

# QUESTIONING THAINESS

An interview with Chulayarnnon Siriphol for the Bangkok Biennial pavilion  
coming soon • เร็ว ๆ นี้

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*Q: How would you position yourself and your practice in the Thai art world?*

Well ... What I'm doing now is, I'm an artist and a filmmaker. So, I'm both an artist and a filmmaker at the same time. But earlier, some 5 or 6 years ago, I began to... I first began my practice in filmmaking. I was a filmmaker at first. I made films since high school and I studied film at university. Since then, I have been making films. But the films I made were ... They didn't really have a narrative. They didn't have a storyline like films usually have. So, there was a possibility to transform my practice into video art or experimental film. So, my video work and short films have slowly crossed the line from film-making into art more and more.

*Q: How do you see the role of an artist in society?*

I think there's a problem in Thai society. At the time when artists began playing a role in society, their representation in the media suggested that they had to be either funny or silly, something like that, and poor. That impression, I think over the last 10 or 20 years, continued to exist for most people, especially for our parents' generation. Only in the last 10 years or so, a different way of presenting art has emerged, which doesn't portray artists as creators of beautiful things, entertainers or people that make jokes. The past 20 years have seen the emergence of a new significant idea: that art is not only for decoration. There has been an attempt to push art more towards a conceptual form. So, as for the role of artists in Thailand, I think that we have to fight for the idea that artists are not just entertainers, or that they exist for the sake of fun or to create beautiful things, but that instead they should be trying to discuss conflicts in society. Not just in Thai society actually, but also societies all around the world. What are we confronted with? What kind of society is this? And what kind of future is waiting for us? That is the important role of artists in society.

*Q: Is it a conscious decision for you to take this role?*

Actually, my work... I'm interested in politics, especially Thai politics over the past 10 years. I feel that the political conflict in Thailand has gotten more violent since 2006-2007 or 2008; around that time. I was studying at a university at that time, I felt that politics was not just about politicians, but also relationships between people. The relationships of everyone in society. It's about my friends, my family as well. So, the mindset and this conflict are not ... They are deeply rooted in our daily life. So, I think as I make art or films, that it is important that I say at the time of this conflict

how we should go forward. And it has become something that ... Since Thai politics has changed, we began to see the world differently. We used to think that politics was far from us. But actually, now that Thai politics has gotten more violent, we have started to realise that we can look at everything in a political way. So, I've decided to pick up this subject. Lately, this subject has appeared in my work quite a lot.

*Q: Is there a difference when you prepare work for an international or domestic audience?*

This is also a problem. Most of my work touches on issues that are close to me, right? And people that see it appreciate and understand my work. So, mostly, they will know the context of the story or of that particular artwork. So my audience is usually familiar with the Thai political context, and understands what is going on in society. But I also get some comments from people saying they find it quite difficult to understand my work because they don't know the background or the context. Over the past 3 or 4 years I received more and more comments like this. I began to wonder how to create artworks for an audience that doesn't know this context, the political context in Thailand. How can an audience that knows very little still appreciate my work? So I have changed the way in which I used to work. I mean, I have to think more about my international audience, and not just my friends or the Thai audience. I have to think about the people from outside.

*Q: Do you think that international art world professionals and institutions have an increased presence in Thailand?*

Compared with 10 years ago, I think the number has increased. I mean, the number of galleries, art institutions, and art schools has grown. But the increase also leads to... I think the art market is... It has expanded and spread out, and as a result the number of artists has now grown. But on the other hand ... OK, let's call it 'ecosystem'. The art ecosystem in Thailand is not whole yet. Many structural flaws remain. OK, we have art schools and universities that produce more artists; galleries to show work. But I think what is missing is probably collectors and an audience. OK, there might be an audience from a new generation that feels that art is closer to them, which is good. But people from an earlier generation, who are about 40 or 50, they might feel some distance to art. And another issue relates to public art institutions, which ... I think the government could possibly provide more support to art, but it is questionable whether they really think this is important.

*Q: What is your opinion about 'Thailand Eye', which consciously brands contemporary art from the outside?*

They might think that *Thailand Eye* had curators from outside that came to select artists who were to present artworks, right? But from what I know, I think it was not quite from the outside. Rather, I think that *Thailand Eye* was organised within the country. And then presented abroad. So there was a group of Thai curators who selected the work of Thai artists, and presented this to the world. Which ... On the one

hand, it's good. It helps people who don't know much about Thai contemporary art to understand what contemporary Thai art is, what Thai artists are interested in, and what they are up to. On the other hand, there is a compromise as well when selecting artworks to show at *Thailand Eye*. If I remember correctly, it was about ... about presenting 'Thainess' as well. When I look at it from that perspective, I have always questioned 'Thainess' since I started making art. And I think that the 'Thainess' presented in *Thailand Eye* was more about tourism. It was not really radical. I think we could question 'Thainess' more seriously; and more intensely too. I think it was too mild, or too compromising.

*Q: Do you think that artists who do not come from Bangkok or Chiang Mai get enough attention?*

OK, so you mean artists outside of these two cities, right? I think it is quite likely that they have been overlooked. Take for example the three southern-most provinces where a serious conflict has been going on. There are some young artists who talk about this conflict. And ... OK, the conflict has existed for over 10 years, but it has just been discovered as ... or the issue has been raised in contemporary art. About a year or two ago. This illustrates that artists in the periphery are overlooked, and have to wait for curators from the centre, from Bangkok or Chiang Mai, in order to be discovered. There is a clear gap here as well. This is another hierarchy in the art world.

*Q: What are the benefits or positives of the presence of the international art world in Thailand?*

I think that the audience reaps the benefits. I mean they will understand the function of contemporary art in society better in terms of ... Sometimes we see artworks from other countries which are shown here in Thailand, right? At the same time, there are some Thai artists who are not successful in Thailand, but are abroad. When they are back in Thailand to show their work, it feels like ... people pay more attention. People wonder why these artists caught international attention when they are not even famous in Thailand. This is the difference or the gap between what happens in Thailand and in other countries. It also goes back to the audience itself, people that wonder what kind of world they are living in. We can see what other countries are interested in through art. At the same time, it shows which aspect of 'Thainess' or which Thai artists they are interested in. It will help people to come out of their bubble; it opens up their perspective, for Thai people to understand the world better.

*Q: What are the disadvantages or negatives of the presence of the international art world in Thailand?*

I think it is similar to a colonial setting. It is... What is it called? Cultural colonisation. It is... Well... We will admire art, or feel that an artwork is interesting, only when the Thai artist has become famous abroad. The artists are selected by Western curators, who have come all the way to third world countries. Sometimes I feel we are being

colonised by curators from the West. At the same time, it's like we have no choice, because ... OK, curators in Southeast Asia are playing a role in the art world now. But before we felt that we had to give our work or what we saw in society to western curators. It feels as if we're being colonised culturally.