

(Hypothesis) Under the Coconut Shell

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A Thai proverb “kob nai ka la” (กบในกะลา), can literally be translated to “a frog under the coconut shell,” referring to a person who, unknowingly, has a narrow perception of the world caused by his/her own confined milieu. This proverb becomes even more omnipresent as a rhetorical tool during this time of political crisis in Thailand, especially for using as a critique of ultra nationalists, royalists, hysterical nationalists, or sheer ignorants who blindly hold unexamined beliefs or produce fallacious arguments. I was a frog under a coconut shell myself to understand that this proverb was exclusively our national humour, just to find out during my research in Indonesia that people who speak Bahasa Indonesian (and Malaysian) are also accustomed to this metaphor. A discovery turned out to be a pseudo-ethnolinguistic joke like — “Oh right, we are tropical countries where coconut trees are abundant. And yeah, our frogs look alike. Although “katak dalam tempurung” is probably bolder and jumping more aggressively [...].” As long as I have engaged myself with the studies of art, one of enduring despairs has been repeatedly though my ears and never seems to be over is that art criticism is becoming a dying breed.

During my university years, I was preoccupied with the hypothesis of how art criticism and knowledge production can be seriously addressed alongside the artistic practice and production. I was of the belief that art criticism needed to be reinvented (but how?). My desire to jump harder (and more erratically on some occasions) and a bit further from my familiar milieu, in the hope of cracking the enduring constraints we are stumbling in, pushed me to write a research proposal on the topic about art criticism as an extension to my prior research: *Violence of Words: the Textual Terrain of Art Writing in Thailand*, searching for prior attempts and methods of (art) criticism in Thailand, in form of writing, curses, blasphemy, defamation, rumours, gossip, etc. I’m using the word “attempts” because, in Thailand, we barely have theories or methodologies for art criticism. Rather, we practice it randomly, fragmentarily, and intermittently — this condition can be as much a source of freedom as much as it is of despair. The frog like me seeing it as freedom in an immensely liberating space, finding scatters of critical practices, even if it might, alas..., turn out to be an(other) coconut shell.

The history of art in Thailand is an invention of the 20th century that conforms with the grand narrative of Thai historiography. Even after the conventional history has been contested, the history of art still remains preserved and untouched. Once there were a few attempts to reread and re-write the history of art in Thailand, particularly in modern art, however, they were still stuck in the same ontological structure, but in the other side of flipping coin. In this context, art criticism that is framed by the sense of the history of art would be limited and rigid. Additionally, I think that art criticism could be potentially engaged with other disciplines in order to provide an elastic method to discuss about art. The hypothesis of my research was therefore to move beyond the paralysis that grips the 'creativity' that art world seems to treasure. Instead, we ought to open ourselves to the narrative gymnastics, the comic irony, and the enchantment of fantasy, in order to open the door of art criticism to literature, political theories, science, and so on. *Violence of Words* was therefore meant to be a research paper on prior attempts of cultivating through diverse trajectories, and of critical thinking about art within and without history of art. It was also my ambition to build it up from scratch.

Although, dearth is my drive, I also believe that we need to stretch our imagination to think about art, and to develop a criticality that could potentially transcend the normativity and confinement. This is how I have tried to jump harder beyond the territory of a given universe - being a bit like a rock 'n roll frog in the Siamese shell. *Violence of Words* became an important point of departure for my ongoing research project, *Thinking in Critical Constellations: art criticism practices and its condition in Indonesia, Philippines, and Japan* (2015-2016), funded by Asia Centre, Japan Foundation. This hypothesis was theoretically constructed with limited evidence and nearly-zero knowledge about the selected countries picked by my initial thirst for learning from other case studies. This quest for critical dialogues would also help to facilitate a better understanding of my home country through a one-step-in-and-one-step-out perspective between the home country and its geographical neighbours.

Methodologically, I came with a formula in order to design my working process upon arrival in these unknown spaces. Ironically, and perhaps quite tellingly, this uncharacteristically pompous method was eventually vernacularised during the fieldwork. The obligation to write a periodical monthly report submitting to the headquarter in Tokyo also functioned as my monthly re-evaluation of the research as much as of my personal development. In the past, I was reluctant to speak affirmatively or ecstatically about ongoing intellectual process, as I was afraid of being perceived uppity or

authoritarian for advocating a rigorous and wide-ranging research methodology, which is never ever my intention. However, I have found that this regular reflection and painstaking attention to and analysis of unassertiveness have amounted to a significant personal realization that this process could be worthwhile to disseminate and foster dialogues. Besides positive feedback from the Foundation, the more meaningful outcome for me is to fill in the lacunae of my hypothesis, challenge my prior criticality, and disillusion my understanding about the art world.

Optimistically, an open and critical dialogue can soften even the hardest of coconut shells. However, no matter how resilient or carefree, a frog still has to survive difficulties and tribulations on its own. Coincidentally, a few years ago I wrote *The Majesty Turtle of the Wetland and his pupils*, an allegory of my existing frustration about my alma mater, the home of masters named in the history of Thai Modern Art, fictionalised into an idiosyncratic piece of writing which somewhat dialogues with this piece of writing. A short story started with a stubborn frog crying out amidst the crowd in the amphibian city conceived as "universe," guarded by chauvinist crocodiles, ruled by an elderly turtle who commands obedient frogs and toads. This quasi-dystopian story does not promise any hopeful ending, as the protagonist, the outcast frog, is ready to give up before the new horizon he has been longing for becomes real.

This is how the story goes...

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Trekking in a deep forest in Kanchanaburi, the West of Thailand, around a decade ago, the conversation with my local guide settled on his life as a hunter in the forest. He told me about the transfiguration of tiger into human, and vice versa, as if it was a usual occurrence in his world. "If a forest is absolutely silent, that means a tiger is coming," he went on explaining how "the language of forest" works. In his workplace, despite my ability to walk and see clearly in the jungle, I was completely dependent on his navigation. People could be a partial handicap in a world of different structures and rules. Although, in the reality, one structure tends to hegemonise the rest which then paralyses the capacity for learning as some people of authority may assume that they know (more). I have preserved this trekking experience as a vivid memory and revisited the conversation in that forest from time to time, including the time of my research fellowship. But, before going further, let me juxtapose this experience with a proximate example: being a researcher in an unfamiliar landscape. I clearly remember what I have written in each report, as I have mentioned earlier that such writing also serves as my periodical

evaluation. During the first two weeks of the fellowship as a foreign researcher knowing no routes and speaking no local languages, I embarked instead on a maze of art networks, mostly relied on the connection of my host organisations in Indonesia. Visiting the usual suspects and gatekeepers in the Indonesian art world who have been cited and interviewed numerous times by other researchers, trekking through the jungle of art scene could be very repetitive, until we could evolve our own eyes to find our own way to perceive phenomena and be less dependent on the navigator.

“To see and to listen” is a basic rule the hunter taught me to survive in a jungle. We need to look more closely in an unknown setting, and to pay more attention, especially for some unassertive yet potential details. In the forest, we need to listen to voices of small animals, and we need to hear the wind if it blows strangely. In the research, the process of hypothesising requires a certain degree of imagination when working with fragmental knowledges. Besides a holiday visit in the tourist setting of Bali, I had no experience in Indonesia and not a single Indonesian friend at that time. This was slightly before the time of the ASEAN community celebrated among art practitioners, although I didn’t find that this phenomenon gave me any better understanding of the unfamiliar context. I heard about a stereotypical assumption that Thais and Filipinos look alike because we are geographically proximate, which turned out to be completely a myth. A query on an epistemological formation occurred to me — why do we know so little about people living in proximity? I think the answer alludes to who dominates this knowledge production. Without a serious consideration of our regional deprivation of critical dialogues, I’m afraid that the concept of Southeast Asian is only a trendy word exploited for the single-minded agenda run by the same face of dominant power.

After a hypothesis is formed, the next question is how far we would accommodate new and unfamiliar forms of relevance by periodically revising a prior knowledge, and remaining open to things that may dialectically disturb or debunk our assumption? Although the question sounds simple, it is not simply conceivable without a serious process of reflection that requires the presence of researcher. However, I am not raising a dichotomy or a binary view of subjectivity and objectivity of a researcher that has been discussed ad nauseam. Rather, I am referring to the tensions between how we acquire knowledge, which form of knowledge can be acquired, and how we embody the knowledge in our practice. Since a research is not a descriptive writing which we simply observe nature and make a catalogue of the facts, we should seek to understand the logics behind the facts and the formation of discourse, to discover nature's inner workings, and to understand this process as a complex phenomenon. My concern is also

how to find the right gesture for a research that would be theoretically rigorous as well as hospitable to any peculiarity or deviation?

Art criticism has always held my interest because it holds the political potential and power to seriously engage with critical thought and other disciplines to talk about art, which could be a conceptual portal to investigate a human perception and reception. The hypothesis of my research was formed through my observations in Thailand, where the government and art institutions tend to perpetuate the process of development because they think that people are not capable of acquiring and understanding the complexity of art. In reality, it is the authorities who actually fails to understand the arts. This patronising attitude treats people as a passive beings, instead of encouraging them to think more critically. At the same time, the art world, or particularly those invested in so-called "alternative art," does not provide the society with any better perception to think about art. The campaign asking for "an art museum, not a mall," paradoxically result in a leisure-cum-art centre right at the Phatumwan junction in the heart of Bangkok. The discourses that people (mostly artists) used to promulgate art's importance in the society, for instance, that art holds a spiritual power, or that a society without art will not be liveable do not sound less authoritative. This unexamined assumption about art returns to the society every time art professionals and cultural workers make a plea for their rights. Take for instance a recent dispute between "street art" in Phuket and their followers versus the local government. A well-known Thai street artist made this graffiti style painting on the wall of the conserved Chino-Portuguese building, commissioned by the organiser of the street art festival. However, the local authority, who did not seem to appreciate that gesture, ordered a removal of the work from the conserved building. This dispute was raised by some people as a conflict between the "progressive" and the "conservative," of which I am not convinced. A false dichotomy of art and the rest, of right and left brain, of new and old, of spiritualism and materialism is myopic and aggravating, and sounds rather like a pure fallacy. Even worse, art risks being narcissistic and authoritative if art (and artist) does not seriously discusses their relational position and its politics [...] Similarly, in Bandung, I was talking to a performance artist, and she complained about how audiences are too busy with tasteless fashion, and consequently ignoring art. She also talked about International Performance Art Festival (Asiatopia) in Thailand, and the crew members who are her friends. I proceeded to tell her that Asiatopia is completely dated, as they failed to evolve their thinking about "social/political" issues which have been a statement of their works. Instead, audiences are force-fed blunt ideas about art, society, and politics. It is understandable that people are not being bothered to attend such art events. She was surprised by what I uttered about Asiatopia, and I too was struck by her perception toward a public reception.

The art world is not only constructed by myths like Pierre Bourdieu suggested, but also pampered by a great amount of assumptions. Without a serious engagement with criticism, art would risk taking things for granted, and it is dangerous if we do not see it as a problem. As time goes by, I have witnessed more and more forms of art, even the so-called "alternative art," constructed within a feudal mentality. Whenever I hear the art world demanding that society pays it high regard, it conjures an image of oligarchy talking about how important they are to other people. This phenomenon is getting more and more prevalent in Thailand, as people with authority and privilege perceive other groups of people as being stupid or incapable of understanding complex issues. This mentality recalls the phrase "rakyat masih bodoh" (*the masses are still stupid/naïve*), coined in the period after the independence in Indonesia, resembling how Thai authority regards its citizens. It is my belief that art should be more critical about how it perceives its audience, and about its often pseudo-feudalist attitude that obstructs its potential leap out of the insularity.

Ideally, art criticism could be an important part of the art system that makes it possible for art to spot its fallacies, exorcise its ignorance, and to activate its social role, either through theory or praxis. However, I do not think art criticism in the region faces a similar crisis to that in the West, where art criticism used to have its position in the "power relation" within art field, and now is gradually disappearing or occupying a more unclear role within the art ecosystem. From Thailand, Indonesia, to Philippines, I have learned that if we want to discuss about art criticism, we almost always have to do so from scratch, as art criticism does not have any real position in the art world and any impact in the public. To me, it is a real challenge to work in such limited conditions and to embody our criticality from both idea to practice. By doing so can we become more intellectually elastic to ignite a critical dialogue relevant to the ground. If there is any crisis of art criticism, the most important cause is not from the outside, or because of an ignorant government or tasteless audience, but rather from within, when art that fails to address itself seriously and to activate a dialogue within its given context.

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My first month's periodical report was about narratives I have encountered leading to the same direction and sounded too smooth to be true. The report was about a consensus and cooperation. To some extent, it was really compelling to see how people in Jakarta manoeuvred in the city of chaos and congestion, and I gleaned that the urban setting is so resourceful to artistic practices. Although, listening people who hold a dominant power

over the systemic narrative should be done with a grain of salt. Similar to a historiography, it provides the reader with a smoothly linear narrative for the sake of some certain agenda. Since I'm particularly seeking for something an off-site and off-sight, I urged myself to step a bit further and be navigated by my instincts, while remain responsible and open to the risk that I might clumsily step on or trespass at the edge of warranty. I am always curious to witness any growing frustration and developing criticality that may evince itself as a resistance to the dominant discourse and practice of art. The hunter who told me that the stillness implied something amiss, that an unusual silence indicates that the king of forest has taken over the ecology. He also taught me how to sharpen an instinct in order to carefully penetrate the thick layers of the forest. However, a few hours after that, after a slight drizzle, the soil turned soft, and I slipped at the edge of a trail, fell down, and landed on a big rock. This accident left me a light scar on my chin as a life-time reminder....

The dialogue with the hunter would not have been possible if I countered him with a scientific truth or rationality. There is no scientific evidence to proof that an animal can transfigure into another animal of completely different species. We have to be careful that we are not rigidly confined by the myths of science and empirical truth. At the same time, I cannot dismiss his perception to be a mere local myth, otherwise I would not really learn from him, but rather turn deaf with prejudice. The hunter's simple suggestion, "to see and to listen," cannot be applied naively, as this aphorism cannot be simply or purely understood. Complexity in one's perception reveals one's experience, sensibility, and unconsciousness, and I appreciate the difficulty of understanding an epistemological framework that one has for the world.

Witnessing Thai artist and filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul's films being spiritualised by Western film critics raises a good example to discuss this issue. I have found that his works are mainly described with words like "mystery," "Buddhism," "silence," "meditation," or even, surprisingly, "Zen" (the last one always sends me into fit of laughter). I cannot help but feel annoyed by this mythification and exoticism that bars us from talking about the deeper aspect of the work. On the other hand, it can be argued that his work is sometimes theorised in order to justify its place in a Western cannon, or to address the authority of that cannon over the others.

Mysterious Object at Noon (2000), for instance, is understood as using "exquisite corpse," a game originally conceived by the Surrealists. However, I see the structure of this film as deeply rooted in the oral tradition that enables people to transfer their ideas into speaking, from one to another. By doing so, the information and knowledge is

gradually re-adjusted through each individual's subjectivity. To me, the exquisite corpse and *Mysterious Object at Noon* are examples of unconvincing articulations that prevail in the imbalanced world of knowledge production. Although it is inevitable that we deal with an unfamiliarity when transferring knowledge into our familiar language, the more pressing concern is about who owns the authority to explain something. Similarly, K'naan, a Somali-Canadian poet wrote "Until the lion learns to speak. The tales of hunting will be weak." In my opinion, the case of the exquisite corpse colonises the interpretation of *Mysterious Object at Noon*, demonstrating the unchallenged authority of hunter over the lion, and consequently the lack of critical thinking inherent in this country. This is why we need to write more, even though we still employ the language of the hunter. The question arises: how one will really "see" and "listen" in order to understand? I think that we cannot omit a consideration of our own subjectivity in the process of thinking as it could make an existing lacuna known, and unfold perspectives that are limited in a certain milieu. This is how a real dialogue should come to fruition. My problem is that most of the time, people within hegemonic power preserve themselves in such hard shells. Instead of cracking their presuppositions about something (like a film made outside their unfamiliar setting), they fortify their reserved territory and suppress that means suppress other perceptions of the world we should also learn from.

A transfiguration of a man into a tiger in Aphichatpong's *Tropical Malady* (2004) would definitely not be a "mystery," "riddle," or "puzzle" for the hunter in Kunchanaburi who relayed this story to me with almost no sign of surprise or excitement. In *The Strange Story of a Strange Beast: Receptions in Thailand of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's Sat Pralaat*, (*Sat Pralaat* = a monster, in Thai), Benedict Anderson employed this fact to counter the reception of *Tropical Malady* among the Thai middle class, especially in Bangkok. Anderson noted that his Dayak friend, Ben Abel, was fascinated by the film, saying that the contemporary film maker could understand the world of which he was born, and that he could immediately identify all the animal sounds in the film. Obviously, by conjuring the opposition between "Dayak friend" and "Thai middle-class," Anderson deliberately draws a line to amplify his critique and his support for the film. It is true that *Tropical Malady* is especially "difficult" for today's Thai middle class, because they are invisible within it – it is something new to them. It is also true that some of them have turned their frustration and awkwardness toward the film into a negative reaction. I see this as a defence mechanism. The statement Anderson made for his argument, however, omitted the fact that Ben Abel is not a man living in the environment of a forest, as he is also an intellectual working at Cornell University. The difference between those two is therefore not as dramatic if we take this fact in consideration.

I doubt that the reason Ben Abel appreciated the film was purely from his “direct experience” in the forest, since his intellectual background should be also taken into account. More importantly, *Tropical Malady*, like other art films, is made of conventions and certain aesthetics, and is thus not a representation of reality even if it appears natural. Furthermore, the reception of art is based on the many complex factors of individuals who experience it. Therefore, we cannot (and should not) make a value judgement through oversimplification. No writing is free from a writer’s agenda, we all know that. In this case, it is obvious to say that Benedict Anderson who very much admires and praises Apichatpong as his “favourite living film director in the world,” wrote the essay in favour of the film as much as of the person. He even went further by comparing Apichatpong Weerasethakul to Chit Phumisak, the Thai Marxist historian and philologist who re-evaluated the historical position of the Thai monarchy and critiqued the intensely hierarchical class society that Thailand had inherited from feudalism. Despite my appreciation of some of Apichatpong’s films, I cannot agree with Anderson’s over exaggerated acclaim of Apichatpong and reductive critique of the negative reception of the Thai middle-class towards Apichatpong’s film.

It is true that Apichatpong’s auteur frustrates many people who have acquired their visual experience through A-Z narrative or Hollywood movies. This frustration was though not widespread until his film was awarded a prestigious prize at the Cannes Film Festival, alluding to the fact that the incapacity of simply enjoying a film or artwork approved by significant and hallowed authorities can undermine the self-esteem of an aesthetically-equipped class, particularly those who love to identify themselves through an affinity and understanding of “exceptional taste.” This mentality seems to belong to an insecure tribe called the “middle-class” who Anderson believed they were invisible in Apichatpong’s film.

Put it more precisely, I would say that a mundane narrative that disturbs their prior understanding about films which they could enjoy. To me, the negative reception of art says a lot about how formal education fails to envisage the ambiguity and an invisibility which are always part of human perception. Apparently, today’s Thai middle-class is a product of this unimaginative education. Negative reception or a great frustration toward an artistic work is a classic issue among audiences, though reactions to Apichatpong’s film appear to be the most famous case. However, no matter how great the work is, I still believe that art educators should enhance efforts to understand the public’s discontent. This is absolutely not for the reason to further degrade or dumb down the work, but to internalise this conflict into a meaningful dialogue and critique, and to endeavour to formulate a complex dialogue in which everyone finds themselves visible.

At the end of the day, I would rather be talking to people who honestly express their frustration about art or someone who simply says that they do not understand art, than hearing certain groups of people glorifying art without any critical perspective. As time goes by, I have come to realise that I can learn so much from the former group of people who leave a generous space for real dialogue. Whereas the latter group tends to adorn themselves with so-called solemn aesthetics, and in this manner, fetishised art as a platform to swank about their cultural superiority.

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Apart from a few essays, I never touched or was acquainted with Ben Anderson's major works until I was conducting the research in Indonesia. This stubbornness to engage was mainly triggered after seeing how much "Ajarn Ben" (*Ajarn* = teacher in Thai) has been praised among Thai scholars, while their critical perspective doesn't seem to be balanced, or fruitful enough to generate more angles to look at him. But once I was in Indonesia, and diving through an enormous ocean of history. I then wondered how other foreign researchers felt and what they found during their research in this massive archipelago. This was the time I started reading some of his work, and that of other researchers. I did my reading under the assumption that distance always matters to a perception. A foreign researcher occupies a position with the advantage of distance, but also bears the disadvantage of not being deeply and constantly involved.

Over my 3-months sojourn in Java, Indonesia, more specifically, in Jakarta, Bandung, and Yogyakarta, my experience of three major cities for art is not enough to claim a sufficient acquired knowledge about "Indonesian art." The practice of quasi-ethnographer helps to support my research, and has paved myself to find a way out of the normative story of art. Nevertheless, these adopted practices cannot yet be considered a comprehensive account of the country. They are simply a scratching of a self-absorbed message on a wall one that is also perhaps logistically engraved amidst an ocean of similar marks made by foreign researchers:

"I was here"

As a research fellow, I am granted the privilege to think and to write without being interrupted by daily-life concerns. I was fully aware of this since I first started the fellowship, yet it was never discussed until I had a conversation with Eileen Legaspi Ramirez in Manila. The conversation referred to my previous letter about how "thinking"

was framed in my research, and how we need to keep thinking until we can look on the past with our own new eyes, unburdened by any norms. At the gaudy cafe at the Department of Art Studies, University of Philippines, Eileen says over the meal, that “thinking is a luxury.” I remembered that I nodded, and said concisely acknowledged my awareness of her observation.

The first time I met Eileen was in Thailand, and my state of mind was similar to our next encounter in the Philippines. At a tedious symposium in Bangkok, I found hardly anything interesting. My only discovery during the discussion with regional art practitioners was how naive and clueless we as Thai people, are. We are hardly endowed with critical knowledge either about art or regional history, and are therefore not equipped to talk about either subject. Looking for a distraction, I then introduced myself to Eileen, and told her that my friend sent her regards. The conversation started with my comment on the symposium, and then moved to my ambivalent feeling for higher education, and what I was working. Although we didn’t have much time to discuss any further, so we continued a dialogue via email afterwards. That was how I remembered her in the beginning. A proper conversation started again when I met Eileen in Manila. At that time, I felt on edge (sometimes miserable) by the daily encounters in Manila, and was overwhelmed by research materials that required so much labour and time to work on. Obviously, the job of thinking is not affordable for everyone, because a consistency and intensity of thinking is relatively concerned with an individual’s economic condition, status, class, etc. — basic yet crucial conditions that most of time we have taken for granted most of the time. Besides academia and fellowship systems, the art world is also full of exploitation. Perhaps the world at large is also guilty of this.

Thinking about ideas may be a pure pleasure — a luxury. But to learn ideas that run counter to values and beliefs learned at home or accepted in society is to place oneself at risk, to enter a danger zone. This is why I consider critical practices of art and thinking as potential sources of transformative power. In a transformative process, however, thinking is not an ends in itself, but is rather joined by meaningful praxis. During this period of political transition in Thailand, people do not regard the production of knowledge and critical thinking as a political and urgent issue. However, if we learn from history, we would not have any difficulty in understanding the circle of political change. If our thinking does not critically evolve in relation to the changing power, it would only pave the way for a new tyranny.

Immediately after I finished reading Melani Budianta’s essay: “Negotiating Boundaries and Alterity: The Making of Humanities Scholar in Indonesia, a Personal Reflection,” I

reached out to my computer, then sent her my response. I told her that I shared her feelings, and that her writing touched questions of an ontological ground I have been trying to unfold for a long time. Firstly, her reflection has filled an obscure space that I seek to understand. Her discussion of her experience being a Chinese person in Indonesia evoked a conversation I had with my Indonesian friend a few days earlier, when I, perhaps naively, opined that it is not easy to imagine the ordeals and treatment of the Chinese minority in Indonesia.

Secondly, and more importantly, the story of how she acquires knowledge that is then disregarded in her home country revealed to me that others shared my chronic loneliness. She recalled her encounter with Pramodeoya Ananta Toer, who asked why she should teach the nihilist literature of Absurdist Theatre. She did not succeed in giving a satisfying answer to the literary master, who insisted that a good work of literature must have "a clear mission." I shared with her my past conversation with someone who said that art is a privilege when juxtaposed with the ongoing political crisis in Thailand, This person said that "we need to consider urgency." I then explained how the studies of Humanities is no less urgent, and very much political, as it is capable of urging people to question forms of authority and domination. Therefore, with its powers of imagination and experimentation, art can potentially encourage people to think for the betterment of their society. Unfortunately, I too did not succeed in promoting the values and potential of art to my listener. This incident left some bitterness in my mind until now. In a positive way, I am even more driven to work on what I believe can foster a critical consciousness among people. In her reply, Melani said that these stories reveal to us the politics of knowledge and practice in Southeast Asia. Obviously, we have much work to do in order to find ways to go beyond political correctness and binary opposition.

This reflection also supports my prolonged obsession with Chetana Nagavajara, especially his ambition to form what he calls an "Indigenous Theory." His idea, however, has never discussed, supported, or opposed. The fact that his idea has eventually moved closer to the cultural nationalist right may repel most progressive scholars/intellectuals to engage or study it. However, I would argue that an intellectual examination solely based on political ideology could bar us from understanding the complexity of the human condition, and Chetana's excavation of uncharted ground in order to construct his theory and pave the way for a rigorous foundation in the Humanities. This dismissal indicates our incapacity of practicing critical thinking and producing a transgenerational dialogue towards prior knowledge and intellectual magnitude. My tentative conclusion about Chetana's failure, particularly his ambitious project, *Criticism as an Intellectual Force in Contemporary Society*, which combines criticism of literature, visual art, drama, and

music, is that his belief in the Romantic framework nurtures a superior position of art which is closely linked to religious and nationalist sentiment. In doing so, he still sees art as another kind of authority to “polish” or “refine” people’s minds.

The development of Modern art in Thailand has never been critical of any establishment or dominant power. This fact can be understood in light of Thai nationalist discourse. The history taught in schools that Thailand has never been colonised by any country is not purely correct. Considering our history, we managed to avoid colonisation by conforming to power. The colonisation process is therefore subtler. Therefore, we have never developed dialectical thinking about dominant power, which prevails until now. In fact, Thai people have been sealed in a feudalist paradigm, which obstructs us from imagining other options. Thus, we have rarely thought seriously about radical change. For this reason, learning about how Sudjojono countered the colonial discourse with local knowledge and originality through his writing and artistic practice, and what Sanento Yuliman has tried to theorise about the practice of art on the ground is compelling. To me, a critical theory must emerge from an effort to make sense of everyday life experiences, and from efforts to intervene critically in one’s own life and the lives of others, even in failures, losses, and mistakes. Personal testimony and experience is therefore fertile ground for the production of critical theory. Once we engage in a critical process of theorising that enables and empowers, individuals can use critical thinking to educate themselves in ways that allow them to transform their lives. While we work to resolve issues that are most pressing in daily life, we engage in a critical process of theorising that enables and empowers a change in a larger context. In this way, I am writing an apologia of thinking which should not be reserved for the privileged, but for everyone who starts to ask why things have to happen in any particular or rigid way.

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At the public square in Cikini where I sometimes hang out with students, I immerse myself with raw facts about their lives - both related or unrelated to art. Sometimes, we play a game that uses non-art topics for conversation, as we want to momentarily distance ourselves from it. On one such night, I met a student of Sociology from University of Indonesia, and he expressed that we need to be in power or hold public attention in order to change something or get people to listen. I hear similar opinions quite often when in Thailand, and it is totally understandable when people are being told that they will be powerless and invisible without conforming to certain kinds of values or institutions. But I am worried that they would end up having two binary options — either craving for that authority, or giving up to what they want to do entirely.

Since I was young, I told myself that it was a pity that my generation's lives were so banal. I looked up to my parents' generation, when young people dreamed for radical change, experimented with their lives by simply living with contingencies. They could appear foolish for doing so, but isn't this too a fruitful and powerful source of life? This is the kind of romantic image of looking with the distance of history, with a nostalgic eye, with which I never foresaw that Thailand would be engulfed in political crisis, and one of the biggest transitions we will ever have in our modern history. While we are sinking into a military abyss and the uncertainty of our futures, I realised how imagination could become very political, and how art could activate this quality. So here, I am making an apologia for a relational position of art not as a representation for reality, but an imagination for the future. This transition has seriously become part of my daily consciousness, even though I don't explicitly express it. I therefore asked myself: how can we really "do something" in this crisis? If I agreed with what the UI student said, the answer would be different from what I am pursuing right now...

The question of *what* and *how* to do is related to what we value. This can be also applied to how we think about art, and how art criticism can take a role in the art world and in the public arena. While I was nearly sinking into chronic depression, my dear friend arrived in Manila, where we didn't expect to meet. I told her that she was like my rescuer. We had a long conversation mostly about art and the art world, during the time of the art fair in the Philippines. We talked about the issue of "visibility" and of work that could cause or generate change. She raised an ambivalent point of how we can judge the outcome and position of change ourselves. Put in the nutshell, would it be "something" if what we have worked for is not regarded or known? If our work is not known or seen, how would it impact our societies? I then asked if the idea of "being influential" was overrated, as how one learns and develops is more complicated than being impacted by a sole factor. Additionally, we should not expect people to be easily influenced, and hence, we should not expect to be influential in the sense that we would gain the authority to convince others.

In the conversation I had with Eileen on my last night in Manila, she asked if I was disillusioned after the conversation with my dear friend, and also my own discoveries during my research process. I didn't give her any clear answer at the time. This question reoccurred to me during my first couple of weeks in Tokyo while I was processing all information and observations from the two countries. After experiencing the politics of "art networks" and "institutions," I felt that the knowledge of art and criticality easily becomes invisible. I have come to realise that I have already got a clear answer for

Eileen's question, and that it only takes a longer time to pronounce. It turned out to be a very significant rumination for what should be done.

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Back to the frog in the wet land clouded with the dust of his ancestor. He murmured the impossibility of change through a weird equation, while also thinking that happy endings were just hallucinations:

R = revolutionary change

but, in order to make R possible, we need to achieve R1

R1 could not be real without having R2 proceeded

unfortunately, R2 is a result of R3

To put it in a (coco)nut shell: R

n, Rn-1, Rn-2,... and n = ∞

Perhaps, I am just like the stubborn frog, murmuring while persisting to understand what is "n." Probably, without knowing that we are in a coconut shell, if we are to make critical points of view, we must turn the space into a battleground, not a consensus. We must transform the closed universe into an indefinite sphere that opens up an experimental spirit without compromise — this is what I think art criticism should work on.

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