

Contemporary Art Project Initiative to Support Artist Career *and Sustain Cultural Continuity*

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Abstract

The idea to support artists to develop and maintain their career has sustained cultural continuity. In Thailand, the primary motivation and support for visual artists are through medals and prize money through platforms such as commissions, competitions and contests where the value lies on visual impact. For contemporary art, the artwork comes in series with a conceptual framework, medium experimentation, working process, etc. These platforms might not be supportive for young contemporary artists. Therefore, this article aims to discuss the Thai platform options available. This study touches on the Paris Salon for the judging process and the movement of art practices; compares art competitions in Thailand with the contemporary art project initiative regarding strengths and limitations. It concludes that the BRANDNEW initiative project could be a suitable platform to sustainably support and promote young contemporary artists in Thailand.

Keywords: Art Competition, Contemporary Art Project, Curatorial Process, Visual Arts, Young Artist

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Introduction

Artists are extremely important to inherit art and culture of the nation from the past to the present. Furthermore, they are considered as a mechanism to develop the country in terms of creative industry. Values of art and culture are in response with the movements and changes in the society, economy and politics. From the past, art has moved from ritual places such as churches and temples to palaces, mansions, institutions and museums. Parallel with that, the art practice in itself has changed from traditional art to modern art and now to contemporary art. Those developments evidently reflect the political socio-cultural changes. And typically, we all learn history through artworks. Therefore, the art forms and cultural dimensions can be changed along with the development of the society. One of the factors that drives the social development is Globalization. It shortens the distance of international influence and stimulates the degrees of art and culture into global level. As a result, national art and culture have to compromise this global dynamic. It is resourceful to implement cultural policy to balance the national and international identity. Not only the Western countries that have vision on that policy, the Eastern countries such as Japan, South Korea or China also focus on it as a part of national development plans. In Southeast Asia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore are the consecutive pioneers to implement cultural policy resulting in income and cashflow in the creative industry as well as tourism industry. In Thailand with the unstable and bureaucratic system that affects the directive cultural policy, it is undeniable that Thai people have exclusive art and craft skills and make profits out of it. Moreover, with some limitations on cultural policy, Thai artists are still well-known and accepted in many international level art stages. That is the first recognition of the study followed by the question on how to create and design the model to support artist career and sustain cultural continuity.

Normally, traditional art is widely respected as national pride. However, because economic expansion is driven by globalization, the art practices must be developed in response with the phenomena in the society. Accordingly, contemporary art is suitable to create dialogues of today subjects through multi-disciplinary practices or approaches. Therefore, it seems to be very significant to balance promoting and supporting traditional art and contemporary art as both genres are frequently acknowledged as cultural and economic values, in which at the end to improve the art ecosystem of the nation. National pride can be represented through traditional art in parallel with contemporary art. In Thailand, there are contemporary artists who are the pride of the nation, for example, Rirkrit Tiravanija with *Untitled 1990 (Pad Thai)* at Paula Allen Gallery in New York, Surasi Kusolwong with *One Pound Turbo Market (2006)* at Tate Modern in London etc. In addition, contemporary artists can be a vital factor to drive the economic expansion in the field of creative industry such as Natee Utarit who is always one of the bestsellers for art galleries and art fairs in Southeast Asia. Therefore, because of the term sustainability, the study scopes to find the way to grow and groom contemporary young artists in Thailand.

Art history provides knowledge and information about the chronological development of art. It makes us understand today and implies on what could be a challenge for the future. That is the core essence conformed from learning art history.

The study goes back to the modern time when the modern art and its movement were grounded and many art competitions were established in order to comprehend and analyze the art competitions at present time. It is undeniable that during the process of any developments, challenge or the objection of the truth can occur. However, the term challenge is positive and important for this study. The study focuses on the Modern era until today practices, when the modern art began to challenge and vibrate all art institutions in the societies until when the contemporary art took place the modern art practices. The research questions about the mainstream art competitions that have been established since the 19th century whether the rules and strictures are still proper in the 21st century. Eventually, by studying an initiative project, BRANDNEW, the research summarizes the reasons why this initiative project is suitable in the 21st Century visual arts practices and offers new possibilities to support and sustain artist career and cultural continuity.

Art Competition in Modern Era

Historically, art competitions have been shaped and formed over centuries. The idea to support artists remains the same but the model has changed and developed through the development of art practices and its relationship to the society, from Renaissance era to Modern era and now to our time, Contemporary Art.

During Titian's time, there was fierce competition among artists for commissions and a drive to dominate the art scene. In times when high standards meant a lot, every ambitious artist strived to excel in his mastery over his competitors and win commission. (Old Masters Academy, 2021)

The statement above proves that during Renaissance period art commission can be compared to nowadays art competition. At that time, a person from a wealthy family performed as an art patron who commissioned the artist to produce a particular artwork according to his will. Some artists could autonomously create the artwork depending on the deal with patron. Consequently, there was no committee, no jury, no rule and no stricture during that period. Moreover, painting surely was a popular art form for commission. That is the way to support artists in Renaissance period.

The Salon or Paris Salon was established in 1667 sponsored by the French Government and Académie des Beaux-Arts. Artists whose works were exhibited at the Salon would be guaranteed the success in their artistic careers. Most artworks shown at the Salon at that time were academic art style which literally referred to artistic style that followed the principles of the academy, historically concerned with figuration and naturalism (Pooke and Newall, 2008:217). Moreover, the jury system of selection introduced in 1748 was conservative. However, like the jury system, the prizes and medals established in 1793 are forms of encouragement which still have influence on art competitions at present time. Nevertheless, the jury system could be the limitation for the Salon and was challenged by the full bloom of modernism. The Salon lost its influence and prestige in the late 1800s. In 1863, certain artists who were avant-garde protested the Salon jury because they

refused many artworks. In conclusion, those rejected artworks were displayed at another space and called Salon des Refusés. These protestors still sought to make use of the name Salon for their own exhibition as they considered it to be imbued with a certain air of prestige (Le Salon des Artistes Français, 2021). In 1881, the Société des Artistes Français was successfully formed, took the tasks of managing and organizing the Salon and preserved the prestigious name Salon for its autonomous organization. Therefore, the Paris Salon was transformed to Le Salon des Artistes Français or the Salon of French artists.

Nonetheless, the respected Salon was challenged by the two breakaway exhibitions that attempted to appropriate the name; Le Salon des Indépendants and Le Salon d'Automne. In 1884, Salon des Indépendants was founded and its association was recognized as public utility in 1923. Pioneer artists such as Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Camille Pissarro and founders; Albert Dubois-Pillet, Odilon Redon, Georges Seurat, Paul Signac claimed to independently present their works to the public without jury and without reward. Consequently, in 1903 Salon d'Automne was established as an alternative to the prestige Salon and Salon des Indépendants which was independent without jury but often led to mediocrity. Frantz Jourdain, the founder together with many artists decided to organize an independent exhibition to promote the avant-garde and innovative ideas of their time championing the concept of multi-disciplinary and equality in the arts. Its exhibitors have been witnesses of the emergence of the most important artistic movements including Fauvism, Surrealism, Cubism, Abstract art, New figuration and Singular art. Recognized as a public service since 1920, now it is supported by the French Ministry of Culture and Communication (Le Salon d'Automne, 2021).

In summary, the ideas of the jury system, prizes and medals from art competitions from the modern era still have influence on art competitions in the present time. The prestigious Salon and the appropriated Salons with the jury system or without have the same objective to support artistic career. Each protest or opposition implies artist's determination to be a part of the game and be stamped from those art competitions in order to pursue the living as a professional artist. It also drives the development of visual arts resulting in many movements emerging in the art territory.

Successive Art Competitions in Thailand

During the 19th century, like all countries in Southeast Asia, Siam confronted colonialism and modernism. Modern and contemporary art can be related to that period when King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) first visited Europe in 1897 and paid a visit to the 2nd Venice Biennale. Consequently, during the reign of King Vajiravudh (Rama VI), the Fine Arts Department which was founded in 1912 hired an Italian sculptor Corrado Feroci or Professor Silpa Bhirasri in Thai to help sculpting monuments and teaching Thais to work on monuments and memorials. Later, he set up the School of Fine Arts which gradually developed and was named as Silpakorn University in 1943.

Later in 1949, the 1st National Exhibition of Art was held by the initiation of Professor Silpa Bhirasri under the joint responsibilities of the Fine Arts Department and Silpakorn University. The National Exhibition of Art has been regularly organized. Later, on the 15th time, it has been handed over to the sole responsibility of Silpakorn University. The National Exhibition of Art is the longest and the most prestigious national art competition in Thailand. Currently, the competition is classified into painting, sculpture, printmaking and mixed media. Thai citizen with no age limitation can submit 2 pieces of works within each category. All works must not exceed 2.8m (width/length/height) including mounts, frames and bases. Installation of work must not exceed the size limit. Annually, expert jurors in various fields of fine arts are appointed. Medal prizes and cash award in each type of work are divided into: 1st Prize Gold Medal and 200,000 Baht, 2nd Prize Silver Medal and 150,000 Baht and 3rd Prize Bronze Medal and 100,000 Baht. Certificates for selected entries will be given to selected artists.

Bualuang Painting Competition was initiated in 1974 by Bualuang Foundation. The painting categories are scoped into Thai traditional, Thai semi-traditional and Thai contemporary. Each artist can submit 3 pieces of two-dimensional works within 1.50 x 2m in size. Judging committee is appointed. Awards in each category are 1st Prize Bualuang Gold Medal with 200,000 Baht cash and the opportunity to attend an 'Art and Culture Field Trip' abroad, 2nd Prize Bualuang Silver Medal with 150,000 Baht and 3rd Prize Bualuang Bronze Medal with 100,000 Baht.

The Exhibition of Contemporary Art by Young Artists was initiated in 1984 by the Art Centre, Silpakorn University. Thais or foreigners who have been residing in Thailand not less than 2 years age from 16-25 are eligible to participate. Original works of fine arts with freedom in concepts and techniques in the fields of painting, sculpture, printmaking, mixed media and others are accepted. Each artist can submit 2 pieces of works. All works must not exceed 2.8m (width/length/height) including mounts, frames, and bases. Installation of work must not exceed the size limit. Expert jurors in various fields of fine arts are appointed. Awards are Silpa Bhirasri Gold Medal Award with 100,000 Baht, 9 of Silpa Bhirasri Silver Medal Award with 70,000 Baht, Special Awards with 40,000 Baht (number of awards depending on patron). Certificates for selected entries will be given to selected artists.

Young Thai Artist Award was initiated in 2004 by SCG Foundation in cooperation with Thailand's leading art organizations. There are 6 categories, two-dimensional art, three-dimensional art, photography, film, literature and music composition. The judging panel, divided into preliminary round judges and final round judges, consists of respectable art professionals including professors from various universities, national artists and members of related associations. For each category, awards are Grand Prize with a trophy from HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, 150,000 Baht cash and the opportunity for an overseas study tour and (maximum) 5 prizes of Distinguished Prize with 50,000 Baht cash award.

UOB Painting of Year Competition was originally inaugurated in Singapore in 1982 and was later organized in designated Southeast Asian countries; Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. The competition is open to all the Citizens and Perma-

ment Residents of the organizing country. It was firstly held in Thailand in 2010 by United Overseas Bank (Thai). There are two categories; Established Artist and Emerging Artist. Each participant can choose to participate in only one category and submit maximum three paintings according to the regional theme that will be changed each year. Two-dimensional and three-dimensional paintings are accepted and subjected to a maximum thickness of 5cm and 1.8m in width and height including frames. Video artworks, installations and sculptures will not be accepted. Entries will be judged by a panel of local and/or overseas artists, art connoisseurs, art critics, curators or other creative professionals appointed by UOB. Awards in Established Artist Category are; UOB Painting of the Year with 750,000 Baht plus the opportunity to compete against the winners from Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore for the UOB Southeast Asian Painting of the Year Award and a residency program at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in Japan, Gold Award with 300,000 Baht, Silver Award with 240,000 Baht and Bronze Award with 150,000 Baht. For the Emerging Artist Category, awards are; Most Promising Artist of the Year with 90,000 Baht, Gold Award with 75,000 Baht, Silver Award with 45,000 Baht and Bronze Award with 30,000 Baht.

The White Elephant Art Award was inaugurated in 2012 by Thai Beverage. The competition, regardless of technique and material, is classified into painting, sculpture, printmaking and mixed media in Realistic and Figurative Art and based on annual theme. Each Thai Citizen or Thai Resident is eligible to submit a maximum of 2 pieces of artworks which must not exceed 2m in width, length and height including frames and bases. The judging committee is appointed. Awards are White Elephant Award with 1,000,000 Baht, First Prize Award with 500,000 Baht, CEO Award with 250,000 Baht, 5 of Second Prize Award with 200,000 Baht and 12 of Honorable Mention Award with 100,000 Baht.

The successive art competitions stated above are listed from the preliminary data collection process. They are well-known and most recognized among visual arts practitioners. It is likely that the winners from those competitions will be guaranteed the fame and success in their artistic careers. After studying the conditions and criteria thoroughly, those competitions have limitations on rules and structures that might not be flexible and suitable for the contemporary art practices such as mediums, the number of artworks that can be submitted and the variations in size. Moreover, there are similarities among them which are the judging system is completed in one day and the judging committee judge the entries from the image and the artistic statement written in the application form. However, there is an alternative model that tries to provide opportunity and experience for contemporary artist whose practices base on concepts, discourses and series of works.

Initiative Art Project: BRANDNEW

BRANDNEW art project was initiated in 2003 with the fundamental objectives to support contemporary artists and disseminate the understanding in contemporary art to general public. Firstly, it is positioned as the community collaborative project among the neighboring contemporary art galleries; Bangkok University Gallery (BUG), Si-Am Art Space and Space Contemporary Art, that would co-organize the parallel exhibitions in order that the audience would be able to see the

exhibitions one after another within the communal area. Another core idea that has been continued until today is to proactively search for the young artists or art practitioners regardless of age and nationality who have never had a solo show in their lives by direct contact to the artists, by recommendations from network such as art institutions and art professionals and by research on artists' proposals and portfolios. An individual artist and group of artists are welcome to participate.

BRANDNEW does not have themes or subjects for artists to interpret. The art project provides opportunity for artists to work on their own interests. Consequently, there are variety in art forms and languages. The only focal point that all artists must have is freshness that is bright and shine according to their maturity, experiences, stories or messages that they want to communicate. (Bangkok University Gallery, 2002)

The message above is excerpted from the preface in the catalogue for BRANDNEW 2003. Until now, this art project still remains in the position that young contemporary art practitioners are waiting to participate and the audience are eager to see the spirit of contemporary art in universal language and experience the freshness in the artworks and messages. However, through the pursuit of the initiative objectives, the project has been developed within itself since the 1st BRANDNEW in 2003 to the current 13th BRANDNEW in 2019. The study finds out 2 core development areas; from community collaborative art space to art space partnership and from judging committee to curatorial process, as described below.

Initially, BRANDNEW art project was co-organized by 3 community art spaces. Si-Am Art Space and Space Contemporary Art were in the vicinity of Bangkok University Gallery City Campus on Rama IV. According to the first edition in 2003 and the second edition in 2004, there were 12 exhibitions by 12 artists (Thai citizens and Thai residents) in those galleries. However, because of some difficulties, Si-Am Art Space and Space Contemporary Art were discontinued in 2005. Therefore, the idea on community art galleries was changed to partnered art galleries. Bangkok University Gallery, the main organizer, determined to support young contemporary artists. Then, the idea of partnership was generated in accordance with the understanding on the situation and stability of art spaces in Thailand. Tadu Contemporary Art Gallery was in partnership in 2005, 2006 and 2008, while the other galleries were in partnership like Numthong Gallery in 2005, 2010, 2012 and 2013, The Art Center Chulalongkorn University in 2006, 2008, 2009 and 2010, HOF Art in 2006, White Space in 2010, WTF Gallery in 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2019, The Jam Factory in 2015, Gallery VER in 2016, RMA Institute in 2016, Artist+Run in 2017, NOVA Contemporary in 2017 and 2019.

Regarding to the judging system, art lecturers and art professionals from art institutions were the judging committee in the first three editions of BRANDNEW. In 2006, the selection of artworks was changed to curatorial process by guest curators. Each edition, Bangkok University Gallery is responsible for the invitation and expenditure of local and foreign curators. Guest curators for BRANDNEW art project are Naoko Usuki from Japan (2006), Marianne Maasland from Germany

(2008), Gridthiya Gaweeewong from Thailand (2009), Ark Fongsmut from Thailand (2010), Ringo Bunoan from Philippines (2012), Isabel Ching from Singapore (2013), Nguyen Nhu Huy from Viet Nam (2015), Angkrit Ajchariyasophon from Thailand (2016), Haymann Oo from Myanmar (2017) and Yap Sau Bin from Malaysia (2019). Regarding to budget wise and regional partnership in ASEAN, since 2009 the project has focused on inviting curators from Southeast Asian countries. The curatorial process starts after open call. The guest curator has to research on artists by visiting the visual arts departments of art institutions, reviewing artists' portfolios and interviewing the artists. Most candidates are recommended by art teachers. However, independent artists can also make appointment with the guest curator. The networking universities are Silpakorn University, Chulalongkorn University, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang, Srinakharinwirot University, Burapha University, Chiang Mai University, Khon Kaen University, Mahasarakham University and Prince of Songkla University Pattani Campus. Later, the guest curator will thoroughly study on all accumulated data and finally curate artists' works for BRANDNEW art project.

Awards for BRANDNEW art project are exceptional and cannot compare to art competitions mentioned above because they are not in the forms of medals, money prizes, certificates or field trips abroad. Selected artists will be supported with production cost, spaces, facilities and other forms of supports to create their first solo show at designated art spaces assigned by the curator. During the curatorial process until the exhibition installment, the outgrowth of the project is real life learning experience which is more meaningful than the production of the artwork itself or the tangible reward. Eventually, it is frequently mentioned that the most precious prize of BRANDNEW is the opportunity to learn how to be a professional artist for a living.

BRANDNEW's Offspring

The previous topic discussed about the development of the BRANDNEW art project. This topic will clarify the intangible prizes and successes of BRANDNEW artists.

Arin Rungjang was one of the twelve selected artists in BRANDNEW 2003. He mentioned that BRANDNEW supported and encouraged his contemporary art practices (Interview, June 14, 2020). It was the right step after his graduation. If he had not got the opportunity for the first solo exhibition at Bangkok University Gallery, he would have left the professional artistic career and worked in the film industry. Arin presented his installation work titled 'Emotions as Waters' by transforming the gallery space into a pond by filling up water with light reflections from ceilings. The audience were invited to walk into the ankle depth water and experienced the tranquility (Figure 1). The artist challenged and played with the audience emotion and perception. Currently, Arin is one of the most active Thai contemporary artists with extensive and multi-disciplinary art practices. He participated in many world-class art festivals such as Venice Biennale (2013) and Documenta 14 (2017).



Figure 1. Left, Arin Rungjang: BRANDNEW art project in 2003 and right, Documenta 14 in 2017.

Krit Ngamsom was in BRANDNAME 2008 curated by an Amsterdam-based curator, Marianne Maasland. Krit stated that it was a great opportunity to work with the foreign professional curator. He recognized the importance of curatorial process and international standard of contemporary art exhibition. He also learnt to solve technical problems that might happen in the space. BRANDNEW confirmed his competency to be a contemporary artist. He participated in many international art events; Singapore Biennale 2013, Bangkok Art Biennale 2018 and Venice Biennale in 2019.



Figure 2. Left, Krit Ngamsom, BRANDNEW art project in 2008 and right, Thai Pavilion, Venice Biennale in 2019.

Jarasporn Chumsri was a young female artist in BRANDNEW 2015. Apart from her skill and unique style in painting, she has ability to apply her contemporary lifestyle exploring through the social network to be the concept of work. In Figure 3, on the left she re-interpreted Impressionism in contemporary way by capturing the joyful and impressive moments from virtual space of Instagram on canvas. On the right, she portrayed Impressionism exhibition perceived from virtual gallery through the website in order to reflect her interest in contemporary way. Jarasporn stated that the opportunity from BRANDNEW encourages her to continue this painting style and concept, teaches her how to write a proposal and prepare portfolio in a proper manner.

Alternative Contemporary Art Projects

BRANDNEW art project is an art competition model that is widely open and provides more options for young contemporary artists. However, there are two art projects established after BRANDNEW that aim to support contemporary art practitioners but with different approaches.



Figure 3. Left, Jarasporn Chumsri: BRANDNEW art project in 2015 and right, an upcoming exhibition.

EARLY YEARS PROJECT was initiated in 2016 by Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC). The project welcomes Thai artists age between 23-40 years old to submit their initial proposals for a chance to interview with the appointed committee. Pannawat Muangmoon, an artist who won the scholarship in **EARLY YEAR PROJECT #4** explained that the shortlisted artists must attend all preparation courses that are essential for artist career such as how to write a proposal, how to do a research, how to install the artworks etc. (Interview, May 21, 2020). Later the project provides the production cost for artists to develop their works. The shortlisted artists can freely choose advisors. Additionally, there will be a critique session to conform the ideas and concepts of works to the annual theme. At the end of the project, the artworks will be exhibited and only two artists will be selected by the committee for the Residency Funding and the Mobility Funding.

HEAD YOUNG was also initiated in 2016. The project targets to support young Thai artists age between 18-25 years old residing in Northeastern part of Thailand. The interested artists can submit their portfolios and proposals with the application forms. The guest curator will interview the candidates. The selected artists will be provided production cost and spaces for their solo exhibitions.

It is too early to compare BRANDNEW with these two alternative contemporary art projects. Since 2003, BRANDNEW has been changed and developed from limitations and difficulties. Therefore, it is appropriate to observe them in the earlier stage for further study.

Conclusion

Art competition has been one of platforms to support the artists since the Modern era. The judging system, medal and prize money had been palpably initiated since then. Today, that criteria still have influence on art competitions in Thailand. However, the initiative art project, BRANDNEW, has been designated to challenge the judging system by developing the committee structure into a professional curator. The project is proactive to do outreach curatorial research. The guest curator performs curatorial processes by in-dept interview with artists on their concepts of works and reviewing on their portfolios and backgrounds. Later, after short-listed, the curator will inspire creative ideas, exchange cultures and share knowledge with artists which Chun Wai (2019) clarified those mutual benefits 'curator as collaborator.' Apparently, young artists who undergo the interview with the guest curator will familiarize the curatorial process. It is a way to groom and grow contemporary artists.

Rules and strictures on mediums and sizes are barriers for contemporary art practices which are conceptual based. To present the artist statement, the artworks might come in series (not one or two works for presentation), in various size and forms. Therefore, BRANDNEW requires only portfolios and proposals for open call so that artists can freely create the artworks regardless of themes and subjects. As a result, the project provides spaces and facilities to support artists' creativity for their first solo exhibition. Moreover, selected artists will experience the installing processes in the actual gallery space where negotiation and collaboration are engaged.

BRANDNEW can be considered as an inferior in terms of money prizes. On the other hand, it will be superior in terms of the opportunity to understand how to pursue a living as a professional artist. The first solo exhibition in a professional art gallery empowers the spirit of the artist. The experience to work closely with a local and foreign professional guest curator strengthens artists' skills and abilities to be able to stand in the international art stages. Almost one third of selected BRANDNEW artists are still around the contemporary art sphere. Apart from Arin Rungjang, Krit Ngamsom and Jarasorn Chumsri that mentioned earlier, Yuree Kensaku, Boonsri Tangtrongsin, Kentaro Hiroki, Prateep Suthathongthai, Orawan Arunrak, Latthapon Korkiatarkul and many more still participate in major art exhibitions. To conclude, BRANDNEW has reached the target to groom and grow contemporary young artists to be able to carry on their career. Correspondingly, BRANDNEW is a contemporary art project initiative that sustain contemporary art in Thailand.

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