



# THE LAY OF THE LAND

AN EXPERIMENT IN ART AND COMMUNITY IN THAILAND

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It's already evening when I arrive by car at the Land, an artists' community in northern Thailand initiated by Kamin Lerchaiprasert and Rirkrit Tiravanija in 1998. Dusk is falling, and the fire that keeps the water buffalo warm at night will soon be lit. The buffalo themselves are already on their way to a familiar spot next to a small pond; slowly and majestically they approach across the vast rice fields. Behind them, in the distance, are the mountains that surround these agricultural flatlands. This is the village of Sanpatong, some twenty minutes outside the northern provincial capital, Chiang Mai, a rapidly growing city of some two hundred thousand people. Hot rain is falling from the skies—in fact, it's pouring—and we find shelter in one of the pavilions huddled around the pond. I entered this structure once before, in its previous life as a work of art in a European institution. Designed by German artist Tobias Rehberger, it was displayed at Stockholm's Moderna Museet in 2000, before being dismantled and shipped across the globe to this rural

and, needless to say, less visible site. It now serves as temporary home to one of the inhabitants of the Land. It may still be a sculptural work, but now it has been put to use. A few belongings (a backpack, sneakers, a few books) make clear that someone is, in fact, living in this basic but elegant three-story wooden structure on stilts, which overlooks the pond. Spread out in the landscape are a number of other modest structures designed by Lerchaiprasert and Tiravanija themselves and by artist friends from around the world.

Rehberger, the very first artist from outside Thailand to be involved in the project, emphasizes its open and somewhat vague quality. "It wasn't at all clear to me when Rirkrit approached me eight years ago what this was going to be," Rehberger told me. "And now, after many visits to the Land, I still don't know exactly what it's

Spread: Digital photocollage of the Land, Sanpatong, Thailand, 2003. Photos: Patricia Chernvechpracha. Opposite page: left, Interior view of house designed by Tobias Rehberger at the Land, Sanpatong, Thailand, 2005. Right: Harvest time at the Land, Sanpatong, Thailand, 2005.



I spent at the site, that these young people were the ones who brought the place to life. Their curriculum, formulated by the Land Foundation, involves a wide spectrum of activities, from farming and meditation to art and philosophy.

The pragmatic aspect of the Land and the nondogmatic attitude of its organizers recur in Lettchaiprasert's presentation of the various projects. We walk from site to site—there are more than a dozen structures so far—and talk about the pond, Rehberger's Swabian architecture (which looks rather Asian to me), and the size of mangos. The agricultural practices used at the Land adhere to the basic philosophy and methods of a Thai farmer named Chaloui Kaewkong, who, besides teaching a general skepticism toward chemicals and industrial farming, has developed ideas about the harmonious composition of the human body. Following his teachings, the terrain of the Land—three-quarters water, one-quarter terra firma—was landscaped to mirror the makeup of our own bodies. Many of the inhabitants, the local artists as well as the participants in the one-year program, practice a kind of meditation based on Hindu techniques, but there is no dogma: Rules and regulations don't govern life on the Land. Everything is figured out by trial and error. It's never about illustrating or implementing some grand doctrine.

**TIRAVANJIA RECOGNIZES THAT HIS POSITION AT THE LAND IS NOT SO DIFFERENT FROM HIS ROLE IN THE ART WORLD. "IN BOTH CONTEXTS," HE NOTES, "I PLAY THE HOST."**

On the contrary, the individual ingenuity and imagination of each denizen and guest is the focus—which becomes abundantly clear when one considers the heterogeneity of the group of artists who have realized things here or are planning to do so.

To actually accomplish anything at the Land has turned out to be more difficult than many of the participating artists originally thought, as the goodly number of delayed projects proves. Rehberger's building, transported from Sweden, is now in rather bad shape, as he knew it would be after a few years. Little by little the wood must be replaced, so that in the end the whole house will consist of local Thai materials. The Danish collective Superflex developed and installed at the Land a system for the production and storage of biogas using nothing but buffalo

**PERHAPS WHAT UNITES THE DIVERSE PRACTICES OF THE INTERNATIONAL CAST OF ARTISTS BROUGHT TOGETHER AT THE LAND IS A LONG-STANDING EFFORT TO ENGAGE THE OBJECTS AND ACTIONS OF EVERYDAY LIFE.**

composer Leif Elggren. Now that his house is finished, von Hausswloff is ready to begin programming ambitious concerts with colleagues from the electronic-music world. The buffalo had better get to work.

Part of the budget for von Hausswloff's architectural project comes from the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe, Germany, an institution to which the artist recently donated a major installation that includes Jürgensov's archive of occult recordings (which his widow had given to the artist). This is typical of how the productions at the Land are made possible. There is no real support locally—from the city of Chiang Mai, say—nor is there any financial help to be expected

from the founders. The artists who have realized projects on the Land have brought their own funding with them and have put together unusual coproductions (as the Rehberger, Parrero, and von Hausswloff cases make clear). These projects have come to fruition because of a strong desire among artists to contribute to the Land. It has nothing to do with normal art-world careerism, with media visibility, fame, or fortune.

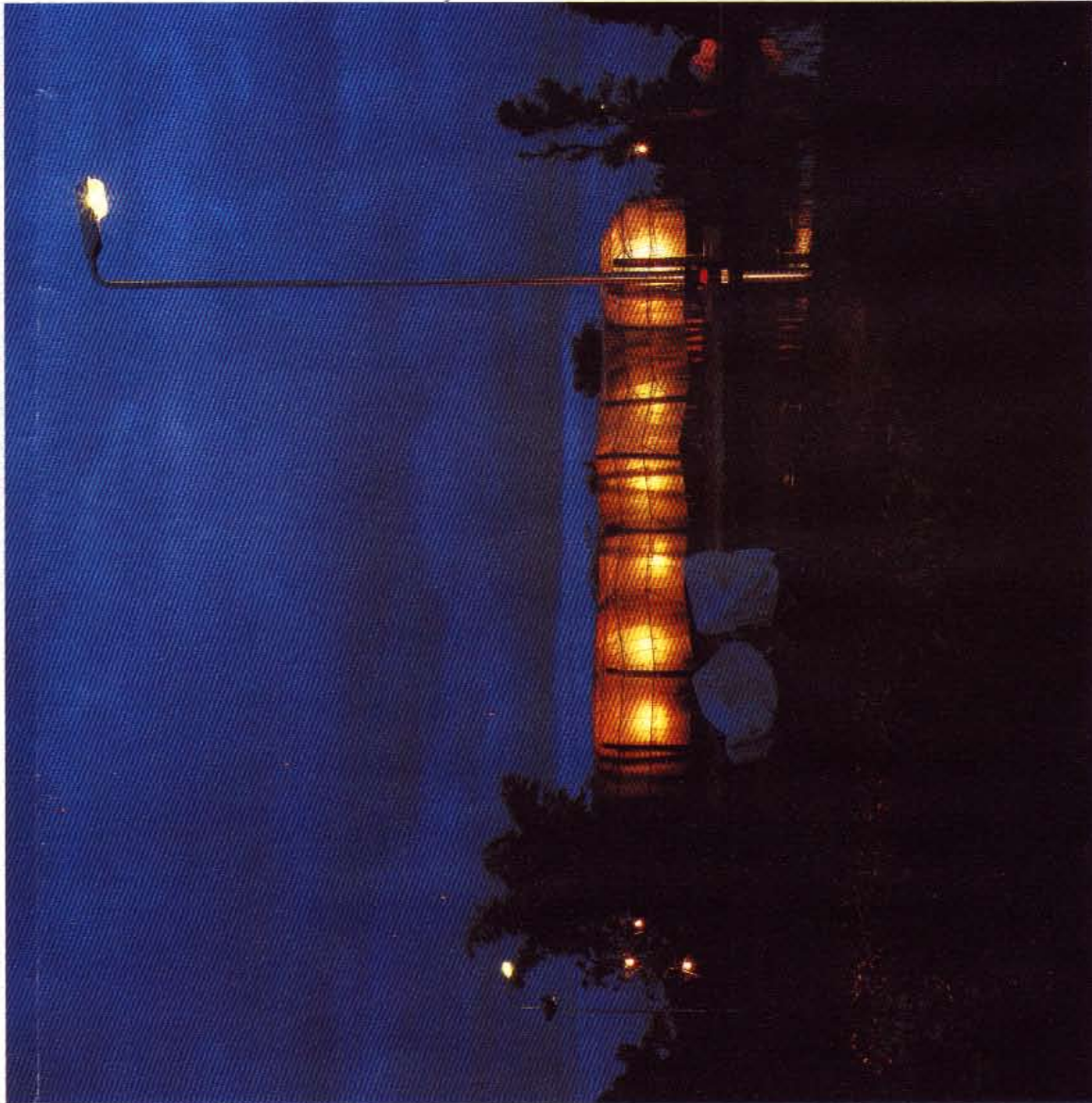
So what *is* the motivation? "If this would have been in Europe, I wouldn't have been so attracted," says von Hausswloff. "The whole art-commune thing has no interesting future there," he adds. "But in the Asian context, things seem to crystallize in totally new and unexpected ways. Nobody knows what's going to happen here." This clearly echoes what Tiravanija himself has to say about the future of the whole endeavor: In response to my question concerning the relationship of the Land to the notion of utopia and to the "Utopia Station" exhibition project he cocurated (with Molly Nesbit and Hans-Ulrich Obrist) for the 2003 Venice Biennale, he replies with a laugh that no one can say for sure where the Land will be in three weeks' time: "Utopia? It's all really quite uncertain since we have no money of our own. People suggest projects, and some can be realized, others not." "Utopia Station,"

Philippe Parrero, *The Boy from Mars*, 2003, still from a color film, 55 min. Editions 40 seconds.

which has already added several chapters to its history after the original Venice installment, is more defined in temporal terms than the contributions to the Land. "People come for short periods to realize works," Tiravanija observes. "Often they're just here for a few days. Then they have to leave, and return only two years later to attend to what they've built. It's all very different from an exhibition—more unpredictable, more open." And yet Tiravanija does recognize that his position at the Land is not so different from his role in the art world. "In both contexts," he notes, "I play the host." The Land is proof more of the extension of today's art world to places far from the centers of commerce rather than of Tiravanija's ambition to break out of the traditional art circuit. Even if many aspects of the Land don't fit the typical art-world categories, what is happening there is—whatever else it may be—also unavoidably art.

Like most of Tiravanija's projects and interventions, the Land is also about integrating and reacting to the local. In Sanpatong, he is something of an ambassador who travels the world and brings back interesting people and ideas, whereas Lertchaiprasert is more closely involved with the local community and has strong ties in Chiang Mai as well. The international presence of artists, writers, and curators at the Land can be quite intense, even overwhelming to some of the more long-term inhabitants, and Lertchaiprasert, who on occasion complains about "art tourism," sometimes gets bored with giving people like myself guided tours. Since most of the art stars whose projects have made the Land famous in art circles are seen here only on rare occasions, the arrival of a small but steady stream of critics and curators can only be disturbing to Lertchaiprasert and the other

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community. There are two things that the Land is missing—an administrative building for the foundation and a meditation hall. So, I'm thinking about these needs. You cannot erase the idea of the local. You need to be corrupted by the context but without forgetting that you're not from it.

Rirkrit has built a platform that could become a tool for the people there. In that sense, you can sort of eliminate the problem of exoticism, since exoticism is often a problem of representation. By attaching a use value to the project, you also start to get around the problem of representation and enter into a kind of postrepresentational situation. Any fiction has to produce a reality. That may in a certain way relate to the film that Philippe Parreno made there, which has a very fictional aspect to it—almost like a science-fiction film. He didn't want it to be simply a report.

**CLAIRE BISHOP** Pierre is pointing to another difference between this project and its precursors of the '60s and '70s. There is a functional motive behind the Land, as there is with Andrea's Test Sites: These are pavilions and units to be used by a specific community.

**RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA** Yes, in fact, the Land in itself is just a land, a leveled field to be acted on, and we request that this action be in the sphere of the everyday. Which is to say that we do not encourage earthworks unless we can eat, drink, or live from them. At this point we are more interested in sustainable infrastructure than outdoor sculpture.

