Roundtables on Performance Research, Developing Cultural Ecologies, and Artistic Research Networking in the Asia-Pacific

Lowell Skar (โลเวลล์ สการ์)

BALAC Program, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok,
Thailand

Lowell.S@chula.ac.th

Pornrat Damrhung (พรรัตน์ คำรุง)

Department of Dramatic Arts, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University,
Bangkok, Thailand

dpornrat@gmail.com

Abstract

Three sessions of international and local participants from a July 2019 conference created active ecosystems which generated living examples of intercultural improvisation, performance research, cultural ecologies and artistic research in Thailand. Summarized and assessed in this article, these sessions revealed some of the first fruits of Thailand's work in these areas through engagement with other practitioners in the region. Besides offering creative improvisation among Thai artists and artist-centered critical assessments of their work, the article captures active thinkers seeking to reimagine the "festival" format for performance research, and seeks for ways to continue future regional collaboration in artistic research. The article embodies the ecological aspects of live collective thinking in the arts.

Keywords

performance research – cultural ecology – artistic research – intercultural improvisation – Asia-Pacific

The conference “From Performance Research to Cultural Ecologies: Creating Sustainable Artistic Communities” was held on July 19–20, 2019 at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, the first of its kind in Thailand. Beyond featuring more than a dozen presentations by international and Thai scholars on new modes of creative research for communities, the conference included afternoon roundtables on each of its two days and a follow-up networking session on the morning of July 21. These roundtables focused on the underlying premise of the conference, namely that performance research works best when it recognizes performance as part of specific cultural ecosystems. Using this premise, the conference explored how research in the performing arts could generate new creative synergies and social innovation for local urban communities. In doing so, the roundtables identify key elements of the rationale for the projects central to Chulalongkorn University’s new research cluster in the arts and culture begun in late 2018. The interactions of artists and researchers on projects involving experts from different backgrounds enable the production of new knowledge, skills and social value. To organize this new thinking on how to ground performance in knowledge to benefit participants and communities, discussion centered on how researchers could adopt the “festival” format in innovative ways in urban communities.

The roundtables achieved the conference goals and embodied the processes of the new research cluster. They provided opportunities for participants to reflect, engage and inspire and to take on the conference themes – performance research and cultural ecologies – both of which are new modes of research in the arts for Thailand. By facilitating interactions of senior and junior scholars, artists and academics, administrators and organizers, these roundtables helped to stimulate, challenge, and encourage those present in these topics, especially younger colleagues, by exposing them to the ideas and experiences of a range of top senior scholars, creative practitioners and managers. These special intellectual events provided opportunities for cross-fertilization with different types of expertise with notable figures involved in international modes of artistic research, creating festivals, intellectual fora and exchange networks. Such roundtables are valuable for the academy, forming an interactive system for creating and testing new ideas and practices for future work in cutting edge research, forming a nascent cultural ecosystem. This article summarizes the three roundtable sessions for this issue of *MANUSYA*, while sketching the agenda of Chulalongkorn University’s new research platform.

The roundtable on July 19 followed the improvisational performance *Thai Dance Now* and focused on “Insights from Performance Research for Today’s

Traditions.” On July 20, a roundtable on the theme of “Artistic Research for Cultural Ecologies in the University, Now and Anon” concluded the conference. A shorter informal roundtable session on “Realizing Performance Ecologies: Networking & Workshop” on the morning of July 21 explored how to continue regional cooperation among researchers, cultural workers and artists in performance as a creative workshop for students was held next door. Summaries of the roundtables held on July 19, 20, and 21 follow.¹ The roundtables fostered new thinking and practical knowledge on performance research and festival creation that focus on combining academic and artistic work to engage urban communities.

1 July 19: *Thai Dance Now* and “Insights from Performance Research for Today’s Traditions”²

After the opening day of the conference, a special performance *Thai Dance Now* by the dancers Saran Suwanachot and Thammanit Nikomrat and composer-musician Sinnapa Sarasas led into the roundtable on “Insights from Performance Research for Today’s Traditions.” The collaborative intercultural performance by Saran (Fon Cheong), Thammanit (Nora), and Sinnapa (modern music arranger), called “Klong Hong 2019” (Catching the Swan 2019), was a new improvisational piece by artist-researchers in different TRF projects conducted in 2017 and 2018 outside Bangkok.³ Since performance research is about live performance and not just about research papers, they were asked to come up with a new dance for us that involved knowledge and skill from different regions of Thailand.⁴ They decided to do the “*Klong Hong*” (Catching the Swan)

1 Full transcripts of the Roundtable sessions will be available on the Thai Performance Practice As Research (PPAR) section of Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/pg/ThaiPerformancePracticeResearch> based at the Department of Dramatic Arts of Chulalongkorn University. More online information on this initiative can be found here: <http://www.findglocal.com/TH/Bangkok/1632830297026383/Thai-Performance-Practice-as-Research>. The Roundtable summaries will identify quotations from roundtable by the use of *italics*.

2 See the photos of this article at the URL <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.13265585>.

3 The original dance by Thammanit and Saran was accompanied by improvised music on traditional instruments by Sinnapa and the central Thai drummer Sa-Ngiam Lertjiraratong and Torpong Samerjai who played a northern style flute.

4 The two masters of dance first were planning to come here to present papers for the conference. But that is not the core of their performance research and it does not show them at what they are best at. So their performance was the best way to show their performance research as a living form of knowledge. Organizers decided to have them show them at their best, at their most creative and artistic: how they creatively dance and play music. Sinnapa had never played for Saran before. But she used music to support the two performers – Saran

dance to new music with a northern “*Fon Choeng*” martial arts dancer. Like performance research more generally, the work brought different artists together and let them come up with something new to show them at their best. The performance remixed styles from Northern and Southern Thailand in a modernized soundscape by Bangkok musicians using traditional instruments. Saran in Chiang Mai and Thammanit’s and Sinnapa’s work in Pattani and Songkhla let them show the creative side of artistic research. In this new artistic interaction with a new audience, the performers of “Klong Hong 2019” aimed to show intercultural artistic collaboration in action in a new environment. By letting the artists living and fresh artistic knowledge and skill interact together in a new living performance ecology for the conference, they formed a performative starting point for the roundtable to follow.

A short 3-minute video of three TRF performance research projects done in 2017 and 2018 introduced the artists and scholars from three research projects outside of Bangkok. They shared their insights and thoughts on their projects and responded to questions from those in attendance on issues tied to performance research.

The three underlying research projects were performed many times in local communities and in universities since they were created since 2017. Pachaya Akkapram from Khon Kaen University in Northeastern Thailand developed a puppet performance piece tied to the Isan Sinsai legends with local artists in the Nongmontai community of Mahasarakham province over seven months from late 2017. His students learned local folk culture from the ground up, developing a new performance, the *Sinsai Ru jai Ton*, to benefit his students and the community. Thammanit Nikomrat from Thaksin University worked with Sinnapa Sarasas from Silpakorn University to develop a new musical piece combining three different musical traditions in Southern Thailand, starting at Thaksin University, Songkhla: Nora, Rong Ngeng and Digir Hulu, and Chinese drumming. They created the piece *Hoamroang Sam Prasarn* to celebrate Pattani’s Lim Gor Neaw in 2017. Saran Suwanachot from Chiang Mai worked with Pornrat Damrhung from Chulalongkorn University on a project to produce a new performance which staged a traditional tale *Pu Nang: The Great Ancestor* at the Lanna Wisdom School in Chiang Mai to celebrate its 20th anniversary in 2018.

The roundtable was skillfully moderated by Dr. Charlene Rajendran from Nanyang Technological University in Singapore and Dr. Lawrence Ross from

and Thammanit—in their dance. Their mutual trust permitted them to communicate how to use skills to make new music for the dance.

the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Researchers from the above three projects were the centerpiece of the discussion in this session and they provided lively exchanges on the work of performance research, including responses from those in the audience.

Charlene Rajendran's opened the session by asking about performance research. Professor Pornrat Damrhung provided background on her vision for introducing performance research to Thailand and the three projects presented in this roundtable. Moderators sought responses from participants on the following four issues based on their artistic research work: 1) how did they deal with artistic and cultural differences in their projects? 2) did the tensions and synergies of the projects lead to new skills for creative collaboration? 3) what would the future of local artistic cultures and intercultural work be like? 4) what new artistic traditions would emerge in Thailand? Following their responses, five questions from the floor led to further discussion: 1) did these projects open new modes of collaborative creative intercultural work? 2) how to assess the value of artistic research in performance – like improvisation and creative interplay – since they depend subtle forms of knowledge and skills that do not easily fit into academic frameworks or forms, and are often intangible and hard to articulate; 3) how can this type of creative work continue – how can it remain “sustainable”? 4) how to make this type of creative and intercultural work interesting to young people? 5) can this type of work make money?

Charlene first reminded everyone that live performance is engaging, powerful, meaningful, but also ephemeral and hard to evaluate. While all performances are based on research, this research is often hard to articulate through standard research approaches. This is partly because performances are part of an ongoing process of producing embodied and collective knowledge, skills and sensibilities. Given this ongoing lived, intangible, processual aspect of performance research, what did Pornrat Damrhung, who ran the projects and organized this conference, see as the main aims and results of the projects discussed at this roundtable?

Pornrat contextualized the projects that conference attendees heard and saw earlier in the day. Besides being based outside Bangkok, they contributed to the larger aims of the umbrella project by developing performance research approaches as viable forms of artistic research for artists, universities and researchers in Thailand. She then introduced the three artist-scholars central to those projects mentioned above, noting how they produced “a living platform of performance research at sites outside of Bangkok.” Their work helped the artists discover their passion and design suitable performance research methodologies for participants and partners to work in communities across

Thailand. They involved the interaction of local artists of different backgrounds and university researchers working diverse local communities, seeking to be cross-disciplinary forms of artistic collaboration in a contemporary vein which could develop performances in local communities by combining different traditions and art forms and connect with their diverse audiences. As the three projects evolved, they required adjustments to solve problems that they faced as they moved from imagining, practicing, rehearsing and performing creativity in their local communities. All three projects also required their participants to remember and relearn neglected aspects of their cultural identities by re-engaging local cultural life, and then to include their efforts, experiences, and insights in this research project as it evolved. Significantly for this conference and the new research cluster at Chulalongkorn University, she began seeing their *research as consisting of dynamic networks of interacting components tied to performance and rooted in local socio-cultural environments. She saw the projects as part of living cultural ecosystems.*

The artists' work produced new performances and durable relations among artists and communities, along with new knowledge and skills. But the artists often found that *writing up their research is hard*. Communicating their thoughts, experiences and goal challenged the artists to write in an academic mode based on their performance practice and collaborative work in local communities. By *putting performance to work in new contexts and new communities*, though, the artists, students, communities, audiences and scholars could better see their dreams realized. Classical and traditional arts went to work in contemporary spaces. In helping participants understand themselves and to have pride in their artistic practice, they could better realize their cultural identities social values in today's world.

When young people practice the arts and become part of new artistic projects that their masters do in a different platform, they learn to adjust and rework their way of working together. Each of the above artists noted the importance of *trust* and *respect* in working with those who are different from them. Time spent working together helps them to create trust and understanding of each form of knowledge, which is the key to sustainable creative work together. In developing performance research projects, the university became a key platform or an interactive space for these experimental projects, and enabled innovative work through the interaction of young and old artists, academics and local communities, with strong university connections, fostering the bonds of *trust*, *respect*, and *self-confidence* participants needed to produce sustainably creative work beyond what they think they can do.

There were varied responses to Lawrence Ross question on the creative challenges and opportunities of working with those from different traditions,

as he wondered how participants “*dealt with aesthetic and cultural difference*” in their projects. Sinnapa, Thammanit and Pachaya, and Saran replied differently to the question, reflecting their diverse backgrounds and goals, their roles in the research and the local contexts of their individual projects. Sinnapa’s long experience in this type of intercultural creative work in music rooted in Thai instruments and musical sensibility had prepared her for this project, but noted it was much more challenging to work with young students and more effective to work with professional musicians. Thammanit’s previous work with Sinnapa let him see her systematic approach to using Thai instrumentation to produce new music, permitting him to see for the first time how Thai music could be modern. Their bonds of trust formed the basis of their creative collaboration in this project. For Pachaya, local Isan culture was something he had avoided, so re-engaging it required sustained effort, with he and his students living for long periods of time with artists in local communities. Their immersion into the world of local artist master Preecha Karoon and villagers in Mahasarakham Province allowed them to do this, permitting himself, his students, his university, and the local community and its artists to create a working system of artist interaction, community engagement and effective education. Saran aimed to strengthen local Lanna culture so it could survive in our complex contemporary culture, using his own knowledge and expertise from the region’s traditional performance culture and involving young people. He sought “*to make a place for his own old Lanna art and culture so it can thrive in the modern world.*”

When Charlene Rajendran wondered if any new skills and attitudes emerged from the collaborative intercultural work across boundaries and from doing creative research. What skills or attitudes were needed to root traditional art in contemporary work, to realize your research goals, the researchers provided diverse responses?

Pornrat stressed two mindsets facilitated the development of new skills: *intercultural trust among artists and confidence in experimenting beyond what artists know best*. Both required listening to and respecting others in the project to recognize and deal with their differences from you. When artists and researchers developed these mindsets could allow for new work and new skills to develop, by expanding the horizons of artistic familiarity and creative possibilities of their knowledge. She first understood this from her work with Thammanit, when sustained interaction among artists from different backgrounds permitted new understanding of the role of experimentation and new possibilities for creative thinking and artistic work in the future. Pachaya wanted to help his students develop life skills and self-understanding by grounding them in local Isan community knowledge. This immersive learning gave them

self-confidence, pride in their cultural roots, teamwork skills, social intelligence, and new abilities to communicate with people different from them through practical action with others. Saran worked to revitalize old Lanna artistic skills and sensibilities as forms of “powerful knowledge” which were lived and felt provided participants with strong experiential and affective understanding grounded in local culture. This knowledge is contemporary, local and personal, forming a very particular Chiang Mai form of lived culture, rooted in the embodied knowledge, skills and roots shared in the area. His work permitted him to retain “our skills in the embodied, practiced, felt cultural knowledge we’ve kept for a time as a powerful knowledge alive in our culture.” Sinnapa stressed how her skills in her classical Thai dance and music let her work with traditional artists. “What’s crucial is that you keep the key characteristics of the dance or music in new work. The challenge is to find ways to let traditional music breathe in fresh air, to give it a new house and a fresh, fluid sensibility.” Never changing her approach or goal, since it would erase its distinctive Thai features, she seeks to show “how Thai instruments, music, and dance can be contemporary,” a task easier for folk arts since they are more open, even if the artists do not realize this.

Lawrence Ross asked two questions about the future of the local arts in Thailand. One related to what Dr. Suradech Chotiudompant said earlier in the day: “What is contemporary now will become tradition, so parts of what we are experiencing now as the current or ‘contemporary’ will crystallize into what is traditional.” Things are changing so much all around us in the mix of traditional arts and contemporary arts. How will local arts look 50 years from now? Sinnapa, Thammanit, Saran, and Pachaya all believed creative intercultural contemporary work grounded in the traditional arts would continue, with some challenges, based on their work with young people in this project.

Presenting contrasting views, Saran first stressed that Lanna’s embodied cultural knowledge would survive. Although it is powerful enough to withstand imported culture from outside, since outside culture often requires a massive support infrastructure, this outside culture can sometimes overwhelm local cultural life. So he wanted to strengthen local knowledge, skills and expertise using the tools and sensibility we already have. By developing creative work with the local forms of culture which are known, artists can make and share something with others and pass it down. By contrast, Pachaya suggested that Northeastern Thailand would be more urban and interconnected with the rest of modern world, with Northeastern cities bigger, more complex and globally interconnected like Bangkok today. Cities of Khon Kaen, Udonthani, Ubonratchathani, Nakhonratchasima will be producing more complex transnationally-focused cultures.

Lawrence followed up by asking about what new traditions would emerge in Thailand, such as in those new cities. Pachaya said that young people would likely seek fame in a cultural celebrity form, but it would not replace Isan culture since young people's interest in Isan folk singing and they can help shape our culture for the future. Pornrat stressed that although cultural life changes, it never quite disappears, and new work can come from the old. There are always forms of engagement through remembering, re-learning or remixing of "lost" or neglected forms of culture to revive them, by listening to masters and letting them play with their traditions. This type of intercultural mixing can create new alternatives, through the mixing of different local and regional Thai cultures, since artists and audiences both value things that are familiar and new. While "contemporary" work is often seen to ignore – if not reject – "traditional" things, the artist's vision, skills and the context matter here. It depends on the world the artist lives in. Sometimes this means not working with the artist as much as providing a space for him or her to work, like my experience with Saran. As someone rooted deeply in tradition, he wanted to do traditional work in a contemporary style, not something Western or even modern. She learned from Thammanit and Saran that she was a modern or Western theatre-based person, so she needed to let the performance emerge from the cultural worlds of the artists she worked with. *"I am already mixed up, so my tradition might not be the same from those of others involved in these performance research projects. Other artists are mixed up differently from me Working with them made me realize there will always be alternatives, which are different than exist now, if you have the eyes, ears, and feel for them. Interaction permits the creativity of multiple interacting artists to produce new work."*

Charlene offered a wonderful set of reminders of key aspects of performance research. First, *"artists have always been researchers. It is the work of the artist to keep questioning and thinking about – what else? what if? why not? how else? who else? why else? These kinds of questions push artists to break the rules and play with difference and play with risk and play with ideas and practices that sometimes will feel like they are not ready or they are too much or too soon or sometimes not yet at the right time. It is not always the linear – past-present-future – things happening in a straight line. There is also this kind of this continuing cyclical, spiral movement of action, feeling, and knowledge, what unfolds from what is here and now in surprising ways. And this unfolding provides a valuable kind of knowledge, the artist's way of knowing, the embodied and felt knowing, knowing through embodied skills of their craft through both vision and body and in the interaction with others in a shared time and space. This is what matters for performance research. So when we ask these questions as researchers sometimes we want to make it very neat and clean and consistent and coherent. Our artistic research needs to admit that sometimes it is the messiness and the*

chaos and the uncertainty of our work that is a highly valuable way of knowing, and these tenuous forms of knowledge are how we try to capture a little bit of understanding. Platforms like this conference permit us to work and talk with these diverse modes of knowing in and through the performing arts."

Five questions came from the floor after the performance researchers spoke in the roundtable. The questions dealt with: 1) how has work in these projects opened new ways of doing creative work together? 2) how to assess the value of research tied to performance, since performance – like improvisation and creative interplay – often depends on and is tied to producing distinctive subtle forms of knowledge and skills that do not easily fit into academic frameworks or forms, and are often intangible and hard to articulate; 3) is the type of creative work considered here "sustainable"? 4) how to make cultural diversity and intercultural work interesting to young people? 5) can this type of work make money?

Lowell Skar wondered if the artists learned to think about doing things differently or doing new things as a result of working on these projects. Pornrat first noted the research led to new productions and new insights among the artists of their arts and their tradition and their new knowledge could help them solve new problems. But this required effort. She needed to listen lot and learn to understand others, to re-educate herself to figure out – to understand and respect – other artists and their way of working. We always work with people who are different from us. "Even if we are all Thai, we are so different. Recognizing this difference challenges one to reflect on and to learn about your own self and how to deal with difference." Pachaya said his project helped him discover how to use local lived and practical artistic knowledge in the classroom and in creative work outside the classroom as a base for better understanding beyond books. This knowledge became practical tools he could use to recover more understanding of himself and his relationship to Isan culture, including how to live it, to work with it, and to research it, which he continues to do. Sinnapa stressed how as a musician it was challenging to write a research paper. She saw her work as a musician as producing value from the relations with the musicians and the music they make, not the research paper. Her focus on collaborating with musicians led her to help them do their best for the project, to make them shine and get the best out of them. This requires their trust, so they are willing to do more than they think they think they can do, opening themselves up to new music-making in the collaborative work. Since the musicians are people, the human dimension is key. Developing trust with good musicians "is heaven" for her. Thammanit pointed out how his work changed by working with people from different artistic backgrounds, like Sinnapa Saran, Pornrat and Pachaya. Sinnapa helped him learn how to create new music for Nora. While doing the research project, after seeing how she worked

with musicians, he tried doing it in Nora performances in Songkhla. While improvisation is normal in Nora, sometimes students learn to create or improvise a bit more or differently from their master. He learned more about improvisation and uses it now with his students, but it difficult to use consistently.

Charlene then wondered about how to evaluate research tied to performance, since performance – stressing improvisation and creative interaction – often depends on subtle forms of knowledge and embodied skills that do not easily fit into academic frameworks or forms, and are often intangible and hard to articulate. Yet none of this underlying artistic effort, this knowledge and skill enter into a top journal article. The kinds of knowledge and insights, the talents and capacities that form this work go beyond how we tend to evaluate and assign value in universities, as a number or a percentage or a score, yet they convey enormous, difficult to measure, value. This *unrecognized knowledge, skill, and effort work in the performing arts* challenges modes of assessing value in our institutions and our academic work, since they often ignore or streamline the hard-to-measure or hard-to-enumerate ways of knowing or these ways of evaluating we normally work with in the arts. The performance on July 19 could not be evaluated in a data-driven way. How to assess the innovative knowledge and creative capacities with the same kind of confidence and clarity and legitimacy and validation that lets us say “yep, that’s good for a tier-one journal”?

Saran offered some hope by saying that when he moved out of his own safe space in his own northern Lanna culture, he saw his interests and efforts were not alone. After the two years of this project, he met other researchers and worked with his students, making bigger performances, one which finished last week (in July 2019). His project with Pornrat helped him step out of his comfort zone so he could proudly present his contemporary Lanna way in the arts to a wider public. He also found out that he was part of a group of other like-minded artists doing their own distinctive contemporary work. Mark Teh from the Five Arts Centre in Kuala Lumpur added a comment on *relevance*, suggesting that the anxieties Charlene highlighted often affects artists doing folk, traditional, or classical work in new ways. But relevance and being relevant in contemporary work often seems so disposable. It can be mass-produced, shaped by social media, which form another metrics. So defining relevance and relevance for whom is crucial. Danny Butt brought up the transnational solidarity produced in the Bandung Conference from 1955. How it is relevant now for us to think about our situation and about connecting across different cultures and societies, seeking authentic ways of being relevant? Sometimes examples from the past are relevant, not just for nostalgic reasons, but because they highlight a forgotten solidarity in the past and possibilities for the future. Earlier events can remind us of something neglected or

avoided as an open possibility for us now, showing us a different way to see *relevance*.

The musician and scholar, Dr. Anan Nakkong, wondered how to sustain the feeling of being part of diverse, but ongoing, common project after it ends. How to keep this kind of work sustainable? Pornrat sees the sustainability as based on relationships created by working together. Previous work generated durable bonds of trust, and these provide the basis for working together again. Developing bonds of trust by collaborative work will permit the work to continue, even though we may not know exactly when, where or in what circumstances this will happen. This uncertainty is part of the fragility of all sustainable systems. But sustainability requires attentive care, and this care is what makes it sustainable as friends of artistic collaboration, helping to bring together artists and communities interested in the arts. Getting young people to know what the older generation has to share through exchanging and supporting others is what matters. So sustainability means knowing we can work together in new ways on projects as they arise or as we create them based on our mutual trust in one another. Pachaya agreed that sustainability emerges from bonds of trust from previous work and the new skills for working with people from different backgrounds. He is now confident to go out of the university to work with other artists or primary schools in local areas around Khon Kaen to network with others, and confident in how he can learn, use, and develop knowledge about theatre, working together and collaborating with another musicians, artists workers in communities. This kind of work is fun and permits him to share our experience and work together to something to benefit communities in northeastern Thailand. Saran pointed out that new chances to work together often depend on luck. But collaboration can increase the chances for both future and better work together since those who worked together know each other better. Since everyone is strong friends now, it is only a matter of finding space and time to walk together again in the future. Thammanit also saw sustainability as the inexplicable connections among good friends and artists who have worked together. This will permit him to continue his artistic work and to contact others here if he has questions or problems or opportunities in his work. He can trust them to provide him with their artistic knowledge and to respect his knowledge, and when they have new projects, he hopes to be part of them again, so he can include his embodied knowledge in them. He will also ask for them to help in big projects in his native Songkhla, too. Sinnapa concurred, since they all have the same mind and head. Without trust, you don't click, so we would not be here. Having the same mind is key.

Lawrence added that sustainability in collaborative work in the arts does just evaporate. Parting after a collaborative event or project does not erase or undo all the work done in preparation for and in the activity of the event, since

participants carry these things with them as shared experience and knowledge, including what they get from another and from their teachers. This ties back to the issue of relevance Mark Teh discussed since what is relevant is what one can pass on and share. Sustainability is a way of saying we are willing and able to share so the arts continue to grow in in groups and communities into the future. To do otherwise would be selfish. How we can help society? We still carry all of our teachers' work as dancers or musicians and as researchers. By seeing our work in this longer endeavor, we can go on in our work, but we cannot really claim anything as our own alone. This is the essence of sustainability: continuing to be involved in work with others we consider to be relevant.

Responding to how to involve young people in this type of work, Pornrat said that getting young people more involved in the arts required they see classical performing arts as relevant to them, informing not just their bodies, but also their minds and hearts. This relevance must be alive, embodied and felt. Young people respond best to these traditions when they are made easy and fun for them to become involved in. Classical traditions need to be simplified, connected to things learners can play around with by using improvisation and engagement. In culturally mixed Bangkok, it is important to make the culture relevant to people living here, to show how it is alive now, while respecting those you learn it from and those you do it for. This will help young people understand how they can enjoy traditional culture, make it their own, and contribute to it in new ways. What they do and how they do this might not be in the same form as in old tradition, but it will be easier to become involved in it. *"Doing so will ensure there will always be someone performing Thai culture into existence."*

Responding, finally, to Anan Nakkong's question on whether the projects could make money, Pornrat said she "does not see making money as bad, but that money-making is not the goal of this kind of performance research." The artists focused on exploring, learning, creating, and sharing their beautiful embodied inventiveness – what they love – with other artists and their communities. The pilot experimental pieces sought to create value by enriching the artists' knowledge and their communities rather than make money.

The July 19 roundtable on performance research highlighted the variety of approaches needed to develop their projects and achieve their results. Central to these diverse approaches is their focus on the importance of local contexts for every project, the complexity of the performance-making process, and the liveness of each performance event. These approaches examine "the engaged social- environmental production of systems and the cultural production of flexible research ecologies wherein tacit understandings, inferred practices and theoretical assumptions can be made explicit and can, in turn, be queried

and contested" (Kershaw and Nicholson 2011, 2). The ecological grounding of performance research points toward both the second roundtable and the underlying rationale and guiding principles of the new research cluster in the arts and culture at Chulalongkorn University: *cultural ecologies*.

2 July 20 Roundtable: "Artistic Research for Cultural Ecologies in the University, Now and Anon"

A key insight emerging from the performance research projects conducted between 2017 and 2019 around Thailand is that *performance lives in cultural ecosystems*. Moreover, the goal of this research is "to create diverse and dynamic research ecologies." (Kershaw and Nicholson 2011, 2) This research also revealed how universities and local communities were two key ecological niches where the creative interactions of performing arts practitioners could be put to work in ways to sustainably give performance cultures new life. Researchers in these projects involved artists from different backgrounds who generated new modes of creative collaboration and community engagement by reimagining performance traditions in innovative contemporary work. Their artistic collaborations interacted in specific spaces, involving specific forms of cultural knowledge and skills, tools and equipment that connected universities to local communities, and developed inventive and durable artistic assemblages. Discovering that these performance projects were embedded in cultural ecologies – what Ann Markusen describes as "as the complex interdependencies that shape the demand for and production of arts and cultural offerings" – provided a useful way to think about how to better involve performing arts' knowledge and skills in connecting universities to local communities, adding value to both.⁵

Viewing *performance as living in cultural ecosystems which produces creative knowledge and adds social value to communities* gave way to a research program in the new Chulalongkorn University Research Cluster on Art and Culture that started in late 2018 and led to the July 2019 conference underlying this special issue of *MANUSYA*. This program seeks to integrate and leverage the collective knowledge in the performing arts from four different Chulalongkorn University faculties in diverse projects that engage and help revitalize local urban communities around the university. Central to the diverse projects in this research

⁵ Markusen, et al. (2011) includes here "the many networks of arts and cultural creators, producers, presenters, sponsors, participants, and supporting casts embedded in diverse communities... cultivating a view of its wholeness and interconnectedness" in the arts and culture.

program was the theme of *performance for life*. Performing arts practitioners from the Faculties of Arts, Fine Arts, Communication Arts, and Education use their knowledge in the performing arts to collaborate with experts in diverse fields – psychiatry, education, medicine, management, etc. – to develop new ways to enhance individual and community lives. These creative collaborative projects to use performance to improve life mostly developed in new off-stage sites and venues outside theatres, late 2019 to mid-2020.

One key outcome planned for this research program was a series of public performance-focused events – most of which were designed for non-theatre spaces. These events – planned to be spread over eight months or so from late 2019 to the Summer of 2020 at various off-stage sites around and off-campus – were collectively called a “festival” and given the name *Life | Performance*. This extended “festival” was imagined as a kind of nascent cultural ecology for performance that could enhance the synergies of inter-faculty cooperation, urban university-community engagement, and transdisciplinary knowledge-making that would not only improve the lives of participants, but offer innovative forms of social entrepreneurship. Although the early stages of this distributed festival took place in late 2019 as designed, the COVID 19 outbreak disrupted plans for the remaining parts of the festival planned for 2020. Some of the planned festival events were moved online or postponed for later in the summer of 2020. In addition, new forms of online engagement helped to continue the research projects.

This roundtable session followed the conference presentations on July 20. It focuses on the role of research and creative activities tied to the urban university ecosystem, especially the idea of a “festival” as a key type of cultural ecology. The festival creates interaction spaces which enable the performing arts to engage and add sociocultural value to the urban university and its surrounding communities.

Charlene Rajendran once more moderated the session, which included Danny Butt from Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne, Mark Teh from the Five Arts Centre in Malaysia,⁶ Norihiko Yoshioka, Director of the Japan Foundation in Bangkok, Thailand, along with Sukanya Sompiboon, Parida, Manomaiphibul, Dangkamon Na-Pombejra, Premmarin Millinthesoot and Lowell Skar, all from Chulalongkorn University. Chetana Nagavajara, Pornrat

6 Mr. Teh is a director, producer and researcher based in Kuala Lumpur. His diverse, collaborative projects are situated primarily in crossroads of performance and education, but he also works via exhibitions, new media, writing and social interventions. He is a member of the Five Arts Centre <<http://www.fiveartscentre.org>> a collective of interdisciplinary artists, producers and activists in Malaysia. He teaches at the Department of Performance and Media, Sunway University.

Damrhung and Lawrence Ross provided many insights to this discussion from the floor, too. What follows is a summary of the roundtable, which considered its role in the university's new Research Cluster in Arts and Culture. It focused on imagining the future of performance research in relation to urban cultural ecologies, especially how it could be linked to the idea of a "festival" based on the "performance for life" theme, one key aspect of the new research cluster, with special attention given to how a flexible but powerful notion of a "festival" could be used to frame the projects in this new research cluster.

Charleen Rajendran began with keywords and key points from the rich conference, which marked a transition or turning point for the research team, moving from earlier work on performance research to new thinking and work with performance as part of cultural ecologies, which would be the focus of the new research cluster. *"So the question before us now is 'where do we go from here?'"* What is the new research agenda of the research cluster? How does it relate performance research to cultural ecologies?

In addressing this question, the roundtable dealt with several important topics. First, Premmarin pointed out how the research of the cluster would relate performance and ecology through a set of collaborative research projects which mixed theatre methods with other types of expertise and participation from different university faculties, linking them to nearby urban communities. Linking performance with those working in fields like psychiatry, education, local communities, and dance in events from late 2019 into 2020 will focus on the connections, extensions, and inclusion of performance on- and off-stage. Not only performance for theater audiences and stage performances, but also to connect, extend, and include acting and performing in new off-stage spaces and initiatives. The research projects and the festival would seek to engage diverse artists, experts, participants and audiences from both within the university and the surrounding urban community. In this dynamic process, the paths taken by each research project and in the design of the overall structure of presenting them to the public and the cultural world were always changing, so flexibility to a changing situation was crucial.

Mr. Yoshioka's experience in the Japan Foundation made him familiar with cultural and artistic dynamism, possibility, and uncertainty. But he also stressed that funders still needed to make decisions and justifications for specific projects, and to do so in relation to wider cultural and social aims, even while recognizing that things might not turn out as expected for any given project. When seen over time, and collectively, the funding decisions do seem to contribute to changes that are both noticeable and noteworthy. His main point is that involving people in the community depends on a clear strategy for developing a festival for the groups you want to include. As a university, involve

people who could stick with the project as good part-time work and to do so for at least five years, since if there is only a one- or two-time result, and does not seem successful in terms of numbers, it does not mean it is unsuccessful. In organizing TPAM – the Tokyo Performing Arts Meeting – in Yokohama each February, the design is a “meeting” of performers and producers. It is not called a “festival.” Only about 300 attend TPAM each year. This often raises questions on its effectiveness, but the organizers do not seek big audiences. It differs from other “festivals” and it needs to differentiate itself from other festivals, to show why we keep doing festival type work at our meeting. Since the “festival” considered here for communities in and around Chulalongkorn University is also not typical and not aiming for a general theater-going public but more for ordinary people who may normally care about theatre, it will be important to figure out how to reach them. This will depend on its direction and how to make it stand out from alternatives and the best at what it does. If it is not designed for many diverse groups of the people, then try to figure out which groups to reach, looking for a main target group and figure out how to reach and appeal to them. Develop a coordinated effort to find a target group and go for a wide target group and continue doing the same for the many months. After working through this process for five years, you will be able to judge if things are working or if it is a success. Even if it is stable and not growing, it could be seen as a success. If it becomes less well attended over time, then maybe there is something wrong. Be sure to start it, and don't give up too early, since then it won't mean anything.

Lowell Skar added some thoughts on linking the research projects and the festival to “ecology” since he was involved some of the thinking on the cluster. He pointed out that the Chulalongkorn's support for the cluster made possible an ecosystem that could link research tied to performance to different areas of expertise and diverse communities in and around the university. Seeing performance cultural projects at parts of ecosystems could be used to encourage a kind of “experimental aesthetics” done out of the lab and in the field. This would seek to produce new knowledge, new skills, insights, perspectives and knowledge of what is going on through creative interactions, with all of their surprises. Increasingly research is being done outside of labs, in the field, in various ecological zones or niches, where there is less knowledge of and control over what goes on. In these marked-off niches, complex *intra-actions*, to use Karen Barad's term, among different types of living, inert and nonliving things, bring phenomena into existence through their performativity. By developing an open “festival” distributed over a long period like being planned here, one that can bring performance out from the theater lab into complex interactions

with the rest of the urban world. This will let performance cultures evolve in many different urban ecological niches. “Experimental aesthetics” points to trials being done in the field, seeking to produce a sustainable cultural ecology, with unexpected results. These experiments will help in planning for what might come even though it is never sure what the results will be, or whether the performance environment itself will change. Chulalongkorn University is providing a platform where that experimental aesthetic ecology can grow. This first phase of support for sustained research in the humanities and the arts and culture here provides the arts and culture with opportunities to developing valuable projects for society. Through this platform that we have now and here, there is a space for creative interaction and experimentation, and many other communities. It will permit producing new synergies, *intra-actions*, connections, and possibilities within and beyond the institution, as experimental aesthetics at work in urban cultural niches rather than in the theatre.

As a director of research in a university arts organization in Melbourne, Danny Butt reminded us that universities only recently became a platform for the arts. The arts and culture face three significant challenges for funding by governments and universities, especially forms of cultural ecologies or sustainable artistic communities that are tied to traditional or new forms of arts like being considered here. First, innovative work in the arts is often still seen as potentially risky with unsure outcomes which are difficult to evaluate in standard ways, such as “knowledge-making” or economic metrics. This means that creative reflections on the nation-state or society often makes relations between the university and the nation-state problematic. Thirdly, new technologies—especially digital technologies—also question the relations of the arts in universities and the wider society. In this uncertain environment, one place to look for support is through intergenerational connection between people of different ages where cultural or artistic forms are alive. In this type of community learning produces knowledge that is flexible and enables people adapt themselves to new situations better. The ecologically rooted and organically produced knowledge and practice tied to the traditional arts provides an alternative style of work amid a changing urban environment increasingly focused on always-on internet connected living as the norm. In this light, the work being planned by this new research cluster and shown in the conference is promising.

Mark Teh used his own experiences with Five Arts Centre in Kuala Lumpur to remind everyone that there are a variety of ways to organize festivals and to link them to the groups or collectives producing work for these various types of festivals. In his recent work he has travelled the world discussing Malaysia's

postcolonial history. He wondered why anyone would be interested in what happened in Malaysia in 1955?⁷ While at first refusing to show our projects in Europe due to concerns of how the work would be interpreted outside of the Malaysian context, the contributing artists, activists and educators worried about the different sense of politics of show in Europe. As they learned the vocabulary and dynamic of the “festival tour” however, since about 2015, they toured to different places, and they began to see how their work relates to the festival format, which typically have their own structure, duration and flow, with 15–30 shows over several days or a week, and every show needing to fit into a particular niche in the festival schedule. Their work has been framed as “Asian,” “Southeast Asian” or “urban Asian” so joining a festival required working with these kinds of categories, and learning how to fit into them, even though they are often not productive ways to talk or think about individual works in the festival. They found other platforms or festivals more interesting, such as one in Greece on the relationships between theatre, archaeology and history in Greece, with a focus on the theme of “emergency” – a key term to describe what has been happening there since 2009. When they showed their work at a festival on communist history in Kerala, India – the first democratically elected communist state government in the world – people there could not believe it was possible to ban communists as was stressed in the Baling project, so it produced many interesting questions. In Jakarta since the September 30th incident in 1965, many people across Indonesia who were labelled communists or suspected communists or communist sympathizers were basically massacred and eliminated in the mid-1960s. They went there just to present it, and knowing there would be some discussion. That helped open some topics tied to communism across Southeast Asia.

Given this variety of ways in festivals formats, Pornrat Damrhung and Premmarin offered their thinking on what the festival for the new research cluster tied to performance in cultural ecologies aimed to do, along with some discussion of the festival theme of “*performance for life*.” The starting point was developing ways to involve creative people on projects in the university. What projects could an urban university in a big city could do to work involve

7 This refers to the Baling project done by the Five Arts Center from Kuala Lumpur. It is about the so-called December 1955 “Baling Talks” which sought to negotiate peace in the Malayan peninsula devastated by the Emergency. This documentary performance reconstructs talks between Tunku Abdul Rahman, David Marshall and Chin Peng and how they helped explore different visions for building a new nation. Using publicly available transcripts, the performer-researchers reconsider what terms like freedom, loyalty, terrorism, reconciliation, surrender, sacrifice and independence could mean, and look at how history still haunts today.

different parts of the university's creative arts and link them to communities and audiences outside the university campus? How could our campus develop as a platform to integrate the Faculties of the Arts, Fine Arts, and Communication Arts, so they could start talk and working more with each other? How could they collaborate in ways that would open them up to something else outside of the theater, the classroom, the stage.

The research theme of the festival: "performance for life" would focus on people and activities not only prepared in or for a theatre or a stage, but also projects involving different aspects of everyday life performed but not normally staged. Some of these performances are those once done but not common now or today in Bangkok, things still around, but rare and maybe hard to recognize or remember anymore. They should be fun to see to do or to be a part of it again. They seek to be tied to different ways that performance knowledge, techniques and skills can help to highlight new aspects of life or to contribute new skills or perspectives tied to life. Premmarin noted the theme was also chosen for its planned use of performance-related skills and knowledge to diverse types of experts, including arts practitioners, ordinary people in urban communities, and diverse community audiences, to actively involve these different groups in a project and to work outside of the theater – part of "real life" so to speak. It is about seeing how performance can be used in new arenas and recognizing that we perform as ordinary people. Not things that are already in scripts, but open performances which are lively and grounded in daily life. They will form the core parts of the festival. Things are always changing, so until the deadline, they need to adjust. "We are making a new type of festival, and things are changing all the time."⁸

To provide more detail on the *performance for life* theme, three of its researchers – Sukanya Sompai boon, Parida Manomaipiboon and Dangkamon Na-pombejra – introduced themselves and the projects they would do for the cluster and the festival. Sukanya would work with people in the Patumwan district close to the Chula campus, using the Likay form and collect community stories for this, designing productions based on stories or do a film. Parida would work with high school teachers to develop their playwriting through writing workshops which they could then use to help their students to write

8 Premmarin emphasis on the "always changing" nature of the festival was perceptive. She did not know to what extent she would be right. By late January 2020, it was becoming clear that the COVID 19 pandemic would severely disrupt not just the university, but also the plans for the festival. Although some parts of the extended festival were completed, many planned for March and April could not be held at all. They are currently being planned in some form for later in 2020 or perhaps early 2021.

scripts and stage small productions based on their work, which would be part of the festival. Dangkamon, Dean of Students, would link life and performance by using the theatre arts to work with a psychiatrist and drama therapist to help some students live better lives despite facing crises in their families, friends, or in their mental or emotional condition, through acting lessons to help them express their feelings and their thoughts better.

Charlene thanked the researchers for their projects and noted how understanding a festival as the full process of making the events and their role in the structure as a whole, along with how the individual component parts came to be. It is a complex and multi-dimensional process and set of practices that involve negotiations and willingness to deal with the discomfort and willingness to have these dreams. This is all important in understanding the ecology of the festival, and how it emerges as a prolonged process rooted in diverse, evolving research projects.

Professor Chetana Nagavajara offered some advice to the plans considered here, based on his long observation of theater in Bangkok and on his own research projects during a changing time. His eloquent statement suggested that success would come from keeping things small, informal, flexible and focused on performance for life in ways that would be open to as wide participation as possible. Cuing on Thailand's "lean theatre" troupes, which lack spaces to rehearse or perform, but were able to create the Bangkok Theatre Festival, he noted how it grew not from the "festival" idea but because small theatre groups attracted enough people and interest to show their work by the river in Banglumpu. Like them, he stressed making daily life as artistically rich as possible.

In final remarks, Lawrence Ross said this roundtable and the conference provided some good ideas but they needed to be put to work locally. Danny Butt returned to the issue of mental health discussed by Dangkamon. The university can help develop a different relationship to knowledge through providing people with a voice and storytelling, helping to find useful knowledge in neglected places. People's stories are everywhere, in our lives, our media, and on the street. But they often become invisible, covered over with fancy paving and walls. So it is important to be open to the voices of others and their stories in the everyday since they are tied to understanding the larger ecosystem we live in. This would help to move towards a more inclusive and holistic social body, to include those often neglected or missing from the scene and invisible parts of normal lives. It is also worth remembering that art is something quite artificial, not natural. It requires effort and creativity to learn it or work with it. We make art because it is something new that offers some unique potential

or something different. The evolutionary ecologist Jaap de Roode sees art as a kind of prosthesis. So if you need an artificial leg, it is very key to your life, but it is artificial. It is not alive, but it allows you to live in an everyday way. This is a useful way to think about the artificiality of art and its role in our lives. Art is not alive. It is not natural. But it helps us to live in everyday life.

Lowell Skar stressed ways of learning to live with the complex cultural ecologies we have are part of, and stressed the performative, intra-active aspect of performance ecologies. To involve more students and ordinary people from the neighboring communities around the university could be two ways to do this. Following Prof. Chetana's suggestion, big projects could be smaller and multiplied to get more involvement with things and people. So part of the festival could involve more people who are tied to the university to gather more ideas and projects and mini projects around those who live around the university.

Overall, this roundtable fruitfully considered some key aspects of a future research agenda of the performance area of Chulalongkorn University's new research cluster in arts and culture. By seeking to integrate theatre knowledge and performance practice into urban cultural ecologies within and around the university, its diverse research projects would involve from people from several faculties and areas of expertise. The research would develop innovative knowledge and creative skills that addressed issues of everyday life and living well. Their varied projects would develop to the point of being shown in a structured set of public presentations or performances which would be called a "festival" planned for a 6–8 months period spanning from late 2019 to mid-2020. Although most of the planned projects for this "Life | Performance" festival were modified and moved to online venues due to the 2020 COVID 19 outbreak, the individual projects have continued and there has been significant online engagement.

3 July 21 Roundtable on Developing Networks of Cultural Ecologies in the Asia-Pacific

On the morning of July 21, 2019, conference participants met to offer their final thoughts, and to consider how to extend the experience of the conference, and to continue their artistic efforts and research collaboration in the future. Discussing these issues over a light breakfast, the guests included Associate Professor Ritirong Jiwakanon, Director of the Institute of Thai Studies at Chulalongkorn University, conference participants and other members of Chulalongkorn University's new Research Cluster in Arts and Culture. The

short morning session considered how to think about continuing the connections and the work begun in the international conference on July 19 and 20.⁹ The researchers in this cluster project at Chulalongkorn University considered ways to keep sharing and connections with one another, including through universities and institutions in the Asia-Pacific.

The fourteen contributing scholars at the international conference discussed, expressed, and assessed how the conference tried to first embed Thailand's experience in performance research into the working of cultural ecologies, and then to extend this works to international friends in Asia. Participants sought to listen to what is happening to find ways to continue their old and new friendships. This writeup includes just a few of these reflections. What all attendees stressed was their interest in continuing and extending what was begun here, their certainty that these connections would continue, but to continue them first by keeping the relations flexible and informal.

Ritirong, whose role as Director of Thai Studies and long involvement in the Cultural Management program at Chulalongkorn University, first provided wonderful opening thoughts about how networks seem to be working now in the 21st century. He stressed that it could be good to keep the network informal so that connections could benefit those who share the same mind and interests. Keeping the connections loose and open in a new platform would enable everyone to support those with the same interests, while helping open up the new platform to other related alliances. This looseness helps encourage connections while being able to do new things. It would be a good starting point to encourage ongoing involvement.

Charlene Rajendran from Singapore pointed out how her role as moderator allowed her to finding out more about the many different interesting participants and projects with an open mind. The presence of artists and scholars at this small international conference compressed so much into two days, producing a small interactive community – a kind of aesthetic ecology – permitting the discovery of new attitudes and insights. The environment of free and insightful exchanges with scholars and artists was refreshing and made her interested in being part of something that would continue and would look for ways to do so.

Danny Butt from Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne, encouraged regional networking by introducing the Asia Pacific Artistic Research

9 Jeungsook Yoo, teaching at Korea National University of Arts and Soongsil University (Korea), had presented a paper in the conference called "A Korean Approach to Acting with Meditation." She was not able to attend the July 21 meeting since she was conducting a workshop in the room next door at the same time.

Network (APARN) as a new initiative he was co-organizing between the Centre of Visual Art in Melbourne and the Indonesian Institute of the Arts Yogyakarta, Indonesia. He announced that its first meeting would be held in October 2019, with Gunalan Nadarajan from the University of Michigan as keynote speaker, and invited others to attend, too.¹⁰ The network aimed to map out artistic research initiatives and activities in the Asia Pacific, provide a regional framework for practical collaboration between individuals and institutions, and develop an understanding of local cultural dynamics influencing artistic research activities in the region. By including artists, teachers, administrators, students and researchers, it seeks to be a network and platform to bring young students to learn and get involve in different kind of arts. Pornrat was delighted to attend this inaugural regional meeting, and promoted its first meeting in October 2020.

Mark Teh, from Kuala Lumpur joined the conference as a break in his hectic schedule. It let him reconsider and rethink himself and his own work, meeting performance researchers and traditional artists, administrators and funders who importantly stressed *trust* and *respect* for this type of interactive and collaborative work. He would be interested in participating in more regional collaborative projects and work. Lawrence Ross enjoyed this conference for special memories and helping him see both changes and continuities in local performing arts, so he would be happy to share more and to join in further projects tied to this type of research.

Pornrat said she saw ways to support each other while developing an alliance of those doing artistic research, whether by evaluating projects, commenting on papers, editing volumes, as editors for journals, or through meeting at other gatherings, conferences, festivals, etc. Everyday forms of sharing and working together through Facebook, email, and other forms of social media would permit our diverse knowledge to benefit where we all are based and also help confirm and support work in the arts and research in Asia.

The meeting decided to create small, informal spaces and activities for sharing among artists, scholars, administrators, and researchers in and beyond the university to keep up to date on activities in the community of arts researchers, to open up arts scholars to listen to other researchers and arts practitioners working in other parts of the Asia-Pacific. This loosely connected, open-ended platform for university arts scholars would help them share their work and ideas when and as needed, while extending the feeling and possibilities for

10 Pornrat Damrhung attended the meeting in Yogyakarta with Khalid Midam from Burapha University in October 2019 and have been participating in APARN since. See their website: <http://www.aparn.net/>.

cooperation in the future. It could help generate a wider arena and a loose inter-university alliance.

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