

■
HOW CAN
YOU BE
SO LOVED

Elden
Zachery
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The phrase ‘time is a bowl of water’ came to me when I first started dancing Butoh. This idea eventually sharpened into positing time as a fluid; a non-linear dimension in a container of empirical truths about our reality, that we use as a soft, cushioned surface supporting our feet to dance upon. We are like debris in the form of culture and society, in constant dialogue between tension and tenderness. I like to think of Southeast Asian queer people as the petals of a cosmic lotus in a space-time pond; blooming, wilting, swirling and crashing into each other as time bends and glides. A choreography of charmed gentleness, intense beauty, and sheer will emerges to tell remarkable stories of a world impending, where malleability and transmutation are recognised as strengths, and not weaknesses. As I’ve come to understand how much of our life boils down to dreaming, cumming, breathing, and dying, dancing butoh and being queer—both being states of in-betweenness requiring tenderness—have helped me navigate with an attuned and trained bodily sense, to be open to the world engulfing me whole.

Anjali

There was a night under the new moon, after the Songkran¹ craziness had died down a bit, when I was out with friends at a lesbian bar called Sapphic Riot—both a haven and an institution for the non-binary, genderfuck, queer creatures of the Chiang Mai night. I had just spent two weeks enjoying the festivities, getting drenched, and smiling at Isan boys. Stepping out of the bar to have a smoke, I was waxing poetic about gender expression and how our bodies shape time and space, trying to synthesise my preliminary thoughts around the artist residency and research I was about to step into in Bangkok. Suddenly, there sat Anjali, my childhood friend, and her friends having a little pre-drink. Yelps of excitement filled the air—us, Malaysian as fuck, screaming and laughing on this Thai street.

Our friends became engrossed in our conversation about our families back home, whose friendship has lasted across at least three generations.

1 Songkran is Thai New Year, where water is traditionally used to cleanse, honour and bless the Buddha, elders, and each other, but is also splashed playfully; which has become central to many big parties and raves to celebrate the sun moving into Aries.





Anjali and I, in the typical queer fashion, unpacked the tough topic with light smiles and crazed laughter still warm in our mouths. We talked about her aunt and uncle, who are the two oldest male and female siblings in their family and are therefore nicknamed 'Girl' and 'Abowie' (A Boy), respectively, by their families and community. We talked about growing up quickly, and the responsibility of fulfilling the needs of family and community. We talked about how we saw ourselves in all of them.

When Anjali and I were kids in the Portuguese enclave in Malacca, Malaysia. Our parents tried to set us up. It was a half-joke-half-hope in our families and extended community that we would end up together. Our parents hoped to be in-laws, but they could only ever make a joke of it, because we were just kids, and perhaps they had a little inkling of the impending, looming queerness that would find us, even if they wished to ignore it. Naturally, only the joke part held up. Anjali and I parted ways and spent time growing into our own people. She ended up tomboyish and I, faggy. The poetry of this is

so cliché to me. Despite this, the kampung² had run with the idea of us together for so long, that there is somehow... a slightly bruised and battered hope of a fairytale heteronormativity that still lingers when either or both of us are back home.

Despite us being apart for so long, we seem to have followed parallel paths to that bar and ended up spitting queer images of each other. It made me think about the relationship between queerness and our environment (our families, our community, our upbringing), and what becomes of these systems when queerness takes root and blossoms from within.

In the lead-up to my residency, I had already been thinking a lot about how I and my body interface with the environment, community, and the world. About how the masculinity I hold within rubs up against the long shadow of masculinity in the world outside me. In the second generation of our families' friendship, Anjali and I's mothers bonded over a love for Bollywood movies. She told me that she was named after Anjali from *Kuch Kuch Hota*

2 Kampung means 'village/neighbourhood' in Bahasa Melayu, i.e. 'Kampung Portugis,' referring to the Portuguese enclave in Malacca.





*Hai*³, the most iconic Bollywood movie to ever exist. Standing outside the bar, we all giggled about how it would have been the funniest and best thing on Earth if my mother named me ‘Rahul,’ after the male lead played by none other than Shah Rukh Khan—his characters always tussling and twisting with heteropatriarchal violence from top to bottom... When a queer creature of the night bursts out of this dynamic and context and disrupts the idealism of heteronormativity, what happens?

- 3 *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* is a wildly popular and iconic Bollywood musical film starring Shah Rukh Khan as the dashing protagonist who softens as he falls in love. The Hindi phrase ‘Kuch Kuch Hota Hai’ translates to ‘something something happens.’ It is colloquially used to describe ineffable internal sensations—i.e. a fluttery, romantic feeling or a crush—where you feel a stirring in your heart but can’t quite put into words exactly what you are experiencing.

Arm

I arrived in Bangkok by sleeper train. As we chugged along, I awoke and rubbed my eyes to a familiar city revealing itself to me slowly from between dense trees, and wondered what big revelation was in store this time. Bangkok has a way of pulling things out for me to confront, setting me back on the right path. Last time, I was offered an ultimatum by my employer: take on more responsibility, or I would have to be let go. I was modelling at the time. I recall looking up at the sky outside of the salon. I left that job over the phone, in full hair and makeup. Ten minutes and a cigarette later, I kept it pushing.

That night, I was introduced to Arm for the first time. Arm is a non-binary trans filmmaker who birthed Nagaphorn, an independent queer artist collective based out of the home they share with their mother. They are incredibly cat-like. Not in an over-performed, Catwoman-y way, but they listen and watch before moving. There is a casualness about them, usually in a tank top hanging lightly from their shoulders that never reads as simply blasé, but *pragmatic*. Our conversations always reveal parts of them that are incredibly precise and





intuitive, and I love the way they subtly share pieces of their dreams for their art practice. The next supreme of the Thai queer art scene, they hold themselves like a mischievous little girl with an ornate string puppet—with care, a sense of cheekiness, and a touch of trouble. I find that incredibly beautiful about them.

Nagaphorn consists of Arm, Chan (Arm's mother), Dew, Tar, Spite, and Praew—a group of wonderful and talented artists who are really putting their all into becoming the movers and shakers of the scene. They host queer artists from different places, who come to stay occasionally, twirling and tangoing with them and the extended local community and landscape. They create a beautiful soup of programming and dialogue that makes Bangkok's art scene just that much more colourful and wonderful. Acting entirely out of compassion and belief, they have made something very meaningful for the larger queer community in Southeast Asia because there is a softness in how they operate that can accommodate queer spirits of all shapes, sizes, and mediums. Everyone leans on one another in the swirling madness of this region we come from.

Mui

A force of nature of a woman. Soft and electric eyes, as expressive as if the fullest, brightest moon could stare you down fiercely. A ballroom girl. A dark horse of femme queen performance. She never moves through space without a flourish, and where there is a sound—whether it's an engine starting or a train stopping—there is a beat to be found, and where there is a beat, there's a femme queen ready to vogue down. That femme queen would be dear Mui.

She stays in Sai Mai, so every time she comes downtown, it is pretty much a pilgrimage. I am so grateful for the time she made for me. Arm asked her to show me around during the residency, as we had met before and there were little whispers that I am her type. She ended up being a real guardian of mine throughout my time in Bangkok.

We reunited at Rot Fai Park with Arm and Dew, to catch a Morlam show—arguably as campy as Thai entertainment can get. Morlam is an extravagant show of sung folk poetry with elaborate costumes and choreography, originating from the Isan region of Thailand. Anyone can play the male or female role in these productions at any moment, but





whether there is even a boundary between those gendered roles is a whole other question. I wondered about how our bodies are living documents of moments in space and time, and how the backdrops we live against can shape our bodily expressions of gender.

With this in mind, I stood watching these performers, trying to understand if there was some essence of masculinity outside of the problems it perpetuates or its need for hard lines to define it. What is masculinity outside of the assumption that femininity lacks something? What is a man, truly, outside of all cultural bias? In the Morlam show, you couldn't necessarily say that femininity meant flamboyance, or that masculinity meant stoicism and hardness, because those lines are all very quickly blurred with men in sparkly costumes and giant wings, stage makeup painted for the back row, and the same levels of showmanship and pizzazz as the female performers; therefore made gender feel close to obsolete. Yet, there is still somehow a need to distinguish male and female presentation in the dancers through costume and choreo. I think the Morlam show presented an interesting challenge to break down what actually defines male and female

presentation. Mui, of course, was performing her own vogue fem version of these Morlam songs, and gagging at the extravagance of the show. 'Bitch this is faaaaaaaaaaaaaab,' she exclaimed multiple times. I learned how to mimic the male performers. Admittedly, it all just came down to hip-thrusting. If you'd like to hip-thrust, wear this bare-chested version of the female costume to signal 'male.' Maybe being a man just means we thrust our hips for fun with our nipples to the air. But in the end, it took Mui and Arm to show me how it's done—so maybe it means nothing at all.





Amadiva

Mui and I met again the next day and she introduced me to some of her ballroom friends. Naturally, we stomped to Silom, the epicentre of Southeast Asian queer nightlife.

Stranger Bar is a place incredibly dear to my heart because it was where I watched some of my first live drag performances. I'm sure many other people have the same story. It is the first drag queen owned drag bar in Thailand, and you can feel the history and catharsis pumping through the veins of performers and attendees alike—an electricity that has been shaped over the years. Pop music, shiny costumes, strong drinks, and intense lighting. I was there multiple times throughout my residency, sometimes catching the same number for the third or fourth time. Amadiva, the host that night, is cunningly funny, somehow always finding a way to work de-dragging into her final number of the night so she can hasten the process of getting home. She, charmingly, has a British accent that pops out occasionally when she speaks English for the crowd. One time, I asked her about a performance I saw on her Instagram story, and whether she would do

it again. In response, she screamed, 'I don't wanna waste my Berghain number on this audience! It's so straight tonight! Come back tomorrow!'

With each encounter, I sunk my teeth deeper into my internal speculation about how the queens think and feel pre-, during, and post-performance. What does performing in drag as a job do to their relationships with gender? Where does a person who is so engaged with their external presence and expression land internally with their identity, and where does queerness sit in this? What I noticed was that, at some point, the mundanity and repetitiveness that sit under all the glitter and lights, and the demanding nature of the job, push queens to intentionally create a manic atmosphere, just to get by. Around 11pm, there is an amorphous agreement between performer and audience that no one is engaged any longer with the gloss over the truth that gender performance, especially at this level, is thoroughly absurd. We just need to get drunk, dance, and have a good time. Who are we performing for anyway?

Amadiva eventually DM'ed me on Instagram to tell me that I was the hottest person in the crowd. We chatted briefly about what we'd been up to, and





she took notice of my bio stating that I dance Butoh. The conversation eventually turned from flirting to the idea that Butoh and Drag are two sides of the same coin—both dismantling and inflating parts of living identity to revel in being a flesh bag possessed by spirit.

The first-ever Butoh performance, *Kinjiki*⁴ by Tatsumi Hijikata, toyed with homosexuality as a device and vessel to explore the taboos of desire. Cross-dressing was commonplace in the beginnings of the art form, and many will say with conviction that Butoh is queer for this reason. But to me, queerness was an import, dropped into an art form that wanted to give airtime to the fringes of humanity and society—to give them life and become their own creatures of the night. Butoh, in its explorations, historically functioned as a format to challenge and shock the landscapes of art and performance in post-war Japan. It eased the tensions and fatigue from the political and cultural obsession with rigidity and fascist discipline, and their influence over how the body can be performed. Butoh

4 *Kinjiki* was a performance by Butoh founder Tatsumi Hijikata, adapted from his close friend and collaborator Yukio Mishima's novel of the same name, which translates to 'forbidden colours.'

dancers had to perform in jazz bars, cabaret clubs, and striptease shows as these were the only places where they could explore these modes of expression without censorship, and also be able to make money. Cheekiness and taboo are the same creature. This is where queerness thrives, I think. In-between. In the crosshairs of format, container, and culture.

I hopped on a bike and rode home drenched in sweat.



Ma

The sun rose through the sheer curtains of my bedroom in Nagaphorn and shone light over a swelling in my heart. Before I could do, say, or think anything, I burst into tears. A deep wail, violently bubbling to the surface, erupted from the fleshy parts under my sternum. A deep, ochre paste of grief, anger, gratitude, and overwhelming love was being pounded and ground softer with a mortar and pestle. I called my mother; a folded towel under the mortar so that the tiles of my floor wouldn't crack. I was suddenly a child coming into contact with the feeling of lack for the first time again, not understanding why I could not have it all. I was softening and hardening at the same time; all these parts, feminine and masculine, accepting and grieving, rearranging themselves within me to accommodate this rumbling—processing why I have to leave my friends and family in Singapore to experience the calibre of queer philosophy, art, culture, and community in Bangkok and Chiang Mai was a really hard thing to grasp, just like having to choose between being a girl or a boy. Must I accept being othered as simply the fate of the damned or allow myself to be angry at being

sidelined and made out to be unpalatable, even when I hold truths about my own beauty within me?

My queerness lends me empathy to understand that this process of unacceptance and pain is a necessary part of the greatness I believe I am meant to attain in this life, but boy, was I pissed the fuck off and hurting deeply. I felt like a lotus stalk being pulled apart to extract strands of silk. This life of mine is so violently halving, but intensely beautiful.

Spending my teenage and young adult years in Singapore led me to internalise a falsehood that I have to accept being sidelined and neglected because I am unpredictable and wild like my mother used to be. She has to tussle with that old version of herself that lives within me. My mother never protected me from the truth that being this way would hurt, but it must be pursued regardless.

On the phone, she quoted Deuteronomy—a relic of the faith she tried to use to tame herself—to ease my anxieties and assure me that I am anointed, chosen, and that my place in this world is promised.

'You are the head and not the tail, son.'

I wondered if perhaps I am actually both—maybe my true power and resolution sit in wrestling between being anointed and damned.



Elden

I ran a Butoh workshop called, 'Time is a Bowl of Water' for the local queer community in a Teochew⁵ cemetery, surrounded by curious uncles, joggers, and playing children. In this site of honouring the dead, the living found ways to share life.

We worked with the idea of the flesh being submerged in the cosmic space-time soup. I primed the participants with Butoh techniques that helped them access the tenderness within. Together, we searched for the body-language that would allow them to dance that out alone, and then eventually, with each other. I have always been fascinated with the goal in Butoh of deconstructing the self before dancing. Even when dancing, you must be moved by something other than yourself—an image, the wind, your environment, a character. The act of de-centring the self to more easily access our own vulnerabilities, and creating a bodily poetics from there, is something so radical and soft to me. This part of Butoh always felt aligned with my own

5 The Teochew are a prominent Han Chinese sub-ethnic group originating from the Chaoshan region in eastern Guangdong, China, and are one of the largest groups of Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia.

relationship to queerness—an exercise in disarming and opening up the softest parts of ourselves to be taken up by the world.

When it came time to dance together, I used the concept of cruising to embody the overlapping of lives, and the magic of connection and desire. We explored the tenderness and tension that exist within the dynamic of strangers dancing in darkness, scanning for each other. This manifested in a thirty-minute-long jam session in the cemetery, where bodies tangled, flirted, and sensed each other in the space. We lay bare and danced between shadows and light—lurking queerly in-between the sun and moon, undressing in rhythms of wax and wane. Desire burns bright but must remain quiet. I see you for who you are; you're here with your own baggage, and I've got mine too. We conceal, reveal, dance, repeat.

Butoh, to me, is to dance tension tenderly. In this world where we are constantly swirling, how do we hold one another? How do our expressions and impressions emerge and intersect—within ourselves and among one another? I propose that the amorphous liminality that exists in both queerness and Butoh contains the answers, and is most easily





accessed when we dance together. The workshop honestly was a microcosm of the universe I had experienced during my six weeks in Thailand. The lives that have passed through mine, the kissing, dancing, sobbing, holding, sensing, and most of all, loving—across time, space, and cultures. People past, present, and future came to intersect. I came with a hardened heart ready to be cracked open, and my softest, barest centre was exposed to the winds of Thailand and the breath of those who shared their time, space, and energy to be with me—and this is my proposal for the future: embrace contradiction, chaos, grace, and harmony all at the same time.

Under a huge highway, in the calisthenics corner of a park implemented by the Thai government to curb drug abuse, a liminal site right in between the more and the less developed parts of Sathorn, a genderfucked cosmological creature was born. I call him Tom of กรุงเทพมหานคร อมรรัตนโกสินทร์ มหินทรายุธยา มหาดิลกภพ นพรัตนราชธานีบูรีรมย์ อุดมราชนิเวศน์มหาสถาน อมรพิมานอวตารสถิต สักกะทัตติย

วิชญกรรมประลี⁶ (Tom of Krungthep for short). Rising from the bowl of time, a Butoh drag creature of masculinity in crisis emerged from the month of incubating and intersecting with the many textures of queerness; the spirits, smiles, tears, laughter, energy, sounds, jokes, sweat, and breath of all the beautiful people and places I got to experience while in Thailand. Wet with time, dirty with love and culture, and a pink dumbbell for a phallus. May he crawl away from the sunset and through the night to where all secrets quietly play. May he continue to be nourished with conflict, friction, and confusion in passing lives, vehicles, and scrambling cities, for it is his duty as a genderfucked cosmological creature. To me, Tom of Krungthep is an

6 “Tom of” was taken from Tom of Finland, an iconic homoerotic illustrator who drew classic male figures of power in compromising positions, used here to work with the site-specific nature of this work, and also the Thai term “tom”, meaning Butch. “กรุงเทพมหานคร อมรรัตนโกสินทร์ มหินทรายุธยา มหาดิลกภพ นพรัตนราชธานีบูรีรมย์ อุดมราชนิเวศน์มหาสถาน อมรพิมานอวตารสถิต สักกะทัตติยวิชญกรรมประลี” is the official full name of the city of Bangkok, used here cheekily due to its length as it is officially the longest name for a city in the world, noting the inconvenience of using the entire name, while also acknowledging its beauty and poetry. This sentiment, in many ways, resembles the commitment required in both Drag and Butoh.



interdimensional being that visited from a world
where none of this gender shit even matters. I have
faith that that world is on its way.

