

## AMPLIFYING SMALL VOICES

An interview with I-na Phuyuthanon for the Bangkok Biennial pavilion coming soon • เร็ว ๆ นี้

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*Q: How would you position yourself and your practice in the Thai art world?*

Actually, when it comes to Thai art, I look at the transformation of art first, before discussing what my position is. Thailand is now in a period of transition. Because of this transition, it's hard to position myself, since I look at global transformations, not just in Thailand. It makes me reflect on where exactly the roots of Thainess are, or what it means being Thai here in Thailand. In fact, to practice contemporary art in this country or some might call it postmodernity, or... Thai contemporary art, or whatever. In fact, it's a period of transition in which Thailand is moving towards the international art world. So, now we are moving in the direction of work that before was not seen as art, or anything that could be art, such as purely conceptual work, purely formalist work, or purely visual work. For me, if I look at it from here, my practice has more to do with community. As I mentioned earlier, at the core it is about diversity. There's no oneness; not one ethnic group. And there is diversity in many aspects. Our identities are structured by many religions, many lifestyles, and diverse contexts. So, when I look at myself and position myself, it is at the heart of this transition of society.

*Q: How do you see the role of an artist in society?*

Actually, the role of an artist is connected to the first question. It relates to how I position myself. The role of an artist in society is to create alchemy with society. This is still rare in Thai society in terms of the interaction with communities or real people, or with people who actually feel it. Artists in Thailand, or in this society, they haven't yet accessed... I can't say access, maybe... What is it? Maybe access... There's so much ego, because artists see themselves as the centre. In fact, their role in society should be that they move themselves closer to society, and put society at a centre stage.

*Q: What are your personal experiences with international art world players?*

Actually, my experience with international players consists of group exhibitions. I haven't interacted with or participated in artist residencies. But I did have a group show at ADM in Singapore, curated by Loredana [Paracciani]. This 2013 show was called *FAITH and FAIRY TALES*. It was actually an important period... I created video art. This type of art did not receive much attention in Thailand. Usually, when it comes to art, we mostly talk about printing, painting or sculpture while video art is at

the end of the list. So, I presented this work in Singapore and it got quite some attention. I feel that now there is more space to show this type of work.

*Q: Is there a difference when you prepare work for an international or domestic audience?*

Definitely there is a difference since how we perceive art, or how we access it depends on culture, religion, belief, politics. Actually, if it doesn't focus on a big issue, or an issue that is being discussed outside of the country, it is hard to understand. Actually, the preparation of work is very different. If we are not tackling hot issues that foreigners understand, then it is hard, because the way in which we live our lives is different. We have a background of... We have different backgrounds of understanding. For example, my work is video art about the three southernmost provinces. This is a very hot issue in the South. When I show my work at international events, they get it, because it addresses a hot issue like, Red Shirts, Yellow Shirts, something like that. Or something that is related to Thai politics that has attracted attention abroad. That makes it easy to understand. But if we talk about lifestyles, and many artists are talking about this, if we show this abroad, it is hard to understand. This is the difference.

*Q: Do you feel that the international audience is more open to your work than the domestic audience?*

Definitely, because if we talk about... For example, my work about the three southern-most provinces; it discusses a multi-layered conflict, and one of these regards safety. People talk about artists who are from the area, and outsiders who are academics. People in Thailand sometimes turn a blind eye because of the complexities. But when I show my work abroad, it's more open because it discusses life in the area. With people abroad, you can discuss anything. You can voice your opinion in whichever way you like. By saying 'the area', I do not mean just the three provinces, but all of Thailand. When I went to show my work in Singapore, it was so different from Thailand. I feel there is a lot that I cannot mention in Thailand, but I can abroad. Deep down, I hope that the issues will be heard outside Thailand because we know there are a lot of complicated conflicts in Thailand, not only historically.

*Q: How do you feel about the fact that MAIIAM is showing your work?*

Actually, I was surprised that this happened in Thailand because I thought that my work would never be welcomed here. Even in universities, or institutions, or academic spaces where they allow you to share different ideas. When MAIIAM bought my work last year, I felt ... It made me... There is a little voice that is not so loud in Thailand, but it is elsewhere in Asia and around the world, which is generating attention. My view is that it gives people who make art, or artists more space to play a role in expressing these little voices, the unheard, the unmentioned. It has reduced the importance of institutions in Thailand as well. MAIIAM is the one place that I wanted to support. And I want to show my work at a place like this. MAIIAM doesn't only

show my work in Thailand; they also bring it to the Gwangju Biennale this coming September.

*Q: What are the benefits or positives of the presence of the international art world in Thailand?*

Actually, international curators and world-class events have made people from peripheries visible, and have given them a voice, and a space to claim their rights. It also creates room for discussions. So, these curators are important. If there were no international curators or art world events where foreign and Thai artists share and show their work together, we wouldn't see the importance of these peripheral areas and origins. This has accommodated encounters with difference. In saying this, this supports diversity and not oneness. For people from peripheries, this is also about alienation, and... the lack of a voice and of rights, both in roles and duties, including in politics, and socio-economics. So, the international stage has created a space, which gives them a voice, and me too, to address the issue in the three southernmost provinces. For example, in Thailand we cannot talk about losses in the South, because there is a conflict of interest, or because of politics, history, and perhaps personal issues relating to some people. But the international stage allows us to claim our rights through art. International curators, or even Thai ones, are following these issues and that has created more space for our work.

*Q: Do you feel that international events in Thailand like biennials would be open to your work?*

Of course, when it comes to the 'international', this has variations related to different ideas of different people. In fact, 'international' in Thailand... If in Thailand... There is a certain power. Of course, the dominant political culture talks about oneness... In itself, it is not bad that you have to express Thainess, but I think that for people from peripheries, or people without a voice, or the ones that suffer... Their space has been reduced as well. There are a lot of limitations in Thailand when it comes to the 'international'. I'm more relaxed about showing work at 'international' events in other countries. They really give space to me and other artists from peripheries. But in Thailand, it is a double-edged sword. We are not selected to show our work here. And most people from peripheries who are selected and whose works are shown, work in traditional styles.

*Q: How could the organisation of this sort of events be improved?*

Actually... How, right? I can't cover it all, but let's say that... Actually, these events are open for entries that will then be judged by committees. There are committees selecting successful applicants and actually there is lot of who-knows-who and... So, many interesting works are not selected. Probably this is because it doesn't fit in with the traditional content, or it is too diverse for the powers to control. So, it doesn't get exhibited. For art, in fact, it is good to accept diversity in terms of concepts, be it confirmatory or critical. It will be beneficial if you create more diversity. It would be

even better if you change committees or organisers or... Maybe not change... but add more people who represent different groups, so that they do not only come from the government or the same group of professors.

*Q: How would you characterise the differences between the art ecosystem in Bangkok and in cities in the South?*

There is definitely some difference between art ecosystems in the South and Bangkok. Bangkok is the centre of political power, economic power, and sovereignty. It is all about one ethnic group, one race, and one religion. Although they are talking about diversity now, only one religion and one kind of belief is being promoted. This is different from the Southern community or from the three provinces. The South has a different tradition, a different lifestyle. This relates to how we eat and everything. It is definitely completely different. For example, if we talk about expression in art, between people from the periphery and Bangkok, of course it's different. Because Bangkok people... Artists in Bangkok don't seem to feel or touch upon... Well, Bangkokians have all these facilities, but the Southern people barely have any rights. If you look closer, or visit the area, you will see that art or artists are exhibiting their work that illustrates multi-layered uncomfortableness, or some sort of suppression. It can or cannot be mentioned, or it can be mentioned but is still not heard. For people in Bangkok, it is easy. For example, there are a lot of art spaces. But there are not so many galleries in the South and they are hard to access. It was only last year that people from Singapore and Malaysia started to visit galleries in Pattani or Narathiwat. So, there are definitely differences between the art works. When comparing art from Bangkok and the South, you will see the difference.