

Transformation from a Tourist Destination to a City of Contemporary Art for the Inclusiveness of the Local Community: Thailand Biennale Krabi 2018

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Abstract

Contemporary art events, such as the Biennales, have been a new concept in Thailand especially in the fields of art and tourism. The term “contemporary arts” has been present in Thailand, both in educational institutions and professional practices. However, the true understanding of the term and its impact on tourism is still a far-fetched concept for the general Thai public. One of the most important tasks of the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Thailand’s Ministry of Culture is to express and share an understanding of how a biennale could bring positive effects to communities and tourism. The goal and resulting effects of Thailand Biennale: Krabi 2018 exemplify how the event has reshaped Krabi from a seaside tourist destination to an international art city. One of the most significant impact generated from the exhibition was creating a harmonious relationship between the art and the beauty of nature. Another significant impact is the addition to the culture and wellness of the many communities who became involved in the creating processes. The exhibition has become a social and tourism asset. The art pieces have become important symbols and tools in developing socio-economic sustainability and inclusivity of all the parties involved.

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Background and introduction

“Contemporary art” seems to be a new topic of discussion for many academics and artists in Thailand. The term has appeared in Thailand’s art movement, both in educational institutions and art professional practices. Yet the concepts such as “contemporary art”, “site -specific” and their relevance to Thai life, however, are still difficult to grasp for the general public, and even for some artists. The Thai government has used the arts to stimulate its economy by promoting art appreciation and providing platforms for artists, both domestically and internationally.

As the economy develops, the physical landscape has transformed human behaviors across Thailand and elsewhere. Thailand’s cultural strategies for art events are shaped by the aspirations of Thai people, together with those of international artists. They have conjoined to co-create, co-exist, connect and contribute to Thailand’s cultural advancement.

The term “Biennale” generally means an art event that is organised every two years, but it is still a novel perception for some people. As Thailand Biennale was under way, two other biennales were organised in Bangkok, namely the Bangkok Art Biennale, which was sponsored by a giant private corporate featuring sculptures, paintings, installations - mostly shipped in from some of the big-name artists. The other, organised under the name Bangkok Biennale, took place without support and featured network of mostly local artists and galleries citywide (Oliver, Irvine: 2019).

Basically, The Thailand Biennale is scheduled to move from province to province in Thailand. For the host selection criteria, the emphasis is on a secondary city that has successfully hosted contemporary art events at least three times. These events used standard and appropriate facilities, and were fully supported by its local community.

Thailand Biennale, Krabi 2018 was one of Thailand’s cultural strategies. It became a mobile, site-specific art event at Krabi, a seaside tourist destination. The Biennale focused on promoting, developing and preserving the area by using art. It combined the natural resources and the history of Krabi to attract international and local tourists. The original idea is similar to the Setouchi Triennale, in Japan, for contributing to urban development,

conservation and stimulating the economy of the area. In addition to Japan, Singapore in the 1980s and early 1990s used art to stimulate their economy and educate the local communities. Singapore now offers biennales to create a growth in their economy.

Bridget Tracey Tan, Singaporean curator stated that the first edition of the Thailand Biennale in Krabi received widespread support and input from comprehensive consultants, advisors and committees. The process of curating and selecting the artworks was a result of layers of consideration. The considerations took into account, not only the capabilities of artists, but also the appropriateness of the artworks to the sites proposed. Also of importance was how the art would relate to the local communities, their identities, their culture, and the well-being of the communities involved, plus its compatibility with the natural environment, (Tan, Bridget Tracy: 2019).

Prior to submitting their proposals, A total of 54 international and Thai artists were invited to spend time on site to immerse themselves in the environment of Krabi's communities. Following such a process, their proposals were channeled to obtain local consensus, determined by both residents and local authorities. Importantly, the local community had the power to reject any artwork they felt inappropriate. Government personnel, ministers, private sectors, university professors, international and local curators as well as renowned national artists of Thailand all assemble what had become an inspiring four months of site-specific art event in Thailand (Tan, Bridget Tracy, interviewed 11 November, 2018, Krabi).

At the initial phase of the Thailand Biennale, Krabi 2018, the total concept was unquestionably well-planned, clearly focused and strategically oriented to; 1) introduce and create an understanding of contemporary art thus preparing Thai public for future international contemporary art events; 2) preserve and improve the natural environment; 3) create a wellbeing for local communities through art and tourism; 4) preserve and promote local cultural identities; 5) energise and equip young Thai curators and artists with new knowledge and hands-on experiences to create and organise a larger art events in the future (Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Ministry of Culture, 2016).

The Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Thailand's Ministry of Culture is a governmental body responsible for hosting the Thailand Biennale. They worked in collaboration with the Krabi province, local government agencies and private sectors. The goals were to promote knowledge and an understanding of this type of art event for local people as well as for Thai and international artists. They also wished to transform Krabi, a world-renowned seaside town, into an art city. Yet they wanted to accomplish this without destroying the local culture, dignities, identities, environment, and the existing art communities. Krabi province provided the context for creating the art. Most of the works exhibited are temporary to semi-permanent, expensive but very creative, and are consistent and harmonious with the sites. The sites of which are naturally beautiful and rich in culture. The artworks presented in the area have hence become new foreign objects, but are meaningful to the local communities, environmentally friendly, and are also beneficial to the local economy (Vimolluck Chuchat, interviewed: 20 July, 2019).

Contemporary Art in Thailand Biennale, Krabi 2018

All artworks exhibited at the event were conceived and created from the study of local contexts, culture and environment (Thailand Biennale, Krabi 2018, exhibition catalogue, 2019). Four sites had been selected by the curatorial team; 1) Koh Klang, Krabi's municipal town areas, and Khao Khanab Nam, 2) Railay Beach, Ao Nang Beach, and Poda Island, 3) Noppharat Thara Beach, and 4) Than Bok Khorani National Park and nearby communities (Thailand Biennale, Krabi 2018, Edge of the Wonderland, exhibition catalogue). The director of the Office Of Contemporary Art and Culture stated, "This four-month outdoor exhibition in Krabi is not only intended to showcase traditional arts such as sculptures or paintings under the rubric of 'public art', but all the artworks are the amalgamation of the imagination of the artists and the local people to stimulate the economy and creative strategies in order to help the local financially and save local resources from the deteriorating environment resulting from the intense tourism industries in the area by using collaborative, creative and initiative works to create a better environment, energise the local, bring people together and take on a new revision of 'Thainess' in order to channel it to the global communities to visit and revisit Thailand." (Vimolluck Chuchat, interviewed: 20 July, 2019).

The resulting Krabi exhibition space features over 70 works by leading artists from around the world. All of the works are placed outdoors in a specific location that takes into account the area's environment and the cultural context .

Interestingly, as stated by the lead curator Jiang Jiehong, "Artists will interact with the venues, both in a consistent and contradictory way, artworks will become a part of the nature and balance with culture, scenery, and environmental surrounding" (Jiang Jiehong, lead curator of Thailand biennale, Krabi 2018). All the arts created played significant roles within the communities. For example, Giant Ruins by Tu Wei-Cheng, explores the boundaries between true stories and fiction reflecting on local history. Another example is Felix Blume's, Rumors from the Sea, inspired by the undulating bamboo dam flutes and generated as a tribute to the need to preserve local Thai resources, management and resilience. The work also functions as a nod to the industry and old age conservation by using naturally found materials. Takafumi Fukasawa's, Football Field for Buffalo, represents his discovery that local people still enjoy sports and nature, and still have close ties with animals such as chickens, goats and buffalos.

Kamol Tassanachalee, Thailand's national artist, created a large-scale sculpture inspired by the shape of two magnifying glasses which represents co-existence and the relationship between life, culture and environment. His work urged the audience to explore the magnificent, natural view of Krabi's key scenery. In addition, Kamol positioned the mirror to reflect images of the audience and the scenes on the LED screen attached to the base of his artwork. Vichoke Mukdamane, another of Thailand's national artist, transformed a local popular story into an abstract form made of ten separated pillars. Each one has a different symbolic shape attached to the top of metal poles four-meters high . This is a narrative of a grooms' parade of gifts and money brought to the brides' parents that is often a part of the Thai wedding ceremony. A third national artist, Panya Vijinthalasam, presented environmental issues happening in Krabi as it becomes the fastest growing tourist destination. The local community needs to cope with many problems such as water pollution, waste from tourism, deforestation and loss of wetlands and mangroves. Panya created a large-scale assemblage installation that was developed from characters of spiders and centipedes. The artist used old car parts as the main materials to reflect how the environmental changes caused by humans, industrialisation, and contemporary societies have invaded nature and affected the existence of all lives.

Mella Jaarsma's, Silver Souls, tells the story of the era in which Thailand faced a tense cultural revolution by focusing on the makings of Batik. Valentina KARGA's Coming Community features four totems symbolising four villages, three of which are old while another is new. The artist spent a month at Koh Klang, a Muslim community that makes up 33% of Krabi's religious profile. This percentage is considered substantial within a largely Buddhist Thailand. The artist worked with local artisans and children in the area. She began by collecting natural sea debris, mostly shells, and organic detritus. Then, she discovered stories, symbols and all manners of sharing that are soulfully expressed by the inhabitants of Koh Klang. Her ambition was to distil the values that the community might have that crystallises their bonds through times of global flux and uncertainty. The four totems were fabricated at a nearby wood kiln outside Koh Klang and are made of bricks, and ceramics from crushed detritus. The surfaces were marked by members of the community using symbols they created themselves. The local villagers could share many stories of the process, pointing out the tiniest of marks on the pillars, proudly conveying what each meant in reflection of the inhabitants and co-existence of Koh Klang community, environment, artist, and the world (Thailand Biennale, Krabi 2018, exhibition catalogue, 2019).

Even though the artworks exhibited were created according to the artists' imagination, all ideas and concepts were originated from local tales to coexist and create a balance relationship between the artworks and the local culture. Environment and culture had been the most important concerns for Thailand Biennale, Krabi 2018. According to Mayor of Krabi, Keeratisak Phukaoluan (2018), "Culture is always connected to the environment. When the environment changes, culture will change accordingly. At the same time, the culture that flows will also affect the environment as well". Because of tourism development, the land and the environment have been affected by tourist-related industries. Thus, art would be one solution to foster awareness and solve some problems as the mayor of the Krabi Municipality, Keeratisak Phukaoluan stated, "Natural environment and culture become important concepts in each artwork. All the artworks reflect the local environment and culture that used to be or still exist in each community. And most importantly, local people could develop their products such as Batik and local food and sale those to visitors.... Art is therefore a representation from a culture that is related to the local environment and stimulates local economy.... Because natural resources and culture of Krabi are rich and diverse, they could be used to stimulate the creation of great artworks by great artists. Merging those resources with artists' imagination would bring about distinctive arts that inspire both Thais

and foreign visitors, who would further connect and position Krabi and Thailand on the global map" (Keeratisak Phukaoluan, interviewed on 28 July 2018 at Andaman Cultural Learning Centre, Krabi).

At the beginning, many critics would have envisioned that Thailand Biennale, Krabi 2018 might not have been as well-received as the Bangkok Art Biennale or the Bangkok Biennale, which took place at the same period (November 2018- February 2019) in Bangkok where art events and exhibitions have been firmly established. Organising the first Thailand Biennale in Krabi was thus complicated because the initial intention was to organise a smaller art event in rural areas.

In addition to being a meaningful art event held amid beautiful nature, various touristic destinations and local culture, Thai government agencies reported very interesting and satisfying achievements. It has produced significant social and economic results in the greater Krabi area as well as for Thailand as a whole. According to the reports, the number of tourists to Krabi increased roughly from 1,000,000 visitors in 2017 to 2,600,000 visitors during the event, comprising 1,700,000 foreign visitors and 850,000 Thais. Each foreign tourist spent 10,468 baht per day (1 US\$=30 baht), while Thais spent around 2,000 baht per day, contributing an increase of 864 million baht to the Krabi economy. Thailand Biennale created more than 3,300 jobs positions, while Krabi generated 323 million baht revenue from local tax collection (Krabi Statistical Office, 2019; Summary of Thailand Biennale, Krabi 2018).

Apart from the socio-economic significance, this event reflects a cultural achievement for Thailand. Even the political, economic and physical landscapes have transformed, cultural policies and art events could surely keep pace. Thailand Biennale, Krabi 2018 has proven to be a meaningful example for other art venues and events in Thailand and internationally. It would clearly benefit Thailand's tourism industries and pin Thailand on the World's Art Map.

Managing the remnants of Krabi 2018

Although the state became the main organiser for Thailand Biennale, Krabi 2018, the government collaborated with the local authorities and communities, thus generating a sense of involvement with the event. It also created a sense of pride and participation for local people who worked with artists and who became part of the creative economy. While utilizing sustainable development concepts, the love of arts and activities that occurred, would continue to stimulate the community's economy. This is true even if the artworks were created by artists who are outsiders.

Benefiting from the work of arts and the event are important assets to the local communities involved. The economic benefits realized either directly or indirectly from the event were expressed in various ways. Tourists' use of accommodation facilities, street food vendors, restaurants is an immediate economic gain. The development of cultural products for tourism industries, such as various souvenirs made from 'batik' in Koh Klang is another example. Art facilities development, including an expansion of the Andaman Learning Center, where a new building is constructed, supports future international art events as well as commercial and trade exhibitions.

In relation to this article's premises, a vital question needs to be asked: "What will happen to Krabi after the Thailand Biennale?" Some artworks may change and deform according to their lifespan, but many will physically and psychologically remain in the area. Many will remain in the heart of the locals, who see and perceive both the economic and aesthetic significance of the works. The transformation from a local tourist destination to a city of contemporary art emphasising the inclusivity of the local community is challenging. Accessibility for tourists to visit and participate in areas consisting of art activities must become a major consideration.

There are many preparations, networks and implementations of value-added goods creation and distribution.

The exhibition of international art show in Krabi is a central investment and it may be difficult for the local communities to drive the "ART CITY" campaign alone. From the case study

of the Thailand Biennale, Krabi 2018, it can be seen that urban development, according to the creative economy principle, needs to rely on cooperation at the policy and implementation levels. Not only imputus from the central government is needed, but also the policy of community leaders giving independence to local organisations under good guidance and consultation must continue. Another importnt aspect is providing education and understanding to the people in the area. Enlisting cooperation from the support units are important advantages in contributing to the successful organisation of international art events of this scale.

An important foundation to the development of an art city is the catalyst of government policy. Even though all of the objectives have been achieved, there are issues to be managed and improved for the next edition; appropriate faculties both indoor and outdoor, communication facilities, legal issues, logistics, human resources management, technological and engineering supports to fabricate artworks, financial management, fundraising and marketing. These factors and issues must be carefully thought out for future development.

Summary and Conclusion

One of the Thailand Biennale's functions is making of beautiful things. But it also functions as catalytic statements and observations on the socio-cultural, political and economic concerns native to the locations involved. Some might argue that Krabi does not need revitalisation for its tourist attractions and revenues contributions to Thailand. But this event has proven that natural resources should be better preserved, by which the Thailand Biennale: Krabi 2018 makes cultural and natural resources a first priority. Hopefully Thailand Biennale, Krabi 2018 will be an important example of contributing to the preservation of local culture, identities, economic, and environment. It functions as an example for bettering the inclusivity in the arts and wellbeing of the local community.

In the fast changing worlds of tourism and local communities the reccommendations for better preparation in organising the next edition of Thailand Biennale need to carefully look at several aspects. This is especially true where the dimensions of cultural resources, environment and history are different from Krabi's. With the success of Thailand Biennale, Krabi 2018, the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Thailand's Ministry of Culture has brought aesthetics, social, cultural, and economic benefits to the Krabi province. By organising

the Thailand Biennale in a different provence every two years they will meet their stated aim of "... transformation from a tourist destination to a city of contemporary art" which should clearly differentiate "Thailand Biennale" from other art events.

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