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Could Installation Art be the New Medium for Southeast Asia?

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Introduction

The rise of three dimensional installation art as a medium of artistic expression in the developing countries of Southeast Asia over the past decade is irrefutably transforming paradigms of modern art throughout the region. Through its capacity to relate meaningful, controversial and often politically critical subject matter in an indirect and implied fashion, installation art has become a favorite tool for social commentary in social and political climates that are not always conducive to such analysis.

The developing countries of Southeast Asia, with the exception of the Philippines and Thailand to some extent, are tricky terrain for artistic protest involving political and social dissent in any form. Installation art gives the artists, thinkers and common people of these countries a medium of communication that in some ways transcends that of written language, in that in place of words, installation art provides a more tangible, and personal experience of the idea in question.

In this paper I will look at new traditions of installation art found in two countries of the region: Indonesia and Thailand. I chose these two countries because I feel that they represent two very different sides of Southeast Asia. Let me explain: After centuries of Dutch colonization, Indonesia fought bitterly for its independence. Since then, it has been governed by, until

recently, a strong military dictatorship that kept firm control over its people. Indonesia is a largely heterogeneous country in terms of religion, ethnicity as well as geography. These formative factors, among many others, have created a uniquely Indonesian method of conveying social commentary through various artistic media.

Thailand, in contrast to Indonesia, was never colonized, and due to its more homogenous reality, Thailand (in comparison to Indonesia) largely lacks the ethnic and religious tensions of its large island neighbor to the south. Likewise the modern art traditions to emerge from Thailand have generally been less political and less reactionary than those coming out of Indonesia. It is my contention that the many cultural differences between these two dichotomous examples of the new Southeast Asian nation have resulted in two different traditions in regard to installation art. In this paper I will compare and contrast these two traditions.

Through looking at some of the issues and nuances surrounding the general state of art and expression in both Thailand and Indonesia, I hope to find out why installation art has become such a successful phenomenon in both countries. To this end, I will look at the work of two artists from each country in hopes of gaining insight into the role that installation art can play as a means of personal, social and cultural expression in both societies. However, before addressing the topic, I think it is important to talk a bit about installation as an art form in itself.

What is installation art? : Definition and history

Installation art can be defined as the placement of objects in a certain context in order to convey a certain feeling, idea or experience. Through their placement, a relationship is created between the objects and the viewer. This relationship transforms the objects from their everyday uses into being a part of a specially created experience. According to San Francisco's Capp Street Project, a pioneer of installation art in the San Francisco Bay Area, "Installation Art is an art form that has no definite boundaries but is an environment created for a specific site. Often working with the physical or historical features of the space, the artist uses any combination of materials at the site he or she feels is most appropriate to express a concept or evoke a feeling."

An important aspect of installation as a medium is that it is an international phenomenon, applicable to any physical or cultural setting. The idea of flexibility is key, as essentially any setting can be used in combination with any variety of materials. Like all other forms of art it explores various aspects of life, from the intensely personal to the overtly political. However, one stipulation of installation as a medium is that it is site specific, meaning the artist creates the installation with a certain place in mind. Likewise, due to its sometimes temporary relevance and limited monetary value, installation is a far more ephemeral medium than traditional media such painting and sculpture.

Evolving from many artistic traditions, today's installation art is heavily indebted to early twentieth century movements in the visual and plastic arts, architecture, theater and music. New ideas regarding the literal and figurative interrelationships between space and form manifested themselves in new forms[1] of all of these disciplines.

The further manipulation of these new forms in art, theater, music and architecture by people and institutions like Picasso, Wagner, Marcel Duchamp and the Bauhaus school led to new understandings of art itself as a combination of any and all of the above disciplines. Out of this inventive adaptation[2] of various artistic media to the creative process, installation as an art form was born.

By the 1960's, installation had become a significant and established medium in the world of modern art. Eminent artists like Christo, Claes Oldenbourg, Jim Dine, Frank Stella, Jannis Kounellis, Robert Rauschenburg and Donald Judd were all fluent in the use of this medium as an interpretation of and commentary on the rapidly modernizing world around them. It is the work of these artists that catapulted installation art into the global realm of artistic thought. By extension, it is generally the work of these artists that introduced artists in Southeast Asia, and throughout the world, to the use of installation as a means of artistic expression.

Adaptation of installation art to the Southeast Asian situation

As it stands, it is undeniable that installation art has caught on in a big way throughout Southeast Asia[3]. In this section I will look at some possible reasons for this phenomenon, and discuss how these reasons could relate to installation art.

All Southeast Asian cultures have very impressive traditions when it comes to the arts. As in the West, the artistic traditions of Southeast Asia generally ascribe to the fields of music, dance, theater, textile, plastic and visual arts. Over the past century, and the last 50-60 years especially, modern, updated versions of these indigenous artistic traditions have manifested themselves throughout the region. These new traditions in all disciplines, painting most noteworthy among them, have redefined the boundaries of each medium and often mirrored important social themes in the process.

The problem facing "traditional" modern art in Southeast Asia is its social implication of class status and exclusivity. Installation art, through its use of temporary, site specific and generally valueless materials, can bypass the exclusive nature of the gallery "scene" by focusing on the interpretive, rather than the monetary, value of the exhibition. Rejection of the economic value and inherent exclusivity of more traditional modern art is not the only reason installation art has caught on in Southeast Asia. There is a far more interesting reason. My research and experience has indicated that, unsurprisingly, Southeast Asian people are definitely predisposed to not only enjoying art, but having an interactive experience with it as well.[4]

Art in Southeast Asia, as in other places, works like language in that it facilitates the transmission of ideas. This language relates culture and experience through a visual vernacular that makes itself understood through the manipulation of space and form. Like the spread of writing based on the Devanagari script or the trade Malay spoken throughout the region during the seventeenth century[5], installation art can be seen as a similarly effective means of

communication because it is easily understood and easily applied to the Southeast Asian cultural context.

In addition to being a language, installation art is also a show capable of creating all the drama and emotion of acting or dance. Again, the long and highly evolved traditions in theater and music throughout Southeast Asia indicate that people there instinctively relate to performance. Performing a theatrical or shadow puppet version of the Ramayana or Mahabharata brought to life heroes who, in the words of Anthony Reid:

were transposed to a legendary past of the Southeast Asian country itself, where they were seen as intensely real progenitors of human society[6]

Thus, due to Southeast Asia's long history of understanding theater as a representation of life, the distinct lines drawn between fantasy and reality in Western culture are far more difficult to discern in the Southeast Asian situation. Going to see a wayang or nang yai performance of one of the old epics listed above, the Southeast Asian viewer can partake in the old tradition of understanding the story being told in the context of his or her own life, and also (especially in the case of Indonesia) in the context of politics as well.

Installation art, like the wayang, is a depiction of aspects of life presented in a fashion that is accessible and familiar to the audience. Southeast Asia's remaining personal and cultural connections to performance have paved the way for the acceptance of installation art as a means of self and societal expression. The acceptance of this medium by artists in the region shows that for Southeast Asians the lines between art and real life are fluid and arbitrary, blurred in a sense. This blurring of the lines between art and life is exactly what the western artists that pioneered the use of installation art sought to do[7].

In considering other aspects of Southeast Asian cultures that could conceivably explain the popularity of installation art, one more thing comes to mind: the Southeast Asian penchant for riddles. In Southeast Asian societies, where verbal and physical communication often revolves around, as opposed to centering upon, the main issue, riddles serve as an important cultural conduit, transferring specific knowledge and cultural nuance in a compelling and thought provoking fashion. Riddles teach us to look beyond the surface and encourage discreet analysis of the situation at hand. As quick wit, creative innuendo and analytic skill are social skills held in high esteem throughout Southeast Asia[8], the popularity of humorous and proverbial riddles is only natural. I contend that this preexisting orientation to having fun at figuring something out is yet another facet of Southeast Asian cultures that has translated into the success of installation art in the region.

Manifestations of social commentary and change: installation art in Indonesia and Thailand

In this section I will explore the role of installation art in the societies of Indonesia and Thailand.

I will be looking at the development of Installation as a medium in each country and then exploring how installation art relates specifically to the local audience. As part of my analysis, I will look at two artists from each country.

Installation art and Indonesian activism

Of the all the countries of Southeast Asia, Indonesia has embraced the idea of using installation art as a form of social activism in a way yet unmatched by any other. While the first uses of installation as a medium in Indonesia can be traced to the 1970's[9], it can be said to have really started with the advent of the "New Arts Movement" (Kelompok Seni Rupa Baru) in 1987. The New Arts Movement was a group of artists from various disciplines that sought to "smash the aesthetic hegemony of the "fine arts" over Indonesian art, and liberate a more pluralistic concept of art".[10]

In the words of Moelyono, this shift was an "invitation to democratize art" and signaled the inclusion of seni rupa keseharian, or everyday art, in the canon of what constitutes Indonesian modern art. Seni rupa keseharian can be defined as any of the common craft and trade traditions found in Indonesia (i.e. pottery, textiles, leatherwork, etc.). What this has translated into is the de-emphasis of modern art as a dry international aesthetic and the redirection of modern art in the country to a fecund and very Indonesian means of social commentary. Through its rejection of the status given to more lucrative forms of art and its inclusion of local idioms, Indonesian installation art has emerged as the ultimate embodiment of the New Arts Movement.

Here it is important to put the roots of a phenomenon like the New Arts Movement into context. As I touched upon in the introduction, the nation of Indonesia has had a somewhat tumultuous history. Many of the country's eminent modern artists (Hendra Gunawan and Sudjana Kerton for example) fought in the war for independence and used their art as an outlet for the emotions that accompany such an experience. Frequently their work focused on the suffering of the people around them.

After the events of September 1965 and the ensuing Orde Baru came into power, artists who dealt with the gritty downside of politics in a satirical or accusatory manner were dealt with swiftly and fiercely. Until recently, public discourse of the horrific events of 1965-66 was an extremely risky proposition[11]. With intense emotions like these so recently seething beneath the surface of an entire national conscience, finding an outlet for them is essential. Installation art has been able to take on such a role for the Indonesian people and by extension become a significant form of social activism as well. The key to the success of installation art as a medium in Indonesia is its wholesale accessibility. Because of its similarity to other familiar storytelling means like the wayang, installation art speaks to the Indonesian people nonverbally through its placement and contextualization of meaningful objects in a given space.

In looking at the installation art of Indonesia it is also necessary to look at the artists themselves; their motivations, aspirations and experience of the issues surrounding their work. Though many accomplished artists work in the medium of installation, very few can make a living from

it. What motivates the artists to get involved? As installation art in Indonesia is largely a critical comment on the injustices endured by the people of the country, it is safe to say that the artists involved in installation in Indonesia are activists themselves. This is significant in that in Indonesia, not only installation art, but also the artist who creates it, blurs the lines between art and society.

Looking at the socioeconomic background of these artists is also important. What is their stake in social progress? How do they relate to the situations that inspire their work? My research has shown that many of the Indonesian artists active in installation art today are from relatively middle class backgrounds and have mostly received western art training.[12] Of the artist biographies I could find, all seemed to echo the sentiments of FX Harsono, who believes that "a work of art should express social problems"[13]. In an internet posting for an exhibition of local artists in Bandung the opening remarks address the idea that "social corruption in many aspects has shocked our society, creating the general assumption that our art has fallen under corruption as well". The artist's collective statement goes on to explain that Indonesia is currently in the midst of a "deformation". This deformation is "not seen as part of the art process, but has indeed become inspiration for further evolution of art practices and theories". [14]

What this information shows me is that the artists involved in installation art are actually letting their work evolve around the events of their times. The issues that they interpret and depict in their work, as opposed to imported notions of what art should be, form the basis of their creative impetus. Thus it can be said that because the political and social environment in Indonesia demands it, in a way these artists are actually activists first, and artists second. To further exemplify this idea, I will now look at the work of two very prolific and controversial installation artists from Indonesia: Moelyono and Dadang Christanto. The work of these two artists presents a clear example of the issues treated in Indonesian installation art today.

Moelyono

A now internationally acclaimed artist and art theorist, Moelyono has made a name for himself through using his installations to tackle very controversial and ideologically dangerous subject matter. Recently he has taken his message and a few of his works abroad, building upon a resume of experience that has dealt head on with the touchy subjects of labor activism and land rights in his native Java. One of Moelyono's many compelling and powerful undertakings was 1993's "Pameran untuk Marsina" (exhibition for Marsina). A fine example of the adaptation of an extremely controversial event to installation art, "Pameran untuk Marsina" served to express the outrage of the Indonesian populace towards the powers that be in regard to the lack of labor rights in the newly industrializing country.

Marsinah herself was an outspoken factory worker who represented a group of workers protesting dismal working conditions and low pay in an East Java factory. This action led to her abduction, rape and murder at the hands of local authorities. Moelyono's installation explores the human implications of this barbarous crime.



Moelyono, *Pameran untuk Marsinah*

His work, entitled "interrogation scene" consists of human forms made of straw and hanging latex gloves set against a black and white checkerboard background embellished with the Javanese word "inggih", or yes. According to expert Astri Wright[15], "the use of left over rice straw to create anthropomorphic forms signifies the impermanence and lowly position of the human race in the context of the event." In agreement with Wright, I see the latex gloves hanging from above as a chilling testament to torture at the hands of the government, "actively oppressing from above". The stark black and white background hints at the struggle between good and evil; the word "inggih" a polite Javanese word for yes, illustrating the submission of the common people to their supposed superiors.

The powerful imagery and dangerous themes of *Pameran untuk Marsinah* did not go unnoticed by the Indonesian government. Just before opening the doors on the first day, the exhibition for Marsinah was closed by Surabaya police for "subversive" content.

Dadang Christanto

Another internationally known Indonesian installation artist, Dadang Christanto also uses his art to convey themes of cultural and political oppression. Drawing on a background in the performance arts, Dadang Christanto is known for staging powerful and compelling installations. His 1994 exhibition, *Perkara Tanah* (concerning land) sought to portray the struggles of the Indonesian people in regard to land and the relatively powerless status of the farmer in society.

Made up of four installations, *Kekerasan (Force/Violence) I-IV*, *Perkara Tanah* was timed to coincide with the 50th anniversary celebration of the Republic of Indonesia. Through hand building and firing scores of terracotta (the tanah) figures, Christanto conceptualized his statement. The deliberate use of terracotta, a material considered cheap and low class in his native Java[16], helps Christanto to set a tone of humbleness and simplicity in the installation.

Obviously related to the overall theme of the exhibition is his decision to use fired clay as a building material. The result, taking the form of the four Kekerasan installations, is a series of haunting visual and emotive experiences. Of these four, I will look at the first.



Dadang Christanto, *Kekerasan I* with detail.

Kekerasan I took the form of about one hundred of these terracotta figures arranged on top of concrete blocks in a pyramid form. Looking at the figures in this context it is easy to see the message intended for the audience. The inherent theme here is the representation of a sort of power structure. This installation is a powerful depiction of the stratified and many tiered system of social and class relations in Indonesia today. Reading further into the deliberate sameness of all the figures, the viewer finds that at the same time the forms are indeed all slightly different, very human, all sitting in silent acceptance of their position in the pyramid, and perhaps their lot in life.

Other Indonesian artists using installation

By no means are Moelyono and Dadang Christanto the only names in Indonesian installation art today. Many others, like FX Harsono and Heri Dono, have made names for themselves throughout the country for projects that continue to challenge the political and social structures of power that have just recently begun to loosen their stranglehold on artistic expression in Indonesia. Artists have also been known to work in anonymous groups. The prime example of this sort of cooperation was the wrapping of the TEMPO building in Yogyakarta after the magazine's closure by the government. Wrapped in a white shroud, significant to the Javanese as the color of mourning, the installation staged at the TEMPO building related the brilliant capacity of the Indonesian people to use art as a collective voice, shouting that they are unhappy with the status quo, that they are ready for a change.

Installation art and cultural commentary in Thailand

In contrast to Indonesia, modern art has never taken on a significantly subversive role in Thai society. The reasons for this are many, not least of which is the lack of sustained dissent among artists over a long period of time due to the relative freedom enjoyed by artists in Thailand. Surely the student uprisings of the early to mid 1970's, as well as 1992, have been the subject of much artistic interpretation, but on the whole, modern art in Thailand reflects the ideas of a people exploring the affects of interaction with the outside world on their culture and environment. It is important to remember that Thailand was never subjected to the humiliation of the colonial experience and the uncertainty of its aftermath. Thus, given this reality, the social and political elements that inspire the installation art of Indonesia are quite different from the cultural elements that inspire artists in Thailand.

Although the message is usually different, installation art appeals to Thai people in the same manner that it does to Indonesians. It is intellectually challenging, culturally relevant in its use of indigenous materials, but also extremely creative in its syncretic adaptation of a western process to an eastern context. Admittedly, installation art in Thailand can be treated much like other modern art, in that it is commodified and earns an attached value that has more to do with the artist than it does with the content of the art. This situation has everything to do with the idea that in Thailand, due to the absence of a government that is terribly oppressive in regard to the arts[17], installation art lacks the activist tendencies that it so actively promotes in Indonesia. Thus, in contrast to the idea of artists being activists first in Indonesia, installation art in Thailand seems more to be art imbued with cultural and environmental commentary, not social activism through art.

Still, some similarities remain. Installation art in both Thailand and Indonesia reflects important aspects of life in both places. The differences stem from the fact that different things are important to artists in different places. In Indonesia, people are upset about the disappearance and subsequent murder of factory workers at the hands of the government. If that sort of terror was as much of a reality in Thailand, installation artists would probably deal with that subject too. As it stands now, Thai people are affected by issues such as the adaptation of Buddhism to modern society or the affects of runaway growth on the environment. Likewise, these issues show up in installation art. Two artists that address these issues in their work are Montien Boonma and Kamol Phaosavasdi.

Montien Boonma



Montien Boonma, *Drawing of the Mind Training and the Bowls of the Mind*

With many of his works dealing with Buddhism and the transcendent human spirit, Montien Boonma's thoughtful installations appeal to a wide audience of Thai people and others interested in Thai culture. The son of a schoolteacher, Montien Boonma is said to have rediscovered the use of Thai elements in his art after returning from years of study in France. [18] He is an avid Buddhist, and Buddhist themes pervade much of his work. The following work, included in a 1994 joint Thai-Australian exhibition called "Thai Australian Cultural Space" mixes objects and illustrations to convey the ideas of meditation and the exploration of an internal, abstract space. In regard to this installation, Montien says: "I am fascinated by the monk bowl. For me its shape looks organic and geometric and ambiguous. I think about the space in the bowl. I prefer to be in this space which separates me from the outside world....I would like to place my mind inside the bowl." [19] Montien Boonma's work is a good example of the importance of Buddhism to the Thai spirit. Through working with the forms and ideas outlined by his beliefs, Montien Boonma uses installation art to compel the viewer, Thai or non Thai, to look within him or herself to find a meditative space.

Kamol Phaosavasdi

Like Montien Boonma, Kamol Phaosavasdi incorporates important elements of Thai social conscience into his work. For Mr. Phaosavasdi, however, Buddhism is not the issue, the recent and drastic transformation of the Thai urban environment is. In the following works, *Sewer* (1993) and *Out of balance, turn a blind eye on the Chao Phraya River* (1993) Kamol Phaosavasdi uses common materials to portray Bangkok's, as well as Thailand's, environment in the throes of death at the hands of the slow poison of unchecked industrialization. For Thai people, these installations need little explanation.



Out of Balance, to turn a blind eye on the Chao Phraya River



Sewer

Their cities hopelessly polluted and their once thriving rivers filthy and lifeless, People are finally starting to notice the graveness of the situation. This realization has led to the emergence of environmental concern and awareness on the part of many people. In his personal statement regarding this series of pieces on the Thai environment, Kamol Phaosavasdi says: "The project.... was gradually developed from my feeling of sorrow for the Chao Phraya river. Not only the Chao Phraya but rivers around the world. There is no time to ask what we should do - it's time to do whatever is good for them." [20] Phaosavasdi's ideas are echoed by a rapidly increasing segment of the Thai population. Likewise, his use of installation as a part of the dialogue surrounding the state of Thailand's environment shows just how installation art can be used to embody and relate the issues that concern Thai society.

Other Thai artists using installation

Montien Boonma and Kamol Phaosavasdi are just two of many artists in Thailand that have discovered and fine tuned the medium of installation to the Thai context. Likewise, not all Thai installation art is centered around the themes of Buddhism and the environment. Other artists, such as Vichoke Mukdamanee and Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, focus their work on the effects of westernization or the traditions of sexism in modern Thailand. In the work to the right, Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook explores the role of women in Thai society, expressing that "women in Thai society are trapped by moralizing social norms and double standards." [21]



Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, *Buang*

This idea is conveyed by the presence of a torso-less female effigy lying on her side in the context of what looks like a house. This sort of statement is indicative of the evolution of feminist thought within the culture of Thailand. It is clear that installation art will be used as a part of that evolution.

Conclusion

Given the facts and recent history of installation art in Southeast Asia, the answer to the question "Could installation be the new medium for Southeast Asia", in my mind, is an unequivocal yes. The cultures of Southeast Asia, long known for their adept and intelligent practice of adopting a foreign idea and making it indigenous, have definitely succeeded again. Throughout the region artists have discovered and actively pursued the development of installation as an artistic medium. Brilliantly suited to Southeast Asia in its similarity to preexisting forms of artistic expression such as shadow puppet theater and other forms of performance, installation art has proven itself as an effective means of communicating a wide range of ideas, dangerous to self-reflective, to a wide range of people.

As simply the placement of objects in a certain context and the manipulation of the space between them, installation art is a medium that can be used to convey just about any idea imaginable. Through this role, the observer can find the inner workings of a specific experience mirrored in an installation. As the artist and issue changes, so does the result. It is this flexibility and accessibility that makes installation art so applicable to the Southeast Asian cultural landscape. From its use as a form of activism in Indonesia to its role in the personal expression of a Thai artist, installation can be used to encompass the entire spectrum of artistic expression

in Southeast Asia. Given the long and intricate artistic histories of all Southeast Asian countries, this is indeed quite a feat.

Though I have tried to look closely at the reasons and events behind the emergence of installation as an art form in Southeast Asia, for me, many questions remain: Is the emergence of installation art indicative of a backlash against other, more "affluent" forms of modern art? and: Due to the lack of formal training needed to create installation art, how much is this medium being utilized by segments of the population (women, the poor, ethnic minorities) who are usually marginalized in terms of the arts? With further analysis of these and many other questions an increased understanding of this subject could be provided. For now, I hope that I have been able to convey some key aspects of the incredible success of installation art in the Southeast Asian context. It is always amazing to see how the many cultures of Southeast Asia are able to absorb, reinvent and indigenize outside traditions and ideas. With installation art, we have yet another example of this ingenious process.

Notes

- [1]Dadaism, Futurism, Surrealism etc.
- [2]Two words that are easily associated with Southeast Asia!
- [3]Julie Ewington, Five Elements... pg. 110
- [4]personal communication, Noel Klavaert
- [5]Reid, A. Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce pp.233
- [6]Ibid. pp. 203
- [7]Julie Ewington, Five Elements.... pp. 110
- [8]Reid, A. Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce pp.231
- [9]Julie Ewington, Five Elements... pg.110
- [10]Moelyono, Seni Rupa Kagunan pg.123
- [11]Rob Goodfellow, A fresh wind is blowing
- [12]Traditions/Tensions artist bios

[13]Traditions/Tensions artist bios

[14]Art Exhibition in Bandung!

[15]Astri Wright Resistance in the Visual Field: Activist Art in Indonesia in the 1990's pgs.120-121

[16]Astri Wright Resistance in the Visual Field.... pg 132

[17]My experience has shown that the most dangerous thing an artist could do is to portray His Majesty the King or another member of the royal family in an unflattering manner, for now a project that is not very interesting to anyone.

[18]The Integrative Art of Modern Thailand pg. 132

[19]Thai-Australian Cultural Space, cat. pg. 34

[20]Thai-Australian Cultural Space, pg. 52

[21]Traditions/tensions, artist bios

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Personal Communication

Earls-Solari, Bonnie. Curator, BankAmerica Corporation Art Collection, San Francisco, CA 24 March 1999

Klavaert, Noel. Specialist in Indonesian art and owner, IndoArts Co. San Francisco, CA 19 March 1999