

# Korakrit Arunanondchai

## *Songs for dying / Songs for living*

September 18, 2021–January 9, 2022

Birth, *decreation*, and death are thresholds of heightened consciousness from which Korakrit Arunanondchai generates his storytelling and formal inquiries. Through video, painting, and installation, the artist processes personal experiences while probing their sociohistorical contingencies. The intricate codependency of these forms asks fundamental questions regarding existence and meaning, especially when understood outside of a Western ontological framework.

In *Songs for dying / Songs for living*, Arunanondchai has divided up the exhibition space into three interconnected acts: each one speaks to a transformative potential which catalyzes the others. Departing from the loss of his grandfather, the artist unfolds stories that carry the idea of self and the community into the space of the unknowable. Ghosts, shamans, and a dying sea turtle are not only metaphors but also the mediums from which processes of becoming and decomposition must pass through. In these stories, rich in mythological references and symbols, Arunanondchai simultaneously takes up social and political realities of life in Thailand, which is characterized by military rule, monarchy, and pro-democracy protests. Songs shape the arc of the exhibition, which lead the audience through a polyphonic narrative in which events are testified to the emotional and transcendent impulses of peoples, nations, and beings living under the symbols of higher powers.

Stories not only create new realities but they can also change the way we relate to the world around us. The work of Korakrit Arunanondchai (\*1986, Bangkok, Thailand) focuses on the transformative potential of storytelling. With each project, the artist expands his cosmos of interconnected stories told through expansive video installations, paintings, objects, and performative works. In his videos, he processes experiences in his personal environment just as he does political events, history and questions to our crisis-ridden present. Born in Bangkok and working primarily in Bangkok and New York, Arunanondchai often draws upon the cultural contexts in his own biography as well as spaces with postcolonial trauma. Using essayistic and experimental approaches, the artist works with multiple collaborators to assemble audio and visual materials from various sources. With references to philosophy and myth, his narratives weave together questions about consciousness, empathy, and community. Moments of loss and transcendence testify to concrete realities that entangle people, politics, and power, while notions of collectivity are explored, in relation to both the secular and the sacred. In addition to family members and the artist himself, mythical figures, spirits, animals, and deities appear in the stories as mediums for narration. A polyphony of storytellers produces a multi-perspectival and nonlinear mode of storytelling in Arunanondchai's work. It allows beings, times, events, and places to flow into one another as a continually mutating stream. The characters are intertwined in ways analogous to how the supernatural cannot be separated from the everyday and the political. Here, relations are permanently in flux.

Curator:  
Heike Munder, Director,  
Migros Museum für  
Gegenwartskunst

Curatorial Assistant:  
Viktor Hömpler, Trainee,  
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At the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Korakrit Arunanondchai presents two new and interrelated video installations *Songs for dying* (2021) and *Songs for living* (2021, created in collaboration with artist Alex Gvojjic), as well as a large-scale painting titled *If we burn, you burn with us* (2021), together for the first time. Arunanondchai has divided the upper floor of the museum into three atmospheric situations that are narratively intertwined. They move through cycles of birth, death, and *decreation* – the latter being a transformative process not equal to destruction. While *Songs for dying* unfolds in darkness in a room covered with earth, *Songs for living*, on the opposite side of the floor, is shrouded in blue-tinted daylight, mimicking the ocean and the sky. *If we burn, you burn with us* connects the two rooms, creating a space for gathering that is akin to a ritual.

*Songs for dying* is based on the final moments of interaction the artist had with his grandfather as he was singing his grandfather's favorite song to him on his deathbed. The video is divided into three chapter-like songs. They interpret the process of dying as an emotional and open space of possibility, in which decomposition enables new existences and from which a reorientation toward the living can emerge. In the video's narrative, ghosts speaking through the character of a shaman lead a dying sea turtle back to the shore on which it was born. The artist often portrays himself as the character of a ghost in order to conceive speculative narratives, which access different realms of time and space while telling of the transformative processes various beings undergo. For Arunanondchai, ghosts carry the persistence of consciousness to exist after a body, and they need mediums to possess, through which stories are then formed. As one of the key protagonists in *Songs for dying*, the sea turtle carries the story of a conscious earth. Sea turtles play an important role in mythology and are also known as the sacred offspring of the powerful "dragon sea god," whose stories surround Jeju Island in South Korea, one of the locations of the video.

In relation to its focus on the interplay between decomposition and new existences, the video also points at forces of order and power, and thus at processes in which institutional powers attempt to preserve structural oppression through the control of storytelling. In this context, Arunanondchai refers to the Jeju Massacre of 1948 in South Korea, as well as to Thailand's social-political present of protest against the military-backed government and the institution of the monarchy. On Jeju Island, a civil uprising against the division of Korea and the US military-backed South Korean government led to a brutal massacre in which more than thirty thousand civilians were murdered. For decades, it was forbidden to speak about the event. At different sites, relatives of the victims have engaged in acts of mourning and remembrance through shamanic rituals. Attempting to give a voice to the victims, shamans channel their spirits and perform public rituals. With this practice of remembrance and its attempt at healing, *Songs for dying* inquires into the functions of ritualistic and spiritual spaces as those in which trauma and oppression can be processed. The political suppression of voices is also addressed with a view to contemporary Thailand. Since the military coup in 2014, a pro-democracy movement has been protesting the ruling military regime and laws that grant unchecked power to the institution of the monarchy. In response to censorship and the enforcement of bans, the protesters continually develop new ways of communicating and voicing their demands. To this end, they often re-code signifiers from animistic traditions of Thailand, the Internet, and global pop culture, such as the three-finger salute of resistance from the Hollywood blockbuster franchise *The Hunger Games*.

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In multilayered montages of images, the narrative, on the one hand, traces the mythologization of the institution of the monarchy in Thailand after the Second World War, and the efforts to sustain it, while, on the other hand, the images point to how individuals can come together to form communities that have the ability to tell alternative stories as signs of hope and renewal. In the course of unfolding its narrative, the video *Songs for dying* performs a farewell to a loved one and acknowledges the necessity that decomposition plays toward new forms of existence. At its end, the story announces a world that lies beyond death, from which such new forms can emerge, likewise envisioning the setting of grounds on which a diversity of beings can survive.

As a reciprocally linked counterpart, *Songs for living* is set in a world beyond death, from which ghosts are journeying back into flesh. The video work, a collaboration between Korakrit Arunanondchai and the artist Alex Gvojić, takes the form of a musical, accompanied by instruments like guitar and drums. It was mostly conceived and produced in New York City in 2021, in the moments when the city was opening back up following the lifting of Covid-19 regulations – a time the artists experienced as a reshuffling of the space of the familiar. *Songs for living* focuses on paths that must be traveled to come into new forms of life. The narrative shifts settings and introduces new characters alongside ghosts – all are part of a universe structured by forces of gravity and light. The main narrator, a god-like storyteller, voiced by the musician Zsela, takes cues from the philosophical writing of Simone Weil in *Gravity and Grace* and of Édouard Glissant in *Sun of Consciousness*. In the video, the space beneath the surface of the ocean is experienced as a cosmic reality, inaccessible to the bodies of the living and accessible only through the collective imagination of human beings, akin to religious thinking. Sigmund Freud's idea of the "oceanic feeling" comes to mind as the ocean becomes the womb, where the ghosts reenter the living. Fire is also central to the story's unfolding, both as a site around which cultural and social orders formed and also as a space in which materials and ideologies can disappear back into a void. In addition, the narrative explores the idea of "faith" in the space of the unknown. Ritual, connection, and community characterize the supposed end of this narrative, which does not in fact mark an end, but rather an entrance.

In *Songs for dying / Songs for living*, the void that is the ocean and the sky (*Songs for living*) and the body of the earth (*Songs for dying*) are connected through the ritualistic space of the bonfire (*If we burn, you burn with us*). This painting, which evokes the process of creation and decreation, is executed on a scale similar to that of the walls of a church or a temple. Layers of figures applied using the human body appear to be gathering in a circle to dematerialize into a bird rising in flames. As a symbol, the bird is often associated with god and the divine space and, thus, has frequently been claimed throughout history by the ruling class. Examples include the Anunnaki in ancient tablets, the figures of angels in Christianity, and the Garuda in Southeast Asian mythology, to name just a few. They become symbols for order and governance that rule and stand above the people.

The movement of the universe is a spiral forever multiplying, collapsing, and returning into chaos, bound by an order an order that we cannot comprehend. All bodies, from planets to humans to ghosts, are affected and governed by gravity and light – the two main forces in the universe. Here, stories are told again and again. Emerging from Arunanondchai's cosmos of narratives, we carry them out into the world in the form of thoughts, feelings, and energies.

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Korakrit Arunanondchai (b. Bangkok, Thailand, 1986) lives and works in New York and Bangkok. Recent solo exhibitions include: Kunsthall Trondheim (2021), Serralves Museum, Porto (2020), Secession, Vienna (2019) and Kasseler Kunstverein, Kassel (2018). Arunanondchai's work has been presented at numerous biennials and festivals, with recent presentations at the Gwangju Biennial (2021), Yokohama Triennial (2020), the Venice Biennale (2019) and the Whitney Biennial (2019).

The exhibition *Songs for dying / Songs for living* is realized in co-production with the Kunstverein in Hamburg and is on view in Hamburg from December 4, 2021. It is accompanied by the most comprehensive publication to date on Korakrit Arunanondchai's practice, jointly produced by the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, the Kunstverein in Hamburg, and the Museo Serralves in Porto on the occasion of three solo exhibitions at the institutions between 2020 and 2022.

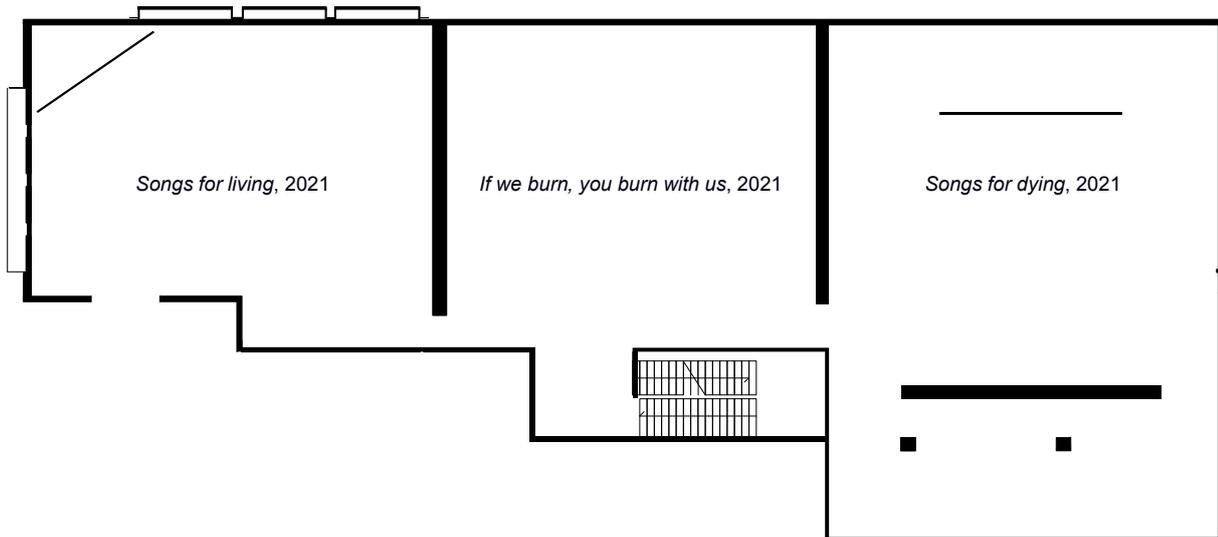


The Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst is a Migros Cultural Percentage institution and thus part of the social commitment of the Migros Group: [migris-engagement.ch](https://migris-engagement.ch)

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Korakrit Arunanondchai & Alex Gvojjic

*Songs for living, 2021*

Single-channel video (HD, color, sound), bleached denim pillows,  
blue photographic gel, blue carpet

20:51 min., Dimensions variable

Sammlung Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst

Co-commissioned by Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst and Kunstverein in Hamburg  
with support from FACT, Liverpool. Courtesy of the artists, Bangkok CityCity Gallery, Bangkok,  
Carlos/Ishikawa, London, C L E A R I N G New York/Brussels, Kukje Gallery, South Korea

Korakrit Arunanondchai

*If we burn, you burn with us, 2021*

Acrylic, metallic foil on bleached denim on inkjet print on canvas, red carpet

Dimensions variable

Courtesy the artist and Bangkok CityCity Gallery, Bangkok

Korakrit Arunanondchai

*Songs for dying, 2021*

Single-channel video (HD, color, sound), soil, blue metallic foil bench,  
artist made shaman costume, stuffed rabbit doll

30:18 min., Dimensions variable

Co-commissioned by the 13th Gwangju Biennale, Han Nefkens Foundation and Kunsthall Trondheim.

Courtesy of the artist, Bangkok CityCity Gallery, Bangkok, Carlos/Ishikawa, London,

C L E A R I N G New York/Brussels, Kukje Gallery, South Korea

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**Credits *Songs for dying* (2021)**

**Production**

Bangkok: **Camera Operator**: Akapol Sudasna, Abhichon Rattanabhayon;

Huahin: **Director of Photography**: Pasit Tandaechanurat;

**Camera Operator**: Parin Intarasorn, Akapol Sudasna; **Camera Assistant**: Kantidarak Chaengtin, Teethat Yimsukpaitoon; **Lighting & Grip**: Piyapong Chatuthipsakul; **Data Wrangler**: Ekkaphob Sumsiripong;

**Performer**: Donruedi Chana, Note Panayanggool, Korakrit Arunanondchai;

**Line Producer**: Cattleya Paosrijaroen, Tanade Amornpiyalerk; **Production Assistant**: Kanich Khajohnsri, Kolap Kansorn; **Art Director**: Narong Srisophab; **Prop Master**: Wissanu Nobnorb; **Art runner**: Chavapol Petkanpoom, Wisit Sratongoil; **Van Driver**: Thanakit Sutham, Nipol Khemthong, Yutthana Suksaman

Koh Tao: **Director of Photography**: Andres Gutierrez Fiskeseth, Korakrit Arunanondchai;

Jeju: **Line producer and Camera A** CHE Onejoon; **Camera B** Seo Jongwook;

**Camera Assistant** Yoon Kyujong; **Research** Seong Nae Kim; **Color & Post Production**: White Light

**Sound**

**Composition and Mixing**: Akritchalem Kalayanamitr, Korakrit Arunanondchai;

**Music**: Koichi Shimizu, Zsela, Aaron David Ross, Bonventure, Wuttipong Leetrakul, Note Panayanggool, Kawita Vatanajyankur, Jink Sridumrongruk, Praewa Chirapravati Na Ayudhya

Co-commissioned by the 13th Gwangju Biennale, Kunsthall Trondheim, and the Han Nefkens Foundation

**Credits *Songs for living* (2021)**

**Production**

Koh Tao: **Camera Operator**: Andres Gutierrez Fiskeseth, Korakrit Arunanondchai, Cyrus James Khan;

**Talent**: child-Warin, ghosts-Senay Zahir, Asia, Taw, Joy, Sha Prad;

**Production Manager**: Turan Zahir, Pookie Supaya, Sirada Chaumthong;

Location Supported by: New Heaven Diving School

New York:

Bonfire:

**Movement Direction**: Monica Mirabile;

**Performers**: Jack Meriwether, Joy Norton, Kate Williams, Maxi Canion, Amanda Wallace, Ellery Burton, Sadie Carnot, Margot Roo Ells, Erika McCarthy, James Adelman, Bryant Kennedy;

**Tai-Chi Dancers**: Albert Chan, Yee Lai Gong, Irene H Lee, Jie Ming Dong, Sun Choi Tsang, Yun Ho Poon, Kam Lei, Zenia de la Cruz, Richard Chin, Wai Wah Ho, Margaret Yuen, Sue Seto;

**Unicycle Delivery Riders**: Melanie Flores, Sofya Yuditskaya, Timothy Villaluz, Veronica H Generoso;

**Crew/Post: Producer & Camera B**: Rory Mulhere; **Producer & Art Department**: Cherrisse Gray;

**Lighting**: Michael Potvin; **Location Manager**: Todd Faulkner; **Production**: Zanze Addington-White;

**Production Assistant & Art Department**: Alden Louke, Alison Peery, Emma McMillian, Meghan Smith;

**Production Assistant**: Violet Flux, Elias Riviera; **Location Manager**: Arba Hall;

**Location Manager**: Dylan Golden; **Color & Post Production**: Ben Federman

**Sound**

**Storyteller**: Zsela;

**Composition and Mixing**: Aaron David Ross;

**Score**: Score-Aaron David Ross

**Music**: "Coral like bones" originally composed by Mikey Hart and Zsela

*Drums*: Brian Chippendale; *Guitar*: Mythless;

**Writing**: Diane Severin Nguyen, Cherrisse Elizaga Gray

Co-commissioned by Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst and Kunstverein in Hamburg with support from FACT, Liverpool

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