

Defying authority with creativity

Narawan Pathomvat has given over The Reading Room for some edgy projects

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You know it's going to be an interesting exhibition (especially in Thailand's current political climate) when both police and army officials drop by to question and find reasons to shut it down. That just so happened to have occurred at the opening of "Paradise Of The Blind" by Sutthirat Supaparinya at The Reading Room last week. The show is the first part of the "Sleepover" series, a six-month project involving handing over the library to six influential groups or figures, giving them complete autonomy over the space for one month each.

The idea came as an answer to a dilemma space founder Narawan "Kyo" Pathomvat faced after receiving a fellowship from the Japan Foundation this year: close down temporarily, or do something completely new and different.

Founded in 2009, The Reading Room is a non-profit contemporary art library and resource centre, which is now also known to be an open area for conversation -- hosting academic talks, lectures, screenings and book clubs every month.

"Normally, it's just me and what I want to do, or people offering certain events," Narawan said on the phone last Thursday, still busy prepping for the exhibition launch that night. "Now, it's pretty much giving up the ability over the space to other people. I thought of people who are respected and I've never worked with before. I identified them, and afterwards, it just started to come together."

As the first instalment of the series, Chiang Mai-based artist Sutthirat's exhibition "Paradise Of The Blind", a title also of a banned book in Vietnam, explores and addresses the issues of censorship, the reproduction and destruction of books, the abuse of law and power, and the systematic elimination of the other -- issues that the artist has been working on since October last year.

The exhibition, on view until the end of this month, consists of a large wooden table in the middle of the room, stacked with banned books from different countries around the world. The most head-scratch worthy books included Dora The Explorer, banned in Malaysia, and Alice's Adventures In Wonderland, once banned in China. On the floor around the table are large piles of shredded photocopied pages from 50 other banned books, and dangling above those heaps are clusters of rifle bullets, which at certain angles of the room look like they're aiming right at the readers' heads.

"It's a powerful statement and a symbol of the power that authorities have on citizens and what we're under at this point," said Narawan. "I think people need to think about it more. It's a metaphor for what's happening here as well."

Though a seemingly dangerous topic to touch on, all of the books featured in the exhibition are legal in Thailand -- something that both the police and army can't do anything about. The police and army visits, though daunting and ironically proving the artist's point, will hopefully not affect the show in any way.

"We've done so much over the course of the week or two," said Narawan. "So it would be horrible if they came to shut it down. Fingers crossed."

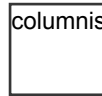
After "Paradise Of The Blind", the next months will feature more interesting groups and figures taking over and curating the space. Though the programmes aren't set in stone yet, June will see "Southeast Of Now", a group of art historians from Asia giving three different academic talks and discussions.

For July, Teepagorn "Champ" Wutipitayamongkol is doing board games with historical and social instigations. August will be taken over by Prabda Yoon, a renowned writer, artist, graphic designer, screenwriter, translator and media personality.

In September, Thai Netizen Network, the Social Technology Institute and Boonmee Lab will create an app to spotlight problems in Bangkok, and critically acclaimed film director Apichatpong Weerasethakul is coming up with an installation or film programme, definitely of social-political context, in October.

"Paradise Of The Blind" is on display until May 29 at The Reading Room, 4th floor, 2 Silom 19. For more information, call 02-635-3674.

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