

Art for October: Thai Cold War State Violence in Trauma Art, Article · March 2010

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Abstract The visual artwork produced about Thai contemporary political trauma constitutes a "trauma art" expressing a politics of loss—loss of life, loss of history, and loss of leftist memory. While much of the literature on 1970s violence and traumatic memory in Thailand has focused on public discourse, historical chronologies, monuments, and music, the body of visual art about Thai state violence during the 1970s Cold War period raises some of the most relevant questions. Before the public articulation about the October 6, 1976, massacre was made possible by the twentieth anniversary in 1996, some artists produced a critical politics on the side of victims, but after 1996 the artists produced a politics of loss that capitalizes on the shock of the massacre to make the point that Thai society has forgotten it. In this essay, I examine these visceral evocations of terror, grief, longing to heal, and irony through shock that are articulated within specific conditions of production and exhibition. Two of the major conditions I examine are the artist's creative process and issues of silencing present in the content of the artwork or its exhibition practices. Prior to 1996 the artists created varying trauma art about the October 6 massacre as an aesthetic of vengeance, grief, and yearning to heal, of the struggle to remember forgotten histories, and of satiric moral outrage. I argue that the affective engagements of foreclosing retribution, of reconciliation, justice, social healing, or critique of the present day are accessible through a trauma art recounting a politics of the present. By charting the shifting affective engagement and the conditions of production and exhibition, one can see how the stakes changed after 1996, from a trauma art that demanded "Never again!" to a critique of forgetting and of the enjoyment of neoliberal democracy, with free markets, elections, and a history without trauma.

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