Boundary of society in conflict through the balance act of play

Eiji Sumi

Playground has become an artistic object for Sumi. "Here and There" is an artwork elaborated by seesaw, also known as a teeter-totter where audience can play and be among others as they take part in an experience within an environment. Unlike a regular seesaw in the playground, this circular installation which accommodate around 30 people has a platform with pathways, benches, and standing areas allowing the audience to move from one side to another as they please and the installation tilts up and down with the movement of the participants. Once audience start to play, audience react with the balance of the classical physics that an action at one point has an influence at another point which turning effect of a force is called the moment of the force and is found by multiplying the force by its distance from the pivot. Participant promptly realize that the weight of the people and their locations will generate various ways of balance act with the condition of the critical mass and physical sensation of unconventional the movement.

According to J Huizinga “Theory of play constitutes a training of the young creature for the serious work that life will demand later on, or it serves as an exercise in restraint needful to the individuals.

But Sumi’s intension of play is not starting from the assumption to serve for theory of play or the scientific education of the classic physics but rather play as a form of activity as social function in questioning of what play is in itself and what it means for the player. According to the J. Huizinga “The fact that play and culture are actually interwoven with one another but was neither observed nor expressed. And we shall observe their action in play itself and thus try to understand play as a cultural factor in life.”

Sumi’s work aims to investigate the element of the play and portrays the political landscape as microcosm of the world where the political particularism polarizes the conflict between racial, religious, ideological and geopolitical interests and touches upon the context of constant power disputes between country, opposite parties or family in smaller scale.

Through the observation of Sumi’s work, player who sit near the center from pivot realizes intuitively their location has less influential for the movement, then player explore to move to more influential areas, but some cases, due to the limited influential space because of the circular shape of the installation, player may become supporter figure of the most influential player to achieve their goal of changing the direction of the movement or keeping balance. (Fig.1. 2) In other cases, player was only Mother and daughter, mother try to move to the other side but in reality, mother’s weight is not enough to carry over the weight of the daughter to change the direction of the movement, then mother have to bring father or to wait other player to achieve their goal of creating movement for their daughter to give an experience of the physical sensation of the movement. (Fig. 3.4)

Play is not the mission and it is for enjoyment of the leisure in free time, In this sense Sumi's work invite audiences from the public viewer to unordinary and non-commercial experiences as a configuration of contemporary art.

But, Sumi's intension to depict the boundary of our society in conflict through the balance act of play seems to contradict the sense of seriousness against nature of play activity. As J. Huizinga says "Play is a voluntary activity and the first main characteristic of play: that is free, is in fact freedom. And a second characteristic is closely connected with this, namely that play is not "ordinary" or "real" life. With this quality of freedom and unreality of play in concern, Sumi aims to bring temporal perfection of our behavior of play separated from our restraint within the perspectives of imperfect and inequitable world.

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Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Routledge and K. Paul, 1949. P2,4,5,8,10



(Fig 1) Off Balance



(Fig.2) Balance



(Fig.3) Mother and Daughter



Fig.4 Mother, Father Daughter and Strangers

Playground and Tectonic Shifts in Politics

by Chol Janepraphaphan

Playground has become an interesting artistic object in exploring the political landscape when a Japanese artist Eiji Sumi showcases his latest installation Here and There. An installation that comes in the round stage shape and the seesaw-like mechanism, that plays with weight and gravity as in the classic physics law. With the law of momentum, the beam structure needs 'force' to support the round shaped stage that inevitably has two sides to stay balanced. The installation has been showcased together with the artist's photos, taken from the playgrounds he has been to.

Eiji intends to use this exhibition as a metaphor of Thailand's societal and political history, focusing on the lost decades of the country's democracy from the 2003 coup d'etat, to the era of political particularism and the 2014 coup d'etat. Even though the election is believed to be both the checks and balances method for the government and the citizens and the solution of the chaos in political situation, however, in the same time the election can be perceived as the problem in the eyes of other political camp as well. Therefore, this conflict appears to be endless and directionless since then, until now.

The exhibition Play(e)scape intriguingly exhibits the photography and installation that the artist himself has observed in amusement parks and playgrounds across the globe, that can remind Thai people of the elements and atmosphere of "temple fair"—the dancers with revealing clothes, the pretentious freak shows, the dunk tank girls, the gambling, the vices and violence. There are times that the host is the religious institutions in which this goes embedded with the way of villagers lives, and other aspects such as the beliefs, the faith, the sins and the charisma. With all that mentioned above, it is noticeable that there is some angle in this kind of local fair that tends to support the growth of the power of state which is opposed to the way of democracy.

In the history of Thai contemporary art, politics is such an interesting and inevitable topic that fits the definition of "contemporary" in the art field. Most importantly, it is the 'experience' that everybody shares together. Actually, politics has been appearing in the works of Thai artists for awhile now, with a variety of focal points including the political change in 1932, the National Economics and Social Development plans, the not fully-effective policy, the seemingly endless change in constitution, and the indefinite election date.

If we look back into the history, art plays different roles and establishes itself with different statements or standpoints. This is the stage where we differentiate each other with the terms of right or left wing. We often view the left wing as someone who is introducing the new changes and ideas to society. Whereas the right wing is seen as the conservative heads who prefer the same old power and social institutions. But the question is: how is this old Estates-General-like kind of logic used to express the artists and the Thai-style heretic political situations in these last decades?

Perhaps, the problem is not about the ideology, since people's thoughts cannot be changed. We have to accept the truth that each collective artists holds to their own ideology—in what they believe in, rather than judging on the fact. Sometimes, we keep holding on to the same thoughts or ideas without considering change, but this round seesaw stage never stays still as time passes by. The stage represents the situations where we sometimes think that we are the important ones, the ones who drive this country forward, where in reality, there's actually someone else who does the job. Also, sometimes unknowingly, we might not be standing on the same old political ideology that we think we are. One may imagine that politics is like a 3D sphere to function as a "Public Sphere." However, the truth is that we are to accept that politics comes in a flat round shape. Take the case of Galileo Galilei for example - he was convicted with 'heresy' because he declared his discovery about the earth was not the centre of the universe, which was opposed to the bible.

It doesn't matter if we, as humans, decide to stick to our own standpoints or get shaken by the situations where Thai politics are always changing, which also reflects and affects the mobilisation of political and social contexts in the smaller units; contemporary art is what matters. Contemporary art, no matter what happens, will still truthfully do its duty — to record incidents. In the least, this round stage is the space where those who still stick to their own standpoints are still visible and noticeable. Furthermore, this stage with its round shape and difficulty in deciphering which side is left or right can also represent the unclear directions or sides in politics. All in all, in the end, regardless if we are the person standing on the stage or down with others, we need to reminds ourselves that the differences are actually caused by the discourse of right or left. The differences actually depend on how we look at things.

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