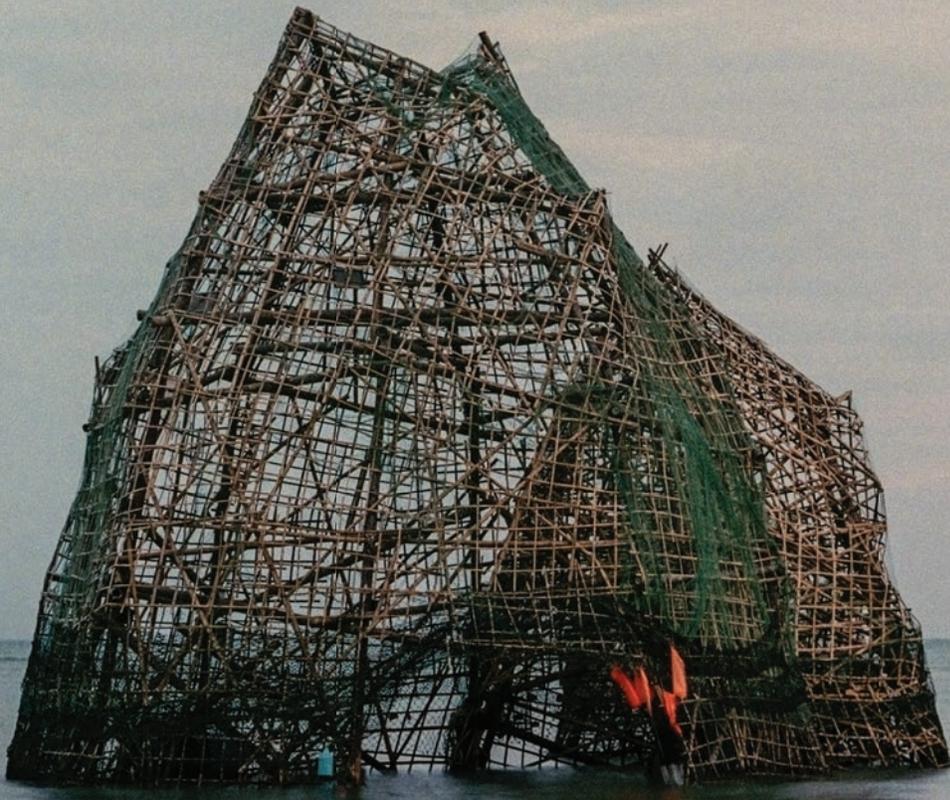


antennae

THE JOURNAL OF NATURE IN VISUAL CULTURE

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Volume 1



uncontainable
natures

antennae

THE JOURNAL OF NATURE IN VISUAL CULTURE
edited by Giovanni Aloï

Antennae (founded in 2006) is the international, peer reviewed, academic journal on the subject of nature in contemporary art. Its format and contents are inspired by the concepts of 'knowledge transfer' and 'widening participation'. Three times a year, the Journal brings academic knowledge within a broader arena, one including practitioners and a readership that may not regularly engage in academic discussion. Ultimately, *Antennae* encourages communication and crossovers of knowledge amongst artists, scientists, scholars, activists, curators, and students. In January 2009, the establishment of *Antennae's* Senior Academic Board, Advisory Board, and Network of Global Contributors has affirmed the journal as an indispensable research tool for the subject of environmental and nature studies. Contact the Editor in Chief at: antennaproject@gmail.com Visit our website for more info and past issues: www.antennae.org.uk

Front and back cover: MAP Office, *Ghost Island*, C-Print, 160 x 120 cm, 2018 © MAP Office

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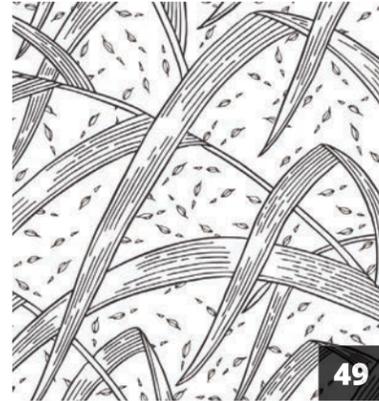


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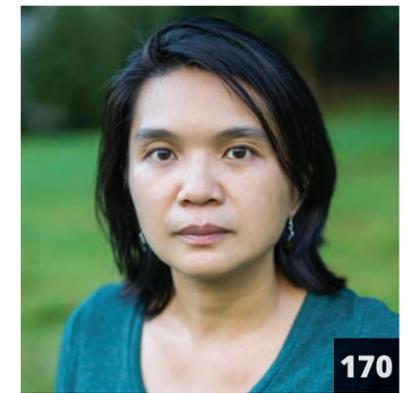


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Nora Taylor speaks with Thailand Biennale co-curator, Vipash Purichanont. Organized by the Government of Thailand's Ministry of Culture's Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Thailand's First Biennale *Edge of the Wonderland* took place from November 2, 2018 until February 28, 2019.



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text by **Yu-Mei Balasingamchow**

In 2015, a dead sperm whale was found floating in Singapore waters. Although the species has been sighted in Southeast Asia, this was the first such record for Singapore. The Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum recovered the carcass, studied the remains and prepared the skeleton for display.

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text by **Ng Huiying**
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What happens when covid-time thrusts upon us a time of both deep need, and distant caring? At a time when we are collectively going inwards and discovering what we have neglected or overlooked, the quest for insight renders us teetering precariously on boundaries of visibility.



Letters to a 19th century grain of wheat

main text by **Lucy Davis**; letters by **Marian Pastor Roces, Nguyễn Trinh Thi, Harriet Rabe von Froreich, Nils Bubandt and Anna Tsing, Faisal Husni, Marietta Radomska**

This is a selection of letters written to a wheat grain that had been found in the straw as stuffing of a 133 year dead salt water crocodile shot at the mouth of the Serangoon river in Singapore in 1888.



Right: Adele Tan
Photo of the central platform at the roof garden of the National Gallery Singapore, hosting the nursery with plants collected from reclamation sites © Adele Tan



**Sutthirat
Supaparinya**

When Need Moves the Earth, synchronized 3-channel video, 2014. © Sutthirat Supaparinya

Tracing ecological histories of the Mekong

This interview with Chiang Mai based multi-media artist Sutthirat Supaparinya discusses her practice, focusing in particular on her “electricity generation series” that includes My Grandpa’s Route Has Been Forever Blocked (2012), Ten Places in Tokyo (2013), When Need Moves the Earth (2014), Where the Wild Things Are (2016), and A Separation of Sand and Islands (2018). Foregrounding the entanglement of colonial and ecological histories of the Mekong region, Sutthirat’s audio-visual installations often connect present day environmental concerns with the historical legacies of colonial expansionism across the region. Sutthirat discusses her collaborations with local Thai environmental activist groups, geologists and the Earth Observatory of Singapore, and the Thai sound artist Arnont Nongyao.

interviewer **Philippa Lovatt**

interviewee **Sutthirat Supaparinya**

Chiang Mai based, multi-media, artist Sutthirat Supaparinya's body of work spans video, installation, sculpture, and photography. Her video work has explored the impact of infrastructural development on local ecosystems in the Mekong region as part of a wider series about energy generation that has also included works made in Japan and New Zealand. Taken as a whole, the "electricity generation series" presents a critique of the development of energy infrastructures that, while recognising the need for "cleaner" electricity in the region, draws attention to the ecological damage such structures cause and to interrelated issues of social justice. Throughout her work, Sutthirat's political and infrastructural critique is subtle rather than didactic, whether she is revealing a series of unusable bus stops in the city of Chiang Mai that were never intended for passengers, in *Unintentionally Waiting* (2017), or the use of nuclear energy for electricity generation in Tokyo after the 2011 Fukushima disaster, in the more abstract *Ten Places in Tokyo* (2016). There is instead an openness to her approach that stems from her use of observational documentary in which the camera patiently records situations as they unfold and locations reveal their stories to her. The more experimental aspects of her work also demonstrate an interest in the expressive potential of duration, abstraction, and location sound recording, and reveal an attunement to the phenomenology of place.

Sutthirat's practice involves extensive research, which she has carried out across the region in Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar, where she has investigated contemporary experiences of infrastructural development, and in particular, the construction of hydroelectricity dams. The multi-channel video and sound installations, *My Grandpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked* (2012), *When Need Moves the Earth* (2014), and *A Separation of Sand and Islands* (2018), address how dams impact upon local ways of life that are intimately connected to the environment and how the land and riverscapes affected have been dramatically and irrevocably altered by human activity. The installations foreground the entanglement of colonial and ecological histories of the Mekong region as Sutthirat connects present-day environmental concerns with the historical legacies of colonial expansionism. In particular, tracing histories of French colonial trade and exploration alongside contemporary political and economic issues, such as the impact of foreign investment on this area, Sutthirat's work suggests that when it comes to the exploitation of natural resources, history repeats itself. Just as in the colonial era, cultures, rituals, and local cosmologies are swept away alongside communities when they become part of the "submersion zone".¹ As Rob Nixon describes, "When a megadam obliterates a flood plain whose ebb and flow has shaped the agricultural, fishing, fruit and nut harvesting—and hence nutritional-rhythms of a community, it also drowns the past: the submergence zone swallows place-based connections to the dead, the dead as living presences who move among past, present, and future, animating time with connective meaning".²

My Grandpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked focusses on Thailand's Ping River, a historical trade route that was blocked by the Bhumibol Dam in 1958. The Ping River has a long Siamese-European history as a route for exporting teakwood but also plays an important part of Sutthirat's family history because her grandparents lived and worked along the Ping River in Lamphun Province until their village was relocated after the construction of the dam. On her mother's side, Sutthirat's grandfather was a manager for a timber transportation company that used the Ping River to move teakwood from Chiang Mai to Bangkok, from where it was then exported to Europe. Sutthirat has described how he would often be away working for long stretches of time and that his job was both physically demanding and dangerous as he had to handle elephants and heavy logs, while watching for bandits and safely navigating the boat between crags and cliffs.³

In making the work, Sutthirat attempted to follow the same route as her grandfather but at one part it became impossible as the route now led to the Bhumibol Dam where the Ping River had swelled to become a lake, submerging villages and teak forests in the process. One video channel features footage tak-



**Sutthirat
Supaparinya**

Top: *My Grandpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked*, synchronized 2-channel video, 2012

Below: installation shot ©Sutthirat Supaparinya

en from onboard the ferry on the lake while the other shows the thirteen weirs and floodgates, and the enormous concrete dam, as the film follows the route from the first weir near the origin of the river at Mae Faek Weir, Mae Tang, Chiang Mai to the end of the journey at the dam. Anxieties over the threat of environmental catastrophe are expressed through casual conversation between the ferryman and a passenger when they briefly discuss their fears over what would happen if the dam were to collapse (as recently happened with the Saddle Dam D disaster in Laos in 2018).⁴

When Need Moves the Earth (2014) addresses resource extractivism and large-scale electricity production at Thailand's Srinakarin Dam site and the (now decommissioned) Mae Moh Lignite coal mine.⁵ In this case, the dam is located in an area of active seismic faults, which increases the risk of earthquakes in the area. *When Need Moves the Earth* juxtaposes contemporary footage of the dam and the mine with black and white and sepia toned archival photographs alongside aerial shots taken from so far above the ground that they resemble abstract paintings. These images unfold against a soundscape of electromagnetic waves and crackles of varying frequencies and intensities that were 'recorded on location by Sutthirat alongside audio she recorded with Thai sound artist Arnont Nongyao in Chiang Mai City. For this purpose, Arnont (who was also responsible for the sound design of the final video) built microphones. Heightened in the mix, this sonic "interference" contrasts with the other ambient sounds of the location, mostly bird calls and the rushing sounds of the water's movement as if to reveal the hidden energies of that environment—to make audible the stress placed on these fault lines and the wider ecology by human activity.

A Separation of Sand and Islands (2018) was filmed in Chiang Rai Province in Thailand, Si Phan Don, Champasak Province in Laos, and Sopheakmit Waterfall in Preah Vihear Province, Cambodia. The project was inspired by environmental activists from Chiang Rai who won their protest against China's economic expansion through a proposed trade route on the Mekong between northern Thailand and Laos in December 2017.⁶ Filmed along the border between Laos and Thailand, the work connects the colonial and ecological histories of the region with the contemporary experience of China's economic dominance through its investment in the construction of hydroelectricity dams and its attempts to cause further destruction to the land and riverscape in the lower Mekong in order to facilitate the transportation of goods.⁷ Like *My Grandpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked*, *A Separation of Sand and Islands* traces an earlier journey as it follows the route of 19th-century French explorers using Louis Delaporte and Francis Garnier's *A Pictorial Journey on the Mekong: Cambodia, Laos and Yunnan (1866-1868)* as a guide. Part of "The Mekong Exploration Commission report", this text was put together by French officers on behalf of the French colonial authorities and provided documentation for an expedition across the Mekong region. Fore-shadowing the situation with China that led to the protests, the purpose of the French expedition was primarily to find ways of connecting the Mekong delta with the port of Saigon in order to transport goods from northern Siam and southern China.⁸

Sutthirat's river installations remind us that environmental crises are often shaped by economic and political interests that emanate from centres of power operating at a significant distance from the site of harm. This is most apparent when the infrastructural developments have been funded and organised by external powers, such as with the many dam projects in the Mekong region that have been funded by foreign investment. These projects have often involved poorer countries such as Laos (with aspirations to become "the battery of Southeast Asia") taking on huge debt to more economically powerful countries like China.⁹ The implicit critique at the heart of Sutthirat's energy series thus suggests that there must always be some form of negotiation between the social benefits that this kind of capital investment can bring to communities and an awareness of the potential long term damage that it will do, and has already

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Sutthirat's river installations remind us that environmental crises are often shaped by economic and political interests that emanate from centres of power operating at a significant distance from the site of harm.

done, to the human and non-human lives that depend on these fragile ecosystems for survival.

Through their open ended structure and use of durational temporality, the videos' aesthetics evoke the phenomenology of the river and thus a temporality and spatiality of geological scale. However, by tracing how the political and economic systems of the present map onto those of the colonial era across these land and riverscapes, Sutthirat's installations also attend to what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing et al refer to as "the structural synchronicities between ecology, capital, and the human and more-than-human histories through which uneven landscapes are made and remade".¹⁰ In Sutthirat's installations, there are no voiceovers or talking heads to explain the significance of her footage. Instead, the work invites audiences to make connections between the contemporary and the historical experience of the changing environment through associations that emerge from the placement of sounds and images recorded in different locations and times that form layers in the work, like strata in the sedimentary rocks that rest on the riverbeds, far below the water's surface.

I met with Sutthirat in Chiang Mai in February 2020, when we talked about her approach to her work as an artist and an organiser with Chiang Mai Art Conversation.¹¹ We continued that conversation a couple of months later via email exchange. I'd like to thank Sutthirat for her generosity in sharing her work and ideas with me.

Philippa Lovatt: So many of your works are about place. Could we start by talking about where you're from?

Sutthirat Supaparinya: I was born in Chiang Mai, but actually I grew up in another city about 30km away called Lamphun city, which is much older than Chiang Mai. The village I'm from, the people from there built up Chiang Mai, so that's why it's a lot older. I grew up in a very small village which had a beautiful landscape near the [Ping and Kwong] river... It was still in the city, but it was really easy to enjoy the environment because everything was so close. So as a young kid, I enjoyed the environment around me—in my free time, just playing outside, running around outdoors. That kind of memory has stayed with me and I can see the landscape has changed very quickly since my childhood until recent times. It's very quick, which is quite different from my grandparents' and my parents' time which is quite slow—how things changed was very slow... When I traveled around the city in Chiang Mai with my mother, she would explain to me about the old days when she was young or even the time when my grandparents lived around Chiang Mai. But I cannot see that anymore—what she described is not what I can see. In one of my early documentaries [*Time-Lapse City*, 2006], I interviewed old people about what they remembered about the changes they have noticed in their lifetime...That documentary gave me a lot of information and inspiration...and I'm still very interested in the issues related to that project because of the memories and knowledge that the old people I met gave to me.

PL: Your artistic practice is often described in writing about your work as "questioning and interpreting public information" in a way that draws attention to the impact of human activities on other humans and the landscape. How did you first become interested in the connection between human activity and the environment?

SS: When I was researching the Ping River, which was a main transportation route from the north to Bangkok in my grandparents' time, I found a large hydroelectricity dam sitting in the middle of the route. Once I visited the dam site,



Sutthirat Supaparinya

A Separation of Sand and Islands, synchronized 2-channel video, 2018

©Sutthirat Supaparinya

it made me recall that my grandpa's family relocated their village because of being flooded by the dam, to a new home prepared by government.

PL: When we met, you also talked about the Mekong River and the need for those countries connected to it to address the many problems that this fragile ecosystem faces as a result of economic decision-making by governments and investors. How would you describe the role of artists and filmmakers in highlighting these issues?

SS: They can help to document landscapes that may not restore, put across various information about the area, voice what is missing, and put across both the small and big picture of the impact. I think that artists hope that their role can be to drive the changing behaviour of humans.

PL: Your research process involves tracing histories of colonialism and its impact on the ecologies of the Mekong alongside contemporary political and economic concerns. Your "electricity generation" series (which includes the two-channel video installation filmed in New Zealand, *Where the Wild Things Are*, 2016) is very interesting to me in the ways that it attempts to connect these histories with contemporary geopolitics. Your video work *When Need Moves The Earth* (2014) for example, depicts two sites used to generate electricity in northern Thailand: an active coal mine and dam. I read that this was a collaboration with the Earth Observatory of Singapore and you worked closely with a geologist, Dr. Sarawute Chantraprasert (Lecturer at Department of Geological Sciences, Chiang Mai University) for the project. How did that project come about?

SS: After making *My Grandpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked*, I became interested in exploring how the consumption of electricity was part of the problem (when I made *Ten Places in Tokyo*, 2013) and at the same time, with *When Need Moves The Earth*, I wanted to show how the electricity was produced. I chose 2 large-scale electricity generations that sat on active fault lines. It is sensitive to the earth and could potentially create a man-made earthquake. This work allowed the audience to see the source of the problem, which was far away from the city. Because of the distance most of people in the city didn't know about the impact on the rural environment.

PL: What did the research process involve and what did you learn through the project, not only about the specific environmental issues but also about what is important to you as an artist?

And what do you think you and the geologist learnt from each other?

SS: I learned about the importance of the work of geologists and geography when humans search for a site to build energy infrastructures or mines, particularly the need to consider if there is an active fault line in the area. I also learned from the geologist how to observe the earth and use "google earth" as a research tool. They explained to me the sign of the active-fault line topography and how they use GPS and satellite to monitor the movements of the earth. It can also forecast the coming of an earthquake. What they learned from me perhaps how I presented my idea in the form of the visual arts.

PL: What were the parallels and differences you noticed between researching and filming on location in Asia and New Zealand for this series?

SS: Before I produced the work in New Zealand, I paused my project related to energy for some years. I had a big question about whether renewable energy is a better solution or another evil. With the nature of the strong winds in Wellington, it makes sense to harness that wind power to transform it into energy. The wind energy turbines are everywhere, small to large. I felt less negative towards electricity generation there. Also, because New Zealand is so careful about the disturbance of their activity to the environment. However, I still question *Where the Wild Things Are* in my mind. I'm still not sure if the renewable/green energy is right for us to feel less guilty and use this as an excuse to consume energy more freely than ever.

PL: *My Grandpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked* (2012) records the infrastructural change in Thailand's Ping River, a historical trade route blocked by the Bhumibol Dam in 1958. This work was part of the "Riverscapes in Flux" – an international eco-cultural art project on the river landscapes of Southeast Asia that was co-ordinated by the Goethe-Institut that featured curators and artists from Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia, and the Philippines working across installations, photo series, video and sound installations.¹² The title of the work suggests that your own family history was really important for this project. Why was this important to you?

SS: Because the inspiration for the project came from my curiosity about my grandpa's life who traded by transporting goods via the Ping River.

PL: Can you explain how you went about researching this project?

SS: First, I went to the dam site because I'd heard about it but had never seen it. There I took an overnight ferry from the dam site to the lake area which is near to where my grandpa's relative lives. On the ferry trip, I was able to observe how the river had been transformed into an enormous lake and see what remained

of the old life below the water. I wanted to see the other structures along the river too and so afterwards, I visited all the dikes, water gates, and anything that blocked the waterway.

PL: With the “Riverscapes in Flux” project, what kinds of connections did you see in the other works from different Southeast Asian countries?

SS: In the other works in the project, I saw the decrease in fish populations in rivers by an artist who collected traditional fish traps that have now become rare items (*Jedsada Tangtrakulwong, Spirits under the Chi River, 2013*). I saw the production of fish as an industry (*Thảo Nguyễn Phan, Mekong Mechanical, 2012*), while in some countries the quality of water was not good enough for living things. When authorities say that a dam won't affect the number of fish, it's not reliable.

PL: Do you think that it's important that environmental histories and issues should be considered from a regional perspective?

SS: Yes, I think so. Those who live in the area should be able to be included and have some say in the planning of infrastructural projects that will affect their environment before and during the implementation of them.

PL: Your work as both an artist and an organiser (with Chiang Mai Art Conversation) has involved collaboration with local environmental activist groups and communities, and traces ecological histories that go above and beyond national borders. An example of this is *A Separation of Sand and Islands*, which was filmed in Chiang Rai Province in Thailand, Si Phan Don, Champasak Province in Laos and Sopheakmit Waterfall in Preah Vihear Province, Cambodia. I read that this project was inspired by Thai environmental activists from Chiang Rai who won their protest against China's economic expansion through a trade route on the Mekong between northern Thailand and Laos in December 2017. The installation was first shown at the 12th Gwangju Biennale in South Korea in 2018 as part of the exhibition *Facing Phantom Borders* and it explores the local ecosystems of the river in close detail, paying attention to rocks, islets, and the rare birds that inhabit them. At the other end of the scale, the work also documents the international trade routes that cut through it. Where did the idea come from for that project and in what ways is it a continuation of previous themes in your work?

SS: The idea came from my trip to Chiang Rai (Northern Thailand) to visit sites and meet with activists who stopped the Chinese attempt to demolish the rocks and islets on the river to make way for larger ships to pass through. There I also got introduced to a book called *A Pictorial Journey on the Mekong: Cambodia, Laos, and Yunnan* by Louis Delaporte and Francis Garnier, which led me to visit the other sites of the rocky area on the Mekong River in southern Laos. *A Separation of Sand and Island* is different from *My Grandpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked* in the way that it documents the riverscape in Chiang Rai before the big changes happen. In this work, I also compared the site with other islets in the southern parts of the river where French Indochina had built infrastructure about 100 years ago on the islands and river in order to travel to the north. Again, there was another hydroelectricity dam under construction that local people believed would change their life and the precious nature there forever. So, I went there to cover what was it was like before the operation of the dam and how the landscape had already been transformed in the colonial era to allow the French to travel through these 4,000 islands.

PL: How did you come to be involved in the *Facing Phantom Borders* exhibition?

SS: I was invited by the curator, Gridthiya Gaweewong, to join the show, since



Sutthirat Supaparinya

A Separation of Sand and Islands, synchronized 2-channel video, 2018 ©Sutthirat Supaparinya

she had followed this project and played a major role in helping me to complete it. Gridthiya's home town is at the Khong River, where I shot the video.

PL: How did you first learn of the campaign group's environmental activism and in what ways do you think that this connection with them influenced your approach (for this work and for thinking about future projects)?

SS: I learned about the issue from the news and I had followed the story for a few years before I told myself that I can't wait to produce some work about it. The timing was important because, I felt that if I didn't start when I did, I wouldn't be able to be a witness and document the area before the big changes came. So, I spent my own budget on research and shooting first and looked for financial support to complete the post-production later.

PL: This particular installation foregrounds transnational connections between Laos, Thailand, and northern Cambodia due to their proximity to the river. I read about how the work revisits the colonial history of the Mekong when the French colonial powers surveyed and constructed transport infrastructures along the river and the Khone islands. In her curatorial introduction to *A Separation of Sand and Island*, Gridthiya describes how your work connects the colonial past with China's shipping expansion plans, which involve destroying large sections of islets and reefs between Northern Thailand and Laos in order to “invent a new Silk Route to Europe through Singapore.” How do you see the current economic and political situation impacting the ecosystems of the Mekong and the communities that live there?



Sutthirat Supaparinya

A Separation of Sand and Islands, synchronized 2-channel video, 2018 ©Sutthirat Supaparinya

SS: In the Khone islands, in southern Laos, the hydroelectricity dam has changed people's life hugely. Since the people here have depended on traditional fishing for their food and livelihoods, the dam project has decreased the number of fishes because it has stopped the fish from being able to travel to Tonle Sap in Cambodia to lay their eggs. The traditional wood structure fish traps that used to be built on the waterfalls were not allowed to be built after the dam started to operate. Also, the electricity produced by the dam was used to create a new Chinese zone in the area. While along the border of northern Thailand and Laos, the river level goes up and down and is controlled by the Chinese dam from both the upper and lower stream. This effects the people, animals, and plants on the river as its flow is no longer seasonal. Last year, after one new dam operated, the colour of the river changed from brown to blue because the dam stopped the sediment, which comes from the plants and other living things that are part of that ecosystem. The area along the river has been developed hugely for international trading.

PL: What recurring themes or shared concerns do you notice in Southeast Asian artists' responses, or artists' responses from the global south more broadly, to the environmental crisis?

SS: That nature has been interrupted and changed by large-scale development projects. That the lives of local people and communities have been affected badly because of their lack of rights. Artists are aware of the change of the environment and the traditional customs that are connected to it—the attempts to conserve the environment and people's well-being presents a big contrast to

the emphasis on new development, which puts income first.

PL: How would you describe the relationship between "official" sources of information and local communities with regards to environmental awareness and activism in Thailand?

SS: Official sources of information are somehow carefully controlled when it can damage the reputation of the government, an organisation or a person. While local communities who are directly affected by the environment reflect the reality of what they experience in daily life.

PL: *A Separation of Sand and Island* follows the French explorers of the 19th century. Can you tell me about your interest in colonial histories of the region? When did you first start to research these histories?

SS: Niwat Roykaew, a leader of the community who fought to conserve the river introduced me to the book [*A Pictorial Journey on the Mekong: Cambodia, Laos, and Yunnan*] and it led me to extend my travel to southern Laos. I became interested in the history of the region after I returned to Thailand from studying in Germany where I felt I didn't know my roots enough. At the time in 2002, after all the conflict between us, people in the region didn't trust or know each other well. It was an eye-opening time for me to explore the area. Their scenes were exotic and exciting for me, but our roots are so close and it's easy to understand each other even though we speak different languages. It was a big contrast to me living in Europe. The region in my view is one unseparated area of shared history, culture, and environment. The border conflicts interest me since these were important in the eyes of the rulers, and then the commoners. The colonisers were only interested in the landscape for how they could gain the most profit through making use of strategic locations and through the trade of products.

PL: In a lot of environmentally engaged artists' moving image from Southeast Asia, the entanglement of colonial and ecological histories is often a central theme. In what ways do you see colonial and ecological histories of the Mekong being connected?

SS: The colonial became a role model for local government or industry to follow the same strategy to gain profit of the nature and people.

PL: When I asked you about *A Separation of Sand and Island* and *My Grandpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked* before you mentioned that you wanted to capture the movement of the river because you could see that with the impact of dams, these natural rhythms will likely soon disappear. Do you see your video works as being connected in a way that documents a process of change over a longer period of time, particularly with regards to environmental change, than would be possible in a single artwork?

SS: Yes, the installation form I find works well to allow the audience to be immersed and surrounded with different perspectives of the place that I want them to experience. With that form, I feel that the wider space of the installation allows audiences to freely move around their body and eyes.

PL: Can you talk about the medium specificity of the works—your practice involves lots of different media, but you work in video a lot. What do you like about working with video?



Sutthirat Supparinya

Ten Places in Tokyo, synchronized 10-channel video, 2016 © Sutthirat Supparinya

SS: I like the role of the video that can document the situation. It also produces fewer objects or trash. It's easy to carry to places in terms of production and exhibition. The post-production process requires less space, which helps me to stay still and concentrate.

PL: Questions of space (both urban and rural) are obviously very important for your work, but how important are questions of time and duration?

SS: Sound, movement, time and duration are important in terms of capturing the situation with a sense of being there to observe something. Sound in some of my works conveys the existing sound on the site. However, some works convey the situation/ perception in my mind in terms of how I comprehend the subjects. I often use sound that we don't hear but that exists at the site.

PL: That's very interesting and seems to connect with how you tend to exhibit your work, as installations rather than single-screen films shown in cinema spaces. I'm curious about your influences — are there experimental or artist filmmakers whose work has inspired you or that you particularly like?

SS: I'm from an art background and so I feel that installation can express my ideas in a fuller form. While working with video, the influence of video art, experimental film, and documentary film has also been important—for example, artists and filmmakers who use political poetic action such as Francis Alÿs or experimental techniques to create their work and installations such as Olafur Eliasson, Carsten Nicolai, Diana Thater, and Ryoji Ikeda. I have also been influenced by filmmakers who use non-narrative, long shots or mysterious stories such as David Lynch, Abbas Kiarostami, Rûken Tekeş, and other filmmakers—who work often without narrative—just on-site shooting and field recording. In contradiction, some of my early documentaries used a lot of talking-head interviews such as in *Omkoï District*, *Pa-an Village* (2004), *Taste of Noodles* (2006), and *Time-lapse City* (2006), which were influenced by my time working with a research unit (Unit of Social and Environmental Research) and the Mekong region journalist workshop (*Imaging Our Mekong*, 2005).

PL: Another of your installations that I'm really fascinated by that links with the theme of energy generation is *Ten Places in Tokyo* (2013) in which you show video footage of ten locations in Tokyo that are reported to use the highest amount of electricity in the city, which is still sourced from nuclear energy even after the 2011 Fukushima disaster.

I saw a talk you gave at Sa Sa Arts Projects in Phnom Penh where you explained how the use of black and white video was to mimic the effect of nuclear explosions, which destroy darker material more rapidly than light, and how you used different colour charts that were connected with the destruction caused by the nuclear bomb. Can you explain in more detail about your uses of black and white/colour for this installation?

SS: I chose to use black and white images in this work following my research at The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum in Japan. There I saw that most of the evidence of the atomic bomb was in black and white such as kimonos, black ink texts on white papers, and images of burned shadow. Heat rays of approximately 5,000°-Celsius produced by the atomic blast burned away dark or black coloured parts of objects because they absorbed more heat. This effect shocked me and inspired me to do more research about nuclear history. In my work, I used the effect of the atomic bomb in destroying the darkest part of the images first and continue to destroy the dark colour of the images until they form a loose quality of the black, grey, and white. The bright white across the ten screens at once also depicts the bright flash of the atomic bomb against the sky when it exploded.



Sutthirat Supaparinya

Ten Places in Tokyo, synchronized 10-channel video, 2018 ©Sutthirat Supaparinya

PL: This project seems to have a particularly strong connection with the new work you mentioned last time about the history of World War II in Southeast Asia. You said that with this work, you wanted to draw attention to the enormous impact that the war had on the environment across the region. In writing about the contemporary ecological crisis, researchers have described World War II (the dropping of the atomic bomb) and the Cold War (especially the dropping of Agent Orange over Vietnam and parts of its neighboring countries in Southeast Asia) as the beginning of the “great acceleration” or the Anthropocene (which has been defined as “the current geological age, viewed as the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment”). The question of survivability seems really relevant to your work. I find it very interesting that you don't necessarily take an overly critical position on power generation for example, as you acknowledge that we are all consumers and as such must take a share of responsibility. I'm very curious about how this theme seems to run through a lot of your work. Do you see your videos as responding to particular environmental/historical moments that ask us to pay attention to these kinds of questions of vulnerability and survivability in the Anthropocene (or something like that!)?

SS: My work is more about how to raise awareness that we went too far and too fast in creating the Anthropocene. We consume too fast and somehow unnecessarily. We can slow down and create what is basically enough for us, but not for a large-scale industry or far away future—since the speed of consumption will hurt the environment, other living things, and ourselves—it's too fast for us to be able to rehabilitate in a short period

of time. We have rapidly spent what nature took so much time to produce.

PL: When we talked last time you also mentioned that you were inspired by the work of a Japanese photographer who moved from Japan to Hawaii, to Bangkok and how his movement across those cities relates to his practice. Can you tell me more about who that was and what interested you about his work?

SS: His name is Morinosuke Tanaka. He helped the Japanese Army to survey the landscape and routes from Chiang Mai to Myanmar, and I'm interested in what kind of images he took for his research and life in the transition time.¹³

PL: How did you first become interested in this topic?

SS: I became interested when I interviewed five elderly people who lived in Chiang Mai. They lived in the time Mr. Tanaka was alive and they shared some of his experiences. Mr. Tanaka took some important images of the time.

PL: You mentioned in our last conversation that you interviewed a lot of elderly people in Chiang Mai about their memories of that time (during and after World War II), how important are personal stories and memories for your work in terms of how you depict environmental change?

SS: Firstly, it's important to know what my grandparents and their generation experienced in the layers of the same landscape I live in now. I see and live differently in this landscape with respect and appreciation of places, buildings and an awareness of time and uncertainty. In another layer of the project, I feel that we must know our history and roots from our family or community's narrative, which seems quite rare sometimes. We should know also the dark side of the history of the city we live in.

PL: What other archival material have you found and how do you approach this material?

SS: I found more online stories from the Chiang Mai residents, and compared stories of the war from the other countries, and collected some occupation banknotes, photographs, and war amulets. The more I found, the more I could piece together the jigsaw and think about which items to use for future projects.

PL: What have you learned through your research about the ways in which the war impacted the landscape in Chiang Mai and across the region?

SS: Some areas became a sensitive location that was occupied by Thai military. Some routes and bridges continued to be developed for public. Some villages had changed for the use of the war and the villagers relocated themselves elsewhere. Many people who lived in the city, escaped to stay in the suburbs and some settle there. People were moving around a lot. During the war, it was the time of discovering new possibilities of places. After the war, some foreigners returned for some reason (trading, living, or to trace the history) which created the new meanings of these places and routes.

Endnotes

- [1] See Andrew Alan Johnson, *Mekong Dreaming: Life and Death Along a Changing River* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020).
- [2] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 162.
- [3] Sutthirat Supaparinya, 'My Grandpa's Route has Been Forever Blocked,' RiverScapes Blog, Goethe Institut, March 17, 2013. <https://blog.goethe.de/riverscapes/archives/34-My-Grandpas-Route-Has-Been-Forever-Blocked-Sutthirat-Supaparinya.html>. See also 'Artist talk by Sutthirat Som Supaparinya,' Sa Sa Art Projects, Phnom Penh, March 30, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/162199477196136/videos/1669374069811995>
- [4] See 'Laos dam collapse: Many feared dead as floods hit villages,' BBC News, 24 July, 2018. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-44935495>
- [5] *When Need Moves the Earth* was shown as part of the exhibition: "Unearthed: The EOS (Earth Observatory of Singapore) Art Projects (2010-2013)" at the Singapore Art Museum in 2014. See https://earthobservatory.sg/news/exhibition-eos-art-projects-singapore-art-museum#_U_SXoUgRbPk. The title of Sutthirat's work was inspired by Francis Alys's *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002).
- [6] See Tom Fawthrop, 'Thai resistance to China's downstream ambitions,' Asia Times, May 16, 2017, <https://asiatimes.com/2017/05/thai-resistance-chinas-downstream-ambitions/>
- [7] I am reminded here of the Vietnamese artist Phan Thao Nguyen's repurposing of Alexandre de Rhodes' 1653 text *Voyages et Missions du Père Alexandre de Rhodes en La Chinese et Autres Royaumes de l'Orient, avec son Retour en Europe par la Perse et l'Arménie* with regard to the layering of the contemporary images over a historical text (implied but not seen in Sutthirat's work). See Nora A. Taylor, "(Tran)scribed History: Thao Nguyen Phan's Palimpsest Visions of Colonialism and Conversion," *Afterall*, No. 47 (Spring/Summer 2019), <https://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.47/tran-scribed-history-phan-thao-nguyen-s-palimpsest-visions-of-colonialism-and-conversion>
- [8] See John Keay, 'The Mekong Exploration Commission, 1866-68: Anglo-French Rivalry in South East Asia,' *Asian Affairs* 36, no. 3: 289-312. See also François Molle, Tira Foran and Mira Käkönen (eds.), *Contested Waterscapes in the Mekong Region: Hydropower, Livelihoods and Governance* (London and Sterling, VA: Earthscan, 2009).
- [9] Carl Middleton, 'Waters, rivers and dams' in Philip Hirsch (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of the Environment in South-east Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 212. See also Marwaan Macan-Markar, 'Chinese dams ramp up Lao external debt,' *Nikkei Asian Review*, November 2, 2018, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Chinese-dams-ramp-up-Lao-external-debt>
- [10] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Andrew S. Mathews, and Nils Bubandt, 'Patchy Anthropocene: Landscape Structure, Multispecies History, and the Retooling of Anthropology,' *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 60, Supplement 20, August 2019, p. S186.
- [11] See my interview with Sutthirat Supaparinya, Chiang Mai, 27 February, 2020: <https://www.aseac-interviews.org/sutthirat-supaparinya>
- [12] The exhibition featured artworks from 17 artists based in Southeast Asia including Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia working in new media, photography, sound, and video installation. It was an eco-art project initiated by the Goethe Institut in Hanoi in 2012 about the ecological and cultural impact of environmental changes across the region. See "Riverscapes in Flux: Ecological and Cultural Change of Major River Landscapes in Southeast Asia," July 29, 2013, <https://blog.goethe.de/riverscapes/archives/71-Riverscapes-IN-FLUX-Ecological-and-Cultural-Change-of-Major-River-Landscapes-in-Southeast-Asia.html>. See also Nora A. Taylor, "(Tran)scribed History: Thao Nguyen Phan's Palimpsest Visions of Colonialism and Conversion," *Afterall*, No. 47 (Spring/Summer 2019), <https://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.47/tran-scribed-history-phan-thao-nguyen-s-palimpsest-visions-of-colonialism-and-conversion>
- [13] See Hak Hakanson, 'Japan in Northeast Thailand during World War II: Morinosuke Tanaka,' https://www.lanna-w2.com/pages/z02200-CNX_city/y02235%20Tanaka/y02235-001_page_01.html

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