

On Text-Based Commoning

Ariane Sutthavong, Lara van Meeteren, Bart Wissink

The inappropriate BOOK CLUB

Are we fools to expect our future to improve? In this volatile era of increased control, stemming from neoliberal capitalism and other—often older—systems of domination and rising authoritarianism around the world, hope feels fragile and fleeting. In Asia, the context from which we are writing, dramatic mobilizations—crystallized around specific nation- and region-based intersections of class and identity—have to various degrees been brutally repressed. In Hong Kong, the Philippines, Thailand and Myanmar, to name but a few places, activists and protesters seem to face insurmountable odds in their fight for political, socio-cultural and economic equality. The outlook becomes even more grim when realizing that these recent protests are part of long-term struggles. The wave of demonstrations that swept through Thailand in 2020–2021 for instance—stimulated as it was by a strong feeling among participants that, this time, things would be different—was yet another instalment of what is a continuous cycle of mobilizations that are thwarted by military coups.

——— So, how can we hope for change in, say, five years' time? Will the institutions of 2028 be any different from today's? Or will our daily lives be transformed? In Thailand, for instance, general elections have been announced to take place halfway through this year. How can we expect a new government to bring improvements in areas where they are so badly needed, when the legislature hinders the prospect of a fair vote? And yet, historic change can and does sometimes happen in an instant.

——— More often than not, that change is preceded by an endless string of collective activities that together lay the groundwork for that moment to come; activities in which people gather to develop the tentative vocabulary to express who they are and what it is that they want for themselves, and for society; in which they practise to claim space; and where they share their determination to continue. Most likely, such commoning practices will not result in big, flashy achievements in the short run, but they are crucial if we want to hope for our world to be a better one, twenty or seventy-two years from now.

——— Texts have an enormous potential in this process. In his 'Further Considerations on Afrofuturism'¹ Kodwo Eshun has argued

for the importance of not only suggesting alternative pasts—or counter-memories—but also of imagining possible futures. Arguing that the future is a ‘chronopolitical’ terrain that is as hostile and treacherous as the past, he warns that it should not be left to others, but should instead be occupied. Collective engagement with texts could play a crucial role in such a project, and serve as a bedrock for collective action. It is therefore not surprising that in Thailand for instance, various publishers such as Faa Diawkan (ฟ้าเดียวกัน), Aan (อ่าน), and Matichon (มติชน) have been formative in mobilizations by sharing alternative ideas with large audiences.

—— However, globally, this potential is undermined by increased control over knowledge production and publishing alike. In a context of neoliberal and politically-complicit universities and media conglomerates, writing is increasingly geared towards efforts benefiting existing capitalist or authoritarian set-ups, while choices over what is translated and published are more than ever guided by what makes money, or is deemed appropriate—or at least doesn’t risk offending. These dynamics are clearly visible in the Thai setting, where universities have never really been left alone as centres for independent thinking, linked as they are to the existing hegemony, and where neoliberal corporations have joined the state in controlling knowledge production and dispersal. As a result, the control over text production and dissemination is extensive, and—where this is not successful—professors lose their jobs, publishers are shut down and books are forbidden; developments that can similarly be seen in neighbouring countries and regions under authoritarian rule.

—— If we simply think in terms of victory and defeat, then the various protest movements in Asia of the past couple of years have come to a halt without tangible results in political or legal terms. However, taking a leaf from Colectivo Situaciones’ ‘Politicizing Sadness’,² we might reflect on the continued importance of these periods of ‘relative calm’ between protests, in order to lay the foundations and keep building for future change in a bigger or smaller way, however hard it is to muster the spirit after what feels like defeat.

¹ Kodwo Eshun, ‘Further Considerations on Afrofuturism’, *The New Centennial Review—globalcities: possibilities of the globe*, Vol.3, No. 2, Michigan, 2003, pp. 287–302.

² Chto Delat collective, Colectivo Situaciones, ‘Politicizing Sadness’, *Potentialities: Beyond Political Sadness*, Newspaper # 16, chtodelat.org/b8-newspapers/12-58/politicizing-sadness/, accessed 25 January 2023.



As part of such groundwork we envision a vibrant world of text-based commoning, that can provide a potential counterpoint by supporting translating, writing and publishing projects that are not guided by market concerns or authoritarian views about what is deemed right, but instead aim to open up space for discussion, engagement and collective production.

—— In Thailand and beyond, we see initiatives for DIY publishing—with a wide variety of characteristics and addressing a wide variety of oppressions—continuously popping up. We believe that in addition to the formal publishing world, these initiatives can play a crucial role in feeding the collective imagination of counter-futures. Important as they may be, the published texts or commissioned translations themselves are not at the core of these self-organized practices. Instead, text-based commoning highlights the importance of the collective gathering of individuals and groups around those texts—activities that in the formal publishing world usually are at best an afterthought. Here, books and pamphlets are but the pretext for collective engagement in and with particular settings. In this view, the real work only starts when the actual ‘publishing’ is done.

—— We remember that protest days have had a distinctive ebb and flow, with mornings dedicated to restoring oneself, checking on each other, communicating and organizing, while the late afternoons had a palpable tension in the air, segueing into evenings when collective grievances were aired in public spaces. The rhythm of self-organized text-based practices is not so different: we come together, dismantle, and focus on restoration, re-assemble around collective understandings of our past, present and future, and do it again.

Acknowledgement

We thank Unchalee Anantawat and Kritti Tantasith for their support in helping us formulate these thoughts.

Memeseum of Contemporary
Art Bangkok
(Pearamon Tulavardhana)

