

A Ghost of Collectivity: Hauntology and Curation of the Future^[01]

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At the end of 2013, the PDRC (People's Democratic Reform Committee), or "whistle-blower" mob, marched through Prayathai road and started to occupy Pathum Wan Junction where Bangkok Art and Cultural Centre (BACC) is located. They demanded that then prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra resign as the head of the government. After the PDRC occupied the forecourt of the art center, the entire junction, and the main street of the shopping district, they set up a "market" that sold PDRC-related goods and merchandise, typically with designs inspired by the Thai national flag, map of Thailand, and the protestors' whistle symbol. They also set up stages shared by speakers and musicians. It was a mixture of protest and festival. During the time of the protest, I was installing the exhibition, "Concept Context Contestation: art and the collective in Southeast Asia," an art historical investigation of the relationship between conceptual practice and collectivity in Southeast Asia.^[02] Artists, curators, and art institution officers witnessed the rally from BACC's fifth floor balcony. Perhaps none of the protestors would have known that in one of the high-rise buildings located on the same street was a space hosting a contemporary exhibition that shared the same common ground; it presented artworks and art projects that derived from the kind of collective consciousness and social movements the protest was based on.

The significant contrast between the festival-like protest in the street and the seriousness of an academic and art historical driven exhibition in one of the biggest cultural institutions puzzled me greatly. I could not sort out the relationship between the two. Nonetheless, it did not take long for one event to override another. In the second week of January 2014, the PDRC began their "shutdown Bangkok" campaign by trespassing and occupying government-related buildings in the capital, which included BACC, in order to prevent the government sector from functioning. Out of fear that the art center would be damaged, BACC chose to close the building the night before the protest. Thus, the "Concept Context Contestation" exhibition would not be available for the protesters to see after they arrived at the exhibition space as I had

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This essay is adapted from a presentation titled "The Crisis Would Never Leave Us: Notes on Hauntology and Artistic Intervention," which I presented at the forum "Imagining New Ecologies." The presentation was based on notes from my collaboration with a Thai artist, Anon Pairot, which explored the concept of hauntology. However, I have shifted the focus of the essay slightly in response to feedback from the forum.

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"Concept Context Contestation: art and the collective in Southeast Asia" was curated by Iola Lenzi, Agung Hujatnikajennong, and myself. It was first exhibited at Bangkok Art and Cultural Centre from December 13, 2013 to March 2, 2014 before traveling to Hanoi in 2015 and Yogyakarta in 2016.

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After repeatedly postponing the elections, the junta government has set the date of the general election as March 24, 2019. See Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "Thailand to hold elections on 24 March," *The Guardian*, January 23, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/23/thailand-marks-stilted-return-to-democracy-with-march-election>.

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See Sonia Yu, "Thai Soldiers Censor Art Exhibition in Bangkok," *Art Asia Pacific*, June 20, 2017, <http://artasiapacific.com/News/ThaiSoldiersCensorArtExhibitionInBangkok>.

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Asaree Thaitrakulpanich, "The City Actually Wants to Turn BACC into a 'Coworking Space'," *Khaosod English*, May 12, 2018, <http://www.khaosodenglish.com/news/bangkok/2018/05/12/the-city-actually-wants-to-turn-bacc-into-a-coworking-space/>; also BK staff, "Bangkok governor backs away from 'BACC coworking space' talk," *BK*, May 14, 2018, <https://bk.asia-city.com/city-living/news/bangkok-governor-backs-down-bacc-takeover-talk>.

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See "Monumental movement," *Bangkok Post*, November 5, 2016.

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Franco Bifo Berardi, *After the Future* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011) Kindle Edition.

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Ibid.

hoped. The question of what would be the reaction of the protestors when confronted with an exhibition that featured artworks from around Southeast Asia that engage with the history of social movements was left unanswered because that possible encounter was rendered impossible by the institution's decision.

The outcome of the PDRC protest affects the future of Thailand tremendously. On May 22, 2014, the military seized power in a coup d'état while the movement remained active. The PDRC disbanded shortly after the coup, but the junta has remained in power until today.^[03] Under four years of military rule, I have noticed three significant changes which do not only affect the field of art and visual culture, but also the contemporary life of the people and their view of history. First, contemporary art, especially any exhibition that makes commentary on the regime, has become subject to severe censorship.^[04] Secondly, alongside this reduction of freedom of expression, public space in a classical liberal sense is declining, an obvious example of this being an attempt by the Junta-appointed governor to convert BACC into a co-working space.^[05] In a sense, I think Thailand is experiencing a unique militarization of neoliberalism where all social spaces have been transformed into semi-public spaces that belong to private companies which support the regime. Thirdly, the public memory has been slightly altered. Two examples are the relocation of Anusawari Lak Si or Guardian of the Constitution Monument, and the conversion of the Democracy Monument—which most social movements have historically used as their battleground—into unoccupiable space.^[06] This third and last change is very crucial here in this essay because it does not only deal with the present directly but also attempts to manipulate the collective historical consciousness to serve the militant capitalist present.

Taking all of these factors into consideration, I argue that Thailand is currently undergoing a social transformation in which the physiological perception of a future as a progressive development has been rendered unthinkable by the reduction of public, social, and artist spaces that are not directly connected to capitalism and the manipulation of public memory in relation to democracy. This phenomenon can be referred to as "the slow cancellation of the future," a term coined by Italian media activist and thinker Franco "Bifo" Berardi.^[07] The term originally refers to the phenomenon in the zero zero decade when the modernist utopian view of the future was slowly converted into dystopian imagination by the forces of neoliberalism. One of the major effects of this socio-political development is the production of individuals who lack collective consciousness, as Berardi puts it, "a generation of human beings lacking competence in sensibility, the ability to empathically understand the other."^[08] In other words, protests where people gather together and form a united social body have become a thing of the past. Although this process is happening slightly later than in the European context and being activated by a different ideological drive, the reduction of collective consciousness regarding the "future" created by modern liberal democracy movements in Thailand from the 20th century points

to a similar result to the European pattern. Unable to see the future, I find my interest slowly turning back to history, or to be more precise, to the continued eradication of political, social, and historical conscious which makes the current understanding of history possible. Indeed, it is quite ironic to turn back to history in order to talk about the future. But perhaps the past (or what should have happened in the past) is the only access to unthinkable possibilities in the present.

Exploring the lack of a notion of the future from a cultural perspective, I have been greatly inspired by *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* by Mark Fisher, a British cultural theorist. In his book, the author explores widely the current condition of lack of development and a sense of a future in contemporary culture—especially in music, fiction, and film—using hauntology as a methodology. Hauntology, a concept Fisher has borrowed from French philosopher Jacques Derrida, is not a concept, but a lack of one. Its approach toward history is not to perceive history anew, but to pursue the absences surrounding historical moments that make history possible. In a sense, one can think of hauntology as a philosophy of absences in comparison to ontology that seeks to study reality. Mark Fisher explains, “it referred to the way in which nothing enjoys a purely positive existence. Everything that exists is possible only on the basis of a whole series of absences, which precede and surround it, allowing it to possess such consistency and intelligibility that it does.”^[09] Elsewhere, he discusses hauntology as “the agency of the virtual, with the specter understood not as anything supernatural, but as that which acts without (physically) existing.”^[10] According to Fisher, there are two forms of hauntology. The first refers to something does not exist anymore in reality, but remains effective in a virtual realm—an obvious example is in mental symptoms such as post-traumatic stress disorder. The second form refers to something that has not yet happened in actuality, but affects the virtual, for example, the specter of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ communism that has not happened in the history of human civilization, but continues to haunt it.

Using hauntology as a conceptual framework for his research, Fisher draws the attention of his reader to the problem of why contemporary cultures, especially music, are unable to produce anything new, and tend to mix and match inspirations from existing genres. But the greater question that Fisher asked was, How can hauntology become a productive methodology in resisting the cancellation of the future? He found the answer in hauntological music, where melancholia—which is the refusal to give up on the desire of future—develops into a political strategy. Fisher noted:

The kind of melancholia I'm talking about, by contrast, consists not in giving up on desire but in refusing to yield. It consists, that is to say, in a refusal to adjust to what current conditions call “reality”—even if the cost of that refusal is that you feel like an outcast in your own time.^[11]

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Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014) Kindle edition.

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Ibid.

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Ibid.

In a sense, melancholia here can be seen as an attitude, a condition of living or a mode of operation, where a subject continues to function in the present as if alternate conditions are possible rather than retreating or withdrawing from it. It can be activated by restlessly living a life while continuing to recall and resurrect specters of possible futures that reside in historical consciousness. However, it is important that it is not read as a refusal to give up on history per se. Rather, it is the refusal to give up on a practice of historiography that would continue to make ghosts visible. This struggle can be applied to both artistic practice and curatorial practice as a mode of knowledge production, whether in the act of making exhibitions, organizing talks, or even attempting to sustain the discussion. Furthermore, one can potentially pursue these specters, or “bring them back” by making use of telecommunication, cyberspace, and undercommon that are regimes of the specter, or of the ontological absences. They are parts of the range of potentiality that belongs to the outcast.

Looking back into the field of the curatorial, I have come to accept that my account of the clash between the political protest and the contemporary art exhibition at the start of this essay is one of the ghosts of my life for two reasons. First, the “Concept Context Contestation” exhibition might have already presupposed the loss of a utopian view of the future in Southeast Asia because it aimed to explore a relationship between conceptual art in Southeast Asia and collectivity from the 1950s until today as a historical phenomenon. Secondly, its existence generated a specter of possible engagement between a knowledge event in the exhibition space and its potential audiences when this possibility turned into an absence due to highly complicated circumstances. Nonetheless, it is important to not give up on this ghost of collectivity because it is its absence which opens us to a new horizon. I am proposing that the future of curatorial approaches in Southeast Asia should shift from historical to hauntological, that they should be interested in the series of absences which make Southeast Asian contemporary art possible rather than the history of Southeast Asian contemporary art itself. In other words, future curatorial practice should aim to create spaces of knowledge production that are historiographical rather than historical and knowledge events that bring back a disarray of specters not a singular historical moment, and engage with public memory and historical consciousness of the public as a haunting not an enlightening. Such a change in methodology to explore the ghosts of modernity can lead to the rediscovery of the passages from the past which are full of possibilities that can help us to think of a better future than the present can offer.