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IMAGINING ASEAN

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ASEAN art update

From GMS to ASEAN: an extension of possibility on art and culture?

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Chiang Mai Art Conversation

The GMS region consists of Thailand, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Vietnam and China (the Yunnan Province and the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region). A decade ago many international art and culture projects in Thailand, which aimed to cooperate with these countries, tended to gain support from the government, private funds and grants from abroad such as Japan and USA.

The art and culture relationship was not formed by chance. The Greater Mekong Sub-region Economic Cooperation was established in 1992. This project was supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to develop priority infrastructure, es-

pecially in transport, energy, telecommunications, environment and law.

The awakening of art and culture in the Mekong Basin occurred during the years 2001 and 2008, after which the support funding in the region changed focus to other topics. For example, the Rockefeller Foundation moved their support to environmental projects, at a time when the world had become more aware of global warming. However, there is a Rockefeller sub-foundation called the "Asian Cultural Council" that supports art and culture projects between Asian countries and the United States. This is a well established foundation, even though funding has decreased. However, many hidden stories from the colonization era, the period of dividing this region into countries, have still been passed on in the form of art, such as visual arts, dance, performing arts, music and literature.

The Asian Cultural Council, alongside the Ford Foundation, has continued to support relationships in the region by subsidizing the Arts Network Asia (ANA). The organisation was founded in Singapore in 1999, and continues to this day. It actively supports small to medium cross-culture projects and aims to establish relationships among the Asian art and culture community. The ANA focuses mostly on Southeast Asia (SEA) cooperation projects, including China. This geographical international cooperation framework around the Mekong basin has seemed to fade away. However recently it was extended to a wider organization, The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) community.

There are 2 exhibitions that give a sendoff to the Mekong basin cooperation. First, UNDERLYING: Contemporary Art Exhibition from the Mekong Sub-Region, hosted by Silpakorn University in 2007, was sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation through an education program funded by the Goethe Institute Bangkok. The exhibition traveled to 4 countries in Mainland SEA. Secondly, in 2009 the 6th Asia Pacific Triennial in Melbourne, Australia, showed works from various Mekong region-based artists.

Even though cultural cooperation between SEA countries in the last century has been rare, a remarkable art exhibition in 2004, *Identities Versus Globalization?*, fully introduced all SEA countries. Established and emerging artists were invited to Thailand and showed their outstanding artworks. The exhibition was organized by the Heinrich Böll Foundation, which is part of Germany's Green Party. At that time, the SEA office was located in Chiang Mai province. Therefore, the exhibition began in Chiang Mai, before moving on to Bangkok and Berlin. This was a chance for all artists to meet and exchange their thoughts. Jompert Kuswidananto, a well-known Indonesian artist, told me that it was the first international exhibition he had ever participated in.

Later, after 10 governmental leaders from ASEAN countries signed to endorse the ASEAN Charter in 2007, ASEAN became a coordinated organization that mediated between governments. The ASEAN Charter is a constitution that aims to establish an ASEAN community through commitment and agreement in the form of law. There is a plan to unite the ASEAN community by 2015.

The movement of cultural cooperation has started to become more concrete. Education in many institutions has gradually shifted focus from Thai and Mekong Studies to Southeast Asian Studies. Activities, festivals and exhibitions from the region have increasingly emerged.

In 2012, Goethe Institutes in the region co-organized a traveling exhibition, the Riverscape in Flux exhibition. The project worked with curators and artists from SEA countries to create artworks and exhibitions related to the current situation of SEA rivers. The exhibition traveled to Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, the Philippines and Indonesia.

A year later, the Japan Foundation's head office in Tokyo initiated a project to mark the 40th Anniversary of ASEAN-Japan Friendship and Cooperation. The project invited young curators from most of the SEA countries to participate in a workshop in Tokyo. At the same time, it created a corporation for a New Media exhibition, "Media/ Art Kitchen: Reality Distortion Field", which invited outstanding artists from SEA countries to create new work. Additionally, each curator selected a Japanese new media artwork to be exhibited in their own country. This show focused on the artist and audience's participation via sub-activities and the selection of various artists to attend a Japan-based artist-in-residence programme after the exhibition. The Japanese strategy to coordinate art and cultural relationships has many levels and is highly professional. Okamura Keiko was appointed as head of the project is a highly experienced curator from the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography.

Moreover, there are other exhibitions that focus specifically on contemporary artworks from SEA artists via domestic organization. For example, 'T R A C E S' at the Jim Thompson Art Center in 2012 and 'Concept Context Contestation: art and the collective in Southeast Asia' at the Bangkok Art and Culture Center the following year.

Another initiation emerged in Taiwan in 2012, when a group of Thai and Taiwanese artists began an artist exchange project. A group of about 10 Taiwanese artists stayed in Bangkok for 6 months, on rotation. They cooperated with Thai artists, creating activities that ended up in an exhibition, showing both Thai and Taiwanese art works. Thai artists then had the chance to travel to Taiwan. All artists again showed new works together, this time in Taipei. The show was entitled *Thaitai: A Measure of Understanding*.

The Outsider Factory is a gathering of Taiwanese curators, art and culture workers. They have basic management skills and an interesting philosophy on how to run art projects. They

focus on the introduction of non-western contemporary arts and assist Taiwanese artists to appear on the international stage. They also spend time and join in the production process alongside artists and are looking for the other possibilities in which to curate exhibitions. As with the above group, they started a project in Vietnam in 2012 and plan to extend to Indonesia. Nobuo Takamori, a director of the group, shared an interesting thought that "Japan is our past in Taiwan (by colonization), but Southeast Asia is our future." These are small groups of people. Both groups started an art and culture relationship between Taiwan and SEA and displayed an attentiveness to SEA culture. Later, the Taiwanese Ministry of Culture created a specific grant application to invite art and cultural specialists from SEA to work in Taiwan with a budget not exceeding 500,000 NT (a little more than five hundred thousand baht) per project.

Last August, I was invited to participate in a symposium entitled *Alternative Route*. It was part of the Koganecho Bazaar art festival, in Yokohama City, Japan. I had previously participated in this festival as an artist in 2011, followed by participation as a co-curator for the last 3 years. As of last year, the symposium is held in parallel to the festival. It emphasizes cooperation between small, alternative art organizations who work with communities, mainly from SEA countries. There were organizations from Chiang Mai, Yogyakarta, Ho Chi Minh City and Manila, together with organizations from Taiwan and China.

Although this year's symposium was extended to include an organization from Korea, the focus was still with SEA. On a kick-start "Asia Bits" symposium, Antarksa, a researcher from KUNCI Cultural Studies Center, Jogjakarta, was invited to talk about his research on Indonesian art during the Japanese occupation in 1940's Indonesia. His research focused on the positive influence of the occupation on Indonesia, which gave rise to art education and the ground concept of working in a collective during the occupation. Working with community is apart of Indonesian root culture that ties in well with the Japanese notion of *Genba-shugi*, which encourages one to be at the location or source of a problem in order to understand the situation they're learning/solving.

Dr. Masato Karashima, a fellow from Kwansai Gakuin University, talked about the development of Japanese and SEA culture and economic relativity after World War II. During the cold war period, Japan acted as the middleman between the United States and SEA with the aim of forming a US-JAPAN-SEA triangle to protect against the rise of communism. He also emphasized how Japan created good relations with Indonesia at that time.

Culture is a tool to gently build friendly relations. It rouses attention and emotion, transforms history and reimagines future relations. Whether it is in the context of GMS or ASEAN, or other forms of cooperation, the understanding of contexts that come with a stream of new culture will certainly help us to comprehend the changing world and adjust ourselves to new variations.