Ghost

Bangkok Biennial

Bangkok Art Biennale

What should biennials do?

Thailand Biennale

Khonkaen Manifesto

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THAILAND: A LABORATORY FOR BIENNIALS

For art in Thailand, 2018 was a remarkable year. Over the last decades, the biennial – and other large-scale, recurrent art events – emerged as one of the most significant global cultural phenomena. Up until 2018, this 'biennial boom' had resulted in more than 300 recurrent events with rapidly growing visitor numbers.[1] Charles Green and Anthony Gardner even describe biennials as "the exhibitions that created contemporary art", arguing that "[m]any visitors encounter contemporary art solely within their frames".[2] However, while Thai artists certainly were participating in this rapidly expanding biennial circuit, despite various attempts, in Thailand itself there were no large-scale, recurrent art events. One notable exception is the Chiang Mai Social Installation, which was organised multiple times in the 1990s, but not after 1998.[3] In 2018 this all changed. At once, various organisers announced separate two- and three-yearly large-scale art events, including Bangkok Art Biennale, Bangkok Biennial, Ghost, Khonkaen Manifesto, and Thailand Biennale. Thailand might have been late in jumping on the biennial bandwagon, but it certainly did so with a bang.

A year after Thailand's 2018 events, it is abundantly clear that their character and organisational models have varied widely, and – as we will see – these differences are crucial in understanding their effects. The Bangkok Biennial was the first event to take place from July until September.

This decentralised, artist-run event, initiated by Lee Anantawat, Jeff Gompertz and Liam Morgan, had neither central funding nor central curation, and relied on the collective efforts of the organisers of some 75 pavilions. These pavilions could be many things, including physical and virtual spaces, existing art spaces and private houses, one-day events or three-month exhibition, and were located in Bangkok, elsewhere in Thailand and in various cities around the world. The contrast with the Bangkok Art Biennale, which ran in Bangkok from October until February 2019 under the tagline 'Beyond Bliss', could not be starker. Organised with significant corporate funding from main sponsor Thaibev – a giant drinks company with considerable real estate interests in the city – the event took place in multiple locations around the city – most with Thaibev connections – including shopping malls, temples and commercial buildings. Here a curatorial team led by Apinan Poshyananda showed mostly existing and often spectacular work of 75 young and established Thai and international artists.

Khonkaen Manifesto had a smaller scale. Organised in an abandoned office building as well as two local art spaces in Khon Kaen, a provincial capital in peripheral North-East Thailand, it took place for three weeks in October 2018 with limited independent financial support. Concurrently billed as one

of the pavilions of the Bangkok Biennial, main curator Thanom Chapakdee aspired to organise a politically engaged, community-oriented event with some sixty artists. Three-yearly Ghost took place in the same month for nearly three weeks as well. With financial support from various benefactors, curator and co-founder Korakrit Arunanondchai brought together video-and performance-art by local and international artists in about ten commercial galleries and alternative art spaces. While the event had a strong international artworld feel, it was supported by a discursive program. The character of the Thailand Biennale was different again. Organised from November 2018 until the end of February 2019 with state funding through the Ministry of Culture's Office of Contemporary Art and Culture (OCAC), UK-based Chinese curator Joshua Jiang and his team commissioned over fifty local and international artists to create site-specific work reflecting on the theme 'Edge of the Wonderland'. These were shown at many outdoor, public sites in the beautiful nature of touristy Krabi province, in South-West Thailand.

With such a variety of organisational models, Thailand presents a great laboratory for studying the effects of biennials. This is especially relevant in light of the dearth of systematic analysis of Thailand's events so far.[4] Probably partly as a result of this, discussions about Thailand's

biennials are characterised by a certain lack of clarity about the criteria through which to think about these events. Therefore, here we first set out to assess the international biennial literature, and to summarise various dimensions through which we can meaningfully describe and take stock of biennials. Based on interviews with more than thirty organisers and artists that are linked to the five events, and a multitude of informal talks and visits, as well as our experiences as a pavilion organiser within the Bangkok Biennial,[5] we will then apply those dimensions to our own analysis of Thailand's biennials. After the storm of 2018, how should we interpret the events that took place? Which criteria should we use to discuss their effects? On which issues should attention focus when the organisers prepare their next events, set to take place in 2020 and 2021? In the eye of the storm, this is an invitation for discussion.

What biennials do : the literature

In the wake of the 'biennial boom', recurrent art events are now organised in most corners of the world. However, in contrast to this practical success, according to Carlos Basualdo, there was still only limited critical academic engagement with this model for organising art exhibitions by the mid-2000s, as he counted "barely a dozen books, divided into two or three languages, largely published in the last decade".[6] Strikingly, more than ten years later Charles Green and Anthony Gardner recently made the similar observation, that "sustained scholarly analysis has been surprisingly piecemeal".[7] Notwithstanding this lack of systematic critical analysis, the biennial literature does give ample pointers for thinking about Thailand's diverse 2018 events. One of those is clearly expressed by Carlos Basualdo in his above cited essay The Unstable Institution. In this text he convincingly argued that at the time the biennial literature was not only scarce but also one-sided, as it systematically discredited biennials in view of their

instrumental nature: they were presented as "[p]ure and simple spectacles whose logic is nothing more than that of capitalism in its late stage".[8] Noting that virtually all biennials relied on the economic support of cities and countries, Basualdo explicitly acknowledged this instrumental character, as they were created "to promote the contexts in which they are carried out, giving them greater visibility on an international scale, supplying them with a patina of prestige, and ratifying the supposed commitment of these different contexts to modernity in general, and specifically to the processes of economic integration associated with late capitalism".[9]

Yet, Basualdo also pointed out that the exclusive focus on instrumentalisation meant that the potentially radical, subversive character of biennials was kept out of view. At a time when access to the artworld was controlled by professionals and traditional institutions – galleries, museums – with a very Western outlook, biennials helped to open up the canon by creating podiums for a more diverse group of curators. These curators experimented with new models of decentred curation, for instance during documenta11 in 2002 when Okwui Enwezor, its first non-European artistic director, dispersed the exhibition over several locations their own curators; or during the Gwangju Biennale in 2002 when Charles Esche, Hou Hanru and Sung Wan Kyung sought to create connections with experimental and non-profit art groups.
For Elena Filipovic and colleagues, "[t]he biennial's raison d'être was to provide a site for experimentation, contingency, testing, ambiguity, and inquiry. (..) The promulgation of counter-narratives and experimentation with counter-models for exhibition making remains the utopian promise of the biennial in the age of globalization."[10] Hou Hanru agrees, arguing that "biennials provide freedom for artists to engage with changing social, political, and cultural realities, beyond the constraints of traditional museum and gallery exhibition models".[11] This experimentation has accommodated the inclusion of a large diversity of artists and perspectives. Charles Green and Anthony Gardner conclude that this "mix of artists and art from diverse cultures and places has ensured that vital intercultural dialogues have emerged".[12]

In the wake of publications by Carlos Basualdo and others, the idea that biennials have been instrumental in decentralising a very Western art world has become somewhat of a commonplace. Meanwhile, however, over the last decade, social and political changes have stimulated a growing sensitivity to the detrimental effects of neoliberal policies, of the related dramatic growth of inequalities, of the rapidly growing political influence of

the super-rich, and of an authoritarian turn in governance. It has become increasingly clear that art and art events play an integral part in these transformations as they are appropriated by entrepreneurial governments and corporations alike to enrich buildings, projects, neighbourhoods and cities.[13] As artist Hito Steyerl notes, "[c]ontemporary art is a brand name without a brand, ready to be slapped onto almost anything for a quick face-lift touting the new creative imperative for places in need of an extreme makeover."[14] This awareness has swung the pendulum of attention firmly back to the instrumental nature of biennials, and to concerns over their potential for appropriation. Charles Green and Anthony Gardner recently summarised the changing zeitgeist when they suggested replacing "the usual, reductive, and immobilizing question – do biennials promote or subvert globalization? – with the far more interesting question (..): are they the artistic playgrounds of neoliberal capitalism or do they enable the forging and testing of alternative, critical, even subtly subversive perspectives?"[15]

The main target of criticism in a newly emerging literature is a certain type of biennial, organised with financial support of entrepreneurial governments and corporations, meant to lure both tourists, middle-class consumers, and the international art crowd to oversized spectacles of mindless art consumption, in order to promote the economy of cities and regions, or the corporate interests of their sponsors.[16] Often, these art festivals are so-called UFO events, without significant engagement with issues concerning the local community. Meanwhile, general local audiences threaten to be perceived as secondary to the international jet-setting art world and local officials and elites, who are only interested in what Anthony Gardner calls the 'spectacle time' of the opening event.[17] In view of their promotional agenda's, these events often are relatively risk averse, which easily leads to forms of censorship or self-censorship; after all, who would want to risk inconveniencing their paymaster? According to Andrew Maerkle, "packaged with hedonistic sidebars of local cuisine, crafts and products", biennials thus easily transform into "empty frameworks for extracting money from tourists and pumping capital into regional economies".[18] Terry Smith concludes that "the biennial has (..) become structural within the exhibitionary complex" and that "its recent history might indicate a certain ossification of the large-scale mega-exhibition, and a lowering of its subversive potential.[19]

Over the last decade, these observations have resulted in a new literature built upon the assumption that the biennial in itself is not good or bad, but that its mode of organising influences its

effects. Criticising the postcritical populism of many mainstream events, and their propensity to appropriate art, this literature aims to position biennials squarely in the political field.[20] Panos Kompatsiaris thus argues that "biennials are primarily platforms of political rather than aesthetic interventions", which comes "at the expense of its function as an institution that displays art".[21] Discussing alternative biennials, Michel Oren stresses that this political potential is better served by smaller and more innovative events.[22] Wondering how biennials can fulfil their critical potential, Dave Beech contends that it is important to make a distinction between critical artists, critical curators and critical biennials. While critical artists can produce good works, in the context of more traditional biennials these can be easily appropriated: "Insisting on focusing on the quality of artworks or the criticality of artists under the conditions of the global art festival is akin to putting your hopes in handicraft against the barbarity of industrialization in the nineteenth century".[23] Recurrent protests against the ethics and ulterior motives of organisers and funders in recent years, for instance during this year's Whitney Biennial, illustrate that at least some artists are increasingly concerned about their potential complicity.[24] Next to the critical artist, Beech is equally apprehensive about the critical curator. While critical curation positions individual works within a larger narrative that can result in interesting questions, at the same time it can also be appropriated, as it still results in spectacles that can be consumed. For Beech, therefore, realisation of the critical potential of biennials necessitates the establishment of a critical biennial: a biennial that experiments with the social form of the biennial itself by turning spectators into collaborators instead of passive consumers, thereby changing society and the institutions on which it is built.

This short overview of literature on biennials is obviously all but conclusive. However, it does provide pointers for thinking critically about actually existing biennials. After all, this literature discusses various characteristics of biennials that can help us to think through and give meaning to the differences between concrete biennials and their models. Here we will discuss nine of these characteristics. As will become clear, these dimensions are interrelated, but not necessarily connected. We stress that this list comes with provisos. Of course, lists always imply a certain level of arbitrariness, are never set in stone, and exclude other possibilities. However, at the same time we feel that these characteristics can help us to think through the actual characteristics of Thailand's 2018 biennials, and thus can form a great starting point for further discussion.

Does this biennial accomodate intercultural exchange?

#1 DIVERSITY AND EXCHANGE

Following the biennial literature, an obvious first dimension along which to position Thailand's 2018 biennials relates to Carlos Basualdo's argument that biennials are potentially subversive. They can open up the canon to a more diverse set of artists and practices, which in turn can help to decentre dominant perspectives while accommodating a broader intercultural exchange. This argument translates into three related issues: the geographical location of the biennial vis-à-vis centres of dominance and the publics that it mobilises; the question if the biennial and its model accommodate a greater diversity of curators; and the diversity of the artists that participate in the biennials.

As for geographical location, a decentralisation of biennials will bring new publics in touch with art, thus accommodating intercultural exchange. In this light, it is important to recognise that the biennials in Thailand in 2018 contribute to a further spread of the biennial format in Southeast Asia. This opens up additional possibilities for Thai artists to present their work, and for the Thai publics to visit shows with a diversity of artists. A further aspect of geography relates to the location of the biennials in Thailand. After all, when biennials are organised outside of Bangkok, they can help to decentre dominant voices in Thailand, and to support the development of infrastructures in places that often hardly have any. The Thailand Biennale, Khonkaen Manifesto, and some pavilions of the Bangkok Biennial especially have supported such wider intercultural dialogues, away from the centre.

The diversity of curation has a direct effect on the diversity of artists as well. Biennials that open up their (lead) curation to rotation like the Thailand Biennial and Ghost probably have a higher likelihood in the long run for greater diversity. The Bangkok Biennial is especially interesting, as it has decided against a central curator, while leaving curation to the individual pavilions. The first impression is that this results in a wider variety of curators, giving a podium to less experienced curators, and making more voices heard on their own terms. At the other end of the spectrum, the Bangkok Art Biennale has a traditional model of a well-established head-curator – Apinan Poshyananda – supported by a team of local curators and curators from the region. Remarkably, Apinan seems set to return for all three biennials for which funding has so far been secured.

Thailand's biennials have resulted in the exhibition of a large variety of works by domestic and international artists, and taken together this has contributed to intercultural exchange. However, attention to the diversity of artists is predicated on the understanding that not every event needs to have the same international mix. After all, curation can also be focused on issues that do not necessitate this. Take for instance Khonkaen Manifesto, which mainly presented domestic artists. This reflected the event's activist and community-oriented agenda, motivated as it was by issues of decentralisation within Thailand. Meanwhile, attention for diversity should not only focus on the mix of artists that actually participate, but also include attention for artists that are not represented. In this context, both the Bangkok Art Biennale and Thailand Biennale were strikingly risk averse – as a consequence of self-censorship and censorship respectively – and politically engaged Thai artists addressing sensitive subjects in Thai society were hardly included. A final critical remark regarding the diversity of artists relates to the all too present danger that biennials might accommodate the circulation of a limited number of artists and curators over various – admittedly diverse – events. Thus, while the Bangkok Art Biennale presented a wide variety of artists, several have been in earlier exhibitions curated by Apinan Poshyananda as well.

Which public does this biennial address, and how?

#2 PUBLICS

Biennials have an audience. However, it is important to note that this public is hybrid, consisting of diverse groups, each with distinct characteristics and interests: international art visitors, participants to a local, regional or national art scene, dignitaries and officials, local communities in all their diversity including middle-class consumers, tourists, and so on.[25] While the Thailand Biennale targeted tourists, the Bangkok Art Biennale catered to 'high-class' tourists as well, but also to middle-class consumers and the international art world. Khonkaen Manifesto, however, combined a focus on regional communities in Northeast Thailand with a focus on the art crowds from Bangkok and Chiang Mai during the

opening weekend. These publics are not incidental; they result from the specific ways in which a biennial is organised. Furthermore, target publics are not always the publics that eventually engage with the event either. Thus, while the Thailand Biennale explicitly aims to attract tourists, it remains unclear if these eventually engaged with the artworks, for instance due to the scarcity or reliable information. As the interests of publics differ, biennials have to make choices between the publics that they prioritise. The contrast between the attention of biennials for the publics of the 'spectacle time' of the opening event and for publics during the remainder of the biennial is especially salient, a distinction that relates to the issue of continuity.

Biennials also differ in the ways in which they perceive their publics. While some biennials perceive their audience as passive targets that need to be entertained – here the Bangkok Art Biennale is the obvious example – others approach their audience as a partner or collaborator. Various pavilions of the Bangkok Biennial for instance focused on a slower, in-depth engagement with their – often local – audience and surroundings. The type of artworks – spectacular, site-specific commissioned works, or works focused on social
engagement for instance – as well as the existence of a public program of symposiums, talks, educational activities directly relates to this way in which audiences are perceived. In view of its perception of the public as a passive target, it is not surprising that discursive, educational and public engagement activities, or even curatorial statements, were strikingly absent from the Bangkok Art Biennale.

Does this biennial

focus on the event itself and its opening, or on continuous engagement?

#3 CONTINUITY

How do biennials avoid falling into the spectacle trap? How can they shift their focus from the three of four invitation-only days at the start of biennials when artists and curator(s) are present towards a slower, stretched-out temporality? How can they move attention away from the exhibition spaces to other spaces of interaction? And how can they thereby prevent that local publics are secondary to the international jet-setting art crowd and local officials and dignitaries that visit the opening days? These questions shift attention to the issue of continuity, or what happens before, during and after – or more accurately: in between – biennials.

Discussions on continuity should in the first place pay attention to the continuity of activities during the biennial itself. Here, the question is how well the biennial is 'kept alive' for the duration of the event, when the high-profile guests have left, and on how it thereby manages to activate its publics. In response to this question, it has become common practice that biennials organise public programs for the duration of the biennial. When looking at Thailand's 2018 biennials, in contrast to the relatively short, high-energy events of Khonkaen Manifesto and Ghost, both four-month biennials – Thailand Biennale and the Bangkok Art Biennale – were heavily tilted towards their opening events. In case of the Thailand Biennale, for instance, the organisers pulled out all the stops when organising an excessive opening parade for which the curatorial team was not invited. In both events, public engagement programs were conspicuously missing, and in the case of the Thailand Biennale, during the event itself the artworks even literally crumbled away due to the absence of conservation. The Bangkok Biennial illustrates that longer events can organise slower, continuous engagement, as its decentralised structure distributed engagement to the individual pavilions, who organised activities at different moment throughout the biennial's duration.

Continuity also relates to the activities between biennials, in the many months between the end of one exhibition and the start of its next iteration. Anthony Gardner argues that there is a shift in attention towards the role of biennials in their larger ecosystems; away from specific events towards guardianship for a broader art infrastructure.[26] He stresses that this necessitates extended time, necessary to create and develop trust and knowledge as a basis for collaboration and communication. Pascal Gielen observes that a "predilection is emerging for the local imbedding, for the collective memory and for the durability once offered by the institution", arguing that biennials should start to occupy a middle ground between the amnesia of the fast-paced radical post-institution and the conservativeness of the slow-moving museum.[27] This is especially important in Thailand, where the art infrastructure is relatively underdeveloped, and documentation and archiving practices are often lacking. Remarkably, in contrast to the longer events, both shorter high-energy events – Khonkaen Manifesto and Ghost – are part of a broader long-term strategy for infrastructure and community development. In the case of Khonkaen Manifesto,

for instance, this has resulted in the establishment of the Maielie art centre in Khon Kaen.

Does this biennial focus on easy consumption

or in-depth engagement?

#4 CONSUMABILITY OR ENGAGEMENT

If biennial publics should be regarded as more than passive targets to be entertained, and if the biennial itself should embrace a slower temporality with more spread-out events, then we have to grapple with the slightly counterintuitive idea that a biennial as a whole should resist easy consumption; the type of consumption where a visit to a biennial becomes a 'gotta collect them all' tick the box experience, a treasure hunt without the possibility to engage with the works and their context, and where the visitor is mainly left with a collection of selfies. If a biennial wants to approach its publics as invested collaborators, then these events should focus on ways to accommodate in-depth engagement. This can be achieved in different ways.

A first approach would be to make sure that something is happening all the time. Such continuity helps to focus on smaller audiences and to engage these in a more meaningful way. Eventually, such smaller audiences can still make up a large public. The Bangkok Biennial does this well. As an example, when friends from Hong Kong visited Bangkok, they asked for a list of the most interesting pavilions, since they only had a few days in Bangkok. As a result of the temporality of this biennial this turned out to be difficult: many pavilions were only open for several days per week, and often only for a shorter period, spread out over the duration of the biennial. On top of this, many individual pavilions engaged with their sometimes very local publics in a slow pace that stretched out over time. As a result, the Bangkok Biennial as a whole resisted easy consumption. While this might not accommodate outside visitors well, this is a positive thing if you want to move away from the art exhibition as a source for mindless consumption, and instead aim to

connect with local audiences, for instance at the level of the neighbourhood.

A second approach would be to shift focus away from objects. Objects themselves can be problematic as they circulate relatively independently from contexts. As a result, a strong focus on objects, without the accommodation of discussions about the context in which they are placed, will not be very helpful for a deeper engagement with publics. Biennials should therefore provide supporting material and activities, such as accessibly written texts about (curatorial) ideas behind the event as a whole and the context of the individual works, or through public engagement programs. Such an approach is clearly illustrated by Khonkaen Manifesto. In this exhibition, objects were secondary to ideas that were clearly communicated to the Thai audience. On top of this, the exhibition itself played a supportive role for a longer-term strategy aimed at accommodating art development away from the centre. Meanwhile, although the majority of the works presented during Ghost were experience based, overall this event focused on deeper engagement as well. The event itself was part of a strategy for knowledge production and dissemination within a 'professional' Thai art public: young artists, curators, filmmakers, etc. The storyteller program of meetings, discussions and the ensuing publication of a bilingual collection of texts facilitated in-depth engagement by this public with the ideas that underpin and inform the discursive elements of contemporary conceptual art.

Does this biennial

focus on individual works, or on context, engagement and development?

#5 CURATION AND CONTEXT

Since the turn of the century, there has been an extensive literature on the transformation of curation. In this discussion, the notion of 'curating' has been contrasted with what has come to be known as 'the curatorial'.[28] Traditionally, curating was focused on the selection, presentation and conservation of artworks. However, gradually it was acknowledged that curators are engaged in many more formative, often collaborative activities, and that an exhibition is only one of many outcomes of this broader collaborative, process-oriented and research-based practice of 'the curatorial'. In response, the idea that exhibitions should not focus on objects alone received traction, and that they should not perceive their publics as passive targets. Furthermore, individual works of art were presented as part of a context that develops in collaboration with publics during the exhibition, expands beyond the realm of the exhibition, and has to be supported by public engagement programs.

Of course, in view of their experimental nature regarding exhibition formats, it is not surprising that these ideas have precedents in biennials. Maria Lind, for instance, points at the 2008 São Paulo Biennial as an example of the realisation of the idea of the curatorial.[29] Remarkably, the outcomes of such experimentation is not really reflected in the exhibition format of the BAB. While this exhibition had a theme in name – 'Beyond Bliss' – this did not play any meaningful role in the exhibition. It did not have much potential to stimulate discussion of cultural and political changes in Thailand either. As a result, the Bangkok Art Biennale hardly provided a context that could help to bring individual works in conversation. Why, for example, was there a painting of Basquiat amongst the works exhibited in the BAB Box? Strikingly, where a context had been created – for instance by one of the co-curators in OP Place – this was not communicated in the exhibition at all, and even a curatorial statement was missing. As a result, the chance that this exhibition could be anything else than the presentation of individual works of art was minimal. On top of this, when the biennial did present critical work of individual artists – which was relatively rare as a result of the risk averse artist selection – there was very little information available that could help in understanding their ideas, thereby effectively neutralising the critical content. The exhibition catalogue consisted of a sequence of artist's bios, reciting resumes and offering only minimal information about the specific works in the biennial. To add insult to injury, the biennial lacked a serious public engagement program as well.

Curation in the other biennials was more in tune with the biennial literature. While the Bangkok Biennial experimented with a decentralisation of curation, both Khonkaen Manifesto and Ghost positioned their main exhibitions within a longer-term strategy of engagement. Meanwhile, the theme of the Thailand Biennale – Edge of the Wonderland – might be problematic as it was formulated from a dominant outsider perspective that did not leave much room for any serious engagement by local communities. However, curation here had a strong focus on site-specific, commissioned

works that accommodated at least in part such an engagement, flirting as it did with participatory art practices. However, in this biennial the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture did display a blatant disregard for the autonomy of the curatorial team, by appointing a Biennial Committee that turned out to have powers to overrule curatorial decisions, suggesting that the notion of the curator and related practices is not fully embraced at least in some corners of the Thai artworld.

Who benefits from this biennial?

#6 ULTERIOR MOTIVES AND COMPILICITY

Biennials have always been linked to ulterior motives. After all, as we have seen, according to Carlos Basualdo they have always received economic support from cities and countries in order to promote the regions in which they took place. Basualdo stresses that biennials are especially prone to instrumentalisation, as "[t]he aura of prestige that surrounds art in general and modern and contemporary art in particular, adapts perfectly to this task."[30] However, in our early twenty-first century context of rampant capitalism, growing private and corporate wealth has added another – private – source of funding to the by now established strategies of

entrepreneurial government. Real estate plays an especially important role in this private funding, because art can help to increase the potential value of properties considerably.[31] However, while biennials around the world are now linked to public and private funding, at the same time, there has been a growing number of alternative biennials as well, which refuse such sources of income, exactly because they do not want to accommodate ulterior motives. The obvious examples of this in Thailand would be the Bangkok Biennial and Khonkaen Manifesto.

With this central role of ulterior motives behind the organisation of biennials, implicitly these biennials have themselves become political. This is true for publicly and privately funded biennials, but also for alternative biennials as their subversive character makes them political as well. It is in this sense, as we have seen, that Panos Kompatsiaris argues that biennials are primarily platforms of political and not aesthetic intervention. The idea that there can be non-political art events therefore is something of the past, if it ever existed. The implication for artists is that their decision to participate in a biennial is political as well, and that this decision can never be made with reference to art alone, as participation also implies a certain complicity to its ulterior motives. At the same time there is an important distinction between the ulterior motives of entrepreneurial governments or corporations on the one hand and those of alternative biennials on the other. The first are related to the often-destructive forces of systems violence – the capitalist system, the authoritarian or entrepreneurial state – which are guided towards a narrowing of the public sphere; those related to alternative biennials stem from the collaborative practices of the lifeworld, and their ambition to broaden the public sphere through collaboration and to create possibilities for new or supressed subjectivities.[32]

The alternative funding models of biennials and the related variation in ulterior motives are clearly illustrated by the events in Thailand in 2018. Apart from some support from the Tourism Authority and various shopping malls, the main funder of the Bangkok Art Biennale was Thaibev – a huge corporation with considerable real estate interests. It is no surprise, therefore, that many of the locations of this biennial overlap with the sites of their upcoming real estate (re)development projects, the largest of which is enormous 'One Bangkok', next to the site of the so-called BAB Box. On top of this, by being aligned with some of Thailand's dominant business groups, by extension this biennial is also in line with the interests of the countries' dominant power regime. In this light, Marina Abramovic' suggestion that while many biennials "are very political and deal with power and the art market", the Bangkok Art Biennale "is for art itself," which implicitly covers up the ulterior motives behind this event, is especially outrageous.[33]

Is this biennial free from direct or indirect external control?

#7 AUTONOMY AND (SELF)CENSORSHIP

Over time, autonomy and censorship have received considerable attention in art writing. At its core this reflected the very Western idea that in modern society, different spheres – art, market, law, etc. – should be insulated from external influences, and that each should be left to their own devises so that they could develop according to their own values and criteria. Within that setting, criticality and open reflection over time developed as core values of the art system: "art is the frontline in debates around free speech precisely because it creates space for questioning values and challenging historical assumptions in public."[34] The early critics of the instrumental nature of biennials, to which Basualdo referred in The Unstable Institution, of course problematised their contribution to the demise of the autonomy of art, and thereby potentially of its critical possibilities. With the radicalisation of expediency under neoliberal governance, over the last decade the concern that the appropriation of art for ulterior motives will influence the contents of art and its critical potential has only further risen. At a time when the idea that art should be instrumental in changing social practices outside of its own system has become common-place, its potential to do so might thereby be negatively affected, encapsulated as biennials often are in the strategies of entrepreneurial governments and corporations.

Of course, when talking about autonomy and censorship, things are somewhat different in Thailand, where recurrent military governments over time have exerted often considerable control over the freedom of expression, and core issues relating to monarchy, military and religion often cannot be freely discussed. In that light it is not surprising at all, that each of the five biennials have experienced their own histories of (self)censorship. Khonkaen Manifesto, for instance, received a visit from the military, upon which the curators decided to "turn down the temperature" by defacing or removing pieces related to the military coup, lèse majesté, or Pai Dao Din.[35] However, there are considerable differences between the biennials as well that stem from the related ulterior motives. Despite censorship, Khonkaen Manifesto and the Bangkok Biennial still actively engaged with politically sensitive issues, aiming to open up the public sphere for discussion. However, in case of the Bangkok Art Biennale the engagement with such core political issues was strikingly missing, as a certain risk averse selection of artists had excluded a whole field of very present politically engaged artists from the exhibition. Meanwhile, the Thailand Biennale went one step further, establishing a Biennale Committee that actively interfered with the selection of artists by the curator. On the one hand, this committee blocked various political projects as these would not be 'suitable', and on the other hand it forced the inclusion of four national artists upon the curatorial team.

Does this biennial have a critical nature?

#8 CRITICALITY AND INSTRUMENTALISATION

The biennial literature made abundantly clear that criticality should be one of the core dimensions for discussing biennials. Dave Beech's distinction between critical artist, critical curator and critical biennials has brought into view that such a discussion should be aware of the fact that criticality – both of the artist and the curator – can still be insufficient, as critical art can become a spectacle when it is instrumentalised for ulterior motives. The meaning of a critical work by a critical artist can easily get lost in the context of a large-scale exhibition, especially when the communication about this work is limited, or when it is not exhibited in one of the exhibition's central spaces. Meanwhile, this critical work will give credence to the exhibition organiser and its funder, as they can amass social capital through the aura of prestige that surrounds the exhibition of critical works.[36] Against this background Andrew Maerkle's argument that artists should always be aware of the possibility that they might be appropriated is understandable, however difficult this might be, for instance for

early career artists.[37] The efforts of a critical curator can be similarly instrumentalised, as the resulting exhibition can still be easily turned into a spectacle, especially when the subject of criticality is not that sensitive in the locality of the biennial, or when communication about curation is lacking. By contrast, it will be harder to instrumentalise a critical biennial. After all, its focus on a slow, continuous engagement with publics that are conceived as collaborators, makes it more resistant to consumability.

The distinction between critical artists, curators or biennials and their instrumentalisation is very instructive for a discussion about Thailand's 2018 biennials. The Bangkok Art Biennale for instance did include various critical artists, but their work was not presented in the most visible locations of the exhibition, and communication about the content of their work was strikingly absent. Furthermore, while the curation of the biennial overall left much to be wished for, contributions by some of the curators certainly had a strong critical character. However, this was not communicated either, with curatorial statements for instance missing. The fact that, as part of the organisation's strategy, the international press was actively 'worked' so that they would perceive the Bangkok Art Biennale as a critical biennial only illustrates the importance of this 'impression' of criticality for the organisers. The justification by Elmgreen and Dragset for a supposed lack of critical art in Thailand with reference to the soft-spoken nature of Thai culture and the imperial character of the requirement of criticality, in this light is very problematic.[38]

Thailand Biennale, Ghost and Khonkaen Manifesto each are shaped by critical curators. However, while the visitor-centric nature of the 'Edge of the Wonderland' theme of Thailand Biennale hardly provides a relevant theme for local publics, and critical curation in this event was clearly appropriated, both other events presented critical curation as part of a long-term strategy of slow engagement with the Bangkok artworld and the Northeast region of Isarn respectively. This illustrates that curation, if well positioned, can contribute to a critical exhibition. The Bangkok Biennial has come closest to Dave Beech's critical biennial. While the character of the individual pavilions of course varied considerably, and some featured more traditional exhibitions, many others focused on a slow engagement with their publics, who were approached as collaborators. The quality of individual works in some of the pavilions might not always have been outstanding – as one oft-heard criticism had it – but maybe that is not too important anyway, because these pavilions focused on a deeper engagement with its audience, and not on the works and their consumption themselves.

Is this biennial based on fair labour practices?

#9 LABOUR CONDITIONS

In the wake of neo-liberal transformations, in recent years the growing precarity resulting from the liberalisation of labour conditions has attracted increased attention. Within the art world, this discussion has focused on the fact that the art world generates huge benefits for some, but that those benefits are often predicated on the precarious labour of many artists and art professionals. Additionally, especially in Europe discussions also question the consequences of austerity-induced cuts in public arts- and culture budgets. In the Netherlands, for instance, proponents have stressed that these cuts have not led to the

predicted break-down of art-initiatives. However, research has shown that this has only been possible due to a dramatic increase of unpaid labour by artists and art professionals.[39] Obviously, these discussions are also relevant for biennials, as was illustrated by a letter by Arts & Labour, calling for an end to the Whitney Biennial 2014: "we object to the biennial in its current form because it upholds a system that benefits collectors, trustees, and corporations at the expense of art workers." [40]

In Thailand, the discussion about precarious labour and art is in its infancy. This was for instance illustrated by the bemused responses to Nut Srisuwan's presentation of 'Labour in Progress', an artistic research on unpaid labour in art, at Speedy Grandma in March 2019 in Bangkok. In itself this might not be surprising, as funding for art – both private and public – has generally been very limited, and unpaid initiatives have been the norm. Against that background it is not surprising that both the Bangkok Biennial and Khonkaen Manifesto depend on unpaid contributions as well. But at least these events have not contributed to ulterior motives – commercial or ideological, and artists and organisers worked on their own conditions and towards their own goals. Meanwhile, the storytellers of Ghost received a reasonable financial compensation.

However, things were different at the other biennials. The Bangkok Art Biennale depended on contributions of some 700 volunteers or 'dek BAB', who worked as art crew, liaison or docent. While not receiving any real pay, according to sponsor Thaibev's website these volunteers "gained knowledge, experience and understanding of art, and shared it with others." [41] They also received a certificate at the end. However, in light of the instrumentality of this biennial to Thaibev's highly profitable businesses, this typical collection of neoliberal rewards is all but convincing. Things were even more problematic at the Thailand Biennale. On top of a similar volunteer program, for this event the organising Office of Contemporary Art and Culture had not reserved any budget for a production team, and the small curatorial team itself had to take care of this. The fact that the necessary self-sacrifice coincided with recurrent conflicts between curatorial team and organisers suggests that this is an all but sustainable model.

AFTER THE STORM;

REFLECTIONS ON THAILAND 2018

For art enthusiasts in Thailand, 2018 felt like a never-ending storm. Throughout the second half of the year, an almost continuous barrage of events threatened to sap away the energy of even the most dedicated visitor. In response, some have criticised specific aspects of individual events. Others condemned their lack of coordination, arguing that the resulting fragmentation reflects the typical insular nature of the artworld – or worlds – in Thailand. But while preparations for the follow-up iterations in 2020 have now started in earnest – both Bangkok Biennial and Bangkok Art Biennale, for instance, have shared the first details of their upcoming events – so far, a more systematic discussion is strikingly absent. Of course, it is a reality that nowadays practical issues occupy much of our professional lives, and that organisers of events have something new to do all the time. Also, why would they take a serious critical look at events that keep them circulating: after all, as Claire Bishop so convincingly argues, "a successful project is not one that has intrinsic value, but one that allows the worker to integrate him/herself into a new project afterwards." [42] However, after the storm, there is value in taking time to reflect as well. After all, as the biennials have only been organised once, their format is not set in stone, and there might be scope for adjustment. While it is therefore probably too early for definite judgements, here as an invitation for discussion we wonder: what do we see, when we read the 2018 events through the eyes of the biennial literature?

Reflecting on the biennial literature, in the previous pages we have argued that a discussion about biennials should pay attention to nine interrelated characteristics. On the basis of extensive interviewing, visits and informal talks, we have used those characteristics as a lens to look at Thailand's 2018 biennials. When we bring these analyses together, it becomes clear that Thailand's biennials respond in very different ways to the biennial literature. First of all, Bangkok Art Biennale comes close to the creative

economy touting, boosterist biennial that forms the negative point of reference for so much of the literature. It does create a platform on which Thai and other artists are presented together, an argument that reflects Carlos Basualdo's attention for diversity and that is repeated often in discussions in Thailand. However, the previous pages have illustrated that this biennial also suffers from almost each of the shortcomings that are highlighted in the biennial literature. The overall impression is that the Bangkok Art Biennale presents art to be consumed, and that it does not want to evoke any serious discussion; traits that of course fit seamlessly with the commercial and political interests of its main financial backers. The Bangkok Art Biennale might have attracted the most attention from both media and visitors, but its outcomes have been disappointing, especially when considering that it was headed by one of Thailand's most experienced curators.

In terms of the biennial literature, the impression of the Thailand Biennale is not very positive either. Admittedly, the focus on site-specific, commissioned work overall was good. However, there were serious infringements on the autonomy of the curatorial team, which significantly influenced the selection of work on show. Furthermore, under the dysfunctional leadership from the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, many suggestions by this team that happen to be in line with the literature – for instance regarding communication, transportation, maintenance, public engagement and the organisation of a symposium – were not realised. This resulted in a poor engagement with the local community, while the biennial was not integrated in a broader, global art discourse either. Of course, these choices did fit in relatively well with the focus on tourists as the main public. Overall the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture seemed to be more interested in the image of the biennial, than in the actual event itself or the way in which it functioned.

The other three biennials are certainly not without their own challenges. The Bangkok Biennial, for instance, could improve communication about the individual pavilions. It could also strengthen efforts between biennial events for infrastructure development in Thailand and the larger region. Such efforts were obviously hampered by the fact that, as a result of the conscious decision to refuse sponsorship, this biennial was initiated by a very small team with minor resources. This, in turn, might put the long-term sustainability of this event at risk, as well as its archiving, as is illustrated by the demise of earlier artist-run initiatives. However, our discussion of these other three biennials in the

previous pages illustrates that their formats are much more in line with the biennial literature. While different in character due to their overall aims, Ghost and Khonkaen Manifesto followed similar strategies of a relatively short curated main event with a clear critical attitude that forms part of a long-term development strategy and is supported by public engagement programs during and between the events. While focussing on different publics – the Thai art public and local communities in Northeast Isarn respectively – both events approach these as active collaborators that need to be engaged. Meanwhile, although the activist and politically-engaged attitude of the Bangkok Biennial is similar to Khonkaen Manifesto, its approach is remarkably different. With its decentralised curation, this event comes closest to Dave Beech's critical biennial. By providing an egalitarian platform, this biennial put responsibility for the overall event firmly in the hands of the individual pavilion organisers. These in turn responded to this opportunity with projects that engaged with local audiences and played out with a slow temporality of community building and engagement. From an artworld perspective, or from the point of view of the Bangkok Art Biennale, the quality of individual works or pavilions might be criticised, but maybe such a criticism misses the point of this biennial's overall aims and strategies.

Obviously, after only one iteration, these conclusions cannot be definitive. Building on experience gained, improvements could certainly be made. But what would be the likelihood of this? While open to surprise, an answer to that question will have to take the political nature of biennials into account. Remarkably, this political character of biennials is not readily acknowledged in discussions. Thus, when responding to specific events, criticism and praise often mainly focuses on their art dimensions, as if these events are only shows of art, and one could therefore discuss their artistic merit in isolation, detached from the ulterior motives that they serve. As we have seen, Marina Abramović provided one of the most blatant illustrations of this tendency, when she suggested that the Bangkok Art Biennale is only for art. Another example would be the criticism on the quality of individual artworks in specific events, detached from a discussion about the overall biennial and its aims and effects. However, in view of their links with ulterior motives, biennials are thoroughly political, and judgements based on art alone that disregard those politics are simply insufficient. Meanwhile, while our previous characterisation of Thailand's events might make sense from the biennial literature, that does not mean that their organisers or funders would agree. Maybe, those behind the Bangkok Art Biennale and the Thailand Biennale actually feel

that these events succeeded in their aims? That at least is the impression that they give in the success-story video's that can currently been seen on the event websites. Meanwhile, they might not care too much about opinions based on an international art literature, because their focus is more domestic in the first place, and maybe not so much on art. We need not remind anybody that historically, Thailand's formal participation in international events, from 19th century World Fairs to today's pavilion in the Venice Biennale, has always had a very strong focus on domestic audiences and local affirmation.[43] Maybe, in a world where spectacle can cover power, Thailand's biennials are more focused on their ulterior motives, than on art. If that is the case, we might not have much to expect from the possible improvements regarding the shortcomings that were outlined above in the second iterations of Thailand's biennials.

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WRITTEN AND PUBLISHED FOR
Table 20,
Bangkok Art Book Fair
© 2019

DESIGNED BY
Pongsakorn Yananissorn
Jordi van Meeteren &
Lee Anantawat

PRINTED AT
Poop Press, Bangkok

WITH THANKS TO
All interviewees

Thailand was late in jumping on the biennial bandwagon. But 2018 at once saw many large-scale, recurrent art events, including Bangkok Art Biennale, Bangkok Biennial, Ghost, Khonkaen Manifesto, and Thailand Biennale. What did these events do? And how do they compare in light of the international biennial literature?
An invitation for discussion.