Who Owns the Mountain?

Power, Ideology and Extractive Capitalist Exploitation in Piyarat Piyapongwiwat’s Recent Work

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Abstract

This essay explores how a recent body of work by Thai artist Piyarat Piyapongwiwat uses an immersive video installation to create a context that affectively connects the viewer with a group of exploited Cambodian labourers. While the struggles of these labourers—whose livelihoods are being eroded as the mountain that has sustained them for generations is fenced off, privatized and mined to supply urban development with limestone—may seem remote and disconnected from the lives of privileged, urban exhibition-goers, Piyapongwiwat’s work belies this disconnection.

The affective portal created by the video installation allows us to not only empathize with the labourers, but to see how their sense of their own agency and power to change their plight is negated by what seem to be inexorable autonomous processes of capitalist development beyond their control or influence. At the same time, she enables us to see how we (the privileged viewers) can conveniently ignore our own complicity in these exploitative conditions through that same ideological sleight of hand that allows us to abdicate our responsibility for these seemingly autonomous processes from which we indirectly benefit. This learned acquiescence to exploitation, and concomitant alienation from a sense of agency to challenge...
these processes, benefits State-sanctioned extractive capitalist exploitation and perpetuates the power to oppress. The essay explores how Piyapongwiwat interweaves fictive, poetic narrative with documentary footage of the limestone quarry labourers, offering critical distance to examine the workings of the ideologies that perpetuate this status quo. The juxtaposition of documentary and poetic, philosophical and political narratives in the artwork offers a fertile space in the imagination for resistance and reclamation of agency through a search for truth beyond the ideologies that serve State and capitalist power.

Thai artist Piyapat Piyapongwiwat has a well-established history of drawing attention to the unseen. Her work focuses especially on marginalized groups that exist outside the periphery of the collective cultural gaze and the complex and invisible structures that, through classification and exclusion, define each individual’s place in the spectrum between power and oppression. Through documentary and experimental video, photography, text, sound, mixed media and installation, she has used her art to amplify the voice and presence of groups whose state of existence demonstrates the failures of our economic and political systems to maintain an equitable social order. Through these voices, she challenges notions that we have progressed very far beyond power structures in which relationships between the powerful and the oppressed are more explicitly embraced.

Piyapongwiwat’s body of work lends voice to perspectives outside of assumed norms and realities. She addresses issues affecting marginalized groups including textile workers, sex workers, refugee populations and queer-identifying people, frequently expressing criticism of State entities that contribute to corruption and oppression. She has also drawn from her personal examination of Thai national customs to develop work that interrogates cultural and political norms and reveals invisible political subtexts underlying daily routines.

In her multimedia installation Particle (2019), recently on display at Gallery Seescape in Chiang Mai, Thailand, Piyapongwiwat continues her examination of power and the ideological narratives that serve it, this time exploring questions of class, extractive capitalism, urbanization and ownership of natural resources, while expanding her video work beyond the documentary form that has been a recurring thread in her practice thus far.

The centrepiece of Particle is a video work, projected onto a screen in a loop like a portal opening into a brutalist landscape. A fine, limestone gravel covers the floor, effecting an immersive sensory experience. The gravel crunches underfoot and the viewer is confronted with the pungent smell of powdered limestone, creating the impression that the room is an extension
of the rocky landscape in the video. The projection acts as a link, a window that pulls you into its world and it into yours. A bleak, monochrome viewing environment envelopes the viewer. It has the effect of a sensory teleportation that collapses distance, emotional or physical, and forces the audience to face the film’s subjects with a degree of empathy that is typically reserved for those with whom we share physical proximity or social connection. While you watch them tell their stories, your lungs inhale the same white dust that is an inescapable part of their daily reality.

“Before, no one owned the mountain,”¹ a voice says over a panning shot of a crumbling limestone rockface. A haggard man on the cusp of middle age speaks with stoic resignation despite the weight that accompanies his words. While his emotive register is dominated by a veneer of pensive calm, there is an underlying sense of grief and exhaustion in his body language. His eyes never meet the camera directly, instead they gaze off into the distance or down at the pile of small rocks beneath him. He listlessly occupies his hands, picking up and turning over nearby stones aimlessly as he speaks. “Nowadays, a fence is built around the mountain so the villagers are not allowed in anymore,”² he explains.

The mountain in question is Phnum Tôtŭng, a traditional source of livelihood for the people who reside at its base. Historically it has provided them with food, medicine, firewood and fertile crop soil, but since the 2006 arrival of Kampot Cement Co., a joint venture between Thai-owned Siam Cement and the Cambodian-owned Khaou Chuly Group, the monetary value of the mountain for corporate and Thai-Cambodian government interests has overridden the cultural and sustaining value it holds for the villagers.³ A critical component in steel, plastic, paint, medicine, and most importantly cement, limestone feeds the juggernaut machine of urban development. In the face of this demand, the needs of the villagers have been cast aside, and their diminished livelihoods treated as collateral damage in the name of economic progress. As the mountain is chipped away into dust, so too are the security and futures of those who rely on it, leaving them with the question: If the mountain crumbles, what will remain?

Piyapongwiwat has consistently turned her camera towards vulnerable people most affected by this kind of State-sanctioned corporate exploitation of the natural world. As such, her work speaks to the Anthropocene condition, which highlights how human activity has imperiled our planetary life-support systems. With these larger connections in mind, the artist explores how extractive industries are one potent vector of destructive anthropogenic change to the natural landscape, as well as being deeply entangled with the ecological destructiveness of urbanization more generally. Her concern in
this work, and in her practice more generally, with how ordinary working people have been systematically rendered disposable by such ecologically destructive capitalist development, resonates with academic and journalist Raj Patel and environmental historian and historical geographer Jason W. Moore’s concept of “cheap lives”.4 Patel and Moore interrogate the workings of capitalist world-ecology in ways that show the larger implications of this important strand of Piyapongwiwat’s work, which explores the mechanisms by which some lives—particularly indigenous or politically vulnerable ones—are cast as negligible and expendable, thus justifying the exploitative agendas of the powerful and privileged in the service of putative ‘development’. Thus, framing this consistent preoccupation in Piyapongwiwat’s work with the concept of “cheap lives” shows how these devastating effects on the environment, or “cheap nature”, and the experiences of these so-called “cheap lives” are systemically entangled.

Piyapongwiwat shows us how these villagers, whose lives at the foot of Phnum Tötŭng have been functionally rendered “cheap”, understand their predicament, as they grapple with its paradoxes. Although they do so without the luxury of academic distance or aesthetic mediation that her work offers us, viewers and consumers of the products of their expropriated labour and strip-mined mountain home, they are not unaware of the bind they are in. While the demeanour of the village labourers in the film is neither anger nor avoidance in the face of looming calamity, the interviews sampled show how clearly the villagers grasp that their lives have become expendable. As one labourer in the film says about her village’s predicament, “What can we possibly do? It is what it is.”5 They understand that they are being exploited, but speak as if their lot was immutable. They comment on their circumstances with resigned acceptance, as if the forces threatening their existence were as natural and unavoidable as entropy itself. What else is there to do but keep labouring on for as long as there is work left for them to do? Thus, she shows how they have come to see themselves as if they were actors without agency, caught up in a drama they have neither authored, nor can refuse to play along with—trapped in the service of seemingly unchangeable capitalist processes.

Philosopher Hannah Arendt shows how webs of multilayered, simultaneous and interconnected “processes”—referring to the cascading, interconnected and potentially endless stream of consequences that stem from human action—overwhelm individual actors “enough to turn away with despair from the realm of human affairs and to hold in contempt the human capacity for freedom”.6 The causal actions that instigated these processes are often so removed from the affected individuals that it gives the illusion that the processes are uncaused, natural and therefore beyond human influence.
The processes are reified as immutable natural laws, on a par with gravity. The paradoxical result of this phenomenon is that it is precisely the overwhelming effect of human action that leads individuals to believe that their own actions have no substantial effect. When this fallacious belief is internalized, it leads the believer to feel alienated from their own agency and resign themselves to passive acceptance of a seemingly deterministic fate.

The seeming inevitability of this process is, of course, the point. Piyapongwiwat shows how the villagers’ belief that their predicament is unchangeable ensures their continued subservience to the system that subjugates them, while making it difficult for them to imagine any viable path towards change. This is a critical aspect of the work because of the way ideology masks its own workings by making these processes, such as capitalist development, seem autonomous. Arendt shows how accepting these processes as autonomous and inevitable does ideological work for capitalism, helping us, again, to see how the feeling of disempowerment by the villagers in Piyapongwiwat’s film is part of a set of vast systems that extend beyond the discrete suffering of the subjects of the film—systems that gain their power in part by convincing the very people being exploited that the world is governed by complex processes so beyond our influence that they “sweep away our ability to exert control over our world, our lives, and at times, even our minds.”

Indeed, this felt lack of agency is articulated by the labourers themselves: “I can leave it to fate. I’m old now. Soon I’ll be gone. I will not know how the country will turn out,” one villager laments as she grips a hammer that she brings down repeatedly, striking rocks with a mechanical resolve. Her talk of the future is coloured with unaffected resignation to this limitation. Again and again, through both the documentary interview footage, and the poetic narrative discussed below, the artist shows how the villagers’ belief that their destiny has been determined by indifferent forces beyond their influence becomes a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy and justification for quiescence. “Can you see my hands? I have been working hard since I was little. I have struggled.” She can only see her agency writ small through the finite prism of her hand hammering rock. The implication, then, is that striking rocks with a hammer is the limit to the scope of an ordinary labourer’s ability to shape the conditions of her life.

While the villagers may see the processes shaping their lives as autonomous, inevitable and too great to overcome, and thus conceding their own agency to it, they do not view it uncritically. They see the injustice for what it is, in spite of their resignation to it. One villager observes the socioeconomic realities that push him towards this difficult and unrewarding labour: “It is hard work to break and burn the stone.” [There are] “[n]o rich people doing
the stone business here. Only poor people willing to do it.”

He believes that the State has prioritized the well-being of others over his people, the villagers, in the decision to allow the mining of the mountain, saying: “I wonder whether the government ever think[s] about the people. Because our lives depend on the mountain.”

Woven into this fabric of documentary work is a poetic narrative that Piyapongwiwat describes as “a mythology or a legend.” This move is an evolution from her focus on more strictly realist narratives and strikes at using the mythic, meaning the otherworldly and supernatural expressed in connection to the immediate or “real” world, to articulate a more broadly fundamental, underlying truth beyond the specificities of her subject’s world. The video work is structured as an intermingling of the poetic and the real, where the focus shifts fluidly between these two forms. Juxtaposed against the crushing reality of the villagers’ “cheap lives” and alienated sense of agency, the poetic narrative unfolds in dream-like fragmented passages.

By doing this, Piyapongwiwat adds another layer of permeability to her work. Through the video installation portal she dissolves the assumed separation between audience and subject, and by seamlessly interweaving her fictive narrative with her documentary work, she points to the broken barrier that ostensibly separates constructed narrative and objective truth. She exposes these false dichotomies that hide the fluid, dialectical and ambiguous relationships between complex and connected webs of life. Through these layers of permeability, she asks us to look beyond the illusion of separation and make connections between categories that have been erroneously compartmentalized into distinct elements. This disaggregation of actually related factors is another way in which ideology functions to mask its own workings.

The poetic narrative follows a young man struggling to scale the limestone mountainside as the sharp, rocky terrain crumbles and slips beneath his feet. As he climbs, his voice is layered over the scene, disembodied from the speaker as if we were being granted access to a private inner-monologue that cannot be spoken aloud. Thus the audience becomes a voyeuristic observer to a story he is recounting as a means of affirming to himself the truth of his experiences: “I try to say it out loud with myself, record it in my mind and draw it in my imagination, again and again.” With the established sense of permeability between worlds, it is also possible to view him as an agent of resistance reaching out from beyond the portal to deliver warnings and exhortations to whoever is listening.

Throughout the film the protagonist recounts the story of a struggle. It is the struggle against the official myth—that is, the unnamed and invisible forces, referred to as “the invisibles”, who have strategically decided that
“the sun is a forbidden thing”\textsuperscript{15} and declared that it does not exist. These forces have constructed a great black canvas across the sky to obscure any evidence that contradicts their claim, and filled it with formless alternative light sources of their own construction that are “intangible, odorless, temperatureless, inextinguishable”.\textsuperscript{16} They possess the power and will to torture or kill those who dare to speak of the light they have seen shining through the cracks in the canvas, and have issued explanations to the young man climbing the cliff that if he believes that he has seen the sun, it is only because his eyes have deceived him. To cure him of this self-deception, he is forced to repeat an official narrative of solar nonexistence that contradicts his treasonous senses, to bring him back to the fold of ‘true knowledge’ as sanctioned by the hegemonic powers.

Reading the official myth in the narrative through Arendt’s ideas on the workings of totalitarian control, can reveal the larger implications of the work in ways that align profoundly with Piyapongwiwat’s self-professed agenda. A combination of terror (the threat and execution of violence) and propaganda (the controlled manipulation of information) can “coerce not merely from without but...from within”.\textsuperscript{17} The result of this rule from within, when tied to an ideology, can render people “unable to distinguish between truth and lies on the elementary factual level”.\textsuperscript{18} From this perspective, the mythic work encourages the audience to interrogate what hegemonic narratives from our own reality are tacitly accepted despite contradictory evidence, and to ask who benefits from these false narratives. Do we, as viewers, also believe that we are powerless against the seemingly autonomous processes that cheapen the lives of the villagers of Phnum Töttüng, processes that also often make us feel powerless in our own lives as well? What—and whose—narratives have we internalized that allow the economic and environmental violence levied against them to be normalized, and ourselves to be absolved of blame or responsibility?

Piyapongwiwat stages this truth-seeking ascent of the narrative’s protagonist up the mountain as an act of rebellion against this oppressive, invisible power. He climbs to seek the sun, which he knows must exist, because he has caught glimpses of it and has not allowed the truth of it to be erased by propaganda or abuse. As he climbs, he ponders the reason for this constructed lie and the violence that is used to enforce it: “The need for this planet to be devoid of sunlight is due perhaps to fear that the constructed light could be replaced by something else.”\textsuperscript{19} If believing that the world is controlled by autonomous processes, such as the global capitalist development and urbanization affecting the villagers living at the foot of the mountain who now work in its quarries, processes that are beyond the influence of ordinary
people, can conceal people’s agency, then recognizing how our tacit acquiescence and participation in these processes helps perpetuate them is the first step towards rejecting the idea of the “autonomy of the process”. Reclaiming agency begins by finding one’s own complicity, however small in their perpetuation. Only then will identifying the asymmetrical power and interests served by these processes be more than just a reinscription of the same alienated agency in the name of another seemingly all-powerful entity. That is, without locating our own complicity in perpetuating these systems and enabling these power structures, simply replacing the idea of autonomous processes with an autonomous power elite will only take us back where we started.

For this reason, the pursuit of evidence to contradict the enforced, authoritative ideology of the ‘invisible’ powers-that-be on the part of Piyapongwiwat’s mythic protagonist is an action that belies the ‘autonomy of the process’ and concomitant totalitarian ‘rule from within’ through its exercise of individual autonomy and independent judgment. Through the counter-myth of this climber seeking the sun, Piyapongwiwat demonstrates that even seemingly immutable processes can be challenged because they rely on our participation to fulfill and embody them.

Through the narrative, Piyapongwiwat presents us with the poetry of struggle and hope, and invites us to look behind the veneer of the narratives, or official myths, presented by those who seek to preserve their disproportionate power and self-interest. She asks us to trust our own reason as we are confronted with ideologies constructed by those who would shape our subjectivity and perceptions of the world for their own benefit.

Class and distance afford exhibition-goers the privilege to regard the lives of such villagers as expendable, even if their plight is seen as lamentable. Neither the capitalists who exploit them, nor the middle-class people who benefit indirectly from the fruits of this exploitation, share the physical or socioeconomic space occupied by the villagers, and are thus free to look the other way. All parties are complicit, but to differing degrees and in varying ways, whether actively or passively. By constructing a portal through this video installation, Piyapongwiwat removes the barrier of physical distance and puts both the villagers and the audience in a common space, a space in which the villagers are allowed to speak with their own voices to the injustices they face, and the viewer is left to wrestle with the questions these injustices raise. What differences exist between us and them that allow us to confidently assert that our way of life is protected by an inherent right to consume cheap things or enjoy the conveniences of urban life, while
regretfully accepting that the lives of these distant others are diminished in the service of ‘development’ or ‘the greater good’? What injustices are we willing to rationalize as unfortunate but necessary sacrifices in the name of inexorable progress?

While the video installation provides a framework for investigating the implied question of “who owns the mountain?”, Piyapongwiwat invites viewers to move through the layers of her work and examine our own histories in search of truths that have been elided. While she hopes that audiences outside of Thailand will see the work and apply their critical insights to their own communities, the fictive portion of this work does speak to political and social realities of specific relevance to her Thai audience. Her goal is not to speak directly to these realities, but to encourage Thai viewers by tactful indirection to engage critically with her work and “make the connection”.20

As the counter-myth’s protagonist reaches the summit of the crumbling gray mountain and looks out at a vast and verdant horizon, his last words seem to implore a collective self-reflection and self-reckoning that would bring us to a more human understanding of each other that exists beyond the reach of the invisible oppressors. “I am beginning my journey toward a parallel territory where they can never find. I hope we will meet us there.”21

As we find ourselves complicit, through rationalization and inaction, in the violence inflicted upon villagers like these in the name of seemingly autonomous processes like development, we are invited to examine the assumptions and distortions underlying our own political and economic structures in order to uncover other forms of violence we routinely allow to go unchallenged.

If Piyapongwiwat’s video installation serves to expose the normalization of oppression and violence via distorted narratives and cheapened lives, then her art objects, which accompany the video installation, embody a warning of the challenges that face us when seeking to rectify damage that is already done, and by extension are a warning of the dangers of waiting too long under the mollifying shroud of complacency.

Among the art objects displayed with the video are three white sculptures collectively titled Reconstructed, each in the form of a craggy limestone rock. They are enlarged scale replicas of stones that the artist brought back from the village near Phnum Tötüng, from the very same pile of rocks that were being hammered apart by the aging villager in her video work. The sculptures are made of a fine quicklime powder, cement and sand, all materials integral or derivative from the rocks they mimic, reassembled to recreate the original forms.
The replicated forms are true to their original objects, but despite the similarity in composition and shape, what is important is that the original strength is greatly diminished. Their consistency appears chalky and delicate, and they are displayed through a protective glass encasement. In Piyapongwiwat’s words they are, “solid, heavy, but fragile”. This comparative fragility is the inevitable result of her attempt to reconstruct the semblance of wholeness from the pieces of what has been broken, and is emblematic of the object lesson encoded in the sculptures: That which is destroyed can never truly be rebuilt.

There is also a large quilt—a direct reference to Piyapongwiwat’s previous installation Fabric, in which she examined the exploitation of textile workers. The quilt is a monochrome patchwork of cement packaging materials coated in quicklime, clay and white acrylic color. It appears stiff and fragile, and a single overhead light draws attention to its craggy topography, highlighting the visual reference to the mountain landscape at the centre of her work. The piece, composed entirely of materials intrinsic to either the products or processes that result from the limestone trade, is titled Not For Sale.

As the title suggests, it is the show’s only piece that is not available for purchase, and this highlights the work’s function as a protest against a process that is already underway. Its composite materials are made possible by the fact that the mountain is already being sold and that any action taken now to stop its continued extractive exploitation can only hope to limit the damage that has already been inflicted on the villagers and the ecosystems of the mountain with which they have coexisted for countless generations. By declaring this item unpurchasable, and by constructing it from the by-products of the extraction and sale of the terrain it is made to resemble, the work becomes a symbolic interruption to this ongoing process of extraction and profit.

In Particle, Piyapongwiwat shines an uncomfortable light, as she has in other works, on one of the innumerable cases in which the privileged abnegate responsibility for actions that benefit them at the expense of the “cheap lives” of the distant underprivileged. By accepting these actions as inevitable necessities of progress in an imperfect world ruled by seemingly autonomous processes, we, the privileged, consent to serving as the complicit confederates of oppressive capitalist exploiters in exchange for lives of small comfort and the dubiously assumed promise that it will always be ‘them’ who suffers, and never ‘us’. Piyapongwiwat asks us the question “who owns the mountain?”, and leaves us lingering in the dissonance between convenient fiction and uncomfortable truth.
BIOGRAPHIES

Piyarat Piyapongwiwat (b. 1977, Phrae, Thailand) is a multidisciplinary artist working with various media including video, photography, text, sound, mixed media and installation. Her work usually reflects her surrounding experiences, including questioning of contemporary issues such as gender, notion of margin, cultural change and globalisation. Her artistic research is informed by theories of social science, anthropology and philosophy.

Piyapongwiwat holds a BA from RMIT University, Australia and a BFA from École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Montpellier Agglomération (ESBAMA), France. She has presented works locally and internationally. She currently lives and works in Chiang Mai.

Blake Palmer is a writer and cultural critic based in Chiang Mai, Thailand, working on popular culture, including film and music, tech culture and Asian contemporary art. His research focuses on the intersection of culture, power and art as a vector of sociopolitical critique. He has taught as a lecturer in the Department of English at Vietnam National University (2013–14), as well as teaching English in South Korea (2012–13). He is a regular contributor for Art & Market, and is currently working on several in-depth monographical, critical essays on a number of Thai and Chinese artists. He is also writing a novel in the gothic tradition of the American South.
Piyarat Piyapongwiwat, ‘Particle’, 2019, still image from video, 18 min 54 sec. Image courtesy of the artist.

Piyarat Piyapongwiwat, ‘Particle’, 2019, painting (cement packages, threads, quicklime, clay, glue, acrylic color), Not for Sale, size 150 × 200 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.
Who Owns the Mountain?

Piyarat Piyapongwiwat, ‘Particle’, 2019, video installation, 18 min 54 sec. Image courtesy of Karin Mongkonphan.

Piyarat Piyapongwiwat, ‘Particle’, 2019, video installation, 18 min 54 sec. Image courtesy of the artist.
Piyarat Piyapongwiwat, ‘Particle’, 2019, sculptures (quicklime, cement, sand), Reconstructed No. 2, stand size: 45 × 45 × 120 cm, sculpture size: 24w × 30l × 23h. Image courtesy of Karin Mongkonphan.

Piyarat Piyapongwiwat, ‘Particle’, 2019, sculptures (quicklime, cement, sand), Reconstructed No. 3, stand size: 45 × 45 × 115 cm, sculpture size: 17w × 40l × 24h. Image courtesy of Karin Mongkonphan.
NOTES

1 Piyarat Piyapongwiwat, *Particle*, 2019, video installation, 18 min 54 sec, trans. from Khmer to English: Dara Kong, Many Sin, Chamroeun Sou.

2 Ibid.

3 Ten Soksreinith, “Cement Processing Brings Jobs, Leaves Scars”, *Cambodia Adrift*, 28 June 2018, https://projects.voanews.com/cambodia-election-2018/english/feature/cement-manufacturing-carves-up-rural-cambodia.html.

4 Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), p. 37.

5 Piyarat Piyapongwiwat, *Particle*, 2019.

6 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 233.

7 Maya Kóvskaya, *Excrescence*, The Guild Art Gallery, Mumbai, India, 29 April 2011, http://www.guildindia.com/SHOWS/Excrescence-CuratebyMaya Kóvskaya/Press-Release.htm.

8 Piyarat Piyapongwiwat, *Particle*, 2019.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Piyarat Piyapongwiwat in discussion with Blake Palmer, in-person interview, English language, October 2019.

13 Piyarat Piyapongwiwat, *Particle*, 2019, trans. from Thai to English: Faikham Harnnarong.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2nd ed. (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1962), p. 341.

18 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 495.

19 Piyarat Piyapongwiwat, *Particle*, 2019.

20 Piyapongwiwat, interview.

21 Piyarat Piyapongwiwat, *Particle*, 2019.

22 Piyapongwiwat, interview.

23 Piyarat Piyapongwiwat, *Fabric*, 2017, video, patchwork installation, 19 min 41 sec, dimensions variable, http://www.piyaratpiyapongwiwat.com/fabric [accessed 5 January 2020].