

Curartistry: Curating Everyday Artistry in Bangkok

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ABSTRACT

How can architecture be taught internationally, beyond the neocolonialist tendency of European-based international exchange programs? Curartistry, a method of curating everyday artistry in Bangkok, is used to achieve bilateral exchanges in art and architectural education between teachers and students of different nationalities. We offer interpretations of late-nineteenth-century and post-war ideas of “everyday life,” based especially on Charles Baudelaire’s “The Painter of Modern Life,” Henry Lefebvre’s “Critique of Everyday Life,” Maurice Blanchot and Susan Hanson’s “Everyday Speech,” and Walter Benjamin’s “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.” Their ideas grew out of their experiences in Western European metropolises, and continue to reflect similar conditions in twenty-first-century Bangkok. In addition to these literary works, Henry W. Lawrence’s *City Trees: A Historical Geography from the Renaissance through the Nineteenth Century* has been useful in the development of our workshop entitled, “Curartistry: Trees in Bangkok.”

Curartistry is a practice in which particular elements of a city are researched and recorded in drawing and photography. We invite students to visit overlooked sites, landscapes, and trees in Bangkok, and then to write and rewrite until a particular object or installation emerges from redrafting their experiences. These records lead to the proposal of projects, whether artistically, architecturally or otherwise crafted. Once a proposal takes on the form of a project, its existence as a project, rather than as a finished artwork or artefact, is what lends the project criteria for judging it. Outcomes from these projects typically take the form of an elementary installation or exhibition, presented by individual students to guest critics.

In this article, we discuss the processes of work, and how everyday artistry in Bangkok is curated in relation to the selected ideas of “everyday life” that transcend time and place, as well as the construction of our method of work. Curartistry is a key way in which we are addressing fundamental issues of city life such as social inequality, nature, ecological crises, labour, and materiality. The final outcomes often address a number of issues, such as the intense relationship between nature and city, dramatic effects in light and colour, transplantation, or tree names in relation to Thai beliefs in fortune. It is hoped that this attempt to systematically document the subjective experiences of urban life will be read as a contribution to global architectural education.

Keywords: curartistry, everyday life, AA Visiting School Bangkok, global architectural education

INTRODUCTION

How can architecture be taught internationally, beyond the neocolonialist tendency of European-based international exchange programs? Many teachers at Chulalongkorn University have attempted to address this issue. Pat Seeumpornroj is one of them. In her article “Globality in Teaching Art and Architectural History: A Case Study of the Glossary Assignment,” she assigns students to conduct “cross-cultural and comparative investigations of Western and non-Western art and architecture” (Seeumpornroj, 2021, p.1). The findings of the study appear to reveal a desire to create art and architecture that transcends time and cultural boundaries. However, our AA Visiting School Bangkok operates in a very different way.

The nature of AA Visiting School Bangkok is based on the initial multilateral exchanges that took place between the program’s three organisers, who are of both Thai and British nationality, thirty years apart in age, and from very different cultural backgrounds. The three of us hung out. Together, we created AA Visiting School Bangkok because of a mutual understanding that this two-week-workshop in Bangkok was not about raising concerns over urban development. Instead, we found an escape from normal working hours through the late nineteenth-century and post-war ideas of “everyday life,” especially Charles Baudelaire’s “The Painter of Modern Life,” Henry Lefebvre’s “Critique of Everyday Life,” Maurice Blanchot’s “Everyday Speech,” and Walter Benjamin’s “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.” Their ideas grew out of their experiences in Western European metropolises, and continue to reflect similar conditions in twenty-first-century Bangkok. In addition to these literary works, Henry W. Lawrence’s *City Trees: A Historical Geography from the Renaissance through the Nineteenth Century* has been useful in the development of our workshop entitled, “Curartistry: Trees in Bangkok.”

“Curartistry,” curating everyday artistry in Bangkok, is a method of work that was developed to help us achieve our mutual aims, bilateral exchanges in art and architectural education between teachers and students of different nationalities and cultures. After a period of trial and error that began in 2013, we came to

a general agreement in 2016 that curartistry was a method worth pursuing. We identified curartistry as a practice in which particular elements of a city could be researched and recorded in drawing and photography. By that we mean that students should set out with the objective of becoming immersed in a particular issue or dimension of something they have experienced in trips to overlooked sites, trees, and landscapes of Bangkok, or in the topic of the workshop itself. We encourage students to write and rewrite until a particular object or installation emerges from redrafting their experiences. These records lead to the proposal of projects, whether artistically, architecturally, or otherwise crafted. Once a proposal takes on the form of a project, its existence as a project, rather than as a finished artwork or artefact, is what lends the project criteria for judging it. Outcomes from these projects typically take the form of an elementary installation or exhibition. In this sense, the work falls somewhere between art and architecture, or perhaps more accurately, it uses some of the habits of an architectural student to produce a draft of an art object. It also requires some skills of curatorship in deciding how an object or installation should be presented. One way of thinking about curartistry is that it generalises some of the procedures of architects to other arts and practices of creation. A final jury in discusses each project and the value of the techniques used in the work.

How does curartistry work? It began with a focus on the relationship between selected ideas of “everyday life” and the processes of work that had to be thought through for the day-to-day bases of the workshop. We began with the basic problem that the concept of “everyday life” appears to be either limitless or without any principles. This, however, is not the case; not everything is part of everyday life, although nothing, in principle, is excluded. Rather, everyday life is a “category” of ideas found in a wide range of literature. Everyday life in Ancient Rome, for example, is the topic of one series of book from the British Museum that illustrates what an ancient Roman house looked like inside, why the Colosseum was built and who built it, how the Roman baths were constructed, and so on (Grant, 2003). This, then, is our interpretation; everyday life is the subjective register of city life. It is neither a philosophical category nor a

psychological reality. It is created and defined by the way in which elements of the city interact – and this includes interaction with human experience. In this sense, individuals often recognise everyday life through episodic structures: a queue for a bus, the raising of umbrella in response to rain, the chanting of a demonstration, or the smell of a city. All these episodes are compounds of a scene but also of materials. Indeed, it makes sense to speak of the objects of everyday life. Understanding the relationship between objectivity and everyday life is an important object of the analysis.

In this article, the ideas of “everyday life” that we have identified ourselves with are classified according to place and time, namely “everyday life” in art, in the street, and at the last sight. We then explain the processes by which everyday artistry in Bangkok is curated, through, first of all, street photographers who work in Bangkok, secondly, the streets and overlooked sites of Bangkok, thirdly, city trees and Bangkok district names, and lastly and most importantly, curating everyday artistry of trees in Bangkok. The final outcomes address a number of issues in relation to city life, such as nature, the effects of light and colour, transplantation, wood and art objects, and the relationship between tree names and Thai beliefs. It is hoped that this attempt to systematically document “Curartistry: Trees in Bangkok” will be read as a contribution to global architectural education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Everyday Life: In Art

Baudelaire’s “Painter of Modern Life” was important to the development of curartistry because of what he wrote as much as how he wrote it. Baudelaire took on modernity through the analysis of a Crimean War correspondent, water colour painter and illustrator for British and French newspapers named Constantin Guys (1802-1892). Baudelaire called Guys “The painter of modern life” whom he had wished to meet for 10 years. Baudelaire praised Guys’ artistic output under the pseudonym Monsieur G. Baudelaire hesitated to call Guys an artist, as

he knew that Guys would not like it, though he did not hesitate to call Guys a dandy, a military man, a man of the world, a man of the crowd, a child, and a flaneur (in reality, Guys was 61-year-old by the time that Baudelaire’s essay was published in French). He wrote:

“Monsieur G. is bending over his table, darting on to a sheet of paper the same glance that a moment ago he was directing towards external things, skirmishing with his pencil, his pen, his brush, splashing his glass of water up to the ceiling, wiping his pen on his shirt, in a ferment of violent activity, as though afraid that the image might escape him, cantankerous though alone, elbowing himself on. And the external world is reborn upon his paper, neutral and more than natural, beautiful and more than beautiful, strange and endowed with an impulsive life like the soul of its creator. The phantasmagoria has been distilled from nature. All the raw materials with which the memory has loaded itself are put in order, ranged and harmonised, and undergo that forced idealisation which is the result of a child perceptiveness- that is to say, a perceptiveness acute and magical by reason of its innocence!” (Baudelaire, 1964/1863, p.11)

The way in which Baudelaire wrote about Guys as an artist at work when Paris was asleep, capturing his gestures, movements and sensations, was a graphic depiction of “shock defence” as Benjamin described it (Benjamin, 1999, p. 160). In his writing, Baudelaire made use of phantasmagoria, a sequence of real or imaginary images as seen in a dream. It is as if he were following Guys to various places -- a cafe, a public garden, a lowlier theatrical world, a casino -- just like a flaneur following an artist in the crowd. After seeing Guys hurrying, searching for something, Baudelaire then asked what it was that Guys was searching for. The answer offered by Baudelaire was the key to the essay; he opined that Guys was searching for the beauty in “modernity,” and that Monsieur G. made it his “business to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain poetry within history, to distil the eternal from the transitory” (Baudelaire, 1964/1863, p.12).

This made the idea of “everyday life” charming to us. Baudelaire’s concept of modernity was ephemeral, always in transition -- eternally changing. To Baudelaire, modernity transcended the place and time that an artist lived in. The great majority of fine portraits of old masters had had their own modernity; from costumes to gestures, or a glance and smile, each was of its own period, “for each age has a deportment, a glance and a smile of its own” (Baudelaire, 1964/1863, p. 12). These elements of which Baudelaire took note combined to form a complete viable whole figure. These transitory, or to use Baudelaire’s word, “fugitive” elements changed according to place and time. Baudelaire wrote: “... for any ‘modernity’ to be worthy of one day taking its place as ‘antiquity,’ it is necessary for the mysterious beauty which human life accidentally puts into it to be distilled from it” (Baudelaire, 1964/1863, p. 13).

Everyday Life: In the Street I

The next piece of literature that caught our interest was Lefebvre’s “Critique of Everyday Life.” The word “critique” is a sign that his 3-volume-book is a systematic attempt to begin tearing away what he called “the veil of ideologies” for the development of Marxist thought in order “to make acceptable - the proletarian situation to the proletariat” (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 167). Lefebvre’s aim was to offer a critique of life and resolve the problem of life itself, beginning by discrediting the “banner of marvellous, nineteenth-century literature [that] mounted a sustained attack on everyday life which has continued unabated up to the present day” (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 125). Lefebvre wrote, “With Baudelaire, and with him alone, the marvellous takes on a life and intensity which were totally original: this is because he abandoned the metaphysical and moral plane to immerse himself in the everyday, which from that moment on he will deprecate, corrode and attack, but on its own level and as if from within. His insight into man’s failures, his duality, his loneliness and ultimate nothingness is not merely intellectual, it is intensely physical” (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 126).

Lefebvre seemed to attack Baudelaire with passion. He called Baudelaire a “half-starved

bohemian clown, [who] lived with his memories of tropical islands, black women and a pampered childhood,” and continued these fierce even personal attacks for more than 4 pages (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 128). So, what writing did Lefebvre enjoy? It turns out to have been Franz Kafka’s “The Castle,” but he described the work with this strange description: “All or nearly all accounts of the ‘universe of the concentration camp’ are the reminiscent of the strange universe of Kafka. It is an enlightening reference” (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 264). It is as if Lefebvre had a distaste for the idea of experiencing the pleasure of reading the text itself. It is as if nothingness is not real in life. Marxism wanted to transform the world; so did Lefebvre, who no longer wanted just to interpret it. Lefebvre set himself the task of getting readers to understand what the term “world” meant -- not simply a matter of intensifying projection, of cultivating new spaces, of industrialising agriculture, or of building giant factories, but the transformation of life in its smallest everyday details. To Lefebvre, Marxism, and Marxism alone, could provide the new consciousness of the “world,” within the consciousness of a man, to change life, to recreate everyday life. It is no surprise that his “Critique of Everyday Life” was a magnum opus; it was an intensive labour of writing and reflection intended to clarify his ambitious aim.

A beautiful moment in Lefebvre’s magnum opus was when he talked about the street as “a living paradox” (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 603). Lefebvre wrote: “It means that all around us, the places through which we pass and where we meet - the street, the cafe or the station - are more important and truly more interesting than our homes and our houses, the places which they link. It is a living paradox, and if everyday familiarity makes us admit it, it does not allow us to see how absurd it is ... when the street stops being interesting, so does everyday life” (Lefebvre, 2014, pp. 603-604). This thought certainly reflects modern Bangkok; the street never ceases to make the everyday public, busy, active, and constantly changing. It links nature, the sky, the clouds, the city, and the trees. It is a representation of social life, a spectacle, almost nothing but a spectacle. To Lefebvre -- and this is interesting -- the street “robs it of its privacy and drags it on to the stage of a spontaneous theatre, where the actors improvise a play which has no

script. The street takes whatever is happening somewhere else, in secret, and makes it public. It changes its shape, and inserts it into the social context" (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 604).

This brief moment of joy lasts for 4 pages before Lefebvre brings us out of the street to far away factories to discuss the repetitive physical movement of labour and technical organisation, followed by another critique of the idea of progress, uneven development, non-accumulative societies, and so on. Yes, somewhere else, there are people whose working hours are spent producing the objects found on the street. Later on in this article, we will discuss the fact that objects for sale farther away from Bangkok include large, aged trees, well nursed and ready to be transplanted.

Everyday Life: In the Street II

Post-war authors tended to place "everyday life" in the city streets, but the focus of their ideas differed. Lefebvre associated the everyday with political struggles, introducing rights to the city, and the production of social space, or, in his words, "real life" (Lefebvre, 2014, p. 125). Blanchot, on the other hand, questioned Lefebvre's interpretation of the everyday by saying:

"The everyday loses any power to reach us; it is no longer what is lived, but what can be seen or what shows itself, spectacle and description, without any active relation whatsoever. The whole world is offered to us, but by way of a look. We are no longer burdened by events, as soon as we behold their image with an interested, then simply curious, then empty but fascinated look. What good is it taking part in a street demonstration, since at the same moment, secure and rest, we are at the demonstration itself, thanks to a television set?" (Blanchot, 1959/1987, p. 14).

After Lefebvre, the everyday was no longer the average, statistically established existence of given society at a given moment. The everyday became a category, a utopia, an idea, and the directions that this could take were diverse. To approach such movement, Blanchot proposed

that ideas of the everyday "escape" every speculative formulation, even, perhaps, all coherence and regularity. Newspapers, for example, replace the notion of "nothing happens" of the everyday, changing it to the point of bursting into history with the contrary idea that "something happens" day-to-day. We find this definition, that the everyday always escapes forms or structures, interesting. Blanchot added, "Whatever its other aspects, the everyday has this essential trait: it allows no hold. It escapes. It belongs to insignificance, and the insignificant is without truth, without reality, without secret, but perhaps also the site of all possible signification" (Blanchot, 1959/1987, p. 14).

Blanchot brought the street back to us in a new light, writing, "The miracle separates the indistinct moments of day-to-day life, suspends nuance, interrupts uncertainties For the ordinary of each day was not such by contrast with some extraordinary; this is not the 'nul moment' that would await the 'splendid moment' so that the latter would give it a meaning" (Blanchot, 1959/1987, p. 16). This thought on the everyday "miracle" fascinates us. The "splendid moment" can happen at anytime. It may be something insignificant in life that reminds us of the past. The street is the site of all possible signification.

Everyday Life: At the Last Sight

Let us turn our attention into the last piece of literature that was important to the construction of curatorial, namely Benjamin's "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." Benjamin explains why "everyday life" doesn't fit into the category of the historical. It's because nothing really happens; there is no event. An everyday occurrence like falling in love may be a "moment," but not an historical "event." The point is that objects of everyday life that have a residue of the past can be anything insofar as we recognise them. For instance, one taste of a pastry called a madeleine transported Marcel Proust back to his childhood memories in the town of Combray (Proust 1913/2003, p. 49). The smell of gas station in Bangkok transported Mark Cousins back to a summer in his hometown in England (M. Cousins, personal communication, December 2018). More interestingly, Benjamin went back to Sigmund Freud's essay entitled "Beyond Pleasure

Principle" in order to discuss memory fragments in relation to fright. Memory fragments, he said, were "often most powerful and most enduring when the incident which left them behind was one that never entered consciousness" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 157). Consciousness received no memory trace, in Freudian sense, but had another function, i.e., protection against stimuli, which was more important than the reception of stimuli.

"The threat from these energies was one of shocks. Psychoanalytic theory strives to understand the nature of these traumatic shocks 'on the basis of their breaking through the protective shield against stimuli.' According to this theory, fright has 'significance' in the 'absence of any preparedness for anxiety'" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 158).

Benjamin explained that Baudelaire's creative process was to put an image of a shocking experience at the centre of his artistic work, like a self-portrait. He exposed himself to fright, so it was usual for Baudelaire to occasion fright. To Benjamin, Baudelaire talked about the close connection between the figure of shock and contact with the metropolitan masses - the crowd. "This crowd, of whose existence Baudelaire is always aware, has not served as the model for any of his works, but it is imprinted on his creativity as a hidden figure" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 162).

"The deafening street was screaming all around me.
Tall, slender, in deep mourning - majestic grief -
A woman made her way, with fastidious hand
Raising and swaying festoon and hem;

Agile and noble, with her statue's limbs.
And there was I, who drank, contorted like a madman,
Within her eyes - that livid sky where hurricane is born -
Gentleness that fascinates, pleasure that kills.

A lightning-flash ... then night! - O fleeting beauty
Whose glance all of a sudden gave me new birth,
Shall I see you gain only in eternity?

Far, far from here! Too late! or maybe, never?
For I know not where you flee, you know not where I go,
O you I would have loved (o you who knew it too!)."
(Baudelaire's "À une passante," as cited in Benjamin, 1999, p. 165).

Again, nothing happened, and this is the beauty of "everyday life." Far from experiencing the crowd as an opposed, antagonistic element, the crowd brought to the city dweller the figure that fascinated. "The delight of the urban poet is love - not at first sight, but at last sight" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 166).

CURARTISTRY: THE PROCESSES OF WORK

Curartistry I: Bangkok's Street Photographers

The first process of curartistry is to equip students with a workshop topic, and to encourage them in the notion that objects of "everyday life" in Bangkok can be systematically recorded, and later on, used as the focus of thought. Street photography is perceived as a twenty-first-century practice that centres the work upon "fugitive" elements, to use Baudelaire's term. Street photographers who thrive in Bangkok have skills that can be taught to students. They know where to go to in Bangkok, and at what time. They know how to follow a figure in the crowd, and how to capture gestures of everyday life with a "point of departure," meaning that they do not simply go out and shoot, they go into the city with a project in mind, looking for a shot that represents what the project is about (R. Narula, personal communication, December 2018). One example of points of departure is Henri Cartier-Bresson's "The Decisive Moment," a split second that reveals the bigger picture of his artistic output that is inescapably urban.

In this way, two Thai street photographers named Rammy Narula and Akkara Naktamna joined the workshops as guest lecturers, teachers, and critics. Narula (2016) photo book entitled "Platform 10" was a project shot on a single platform at the Bangkok Central Train Station, known as Hua Lamphong, a place that, we, the Thai organisers of the workshop were familiar with. That said, we had never, ourselves, encountered such a powerful high contrast of light and shadow on this crowded platform. In his forward, Breyer M. described:

"It is here at the same time everyday - while a regularly scheduled train heading for out of town briefly docks in preparation for its daily voyage - that the magic happens. The sun hits just right and the light and shadow conspire to carve out scenes, illuminating isolated moments - spotlighting gestures, faces, colour, bodies, all subtle plotlessness of larger stories. In a haze of smoke and mist, officials direct, workers spray and scrub, people wait - all unwittingly in an ersatz set stable for a 1940s Hollywood film, albeit with uniquely saturated hues and a modern cast" (Narula, 2016, forward).

Akkara Naktamna's photo book entitled "Signs" demonstrates his experience of "weird, even eerie" (Naktamna, 2016, forward) environmental elements along the streets and alleys in Bangkok and other parts of Thailand (see Figure 1). When he looked, he saw nature fighting against urban growth, dragging down telephone wires and taking over fences. Nature in Naktamna's photographs starts to resemble tree-like, prehistoric monsters, with huge branches for limbs. In his forward, Kathmandu Photo Gallery described:

"Nightmarish, primeval and strong images captured with beauty and precision. For fans of horror sci-fi, the apocalypse and other mysteries of the Intelligent Universe, Ankara Naktamna's simple but eye-opening series 'Signs' is likely to confirm their growing sense of an organic doomsday conspiracy" (Naktamna, 2016, forward).

Narula and Naktamna managed to turn objects of everyday life into art through lighting conditions of Bangkok and their thinking processes. This is what we invited the students to learn.

Curartistry II: The Street and Overlooked Sites of Bangkok

The second process of curartistry is to introduce students to overlooked sites and landscapes of Bangkok, so that they will keep their minds open to every opportunity. The ideas of everyday life discussed by Blanchot and Lefebvre are generally perceived by scholars as "the hardest

thing to discover" (Sheringham, 2006, p. 16). We have found this to be partly true in the case of Bangkok, a city that once had elephants walking along the street, a Buddhist monk walking a wild boar along the footpath. A particular encounter that we had with the everyday in Bangkok involved a one-eye-man killing a cobra with surgical knives in front of the biggest fresh market in the Khlong Toey District. We saw his two assistants using their hands to pull the cobra's head and tail with full strength while the cobra was twirling its body at the touch of a surgical knife. While its blood was being sold in a small medicine glass to a man who was waiting to it, we walked closer to the one-eye-man, asking him what he was selling. He looked at us, and we noticed that one of his pupils was opaque grey in colour. He replied, "Don't ask, if you don't want to buy." We walked away, still thinking about his grey pupil, and musing that there might have been a time that a cobra bit his eye. There was nothing symbolic about one-eye-man's grey pupil, but the thought of being hurt in the eyes reminded us of E.T.A. Hoffman's *The Sandman*:

"A wicked man, who comes to children when they won't go to bed, and throws a handful of sand into their eyes, so that they start out bleeding from their heads. He puts their eyes in a bag and carries them to the crescent moon to feed his own children, who sit in the nest up there" (Hoffman, 1816, p. 2).

If there is such thing as art, we propose that the art is there in the streets of Bangkok, rather than in museums. The streets are the sites of spectacles and all possible significations.

One of our site visits was to a bizarre and wonderful building with a modern facade on Tri Phet Road. Nightingale-Olympic Department Store, established in 1930, is the oldest and —at one time, at least -- most fashionable department store in Bangkok, especially famous for Merle Norman Cosmetic, sports equipment, and musical instruments. After the death of her brother, the owner, Aroon Niyomvanich, decided to continue the family-run business as before; that is, things today remain unchanged, as if the sale ladies and merchandised objects are frozen in time. The store sells empty bottles of Schiaparelli perfume, almost-gone Dior perfume, and seemingly white corsets wrapped in aged plastic bags to protect the expensive goods from dust. The store is filled with memories that the

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We became confident about the workshop topic, “Curartistry: Trees in Bangkok” because published books on trees were increasing in number, both in Britain and in Thailand. Trees, it seemed, were catching popular interest. One of the useful books was written by Henry W. Lawrence (2006), *City Trees: A Historical Geography from the Renaissance through the Nineteenth Century*. Lawrence identified three reasons for trees being planted in Western European, American, and western colonial cities as “aesthetics, power, and national tradition.” He stated that, “The first [aesthetics] is seen in the continuing association of trees with garden, not just for the aesthetics of garden design but in their fashionability as social venues” (Lawrence, 2006, p. 6). Changes in the aesthetics of architecture, garden design and urbanism influenced the ways trees were planted in the cities. Lawrence gave the example of when the French formal garden was introduced to Britain in the seventeenth century, saying that one of the results was the planting of the Pall Mall in St. James’s Park in London. The second issue of Lawrence’s study is the question of power and the control of spaces, as the “ability of plant trees reflected a degree of social power. Many baroque tree-lined avenues were intended for the parading of troops, a use that has continued to the present, and trees were simply aides in the display of state power” (Lawrence, 2006, p. 7). National cultural tradition -- and this is interesting -- was the third reason that Lawrence gave for planting and using the trees in Western Europe and America. “Tree-lined canals were rarely found outside the Netherlands, for example. Enclosed residential squares were seldom found outside Britain. And the rather haphazard, highly individualistic planting of trees in front of some houses and not others that developed in the United States was rarely found elsewhere. Perhaps, the strongest association with a national culture is that of the formal tree-lined boulevard with France” (Lawrence, 2006, p. 8). Lawrence’s work is a systematic attempt to study these national differences in the uses of trees across Europe and America, as well as in European colonies overseas, including in Asia and Africa.

Siam, now called Thailand, has never been colonised by Britain or France. For this reason, Bangkok was not on the list of what Lawrence

called “European colonial cities” (Lawrence, 2006, p. 99), but Bangkok has elements that are similar to the conditions of “European areas” and “non-European areas,” as Lawrence pointed out in his book. He stated that there was a distinction between streets that were “kept in neat order” and which were “open and airy” as opposed to “narrow and ill paved” (Lawrence, 2006, pp. 103-107). Why? In the Thai Royal Language, Bangkok’s formal appellation is a paragraph long, and can be translated as The City of Gods, the Great City, the Residence of the Emerald Buddha, the Impregnable City (of Ayutthaya) of the God Indra, the Grand Capital of the World Endowed with the Nine Precious Gems, the Happy City Abundant with Enormous Royal Palaces which Resemble the Heavenly Abodes of Reincarnated Gods, a City Given by Indra and Built by Vishnukarn (Askew, 2002, p. 16). For the Royal House of Chakri, Bangkok was not an urban system, but, instead, a collection of royal palaces surrounded by an ever-expanding populace. This is a clue about who exactly controlled the appearance of Bangkok, including the orderliness of trees along the newly built Ratchadamnoen Avenue, the “thoroughfare of the King,” that took the tree-lined boulevards of Paris as a model.

In Thai Language, the less formal name of the capital city, Bangkok, can be translated as the “hamlet of wild plum trees,” which might be read as another clue that trees came to the place before the city. Each of the city’s district names signifies people’s lives. Ladprao district, for example, means the “inclined land of coconut trees.” Bangna district means the “hamlet of rice fields.” Khlong Toey district, for another example, means the “waterways of Pandan.” The *Pandanus amaryllifolius* Roxb. ex Lindl. is “a plant belonging to the Pandanaceae family, mainly native to South-east Asian countries. Pandan leaves are widely used in Southeast Asia for flavouring various food products such as bakery products, sweets and even home cooking because of [their] distinct and pleasant aroma,” and the plant continues to hold scholarly interests in pharmaceutical research (Bhuyan & Sonowal, 2021, p. 138). Today, the waterways of Pandan are gone from Khlong Toey District; the canal has been replaced by a street, and gone are the Pandan trees, just like other trees that at one

time represent the now-absent character of Bangkok that is still reflected in its district names.

Curartistry IV: Curating Everyday Artistry, Trees in Bangkok

Curartistry provides a pathway for addressing fundamental issues within city life such as social inequality, nature, overlooked sites, ecological crisis, labour and materiality. This process involves the practice of writing and redrafting until the point at which students are confident about their projects, or, at least, have clearly defined projects. The final outcomes are presented by the individual students to guest critics in the formats of exhibitions or installations. Communication skills are, therefore, important. A student's presentation, whether it comprises an installation, digitalised moving images, or speech, is generally rehearsed a day prior to the final exhibition.

“CURARTISTRY: TREES IN BANGKOK” AND THE FINAL OUTCOMES

In this part of the article, we will summarise what the workshop, “Curartistry: Trees in Bangkok,” is about, and we will classify the final outcomes of the workshop through issues that students have addressed, namely, the intense relationship between nature and city, dramatic effects in light and colour, tree transplantation, and tree names in relation to Thai beliefs about fortune.

At AA Visiting School Bangkok, the program, “Curartistry: Trees in Bangkok,” is not about trees as natural objects in a human-constructed urban territory. The real object of the investigation has always been that of everyday life in Bangkok, asking how trees are connected to many other conditions - the climate, the light, or the look of the city in a normal yet distinctive manner. We have tried to study trees as part of the way in which a certain normality of the city is achieved. Our focus on trees is an attempt to see trees both as part of that normality and as a dimension in describing how the city is seen within itself.

This has allowed students to be more definite about what is, in effect, the aesthetics of the tree. We are not concerned with anything like the beauty of the tree or the trees' assistance in making everyday life more visually beautiful. The study of a tree in this program is less concerned with the tree as an object in the landscape, and more concerned with the tree as a tool in constructing a way of seeing and attending to the city.

An Intense Relationship between Nature and City

In fact, a generally agreed finding of many students has been that the relationship between the tree and the city is a tense one. Zi Ye and Junyuan Cheng, for example, saw the “Silent Battle” between trees and human, or in nature versus city (see Figure 2). They wrote:

“Roots, are cracking asphalt roads; are lifting up pedestrians' tiles, are breaking concrete parterre. Perhaps they have the power to dominate the battle. Or perhaps, they do not strong enough and remain trapped beneath the ground. This war, will never end until the life of tree has ended” (Z. Ye & J. Cheng, personal communication, December 2018).

Somehow, the logic of the city and distribution of trees set up a certain conflict. Part of the fantasy of the city is that it is complete, or at least that it calls out for completion. By contrast, a tree introduces into the city a principle of incompleteness. A tree was part of the “city” of nature. It is clear that trees follow a line of development which has not been exhausted by the idea of design. Following this line of thought, the relationship between the tree and the city, within the city, always undermines the idea frequently expressed in utopian literature that the city could ever be solely the product of design. The city always relies upon stuff, of which trees are a part, and that ‘stuff’ can be conceived of as either something that is missing, or something which can be added to make a city.

At AA Visiting School Bangkok, the tree is treated as a means of perception just as much as an object of perception; the tree, like other objects, contributes to the stuff of the city, to the

appearance of the city. The tree helps to manifest the phenomena of the city. At its simplest, the tree helps to make manifest movement in the city, since wind manifests itself through movement. Phenomena are grouped by architects, usually as atmosphere or atmospheric conditions needing to be re-conceptualised. Atmosphere is always mediated by stuff in the city, and by the city itself. At the same time, trees help to develop techniques of appearance that may be distinct from the trees themselves. In

Bangkok, there are a large number of telephone poles that support bundles of wiring in a way that has obviously been derived from the tree, and these functions of supporting the wiring and bunching the wires as if they were branches clearly show that the relationship between the city and the tree travels in two directions, from the tree towards a design element, and also from the design element to the tree as in the case of the surgical transplant of moving a tree from one site to another (see Figure 3).

Figure 2

“The Silent Battle” by Zi Ye and Junyuan Cheng, AA Visiting School Bangkok 2018



Courtesy
Trees in Bangkok
Zi Ye | Junyuan Cheng

The Silent Battle

Forest,
was wild and chaotic.
Trees burned, blew down, grew, and regenerated on their own,
freely.

Then man,
stepped into this land,
changed it into industries and cities.
The war for space between trees and human began.

Concrete and tiles,
created by humans,
bring people convenience,
but suppress the nature of trees.
It acts like a barrier
and separates the roots of trees from the civilization of man.

The ground,
still seems calm and peace above,
but,
there are undercurrents beneath.

Great power is brewing.
A power
which breeds in silence.

Trees,
they are trying to break away.
And maybe at some moments, in some places,
they will break free
and send a signal of war to human.

Roots,
are cracking asphalt roads,
are lifting up pedestrians' tiles,
are breaking concrete patterns,
are ...

Perhaps,
they have the power
to dominate the battle.
Or perhaps,
they do not strong enough
and remain trapped beneath the ground.

This war,
will never end
until the life of trees has ended.

Note. This figure demonstrates an intense relationship between nature and city. Graphic layout by K. and K. Kaewprasert, 2018. From AA Visiting School Bangkok 2018, by Architectural Association School of Architecture, 2018. Copyright 2018 by Architectural Association School of Architecture. In the public domain. Reprinted with Permission.

Figure 3

“Interlacing” by Chenyi Zhang, AA Visiting School Bangkok 2019



Curartistry
Trees in Bangkok

Chenyi Zhang

Interlacing

Seeing the electricity wires tangled with street trees in Bangkok reminds me of the situation in Guangzhou: underground cables have replaced the traditional cables in the air within the city centre. There are given enough space and a safe condition for growing, creating a more refreshing and cleaner streetscape. Looking back to Bangkok, I started to wonder: Where will the wires go? Where will the trees go?

Walking on a busy street in Bangkok, immersed in the hustle and bustle, I saw the complexity and chaos of this city. Buses, cars, motorbikes and “tuk-tuks” gallop and honk their horns. Hawkers sit on the steps outside the street shops and yell to attract customers. Food stalls occupy the narrow sidewalks. The polluted smell and noise make me breathless. I shift my gaze upwards to seek for fresh air and view. Accompanied by a huge shock, I saw this image with layers of urban fabric: wires, a tree, a cement pole, a street light and the facade of a building. A bundle of tangled wires was overhead in the air. The trunk of the street tree grew through the void between the wires, expanding radially. A cement pole erected high above the tree. The street light springs from the gap between tree branches. A tall building is only a few metres away. The sky in the background is split and blocked by these layers of elements.

During my stay here, I sense the rapid development radiating from the city. Perhaps, the number of poles and wires will be multiplied in the coming future. Inevitably, trees are penetrating from the periphery towards the city centre as a recognised indispensable element. What is our role in mediating the adverse trends?

Note. This figure demonstrates an intense relationship between nature and city. Graphic layout by K. and K. Kaewprasert, 2018. From AA Visiting School Bangkok 2018, by Architectural Association School of Architecture, 2018. Copyright 2018 by Architectural Association School of Architecture. In the public domain. Reprinted with Permission.

Dramatic Effects in Light and Colour

This process, in which the tree or trees function both as objects and as means of the production of perception, is clear even in the simplest examples found when looking at a city. The city contains stuff, in this case trees, but, by extension, all sorts of stuff, and this stuff is seen as objects, but also seen through as an element of urban vision. Seeing things in the city is frequently a form of seeing through. Our vision bumps up against objects; this partly occludes our vision. We cannot see what is behind a building, but we quickly work out what must be behind it. Other objects like trees are not so much occluding as they are semi-transparent and mobile. Looking through a tree, then, provides a clear example. This often leads to an intense preoccupation with the effect of lighting. As a result of an appearance of shadowing and of

dramatic differences in light and colour, artists tend to concentrate on the lighting effects of crowded areas. Urban oil painting, which we associate with Impressionism, would be an example. Our objective, though, is somewhat different. It is not so much to be able to reproduce this complexity, as is the goal of Impressionism, but to develop a simultaneous grasp of something as an object and also as part of an apparatus for seeing objects.

In the work entitled “Treeniverse,” Ke Su took close up photographic shots of a tree, resulting in a photo with high contrast between light and shadow (see Figure 4). She then wrote about the “crust of a tree, the bark of the earth, the fire, the breeze, the roaring mountain, the slumbering plain, the storm, the stars” and “a dust in a tree” (K. Su, personal communication, December 2019).

Patarita Tassanarapan used torchlight to capture “wounds” on trees (see Figure 5). Her imageries

appear similar to Francis Bacon's painting of distorted meat.

"The forensic light on the bark's evidence,
Of injuries inflicted, Living red sap leaking.
A landscape of wounds wanting suture.
Imperceptible to this passing light, these
monuments are sealing, yet growing" (P.
Tassanarapan, personal communication,
December 2018).

Instead of seeking the sublime convention of landscape photography, Hongchang Duan took photographs of the trees by using the methodology of paparazzi-style photography (see Figure 6). The "flash," Duan noted, "intrudes and interrupts to catch them off-guard where they forget to be trees and reveal their strange, quirky and unique selves, much like celebrities under the flash of paparazzi" (H. Duan, personal communication, December 2019). The students' creative process represents the subject in relation to the object in observation. A palm tree, as captured by Duan, was turned into the thin figure of a blond-haired celebrity.

Eunbi Kim took a photograph of a tree in broad daylight (Figure 7). She cut a small piece of the tree's bark and revealed the red colour, blood-like, inside the tree. She then drew the distinction between bark and wood through a particular scene of Alfred Hitchcock's movie, *Vertigo*, when Madeleine, played by the actress Kim Novak, put her finger on a growth ring of the cross-section of a huge tree and said, "Here, I was born," then she moves her finger and says, "And there I died." Kim wrote:

"The growth or the ageing of the tree is nothing other than internalisation of the bark. The bark is tree's temporary skin which is always extended and renewed. This is relevant for a character who in the sense does that in reality. The tree is a continuous transformation from bark to a tree, if one takes the bark as being the skin," and this was fascinating, "Bark is the present and wood is the past" (E. Kim, personal communication, December 2018).

Figure 4

"Treeniverse" By Ke Su, AA Visiting School Bangkok 2019



Note. This figure demonstrates an effect of light and colour. Graphic layout by K. and K. Kaewprasert, 2019. From AA Visiting School Bangkok 2019, by Architectural Association School of Architecture, 2019. Copyright 2019 by Architectural Association School of Architecture. In the public domain. Reprinted with Permission.

Figure 5

“Wound” by Patarita Tassanarapan, AA Visiting School Bangkok 2018



Note. This figure demonstrates an effect by light and colour. Graphic layout by K. and k. Kaewprasert, 2018. From AA Visiting School Bangkok 2018, by Architectural Association School of Architecture, 2018. Copyright 2018 by Architectural Association School of Architecture. In the public domain. Reprinted with Permission.

Figure 6

“Celebrittrees” by Hongchang Duan, AA Visiting School 2019



Note. This figure demonstrates an effect by light and colour. Graphic layout by K. and K. Kaewprasert, 2019. From AA Visiting School 2019, by Architectural Association School of Architecture, 2019. Copyright 2019 by Architectural Association School of Architecture. In the public domain. Reprinted with Permission.

Figure 7

“Bark” by Eunbi Kim, AA Visiting School 2018



Courtesy:
Trees in Bangkok

*
Eunbi Kim

Bark

Bark.
The external skin of a tree.
How I feel when I watch it, how I see when I touch it,
and now as I think as I peel it.

In Benchasin Park, a tree intrigued me.
I watched it closely: grayish, smooth, but with small, dark cracks everywhere.
I touched it: solid but soft, powdery, thin, but fissured.
I tried and failed to cut it: too resistant to cut, very thin, easily broken and sticky to the wood. Finally, I managed to cut. The size of the cut is about a fingernail. The cut part leaked very white sapwood and green sticky rubber. From the inside of the peeled bark, sticky white rubber flows and green cambium were cut together, which was in sharp contrast to the dry, grayish outer bark.

I watched another bark with another trait.
I watched it: characteristic strip pattern. Grayish.
I took a closer look: each strip is light or dark grayish forming a visually striking pattern.
I touched it: the suggest texture along the strip.
I tried to cut it: very thin like the old tree. In contrast to the previous tree, the rubber was not like latex. I intended to cut only the outer bark, but when I pulled it, the inner bark and cambium came off as well. The juicy red rubber sound made me feel guilty.

Bark creates the first perception of a tree.
One might think, "Isn't it just a superficial layer?"
Not really. Bark is being expanded and renewed depending on external as well as internal environment.

Alfred Hitchcock's movie, Vertigo, has a scene for a big tree. "Trees record time. Madeleine, the actress, put a finger on a spot. She said, "Here, I was born". Her finger moved, then she said, "And there I died". The trees accumulate traces of time during the growing process. Wood shows the accumulated past, and the bark is constantly being infused while creating a new life. Bark is the present that existed to reflect the past.

The growth or the aging of the tree is nothing other than internalization of time bark. The bark is like a temporary skin which is always being extended and renewed. This is relevant for a character who in the same does that in reality. The tree is a continuous transformation from bark to a tree, if one takes the bark as being the skin. Bark is the present and wood is the past.



Note. This figure demonstrates an effect of light and colour, a relationship between bark and skin. Graphic layout by K. and K. Kaewprasert, 2018. From AA Visiting School 2018, by Architectural Association School of Architecture, 2018. Copyright 2018 by Architectural Association School of Architecture. In the public domain. Reprinted with Permission.

Transplantation and Tree names in relation to Thai Beliefs in Fortune

Perhaps the most ambitious trip of our workshop was to the Big Trees Garden in Nakhon Nayok, Rangsit Canal Number 14, which is 2 hours' drive from the Montien Hotel on Rama IV Road. Students seemed to be powerfully affected by visiting this estate, which functions as a clinic and market for grown trees which have been removed from a site. Each removed tree is brought to the clinic where it recovers its root system before being finally transported to a site chosen by a buyer, so that the site has a mature tree transplanted to it. Stated this way, it seems

unremarkable, but the students were all struck by the dramatic force of this transplantation.

Yaoxuan Wand and Tong Wu saw a tree from Big Trees Clinic and Market called "Cha-Nuan-Thong," and they saw its price tag. They addressed a complex issue concerning the appearance of a living tree, wood, sculpture and art object through their imagination of exhibiting the kra-pee trunk, "inspired by techniques of bonsai, pruning is used to heighten the aesthetic value the form" (Y. Wang & T. Wu, personal communication, December 2019). They labelled the name, provenance and the date from which the kra-pee trunk had become a curated artwork, and addressed how the kra-pee had a second life, with new meaning and a new position as a valued artefact of the museum (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

“Cha-Nuan-Thong” by Yaoxuan Wand and Tong Wu, AA Visiting School Bangkok 2019



Cha-Nuan-Thong

Curartistry
Trees in Bangkok

Yaoxuan Wand | Tong Wu

Cha-Nuan-Thong,
2019
Sculpture, mixed media
395 x 178 x 224 cm.

This sculpture comes from the *kras* tree trunk. Inspired by techniques of bonsai, pruning is used to heighten the aesthetic value of the form. Aspects of the *kras* tree, such as texture and colour, are artificially exaggerated their natural context. The trunk came from the *Uthitjan Forest Association* was selected by the artist, was given a new name and date of birth. The label details the name, provenance and the date from when the *kras* tree became a curated artwork. The *kras* tree is now living a second life. With its new meaning and its new position, the *kras* tree becomes a valued part of the museum.

↑ This is the gallery view way of seeing how the wood became an art object.

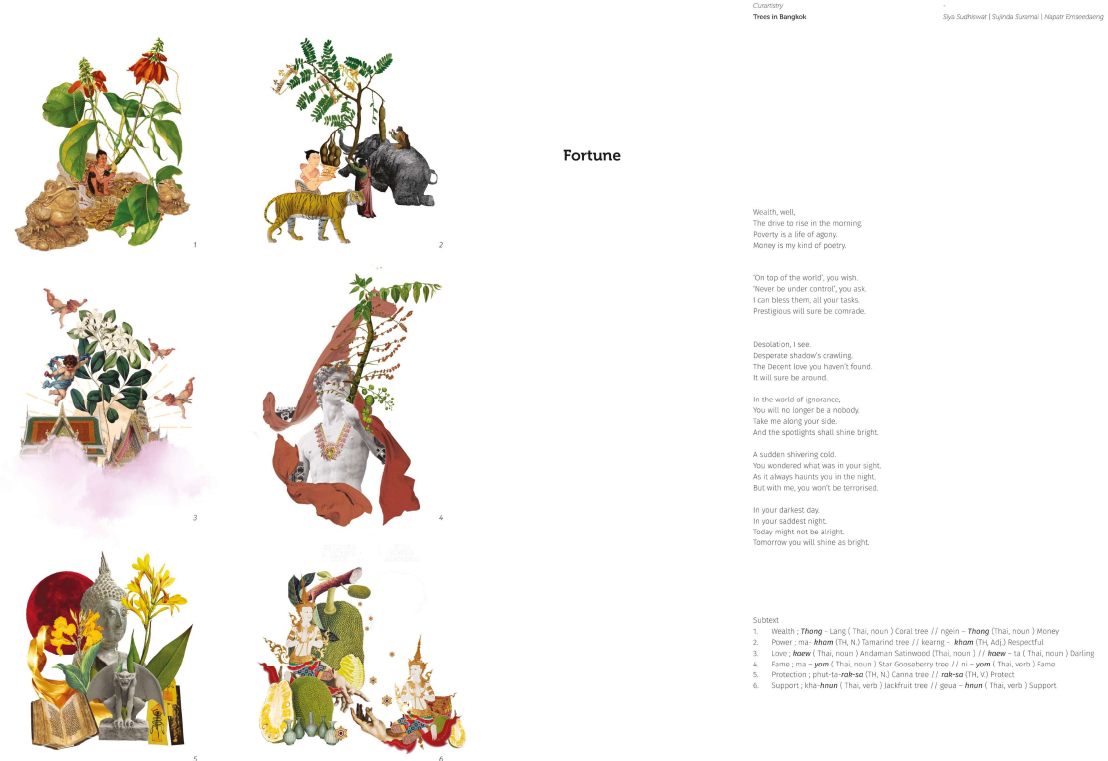
Note. This figure demonstrates the relations between transplantation, wood and art object. Graphic layout by K. and K. Kaewprasert, 2019. From AA Visiting School Bangkok 2019, by Architectural Association School of Architecture, 2019. Copyright 2019 by Architectural Association School of Architecture. In the public domain. Reprinted with Permission.

S. Sudhiswat, S. Suramai, and N. Emseedaeng drew the relationship between tree names and Thai beliefs in “Fortune” (see Figure 9). They wrote about the Thong-Lang Tree, or Coral Tree, as being popular amongst Thai buyers. The Thai word *thong* signifies “money,” and they wrote, “Poverty is a life in agony” (S. Sudhiswat, S. Suramai, & N. Emseedaeng, personal

communication, December 2019). During the courses of the workshop, it became clear that the trees not only played a role in people’s well-being, but that they also existed in the consciousness of students. We concluded by honouring the tree while expressing fear for its future.

Figure 9

"Fortune" by Siya Sudhiswat, Sujinda Suramai, Napatr Emseedaeng, AA Visiting School Bangkok 2019



Note. This figure demonstrates tree names in relation to Thai Beliefs in Fortune. Graphic layout by K. and K. Kaewprasert, 2019. From AA Visiting School Bangkok 2019, by Architectural Association School of Architecture, 2019. Copyright 2019 by Architectural Association School of Architecture. In the public domain. Reprinted with Permission.

Figure 10

“Curartistry: Trees in Bangkok,” AA Visiting School Bangkok 2019 Book in A2 size



Note. This figure demonstrates the final outcome of AA Visiting School Bangkok 2019. Sewn binding by K. and K. Kaewprasert. Photo of the cover by H. Duan. Photo of the tree and its support by M. Moore, taken at Big Tree Garden. Photo of the book by T. Chitrabongs, ML, 2019. From AA Visiting School Bangkok 2019, by Architectural Association School of Architecture. Copyright 2019 by Architectural Association School of Architecture. In Public Domain. Reprinted with Permission.

EPILOGUE

The final outcomes of “Curartistry: Trees in Bangkok” became traveling exhibitions (see Figure 10). AA Visiting School Bangkok’s hand-bound books were exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts in London during the Summer Exhibition of 2020. Digital editions of the books also formed part of the exhibition entitled “Paradise Lost,” organised by Bangkok Art and Culture Centre from 24 December 2021 to 24 April 2022. Interestingly, “Paradise Lost” is also the title of John Milton’s book that Cousins relied on for his account of Satan, the “fallen angel” as described by Milton, in relation to the “miracle” during Cousins’ Friday lecture series “Where is every life?” on February 1, 2013.

The next topic of focus for AA Visiting School Bangkok will be “everyday materials.” This topic involves students in visiting local factories and construction sites in order to observe the different characteristics of brick and wood, such as colours and textures. We will not be concerned with the selected materials as building materials; rather, the selected materials will be taken as the agencies to enter into observation of “everyday life.” One brick factory that may fall into Benjamin’s category of “love at last sight” is the Bang Pla Kot (BPK) Factory. Its name signifies a part of Chao Phraya River that has fertile soil because of the annual flood tide. Bang Pla Kot is a popular site for brick factories in Thailand because of the soil quality. Today, brick factories in Bang Pla Kot have already adopted gas technology for the brick ovens; however, the BPK factory continues using firewood and baking bricks in marvellous coned-shaped-buildings with chimneys and raised floors, similar to those of Roman Baths, made entirely out of bricks. Each brick oven has an oculus on the top, open to beautiful rays of light at lunch time. Of course, when dust is in the air, the spatial effect is intensified, exposing traces of brick arrangements piled up high against the brick oven wall. On an earlier trip to the factory, those red stripes reminded us of Barnett Newman’s paintings entitled “Eve” (1950) and “Adam” (1951-2), in particular.

Unfortunately, it is no longer possible for our late colleague, mentor and friend, Mark Cousins, to visit the BPK factory, and it is difficult to imagine the workshop taking place without him. His

recorded Friday Lectures, however, are in the public domain of the AA digital archive, now being transcribed and published in book form, edited by his widow, Parveen Adams. We once asked Cousins as his health became more and more fragile, when he would stop coming to Bangkok. Cousins’ reply was that he would not stop “until education ends” (M. Cousins, personal communication, December 2018).

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