

# Korakrit Arunanondchai

## *Songs for dying / Songs for living*

September 18, 2021–January 9, 2022

At its core, Korakrit Arunanondchai's (b. Bangkok, Thailand, 1986) artistic practice explores fundamental questions of life, meaning, and community. Arunanondchai brings together video works, sculptures, and paintings in installations that occupy and transform spaces with narratives between reality and fiction. The artist interweaves events in his personal environment with the social and political, with stories and speculation. Various contexts can be at play in this process: from Thailand's reality between military rule, monarchy, and pro-democracy protests to technologization, non-human ways of life, and spirituality. The artist's practice, however, always remains grounded in essential and partly metaphysical questions around existence. From there, Arunanondchai delves into the challenging complexity of our globalized, crisis-ridden present. In *Songs for dying / Songs for living*, his first institutional solo exhibition in Switzerland, Korakrit Arunanondchai focuses on existential experiences more explicitly than before. Confronted with the loss of his own grandfather, the artist unfolds thoughts on the cosmological origin of the world and its cycles of life and death, growth and decomposition. In atmospheric environments, the exhibition weaves together stories of grief, transformation, and spiritual power. Its narrative pull leads into imaginative spaces in which new perspectives on life and its potential forms emerge.

At the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Korakrit Arunanondchai presents his new, interrelated videos *Songs for dying* (2021) and *Songs for living* (2021, in collaboration with Alex Gvojcic) together for the first time. In *Songs for dying*, Arunanondchai bids farewell to his recently deceased grandfather with intimate recordings. Based on songs the artist sang to him on his deathbed, the video is split into chapters with different musical compositions. They interpret the process of dying as an emotional and open space of potential between life and death, in which parting, disintegration, and memory merge with new outlooks on life, dreams, and hopes. Able to wander between worlds and times, the figure of a ghost guides through this sphere, joined by other protagonists and narrative voices – most prominently, a dying sea turtle that looks back at past lives it once lived. Thematically, the process of dying is intertwined with mythological thoughts on the origin of the world and the formation of power through cultures and belief systems. Arunanondchai draws on speculative ideas about certain mythemes, related (animal) beings, and their role in cosmological contexts. Telling of the forces of growth, order, and chaos that are at work in all processes of life, the video gradually connects the cosmological and abstract to political and historical realities, addressing conflicts and the traumas of marginalized voices.

In this context, Arunanondchai refers to the Jeju Massacre of 1948 in South Korea as well as Thailand's social and political present. On Jeju Island, a civil uprising against the division of Korea and the South Korean US-military backed government as well as paramilitary groups led to a brutal massacre in which more than 30,000 civilians were murdered. For decades, it was officially forbidden to speak about the event. At different sites, relatives of the victims have engaged in acts of mourning and remembrance

Media release:  
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Press conference:  
September 17, 2021, 11 am

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through shamanic rituals. Attempting to give a voice to the victims, shamans aim to embody their spirits as mediums. By exploring this practice of embodied remembrance and its attempt at healing, *Songs for dying* inquires into the functions of ritualistic and spiritual spaces 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 recode signifiers from animistic traditions of Thailand, the internet, and global pop culture such as the three-fingered salute of resistance from the Hollywood movie series *The Hunger Games*. Through a montage and superimposition of images of protest with those of representative enactments of the monarchy, Arunanondchai, on the one hand, traces the storytelling that endows the monarch with godlike authority. On the other hand, the images point to how individuals can come together to form communities that have the ability to tell alternative stories. In a cosmological perspective, the main narrator in *Songs for dying*, a dying sea turtle, sees humans as trees whose roots, together with mycelium, form a shared network of connection. Through the way the video's stories unfold, it becomes clear that such a connection can be troubled by conflict but possesses a resilient power of resistance. Arunanondchai works with various images and metaphors, drawing on a wide range of references including the biologist Merlin Sheldrake and the religious scholar and philosopher Mircea Eliade.

How can something new emerge and grow in the face of challenges? And how can the course of life be altered or future lives be projected? Questions like these will also be at the heart of the video *Songs for living*, which will be produced in the spring and summer of 2021. Here, Arunanondchai and his frequent collaborator Alex Gvojić take up threads from *Songs for dying* along with their previous collaborations, *There's a word I'm trying to remember, for a feeling I'm about to have (a distracted path towards extinction)* (2016) and *No history in a room filled with people with funny names 5* (2018). Even more explicitly conceived as a musical piece, *Songs for living* positions the ocean as a realm of collective consciousness which communicates through songs with human beings living on land.

In the exhibition *Songs for dying / Songs for living*, an atmospheric environment of video installations, sculptures and paintings invites visitors to explore narratives of grief and transformation across interconnected landscapes. With reference to the elements of earth, water, fire, and air as well as the world of plants, Arunanondchai's work and spatial interventions facilitate an intense interweaving of the senses, tangibly embedding the viewer in different situations: while the installation for *Songs for living* is swathed in bluish-toned daylight, *Songs for dying* unfolds amid the darkness of a room covered with soil on which a large, elongated monolith-like object rests. Paintings, sculptures, and plants line the visitor's journey, transferring and amplifying narratives and motifs from the videos. In this way, a tapestry used in *Songs for dying* reappears in the gallery, transformed into a large-scale painting. Immersed in the artist's narratives of liminal spaces, thresholds of existence, and the interplay of realities, beings, and energies, the act of storytelling reveals itself as a tool with which new communities, worlds, and futures can not only be projected but also come to life.

*Songs for dying / Songs for living* is curated by Heike Munder (director, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst); she was assisted by Viktor Hömpler (trainee, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst). The exhibition is realized in co-production with the Kunstverein in Hamburg and is the first to present the artist's two most recent videos *Songs for dying* and *Songs for living* (both 2021) together. With sculptures and paintings, the videos

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form site-specific installations. *Songs for living* is produced as a new commissioned work for the exhibitions in Zurich and Hamburg. The video *Songs for dying* was commissioned by the Gwangju Biennale in South Korea, Kunsthall Trondheim, and the Han Nefkens Foundation and presented for the first time at the Gwangju Biennale and Kunsthall Trondheim in 2021.

The exhibition *Songs for dying / Songs for living* 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. As an extension of his practice, it is realized in close collaboration with the artist and features an experimental design. The book brings together new essays on Korakrit Arunanondchai by Chrissie Iles (curator, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York) and May Adadol Ingawanij (professor of cinematic arts, University of Westminster, London). In addition, a conversation between the filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Arunanondchai (moderated by the film programmer and critic Mark Peranson) and a discussion between Arunanondchai, Heike Munder (director, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst) and Bettina Steinbrügge (director, Kunstverein in Hamburg) will provide insights into the artist's practice and thinking.

The exhibition will be on view at the Kunstverein in Hamburg from December 4, 2021 until February 20, 2022.



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