

BY ARTISTS
ON ARTISTS

Conversation: Jakkai Siributr and Elif Gül Tirben

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Textile art is not the first thing that we think of when talking about art in public space as textile is associated with the feminine and the domestic. We have a tendency to imagine textile art as separate, both as a material and a practice. However, textile as a surface is situated at the intersection of the personal and the public, just like the body. As a means with which we cover ourselves, it is the prerequisite for our participation in social life.

Jakkai Siributr transforms textile into a pictorial surface on which the public and the political life in Thailand is interpreted. I encountered Siributr's works at the Contemporary Istanbul Fair in November 2013; two embroidery works by the artist that were made in response to the moral corruption and the decadence of the political life in Thailand were exhibited at Yavuz Fine Art's booth. The works were seductive, shiny; the artist was punishing the bad in scenes reminiscent of S&M setups, inspired by religious descriptions in Buddhist temples, sending the good to a destination above the clouds in the lotus position. Thus, he was providing justice in a form that was absent from real life, seeking revenge from the order of the world that seemed to never change.

This was last November. With Siributr, we talked about the corruption in his country, the religious exploitation that penetrated all levels of society, political instability, polarized masses and how this evoked a sense of despair. While I comprehended exactly what he meant, with the positive impact of the Gezi resistance, the chaos of Thailand seemed very distant. I was thinking our situation was not as bad. Five days before the national local election in Turkey, I fear I spoke too soon.

—Elif Gül Tirben



Jakkai Siributr, *Rape and Pillage*, 2013. Embroidery on 39 Thai civil service uniforms, dimensions variable. Courtesy of Yavuz Fine Art.

Jakkai Siributr interviewed by Elif Gül Tirben

E.G.T.: Before we talk about your two embroidery works in detail could you tell us about the content of your solo show in Singapore and your installation with the uniforms?

J.S.: There are two parts of the exhibition and one is the installation with the uniforms. They are civil servant uniforms.

E.G.T.: They look like Marine Uniforms.

J.S.: No, anybody who works for the state has to wear these uniforms for official ceremonies. So if you are a professor at a state university, or if you work for any kind of ministry, you wear these uniforms. Politicians in the government also wear them.

The exhibition is very much critical of the political situation we have been having for several years now in Thailand. With several years of political uncertainty, there is political corruption and everything that comes with it.

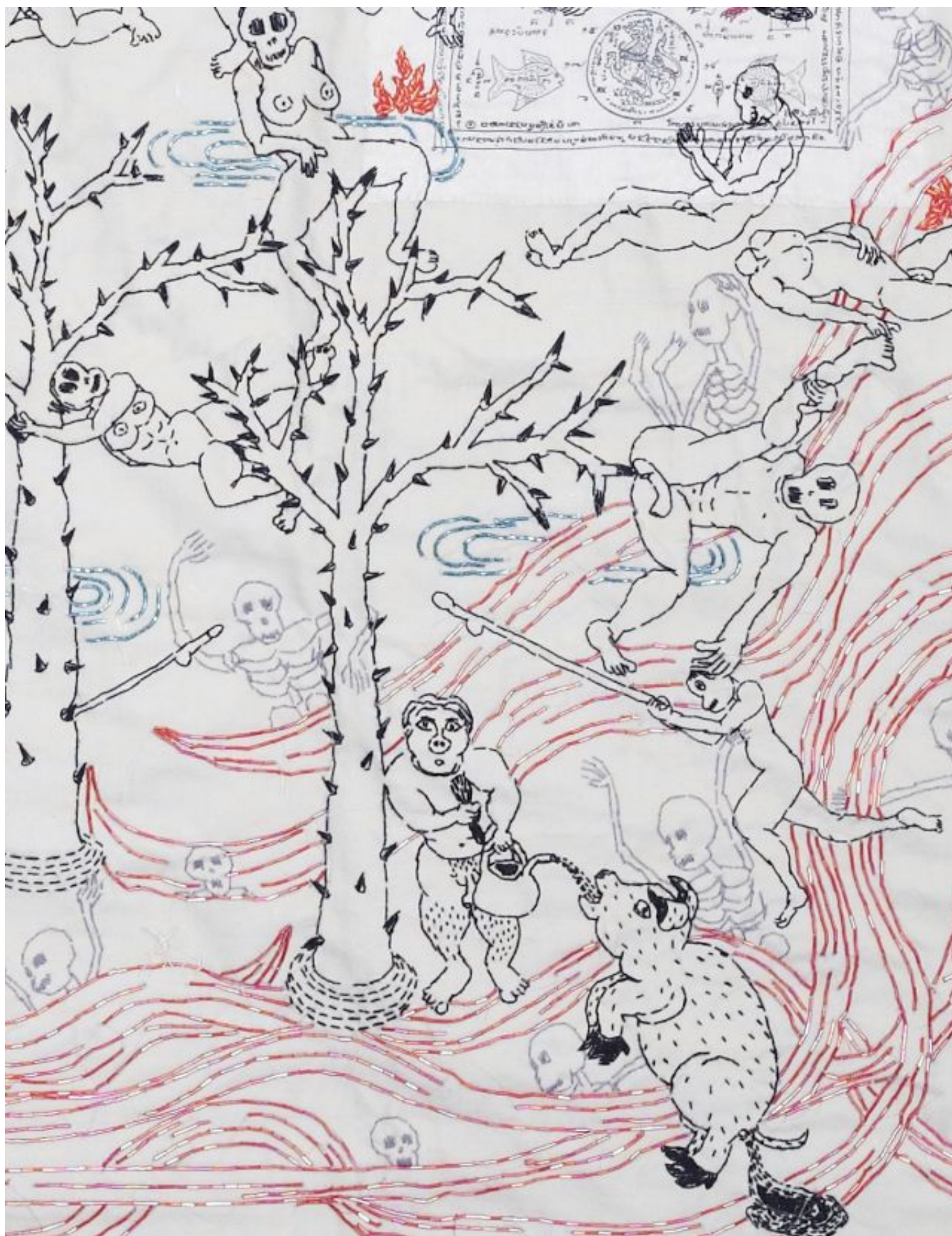
There are 39 uniforms in the exhibition and they represent the number of cabinet members, who are in the government. On the uniforms I have stitched the faces of politicians, good, bad, past, present. But the politicians themselves are no longer there. Just look at the uniforms—they float

around like ghosts. They are floating off the ground with no head. What is left is all these ranks; whatever they had gained while they were alive through corruption, stealing or just being a good civil servant.

These scenes on the embroidery works depict what will happen to them. The specific pieces in this fair, there is hell down there, in the middle it's like earth, when they are pretty much alive and up there is heaven with monks sitting on clouds.



Jakkai Siributr, *Mobius*, 2013. Embroidery and glass beads on canvas, 198 x 154cm. Courtesy of Yavuz Fine Art.



Jakkai Siributr, *Mobius*, 2013 (detail).

E.G.T.: They look both everyday and mythological at the same time; in sharp contrast to their beauty, the images' content is cruel.

J.S.: These are the scenes from the stories I read from basic Buddhist folk tales; they show what happens to you when you take certain actions. For example, do you see these trees? Let's say, if you commit adultery, there would be a specific punishment. For example, you have to climb these thorny trees.

Thailand is predominantly a Buddhist country and there are many temples that do have these scenes just to teach people morals as well as to scare them. This is another example of a scene from a very famous temple on the West of Bangkok, famous for its sculptures that depict scenes of after life.



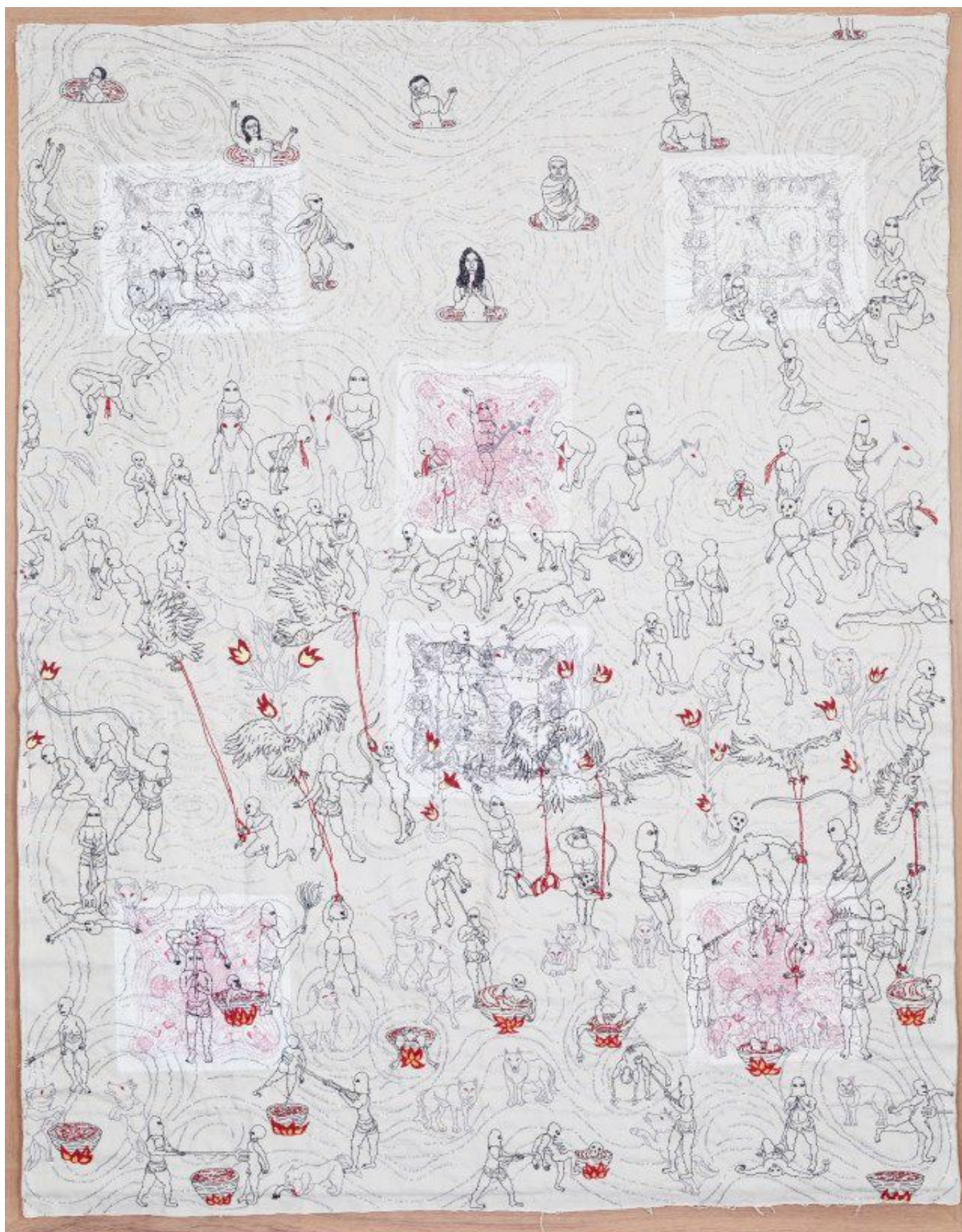
Wat Pai Rong Wua Temple in Supanburi province. Photo by Jakkai Siributr.



When I was growing up my parents would tell me stories about afterlife, reincarnation, Karma and all that. I always fear that whatever I do is going to effect me somehow as Karma. But when I look at the political world with all these politicians and their corrupted behaviour I don't have that much hope. I feel like it's always going to be the same. People will never benefit from the system; it's always the politicians that gain from the system. One political group come to power and they benefit from everything.

E.G.T.: It is part of the culture. I feel the same hopelessness sometimes.

J.S.: Right. Maybe I can't expect them to be punished, that's not going to happen so it's my way of punishing them myself. It is my way of dealing with it.



Jakkai Siributr, *A Restless Sleep*, 2013. Embroidery and glass beads on canvas, 197 x 154cm.
Courtesy of Yavuz Fine Art.



Jakkai Siributr, *A Restless Sleep*, 2013. Courtesy of Yavuz Fine Art.

E.G.T.: What is this thing that looks like an identity card?

J.S.: It is called a Yantra, a type of talisman. It's a piece of cloth. In the old days, they would make

it into a tunic and they would wear it to war. Some yantras are actually tattooed on the body. They are created by monks. You make a donation to a temple and you are given these things. This particular one is a trade talisman. You worship it in order to have good business.

So there are monks who are not practicing Buddhist principles and are doing all these things instead. This is not Buddhism. It is more like Animism. If you look at the design there are people having sex with each other or with animals. A monk who is supposed to be celibate drawing all these designs to give it to people... That's where religion has gone. This is very absurd in a way but it is all interconnected; politics, religion, animism...



Jakkai Siributr, *Mobius*, 2013 (detail). Courtesy of Yavuz Fine Art.



E.G.T.: How did you decide to study textile art? You made the decision at a young age, when you were 18 years old. Where did your interest in textile come from?

J.S.: I have always been interested in arts but I had an aunt who had a batik studio, she was one of the very first few people in Thailand who did batik. She also did very good fine art pieces. I've wanted to study art but at that time I wasn't thinking of being an artist. Because twenty years ago, to be an artist in Thailand was still very difficult.

Having seen my aunt making her living through craft I thought I'd study art but do something more commercial like textile. Eventually I would become a designer. But then I realized that I didn't quite understand the commercial aspects of the textile industry. To become a designer you also have to know the market wants. So I moved away from it.

In 1996 I moved back to Thailand and started teaching at a university. I also wore those uniforms cause I worked for a state university for seven years.

E.G.T.: When did you start doing this type of embroidery work?

J.S.: I've always done it. But before my work used to be very abstract; I used color and texture only, I was not doing much figurative. Because in America during the 1980s and 1990s where I studied, fiber art had its own separate place in the same way ceramics was, from the rest of fine art. So we were taught that if we wanted to do textile art, we needed to do something different, not to emulate painting.

Then I came back to Thailand and when I started doing textile in Thailand, nobody understood it. Nobody was familiar with Western textile art.

Also, each piece I make takes at least two months to do because I would do it all by myself. I didn't have any assistants then. I couldn't work on my art as much as I had wanted to back then because I was also teaching full time. There was a period where I went back and forth between

painting and textile. And one day, a curator told me that textile was my strength, I didn't want to give that up.

So when I went back to textile again I looked at it in a different way. I didn't look at it as fiber art or categorized it as craft or fine art, it's just my way of making my art. I try to take a very basic, domestic, grandmotherly technique and take it as far as I can. When I saw no limitations, the work really evolved. It became more three-dimensional and installation based.

When I quit my job and concentrate full time on art, I got rid of all my limitations. I could do whatever I want, however big I wanted it. Like 'Shroud', an installation comprising of more than 700 crocheted Buddhas.



Jakkai Siributr, Shroud, 2011. Crocheted hemp, wax, 200 x 200 x 160 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Jakkai Siributr, Shroud, 2011 (detail). Courtesy of the artist.

E.G.T.: At what stage did your work become so political?

J.S.: In the past seven years. You can't get away from it. At some point, I had to stop watching TV, listening to the news. It would drive me crazy. I don't agree with any of the sides. I am not one of these people or one of those people. People with authority can always negotiate what they want and the regular people rarely benefit from it. When people have authority, they always abuse their power and the uniform installation was the symbol of that. Because once you become part of the state, you have the authority to do whatever you wish.

E.G.T.: How do people react when they see your work?

J.S.: They do understand it but sometimes I get categorized—they think that I am from one side.

E.G.T.: What about aesthetically? Because what you do is very beautiful but very critical at the same time. The form and the content are somewhat contradictory.

J.S.: The reaction to my work is either people like it very much or they hate it. I don't get the reaction in the middle. Sometimes people just have no reaction.

I don't mind the word craft. You can call it anything you want to call it, it's not a problem for me. I am an artist working with this medium. I am trying to keep the beauty of craft but then it is decorative and at the same time it's not. When people do not pay attention to the content, they

say it's craft, it's decorative and it's not good. It's also part of my culture. Textile goes a long way back. So why reject it when you can embrace it?

E.G.T.: Do you ever get censored, does the state take art seriously in Thailand?

J.S.: They have serious censorship with films. If you make a film, you have to pass it through the censorship board run by policemen who have no expertise. Luckily for me, in Thailand not many people with authority is interested in visual arts. There are images of politicians, prime ministers but nobody sees it.

I also criticize the commercial aspects of religion very often. I could be in trouble with Buddhist extremist and conservatives but they don't come to see the show. I have a show now in Singapore with uniforms. I don't know if I'd be able to show that in Thailand because it's a little bit sensitive with the authority ...I think it was a good decision to show that particular work with uniforms in Singapore because I wouldn't want to censor myself in Thailand—that's the worst thing for an artist. If they want to censor my work, I'll deal with it but I wouldn't self censor my work. I wouldn't call myself a political activist or anything like that.

E.G.T.: Do you still live in Thailand?

J.S.: Yes, I do.

E.G.T.: What makes you still want to live there?

J.S.: It's home. Having spent a long time somewhere else, I always wanted to come back. Even now with all the political uncertainties, there is no other place that I would want to live. I like Istanbul but you have the same problem right? (laughs)

Jakkai Siributr (b. 1969) is one of Southeast Asia's leading contemporary artists, working primarily in the textile medium. He is noted for producing intricate, meticulously handmade tapestry and installation works that make powerful statements about religious, social, and political issues in contemporary Thailand. Beyond his gallery shows, his work has been included in exhibitions at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, San Francisco, USA; The Art Centre, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok; the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore; the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, Taichung, Taiwan, among other distinguished institutions.

Elif Gül Tirben is an arts writer and curator based in Istanbul. She holds a BA in International Relations from Middle East Technical University, an MA in Sociology from the same university and an MA in Visual Arts Theory from Sabanci University. Her interests are contemporary art and sociology of culture. She is one of the three editors of m-est.