

## LIFE

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## CONTEMPORARY ART

## Where books meet bullets

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Supaparinya's art installation consists of shredded photocopies of banned books and souvenir bullets.



**Banning books is a habit with Asian governments, as the art installation "Paradise of the Blind" proves**

It looks like somebody's shot up all the books in the Reading Room off Silom Road. A second glance reassures you, though, that you're actually just looking at an art installation.

The library that enjoys being an art gallery is hosting an exhibition on banned

books, "Paradise of the Blind". The title comes from a novel that happens to be prohibited reading in Vietnam.

Chiang Mai-based artist Sutthirat Supaparinya has loaded a long table with 55 fiction and non-fiction works and a bunch of comic books - the subjects ranging from fantasy to democracy, religion to gender issues - and they're all banned somewhere, mainly in Asian countries.

"Whenever I come across a banned book, I like to read it to find out why it's banned," says the 43-year-old Sutthirat. "I started keeping a list and there were so many books banned in Asia! I searched for the titles in libraries and bookstores here and abroad so I could read them."



Not surprisingly, she says, "a lot of the books banned in Southeast Asia are related to politics". If the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations are looking for unifying elements, she says, they always have censorship.

Sutthirat delves into not just prohibitions but also the reproduction and destruction of books and the abuse of power and the law.

Before the police descend on the Reading Room with handcuffs and gasoline, it should be noted that all the banned material was legally acquired here. None of the intact books is currently under ban in Thailand.

In fact there was a soldier in civilian clothes at the opening, making sure the art didn't threaten national security.

The one Thai title on display was once forbidden but has been restored to good graces - "Chom Na Sakdina Thai" ("The Face of Thai Feudalism") by the late democracy leader Chit Phumisak, written in 1957 under the pseudonym Somsamai Srisootarapan. Reflecting shifting ideologies, it was banned in 1977 and yet is now on the government's list of 100 recommended reads.

Sutthirat photocopied many of the banned books and ran the pages through a shredder, creating an off-white mountain of destroyed thoughts and ideas that she then moulded into art - a fresh concept emerging from all those that were lost.

Slim curtains of high-calibre bullets hang like wind chimes from the ceiling, aimed squarely at the pulped books and comics. The ordnance was purchased as a "souvenir" at a Thai military camp.

That some of the books on view are banned comes as a surprise. "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland", the Lewis Carroll classic, was once verboten in China, and Singapore formerly took a dim view of "And Tango Makes Three", a children's book about penguin same-sex parents.

Indonesia won't let its citizens read "All That is Gone" by one of its citizens, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, and you still can't buy Salman Rushdie's "The Satanic Verses" in many countries. Nothing by Rushdie is allowed in Malaysia. South Korea has barred a slew of books including Noam Chomsky's "Year 501".

Sutthirat opened her show on May 5, the 50th anniversary of Chit Phumisak's death. Among the dozens of keen local and foreign readers discussing the issues was a soldier in plainclothes, there to ask her about Chit's book and the intent of the show. No further action was taken, and the rest of the crowd was highly supportive.

"It's a fantastic show raising the issue of censorship in this region," said Vuth Lyno, an art curator from Cambodia. "In my country the government doesn't care much about English-language books, but it does control Khmer publishing and blocks criticism of the government on any issue, not just political issues. Religious and sexual matter is taboo in Cambodia."

"Paradise of the Blind" is the first instalment in "Sleepover", a six-month series designed to turn the library-gallery into a "temporary platform for critical engagement". It's the brainchild of the Reading Room's director, Narawan Kyo Pathomvat, who researched self-organised initiatives in contemporary art and culture in Japan on a fellowship from the Japan Foundation.

"I had the chance to rethink the Reading Room programme and came up with this idea of inviting individuals and organisations involved in socio-cultural matters to use the space," she says.

"I'm really hoping to open up the Reading Room for multi-disciplinary exchanges and extend a sense of community and co-ownership for both practitioners and audience."

Coming next month is "Southeast of Now", in which Southeast Asian art historians and researchers will discuss what's happening in contemporary art in the region. Patrick Flores from the Philippines and Keiko Sei from Japan will give the lead addresses, and the Reading Room will build a corner of books and catalogues on local art history.

In July writer-illustrator Teepagorn Wutipitayamongkol will be there, talking about the boom in popularity of board games, and SeaWrite Award winner Prabda Yoon will examine issues in contemporary literature in discussion with invited foreign writers.

September will be devoted to the new media, urbanisation and human rights in events involving the Social Technology Institute, the Boonmee Lab and the Thai Netizens Network. They intend to create an online application with which Bangkok residents can report problems to the authorities as they arise.

And, in October, acclaimed filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul will be given the stage to explain how the visual arts can deal with social taboos and political criticism.

## **To sleep, to dream**

The "Sleepover" project runs through October at the Reading Room on Silom Soi 19.

"Paradise of the Blind" by Sutthirat Supaparinya continues through May 29.

June has "Southeast of Now" with Southeast Asian art historians. July has writer-blogger-illustrator Teepagorn Wutipitayamongkol, and August has writer Prabda Yoon.

In September the Thai Netizens Network, Social Technology Institute and Boonmee Lab are lined up, and in October it's filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul.