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Center Stage

Bangkok's Alternative Arts Scene

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By [JOHN KRICH](#)

Chumpon Apisuk is rubbing salt in his wounds -- literally. Before a crowd of young people in a concrete antechamber of this city's recently opened Art and Culture Centre, he walks around a table covered in heaps of salt, pausing repeatedly to roll his head back and forth in it until the pain in his eyes becomes too great.

Whatever the statement he's making, the tears seem out of place: This new modern-art museum is the fruit of a 15-year campaign led by the 60-year-old Mr. Chumpon, and provides a prominent stage for Asiatopia, an annual festival he has directed for a decade. The latest one featured 110 performance artists, making it the largest in Asia.

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Luke Duggleby for The Wall Street Journal

Chumpon Apisuk surrounded by art in the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre, a museum which he led a 15-year campaign to establish.

"In the past, we didn't even call ourselves 'alternative,'" Mr. Chumpon says about Bangkok's art scene, "because there was nothing to be an alternative to." But now this 11-story, gleaming white \$13 million center offers a different sort of attraction than Siam Square's adjacent shopping malls.

Another arts oasis, the Patravadi Theatre complex, has established itself on the "far shore" of the Chao Phraya River, directly across from the golden spires of Bangkok's main tourist draw, the Grand Palace. Founded 16 years ago by actress and ferry heiress Patravadi Mejudhon, the complex is thriving like never before -- and plans to establish Thailand's first full-time academy for the performing arts. Tucked between a traditional market and housing for temple monks are two auditoriums and an outdoor stage that host dance and theater -- local and foreign, traditional to avant-garde -- along with studios and classrooms, a kindergarten, cafe, crafts shop, gallery, apartments for visiting creators and a dinner-show venue with a river view.

Bangkok Arts Guide

Bangkok's "underground" is most easily sighted online. The Web sites below are the best means for keeping current on exhibits and performances:

Patravadi Theatre

A veritable arts oasis with performances, classes, residencies and restaurants (plus the Ratchaburi Fringe Festival)

69/1 Soi Wat Rakang Arun Amarin Rd.

66-2-2412-7287

Web: www.patravaditheatre.com

Bangkok Art and Culture Centre

Long awaited modern-art hub

939 Rama I Rd.

66-2-2146-6301

www.bacc.or.th

Asiatopia

A month of performance art and workshops, held in November at BACC

66-2-526-8811

www.asiatopia.org

Bangkok Theatre Festival

Hundreds of performances throughout the city, also in November

66-81-3023-8519

www.bangkoktheatrefestival.com

Makhampom Theatre Group

Thriving neighborhood theater with roots in the countryside
55 Soi. Intamara 3, Suttisan Rd.
66-2-616-8473
www.makhampom.net

Kathmandu Photo Gallery

A funky space for local photographers
87 Pan Rd. (near Indian Temple),
off Silom Road
66-2-234-6700
www.kathmandu-bkk.com

H Gallery

New art in one of the city's oldest houses
201 Sathorn Soi 12
66-81-310-4428
www.hgallerybkk.com

Conference of Birds

Is this Bangkok or is it New York's arty Lower East Side?
131/18 Pan Rd.
66-81-492-811152
www.conferenceofbirds.com

Jim Thompson Art Center

An art space by the late Jim Thompson's house, now a national museum
6 Soi Kasemsan 2, Rama 1 Rd.
66-2-216-7368
www.thejimthompsonartcentre.org

"Being regular is better than being good," says Ms. Patravadi, 60, about her "work of a lifetime," created nearly entirely without government help. "Even if we've trained recognized national artists, it's only now that the big hotels are beginning to take our brochures without throwing them away."

Thailand has a rich artistic (as well as eccentric) tradition, and Bangkok seems packed with hip-looking youth ripe for rebellious expression and bohemian poses. Still, beyond noisy pubs, travelers have been hard-pressed to locate much evidence of cultural ferment. "People on one block have no idea what is happening on the next, whether a massage parlor or a museum, a hot party or a war zone," says Thanom Chapakdee, an art critic and head of fine arts at Srinakharinwirot University in Bangkok.

Lost in the smoggy sprawl of stalled traffic, settled in neighborhood shop fronts far beyond the reach of tourist tuk-tuks, disdaining the patronage of art departments or political machines, Bangkok's "underground" has remained happily below all radar.

"Sometimes, I think it's better to just be left alone to plant my evil seeds," says Ing K., 49, a writer, artist and filmmaker who founded the city's Kathmandu Photo Gallery. Or, as co-owner and photographer Manit Sriwanichpoom puts it, "This is not a well-organized society, so why expect artists, of all people, to organize any better?"

But all that is changing. Still largely empty, without clear mandate or adequate funds, the Art and Culture Centre mounted its first major exhibit in September and has already sparked ambitious talk of arts fairs and conferences, possibly leading to a Bangkok Biennale. Fairs and biennales -- art shows held every other year -- have been proliferating across Asia in recent years as cities look to become players on the world cultural stage.

Bangkok's formerly obscure and homemade Theatre Festival reached critical mass for its 10th

anniversary in November, staging hundreds of performances over five weeks across the city. The Bangkok Experimental Film Festival, held every other year, crossed a threshold with its fifth edition last March: More than half the 400 works were by Thais. And as the Patravadi complex spurs a resurrection of Bangkok's far shore, so a steady invasion of small and highly personal galleries is turning the multicultural area around Silom Road's Sri Mariamman Indian Temple into a must-see for art lovers and dealers. Never have residents or visitors been presented with more venues, resources and regular opportunities to explore and engage Bangkok's cutting-edge creators.

"A decade ago, everything was still dominated by formalistic, academic galleries and many young artists had to go abroad because there was nowhere to show," says Gridthiya Gaweewong, curator of the Jim Thompson Art Center. "Now they have a range of choices." Fifteen years ago, she was one of a group of Thai students who returned to Bangkok from the Art Institute of Chicago. Having written a thesis on the feasibility of establishing a nonprofit arts and performance space in Bangkok, she tested it by founding Project 304. It's no longer operating, but Ms. Gridthiya says, "I meet young artists who say their parents took them to our gallery." The Experimental Film Festival is one fruit of her work.



Luke Duggleby for The Wall Street Journal

Inside the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre

And she believes that today's economic and political turmoil "will be a kind of wake-up call for the arts." Crises, Ms. Gridthiya says, are "very stimulating." Photo gallery owner Ms. K. agrees: "There's just so much to say, and if we don't say it somehow, somewhere, anywhere, we'd burst."

Practical factors are also propelling Bangkok's art scene. In addition to the construction of the new culture center -- which Ms. K. notes has allowed Asiatopia to move to the heart of town from Nonthaburi, 10 kilometers out -- there's the development of the Skytrain and subway systems in the past decade.

"I certainly would not have opened up Kathmandu in Silom if the train did not exist," she says. It wouldn't have been worth it for her or potential customers to fight the city's "ghastly traffic," she adds.

With spaces available in the city center, Mr. Chumpon was able to close Nonthaburi's Concrete House, which he established for his projects and those of Empower, the much-praised theater program for sex workers begun by his wife, Noi Apisuk.

"In the past, art was simply an expression of a political cause," he says. "But now, even if we still lack arts professionals, Bangkok artists are more serious about getting in touch with both the market and the realities of the world."

That's happening in the theater world thanks largely to Pradit "Tua" Prasarthong, a youthful, self-trained theater innovator who in 1980 began the Makhampom Theatre, named for a healthful though bitter native kumquat. Operated from a graffiti-covered storefront that's not just underground but hidden under a pedestrian flyover in a working-class neighborhood, his troupe has combined modern productions with socially relevant forms of *likay*, the traditional Thai "folk vaudeville" with dance (which he sometimes performs privately at politicians' homes to raise funds) and branched out to encourage upcountry villagers to act out plays and sketches based on their lives.



Luke Duggleby for The Wall Street Journal

A performance at the Patravadi Theatre complex's Studio 9, a restaurant with river views and weekend shows.

After plans for a larger theater showcase fell apart, Mr. Pradit invited other company heads to a party, where an exchange of ideas led to the first theater festival. "Our first trick was to offer a lot of plays for children, so the parents would come, then to offer traditional forms of shadow play or opera next to Western mime so the grannies would get curious," he explains.

According to Mr. Pradit, 48, strategy No. 2 to make new Thai theater visible "in his lifetime" was to return performing arts to the riverside enclave of Banglumpu. Now largely the headquarters of nongovernmental organizations, its mansions were once home to nobles who competed to stage performances and patronize masters of Thai music, dance and drama.

The festival's first stages were set up around the ramparts of the area's old Sumen Fort; later some of the NGOs opened the restored palaces to performances. Four continuing companies buttress the festival, but almost anyone can perform, making it a hit-and-miss, at times amateurish but always lively affair. It includes many performances with English supertitles or synopses, and shows on the outdoor stages at the base of the park are free.

"This is something entirely new here, because theater was either very formal, or performed in small bars," says Mr. Pradit, who jokes that he's inspired others mostly through his longevity in the business -- they figure if he can make a living from theater, so can they.

In telling her story, Ms. Patravadi likewise highlights doggedness. Back in 1991, finding there weren't enough professionals for her to stage her shows, she decided "not to wait for help, but just do it," creating Thailand's leading performing-arts hub. Neighborhood kids enroll in classes in dance, drumming, mask making, ballet and other subjects for free, and in May the theater will start a 420-student boarding school for arts training near the resort town of Hua Hin.

Along Pan Road near the lively Indian Temple, hip boutiques and new art spaces jostle with hole-in-the-wall Burmese, Nepali, and even Nigerian eateries and the many stores for incense and religious statuary. Kathmandu is a book shop, gift shop and hippie haven advertising "divine inspiration," with walls devoted to photographs that take a highly caustic view of Thai social issues and hypocrisies.

Down the street, among the cheap housing for migrant workers whose concerns it shares, Conference of Birds is even more on the edge. Founded 10 months ago by recent Harvard graduate Andrews Little, 26, an American, the space on the fourth floor of the narrow walk-up isn't for selling works but for bringing Thailand in contact with activist art projects from around the globe. On a recent visit, video documentation of a New York exile's protest piece, "Shooting An Iraqi" was mounted next to a room whose ceiling was hung with stuffed pink pigs, a statement on animal rights.

"We're hard to find -- the art community doesn't come to our openings," Mr. Little says, nearly as a boast. "We get mostly people from NGOs, unions and film blogs." With the White Space Gallery -- hidden at the back of a faded movie palace in Siam Square -- Conference of Birds provides a decidedly radical reply to the commercial art dealers in the nearby Silom Galleria.

Hidden even further from the long arm of developers down a nearby alley, H Gallery is the tasteful one-man operation of ex-Virginian H. Ernest Lee, housed in a rare and perfectly restored two-story wooden house with Victorian filigree and teak floors perfect for displaying site-specific fish tanks and conceptual sculpture. Built in the 1880s by an English sea captain, the space was considered haunted by locals because of a child's suicide during its days as an orphanage. But that hasn't stopped Mr. Lee, 49, from building it in the past six years into one of Bangkok's more-serious venues.

The city isn't about to become another Manhattan, Tokyo or even Beijing -- with its designated, swiftly overdeveloped art villages -- but the arts are on the move.

"I've seen a tremendous, if slow, change," says Mr. Lee. "We're definitely getting there now."

—John Krich is a writer based in Bangkok.

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