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BELOW THE RADAR SCREEN: DYNAMIC NEW ARTIST LED MOVEMENTS IN ASIA

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ABSTRACT

“Mapping Asian Artists' Mobility: Dynamic Synergies of Artist Hubs” is a research project that was conducted by Bamboo Culture International in 2005-2006. It aimed to confirm our observation of the recent trends in Asia, that there is a dynamic correlation between successful reuse / regeneration and artistic mingling of cross-disciplined artists. From the 373 surveys sent to culture organizations in 22 Asian countries, we received 145 survey replies, hence we had 38.9% response rate. We've located creative hubs acting as interface of different cultures and art disciplines. These hubs assist in cultural exchanges projects and act as international communication platforms, fostering local development in general. This paper is a synopsis of our findings.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

This mapping is done in a non-traditional way, unlike the method for empirical research, whereby materials and information are obtained from published and official statistics and breakdown by standardized groupings. These general culture information we feel, is already easily available, and the WWW have made it possible to know without being another portal for just general art news of Asia.

Our methodology is influenced by many culture directors in Asia that we have met in the last decade. We feel the trend of culture practices in Asia is changing very fast. There is a subliminal force that is bubbling up that we wish to tap into. Asian art today is multifaceted. Though there are different focuses and aims, we target the organizations that commonly use contemporary art language to develop their projects. This is the core ideology that makes this study different. Though we do add in some major public and private institutions and traditional / ethnic organizations in our outreach, it is more for their added input of contextualizing the whole country's culture background, and also to seek their help in their local knowledge for appropriate referrals.

We also rely heavily on the previous years of personal connections and on site visits to add in the patina of our understanding of the real situation in a longer time line instead of a web base context of present activities. These connections, relationships, personal and specific referrals provided us with unique leads to these new clusters and / or old grand dame institutions with high impact on local culture. These units when seen in the context of the WWW, and the globalize consumption market can be indeed very much beneath the radar of international media coverage of culture observations. Without these first hand knowledge, plus time spend listening and asking, it would not



Figure 1. "Mapping Asian Artists' Mobility" workshop and conference, Taiwan 2005

be easy to interpret some of our responses that we have received, nor some of the activities that we saw while on site. Thus some of our remarks are indeed very subjective and may differ from regular published information. However we do need to acknowledge that this does make our research more subjective than accepted academic standards. Hence we wish to state that culture interpretations in this report are subject to our research team's perspectives, from comments written by of our participants.

RESPONSE ANALYSIS

According to our own contact database and referral of replied surveys, we've sent out 373 surveys in 22 countries. Among them, we received 38.9%, hence 145 active surveys, 2.4% have now ceased of activities, and 0.8% replied that they do not fit into the scope of our research. Based on the replies to 15 questions, we see several trends that we may or may not be aware of before:

1. The Internet is a powerful tool for connectivity for less resourceful regions in Asia to the outside world, the benefit of easy access to communication technology has equalized outreach opportunities.
2. They mainly cluster together, by choice or by default in reused spaces within the city. Many acting as a physical hub for interactions in these low rent zones.
3. There is a rush for new initiatives since the turning of the millennium with new legal structures and visions for ways that artist engage themselves to other sectors of society and between international culture entities.
4. Many have very high social agenda in their long term missions. But they are far from being the classic units waiting for subsidies from public sectors to achieve these goals.
5. With innovative mixed economy and cross disciplines, for profit activities, many models of sustainability are indeed new case study for social economists.
6. Outreach to different sectors of society for socially engaged projects, such as social services, schools, environmental protection, disadvantage groups etc.
7. Size is not an indication of their international connections, many new and small units are very active with projects, joining other arts organizations from as far away as Europe Res Artis, Art Factories, Triangle Projects, and as close to home as Asialink and Arts Network Asia.
8. These outreach would made possible not necessarily through local funding, a lot of financial support and services were provided by cultural diplomatic connections such as British Council, Alliance Française, Goethe Institute, and international culture foundations, such as Asian Cultural Council, Ford Foundation, Prince Claus Fund, Japan Foundation and many others.
9. We found lack in financial resources in countries such as Indonesia and Philippines, while Australia, Singapore and Hong Kong shows the correlation between economic level and culture budget.
10. There are many small independent self financed units have appeared through the effort of its own funder all over Asia.
11. Of special mention, support from international organizations are critical for the survival of culture units in developing countries, such as Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Vietnam, and Mongolia.
12. About 90% of our replies stated that they have had artists' mobility programs and more than 50% of the respondents show that they have had received artist as residents in their program.
13. Financial resources and operation spaces are urgent concerns to our international directors, especially for start-ups.

14. While long term sustainability of their operations is very dependant on the supply of professional management of these culture spaces. The lack of which is severe in many parts of Asia.
15. The focus of the future efforts of many Asian artists organizations are as varied as their own local situations, but common voice is heard in the need for international networking and artists' mobility programs, and to foster cultural exchanges with other cultural organizations.

CULTURE HUBS

Seeing the importance of the international networking to these culture units that we are analyzing, we selected several physical hubs of exchange, as significant indicators of the level of dynamics activities in that district. We highlight artist hubs from each region / city that provide rich source of information and activities for their local development.

These contemporary culture organizations that replied to us are mainly independent and autonomous, many have visual arts as their main focus, but far from limiting their activities to static exhibitions of solo presentations, these spaces have a bigger vision, as they are the meeting points of people and events. Given the technological / digital advancement, they lead the artists toward interactive methods towards multi discipline practices. Many greatly emphasize the process, specifically with dialogue crossing many fields, with specializing in social, experimental, site specific projects.

Once a new issue is established within the creative cluster, an organic transformation follows. The social and economic events encircling the local community became the stimuli for the artists, being fresh materials and inspirations for the creativity of these artist colonies. This can be seen in the development direction of Beijing's Chiao Yang district, within the 798's creative industry enclave.

Others such as the Concrete House in Thailand, it is focused on promoting performance arts, they have outreached to other related theme events such as the performance art festival in Taipei. Another example, Necessary Stage of Singapore, with social mission in mind, combines many professionals from Asia, in creative collaboration, producing joint performances. These are indeed unique case studies in Asia.

On an island south of Sydney, Salamanca Arts Center is worth noting, as it attracts a sizeable cluster of Australian artists there for their creative productions. Meanwhile, the Fringe Festival from the Fringe Club in Hong Kong, an old icehouse diary that evolved into a classic reuse, has infected the whole district towards regeneration for culture tourism, the now infamous Lan Kwai Fong. There is the Common Room and the Kedai Kebun Forum in Indonesia; both are innovative in their social agenda within their art practices. In Japan, the Gallery Soap is a unique sound art group with its own branding concept for new music talents. But Green Papaya Gallery is the hot bed of contemporary art of the Philippines; they set their vision to outreach towards Asia for new channels of dialogue.

Arts intervention into Environment

In our responses, there are those that showed their concerns to the relationship between the land and environment. As our Bamboo curtain Studio is also emphasizing its efforts towards promoting arts' intervention into space, we are indeed happy to like minded organizations such as Colab in India and the Land Foundation in Thailand. The former is a facilitator for artists and architects for experimentation in issues of mutual concerns, to seek solutions via inputs of both disciplines. The later, through founder Rirkrit Tiravannija, who invites international artists to their northern territories to experience the natural way of life on the farm, to seek alternative development solutions, while experiencing life without such basics as water and electricity. Similarly, in Alice Spring, the desert of Australia, Watch This Space employs unusual strategies to illicit awareness and understanding through art intervention to the changing environment of the desert.

But then there are arts' intervention into the cityscape, Fukuoka Japan, the Museum City Project sees the city as a mega exhibition zone, presenting short term exhibitions and performances and interactions, it aims to bring contemporary art to their citizens daily transits routes through urban spaces. Singapore's Artist Village and Indonesia's Performance Klub work along similar strategies, using non traditional culture spaces as their arena so as to outreach to a wider audience, using participatory events to bring arts within the reach of their citizens. Japan's P3 Art and Environment stated it concisely, that through the hands of artists, participants can truly experience the relationship between man and his surroundings, plus man and society, in their respective local context. Art has true value and direct impact on environment and society at large.

Art Intervention in Society

Besides the environment, many culture organizations showed their concern towards the developments in social, economic, and political trends, especially their impact on minorities. In Indonesia and Philippines, there are the performing arts groups using theater as their channel for expressing political criticisms. Indonesia's Performance Klub, and Teater Garasi, plus Philippine's Green Papaya are representatives, add in New World Disorder in that network, they reflect on the disarray in their country. New World Disorder mimic mega brands strategies to counteract on global conglomerates such as MacDonal and Microsoft, to address the impact of globalization of this monolithic power on their domestic culture.

Similarly, P3 Art and Environment tries to use the artists to awaken the power of social dialogue and intervention to its citizens. Given the closed societies such as Myanmar and Vietnam, foreign culture workers help foster the local art practitioners towards new forms of expression, using that as tool of persuasions to the local government, towards opening up the local culture. Myanmar's NICA (Networking & Initiatives for Culture and the Arts) and the Ho Chi Ming city's Saigon Open City Company is similarly effective. The efforts of others such as Reyum Institute in Ream Seap in the capital of Cambodia, Bangkok's Concrete House, and Philippines, the Tam-awan Village, all have substantive projects that are geared towards minorities. Due to the severe lack of welfare resources in Cambodia, Reyum Institute teaches street children painting, so as to learn a skill for life. Concrete House focuses on human rights; the latest project is a reflection from a group of Myanmar women who, while on the way to see the Bangkok Civilization, were being accosted at the border, infringing their human rights with undue search and queries. This event is made into an arts project and eventually traveled through different countries in South Asia addressing such inequalities. Tam-awan Village in Philippines is the gateway for the indigenous culture for the outside world. Besides interpreting to the outsiders, they are also a supply station and help in indigenous groups in improving their quality of life.

Last but not the least, Bangkok as the base for Nuts Society, uses arts projects to let each individual understand his position in the world, intervening between world development and local realities. One more organization is worth an exceptional mention, Very Special Art in Singapore is established under government's social service sector, to use the unique value of arts to help mental or physical disabled to rebuilt their self confidence and explore their potential. This is a case of art having real social contribution.

CONCLUSION

Lack in Professionalism of Cross-Cultural Management

In our research, we feel very disappoint that some regions in Asia is lacking in response, e.g. Japan, Korea, and Thailand, most probably due to language barrier. The low response rate from these regions has affected our data interpretation. Similarly, China and Taiwan have language barrier too, but we were able to send out a Chinese version to these culture units, thereby receiving an appropriate response ratio. Therefore, language ability is an asset (especially English), as it has direct impact on potentials for cross border exchanges.

We also have found that many directors of these culture hubs are either long term settlers to Asia from the West, or returnees from overseas. They use contemporary concepts onto the local context, absorbing the rich resources of the West, and apply it to the local culture of the East, and vice versa, they show to the West, the culture diversity of the East. Daravuth Ly, director of Reyum Institute in Cambodia, escaped to France as a refugee, now returned to his motherland with reinterpretation of the past decades, plus street wise contributions. Similarly, Platform China in Beijing is a culture hub, initiated by director Natalie Sun on her return from her studies in England; she specializes in art management, promotion of contemporary art of China. At the same time, long time resident, Brian Wallace of Australia, in 1991, established Red Gate Gallery, as one of the first international art platform in China, right at the edge of the Forbidden City. Across the strait, Chang Huai-lan, artistic director of Kio-a-thau Artist Village and KYIT Art Center in the south of Taiwan, is a returnee from France, and thus promoted many French artists in residency exchanges. It is obvious from the above highlights, that promotion of artists' mobility and culture exchange requires hands on know-how which is in severe shortage in some regions of Asia, and can become the bottleneck to further development, more so than financial support. Many established units remarked that lack of professional art management is affecting their sustainable development potential.

Structure and Operation Systems

Overall, the arts practices are multifaceted in Asia, with differing ideals and visions. However they mainly use contemporary languages in their culture projects. Common denominators are the exploration of new media, new ways of experimenting and implementing the art practices, and provision of support to local emerging talents.

As for structures, the public resources are lacking in Philippines, Indonesia, and Myanmar etc.. Many small new art entities have unclear legal status, and are dependent on personal contributions for their operations. Their operations ebb and flow from funds raised on project basis, while their daily management and communication are mainly on voluntary basis. These directors are mainly artists with fervent ideals, but lacking professional management know-how. Depleting their own personal energy, not to mention their financial purse strings, these units have difficulty holding onto sustainable strategies. As we can see in our responses, quite a few told us, with regrets, that they have already stopped operating.

Unlike the rest of Asia, Taiwan has unique situation of government outsourcing their preferred culture projects. Lacking in-house execution capability, the government uses BOT system to outsource their annual culture agenda to arts organizations, funding on an annual basis, culture entities can hardly focus on long term development directions. This system of government support created inordinate dependency on the public sector, while corporate and private support is lacking. This is similar in other Asian countries, where tax deduction incentives are not enough to attract private support to the Arts. However, Korea is an exception. Samsung Corporation is a mega-force in that country. While SSamzie Space is worthy of mention: a fashion brand that establishes an art space that nurtures creativity in international emerging talents alongside their local artist for experimental collaboration. That does fit well into the spirit of that creative enterprise.

Networking

We find many of these culture hubs acts as a platform for young talents, helping them enter into the international art arena. We may not have located too many artist-in-residencies complexes in Asia, but that is not an indicator of the exchange movement, a lot is beneath the radar screen. Especially in South Asia, the international exchange activities are more dynamic than we have envisioned. Could it be because English language may be more common in usage in South Asia than East Asia?

Also of mention, is the political network of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) helps to promote culture dialogues between their twelve member countries. Other networks are specifically for culture exchanges, Asian Culture Council, Asia-Europe Foundation, Ford Foundation etc. have helped in promoting network development within Asia. But, some Asian countries are excluded by these international NGOs, such as India, Australia, and Taiwan. Other

systems of networking are thus evolved to complement the above situations. Asialink is a major force from Australia for Asian culture diplomacy of sending out Australian artists to all parts of Asia. While KHOJ International Artists' Association, based on the operating system of Triangle Trust in UK, has established a South Asian Network for Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal, a much needed culture input in that volatile zone.

In summary, we would like to highlight the size of the organization and budget of these culture units do not have direct correlation. Many small units have surprising dynamic synergy promoting international exchanges, while incorporating new knowledge and creativity to their local arts and community groups, and acting as a real platform of art of living. But a similar echo is heard across these earnest directors that they need to expand their audience towards difference sectors of their society, in hope that they will understand the spectrum of contemporary art expressions in different parts of Asia and the world.

We wish this mapping to be an action research giving ourselves and others, a tool for immediate action to change their paradigm of Asia and our own position within this continent. This we hope is just a sampling of insights, in future, there should be efforts to continued to delft more deeply and specifically into complex structures of Asian culture hubs

Intra-Asia Network

Finally, given the overriding concerns of many of our responses, are that of outreach and networking, Intra Asia Network, this new group of culture directors, can indeed be of assistance to many active Asian directors who wish to initiated or expand their interaction with other counter parts. There is indeed a mountain of information in Asia on culture activities in different cities, but we have very little first hand, face to face connections, to other Asian spaces and curators, artists, and directors. We need more specific knowledge and trust, to link like minded entities into groups and assist these culture workers via meaningful collaborations, such as management interns, curatorial trainings, artist exchanges, technical support and professional mentoring. Asia does not have the luxury of too many classic artist-in-residencies complexes such as SSamzie Space (Korea), Taipei Artist Village (Taiwan), Rimbun Dahan (Malaysia), Sanskriti (India), Artspace (Australia) or Akiyoshidai (Japan). But Asia now has already an active movement of culture workers' mobility, in various innovative formats, with high social and economic value to local developments, and long term effects for nurturing civic society in those regions. It is our hope that we can use this new network for furthering such ideals for many Asian culture spaces. Asia does need to know Asia, in finding its own culture mosaic that is uniquely Asian, but each piece is full of color and flavor incomparable to the next. Hopefully IAN will be a platform for sharing of each of our directors' professionalism and experiences for this higher goal.