



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

### ● Collaboration and Providing Channels

#### Vision for the Asian Culture Station

Fujioka: Art and culture can be different things: it can be an avant-garde movement, trying to push the boundaries of thinking; it can be uncomfortable or sometimes outrageous. But there is also food culture, which is very comforting and close to our lives. What is your vision for Asian Culture Station? Is it a place that encompasses all kinds of arts or is it like a gallery that challenges people? I think this is a question for everybody who is involved in cultural curation. What [do you think] is the balance between wanting a bigger audience and testing the depth of experience? I experience this

dilemma all the time and nowadays curators are even more confronted with this question.

**Som:** We focus on the contemporary art scene and what is missing there. We think that if we can provide what is missing, it can contribute to improving the scene. The Japan Foundation Asia Center is interested in exchange and collaboration, so it's really good. There was a performance event of a local shadow puppet theater group in Chiang Mai which was very successful. They were already good at the puppeteering, which they'd continued over the years, but they simply copied soundtracks from other sources. I was always telling them, "Why don't you compose your own music?" So last year, I asked them to collaborate with a group of musicians—Japanese or Southeast Asian—to produce a new piece. It was the first time for them to perform with live music, apparently. Both the musicians and theater group were very happy with that which was apparently surprising for them. It became a new theme and they said they wanted to continue with that kind of collaboration. So for me, this is the type of movement that I want to generate: different kinds of careers or practices working together, crossing over each other's practices and also cultures.



Photo credit by Atikom Mukdaprakorn

Fujioka: It's a good example of the possibilities of collaboration across different people, genres, and art forms.

**Som:** We think that the traditional arts and crafts are already heavily supported by the government and general community already, so we want to focus on contemporary art practice. We want to go further, take a few more steps forward, and offer more channels and knowledge that the new generation might not have access to.

### **The Role of Asian Culture Station for an Artist**

Fujioka: What role does Asian Culture Station play for an artist?

**Som:** We provide new channels for all those who are interested in the practice of art and who want get involved more seriously. For example, we are now trying to organize a workshop for young artists who just graduated from art school; to teach them on the basics of how to make a CV, a portfolio, and write proposals. As artists, they need that basic skill but they never learn it in school. We will start with that and the workshop will introduce ways to use them to

develop a project on their own. They can find information where to apply, and then we will have an open call for exhibition proposals by young artists. We invite curators to choose works and artists and to explain their choices. At the same time, we could have an open call for young people who want to learn how curators works to assist them and work together. So at first providing the basic skills for everyone, and then narrowing down the selection.

Fujioka: This idea of a cooperative sharing of space and dialogue and providing new opportunities is very special in a world where artists are so competitive. Have you encountered any problems in communication and collaboration?

**Som:** The Chiang Mai Art Conversation is a loose group actually. The members involved depend on each project; those who are interested will join, and if not, they won't. It is a flexible group all the time. There were around ten in the beginning, but over time we're becoming a smaller group because it is not so much fun anymore.

Fujioka: Yes, it must be a lot of work.

**Som:** A lot of heavy work with deadlines, unfortunately. There is only a few of us now; there is about three, and an extra two sometimes. But the good thing about it is that the community around us is growing because of the activities we do. We hope we can train people who, in the future, will not only participate in our events but will also work with us.

## ● Making a Solid Ground

### Cultural Space Network

Fujioka: The Japan Foundation Asia Center supports similar kinds of cultural spaces in Yangon and in Ho Chi Minh City. Compared to the one in Chiang Mai, the [Japan Culture House in Yangon](#), I think it is called, is more focused on Japanese language study and introducing Japanese culture. It's located in a business area making it accessible for working people but not necessarily for travellers or the arts community. Can you give me your impressions of Yangon

and Ho Chi Minh City?

**Som:** As I understand, there is no Japan Foundation office in Yangon yet. They want to introduce very basic Japanese culture like language or tradition so that people start to understand and learn about Japan. Maybe it is a good way to do that. In Chiang Mai, we have so many places for Japanese language and cultural studies in universities and other places already. Maybe in Yangon, once people start to understand, the next step will be to collaborate or exchange with Japanese culture.

Fujioka: And Ho Chi Minh City?

**Som:** Ho Chi Minh City is different. There, they already have a strong art network with Southeast Asia and Japan. They run the organization differently from us in that they work with the general community. For example, they would ask artists to do mural paintings in schools or arrange a market for the public and install an artwork there. So their events are not necessarily about art, and maybe that is a good way to work on art events in Vietnam: to not present works that are serious or critical in such an upfront manner. But for us, at the Asian Culture Station, we want to have a direct conversation that is practical to improve the art scene. It can reach various art communities and practices, such as art management, curatorial practices, writing, performance, film, and fine arts. Public education through exchange and collaboration project is the core objective. We want a very clear message and start to create a dialogue on the topic.

Fujioka: It sounds like Chiang Mai has the most collaborative agenda, and it is powered by what is organically happening in the local arts scene.

## **Pushing the Art Scene Forth**

**Som:** The basic thing now is strengthening the ground to get solid infrastructure. That applies not only to us, but other people in the city and across the country also. If they start to work for their own communities, for their own practices, we can move forward and make tremendous progress. There are many new art collectors, writers, art managers, and curators. So I

hope they can develop their careers too so we can improve the art scene as a whole. We need to make it [a solid ground], we need to push it [the art scene] forth, we need to encourage people to do things, otherwise it [progress] won't happen.

Fujioka: Yes, and what you're doing is really encouraging that. In my six-week fellowship to Southeast Asia, I noticed that artists and filmmakers were really using new tools of technology, especially communication tools and social media. They are curious about all the information available out there and are active in using it for their benefit. The hunger and desire is much stronger than in Japan where the young people seem to just wait for luck to drop in their laps.

**Som:** I agree. I feel the need to remind them [the younger generation] not to rely on Bangkok; to tell them, "Don't wait to get invited to a show, you need to be active to find a project or residency, or anything that will push your career forward." You shouldn't blindly follow what is there, and change your position accordingly.

Fujioka: It's an attitude that you, Som, are a role model for. As a young girl, you were already knocking on doors to change your destiny. Doors will only open if you push hard.

**Som:** And fight!



On July 3, 2017 at the Japan Foundation

### More Information on the Japan Foundation Asia Center's culture centers:

[Asian Culture Station Official Website \(Chiang Mai, Thailand\)](#)

[Japan Culture House Facebook Page \(Yangon, Myanmar\)](#)

[Asian In/Visible Station Official Website \(Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam\)](#)

#### Interviewer: **Asako Fujioka**

International film festival organizer and distributor. Works with Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival in Japan from 1993 on as Coordinator, Director, and now on the Board of Directors. Established the New Asian Currents program, a collection of films and videos by emerging documentarists from around Asia during the years 1995–2003. Organizer of film workshops with Asian filmmakers from 2009 on. Selection committee and advisor for Busan International Film Festival's Asian Network of Documentary (AND) Fund



since 2006. Sometime distributor of Asian documentaries in Japan, and Japanese documentaries overseas.

◀ 123

Page 3

## Related Page

### Projects

SUNSHOWER: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now Exhibition

### Projects

Asian Culture Station (Chiang Mai)

### Links

Asako Fujioka's report | The Japan Foundation Asia Center Fellowship Program

## Current Article



EDDIE CAHYONO—From Yogyakarta to the World: Independent Filmmaking born from the Local Community of Film

Interview / Asia Hundreds



ARCO RENZ—Dance Creation: The Body, Time, Space, Negotiation, and Collaboration

Interview / Asia Hundreds



PANG KHEE TEIK—Arts & LGBT Activism in Malaysia

Interview / Asia Hundreds