

# The Poor Image and Royalty: *A Battle Between Two Thai Pops*

What does it mean to be Thai? Historian Saichon Sattayanurak contends that the concept of ‘Thainess’ was constructed by the government and conservative academics to uphold a hierarchical social and political order.<sup>1</sup> As surrounding imperial powers expanded in the early twentieth century, King Rama VI (r. 1910–1925) deployed media and the arts to popularize a concept of modern Thai nationalism centred not on a geopolitical or cultural identity, but on the body of the king. He established three pillars of Thai identity, or Thainess, that still define the country today: nation, religion and king. In November 1952, as the US Central Intelligence Agency accelerated training the Thai military in combat and social control, the passage of the Un-Thai Activities Act, or the anti-communist act, codified the tremendous power of Thai law enforcement. This legislation defined “un-Thai activities” as acts that might undermine any of the three pillars. Praised by the US for combating communism and sedition, the law was used to justify four decades of institutionalized suppression. To the current chagrin of the Thai government, whose legitimacy throughout the twentieth century relied on performing a well-made image to foreign powers, the three-pillared definition of Thainess has received increasingly critical international attention.<sup>2</sup> While this conservative definition of Thainess persists and is strictly enforced through martial law and the lèse-majesté law – which makes it illegal to defame, insult, or threaten the Thai monarchy – young Thais are using protest to imagine a more inclusive picture of what constitutes Thainess.

Because Thainess has historically been constructed through visual means, visual culture is not the ‘weapon’ of choice of these protesters, but a necessary site of contention to meaningfully challenge current conceptions of national identity. In 2020, global audiences witnessed Thai protesters appropriate a wide cross-section of imagery—from nationally specific references to international global popular culture. Over that summer, protesters shifted focus from the resignation of ex-army general and Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha’s government to unprecedented calls for the reform of Thailand’s most inviolate institution: the monarchy. To challenge unified, official royal iconography that has been codified and popularized over generations, protesters traded international pop iconography at high frequency, injecting Thai visual culture with unprecedented diversity and volatility.

During the post-Second World War era, the Thai art establishment was dominated by stable, state-sponsored image production in which the monarch symbolized the nation. Following an overt silence from the arts establishment during the 2010 protests, most Thai artists have approached political subject matter from an oblique angle, if at all. However, many artists directly participated in the 2020 protests, blurring the line between acts of creative protest and politically engaged works of art.

This text investigates how Thai visual culture and aesthetic taste shift when they are motivated not by the ideologies of a centuries-old dynastic regime, nor sponsored by the US government, but rather led by a grassroots movement for democracy. The effect, I argue, is the laying of a parallel track of highly legible imagery that reads as easily as photographs of the monarch. First, I discuss the construction and consolidation of Thainess in the image of the king in the latter half of the twentieth century. Second, I discuss 2020 protesters' attempts to negate or hijack these state-sponsored, and highly regulated symbols of Thainess. Third, I discuss how protesters and artists have appropriated global pop imagery to appeal to an international audience. Unlike stable, resilient royal iconography designed for national unification, the lifespan of highly legible images utilized in the protest movement was short. This suggests protesters are more interested in visibility as an instrument of safety than in creating a new dogma of Thainess. Finally, I discuss how politically engaged artists in galleries and on the streets have moved towards more progressive and candid work to match the standards of legibility of a grassroots political movement. The emergent image of Thailand is an unresolved mosaic of diverse voices that may reject traditional Thainess as an aspiration altogether. But then again, maybe that is what democracy looks like.

#### CONSTRUCTING THAINESS IN THE IMAGE OF THE KING

From birth, Thai people internalize the iconography of royalty as thoroughly as they are excluded from the sacred class it signifies. Both mundane in their ubiquity and sacred in their signification of *dhammaraja* (divine kingship) status, symbols of royalty manifest through colours, language, songs, picture-framing styles, and most of all, photographs of the royal family. Since the 1960s, the visage of the king has been the common denominator of Thai visual culture: printed on every Thai baht (the Thai currency), hung in every home, illustrating every day of printed wall calendars, and watching over every city.

This was not always the case. As early as 1920, it was noted that every Thai home possessed at least a humble lithograph of the monarch to "show its loyalty in this easy and practical manner."<sup>3</sup> However, the image of the king receded from public view following the 1932 revolution, in which the People's Party or Khana Ratsadon overthrew absolute monarchy and deployed new symbols to promote belonging, through national citizenship as opposed to royal subjecthood. When the United States Information Service (USIS) conducted a survey in rural Thailand in the mid-1950s, the majority of respondents did not know the name or visage of the then king.<sup>4</sup> As the legitimacy and ideology of the military-dominated political system was called into question, the regime of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1957–1963) began to promote the royal image of King Bhumibol Adulyadej or Rama IX (r. 1946–2016) to cohere national identity.<sup>5</sup> Sarit's regime fused military power with royal legitimacy, initiating a pattern of royal involvement in politics, although the monarchy has taken a public position "above politics" since student-led uprisings in 1973.<sup>6</sup> In 1957, state-controlled media began presenting daily photographic and film coverage of the royal family's projects that established the king as the father and moral leader of a sovereign Thai people.<sup>7</sup>

This project to unify Thailand around the image of the monarch was supported by the CIA and USIS as an integral component of the Cold War strategy in Southeast Asia. In 1956, there were eight US teams producing film and music with the aim of "contrasting the beloved King and Queen with the evil spectre of communism," and making the monarchy more 'real' in the eyes of Thai people.<sup>8</sup> In the early 1960s, the US Agency for International Development and USIS printed hundreds of thousands of posters and calendars with pictures of the king and queen each year.

These were distributed throughout the country and were often the only wall image in the homes of the rural poor.<sup>9</sup> In 1965, USIS films were estimated to have been seen by as much as fifty-nine percent of the population of Thailand.<sup>10</sup> Anthropologist Rosalind C. Morris characterizes this aggressive promotion of the monarchy via mass media as a “commandment to not only revere the king, but to revere him by revering his image.”<sup>11</sup>

Royal portraits, paradoxically both mass products and sacred objects enjoy the ubiquity of pop culture but via the consistency of government-regulated assets. The Royal Household Bureau maintains regulations for how and where the public may display royal photographs in physical and online contexts. Often incorporated into household or neighbourhood shrines, they testify to one’s personal relationship to and investment in the monarchy and thus conformity to the three-pillared definition of Thainess. Many believe these images evidence a intimate relationship between the king and the commoner, in which the monarchy operates paternally for the believer or as surveillance of the naysayer. Love of the monarch is so embedded in the concept of Thai nationality, that if a Thai person does not worship the king, many see them as “not Thai” or “nation haters” and believe they should leave the country.

The inextricable link between the monarchy and Thai sovereignty that characterizes Thai politics today was far from assured, but rather “born through an entire industry of image makers who lovingly reformatted, retouched, and reworked—in other words, reproduce—the image of divine kingship.”<sup>12</sup> In addition to creators enlisted to mass produce official imagery, artists rose from a new class of professional image makers who enlarged and embellished photographic prints at a time when prints larger than postcard size were costly. Artists competed for commercial success by bringing Thais closer to their king through convincing images, which expanded the market for images of the monarch. Thai modern art was thus reciprocally born “in the image of [an] imported nation form” that necessitated the performance of state cohesion to both foreign and domestic audiences.<sup>13</sup> In the broadest strokes, this close promotional relationship between artists and the state homogenized dominant Thai art in the latter half of the twentieth century. Gridthiya Gaweewong, artistic director of the Jim Thompson Art Centre in Bangkok, who has led research projects on the legacy of Sarit’s regime, notes, “It is [necessary] not only to revisit but also [to] deconstruct the influence of this period, because we see that the core problems of today are rooted in that time.”<sup>14</sup>

Constructed and wielded for political control, the image of Thai monarchy historically has been self-aware and oriented toward both domestic and international audiences. King Rama IV (r. 1851–1868) purposefully changed into a French-style military uniform and sat according to Western portrait conventions, which made his power and worldliness specifically legible to European leaders.<sup>15</sup> King Rama V (r. 1868–1910) dressed in Western-style clothing to assert the civility and cosmopolitanism of his rule under the pressure of encroaching British and French imperial forces. Rama V was the first Thai king whose likeness was widely accessible amongst domestic audiences (eg. stamps, postcards and coins) which made the monarchic image more available to the perversions and caricatures of King Rama VI.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, King Rama IX (r. 1946–2016) donned saffron robes with traditional Buddhist significance to declare his moral fitness as the rightful Thai king when he returned home from a European education.<sup>17</sup> Rama IX also made frequent, strategic appearances before the Thai public and international news that aligned the Chakri monarchy with other constitutional monarchies. By formalizing official royal iconography and strengthening prosecution of iconoclasm under *lèse-majesté*, King Rama IX’s reign reconstituted the monarchy’s sacred power through consistent appearance to domestic and international audiences.

The image of King Rama IX functioned as the nation's "pillar of stability," not only domestically but also in the eyes of global media's uncritical analyses of Thai politics.<sup>18</sup> While touring England in 1966, Queen Sirikit's fashion style successfully captured the attention of British and American press, garnering support for Thailand in the face of communist insurrection, and the explosion of a US military-fuelled prostitution industry. *Time* magazine reported, "nearly every Thai household boasts a picture of the king," as King Rama IX has "taken it upon himself to mould his emerging nation's character" in which "the easygoing Thais simply do not care very much one way or another" whether they have democracy or a constitution.<sup>19</sup> While a patronizing portrayal of the political will of the Thai people, this image of Thailand as an equanimous, ambivalent "land of smiles" has endured to this day and clouds both foreign and domestic judgment of the urgency, earnestness, and depth of political division in the nation. King Rama X's 30 October 2020 statement that "Thailand is the land of compromise" to a UK Channel 4 News reporter thus had deep historical precedent.<sup>20</sup>

King Rama X has made fewer appearances before foreign media, and the current monarchic image is more exposed to the anarchy of global internet culture in the forms of digital manipulation, memes, and the decontextualization of social media. Foreign media viewed the king's press conference and his consent to 'selfies' with the crowd as a gesture to improve his international image in the wake of challenges to his rule.<sup>21</sup> However, for the Thai people, this proximity to the sacred body of the king was highly abnormal. Typically, Thais would only be able to photograph the royal family from a significant distance, as in the royal funeral of King Rama IX. In 2016, European tabloids published "unflattering" photographs of the current king wearing a tank top, which authorities declared were doctored.<sup>22</sup> These images contradict strict scripts about the role of the king, and authorities have attempted to curb their resurgence during the 2020 protests. For example, sixteen year-old Napasin Trirayapiwat was charged with *lèse-majesté* for wearing a tank top to the October "People's Runway" protest that year.<sup>23</sup> Later that December, high-profile protest leaders dressed in revealing tank tops to demand the repeal of the *lèse-majesté* law. Protesters interpreted the images of the monarch wearing non-traditional clothing as evidence that the official image of royalty is meticulously constructed rather than a consistent reality, leading to the circulation of hashtags claiming that royalist imagery is 'a show'.

Recently, the Thai people's changing perception of national identity has enabled spectacularized protests before a global audience. For performance artist Teerawat Mulvilai, casting familiar foreign characters in Thai protest productions is key to both gaining an international audience and cloaking critique of taboo topics through comedy. Artistic director of B-Floor Theatre and a founding member of the Free Arts Movement, he debuted on 19 September 2020 a 'nude' three-metre marionette that required three people to operate. Like Hans Christian Anderson's tale of the emperor without clothes who surrounds himself with yes-men, "the king believes only the people who are supporting him," explained Teerawat.<sup>24</sup> He designed the puppet with a rotund stomach and a crown that resembles horns, referencing the extreme wealth inequality in Thailand. The puppet was a favoured subject for international news photography at the sensational 11 November 2020, Mobfest protest in Bangkok. Teerawat successfully captured Western audience attention, but the puppet's 'nakedness' also held particular significance for Thai audiences. Following a lineage of monarchs whose particular attention to dress not only covered the sacred *dharmaraja's* body but also acted as a layer of charismatic armour against domestic and international critics, the puppet presents a conspicuously exposed contrasting image of Thailand.

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#### COMMANDEERING THE IMAGE OF THAINESS FOR COMMONERS

One of the 2020 protesters' primary visual strategies, to both gain widespread recognition and to challenge conservative notions of Thai identity, was to hijack sacred royalist imagery. The specificity and performativity of royal iconography, which was successfully designed to captivate a national and international audience, made it an identifiable target for spectacle in contemporary protests. Royal iconography is so embedded within Thai culture it can be referenced indirectly, through situational elements such as (picture) framing, placement, object type, and timing. The state's success in teaching and controlling not only the royal image, but also the standards of its staging, make these contextual aspects of the so-called 'show' ripe for distortion by protesters and artists.

On 10 August 2020, a video of political refugee Pavin Chachavalpongpun was introduced to protesters at Thammasat University. Announcers foreshadowed Pavin's appearance with the phrase "the image that every household has" – the title of a famous royalist song. The Royal Guard March trumpeted out through speakers, and a screen transitioned to a glittering gold background – both characteristic of the royal news broadcast on every television channel at 8pm nightly. Pavin's portrait appeared, framed in gold and flanked by the symbols on the flag of the king – iconography typically reserved for royals. This evocative introduction expropriated the government's decades-long work of manufacturing consistent, universally recognizable media for framing and distinguishing the royal family, in order to make a widely accessible joke. The use of these rarified symbols to herald a low-tech video of a dissident was disarming. The effect was not to deify Pavin, whose video appeared to have been taken on a smart phone, but rather to suggest that those for whom these symbols are normally reserved may also be human.

In contrast to the highly regulated and produced royal iconography, Pavin's phone-camera video shared the characteristics of Hito Steyerl's "poor images."<sup>25</sup> These fast travelling digital "popular images" are "made and seen by the many" in defiance of "patrimony, national culture, [and] copyright."<sup>26</sup> 'Poor images' are the Achilles heel to institutions like the monarchy, historically constructed on "the fetish value of visibility" and reliant on totality and regulation.<sup>27</sup> As Pavin's sign-off, "I don't know if I'll be able to come home" beamed across borders impassable to the former diplomat, from Kyoto to the Bangkok crowd, his pixelated 'poor image' clarified the inadequacies of a policed image of Thainess constructed upon exclusion: Pavin's passport was revoked in 2014 following his criticism of the government and recurring accusations of *lèse-majesté*. The video's appropriative introduction lampooned extant "visual bonds" in the audience<sup>28</sup> – their alleged unity under patriarchal media – by placing them in an inappropriate context. It called out the protesters' affective synchronization with Pavin, "organizing its viewers" despite the author's physical distance from their shared home. Pavin's foreign-made, yet undeniably Thai video demonstrates that a national identity that disowns and physically ejects those who question it is doomed to dissolve in the age of the globalized, ungovernable, "digital no-man's land" of poor images.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to sound and visual iconography, the material context of an image can signify its connection to royal imagery. Artist Nibhon Khankaew distributed calendars at the biennial Khon Kaen Manifesto 2020, printed with the image of a dissident Isaan monk arrested during Sarit's regime in 1962. The calendars not only made a 'disappeared person' visible again, they also replaced the standard image of the royal family printed and distributed on annual calendars by private and public companies. On 25 November 2020, the Ratsadon group came under criminal investigation for forgery and *lèse-majesté* for distributing 3,000 'banknotes' to protesters at the Siam Commercial Bank's headquarters, where King Rama X is the biggest shareholder.<sup>29</sup> The design replaced the

familiar image of the king on Thai baht with that of a rubber duck wearing a crown—grounds for lèse-majesté charges. Protesters took up the symbol of the rubber duck in multiple contexts, calling it “protector” for its function as a barrier against water cannons and its innocuous appearance which spectacularizes power imbalance in photographs of police brutality. The ‘banknotes’ were hardly a convincing ‘counterfeit’—the Garuda, the national emblem of Thailand, was replaced with a white dove, and the People’s Party Plaque of 2020 was replicated on the left side of the note. The upper left read “this banknote can be used to purchase items from CIA stores”: the participating vendors around the protest site were nicknamed “Central Intelligence Agency.” The ten baht cash coupons functioned similarly to systems used at festivals and food courts across the country. Although the Ratsadon group faced charges of forgery, the notes seem more so to have drawn authorities’ attention for their use of the rubber duck in the place of the standard image of the king, which validates the currency and the symbolic security of Thai sovereignty in global markets.

The king’s image has long been positioned respectfully in places of physical prominence, but its position in digital space also matters. On Father’s Day and Mother’s Day, social media is usually filled with images of the king and queen. In 2020, student protesters hijacked prominent hashtags, such as “long live” with images of K-pop idols, rather than the royal family. In these instances where artists and protesters reference contexts where the Thai public expected to see the king, the presence of another figure reads as replacement or omission. Nalin Sindhuprama contrasts the purpose of the state spectacle, which is to “actualize” and “naturalize” the sacredness of the royal family, with that of protesters’ appropriation of the spectacle, which prompts audiences to realize “the performative framework of the royal spectacle and pushes the sacred monarch from reality into artificiality.”<sup>30</sup> For the younger generation, the exclusionary and hierarchical social order, justified by Buddhist karmic categories and exemplified in *dharmaraja* status—which positions the monarchy above accountability—stifles diversity and economic possibility. Perhaps royal imagery and ceremony are so ripe for satire because as protesters have commented widely, they “know it’s a show,” and are ready for a reality of Thailand that includes them.<sup>31</sup>

#### CAPTIVATING GLOBAL AUDIENCES FOR SAFETY

The question “are you Thai?” has been used by royalists since 2005 to publicly and privately accuse other Thais of a lack of patriotism. For the 2020 protesters, the question, “are you still human?” was used to combat this sentiment that one’s human rights depend on their adherence to standards of Thainess. By inserting themselves into the official imagery of Thainess, protesters “are reclaiming their place in this nation,” explained Nalin Sindhuprama.<sup>32</sup> For many young people, critiquing the government is no longer an un-Thai activity but rather the warp upon which they weave their own identities. Teerawat Mulvilai stated that asking how protesters are redefining Thainess is beside the point. Rather, the protesters’ philosophy is better described by the hashtag circulated by the 2020 Citizen’s Committee, “reduce Thainess, add humanity.”<sup>33</sup>

Rather than redrawing borders around who and what is and is not Thai, protesters are building on historiographic efforts to expand, perhaps even explode Thainess as a bounded category. In his paper, ‘Is “Thai” Studies still Possible?’, historian Charnvit Kasetsiri recalled the efforts of historians of the 1990s who questioned the dominant national narrative which excludes the political and ethnic “Other.”<sup>34</sup> Inclusivity, a strategy to recruit a robust base of constituents, is emblemized in the 2020 People’s Party slogan, “tolerate more diversity.”<sup>35</sup> The current movement is diverse across lines that traditionally divide the population: geography, class, and ethnicity. The movement spreads

far beyond Bangkok and the historic centre of Thammasat University, with universities in the majority of national provinces serving as loci for organizers. The movement thrived among people typically excluded from participation in traditional Thai politics, including LGBTQ+, feminists and the disabled, high-school students seeking education reform, as well as seasoned syndicates such as the Red Shirts, Labor Party, and Dao Din Group. Unlike the proletarian Red Shirts movement of 2010, however, many of the loudest leaders of the current movement are students from elite universities who are the children of the Bangkok middle- and upper-class. The Malay-Muslim population in the south, often counted as 'not Thai' by royalists, has also found a voice in the movement. Such diversity of constituents lends the protesters safety in numbers, the leverage of intersectional advocates and privileges, and alignment around the core value of a representational democracy rather than a particular dogma. For the arts community, it has prompted similar decentralization as critics look towards centres of activism and ingenuity in the South and North.

In 2020, protesters sourced punchy, globally legible imagery, not only to perforate the borders of official Thai visual culture, but to captivate the world with their cause. International attention lends the protesters the safety of hyper-visibility to protect against a state with a history of using brute force and clandestine 'disappearance' to handle political dissent. The protesters' primary fear and the driving strategy of leaders is to avoid "another October 6," referring to the infamous massacre at Thammasat University in 1976.<sup>36</sup> Current student protesters have grown up during the post-2006 escalation of *lèse-majesté* arrests and witnessed the government's crackdown on the Red Shirts in 2010 that resulted in ninety-four deaths and over two thousand injuries.<sup>37</sup> On 4 June 2020, unrest escalated following the abduction of Wanchalearm Satsaksit, a self-exiled Thai political activist, in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. He was the ninth prominent Thai dissident to suffer 'disappearance' since 2014: a potentially frightening fate, as police confirmed that the bodies of two other dissidents were found floating in the Mekong River in 2019.<sup>38</sup> One thing which the Thai have learned from the royal strategy of image promotion is that remaining visible is a form of power.

In 2020, protesters sought to bypass state media censorship by appealing to an international audience to gain visibility. In July, when thousands of protesters rallied at the Democracy Monument in Bangkok—the largest demonstration since the government declared a state of emergency in March due to COVID-19—the Thai media remained silent. Such self-censorship is characteristic of Thai media and the general population, and even though the government cannot control foreign media, they are still subject to allegations of *lèse-majesté*. Teerawat Mulvilai recalled, "There was no news, we had to get media from Facebook."<sup>39</sup> In the weeks and months that followed, protesters whose Thainess was symbolically and bodily on trial opened a space for political discourse through what cultural theorist Ariella Azoulay terms the "civil space of photography."<sup>40</sup> Protesters appeared in photographs before international audiences as "member[s] in the citizenry," creating a mediasphere to "present their grievances" to a state that would rather disown them or, better yet, make them disappear.<sup>41</sup>

To gain international media attention and generate coverage in Thailand, organizers such as student @judythecatz called for the use of global pop imagery on social media via the hashtag #ideaformob. This same Twitter user organized the first major Thai protest on 26 July 2020 when protesters adapted the lyrics from the Japanese cartoon '*Hamtaro*', about a hungry hamster, to critique irresponsible government spending. Carrying sunflower seeds and running around the Democracy Monument the protesters sang, "The most delicious food is taxpayers' money!"<sup>42</sup> This light-hearted appropriation of a foreign cartoon to lodge serious critiques against the Thai



government caught the attention of Reuters and was republished by *The Independent UK*, *Japan Times*, and others. Following the success of this 'Hamtaro Run', organizers repeated this strategy – students from the Mahanakorn for Democracy Group and Kaset University organized a protest in which activists dressed as Harry Potter characters, fighting the 'dark forces' and "You know who" (in reference to the king, so as to circumvent lèse-majesté laws).

This strategy of global pop appropriation successfully increased Thai media reporting on the protest movement. On 15 October 2020, the government banned news and online information that could "affect national security" and launched an investigation into four news outlets including *Voice TV*, *The Reporters*, and *Prachathai*, for reporting on the protests.<sup>43</sup> This provoked a backlash from other Thai news organizations which criticized the government for further restricting freedom of the press. In December, the movement was featured on the front page of *The Nation*, a popular Thai English language newspaper that protesters had boycotted for its earlier unfavourable coverage of the movement.

In addition to international pop culture, foreign language signage has been a key component of the protesters' address to a global audience. Activists have long used foreign languages as a protective mechanism as, ostensibly, it is more challenging for the government to read and censor texts in other languages. For example, in February 2020, students at Chulalongkorn University attended protests condemning the Court's decision to dissolve the Future Forward Party and laid messages around a funeral wreath that read "RIP Democracy." The languages included Thai, English, French, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Khmer, Hindi, and Pali-Sanskrit.<sup>44</sup> Some messages in non-Thai languages were directly critical of the monarchy in a way that would not be permitted in the Thai language. Now, foreign-language signs are also widely used to address international spectators. English or English-Thai signage is used at key protests even though only a small fraction of the populace speaks English. The clearest example of protesters directly addressing a non-Thai audience was the 26 October protest at the German Embassy, in which speakers were appointed to read an open letter in Thai, English, and German. Although the German government did not intervene, the protesters accomplished their goal of making front-page news across the world. Protesters say they are far more interested in increasing the accountability of the Thai government to its people and deterring an escalation of violence than foreign government intervention, which could erode Thai sovereignty.

Beyond its humour, familiarity and international recognition, global pop imagery has another key advantage: to puncture the visual landscape of Thailand with imagery that is *not* Thai, with such symbols of resistance. In addition to referencing *Hunger Games*, *Hamtaro*, and *Harry Potter*, protesters have trended hashtags such as #milkteaalliance, made memes that retool *Game of Thrones* and Japanese animes, and circulated images of K-pop idols in place of royals. These copyrighted images relieve individuals from the burden of authorship and create ambiguity of intent (that might provide plausible deniability in any charge of lèse-majesté). Low-brow global pop is perhaps the only type of imagery with levels of distribution to compete with royal iconography. By associating foreign-owned images with the democratic movement, activists are outsourcing the cost and labour of distributing protest iconography. If the image of the king has been the lowest common denominator of Thai visual culture since 1957, the protesters have altered the equation, expanding 'the picture' beyond Thainess by enacting the porousness of the Internet's visual culture.

For democracy protesters, the legibility of imagery is a solution to a time-specific problem (the need for safety in overt visibility) rather than a means to communicate ideology. Since at least

2008, royalist protesters have brought their own, beloved gold-framed images of the monarch to function as their protest signs. The precedent of deploying royal photographs in partisan politics traces back to the October 1973 student union protests, in which photographs of the king and queen were raised as “virtual shields against the threat of army,” a barrier that would later prove impotent.<sup>45</sup> The 2020 democracy protesters, seeking safety from a royalist-backed regime, have interchanged their protective icons from week to week. These volatile yet true ‘poor image’ protectors “express all the contradictions of the contemporary crowd: its opportunism, narcissism, desire for autonomy and creation, its inability to focus or make up its mind, its constant readiness for transgression... its craving for intensity, fun, and distraction.”<sup>46</sup> What emerges from this motley brigade is the language of protest as a globally legible form, one in which entertainment is put to work to energize and protect human bodies. Whereas the legibility of the monarch’s image serves to unify royalists under the ideology of Thainess, the visibility of global pop, vacant of dogma, invigorates a broad base for a pluralist, political movement.

#### DECENTERING ART AND CO-CREATING DEMOCRACY

In taking up global pop images as a communication strategy the student protesters left the artworld to play catch-up. “The art of resistance starts from ordinary people, not the artists,” reflected Teerawat Mulvilai.<sup>47</sup> He noted that as opposed to the ‘safe space’ and sympathetic audience of a gallery or theatre, protesters on the street have been forced to refine their communication to contend with the threat of physical violence from the government. “[Artists] can’t do the same thing anymore because this new and fresh idea is on the street,” he said, describing how students’ unprecedented level of directness and creative appropriation of low-brow pop has pushed artists towards experimentation and raised the bar for meaningful contribution. Teerawat continued, “If you’re still doing indirect work, you stepped backward.”<sup>48</sup>

Cutting-edge visual and political strategies utilized by the protesters have emboldened contemporary artists towards more explicit critique. Thailand’s contemporary art scene has long been dominated by conservative, Bangkok-based institutions, such as Silpakorn University, that uphold the ideals of nation, religion and monarchy. Though the history of Thai art has a close relationship with royal patronage, makers in the northeastern region of Isaan, long stereotyped as backward by the Bangkok elite, have led challenges to the national visual culture. The Khon Kaen Manifesto, launched by curator Thanom Chapakdee in 2018 and based in Isaan, is one of the more significant examples of artists incorporating highly visible protest iconography. Heavily promoted by the Bangkok-based Free Arts movement, which has been active in the protests, the Manifesto has received international critical acclaim. Nibhon Khankaew’s goals for Manifesto predate the protests, but align with the push towards highly visible, engaged art. In 2018, he encountered the general sentiment that art should be separate from politics, saying that “the art at Manifesto sent messages to people in power and people within society.”<sup>49</sup> Manifesto’s early aspirations were apparent in the unusual directness of the works of art selected, which did not go unnoticed. Within the first week of Manifesto’s launch, it was reported law enforcement officials asked curators to remove any works related to *lèse-majesté*, including artist Sermsilp Pairin’s painting of Jatupat Boonpattaraksa, or Pai, the leader of the activist group Dao Din of Khon Kaen University who had been convicted of this law. Thai contemporary artists have become experts at manipulating the opacities of their media, as works of art that are legible to an audience outside the art world risk being read as *lèse-majesté*.

Philosopher and writer Édouard Glissant testified to the indispensable value of opacity to resist “enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy” and colonial attempts to flatten irreducible divergence—contrary to the “principle of unity” and omniscience embodied in the image of the king, opacity “saves” artists from “irreversible choices,” such as those which might result in charges of lèse-majesté.<sup>50</sup> Opacity proved to be an effective salvation, for example, on 15 June 2017, when soldiers and plainclothes police entered Cartel Artspace and Gallery VER in Bangkok. This was the first time a visual art exhibition attracted the attention of state officers who were following a false warning that Prontip “Kolf” Mankong, convicted of lèse-majesté for her play *Wolf Bride* (2013), had organized the exhibition at Cartel Artspace.<sup>51</sup> The works of Paphonsak La-or and Tada Hengsapkul did in fact allude to political prisoners and dissidents, but did so opaquely. Due to their “illiteracy with regard to visual art,”<sup>52</sup> officers dismissed Paphonsak’s *Far From Home* series (2017) at neighbouring ARTIST+RUN gallery as innocuous landscapes. An American critic for example, might read the series as a remix of Ed Ruscha’s *Mountain Paintings* but Paphonsak traces his inspiration to a compilation of King Rama V’s travelogues from Europe, titled ‘Far from home’<sup>53</sup>—the mountain peaks representing countries where Thai exiles have lived since the May 2014 coup. The officers’ stop at ARTIST+RUN bought time for Tada to deinstall *The Shards Would Shatter at Touch* (2017) at Cartel Artspace, a series fashioned with literal opacity opposite to Paphonsak’s approach of ‘trick’ transparency. Tada’s installation invited viewers to embrace what appeared to be blank black images, using their body heat to activate the portraits rendered in thermochromic paint. The images of the dissidents may have remained invisible to law enforcement, whose engagement with Paphonsak’s paintings stopped at an equivocal surface level. Non-expert viewers felt content to classify Paphonsak’s landscapes with the simple nomenclature of ‘landscape’, but the challenging blankness of Tada’s works may have invited closer scrutiny. Although the efficacy of Tada’s black cloaking remains untested, the incident suggested that lighter shades of opacity that hide in plain sight were likely to satisfy the skimming eyes of law enforcement.

Although the state pressured Manifesto curators to censor works transparently related to lèse-majesté, oblique references to oppression did not raise any concerns. Artist Nutdanai Jitbunjong installed a folding chair made of tamarind wood, hanging upside-down from a noose, referencing Neal Ulevich’s famous photograph of a right-wing vigilante using a chair to beat the corpse of a student lynched from a tamarind tree at Thammasat University on 6 October 1976. Although Ulevich’s photographs have been widely appropriated by artists—notably Rirkrit Tiravanija’s installation *Who’s afraid of red, yellow, and green* (2010)—Nutdanai’s work succeeded in its intentional subtlety to a general audience in 2018. When asked whether such an audience, including the military, understood the work Nutdanai said, “I think most people could get the underlying message. But many may not.... [It] is history that the powers-that-be are attempting to sweep under the rug. And as for the military, they came because it was their duty.”<sup>54</sup>

Some of the art exhibited in 2018 Manifesto however, has moved from the realm of opacity to broad legibility due to the work of activists increasing visual literacy of political content. Ulevich’s taboo photographs resurfaced to broad viewership in the 2020 protests. On 10 August 2020, protesters gathered at Thammasat projected Ulevich’s photographs from the 1976 student massacre to the University’s anthem song, the Yoong Thong March, composed by King Rama IX. Nutdanai Jitbunjong’s folding chair reappeared on the anniversary of that event in 2020, in the group exhibition *Status in Statu* at WTF Gallery in Bangkok, under the title *A Massacre*. Curator Thunwalai Thaiprasert’s exhibition description noted the potential for art to deepen viewers’ awareness of

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political resistance, writing *Status in Statu* was “specifically for the Bangkokians, who have little or no knowledge or interest in the history of the decades-long struggle between Isaan and central power in Bangkok.”<sup>55</sup> In the political landscape of 2020, Nutdanai’s work, once opaque to a general audience, was retooled to address the Bangkok art world’s myopia. Artist Prakit Kobkijwattana, who exhibited in the 2020 Manifesto, has long used the more vernacular language of memes to make a similar point. Prakit manages a Facebook Page (Living in the pretentious city, your life must be pop) which lampoons middle-class Bangkokians following the April-May 2010 government crackdown. As protesters have made certain historical images and characters more widely accessible, artists have entered into iconographic dialogue with the protest movement, building from the imagery circulating in the public sphere.

The 2020 Manifesto saw artists move beyond the safety of operating within the arts community to incorporate protest iconography associated with open critique. Prakit Kobkijwattana’s *Untitled* poster series (2020) of former Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat connected Thai history with international imagery and contemporary icons of the protests in a gallery context. The six posters were on view at Khon Kaen Manifesto in December 2020 in the Northeast region of Isaan near the Laotian border. The series of digitally altered traditional-style portraits of Sarit Thanarat asserts the lasting impact of his anti-communist campaign, which deepened Thailand’s relationship with the US and Thai peoples’ relationship with the monarchy. The work has site-specific resonance, as the legacy of Sarit’s vigorous anti-communist policy left especially deep scars on the Isaan in the form of persistent poverty, dilapidated American military bases and abandoned brothels, one of which was a venue for the 2020 Manifesto.

Prakit Kobkijwattana’s posters are particularly arresting for their evocation of 1960s pop art, with chunky colour separation in the dictator’s clothing, abruptly cut forms, serial iteration, and flat neon backgrounds. Sarit’s headshot is infiltrated by a motley cast of characters which seem to mock the dictator, betray his shadow motivations, and draw a lineage between Sarit and today’s situation. The installation featured an image of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha emerging from former Prime Minister Sarit’s head, with a rubber duck sitting like a cherry on top of Chan-o-cha. The next three posters also featured yellow ducks popping playfully into Sarit’s portrait with the infuriating levity of a computer virus. The fifth and sixth images replace Sarit’s brain with stacks of cash, and lastly, the iconic image of ‘Uncle Sam’. He attributed his inspiration to old posters and those of net idols hung on a bedroom wall, calling Sarit “an idol of the coup d’etat and far-right in Thailand.”<sup>56</sup> Prakit posted five of the six images, omitting the one with Chan-o-cha, on Facebook in which each image had a resolution of 1000 x 1500 pixels, inviting followers to print their own copies and take them to the streets. One could just as easily see these portraits framed in flashing neon on a billboard as in a white cube setting. Prakit’s images, like those of the monarch, were made to adapt to both mundane and elevated contexts of display.

To an American viewer the most striking of this group, the ‘Uncle Sam’ image, addresses us with an intensity that exceeds his accusatory gaze. He occupies the region of the image with the highest resolution, commanding the most information-per-inch in the image file. Viewed in an abandoned brothel, this image’s quality betrays its foreign origins—a transplant, reborn into the pixelated head of native dictator Sarit, who has been decapitated at the neck from his decorated uniform. Uncle Sam ruptures the visual landscape of Thai imagery, conscripting the attention of international viewers who are all too familiar with American military propaganda. His persistent, pointing finger, a rude gesture in Thailand used mainly to indicate objects and animals, demeans



Thais. Prakit's posters remind us that although today there is no image more Thai than that of the monarchy, it was the US' financial and military resources that supported King Rama IX's ascension in Thai cultural imagery.

In 2020, as politics became the most popular subject for young Thai artists, with exhibitions ranging from formal gallery settings to pop-ups at protest sites, international critics looked to Khon Kaen. That symbols appropriated by protesters from international pop culture were now being represented as fine art reflected a rising tide of a more forthright conversation between protesters and artists, and a more democratic co-creation of Thailand's visual culture. David Teh, author of *Thai Art: Currencies of the Contemporary*, described this shift towards legibly critical work at Khon Kaen: "In a country where artists have excelled in cryptic forms of political expression for so long, the art is really evolving and maturing in a really nice way."<sup>57</sup>

This collaboration between artists and protesters is a marked shift from 2010, when the former, who were active in the leftist movement of the 1990s, were conspicuously silent. In 2020, protesters received much wider support from prominent artists and cultural workers. On 13 August, the Arts and Culture Network for Democracy published a statement in support of the protests, which accumulated over 1,000 signatures, including artists who supported the 2014 coup.<sup>58</sup> Later in October, twenty-five artists from the Bangkok Art Biennale 2020 released a public petition for the Biennale and the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre—one of the biennial venues and a site of protests and reactive police violence—to support the protestors and oppose state violence. While it might be conjectured that the signatories were exercising protective privileges of foreign citizenship, their visibility and publicity presented tangible outcomes for the protesters' safety. There may have been some protection in numbers from members of the Bangkok art elite signing the petitions, but the issue of authorship might still pose safety concerns. Most of the artworks at 2020 Manifesto were anonymously displayed, the organizers explaining this was to protect the artists and promote a 'collective spirit'.

While some artists may have used the moment to gain traction in their work, others saw their role as supporting protesters by creating festive resistance, increasing the visibility of the cause, and even creating sites for mutual aid and economic exchange. Thai hip-hop group Rap Against Dictatorship, who have performed at key protests, released a music video of the song 'Reform' filmed at previous protests that aimed to bring the reform agenda before a broader audience. The song also references one of the wider-known acts of protest art when, on 28 August, lead singer Ammy of The Bottom Blues threw royal blue paint on police at Samranrat Police Station. An offer was made to buy a stained uniform, and Ammy has since set up three-metre canvases printed with the faces of government leaders for passersby to pelt with the royal blue colour.

Participatory art capitalizes on anonymity to protect individual artists and adapt to the needs of the movement. From the beginning, protesters have followed Hong Kong's model in declaring themselves to be a leaderless movement. This has become even more valid since the arrests of key people between mid-October and December 2020. While critics of the movement point to its lack of organization, the diversity of goals between different factions and the lack of consensus among faction leaders, this decentralized approach has served to sustain it. On 16 August, Teerawat Mulvilai organized a fifteen-minute performance of '*Paper Work*,' one of B-Floor's more stage-style shows. It featured a military leader and lawyer writing a constitution for the people on a long scroll of paper which the audience rips up at the end. Following the arrests, Teerawat changed tactics towards more impromptu, participatory works, "to release the tension." Since December,

B-Floor has been leading pop-up drumming groups, a model that anyone can join or replicate on their own without prior experience, and one with a less didactic message than *"Paper Work."* Teerawat recognized the importance of joy and flexibility as strategies, saying that "the mob has to be something people want to come to any time... The art changed because the movement changed."<sup>59</sup>

Free Arts, a Bangkok-based collective that has been active in protest art, collaborated with three other groups—the Bad Students, Free Youth, and Women for Freedom and Democracy—to organize Mob Fest, one of the most successful examples of artistic leadership in the movement. Thousands of protesters and hundreds of food carts and creative vendors convened at the Democracy Monument for the day-long festivities. Mob Fest served as a site for economic exchange to aid street vendors and service industry workers who had been hit hardest by Thailand's crumbling economy in the wake of COVID-19. Organizers have solved the challenge of taking over the street for mass protests by tipping off vendors as to where and when they will host an event. The targeted street floods reliably with food carts, blocking traffic. For vendors, the mobs provide an economic break to relieve the financial pressures of the pandemic, increasing earnings by over 330%.<sup>60</sup> Organizers were happy that vendors were gaining exposure to the movement as well, as the protesters' demands for more robust government economic policies align with their needs. This example of an artist-organized event with an uplifting material impact on a disadvantaged section of the population exemplifies values of the movement. Rather than prioritizing a unified symbol or dogma, the protesters seek basic material support and accountability to Thailand's taxpayers and a seat at the table for diverse constituents.

Mob Fest organizers planned three main stages to be more resilient to state obstruction, and to facilitate a non-hierarchical experience of the event. Attendees enjoyed K-pop dance lessons, DJs, Rap Against Dictatorship's debut of 'Reform', and Isaan folk music. A plurality of expression was also evident on the white cloth that protesters wrapped around the Democracy Monument, decorated with responses to prompts, "what the future of democracy will be, what will the tomorrow of Thailand be, what do you hope for?" Responses included "eat the rich", the hammer and sickle, "no more dictators", #milkteaalliance, and references to the recently banned website Pornhub. "This is democracy," said Teerawat of the divergent visions. "Sometimes it is chaos, but this chaos is how we build a society, rather than a dictatorship where you have to listen to one thing."<sup>61</sup>

If the monarchy's project of domestic and international profile was one of consolidation and unification under one nation, then the protesters have used this same visibility towards an opposite end. For the protesters, global visibility has created the safety of international recognition needed to have a blunt, forthright conversation about democracy. Protesters' images not only appeal to international spectators, but also implicate them in the Cold War politics that created the current situation. Seemingly flat, 'poor images' have empowered artists and the broader public to break beyond the wall of censorship into unprecedented and rich depths of critique. The plurality of voices invited into the collective visioning of the country's democratic future cannot be compressed or enclosed within traditional notions of Thainess. In their irreducibility, the 2020 protests should be characterized not only by legibility, but also by the Thai artist's familiar medium of opacity. Édouard Glissant describes the state which recognizes constituents' right to open unknowable identities as one in which, finally, "every Other is a citizen."<sup>62</sup>

This text is in response to one of the framing questions from the Asia Art Archive in America's annual Leadership Camp, 'Other Racisms' (held November 2020), which explored race and ethnicity from and within an Asian context, addressing racism not only against Asians, but also among and by Asians. For further information see <https://www.aaa-a.org/programs/asia-art-archive-in-americas-2020-leadership-camp-other-racisms/>

Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Farrelly, 'BEING THAI: A Narrow Identity in a Wide World', *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2016, pp. 334–335

<sup>3</sup> H. G. Quaritch Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies: Their History and Function*, London: Bernard Quaritch, 1931, p. 173

<sup>4</sup> Thanavi Chotpradit and Chanon Praepipatmongkol, The Iconography of Protest in Bangkok, interview by Ariana Chaivaranon, Podcast, 4 October 2020, College Art Association Conversations

<sup>5</sup> Irene Stengs, *Worshipping the Great Moderniser: King Chulalongkorn, Patron Saint of the Thai Middle Class*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2009, p. 15

<sup>6</sup> Thongchai Winichakul, 'Toppling Democracy', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 38, no. 1, 2008, pp.11–37; <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472330701651937>

<sup>7</sup> Chanon Praepipatmongkol, 'Postwar Abstraction and Practices of Knowledge: Fernando Zóbel and Chang Saetang'. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 2020, p. 105

<sup>8</sup> Paul Handley, *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej*, New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2006, p. 124

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149

<sup>10</sup> R. Sean Randolph, *The United States and Thailand: Alliance Dynamics, 1950-1985, Research Papers and Policy Studies 12*, Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1986, p. 108

<sup>11</sup> Rosalind Morris, *Photographies East: The Camera and Its Histories in East and Southeast Asia*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2009; <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822391821>

<sup>12</sup> Chanon Praepipatmongkol, 'Postwar Abstraction and Practices of Knowledge: Fernando Zóbel and Chang Saetang', pp. 114-115

<sup>13</sup> David Teh, *Thai Art: Currencies of the Contemporary*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2017, p. 10

<sup>14</sup> Fabian Drahmoune, 'Artists Lead Push for Change in Thailand's Northeast', *Nikkei Asia*, 9 January 2021; <https://asia.nikkei.com/Life-Arts/Arts/Artists-lead-push-for-change-in-Thailand-s-northeast?fbclid=IwAR1CPZsNyHxvAb09NKPhxIUTN-crxdlhw9AEdXhg8CNPauBsJp7qyDST9fw>

<sup>15</sup> Clare Veal, 'The Charismatic Index: Photographic Representations of Power and Status in the Thai Social Order', *Trans-Asia Photography Review, Local Culture/Global Photography* 3, no. 2, 2013; <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7977573.0003.207>

<sup>16</sup> Maurizio Peleggi, 'The Aesthetics and Politics of Royal Portraiture in Thailand', *Ars Orientalis* 43, 2013, pp. 89-90

<sup>17</sup> Praepipatmongkol, p. 114

<sup>18</sup> Stengs, p. x

<sup>19</sup> Handley, p. 181

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Miller, Kocha Olarn & Helen Regan, “‘Thailand Is the Land of Compromise’, Thai King Says in Rare Public Comments’, *CNN*, 1 November 2020; <https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/01/asia/thailand-king-vajiralongkorn-protests-intl-hnk/index.html>

<sup>21</sup> Miller, Olarn and Regan, “‘Thailand Is the Land of Compromise’, Thai King Says in Rare Public Comments’

<sup>22</sup> Adam Ramsey, ‘Wife of Anti-Monarchist British Journalist Detained in Thailand’, *The Guardian*, 22 July 2016; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/22/andrew-macgregor-marshall-anti-monarchist-thailand-wife-detained>

<sup>23</sup> ‘Students Accused of Royal Defamation for Protest Fashion Show Hear Charge’, *Prachatai English*, 18 December 2020; <https://prachatai.com/english/node/8976>

<sup>24</sup> Teerawat Mulvilai, interviewed by Ariana Chaivaranon, 22 December 2020

<sup>25</sup> In the spirit of poor image, the publishing collective ‘alley’ posted Google docs of Thai translations of In Defense of the Poor Image and three other Steyerl essays on their Facebook page (@thisissoisquad) in August 2020. The series received such wide readership in connection to the contemporary moment, they published a book in December

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Ratsadon’s “Duck” Currency Violates Currency Act: Activist’, *The Nation Thailand*, 26 November 2020; <https://www.nationthailand.com/news/30398615>

<sup>30</sup> Nalin Sindhuprama, ‘The People’s Runway: Breaking off the Spell through the Mockery’, Primary Source Analysis, University of California, Berkeley, 2020

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Nalin Sindhuprama, interviewed by Ariana Chaivaranon, 5 January 2021

<sup>33</sup> Wonggamdee, ‘จาก ‘การเป็นไทย’ สู่ ‘การเป็นมนุษย์’: การประท้วงในประเทศไทยและการนิยามชาติใหม่’

<sup>34</sup> Thak Chaloemtiarana, ‘Postscript: Re-examining the Dominant National Narrative and an Interpretation of the Sarit Monument in Khonkaen’, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism*, 2018; <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501721106>

<sup>35</sup> Wonggamdee, ‘จาก ‘การเป็นไทย’ สู่ ‘การเป็นมนุษย์’: การประท้วงในประเทศไทยและการนิยามชาติใหม่’

<sup>36</sup> 6 October 1976 refers to the violent crackdown by Thai police against leftist protesters at Thammasat University and adjacent public square with hundreds killed and wounded. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/6\\_October\\_1976\\_massacre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/6_October_1976_massacre)

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<sup>38</sup> Associated Press, ‘Thai Police Says Bodies from River Were Missing Activists’, *Associated Press*, 22 January 2019; <https://apnews.com/article/46be62385c4e40aea66fe5881a7492ed>

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- <sup>46</sup> Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image'
- <sup>47</sup> Mulvilai interview
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>49</sup> Mike Eckel, 'Nibhon Khankaew: Art Is No Longer the Same', *The Isaan Record*, 30 November 2018; <https://theisaanrecord.co/2018/11/30/interview-niphon-kangaew/>
- <sup>50</sup> Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, Betsy Wing trans, Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997, p. 192
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- <sup>52</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>53</sup> Thanavi Chotpradit, 'Living in Exile: Far From Home by Paphonsak La-Or', *Arts Cabinet*, September 2017; <https://www.artscabinet.org/repository/living-in-exile-far-from-home-by-paphonsak-la-or>
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- <sup>55</sup> Status in Statu, WTF Gallery; <https://www.wtfbangkok.com/events/status-in-statu>
- <sup>56</sup> Prakrit Kobkijwattana, '#KhonkeanManifesto', Facebook, 29 December 2020; <https://www.facebook.com/prakit.kobkijwattana/posts/3485636954823722>
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