial encounter with the West facilitated the emergence of a “regime of images” (Jackson, 2004b:181) initiated by the Thai monarchy to convey to potential colonizers Siam’s high level of cultural achievement and its capacity for self rule. As a result of this, Thai-ness as a form of hegemony emerged in tandem with projects of modernisation and nationalism, both of which followed the overthrow of the absolute monarchy – where the king had absolute power to freely rule the Kingdom until 1932, when the Coup d’état military takeover had peacefully ended the one hundred and fifty year reign by the Royal House of Chakri (since 1782). The Australian political scientist Michael Kelly Connors has observed that Thai military dictatorships from Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsonggram’s rule from 1938-1957 through to Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn’s ending of this dictatorship in 1973, had a significant impact on representations of Thai identity (Connors, 2005). Some traditional Thai folk music and some traditional dress were prohibited during dictatorship rule. The need for Thailand to be seen as ‘modernized’

in the Western sense became a threat to national security. In the early 1970s the Thai government feared regional communism in Vietnam and Cambodia and right wing anti-communist propaganda became heavily enforced as the national Thai identity of that period. The ideology from this era of nationalist propaganda promoted anti-communism. The suppression of individuality remains arguably visible in contemporary teaching of art in Thai schools.

Thai Identity Under Dictatorships

In the Thai language the word 'Thai' literally means to be free and the official name for the Kingdom of Thailand translates as 'Ratcha Anachak Thai' or kingdom of the free. (Keyes, 2018)

In opening a discussion about iconography that represents contemporary Thai identity, one cannot avoid the topic of the Thai monarchy.

From a Thai perspective, there is daily coverage of royal duties during prime-time news on all television and radio stations. There are also broadcasts for royal ceremonies and public engagements with narration exclusively in the Royal Thai language which is taught in schools and reserved only for use in a Royal Thai audience. Generations of Thais have been raised on listening and seeing images of the Thai King working hard to develop Thailand and its people with challenging projects such as irrigation for agriculture in remote parts of the Kingdom. According to *Financial Times* journalist Amy Kazmin, King Bhumibol is revered in Thailand as:

a demi-god. Although he is a constitutional monarch with limited official powers, his advice and guidance is always sought in times of crisis, and his words are treated as nothing less than mandatory commands. (Kazmin, 2007)

Mass media influence in Thailand have historically been pivotal in the promotion of social values. For instance in a televised public address on 11 July 2014 in the program *Return Happiness to the People*, Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha, in his capacity as Head of the National Council for Peace and Order, has suggested the core values of the Thai people in order to build a strong Thailand. Media communications had included public screenings of twelve short films that was commissioned by the NCPO and features some of the most popular superstars in Thailand. (Thailand, 2014)

He proposed the following 12 core values that Thai people should possess:

1. Upholding the three main pillars: the Nation, the Religion, and the Monarchy;
2. Being honest, sacrificial and patient, with positive attitude for the common good of the public;
3. Being grateful to the parents, guardians and teachers;
4. Seeking for knowledge and education directly and indirectly;
5. Treasuring cherished Thai traditions;
6. Maintaining morality, integrity, well-wishes upon others as well as being generous and sharing;

7. Understanding, learning the true essence of democratic ideals, with His Majesty the King as Head of State;
8. Maintaining discipline, respectful of laws and the elderly and seniority;
9. Being conscious and mindful of action in line with His Majesty's the King's royal statements;
10. Applying His Majesty the King's Sufficiency Economy, saving money for time of need, being moderate with surplus for sharing or expansion of business while having good immunity;
11. Maintaining both physical and mental health and unyielding to the dark force or desires, having sense of shame over guilt and sins in accordance with the religious principles;
12. Putting the public and national interest before personal interest.

I am inspired by media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) who observed that he didn't know who discovered water, but it certainly wasn't a fish (Levenson, 2001) as quoted in the *Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing Website and Digital Archive*. Fish would be the last creatures to discover water, simply because they know nothing else – it is the medium they live in. They know no other reality so there's nothing to compare it to. The metaphor is applicable to many cultural conventions as, the unquestioned norm within contemporary Thai cultural tradition. In the context of global awareness and understanding of diverse cultural differences, outsiders to Thailand will need to be prepared for the potential challenge of cultural mis-translation in seeing a parallel world with new eyes.

Government-approved historical theories that are taught in Thai schools are usually not challenged due to fears of scrutiny by the state alongside the unspoken self-censorship that often occur within smaller communities. On the other hand, my experiences of cultural itinerancy have pointed me to the notion of relative interpretation. Confrontational works by the Australian educated Thongchai Winichakul who published "Toppling Democracy" (2008) in *The Journal of Contemporary Asia*, and the British educated Thai cultural critic Sulak Sivaraksa have been highly influential to international discourse about Thai cultural politics. Winichakul's book *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (1994) argued a case for reassessing the history of 19th century Siam against the previous cultural misinterpretation of the country by neighboring French and British colonizers. Thongchai claimed that the Siamese were not just passive bystanders who provided a buffer state between the British and the French. In addition, Thongchai has convincingly argued against historical theories that the Siamese were as much a player of South East Asian colonization as the Western colonialists.

In 1965 Thailand became an ally of the United States. The Thai-US relationship was strengthened during the Vietnam War which began in 1965 and finished in 1975 when the Americans retreated from Vietnam. The threat of expanding communism within the South East Asian region was seen not only an immediate threat to the borders of Thailand, but also a threat to the US (Winichakul, 1994).

By that time, fanatically anti-communist propaganda had already taken root within popular Thai culture. Not long after the end of the Vietnam War, Thailand witnessed the massacre of October 6, 1976. This was a violent crackdown by the state on leftist students and protestors that occurred in the grounds of Thammasat University (Bangkok) and on Sanam Luang (a name which literally translates as 'Royal Ceremonial Grounds') in the historical heart of Bangkok. The newspaper *International Herald Tribune* (February 24, 2008) published the official record of the massacre issued by the Thai government which stated that 46 people were killed and hundreds more were wounded. Conflicting reports by several human rights groups and eyewitnesses suggested the death toll to have been in the hundreds. (Ahuja, 2008)



Figure 1. Mani Sriwanichpoom, *Horror in Pink* (2001.) Courtesy of the artist.

As a challenge to the state-controlled news of the massacre, Thailand's internationally renowned photographer Mani Sriwanichpoom incorporated black and white archival photographs from the 1976 lynching of students during the day of the public massacre into his *Horror in Pink* (2001) series of photographic works. Sriwanichpoom's *Pink Man* (performed by poet Sompong Thawee) is part of an ongoing series that depicts a distastefully sneering Thai middle-aged man, overdressed in a flamboyant shocking-pink silk suit. In the *Horror in Pink* superimposed photographic series, the colorful *Pink Man* appears to be clearly separated from (whilst juxtaposed) with an ogling mob of on-lookers within the black and white archival photographs. Sriwanichpoom, who actually participated in the 1976 student protest, remains one of the few contemporary artists who continues to question issues of Thai liberty and confront the issue of human rights under the heavy-handed violence exerted on the Thai people by the Thai state government.



Figure 2. Chulayarnnon Siriphol, *Planking* (2012) 4 minute video, color. Courtesy of the artist.

I now turn to a relatively new generation of photomedia artist/filmmaker Chulayarnnon Siriphol, *Planking* (2012) which the artist and his friend performed the so-called Plank. As the trend of 2011 by which social media users around the world would be photographed lying horizontally faced down in a range of absurd locations. But Siriphol and his friend chose to film their Planking during Thai national anthem at 8 am. and 6 pm. in some of the most historically significant public locations in Bangkok for pro-democratic movements. All citizens are expected to cease activity and listen respectfully during this time. Siriphol's work shows those around them stand in silent respect, creating a peculiar scene. (Shinichi, 2015:64) Siriphol mentioned in conversation that he wanted to change the axis when comes to paying respect in public and combine this international trend with the local custom of paying respect to the ideology of nationhood. He then went on to mention that public response changed when the video camera became noticeable, people would associate the prank as part of a television game show. Some members of the public thought that the performer had fainted. (Siriphol, 2018)

Art historian and independent curator Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani describes:

Under the guise of unpolished, unconventional aesthetics, video works shown in galleries and educational settings seem to escape the backlash caused by potentially thorny subjects. The video *Planking* (2012) by film director Chulayarnnon Siriphol was recently shown at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC) as part of the Politics of Me group exhibition (2012). Politically charged as it is – the director is in fact “planking” in various parts of Bangkok when the national anthem is broadcasted nationwide – this engaging video has likely survived the scrutinous eyes of censorship. (Pazzini-Paracciani 2012)

Contemporary Thai Identities

Since the days of the 1970s anti-communist witch-hunts, Thai politics remained

relatively bloodless until February 2003 when the Thai government officially launched an attack on the trade of narcotics, which was viewed as another form of threat to national stability. According to online documents by Human Rights Watch, Thailand's 'War on Drugs' is a "violent state-sponsored crackdown which resulted in the unexplained killing of more than 2,000 persons, the arbitrary arrest or blacklisting of several thousand more, and the endorsement of extreme violence by government officials at the highest levels." (Human Rights Watch, 2008) The violent crackdown and unexplained killings by Thai police and soldiers spilled into the regional unrest in Thailand's Deep South. The South Thailand insurgency is an Islamic separatist campaign who are referred to as terrorists by the Thai State, and the insurgency is taking place in the predominantly Malay Pattani region, a region in between the cultural and political borders of Thailand and Malaysia.

Australian newspaper *The Age* (Levett, 2004) reported an incident in Tak Bai on October 30, 2004 which resulted in at least 85 deaths of Thai-Muslim villagers. They had demonstrated against the local police for the freedom of six locals who were arrested and regarded as suspected insurgence. Earlier that year on April 28, the Royal Thai army stormed the historic Krue Se mosque in Pattani, a Thai province. They shot and killed 32 Thai-Muslim citizens, mainly teenagers, after they had supposedly attacked a nearby police post with sticks and knives.

Unfortunately since January 2004, there has been a rising level of violence in Thailand's four southern provinces of Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat and Songkhla. More than 3000 people have reportedly been killed and many more injured, including a number of foreign visitors (Connors, 2008). Thailand is currently facing separatist violence in its southern ethnic Malay-Muslim provinces. There is no simple explanation for this conflict between the Thai state and local insurgent groups. A key historical factor that has often been withheld by the Thai media is the fact that this troubled territory was formally annexed by Siam in a 1909 agreement with the British, who in return were given parts of the north of present-day Malaysia (Connors, 2008). For almost a century, Thai governance within this troubled region has not done enough to assimilate cultural differences in religious faith, especially in regards to the local Yawi language (the Thai language is not widely used in the region). In this particular example, Bangkok-centric Thai governance has colonized its own ethnic minority groups in the Deep South of Thailand.

Citizen Juling

I turn now to the first Thai feature film which examined the political unrest in the southern Thailand. Manit Sriwanichpoom and Ing K's feature length film *Citizen Juling* (2006) traces the true story of Juling Pongkunmul, a Buddhist recent graduate kindergarten teacher who volunteered to live in the Malay-speaking Muslim province of Narathiwat in May 2004. Juling made an informed choice to leave her home village in the far north of Thailand to teach art in Thailand's troubled southern region. During her time at a school in Narathiwat, she was abducted, severely beaten and left comatose, allegedly by local Muslim women whose children she taught. As a result of this, Juling's story was the focus of the narrative which al-

lowed the filmmakers to embark on a journey from Bangkok (which is in the centre of Thailand) to the furthest southern province and then through the country to the farthest northern province. After months in an Intensive Care Unit, Juling passed away in January 2007. She was 24 years old.

Social activist and filmmaker/painter Ing K and photographer and videographer Mani Sriwanichpoom are the very first filmmakers to reflect on the conflict in the south of Thailand. For the film, the artists collaborated with Kraisa Choonhavan, a former Senator and Chair of the Senate's Foreign Affairs Committee. Kraisa is a well-known in Thai politics as an outspoken critic of the government on human rights issues. Very few politicians would have been able to gain this kind of access to community leaders, government officials and avoid potential obstructions from the police and military – all of which are documented in Ing K's film. (Ing K, 2008)

Citizen Juling contained no guiding narrative voice or introduction to the film's background, as the film aimed to reveal and convey an emotional journey that did not sensationalize the trauma and heartaches from the genuine lived experiences of those who appeared in the film. (Ing K, 2008) After the 220 minutes screening of the entire film, I walked away from the cinema with a confronting sense of ambivalence about my perception of Thai politics and the politics of my Thai identity. I do not intend to downplay the immense pain and suffering of those whose lives have been forever scarred by the conflict. *Citizen Juling* is placed in between genres of experimental art and documentary filmmaking and Ing's relatively minimal use of on-screen storytelling allows the deeply poignant subject to surface. *Citizen Juling* reveals serious problems regarding multiculturalism in Thailand where cultural minorities are under-represented and cultural differences are often misinterpreted. The film depicts Thai-Buddhists and Thai-Muslims and includes interviews, with scenes representing disenfranchised Thai-speaking tribesmen who spoke of persecution by the Thai State.

Citizen Juling has inspired my research into notions of contemporary Thai identity. For instance, question regarding the ways which photo-media can be used to elucidate the relationship between an individual's cultural identity and their immediate environment, was answered by the film's journey through diverse cultural environments in Thailand (including the royal parade grounds in the geographical centre of Bangkok, Muslim schools in the southern borders and paddy fields of the northern borders), and by conversations held with Thai-Buddhists, non-Thai speaking Thai-Muslims and a disenfranchised tribesman from the northern borders of the Thai Kingdom. More specifically, I was inspired by Kraisa Choonhavan's gradual revealment of his own trans-cultural identity over the course of the film. Even though the film documented a series of actual events (including the public celebration of King Bhumibol's birthday in Bangkok and Juling's hospital visits in the southern province of Songkhla,) most scenes unfolded without any obvious direction by the filmmaker. For example, in the scene where Kraisa met Narathiwat Tourism Board officials, a senior government official modestly introduced himself to Kraisa, who it turns out, was one of the people who had aided

his illegal cross border escape out of Thailand into Malaysia in 1991. They recalled memories of Kraissak dodging Thai soldiers, policemen and border patrols with only a paper bag's full of possessions. Kraissak's father, the late General Chartchai Choonhavan was removed as Prime Minister of Thailand in the 1991 military coup. Arrest warrants were publicly issued on General Chartchai and his immediate family members so as a result, Kraissak fled Thailand through Malaysia into Singapore in order to retain his freedom.

Even though *Citizen Juling's* marketing poster profiles it as *a road movie through Thailand's soul*, (Ing K, 2008) the film is essentially a reflection on problematic aspects of Thai identity that are rarely questioned.



Figure 3. Jakrawal Nilthamrong's *Black Air* (2008) video installation with sound. Courtesy of the artist.

Black Air

Another work that further investigates the problematic concerns of cultural clashes in the Deep South is *Black Air*: an interactive video and sound installation group project led by the accomplished artist/filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethukul as advisor, Pimpaka Towira, Jakrawal Nilthamrong, Akritchalerm Kalayanamitr, Koichi Shimizu, 2008. (IFFR 2008)

The installation is divided over two spaces. The first comprises an audio artwork. It is a light space in which the visitors can change the sounds of the countryside and jungle of Thailand with buttons. While the first space evokes a general picture of Thailand, the second space is dark and focuses on the image, looking at a specific recent event. (IFFR, 2008)

From an interview with artist Jakrawal Nilthamrong. The so-called Tak Bai incident began with a huge crowd of over one thousand local protesters in front of

Tak Bai Police Station to free six Muslim men, whom were held by the Royal Thai police as suspects in the robbery of machine guns from the Royal Thai Army. The outcome resulted in over 84 deaths and about 1,300 arrests. (Nilthamrong, 2018)

A compilation of 100 different video clips, depicting the incident from both camera angles of the villagers and government authorities was purchased as a video compact discs, bought on the black market. This section of the installation in Rotterdam was held in a dark room with four sets of screens and video projectors, each screen had a button for the viewer to select their desired video footage to be played as audience participation was integral to both installations. The clips had been divided into four timeline sections, representing the key stages from early gathering through to the gruesome handling of the dead. The clips also included the televised news coverage of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's public apology. (Nilthamrong, 2018)

In the artist's opinion, the censorship and systematic erasure of Tak Bai incident had severely impacted Thai society especially with continuing violent clashes in the Deep South. None of the gruesome footage had ever been discussed in mainstream Thai media and that justice has not been served as no government official was ever punished for this incident. (Nilthamrong, 2018)

Thai Xenophobia

Culture is love of self but with malice toward none; ideology, as it's opposite, would therefore be the defensive, at times paranoid elevation and defense of self and the hatred and repression of the Other. (Carroll, 1998:111)

Photomedia artist Prateep Suthathongthai for this particular work, he researched into the didactics of what it is to be Thai and found that there are multifaceted layers to contemporary Thai-ness because of the many ethnic groups whom have occupied the country well before Thailand had been named. The coexistence of multiple ethnic groups was normal during the Siamese era. Not dissimilar to our northern neighboring countries like Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia where ethnic groups have historically occupied the land well before notions of country have been defined. (Suthathongthai, Explanation of the word Thai, 2018)



Figure 4. Prateep Suthathongthai *Explanation of the Word 'Thai'* (2007) from *Yonok Chronicle* (1964.) 15 minute video. Courtesy of the artist.

In his video artwork titled *Explanation of the Word 'Thai'* (2007) from *Yonok Chronicle* (1964.) The artist had collaborated with a performer who was his student at Mahasarakham University in the heart of Thailand's Northeastern region. As a Thai citizen who is also an ethnic Phu Tai community member, he confidently recites official Thai secondary school history textbook in his ethnic Phu Tai dialect that supposedly explains the single ethnic origination of the Thai people. The recital appear incomprehensible to general Thai audience even though Thai and English subtitles had been provided. The artist discovered that ethnic Phu Tai communities have always existed in Thailand but not officially recognized in the national history. He also suspects that many more ethnic minority groups exist but have not been officially recognized in national history. Surely there is an overlooked and inaccurate history that is currently taught in schools that must be in favor of the winning team, which may not be dissimilar to how the Western world would have chosen to write their single-perspective version of world history. (Suthathongthai, 2018)



Figure 5. Kong Rithdee Gaddafi (2012) 23 minute documentary film. Courtesy of the artist.

Introducing a Bangkok-based writer and filmmaker Kong Rithdee's 23 minutes documentary film *Gaddafi* (2012) when he investigated the issuance of names for a fourteen year-old boy within Thai bureaucratic system in central Bangkok. The opening screen text states that there are 69 million people living in Thailand, four percent are Muslim. Eighty five percent of the Muslim population live the

Deep South bordering Malaysia. Twelve percent of Thai-Muslims live in Bangkok. Many of these 2.5 million Thai-Muslims have official Thai first names, an Arabic name and often another nickname. But only one Thai citizen has the name “Kod-dafi Mahommad” after the former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. His father, Chatchawal Muhammad, is an ardent admirer of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, the ousted and killed ex-ruler of Libya. The fourteen year-old boy’s father said that he will name his first-born after the revolutionary colonel but the boy’s mother becomes concerned about the social implications. In Thai language, the spelling of the names Gaddafi and Koddafi are the same even though the English spelling differs on the boy’s Thai national identification card. The interviews with this Thai Muslim family pose the age-old question: what’s in a name? (The International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam 2013)

Personal Politics

Pen-ek Ratanaruang one of Thailand’s most celebrated working film directors whom has frequently represented Thailand abroad at international festivals including Cannes, Berlin and Venice. (Brzeski, 2013.) His feature documentary film *Paradoxocracy* (2013) explored the delicate political history of Thailand through unnamed interviews with leading historians, political activists and using archival footage. The documentary was separated into three timelines, the first part was between 1932-1947, the second part was between 1973-1976 and the third and final part was between 1997-2006. Censorship was enforced by the Ministry of Culture on five scenes so the sound had been muted but the footage was deliberately not cut out of the film. This was met with screams and verbal outcry in cinemas. This particular film was clearly not in line with the usual stylized production that have captivated his regular audiences over the decades. But considering the political turmoil of 2013 when any attempts to be politically neutral, had sparked many arguments in public as a clear political stance. Ratanaruang took major risks to deliver what is unimaginable for many Thais. From my direct experience in watching this film at the cinema in Bangkok, the limited screening times and days were sold-out with people ranging from school children, intellectuals through veteran protesters from the 1970’s. According to the official Facebook page, *Paradoxocracy* had a limited run in two Bangkok theatres starting June 24th and running through July 3rd. (Hombrebueno, 2013)

But with his latest project, the 51-year-old director has trained his attention inward, exploring the fraught and complicated modern political history of his homeland in a documentary he says was made with only the Thai audience – and his own curiosity – in mind. (Brzeski, 2013)

The closing voice-over scene of the documentary states that *New pages of history is written everyday. Whilst at the same time pages of old history awaits discovery and all to prove that democracy is not easily achieved.*

The vernacular

Zhuang Wubin an independent researcher specializing in contemporary photography in Southeast Asia describes that many Thai artists have examined the erasure

of histories, deconstructed the visual representation of power, or given parity to the unheard voices in Thailand. (Wubin, 2011)

But the idea of homogeneity that has been inscribed into Thai national identity affects not only the people who belong to ethnically distinct groups. As it gives pre-dominance to Central Thai culture, the construction of Thai-ness allows for stereotypes directed against, for instance, the peoples of Isarn (Northeast Thailand) – a region where one-third of Thai citizens actually live. (Wubin, 2011)

A recent public sensation of 2018 where members of the public would get dressed-up in period Thai outfits and ethnic regional Thai outfits to be photographed has been the new festival graciously organized by His Majesty King Rama X. *Un Ai Rak Khlai Khwam Nao* (Love and Warmth at Winter's End). His Majesty King Maha Vajiralongkorn Bodindradebayavarangkun has graciously initiated the organization of a winter festival under this theme. The *Un Ai Rak Khlai Khwam Nao* event ran from February 8 to March 11, 2018, at the Royal Plaza on the grounds of Dusit Palace. The event reflects the long-standing bond between the Royal Institution and the Thai people, plus corresponds to the wishes of the late King Rama IX to carry on, conserve and continue to further develop all aspects of life for the benefit of the Thai nation. In addition, the public are invited to take part in charitable activities with proceeds going to assist the under-privileged and needy in all regions of Thailand. (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2018)

Newspapers published that the organizers of the Aun Ai Rak Khlai Khwam Nao expo reported that 1.26 million visitors had passed through the gate in the 32 days after its opening. (Bangkok Post, 2018)



Figure 6. Dow Wasiksiri *Street Fashion* (2014-2015) Courtesy of the artist.

The next artist to be discussed will be Dow Wasiksiri's *Street Fashion* (2014-2015) series of still photographs which the artist described in a personal interview as he

was inspired by the nineteenth century itinerant Western photographers when they encountered the colonial natives. This three-year project investigated the classification of little known ethnic groups as he travels around the borders of Thailand. The collision between traditional dress and mass-produced clothing became the subject matter in this series of deliberately mis-staged photographs when the sitter becomes partly separated by the actual field environment. Colorfully improvised backdrop that Wasiksiri found in the area became part of the formal pictorial composition. The sitters are all members of ethnic minority groups from the borders around Thailand. Wasiksiri's whimsical presentation of the everyday was delivered through his professional punch as a highly skilled photographer. This exhibition also traveled to the Netherlands. (Noorderlicht, 2015)

Conclusion

As we boldly venture into the twenty-first century, notions of national identities and cultural boundaries around the world are already transforming at unpredictable paces, whichever side of any political division comes notions of national identity for the sake of unity and survival. My intension is to inform a diverse range of Thai identities in the hope of widening the social embrace on any unforgiving notions of us and them. Through contexts of consumer technology, global politics and transnational trade, our lives have witness significant changes, even within the scope of twenty-first century alone. Nowadays many contemporary media artists around the world no longer need to totally rely on public galleries and museums to exhibit their artworks. Gallery and museum endorsements may no longer need to host physical, on-premises art exhibitions. Even though the intellectual contents within contemporary media art and vernacular social media may appear similar at first glance, the integral different for contemporary media art will rely on how society can seriously respect the artistic intentions and cultural values. On the other hand, social media as a sustainable and credible platform will also need to accommodate concerns of fake news, hate speeches and unlawful trade of consumer information for further manipulation.

I trust that Thai identities as scened in twenty-first century contemporary Thai media art will continue to diversify and flourish on par with the global academic art communities. Especially with the two biennales coming to Thailand in 2018. These will be an exciting time for the wider public and intellectual communities to cultivate an interest in contemporary art.

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