

Apichaya Wanthiang

Inclined towards...

intimacy /
affect /
opposites /
the singular /
conflicts /
play /
the adversarial /
a stand /
dualities /
complexities /
earnestness /
matter /
understanding /
relatedness /
empathy /
storytelling /
a frame of reading /
multiplicities /
disagreement /
imagination /
visualisation /
endurance /
ambiguity /
care

A few weeks ago, while travelling, I met a fourteen-year-old boy called Ismael in a small, idyllic fishermen's town in Burundi called Marunge. We were passing through and I was taking pictures of the far away view – the washed out cobalt blue sea; canoes and men repairing holes in their fish nets – when Ismael approached with a bunch of smaller children. He looked distinctively different; obviously taller and well respected among his peers. "How are you, ma'am?" – and the conversation lifted off. He told me about the daily activities within his village: what the men were doing around us; how many fishermen families live in the big tent on the beach; about his student life. I asked him how he learnt to speak English and French so well. He said: "I speak very well both languages, Madam." Avoiding the question. "Can I please get your address so we can write each other?" I agreed and we discussed the options of sending mail by air or by e-mail and the cost involved. After which he made a long plea for me to buy him a computer, as it would cost too much money to go to the cyber cafe everyday. I tried to explain that I couldn't just buy a computer for someone I didn't know. Then our Taxi Moto came for us and I felt relieved with the interruption and slightly guilty of shying away from the discussion. After handing him my email and a little bit of money he grasped my hand and asked me to take a picture of him. After which he said: "My name is Ismael - will you please remember me. My name is Ismael - please do not forget me." It is now three weeks later. I have not gotten an email from him yet.

This summer, my mind has been occupied with thoughts about conflicts in relation to engagement and the things that move us, from a global to a personal perspective. The news is flooded with images from Gaza, the Ebola virus, planes falling from the sky, and conspiracy theories. I made my first journey through the East of Africa and discovered that helping is an extremely complex gesture. Making art in this world is equally complex. I meandered around, aimlessly travelling, hoping to gain an understanding. Observing poverty and injustice while experiencing a personal limitation: You cannot give every street child food or money, there are too many of them. You cannot even think about them constantly since these thoughts will suck you dry. I met many people who were trying, and have been trying for many years to help: red cross workers, bio engineers, agricultural developers, and volunteers. I heard many say that humanitarian aid is a slow process. If you aim to change something structurally, you might never see it materialized. However, with the small actions you manage to do matter, you need to believe that they matter.

Repeat these generalized thoughts, like mantras slightly out of cadence.

The move from Thailand to Belgium when I was nine is a singular event that has deeply influenced my work. Being caught between two cultures so diverse has been a struggle that I avoid to romanticize. As art critic Camiel van Winkel once said to me during a tutorial: "all artists have a problem to solve, if they don't they are not real artists. So what is your problem?" I started talking about art history and the dimensions within the painterly space. Was I being dishonest? Not at all. It was just easier, but not less truthful. Our fields of interests are complex. As an artist, I value interpersonal relations and affect: the aim is to generate empathy or relatedness. I am inclined towards indirect discussions and wide meanderings since I believe they encourage a more genuine side of us. Talking about lines and shapes and historical references is one manner of discussing the form of what we do. However, this doesn't exclude the fact that it is this form that will communicate our aims and intentions. I was answering his question, although he might not have read it as such. Lately, this indirectness has proven to be unfulfilling sometimes. However, as a cultural producer of any kind, we can

have a hundred agendas all at once and still entertain the possibilities of one temporary existence, followed by another, followed by another. This temporary existence is the work we propose to the gallery visitor or art consumer.

What could be the advantage of promoting anecdotes or storytelling across geopolitical borders, across history? Stories facilitate relatedness, but stories could also initiate cruelties such as war and genocides. Narratives are more powerful and mind consuming than we like to admit. But somehow it has become more acceptable in the field of art to talk about methods, paradigms, philosophy or a certain fashionable theory. But unless they touch us on a personal, individual level, these topics are insignificant.

I don't know Ismael, but I do in a way. Rather than entertaining a highly abstracted text about internationalization, equality and the good, as I tried several times for this occasion, I've found it more meaningful to retell my seemingly insignificant encounter with Ismael.

We could reflect all our lives on what matters to us, why it matters, and what we should do with that know-ledge. We could do the same with art: I just read a New York Times article: *ART; Is It Art? Is It Good? And Who Says So?*¹ Where the author, Amei Wallach, collected answers and quotes on the topic from high-standing artists, art critics, and museum directors. Some parts of the answers were seemingly and alarmingly simplistic, answers such as: "Something is a work of art when it has filled its role as therapy for the artist." (L. Bourgeois) "Good art makes you give something up." (R. Storr) "With my own work, it's art when it looks as if I know what I'm doing and when doing it makes me feel good." (R. Prince) I do not question the actual expertise of any of the subjects, but it's easy to be sceptical about the chosen formulations here. The answers are singular, opinionated and passionate. Instead of being critical about these form(ulation)s, could we possibly acknowledge the fact that these contradictions are productive? It's possible to steal a little from all, and by doing so to collect multiple voices. It could be a method to encourage diversity.

By telling stories or producing work we cultivate biases. We value and pay attention to our intuitive preferences, while keeping a critical eye. In general, biases are associated negatively with falsely or unfairly advancing or promoting self-interest. However, I would argue that we are made out of such complex motives and interests; it is impossible not to be biased. By sharing our preferences we may be pointing towards what we believe to be of value or what we think is good. Both in terms of what we think constitutes good art, but also what is good in a larger philosophical thinking. To be unbiased in this sense would nearly mean to stop existing. We do not even know most of the time what we promote in what we produce, but we have gut instincts and automatic preferences... and yes, sometimes they are wrong. However, most of the time, when we have to make quick judgments of any kind, we are inclined towards something and very often it pushes us towards that which we have processed and decided in milliseconds. Malcolm Gladwell argues in his book *Blink* that we should learn to trust instantaneous decisions especially when they are too complex to think our way out of. As a painter I feel truly related to this proposition: ask any painter with more than five years experience why a line should be this thick or that colour and many will answer they have learned that their hands are far smarter than their heads, or that it feels like that is the right decision due to experience. The answer to this question could be endless, but I think it would be fair to say that the stroke is just as random as it is calculated and based on years and years of internalising and weighing down one decision over another. We have to trust that these calculations are meaningful.

An art space such as 3,14 is important in the way that it advances subjective storytelling and promotes a look across geographical borders. At the same time, a space with an international profile has a responsibility to its local art scene: it should find and show art that has not yet been placed within a canon, while experimenting with the language that accompanies it. There lies the gallery's responsibility: to find a language and create a space that will shed light on the characteristics of the work shown. This tailor-made flexibility requires hard work and adapted sensibility from the gallery leader. Within the Bergen art scene, there is an aim to be democratic. We try to divide equally between showing local artists and international artists, both newly established or very established. This constitutes a politics of its own. What I propose is that we shift the focus and consciousness from this democratic politics as the main priority and rather decide firstly based on the narratives that are suggested. After which we could have a closer look at the stratification of the selection made. When promoting canonical ideas or movements we are advancing the already established. It is easy to overlook the small and anecdotal. I cannot contribute much more in this setting than to bring this to the fore: let us relentlessly question the stories we are fed and try to provide alternatives as diverse as we can possibly imagine; let us encourage relatedness and affect. By promoting this I should not be misunderstood: I am not asking for us to be charitable, I am not preferring a subjective view for the sake of doing good. I am making a plea for us to develop our own critical attitude, and to really develop our taste buds intensively, this task is equal for all of us entering a gallery space. The categories we encounter in art spaces should not be a given, but should be privately developed. With that in view, we might choose to promote narratives that are as diverse as they are meaningful.

1 - <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/10/12/arts/art-is-it-art-is-it-good-and-who-says-so.html>

BIO:

Apichaya Wanthiang graduated in 2009 with a BA from Sint-Lukas Brussel, and in 2012 with a MA in Fine Arts from Bergen Academy of Art and Design. Her practice consists mostly of painting, video, immersive installation and text, dealing with slow time and the construction of fictionalized places. Her interest lies within the small and the anecdotal, with the aim of constructing a shared space. Piya also has an interest in curating and pedagogy. Currently, she works part time at BEK (Bergen Center for Electronic Art) and as Assistant Professor at the Bergen Academy of Art and Design.