**The Perils of Utopia: Sakarin Krue-on's Terraced Rice Fields Project**
By David Teh

## Preface[1]

In 2007, the Thai artist Sakarin Krue-on attempted to construct terraced rice paddies in front of Schloss Willemshohe in Kassel, Germany, for the exhibition Documenta XII. One of the major events on the international contemporary art calendar, Documenta happens every five years and is known for showcasing critical and conceptual art from around the world. Set up by artist and curator Arnold Bode in 1955, it emerged from Germany's post-war soul-searching, its founding premise "to reconcile German public life with international modernity and confront it with its own failed Enlightenment."[2] Its geographical scope has since broadened, as contemporary art reached out from its Euro-American centres in the 1990s. The last Documenta (XI), under Nigerian-born curator Okwui Enwezor, was a major watershed in this process.

Sakarin was the first Thai artist to exhibit at Documenta. His *Terraced Rice Fields* project invoked notions of communal labour and traditional farming techniques. Working with a team of Thai and European volunteers, the artist effected a major physical transformation of a hillside in Kassel's Bergpark, once the botanic garden of Landgrave Wilhelm IX. But the project's failures yielded more interesting results. The irrigation system failed, leading to a set of formal changes and compromises, but also to a kind of accidental archaeology of the site, revealing aspects of its wartime history. Over the German summer, the terraces produced only a handful of rice. However, these grains were brought back to Thailand and re-sewn on a plot in Ratchaburi Province, west of Bangkok. For the project's homecoming, a second crop was then sewn in a temporary paddy at Ardel Gallery of Modern Art in the suburbs of the capital, as part of an agro-educational workshop for children.

In responding to the project, I would prefer to register some of my reservations about it, rather than add to the chorus of voices, both curatorial and critical, that judged it (fairly, I think) to be a valuable experiment. The following critique addresses the *context* of the work – the way this and other such projects are framed and received, in Thailand and abroad – more than the work itself.

## The Perils of Utopia: Sakarin Krue-on's *Terraced Rice Fields* Project

If Sakarin Krue-on's *Terraced Rice Fields* make a beautiful image, it is beautiful as an image of failure. The artist's ambition and the work's sheer scale are admirable in themselves. But what will make this image endure is the enduring impossibility of what it tries to achieve. I'm referring not to the failure of the terraces or the crop, but to a failure of communication, of translation. In these leaking paddies – their tropical density seeping through Germany's inadequately compacted past, dissolving it, destabilising the terrain on which its reconstruction stands – here lies an image of the impossibility of cultural and philosophical cross-fertilisation, the difficulty of transplanting an idea or a way of life from one historical reality to another. It is perhaps only natural, then, that what we glean from such an exercise should yield two stories, not one.

My own visit to Kassel also ended in failure. Having seen the bulk of Documenta XII over two busy days, I set off to see Sakarin's rice fields on my way back to the airport (some hours drive away in Frankfurt). Alas, I got lost on the edge of town and with the shadows lengthening, had to abort the mission in order to catch my flight. So I never actually saw the artwork in question. I did, however, edit the English texts in the catalogue produced for the Bangkok

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[1] This text began as a 'critic's talk' held at Tang Contemporary Art, Bangkok, in February 2008. I wish to thank Sakarin Krue-on, Josef Ng of Tang Contemporary Art and Thavorn Ko-udomvit of Ardel Gallery of Modern Art, for inviting me to reflect on this thought-provoking project. An early draft of this text appeared in English in the expat literary zine *Lizard*, No.2 (Bangkok, 2008).

[2] www.documenta.de

exhibition, and so became familiar with how it unfolded, and how it was framed.[3] And it is this framing that I wish to complicate.

**National Culture, Dodging History**

At a recent symposium at the Goethe Institute, Apinan Poshyananda, head of the Culture Ministry's Office of Contemporary Art and Culture (OCAC), made some provocative comparisons between Thai and German history, with respect to the nexus of art and politics. Perhaps Apinan – once one of Asia's most esteemed curators – is tired of defending himself, having donned the official mantle three years ago, and had so resolved to go on the offensive. His slideshow included a catalogue of critical, political artworks that had been exhibited in Thai official contexts. It was designed to contradict the image, popular amongst commentators on Thai art, of state propriety as a force of conservatism, chauvinism and mediocrity. He went on to remind the audience that the new centre of the contemporary art world – Berlin – was not too long ago the centre of fascism, a place where books were burned and from which artists had fled in droves. His tone was sanguine, rather than taunting, but in the cool, diplomatic airspace of the Goethe Institute, his powerpoint images of Hitler and Nuremberg were gratuitous.

I sympathised with Apinan's co-panellist, Ursula Zeller, an art historian from the German Foreign Affairs Ministry, who did not quite see the point of Apinan's comparison, and dodged it. With a brave face, she went ahead and paraded the credentials of the German arts bureaucracy, principally, a professional independence and immunity from political interference that are, whether exaggerated or not, wholly unthinkable in Thailand – indeed, probably not even aspired to – and that will remain unthinkable for years to come. Perhaps it was this comparison that Apinan wished to pre-empt. We were not to know, as his schedule prevented him from staying for Zeller's presentation and the following Q&A. The afternoon's session ended incoherent and very much unresolved; a kind of disarticulation hung in the air.

When asked what made Berlin the centre of today's art world, Zeller had replied that it was nothing to do with government policy but a matter of market economics: space – to live, work and exhibit – was cheap and plentiful. She adverted to the fundamental material conditions of production and labour. And it is as an intervention in the conditions of production, I think, that Sakarin's Documenta project should primarily be seen, an intervention not in the materiality of agricultural work, but in the materiality of *artistic* work which is, contrary to popular wisdom, also real work with real economic constraints and real systems of exploitation. Zeller's response to the question was well founded. But its side effect was to occlude further the discussion of state arts policy. She deflected the focus away from the state's responsibility for how contemporary culture is produced, consumed and exported, a business in which Germany's government has been engaged a lot more deeply, and for much longer, than Thailand's.

This is a vital discussion if Thai art is to be advanced and promoted via platforms like Documenta. And indeed, in the context of Documenta, Apinan's point would have been well made, and worth emphasizing. For this Mecca for critical art and discourse arises out of, and invokes, a failure of public conscience. All the participants – including the state – are mindful that the terrain carries historical baggage, some shards of which it coughed up in the process of Sakarin's troubled landscaping effort.

Amongst artists, one sometimes gets the feeling that OCAC is excused, its nationalist pretensions tolerated, because its very existence promises such an improvement on the chauvinist and backward-looking cultural bureaucracy of the past. As usual, past deeds, being distasteful, are ignored for the sake of a smoother present. But the reactionary state is still with us, or at any rate *undead*. Of the artists determined to rattle its skeletons, to confront its history, Vasan Sitthiket and Manit Sriwanichpoom are amongst the noisiest, while Sutee Kunavichayanont takes a gentler approach with his sardonic appropriations of national cultural signage. We would *not* count Sakarin amongst them, though he clearly shares their anti-consumerist posture. Sakarin's is a very different *modus operandi*. It proceeds from a sincere, non-confrontational engagement with traditional aesthetics, through high culture (Sakarin is head

[3] *Ripe Project: Village and Harvest Time*, bilingual exhibition catalogue (Bangkok: Ardel Gallery of Modern Art and Tang Contemporary Art, 2008).

of Silpakorn University's Thai Art Department), popular culture and folk spirituality. This background is important for our reading of *Terraced Rice Fields*: agriculture appears here not primarily as nature, but as *culture*, and traditional culture at that. Its putative connection to national imagery could thus take several vectors.

**Unstable Fields**

The rice field – and the imagery of natural bounty to which it is central – has an ancient political resonance across Southeast Asia, as the source of a community's wealth and sustenance. It has thus been intimately associated with power and kingship, in both traditional iconographies and those of modern nation states. In Siamese cultural history, it appears across all artistic media, going back at least as far as the Sukhothai period, to the controversial 13th Century inscription of King Ramkamhaeng with its oft-cited allusions to natural bounty ("There are fish in the water and rice in the fields"). Some anthropologists even suggest that wet rice cultivation, beyond being a trait shared by all Tai peoples before the intensive settlement of the great river deltas, may even have played a role in *defining* Tai ethnicity in the first place[4], a contention hardly undermined by the use of this imagery after the formation of the state.

This image became conflicted terrain when, as in neighbouring countries, it was invested by communism after the Second World War, and from time to time by the Thai intelligentsia. A glance at some well-known films will be revealing. At the climax of *The Ugly American* (1963), made under the heady influence of the US military gift economy, loyalist (US-backed) troops are shot in the back, by unseen insurgent gunmen, as they flee across the paddies. This is by no means the most naïve of propaganda films, and the rice field is a curiously ambivalent *topos* for Cold War conflict, a site of both exposure and disappearance, a geography of ambush. In both jungle and city, danger is everywhere, but everywhere unseen. When cover is broken, when one is flushed out, it is across the rice paddies (cultivated Thailand, *muang thai* proper) that the brutal reality of conflict can be brought into relief. But it is also the paddy that absorbs the terror of the falling corpse, almost swallowing it.

In 1975's *Tong Pan* the field is reframed by the encroachments of modernisation and development. Giant electricity poles loom overhead, but there are no longer any fish in the streams, nor water in the paddies, as a great dam has interrupted nature's flows. As Tong Pan and his wife toil in the mud, sluicing water over a low bund, they are passed by a caravan of refugees fleeing the state's heedless environmental footprint. In both films, the paddy is the very stage of modernity: rural idyll interrupted by progress (war, or economic development). This unstable terrain was contestable in a way that it seems not to be today, since development has been redeemed – and the rice field recuperated – by the monarchy, most recently under the umbrella of the 'sustainability economy'.[5]

Despite this wealth of imagery, the ideology guiding the Siamese state has not been agrarian for centuries. It is mercantilist, a matter put beyond doubt by its long struggle with, and eventual absorption of, migrant Chinese identities, and by its brutal suppression of communism during the Cold War. Nevertheless, agriculture still figures prominently in national imagery, while trade, dominated by the Sino-Thai middle and upper-middle classes, seems not to have yielded an iconography capable of competing with it at the symbolic level. Meanwhile, Thai historiography has seen considerable debate about the notion of subsistence.[6] As a *farang* who doesn't read Thai – and whose grasp on Thai history is that of an amateur – I will leave this debate to others, but wish simply to renew the call for scrutiny of the subsistence myth in the contemporary vocabulary, and iconography, of power.

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[4] See Richard A. O'Connor, 'Agricultural Change and Ethnic Succession in Southeast Asian States: A Case for Regional Anthropology', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (Nov., 1995), 968-996.

[5] A suite of lengthy propaganda films about the royal agricultural projects was made for the King's 6th Cycle celebrations. They were abridged for skytrain and cinema audiences, but screened in their entirety on Thai Airways' in-flight entertainment system. This expansive mega-production was driven by, *inter alia*, certain Thai Rak Thai cronies beefing up their royalist *bona fides* in the post-Thaksin vacuum.

[6] For a summary, see Katherine A. Bowie, 'Unravelling the Myth of the Subsistence Economy: The Case of Textile Production in Nineteenth Century Northern Thailand', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 51(4): 797-823, 1992.

**Home and Away: two views on Sakarin's Rice Fields**

Not incidentally, a key symbolic plank of German National Socialism was the image of the Fatherland as a source of agricultural bounty, a stage for communal toil towards a common (national) cause. And we ought to note, while we are at it, that Socialist Realism, too, yielded its fair share of images of group agricultural effort – in all its Marxist-Leninist, Stalinist and Maoist variants – such as those now being regurgitated in the contemporary art of mainland China. The liberal-capitalist world, meanwhile, boasts a long tradition of political and activist art – leftist, though not all of it Marxist – which attacks capitalism for its injustices, a tradition in which we would surely place Sakarin's rice fields, along with quite a lot of contemporary art that pits itself against 'globalisation'. Documenta is a primary site for this sort of critique. A lot of it takes aim at nation states as agents of economic and political violence, ethnocide, and worse.

The curators of Documenta XII, Roger Buergel and Ruth Noack, had a complicated task: that of a platform torn between its European conceptualist heritage and the strong multi-cultural precedent set by Documenta XI; and of an international art world that, having reset its focus from the West to the Rest, now tries to make good on its overtures to the developing world, while avoiding the sort of colonial relationships that have characterised this exchange in the past. Certainly, a great variety of post-colonial stances were represented at Documenta XII, ranging from anti-imperialist postures against US foreign policy, to anthropological missions uncovering the tangled crossings of the cultures in which colonial power has trafficked. The curatorial framing was clearly sympathetic, metadata in the exhibition containing no mention of the artists' nationalities, despite the obviously multi-national array on offer, and support from not a few national cultural bureaucracies.

With its multicultural workforce, Sakarin's project fitted well into this post-national wonderland. As a cultural marker, the paddies are regional or continental, rather than national (just as the schloss signifies a neo-classicism that is clearly European but not especially German). In contrast with much of the work at Documenta, text – and therefore language – played a minimal and inconspicuous role, for instance the small sign (in German) in a nearby chapel, inviting visitors to take a few grains of the crop away as a souvenir. Art historically, the project recalled the Land Art of the 1970s, its form organic, monumental and non-discursive – set up for a direct, physical, unmediated reception – like that icon of late modernism, Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*. But while the latter, situated in the wilderness, imagines for itself a quasi-ascetic viewer, Sakarin engages directly with civic and touristic space. His landscaping could be seen to critique and/or complement the castle and park as sites of aesthetic or historical significance.[7] Yet however we read it, the paddies are in some sense *out of place*: apart from the obvious environmental incongruity, they import an ancient and exotic form of agriculture into one of the world's most industrialised economies.

Reading the project in a Thai context, however, a rather different political geography becomes legible. For one thing, its ethnographic dimension makes it more nationally specific. The artist draws not just on traditional farming techniques, but also on the social and labour formations in which they are embedded. The former are found throughout Southeast Asia, while the latter were more specific to Thailand, especially to the rural populations of the north, the Khorat Plateau, and the Chao Phraya basin. Physically and formally, too, the contrast is striking. The local iteration of the work was anything but monumental – a diminutive plot in front of a suburban gallery, invisible to the streams of traffic passing nearby. The installation at Ardel comprised documentation from Kassel, from the repatriation of the crop, and from ethnographic research conducted during the project. Ironically, it looked much more like a Documenta-style work. Not surprisingly, text featured very prominently here, and it was in the Thai language. The agricultural workshop appears to have involved only Thai nationals, and the project's launch was attended by many Thais and only a few *farang*. Put simply, though it now addressed its native

[7] Project co-ordinator Wantanee Siripattanantakul emphasises the historical dimensions of this juxtaposition. But in highlighting the two 'cultures of collecting' – that of the museum and that of the botanic gardens – she neglects a third sort of collecting: the global, postcolonial surveying of Documenta itself, with its own architectures, its own commodification and *mythos*, its own political quandaries. *Ripe Project*, 43.

audience, the work became much more heavily *mediated*. There was even a live video webcast from the paddy to a gallery in downtown Bangkok. None of these observations are criticisms. I make them merely to demonstrate how comprehensive a formal transformation occurred when the idea was recontextualised for local consumption.

This sort of metamorphosis is not uncommon in contemporary art. Half a century of conceptualism, media art and installation has undermined the sanctity of the object. Angst about commodification has flowed into the new anxiety of site-specificity: art must be seen to adapt and respond to its context. It is now ten years since Nicolas Bourriaud established the term 'relational aesthetics' to champion the unconventional approaches of artists like Pierre Huyge, Philippe Parreno and Rirkrit Tiravanija, whose innovations have been not so much formal as *social*.[8] Artistic collaboration is nothing new, but these artists seek to open their work up to the specific, non-art contexts that their practice touches upon, blurring the spheres of process and reception. They frequently tap into non-art cultures including, *inter alia*, agriculture. The Land Foundation in Chiang Mai, a pilgrimage site for 'relational' art's globe-trotting devotees, provides one obvious comparison with Sakarin's rice fields, and at least serves to remind us of Thailand's place on a global art circuit that valorises – we might say *fetishises* – the 'return' to communal contexts and with it, anti-capitalist, utopian rhetorics in general and pastoral, anti-modern ones in particular.

Documenta XII was not, in any general way, pitched to the 'relational' mentality, yet it was possible to discern in many works a self-conscious preoccupation with the non-art actors that art nowadays brushes up against, and with the communities and histories belonging to the places it occupies. Most conspicuous of these was Ai Wei Wei's *Fairytale* project, which saw 1001 'ordinary' Chinese people visit Kassel over the course of the exhibition. Other examples were less grand: Trisha Brown employed young performers from a local dance academy in her *Floor of the Forest*; and Danica Dakic worked with local groups of disadvantaged youths for her project, *El Dorado*. Sakarin's rice fields should certainly be mentioned in this context.[9] The project documentation emphasises the artist's insistence on voluntarism and community collaboration, both with the farmers whose traditions were being propagated, and with the European helpers. We could examine how the resulting 'cultural exchange', prominent amongst contemporary art's mixed agendas, aligns the project with the contemporary PR agenda of state power. But the more interesting 'relational' exchange, I think, is the historical one – an engagement with Thai social history.

Relational aesthetics' flirtation with utopia – like that of its Situationist forebears – is not unselfconscious, and again, Thai artists have played their part. If Rirkrit's 'Utopia Station' (2003)[10] signalled a new preparedness to explore a Utopian horizon deemed off-limits by a cool-blooded postmodernism, more locally grounded artists had arrived at a similar point, albeit via different routes. Precedents might include the 'Art for Life' movement of the 1970s; the Chiang Mai Social Installation in the early 1990s; and the synthesis of conceptual strategies (such as Joseph Beuys' notion of 'social sculpture') with local progressive tendencies (such as Montien Boonma's socially engaged Buddhism). While the currency of politically oppositional art in Thailand waned somewhat with the post-1998 economic recovery, art's increasingly global context made possible a renewal of the radical project of institutional critique elsewhere. And while the tactics for spicing up the museum – whether Pop, Punk or more cerebral lines of attack – may have been exhausted in the West, they were still fair game for artists from the art world's margins. With the right measure of iconoclasm, a Thai artist stood to be enshrined by the institution he was playing at undermining, whilst still offering the exotic charge of the outsider, only again, at an acceptable level and without the obvious trappings of his foreign cultural heritage.

This intercultural arbitrage has *not* been Sakarin's *modus operandi*, but it certainly conditions the reception of Thai contemporary art abroad. It is therefore worth drawing out some of the conflicts in the project's dual framing. For example, a curious epithet appeared in the Ardel installation, and the catalogue: "Not a Utopia / Not a self-reliance / Is the truth / Is helping each

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[8] Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods and Mathieu Copeland, (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002).

[9] Project coordinator Nanthapa Cooper explicitly claims the 'relational' label in her text 'The Art of Rice Farming', *Ripe Project*, 33.

[10] Which he co-curated with Molly Nesbit and Hans Ulrich Obrist for the 2003 Venice Biennale.

other". This denial runs counter to many claims, elsewhere in the catalogue, about the project's socially transformative power. Two of Sakarin's European collaborators, Dagmar Keller and Martin Wittwer, suggest that he would never have settled for a true – that is *unrealised* – utopia. Impressed by his perseverance, they note that he would never "accept that the project to realise a utopian idea would remain exactly that…" The project thus finds its most explicitly utopian theorisation: "a symbol for the possibility of success of a utopian idea."[11]

**Utopian Sufficiency and Mythic Community**

One of many ethnographic gestures in Sakarin's project was the metaphor of the *long kaek* – the round-up where villagers of one family join those of another to sew or reap a crop, a communal effort traditionally lubricated by song, dance and booze. At Ardel, the Documenta effort was depicted in the image of the *long kaek*, which it purported to revive and record as an agricultural practice – an organic political economy – rendered all but extinct by the juggernaut of industrial agriculture. The artist went beyond mere nostalgia for a dying tradition: he explicitly decried the triumph of waged labour over communal labour. The geo-social displacement between the two contexts turned on this contradiction between voluntarism and alienation, the irony being that the former makes a comeback in the utterly capitalised socius of central Germany (albeit in a Utopian enclave), even as it is becoming impossible in the hybrid economy of Thailand, which still harbours some communal, informal and undocumented migrant labour forces.

In invoking the *long kaek* as a practice passed, or nearing extinction, the project imagines a pre-modern, pre-capitalist past where exchanges of labour were communal and voluntary, unmediated by capital, unsoiled by the profit motive. Such pictures of a pre-Lapsarian past, where everyone helps everyone and nobody goes hungry, often conceal a nastier reality.[12] This is my main reservation about the *Terraced Rice Fields* project: to confect a Utopian-agrarian, collectivist endeavour – especially in a super-developed economic space like Germany – is to appeal to an idealized picture, a fantasy really, of a pre-capitalist society, harmonious and collaborative. But this image *is itself a product*, not of some timeless, communitarian prehistory, but of urban, bourgeois modernity. The alienated, present reality is the lens that mediates and makes possible the fantasy, that colours its claims to authenticity (in this case ruralness, grubby hands, a contrived voluntarism); its spiritual airs and its sacred cows (rice-grain relics that transcend time and space via air freight); and its tenuous investment in an untroubled past.[13]

This critique is germane to the Thai political present for several reasons. First, because the Thai economy is a hybrid, where industrial and post-industrial enterprises represent an ever-larger slice of GDP, but where agriculture still firmly remains the symbolic keystone in the national imaginary and moral order. And second, because this symbolism is often the paternalistic state's compensation – a poor substitute – for genuine social and economic development. The celebration of agriculture by the Bangkok elite is a kind of consolation prize for a class that has seen little of the economic mobility that has so transformed Thailand in the last century.

Meanwhile, state initiatives routinely advert to the vague concept of a 'sufficiency economy', an ideology catapulted back into public discourse by Thailand's king and bureaucracy after the 1997 financial meltdown, and enshrined in state policy by the military-appointed government after the 2006 coup. This talk of sufficiency is designed to counter the agenda of dumped (but undead) national CEO, Thaksin Shinawatra, whose One Tambon One Product scheme streamlined community-level production with a view to domestic and international export markets. Amongst Thailand's foreign partners, it would raise the spectre of isolationism, were it not so clearly at odds with actual economic practice, which remains strongly geared towards foreign investment, export and rapid growth. With the gradual dismantling of Thaksin's political empire – in particular the recent defection of a key faction from the agricultural northeast – the battle over this symbolic terrain is likely to become even more vigorous.

For modern Thailand – for any country – the return to agrarian contentment is not an

[11] Keller and Wittwer, 'About Terraced Rice Fields Art Project…', *Ripe Project*, 51.

[12] A friend, who is from the rice fields of Khorat, informs me that *long kaek* is also a euphemism for gang rape.

[13] See Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster (St Louis: Telos, 1975).

option. Yet the desires or insecurities to which this imagery caters are pressing matters for historical study. For the art critic, too, the genre deserves scrutiny: How has it developed? What are its favoured media? And how does a project like Sakarin's fit alongside the local counter-capitalist rhetoric of subsistence? For all its communitarian airs, we should be wary of art's investments in the myth of sufficiency. The art of utopia risks collusion with a reactionary mythology that is a dampener on social mobility and long overdue social transformation.

David Teh, Bangkok, 2008