

國立台北教育大學

當代藝術評論與策展研究全英語碩士學位學程

碩士論文

Master of Arts in Critical and Curatorial Studies of Contemporary Arts

National Taipei University of Education

Master's Thesis

緬甸移工社區藝術的重要性與實踐途徑：以「365 天生活博物館」

——Baan Noorg 跨領域藝術與文化合作計畫為例

The Significance and Approach of Community Art to Burmese Migrant Workers in Thailand:

A Case Study of 365-Day Life Muse by Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture

旭寧

Sinlapakorn Rittirong

指導教授：助理教授 Thanavi Chotpradit

Advisor: Asst. Prof. Thanavi Chotpradit

中華民國 114 年 11 月

November 2025

國立臺北教育大學
當代藝術評論與策展研究全英語碩士學位學程
碩士學位論文審定書

National Taipei University of Education
Master of Art in Critical and Curatorial Studies of Contemporary Art
Letter of Approval for Master's Thesis Review

研究生_____之論文_____業經本委員會審
議，和於碩士資格。

The Significance and Approach of Community Art to Burmese
Migrant Workers in Thailand: A Case Study of 365-Day Life
Muse by Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture

The Committee has reviewed the thesis _____ by
graduate student Sinlapakorn Rittirong, and hereby approved the student for master's
qualification.

指導教授 Thesis Advisor Signature : T. CHOIPRADIT (簽名)

審查委員 Review Committee Member Signature : [Signature] (簽名)

審查委員 Review Committee Member Signature : Lu Peiy (簽名)

學程主任 Program Director Signature : Lu Peiy (簽名)

中華民國 114 年 11 月 11 日

Acknowledgement

My life has been intertwined with art for as long as I can remember. I grew up in a home where my father taught me how to mold clay, and we often fired ceramics together. For many years, I understood the value of art mainly through its aesthetic qualities—until I studied here. In particular, this research has revealed to me that art can also be a tool for social change. Spending more than two years completing this thesis may seem long, but it has been truly worthwhile. I have learned so much and discovered new versions of myself along the way.

This thesis would not have been accomplished without the generous support of many people. I would like to thank curators Jiradej Meemalai and Pornpilai, as well as the members of Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, for warmly welcoming me when I visited Nongpo Village and for sharing invaluable information about the case study. My sincere thanks also go to the artists Preenun Nana, Katherine Nunez, Jutamas Buranajade, and Piti Amraranga, who kindly shared their insights during our interviews.

My deepest gratitude goes to Professor Thanavi Chotpradit, who has been far more than a thesis advisor. I am truly fortunate to have received your guidance—you have been a ray of light on the days when everything felt dim. Your knowledge, open-minded discussions, and constant encouragement have empowered me throughout this journey. I am also thankful to Professor Lu Pei-yi, who initially guided me at the early stage of this research. Your meaningful class, *Art and Public Sphere*, greatly inspired me to learn about community art, and I appreciate your time as one of my committee members. My thanks also go to Professor Paramaporn Sirikulchayanont for kindly serving on my committee and offering thoughtful suggestions.

Importantly, I want to thank my family, who have taken such good care of me all my life: my dad, who brought art into my world; my mom, who has always believed in me unconditionally; my aunt Na Nu, whose constant support has allowed me to pursue my dreams; and my younger brother, who gave me the two cutest nephews that have brought so much joy back into my life. My heartfelt thanks also go to Folk, for staying by my side every day and night—from the very first day of my M.A. until today. I can say that there would be no “today” without you. To my close friends in both Thailand and Taiwan—although we barely saw each other over the past two years, I believe our bond has never changed. You are the flowers that keep my road beautiful. Lastly, to everyone who has been part of this journey, even if I could not mention all of you, please know that I am honestly grateful for your support.

摘要

1990 年代的「清邁社會裝置藝術節」 (Chiang Mai Social Installation) 使社群藝術在泰國逐漸受到重視，並成為藝術角色的重要轉折點——藝術不再僅是博物館中的神聖物件，而轉變為一種讓大眾能夠參與的社會性活動。然而，由於社群藝術常被視為社會工作，其藝術地位與實際效益也因此備受質疑。儘管在過去十年中社群藝術在泰國逐漸擴展，並開始獲得國際關注，但針對「居住於與在地社群相對隔離地區的移工社群」的相關研究仍然十分有限。

本研究旨在透過對 Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture 於 2016 年發起的「365-Day Life Muse」計畫進行個案分析，探討社群藝術的「重要性與實踐途徑」。該計畫以駐村創作與當代藝術展覽的形式，創造一個實驗性的互動空間，以促進居住於當地的緬甸移工與農坡 (Nongpo) 社群之間的交流。本研究主要採用文獻資料分析與深度訪談方法，說明該計畫如何建構互動關係空間、減緩「泰國性」 (Thainess) 與「他者性」 (otherness) 之間的偏見與隔閡，並為移工群體累積社會、文化、經濟與象徵資本。本研究主張，社群藝術可作為促進多元文化互動的有效工具，並具有在其他具有相似脈絡的社區中加以應用的可能性。

關鍵詞：

社群藝術、泰國、緬甸移工、他者性、多元文化社會

Abstract

Community art in Thailand began to gain prominence after the *Chiang Mai Social Installation* festival in the 1990s, which marked a turning point in the role of art from being a sacred object in museums to a social activity that allowed people to participate. However, since community art commonly functioned as social work, it confronted questions about the status and real benefits. Although community art has expanded in the past decade and begun to gain international recognition, rigorous study in the context of Thai communities with migrant workers has been limited, particularly in areas where they live separately from the local community.

This research aims to investigate the ‘significance and approaches’ of community arts through a case study analysis of *365-Day Life Muse* (2016) by Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, an artist-in-residence and contemporary art exhibition project that creates an experimental space to promote interactions between Burmese migrant workers and people in the Nongpo community. This study focuses on documentary research and in-depth interviews to demonstrate how the project can construct the relational spaces, mitigate prejudices and gaps between Thainess and ‘otherness,’ and foster social, cultural, economic, and symbolic capital for this group of workers. This study proposes community arts as an effective instrument for multicultural engagement and can be applied in other communities with similar contexts.

Keyword:

Community art, Thailand, Burmese migrant workers, Otherness, Multicultural Society

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Introduction

The emergence of art in the public space in Thailand became particularly prominent in the late 1990s, especially with the case of the *Chiang Mai Social Installation (CMSI)* festival, which marked a milestone in releasing art from the confine of art institutions and transforming it into an activity that invited public engagement with various artistic processes.¹ *CMSI* was organized four times in the 1990s, with an emphasis on exhibiting art outside of gallery spaces. The notion of the festival was inspired by Mit Jai Inn's experience of visiting *Documenta* in 1987, which explored the social dimension of art.² For the first *CMSI*, artworks were installed in temples and cemeteries, allowing contemporary art to encounter people in familiar spaces through the social and aesthetic experiences of everyday life. One of the highlights of *CMSI* was the encouragement of 'community participation' in various forms, whether it was opening the houses or shops to exhibit each artwork, interacting with artists who performed as tour guides, or organizing a campfire seminar called *Midnight Socrates*, which provided a space for marginalized groups such as prostitutes, drug dealers, and unlicensed local guides to exchange ideas. Simultaneously, *CMSI* also provided an opportunity for the public to showcase their artworks, covering all types of creativity.³ Therefore, this festival not only challenges the conventions of art but also becomes a significant foundation that influences new generations of Thai artists, especially the concept that perceives art as part of everyday life and positions participation as the heart of artistic creation.

Economic growth in the capitalist era led to inequality in access to resources and the commodification of culture. This stimulated several artists to assemble as a group, employing art as a means of communication.⁴ Historical, social, and cultural contents were presented, as well as community issues that required collective solutions.⁵ Meantime, the democratic development that supported decentralization to the local area engendered community art in

¹ Supitchaya Khunchamni and Paramaporn Sirikulchayanont, "*Rupbaep kan khaphkhleun sinlapa chumchon: koranisueksa changwat Ratchaburi*" [*Community-Based Art Projects: Case Study of Ratchaburi Province*] (MA thesis, Silpakom University, 2020), 24, <http://ithesis-ir.su.ac.th/dspace/handle/123456789/3154>.

² Simon Soon, "Images Without Bodies: Chiang Mai Social Installation and the Art History of Cooperative Suffering," *Afterall*, September 20, 2016, 2, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://www.afterall.org/articles/images-without-bodies-chiang-mai-social-installation-and-the-art-history-of-cooperative-suffering/>.

³ David Teh, *Artist-to-Artist: Independent Art Festivals in Chiang Mai 1992–98* (Singapore: Osage Art Foundation, 2018), 50–85.

⁴ Kunavichayanont, Sutee. *Chak syam kao su thai mai wa duai khwam phlik phan khong sinlapa chak prapheni su samai mai lae ruam samai* [From Old Siam to New Thailand: On the Transformation of Art from Traditional to Modern and Contemporary]. Bangkok: Silpakom University Art Center, 2003. 2nd ed.

⁵ Sitthidham Rohitasuk, *Phatthanakan sinlapa lang samai mai* [Development of Post-Modern Art] (Bangkok: Srinakharinwirot University, 2021), 83–92.

Thailand having a unique characteristic, which was cooperation⁶ between artists and community members, including varied parties, namely schools, hospitals, civil society organizations, etc.⁷ Consequently, community art in this context plays an important role in connecting people to learn through participation.⁸

Since the early 2000s, community art in Thailand has constantly illustrated its apparent trajectory towards responding to social issues. Several projects demonstrated the role of art as an apparatus for participation between artists and multiple groups, namely local people, migrants, and ethnic groups. A notable example is the *476 Kilometer Echo* (2001) project by curator Ark Fongsamut, which brought new-generation artists to Dan Sai District in Loei Province to collaboratively create artworks with the local community. Its content reflected a sense of pride in local culture, which had gradually faded amid globalization⁹. *Fly with Me to Another World* (2003) by Nawin Rawanchaikul, which took place in Lamphun and Chiang Mai Provinces. The project included a variety of works, one of which was the film *Made in Lamphun: Yong in Transition* by Santiphap Inkong-ngam, shot in collaboration with the Yong people to tell the story of the immigrants' way of life facing the cultural transition. Around the same time, there was also a live performance titled *Honey Bee Special* (2003) by the Empower Foundation in collaboration with a group of sex workers to promote safe sex.¹⁰ Then, Paisarn Plianbangchang, Jittima Pholsawek, and others created the project *Thai-Burmese Art Exchange: Salween* (2002) in Mae Sariang District, Mae Hong Son Province, employing live performance art with the Karen people to expose the problem of flooding in their farms caused by the Salween Dam project.¹¹ Meanwhile, *Art Operation in Dawei, Myanmar* (2016, 2017), in Ban Kalone Htar, Dawei City, provided woodblock printing workshops to be a platform for youth to express their opinions about labor, industry, and the environment.¹²

⁶ Ark Fongsamut, *Sinlapa chumchon: siang sathon 476 kilomet* [Community Art: Echoes of 476 Kilometers] (Bangkok: Usakane, 2008), 10–29.

⁷ Rohitasuk, *Phatthanakan sinlapa lang samai mai*, 83–92.

⁸ Pranicha Kalyanamit, “*Sinlapa chumchon nai khwam na cha pen* [Community Art in the Realm of Possibility],” in *Sinlapa chumchon: siang sathon 476 kilomet* [Community Art: Echoes of 476 Kilometers], 32–39 (Bangkok: Usakane, 2007).

⁹ Fongsamut, *Sinlapa chumchon*, 10–29.

¹⁰ Thanavi Chotpradit, *Prakotkan nithatsakan* [Exhibition Phenomenon] (Bangkok: Sommot, 2010), 45–70.

¹¹ MGR Online, “*Sai nam, sinlapa, lae kan bonchop kan khong sinlapin song fang Salawin* [Water, Art and the Convergence of Artists on Both Sides of the Salween],” December 17, 2004, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://mgronline.com/live/detail/9470000097754>.

¹² Transborder News, “*Sinlapa choeng patibatkan – sinlapa sadaeng sod, phak Tanawasi prathet Pama* [Practical Art–Performance Art, Tenasserim Region, Myanmar],” November 15, 2016, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://transbordernews.in.th/home/?p=15040>.

From the above projects, community art in Thailand is not confined to cultural work but has obviously expanded its scope to include marginalized groups. This research focuses on the *365-Day Life Muse* project (2016) by Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, an artist’s residency program and contemporary art exhibition in Nongpo Community, Ratchaburi Province. Its intention is to address the issue of social exclusion faced by Burmese migrant workers, which leads to their difficulty in integrating themselves into the Thai community. It is distinguished in terms of letting migrant workers participate as ‘co-creators.’ Hence, this project is not just an artistic activity but also the creation of a social experimental sphere that connects the migrant workers with the Thai community through the process of co-creation in everyday life, with the objective of breaking down the barriers of otherness and restoring relationships in a multicultural society. The crucial question is, how can such art truly mitigate prejudice and change the power structure in the art field?



Figure 1. Exhibition poster for *365 Days: Life Muse* at the Art Center, Silpakorn University
 Source: Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, “365 Days: LIFE MUSE,” 2017.

Defining Community Arts

Community Arts was a cultural movement that emerged in the UK in the late 1960s, when a group of artists announced their common intentions with other movements such as underground media, spatial occupation, and festivals. Although the term was widely used, it

lacked a clear definition. In this regard, Owen Kelly, a British academic, proposed that community arts was a creative activity that included a variety of events and media, often occurring in a group of people who possessed a common position, as an approach that allowed artists and communities to utilize art as an instrument to communicate, express, and drive social change.¹³ Later, American anthropologist Kate Crehan suggested that community arts were not limited to the British context but occurred in several countries around the world, with artists in each area interacting and influencing each other. These approaches had various names, including social practice, participatory art, new genre public art, relational aesthetics, and dialogical aesthetics, all of which reflected an effort to change the role of artist from being sole creator to working with communities. Crehan also emphasized that this interest in communities coincided with the notion of the welfare state, encouraging people to solve their own problems without relying on the state. Artists acted as coordinators and sought support from external organizations.¹⁴ This notion aligned with what Worathep Akkabootara, a Thai curator and scholar, explained. Returning art to the community was a way of tracing back to the origin of creativity. Both art and community are born from human interactions in daily life. The artist's attempt to work like an ethnographer not only challenged the authority of the creator but also expanded the scope of art to cover issues, i.e., gender, status, consensus and dissent, privacy and publicity, all of which had fundamental political implications.¹⁵ Meanwhile, Ark Fongsamut articulated that art moving from museums to public spaces to reduce the gap between artists and audiences and break down the boundaries between art and everyday life possibly generated ambiguity between 'art and community' and 'community art.' Despite their similarities, they had different significances, especially in the Thai context, where community art was related to democratic development. Hence, it was necessary to have genuine people's participation rather than installing art in the community.¹⁶ Considering all the concepts above, this study adheres to the definition of community art by focusing on people rather than objects and prioritizing processes over results. Since community art in Thailand involves the process of developing democracy, not just organizing art activities in community areas, but building a space of relationships where everyone has a voice, participates, and has equal status.

¹³ Owen Kelly, *Community, Art and the State: Storming the Citadels* (Comedia Pub. Group eBooks, 1984), 12-13.

¹⁴ Kate A. F. Crehan, *Community Art: An Anthropological Perspective* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 14, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474214629>.

¹⁵ Worathep Akkabootara, *Kan han he su chumchon nai sinlapa ruam samai: kan samruat thang thritsadi lae naeo patibat beungton* [Community Turn in Contemporary Art: Surveys in Theories and Practice] (Ubon Ratchathani: Ubon Ratchathani University, 2020), accessed April 20, 2025, <https://www.academia.edu/45345171>.

¹⁶ Rohitasuk, *Phatthanakan sinlapa lang samai mai*, 83-92.

Problems and Significance

Thailand had been a destination for migrant workers for over two decades due to its status as a major production base in the Southeast Asian region with economic stability and a higher average income than its neighbors.¹⁷ Most of the workforce originated from Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, in which Burmese migrant workers accounted for 80-90 percent.¹⁸ However, this group was often portrayed negatively by Thai media, linking them to past violence such as the 1999 occupation of the Burmese embassy and the 2000 hostage-taking at Ratchaburi Hospital. As a result, they were perceived as a threat to national safety.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the state was deficient in policies to promote social integration.²⁰ Coupled with their ambiguous political status, they had obstacles in their adaptation²¹ leading most to reside merely in their own communities.²²

The notion of ‘Thainess,’ which consisted of nation, religion, and monarchy,²³ was generally deployed to determine who should be accepted as part of Thai society²⁴. This concept was reproduced by the state and education system until it became an influential framework²⁵ and played a crucial role in generating ‘otherness’ for those who were different in terms of nationality, language, and culture²⁶, especially other ethnic groups who were inferior in economic and societal status.²⁷ This discrimination prevented migrant workers from participating in social activities that related to material, social, and political aspects.²⁸ Importantly, when migrant workers and local people lacked interaction between them, it caused mutual suspicion.²⁹ According to Thai academic Lalita Hanwong, Thai people tended to look down on those who were lower than them, reflecting the view about people’s

¹⁷ Charamporn Holumyong, *Raeng ngan kham chat thi mai at lathing: thatsana thang sethasat khong kan lueak patibat nai talat raeng ngan* [The Indispensable Migrant Workers: Economics Viewpoint of Discrimination in the Labor Market] (Mahidol University, 2022), 3–14, https://ipsr.mahidol.ac.th/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/1.1_Charamporn_IPSR2016_fulltext.pdf.

¹⁸ Yongyuth Chalamwong, Jidapa Meepien, and Khanittha Hongprayoon, “Management of Cross-border Migration: Thailand as a Case of Net Immigration,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 40, no. 4 (January 1, 2012): 447–63, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685314-12341251>.

¹⁹ Malee Sunpuwan, ed., *Khon kham chat chak Pama lae khwam pen uen nai sata khong khon Thai: mong phan praden kan dai rap anuyat hai yu asai bap thawon* [Myanmar Migrants and ‘Otherness’ in the Eyes of Thais: Through the Context of Granting Permanent Residence] (Mahidol University, 2022), 215–229, <https://ipsr.mahidol.ac.th/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/447-IPSR-Conference-A14-fulltext.pdf>.

²⁰ Chalamwong, Meepien, and Hongprayoon, “Management of Cross-border Migration,” 447–63.

²¹ Holumyong, *Raeng ngan kham chat thi mai at lathing*, 3–14.

²² Chalita Sunantaporn, “*Khwam yiat yan an yon yaeng: raeng ngan tang dao yuk 4.0* [Paradoxical Discrimination: Migrant Workers in the 4.0 Era],” *Way Magazine*, July 13, 2017, accessed April 20, 2025, https://waymagazine.org/pinkaew_laungaramsri/.

²³ Holumyong, *Raeng ngan kham chat thi mai at lathing*, 3–14.

²⁴ Sunpuwan, *Khon kham chat chak Pama lae khwam pen uen nai sata khong khon Thai*, 215–29.

²⁵ Thongchai Winichakul, *Khon Thai – khon uen: wa duai khon uen khong khwam pen Thai* [Thai-Others: About Others of Thainess] (Bangkok: Same Sky Books, 2017), 13–23.

²⁶ Holumyong, *Raeng ngan kham chat thi mai at lathing*, 3–14.

²⁷ Sunpuwan, *Khon kham chat chak Pama lae khwam pen uen nai sata khong khon Thai*, 215–29.

²⁸ Millar, Jane. “Social Exclusion and Social Policy Research: Defining Exclusion.” *Multidisciplinary Handbook of Social Exclusion Research*, December 21, 2007, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470773178.ch1>.

²⁹ Sunpuwan, *Khon kham chat chak Pama lae khwam pen uen nai sata khong khon Thai*, 215–29.

inequality and the misunderstanding that democracy was just for Thais.³⁰ This racism in the name of ‘Thainess’ was partly due to an attempt to make the Siamese Kingdom civilized in the reign of King Rama V (1868–1910). It caused an internal colonization when the elite in Bangkok, mostly white Chinese, viewed the darker-skinned southerners, Khmers, and Laotians as lower class, ugly, and dirty. While Burmese and Cambodian migrant workers were also seen as suitable for domestic work. Importantly, the myth that Thailand was never colonized reinforced the racist mindset that viewed neighboring countries as inferior.³¹

In this context, the *365-Day Life Muse* project by Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture is an intriguing case study since it demonstrates the possibility of utilizing art to create a ‘shared space,’ granting Burmese migrant workers and locals the opportunity to work together. This not only lessens prejudices and gaps between Thainess and otherness but also fosters social, cultural, economic, and symbolic capital for them. Therefore, this study is meaningful for comprehending the role and approach of community art as a cross-cultural communication appliance, as well as its potential to be applied to other areas with similar contexts, thus filling the gaps in current knowledge that are inadequate today.

A Case Study of *365-Day Life Muse*

Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture is a contemporary artist collective founded in 2011 as a non-profit organization by Jiradej and Pornpilai Meemalai, along with Sakarin Krue-on and two Taiwanese artists, Lo Shih Tung and Hsu Chia Wei.³² The Thai word ‘Baan Noorg’ (บ้านนอก), the name of the community, referred to a local area outside the capital. However, in this context, it also implied a challenge to be the center of art creation. Baan Noorg aimed to be an alternative platform for artists to work experimentally with the community.³³ Jiradej underlined that they employed community development as a strategy and adhered to the idea of ‘collaboration,’ allowing people to participate in every step of the creative process, sharing ownership equally, which was the heart of learning together.³⁴

³⁰ Pichdej Saengkaenphet, “*Mong Thai, mong Pama yuk Covid kap panha mong khon mai thao kan: phonphlit – khwam khit khong rat Thai* [Look at Thailand, Look at Myanmar in the Covid Era and the Problem of Looking at People Unequally, the Product and Thinking of the Thai State?],” *Matichon Weekly*, January 8, 2021, accessed April 20, 2025, https://www.matichonweekly.com/column/article_389343.

³¹ Rackett, Tim. “Un-Thai Lives Matter! Thai Identity Politics as a Race War?” *The Foreign Policy Centre*, July 19, 2022. Accessed April 20, 2025. <https://fpc.org.uk/un-thai-lives-matter-thai-identity-politics-as-a-race-war/>.

³² “Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts & Culture – Bann noorg khwam ruam mue thang sinlapa wathanatham,” n.d., <https://www.baannoorg.org/>.

³³ Pornpilai Meemalai, interview by the author, April 5, 2024, online.

³⁴ Jiradej Meemalai, interview by the author, April 5, 2024, online.

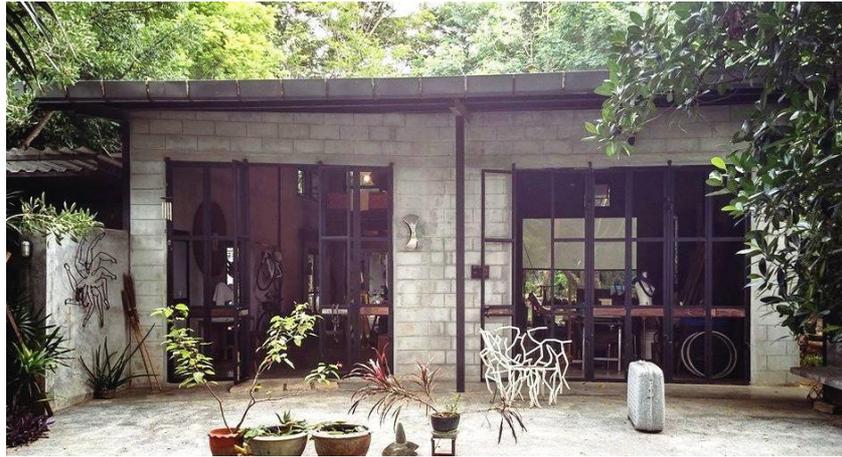


Figure 2. Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture located in Nongpo Community, Ratchaburi Province
Source: Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture

The *365-Day Life Muse* project was curated in 2016 by Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, which addresses creating an experimental space to promote interactions between Burmese migrant workers and the Nongpo community through artistic activities. The project operates within the contextual legacy of Thai community arts, playing a role in the community's issue solving and boosting participation, with a focus on creating cross-cultural dialogue, bridging social gaps, and building capital for migrant workers. The background of this project started from *days OFF LABORatory* (2014), an artist residency program that concentrated on visual art research and contemporary art exhibitions under the theme of *Pop-Up Museum* with the Nongpo community as a case study. Later in 2015, the team developed a follow-up project called *365-Day Life Muse* (2016) with the purpose of learning and exchanging experiences in contemporary art internationally, together with the reduction of the social gap in the multicultural era.³⁵ The project was led by a core team consisting of curators, Thai artists, international artists and researchers, participants (referred to as 'participated communities' by Baan Noorg), and support agencies. It was first initiated by Jiandyin (Jiradej Meemalai and Pornpilai Meemalai) under the name Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, together with a group of students, including Supitcha Khunchamni, Sreena Saththaphon, and others.³⁶

³⁵ Art Centre Silpakorn University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo [365 Days: Life Muse: Model Study for Nongpo Community's Foreign Labour]*, exhibition brochure (Bangkok: Silpakorn University Art Centre, 2016), 2.

³⁶ Khunchamni and Sirikulchayanont, "Rupbaep kan khapkhleun sinlapa chumchon," 83–94.

The main participants included two Burmese migrant workers, Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe, who labored at a Taiwanese stainless-steel factory, as well as their friends who lived nearby, including Nongpo's community members, e.g., dairy farmers, teenagers, and local temples.³⁷ Apart from 8 Thai artists—Korakrit Arunanondchai, Preenun Nana, Jutamas Buranajade, Piti Amraranga, Rachan Klomklieng, Suraporn Lertwongpaitoon, Thatchatham Silsupan, and Henry Tan—there were 14 international artists and researchers who also took part in the project, including Ma Ei and Maung Day from Myanmar, Okui Lala from Malaysia, Katherine Nunez from the Philippines, Helmi Hardian and Tuwis Yasinta from Indonesia, Varsha Nair from India, Masaru Iwai from Japan, Chi Yu Wu and Chia Jen Chen from Taiwan, Alfred Banze from Germany, Jeanette Mueller and Paul Divjak from Austria, and Sebastien Tayac from France.³⁸ This project received funding from The Japan Foundation, Bangkok, and was also collaboratively operated with Silpakorn University Art Centre. Moreover, it obtained cooperation from various agencies, both within the community—Nongpo Temple, Nongpo School, and PASAYA Factory, which provided artist residencies—and international agencies, i.e., Open Contemporary Art Center (OCAC), Taipei; 98B COLLABoratory, Manila; and WAFT LAB, Surabaya.³⁹

The 'Nongpo' community was in the Photharam District of Ratchaburi, which was one of the western border provinces of Thailand, bordering Myanmar for around 70 kilometers. This geographic feature made Ratchaburi compelling for migrant workers, especially in the industrial sector. According to the Provincial Industrial Office, in 2022, Ratchaburi had a total of 1,414 factories, with the three main types being electrical, food, and non-metal industries, which required more than 64,945 workers.⁴⁰ The Nongpo community had been a 'multicultural area' for over 200 years, consisting of a diverse population of ethnic groups: the Tai Yuan, Mon, Lao, Teochew, and Burmese, who recently immigrated in the past decades.⁴¹ Jiradej Meemalai, one of the co-founders of Baan Noorg, realized that the ethnic groups in this place had learned to coexist peacefully, despite their different migration periods.⁴²

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Baan Noorg, "Off Lab#2/2016: 365 Days: Life Muse (Model Study for Nongpo Community's Foreign Labours)," accessed April 21, 2025, <https://www.baannoorg.org/dayofflab/365-days-life-muse-2/>.

³⁹ Art Centre Silpakorn University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo*, 3.

⁴⁰ Ratchaburi Provincial Industrial Office, *Raingan kan wikhro saphawa setthakit uthsakam [Industrial Economic Situation Report 2021]* (Ratchaburi Industry, Ministry of Industry, 2022), accessed April 21, 2025, <https://ratchaburi.industry.go.th/th/5896/download?did=191866>.

⁴¹ Art Centre Silpakorn University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo*, 27.

⁴² Sebastien Tayac, "Baan Noorg – Ratthasat chunlaphak" [Micropolitics at Baan Noorg], in *365-Day Life Muse: Model Study for Nongpo Community's Foreign Labour*, 20–25 (Bangkok: Silpakorn University Art Centre, 2017).

This project took place when the Baan Noorg collective found that Ratchaburi had around eight Burmese sub-communities and was aware of the negative attitudes that Thai people had towards them, which might be partly due to the nationalist lessons causing Burmese people to be seen as enemies in history. When they encountered prejudice, they segregated themselves into their own area implicitly⁴³ yet this isolation caused them to be unable to adapt themselves to new environments. International concepts and debates on migration were typically based on the concept of ‘xenophobia,’ which was anxiety when facing people from other cultures. This feeling led to biases that migrants came to exploit and caused social problems, namely drugs, crime, or social and cultural interference. They were also seen as a burden on welfare systems and national security, resulting in policy pressures to strictly control migration, including preventing these workers from settling in Thailand. However, migration economists argued that the movement of migrant workers was a phenomenon that occurred in conjunction with economic restructuring. Most industrialized countries had developed on the mechanism of migrant workers, who filled labor shortages. Thus, migration did not only benefit workers but also contributed to the economic development of the destination countries. The *365-Day Life Muse* project aims to raise open-ended questions about cultural contradictions in the context of contemporary multicultural society⁴⁴ which may still be filled with deep-seated biases.



Figure 3. A space where participants lived and collaboratively created artwork throughout the year.
Source: Open Contemporary Art Center, “Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture,” 2017.

⁴³ Jiradej Meemalai, interview by the author, April 5, 2024.

⁴⁴ Art Centre Silpakorn University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo*, 2-3.

This visual arts research and development project operated under the concept of ‘integration,’ attempting to break down existing social divisions and rebuild them into the mode of experimental community. The project began with the recruitment of Burmese migrant workers with legal work permits to participate in the project, moving into provided free-of-charge housing for a year. During the residency, migrant workers were encouraged to take part in various alternative art learning processes with artists and researchers, in which two artists would rotate to visit them every two months, living together, sharing experiences, and co-creating artwork over a period of approximately three weeks. The project activities proceeded step by step organically.⁴⁵ It consisted of important steps such as creating cooperation between Burmese workers and the Nongpo community, learning about local lifestyles and cultures, and collaboratively creating art together, as well as concluding with a seminar and a contemporary art exhibition at the Silpakorn University Art Centre, Wang Tha Phra, Bangkok, during January to February 2017.⁴⁶ The final artworks existed in a variety of forms, including recordings, videos, photographs, prints, drawings, sounds, installations, and sculptures, all of which reflected the traces of the gradually ‘forming relationship’.⁴⁷ Importantly, Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe also played a significant role as creators of the narrative of an exhibition through personal records that conveyed their own perspectives.⁴⁸ In addition to making artworks in the conventional style, some artists employed social activities as an artistic process. For example, *Roots* by Preenun Nana, which employed growing herbs to convey a feeling of new settling. *Getting to Know You* by Katherine Nunez utilized the imprinting of the pattern of everyday stuff to construct a sense of home. And, in *Saponification Case* by Jutamas Buranajade and Piti Amraranga, it deployed soap-making to explore the idea of cleansing Thailand’s nationalist history about Myanmar.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Khunchamni and Sirikulchayanont, “Rupbaep kan khapkhleun sinlapa chumchon,” 83–94.

⁴⁷ Art Centre Silpakorn University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo*, 9.

⁴⁸ Pornpilai Meemalai, interview by the author, April 5, 2024.



Figure 4. *365 Days: Life Muse* exhibition at the Art Center, Silpakorn University
 Source: Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, “365 Days: LIFE MUSE,” 2017.

This project reflected that it was the ‘first time’ that the two Burmese migrant workers, Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe, had left their sub-communities to reside among their Thai local neighbors.⁴⁹ Therefore, it had potential in breaking down the specific communal living patterns of migrant workers, who were excluded from their surrounding society, and in organically reducing the anxiety fostered by xenophobia.⁵⁰ Moreover, building a space for dialogue instead of cultural confrontation and providing an opportunity to create something together, both parties learned to respect cultural differences.⁵¹ In my opinion, the participation of migrant workers as ‘creators,’ not just participants, is a crucial shifting point that clearly reflects the role of community art in mitigating cultural bias. When migrant workers are recognized as co-creators, for example, Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe participated in a discussion in a seminar at the Silpakorn University Art Center alongside art industry experts. This situation not only shed light on structural changes in the contemporary Thai art scene and society but also significantly demonstrated their new cultural status. Given the complexity of this context, three questions are proposed to frame this study:

1. How does *365-Day Life Muse* create a relational space between Burmese migrant workers and the Nongpo community?
2. In what ways does the project contribute to mitigating prejudice and a gap between Thainess and ‘otherness’?

⁴⁹ Art Centre Silpakorn University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo*, 27.

⁵⁰ Tayac, “Baan Noorg – Ratthasat chunlaphak,” 20–25.

⁵¹ Art Centre Silpakorn University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo*, 9.

3. What is the significance of the project to both Burmese migrant workers and the contemporary art field?

Theoretical Framework

Once several artists decide to leave the gallery and head to the community, opening spaces for people to influence the creative process, what is concurring is not just a change in the venue but also a shift in the relationship between art and audience as well as artist and society. This phenomenon could not be comprehended through merely traditional art evaluation frameworks but requires a set of concepts that open space for ‘relationships,’ ‘power,’ and ‘awareness between people of different cultures,’ which are at the heart of community art today. For the case study of the *365-Day Life Muse* project, which operates amidst the context of Burmese migrant workers in Ratchaburi Province, explaining the process and changes that occurred over a full year requires a multi-dimensional analytical framework, particularly the concept of ‘Relational Aesthetics’, which views art as a space of relationships; ‘Contact Hypothesis’, which suggests interaction to mitigate intergroup bias; and ‘Field Theory’, which illustrates the power structure in the art field as changed by community participation.

The notion of relational aesthetics is a dominant theoretical framework that helps explain contemporary art, which is not in the form of objects but is a ‘social situation’ resulting from the interactions between artists, viewers, and communities. This preconcept was developed amidst the growth of cities in Europe after World War II, which generated more social exchanges. Hence, art reacted as a social interstice—artwork in this context was not just an isolated object for passive viewers but a relational object that could connect individuals with groups, artists with the world, and viewers with the world.⁵² In his writing, Nicholas Bourriaud cited the work of expatriate Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, whose *Untitled (1990)* was a cooking of Pad Thai in the gallery space rather than displaying any work of art, inviting viewers to savor the food the artist prepared himself. Instantly, this process created a ‘new relationship’ between artists and viewers in the gallery.

⁵² Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods, and Mathieu Copeland (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002), 14–17, <https://www.scribd.com/document/370705907/Bourriaud-Relational-Aesthetics-pdf>.

Later, American art historian Grant Kester expanded on Bourriaud's ideas by proposing that art could function as a 'dialogical aesthetics' in which listening was a key element, as such dialogue led to social change.⁵³ One interesting exemplar was the practice of Singaporean artist Jay Koh, who joined in the 3rd *Chiang Mai Social Installation* through the activity *Exchanging Thought* (1995-96) that allowed locals to exchange their belongings for artworks by international artists. This process was not only an economic exchange but also a profound exchange of ideas and cultures.⁵⁴ According to the perspective of Thai scholars, Sitthitham Rohitasuk (2021) mentioned relational aesthetics as a notion related to community art, as it emphasized the relationship between art and society, especially the role of the community as participants. Gridthiya Gaweewong (2004) pointed out that this theory evaluated the artwork from the relationship between the artist and what he presented, while Worathep Akkabutra (2005) noted that it was a transformation of the audience into an 'interlocutor' who developed aesthetic experiences through other senses, leading to new vision.⁵⁵ Considering the case study of *365-Day Life Muse* (2016), which concentrates on building a space for cultural exchange and participation among Burmese migrant workers, the idea of relational aesthetics is clearly reflected. Such a space allows them to connect with the local community on a deeper level. Accordingly, this theory can be employed as an important tool to explain the role of community art as a relational space that facilitates coexistence in a multicultural society.

The Contact Hypothesis was first articulated in the book *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954) by Gordon Allport, an American social psychologist, in the context of post-World War II America, which was full of racial and cultural conflicts. This notion attempted to propose the possibility of coexistence among differences through interactions to reduce ingrained prejudices in society. Allport explained that intergroup contact could decrease prejudice against others if the interaction occurred under four conditions: equal social status, which meant that participants must be in an equal status, not a hierarchical relationship, such as employer and employee or teacher and student; shared goals, which meant that members must work in the same direction in a non-competitive environment; cooperation, which focused on true

⁵³ Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 104–109, <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB16783983>.

⁵⁴ Grant H. Kester, "The Art of Listening (and of Being Heard): Jay Koh's Discursive Networks," *Third Text* 13, no. 47 (June 1999): 19–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528829908576792>.

⁵⁵ Rohitasuk, *Phatthanakan sinlapa lang samai mai*, 83–92.

interdependence to achieve goals; and finally, institutional support, like local organizations or government agencies.⁵⁶

Contemplating the context of the *365-Day Life Muse* project, various elements of this project aligned with several conditions from Contact Hypothesis, especially in terms of ‘equal social status,’ which appears through the collaborative process between artists and migrant workers. Kester (2011). This type of working framework is consistent with what Grant Kester called a horizontal working style that provided everyone with equal status and creative power.⁵⁷ The participants share a common goal of learning and exchanging cultures through artistic activities, while the artworks are the result of collaboration between migrant workers who share the issues as content and the artistic skill of the artists. The project also receives strong institutional support from local organizations, the education sector, and international agencies. In summary, the Contact Hypothesis helps us to understand why encountering, living, and working together in a creative space for more than a year can reduce prejudices and gaps between Thainess and Otherness. When art is not just about creation but also about the power and status of people in the field, Pierre Bourdieu’s Field Theory becomes an effective frame for understanding the role of community art, especially people’s participation in art, which is a challenge to the original power of the artist as the sole creator. Bourdieu described society as divided into different fields, such as education, the economy, and the arts, each of which had its own power structures and agents who attempted to seize status for themselves. The field of art could be divided into an ‘autonomous field,’ or the field where artists created work based on its own intrinsic value, like art for art’s sake, and the ‘heteronomous field,’ where art was linked to social, political, and economic issues.⁵⁸ Community art was regularly positioned in the latter field as it directly addressed social issues and allowed people from outside to participate in the creative process so that artists were no longer the sole creators.⁵⁹ Apart from the structure of the field, Bourdieu also proposed the concept of ‘capital,’ which was a resource utilized by agents in the field to create status and power. Community art could foster four types of capital, including *cultural capital*, which did not refer only to artifacts but also included knowledge and skills; *social capital*, which referred to the networks of relationships between

⁵⁶ Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1954), 281–282, <http://psycnet.apa.org/record/1954-07324-000>.

⁵⁷ David Bell, “The Politics of Participatory Art,” *White Rose Research Online*, 2015, 2, https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/86339/4/WRRO_86339.pdf.

⁵⁸ Maanen, Hans Van. “Pierre Bourdieu’s Grand Theory of the Artistic Field.” In *How to Study Art Worlds*, 53–81. Amsterdam University Press, n.d. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46n0p3.6?seq=1>.

⁵⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 217–221, <https://bildfilosofi.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/therulesofart.pdf>.

artists, communities, and organizations that facilitated access to other resources; *economic capital*, which derived from artistic knowledge such as a career in the community⁶⁰; and *symbolic capital* which signified the recognition and respect received from others in that society.⁶¹ Considering the case study of *365-Day Life Muse* (2016), this project is apparently aligned with the Field Theory framework. It provided an opportunity for migrant workers to develop their cultural capital through the everyday practice of linguistic and artistic skills, meanwhile allowing them to express their existence and identity through creative processes, which sheds light on the formation of symbolic capital. The collaboration between curators, international artists, migrant workers, and local communities also constructs social capital since it helps connect different groups of people who previously had no opportunity to meet each other in the same circle. In terms of economic capital, even though it does not generate income for migrant workers, the co-creation of artworks in which participants have ‘shared ownership’ allows migrant workers to have an equal, any-dimensional benefit to that of artists.



Figure 5. Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe wrote their memories, which became a narrative of the exhibition.
Source: Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, “365 Days: LIFE MUSE,” 2017

In conclusion, the application of these Western theories will help us comprehend that community art is not just a creative activity but a space of relationships. These concepts also help explain the reason why community art has the potential to reduce prejudices between groups, narrow the gap between Thainess and Otherness, and create cultural, social, economic, and symbolic capital for people who were previously seen as outside the art field, especially migrant workers who were, or still are, the ‘other’ of Thai society. These processes do not only

⁶⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 241–58, https://home.iitk.ac.in/~amman/soc748/bourdieu_forms_of_capital.pdf.

⁶¹ Supang Chantavanich, Thrirtsadi Sang Khom Wittaya [Theory of Sociology], 4th ed. (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 2011).

change the relationships between people but also change the power structure of the art field itself, from an elite area to an open space where everyone can co-own it.

This study focuses on documentary research and in-depth interviews. The main sources of data include academic documents, research articles, and media reports produced by the curators during the work, which demonstrate the sequential creative process. Data from these documentaries will be analyzed alongside interviews with Jiradej Meemalai and Pornpilai Meemalai to study the role of community art in building social relationships, reducing prejudice, and the resulting cultural, social, and economic capital under the framework of relational aesthetics, contact hypothesis, and field theory. The structure of this thesis consists of three analytical chapters and one concluding chapter. Chapter 1 explores how *365-Day Life Muse* creates a relational space between Burmese migrant workers and the Nongpo community. Chapter 2 examines how the project mitigates prejudice and a gap between Thainess and ‘otherness’ through collaborative artmaking. Chapter 3 analyzes the significance of the project for both Burmese migrant workers and the contemporary art field in Thailand. Chapter 4 offers a conclusion that synthesizes insights from each analytical framework and reflects on the project’s significance—both for the migrant workers and for the broader contemporary art field.

Chapter One

Building Relationships between Burmese Workers and the Nongpo Community

The construction of the Thai nation within the framework of the modern nation-state, in fact, erased the original identities of the people of Siam, such as the Chinese, Lao, Khmer, Burmese, and Malays. Attempts to assimilate were part of the reason for the conflicts in identity politics, which became the foundation of various forms of social exclusion.⁶² The context of the Nongpo community, Photharam District, Ratchaburi Province, was a reflection of the coexistence of various ethnic groups, including Teochew Chinese, Tai Yuan people, Laotian, and Burmese, who had resided harmoniously for more than two centuries.⁶³ However, a survey by the Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture found that there were as many as eight Burmese sub-communities in 2014,⁶⁴ reflecting a gap in relations with the local people. Since community art in Thailand has developed in close relation with responses to social issues, to study it within a dynamically ethnic area like Nongpo is important to explore the possibility of experimental community creation where multicultural people can coexist equally in the context of contemporary Thai society. A significant question that arises for contemporary art practitioners is how community art plays a role in fostering social integration between the Thai community and Burmese migrant workers, and to what extent can we analyze such projects through relational and participatory lenses? The relational aesthetics framework by Nicolas Bourriaud provided a perspective on art as a space of relationships, offering an art that allowed for encounters, conversations, and exchanges. Especially when the viewer was able to participate in the creative process, a specific ‘new relationship’ could emerge.⁶⁵ In this chapter, the author will consider three dimensions of relation-making and intends to sequence the first argument ordered by the spatial-to-social logic: namely, starting with the construction of physically relational space, moving toward the formation of spatial relations through everyday practices, and finally addressing the interpersonal relationships through collaborative art-making.

⁶² Rackett, Tim. “Un-Thai Lives Matter! Thai Identity Politics as a Race War?” The Foreign Policy Centre, July 19, 2022. Accessed April 20, 2025. <https://fpc.org.uk/un-thai-lives-matter-thai-identity-politics-as-a-race-war/>.

⁶³ Art Centre Silpakorn University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo*, 27.

⁶⁴ Jiradej Meemalai, interview by the author, April 5, 2024.

⁶⁵ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 14–17.

A Relational Space for Social Integration

Migrant workers in Thailand, meaning those who originated from Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, were either legal or illegal, with the latter leading to stereotypes towards all of them as a threat to social safety.⁶⁶ It caused the policies that tend to control their lifestyles, such as restricting them to merely living in factory campsites or prohibiting them from leaving the residence after 8 pm at night. The host biases and controlling policies not only excluded Burmese migrant workers in their own sub-communities, which obstructed them from integrating into Thai society,⁶⁷ but also prevented access to physical and social ‘spaces’ involved with all key resources for their livelihoods, infringing on their rights, freedoms, and humanity. It is necessary to think about where their private and public space is. Therefore, constructing a relational space will offer an opportunity for multicultural people to greet, have conversations, and exchange with each other, leading to greater access to resources, especially social, cultural, and economic capital. In the context of the *365-Day Life Muse* project that built a space for co-living and participatory art practices among international artists and researchers, migrant workers, and the locals, the author is going to analyze the creation of such a space through the theoretical framework of Relational Aesthetics, which emphasized that art could act as a social interstice—a small space for negotiation and new relationships in marginalized communities under the process of micro-politics.⁶⁸



Figure 6. Curator Pompilai Meemalai welcoming Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe to live in a shophouse inside the Nongpo community.
Source: *Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture*, “365 Days : LIFE MUSE,” 2017

⁶⁶ Chalamwong, Meepien, and Hongprayoon, “Management of Cross-border Migration,” 447–63.

⁶⁷ Jiradej Meemalai, interview by the author, April 5, 2024.

⁶⁸ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 14–17.

365-Day Life Muse was an artistic research and development project that operated under the concept of ‘integration,’ aiming to break down the wall separating people and return them to a mode of experimental community.⁶⁹ A working process of Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture began with an announcement to recruit a Burmese couple—who normally lived in Photharam District and possessed a legal work permit—in order to move into a house provided by the project, free of charge for a year.⁷⁰ When Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe saw the inviting poster, they decided to apply and were eventually selected. They moved in together with a dog who became the darling of the children in the neighborhood at once. Their house was a small shophouse, but it had enough space for two people and consisted of comprehensive functions for living. In the front was a hall for rest, cooking, and welcoming neighbors. At the back was a bathroom, including a sunny washing area. Jiradej said,

*The house the participants lived in was an un-isolated shophouse near the curator’s residence and the community, which looked like an egg yolk surrounded by egg white. Thus, they had the opportunity to meet their local neighbors all the time. Importantly, when Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe were introduced and certified their legal status by the abbot of Nongpo temple, respected by the villagers, they felt secure enough to come out and dwell outside the factory with the Thai community for the first time.*⁷¹

Nonetheless, if we contemplate it deeply, a critical question may arise: is the creation of such physical spaces sufficient to address the issue of social exclusion? How does this activity differ from the social work of building shelters for migrants? Of course, if it only constructs spaces for encountering, this community art project may be problematic. To explore this further, I would like to compare it with one of the iconic works by Rirkrit Tiravanija, a globally recognized artist since the 1990s. He specialized in making an open space for audience participation and was often mentioned by Bourriaud as a key figure in relational aesthetics. *Tomorrow is Another Day* (1996-97) at the Kölnischer Kunstverein Museum in Cologne, Germany, was a simulation of an exchanging space, e.g., a hall, café, or living room, for people

⁶⁹ Art Centre Silpakom University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo*, 2.

⁷⁰ Khunchamni and Sirikulchayanont, “Rupbaep kan khaphkleun sinlapa chumchon,” 83–94.

⁷¹ Jiradej Meemalai, interview by the author, April 5, 2024.

to weave communal bonds in the museum settings. The author generally agrees with Jay Koh, a Singaporean artist, when he criticized Tiravanija's work for merely being formalistic but devoid of content, as the artist at the time seemed to overlook social processes in Thailand.⁷² When we apply Koh's critique to examine 365-Day Life Muse, it becomes clear that the open space constructed in this project contains both form and content. It not only fosters encounters but also articulates a key message: social integration transcending the boundaries of the nation-state—an idea embedded in the specific context of the Nongpo community. While Henri Lefebvre (1991) proposed that the relationship of groups of people was related to space—reasoning that when everyone desired to be part of society, they were connected through physical space.⁷³ In this context, I would like to argue that the creation of mere physical space is not adequate; it should be accompanied by meaningful content and social processes that respond directly to the issues of a particular community.

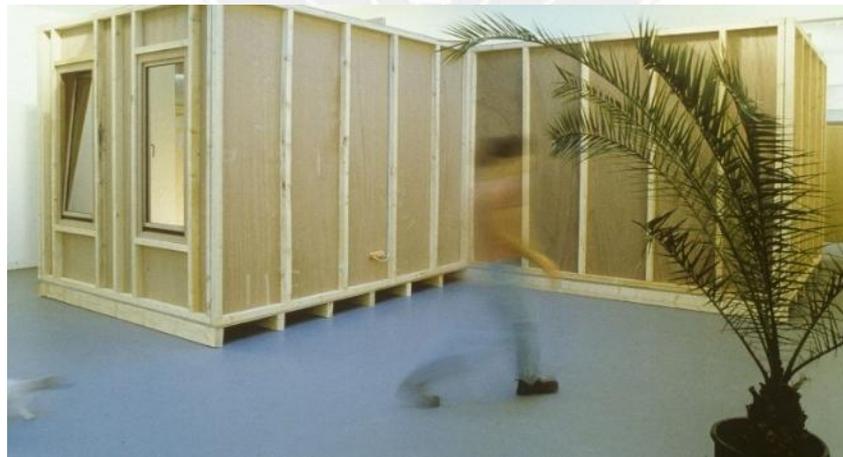


Figure 7. An artwork *Tomorrow is another day* (1996-97) at the Kölnischer Kunstverein Museum in Cologne, Germany
Source: David Zwirner, "Rirkrit Tiravanija: *Untitled 1996 (Tomorrow Is Another Day)*," 1996–97.

Meanwhile, if we acknowledge the framework of Relational Aesthetics, which proposes that art was a social interstice. Relational art had its boundary at the social context and human interaction. Rather than asserting an independent and private symbolic space, current art built a relationship between the individual and the group, the artist and the world, and the audience and the world. While direct criticism might be useless in marginalized communities, an instrument that Bourriaud called micro-utopia, which referred to small changes in everyday life that seemed to be minimal but had crucial power in shifting the microscopic social structure, such as dining in museums, meetings with neighbors, or

⁷² Kester, "The Art of Listening (and of Being Heard)," 19–26.

⁷³ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 331–333.

dishwashing with strangers. Furthermore, the role of the artist was no longer to create a utopia but to connect the physical world with the ideal world instead.⁷⁴ Hence, the creation of a space for co-living and co-creating artworks between Burmese workers and the Nongpo community in 365-Day Life Muse is not just banal social work but a micro-political artistic process for social integration.

Relations with Place through Grounding Root on the Land

In some ways, the mobility of migrant workers meant a departure from their home, which was the foundation of their lives. In particular, when they were constantly on the move from place to place, this situation might cause a sense of rootlessness in where they temporarily were living.⁷⁵ In the case of Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe, according to their biography, they migrated to Thailand in 2002 through the Mae Sot District of Tak Province, starting as workers in a garment factory and then traveling to Bangkok. Eventually they moved to work at a stainless-steel factory in Nongpo Subdistrict, Ratchaburi Province, in 2010.⁷⁶ Among several artists in this project, Preenun Nana was one who responded to the issue of ‘rootlessness’ that occurs with migrant workers. She was one of the members of Womanifesto Based on her background, Preenun was mixed-race, since her ancestors were Persian and Indian. Although she was born and raised in Thailand, under the framework of Thai social and cultural conditions, someone often misunderstood that she was a Persian⁷⁷ or ‘khaek’ (คหก)⁷⁸, a word that Thai people are generally familiar with calling foreigners from India, Pakistan, Persia, Arab, and Malaysia—in which almost all are Muslim. Due to it originating from the intention to define the Thai race, it also generated ‘the others’ at the same time. It was not only invented to employ with Islamic foreigners but also camouflaged the feeling of racism.⁷⁹ Interestingly, an organizer’s inviting of Preenun to participate in this project highlights one possible potential: that she would meticulously understand Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe since they have a similar difficult experience as a sub-ethnic minority of Thai society.

⁷⁴ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 13–32.

⁷⁵ Sara Ahmed, “Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 3 (1999): 329–47, <http://ics.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/2/3/329>.

⁷⁶ Art Centre Silpakorn University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo*, 27.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁷⁸ This issue of ethnic labeling has also been addressed in Thai contemporary art, particularly in *Khaek Pai Krai Ma* (*Guest Is Leaving, Who Is Coming?*) by Navin Rawanchaikul, a notable Thai-Indian artist. The work narrates the life and times of Thailand’s Indian diaspora and questions the generalized use of the term *khaek* in Thai society. See: Navin Rawanchaikul, *Khaek Pai Krai Ma* [*Guest Is Leaving and Who Is Going?*], exhibition at Warehouse 30, Bangkok, December 15, 2019 – January 19, 2020, <https://www.jwd-artspace.com/news/khaek-pai-krai-ma-navin-rawanchaikul/>.

⁷⁹ Silpa-Mag, “Kaek, Maeo, Kwae, Chek: Thima Khwammai Khamriak Chatiphon Choeng Yiat [‘Khek, Maew, Kaew, Jek’: Origin and Meaning of Racism Ethnic Terms],” March 2, 2022, https://www.silpa-mag.com/culture/article_102928.



Figure 8. Artist Preenun Nana introduced the participants to the landlady while requesting soil for the project.
 Source: Video still at 3:30 from the documentary *365 Days: LIFE MUSE Artist Interviews – Preenun Nana*.
 Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, 2019.

After recalling her own historical and cultural roots, Preenun discovered that food was the first sense of identity that related to stories and memories, and when she realized the root of the plant was able to communicate about the root of life, she decided to utilize the planting of herbs in this art practice.⁸⁰ The collaboration began when Preenun met Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe. She started getting to know participants by inviting them to think about herbs that related to their childhood. Especially when their family cooked, and what variety of herbs were able to be found in different cultures. This allowed them to list some plants from Myanmar, Thailand, and India. Then, she supported the participants to ask for sharing soil and fertilizer from the landlord, which organically generated a conversation with the neighbors. After finishing planting seedlings in the pots, Preenun asked Kyaw Moe to take photos, note a report of its growth, and send them to her periodically. When six months passed, she encouraged them to cook any cuisine with those herbs before taking turns to exchange knowledge about the recipe with each other. Preenun demonstrated how to make Indian-style fried dough, while the migrant workers made a tribal curry and shared it with their neighbors.⁸¹ Preenun stated,

The roots of the herb symbolized the grounding process. The reason for employing the soil from the land of the Nongpo community was to create a relationship on multiple levels, from planting and rooting to gradual growth. Until they finally could apply herbs in daily life. Based

⁸⁰ Art Centre Silpakom University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo*, 59.

⁸¹ Preenun Nana, interview by the author, May 10, 2024, online.

*on the idea of Stuart Hall, people inevitably seek roots for their mental stability, but it could also occur in a non-strict way.*⁸²

The artist attempted to propose the flexibility of human mobility or migration, which could transform itself to create a new awareness of cultural diversity in the form of ‘in-between relations,’⁸³ which shift according to the context of exchange and living. In the author’s perspective, Preenun clearly applied herb planting to convey a sense of rooting. In which the soil from the community area represents the Thai’s land, and the method of using a movable pot symbolizes the ability to move all the time, meaning the dynamic of an identity that still has roots, even if not deeply buried in the ground. Despite this artwork emphasizing the construction of relationships with place, in practice, it also offers opportunities for exchanges of soil and food between migrant workers and their neighbors. The relationships that arise from sharing these resources possibly have implications in terms of fostering equality that the Thai state never provides but that occur through the actions of these multicultural communities. Lastly, the art practice *Root* (2016) may not be a work that stimulates direct dialogue but rather creates a cooperation through routines, gradually connecting space, culture, and humanity.



Figure 9. Participants exchanged a Burmese recipe with the artist and shared their locally cooked soup to neighbors.
Source: Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, “365 Days : LIFE MUSE,” 2017.

⁸² “365 Days: LIFE MUSE Artist Interviews – Preenun Nana.” YouTube video, 6:38. Uploaded by Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, July 9, 2019. Accessed May 11, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3ZlbO7sWng>.

⁸³ Art Centre Silpakorn University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo*, 59.

In conclusion, it is possible that this artistic practice attempts to encourage Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe to feel more connected to the Nongpo community while simultaneously enhancing cultural negotiation power under the condition of being other. Sharing homemade food cooked from herbs, a joint product of the neighbor's soil, and care by the migrant workers until it grew was not only symbolic of coexistence, but this routine quietly initiated an interdependence that would catalyze the formation of beneficial relationships between them and the community.

Non-hierarchical Relationships from Working Together as Co-Creators

Racism, or the separation between being Thai and being other, had caused migrant workers in the position of 'second-class' citizens, discriminated against by both state officials and the public,⁸⁴ leading to inequality in various dimensions, e.g., the inability to access healthcare, children's education, or even legal motorcycle licenses. It is curious to think about how community art can be an equal space for everyone. Apart from the physically relational space mentioned above, the core of the *365-Day Life Muse* project was to encourage the participants to learn through alternative art practices with international artists and researchers. All activities were operated gradually and organically, consisting of four main steps: visiting the community area to make a cooperation with the people, learning about the local way of life and culture, living and creating art together, and concluding with a discussion and a contemporary art exhibition at the Art Centre Silpakorn University, Bangkok, during January-February 2017.⁸⁵ Every two months throughout a year, the two artists would take turns residing with Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe, especially on their days off, in order to get to know each other, share experiences, and create art together for approximately three weeks at a time. Accordingly, all artworks had a variety of forms, i.e., recordings, videos, photographs, prints, drawings, sounds, installations, and sculptures, reflecting the traces of their gradual relationship.⁸⁶ Based on the framework of Relational Aesthetics, the relationships that arise from artworks can be enunciated in many dimensions, including the spatial relationships, the social relationships or the interpersonal relationships between migrant workers and artists. In this project, there are several art practices that are prominent in terms of fostering 'social relationships' between

⁸⁴ Chalita Sunantaporn, "Khwa yiat yan an yon yaeng: raeng ngan tang dao yuk 4.0 [Paradoxical Discrimination: Migrant Workers in the 4.0 Era]," *Way Magazine*, July 13, 2017, accessed April 20, 2025, https://waymagazine.org/pinkaew_laungaramsri/.

⁸⁵ Khunchamni and Sirikulchayanont, "Rupbaep kan khapkhleun sinlapa chumchon," 83-94.

⁸⁶ Art Centre Silpakorn University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo*, 2-9.

participants and the Nongpo community. For instance, *Root* (2016) by Preenun Nana, which utilized sharing the Burmese food with neighbors who gave them soil for growing herbs, or *The Saponification Case* (2016) by Jutamas Buranajade and Piti Amraranga which employed sharing soap with dairy farmers who donated their milk sediment to them.

Considering the overall participation of Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe, we could notice that they took part in every process, from fieldwork research to exchange of ideas, art making, and public exhibition. Importantly, they also play a role as a creator of the exhibition's narratives through personal diaries that convey their own points of view.⁸⁷ In my opinion, therefore, their collaborative approach is consistent with Bourriaud's claim that relational aesthetics turned viewers into interlocutors.⁸⁸ According to the artistic research by David Bell, a British curator whose focus is on the politics of participatory art and community. He mentioned that Kester proposed, it was a horizontal rather than hierarchical form of work. When the artist was not the sole creator, the artwork's subjectivity was shared with the co-creator,⁸⁹ reflecting that the participants could present their identity and voice more apparently. Although British art critic Claire Bishop seriously questioned that—whether the relationship that happened from participation in art practice was truly equal or whether it still concealed the artist's power controlling the content.⁹⁰ In this context, the personal stories, memories, and voices of the participants are not only expressed through art practices but become the key content and message of the artwork itself. For example, *Taung Tae Su Nae Pyae Wa Ya Say Thar* (2016) by Thatchatham Silsupan invented a paper speaker to present a song sung by Chaw Su to convey her undercover feelings. In this case, despite a question about hierarchical power in collaborative artmaking, the fact that migrant workers could participate in art practice by their own voice undeniably sheds light on a beginning for building non-hierarchical relationships in local communities, tangibly. The previously separated relationship between artists, migrant workers, and communities has changed. Once Burmese migrant workers, overlooked as just laborers in the industrial system despite their important role in the development of Thailand's capitalist economy, may gradually transform from outsiders into insiders, both as 'equal' co-creators and community members.

⁸⁷ Pornpilai Meemalai, interview by the author, April 5, 2024.

⁸⁸ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 43.

⁸⁹ Bell, "The Politics of Participatory Art," 2.

⁹⁰ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), esp. 2–6, 18–24.



Figure 10. Artist Thatchatham Silsupan encouraged Chaw Su to sing her favorite song, expressing a subtle emotion.
Source: Video still at 5:57 from the documentary 365 Days: LIFE MUSE Artist Interviews – Thatchatham Silsupan.
Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, 2019.

However, this question may arise in the reader's mind as to how we can evaluate the quality of these relationships. Do they still consist of Thai 'biases' towards Burmese people? Since Bourriaud does not provide a clear explanation about it, merely relational aesthetics may be insufficient to explain. Thus, it is crucial to further study how Thai biases towards Burmese workers can be mitigated through other theoretical frameworks. In conclusion, even if relational aesthetics opens a shared space for interactions among multicultural people, along with efforts to foster equal relationships among co-creators, the pivotal question is how existing bias can be reduced, and can the resulting relationships lead to long-term attitudinal changes? Accordingly, the author believes that it is crucial to consider further through other theoretical frameworks, particularly the Contact Hypothesis, which will help to understand the conditions for bias mitigation between social groups more clearly, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter2

Mitigating Prejudice Towards Burmese Workers Through Community Arts

Contemporary art currently has the potential to dismantle various myths in terms of society, politics, and culture. In Thai society, Burmese migrant workers still confront prejudices that are deeply rooted in the discourses of the state and mainstream media. Therefore, community art is important as a cultural mechanism to demolish these stereotypes. Gordon Allport defined prejudice as thinking negatively of others without sufficient reason. It might indicate judging from past experiences and ignoring actual experiences in the present.⁹¹ For Burmese migrant workers living and working in Thailand, they possibly face various prejudices, namely “*Burmese are enemies*,” which is a bias from history textbooks.⁹² “*They are impoverished and foolish*” is viewed through the eyes of the imperialist elite⁹³, while “*Being a threat to society*” is a result of some of them being illegal workers due to the Thai state’s discrimination in issuing work permits, together with the media’s continuous association with crime news.⁹⁴

The question that arises here is: how can community art contribute to challenging prejudice against this group of workers? It may mean bridging the gap between Thainess and otherness. And can we examine an art project like *365-Day Life Muse* through a social psychology lens? Based on Allport’s hypothesis, he proposed that prejudice against a group of people could be mitigated when contact occurred under the right conditions. These conditions include, pursuing a common goal, working together, and receiving supported by an organization or the authority.⁹⁵ Considering this case study of Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, the researcher believes that we could employ the above conditions to analyze how community art may challenge the prejudice that local people have against Burmese migrant workers, both at the level of the structure of the activity and symbolic act, which I will gradually discuss in the next section.

⁹¹ Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, 281–82.

⁹² Winichakul, *Khon Thai – khon uen*, 150–159.

⁹³ Charnvit Kasetsiri, “Thai Mong Pama [Thai Views Towards Burmese],” in *Thai Mong Pama [Thai Views Towards Burmese]* (Bangkok: Thai Action Committee for Democracy in Burma, 1998), 11–15, https://digital.library.tu.ac.th/tu_dc/frontend/Info/item/dc:51931.

⁹⁴ Sunpuwan, *Khon kham chat chak Pama lae khwam pen uen nai sata khong khon Thai*, 215–29.

⁹⁵ Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, 281–282.

A Structure of Community Art in Prejudice Reduction

If we examine *365-Day Life Muse* project through the theoretical framework of Gordon Allport, an influential social psychologist to this day, this community art consists of a structure and working process that is consistent with the conditions of prejudice reduction in his contact hypothesis as follows:

Holding an Equal Status

Firstly, Allport suggested that members of different groups who contacted each other should be on equal footing, rather than one party acting as a giver and the other as a taker.⁹⁶ Considering the main participants of this project, Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe, members of the Nongpo community, local curators, and international researchers and artists, while the latter may be artists with cultural status in the contemporary art world, when they took part in the project, they were only as neighbors who lived and worked with migrant workers. At this point, Ark Fongsamut observed that community art, where artists attempted to give something to the community, was problematic because it reflected the artists' perception of themselves as having a superior cultural or social status than the others.⁹⁷ Although I could not affirm that all the artists and researchers in this project stand on the foundation of equality, from discussions with some participants such as Jutamas Buranajade and Piti Amraranga, they noticed that their relationship with migrant workers gradually developed from strangers to friends.⁹⁸ While Preenun Nana genuinely realized that she and they were in the status of neighbors.⁹⁹ For this reason, she decided to grow herbs and cook meals to share, which are everyday routines for Thais, especially in the local societies that are generous to each other. Hence, if these relationships are built between equal-power persons, this structure is leveling the social hierarchy between participants, challenging the prejudice that Burmese are enemies by altering them to be friends and neighbors. In which Malee Sunpuwan noted that negative attitudes towards Burmese workers were alleviated through contact as friendship, helping to narrow down the gap of Thainess and otherness at the same time.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Fongsamut, *Sinlapa chumchon*, 10–29.

⁹⁸ Piti Amraranga, interview by the author, April 4, 2024, online.

⁹⁹ Nana, interview by the author, May 10, 2024

¹⁰⁰ Sunpuwan, *Khon kham chat chak Pama lae khwam pen uen nai sata khong khon Thai*, 215–29.

Setting a Common Goal

Secondly, Allport proposed that intergroup interactions necessarily have a shared goal to accomplish.¹⁰¹ In this context, *365-Day Life Muse* is a community art project aiming to create an experimental space for living together across cultures.¹⁰² Even if, on an individual level, migrant workers, members of the Nongpo community, curators, or artists may not have the same objectives exactly. For example, Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe probably wish for new experiences, as they never lived among Thais before¹⁰³, while Burmese artist Ma-Ei needs to reach the real situations of Burmese workers living in a factory's campsite abroad.¹⁰⁴ However, since the organizers had designed a clear and systematic process of community art—every two months, two artists and researchers would reside with the migrants and collaboratively work within three weeks.¹⁰⁵ This project establishes a reasonable common goal for them: to exchange, learn, and create art together.

Relying on Cooperation

Thirdly, Allport also suggested that participants from different groups must work together, which meant that they had to rely on each other to complete the work.¹⁰⁶ At this point, Ark Fongsamut pointed out that the democratic development and the decentralization of power to the local level made community art in Thailand require cooperation from all sectors.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, Pranicha Kalyanamit stated that participation in community art could be divided into 6 levels: providing information, receiving feedback, consulting, planning together, implementing, and monitoring.¹⁰⁸ According to the *365-Day Life Muse* project, it apparently emphasizes participation, as seen from several practices. For instance, in the making of soap in the artwork entitled *The Saponification Case* (2016) by Jutamas Buranajade and Piti Amraranga, they intended to build a cooperation among themselves, migrant workers, and the Nongpo community by introducing Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe to the villagers who were dairy

¹⁰¹ Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, 281–82.

¹⁰² Art Centre Silpakorn University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo*, 3.

¹⁰³ “365 Days: LIFE MUSE Artist Interviews – Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe.” YouTube video, 7:50. Uploaded by Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, May 23, 2017. Accessed July 1, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oL8o-4RSzv8&t=4s>.

¹⁰⁴ “365 Days: LIFE MUSE Artist Interviews – Ma Ei.” YouTube video, 6:00. Uploaded by Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, March 4, 2017. Accessed July 1, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILwwstd9ysw&t=2s>.

¹⁰⁵ Art Centre Silpakorn University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo*, 3.

¹⁰⁶ Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, 281–282.

¹⁰⁷ Fongsamut, *Sinlapa chumchon*, 10–29.

¹⁰⁸ Pranicha Kalyanamit, “Sinlapa chumchon nai khwam na cha pen” [“Community Art in the Realm of Possibility”], in *Sinlapa chumchon: siang sathon 476 kilomet* [*Community Art: Echoes of 476 Kilometers*] (Bangkok: Usakane, 2007), 32–39.

farmers¹⁰⁹, encouraging them to take part in the consultation stage until they obtained another key ingredient from Myanmar to enhance the quality of the soap, including planning together and making it successfully.¹¹⁰



Figure 11. Artists Jutamas Buranajade and Piti Amraranga took participants to ask the dairy farmers to donate their milk waste. Source: Still at 2:34 from the documentary *365 Days: LIFE MUSE Artist Interviews – Jutamas Buranajade & Piti Amraranga*. Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, 2017.

Receiving Support from an Organization

Fourthly, the final condition proposed by Allport is that when an intergroup contact was supported by an institution or authority, prejudice could be reduced since participants perceived that they were more accepted and important at a structural level.¹¹¹ This project is an example of community art that has been officially promoted by local, state, and international agencies.¹¹² At the community level, Pramaha Somkit Adhasittho, the abbot of Wat Nongpo temple, informed the villagers that Burmese migrant workers would be moving into the community to participate in the Baan Noorg's artistic project and affirmed that they had legal work permits. This not only made the locals less alarmed, but also made Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe feel more comfortable as they were not suspected by the residents.¹¹³ At the institutional level, the project was supported by the Art Centre Silpakorn University as the main sponsor through facilitating exhibitions and seminars. At the international level, it was co-funded by the Japan Foundation, a partnership with the Open Contemporary Art Center (OCAC) and Bamboo Curtain Studio

¹⁰⁹ "365 Days: LIFE MUSE Artist Interviews – Jutamas Buranajade & Piti Amraranga" YouTube video, 7:34. Uploaded by Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, March 8, 2017. Accessed July 1, 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xnp7_P4QWqg.

¹¹⁰ Jutamas Buranajade, interview by the author, April 4, 2024, online.

¹¹¹ Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, 281-282.

¹¹² Art Centre Silpakorn University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo*, 3.

¹¹³ Jiradej Meemalai, interview by the author, April 5, 2024.

from Taiwan, as well as sending artist representatives to the project by 98B COLLABoratory from the Philippines and Waft Lab from Indonesia.¹¹⁴

Nonetheless, if this project were held for a day or a week, I personally cannot be sure whether these conditions would still be effective in mitigating prejudice. If we greatly consider the **‘duration’** of the art project, the fact that *365-Day Life Muse* is a long-term participatory art project lasting up to a year possibly makes it more effective in mitigating myths against Burmese workers than one-time-event art practices.

Tactile Communication to Alter the Historical Mythology

While the previous section has already analyzed the reduction of prejudice through the structure of community art, this part will illustrate that the **‘language of art’** is also important in dismantling historical myths. As I mentioned earlier, Thai people have many sets of stereotypes of all Burmese. Most of them tend to look on this group of workers as dangerous, illegal, and foolish. In this context, Ma Ei stated that Chaw Su used to hear her employer say that they were like buffalo¹¹⁵ that would do everything as ordered.¹¹⁶ Even though influential Thai scholars who specialized in Burma Studies, such as Sunait Chutintaranond, conducted a research in 1993 to expose that within the 400-year relationship between Thailand and Myanmar, the actual wars that really occurred were only two periods.¹¹⁷ Importantly, Thongchai Winichakul, another key historian of Thailand, pointed out a fact: the myth *“Burmese were enemies”* was initiated in 1767, when Angwa (Myanmar) was an antagonist of Ayutthaya, or Thailand. But it was accentuated when Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, a father of Thai history, wrote a book titled *Thai rop pama* (Thai fought Myanmar) during the period of building a modern state with hyper-royalism, which widely influenced people.¹¹⁸ Whereas the bias *“They were foolish”* was part of the Thainess construction that simultaneously attempted to create **‘otherness’** at the same time. When the Thai elites were still resentful that the Burmese military had burned down the Ayutthaya Kingdom in the past, therefore, they employed the Buddhist belief in karma to understand the reason why Myanmar became a

¹¹⁴ Art Centre Silpakorn University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo*, 3.

¹¹⁵ In Thai society, the word buffalo (kwai) is often used as a damn, meaning stupid and being easily ordered. This comparison is made because it is giant and strong but allows people to whip it and use it as their labor. See Tassachon Tepkampanart, “Sharing the Story of ‘Animals...Vegetables...Fruits, How Did They Become Curse Words?’ (Lao suu gan fang reuang sat phak phohnlamai chanai glai pen kham da),” *Department of Cultural Promotion*, June 15, 2020. Accessed July 20, 2025. https://www.culture.go.th/culture_th/ewt_news.php?nid=5004.

¹¹⁶ “365 Days: LIFE MUSE Artist Interviews – Ma Ei,” YouTube video, 6:00.

¹¹⁷ Kasetsiri, “Thai Mong Pama,” 11–15.

¹¹⁸ Winichakul, *Khon Thai – khon uen*, 150–159.

colony of England in the late 18th century, rather than realizing the Western colonialists' power expansion. In those days, when Siam, or Thailand, was autonomous from external colonization, allowing some elites to assume that our kings were brilliant, opposite to Burmese leaders.¹¹⁹

Several artistic practices in the *365-Day Life Muse* project challenged the bias that Thais have against Burmese. For instance, an artwork entitled *Unfolding* (2016), by Chia Jen Chen, an artist representative of Open Contemporary Art Center (OCAC) from Taiwan, employed an origami white elephant as a key character in a short film.¹²⁰ In the step of shooting, he asked participants to unfold and refold the origami elephant to communicate the theme of **'reconstructing'** the antagonistic history between Thailand and Myanmar.¹²¹ Meanwhile, an artwork, *The Saponification Case* (2016), by Jutamas Buranajade and Piti Amraranga, utilized soap-making to convey the theme of **'cleansing'** prejudice¹²², which I found to be suitable for in-depth examination since it reflects the challenge of prejudice in many dimensions.



Figure 12. Artist Chia Jen Chen invited Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe to unfold the elephant origami before refolding it again. Source: Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, “365 Days: LIFE MUSE,” 2017.

Jutamas Buranajade and Piti Amraranga are the artist duo who founded “o-d-a” (object design alliance), whose interest in functional design developed through research and collaboration with local artisans.¹²³ Upon moving into the Nongpo community, they suspected that the segregation of the locals and Burmese workers might be partly a result of prejudices

¹¹⁹ Kasetsiri, “Thai Mong Pama,” 11–15.

¹²⁰ Art Centre Silpakorn University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo*, 38-39.

¹²¹ “365 Days: LIFE MUSE Artist Interviews – Chia Jen Chen” YouTube video, 6:52. Uploaded by Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, March 28, 2017. Accessed July 1, 2025.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PkuB183NBuY&list=PLX1ZcBtJPBNuAwXsjoDxQcEOku2-hKgwF&index=17>.

¹²² Buranajade, interview by the author, April 4, 2024.

¹²³ Art Centre Silpakorn University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo*, 38-39.

that most people hold against them. The artists questioned how they could deliver the message of social integration and whether they could question the historical myths that breed cross-cultural hatred through their artwork. Piti described that while they were looking for a relational object to communicate, they were stopped at soap and realized that

*Soap was a fundamental item in our daily life, but what made it special was its neutrality. No matter what class...what race...they must use it the same way. Thus, it led to the idea that if our practice was soap-making, in the end it would be useful in terms of cleansing something...*¹²⁴

Since Jutamas usually makes her own soap at home, when most of the Nongpo community's members are dairy farmers, she guided Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe to visit their farms to ask for leftover milk waste as materials for soap production. After that, she invited them to brainstorm on which raw materials from Myanmar to improve the quality of soap, leading to their joint decision to add 'Thanakha powder' into the formula. Thanakha in Burmese, or what Thai people in Ratchaburi Province call "Phaya Ya," was a small tree in the same family as the lemon. An ancient wood that Burmese women usually grinded with water until it had a light-yellow color and then used to beautify the skin.¹²⁵ The artist explained that the reaction of soap generation was called saponification, which was when fat met with lye before stirring until all ingredients completely combined. For this reason, the artists deploy soapmaking as an artistic practice to signify to the workers and Nongpo community about the possibility of '**social integration,**' utilizing milk waste and Thanakha powder to represent the two cultures.¹²⁶ In my perspective, once the participants could learn that stirring different ingredients to become soap took a lot of time, they could also gradually realize that social integration was the same. Furthermore, Piti underlined that since they valued utility, when soap was something that all farmers could use in their daily lives, he believed that it would act as a tool to communicate the message of cleansing prejudice to someone because when we showered, soap was the object closest to our body. So that it could stimulate reflection on whether the hatred we had for each other was reality or just fiction.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Amraranga, interview by the author, April 4, 2024.

¹²⁵ Promjit Sornlum, "Na Suai Duai Thanakha Khong Mianma Rue Krachae Khong Thai [Beautiful Face With Myanmar Thanakha or Thai Krachae]," Mahidol University, October 26, 2012, <https://pharmacy.mahidol.ac.th/th/knowledge/article/122>.

¹²⁶ Buranajade, interview by the author, April 4, 2024.

¹²⁷ Amraranga, interview by the author, April 4, 2024.



Figure 13. Chaw Su was combining all ingredients together during the soap-making process.
Source: Still at 3:12 from the documentary *365 Days: LIFE MUSE Artist Interviews – Jutamas Buranajade & Piti Amraranga*.
Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, 2017.

Moreover, in terms of the **‘working process,’** the two Burmese labored in an industrial factory, in which working at specific points likely prevented them from seeing the result. For this reason, the artists designed their operation by imitating a clear process of the production line but intended for the participants to be hands-on from start to finish. They believed that encouraging Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe to become creators of a product would promote their self-esteem. Jutamas pointed out that although making soap was not difficult, it still required a fixed formula, precise measurements, and patience in stirring ingredients and pouring into molds until it was formed. And eventually, it would be left for a month to let its pH value decrease to a usable level. Therefore, the fact that the two workers were able to do everything well demonstrates the craftsmanship skills they had accumulated from their work.¹²⁸ Jutamas concluded in the documentary that *“They had ideas and abilities...more than we thought,”*¹²⁹ echoing how cooperation under Allport’s conditions is vitally important in mitigating prejudices towards each other. Because in this case, it not only gradually transforms the perception of the artists and the farmers about Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe but also encourages the migrant workers to realize that they are as capable as Thais. In the same vein, it can be said that this art practice could reduce the bias that Burmese are foolish significantly.

Although the above analysis may offer a positive impact, it remains questionable whether conveying key messages through these symbolic processes in creating new understandings of Thai-Burmese relations ‘without direct words’ is truly effective. Is it articulated or ambiguous? For this reason, the researcher would like to point out the

¹²⁸ Buranajade, interview by the author, April 4, 2024.

¹²⁹ “365 Days: LIFE MUSE Artist Interviews – Jutamas Buranajade & Piti Amraranga,” YouTube video, 7:34.

importance of other kinds of communication than verbal language, in particular of touch. David Howes, a Canadian anthropologist who played a vital role in sensory studies, proposed an idea that our world was constructed through multi-sensorial experiences. It was full of contents, but mere visibility and language could not interpret the entire world.¹³⁰ For example, you could not describe the flavor of food without tasting it. Constance Classen, another key thinker, explained that humans possibly learned a ‘mother touch’ alongside our mother tongues. It was a foundation of how we interact with each other since people could learn what and how to touch, which were full of meaning and rules.¹³¹ Importantly, Ruth Finnegan underlined that social touch affirmed our separation while allowing for integration with others beyond physical boundaries. Thus, among all the channels of communication, touch might be the most powerful and fastest.¹³²



Figure 14. Rung and Orn apply the moisturizing cream to Min’s skin to relieve his mysterious disease. Scene from *Blissfully Yours* (2002), directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Source: Source: International Film Festival Rotterdam, “Blissfully Yours,” n.d. Accessed July 1, 2025. <https://iffr.com/en/iffr/2003/films/blissfully-yours>.

To illustrate an idea of how artists employ tactile as the main language in their work, I will refer to a few examples of films. The first is *Blissfully Yours* (2002), a cinematograph by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, which won the top prize of Un Certain Regard at the *Cannes Film Festival* in 2002. It narrated the story of three main characters—Min, a Burmese immigrant suffering from a mysterious skin disease; Rung, a Thai factory worker who was his girlfriend; and Orn, a middle-aged woman whom Rung hired to take care of him. The first part depicted a city regulated by law and disappointment. We could see from their attempt to obtain a medical

¹³⁰ David Howes, ed., *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA71410866>.

¹³¹ Constance Classen, “Contact,” in *The Book of Touch*, 2nd ed., ed. Constance Classen (London: Routledge, 2020), 13–15.

¹³² Finnegan, Ruth. “Tactile Communication.” In *The Book of Touch*, 2nd ed., 18–25. Routledge, 2020.

certificate to help Min apply for a job, but the doctor rejected them as he lacked a Thai ID card. While the second part oppositely presented a forest filled with bliss once they went to picnic in the forest to relieve their stress¹³³. In my opinion, what is most intriguing about this film is that the director employed touch as the primary communication channel between characters. Although Min understood the Thai language, several scenes in the forest where they took turns touching on their bodies show the audience the way the cross-cultural couple intimately connected. Especially the late scene, where two females helped each other apply moisturizing cream to Min's body, it not only allows us to see his physical pain but also the difficulty of being a marginal person in Thai society and our competence to mitigate their suffering.



Figure 15. Kung gives a music box to Nont after receiving an erotic massage.
Scene from *Days* (2020), directed by Tsai Ming-Liang.

Source: Glenn Kenny, "Days Review: A Taiwanese Auteur in a Quiet Mode," *The New York Times*, August 12, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/12/movies/days-review-tsai-ming-liang.html>.

The second film is *Days* (2020), the latest one from Malaysian director Tsai Ming-Liang, well-known for his slow cinema and contemplative themes, reflecting on solitude and sickness amidst urban landscapes and vast nature. It was a story of two characters: Kang, a middle-aged Taiwanese man with chronic neck pain, and Nont, a young Laotian migrant worker living in Bangkok. *Days* presented a narrative of their lives, which are trapped in distinct 'cages.' Kang was trapped by his illness, whereas Nont was desolate from being an immigrant.¹³⁴ A climax of this story was when Kang received an erotic massage from Nont—although their relationship unclearly occurred, it was a mutual release through human touch.¹³⁵ Jacob Anguis noted that their sexual interaction became the center that brought the

¹³³ Thomas Moran, "Blissfully Yours (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2002)," *Senses of Cinema*, October 1, 2018, <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2021/cteq/blissfully-yours-apichatpong-weerasethakul-2002/>.

¹³⁴ Jacob Agius, "Days (Tsai Ming-liang, 2020)," *Senses of Cinema*, October 1, 2018, <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2023/cteq/days-tsai-ming-liang-2020/>.

¹³⁵ Devika Girish, "Interview: Tsai Ming-liang," *Film Comment*, July 18, 2022, <https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-tsai-ming-liang-days/>.

two together, even if it was fleeting.¹³⁶ In addition, Tsai stated in interviews that it was two people comforting each other, and he intentionally made the massage scene last as long as real time so that the audience would feel as if they were also obtaining it.¹³⁷ For me, this film is a crystal-clear instance of how people with limited language literacy can communicate with each other through touch, without direct words. Although both films feature explicit erotic intimacy, unlike the *365-Day Life Muse* project, which does not create the same kind of bodily touching. Yet, these films could demonstrate that, apart from a verbal language, tactile is another vital human communication approach, especially in contexts where people have different languages and cultures. Therefore, when we look back at the *365-Day Life Muse* project, we can see that Preenun Nana's growing culinary herbs, Chia Jen Chen's unfolding paper into elephants, and Jutamas Buranajade and Piti Amrarang's soap-making intentionally convey the key messages through '**symbolic touch**', e.g., settling down through plant cultivation, historical review via paper unfolding, and social integration by soap-making.

In summary, if we consider the conditions of the Contact Hypothesis, this community art has the competence to mitigate prejudice against Burmese workers through both particular structure with long-term processes and tactile communication. Yet, what is worth contemplating further is how the myths about Burmese can be altered when they have been imprinted in a textbook and become a widely accepted mainstream history that has a great influence on Thai people today.

¹³⁶ Agius, "*Days* (Tsai Ming-liang, 2020)."

¹³⁷ Girish, "Interview: Tsai Ming-liang."

Chapter 3: Enhancing Capital and Negotiating the Status of Migrant Workers through Community Arts

Most migrant workers from Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia move to Thailand in order to find a higher-income job than in their home country. However, the lack of capital resulted in them often being forced into ‘3D’ jobs (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning), which were undesirable to Thais because of their low wages.¹³⁸ According to Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory, a French thinker who still influences contemporary sociology nowadays, our society consisted of social ‘**sub-fields**’, such as the media field, the academic field, and the art field. Each field was populated by agents who used various forms of capital for their own positions and power.¹³⁹ Therefore, when considering migrant workers as players in Thai society, it is obvious that they are uncompetitive due to their inadequacy of capital and no distinct status. In this chapter, the researcher accordingly aims to examine how the *365-Day Life Muse* community art project can foster the capital and negotiate the power of Burmese migrant workers to achieve social and cultural status.

3.1 Community Art and the Promotion of Migrant Workers’ Capital

Bourdieu stated that human differences across classes were related to the capital they had accumulated. According to its definition, ‘**capital**’ referred to tangibly collected labor. When it was used by a player, it enabled them to possess living labor. Capital could be divided into four dimensions: economic, social, cultural, and symbolic. Economic capital was something that could be converted into money directly and immediately. Social capital meant the total potential that was linked to an individual’s existing relationships. While cultural capital implied knowledge and skills, in which cultural goods could be in the form of books or qualifications. And symbolic capital signified the recognition and respect received from others in that society.¹⁴⁰ Examining this case study by Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, we can see the promotion of capital in various dimensions for these Burmese migrant workers, as follows:

¹³⁸ Chalamwong, Meepien, and Hongprayoon, “Management of Cross-border Migration,” 447–63.

¹³⁹ Van Maanen, “Pierre Bourdieu’s Grand Theory of the Artistic Field,” 53–81.

¹⁴⁰ Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” 241–58.

Firstly, the *365-Day Life Muse* project may be able to support their ‘**economic capital**’. Ma Ei stated in the documentary that she was appalled after arriving at the immigrant’s dormitory in the factory since it was narrow and dirty. One of the workers told her that before migration, he dreamed of becoming wealthy but only earned just 250 baht per month at the end.¹⁴¹ Similarly, Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe had been dwelling there before they participated in this project. Due to the application’s condition, it required participants to move out of their previous place and to stay in the Nongpo community for a while. The researcher proposes that, without rent, even if the project did not obtain additional earnings for the couple, providing free housing for up to a year would help lessen their financial burden and let them deliver more money back to their families in Myanmar. Importantly, Piti Amraranga used to state that they also dreamed of having their own business rather than being laborers.¹⁴² Therefore, this saving could be prepared for that goal. Moreover, when the project ends, their economic capital is likely to increase due to the accumulation of cultural capital, especially if they continue practicing skills learned from the artists, such as cooking Thai food with herbs or making soap from cow’s milk, and adapt it to their career to generate extra income. Secondly, participating in this community art tends to enhance the migrant worker’s ‘**social capital**.’ Bourdieu described that networks of relationships could be established in the form of family names, class, or tribes, which were significant in that they potentially transformed into economic capital under certain conditions.¹⁴³ Nonetheless, the researcher proposes that effective networks could also be formed through collaborative working. As the participants in this project were required to jointly create work with each artist every Sunday throughout a year, it meant that they had to sacrifice a day for it instead of taking a rest. Hence, all nineteen finished artworks serve as a testament to their determination and endeavor, leading to recognition as the ones with competency. For this reason, the trust of the immigrant’s capability leads to the potential network with the local community (both the residents and local organizations serving as the spiritual anchor for people like Wat Nongpo temple) and the art scene (the Baan Noorg collective, Art Centre Silpakorn University, along with 23 artists and researchers from around the world, and so on).

¹⁴¹ “365 Days: LIFE MUSE Artist Interviews – Ma Ei,” YouTube video, 6:00.

¹⁴² Amraranga, interview by the author, April 4, 2024.

¹⁴³ Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” 247.



Figure 16. Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe were coloring on the sculpture in the collaborative artwork with Korakrit Arunanondchai.
Source: Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, “365 Days: LIFE MUSE,” 2017.

Thirdly, a year-round activity could promote ‘**cultural capital**’ for participants. Since Baan Noorg has planned the activities into four phases, namely visiting the local museums, doing a cooperation with the villagers, co-creating artworks, and making an exhibition, it generates the long-term exchange of knowledge, experiences, and cultures. Thus, the first competency that they could continuously practice is linguistic skills. Full-time living in a local community encourages them to learn the Thai language more with neighbors and organizers while also practicing English with the international artists and researchers who rotate through their residence. Jiradej underlined that Chaw Su was already fluent in Thai, but Kyaw Moe hesitated to speak at the beginning; until he was accustomed to the multicultural environment and its diverse languages, he finally became more confident to communicate.¹⁴⁴ Apart from language, this project also enhances artistic skills in the couple. Sebastien Tayac, a French researcher who was involved in the project, observed that no one knew what art meant to them. Even if the couple might be familiar with temple murals, they collaborated on various forms of art.¹⁴⁵ Some artists employed everyday routines such as singing, planting herbs, and making soap—all of which attempted to connect art with social and political dimensions; they gained at least some new experiences.¹⁴⁶ Since Thanavi Chotpradit used to point out that sometimes other things could be utilized for art, while sometimes art was used for other purposes as

¹⁴⁴ Jiradej Meemalai, interview by the author, April 5, 2024.

¹⁴⁵ Art Centre Silpakorn University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo*, 35.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

well.¹⁴⁷ For this reason, the researcher agreed with Tayac that we should leave the meaning of art up to their own interpretation.¹⁴⁸



Figure 17. Artist Katherine Nunez used graphite and stencil paper to copy the texture of Chaw Su’s face.
Source: Video still at 1:40 from the documentary *365 Days: LIFE MUSE Artist Interviews – Katherine Nunez*.
Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, 2017.

Fourthly, *365-Day Life Muse* possibly fosters ‘**symbolic capital**’ for migrant workers. Bourdieu emphasized that despite its intangible nature, symbolic capital was crucial to the positioning of individuals in society, leading to both social and economic capital.¹⁴⁹ Consider ‘*Getting to Know You*’ (2014) by Katherine Nunez, an artwork that aimed to make the existence of migrant workers visible in Thai society. Nunez, an artist representative of the 98B COLLABoratory from Manila, participated in this project with the Baan Noorg collective. Normally, she was interested in micropolitics and sought to investigate the essence of things through artisanal processes such as sewing and embroidery.¹⁵⁰ Upon meeting the participants and hearing their stories, as Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe were migrant workers who had to leave their homeland, she was interested in examining what home meant to them and what it was made of. In the process of creating collaborative work, she decided to employ rubbing the surface of their belongings onto stencil paper with graphite, as it was easy for everyone even if never done before. Moreover, the tracing process was significant in that it allowed people to visualize the surface of the banal object instantly.¹⁵¹ The artist explained

¹⁴⁷ Chotpradit, *Prakotkan nithatsakan*, 45–70.

¹⁴⁸ Art Centre Silpakorn University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo*, 22.

¹⁴⁹ Chantavanich, Thritsadi Sang Khom Wittaya.

¹⁵⁰ . Art Centre Silpakorn University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo*, 47.

¹⁵¹ “365 Days: LIFE MUSE Artist Interviews – Katherine Nunez.” YouTube video, 4:39. Uploaded by Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, January 19, 2017. Accessed August 12, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4GUErF15cKw&t=109s>.

that the objects the migrant workers chose to rub were greatly meaningful to them. For example, the Buddha altar, in which they prayed every day for blessings; the luggage for travelling back home; and the license plate of the motorcycle they used as their primary vehicle.¹⁵² Then, to display this artwork in the exhibition, the artists and immigrants assembled sheets of tracing paper into square boxes illuminated by light inside, inviting the audience to take a closer look at each image to explore their origins, which were all their household objects. From the researcher's point of view, this artistic practice is beneficial for Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe in helping them reconstruct the meaning of home, since being away from their origin might make them unable to see their own worth. Hence, seeing the patterns of their mundane objects in detail probably reveals to them the meaningful stories beneath. The organizer believed that these mysterious light boxes in the exhibition might stimulate the public—Thai society—to open their eyes from the nationalist blindness.¹⁵³ Whereas the researcher notes that it could make them realize the existence of migrant workers to Thailand, especially in terms of their significance towards the development of our economic growth.

To visualize how community art could promote the individual's capitals, the researcher would like to give another example that was prominent in the history of public art and possibly influenced later-generation practitioners. '*Culture in Action*' was a public art project that took place in the early 1990s in the United States. Despite a different context from Thailand, it apparently shares a key commonality with the *365-Day Life Muse* in terms of the community's engagement. *Culture in Action* (1993) was an experimental exhibition by Mark Dion and the Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group (CUEAG), curated by Mary Jane Jacob. It was officially held from May to September 1993, consisting of eight sub-projects installed around Chicago,¹⁵⁴ which served as a canvas for artists to explore pressing social and political issues. The project positioned the audiences as vital as the artists,¹⁵⁵ seeing from the cooperation of hundreds of people, from women, high school students, laborers, and people living with HIV/AIDS, blurring the distinct boundaries between creators and participants.¹⁵⁶ '*Flood*' (1992–1995) was a sub-project, initiated by the Haha group (Richard House, Wendy

¹⁵² Katherine Nunez, interview by the author, April 5, 2024, online.

¹⁵³ Art Centre Silpakorn University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo*, 47.

¹⁵⁴ David Morris and Paul O'Neill, "Introduction: Exhibition as Social Intervention," *Afterall*, April 20, 2014, accessed August 1, 2025, <https://www.afterall.org/articles/introduction-exhibition-as-social-intervention/>

¹⁵⁵ Eva M. Olson, "New Art, New Audiences: Experiments in Public Art," in *Culture in Action*, ed. Mary Jane Jacob (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 10–15, https://monoskop.org/images/9/94/Culture_in_Action_A_Public_Art_Program_of_Sculpture_Chicago_1995.pdf.

¹⁵⁶ Morris and O'Neill, "Introduction: Exhibition as Social Intervention."

Jacob, Laurie Paimer, and John Ploof) together with a volunteering network to actively participate in health care. Physically, they built a greenhouse in Rogers Park, north of Chicago, and invited the community to hydroponically grow vegetables to feed HIV-infected people.¹⁵⁷ The artist employed a little plant to represent the patients and believed that its growth and stability depend on a cooperative network generated by community. While the garden was not a representative of medical treatment directly but rather a social embodiment of individual responsibility.¹⁵⁸ Considering the processive practice of this project, it resembles Preenun Nana's *'Root'* (2014), which deploys herbal cultivation as an artistic practice to communicate a concept of settling down. Apart from the collaborative urban farming, the project also included meetings and educational sessions about AIDS, safe sex, and volunteerism¹⁵⁹, which also align with Bourdieu's theory. Therefore, the researcher notes that this project clearly promoted social capital for the sub-community by creating a caring connection among patients, communities, and active volunteers. At the same time, it also fosters cultural capital among the public, sharing accurate knowledge of disease prevention and treatment.



Figure 18. Zach Jennings, Caroline O'Boyle, and their visitors at Flood's project space.

Source: Afterall, "Explore 'Culture in Action' 1993," April 20, 2014, <https://www.afterall.org/articles/explore-culture-in-action-1993/>

Another sub-project that must be mentioned is *'We got it!'* (1993), which involved Simon Grennan, Christopher Sperandio, and a group of laborers who were members of the Bakery, Confectionery, and Tobacco Manufacturers Association at the Nestlé factory in Franklin Park.¹⁶⁰ Since this city was infamous as the candy manufacturing capital of the world

¹⁵⁷ Afterall, "Explore 'Culture in Action' 1993," April 20, 2014, accessed September 1, 2025, <https://www.afterall.org/articles/explore-culture-in-action-1993/>.

¹⁵⁸ Haha and Flood: A Volunteer Network for Active Participation in Healthcare, "Flood," in *Culture in Action*, ed. Mary Jane Jacob (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 88–97, https://monoskop.org/images/9/94/Culture_in_Action_A_Public_Art_Program_of_Sculpture_Chicago_1995.pdf.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 90.

¹⁶⁰ Afterall, "Explore 'Culture in Action' 1993."

because of its several chocolate factories. Yet, the anonymity of the laborers behind the product caused them to be unknown, allowing only the brand's names to be advertised. For this reason, the artists invited the twelve workers to collaborate on a new chocolate bar.¹⁶¹ After an intensive discussion, they decided to insert their names and images on the packaging to promote their workforce union. The final products were 30,000 bars distributed to stores, including an advertisement for a new dessert on 11 billboards around the city. Chocolate became a communication tool for the unions.¹⁶² The artist attempted to make the audiences question who was behind the food they consumed every day.¹⁶³ From the researcher's view, this sub-project has a process like the work *'The Saponification Case'* (2014) by Jutamas Buranajade and Piti Amrarang, which invited migrant workers to produce soap together with the Nongpo community to convey the message of mythological cleansing. Moreover, if we consider Bourdieu's concept, this sub-project has a goal resembling the artwork by Katerine Nunez, which the researcher has previously articulated in this chapter, as both artworks aim to enhance the symbolic capital of the participants, helping the public to see their existence and listen to their voices more apparently.



Figure 19. A chocolate bar *We Got It!* made by Simon Grennan, Christopher Sperandio, and a group of laborers.
Source: Northwestern University, "Chris Sperandio (2007)," n.d., <https://art.northwestern.edu/visiting-artists/chris-sperandio-2007>.

In addition to the community art projects in the West, in fact, there are several practices in the Southeast Asian context developed to enhance the capital of the marginalized people. Since 2012, for more than a decade, urban villages across the island of Java, Indonesia, had been gradually becoming colorful until they were called *'Rainbow Villages.'*¹⁶⁴ Originally, it was initiated by Slamet Widodo, a middle school principal in Semarang;¹⁶⁵ it was later

¹⁶¹ Simon Grennan, Christopher Sperandio, and The Bakery from the Confectionery and Tobacco Workers' International Union of America Local No.552, "We Makes It! The Workforce Makes the Candy of Their Dreams," in *Culture in Action*, ed. Mary Jane Jacob (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 114–21, https://monoskop.org/images/9/94/Culture_in_Action_A_Public_Art_Program_of_Sculpture_Chicago_1995.pdf.

¹⁶² Ibid, 119.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 121.

¹⁶⁴ Ernest Irwandi, Setiawan Sabana, Andryanto Rikrik Kusmara, and Tisna Sanjaya, "Urban Villages as Living Gallery: Shaping Place Identity With Participatory Art in Java, Indonesia," *Cogent Arts and Humanities* 10, no. 1 (August 24, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2023.2247671>.

¹⁶⁵ Ryan General, "Indonesia's 'Rainbow Village' Is Basically Where Asian Unicorns Are Born," *NextShark*, May 12, 2017, accessed September 11, 2025, <https://nextshark.com/indonesias-rainbow-village-basically-asian-unicorns-born>.

developed by community service groups, college students, and activists. This project was intended at transforming the slums into tourist attractions through the community murals, local food, and unique festivals. Ernest Irvandi conducted research and proposed that these rainbow villages (in Kampung Bustaman, Kampung Pondok Pusang, and Kampung Pelangi Semarang) were the participatory art that shared a common characteristic: workshops, such as painting on walls or cooking local dishes, allowing artists and the community's members to work together in the ideation of artistic themes and writing their descriptions.¹⁶⁶ According to Bourdieu's lens, this participatory art tends to increase the cultural capital for the Java islanders through the joint realization of shared identity, reimagining of their residence in relation to history and culture, and knowledge sharing through hands-on practice. At the same time, it leads to the improvement of their economic capital as well since the place has been embellished for tourism, which generates additional income for the community.



Figure 20. A mural in Kampung Pelangi created as part of the Semarang River Calling Festival 2021.
Source: Ernest Irvandi, Setiawan Sabana, Andryanto Rikrik Kusmara, and Tisna Sanjaya, "Urban Villages as Living Gallery: Shaping Place Identity With Participatory Art in Java, Indonesia," *Cogent Arts and Humanities* 10, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2023.2247671>.

3.2 Negotiating Social and Cultural Status

In the previous section, although the researcher has demonstrated that community art can build various dimensions of capital, especially symbolic capital related to social acceptance, contemplating the *365-Day Life Muse* project, along with Bourdieu's concept of habitus as a tool, we can also see the possibilities of power dynamics in society and the arena of contemporary art. In the Thai social class, Burmese migrant workers might be ordered at the bottom as **'the others,'** not being considered citizens of the state and as **'outsiders'** of the

¹⁶⁶ Irvandi et al., "Urban Villages as Living Gallery."

community level. In addressing this issue, the researcher must mention Busui Ajaw, a female artist who is now gradually well-recognized in the contemporary art scene, as her works have been increasingly exhibited at various international festivals such as the Singapore Biennale (2016), Chiangrai Biennale (2023), and Bangkok Art Biennale (2024). According to her biography, Ajaw was born in Myanmar, but her family necessarily took refuge to live in Mae Sai District in Chiang Rai Province¹⁶⁷ and was known as the Akha people¹⁶⁸. Her artworks typically reflected the traditional Akha way of life, respect for nature, and spiritual beliefs.¹⁶⁹ Thai curator Angkrit Ajchariyasophon stated that almost all her works were violent because they often honestly reflected the pain of being a minority.¹⁷⁰ Ajaw stated in interviews that, as a marginalized person, she received no education, and all her artistic skills were self-taught. Lacking a Thai ID card prevented her from traveling anywhere overseas.¹⁷¹ Until 2016, when her work was selected for display in an exhibition at the Singapore Art Museum, a group of Thai artists in Chiang Rai Province rallied to request citizenship for her.¹⁷² This marked a turning point, securing Ajaw's official passport and her clearer position as a Thai artist in the art scene. For this reason, the researcher perceives that she is a dominant example of how art can create symbolic capital, particularly as a tool for negotiating social and cultural status. Reflecting on the *365-Day Life Muse* project, it simultaneously reorders Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe's social status. Primarily, an abbot of the Nongpo temple, whom all community members respected, helped to announce the immigrants' status as legal workers officially holding working permits,¹⁷³ while the project itself also attempted to develop a familiarity between the Burmese and local people through cohabitation and collaborative art creation over a year. The previously mistrustful behavior gradually transformed to acceptance instead, leading to understanding and trust at the end.¹⁷⁴ Compared to Busui Ajaw, their political status might not yet have been structurally altered by the state; however, Jiradej highlighted that there was a

¹⁶⁷ Bangkok Art Biennale, "Busui Ajaw," accessed August 12, 2025, <https://www.bkkartbiennale.com/artist/busui-ajaw>.

¹⁶⁸ "Akha" was an ethnonym used by the Akha people, an ethnic group that originally migrated from southwestern China. In Thailand, since almost all of them still lacked citizenship, they could not access basic rights equally as Thai people. For more, see Pamira Rakorasilp, "Akha," Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (Public Organization), April 22, 2025, accessed September 2, 2025, <https://ethnicity.sac.or.th/database-ethnic/211/>.

¹⁶⁹ Bangkok Art Biennale, "Busui Ajaw."

¹⁷⁰ "Sinlapin Thai Ei Pi Sib Ngan Haeng Chit Win Yan Akha Khong Busui Ajaw Sinlapin Phu Mai Koey Rian Sinlapa [Thai Artist EP.10 Akha Spiritual Work by Busui Ajaw, an Artist Who Never Studied Art]," YouTube video, 30:29, uploaded by The Cloud, May 3, 2024, accessed August 12, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Wlg26KsJDU>.

¹⁷¹ "Sampath Busui Ajaw [Interview Busui Ajaw]," YouTube video, 12:30, uploaded by Angkrit Ajchariyasophon, October 9, 2019, accessed August 12, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jIKa2sSoTk&t=265s>.

¹⁷² "Sinlapin Thai Ei Pi Sib Ngan Haeng Chit Win Yan Akha Khong Busui Ajaw," YouTube video, 30:29.

¹⁷³ Jiradej Meemalai, interview by the author, April 5, 2024.

¹⁷⁴ Art Centre Silpakorn University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo*, 21.

significant social shift. Since after the project ended, Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe had decided to not return to their factory's dormitory anymore but rent a shophouse to dwell in the Nongpo community.¹⁷⁵ Thus, it may be said that this project has made them become **'community members'** successfully. Furthermore, contemplating their cultural status, the art field was previously reserved for those with high cultural capital, such as artists and academics. This project opens an opportunity for those who are non-artists without any kind of capital to negotiate their cultural status to be as **'co-creators'** alongside artists and researchers with higher capital.



Figure 21. Chaw Su spoke up during the opening event of the exhibition *365-Day Life Muse* at the Art Centre, Silpakorn University.
Source: Baan Noong Collaborative Arts and Culture, “*365 Days: LIFE MUSE*,” 2017.

In summary, community art can be utilized as an approach to enhance **'capital'** for migrant workers in Thailand in various dimensions, including economic, social, cultural, and symbolic. And it also has the potential to negotiate their social and cultural **'status'**. Even though Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe are not called artists, this phenomenon may challenge the sacred status of artists in Thailand. However, since current art projects are still funded by the state or organization that holds the authority, it remains to be seen whether artists, curators, and institutions still possess significant power. At least, we could see that encouraging non-artists, such as an immigrant, to be co-creators affects the power dynamics in this arena irresistibly

¹⁷⁵ Jiradej Meemalai, interview by the author, April 5, 2024.

Conclusion

Community art in Thailand emerged in the 90s, having the *Chiangmai Social Installation* (CMSI) festival as its key milestone, which proposed the idea of bringing art out of the museum and into the public sphere. It excelled in the connection between art and pressing social issues—while engaging communities and the marginal groups of people.¹⁷⁶ This research investigates the case study of *365-Day Life Muse*, a one-year participatory art project initiated by the Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture in Nongpo Subdistrict, Ratchaburi Province, involving 23 international artists and researchers, a Burmese couple (and their friends), and Nongpo residents. By merging the artist-in-residence program with a collaborative art-making process that encouraged the migrant worker's participation in every step of the project, from brainstorming to exhibition at Silpakorn University Art Centre in 2017. The researcher deploys an artistic framework, a psychological hypothesis, and an anthropological theory to discuss the significance and approach of community art towards the Burmese migrants, resulting in the following key findings:

In Chapter 1, the researcher refers to Relational Aesthetics by Nicholas Bourriaud, a French art critic and curator, who proposed that art was a space of relations—from the relationship between the artist and the world, the artist and the audiences, and the audiences and their worlds at hand, including the possibility of micro-politics that arises from community art using ordinary daily routines to initiate crucial change for the marginal communities.¹⁷⁷ In this chapter, the researcher discovers that a temporary relocation of migrant workers to reside in a house within the Nongpo community alongside Thai neighbors and international artists creates a 'relational space,' breaking down the boundaries of the modern nation-state that defines citizenship by borders or nationality. The creation of a space for coexistence and cultural exchange leads to a gradual acceptance of each other's differences while also reflecting similarities or shared cultures in Southeast Asia, such as the use of herbs in cooking curry. The researcher found that an artistic practice, *Root* (2016) by Preenun Nana, wove a social tie between migrant workers and the community. On the one hand, growing herbs with the neighbors' soil offered the Burmese couple a concept of new settling, making a connection between themselves and that area. On the other hand, sharing the food they cook with neighbors initiated a social interaction with Thai people because it aligns with the local culture. Moreover,

¹⁷⁶ Teh, *Artist-to-Artist*, 50–85.

¹⁷⁷ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 14–17.

Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe's collaboration as co-creators with the artist allows them to have a non-hierarchical relationship, since their role shifts from audience to interlocutor, as defined by Relational Aesthetics.¹⁷⁸ This reflects how co-creating art can empower individuals to have their power equally with that of artists and to hold shared ownership, something Jiradej repeatedly stated as their core ideology.¹⁷⁹ Importantly, if we consider the small actions, such as co-living, growing herbs, and sharing food with neighbors, these are everyday routines that the public might not perceive as art. However, the researcher proposes that it enhances micro-politics, as envisioned by Bourriaud. When the direct criticism may have no impact on marginal communities,¹⁸⁰ these ordinary routines may gradually challenge the existing nation-state framework that generates xenophobia and the segregation between Thais and migrant workers, leading to their isolated existence in sub-communities where it hinders their access to basic rights and equal resources.

In Chapter 2, the researcher relies on the Contact Hypothesis by American social psychologist Gordon Allport, who noted that intergroup bias could be mitigated under specific conditions.¹⁸¹ In this chapter, the key activity of the *365-Day Life Muse* is examined to see how it can alleviate the prejudices that the members of the Nongpo community have against Burmese workers. Due to multiple elements, including crime news, imaginative history, and nationalist ideology, a series of biases about Burmese people in Thai society are generated, such as "*Burmese are the enemy...they are poor and foolish...they are a threat to state security.*" From the researcher's point of view, the structure of this community art project possibly aligns with Allport's four key conditions. First, collaborative work creates equal status between migrant workers and artists, as evidenced by the artists' positioning the other side as friends or neighbors, who collaborate in brainstorming, creating, and exhibiting their works. Second, Baan Noorg's framing of a systematic working process could establish a long-term shared goal for them, as the artists and participants would have three weeks to make friends and exchange knowledge with each other before finishing creation of each artwork within a few months before a deadline. Third, this participatory art has fostered cooperation with multiple sectors, especially the residents. For example, the practice of *The Saponification Case* (2016) by Jutamas Buranajade and Piti Amrarang, which took Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe visiting

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 43.

¹⁷⁹ Jiradej Meemalai, co-founder of Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, interview by the author, April 5, 2024.

¹⁸⁰ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 14–17.

¹⁸¹ Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, 281–82.

dairy farmers and soliciting donations of milk waste for soap production. Fourth, the project has received official sponsorship from multiple-level organizations, e.g., Wat Nongpo Temple (local level), Silpakorn University (state level), and the Japan Foundation, together with studios from Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia (international level). Considering all these four conditions and the one-year project duration, the researcher suggests that it has the potential to mitigate existing biases to some extent. However, given that prejudices have been implanted in people's minds for long, attempting to dismantle them proved challenging for a community art. The researcher observed that several artists used tactile communication as their strategy. For instance, the practice of *Unfolding* (2016) by Chia Jen Chen stimulates the migrants to unfold an origami elephant and refold it again, proposing the concept of reconstructing the stereotypes between Thai and Burmese. While the aforementioned *The Saponification Case* explored social integration through soap-making that used materials from two cultures and symbolized the cleansing of the racist mythology about the Burmese. Lastly, the collaborative act of soap-making from start to finish also communicated to Thai society that they were not unintelligent and encouraged the migrant workers themselves to realize their own abilities as equals to Thais.

In Chapter 3, the researcher applies Field Theory by Pierre Bourdieu, a French anthropologist who proposed that our society consists of multiple fields, each of which is populated by agents who deploy various types of capital to acquire power, all of which influence social and cultural positions.¹⁸² Typically, migrant workers in Thailand are at the bottom of the social hierarchy, as the state classifies them as 'aliens,' not similar to citizens who could absolutely access the state welfare.¹⁸³ This contrasts with foreigners from the West who work as specialists—called expats—holding the higher capitals. Relying on this concept, the researcher examines how community art could foster capital for Burmese and how it can help them negotiate their social and cultural status. The researcher discovers that the project's conditions foster four dimensions of capital. First, the participants' relocation from the factory to the Nongpo community provided them with more economic capital, as they were exempted from rent, allowing them to accumulate funds to start their future business. Second, living and creating art alongside international artists and local people fostered their social capital by building potential connections through gaining recognition from their colleagues as capable individuals, not just anonymous labor in the industrial system. Third, the project provided them

¹⁸² Van Maanen, "Pierre Bourdieu's Grand Theory of the Artistic Field," 53–81.

¹⁸³ Art Centre Silpakorn University and Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture, *Baep chamlong kan sueksa raeng ngan kham chat nai chumchon Nongpo*, 4.

with a platform to learn the multiple linguistic skills from the international artists, such as Thai, Malay, Chinese, Japanese, and German, especially English, which is basically used in the project. While they could learn artistic skills as new experiences that differed from their previous perceptions, participating in art that related to the social-cultural-political issues. Fourth, it empowers them to collect their symbolic capital, which could be seen in the artistic practice *Getting to Know You* (2016) by Katherine Nunez, a lightbox that is full of the enigmatic images generated by rubbing the surface of the migrant's personal belongings. It aims to invite the public to inspect the origins of the patterns closely before the realization of the meaningful existence of the migrant workers in Thailand, while also stimulating the Burmese couple to recall the heartwarming stories behind the objects, the components of home, and their self-worth. Contemplating the traditional Thai art scene, which is dominated by elites, academics, and distinguished artists, this participatory art project allows migrant workers who previously lacked both capital and status to participate as co-creators. The researcher notes that it negotiates for their social and cultural status, shifting from the bottom, or as 'the others'¹⁸⁴, to become members of the Nongpo community. Jiradej stated that after the project terminated, Chaw Su and Kyaw Moe decided to rent a shophouse in the Nongpo community in order to dwell among their Thai neighbors officially¹⁸⁵, enabling them to participate in social activities that facilitate greater access to resources similarly to locals. Meanwhile, their cultural status is no longer limited to the labor in the factory but is recognized as co-creator by international artists and researchers, Silpakorn University, and the contemporary art arena.

In summary, from all the findings mentioned above, it can be stated that the *365-Day Life Muse* project let us perceive that community art in Thailand is significant for Burmese migrant workers in three ways: 1. Creating a relational space as an apparatus for a micro-politics leading to social change; 2. Mitigating intergroup bias between locals and immigrants; and 3. Promoting capital and negotiating social and cultural status.

Limitation and Suggestion for Further Research

Nonetheless, within these findings above, the researcher foresees various questions that may arise in the reader's minds, which should be further explored in the future. For example, if community art aims at building a relationship, such as those between migrant workers and Thai communities, a crucial question by Clair Bishop of how to measure the quality of the

¹⁸⁴ "The others" refers to those as outsiders to Thai society. See: Thongchai Winichakul, *Khon Thai – khon uen [Thai-Others]* (Nonthaburi: Fa Diew Kan, 2017), 150–159.

¹⁸⁵ Jiradej Meemalai, interview by the author, April 5, 2024.

relationship generated by art sounds quite reasonable.¹⁸⁶ Furthermore, existing myths about Burmese people, such as “*Burmese are the enemy*”, did not arise within a single day or not just from merely writing an imaginative history that blended fact and fiction with an imperialist perspective in the 1950s. As Thongchai Winichakul underlined, they had been constantly accumulated by both the state and the general public.¹⁸⁷ Therefore, the efforts of community art to dispel these myths will take a long time, perhaps as long as they have been in existence. Meanwhile, encouraging migrant workers to participate in the art-making process may support their various kinds of capital, but it could not be predicted whether their social and cultural status truly changes or not. How much influence does this project have on the public, the state, or the authority? Meanwhile, this project is officially supported by the Japan Foundation and Silpakorn University Art Centre, which is the first university of art in Thailand. Established during the nationalist era, leading to the implementation of using art to subtly serve nationalist ideology. For this reason, the concept of disempowering sophisticated artists and sharing the artwork’s ownership with participants is quite contradictory to the interests of its supporters. In some vein, given the project’s title in Thai, *Pipit tapan cheewit* (or a museum of lives), this project might be questioned as to whether it attempts to address the pressing issues similar to the early concept of 90s community art in Thailand, or whether it is merely a social experiment that exploits resources provided by powerful institutions, positioning the migrant workers as tools or main actors of this performance.

Honestly, there are some questions raised by the researcher at the beginning of this study that could not be thoroughly explored due to the limitations of the secondary data-based approach. These include, how can *365-Day Life Muse* reduce the gap between Thainess and Otherness? And how can this project foster power dynamics within Thailand’s contemporary art field? From the researcher’s perspective, addressing the first question requires a psychological questionnaire to measure whether and to what extent attitudes among Thais in the Nongpo community regarding biases toward Burmese workers have changed. The second query necessitates a field observation conducted during the ongoing project to examine the power relations between Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture and the Silpakorn University Art Centre—the funding supporter—as well as the broader impact on the contemporary art scene. Therefore, the researcher proposes that to further explore the significance and approach of community art more critically, it may be essential to place greater

¹⁸⁶ Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 51–79.

¹⁸⁷ Winichakul, *Khon Thai – khon uen*, 150–159.

emphasis on interdisciplinary methodology, such as a periodic fieldwork observation alongside artists and participants when the project is ongoing, an in-depth in-person interview that could reveal realistic situations and the hidden agenda, and a psychological questionnaire that could measure attitudes before and after the project or evaluate the quality of an emerging relationship generated by art. Due to *365-Day Life Muse* being a project finished in 2017 and, after that, a few years later, the participant's relocation back to their motherland, this study must depend on the insight from the project documents and interviews conducted by curators, which may present merely positive impacts consistent with the project's objectives. Finally, apart from the research methods, there are other related topics that should be carefully investigated, namely power relations between institutions, curators, artists, and Burmese workers, or the scope of institutional support that may impact the overall working of the project.

In conclusion, this research echoes the legacy of the *Chiangmai Social Installation (CMSI)*, which moves art beyond the museum and responds to the social issues. *365-Day Life Muse* not only demonstrates how community art could enhance micro-politics for the marginal people but also challenges the power dynamics inside the art field through the concept of co-creation in the participatory art practice. Crucially, it sheds light on the fact that community art in Thailand has the potential to create social relationships, mitigate intergroup bias, and negotiate status for Burmese workers. Nonetheless, this occurs within the constraints of institutional controlling power and the long historical myths that take time to dismantle.

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