

A Virtuoso with Multiple Faces

by Chu Yuan & Jay Koh

The painting *The Founding of the Nation* also known as *Ceremony of Declaring People's China* by Dong Xiwen¹ (1953) serves as one of the greatest modern cultural icons of China, state endorsed and housed in the Great Hall in Beijing. This painting had to undergo numerous cosmetic alterations (such as visibly removing or adding the presence of key political figures) to present historical accounts that were in line with the political constructions of modern China. Another art-related happening in the spring of 1989 in a student exhibition in the Beijing Academy of Fine Arts created a conflict with the law, resulting in a series of student protests that brought about further suppression from the state. These student protests constructed meanings that could be related to the general dissatisfaction of the public during that time, sustaining a period of heightened public unrest that led to the Tiananmen tragedy.



The Founding of the Nation, 1953 by Dong Xiwen

While the painting was expediently altered without any qualms or fuss, under the directive of the state, the students' exercise of freedom to create art was suppressed by the state. This illustrates the workings of power in determining the expression of art as cultural knowledge. Subsequently, Mao's icon exists on as an object and carrier of memory, and Dong Xiwen's painting as an attraction to visitors, tourists and Chinese citizens on daily visits and national holidays - whilst Tiananmen becomes a symbol of human rights violations and a lost opportunity for change.



The Founding of the Nation as a tourist attraction in the Great Hall, Beijing

In Singapore, western contemporary art and theatre has recently become the sexiest and most potent weapon to generate positive publicity to counter its long standing image as an authoritarian state that is regulated, conservative and governed with strict surveillances, laws and actions for self preservation. Art has become a hotly promoted feature of the island-state, and a string of cultural agencies were set up to showcase the state's new clothing - hip, open and progressive - while in the not-so-distant past of the island's history, western fashion and style were propagated as destructive influences and adherers were penalized² theatre practitioners were repeatedly imprisoned in the '70s and '80s, performance artists and practitioners of forum theatre were intimidated, punished and co-opted in the '90s³ and at present ongoing intimidation still exists in the censorship of scripts, the distribution of funds and permits to practice.

Why has art awakened such fear (and attraction) in authoritarian states? In Burma (Myanmar) the state subverts and suppresses any foreign initiatives that offer art and culture-related resource development, and have in place strict censorship laws on public viewing. These laws of suppression of free expression are similar to those found in Vietnam where relatively few innovative artistic activities can take place in the capital city, although conditions are a little more free in the south. In Thailand, art has been allowed to develop relatively freely in the last two decades - as long as artists do not touch on the state religion and monarchy - giving rise to numerous citizen NGO and artist collaborations.

In all these countries, contemporary artists have managed, in one form or another, to create their respective brand of activism to present their resistances to power, and art and politics have been coupled together in ways that are not often seen as problematic. Although these forms of activism and activities have been going on for at least two decades in Southeast Asia, very little evidence is available to show their effect in the public sphere. Most of these artists continue to employ forms, methods and strategies inherited from the modernist tradition. Does the much-touted modernist myth of art - as a universal tool that can empower democratic values, citizen participation and diversity - really have the power it aspires to? If we look at the actions of the Yellow "royals" in 2009 and now the Red "underclass" in Bangkok, their actions - analysed as creative strategic and participative acts - make those of art and artists pale by comparison.



The besieged Suvarnabhumi Airport, Bangkok 2008



Blood parade to Parliament, Bangkok 2010



Blood painting at Government House, Bangkok 2010

Literature churned out by art writers, curators, historians and critics – long regarded as mediatory tools for the public outreach of art - is often deemed as inaccessible by persons outside of the art world. Do art works and texts increasingly employ a language that is understood and decodable only by an elitist circle (museum, galleries and independent art spaces) of users, or are they viewed by those outside the art world as being irrelevant and of little value to their lives?

Have these artists, who wish to engage the public and art agencies, wrongly constructed their position in relation to state power, or perhaps applied the wrong form of communication and language that has resulted in passivity and disengagement? Can art be effective in facilitating democratic space and political agency if it itself assimilates the same strategies that authoritarian powers use? The methods of top-down, imposed values, messages or prescriptive strategies often leave the receiver without any real choice, option or engagement nor the space to think reflectively in order to arrive at one's own opinion and position.

In this essay we would like to examine the ideology of art as political construction that aspires to serve a democratic social objective - artists creating resistances in response to a lack of social justice - yet turns out to be serving another egoistic and essentialising ideology, in using a language and/or methodology that is inadequate to carry out an effective engagement with a 'layperson' – someone uninitiated into visual

language or art speak. At the end we will propose interdisciplinary and participatory approaches that may hold possibility for some success in creating a bottom-up discourse.

Ideology and Activism as Social Constructions

The management of knowledge as a construction of power

When the state regulates knowledge in the expression of art and cultural activities (such as creating boundaries of discourse, acts of censorship, or laying limits through bans and imprisonment), it sees itself as the rightful guardian (e.g. communist – inherited, democratic – elected) of knowledge: promoting the ‘right’ kind of knowledge and suppressing the ‘wrong’ kind. In so doing it also generates knowledge by interpreting what is allowed (good) for society, creating representations and supporting the art and cultural activities they desire. These abilities to manage knowledge are activities of power.

Artists who aim at activism wish to portray themselves as being in the same category as the ‘lay people’, victims of state oppression and exploitation of the capitalist system. They do this by creating forms and symbols of resistance through art works and activities. Modernist art practice has internalized the belief that an artist automatically inherits the knowledge and ability to represent the disadvantaged, the weak and the exploited, that art has transcendental properties to evoke in the mind of the uninitiated an enlightenment that can lead to social change. This blatant and unreflexive display of ego, self confidence and belief of endowed knowledge may in fact lead to the manifestation of a kind of power akin to dictatorial power.

What these artists have not addressed is the rupture between art and life. One can perhaps argue that this gap or distance has existed between art and life for a long time, however it became even more pronounced with modernism and high modernism, when art became totally uninterested in life, and in fact insisted on the separation in order for it to remain ‘true’. If an artist were to continue with that lineage of modernist ideas and modernist art education - on which most, if not all, of Asian modern art and art educational institutions are based – one that fosters individual creativity, individual inspiration, and pays almost undivided attention to processes of art production at the expense of reception, distribution, consumption, representation and interpretation, or sees these as outside of the artist’s concern - the political artwork would most probably be conceived and executed by the artist in the studio. It would be circulated via complete reliance on the ‘machinery’ (agents, circuit, networks, institutions) developed from the modernist tradition – the curators, historians, critics, arts managers, gallery, museums and the art market - and interface with the ‘public’ in an exhibition format.

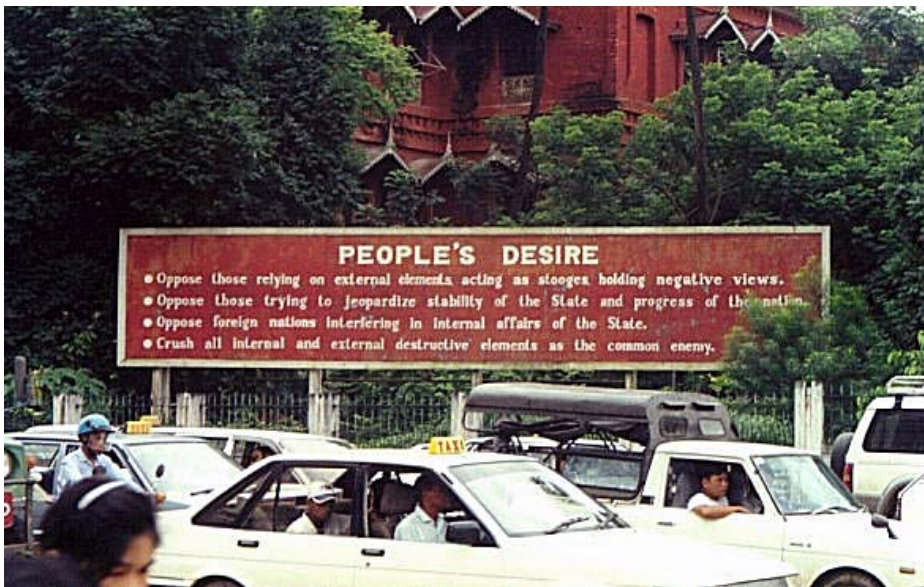
In such a scenario, what effect does the artist hope to achieve and whom, in fact, would the artist succeed in reaching? For one, the artist would certainly be able to reach the art audience – fellow artists, curators, art historians, critics, arts managers, gallery owners and collectors - secondly the media, journalists, writers, and – if the artwork is provocative or sensational enough (in whatever sense) - perhaps the state or authorities, catching the attention of the politicians and the law makers, which in most cases as we have encountered in Asia (one can think of numerous examples) this happens as something negative, producing confrontation, censorship, sometimes arrests, banning, other forms of harassment and generating outcry rather than dialogue. And perhaps in Asia, this has become the measure of ‘success’ that we have come to attach to a political art event.

Where is the public in this picture? Well, the public is of course relegated to the position of the sidelined audience of this power play – the onlookers – and if in the first place no one in fact took the effort to

address or involve them in this whole scenario, why should they respond? What business is it of theirs? It is the same with the performance of politicians in positions of power, often citizen voters are standing by watching these power manifestations like stage shows, treating them as forms of entertainment, and not something requiring their intervention or active participation, which itself is a symptom of disempowerment.

Contestations and resistances in the public and social sphere

The language(s) of visual art has/have evolved over time, and artists align themselves with and build onto complex lineages and cross trajectories of styles, concepts and vocabularies, highly coded and yet open to a range of readings. The entity that is relegated to the position and role of ‘audience’ or the artist’s ‘other’ – also inhabit, inherit, adopt or align themselves with complex lineages and bodies of knowledge, practices, values, beliefs, tastes – which may be conflicting and yet given a constructed coherence by the individual or group – and would have been shaped and sustained by discourses, narratives and material culture including images over a long period of time. (The division between artist and audience/other is of course artificial and one that is set up in art discourse, for the artist and audience are likely to share many commonalities. The argument made here is to highlight the fact that the process of engaging the audience is seldom invested with the same value as the process of engaging art.)



Public display of ‘People’s Desire’ in Rangoon, Burma

These bodies of knowledge, practices and values sustain people’s imagination and direct their performances in everyday life, and would also influence the process of reception when people are placed in ‘audience’ positions. Any new stimuli into a socialized space is mediated and bracketed by complex environments and competing forms of existing knowledge. People tend to respond to new information or things in ways that draws from existing knowledge, habits and tastes, and tend to resist or dismiss those that appear unfamiliar or threatening. As such, any artwork would face resistances and contestations when it enters into the cognitive and experiential space of an audience, and would need to negotiate its meaning with these existing factors. Culture is indeed the dynamic field where these contestations, negotiations and change take place; however, in Asia, culture is still often defended and propagated as something ahistorical, essential and unchanging – and not exercised as a realm of realising dialogue, discussion, possibilities or a realm of constant becoming.



Activities from Open Academy Burma, 2005 & 2006

Faced with this, we think the most radical question for us now in our practice is not to further expand on how the structures, agents or processes of art can accommodate an engagement with life (as artists have been trying to re-invent and push this line of thinking more concertedly since the 1960s, for example Allan Kaprow's *Essays on Blurring of Art and Life*, the experiments of Situationist International, and postmodernist artists' efforts in reconnecting with traditional community-oriented art forms); but rather to question and investigate how the concepts, structures, processes and relationships of people in their daily lives can accommodate and engage with art. The entry points need to be reversed, and investigated from the others' point of view. If an artist hopes - through art - to engage with or motivate, affect or influence an 'other' (aspirations which some would call didactic - an issue that calls for a separate discussion), the investigations would need to go deeper than to just think of the other as a faceless, identity-less 'audience'. Perhaps there is a necessity to engage the other as a partner, co-participant or collaborator.



Activities from Open Academy Mongolia, 2009

Evolving models of engagement

How then can this point us towards evolving models of engagement? For one, we think that such approaches should incorporate active *negotiation* between artist and participating/ collaborating parties - in a dynamic process that acknowledges and recognises real differences in terms of power, values, beliefs, behaviour and interests. As such, this approach will also need to be responsive to specific contexts; cultural cognitive, communicative and behavioural processes; patterns of interactions; value systems; hierarchies; inclusions and exclusions; and resistances.

In our various projects in Burma, Mongolia and presently in Ireland under the platform of IFIMA,⁴ we have been researching and developing a model of collaborative practice that builds on inter-subjective meanings created through relational exchange taking place in everyday spaces, a process that will reveal differences and commonalities amongst co-participants and allow engagements, negotiations and contestations, which will either bring about some form of desire or empathy to further the relationship, or some form of tension or adversity, which may then either end the relationship or perhaps transform the engagement in various ways.

In our efforts to move away from top-down as well as bottom-up models of engagement (the first often produces situations in which the community/ participants are removed and alienated from much of the fruits or outcome of the work, or in a worse scenario, exploited and used; the second renders the artist under the service of the specified community or 'client', and often results in the artists feeling exhausted, exploited and lacking motivation for long term sustenance), we see the model of horizontal engagement and negotiation as providing the best chance of creating mutually informing, challenging and sustaining relationships. We seek, through relational processes, for commonalities to emerge and form between co-participants, leading into negotiative processes which do not deny but feed and sustain the curiosities, interests and energies of the different parties, and seeks to increase personal and communal agency, in the hope of bringing about a third phase or space of engagements, the space where new possibilities emerge.



Conversation Pieces, Seri Kembangan, Malaysia 2008



Imagining Possibilities, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia 2009

Closing questions

In political art or so-called ‘participative’ art practice, if the artist’s methodology works by imposing or dictating a particular idea, outcome or answer on the audience/participants, even if it is one that is highly just or wise, enlightened or visionary, without opening up of a range of choices and the exercise of personal agency for the viewer, how is that different from the method of hegemonic state power? Should the artist’s method be different or is it a matter of power play – a wrestle of the arms of power, intellect and will in the public arena? What role can art as a form of knowledge play in the opening of choices, of the imagination and in constructing and realizing alternatives?

¹ <http://chinese posters.net/artists/dongxiwen.php>

² WOG (Western Oriented Gentleman) was a social campaign in Singapore in the ‘70s where males with long hair will be served last in a queue or not at all.

³ In January 1976, Kuo Pao Kun, dramatist and playwright was arrested among 50 persons under the Internal Security Act (ISA), he was released in October 1980. In May 1987, Wong Souk Yee, dramatist was arrested among 16 persons under ISA. In 1994 the suppression of performance art and forum theatre resulted in the prosecution of performance artist Josef Ng and arts manager Iris Tan and the withdrawal of funding for any forum theatre production put up by The Necessary Stage. Langenbach, R. 2004. “Jacked Off With No Pleasure: Censorship and the Necessary Stage”. *Ask Not: The Necessary Stage In Singapore Theatre*. Singapore: Times Press.

⁴ <http://ifima.net/IFIMA/IFIMA2k.htm>