



WHEN EVERYTHING FLOWS



Embodied in the forms of travel, process, and exchange, the work of Thai artist PRATCHAYA PHINTHONG speaks eloquently to the dematerialization of human existence today. The first thing to dissolve: the artist's role and responsibility.

words by
ALESSANDRO
RABOTTINI

HIGHLIGHTS: PRATCHAYA PHINTHONG

Pratchaya Phinthong is an alchemist of economic value and social functions. In the work of this Thai artist, born in 1974, financial fluctuations, media alarmism, and the world labor market are transferred into matter as it transforms from solid to liquid to gaseous states, and then back again. Perhaps, however, it would be better to describe Pratchaya Phinthong as a trader who operates according to a logic opposite to that of profit, and who deals in cultural and value systems, trafficking in everyday meanings, hopes, and troubles. Phinthong accepts the perpetual transformation of forms and politics, of existence and daily life, poetically transferring the metaphor of fluctuation in currency values to various areas of human action. But if we start out from the premise that economic value is the most abstract of forces known to humanity—and, at the same time, the most concrete and painfully influential—then it becomes easier to understand the dialectics of materialization and dematerialization upon which Phinthong's artistic practice is founded.



ARTIST'S BIO

PRATCHAYA PHINTHONG (b. 1974) lives and works in Bangkok, Thailand. He has had two solo gallery exhibitions at gb agency, Paris, as well as a museum presentation at Chula Art Museum, Bangkok.

CURRENT & FORTHCOMING

PRATCHAYA PHINTHONG's most ambitious project to date is a solo exhibition organized in collaboration with the CAC Brétigny, where it will be held from December to February, and the GAMEC in Bergamo, where it will open next June.

In his second solo exhibition at the Parisian gallery gb agency in 2009, the artist showed two works springing from this dialectic and based on a reciprocal relationship of disappearance and accumulation. The first, titled *2017* (2009), was presented as a wall painting. For the piece, Phinthong downloaded a text from a website devoted to conspiracy theory, and then transferred it onto the gallery's wall using an ink that was designed to vanish over time. The words of the text oscillated between paranoid reflections, the prediction of a catastrophic future, and religious delusion, in a confused account of an imminent and inevitable end of the world resulting from a collision between the Earth and a heavenly body. Just like spoofs in the media, once their place has been taken by a more compelling, idiotic, or tragic piece of news, the text was destined to gradually disappear as the ink was gradually absorbed into the wall.

Conversely, the pile of banknotes that formed the second work on display (*What I learned I no longer know; the little I still know, I guessed*, 2009) grew over the weeks. This small heap of banknotes—a floor sculpture measuring one square meter, set directly on the ground—was made by stacking wads of Zimbabwean dollars, a currency that over the years has undergone such hyperinflation that it has been shut out of the international currency market. Exchanging the sum of five thousand euros for its equivalent in Zimbabwean dollars and using them to create a minimal form out of nearly worthless paper, Phinthong erected



Give more than you take, 2010 - ongoing
 All photos: Pratchaya Phinthong
 Co-production: CAC Brétigny / GAMeC, Bergamo
 Courtesy: the artist and gb agency, Paris

an anti-monument to financial growth, creating a black hole into which the symbolic violence and arbitrariness of value itself could be collapsed.

If capitalism has been the ideology of the endless and exponential transformation of nature and materials by humanity, today's dominant neoliberal ideology seems to have taken the boundlessness of this act of transformation into an extreme realm of abstraction and immateriality, an extra-national territory that answers only to its own laws—just as in the best tradition of abstract art—where capital is revealed for what it is: a hypertrophied and imponderable force.

Time, as the main gradient of this form of alchemy, in which politics, imagination, paradox, and reality merge, appears at the heart of the most ambitious project carried out so far by the artist, *Give more than you take* (ongoing), which will be at the center of his upcoming solo exhibition, organized in collaboration with the CAC Brétigny, where it will open in December 2010, and the GAMeC in Bergamo, to which it will travel in June 2011. Phinthong's work is generally based on the artist's personal experience of reality—in the form of travel, process, and exchange—which is then pared to the bone in a space of poetic imagination. In this project, his representation of that experience becomes more complex, embracing an extension over time that includes the process preceding the exhibition and that unfolds into the realms of global economics and everyday life. After learning from local and international media that a large number of Thai peasants travel to Sweden in the summer to pick wild berries, facing exploitative work conditions and pay so low that many do not even earn enough to pay off their original airline ticket to Sweden, the artist decided to spend a month and a half living and working alongside the workers in the Swedish part of Lapland. But what might sound like the fundamentals of an ordinary journalistic exposé instead serves as the starting point of a project that presents the exchange of money and workforce, and the market of individual stories and collective hopes, as part of a process of transformation, sublimation, and formalization. At the end of each work day, Phinthong calculated the weight of wild berries he had managed to pick. In turn, he asked the director of the CAC Brétigny, Pierre Bal-Blanc, to collect an equivalent weight in useless objects, destined to be forgotten or thrown away, and pile them in the exhibition rooms.



AUTHOR

ALESSANDRO RABOTTINI is an art critic and Chief Curator at the GAMeC – Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Bergamo, Italy, where he recently curated solo exhibitions of works by Sterling Ruby, Tris Vonna-Michell, Victor Man, and Aaron Curry.



Ultimately, a total of nearly six hundred kilos of castoff things accumulated. Between the two loci of the project, a dialectic was established between the functional character of individual labor, which vanishes into the vortex of profit, and the alienation of use in the form of a graveyard of objects that have lost their function. We are confronted, on the one hand, with those the dissolution of laborers' identity in work, and on the other, with a heap of things that have been saved from dissolution, in a gesture that attempts to symbolically compensate for the loss inhering in the former.

But there is another form of disappearance at play here: that of the artist as a composer of forms. Phinthong asked the curators of both exhibitions to decide for themselves how to display the objects collected over many days, arranging them in the space as they wish, without consulting him. While this might appear to be an act of negation and depreciation, in actuality Phinthong is confronting us with yet another transposition: not just of materials and symbolic functions, as we have just seen, but of responsibility—from the artist to the curator—which subtracts from these objects their value as mementos, testimonies, or fetishes in order to set them free in the space of the viewer's experience.

This gesture of deferring the artist's role and responsibility is matched in the exhibitions by an additional gesture of spatial displacement and direct appropriation on the part of the artist. One night, Pratchaya Phinthong dismantled a control tower used to oversee the work of the pickers and sent it to Brétigny where, once again, the responsibility rested with Bal-Blanc to determine its place in the exhibition. The control tower, erected in Brétigny, will resemble a stage set inside of which the multitudes of anonymous workers move like the extras in an epic of invisibility, control, and possession. An epic, recorded in minimal and immaterial form through the images that appear in this report, makes up the third and last work in the exhibition, a website that will exist only in the interval between the two phases of the installation in Brétigny and GAMeC, and will vanish afterward. But, just as with the ink of the text of *2017*, which disappears from sight as it seeps into the architecture, the virtual space of this website will be inscribed in the memory of the Internet as a remnant even after it is no longer available for consultation. There it will remain, like a ghost in the search engines, in the continually rewritten memory of the world. ◇