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Pratchaya Phinthong

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Pratchaya Phinthong's world is a play of equivalences and flux, an organised ensemble of tensions between two positions; his art becomes a prolongation of this complex system, as the gallery turns itself into an active partner in a business whose stakes go beyond the habitual boundaries of art. Continuous with a history of conceptual art, his work is built into the interstice between a reality and its representation, between an experience and its form. Pratchaya Phinthong translates elements of the real world (a rumour, a scientific discovery, a trip) into a form or a gesture. As a project is brought to fruition, the shift from one field into another can, at times, also modify reality. Through a sort of mirror effect, the artist also questions the status of the author and sometimes frees himself from the fetish of the work of art by delegating everything, including the form the work is to take. As an entrepreneurial artist in the face of the plague of sleeping sickness in Africa, as an agricultural worker in Lapland, or as a moon hunter, before anything else, Pratchaya Phinthong tells stories. His micro-situations often take the form of excursions, linking one point to another or traversing the two sides of the same thing. His projects are often a pretext for creating a new human exchange and for growing a dense, social network. The different accounts in this exhibition respond to one another across round journeys in time, and question the different forms of perception available in respect to any one reality, underlining the role played by one who 'shows'.

The story of *One of them (02)*, 2012, begins in China, 132 AD, as Zhang Heng presents his mysterious invention, the first known seismometre, to the Han court. Recognised by sources as remarkably precise, Zhang's machine (the exact mechanics of which are no longer known) consisted of a dish on which eight dragon-shaped tubes corresponding to the eight points of a compass had been fixed. Each dragon held a metal ball in its mouth. An earthquake occurring at a distance would cause one of these balls to fall into the mouth of an object in the shape of a toad, thus showing the direction of the coming disaster. Pratchaya Phinthong has recreated one of these balls here but rather than bronze, he has made it with a rare earth element (one in a group of minerals used in manufacturing high-tech objects: flat screens, batteries...). The People's Republic of China owns more than 90% of the mondial market in rare earth elements and uses this economic power to political ends. Linking an ancient scientific object to a modern technology, the artist gives current economic reality to the work. The sculpture is accompanied by a photograph taken by the global imaging satellite ASTER, run by Japan and the USA. It is an image of the largest rare earth mine in Chinese Mongolia. Again, Pratchaya Phinthong plays on correspondences, causing the geopolitical sphere to slide towards the more sensual one of an installation.

This last image, controlled by Japan and the United States, reverberates with the image of a planet drawn by an illustrator employed by NASA and reproduced here by the artist Pattara Chanruechachai. The installation *Algahest*, 2012 represents the planet Kepler 22B through a movable window. As one

turns the window frame, a landscape of sand, air and water (elements necessary for all forms of life) slowly constitutes itself. We know little about K-22B, other than that the possible presence on its surface of water in a liquid state could mean a chance of finding lifeforms. NASA, having recently published this artist's drawing of the planet (in the end very like an image of Earth), has decided to communicate its scientific advances through someone's subjective imagination. For Pratchaya Phinthong, this image of a future world recalls our prehistoric past. *Algahest* represents the way memory is constituted through different cultural, collective and personal filters. The title of the installation alludes to a universal solvent capable of reducing every body to its base matter. This process, consisting in passing from one form to another, is close to the artist's train of thought. Each work in the exhibition stretches time, past and future, in order to position itself in the present.

It is also the occasion to question a delicate present when Pratchaya Phinthong decides, on a rumour, to make an investigation in Zambia: a guide of the Luzaka Museum is apparently telling visitors that the most prestigious object on display is a copy, the original being in the London Natural History Museum. The artist takes this point of departure to develop his project. He asks a director in Lusaka to tell the story of the Broken Hill skull, a relic from an ancestor of homo sapiens discovered in a mine in Rhodesia in 1921 and sent to London. Zambia having being dispossessed of this treasure of humanity, the artist has preferred to remain outside such a memory and delegate its telling to Musola Catherine Kasekati. The video installation *Don't kubeba (don't tell them)*, 2012, is made up of two films: that made by the director, and that by the artist. In the first, Pratchaya Phinthong is nothing but a walk-on part; in the second, he films the filming. Appropriating the artist's idea, the director reappropriates her own history. As in *Algahest* and *One of them (02)*, the artist orchestrates a double vision of the same thing, putting what is visible and what is hidden on the same level.

Untitled (no work), 2012 is a pile of paper on the ground, made up of forms stolen by the artist from the French Embassy in Bangkok. The form, to be filled out by all Thais entering France, contains a declaration of honour not to carry out any professional activity while in the country. If the other pieces put a linear history in perspective, suddenly time becomes more immediate and autobiographical. The act of putting the form in a Parisian gallery reminds us of current social crisis and reveals the fragile position in which the artist finds himself in the face of fear.

Punctuating the exhibition almost invisibly, *A piece that nobody needs*, 2012, gives, symbolically, its sense and scale. A white sheet of paper attached to the wall, it is a marker, a mould in which the time of the exhibition will leave its trace: impeccable at the exhibition's opening, the paper (specifically chosen by the artist for its fragility) is destined to be transformed with time.

This exhibition received support from la Mairie de Paris – Département de l'Art dans la Ville.

News:

Sleeping Sickness, 3^{ème} édition des Ateliers de Rennes, Biennale d'art contemporain, La Criée, Centre d'Art Contemporain, Rennes - September 13 - December 9, 2012