Artist: Manit Sriwanichpoom, Title: Bangkok Phantasmageria (2005)

Modern Bangkok from an ICT perspective

Why this IT journalist is talking to the art world

OPEN **Thought**

DON SAMBANDARAKSA

A few days ago I was contacted by a lovely lady by the name of Miya Yoshida, the co-curator of the Lak-Ka-Pid, Lak-Ka-Perd: The Bangkok Invisible Landscapes art and film exhibition and seminar. Miya asked if I cared to deliver a keynote address explaining these ideas in the context of today's Bangkok. She had arranged to invite other experts in the field of sociology, urban planning, art and architecture to each explain not just how Bangkok had changed, but why.

I was to meet such luminaries as Professor Sarat Maharaj of Sweden's Lund University and London's Goldsmith College and Thailand's own Professor Apinan Poshyananda. Names which, I am assured, mean much more in the world of art than they do here in the pages of the *Post Database*. Also attending and exhibiting will be artists from France, India, Korea, Sweden, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

I have no illusions of being an expert in the field of fine art, though I do admit to delusions of one day publishing a photo journal on the other side of the Chao Phraya river, metaphorically of course, perhaps taken with my old 1981 Pentax Super-A, perhaps with a digital SLR if they can finally reach a decent resolution and get rid of the noise problems, or perhaps with my medium format Bronica SQ-Ai (yes, I have one of those too). But I digress.

As an outsider, I immediately felt this was interesting and challenging yet felt unsure of whether I knew enough of the matter at hand. I soon felt better once Miya told me I was to be the person who gives the audience an explanation of modern Bangkok from a technology perspective. The best thing of all was that Miya specifically asked me to address it from a critical perspective, rather than the peaches-and-cream view that our leaders often subscribe to.

Being asked to elaborate on one of the things I am passionate about, and more importantly, asked to be critical about it, is perhaps the greatest birthday present I could wish for. All due credit to my co-conspirator here at the *Post Database*, Geoff Long, who guided Miya my way.

The question I need to answer is perhaps threefold. What has ICT done for Bangkok? What can it do and why it has not done so? And what ills has it brought upon us?

Returning again to my often quoted metaphor of the telephone, it is clear that mobile phones have given the residents of Bangkok the greatest advance since the discovery of fire — more time to work and conduct meetings while stuck in our notorious traffic jams. Looking at the social divide, we see that pre-pay technology has given our migrant workers and the underclass the means of connecting to the world at large.

What has not happened here, but has happened in much of Europe and the United States, is the freeing up of the workforce through 2.5G and 3G data technology and the political reform that has graced South Korea. The problems it brings are that of privacy and the decimation of social manners — with today's longer and longer talk times, being out of range is tantamount to admitting that there is something to hide, and I am sure that you will agree that many teenagers today seem to be constantly on the phone, lack face-to-face interpersonal skills and, by and large, tend to be somewhat annoying.

Another issue that comes to mind is that of online gaming. Way back when Ragnarok was making the headlines for the damage it was doing to our youth, creating a generation of Internet zombies, a friend asked me if it was in fact an IT problem. No, I reasoned, it was not. The problem was a social one. Our children were escaping from the real world for the online world not because of the evil technology, but because real life was really so stressful and depressing.

One topic I must ask the urban planner in the seminar is the challenge of wiring up Bangkok and getting people online. It has been suggested that South Korea succeeded with its VDSL Internet roll-out, piping 54 Mbps into apartments across Seoul, because most people lived in neat and compact apartment blocks that could easily be wired with fibre to the building and short-range (but fast) VDSL within it. The wiring task they faced is quite different to the sprawling, old metropolis with aging and sub-standard telephone copper that is called Bangkok. Still, with the limited number of fixed lines, do we need copper-wire DSL at all? Should we adopt fibre to the home? Wireless? Satellite?

The issue of the effect that technology has on art is also one which I find close to my heart. Are we to believe the rhetoric of the incumbents that digital media only promotes piracy? Is the Napster (the original one, that is) truly evil? What of Morpheus (currently gasping for its last breath in court)? And if Apple's iTunes are the future, why are we left out? Is our culture of software piracy turning the country into a pariah state?

On the other hand, are we to believe others who claim that digital media creates new opportunities and lowers the cost of entry to a market that is monopolised by only a handful of promoters and media companies? Has the MP3 file format truly made it possible for any new artists to break into this most select of clubs?

These are just some of the issues that I will explore in my keynote address this Saturday (12th March). The exhibition itself runs from the 11th of March to the 15th of April. You can find more information at www.in-betweenartproject.com and I look forward to seeing you there, cheering on an IT guy caught in-between artists and filmmakers.

Don Sambandaraksa is an open source advocate who is doing his bit to advance awareness of the difference between free speech and free beer in the corridors of power in Thailand. Email: Don@bangkokpost.net