

Chiang Mai: The Art Community And Practice Outside The Center

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Chiang Mai is a city located in northern Thailand. It is about 700 kilometers away from Bangkok, the capital city. Before the late nineteenth century, it was the capital of an independent kingdom. Due to this, it boasts of an inherent cultural heritage. However, in relation to the Thai art scene, artists from here are not given the same opportunities not only because we live outside of the capital city, but also due to political power, financial growth and media. The central government may have united the population through education but it is not enough to sustain one's chosen career. The disparate development between Bangkok and the rest of the country has pushed many people to move towards the center.

In my opinion, an artist whose practice is outside of the center can be likened to a marginal city's character. It has a lesser sense of nationality, but more of a sense of locality that opens itself up to foreign opportunities to replace the center. These prospects are accessed through tourism, NGOs, trade with neighboring countries, foreign religion or other similar forms.

There are two target audiences in Chiang Mai. First of which is the local audience who physically live in the same area. They can either be native to the place or newcomers from a different locale who decided to live here. Since traditional crafts and decorative artworks are popular for most people, whether they are locals or tourists, this kind of art practice has a steady market. These are seen and sold in the streets or the high end galleries. Therefore, it is less dependent on the center.

However, practices that deal with contemporary issues or specific modalities only attract a section of the youth or a small select set. Since it does not appeal to a wide local audience, it searches for other individuals who have similar interests or audiences in distant communities where the development of its own center is possible. This shift happens when the support from the local audience becomes impracticable or ceases to exist. For now, I will call this network a niche community.

When we think of the prominent Thai contemporary artists, the names Rirkrit Tiravanija, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook and Navin Rawanchaikul come to mind. While they all live in Chiang Mai, the city does not provide enough resources to sustain one's art practice. Out of the list I made mention, it is only Rawanchaikul who is originally from here. The rest migrated to Chiang Mai when they became successful. Most of them steadily built their career in the center or in some other community that could regularly support it. To be recognized before you move away from the center is perhaps a good ground to smoothly work and live here.

This does not mean that an artist who is not well connected within an artist community in a capital city is doomed to misery. Navin Rawanchaikul, Kosit Juntaratip and their schoolmates at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Chiang Mai University, have been well received in the international art sphere during and after their studies through the Chiang Mai Social Installation Art Festival held from 1992 to 1995. Rawanchaikul later organized art festivals in Chiang Mai and Lamphun as his art projects, thus, solidifying his status in his hometown. However and wherever you begin, once you are recognized for your work, it facilitates the circulation of art practice in Chiang Mai. The migration and flow between a niche community, the center or another strong community is necessary to maintain a stream of support and exchange.

Chiang Mai has a low cost of living. It is easy to move around, to meet people, be surrounded with nature and has less violence due to political conflict. The question is: How can we maintain our strength even if there is a shortage of choices, art organizations, career paths, information and activities as well as financial funding? Many artists live in Chiang Mai despite the lack of infrastructure to support their careers. When an artist wants to connect themselves to a public audience, they need to play a role that is missing in the community in order to keep up with the artist situated in the city center. This is the reason why most alternative spaces, art and film festivals and artist-in-residence programs are run by artists. To execute such undertakings is to wear additional hats aside from being an artist.

Without dealers, gallerists, curators or art writers, the artist communicates directly with the audience, media and funding institutions. It is useful to have the following abilities: administrative skills, portfolio presentations, documentation, social media and cyber proficiencies, drawing, sketching and art proposal writing in both Thai and English. If you are working with a group of artists, tasks and roles can be shared. Moreover, you can learn new skills from each other. Moving forward, these working groups can serve and be part of the basic infrastructure for the art community to generate art maps, archives and other art information centers.

There are some strong art communities that are situated outside the center in Southeast Asia such as Penang in Malaysia, Hue in Vietnam, Yogyakarta and Bandung in Indonesia, and Chiang Mai in Thailand. I am sure that more emerging communities will arise in the near future. Even though decentralization has not fully entered the region, globalization is knocking on our door. In the Alternative Route Symposium at Koganecho Bazaar 2013, Antariksa, a researcher from KUNCI Cultural Studies Center in Indonesia, mentioned something quite meaningful to me. He said that, "Singapore is our art capital city and not Jakarta." Artworks and artists from Yogyakarta are presented and have gained more financial support from Singapore than from their own capital city, Jakarta. Low budget airlines, like Air Asia, help bridge international city-to-city connections much easier, thus, making it less dependent on the capital city. I like this idea of having an art capital city which may not be necessarily in your country. In addition, a city-to-city or community-to-community association deconstructs a form of centralization by providing a diversity of choices and solutions. There are numerous other probabilities and possibilities for artist communities outside the center. Why don't we give it a try!

Chiang Mai



Art Scene in Chiang Mai (Sutthirat Supaparinya)
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The Chiang Mai art scene has three main characters. The first is the Relational Art practice. It began when the city lacked art spaces to showcase new practices such as performance art, mixed media and installation art. The use of public spaces created and adopted the relational art sensibilities. It stimulated artists to work with the public as well as with specific sites and content. From 1992 to 1995 the “Chiang Mai Social Installation,” an active public art festival, ignited the Relational Art practice among artists and art students. Personal expression is another mode; it brings the artist’s personal message to a form of art. It is less socially engaged but it exposes the experiences or surroundings that inspire and motivate the artists. The last one is decorative or functional in nature. These can be seen from a range of decorative settings to art galleries.

大きく3つの傾向が挙げられる。まず、一つめは「リレーショナル・アート」（関係性のアート）と呼ばれる実践だ。この動向は、パフォーマンス、ミクスト・メディアやインスタレーションといった新しい表現を受け入れる受皿がチェンマイに無かった頃に遡る。様々な関係性を軸に形成された美的感覚は、公共空間を実験の場とし、人（パブリック）、場所性や文脈を取り込んだ表現へと展開していった。1992年から1995年には「チェンマイ・ソーシャル・インスタレーション」と呼ばれるパブリック・アートフェスティバルが開催され、「リレーショナル・アート」の実践がアーティストや学生の上に普及していった。もう一つの傾向として、個人的な表現が挙げられる。これは、アートを通して個人のメッセージを伝えようとする試みで、社会との直接的な関わりは希薄だが、アーティストの視点を通して、社会的な経験や環境が映し出されるのが特徴だ。三つめの傾向は、装飾的、または実用的な作品であり、これらは画廊に限らず、様々な場所で広く受け入れられている。