

Through the prism of history

A powerful new photo book and exhibition ensure that the tragedy of Oct 6, 1976 will not be forgotten

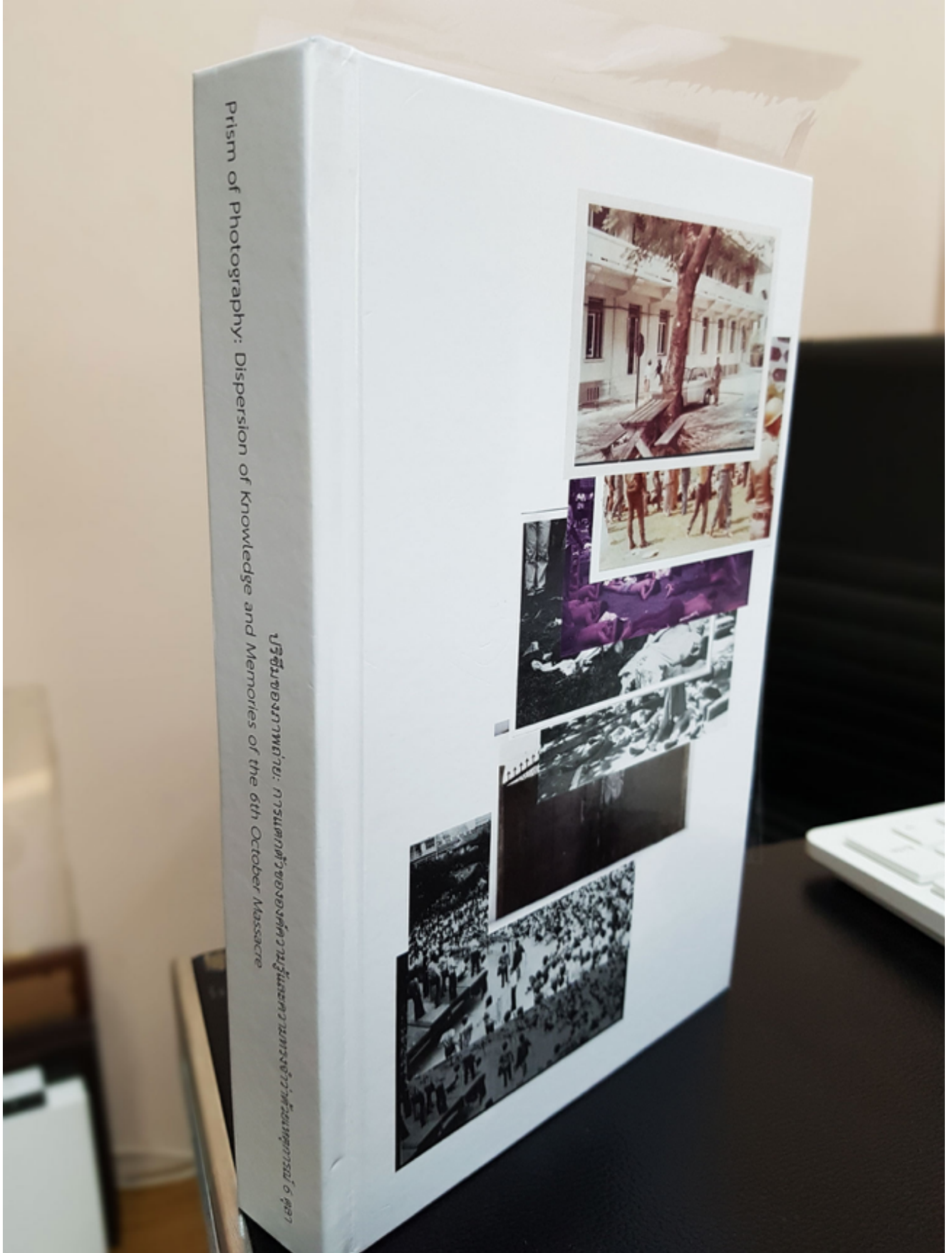


The book's title is printed on its spine: Prism Of Photography: Dispersion Of Knowledge And Memories Of The 6 October Massacre. Thereafter, from the first page on, we have only photographs with no captions.

Page after page, we are presented with images: of the front page of newspapers from 1976, in Thai and English, the Bangkok Post among them; of students gathering at Thammasat University; of students being stripped naked on the lawn; of students being lynched; of right-wing mobs waiting to pounce; of policemen waiting to pounce; of policemen firing into the crowd; of mutilated bodies; of

smashed faces; of corpses; of corpses hanging from trees; of corpses being brutalised; of corpses photographed in forensic reports; of weapons photographed in police records; of more newspaper front pages, their headlines screaming chaos, confusion and death.

There's a chilling abstraction, a deadpan silence, in the book as we turn over the pages and look at the images. Over a thousand in all, each concerned with one of the most momentous events in modern Thai history, and yet one that has come to acquire a supremely awkward status in history textbooks. The massacre of scores of students on Oct 6, 1976, remains an enigma, a shame, a brutal lesson and a taboo, all rolled shambolically into one. Only when we get past the 1,000 or so photos do we see a piece of text describing the project and the compilers' intention: to use these pictures to explore Thailand's "wounded history" -- one that still hasn't had proper closure.



As Thai politics continues to wander in its space-time labyrinth, the ghost of the Oct 6 Massacre has returned to haunt those who care to remember. Prism Of Photography signifies a contemporary movement within a certain wing of academia, as well as social activism, to

assign a proper, permanent shelf to Oct 6 in the national consciousness.

Initiated by art historian Thanavi Chotpradit, who was assisted by photographer Kornkrit Jianpinidnan in curating the content, Prism Of Photography is part of a broader research project under the same title. The book is printed in handsome hardcover and glossy paper -- a sort-of unassuming coffee table book that is likely to elicit unusual reactions should it be placed on a coffee table. It's not for sale, and free copies have been given out since last month. The idea, as the title suggests, is to circulate the knowledge and memories of the horror that struck 43 years ago. But it's about more than just "reminding people" what happened.

Thanavi and Kornkrit first distributed nearly 200 copies of the book last month at Bangkok Art Book Fair, a lively gathering of art book publishers and readers at Bangkok CityCity Gallery. There, anybody was welcome to get a copy on one condition: they must write down a note detailing what they learned after looking at the photographs and send it back to the compilers.

"We gave out the books at that event because it was attended by young people and people who are normally not into politics," said Thanavi. "They're a generation that have grown up knowing little or nothing about Oct 6, 1976, and we would like to hear what they think."

The collaboration between scholar and photographer is an unusual one. Kornkrit is a fashion photographer, well-known for his stylish sets, not a photojournalist with a resume covering street protests. Thanavi decided that the content would be more enriching if she worked with someone who wasn't in the circle -- that is, the political or history buffs who are likely to attend Oct 6 commemoration events anyway -- but rather someone from a different field who is keen to find out, through images, about the factual and emotional elements of the incident.

In curating the photos, the two compilers took much of their materials from a trove collected by "Documentation Of Oct 6", an ongoing project by scholars and historians to gather records, evidence, physical objects and oral history regarding Oct 6, 1976 (see sidebar). They also went through Thammasat University Archives to select photos. Some of them are thus familiar -- especially the violent ones, in which right-wing mobs beat up, drag or maim lifeless bodies. But there are also cold, matter-of-fact copies of police reports, evidence sheets and images of weapons allegedly found in students' hide-outs.

Absent, however, is "the photograph" -- the iconic, Pulitzer-winning Neil Ulevich photo showing a man about to bash a hanging corpse with a chair as onlookers smirk and laugh, which has become synonymous with the Oct 6 incident and the extreme prejudice that fuelled the killings. There are other shots of similar actions, though

Thanavi didn't pursue Ulevich's picture out of concern over licensing fees.

In the end, it doesn't matter. The weight of each picture - - and the unfolding consequences as told by newspaper headlines -- has a cumulative effect: they compel you to keep looking, and to look away at the same time. The prism refracts light and memories, then multiplies and hopefully enlightens. Thanavi and Kornkrit still have 300 or so copies of their book to hand out for free; just don't forget to write to them about what you learn, feel or remember, because that's how the Oct 6 Massacre can be freed from the fog of history into a clear and present reality.

To request a copy of the book, contact thanavichotpradit@gmail.com. The scholar will also join a panel of discussion tomorrow and on Sunday at Thammasat University.

BEARING WITNESS

Objects, records, stories and even a pair of blood-soaked jeans — that's how the horror of Oct 6, 1976, is remembered and archived. Tomorrow and Sunday, drop by Sriburapha Hall, Thammasat University, to see a small exhibition whose deathly implication looms larger than life. Organised by researchers at the Documentation Of Oct 6 Project, "Prajak / Payan" ("Eyewitnesses") will

feature three simple objects that bear witness in one way or another to that horrific morning. This is an initial step in a long-term effort to raise funds for the Museum Of October 6, a permanent space that will guarantee public memory of the incident.

The largest physical evidence of death at the exhibition is "the red gate". This is the actual gate where two mechanics were hanged in September 1976 after they had distributed flyers calling for a protest against the return to Thailand of Gen Thanom Kittikajorn, the military dictator who had fled the country after the 1973 uprising (Gen Thanom's request to return to Thailand was the spark that would lead to the blow-up of Oct 6). The murder of the two mechanics was an outrage, and in protest, students restaged their hanging in a play at Thammasat University on Oct 5. Police and right-wing paramilitaries exploited this incident, using it as a pretext to storm the university compound the following morning.

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Last year, researchers from the Documentation Of Oct 6 Project spent months looking for the gate. Once they had located it, they removed it from its original site in Nakhon Pathom in order to safeguard it as a piece of historical evidence.

The second object is a bullet-strewn loudspeaker which, on Oct 6, was installed near a football field in Thammasat University by the students. Experts have inspected the piece punctured by bullet holes and concluded that a shooter deliberately shot rounds at it to destroy the

students' means of broadcasting.

The last object again concerns death: a pair of jeans worn by Danaisak Eiam-khong, a Ramkhamhaeng University student who came to join the protest at Thammasat and was shot dead. He died from a bullet that tore an artery on his leg, beneath the denim. His family retrieved his body and have kept the jeans ever since.

"We have worked with families of the victims, and we have done extensive research to try to find eyewitnesses who are still alive and to archive as much evidence as possible," said Pattaraphon Phoothong, a researcher for the Museum Of October 6 project. "We have support from various organisations that realise the importance of documenting political violence, and from those who want to get rid of the culture of impunity. For all of us, it's still a long way to go."

The exhibition "Prajak / Payan", accompanied by talks with panels by historians, experts and staff from the Museum Of October 6 Project, takes place on Oct 5 and 6 at Thammasat University.