



CLEARING

How to find beauty in a sea of data

The Brooklyn Rail, 2017

(author: Adriana Blidaru)

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BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

An epilogue to a series that began in 2012, Korakrit Arunanondchai's *with history in a room filled with people with funny names 4*, boldly inhabits Bushwick's CLEARING gallery. Arunanondchai has devised three immersive installations in the space, each occupying a room and setting its own mood and tone, yet all operating as part of the same larger story. In this narrative, autobiography clashes in unison with facts and fiction, and animals, plants, humans, machines, infrastructures, and feelings all merge into one single meta-organism.

In the first room, a projection on a large screen sets the ground on which the other two installations unfold. Some of the objects and elements from this video materialize in the exhibition space, enabling the installations to recount key scenes from the video and to further expand into independent sequences of their own. This, together with the video's narration—which is spoken both in Thai (the artist's mother tongue) and in French (the language his mother



Installation view: Korakrit Arunanondchai, *with history in a room filled with people with funny names 4*. Courtesy the artist and CLEARING New York / Brussels. Photo: Stan Narten.

teaches)—allows one to navigate the exhibition as a journey: passing from the video, which acts as frame and prelude, through “the garden”(the second room of the exhibition) and finally arriving at “house” (the last room of the exhibition). The second room features a seemingly post-apocalyptic landscape, a merger of both artificial and natural elements, intertwined together in a wasteland. Wiry matter crops up from clumps of solidified black silt and climbs over the gallery's floors and walls like ivy. Plastic tubes circulating liquid make their way as veins in and out of the black cavernous sediment, gushing into small waterfalls here and there. There is something disquieting yet sensual about the garden: the streams of water running through and the scattered constellation of amorphous objects, make the space feel alive. The house leaves the opposite impression: a pristine space meant for reflection, where the white walls of the gallery are adorned with personal objects and family photos. Some of these objects are recreations from the video, others are the inventions of Tipyavarna Nitibhon, Arunanondchai's grandmother.

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The artist's grandmother also features in the very first scene of the video. Struggling with dementia, as we find out later from the exhibition notes, here she is caught on camera failing to recognize a slipper, and trying to fit different objects into it, including a red wooden toy block. Juxtaposed with this image, a voiceover plays: "In this body the data is alive but it is stuck in a loop. The present stopped existing for me. The relationships are undoing themselves." This emotional and personal scene is the starting point for a series of universal questions that flow through the parallel narratives of the show. A hypnotic montage follows: wild animals in the safari, scientific studies, major global events such as the post-election protests in the U.S., and the gatherings mourning the death of the King of Thailand, followed by the question, "If the hierarchy of images form the design of life, what forms the design of death?"

Arunanondchai's work suggests that life and death are embedded in a large and rich web of interdependence. It sees technology as a materialization of this cooperation between humans, animals, and data, adding to a mythological twist through the manifestation of Chantri, the drone-spirit: a fictional character that has appeared in his previous videos and that represents the artist's consciousness as well as the incarnation of the audience.

With scattered scenes featuring things like a huge rat reading a book, or performance artist boychild's magical appearance as an avatar, the video swerves at times into surreal territory. At one point, the sound of heavy breathing produces an almost uncomfortable out-of-body experience. These scenes emphasize something missing from the construction of overarching representational narratives. In the cracks, we find matter's continuous transformation in the world, beyond human existence, identity, politics, or pain. As humans seem to be the agents of their own destruction by consciously transforming the earth into a smoldering wreck, Arunanondchai's video suggests that the power of storytelling could shape a better reality, a more ecologically oriented one, in which matter is a single meta-organism that needs to be understood independently of common human perception.