

Manit Sriwanichpoom on Art, Purpose and being Fearless

KEVIN WY LEE 17/02/2017 [INVISIBLE INTERVIEWS](#), [PROJECTS](#)



Image courtesy of ©Manit Sriwanichpoom
Embryonia, 2007

In the following conversation with prolific Thai artist/curator Manit Sriwanichpoom, we talk candidly about photography and purpose, censorship and compromises, and being fearless in art-making. Like many others, I first learnt of Manit Sriwanichpoom (b. 1961) from his now iconic Pink Man series, a sharp satirical criticism of Thailand's consumerism and materialism at odds with the country's Buddhist inclinations. I have since visited him at his Kathmandu Gallery in Bangkok, sat in on one of his artist talks and collected a few of his publications. Manit, exhibits enviable range beyond Pink Man, not only in his photography but also his efforts across the field as filmmaker, curator, artist and activist. His masterful use of symbolism and iconography, coupled with brave and vividly political signature, has made him one of the most successful names in Thailand's contemporary artscape. I have long wanted to speak candidly with Manit Sriwanichpoom, a luminary in Southeast Asia photography. Now seems more timely than ever.

YOU DEMONSTRATE GREAT RANGE IN YOUR WORK. HOW DO YOU FIND PURPOSE AND PATH IN THE CHOICES YOU MAKE?

Manit Sriwanichpoom: Since I became an art student at Srinakharinvirot University in 1980, my interest in art has been wide-ranging. Although I studied visual art, I involved myself in literature, drama and film activities. I believe we can learn from and be inspired by different disciplines. We shouldn't limit ourselves to just one artistic area. The experience I got has freed me from any rule or norm of artistic practice.

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY ARE THE THREE MAIN THINGS THAT SHAPE WHO YOU ARE AS AN ARTIST?
Being idealistic, Romantic and rebellious.

BIENNALES, MUSEUMS, ART FAIRS AND MARKETS ARE ALL DIFFERENT SPACES WITH DIFFERENT AGENDAS. YOU SEEM TO NAVIGATE THEM WITH EASE WHILST STILL MAKING WORK THAT SEEM TRUE TO YOUR ART. HOW DO YOU MAINTAIN YOUR AGENCY ACROSS THE VARIOUS SPACES?

If you know the role and function of each space well you can handle them easily. If you confuse the fact and do not know how to deal with them properly then you might be easily manipulated by commercial demands and lose your soul. It's not an easy thing to do or to resist demands from all of these venues. But you have to ask yourself first – what do you hope to gain from participation in a biennale or an art fair?

YOUR PARTNER ING KANJANAVANIT (ING K) IS AN ARTIST IN HER OWN RIGHT, WORKING AS A FILMMAKER. YOU WERE THE CO-DIRECTOR OF SHAKESPEARE MUST DIE. AND MANY WOULD ARGUE THAT PHOTOGRAPHY IS A LIMITED MEDIUM COMPARATIVELY. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE DIFFERENCES IN LANGUAGE BETWEEN THE 2 MEDIUMS. AND WHAT IS IT ABOUT THE STILL IMAGE THAT MAKES YOU CONTINUE WORKING WITH IT?

I was the Director of Photography (cinematographer) not the co-director of Shakespeare Must Die. I did co-direct Citizen Juling. For me, still and moving images are not different. It's just the matter of length of image and time. Both are about story telling. When you work with film you have to deal with many people from different artistic areas. As a DP for a film, I have to be aware of teamwork as I'm the head of the camera crew. When I work on my still photography I'm alone. No one has to wait for my decision-making. That's why I still enjoy working with still photography more than film as I don't have to deal with a crew.

SINCE WE'RE ON SHAKESPEARE MUST DIE, IT WOULD BE ERRONEOUS TO OMIT A DISCUSSION ON CENSORSHIP. CAN YOU THINK OF ANY CIRCUMSTANCE WHERE CENSORSHIP WOULD BE JUSTIFIED? During war, I guess. In a normal situation, censorship is an act of power abuse. It's unacceptable and unjustifiable in most cases. That's why Ing K & I recorded our fight against the banning of Shakespeare Must Die in a documentary called Censor Must Die to reflect the ignorance and brutality of the censorship system that serves the powers-that-be.

ON YOUR CO-DIRECTORSHIP, HOW IS WORKING ON A PROJECT WITH A PARTNER?

I'm a photographer so I take care of the film's visual. Luckily, Ing K herself is a talented multi-disciplinary artist who has clear visions for her film. We both spend time brainstorming what we need for locations, props and so on. We both have to agree what the visual style we want to have for each film. For instance, in Shakespeare Must Die, we wanted the look of Caravaggio's painting style for the film since Shakespeare and Caravaggio lived in the same period. The light intensity and high contrast with dark atmosphere fit well to the story of a struggle between good and evil inside a megalomaniac.

YOU'VE WORKED WITH STAGING AND PERFORMANCE IN YOUR WORK AND OBSERVATIONAL STREET PHOTOGRAPHY. HOW DOES YOUR RELATIONSHIP, OR THAT OF THE WORK, WITH THE AUDIENCE DIFFER IN EACH CASE?

I never actually segregate or categorise my audience. I just try to do my work as best as I can no matter what role I play behind the camera – stage director or pure observer. Audiences never come to my mind. I think about the issue first and how I should deal with it.

DO YOU CONSIDER IMPACT THEN?

For me, idea comes first then finding cloth (form) to put on it so people can see what the idea is like. What colour the cloth should be, black & white or technicolor, that would attract people's attention. Ideas are like air. You cannot see it but you can make it visible through art form. At this stage, audiences

become my concern as I'm speaking to them. Will they get my message or not? How much and how far I can go with artistic expression? I prefer to take my audiences exploring and experiencing the art that I discover.

AND FURTHER ON AUDIENCE – LOCAL ISSUES, LOCAL SYMBOLS FOR LOCAL AUDIENCES OR UNIVERSAL THEMES FOR A WIDER INTERNATIONAL REACH?

My main audience is local so issues and symbols must be local as well. I believe that you can learn about the universe from a tiny little thing such as a rock or a drop of water so that you can see universal issues from my art. For instance, the Pink Man series is dealing with local consumerism but it illustrates a picture of global crisis.

THE STREET PHOTOGRAPHY SCENE IN THAILAND IS HUGELY POPULAR AT THE MOMENT AND ONE OF THE MORE ACTIVE ONES IN THE REGION. WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THIS AND WOULD THIS MOVEMENT SHAPE THE NEXT GENERATION OF THAI ARTISTS?

I'm really happy to see the Street Photography scene become so popular as I'm one of the supporters of the genre. A group called Street Photo Thailand came to ask for my support and participation in its first group exhibition at Bangkok Art & Culture Centre (BACC) in 2007. I saw young and talented photographers in this field emerging and gaining recognition internationally such as Akkara Naktamna, Tavepong Pratoomwong and Rammy Narula. The modern digital camera and the light-hearted character of the work have attracted young generations to the field. Lately, people started questioning the gimmick of the decisive moment with candid style of framing that produces the sameness and repetition of work which has bored their interest. This is the challenge to all street photographers: how to be unique, to have an impact and be different from each other.

I HAVE HEARD COMPARISONS OF TRUMP TO THAKSIN. WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THIS AND HOW TRUMP IS ATTEMPTING TO RESHAPE AMERICA?

People here have been living through Thaksin Shinawatra (Trump Thailand) for over a decade. The U.S. government and some Americans have been criticizing anti-Thaksin groups and the Thai law court for being anti-democratic. Now U.S. citizens and the whole world are experiencing for themselves just how it feels to live under an elected dictator. Everything Trump is doing now Thaksin has done before such as power abuse, conflict of interest, corruption and social division. Same pattern and manner. The difference between Trump and Thaksin is the scale of damage. The U.S. is the super power dominating world economy so the damage will be unimaginable.

THESE ARE CONFUSING AND POLARISING TIMES. FOR ARTISTS, BOTH ENDS OF THE SPECTRUM WOULD APPEAR BLEAK – THE MARKETS ARE TERRIBLE AND THE AGENCY OF THE ARTIST'S ARTIST IS BEING QUESTIONED AND EVEN CHALLENGED AT TIMES, WHAT WOULD YOUR ADVICE BE TO YOUNG ARTISTS? Be honest and true to yourself.

OXFORD'S 2016 WORD OF THE YEAR WAS "POST-TRUTH". WHAT IS TRUTH TO YOU?

Truth is truth. No pre-truth, no post-truth, no alternative truth and no after-truth. Don't let the liar manipulate your mind. As Ing tells me: as a horror filmmaker, you never argue with the demon when you perform your exorcism, otherwise you will lose your mind and power.

YOU BEGAN WORK FOR SEVERAL YEARS FIRST AS A PHOTOJOURNALIST AND MADE THE TRANSITION. ART AND/VIS JOURNALISM IS STILL VERY MUCH A TOPIC OF DISCUSSION. I KNOW MANY MID-CAREER PHOTOJOURNALISTS CONSIDERING A SWITCH. WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THIS MATTER?

I'm very lucky that I shifted my career soon enough, before the paper media business became affected by digital media. I know many friends who still want to work as photojournalists but there are no jobs or assignments any more. Change is inevitable. Use what we have to serve the art audience instead of newspaper or magazine readers. Our boss is not the agency or editor but the public audience. We communicate with them directly. We're more free than ever. Just use it to create art.

YOU SEEM TO STRIP OFF MOST NUANCE IN YOUR LATEST WORK FEAR. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE CHOICE AND BALANCE BETWEEN NUANCING AND BEING MORE DIRECT, LITERAL IF I MAY USE THE WORD.

Being direct or nuanced is a matter of choice. It depends on a case by case, series by series. I don't hold it as a bible or a must do. For the FEAR series, it has to be clear and specific for what I'm talking about. It has to be fearless. I can't make it abstract or a blurred idea (except my images). The series touches upon sensitive issues such as the monarchy and the army. Although the images in the series itself look more direct the interpretation is still open. That's why I have no problem with Thai authority, so far.

LET'S TALK ABOUT CRITICISM. EVERYONE HAS THEM, ESPECIALLY IF ONE HAS AN OPINION AND EXPRESSES THEM OPENLY. ARE YOU AWARE OF CRITICISMS AGAINST YOU? HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH THEM?

Another work that I've been doing is writing an art & culture column for local Thai political magazine Siamrath Weekly, once a month since 1999. That means I've been criticizing artists, art works and Thai culture all the time. I believe in 'constructive criticism' with sincerity. It is like we need a clean and clear mirror to see ourselves. So I have no problems when I hear or read what other people are thinking about me and my work. In a true democracy we have to be open to different opinions. You can't force anyone to think like you.

YOUR WORK AS A CURATOR HASN'T GONE UNNOTICED. I DIDN'T HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO SEE THE FORGOTTEN THAI MASTERS OF PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION BUT HAVE THE CATALOG AND ENJOYED IT VERY MUCH. THE QUESTION WOULD BE – WITH THE PHOTOGRAPHY MEDIUM CURRENTLY EVOLVING AND INTERROGATED, WHY IS AN EXHIBITION OF OLD MASTERS PRACTICING OLD METHODS AND TECHNIQUES RELEVANT TODAY?

The idea behind this project is whether Thailand has its own photo masters like in the West. It's about writing our own local photographic history – for people to know what photographers of the past have done and archived before. Knowing oneself is an important part of art creation. When we learn history it is like a tree that sucks up nutrients from the soil. Many artists get inspiration from old masters' work and practice. That's why we go to museums.

YOU'VE ALSO CURATED SOME YOUNG THAI ARTISTS AND SHOWN THEIR WORK AT YOUR KATHMANDU GALLERY IN BANGKOK. WHAT DO YOU LOOK FOR IN YOUNG ARTISTS?

Photography is like language. It has a function of communication. I came from the analogue era, but today is the digital era. I'm curious about how young photographers today practice. How they compose the photo. They must have their ways of looking at photography, probably different from my generation. I very much enjoy learning from the new generation. It keeps me connected to today's artists.

THERE'S A BOOM IN PHOTO FESTIVALS IN ASIA. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE PHOTO FESTIVAL TODAY?

I've been to many festivals in Asia, including ones that are funded by local government, which became propaganda tools to promote political agenda and tourism. It's really hard to find a politics-free festival. As one of the co-founders of PhotoBangkok Festival with Piyatat Hemmatat, we're aware of it. Luckily,

for our first edition in 2015, all our support came from the private sector so we could set our agenda freely. Besides, as a showcase and meeting place for talented Asean photographers, we try to promote networking among artists, curators, art institutions and collectors as well.

Since we don't have a photo fair to promote photo collecting, at PhotoBangkok we have a programme like 'collectors' talk' to share their view on why they collect photographs. This kind of programme helps to encourage people to collect photography.

SOUTHEAST ASIA IS IN FLAVOUR AT THE MOMENT. PEOPLE ARE CURATING, UNCURATING, PACKAGING AND REPACKAGING THE REGION FOR PRESENTATION. WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS AND THAILAND'S PLACE IN IT ALL?

It is an exciting moment for the Southeast Asian community. We are exploring, learning, connecting and exchanging among ourselves in the region. Southeast Asian art has been ignored and treated as third world and exotic. With economic growth and digital accessibility we should hope it can help artists in the region to redefine the art of the future.

I HEAR INDONESIA SPEAK OF THE LACK OF CURATORS WITHIN THE PHOTOGRAPHY FIELD. THE SAME CAN BE SAID OF OTHER PARTS IN THE REGION. CURATING FOR THE MARKETS AND ART ESTABLISHMENTS IS MORE LUCRATIVE. WHAT ABOUT THAILAND?

Thailand also has the same problem like Indonesia and probably the rest of SEA countries. We're struggling with this issue and we don't have any educational programme to produce the experts of the field. On the other hand, this situation gives an opportunity to people who are interested in the job. I think this problem won't go away in the next 5 years if there are no proper solutions from art and photography educational institutes and private sectors.

ARTISTS ARE HAUNTED BY ANXIETIES BY NATURE. BUT WHAT MAKES YOU CALM AND AT PEACE?

I'm always grateful to what I achieve each day including staying alive. I'm thankful for what I have. I always remind myself that the materials and knowledge I gain is not just for personal indulgence. I came into the world with nothing so no point in keeping anything to myself. I should use my resources for a bigger purpose. When I feel detached then I feel calm and peaceful.

SELF-DOUBT IS VERY MUCH PART OF THE ARTISTIC AND CREATION PROCESS. SOME FIND IT TORTUROUS. WITH YOUR MANY YEARS OF EXPERIENCE, DO YOU STILL FEEL SELF-DOUBT? AND HOW DO YOU CONFRONT IT?

Yes, I still do have self-doubt. It's important to have it. Self-doubt is like a compass, it keeps you on track. You won't get lost easily. This is how I take it.

HAVE YOU EVER COMPROMISED?

At the end of the day you have to compromise since you have to live with other people. That's why I try not to compromise in the first place. Think of something radically. When you aim your goal high, your point of compromise will be high too.

LASTLY, WHAT IS YOUR GREATEST FEAR?

To be irrelevant.

This interview with Manit Sriwanichpoom, conducted by Kevin WY Lee in February 2017, has been edited for length and clarity