

Bangkok: 1999-2542. Examining the Legacy of the Sixth Edition of “Cities on the Move”

Francisco García Moro

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20868/cpa.2023.13.5175>

Bangkok, 1999: the Sixth Edition of “Cities on the Move”

“Cities on the Move” was an itinerant art exhibition about Asian cities organized by Hans-Ulrich Obrist (b. 1968) and Hou Hanru (b. 1963). The first edition took place in Vienna in 1997, followed by Bordeaux, New York, Humlebaek and London. Bangkok, a city that was still recovering from the Asian financial crisis, hosted the sixth edition in 1999. Unlike the other host cities, the Thai capital lacked venues that were suitable for international art shows. However, such inconvenience was in turned into an opportunity: instead of conceiving the itinerant exhibition as a “product to be packaged and sent on to the next venue”, Obrist and Hanru conceived a more flexible organization. A program that would remain open to fixes on-the-go and last-minute arrangements. “Little by little, very interesting things started to occur” since artists spontaneously started collaborating with each other and the ‘exhibition in this sense truly became on the move’². After the European editions, the festival was returning to Asia –its conceptual ‘home’– and thus there would be chance to present art “originally produced for the context”. For Obrist, “simple artistic presentations”³ in formal institutions were not enough to face the “fluctuations and instability: the unpredictable” conditions of contemporary exhibitions. The idea of spreading the show around a vast, developing metropolis fit well with the focus on the rapid urban development of Southeast Asia, highlighting the contrasts between local pulses and the nascent globalization.

Architect Ole Sheeren (b. 1971) and filmmaker Thomas Nordanstad (b. 1974) were appointed as delegate curators⁴ and one hundred and eight artists and architects were featured⁵. The event hosted a number of well-known Thai contemporary creators such as Rirkrit Tiravanija (b. 1961), Navin Rawanchaikul (b. 1971), Surasi Kusolwong (b. 1965), Chitti Kasemkitvatana (b. 1969) and Manit Sriwanichpoom (b. 1961), as well as Wong Hoy Cheong (b. 1960) and Lew Kungyu (b. 1960) from Malaysia, Arahmaiani (b. 1961) and Heri Dono (b. 1960) from Indonesia and the Singaporeans Simryn Gill (b. 1959) and Matthew Ng (b. 1962). Other well-known international figures such as Zhou Tiehai (b. 1966) and Rem Koolhaas (b. 1944) were also featured.

The notion of ‘Glocality’⁶, a hybrid quality that merges vernacular practices with the modes of transnational capitalism, served the curators to characterize a creative negotiation process that involved local and international artists⁷. Among the eight editions of the itinerant exhibition, Bangkok is probably the one that has received less attention afterwards. Almost twenty-five years later, at a time when globalization seems to be in course of reversal, we will assess the legacy of the sixth edition of “Cities on the Move”, understanding how the exhibition brought new options about the city Bangkok through the lens of some of the participant artists and architects. This show linked art, architecture and film as a response to and exploration of urban dynamism and development frenzy of which the East Asian metropolis was held as exemplary⁸. The promise of engaging the “dynamism of a contemporary Asian city” was, according to art critic Brian Curtin, “actually achieved”⁹.

Postmodernity and the ‘Spicy Soup Crisis’

The seminal work by Apinan Poshyananda (b. 1956) *Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* in 1992 opened the modern study of contemporary Thai Art¹⁰. Four years later the first international show of Thai art, “Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions” launched at the Asia Society in New York City, curated by Poshyananda under direction of Vishakha Desai (b. 1949), who led the Society’s shift of focus from the historic collections to Asian contemporary art¹¹. The exhibition characterized the notion of ‘tradition’ as a homogenizing product of national politics that overlooked nuances and complexities across the diverse cultural spheres of Asia¹², exploring the way aesthetics were employed “in a counter-hegemonic fashion”¹³.

Out of educated circles, it may seem clear that Postmodernity had not permeated Thai society in the way it had done in the West. Majority of Thai artists had “not been directly exposed to Western developments in critical and literary trends”, in many cases for the unequal access to education resources. However, their work would exhibit several “defining characteristics of postmodernism” that reflected the ongoing transformations that were taking place in society¹⁴. The prosperity of the early Nineties facilitated the emergence of a middle class that constituted itself as a new political actor, which would eventually lead to the 1997 Constitution. However, the burst of the speculative bubble that same year¹⁵ gave rise to “vibrations of fear and unease spreading through the people” through mass layoffs and bankruptcies¹⁶. The intervention of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) left a bitter feeling, unleashing a wave of nationalism that was amplified by the mass media. In their urgency to “buy local”, the Thai consumers found themselves in the paradox that domestic products tend to mimic foreign looks. Marketers had then to appeal to underlying essential values or *Khawampenthai* (“Thainess”) that supposedly laid beneath their foreign skins¹⁷. Anthropologist Kasian Tejapira (b. 1957) noted that the term was appropriated by all sorts of social and political factions with the intention of reinforcing their moral capital,

resulting in a “palpably rapid and drastic change in the meaning and enunciation of Thai national identity”¹⁸. This resulted in a disorganized mix of divergent meanings, transforming Thainess into a “true postmodern entity”. It was a “liberalization” of “symbols of national identity” that opened up an “ethno-ideological space” while “linguistic barriers” crumbled resulting in a “semiotic chaos”¹⁹. Postmodernity opened the gates for artists to react against this essentialist reductionism, finding ample room to question the nationalist discourses through the re-appropriation of symbols and visuals, while also pointing at the true drivers of the country’s financial fallout.

The puzzling contradiction between essence and appearance literally reached the skies with the Nineties wave of neo-classical skyscrapers. The fast-economic growth engendered a plethora of Europeanising architectural pastiches, commonly known in Thai language by the term *Loui*: a French borrowing denoting a generic, phantasmagorical *Louis* style. The mixed-use complex “Amarin Plaza” (1985), designed by Rangsang Torsuwan (b. 1939)²⁰, was allegedly Thailand’s first commercial building to be sold entirely off plan. Its uncomplicated mix of classical orders, flamboyant vaults and curtain walls was an immediate hit for investors and the public alike. Other sumptuous developments such as “River Park Condominium” (1994) and “State Tower” (2001) followed along the riverside [Fig. 01]²¹. The construction of the most ambitious of these *Loui* buildings, “Sathorn Unique”, was however abandoned as a consequence of the crisis. Today, its forty-nine unfinished floors rise over the Chao Phraya River while the large ionic capitals made of concrete grant some odd romantic feeling to the ruin. In 1986 Architect Sumet Jumchai (b. 1939) –a cultured scholar and author of modernist landmarks such as the Museum of Science and Technology (1964) and the Campus of Thammasat University in Rangsit (1985)– inaugurated the “Robot Building” in 1986, an office tower shaped like an actual eighty-three meters tall android²² that was presented as “Post High-Tech” architecture²³. Given that the local construction industry could not emulate the technological wonders that architects like Piano, Rogers and Foster were creating around the world, the semiotic artifices of Postmodernity granted moral cover for local practitioners to thrive in figurativism and superficial extravaganza. These ‘Talisman-buildings’, as we could call them, catered simultaneously to the representation aspirations of the non-Western owners and developers international critics²⁴.

When “Cities on the Move” arrived in Bangkok a new elevated train system known as BTS was about to be inaugurated. However, since the bitter memories of the Hopewell fiasco, an airport transfer railway abandoned in 1998 after years of delays and scandals, were still fresh, the new project was being met with certain scorn and scepticism²⁵. It was in this context, marked by the amalgamation of extravagant buildings, oversized civil works and congested roads, when architect Ole Sheeren introduced the art show with this colourful description:

"543 years later... the city of Bangkok is full of Robot-Buildings, Louis-XIV Towers and Skeletons of unfinished constructions. They seem to be the dominant typologies, vertical characters, the ones to survive the battle of urban growth and mutation. [...] A fluidum of vehicles - boats are cars are moving points are continuous lines. Gravity is finally overcome: elevated highways. Skytrains. [...] On top: If not the dome then the temple, re-occurrence in the shape of arts, eyes and horns overlooking the city. Historical reminiscence or technological personification. Unidentified Flying Objects just landed. Saucers and dishes of urban comfort hovering above the ground. Ready for take-off: The city of the future..."²⁶

Sheeren played with the lapse between the Gregorian year of 1999 and that of 2542 in the Buddhist Era, which is the official calendar in Thailand. Pompous european towers, antique ruins out of time and place and the skeletons of unfinished mega-structures were merged into a prospective future that blurred the boundaries between localism, development and humanism.

The Event: Hungry Ghosts and Urban Skeletons

The poster of the event [Fig. 02] was designed by Navin Rawanchaikul in his signature pop style. Several architectural landmarks were portrayed around the featured artists: the "Robot Building" grew legs and turned into a walking humanoid, the revolving restaurant at Sofitel Hotel was uncovered as a flying saucer and the BTS skytrain, the city's latest novelty, turned into a vigorous mythical Naga²⁷. In overall, the poster recreated the naïf looks typical of local movie billboards, which were notorious due to the unbridled creativity of local artists whose choral imageries were often more suggestive than the actual films. Rawanchaikul –disproportionally self-portrayed at the centre– interpreted literally the dynamism implied by the exhibition's name, presenting it as a carefree comedy film. In a city at the peak of its postmodernist craze, the logotype played, as Sheeren, with the cohabitation of Western and Thai calendars, transporting the audience to a faraway future more than five hundred years ahead²⁸.

From the ninth to thirtieth of October of 1999, the artworks were exhibited in thirteen locations, including government galleries, cafés, theatres, shopping malls and the actual streets²⁹. A precarious transport arrangement of bus lines, train and river boats was suggested to the public, but it was patently insufficient for any casual visitor [Fig. 04]. In such scenario, it made sense to bring the action to the road, as in the tuk-tuk tour by Navin Rawanchaikul and Rirkrit Tiravanija. Other performances, like "Red Man Swimming" by Kata Sangkhue (b. 1976) took place right on the Chao Phraya River as warning of the slow but unavoidable demise of Bangkok, a city built on a dense network of canals and unstable soil, under the overwhelming weight of its urban development.

Domestic spirits are entities in an eternal state of hunger; they are remnants of the animist cults that still permeate Asian post-colonial societies and enjoyed a prominent role at the festival. During the opening event at the Siam Society, a paper model of River Park Condominium (at the time one of latest and most flamboyant high-rises) was exhibited while Malaysian Liew Kungyu (b. 1960) performed as a Chinese fortune genius dressed with logos of foreign consumer brands [Fig. 03]. Liew's performance would continue around the gold shops –a trade that is commonly attribute to the Chinese diaspora– in the Siam Discovery Mall³⁰.

After a career as a photojournalist and advertiser, Manit Sriwanichpoom (b. 1961) presented "This Bloodless War" (1997), an unsettling photographic series that was posted in street³¹ billboards. Probably due to his experience, Sriwanichpoom favoured impactful images that made raw and bold statements where violence is often implicitly palpable. "This Bloodless War" presented the aftermath of the financial crisis as re-enactments of the most well-known photographs of the Vietnam War [Fig. 06]. Running on the tracks of the abandoned Hopewell railway project, a model taking the place of the South Vietnamese girl Phan Thi Kim Phúc flees in dismay as her universe of consumerism and sophistication collapses; the "men in black" of the IMF walk unperturbed behind. Sriwanichpoom's billboard images were directed to the same population that was portrayed as a victim of consumerism and the "murderous power of financial corporations"³². The use of war imagery confronted the nationalist discourse promoted by those who had most encouraged the irrational exuberance of the financial markets: "it is easy to blame the West, but it is the whole system that has failed. Greed has buried us"³³.

Sriwanichpoom is also known for the performance character of *Pink Man*, who has been incarnated for years by poet Sompong Thawee (b. 1960). *Pink Man* dressed in a pink suit, a colour that mocks the aspirations of the Thai middle-class and the patronage society: "Pink Man Golfer", "Pink Man Socialist", "Pink Man the Siamese Intellectual" were some of the character's avatars. The street-level approach of the festival provided a natural setting for Sriwanichpoom's parodies: same as Liew Kungyu's consumerist geniuses, "Pink Man" walked around the shopping centres and gold shops invested of the gravity of Thawee's semblance.

Rem Koolhaas, who had designed the exhibition of the London edition of the festival that same year³⁴, presented "Hyperbuilding" (1996) in Bangkok, a speculative project that, as we will detail, connected to OMA's long-term plans for Asia. Obrist and Hanru entertained concepts coined by Koolhaas³⁵ such as 'COED' ('Cities of Exacerbated Difference') and '-SCAPE' a "new kind of post-urban condition" somewhere in-between city and countryside³⁶. The "Hyperbuilding" was a self-contained city for 120,000 inhabitants sited on the banks of the Chao Phraya, a

peri-urban area known as Bang Khrachao. Renderings of the "Hyperbuilding" were exhibited in wide street billboards [Fig. 05]. The images of stacked glazed volumes –forms that appeared to defy gravity– conventional notions of functionality in high-rise buildings– merged seamlessly with the surrounding abandoned construction sites and the amalgamation of power wires and informal structures that characterize the streets of many cities in the Global South.

The Legacy of "Cities on the Move"

In a time when plagues and wars are back on the fields of old Europe and neologisms such as 'decoupling' and 'deglobalization' thrive in media, getting back to the curatorial manifest is certainly revealing, as it aimed to: "present the dynamic and highly creative situation of contemporary architecture, urban planning and visual culture [...] in the age of globalization at the turn of the 21st century"³⁷. The *Tom Yum Kung* crisis was, for the international organizers, a mere bump in the road to the unstoppable rise of Asia. The ideas of Rem Koolhaas pervaded all editions of the exhibition. China, rather than Thailand or any other Asian place, could be intuited as his actual object of desire. Koolhaas published *S, L, M, XL* in 1997, a book rich of infographics that today reads like an emphatic effort to let the Western architects visualize the mind-blowing scale of China's growth³⁸. One year later, *The Generic City* set the ideological foundations of OMA's design methodologies towards the upcoming wave of large-scale Asian projects³⁹; an expansion for which the "Hyperbuilding" project, sited on the placid orchards of Bang Khrachao, presumably served as a test-run⁴⁰.

Local optics, however, tended to present a more fine-grained, nuanced portrayal of place and situation. The featured artists were grouped in two broad categories: those calling for active "resistance to this new totalitarian power of Hyper-Capitalism" and those who opted instead to bloom within the interstices created by the desynchronization between modernity and locality, "inventing their own spaces and channels of expression"⁴¹. For the most vocally critical, the crisis constituted a sort of collective defeat and a moralist tale that concluded with a biblical punishment. Sriwanichpoom portrayed the ruins left by the crisis in a collection of photographic studies of Bangkok's urban death titled "*Dream Interruptus*" (2000): "tombstones in a postmodern cemetery" where dreams of easy enrichment "disappear in their own shadow. Empty skeletons and ruins of a global economic war" [Fig. 07]⁴². The dream of turning the nation into a "Newly Industrialised Country" not through "hard work and democratic development but through real estate and stock market speculation" had vanished: "money comes from nothing, returns to nothing. There is not even enough left to finish the skyscrapers"⁴³.

The success of "Pink Man" endured for years, reaching its 'critical zenith' with series like "Pink, White & Blue" (2005)⁴⁴. The small, avid spirits that populate domestic altars in contemporary folk beliefs kept offering a

fertile ground for the satire of the aspirations of the emerging middle classes. Collages like “Hungry ghost No1” (2003) retook the mockery of folk animist beliefs by depicting a giant “Pink Man” shopping around Empire Tower [Fig. 08]. In the installation “Golden Ghost (Reality Called, So I Woke Up)” (2014) Kusolwong hid twelve gold necklaces under five tons of industrial linen. Visitors were invited to search for the necklaces by digging with their own hands. However, a large mirror returned them their reflection as unsuspecting miners, creating a subtle unease among the audience as visitors wandered among the skeins of linen. These visitors were now the ‘little ghosts’, driven by insatiable thirst, that had succumbed to the capitalism ‘dreams of gold’.

The success of “Pink Man” lasted for years, reaching its “critical zenith” with series such as “Pink, White & Blue” (2005). The thirsty spirits that populated the domestic altars of the new upper-middle classes continued to provide fertile ground for satire [Fig. 08]⁴⁵. The collage “Hungry ghost No1” (2003) took up the parody of the aspirations of the urban bourgeoisie by depicting a gigantic “Pink Man” shopping around “Empire Tower” [Fig. 09]⁴⁶. The installation “Utopia Station” (2003) by Rirkrit Tiravanija⁴⁷ was one of the foundational works of ‘relational art’ and was curated by Nicolas Bourriaud (b. 1965) –the movement’s leading theorist– at the fiftieth Venice Biennale. At the 2014 Taipei Biennale, –also curated by Bourriaud– Kusolwong presented “Golden Ghost (Reality Called, So I Woke Up)” (2014), where visitors were invited to dig with their bare hands to find one of the twelve golden necklaces that had been buried under five tons of industrial linen. Some visitors did indeed throw themselves among the skeins of cloth, turning into spontaneous miners. However, a large mirror returned their reflection, creating a subtle discomfort among the public, who saw themselves portrayed as victims of a sudden gold rush⁴⁸. Now the “little ghosts” was the public itself, wandering among the flax mountains, gripped by an insatiable thirst, having succumbed to the “golden dreams” of capitalism⁴⁹.

In 1999, in spite of the awe for the postmodern skyscrapers, the verticalization process of Bangkok was still about to begin. “Cities on the Move” took place at a pivotal moment in Asia’s economic history; as local capitalists were about to get diluted into the international flows of capital, the classicist skyscrapers would be replaced by mix-use complexes made of glass boxes⁵⁰. Class divide and socio-spatial segregation have since increased considerably. Although traffic jams had historically acted as a sort of social equalizer, the creation of verticalized levels of pedestrian circulation –interconnecting office towers, shopping malls and public venues– took the upper classes far from the suffocating ambience of the streets and the decrepit public buses. “Cities on the Move” was informed by the sharp intuition of Koolhaas and his team. The event unquestionably served as a launch pad for the incoming golden era of foreign ‘star architects’ in Asia. Ole Sheeren,

who was also director of OMA’s projects in Asia until 2009, had chance to leave his signature in the same surrealist skyline he had previously romanticized. After going on a solo career he authored “Mahanakhorn Tower”, the tallest building in Southeast Asia (314 m.) comprehending retail, hotel and branded residences –the latest and probably the starkest example of commodification of housing as a transnational investment asset. The tower was inaugurated with great fanfare in 2016 and shares genealogy with earlier OMA’s designs like the “Idea Vertical Campus” (2004) in Tokyo [Fig. 09].

Inadvertently, “Cities on the Move” served to symbolically close the period born with the 1992 protests led by the “middle class mob”⁵¹ and the attempt to overhaul the Thai “electocracy” system⁵². The electoral triumphs of Thaksin Shinawatra opened a new political era at the turn of the century⁵³. Shinawatra was the personification of the predatory capitalism that Sriwanichpoom had denounced, yet he would enjoy fervent support from the left-wing peasant movements⁵⁴. Riding on “the insecurities of white- and blue-collar workers” in the wake of the financial crash⁵⁵, Shinawatra transformed “radically” the previous “power relationships”⁵⁶. Self-appointed as “Thailand’s CEO”⁵⁷, his unique combination of neo-liberal privatizations, welfare policies and disregard for human rights turned upside down all previous ideological frameworks.

Perhaps the most enduring finding of the art show was the consecration of the streets of Bangkok as a live, spontaneous museum. That was probably due to its late appointment as a tour stopover –the only on Asia soil– and the many difficulties that had to be solved on the go. According to Lucy Steeds, Bangkok was the edition of the festival that got closer to “local and regional contemporary art” and felt more released from “an overbearing or prescriptive (Western) art history”⁵⁸. For example, the modified tuk-tuk parked by Rawanchaikul and Tiravanija at the Secession Pavilion in Vienna turned a life creature when joining the traffic congestion, roaring through the roads in Bangkok. This not only applied to relational artworks, but also performative and visual creations such as “Pink Man”, which stood right next to the social elements it aimed to ridicule. The exhibition displays conceived by Yung Ho Chang in Vienna (1997) and Koolhaas in London (1999) could not, in any case, be substitute of the experience of street vending, the informal occupation of public spaces, the cohabitation of animist shrines with corporate skyscrapers or the sticky mix of pollution and tropical moisture, all contextual factors that governed the way in which artwork was experienced. Without doubt, “Cities on the Move” was not the first time that the mismatch between Gregorian and Buddhist calendars was used as a poetry instrument. More recently, Lawrence Chua also envisioned that alternative future when depicting a post-war expressway plan for Bangkok⁵⁹ as one of his ‘Buddhist Felicities’⁶⁰. Alternative chronologies as a figure of speech provided a gentle literary respite to the verbalist, inconclusive debates about the existence of one or several modernities –or if

there exist non-Western forms of modernity– that engulf a substantial part of contemporary scholarly. The portraits by Rawanchaikul helped to represent such uchronias in a candid, light-genre style that connected closely with local sensibilities, distancing them from the dark cyberpunk themes⁶¹ that teased the imagination (and ambition) of European architects. Taking the museum to the streets allowed for the creative distil of endless, unpredictable series of cultural misunderstanding and translation shifts, producing artworks of multi-layered readings that would have been substantially harder to communicate if placed in Europe.

In the next years Bangkok finally got its long-awaited exhibition venues⁶². However, the succession of biennales that started in 2018, directed by Poshyananda, continued spreading the artworks through diverse locations across the city, vindicating Bangkok’s cityscape as the genuine substrate of local creative forces⁶³. Folk art and everyday architectures found their place in the interest of the educated public. The festival invited produced a method through which the cities of the Global South could represent themselves. Everyday utensils and informal spaces were reassessed as hybrid creatures thriving in the interstices left by urban planners and art critics, drifting among *Art Brut* hunters⁶⁴, ethnographic *flâneurs* and *kitsch* aficionados. The *Loui* style and its architectural corpses, which had once aimed to satisfy the well-to-do aspirations of a Thai life under a Western skin, ended considered as just one more episode of the urban and social continuum that informs the streetscape of Bangkok.

Nevertheless, international creators remained remarkably self-aware of their stance regarding worldwide (Euro-American) critics. The upcoming wave of European architecture in Asia would ‘exacerbate’ the sharp differences glorified by Koolhaas while local crony capitalists turned into transnational conglomerates. Later on, in 2014, President Xi Jing Ping criticised the “weird buildings” that had sprouted around China during the previous two decades⁶⁵. Soon after, new policies avoiding “extravagant” designs started to be implemented⁶⁶. The Covid lockdowns and, more importantly, the 2022-23 property crisis in China can only suggest that those appeals for moderation and conservatism in architecture will remain in force for years to come⁶⁷. “Cities on the Move”, guided by the sharp intuition of Koolhaas and his team, took place at the peak of Postmodernity, serving as a launch pad for a golden era of foreign ‘star architects’ in Asia. It was a time when the world, sited at the dawn of globalization, was a festival of swapping meanings and converging cultural realities flourishing under the prospects of an enduring *Pax Americana*⁶⁸. Artistic expression has the potential to synthesize the complexities and contradictions of society in single but compelling bits such a photograph or a literary metaphor. The 542 years ‘uchronia’ engendered by the marriage of Gregorian and Buddhist calendars gave place to a ‘delirious Bangkok’, a festival of ‘global’

varieties and 'talisman buildings' where local audiences and international critics were offered simultaneously, and under the same formal disguise, diverse narratives fit for autonomous avatars of Modernity.

1. Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Vivian Rehberg, and Stefano Boeri, "Moving Interventions: Curating at Large", 150.
2. Ibid., 150.
3. Ibid., 150.
4. The event was organized by France Meolule, cultural attaché to the French Embassy in Bangkok and funding by the 'French Association for Artistic Action' (AFAA) and the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) from Singapore. Partnerships were secured with the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA), the Siam Society in Bangkok and Surasi Kusolwong's 'Invisible Academy Project' at Silpakorn University, the country's flagship fine arts school.
5. Brian Curtin, *Essential Desires: Contemporary Art in Thailand*, 62.
6. The term 'glocal', allegedly created by Japanese manufacturers seeking to place their products internationally, was popularized in 1997 by sociologist Roland Robertson (b. 1938, d. 2022).
7. Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Hou Hanru, "Cities on the Move".
8. Brian Curtin, *Essential Desires: Contemporary Art in Thailand*, 61.
9. Curtin, 62.
10. Apinan Poshyananda, *Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*.
11. Gregory Galligan, "Curating the Contemporary in Decolonial Spaces. Observations from Thailand on Curatorial Practice in Southeast Asia", 208.
12. They sought to understand Southeast Asia's nation-states as a modern, post-independence construct superimposed to complex ethnocultural realities. These ideas can be traced back to the influential work *Imagined Communities* (1983) by Benedict Anderson.
13. Curtin, Op.cit. 61.
14. Soraj Hongladarom, "Postmodernism in Thai Poetry: Saksiri Meesomsueb's Tukta Roi Sai".
15. The crisis was named by international media as *Tom Yum Kung* ('Spicy Prawn Soup'), a popular Thai dish.
16. Steven Pettifor, *Flavours. Thai Contemporary Art*, 54.
17. Kasian Tejapira, "The Post-Modernization of Thainess".
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 220.
20. The career of Rangsan Torsuwan, a 1966 MIT graduate, spanned four decades and multiple styles, from modernism to high-tech to colossal post-modern towers along the Chao Phraya River, enjoying large commercial success.
21. The high-rise building, crowned by a remarkably dashing neoclassical dome casted in gold, was originally named *Silom Preechiat Thaawuhr* ('Precious Tower of Silom Road'), an English borrowing.
22. Originally serving as the headquarters of the Bank of Asia, the "Robot Building" aimed to reflect the increasing computerization of the banking sector. In 1998 Dutch group ABN AMRO took control of the majority of the bank's equity, turning the robot into an illustration of some of the financial excesses that led to the *Tom Yum Kung* crisis.
23. Sumet Jumsai, "Bank of Asia, Bangkok", 74.
24. See, among many other examples, the "Elephant Building" (1997) and the Rangsit campus of Bangkok University (2006). Both buildings are shaped after the literal surnames of their promoters: *Chang* ('Elephant') and *Petch* ('Diamond').
25. Seth Mydans, "Bangkok Opens Skytrain. But Will It Ease Car Traffic?"
26. Ole Sheeren, "Cities on the Move, Bangkok".
27. Some folk geomantic beliefs assimilate railways to snakes that bring conflicting energies into homes and businesses. Protection amulets are often placed

- in dwellings facing railways and viaducts. The Naga, however, is a protective creature associated to some episodes of Buda's life and it is an emblem of nobility and vigour.
28. It can be inferred that such chronological misalignment was particularly noticed by the foreign spectators, since they were less accustomed to look simultaneously at both calendars.
 29. The participating venues were: the Faculty of Painting Sculpture and Graphic Arts at Silpakorn University, About Studio/About Cafe, the United Artists Cinemas at Central Rama III, the Siam Society, Jamjuree Art Gallery at Chulalongkorn University, the National Gallery, Project 304 Gallery and Tadu Contemporary Art Gallery.
 30. Liew's career has been focused on the exploration of ethnic and national identities in Malaysia. For the Fifth Edition of the exhibition at Hayward Gallery in London, Liew Kungyu set an ironic Chinese shrine that also criticised the excesses of chrony capitalism in the Asian Pacific region.
 31. Curtin, Op. cit., 27.
 32. Ibid., 27.
 33. Pettifor, Op. cit., 64.
 34. Lucy Steeds, "Exhibitions and the City: To Accelerate or Pause? Two Case Studies", 119.
 35. Rem Koolhaas, *The Generic City*.
 36. Obrist and Hanru, "Cities on the Move".
 37. Ibid.
 38. Koolhaas, Mau, and Werlemann, *S, M, L, XL*.
 39. Koolhaas, *The Generic City*.
 40. Landmark projects like the CCTV Headquarters (2012) and the Shenzhen Stock Exchange (2013).
 41. Obrist and Hanru, "Cities on the Move".
 42. Pettifor, Op. cit., 85.
 43. Ibid., 62.
 44. David Teh, "Travelling Without Moving: Historicising Thai Contemporary Art", 582. Teh was, as Zhuang Wubin noted in *Putting Pink Man into History: Photography, Art and Politics* (2021), sceptical of Sriwanichpoom's political stance, since he perceived him as too firmly installed in the same middle-class he ridiculed.
 45. These domestic altars are known as *Sam Phram* and can be found today in many homes. They trace back to folk beliefs that still find accommodation in modern Thailand. These cults may cohabit with other cults observed by the Chinese diaspora such as the Hungry Ghost Festival or the home deities known as *Tu Di* ('god of the place') in Taiwan, or *Tou Tei* in Hong Kong and Macau. It is not surprising that local artists found them representative of the *petit bourgeoisie* notions of dignity and prosperity.
 46. Concluded in 1999, Empire Tower" was one of the many Real Estate excesses left by the bubble economy of the Nineties. Its proportions (227 meters tall and 110 meters wide) were unusual for an office building and created a 'wall effect' that gave it a particularly bulky and imposing presence.
 47. David Teh, *Thai Art: Currencies of the Contemporary*. "Utopia Station", like most of Tiravanija's work, would not, however, be directed to the Thai context, as Teh develops in the first chapter of his book.
 48. Center for Contemporary Art, "Surasi Kusolwong: Golden Ghost (A Guest + A Host = A Chinese Ghost)".
 49. The Thai expression *phi noi* ('little ghost') refers to undocumented Thai migrants working in countries such as South Korea or Taiwan who lack labour rights and basic services and whose existence is generally silenced by governments and the media. This political connotation was, however, evident to the Thai public.
 50. The 2013 Masterplan incentivized the verticalization of central Bangkok even more because it introduced generous bonuses on floor-to-area ratios for those developments that were located in proximity of the skytrain stations.
 51. Surin Maisrikrod, "Thailand 1992: Repression and Return of Democracy", 333.
 52. Tejapira refers as "electrocracy" to the power brokering system sustained by elected politicians and businessmen in post-war Thailand. A simulacra of a participative society where the lower and middle classes were left to act as passive spectators.

53. The party led by Thaksin Shinawatra achieved Parliamentary majority with 40% of votes in the 2001 elections and 60% in 2005. Such overwhelming results constituted a shock for the upple-middle classes in Bangkok and questioned the whole power architecture that had ruled the country since the world war.
54. Pasuk Phongpaichit and Baker, *Thaksin*.
55. Kasian Tejapira, "Toppling Thaksin", 10.
56. Ibid., 10.
57. Wayne Hay, "Thaksin Shinawatra: Let Thailand Return to Democracy".
58. Steeds, "Exhibitions and the City: To Accelerate or Pause? Two Case Studies", 122.
59. *The Greater Bangkok Plan of 2533* (1960) by Frederick J. Adams, John T. Howard and Roland Greeley.
60. Lawrence Chua, *Bangkok Utopia: Modern Architecture and Buddhist Felicities, 1910-1973 (Spatial Habitus: Making and Meaning in Asia's Architecture)*, 1. 4745.
61. Xin Wang, "Asian Futurism and the Non-Other". Wang explains the alineating consequences of the urban futurism fantasies conceived in the West that take Asian cities a stage. These visions of extreme urban density are a common theme of science-fiction imagery and have a signified influence in the way Asian cities have been understood by foreigners.
62. The creation of the future Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC) was at that time engulfed in a bitter political conflict. BACC finally opened in 2005 as the city's flagship exhibition venue. Government projects like the Thailand Culture and Design Centre (2017) and a long list of private-run galleries and event spaces constitute a new wave of world-class art facilities.
63. Many other city-wide art festivals also followed, from the "Bangkok Design Week" to the "Galleries Night", sometimes based on imported models such as the "Nuit Blanche".
64. Francisco García Moro, "The Liquid Mandala. Art Brut and Mystical Landscapes in the Marginal Spaces of Bangkok". Treza, Raphael, "Mistery Mind Maps" The discovery and consecration of spontaneous street artists like Sametr Pattanapornchai is probably one of best examples of the imbrication between streetlife in a non-Western context and contemporary art.
65. "Xí Jìn Píng: Bù Yào Gāo Qí Qí Guài Guài de Jiàn Zhù [Xí Jinping: Don't Make Weird Buildings]".
66. Jinran Zheng, "China Looks to Regulate City Growth".
67. The extent at which such changes will apply to greater Asia is still to be assessed.
68. The accession of China to the World Trade Organization in 2001 fuelled the hopes that economic liberalization would increase political freedoms by making the government more transparent and accountable. However, reality worldwide has proven to be very different.

Thai contemporary art
Cities on the Move
Manit Sriwanichpoom
Postmodernity in Asia
Hans-Ulrich Obrist
Rem Koolhaas