

The background of the entire image is a photograph of a cityscape, likely Bangkok, viewed from a high vantage point. The image has a strong color grade, with the lower half being a vibrant red and the upper half being a teal/cyan. In the foreground, on the left, is the dark silhouette of a person's head and shoulders, looking towards the right. In the center, there is white text for the exhibition title and subtitle, and on the right side, there is white text for the artist's name and affiliations.

# PARADOXOCRACY

THE PURSUIT OF UTOPIA IN FLAWED LANDSCAPE

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## ***PARADOXOCRACY***

*Paradoxocracy* interrogates the tension in society's continuous pursuit of utopia, where hope is repeatedly placed in the next technological innovation as a means of liberation, often without reckoning with the regressive consequences of past progress. Even when all signs in the present point to damage, inequality, and regression, the architecture industry remains deeply utopian and continues to propose for the ideal future where buildings are imagined to resolve all social, political, and environmental issues.

With new advancements that seem to suggest society is progressing, we often end up navigating the unintended consequences that place us back with the same problems we started with. This paradox of progress was observed throughout the modern history of Thailand as new technology

thought to alleviate quality of life and resolve injustice is used to benefit and provide comfort to the ruling class. The establishment of the nation as constitutional monarchy and the attainment of democracy is more performative and surface-level than liberating. The new ideals that once provided hope remained governed by those of the past, resulting in a version of progress and democracy that significantly departs from definition of the West – paradoxocracy, a democracy full of contradictions.

The immersive exhibition intends to translate this dual quality with a series of sensory illusions to pose the question on the position of the architecture industry and its intrinsically utopian nature, and how it can continue to navigate the future world full of paradoxes.



The term *Paradoxocracy* is first coined by Thai directors Pen-Ek Ratanaruang and Pasakorn Pramoolwong in their 2013 documentary title (in Thai: *Prachathipatha*). The film explores the paradoxical nature of Thailand's political landscape, tracing its evolution from the 1932 Siamese Revolution, which transitioned the country from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy, to present day's endless cycles of coups, political turmoils, and divisions. Through a combination of archival footage, voice-over narration, and interviews with activists and political leaders

**CHAKRI REFORMATION;** Paradox in Modernization  
Late 19th century-early 20th century

With rapid encroachment of colonial power in Southeast Asia in late nineteenth century, King Chulalongkorn (reigned 1868-1920) **implements major government and social reforms aimed at modernizing Siam and its institutions.** These include the abolition of slavery, the restructuring of the administrative system, the establishment of a modern bureaucracy, and significant investment in infrastructure such as railways, education, and healthcare.

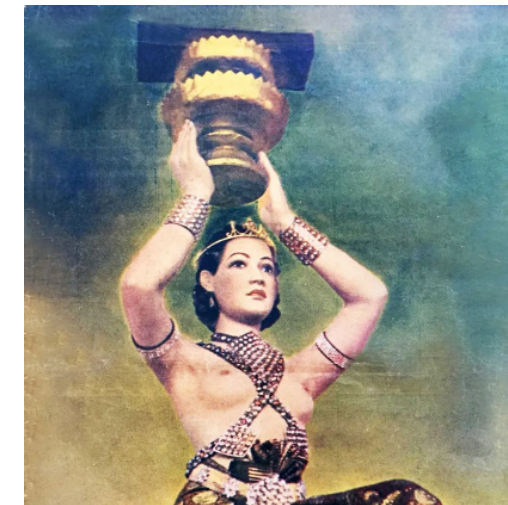
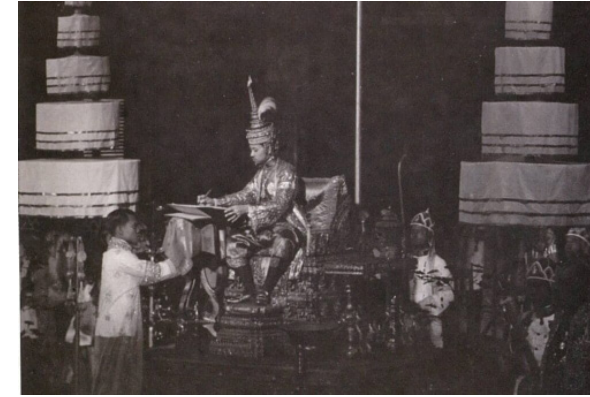
In spite of these advancements, King Chulalongkorn has prioritized centralizing power to the royal authority and established the country as a nation-state with absolute monarchy. Cultural historian Maurizio Peleggi observes in his book *Lords of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy's Modern Image* the transformation of Bangkok into a royal playground with number of construction projects executed by Chulalongkorn, majority of them are architectures of Western forms, and argues that the city becomes a backdrop for the king to convince not only the international eyes or his subjects, but also himself of being modern.

Siam during the reign of Chulalongkorn can be seen to grow into its own definition of a modernized nation still overshadowed by an autocratic monarch of the established hierarchical order and abiding traditionalism.



**SIAMESE REVOLUTION;** Paradox in Democracy  
1932

In 1932, a revolution led by the People's Party overthrows king Prajadhipok (reigned 1925-1935) and transforms Siam from an absolute into a constitutional monarchy. Architectures of this period is stripped or ornate structures that once showed class difference to prioritize the idea of equality. However, in building their own legitimacy, the people's party leans into symbols that once gave the monarchy the authority. Architectures are adorned with the symbol of democracy, paan ratthathammanun – a golden offering tray typically used to produce to someone of higher status, holding concertina-fold manuscript that is the constitution – as the concept is celebrated and worshipped. The symbol of Thai democracy is a paradox in itself, for the constitution could not be presented to the king for him to sign, without the offering tray. **Absolute monarchy is abolished, but the royal now sits as the patron of democracy. The revolution later the revolution initiates a cycle coups and counter coups where military and elite forces have the chance to dismantle and rebuild democratic procedures in their own ways.**



**DESPOTIC PATERNALISM;** Paradox in Ruling Powers  
1958-1963

Rising out of the series of coups and counter-coups is one Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat whose prime ministerial leadership from 1958-1963 makes one of the most influential in Thai political history. The "Sarit system" is observed to be a close remodel of the paternalistic phokhun kingship first promulgated by kings of the early Sukhothai period (1237-1317), where the relationship between the ruler and their subjects emulates that of father and children. Natural to the original concept is the fatherly benevolence, but the intrinsic despotism in Sarit's modern execution is an anomaly political scientist Thak Chaloemtiarana calls to attention.

Sarit's phokhun model is principally governed by his determination to forge an orderly society. Atop the dualistic role he wields, Sarit invites the monarchy from its place of desolation post the abdication of Prajadhipok to participate in the political arena in a coetaneous "two spheres of leadership". As peculiar as this "dualism between the authority of the king and his chief minister" is, Chaloemtiarana writes that Sarit has proven successful in securing his government stability. **A product evolved past his death, however, is the independent power of the monarchy, entrenched mutualistic relationship between the monarchy and military and defined boundaries between the socio-political hierarchy of state, bureaucracy, and people that becomes the basis to modern Thai politics.**

### ***BUDDHIST MURALS***

Professor of Indian art Vidya Dehejia analyzes in her book *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art* the variations of Buddhist representation modes employed at major Indian sites. She points to the synergy between its “discourse” and “story” to create a particular affect and deliver the intended message to its audience. As the main theme of her book, Dehejia defines “discourse” as the form of expression – the techniques used by the artist to communicate the story. The latter term refers to the subject matter selected to be communicated, which inevitably brings to discussion the significant roles donors and patrons play in enabling, before all else, the very construction of Buddhist monasteries and production of its visual narratives. The fourth component is not identified along the others as the book’s focus but is without question imperative in this exchange: the viewers. Dehejia demonstrates through each of the visual narrative she presents that a viewer’s reception and emotional response is an exclusive product of each specific “discourse” and “story” they are exposed to, in conjunction with the individual’s own background and social stratification. Provided that, as complex Buddhist murals are in their multi-dimensional narratives and modes of representation, as restrictive they become in communication, it

is counterproductive to assume universality in Buddhist visual narratives; instead, each mural should be approached with careful recognition that they are intentionally created to appeal to diverse groups of audience, upon whose receptions will rise even more diverse sets of understandings and responses.

**Dehejia carefully demonstrates that Buddhist visual narratives contain multilayered narratives not uniformly communicative to Buddhism’s diverse groups of worshippers.** Perhaps some are intended to be solely experienced by the monastic community than the general public while others are well established upon the patrons’ and donors’ influences such that the contents are privy to their personal preferences and circumstances. Even so, as “competent ‘readers’” engage with narratives in the manner they are made and intended to be, the public is never inhibited from gathering their own undirected experiences and comprehension. An audience can conceive these murals solely in their cosmetic function to sacralize the interior space of the vihara they are displayed as much as it is possible that, to another viewer, “identifying the story and gathering its general sense was all that interested [them]” and not the entire narrative progression. Guiding monks

and painted inscriptions serve as identification aids for certain audience who is willing or able to delve into the story. Regardless of privileges or devotion, a viewer is subjected to face multiple options to contemplate and follow the narrative course. **As Dehejia puts it, “the viewer becomes a participant in the narrative” to which their personal background and volition inform their exposure to the story and the particular experience they receive.**



### ***KHRUA IN-KHONG’S INNOVATIVE MURALS***

Murals in the ubosot ordination hall of Wat Barom Niwat and Wat Bovorn Niwet in Bangkok stand out from typical Thai Buddhist murals in their stylistic and thematic departure from depictions of tales of the Buddha or jātakas of his previous lives; rather, the dusky paintings of railroads, ships, and European buildings are snapshots of lives in society and ideals envisaged at the time it was painted around 1840. The artist of these panels, a Thai monk named Khrua In Khong, is known for his **innovativeness in breaking away from traditional Buddhist representations**, whether in the illustrating techniques or the subject matter represented.

Religious historian Paul McBain argues that Khrua In Khong’s murals are not simply imitations of modern West but are arguments to assert the place of Buddhism in the new Western-dominated world and assure to its followers that Buddhist ideas remains prominent at the center albeit the changing forms and landscape. As McBain unveils his argument, it becomes obvious the role the murals’ patron Vajirayan, the abbot who would later reign as king Mongkut, plays in influencing the contents of the murals. Coated in elaborate Western features, the murals of Khrua In Khong do not exert themselves attempting to convince common devotees of its contents but **appeal to the nobles with promises of the new world and, more so likely, to Vajirayan himself of his rightful place in new Siam.**

*PARADOX IN UTOPIAN VISIONS OF ARCHITECTS*

In **Kenzo Tange's 1960 Tokyo Bay Plan**, urban forms revolve around the introduction of automobiles. The innovation gave rise to concepts like mobility, although the plan ends up proposing for an oppressive megacity of control and top-down approach meant for automobiles and not humans.

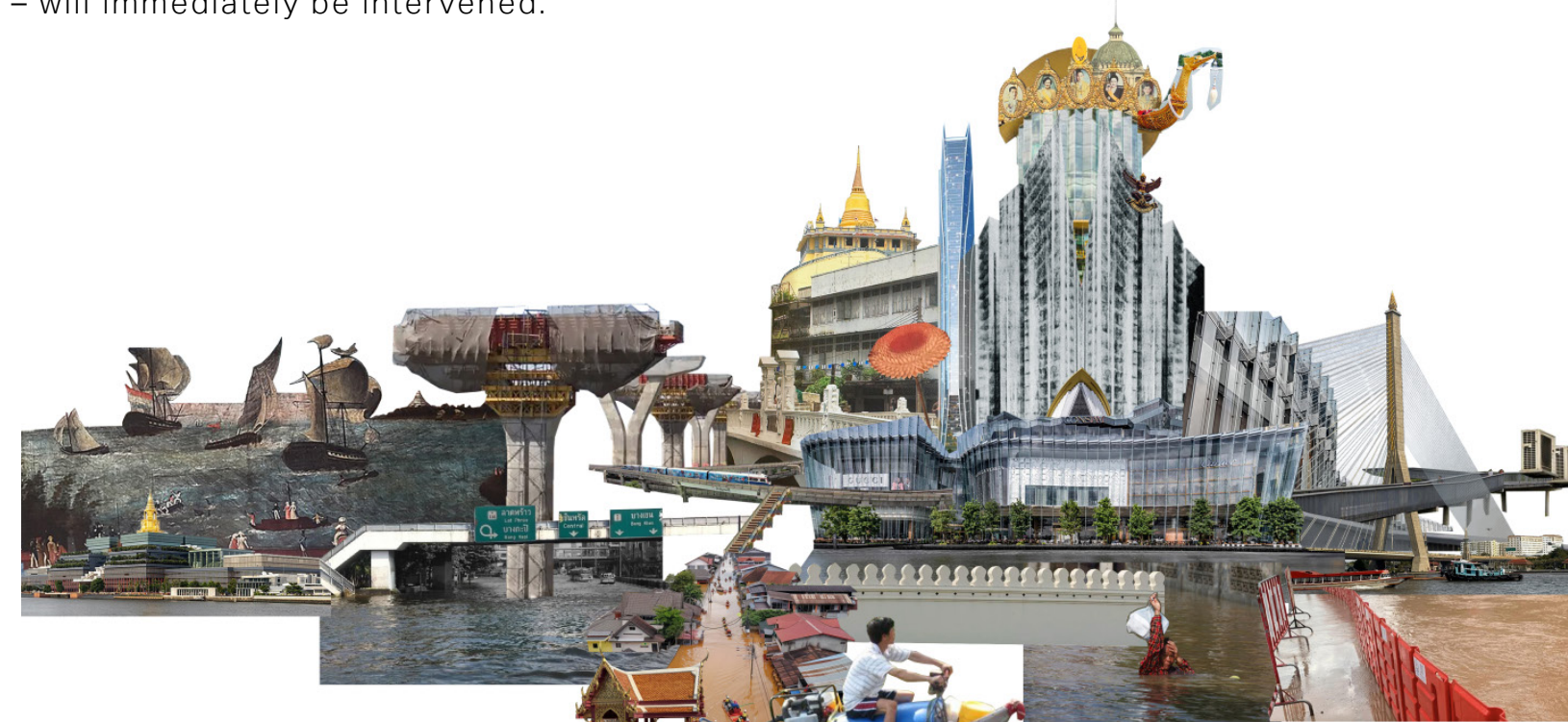
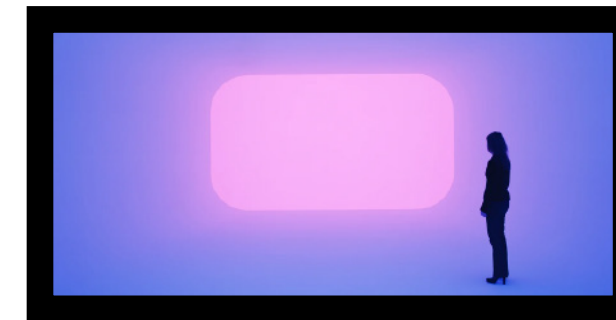


In 1940, after the People's Party revolution, **Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram** aims to develop Lopburi with new urban plans with new infrastructures and "modern" roundabouts. The plan instead transforms Lopburi into a military-oriented city.

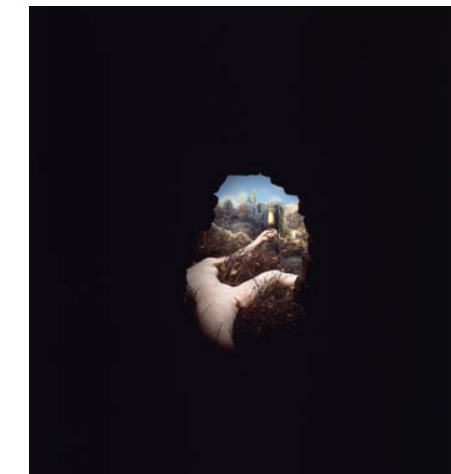
*2082 REINVENTED FUTURE CITY OF BANGKOK*

The proposed reinvented future city of Bangkok, Mahannopnakhon, translated to the city of great waters after urban flood raises to take Bangkok – a play on the current name Krungthep Mahanakhon of Bangkok Metropolis, is an exemplary utopian vision of a future city: a self-sustaining megastructure, enabled by the cutting-edge construction technologies with modular frameworks to ensure porosity and connectivity. A smart vertical city of 2082, **Mahannopnakhon is grounded in the hope that technology and democracy will ultimately redeem its citizens.**

Hope is placed in technology of the future. 3D printing, prefabrication, and artificial intelligence are seen to lead society to highest level of happiness, leading to consistent monitoring of society's health through happiness indexes. Those who fall short – in happiness or conformity – will immediately be intervened.

*EXHIBITION CURATION*

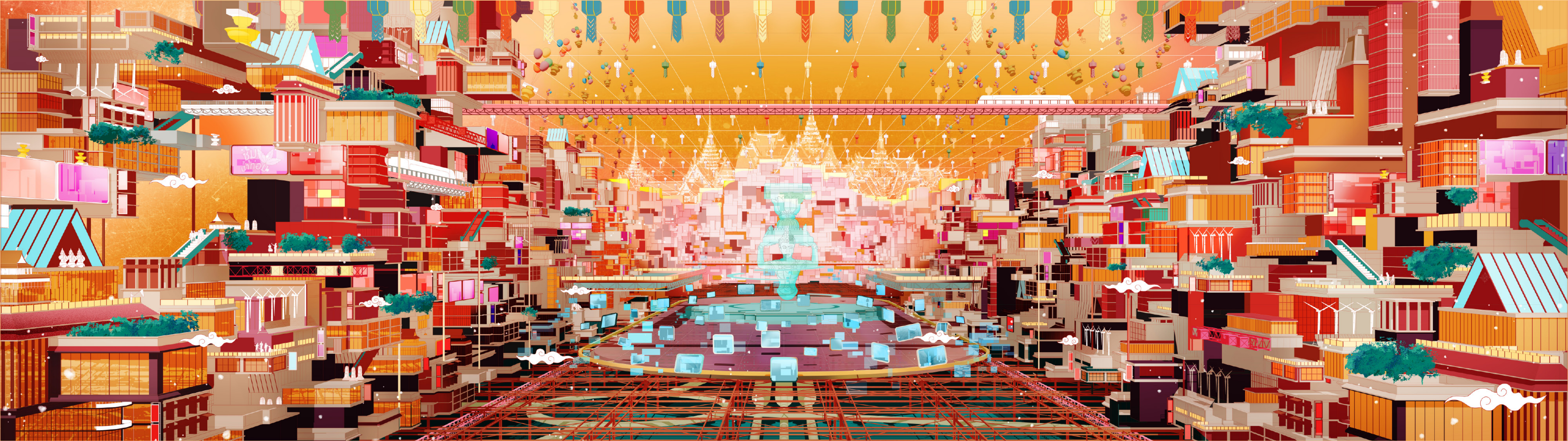
**James Turrell** perceptual art and light movements



**Paul Pfeiffer** *Dutch Interior*



**Marcel Duchamp** *Étant donnés*



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