



documenta fifteen — Aspects of Commoning in Curatorial and Artistic Practices

Edited by Ronald Kolb and Dorothee Richter

Contributions by Tanya Abraham, Unchalee Anantawat, Britto Arts Trust (Tayeba Begum Lipi, Mahbubur Rahman), Nanne Buurman, Christoph Brunner, Jennifer Deger, Wulan Dirgantoro, Dan Farberoff, Gudskul (Marcellina Putri, Gesyada Siregar, MG Pringgtono), Jatiwangi art Factory (JaF) (Ismail Muntaha, Al Ghorie), Gilly Karjevsky, Elly Kent, Ronald Kolb, Oliver Marchart, Séverine Marguin, Más Arte Más Acción (Jonathan Colin, Alejandra Rojas, Rossana Alarcón, Carmenza Rojas), Lara van Meeteren, OFF-Biennale Budapest (Hajnalka Somogyi, Eszter Lázár, Nikolett Eross, Katalin Székely, Bori Szalai, Eszter Szakács), Dagmar Pelger, David Behar Perahia, Project Art Works (Kate Adams, Patricia Finnegan), Question of Funding, Dorothee Richter, Grégoire Rousseau, Alder Keleman Saxena, Maayan Sheleff, Nora Sternfeld, Ariane Sutthavong, Trampoline House (Morten Goll), Anna L. Tsing, Wajukuu Art Project (Shabu Mwangi, Ngugi Waweru), Bart Wissink, Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik Berlin (Philip Horst), Feifei Zhou

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Imprint

On the Ideological Flexibility of the Cultural Common(s): The Many Lives of Thailand's Art Lane

Unchalee Anantawat, Ariane Sutthavong,
Lara van Meeteren, Bart Wissink

In May 2022, we received an announcement from the *Institute of Commoning* (InCom-mons) introducing a “taster course” for its new *Masters in Commons Administration* (MCA).¹ Bringing together an impressive group of scholars, activists, and organizers “who want to understand the world better in order to be able to change it,”² this initiative reflects a growing dissatisfaction with the state of our late-capitalist world, as well as with the complicity of academia in its functioning. It is increasingly clear that states and markets are unable—or unwilling—to respond successfully to the many crises that we face today, so the initiators argue.³ Instead, governments, corporations, think tanks, and opinion-makers provide “solutions” that keep them in power and in profit. However, the initiators continue, this status quo is now challenged by people (re)discovering new ways of working together and creating and sustaining commons. The *Institute of Commoning* aims to support such initiatives by “offering a programme of study for any adult learner who wants to explore the commons as an alternative and challenge to markets, the capitalist state and colonization.”⁴ Rejecting the privileging of self-interest, competition, and extraction in contemporary MBA programs—which aim to meet the needs of capital and produce “good workers”—the alternative MCA program is provided outside of the formal education system. In contrast to the exorbitant fees that most universities extract from students, the program is free of charge.

The *Masters in Commons Administration* is but one of many recent initiatives that pit the common(s) against states and the market. Recurrently, these initiatives discuss the potential of the common(s) in response to the many crises of our times.⁵ And time and again, these discussions reference the destructive role of neoliberal capitalism. For instance, in her analysis of contemporary crises, *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot be Born*, Nancy Fraser observes that various “forces have been grinding away at our social order for quite some time without producing a political earthquake.”⁶ Now, however, she finds a widespread rejection of politics as usual, as “an objective system-wide crisis has found its subjective political voice.” It is this atmosphere that has ushered in the re-evaluation of existing practices in all institutional domains, on a par with the education initiative of the *Institute for Commoning*. New common practices are now debated and created as a means for realizing more hopeful futures.⁷

Of course, as is widely acknowledged, the writing on the common(s) has various strands, each with their own assumptions and critical potential.⁸ Within this literature, the perspective of the *Institute for Commoning*, which presents commoning as a third way of social organizing next to the state and market, is relatively new. Highlighting its potential to produce practices and institutions that can help realize a non-capitalist future,⁹ this view centers on that idea that the common—in the singular—can be a means to “reassert participatory control over the urban commonwealth” vis-à-vis

states and markets.¹⁰ In recent years the literature that starts from this view increasingly pays attention to “cultural commoning” as well.¹¹ On the one hand, this attention relates to the observation that states and markets have radically appropriated the cultural domain, stimulating interest in the consequences of that development, and in possibilities for “freeing” culture of interference by states and markets.¹² On the other hand, following Antonio Gramsci’s recognition that culture is a central battlefield for social struggle over domination, cultural commoning emerges as a place where structural social change can be initiated as well.¹³ Inspired by these possibilities, here we will reflect on the political nature of cultural commoning from the vantage point of common cultural initiatives aligned with social movements in Thailand.

Ideological Flexibility

The starting point for our discussion is the observation by various authors that the common as a distinct domain next to the state and market is inherently political.¹⁴ Chantal Mouffe, for instance, is outspoken in her opposition to perspectives on the common that postulate “a conception of multiplicity that is free from negativity and antagonism.”¹⁵ She argues that the public sphere will always be a “battlefield on which hegemonic projects confront one another, with no possibility of a final reconciliation.”¹⁶ By extension, this is also true for a common world, devoid of states and markets. Chantal Mouffe therefore stresses that “commoning” practices should be conceptualized from a political model that recognizes that society is divided and that every order is hegemonically structured.¹⁷ Lauren Berlant similarly criticizes views on the common that somehow downplay antagonism, observing that “[t]he recently ‘resuscitated’ fantasy of the commons articulates many desires for a social world unbound by structural antagonism.”¹⁸ The alternative antagonistic view acknowledges that the cultural common is based on sharing and circulation, but it also stresses that there are boundaries to such sharing, resulting in diverse commons that reflect cultural oppositions. And while some of these commons might be anti-hierarchical and strive for openness and inclusion, others can be exclusionary and de facto function as “clubs.” Similarly, while some commons might aim to counter existing hegemonies, and thus support structural transformation of social, political, and economic practices, others might actually support existing hegemonies and thereby resist change. In short, the counter-hegemonic nature of a common is an empirical question.

With others, we have argued that the role of artists and cultural organizations must be understood from this perspective of hegemonic struggle.¹⁹ Chantal Mouffe highlights that artistic practices can be a vehicle for counter-hegemonic struggle, as they can support the emergence of alternative subjectivities.²⁰ Meanwhile, Jonas Staal pleads for a “propaganda art” of the left that can help to assemble a new “us.”²¹ However, an antagonistic perspective suggests that leaderless mass movements and the commons to which these are linked can point in many directions, and can thus support existing hegemonies as well.²² In *Kill All Normies*, Angela Nagle has thus for instance shown that in online culture, the alt-right has appropriated transgression for non-inclusive aims.²³ And in two essays—written more than twenty years apart—that were recently published on *e-flux Notes*, Hito Steyerl and Igor Gulin criticize the idea that art is an inherently progressive or pacifist force; it can be otherwise as well.²⁴ In other words, cultural commoning is “ideologically flexible.” For this reason, it is critically important to analyze the role of artists and artistic practices within the cultural commons vis-à-vis hegemony empirically. An analysis of several art events in Thailand under the heading *Art Lane* can help to illustrate this point.

Contemporary Art and Hegemony in Thailand

Contemporary art practices in Thailand operate within a context of a decades-long hegemonic struggle that—as is well-documented—has been resulting in recurrent coups d'état.²⁵ This struggle is an expression of radically opposing views of the Thai nation.²⁶ The dominant view centers on an imagined uniform Thai society, bound by ethnolinguistic homogeneity and by so-called “Thainess,” a Buddhist religion, and a monarchy that is protected by strict laws, like the “112” royal defamation law and the Computer Crime Act.²⁷ According to this view, it is the task of the state—with support of the bureaucracy, monarchy, and army—to educate people in the “right” way, and to defend this imagined Thai unity against internal and external threats.²⁸ This conviction has gone hand in hand with the production of dramatic economic and political inequalities. From this hegemonic view, art is an instrument to create the “right” public culture by educating citizens.²⁹ This has translated in the development of institutions such as Silpakorn University, National Exhibitions, and National Artists that have obtained a monopoly on the interpretation and production of Thai culture.

Art education has played a crucial role in this appropriation of contemporary art in the name of Thailand's hegemony. For a long time, Silpakorn University—the offspring of a national art academy founded in 1933 by Italian Corrado Feroci, or Silpa Bhirasri—was at the core of this education. This University and its professors would go on to exercise an iron grip on all facets of Thai art practices for decades to come, regulating access to teaching jobs, annual National Exhibitions, state commissions, and competitions sponsored by banks and insurance companies. Anybody wanting to become an artist therefore needed to succeed within this system, to abide by its rules and expectations, and—crucially—to appease its teachers.

Only in the 1980s did an alternative art scene start to develop.³⁰ This art scene in part aligned with a radically different view of Thai society, situating sovereignty in the people rather than the palace. Embracing the nation's diversity, in this view the state should improve the well-being of all, and diminish political, social, and economic inequalities.³¹ While these ideas certainly translated into counter-hegemonic cultural practices, at the same time, most contemporary artists were reluctant to speak out about issues of human rights, freedom of expression, political justice, or the monarchy in Thailand. Remarkably, such issues—including discussions surrounding the monarchy and the “112” law—have become an important part of the counter-hegemonic agenda in recent years and—as we will see—they are now finding expression in many alternative art practices.³²

Meanwhile, an influential third view of contemporary art grounded in the Thai corporate world emerged as well. At the core of this view are economic conglomerates that have gained considerable influence on the state and are at the same time willing to leave its core ideas of unity, religion, and the monarchy intact. Following their discovery of the potential of contemporary art for stimulating consumption and enriching real estate, corporations have started to engage with contemporary art, domesticating radical views and appropriating artworks seemingly critical of the existing hegemony along the way.³³ This coincided with the emergence of a new generation of contemporary art visitors, for whom consumerist imaginations of the “good life” are aspirational.³⁴

In parallel with the emergence of these new views on contemporary art, the educational system has changed dramatically as well. New art schools—at Chiang Mai University and elsewhere—and study periods abroad have brought Thai students in

conversation with alternatives to the state's view of art. Meanwhile, a growing number of art spaces have introduced platforms for a variety of new practices, thereby supporting imaginations of another Thailand. With these developments, art was increasingly wrested free from the "Silpakorn system."³⁵ However, the Silpakorn apparatus continues to influence views of what art should be, while structuring opportunities to work within its system. The conflicting common(s) initiatives under the banner *Art Lane*, which took place first in 2014, and later in 2020 and beyond, are clear expressions of these different views of contemporary art.

Art Lane 2014

Art Lane was first introduced to reference a collection of artist-led events that took place in early 2014, both within and in support of the "Shutdown Bangkok" street protests, organized by the self-styled People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) against Thailand's Yingluck Shinawatra government. These protests extended a period of mass-mobilizations, both in favor of and against the country's highly divisive Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra—Yingluck's elder brother—who had come to power in 2001.³⁶ Campaigning with populist measures that attracted rural voters, Thaksin won various democratic elections in landslide victories. The policies of this businessman cum politician "combined aggressive neo-liberalization with capitalist cronyism, and absolutist counter-reform politics with populist social policy, to radically transform the existing patterns of power relationships and elite resource allocation."³⁷ Support for Thaksin's administration from the rural electorate was enormous. However, the questionable, anti-democratic nature of many of his policies—which included a violent military campaign in the Deep South, extra-judicial killings during a war against alleged drug dealers, the tax-free sale of his almost \$2 billion corporation to Singapore, attacks on the legal system, and increased media censorship—meant that he was detested by the old elite, inhabitants in the Deep South, and the urban population—intelligentsia included—alike. After his ouster in a military coup on September 19, 2006, enduring popular support for Thaksin meant that political parties aligned with him continued to win subsequent elections, eventually putting his sister Yingluck in power. The PDRC was set up in November 2013 by ultra-nationalist and pro-royalist Suthep Thaugsuban with the aim of unseating Yingluck and ridding Thailand once and for all of Thaksin's influence.³⁸ Its months-long demonstrations eventually paved the road for the May 22, 2014 military takeover of the country.³⁹

In late 2013, professors at Silpakorn University with help of students—voluntarily or not—started to use art as a means of political expression to show their support for the PDRC movement. Activities took place at the university's Wang Tha Phra campus on Rattanakosin Island—the capital's old town—and its vicinity, including a rally on November 11, 2013, in which signs produced by students with anti-government slogans were carried from Silpakorn University to Democracy Monument on Ratchadamnoen Klang Road. On January 11, 2014, these professors joined other artists, again at Democracy Monument, where they produced forty-two anti-government paintings.⁴⁰ These paintings were subsequently put on view in a show called *Silpa Karawa Prachatham* (Art in Praise of the Masses) at the DOB Hualamphong Gallery on Rama IV Road, where they were sold to generate funds for the PDRC. Asked about their motivation to participate in these political activities, associate professor Thavorn Ko-Udomvit who managed the exhibition stated that, "[a]s artists who think differently from the government, we agreed to take action and call for political reform through our artistic skills."⁴¹ Other Silpakorn professors stressed that they couldn't stay silent.⁴²

In light of these initial activities, it is not surprising that Silpakorn professors again contributed to various protest events under the name *Art Lane*, organized in the context of the “Shutdown Bangkok” campaign which started on January 13, 2014. This campaign did not only aim to block major intersections in the capital, but also government offices and—in the run-up to the February 2014 general election—polling stations, effectively preventing voters from exercising their democratic right.⁴³ Instead, the PDRC called for the formation of an unelected government appointed by the king.⁴⁴ Despite such ominous goals, PDRC protests were viewed by many as colorful and ebullient manifestations, closer in appearance to festive fairs. Speeches were not the only attractions, as these were often accompanied by concerts, street art, and market stalls. At the protest sites, functional objects such as umbrellas, goodies, clothing items, and accessories with designs featuring the Thai flag were being sold around the clock. In hindsight, the organizers of *Art Lane* were instrumental in the creation of such a convivial façade for the PDRC.⁴⁵

Established by a network of artists, designers, and cultural workers, *Art Lane* operated outside of formal cultural institutions, bringing creative organizing initiatives to the street⁴⁶—specifically around the Chidlom intersection in central Bangkok. *Art Lane*’s commoning nature was captured in the documentaries *Bangkok Joyride: Chapter 1 - How We Became Superheroes* (2017) and *Bangkok Joyride: Chapter 2 - Shutdown Bangkok* (2017) by filmmaker Ing Kanjanavanit—herself a fervent PDRC supporter. Positioning her camera within the crowd, Ing’s footage—edited without commentary—grants viewers unmediated access to a street-level view of the movement, thus highlighting its “popular” aspect. The film’s credits read: “Starring The Ordinary People of Thailand.” The heterogeneous contributions of artists to the protests are depicted in the second opus, in which a performer about to appear on the political rally’s stage says to her troupe: “What we can do? [...] We don’t have to become soldiers or fight anyone; we don’t have to be businessmen, but we can raise the people’s morale [...]” highlighting the key role of artists in sustaining the protests’ momentum.⁴⁷ In the 2020 pro-democracy movement, *Free Arts*—a network of artists and cultural workers opposing dictatorship in Thailand—would perform a similar role, organizing alongside the standard flash mobs and succession of speeches, events of a different nature—be they concerts, fashion shows, performances, or participative street art—aiming to maintain steadfastness among protesters.⁴⁸

The instigators of the 2014 *Art Lane* included several well-established Thai artists—many with a Silpakorn affiliation; chief among these were Vasan Sitthiket, Sutee Kunavichayanont, and Amrit Chusuwan.⁴⁹ Vasan and Sutee were part of the generation of artists who, in the 1990s, became “standout players” according to David Teh, “putting Thai contemporary art on the international map.”⁵⁰ Their works were critical of the era’s consumerist craze and of the negative consequences of neoliberal globalization. Then, in the early 2000s, Vasan became known for his biting, often bawdy, depictions of Thai political life, as well as conceptual works that denounced Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s crony capitalism. Amrit, who represented Thailand at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007, was dean of Silpakorn University’s Fine Arts Department and enlisted his students to partake in *Art Lane* activities.⁵¹ Sutee would see his work *Thai Uprising* (2013–2014), mainly composed of agitprop, t-shirts, and placards that he designed for the “Shutdown Bangkok” campaign mired in controversy two years later, when it was included in a group show at the Gwangju Museum of Art.⁵² The exhibition, marking the 36th anniversary of the Gwangju Uprising, celebrated peace, human rights, and democratic values in Asia. However, as Thai critics pointed out in an open letter to the museum and curator, the PDRC were no guardians of

democracy.⁵³ Aided by artists participating in *Art Lane*, this movement had effectively dispatched a representative government—problematic as it might have been itself—and prompted as much as welcomed a military coup.

Whether Silpakorn students participated in the 2014 *Art Lane* of their own volition and based on their personal political beliefs or were pressured by faculty members into assisting more senior artists with labor-intensive tasks is yet to be determined on a case-by-case basis. Tom's Yard (a pseudonym for a former Silpakorn student, then in his second year) says the “SOTUS” system—the acronym for Seniority, Order, Tradition, Unity, Spirit—that exists in many Thai universities but is particularly dominant in Silpakorn's Fine Arts department made it difficult for students to refuse their seniors' requests.⁵⁴ Faculty members were using university resources to make objects that would be sold to profit the PDRC, he added. These resources included students' free labor, but also supplies and materials provided by the university's shop that were acquired with revenues coming from students' tuition fees. Students were asked in their free time to screen-print t-shirts or make objects and goodies following their professors' or senior artists' templates—a far cry from the creative outpour of 2020–2021, when artists and makers each brought their own designs to the pro-democracy protests. According to Tom's Yard, most students who took part in *Art Lane*-related activities at the time—himself included—did not have a fully formed political opinion of the PDRC. “We did what we were asked to do, but didn't necessarily realise that we were part of something bigger, a movement that was essentially destroying Thai democracy.”

The original *Art Lane* events were indisputably a cultural commoning initiative, albeit one that supported the existing Thai hegemony. Its productions were not limited to traditional art objects, but encompassed a variety of media and practices suggesting a “leveling of art to a more general sense of creativity,” a tendency which Yates McKee observed in the Occupy Wall Street movement in New York as well.⁵⁵ Many *Art Lane* activities, such as graffiti, mural and pavement painting, t-shirt screen-printing, politics-themed games, as well as the sale of art objects and posters, would not have seemed out of place in the more recent 2020 pro-democracy protests in Thailand either, despite—as we will see—the two movements' conflicting ideologies and messages. However, unlike Occupy-affiliated cultural workers, or those involved in Thailand's democratic faction today, original *Art Lane* participants often placed emphasis on their artist identity—which they defined by their “skill” or institutional recognition—rather than letting it be subsumed in the general protest movement and wider protester or citizen identities. By doing so, not only were the artists making the PDRC seem more palatable and appealing, but they created cultural value, which was then transformed into financial value when their works were auctioned at the exclusive Pacific City Club.⁵⁶ The proceeds from these sales, in turn, were donated to PDRC leaders. David Graeber understood creative direct action as an autonomous, non-mediated action, but also one “in which the ruling order is challenged even as a new world is ‘prefigured,’” adding that “collective resistance and collective invention are inseparable.”⁵⁷ In the case of the original *Art Lane* event in 2014, the Thai society that its participants prefigured was rooted in inequality and aligned with the existing hegemony.



In an event pre-dating Art Lane, Sutee Kunavichayanont—Silpakorn University professor and well-known Thai artist—paints ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra riding a red crab that clutches Thailand in one of its claws, referencing Thaksin's sister and then Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, whose nickname Pu means crab in Thai (Image from <http://www.rama9art.org/sutee/visual.html>, 2013).



Vasan Sitthiket—well-known socio-politically engaged Thai artist and PDRC supporter—stands in front of Bangkok's Democracy Monument during a run-up event to *Art Lane*, holding a painting depicting himself as part of the PDRC-led anti-government protests, and the occupation of central locations in the city, known as "Shutdown Bangkok", that would start on 13 January 2014 (Image from <https://www.facebook.com/Vasan-Sitthiket-240212462671471/photos/803156999710345>, January 2014).



Stenciled poster at the first Art Lane event on 13 January 2014, the start date of the "Shutdown Bangkok" campaign, reading ยึดคืนประเทศไทย [Take back Thailand]. *Art Lane* was situated near the Chidlom rally site of the anti-government protests, from Soi Ton Son to the Chidlom intersection (Image anonymous, January 2014).



Sutee Kunavichayanont produces spray painted t-shirts and posters at the first Art Lane event in front of Central Chidlom on Phloen Chit Road. Some of these were later auctioned at the exclusive Pacific City Club benefiting the PDRC; another batch was displayed in 2016 as *Thai Uprising* in the Gwangju Museum of Art (Image anonymous, January 2014).

Art Lane 2020

In 2020, a new *Art Lane* saw the light of day, this time under very different circumstances and carrying contrasting goals and allegiances. The context for this project was the coup d'état of May 22, 2014 that followed the PDRC protests and its aftermath—the five-year rule of the *National Council for Peace and Order*, a junta led by general Prayut Chan-o-Cha. From the outset, the coup leaders instituted a ban on political gatherings, resulting in the forced de-politicization of all institutional settings in Thailand, including education, for more than five years. Meanwhile, they pushed through a new constitution in 2017, which according to critics instituted far-reaching limitations to the functioning of democracy in Thailand.⁵⁸ Political activities only became possible again when the ban on political gatherings was lifted just three months before the first post-coup elections in March 2019, which strongly favored the coup-leaders. Eventually, the election resulted in a civilian government under coup-leader Prayut Chan-o-Cha. Further conflict emerged a year after these long-awaited elections, when the new and successful Future Forward Party—extremely popular with young people—was dissolved on questionable grounds, while the party's founder—Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit—was prosecuted. This was one of the triggers for widespread pro-democracy and monarchy-reform protests in 2020-2021.⁵⁹

It was in this setting that *Art Lane* returned in the summer of 2020. The initiator and organizer behind this event was Atom Pavarit, a fourth-year Fine Arts student at Silpakorn University's campus in Nakhon Pathom. Customarily, students display their work during the end-of-year presentation at the university's art gallery. However, Atom decided to put out an open call under the name *Art Lane 2020*, asking anyone—students, artists, and others—to send in works. The spark for the open call was a conversation with one of his teachers, who had been adamant that art and politics should be kept separate. In the highly charged environment of 2020, when many students were active participants in the pro-democracy protests—with all the risks involved—that position did not sit well with Atom. His unease further escalated when he found material online, documenting this teacher's active involvement in *Art Lane 2014*, which visibly and vocally supported “Shutdown Bangkok” and the PDRC, and by extension was complicit to the years of military rule that followed. Apparently, art and politics should only be separated in certain circumstances.

It can thus be said that *Art Lane 2020* started out as a parody. However, it functioned as a serious indictment of Silpakorn's teachers as well. In 2014, these teachers had entered the political arena with their professional artist and teacher identities. But subsequently, they stayed silent about the many injustices—the decline of democracy, enforced disappearances, rising inequality—under the junta leaders that they helped to put in power. According to the *Art Lane 2020* open call, “Thailand deteriorated in every aspect except the wealth of the capitalists, generals and feudal men.”⁶⁰ Atom therefore explicitly questioned his Silpakorn teachers: “Before, you were part of it [the political protests] and now there are many problems that arise from these actions; what are you doing now? There is more injustice in society; why are you quiet about it now?”

Art Lane was revived to address such double standards of various Silpakorn teachers. According to a recent open call for a yet to be organized *Art Lane 2022*, the event aims “to be a space for everyone's freedom; a space to criticize and remove society's fears [about expressing yourself politically].”⁶¹ So, whereas *Art Lane 2014* had a conservative inclination, was hierarchically structured, and supported the existing Thai hegemony, these new iterations are counter-hegemonic. They emphasize accessibility for

everyone and result in the display of many heterodox voices—a radical act in a setting where access to presentation spaces is still fundamentally restricted.⁶² When asked if he applied for permission to display these pieces at the university gallery’s end-of-year presentation for the first *Art Lane 2020* iteration, Atom chuckled, responding: “No, I didn’t ask for any permission, because I knew that if I asked, they would not have let me do it.”

Atom’s own contribution to *Art Lane 2020* consisted of portraits, stenciled on newspaper pages, depicting victims of enforced disappearance by the Thai state over the years. In response to his open call, he also received some 100 other works, about half of which were text-based. These, for instance, included banners from activists and grievances written by high school students. This inclusion of high school student work reflects a broader emergence of middle and high school student activism, also exemplified by political protests under the banner “Bad Students” (นักเรียนเลว).⁶³ Rallying against the rigid structure and rules of the Thai education system, which for instance mandates a strict dress code and the forced cutting of hair, this group demanded an overhaul of the old-fashioned curriculum.⁶⁴ In one widely reported event in August 2020, a group of over 500 students marched to the Ministry of Education to protest restrictions on political expression in schools. There, they made the hurriedly summoned Minister of Education wait for his turn to speak, chanting that he had to “get in line”: an unheard-of affront in Thailand’s hierarchical society, where one is expected to defer to people in power, be they teachers or government officials.⁶⁵

One of the contributing groups to *Art Lane 2020* was PrachathipaType, a self-described collective of “designers who use the art of typography to communicate political issues.”⁶⁶ They sent in various works, some using a typeface that they had designed called “missing head” (หัวหาย). This typeface was created in response to the Senate’s rejection of the “people’s draft” for an amended constitution, proposed by free speech watchdog iLaw.⁶⁷ Starting out with font TH Sarabun New, which is used by the Thai state in official documents, they cut out the round headers that are part of Thai script. According to PrachathipaType, the resulting typeface symbolizes the fact that the Thai state “doesn’t see the people’s heads.”⁶⁸ Other works that the collective sent in referenced rare comments by the Thai king in English to a foreign reporter, who asked the king’s opinion about protesters who had been on the streets asking for reform. The king’s answers—“We love them all the same” and “Thailand is the land of compromise”—attracted widespread attention; they were also immediately repurposed in the protests, and re-emerged under many guises.⁶⁹ Next to such text-based works, the submissions included many political illustrations as well—for instance, those by Bangkokgag and Sina Wittayawiroj®. The latter is an alumnus of Silpakorn University, critical of his alma mater’s functioning. At the height of the political protests, Sina shared a new political illustration almost daily with his more than 35,000 followers via Facebook.⁷⁰

The reactions to *Art Lane 2020*’s controversial collection of works and to the hijacking of Silpakorn University’s art gallery were as expected: teachers disapproved and deemed the project inappropriate. They were especially bothered by references to the monarchy. And while fellow students did comment with customary responses—“be careful” and “take care of yourself”—by and large they remained quiet. According to Atom, “Nobody talked about it. Most of my friends were afraid of the teachers. They don’t want to have any problems with them”. However, like-minded peers responded as well. At the request of a fellow student who had just graduated from Silpakorn University, the *Art Lane 2020* collection was once more exhibited at *Light my Fire*, a

bar-restaurant in Nakhon Pathom, in late November 2020. *Art Lane* then made a brief third appearance in December of the same year, when others joined Atom as organizers. This time, new works were shown in the streets of Nakhon Pathom, outside of faculty buildings with the university's walls as canvases and exhibition spaces. The works mainly referenced well-known symbols of the pro-democracy protest movement, such as rubber ducks, the people's plaque and calls for an end to dictatorship. As Atom recalls, the teachers were furious, and the walls were scrubbed clean in a matter of days.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, there have been no further *Art Lane* exhibitions at the time of writing. However, this hiatus is most likely to be temporary. *Art Lane* is set to return at the end of 2022, as a call for new works has been put out for a next edition—to be held at Kinjai Contemporary, a gallery that is part of a new wave of spaces enabling people to show works that express alternative, non-hegemonic political positions. For Atom, this is part of a wider transformation process: "I think most of my friends [...] have changed their opinion about Thai art. Before, they used to do contest work, and you know, if you paint a Thai flag or Buddha or the king you would get the prize. They have stopped doing this. [...] I think that more than before, they focus on social issues in their work. Maybe it is hard to sell those works, but I think it is a better way."



Works by Atom Pavarit (left) and PrachathipaType (right) at the second *Art Lane* 2020 exhibition at *Light my Fire*. Atom's work refers to the many victims of enforced disappearance by the Thai state. PrachathipaType repurposes words of the Thai king, "We love them all the same" and "Thailand is the land of compromise", uttered in response to an unexpected British reporter's question about the protests during a staged walkabout amongst thousands of royalists (Image *Art Lane* 2020, November/December 2020).



Illustration by Sina Wittayawiroj® referencing *Art Lane* 2020. It depicts part of a statue of Silpakorn University's founder, Silpa Bhairasi, that stands in a central square at the university's Wang Tha Phra campus. In the illustration, the statue is "defaced" by graffiti and stickers, referring to current struggles and controversies at the university, as well as a playful reversal of "Shutdown Bangkok" into "Turn on Bangkok". The university's motto "Ars Longa Vita Brevis" is also evoked, but reworked to a critique of the country's dictatorial leaders (Image Sina Wittayawiroj®, June 2021).



Installation view of the second *Art Lane 2020* at *Light my Fire* in Nakhon Pathom. The banner reads “When injustice becomes law, resistance becomes duty” and belongs to prominent political activist Jatupat “Pai” Boonpattaraksa, also known as “Pai Dao Din”. Since 2016, Pai has been charged and imprisoned several times, including a 2,5-year prison sentence following a secret trial after an Article 112 charge, based on sharing a BBC profile of king Vajiralongkorn on social media. The people portrayed on the red flags are pro-democracy and monarchy-reform activists, amongst which student protest leaders Parit “Penguin” Chiwarak and Panusaya “Rung” Sithijirawattanakul, and human rights lawyer Anon Nampa, all imprisoned on royal defamation and other protest-related charges (Image Art Lane 2020, November/December 2020).



Mural by RUDE reading “Shutdown Dictatorship”—an obvious play on “Shutdown Bangkok”—on a Silpakorn University wall at its Nakhon-Pathom campus, during the third Art Lane 2020 (Image Art Lane 2020, December 2020).



Objects from พิพิธภัณฑ์สามัญชน (*Museum of Popular History*), displayed at the “Uprisings Exhibition” at Sakon Nakhon Rajabhat University. In line with the museum’s aim of collecting objects from all popular movements across the political spectrum, next to artefacts from Thailand, it contains a cap from Trump’s “Make America Great Again” campaign and a poster from Hong Kong’s protest movement reading 香港人加油 [Hong Kong People Add Oil] (Image พิพิธภัณฑ์สามัญชน Museum of Popular History, 2020).

Beyond Ideological Flexibility?

The various *Art Lane* events illustrate that common art events can have highly contrasting allegiances. While these initiatives have used the same type of common(s)-related arguments to justify their actions, and are each indisputably cultural commoning initiatives, they support radically opposing goals, thus highlighting the ideological flexibility of the common. While this might seem a relatively obvious conclusion for those interested in political activism, against the background of a broad literature that presents the common as a solution for the appropriation of the cultural domain by states and markets, it is important nonetheless. The *Art Lane* events suggest that common initiatives cannot provide a final reconciliation for the shortcomings of states and markets, because the cultural commons itself will always be political, made up as it is by various opposing voices. Instead of presenting the common as solution, we have therefore argued for a perspective that pays precise attention to the actual alliances of a certain common; and we have argued that this should especially focus on the relation of those alliances to hegemony.

The importance of attention for the relation between a common and hegemony is underlined when seeing their different reception. While *Art Lane 2014* received a favorable response from within the existing hegemony, the organizers of *Art Lane 2020* had to struggle against institutional constraints, including the university system. Furthermore, the Silpakorn University system has clearly supported the retelling of certain views of past commons, while restricting the retelling of others. It is not surprising therefore, that one objective of the *Art Lane 2022* initiative is “to study the past so that it doesn’t happen in the future.”⁷¹ This harks back to a remark of one the teachers in response to *Art Lane 2020* in the university art gallery: “The past is the past, we should forget it and start again.” However, in Thailand, up until now, the past is not forgotten at all, and one hegemonic side has had a monopoly on the writing of history. However, illustrating Kodwo Eshun’s attention for the importance of “counter-memories,”⁷² this monopoly is recurrently challenged, most recently—as we have seen—by protesters and commons initiatives like *Art Lane 2020*. The common-based *Museum of Popular History*—a topic for discussion in its own right—is another example of a common initiative that challenges the control over memory by one hegemonic side. Collecting objects from popular movements across Thailand’s political divide, the initiator behind this museum wants to accommodate the conservation and development of counter-memories.⁷³ Aiming to fill the gap left by Thai museums and their history-telling, the museum targets the preservation of all political expressions, so that future audiences may make up their own mind. This at least ensures that we remain aware of all political activities of old, and that we continue asking Atom’s crucial question: “Why are you quiet about it now?”

Notes

1 Institute for Commoning, “MCA taster course,” <https://www.incommons.info/masters-in-commons-administration/taster-course>.

2 Institute for Commoning, “Home,” <https://www.incommons.info/home>.

3 Institute for Commoning, “Take back the commons,” <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1J5MKTD3Ddg4XGIL9IRDEeDwcWeZFwfCv/view>.

4 Ibid.

5 For an intriguing analysis of the political role of such crisis-talk, see Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014).

6 Nancy Fraser, *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot be Born: From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond* (London and New York: Verso, 2019), 9.

7 For earlier presentations of our views on cultural commoning on which these discussions are partly based, see Ariane Kupferman-Sutthavong, Lara van Meeteren, and Bart Wissink, “Art and Politics in the Age of Radical Appropriation: An introduction,” in Ariane Kupferman-Sutthavong, Lara van Meeteren, Bart Wissink and Sina Wittayawiroj, *Common Dissent: Texts on Art and Politics in the Age of Radical Appropriation* (Bangkok: inappropriate BOOK CLUB, in Thai, 2021), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354680260_Art_and_Politics_in_the_Age_of_Radical_Appropriation_An_Introduction; Bart Wissink and Lara van Meeteren, “Art Organisers as Commoners: On the Counter-Hegemonic Potential of the Bangkok Biennial,” *Social Inclusion* 10, no.1 (2022): 126-140, <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v10i1.4895>; Lara van Meeteren and Bart Wissink, “Artists as Organisers: Cultural Commoning and Hegemony in Thailand,” in Thijs Lijster, Pascal Gielen and Louis Volont, *Rise of the Common City: Cultural Commoning in Urban Conditions* (Brussels: ASP Editions, 2022), 133-149.

8 For a discussion of these different strands, see for instance, Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *Common: On Revolution in the 21st Century* (London etc.: Bloomsbury, 2019); Louis Volont, *Shapeshifting: The Cultural Production of Common Space* (Antwerp: Antwerp University Press, 2020).

9 See, for instance, Dardot and Laval, *Common*; Massimo De Angelis, *Omnia Sunt Communia: On the Commons and the Transformation to Postcapitalism* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2017); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009); Stavros Stavrides, *Common Space: The City as Commons* (London: Zed Books, 2016); Volont, *Shapeshifting*.

10 Louis Volont and Peer Smets, “The Politics and Aesthetics of the Urban Commons: Navigating the Gaze of the City, the State, the Market,” *Social Inclusion* 10, no.1 (2022): 84-90, <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v10i1.5392>.

11 See, for instance, Massimiliano Mollona, *Art/Commons: Anthropology beyond Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2021); Cornelia Sollfrank, Felix Stalder, and Susa Niederberger, *Aesthetics of the Commons* (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2020); Thijs Lijster, Pascal Gielen, and Louis Volont, *Rise of the Common City: Cultural Commoning in Urban Conditions* (Brussels: ASP Editions, 2022).

12 See also Lara van Meeteren and Bart Wissink, “Biennials and Hegemony: Experiences from the Thai Laboratory,” *OnCurating* 46 (2020): 431-449, https://on-curating.org/issue-46-reader/biennials-and-hegemony-experiences-from-the-thai-laboratory.html#.XxKTIPJS_OQ; Kupferman-Sutthavong, Van Meeteren, and Wissink, *Art and Politics*.

13 Nato Thompson, *Culture as Weapon: The Art of Influence in Everyday Life* (Brooklyn and London: Melville House, 2016); Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: The Online Culture Wars from Tumblr and 4Chan to the Alt-Right and Trump* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2017); Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London and New York: Verso, 2018).

14 The following presents a shortened version of arguments in Van Meeteren and Wissink, “Artists as Organisers.”

15 Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 55.

16 Ibid., 93.

17 Ibid., 69-70.

18 Lauren Berlant, “The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 3 (2016): 393-419, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775816645989>.

19 Kupferman-Sutthavong, Van Meeteren and Wissink, “Radical Appropriation”; Van Meeteren and Wissink, “Biennials and Hegemony”; Van Meeteren and Wissink, “Artists as Organisers.”

- 20** Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London and New York: Verso, 2013).
- 21** Jonas Staal, “Assemblism,” *e-Flux journal* 80 (March 2017), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/80/100465/assemblism/>; Jonas Staal, *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2019).
- 22** For a discussion on the relationships between social movements and commoning practices, see Massimo De Angelis, “Crises, Movements and Commons,” *borderlands e-journal* 11, no. 2 (2012): 1-22.
- 23** Nagle, *Kill All Normies*.
- 24** Hito Steyerl, “Culture and crime,” *Transversal* (October 2000); republished in *e-flux Notes*, May 16, 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/468843/culture-and-crime/>; Igor Gulin, “On war, violence, power, and Russian culture,” *e-flux Notes*, May 18, 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/469328/on-war-violence-power-and-russian-culture/>.
- 25** For a more extensive discussion of these arguments, see Van Meeteren and Wissink, “Biennials and Hegemony”; Kupferman-Sutthavong, Van Meeteren, and Wissink, “Radical Appropriation.”
- 26** See also: Michael Montesano, Pavin Chachavalpongpun, and Aekapol Chongvilaivan, eds., *Bangkok May 2010: Perspectives on a Divided Thailand* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2012); Pavin Chachavalpongpun, ed., “Good Coup” Gone Bad: *Thailand’s Political Development since Thaksin’s Downfall* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2014); Federico Ferrara, *The Political Development of Modern Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
- 27** Søren Ivarsson and Lotte Isager, eds., *Saying the Unsayable: Monarchy and Democracy in Thailand* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2010).
- 28** Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 3rd edition), 282-284.
- 29** David Teh, *Thai Art Currencies of the Contemporary* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017).
- 30** David Teh, “Artist-to-Artist: Chiang Mai Social Installation in Historical Perspective,” in *Artist-to-Artist: Independent Art Festivals in Chiang Mai*, eds. David Teh and David Morris (London: Afterall Books, 2018), 17; Van Meeteren and Wissink, “Biennials and Hegemony.”
- 31** Baker and Phongpaichit, *History of Thailand*.
- 32** On the silence of contemporary Thai artists on issues of human rights, freedom of expression, and political justice, see Thanavi Chotpradit, “The Silence in Thai Contemporary Art,” *ArtReview Asia*, February 3, 2017, <https://artreview.com/ara-winter-16-feature-the-silence-in-thai-contemporary-art/>. On recent counter-hegemonic practices, see Wissink and Van Meeteren, “Art Organisers as Commoners”; Van Meeteren and Wissink, “Artists as Organisers.”
- 33** Kupferman-Sutthavong, Van Meeteren, and Wissink, “Radical Appropriation.”
- 34** Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).
- 35** Teh, *Thai Art*.
- 36** On Thaksin Shinawatra’s ambiguous place in Thai political history, see Kasian Tejapira, “Toppling Thaksin,” *New Left Review* 39 (2006): 5-37; Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thaksin: The Business of Politics in Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009, 2nd edition).
- 37** Tejapira, “Toppling Thaksin,” 10.
- 38** Matthew Petty and Amy Sawitta Lefevre, “Thai PM says Shinawatras want peace, not power,” *Reuters*, December 7, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-yin-gluck-idUKBRE9B606G20131207>.
- 39** John Clark, “‘Tradition’ in Thai Modern Art,” *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* 4, no. 2 (2020): 39-89, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sen.2020.0007>.
- 40** Khetsirin Pholdhampalit, “Art as a shrill whistle,” *The Nation*, January 17, 2014.
- 41** Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Kate Hodal, “Thai voters prevented from casting ballot by anti-government protesters,” *The Guardian*, February 2, 2014, <http://Thai voters prevented from casting ballot by anti-government protesters>.

44 Tim Hume, Saima Mohsin, and Kocha Olarn, “Protesters descend on Thai capital seeking government’s ouster,” *CNN*, May 9, 2014, <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/05/09/world/asia/thailand-yellow-shirt-rally-bangkok/index.html>.

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46 Van Meeteren and Wissink, “Artists as Organisers,” 137-138.

47 *Bangkok Joyride: Chapter 2—Shutdown Bangkok*, directed by Ing Kanjanavanit (Bangkok, 2017).

48 Van Meeteren and Wissink, “Artists as Organisers,” 140-142.

49 Chanrochanakit, “Reluctant Avant-Garde.”

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51 Chanrochanakit, “Reluctant Avant-Garde.”

52 Brian Curtin, “No Common Ground,” *Art Review Asia*, February 3, 2017, <https://artreview.com/ara-winter-16-opinion-brian-curtin/>.

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54 For the most part, the information in this paper is based on existing written sources. Where such information was not available, we conducted additional interviews in the summer of 2022. The quotes in this paper without references are based on those interviews.

55 Yates McKee, *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition* (London: Verso, 2016).

56 Chanrochanakit, “Reluctant Avant-Garde.”

57 McKee, *Strike Art*.

58 See, for instance, Duncan McCargo, “Southeast Asia’s Troubling Elections: Democratic Demolition in Thailand,” *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 4 (2019): 119-133.

59 Gabriel Ernst, “What Next for the Thai Protest Movement?,” *New Bloom*, October 23, 2020, <https://newbloommag.net/2020/10/23/thai-protest-movement-october/>.

60 “Open Call for Art Lane Project 2022,” https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeeq_5nVv_BdNaXlqPJ2f2InSH3icX1sJ6MhIR6-ai-SJ9BHQ/viewform.

61 This open call (in Thai) can be found as the pinned post on the *Art Lane 2020* Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/ArtLane2020-107490284489558>.

62 For the same argument, see our analysis of the radical character of the Bangkok Biennial, an artist-led commons event that took place for the first time in 2018 in Wissink and Van Meeteren, “Art Organisers as Commoners.”

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66 For more information on PrachathipaType, see their website (in Thai): <https://www.prachathipatype.com/>.

67 Anonymous, “Parliament rejects civil society’s draft constitutional amendment,” *Prachatai*, November 19, 2020, <https://prachatai.com/english/node/8922>.

68 Kanyarat Mainoy, “เขาบอกว่า ศิลปะไม่ควรยุ่งกับการเมือง?” [They say, art should not be involved with politics?], *ili*, October 28, 2021, <https://www.ili-co.me/u/2021/10/art-political>.

69 For this exchange, see: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=415884299573124>.

70 For the work of Sina Wittayawiroj®, see: https://www.facebook.com/sina.wittayawiroj.official/?ref=page_internal.

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72 Kodwo Eshun, “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 287-302.

73 For information on the Museum of Popular History (in Thai), see: <https://common-muze.com/>.

Unchalee Anantawat is full-time instructor in the communication design programme at King Mongkut University of Technology in Thonburi, Thailand. She co-founded independent art space Speedy Grandma in 2012. With Jeff Gompertz and Liam Morgan, in 2018 she initiated the Bangkok Biennial, a biennial challenging the “authority of access” to representation in art and curatorial practices.

Ariane Sutthavong is involved in curation, writing and translation projects at the intersection of art and politics in Bangkok and London.

Lara van Meeteren lives and works in Hong Kong and Bangkok. She conducts research, writes and co-organises projects. Aiming to make the political nature of art and its events and institutions visible, in her work Lara explores the idea of contemporary art as counter-hegemonic practice.

Bart Wissink is associate professor urban studies and urban policy at City University of Hong Kong. His research centres on issues relating to urban governance and social justice, with a strong focus on cultural commoning in recent years.