

Putting Pink Man into History: Photography, Art and Politics

By Zhuang Wubin

Let us begin with the most celebratory of quotes on Manit Sriwanichpoom (b. 1961, Bangkok), penned by David Teh, long-time observer of Thai art:

To be a political artist in Thailand—and few fit the description—is to accept confinement to the most dimly lit corners of the public sphere, to crouch and weave amongst the shadows of the so-called three pillars: monarchy, religion and nation. Manit has established an unusual position here: a critic of nationalism and champion of artistic and social causes, yet by no means on the sidelines of public debate.^[1]

Manit is one of the most visible artists in Southeast Asia working predominantly in photography. He marked his entry into the art world with *Pink Man Begins* (1997) and *This Bloodless War* (1997), which coincided with the Asian Financial Crisis (AFC).^[2] Since then, the Pink Man series—performed by artist-poet Sompong Thawee—has undergone different iterations. It is fair to say that the image of Sompong dressed in shocking pink, a colour associated with vulgarity and call girls, trudging his empty trolley in Thailand and across the world has become iconic. In Southeast Asia, I have met very few people interested in the arts who do not recall this iconic trope. In the last two decades, various iterations of the work have received plenty of attention. Influential curator Gridthiya Gawewong (b. 1964, Chiang Rai), for instance, mentions the work in her various writings.^[3] She notes that the Pink Man has “invaded many touristy, commercial and historical spaces”^[4] to express his “alienated nature in the urban context, and sought to criticise economic consumerism, the cause and effect of globalization”.^[5]

After 20 years of trotting the Pink Man across biennales and exhibitions, Manit has planned this finale to end off the series, which provides the impetus to this essay.^[6] Here, I aim to detail Manit’s upbringing, education background, and his working experiences in journalism and advertising, which informed and led to *Pink Man Begins*. This attempt at biography is not a matter of convenience, as his past experiences continue to shape his political outlook.^[7] To conclude this essay, I record Manit’s current views on art and politics amidst the gridlock in Thailand while offering some personal thoughts on the Pink Man series.

Growing Up at On Nut

Manit spent his early life at Prawet, On Nut. Even though his family moved several times, they remained largely within the same vicinity. He recalls:

I was born in the outskirts of Bangkok. At that time, it was still possible to see paddy fields in Bangkok. The city was still green. We had clean water and clean air. When I was a child, my house was by a canal. I would travel to school on little boats.^[8]

This idyllic memory stands in contrast to the difficulties at home. A womaniser and gambler, Manit’s father was seldom around. His mother struggled to look after her six children, as she supported the family by running the grocery store established by Manit’s paternal grandfather

Pink Man on Tour # 2
Amazing culture with no soul, Thailand.
C-print
1998
Manit Sriwanichpoom



This Bloodless War # 2
Gelatin silver print
1997
Manit Sriwanichpoom



My Feet
Gelatin silver print, 16.5 x 22 cm.
1978
Pramuan Burusphat



Eggs, Fish Meats & My Feet
Gelatin silver print
1983
Manit Sriwanichpoom



Whisper #1,
Gelatin silver print
1984-85
Manit Sriwanichpoom

from Swatow, China. After they divorced when he was around 11 or 12, Mani lived with his siblings as a “free boy” with their colourful, loving but often absent father. His earliest memory of photography came during that period when he would sometimes wander playfully into the Chinese studio in his neighbourhood. The image of the Chinese uncle retouching the glass negatives in his darkroom has stayed in Mani’s mind.

Growing up, Mani had a lot of Muslim friends, as they formed the majority in his neighbourhood. The azan calls accompanied his childhood life. He even studied in a primary school established by a Thai Muslim. Mani raises this anecdote to highlight the multicultural environment of his coming-of-age years, perhaps displaying his solidarity with the much-maligned Muslim community in Thailand.^[9] Later on, when he moved, he would befriend another group of schoolmates from the middle and upper-middle classes. Their families had moved to On Nut due to the newly established private housing projects. Even though Mani was already working during his high school years, he also got on well with his more privileged friends. It seems that he had no issue circulating amongst people of different religious and economic backgrounds.

Studying at Prasarnmit

Initially, Mani wanted to study architecture at Chulalongkorn University (CU) but his grades could only qualify for the Faculty of Visual Arts at Srinakharinwirot University (Prasarnmit). As an undergrad in visual arts, he had to learn painting, sculpture, printmaking and graphic design. He also took a course in school, which equipped him with some basic technical skills in photography.

His education at Prasarnmit was crucial for several reasons. There, he met Pramuan Burusphat (b. 1953, Bangkok) who had just completed his MFA in Photography from North Texas State University, Denton. From 1980 to 1982, Pramuan taught art history and printmaking at Prasarnmit, inspiring the likes of future critic Thanom Chapakdee (b. 1958). In truth, it was an awkward fit for Pramuan at Prasarnmit because there was no photography major for him to lead at the university. He would go on to establish the first BFA in Photography when he moved to CU in 1982.

At Prasarnmit, Mani’s connection with Pramuan occurred informally, outside the classroom. Hanging out with Pramuan, Mani would often ask about the arts because it was difficult to find someone as generous and knowledgeable. He also bought his first camera—a Pentax MX—from Pramuan. Paying tribute decades later, Mani notes: “The work of Acharn Pramuan paid attention to the form, the resulting image and the visual effect created. It experimented with putting images together to create a new image. That was what got me interested [in art photography].”^[10]

By then, Mani had developed a healthy reading habit. While he recalls reading the works of Thai writers like Siburapha (Kulap Saipradit; 1905-74, b. Bangkok), Lao Khamhawm (Khamsing Srinawak; b. 1930, Nakhon Ratchasima), Jit Phumisak (1930-66, b. Prachinburi)^[11] and Seni Saowaphong (Sakchai Bamrunghong; 1918-2014, b. Suphan Buri), Mani found himself gravitating towards the translated work of Franz Kafka, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. They spoke to his existential quest as a young man searching for his purpose in life. Similarly, Pramuan’s work, which is largely informed by his personal life, threads the fine line between autobiography and fiction.^[12] These influences left an indelible imprint in Mani’s early photographs, made from 1981 to 1986, which explored the notions of life and

death, body and self.

Other than Pramuan, Mani cites Aree Soothipunt (b. 1930, Ratchaburi) as the other lecturer at Prasarnmit who impacted his work. Armed with a MFA from Indiana University, Aree proposed a questioning attitude towards art, which he used as a counter against the perceived conservatism of the pre-eminent Silpakorn,^[13] Thailand’s first art school established by Italian artist Silpa Bhirasri (1892-1962).^[14] From the vantage of Silpakorn, the Prasarnmit people are probably nothing more than “sour grapes” who cannot make it into the former.^[15] It is fair to say that the Prasarnmit graduates carry a chip on their shoulders. At that time, a significant number of them had come from the provinces. Studying at Prasarnmit brought them to the capitalist heart of Thailand. The socio-economic gap between their families back home and the Bangkok nouveau riche must have been impossible to ignore.^[16] Furthermore, when Mani enrolled in 1980, the imprint of the October 1973 uprising and the 6 October 1976 massacre at Thammasat University was still keenly felt at Prasarnmit.^[17] Students were encouraged to volunteer their time for the people in the countryside.^[18] By then, the activists who went underground after the 1976 massacre had started to return.^[19] Mani casts them in a shining light:

For people my age, these men and women were our heroes. They had dreams. They wanted to better society. They wanted to see equality. These were the great things that the October generation instilled in people of my age. I saw their ideals as a legacy that we needed to uphold and carry forward. So I began to question my own role as well.^[20]

This is why Mani references these historic episodes as the contextual backdrop to *Horror in Pink* (2001), an iteration of the Pink Man series, and *Died on 6th October 1976* (2008). On hindsight, the progressive atmosphere at Prasarnmit germinated Mani’s gradual evolution from the existentialistic slant of his early work to a more socially conscious art practice.

“With my early work, I was just walking inside the room, without trying to open the door,” Mani explains. “When I opened the door, I realised the world is much bigger than myself. I walked through the door to address the bigger issues in life.”^[21]

Advertising Work and Photojournalism

Before graduating from Prasarnmit in 1984, Mani had already developed a burgeoning interest in photojournalism, inspired initially by the photographs of Henri Cartier-Bresson. He was particularly intrigued by those photojournalists who seemed to have the knack for summing up the complexity of each situation in one photograph. He challenged himself to produce similar images on the streets of Bangkok. Some of these images would end up in *Bangkok in Black & White* (1984-99), his first photobook. Upon graduation, Mani worked as a photo assistant at Paul Montri’s advertising studio for half a year. He then worked as a scriptwriter and producer for a TV documentary programme, which gave him the opportunity to visit the rural areas of Thailand. After a year, he returned to advertising as a creative because he wanted to understand the conceptualising process behind the production of advertising spots.

While working at these different places, Mani started sending his photographs to English publications like *Living in Thailand* and *Bangkok Post* to make extra cash. When Dominic Faulder established Bureau Bangkok, Mani joined the photo agency as a full-time contributor. A near-death encounter around 1989 or 1990 in the remote reaches of Aranyaprathet, where



Untitled #5
Gelatin silver print
1983
Manit Sriwanichpoom



Died on 6th October 1976 (Siripong)
Pigment print on paper
2008
Manit Sriwanichpoom

Asiaweek, 19 August 1989
Cover photo 'Khmer Rouge Soldier,
Thai-Cambodia border'
by Manit Sriwanichpoom



A Karen fighter taking a nap.
Eyewitness, Asiaweek 1989
Photo by Manit Sriwanichpoom



Bangkok in Black & White
By Manit Sriwanichpoom
Published in 1999

Asiaweek sent Manit on assignment to uncover the Khmer Rouge (KR) camps, brought an urgent reconsideration of his priorities. He realised that, had the KR soldiers killed him then, nobody would have given a hoot. He would just be collateral damage to the political game and the commercialised ecology of journalism. If he were to sacrifice his life, it would have to be for a cause that he believed passionately. In any case, he did not intend to stay in journalism beyond a certain period of time. He did not dream of winning the Pulitzer or the World Press Photo. After a year at the agency, Manit left to set up his commercial photography business.

“In journalism, we tend to wait for things to happen, to run after the issues. This is not what I want,” Manit adds. “I want to be someone who puts forth the issues. That’s why I work in art, which allows me to express my thoughts.”^[22]

Riding the Boom and *Pink Man Begins*

From the mid-1980s leading up to the AFC, Thailand enjoyed spectacular economic growth. Like most people in Bangkok, Manit rode the high tide of opportunities. There was a lot of money to be made, which compelled everyone to work crazy hours, lured by the illusion that they could retire when they hit their 40s. With more money to spend, there were increased temptations for people to squander their earnings. An internal conflict started brewing within Manit. He had just started his business and bought his house. There were bills to pay, deadlines to meet. He wanted to make art but could not turn down the money in commissioned work. He felt angry and trapped. As a distraction, Manit continued to prowl the streets of Bangkok to take photographs. By then, his reference had shifted from Cartier-Bresson to Robert Frank’s apocalyptic vision of America. Inevitably, Manit’s frustrations seeped into *Bangkok in Black & White*.

“Basically, I just photographed things that attracted my attention. Sometimes, when you walked on the streets, you would bump into an elephant, as though it had appeared out of nowhere!” adds Manit. “If you live in this city, it is hard not to be alienated by your surroundings.”^[23]

Bangkok in Black & White is Manit’s diary and sketchbook, from which we can map his concerns and obsessions. They recur as tropes in his different projects. For instance, the wooden cut-outs of Thai people in traditional and modern costumes, placed at tourist sites for visitors to pose and take pictures, recur as a motif in the photograph that opens the *Bangkok in Black & White* photobook and in one of the images from *Pink Man on Tour: Thailand* (1997-98), symbolising the hollowed commodity of Thainess.

In the early 90s, Manit started helping out at Saeng Arun Art Centre, a theatre and performing arts venue in Bangkok.^[24] He became a founding member of the Ukkabat group, which included Sompong Thawee, Thanom Chapakdee, Vasana Sithiket (b. 1957, Nakhon Sawan) and Paisan Plienbangchang (1961-2015, b. Bangkok), amongst others. The group organised happenings and public art events of a political slant. By then, Manit was already acquainted with the possibility of incorporating the performative in his work. After all, he did take the very rare step of putting his visage in front of the camera for *Self-Portrait #2* (1981), created when he was still at Prasarnmit, possibly referencing Pramuan Burusphat’s art making trajectory.

In *Pink Man Begins*, Manit did not set out with the deliberate intent to stage his work.

Instead, he references the site-specific intervention of artist-writer Niwat Kongpien (b. 1946) who, in the early 80s, made a series of photographs featuring a red chair placed at different public locations. In this sense, we may think of the Pink Man as Manit’s intervention in public and historical spaces. The idea of collaborating with Sompong came naturally. He was already familiar with Sompong’s performance art practice, through which Manit could sense the anger within his collaborator.

“I never thought of performing the work myself,” says Manit. “I’m quite shy. I am used to the position of the photojournalist. I prefer to be behind the camera, like an observer.”^[25]

Art and Politics

Since the demonstrations in early 2006 calling for the resignation of Thaksin Shinawatra, Manit’s work has become more literal, reactive and hard-hitting. As a result, the scope for offering multiple readings to each project has also narrowed.^[26] There are exceptions as well. In *Waiting for the King* (2006), Manit photographed the people who turned up at the Royal Ground to greet Rama IX (r. 1946-2016) during his birthday. They appear bored, bemused, ambivalent, even irritated (perhaps at Manit’s camera) in his photographs, which, on one level, reveal the king’s enduring allure on the Thai psyche. David Teh puns the title of the work to pick out the “political resonance of Manit’s portraits: waiting for a revered but ailing monarch *to pass*, these faces testify to a collective dread that quietly structures public discourse in Thailand, but leaves few traces on any visible surface”.^[27]



Waiting for the King
(sitting),
part of 13 prints
Gelatin silver print
2006
Manit Sriwanichpoom

Justifying the function of his art making, Manit notes: “As I become more established, I should express my concerns to the society. If I can benefit the public, I should use the opportunity. Or else, why do I need the fame? When you are younger, you are not smart or rounded enough. As I get older, I have to do something.”^[28]

In terms of the connection between art and politics, Manit believes that politics has to be conveyed through art, whereas it is possible for art (in the indulgent mode of art for art’s sake, for instance) to have no relationship to activism. Art, in this sense, refers to anything from writing and singing to oratory performance and photography.

“Politics is an idea. The idea cannot manifest itself. It is like air. You need art to clothe the idea, so that people can see it,” Manit elaborates. “Activism cannot activate without art.”^[29]

Nevertheless, he concedes that the criteria for evaluating art are not entirely the same as the criteria for evaluating activism. Within the context of activism, the functional value of a body of work—its ability to convey the message—becomes paramount. In his own practice though, he sees no point in separating art and politics.^[30] I believe this can become problematic

Which way to go?
Gelatin silver print
1994
Manit Sriwanichpoom



Soulless
Gelatin silver print
1999
Manit Sriwanichpoom



Self-portrait #2
Gelatin silver print
1981
Manit Sriwanichpoom



Pink Man Begins II # 02
C-print
1997
Manit Sriwanichpoom

Tuesday 2 July 2002
: Oppressed by globalization
(From 'Protest' series 2002-2003)
Gelatin silver print
Manit Sriwanichpoom



A sketch of Horror in Pink #1
2001
Manit Sriwanichpoom

because it allows the artist two different ways to deflect criticism against his work. If the work is deemed to be not “artistic” enough, he can claim that it is made largely for activism. If the work is deemed to be not “political” enough, he can claim that it is made largely for artistic expression.

Broadly speaking, Manit does not align his politics with any ideology. His fight, Manit reiterates, is for the basic principles of democracy, justice and equality. He feels that his politics has not changed over the years. It is the political situation that has evolved, which means he has to constantly *react* to it. Given his virulent criticism against Thaksin Shinawatra today, it may be surprising to know that when the self-made businessman decided to enter politics through the Palang Dharma Party in the early 90s, Manit was tasked to photograph the future Prime Minister, to craft his public image into the kind of politician whom he had hoped for. Despite the apparent U-turn, Manit feels that he has remained consistent, via his longstanding belief in working with different people. At that time, Thaksin was seen as different from the typical politicians who enjoyed entrenched relationships with the military and the palace. In this sense, Manit does not profess to speak for any particular group of people. He speaks for people with similar experiences to himself, not just for the poor. He explains:

When I was a student, I used to have that idea. I can't fake it now. Look at how I live. How can I say I'm fighting for the poor when my life is totally different from them? I don't want to be hypocritical. In *Protest* (2002-03), for instance, the fight is against injustice, and not solely for the poor. Even if you are poor, if the justice system functions properly, you will not need to suffer. It will serve everyone equally. As an individual you can of course choose to work for the poor. But you cannot think that, just because you work for the poor, you are better than others. I think this is more arrogant.[31]

Putting Pink Man into History

At the onset of the Pink Man series, there were still people optimistic about globalisation. Today, as Manit lowers the curtain on the work, there are visible elements across the world agitating against globalisation.[32] Meanwhile, the shoppers from far and near who continue to throng CentralWorld and Siam Paragon in Bangkok suggest that, as a reaction against consumerism, the Pink Man has been fighting a losing battle.

Without naming Manit directly, art historian John Clark notes that in nearly every Asian country, there are contemporary artists who churn out iconographies of anti-consumerism.[33] In Thailand and China, there is little interest to go beyond that, to examine, for instance, the plight of the urban poor. Clark suggests that this is “unlikely just to be due to political sensitivity, but also to the career investment of contemporary artists in the very urban spectacles they might otherwise have looked behind or tried to overturn”. [34] His reasoning may be read as an indirect critique of Manit's Pink Man series, although Clark's assumption that art can *overturn* economic forces is analogous to the claim that photography, in itself, can change the world.

But the greatest U-turn comes from David Teh who, a mere three years after penning the celebratory quote that opens this essay, returns to castigate Manit's Pink Man series (alongside the works of Vasan, Chatchai Puipia and Sutee Kunavichayanont) as “pretend critique, a form of self-exoticisation long since recuperated by both the market and the state”. [35] In other words, for a body of work to perform a critical function, it should be untouched by the market and the state. Teh's valorisation of an artist's independence can be extrapolated as

a criticism against the political artists in Southeast Asia who are not averse to working with commercial galleries or representing their countries in exhibitions. In any case, I think it is always tricky to make a moralistic judgement of any artist based on a body of work that she or he produces, without considering the person's biography and experiences outside of art making.[36] In fact, the correlation between the progressiveness of an artist's work and her or his personal politics is, at best, tenuous.[37]

It is clear that Manit's experiences in photojournalism and advertising, which favour images that generate immediate impact, have informed his Pink Man series. His tendency to react passionately against specific issues compels him to make art that is *raeng*—intense, extreme, strong and with connotations of violence.[38] This explains why the Pink Man has become such an icon, an indication of Manit's virtuosity in making an impression and evoking a reaction from his audience. However, this does not guarantee that they will prod deeper into the varying issues that he hopes to address through the different iterations of the Pink Man series, which concern the wanton consumption in Thailand (and Beijing), the post September 11 world and Thaksin's neo-nationalism, amongst others.[39] It is problematic to assume that an iconic work can unpack these issues with criticality. This is aggravated by the fact that Pink Man has traversed so many social, political and cultural contexts that, in a way, it has become a de-contextualised caricature.

Nevertheless, I believe Manit operates from a genuine intention to speak against the ills of society. He is compromised due to the elusiveness of photography, in that it is virtually impossible to affix the medium to a certain politics. In the case of *Horror in Pink*, for instance, Manit's desire for impactful visuals to compel his Thai audience not to forget the legacy of the October generation raises the ethical dilemma of reproducing the violence captured in the journalistic photographs of historical events, into which Sompong is digitally inserted. While clearly sympathetic to Manit's cause, sociologist Sudarat Musikawong does not believe that the work is redemptive to anyone, in the sense of allowing the victims, perpetrators and bystanders to come to terms with the trauma of the 1976 massacre.[40] In this sense, “trauma art guarantees neither a politics of liberation nor a reconstitution of the victims' dignity”. [41]

Returning to Clark's dismissal of artists who manufacture iconographies of anti-consumerism, it is clear that Manit felt impassioned enough to react against the issue. While he has gained considerable fame over the last two decades, the tangible outcome of his work, in terms of pushing back consumerism, is indeed limited. Beyond the shelter of academia, this should hardly be surprising. Consumerism is very much a temptation of life, Manit adds. How are you going to fight against that kind of temptation?[42] Nevertheless, he returns to the Pink Man time and again because he does not want to see his homeland become a fat man in a pink suit.[43] Other than that, there is little that he can do.

Zhuang Wubin

Zhuang Wubin (b 1978, Singapore) is a writer, curator and artist. As a writer/curator, Zhuang focuses on the photographic practices of Southeast Asia and Hong Kong. He uses the medium as a prism to explore the following trajectories: photography and Chineseness, periodicals and photobooks as sites of historiography, and photography's entanglements with nationalism and the Cold War. Published by NUS Press, *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey* (2016) is his fourth book. As an artist, Zhuang uses photography and text to visualise the experiences of negotiating Chineseness in Southeast Asia.

<https://zwubin.wordpress.com/>



Horror in Pink #5
(6 October 1976
Rightwing fanatics' massacre
of democracy protesters)
C-print
2001
Manit Sriwanichpoom

NOTES

[1] David Teh, “Model and Medium”, in *Masters*, exh. cat. (Bangkok / Sydney: Kathmandu Photo Gallery / Chalk House, 2009), unpaginated.

[2] See David Teh, “Travelling Without Moving: Historicising Thai Contemporary Art”, *Third Text* 26, no. 5 (September 2012): 574, doi:10.1080/09528822.2012.712773, who notes that the decade from the mid-1990s to around 2004 coincided with Southeast Asian art’s arrival on the international [read: Euro-American] stage. Thai curator Apinan Poshyananda (b. 1956, Bangkok) played a significant role in this regard, mounting the landmark *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions / Tensions* exhibition in 1996. It is clear that Manit Sriwanichpoom’s career benefited from this burgeoning interest in art from the region.

[3] See, for instance, Gridthiya Gaweewong, “On Thai Artists and an Issue of Cultural Identity”, in *On Cultural Influence: Collected Papers from Apexart International Conferences 1999-2006*, ed. Steven Rand and Heather Kouris (New York: Apexart, 2006), 130.

[4] Gridthiya Gaweewong, *Story of the “I”*, exh. cat. (Bangkok: Thunkamol Publishing House, 2002), 8.

[5] Gridthiya Gaweewong, “Bangkok, Bangkok”, in *Bangkok, Bangkok*, exh. cat. (Barcelona: Institut de Cultura de Barcelona, 2004), 52.

[6] Elsewhere, I have already detailed Manit Sriwanichpoom’s art-making practice. See Zhuang Wubin, *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey* (NUS Press, 2016), 156-163.

[7] Expressing his astonishment that some of the progressive Thai student activists of the 1970s had joined the conservative parties by the 1990s, Benedict Anderson made this almost innocuous point: “Perhaps I would have been less surprised by all of this if early on I had thought to look at some of the male activists’ choices in girlfriends and wives.” Reviewing their collective experiences since the 1970s, Anderson would go on to explain why these former activists chose to collude with Thaksin Shinawatra. Anderson’s recourse to biography is neither a matter of convenience. It reinstates the importance of unpacking a person’s experiences and affinities in any critical work. We should also do this for the “progressives”. See Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, “Introduction to *In the Mirror*”, in *Exploration and Irony in Studies of Siam over Forty Years* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2014), 97-98.

[8] Manit Sriwanichpoom, interview by author, Bangkok, Thailand, February 2007.

[9] Years later, Manit Sriwanichpoom served as cinematographer and one of the producers in *Citizen Juling* (released 2008), a documentary film made by his partner Ing K, which touches on the litany of injustice that has, for decades, plagued southern Thailand—home to longstanding Muslim communities. I will like to thank Waew Kasamaponn for urging me to make a clearer connection between Manit’s formative experiences and his art making.

[10] Amitha Amranand, “Flying in the Face of Complacency”, *Bangkok Post*, January 25, 2007, sec. Outlook, 1.

[11] Jit Phumisak was a Marxist activist who published the influential *Art for Life, Art for the People* in 1957, inaugurating the Art for Life movement, which touched literature, music and the visual arts. When asked if he still believes in Art for Life, Manit Sriwanichpoom qualifies that *life* for the left connotes the experiences of the poor. He prefers a broader

definition of life, which can refer to anyone in society. Manit Sriwanichpoom, interview by author, Bangkok, Thailand, February 9, 2017.

[12] See Zhuang Wubin, “*Destination: Still Unknown*”, in *Destination: Still Unknown*, exh. cat. (Bangkok: Kathmandu Photo Gallery, 2017), 11-21, for an analysis of Pramuan Burusphat’s art making trajectory.

[13] Sriwanichpoom, February 9, 2017.

[14] See John Clark, *Asian Modernities: Chinese and Thai Art Compared, 1980 to 1999* (New South Wales: Power Publications, 2010), 117, 121, 126-129, 131-133, 149, for an overview of Silpakorn’s dominance in the Thai art world.

[15] Sriwanichpoom, February 9, 2017.

[16] In the 1960s, within the context of American aid and anti-communism, there was a massive expansion of tertiary education in Thailand, which brought capable and ambitious students from the provinces into the capital city. Ironically, their experiences in Bangkok compelled some of them to respond in a progressive manner through the writing of fiction. Nevertheless, they were painfully aware that the political forces that benefitted their progression (through education) along the social ladder were the same ones that continued to exploit the people and environment of their hometowns. See Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, introduction to *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era*, ed. and trans. Benedict R. O’G. Anderson and Ruchira Mendiones (Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1985), 9-87.

[17] For a historicisation of the traumatic episodes in Thai history, see Thongchai Winichakul, “Remembering / Silencing the Traumatic Past: The Ambivalent Memories of the October 1976 Massacre in Bangkok”, in *Cultural Crisis and Social Memory: Modernity and Identity in Thailand and Laos*, ed. Shigeharu Tanabe and Charles F. Keyes (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 243-283.

[18] The activists who had joined the underground resistance in the jungles or fled overseas after the brutal suppression in 1976 started returning to Thai civic life after 1979. They included artists who returned to work in less prestigious institutions like Prasarnmit, where they tried to instill some social conscience amongst their students. See John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1998), 162.

[19] See Anderson, “*In the Mirror*”, 93-94, for a quick recap of the reasons for the activists’ return from the underground. See also Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, “Radicalism After Communism in Thailand and Indonesia”, in *Exploration and Irony*, 120-122.

[20] Amranand, “Face of Complacency”, 1.

[21] Sriwanichpoom, February 9, 2017.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Sriwanichpoom, February 2007.

[24] During the 90s, Manit Sriwanichpoom was also commissioned to photograph the artworks for the landmark *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions / Tensions* exhibition, bringing him in contact with some of the leading artists from the region.

[25] Sriwanichpoom, February 9, 2017.

[26] Zhuang, *Photography in Southeast Asia*, 161.

[27] Teh, “Travelling Without Moving”, 580.

[28] Manit Sriwanichpoom, interview by author, Bangkok, Thailand, February 2009.

[29] Sriwanichpoom, February 9, 2017.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Clark, *Asian Modernities*, 147.

[34] Ibid., 255. If his framing of art is expanded to include documentary photography, John Clark will be able to find works that explore the condition of the urban disenfranchised.

[35] Teh, “Travelling Without Moving”, 582. See also David Teh, *Thai Art: Currencies of the Contemporary* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 116-117, who writes: “Manit’s celebrated ‘Pink Man’ photographic series, also begun in 1997, depicted the eponymous Thai shopper pushing his trolley blithely from downtown Bangkok to the temples of Bali, and even to Europe and China. Yet this po-faced antihero could never stand for anything but the stereotypical, bourgeois Bangkokian, and at the project’s critical zenith—the ‘Pink, White and Blue’ series of 2005—he is back home posing in a Thai classroom, flanked by flag-waving Boy Scouts. However well their critiques might have traveled, these artists [including Vasan Sitthiket and Sutee Kunavichayanont] never got far from their urban middle-class moorings. Even as they rebuked the official aestheticization of Thainess for its hypocrisy, their ironic subversions drew heavily on the same symbolism, especially the three ‘pillars’ of nation, religion, and monarchy, yielding legibly ‘Thai’ and ‘contemporary’ products for an expanding global exhibition circuit—critical, but still exotic.” If Manit (the urban middle-class artist) chooses not to subvert the “stereotypical, bourgeois Bangkokian” but to speak on behalf of the labouring class, for instance, one wonders if Teh would resist in calling him hypocritical, on top of his observation of being exotic.

[36] If an artist’s biography and experiences outside of art making have indeed shaped a writer’s judgement, it is only fair for the latter to be explicit about it.

[37] See Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 415-416, in which the cognitive scientist writes: “The conviction that artists and connoisseurs are morally advanced is a cognitive illusion, arising from the fact that our circuitry for morality is cross-wired with our circuitry for status.... The moral and political track record of modernist artists is nothing to be proud of. Some were despicable in the conduct of their personal lives, and many embraced fascism or Stalinism.”

[38] Ing K, “Poses From Dreamland”, in *Manit Sriwanichpoom: Phenomena and Prophecies*, exh. cat. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2010), 19.

[39] See Manit Sriwanichpoom and Ing K, “Manit Sriwanichpoom in Pink, White & Blue”, in *Neo-Nationalism*, exh. cat. (Bangkok: The Art Center, Chulalongkorn University, 2005), 75-77, in which Manit explains his views on nationalism. First, he believes that it is “self-contradictory to have nationalism and democracy simultaneously” because the rights and freedom of expression guaranteed under democracy (and constrained by a sense of responsibility for other people) cannot protect a person who wishes to discuss or criticise things that remain taboo in Thai society. He continues: “The thing with

nationalistic concepts is that part of it is the [natural and sincere] love and proprietary feelings for one’s community, for one’s homeland, where one was born, for one’s own culture. This fundamental love is understandable [and natural]. But the conspiracy to transform that love into a tool to ravage and destroy people who think differently from you; to destroy political rivals—I wonder who first invented that in our country; where did our rulers get these ideas?” As a solution, Manit proposes: “History must look for heroes among the common people.... We need heroes who are not kings.” Reiterating his love for the land of his birth, Manit says: “What I’m satirising [in my art] is the conspiracy to mythologise the nation state.... In the end, I wish we would stop thinking only of our own nation. I’d like us to think in terms of the whole of humanity, to love and sympathise with our fellowmen, to realise that they feel love and pain just as we do.... As soon as the concept of nationhood enters into it, we divide into Us and Them; immediately you have enemies. Because nationalism cannot exist without enemies.” I will like to thank Vipash Purichanont for directing me to the *Neo-Nationalism* exhibition catalogue, from which these quotes are cited. For a delineation of the nationalisms in Thailand, especially the nationalism of the (former) progressives, see Thongchai Winichakul, “Nationalism and the Radical Intelligentsia in Thailand”, *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (2008): 583-589, doi:10.1080/01436590801931520.

[40] Sudarat Musikawong, “Art for October: Thai Cold War State Violence in Trauma Art”, *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 43, doi:10.1215/10679847-2009-023.

[41] Ibid., 22.

[42] Sriwanichpoom, February 2007.

[43] Sriwanichpoom and K, “Manit Sriwanichpoom”, 77.