

## THE LAY OF THE LAND

Daniel Birnbaum. Artforum. New York: Summer 2005. Vol. 43, Iss. 10; pg. 270, 6 pgs

### AN EXPERIMENT IN ART AND COMMUNITY IN THAILAND

It's already evening when I arrive by car at the Land, an artists' community in northern Thailand initiated by Kamin Lertchaiprasert and Rirkrit Tiravanija in 1998. Dusk is falling, and the fire that keeps the water buffalo warm at night will soon be lit. The buffalo themselves are already on their way to a familiar spot next to a small pond; slowly and majestically they approach across the vast rice fields. Behind them, in the distance, are the mountains that surround these agricultural flatlands. This is the village of Sanpatong, some twenty minutes outside the northern provincial capital, Chiang Mai, a rapidly growing city of some two hundred thousand people. hot rain is falling from the skies in fact, it's pouring-and we find shelter in one of the pavilions huddled around the pond. I entered this structure once before, in its previous life as a work of art in a European institution. Designed by German artist Tobias Rehberger, it was displayed at Stockholm's Moderna Museet in 2.000, before being dismantled and shipped across the globe to this rural and, needless to say, less visible site. It now serves as temporary home to one of the inhabitants of the Land. It may still be a sculptural work, but now it has been put to use. A few belongings (a backpack, sneakers, a few books) make clear that someone is, in fact, living in this basic but elegant three-story wooden structure on stilts, which overlooks the pond. Spread out in the landscape are a number of other modest structures designed by Lertchaiprasert and Tiravanija themselves and by artist friends from around the world.

Rehberger, the very first artist from outside Thailand to be involved in the project, emphasizes its open and somewhat vague quality. "It wasn't at all clear to me when Rirkrit approached me eight years ago what this was going to be," Rehberger told me. "And now, after many visits to the Land, I still don't know exactly what it's all about. It may sound strange, but this hazy quality is precisely what attracts me. Nobody knows what the Land is-and even less what it's going to develop into." In fact, the Land isn't a commune in the normal sense, because the artists realizing projects there have done so primarily for the benefit of others. The inhabitants-perhaps "users" is a better term-are a mix of local artists, a few farmers, and a small group of students.

"The Land [is] to be cultivated as an open space, though with certain intentions toward community, toward discussion, and toward experimentation in [various] fields of thought," according to an official and no doubt deliberately vague-statement of intent that makes clear that other fields besides art are part of the experiment. So, what is the Land? A sculpture garden? A huge artist-run space emphasizing interdisciplinary and collaborative practices? A commune in search of new forms of being in the world? Or is it, if not a collaborative artwork by Tiravanija and his colleagues, then at least an extension of his practice beyond the institution? Probably all of these things, but not quite in the way we tend to understand them in Europe and the United States, where the very idea of a commune simultaneously gives rise to a murky nostalgia and to skepticism, even to a sense of revulsion-conjuring thoughts of monstrous gurus, psychological terror, and sexual oppression. The truth, however, couldn't be less dark.

The Land's land-no one seems to know the precise acreage, but you can walk the length of it in three or four minutes-was acquired seven years ago for a modest sum (roughly ten thousand US dollars) by the two founders, but each is eager to point out the

irrelevance of the notion of property to their endeavor. Lertchaiprasert, who is showing me around, is critical of the art world's rush to label the collective effort an art project, thus defining it according to standards set elsewhere. "It's more about finding new ways of being together," he says. "That's how it started, and that is the real significance of what's going on here. A group of artists has come together to find out if there are other ways of working together and producing things. Not just art but, more important, things to eat, like fruit, herbs, greens, and other vegetables." Lertchaiprasert emphasizes that the projects on the Land all have a practical function. "They actually do work," he emphasizes, "and that's important. It's about learning by doing."

The projects at the Land are not primarily meant to be contemplated aesthetically but rather to be used. So what does the praxis consist in? On the one hand, farmers and local artists work the fields together. With the support of a student group from Chiang Mai University, rice is harvested not seasonally but year-round. Some three thousand pounds are consumed by the community at the Land and by a number of AIDS patients in the local village. There is also a one-year program of around ten students, mostly from Thailand, who stay in Chiang Mai for a year to develop their own art in dialogue with Tiravanija, Lertchaiprasert, and a number of other artists and academics. This pedagogical endeavor is a recent development but is already gaining attention internationally and could develop into a new kind of art college. Some of these students live at the Land itself, others in the city. It seemed to me, during the few days I spent at the site, that these young people were the ones who brought the place to life. Their curriculum, formulated by the Land Foundation, involves a wide spectrum of activities, from farming and meditation to art and philosophy.

The pragmatic aspect of the Land and the nondogmatic attitude of its organizers recur in Lertchaiprasert's presentation of the various projects. We walk from site to site—there are more than a dozen structures so far—and talk about the pond, Rehberger's Swabian architecture (which looks rather Asian to me), and the size of mangos. The agricultural practices used at the Land adhere to the basic philosophy and methods of a Thai farmer named Chaloui Kaewkong, who, besides teaching a general skepticism toward chemicals and industrial farming, has developed ideas about the harmonious composition of the human body. Following his teachings, the terrain of the Land—three-quarters water, one-quarter terra firma—was landscaped to mirror the makeup of our own bodies. Many of the inhabitants, the local artists as well as the participants in the one-year program, practice a kind of meditation based on Hindu techniques, but there is no dogma: Rules and regulations don't govern life on the Land. Everything is figured out by trial and error. It's never about illustrating or implementing some grand doctrine. On the contrary, the individual ingenuity and imagination of each denizen and guest is the focus—which becomes abundantly clear when one considers the heterogeneity of the group of artists who have realized things here or are planning to do so.

To actually accomplish anything at the Land has turned out to be more difficult than many of the participating artists originally thought, as the goodly number of delayed projects proves. Rehberger's building, transported from Sweden, is now in rather bad shape, as he knew it would be after a few years. Little by little the wood must be replaced, so that in the end the whole house will consist of local Thai materials. The Danish collective Superflex developed and installed at the Land a system for the production and storage of biogas using nothing but buffalo manure, which is stored in large, lurid orange balloons that float on the water. Since there is no electricity on the Land, their contribution is essential for everyday life: The methane gas thus produced is

used to fuel the stoves in the communal kitchen sited in one of the centrally located houses. The entire system is to be overhauled this fall. For a project in Africa, Superflex had already developed a simple, portable biogas unit that can produce sufficient methane for the cooking and lighting needs of a large family. In part as a comment on the Thai culture of cheap copies, Superflex also designed a biogas version of Danish designer Poul Henningsen's famous PH5 light fixture and had it manufactured inexpensively in Bangkok, to be used by people living in areas without access to electricity. Both of those devices were ideally suited for the Land. Projects by other Land practitioners that have already been realized or are in advanced stages of planning include a compost-toilet system by the Dutch collective Atelier van Lieshout; a library in the middle of a pond, designed by Prachaya Phintong but as yet unfunded; houses by Spanish artist Alicia Framis, Swedish spoken-wordsmith Karl Holmqvist, and the Stockholm-based design collective Uglycute; a bus stop by Swiss duo Peter Fischli and David Weiss inspired by Oscar Niemeyer's Brasilia; and a solar-energy plant (still years away) by American artist Arthur Meyer. Tiravanija himself has designed a group house based on what he calls the three spheres of human need. On the ground floor one finds a communal space with a fireplace; it's a place for meals, gatherings, and the sharing of ideas. The second floor is for reading and meditation; here one can reflect on the exchanges that took place downstairs. The top floor is for sleeping.

The most ambitious project and perhaps the most visionary to date is artist Philippe Parreno and architect François Roche's collaborative Battery House, a hall for large gatherings that is to feature an animal-powered generator and storage system, which will solve the electricity problem at the Land and provide a central venue for various activities, including the use of computers. Built and financed as a film set for Parreno's *Boy from Mars*, 2003, this strange-looking building (somehow plant, animal, and machine at once), was about to undergo extensive reconstruction when I arrived and has yet to be completed. Originally, the Battery House was supposed to be powered by the elephants that live in the area, but the collaborators had to settle for buffalo. This is a building that "breathes and perspires—something between Clement Adler's early bat-winged airplane and a Spielberg pterodactyl," according to Roche. In a short, rather literary essay from 2003, "Hybrid Muscle," he spells out the inner workings of the Battery House and the intimate cooperation between man and animal that's involved:

In front of [the elephant and his trainer] is a structure made of still-inert plastic leaves holding a zo-tonne concrete counterweight, hanging vertically like clothes in a European miners' locker room. Their job: to lift [the "leaves"] patiently, one by one, using a system of cables and pulleys, moving with animal slowness. Thus muscular energy (2,000 [watt-hours]) is transferred, stored and released, transformed, by means of a dynamo, into electrical energy. This endless cycle from elephant to structure to gravity and then to energy compresses or frees interior space, in rhythm with the occupation of the Land and the movement of the counterweight platform.

Since Lertchaiprasert is highly suspicious of projects that don't perform a practical task, he says that Parreno's structure will be turned into a greenhouse if it doesn't produce electricity as originally planned. But a young engineer working on the project assures me that this biotechnological vision is no fantasy—the generator will soon be up and running and three buffalo put to work on a daily basis. The interior space, defined by the massive artificial leaves reminiscent of elephant hide, will function as the natural venue for larger gatherings and the place to recharge your laptop and cell phone. The energy produced will also make possible the electronic-music events planned by Swedish sound artist

Carl Michael von Hausswolff, whose own house was finished in February. This curious, star-shaped wooden building is an homage to occult scientist Friedrich Jurgenson (who claimed to communicate with the dead via radio) and also a materialization of the antihierarchical symbolism developed by von Hausswolff as part of his fictive nation Elgaland-Vargaland, a collaboration with various artists and the composer Leif Elggren. Now that his house is finished, von Hausswolff is ready to begin programming ambitious concerts with colleagues from the electronic-music world. The buffalo had better get to work.

Part of the budget for von Hausswolff's architectural project comes from the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe, Germany, an institution to which the artist recently donated a major installation that includes Jürgenson's archive of occult recordings (which his widow had given to the artist). This is typical of how the productions at the Land are made possible. There is no real support locally—from the city of Chiang Mai, say—nor is there any financial help to be expected from the founders. The artists who have realized projects on the Land have brought their own funding with them and have put together unusual coproductions (as the Rehberger, Parreno, and von Hausswolff cases make clear). These projects have come to fruition because of a strong desire among artists to contribute to the Land. It has nothing to do with normal art-world careerism, with media visibility, fame, or fortune.

So what is the motivation? "If this would have been in Europe, I wouldn't have been so attracted," says von Hausswolff. "The whole art-commune thing has no interesting future there," he adds. "But in the Asian context, things seem to crystallize in totally new and unexpected ways. Nobody knows what's going to happen here." This clearly echoes what Tiravanija himself has to say about the future of the whole endeavor. In response to my question concerning the relationship of the Land to the notion of Utopia and to the "Utopia Station" exhibition project he cocurated (with Molly Nesbit and Hans-Ulrich Obrist) for the 2003 Venice Biennale, he replies with a laugh that no one can say for sure where the Land will be in three weeks' time: "Utopia? It's all really quite uncertain since we have no money of our own. People suggest projects, and some can be realized, others not." "Utopia Station," which has already added several chapters to its history after the original Venice installment, is more defined in temporal terms than the contributions to the Land. "People come for short periods to realize works," Tiravanija observes. "Often they're just here for a few days. Then they have to leave, and return only two years later to attend to what they've built. It's all very different from an exhibition—more unpredictable, more open." And yet Tiravanija does recognize that his position at the Land is not so different from his role in the art world. "In both contexts," he notes, "I play the host." The Land is proof more of the extension of today's art world to places far from the centers of commerce rather than of Tiravanija's ambition to break out of the traditional art circuit. Even if many aspects of the Land don't fit the typical art-world categories, what is happening there is—whatever else it may be—also unavoidably art.

Like most of Tiravanija's projects and interventions, the Land is also about integrating and reacting to the local. In Sanpatong, he is something of an ambassador who travels the world and brings back interesting people and ideas, whereas Lertchaiprasert is more closely involved with the local community and has strong ties in Chiang Mai as well. The international presence of artists, writers, and curators at the Land can be quite intense, even overwhelming to some of the more long-term inhabitants, and Lertchaiprasert, who on occasion complains about "art tourism," sometimes gets bored with giving people like myself guided tours. Since most of the art stars whose projects have made the Land

famous in art circles are seen here only on rare occasions, the arrival of a small but steady stream of critics and curators can only be disturbing to Lertchaiprasert and the other artists and students who work here day in, day out.

Perhaps what unites the diverse practices of the international cast of artists brought together at the Land is a long-standing effort to engage the objects and actions of everyday life, and Sanpatong has provided them a unique opportunity to extend that effort, without limitations. In this way, the Land may be seen as a physical manifestation of how far artistic production today has come to exceed the boundaries of the autonomous object and the institutions that support it. And given the motivation of artists all over the world to realize projects here, one gathers that there is something specially attractive about this site exterior to the world of institutions and commerce. Is the allure simply the possibility of working outside the system-or of working within an altogether novel system of one's own devising?

Not long ago, a German newspaper asked Tiravanija about the intentions behind his work, and he replied simply, "To destroy capitalism. To destroy imperialism." And yet he is no political activist in any antagonistic or belligerent sense but rather someone who, in a helpful and generous way, suggests models for being together, for communicating, and for exchanging things in a manner that resists reducing everything to an image or an object. When Tiravanija turns a German kunsthalle into a functioning apartment where people can live, work, and sleep, or when he turns an entire art academy into an inn with hundreds of guests, as he did in Frankfurt, he doesn't really expect to change these institutions for good but merely to suggest the possibility of another model-the possibility of new forms of exchange, and perhaps, ultimately, other forms of human life, another societal order: one less obsessed with things. In this light, his art could be seen as a kind of therapy for curing us of today's pathological acquisitiveness. The Land, Tiravanija insists, is not a property.

When I leave Sanpatong by car, it's pitch black and the buffalo are asleep. The fires are glowing in the dark. In my mind I keep turning over something Tiravanija once said. Asked if his nomadic way of life should be seen as an attempt to create many centers, he replied that, on the contrary, he's much more interested in the multiplication of peripheries. "Because then you will understand," the artist offered gnominically, "that the center lies on the outside."

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