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Raiders of the Lost Archive: the 6th Bangkok Experimental Film Festival

The biennial Bangkok Experimental Film Festival had its sixth incarnation from 24 January to 5 February 2012 with a focus on the archive as inspiration for new critical artist films and as invocation to locate lost or forgotten Asian experimental works. The new works program was formed from open call submissions predominantly from across Asia. For the historic screenings the curatorial team gleaned archives in Taiwan, Singapore, Thailand and Hong Kong and also the Netherlands and Britain. The festival included a number of invited packages from New Zealand, Malaysia, Vietnam and India and also European compilations from sixpackfilm, LUX and CologneOFF. Consequently the curatorial act itself challenged the films for centre stage.

Events were spread across the Thai Film Archive, Bangkok Art and Culture Centre, William Warren Library and Goethe Institut, with the Library providing the most effective intimate atmosphere for engaging with personal cinema. The curatorial team for the festival consisted of May Adadol Ingawanij, David Teh, Chalida Uabumrungjit, Mary Pansanga, Pathompong Manakitsombon, George Clark, Brigitte Paulowitz, Richard MacDonald and Wiwat Lertiwitwongsa. This group fronted the different programs, led discussions and interviewed attending artists and curators through alternating English and Thai translation. David Teh had fronted BEFF5 and it was announced after the final screening that Mary Pansanga is taking charge of BEFF7. Such moves describe BEFF’s ongoing malleable and collaborative organisational strategy that borrows elements from both the classic festival and themed art event models and networks rhizomatically with its bordering regions, all done with limited financial resources.

I came with my own film in tow and was interested in reading experimental film or film art as an ongoing project articulating the impact of modern postmodern and contemporary worlds on our senses, how this impact morphs the way our worlds are perceived. What specifically can a regional Asian cinema tell us through both content and structure about uniquely Asian experiences and situations? I came not looking for exotic readings for a European imagination’s consumption but for a film art of intimate responses to Asia’s changing political and cultural landscape. In the following paragraphs I highlight some of these works from both the Archive and the open call screenings, with some European works thrown in.

George Clark made a case for the film art curator straddling the worlds of cinema and the gallery space, opening up that grey area that meshes both black and white cubes. Experimental film’s founding generation expanded exhibition strategies through Kubelka’s cubicled invisible cinema, Valie Export and Peter Weibel’s streetwalking “touch and taste” cinema or Robert Beaver’s more recent four yearly Temenos project of recycling Gregory Markopolous’s oeuvre in four hour parcels in a remote Peloponnesian open field as antidote for digital media. The current generation of curators takes their cue from Berlin’s Arsenal programmer Stefanie Schulte Strathaus who implores curators to show different films differently, to provide contexts that underscore unique aspects in the originating works. For Clark such creativity is evident in New York’s lightweight and nomadic Light Industry, Newcastle’s self-built Star and Shadow Cinema and Ian White’s re-screenings of Tony Conrad and Richard Serra’s films in Berlin. Filmvirus, through screenings and a web presence provide a profile for surfacing experimental work in Bangkok as do emergent festivals in Malaysia and India. DOCLAB in Hanoi holds screenings and discussions at the Goethe Institut in Hanoi where they also have an office. The Institut has also provided some funding for workshops and filmmaking activities. Because of this location the Institut can offer some diplomatic “protection” for this activity. Such examples suggest that whilst in the West curatorship on the surface is more conceptually based, in the East it is entangled with political necessity and the visceral articulations of an expanding middle class. What in Europe are framed as conceptual games in Asia can be utilised to express political or perceptual reality.

Hanoi DOCLAB’s Nguyen Trinh Thi’s *Chronicle of a Tape Recorded Over* (2011, 26 minutes) retraced the Ho Chi Minh Trail from North to South as a way of recovering a forgotten history of the war, with disarming interview- conversations with those she met on the way asking them to tell her factual and fictional stories of that time. She said most interviewees had trouble fantasising and stuck to truth. One old gentleman talked of having been affected by Agent Orange and his government’s unwillingness to recognise and address his illness: also a familiar story
amongst Vietnam Vets in Australia. The centrepiece of the film was the secret filming of a village official who had forbidden her to interview locals as this was only permitted by government officials. This “interview” reflexively integrates the precarious nature of filmmaking in Vietnam, where you can be picked up for questioning for filming without a permit, into the work itself. Nguyen Trinh Thi’s A Soldier’s Song Sample Experiment (2011, 5 minutes) was sampled from an old Vietnamese romantic war melodrama. Its trick effects, re-edited hospital scene and romance plays out like a response to Maya Deren’s classic Meshes of the Afternoon (1943), assembled with a method of de-construction the reverse of Deren’s.

Documentary filmmaker and photographer Zhuang Ling had been part of an independent group in the ‘60s bringing Western art and film theory into Taiwan through their magazine Theatre. These influences are on show in his black and white silent pieces, Life Continued (1966) and My Newborn Baby (1967). Zhuang Ling’s father had been one of the curators overseeing China’s imperial treasures move from mainland China to Formosa in 1949. Shot in a style reminiscent of early Antonioni, Life Continued features his pregnant wife waking to a new day and moving through a still un-weeded estate of new modern compact units on Taipei’s outskirts (itself a sign of emerging middle class privilege). Zhuang designed these films to work as metaphor for a new society forming in Taiwan. His wife’s ritualised travel and busing through the city to her work in a Chemistry setting suggest themes of education and a commitment to scientific knowledge and industrial development that resurface in a number of other films at this festival. My Newborn Baby (1967) extends Zhuang’s metaphor further showing doting parents and grandparents at home and the child in his first year learning to walk on the steps of historic public sites and temples. Where Antonioni’s character’s gestures are marooned, dislocated from their pre-war class bearings, Zhuang’s characters, though migratory, remain aspirationally focused.

Korean Kim Kyung-man’s 118 minute An Escalator in World Order (2011) locates this aspirational force historically. This compilation would work well as a low budget companion piece to Andrei Ujica’s 180 minute The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu (2010). It begins with newsreel footage, splattered with overblown orchestral music, of a line being drawn in the sand, with the word 38th parallel scrawled next to it, a demarcation and starting point that has since become institutionalised in the North and South Korean face-off. The film includes war footage but becomes a procession of the relationships between Korean Heads of State and visiting American dignitaries and Presidents, helpfully giving this viewer some frames of references for this historic cavalcade. Newsreels reveal the Matador rocket as a nuclear successor to WWII’s U2. Sequences indicating the ‘60s and ‘70s explosion in trade with the US are built on factory shots, modernised landscapes and the cheap but high quality of Korean wigs. Connections are made between the 1984 Los Angeles and 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, with athletes inscribed with now redundant Kodak sponsorships on their uniforms. When a group of very young Korean children phonetically singing “God bless America, my home sweet home” to Jimmy Carter, a hard-wired aspirational will performs at the feet of its ideological altar. Johnny Osmond learning Korean through a song that sounds vaguely related to that Sound of Music’s perennial, Do Re Mi, provides a further magic moment of re-processed Americana.

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Sky Don’t Fall by Akiko Nakamura (Japan), at a length of 3’11”, was commissioned to remember the Japanese earthquake of 11 March, 2011. This film consists of long “emptied” shots of Tokyo’s cityscape and sky that could be read as formalist but here express a traumatic aftermath on the senses, that implores the sky not to fall in once again as it did during those charged visceral moments of the quake’s rupture.

Taiki Sakpisit’s Thai video Ripe Volcano (2011, 15 minutes) plumbs a sublimated anticipation at the heart of contemporary Thai politics, pointing to off-screen potential and dread. Doors intimate something ready to be revealed, addressed, smoke acts as trace to an unspoken smoldering, fermenting residue and police paraphernalia suggest a dormant but powerful force. But it is the waving orchestrated football crowd all dressed in blue that takes the simmering heat up another notch. This film’s deft pacing and rich imagery reminded me of American experimental pioneer Bruce Baillie’s empowering lyricism evident in such films as Castro Street (1966) and Mass for the Dakota Sioux (1964).

Chulayamnon Siriphol finds an acceptable way to document the personal toll of political tensions. A Brief History of Memory (Thailand, 14 minutes 2010) records a poor community’s mourning for a lost boy caught in the crossfire between the red shirts and the military in Bangkok. The film had started as a documentary about the eradication of head lice, and bleached out graphics to this effect often overlay the action, acting both as marker of the scientific and technical emphasis driving Asian economies and as a-political cover for the discord festering underneath. Siriphol noted that some of his red shirt friends find the film too critical of them, but it may be this lack of direct criticism of the authorities that permits this film a public life. Watching some of the 1972 super 8 from the Hong Kong Archive, footage of student street protests against the UN/US decision to give the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands back to the Japanese, further suggests that you have to pitch your resistances in such a way that they do not overly stress local authorities. All the gestures and public posturing of May ‘68 are there in these images: megaphones, posters, pamphlets, speeches, public gatherings, but their target lies elsewhere.

The Propeller Group’s Fade In: EXT. Storage-Cu Chi- Day (2010) is based on real events. An east west divide is at the centre of a telephone conversation between an artist and a customs official when the artist has trouble bringing back into Vietnam the movie props from a Local Television show that has been on exhibition in the Netherlands. Alyssa Grossman and Selena Kimball’s Memory Objects, Memory Dialogues (2011, 26 minutes US/UK) was compiled from an original two-screen installation. One track animates objects that are discussed on the other track by their Romanian owners revealing traces of the absurdities of daily life in Ceausescu’s Romania. In the Indian program Pramod Pati’s rich and colourful 35mm films from the late ‘60s, early ‘70s use trick techniques to re-animate the objects in his studio space with a distinctive cinematic energy.

Mark Williams’ New Zealand program of six women’s home movies unearthed from local archives from the 1920s on sat neatly within the festival brief. Although these women were privileged to have access to their recording devices their ways of seeing while touring, at home, in the community and documenting farm life present perspectives outside those available at the time. Since then feminism has brought these ways of looking to view nudging them closer to the centre of public life, a trajectory also present in the other archival programs. Charles Ong’s ‘60s home movies raided by Richard McDonald from the Singapore National Archive record nuclear family birthdays, revealing familiar gestures and rituals, the cutting of cake and the blowing out of candles again signposting an aspirant lifestyle now accessible to an expanding Asian middle class. Other archived experimental films like Law Kar’s Hong Kong black and white films from the ‘60s (e.g. Beggar) have been inadvertently transformed by emulsion breakdown and shaky film to digital transfers in which the films repeatedly jump in and out of the gate. In this time warp character studies, psychodramas and personal diaries metamorphose into hard-
edged formalist films. The curator and the archive have unwittingly conspired to create new work full of materialist
noise and divorced from the artist’s original intent. Time changes all things.

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