

## Working in Chiang Mai

In 2006 I've been working at the Chiang Mai University, Faculty of Fine Arts for three months within the framework of a UNESCO-grant; I worked there on my behalf as well as in lectures, a class and a project, started off by me, involving students.

I've worked on "strangeness" during that time, not because it was my idea before going there; rather "strangeness" got an unavoidable subject: everything was new to me, people and their language, their letters, religion and culture in a wider sense, climate, vegetation, food ... and at last art.

### **First: "9 x 9 x 9 x they say it's a hundred meters"**

In a Bazaar I found (after years of working with black cotton) weird big balls of white cotton. This yarn had nine threads – I bought nine balls. Later I learned, that this yarn has ritual functions like in weddings or baptism etc. – a bit earlier I knew that the number nine is an important number in Buddhism.

My intention was to stick on a bit of me or my body to this strange material; after that I wanted to try an approach to trees which were strange to me. I choose the length of my hand span (from the tip of little finger to thumb's tip) as the distance of black dots on the white yarn. In my studio I used brush and Chinese ink and marked these hand span distances.



White nine-thread cotton, after having marked my hand span distances

Then I choose nine trees on the campus. About at eyelevel I started to wrap the thread, no longer plane white, densely around the trunks. According to the diameter of the tree the result was a distinguishable pattern on this temporary second bark. I used simple glue to fix these forms.

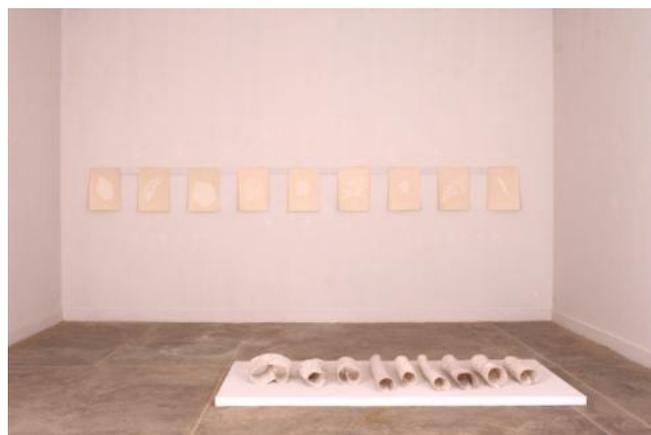


Three of the nine wrapped tree-trunks on the campus.

I had changed parts of my new and still strange surroundings into a familiar one and – if you like – Europeanized it by modifying the phenotype of the exotic flora: parts of the bark now convey the impression of a Birch tree's bark.

It was not me – incidentally – who noticed that, it was a fellow of the academy, Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, a professor having had studied in Germany for some years. I was irritated primary, later I decided to accept this accident.

Short before the end of my stay I've had a show in the Chiang Mai University Art Museum. Two days before the opening I went to the trees, set a distinct upright cut and took off the "new" bark. In the museum I displayed them on a plate like in a scientific collection of natural produces.

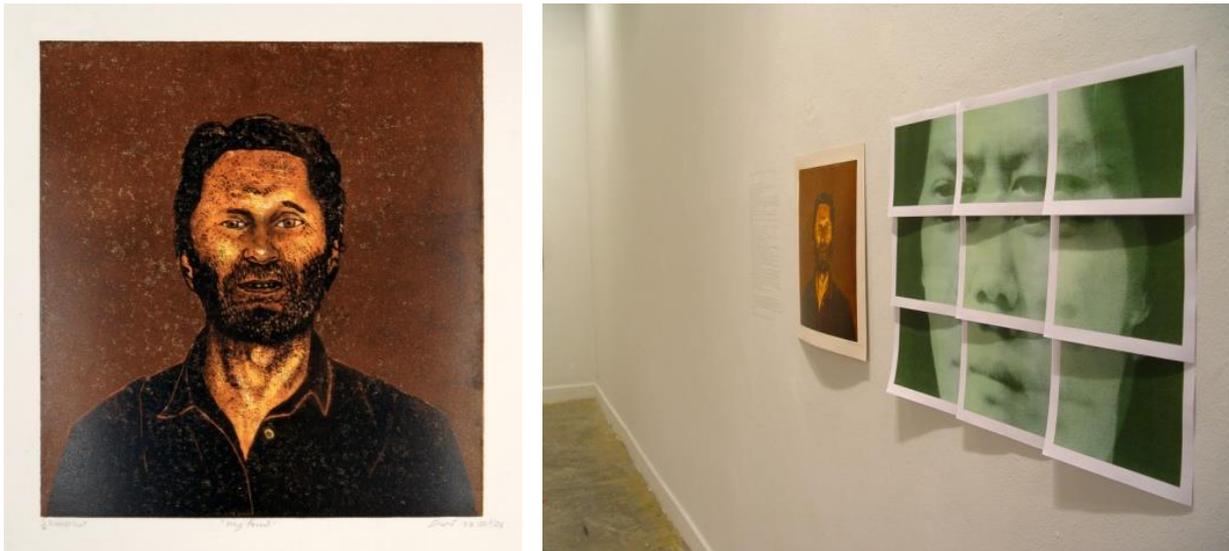


"9 x 9 x 9 x they say it's a hundred meters" – displayed in the Museum, left detail; right, on the wall in addition 9 silkscreens

In parallel I created nine silk screens with white ink on white saa-paper (traditional mulberry-paper). They show the leaves of the trees I've had wrapped and the Thai letters for the Thai names of these trees.

**Second: “HOWWHO”**

Besides working in my studio, I’ve worked in the library of the Fine-arts-faculty. With a desk and a computer I’ve had the possibility to read about Thai art and individual artists there (and besides to write e-mails home to Europe). This place obviously is also an important place to meet for the Thais. Anyway, I got into conversation with some of them and came up with an idea: I wanted to start a project with Thai artists and art students, in which we portray each other – what medium ever. – I relinquish the details.

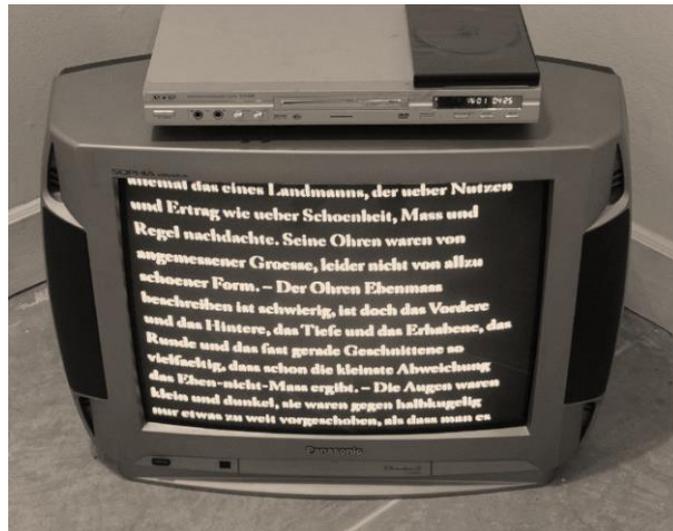


Left a portrait of me, done by a young Thai graphic artist; right, next to his work, my trial to portray him with a photo work.



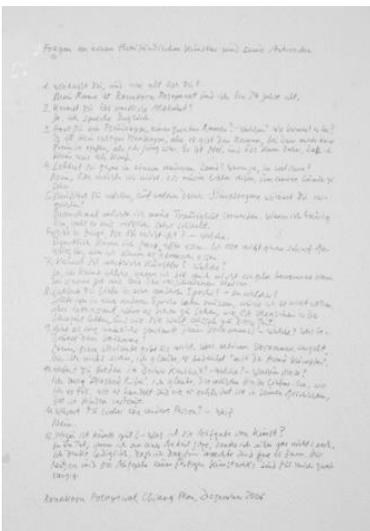
Left silhouettes, done by two art students - it's my German and my Thai name (Reinhold / Adsawin) in those symbols, given to the Thai children to learn their letters and language. Right my trial with Thai letters – In return I draw with Chinese ink their names with Thai letters (like a negative photo) on pages of the then current German magazine SPIEGEL - through the letters you could read the rest of the European news.

Finally each of us had filled in a questionnaire developed by me and had portrayed the counterpart, as a woodcut, traditional woodcarving or as silhouettes – my works in return were a photo work, a graphic work with Thai letters and a little story, shown as a loop on-screen.



Left my face in the vein of a Lanna-price done by a traditional Thai woodcarver; right my portrait in return in the form of the story trying to find his place shown as a loop on-screen

My questionnaire had been translated into Thai and written in Thai letters. Those of the other participants had been translated first into English, finally German and written with graphite directly onto the wall.



Left one of the four questionnaires with the Thai artists, German text; right mine in Thai letters.

The final question will be: Did we reach a kind of intercultural understanding? – I’m still doubtful but I also believe that all of us became acquainted to something completely new. Enough for a first step.

As an example I take the two pieces showing faces. The woodcut, appearing very traditional and a bit clumsy is titled “My friend”. I know, that part of this is ascribable to the very great and special warmth of the Thai people, but I also can accept this because of his appreciation. He first was upset about the photo-portrait I did for him – but after all he honestly could identify with the “fragmented” visage quite well.

The idea of the two students, to portray me in form of golden paper silhouettes of my names totally enchanted me.  
– This to me was really a conceptual start of working.



„Mai khao tai pid” – silk screen; I gave this *misunderstanding* as a parting gift to all those I had worked with and those who had helped me.

A wonderful story in my view about the word “misunderstanding” will last beyond that. Quite early I’ve found this expression characterizing our cooperation. Soon I asked someone to translate that – the translation was Mai Khao tai. I worked with this term and the corresponding Thai letters. Among others there was a little graphic work (see above). None of the Thais confronted me with work and title during the opening of the show. – Very late that night, alone in a bar downtown, the bartender gave me the hint: this must be a misunderstanding, because misunderstanding means Khao tai pid – whereas we have to translate Mai Khao tai with not-understanding. My first anger about the wrong translation done by the faculty’s librarian vanished quickly and an enjoyment grew more and more: isn’t this little story the best way to illustrate the expression misunderstanding, describing all the difficulties of a bicultural coming together at its best.