

Micropolitics at Baan Noorg

A one-year complimentary accommodation plus different activities and exchanges with eighteen designers, artists and researchers of eleven nationalities¹ had been offered to Burmese couple Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe by the Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts & Culture. Described in this style, the project “*365 Days: Life Muse*” might seem more like a reality TV show rather than an artistic project. Such a perception could be misleading. Others will probably only see this project as another avatar of relational art. This would again be a mistake. As pointed out by Dominique Baqué, relational aesthetics has not arisen from nothing. In fact, artists like Allan Kaprow (1927-2006), Fluxus, Adrian Piper (1947-), Daniel Spoerri (1930-), Untel (1975-1980) and so many others were there long before (Baqué, 2004: 150). So what does that mean, then? Is this project linked to the spirit of relational art without necessarily claiming their ins and outs? If so, what does this truly imply? With the success of the dystopia, the last twenty-five years of the twentieth century marks the disappearance of ideals and social utopian ideologies as from Charles Fourier (1772-1837) to Etienne Cabet (1788-1856) and from Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876) to Karl Marx (1818-1883). Philosopher Marc Jimenez considers that we can oppose to the political utopia, the utopia of art that is a "negative utopia" or “utopia of the rout”. The latter reveals negative dysfunctions and disorders of the present world. The art that we judge depoliticized, disengaged and not involved is to be placed under the sign of this negative utopia. (Jimenez, 2014: 62). Conversely, in his book *Relational Aesthetics* published in 1998, French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud (1965-) put an emphasis on the utopic shift from *macro* to *micro-politics* in his famous quote:

Social utopias and revolutionary hopes have given way to everyday micro-utopias and imitative strategies, any stance that is « directly » critical of the society is futile, if based on the illusion of a marginality that is nowadays impossible, not to say regressive (Bourriaud, 1998: 31).

Bourriaud was not the only one, nor the first. In 2000, French art historian Paul Ardenne (1956-) and fellow Christine Macel co-curated the exhibition *Micropolitique* at the Centre National d’Art Contemporain Le Magasin - Grenoble, France - showing the shift mentioned above. The very essence of this exhibition was based on one of the assumptions stated by Gilles Deleuze (1925-

¹ Austria, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Taiwan and Thailand.

1995) and Félix Guattari (1930-1992) in the book *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980 translated in English by Brian Massumi in 1987): “*When the machine becomes planetary or cosmic, there is an increasing tendency for assemblages to miniaturise, to become micro-assemblages*” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 215). In his introduction of *Conference Micropolitiques*, Paul Ardenne lashes against **committed art** supported by the Establishment, which he believes is just a *democratic alibi* that does not rise above *the politically correct*. Although appreciated, Ardenne argues that committed art does not have any social impact as observed in artwork by Lucy Orta (1966-), Hans Haacke (1936-) or Krzysztof Wodiczko (1943-) (Ardenne, 2000: online). The art historian is even more critical when he further explains by mentioning that this art is there to:

nourish the thirst of public distraction and thereby refers less to art than to cultural events. The propositions in this case are limited to a kind of light opera symbolism with a humanist consonance which is consensually firmly set in the minds, furthermore is logically linked with the demand for shows aligned with the ruling powers in place, always favourable on entertainment and mass mental anaesthesia (Ardenne, 2000: online).

Paul Ardenne is not the only one. In fact, the aforementioned French philosopher Dominique Baqué, in the same book published in 2004, shares the same ideas. Although they both denounce this kind of art, Paul Ardenne proposes an alternative namely **micro-political art** that he defines as “*a form of art in which the approach is above all privileged micro-layouts, local initiatives or symbolic questioning propositions lightened by a concern of asserting slogans, utopian ideas or encouragement to a targeted commitment*” (Ardenne, 2000: online). Instigators of “*365 days: Life Muse*”, the approach of Pompilai and Jiradej Meemalai must be perceived in the lineage of micro-political art defined by Paul Ardenne in the particular context of Thailand and Myanmar... neighbours... enemies? In every nation, populism based principally on racism and xenophobia creates more problems than solutions. When reflecting on this, titles of two songs by Georges Brassens “the two uncles” and “To die for your ideas” suddenly popped into my mind... very much as a warning against nationalism and patriotism. French and Germans were at war several times but are nonetheless two driving forces of Europe. Another problem that France currently encounters owes its deep roots to its colonial past and especially its inability to incorporate the descendants of all these foreigners coming to work during “The Glorious Thirty”. All these people were grouped creating nowadays ghettos and no-go zones. Like the Burmese, many workers come from neighbouring countries to work in Thailand. One must not imagine that migrants leave their country with joy. They are not tourists. The choices are not the same.

Moreover, we have yet to mention the stateless people! Politically correct speeches are useless; experience is privileged more than words.

Giving privilege to proximity and local social roots, the complementary accommodation for the Burmese couple is located mere 50 meters from Jiradej Meemalai family home, a place where he grew up and still resides with his partner Pornpilai. But why there? Why this involvement? Located in the district of Photharam in the sub-district of Nong Pho, Jiradej Meemalai knows the local history and why this particular context history matters. The Mae Klong region² is where Tai Yuan, Mons and Lao Phuan have learned to live together according to the different waves of migrations. The Wat Muang Folk Museum is a notorious example for the memory of the people in this geographic area. Although it was possible in the past, there is no reason for that to change now. At first, the difficulty for Pornpilai and Jiradej Meemalai was to convince the administrative and religious authorities of the soundness of the project and therefore vouched for Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe for one year. The young couple are both working at Kinzi, a Taiwanese company specialised in stainless steel that employs 500 people including 200 Burmese. By changing accommodation, this couple leave the living neighbourhoods attributed to Burmese by the company and for the first time are set in an environment with Thai neighbours. Some of their colleagues - who do not even speak Thai - want to leave this place but it is where they feel safe. However, for Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe, this project represents the opportunity of a new life, a way to feel integrated in the Thai society. In the chapter "For an aesthetics' encounter", Marc Jimenez remembers a presentation of Edouard Glissant (1928-1911), and his numerous references to Gilles Deleuze and the metaphor of the rhizome; which, unlike the root identity, even totalitarian means that any identity is well-founded and extends in a relation to one another, transcending conflicts, contradictions, differences and variety, which highlights the complexity of "Chaos-Monde" to arrive at the "Tout-Monde" (Jimenez, 2014: 72). In this singular context, the couple is no longer exclusively surrounded by Burmese. Their new neighbours also have the opportunity to get to know them. An ordinary life marked by daily needs, work, and neighbourhood children who stop to play with their newly adopted black dog. A seemingly commonplace daily life which could positively affect mentalities. This part of the

² Pranee Wongthes, editor, *The Mae Klong Basin: socio-cultural development*, published by Silpakorn University, 2536 [1993].

project is arguably invisible-or not really- as it takes place in the everyday life, without audience. Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe could be perceived as shy at first but have gradually become more jovial, happy and in a way blossoming. Different stakeholders in this project, whether they are artists or designers, or a bit of both, attempted, in form of various activities, to act and to create links not only between the couple and Thai neighbours but also among their friends, colleagues and family members. This is also a means to 'de-ghettoize' Burmese people who work and live together. The fear generated by xenophobia can thus defuse gradually. This probably led us to the French psycho-sociological concept of "Reliance" that shall be translated into English as "re-binding" or "re-linking". As Marcel Bolle De Bal illustrates - theorised by the two well-known French sociologists Edgar Morin and Michel Maffesoli - it refers to the reconstruction of human and social bonds that have been more or less destroyed by modern societies (Marcel Bolle De Bal, 2009: online). Even though social motivations and intentions of this project are real, the Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts & Culture's positioning should not be mistaken; it is not a humanitarian organisation. Quite the contrary, it is a non-profit artist initiative. Surely, one might wonder what will happen to Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe upon the achievement of the project. Everyone involved in this project is also concerned by them, but the answer belong to them; it depends only on their free will...

I cannot end this text without mentioning, among others, one of my main interrogations. The general public understands that social and political issues are at the heart of this project, but what about the artistic perception of Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe? The art they know comes mainly from religious art in Buddhist temples in Myanmar and Thailand. Probably one could be content with the idea of Morris Weitz in his article "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics" explaining that art is an open concept with no possible definition. One can also easily jump from Nelson Goodman's famous "When is Art?" appeared in his 1978 book *Ways of Worldmaking*, to "When is Artification?" by *Roberta Shapiro* and *Nathalie Heinich*. Nevertheless, what the Burmese couple experienced in the project generates more misunderstanding and confusion to try to define art since it does not correspond to their initial, rather traditional, vision of art. Again, the underlying aim of this project is not to impose a particular definition of art on them but rather to let them experiment on their own. Last but not least, as Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe demonstrate themselves, it does not prevent them from appreciating all these new activities and sharing joyful moments with all the stakeholders. For them, be it art or not, this is not the most important thing. As a

result, we might as well stop talking about this project...

For the ultimate challenge, the last conclusions will be in the hands of the instigators of the project, Pornpilai and Jiradej Meemalai who will organise an exhibition and a publication to revive and put forth this one-year project before it is archived indefinitely.

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