

CHAPTER 8

ARTISTS AS ORGANISERS: CULTURAL COMMONING AND HEGEMONY IN THAILAND

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CULTURAL COMMONING: THE BATTLEGROUND OF OUR TIMES?

This year's Chiang Mai Design Week motto 'Connect, Restore and Move Forward Together' clearly underlines the state's bright and cheerful worldview, aimed at lulling the people with smooth entertainment, and chic and chill end-of-year festivities. The launch of this festival without care for recurrent local problems is a scam to sedate people, and turn them away from political and social problems, wash themselves of the exhaustion and hardship of daily lives, and step into a fantasy world advertised by the state.

(Artn't, 2021)

These words from the *Anti-Design Design Week Manifesto* are written by Artn't, a Chiang Mai-based collective aiming to use art as a means to challenge the authoritarian powers that be in Thailand (see also: Prachatai, 2021). The manifesto accompanies various actions aimed at hijacking—or 'jamming' as they call it—the Chiang Mai Design Week in order to unveil its political function. The image accompanying the manifesto leaves little doubt about Artn't's stance: superimposed on mash-ups of the Chiang Mai Design Week name—'Design Weak, Design't Week, Desire Weird'—a tagline states that 'this festival is for advertisement purposes only' (<https://www.facebook.com/artntist>). It is this tagline, in the official Design Week typeset and colours, that Artn't has brought to various locations around town, in order to photobomb shots with visiting dignitaries. Or, as the caption for two such photos on the group's Facebook page reads: "Thank you to the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Energy for taking a photo with our sign". Artn't similarly photobombed the official opening of the Design Week with an anti-'112' poster, which, as we will see, references Thailand's strict royal defamation law (Image 8.1).



IMAGE 1 During the official opening of the Chiang Mai Design Week a member of *Artn't* stands on the first-floor gallery holding up a sign, in the official Design Week visual style, protesting the royal defamation law, known as Article 112 (Photo by *Artn't*, December 2021).

The Chiang Mai Design Week action is just one example of a rapidly growing list of—often ironic—political interventions by *Artn't* and other grassroots collectives in Thailand, aimed at criticising the views on art and culture of the Thai state and of Thai corporations. As we will see, with others, *Artn't* is highly critical of Thailand's formal contemporary art institutions, which in their view are at best quite irrelevant and at worst complicit to the functioning of states and corporations. Illustrating that in our times of radical appropriation the cultural domain has become a core battlefield for politics (Kupferman-Sutthavong et al., 2021), the collective instead aims to redirect contemporary art practices towards counter-hegemonic resistance. Following the introduction to this book as well as a companion piece to this chapter elsewhere (Wissink & Van Meeteren, 2022), we suggest that the literature on the common(s) provides a useful lens for an analysis of these politics of contemporary art in Thailand.

As has been widely acknowledged, the literature on the common(s) consists of various strands, each with their own assumptions and critical potential (e.g., Dardot & Laval, 2019; Volont, 2020). In this chapter, we are especially interested in one relatively recent strand in this literature that presents commoning as a third way of social organising, next to the state and market and which highlights its potential to “reassert participatory control over the urban commonwealth” (Volont & Smets, 2022). In recent years, this literature has paid increased attention to ‘cultural commoning’ as well (e.g., Borch, 2018; Dockx & Gielen, 2018; Mollona, 2021; Sollfrank et al., 2020). Following Antonio Gramsci's rejection of the idea that culture as part of the ‘superstructure’ merely mirrors transformations in the economic ‘base’ (see also Dockx & Gielen, 2018; Lijster, 2017), this interest reflects the conviction that culture has become a core battlefield for social struggles over domination, and—crucially—a place where structural social change can be initiated (Mouffe, 2018; Nagle, 2017; Thompson, 2016). This chapter is firmly positioned within that literature.

THREE REMARKS ON CULTURAL COMMONING

The idea that cultural commoning is inherently political is also at the core of the introduction to this book by Lijster, Gielen & Volont. The authors start from the observation that “in contrast to ‘natural’ phenomena (like forests, drinking water) [the] ‘artificial’ commons depend in their very being on sharing and circulation” (p. 17). However, they also stress that cultural commons are continuously enclosed and appropriated, in order to accommodate value extraction and exploitation. Fortunately, in their mind there is hope. Just like factory workers developed a ‘class consciousness’ and started to organise against industrial capitalism, today’s citizens are also claiming their ‘right to the city’. According to Lijster, Gielen & Volont, artists and cultural organisations within the more narrowly defined cultural domain play a crucial role in these counter-hegemonic mobilisations. For while they have been complicit in the production of the current urban crisis, they can also act as a counterforce. Public mobilisation takes guts and daring and groups need to be ‘loaded’ to take to the streets: “Our thesis is (...) that both culture and urban cultural infrastructure such as theatres, concert halls, culture clubs, festivals and museums play a constitutive role in the charging of civil action and commoning practices” (p. 25). In these cultural spaces diverse groups of strangers temporarily share experiences. The affective bonds that are thus created provide the energy that can turn residents into active citizens and transform consumers into commoners.

In this chapter, we aim to ‘talk to’ and contribute to this discussion on the importance of cultural commoning for political action, on the basis of three remarks. First, we argue that it is important to clarify the nature of society without state and market. Our position aligns with Mouffe, who takes issue with perspectives on the common—in her view present in many texts—that postulate “a conception of multiplicity that is free from negativity and antagonism” (Mouffe, 2018: 55). Similarly, for Berlant (2016) “[t]he recently ‘resuscitated’ fantasy of the commons articulates many desires for a social world unbound by structural antagonism”. Hall (2020) meanwhile argues that “[c]ontrary to the impression sometimes given in writing on the commons, achieving a unity, harmony or ‘oneness’ is not what creating commons is actually about”. Taking issue with views that “foreshadow a transparent society from which antagonisms have disappeared” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 4), Mouffe argues that the public sphere will always be a “battlefield on which hegemonic projects confront one another, with no possibility of a final reconciliation” (Mouffe, 2018: 93). She adds that ‘commoning’ practices are important, as long as they are based on a political model that recognises that society is divided and that every order is hegemonically structured (ibid.: 69-70). While this antagonistic perspective acknowledges that the ‘artificial’ cultural common results from sharing and circulation—as was argued in the introduction of this book—it also suggests there are boundaries to sharing and circulation relating to subcultures and cultural oppositions. And while some of these subcultures are characterised by

openness and inclusion, others might be more exclusionary and de facto, function as 'clubs'. In short, the inclusivity of a common is an empirical question.

Secondly, and related, this means that the role of artists and cultural organisations has to be understood within this setting of hegemonic struggle. According to the introduction to this book, various artists and cultural organisations are complicit to the emergence of our current urban crisis. However, they also stress that artists and cultural organisations can contribute to resistance to states and markets. In this context, Mouffe (2013) stresses that artistic practices can play an important role in counter-hegemonic struggles through their capacity to support the emergence of alternative subjectivities; and Staal (2017, 2019) pleads for a 'propaganda art' of the left as a basis for the assembly of a new 'us'. However, as Nagle (2017) shows in her analysis of online culture, leaderless mass movements can point in many directions, might not be inclusive, and could support the existing hegemony as well. As a consequence—and in contrast to the seemingly blanket belief in the role of culture and urban cultural infrastructure for the charging of civil action and commoning practices—we argue for the need to critically analyse the actual functioning of artists and cultural institutions like museums and their position vis-à-vis hegemony (McKee, 2017; Raicovich, 2021; Wright, 2013). We need to understand under which conditions, and in which ways they support counter-hegemonic action, as well as the nature of that counter-hegemony and the extent of its inclusivity. And we need to be aware that common cultural practices can support the existing hegemony as well.

A third issue relates to the precise mechanisms through which artistic practices can play a counter-hegemonic role. Elsewhere, following Mouffe (2013), we have stressed that critical artistic practices do not just work through the unveiling of a 'true reality' that is hidden by a false consciousness (Kupferman-Sutthavong et al., 2021). Not only is such 'unveiling' critical art often politically inconsequential; it can also be easily appropriated—as is for instance illustrated by the strategy of 'total curation' behind the corporate-organised Bangkok Art Biennale (Van Meeteren & Wissink, 2020). The introduction to this book instead highlights the transformative role of affect, stressing the importance of mutual experiences amongst strangers in cultural institutions for the 'loading' of a public. In a different framing, Mouffe (2013) similarly points at the importance of affect for the counter-hegemonic agency of art. We now wonder if such affective agency is really located in all cultural institutions, and we question if affect is the only mechanism at work.

In answering these questions, one cue can be found in McKee's (2017: 26) argument that the transformative nature of artistic practice might not lay in "expressing a radical tendency within the established institutions of 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". Following Graeber (2009), McKee (2017: 16) suggests that this compositional step takes 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”. Remarkably, such ‘prefiguration’ is at the core of much recent writing on the transformative potential of artistic practice (e.g., Hall, 2020; Lütticken, 2020; Van Heeswijk et al., 2021). In their discussion of commoning practices in the art field, García Díaz & Gielen (2018) stress that organising is an important element of prefiguration. Following these arguments, we suggest that affect plays an important role in artistic practices, but that only in some cases—often outside formal institutions—it contributes to counter-hegemonic political mobilisation; and in cases where it does, the ‘organising function’ of practitioners might play an important additional role.

CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICES IN THAILAND

Starting from these observations, here we reflect on the counter-hegemonic potential of contemporary art practices in Thailand. These practices have developed in the context of a decades-long hegemonic struggle, that has resulted in repeated, often-bloody, street protests and recurrent coup d'états (Chotpradit, 2017; Van Meeteren & Wissink, 2020; Wissink & Van Meeteren, 2022). At the core of this hegemonic struggle are radically opposing views of the Thai nation (Chachavalpongpun, 2014; Ferrara, 2015; Montesano et al., 2012). The dominant or hegemonic view centres on three pillars: an imagined uniform Thai society, bound by ethnolinguistic homogeneity and ‘Thainess’ (Connors, 2005); a Buddhist religion; and a monarchy, protected by strict laws, like the ‘112’ royal defamation law and the Computer Crime Act (Isager & Ivarsson, 2010). According to this view, it is the task of the state—heavily leaning on the bureaucracy, monarchy and army—to educate people and defend the imagined Thai unity against internal and external threats (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2017: 282–284). The institutions that have resulted from this hegemonic view have produced dramatic economic and political inequalities. This hegemony has been challenged from two sides. On the one hand, economic conglomerates have rapidly gained influence on the functioning of the state, while leaving the core-ideas of national unity, religion and the monarchy intact (Ibid.). On the other hand, situating sovereignty in the people rather than the palace, an egalitarian popular nationalism has challenged the heart of the existing hegemony. Embracing the nation’s diversity, in this view the state should improve the well-being of all, and diminish the enormous political, social and economic inequalities (Ibid.: 282–284). Reflections on the role of the monarchy and resistance to regulations like ‘112’ have become an important part of this counter-hegemonic agenda, and—as we will see—have been central in the political protests of recent years.

Contemporary art practices in Thailand operate within this context of hegemonic struggle (Van Meeteren & Wissink, 2020). This has translated into the emergence of three distinct strands of contemporary art practices (Van Meeteren & Wissink, 2020). For decades, the Thai state has perceived—first modern and later contemporary—art as a means to mould public culture in the ‘right’ way and to educate citizens (Teh, 2017). It developed

institutions like Silpakorn University, National Exhibitions and National Artists that were granted a monopoly on the signification and expression of Thai culture befitting the views of the dominant hegemony. Since the 1980s an alternative art scene has started to develop as well (Teh, 2018; Van Meeteren & Wissink, 2020). While newly instituted art schools—at Chiang Mai University and elsewhere—and study periods abroad brought students into conversation with alternatives to the state's views of art, new art spaces provided platforms for a variety of practices, supporting imaginations of another Thailand. According to Teh (2018), art was therefore increasingly wrested free from control by the 'Silpakorn system', the system of state centred institutions with Silpakorn University at its core, that had for long exercised an iron grip on all facets of Thai art practices. Meanwhile, the Thai corporate world has started to engage with contemporary art as well, on the back of the discovery of its potential for stimulating consumption and enriching real estate. This has coincided with the emergence of a new generation of contemporary art visitors, for whom consumerist imaginations of the 'good life' are aspirational.



IMAGE 2 Standing in front of the Democracy Monument in Bangkok, a protester holds the sign 'Rirkrit is not here', written in the recognisable style of Rirkrit Tiravanija, one of the most well-known Thai artists internationally, demonstrating the irrelevance of the formal Thai art world for the current protests (Photo by Natthapol Klaharn, March 2021).

In view of the embeddedness of these three strands of contemporary art production and presentation in the state, society and the corporate world respectively, we have suggested elsewhere that the literature on the common and its opposition to both state and

corporations is highly relevant for an analysis of the contemporary art field in Thailand (Wissink & Van Meeteren, 2022). After all, while the ‘art of the state’ aims to appropriate art as a means to educate citizens and teach the ‘right’ culture in line with hegemonic views of Thailand’s existing power relations, the ‘post-political’ art of corporations aims to appropriate art for commercial gain. Critical of the ‘unprofessional’, ‘old-fashioned’ efforts of the art of the state, representatives of this corporate perspective present it as the only viable alternative (Poshyananda, 2021). However, while individual works in corporate-sponsored exhibitions can certainly have a critical edge, as for instance artistic director Poshyananda is happy to point out in the context of ‘his’ Bangkok Art Biennale, this is easily neutralised through curatorial strategies that prevent the emergence of any real discussion (Van Meeteren & Wissink, 2020). This post-political approach thereby ends up supporting the existing hegemony as well. Meanwhile, self-organised art initiatives seem to align with the idea of cultural commoning, as a sphere of social organisation distinct from both state and market. We have for instance analysed the Bangkok Biennial as an example of a commoning practice that deliberately took position against the usual top-down organisational model of the Thai contemporary art world, thus adding a patchwork of common art spaces as pockets of resistance to Bangkok’s cultural landscape (see Wissink & Van Meeteren, 2022).

In line with our three remarks, the different attitudes vis-à-vis hegemony stemming from these three strands of art production and presentation confirm that it is crucial to acknowledge that only some contemporary art practices support the ‘loading’ of publics for counter-hegemonic action (Image 2). This observation becomes even more pertinent when taking a closer look at common art practices. Especially, we argue that while many common practices might support counter-hegemonic action—we will analyse three examples of this below—at the same time we should recognise that others might instead support state practices and the underlying hegemony. In other words, common art practices are ‘ideologically flexible’. In this context, it is noteworthy that vigilante groups have played an important role in many of Thailand’s most problematic historic political events in which anti-state protesters were forcefully repressed (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2017: 191-195). The underlying fragmentation of ‘the public’ also marks common organising. As a result, some common art practices might support the existing hegemony and function to ‘load’ a public to support repressive, rather than emancipatory, practices.

Art Lane is one example of a common contemporary art practice aligned with Thai hegemony (Chotpradit, 2017). It consisted of a collection of creative initiatives in public space, aiming to support the *Bangkok Shutdown* protest movement of 2013 and 2014 (Image 3). Organised by a network of artists and cultural workers, the common nature of *Art Lane* seems beyond doubt. However, the protest movement that it supported was organised by the *People’s Democratic Reform Committee* (PDRC), and it aimed to replace the democratically elected Yingluck Shinawatra government by an unelected ‘People’s Council’.



IMAGE 3 Artist Sutee Kunavichayanont produces spray painted t-shirts and posters during *Art Lane*, an artist-led event in the PDRC-organised *Bangkok Shutdown* protests. These objects were later displayed as part of the installation *Thai Uprising* in the Gwangju Museum of Art (Photo anonymous, January 2014).

Art Lane not only supported this cause; it provided a platform to sell artworks and donate the resulting funds to the anti-democratic PDRC protests as well. Eventually, it thereby helped to instigate the May 2014 military coup, which resulted in an army-run government, a rewriting of the constitution, and a later formation of the current government, after highly problematic elections. It reminds us that repressive political practices in Thailand have considerable support in society; and that common art practices can have a repressive rather than emancipatory character as well. To add insult to injury, the installation *Thai Uprising*

by Sutee Kunavichayanont, which comprised of t-shirts and posters with slogans of the PDRC protests from *Art Lane*, was later included in the exhibition *The Truth to Turn it Over* in the Gwangju Museum of Art in South Korea in 2016. Explicitly organised in commemoration of the popular Gwangju Uprising against military dictatorship in May 1980, this resulted in widespread condemnation in counter-hegemonic art circles in Thailand (ibid.). With this example firmly in mind, over the coming pages we aim to analyse three counter-hegemonic common practices. We will discuss the characteristics of counter-hegemonic cultural commoning in Thailand; and we will address the mechanisms through which the artists involved have tried to instigate change.

ARTN'T

Artn't is a collective of students and recent graduates in art, design and philosophy from Chiang Mai University in Northern Thailand. The group, which we have already encountered at the start of this chapter, was formed at the end of 2020. Starting with a handful of members, it has since grown organically, helped by an increased visibility in the media and on campus. The group's practice consists of a mix of performances in public space and what they call 'actions': unannounced interventions in the city, that aim to 'jam', 'bomb' or 'disrupt' the status quo. These actions target institutions and authorities that in their eyes are problematic, especially in relation to the (art) education system and the monarchy. One of their first actions is instructive for *Artn't's* approach. In January 2021, they printed the text of Section 112 of the Thai Criminal Code, the repressive royal defamation law, on toilet paper rolls which they used to 'bomb' public spaces in Chiang Mai. As one of the members explains, this action aimed

to “decrease the power of that official paper”. The wish to repeal ‘112’ and reform the monarchy—as we have seen two important demands in Thailand’s recent protests—are recurring themes in the projects of the group. And while their actions often have an ironic, tongue-in-cheek character, they are certainly not without personal risk. Two of *Artn’t*’s founding members are facing serious legal charges for allegedly violating Section 112 because a well-known right-wing political activist and serial complaint-maker reported their works for a student exhibition at Chiang Mai University to the authorities.

As the name suggests, *Artn’t* has an ambivalent attitude towards art and its formal institutions. While the members recognise the efficacy of the tools of artistic practices in communicating with a public, they also rail against certain aspects of the art system. In the authoritarian setting of Thailand, they want to unsettle conservative ideas that equate art with beauty. They use their work to resist power and to “reveal the problems in society”. As one member suggest, *Artn’t* doesn’t want to make “friendly art” and it “doesn’t really trust the old platform of art”. To circumvent these obstacles, *Artn’t* takes its performances to the streets, for example to Tha Pae gate in Chiang Mai’s historic centre, which often functions as a stage for protests. Here they organise visceral, durational performances referencing both the dark pages of recent Thai history and current injustices. The public aspect of their practice is important, as it accommodates not having to compromise in the message. After all, “there are differences in the function of public space and formal art spaces, where you maybe have to join the system and then you cannot do the things that you want to do”. But just as importantly, in public space they reach a wide variety of people and “expand the audience” beyond “the community of art”: “[w]e have to push the message to the people who just bump up to us. I think that this is important because many people just work and go home, work and go home; they do not have time to go to an art centre.” As such they use art and its affective qualities “to create another standard in the public consciousness, and to push the boundary” of what is deemed acceptable and what is up for discussion, in matters past, present and future.

Unsurprisingly, the actions of *Artn’t* have attracted the attention of various authorities. In immediate dealings with the police, the ambiguity of their practice has its advantages and they can make strategic use of the idea of art as an autonomous practice, one plane removed from the everyday. This is a familiar tactic, often used by Thai artists treading the same political terrain and one that until now has worked reasonably well. But when the system in its entirety decides to strike back with arrests and charges, the consequences can be severe, illustrated by the remark—heard more often in the Thai art scene—that “our art is not talking with a curator, but talking with a lawyer”. This makes it all the more remarkable that several members of *Artn’t* walked willingly into a police station in early 2021 to press charges against the Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts, when their works and those of other students in the above-mentioned exhibition at Chiang Mai University were destroyed and removed from campus at his orders. To some this

might reek of youthful hubris. However, in the authoritarian and hierarchical setting of Thailand, it is a potentially transformative and radical act to demand to be treated justly, bringing to mind Graeber's (2009: 203) idea of direct action as "the insistence, when faced with structures of unjust authority, on acting as if one is already free."

FREEARTS (ศิลปะปลดแอก)

FreeArts consists of a group of Thai cultural practitioners who have consciously embedded their practice in the Thai political protests of recent years. This network emerged in Bangkok in the summer of 2020, when a small group of initiators started to discuss how they could help the protests. Not impressed by the functioning of the 'boring' formal art world, which according to one of the initiators mainly caters to the rich and those with an art background, the group was critical of the role of artists. In their opinion those artists used the political situation in their work but at the same time rarely offered their skills to help protesters in the street. Tapping into their personal networks, the initiators wanted to change this. With a name that referenced similar initiatives in other sectors of Thai society at the time ('Free Youth', 'Free People', etc.), the resulting core group of practitioners started to offer their skills to support actions of protest groups. Their first project in September 2020 was 'Act ศิลปะ Art'—a one-day protest 'festival' in front of the Bangkok Art & Culture Centre (BACC) where the typical ingredients of Thai outdoor markets—music, food and stalls with knick-knacks—were mixed with protest activities organised by like-minded groups, including Speedy Grandma, Tokyo Hot and BBQ International Gallery. Other projects soon followed and more people offered to join. Soon, *FreeArts* consisted of 20-25 people, with diverse creative backgrounds, including music, visual art, theatre, and illustration.

For months on end, *FreeArts* organised a stream of projects. With protest activities around the clock, the group met virtually every day—and often after a long day of protesting. Each time they would start with the message that protest groups were planning to highlight and discuss how they could best support that message, eventually deciding their actions through votes. Importantly, they also had to see who would be available to execute the project, as there was no budget and everybody also had other commitments. As one member recounts, "it is really, really difficult (...) because (...) you feel very fucking tired. And you want to be left out. (...) But then you are also so, so angry about the injustice." Running on this emotion, *FreeArts* organised a wide variety of projects embedded in the protests, such as communal chalk drawing on the streets, paint ball throwing at images of government officials, silk screen printing, stencil spraying, festive markets, music events, and performances (<https://www.facebook.com/FreeArtsTH>).

One example of a more elaborate project is 'Free our Friends' (ปล่อยเพื่อนเรา), a concerted action focussed on liberating protest leaders—especially those who had

dared to speak out against the monarchy on stage—that had been arrested and refused bail. *FreeArts* produced a range of images, posters, stencils and stickers and organised related actions. Another example is the performance *#99dead* at Sanam Luang, the large field next to the royal palace and Thammasat University, the location of the massacre of 6 October 1976 (<https://sanamratsadon.org/2021/08/11/99-dead/>). *#99dead* commemorates the many deaths resulting from the April and May 2010 crackdown by the army, which ended Redshirt protests in Bangkok (Chotpradit, 2021). The words “someone died here” (ที่นี้มีคนตาย), shouted during the performance, referred to earlier public enactments of the massacre in 2014 and 2015. They also formed the basis for another project in April and May 2021 (Image 8.4; <https://www.freearts.net/someonediedhere>). However, by that time, many *FreeArts* members had been charged for participation in perceived unlawful activities. In combination with the downturn of protest activities due to Covid-19 and the resulting economic hardships this has meant that for now the group has taken a more backstage position.



IMAGE 4 For *FreeArts*’ project ‘Someone Died Here’, over the course of the months April and May 2021, participants represented the many people killed by the military during the 2010 protests on the date, time and place of their deaths. The website www.freearts.net/someonediedhere tells their stories (Screengrab from the *FreeArts* Facebook page, April/May 2021).

FreeArts has deliberately embedded its practice in the anti-government movement. Partly, it has helped to make the protests more appealing—or less scary—by creating a ‘good’ atmosphere, thus attracting potential protesters. Partly, it used art as a tool to communicate the messages behind the protests and to engage protesters so that they take ownership and become an active part of the event and the messages involved. And partly, it staged various projects—including performances—that use affect to communicate these messages and ‘load’ the protesters, although always in a deliberate direction. Their position within this movement has also meant that the organisers have had to adjust their practice in important ways. In contrast to art projects in formal presentation spaces, they have had to be pragmatic in view of time-constraints and the

limited number of ‘hands on deck’. They have also had to keep the potential risk for participants in mind, both in relation to the legality of their projects as well as potential police violence. They have also had to balance their own perceptions of quality with the efficacy of their projects. Or, as one of the members recalls, “when we are in a meeting, sometimes we think like ‘yeah, this concept is good’ (..) but then sometimes it is too complicated to work in the protest”. Alternatively, members might think that a proposal “look[s] really clichéd (..) but then sometimes it works”. In other words, the relationship between the artist as author and the audience as spectator is fundamentally changed, a point to which we will return in the conclusion.

WE TAKE CARE OF OURSELVES GROUP (กลุ่มคนดูแลกันเอง)

The *We Take Care of Ourselves Group* is one of several grass-roots volunteer groups established in response to the Thai government’s ill-conceived Covid-19 lockdown (<https://www.facebook.com/noonecaresbangkok/>). Set up in early June 2021 by people with a creative background, at first sight the activities of the group do not have an ‘art’ component: there are no objects, no publics, no events. Instead, people are helping other people, namely construction workers—both Thai and migrants from neighbouring countries—who became entrapped for an initial thirty days under guard of the police and military, following the discovery of Covid-19 clusters in several of Bangkok’s 600 worker camps. These temporary camps are customarily erected by real estate developers on empty plots of land to house construction site day-labourers and their families. After their lock-up, these workers were left without income, food, medication, and other necessities, as both real estate developers and the government refused to take responsibility.

The *We Take Care of Ourselves Group* was one of various community responses. Initiated by a handful of people, it started operating out of an artists’ studio, supplying food to camps in its immediate vicinity and rallying for donations via social media. The initiative grew bigger when the group managed to obtain a list with locations of all Bangkok worker camps from the government (Image 8.5). Soon, an infrastructure was put in place to match donations and volunteers, with camps in need. When immediate food shortages were dealt with, attention shifted towards medical care. With authorities following a ‘Thai first’ attitude in response to its general failure to keep up with the rising number of Covid-19 cases, the volunteer group organised doctors available for tele-consults, matched them with Covid-19 patients in the worker camps and made deals with the government to be allowed to deliver scarce Covid-19 medication to the camps through motorbike couriers. Throughout, the group worked on a voluntary basis and where possible, they teamed up with organisations with a similar commons ethos, like the *Workers’ Union* and the *Freedom Rider Union*. Later the group also expanded their medical support beyond the boundaries of the worker camps.



IMAGE 5 Graphics by the *We Take Care of Ourselves Group* accompanying their manifesto (Images by *We take Care of Ourselves Group*, July 2021).

While the actions of the *We Take Care of Ourselves Group* transformed from crisis management to more controlled operations, the group also started to stake political claims. Under the motto ‘We Are All Workers’, in July 2021 they released a manifesto, drawing attention to the authorities’ neglect of workers in camps (Image 5). Acutely aware of the power of their actions to expose government failings, they pre-emptively deflected any potential commons-fix attitudes by the state, putting their recognisable logo on distributed goods and stressing in all of their communications that: “[i]n all this, we continue to insist that the public service we are providing here is the duty of the government; it should not impose the burden on the public to take care of themselves as it currently does” (see <https://www.facebook.com/noonecaresbangkok/>). In their communication with real estate developer-employed camp managers, the group also started to insist that they urge their employers to take responsibility; a transformative act in itself in a setting where demanding things of higher-ups is difficult. Some of the participants have also started to explore ways to translate the group’s platform into broader political action.

Emerging from the fertile social grounds of art organising, the *We Take Care of Ourselves Group* have (through their actions), been making use of skills that were acquired in the self-organised part of the cultural sector, where budgets are always tight and everyone does everything from start to finish with the help of like-minded others. Meanwhile, due to contributions to the group being made next to other commitments, the time left for art commoning has been seriously restricted. Or, as one of the organisers explained regarding concurrent art events, “I just shut off, I felt just like: nope sorry... there is another thing that I want to care about more.” At first sight, therefore, it seems logical to contrast the actions of this group to art organising. However, on second thoughts,

maybe both types of organising—art and social alike—are informed by the same anti-hierarchical attitude, propelled by a deep-held belief in a more just society in which more people can thrive. In remarkable similarity to *Artn't* and *FreeArts*, both the ethos and actions of this initiative are driven by the conviction that you don't have to ask or wait for permission, and that you can instil a sense of agency in people, empowering them to speak for themselves. Looking at it like this, the distinction between art and non-art might not be so important. While coming *from* the art field, this initiative does not function *in* the art field. It operates on what Wright (2013) calls a '1:1 scale', whereby focus shifts from spectatorship linked to autonomous art as representations in galleries, museums or other art contexts, towards usership without the need to 'perform' art competencies; an observation that brings us to our conclusion.

COUNTER-HEGEMONIC CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICES IN THAILAND: ORGANISING THE 'NOT-YET'?

In Thailand's highly polarised social and political setting, contemporary art practices play an integral role in the hegemonic struggle over the role and organisation of the state in society. With their explicit or implicit support, state-led and corporate-led practices are part of the existing hegemony, functioning to maintain it. The potential of common art practices for counter-hegemonic action has therefore become the prime focus of this chapter. In view of the fragmented and polarised nature of civil society in Thailand, with our first two remarks we have stressed that these practices, developed separate from state and market, reflect Thailand's hegemonic struggle as well. In contrast to efforts to create a more inclusive society, some common art practices support the existing repressive hegemony, and we discussed *Art Lane* as an example of this. Mindful of Mouffe's (2018) plea for a 'new left populism' and Staal's (2017; 2019) insistence on the need for a left-wing propaganda art, our analysis illustrates that while contemporary art practices certainly function to 'load' publics in support of civil action, the direction of that action and its position vis-à-vis hegemony and the related inclusiveness of social practices varies: the common is 'ideologically flexible'.

Following this observation, we have discussed three common practices with counter-hegemonic intent. How do these practices support the emergence of the 'common city'; and what are the mechanisms at play in this process? In response to these questions, we draw two conclusions. First, the organisers discussed in this chapter are highly critical of formal art institutions. To be clear, as McKee (2017: 12) stresses, participation in such practices should in itself probably not be moralistically condemned. At the same time, McKee adds that in view of the constraints within the formal art system, it is questionable if these practices will have a counter-hegemonic effect. Instead, counter-hegemonic agency is more likely to be located elsewhere: on the one hand, in the

independent common art spaces, like those created by the Bangkok Biennial, which have contributed to a wider infrastructure of counter-hegemonic action (Wissink & Van Meeteren, 2022); and on the other hand, in the actions of practitioners with art competencies in social practices and social movements outside the art field. Stressing that autonomy has been an obstacle for art's potential to have consequences beyond the aesthetic realm, it's not surprising therefore that Wright (2013) observes that practitioners are leaving what he calls 'the sandbox of art': "Turning away from pursuing art's *aesthetic function*, many practitioners are redefining their engagements with art, less in terms of *authorship* than as users of artistic competence, insisting that art foster more robust use values and gain more bite in the real" (Wright, 2013: 1). According to Staal (2017: 10), in this role, cultural practitioners can "help formulate the new campaigns, the new symbols, and the popular poetry needed to bolster the emergence of a radical collective imaginary. In that process, [they] can also begin to devise the new infrastructures—the parallel parliaments, the stateless embassies, the transdemocratic unions—needed to establish the institutions that will make a new emancipatory governance a reality." The art organisers in this chapter clearly are part of this mobilisation of practitioners outside of the field of art.

Staal's argument, with its insistence on the creation of new infrastructures, begins to imagine the mechanisms through which change might become a reality as well. For while both ideas and affect certainly play a role in this process, as García Díaz & Gielen (2018: 176) rightly observe, "ideas alone cannot produce real social changes" and affect by itself will not change the world either. After all, as Staal (2021: 294) has argued elsewhere, "[e]galitarian life forms do not appear. They are trained, organized, and assembled for and through the common struggle that make collective worlds imaginable and possible". Next to ideas and affect, what is needed for this is a significant dose of organising. The organisers in this chapter have certainly started to be involved in the organisation of the 'not-yet' (Van Heeswijk et al., 2021). With their focus on the prefiguration of more a just world, and the organisation of practices and infrastructures that fit that bill, their practices have shifted from 'representing' struggles to 'becoming' a tool in the struggle (Wright, 2013). And it is in this context also, that it becomes increasingly questionable if the distinction between art and its outside is productive at all. In this light, the similarities between the practices of the *We Take Care of Ourselves Group* and the other art organisers is not at all surprising. They all employ their art competencies but perform them in different ways. Looking at it like this, maybe the prolonged and often invisible, unauthored work of practitioners as organisers of alternative possible worlds, rather than affect, should be at the forefront of attention when discussing counter-hegemonic cultural practices.

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