

Analysis of the Aesthetics of Contemporary Sculptures Suitable for Public Parks in Thailand

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to examine the background, current conditions, problems and body of aesthetic knowledge of contemporary sculptures suitable for public parks in Thailand. The research area covered Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Phuket, Songkhla, Krabi and Ubon Ratchathani provinces in which there are constructions of contemporary sculpture permanently installed in the public parks. The research procedure used the qualitative research methodology. Data were collected from related literature and field studies using survey, interviews and focus group discussion from a group of 129 informants. The findings were presented by means of a descriptive analysis. The results show that there are 101 constructions of contemporary sculptures permanently installed in 15 parks across Thailand. The aesthetics of the contemporary sculptures in the public parks consists of 3 aspects: content, form and relationship with the environment and activities of the people who use the public parks.

Keywords: contemporary sculpture, public parks, aesthetics

บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยนี้มีจุดมุ่งหมายเพื่อศึกษาประวัติความเป็นมา สภาพปัจจุบันและปัญหาของ ประติมากรรมร่วมสมัยในสวนสาธารณะในประเทศไทย และถอดรหัสองค์ความรู้ทางสุนทรียภาพของ ประติมากรรมร่วมสมัยที่เหมาะสมกับสวนสาธารณะในประเทศไทย พื้นที่วิจัย ได้แก่ กรุงเทพมหานคร จังหวัดเชียงใหม่ ภูเก็ต สงขลา กระบี่และอุบลราชธานี ซึ่งเป็นพื้นที่ที่มีการจัดสร้างประติมากรรมร่วม สมัยติดตั้งถาวรในสวนสาธารณะ วิธีการศึกษา ใช้ระเบียบวิธีวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ เก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลจาก เอกสารงานวิจัยที่เกี่ยวข้องและข้อมูลจากภาคสนาม ใช้วิธีการสำรวจ การสัมภาษณ์และการสนทนา กลุ่ม จากกลุ่มผู้ให้ข้อมูลรวม 129คน แล้วนำเสนอผลการวิจัยแบบพรรณนาวิเคราะห์ ผลการศึกษา พบว่าประเทศไทยมีการจัดสร้างประติมากรรมร่วมสมัยติดตั้งถาวรในสวนสาธารณะ 15 แห่ง องค์ ความรู้ทางสุนทรียภาพของประติมากรรมร่วมสมัยที่เหมาะสมกับสวนสาธารณะในประเทศไทย ประกอบด้วย (1) สุนทรียภาพของประติมากรรมด้านเนื้อหา (2) สุนทรียภาพของประติมากรรมด้าน รูปทรง และ (3) สุนทรียภาพของความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างประติมากรรมร่วมสมัยกับสภาพแวดล้อมใน สวนสาธารณะ

คำสำคัญ: ประติมากรรมร่วมสมัย, สวนสาธารณะ, สุนทรียภาพ

Introduction

Sculpture is a tangible, three-dimensional visual art that is considered one branch of the fine arts. Sculptures can be made from a variety of materials, including stone, wood, clay, metal or alloy. A variety of techniques are also used in its creation, including carving, chiseling, molding, lathing and casting (Leesuwan, 1985). The aesthetic value of sculptures is two-fold: beauty in relief and beauty in form (Taotong, 1989). There are a number of examples of prehistoric sculpture across Thailand, proving the existence of this form of culture in Thailand for over 5,000 years (Natapin, 1999). Original sculpture trends have been developed over time according to history, society and culture and scholars have identified 8 eras of sculpture throughout Thai history (Kreileug, 1985).

There is a close link between Thai sculpture and the ideals and principles of Thai people. There were generally three reasons for the creation of sculptures in former Thai society: (a) to reflect local belief or customs; (b) to respect the monarchy; and (c) to show faith in religion (Leesuwan, 2004). During the reign of King Chulalongkorn, sculptures began to resemble public figures (not specific to-royalty or clergy). This transition was further developed, so that sculptures soon were created for the purpose of decorating important places and to showcase Thai art (Kreileug & Tongjuea, 1982).

During the reign of King Rama VI, Silpakorn University was founded as a higher education institution for the arts. Initially, the university was managed by Corrado Feroci (latterly known as Silpa Bhirasri), an Italian-born sculptor considered the founder of contemporary art in Thailand (Kunawichayanon, 2003).

Sculpture is a medium closely linked to society. The job of a sculptor is to create a piece of artwork that reflects an aesthetic emotion recognizable by society at large. Public sculptures must respond to the needs of the local community. These sculptures are a cultural heritage that often last longer than the lifespan of the particular sculptor or, sometimes, society they represent (Saihoo, 1995). They often concern themes such as traditional stories, concepts and feelings and aim to send a message to the viewer, which depends on the objectives of the artist and commissioner of the sculpture (Mosikrat, 2005).

With the increasing prosperity of the Thai economy in the last twenty years (and despite the global economic downturn of the past five years), there has been a boom in the number of artworks commissioned for public display in local parks. Sculptures have been viewed as aesthetic relief from the pressures in an ever quickening and stressful modern world. Urbanization in Thailand has caused huge

growth in city areas and public parks have become a more increasingly frequented respite from the concrete sprawl. Sculptures have been viewed as a way to broaden the cultural value of the parks (Jantanapalin, 2007).

Given the new importance of public parks in urban Thailand and the increasingly prominent role of art within them, the researchers were keen to investigate the aesthetics of contemporary sculptures suitable for public parks in Thailand.

Research objectives

There were three objectives of this investigation:

1. To purpose examine the background of contemporary sculptures in Thai public parks;
2. To identify the body of aesthetic knowledge concerning the creation and design of contemporary sculptures for Thai public parks; and
3. To synthesise the the body of aesthetic knowledge concerning the creation and design of contemporary sculptures suitable for public parks in Thailand.

Literature Review

Public parks were a Victorian creation in reaction to the cramped conditions of the industrial workplace and a belief that miasmas (bad air) caused diseases. There is also an argument that these parks were the imposition of middle class values on an increasingly working class urban lifestyle. Thus, the installation of public art was an aesthetic reaction to rapid urbanization (Schuyler, 1988). The content of public art over the years has varied. Statues of stately figures or high achieving professionals have often been commissioned in waves of public commemoration following their death (Wyke & Cocks, 2004). Such commissions add value to the location and help preserve their place in local and national identity. This is especially true if the sculptures are religious in nature. “The creation of public places of worship results in places classified as ‘religious’ due to the intention of the creator, the terminology used and the types of activities that take place in the space” (Colfer, 2015). There is also a moral justification for the presence of artwork in public spaces (Stalker & Glymour, 1982). Janet Kardon, then Director of Philadelphia’s Institute

of Contemporary Art, wrote that “public art is not a style, art movement or public service, but a compound event, based on the premise that our lives are enhanced by good art and that good art means work by advanced artists thrust into the public domain.” Yet, the constant theme in the messages portrayed in public sculpture is the reflection of national values (Senie, 2014).

Nevertheless, public art endured a backlash in the post-war years, which lasted up to the turn of the twenty-first century. As Rosalind Krauss observed in the 1980s, “rather surprising things have come to be called sculpture: narrow corridors with TV monitors at the ends; large photographs documenting country hikes; mirrors placed at strange angles in ordinary rooms; temporary lines cut into the floor of the desert. Nothing, it would seem, could possibly give to such a motley of effort the right to lay claim to whatever one might mean by the category of sculpture” (Krauss, 1979). This was a reaction to rising materialism and a conscious effort from the artists to prevent the commodification of their work by producing intangible and remote design concepts (North, 1990). The reaction became coupled with a sense of distrust over the commission of public artwork for the latter half of the twentieth century, but there has been a mini-revival, especially in the parks of the Western world. The modern trend is for public artwork to be commissioned by “an autonomous art-world insider rather than a public panel of judges, politicians, bureaucrats, architects, or businesspeople” (Saltz, 2015). This has resulted in a greater emphasis on the aesthetics of the artwork, rather than the corporate, capitalist or classist message found in earlier pieces.

But what should be considered “aesthetically suitable”? Such a question is particularly problematic in a country such as Thailand, where “Thainess - as much as any national identifier, and probably more than most - is less a biological fact than a performance, a slow and convoluted becoming” (Teh, 2017, p.9). The multitude of facets to Thai culture and national identity make pinpointing an aesthetic blueprint a particularly difficult exercise. This task has been ambitiously undertaken by Koompong Noobanjong in his accomplished work *The aesthetics of power: Architecture, modernity and identity from Siam to Thailand* (Noobanjong, 2013). Thainess is a common theme throughout the study and the lasting impression is of an inextricable and historic link between public sculpture, aesthetics and political ideologies. This is consistent in royal, religious and civic architecture over one hundred and fifty years. However, “whatever the meanings inscribed in these buildings by patrons and architects, cultural artifacts are notoriously polysemic or, in the opposite analytical perspective, open to multiple readings; slippages, contestations, and appropriations are common modes whereby inscribed meanings are subverted and re-signified by users/holders” (Peleggi, 2013). Therefore, rather than examine

the aesthetic meaning of the sculptures in Thai public parks, this study will analyse the aesthetic considerations of the artists in their design of said sculptures.

Research Methodology

This is a qualitative investigation which employed data collection methods in the field and documentary analysis. Data was collected over a seven-year period from November 2009 to December 2014. The research area was purposively selected and covered Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Phuket, Songkhla, Krabi and Ubon Ratchathani provinces. Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Songkhla and Chiang Mai were selected because they are major cities in each of the four provinces of Thailand. In addition, Krabi and Phuket were chosen due to their prominent role in the Thai tourist market. Moreover, each of the cities is home to famous and recognisable public parks. The scope of the investigation was narrowed further as only parks with permanent contemporary sculpture installations were selected for further investigation. In Bangkok, the eight parks meeting this criteria are: (a) Chatuchak Park; (b) Thonburirom Park; (c) Benchakitti Park; (d) Bangkok Commemorative Forest Park; (e) the commemorative forest park at the foot of the Great King Taksin Bridge [on Thonburi bank]; (f) Lumpini Park; (g) Wachirabenchatani Park; and (h) Benchasiri Park. In Chiang Mai, two parks meet the criteria, which are Lanna King Rama IX Park and Buak Hard Public Park. In Phuket, two parks meet the criteria, which are The 100-Year Commemorative Park and Saphan Hin Park. In Songkhla, two parks meet the criteria, which are the Sculpture Park in Commemoration of H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn's 50th Birthday and Seri 1943 Park. In Ubon Ratchathani Province, Thung Si Muang Park is the only park to meet the criteria.

Data were collected from related literature and field studies. The research was conducted using observations, informal interviews, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and workshops with a group of 129 informants, who were selected by purposive and snowball sampling methods. The key informant group of 17 experts was composed of nine government officials and academics and eight expert contemporary sculptors (recognised national artists, sculpture consultants and the head of the national sculptors' association). The casual informant group was composed of 35 sculptors and 16 park caretakers. The general informant group was composed of 61 park users. After initial analysis of related documents and literature, the researchers made observations at each of the research sites. Subsequently, in-depth interviews were held with the key informants and informal interviews were held with the remaining informants. Next, two focus group discussions were conducted with three to four key informants at a time to explore the findings fur-

ther, before conclusions were presented at two seminar workshops. The collected data were checked for correctness and completeness using a methodological triangulation technique. The research findings were checked by experts in visual arts and subsequently analysed by inductive analysis and typological analysis. The results are presented here as a descriptive analysis.

Results

Contemporary Sculptures in Thai Public Parks

There are 101 constructions of contemporary sculptures permanently installed in 15 parks across Thailand. Saphan Hin Park in Phuket was the first public park to feature a contemporary sculpture in 1969. In Bangkok there are eight parks containing a total of 40 sculptures, in Chiang Mai there were two parks with 43 sculptures (although one piece has been stolen and another is not at the point of installation), in Phuket there are two parks with 2 sculptures, in Songkhla there are two parks with 15 sculptures and in Ubon Ratchathani there is one park with one sculpture. The sculptures differ in terms of appearance but there are some common aesthetic features that suggest an accepted set of artistic considerations when designing and creating sculptures for public parks in Thailand.

Aesthetic Considerations for the Design and Creation of Contemporary Public Sculptures

The researchers gathered data from structured interviews with eight visual arts professionals, two focus-group discussions with higher education arts teachers and two seminar workshops with ten experts. Results were also gathered from focus group discussions with the research sample.

During his interview, Honorary Professor Chalood Nimsamer said that contemporary sculptures are human creations. Therefore, in order to analyse the aesthetics of contemporary sculptures suitable for public parks in Thailand it is necessary to first consider the location, the desires of the owner and the contemporary sculpture itself.

Assessment of the location of the sculpture is crucial to understanding the aesthetics of the artwork. The location can be divided into two categories: general physical location (the overall surroundings, including localised geographical fea-

tures, height and position of the sculpture and scale of the sculpture and its surroundings) and specific location of the sculpture (this will likely include similar observations as the first category, only over a smaller, more immediate area. It is possible for the sculptors to request landscaping changes to the park and they may also move features, such as plants and trees, to better accommodate their sculptures (Tawee Rujanee Korn, 2012, personal communication).

The desires of the owner refer to the wishes and needs of the people who own the land or commission the sculpture. Nevertheless, despite the need to produce contemporary sculptures that reflect the wishes of those commissioning the work, the sculptor's own creative imagination must be the basis of the piece. This is where the identity of the artwork is made and it is also a trace of the artist's signature and their preferences for realistic, semi-abstract or abstract art (Insong Wongsam, 2010, personal communication; Vichai Sitthirat, 2013, personal communication). However, the objectives of the art must not get lost (Kamon Tasananchalee, 2012, personal communication). Indeed, in his interview Vichoke Mukdamanee (2010, personal communication) stressed the importance of the sculptor signing a contract that stipulates the exact interpretation of the brief that the artist will reflect in his work. This, Mukdamanee argued, is necessary given the high budgets required for public sculptures.

The creation of contemporary sculptures in public parks requires more thorough consideration and planning than private sculptures in museums or private homes, whether the content of the art has been specified or not (Nontiwat Chantanapalin, 2012, personal communication). This is because they must take into account both the subjective and objective opinions of members of the general public to ensure that the designs please the maximum number of people (Chalood Nimsamer, 2010, personal communication). There is no need to use complicated shapes and patterns in public parks. Designs should be kept simple, with minimal story, so that their creative concept is easy for the majority to understand. Additionally, there are other important factors to consider when designing a sculpture for a public place, such as safety. The structure must be strong, durable and not be a danger to the general public. Moreover, many outdoor sculptures are metallic. Consequently, there must be no part of their design that enables water to collect, otherwise the sculpture may rust (Kamon Tasananchalee, 2012, personal communication). The most durable materials for sculptures in public parks are metal, stone, concrete and synthetic materials (Decha Warachun, 2010, personal communication).

In summary, there are many current problems with the aesthetics of contemporary sculptures in the public parks of Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Phuket, Ubon Ratchathani and Songkhla Provinces. These include graffiti, poor maintenance, lack of gardening and care of surroundings, blockages and inadequate signage (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Examples of deterioration and lack of sculpture maintenance in public parks across Thailand.

The Aesthetics of Contemporary Sculptures Suitable for Public Parks in Thailand

A workshop was held from 5th to 9th February 2012 at the Arts and Culture Hall and the Architecture Testing Hall, Faculty of Fine Arts, Chiang Mai University. A second workshop was held from 10th to 15th July 2012 at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Khon Kaen University. At each workshop, participants considered the findings from investigation of contemporary sculptures in the public parks of five provinces across Thailand, which were representative of each region of the country. From the workshops, the researchers concluded that there are three aspects for consideration concerning the aesthetics of contemporary sculptures in the public parks of Thailand: content, form and environment.

The aspect of content deals with subject matter, including goodness, love, unity, philosophy of life, human intentions, beauty of nature, lifestyle and local culture (Lowell et al, 2009). This is the aspect of aesthetics that is easiest to perceive and understand because it is not influenced by the artist's personal interpretation. This is the case in all five of the provinces studied during this investigation, although one specific example is the sculpture "Participation, Development and Peace" by Chakaphan Vilasinikul in Lumpini Park, Bangkok (Figure 2).



Figure 2. “Participation, Development and Peace” by Chakaphan Vilasinikul, 1985. Material: bronze. Height: 250 cm. Location: Lumpini park, Bangkok

Concerning the aspect of a sculpture’s form, people will more easily appreciate semi-abstract aesthetics than abstract art (Awomeso et al, 2010). These findings were consistent in Chiang Mai, Phuket, Bangkok, Ubon Ratchathani and Songkhla Provinces. The use of simple and uncomplicated forms using the principles of arts composition can reveal beauty and make the sculpture unique. Consideration of mass, planes, lines, texture, materials and colors that can respond to the content and environment generally helps the artist make a more popularly aesthetic sculpture. Nonetheless, aesthetics still depend on good conditions, as generated through maintenance. This is evident with the sculpture “Protector”, which displays the love of man to child through the gesture of an adult carrying a child in her arms, fully-curved, displaying no pain (Figure 3).



Figure 3. “Protector” by Khien Yimsiri, 2009. Material: bronze. Height: 395 cm. Location: The commemorative forest park at the foot of the Great King Taksin Bridge [on Thonburi bank].

The aspect of the environment consists of designing, adjusting and decorating the environment to be appropriate, to relate to the sculptures and activities of the people who come to use services in each local area, enhancing the general aesthetics of the sculptures (Yee & San, 2011). There must be a beautiful vision and good caretaking for people to enjoy relaxing around the sculptures and to generate pleasure and joy to see aesthetic things. As with contemporary installations in each of the regions of Thailand, the sculptures that have been constructed and permanently installed in Benchasiri Park, Bangkok were planned to enhance the various elements of the park (Figures 4, 5 and 6). The contemporary sculpture and environment of the park are in harmony. The park maintenance department is also responsible for maintaining a beautiful garden surrounding the sculpture.



Figure 4. Sculptures in Benchasiri Park, Bangkok.



Figure 5. Chaovalit Hatsaphong, 1969, The Milestone. Sculpture made from concrete at a height of 600cm. Saphan Hin Park, Phuket.



Figure 6. Chanvit Yeamprapha, 1990, Red Structure. Sculpture made from iron at a height of 350 cm. Lanna King Rama IX Park, Chiang Mai.

Discussion

Results found that assessment of the location of the sculpture is crucial to understanding the aesthetics of the artwork. Environment has long been an important consideration when designing sculptures (Finn, 1976). The environment surrounding the sculpture must be designed, adjusted and decorated to be appropriate, to relate to the sculpture and activities of the people who come to use services in each local area, enhancing the general aesthetics of the sculpture (Robinette, 1976). This is reflected in the critical engagement with art of geographers from the 1980s, who saw that “layers of social and cultural meaning and power could be discerned via visual interpretation and contextual investigation of symbolic imagery” (Cant & Morris, 2006). In fact, aesthetically, Carlson argued that “we may appreciate a rock or a piece of driftwood in the same way as we appreciate a Brancusi sculpture” (Carlson, 1979). This is only possible, Carlson continues, once we conceptualise the natural environment as scenery, a landscape to be manipulated, rather than as nature, a fixed object. Indeed, “the ideas and the methods of modern sculpture, especially of Minimalism art and land art, have much effect on the landscape design of today” (Wang & Lin, 2002). Sculptors have embraced the need to manipulate the surroundings of their artistic installations for maximum aesthetic impact.

Despite the need to produce contemporary sculptures that reflect the wishes of those commissioning the work, the sculptor’s own creative imagination must be the basis of the piece. The importance of an artist’s identity can be seen in the recent dispute between Italian sculptor Arturo di Modica and Kristen Visbal. Visbal’s sculpture of a “Fearless Girl” was placed on a traffic island near Wall Street on 7th

March 2017 and positioned to face off the existing “Charging Bull” statue, created in 1987. Di Modica now contests that the placing of the girl and her association with International Women’s Day has altered the meaning of his bull statue from a symbol of financial resilience in the wake of the 1987 stock market crash to a symbol of anti-women’s rights (Associated Press, 2017).

The creation of contemporary sculptures in public parks requires more thorough consideration and planning than private sculptures in museums or private homes (Madanipour, 2003). It is generally the case that people will more easily appreciate semi-abstract aesthetics than abstract art (Parsons, 1987). Sculptures are thus most useful in conveying meaning when their content is more obvious. This is a fact known to the artists interviewed in this investigation. Contemporary sculptures have been created in abstract art and non-objective art styles. They communicate meanings and feelings in similar ways to traditional popular art styles because contemporary sculptures are based on similar content, which artists want visitors to appreciate, such as the love of a mother holding and protecting her baby. Content is greatly important because it transcends individual interpretation and always relates to the society because every artist is an inherent part of the society in which their work is displayed.

Suggestions

Following the results of this investigation, the researchers wish to make a number of suggestions. In terms of practical implementation of the results, artists across the country can use this analysis to inform their own designs for public artwork. Similarly, local institutions and private commissioners should study the body of knowledge related to suitable aesthetic designs for art installations in public parks before ordering such work.

The researchers also wish to make a number of suggestions for future investigation. Further research should consider the impact of public sculptures on people in different regions of Thailand. Similarly, the impact of public sculptures on people with different economic and social backgrounds should also be examined. There should also be further investigation into the personal meaning of public artwork for park visitors and a comparison between this and the intended meaning of the artist and the commissioner.

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