

## PRATCHAYA PHINTHONG

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by *vivian rehberg*

### PARIS

For his second solo exhibition in Paris, Thai artist Pratchaya Phinthong pursued his quest to materialize things both elusive and ephemeral in three concise new works (all 2009). Sitting on the main gallery floor, *What I learned I no longer know; the little I still know, I guessed* is a square, multicolor patchwork of loosely stacked bricks of Zimbabwean dollars that, from afar, is reminiscent of Minimalist sculpture. To construct this piece Phinthong set up a network of exchange between the Paris gallery and residents of Zimbabwe, to whom he sent 5,000 euros earned from the prior sale of his artworks. In return, over the duration of the show, Phinthong received random denominations of Zimbabwean currency, including single bills that are “worth” trillions of ZWD, a sum rendered meaningless by that nation’s spectacular level of inflation and financial ruin. Gift-giving and mutual trust lie at the heart of this work, whose very existence depends on the goodwill of the senders and reliability of the exchange circuits arranged between the sites.

The effects of time are integral to Phinthong’s process. While the stack of worthless paper accrued status as art week by week, gaining both symbolic and market value, a large circular wall text in the neighboring space, printed with black disappearing ink, faded out of view by the end of the show. Titled *2017*, this increasingly illegible work reproduced an Internet conspiracy theory, which revolves around the man-made collision of molecular particles and the imminent crash of Earth and an unnamed planet the size of the United States and China combined. The text concluded on the hopeful note that Buddha will save us.

In straightforward thematic relationship, four color photographs of small, gleaming fragments of meteorites nestled in dark grass were hung directly opposite the text. Shot from above and centered in the composition, the fragments’ edges demarcate the ground like the borders of uncertain topographies. Cerulean skies with feathery white clouds are crisply reflected in their smooth mirrored surfaces. The unreal clarity of the reflection collapses depth and distance in these powerfully disorienting images, in which the sky seems to have fallen into a very deep hole. Phinthong’s conceptual approach relies on the contemporary leitmotifs (in art as in society) of rumor, loss, secrets, social exchange, bankruptcy and doubt. Like many of his artist peers, Phinthong seems fascinated by enigmas, but he approaches his disparate subjects from a distinctively ethico-poetical stance.

*Photo: Pratchaya Phinthong: What I learned I no longer know; the little I still know, I guessed. 2009, Zimbabwean dollar banknotes, approx. 39 1/4 inches square; at gb agency.*

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