

### **Less Oil, More Courage and Love: Thai Contemporary art today<sup>1</sup>**

Since 1923 the Thai monarchy has been the key driver in the development of the arts. The intrinsic and extrinsic value of art in Thailand has a long history of being intertwined within political and cultural apparatuses. As the country combined liberal economics with authoritarian regime, an ambiguity is born from the tension in between. Due to the religious dominance of Buddhism in Thailand, combined with the consideration that the founder of the first Fine Arts Department in Thailand is an Italian sculptor: Thai art may be seen as a product of Western ideology and Buddhist self-consciousness. The contemporary art of Thailand has developed its own unique language: meditative, poetic with a subversive undercurrent and phenomenological sensibility. Thai Contemporary artists exemplify Jacques Rancière's definition of politics:

“Politics, indeed, is not the exercise of, or struggle for, power. It is the configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of experience, of objects posited as common and as pertaining to a common decision, of subjects recognized as capable of designating these objects and putting forward arguments about them.”

The reason I have chosen the following three Thai contemporary artists is not only due to their unique artistic practices, but also their experimental gestures that consistently test the form and frame of art. The three Thai artists' profiles are RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA (b.1961), ARIN RUNGJANG (b. 1975) and KAWITA VATANJYANKUR (b. 1987). Through the trajectory they might form, art lovers could understand how the dialogue between the western and eastern ideologies manifest and enrich the context of their works, allowing them to attain a broader aesthetic spectrum and to form conversations about the future of contemporary art in Thailand.

#### **RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA (b.1961)**

With his long black hair and big warm smile, Rirkrit is never one to shun the limelight.<sup>2</sup> The son of a Thai diplomat, Rirkrit was born in Buenos Aires and grew up living between Thailand, Ethiopia and Canada. His international background shapes his interest in how social structures are built through human interactions in space and time. His grandmother played an important role in his life. She taught cooking lessons on Thai television and owned a restaurant in Bangkok where Rirkrit spent his youth. His culinary-centered background influenced his unique art language: Rirkrit often stages cooking events in an art space in which he invites the audiences to have food together. Rirkrit is interested in how an idea becomes visible through the collaboration—what can be taken away from the collective experiences and what is left?<sup>3</sup>

Rirkrit is often recognised for his role in “relational aesthetics,” an art movement that focuses on social interaction and the artist as a catalyst for social exchanges.<sup>4</sup> He often stages a daily activity in a mundane situation: a total event to manifest the value of the collective sharing experiences and collaboration. Rirkrit's works

demonstrate performative and phenomenological qualities through temporality and textuality. Rirkrit would like to explore the possibilities opened during collaboration, what lies outside of the frame/structure. Often asking how rather than why, Rirkrit contemplates and observes how the communal activities that he creates reflect how the behaviors of people can change in different times, spaces, and cultures. His belief in Buddhism contributes to his openness to detours, which is an important element in his art. His utopia is not a community without conflicts but a community with a capacity to cope with reality through collaboration in order to reach the true harmony.<sup>5</sup>

In his best-known series *Pad Thai, 1990* at the Paula Allen Gallery in New York, Rirkrit cooked and served traditional Thai food for exhibition visitors. It was Rirkrit's affirmative public announcement of his Thai identity. In addition to cooking, he created environments, prints, drawings, installations, and text-based works, which often relate to his social initiatives. He constructs communal environments in the art-related spaces that offer alternative venues for visitors' daily activities, like *Untitled, 2002 (he promised)*, a platform for improvisation and interaction. Rirkrit is interested in the derived shapes of adaptation and mutation in the dematerialization in the physical structure. In his retrospective *Rirkrit Tiravanija: A Retrospective (Tomorrow Is Another Fine Day)*, 2004, he co-worked with French artist Philippe Parreno and American science fiction author Bruce Sterling to create an objectless space in the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam for the viewers to imagine the actual work of art by the theatrical readings related to three artists' memories and the minimal architectural interventions. His engagement with propaganda can be seen in the series of commissioned drawings derived from newspaper images and in *untitled (fear eats the soul/ November 1–8, 2004)*, 2006, in which Rirkrit painted the phrase "FEAR EATS THE SOUL" over the front page of The New York Times.

Although he often makes installation events, Rirkrit started widening his explorative practice through video and film in 2010. The film, *untitled 2012 (a study for Karl's perfect day)* or *(the incomparable Karl Holmqvist)*, is a survey of how Karl Holmqvist's, an artist friend, inspired him with his improvisations with dematerialized forms such as reading poems or staging a performance. Rirkrit's art seeks the interaction with other artists' practices. Rirkrit sometimes intentionally chooses another artist's work as a structural or bodily host in which to insert his own interpretation and contemplation. For example, the exhibition *U.F.O.–Naut JK (Július Koller) Orquestra por Rirkrit Tiravanija, kurimanzutto, 2012* at the Jumex Museum in Mexico. He transfigured the museum from a space of contemplation into a space of social interaction. He reinterpreted and reactivated a 1970 project by Slovakian artist Július Koller (1939–2007) entitled *Ping-Pong Society* by putting seven ping-pong tables bearing the phrase "TOMORROW IS THE QUESTION" (along with corresponding paddles marked with a question mark), which are installed within a tennis court layout.<sup>6</sup> His exploration of the philosophical implications in ordinary language makes his works easy to access for people.

The ethos that permeates Rirkrit's work, a desire to bring people together, a commitment to collaboration and dialogue, and openness to the unknown, makes Rirkrit a leading figure of his generation. One day he told me, "you know, selling stuff is easy but selling idea is very hard..." Based upon my observation of how Rirkrit integrates his concepts into his artworks in a manner that allows them to stay accessible to the public, I think he sells quite well.

#### ARIN RUNGJANG (b. 1975)

"The sound of the airplane was related to my childhood memory. It was a few years my father has gone and every time I heard the sound of the plane I would go out to the front yard jump and shout "Daddy is coming, Daddy is coming" and my mother would cry. My grandmother told me to stop and she said if any son made mother cry, they will go to hell." – excerpt from the exhibition material of Arin's installation 'The Scars of your love they leave me breathless, 2011

Arin, a grandson of a Monarchy fighter and son of a man who was beaten almost to death by the German Neo-Nazi when he worked in Germany, became aware of nationalism and transnationalism at a very young age. Raised by his grandmother and mother, two widows who lost their husbands in the early stage of the marriages, Arin's world was veiled in bittersweet memories and harrowing stories. The portraits of his grandfather and father were mainly formed by the oral storytelling of his grandmother and mother. Arin captures the essence of these lost figures through the presence of objects related to his father: photographs, the gifts bought by his father, the clothes his father used to wear. Everything related to his father carries a metaphorical meaning in his life and represent the archival presence of absence. Arin started questioning if the so-called-reality of memory is presented and represented based upon the subjective, what is the truth? This is a point from which Arin began his journey for answers.

Arin develops his unique artistic practice and style based on life experience. He is interested in investigating the lesser-known aspects of things, unnoticeable truths, like the negatives between the spaces.<sup>7</sup> The title of a work is part of Arin's aesthetics, like the thread end of clothes or a clue in a puzzle. Narrative plays an important role in his practice. An object, which can draw together distant events across time and space, is as important as a video. Objects, installations and videos own the metaphorical quality. Due to the prominent dimension of the narrative, which usually bridges the past and presence, a subtle sense of nostalgia unveiled in Arin's works.

In his early works, mainly installations, a story was kept in the background, sometimes even hidden within. It is only after the exhibition *Never Congregate, Never Disregard*, 2007 at Bangkok University Gallery Arin started his engagement with video as a medium that provides fluidity to his search for the truth, making the practice lyrical and poetic, yet unsettling. Arin's research was further matured in

*Golden Teardrop*, 2013, a monumental video installation work exhibited in Thai Pavilion in the 55th Venice Biennale. Arin explored the historical intersections between Thailand and other countries through the video telling the backstory of a venerable Thai dessert, “golden teardrop”, that the Siamese of Ayutthaya concocted based on a treat imported by the Portuguese, pairing with the installation, which utilises heavy wooden beams from an old Ayutthaya house and iron trusses from a post-war factory to frame a refined sculpted “chandelier” of bronze droplets. Arin dissected materials in a binary way, showing the historical and the present, the oral and the archival. Through the investigation, Arin deftly uncovered the bitter and sweet of the transnational interchanges in the Thai history. *Mongkut*, 2015, a video installation now exhibiting in Kyoto City University of Arts Gallery, shows how Arin located and manifested the transnational relationships in history through an object, mongkut, meaning a crown in Thai. Through overlapping the past, intertwining with the present, Arin tried to negotiate space for the arbitrary in history.

Arin’s work *246247596248914102516... And then there were none (Democracy Monument)*, 2017 comprised of wood and brass sculpture, video, paintings and drawings was exhibited at Neue Galerie at Documenta 14. Based on the oral and archival materials, it highlights the complexity of the ideological conflicts as well as how they can be read or narrated. It reveals the psychological and sociocultural aspects of history. The video *And then there were none* is the opening of the work, which provides the structure of the whole presentation and reflects upon the artist’s preoccupations with memory, loss, mysticism and history. Often using private events to investigate the political issues of the past, Arin continues this practice in video, exploring the narratives of a Thai student riot in 1973 including his grandfather’s role as a democracy fighter and his father’s tragic accident in Germany.

The bloodshed during the student riot in 1973 in Thailand near the site of Democracy Monument was concealed and lost in the Thai history. However, the ideologies embedded in those statements shape the way in which memory and history are presented. If what we regard history nowadays as programed and constructed, what is left for us to believe? What is the truth? A sculptural installation that references the numerological symbolism of the Democracy Monument, the drawings of the Thai ambassador and his wife, the archival materials of the Thai ambassador’s published memoir and the signed guest book, are the symbols of transmitting didactic advice or historical information.

*246247596248914102516... And then there were none (Democracy Monument)*, 2017 is a critical work because Arin experiments the possibility of blurring the borders between video, performance art, painting, sculpture and installation.

*246247596248914102516... And then there were none (Democracy Monument)*, 2017 fascinates further with Arin’s exploration of the collective phenomenological spheres between the dancers and viewers. Arin investigates how humans of different cultural

backgrounds interact and co-exist: an open-ended story that allows the viewers to instill their own interpretations.

Arin constructs the medial well, reintroducing what has been registered in an intimate and dialectical way. Through the decomposition of images and narratives, the enigmatic arises. However, this is where the sublime arrives.<sup>8</sup> This medial sphere is like an invitation for the audience to enter Arin's small-deal-in-big-details sovereign. In this sovereign, there are no answers but questions. In the end, what is left for the audience is their own interpretation. Arin sees this as a political act; an act in the hope of waking a collective conscious by stimulating the audience's accustomed senses and minds.

Arin told me, "*246247596248914102516... And then there were none* (Democracy Monument), 2017 is a love story after all." Arin tries to 'fragments the moment and disperses the subject into a plurality of possible positions and function.'<sup>9</sup> He consistently searches the deepest politics of truth through his art. It is indeed because of love, the love of humanity.

#### KAWITA VATANJYANKUR (b. 1987)

Kawita is never afraid of being perceived as a feminist artist; however, she could be identified as a "bad feminist." Despite being a pioneer in her realm, she adopts a demure and feminine demeanor, with long black hair and a lilting voice.

A graduate of RMIT University in Sydney majoring in fine art in painting, Kawita decided to adopt video as primary medium when she encountered Bill Viola's work in 2007. Kawita's deep training in painting is evident; she incorporates the methodology of painting in her video works in term of the composition of colours and shapes. She purposefully chooses minimal movements with no plot. Her work owns the features of Pop art: everyday subject matters, the consumer goods and vivid colours. At the same time, her work challenged traditional boundaries in the video art through combining the painterly gestures with minimal performance.

Deeply inspired by her mother, who raised her brother and her alone after her father passed away when she was young, Kawita witnessed her mother's endurance as she bore sorrow within while raising children alone and decided to speak for minority. Conceptual but figurative, Kawita's works always explore and examine the psychological, social and cultural ways of viewing and valuing everyday labour. Her artwork is to interrogate the idea of labour, the human's unstoppable and repetitive action as a tool for survival, and the power relation between the human activity and the materialism and capitalism world. She often objectifies her body as an instrument to perform in front of colourful backdrops to stage the labourer's works to make the invisible grueling becomes the visible pain. Through staging what labourer does for the society by mechanizing her body and mind, she also questions the self and identity of labour, who use acceptance and tolerance to fight against the

ambivalence. The sense of trapped permeates in her works. The human's vulnerability is eminent from the feminine body in the quasi-nudity outfit. The meditative aspect is another whimsical part of her works. Through her meditative postures in the performative video works, the intricate relationships between private and public, pain and joy, mechanism and self-enlightenment, resistance and acceptance are physically inspected.

The suspension and reflective redemption presented in her violent video aesthetic lend her works the unremitting power.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the alluring bright colours and painterly aspect in Kawita's works become her artistic repertoire.

The investigation into the human condition in today's society seeks to provoke questions of ethics and accountability - a catalyst to further social commentary that will hopefully evoke needed empathy from the general public. It is her activist desire to defy against inequality.

Kawita's video works are easily recognizable by her specific artistic language: the quasi-painting quality, the exotic colours, the suggestive nudity of the female performer with her repetitive mechanical movements and the somewhat pornographic.<sup>11</sup> Her works appear to be inviting, playful and appealing, being simultaneously evocative and meditative. The layers of the work can be compared to the flavours in Thai cuisine, which is famous for the balanced mix of sweet, sour and spicy. Yet, sometimes the flavours are too strong so that they bring the viewer to the verge of tears. Kawita's work *The Scale of Justice* exhibited in 57th Venice Biennale with Alamak!project "Islands In The Stream", a group exhibition curated by Yoichi Nakamuta and Stefano Casciani.

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this article is inspired by one of Rirkrit's artworks *Less Oil More Courage* and the conversations I had with Arin and Kawita. The phrase is originally from a short-lived young artist Peter Cain's notebook: a text that reads "More courage less oil". Aware of the current sociopolitical situation in Thailand and the world, I feel the phrase engagingly correspond to these three Thai contemporary artists' art practices and also the dilemma and the hope for themselves, the society and the world.

<sup>2</sup> In Thailand, people name each other by their first name rather than last name in the professional world, because almost every Thai has his/her own nickname, which only called by the family members or close friends. Therefore, I will name every Thai artist in his/her first name in the article.

<sup>3</sup> Rirkrit used to say in Studio Banana TV's video interview, "*I am interested in making a condition or situation where ... people have to come and stand next to each other and look at something ... and deal with each other. I think it is quite important in the work, for me, that people participate in it or take action in it or are in it...Of course, there is harmony and there is chaos, and that is very true in an existence in the social structure.*"

<sup>4</sup> This idea resonates John Latham's ideas of Event Structure and Incidental Person, which convey the importance of an event in the history and the sociopolitical roles of an artist, respectively. However, different from Latham, who regarded language as a flawed medium, Rirkrit embraces the flaws of the medium, the chaos of the system, to find the rhythm within the system through the collaboration. It is a positive dynamic, the acceptance that induces people to the situation he creates.

<sup>5</sup> It reminds me Foucault's Heterotopia. Instead of passively running into Western's Utopia, a world that never exists, Rirkrit positively creates an environment to let people recognise the reality. Ultimately, people connect to the detour, the disruptive, the truth, the macrocosm and microcosm,

the relationship in between re-established through disturbance, adaptation and reflection; the system is phenomenologically modified.

- <sup>6</sup> It seems Rirkrit followed Hal Foster investigation on second neo avant-garde using Freudian's model: repressed → repeated → recollected. In Freudian analogy: repetition = reception = resistance to the unknowing. Rirkrit's art practice corresponds to Hal Foster's analysis that 'the second neo-avant-garde have moved away from grand oppositions to subtle displacements and/or strategic collaborations with different groups.' Therefore, I wonder is it a proof of Hal Foster proposition, 'second avant-garde's testing that is now extended to other institutions and discourses in the ambitious art of the present.'
- <sup>7</sup> Arin's interrogation reminds me Foucault's proposition in 'What is an author?' "...It is not enough, however, to repeat the empty affirmation that the author has disappeared. For the same reason, it is not enough to keep repeating that God and man have died a common death. Instead, we must locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings this disappearance uncovers."
- <sup>8</sup> In Gadamer's hermeneutics, "If a word is applied to a sphere to which it did not originally belong, the actual "original" meaning emerges quite clearly."
- <sup>9</sup> Michele Foucault, "What is an author?" 130.  
<http://artsites.ucsc.edu/faculty/Gustafson/FILM%20162.W10/readings/foucault.author.pdf>
- <sup>10</sup> As Louise Bourgeois stated, "Hanging and floating are states of ambivalence." In psychology, ambivalence is a state of uncertainty and fluctuation. It is the wanting to do two different things or feeling two opposing ways. It is the conflicting feelings about the two desirable situations.
- <sup>11</sup> In her study of food etiquette, Margaret Visser observes that in some cultures 'it is considered shameful to be seen eating by outsiders, even guests; people may sit in a corner or facing the wall to eat in some cases, or delicately hide their mouths when masticating'.