

ART OF DOMESTICATION

ARIN RUNGJANG



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At a recent artist's talk in Paris, a Thai artist was asked about a project for which he'd engaged the services of a black market currency trader. The work, *What I learned I no longer know; the little I still know, I guessed* (2009), took the form of a neat, one metre square pile of cash accumulating on the gallery floor. The artist, Pratchaya Phinthong, had converted his artist's fee for the show into Zimbabwean Dollars, at the time, the fastest inflating currency the world had seen since the Second World War.¹ The trader, who professed to be working for charity, had enabled international transactions made almost impossible and forced underground, by both international law and unhinged market forces. The audience at the talk wanted to know about the artist's ethical considerations: how did he know the trader would use his profits charitably, as claimed? Had he checked? Would he not feel compromised if the trader had simply pocketed the proceeds? Fair questions, perhaps. But in the event, both the trader's identity and his claims were unverifiable; the artist was in no position to assuage these concerns. Without dismissing them, he made it clear that in order to realise the work, he had had to enter into a relationship of trust, the merits of which might remain obscure, perhaps indefinitely. After all, art is also a fiduciary business. And was he not engaged in a similar kind of arbitrage with his gallery, perhaps with his audience too?

In a recent lecture, curator Charles Esche argued that art, however political its concerns, must maintain a certain distance from political action; that art's parallel universe can offer us something—must offer us something—that the ebb and flow of politics cannot.² Since the unravelling of the ideological binarism that ordered the last century, the art world has had as hard a time regaining its ethical bearings. Hence, perhaps, its preoccupations with “community”, with *homo sacer*, with Jacques Rancière. The awkward encounter above offers a telling snapshot of its drift, what Jean-François Lyotard would have called a “*différend*”: the interrogation implied ethical standards supposed to be universal, but which the artist did not share. Indeed, his position, insinuated rather than asserted, was closer to that of the currency trader. Of course, the Thais are no strangers to currency volatility, not to mention the unabashed monopolisation of national resources by unscrupulous elites.

Since its millennial awakening, the language of globalisation has suffered a hyperinflation of its own. From its shadow, privileged issues have emerged, competing for our attention and thoughtfully spent dollars: the mainstreaming of climate change, for example, the plight of the migrant labourer, and the many struggles over information technology. But as global as these concerns may seem in the cities of the First World, their popularisation has not been accomplished everywhere, and one needn't go far beyond this sphere to find them relegated to the margins of public consciousness. Yet the Western-liberal petitioner will take umbrage when Chinese bloggers turn out to be patriots, when Oxfam gets its trinkets made in Africa, or when Facebook starts making money.

In the ethereal public sphere of networked capitalism, we assume affinities at our peril. But contemporary art, as many have observed, exemplifies the new transnational circulation; and so artists, like statesmen, are expected or even assumed to be good global citizens, scrutinising institutions, eating organic, sporting only fair-trade *accoutrements*, ever mindful of their carbon footprints. Our theorists, meanwhile (Esche cites Saskia Sassen and Brian Holmes) tell us that now, as never before, one's position must be articulated across multiple *levels*, from the intimate and local to the national and geo-political. And many artists strive to show how we, and our commodities, are not the same at every level. As Esche suggests, what we should be asking from them is questioning, not judgment; that they suspend us on the tightrope of this ethical relativity, force us to reflect, to specify, to be conscious of our assumptions and expectations.

SOCIAL SCULPTURE AND THE LIMITS OF INCLUSION

Arin Rungjang exemplifies this contemporary vocation. One of Thailand's most outward-looking and politically conscious artists, Arin is acutely aware of how social and economic transformation, and the country has seen plenty in his lifetime, intersects with the private struggles of individuals. Rather than sketching the bigger picture, he is drawn to detail, shadowing the general through encounters with the particular.

For one recent project *Untitled* (2008), Arin occupied for six weeks a well-known art space in Bangkok's Chinatown with his partner (a collaboration with Sylvain Saily). Instead of exhibiting art, the pair invited friends and collaborators over for meals and discussions; the general public was not invited. ‘Social sculpture’ has been a favoured strategy of Thai contemporary artists since the early 1990s—Arin is quick to acknowledge his debt to Surasi Kusolwong—but as elsewhere, it's typically geared towards dismantling art's exclusivity. What distinguishes Arin's approach is his emphasis on the *private*. Of course, he is not the first artist to bridge domestic and professional spheres—Rirkrit Tiravanija's transpositions of his New York apartment into galleries (since 1995) are an obvious precursor. But Arin's domestication may have more in common with Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau*: he dispenses with the exhibitionism, privatising, rather than publicising, the encounter.

A recent installation in Paris underscores this predilection for the intimate, and its sometimes surprising metaphoric valence. *My knees are cold because it is winter in Paris* (2010) comprised three elements: a personal memoir of the curator, Pier Luigi Tazzi, an Italian now residing in Bangkok; a narrow corridor, sparsely furnished with personal effects; and swirling around an antique wardrobe, an ungainly assemblage of second-hand furniture, sourced from a French charity for newly arrived immigrants.³ Together, they form a kind of abstract portrait, a cumulative collage of migrant experience, fading into the worn surfaces of shared furnishings—a portrait of today's Paris perhaps, or of the charity, or of the musical chairs of the artist residency. There is no attempt to assimilate the experiences of this and that individual. Yet Arin makes visible, with a light touch, the contours of a shared alienation, hinting at the unending cycle of domestication, attachment and abandonment.



neon from [unclear] / [unclear] contemporary art museum
neon from [unclear] [unclear] [unclear]
neon from [unclear] [unclear] [unclear] art gallery

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Atelier Van Lieshout

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In her oft-cited critique of “relational” art, Claire Bishop suggests that the much-theorised *rapprochement* between art and everyday life may have gone far enough.⁴ In its emphasis on sociality and the ‘open-ended’, she argues, relational aesthetics forgoes the antagonism that is a prerequisite to the political encounter. For there can be no context, she reasons, without exclusion. Against champions of conviviality like Rirkrit and Liam Gillick, Bishop pits the more discriminating invitations of Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirschhorn, artists who delimit in advance who is, and is not, eligible to participate in their work. While not exactly confrontational, Arin leans toward this latter style, insisting that art, like life, does not deal everyone an equal hand.

In his new commission for the *Singapore Biennale*, the stories of Thais living and working in Singapore become the pretext for exchanges of furniture that obliquely index their social and economic mobility. The worn flotsam and jetsam of migrant domesticity—salvaged, repurposed, handed on—is swapped for the virginal cargo of flat-packed, transnational mega-retail. This formal substitution reflects a central contradiction of contemporary life, between the singularity of lived experience and the standardised forms of a global consumer society. But it unfolds without friction: while the participants bring objects freighted with personal stories, they happily exchange them for the modular generic of the IKEA showroom. The great abstract “de-differentiation” that Fredric Jameson identified with late Capitalism is laid bare, but is also shown to have a communal dimension, and to be fuelled by the desires of individuals. By restricting participation to Thai nationals, the artist applies some pressure to this *Biennale’s* framing thematic, “open house”. Inclusiveness and openness may be cardinal principles for such events, but must every artist necessarily subscribe to them? For a social sculptor like Arin, would this not mean forgoing the right to choose his materials?

Such an idea would be anathema, too, for the Swedish homewares giant (a sponsor of the project), its business hinging on vast economies of scale and control over raw material streams. Joseph Beuys will be turning in his grave, but could we not see in the prodigious success of IKEA’s ‘democratic design’ agenda a more inclusive, and certainly more consequential, form of social sculpture? Perhaps not coincidentally, the company—its profits piling up in a tax-exempt foundation in the Netherlands—also demonstrates a special genius for stretching the lines between public and private. There could be few better examples of our global relativism: it has long promoted itself as a paragon of environmental responsibility and resource efficiency; yet with some three hundred and twenty stores and operations in over forty countries, no company has done more to reduce the half-life of our domestic trappings.

REVERSIBILITY: SURFACE AND SUBVERSION

IKEA arrived in Singapore in 1978 (three years after Australia), and will plant its first giant blue footprint in Thailand later this year. Its flexible philosophies will serve it well there: in a nation that prides itself on its knack for compromise, widely held to have saved it from colonisation, relativism is a core value. If the country’s symbolic architecture is, as they say, propped up by three ‘pillars’ (religion, monarchy, nation), these supports are anything but rigid. Indeed, Thailand’s institutions can seem singularly unprincipled: a monarchy prone to meddling in the political economy; a clergy, its esteem in slow decline, that not so long ago sanctioned the murder of suspected communists; a State paralysed by the squabbling of the political elite, its puppets recycled and rebranded with unbearable lightness. The modern military, meanwhile, the most powerful institution in the land, styles itself as the great defender of the people; but it has slain far more of its own than all its adversaries put together, in perennial flare-ups in the capital and in various extra-judicial borderlands.

None of this makes Thailand unique, especially in Southeast Asia. But with economic progress sapped by a feudal class structure, and development gaining pace in nearby Vietnam and Indonesia, the Thais have good reason to be circumspect about the principles preached from above. In such a moral climate, the only sure thing has been the regenerative flux of desire and profit. In the 1990s, Thailand’s first generation of contemporary artists made their reputations dramatising this epic failure of trust. They are still at it: take the veteran firebrand, Vasan Sitthiket, whose garish painting, *It must be like this!* (2010)—seen recently at Singapore’s new art fair *Art Stage*—depicts a sadistic orgy, commoners pronged by smiling hypocrites in a flurry of ill-gotten cash. But for Arin, nothing has come of these protests. Rather than rail against the reversibility of principles, he is more concerned with the principle of reversibility.

The younger generation has pulled back from the hopeless political drama. They steer carefully around the stereotypes of Thainess (*kwampenthai*) on which their seniors have traded for decades, favouring generic forms and mass-produced materials over those of fine art. Consequently, though well received in Europe, their conceptually driven work seldom gets much attention closer to home. Now in their mid-thirties, these artists were born amidst tremendous social conflict, marked indelibly in the national psyche by the massacre of students on 6 October, 1976, a tragic end to three years of progressive political experimentation. They graduated from art school in the late 1990s, a time of relative optimism, with independent organisations plugging Bangkok into a burgeoning international

circuit. But by the time their work matured, these channels had dwindled, a loss for which the gradual emergence of State promotion for contemporary art has been meagre compensation.

Thailand’s political calamity, meanwhile, has only deepened. The most recent meltdown—a tense standoff last April between ‘red-shirt’ protesters and troops loyal to Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva—culminated in another bloody crackdown, in which nearly a hundred people perished. Just one month later, a massive exhibition was stitched together at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC), a cavernous museum at the heart of the city’s shopping district, brought to a standstill by the conflict. *Imagine Peace* was an unabashedly political exercise, and deliberately inclusive, a bald-faced attempt to simulate national unity.⁵ Within it, though, was a sub-section that stood apart from the weak, quasi-political art that dominated the show. Deftly curated by Rirkrit, and sheltering in one of the museum’s peculiar alcoves, this offbeat annex threw the ambivalent politics of the younger generation into stark contrast. For his contribution, Arin salvaged heaps of synthetic carpet from the museum storeroom, which he drew up into a slumping pyramid of flaccid surfaces—red, black and grey—hitched to an internal pillar.

Although it belongs to the city and is publicly funded, BACC’s first exhibition was a display of photographs by Princess Sirindhorn, the King’s popular second daughter. This was followed by a nationalistic blockbuster, *Traces of Siamese Smile*, comprising some three hundred works by over a hundred artists. Along with these presentations came a string of inauguration events, where the crowded echelons of the bureaucracy could parade their love for King and country, contemporary art coming in a distant third. In two short years, Arin’s carpets had seen a lot of action. His work, entitled *Art as space for politics without space*, was a modest, spontaneous gesture, yet characteristic of his practice in many ways. It recalls earlier experiments—particularly *Red and Blue Floor*, (About Café, 1998), and *Never Congregate, Never Disregard* (Bangkok University Gallery, 2007)—in which the void of the contemporary art gallery was domesticated, rescaled to reveal the social dynamics that order our built environment.

In Arin’s patient exploration of the poetics of space, what appears to be anti-materialism is not a denial of the object but is in fact *accretive*: the artwork is *there*, but it tends to gravitate towards the architecture that frames it, tracing and re-surfacing the floors, ceilings and walls. And surfaces, in Arin’s work, can have extraordinary amplitude. Before becoming art, the BACC carpets had served two functions—one practical, one symbolic, but both *prophylactic*. They had staved off the wear and tear bound to take the shine off the new infrastructure; and they had allowed some near-celestial visitors to grace the galleries without touching the ground. By repurposing the symbolic scaffolding of State and royal patronage, Arin implicitly jumbles the social pyramid over which they preside. He brings into focus both the material and the symbolic economies in which the art institution operates and on which it depends, illuminating the folds where the two embrace and overshadow one another, often without touching.

This tenuous and reversible distinction is the thread that draws Arin across the unmarked thresholds between public and private, from the compromised institutions of art, through the flat-packed habitats of mass consumption, to the horizons of migrant aspiration: it is a fine line, sometimes, that separates hospitality from mere accommodation.

Notes

¹ In late 2008, the Zimbabwean currency was inflating at a rate of 5473% per month. This meant that its buying power was halving every five days

² Charles Esche, lecture at Galeri Nasional Indonesia, Jakarta as part of Decompression #10 (ruangrupa’s 10th anniversary), 7 January, 2011

³ The work was part of a group show called *La Mainmise/The Grip*, curated by Dougal Phillips, Kadist Art Foundation, Paris, 2010-11

⁴ Claire Bishop, ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’, *OCTOBER* 110, 2004: 51-79

⁵ The exhibition was coordinated by art historian, curator and now super-bureaucrat Apinan Poshyananda. An overview is available at <http://www.bacc.or.th/>