

CHAPTER 8

Uncanny Drought: On Apichaya Wanthiang's *Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines*

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Abstract: Apichaya Wanthiang's art installation *Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines* (2018) recreated a drought in Thailand by filling the gallery space in Oslo with soothing heat emanating from huge, dry, dirt sculptures. Visitors to the exhibition were encouraged to both touch and sit down on the dried clay sculptures. They were bone dry and felt warm on the skin. The recreated environmental event was contrasted with the freezing Oslo winter outside the gallery space, but the inside and the outside of the gallery were also connected through a synchronisation of the dim light in the exhibition space and the ongoing dusk outside—opening up for the sensorial aspect of climatic change. By describing a subjective experience of Wanthiang's environmental event, this chapter shows how an uncanny drought in an exhibition space can activate a mode of habituation when faced with the overwhelming consequences of the age of humans.

Keywords: installation, environmental event, habit, Kant, the sublime

Introduction

After dusk fell, I entered an oasis. A narrow passage made of neon-green synthetic fabrics stretched across a wooden skeletal structure led me from the dark and cold everyday life of the streets of Oslo into a dark enclosed space [figure 1]. The room with the passage was brightly lit, yet the following rooms were dimly lit, and further into the darkness, the temperature increased and mimicked that of a land far from the cold north. Entering

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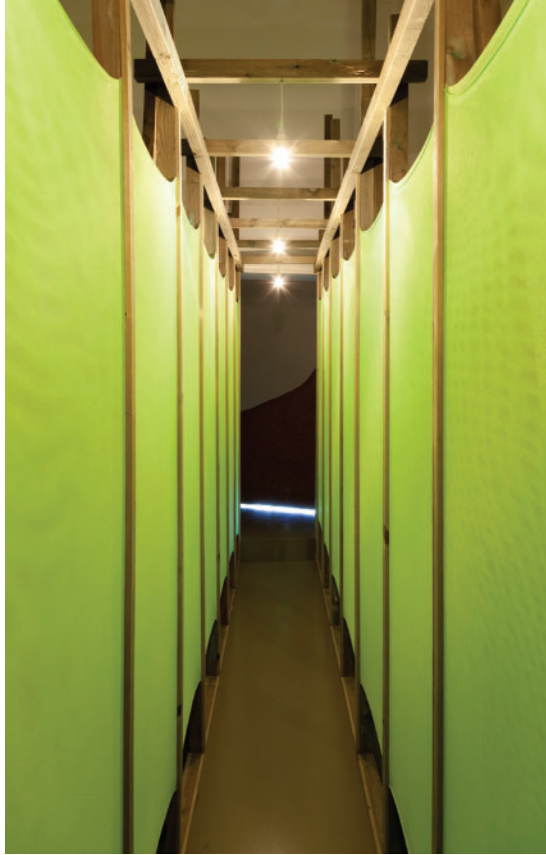


Figure 1. Installation image from the exhibition *Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines* by Apichaya Wanthiang at Unge Kunstneres Samfund, 2018. Photo: Jan Khür. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

the room at the end of the passage, I discovered the origin of the soothing heat: the warmth emanated from huge sculptures made of dried clay, filling most of the gallery space [figure 2].

Apichaya Wanthiang's sculptures from the exhibition *Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines*¹ reminded me of one of the most terrifying encounters with nature I have ever had. When I was walking alone in a mountainscape just before sunrise, the pitch-black mountains were reflected in a lake, which stretched between the foot of the mountains and the road I was walking along. Merged with their reflection, the mountains

¹ Apichaya Wanthiang (b. 1987, Bangkok, Thailand), *Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines* at Unge Kunstneres Samfund, Oslo, 2 November – 16 December 2018.



Figure 2. Installation image from the exhibition *Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines* by Apichaya Wanthiang at Unge Kunstneres Samfund, 2018. Photo: Jan Khür. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

gained an abstract form, and their silhouettes became increasingly discernable by the approaching sunrise—which was also reflected in the water. Because of the mountains’ mysterious shapes and the growing amount of background light, the mountains became animated. They were almost like living beings and seemed therefore especially threatening.

Wanthiang’s clay sculptures had the same effect, with a similar pulsating background light emanating from the point where the sculptures met the floor, making the sculptures appear to be hovering above the floor. Visitors to the exhibition were encouraged to both touch and sit down on the clay sculptures. They were bone dry and felt warm on my skin. Like the hottest days of summer when walking barefoot and feeling the burning ground with every step.

Distance and Catastrophe

This dark, dry world appeared to be hostile to life, except for the constant sound of mayflies swirling in the background. In a similar manner to the passage at the entrance, wooden frames covered with green textiles

were also present in the room with the sculptures. Upon these textiles, atmospheric black and white video footage of the home of Wanthiang's grandparents, which is located in Thailand, were projected. The video projection showed the rooftop of a house during night-time and, above the rooftop, the camera captured the mayflies swirling around. The meditative still lives captured the calm atmosphere of a place so far away from where they were exhibited, thus strengthening the experience of having entered an unknown, different world.

The exhibition also had a comfortable atmosphere, which was a great contrast to the usual turmoil of the city. This comfort was also a strange contrast to the potentially dangerous *drought* that was recreated in the exhibition space by the means of the hot and bone-dry sculptures. Because of this calming atmosphere, I did not respond to this extreme drought with a desire to escape the room. Instead, I responded with indifferent laziness. The exhibition was like a time capsule: it was like being in a spa or a sacred temple, a place where time disappears and no one wants to leave.

When reading news about extreme drought, it may seem too abstract and too distant to really comprehend it. Oslo's cold winters combined with well-managed resource infrastructure make weather-related issues rarely a problem in this corner of the world. Considering that Wanthiang's previous artistic project has been described as a portrayal of a distanced relationship to natural disasters, *Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines* can be interpreted along the same lines as addressing issues of distance and catastrophe.

When entering the dark, uncanny space it felt like entering a surreal bubble, but by transporting the visitors from cold Oslo to a hot, dry climate, the display also captured local realities of a place far away—which one could physically feel when sitting on the hot clay sculpture. This particular environment was far away, but Wanthiang created a link between the environments in Thailand and in Oslo by means of the dim light in the gallery space, which resonated with the dusk outside. The opening time of Wanthiang's exhibition changed from day to day, as it was synchronised with the darkest stage of twilight. The doors opened at dusk, and the lighting inside the exhibition reflected the dusk outside. The

atmosphere of the exhibition thus captured the temporal conditions of nature's recurring rhythm. When I left the foreign atmosphere of the exhibition and returned to the streets of Oslo, the mystical light from the exhibition space continued. The sensation of the exhibition therefore had a continued presence and reminded me that the climate around the globe is intimately connected.

By visiting *Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines*, I travelled to a dry landscape where I could physically feel the heat, but the comfort of the heat and the clay sculptures I was sitting on simply made me want to rest while watching the mayflies projected on the screens. It was as if I was sitting on my sofa at home watching the news. I see extreme weather events from around the globe but I remain passive. Likewise, although I interpreted Wanthiang's exhibition as a portrayal of a gruesome scene of a natural disaster, my only response was one of passivity. It was even tempting to fall asleep. This temptation, I believe, reflects the numbness one can feel when confronted with the scale of the climate crisis.

Fear and Comfort

Philosopher Immanuel Kant described the *sublime* as a movement of the mind with an alternating repulsion and attraction (Kant, 1995, p. 81). According to Kant, towering mountains—which Wanthiang's sculptures give associations to—give the beholder a sublime response. They are pleasurable to look at but are at the same time frightening. Unlike positive pleasure, the pleasure we get from the sublime is, according to Kant, closer to admiration and deference (Kant, 1995, p. 76). The sight of a tall mountain is an admirable view, yet also threatening and therefore evokes a fear which makes us cautious. Kant described the sublime as something which evokes fear, but he qualified this by adding that not everything which evokes fear can be described as sublime (Kant, 1995, p. 80).

According to Kant, we are more attracted to something the more terrible it is, as long as we are not in serious danger (Kant, 1995, p. 81). Kant argued that when someone is faced with a challenge, like a storm, and responds with courage, they find themselves in a sublime state. In this case, the storm would be perceived as sublime because it provokes

an active imagination (Kant, 1995, p. 82). In *Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines*, the legitimate fear of the drought was not toned down and it was a pleasant setting to be in, but the dissonance between the fear of the drought and the comfort of the exhibition did not directly give me a sublime experience either. Instead, I experienced neither a feeling of having the ability to act nor despair over not being able to. I was simply relaxed, which is perhaps more frightening.

Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines was a really comfortable exhibition, but the presence of the sublime in the clay sculptures created a disturbing feeling. When entering the gallery space, I entered a scene of the local realities of a natural disaster, or at least a threatening drought, yet my response was laziness. The comfort of the exhibition space was therefore disturbing in itself. When leaving the exhibition and coming back out onto the streets of Oslo, the lighting of the continuing dusk gave the single environmental event a continued presence and left me with a feeling of unease which was difficult to place because of the exhibition's sensorial quality.

Wanhiang brings forth the aesthetic in the disaster, and the combination of the comfortable and the gruesome creates a fascination in its dissonance, but instead of resulting in a will to act, it left me feeling calm. Yet, after reflecting further on this, I arrived at an even more uncanny sensation, a feeling of familiarity. The exhibition made me think of images I have seen many times before on the news which I have gotten strangely used to: images so overwhelming they often leave me apathetic. Few people in Oslo have experienced the consequences of extreme floods or droughts; it is difficult to comprehend the brutality of yet another image of natural disaster. To me, *Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines* captured this strange sensation of not being able to react when disasters occur in places far away. Although extreme weather instigated by the climate crisis is dramatic, the changes are gradual and to a large degree unnoticeable. The amount of extreme weather around the globe is accelerating, but since this happens gradually, privileged people like myself, who have never lived outside a city full of resources, *get used to it*. When going on living our lives in a habitual manner, we might get used to the strangest things.

Viktor Shklovsky said in his influential essay *Art as Technique*: ‘Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war’ (Shklovsky, 1965, p. 12). If we do not have anything to pull us out of the habitual course of everyday life—in which we only look at weather conditions on a day-to-day basis—we might overlook the fact that the warming of the planet is causing sea levels to rise, extreme droughts, and glaciers to melt. Shklovsky argued that ‘art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony’ (Shklovsky, 1965, p. 12). Wanthiang made it possible for those who visited *Evil Spirits Only Travel in Straight Lines* to feel the environment in Thailand; she had created a space where I could sense the stone, but the stone was not made stony. I only sensed a disturbing habituation and wanted to be lulled into sleep by the comfort of the heat, dimmed lighting, and soothing sound of mayflies. In other words, it made me conscious of my response to the overwhelming consequences of the age of humans.

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