

Contemporaneity Decolonizing Knowledge & Independency

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Abstract

This article discusses the platform and selected texts from Journal of Urban Culture Research (JUCR), in relation to contemporary turns from the 60s on participation and diversity in responses to the making of an open society to the 80s on decolonization of knowledge from the enlightenment trajectory. Only lately, these ideas of 'decolonization' has gained traction in our regions and we need to be careful not to mix the meaning of this term with the fight for independence after the WWII by colonized nations or criticism of the concept of orientalism and the construction of racial stereotypes. Discussed turns on participation, diversity and decolonization are juxtaposed to issues and working in urban culture, the everyday, the cognitive and communicative qualities in the performance of the self, and the many others. This text includes discussion and exploration of critical structures in research and analytic processes, on reading theory-based and practice-based writings and relates these to art-making in traditional spaces and in real world situations.

Keywords: *Contemporaneity, Decolonializing Knowledge, Artistic Research, Urban Culture, Urban Culture Research, Journal of Urban Culture Research*

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Introduction

The Journal of Urban Culture Research (JUCR), is an educational open platform with aims to nurture and scrutinize knowledge production through writings and researches urban culture's many faceted connections and the arts. It is based in Thailand, a collaboration starting in 2010, between Chulalongkorn University, faculty of Fine and Applied Art (Chula) and the Osaka City University (OCU); recently renamed Osaka Metropolitan University (OMU); both based in non-native English-speaking societies.¹

History has shown that start-up of research journals are not easy, particularly when they are not located within the dominant culture. Pakistan artist and intellectual, Rasheed Araeen moves to London in 1964 and started Third Text (TT) in 1983 after founding the short-lived publications of Black Phoenix/ Black Umbrella in 1978. His concerns with postcolonialism and eurocentrism are well known,² his publications served as a platform for voices residing outside the west and from a recent report, Araeen made texts to become part of his various artistic medium.³ For Araeen, to establish Third Text in London seem to be the zeitgeist of those decades for intellectuals to be present within the site of power if we take into account of Stuart Hall's effort to encode and decode messages between the dominance and the others and see culture as a space of remixing meanings, and Frantz Fanon's revelation of the everyday indigenous world and the violence produce by western dominance⁴ are further instances of such efforts.

JUCR has among non-western platforms independently acted to make connections within regional context on research and knowledge production. Resource-scarce non-western journals faced many and different difficulties in light of the prevalent authoritarian state and control in Asia's different belief and political systems. One of such initiated by artist and educator Lucy Davis, was the journal *Forum On Contemporary Art & Society*⁵ that began in 2001 and ended in 2007 after having to negotiate the complexity of funding, free expression, and 'management' in the nation state of Singapore. Their unexpected final issue was on discussing censorship and receive the wrath from the domineering self-named 'smart' city state. Third Text, being Asian led but based in one of the centres of modernity has become an international reputable journal for critical perspective in term of being cited,⁶ exists today under Taylor and Francis after the departure of Araeen in 2011 while the Third Text Asia with editorial based in Karachi and London exists from 2008-10.⁷ The end of TT Asia is certainly a disappointment for Araeen as he has express hope for it to succeed.⁸

Against these backgrounds, I begin my discussions on selected texts from JUCR publications. I am an artist-curator practitioner with praxis of over 35 years, beginning in Cologne,⁹ specializing in public spaces with focus on social engagement, participatory, and community self-determining activities, and with prior experience in sciences and health.¹⁰ Focusing on visual and public art, the progression of my practice to praxis involved trans-disciplinary artistic research in the University of the Arts Helsinki, an institution that did not belong to the modernist enlightenment bloc. My artistic and curatorial activities mostly took place in both

west and east Europe and in East and Southeast Asia in systems under communism, military dictatorship, flawed democracies, include immersive experience in nomadic cultures both in their dominance (Outer Mongolia) and minority (Irish Travellers) roles and in various religious societies. These experience and opportunities allow me to take on different professional roles as educator, evaluator, and mentor. Being aware that bias, opinions, and cognitive flaws still exist in my own thinking and expression, even with heightened consciousness, I hope to counter them with an open reciprocal praxis, development of participatory writing,¹¹ and specific validating structures from the real world, as a form of criticality to present constructive texts.

As this review cannot be separated from my own praxis, my text will meander between reviewing past texts of JUCR with what may appear as my readings or proposals of its full possibilities.

Urban Culture as An Open Site for Practice To Praxis

Generally, our education has primed and schooled us to value the readings of books, until we realize that not all knowledge come from printed or written matters. Schooled under the western system, being taught literature interpretation skills and exposed mostly to their philosophy thoughts, I could not remember acquiring any critical tool to dissect and intervene matters from within, but rather was schooled to pass examinations. As our awareness progress to consciousness and criticality of the exploitation of modernism and social injustice, our need of negotiating with the many and different others in society become acute, exacerbated by increasing uncertainties in the macro fields of the economy, ecology, and governance to the micro fields of mental health. With the resulting “contemporary turns”, consciousness of the values of diversity, the participatory, and lately decolonization in knowledge production, activities in critical knowledge production to question existing structures, dominances and demand for constructive changes has increased. However, with the urgency of climate disaster and reoccurring pandemic, what is an urgently needed ‘new criticality’ seems to move at a snail pace. .

Theory-based and Practice-Based Research and Writing

JUCR was initiated and is managed through a collaboration of Chula and the OCU.¹² Chula supported both forms of theory- and practice-based research up to the doctoral level with terminal qualification in PhD and DFA made it interesting. Practice-based research – also widely known as artistic research – would always conclude with field projects together with a thesis to discuss the dynamic of practice with theories as praxis, and would normally require a longer duration to reach graduation. Practice-based research should not be confused with other investigations in which artists produce texts that describe their practice or projects, and are claimed as “practice-based” or “practice-led” by some institutions and researchers.¹³ The historical development of artistic research in the attainment of a DFA over the last hundreds of years emerged from art practices to praxis in the drawing schools to academies,¹⁴ mostly began as drawing schools, such education form prioritizing real world application also exist in other fields.¹⁵

Theory-based writing tends to be dominated by western enlightenment trajectory and north-Atlantic hegemony, which have shown their shortcomings and have created inequalities,¹⁶ challenged by the call and actions of the decolonization movement rising from scholars from the South, African, and east European. Such as in the late 80s by discussions initiated by Rosa Maria Rodrigues,¹⁷ Walter Mignolo,¹⁸ and many others such as Enrique Dussel.¹⁹ Only lately, it gains traction in our regions we need to be careful not to mix this decolonization of knowledge with the activities for independence after the WWII or criticism on the concept of orientalism and the construction of racial stereotypes.²⁰ This decolonization of knowledge is another crucial factor in any platform of knowledge production.

Because of these two different processes of research, writings on practice are as important to nurture as those based on theory. Even though Chula U and OCU are institutions from non-native English-speaking societies; JUCR encourages contribution in English in order to make knowledge accessible to a wider audience, to encourage exchanges and discourses. OCU priorities trans- and inter-disciplinary research application into the field of the progression usages of energy, social conditions in health science, and support and care in the field of disaster management.²¹ There are ideal opportunities for JUCR to nurture research texts of combining urban culture and arts in real world situations and applications of Arts & Science, Arts & Health, extending research, practices, and activities into working with the ecology, aging society, social illness, addressing embedded anxiety, and trauma.

However, theory-based English texts have shown many limitations in incorporating experiential qualities, emotional properties of the everyday and traditional oral knowledge of different cultures that are passed down the generations, although English texts have contributed to creating new structures in urban settings as cities grew and have been able to respond to contemporary turns but because these texts originated from the master's tool²² (western education), we need to be critical of embedded agenda. Experiential knowledge is local – often contained in oral history – are embedded with emotional properties, from anxieties to uncertainties, and inherited ancestor narratives. Knowledge-experience from other cultures (that are yet to be translated) and the Quantum Entanglement (although a phase pioneered in western knowledge but understandings of it have already existed in different forms in non-western knowledge) are barriers to researchers who only seek text-based research and even more so if they are English texts.

I see the potential for the field of urban culture – and for a journal such as JUCR as the platform – to play a constructive role, in bringing together the two forms of research and knowledge discussed above. JUCR can serve to act as a research platform on urban culture to nurture responses to contemporary turns, participations across sectors and disciplines. Additional support for texts from non-native English speakers that focus on regional contexts will advance progress in the decolonization of knowledge. Western education structures' domination is continually being criticized, and calls for expanding connection, diversity, and collaboration of

the global South and elsewhere is increasing being heard, such as this tagline for Knowledge and Global Power:.. “The demonstrated existence of Northern dominance and influence does not imply Southern passivity, nor uncontested domination. Knowledge production is now negotiated, and creative ways of participating are devised.”²³

Urban Culture: Experiential Meaning-Making and Social Connectivity

In the everyday, real life performative interactions contain non-verbal and verbal communication, which are inclusive of tones and expressions that contain and produce interactive knowledge, with deep meaning-making. They build relationships and manifest nuances of power relationships and internal struggles of materials and class division. In my over 40 years of working in public spaces to create network and activities in various fields to initiate participation to collaboration, I have found that using text alone without human interaction cannot succeed. The lockdowns in our recent past confirmed our needs for the ‘social everyday’, to connect with performances of the self to the others.

However, the interactive knowledge, reciprocity, and experience situated in the everyday need continual affirmation and validation. Through our sometimes shifting and dynamic cultural values, practices, and depending on the different sites and purposes, such knowledge dictate the performances of our multiple identities and the reciprocities from the many others.

Experiential meaning-making within urban culture is defined by the emotional and dynamic stages in our everyday perception, which are always fluid. Our manifold interactions with others, institutions, states, and the public transcripts²⁴ are the main factors that determine outcomes we make. As each individual evaluates their existence with the others, in the face of uncertainties, value is placed on tangible and intangible actions and gestures that could elevate the anxieties and challenges of the everyday. Arts, culture activities and materials that cannot provide the crucial ‘witness thinking’²⁵ – linking to the real and the environment – but only have message pointing to, talking about or down to, will not be valued or will be seen as non-essential during times of crisis by the people at large, such as during a pandemic. As shown in a recent survey²⁶ in pandemic stricken Singapore, 71% of respondents listed artists as the most non-essential jobs, before telemarketer, social media/PR manager among others. What caused this low esteem toward artists?

Some artists responded to the results by challenging the people to do away with entertainment – which many turned to during the pandemic – as entertainment is art as well. Such a retort blinded the bigger picture, and missed the opportunity for constructive discussion on the highly intangible values residing in arts and culture. A prominent public intellectual and social-political leader of the ruling oligarchy responded to results of that survey by listing out the theoretical values in arts,²⁷ which to me was a rather top-down approach that did not respect and respond to individuals’ needs during crisis.

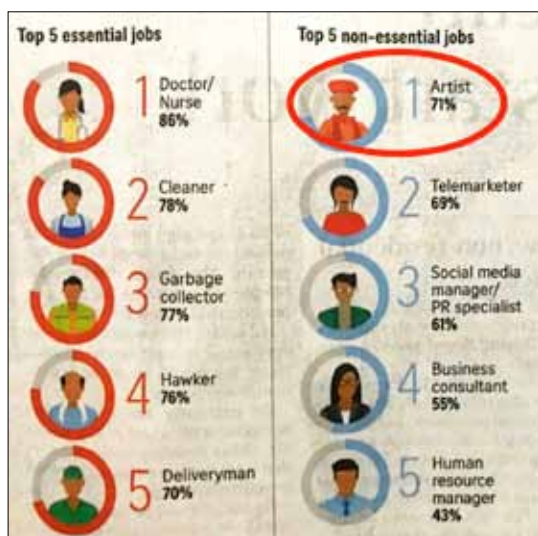


Figure 1. The Sunday Times, Singapore, June 2020. Source: Author.

Macro (Power and Policies) and Micro (Everyday) Structures in Urban Culture

JUCR's inaugural issue in 2010 focused on community development and social transformation through the lens of cultural and artistic activities in relation to respective authorities in different countries. In his text, *The Progression of Art in Bangkok's Public Spaces* educator and artist, Kamol Phaosavasdi see:

'...Art, not only as an aesthetic tool, but also as a tool whereby human beings may learn more about themselves and their societies.' (Vol.1:75)

And calls for a scrutiny of our egocentricity, as a reboot in the community or at a larger reference, associated with the new millennium. He discusses his hypothesis

"art and cultural activities (to) slow down the pace and rhythms of life, ... providing a more delicate world vision and empathy." (Vol.1:76)

Believing in the universal quality of intangible art beyond its aesthetic could work in tandem with emotional intelligence to nurture development of love and empathy across divisions to face earthly calamities. The author is conscious that this is a hypothesis, aware of selective bias and dominant influence but with high hope because of the city authority support to develop an independent Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC) as a milestone through the signing of the agreement 'Bangkok's Declaration of Cooperation in the Field of Art and Culture.'²⁸ With the end of this agreement in 2021 and the past years of tension with the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, BACC faces various rocky roads ahead.²⁹ Questions arise as to the artists working with BACC – being experienced in creating objects and concepts for spaces, mostly indoor, and in short duration – were equipped to deal with the open public environment and the Thai's many layered social norms in intersubjective exchanges.

In the same issue, Takuya Oi's *Alleviating Isolation Through Art Projects* (JUCR Vol.12) discusses social isolation of the marginalized community of "day labourers - yoseba" in the Kamagasaki district of Nishinari Ward, Osaka City. These are citizens and residents of the city affected by issues of old age and economic recession. In order to alleviate these isolations, a local NPO, Cocoroom, includes public art activities such as workshops and events to address the result of physical social distancing, lack of independent resources and mental wellbeing of the 'yoseba' as homeless persons, to increase social participation for this community. The project is named as "Kamagasaki Geijutsu-Daigaku (Art University) = Kamagei." Kamagei provides lectures and workshops by specialists on various subjects.

The short text did not elaborate any conceptual theory that can accompany the implementation of the public art activities open to everyone. The core concept is simply:

'We wanted to create a space where people of Kamagasaki and people from outside the area could encounter each other.'(Vol.16:76)

As there was an omission in describing the processes of making the program, of choosing the subject and facilitators, these came across as being organized in a top-down manner and the locals and participants were not roped into the decision-making, the sharing of ownerships, experience, knowledge in organizing the activities, with future possibility of taking over and be independent after the organiser has left. The unpacking of one workshop 'Expression', the only example, did not indicate additional qualification of the drama educator's experience in working with persons of different classes, ages or understanding communication processes between strangers. The facilitator's statement of the goal of the workshop.

'...is for each and every person to be able to be just as they are in this venue. That's the space we're creating.' (Vol.16:77)

– is a wish but being aware of the difficulties of initiating public and intersubjective communication within a Japanese society, especially among strangers and hoping that it would somehow work, by saying that the workshop is for

'...letting each and every person be just as they are, and making a space for that,...' (Vol.16:77)

To me, this may be stretching a speculation too far and risk sounding like rhetorical acrobatics. Missing are learning moments in discussing how the local contexts and cultural practices can play roles in the motivation, implementation, and evaluation of such public activities.

The discussion on 'Isolation as a Social Problem'(Vol.16:74) gives the circumstances of the yoseba being discriminated leading to them being a taboo in communication processes and producing their transitory social life that prevent social bond-

ing. Could this art project includes some motivating processes of interactions, where the yoseba could at their own pace, outside a classroom scenarios (of being taught), use everyday activities and community services to create opportunities of exchanges with residents in the neighborhood. These yoseba are matured and elderly individuals and not young children whom one can put into the classes and teach to communicate and interact.

In Bussakorn Binson and Alan Kinear's 'Creative Arts Therapy with Thailand's Mobile Arts Therapy Group' (JUCR Vol.6) on recurring flood crisis in Bangkok, specifically in period of 2011-12, a volunteer Mobile Arts Therapy group³⁰ was initiated to elevate the acute trauma and anxieties face by displaced residents living in flood relief centers³¹ all over Bangkok. The conceptual framework grounding the activities in this period was termed as Creative Arts Therapy. The descriptive text discusses the use of creative art activities from various mediums of visual arts to performing arts to engage with the residents' emotional conflicts, to foster self-awareness and personal growth. The theory was drawn from the American Art Therapy Association³² but in the creative activities, visual arts, music, dance, and language were applied in connection with local context so that the young participants could connect with them. Both verbal and non-verbal communication were applied which could support any individuals who may be reluctant to express or may be emotionally charged and have difficulties to communicate with strangers and those outside their comfort zones. Narrations in activities with the facilitators plus the participants' ability to verbalise or express their stories and events will help to reduce tensions and anxieties, and can create a witnessing of positions, relationships and reciprocity with the many others. The mundaneness of the everyday and of waiting are countered by these activities cum entertainment, creating learning moments for participants and can generate positive imaginations and hope.

However, a limitation needs to be pointed out about these activities – with older persons as facilitators and young participants – is whether the young participants would be able to draw on critical positions to articulate any feedback to the project, especially in the context of the Thai's reverence for the older persons. For a research journal, I think that such aspects of activities can provide learning opportunities. The obvious 'Chang' (Thai for elephant) in the room, is to ask what or where is the State during such calamities? What about the other communities that do not have the fortune to receive assistance from these volunteer groups, who are seeking refuge in the various relief centres, Do they belong to a specific class and how are their hardships compare to other citizens. To connect such a project to a larger discussion, such as unpacking Thai's volunteerism within the Theravada concept and the established priority given to community development are other constructive entry points for this study, from the perspective of urban culture.

Through the above texts, we can see that urban culture is a vast field where the interconnected dynamic practices of the intellectuals, power leaders, activists,

citizens, and residents predetermine the everyday social, in tandem with the economic and the political, to make meanings and progress. The everyday's effects on individuals evidence the legacies and manipulation of past deeds, patience and greed, and also show victims' and survivors' resilience to deal with impending uncertainties and disasters. These three texts offer greater potential than that realized, to explore in greater depth, to discuss critically within their specific belief systems, to engage respective authorities, and open up possibilities to initiate policy changes.

The Dynamic Manifestation of Political, Economic and Social Well-Being in Everyday Life

To go deeper into the Everyday, it is in its spaces that the stages of our existential identities are put on display and mirrored, whether in private or public. These are performances of the self, to act out and on our togetherness; they display our anxieties, and our stages of mind to the many, different others, and emerging uncertainties. Urban culture and the everyday is an area of contestation between the dominant, public transcript against the public display of private transcripts. They are about everything social, political, and economical: they highlight resistances, struggles, and anxieties, and attest to people's creativity to intervene and respond to the structures and uncertainties.

I would like to use the following three examples to illustrate opportunities for the study of the intersections of the politic, economic and the social well-being, as visualized within everyday contexts.

In Havana, the capital of Cuba, a much sanctioned country³³ lack availability to global materials, Cubans used creativity to manage shortages, such as condoms,³⁴ and local resources, to sustain their well-being. Cultural workers find ingenious ways to get their work out especially during and after the pandemic,³⁵ writers reading out their works, utilizing videos and free broadcast with their improved Wi-Fi access points and internet to overcome long queues.



Figure 2. Havana, Cuba 2017, Social activities in the non-touristic area of La Lisa in outer Havana. A game in the public space and chat group in a residential neighborhood.



Figure 3. One of the many parks in Havana city, where paid Wi-Fi can be accessed. These are the only public spaces available for residents to go online in, using time-rated prepaid cards, while internet service on cell phone is only available from very late 2018.³⁶ Other spaces for Wi-Fi are in the lobbies of international hotels in sanctioned Cuba.



Figure 4. Creative private repair works in progress as spare car parts needed to be sourced, in the non-touristic neighborhood away from Havana old city centre.



Figure 5. Daily activities at a neighborhood store, away from Havana old city centre. Most goods are limited and have to be allocated to residents of each neighborhood.



Figure 6. In the aftermath of the rare (since 1923) category 5 hurricane, Irma, that landed with great devastation in Cuba, September 2017, army personnel of both genders move in with hand tools to various sites. Power was down for over 7 days in this residential non touristic quarter.



Figure 7. Elderly struggle to survive in Singapore.

In 'smart' and expensive Singapore, the elderly struggle to survive and this has gained much public attention. The 'smart' nation label³⁷ given to Singapore are connected to technological and modernisation advances that have made life easier but the everyday visuals of elders working in public eating places and housing estates have raised anxieties and incited people's senses of social justice. Everything is top-down in Singapore's neo-liberal led authoritarian system, and

when facing criticism, the retorts are mostly myopic (see my discussion before on a recent survey on how essential the arts are in pandemic stricken Singapore). The lack of human-centric consideration,³⁸ chasing materialism and exploitative factors has made Singapore a very unhappy place.³⁹

In sanctioned Myanmar, below, the oppressive state has always used the everyday to place and perform their public transcripts of dominance and manipulation. Residents resist with their private transcripts and establish cultural practices as counter to the wide spread oppression and lack of resources that I have discussed in detail in my case study of setting an independent capacity-building space in Yangon.⁴⁰ When the private transcripts reach a seething point, it will break out into the visuality of the public ‘everyday.’

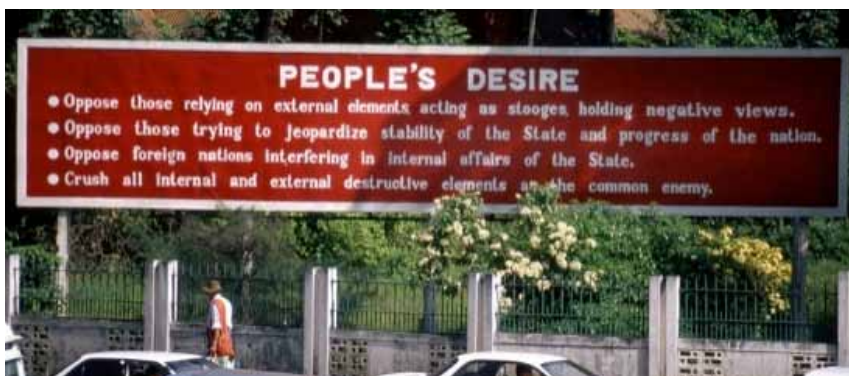


Figure 8. In Yangon, Myanmar a billboard depicting the military's statement of the “People’s Desire” that targets foreigners.

Billboard depicting military statement of the “People’s Desire” in English that targets foreigners, in 90s Yangon, (similar billboards in Burmese are in their neighborhoods) is one of the many public transcripts created by the military dictatorships, on top of local laws, and cultural practices.



Figure 9. A 2007 Yangon billboard stating ‘Be hand in hand for the national convention’ asking the people of different ethnicities to work together.

In Yangon, 2007. Billboard stating: ‘Be hand in hand for the national convention’ asking the people of different ethnicities to work together, create a new constitution, and trust the forming of the democratic government. This was not true as the quasi-civilian government formed in 2010 was completely controlled by the military. Books published now reveal the narratives of control, deceit, and mind-sets of how those in power were undermining democracy.⁴¹



Figure 10. Yangon 2021. Peaceful protest against the military coup. Private transcript made public. Photo credit: The photographer and citizen wish to remain anonymous.



Figure 11. In Yangon 2022, young persons used masks during public display of their resistance as many of them have died and captured.⁴² Photo credit: Yangon Revolutionary Force.

The dynamics of politics, economy, and social well-being cannot be explained in their singularity. In time of scarcity, individuals and the state will produce creative improvisation. In Havana, I observe the strong social bonding coming together, patiently waiting for their turns to do whatever they can.

In Myanmar, the young people have discarded their fear and use all means to create tools for resistance. In the past military periods up till 2009, the various ethnic groups were divided but the young individuals are now able to start to unify in their present fight.

What is “Appropriate Knowledge” to Respond to Contemporary Turns?

Diversity, Participation and Author-Centricity

Diversity and participation are known for quite some time, as emergent concepts in discourses in Postmodernism around the mid-twentieth century as a resistance or challenge to modernism. Different disciplines build upon these discourses and refine their criteria to be suitable for further exploration in their specific fields. Some important fields emerged such as deconstructionism and post-structuralism, which did not matter when look at the structures now. However, I observe that after all these years, author-centricity in production is still prevalent in the academia, as well as and in the arts, especially in international events promoting regional identities and interests.⁴³

Earlier implementation of ‘participatory’ practice in the 70s by the NGO sectors working in less resourced countries with local communities and grass roots provide adjustment to their learning curves...mistakes like doctoring participation count on paper to obtain funding, not following through of concept on inclusiveness or carrying out activities absence of discussing diversity and participation block the transfer of knowledge, experience, and shared ownership.⁴⁴

Historically social engagement in art was pioneered by female artists in the 70s as performances in the public. Only in the 80s does art production makes a slow entry into the participatory realm under the rubric of ‘socially engaged art’ with art activities taking place outside the box, e.g. in public and everyday spaces, performances in non-institutional settings.⁴⁵ Dialogical Aesthetics (Kester, Grant) became the concept to unpack this new field and it was in the late 90s that I was exposed to the critical discussions through an international platform and enter into meaningful exchanges with like-minded colleagues from the west. - Although social engagement has existed in different ways in artmaking in Asia, the Chiang Mai Social Installation (1992-1998) - which demised after its 4th iteration in 1997-8 – was one of the earlier manifestations of what is termed as the “socially engaged art” form in Asia, albeit in a largely show and tell approach than those practised in the west. Unfortunately most of these activities are driven largely by good intention, passion, and author-centricity, lack critical knowledge to question their power relationships (the dominances and the others, feminist perspectives,..) or sustainable structures to nurture their art practice into praxis.

Plastic Sea: Art Exhibition on Marine Plastic Pollution, a recent text (JUCR 2021 Vol.23) by Haisang Javanalikhikara, is on raising awareness of pollution, in a 9-day public project announced as artistic research, that include components of participation, public activity in building diversity in knowledge, and emerging technology in art making. This text narrates a wide range of public art projects, locally and foreign, but with only brief descriptions of intentions and without providing theoretical concepts for these examples to guide or discuss the learning moments. The exhibition Art for Air (JUCR 2021 Vol.23:241) mentions ‘...to use creativity and artistic practices to raise awareness on the issue, and to find ways to solve this problem.’ However, details from Art for Air, that could be shared and discussed with Plastic Sea as learning opportunity are absent, especially the part on finding ‘ways to solve this problem.’ The technology of the artwork did make an impression if one is exposed to it for the first time but how can this impression become knowledge to nurture changes that can reduce plastic waste? How can such new awareness of pollution in a show-and-tell motivate the audience to make concrete change on their return to their everyday or resist peer pressure?

Plastic pollution is not caused by technology but human’s dysfunctional relation with nature and uncontrolled consumption of materials following their egocentric ways. Superficial discussions and short interactive durations are inadequate to support public facing activities, to teach or pass on knowledge or to intervene the socially negative practices of plastic waste in the society. Criticism of the top-down 12-year plan of the Thai Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (JUCR 2021 Vol.23:240) is a good start but why did the project coined as artistic research just point to the issues without offering any durational intervention or viable solution? Are there possible processes of working to motivate the people and to identify the sources that generate these plastic wastes as community activities? Author-centric rhetoric without discussing actual processes or public incentive to motivate real world measures and more crucially with no effort to hold the sources of these pollution accountable, are not helpful. These issues on claim as artistic research, local context, and others are discussed later under different criteria in some following sections.

Educational Outreach Unit for Visual Arts Exhibitions (JUCR 2011 Vol.2), a text that discusses the use of mobile platform to conduct participative educational activities for the public, began by listing the budget constraints of operating a museum and named many national and well-known museums around the globe. Whether and how these foreign museums share any common context and purposes to those in Thailand is not discussed. The author, Monvilai Rojanatanti could have just made a small selection with one or two case studies on these public outreach activities and discuss their success or failures. He does question the viability of foreign materials for Thais in ‘Does these written materials really enhance the interpretive learning process for the Thai audience?’ (Vol.2:70). The Singapore Art Museum serves as an ideal example in his text but the author neglects to take into consideration the authoritarian structures of a government that has held onto their power since independence in 1959.⁴⁶ All public materials to culture, education, and other institutions serve only to uphold the ruling party⁴⁷ and the censorship of culture, films and the arts are common occurrences.⁴⁸

The Outreach Unit's agenda advocated in the text's abstract, commonly state objectives such as 'enhancing their (the people's) understanding of art...' and '... shape their hearts and souls leading to good citizenship,' Such rhetoric should raise red flags as they sound like brain-washing or priming strategies used in commercial or state propaganda. No doubt the author's Outreach Unit may have the good intention of doing social good but they fail to consider that audience are not empty vessels nor ignorant, and may have greater concerns in life and face greater struggles in the everyday, which raises question of the suitability of this top-down approach. Should not the targeted audiences be consulted on what they wish to gain from the museum and how the role of education be transmitted? I think the author is out of touch with the context, using a reference from 1995 that discusses the Louvre which was conceptualized in the late 18th C Europe and does not account for the context of education in contemporary Thailand or in an open society.⁴⁹

Similarly, in JUCR 2020 Vol. 21, a classical theory and statistic-based academic text, *Strategy & Social Interaction for Making Creative Community...* Dongsuk Huh, Su-Hee Chung and Byung-Min Lee discuss the effort of Korean cities to use craft production to build '...culturally creative community...based on cultural and place-making strategies....' The authors relies solely on empirical study to theorise social interaction in '...place identity and social empathy in order to achieve sustainable regional development.' (Vol.21:4).

In fact, the reliance on the theory of place-making has been criticized as being top-down and associated with the detrimental effect of gentrification.⁵⁰ The absence of engaging local residents in consultation and participatory processes indicate problems in social interactions,⁵¹ unless the residents are not parts of the community or this text is only trying to influence state policies for business development.

In the afore-mentioned texts, the mainframe seem to be all authors-centric and artists-led, selective, top-down research and writing, with almost no reference to the diversity or participative input from the audiences, residents and participants. Diversity has become a much-loved narrative of neo-liberalism, but its outcome should not be a superficial display of multiculturalism. Diversity should include the narratives of people's feelings, experience and differences allow these nuances to surface and claim their importance in our everyday, locality, and formation of knowledge.

Practice to Praxis: Employing Artistic Research and 'Thick Description'

To effectively respond to the contemporary turns of diversity, participation, decolonization and to nurture scholarly texts that discuss the turning of practices to praxis, critical distinction needs to be made to differentiate artist-led or author-led research with artistic or academic research. Author-led research, also known as text-based academic research – being not inclusive of non-text experience or oral knowledge – would not be able to acknowledge cognitive bias and the absence of diversity of other voices and participation in knowledge production. Artistic

research is not about learning rigid regulations or adhering to set of methods but acquiring a mind-set of the progressive stages of awareness to consciousness in producing shared knowledge, local context, and experience.

A good method to adopt in artistic research is to write using the richness of ‘thick description’⁵² popularized in anthropology and ethnography texts. It is a qualitative method that is able to effectively respond to and capture experience, emotion, interactions, and be inclusive of unspoken thoughts and contexts. All these could otherwise be lost if writings used to discuss praxis are not able to adopt a language that is differentiated from writing based only on text references. I will further discuss how this method can be used in my discussion of the following text.

In *Dialogic Performance:...* (JUCR 2010, Vol. 1:118-127) Dan Baron Cohen as an outsider based in Brazil uses the theory of performativity of dialogical aesthetic⁵³ to unpack his interactions with the locals and the possibility of decolonization of the participants’ (including his own) internal dialogue with their embedded historical memory and imagined identities. These intercultural interactions took place within the intimacy of the everyday, which for the author is a form of participatory and educational democracy, and if carried out with adequate duration could have transformative potential.⁵⁴

The author’s narration of his praxis begins with the crossing of the inner and public stages of non-verbal and verbal interactions to make meanings. He begins with performances of the self,⁵⁵ in the between strangers and then progresses to subsequent social stages of acquaintances, participants and ideally as collaborators.⁵⁶

‘In the fractional pause in our public dialogue, I read the eyes and ‘comportment’ of my questioner to interpret his(or her) subjectivity, his presence and how he is reading mine, to decide how I will identify the two stories I inherited with my name,...’⁵⁷(p. 119)

The text discusses issues of intimacy and public dialogue and the complexity of intersubjective interactions, of reflection, interpretations, performances, and expectations. These references could have moved out of the individual cognitive bias and imaginations, to discuss with different others’ imagined narratives in another context or belief systems.

The author also discussed colonized subjects bear the mutilation of their cognitive selves, distorting intimate dialogue and expressions and recognizing his performativity as a ‘white male.’ The author’s efforts of applying decolonization within these intimate exchanges with the locals draw from his personal and traumatic history of loss and cries for social justice. He regards such breaking of silence of bias and selection in dialogue as beneficial for all participants and be constructive as shown in

‘...breaking our silence in an intimate space of principled but empathetic solidarity where we could reflect analytically and creatively, not defensively and dogmatically about the politics of our subjectivity,...’⁵⁸ (p. 125)

Another indication of the author's reflection of his praxis is the discussion on the internalization as colonized subjects and acknowledgement of the effect of immunization..

'...to know what needs to be transformed to avoid reproducing our oppressors within our own subjectivity.' ⁵⁹ (p. 125)

We need to recognise that these reflections are made as part of the author's efforts of moving his own practice to praxis; however, the others – his referenced individuals – did not affirm nor deny these reflections. His method may be able to reflect the exchanges during the social stage between strangers but I speculate that it would be inadequate in the more advance social stages of participation where trust need to have developed. Language proficiency would have been another factor to allow unhindered understanding of each other.

As the local's unedited expression and interviews are not available, we can only rely on the author's words, as he describes with good intention and an informed white gaze, the '...unintentional...repressed Brazilian presence' when he discusses the performance of the self in the dynamics of the culture of local hospitality, with 'excessive generosity' to strangers and with 'increasingly global, neo-liberal reflexes...on empathy...poverty...within the rural culture of solidarity.' (p.123) Such descriptions add depth to his study, albeit being speculative on the author's part.

In order to discuss his individual position towards conflict, trauma, and tragedy with all the subjective emotionality, any researcher's process of acquiring distance to discuss it in detail, and present them as knowledge for scholarly purpose would have been paved with potholes and bias, as Cohen would have faced. Employing the method of artistic research would assist a researcher to avoid selective bias and personal position, and by applying concepts of reference investigating from the positions of social relationship within local family structures and society norms, the researcher can find useful entry points. Any member of the society will be able to connect on the micro level with the identities of many different others as each person would know what it is to be a son, daughter, man, wife, brother, sister, mother, or father.

Produced knowledge should not only reflect the competence and quality of the individual researcher but should also to communicated and discussed with the many other colleagues across sectors, disciplines, and belief systems. When civil language and constructive framing are used in criticism, and are not personal attacks, it should not offend others, As knowledge is not rigid but need constant validation, continual meaning-making with other disciplines and sectors are crucial in moving knowledge and experience forward.

Returning to the example above, I would propose to frame the analysis of Cohen's project using his descriptions of oppressed colonized subjects (p.124), and include references to empathy, solidarity with the others. By employing the method of thick description – as a qualitative method to reflect on emotion, experience, and

interactions – to discuss his intimate exchanges with participants, the writing have been inclusive of unspoken thoughts and contexts and provide a closer study of the internalization of oppression and the immunization of the Brazilian participants to the contradictions between resistance and self-determination. These are examples of some entry points to discuss a praxis based on artistic research. The qualitative intersubjectivity and theoretical framings of multiple spoken and unspoken voices in artistic research would be able to accommodate differences and contestation in discussion across sectors and disciplines.

Criticality in Analysis

My entry points in discussing my selected JUCR texts are certainly infused by my own bias, as mentioned in the beginning: there is no escape from the ego, conditioning, education, and personal limitation of an author. For example, I did not include topics crucial to the Asian context such as feminism, gender, and queer studies, for lack of competency to discuss them in depth such as the development to the 3 waves of feminism⁶⁰ or the hardship of members of the LGBTQ in gaining social acceptance. I have instead chosen to focus on discussions on critical structures, accountability, and otherness, and I hope that they can be constructive to shaping future publications of JUCR.

Although I have criticized numerous texts as being top-down in approach, due to their western modernistic structures and dominance of western resources, neglecting non-western origins in knowledge production, this does not mean that these texts do not have any critical and constructive features. Credit needs to be given when texts adopt ethical processes, acknowledge shortcomings, wrong doings, and show constructive forms in analysis and depth of discussion. An example will be the academic and author-centric text, *Strategy & Social Interaction for Making Creative Community* (JUCR 2020 Vol. 21) criticizing the city lack of paid ‘attention to the cultivation of expert communities and young craft artists,’ (p. 19) and not working with educational functions in this aspect. This text is able to discuss shortcomings and offer suggestions on constructive actions moving forward if residents’ emotional reflection and participation in city planning be included.

Issues in Decolonizing Knowledge

After discussing the necessity of responding to contemporary turns and inclusion of artistic research to adequately address practices to praxis and the everyday I conclude here with discussing some issues in decolonizing knowledge.

Language, Publishing Conventions and Dominating Concepts in Education and Discourse

As I mentioned in the beginning, with the difficulties facing a journal produced by non-native English institution and the need for making available English texts for sharing and dissemination of knowledge, we are presented with an unequal playing field.⁶¹ In fact, these difficulties do not begin with text production but from accessing education itself and making a mark in the international arena, where clearly those who are from English colonized countries have certain advantages. My personal experience of encountering postgraduate non-English native-speaking students in western European institutions suffering from humiliation and deg-

radation in their studies and examination are numerous. The dominant language has also been employed as a tool to reject references in other languages,⁶² to censor unwelcome critical text due to difficulties of interpretation or to be reviewed, accessed, and accepted into the institutional knowledge bank. My experience bear witness to these and showed me the necessity of the processes of decolonizing knowledge.

Within the field of research methods, each writer needs to decide on what kind of research they wish to produce; the same with JUCR on what kind of journal it wants to be. The wide field in urban culture does make this difficult to achieve a committed and consistent approach for the journal. Presently, its inclusion of short texts, mostly descriptive, from different disciplines, that even includes journalist reporting gives the impression that everything goes.

Perhaps, JUCR can try implementing a few categories that provide substantial analysis, texts from practices, and an open section with more attention given to the length and usage of references in the texts. Over 20 years ago, *Third Text*⁶³ demands from each contributor a word count of from 2000 words and increased to 7000 words, which is similar to JUCR. This length is necessary in order to unpack and analyze, provide adequate materials and different voices or case studies. Editors should be strict on this word count, clarity of connecting analysis and knowledge, and demand precision through proper citations, page referencing, and quoting and not be satisfied with a list of book references. Today contemporaneity demands making interconnections, transparency and substance, especially in knowledge production.

Accountability to Readers: Appreciation, Appropriation and Transference

Is accountability subjective (just a matter of opinion), or related to the general perception, like that mentioned in the survey from Singapore, on the public perception that artists are non-essential to the community? Or could accountability be discussed in the framework of appreciation vs. appropriation? In the larger arena of the real world, ethics, issues of appreciation vs appropriation, acts of transference are often discussed in dynamic to each other. Appropriation and transference are also popularly engaged in contemporary artmaking.

Transference began to be used in the field of counselling in therapy practice,⁶⁴ to discuss unconscious association but it has also been used in education, as in the "transference of knowledge." When used in visual cultures and the arts, it denotes a conscious exercise. The ethical discussion in culture and art involves issues of whom transference benefits and is it appropriated for personal gain. Examples are forthcoming. It is considered to be acceptable when transference benefits a community, or assist in the struggle of many to overcome hardships and transference is seen by Nietzsche's transformative narrative⁶⁵ as a transitional phase in individual quest for self-knowledge.

An example of transference was found in the merging of the tiger and the eagle symbols on the external and other animal symbols on the inside walls of the

Catholic CamLy Parish church in Dalat, which has found a foothold in a dominantly non-religious Vietnam while working with members from the mountain indigenous communities. The compromise of its Christian doctrine by using non-Christian symbols from the minority's existential struggle in Vietnam is a case of positive transference of meanings that are valuable to the mountain communities and in turn add reason to justify the church presence.



Figure 12. An outside wall of the CamLy Parish Church, Dalat, Vietnam.

A controversial event in association with transference arose during Singapore Biennial 2016 when artist and educator S. Chandrasekaran⁶⁶ in his installation and public performance protested the historical exploitation of Indian convicts under British colonial rules in the 1800s to serve as cheap or free labour in pre-independence Singapore. His proposed public performance, was to walk in the public streets, while being bodily pierced with metal hooks, rod, and attached sculptures along the roads and passing buildings that the convicts built, with the intention of portraying their hardships, and through his performance he hoped to “gives meaning to their presence” (quote taken from Today). In doing so, he ‘transferred’ – through his own ethnicity – the suffering of the convicts onto his body. However, he seems to have forgotten the privileges he has now, a citizen with rights, as an artist working on an international platform, and in a different time and site. All these was not available to those convicts he wished to connect with. Critically, it would seem that the artist is the sole benefactor of the attention seeking act. As he failed to obtain permission for the proposed performance from the biennial organizers, partly because of resemblance to a Hindu’s religious act, he transformed his artwork to become an installation in the form of “an intention to walk” and during his artist’s talk in the gallery where his installation is shown, he performed a blood oath as protest and declared that he will cut himself everyday as a sign of his protest until the day he is allowed to perform his walk, which to my knowledge, he eventually did not carry through with.⁶⁷ Nor did he pull out of the biennial.

The Weakness of Intertextual Reference and Interpretation

Textual knowledge demands that we use references to show the connection, acknowledgement of ownership in knowledge production. In education alone, each level, from under- to post-graduate demand different criteria applied to the outputs of research processes, texts, and articulations just to name a few.

However, text references become outdated, when they are, let's say, over 10 years old, if left to stand on its own without being subjected to contemporary validation, because our world move at a pace at which knowledge production cannot follow up with, depending on the disciplines. When a referenced book is published over 10 years ago, the research done would have been much older, written in a different context from the present author's. If this text involves interviews, reports, and... then other contexts are also implicated in their reciprocity and impact the original author's findings and conclusions. There would be numerous contextual information – for example those that implicates various power relationships (dominance, resources enable to scarcity, linguistic competence,...) – that would be lost and flattened when an author simply builds an argument by solely lifting off a statement from another author's text. No matter how brilliant the interpretation may be, it denotes incompetence, laziness, and... on the part of the author. In several texts published in JUCR, references used are over 20 years, one was in 1934 to reference social patterns in a city that has not yet exist.

There are various ways to circumvent these shortcomings (of using outdated references), for example, by understanding the backgrounds and the contexts of the interviewees and interviewees and within which the artwork was made, quoting authors through depth of research or asking for updated comments from parties concerned. With deceased authors, reading more than a book of these parties will throw more light. When I discuss the Dialogism of Bakhtin⁶⁸ as one of the main foundation to discuss my Art-Led Participative Processes, Bakhtin's Russian texts on linguistic, heteroglossia, and polyphony, and the dynamic and unfinishedness in meaning-making was only translated into English in the 80s which demanded that I read different translations of his books. Dialogism, a later coinage, discussed the flaws in Marxism which in turn was a criticism on Modernism, in connection to labour, capitalism, and social exploitation. Bakhtin's era was during the period of Russian imperialism, evolving into Russian socialism, under the oppressive hands of Stalin and Lenin and the departure of Trotsky. The suppression of critics has been acted out in history, as in today. Bakhtin was fortunate to be saved from execution but met with banishment to a small village where he could teach and died in the mid-70s. These backgrounds, the various concepts in and interpretations of Dialogism from different translators and disciplines, and lastly how they are connected/applied to other knowledge out there.⁶⁹ If no one uses Dialogism for contemporary discussions, it could mean that this knowledge has become irrelevant.

Another way of overcoming outdated references would be to initiate communication with the authors to ask for their comment on the context of the statement and their references. Remarks could be discussed and analyzed with author's

intentional use and context of discussion. When the original refereed actors are not available or remarks not forthcoming, feedback can be sourced from contemporary colleagues or persons to provide polyphony and diversity. These acts of consultation, reciprocity will not remove all bias but can be used to show depth, respects, and engagement of ethical processes to cultivate inputs and decolonize the knowledge of a single voice. Whether if it is text or practice led knowledge production, domination by one over the others or the many (history, popularism, the famous) on one should not take place.

Another aspect that can assist the decolonization of knowledge is using non-English with English References, as it will present more than one perspective, as interpretation and translation never provide exactly the same content. It will not be a single voice.

Revisiting and Updating

Another way of dealing with outdated references is by revisiting the subject. When Plastic Sea made references to many public projects, especially those in Thailand that took place years ago (one of these, The Land project, will be discussed here.), time passed could be included as a marker to analyze outcomes, what are the stages or forms that, these projects have become or progressed into and what are their effect on the participants? Have any of the objectives that emerged during the formation years reached any fruition? Has their practitioners practice evolved?

When The Land,⁷⁰ a project that took place in the environment outside the city of Chiang Mai was initiated in the late 90s by artist and mindfulness practitioner Kamin Lertchaiprasert, I was extended an invitation. The concept as I understood was for artists to use a small lot that was given to each artist for mental contemplation, not to produce any works, and use the common communal space for exchanges. I was hesitant as I was in the midst of getting out of the author centric traditional mode of art making and was still lacking a critical viable structure to scrutinize my practice and had doubt of whether such a concept could take precedent over the goals of egocentric art production . On visiting the site a year later, I saw that various housing artworks of international artists were displayed without any visible evidence of occupation or meditative activities. Engagements with the public, environments or with any community in the vicinity of The Land was absent, except for Mit-JaiInn who attempted to grow a circle of quick growth trees, hoping to create some form of housing although I was told later that his idea could not be realized. Subsequent visits revealed some locals have moved in and out to use the land for cultivation and some students were trying to make project work, but the ground looked desolate with non-functioning and neglected art installation. The narratives I heard were that the students were waiting for leadership to kick-start many ideas. The project has much attention from the art world that questioned the meanings of the physical and mental space⁷¹ and contains valuable learning moments of working in the real world outside elitist spaces and outside of the short duration of modernistic art making.

Conclusion

The Importance of Connecting and Negotiating with Real World Complexities

Throughout this text I have repeatedly stressed the importance of using context to scrutinize ideas, practices, and their application in the real world culture without neglecting the position of dominance, processes of reciprocity and prioritizing clarity in communication and interactions. At this very moment the art world is rocked by the controversy in Documenta 15⁷² related to arts from our region. The quinquennial aims to serve to show and tell and the intention of the city of Kassel to use this event to enhance its cultural standing but have now taken a hard hit even involving criminal proceeding due to reaction to the presence of anti-Semitic imagery in the work by Indonesian artist group.⁷³ Not considering the privilege, context and inability of those from the dominant group in society to be equipped to deal with complexity in multi-layered conflicts, and going into the real world of politics with the naivety of art world egocentricity are some of the major causes.

Summed up here by artist Hito Steyerl who withdrew her work from D15:

‘I have no faith in the organization’s ability to mediate and translate complexity’ ... the curators ‘repeated refusal to facilitate a sustained and structurally anchored inclusive debate around the exhibition, as well as the virtual refusal to accept mediation.’⁷⁴

On one hand German intellectuals, stakeholders, and public have developed a rich history and perseverance of dealing with resistances, conflicts and trauma, their own and with many different others, relating to ideologies, racism, religious tension, wars and holocaust. There are acquired competence and also blind spots. On the other hand, we have art workers belonging to the dominant group from Indonesia, a post-colonized country, with long history of resistance, dealing with fundamentalism, schooled in their local practice. But perhaps, being in the dominant group, they have been comfortably unchallenged, and have not acquired the capacity to deal with the complexity of negotiating with cultures very different from their own. In contemporary circles, I have often encountered artists who operate under a universalism equipped with a self-righteous ideology to speak for the selected weak, for selected wrongdoings or in the name of free expressions.

According to philosopher Omri Boehm, this is a clash of two ideologies of anti-universalism,⁷⁵ that has pitted a European post-holocaust thinking against a Post-colonistic global south. I think we can add one more universalism to this simplify duality, the one from the art world where saying ‘it is not our intention to cause trouble’ and ‘this artwork has been exhibited elsewhere without causing problem’ and the super card of ‘freedom of expression’ to trump all other existing values.

In our alternative facts, post-truth⁷⁶ and fake news world, mishaps, misunderstanding, and accusations are bound to happen with any confrontational provocative works and activities. We all need to build the ability to contextualize, communicate, and mediate effectively and sincerely in multiple sites or else such incidents will keep happening in the future.

Endnotes

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- 10 Working in the late 80s with Gesundheitsladen Koeln, a health activist group in Cologne on the issues, future projections of genetic and reproduction technology and the founding of the citizen movement BuegerInnen Beobachtung Petunien.
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- 23 Raewyn Connell, Fran Collyer, João Maia and Robert Morrell 2019 Knowledge and Global Power: Making New Sciences in the South, Monash University.
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- 25 Shotter, John. 'witness thinking' as a form of participatory thought... was discuss by Chu Chu Yuan in relation with other theorists under 'durational immersive involvement and 'relational responsiveness' in Negotiation-as-Active-Knowing:.... A chapter in Koh, Jay, 2016, Art-Led Participative Processes: Dialogue and Subjectivity within Performance in the Everyday, second edition, SRID/Gerakbudaya, Kuala Lumpur, 2005.175-6.
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- 28 BACC is dear to all artists and cultural workers, being a presence in the numerous 'sit in' with my Thai's colleagues to ensure that the building should not be combined with a shopping mall led to success.
- 29 The repeated absence of promised funding by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration and their attempt to take control in the last few years, the existence of a BACC raised great concern to many and Phaosavasdi's desire for BACC programs and public outreaches to act as a catalyst for the individual and community wellbeing may be jeopardise.
- 30 This volunteer group was established by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bussakorn Binson, FFAA, Chulalongkorn University, Ms. Krittiya Kawee Wong, a former PhD candidate with support from artists of James H. W. Thompson Foundation, and the Chulalongkorn University Alumni Association.
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- 55 In the *Performances of the Self*, I used the concept from Erving Goodman to discuss the performances of identity in public spaces during intersubjective interactions. It is connected to those concepts of James C. Scott and John Schotter.
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