

In what ways does Jiandyin's art transform the traditional relationship between artist and subject?

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Abstract

In this essay I analyze the art of collaborative artists Jiradej Meemalai and Pornpilai Meemalai, who work under the name Jiandyin. To gain information for the analysis, I have used information from art journals, a personal interview with the artist, and various other sources from the internet, including Jiandyin's blog. The analysis is then used to answer the research question: in what ways does Jiandyin's art transform the traditional relationship between artist and subject?

My starting point or introduction is to define Jiandyin as interactive artists. The main body of the essay focuses on the ways in which Jiandyin's art has transformed the traditional relationship between artist and subject. The first way discussed is how the dominance of the artist the art has lessened, and how control has shifted towards the subject. The second way discusses the subject becoming an active functionary instead of a formal subject, focusing on the influence of Joseph Beuys. The third and final way focuses on Jiandyin as collaborative artists, and how that has affected the autonomous perception of an artist. Two main artworks will be used to illustrate the points which are *Dialogue: Seeing and Being* and *Chance, 2012*. Throughout the essay, traditional forms of an artist-subject relationship are referred to as it is instructive for the essay to compare the traditional relationship and the relationship in Jiandyin's art.

In my conclusion, I state that the relationship between the subject and artist has changed in the way that the subject has some control of the art produced, and the art has become a two way conversation. I also conclude that the subject has become a function of the artwork, instead of a form.

Word Count: 279

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Introduction

In this essay, I will discuss dominance versus ascendancy, art as a function, and collaborative art and using Jiandyin's as reference. Finally I will answer the research question **“in what ways does Jiandyin's art transform the traditional relationship between artist and subject?”** Jiandyin is a duo based in Thailand made up of married collaborating artists Jiradej and Pornpilai Meemalai, coming from sculptural and jewelry backgrounds respectively. The duo has “become known over the past eight years for sculpture and performance work that describes their relationship and its place in the world” (Meemalai). Jiandyin has had performances in New York and Taipei, and is currently based in Rajburi Province in Thailand. Their work is primarily based on creating spaces that are aimed to construct human relationships. This purpose stems from the nature of the collaborative work that has led them to create an interaction with the participant. They also explore the context of their participant. An important part of their artwork is to explore the relationship constructed between the artist and the participant in relation to their social context (About). Their background of dealing with or constructing relationships changes the dynamics of a traditional artist-subject relationship that has remained stagnant in earlier times. Because the author of the artwork is a collaboration, the relationship of the author to the subject becomes more complicated. The collaboration also challenges the autonomous perception of an artist. It is also worthy to investigate the role of the subject in Jiandyin's art, as this strengthens the role of the subject in the artwork.

Artist and Subject: Dominance and Ascendancy

In the performance-based drawing project titled *Dialogue: Seeing and Being* which started in 2010, Jiandyin invites the audience or ordinary people in a public space by drawing a portrait for them (About). The ordinary person as subject itself contrast to subjects in earlier art, for instance Medieval art, which were more focused at higher beings such as gods or royalty. Gustave Courbet had first challenged the traditional subjects which were historical figures by creating a large scale painting of scenes from daily life in 1850, which were dismissed by critics who claimed the subjects' figures were ugly. Courbet's modernism led the French realist art movement, as his paintings focused on ordinary and real figures instead of exaggerated figures earlier (Galitz). All drawn portraits in *Dialogue* are given away for free. *Dialogue* has been completed in many countries including Germany, China, and Thailand. The setting of *Dialogue* is simple: the artists, drawing materials, and three chairs. Jiandyin views *Dialogue* as an uncontrollable happening, by which the artists merely create a setting as their desired environment, and the engagement is ultimately dependent on the input of the audience. A fragment of the product is completed as the artists put forth their effort in constructing an environment that welcomes engagement, and the audience completes the

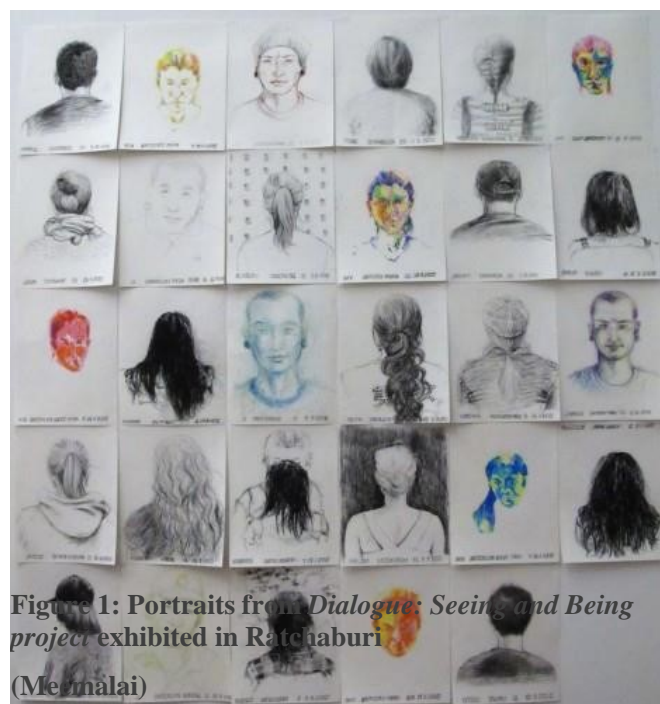


Figure 1: Portraits from *Dialogue: Seeing and Being* project exhibited in Ratchaburi (Methalai)

performance by taking part. *Dialogue* does not end with process of drawing a portrait of the participant. Each participant is also given the notice that the artists might make contact for a later visit at the participant's house. The visit is followed through with the permission of the participant. The interaction that follows *Dialogue* creates potential for a deeper relationship between the participant and the artists. Jiandyin share their experience of visiting their participant's home as "bearing a similarity of visiting a cousin" (Meemalai). The interaction is not merely superficial, but is constructed as a relationship throughout the visit. The participants act on their part as well, viewing the artists as guests, and preparing for the time the artists will be at their place (Meemalai).



Figure 2: Performance of *Dialogue: Seeing and Being Project* in New York, 2010 (Pinpech)

Part

of the

decision made by the artists for this artwork is the location the performance is set up. The location is also inputted by the subject. Indeed the exact person that walks by and decides to take part in *Dialogue* cannot be determined, but the location serves as a context that indicates the type of person that could take part. *Dialogue* in Taiwan took place in 4 locations. There is reason pertaining to why a participant in location 4 did not appear in location 1. Put simply, the participant met in each location is not simply by chance. It is a conscious decision that

each participant makes with reason to be at each specific location at each specific time. In Taiwan, one participant at specific location was headed to pray at a temple, while another participant at another location was headed to the Chiang Kai-Shek Memorial Hall. With only site context, the two participants already show different intentions: religious and historical. *Dialogue* has taken place in many cities and the variety given a different context of each potential participant. The decision that they make to set up in tourist locations is because these locations have cultural, historical, political context, thus attracting tourists. *We Are Going To Taiwan* was set up at locations that were significant in shaping politics in Taiwan. In Berlin, the artist set up at locations that were significant in the migration of the population. The connection made with the participants on their way to such tourist attractions then expose the cultural, historical, or political implications of that certain location (Meemalai).

The Male Gaze

Dialogue: Seeing and Being illustrates a shift in control from the artist to the subject. In a traditional relationship, the autonomous artist has total control over what is to be produced. Laura Mulvey coined the term 'male gaze' which exhibits the traditional role of the subject in a traditional relationship. Mulvey believes that the women is objectified in film as the 'gaze' from the director is from a heterosexual man, who believes the audience are also heterosexual men (Lukas). To apply this to visual arts, the traditional artist acts as the director who has total control of the art, and the subject is the passive woman or man who moves as told. In *Dialogue*, even the selection of the subject is not totally up to the artist, in contrast to earlier artists who had selected their muses and models as subjects or inspiration. The dominance has shifted towards the subject, as the portrait to be drawn requires their consensus and understanding of the whole artwork process. Regardless, the essential drawing process is very much like the traditional routine of an artist – a chair and a facing subject. The portrait, however, has much more meaning than the shallow objectification of the subject.

With this development of *Dialogue*, Jiandyin believe that *Dialogue*'s final product has not yet been unveiled. Pornpilai Meemalai states that the portrait initially drawn is treated as evidence of the interaction that first occurred between the artists and the participant. The portrait shows a more holistic view of the subject – their background and demeanor. The portrait produced is put into an archive and is not viewed as the product of the performance. This form of evidence can be displayed in other ways as well. Through *Dialogue*, Jiandyin have been in contact with a middle-aged man for over 4 years. That participant had a motorbike that he treasured, which is what Jiandyin decided to put on display in an exhibition at the URS21 – Chung Shan Creative Hub. The process of borrowing the motorbike implies the depth of relationship that exists between the artist and the participant. Control, again, is brought to the subject to decide how much he or she is willing invest or exchange in the relationship. In this case, the man had contributed in the relationship and thus the art produced documents that relationship. Bringing the motorbike to the URS21 did not happen as a smooth process, as the motorbike had crashed once while being moved. The accident is also an experience shared by the participant and the artist, which then contributes to this particular relationship. The motorbike on display is evidence for their relationship, in the same way that the portrait is evidence for their interaction. The portrait does not depict the subject as a sexualized object similar to a traditional relationship, but instead as a holistic person. The control over the content of the art produced is also adjusted according to how willing the subject is to participate, unlike the traditional relationship where the artist has total control (Meemalai).

Subject as a function

Jiradej explicitly states that art must have a function, possibly influenced by his educational background in design. In *Dialogue: Seeing and Being*, the artists view their art as

a function, working with a purpose of creating an interaction and perhaps a relationship between virtual strangers. The subject, in accordance to the 'male gaze' is merely an appreciated form while the subject is objectified by the artist. Jiandyin's art challenges this one-way relationship by employing their art, as well as their subject, as active functions.

Dialogue: Seeing and Being is as effective as it is simple. The three chairs provided work as seats for the two artists plus their materials, and then an "author" from the public, which is considered similar to a traditional setting to create a portrait of the subject. However, this simple arrangement allows the audience to understand the purpose of the setting without guidance, and allows the subject to be an active participant in the art which is unconventional. The inquiry from the subject that follows the set up immediately is on the fee of drawing ("is it for free?"), not why the chairs were set up in the first place. The choice of using a portrait is as effective. Portraits, Jiradej claims, represent the traditional meaning of art in many civilizations. A participant would find a portrait easier to approach, without questioning the function or the intention of the performance. The art created is from the background and stories of the subject, and not merely his or her form which lessens the superficiality of the portrait. Not only does it make the portrait more meaningful, the art is reliant on the subject to communicate back to the artist, which renders the subject a function that creates the art (Meemalai).



Figure 3: Performances of *We Are Going to Taipei*, a part of *Dialogue: Seeing and Being* project
(Meemalai)

Dialogue: Seeing and Being is able to transcend many barriers when executing their art. *Dialogue* has been completed in many different countries, with people who speak different languages of different ages and statuses in society, ranging from the homeless to highly educated individuals. Jiradej feels that “in the moment of 15 minutes [participants] spent with us”, they exist in another “channel” that contains a certain trust (Meemalai). The participants decide to participate without any underlying or concealed motive, consequences, or expectations. Pornpilai asserts that the fact that *Dialogue* itself does not have any attached material or economic value dissolves barriers that usually exist in real life situations. Ironically, being strangers to one another also creates a trust and openness when participants share their personal stories. *Dialogue* emphasizes the subject as a person. The spontaneity of

the event as a whole does not leave room for the participant to have great expectations or suspicion of the consequences of joining *Dialogue* (Meemalai). In that moment of initial interaction – with the help of the performance arrangement set up – the participant does not question the process that *Dialogue* is smoothly executing. Essentially, *Dialogue* is asking participants to share their personal stories to virtual strangers.

A Social Function

Chance, 2012 is a similar drawing-based performance that was developed further from *Dialogue: Seeing and Being* which effectively demonstrates subjects moving as a whole for a sole purpose. *Chance, 2012* was the first interactive project that Jiandyin initiated in Bangkok, and was done after *Dialogue: Seeing and Being* had been done in a few other countries. The artists did not feel that simply recreating *Dialogue: Seeing and Being* in Bangkok would address any social issue or initiate social engagement. Due to these issues, *Dialogue: Seeing and Being* was transformed and adapted to thrive in Bangkok. Having executed *Dialogue: Seeing and Being* in several countries earlier, Jiandyin came to the realization that each moment that they had interacted with virtual strangers, there would be people who had gone missing.

A missing person is someone who has disappeared and whose fate and location are ambiguous. Reasons for a disappearance include escaping abuse, kidnappings, and murders (Missing). The Nation reports that “on average, three people are reported missing every day in Thailand, and two of them are children.” Supporters of the cause also claim that the police does not handle reports of missing people efficiently (Sriwateekart). The issue is in stark contrast with the performance as the performance works by meeting new people.

Chance, 2012 was targeted at the social issue of missing people. Jiandyin decided to use ten high school students who were applying for a visual arts major to help them as artists.

Students that participated in *Chance, 2012* registered through social media and were not selected by Jiandyin. The process of *Chance, 2012* proceeded in a similar way as *Dialogue: Seeing and Being*. The high school students were to draw strangers that decided to participate, and then proceeded to hand out posters to the participants. As *Chance, 2012* was aimed to bridge the chance of meeting someone new and those who are missing, the posters show the statistics of missing people in Bangkok. One side had the names of the missing, and



Figure 4: *Chance, 2012* on National Stadium skywalk in Bangkok, November 2012

the other had their pictures. The portraits of the strangers who were drawn were then displayed next to the names of the missing – literally connecting a new meeting to those who were still missing. According to Jiradej, the increased number of “artists” in this project is what makes it stand out. Unlike *Dialogue: Seeing and Being*, there were ten artists instead of two. Thus, more posters were handed out; within two hours each day for two days, 300 posters were successfully distributed by the high school students. Had it only been two artists, only 15 posters would have been handed out in the same duration of time (Meemalai).

Joseph Beuys

Jiandyin states that the main figure of influence for *Chance, 2012* is Joseph Beuys. The present idea of interactive art first flourished in the 1960's, partly due to political motivation. Joseph Beuys, a German artist, coined the term "social sculptures" for politically motivated art that takes place in social locations and required audience participation in order to be complete. Involved in post war avant-garde movement, social sculptures initially served as an answer for the question: what good is art? The answer best suited during the war was that art was used as a part of propaganda for political and social movements. The use of the subject as a means of achieving a collaborative goal contrasts the basic appreciation of form that earlier artists had done. Beuys, "motivated by a belief in Utopian power of universal human creativity" and the potential of art in cultural, social, and political movements leading to revolutionary change, named such art 'social sculptures' (Miller). The fundamental idea of a social sculpture is to engage people to act on a massive scale for a single cause, unlike the traditional subject who remained passive. Once again, the engagement of the subject is consensual, putting more control onto the subject. For a piece, Beuys created land art that required the audience to plant an oak tree to replace a basalt stone he originally placed, now called *7000 Oaks* (Moore). The piece exemplified the definition of social sculptures that required the audience to participate in order to be complete. Furthermore, it allowed the participants to move as a whole, single organism rather than separate individuals, resembling a revolutionary movement. In the craft of his experimental art, Beuys discarded the idea of art as a form of entertainment to please the eye, directly counteracting the idea of a muse or a model. Rather, Beuys not only wanted to "stimulate people" but also to "provoke them" (Joseph). In his social sculptures, Beuys believed in 'a social organism as a work of art' suggesting that each individual participant in his art took credit in creating the art. Beuys arguably most famous phrase 'every human being is an artist' blurred the line separating the

artist and audience, a beginning to present day interactive art. The completion of his artwork is largely reliant on the subject acting as a massive function, in which *Chance* bears strong similarities (Joseph).

Chance, 2012 engulfs the idea of art not only as a function, but a tool in creating a social organism that moves together as a whole, for one ultimate goal. Influenced by Joseph Beuys, the artist is obviously conscious of the decision and consequences of incorporating more artists in this project. Unlike *Dialogue*, the purpose of the subjects in this case is more massive in scale and has a social motive, while *Dialogue* has subjects working on a personal level. *Chance, 2012* is conscious of the change it is attempting to perpetuate the awareness of the missing in Thailand, which fits into Beuys' original intentions to make change concerned with a social or political issue. The aesthetic of the subject bears little significance, unlike in traditional relationships, relative to how the subjects as a whole act as a distributor.



Figure 5: 7000 Oaks by Joseph Beuys in Kassel, Germany
(Goebel)

Incorporating young high school artists is a decision in order to make this, arguably, social sculpture more efficient. The high school students act as distributors of information regarding Thailand's situation on missing people. More distributors meant that more people would be reached through *Chance, 2012*. The point of *Chance, 2012* is not the portraits of the subjects

drawn by the students or the artist, but it is the social issue or movement that has brought them together, and how the *Chance, 2012* functions in response to the issue (Meemalai).

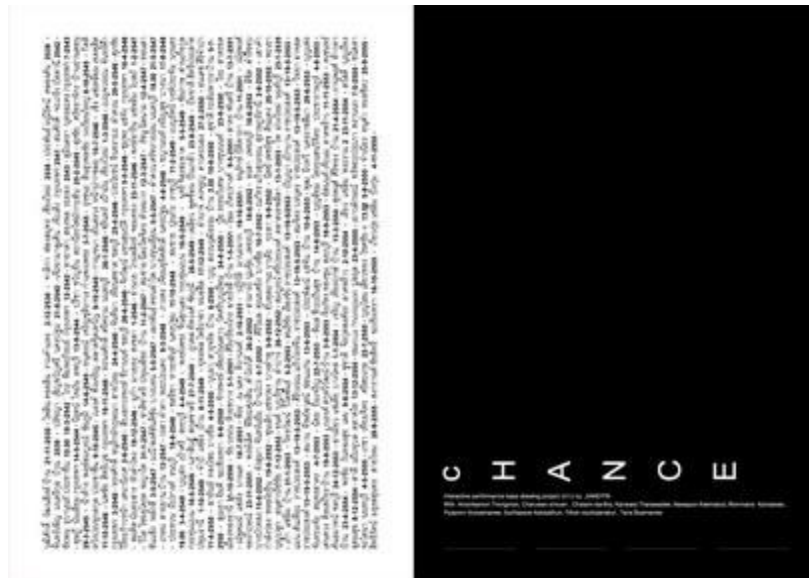


Figure 6: Poster handed to subjects of *Chance, 2012* to distribute (Tung)

Collaborative Art

Jiandyin describe themselves as collaborative artists. Over the last three decades, more focus has shifted to collaborative teams and collaboration as a topic of inquiry. In the years before, collaborative efforts were concealed under individual identities due to the demand for individual establishment in art. Collaborative art emerged again in the early 20th century when conceptual artists would sign a single piece of work. However, the factor of collaboration was not focused on as one known artist would overshadow the others. It was not until the late 20th century when joint artists began their career together as a collaborative unit that collaboration was focused on (Galenson). Jiandyin's interactive pieces *Dialogue* and *Chance* are collaborative and challenges the traditional relationship between the subject and artist in which an autonomous artist is in charge. Their subjects face two artists instead of the traditional single artist. In *Dialogue*, two artists now create two artworks based on one subject, which may lessen the control and reliance on a single artist's interpretation.

Collaborative art overlaps the postmodernist idea of working as a collective identity for an ultimate purpose. Collaborative art inserts another relationship between one artist to the other artist in addition to the traditional relationship between the artist and the subject. Due to this collaborative nature, an interactivity of the artwork is injected in its creation as well. The artwork itself is “born of a social process”, and the artist incorporates their own interaction or dialogue in the making of the art. Grant Kester, an art theorist, stated that artists that included a factor of interactivity in the creation of their work “often include interaction and participation as the subject and/or medium of the art”. Jiandyin started their interactive work in 2007, when they started working as collaborative artists under one label. Jiradej Meemalai claims that their important starting point roots from collaboration – to finish one piece of work with another person. “The author is questioned as it is not only one who has the total control of the work”, and “one artist no longer the center or the dictator of the work produced.” The traditional element of a sole artist’s dominance over the subject is again lessened. Even in the creation process, the artist does not have total control over the purpose, aesthetic, or any other factor of the artwork, as the other artist weighs in as well. This lack of control creates a large disparity between the traditional artist’s role that had control over every element in his or her art. The artist believes that “interactivity in this sense requires recognition that we are not able to distinguish which part belongs to whom.” Grant Kester suggested that collaborative art broke down the traditional forms and barriers between the artist, artwork, and audience. This transformed idea of boundaries allowed the viewer to communicate back to the artwork. The unpredictable nature of the creation process is stretched further to other people apart from the two artists (Lehrman).

Conclusion

The art born from collaboration between Jiradej and Pornpilai drastically transforms the traditional relationship between artist and the subject. The subject in question itself is a mixture of audience and subject. Even though the setting of *Dialogue* remains traditional – the subject facing the audience – the overall process and purpose is distinct. Performances like *Dialogue* displayed in public make anyone who passes by their audience. The audience has the potential to become the subject of the art, a decision controlled by both the artist and the audience. It is ultimately the audience's decision to pass by a certain location and whether to participate as the subject in the portrait. However, the decision is also affected by the location and method of the sculpture in which the artist decides. In the process, the subject itself has become much more active in the process of selection than before. Muses or models were picked by artists to paint or depict, rendering the traditional methods of selection much more one-sided. The portrait of the subject represents much more than a mere visual depiction. As Jiradej mentions, the portrait acts like a piece of evidence of the relationship between the artist and the subject. *Dialogue* focuses on the relationship born of the process, and art pieces act as the evidence of that process. One subject could decide to invest more and make the relationship personal, while others may choose not to. Not only do the subjects have control in participation, they are able to control their side of the relationship. It is not merely the artists that have complete control over the artwork, but relies on the efforts and input of the subject as well.

Jiandyin view their art as a function. While many earlier art was focused on the form of their subject and worked to represent ideals, Jiandyin's art is much more focused on the employment of their subjects as a function. Jiandyin were influenced by Joseph Beuys regarding this philosophy. The piece *Chance, 2012* is used to call attention to the missing people in Bangkok. The art itself started off with an objective for a social cause. In the same way as *Dialogue*, the selection of the subject is active. In *Chance*, however, the subject drawn

is viewed as more mechanical and less intimate. Their portraits serve as a reminder of the missing people every time you meet a new person. The relationship between the artist and subject does not work on an intimate level, but on a massive scale towards one single goal. The subject is treated much like a distributor of information on the number of missing people, as another part of this machine-like process. The transition to viewing the subject as function of an artwork rather than a simple form is another way Jiandyin's art has transformed the relationship between the artist and the subject.

Because Jiandyin's portraits are drawn in different contexts and methods, they become much more than a simple drawing of a subject. In *Dialogue*, the portrait is evidence of an initial interaction that could form a relationship. In *Chance, 2012*, the portrait documents the process of meeting people which is used to juxtapose the issue of missing people. It is the contexts and methods of arriving to the portrait that transforms the original intent of merely depicting the subject.

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