Some Kind of Travelogue

Visiting Jupiter at the Turn of the Fifth Age

by Esther Lu

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Sorawit Songsataya's research footage. Courtesy of the artist.



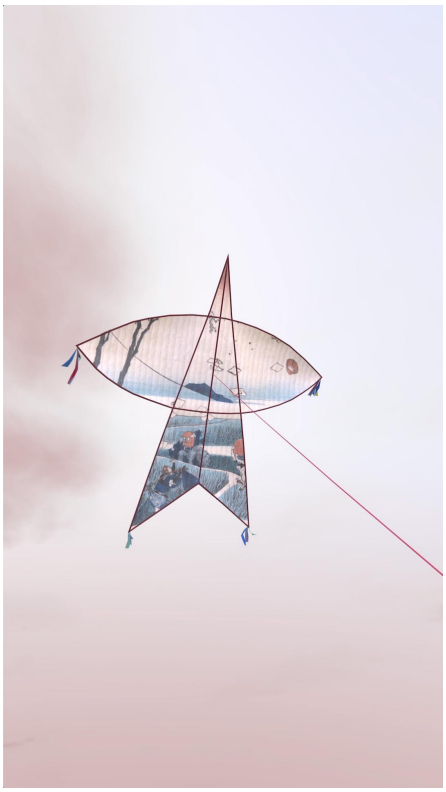
Sorawit Songsataya, *Jupiter* (2019). Six-channels digital video, merino wool, copper wire, cotton twine, pressed flowers. Installation view, Wing Gallery, Selasar Sunaryo Art Space, 2021. Image courtesy of Selasar Sunaryo Art Space and Taipei Contemporary Art Space.



Sorawit Songsataya, *Jupiter* (2019), copper, wool fibre, silk, pressed flowers, jute twine. Installation view, Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery, Auckland. Photo: Sam Hartnett.



Sorawit Songsataya, *Rumours (Kinnaree)*, 2020. 3D computer-generated image, acrylic print, light box fabrication, aluminium frame. 2000 x 1400mm. Massey University Art Collection. Image courtesy of the artist.



Sorawit Songsataya, *Jupiter* (2019). Six-channels digital video, 7:17 min. Video still.

The Turn of the Fifth Age *is an exhibition initiated by Selasar Sunaryo Art Space (SSAS) in Bandung, Indonesia, and Taipei Contemporary Art Center (TCAC) in Taipei, Taiwan. Co-curated by Esther Lu, Heru Hikayat and Shih-Yu Hsu, the group exhibition*

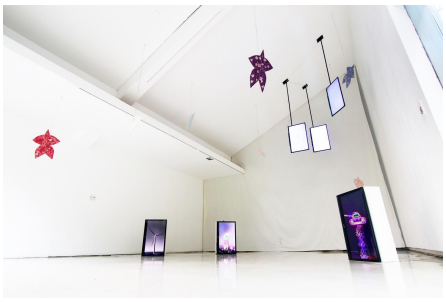
featuring Aotearoa-based artist Sorawit Songsataya, took place across three galleries in SSAS from 26 February to 28 March, 2021. The exhibition aimed to generate new speculations on a possible future that ebbs away in the face of the ecological crisis caused by human desire in the capitalist game.

Sorawit Songsataya's practice explores the many tangents that connect and redefine our understandings of subjectivity and ecology. Songsataya often employs moving image and sculpture within installations, incorporating both digital and tactile media to engage with world-making in imaginative and tangible ways. Songsataya was invited to participate in this show, alongside eleven other Indonesian and Taiwanese artists, to share their thoughts in an extended archipelago.

In the following piece, co-curator Esther Lu responds to Songsataya's work Jupiter, *2019, exhibited as part of* The Turn of the Fifth Age.



Sorawit Songsataya, *Jupiter* (2019). Six-channels digital video, merino wool, copper wire, cotton twine, pressed flowers. Installation view from the garden, Wing Gallery, Selasar Sunaryo Art Space, 2021. Image courtesy of Selasar Sunaryo Art Space and Taipei Contemporary Art Space.



Sorawit Songsataya, *Jupiter* (2019). Six-channels digital video, merino wool, copper wire, cotton twine, pressed flowers. Installation view, Wing Gallery, Selasar Sunaryo Art Space, 2021. Image courtesy of Selasar Sunaryo Art Space and Taipei Contemporary Art Space.

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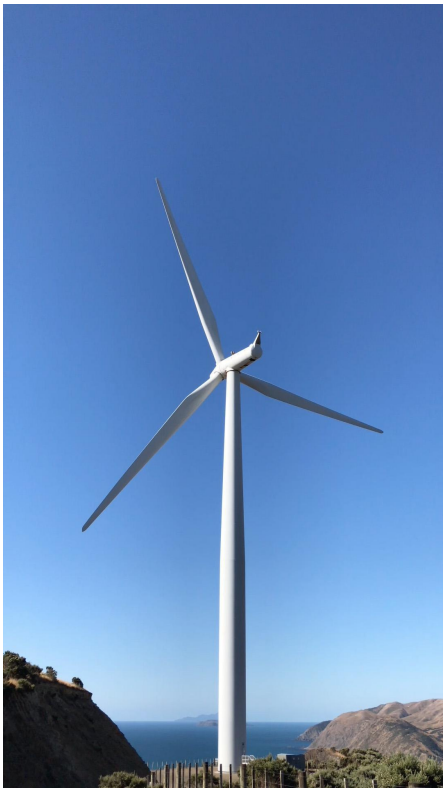
You would probably presume that walking in a hot vortex is not possible. When I took my first walk on the stormy surface of this planet, I was stunned by the unexpected crispy sound of my steps. We had been wrong about it for so long. The hardest question is not about the act of landing on Jupiter, but performing a new way of cruising and tangoing with the invisible structure of the air while trying not to melt apart. It is about locating the plausible interval

of time within this dynamic flux, not simply locating any point on any line. It would have been impossible, as all the borders were bent and torn. It was the ambiguous space between ‘neither’ and ‘nor’. No sky, no earth. This place is full of the constant movements of the overbrimming being that does not recognise the form of itself. The self is always twirling, deforming, liquidising, and raining. The self is almost like cloud, which is heavily magnetic. All atoms and stars are alike, too.

To encompass one’s navigation to this planet, you would need to learn the secrets of the wind until you can hear your own raindrops echoing in the dim turbulence. The night is never devoid of light. There are seventy-nine moons in this sky, and some of them are still nameless. The reflections of these moons are sometimes more expansive than the sun.



Sorawit Songsataya, *Jupiter* (2019). Six-channels digital video, 7:17 min. Video still.



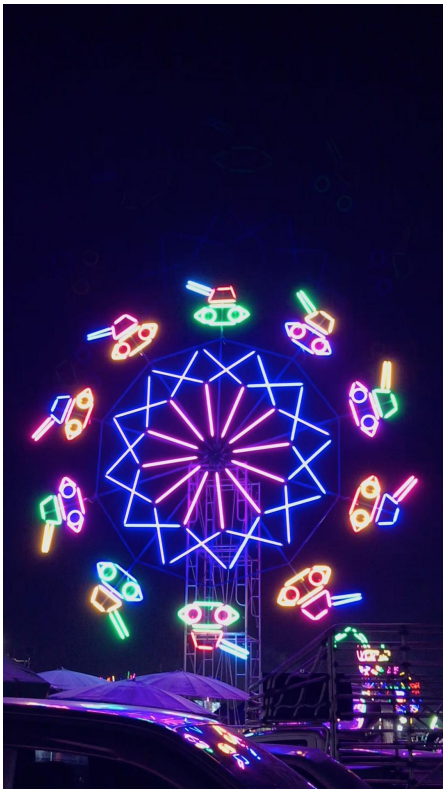
Sorawit Songsataya, *Jupiter* (2019). Six-channels digital video, 7:17 min. Video still.



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2.

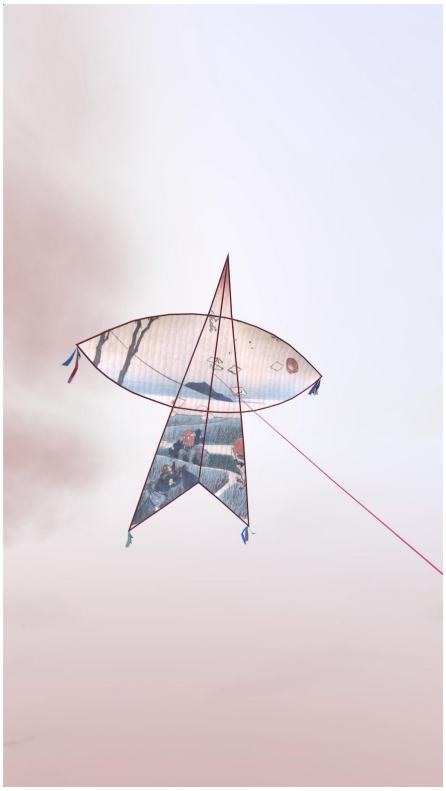
On that trip, I was told by two elders in the village that kites became gendered with specific design during the Ayutthaya period. In traditional Thai kite culture, *Pakpao* (female) and *Chula* (male) kites come in different shapes and were mostly made and flown by males following sophisticated rules in fierce competitions. The two ladies who taught me how to make kites were perceived as tomboys in their village, as their craft belonged within a male-dominated field. This fact lingered in my head, and later I decided to propose a new purpose for kites: they should send a message to the next god to repair the separation of our worlds.

Between the gaps of the felt and flowers, the air swirls in an electricity-conductive, microcosmic pattern, asking after the relata between animal hair and botanical organ, between the forces of thrust and drag, lift and weight. These delicately adorned kites, however, sit still in the air. Flying remains as a porous action and a failed dream, as they quietly receive the airy tickles that bring new breaths of life and transmit gazes that are full of desire. Instead, they sit to decipher all the signals sent by varying currents, memorising all the stories across fiber, protein and chlorophyll. They whisper to moss and mushroom, sigh with spiders and sing along with birds and bees. Their immobility is visible in this dimension, but their action takes place in another.

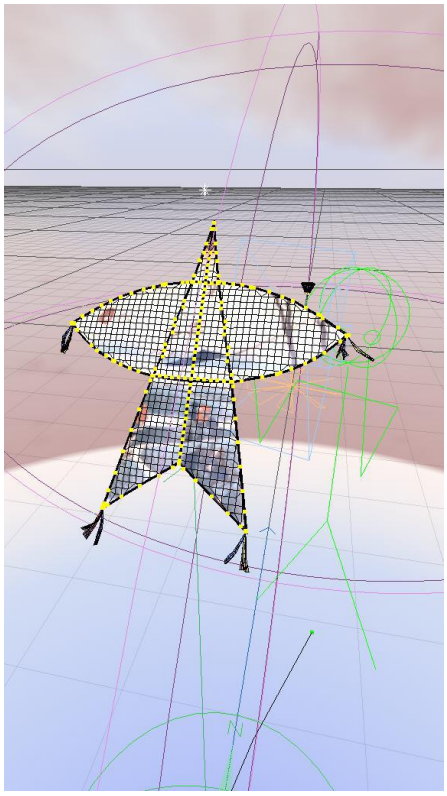
Their alignment composes a garden of prosperity in today's desert. They receive bodiless energy and construct kinship with creatures other than their own kind. Languages have become the new money in this world, as hybridity is the only way survivors can acquire and follow. One can't go on as one anymore. You can't be just this or that. We are all multiple. My lizard toes and eagle wings would have to speak to ladybugs, crickets, oysters and frogs, and know how to fly together in a desert cyclone. They are green today, and blue tomorrow. Your calendar will be marked by a rainbow before being swallowed by a new variant. Language is like the new water in this arid land. In this age, our bodies are thirsty for codes, and we rush to interact and communicate to keep the water flowing, to nourish life before the apocalypse.



Sorawit Songsataya, *Jupiter* (2019). Six-channels digital video, merino wool, copper wire, cotton twine, pressed flowers. Installation view, Wing Gallery, Selasar Sunaryo Art Space, 2021. Image courtesy of Selasar Sunaryo Art Space and Taipei Contemporary Art Space.



Sorawit Songsataya, *Jupiter* (2019). Six-channels digital video, 7:17 min. Video still.



3D drawing process to make the animated kites of *Jupiter* (2019). Courtesy of the artist.



Sorawit Songsataya, *Jupiter* (2019). Six-channels digital video, 7:17 min. Video still.

3.

As much as people had invested in all kinds of wings, they eventually mastered how to dance with less gravity and to touch without touching. Aviation was the advanced level of floating and a technology for redirecting energy. The desire to fly above the horizon had eventually recalibrated the human course to the desert of their days. There was no green in their forest, and no blue in the sea. Money was a powerful god to force an eclipse, and the highest virtues were energy, speed and mobility.

Kites, sailboats, wind turbines and fairground lights, these human artefacts spinning around the clock shone against celestial frequencies. In all their random movements and encounters, they were searching for reconnecting memories that would disclose more stories about the tears of the sky father and the world before all families split.

These winged machines, however, appeared only as boxed imageries, charged with electricity.

Animation had become the utmost pure form of procreation in this world, and only revealed itself via powered light. Everything could borrow the breath of life through such a process. A dot can be a mother, and a line can be a father. But they can rewrite each other and become children of their own child, like a dodecahedron, a vase, or a mermaid whose discerning eyes are full of empty sorrow, practicing her voice by the coast which receives no tide anymore.

They were all looking for a switch.



Sorawit Songsataya's research footage. Courtesy of the artist.



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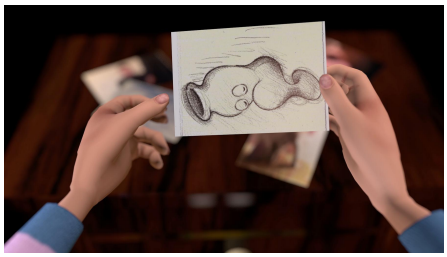
Sorawit Songsataya's research footage. Courtesy of the artist.



Sorawit Songsataya's research footage. Courtesy of the artist.



Sorawit Songsataya, *Bronies* (2016). Digital animation, colour, sound, 3:13 min. 3D printed vases, antique wooden furniture, inkjet print on aluminium. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.



Sorawit Songsataya, *Bronies* (2016). Digital animation, colour, sound, 3:13 min. 3D printed vases, antique wooden furniture, inkjet print on aluminium. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

Afterword

Can an exhibition be an oracle or a method for reading the future? *The Turn of the Fifth Age* was an exhibition conceived before and during an extremely unsettling year, as the global unforeseeable conditions of the pandemic challenged us to reconsider the ways we construct our material relationships with the world. Many reflections on different body politics and new practices for a sustainable, local economics, community and network mushroomed amid moments of mourning. Our initial premise of imagining a feminist post-capitalist society retained its urgency under these circumstances.

The title of the exhibition follows from Margaret Atwood's article/ statement *Time capsule found on the dead planet*, written for *The Guardian* in support of the 10:10 climate change campaign organised ahead of the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen. In this short story, Atwood outlines four ages for our world: "In the first age, we created gods"; "In the second age we created money"; "In the third age, money became a god"; "In the fourth age we created deserts".[01] We find these peculiar times not

only fragile, but a vividly tangible moment in such deserts. It's as if we are striving to survive in a whirling *simoom*[02] while submitting our ways of being to new rules and logics propelled by invisible viruses or Gaia.[03] It is time we learn all the names for dust cyclones; it is also time we unlearn our estrangements with living forms and matter. *The Turn of the Fifth Age* proposes how varying methodologies and ways of imagining speculative futures can nurture an allegorical space in which to rest, or an alternative time capsule that enables a reset of the current climate.

Following the original curatorial incentive and proposal, the above fictional travelogue is written as an epilogue and an epiphany inspired by the artwork *Jupiter* (2019), a multimedia installation presented by New Zealand-based artist Sorawit Songsataya. The work employs many wind-related artefacts to address ecological concerns over the human/nature relationship, and offers a reflection on gender identity, drawing references from the traditional Thai kite culture. The poetic sense of suspended belongingness and progression is expressed through the installation that comprises six hand felted kites and six-channel videos in the Wing Gallery of Selasar Sunaryo Art Space, facing a lavish garden from a glass window.

This text is also composed as a time voyage to different ages in response to Atwood's short story, as well as to speculate new narratives along with the artist's inspiration (the planet Jupiter), research (Songsataya's memories on the trip back to their hometown in Thailand), lineage (the artist's long-term thinking on subjectivity/identity and the 3D modelling technique they employ) and actual works (recent projects). Finding resonance outside of the form of an exhibition, this literary experiment attempts to present the artwork from an alternative curatorial mediation, bringing new focus and reflection to imagine the flows and gestures of the inner world in the project, conducting a different kind of dialogue or inter-view. In this reverse act, the entire exhibition acts to illustrate the artwork (not the other way around), and this creative jump can perhaps generate more explorations on future politics in a world where moons are brighter than suns.

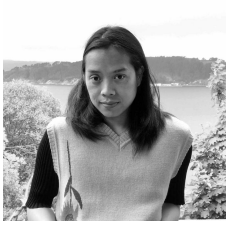
Footnotes

01. Atwood, Margaret. "Time capsule found on the dead planet." *The Guardian*, 26 September 2009. www.theguardian.com/books/2009/sep/26/margaret-atwood-mini-science-fiction

02. In Arabic, the name means poisoned wind, referring to a strong, dry, dust-laden wind. It occurs in the Sahara and the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula. Its temperature may exceed 54°C and humidity may fall below 10%.

03. The Gaia hypothesis coined by James Lovelock "proposes that living organisms interact with their inorganic surroundings on Earth to form a synergistic and self-regulating, complex system that helps to maintain and perpetuate the conditions for life on the planet." www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaia_hypothesis.

Biographies



Sorawit Songsataya is an artist currently based in Te-Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington. Their interdisciplinary practice often comprises sculpture, ceramics, textiles, and digital animations. Through their installations, they reinterpret connections and the dynamic relationships we have with the natural world. Recent exhibitions include *Heavy trees, arms and legs*, The Suter Art Gallery (2021); *Come up for air*, The Lightship (2020); *Rumours (mermaid)*, Govett Brewster Art Gallery (2020); *The Interior*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki (2019); *Starling*, Artspace Aotearoa (2018); *Soon Enough: Art in Action*, Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm (2018).



Esther Lu is a curator and writer with a background in literature, art history, activism, and curatorial studies. She is interested in formulating conceptual ways of seeing and discursive events crossing art and reality. Many of her projects focus on interplays of sensibility, body, institution, and memory, driven by the curiosity to explore human conditions, boundaries of knowing, and how art embodies and exceeds our imagination to address various concerns toward humanity, culture, and relevances of life.

Esther was the director of Taipei Contemporary Art Center from 2015 to 2017, and the curator of *This is not a Taiwan Pavilion*, a collateral event in the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013. She has curated a number of international exhibitions and workshops in Asia and Europe. Her recent curatorial practice involves creating co-learning and innovative mediation strategies for professional workshops and audience experience. www.lo0.tw

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