

“Thailand Biennale Chiang Rai 2023” Inspection Tour Report

December 25, 2023

Text and Images by Iida Shihoko

Period: December 7 (Thu)—14 (Thu), 2023

Destination: Chiang Rai, Thailand

Visiting Personnel: Iida Shihoko (Curator)

Thailand Biennale Chiang Rai 2023 (December 9, 2023—April 30, 2024)

Travel Itinerary

December 7 (Thu) Depart from Japan/ Arrive at Chiang Rai

*The main venues, participating artists, and official opening ceremonies of the biennale are underlined. The rest are the pavilion programs held concurrently with the biennale. The names of NCAR-supported Japanese artists are listed in alphabetical and Chinese characters.

* Titles of the artists and related parties mentioned in the text are omitted.

December 8 (Fri)

- **CIAM: Chiang Rai International Art Museum** (Artists: all (zone)/ Rachaporn Choochuey, Almagui Menlibayava, Haegue Yang, Maria Hassabi, Movana Chen, Pierre Huyghe, Precious Okoyomon, Sarah Sze, Somlak Pantiboon, Tobias Reberger, Tuguldur Yondonjams, Wang Wen-Chih, Xin Liu) Tour by the Curatorial Team [Image #1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6]
- Sawanbondin Tea House & Experience (Pavilion by PLUVIOPHILE) [Image #7 and 8]
- **The Old Chiang Rai City Hall** (Artist: Michael Lin) [Image #9]
- RJJ building “Don’t be afraid to walk alone: Deliberating drawings, lines, marks and borders” (Pavilion by RUBANA) [Image #10 and 11]
- **Tobacco Warehouse** (Artists: Arto Lindsay, Atta Kwami, Maria Thereza Alves, 島袋道浩 Shimabuku, Tomas Saraceno) [Image #12, 13, and 14]
- **Chiang Rai Railway Library** (Artist: Poklong Anading) [Image #15]
- The former Wiang Thong Bookstore “Point of No Concern: return to the rhizomatic state” (Pavilion by MAIIAM) [Image #16]



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December 9 (Sat)

- **Mae Fah Luang Art and Cultural Park** (Artists: Tarek Atoui, 木戸龍介 **Ryusuke Kido**, Tayeba Begum Lipi, Ernesto Neto, Citra Sasmita, Nguyen Trinh Thi, Haegue Yang) [Image #17, 18, 19, and 20]
- **Black House (Baan Dam Museum)** (Artists: Busui Ajaw, Chakaia Booker, Kamonlak Sukchai, Soe Yu New) [Image #21 and 22]
- **Mekong Basin Civilization Museum** (Artists: Boedi Widjaya, Ubatsat, Wit Pimkanchanapong) [Image #23, 24, and 25]
- Singhaklai House, Mod Chana Phai Foundation (Pavilion by Zomia in the Cloud) [Image #26]
- **Chiang Rai International Art Museum (CIAM) for the Opening Ceremony** (Guests: Mr. Srettha Thavisin, the Prime Minister; Deputy Prime Minister, Mr. Sermsak Pongpanit, the Minister of Culture; Permanent Secretary for Culture; Executives of the Ministry of Culture; Governor of Chiang Rai; Executives of relevant agencies; Diplomatic Corps; Organizing Committee and Participating Artists) [Image #27 and 28]



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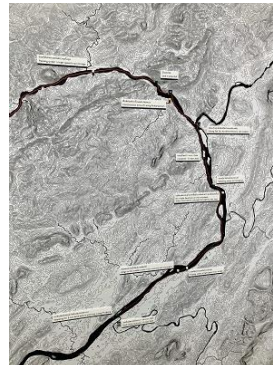
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December 10 (Sun)

- **Chern Tawan International Meditation Center** (Artists: Korakot Aromdee, Chata Maiwong, Sanitas, Pradittasnee, Arin Rungjang, Zen Teh) [Image #29, 30, and 31]
- **Chiangsaen National Museum** (Artists: Chitti Kasemkitvatana, Kader Attia, Roongroj Paimyossak) [Image #32]
- **Ancient Monument No.16** (Artist: Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture) [Image #33]
- **Wat Pa Sak** (Artist: Chitti Kasemkitvatana) [Image #34]
- **Huai Kiang Warehouse** (Artists: Cheng Xinhao, Ho Tzu Nyen, Nipan Oranniwesna, Pablo Barthlomew, Pangrok Sulap, Tcheu Siong, Wantanee Siripattananuntakul, Sawangwongse Yawnghwe) [Image #35, 36, and 37]
- **Baan Mae Ma School** (Artist: Apichatpong Weerasethakul) [Image #38]
- **Golden Triangle Activity Area** (Artist: ナウイン・ラワンチャイクン **Navin Rawanchaikul & StudiOK**) [Image #39]
- **Wiang Digital Community Center** (Artist: Hsu Chia-Wei) [Image #40]



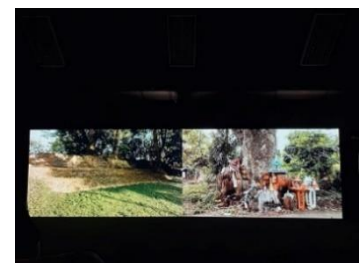
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December 11 (Mon)

- **Wat Rong Khun (White Temple) (Artists: Korakrit Arunanondchai, Tsherin Sherpa)** [Image #41, 42, and 43]



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Evaluation as a Biennale

Thailand Biennale, Chiang Rai 2023 (TBC 2023) is the third iteration of the Thailand Biennale, which was founded in 2018 by the Thai Ministry of Culture's Office of Contemporary Art and Culture. It opened in Chiang Rai and Chiang Saen, two districts in the province of Chiang

Rai in northern Thailand, with eighteen main venues and fourteen pavilions. A curatorial team of four – two artistic directors and two curators – adopted the theme “Open World,” inviting sixty artists/units, of which three were from Japan - Kido Ryusuke, Shimabuku, and Navin Rawanchaikul & StudiOK.

From a subjective viewpoint, the overall impression of the biennale was led by Thai and Southeast Asian artists, in addition to the large number of internationally recognized midcareer artists based in East Asia, South Asia, North America, South America, and Europe, and by the monumental and spectacular site-specific works in venues that included a unique temple, private art museum, and gardens, built by local artists. Of the sixty participating artists/units, the lineup of Thai artists ranged from emerging artists through to well known, established artists and included local artists from Chiang Rai, Bangkok, and other cities in Thailand, and Akha artists. When examined from a multi-faceted perspective, it was clear that the overall lineup of artists is well-balanced, and especially in the selection of Thai artists, it is a testament to the solidity and depth of these artists. This is due to the fact that the two artistic directors – artist Rirkit Tiravanija and curator Gridthiya Gaweewong – have achieved extensive international success and also have a wide network, factors that enabled recognized artists to be invited to the biennale. In addition, all four members of the curatorial team are from (or have a connection with) northern Thailand, which facilitated both the selection of artists and venues in the region and the establishment of a collaborative system. This in turn contributed to the realization of multiple site-specific works. The strength of Chiang Rai’s art community and its passion towards TBC 2023 is evident from the huge contributions by the two great artists of Chiang Rai (Thawan Duchanee and Chalermchai Kositpipat, including founding a new art museum, CIAM) and from hearing that artists following in their footsteps were engaged in setting up the biennale venues.

The selection of Chiang Saen as one of the biennale’s main venues and the production of a large number of outstanding new works is worthy of praise. The region where the borders of Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos meet, the Golden Triangle, is well known for having been one of the largest opium-poppy producing areas in the world. Although this is a region of extreme political and economic complexity where the hearts and minds of the three bordering nations have intersected for decades, it is now a booming tourist destination characterized by the stark contrast between the majestic Mekong River and contemporary resort development. The numerous art works – based on themes such as the geopolitics or the environment of the Mekong River Basin region and addressing, for example, the passing of time as symbolized by the Mekong River or the relationship between people and nature, border

tensions and the ecological crisis that lurk behind the glamour of resorts – wonderfully conveyed the depth of northern Thailand’s history, culture, and the curatorial theme over multiple venues. If the biennale had only been held in central Chiang Rai, the event could have ended up as an example of “biennale as pastoral art tourism,” so it can be assumed that the contraposition of the two districts was a curatorial intention. This was a successful project decision in terms of providing a source of inspiration for new works by the participating artists. These factors resulted in the myriad global issues that we confront today being shared with the world through contemporary art while also referencing the rich traditions of northern Thailand that date from the 13th century to the present day, and as a result the “Open World” theme was made accessible to and manifested in the regional communities of this district, which is inhabited by multiple ethnic groups.

In addition, fourteen pavilions, representing governmental organizations other than Thailand, art institutions, universities, and artists/collectives, were constructed as part of the biennale. That the exhibitions held in these pavilions, though small in scale, were theme-based with a clear intention and focus also contributed to creating opportunities for open participation.

The daily tours conducted during the vernissage were attended by people from both the Thai and international arts sector and the media, creating a truly international atmosphere, and there was a noticeable number of attendants from Japan. The approximately twenty to thirty Japanese nationals included not only those accompanying the participating artists, but also staff from Tokyo University of the Arts, lecturers and students on an inspection tour to Thailand organized by TUA, art sector participants from organizations such as the Japan Foundation and Arts Council Tokyo, and the staff of Arts Commons Tokyo. In fact, I have never seen so many Japanese at the opening of a major biennale outside Japan, making the relatively few Japanese curators attending independently seem very much in the minority. No doubt factors such as the proximity of and ease of travel to Thailand, the safety of the country, and the low cost of living would have encouraged people to travel to the region, but the fact that the participating artists were not announced until just before the biennale conveys both the level of expectation towards the artistic directors and the significant internationality and potential of the biennale itself.

As can be seen from the above, TBC 2023 can be described as a highly regarded international platform for contemporary art in terms of content, selection of the artistic directors and participating artists, substance of the works, and community involvement and popularity.

However, in terms of the operation of the event, there was a significant level of confusion prior to and after the opening, although this is something that is unavoidable at any biennale around the opening period. The tour schedule kept changing every day, and it was difficult to obtain any information or updates unless you had inside connections. Although I heard that fifty to a hundred minivans were provided every day during the four-day opening, the majority of drivers were from Bangkok and were unfamiliar with the roads, and translation apps had to be used to get from one place to another or to meet up with others, creating major challenges. During the tours, participants witnessed works that were still being built, and I also heard that a shortage of art installers meant that setting up works in the pavilions had to be put on the back burner.

The individual venues were ten to thirty minutes drive apart, and it is a two hour drive from Chiang Rai to Chiang Saen. With the biennale covering such a huge area, it required three to four days to see it in its entirety. I would also like to add that a support person or an interpreting app was essential for communicating in Thai for organizing a car, speaking with the driver when traveling between venues, asking directions, searching for venues, and ordering meals. In this sense, this biennale was undeniably challenging for overseas visitors. The way that the needs of visitors are addressed and accommodated needs to be improved, both during the current biennale and for future biennales.

On the other hand, despite the confusion, there was a sense of calm and equanimity – whether due to tolerance or resignation – as a result of a general acceptance that we all had to just go with the flow. As art festivals and official events in Japan tend to be run in an overly precise and strict manner, I felt that this relaxed attitude at the biennale is something that we could learn from as part of progressing towards a tolerant society that people find easy to live in.

Evaluation of Participating Artists from Japan

- **Kido Ryusuke**

Kido Ryusuke spent two months at Mae Fah Luang Art and Cultural Park in Chiang Rai creating the work Inner Light – Chiang Rai Rice Barn in which he carved the entire surface of an existing wooden rice barn in the park. Kido created this work in collaboration with local craftsmen, and the sophisticated wood carving skills of both the artist and the craftsmen were applied to create and decorate a work through which light can penetrate, breathing new life into an old barn. According to Kido, he was initially concerned whether he would receive the

approval and agreement of the management of the park and the local community to carry out work on the rice barn which had been preserved as is for many years. However, he communicated daily with the craftsmen using a translation app and a relationship of trust was established through the creative process. In the end, the craftsmen themselves proposed replacing the existing roof. Kido happily describing the home cooked lunches that the craftsmen shared with him, the likes of which he had never tasted before, was particularly memorable.

As a result of the support of multiple organizations, including NCAR, Kido was able to purchase the barn, experience a long-term residency, and produce a video documenting the process. It was decided that the completed work would remain in the park as a permanent installation. Kido's ability to openly share his unique qualities with others, while giving the local community a sense of ownership of the project, should be recognized above all. In this work, TBC 2023's "Open World" theme was superbly manifested through Kido's creativity. The popularity of Kido - who became very much a member of the Chiang Rai community as the result of his residency – and his efforts at establishing a relationship of trust with the craftsmen ensuring that the work will continue to be maintained without any issues, resulted in an outcome that goes beyond the expectations for the project from the perspective of the support provided by NCAR. And, for first-time biennale participant Kido, being able to exhibit his work in the same venue as artists such as Tarek Atoui, Ernesto Neto, and Yang Haegue who regularly show their work in international exhibitions was an excellent opportunity for his international debut.



- **Shimabuku**

Shimabuku asked several painters to depict portraits of the members of the curatorial team and participating artists, standing up and facing forward. These were then used by the artist to create human-shaped kites. The results were exhibited at a venue that was once a tobacco warehouse as a new work, *We are flying*, which included a video, recorded earlier, of two kite flying sessions. These kites were displayed on the walls along with kites created by and depicting workshop participants, and another kite flying session is scheduled for the second half of the biennale.

The sight of a range of kites ranging from realistic depictions to rough sketches, fluttering and floating in the sky was both humorous and poetic, bringing smiles to the faces of visitors as their attention turned to the actual kites displayed and then to the kites in the video, comparing the images. The kites flying in the sky were like symbols of freedom. At times, however, visitors would be made aware of the current state of the world represented by, for example, tension over airspace and national borders, resulting in a work that at times seemed pastoral and yet exuded what lurks beneath.

Although the work itself appeared to be completed as usual, Shimabuku described struggles with the temporary wall to display the kites, which was not built until the day before the tour, frequent changes to the schedule that were not communicated adequately to the participating artists, the biennale organizers' complicated budget execution process, and the time it took for expenses to be approved. With regards to NCAR's support, too, Shimabuku wished to see improvements in the categories of expenses eligible. Shimabuku is an outstanding, internationally recognized, and popular artist who has participated numerous times in major biennales around the world. That this artist was invited to participate, along with emerging Japanese artists, is sure to have a synergistic effect in conveying the depth and importance of the artist and should be welcomed as boosting the presence of Japanese contemporary art.



- **Navin Rawanchaikul & StudiOK**

As mentioned above, the Chiang Saen venue where the new work by Rawanchaikul and his team was on exhibit was one of the highlights of TBC 2023 because of the synergistic effect on the complex relationship between the geopolitical, economic, and environmental situation of the region. Although these factors were reflected in many of the works by artists in this venue, Rawanchaikul, as he has done in places around the world to date, exhibited, at an outdoor plaza along the Mekong River a large billboard onto which he had drawn group portraits of the locals, together with a new documentary video of the process. He depicted one aspect of the Golden Triangle, as an activity area lined with night stalls where locals and tourists gather, and particularly memorable was the fact that this work is an excellent example of placemaking that energized both the town and its people.



Support by NCAR – Further Potential and Challenges

Considering the fact that the Thailand Biennale had already been held twice and the content of TBC 2023, this biennale is worthy of the support of NCAR, which supports the participation of Japanese artists in order to enhance the international presence and recognition of contemporary art from Japan.

As the province where the biennale is held differs each time, future potential depends greatly on the location selected for each biennale, and on the individuals making up the curatorial team. I look forward to watching the biennale evolve in a way that continues to build on its solid achievements.

I would also like to mention two challenges regarding this biennale. One is that operational improvements need be implemented by the organizer to ensure smooth communications between NCAR and the Biennale Office in the initial stage and to address concerns raised by the artists. The other is the need to consider how Japanese participants who are not official invitees are to be supported. Production Zomia participated in this biennale as one of the Pavilions. This is a project run by Japanese organizer Yabumoto Yuto, with participating artists from Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar alongside several NGOs. It was an ambitious project that also focused on indigenous artists from the Golden Triangle, but it was clear that there were limits to what could be done without external funding. In cases where the biennale organizers have established a framework for invited artists and a framework for collaterals and voluntary participation, it is assumed that these projects are not included in the application from the organizers to NCAR. For future applications, it would be worth considering whether NCAR should to some extent encourage the organizers to apply for the inclusion of collateral projects or artists that meet NCAR's evaluation criteria, rather than leaving it entirely to the organizers.



Venue Map (Left: Chiang Rai, Right: Chiang Saen), Biennale banner in downtown, Biennale sign near the venues: There are sufficient numbers and visibility.