

'Artists Not Farmers'

In her third article on the subject of art & utopia, Sarah Browne discusses her impressions of The Land Foundation, Thailand

The Land Foundation in Northern Thailand, a project initiated in 1998 by Thai artists Rirkrit Tiravanija and Kamin Lerchaiprasert has been mentioned in the previous two articles. The Land aims to be a place that is to be cultivated as "a lab for self-sustainable development" that facilitates the creation of new architectural ideas for living. With Tiravanija having been co-curator of the *Utopia Station* project, and his association with a particular art scene, the project has become something of a flagship for certain artists working with utopian proposals and 'functional art'. The literature produced by the project also marks it as an ideal case study for the emergent "culture of sustainability" proposed in the previous article. Earlier this year I lived at the project for a period of about one month and this article will focus on a discussion of how it actually operates as a living situation – does the 'arti-tecture' really function?

The projects on site represent a constellation of international art stars, that reads somewhat like a 'who's who' of Nicolas Bourriaud's text *Relational Aesthetics*. These include Rirkrit and Kamin, Tobias Rehberger, Philippe Parreno and Superflex. On paper (or in virtual space) The Land looks like a very exciting proposition indeed. Glossy representations of it abound, most recently an extensive feature in the summer issue of *Artforum*. Curator Hans Ulrich Obrist has been quite prolific in his writing about it, though he has never actually visited.

Unfortunately, attempting to actually live on site – as presumably intended – does not live up to this (ubiquitous) representation. It is clear on arrival that the luscious images of the works circulated in the international art press do not meet the reality of what the structures look like. The functional art isn't functioning so well. Rehberger's house is in very

poor repair and is unsafe to go into (1). *Supergas*, the bio-gas system designed by Danish collective Superflex is not working properly, or consistently. And no one on the project who we spoke with could

give us a satisfactory explanation of how *exactly* it should (practically, *not* theoretically) or what the problem was (2). The top floor of Rirkrit's house was unsafe (and damn hot) and the cooking system also couldn't be used. It was apparent that all the houses had been sited with little consideration of sunlight, time of day or suitability of materials.

There is a glaring gap between these international artists that build the houses and the people who live in them on site (3). The artists designed the houses, architects made any necessary adjustments and then they were built by local Thai labour. The resulting structures as aesthetic objects are quite attractive, but are not very inhabitable (see illustration). None the less, they have been speedily translated into an image, a currency distributed and used elsewhere. In a way The Land has been a blank canvas for artists to work on – it's not a place, but an image.

Perhaps the most painful example of this economy is the *Battery House* designed as a film set by La Roche and Parreno in 2003. The idea of the structure is that a buffalo (the original idea was an elephant but this unfortunately proved to be unfeasible) pulls up a weight, which when gradually lowered over the course of the day, generates electricity. This never fully worked. The structure was built by assistants, the artists arrived for two days to shoot a film (*The Boy From Mars*, shown at the 2003 Venice Biennale) and left. The original yellow roof had to be removed – the imported French latex was not up to the local climate and melted over the structure. *Battery House* is now only a skeleton with a pile of grotty latex beside it. It is the most visually commanding and space-consuming structure, yet it is absolutely non-functional. As another visiting artist remarked, it looks an awful lot like some kind of "socialist functionalism... and it still doesn't work".

There is a disquieting sense when living at The Land of inhabiting a real-TV set where somebody else has control over your representation. In his statement for *Utopia Station*, Luc Steels claims "art and other forms of representation-making are essential in creating

Utopia ... everyone must be allowed to be both a producer and interpreter of such representations.” (5). However, this two-way interpretation – between those who produce and those who use it, has been lacking. This article might go some small way to readdress this.

At The Land it's the vernacular Thai *buildings* that are successful social and living spaces, while the *architecture* (so often discussed and photographed) is falling apart. 'Architecture' is not a neutral concept, its not applied to all built structures – it's to do with a constructed understanding of quality, class, interpretation, intention and meaning. The empty houses at The Land, as represented in art publications, are always vacant, awaiting inhabitation. Like some of the classic photographs of Corbusier's houses, the representations don't show a single trace of domesticity that says anything about the inhabitants, the images possess the same aloofness as found on the glossy pages of lifestyle magazines. Neil Leach has described how, just as Hollywood role models are fictive characters, so too is architecture

reduced to 'stage sets' – ephemeral settings in which one might lead out one's fantasy existence (4). Leach sees this aestheticisation as suppressing political and social concerns, describing a 'Wallpaper* architecture' that is oriented towards the construction of a 'lifestyled', fictive, and escapist dream world.

As for the agricultural element of The Land, it's a romantic notion. Frequently referred to by its artist founders, who do not live there, as the 'Nature' area, it comprises a small island of maybe 4 acres, completely surrounded by conventional farms, monocultures of soybeans and paddy fields, where wholesale use of pesticides and other agrochemicals is common (see illustration). There is no criticism of this 'Nature' and it does not seem to be any cause for concern. Neither is there an accessible body of agricultural knowledge present, except for Ai Wai, a local farmer who works the rice field, the main crop grown. He is not a professor, as claimed on the website – a private joke that doesn't travel well via cyberspace.

Philosophical texts such as Masanobu Fukuoka's *One Straw Revolution* and the practice of a Thai Buddhist farmer named Chaloui Kaewkong are claimed to underpin the project's agricultural intentions (6). In practice, however, this is not very evident and the basics of sustainable living

principles such as composting and organic grow-your-own vegetables are almost entirely absent. This might not be that surprising in a developing country such as Thailand, except that there are organic farms and experimental projects nearby – it seems the effort to form links has not been made. When confronted with these questions, Kamin replies that “we are artists not farmers” (7). This pretty much collapses much of the supposed interdisciplinary rhetoric surrounding the project. At The Land, while the jargon and aesthetics of agricultural disciplines have been appropriated, the practice has not been adopted for its own sake.

Ultimately, the major contention with The Land is its status, or non-status, as an art project. This is both denied and used as an excuse. The Land simply could not exist as anything other than an art project, it wouldn't bear up to scrutiny in environmental or agricultural publications and discourse. Surely art should not be used as an alibi for bad architecture, or an excuse to build things that don't work or to plant things that don't grow? There has to be substance beyond images.

And while the project *is* a laboratory, where failure should be allowed, maybe even encouraged, this can only be the case if its recognised as such. My criticisms of The Land are not necessarily directed at the foundation itself (and as a foundation without the concept of ownership, it expertly evades accountability.) The representation of the project, particularly on its website, has really run away with itself and such terms such as 'sustainability' and 'interdisciplinary' simply must be dropped. At the level of discussion, publication and reference, representation has sadly surpassed the thing itself (8).

Of course as a “happy place” that exists in mental or virtual space, it is for better or worse, a true 'utopia'. This utopia brings people from around the world to see it, like myself and my partner, Gareth Kennedy, French duo Dejode and Lacombe, and Norwegian artists Geir Holm and Sossa Jorgensen, to mention just a handful of the great people I met during my time there. And these people and others have been inspired by The Land to set up their own models – either through excitement or disappointment.

Utopian plans often develop problems when they are conceived of as islands – complete, insular and isolated systems in miniature that can deny the reality of their surrounding circumstances. The Land is just such a bubble that lacks a deeper

ecology of place. And just like the failures of modernist planning solutions, a superficial visual order has been mistaken for the messier, chaotic and complex systems that are actually necessary for socially functioning order (9). The concluding article

in this series will look at some artists who have engaged with the latter and who work to develop an understanding of utopia as a complex and contested locale.

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Notes

1. Rehberger's house was originally exhibited in the Stockholm Museet Moderna in 2000. Although it hasn't happened, it was originally intended to be rebuilt using local materials as it disintegrated.
2. For more on *Supergas* see www.superflex.net/tools/supergas/
3. Now a 'One Year Project' has been initiated where a group of young, mainly Thai artists live and work on the project for a year. This moves the experimental buildings on the Land into the realm of something much more serious, as structures that must shelter and protect people, not just for a weekend slumber party but to support a daily living situation.
4. Leach, Neil, "Wallpaper* Person: Notes on the Behaviour of New Species," in Leach, Neil., ed., *The Anaesthetics of Architecture*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1999.
5. Luc Steels in "Utopia Stations" p.305 in the catalogue *Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer 50th Venice Biennale*, Marsilo, 2003.
6. For more information see thelandfoundation.org.
7. Interview with Kamin Lerchaiprasert by the author and Gareth Kennedy, Chiang Mai, January 22nd 2005.
8. For more on this see Rattenbury, Kester (ed), *This is Not Architecture: Media Constructions*, Routledge, London, 1988.
9. see James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State, How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1998.