

# ปฏิบัติการภัณฑารักษ์และเรื่องเล่าขนาดย่อม: กรณีศึกษาเชียงใหม่จัดวางสังคมและเชียงใหม่วิถี

กฤติยา กาวีวงศ์

ผู้อำนวยการศิลปะ หอศิลป์ บ้านจิม ทอมป์สัน กรุงเทพมหานคร

นักศึกษาระดับปริญญาเอก คณะศิลปกรรมศาสตร์ จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย

วารสารสังคมวิทยาและมานุษยวิทยา 34(2): กรกฎาคม - ธันวาคม 2558

บทความ

## curatorial practices and small narratives: a case study of Chiang Mai Social Installation and its trajectory

Gridthiya Gaweewong

artistic director, Jim Thompson Art Center, Bangkok

PhD student, the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts,

Chulalongkorn University

This paper is based on one of the case studies that the author used for her Doctorate of Fine Art thesis, "Missing Links: Curatorial Practices and Small Narratives in Southeast Asia," to be submitted to the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University. The author wishes to thank her advisors, Associate Professor Kamol Phaosavadi, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University and Assistant Professor Dr. Kasem Phenpinant, the Philosophy Department, Chulalongkorn University for their tireless support. Thanks are also due to Uthit Atimana for sharing the archives, Associate Professor Dr. David Teh, National University of Singapore, for being the long-term comrade who always encouraged and showed enthusiasm for this topic, Luci Standley for editing and Kim Sunjung, The Asia Culture Center for commissioning the author's research and digital archive project of the history of exhibitions in Thailand from 1970s to present.

This article focuses on the curatorial practices and the small narratives emerging from the Chiang Mai Social Installation (CMSI), a self-organized festival by Chiang Mai-based artists collective, started in 1992 and ended in 1998. The emergence of CMSI signaled their autonomy and emancipatory from the Thai-centric modern art tradition. This article, which is based on the study of festival archives, aims to trace how the artists collective performed their role as curator to organize the large-scale exhibitions in Chiang Mai to debunk Thailand's conservative art scene, and transcend the national boundary to connect with the regional and global art scenes and communities.

**keywords:** contemporary art, curatorial practices, artist collective, small narratives, Southeast Asia, Thai art

## ABSTRACT

## บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้สนใจปฏิบัติการภัณฑารักษ์และเรื่องเล่าขนาดย่อมที่ปรากฏขึ้นในระหว่างเทศกาล “เชียงใหม่จัดวางสังคม” เทศกาลศิลปะที่จัดขึ้นจากการรวมตัวของกลุ่มศิลปินในเชียงใหม่ ตั้งแต่ปี 1992-1998 (พ.ศ. 2535-2541) การปรากฏขึ้นของเทศกาลเชียงใหม่จัดวางสังคม แสดงให้เห็นถึงลักษณะอันเป็นเอกเทศและความพยายามที่จะปลดปล่อยตนเองออกจากจารีตของศิลปะสมัยใหม่ของไทยที่มีไทยเป็นศูนย์กลาง บทความนี้ ซึ่งข้อมูลหลักมาจากการศึกษาเอกสารสำคัญของเทศกาลเอง พยายามที่จะสืบสาวร่องรอยของปฏิบัติการภัณฑารักษ์ของกลุ่มศิลปินที่แสดงบทบาทหน้าที่เป็นภัณฑารักษ์ในการจัดนิทรรศการขนาดใหญ่เพื่อที่จะหักล้างความเป็นอนุรักษ์นิยมของวงการศิลปะของไทย และการก้าวพ้นเขตแดนของความเป็นชาติ ไปเชื่อมต่อกับวงการและชุมชนศิลปะต่างๆ ทั้งในระดับภูมิภาคและระดับโลก

**คำสำคัญ:** ศิลปะร่วมสมัย, ปฏิบัติการภัณฑารักษ์, กลุ่มศิลปิน, เรื่องเล่าขนาดย่อม, เอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้, ศิลปะไทย

This essay focuses on the curatorial practices and the small narratives emerging from the Chiang Mai Social Installation (CMSI hereafter), which was started in 1992 by a Chiang Mai-based artists collective to question and debunk the traditional artistic practices dominated by Bangkok's art school, Silpakorn University. The nature of curatorial practices by CMSI artists collectives signalled their autonomy and emancipation from the Thai-centric modern art tradition that served national ideologies. Inspired by German conceptual artist and political activist, Joseph Beuys and his social sculpture idea, CMSI sprung out of the necessities arising from the lack of the infrastructure, and the attempts by young artists, lecturers and art activists to define contemporary art in the 1990s. This essay is based on the study of the festival archives and identifies the curatorial practices and the social impact and trajectory of CMSI to the art scene. It also explores the construction of networks between this artists' collective within the regional and global art community.

### **the invisible curatorial practices in Thai modern art**

The term curator has its origins in the Latin word, *cura*, meaning to care. This profession originally existed in the museum context and has been traditionally responsible for the keeping of collections in the museum since the 18th century. In the traditional sense, the curator is responsible for taking care of collecting, researching, exhibiting and educating the public. The position of contemporary art curator developed over centuries. Various terms were used in the West, such as curator in America, keeper and conservator in Britain, *Ausstellungsmacher* (exhibition makers) in Germany, and *commissaire* in French (Kuoni 2001, 12). According to Paul O'Neil, the 1920s saw a slow shift in the role of curator as carer, working with the collection out of sight of the public, to a more central position on a much broader stage. By the late 1960s, even though there were differences in form and content, many exhibitions had developed a relationship between spaces and conceptually led artistic production. This made the

exhibition, the artworks and the curatorial framework essential, independent elements in a process of realization that culminated in the final public exhibition (O'Neil 2012, 9). In the 1960s, curators started to work outside museum and art institutions and their roles started to change from keeper to what Bruce Altshuler called "the world advanced exhibition and the rise of the curator as the creator" (O'Neil 2012, 236).

In contrast to the curatorial practices in the West, the curator figure was invisible in the regional art scene. In the West, it was reinvented in each decade, going from the demystification and the role of curator to mediator in the 1970s, to the curator as author of the exhibition in the late 1980s, and to supervision in the 1990s (O'Neill 2012, 32). In Southeast Asia, the curatorial practices is a relatively new concept. In Thailand, the term "curator" was introduced to Siam at the end of 19th century, during the reign of King Rama V (Thawatchai Ongwuthiwes 2004, 250). "Curator" existed in the context of the Royal Privy Museum and after the shift from absolute to constitutional monarchy in 1932, this term was applied to the national museum and archaeological museums. For modern art, its history is more recent, especially if we regard the establishment of Silpakorn University in 1943 by Corrado Feroci (later Silpa Bhirasri) with the endorsement of the Pibun Administration as the official start, indeed, the modern art museums did not come into existence until the mid 1970s, after Corrado Feroci's demise, with Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art, and later the National Gallery on Chao Fa Road. The term curator was not used in a modern art context; instead, it was replaced by "committee" and "jury of the exhibition." Therefore, exhibitions of modern art in Thailand were mostly organized by committee and jury, and later by artists' collectives, such as Jakrawat Silapin (The League of Artists) in the 1950s, and later, the Artists Front of Thailand in the 1970s. This collective's aims were diverse, from aesthetics to political agenda, the first wanting to find their own exhibition space to counterbalance the national competition and the later formed during the Student Uprisings aimed to fight against the military government. In 1980s, there

were many artists' collectives in Thailand whose work dealt with the socio-political context. CMSI was born from this tradition, combining the artists collective as curatorial practice to organize the ground-breaking public art festival in the early 1990s. It dealt with both socio-political issues and challenged the traditional perception of aesthetics.

Despite being reintroduced earlier in the modern art context, the term curator was new to the art community. Its first proponents being Piriya Krairiksh, Apinan Poshyananda and Somporn Rodboon, who collaborated with local and international art events by serving as consultants, local curators, experts in Thai modern and contemporary art as well as guest curators of major international and regional art exhibitions in Australia, Japan and beyond. Most of the aforementioned curators were trained as artists or art historians, who later became curators, what Patrick D. Flores called artist-curator, in his research of curatorial practices in Southeast Asia by studying Apinan Poshyananda and Jim Supangkat, an Indonesian curator as case studies (Flores 2008, 81).

Referencing the term curator to the Western context in its transfer the Asian context was unavoidable, though the definition and the role were modified and localized. Such dynamics were manifested through the emergence of the artists collective in the 20th century because modern art was introduced in Southeast Asia at different times, depending on history of colonization and, in Thailand's case, auto-colonization. These time lapses in modernization in the region were dubbed by Jim Supangkat "multimodernism" because of the time lapse in modernization in this area (Supangkat 1996, 56). As a result, the initiation of the Western style art school, museum system and art education focused more on training artists, with no classes in curatorial practice offered until the late 2010s. Within this context and without any choices, the CMSI art festival was adopted by this artist collective as their curatorial practice.

## small narratives vs grand narratives

In terms of historical context, CMSI challenged the conservative notion of modern art in Thailand. John Clark studied modernity in Asia, describing modern art as the “indirect effect of the Euramerican imperialist expansion since the 19th century.” It was used as the “outward cultural expression of modernity in social and political organization, a kind of nationalism that reinforced the presentation to the West of a justifiable claim to equality of status, and access to the modern world. It’s a way to securing a place for a conservative state like Thailand in the 1930s” (Clark 1993, 8–9). Thasnai Sethaseree agreed with John Clark and went further. He described Thai modern art as a way to adhere to the pillars of national identity or Thainess, Kwam Pen Thai, through visual expressions. To him, CMSI saw artists uproot themselves from traditional modern art and create the new approach called “Overlapping Tactics and Practices” (Thasnai Sethaseree 2011). This remarkable observation clearly marks the turning point in art history, where the artists collective, most of them Silpakorn University graduates, broke away and started new practices, which were a critique of the art that had served the national ideology since the 1940s. The narratives formulated during this early period were mainly about identity, seeking Thainess in landscape and figurative form following the academic training of Corrado Feroci, who encouraged his students to work with paintings and sculpture in the genres of realism and impressionism. We may consider this type of works as the grand narrative of Thai modern art. In contrast, the artist collective created small narratives by exploring reality, everyday life and contemporary issues such as globalization, urbanization, consumerism, capitalism and poverty while still retaining Buddhist influences. They produced artistic practice and visual language that went beyond the traditional media, and it thus created the micro narratives that critiqued the modern art as being conservative in securing the national ideologies.

How did these narratives connect to the regional and global art discourse? Was there anything related to postmodernism or postcolonialism like in other countries in Southeast Asia? Apinan Poshyananda, who began to take part in international biennales, stated in one of his articles that the postmodern was not widely discussed on the Thai art scene. But he and his colleagues proposed to challenge the dichotomy between East and West, tradition and modern by shifting the perspective from the Western to the Other's eyes, in his case, Oriental perspectives, *Yellow* (Apinan Poshyananda 1993, 223). The clash between tensions and tradition were critical debates on the local art scene in the late 1980s and 1990s. It is hard to pinpoint the turning point of contemporary art: when it started and when the art scene and artists became contemporary. Contemporary art is about imagining the "Worlds within the World," Terry Smith said in his article, "World picturing in contemporary art." For Smith, place making, "world picturing and connectivity are the most common concerns of artists these days because they are the substance of contemporary being. Increasingly, they override residual distinctions based on style, mode, medium and ideology. They are present in all art that is truly contemporary" (Smith 2014, 241).

Terry Smith's notion about place making and networking among the global community had in fact existed in regional networking and connectivity before 'globalization' since the 1960s through the ASEAN mechanism. After the end of the Cold War, the idea of networking and connectivity within the regional contemporary art started to shapeshift gradually. The regional network started to take the roots and was realized by artists' collectives in second cities like Chiang Mai, Thailand, Bagiuo, Philippines, Yokyakarta, Indonesia, and in Singapore. Today, academics look back and reexamine the exhibition histories of regional projects, such as the CMSI in the 1990s as one of the significant projects that defined the emergence of contemporary art in Thailand and the region and which transcended national borders.

## Chiang Mai Social Installation and its trajectory

Why is the CMSI important and why has it become the focal point of study again? What makes this project significant for Thailand and the region? What kind of situation constituted CMSI? The notion of contemporary art was a product of the cold war, marking the focal points for many local artists who had received scholarships to study art in the United States since the 1960s. They were the first generation to return to teach in the art schools mainly in Bangkok and inspired their students to further their studies abroad in the 1980s. Economists Chris Baker and Phasuk Pongpaichit pointed out that “the economic growth depended on agricultural and export-oriented manufacturing. Many companies from Asia started to invest in Thailand for manufacturing technology-based goods at the end of the 1980s. From the 1990s onwards, they were fastest-growing sector of exports, as was tourism, which grew in the same era” (Baker and Pongpaichit 2014, 203–4). This period gave rise to a middle class, who were able to support their children to study abroad. In the public sector, the country had more resources to provide funding to art students to study abroad, and additional support came from Japan and Germany, to name a few. Art students who received such grants are for example Montien Boonma and Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook. They strongly influenced by the conceptual, post-modernist and anti-aesthetic approaches.

In the late 1980s, the art educational landscape changed and art schools were decentralized from Bangkok, opening in different regions including Chiang Mai in the North and in the Northeast at Khon Kaen University. These art schools focused more on training the art students to make art, itself based on influences from Silpakorn University, meaning more academic and traditional works. However, the new art schools did not provide platforms like art galleries or art museums for artists/students to exhibit their works. The birth of the Faculty of Fine and Applied Art at Chiang Mai University (CMU) and the lack of infrastructure created a disconnect between modern art and craft traditions in Chiang Mai.



A group of young lecturers and artists felt frustrated at this gap. Some of the lecturers set about forming an artists collective and in 1992 started the public art festival by finding public spaces for themselves and their students to make their works accessible to the public in temples and cemeteries around Chiang Mai city area.

Another reason why the project was allowed to happen was the very nature of the place. Prior to the CMSI project, the city and suburban areas faced urban problems. Waste management by the city administration was problematic, because spaces couldn't be found to dump the waste from the urban area and the suburban communities did not allow their villages to become garbage zones. The artists' collective felt it should engage with these critical issues, so using waste to create art in public spaces around the Tha Pae area. This was the starting point for artists to integrate with the public spaces and their community.

When we contextualize and situate CMSI in the regional and global context, many important factors contributed to the significance of contemporary art and curatorial practices such as autonomy, flexibility, transnationality and contemporaneity. If being autonomous is the most important factor for the art world, this project proved that they achieved this quality thanks to the nature of the organization as an independent artists' collective, which concentrated on Chiang Mai as a site with which to interact. They responded to the city context and its critical issues, firstly engaging with the city through the waste management problem, and secondly connecting art with everyday life and public, which also solved the problem of lack of exhibition space. Being autonomous was important for the collective, because they could set their own agenda and curatorial approach in each edition, which were relevant to such contemporary social issues as AIDS, capitalism, poverty and gender.

CMSI manifested the artists' emancipation from modern art in Thailand, which was influenced by Silpakorn University. It brought critical thinking and

discourses of what art was and should be to the stagnant local art scene, which still followed and even glorified Feroci's art for art's sake and detached itself from society. Mainstream Thai art served the national ideology, reinforcing the "Thainess" by using neo-traditionalistic patterns to present itself to local audiences and the world, while remaining fully commodified by the market.

CMSI was initiated by Uthit Atimana, an artist and a lecturer at Chiang Mai University's Fine Arts Faculty, and his friends, among them Mit Jai Inn, an assistant to Austrian artist, Franz West, who had returned from Vienna to his hometown of Chiang Mai, primarily as a solution to the problems of the art education system. Both were alumni of Silpakorn University's Paintings, Sculpture, Graphic Arts and Thai Arts Faculty, but were influenced by socialism, Buddhism and conceptual art, especially Joseph Beuys, the German artist and political activist. Beuys was a member of Fluxus, an international interdisciplinary art movement considered the most radical and experimental in the 1960s. Beuys's works dealt with shamanism, healing, environment and democratic society. His famous "living sculpture" used both visible materials (fat, felt, iron, animals) and invisible materials (words, ideas, intuitions, actions). Beuys explained, "They should provoke thoughts about what sculpture can be and how the concept of sculpting can be extended to the invisible materials used by everyone: Thinking Form—how we mould our thoughts or, Spoken Form—how we shape our thought into words or Social Sculpture—how we mould and shape the world in which we live. Sculpture is an evolutionary process; everyone is an artist" (De Dominizio Durini 2011, 220).

Two main points from Beuys, "social sculpture" and "everyone is an artist," became core ideas for the CMSI artists collective and were used as the reference to develop the festival's conceptual framework. Further, Uthit applied his beliefs in the relevance of Buddhism and arts and used community centers such as temples as spaces for art activities over a specific period. This idea brought many art projects to interact with monks and civilians. CMSI declared

itself “a flexible and spontaneous cooperation, inspired by contemporary culture problems and aiming at a better, more balanced society. CMSI presents contemporary art for people, and hopes it will set an example to be followed by other provinces and society as a whole.” Its members came from Chiang Mai University, with many other professionals joining the project, most of them were local residents. CMSI aimed to organize an annual social installation which could be a model for all levels of society all over the world. They declared that these activities should function as social consciousness, through a process of “installation” rather than “occupation” of a lasting and continuous society-model, with complete participation of the people, which was considered the “foundation for the development of a natural unified society.” Their works concerned “human relations” as a contribution to the creation of a more balanced culture in the context of a free market and capitalist contemporary society. CMSI was a project that seriously attempted to form a counterweight, to stimulate “cultural activities” and to cooperate in humility in the hope that contemporary society would develop towards mixed cultural activities in a capitalist society. The working method was divided into three parts, the first of which took the form of a festival. The CMSI essentially focused on three basic values 1) human spirit 2) art activities and 3) thoughts (CMSI Committee 1995).

When the public art festival was initiated in 1992, it was entitled “Art Festival: Temples & Cemeteries” and took over both public and private areas, such as temples, graveyards, civic squares (khuang), bridges, streets and the moats and so on. It became the Chiang Mai Social Installation. The first edition consisted of 16 local artists mostly from Chiang Mai University’s Fine Arts Faculty and students, among them Uthit Atimana, Navin Rawanchaikul, Kosit Juntaratip and Udom Chimpakdee, who installed their works in front of the chedi at Jed Yod Temple. Due to misunderstandings and miscommunication between the organizer and the temples, the operation was not that smooth. Monks removed the works of Navin Rawanchaikul and Kosit Juntaratip from their original spaces (CMSI Committee 1992).

The second CMSI took place in temples, cemeteries, private residences, public buildings, on walls, rivers, canals and in open spaces where the public might run into art works, from 11 November 1993 to 19 February 1994. The expansion of the art festival in this edition was so remarkable that Khetsirin Knithichan, a reporter with The Nation Newspaper dubbed it “Turning Galleries inside out.” Thirty local and international artists participated in the second edition, including Montien Boonma, who did the seminal installation, “Meditation–Vassels” at U-Mong Temple, where many art works related to Buddhism were displayed. Montien explained to the reporter, “I chose to set my work here surrounded by the trees because it brought to mind the place where the Buddha tortured himself when searching for the truth of life. The pottery symbolized the burning of lust in our mind” (Khetsirin Knithichan 1993, C8).

Many students participated, later becoming the core organizers and also well-known on global art scene, among them Navin Rawanchaikul, Tawatchai Puntusawasdi, Thasnai Sethaseree and Sutthirat Supaparinya. In this edition, Navin created a cone-shaped installation, stacking shelves with used bottles filled with the images of old people in villages from the Northern area and placing them next to the shelves in the USIS (United State Information Service) library. Meanwhile his friend, Kosit Juntaratip, preferred a performance work with a non-Buddhist context. Kosit staged the performance at the First Church of Chiang Mai by asking the priest to perform the marriage ceremony between him and Lily, the plastic doll he imported from Japan. International artists included Joan Ground, Noelene Lucas and Jacqueline Clayton from Australia David Hammons and Lawrence Weiner from the USA, all brought to Chiang Mai through Mit Jai Inn’s connections. David Hammons’ work did not arrive on time due to logistical problems, Uthit said later. For Lawrence Weiner’s work, Mit explained during an interview in Chiangmai on 10 February 2015 that he brought over the instructions from the gallery in Vienna. These said that one should find a rectangular space and place the sign, “Rectangular,” on that

site. Mit followed Weiner's instructions. He found an appropriate site for this piece at Hillside Condominium on Huay Kaew Road and installed the signage on top of that building. The attempt to make art accessible to the public and change the perceptions of what art is was evident, as seen in Montien's emphasis on the aim of this festival, "we want this event to show that Chiang Mai is not only a province with traditional art. We don't want to change the image of this province but we would like to present the opinions and perceptions of the new generation" (Khetsirin Knithichan 1993, C8). Their messages seemed to have been put across, because the free spirit and autonomy of the CMSI started to gain more interest from the regional and international art scene, with many more artists joining the next edition.

The third festival ran from 19 November 1995 to 19 February 1996. This edition was the most important because it was organized in the framework of the 18th SEA Games and the celebrations of Chiang Mai's 700th anniversary. In terms of the contents and narrative, CMSI got into deeper issues as it engaged with wider society as well as with Chiang Mai city's development plan. Many practices in the festival provided chances for political expression. It started a counter-current in Thai art circles, getting broader each time with more participating artists from around the world occupying more public spaces in the city. 63 participating artists were listed on the posters. Most of them offered performance, site-specific installation and participatory approach. There were regional artists from Singapore's Artists Villages, such as Tang Da Wu, Amanda Heng, Vincent Leo, Lee Wen; and Germany-based Singaporean artist Jay Koh; Arahmaiani from Indonesia; and Tan Chin Kuan and Eng Hwee Chu, Malaysia; Sone Yutaka, Masato Nakamura, Satoshi Hirose and Tatsuo Inagaki and Tei Kobayashi from Japan. The rest were locals and Europeans. In terms of the spaces, the main areas included U-Mong Temple, cemeteries and temples in the city area, Tha Pae Gate and markets, the moat area, and streets and bridges along the Ping river. Highlights of this editions were the installation at U-Mong Temple of works by Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook entitled

"Untitled; Chitti Kasemkitvatana's "Mo(nu)ment to the Third (CM.)SI." and Montien Boonma's "Body Temple" installed at Wat Panthong. His work was an installation in the form of a stupa constructed by coffins coated with herbs, for which he was inspired by the Arokhaya Sala (hospital) visited during his trip to Angkor Wat, Cambodia. At the end of the festival, Montien relocated this piece to Wat Suandok. He invited the monks to pray and later burnt and buried the works (CMSI Committee 1995). Indonesian artist Arahmaiani did an extensive performance entitled, "Intersection Flower" at Tha Pae Gate, Pa Daeng Cemetery, and U-Mong Temple. In the hillside plaza building on Huay Kaew Road, Japanese artist Masato Nakamura created the installation "Frontside of the backside—watch what's showing." And Satoshi Hirose showed his "Red Light."

In Ton Lam Yai market, Jay Koh served as the coordinator of E.T. (Exchanging Thought), an interactive project on which he collaborated with international artists, some of them also in exile from their own countries. He described it as "time-response art." He stated in the brochure, "The exchange will cross cultural and professional differences on a basis of respect and equality in a process where spectators become participants." Koh took this project to different marketplaces in Chiang Mai, proposing that people undertake bartering and negotiation and hold social gatherings (Koh 1995). On the streets of Chiang Mai, Navin Rawanchaikul launched his iconic project, "Navin Driving School (Thailand)." He made an open call to members of the public who wanted to learn how to drive a car, regarding his teaching someone to drive as an art-making process. Navin later developed his driving school into Navin Taxi Gallery, taking over the taxi as a gallery space and driving through the congested streets of Bangkok in the mid-1990s. Later, Navin invited Rirkrit Tiravanija to create his project in 1996 in Bangkok and Chiang Mai. This edition saw a change in both art projects and the artists participating in CMSI, as they shifted from object-oriented art and performative elements to more durational works requiring public participation.

The Asian economic crisis brought an abrupt end to Thailand's economic growth at the end of 1997. This economic situation was reiterated in the theme of the fourth CMSI entitled, POVERTY, which ran from 1 December 1997 to 7 January 1998. Its programs centered on this topic, working with a case study on whether politics cause poverty in Thai society. The organizers raised questions about the definition and factors of poverty. They asked how a lack of money could be translated into the cultural activities produced within CMSI context. What's the quality of art or cultural activities, and what is its relationship to the culture and the poor? The other project was related to political issue such as drafting of the Constitution after Black May in 1992 (CMSI Committee 1997).

This edition proved that the reputation of CMSI had spread around the region, with many artists from home and abroad participating, mostly at their own expense. Some international artists were funded by such institutions as Japan Foundation and local organizations. There were groups of performance artists from Germany's Ultimate Akademie. Other adjunct projects included the market place at Chiang Mai University and the Week of Cooperative Suffering, which attracted many local and international artists to make time-based art and performances at Tha Pae Gate throughout the first week of January 1998.

## **week of cooperative sufferings**

If the Chiang Mai Social Installation was a platform for artists to express their ideas and engage with public through such works as site specifics, installations and performances, the Week of Cooperative Suffering (WOS) pushed the boundaries further to define what art could do in public spaces. From the initiation of the festival, the idea of Beuys became the point of departure for the artists' collective to explore the possibilities. Pandit Chanrojanakit elaborated on the specific idea that drove the CMSI to focus on socially engaged art, which he saw as political action. The idea was to build the social

organism as a work of art which requires public participation “as the creator, a sculptor, or architect of social organism. In doing so, the public became a political productive force, and it made the concept of social sculpture as a frame.” He further pointed out that “CMSI produced and defined its artists’ practice, revitalized traditional space, and embraced the notion of social sculpture in practice” (Pandit Chanrochanakit 2014).

Besides Beuys’s ideas, Buddhism also played significant role in shaping artists such as Mit Jai Inn’s idea to stage the “durational performance,” drawing on the Lanna Buddhist tradition of “midnight pha pa” (midnight forest monk robe). He invited his fellow artists and people to visit Buddhist temples. They prepared the robes and other necessities to offer the monks at midnight. This represented the lost tradition of Lanna-style merit making, which suggested that the relationship between the people and monks, the area of sacred and profane, were bonded. For Mit Jai Inn, this tradition served as a check-and-balance system for the secular and the religious. It allowed people to monitor the monks at night to make sure they stayed in the right place and were under the public gaze to prevent scandalous gossip or misunderstandings (Thasnai Sethaseree 2011, 193–4).

CMSI introduced an additional program in conjunction with the festival in the first week of 1995. In the principles and objectives of CMSI, it added “joint sorrow” activities, an exchange of problems concerning the way of life in contemporary society; to show sympathy and respect to one another (CMSI Committee 1995a). The key person taking care of this program was Mit Jai Inn, who initiated the “Week of Joint Sorrow” project, (later changed to Week of Cooperative Suffering), which was defined as “cultural activities of the suffering, by the suffering and for the suffering. The announcement stated the venues and activities of the cultural tour, which ran from 1–7 January 1995 from 12 am–5 am at Tha Pae Road to Nawarat Bridge, Chiang Mai. They planned to travel to Ubon Ratchathani on 5–10 July 1995, and present the project from midnight to 5 am, at Thesaban Muang Ubon Road. In a call for entries, there



were a variety of art forms in which the public could participate. These included multidisciplinary art and cultural activities in the public spaces with no limitation on art forms: visual arts, mixed media, performance or performing arts, video, films, music, sport, talks, lectures, seminars or traditional performances. Admission was free and anyone could apply to join (Tatree Pokavanij 1995). Unfortunately, this project was not realized in Ubon Ratchathani.

A Week of Cooperative Suffering aimed to pursue a better life and happiness. Mit Jai Inn played with the concept of happiness between the West and the East, the latter being Buddhism. This project clearly showed how Mit reenacted Beuys's idea social activism, to invite public to join and create the collective experience. Mit stated, "The week of cooperative suffering was intended as a cultural activity by and for the masses, bringing attention to the idea that we are all caught in the pool of suffering. Within this time and space, everyone was encouraged to join in this phenomenon." The multifunctional platform listed its week-long programs in the first week of January 1996 running consecutively as follows: night of contemporary performance, day of installation, Midnight Market, Midnight entertainment, Midnight University, Night of contemporary light and sound" (CMSI Committee 1995c). T. J. McGuire, a lecturer at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, wrote extensively about these weekly events. McGuire provided the "thick description" of her attendance at this festival. She saw Jian Jun Xi, the artist from Inner Mongolia based in the UK performing at the Tha Pae Gate, with oil-based paint of a red bindi on his body and the audiences' as a ritualistic performance. In her article, McGuire explained the artist's network behind the scene and how they could bring international artists to the festival from Europe and the region (McGuire 1996, 18–22). The festival grouped different themes and placed them in various spaces. Gender issues and the role of women in Thai Buddhist society were concentrated at temples such as Pa Pao by the works of Toeingam Srisubat, Liz Miller explored the bridge between the nun at U-Mong Temple by installing a mirror on a pedestal and arranging on it commercialized air freshener

containers (McGuire 1996, 21). The AIDs issue was raised by both the festival artists and highlighted at the Week of Sufferings in the performance by Sutthisak Phuthararak and Kosit Juntaratip as well as by Chumpon Apisuk.

The third edition of "A Week of Suffering" started in the first week of January 1998. Transgeneration artists from Asia and abroad joined the project, among them Lee Wen (Singapore), Keiko Sei (Japan), artists from Bangkok such as Paisan Plienbangchang, Katha Sangkhae and Americans Robert Peters, Ray Langenbach and Liz Miller. The main public spaces were Tha Pae Gate, U-Mong Temple, Jed Yod Temple, Tung Yu Temple, the Night Bazaar Market, Faculty of Fine Arts, CMU, Rachadamnern Road, the center for the promotion of art and culture, blind school, Pra Singh Temple, Chiang Mai temples and streets in the old town area (CMSI Committee 1997).

Thasnai Sethaseree saw CMSI as questioning the status quo and the perception of modern art and its commitment to the idea of beauty as truth, which constituted the idea of governmental agencies as the institutionalized art of the nation. He called this movement the "overlapping tactic and practices" at the interstices of Thai Art, because he found CMSI played a critical role in contesting the established cultural orthodoxy of art practices by developing multiple critical tactics in an iconoclastic manner (Thasnai Sethaseree 2011, vi). However, not all he works in CMSI fitted in Thasnai's claim of being critical and contested the idea of beauty as truth and cultural orthodoxy. Some works still related to Buddhist philosophy as a motif, though their practices took a non-traditional approach. My questions for CMSI's artists and curatorial practices are: can it actually emancipate itself from academic and traditional works? When artists occupied the public spaces in the urban area, did they see the space as their studio or canvas? Did they actually engage with the community and public? Did they see the public space as their "platform" to merely show their works. It is evident in the first three editions of the CMSI that the exhibition focused on aesthetics more than socially engaged art, for example most of the works shown at U-Mong Temple.

This might be a crucial to Mit Jai Inn's intervention in creating the adjunct program of Weeks of Sufferings and the Midnight University Program, which was a game changer for the CMSI. It broke new ground for the collective by expanding and changing the curatorial practices of the festival from curating into the "curatorial," with Maria Lind's term, "performing the curatorial." Lind elaborated, "the 'curatorial' operates in parallel with political philosopher Chantal Mouffe's notion of 'the political.' Mouffe famously challenges representative democracy's tendency to consensualize and foreclose, proposing outspoken opposition and agonism as alternative" (Lind 2012, 19). In this case, Mit Jai Inn's practice signified the political changes through exhibition making. The aftermath, Midnight University survived and became actively involved with political activism both on and off line.

## **conclusion: post CMSI**

CMSI ended in 1998 because of many factors such as the collapse of the artists' collective and the rise of the institution in Chiang Mai. Pandit Chanrochanakit offered his perspective by comparing it to another performance festival in Thailand called Asiatopia, which is more accessible to the public. He also wrote about the identity problem of Pandit Chanrochanakit offered his perspective by comparing it to another performance festival in Thailand called Asiatopia, which is more accessible to the public. He also wrote about the identity problem of CMSI, noting "it keeps changing its name, so people no longer recognize the original idea" (Pandit Chanrochanakit 2014). But Pandit missed the point: CMSI was highly flexible in the sense that its identity and program could be fluid, as they kept transforming the project and shapeshifting it in different directions. While they did not change the name, programs could not be consistent due to the lack of funding. For example, they would like to continue CMSI as an annual event, but sometimes couldn't make it, so the adjunct program like Weeks of Suffering was created out of necessity. Multiple

satellite programs such as the Week of Joint Sorrow, later changed to Week of Cooperative Suffering, were created and became more visible, creating stronger socially engaging art and greater collaboration with ordinary people than the CMSI, which focused more on artistic expression and was object oriented. This flexibility and openness became attractive for the international art community, especially the possibility of creating works in public spaces. Because the law for public space usage in Chiang Mai was not as strict as in the West, and thanks to the openness of the city administration, many art projects and performances were allowed to happen.

However, there was another reason for the endgame of CMSI, one that no one mentioned: that the curatorial practice and its administration seemed to be the core problem of the collective. Uthit Atimana said during an interview in Chiangmai, 10 February 2015, that there was internal conflict among the artist collective regarding the selection process. Some artists felt there should be a more systematic selection process, while the rest still wanted an open system and social inclusion. The other point was institutionalization and infrastructure, as the university had received a grant from the government to build a new art museum, which would be operated under the faculty of fine arts. Uthit was requested to help run this museum. Thus the idea of promoting public awareness of art in public spaces like CMSI was killed off by the institutionalization of the new museum setting and Uthit submitted to this condition.

CMSI's gradual impact on contemporary art in Thailand and the region became significant in retrospect. Pandit Chanrojchanakit, who saw its importance, noted it could not be resurrected by original organizers. He hoped that "sooner or later, they might do some form of digitized archive for the Chiang Mai Social Installation" (Pandit Chanrojchanakit 2014). Actually, there were attempts by the organizers and its previous members on several occasions to revive the concept after the last chapter of the CMSI. These events were run by mainly young artists who had been volunteers with CMSI while they were

students. They included MokMUAN, by young Chiang Mai-based artists Sutthirat Supaparinya and Att Poomtong in 2003; and Eukabuek, a multidisciplinary project by Uthit Atimana and his friends including international artists Superflex at the CMU Art Museum in 2003. They also coordinated with Thasnai Sethaseree, who did his Master's degree in Visual Arts at the University of Chicago. His version was a project with the Chicago-based alternative space, Temporary Service. None of these attempts succeeded. Only Midnight University was still actively engaged with political activism, and active online as archives of texts and essays about art theory, and philosophy mostly translated by the late Somkiat Tangnamo. However, the spirit of social sculpture and the autonomy of art, inspired by Beuys and for which the seeds of CMSI were planted in the early 1990s became the catalyst for social engagement art projects in the present. These included the Midnight University, The Land, co-founded by Rirkrit Tiravanija and Kamin Lertchaiprasert as well as the migration of internationally known Thai artists' studios in the last ten years such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, who joined CMSI in 1996 by collaborated with Navin Rawanchaikul's Taxi Project and Udomsak Krisanamis. Among those who created awareness of art among the public are the Chiang Mai Art and Culture Center at CMU and the mushrooming small art spaces in Nimman and CMU area.

Through the four editions of CMSI and three editions of Week of Cooperative Suffering in the 6 years of their operation, the festival transformed gradually from a local art project into a regional and international art festival. The artist collective as curatorial practices was the strategy for the CMSI team to critique and liberate themselves from national centric modern art in Thailand. The border crossings between countries pushed the festival to go beyond the nature of Thai modern art as the national centric and transcend the border of the nation-state. Terry Smith described the nature of the contemporaneity as the place making process. Transnational seemed to be the sentiment of the artists at the end of the cold war period and the beginning of globalization in the early 1990s. Artists started to connect with each other around the world

through their practices and large-scale exhibitions, suggesting they reimagined the new world order in the last decade of 20th century. During this transitional period, CMSI managed to not only emancipate itself from the traditional modern art, but it redefined contemporary art to the public and became the early Thai contemporary art platform. It proposed the possibility of contemporaneity, before deciding to end itself before it became institutionalized and historicized.

## references

- Apinan Poshyananda. 1993. "Thai MODERNism to (post?) modernISM, 1970s and 1980s (Seeing 'Yellow' from a Thai Perspective)." In *Modernity in Asian Art*, edited by John Clark. Australia: Wild Peony.
- Baker, Chris and Pasuk Phongpaichit. 2014. *A History of Thailand*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clark, John. 1993. "Open and Close Discourses of Modernity in Asian Art." In *Modernity in Asian Art*, edited by John Clark. Australia: Wild Peony.
- CMSI Committee. 1992a. "Chiang Mai Social Installation Poster." Unpublished.
- CMSI Committee. 1992b. "The First Chiang Mai Social Installation." Unpublished.
- CMSI Committee. 1995a. "Chiang Mai Social Installation Principal and Objectives." Unpublished.
- CMSI Committee. 1995b. "The Program of Week of Cooperative Suffering." Unpublished.
- CMSI Committee. 1995c. "The Third Chiang Mai Social Installation Poster." Unpublished.
- CMSI Committee. 1997. "The Fourth Chiang Mai Social Installation Poster." Unpublished.
- De Domizio Durini, Lucrezia. 2011. "Beuys Voice. Verona: Mondadori Electa." Exhibition catalog.
- Flores D, Patrick. 2008. *Past Peripheral: Curation in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: NUS Museum.
- Khetsirin Knithichan. 1993. "Turning Galleries Inside Out." *The Nation*, November 29, 1993.
- Koh, Jay. 1995. "E.T. (Exchanging Thought)."

- Kuoni, Carin, ed. 2001. *Words of Wisdom: A curator's vade mecum on contemporary art*. New York: Independent Curators International (ICI).
- Lind, Maria, ed. 2012. *Performing the Curatorial: Within and beyond art*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
- McGuire, T. J. 1996. "The Week of Suffering in Chiang Mai." *Asiana* February.
- O'Neill, Paul. 2012. *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Tatree Pokavanij. 1995. "Proposal of Week of Cooperative Sufferings." Unpublished.
- Thasnai Sethaseree. 2011. "Overlapping Tactics and Practice at the Interstices of Thai Art." PhD. Diss., Chiang Mai University.
- Thawatchai Ongwuthiwes. 2004. "The Exhibitions in Siam during 1882–1932." Master's of Art Thesis, Mahidol University.
- Smith, Terry. 2014. "Worlds Pictured in Contemporary Art: Planes and connectivities," In *Regional/Mondiality: Perspective on art, aesthetics and globalization*." Stockholm: Södertörn University.
- Supangkat, Jim. 1996. "Contemporary Art and Multimodernism." Paper presented at The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Brisbane.

## electronic document

- Pandit Chanrochanakit. 2014. "The Negotiation of Approaches: From Chiang Mai social installation and asiatopia to contemporary southeast asian art." Paper presented at the Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative, Hong Kong, January 11. [https://media.guggenheim.org/content/foundation/MAP/pdf/MAP\\_NC\\_ASHKC\\_CH\\_08\\_transcript\\_090814.pdf](https://media.guggenheim.org/content/foundation/MAP/pdf/MAP_NC_ASHKC_CH_08_transcript_090814.pdf).