

Without Waiting for Her Reply

Apichaya Wanthiang

In the dark of night we enter a sparsely lit space. A red hue emanates from the dark structure that we are guided through. Looking in from the outside, it seems recognizable as a kind of shed, its rough outlines contrasting against the slightly infernal light escaping from under the roof. Once inside, the structure reveals its particular materiality: the corrugated iron plates with their rusty patches that make up the roof, the worn timber, the lighting itself which envelops the structure in a surreal half-light. This space is neither here nor there. It creates an atmosphere that is at once intimate and stifling, recognizable and unfamiliar. Like the liminal space in a ritual, it opens the way to transformation. During the three hours of Apichaya Wanthiang's nightly exhibition *Without Waiting for Her Reply*, work and beholder meet each half way in order to establish a new, temporary community.

The structure, built together with Christian Stefanescu, is reminiscent of so-called rest houses that are frequently found in the landscape of a Thai rice field. It is an architectural form indigenous to the artist's native country, yet its execution in the exhibition space also transcends this particular cultural reference. It provides the orientation for the visitors as they move through the installation, imposing certain movements and attitudes that might not be natural to them, but that belong to the life originally lived in these buildings. Images of this life can be seen upon first entering the installation. A video consisting of a sequence of still and contemplative images evokes the rhythm of daily life in the artist's native community. We can see its inhabitants carry out their labors and perform their rituals, as well as its surrounding landscape. More than painting a mere picturesque image, the video works together with the rest of the installation to install a specific temporal experience. On the one hand, its slowness requires a level of engagement on the part of the viewer. On the other hand, it is part of a collection of elements, including the installation structure itself and the subtitles to the video that are consciously presented as fragments, discouraging a linear reading.

From the vantage point of a raised wooden platform outside the rest house, we look onto a nightly landscape, registered in infrared images. Small animals and insects unwittingly move in and out of the image, enhancing the impression that we are 'looking in' on something, that our gaze and the camera's is intruding in some way. More surprisingly still, is the realization that the camera's gaze is not entirely static, that it seems to move, and that it responds to the shifting weight of the body of spectators on the platform. The video projection shows live-stream footage, developed in collaboration with Sindre Sørensen, of the village gradually awakening under the rising sun. As the sunrise progresses, the night vision is replaced by color images. The position of the camera reacts to movement sensors planted in the wooden platform, co-developed with Roar Sletteland, turning it into a physical interface between the viewer and that, which is filmed. In a very real sense, we come to inhabit a village that is thousands of miles away from us. The camera becomes our eye; its movements belong to us. But it is a shared eye, a shared body, a shared experience. The disembodied eye of the camera becomes re-embodied by the community of spectators whose individual members become conscious of how their presence relates to that of the other viewers.

The English verb 'to relate' has a semantic versatility that seems tailor-made to describe the effects generated by Apichaya's installation. To be related to someone means you are connected either by blood or marriage. It designates a familial relationship. To relate to

someone means you feel a connection to and can sympathize with this person. When you relate something to someone, you give them an account of something, you tell them a story. Originally, the word derives from the Latin *referre*, which literally means to carry or bring something back, but also to repeat, revive, return or restore. This restorative impulse in Piya's work is crucial. In the early stages of her work as a painter, she was highly influenced by Mark Rothko, whose turn to myth and tragedy seems to epitomize the desire to restore art to the realm of the sacral: art as a balm to soothe the cracks through which modern man experiences his loss of spirituality. Perhaps this is art's most fundamental concern? To a great extent it probably is, and there is an inherent (almost tragic) beauty to the ambition of a project such as Rothko's. But at the same time the attempt to re-install in art the experience of the sacral is problematic, because it cannot help reveal its own impossibility in one way or another.

If Apichaya's art operates in the difficult tension between fragmentation and the restoration of a sense of wholeness, then it is perhaps the meaning of this wholeness that has significantly changed during her evolution as an artist. Far from the Abstract Expressionist ideals that informed her early work, it is no longer a matter of reaching the transcendental or sublime. It is also not nostalgic in nature; but rather it has become a very tangible effect, based on interpersonal and affective connections between the work, and the community of spectators. Something old and lost is not simply restored; something new is also created. At the heart of *Without Waiting for Her Reply* lies the conviction that the meeting places between work and beholder are full of potential. Tradition and narrative are released from a linear understanding of history, and are instead captured in a multitude of small memory fragments that together make up shifting constellations. The fragments that Apichaya presents to the viewer belong to a past and a tradition that we are not familiar with, to a rural society still governed by myth and ritual. Even though its images and stories still hold an appeal to us, we can no longer connect to them completely. Instead, they come to us mediated through images detached from their origin. In a paradoxical gesture, this extreme fragmentation and mediation allows for the viewer to experience a sense of presence through different encounters with the elements set out in the installation.

A good strategy to describe this is and which touches on the other meaning of 'to relate' is that of the story, understood here not merely as a traditional narrative that moves from beginning to end, but as a container of latent memories that wander through history. In 1936, Walter Benjamin wrote '[t]he art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out. This, however, is a process that has been going on for a long time. And nothing would be more fatuous than to want to see in it merely a "symptom of decay", let alone a "modern symptom". It is, rather, only a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing.' For Benjamin the story belongs to an archaic world that is gradually disappearing. Writing in the 1930s, Benjamin refers to World War I, and the shift in experience that occurred in the wake of it. Soldiers returning from the war had lost their ability to communicate their experiences, because they no longer lent themselves to mouth-to-mouth communication. As the aura of lived experience in modern life diminished, so did that of the storyteller. Furthermore the story for Benjamin is connected to craftsmanship and memory. It requires a distracted attention on the part of the listener, something that is connected to a type of labor increasingly lost in an industrialized society. There is no more 'weaving and spinning' to extend the 'web of storytelling' and to 'engrain' it in the listener's memory.

As is often the case for Benjamin, however, a loss also signals a new opportunity: it allows us to ‘see a new beauty in what is vanishing’. The story for Benjamin retains a potential because it is so intimately connected to the experience of the storyteller, because it always contains a trace of his or her life, and of history. ‘It resembles the seeds of grain which have lain for centuries in the chambers of the pyramids shut up air-tight and have retained their germinative power’. When encountered in a new context, they will reveal their potential. Stories then, even though they belong to a tradition we have lost, and that we are no longer familiar with, still contain truth and wisdom that can be activated anew. This is perhaps what occurs in Apichaya’s installation. The stories she tells belong to a world and a tradition that she herself left a long time ago, but that nonetheless reside in her and perhaps unconsciously form part of her identity. In her installation these memory fragments continue to wander even further as they acquire their meaning through different meeting points between the work and the community of spectators.

The story then is pure potential, a small yet powerful encounter in which we experience a momentary merging of past, present, and future. In telling stories, we recollect past events as much as we invent new ones. In either case it entails an imaginative process, in which we give up a part of ourselves in order to enter another reality, to empathize with another consciousness. A story, in this sense, is something of a liminal dwelling, in which we encounter traces of the past, or traces of the other, as well as potential futures. The narrative of *Without Waiting for Her Reply* is therefore not linear, but fractured. It comes to us dispersed in different elements containing knowledge of which we might not be aware until we meet it under the right circumstances. This is the type of knowledge and wisdom unconsciously passed on to us, engrained in our memory only to germinate when touched by the oxygen of a new time. The past flourishes in the present only as momentary illuminations, as Benjamin would have it. In a similar vein, Apichaya’s installation generates temporary communities in which knowledge of the past and of tradition is not imposed on the viewer, but carefully transferred, carried over from another time to meet us in a new present.

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CONCEPT AND ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT **Apichaya Wanthiang** ///TIME INVESTORS AND SHAREHOLDERS///CO-DEVELOPER OF INSTALLATION STRUCTURE **Cristian Stefanscu** STREAMING AND IT DEVELOPMENT **Sindre Sørensen**, ELECTRONIC DEVELOPMENT **Roar Sletteland**, CATALOGUE TEXT AND DISCUSSION PARTNER **Esther Tuypens**

This exhibition was generously supported by BEK, Bergen Kommune and the Norwegian Arts Counsel.

