

ON UNDER CONSTRUCTION AND LOCALIZATION

Gridthiya Gaweeewong

T.C. : Under construction is like what happens in Asian societies, which is not really finished or completed. Why under construction? The role of the West so far is beyond our scope. They are going towards the new world, while we are still under construction. From what I saw here, your works seem so complete. It's quite paradoxical. I would like to ask Chen Shaoxiong, what you understand by the idea of "under construction." Why are your works already completely constructed?

C.S. : The work I did for the show is my answer for the idea of under construction. My plan is to respond to the ideas of "Sorry for the Inconvenience," too.

T.C. : The work itself is a critique of our society. Do you agree? Sharmila? Do you think the title is quite critical of our society?

S.S. : It is critical of our society. But I think under construction is a counterpoint. Because something clearly is constructed, hence we are under construction. It's a comparison. For us, maybe it's fine. Under construction is constructed from somewhere else. Because its frame is something which is not from Asia, which is still under-constructed.

B.K. : The question you asked him in one way is very clichéd. We don't have to take the title in such a literal way to work with. Thasnai is the only one whose work is in progress, that's the nature of his works anyway. And the rest of the artists show works that are very controlled, like mine. Really controlled, I control the space, I control how it is shown. I completely constructed this in my mind, before it happened. It's an issue that you deal with and that's what the show is about.

G.G. : Shaoxiong's works are in progress. He's been doing this for a while. This is also part of the idea behind under construction. He combined several images he did since 1999 from the streets of Guangzhou and contextualized them into a Thai context, because we found many similarities between the streets of Guangzhou and Bangkok. He will do it again in Tokyo. Even though you saw the works as quite complete, the process itself remains on-going. Many artists' works deal with a kind of double dialogue with the main theme and the local exhibition theme. And the artist has to work with both ideas. It's like a layering of dialogues.

T.S. : Under construction in the Third World is whatever we try to do to catch up with what the Western world has done. If we tried to catch up with the ongoing idea of the idea, existing in someone else's mind, or existing in someone else's discourse of knowledge, what happens is that the word under construction doesn't work. It's not only in the Third World. But it happens around the world. This doesn't mean that people in the West have finished their project. It goes beyond being "under construction." The point of saying enough is truly to go beyond the originality of the idea, to try to go to the end of the world. We've never been there yet. But I think the artists have certain conflicts between their life and works. Maybe it appears in their works. But it's part of their structure to make some kind of statement in their minds. Some, like Bharti, said that she had total control of the works, why? Because maybe in reality she couldn't control something outside of herself, or her mind. I don't know and I am just guessing. For me, I made a statement but somehow we are fine. But this doesn't mean that we tried to match our projects with the title of the show. Some of us have some aspects in our works which really match the title.

T.C. : If you are not making your work to match the show's ideas, then what did you want to get

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from showing your ideas to the public?

M.T. : For me, this project has been designed already, ever since my residency program in Fukuoka in 2000. I received the invitation from the curator and sent a sketch of the project to her. And we agreed at this point.

U.A. : I tried to interpret Thasnai's observation about the definition of the word "under construction." He gave a description based on a dialectical system, which is a Western kind of thinking. If you accept Thasnai's idea, it failed because this definition is very deep and broad ranging. And we are sitting here following Western ideas. Art in the past was not like this. Art connected with religion, not philosophy. And now we are living in the paradigm of art and philosophy. This is very difficult. In the realm of religion, we know something about the answer, about how life should be. Art is about making something to promote the answer. And for modern art now, art and philosophy go together. Philosophy means, like a dialectical system, that tomorrow will be better than today, as we read in Greek philosophy, Kant, and Marx. It's also the paradigm for modern art now. This definition for me is meaningless. Thasnai followed the topic, because his works are not finished yet. People are still working on it. But the other works are done. And we can't say that they are under construction. For other artists the works are clearly finished, done.

T.S. : Let me make this clear a little bit. First I don't think that only Asian society had a privileged relationship between art and religion. We could say that art and life were very close to each other. The world before modernism, art and life... life means community and religion... was still close together. With the advent of modernism, art became institutional, through schools, etc. Secondly, I don't think under construction physically means complete or incomplete. You do anything with these works and read them in many ways. But what we are asking now in the world, if the world is already constructed, is what's going on under the conditions of being under construction. It doesn't mean that okay, we have the title, under construction, it doesn't mean that every project of the show has to be incomplete. For Shoaxiong, I can see what is being said in his works. He's got some sense of alienation in the urban scene. He tried to say that any cosmopolitan city is pretty much the same by juxtaposing cities together and finding similarities in them, like we live in the same world, even though we have different languages. Every big city becomes the same, and this includes what's going on at many levels. Every street becomes the same, as do our motivations; where are we going to be if we are all the same? We have the same skyscrapers, we have sky trains, the same as other cities.

T.C. : The same as Westernization and the West. But we are now dealing with Asian society. We can relate the idea of alienation with capitalism. You alienate yourself in urban society. It's a Western world we live in. You live with cosmopolitan ideas, you alienate yourself.

S.S. : Artists living in today's world have to deal with negotiation. This is the negotiation that has to go on. I'm going to negotiate with under construction as a large picture. So will all of us. What's under under construction is the constant negotiation with human life through works. You can see that one thing about the works is this aspect of negotiation.

T.S. : Thanom mentioned capitalism. It's not that some people tried to force other people to accept it and thus became alienated, like some Western guy forced people in the Third World to accept the term. They alienated themselves, because of capitalism. "Under construction" raises the question of what we are going to do, not just the Western guys, but the Eastern guys as well, to ask the same questions, "what's going in the world as a whole?"

N.S. : You referred to the word "under construction," and alienation. Asia is not that simple, it's more multi-layered. Some people don't even like the word Asian society in general. Even within one country, it's more multi-layered and complex. But what fascinates me about the show was that it did reflect a hybridization by trying to adopt different ways. Like drinking coke, how do people drink coke in different cities, maybe it's different. It's more about local contextualization. They are trying to construct their own values. It's not the same. It's different. It's not a single Asian society as such. I think it's so wrong to think that we are all Westernized. It's hybridized, not Westernized. In this sense I feel a real richness in hybridity.

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It's the richness of variety which I really appreciate.

B.K. : What emerges from the show is the notion that there is no such thing as authentic culture. It's just a myth. You are in the show, I meet Chinese artists and Thai artists for the first time, and that's good. I'm just looking for what kind of issues they are dealing with in their works. I'm not necessarily interested in the locality of their works, or the authenticity of their works, because I don't know that there is a right way of perceiving them. It's kind of dainty, to look for a cultural authenticity, like in the 20th century. We are in the 21st century. Let's not go backwards. The idea of Eastern and Western society is about parallels. Let's not look at the West as a model, but take it as a parallel. When you look at history, you see in the 3rd, 4th century, 1500 years ago, Chinese society was so advanced and in India parallel developments in knowledge and science were happening, but nothing happened in the West. It was essentially a dark age. This then balanced out over time. Perhaps it is like a scale permanently under construction.

On Localization

G.G. : The whole idea of globalization doesn't mean that it has to be treated as an enemy. We don't want to attack it, but the question must be how to deal with it in a local context in each city, each country, particularly in the context of contemporary culture.

U.A. : I like the word "in between." The first dimension was in the scale of artists communities. I am not talking about China, Thailand or India. I'm basically free and an individual. People think differently. Everybody thinks in different ways. We can learn what the differences and similarities in different countries are. This is beautiful. And the point of commonality is that we are in between artists communities. We are the first group of people who are open minded to learn from each other. We have many opportunities to see the differences between each other. We work together through ideas of collaboration within the art community. The word art community for me is like a religion. We invite people to join what we believe in. There are other communities, like the military, for example. I used to join their discussions because I wanted to know what and how other people thought. It was totally different from us. For soldiers, they don't talk in the same way that we do, rather they talk about a definite Thailand, America, what American policy is. They have a master plan, one or two hundreds years to control this and that. It's totally different. That's why we are in between politics and economics, too.

G.G. : The way Uthit talked about community is really interesting. Perhaps, you can give us some examples of projects you did with the community in Chiang Mai. They perhaps have a stronger sense of community. He has been involved, as a founding member of a public art project called the "Chiang Mai Social Installation." Maybe we can share this information with our friends from China and India. He is someone who's in between local and international communities.

T.S. : We talked about localization and internationalization. If we don't talk about this carefully, we may end up becoming very national centered. If we localize our country too much, it can go too far. The same can be said if we internationalize ourselves. We can't go to the extremes. We have to stay in between.

U.A. : We treat famous and not so famous artists alike. We work together. We treat one another as friends. We are not interested in only showing works, but making friends. We are not talking about a Documenta kind of operation. Many famous artists go here, they sleep at the temple, so to speak. We speak about sincerity. We have tried to invite people from different communities and backgrounds. It's a simple organization. We have been doing this for ten years already, and now I'm working in a museum from one year ago. I changed the concept of the museum so that it can be for all groups of people from Thailand and abroad. In the museum, we tend to spend money only on the heroes of the art society but we do ten things, ten projects a year. We invite both mainstream and famous artists because we want to know more about the originality of their ideas. And we welcome pop culture as well as monks to do activities in the museum as well. This only exists in Thailand.

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G.G. : Sharmila is interested in how native or local people deal with their everyday life in a global setup. She also runs the program Open Circle in Mumbai (Bombay). I must also mention Gongxin, who is actively involved with an art / community center called "Loft" based in Beijing. It's a place to go to when you are in Beijing and meet and discuss together.

S.S. : Open Circle is an artists' initiative project. First we had funds from the Netherlands, Prince Claus Foundation and Rijksakademie. The Dutch have been so sweet and kind. Last year, we were looking for the South - South connection, like Bombay, South Africa, Pakistan. You take the funds and use it in such a way that you exclude them. We have people from Ecuador, Israel, Iran and the Caribbean involved. Now this year, we realized that we'd been following a set international model. We meet again, and look for something more local. We are looking for good non-visual artists and writers, too. What we are trying to do is something that has effects for the place that we are from, Bombay.

G.G. : The idea of "Open Circle" is quite different from what the group of artists from Delhi, where Bharti has been involved, has developed. And anyway, perhaps she has now left.

B.K. : We didn't quit as such but became tired, and needed more people to join and grow. Actually we set it up for ourselves. We needed space, so we created spaces for ourselves to show works. Basically, it was going to be a forum for young artists to talk and discuss or work together. Then we managed to get this place outside Delhi through the "KHOJ workshop." It's different now from what than it was then.

T.C. : You mean it's a smaller scale.

B.K. : No, it's huge, and it became like an institution. There were seven founding members, and I was one of them. We started in 1997, and after that we found ways to receive funds for international artists to visit India. And we worked with Pooja Sood, who ran the projects. We just said, "you've got to join, you've got to do it!" She came on board. Now she has set up similar workshops focusing more on a Southeast Asian Network. The board members decided to reshape them into a residency program and to turn it into a studio program. First we wanted to create a space for Indian artists to work, as well as international artists. The founding members were also very busy working on their own works. Every two years we recruited new people to help us. We also really reached a stage where the workshops had their day and new things needed to happen in other cities with other artists taking the initiative.

W.G. : Loft has been going for two years. My wife's brother opened a big bar and restaurant. We made the interior design for it, and we asked him to make a space for art. That's how we got the space for free. I worked for free for one year. In Beijing, or China even, this is the first gallery that we can call "non profit." Now China has started to open its doors, and everything is about money. But in contemporary art, we have no market, no governmental support.

G.G. : What happens to Chinese artists when they hear that curators from abroad visit? How do they gather information and vice versa?

W.G. : Well, I've heard many stories about international curators. They ask artists who they meet if they know anyone else. The answer is no. And they sell the names of other artists to them. There are foreign curators who spend two weeks in Tokyo or Korea, and get nothing. It's hard to find even a single name.

M.S. : I am wondering if we are talking and bitching here about curators who are touring around this region. You are such a powerful man in Beijing and you are a powerful woman in Bangkok right now. You are valuable players in the art world here; the question could be how we should educate these creatures called "curators" so that they understand how we work here in this region. That's a question we could be thinking about.

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