



Hacking the Thai Regime of Images: Visual Activism in Post-coup Thailand (2014–20)

Nigel Power^(✉) 

King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Bangkok 10140, Thailand
peter.nig@kmutt.ac.th

Abstract. This article discusses visual resistance to the 2014 coup d'état in Thailand. Faced with severely curtailed freedoms of association and speech, state censorship and repression, Thai activists were forced to appropriate, domesticate and create a range of symbolic modes of resistance in both the off- and on-line realms. This study was based on Descriptive Case Study Research Methodology and direct observation. I discuss three broad approaches to graphic protest: performance and the use of the body as a semiotic resource; on-line political satire; and street art interventions. I suggest that these served two important roles in the ongoing struggle for democracy: 1) keeping spaces of opposition and dissent open whilst spatial and electoral politics were prohibited; and, 2) challenging the particular visual logic of Thai power on its own terrain – the realm of appearances. The article addresses the period between the 2014 coup d'état until the reemergence of mass popular protests in 2020.

Keywords: Thailand · Visual activism · Authoritarianism · Regimes of images

1 Introduction

International press coverage – and a large part of conventional academic discourse – frequently reduces Thai politics to intra-elite power struggles. According to these narratives, other social forces – when they are present at all – are political ciphers or proxies for this or that section of the aristocratic, corporate or military elites. Whilst this is a convenient mystification for the powerful, it is an inversion of the truth. As Ungpakorn (2003: 6–40) argues, modern Thai history is in fact a series of mass political struggles aimed at extending the sphere of politics and military interventions aimed at protecting and restoring the dominance of the ruling classes. In this light, intra-elite power struggles are best seen as responses to mass politics: particular ways of returning the democratic genie to its bottle and restoring what Jackson (2004: 181) refers to as the appearance of 'smooth calm' (the significance of this policing of surfaces will become apparent later in this article).

One could argue that the 2014 coup was the latest iteration in this political cycle. Yet in an important way it marked a qualitative change of strategy, the purpose of which was to end this political cycle once and for all. Since the election landslide of 2000, the ancien régime had been unable to reverse a wave of big losses to populist parties. Political,

judicial and military means had failed to dent the popularity of the populists amongst the working class majority and in 2014 right wing groups – nicknamed the Yellow Shirts – mobilized street protests against what they cynically termed ‘parliamentary dictatorship’. In response, the government supporters formed the National United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) – the Red Shirts – a decentralized grass roots mass movement dedicated to advancing democracy and agitating for social and economic justice (Taylor 2012: 298). This manifested a growing confidence and agency in sections of Thai society seen as passive, apolitical and corruptible by the traditional elites. As a result, the UDD quickly became both counter and anathema to the anti-democratic forces on the streets and in the corridors of power. In 2010, after a series of mass pro-democracy demonstrations and lengthy occupations of the symbolic centres of Bangkok, the Red Shirt movement was violently repressed, its leaders arrested or exiled and its communications and educational infrastructures dismantled (Fullbrook 2012: 133).

Not surprisingly, conflict continued in the aftermath. In early May 2014, the Constitutional Court removed the caretaker government from office for alleged ‘abuses of power’, a move widely seen as a ‘judicial coup’ (Veerayooth and Hewison 2016: 375). In the week before the putsch, the army imposed a State of Emergency, closed down independent TV and community radio stations and prohibited academic seminars. Potential nodes of resistance such as activists, academics and politicians were ‘visited’ by men in uniform. In an atmosphere febrile with talk of yet another coup d’état, the leader of the armed forces General Prayuth Chan-ocha took to the airwaves to denounce such irresponsible rumours and rule out military intervention. Yet on the evening of the 22nd of May 2014 Prayuth proved the rumour mongers correct, and assumed power as the head of the National Peace and Order Maintaining Council (NPOMC) (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Broadcasting interrupted (photograph by the author).

Haunted by their repeated failures to neutralize their opposition and to counter growing popular aspirations for democracy and equality, the regime and its allies set in motion two interrelated projects aimed at reestablishing the old order and foreclosing future challenges to it. The first sought to re-engineer the nation’s political institutions and

and protesters in central Bangkok increased and an early reluctance on the part of the authorities to intervene directly, segued into confrontation and the detention and injury of numerous demonstrators.

Sections of the mainstream media attempted to cover protests but soon after the coup, overt and covert control of journalism intensified as the authorities launched what Aim Sinpeng (2014) characterized as, ‘Thailand’s Information War’. Significantly, it was not only online media organizations that the junta sought to target. Individual users also appeared in the crosshairs. For example, in June 2014 the junta declared that, ‘liking or expressing approval of anti-military junta messages is a crime’ (Prachathai 2014a). Lim (2018: 488–489) provides a useful summary of reports on the nature and effects of this strategy. For example, the extension of already draconian *lèse majesté* laws ramped up pressure on social media users and fostered a climate in which self-censorship flourished (FIDH 2016). Such approaches, accompanied by comprehensive legal instruments such as the 2016 Computer Related Crime Act, established a finely woven legal net whose aim was to capture any online content, ‘perceived to criticize the Thai monarchy, the NCPO or the government’ (Freedom House 2016). The jailing of human rights activist Jatupat Boonpattaraksa for ‘sharing’ a Facebook link to a BBC biography of the Thai King, typified the ways in which the junta sought to, ‘restrict free speech, enforce surveillance and censorship, and retaliate against activists’ (Human Rights Watch 2016).

In response to these attempts to criminalize public dissent, bridle journalism and discipline social media, activists sought to develop alternative ways to make protest possible and resistance visible. The battle shifted to the semantic field where powerful state forces sought to identify and erase images of resistance whilst activists created ways to maintain the visibility of critical voices and alternative conceptions of social and political possibilities. In what follows, I will discuss three of the most significant of these broad forms of visual political action. It should be noted, however, that these were not, in practice, mutually exclusive, but rather fed and fed off each other as the situation unfolded and circumstances dictated.

2.2 The Play of Symbols

As the regime consolidated its position, activists sought viable tactics for circumventing the junta’s desire to police and discipline all forms of association and expression deemed critical of their legitimacy and political project. Counter-intuitively, the government’s totalizing ambition raised questions and suggested possible answers. How, for example, is it possible to criminalize in advance each and every form that a protest might take without unduly disrupting everyday life? And, how is it possible to exercise control over the meanings that signs and symbols might accrue over time? These ambiguities, contradictions and immanent possibilities, provided footholds for creative interventions capable of confounding and challenging the authorities.

At the heart of these were a small set of strategic tools that chimed with Situationist games (Debord 2006), culture jamming practices (Dery 1993) and network-enabled protest (Mason 2011). Firstly, protests were often difficult to distinguish from the mundane activities of everyday urban life. Secondly, activists mobilized a shifting vocabulary of symbols from beyond the usual register of politics. Thirdly, despite the seriousness of their message and the risks involved, they infused interventions with various forms

of play and humour. Fourthly, once decoded or discovered, activists sought to draw the authorities into absurd and patently unequal confrontations. And, finally, leveraging the multiplying power of social media, activists produced images of these interventions and the state's responses to them, and disseminated these far beyond the spatial bounds of the protests themselves.



Fig. 3. Protest as performance, performance as protest (courtesy of Prachathai).

In June 2014, for example, the Facebook page of the independent on-line news agency Prachathai (2014b) reported that ‘at 5pm today a man was arrested by plainclothes police officers for sitting alone in front of Siam Paragon Mall while eating a sandwich and reading the book 1984’ (see Fig. 3). This odd story is an interface to a political practice that I characterize as protest by performance (or perhaps the performance of protest). Here, the ‘performer’s’ props – a book and a sandwich – as well as his mundane actions – sitting, eating and reading – were already politically charged elements in a shifting and distributed register of ambiguous and apparently apolitical signifiers. For example, in June 2014 the Chiang Mai police forced a local art gallery to cancel a screening of the feature film based upon George Orwell’s dystopian novel 1984. In the following weeks, in acts of subtle and ironic defiance, students and other activists took to openly carrying the novel or stood reading it in public places, often in sight of police or military personnel. To kick-start another intervention, Red Shirt activist Sombat Boongam-anong posted a ‘Facebook invitation to meet up “to have burgers”’ in a popular international retail area of Bangkok (Prachathai 2014c). As activists gathered, the authorities mobilized troops to prevent protestors – initially, of course, indistinguishable from hungry shoppers or tourists – entering the now locked-down area. For a while the fast food outlet became agora, the hamburger a sign of dissent and the détourned image of Ronald MacDonald an entry in the symbolic vocabulary of protest. Soon after, in a further attempt to short circuit

such gatherings, the increasingly alarmed authorities announced that using Facebook posts to mobilize protests ‘may lead to seven years imprisonment’ (Prachathai 2014d).

In this cat and mouse conflict, the creation or appropriation of new symbolic resources was tactically important. As Wad (2015) noted, ‘this was the beginning of psychological war between the protesters, who kept on changing resistance symbols, and the junta, who kept on chasing and arresting.’ For brief moments, new semiotic assets created possibilities for action and association that were illegible to the official gaze. At various times, pink Valentine’s Day balloons, dolls, white T-shirts and even sheets of blank A4 paper, were all symbolic vehicles through which activists made their opposition visible. Once discovered and added to the inventory of suspect or prohibited signs of dissent, the political charge of these symbols attenuated. The significance of others, however, endured and several of these served as longer lasting symbols of solidarity and collective opposition.

Of particular interest here is the use of the body as a means of semiotic production. Hand gestures such as the clenched and raised right fist, for example, have a long history in radical politics. They are simple yet powerful gestalts and formed and unformed in an instant using only slight movements of the hands or fingers. As a result, they are difficult to police without constraining or doing more serious violence to the body. The production of the image of a dove – a universal symbol of peace – using hands locked together and placed flat across one’s chest became an important example of this embodied approach to meaning production. The widely circulated photograph of a smiling Sombat Boongam-among producing the dove whilst surrounded by police and state officials at the moment of his detention, epitomized the spirit of peaceful civilian protest and resistance (see Fig. 4). Speaking to the on-line news service Prachatai (2014e), Sombat said, ‘they arrested me because they hoped that the [anti-coup] movement would then stop. If the movement stopped, I lost [...] they want to wipe out all the doves.’



Fig. 4. Performing ‘the dove’ (courtesy of Prachathai).

Protesters at Sombat's arrest demonstrated their solidarity using another hand gesture; this one borrowed from the popular feature film *The Hunger Games*. In the movie, opponents of an authoritarian regime visualize opposition using a raised-arm three-fingered salute. Thai activists were quick to see potential of leveraging both the content of the movie and the graphic simplicity and ease of production of the gesture. For the former, student activists from the League of Liberal Thammasat for Democracy (LLTD) carried out a range of actions including announcing their intention to view the movie as a group and distributing free tickets outside cinemas (see Fig. 5). The simple aim here was to draw parallels between the dystopic authoritarian society depicted in the movie and life in post-coup Thailand. The authorities' response, of course, unintentionally amplified this message as police surrounded one movie theatre, forced others to abandon planned screenings and arrested known activists attempting to buy tickets (Prachatai 2014f). Moreover, the gesture itself spread quickly to other oppositional groups and individual protesters. For example, a speech by junta leader Prayut Chan-ocha was interrupted by five members of the student Dao Din group wearing 'No to the Coup D'état' T-shirts and giving three-finger salutes (see Haberkorn (2015) for a detailed discussion of the emergence of youth and student protest groups). At a Bangkok shopping mall an anti-coup 'aunty' was arrested for making the gesture. And, across social media, sympathetic users created and shared a variety of graphic forms of the salute.



Fig. 5. Hunger Games salute at Bangkok cinema (courtesy of Prachathai).

Subversive and often ludic forms of direct action such as these proliferated, particularly during the early years of military rule. They played important roles in maintaining

and building opposition when other forms of activism were, to all extents and purposes, impossible. Moreover, driven by a combination of organized improvisation and improvised organisation, they proved, at one and the same time, difficult to police and problematic to discipline. Interventions created moments during which opposition to the regime became visible in both the urban everyday and on-line realms. They tested the nerve and resolve of the regime, knowingly inviting the security forces into surreal encounters over odd objects in mundane places.

But of course, this was serious play – play with consequences for those brave enough to participate. Interventions made apparent the authoritarian logic of the junta and its willingness to use state power arbitrarily and with impunity to erase dissent. On the other hand, they also provided opportunities for the unequal encounters between peaceful protesters and state power to be concentrated in images that circulated rapidly and widely on social media within and beyond Thailand. These consequences were, of course, part of the activist's calculations and many of them paid dearly for the making of them.

2.3 Networked Individuals

The world of online communication presented the government with puzzles it was ill equipped to solve. On the one hand, as a forum for critical discourse and a tool for organizing dissent, social media simply had to be policed. Yet the distributed nature of digital platforms, uncrackable encryption technologies and the ambiguous status of the social media 'platforms' themselves, repeatedly confounded the government's nationalistic and authoritarian mindset. Moreover, Internet censorship and prosecutions for posting, commenting and even liking online content, drew widespread international condemnation and this threatened the government's already sullied image (Lim 2018: 489). On the other, social media enabled pro-coup partisans to counter critical perspectives and engage with pro-democracy netizens at home and abroad. Overt control over social media would, therefore, remove supportive as well as critical voices. Above all, disrupting social media had the potential to alienate the coup supporting sections of the urban middle-classes for whom Facebook had become an essential medium for personal and political communication. This was too high a price to pay. As a result, the online realm, though heavily policed by the state and scrutinized by official and self-appointed pro-regime censors, remained relatively open for oppositional activists willing and able to find ways to evade or confuse the authorities and their supporters.

Again, jokes of various kinds provided important vehicles for these everyday expressions of resistance. As Metahaven (2013: 30) put it, 'Jokes are an active, living and mobile form of disobedience.' The power of jokes to illuminate discourse and provoke action lies, in part at least, in their unpredictability. On the one hand, a joke may burn briefly but incandescently, like a lightning strike. On the other, it may, like a crown wildfire, spread with a rapidity that is impossible to monitor let alone control. Thai activists took full advantage of each of these forms.

Ironic or satirical replies to or comments on the government's attempts at social media communication proved a simple yet effective way to draw attention to ideological and political absurdities. For example, the substitution of popular radio and TV programs with martial music from the Cold War was met with a wave of ironic messages on the

NPOMC's Facebook page. The Basic Education Commission's offer of free downloadable patriotic songs was similarly satirized. Whilst the vast majority of these forms of infra-resistance were ephemeral and improvised, their mobilization of irony and other humorous forms – pastiche, satire and slapstick – confounded the censors long enough for them to proliferate.



Fig. 6. Networked political cartooning (courtesy of the artist).

For many though, a more substantial on-line presence was also required. Meme-making pages such as KuKult and We Love PM Prayuth mercilessly parodied policy announcements and drew humour from discrepancies between political promises and social realities. Given their visibility and popularity, these comic memes found it difficult to escape the attention of the authorities and both KuKult and We Love PM General Prayuth were disrupted. In 2016, for example, the organizers of the latter page were arrested on charges that could have resulted in up to twelve years in jail. Whilst the Facebook 8 – as the group came to be known – were released without charge, a number of them were subsequently rearrested and threatened with the far more serious crime of *lèse majesté*. Not content with harassing the meme makers themselves, their supporters were also targeted and a number of activists who demonstrated on their behalf were also detained.

Others managed to maintain a visual presence despite the attention of the authorities. For example, since 2016 Khai Maew – literally Cat’s Balls – has posted a stream of increasingly popular cartoon gags on Facebook. Typically, the cartoons use a simple four-cell format to present wordless narratives populated by a rotating cast of more or less recognizable political caricatures and symbols: the bewildered citizens whose everyday lives are haunted by the smiling general with the toothbrush moustache shown above is a typical example (see Fig. 6). According to the artist, the cryptic nature of these cartoons invites viewers to decipher the narrative and, in so doing, unlock the social comment and activate the gag (Ramasoota 2018). In other words, these pictorial riddles require forms of critical and comical thinking that are inimical to the one-dimensional socio-political orthodoxies mandated by the government and accepted by its supporters.

2.4 Meanwhile, Back on the Streets



Fig. 7. Spontaneous anti-coup graffiti (courtesy of Kisanphol Wattanawanyoo).

In October 2018 Reuters reported that Thai police had arrested two tourists for vandalism (Briton, Canadian Arrested 2018). Their crime was spray painting graffiti on an historic wall in the Northern city of Chiang Mai. This was not, however, a political or subversive act. According to reports, one ‘vandal’ inexpertly sprayed the wall with a tag identifying his city of origin and name, presumably exhausting his spray-can before being able to add his passport number. Nevertheless, the police threatened ‘Scouser Lee’ and his bumbling Canadian partner in street crime with the full force of the Thai law – ten years in jail and a hefty one million baht (£40,000) fine. Whilst the charge was never filed, its potential severity illustrated the baseline perils facing Thai street art activists. Add to these, potential charges for sedition, and a night out with the spray-cans is a far from comfortable prospect.

Yet despite these dangers, various forms of anti-regime graffiti began to appear soon after the coup and have continued to do so in the years since. Many of these interventions were clandestine expressions of anger and dissent, and were no less effective or valuable

because of that (see Fig. 7). Others were more carefully constructed visual utterances whose form and rhetoric appropriated and domesticated international political street art practices (see Marche (2012) for a detailed discussion of the origins and uses of graffiti as a form of political communication).



Fig. 8. Street art intervention by Headache Stencil (photograph by the author).

Perhaps the best-known exponent of this latter approach is the Thai street artist known as Headache Stencil. Headache works anonymously – for good reason. As his topical stencil visual works began to be noticed in the Thai capital, the authorities got wind of the satirical damage inflicted on the regime and attempted, unsuccessfully, to detain him. Since then the artist often inately referred to as the ‘Thai Banksy’, has conducted a guerrilla graffiti campaign against the government.

Whilst Headache Stencil uses a range of forms and media in his work, his most powerful and controversial pieces are ostensibly simple, stencil and spray-can street-works. Appearing overnight at different locations within the city, these images boldly call out the hypocrisy and unaccountability of leading figures within or close to the junta. An example. In 2018, whilst the Deputy Prime minister was struggling to account for possession of a million-dollar horde of undeclared luxury watches, a single stenciled image appeared on a footbridge in central Bangkok (see Fig. 8). This bold montage placed a portrait of the under-fire soldier-cum-politician on the face of an old-fashioned bell alarm clock. Burned into his forehead like a brand, was the logo of the luxury timepiece company, Rolex. On one level this was the knockabout stuff of political cartooning – a collage of easy to recognize signifiers lampooning its subject’s ‘allegedly’ unusual wealth. On another, however, it insinuated different readings by activating a cluster of connotations about life under military rule: how long will this nightmare last and when

will we awaken from it and move on with our lives? At their best, Headache's stencil street images work in this way. A handful of graphically economical representations drive critique and parody whilst, at one and the same time, the image overall plays with deeper doubts, concerns and fears.

Of course, street images such as these reach a relatively small audience and last only as long as it takes the authorities to locate and over-paint them. Their digital afterimages, on the other hand, cut free from time and place, live new lives, multiplying repeatedly as they pass through the social rhizomes of the online world. And, as the discussion above has shown, the on-line realm became and remains a crucial means of doing politics, building affinity groups, and nurturing networks of solidarity and support, once other possibilities for action and association were denied.

So why take the risk? Why not create and circulate memes? For Marche (2012) the answer is crucial to our understanding of the significance of visual interventions of this kind: 'whereas a website's viewers initiate the viewing, graffiti in physical space impose their tangible presence to the viewer – which is why they are commonly considered a nuisance.' And, it is not only in their unruly mode of address that differences lie. By its very nature, the act of producing an image *in situ* lays claims on a cluster of denied rights: the right to political agency; the right to produce and circulate meaning; the right to dissent; the right to speak back to power; and crucially, the right to exercise these rights in public space – the right to the city (Lefebvre 1996).

Nevertheless, the extent to which this mode of visual protest can maintain its critical edge and political potency in contemporary Thailand is a matter of conjecture. The recuperation of radical iconography for commercial or ideological purposes is well known. However, as Demos (2016: 91) argues, there is another danger – the danger of the protest images becoming detached from their oppositional contexts and circulating instead primarily within radical circles: 'What good is promoting visual activism if the results are directed towards being aesthetically enjoyed, spectacularized, marketed, sold, and consumed by those in the political opposition?' Each of these issues weighs heavily on critical street art in post-coup Thailand.

For one thing, the practice is already being recuperated and set to work as the advance guard of gentrification and as an alibi for capital accumulation. A November 2018 headline from the 'Lifestyle' supplement to the English language daily the Bangkok Post screamed, 'It's Graffiti! It's Hip! It's Street! Urban artists descend on Bangkok' (It's Graffiti 2018). Reassuring the authorities and property owners, the story declared that, 'private walls (permission already secured) will be splashed in all colours.' Meanwhile, on the edge of the neighborhood hosting this festival, developers were constructing yet another shopping mall and 'lifestyle' complex. This half-built edifice was wrapped in a hoarding decorated with giant reproductions of work by Thai street and graffiti artists, and announced itself, with no trace of irony, as an 'Artists' Collaboration' (see Fig. 9). It is, of course, faux radical chic, a prime example of the noxious collaboration between art and capital accumulation that Crystal Bennes describes as 'development aesthetics' (Vince 2019).

For another, the art scene itself, as Demos (2016) argues above, presents significant challenges to activist artists. Will the work of Headache Stencil and other graffiti radicals survive the shift of register that surely accompanies gallery shows and merchandising?

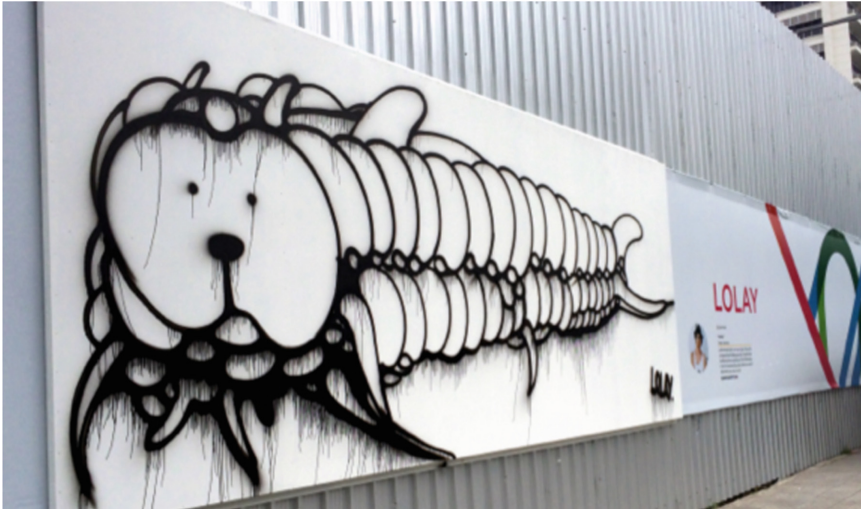


Fig. 9. Development aesthetics (photograph by the author).

And will association with the Bangkok contemporary art scene – large sections of which were compromised by their support for the 2014 coup d'état (see Chanrochanakit (2016) and Chotpradit (2017)) – exhaust any remaining radical potential?

3 Hacking the Thai Regime of Images

Before concluding with a brief description of where this struggle finds itself at the time of writing – September 2020 – I want to locate the discussion within a specific cultural frame. It is, of course, possible to view the above entirely through the globalized lens of post-Occupy, visually orientated and network-fueled protests. And, indeed, many of the tactics and forms used by the Thai protesters chimed with, appropriated or détourned these forms of radical interventionist and symbolic politics. Seen in this light, the activism described above – itself but a fragment of a rich and complex whole – served immediate political goals: to challenge the legitimacy of the government, to preserve existing and open up new spaces for dissent, and to maintain networks of solidarity and mutual-support until such a time as democratic politics and mass protest would once again be possible.

There are, however, also socio-political dimensions that give these struggles a distinctively Thai character and visual significance. However, whilst studies of the perceptual dimensions of Thai politics are growing in significance within the country – see for example the work of Noobanjong (2007) and Thanavi (2017) – the most developed theoretical accounts of Thai power in its visual registers have been proposed by non-Thai anthropologists. Peter Jackson, for example, argues that in Thailand power is conceptualized and exercised in a characteristic and exceptionalist manner that he terms 'The Thai Regime of Images' (2004: 181): 'the distinctiveness of Thai power lies in an intense concern to monitor and police surface effects, images, public behaviours, and representations.' This Regime expresses a cultural logic that values, above all else, the production

and reproduction of an image of social tranquility, or as Jackson (2004: 184) puts it, the appearance of ‘smooth calm’.

To flesh out this theory, Jackson mobilizes the work of Rosalind Morris. For Morris (2000: 147), the Thai mode of power is primarily concerned with ‘the appearance or the performance of ideally nationalist behaviour. It requires one to conform oneself to the ideas of the national, and it makes performance the criterion of proper citizenship.’ The twice-daily ritual of standing for the national anthem is a signal example of how the regime binds together representations, ideological conceptions and bodily practices through public performance. Personal and private beliefs remain, under normal circumstances, beyond the purview of the state. If, however, these appear in the public realm and perturb the veneer of social calm, then they ‘can be silenced or made invisible by the deployment of the full legal (and at time extra-judicial) power of the state.’ (Jackson, 2004: 184). Put simply, the Thai Regime of Images serves, at one and the same time, to render visible the performance of an idealized notion of Thai identity and invisible – and therefore ahistorical – the particular instantiation of class and power-relations characteristic of Thai capitalist modernity.

The years before the 2014 coup d’état had seen this Regime increasingly bent out of shape – a map that no longer corresponded with its territory. Whilst various social, political and economic eruptions contributed to this deformation, the mass Red Shirt street protests and urban occupations of 2010 were decisive. Located at the symbolic heart of conservative power, these made visible a major challenge to the political logic of the Regime, the social ordering it produced and the system of symbols and representations that legitimized it. The violent dispersal of the protesters and the subsequent ritualized public cleansing of the spaces of occupation were, I believe, material evidence of a project of erasure and the beginning of moves to recreate a system of appearances amenable to the anti-democratic élites. Seen in this light, the 2014 coup d’état was conceived as a decisive response to this challenge: a totalizing political project charged with reestablishing and perpetuating nationalist-royalist class power whilst reconfiguring the system of representations that naturalized it.

The examples of visual activism discussed above, engaged this project on its own terrain: the realm of appearances. These simple acts of visual resistance hacked the regime of images by disrupting the reconstruction of the symbolic order and ridiculing attempts to manipulate appearances in such a way as to produce a simplified and unified picture of a complex and fragmented social reality. Whilst the coup-makers promised to ‘return happiness’ to Thais – and, for external consumption, resurrected the tourist cliché ‘land of smiles’ – very many people were laughing not only at those in power, but also at power itself. As Mulder (1985: 198) argues, in Thailand ‘presentation is more than superficial reality: it is essential reality [...] the tendency to equate the manipulation of symbols of social reality with its actual mastery.’ Visual activists drove symbolic wedges between appearance and reality and for this reason were subject to increasing levels of state and extra-state violence in the years following the 2014 coup d’état.

For a while it seemed as if the political project set in motion by the 2014 coup d’état had succeeded. In 2016 a new constitution institutionalized the power of the coup supporting political, corporate and military forces. Moreover, despite the emergence of a youthful and dynamic electoral force – the liberal Future Forward Party – a tightly managed general election in 2019 was won by the same coalition. In July 2020, however, pro-democracy student demonstrators took to the streets and set in motion a wave of

increasingly large and politically ambitious protests. At the heart of these was a set of proposals for radical reform, including the resignation of the government, the rewriting of the constitution and, controversially, reform of the symbolic cornerstone of the Regime of Images, the monarchy (Phuaphansawat 2020). Significantly, Red Shirts appeared once again in large numbers at this and other demonstrations across the country. With youth and student protest leaders openly paying tribute to the role of the Red Shirt movement in the struggle for democracy, it is clear that new alliances are forming and old struggles returning. Phuaphansawat (2020) argues that this common ground is evident in increasing parallels in pro-equality and anti-authoritarian iconography and rhetoric of these two moments and movements. Moreover, the taking up of Red Shirt attempts to question dominant historical and ideological narratives represents an open challenge to the ahistorical account of and justification for the outward form and social content of the Thai Regime of Images. Once again, the symbolic dimensions of protest were unified with the power of bodies in space. How the government responds to these challenges to its control of the nation's political, physical and symbolic spaces will mark the next stage in the Thai elite's troubled relationship with democracy (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10. Symbols and bodies in space (courtesy Napin Mandhachitara).

4 In Place of a Conclusion – A Note on Design

At first sight, the improvised and guerrilla activities described above appear far removed from the world of graphic or visual communication design in either its academic or professional forms. In Thailand, design schools and professions remain closely integrated into circuits of capital accumulation and the field has yet to carve out the social footholds necessary to establish an independent identity with the right to speak publicly about matters beyond its immediate practical concerns. So, whilst many designers

and design students participated in the current protests as political activists, and others volunteered their practical skills to this or that protest or campaign, a collective ethical position with regards to issues at the heart of visual communication – the right to produce and circulate meaning, for example – could not be articulated. In part at least, this was because many within the university and professional sectors remain – like the artists mentioned above – compromised by their initial and often ongoing support for the political project set in motion by this and earlier coups d'état. Nevertheless – like the protests themselves – change is appearing from the bottom upwards and is largely led by the youth. The emergence of informal and explicitly graphic orientated groupings such as *Young Designer For Democracy* suggests that, at the very least, the next generation of visual communication professionals will fight to establish progressive social, political and ethical agendas within Thai design discourse and practice.

References

- Briton, Canadian arrested in Thailand for graffiti on wall (2018). Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-graffiti-idSUSKCN1MTOKJ>
- Chanrochanakit, P.: Reluctant Avant-garde: Politics and Art in Thailand. *Obieg 2* (2016). Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/5n8tsyn3>
- Chotpradit, T.: A Dark Spot on a Royal Space: The Art of the People's Party and the Thai (Art) History. *Southeast Now: Direct. Contemp. Mod. Art Asia* **1**(1), 131–157 (2017)
- Chotpradit, T.: My Own Words: On Thai Art and Politics, Never Forget. *Art & Market* (2020). Retrieved from <https://www.artandmarket.net/analysis/2020/10/28/my-own-words-on-thai-art-and-politics-never-forget-thanavi-chotpradit>
- Debord, G.: Report on the construction of situations. In: Knabb, K. (ed.) *Situationist International Anthology*, pp. 25–29. Bureau of Public Secrets, Berkeley (2006)
- Demos, T.J.: Between rebel creativity and reification: for and against visual activism. *J. Vis. Cult.* **15**(1), 85–102 (2016)
- Dery, M.: Culture jamming: hacking, slashing, and sniping in the empire of signs. *Open Magazine* (1993)
- FIDH. Thailand: Lese Majeste detentions have reached alarming levels, new report says. International Federation for Human Rights (2016). <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/asia/thailand/thailand-lese-majeste-detentions-have-reached-alarming-levels-new>
- Freedom House. Thailand: Freedom of the Press. Freedom House (2016). <https://freedomhouse.org/country/thailand/freedom-world/2020>
- Fullbrook, D.: Changing Thailand an awakening of popular political consciousness for rights? In: Montesano, M., et al. (eds.) *Bangkok May 2010: Perspectives on a Divided Thailand*, pp. 131–140. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Bangkok (2012)
- Haberkorn, T.: A Budding Democracy Movement in Thailand. *Dissent Magazine* (2015). <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/new-democracy-movement-thailand/>, Accessed 20 July 2020
- Human Rights Watch. Thailand: cyber-crime act tightens internet control (2016). <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/21/thailand-cyber-crime-act-tightens-internet>
- It's Graff! It's hip! It's street! Urban Artists Descend on Bangkok (2018). <https://www.bangkokpost.com/life/social-and-lifestyle/1569738/its-graff-its-hip-its-street>
- Jackson, P.: The thai regime of images. *Sojourn* **19**(2), 181–218 (2004)
- Ungpakorn, J.: A marxist history of political change in Thailand. In: Ungpakorn, J. (ed.) *Radicalising Thailand: New Political Perspectives*, pp. 6–40. Institute of Asian Studies, Bangkok (2003)

- Lefebvre, H.: The right to the city. In: Kofman, E., Lebas, E. (eds.) *Writings on Cities*. Blackwell, Cambridge (1996)
- Lim, M.: Disciplining dissent: freedom, control, and digital activism in South East Asia. In: Padawangi, R. (ed.) *Routledge Handbook of Urbanization in Southeast Asia*, pp. 478–494. Routledge, London (2018)
- Marche, G.: Expressivism and resistance: graffiti as an infrapolitical form of protest against the war on terror. *Revue Française d'Études Américaines* **1**(131), 78–96 (2012)
- Mason, P.: *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions*. Verso, London (2011)
- Metahaven. *Can Jokes Bring Down Governments?: Memes, Design and Politics*. Strelka Press, Moscow (2013)
- Morris, R.: *In place of Origins: Modernity and mediums in Northern Thailand*. Duke University Press, Durham (2000)
- Mulder, N.: *Everyday Life in Thailand: an Interpretation*. Duang Kamol, Bangkok (1985)
- Noobanjong, K.: The Democracy Monument: Identity, Ideology, & Power Manifested in Built Forms. *J. Arch./Plan. Res. Stud.* **3**(5), 29–49 (2007)
- Pattana, K.: From red to red: an auto-ethnography of economic and political transformation in a north eastern thai village. In: Montesano, M., et al. (eds.) *Bangkok May 2010: Perspectives on a Divided Thailand*, pp. 230–247. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Bangkok (2012)
- Phuaphansawat, K.: *The Anti-Royalist Possibility: Thailand's 2020 Student Movement*. Institute of South East Asia Studies (2020). Retrieved from <http://www.iseas.edu.sg/media/commentaries/the-anti-royalist-possibility-thailands-2020-student-movement/>
- Prachathai. Liking anti-junta Facebook posts is a crime: Thai police. Prachathai (2014a). <https://prachatai.com/english/node/4110>
- Prachathai. Police detain 8 student activists before their anti-coup sandwiches activity. Prachathai (2014b). <https://prachatai.com/english/node/4148>
- Prachathai. Anti-coup protesters, soldiers clash at McDonalds Ratchaprasong. Prachathai (2014c). <https://prachatai.com/english/node/4017>
- Prachathai. Police say Facebook posting to mobilise protests may lead to 7 years imprisonment. Prachathai (2014d). <https://prachatai.com/english/node/4133>
- Prachathai. Detained key red-shirt figure Sombat urges people to stop protests against the coup. Prachathai (2014e). <https://prachatai.com/english/node/4123>
- Prachathai. 3 people detained related to Hunger Games premiere in Bangkok. Prachathai (2014f). <https://prachatai.com/english/node/4506>
- Ramasoota, P.: Khai Maew, RIP. Bangkok Post (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/1399806/a-sad-end-to-popular-online-comic-strip-khai-maew>
- Sinpeng, A.: The Coup and the Information War in Thailand. *Global Voices – advox* (2014). <https://advox.globalvoices.org/2014/05/26/the-coup-and-the-information-war-in-thailand/>
- Taylor, J.: No way forward but back? re-emergent thai falangism, democracy, and the new “red shirt” social movement. In: Montesano, M., et al. (eds.) *Bangkok May 2010: Perspectives on a Divided Thailand*, pp. 287–312. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Bangkok (2012)
- Thanom, C.: Remembrances of Red Trauma (22) – The forgotten art of the Red Shirts (video 2:40). *The Isaan Record* (2020). <https://isaanrecord.com/2020/06/08/ten-years-after-april-may-2010-22>
- Veerayooth, K., Hewison, K.: Introduction: understanding Thailand's politics. *J. Contemp. Asia* **46**(3), 371–387 (2016)
- Vince, O.: *Death Sentence: The Words That Bulldoze Our Cities*. Failed Architecture (2019). <https://failedarchitecture.com/death-sentence-the-words-that-bulldoze-our-cities/>
- Wad, W.: *The End of Symbolic Protest in Thailand*. New Mandala (2015). <https://www.newmandala.org/the-end-of-symbolic-protest-in-thailand/>