



Still from 'Songs for Dying', 2021

INTERVIEWER:
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INTERVIEW WITH KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI

To write about Korakrit Arunanondchai is to be in hot pursuit. The first day we were meant to have this interview, he was out of reach, freediving off the reefs of Ko Tao. When I travelled to Bangkok in 2018, to see the inaugural *GHOST* festival of video and performance that he had curated, for a book I was working on, I followed friends to performances around haunted ta-khian trees and drag parties in bank vaults in hopes of tracking him down. In London a year later, I found him carrying the chef Angela Dimayuga like a newlywed into the nightclub at the top of the Standard Hotel. Whenever I have succeeded in sitting down with him, I leave with an impression familiar from viewing his work: the joy of immersion into his oblique and mysterious logics, grasping the iridescent tail of several interconnected ideas.

Contingency is the force that drives Arunanondchai's sprawling oeuvre of video, performance, painting and installation, which roams through personal relationships, political upheaval and cosmological concerns. His videos, often the centrepieces of exhibitions, combine found clips with drone and handheld footage filmed in collaboration with director Alex Gvojic. Religious artefacts, veterinary surgeries, news broadcasts and highlights from reality TV are interleaved with slow and sublime cinematic action, sewn together by Arunanondchai's distinct poetic voice and grounded in a close relationship to location. In these major works, titled *PAINTING WITH HISTORY IN A ROOM FILLED WITH PEOPLE WITH FUNNY NAMES 1-3* (2013-15), *WITH HISTORY IN A ROOM FILLED WITH PEOPLE WITH FUNNY NAMES 4* (2017), and *NO HISTORY IN A ROOM FILLED WITH PEOPLE WITH FUNNY NAMES 5* (2018), he seeks out sites such as the former CIA black site Ramasun Station, north of Bangkok, or the self-governed island of Jeju in South Korea,

This nebulous material is anchored in a regular cast of characters: the Denim Painter, an ambitious young artist negotiating life between Thailand and the United States, played by Arunanondchai; Chantri, a ghost who later inhabits a drone; Tosh Basco (formerly known as boychild) – a performance artist in her own right – who plays herself or, at times, the naga, a Thai deity representing chance, chaos and revolutionary forces; and the artist's grandparents, whose sunset years Arunanondchai approaches with great tenderness, anchoring his contemplation of time, memory and existence in 'a life lived'.

For this interview, we began at the end, with *SONGS FOR DYING*, a video installation exhibited at Kunsthall Trondheim in 2021. The video follows a rich diorama, in which gravel, moss, excavated clay, modelled tree roots and banana leaves comprise the body of a figure; Arunanondchai cast the head from Basco's, and the hands from his grandfather's. A gnarled, fake mountainside is flung back, wing-like, from the figure's shoulders; a path the colour of oxblood leads to a wall-sized painting, noisy with abstract marks that cohere into the symbol from *THE HUNGER GAMES*, co-opted by Thailand's pro-democracy protest movement from 2014. Within this cacophony of signs, we encounter *SONGS FOR DYING*, a moving, circular meditation on individual mortality, systemic collapse and the promise of regeneration. The narrator of the film asks: 'How many lives do I have to live to see you again?'

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Still from 'No History in a Room Filled With People With Funny Names 5', 2018

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — We've spoken before about how your grandparents provided much of the impetus for you to pick up a camera and start filming. *SONGS FOR DYING* opens, heartbreakingly, with the immediate aftermath of your grandfather's death. In the 30 or so minutes that follow, you consider the idea that our consciousness dissolves into other forms, yet you also talk about ancestral traces and the ways that we can speak to ghosts. I thought we could start by talking about this tension between impermanence and eternity.

A KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI — There's a saying in Buddhism about how change is inevitable, and the only thing that's certain is change. That seems pretty true. I've been making these videos for the past 11 years. When I started, one of the reasons I got a video camera was to shoot my grandfather as he was his losing short-term memory and ageing. A part of my practice is about anticipating the death of my grandfather. The experience of that relationship, pulled into the frame of my art practice, then makes and expands relationships between other things. On a personal level, the work is about the fact that he raised me and is a significant figure in my life. But on a material level, it's a loaded space: the ancestral space, the space of personal relationships.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Relationships are an organising principle of your work. You think a lot about how a 'self' is developed through kinship, intimacy, collectivity and dialogue. Let's time travel to 11 years ago. How did you start thinking about your practice as a set of relationships?

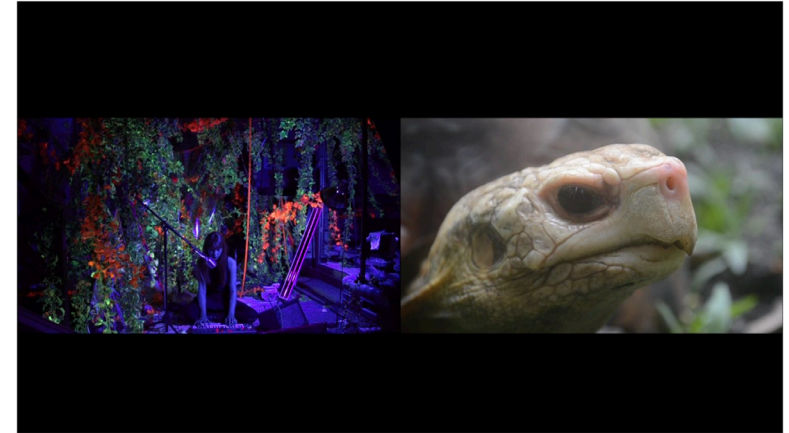
A KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI — My first video work was the trilogy *2012-2555* (2012). When I set out to make it, I wanted time to work as it does in a movie; that is, with nonlinear cuts between past, present and future, all compressed into 120 minutes. At the time, I was obsessed with death and the end: we were experiencing intense flooding in Thailand, and 2012 was meant to be an apocalyptic year. I was also thinking about the future. In the Thai calendar, 2555 is the equivalent of the Gregorian calendar year 2012, but seeing those dates together sparked some thoughts about science fiction.

But instead of developing a fully-formed speculative future, I was mainly filming and gathering material from my own life. The project took on a diaristic bent as a result. I became more interested in looking for the future elsewhere, in the present, rather than creating or imagining an entirely different temporality. In other words, I wanted to find an alternative sense of futurity in regions or locations where modernity has played out differently. So I went the other way: rather than using material from my life to create narrative structure, I used narrative or cinematic forms — such as the trilogy, the documentary, the trailer — to structure my own experience of time, my psychology and my artistic practice moving forward. I consciously approached making these films as a form of actualisation and development. I was still thinking about time, but not in a sequential sense: more like how the passage of time is perceived through life-changing relationships, in the progression of ideas and how time's effects are marked on the body.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Let's talk about another form of futurity: haunting. Ghosts and spirits feature prominently in your work. How do they relate to your interest in time?

A KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI — In *HISTORY IN A ROOM FILLED WITH PEOPLE WITH FUNNY NAMES 4* (2017), I was thinking about my grandmother's dementia in terms of entropy in thermodynamics, where everything in the universe goes through the entropic stage, where all things start to become more of the same as they lose energy. You can apply that to real, living things and to human systems as well. In *SONGS FOR DYING*, one of the central ideas is decomposition. I talk about ghosts themselves as decomposers: how they digest ancestral memories, trauma, things that seem like they can't be processed in one person's lifetime.

My obsession with video, or moving image, or time-based media is with time itself. My medium is time, and change — change seen through all these bodies and places that are depicted in the work. In 2017, I curated and helped found the inaugural *GHOST* festival of performance and moving image in Bangkok. That edition really expanded upon the idea of seeing invisible networks — from animism to capitalism — as ghostly, like how you can think of 'possession' in terms of both hauntings and ownership or private property. It was conceptually grounded in various ways of relating to time: locating yourself in a specific moment in time, spending time, allowing your body to be possessed by time. *SONGS FOR DYING* felt very special because the main body being depicted in the video is that of my grandfather, who was the beginning thread of this entire project, which stretches from 2012-2555 to the work I'm producing today. Following tradition, his funeral happened really quickly and it was really formal. For me, the process of making this video was about personally processing his life, too.



Still from '2012-2555', 2012

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — My grandmother passed away around the same time as your grandfather, and I've been thinking about the purpose of mourning. It's not so much about loss as it is about considering how someone remains with us: thinking about that person's enduring role in your life, along with their role in the universe and all of these other systems. Can you say more about how the form of *Songs for Dying* reflects your own process of mourning?

A KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI — A video always feels like a meditation. I guess different videos have different ways of meditating. *HISTORY IN A ROOM FILLED WITH PEOPLE WITH FUNNY NAMES 4* was actually structured around an ayahuasca circle, and the qualities of an ayahuasca meditation. In *SONGS FOR DYING*, we begin with footage of my grandfather at the funeral overlaid with a Marapasati meditation, which roughly translates as death-consciousness, a recreation of dying, or learning how to die better.

Before I started editing, I went to a meditation-retreat-slash-workshop, at this place called the Paccaya Foundation in Chiang Mai, [Thailand]. Some of the monks there were once student activists who had been jailed while protesting. All the attendees got invited to an advisor of the foundation's ninetieth birthday, which doubled-up as a mediation trip. The whole thing was like a movie, where I was the extra and this woman was the main character. For political reasons, she had to escape Thailand in the 1970s, when the military overthrew the monarchy. She left for England, where she became a student activist. In reality, I was participating in a meditation workshop that went back and forth between a Buddhist mindset and revolutionary politics. The monks explained that there are always these two spaces that are connected. Even the Buddhist space, where you're trying to be zero, is connected to what's happening in Thailand right now, with the student protests.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — In *SONGS FOR DYING*, you also talk about how decomposition is the great unifier of all organisms. I'm curious about your impulse to 'unify' the historical, political, personal and spiritual: it's a driving force behind much of your work.

A KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI — There's power not just in vulnerability, but allowing for instability, and trying to write a sequence that allows you, and the audience, to feel many things within an artwork: to feel transformed, and to open up many more conversations with people about their experiences. Early on in my artistic development, I wondered: could I make work about not just my life, but life in general? And could it still be interesting to me? A lot of movies about life end with a bottom line, a lesson learned — but could I make something where life can still be a lucid, moving, undefined thing? Could it still be art *laughs* — but could it still be life?

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — I call this 'porousness', the way we can allow our bodies to hold all those different spaces and move through them in a way that isn't tethered to any one form or set ideology. Where did that line of thinking begin for you? Was there a moment that it all clicked?

A KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI — It came at a really specific time. Grad school is basically therapy, and I went to do my MFA at Columbia at a relatively young age. I didn't have so much of a life or a self outside my art practice, so what I was processing as a person in the world, and within my art, became one and the same. Back then, I was interested in the virtual space and the real space, and the ambiguity of the former. Everyone was obsessed with conceptualising what the virtual space was, which was interesting because it was unclear. I would go on for hours talking about the ideas travelling between these two spaces. It was Daniel Bozhkov, my professor at the time, who said: Forget about the real and the virtual. Think about those two spaces, and the invisible membrane between them. Your practice is about throwing an object that makes that membrane appear. A membrane is interesting because it's not a wall, it allows things through, but it's still there.

Since then, I've been working with the idea of the membrane over and again. And I don't only mean what divides and lies between real and unreal space, the West and the East, Thailand and my personal life. At the *GHOST* festival, we called the membrane 'air': the air around things, the air around the event. It's subjective but it's not neutral. In *SONGS FOR DYING*, the membrane becomes the ghost: an embodiment of the space between disparate locations or events where ideas or emotions get translated. In *PAINTING WITH HISTORY 3*, the membrane becomes a character called Chantri: a drone, ghost and spirit. The membrane between the audience and the work gets given a name. The membrane is what weaves between rooms, different times, different spaces. It's also storytelling.

I remember the moment when Bozhkov conceptualised the membrane for me – he picked up something and threw it at a wall to illustrate it – and that's when I re-conceptualised my practice.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Your early video works, such as *2012-2555* (2012), openly consider the tension you felt between developing your artistic practice in the American higher education system — you did your BFA in printmaking at the Rhode Island School of Design and your MFA at Columbia University in New York (graduating in 2009 and 2012 respectively) — and your familial, ancestral and personal ties to Thailand, where you grew up. Can you elaborate on the specific issues of identity and artistic production that you set out to address?

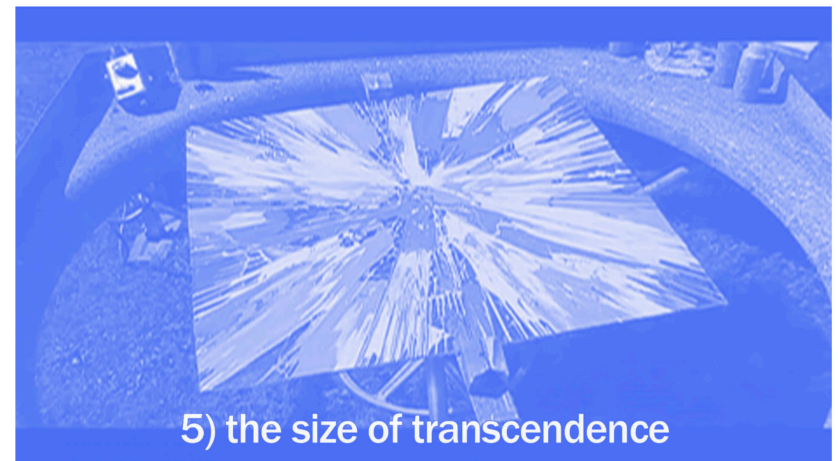
A KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI — I moved to America at the age of 18 in 2005. I think of this as the time when I learned how to be an artist, but I was also preoccupied with my grandfather and the life I left in Thailand. I began this series in order to build a bridge between the academic discourse in the United States and the rest of my life at a time when I really saw and felt the separation between these two worlds. I created the central character of the Denim Painter to address the questions I had about Western art history and art practice, and where my own perspective came in. I was thinking: How do I connect these disparate spaces to become a more full person? At the time, there was almost a stigma around being from Thailand, doing video and trying to make something that connected personal experience from a non-American context to the traditions and context of Western art. In Western white spaces, the work often sits in a neutral ground where 'a life lived' doesn't really enter — its's like life contaminates the space of art. And when life is allowed to enter, it suddenly dominates the conversation and how the work can be read. As the work grew, I felt like I wanted to find a type of storytelling where all my interests could come together, without these limitations.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — The Denim Painter is the main character in nearly all your films. He's an ambitious young artist who is played by you, and in many ways *is* you. He writes letters to another character, Chantri — who we'll talk about shortly — reflecting on and questioning his role in the world. In literary terms, you could call these narratives 'autofiction'. You use material from your life and your relationships to build vast artistic worlds and provide a meta-commentary on their existence. Where did the idea of the Denim Painter come from, and how has it evolved?

A KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI — The Denim Painter is based on a fictional, more representational version of myself as an artist. In *2012-2555*, I was thinking through a few themes. First, I was really interested in Duangjai Jansuoni winning *THAILAND'S GOT TALENT* in 2012. Because she made paintings using her half-naked body, she created a huge controversy — and a public conversation around 'real' versus amateur art. One of the more prominent figures condemning her work was a neo-traditional Thai painter. His power and authority also got me thinking about the role of Buddhism in Thai culture, especially in terms of how the nation-state was structured and modernised after World War II. Lastly, conversation about Janasuoni's art was closely tied to sex entertainment and its association with moralised, unconscious desire. I started to see how the relationship between the conscious and unconscious self was projected onto the identity of the nation-state: between the Buddhist religion and sex entertainment, for example. In short, the Denim Painter became this character who was always trying to find a place where he could actually connect the conscious with the unconscious, and the work that he makes addresses that. He's called the Denim Painter because he wears denim, and uses it as a material in his paintings.

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — You've mentioned before that denim appears to be a universal clothing material, but retains an aura of globalised, commercial America. I like how the Denim Painter tears, splatters and literally sets fire to this stand-in for neo-imperialism in his work: it's almost like burning a flag. You also bring in elements of Janasuoni's work, with the torso and hand-prints, which cascade into references to Action Painting and Yves Klein. You make and exhibit the Denim Painter's paintings in real life, right?

A KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI — Yeah – the paintings are more like metaphor-making or symbolic actions to serve the character of the Denim Painter. At the same time, there's a symbiosis between making paintings and making videos. Sometimes, as in this case, paintings will arise from the video work. Other times, the painting will present a way to push the narrative forward, or shift something about the characters' relationships.



5) the size of transcendence

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Whenever I refer to your work, the word I reach for is 'vast'. We can spend, and have spent, hours talking about every social, political, personal and cosmic aspect contained therein. But, of course, there's a hidden logic behind it all: a system you've created around your central themes and characters. How do you structure each video, and how does that relate to your body of work overall?

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Let's talk about the film and installation series: *PAINTING WITH HISTORY IN A ROOM FILLED WITH MEN WITH FUNNY NAMES* 1 (2013), 2 (2014), 3 (2015), *WITH HISTORY IN A ROOM FILLED WITH PEOPLE WITH FUNNY NAMES* 4 (2016), and *NO HISTORY IN A ROOM FILLED WITH PEOPLE WITH FUNNY NAMES* (2018). Where, or what, is the 'room full of people with funny names'?

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Earlier, you mentioned wanting to be free of the limitations imposed by a Western lens, and the de facto binaries such readings put in place. Your films feature a secondary character named Chantri, who is the recipient of roaming, introspective letters from the Denim Painter. At the beginning of the series, the films' narrative unfolds via a monologue spoken by the Denim Painter. From *PAINTING WITH HISTORY* 3 onwards, it's a dialogue between him and Chantri. Either way, the Denim Painter always uses the second-person as a form of address, making the work feel both intimate and direct. How does Chantri help you approach an audience that might, consciously or unconsciously, project some of these limitations onto your work?

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Then, starting from *PAINTING WITH HISTORY* 3, she got a voice. This allowed her to evolve from being a void or non-character that was a silent recipient of the Denim Painter's letters, or a stand-in for the audience, into a real, active character who could converse with the Denim Painter and move the film along through her own intellect and agency.

A KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI — At first, my idea was: if the trilogy 2012-2555 was about the life of the artist, then the *PAINTING WITH HISTORY...* series would be the work of the artist, and these two series would function separately. How that ended up playing out was more like a full cinematic universe: with spinoffs, sequels and prequels, along with trailers and live performances, that feature a consistent cast of characters. Sometimes, I think of my entire practice as a sculpture: how each individual part – video, performance, installation, painting and research – comprises a whole, three-dimensional body.

A KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI — In naming these works, I'm referring to spaces or 'rooms' built from discourse or compartmentalisation. The Room of Western Art History. All these rooms! In the beginning, my work was very much about how to find or claim a space of 'painting' for myself, but it was never about making paintings on my own terms *against* a Western context and Western audience.

A KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI — Chantri is a void. She is also a filter for the audience: a storytelling tool that allows me to alter the audience's point of view. Initially, I used Chantri to address a Western audience with a Thai name. Part of those early works involved telling a story about Western male painters, and what it feels like to be othered in the 'room' of Western art history. Through this form of address, whoever comes to the exhibition and watches the video essentially becomes Chantri. They become one of the people with funny names.

A KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI — I gave Chantri a voice. She became an embodiment of this space 'in between'; the space where meaning arises. For example, the space in between the moment when light enters your retina, and the moment when you interpret what you see as an image.



Still from 'Painting With History in a Room Filled With People With Funny Names 3', 2015

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — Right, so she embodies the *process* of understanding experience. In dialogue, she becomes more of a void in a spiritual sense: the negative space that is necessary to the existence of any positive form, balancing out and giving shape to the overabundant chaos against which the Denim Painter shapes his worldview and experience. You also gave Chantri a body: a drone.

A KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI — The year I was making *PAINTING WITH HISTORY* 3 was the year the first prosumer drone, the DJI Inspire, came out. I remember thinking to myself, this is going to change how we see the world. At first, it was just a filmmaking tool, but then the drone just had such a big presence on set. It was this new technological object that no-one had seen before. At some point, I realised the drone was a main character, and that the entire shoot should be based on it. Turning the spirit of Chantri into a drone let me give form to the connection between animism and technology. She links the animistic, anachronistic network of spirituality with the physical-yet-immaterial digital network. Both these networks function very similarly, and by the time we get to *PAINTING WITH HISTORY* 4, Chantri takes on a more dystopian personality. It was 2016, Trump had gotten elected, and any tech optimism had faded; instead, we were facing a deep anxiety about the digital network.



Still from 'Painting With History in a Room Filled With People With Funny Names 3', 2015

KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — That makes me think of K Allado-McDowell's book, *ATLAS OF ANOMALOUS AI* (2020), which encourages us to consider artificial intelligence from an ecological or animistic point of view, in terms of how a variety of intelligences hang in the balance through connection, rather than solely competing for dominance. In my book, *SMALL GODS* (2020), you and I discuss how much the drone — who is voiced by your mother — also embodies another function of spirituality: the assurance of being watched over, protected, observed, and the sinister flip-side of this, surveillance.

Alongside Chantri and the Denim Painter, there's a rotating cast of people who play themselves. There's the performance artist Tosh Basco, your close friend and collaborator, whose raw, sinuous, dance-based work makes appearances in your own films and performances. There are also your family members, from your grandparents to your twin brother, Korapat. How would you describe the relationship between these entities, and how do you see these distinct personas inside your interconnected, multifaceted world?

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — At the same time, *WITH HISTORY 4* contained and responded to several significant contemporaneous events from Trump's election to the King of Thailand dying, ending his reign of 70 years. Thinking of your role, as you mentioned, of 'documentary filmmaker', can you talk more about your research process?

A KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI — If we think of Basco or my grandparents, these are characters that are, in essence, relationships with real people that I've made. Even though there are metaphors and names and ways they perform, the way they enter the work is actually through a non-constructed space. My video *WITH HISTORY 4* (2016) was centred around this idea. Tristan Garcia's book, *FORM AND OBJECT* (2014), was hugely influential. I was thinking about how the definition of the human species is relational: from the names we choose to give to everything, to the network of relationships between these contexts. The human species is defined by how it names, connects and remembers itself. I was considering this in relation to my grandmother's dementia — how that meant that she was starting to physically lose these networks of meaning. She became the main character for this video.

Actually, in *WITH HISTORY 4*, a new structure was formed. I started to see myself as a medium: channelling and telling stories from the world and people around me, rather than my own. Equally, I was playing the role of documentary filmmaker. I spoke to archeologists who worked in carbon dating, I spoke to brain surgeons and psychologists who specialised in animal consciousness, I joined an ayahuasca ceremony, all to understand how the network of the mind, and the network of the world, were connected.

A KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI — The more gaps between the bodies of knowledge I'm drawing from or investigating, the better — then I can actually be a poet. What's most important is that the work starts to make sense for me, and in dialogue with other people. Having all these gaps allows you to see things better. The space in between allows you to see or feel something else.

A lot of the time I don't actually write with my own ideas; a lot of it is me processing different people and their ideas. It's not a zeitgeist, per se, but it's an energy of the time. That's what was hard about trying to shoot *SONGS FOR DYING* in Korea without actually being able to be there because of the pandemic], breathe the air, talk to people. The writing itself may be united with one or two voices, but a lot of it is a collage of conversations and texts and responses. Some of it, I'm processing as I'm writing as well. There are all these different memories and encounters and they get pulled together. It's important to me that a certain line may come from this person, this text, the characters you see in the video, they might not talk, but a lot of them are mentioned.

The shamans on Jeju Island, one of the locations central to *SONGS FOR DYING*, work in a similar way. They tell the story of the island] starting from the cosmos, describing the way existence is rooted in the island spiritually, socially and ecologically, tracing the deep time of history all the way to the Jeju massacre the slaughter of 30,000 residents on Jeju Island, who had opposed the division of Korea in 1948]. Their worldview and method of storytelling connects the bodies of the people in the present to the past, but in encompassing cosmological and deep-historical questions, it evades being *just* political — and in doing so evades censorship or crackdown.

CARLOS/ISHIKAWA

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — In the Philippines, there's a saying about how you need to say it sideways when you can't say it straight. Saying it sideways isn't just evasion, it's a way of producing knowledge and producing a way of understanding the world that is beside the brute force of the state narrative. Are you similarly avoiding state intervention or censorship in your videos?

Q THE WHITE REVIEW — I'm interested in the relationship between order and chaos, revolution and control, abstract and concrete in your work. The locations that you select, from Ramasun Station to Jeju Island, are almost microcosms of these dialectics. How do you find these places?

A KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI — When we think about the language being used in the video, I use the cosmological to address the nature of power. I'm able to communicate how the monarchy and the military have consolidated power in Thailand, for example, in a way that, if I do get to show this video in Thailand, is just about legal.

A KORAKRIT ARUNANONDCHAI — It's pretty natural to me. I'm privileged to have so many amazing friends I'm in constant conversation with. I want the projects to fill themselves out. It's not really audience participation *laughs*], but I create this big picture which I can then fill out with specific contexts and stories from the sites the works will be shown in. Every show I do is a research opportunity as well. As an artist, you're constantly wearing your interests and research on your sleeve; you're touring the mass of your ideas. One of the locations that features in *SONGS FOR DYING* is an archeological site in Turkey called Göbekli Tepe, known as the first temple in the world. I'd been trying to go to this place for three years. I'd read Yuval Noah Harari's *SAPIENS* (2011) and was interested in when hunters and gatherers became farmers; in other words, the building blocks of capitalism. I was finally able to go when I exhibited at the 16th Istanbul Biennial (2019). I went to Jeju Island because I was doing the 13th Gwangju Biennale (2021). I was already interested in Cold War politics and the invisible space of animism. The animistic space is one that always absorbs ambiguity.



Still from 'Painting With History in a Room Filled With People With Funny Names 3', 2015