

Conversations between Artists, Writers, Musicians, Performers, Directors—since 1981

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Korakrit Arunanondchai
by Martha Kirszenbaum



Korakrit Arunanondchai in *With history in a room filled with people with funny names 4*, performance at Kiasma, Helsinki, 2017. Images courtesy of the artist; Carlos/Ishikawa, London; Clearing, New York; Bangkok CityCity Gallery, Bangkok.

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In his multilayered practice—which includes film-making, painting, installation, performance, and music—New York-based artist Korakrit Arunanondchai summons and reflects on a host of topics: technology and spirituality, the accumulation of data and notions of the supernatural, the fragility of memory and the interfaces between world history and personal experience, and the Anthropocene.

An enthusiastic collaborator who draws on both traditional and present-day rituals from Eastern and Western cultures, the artist aims to create participatory spaces where we as the audience can probe our interactions, share perceptions, and cultivate empathy.

Arunanondchai was born in Bangkok 1986 and began filming at a young age, creating an expansive and continuously growing archive of footage that he revisits for each new work, often transmigrating material from the past into the present. In 2013 he started *with history in a room filled with people with funny names*, a video epic of sorts (now in its fifth iteration) where a fictional Thai painter, in dialogue with a drone spirit named Chantri, comments on the ramifications of globalization in contemporary Thailand. His ongoing series of performances, presented with fellow artist boychild, investigates our relationship to popular rituals, animism, and storytelling.

This fall Arunanondchai will participate in Performa 19 with a new work that continues his many threads of exploration.

MARTHA KIRSZENBAUM We're in a house in Southern France where you've just spent a month at an artist residency. You're also in the middle of a very busy year between projects at the Venice Biennale, the Whitney Biennial, the Istanbul Biennial, and the Vienna Secession. Tomorrow you're headed to Berlin to participate in a show called *Garden of Earthly Delights* at the Gropius Bau. So I want to ask you where you are, with your practice and with your relationship to your work, as we're standing in this room right now, on July 14, 2019.

KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI I have a constant research thread going that mostly results in video installations. It's a continuing project which has been building on itself for several years now. My most recent work is *No history in a room filled with people with funny names 5*, in collaboration with Alex Gvojic. It's at the Venice Biennale right now and has been shown in a few other places. It was made last October while I was curating a video and performance festival in Bangkok, called Ghost:2561.

It was an intense and very special project because of its theme: ghosts. It required not only developing my personal approach to the topic but also researching the history of Ghost Cinema, a ritual in Thailand where monks project movies on temple walls

Stills from *No history in a room filled with people with funny names 5* (with Alex Gvojic), 2018, three-channel video, 30 minutes 44 seconds.

to attract spirits. The core idea for Ghost:2561 was to create a social ecosystem with emphasis on artists as storytellers and on experiencing time-based artworks akin to a ritual where a group of people allow stories to possess them.

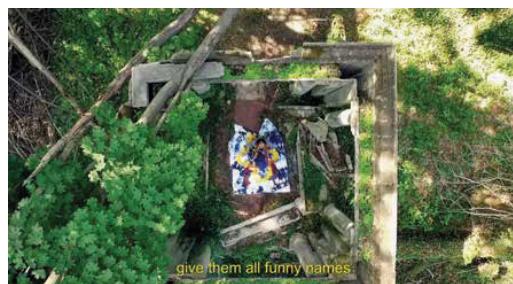
The next project I'm working on is for Performa in New York this fall. It's a musical based on the idea of Ghost Cinema, jumping off from my last piece. It will be a performance with my usual circle of collaborators, including boychild and Alex Gvojic. It's again built on the question of what a ritual circle is. I want to offer ways for people to come together in a room for a certain amount of time. The notion of people filling a room ties all these videos together. That's why the words reappear in the series' titles.

MK I've seen most of your films over the years, but I was struck by how multifaceted *No history... 5* is in its construction, both in the narrative and accumulation of images. There's found footage, images from Thailand, of course, and the presence of boychild and yourself. The way you negotiated all these materials resulted in a strong, coherent work. What was your idea behind this piece?

KA Well, I was prompted almost two years ago when Andrea Lissoni and Andrea Bellini invited me to make a new video installation for the Biennale of Moving Images in Turin. Then, a year ago I did a performance with boychild and Alex Gvojic in Marseille. In the final part we used a laser harp, which allowed me to sculpt light into sound and then into narrative. This became my way of communicating a "script" to boychild—through the act of touching light, like a ghost. *No history...5* took our experience with the laser harp as a starting point and turned it into a movie.

MK It's like a code that links you and boychild, but it also connects what's on the screen with the installation and objects in the room.

KA It's about networks and connections. I have to backtrack a little to the making of *With history in a room filled with people with funny names 4*. Generally, during my research phase, I have conversations with people who share my interests or have knowledge in certain areas, whether it's technical, scientific, or spiritual. I might talk to a shaman or a scientist, or my brother who is a VR AR engineer. While researching subjects around the Anthropocene for *With history... 4*, I listened to an episode of the *Habitations* podcast, where Noah Sokol, a Yale PhD student, was in dialogue with Elizabeth Kolbert, the author of *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*. I decided to go see Noah, and we began talking about the underground networks of plants: the way roots exchange chemical signals below the ground and, for instance, one part



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of a forest sends energy toward another to allow that part to survive. It's almost like a network of synapses in the brain. It's about keeping the system alive rather than each individual part.

At the time of my conversation with Noah, I was seeing my grandmother going through dementia. That led me to thinking about human consciousness versus that of plants and animals, and I decided to join an Ayahuasca circle. I initially thought that an Ayahuasca ceremony was a way to explore a state of consciousness that feels more sensual. I assumed that it was chemically based, like in plants and animals, as opposed to language-based, which is how a human in society operates most of the time.

MK I'm curious about your experience.

KA I wanted to learn through chemicals how empathy is developed and negotiated. Not only empathy for human beings but also for other beings. My question was: What is the mechanism of empathy? The experience of being in the Ayahuasca circle overlapped with certain things I had learned in Buddhism class when I was younger. I could talk about this for a long time, but essentially, looking at it through a lens of Buddhist practice, you negotiate empathy through a trauma-meditation experience. In other words, a state of trauma is induced and you're meditating through it by focusing on your breath. I got to this place of just staying with my breath while letting in all the distressing thoughts and emotions, like fear of sickness, etcetera. While facing the trauma, it was comforting to identify with other living things through the act of breathing. It made me very conscious of how we are connected.

With history... 4 was edited to a breath sequence. The soundscape is engineered to highlight the background noises—for example, I used the music that had been playing on TV in the room where I filmed my grandmother to build the soundtrack for the video.

If you stay really quiet, you start to hear yourself and other people in the room breathing, and things in the background begin to come to the forefront. In speculative realism, that's the moment people call the ontological turn: when the setting, or what's perceived as the background, becomes the subject. The negative space that we aren't usually conscious of can start to become the missing script to our lives.

Tristan Garcia said something like, If the definition of our species is linguistic, it's about the relationships that we've named. So I was thinking, if consciousness was the act of recognizing your own breath, perhaps in post-human sci-fi reality—where the body has merged with the digital and no longer needs to breathe—that consciousness won't continue to exist.

Stills from *Painting with history in a room filled with people with funny names 3*, 2015, video, 25 minutes 29 seconds.

MK We've been talking over the past few days about this discrepancy between image and voice, the shifting visuals and sounds in your last film.

KA Essentially, the video was built upon the sounds; the narrative is comprised of them, together with the video footage and the text I wrote.

MK Which is also read by you. It's your voice.

KA It's a letter to Chantri.

MK Would you say that Chantri, the drone, is your alter ego?

KA Actually, if I'm a character, or the narrator, Chantri is like a filter for the audience. But who Chantri is expands with each video in the series. Chantri is a sort of intermediary for communication, connecting me to other people. When I write Chantri a letter in video, I'm actually writing to the audience. In *Painting with history in a room filled with people with funny names 3*, Chantri became the drone, the recorder, the image-maker and formal container of the video. In that work, Chantri's role nests in a bigger idea which relates to animistic symbolism. Initially I thought of Chantri as a Garuda, the ubiquitous bird-man creature from Hindu and Buddhist mythology. In Buddhism, Garudas are golden-winged birds that, like angels, hover in packs in the sky. They are the opponents of the Naga, the snake-god that lurks underwater. Their relationship is not one of good and evil but perhaps more of codependence. The Garuda asserts control from the sky over its people whereas the Naga, from below, provides magic or a break from reality. The Naga is like an anarchic force. But the thing about magic is that it happens in the moment and you can't capture or hold on to it. It's like an abstract memory, a touch without touching. In my video, Chantri became a Garuda and boychild became the Naga.

MK Chantri has a female voice.

KA Chantri is narrated by my mother in French. I wanted Chantri to appear empathetic. In the next work, *With history...* 4, it's as if I'm asking Chantri to reincarnate in my grandmother who has dementia, so I can speak to her.

At this point, capitalism controls all the social media channels, which are our global infrastructure to talk to each other, to represent and understand each other. I was trying to take back some agency through Chantri, giving voice to the in-between space and writing a script for it.

MK When in the process does your writing come in?

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The ritual, with all the bodies going through an experience together, brings you outside of normal life, to look back into life. That's the empathetic moment—you can't name it, and you can't recreate it.

KA For the videos, I have a research period, then a filming period—you know, ongoing—and then I sit down, usually for three to six months, with my entire archive of videos and I write the script, using all these materials. The subtitles you see on the screen are the actual script—usually it's a conversation between myself and another character—Chantri or boychild, for example. It's important to me that the writing appears on the sequence of images it belongs to, not before or after.

MK With your three-channel video setup in *No history... 5*, you show us what comes before, revealing your process. You're opening the door for us to understand how you get to your stories.

KA I always need a frame of metaphor or an existing story to build on while I'm in the process of researching and filming for a project. It enables me to understand what I'm looking for. With *Ghosts:2561*, the festival, we used the frame of Ghost Cinema, which originated as a political phenomenon. It started during the Vietnam war, when Thailand was in an alliance with the United States.

I'm stuck with the metaphor of the spirit—the ghost, the host, and the procession. The idea that things reincarnate, find a new body, is fundamental to me. I've always carried the past into a new piece. That's the way I've been working ever since I was an undergraduate at RISD. I used to be a printmaker. To make a print, you take a drawing, transfer it onto a silk-screen, and move ink through that screen. The stencil on the screen is like the ghost. Essentially, through the materials the drawing reincarnates.

I made a series called *Untitled (History Paintings)*, which consisted of bleached denim on stretchers, with inkjet prints of the fire that burns the denim. The fire is captured digitally and "possesses" the left-over body, the denim after it's burned. To me, ghosts are just metaphors for various kinds of information, some of which we can easily document, while others need different modes of recording. Some ghosts are more evident and physical, like the white marks from the wear and tear of denim.

MK Ghosts are also a testimony to memory, to history, to something that happened to someone.

KA Definitely. What makes a ghost a ghost is that while it's from the past and doesn't have a physical body, it still contains information and is allowed to act on and continue a certain subjective relationship with the present and toward the future. That's why video

documentation of past performances is an important part of my work—the footage contains former versions of myself, things I've said back then, and moments from years ago when life included certain conditions or people, like my grandparents when they still had their memories.

When I made *Painting with history... 3*, I went through all the videos I had at that point and found footage of my paternal grandmother, who was Chinese. Growing up in Bangkok, I used to see her every Sunday, but because I didn't speak Chinese, I could never really talk to her. Then, seven years after she passed away, I came upon this footage I shot on her deathbed—although we didn't know at the time she was dying. I was just messing around with my first SLR camera, so I filmed my mom and dad waving to her as we were leaving. While editing *Painting with history... 3*, I found a place in the video for my Chinese grandmother that made sense to me and filled a void in the essay. When I put the footage in, it felt like I had reconnected to whatever her essence was, and I cried. It was like a goodbye. And I was at last able to renegotiate and say something in that relationship. It was a really powerful moment for me. I realized that this is why I want to make art and, more precisely, why I make art about the relationships that are important to me. The same goes for why I keep working with boychild and Alex.

MK They seem to fill the background that you need for creating things. People disappear and reappear, just as your grandma disappeared, but then new characters fill her space.

KA The reason I started videoing was because I wanted to find a way to hang out with my grandfather. This was in 2011 when he was losing his short-term memory and I was trying to keep a close relationship with him. I started to film him, and then I would show him the footage after the edit. Every time I visited, I had a video for him. The piece I'm going to install tomorrow at Gropius Bau resulted from that time. It was also my thesis for the Columbia University MFA program. Basically, my grandfather's Alzheimer's got me into filmmaking.

MK So you started to work with video to bring your personal stories to life and ensure their memory.

KA If you're filming people with dementia or Alzheimer's, they're in the process of disappearing. You're kind of holding onto their vanishing breath.

Video is my favorite medium, but I've enjoyed making paintings here during this residency. I'm always excited to talk to people about what interests them, about their experiences and what it means to be an artist, about their art and mine, about nature—it all informs my work. That's what was great about *No history... 5*; I felt like all the life experience I had in 2018 entered the work—the Ghost festival, all the trips I took, the conversations I had, everything.

MK In the subtitles you touch on myths and beliefs in supernatural powers.

KA I went to the Tham Luang cave, where the kids from the soccer team got stuck last year. Talking to the local shamans, I started really believing in this scary version of the Naga. People in Thailand are super afraid of the serpent god. Even if you understand ghosts as people's way to negotiate life circumstances they are trapped in, when everyone believes in a certain story, supernatural stuff starts to feel very real.

When I came back to New York after filming in Thailand and having talked to all these people there who believe in ghosts and spirits, I was confused and scared because I too felt that they exist. And my friend Borna Sammak said to me, "Words make reality. That's all it is. Whatever stuff people say around you, makes your reality." And that's why in the video subtitles, there's a part that keeps repeating, "Words make worlds." It's reinforcing the idea of storytelling as a weapon, as reality-making.

According to Yuval Noah Harari's book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, storytelling is why *Homo sapiens* won out over all other archaic humans, who couldn't use language fluidly enough to unite more than five hundred members of their species. That's why we're here.

MK I find what really links and cements your practice is performance. As a painter, you're a performer; in your films, you're performing and filming others' performances. Can you talk about how performance has punctuated and influenced your practice?

KA It took me a really long time to understand what performance is.

MK In connection to film or painting, or just in general?

KA Well, I used to be a musician in high school. I was an artsy kid, and I tried to be in a rock band. I tried a mix-tape-rap thing, mostly because I just liked music and music events. I liked how at a concert, you're in your own space while you're also together in this energy field that everyone is contributing to. You're using the music as a stimulus to process your anxieties as a teenager in the world, but you're doing this shit together, you know? Once I was at RISD, the minute

I could make something, I realized I wanted to make it into a space similar to that of a concert, so I could bring people into it.

When I interned with Rirkrit Tiravanija, I learned about relational aesthetics, and with my twenty-year-old brain, I really responded to the ecstatic experience of being in Providence, with Fort Thunder and all these warehouse parties where art meets life and everything. Later on, performance for me became more of an action in a programmed space, and it kept developing from there. When I met boychild, a lot changed for me. In earlier live performances, I would do something that came out of the video, like I would bodypaint because I did bodypainting in the video. Or I would rap the same song that I rapped in the video.

MK But then you met boychild and projected onto her?

KA No, I didn't project onto her; it was more like she added to the work in a way that it made more sense. She filled in gaps in my human experience. For example, my bodypainting performance at MoMA PS1 in 2014 was based on an incident from an episode of Thailand's Got Talent, where a topless woman painted with her bare breast and stirred up a public debate over morals. I was trying to use the relationship between our subjectivity and a colored liquid and push that forward. My performance was about a certain human code and paint as a medium to transfer that code. Boychild performed boychild, but she was also using paint and I felt that we were on the same plane in our relationship to bodypainting while also adding to each other's very different dimensions.

MK Were you already using the green laser light back then?

KA No, the laser light came after, but looking at how I used paint back then, it was what the green laser is now. The best way to describe my relationship to boychild is that I'm also performing her audience. Later on, that audience-to-performer relationship developed further in each setup. Now boychild plays very specific roles, such as the Naga, and in every video she's a different Naga.

When I think of performance, I think of ritual, of a ceremonial circle, but not connected to any particular religion or belief system. Just being together in the room serves as the circle, and boychild functions like the shaman.

MK Is boychild also the link between you and the audience?

KA She connects me to the audience, but I'm also the audience.

MK I think I know what you mean because at the core of

your work is empathy. You are the audience because the audience is inside you. Everything is so porous in your practice.

KA Empathy is the whole point of the circle I'm talking about, which, for me, connects back to that concert circle from high school. And it was a feeling that was very palpable when I first saw boychild perform. To be empathetic is written into the code of being human. It's one of the most important traits of a person, but you don't speak about it. And you can't really obtain it or program for it—that's why I talk about storytelling. You can't fake empathy; you can only make it happen through true presence. So in the footage, I'm speaking to a filter or medium—Chantri or boychild—and that's how I'm there and that is the present.

You can watch a video of boychild performing and it can generate empathy. But when you're in the space where she's performing, together with all these different bodies in the room, it creates a collective sense of empathy that's impossible to record or hold onto. The ritual, with all the bodies going through an experience together, brings you outside of normal life, to look back into life. That's the empathetic moment—you can't name it, and you can't recreate it.

So empathy underwrote everything I do, but I never want to think about it as the goal for a video, because that would fail.

MK How important is the notion of identity? You mentioned the other day that you think of yourself as a "non-white painter." How much does your Thai background matter to your work?

KA When I had my first show at CLEARING gallery in Brooklyn in 2013, there were only white male Western painters showing there. I had come from this vacuum at RISD, not ever hearing anyone call me an "other," to Columbia University in New York, where I became really conscious of being an "other" to Western art history. So my first show and the first iteration of *Painting with history in a room filled with men with funny names* was my way of negotiating that.

MK As a man with a funny name yourself.

KA Picasso's a funny name, Warhol and Basquiat are funny names. The premise of my project was that it's me and my Thai people making paintings. But in the end, it's also about this weird space of othering and the fact that when you choose to become a painter, you also choose to take on this funny name and become like a public clown. You become Kippenberger, you become all these characters, these stories.

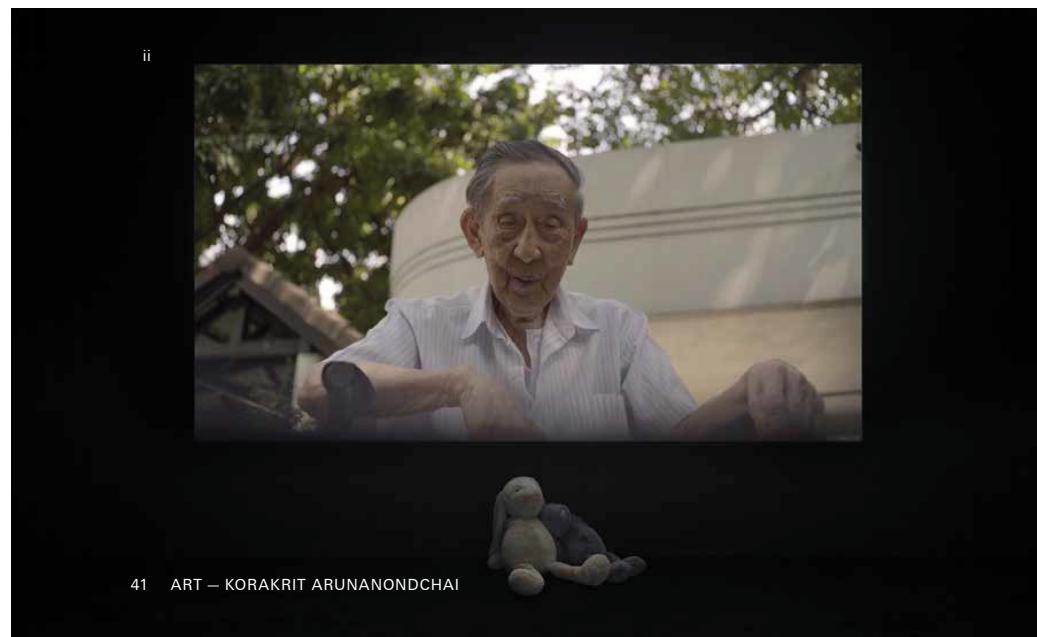
When I started making paintings, I took on the

role of this denim painter, which is no more ridiculous than the persona of painters like Jonathan Meese, Julian Schnabel, or others. I was looking at every Western male artist I could find footage of on YouTube—they all take on a character. And that's why I felt this othering I experienced was weird. So I thought that with my project, literally being "with history in a room with people with funny names," we could perhaps create a space where we're able to accept that we all have funny names to someone, and it's not about a dominant culture that is Western.

MK Do you feel more inspired making work in Thailand?

KA I make a lot of my work there. Thailand interests me as a space, which partially has to do with the fact that I went to college and graduate school in America. I'm now looking into the history of Thailand during World War II. The reason for *No history...* is that we're not allowed to talk about the royal family or anything that's not part of the official narrative in Thailand. And now it's even worse than it used to be: the military is censoring and deleting whole chunks from our history books.

So I naturally see myself as a Thai artist because I am Thai, but then I'm also an artist in general. An identity is about a story, so let's go back and see what these stories are. They are the "history" or the "no history" and they provide you with an identity, or perhaps even several identities. Not a flattened version like, Thai artists, Thai patterns, things that look Thai. Maybe my video project can unflatten the idea of what a painter is. Unflattening flattened identities into stories—I think that's my point on identity.



(i) Installation view of *No history in a room filled with people with funny names 5* (with Alex Gvojic), 2018, three-channel video, mixed seashells, tree branches, laser harp, hazer, resin, LED lights, and fabric pillows, at the 58th Biennale di Venezia, 2019 (ii) Installation view of *No history... 5* at Carlos/Ishikawa, London, 2018.

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