Fine Arts Education in Rural Thailand: A Case Study of the Department of Art and Design, University of Phayao

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Abstract: Contemporary art is a global subculture typically associated with urban contexts. Infrastructure such as galleries, networks of brokers and collectors, auction houses, and museums, as well as an informed and engaged audience, are conventional hallmarks of a flourishing art scene. Educational institutions are also a crucial part of this infrastructure, not only in shaping the next generation of artists, but in presenting and promoting young artists' work while simultaneously cultivating audiences. Thailand, with the exception of the Bangkok Greater Metropolitan Area, is devoid of any major urban centers. Numerous institutions of higher education have been established throughout the country, yet perhaps unsurprisingly, few of these institutions offer degrees in fine arts. However, as in the case of the University of Phayao (founded in 1996, and offering a BA in art and design beginning in 2012), more institutions are beginning to acknowledge the benefits of arts education regardless of an existing "arts infrastructure" to support them. Such benefits may include developing critical thinking, cultural awareness, and creative development. This research paper surveys the curriculum of the Department of Art and Design at the University of Phayao. Through interviews and site visits, the author examines the aims and objectives of these universities, their strategic plans for development, their impact on local communities, and how they envision the growth and development of their program.

Keywords: community arts, fine arts education, rural arts, socially engaged art

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1.   Introduction

Since at least the Industrial Revolution, art has been understood as belonging within the socio-cultural makeup of urban centers (Molina 2018). Elements typical of urban infrastructure, including galleries, auction houses, networks of brokers and collectors, educational institutions, and museums, as well as an informed and engaged audience, are conventional hallmarks of a flourishing art scene. In the current era, the arts, cities, and socio-political actors interact together within a dynamic coproduction of culture (Terrin 2012). Art is not only made in urban centers, but with urban centers, as the participatory and democratizing trends in recent art have seen various stakeholders collaborate with artists in the establishment of new modes of relation (Volvey 2007). What, then, of the relationships between art and non-urban locales? Within the context of Thailand, a country that began industrialization as recently as the 1980s (Falkus 1995), the Greater Bangkok Metropolitan Area (GBMA), including Bangkok, Thonburi, and the contiguous cities of Nonthaburi and Samut Prakan, remains the sole major urban center in the country. While the GBMA accounts for nearly 16 million individuals (Thailand: Administrative Division 2015), the majority of Thailand's population of 70 million remains rurally based (Thailand: Rural Population n.d.). Despite major social and economic progress over the past few decades (The World Bank in Thailand 2020), the majority of rural Thais are dependent upon agriculture and subsistence farming for their livelihood (Thailand: A Labour Market Profile 2013). While unemployment is officially reported as less than 1% throughout the nation, more than half of all Thais are in "vulnerable employment (defined as the sum of own-account work and unpaid family work) and more than 60 percent are informally employed, with no access to any social security mechanisms (Thailand: A Labour Market Profile 2013)." Thus, Professor Attachak Sattayanurak of Chiang Mai University perceives any conversation regarding the issues facing "rural Thai society" as a categorical misnomer—rather, these issues are embedded within the core of Thai society itself (Sattayanurak 2010).

Developments over the past few decades have given rise to an evaluation of contemporary cultural production which is no longer dependent upon aesthetic merits, but upon an artwork's ability to address real world problems. This utilitarian notion of art is articulated by George Yudice as "culture as a resource," in which the value of an artwork is directly tied to its instrumentalization as a socio-political tool (Yudice 2003). Art is being used to stimulate economies, to construct shared identities, to raise awareness of political issues—in short, art now must *do* something. Trending concurrently with socially engaged art practices is an increased desire to amplify voices within marginalized communities. Affirming the agency of historically oppressed voices, primarily through the lens of postmodern and postcolonial critique, has become mainstream within international arts discourse. Across Europe and North America, socially engaged artists are increasingly active in engaging rural spaces and addressing the problems their underrepresented constituents may encounter. Have these conceptions of socially engaged art praxis

resonated with arts practitioners in rural Thailand? If so, how does one envision such concepts functioning within this relatively uncharted terrain?

The University of Phayao (UP), located in Phayao Province in Northern Thailand, is one of few rurally based universities in Thailand with a School of Architecture and Fine Art (SAFA). Located 20 kilometers outside of Phayao City (*muang Phayao*), the student body of UP (18,089) rivals the district it resides within (*tambon Maeka*) in population (19,325)(Phayao Census 2010). The university, originally a campus of Naresuan University in Phitsanulok, was formally inaugurated in 1996, while the School of Architecture and Fine Art (SAFA) was established later in 2012. SAFA includes departments of architecture, art and design, performing arts, and music. The Department of Art and Design at UP is positioned to establish a precedent for developing best practices in regards to context-specific, socially engaged arts pedagogy in rural Thailand. The central inquiry of this study departs from the understanding that developing contemporary arts pedagogy in rural contexts presents unique challenges to educators. The Department of Art and Design at the University of Phayao occupies a unique position within the scope of fine arts programs in the Thai university system, yet there has not been an analysis of its curriculum in relation to its aims and objectives within a rural context. Ultimately, this research hopes to contribute towards a methodology and framework that researchers and educators may reference to the benefit of their rurally based constituents.

2.   Research Objectives

The objective of this research article is 1) to assess how members of the Department of Art and Design at the University of Phayao consider their position as fine arts educators within rural Thailand, and 2) to determine the aims and objectives of the department within this context.

3.   Methodology

This paper presents qualitative research compiled through the use of open-ended, in-depth interviews with three high-ranking administrators in the School of Architecture and Fine Art, University of Phayao. The interview participants were selected via purposive sampling based upon the selection criteria outlined below:

1.   Does this individual currently work in the School of Architecture and Fine Art in the University of Phayao?

2.   Does this individual occupy an administrative position with influence over the vision of the program, the direction of the program's growth, and the curriculum of the program?

3.   Is this individual willing to participate in an in-depth interview assessing the nature of their programs within the Department of Art and Design?

Three individuals met these criteria: the Dean of the School of Architecture and Fine Art, the Department Head of Art and Design, and the Vice Dean of Research and Academic Affairs. In situ interviews were conducted with all three participants regarding their background and education, motivations, teaching philosophies, methods, and visions for the progression of the program.

As an additional note, the researcher is currently employed within the Department of Architecture and Fine Art as a visiting lecturer and has several years of firsthand experience with the department and its curriculum. In addition to their administrative duties, two of the three interviewees continue to operate as active professors and offer their insights as both designers and practitioners of the curriculum.

4.   Results

The findings of the interviews have been subdivided into three areas of focus: 1) the advantages and disadvantages of a rurally based arts program, 2) the goals and objectives of the program, and 3) the curriculum design.

A. The Advantages and Disadvantages of a Rurally Based Arts Program

The interviewees saw both advantages and disadvantages to being a rurally based art program. However, while the advantages stated were generally vague and amorphous, the disadvantages were concretely outlined in detail, reflecting a higher degree of consideration towards the latter. They are summarized as follows:

Advantages:

1.   Rural communities have been able to preserve "authentic" local knowledge more effectively than their urban counterparts. The local culture is a valuable resource.

2.   As we occupy a privileged position as the sole university in a rural province, we have access to resources and networks that would be more difficult to access in competitive urban environments.

3. Our department has a degree of autonomy not enjoyed by many more competitive, urban universities who have been under the *de facto* influence of established art programs, for example, the Silpakorn University model. There is less pressure to adhere to trends, as we are geographically and ideologically independent.

4. Our students have been shielded from the pretensions of an urban art scene. They do not have "big egos" and are humble, which makes them good team members towards future endeavors.

5. Our students don't have access to many art supplies here, so this forces them to be more creative when selecting media and materials for making artwork.

Disadvantages:

1. Our rural location presents challenges in attracting qualified educators as well as high-quality students. For many Thais, moving from the countryside to the city represents an idealized notion of climbing the socioeconomic ladder, so working or studying in a rural environment is not perceived as desirable. Ambitious individuals tend to flock towards urban centers.

2. Rural institutions receive less funding than our urban counterparts. Thus, we have little to invest in improving our facilities and equipment. This is particularly damning in regards to digital technology, as our students are at risk of being left behind in the face of rapid technological change and development.

3. There is virtually no infrastructure locally to support a fine art scene. While this is cited as an advantage in some respects, the disadvantages include a lack of "cultural atmosphere"; a lack of sites of educational, historical, or cultural significance (such as museums, artist studios, galleries) to incorporate into our curriculum; and a lack of working arts professionals to network with and learn from (for instance, through internships or assistantship positions). This culminates in a general lack of opportunities for our students to glean real world professional experience.

4. The lack of a competitive atmosphere breeds complacency. Professors feel less pressure to be proactive and progressive. Students often lack ambition or interest as they receive little indication that their efforts can or will impact their external surroundings. There is a general lack of energy and professionalism in the program.

5. The authorities within rural areas have less understanding of the values of art and design than their urban counterparts. STEM disciplines are privileged at the expense of the humanities. Thus, there is a perceived lack of support in comparison to our urban counterparts.

6. Sites are very geographically dispersed here, so transportation is a problem. There are no cabs and little public transport to travel between areas, so students often must procure transport on their own. This makes coordinating events difficult.

B. The Goals and Objectives of the Program

The aims and objectives of the Department of Art and Design can be summarized as follows:

1. To provide knowledge to our students that will allow them to be competitive in the job market

2. To develop strong analytical and creative thinking skills within our students which are transferable to a multitude of disciplines or endeavors

3. To provide morally uplifting and edifying pedagogy through the arts

4. To engage the local community and work to preserve traditional culture

All interviewees responded that the ability of alumni to secure work within the arts was of primary importance. Within the Department of Art and Design, there are four officially stated career paths the department is preparing students for:

1) designer

2) entrepreneur

3) in-house designer for government offices and private corporations

4) educational personnel

One interviewee stated, "We want our students to be able to pursue what they want to do in the arts. In fact, we want them to have a creative base from which they can pursue anything, because creativity is transferable to all fields."

Another interviewee quoted a book, stating that "good art is like religion or philosophy—art must teach people good things." This respondent believed that our focus should be on developing creativity and originality in our students. They believed art education was lacking in Thailand, as "Thais think design is easy because we can copy it from other places, but to truly innovate is difficult, and we need to be developing these skills. We have lost a certain respect for one another, but I think learning to conceptualize and design for ourselves is a way to build our self-respect up."

Outside of the university's primary responsibility to the students, there was a consensus that "engaging the community" was important. One respondent said, "Our philosophy now for the thesis exhibition is to bring art to the people and to make art accessible to normal citizens." All interviewees considered the vernacular culture a valuable resource which should be preserved.

C. Curriculum Design

The original curriculum was designed in 2012 with the start of the Department of Art and Design. Every five years, the curriculum is updated. The results show that the initial curriculum of the University of Phayao was influenced by educators and curricula originating from Chiang Mai University (CMU). This may be due to the fact that the original drafters of the curriculum had all been trained and educated at CMU and consulted with active CMU professors while developing the curriculum. Individual professors from UP have taken strides to contextualize their curriculum within the rural environment; for example, incorporating local site visits into their classes, organizing workshops with traditional craftsmen, etc. However, as a cohesive, overarching unit, the curriculum is not tailored to the context of a rural environment.

Of greater consideration than the rural setting were the characteristics of students matriculating to the Department of Fine Arts. Qualities such as students' background skill sets and degree of potential were cited as considerations in developing the curriculum. For example, one interviewee stated that, due to the students lack of formal training in the arts and their perceived lack of experience, a multitude of wide-ranging electives were included so as to allow students the ability to experiment and sample diverse disciplines. Thus, the original curriculum featured roughly 23 electives in addition to core curricula. Another interviewee cited this as a failing of the original curriculum, as there were only seven full-time professors employed within the department at the time and many elective courses had to be outsourced to visiting lecturers. One interviewee stated that many of the electives were superfluous or irrelevant to the context of rural Thailand (such as lighting design and exhibition design) and cited having to teach an elective class with only one enrolled student. In the 2017 curriculum update, the 23 electives were whittled down to seven.

One interviewee felt that the standards set forth by the Thailand Quality Framework (TQF) as dictated by the Ministry of Education imposed limitations on the department's ability to develop curriculum. However, this was contradicted in another interview as not having a significant impact on internal decision making. There were also contradictions amongst the interviewees as to the notion that decisions regarding the curriculum are made through a process of consensus—in general, individuals who occupy higher positions of power within the department seem to be less aware of their subordinates' specific dissatisfactions.

Doubts were expressed as to the efficacy of the curriculum design. One interviewee felt that the stated objectives of the program were not reflected in the curriculum design, particularly regarding job placement. The interviewee stated, "I'm not sure there is a plan. If you ask me what our students can do once they graduate, I can reply to you, 'They can do everything!' but in reality, this means we don't have a strong point of focus—the students we produce have general skills. Sure, they can do graphic design, but honestly, I'm not sure if they're that good or not. But I think a positive thing about our curriculum is that students have a lot of opportunities to try many disciplines."

5.   Discussions

All of the interviewees expressed their opinion that as a rurally based arts program, we cannot compete with urban institutions on the same playing field. It seems our only recourse then is to establish an alternative mode of operation, unique and contextually specific, in order to empower students and community as desired. Per the interviewees, the main challenges facing the program can be summarized as follows:

Lack of funding, including*:*

Lack of facilities, equipment, and training

Lack of qualified educators

Lack of pre-existing arts infrastructure, including*:*

Lack of on-site art spaces, such as studios and workshops

Lack of off-site art spaces, such as galleries and museums

Lack of engaged audience

Bureaucratic limitations, such as*:*

Lack of general understanding and support for the humanities

Regulatory bodies which inhibit the agency of the department

Cultural*/*Environmental limitations*:*

Lack of healthy competitive pressure

Lack of professionalism

Hierarchical structure with lack of horizontal decision making

Roughly 70% of the 152 students currently enrolled in the Department of Art and Design at the University of Phayao hail from rural places in Thailand. Inequalities in educational achievement between rural and urban students in Thailand is well documented (Ariyaarpakamol 2019), so the observation that our students are of "lower quality" is not completely unwarranted—the majority of our students are beginning their foray into higher education at a disadvantage. Similarly, infrastructural challenges such as lack of galleries and museums or an informed and engaged art audience can be directly tied with rurality.

The primary objective of the Department of Art and Design is for graduates of the program to be able to secure employment in the arts or related fields. Yet, the results are inconclusive as to whether the departments' methods are effective towards this objective. This is largely due to the ambiguity of the stated objective and the department's self-determined metric of success—for example, a former student turned street hawker who paints a handcrafted sign for their food stall could be classified under "creative entrepreneur," while a government clerk who occasionally does formatting for an internal newsletter could be classified as "in-house graphic designer." This is neatly paralleled in the curriculum in which, as previously stated, some interviewees expressed a lack of confidence due to its ambiguous focus and objectives. This lack of specific focus is particularly problematic considering the hyper specialization of labor that occurs within professional design and art. Designing an interdisciplinary liberal arts education which builds familiarity with diverse subjects and contributes to a broad base of knowledge is a commendable goal, but this breadth must also be accompanied with depth and intention. While many skills associated with an arts curriculum are demonstrably transferable, here too one must take a targeted approach in cultivating specific skills.

Nevertheless, in the context of rural Thailand, the question remains if careers as professional designers and artists (i.e. urban professionals) is in fact what we need to be preparing our students for. In which case, what are the relevant objectives or career paths we should be building their skills towards?

Here we might consider the social turn in contemporary art as a reflection point in regards to our purpose as an educational institution and our responsibility to students and local community alike. All three interviewees stressed the importance of community engagement as a core value of the department. Socially engaged arts programs can shift the focus of arts education from the production of aesthetic objects for exhibition or market, to a research-based practice towards the empowerment of regional communities. There exists much literature specifically regarding the implementation of socially engaged art within rural contexts which may prove of use. Deciding whether or not moving the curriculum towards socially engaged art practices is relevant or beneficial is up to the administration and faculty to determine.

It is the opinion of the author that the Department of Art and Design at UP should undergo a strategic planning process—involving stakeholders at every relevant level—to address their perceived shortcomings as well as the overall trajectory of the program. If, at the close of this process the primary objective is to produce employable graduates in the arts, then we must examine the data and engage in honest self-critique: What do we mean by "working in the arts"? Do students have the required knowledge and skills to succeed? How can we better cater to their needs? For example, if the data tells us that most of our graduates working in the arts work as graphic designers

or teachers, the curriculum should be updated with such concrete goals in mind. This might include incorporating an elective for "Arts Education" specifically to train future educators, incorporating an elective dedicated specifically towards developing technical fluency in graphic design–relevant software, or developing partnerships with working professionals to foster internship and apprenticeship opportunities, etc. Ultimately, the art and design program at UP should leverage their unique position as rurally based arts educators towards constructing a context-specific identity with clear intentions and focus. A strategic consideration of such obstacles is likely to resonate with other rurally based arts programs in Thailand as well.

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