

“One Year Project #2” *artUS* issue 22, Spring, 2008 pp. 48-9.

the land foundation, Chiangmai THAILAND October 1, 2007 * September 30, 2008

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Thai co-founders Kamin Lertchaiprasert and Rirkrit Tiravanija consider the land (a more direct translation would be "the rice field"), a working farm that doubles as an intermittent, kibbutzlike art camp, 30 kilometers southwest of Chiang Mai, a public space. Unlike Denmark's collaborative team N55, whose signature geodesic cairns demarcate private spots as public-use lands, the land depends on public will to keep it afloat, so its wellbeing is a barometer of public engagement. So far, the land welcomes curious passersby to visit whenever they wish and encourages them to stay as long as they dare. Seventeen artists are currently in residence as part of "One Year Project #2." Designed to thwart society's focus on purchasing power, this yearlong retreat emphasizes sustainable artistic practices by encouraging criticality and exchange, teaching natural farming techniques, and enhancing self-knowledge via Vipassana meditation. Not surprisingly, their first assignment called for "site development," a three-week process that indubitably entailed repairs and clearing back nature. The day I visited, there were no artists in sight, since they were practicing meditation at Chiangmai's Doi Ton Temple, according to the One Year Project #2 Schedule handout.

The land is best known as the place where artists Angkrit Ajchariyasophon, Kamin Lertchaiprasert, Philippe Parreno/ Francois Roche, Tobias Rehberger, Superflex, Tiravanija, and Carl Michael Von Hausswolf have all built and/or designed semi-permanent structures. I say semi-permanent only because northern Thailand's hot, muggy weather is brutal, capable of melting and/or warping the kinds of structures most artists can afford to build on their own dime. Entirely entropic, the land is in a constant process of decay. Even so, the land offers a special spiritual sense, a place where time is visible--time-full rather than timeless. While the tattered look of several buildings leads you to envision their prior glory, one can't help but imagine delicious communal dinners, given the open-air kitchen, healthy vegetable gardens, and twin rice fields, around which the buildings are sited. While touring the grounds with long-term inhabitant Tom, I climbed up into the stilted houses, and scooted across some rather scary, flimsy bamboo bridges, and tasted lettuce, green beans, teensy chilies, and cherry tomatoes straight off the vine.

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I first heard about the land in 2001 when collectors Andy and Karen Stillpass visited, only to be reminded again when Art-forum dedicated its Summer 2005 issue to art and land. Artists Michael Barton Miller and Tera Galanti's tales of multiple pilgrimages there further piqued my curiosity. Once I began work on the exhibition "Green Acres: Artists Farming Fields, Greenhouses, and Abandoned Lots" (due to open in Summer 2009 at the Abington Art Center, Jenkintown PA), the land became a must-see destination. Minutes after my arrival, I found myself leafing through *Nothing*, the catalogue for Lertchaiprasert and Tiravanija's 2004 two-person retrospective at Chiangmai University Gallery. Since "nothing comes from nothing" (*ex nihilo nihil fit*) as the Oracle of Delphi's other slogan goes, titling an art exhibition "Nothing" seems inconceivable. I could imagine, however, that these two artist-farmers had had plenty of time to consider how much can come from scant resources, which is what the land incidentally demonstrates. One arrives there not knowing exactly what to expect, yet one finds plenty to explore and

even leaves with a mental list of possible projects that one ought to undertake to improve the place. A totally open-ended situation, whoever will drop by, stay, or return is entirely unpredictable. The land's endless potential was echoed by Nothing essayist Karen Demavivas, who describes the land as striving to become a micro-utopia of conscious daily acts that "propagate an equanimous life in the present for the betterment of a community, and more broadly, society." While it would be difficult to evaluate a community's betterment, visitors can't help but leave changed, even if they visited for only two hours, as I did. Finding oneself in the middle of nowhere, one has no choice but to focus on one's surroundings. It's up to each visitor to transform nothing into something, to view the work as the show. There is never really nothing, though we often lack the presence of mind to appreciate something as wonderful.

Los Angeles gallerist Brian Butler recently remarked to me at Art Basel Miami Beach that the land is a beautiful failure. It's rather difficult to pinpoint the exact failure Butler had in mind. The land fails to produce enough food to feed its occupants, yet no one goes hungry. Exemplary of entropy's pull, this site requires tons of maintenance. Facilities, like composting toilets or bicycle-pumped running water, break down. These are rather real-world situations, hardly exemplary of failure. Public art, like public works, is in constant need of attention. Maintenance is part and parcel with habitation. But the great thing is that so far the land has no problem attracting artist-residents, who feel committed to sustaining this remarkable site.

By chance, my visit to the land coincided with the beloved Thai king's eightieth birthday celebration and his diamond jubilee (60-year reign). An article in Sawasdee, Thai Air's in-flight magazine, described their king's great contributions, inadvertently linking the land to a larger political policy. Early on in his reign, the king called for self-sufficiency, cultural preservation, and environmental protection. He similarly cautioned Thais not to rush into modernity's superficial trappings. "It is not important to be an economic tiger. It is, however, important to have a self-sufficient economy, which means being self-reliant. This self-sufficiency does not mean that every household has to provide its own food or weave its own clothing. That will be too far-fetched. But in a community or a district there must be a certain degree of self-reliance." Eager to ensure his subjects' self-reliance, the king apparently focused on rural development, healthcare for agricultural workers, irrigation, reforestation, education, the revival of local cultural traditions, and even earned a patent for seeding clouds to battle drought. It's truly wild how closely the king's values parallel those discussed in one year project ..., the land's first catalogue. So long as the land remains self-reliant (not necessarily self-sufficient), yet also depends upon its community for support, the land is a success. What makes the land remarkable is the tension between its natural needs (clearing, planting, harvesting, maintenance, feeding animals) and their fulfillment. Were its needs satisfied by its actual owners, the land would be like any another parcel of private property. Satisfied by transient residents, the land remains a test and testimony of public will.

With the land, there is no work (no complementary objects) aside from the show (the physical space). In a profound sense, here the work is the show. But how many people are ever going to visit Thailand to see it? They are likely to go to Bangkok, but not make the extra \$100 trek to Sanpatong. Kamin and Rirkrit are of the view that there is only one objective level in art, so there's no reason to exhibit photo-documents, videos, or related products. To see this show, I recommend your taking the time to visit the place. But if you can't manage to get there, you can still appreciate the beauty of it. Like all art, its beauty lies in its dependence on the generosity of complete strangers.

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