



Pratchaya Phintong, *An Average Thai Berry Picker's Income*
(part of *Give More Than You Take*), 2018
Framed Swedish notes and coins
47.1 x 76.6 cm
ADN Collection
Image courtesy of the Artist and gb agency, Paris

The primacy of logistics as an artistic subject also reflects the importance of scale in artistic practice. Artists who came of professional age in the late 1990s and 2000s often process and manage resources at a scale vastly different than that of even their colleagues of a decade prior. An unprecedented number of artists, for example, shuttle between various metropolises that are often thousands of miles apart. Others endorse a kind of calculated literalism which reads as a reaction against the sometimes nebulous and abstract thinking often afflicting discussions of globalism on the one hand, and a direct attempt to rescale the notion of the world so as to permit the individual to matter once more. For *Give More Than You Take* (2010–ongoing), Pratchaya Phintong picked berries in Sweden alongside migrant workers from Thailand. The weight of the berries he picked – the measure by which he and his fellow workers were compensated – was represented in a gallery by “useless objects, waste, recycling or leftover items” collected by a curator at Pratchaya’s request.²² The tangibility of these items, collected and displayed, offer a poignant counter to how these workers are discussed as statistical information in various reports about the “migrant worker” issue. But although the objects may effectively work as a material presence and as a representation of the artist’s subjectivity, they also read as a profoundly depressing testament to just how frequently individuals exist only as data circulated through the structures of capital for which life exists to be constantly optimised: wages, weights, identity card numbers, hours worked and government reports published. The second large question, unsurprisingly, concerns the production of information and the collection of data, challenges whose urgency is especially pronounced in a field for which conventional tactics of archive production are often impossible. Under such circumstances, how do we mobilise data in order to consider what has been lost?

TOWARDS AN ANTICIPATORY ART HISTORY

Along these lines, it is striking to note the number of artworks embodying the spirit, if not the force of what might be called an ‘anticipatory art history’. Borrowing from geographer Caitlin DeSilvey’s studies of climate change in which anticipatory histories are created to explore alternative choices leading to a variety of futures,

an anticipatory art history stresses a vision of history that reconfigures itself as a new mythology better able to produce ethically and politically aware audiences.²³ It requires prioritising a truthfully imagined future over misleading revisions of the past. Rather than insist that histories turn on the projection of indefinitely sustainable narratives, anticipatory art history makes use of fiction to stress the hypothetical rather than the probable or even the believable. As DeSilvey and others note via Hayden White's view of a "progressive history", we engage with the past not to reveal a fixed truth or legitimise the present but "to find out what it takes to face a future we should like to inherit rather than one that we have been forced to endure."²⁴

Going further, an anticipatory art history demands a fuller account of the social implications of emotion and affect. It urges us to consider how artworks look forward to a world able to accommodate a wide variety of emotional responses, including but not limited to those most commonly invoked in discussions of art's social relevance, namely, rage, grief, cynicism and indifference. What made *The Act of Killing* (2012), Joshua Oppenheimer's documentary of the Indonesian Massacres of 1965–1966, durably memorable, and thus effective as a form of social and political work, was how it proposed history as a form of creative nonfiction. By letting the actual perpetrators of what amounted to state-sanctioned mass murder re-enact how they killed in the name of the state without passing moral judgement, Oppenheimer seems to imply how outright fiction is preferable to any pretence at objective truth-telling. This is particularly important in a time when the credibility of knowledge dressed as fact has never been more suspect. One is more likely to trust subjectivity, especially feeling that is presented as anything but objective, a point raised over and over again in the films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul or the performances of Arahmaiani, especially her brilliantly named video work, *I don't want to be part of your legend* (2004).²⁵ It is arguably the best cure against intellectual sclerosis; to quote Moten and Harney, "there are always elaborations of social life that are not comprehended or exploited by capital."²⁶



Wong Hoy Cheong. *RE:Looking* (video stills). 2002–2003
Video installation
Dimensions variable
Singapore Art Museum Collection
Images courtesy of the Artist and Singapore Art Museum

Perhaps the most sensible thing one can do is to simply make things up. Wong Hoy Cheong's multimedia work *Re:Looking* (2002–2003) demonstrates how and why the presentation of information matters. In many respects a culmination of several interests, including decontextualising 'master' narratives and the mediation of information, the work is about a fictional Malaysian television broadcast documenting the life of migrant white Austrian workers, complete with Austrian scholars criticising the influence of Malaysia.²⁷ Wong merges the dynamism of the past with future process rather than reinforcing a genealogically legitimated present. His decision to situate the viewing in a room meant to function like a living room is particularly significant – it directs attention to the act of viewing as a circumstantial function. The space competes with the mode of communication; the plush couch in this inviting if slightly creepy living room with deer antlers asks you to tarry longer even as the television set urges you to mediate your looking as a series of momentary staccato contact by flipping through channels on a remote control.

20 E. Joseph Pine II and James Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999).

21 Janet Kraynak, "The Land and the Economics of Sustainability," *Art Journal* 69 (2010): 24.

22 For example, when the work was shown at the Singapore Art Museum in the exhibition 'Time of Others' in 2015, the museum purchased \$49 kilograms of old newspapers from a *karung guni man* (rag-and-bone man). Once a common sight in Singapore, *karung guni men* are disappearing with the advent of modern recycling.

23 Caitlin DeSilvey, "Making Sense of Transience: An Anticipatory History," *Cultural Geographies* 19 (2012): 31–54.

24 Ewa Domanska, "A Conversation with Hayden White," *Rethinking History* 12 (2008): 3–21, quoted in Caitlin DeSilvey, Simon Naylor and Colin Sackett, "Anticipatory Histories: An Introduction," *Journal of Wild Culture* (2014), accessed 10 July 2016, www.wildculture.com/article/anticipatory-histories-introduction/1298. Originally published in *Anticipatory History*, ed. Caitlin DeSilvey et al. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011).

25 *I don't want to be part of your legend* is a retelling of a well-known episode from the epic Sanskrit poem *Ramayana*, where the protagonist subjects his queen to a series of tests to prove her fidelity.

26 Moten and Harney, p. 124.

27 Ray Langenbach's interview with Wong offers an illuminating discussion of these interests: "In Conversation with Wong Hoy Cheong," *Wong Hoy Cheong: Of Migrants & Rubber Trees* (Kuala Lumpur: Valentine Millie Fine Arts and DVA, 2002), p. 26–40, catalogue of an exhibition at The Creative Centre, National Art Gallery, Malaysia, 12–28 August 1996.



Ming Wong, *Four Malay Stories* (video stills), 2005
4-channel DV video, in black/white with audio, edition 2/5
Duration 4:03 mins and 25 mins (loop)
Singapore Art Museum Collection
Images courtesy of Singapore Art Museum

Equally striking is a pointed embrace among some artists of an inverse chronology, crudely defined here as an intentional and visible attempt to access history from a recognisable present. Consider Ming Wong's *Four Malay Stories* (2005). A four-channel video installation, it depicts Wong recreating key scenes from the films of legendary Malay showbiz icon P. Ramlee. Wong – himself not a Malay speaker – repeats the lines in repeated takes of the same scene along with a simultaneous transcription and literal translation in English. His performance becomes another story, and thus another chance to add to a counter-repository of thinking, one perhaps better equipped to undermine the evidentiary value ascribed to information masquerading as fact. They invoke the ability to tell stories that go beyond official narratives without succumbing to the flawed temptations of nostalgia, or to drawing an arbitrary distinction between form and content (a distinction which still permeates interpretations of artworks) – how they are told is at the heart of the rhetoric import.

Four Malay Stories calls for a particular kind of sociability, which scales the idea of encounter around the psychological and physical dimensions of individual bodies rather than the safety inherent in group identification and lineage. Here we inch towards another question of value, definitions of which are heavily based on how states, institutions and markets manage available resources including the right to be heard. The more effective works tend to be those making the case for what these traditional benchmarks of value exclude or cannot adequately accommodate.

By way of closing in anticipation of other beginnings, consider Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's 'Two Planets' series, begun in 2007. A series of single-channel videos, each between 16 and 18 minutes long, they show Thai villagers from behind as they sit and contemplate framed copies of famous Western paintings. It certainly recalls the question of how and why certain works are regarded as 'Art History' as opposed to an art history actively imbricated in the experiences of particular audiences.

'Two Planets' may be among the best descriptions of the processual nature of viewing. The story behind the work is straightforward enough: former university tutor Araya becomes interested in how her students were reluctant to pass judgement on artworks designated as 'great'. By recontextualising the situation, she implies how context affects perception. The farmers generally view the work outside: next to the sea, for instance, or in a forest clearing. A work encased in a golden frame is presented, almost as if out of nowhere. Like audiences of Wong Hoy Cheong's *Re:Looking*, those of Araya look up at the work, as if the work was a television or screen; they look at each painting as if watching a scene from a movie. Frequently the farmers discuss the work not as a painted artifice, but as if the image was an extension of their own lives. Often they cut the work down to size by talking about what happens in each image as if they are incidents that could be quotidian occurrences. "Why did she take off her clothes?" one woman asks of Edouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1862-1863), inspiring mirth among her colleagues. "Are the picnickers eating bananas?" another asks. "Are the far-off animals yoked to a cart in Jean-François Millet's *The Gleaners* perhaps elephants? Or camels?"

The farmers seemed to treat it like it was any object, or at least as an image contiguous with their world. The gold frame compositionally acts like a television console. As a symbol, the weight and colour of the frame reinforces the notion of how what it contains – the canonical works of Art History – as being cordoned off. As an object, it reminds the viewer of how contiguous such works are with the world. Its perceived weight, size and even its brassy tone emphasise its material presence in the world. And the farmers seem to recognise such contiguity. Of the figures in *The Gleaners* (1857), the farmers observe that they are "like we are," or, since they seem to have harder lives, "like the old folks in the past."²⁸ Of the unclothed picnicker in *Le Déjeuner*, they describe her as "a cute rich girl." "Her face is fresh like fresh chicken droppings (so white and soft)."

The point here is not that the farmers are some primordial mirror of truth, but that Araya stays with them long enough to record comments gets us to think about the durational aspect of looking, that duration is necessary to activate the artwork as a catalyst for real encounter. The farmers are not there to poke holes in a particular history

of modern art or to reinforce the cliché of the authenticity of the naïf. But the farmers' reactions do underscore the experience of viewing at its most unvarnished point, their responses putting description at the forefront in turn emphasising how the encounter with paintings often takes the form of externalising the gap between seeing and saying. Araya seeks to foster an encounter, rather repeat a value judgement where students never fully realise their own capacities as viewers and where the artwork is presented to them as an object of unqualified veneration. The farmers' voices are authorial but their identities remain anonymous, in sync with how the painter of each work remains nameless to the farmers. Could namelessness be the grounds for sustaining the viability of a commons?

Central to 'Two Planets' is how Araya brings the work to the viewers. The reproductions are taken from the wall and resituated in areas her audiences know and understand. In this respect, she takes literally the call to make works seem closer. But how the farmers discuss the works indicate that there is only so much you can do to get close to the work; hence the farmers' constant use

of analogy to communicate what it is they feel the works embody. All you can do is describe what something is like, using words that convey as specific a meaning as possible to your recognised audience, in this case other farmers who may very well be neighbours or kin. Viewing is a communal practice, one where the act of response is mediated by a simultaneous awareness of others being able to exercise their faculties of judgement.

In order to talk about Manet's risqué picnic, the farmers use slang to replace words that, in Thai culture, should not be spoken between men and women. Accordingly, the work becomes a moment where impossible communication is made possible; they demand new production of language. The violation of a social taboo, however minor, further suggests a point where the experience an artwork generates crosses over into the realm of encounter. Put otherwise, when you have the very strong feeling that it is happening to you, it generates sensations of attraction or repulsion compelling you to think differently about your own claims to inhabit a shared present. Thus if part of the viability of contemporary art in Southeast Asia turns on discussion of the 'contemporary', thinking about what it cannot accommodate becomes that much more important. Doing so is necessary in order to activate the kind of imaginative attack worthy of the commons, to which so much affective investment is being presently made.



Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook,
Two Planets series: Manet's *Dejeuner sur l'herbe* 1862/63
and the Thai villagers (video still), 2007
4-channel video installation
Duration 18 mins
Singapore Art Museum Collection
Image courtesy of Singapore Art Museum

28 A full transcript of the villagers' remarks is published in Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook: *In this circumstance, the sole object of attention should be the treachery of the moon* (Bangkok: ARDEL Gallery of Modern Art, 2009), catalogue of an exhibition at ARDEL Gallery of Modern Art, 2009.