

Collaborative Projects to Build Art Platforms Interview with Gridthiya Gaweewong

Hattori Hiroyuki, Gridthiya Gaweewong

Gridthiya Gaweewong established Project 304 with fellow artists in 1996 in Bangkok. While running the space, she has collaborated with many overseas curators and artists and contributed to the formation of art platforms in Thailand. Therefore under the themes of “collaborative projects” and “making an art platform,” I interviewed her mainly about her activities in the late 1990s and early 2000s and her thoughts.

Mail interview

Guest: Gridthiya Gaweewong (Artistic Director, Jim Thompson Art Center)

Interviewer: Hattori Hiroyuki



Gridthiya Gaweewong, 2020

Hattori Hiroyuki: I think you were involved as a member of Project 304^[1], one of the venues for “Cities on the Move, Bangkok” (COM) held in 1999. “COM” was an exhibition that traveled around Europe and to the United States introducing Asian architecture, cities and contemporary arts. Do you know why this exhibition was held in Bangkok? And could you also tell us how you were involved in this exhibition?

1. For more on Project 304, see <https://www.facebook.com/Project-304-bangkok-148286781933955/>, accessed Nov 8, 2020.

In addition, you’ve mentioned that, because of the lack of public museums for large-scale contemporary art shows in Bangkok at that time^[2], various places in the city (art spaces, streets, even vehicles) became venues. Please give us your opinion on the significance and positioning of this exhibition. Did it have any influence on the subsequent development of contemporary art in Bangkok?

2. Gridthiya Gaweewong, "Shifting Asian Contemporary Art Networks," International Symposium 2015 "THE 1990s: The Making of Art with Contemporaries" report, *The Japan Foundation Asia Center Art Studies 02* (Tokyo: The Japan Foundation Asia Center, 2016) pp.008-013.



Exterior view of Project 304

Gridthiya Gaweewong: The "Cities on the Move, Bangkok" version was initiated and facilitated by the French Embassy, under the supervision of Francine Meoule, the cultural attaché, who was very much involved with contemporary art in Europe. She managed to connect small and major art institutions in Bangkok successfully, especially to work with the Bangkok Metropolitan

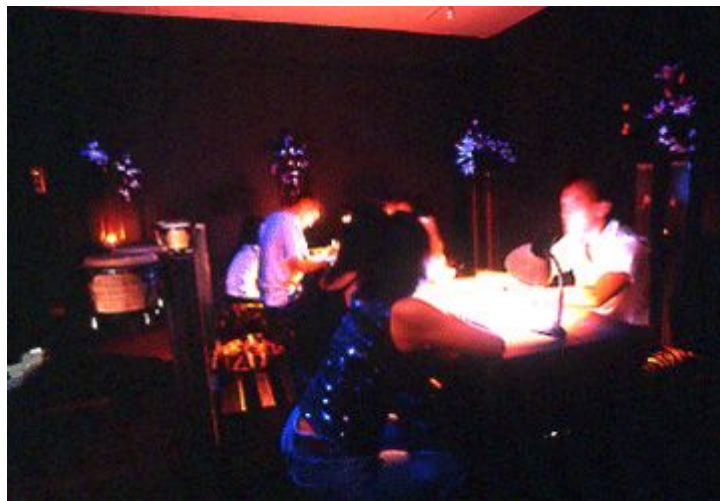
Administration(BMA), through Kraissak Choonhavan, who served on the advisory board of the BMA. During that time, in the late 1990s, BMA planned to build an art center at the Pathumwan intersection, resulted to the demand and pressure from local arts community, which is now the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC). In the 1990s, the art and cultural landscape in Bangkok was still underdeveloped in terms of infrastructure and institutions. There were few alternative spaces, university galleries and national museums. With this landscape, it was impossible for Bangkok to accommodate a big show like COM in one space, so the local curators, Ole Scheeren (a German architect who worked with Rem Koolhaas then and served as the exhibition designer for COM in Hayward Gallery, London) and Thomas Nordanstad (a Swedish curator based in Bangkok) decided to spread the exhibition across many spaces, both institutions like National Gallery, Chao Fa road, Siam Society, Asoke area, and alternative spaces like Project 304, About Café and Tadu Contemporary Art, as well as public spaces like street posters, billboards, Chao Phraya river, to name a few. Project 304 served as one of the venues for COM, where we showed Osawa Tsuyoshi's *Nasubi Gallery*, Koo Jeong A, Hanayo, Surasi Kusolwong's *Free-For-All: Massage*.



Surasi Kusolwong, *Free-For-All: Massage*, "Cities on the Move, Bangkok," Project 304, 1999

The significance and the impact of COM for the local scene was quite interesting. Even though it didn't change the scene radically, it was the first time that these art spaces collaborated with each other. It was a phenomenal experience to see

such a thing happen in the highly fragmented and territorial Thai art scene. But I think artists, art spaces and independent curators like us got the most out of it. Why? Because many young artists received international exposure from this project both directly and indirectly. There were many international and regional curators and artists visiting Bangkok during that time, they did studio visits, they connected us with the international art scene. Many artists from Thailand got invitations to join biennales and other international shows outside of the region. It was different from the 1990s, when the circulation of artists was still around the region, but after that in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the circulations and networks expanded outside of the region and spread to Europe and the US. For me, I got a lot more projects in Europe and the US in the early 2000s.



Kamol Phaovasasdi's installation *DILEMMA* in collaboration with a fortuneteller, Project 304, 2001

Hattori: Three years later, you realized the Bangkok exhibition “Under Construction, Bangkok: Sorry for the Inconvenience.” You were the only curator for the Thai exhibition, but please tell us how you got involved with the other curators. Also, it was written in your essay that you visited India and China as part of the research for this exhibition. Was there any support from curators in each country in the research? Please let us know if you have any learnings from relationships with curators in other regions.

Gridthiya: When I was invited by the Japan Foundation Asia Center to join the “Under Construction” project, it was quite amazing to see how little we knew each other and about our neighbors' history. I was so ignorant about this, and even about my own socio-political history. This project allowed me to explore and relearn about my own history as well as Asian history in a contemporary regional perspective. Actually, the Japan Foundation encouraged us to collaborate, so I

proposed to work with India and China because I wanted to retrace the connections and history of international relationships between Thailand and mainland Southeast Asia in the pre-modern period with these two countries, which used to be major civilizations in the past. Before the formation of the nation/state, Siam/Thailand or Lanna Kingdom where I came from, were tribute states to China, so we were involved politically with China since that period, but conceptually and culturally, in our daily life, we were highly influenced by the animist, Brahmin, Hindu and Buddhist traditions and beliefs which derived from the Indianization of this region.

When I proposed this idea to my colleagues, Pi Li and Ranjit Hoskote, they didn't buy it. So I had to do it alone, but they were very helpful when I did research in China (Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou) and India (New Delhi and Mumbai). It's very interesting to see the reaction of my colleagues because they finally worked with other Asian countries in Pi Li's case, who worked with Japan and Korea, while Ranjit Hoskote decided to work with Patrick D. Flores in Manila. However, many curators visited and researched in Thailand during the research period. I also visited the exhibition in South Korea. So this was the best chance for us to explore different cities and art scenes in Asia at the dawn of the 21st century.



Performance by Montri Toemsombat, *Bangkok Buffalo Boy*, "Under Construction, Bangkok: Sorry for the Inconvenience," 2002



Installation by Chen Shaoxiong, *Third Street*, "Under Construction, Bangkok: Sorry for the Inconvenience," 2002

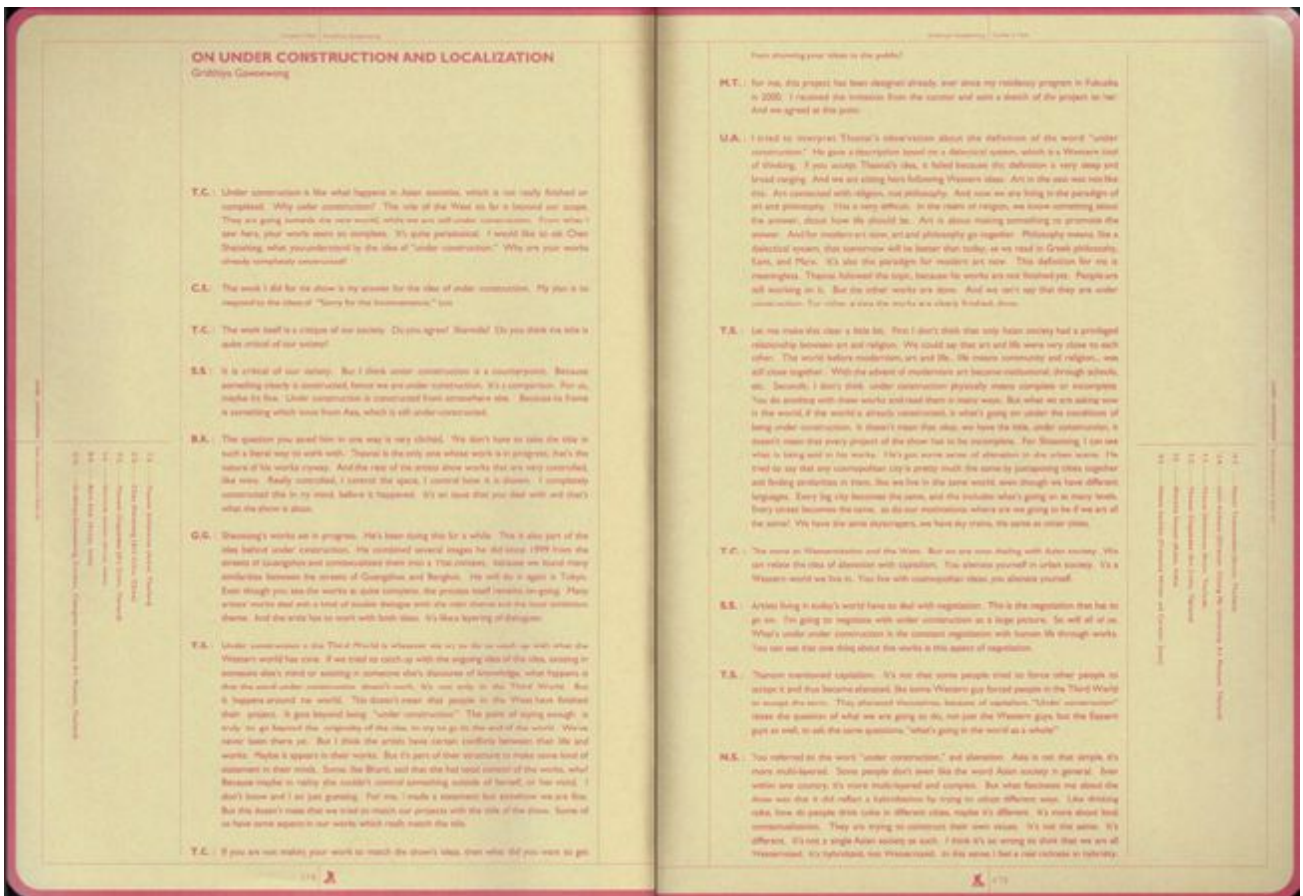


View of Thasnai Sethaseree, *A Chinese New Year Project*, "Under Construction, Bangkok: Sorry for the Inconvenience," 2002

Gridthiya: Since it was a two to three-year project, it allowed us to learn and grow with each other. Later, many of us collaborated together on different levels and projects both on an individual and institutional basis. At the beginning, this might have been facilitated by the Japan Foundation or other trans-regional cultural institutions, but later in the late 2000s and especially in the 2010s, it was more or less through our own institutions. For example, I worked with Kim Sunjung in Gwangju Biennale 2018, with Patrick D. Flores in many occasions such as for essays and lectures as well as a fellow jury member in Manila, Bangkok, Singapore, Gwangju and Seoul. Kamiya Yukie and Kataoka Mami were on the same panel as me many times in Japan. Yamamoto visited my show in Shodoshima Island, and we had a nice dinner in Osaka together. I also bumped into Ranjit Koskote when Bergen Museum of Art held the Bergen Assembly a few years ago. For artists, I still work with some of them on a regular basis, such as Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Montri Toemsombat, Thasnai Sethaseree. It was very sad to see two of the Chinese artists I worked with passed away, Chen Shaoxing and Cui Xiuwen, while Wang Gongxing was very much alive and joyfully shared the good news about his son who had finally graduated from Columbia University, when we met in Japan in 2018. In retrospect, we found that the artists and curators that we invited to join “Under Construction” was like a family. We kind of grew up together, and are happy to support each other.

Hattori: In the catalog of the “Under Construction” Tokyo exhibition, you submitted a conversation with the participating artists of the Bangkok exhibition and others instead of your own essay. It was a very interesting approach, but could you please tell me the intention of presenting this polyphonic conversation rather than an essay?

Gridthiya: For the text in the catalogue, I decided to include multiple voices of participating artists from Thailand, India and China because I felt I would like the artists’ voices to be put first. My idea was to hear them speak directly about their own contexts and reality. With this respect, I decided not to write the essay and reflect on my subjectivities. That’s why I transcribed our conversations that took place in Bangkok during the local exhibition. The other reason was because the duration of the research was not that long, and I didn’t spend much time in each city and country, I felt it was impossible for me to encapsulate that kind of reflexive experience in a single-author essay.



The essay written from the dialogue with artists by Gridthiya Gawewong, "On Under Construction and Localization," excerpt from *Under Construction: New Dimensions of Asian Art*, catalogue, 2002

Hattori: Both "Cities on the Move" and "Under Construction" were characterized by having multiple art spaces in Bangkok as venues. In the "Under Construction" exhibition, you captured the problems and hopes of the Thai Art scene vividly with humor and criticism under the title "Sorry for the Inconvenience." What was your intention in "Sorry for the Inconvenience" at that time?

Gridthiya: My intention was quite simultaneously responsive and reflexive to the reality of our urban experiences. The shifts in urban spaces happened not only in Bangkok, but in major cities all over Asia, as I experienced during my research period. They were undergoing heavy construction, so the title of my show was a warning signage as we faced these physical problems while maneuvering ourselves through these cities. When we saw a yellow sign that said, sorry for the inconvenience, it created discomfort and disturbing sentiments in all of us, especially in Bangkok where the traffic jam became one of the major issues for us in daily life. That's why I used this title to reflect the reality of our contemporary society, then.



The main visual of “Under Construction, Bangkok: Sorry for the Inconvenience,” 2002

Hattori: Also, is “Sorry for the Inconvenience” still a valid attitude in the current Thai art scene? Or do you think that Thai art is now at a different stage? I think that the situation surrounding art in Bangkok has changed drastically, such as the establishment of Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC) in 2008, so I would be grateful if you could give us your opinions on the changes in the environment.

Gridthiya: The question is, who would say sorry for the inconvenience now? If it's the state, it's no time to say that because we are no longer in the “under construction” state physically. Politically maybe, yes. However, I won't accept this term for now. You are right about the contemporary art situation has changed drastically and dramatically since the late 1990s. The infrastructure of the local art scene has gradually progressed since the 1990s—the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Ministry of Culture started in the early 2000s, and later BACC started; in the mid 2010s we witnessed the emergence of private museums and later we saw a few biennials and triennials in Bangkok and other provinces. It seems like a perfect picture, but how come the Thai art scene is still standing in the lurch? A few major problems that have held us up include turbulent politics, national centric policy, and economic recession. This kind of

context has not provided the healthiest or best conditions for our art ecology to grow.

Hattori: In recent years, several biennales such as Thailand Biennale, Bangkok Art Biennale, and Bangkok Biennial have been held in Thailand. Bangkok Biennial are trying to use venues across the entire city and build a network of various art spaces, but these methods seem to inherit the practice from the “Cities on the Move” exhibition. What are your thoughts on such a Biennale initiative? I would like to hear your opinion on the current situation, such as changes and discoveries from the attempts of the late 1990s and early 2000s in these recent efforts, or problems that persist.

Gridthiya: The decentralization of the biennale sites existed in both Bangkok and beyond. The Bangkok Biennial was not the only biennale that implemented the venue in the entire city and built networks of various art spaces, Bangkok Art Biennale (BAB), and Ghost Festival have also used the same models. While the BAB connected with major institutions like BACC, BAB Box, temples and various sites of real estate of the major corporations that support them (such as ThaiBev), Ghost Festival works with independent art spaces as well. And for your information, “Cities on the Move” was not the first art exhibition that used different spaces and public spaces to show artworks in Thailand—“Chiang Mai Social Installation” had been using this strategy since the early 1990s. However, “Cities on the Move” used this strategy out of necessity, and I guess BAB, Bangkok Art Biennale and Ghost Festival did it because of the same reasons. It means that there are still not enough art institutions and spaces to accommodate major shows like other countries. On second thought, they perhaps use this strategy because they want to reach out to different parts of the city, and wider audiences because of the nature of our urban landscape as well as the demographic disparities. In the future, if we have more spaces for contemporary art and culture, the model might be different and shift to a more institutional approach.