

Excerpts from *Collapsing Clouds Form Stars: A Continuum of Resistance in the Video Works of Som Supaparinya*

by Philippa Lovatt

In reading Som's aesthetic practice as a form of "critical cartography" or "counter-cartography"¹ that is resistant to the silencing effects of state censorship, one can trace a larger set of networked infrastructural and architectural relations in her work between rivers and dams, and the roads, railways, and monuments. These different forms of infrastructure become recurrent motifs in Som's work that form part of a contested mediatic environment that links Thailand's military and Cold War histories to more recent political and environmental activism through the layering of sound and image.

Som's aesthetic practice involves experimenting with different ways of understanding and perceiving environmental histories, presents, and futures, and she often works in collaboration with other researchers, environmental educators and activists (such as the Mekong School) as well as sound artists, Arnont Nongyao, Koichi Shimizu, and Helen Ganya.

In making *My Grandpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked*, Som had initially hoped to follow the same route as her grandfather, but this would no longer be possible because the journey that he would have taken now led to the Bhumibol Dam, where the river had swelled and become a lake. Instead, she documents how flooding from the dam's construction submerged villages and teak forests that could never be recovered. One video channel shows footage of the lake filmed during an overnight trip on a cruise ship, while the other shows the thirteen weirs and floodgates, and the enormous concrete dam, as the video follows the route from the first weir near the origin of the river at Mae Faek Weir, Mae Tang, Chiang Mai to the site of the dam where the journey ends. Concerns about the threat of environmental catastrophe are expressed through casual conversation between the navigator and a passenger when they talk about the large-scale flooding in central Thailand in 2011 and 2012 caused by mismanagement of the Bhumibol Dam and 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).

Filmed along the border between Thailand and Myanmar, *The Rivers They Don't See* follows the route of the Salween River towards the Ping River and the Chao Phraya River, opening out to the Gulf of Thailand. The work calls into question who has the right to make decisions about the exploitation of the natural world. Rather than looking to the past and the history of the river, the video is concerned with the government's future plans to redirect water from the Yuam, Ngao, Moei, Salween River basins to the Ping River, and the area of Bhumibol Dam in the Mae Ping River basin. Som's camera calls attention not only to the most visible indicators of ecological damage and the loss of cultural heritage formed over many generations in these locations, but also to the aspects of this story that are hidden from public view. The film follows the journey of the water and the migration of people before and after the water diversion in order to document the ongoing impact that environmental development and water management on this scale has on the local ecologies and communities. With locations including the Ei Tu Hta Camp of Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) in Karen State, Myanmar, *The Rivers They Don't See* relates the war in Myanmar to environmental development projects in Thailand, reminding us that both lead to conflict, mass displacement, the loss of cultural heritage and significant societal changes. Just as the water is re-directed, the film shows that war and development projects lead to the displacement of people, like the two boat passengers from Yangon who have relocated to Thailand and found work in a fish sauce factory.

In the making of *The Unsung Lyric of Ping*, Som's research and aesthetic practice also draws from video footage and photographs, poems, and traditional Lanna folk songs to piece together a lived history of a place. In *The Unsung Lyric of Ping*, a 16-minute video made in collaboration with Scottish-Thai musician and sound artist Helen Ganya, the work explores how the narrative of a place takes form over long periods of time and across generations, told from multiple perspectives and through various means: scientific, poetic and musical. A companion to *The Rivers They Don't See*, *The Unsung Lyric of Ping*, returns to the site of the Ping River to

document the effects of the flooding that occurred in northern Thailand in 2024.

The video charts a journey along the river, beginning at an ancient temple, located far away from villages and only accessible by the water—one of very few similar buildings in the area unaffected by the flooding due to the dam construction. The second part of the film moves to Chiang Mai city, where it records the impact of the flooding. Although the scale is vastly different, because in the earlier time whole villages were submerged, these scenes invite comparisons with the flooding of the Ping River following the construction of the Bhumibol Dam in the 1950s (as described in *My Grandpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked*). The soundtrack of *The Unsung Lyric of Ping* features an archival audio recording of a local Lanna folksong of people who were forced to relocate when the Bhumibol Dam was built, and their homes were flooded. The lyrics speak of the experience of the dam's construction, and the sorrow of the villagers at the loss of their homes and the dispersal of their community. While the male singer expresses some faint optimism about the possibility of electricity coming to Lamphun and Chiang Mai, the female voice laments what she sees as a hopeless situation. These audio fragments are played alongside Ganya's own field recordings of the site, meaning that *The Unsung Lyric of Ping* not only begins a dialogue with these voices from the past but also offers a way of conserving and protecting these fragments of Lanna's cultural heritage through film.

Som uses her camera to document the water levels as they are at the time of filming, and records the presence of birds, insects and other wildlife on the soundtrack. Recognizing the limitations of an art practice that may not reach audiences who have the power to affect change, however, Som sees her works as documents of specific moments in time that can testify in the future to how the Mekong region once looked and sounded, highlighting the ongoing environmental degradation caused by capitalist extractivism and environmental development. [The videos] ... present 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.

Traversing multiple timeframes, Som's cartographic practice not only documents and archives the present, but her work also serves to inform a future public of the region's hidden and submerged political and environmental histories.

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1 Gridthiya Gaweewong has described Som's spatial and itinerant art practice as a form of cartography. This association with mapping is due to the artist's longstanding interest in geography, and the deeply situated nature of her engagement with place and the entwined histories of displacement, dispossession, and resistance in these sites.