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Thai artist seeks discomfort as a medium for his message

Manit Sriwanichpoom, known for his provocative commentary on growing Thai consumer culture, advises Cambodia to look to Thailand in order to avoid the pitfalls of development

BY ELEANOR AINGE ROY

AS AMERICA'S post-Thanksgiving sales degenerated into consumer chaos on Saturday – one Wal-Mart employee was crushed to death beneath frenzied bargain hunters and a gunbattle erupted in a Toys R' Us store – Thai photographer Manit Sriwanichpoom stirred his black coffee and looked with curiosity around the polished interior of Metro, a very different Phnom Penh from the one he knew when working as a freelance photojournalist here in 1992-93.

"It was rather scary coming back because I knew tourism must have changed things dramatically. The countryside is still very beautiful, but Phnom Penh architecture seems a bit of a mess. I think Cambodia should look to Thailand as a case study to avoid the pitfalls of development. It seems that Cambodia is at a crossroads right now – didn't Phnom Penh use to be called the Paris of the East?"

Manit is visiting Phnom Penh for the first ever PhotoPhnom-Penh festival, which is being hosted by 11 different venues across the capital this week.

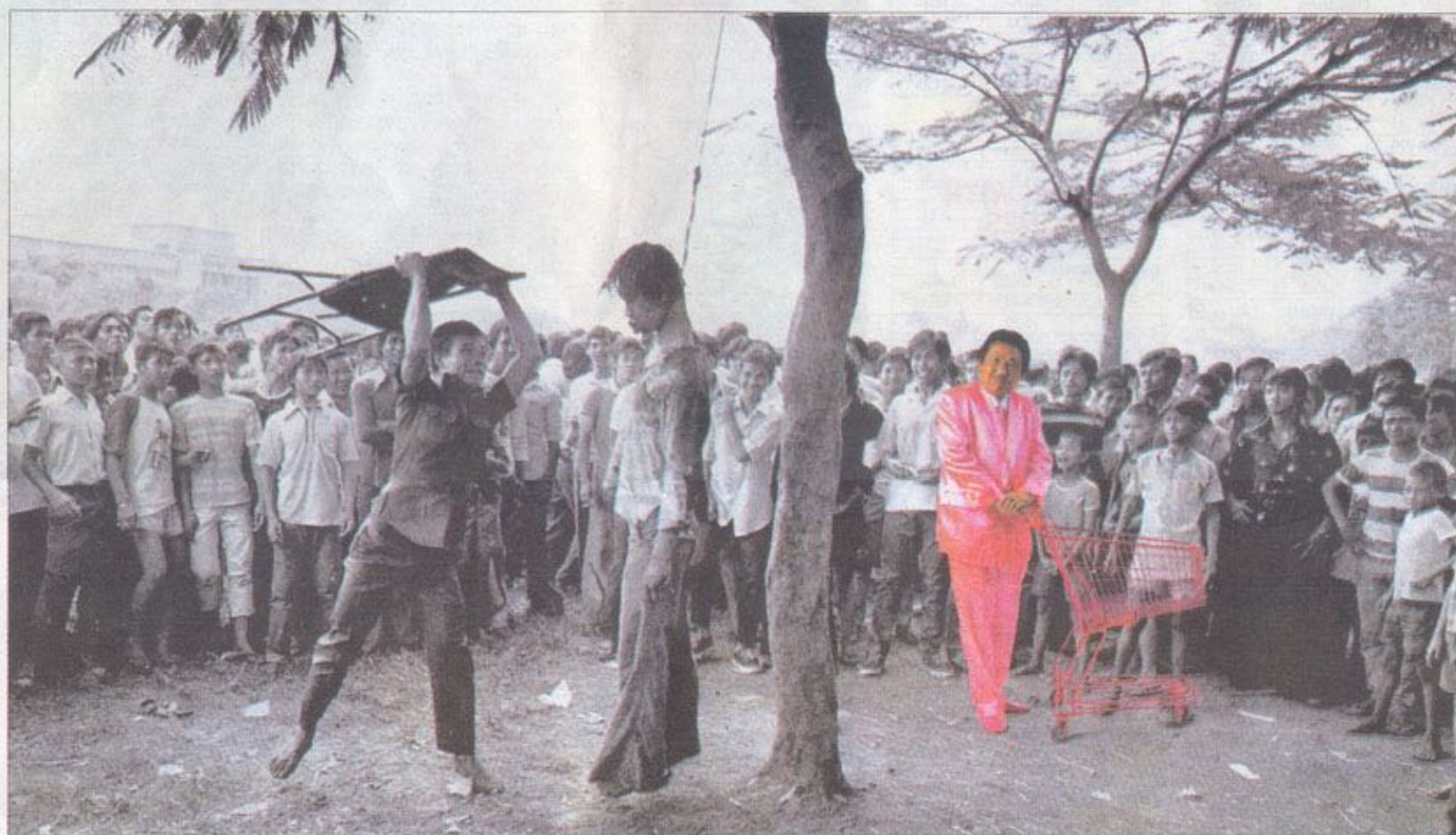
Manit's work can be seen at the French Cultural Centre during the festival, and he will be hosting a projection introducing new talents in photography from Thailand at 8pm today at the same venue.

Documenting vs creating

Initially trained as a visual artist, Manit has been working as a photographer since the early 1980s. He began his career working for advertising agencies in Bangkok and as a freelance news photographer on the Thai-Cambodian border, where a humanitarian crisis at the vast refugee camps provided him with more than enough work.

"What I love about photojournalism is that you have only one chance to speak out, one image to capture an idea and everything has to be in that image," Manit said.

"But gradually I began to get frustrated with photojournalism, as everyday I was waiting for the work call – where you are going and what you are shooting, even if it doesn't really interest you. As a photo-



Horror in Pink by Manit Sriwanichpoom. © MANIT SRIWANICHPOOM

journalist you are waiting for things to happen, but because I was trained as a visual artist, I was taught to create them by yourself and I had a kind of conflict within me. It was frustrating to not be able to express myself, so I said, okay, I don't want to be a photojournalist anymore. Instead I want to express my feelings, my ideas and my anger," he said.

"However, I do sometimes miss the feeling of photojournalism that you always have

structuring provocative images on the growing Thai consumer culture, often putting his own spin on famous photographs from the Vietnam War.

One of his best known works is the "Pink Man Series" – consumer icon of the contemporary Thai man, pushing his pink supermarket cart in search of material satisfaction.

"The suit is a symbol of Westernisation and capitalistic success. The flashy pink satin personifies tastelessness

ple, and I was so angry that most did not seem to know about Sundaravej's support of the 1976 pro-democracy student massacre," he said.

"How could he get in on a landslide vote? I thought something was very, very wrong," he continued.

"The man being beaten in the photograph is a student who was fighting for democracy," he added.

"But the government spread the lies that these people

to bring this photograph to the attention of the new Thai generation, which is often unaware of this event.

"When I was at the print shop printing this image, the young shop assistant came up and said where is this? I told her to guess, and she said, 'Cambodia, Burma, I don't know'. I said, 'look at the picture, can't you see the palace, look for the temple – it is Bangkok'. She was really shocked and said, 'No, no, no, no', and I said, 'Yes, this is not the Thailand that you know'."

The land of smiles?

Thailand calls itself the land of smiles, but this is a myth, Manit said. Like in many parts of Southeast Asia, nationalism is very strong and it is used by the government as a tool to control the people, Manit added.

Manit said the pink man works because he is annoying, he gets under people's skin, and makes them ask questions which, even if they don't have answers, are important as a means to begin dialogue.

Nearing the end of the interview, talk inevitably turned to

the border dispute near Preah Vihear temple, an 11th-century Cambodian ruin that is at the centre of a military standoff between the two countries, and the current occupation of Bangkok's international airports by anti-government protesters.

Despite having to make the 12-hour overland journey the day before to reach Phnom Penh, Manit thinks the current disruption in his homeland is a blessing in disguise.

"I don't think anybody likes the situation at the moment, but is a good thing that it is happening. This is a chance for the Thai people to reconsider themselves, and what is happened in their own country, in their culture, in politics and everything," he said. "It is a good time for Thai people to come back and examine the problems – they have to open themselves up."

"These disruptions are a sign that, whether we like it or not, maybe we have a problem in ourselves, we have a cancer in ourselves. And if it is like a cancer ... we must go through this operation even if it is painful."

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to be ready. I feel rusty sometimes and I think, 'OK, I have to be prepared and move faster,' he added.

Art photography

Following his creative calling, Manit began making what is commonly dubbed "art photography" and started con-

and conspicuous consumption," Manit said.

"I did *Horror in Pink* in 2001. In the year 2000, one of the politicians – the last prime minister of Thailand, Samak Sundaravej, was elected as mayor of Bangkok. Now Bangkok is meant to be made up of educated, well-informed peo-

were communists, and communism was the ghoul of the time that would eat you up. Vietnam had just 'fallen' to communism and rumours was spread that these Thai students were in fact Vietnamese invaders."

By placing the pink man in this context, Manit was trying