

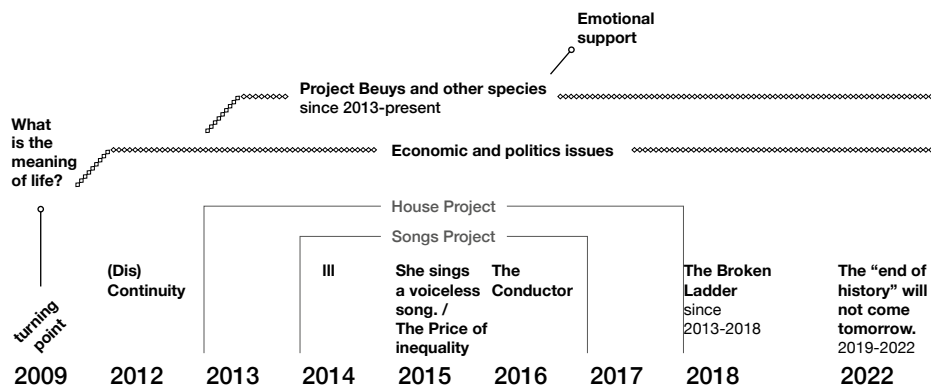
**On Art, Life, Economy,
and Disparity**

Gridthiya Gaweewong

Wantanee 'Obchay' Siripattananuntakul is a mid-career artist who grew up during the 1990s, at a transitional period for Thai contemporary art. At the time, she was studying sculpture at Silpakorn University - alongside notable contemporaries such as Arin Rungjang and Pratchaya Phinthong - amidst the turbulent political and economic atmosphere of the late-bubble era, when stock markets plummeted as a result of the 'Tom Yum Goong' crisis, which originated in Thailand before spreading across the Southeast Asian region, and eventually Asia as a whole.

Many art students who grew up during that time noticed a contradictory shift: while Thailand's economic predicament worsened enough to necessitate a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the local art scene experienced unprecedented growth. Many artists joined together to form collectives, while a new generation of art managers established numerous alternative art spaces, such as Project 304 near the Samsen Train Station, About Studio/About Café near Wongwian 22 Circle, in Chinatown, and Tadu Art Gallery, near RCA. Multidisciplinary art festivals were also initiated during this period, such as Chiang Mai Installation Art Festival, Bangkok Experimental Film Festival (BEFF), the Asiatopia Live Arts International Performance Festival, Cities on the Move, and other public art exhibitions. At the same time, art professionals engaged in the struggle to establish the Bangkok Arts and Cultural Center (BACC) at Pathumwan intersection. It was during this chaotic and confusing time that Wantanee stepped into the role of witness to the changes, participating in various art activities and exhibitions while also attending art exhibitions from her fellow progressive academics from Silpakorn University, along with other universities that possessed an art gallery, such as Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok University (Kluaynamthai campus), and Art Centre Silpakorn University, Wang Thapra, to name a few.

After completing her studies at Silpakorn University, Wantanee went on to pursue a degree in Media Art in Bremen, Germany, before returning to teach at the Faculty of Painting, Sculpture, and Graphic Arts, Silpakorn University. From the dramatic societal shifts facing early-2000s Thailand during the post-bubble economy, to the Tom Yum Goong crisis, none of these events had as much of an impact on Wantanee's art as the loss of her father upon her return from the Venice Biennale in 2009, where she held an exhibition in the Thai pavilion. As a pillar of her family, her father's passing put into stark relief the importance of the economy on her own well-being. Now that her father had gone, how would she continue to live? The realization forced Wantanee to take a pragmatic look at her own bank balance, realizing that her main source of income came from her position as an art lecturer at a state university; she wanted to reconcile this with her own desire to create art the way she intended, specifically conceptual art, which typically requires significant funding and support.

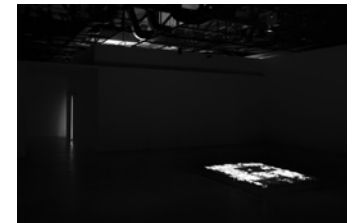


To have her works produced and exhibited in the university's art gallery, Wantanee chose to follow in the footsteps of her seniors - such as Montien Boonma - by taking out a loan from the University Savings and Credit Cooperative to fund her endeavors. This process reflected the state of Thai artists at the time (and up to the present), most of whom were unable to earn a living exclusively from their art as they received no support from the government. Despite their positions as art university professors, art institutions did not even offer funding for the artists teaching there, whether for work or research. Furthermore, even the university's art galleries failed to generate enough budget to commission any works, let alone compensate artists. As such, Wantanee's works discussed the economy, as well as the tribulations artists had to face in their attempts to create each piece of work. She frankly expressed her discontent with this situation in the exhibition (Dis) continuity, a media art installation that featured a large LED billboard detailing how she spent each and every Baht that went into her work, alongside the cost per viewing audience member, which she calculated to be roughly 500 Baht each.



☆. (Dis)continuity, 2012, installation view. Dimension variable. The Art Centre Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok. Photo by Lek Kiatsirikajorn

In the same exhibition, Wantanee also presented a video piece produced in 2000, which she screened onto a sheet created from 366 t-shirts - all of which have calendars of the same year on their backs - as a tribute to her late father. This work marked an important turning-point for Wantanee, serving as a wake-up call for her to view the world through the lens of economics. The loss of her father also forced the relocation of her family into a newly-purchased home in suburban Bangkok, where she could care for her mother. Her search for a new house allowed Wantanee to enter the world of real estate, with its differences between the classes, disparity between the rich and poor, and the struggle of the middle-class, which she observed in the various residential developments. At the same time, the rapidly changing political and economic situation that followed the 2006 coup d'etat stirred Wantanee's interest in politics.



All of this, coupled with her newfound position as her family's provider, slowly gave her an insight into the fundamental issues underlying Thai society.

Her most recent interests became apparent in her new piece, an exhibition entitled "The 'end of history' will not come tomorrow." Inspired in part by the works of Japanese-American political scientist Francis Fukuyama, who wrote an article entitled "The End of History?" in 1989, towards the end of the Cold War. Wantanee looked back on Fukuyama's work, which argued that the 'end of history' was at hand because liberal democracy and capitalism would slowly take over every political structure, as it was the only mode of government that ensured peace and prosperity for every nation.^[1] Concurrently, Fukuyama also discussed the importance of democracy's victory over communism and fascism. While both were prevalent during the Cold War era, they ultimately did not prevail, and thus came the rise of democracy across the world. Fukuyama presented historical evidence from the 20th century that more countries continued to discard their original governance, opting for variations of the principles of liberal democracy. For Fukuyama, this was in line with human nature, and could be traced back to simple human needs and desires. And yet, liberal democratic societies still had their own foibles, giving rise to unprecedented disparity between the economic classes, most notably between an elite and everyone else. As such, it came as no surprise that some would choose to reconsider the cult of communism once again.^[2] Wantanee built on Fukuyama's ideas, putting forth the question that if we were to disagree with Fukuyama, and that 'the end of history' isn't as imminent as he believes, how would we view the same issue?

Wantanee was also interested in the works of French economic theorist Thomas Piketty, who has written many books pertaining to capitalism and idealism. Piketty's works tend to revolve around issues of wealth inequality, seen from the perspectives of Western and Eastern societies.^[3] Walden Bello (2021) noted that in Piketty's *Capital and Ideology*, the French author was referring to the evolution of global economics, which is filled with disparity. Piketty spoke about inequalities in Western society by examining the relationship between capital and ideology and comparing it with the social conditions of societies in the past, from slavery and imperialism all the way to the Cold War, while discussing

the switch points in the structure of unequal regimes. However, Bello argues that Piketty's work still lacks statistical data, as he has chosen to frame this social phenomenon through the works of 20th and 21st century authors of fiction from the likes of Jane Austen, Honoré de Balzac, and Pramoedya Ananta Toer, as opposed to empirical data.

Piketty responded to Bello's claims, saying that when these authors present their insights into the structure of inequality, they did so with supportive arguments about life "with an evocative power that no political speech or social scientific treatise can rival." While they were all accustomed to wealth and hierarchy, ownership dominance, and power relations, they were "not to make heroes of their characters, whom they neither condemn nor glorify [that] enables them to convey both their complexity and humanity." (Bello, 2021:7). For Bello, that is what it means to maintain the status of a detached observer without judging or interference.

Piketty uses academic research and literature to describe the inequality on the global scale, focusing on the West and East, such as China and India. Situations in Thailand and other unmentioned Southeast Asian countries were examined in contemporary art platforms, such as in the works of Singaporean artist Ho Rui An, whose lecture-performance and art installations focus on Singapore and the regional economy in the Tom Yum Kung era, among other issues. For Wantanee, she uses her artistic practice to investigate the structural problems of inequality in Thailand. Instead of portraying them through literature, as Piketty did, she explored them through her art, which was her specialty. For this work, Wantanee tackled the core economical problem in her country, questioning state control in its relationship to tax issues. She collected the receipts of tax payments hidden in various forms, most of which come from daily expenditures such as utilities and electricity bills, groceries, or as value-added tax (VAT) that we unwittingly pay every day. Instead of challenging this (un)fair taxation system directly, Wantanee chooses to let the audience consider the numbers displayed on an art piece. Barely capable of being labeled or described, as a cross between a painting and an installation, Wantanee has elevated her work to another level to act as witness and mediator, reflecting the issues of our contemporary era.

To gain a better understanding of the artist's work process, consider this excerpt from an interview with Wantanee at her studio, which was conducted on May 9th, 2022, in Nonthaburi.

GG. Please tell us about your latest series, and how it connects to your previous works, which focus on the economy.

WS. I actually took an interest in this subject after my father's passing. My previous work actually had nothing to do with the economy at all, as I always had backup in the form of my parents. My father was like my bank, and when he passed away, all of that collapsed. Dad would always protect me from any and all risk.

GG. So you feel like you were living in a safe-zone, or a bubble?

WS. That's right. I first started having serious questions about my life and future then. That loss really left a mark on my emotions. Do you remember my work in 2012, which featured an LED panel displayed at the Art Centre, Chulalongkorn University? I came up with that piece when I was driving and thinking about life. I looked back on my past, up to my present, all the way into the future, and it surprised me to realize that my dad was gone! And I was about to have my own solo show, which I had no money for, so I was putting myself into debt just to create art. The part that's really not funny is that when I talked about this to others, the overwhelming sentiment was that it was normal for artists to go into debt for their work. So that piece was partly questioning the system and art institutions, whether it was actually normal. Why did every artist seem to just accept something that clearly shouldn't happen? For an art professor to create their own work, they must be willing to put themselves in debt? This isn't the case for many other countries so why is Thailand different? I wanted to raise these questions in the piece, but I also wanted to make it a tribute to my father. The show is now over, and I went into debt for the first time in my life.

[1] Somkid Buddhasri. (2017). The world without final version: when history isn't over. (โลกที่ไม่มีไฟนอลเวอร์ชัน: เมื่อประวัติศาสตร์ยังไม่จบ). Retrieved in <https://www.the101.world/neverending-version-of-world/>

[2] Great Books Prof. (2021). Francis Fukuyama and the end of history. Retrieved in https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2-_FTpnMJ0&t=7s

[3] Bello, Walden. (2021). Reading Piketty I: A concise and comprehensive summary of capital and ideology. Focus on the Global South. Retrieved in https://base.socioeco.org/docs/a4_readingpiketty_web.pdf

GG. How much?

WS. Over 200,000 Baht.^[1] I had to use my own credit card and also take a loan from the university. At the time, I had no idea how I could possibly pay for anything, I was only concerned about wiping away my debt. I took every job I could, from teaching to researching, do you remember?

GG. I do, when you worked with Prof. Chetana Nagavajara, how was that experience?

WS. I took on 3-4 research jobs at the same time. I taught everywhere that invited me to. Everything I earned was to pay off my debt. This went on for 2-3 years since the interest would keep piling on. After I finally paid it off, I told myself I've had enough. I couldn't do this anymore. That was another turning point that appeared in my work.

GG. When you say it was an important turning point, that was when you exhibited in the Thai Pavilion at the Venice Biennale right? What happened when you got back?

WS. About 2-3 months after I got back from Venice, my father passed away. This caused a major change in my economic situation, as I mentioned. The work and the money I could handle, the difficult part was managing my unstable emotional state. Many questions I asked myself after my dad passed away remain unanswered after all these years. I still can't answer what life is, or what I am living for. There were still times when I felt down. Then one day I went to the zoo, where I met a parrot who greeted me as I walked past its cage. I've seen talking birds before, and I never thought much of it, but in that moment, in that space, it was different. It was like my sentiment, my emotional state just kicked right back up. I felt excited again, like I wanted to create art again. That led to the project where I worked with the African Gray parrot that I named Beuys. It was a work process that let me examine what it means to be alive, as well as the relationship between animals of different species. So if you asked what the turning point was after I came back from Venice, it was the birth of my parallel working process, switching back and forth between questioning the economy and the relationship between lives, which I have worked on since 2013 until today.

GG. It seems like you just needed company, right? You were so close to your father, when you lost him it felt like you had no one to keep you company?

WS. It was a sort of emotional support. Beuys did that for me, whereas my mother is more like someone I wanted to protect. She wasn't a pillar I could lean on like my father. In my eyes, she is a hard working woman who raised eight kids, but she was also a bit of a pushover. She wouldn't say a word even when she was taken advantage of. After my father died, it wasn't just my life that was turned upside down, but my mother as well. There were some issues at the time that suddenly forced my mother and I to move from our old home, so we went to live with my older sister. That was when I felt like I wanted my own house.

At the same time, I had just finished my solo show in 2012. But everything was put away right after the show, so I had nothing to keep from it. That was when I promised myself that I would never create art by putting myself into debt, without any kind of compensation, ever again. That was when I thought I'd buy a house as an art project, so I began looking at houses in different residential developments, though I still couldn't secure a loan. That was when I realized you had to create a financial portfolio along with a lot of other things, as my salary was too low to take out a loan by myself.



☆ The Broken Ladder, 2018.
mixed-media installation.
Dimension variable. Gallery Ver, Bangkok.
Photo by Tanatchai Bandasak.

GG. **What are the requirements for the loan again?
How much must you earn?**

WS. When I was taking out a loan for my house, I was able to get 100% of the money. At the time, the university had signed an MOU with the bank for residential real estate loans. But since my salary was quite low, coupled with the fact that I still had outstanding debts, the bank clerk suggested that I settle all my other debts first before taking the loan, to show the bank that I could pay it back, so I did. I remember that when we had to move, I only had enough money to buy a refrigerator, washing machine, a bed for my mom, and air-conditioning for me and my mothers' bedrooms, but owning my own house also allowed me to have Beuys.

Having my own space gives me freedom to make a lot of decisions, but a house is also another constant source of worries, as I was afraid I won't be able to pay it all off. Part of me wanted to quit my day job and become a full-time artist, but my house loan prevented me from doing that. That was when I fully understood the burdens of life, what it's like to struggle for a living. It really made me think that even with a full-time position I had it this hard, how hard must it be for others who never had my opportunities?



∴ The Price of inequality, Dollars,
Chinese Yuans, Thai Banknotes,
paper models and mini robots, 2015.
Dimension 8x4 M. H Gallery, Bangkok.
Photo by Wantanee Siripattananuntakul.

While I had my home debt, I began working on my next show in 2015 at H Gallery, where I folded 100-baht bills, 1 dollar bills and 5 yuan bills into cockroach-shaped origami - it also came from my idea that if one day I needed the money, I'd unfold my work for the cash. For me, every show kind of has its own time, as well as a path forward. While I was paying off my loan, there was a year when my work *Wantanocchibot'09* was offered for acquisition to the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, which would increase my income, but also introduce me to the world of taxes. I learned what I had to do and how I could ask for deductions. Someone suggested I buy insurance or bonds. I wanted to learn about it in-depth, so I consulted a bank employee, who suggested I should go further than deductions and get back my tax payments, as doctors and businessmen often do. It's very interesting, all the ways you can get your taxes back. But after looking into my own financial limitations, I found that I couldn't afford a lot of these options. That meant you had to be someone with a significant amount of savings to get those deductions. All of this gave me the idea for my next work after my house project - taxes project.

The government often claims that progressive taxes will create equality, but is that really true? Because what I've found is that the wealthy pay a pittance in taxes compared to their income, while middle-class people like me are the ones who pay the most taxes, since I couldn't access any of the options for deductions. My fixed income is taxed even before the money gets into my hands. No matter what works or rights I sell, or whatever I buy, everything is taxed, since there's so many kinds of taxes beyond just income tax. There's value-added tax, there's business taxes, land-sale taxes, everything is taxed. So I began collecting all my receipts in 2019.

GG. **What kind of receipts do you collect?**

WS. Everything, from my water bill, my power bill, gas bill, shopping receipts, convenience store receipts, my income tax receipts, my land sale receipts, every kind of daily expense, adding up to about 200 to 300 pieces.

GG. You mentioned that the size of it will be the same as the receipts?

WS. The size of every receipt will be multiplied by the rate in which it is taxed. For instance, daily items that require the 7% VAT will have the receipt multiplied 7 times.

GG. What is the basic idea here? A ratio based on what?

WS. It is based on the original size of each receipt. If a receipt is 21cm in width and 29cm in length, we multiply that by the amount of tax paid on that receipt. So if we pay the 7% VAT, we multiply those numbers by 7. For the land deeds, I can't remember the exact amount, but it was around 2 or 3%, so I'll multiply it by that. Some pieces have their size multiplied by over 10 times, as that is the percentage taxed.

GG. I got it, the dimensions of a work were multiplied by the percentage tax rate. And what of the frame colors? Why does this piece have a blue frame, whereas this one has a white one?

WS. The colors are based on the colors of the vendor or company the transaction is made with. The blue color is there since the receipt comes from HomePro, while the orange, black, gray, white, and others, are based on where they came from.

GG. How are you planning to install it? From the Sketchup image, it seems like you are going to stack them up, will you let the audience pull them out too?

WS. That's right. I'll stack them up, and some parts will be able to be pulled out. Some will also be hung up, to present them like paintings. Besides the paintings, this work will also feature a little side room, where all the original receipts are blended together with the laws regarding wealth management and taxes that went into effect in 2017 and 2018, before recycling them into blank A4 sheets again.

GG. And how are you going to show that?

WS. Nothing complicated. I just want it to stand there on a long table, as it contains enough traces of things that have happened in the past.

GG. And how are you going to blend them?

WS. Using DIY paper-making techniques with my bare hands. I actually gave a lot of thought before settling on this method. What I want is to show the power of managing something that can't be seen by the naked eye.

GG. The work isn't really a painting. It reminds me of the works of Kazimir Malevich, Lucio Fontana, those Russian Avantgarde/ Suprematism, Abstract Expressionist works where there is a time-based component to it. What would you classify this work as?

WS. Tax Painting (laughs). It's managed like a painting installation. While I was creating this work, there was a point where I really laughed at myself. After finishing a few pieces, I realized that this was clearly an On Kawara work, which was related to time in some way. But for me, none of that poetic sense has survived to this era. This is the Phra-Sri-Arnd (era of taxation), and so the work ended up as you see it.

GG. It's a good play on words, Phra Sri Arnd (tax era) with Phra Sri Ariya. It was Khaek Kamphaka who once said on her TV show that Thai people have to pay layers and layers of taxes. Is that not true of other countries? How is it different?

WS. That's not the point. Overseas, we can tangibly observe the benefits of our taxes in the form of pensions or social services. But in Thailand, that money is just gone.

GG. But there are people who counter that our taxes are actually cheap, but they may be referring only to the personal income taxes, without taking into account the VAT or other taxes. So now it's a matter of whether or not you want Scandinavian pensions and the 30% tax that comes with it.

WS. But that 30% tax is based on an hourly wage, not a daily one. As such, taxes are no issue if we also earn the same high wages. Some business owners may protest that they don't have enough, that this is too much, but us normal people have to live like... we have European expenses, but our income...

GG. But we have third-world country incomes.

WS. Right? When I was in Germany and had to take a job cleaning floors in a bar, I was still earning about 200 Euros in a few days of work. That's the difference. Not to mention that this place judges people based on their position, not that everyone who works deserves to be paid, so there's that pressure, that oppression. And for those who say poor people don't pay taxes, that's just not true. Every expenditure has taxes baked into them already.

GG. You've worked on this series since 2019, so you've spent a lot of time on it. What have you learned, and how do you plan to take it forward?

WS. I did get to see a few things. I saw the pattern of consumption, of the emergence of corporate interests that benefit from the system. Of course, when we talk about taxes, besides the fairness of the taxation model, you also see the power to get around these taxes held by a select few. But after this project, I don't know how I'll build upon it yet. As I said, I've always worked on parallel projects. At this moment, the scale is tipped a little more towards living life, but I hope that one day I will be able to combine the two sides. I'm figuring that out, but I also don't want to rush it. I've never pressured myself to think or do anything right this moment. If I can't figure it out yet, then I can't figure it out yet.

GG. Right now, the Ministry of Culture is offering funding, but there's no guarantee that you'll receive anything if you apply. In reality, educational institutions should be able to give out funding for research and development purposes, so their professors can do some practical work too. How do you see your own situation in terms of producing art?

WS. For me, producing art is definitely a career, even though it's an extremely difficult one to make money from.

[1] 5,400 USD (As of today's rate 36 baht to 1 USD, July 21, 2022)

