

## “Ratchaprasong is alive” – Bangkok’s Decentered Spaces of Security and Public Performance

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It wasn’t possible for (my T-shirt stall to be) here before May 19th (2010)...but after that I can set up here as long as that fence (the post-arson CentralWorld construction façade) is up and they are rebuilding.

(“Hom,” interview, 20 Aug 2010, Ratchaprasong, Bangkok)

I didn’t start (driving a motorcycle taxi) here until after the problems earlier this year. It’s something new. This corner, Ratchaprasong, is alive.

(“Saksri,” interview, 20 Aug 2010, Ploen Chit Road, Bangkok)

This paper<sup>1</sup> applies the anatomical and genetic metaphor of the *chiasm* to new sites of cultural activity in Bangkok. In anatomy a chiasm depicts the intertwining of two tracts or strands and in genetics it depicts the cross-shaped point of contact during meiosis.<sup>2</sup> Within one strand of this urban vitality, new scenes of street vending, sidewalk performance and other political phenomena emerged at the sites of 2010’s violence. Within another strand, these wounded sites of arson, bombings and riots justified securitized zones of surveillance in the service of governmental and economic order. How are these strands of emergent political expression and securitization related? In Bangkok’s contested public spaces, entrepreneurial activity is

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<sup>2</sup> Meiosis is a genetic term describing the creation of new cells through a process of germ cell division that results in the cross-shaped configuration of two chromatids at a point of contact known as a chiasma or chiasm.

intertwined with political performance. Moreover, cultural creativity becomes visible in decisive moments of instability, when intensive securitization meets continual insecurity.

This paper employs methodologies of personal experience and other anthropological approaches to explore new street vendor sites that emerged around zones of urban unrest, arson, and bombings in Bangkok. Ethnographic observations from August to October in 2010 show how these sites of arson and destruction were an active part of Bangkok's urban landscape. This research confirms recent anthropological explorations of how informal entrepreneurial spaces are both politically and culturally productive.<sup>3</sup> This research also interfaces with a growing body of scholarship associating decentralization with information technology, artistic expression, and cultural change.<sup>4</sup> Although some of the street vendors in these urban spaces worked previously in Bangkok's more formalized spaces of economic order, their temporary entrepreneurial activities are part of a repertoire of decentered performances within a seemingly centralized zone of government surveillance. The centralization of state security and formal trade in Bangkok intertwines with decentered appearances of street vending, political performance, and urban expression. In seeking broader interpretations of decentralization, this paper explores the concept's boundaries and paradoxes through three interrelated research themes. First, it conceptualizes the creation of "spatial anomalies" within the city's contested public spaces. Second, it describes the state reaction to these contestations through performances of security and surveillance. Third, it describes how these state performances are not all-encompassing: these sites of insecurity also host many decentralized performances of urban resistance. Thus, this paper argues that Bangkok's contested public spaces, state security deployments, and attendant acts of urban performance form a dynamic "chiasm" of decentralized cultural productivity.

### **Spatial anomalies in Bangkok's contested public spaces**

Deep social fissures exposed by the continual popular support for former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra reveal multiple opposing layers of

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<sup>3</sup> P. Sean Brotherton, "We Have to Think Like Capitalists but Continue Being Socialists": Medicalized Subjectivities, Emergent Capital, and Socialist Entrepreneurs in Post-Soviet Cuba, *American Ethnologist* 35, no. 2, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Daron Acemoglu, "Technology, Information and the Decentralization of the Firm", NBER working paper series, Cambridge, Mass.: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2006; Graham St. John, *Technomad: Global Raving Countercultures*, London; Oakville, CT: Equinox Publishing, 2009: 183.

political interest vying for control of the Thai state. Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's younger sister, was elected in 2011, less than five years after the military coup that deposed him. The coup makers supported Abhisit Vejjajiva's Democrat Party government, a party that maintained loyalties to numerous factions within the Thai military, the urban "Yellow shirt" movement, and a cadre of royalist elite. As growing opposition to the Democrat Party's government intensified in the first half of 2010, the decentered mosaic of protest that began appearing throughout Thailand and in many spaces in Bangkok became centralized as a result of elaborate military suppression which created a constructive zone of encircled demonstrations in one central area of the city, and eventually a single intersection at Ratchadamri and Rama I road: Ratchaprasong. The flame-engulfed Zen department store at "CentralWorld", formerly the "World Trade Center"<sup>5</sup> became an icon as the largest site of arson during the suppression operations and the government crackdown on 19 May. The street demonstrations that led to the crackdown were widely covered by foreign journalists who descended upon the city in search of violent and chaotic imagery while providing decontextualized news reports. Simultaneous arson attacks throughout the city, including the burning of CentralWorld, were all attributed to "Red Shirts" despite the presence of mysterious paramilitary agents, known as the "black warriors."<sup>6</sup> After the crackdown the cases of arson that intensified from March through May subsided, but the grenade and bombing attacks that accompanied the protest suppression operations continued. The chiasmatic crossroads near CentralWorld at Ratchaprasong intersection became a symbolic representation of Bangkok's growing factionalism and the deep divisions within the Thai political environment.

From June to September, more than nineteen bombing incidents occurred in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Udon Thani ranging from incendiary bombs at shopping centers, PVC pipe bombs in phone booths, improvised

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<sup>5</sup> The "World Trade Center" was renamed the "CentralWorld Plaza" after it was acquired by the Central Group in 2002, and was named "CentralWorld" in 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Government security agencies promoted the idea that the "Masterminds behind the bombs could be "Men in Black" or hardcore red-shirt protesters who wanted to create a disturbance, either for revenge, or to discredit the government." Alternative theories, however, proposed "that the government or the military planted the bombs to give them an excuse to maintain the state of emergency" so Srivalo Piyanart, Bombs and a State of Emergency, *The Nation*, 29 Sept 2010. Described by most reporters as the "more militant wing of the movement" who operate "unseen in the shadows" (James Burke, Thailand Residents Go Back to Shopping in Bangkok, *The Epoch Times*, 16 Aug 2010.), these "men in black" were also attributed to forces loyal to Khattiya Sawasdipol (a.k.a. Se Daeng, "Commander Red"), or soldiers of Vietnamese ethnicity, trained in Cambodia as snipers for an assassination attempt on Thai PM Abhisit Vejjajiva. Cheang Sokha and Cameron Wells, Assassins Trained in Kingdom?, *Phnom Penh Post*, 19 Sept 2010.

cooking gas cylinder explosives, various thrown and launched grenades, and fake bomb scares.<sup>7</sup> Incidents of violence and security threats clearly transformed the city. The government's ongoing emergency declaration, which made public gatherings of more than five people illegal, was lifted in several provinces but remained in effect in Bangkok. The declaration justified the deployment of camouflage-clad soldiers bearing combat shotguns at the city's elevated train stations and patrols of "Explosive Ordinance Disposal" (EOD) officers checking electrical boxes outside shopping complexes in the CentralWorld environs. This new security presence was also accompanied by a proliferation of new market spaces, particularly in makeshift night markets selling T-shirts, jewelry, shoes, food and "panhandling" performances. In front of the burned shops where corrugated metal facades covered the reconstruction sites, these new impromptu markets clogged pedestrian traffic, and inserted dynamic performances into these former spaces of subversion and destruction. These new market stalls replaced the disrupted order at the sites of bombing and arson with cultural and entrepreneurial creativity.

The "Big C" shopping center on Ratchadamri Road across from CentralWorld, scene of a grenade attack on 25 July, was a key site of this cultural generativity. The area in front of this bombed center was subsequently covered by another corrugated metal facade. Across the street, a night market emerged as vendors filled the entrepreneurial space in between these two temporarily disrupted sites of capitalism. Here, Bangkok's capitalist normalcy was violently disrupted, abolishing routines of spatial power and opening up new spaces of cultural creativity. In late July 2010, I sat down for a snack of *isan priaw* at a stairway blocked by a Zen department store construction fence. Sitting next to me, a man in a drab olive jumpsuit, military boots and a T-shirt reading "ATF" (the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms) engaged me in conversation with his friends. He pointed out his ATF insignia in the course of our conversation, and was proud to tell me he worked for the Royal Thai Police in the EOD division. He talked about his previous explosives disposal training with ATF in Washington DC among international law enforcement colleagues from the Philippines, Mexico and other countries.

In our conversation, I asked the EOD officer his opinion on the *Bangkok Post's* recent report citing Jatuporn Prompan, a "Red Shirt leader," who suggested that the grenade attacks and Big C bombing were part of an agent provocateur-style government operation to prolong the emergency decrees.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Srivalo Piyanart and Intaket Monthien, Protection Beefed up at 467 Sites, *The Nation*, 29 Sept 2010.

<sup>8</sup> The emergency decree was due to expire in Bangkok, Nonthaburi, Samut Prakan, Pathum Thani, Udon Thani, Khon Kaen, and Nakhon Ratchasima on 7 Oct 2010. However,

He concurred with the media coverage and the government's position that surveillance cameras were the solution to this ongoing insecurity: new cameras could be observed everywhere in the area of CentralWorld, along with the new public order signs and posters of the "Together We Can" national unity program. These posters stressed cultural conformity, and combined patriotic colors in a heart icon with photos of smiling citizens of a variety of ages and occupations. The EOD officer said, "We need more ways to help the economy, like the Big Sale they had in the street after the city cleanup day...lots of those sellers are still here, trying to get things back to normal."<sup>9</sup> The officer's presence in these damaged spaces demonstrates that government social control and generative urban creativity co-exist here: they are not antithetical, but symbiotic social phenomena.

However, to determine the accuracy of this officer's description of cultural revitalization in this urban area requires theoretical approaches and methodologies that map the contours of everyday Thai life at recent sites of violence and government suppression. Following Amster and Korff, this paper highlights public space and public zones as key sites of analysis and observation, incorporating previous analysis of urban public space in Bangkok and US cities.<sup>10</sup> Methodologically, it takes cues from Goffman and Lofland in analyzing spatial arrangements and cultural features of public life.<sup>11</sup> Because the public realm is the central locus for everyday cultural life, it is an informative social territory for ethnographic inquiry. Zones of "public

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National Security Council officials threatened that Bangkok's state of emergency might need to be extended into 2011 in reaction to the bombings. Similarly, the Department of Special Investigation predicted "that bomb blasts would continue to rock Bangkok until the year-end." The decrees allowed the government to detain "suspects" for thirty days without charge, freeze their bank assets, censor media organizations, and block access to websites.

<sup>9</sup> Interview, Ratchadamri Road, Bangkok, 29 Jul 2010. In addition to the poster campaign, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) project also included a "Big Cleaning Day" to remove street debris after the May crackdown, religious ceremonies, a "Grand Sale" of street vendors, "Big Planting Day" and charity concerts. See: Daria Redanskikh, "Legitimacy Crisis and Thailand's Road to the National Reconciliation", MA thesis, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, 2011: 41-44.

<sup>10</sup> Randall Amster, "Spatial Anomalies: Street People, Sidewalk Sitting, and the Constested Realms of Public Space", Dissertation, Arizona State University, 2002, 11. Rüdiger Korff, *Bangkok and Modernity*, Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, Social Research Institute, 1989.

<sup>11</sup> Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places; Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings*, New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963. Lyn H. Lofland, *A World of Strangers. Order and Action in Urban Public Space*, New York: Basic Books, 1973.

space” include the streets, sidewalks, subways, parks that physically embody the concept of common property and free expression.<sup>12</sup>

Yet highlighting the cultural dynamism of public spaces reveals an inherent paradox. On the one hand, public spaces are “natural stages” for community life, especially for those with limited access to private space. Furthermore, public spaces are vital sites of societal communication, plurality, spontaneity, and “progressive politics.”<sup>13</sup> As such, public spaces stand at the physical and metaphorical crossroads between political participation and individual freedom. On the other hand, public spaces are also historical places of exclusion. Despite their idealized position as representing access and inclusion, public spaces are thus subject to a gradual and incremental decline.<sup>14</sup> This exclusionary aspect of these spaces leads Koskela and others to declare the “death of public space.”<sup>15</sup> As “defensible spaces” are created to restrict open access, city agencies control public spaces using a number of tactics, such as surveillance and security systems; ordinances regulating behavior; and increased security patrols.<sup>16</sup> These tactics result in a privatization of public space where limitations of access and rights create the eventual realization of “the ‘dream’ of the ‘private city’.”<sup>17</sup> This vision was physically evoked near the CentralWorld reconstruction site, where a construction company’s banner declared, “We build what you dream” (Figure 1).

<sup>12</sup> Don Mitchell, Political Violence, Order, and the Legal Construction of Public Space: Power and the Public Forum Doctrine, *Urban Geography* 17, no. 2, 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Lyn H. Lofland, *The Public Realm: Exploring the City’s Quintessential Social Territory*, Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1998: 124. Doreen B. Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994: 57. Susan J. Drucker and Gary Gumpert, *Voices in the Street: Explorations in Gender, Media, and Public Space*, Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1997: 1.

<sup>14</sup> Don Mitchell, The End of Public Space? People’s Park, Definitions of the Public and Democracy, *Annals of the Association of the American Geographer* 85, no. 1, 1995: 115-28.

<sup>15</sup> Hille Koskela, ‘The Gaze without Eyes’: Video-Surveillance and the Changing Nature of Urban Space, *Progress in Human Geography* 24, no. 2, 2000: 261, n.2.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Carr, *Public Space*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992: 149-50. Lofland, *A World of Strangers*, 90f.

<sup>17</sup> Lofland, *The Public Realm*, 196. Michael Sorkin, *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1992.

FIGURE 1: Banner leading to a construction site near Zen Department Store and CentralWorld (Author photo, 1 Aug 2010)



Thus, despite the increased appearance of public spaces of exclusion, these uncertain zones are also dynamic sites of urban transformation: the public spaces that remain serve as zones of cultural generativity. Megacity Bangkok, with an unofficial population exceeding well over ten million, is a vibrant space of complexity and conflict marked by prosperity, unrest, sprawl, traffic, poverty, resistance, conformity, and urban performance. According to Amster's configurations, these spaces, and the street people and artists who inhabit them are "spatial anomalies" or "entities who are 'out of place' in a seemingly well-ordered world."<sup>18</sup> Their anomalous existence in the marginal spaces they inhabit results in an overtly negative characterization of these spaces by government agencies. The New York City department of planning, for example, defines marginal space as "public space that, lacking satisfactory levels of design, amenities, or aesthetic appeal deters members of the public from using the space for any purpose."<sup>19</sup> British multimedia artist, Adam Chodzko, who creates art performances in these spaces concurs, "If you're working with marginal space... Well, one of those spaces is on the edge of the law."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Amster, "Spatial Anomalies", 4.

<sup>19</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, "From Pilgrim to Tourist", in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, London; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996: 138.

<sup>20</sup> David Barrett, Adam Chodzko Interviewed, *Habitat Artclub Magazine*, Summer 1999.

One August evening, when the Bangkok emergency declaration was still in effect and the Zen Department store was still enveloped in barbed wire and corrugated construction barriers, I witnessed the legal edge of the city's marginal spaces firsthand. Because CentralWorld was still closed, its massive underground parking lot was largely unused, and the parking entrance drive in the back of the complex became the site of improvisational urban performance. Drawn by the sound of small engines, I was surprised to find a crowd of people on either side of the broad drive leading to the parking ramp, during a time when gatherings of more than five people were illegal. The group was watching several small "underbone" motorcycles performing high speed tricks. Among clouds of exhaust and smells of burned rubber, I asked a dreadlocked Thai man, "When's the best night to come and watch this?" He smiled when he realized I could speak Thai and said, "Every night!" His descriptions indicated that the temporary closing of CentralWorld offered an unprecedented, if illegal, opportunity for urban expression.

Despite the chaotic appearance of this backstreet gathering in Bangkok, these marginal urban spaces represent cultural vitality and offer transformative possibilities. Toshiya Ueno, a sociologist and media theorist, describes the stabilizing properties of these spaces, "Society can establish a stable position by creating some marginal space. Often, only by creating an "outside", by creating ideological dichotomies a society can generate stability."<sup>21</sup> Anthropologists such as Das and others attribute a distinct centrality to marginal spaces. Unlike geographic borders, the margins these theorists describe are areas outside the centers of state sovereignty, but nevertheless these fringes are still sites of state intervention. Thus the state's margins, in this case within the urban boundaries of private space, become central to theorizing the state itself.<sup>22</sup> In these marginal spaces, aspects of the paradoxical duality of postmodern cities include strategies of both inclusion and exclusion. Cities are constantly transforming, and these competing strategies result in a constant process of spontaneous invention and focused intervention. This perspective views cities as dynamic places of internal urban transformation based on a complex intertwining of cultural and economic life. In Bangkok, urban transformation is a dialectical interaction between performative cultural creativity and surveillance-based social control.

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<sup>21</sup> Krystian Woznicki, "On Marginal Space and Periphery: Interview with Toshiya Ueno," Nettime, 1998.

<sup>22</sup> Veena Das and Deborah Poole, *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*, Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2004.



## Security, surveillance, and millennial capitalism

Selling or Displaying of goods for sale, Sporting Activities, Distributing Leaflets, Loitering or Sleeping in public areas is prohibited. Act on cleanliness B.E. 2535

(Bangkok Metropolitan Administration sign at elevated train platforms, 2011)

Following the events of May 2010, many shopping complexes near the damaged CentralWorld deployed metal detectors in their main entrances. Visitors were required to walk through these devices and show the contents of their bags to the security personnel of the shopping center. These security rituals extended government incursion into public life and confirmed the consequences of international scrutiny in the wake of the 19 May crackdown, as noted by several other observers.<sup>23</sup>

Small shopping complexes also introduced new security set-ups at the entrances, despite the fact that all of the bombings in 2010 were incidents of thrown or launched grenades from outside or in garbage cans on the street. Thus, these surveillance performances reflected the impossibility of protection, and constant metal detector alarms were ignored without exception. In addition, exterior entrances attached to department stores, McDonalds, and Starbucks did not include security checkpoints and offered an opportunity to enter shopping complexes without search. This daily façade of security contrasted with warrantless searches at night on the city's streets. State security agents, ostensibly searching for explosives, thereby generated revenue from drug seizures and other contraband goods.<sup>24</sup>

Thus Bangkok's securitization deployments took the form of a broad pastiche of performances and surveillance techniques at formative chiasmata throughout the city. Out of the hundreds of places declared as at-risk zones for bombs and political attacks since March 2010, seventy-seven Bangkok locations were designated for "secret surveillance" by the Centre for Resolution of the Emergency Situation (CRES) to be patrolled by teams of troops and police. The thousands of CCTV cameras run by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration were to be linked with thousands more run by private entities, supported by networks of urban intelligence that "would be strengthened to follow the movement of people who threaten trouble for the

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<sup>23</sup> Peter Bouckaert et al., "Descent into Chaos Thailand's 2010 Red Shirt Protests and the Government Crackdown.", Human Rights Watch, 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2011/05/03/descent-chaos-0>.

<sup>24</sup> Jane Schneider and Ida Susser, *Wounded Cities: Destruction and Reconstruction in a Globalized World*, New York: Berg, 2003.

government.”<sup>25</sup> These thousands of private cameras that could be accessed by government agencies show how decentralized surveillance was used for centralized purposes.<sup>26</sup> In addition, CRES also relied on unspecified “psychological operations” in order to keep people “safe and sound.”<sup>27</sup>

The new checkpoints, searches, and the hundreds of new cameras deployed around Ratchaprasong intersection reflect a centralizing urban phenomenon which one city planner describes as “the increasing envelopment of public space and public life by an architecture of security.”<sup>28</sup> In these urban “arenas of conflict,” concrete barriers, security patrols, gated communities, and surveillance schemes constitute elements of fortified space and landscapes of defense.<sup>29</sup> Geographers conceptualize the envelopment of public space by the architecture of security as *Landschaft*, a restricted or bounded piece of ground.<sup>30</sup> The equivalent Thai concept is “protective suppression” (*bongkan brapram*), a seemingly contradictory phrase that is ubiquitous in Thai policing and security bureaucracies. The media imaginary of terrorism increasingly alters urban forms and results in an “architecture of fear.”<sup>31</sup> The increased surveillance and protective suppression operations near Ratchaprasong were performances of control within the context of potential anti-government violence rather than enactments of security.

Accordingly, the architecture of fear is a key indication of how perceived security threats influence the design of cities and the partitioning of urban space. The militarized defense of fortress cities and places of potential violence delineate the conjunction of terrorism, risk and the global city.<sup>32</sup> At this conjunction, the boundaries between affluence and poverty are marked by urban fortifications. Post-9/11 security literature charts this spatial com-

<sup>25</sup> Piyanart and Monthien, “Protection Beefed up at 467 Sites.”

<sup>26</sup> María Amelia Viteri and Aaron Tobler, *Shifting Positionalities: The Local and International Geo-Politics of Surveillance and Policing*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009: 1.

<sup>27</sup> Piyanart and Monthien, “Protection Beefed up at 467 Sites.”

<sup>28</sup> Michael Sorkin, *Indefensible Space: The Architecture of the National Insecurity State*, New York: Routledge, 2008.

<sup>29</sup> John Robert Gold and George Revill, *Landscapes of Defence*, Harlow; New York: Prentice Hall, 2000: 11.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Muir, *Approaches to Landscape*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999.

<sup>31</sup> Edward L. Glaeser and Jesse M. Shapiro, Cities and Warfare: The Impact of Terrorism on Urban Form, *Journal of Urban Economics* 51, no. 2, 2002. Kathryn Cramer and Peter D. Pautz, *The Architecture of Fear*, New York: Arbor House, 1987.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Marcuse, “Walls of Fear, Walls of Support”, in *Architecture of Fear*, ed. Nan Ellin, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997. Jon Coaffee, *Terrorism, Risk and the Global City: Towards Urban Resilience*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2009.

petition of economic inequality, state surveillance, and urban regeneration.<sup>33</sup> This research clearly demonstrates how the increasing fortification of the modern surveillance city is linked directly to globalized capitalism and its attendant critiques. These critiques challenge the presumed inevitability of “global governance.” Devotees of fast food restaurants and popular Hindu icons meet in the multi-story metal and glass shopping centers of the Ratchaprasong intersection as shrines of what the Comaroffs call millennial capitalism.<sup>34</sup>

These theorists provide insight into a capitalist colonization of urban life, an annihilation of public space where “there is no outside to capitalism.”<sup>35</sup> As Amster notes, it is “increasingly impossible to find residual parts of the ‘lifeworld’ that capitalism has not colonized.”<sup>36</sup> Urban gentrification and redevelopment destroys public space in order to attract desired consumers, “thus protecting the inalienable right of the well-to-do to spend their money without having to rub shoulders with the ‘dangerous classes’.”<sup>37</sup> The economic and aesthetic control of landscape has been conceptualized as the “hegemonic capitalism of Disneyfication.”<sup>38</sup> For Amster, the panoptic towers of millennial capitalism are “skipping merrily toward that magical kingdom where none need confront the horrors of poverty while out consuming conspicuously.”<sup>39</sup>

Equally, urban space can be theorized as a mirror of cultural processes and a zone of social exchange.<sup>40</sup> Viewed in this light, resistant forms of urban expression, such as graffiti and other transgressions of legality, are seen as humanistic necessities with transformative and redemptive qualities. Following Harvey, Amster envisions:

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<sup>33</sup> Steven Miles and Ronan Paddison, Introduction: The Rise and Rise of Culture-Led Urban Regeneration, *Urban Studies* 42, no. 5/6, 2005. Jennifer S. Light, Urban Security from Warfare to Welfare, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 26, no. 3, 2002.

<sup>34</sup> Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming, *Public Culture* 12, 2000.

<sup>35</sup> Todd May, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994. Joanne P. Sharp, *Entanglements of Power: Geographies of Domination/Resistance*, London; New York: Routledge, 2000: 15.

<sup>36</sup> Amster, “Spatial Anomalies”, 46; citing Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Detroit: Black & Red, 1983 [1970]), 17.

<sup>37</sup> Lofland, *A World of Strangers*, 76. Carr, *Public Space*, 149.

<sup>38</sup> Sorkin, *Variations on a Theme Park*.

<sup>39</sup> Amster, “Spatial Anomalies”, 61.

<sup>40</sup> Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, London; New York: Verso, 1989.

There is no single moment within the social process devoid of the capacity for transformative activity – a new imaginary: a new discourse arising out of some peculiar hybrid of others; new rituals or institutional configuration; new modes of social relating; new material practices and bodily experiences; new political power relations arising out of their internalized contradictions. Each and every one of these moments is full to the brim with transformative potentialities.<sup>41</sup>

These potentialities are clearly evident in Thailand's emergent art movements, as online videos juxtaposing local underground music with scenes of 2010's violence in Bangkok dramatically illustrate.<sup>42</sup>

### Decentralized performances of urban resistance

In the context of this paper's central metaphor of the "chiasm", the strands of public space that exist within contested sites of security are intertwined with the strands that exist within spaces of representation. Public space is integral to performances of urban resistance and cultural contestation. The Thai Red Shirt and Yellow Shirt movements are both performance-based and reliant on the symbolic qualities of urban spaces. For example, the cremation ceremony of Maj. Gen Khattiya Sawasdipol on June 22<sup>nd</sup> was, according to observers of the event, one of the few chances for Red Shirts to gather legally in accordance with Bangkok's 2010 emergency decrees. The funeral ceremony was accompanied by an array of street vendors selling T-shirts, Red Shirt paraphernalia, and CDs with iconic memorialized images of the "Red Commander" (*Seh Daeng*).<sup>43</sup> Also at this event, one man impersonated Gen. Khattiya in uniform while others reenacted the government suppression of the protests.

In a "prelude" to the four-year anniversary of the 2006 coup and the four-month anniversary of the 19 May crackdown, a bicycle parade was organized around Victory Monument, Lumpini Park, Din Daeng and Ratchaprasong intersections where hitherto weekly events were held by the "Red Sunday" group. The prelude event also included other performances such as the "ghosts of 19 May" in make-up and costumes – the actors playfully posed with soldiers at BTS elevated train platforms in choreographed photo opportunities. Students from Ramkhamhaeng University dressed as ghosts,

<sup>41</sup> Amster, "Spatial Anomalies", 39. David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996, 105.

<sup>42</sup> Red Riot, "Bangkok City Is Burning", <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QipGgVRUpbs>.

<sup>43</sup> Jim Taylor, "Scenes from Saedaeng's Funeral", Australia National University, <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2010/07/03/scenes-from-saedaengs-funeral/>.

and hundreds of bicycle riders also appeared at the Khok Wua intersection, the Democracy Monument, and the Rama VI monument. One student said they wanted to serve as reminders that people had died at the sites and told reporters that “spirits of the red shirt people are still here to seek justice.”<sup>44</sup> Others wrote slogans and held photos of dead friends and relatives in front of CCTV cameras in order to succeed in “getting the government’s attention.”<sup>45</sup> These performances suggest how surveillance techniques are becoming increasingly integral to resistance practices, confirming interpretations that transcend much of the current literature on totalizing surveillance.<sup>46</sup> Sites of resistance and performance thus confront sites of surveillance directly, represented by the tens of thousands of red balloons and ribbons with handwritten slogans tied around trees and sign posts in the Ratchaprasong area on 19 Sept 2010.

As these political performances demonstrate, the state of emergency in Bangkok was an important underlying factor linking securitization with public space. For example, the ongoing military security performances at subway and skytrain stations were justified by bomb threats and rumors of planned attacks on transportation systems. First Army Commander, Kanit Sapatitak, who made the announcement that Bangkok would be the last place where the emergency decree would be lifted said that “increased troop presence at crowded public places such as subway and skytrain stations might cause the public to be alarmed, but they should feel more secure knowing they are being protected.”<sup>47</sup> In Thailand’s state of exception, 2010’s mass rally on the coup anniversary of 19 Sept was a performative testing of the emergency decree. The rally included a merit-making ceremony at Wat Prathum Wanaram, the temple near the Ratchaprasong intersection which served as a zone of refuge, echoing the use of temple spaces as “safe areas” for Red Shirts.

On the coup anniversary, a “sea of red” began building at Bangkok’s Ratchaprasong intersection in the early afternoon, while a simultaneous rally was held in Chiang Mai<sup>48</sup>. Chants, music, dancing, and sporadic cheering accompanied the growing crowd which peaked in size by 5pm despite intermittent rain showers. Within an hour, long red nylon or cloth ribbons were

<sup>44</sup> Intathep Lamphai, Red Shirts Mark May Violence, *Bangkok Post*, 13 Sept 2010.

<sup>45</sup> Sarnsamak Pongphon and Rojanaphruk Pravit, Red Tide Returns, *The Nation*, 20 Sept 2010.

<sup>46</sup> Viteri and Tobler, *Shifting Positionalities*.

<sup>47</sup> Decree Ends in Bangkok Last – CRES, *Bangkok Post*, 12 Sept 2010.

<sup>48</sup> At a simultaneous gathering in Chiang Mai, Thaksin’s home province, some of an estimated crowd of seven thousand held portraits of the deposed Prime Minister in his Royal Thai Police uniform.

tied to telephone poles and other places to create a lightweight web or canopy that could be lifted when necessary, but effectively blocked traffic in a soft solution to the ban on street blockades. The road was blocked by a loose line of parked cars in the middle of the street to the north of the gathering. Because public address systems were banned as well, the only PA was provided by a police truck with speakers and cameras making the police response resemble a media event more than an act of potential suppression.<sup>49</sup> Stretching across the street to the Erawan shrine, and north past the Big C bombing site, the crowd held the “red web” aloft while shrines of red candles, balloons, and roses were constructed in the street and on sidewalks. The largest of these shrines comprised signs which implicated government officials and PM Abhisit in the May violence. The signs asked “Who are the Killers?” and memorialized the dead. At this main shrine, a man sat cross-legged on the pavement flashing the modified *mano cornuto* hand signal associated with Thaksin, cavorting and posing for journalists and phototakers. New vendors of T-Shirts, CDs, food, and beverages stretched in every direction.

Beyond the typical forms of “protest” performance, such as signs, chanting, and cheering, the BMA’s “Together We Can” billboards on the construction façade around CentralWorld became an impromptu site of public dissent and counter-expression. For example, signs which depicted blank red and yellow cartoonlike “speech bubbles” to imply a dialogue between the opposing political movements were quickly marked with graffiti. The blank speech bubbles became filled with “Red 4 Life,” “Red Never Dies,” “I am Red!” (written within a yellow speech balloon) and other slogans that covered all of the government-designed “peace propaganda” billboards on the construction façade. One of the last of these billboards to be marked by graffiti was a large blue sign which repeated the phrase “Everything Will Be OK” (Figure 2). In front of this sign, a Thai teenager wearing a T-shirt reading “Life firing zone” covered with simulated bullet holes performed martial arts moves and flipped his middle finger while smiling to camera-toting onlookers. Like the acts of graffiti, this impromptu performance was directed specifically at the BMAs “Together We Can” billboards, and was thus a deliberate communicative statement encoded in a youthful act of rebellion.

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<sup>49</sup> Hundreds of police officers stood by largely out of sight in an area between the Intercontinental Hotel and Gaysorn shopping complex which was voluntarily closed as a security measure. Despite the presence of the green pickups and squad cars of the recently formed “City Law Enforcement,” there were no major deployments of metropolitan special patrol riot squads.

FIGURE 2: The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration's "Together We Can" billboard project (Author photo, 6 Sept 2010)



Among these performances of dissent, street merchants sold protective amulets, red shirts, VCDs of the May 19 shootings, and memorial VCDs.<sup>50</sup> In addition to these more overtly political vendors, hundreds of merchants also sold clothing, shoes, toys, flowers, and dried seafood. As the crowd began dispersing by 6:30pm, the red web of interconnected ribbons was quickly dismantled as cars and *tuk tuks* began to drive through assisted by the crowd who dutifully held it aloft. Although the red shirt movement was at that time supposedly devoid of leadership, with the exception of Sombat Boonngamanong, a number of Red Shirts were clearly supervising the process of removing the ribbons. City street sweepers, some wearing subtle red paraphernalia such as buttons or small red strips of cloth, quickly swept up the debris except for the still-burning candles and red roses of the street memorials. Sporadic firecrackers caused no visible alarm among those who remained including small groups of police who casually circulated the scene. The entire intersection was cleared well before 8pm and reverted to

<sup>50</sup> Alan Klima, *The Funeral Casino: Meditation, Massacre, and Exchange with the Dead in Thailand*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002.

“normalcy” soon afterwards. Despite this cooperation, one red-shirted demonstrator said, “Don’t think we are water buffaloes...Those who are here [today] are hardcore. They can’t be controlled.”<sup>51</sup> This commemoration event clearly demonstrated how acts of political and entrepreneurial performance dynamically intertwine with securitization techniques in Bangkok’s contested public spaces.

These examples can be theorized as a multiplicity of resistances, where resistance is decentralized. As May writes, “it is because what is to be resisted comes in the form of networks that resistance must do so too. Just as power and oppression are decentralized, so must resistance be.”<sup>52</sup> These forms of resistance are described by sociologists as performances of decentralized power, spontaneous creativity, and spatio-temporal “play.”<sup>53</sup> Like vagrants and vagabonds, the performer of urban resistance is “an avatar of chaos, disorder, indeterminacy, and unbounded freedom – and this is why he frightens us.”<sup>54</sup> These are the “decentered poetics” performed in metropolitan centers by vagrants, graffiti artists, dancers and musicians, street vendors, and protesters. From these poetics the spaces of power which require a capacity for action among the “overpowered” emerge.<sup>55</sup> In what Dobler calls the “residue of uncontrollability,” exercising power over human agents requires a control that is imperfect, not a totalizing performance of power.<sup>56</sup> In the imperfections and vulnerabilities of social control systems, the expression of individual and collective agency creates new cultural orders, and these imperfect spaces are transformed into chiasmatic crucibles.

## Conclusion

At these formative points of dynamic exchange, new cultural formations are emerging while others are publically tested and contested. The post-coup political discord has created decentered performances of democratic participation. These performances take place in a cultural context of violent protest, of state factionalism, of royalist mythmaking and of international political

<sup>51</sup> Pongphon and Pravit, Coup Anniversary: Red Tide Returns, *The Nation*, 20 Sept 2010.

<sup>52</sup> May, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism*, 52f.

<sup>53</sup> Bauman, “From Pilgrim to Tourist”, 31.

<sup>54</sup> Amster, “Spatial Anomalies”, 52.

<sup>55</sup> Heinrich Popitz, *Phänomene der Macht*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992.

<sup>56</sup> Gregor Dobler, “Private Vices, Public Benefits? Small-Town Bureaucratization in Namibia”, in *Conflict of Interest in Governance – an Interdisciplinary Outlook on the Global, Public, Corporate and Financial Sphere*, ed. Anne Peters, Lukas Handschin, and Daniel Högger, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.



pressure. Although aspects of the protests and performances are designed to generate international media attention, many are exclusively performed for Thai audiences. Some nationalist Thai critics, for example, continually assert that foreigners, including academics who study Thailand, will “never understand the country in the same way the Thais do” and “*farangs* may know a lot about Thai politics, culture, way of life and so on, but they will never be able to reach the core of Thai-ness.”<sup>57</sup>

The performances attempt to delineate the imagination of space in post-millennial Thailand. How is public space to be imagined in Bangkok, and how is that imagination revitalized? Bangkok is witnessing, like other postmodern cities, a compression of space-time.<sup>58</sup> This compression is the catalytic element of the city's cultural chiasm. In the glittering shopping centers of Ratchaprasong intersection and elsewhere in the city, shrines of millennial capitalism coexist with and are spiritually reliant on Buddhist-Hindu shrines to Ganesha, the Trimurti and Erawan. This coexistence represents a merger of legal and religious realms of order as capitalism is continually transformed in popular centers of religious practice. Kirsch and Turner describe how “legal” and “religious” acts of ordering are merged with one another.<sup>59</sup> As security and surveillance are reinforced in the service of these millennial capitalist sites, the Derridean mystical foundations of law become manifest.<sup>60</sup> After last year's violence, arson attacks, and bombings, the religious shrines at Ratchaprasong intersection and the market spaces nearby are more popular than ever, although they are encircled by construction facades, surveillance, and barbed wire. This intensified popularity suggests a merger of spiritual belief with the legal underpinnings of market-based government.

In Bangkok's contested public spaces, government security deployments, improvisational urban performance and decentralized entrepreneurial activity are intertwined. These strands of governmental securitization and urban performance derive their justification and vitality from the recent violence and unrest in the public spaces where they are based. Thus, these spaces of former insecurity are creative zones where security assertions and politicized performances come together like two nerves crossing each other at an anatomical chiasm or two chromatids crossing in a genetic one. While

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<sup>57</sup> Chachavalpongpun Pavin, ‘Farang Cannot Know’ – Even If They Do Understand, *Bangkok Post*, 31 Aug 2010, italics added.

<sup>58</sup> Amster, “Spatial Anomalies”, 24.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas G. Kirsch and Bertram Turner, *Permutations of Order: Religion and Law as Contested Sovereignities*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2009: 3.

<sup>60</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Force de loi: le ‘fondement mystique de l'autorité’”, *Cardozo Law Review* 11, 1991.

this urban vitality continues to be visible in this moment of the Thai government's vulnerability, the outcome of this cultural and political movement remains unclear: Bangkok's spaces of security and insecurity contain economic potential and political uncertainty.

CentralWorld reopened on 29 Sept 2010, and "the lively shopping atmosphere of the Rajprasong intersection returned to normal."<sup>61</sup> As thousands of shoppers returned to the air-conditioned site, the fate of the decentralized entrepreneurial capitalism that had emerged in the streets and sidewalks outside the complex was less clear. Top executives wearing pink "We ♥ CW"-shirts waved and smiled from escalators in choreographed media photos. The operator of the complex, Central Pattana (CPN), spent 1.5 million Baht on advertising the reopening. Projected sales for the remaining quarter of that year were double the cost of the advertising campaign. By the end of October 2010, international credit rating agencies were reportedly "amazed" at Thailand's rapid economic recovery.<sup>62</sup> In the wake of this recovery and its subsequent ebb after the unprecedented flooding of 2011, will the vibrant new sites of entrepreneurial expression and performances of urban resistance that briefly flourished in the area be erased?

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<sup>61</sup> Rungfapaisarn Kwanchai, "Central Group Eyes Carrefour as CentralWorld Reopens", *The Nation*, 29 Sept 2010.

<sup>62</sup> The subtle performance of police and government forces in contrast to the coercive events early that year had a measurable economic effect. Importantly, by the time the 19 Sept. gathering cleared peacefully with no arrests, Thailand's "SET Index" economic indicators gained 21 percentage points and since the 19 May crackdown the Thai baht strengthened to a thirteen year high. MCOT, "Fiscal Police Office: S&P 'Amazed' at Thailand's Rapid Economic Recovery", MCOT, 21 Oct 2010.

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