

Mit Jai Inn

Established in 1992, the Chiang Mai Social Installation (CMSI) became Thailand's first public art program. It was founded as an exchange platform for art and other disciplines, where public spaces could be used as exhibition and debating sites. Ever since the third rendition of CMSI in 1995, which over-expanded the program, CMSI has gradually scaled down and been renamed various things like the Week of Cooperative Suffering and Euk-ka buek. CMSI was a forerunner of what is now known in Thailand as the "politico-aesthetic" practice of art. Mit Jai Inn was one of the key figures responsible for incorporating this kind of discourse into Thai culture.

Mit is an outsider, by birth as well as practice. Born in 1961 to a Yong family in Sankhamphaeng district of Chiang Mai, he became a Buddhist novice in his youth before attending an art college in Chiang Mai. In the mid-1980's, Mit left his art studies at Bangkok's Silpakorn University prior to graduating and started a new life in Vienna. He did return to Chiang Mai in 1992, however, and helped to found the MCSI. He now lives in Lumpun with his wife, Pen Pakata, who works as Director of Lumpun's Hariphunchai National Museum. In addition to his own work, Mit also engages in other community-based artistic ventures. He is constantly involved in art projects with friends and young artists.

You are one of the very first artists to be affected by globalization, as represented by the early days of your art career. What are your takes on personal and community identity being that your origin is Yong, today an ethnic minority?

There hasn't been much of an impact on me. I rarely think in Yong or Thai. When I think about Dharma, it is in Pali, but when I do research on something, it's always based on English reading. Yong language seems to be far from me. However, I do speak Yong on some occasions, as when I visit my parents or participate in family events. Identity is used as a mask or a crutch. It has to be used wisely. We should not be dominated by our identity, nor use it unconsciously.

Do you believe imaginary communities? You've worked on art that brings people to spend a whole day or even years together.

In fact, artists have no community. They direct themselves in various directions because of society's erosion. Everywhere, fifty years after developing, societies have been breaking down. It's not the same as recession, but it is the beginning of fragmentation. There have been gathering of Honda Lovers. Harley Lovers, etc. Still, there has been even more distraction, as the whole of mankind fragments. So, it's a matter of freedom-of-choice. My idea for the CMSI project is based on the belief that society has its own deep origins; we couldn't establish it or keep it stabilized. Society has origins in the loose accumulation of different institutions, like a piece of pudding. People agree to call a given society one national state, like the State of Thailand or the country of Siam. One wishes to represent a society through art, as in movies about legendary heroes. And there are various social programs. For example, there are community conversation groups, which help preserve the vast stores of ancient know-how and local know-how. If we look closely at the workings of each institution, we will see underlying concepts created by communities and their artist. In our case, Inson and I, we didn't engage in art that much, but since Inson loves art, it has united us to this day. It becomes a union under the common flag of "Artist Community".

However, it's undeniable that there are various perspective on art. One of these is related to local communities; another is related to modern, capitalistic society. That's because people in modern society blind themselves by elevating artists' status; art is like holy power, don't you see? Even art itself can't overcome the issues of politics and power. Try... just try not to pay attention to the use of power and the quest for money which is the father of fortune (or at least the steps to climb towards it). These concerns are the source of suffering. I don't agree with new age artists who have to follow that path. I have told younger artists to try and achieve excellence tomorrow rather than mediocrity today. Well, I was trying to say that we shouldn't spend all our energy trying to get into the labyrinth of power.

Even though you're not really into community trends, do you believe in the transfer of identity from generation to generation?

I still believe in what we've done for our later generations and the world : this makes us who we are. At least the concept of constructive ability, which is genetically inherited, is still valid. If the mango doesn't fall too far, it will still become a mango tree. My father was a musician; he was charmed by his instrument. In him as in me, the love for craftsmanship can reveal itself. He could do anything with his fine and thorough ability; he was unique. He invented a new style of plough wheel and a double plough. We could say that he was a founder of innovation.

Talking about the imagined community or imaginary nation, that is a kind of mystical way of seeing society. For me, the only thing that doesn't change is the temple. It is the primitive community, everything is common ownership, not everything is for the dean of the temple alone; outsiders can become insiders thanks to clear expectations and opportunities for everyone; there are systems of donation, support, and maintenance. The monk's society alone could be counted as primitive democracy because the classes are close to one another and differ only marginally.

What do you think about the role of artist in society?

We just stick with the ideology of flux and flow, we ride the waves of situations. It's the idea of voyage. We're part of the trend called Zeitgeist or the Spirit of Times. We call the artist or creator the man of good will, inspired by God. As artist, we need to follow this ideology with mindfulness, adjusting art to prevent suffering or contradiction.

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