

The Progression of Art in Bangkok's Public Spaces

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Abstract

This article discusses the developmental process of art projects in Bangkok's public spaces in response to research on harnessing art as a life development tool. Moreover, the article describes how artistic programs may assist in diluting ego-centrism while at the same time, reinforcing individuals' emotional intelligence.

Keywords: *Bangkok Banana, Thai Community Arts Project, Thailand Contemporary Art, Public Art, Empowering Urban Culture, Oral History*

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Introduction

The date of December 31, 2012, not only marks the holiday farewell to the previous year, but a welcome to the new one. It is also the grand opening day for the new planet “Ego-centric” which the astronauts recently discovered. It is rich in natural resources, oxygen as well as both arable and buildable land. On this same day, a limited selection of just 10 million “suitable persons” destined to be its inhabitants will take place.

There is only one essential requirement that defines a “suitable person” - they need to prove to the God of “Ego-centric” that they are capable of expanding Earth’s orbit.

People around the world were competing to collect redeemable points in the competition to become a planet Ego inhabitant. Individual scores are the aggregate from the year 2001.

Many Earth dwellers wanted to preserve its orbit so consequently they began searching for and creating activities at both the community and district levels to earn more points. These dwellers were proud and knew their own value in belonging to the movement that supports the Earth continuing along its path in the solar system.

The main objective of the activities created by this group of Earth dwellers was to function as a unifying center point of Emotional Intelligence (EQ) reinforcement where everyone achieves a high level of self-satisfaction, learned to love someone and is dedicated to serving society. Although the process of redirecting the ego may seem overwhelming, art and culture can be one universal, strategic source utilized by the people at all levels and of all nations to nourish their feelings of tenderness and sensitivity. Art and culture is a universal mode of expression that the people of all ages and nations can acknowledge and understand. Art and culture is therefore a primary strategy for EQ reinforcement.

After the decision has been announced, there will be 2 groups remaining. Those that qualify and desire to be inhabitants of the new planet “Ego-centric” and those that do not. As for the faith of this last group previous events such as the collapse of the Twin Towers, forest fires, tsunamis, earthquakes, rainstorms, floods, the Holocaust, suicides, economic slowdowns, global warming, bird flu, religious wars, genocides, colonization, nuclear experiments, and others are seen as the punishment or a reciprocal, measured response by nature against humankind’s leading negative personalities.

I recognize Art, not only as an aesthetics tool, but also as a tool whereby human beings may learn more about themselves and their societies. This was the basis for my research on the progression of art in Bangkok’s public spaces. This shows that art plays a major role in heightening the quality of human lives. Experiences from this project also taught me that art can stimulate emotional development.

This article discusses art and culture not only from the perspective of an artist or art instructor, but also from a former teenager caught up in self-centered enjoyment. My knowledge of art and culture allows me to see myself without arrogance or self-indulgence, remaining humble and trying to understand others.

More importantly, I realize my own value and respect what I have achieved. A person with high personal regard or self-esteem is more open-minded as well as much more aware of other people and their surroundings. Additionally, a person with high personal regard has an awareness that extends beyond ones family. Consequently, I wanted to explore my hypothesis that art and cultural activities slow down the pace and rhythms of life, while at the same time, providing a more delicate world vision and empathy. My central concern is to provide a way or a vehicle enabling others to acknowledge these feelings.

I have a secret hope that the art and culture my student's have absorbed during our short period together will motivate them to apply their acquired knowledge and skills for the benefit of themselves and their surroundings after graduation.

It is never too late to embrace art and culture as a strategy for “EQ Reinforcement” and “Ego-centric Dilution” regardless of age, gender or position. One needs only to open ones mind when another offers it to you. During this transformation the giver and receiver's personalities co-mingle.

I am very pleased to report that I am not alone in my belief in these concepts. They are supported by governmental departments, organizations, academics, artists and students as described below.

Declaration of Cooperation in the Fields of Art and Culture

During Khun Apirak Kosayodhin's term as Bangkok's governor, he was the first to initiate, campaign for, and sign an arts and culture declaration to develop the Bangkok Art and Culture Center. He recognized and accepted the proposal of the Subcommittee for Network and People Participation, since it became clear to him that this could be the first step for both the governmental and private sectors to achieve cooperation in the field of art and culture. It also expedited and consolidated support from the government in the area of creativity research.

After establishing a visionary agenda and organizational objectives they signed the below agreement between itself (under the umbrella of the Bangkok Metropolitan government) and other independent art and cultural organizations. This agreement forms a framework of cultural objectives collectively known as the “Bangkok's Declaration of Cooperation in the Field of Art and Culture”.

Joint Declaration of Cooperation in the Fields of Art and Culture by Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) and Alliances

1. The administration recognizes the fact that art and culture contributes to the enrichment of both individual and communal life. We will cooperate to protect the artist's creative expression, liberty, and rights, since this is a fundamental constitutional declaration as well as a human right supported by the United Nations under the category of public participation.
2. The administration recognizes the vital role of artists and art organization in education and shall support them developing and disseminating a holistic body of knowledge to children and youth at all levels, both in formal and informal education systems. We shall promote a well-balanced learning approach which combines artistic expressions, academic knowledge and moral values, and enhances imaginative and creative skills.
3. The administration is committed to promote appropriate applications of modern technology for the creation and conservation of artistic works, for the benefit of academic research, the sharing of learning experiences at all levels, local, provincial city, national, regional and international.
4. The administration is committed to promote the active and meaningful participation of artists and art organizations in the implementation of the policy set forth by the BMA whilst collaboratively creating artistic and cultural initiatives to be carried out in communities and areas under the jurisdiction of the BMA.
5. The administration is committed to promote and strengthen institutions, which are actively engaged in artistic and creative activities at all levels. Drawing on the capacity of art to cross-linguistic and cultural borders and to contribute to mutual understanding between the peoples, we shall facilitate artistic and cultural exchange programs on an international scale. Within this context, particular emphasis must be placed on promoting cultural dignity, moral integrity, transparency and cultural diversity as well as on the encouragement of public participation in order to support sustainable development, and earnestly resolving conflicts and confrontation.
6. The administration shall duly promote and render support to the mass media in presenting to society at large artistic and cultural works, as part of our overall endeavors to publicize artistic and cultural expressions, which in themselves reflect the society.
7. The administration shall act in concerted efforts to promote and create equal opportunity for artistic and creative expression, focusing on those who are disadvantaged and marginalized, for a more just and humane society.
8. The administration shall jointly advocate for a social security program for professional artists and call upon the concerned agencies and organizations both in public and private sectors to come up with formal, systematic and legally

established guarantees in terms of social security, social services and due benefits for those genuinely and professionally engaging in the arts. We are committed to collectively safeguard the rights and benefits earned by those who create artistic and cultural works, as part of the overall scheme to prevent any infringement.

9. The administration shall conscientiously advocate and continuously lobby for the allocation of funds from the concerned agencies, both governmental and non-governmental, in order to enable genuine artistic achievements, bona fide creative endeavors in the arts as well as educational programs and research projects aiming at the advancement of art and culture.

Bangkok Metropolitan Administration's Plan 2009-12 Declaration of Cooperation in the Field of Art and Culture

With the visionary aim of Bangkok as a lively, sustainable city, one of its top five main strategies is as follows:

Strategy No. 4

Develop the Bangkok metropolitan area into a culturally rich Mega-City.

Strategy Theme	Socio-cultural Dimensions
Gateway	Regional gateway of art and culture. A city of knowledge and learning in the areas of health and culture
Green	A city with a high quality of life and distinct cultural identity
Good Life	A city comprised of happy families and safe communities

In this article, I will mention the issue of the Strategy in item 4.6 – Contribution of adding Charm to the Bangkok Metropolitan for cultural identity

Main Strategies:

4.6.1 To develop special programs that support historical and cultural preservation.

4.6.2 To recover and renovate the city's landscape.

4.6.3 To support, conserve and re-enliven local culture.

4.6.4 To encourage the participation of community and religious organizations in the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration's Plan 2009-12.

As a Thai national, artist and art instructor, I had doubts about the ability of government administrators to make it a reality after my first reading of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration's Plan 2009-12. However, at least they have realized and more importantly believe that the support of art and culture is vital for the strength and security of the Thai people and their country. I consequently, now

know that when the selection date for the inhabitants for planet Ego comes, I will have more friends who prefer to stay on this livable Earth.

Projects Launched by the Government Sector

Bangkok Banana Festival

This is a selection of visual artwork under the artistic direction of Asst. Professor Sansern Milindasuta with the goal of empowering urban culture. But more importantly, it is a governmental program encouraging artists to exhibit their works at an internationally accepted venue, through the establishment of the office of Contemporary Art and Culture.

The “Bangkok Banana” project was first initiated by the director of the Contemporary Art and Culture Center under the Ministry of Culture, Professor Dr. Apinun Poshyananda wanted Thailand to host an exhibition comparable to the Venice Biennale knowing that many Thai artists had successfully exhibited there and a similar exhibition in Thailand would be successful. However, due to the lack of sufficient resources of capital and personnel a replacement in the form of a festival was arranged as an alternative.

The government expectantly views the Bangkok Banana Festival as benefiting both Thailand and the international community. The Thai public may gain access to public art and displays, while the government expects the international visitor to view Thailand as a country safe for visiting, vacation or investment countering the recent political and economic crises.

The Bangkok Banana Festival not only displays visual art, but offers a wide variety of cultural displays from many genres. This will encourage and attract a diverse audience to its centrally located venues, the Bangkok Art Center and the Central World shopping complex, enhancing this areas revenues.

Selection criteria for Bangkok Banana Festival's art works (Visual, Performing Art, Concert, and Film) are as follows:

1. For visual works they should be readily understandable and relate to the other presentations in the same local area.
2. The selected works need to be engaging and inviting to the passersby.
I.e. inviting one to take a picture, to touch it or otherwise interact with it.
Works that trigger the viewers' curiosity are more engaging.
3. All works need to be safe for public interaction (especially with regard to children and vandals) as well as robust and designed to survive Thailand's wet summer monsoon season and high temperatures.

The organizer will launch public relations activities to encourage participation. One example of such an activity is a daily photography competition under the Bangkok Banana Festival theme where winning images are exhibited onsite.

Project Inspired by Education for Empowering Urban Culture “One Book, One Story” and “A Scene in My Memory”

The idea of “One Book, One Story” was that if each child wrote one story for their community library, both the child and the parents would have something to be proud of. During the project, each child imparts a story about their feelings, personal events, and life style. If it were not for this project, these personal stories would never be known.

Using art as a tool to encourage the children in the community to express and expand their point of view enables one to learn and understand more details about the conditions of their living environment. Furthermore, this “One Book, One Story” project can be used as a tool of personal reflection instead of telling. Through the feeling and expression of each child, they can become a way to understand and relate to their creator.

Preeyachanok Ketsuwan started to pay an interest in community art when she was studying as an undergraduate. She holds that effective art projects need to be derived from direct experience in the community. In designing this project she inspired Suwan Waelployngarm, a community leader who gave her helpful ideas for her artwork projects with the community. She only sets the agenda about the art, while letting the community members participate and create freely. She at times, needs to help them understand the particulars of art, but she first tries to understand the participants personally. It was through her working to understand those in the community and talking with the children, that her project concept of one “One Book, One Story” came to be.

She finds her work personally enriching as it is an interpersonal chance to learn and connect with others. For example, a child draws a woman with a coffin, but she actually does not know what the child’s intended meaning is. She admires the beauty of the drawing, but only through a conversation with Suwan Waelployngarm did she learn that the child’s mother had already passed away. In my opinion, the child might want to reflect the last scene of his mother.

Preeyachanok found that there’s no need to have a big visible project and no need to be graceful in term of its appearance. On the contrary the “One Book, One Story” is mentally graceful. In her projects both she and the children learned that “Art is spending a period of time of our lives to see life and earth in a positive way.”

“For my first project, I have a chance to talk to children about their favorite careers. What I realized is how I can make them enjoy making “art” and also help them develop their quality of life in order to have wider perspectives and dreams. They never dream of a great career. On the contrary, they prefer to be receptionists, motorcycle services, fried banana sellers etc. This leads to the creation of “paper doll” to be symbols of each child.”

She begins her “A Scene in My Memory” sessions by using a paper doll to symbolize each child. She has them create their doll under the concept that everyone needs

to have their own dreams in life and specifically ones about their favorite career. They can recall these memories when they grow up. This type of activity can also be serving as a child's preliminary life plan that encourages them to start thinking about their future and imagine how they will be able to fulfill their dreams.

Before she begins the artwork process, she has the children view a video that portrays and discusses the various more mainstream careers such as nurse, policeman, doctor, teacher, lawyer, journalist, etc. in order for them to learn about a wider set of career options. From her observations, being exposed to this type of career movies has influenced the children's choice of careers. Some now desire to be journalists, lifeguards and models etc.

Of course in reality, we cannot know what careers these children will eventually delve into, but it is clear that they have absorbed some additional options. Whether they will continue towards their dream or change again depends upon them and the opportunities they avail themselves of.

She also reported that "A Scene in My Memory" is more successful than expected as the curators at the Museum House allowed her students to present their work in a public exhibition. This provides a rewarding opportunity for these young artists to experience first-hand the value of their artwork and its impact on those in their community. They may experience feelings of social acceptance and encouragement along with the value of their contribution.

Comments on Preeyachanok's Projects

The impact of both of her art programs was not a sudden change of thinking in the community, but rather a subtle, but important initial step in which children's life perspective was expanded either directly or through self-reflection as the result of artistic exploration. Their life vision became wider and their feelings enlivened toward additional career opportunities. This expansion of view can encourage a more positive personal perspective for the participants and if this had ongoing support, EQ reinforcement of the children in the community would be strengthened.

This type of personal development can certainly lead to initiating new ideas beneficial to both themselves and their family that leads to an acceleration of realizing ones potential. In time, as these children grow into adult members of the community, they are qualified to continue the same cycle of development with their own offspring.

Most importantly, the intention and the real learning experience of Preeyachanok's programs emphasize the strength of artistic enlightenment regardless of the particular artistic field or university curriculum.

Art Programs for Enhancing the Family

The Art Community and Empowering Urban Culture

Suwan Welployngarm, graduated from Faculty of Management Administration Krerk College, was currently the leader of Wat Sunthornthammatharn Community.

Nawarat is a master degree student and the daughter of Suwan who are the founders involved in the program. She relayed to me the details of the beginning of these artistic activities for children. They were created, inspired and encouraged by her mother so they can modify the participants' behavior by either reducing negative aspects and/or increasing positive ones.

Whether the community is large or small or it is urban or rural what cannot be avoided are the problems of a lack of education, career opportunities and the personal maturity needed for a successful marriage. These issues if never addressed, cause a problematic repetitive cycle from one generation to the next.

In her own community, she realized with love and understanding that these problems needed serious attention. So in conjunction with her mother she initiated artistic activities specifically to address these community development concerns at both an individual and personal level. Since her mother was already well established as a respected member of the community, a cooperative foundation was established for her programs.

Her mother explained "We start small instead of large by changing a person's individual perspective. This is done with various activities to develop their quality of life by bringing ideas garnished from the study of contemporary art. Specifically, the students are trained to consider what were initially viewed as problems from a pleasant perspective through artistic expression. The students are also guided to develop their capability to produce their own works of art while contemplating the problems found in their community"

Additionally she expressed that "If we can design artistic activities where any social or personal problem is considered as a humorous matter, one becomes intrigued and is thereby better able to thoroughly understand it. Then with an established easy access to the community, it naturally encourages cooperation in problem solving, making a formally difficult process smoother and more pleasant."

For example, in the case of the use of vulgar language people familiar with its use regard the issue as a small matter, but in reality it is a big issue. Inside family conversations it can be an everyday negative influence. She proposed a way to decrease the use of such language. Her project idea was to ask participants for their cooperation in avoiding the use of negative language for one day while they wore an mp3 recorder as a motivating reminder. The participants did not know whether they would succeed or not, but they enjoyed the attempt to solve their habit and agreed to "hit their mouths" as a form of self-punish to reduce this behavior.

One of the larger projects she and her mother conceived was a “Walking Children Road Project” with the idea to use a road as the venue for creative activities. Initially they intended to use a real roadway, but due to issues of security and the impediment of traffic, an access road to a temple was used instead. The temple is adjacent to the community and is viewed as a much more inviting location.

The activities held are based on the needs or requirements of each group of children. For example, the boy group has a B-Boy activity (a form of Break dancing) with a trainer for 3 months in advance. The girl group has an inventive art activity to match current social trends such as producing re-usable “global warming” tote bags. A group of children with severe behavioral issues is appointed as the working team responsible for the venue’s decoration and security to focus their energies in a constructive way. Furthermore, there is an opening concert performed by a student band that is in need of an opportunity for public expression.

The selection of activities is the result of thoughtfully finding activities congruent with the requirements and needs of each group of children.

There is also a group photo activity for the families that was inspired by the results of a questionnaire where it was discovered that some had no family portrait due to the economics of their life style and careers as day laborers. Both Nawarat and her mom realized the importance of the family as a central social foundation and wanted to reflect that in giving the opportunity for each to have a family portrait made together.

A portable professional studio was brought in to the event that had props and a projected background for each family to personalize their family’s portrait. The background settings they could select from were waterfalls, mountains, the beach etc. The families became more excited and involved with each other in this picture-taking event as they made their arrangements with props for it. Through the use of digital technology even family members that could not be there in-person was included in the final family image.

A warm feeling of family, pride and kinship was the outcome of this activity held in a communal setting. This supports my concept that art related activities such as this can reduce severe behavioral problems of teenagers who often destroy public assets. This can be especially true if family photos were attached to the medicine cabinet and other items in the community. It is found that when personal ownership is acknowledged, that it is also more respected. Additionally, these photos serve to symbolize the familial bonds of the community. Those that have a stronger sense of belonging are less likely to rebel or act out against it.

One last activity was the making of team T-shirts for the families. This idea was a response to the observation that some adults could not fully attend due to work or other obligations. Each family would individually design theirs’ as they liked which was printed by easy silk-screening techniques. For some, this experience could develop into a career as custom T-shirt producer in the future.

At the end of the event there was an exhibition to display all of the art works produced by the community with a venue for personal exchanges where people could describe their personal impressions and responses to the pieces. It was found that there was more unity and higher levels of cooperation amongst the community members whether they were adults or children; whereas previously there was a vastness of separation.

Comments on the Art Community Projects by Nawarat Welployngarm

These art projects resulted in an increase of love, caring and attention in their community and a reduction in the neglect of its problems. The little matters such as the use of vulgar language and littering are the result of an inferiority complex residing in ones mind as the result of lack of a personal connection to the community, family and a feeling of scarcity. However, after experiencing these community and family art programs that give an opportunity for people to express their feelings, preferences and needs, they are making the first step on the path of a growing self-confidence and personal esteem.

Viewing these ideas and activities by this mother and daughter team, it reflects that no one knows and understands the problems and needs of a community better than the people living in it. However, it is not only the residents of the community; it is also the individuals as well as governmental agencies that are paying attention to the development of their neighbors. Moreover, members of the community must be willing to cooperate and be responsible for helping each other solve problems or seeking ways to improve their quality of life.

I therefore hope that anyone acknowledging the intention and real practice of this mother and daughter team will in turn pay more attention to their own community. They work towards creating a more livable environment, increasing the love and personal regard between the residents as well as being ready to rectify or reduce its current problems. The periodic gathering of small communities strengthened by community art programs certainly leads to the increase in ones mental, wisdom and EQ strength. This combines to strengthen the nation's ability to fight problems and crises as well. If every community uniformly paid careful attention to each other and did not ignore or neglect their problems they would provide a stronger foundation for Thailand.

Clearly every art program or project mentioned here may be considered small and not worthy enough to win any competition nor bring its originators fame, since upon first glance they appear to be just fun group activities. They belie the fact that their positive and cumulative impact is immeasurable. This is contrary to the common impression that most people have for Thais whom are viewed as non-proactive and their "Mai pen rai" or "it is nothing, let it be" philosophy of life that keeps them smiling, flexible and accepting whatever life has in store for them. I love Thai's usual response of "let it be" and its manifestation of an easy acceptance, since it allows them no matter what situation or environment, to be first in line to rapidly adjust themselves. This includes being readily able to forgive others and let them try again.

I smile every time I recall an image of someone lending assistance to another whether it is a photograph of a woman helping an old man or the hand-in-hand support for tsunami victims. These acts of offering caring assistance happen in every community and we all could be an initiator for contributing to the mental and character strength of our communities. We can encourage the appreciation and responsibility for our fellow men along with our living environment, regardless of age, gender, or educational or income level. It can start from a small point of understanding by paying attention to the requirements and ways of life of those around us as the basis for supportive art activities.

Conclusion

The main core of activities, which all groups mutually recognize are those that implore the people of the world to realize the importance of “self-value”. It is a state where people are content with who they are, what they have and what they have achieved. Some additional core activities are those that encourage others to increase their self-value by devoting their time and surplus resources to cater to the needs of the public.

However, regardless of governmental policy, when it comes to specialized community activities, required public school class or even a strong civil awareness from ones family, all strata of society should assist each other to support these ventures for the betterment of society.

In all seriousness, I totally believe that if the governmental and private sectors worked together in a mutually valued, as well as unanimously realized manner, the “minimization of ego-centric” and the “maximization of EQ” would be realized by December 31, 2012. However, for this to take place communication would need to travel both up and down between the individual, community, district and higher levels. At this future time, the Earth will be very pleasant and those that are required to evacuate to live on planet “Ego-centric” may be very unhappy and would likely want to remain.

With mutual appreciation and EQ contributions in the community, members will have learned to live together happily and how to forgive. They will also have learned how to maintain the human lineage as well as internalizing the life perspective of “it is nothing, let it be” and “take it easy”.

I and a number of “love-the-earth people” who still plan various projects will not do small things quietly anymore. We have a power driven heart and positive thinking to work “strongly and actively enough for all when returning in joy from the December 31, 2012 celebration. It is with confidence that “art” and “culture” can really “minimize ego-centricity and maximize emotional intelligence for all enjoying support and assistance from government and private institutions.”

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