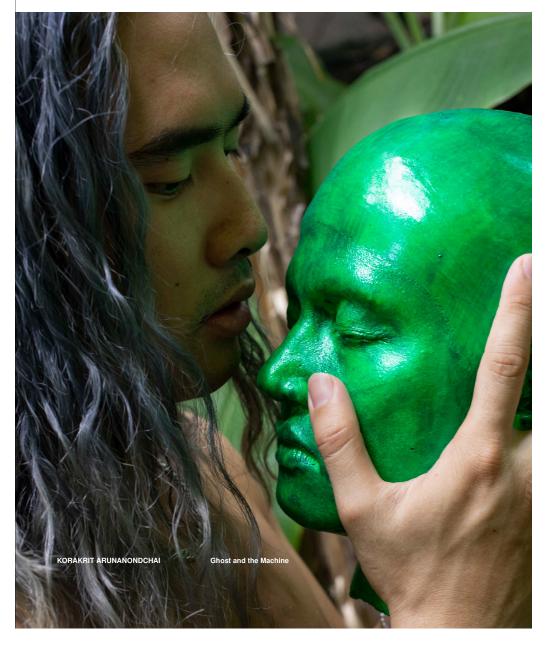
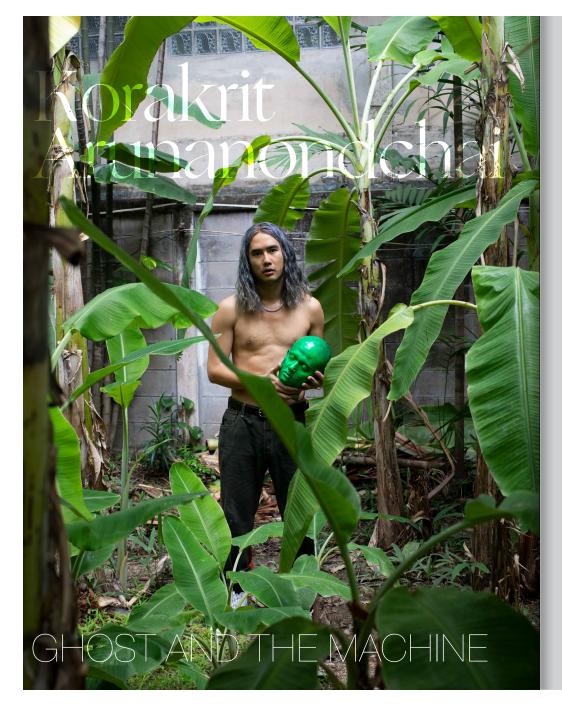
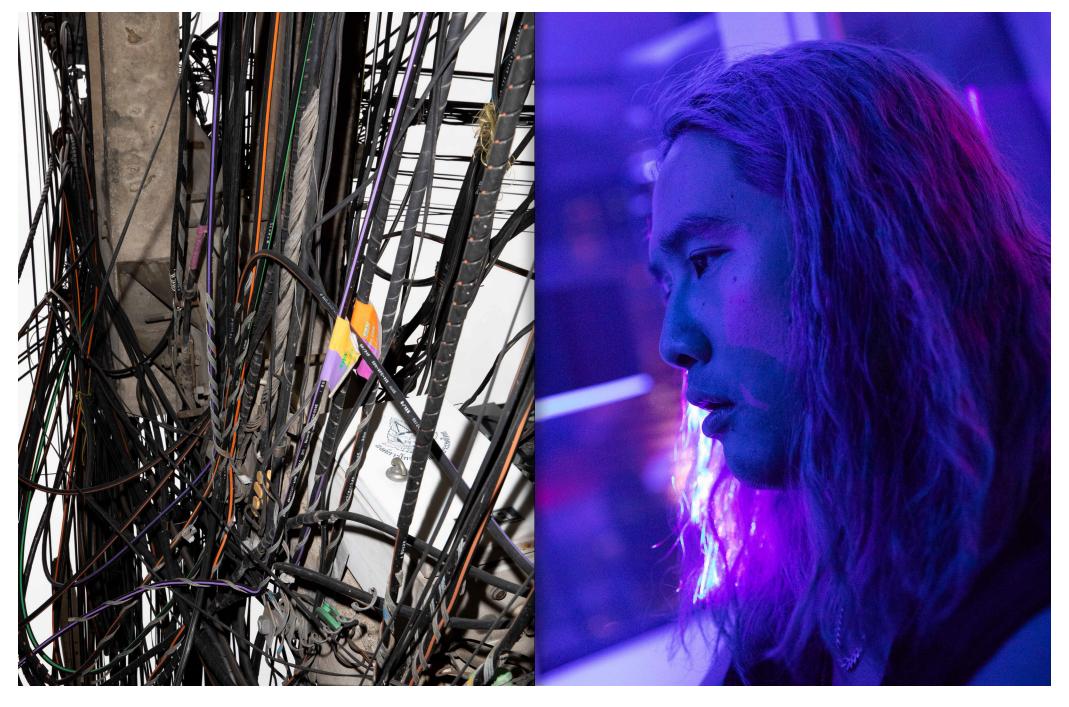
### **KALEIDOSCOPE**



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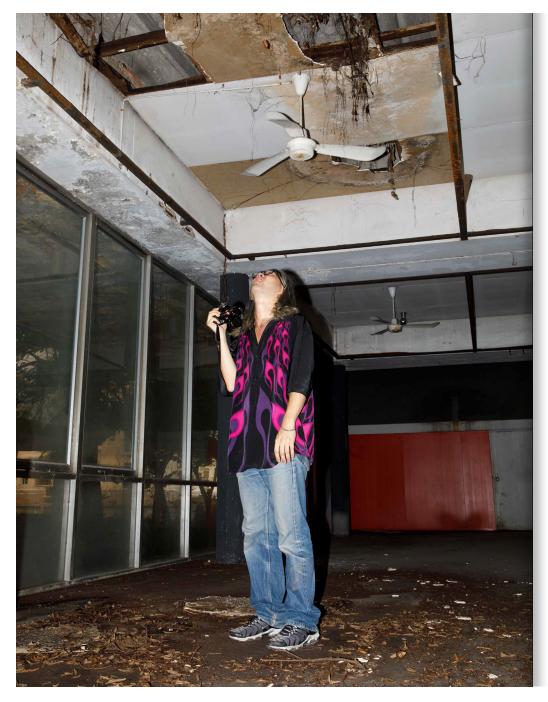


With characters and symbols borrowed from Buddhist myth, the Thai New York-based artist reflects on the duality of animism and technology, activating collective emotions through a ceremonial togetherness.



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Words by Adriana Blidaru

ome paleo-climatologists today argue that the mastery of fire by humans was *the* inflection point from which the era of the Anthropocene began, possibly culminating in the sixth mass extinction on our planet. We understand today how fire was essential for our physiological as well as social evolution—how heating sterilized and tenderized food, thus socializing around ancient campfires, most likely led to the birth of storytelling and mythology. In a sense, fire was that which began humanity, but it's also that which may bring its end.

As science progressively debunks the convoluted webs of myths that we have created to comprehend the world, it also offers us an unprecedented view into our past and our future, or "deep time." This is a difficult concept for humans to grasp, as we struggle to think in huge numbers, vast scales or great distances. Breaking down incomprehensible concepts like these should be a task not only for scientists, but also for humanity scholars and artists, who might offer a clearer understanding of how we exist as a species within a history of existence of 4.5 billion years, and help us do better by our environment. As philosopher Claire Colebrook purs it in her <u>Introduction:</u> Framing the End of the Species: "With geologists suggesting that we might be on the brink of a major extinction event, this

time caused not by external factors but by one of the earth's own species, it might be time for the humanities and other disciplines to ask the question of extinction, and to take seriously the very notion of the humanities and discipline."

Reflections on our contemporary way of life and the meanings behind it can be found in abundance in the artistic practice of Korakrit Arunanondchai (Thai, b. 1986, lives and works in New York). His videos, installations and performances, often presented in combination, look at the evolution of humans as spiritual beings in the context of technological advancement. Through a series of strategies, Arunanondchai's work opens up the possibility of imagining the transcendence of human time—an exercise that Colebrook considers most useful for a better understanding of deep time, and with it, the consequences of the Anthropocene as a real and tangible geological phase.

Arunanondchai has built his practice as a structure in which a set of symbols keeps reappearing. These symbolic elements are reinforced with each new project, and are inspired by the artist's exploration of mythology, spirituality and Eastem philosophy, as well as by his own family roots. As a young Thai artist who moved to New York to get his MFA at Columbia University, Arunanondchai's own identity has always played an

With history in a room filled with people with funny names 4, 2017 INSTALLATION VIEW AT CLEARING, NEW YORK

important role in his work, especially earlier in this transition. By far, however, the most striking apparition, recurring While his initial interests were confined to topics regarding the from 2013 onwards, has been his friend and fellow artist boymyth of "the artist as genius"-often depicted in his videos child, who has become a central character in the cosmology through archival footage of famous white Western artists, all that Arunanondchai has been constructing. If she initially took of them men—his penchant for storytelling soon extended his on the artist's persona looking for revelation, more recent works line of inquiry beyond the personal struggle of the artist. see her become the great serpent Naga, a Buddhist creature His videos are often narrated in English and Thai, the lan- which defies humanity by escaping representation, boychild's guages of his immediate contexts, and sometimes in French, own artistic practice in dance and performance is rooted in which his mother has been teaching for several years. Looking an investigation of specific key figures, such as witches or at the two main concomitant series he's been developing since non-Western shamans. The choreographies she creates for 2012 ("Painting with history in a room filled with men with Korakrit's video-installations and live performances are often funny names" and the trilogy 2012-2555 (2012), 2556 derived in response to the music, another essential component (2013) and 2557 (2014)), there is significant overlap in terms of Arunanondchai's practice, as well as to the scenography of style, storyline, and even footage, but from one video to the and lighting coordinated by Alex Gvojic, another long-time next, the inquiry and self-reflexivity advances further questions. friend and collaborator. With the installations as backdrop, the

## "The videos are often narrated as a personal and philosophical exchange between the artist and the drone Chantri."

The role of this self-reflexivity, which carries a great deal of vulnerability, is also to establish the artist as a candid observer of the world that he is experiencing. The videos are often narrated as an exchange of letters between the artist and Chantri, a drone embodying the Garuda—the divine bird in Buddhist mythology-that the artist addresses as "an old friend, or family." This style of narration, in the form of voiceover dialogue, involves the viewer in a personal and philosophical exchange between the two

In the making of his videos, performances and installations, Arunanondchai familiarizes us with a set of recurring characters drawn explicitly from his family and friend circle, thus creating an ingenious but genuine bond with the viewers. For instance, his twin brother Korapat appears in many of the videos and often collaborates on live performances-including those at MoMA PSI, New York; Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw: and ICA, London—and even paintings, like the series "Untitled (White Temple Paintings)." In the work There's a word I'm trying to remember, for a feeling I'm about to have (a distracted path toward extinction) from 2016, the artist uses footage from his older brother's wedding, and in most of the videos from the "Painting with history" series, he films his grandparents in their elderly home in Thailand.

intensity of the music and the game of lights, the performances become spectacular events in which the exhibition space is converted into a ritualized space, as the public experiences intense collective emotions which are virtually activated by a ceremonial togetherness.

Another significant inspiration is the Wat Rong Khun temple in Thailand. Also called the White Temple, it was bought, rebuilt and reopened to the public in 1996 by artist Chalermchai Kositpipat. A hyper-decorative complex of stark white buildings that serve as worship place, the Temple has become an attraction for thousands of tourists for its unique combination of Buddhist mythology with popular Western iconography—from Kung Fu Panda to Spiderman, from Hello Kitty to Michael Jackson. Wat Rong Khun appears as a backdrop in several of Arunanondchai's videos, highlighting the artist's interest in fusing and addressing both Western and Eastern sensibilities.

As the recurring presence of this unique architectural backdrop suggests, the risk of sacrificing focus in favor of spectacle, conceptual rigor in favor of reaching a larger public, is a risk that the artist is willing to take. In the past few years, his installations have become much more sculptural, requiring complex processes of casting, molding, glassblowing, appro-





264

priating and recreating large spiritual ecosystems. Still, there is always a distinctive feature that links all the elements of the installation, both physically and conceptually—be it in the form of water, as a conducting fluid flowing between the different "islands" constituting the installation, or something as simple as the sound of breathing, which from the video echoes in the exhibition space, emphasizing empty space as a positive space (an idea he claims to have borrowed from meditation). By means of this "connecting tissue," Arunanondchai seeks to connect the multitude of elements in such a way that he can build a personal cosmology.

The flaming denim, probably one of the most recognizable visual motifs of the artist's work—it's appeared in his paintings, as his own clothing, and on the large cushions where viewers are invited to lounge while warching the videos—also carries an important significance in the construction of this mythology. In one of his films, he confesses to Chantri: "I saw a billboard outside of the Levi's store on 34th Street and it made me think abour you, actually. The billboard had a picture of a man who is wearing like eight layers of denim and a text next to his body that said. 'Join the conversation.' What do you think that conversation is about? Is it a conversation about how to layer denim in a temperature over 90 degrees and not be sweating so much?" A universal symbol for youth culture across different cultures, denim became a part of the artist's personal style as well.



A similar feeling of "belonging" is entrusted to the Manchester United football uniforms, which the artist employed in many of his previous installations. His twin brother being a supporter of the team (or a "red devil," as they're known) became an opportunity for the artist to speak to an invisible link between people, regardless of differences of nationality, class or age. "We need one team to cheer on together: like a religion or a band" he says in \*Painting with fistory in a room filled with people with funny names 3 (2016).

By borrowing symbols and creating mythological characters such as Chantri and Naga, and emphasizing the ways in which people can cooperate, coalesce and come together—even through what might look like arbitrary connectors such as denim, music, art, pop culture or socer—Arunanondchai sets the foundation for a universal ontology through his practice. But aside from cultural, religious and spiritual values or technological developments, perhaps the strongest common denominator that he calls attention to is evolution itself, and the necessity for humanity to access a higher level of emotional awareness. "Your feelings are the algorithms; helping animals to make the right decisions," he writes to Chantri in Natural Gods Episode 1 (2017).

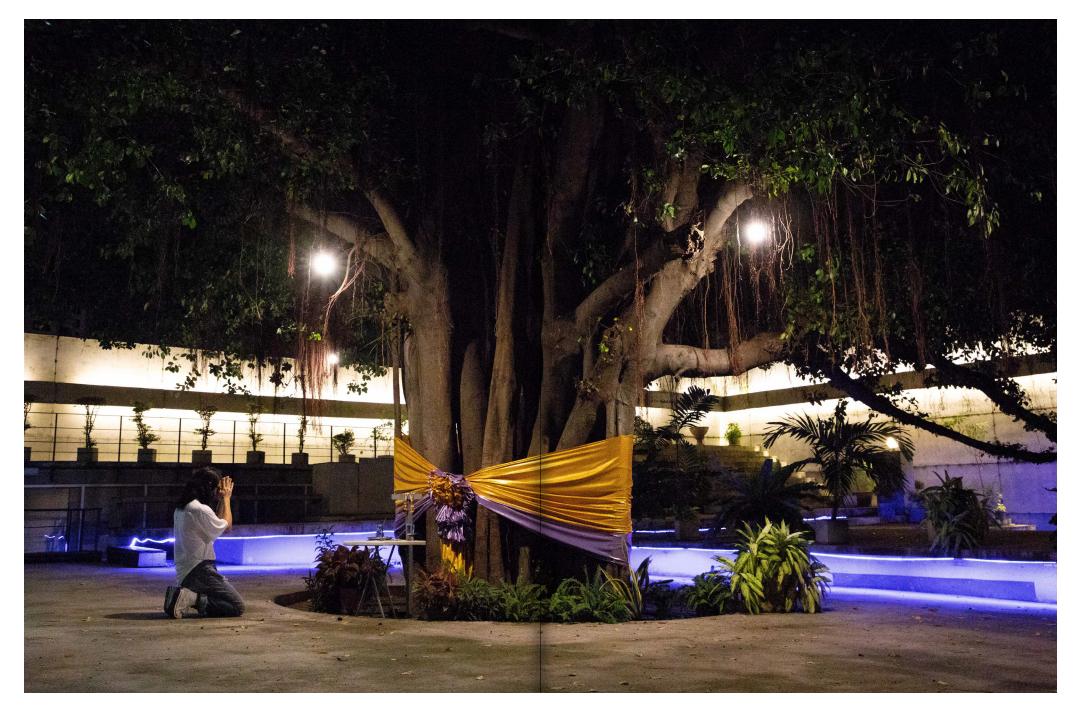
Beyond these interchangeable symbols which recur and evolve throughout the works, a somber reflection underlies the artist's recent practice: a reflection on human extinction in relation to animism, evolution and technological development. His focus on temporality collapses the past, present and future of human civilization into a flattened context outside of human time: "The membranes comecting all things visible are the mystical monsters of the past, the zombies of the present, and the robots of the future." Arunanondchai breaks down the perception of linear time to highlight the collective foundational stories, and to show the importance of the human race as a deep yet temporary mark on nature. Here, alongside Chantri and Naga, appears a giant rat, the possible future inhabitor of this planet, long after the sixth extinction. This opens a conversation that Colebrook finds useful in her arguments. She writes:

"Humans are beginning to imagine the next great extinction event—which is to say that this will be the first time that extinction has been imagined. It is as though the layers of our geological past yield a possibility (of extinction) from which we might regard a future that is not a future for us, and a future in which all the ways in which we have mapped time and history will be absent. For even our current conceptions of deep time-a time beyond human histories-have emerged from a present reading of our own past. What we now imagine, from this reading of the past, gives us a sign not only of our end within time, but also of the fact that we will ourselves have altered our place in time."

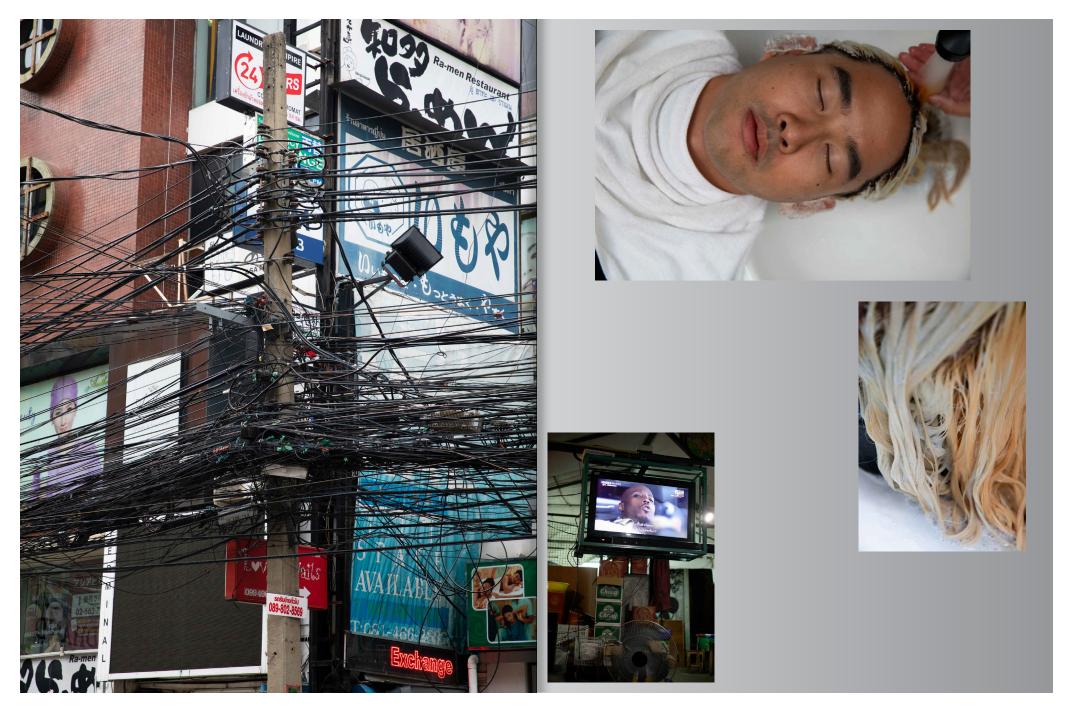
Colebrook proposes that it is time for humanities and other disciplines to reflect on the question of extinction more accurately, in order to understand and improve how we, as humans, think about climate and respond to threats of annihilation. Arunanondchai's practice seems to take on this challenge, conveying a cosmic perspective through his unique take on the relationship between creation and creator, the dialectic of birth and death, and the essence of life. K

Adriana Blidaru is a writer and curator based in New York. She is the editor and founder of the project Living Content.





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### ABOUT GHOST

Ghost is a new video and performance art series that will happen every three years in Bangkok, Thailand. The series takes the idea of the "ghost" and expands upon its connotations by looking at the contemporary condition shared by people across the globe. Although each culture has its own concept of "ghosts," common is the notion that "ghosts" give form and presence to invisible systems. To experience a "ghost" connects you to the infinite reverberations of human experience simultaneously as it brings you back to your own body—uniting past and present, singularity and multiplicity.

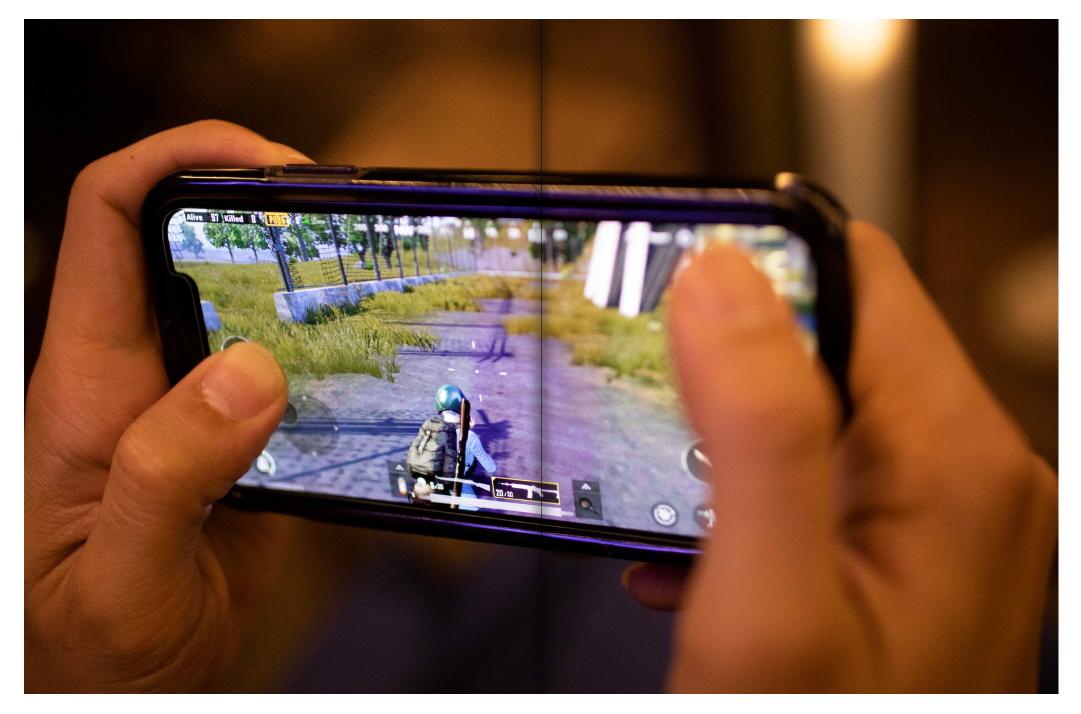
### ABOUT GHOST:2561

The first edition of Ghost is curated by Korakrit Arunanondchal and will take place from 11–28 October 2018. Exhibiting work by fifteen artists across eleven venues, three performances plus film screenings and a series of talks, Ghost:2561 views humanity through a screen, taking inspiration from the layers of data that mediate contemporary life. Today's technology is unique in how it engenders a radically new mode of thought: when the mind registers visions and sounds at an increasing physical and psychic distance from the material stimulus, people are increasingly challenged to expand their own imagination of other beings and potential realities. And as the means of generating, modifying, and consuming data have opened up, people are using technology to create the matrix of multiple realities. These multiple realities that we live in, and constantly fluctuate between, are at the core of Ghost:2561.







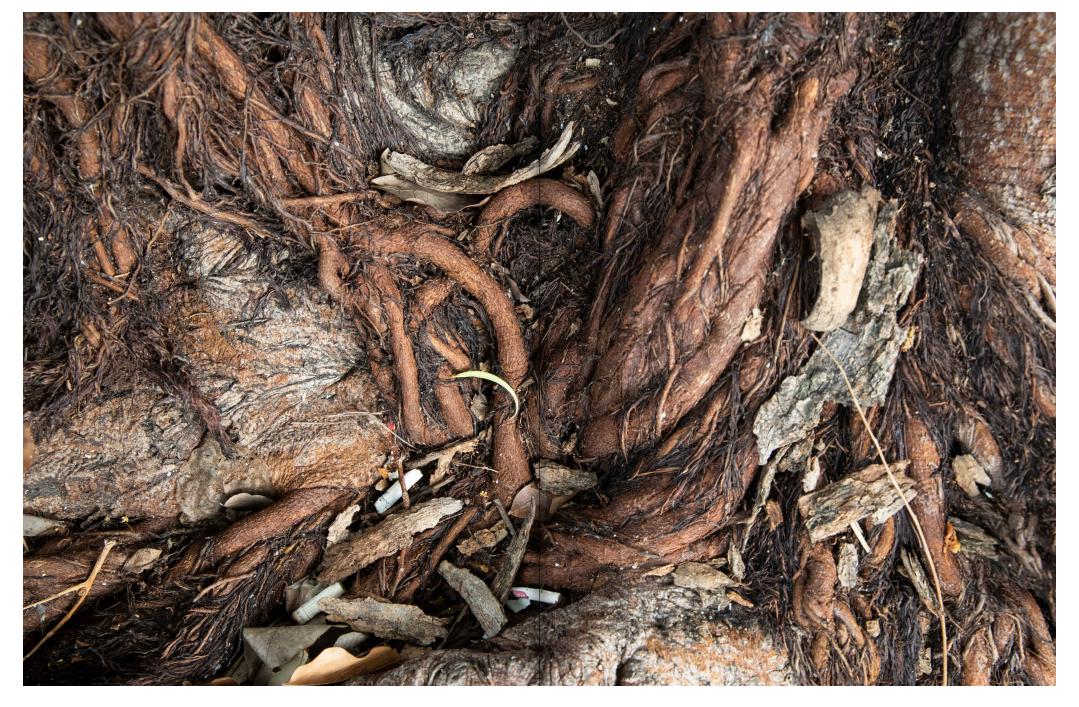


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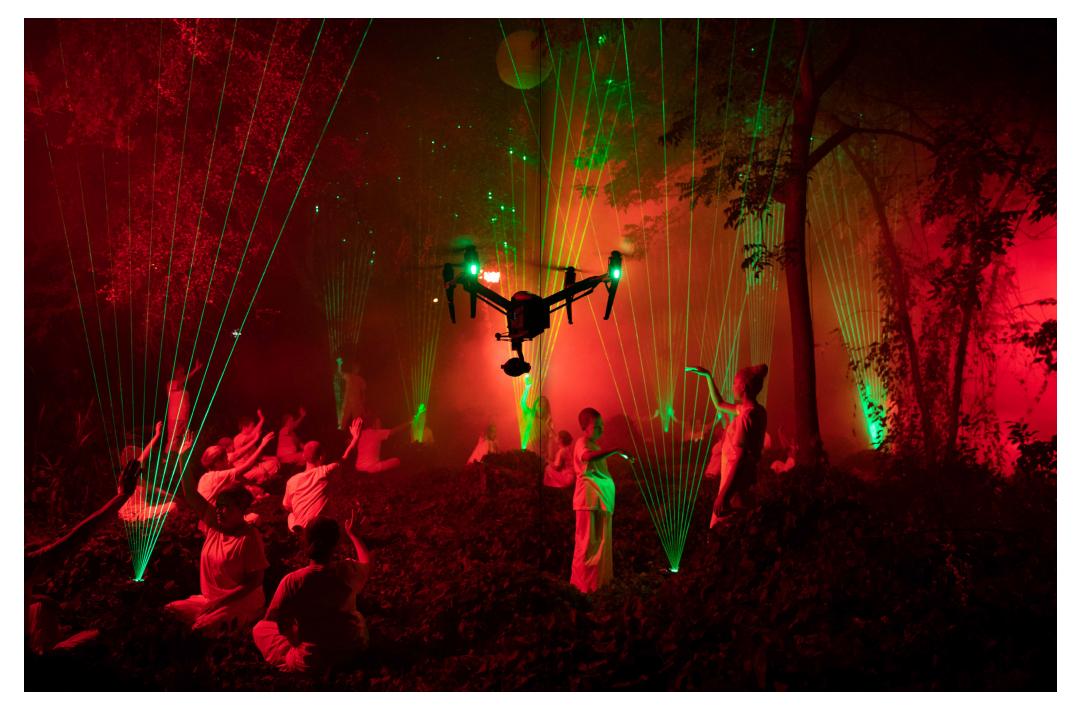
Confirmed projects include video works by lan Cheng, Stephanie Comilang, Josh Kline, Metahaven, Jon Rafman, Raqs Media Collective, Rachel Rose, Chulayarnnon Siriphol, Hito Steyerl, Jon Wang, Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Samson Young; as well as performances by boychild, Thanapol Virulhakul and Total Freedom. The screening program is curated by Aily Nash, Victor Wang and DIS. An educational program led by OPEN FIELD, "Classroom of Storytellers," will provide a temporary space for local participants to learn the ideas and discourses related to Ghost:2561, followed by the release of an anthology co-edited

### GHOST:2561 PARTNERS

The Ghost series is organized by the Ghost Foundation, initiated by Korakrit Arunanondchai and Akapol Sudasna to create and loster a community in Thailand around video and performance art. Co-host and main partner of Ghost:2561 is OPEN FIELD, a non-profit organisation based in Bangkok grounded in the belief that knowledge possesses a transformative power for the advancement of society. A supporting partner is the Jim Thompson Art Center, with venue partners including 100 Tonson Gallery, Artist+Run Gallery, Bangkok Citycity Gallery, Cartel Artspace, Doxza Art Lab, The Jim Thompson House, Nova Project Space, Subhashok The Arts Centre, Gallery VER, Imagimax and Stam Motors.







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Intersecting historical narratives with his personal cosmology, the artist navigates non-linear time and in-between spaces to explore a collective Interview by Andrea Lissoni body of consciousness.



AL You're currently back in Bangkok, your native city, working on a new video and performance triennial which you've initiated, and of which you will co-curate the first edition this fall, "Ghost:2561" (2561 being the Buddhist calendar year for 2018.) Can you tell me a little bit about it?

KA 1 started this project with my friend Op Sudasna, who runs a gallery called Bangkok CityCity. Ghost will exhibit work by eleven artists across six venues, four performances plus film screenings

and a series of talks. The idea of taking the "ghost" as starting point came out of my own research, my own relationship towards spirituality and animism. It stemmed from growing up in a post-war Thailand where there's a strong emphasis on Buddhist consciousness, perhaps in part as an anti-communist propaganda. Thailand was defining itself to the West as this sort of spirited land. So what I am trying to address with "Ghost" is this dichotomy of (Eastern) spirituality and (Western) technology.

Workshop for Peace / Cry Pan Cry, 2018



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- AL Speaking of ghosts and caves, I cannot avoid to think of Uncle Boonnee Who Can Recall His Past Lives, the 2010 film by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, which ends with the protagonist's last drips of life draining away in a cave. I'm curious about how you're tracking back this field.
- KA This story about the boys in the cave has so many intersecting layers and readings. The military has been in control in Thailand for four years, and they've been promising an election, which is supposed to happen next February. So when this incident with the kids happened, it also became a really great opportunity of rebranding—this sort of hero narrative. Then there's the fact that half the team are stateless people, who had crossed from Burma and essentially have no nationality. Also, there is a conspiracy theory because people say there's a lot of drug smuggling through the channels of the cave, which provides this other layer of complication. It's like—some of what they've been telling us is probably true, a lot of it is probably not. But what's interesting is just the fact that it's such a gray area. Spirituality is in fact really

- gray and things twist and turn and become other things. It's in a constant state of becoming.
- AL You are not following the typical path that a filmmaker would—researching, scouting locations, visiting sites, observing, and then finally months after, sometimes years after, shooting. Do you have any idea on how, if at all, this story will become part of your new work?
- KA Emnot sure yet. As you know in my practice, every work feeds off of the previous one. I have characters that I or other people play. There's a combination of documentary-like footage and set-up performances or rituals staged for the camera. My latest video, Painting with History in a Room Filled with Deople with Funny Names 4 (2017), is built around the idea of a breath that remains post-human consciousness. I started thinking how at this time in the Anthropocene, we have this limitation or sort of lack of imagination where we are really unable to empathize towards other natural beings or systems. The problem is you can never escape the human lens. For example, I was talking to this PhD student at Yale who specializes in soils. He told me about this study by a Canadian plant scientist, who realized that there is a chemical exchange happening, deep down at the level of the roots, between the trees on the entire surface of the Earth. If you zoom out and look at this pattern and anthropomorphize it, it's essentially like a human brain, as if all the trees were communicating.
- AL That makes complete sense when considering the environments created for your recent exhibitions at Clearing Gallery in New York and JI in Marseille—filling the exhibi-



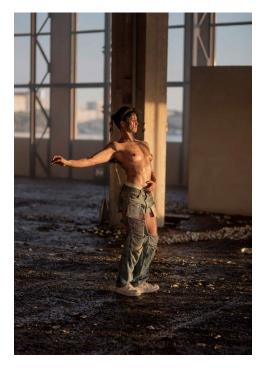
# "May your consciousness have existed before your breathing body, passing through you as a medium?"

shells, seaweed and latex paint that glimmers of fuel.

- KA It started with the idea of a stage for the video installation and the performance. This earth almost feels like a prehistoric or post-historic setting. The ground became this space where you can feel that something has passed, but also about to form—a kind of potentiality, this memory of a place. An important ingredient to this earth is a bag of dirt that I received from going to the posthumous birthday of King Rama IX of Thailand last vear-they gave a bag to the first 30,000 people that arrived. Apparently they collected dirt from every single province that he had stepped on, so it was this material that has archived the aura of this man, a certain magical touch formed through a historical narrative of an era. This is where the idea of a consciousness post-existence sort of came into play, and I decided to have the audio track of the breathing sound from the video echo into the exhibition space. The entire video (With history....4) was edited to a musical score that is essentially breathing sounds. When you recognize your own breath in meditation, or in panic, that in itself is consciousness. Will it continue to exist beyond the point when you have a body that breathes; or may it have existed before, passing through you as a medium?
- AL In Marseille, the JI hangar has large windows opening onto the sea, which you kept unobstructed for the viewers to be able to look out, as if the whole building was a docked ship. But in Geneva, where you will present a variation of this work at the Biennale de l'Image en Mouvement (BIM). you will install the work underground within a sort of cave, or black hole. What are the reasons for such choices?
- KA In Marseille, there's something really special about that site. On one side of the space, you have the sea, the sky, and the mountains in the distance. In front of you is the gate of the international port. Finally on the other side, you can see one of the most ancient churches in France. So it felt to me that the site rendered very well the duality that is at the heart of my work—showing the landscape transitioning into trade, civilization and religion, But also, I call it a stage, because when you step on it, it transports you to this other place, a simulated post-extinction space where the oceans have dried up, leaving this cracked ground behind. In a fictional "After all this", what remains, or what has not been used up or taken away, will probably define and become humanity itself.

- tion space with a soil made of sedimentary layers of loam. AL I'm asking because in many interviews and critical texts about your work, fire emerges as a leading element, and it is indeed a recurring element in your videos and paintings. However, I'm rather fascinated by how water is always infiltrating your works. There is something about its ephemeral and transformative presence. Everything just spills and drifts from one stage to the other. There is never a proper wall; every division is kind of transpiring. Everything is porous, as if made of membranes. So I am curious about the choice of immersing yourself-almost going underground—for the BIM. Although, when I think about it, it's not entirely new: for the 9th Berlin Biennale, you created a site-specific video installation on a boat that traveled up and down the Spree River; to enter the work, one had to go down-so when watching the video, the viewer wasn't floating on the water, but was literally underwater. The experience was that of sneaking and finding refuge under a mangrove...
  - KA Definitely. On the top of the boat, there were sculptural works that resembled trees, so the movie room underneath was almost like you were at the roots. For Geneva, I was thinking about ancient tombs or funeral rituals, specifically dating back to the Neanderthals or even great apes. There are millions of years between monkeys and homo sapiens, and scientists discovered that there was a moment when they started to develop a sense of beauty that connected to the sacred and perhaps an afterlife, in the way that they arranged objects in a ritualized manner. So I am trying to make these moments happen in a very subtle way.
  - AL There was a sculpture emerging towards the end of the exhibition space at J1-a gravestone, a reliquary, or a monument. What did it stand for?
  - A In the video, boychild always plays this character, the Naga-a liquid, non-human character inspired by a mythological serpent in the Buddhist tradition. At the end of the video, like an agent of nature, she comes out and puts me to rest by wrapping my body in banana leaves—a ritualistic action gesturing towards this other world not so defined, as if saying "Our world is exhausted and transitioning." Human beings are always thinking about leaving something behind. A lot of times, that's why temples and such are built-palaces, monuments, pyramids. So in the installation in Marseille, the end of the video gestures towards a transition of human breath and vitality into an unknown world. Perhaps, a world of gaia, where our old rules and systems no longer apply. When you finish the video and

295



get to the next room, it's like another epoch has passed, boychild's Naga has already turned into a worshipping tomb. I wanted to use this sculpture to narrate a sense of time that belongs elsewhere, like mythical time.

AL In the performance with boychild, titled Together in a room filled with people with finny names 4, you also employed a laser harp, which provided a sense of green verticality (and elevation) to the whole. Can you tell me more about this?

KA It's a little bit like a new ritual I've been performing. Factually, it's like a musical instrument. When you touch each laser beam, there's a sensor linked to a different MIDI controller, which activates each of the audio tracks from the score for With history... 4. One of my main collaborators is music composer Aaron David Ross, who composed the audio for my last few videos. I had finished *History* in a room filled with people with funny names 4, and I was thinking about a way to extend it into performance. I wanted to create a musical hardware out of something invisible or uncapturable, and sort of make a light sculpture out of it—which in turn, would then become music and a script for boychild to perform to, I said this to Aaron, and he was like, "Well, there's this thing called a laser harp. You should get it and try it out." It's this light that you can essentially touch, making physical gesture into sound.

AL Did you have a script for the performance?

KA Yes, boychild and I wrote it together. It feels like a parallel journey to the video. boychild was performing a new

character, which she calls the "bottom feeder," picking up leftover pieces of prior self from prior performances. Alex Gvojic, another one of my long-time collaborators, was filming her as part of the performance. He played Chantri, the lens which archives and re-represent boychild's movement by live-feeding it back into the main video screen I was reading from. So it created this loop between my voice, boychild's movement, Alex's camera back to me via the screen, all within the setting of the stage made from earth and the setting of Marseille's port. When the video finished, I walked over to the other room and performed the laser harp script with her. There was this kind of déià vu or time warp I really felt. I think the audience felt it, too. In a way, it's like the boychild green tomb at the end of the exhibition in relationship to seeing her in the video—this kind of non-linear experience of time that started to happen, where what you saw on the screen and what you saw in the room starts to blend. It feels like you've almost just seen the future. It's difficult to explain.

AL Actually, I see exactly what you mean—it's all about your working process. And it's intriguing, because we started talking about how the project melts into the production, how the production spills into the actual work, and then again how the work becomes a site of production, and how the present work, the past work, and the future work feed off one another, dragging the wakes of all previous states. It seems you've found a way to stew constantly, to keep these threads ongoing from one work to the other. It's very fascinating, It's like a never-ending dialogue between animation and reanimation. So, after all, what's a ghost then? In Western culture, it's always like a vertical presence, overseeing and surrounding us almost as if it were a person. It's not inhabiting things, rather artifacts. Above all, it's never horizontal.

KA I guess the whole idea about ghosts in my work, whether it is the Naga or the idea of a collective subjectivity, is that it is horizontal in the way you're saying. I've grown up kind of being scared of ghosts and feeling like I have no agency in deciding the fabric of belief, and in a country that's so animistic, that kind of becomes the fabric of reality. So maybe what we're trying to do with "Ghost:2561" is to use this fear and try to understand it.

AL It reminds me of the drone Chantri in your previous videos, which offered a surprising update of an historically stereotyped vision of the ghost. To paraphrase Gilbert Ryle. I will say that in your work, the ghost is no longer in the machine—the ghost is the machine, and we are the machine to some extent as well. It's not something that is within; it's beyond and everywhere.

KA Definitely. I grew up with the opposition of Western enlightenment/empiricism and Eastern spiritualism; a technologically advanced, future-forward West and an East stuck in old traditions. What I'm trying to do is not be in-between those two, but at least find a new way to engage with history and the present.

Andrea Lissoni is Senior Curator of International Art (Film) at Tate Modern, London. Together with Andrea Bellini, he will co-curate the Biennale de I'lmage en Mouvement 2018, held at Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève from November 2018 through February 2019.

