



The Japan Foundation Asia Center carries out mutual exchange programs and cooperative work between the people of Asian countries and regions.

Features

SUTTHIRAT SUPAPARINYA—Knocking on Doors

Interview / Asia Hundreds

● The *SUNSHOWER* exhibition and Chiang Mai

My work *My Grandpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked*

Fujioka: You are in Tokyo for the opening of the *SUNSHOWER: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now* exhibition, co-organized by the National Art Center, the Mori Art Museum, and the Japan Foundation Asia Center. Tell me about your work that is on display.

Som: The curators of the *SUNSHOWER* exhibition chose to show *My Grandpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked*, a two-channel video installation that I produced in 2012 with the support of the Goethe-Institut. They were interested

to have an artist work on the river-scapes in Southeast Asia and I chose the Ping River. This river is quite a famous historical river that was used as the main transportation route during my grandparents' time, before 1958. They lived and travelled along this river. One of my grandfathers even worked for a company that transported teak wood on the river. In the old days, it was a big business in northern Thailand. Europeans had to apply for permission to cut timber from the forest and export them to Europe.

Fujioka: For furniture, for beds.

Som: Using elephants, they transported logs to the river, travelled on the river to Bangkok, and then exported the timber to Europe. I looked into this river because I was curious about what my grandfather had experienced on his way to Bangkok that lasted a very long time—maybe one or two months. There must have been a lot of difficulties and stories about his travels on the river. And no one these days travels like that anymore.

Fujioka: So the travel was always on the water; from the Ping River to Bangkok.



Som: From Chiang Mai down to Bangkok, they used the Chao Phraya River. But I was too late to discover the story [of this particular route] because fifty years ago, a large dam was built midway which interrupted the journey. I travelled from Chiang Mai to see the dam anyway, but it was then that I [truly] understood my grandfather's story. His family had to relocate from the mountain that was affected by the construction of the dam. I went to the dam and imagined his hometown which was now submerged under the huge lake. I travelled just to see how the landscape of the river kept changing, how such things affected the [surrounding] landscape.

Fujioka: This is a unique, personal story about your grandfather but it's also about history and social issues. Does this [method of intertwining issues of many levels] represent your approach as an artist?

Som: Actually, when I was younger, I only focused on the smaller topics that surrounded me. But over time, I witnessed the changes in the country and also its landscape. Landscape is an important component of my work: I think it has led me to see the whole structure and changes of society; to understand why it

changed. And to understand this, we cannot avoid politics.

Fujioka: Interesting.

Using Available Tools

Som: Research, too; it is through researching the content or topic at hand that I start to form new ways of [artistic] expression. [And this is always accompanied with] using the tools and equipment that are available. This is important. When I first returned to Thailand from Germany, I couldn't really show my work properly or continue what I had learned in school. For an installation, I couldn't get a hold of multiple projectors, work with different monitors, or get access to program applications for computers. Nobody knew media art then, and the equipment was not available. The tools I had back home in Thailand were limited, so I had to find different—easier but still interesting—methods.

Fujioka: Using what you can get your hands on.

Som: Yes, and also showing that you can create interesting works with them. You don't have to wait for the tools; you can just start with what you have.

Fujioka: It's strength that artists in developing countries have—the adaptability and mindset to bricolage, because tools are limited. Perhaps Japanese and Germans artists can learn from you. When you returned from Germany, why you didn't go to Bangkok?

Som: At that time in Bangkok, art was more "traditional" compared to Chiang Mai. In Chiang Mai, we were quite open to installation, performance, and conceptual work. Maybe a lot of professors at that time had just graduated from [schools in] Europe, and the Faculty of Fine Art at Chiang Mai University was quite new and open to anything from abroad. There were professors from different fields and backgrounds, so they opened themselves up to new practices.

Fujioka: I used to hear that Chiang Mai is full of people from around the world

and the [art] scene is more international than Bangkok. Does this help the art culture?

Som: I think it has helped us connect to the world as a non-capital city. We can at least share the knowledge and the network among ourselves. Also, Chiang Mai is relaxed and I have time to be by myself with nature, to learn things slowly. As a student, Bangkok was not a good place for me to live. It was too busy and dirty at that time.

🕒 The Asian Culture Station

Creating a Cultural Space in Chiang Mai

Fujioka: So, about the Asian Culture Station. It is a cultural space in Chiang Mai that is open to the public and supports collaboration in arts and culture particularly between Thailand and other Asian countries including Japan. It opened in August 2016—that is less than a year ago—but you have organized a lot of events including a series of mini-talks by artists and curators, a film festival, and a major symposium on art curation in Asia. What did you think when the Japan Foundation Asia Center first approached you with the idea of this institution?



Photography by Chaiyaporn Sodabunlu

Som: It was a surprise because we were just a small group of artists. I had started to discuss with some Chiang Mai artists that we should do something for the city, for the society, and to improve the whole art scene for our own benefit. But not much was happening; we just had some meetings. Then in 2013, there was a project to attend a festival as an art organization, and so we named ourselves "Chiang Mai Art Conversation" and set up the organization for the project. At the beginning, we thought it would be temporary because we didn't really have a lot of projects going on.

We focused mostly on creating a database of the art spaces and a who's-who in the art scene in Chiang Mai. Through that basic database, we thought we could promote the art scene for those who visit Chiang Mai: you can get to know what's going on in the city and meet the community which could then grow to a supportive relationship among each other. It was a very basic idea, but actually the initial goal was to, maybe, do an art festival in the city so that people [artists] could get more experience in different jobs. Not only artists' work but more like management.

Fujioka: That is an interesting idea. Most artists are focused on doing their own

thing and aren't interested in helping others.

Som: For me, I travelled around and saw other countries that have a very good system [that supports the cultural scene]. So I thought, "Why don't we have that too?" We have so many artists here—it is a city of artists and art—but we don't really have a proper system to improve the overall scene. Art alone is not enough; you need people who work on management, writing, or developing other kinds of positions that would help towards making a system that supports the cultural scene.

Fujioka: That is important.

Som: So when I started that [making a scene that supports the cultural scene], it opened up and led to other things. More people got to know us, supported us, and eventually we set up the first meeting with the art spaces in Chiang Mai. At this first meeting, all the galleries and artists in the city presented what they were doing. We proposed to make an art map of Chiang Mai and asked for suggestions and thoughts, ways to support [the artists in Chiang Mai]. It took quite a long time to produce the first Chiang Mai Art Map, but once it was made, other things just evolved.

For the launch of the Art Map, we organized Gallery Night which invites galleries in the city to stay open until late at night. This year celebrates the second year of Gallery Night, and more people are coming to Chiang Mai to get to know what is going on in the city. We try to help connect visitors with whoever they want to meet in the scene. It was good for the whole community.

Fujioka: It's a great seed that you planted; it's really growing in different directions, and maybe it has lifted the social status of people involved in art. Art can contribute to economy, to people's lives, to raise the value of a city.

Som: I think slowly people do recognize that but not immediately. But a lot of cafés and hotels are very happy with the Art Map.

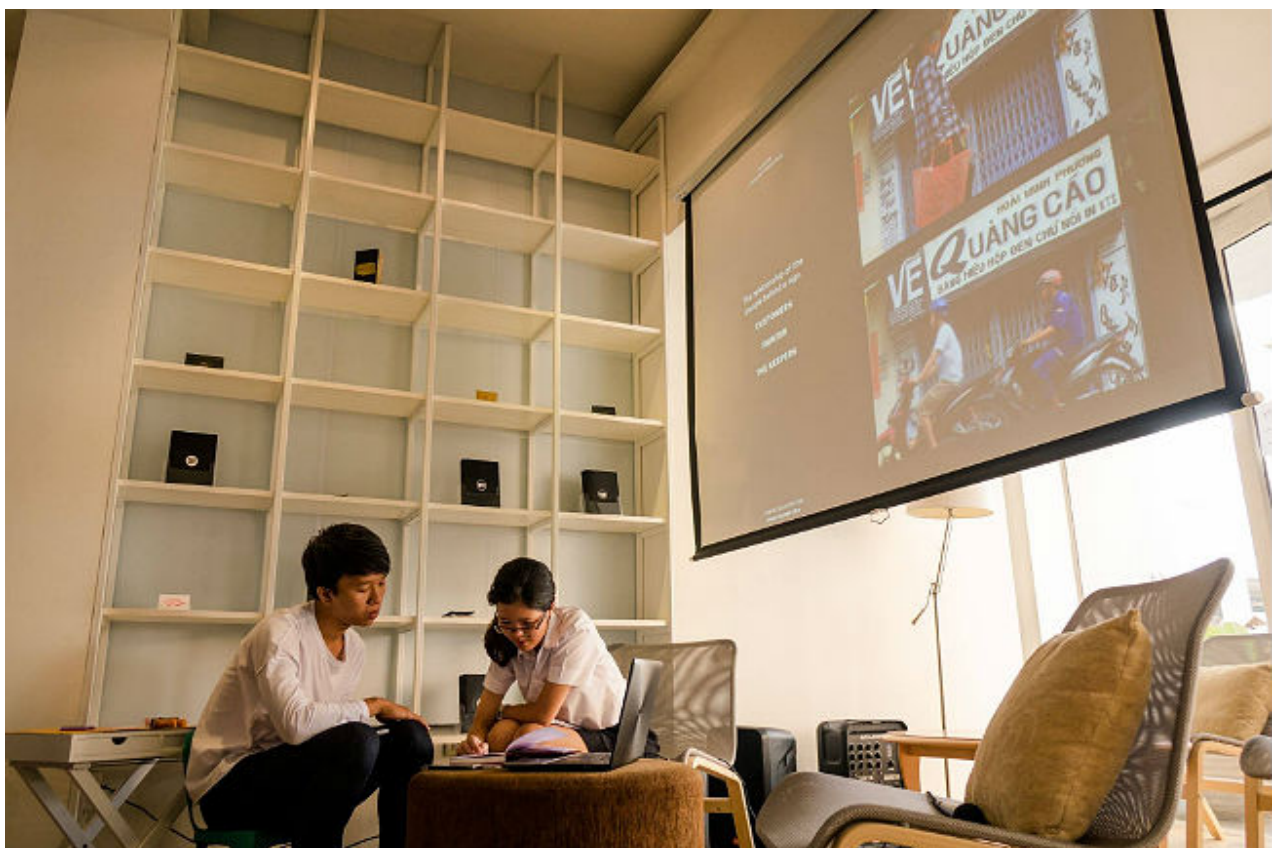
Fujioka: And as for Asian Culture Station; it became the space for your activities?

Som: For the first time ever, we have a space. And through the Asian Culture Station, we can now extend our mission to Southeast Asia and Japan. Before that, we only focused on Chiang Mai, supporting only the locals. We are happy with what's happened because my idea had always been to create a network with other cities, without relying on Bangkok. We can make our own networks and grow on our own through arts and culture. So it [the Asian Culture Station] is perfect for us to be able to do that.

Fujioka: How many activities and visitors do you have around the year?

Som: It has only been about nine months and, at first, it [the number of visitors] was kind of little because people didn't know about us yet. But in the high season, a lot of people visited and recognized us. Also people find us using the Art Map; to have a conversation with us since they want to know about Chiang Mai.

Fujioka: Are the visitors art professionals or tourists who like art?



Photography by Peasadet Compiranont

Som: There are ordinary people but also professionals looking to launch art

projects or educational projects, for example, with young students. There are some who want to do research, and we introduce them to other people [who might be able to help them].

Fujioka: It's great; it is so rare to have a public space like that.

Som: We also try to create different kinds of events that can reach out to different communities. For instance, [your documentary screening](#) was on visual art but it was also about history. One time we invited the prince from Shan State in Myanmar who was also a painter to give a [talk](#). People interested in visual art enjoyed the event, but so did the academic people and people interested in the history of Shan.

Fujioka: Yes, for my screening there was an architect, artists, a filmmaker who runs a hotel, a backpacker who just happened to drop by, and there were also local Westerners too. The audience range was very diverse, and that was the most interesting thing.

Som: People were very inspired by that screening, seeing the city of Tokyo of the past. We had never seen that before.

Fujioka: When I visited the Asian Culture Station, there was an art project on show.

Som: We don't always have an exhibition; we only organize one occasionally. In the beginning, we invited artists to occupy a part of the space, to get to know it, and discover the potential of this small [exhibition] space. But it is not a proper gallery. It is an office where we sometimes host screenings and other events.

Fujioka: What was the most successful event so far? And how do you judge your success?

Som: For me, it would be NIFF 2017, the First Nimman Film Festival 2017^{*1} because of the size of attendance and the media [coverage]. We are starting to think that we should try to record the audiences' responses because we had a lot of positive feedback from different audiences—students, expats, and the

general public. There are so many small narratives from Southeast Asia and Japan that people never had the chance to access before. Films show the reality of something unexpected from that country. The event allowed us to understand many things. And a panel discussion with a filmmaker or curator would get people more interested in how the media is produced.

*¹ The theme of NIFF 2017 is "[Lost & Found](#)": Culture, Spirit, Place and Freedom of Expression.



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