

# To turn one's anus towards the sun and say "GO"!

Quote from Bob Hansson

## 1 YELLOW MONDAY

Monday, in front of a cash machine at Siam Square in Bangkok. I wonder if it is a video module of some sort or if I am standing in front of a machine that actually will provide me with a financial service. On the screen there is a moving image of a smiling man, dressed in yellow and jewellery that I recognise as the Royal Highness of Thailand – the King. Why is he on this cash machine greeting me before I insert my VISA card?

A moment later: inside the enormous shopping centre in line for the toilet. I notice that a majority of the people here wear yellow t-shirts. The walls inside the rest room are made of thin frosted glass and the entire interior is exclusively designed in steel and stone. Large flat screens are inserted in the thin glass and they scream out a diversity of commercials for us in need.

The former Prime Minister Thaksin wanted to run Thailand using the company as a model. It strikes me that a company does not need citizens – only producers, consumers and employees. There is also no need for public spaces, more likely caateens or halting places.

I walk towards the cinema when the time strikes 6 pm. All of a sudden the whole urban landscape – with hundreds of people heading in different directions, the loud commercials, the cars, the motorbikes – turns still and quiet. The huge moving billboards turn into a yellow utopia with smiling crowds and the King greeting us. Everybody stands completely still during the musical celebration and as soon as it stops everything turns back into the usual order.

In 2006 I was invited to make an art project in a public site at Siam. On September 19, Thailand experienced a military coup and the Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was removed. I suddenly found myself in an odd situation where a state of emergency was proclaimed and I was involved in an art context in Bangkok where the overall theme was "Place Art in Everyday Life". In January 2007, only five weeks before the opening, I receive an e-mail: "I write to you with important news, and a heavy heart today regarding the Bangkok International Art Festival (BIAF). Our project has experienced

major set-back, which has little to do with art and more to do with terrorism. (...) We of course for safety and security reasons cannot go forward with these [outdoor events and gatherings] in February so we have been hit in an Achilles heel conceptually with this news. (Connelly LaMar, International Art Director, BIAF).

On New Year's Eve seven bombs blasted in different locations in Bangkok and the perpetrators are still unknown. After the bombings the authorities did not want the outdoor events of BIAF to take place since it would gather crowds in public spaces. When a decision like that is made, not to let art activate public space in a society that gets more and more isolated, what is then being stated about the potentiality of art? Do you protect the citizens or are you rather representing the terrorists' interests? The market stalls in the street and the shopping malls with thousand of visitors and tourists every day, continue to be open. The many shrines gather crowds of people as usual. Art in public space on

the other hand is in this situation perceived as a possible stage-set for acts of terror.

In the Land of Smiles, where the smile often functions as a guarantee to save one's face, you can laugh at anything, but one does not make fun of the King. The King's existence in the Thai society infuses a sense of security and order. We do not need to worry; he smiles and greets us, like a Thai version of the Sandman. Swedes love Thailand and its friendly atmosphere. Every year 300, 000 Swedes (3,4 % of the Swedish population), visits Thailand. Here every Swede can afford to allow oneself some luxury. A wide spectrum of anti-stress massage, shopping and manicure is offered everywhere. The country is a popular first stop for newly hatched adults who want to explore the world, as well as a paradise for winter pale charter tourists and golf-playing commercial travellers.

I happen to visit a friend who works at the third biggest hospital in Bangkok. One of the hospital's main fields of activity is sex change. On the wall in the hospital elevator I am welcomed by a sign that says: "Happy New Year - New You".

## 2 THINK PINK

I listen to a lecture by Dan Pink, a hyped author and speechwriter for Al Gore during the Clinton administration. He is here in Stockholm to help us understand how we can be winners in a changing global economy. What does an individual have to master to live in today's society? ABUNDANCE-ASIA-AUTOMATION lectures Pink from the rostrum. If you want to understand globalization, that's it: ABUNDANCE-ASIA-AUTOMATION. Routine work can be outsourced and automatized and therefore quickly disappears to the cheapest provider. In our western society of abundance you have to deliver significance, not only utility, says Pink. Therefore empathy, design, story, play and meaning are what count today. Exit: information society, enter: the conceptual age. He presents the artist as an ideal, a personification of the right blend between analytical and intuitive skills. In the midst of the large audience, among representatives for the municipality and the business world, I think to myself: If this is my chance, who am I ready to serve?

Sweden is said to be the most democratic country in the world and is positioned fifth in Quality of Life rankings. Not much left to do then, except keeping up the good work? Increase the export of arms and let the consumers make the green and ethical choice while shopping. Concurrently one third of the population in Scandinavia is at least once in their life so depressed that they need medication.

Throughout history melancholy has been highly fashionable among the social elite, if viewed as a state of mind rather than a disease. Melancholy is often described as if being suspended between despair and potentiality. But one can also trace a line between the social classes that separates the madman from the genius. I have a suspicion though, that the ambivalent and potential character of melancholy today has been pushed to the limit. It has turned into a more severe condition of manic-depression. While mania is encouraged and seen as an innovative and highly productive kind of obsession, depression is rejected as unproductive. No longer in suspense, we are reduced to an attitude of either-or. Depression alone is a crisis that needs to be resolved as quickly as possible. Potential state has become a medical state.



"I know all about slimming", the editor in a Swedish lifestyle magazine writes, and she continues: "I learned as a teenager. When I ruled out the possibility to "Change the world", I wholeheartedly engaged in the project "Change myself".". The issue tries to highlight why we shop even if we cannot afford it, and then it continues with the usual makeover specials and spa tips. You cannot simply rest, the ideal is rather "resting by doing". Relax and make yourself useful at the same time by acquiring an aestheticized façade and a seemingly healthy lifestyle. We appear to live by the rule: If there is a need for change,

start with yourself! And very neatly we hide the dilemma of when acceptance or revolution is needed.

I think about what Sonia Kruks strikingly calls the politics of self-transformation. How do we as socially privileged address our privileges and the sense of guilt and shame that is associated with them? A feminist strategy to overcome structural racism for instance is to take a fine look at one's own personal habits.

Everyday life is soaked in ideology! Ransack your motifs, change your line of thinking and act in awareness of the perspectives and experiences of the other. But this attempt to transform oneself in combination with an excessive belief in the autonomy of the individual rather threatens to cause a short circuit. Kruks points to a crisis that cannot be resolved, that of being both oppressed and oppressor at the same time. Who is to blame - and who am I to judge? We seem to be badly equipped to handle this double identity, as if our craving for authenticity stops us from getting involved at all.

## 3 OUT OF THE BLUE

It is said that the Chinese sign for "crisis" is composed of the signs for "threat" and "opportunity". It is a myth though, much cosseted by management consultants. In the so-called conceptual age it is a very convenient and effective story to use in order to inspire meaning and give significance to a situation of upheaval. It is up to you, the autonomous individual, to spot the potentiality. This is not a crisis, this is your chance!

The military coup in Thailand has also been described as an opportunity, a possible way out of a political cul-de-sac. To empty public space is a way to control space, meanwhile the stage is under construction for the comeback of democracy. When our safety is said to be the reason we are inclined to regard it as self-evident that the possibility to activate public space should be restricted. Individual freedom is in this situation overrated.

In case of crisis we usually look for a cause. But rather than a single trigger we find a cluster of events that together have formed the current situation we find ourselves in. The crisis is conceived as a decisive turning point, and at that moment we reach for the quick release button. Another strategy might be to wait, to convince oneself that it is not such a major thing after all, and a state of emergency then slowly becomes normalized. Or we make a scene in order for a decision to be made – by someone else. To make a scene can be a way to provoke a reaction in order to get what you want. Lovers do it. Artists do it. It can also be a way to penetrate a given situation, to cause a disruption in the framework presented to you. To set things in motion and let the storyline write itself, live in front of your eyes. Unfortunately terrorists do it, and the effect is paralysing.

A common hero since childhood has for us been Tage Danielsson, a Swedish writer, film director and comedian. He used to describe himself as being an absurd optimist. He did not explain what that was, but it can clearly be perceived through his artistic work – traced as an attitude of believing that everything is possible, even if you have no plausible reason to think so. To us absurd optimism hints at the possibility of living with the smallest conceivable concentration of power. You cannot escape power structures and interdependence, but you do not have to abide to an authority to make your belief tangible and true. As if you were to say: I do not believe in God, but I believe in believing. This is a potential space where the strange habit of absurd optimism grows.

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