

Som Supaparinya's first institutional solo exhibition in Germany focuses on rivers as politically, socially, and ecologically charged landscape elements. Her works analyze how economic expansion, state interventions, and global infrastructure projects not only alter the natural course of rivers but also profoundly impact the lives of the local population.

The two-channel video installation in the first exhibition room, *My Grandpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked* (2012), follows the course of the Ping River, a historic trade route for dried fish and teakwood between Chiang Mai and Europe, while also illuminating its special role in Supaparinya's family history. The construction of the Bhumibol Dam in 1958 drastically altered the natural course of the river. Her family's home at the time was flooded, the livelihoods of many residents were destroyed, and a wave of relocations and irreparable environmental damage was triggered.

The central work of the exhibition is the video piece *The Rivers They Don't See* (2024), which examines the complex interconnections between water use, political control, and environmental consequences. The work follows the course of the Salween River along the Thai-Myanmar border, via the Ping and Chao Phraya rivers, ultimately flowing into the Gulf of Thailand. Supaparinya traces the barely visible marks of large-scale development and diversion projects, such as the planned initiative to divert water from the Yuam, Ngao, and Moei river systems to the Bhumibol Dam. Using the example of the Ping River, whose course has been increasingly altered by economic interests, state interventions, and international infrastructure projects, Supaparinya makes visible how environmental destruction, state control, and human resilience are interwoven. She shows how water management and energy policy, often legitimized by economic growth targets, lead to massive interventions in the lives of those who live along the rivers, particularly farming communities, fisherfolk, and migrant workers.

The camera follows the routes of the water, documenting its absence as well: dried-up riverbeds, destroyed ecosystems, abandoned villages. The video work combines these images with the voices of those affected, such as refugees from Myanmar seeking work in fish processing in Thailand. In this way, *The Rivers They Don't See* also becomes a portrait of migration and silent loss—of home, history, and cultural heritage. The work thus points to the multifaceted impacts of a so-called “green” energy policy that reduces rivers to reservoirs and transforms landscapes into economic infrastructures. Supaparinya demonstrates that this transformation is not only a question of environmental engineering but also of social justice, historical responsibility, and political power.

Above the former swimming pool of the Goseriedbad, whose architecture was once designed for water use, *The Rivers They Don't See* is presented in cinema format. In all the exhibition spaces, the continuous sound of flowing water and its environment in Thailand and Myanmar can be heard—an acoustic thread that atmospherically connects the works. Behind the central video work, a corridor extends, accompanied by nocturnal recordings the artist made during her research trip along the waterways. This intervention was developed by the artist specifically for the unique architecture of the Kestner Gesellschaft: Mirrors mounted on wood, reminiscent of framed family portraits, reflect light and appear as ghostly light sources in the space, like fragile echoes oscillating between visibility and absence. The corridor follows the route Supaparinya herself traveled, concentrating personal photographs, geographic traces, and cultural observations along this line. A walkable narrative emerges—an “archive of atmospheres” in which individual memory, political movement, and collective resistance are inextricably interwoven.

Thirteen years lie between the video in the first exhibition room and *The Unsung Lyric of Ping* (2025), and it is strikingly apparent how history repeats itself. In this work, Supaparinya, in collaboration with the musician Helen Ganya, documents the consequences of climate change and human interventions in nature. The video shows scenes after Typhoon Yagi, which caused severe flooding in Chiang Mai in 2024. Supaparinya stages the soundscape of bird calls, insects, and flowing water as a counterpoint to images of destroyed landscapes. This creates a multifaceted portrait of an ecosystem in transition, and of an urban society trying to cope with the loss of its livelihoods.

Co-Curator Natalie Keppler got to know Som Supaparinya in 2021 during her one-year fellowship with the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program, recognizing her as a precise and attentive observer. Particularly interested in the history of a specific place and in the complex relationships that connect—or separate—people and spaces, Supaparinya directs her gaze to the unseen and unheard. She follows traces, listens, waits. As she herself says, until she can “feel that the atmosphere, the surroundings, or the stories are looking back” at her.

Her artistic practice is characterized by patience, openness, and resonance. Often, she begins with a filmed archival scene where a thread suggests itself, which she follows over years, even without a fixed research question or predetermined direction. Along this open research path, she encounters people, listens to them, and thus allows new perspectives on historical as well as current conditions. From this working method, a recycling process emerges that resembles the water cycle: Not only images, but also

themes, perspectives, and collaborations return, transform, and flow onward. In times of media acceleration, environmental disasters, and political instability, Supaparinya's work takes on particular relevance. Her works show not only the potential of art as a documentary practice but also as a form of lived resilience, especially in societies where authoritarian tendencies are strengthening. Persistence and sustainability are therefore not only the content but also the method of her artistic work and, as such, also connect the three works presented at the Kestner Gesellschaft.

In spring 2026, Supaparinya and Keppler will continue their collaboration at the daadgalerie in Berlin, with an exhibition that once again focuses on the entanglement of resistance, collective memory, and systematic forgetting. The Kestner Gesellschaft will participate in the project with a film screening in Hanover.

*The Rivers They Don't See* was first shown at the 2024 Bangkok Biennial in the National Gallery in Bangkok. An accompanying publication was produced, from which excerpts of the text “Collapsing Clouds Form Stars: a continuum of resistance in the video works of Som Supaparinya” (2025) by Philippa Lovatt appear in this exhibition.

Text Natalie Keppler & Alexander Wilmschen

## Biography

Som Supaparinya (born 1973 in Chiang Mai, Thailand) is a multidisciplinary artist who works with installations, sculpture, photography, and film. Central to her artistic practice is an engagement with the social history of Thailand and Southeast Asia, as well as a critical reflection on contemporary infrastructure projects and their environmental and social impacts.

Supaparinya studied fine arts at Chiang Mai University and media art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Leipzig. She is a co-founder of the initiative *Chiang Mai Art Conversation* (CAC) and directed the *Asian Culture Station* (ACS), a platform for cultural exchange in the region, from 2016 to 2019. She lives and works in Chiang Mai.

She has received numerous prizes for her artworks, including the *Han Nefkens Foundation Southeast Asian Video Art Production Grant* (2024), a grant from the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program (2021–22), a fellowship at the Japan Foundation Asia Center (2019), and a residency at ISCP in New York. She was also nominated for the *Prudential Eye Awards* in Singapore (2016).

Her works have been shown internationally in solo and group exhibitions as well as biennales and film festivals, including *The Rivers They Don't See* (2025, Kestner Gesellschaft, Hanover), the Bangkok Art Biennale (2024), documenta 15 (2022), Thailand Biennale (2021), APT10 (QAGOMA, Brisbane, 2021), the 12th Gwangju Biennale (2018), and the 13th Cairo Biennale (2019). Her solo exhibitions include *Melted Stars* (2025, daadgalerie, Berlin), *Sweet Corn, Bitter Air* (2023, Gallery Seescapes, Chiang Mai), and *Tipping Point* (2021, Memphis, Linz).

Supaparinya's works are part of international collections, including the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA), the Museion in Bolzano, and the KADIST Collection.

# Som Supaparinya

## The Rivers They Don't See

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