

Art and Politics in the Age of Radical Appropriation: An Introduction

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“Common sense creates the folklore of the future, that is as a relatively rigid phase of popular knowledge at a given time and place.”

Antonio Gramsci¹

Welcome to the *inappropriate BOOK CLUB*

On 21 October 2020, in the midst of various opening events of the second Bangkok Art Biennale (BAB), twenty-five participating Thai and international artists led by global A-listers Ai Weiwei and Anish Kapoor issued a public statement in support of protesters calling for democratic change. Condemning recent police violence, they stressed that art should provide a platform for open discussion, and that its institutions should give refuge to those in need of protection. They also called upon the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC) – a main venue of the BAB in front of which various protest-related events had taken place – and the BAB organisers themselves to take a stand against police violence and to affirm the right to peaceful protest.² Meanwhile, in sometimes heated discussions – for instance in Facebook groups – artists condemned the direct links between the corporately organised BAB and Thailand’s political and economic hegemony, and called out the complicity of participating artists. Even though the political nature of the BAB had been criticised before,³ in the context of the 2020 protests this now seemed to become a topic of wider contention. Nonetheless, the consequences so far have been remarkably meagre. The BACC and the BAB never responded to the 21 October statement and the exhibition went ahead as planned. It included the works of the artists behind the statement, who – contrary to similar protests at exhibitions elsewhere – had not threatened to pull out either. The uproar also didn’t seem to make a big impression on the BAB organisers, as the exhibition’s artistic director, Apinan Poshyananda, explained to the international press that the protests “add more spice” to the exhibition’s theme ‘Escape Routes’.⁴ Presenting the demonstrations simply as another backdrop for a successful exhibition, clearly, criticism on the political role of art institutions in Thailand can be easily neutralised by entrepreneurial organisers.

The BAB is of course only one example of a growing list of art exhibitions and institutions – in Thailand and elsewhere – that are criticised for their fraught relationship with politics. Earlier in 2020 for instance, Petrit Halilaj withdrew his work from the Belgrade Biennial when organisers didn't allow him to list Kosovo as his country of origin, because Serbia doesn't recognise this as an independent country.⁵ Further examples include the 2019 Whitney Biennial, the 2019 Aichi Triennale, the 2014 Sydney Biennale, and the exhibition '*Urban Realities: Focus Istanbul*' that is mentioned by Ahmet Öğüt later in this book. In '*176 Gifts / 176 Disposessions*' – also in this book – Donna Miranda and Angelo V. Suárez demonstrate that this type of criticism is not only directed at biennials, highlighting the complicity of the Ateneo Art Gallery in Manila, art institutions in the Philippines in general, as well as the SFMOMA – the commissioner of their text – to a patronage system that normalises dispossession. Crucially, such critiques on the politics of art exhibitions and institutions are not simply concerned with what they show, but especially also with what they do, or how they function.⁶ In other words, this criticism implies that even institutions and events in which the participating artists do not make 'political' work, are actually political, as these events and institutions themselves function politically; and that this political role should be scrutinised.

One important factor behind the growing attention for the political role of art events and institutions has certainly been the increased appropriation of art by states and corporations over the past decades, and we will return to this setting of 'radical appropriation' soon. Art now helps to promote benevolent images of national identity, thereby providing a liberal mask for illiberal regimes; it is employed by the neoliberal capitalist economy to mobilise consumerist desire towards the acquisition of services and goods, as Chantal Mouffe argues later in this book; and it is used by governments and real estate developers to enrich⁷ buildings, projects, neighbourhoods, cities and regions, thus promoting development and gentrification. Or, in the words of Hito Steyerl, "[c]ontemporary art is a brand name without a brand, ready to be slapped onto almost anything".⁸ As a result, according to Ana Teixeira Pinto in *Mousse Magazine*, the effects of art often run counter to the social aspirations of many artists. And while the resulting frustrations are sporadically expressed in boycotts and open letters – such as the ones mentioned above – they are seldomly addressed systematically.⁹ This is all the more problematic when we realise that art – and culture in general – have become core battlefields for social domination. Or, as Nato Thompson argues, it is a crucial tool for those in power to maintain and expand their influence.¹⁰ Of course, it is easy to despair over this deeply coercive nature of art, especially in a place like Thailand where, as we will argue, art helps to sustain a system that produces dramatic political, economic and social inequalities that deny a dignified life to many;

and where – judging from the lack of effects of the artist statement directed towards the BAB – apparently it is very hard to call out that role.

Triggered by the urgency of these issues, this book brings together eight texts on art and politics that, on the one hand, help to build awareness by unveiling the often-implicit political function of artistic practices, but on the other hand try to imagine the possibility of another kind of artistic practice that can support a more hopeful future. These texts are highly relevant for Thailand, as the current protests are not only about resistance against the current regime, but also about imagining another society beyond the political oppression of entrenched power structures and the economic oppression of neoliberalism. The texts in this book will serve as a basis for discussions at the *inappropriate BOOK CLUB*, which is organised on eight Saturdays from 6 February until 3 April 2021 as part of Talk-Talk-Vilion, a pavilion of the Bangkok Biennial. As the name of this book club suggests, it will not be appropriated by the agendas of governments or corporations. It thereby provides a platform for the discussion of ideas that might be deemed ‘inappropriate’ by the existing common sense, a term that as we will see is central in Antonio Gramsci’s thinking.¹¹ With this book club we hope to contribute to the emergence of ‘common dissent’, as the basis for new counter-hegemonic practices.

Radical Appropriation as the ‘New’ Setting for Art

Discussions on the appropriation of art by interests outside the art system are of course not new. As Howard Becker for instance clearly describes in *‘Art Worlds’*, states have always been involved in the production and presentation of art.¹² Over time, the awareness of the detrimental effects of such appropriation has led to the institutionalisation of norms and practices, meant to demarcate the boundaries between the art system and other social fields like the economy, science and politics. As one example, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu discusses various codes of conduct regarding professional roles for those invested in the art field.¹³ As a result of this ‘boundary work’, the art system became relatively insulated from the outside influences of state and market. This development towards relative autonomy is often presented as part of a wider process of functional differentiation, typical for modernisation, whereby according to Ulrich Beck “the political sphere splits off from the economic one, the scientific sphere from the political one, and so on”.¹⁴ Indirectly, this did not only restrict the appropriation of art, but – as Pascal Gielen argues – it also helped to safeguard its critical potential, as the relative insulation created a space for the open exploration of diverse world views and imaginary horizons.¹⁵ Or, in the words of Nancy Fraser, art could develop into a public sphere as “an arena (..) conceptually

distinct from the state; (...) a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state.”¹⁶

Of course, it is now abundantly clear that this very Western story of modernisation as functional differentiation does not characterise social developments everywhere, and that it is only one example of a variety of multiple modernities.¹⁷ On top of this, the idea of functional differentiation is problematic as well, as it relates to normative assumption that have played a highly questionable role in history.¹⁸ But as for instance Paolo Virno argues, even in places where this story of functional differentiation depicted social transformations adequately, things have now changed over the past decades. With the emergence of a post-fordist economy the boundaries between distinct social spheres have become increasingly porous.¹⁹ According to Ulrich Beck, boundary transgressions are part of a wider process, in which “[t]he questions of functional differentiation are replaced by the questions of *functional coordination*, cross-linking, harmonization, synthesis, and so on”.²⁰ According to Isabelle Graw this has resulted in “a structural alignment of the art world to other social systems”²¹ like the economy and politics. Meanwhile, as George Yúdice argues, “culture is invoked to solve problems that previously were the province of economics and politics”.²² As a consequence, art is now enlisted by governments and companies to enrich products, solve social problems, mobilise consumerist desire, sell images of national identities, or advertise cities, regions or countries. As Brian Holmes concludes, this has turned “both artistic and cultural production into a major field for capital valorisation, and into an important means of controlling and channelling the aspirations of populations, partially replacing the disciplinary frameworks of the mass-production society.”²³

On first sight, this ‘radical’ appropriation of art by other social domains might seem positive. After all, it has contributed to growing public and corporate budgets for art professionals, institutions and events, resulting in an avalanche of creative centres, biennials, and private and public museums in cities around the world. This can be especially interesting in countries like Thailand, where these funds can help support art infrastructures that up until recently were relatively under-developed. However, these opportunities might come at a price. For Nato Thompson the implication of this development is “that the meaning of artworks cannot be detached from the political economies within which they participate.”²⁴ After all, artists become complicit in political, economic and social transformations that they help to generate – a first negative effect. However, the ulterior motives towards which art thus comes to be employed might clash – sometimes quite considerably – with the social aspirations of the artists involved, as well as with the norms supposedly ingrained in the art system itself.²⁵ In his chapter in this collection, Ahmet Ögüt therefore stresses that artists should take responsibility and hold

institutions accountable. Unfortunately, in reality complicity often goes unchecked. This reluctance to account for the effects of art exhibitions and institutions might spring directly from the increasingly entrepreneurial, neoliberal mindset of artists, who in their training in art schools and in practice have learned that networking is everything, and a successful project is not one that has intrinsic value, but one that triggers a new project afterwards.²⁶ As we will see, David Hodge and Hamed Yousefi argue in their chapter in this book that the same mindset might be the reason for the diminishing capacity to organise solidarity within the artworld.

Secondly, radical appropriation of art also undermines the critical potential of art. After all, if art events and institutions are meant to generate positive narratives about a product, company, city, region or country, then state and corporate funders might be enticed to try and 'curate' artistic production by controlling which art is produced or presented.²⁷ In settings where the control over what is heard and seen is extensive, active censorship might not even be necessary.²⁸ In this light, it is telling that Chantal Mouffe starts her chapter in this book by asking: "art occupies an increasingly central place in our societies, but can it still play a critical role?" The cynicism about this possibility amongst art observers is considerable. Pascal Gielen for instance stresses that "[t]he push to be more entrepreneurial and to embrace the creative industry is supposed to convince us that only one world matters. Such a reduction leads to a shrinking of the imaginative horizon".²⁹ Peter Marcuse expresses a similar scepticism, when he posits that while "[c]ulture (..) is promoted as a contributor to economic development (..) [i]n the process, its critical and transcendent potential has been eviscerated." He adds that "[w]hile such instrumentalization may help artists in the short run, it also poses a danger to the ultimate social role of the arts".³⁰ Singapore provides one sad example of the new cynical reality that thus emerges: on the one hand, this city-state has initiated an extensive investment programme for contemporary art in view of the new prerogatives of the post-fordist economy. On the other hand, it clamps down on any counter-hegemonic, critical project that artists might initiate because of political control.³¹

These dual consequences of radical appropriation are all the more problematic in view of the crucial position of culture in our societies today. As we have seen, according to Nato Thompson, culture is an essential tool for those in power to maintain and expand their influence.³² Similarly, Chantal Mouffe argues later in this book that the cultural terrain occupies a central position in contemporary society. This conviction is based on the rejection – following Antonio Gramsci – of the Marxist idea that culture as an element of the 'superstructure' follows transformations in the economic 'base', a rejection that is shared by more authors in this book.³³ Inverting the relation between base and superstructure – or economy and culture – culture is seen as the central battlefield for a social struggle over domination, and – crucially – a place where structural social

change can be initiated. At the core of this struggle is a fight over hegemony – a central term that returns in many of the chapters in this book – in which coalitions of groups try to get their definition of reality accepted as ‘common sense’ by others.³⁴ Eventually, the dominant common sense is institutionalised in a variety of hegemonic practices, through which as Chantal Mouffe argues “a given order is created and the meaning of social institutions is fixed.”³⁵ As a result, according to García Díaz and Gielen in their chapter in this book, “social institutions and structures such as the family, universities, churches, or trade unions become sources from where [the common sense] is diffused, coexisting between different class interests and finally creating a concrete hegemonic system”. Mouffe stresses that a hegemonic order has to be actively maintained and that it can also always be challenged by “counter-hegemonic practices (..) which attempt to disarticulate it in order to install another form of hegemony.”³⁶ In *‘Learning from Thatcherism’* she illustrates this process, showing how the emergence of the current neoliberal order has been the result of a counter-hegemonic struggle in the cultural domain that started in the 1970s.³⁷ By implication, the cultural domain will also be crucial for any future social change beyond neoliberalism, or paternalist social structures for that matter. Unfortunately, the radical appropriation of art and culture in general might now present obstacles for such a counter-hegemonic role.

Radical Appropriation in Thailand

In Thailand, discussions about art and politics are likely to focus on art that has politics as a subject matter rather than on the ways in which artistic practices function in the current political setting. While debates on the latter do exist, they are often confined to the semi-private realm of informal conversations, carried out in-person or on social media. A recent example is the debate that unfolded in a Facebook thread – mentioned earlier – through which Thai artists condemned the links between the Bangkok Art Biennale (BAB) and Thailand’s political and economic hegemony, while calling out the complicity of their participating colleagues. This was in late August, only a few weeks after the most recent round of demonstrations had picked up in the capital and when the protesters’ list of demands was extended to include a reform of the monarchy.³⁸ Many in the Thai art scene have taken part in these demonstrations and a statement released by the “Arts and Culture Network for Democracy”³⁹ – in support of the movement’s 10-points manifesto – counted more than a thousand signatures.⁴⁰ However, some of the names that figured under the declaration concurrently appeared on the BAB’s list of participating artists, raising questions about conflicting allegiances.

Controversies like this are frequent topics of local art scene whispers, but they are rarely recorded for future reference. Meanwhile, national and international news outlets have taken to uniformly painting Thai artists as ‘dissident’ or ‘rebel’⁴¹ – terms that are as attention-grabbing as they are reductive of the question ‘what constitutes political art’ and of the intricate politics of the Thai contemporary art landscape. This enduring confusion between artworks that tackle politics as a theme – referring to political events, actors or regimes, even as they appear critical of them – and the manner in which art operates in relation to existing hegemony (either serving or countering it) provides a fertile ground for radical appropriation to take place. Indulgent reporting on the BAB’s first edition by prominent newspapers, including *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*, focused on the ‘sensitive’ or ‘often-censored topics’ being depicted rather than the well-oiled hegemonic machinery that allowed the biennale to exist in the first place.⁴² As per Nato Thompson “the meaning of artworks cannot be detached from the political economies in which they participate”.⁴³ However, just as several articles applauded the artists’ and curators’ supposed boldness, they passed over the entanglement between the BAB, its main sponsor ThaiBev Plc. and the military government.⁴⁴ In doing so, they helped to create the illusion of a permissive environment, thus minimising attention for the very real censorship⁴⁵ and curtailment of freedoms in Thailand.⁴⁶

Dating back to 1932 and the end of the absolute monarchy, the relationship between hegemony and artistic practices in the kingdom remains a close, if at times tumultuous, one.⁴⁷ As David Teh notes, the creation of the modern state was accompanied by the formation of a fine arts academy – later to become Silpakorn University – as “new principles of order and authority had to be found and communicated.”⁴⁸ The man selected to carry out this task, Italian sculptor Corrado Feroci, equated art to “beauty and goodness”, a view that matched the dominant ‘*khondi*’ or ‘good people’ ideal in Thai society.⁴⁹ While the political and economic alliances that constituted Thailand’s hegemony shifted in the 1950s, 1970s and again during the 1990s – with the military at times gaining or losing some of its power and the emergence of new players, such as Sino-Thai conglomerates – Feroci’s lasting influence continued to tie art to the three pillars of the Thai state: nation, religion and monarchy.⁵⁰ Although the Silpakorn network still dominated Thai art, its polished surface began to crack in the 1980s, with the emergence of counter-hegemonic practices that would find global resonance in the next decade. A younger generation of practitioners, often returning from their overseas studies, produced new works in defiance of the three-pillars model and the conservative notion of *Thainess*.⁵¹ Instead, they looked at subalternities within the country and offered biting criticism of the epoch’s consumerist drive. Their exhibitions – taking place outside the mainstream platforms, either at alternative galleries

or vibrant outdoors festivals⁵² – soon caught the eye of international curators looking to broaden their base and propel Asian artists onto the global stage.

However, the end of the twentieth century also would see a realignment of art with Thailand's hegemony – in which large corporations now occupied an increasingly central position – thereby undermining the evolving role of artistic practices in social critique.⁵³ One year after the 1997 Asian financial crisis, Silpakorn University, the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority, and the Tourism Authority of Thailand jointly delivered the '*Bangkok Art Project*'. Illustrating the utility of a new understanding of 'contemporary art', this exhibition was part of a development that led to the creation of the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture (OCAC) within the Ministry of Culture in 2002, under the leadership of established curator Apinan Poshyananda. In the following years, Poshyananda and the OCAC organised various large-scale contemporary art exhibitions, with remarkable similarities: punny names, reappearing artists, a focus on the spectacle, while packaging social events in ways befitting the hegemony. These exhibitions underline the increased importance of culture as a battlefield for social control. One example is *Imagine Peace*, organised in June 2010, when casualties of the bloody crackdown on red-shirt protesters were barely buried. As David Teh observes, "Here we saw art's independence from the state, tentatively staked out in the 1970s, extended in the 1980s and 1990s, collapse in a spectacular heap."⁵⁴ It was this model of contemporary art, based on large-scale experience-focused exhibitions, projecting an idea of smooth consensus, that would soon be discovered by corporations as soft power tools for mobilising consumerist desire – for instance, in the form of the BAB.

In the meantime, a number of alternative art venues – from independent spaces to commercial galleries and museums – would emerge or thrive as well, both in the capital and elsewhere in Thailand, despite the army's clampdown on civil liberties.⁵⁵ These included Bangkok's N22 art hub and its rotation of hard-hitting exhibitions, as well as relative newcomers Bangkok CityCity and Nova Contemporary – both commercial spaces branching out to represent Thai artists on the international stage. In Chiang Mai, the opening of MAIIAM Museum of Contemporary Art in 2015 finally gave Thailand a full-fledged art institution detached from the state. The privately-owned museum collects works by Thai artists, while presenting exhibitions in tandem with regional institutions.⁵⁶ In 2018, this multiplication of alternative art events and venues culminated in the launch of both the counter-hegemonic Bangkok Biennial⁵⁷ and Ghost2561, a triennial curated by New York-based artist Korakrit Arunanondchai and Judha Su, featuring a line-up of international A-listers and in-demand Thai artists on a par with that of the BAB⁵⁸. At the same time, a wave of decentralisation resulted in spaces and festivals outside the capital, like

for instance Khon Kaen Manifesto and Maelie in Khon Kaen. Today's schizophrenic setting sees arts practitioners vocal in their support of the pro-democracy movement, but also threatened or arrested in relation to these activities.⁵⁹ Moreover, they share the same playing field as a star-studded biennale funded by the army's backers – the opening event of which was attended by Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, whose family's vast wealth and power have come into question. While the country stands at political crossroads, with never-before-voiced grievances being aired, earlier interrogations on the course of Thai contemporary art take on a new meaning. At a time when political institutions and society are being collectively reimagined, it is important that we ask ourselves how the present-day relationship between artistic practices and hegemony is articulated.

On a political level, Kasian Tejapira observes that the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) that carried out the coup d'état in 2014 and its successor, the Prayut Chan-O-Cha-led government, have used lèse-majesté, sedition and other security laws with abandon to prevent political participation, resulting in the creation of a "permanent state of depoliticised exception."⁶⁰ This, in turn, helped to establish a "retro-semi-democracy under the tutelage of royal nationalist and hyper-moralist, non-majoritarian institutions." The latter, which he calls 'Amnat' (power) forces, are composed of the military, Privy Council and judiciary, all placed above Thai citizens and their elected representatives.⁶¹ Furthermore, the military has strengthened its position by partnering up with Sino-Thai conglomerates. Prajak Kongkirati and Veerayootj Kanchoochat argue that, in doing so, the army is able to conserve "dominating power in the long term" and prevent others from "form[ing] an alternative elite group."⁶² In December 2015, twenty-four conglomerates signed a deal with the NCPO in support of a public-private alliance aimed at strengthening the Thai economy. The ensuing *Pracharath* policy also reflected aspirations towards hierarchical capitalism harboured by business tycoons, including the BAB's main sponsor ThaiBev Plc, as well as Charoen Phokphand (CP) Foods/True Corp., Central and The Mall groups.⁶³

With close ties to the art and creative industries, a central facet of the *Pracharath* scheme is the promotion of tourism.⁶⁴ In the years that followed the coup d'état, a number of urban redevelopment projects have cropped up along Bangkok's riverfront, closing in on the vibrant Charoenkrung neighbourhood, home to a number of independent art spaces. The Thailand Creative and Design Centre (TCDC), which operates under the Office of the Prime Minister, relocated its headquarters to the Grand Postal Building, an iconic edifice of the area targeted to become a 'creative district'.⁶⁵ Across the river, plans to build a profitable observation tower sailed through cabinet meetings. There was apparently no need for a bidding process, when

investors included CP and Siam Piwat representatives, developers of the adjacent IconSiam shopping mall.⁶⁶ As the BAB kicked off in 2018, much excitement was registered about one of its locations, the elegant but dilapidated, and previously cordoned off, East Asiatic Company building. The exhibition would come to serve as a publicity campaign, as TCC Land Asset World Co., the property development arm of ThaiBev Plc., had announced two years earlier that it would convert the site into a five-star hotel.⁶⁷ Both in 2018 and 2020, the BAB featured 'river' and 'city' routes linking artworks along the Chao Phraya River – in the vicinity of property owned by business partners – as well as a strong presence in shopping malls operated by Siam Piwat, The Mall and Central groups. Ahead of the BAB's launch, its artistic director Apinan Poshyananda had expressed hopes that the biennale would draw in tourists as well as "enhance the city's image and reputation".⁶⁸ By observing the current 2020 BAB edition it's safe to assume that the alliance between artistic practices and hegemony in Thailand is still going strong, albeit having shifted from a promotion of the Three Pillars to that of private interests and eye-catching consumerism.

Although the BAB is organised by ThaiBev Plc. and not by the military-backed government itself, the former is a sponsor of the latter's Palang Pracharat Party⁶⁹ and holds tremendous political and economic influence. Local actors as well as international artists familiar with the kingdom's art scene are well-aware of those linkages. Nonetheless, the BAB carried on its second edition without much obstruction, at a time when calls for a political regime overhaul were voiced at its doorstep. This time around, some of the 1990s artists – who were then challengers of the kingdom's hegemony – turned more consensual, having found themselves aligned with this nexus of power not least through their participation in the BAB. Their involvement was abetted in part by Apinan Poshyananda's smooth salesmanship, which had allowed him to 'play both sides' with spectacular dexterity in 2018, projecting an aura of subversiveness while cosying up to powerful players.⁷⁰ Thus, the inclusion of a handful of works by Thai artists known for their progressive views could be regarded as cynical curatorial attempts to divert attention away from the BAB's questionable political agenda. Meanwhile, when Poshyananda looks at the recent street protests demanding reform and the disproportionate police violence they garnered in return, he sees 'spice'⁷¹ – hot and flavourful seasoning that will make his biennale stand out more.

While Thai artists have played an important role in keeping the country's hegemony in check these past few years, often drawing attention to human rights violations through their works,⁷² the fact remains that they commonly engage with very diverse platforms, serving contrasting – if not incompatible – political agendas. The new strand of Thai artist is ubiquitous. Most recently, a

handful of well-known figures travelled to Khon Kaen Manifesto to display their outrage at the military, days after they had finished installing their works at the BAB. Apparently, it was of little consequence that these two exhibitions stood on opposing ends of the political spectrum. This brings us back to our earlier argument regarding the critical contents of artworks versus the ways in which they relate to hegemony. David Hodge & Hamed Yousefi's analysis of the global art world's neoliberal functioning in this book offers at least a partial explanation of Thai artists' competing interests and unclear position vis-à-vis hegemony. Choosing "individual progress over collective emancipation", many artists focus on their personal career trajectories, thus undermining the potential for structural change. The valuable contributions of artists to recent demonstrations in Thailand show that there is a 'shared political horizon'. However, it appears that professional ambitions continue to supersede such political aspirations. When international exhibitions of the scale of the BAB remain rare in Thailand, opportunities can be delicate to turn down, especially for emerging and mid-career local artists. However, we can easily surmise that the Thai art veterans participating in the current BAB had no need to build up their portfolio or connections, as of course is also the case for established international artists that help to give the event its sheer of legitimacy as an art exhibition.

An introduction to the texts in this book

It is clear that in Thailand's setting of a hampered institutional development of contemporary art institutions, the spaces where artists can show their work are limited. Furthermore, it is also beyond question that many of these spaces align with the existing hegemony, and its political and economic elites. Our discussion furthermore indicates that there doesn't seem to be clear agreement over the question if artists should participate in exhibitions in those spaces, and if so, under which conditions. Such questions are neither neutral, nor irrelevant, because – as we have argued with others – culture in general, and artistic practices in particular, have become crucial battlegrounds for the struggle over social domination, where soft power control aims to influence what is regarded as common sense. This is especially relevant in Thailand today, where widespread recurrent protests provide a clear indication that various social groups aim to build a counter-hegemony as the basis for political, economic and social transformations.

In this moment of civil resistance, it is important to start expressing what type of society is imagined for the future; and to discuss which roles artistic practices should play in this process. Andrew Marantz' provides a pointer when he observes that "if protests are expressions of what a movement is against, then alternative social institutions can be manifestations of what a movement is for, a glimpse of how the world might look once it has been transformed."⁷³ For

Marciej Bartkowski, this process of building alternative institutions is “undertaken by organised civilians to establish new practices and organisations that are parallel to and aim to challenge dominant socio-economic, cultural and political structures viewed as unjust and oppressive (..), for example alternative schools, publishing houses, media outlets”.⁷⁴ Examples of these alternative institutions would be the independent news organisation Hong Kong Free Press in Hong Kong, artist-led public learning space Gudskul in Indonesia, or indeed the Bangkok Biennial in Thailand.⁷⁵ As we have seen, in Thailand over the last decade more new art spaces and exhibitions that do not directly relate to the existing hegemony have emerged. There is an urgent need for a discussion on the political potential of such alternative spaces and exhibitions.

It is our ambition that the *inappropriate Book Club* as a reading group on art and politics can support such a discussion. During this book club, we want to address the pitfalls of existing contemporary artistic practices in view of their complicity to existing hegemony; but next to building awareness, we also wonder how we can imagine different artistic practices, able to support a counter-hegemonic common sense. The eight texts in this book, each in their own way, serve this dual purpose. In ‘*Agonistic Politics and Artistic Practices*’, Chantal Mouffe – a highly esteemed political scientist at Westminster University in London – sketches a Gramscian framework for the conceptualisation of the relationship between artistic practices and hegemony. Building on her lifelong project of reimagining a post-Marxist radical democratic politics, Mouffe argues for a so-called ‘agonistic’ view of politics.⁷⁶ According to this view, it is impossible to reconcile all perspectives in society. A social order can therefore be contested, and reflects the common sense of dominant groups in society. As a result, this hegemonic order is also always susceptible to challenges by counter-hegemonic practices.⁷⁷ Such challenges do not only necessitate criticism of the existing hegemony; an imagination of alternative social relations is needed as well. According to Mouffe, cultural and artistic practices can play a decisive role in imagining such alternatives, as they engage with people at an affective level. Arguing for a widening of the field of artistic intervention, she encourages artists to work in a multiplicity of social spaces, both inside and outside the formal art system. She rejects an exit strategy that results in a complete withdrawal from the formal art system as this would not result in the necessary structural changes.

In their own ways, each of the following texts – explicitly or implicitly – engage with Chantal Mouffe’s framework. We have chosen to include texts reflecting on the formal art system first, followed by texts that shift attention beyond this system. ‘*176 Gifts/176 Disposessions*’ clearly illustrates how cultural institutions within the formal art system can be complicit to the preservation of hegemony. This text by Donna Miranda and Angelo V. Suárez, a choreographer

and a poet from the Philippines, who are both involved with activist land reform organisation SAKA, puts the spotlight on the collection of the Ateneo Art Gallery, a museum of modern art in Manila. Tracing the feudal and colonial history of the Philippines through which land and business owners secured their staggering wealth, they show how the museum's collection results from gift giving practices that whitewash these families' violent pasts, thus perpetuating injustice in the present. They furthermore show that complicity with hegemony is not only a domestic affair. Silverlens, the Philippines' most successful contemporary art gallery which operates in the international art system is founded and run by a member of one of these well-known families. At the end, Miranda and Suárez show that even their own text cannot escape complicity, as it is commissioned by SFMOMA, whose chairman of the board of trustees is CEO of an American clothing giant implicated in unjust labour practices in the Philippines.

In *'CCC: Currency of Collective Consciousness'*, Ahmet Ögüt – a successful mid-career artist and veteran of the biennial circuit who lives in Amsterdam and Istanbul – reflects on the complicity of artists participating in the international art system. Stressing the agency of artists, he argues that they have a responsibility to not participate in events with questionable politics. Ögüt grapples with the difficulty of making informed decisions about political issues when working in unfamiliar locations, a common situation in the international art world. He introduces the figure of the 'Intervenor' as a possible solution to deal with those challenges. In the end, Ögüt posits that collectively, artists have a strong position to enforce a reckoning with art events and institutions that have unsavoury elements at the core of their operation, thereby making sure that – when necessary – they put a stop to their own complicity.

'Provincialism Perfected: Global Contemporary Art and Uneven Development' zooms in on the current shape of the art system and its effects on the potential for solidarity between artists. David Hodge and Hamed Yousefi – independent art historian and filmmaker / art historian respectively – argue that the 'provincialism' problem that faced non-Western artists a few decades ago seems to have faded. After all, nowadays artists from everywhere are invited into the fold of the global contemporary art circuit. However, according to the authors, rather than being solved, the problem has been neoliberalised. Despite claims of the absence of a stylistic lingua franca, a very specific way of working – auto-reflective, based on thorough research, and implying criticality – has become the prerequisite for participation in the international scene. As this necessitates expensive training at international art schools, access to this circuit is in effect still highly unequal. This is now obscured by the guise of meritocracy. As a result, artists internalise the blame of a lack of success as a personal failing. On top of this, the scarcity of the highly sought-after opportunities – for instance for residencies – throws artists into perpetual

competition, encouraging individual progress over collective emancipation, an argument that we already alluded to previously. In contrast with the image of contemporary art as a privileged site for critical projects, its socio-economic structure thus impedes the formation of solidarities needed to produce structural change.

In his introduction to the book *'Strike Art'*, art historian and activist Yates McKee dives further into the shortcomings of the 'art world system', with its too-close-for-comfort connection with the 1%, the corporate world and the financial elites. While McKee stops short of denouncing participation in the 'formal' art world of museums, galleries, biennials and so on, he does stress that its proximity to capital makes it impossible to generate any real social change from within this system. Instead, he focuses on the artistic strategies beyond the formal art system as employed during New York's Occupy Wall Street, the 2011 protest movement against economic inequality and the dramatic wealth of the 1% in which McKee took part himself. He observes that artists played a central role in this movement, not as superficial 'decorators', but as initiators and organisers. McKee contrasts the 'artist as organiser' who is engaged in creative direct action positively with the artist of the formal art system performing critical aesthetic gestures in gallery spaces. He also argues that the Occupy-movement itself should be seen as art, as it uses affect to explore alternative social relations, thereby helping to imagine alternative futures. In this way, according to McKee, Occupy New York takes the avant-garde dialectic of 'art and life' to a new level.

The theme of the avant-garde is further explored in the exchange between Geeta Kapur – the grande dame of Indian art criticism – and US-based art historian Saloni Mathur. In her densely written manifesto *'Proposition Avant-Garde: A View from the South'*, Geeta Kapur suggests a renewed role for the concept of the avant-garde, wrested free from historical understandings within Euro-American art theory. She proposes a locally-grounded, situational perspective on the avant-garde that is imbued with diverse cultural annotations which can give new meaning to the key dialectic of 'art and life', this time on the widest political and geographical scale. Kapur views the avant-garde as an interventionist strategy, providing a force of radical disruption in a world where inequalities – economically, socially and politically – are too immense to solely rely on agonistic strategies for reaching more just outcomes. In a simultaneously published response to the manifesto, Saloni Mathur suggests that Kapur seeks to challenge the unfolding universalisms of transnationalism, neoliberalism and globalisation. This does not imply that Kapur advocates an inward turn; instead she calls for communication, collaboration and collectivities – on the ground and online – in order to shape a meaningful role for a new avant-garde. Mathur furthermore signals the urgent need for a discursive and theoretical reflection on

artistic practices, as antidote to a world that emphasises professionalisation, is dominated by market concerns, and where instrumentalist art writing is the norm.

In the '*Precariat – A Revolutionary Class?*', Lara García Díaz and Pascal Gielen – cultural activist/social theorist and professor in sociology at Antwerp University in Belgium respectively – reflect on the potential role of the precariat as an agent of fundamental social change. They present precarisation as the adverse effect of neoliberal policies, which have ushered in a new model of labour subjectivity based on entrepreneurial, risk-taking individualism. As a result, many self-employed workers – including those in the creative sector – are now struggling for a decent quality of life. García Díaz and Gielen stress that the precariat consists of a multiplicity of groups, without a coherent subjectivity. This group will not automatically operate as a revolutionary agent, on a par with the Marxist proletariat. With explicit reference to Gramsci's theory of hegemony, García Díaz and Gielen stress that fundamental social transformation has to be actively organised, by rallying a variety of groups behind an alternative common sense about the world. They argue that such a process will include three phases: first the articulation of critique against the existing dominant hegemony; then self-organisation of alternative social models; and lastly commoning practices that help to spread those alternatives beyond the local context. Focusing on solidarity and a collectivisation of activities, according to García Díaz and Gielen, commonism could provide the core of such a counter-hegemonic strategy with its focus on "free or very low-cost sharing of information and knowledge, of materials and logistics, but also of business models and new solidarity structures based on trust and mutual support". They end by exploring the potential for commoning practices within the art field.

In the final chapter, '*Politicizing Sadness*', Colectivo Situaciones – a former collective of militant researchers from Buenos Aires – problematises what happens when civil protests end. The text was written in 2001, in the aftermath of the Piqueteros-movement in Argentina. Sadness is the overwhelming feeling that remains after the realisation that the goals of a movement have not been reached. However, according to the collective, sadness results as much from the realisation that after a protest – or more precisely between periods of protests – things tend to return 'back to normal'. Thus, while boundaries disappear during protests and the possibilities of new forms of sociality emerge, after the protests, walls are drawn up again and groups and people that worked together return to their separate fields, re-establishing their 'professional' selves. As one example, they observe that after a civil protest, the participation of artists to social movements at once is evaluated according to formal artworld criteria; criteria that didn't have any relevance during the protest. Politicising sadness means realising that this state of affairs is detrimental to social change, as it interrupts the building of a counter-hegemony. In a beautiful text that is

highly relevant for Thailand with its almost endless cycle of protests and repression, they argue that a successful counter-hegemony necessitates a sustained effort that does not stop when the barricades disappear.

By way of conclusion – Some lines of thought in these texts

While these texts focus on distinct aspects of the relationship between art and politics, various themes run through multiple contributions. Here, by way of conclusion, we want to start teasing out those lines of thought, as a primer for a discussion on the role of art in Thailand today, and in the future. Without any pretence to be complete, we want to highlight seven issues:

All art is political. While each of these texts deals with the inherent political nature of art differently, they all start from this assumption. Like it or not, in a setting of radical appropriation, exhibitions and institutions increasingly function politically; they are not neutral but are organised with specific objectives in mind. Participating artists have to account for these often-implicit ulterior politics, which go beyond the horizon of their own work. Donna Miranda & Angelo V. Suárez, Yates McKee and Ahmet Ögüt explicitly engage with this complicity of the art system to politics. As Ahmet Ögüt writes later in this book, “[a]s artists, curators, social agents, cultural workers, writers, academics, organisers, students, and museum directors, we constantly need to ask ourselves how much we are willing to compromise while creating the conditions for art’s production”. The relevance of Ögüt’s position for Thailand was illustrated earlier in this introduction, when we discussed how the participation of artists to the BAB had become a topic of contention. In times of radical appropriation, it is impossible for artists not to be political.

Critique alone is not enough. The nature and efficacy of critical art is a theme that returns in almost all texts. At the core of this line of thought is the idea that the unveiling of injustice through an artwork in the formal art system is not enough on its own. Thus, both Chantal Mouffe and Yates McKee stress that however committed these ‘critical artists’ might be, they will not facilitate the emergence of a counter-hegemony by simply picking apart the existing one. Or, in words of Lara García Díaz & Pascal Gielen, “ideas alone cannot produce real social changes.” It is at least as important to contribute to the building of a counter-hegemony around an alternative common sense, by the production of new subjectivities. David Hodge & Hamed Yousefi argue that unfortunately the conditions for this in the neoliberal setting in which artists operate today are not ideal: “while the aesthetics of contemporary art may make it a privileged site for critical projects, the socio-economic structure of the international scene means that artists lack any shared political horizon to concretise their affirmations of difference into a strong attack on

hegemonic conditions". This line of thought is highly relevant for Thailand, which has seen a plethora of critical works, not least in the years that followed the 2014 military coup.⁷⁸ While pointing at injustices in Thai society and denouncing repressive acts by the army and the state, these works can still be co-opted by those in power, including – as we have seen – NCPO's economic partner ThaiBev Plc. through 'their' Bangkok Art Biennale; especially when artists prioritise their professional development over a 'political horizon' that they certainly share. Of course, this doesn't mean critique is not important. In recent years, in Thailand's highly constrictive setting, 'critical exhibitions' have played an important role in 'keeping the struggle alive'. Visual artists' conceptual approaches to politics spared them censorship until mid-2017, allowing them to address a number of sensitive topics.⁷⁹ When freedom of expression and freedom of assembly were seriously threatened, and events from protests to academic seminars were banned or closely monitored, gallery openings functioned as alternative meeting spaces for like-minded Thais. Shows at N22, for instance, drew in visitors from outside traditional art circles, including pro-democracy activists and political figures, as well as ordinary people sharing similar beliefs.

Artists should be organisers. This line of thought follows directly from the previous one, and points at the possibility of artists to support counter-hegemonies by prefiguring new realities. It hinges on Yates McKee's argument – built on Walter Benjamin's famous figure of the 'author as producer' – that the political relevance of an artist's work does not only lie in radical or critical expressions within the art system, "but rather when it takes on an 'organizing function' in the creation of a new collective assemblage of authorship, audience, and distribution networks embedded in political struggle". This focus on the creation of new assemblages echoes Chantal Mouffe's plea for the artist as organic intellectual – a term that she borrows from Antonio Gramsci – signifying those who articulate the common sense of the masses. Following the work of David Graeber, McKee suggests that this compositional step take the form of 'creative direct action', as "action undertaken autonomously without permission from any mediating power – such as a political party or an art institution – in which the ruling order is challenged even as a new world is 'prefigured' in the action itself". This also aligns with García Díaz & Gielen's ambition to construct a new consciousness for the precariat. As touched upon above, they suggest that in this process articulation of critique and alternatives needs to be followed first by self-organisation – a process of building compositions in local settings – and then by the process of commoning. During this third step, "[i]n order to build an effective counter-hegemony (..) alternative models must be distributed and (..) shared beyond local borders", thereby supporting structural changes.

The renewed relevance of the avant-garde. Remarkably, while declared outdated or dead for some time in Western art criticism, the figure of the avant-garde features in four contributions. Yates McKee explores the relevance of historic ideas about the avant-garde for the Occupy Wall Street protests. He observes a “veritable renaissance of the avant-garde”. In similar terms, from a post-colonial perspective, Geeta Kapur sees a continued relevance for the avant-garde and its disruptive and interventionist strategies. She suggests that these strategies can generate “ruptures on the ground of one country, then another and another”, thus piercing the smooth terrain that global capital tries to project. Meanwhile, David Hodge & Hamed Yousefi reference the group identity of the modernist avant-garde, which formed the basis for its emergence as a historical subject with the capacity for collective resistance, when criticising the individualism that characterises artists nowadays. Perhaps the idea of the avant-garde could function as an aspirational collective subjectivity, assisting in movement-building and fostering solidarity between artists, thereby forming an antidote to the neoliberal modus operandi of individual competition that is governing the global art world today.

Commonism as the core of a new hegemony? The spectre of neoliberalism looms over each of the texts in this book. It provides an explicit negative counterpoint for both Colectivo Situaciones and David Hodge & Hamed Yousefi. Meanwhile, Chantal Mouffe and Lara García Díaz & Pascal Gielen go one step further, wondering how we can move beyond neoliberal hegemony. The latter present ‘commonism’ as the potential core of a counter-hegemony. Their starting-point is the emergence of the precariat in our recent neoliberal decades. García Díaz & Gielen argue that the precariat is not a homogeneous social group and criticise the idea that it is a coherent revolutionary class on a par with the Marxist proletariat. Their Gramscian framework aligns with Chantal Mouffe’s denunciation of the classical Marxist idea of the possibility of an ultimate victory over inherent social contradictions of capitalism by lifting a ‘false consciousness’. Stressing the active, constructive nature of any counter-hegemonic struggle, as organisers, artists might help building a new coalition around alternative perceptions of the world. They suggest that commonism could provide the basis for such an alternative common sense, and that – in contrast to demands for fair pay or similar solutions to precarious labour conditions that remain within the remit of neoliberal social and economic relations, as important as those might be in themselves – this could instigate structural changes beyond the current neoliberal hegemony.

Should artists exit the formal art system? The argument that the formal art system is complicit to the existing hegemony, and that critical gestures are easily neutralised begs the question if artists should participate in this system in the first place. While Yates McKee suggests that

participation in this system is not something to be condemned on moral grounds, at the same time he stresses that practices within this system have little chance of initiating structural change either – an argument that is supported by many of the authors in this book. After all, those “aspiring to radical political engagement, (...) [are] constrained by the norms, protocols, and cultural cynicism that comes from working in mainstream art institutions and academia.” Others have therefore been more forbidding, pleading with authors like Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno for a strategy of withdrawal from institutions. However, Chantal Mouffe adamantly argues against such an exodus strategy, maintaining that a counter-hegemony can only be successfully realised if the existing hegemony is challenged in a multiplicity of spaces, those inside the formal art system included. Nonetheless, Ahmet Ögüt shows that when artists decide to remain involved within this system, they should articulate the conditions under which this is acceptable. Meanwhile, following Geeta Kapur’s insistence that an agonistic worldview might not be well-suited for highly polarised and unequal social settings, the question also remains if participation should be pursued in every situation or setting.

Protest and/as art. This is the central argument of Yates McKee, who not only argues that artists have played a central role in the Occupy Wall Street protests, but also that the experiments with alternative social relations within these protests could be considered art in themselves. McKee stresses the importance of the subjective, affective and imaginative dimensions of social movements, in bringing together very diverse groups of people in new relations. He thereby echoes Chantal Mouffe’s observation that artistic practices have a great capacity to mobilise affect, thus accommodating the emergence of new subjectivities. McKee furthermore observes that in ‘protest times’, pre-existing specialised identities dissolve, an observation also made by Colectivo Situaciones. Protests thus are moments in which all participants – regardless of background or professional identity – take part in envisioning alternative political futures together. This line of thought is of course highly pertinent in the Thai context, where artists have been core-participants in the current pro-democracy protests; for instance, through the ‘Free Arts’ platform driven by visual artists, filmmakers, performers and musicians. Artists have also contributed to the protests via a variety of materials, including vivid illustrations, memes, font works, posters and flyers. These were often produced anonymously or widely circulated online in a way that sees their authors giving up ownership – something that would be harder to imagine in ‘normal times’. During ‘protest times’, these materials are crucial affective tools for the mobilisation of people, and our co-editor Sina Wittayawiroj has compiled a collection for this book. After the protests, they become important markers of a common past. At the same time, following McKee, maybe the essence of protests as artistic expression especially lies in their

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