

Arts & Social Action: Case Studies from the Mekong

Revealing Contexts in a Pandemic Moment

Creative Actions during MCH Meeting Point 2021

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Introduction

One year into a global pandemic at the time it was proposed (early 2021), Creative Action is [Mekong Cultural Hub 's \(MCH\)](#) effort to facilitate real and meaningful exposure to the contemporary contexts of Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Taiwan and Vietnam. This initiative was to be given shape to and carried out by MCH Regional Representatives¹ (country reps), with the support of their mentor– artist/curator Trần Lương and the assistance of facilitator Lê Thuận Uyên. All country reps' Creative Actions took place in their actual living conditions during or prior to the day of the online event.

Travel restriction had brought reasonable challenges to MCH, whose mission is to facilitate conversation, connection between artists and cultural workers within the lower Mekong region and beyond. Although online conferencing platforms have been helpful in enabling uninterrupted communication, they have not yet been able to replace the physical interaction. Thus, Creative Action was born out of the need to form a hybrid experience, where country reps bring forth an aspect of their current context by engaging with the socio-cultural environment around them and share with MCH's network via livestreaming. All actions occurred on the same day, and participants/viewers could hop on and hop off different Creative Actions as they wished. The idea was to *be together* in a time where international movement was not an option.

Creative Action was planned to take place from 20th to 22nd May 2021, as part of a larger program called [Meeting Point](#) but was later rescheduled to [17th July 2021](#). This is because many countries in the Mekong Region were experiencing ongoing lockdown, which made it hard for them to take outdoor action or to gather.

What is Creative Action?

The aim of the Meeting Point is to bring together like-minded people from all over Asia to share their vision for the role that arts can play in their society. Creative Action, from the beginning, was one of the 4 main activities featured in the Meeting Point program (Curated conferences, Arts and Social Action Case Studies, Local gatherings and Creative Action).

¹ According to MCH website: "The MCH Regional Representatives are a very important part of the MCH team and network. They have two main responsibilities: one is to give input, advice and direction to MCH as it develops programs and services, and the other is to be a two-way promoter of opportunities between their local arts community and the regional network (which can be via MCH but also beyond). It is a part-time role, and something that would be suitable for somebody who is already quite active in their own community, who is interested in developing their own regional network, and who is excited about the idea of shaping and initiating more projects and collaborations between countries."

MCH is aware of the fact that even within Southeast Asia, many people don't fully understand the notion of the Mekong Region. They often have some ideas about it, or assumptions that this region is part of Southeast Asia thus shares similarity. Creative Action aims at challenging existing assumptions that we know and understand each other, and the context in which others work in.

Furthermore, Creative Action is designed to encourage cultural practitioners to be creative in ways of engaging with their communities during the pandemic. Social distancing measures have made numerous cultural workers retreat to online communication. Creative Action requires country reps to initiate an activity that can disrupt/ reveal/ question their physical surrounding. Without having to reduce the complex social conditions into a summarised presentation, Creative Action allows multiple trajectories of interpretation. It was an attempt to break away from the conventional format of programming.

Shaping Creative Action



"Moving Forwards and Backwards" by Trần Lương (2009)

Creative Action was not a concrete program at its early conception. The inspiration for it took root in MCH's impression of Tran Luong's performances including "Moving Forwards and Backwards" (2009)² where he invites people to brush their teeth in an outdoor space, and "Welts" (2007-ongoing)³ where he invites the audience to take his red scarf and hit his body using however much force they wish to.

² An interactive performance work, during which audiences were invited to participate in the simple act of tooth brushing by Luong and fellow socially engaged artists. The happening took place on the promenade bordering the Tonle Sap River in Phnom Penh and acts as a gesture to ease the tensions and distrust created when the Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia in order to dispose the Khmer Rouge. By simply stating their names, passerbys can participate in this intimate everyday act of human cleansing that is both bizarre and intriguing.

³ A performance where the artist invites the audience to participate by taking the scarf to whip his bare torso. The repeated action eventually leaves deep red imprints on his skin. For further information on the work, please refer to this interview: <https://www.guggenheim.org/video/tran-luong-on-lap-loe-and-welts>.

Such works show that a simple action that anyone can take in any place, has the potential to speak a thousand words. Therefore, initially Creative Action was conceived to be a collective effort, organised in a way that could inspire participants to think and exchange. Tran Luong would lead the discussion on what kind of action could be carried out in various Mekong countries yet have the ability to open up different conversations. The initial plan was that Tran Luong would introduce an idea that can be acted out in different contexts. The Reps would replicate that very idea in different locations, which was thought to generate networking and coordination.

CREATIVE ACTION vs. ARTWORK?

The distinguishment between a Creative Action and an artwork is a fine line. Inspired by a performance artwork, Creative Action could be understood as a hopeful spin-off attempt.

However, it is different in the following aspect:

- Pre-conditioned overarching concept: reps were encouraged to have direct involvement in their locality to draw out regional shared concerns
- Replication possibility: the action needs to be simple and straight forward so that it could be easily replicated or spread. The idea is that if it is a common concern, it could be reinterpreted in other areas by other cultural workers or other reps.

The development of Creative Action first took place at the Regional Representatives Annual Meeting⁴ in March 2021. It was expected that a general direction for one action was to be drafted by Tran Luong at the end of the session. However this soon evolved into a different format, delegating more agency and creative control to each of the country reps. Instead of having the curator and mentor (Tran Luong) designed the action, each rep or pair of country reps would come up with their own initiatives, based on the experiences and concerns of all countries reps over their own contexts. Afterwards, the mentor (Trần Lương) and facilitator (Lê Thuận Uyên) would meet with each pair of country reps from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Taiwan and Vietnam to refine the idea and finalise the details of the action by the middle of April.

⁴ During the Reps' two-year term, they meet regularly for short sessions to exchange and update information. Once per year, in March, they have a longer workshop session of 3 days, the *Annual Meeting*.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE REGIONAL REPS?

MCH Regional Representatives (Reps) are selected on a biannual basis. They act as cultural bridges between countries within the Mekong region.

They assume two main roles:

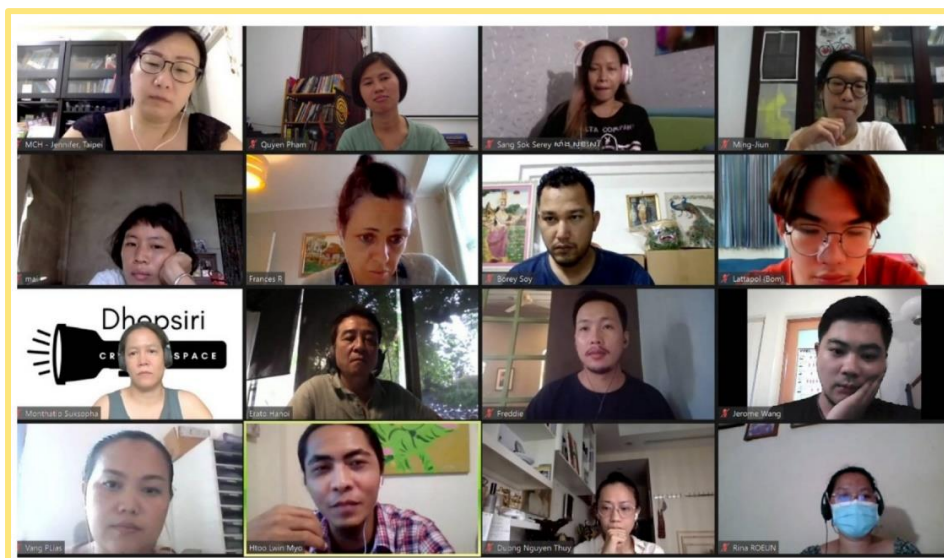
- Help shape MCH's program direction through regular meetings and discussions
- Act as a two-way promoter of opportunities between their local art community and the regional network, not limited to MCH program

The approach to the Creative Actions evolved organically through dialogue with the Reps; however this led it to go beyond the scope of the Reps' original responsibilities when they signed up for their roles. How did the Reps feel about this?

Such changes came about after the first round of discussions, where Luong and Uyen held separate group discussions with each pair of country reps. It was decided that one collective action would not be sufficient to address all of reps' interests and concerns. Thus, country reps were welcome to develop their individual idea for Creative Action or to join hand with fellow rep from their country to develop one action together. It was agreed upon that Creative Action should be a simple gesture/ ritual/ interaction based on each person's environment or community. It was not meant to be a big artistic production and there was no time limit for its duration. All participating members would work in close collaboration with Lương and Uyên to determine what they wish to do and how to coordinate their time on the day of the event.

Although this alternation was brought in response to listening to the reps, at the same time, it also meant that Creative Action was taking them in a direction they hadn't originally signed up for. Though there was no opposition, this meant that the responsibility of the reps expanded beyond the scope of work laid out in the open call of MCH.

During the brainstorming process, it was confirmed that the Reps from Myanmar could not join due to unanticipated escalation of political conflict.



Online Meeting with REPs and Trần Lương in preparation for the Creative Actions

The role of the mentor and facilitator

Lương and Uyên were tasked with the responsibility of supporting country reps to identify a key aspect that they wish to address through their action. As a facilitator, Uyên was also in charge of liaising with country reps with regards to clarifying administrative details, budget planning, coordinating time on the day of the event,...

Given that country reps come from a diverse range of professional backgrounds and varying levels of experience in interacting with the public, there was perplexity over how “creative” or “artistic” their action needed to be. There were two rounds of meeting where Lương and Uyên talked with reps from each country to help unpack their concerns, and give comments as well as suggestions to their proposed ideas. A group chat for each pair of country reps was set up for in an attempt to ensure communication ease.

The day of mini-Meeting Point

Due to Covid-lockdown, two initiatives (Creative Action and Local Gatherings) of the initially planned Meeting Point were rescheduled to July, two months later than the original date. They formed part of the new event titled mini-Meeting Point. As Southeast Asia struggled with the challenge of an outburst of the deathly Covid-19 Delta variant amidst vaccine shortage, social distancing protocols were factored into the planning of the mini-Meeting Point. Some country reps changed their creative action idea so as to be best prepared for unexpected circumstances.

There was also a discussion between MCH and the Mentoring team on initiating a Collective Action to bring synergy into the all-day event. During various conversations with country reps and organising team, it was often brought up that sharing food and drink together are the best ‘ice-breaking’ activity. Eating habit and cooking ingredients can offer interesting insights into one’s local climate conditions, culture and belief. Therefore, to ignite the spirit of ‘being together’, Trần Lương would facilitate a collective action, [*EAt EAst rEvEAl*](#), where he would invite everyone to join him for lunch and where conversations on their local dish would warm up the environment and set the stage for follow-up Creative Actions.

Below are the brief synopses of each Creative Action as carried out by country representatives, listed in order of [happening](#).

[The Living Room](#) – Joint action by Soksopha Monthatip (Tip) and Jirapathomsakul Lattapol (Bom)

Location: Chiang mai / Chiang rai / Bangkok / Nakornprathom, Thailand

Language(s): Thai and English



This project investigates how a simple act of reading a book may lead to different artistic articulations. Tip and Lattapol invite artists from different fields, across generations with varying perspectives to read a book and create works that respond to it. The book was written in 2000, narrating the story of a Thai political hero

during the student revolution in 1973. Up until today some social aspects in the book still resonate. The project stems from the act of reading a book creatively, and is realised in the form of a showcase accompanying by a panel discussion moderated by Lattapol titled "From Fear to Resilience: Artists Amid the Pandemic".

[Walking on edge of The Citadel](#) – by Nguyễn Thanh Mai

Location: Hue City, Vietnam

Language(s): Vietnamese + English



For her Creative Action, Mai takes everyone with her on a walking tour of the Old Citadel's walls in Huế city.

This action is part of her larger "Edge of the Citadel" project, for which she aims to address the issue of urban planning, displacement and heritage preservation. On her tour, she

talks about the government's plan to relocate farmers and low income workers residing along this citadel walls as the result of inconsistent post-war city planning. Using livestream to record and share her interaction with the farmers, her drawing of the farmers' hopes and dreams, Mai allows us to be present in her locality.



Cyclo – Joint action by SOY Chanborey and Sang Sok Serey

Location: Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Language(s): Khmer



Borey and Serey are both concerned with the impact Covid-19 has placed on Cambodia's tourism industry and consequentially the increasing precarity that cyclo drivers face with in their hometown Phnom Penh. They interact with cyclo drivers to learn about those drivers' working conditions. Based on this experience, the two create rap music, dance movement that reflect the drivers' stories. The drivers are invited to join the project, rapping along Serey and driving Borey while wearing face masks painted with positive messages.

Fragment of history – by Nguyễn Thùy Dương

Location: Hanoi, Vietnam

Language(s): Intro in English, the rest in Vietnamese



Dương follows Lộc Vàng (Nguyễn Văn Lộc), a 76-year-old Bolero singer who was previously arrested in the late 60s for singing sentimental, "anti-revolutionary" music. Though this music genre is no longer a taboo, the purge left him unable to perform on stage during the peak of his career. He lives in a small house on the banks of the Red River, a low-income, migrant-occupied

neighbourhood that is as precarious as his life. His walk is an act of normalcy, yet singing aloud while walking can be perceived as unusual. It is this seemingly abnormality of the daily mundanity that reveal stories that are often rendered absent in mainstream narrative.

Gender Issue Kidnapping woman to be wife – by Khampalian Nengmongvang (Pia)

Location: Vientiane, Laos

Language(s): H'mong language with English subtitle

Traditional practices of some cultures can be considered inappropriate and unethical in contemporary society. Pia sheds light on gender complication in the act of taking wife by kidnapping in H'Mong ethnic community. Originally a symbolic gesture, it has become mentally violent and problematic in the present day. This act also renders a negative image of H'Mong ethnic community which can lead to further discrimination. By gathering a group of H'Mong men and women and showing them a video re-enacting this act, Pia offers an open platform to talk about this ongoing issue.



How to reduce the use of plastics in Buddhist rituals?



by Phonepath Keosomsak (Freddy)

Location: Luang Prabang, Laos

Language: English

Plastic use is a silent threat to the Buddhist city of Luang Prabang. The increasing use of plastic products as wrapping, container,...in pagodas have led to a serious overflow of plastic rubbish. Before the plastic age, people used banana leaves very creatively for various different domestic and consumption purposes. By bringing back this custom in the form of ad-hoc workshops that anyone can join and replicate, this action hopes to bring forth a discussion on plastic usage and its damage to the environment that we live in.

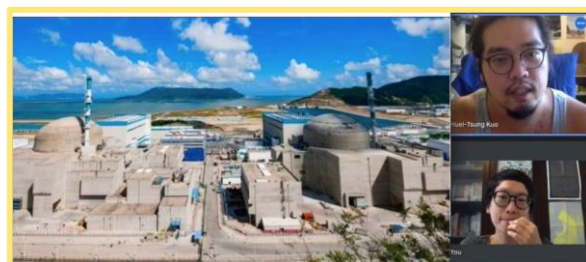
Making connection – “Coffee, tea or ()?”

Joint action by Jerome Wang and

Tsai Ming-Jiun

Location: Taiwan

Language: Chinese with English subtitles



Making connection invites people to upload a short video about their caffeine consumption habit and take part in a fun quiz. Taking the form of a video diary snapshot, and a game-like questionnaire, Jerome and Ming-Jiun bring to light the knowledge (or lack of) that we have on our neighbouring countries. The quick, short, fun questions force participants to respond out of reflect, thus rendering interesting reactions.

Due to the high volume of activities, the day was packed with events and not all country reps were able to attend each other's actions. The online guests had more freedom in tuning in and out of various channels. As activities were taking place simultaneously and continuously, it echos the speed of a physical event where one can move from one area to another. However, those who are not technologically fluent could find it difficult to navigate. Within the networks of country reps, the purpose of making connection through accessing each other's contexts was somewhat compromised. Having said that, [all actions were recorded for archival purposes](#), which are helpful access points for the long run.

Reflection on cross-cultures programming

Albeit the challenges and limitations of online programming, Creative Action has managed to shake up the mode of producing cultural programs. Instead of enabling a platform through which cultural practitioners represent their context, Creative Action attempted at giving agency to the context itself. Context, as MCH and its country reps seek to expose, share resemblance to the notion of medium, as elaborated by educator, curator and writer May Adadol:

"Medium, as atmosphere, is the intertwining of elemental nature and human elements creating environments and habitats that enable existence, experience, interrelation and action. This understanding of medium draws attention to the unbounded dynamic of interplay between mutually affecting parts, constituting its environmental characteristic as a kind of contingent ensemble, an apparatus, with certain latent capacities and dispositions, and as an indeterminate duration of interrelation, response and possible change. Medium, in this sense, does the work of enabling and mobilising in the invisible, indeterminate and perhaps even boring way that infrastructure does."⁵

⁵ Ingawanij, May Adadol. "Making Line and Medium." Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia, vol. 3 no. 1, 2019, p. 13-21. Project MUSE, [doi:10.1353/sen.2019.0001](https://doi.org/10.1353/sen.2019.0001).

Taking the Regional Reps out of their comfort zone

The country reps were selected from different backgrounds, expertise and experience. They are project managers, cultural organisers, researchers, filmmakers, dance artists, visual artists,...

This level of diversity means that not everyone is familiar with the format of a project like Creative Action. For some of the reps, designing and producing creative activity is out of their usual realm of work.

Did the Reps consider this a challenge or a good opportunity?

In the case of Creative Action, the social environment is both visible (through the various types of forms reps chose to voice their messages) and invisible (through the network of interactions generated by the actions itself). Thus, by entering the physical world, country reps are altering the medium in which they live and operate, while at the same time letting the medium converse with their action organically. As an observer looking in, I think Creative Action can offer a good alternative to the conventional cycle of programming.

Solo vs. Duo actions

There were two cases where the within-country collaboration formed organically and worked really well. Those are the examples of Cambodia and Taiwan, where the reps bounced off of each other's ideas and effectively created interesting collective work. There is one common thread in these two cases, which raises the question of whether or not sharing an artistic language helped produce more conducive content. That is the similarity in the reps' backgrounds. In the case of Taiwan it was the understanding of the command of an artistic medium, and the collaboration that resembled that of an artist and a curator. Meanwhile, in Cambodia, it was the performing art form that made the collaboration of the two reps doable, though they come from different segments of the performing art (classical Khmer dance and sub-culture rap).

For the rest of the participating members, individual action was favoured. The potential point of discussion lies within the decision to pair the reps. Was it a productive choice to group them according to their country of origin? If not so, how else should they be paired up and what are the potential consequences? Would the choice be made by MCH or by reps themselves and on what basis?

Creative Action: misfit or brilliance?!

According to private dialogues conducted with each country rep, the writer found out that Creative Action was perceived very differently by each individual. For those with an active artistic practices, Creative Action was considered more or less an artistic project, thus requiring thorough artistic articulation. On the other hand, those who come

from non-art backgrounds viewed Creative Action as a true creative outlet. This format lent them a means through which they can engage with a community and bring about meaningful conversation without the implication of a power hierarchy through conventional forms such as talk, symposium, etc.

Based on this observation, could it be that Creative Action serves as a valuable way for cultural workers - who may not identify themselves as practising artists – to creatively motivated in their engagement in community based activities. This perhaps needs another trial and reflection before more can be said about the fruitfulness of Creative Action as an approach of programming.

From the perspectives of the insiders, things are not as linear. The purpose of the meeting point and the action is to reveal the context of reps' resident country, but this format as explained above, is not one that is easy to grasp in the beginning. In the post-event phase, I had a chance to catch up with all country reps who participated in the mini-Meeting Point Creative Action. For discretion, their names are not mentioned here. Despite the early struggle to unpack expectation from MCH over their role, country reps gradually became at ease with it. Some thoroughly enjoyed the process and saw it as an opportunity to raise their issues at heart. A small number found Creative Action somewhat of a go-between, negotiating the boundary of ordinary action and artistic gesture. This brief summary is unable to account for country reps' actual experiences, and as a report of the entire program, it is not its goal to do so. Having said that, it does present an angle for further examination. If the aim of the program is to reveal context, perhaps there is more in each country rep's personal and social context that can impact their embarkation on this program. In order to build meaningful bridge, what kind of format, or what form of format briefing would be more productive in bringing people together?

Thanks and Acknowledgements

MCH would like to express gratitude to the Creative Team and all the Reps who collaborated on the Creative Actions program, along with the supporters and partners who made it possible.

Trần Lương, Lê Thuận Uyên

Suksopha Monthatip (Tip), Jirapathomsakul Lattapol (Bom)

Nguyễn Thị Thanh Mai,

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Khampalian Nengmongvang (Pia)

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MEKONG CULTURAL HUB is a regional initiative of Living Arts International, a non-profit organization which believes that arts are at the heart of every vital society. Living Arts International's other initiatives include Cambodian Living Arts.



Cover photo: 'Cyclo' – by Voch BEAT

