

River Kwai: This Memorial Service Was Held In The Memory Of The Deceased,
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Saroot Supasuthivech

Supasuthivech's new work explores the memory of geography and the memorialization of histories. The artist's practice is rooted in the sociohistorical research of specific, and at times unassuming, geographical locations that often belie their current appearance and form. This three-part multimedia work, *River Kwai: This Memorial Service was Held in the Memory of the Deceased* is inherently progressive, provocative, and emotional. Reacting to popular and official narratives, Supasuthivech examines the corruption of our histories and the dissolution of our identities. And it drives the viewer to question the very source of their knowledge, if not their knowledge altogether.

An artist coming of age in a Thailand grappling with such questions, Supasuthivech takes as a microcosm for this tension a location on the Mae Klong River—now known internationally as the River Kwai—where the now-defunct Burma Railway crosses into Thailand. He uses the history that surrounds this bridge as the inspiration and framework for this work to explore how a remote geographical area, in the western Thai province of Kanchanaburi, has been divorced from its environs, its people, and from reality, serving instead the forces of popular and official interest: Representing no longer a community, but a spectacle.

Since 1980, the Tourism Authority of Thailand has organized "The River Kwai Bridge Light and Sound Show" at an annual week-long festival commemorating the Allied prisoners of war who lost their lives building the Burma Railway. Part of the Japanese war effort, the infamous conditions under which POWs were forced to work earned it the dubious distinction of the 'Death Railway.' However, an excerpt from the memoir of a former POW, Hugh V. Clarke—in his 1986 memoir *A Life for Every Sleeper*, counts the dead at: 13,000 British, American, and Dutch prisoners of war and an estimated 70,000 Asian civilian labourers... The total workforce on the railway included 51,000 British, Dutch, and American prisoners of war, 9,500 Australians, and over 270,000 conscripted Asian labourers from China, Burma, Thailand, Malaya, and Singapore.

Supasuthivech was struck by both the magnitude of the Asian workforce—who by the few available accounts, were recruited as indentured labourers only to end up as slaves—and the lack of acknowledgment around their sacrifice. While the 1957 film, *The Bridge on the River Kwai* is one of the most well-recognized narratives of events and conditions surrounding the POW experience and the Burma Railway, it is not historically accurate.

And yet, by virtue of its cultural currency, it has inspired the renaming of a major river of Thailand's central basin, redefined the location, and diminished local agency.

It is the historical void, the loss of collective memory, the reattribution of geographical significance that Supasuthivech captures in this multidimensional work. *River Kwai: This Memorial Service was Held in the Memory of the Deceased* will be divided into three parts. The first part is a single-channel video depicting the annual commemorative performance with its theatrics, sounds, fireworks, and audience participation. However, the artist slows the pace of the performance and defaces actors' expressions, thereby digitally distorting and transforming the energy of show. The second part of this work, sits to the right, and is a video/audio installation depicting Kanchanaburi's geographical context. It provides a new dataset composed from the artist's field research with a multi-language voice over. And displayed to the left, is a sculpture inspired by the offering bouquet used in formal Thai ceremonies.

Supasuthivech's immersive installation, *River Kwai: This Memorial Service was Held in the Memory of the Deceased*, is on its surface, a tribute to the deceased; but at its core, questions the infallibility of official narratives of history, and presents a clear commentary on Thailand today.