



## About Café ... About Art

*Young Thai artists, many of whom have spent time abroad studying or working, have been contributing fresh perspectives and approaches toward the development of contemporary art in Thailand - without much government involvement or corporate support. Some of these artists have been involved in the About Café, the 'baby' of Klaomard 'Meo' Yipintsoi, who has been presenting contemporary art to the local as well as international audience through her bar/restaurant which functions as an art space too. Aware that it may be difficult for these independent efforts, activities and organisations to continue, because of the neglect of government, and indifference of community, we interviewed Meo to learn from her experiences. She kindly shared with us her thoughts.*



*Klaomard 'Meo' Yipintsoi*

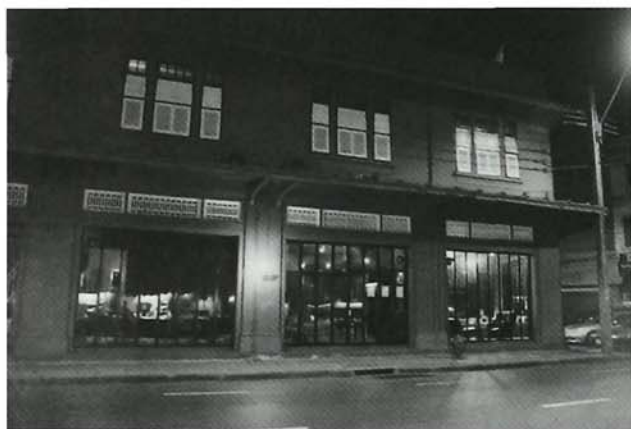
Meo, founder of the About Café, was a Fullbright Scholar in Visual Arts Administration (museum) at the New York University, and also studied at SOAS (University of London), and Silpakorn University, Bangkok. She was an advisor to the establishment of the Bangkok Modern Art Museum, and the Children's Museum. Since 1997, Meo had lectured on visual art administration/museum management at the Silpakorn, Chulalongkorn and Chiangmai Universities.

### When was About Café established?

Meo: In 1997, About Art Related Activities (AARA), a non-profit art organisation, consisting of three local founders, set up About Café as a spin-off from a private sculpture museum project. The café is a 90-year-old charming building, converted into an art space with its original structure and features preserved. Its location is close to Chinatown, near the Hualamphong



*main area of Café/Nipon Sud-Ngam*



*view from the road/Nipon Sud-Ngam*

railway station. Tawat-Yaovadee Yipintsoi and my family, the Thai silk company, and sponsors-in-kind, provide most of the funding to AARA for operating the café.

### What is its role?

Meo: A meeting place for the exchange of ideas, multi-disciplined interaction, allowing artists to study each other's work. We are in the experimental stage of promoting and building a

context for the displaying of art. We started with Misiem Yipintsoi sculpture garden (our main museum) outside Bangkok (in Sampran, Nakorn Pathom province). The work in establishing this project led to serious questions regarding the

place of art in the community, and its relationship to the local people; and also questions relating to the role of museum in modern society. Eventually, we decided to find a place in the city that is public enough to blur that typical museum/gallery "look", and a café seemed to be a good idea.

*Nipapan Rerngmongkol,  
oil painting*



*part of "Medium Rare  
Creation" project by Kamin  
Lettchaiprasert, About Café*

About Café was previously a shophouse that had been abandoned for a long time; the condition was quite bad. We spent eight months fixing it. We wanted the café to be a meeting place of the various disciplines of art. The moment for the idea was quite right at that time. Every exhibition that we do, we have other events going on. We want to attract other groups of audience. With one show, we have fashion, we have deejays, films videos, performance, reading, lectures, children's workshops, i.e. the fun events and the more academic/educational programmes for various groups with different backgrounds and interests. It doesn't have to be but it can be a sort of intellectual junction, and it depends on the type of communication/dialogue programmes. Everywhere you turn, some form of art exists to confront and enchant us, and this is how we want the café to be, a meeting place of ideas, of presentation, of information, a platform.



The learning process happens easier in a café than, say, a studio or a formal institution. The relaxing environment of a café encourages more openness and flexibility. The problem is that people are used to certain concepts of where they want to learn or study something. This is rather different: you can come in here, not only as a customer, but to read books, view our exhibitions or participate in our art programmes. In other words, to enrich your experience, your perception with art-related activities.

Another problem is people try to brand us, and label our café as an alternative space. We are not an alternative space. We do not really have a main space, for alternative whatever, but we are more concerned with learning to establish our role - which we haven't done yet due to our continuing exploration of the interaction between art and society. We are doing something which I hope the national institutions are doing too, interpreting their roles in society. Stereotyping is rather dangerous. It narrows perceptions, block possibilities, and stops creativity. Judging or believing, based on appearance, only deceives you. It's not about propaganda.

It was not the intention of the founders to use the café to generate sufficient finances to support itself, but rather to create and provide a meeting place, a site for experimental exhibitions, and a venue that can bring different disciplines of contemporary arts, life, and culture together, and especially for the 'non-art' audience to have the

experience with art. But, as time goes on, we realise that such spaces need to be self-sustaining, which does not mean profitable but solvent.

AARA is currently securing foundation (non-profit) status and has been working on a fund-raising/development programme. It does not make profits from sales of the works displayed on its premises; neither does it represent artists nor receive any commission. That is not our purpose. Our goal is public service.

#### **How has About Café been functioning?**

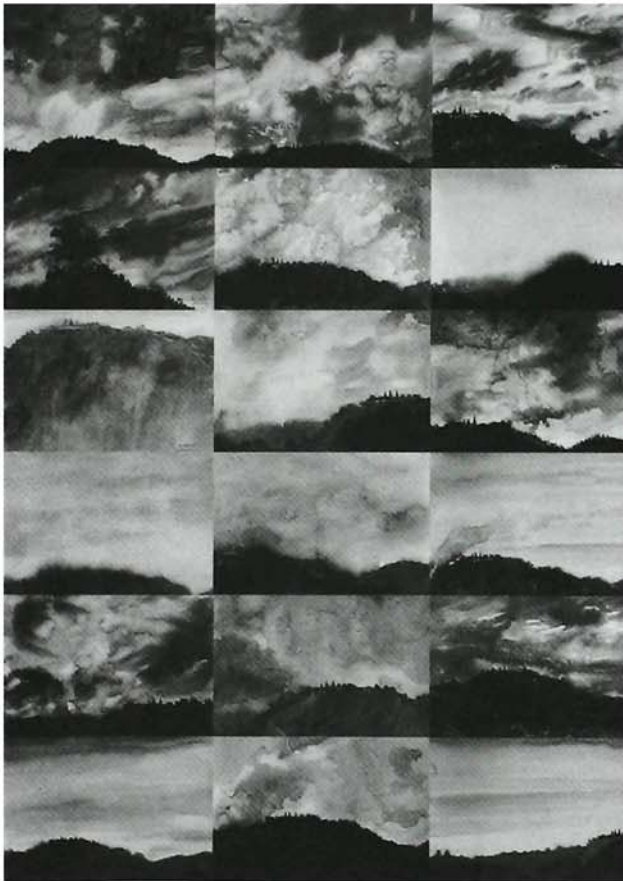
As it is an object-based, site-specific, activities-based environment to encourage learning of art,



*at the bar / Nipon Sud-Ngam*

most of the work exhibited here is site-specific installation-based but multi-disciplinary, multimedia ... it can be anything but with the intention to explore. What we do is basically very experimental for the artists and for us, and partly because of the structure of the space, we work more with installations than paintings or sculptures.

On the ground floor of the café, we have a reading room (with a collection of over 600 titles of art-related books, periodicals, etc.), and a venue for site-specific exhibitions, music, lectures, film screenings, performances, poetry readings, workshops, fashion, and discussion. On the second floor is the main exhibitions space, and



*Surin Yingyong's watercolours of Doi (mountain) Sutep, Chiang Mai*



*About Café at night*

on the third, an open space and garden, for other events and programmes. We do a lot of film screening, music, and performance on the roof.

What's happening here is we're continuing to determine the position of art in the people's daily concern; we are an exhibition space for others' work, and we seek a wider audience for that work to develop more understanding and appreciation of art.

We are questioning the position of art in society. What is its significance? Are they statements of value? What is the role and function of the artist? How can an artist communicate with the audience? If issues are raised, limits pushed, who is the artist communicating with, really?

#### **And the activities?**

We work a lot with independent and free-lance artists, and we engage a resident curator, a conservationist, as well as someone to help with art education. Our residency programme enables us to invite those with skills and expertise to study the situation here, and also to be involved in the general work.

We used to do one major event every week which would include different activities; thus, drawing diverse interest groups. Now we're considering a change because we have been doing this for some time now. Perhaps a different format. To attract a non-artist audience, each week we organise one event. There are lots of diverse events, and they are publicised in the dailies.

Commencing November 2001, we have been working on an abandoned shophouse nearby, turning it into a site for experimental sound installations, web TV station, and exhibitions.



Then, there is the 'AARA Window Project', started in 1999, to use commercial window displays for art projects in public space. The windows face a busy street next to a school and a temple, and provide a place where artworks can be viewed by the general public.

**Are there opportunities for students to be involved?**

Yes. However, the students who have been participating in art activities have not formed or evolved into new art groups. I don't know if that may be the case, but it should be - the evolution of groups. Most of those involved in helping us are university students. We work with them, and hope that they gain experience, and go on to work with institutions relating to art. Yes, I think some formations should have emerged from their involvement here.

**What are your thoughts on the local trends within contemporary art?**

Who are the artists communicating with, if the local public is not drawn to arts, and the mass media does not make art a priority? Now, those people who go to view art, particularly modern and contemporary, have been exposed (having been abroad) to western concepts of art, and they follow the foreign media, etc.; this is a minority in this country.

I know that not everybody shares the same idea of what art and its relevance is. There have been efforts to simply expand the interest in appreciating art, but since my grandmother's time - she was an award-winning artist herself -

I understand that the situation remains more or less the same; the issues stay: a less than enthusiastic attitude toward art among the locals; non-professionals running national institutions of art, and museums.



*Tall ceiling and old-fashioned fan, installation by Sakarin Krue-on, 'Temple'*



*'Confident Bodies,' Saa (mulberry) fibre and steel, collection Misiem Yipintsoi Sculpture Garden*

We're trying to understand the issues so that we know what to do. Also, I feel that making space available is not just about art. It works within a social context, so we have to know a lot of things about the relationship between the artist, art institutions and society.

**What is your view on the state of the National Gallery, and the debate on a contemporary art museum for Bangkok?**

We support any effort to involve more public interest in art. The first question on my mind is: What is our concept of it, and why the public lack of concern for it? A gallery or museum is just a shell if these issues remained unresolved: artspace, institutions, professionals. The priorities/guidelines on how to "sell" shows but maintain ethics are important if we are to support the artists, and provide more understanding about art for the masses - we have to interpret and understand it ourselves first. The personnel are important; apart from bureaucracy, I would like to support letting one long-term director who has a strong vision and direction to lead an institution uninterrupted. Continuity is necessary. About the proposed Contemporary Art Museum: it is just space, a shelf, a building if there is not a clear mission on why we are having it, and commitment to the directions. The important thing is the team that will run the museum, gallery, institution...turning it into what it truly can be. It would be nice to have a space, but it is as important to have a solid programme, a solid mission, a good team to work toward the objectives for it.

**And what is your opinion of the media?**

All our activities and events are publicised in the mass media, and we are grateful for their support. My concern is about the criteria the media use to decide what event is worth publicising. Basically the success of an exhibition is subject to choices made by the media, and art is still not a priority. I hope to see a greater variety and more in-depth coverage of art in the future but that

means a closer relationship between art and the media. I don't mean there is nobody - there are plenty of supportive journalists. I would just like to see more or, at the very least, more comprehensive coverage of art events. It's important that they help to inform and, to some extent, educate readers, especially students, and contribute towards the habit of visiting galleries, to become interested in cultural events, etc.. Having art-related activities is another choice in everyday life because people understand and appreciate the value of the experience they have with art. This is where we can work together to create a better environment.



*"...between the art and the audience"*

**How do you see the impact of About Café?**

If you agree that art is a product of society, the product should then be able to communicate, you need to learn its language, spend time on it; it's not that easy, but then all these institutions are there to promote the link (communication). If you say you want to promote art, what do you mean by promoting? It is about making people comprehend and appreciate what they see and inspiring them to make their own interpretations. If art and its institutions are not doing that, then what [are they doing]?

I see our work as being between the art and the audience. If we are to present one to the other, and support an understanding between them,



we need to know confidently what our role and function is in the current situation.

We want to raise issues through art, and make people start thinking about it. It's not just aesthetics, emotional responses and beauty, but questions and related issues that can arise. We're trying to work with schools, but some of the colleges are not supportive of the idea because they do not have any programmes in their formal curriculum to actually look at art from the art appreciation angle. I think museums should act, actively, in this matter.

#### **Your personal aspirations?**

I would like to develop and run a museum, not by turning About Café into one; but a museum, to start one on my own. About Café is a different experimental space/project. It is my dream to have an active museum with "super" collection, "super" exhibition, "super" programmes and "super" setting...the micro context. I'm planning to work more with local founders, because if you don't have local support, it means that your development programmes are not working. If this museum takes off, it may be funded by corporate, government or private interests but the most important thing should be that it is USED.

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AARA is a non-profit art organisation, began in 1997. Its mission is to promote and to support artists and the development of art, especially modern and contemporary art, in Thailand by

providing exhibitions and project opportunities and helping to create an enriching art environment. AARA concentrates on identifying issues relating to art in Thailand, and seeks to offer new formats, environments, and programmes in the promotion and expansion of contemporary art and audience.

Its main projects are:

- 1) the residencies programme consists of curator-in-residence, educator-in-residence and conservator-in-residence;
- 2) about TV, a web-tv project on issues related to art and contemporary art and culture;
- 3) outreach and training programmes.

One of its strong emphases is on educational and outreach programmes (artist lectures, workshops and discussions with every exhibition held at its venues).

Documentation and cataloguing are the other main components of AARA's activities. Programmes and events outside its own venues have also been conducted.

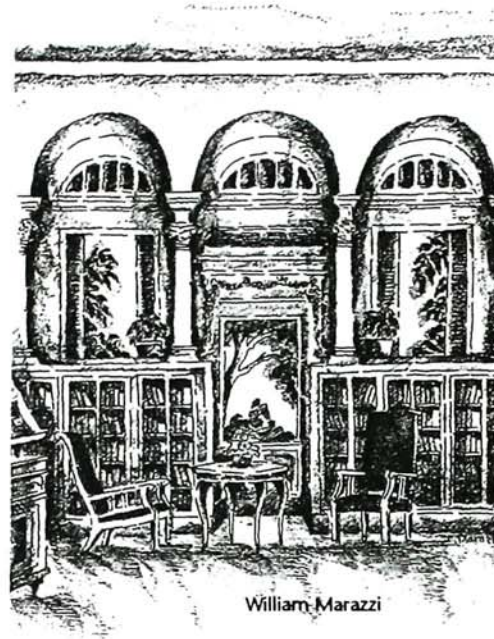
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*Watercolours. by Louise Truslow*