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# The World According to Venice

When contemplating what to cover in the May/June issue of *ArtAsiaPacific*, we were naturally compelled to consider the upcoming Venice Biennale. We were struck by how many of the artists who will represent their native lands have already graced our Feature pages. The list includes Tsang Kin-wah (Hong Kong), Moon Kyungwon & Jeon Joonho (Korea), Wu Tien-chang (Taiwan), Heri Dono (Indonesia), Fiona Hall (Australia), Istanbul-born, Paris-based Sarkis, who will inaugurate the new Turkish pavilion, and Danh Vo, the Vietnamese-Danish artist who will transform the Danish pavilion. We are very excited about the attention these artists will garner in the coming days. For this issue, the editors gaze back at some of the recent participants at Venice, and look forward to some of the figures who merit inclusion in future Biennales.

Taking a lead from Okwui Enwezor, artistic director for this year's 56th Venice Biennale, who chose Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* (1867-94) as a focal point of his exhibition and will mount a marathon reading of the three volumes of the seminal work, our cover Feature introduces the Chinese collective Polit-Sheer-Form, comprised of Beijing-based Song Dong, Xiao Yu, Hong Hao and dealer-critic Leng Lin, and Shanghai-based Liu Jianhua. New York-based guest contributor Ingrid Dudek examines some of their ephemeral projects, while conjuring up memories of her years living in Beijing (1999-2002). Dudek writes about the group: "The works are confounding, elusive, full of contradictions and easily given to one-liners. At the same time, taken as a whole, their oeuvre presents one of the more subtle and sincere articulations of political experience by this generation of Chinese artists... they cautiously celebrate the unsung pleasures of the communist period, while also providing a critical corrective to their own highly individualistic era."

After Singapore opted out of Venice in 2013, as the National Arts Council reassessed their official participation, the country returns this year with Charles Lim, the noted artist, filmmaker and Olympic sailor, at the helm. AAP Reviews editor Hanae Ko speaks to Lim and curator Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, as they prepare to install the new pavilion in the Arsenal. Topics discussed include Lim's inspiration for his "Sea State" series and how a massive underwater telecommunications cable, which ceased functioning and interrupted internet activity one day in 1999, triggered his interest in exploring his country's aggressive land reclamation policies in the surrounding waters.

Elsewhere in Features, Latin America desk editor Inti Guerrero considers the founding figures of Brazilian modernism by reviewing the influence of Japanese-Brazilian artists active in São Paulo. In the 1950s, while most Brazilian artists embraced Bauhaus-inspired geometric and constructivist abstraction, the first and second generations of Japanese-Brazilian painters and sculptors, who pursued "informal abstraction" styles, played a key role in fostering the country's cultural modernity, at a time when, as Guerrero points out, "'cultural cannibalism' was central to Brazilian identity."

Working in a similar context with multiple cultural heritages of her own, Nevin Aladağ—Kurdish and Turkish by birth and German by upbringing—explores the hybrid nature of contemporary culture in Europe, particularly among

minorities and in marginalized communities. AAP Editor-at-large HG Masters escorts us through Aladağ's two decades of sculptural installations, mixed-media assemblages, videos and performances.

Wrapping up the Features is our special column Inside Burger Collection. In this issue, we take a close look at Khoj, the influential artists' association based in South Delhi that has catalyzed and enabled experimental and challenging practices of contemporary art-making in India.

In our Profiles section, we focus on some of the curators who are collaborating with artists taking part in this year's Venice Biennale. The major facilitators include Sheikh Hoor bint Sultan al-Qasimi, who is presenting little-known yet influential figures from the United Arab Emirates's art historical canon; Tate's Sook-Kyung Lee, who will oversee the Korea Pavilion; Robert Leonard, chief curator of City Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand; and Patrick D. Flores, curator of the Vargas Museum at the University of the Philippines, the mind behind his country's second exhibition in Venice after a 51-year absence.

In Essays, both concerned with West Asia, Jeddah-based artist Ahmed Mater articulates the challenges of initiating arts education in conservative Saudi Arabia. And AAP Dubai desk editor Kevin Jones begins a three-part series considering the fledgling arts infrastructure in the United Arab Emirates.

Rounding out the rest of the issue, Catherine Levene, CEO of online platform Artspace, explains how the internet can connect the many players in the art world and generate greater visibility, broader audiences and even some new collectors. Koki Tanaka pens a One on One in admiration of the politically engaged practice of the late, Cuban-born Félix González-Torres, while video and installation artist Sutthirart Supaparinya files a Dispatch from Thailand's cultural capital, Chiang Mai. In Where I Work, AAP Hong Kong desk editor Siobhan Bent ventures to performance and ink artist Frog King's studio teeming with found objects, mixed-media mash-ups and memories in the form of clippings, photos and other primary sources about his work.

And finally, we review *Playing with Slippery Lubricants: Apinan Poshyananda, Selected Writings, 1993-2004*, an anthology of essays and conference papers by Thailand's acclaimed scholar, curator and critic. While serving as the permanent secretary for the Thai Ministry of Culture, Apinan's mind remains irrepressible. His collection covers everything from anthropophagy to body politics in performance art in Asia, while offering reflective pieces on artists Marina Abramović and Yasumasa Morimura. Reading these texts makes us wish Apinan were back in curatorial action, preferably at a major international art event—the Venice Biennale, perhaps.



ELAINE W. NG

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# Chiang Mai

BY SUTTHIRAT SUPAPARINYA

## A City Famed for Crafts and Design is Losing Its Verve



View of Chiang Mai from the southeast, where a mosque and a Buddhist temple are adjacent to each other. Photo by Sutthirat Supaparinnya for ArtAsiaPacific.

This year, the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Economic Community, of which Thailand is a member, is gearing up to integrate the respective economies of ASEAN nations. Though not a capital city, Chiang Mai is easily reached from neighboring countries by land and by air and has thus become one of the primary arts and cultural destinations in the region. As competition stiffens among ASEAN cities, it becomes increasingly imperative for this northern Thai metropolis to sustain improvement and maintain attractiveness as a site of creative innovation.

There is no doubt that this former capital of the Lanna Kingdom has been growing rapidly with local and international populations. The traditional and evolving aspects of local cultures are continuously being blended with imported styles. Beginning last year, Chiang Mai has been positioning itself to become a UNESCO "Creative City of Crafts and Folk Art," a status that recognizes cities as hubs of excellence in said endeavors. Though a commendable initiative, it unfortunately skews government funding, support and attention toward organizations and practitioners of these conservative art forms. As the scope of artistic pursuits has broadened in the city

in recent years, resources need to be shared among a more diverse range of practices.

The crafts and design industries in Chiang Mai are thriving at both the low and high ends of the market, while the fine arts are struggling. The government runs institutions such as the Thailand Creative & Design Center Chiang Mai, which offers the crafts and design sector access to knowledge, resources and networks. The Department of International Trade Promotion is another organization that actively promotes the Thai products industry through fairs, workshops, online marketing channels, data systems and, most importantly, policies that secure current markets and create new ones. As a result, many artists in Chiang Mai have had to cater their work to the markets of commercial or product design. This is due primarily to the ambivalence of government actions supposedly implemented to develop and nurture systems for art careers and markets. Whether an artist or an art organization receives support depends on their relationship with the authorities. There is no transparent system or public information as to how the process works and how someone might get involved.

Programming at private art spaces in Chiang Mai is more active and dynamic than that at government-run art spaces. Themes and content of exhibitions held at private sites are creative and fresh, and oftentimes the shows are more interactive; the government-run sites, on the other hand, devote themselves to visualizing history and preserving local traditions.

Chiang Mai University Art Center is a unique case. When first started around the mid-1990s, the Center offered an energetic program and gained a reputation as a place of inspiration and exploration for the public. Over the last decade, however, its curating grew passive and its shows lacked

energy. This year, a complete renovation of the entire compound building is scheduled, with plans for a new management team to take over and hopefully give new life to the space. What is the role of an art center, if not a gathering place for the community?

Since 2006, many commercial galleries have faded away during Thailand's ongoing political conflict. Surprisingly, a number of artist-run residencies, studios and community art spaces have survived and continue to host and welcome artistic spirits.

Chiang Mai is home to many resourceful, creative minds, from crafts people and visual artists to musicians and writers. Senior contemporary artists from Chiang Mai who are internationally known include the late Montien Boonma (1953–2000) and Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, followed by their pupil Navin Rawanchaikul. Rirkrit Tiravanija, champion of Relational Aesthetics, and filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul have also made Chiang Mai their homes over the last decade, bringing their fame with them. Unfortunately, the majority of Thai audiences barely know these names. Instead, they are much more acquainted with artisans who preserve traditional beliefs and styles.

Contemporary art should not be overlooked. Respect for the ideas and methods passed down by our ancestors can coexist with new ideas and avant-garde practices. I believe soft economic values can be procured and fostered not only through traditional crafts and design industries, but also through contemporary culture and its critical discourse. Brimming with potential, Chiang Mai urgently needs dedicated professionals to capitalize on its multifaceted community, develop the city's contemporary art infrastructure and nurture the practitioners who help develop its cultural capital.