Placing the Self in an alien Territory as Design Act

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Abstract

In a continuum quest to fulfil the cultural gap between his homeland and the host territory of formal Siam, this paper aims to illustrate the journey of the author who as practitioner trough scholarly activities in the discipline of design had become a participant observer in the new context. While merging the ethnographic approach with design thinking a hybrid method has been moulded. Nostalgia intertwined with dream, and, on the other hand ambiguity from a source of uncertainty is as suggested from Professor Bill Gaver, "a resource for designer". What it started as personal exploration, a sort of search for the inner self, it later became while engaging with the framework of design practice and education a way to decrease preconceptions and furthermore a process to merge the participation with the learning. By engaging in projects with local artists and entrepreneurs the author of this paper has embedded the value of participation as locus of his investigation. Experiments conducted while teaching to freshmen and sophomore design principle have been shifted from the use of the traditional roots of the Bauhaus school as main heritage, to the integration of physical theatre elements.

Keywords

Southeast Asia, Design pedagogy, Emerging Design Practice, Ethnography, Body Consciousness.

Introduction

2560 is the year that appears on Thai calendar, Thailand a Buddhist State where the equation authority, education and collective identity are convincingly preeminent in the daily life. Additionally the anthropologist Aulino defined the "social body'" as an actual living organism of which everyone is a part. (2014: 417). [1] The comparison between human body of an individual and collective body as untouchable it is a subtle concept that permeates the idea of the country itself, this has engaged the attention of the author. "To design without first understanding context is blind and inefficient" (Chow and Wolfgang 2010, 10). [2] On the other hand it is fundamental to recall the attention to the fact that experiments conceived by the author are made in situations where the idea of freedom, society and self are significative diverse by the European concept. For instance the concept of liberty, as Prathet Thai ("land of free") adopted in Thai modern history is part of national anthem, it is compared by the Professor of Social Science Michael Herzfeld with the *Greek language that conceived the idea of freedom to celebrate the ''free spirit'' that ''liberated'' them from ''Turkish'' (that is, Ottoman) rule and led them to prefer ''freedom to death,''* (2002 : 904). [3]

The formal Siam is nowadays a Theravada Buddhist country, traditions and social etiquette are blended within religious believe. From a designerly perspective these considerations about culture are quite relevant and indicated that might a specific approach to practice and scholarly activity in this framework is needed.

How do these national believes impact into the sense of aesthetics? Postmodernists underlined that reality is a subjective matter intertwined with culture and context. What is then the relation between self and others vision?

As the investigation is made in Thailand, hence it is relevant to underline how Confucian collectivistic culture can be retrieved in Thai conception of nation as social body "chaat" that can be also located into the individual body "tua" and its life force or spiritual essence "khuan" (Taylor 2008: 128). [4]

Moreover, the scholar in the field of Critical Discourse Analysis Teun A Van Dijk stated "people learn that other people in similar circumstances have the same or similar beliefs, or, vice versa, they learn to accept (or reject) what they are told by others" (1998: 246). [5]

Likewise, the neurologist and psychoanalyst Paul Schilder asserts that "the body image is a social phenomenon" (1950: 217). [6]

In this sense the author's quest for rhizomatic approach inclusive of activities moulded in and out of the academy framework has three main elements to consider first the given society as sum of the relation among its constituents, secondly the design education as process and third the body as filter.

Society

Everyday (Tuk-wan 🔲🔲🔲🔲🔲) the subtle flux between the tradition (samai-korn) and modernity (samai-mai) leads the lifestyle of inhabitant of the formal Siam. Theravada Buddhism, is the most popular religion in Thailand (2006 : 470). [7]

According to Pew Research Center, Global Lanscape 2010 religious composition by country, in Thailand religions are as following 93.2.% Buddhism, 5.5% Islam, 0.9% Christianity, 0.3% Non Religious. [8]

Additionally, "As a country that has achieved a significant reduction of poverty and trying to eradicate poverty and hunger totally by 2030 through science, technology and innovation" [9].

With other words, the triptych sciences, technology and innovations appear to be the main elements to cultivate a harmonic flux within the sense of spirituality, mythology and nationalism. A recent interview conducted by the Thai newspaper Nation to the President of (CIDI) Chanapatana International Design Institute, Sakorn Suksriwong stated "Our design-education system and connectivity are weaknesses that have limited our growth potential in the global design arena…" (2017) [10].

On the other hand it is relevant to underline that "the creative industries in Thailand in 2014 reached the 1.61 trillion in value, accounting for '13.18% of gross domestic product (GDP), Value added of creative industries in Thailand and gross domestic product (GDP) in 2014. [11]

As integration between design values and city is visible in the pilot project Co-create Charoenkrung (a community based project conducted in a historical area of the urban Bangkok) started in 2016 between private and public agencies and the TCDC (Thailand Creative and Design Center). By looking at non-formal (art) education, while the idea of alternative art education is to expand the perspective and preconception on the subjects, here in the formal Siam, no long-term project have been yet developed. Alternative education has been officially recognised just since 1999 by the Thai education reform; early form of alternative education had the objective to

respond to learner in rural area, especially with specific needs as the case of home schooling, followed to curriculum based on Buddhism knowledge. Dr Kowit Varapipatana has been called the "father of Thai adult and non-formal education". [12]

Kowit holistic approach created the Benchamaracharungsarit 2 School in Chachoengsao in 1996. The mentioned data are references for the actual designerly context of Thailand, it then might be relevant to step back to comprehend the relation between design practice and education.

(Design) Education

"Education is both a 'cause' and an 'effect' … [T]he school is not a passive mirror, but an active force, one that also serves to give legitimacy to economic and social forms and ideologies so intimately connected with it." (Apple, 1993). [13]

In the first place, Professor Richard Buchanan stated "the era that is emerging around us today education and practice are partners" (1998: 65), nowadays, nearly twenty years later we can affirm that is the 'new normal'. In formulating a theory of design for learning, Professor and Co-director of Center for Learning Innovation Peter Goodyear and Prof. Yannis Dimitriadis drew a parallel between design and learning theory and practices, as 'someone involved in the design for learning can design things that help other people learn' (2013). [14]

Moreover they underlined that in learning attention we should focus on what the students do. [15]

On the other hand, Associate Professor Design Innovation Cara Wrigley's article "Design Innovation Catalysts: Education and Impact" is focused on the impact of education about tomorrow designers, in her view the industry's demand is equal to education opportunity and based on it, she developed an approach to heighten the potentiality of this comparison through three phases as "Dissect, Learn, Integrate" (2016). [16]

In addition, last November, in a meeting in Cumulus Leadership Working Group the author had the chance to discuss with colleagues from several countries and institutions the question raised by Dean Professor Cees de Bont from PolyU, Hong Kong, "Do we even need a physical school in the future? Why don't we move all instruction out into the community?". [17]

Conversation debated the meaning of a tangible space and the unfeasibility to generate prediction four of five years ahead and highlighted the value of lifelong learning. In summary if we trace a line between these situations we might consider design as lifelong process of learning; a discipline under perpetual mutation with a core and stable attitude to learn how to learn. Moreover a discipline intertwined with local culture and effected by the global trend where nostalgia and dream became the contemporary landscape.

It is extremely important to underline that the investigation initiated to fulfil the sense of uncertainty due to the cultural gap that at first the author faced it lead him to series of experiments in and out of the umbrella of scholar activities. The studies of early libertarian education as the Beacon Hill School by Dora and Bertrand Russel (1927) to the experiments conducted by the architect and theosophist Rudolf Stainer and the Walford education based (since 1919) on his anthroposophical view of human being, the computers scientist Seymour Papert "the computer was an object to think", or the 1999 Prof. Sugata Mitra 'Hole in a wall', as example of the potential power of self organised learning practice in a Kalkaji, New Delhi. [18]

The study of such examples, are blended with an attempt to track contemporary actions on alternative education as the Mexico City's SOMA, School of Apocalypse a collective of cultural practitioners, Institut für Raumexperimente an educational research project by Olafur Eliasson in collaboration with the Berlin University of the Arts, and the School of Everything a symposium hold in Kassel and Athens at the Documenta14. Beside the HB Station an alternative art education platform based in Guangzhou, China launched by the artists Liang Jianhua, Huang Xiaopeng and Xu Tan, it is quite complex to identify literature on similar situation in Asia, especially in south east Asia. The search was then expanded by encounters with the art vanguard scene in the context of Bangkok and Chiang-Mai, Thailand.

Body

Gesamtkunstwerk (1849), literally translated as synthesis of all arts, a body of work inclusive of all senses, a term coined by Richard Wagner in two essays "Art and Revolution" and the "Artwork of the future" spread his influence to a broad range of artists and theorists who consequently became part of the the early and well known art education institutions such as the German Bauhaus Art School (1919-1933) and the Russian Vkhutemas Institute (1920-1930). The choreographer Oskar Schlemmer with his dance of trinity called the 'triadic ballet' (Stuttgart, 1922), still a celebrated and inspiring icon of that time.

Behind the artistic aspect of the body, in a philosophical perspective, it is relevant a distinction between the concept of the body and soma. A fundamental reference about thus subject was written by Thomas Hanna (1986) "the soma, being internally perceived, is categorically distinct from a body, not because the subject is different but because the mode of viewpoint is different". [19]

Equally important is the term somaesthetics coined by the philosopher Richard Shusterman to define a "critical study and ameliorative cultivation of how we experience and use the living body (soma) as site of sensory appreciation (aesthetics) and creative self-fashioning" (2008). [20]

In an interview with the Interaction Design Foundation he suggested to implement the design process "training designer to make them more conscious of user experience by themselves being the users" (2014). [21]

In the design industry Body-storm was emerged as an alternative method to mind-storming developed by IDEO the global design firm to create a narrative tool to comprehend the human interaction (to space and other objects). According to Jones (2013), "It allows the team and stakeholders to experience some of the functions and working relationships of proposals, either during their formation or after prototyping". [22]

Likewise body-storming, Professor of Social and Organisation Learning Danny Burns et al. (1994) suggested that performance can help designers by activating imagination; facilitating empathy with users; communicating within and outside their team; and encouraging less self-conscious contributions. [23]

Rather than thinking about theatre as ways of discussing about ethnographic insight, "I suggest that we think of the theatre acts as ethnographies themselves, i.e. as accounts of people's (future) practices", stated Professor of User Centred Design Jacob Buur (2014: 11). [24]

Immerse in the territory of formal Siam the author, as participant observer though an investigation on design practice and scholarly activities, he has felt the necessity to developing an approach to convey an alternative approach to design education based on the flux of his experience as practitioner and vice versa. Human factors as ergonomics data are the key elements of design studies. On the other hand, "not only ideas, but emotions too, are cultural artefacts" (Clifford, 1973). [25]

By tracing lines between the above considerations, the author is processing a method to repositioning human issues and Thai culture trough the narrative of the body–self, body–space, body–objects as locus of the design process.

Body, Unconditional Experiments; Body as filter versus body as mirror

In another sense, comprehension of the society pass though the analysis of the body as tool to embed subtle concepts. It started though collecting fabrics as pleasure for the eye and as visual narrative of the host territory. A subsequent decision to merge the richness of these artefacts with personal memories led to unexpected outcome, a sort of collective *immaginarium*. "The garment as manifesto to reframe cultural preconception, a tool to touch on the untouchable" (Maggio, 543: 2017). [26]

Furthermore, while developing the fashion project, urban explorations blended with a search for emerging artistic scenes; it has led the author of this paper to an encounter with physical theatre performances, developed by a group of artists who attempt with success to perform quite radical pieces. A call to become the artistic director for the art and design production, was the key element who brought the author into the stage, an immersive experience that draw a line between his practice and scholarly activities.

Blending science with arts was the assigned role, develop the visual narrative based on scientific data shared by the Wellcome Foundation (United Kingdom) with the directors of the show was the objective. As participant observer, the author was asked to develop an aesthetics to make the data appealing to a diverse range of readers. Here participation was blended with performance. Design became suddenly a tool to develop tools where the human factor was intended not as pure ergonomics but as an approach to expand human reaction (as: emotion and feeling).

In the last three years, more than eight projects have been developed by positioning the human body and local culture at the centre of the study. Immersive projects where the participation though a local conversation have been developed.

While emerging practice of vanguard theatre caught the attention of the author that consequently brought it off to the stage to the class then to his own investigation. An apparent linear sequence that in fact is not trace his approach to design, his work in fact is a sum of experiences that has led the author to expand his background of product design to a communication design and to co-mould curriculum on both subjects.

Findings

Doing projects inside and outside the context of the relation client — professional it has led to a constant reframe of preconceptions and a partial consideration of self to others behaviour. It is a fact that while working in a context that the writer Richard D. Lewis consider non-tactile (1996: 472), were the traditional greetings of "*wai*" a gesture that elegantly does not allow the touch between people and where by etiquette it considers the head the sacred part of the body as the position where the "*khuan*" is located (spirit) and the feet the lowest, the author initiate his own exploration of the body that became from a mirror of the society to a sort of filter to the outside world. [27]

Additionally the act of being empathetic has the highest risk to "burnout" ourselves as asserted by the teaching fellow Holly May Mahoney on 'the other side of empathy' (2017). [28]

Conclusions

As asserted above, the aim of this paper is to illustrate how a design action could intercede in settling in alien territory. The scholarly activities merged with the practices allowed to develop ameliorative approach to comprehend the host society culture and values. The culture of the human body as social and moral element, has become a path to explore the self; enhanced via the study of spiritual practices and the evolution of the body culture to an investigation that has merge abroad spectrum of practise. The idea of the social body, individual body and spiritual aura might not be so explicit tools able to dictate aesthetics preference, but if we do agree that emotions are cultural artefact, then we can affirm that the social sphere affects the view of reality. On the other hand the paper gives a picture of the framework where the investigation has been conducted. The addition of the three main elements as the given society, the design education as process and third the body as filter are intertwined to accommodate a sense of a place though a design action. all figures, and tables are to be referenced in the text. ©Respect Copyright.

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