Francisco García Moro

“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”. After the European editions, the festival was returning to Asia -its conceptual ‘home’— and thus there would be chance to present art “originally to Asia –its conceptual ‘home’– and thus there European editions, the festival was returning nine 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 exemplary. The promise of engaging the “dynamism of a contemporary Asian city” was, according to art critic Brian Curtin, “actually achieved”.

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 Art. 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 art. 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 Asia, exploring the way aesthetics were employed “in a counter-hegemonic fashion”.

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 society. 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 year gave rise to “vibrations of fear and unease spreading through the people,” through mass layoffs and bankruptcies. 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 Khwampenthai (“Thaiiness”) that supposedly laid beneath their foreign skins. 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 “pulsably rapid and drastic change in the meaning and enunciation of Thai national identity”. This resulted in a disorganized mix of divergent meanings, transforming Thaiiness into a “true postmodern entity”. It was a “liberalization” of “symbols of national identity” that opened up an “ethno-ideological space” where “linguistic barriers” crumbled resulting in an “ethno-ideological space” where “linguistic barriers” crumbled resulting in a “semiotic chaos”.

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 Rangsan Torsuwan (b. 1939), was allegedly Thailand’s first commercial building to be sold entirely off plan. Its uncomplicated mix of classical orders, flambantypal 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 iconic capitals made of concrete grant some odd romantic feeling to the ruin. In 1986 Architect Sumet Jumscha (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 1965– inaugurated the “Robot Building” in 1986, an office tower shaped like an actual eighty-three meters tall android that was presented as “Post High-Tech” architecture. 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 artifacts 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 critics.

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 experience 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 skepticism. 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 flattened high-rise skies. Skyrains. [...] 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...”

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. Pompidou 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 to be the dome and the BTS of financial corporations”[29]. 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”[30]. 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 growth[31]. One year later, The Generic City set the ideological foundations of OMA’s design methodologies towards the upcoming wave of large-scale Asian projects[32]; an expansion for which the “Hyperbuilding” project, sited on the placid orchards of Bang Khrej, presumably served as a test-run[33]. 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 a creative “resistance to this new totalitarian speculation” had vanished: “money comes but through real estate and stock market hard work and democratic development "Newly Industrialised Country" not through the Western architects visualize the mind-blowing scale of China’s growth”[34]. One year later, The Generic City set the ideological foundations of OMA’s design methodologies towards the upcoming wave of large-scale Asian projects[35]; an expansion for which the “Hyperbuilding” project, sited on the placid orchards of Bang Khrej, presumably served as a test-run[36].

Domestic spirits are entities in an eternal state of hunger; they are remnants of the animist cults that either intermate 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 Mall[37].

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 street[38] 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 China, rather than its 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”[39]. 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”[40].

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 year[41], presented “Hyperbuilding” (1996) in Bangkok, a speculative architecture of the Vietnam War we will detail, connected to OMA’s long-term plans for Asia. Obrist and Hanru entertained concepts coined by Koolhaas[42] such as “COED” (‘Cities of Exacerbated Difference’) and ‘SCAPE’ a “new kind of post-urban condition” somewhere in-between city and countryside[43]. 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 Khrejao. Renderings of the “Hyperbuilding” were exhibited in wide cover billboards[44].

**The Dream Interruptus**

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”[45].

The success of “Pink Man” endured for years, reaching its ‘critical zenith’ with series like “Pink, White & Blue” (2005)”[46]. 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) retold the mockery of folk anist 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 fine 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 never 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 domed altars of the new upper-middle classes continued to provide fertile ground for satire (Fig. 08)49. The collage “Hungry ghost No1” (2003) took up the paradox of the aspirations of the urban bourgeoisie depicting a gigantic “Pink Man” shopping around “Empire Tower” (Fig. 09)49. The installation “Utopia Station” (2003) by Rirkrit Tiravanija 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 anniversary Pavilion in Vienna turned a life creature when Rawanchaikul and Tiravanija at the Secession of Bangkok’s cityscape as the genuine substrate of local creative forces50. 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 hunters51, ethnographic flâneurs and kitsh 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 ’exhaust’ the ‘star architects’ and the architectural corps, 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.

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” served to symbolically close the period born with the 1992 protests led by the “middle class mob” and the attempt to overhaul the Thai “electrocacy” 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 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 and presentiment” of its own history5455. 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, roaming 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 Koohlaas in London (1999) could not, in any case, be substitute of the experience of strolling through the informal occupation of public spaces, the habitation 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 meetings 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 Bangkok56 as one of his ‘Buddhist Felicities’57. Alternative chronologies as a figure of speech provided a gentle literary respite to the verbal, 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 work. 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 themes58 that teased the imagination (and ambition) of European architects. The attempt to return to the streets allowed for the creative distill 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 venues59. However, the success 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 forces60. 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 hunters62, ethnographic flâneurs and kitsh 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.
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.

2. Ibid., 150.
3. Ibid., 150.
4. The event was organized by France Moclule, 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 National Art Council in Bangkok and Surasi Kusolwong’s ‘Invisible Academy Project’ at Silpakorn University, the country’s flagship fine arts school.
10. Apinan Poshyananda, Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.
12. They sought to understand Southeast Asia’s nation-states as a modern, post-independence construct superimposed to complex ethnocultural realities that can be traced back to the influential work Imagined Communities (1983) by Benedict Anderson.
15. The crisis was named by international media as Tom Yum Kung (‘Spicy Prawn Soup’), a popular Thai dish.
18. Ibid., 220.
19. The career of Rangsan Torsuwan, a 1966 MIT graduate, spanned four decades and multiple styles, from modernism to high-tech to colossal petit bourgeoisie that local artists found them representative of the petty bourgeoisie notions of dignity and prosperity.
20. The career of Rangsan Torsuwan, a 1966 MIT graduate, spanned four decades and multiple styles, from modernism to high-tech to colossal petit bourgeoisie that local artists found them representative of the petty bourgeoisie notions of dignity and prosperity.
21. The crisis was named by international media as Tom Yum Kung (‘Spicy Prawn Soup’), a popular Thai dish.
22. Originally serving as the headquarters of 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.
23. Suthep Sotsathit, Bangkok Opens Skytrain. But Will It Ease Car Traffic?
25. Some folk geomantic beliefs assimilate railways to symbols 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 amulet associated to some episodes of Buda’s life and it is an emblem of nobility and vigour.
26. Tom Yum Kung (‘Spicy Prawn Soup’), a popular Thai dish.
27. Tom Yum Kung (‘Spicy Prawn Soup’), a popular Thai dish.
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 Tada 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 Kunju set an ironic Chinese shrine that also criticised the excesses of corrupt capitalism in the Asian Pacific region.
32. Ibid., 27.
34. Lucy Steeds, “Exhibitions and the City: To Accelerate or Pause? Two Case Studies”, 119.
38. Koolhaas, Mau, and Werlemann, S, M, L, XL.
41. Obrist and Hanru, “Cities on the Move”.
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 Srivianichpoom’s political stance, since he perceived him as too firmly installed in the same middle-class. He instead focused on the idea that as “petit bourgeoisie” that local artists found them representative of the petty bourgeoisie notions of dignity and prosperity.
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 Hungarian 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 bourgeois 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 the participating venues were: the Faculty of Fine Arts at Silpakorn University, the National Gallery, Project 304 Gallery and Tada Contemporary Art Gallery.
53. Tejapira refers as “electrocracy” to the power structure of contemporary Thailand.