

Performance Art for Social and Political Communication II

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Abstract

This article examines how performance art functions as a medium for social and political communication through analytical case studies of two contemporary Thai performance artists: Jittima Phonsewak and Mongkol Plienbangchang. The study investigates how their conceptual approaches, symbolic materials, bodily actions, and site-responsive performance strategies address themes such as state power, environmental degradation, cultural identity, and community struggles. Rather than merely presenting examples of artworks, this article critically analyzes how performance art constructs meaning, generates public discourse, and transforms personal expression into sociopolitical commentary. The analysis demonstrates that performance art serves as an alternative form of communication capable of confronting dominant narratives, amplifying marginalized voices, and stimulating public reflection on social realities.

Keywords : Performance Art, Art for Social, Political Communication, Jittima Phonsewak, Mongkol Plienbangchang

Introduction

Performance art has long played a significant role in contemporary visual art practices, serving as a dynamic and interdisciplinary medium that integrates the body, space, action, time, and symbolic objects into a unified communicative form. According to Goldberg (2011), performance art functions as a live, action-based practice rooted in both visual art and theatrical expression, making it particularly effective in conveying social and political messages.

In Thailand, social, political, environmental, and economic challenges—ranging from state violence and cultural conflict to environmental destruction and industrial exploitation—have continually inspired performance artists to use their practices as acts of resistance and social commentary. Performance art, therefore, becomes a powerful means through which artists articulate personal perspectives, confront structural injustice, and provoke dialogue among audiences.

This study focuses on two influential Thai performance artists, Jittima Phonsewak and Mongkol Plienbangchang, whose works exemplify the communicative power of performance art within sociopolitical contexts. Instead of presenting biographical information as raw data, this article critically analyzes selected performances to understand how each artist employs the body, materials, and symbolic actions to construct meaning and stimulate awareness.

Literature Review

Performance art has been widely discussed in global scholarship as a medium that challenges conventional modes of artistic communication. Fischer-Lichte (2008) emphasizes the transformative nature of performance, wherein the body becomes a site of meaning and social negotiation. Bishop (2012) highlights how participatory and performance-based practices often confront political structures by engaging audiences directly.

In the Thai context, performance art emerged prominently during periods of political unrest, reflecting tensions between state authority, cultural identity, and public dissent. Scholars of Southeast Asian art have noted that Thai performance artists frequently address environmental issues, rapid urbanization, and the erosion of local cultures through symbolic gestures and public interventions. This literature establishes a conceptual foundation for examining how Thai artists utilize performance art as a medium for sociopolitical critique.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative interpretive methodology**, using two complementary analytical frameworks:

1) Interpretive Visual Analysis

Assessment of bodily actions, gestures, spatial composition, use of materials, and symbolic meaning.

2) Contextual Analysis

Examination of sociopolitical conditions, cultural references, and community contexts influencing the artworks.

Data sources include:

- photographic documentation
- artist statements
- performance festival archives
- written interviews
- academic and critical texts

Three works from each artist were selected based on relevance to social and political communication, thematic clarity, and public impact.

4. Analysis of Selected Works

4.1 Jittima Phonsewak

4.1.1 Themes and Artistic Approach

Jittima's works address issues of neo-colonialism, cultural resistance, environmental degradation, and the exploitation of marginalized communities. She often employs her body as a symbolic site of confrontation, using simple but powerful materials soil, seeds, traditional objects, and everyday items to reflect social struggle.

4.1.2 Analysis of Key Works



Figure 1. Neo Colony Series, Part 1

Source: Jittima Phonsewak (Collection of Photographs), 2020

(1) Neo Colony Series (2020)

Set against colonial-era architecture, this work critiques the persistent influence of transnational capital and state complicity in resource exploitation. The setting itself functions as a metaphor for historical and contemporary oppression. The artist's actions and placement within the urban landscape highlight the tension between local communities and external power structures.

Communicative Function:

- Reveals forms of “invisible domination.”
- Uses historical architecture to comment on modern political control
- Encourages audience reflection on systemic inequalities



Figure 2. Neo Colony Series, Part 2

Source: Jittima Phonsewak, Collection of Photographs, 2020.

2) Green Revolution Series (2020)

This series explores global corporate control over seeds and agriculture. Through gestures involving soil, seeds, and her body, the artist transforms the politics of agriculture into a tangible and emotional experience.

Communicative Function:

- Draws attention to food sovereignty
- Critiques industrial agriculture as a threat to rural autonomy
- Uses the body to symbolize the vulnerability of communities



Figure 3. *Green Revolution Series, Part 1*

Source: Jittima Phonsewak, *Collection of Photographs*, 2020.



Figure 4. *Green Revolution Series, Part 2*

Source: Jittima Phonsewak, *Collection of Photographs*, 2020.

(3) Let Me Dance (2020)

Inspired by the Nora fingernail a symbol of Southern Thai cultural identity, the performance reflects on cultural repression and the politics of identity. The artist asserts her right to cultural expression through choreographed gestures, using the fingernail as a metaphor for resistance.

Communicative Function:

- Addresses cultural discrimination
- Emphasizes resilience against suppression
- Connects traditional identity with contemporary political struggle



Figure 5. *Let Me Dance Series, Part 1*

Source: Jittima Phonsewak, *Collection of Photographs*, 2020.



Figure 6. *Let Me Dance Series, Part 2*

Source: Jittima Phonsewak, *Collection of Photographs*, 2020.

4.2 Mongkol Plienbangchang

4.2.1 Themes and Artistic Approach

Mongkol's works often reflect poetic contemplation on human vulnerability, political tension, spiritual symbolism, and the fragility of existence. His performances integrate sound, ritual objects, and environmental elements to create layered meanings about life under sociopolitical pressure.

4.2.2 Analysis of Key Works



Figure 7. The Mysterious Sense: Hidden Perception, 2018
Source: Mongkol Plienbangchang, *Collection of Photographs*, 2018.

(1) The Mysterious Sense (2018)

Using ritual ashes, bells, water, and fragile clay vessels, the performance reflects the conflict between strength and fragility. The breaking of the vessel symbolizes the breaking of social structures, while flowing water represents liberation.

Communicative Function:

- Symbolizes systemic pressure and vulnerability
- Offers commentary on political uncertainty
- Uses ritualistic gestures to provoke introspection



Figure 8. I Dream the DREAM: I Dream of the Dream, 2019 (Preparation Phase)
Source: Mongkol Plienbangchang, *Collection of Photographs*, 2019.

(2) I Dream the DREAM (2019)

A participatory work in which audiences attach artificial butterflies to the artist's face. The butterfly symbolizes memory, dreams, identity, and fragility, while the artist's face represents the earth—a shared collective space.

Communicative Function:

- Models democratic participation
- Emphasizes shared human experience
- Uses metaphor to explore collective hope amid struggle



Figure 9. *I Dream the DREAM: I Dream of the Dream, 2019 (Part 1)*
Source: Mongkol Plienbangchang, *Collection of Photographs*, 2019.



Figure 10. *Close to Be: Self-Portrait Series, Sample Image 1 (2020)*
Source: Mongkol Plienbangchang, *Collection of Photographs*, 2020.

(3) Close to Be: Self-Portrait Series (2020)

Created during COVID-19 lockdown, this 103-day project uses household objects covering the artist's mouth and nose to symbolize scarcity, state mismanagement, and psychological pressure.

Communicative Function:

- Documents lived experience during crisis
- Highlights political failures and social vulnerability
- Transforms isolation into political reflection

5. Discussion

The analysis reveals that both artists use performance art not merely as aesthetic expression but as a communication strategy that:

1. challenges dominant political narratives;
2. highlights structural violence and marginalization;
3. transforms personal experience into collective reflection;
4. utilizes symbolic materials to deepen sociopolitical critique;
5. engages audiences emotionally and intellectually.

Their practices demonstrate how performance art transcends traditional art forms by employing the body as a discursive tool and by situating artworks within real social contexts.

6. Conclusion

This study illustrates that performance art is a powerful medium for social and political communication. Through the works of Jittima Phonsewak and Mongkol Plienbangchang, performance art becomes a platform for interrogating power, amplifying marginalized voices, and stimulating public dialogue. Both artists transform everyday materials, symbolic gestures, and bodily presence into potent communicative acts that critique structural inequalities and cultural conflict. Their contributions reaffirm the vital role of contemporary art in promoting social understanding and political awareness.

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