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Arts

The Goethe Institut attempts to re-create the atmosphere of a uniquely evocative exhibition held last year in Chiang Mai, writes Phatarawadee Phataranawik.



One of five views from the former Railway Hotel taken for a conceptual exhibit by Navin Rawanchaikul and Rirkrit Tiravanija.

# Magic Rekindled

Abandoned for years, the former Railway Hotel in central Chiang Mai came briefly back to life in August last year, for one fleeting day its bare dusty rooms were once again filled with the sounds of bustling humanity. It was taken over, not by travellers, tourists or even homeless squatters, but by some 70 art students and instructors from Chiang Mai University who had come to view *Deserted and Embraced*, a one-day conceptual exhibition featuring the work of eight artists.

It was a most unusual concept involving installations, short performance pieces, photographs, postcards and film screenings. Quite a challenging project, too, since visitors were given absolutely no information on the location of the works and had to wander through the 60-room hotel searching for the "hidden" art treasures.

Although it would be next to impossible to re-create the powerful atmosphere of that day again, those who missed the one-off event in Chiang Mai are being given another chance to experience some of the emotions it evoked by visiting *Deserted and Embraced - Revisited*, an exhibition of photos and videos about the original project currently underway at the Goethe Institut on South Sathorn Road.

The Railway Hotel exhibition was the brainchild of Dr Helen Michelsen, a German art historian who is currently lecturing at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Chiang Mai University, as part of the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (German Academic Exchange Service) programme. She explained her concept thus:

"At the beginning was the idea... The idea of an idea turned into a desire to create a triangle of exchange, a magic triangle, consisting of a site, a concept and works of art - all three equally important, connected by cogent interrelations. Then, the idea slowly evolved into the actual exhibition project *Deserted and Embraced*.

"Forward realisation, finding the right site became the first prerequisite. Previously untouched as an art venue, the deserted site had to be an abandoned place evoking its own stories and memories. It turned out to be the former Railway Hotel, deserted for a number of years; the interior now almost completely looted and destroyed. And yet this deserted place is unique with its embracing atmosphere. Despite its imposed incomplete state, the building seems complete in its quietness and cohesiveness. Being abandoned also implies being left alone, not being interfered with, thus prolonging the waning spirit of the past."

Completing the "magic triangle" eight artists, most of them based in Chiang Mai, were invited to engage both with the concepts (*Deserted and Embraced*) and with the site. A 20-minute video was made showing highlights of these artists' work. It is being screened continuously at the Goethe Institut.

Suthirat Supaperiny's contribution to the original project was a piece called "Sound in One Minute-One Person-One Instrument-One Room". Sound emphasises the intensity of a moment and it, like the one-day exhibition and life itself, is fleeting in nature (we can not hold on to it or possess it). So last August Suthirat invited local musicians to put on one-minute performances in one of the hotel's rooms. Most of the time the musicians were "invisible", one would hear a short snatch of music but the sound would fade away before one was able to locate its source.

Suthirat's piece has been brought back to life again at the Goethe thanks to the active participation of three staffers who have agreed to perform three, one-minute pieces each day in different parts of the building.

Visitors to the Railway Hotel were initially puzzled by Araya Rasdjamneansook's "private performance"



A scene from a video of Araya Rasdjamneansook's "private performance" piece, 'Rite of Passage'.



Kosit Juntaratip persuaded his family to take part in a piece of performance art he staged for *Deserted and Embraced*.

pieces, "Rite of Passage". What appeared to be a large empty fish-tank lay on the floor of a corridor in the hotel. Next to it stood a black wooden chair on which two books had been placed. A closer examination revealed these to be *I Nao* and *Matonaphatho*, epic poems written by King Rama VI in the early part of this century. From the fish-tank came the unmistakable stench of formaldehyde, a chemical used to preserve or embalm human corpses.

Only now, with the screening of a 15-minute video about "Rite of Passage" at the Goethe Institut, do we get the full picture. The "fish-tank" is revealed as a glass coffin, the performance piece as a way of conveying the immense sadness that envelops people after the death of a loved and the impossible hope nurtured by many of them: If only we could breach the silence of the grave and bring him/her back from the dead.

Araya's work often deals with death and the suffering of those left behind. Her own mother passed away when she was only a toddler. Her grandmother died in 1987 and her father in 1993. "Sometimes, a profound relationship is not a positive force," she said.

In the video we see the artist dressed all in black sitting on a chair in a bare, white-tiled room. She is holding a book. The glass coffin is at her feet. Inside lies a mannequin, its face covered with a cloth. Araya begins to read aloud. The book is *I Nao*, the story of a

tragic love affair, and the excerpts she chooses are about love, passion and loss.

Slowly it dawned on us why this had to be a "private performance" (as Araya termed it). That "mannequin" is actually a human corpse. It transpires that the video was shot in the morgue of a Chiang Mai hospital and the only onlookers were the exhibition organisers. "Rite of Passage" is undeniably a very strong piece and it certainly fits in with the "embraced and deserted" theme. My only quibble is that it is not site-specific enough.

I had no such complaints with the fruits of a collaboration between artists Navin Rawanchaikul and Rirkrit Tiravanija. For the Railway Hotel project they created three works which were both concept- and site-specific. For the first work, five viewpoints were chosen at five different sites in the building. Photos were then taken and reproduced in postcard format. These were placed in postcard stands at the five locations thus giving viewers the impression of being simultaneously inside and outside the pictures.

Their second work was an enlarged cut-out of the frons of the hotel made to look brand new again. It was presented as a billboard positioned right next to the building itself. The idea the artists wanted to convey was that by re-forming fragments into new wholes, what has become "too familiar" can be perceived anew with a fresh eye.

Association being an essential element for establishing connections, the third work was an event at night, showing three films evolving around travelling and hotels. To embrace the site, the pair projected these films onto the outside wall of the building, turning parts of the hotel into a kinetic sculpture.

Kosit Juntaratip often bases his work on aspects of his own life. Just after the Chiang Mai exhibition last August he was due to fly to Köln in Germany. So he decided to say a symbolic farewell to the members of his family. He invited them to the hotel, set up a table in a deserted, bare room and served them all a dim sum lunch. The meal over he had them pose for a family portrait. Late the same afternoon he arranged a "tea ceremony" for them on the fire-escape at the side of the building. A table and chairs were set out on each of the landings so that the party were all sitting on different floors of the building. Afterwards each person was given a farewell present.

Patapan Nagwiroj's photographs focused on bonding. He addressed the process of ageing and decay by searching for traces of the hotel's former life and vitality in order to highlight the building's still-present energy. Using his camera as a "magnifying glass" he took photos of cracks in the wall, paint peeling off walls and other signs of neglect in order to accentuate the idea that beauty is entirely dependent on perception. The photos were then displayed next to their actual subjects.

Suthee Eur-Sirpornrit approached the exhibition's theme by focusing on the physical senses, touch and sight in particular. She covered the floor of a room, totally devoid of pictures or art objects of any kind, with a layer of damp sand. The only light came from an adjoining room through a hole punched in the wall. Visitors were asked to remove their shoes and socks before entering the room.

The room, he said, was intended to be a "three-fold invitation". He wanted to show how sensory deprivation can stimulate the imagination; how reality can be "continuous, multiple, simultaneous, complex, abundant and partly invisible"; and how "a spatial moment" can be "sensuous as well as aesthetic, visceral as well as intellectual".



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PHOTOS COURTESY THE GOETHE INSTITUT



One of five views from the former Railway Hotel taken for a conceptual exhibit by Navin Rawanchaikul and Rirkrit Tiravanija.



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It was a most unusual concept involving installations, short performance pieces, photographs, post-cards and film screenings. Quite a challenging project, too, since visitors were given absolutely no information on the location of the works and had to wander through the 60-room hotel searching for the "hidden" art treasures.

Although it would be next to impossible to re-create the powerful atmosphere of that day again, those who missed the one-off event in Chiang Mai are being given another chance to experience some of the emotions it evoked by visiting *Deserted and Embraced - Revisited*, an exhibition of photos and videos about the original project currently underway at the Goethe Institut on South Sathorn Road.

The Railway Hotel exhibition was the brainchild of Dr Helen Michaelsen, a German art historian who is currently lecturing at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Chiang Mai University, as part of the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (German Academic Exchange Service) programme. She explained her concept thus:

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"Toward realisation, finding the right site became the first prerequisite. Previously untouched as an art venue, the desired site had to be an abandoned place evoking its own stories and memories. It turned out to be the former Railway Hotel, deserted for a number of years; the interior now almost completely looted and destroyed. And yet this deserted place is unique with its embracing atmosphere. Despite its imposed incomplete state, the building seems complete in its quietness and contentedness. Being abandoned also implies being left alone, not being interfered with, thus prolonging the waning spirit of the past."

Completing the "magic triangle" eight artists, most of them based in Chiang Mai, were invited to engage both with the concept (deserted and embraced) and with the site. A 20-minute video was made showing highlights of these artists' work. It is being screened continuously at the Goethe Institut.

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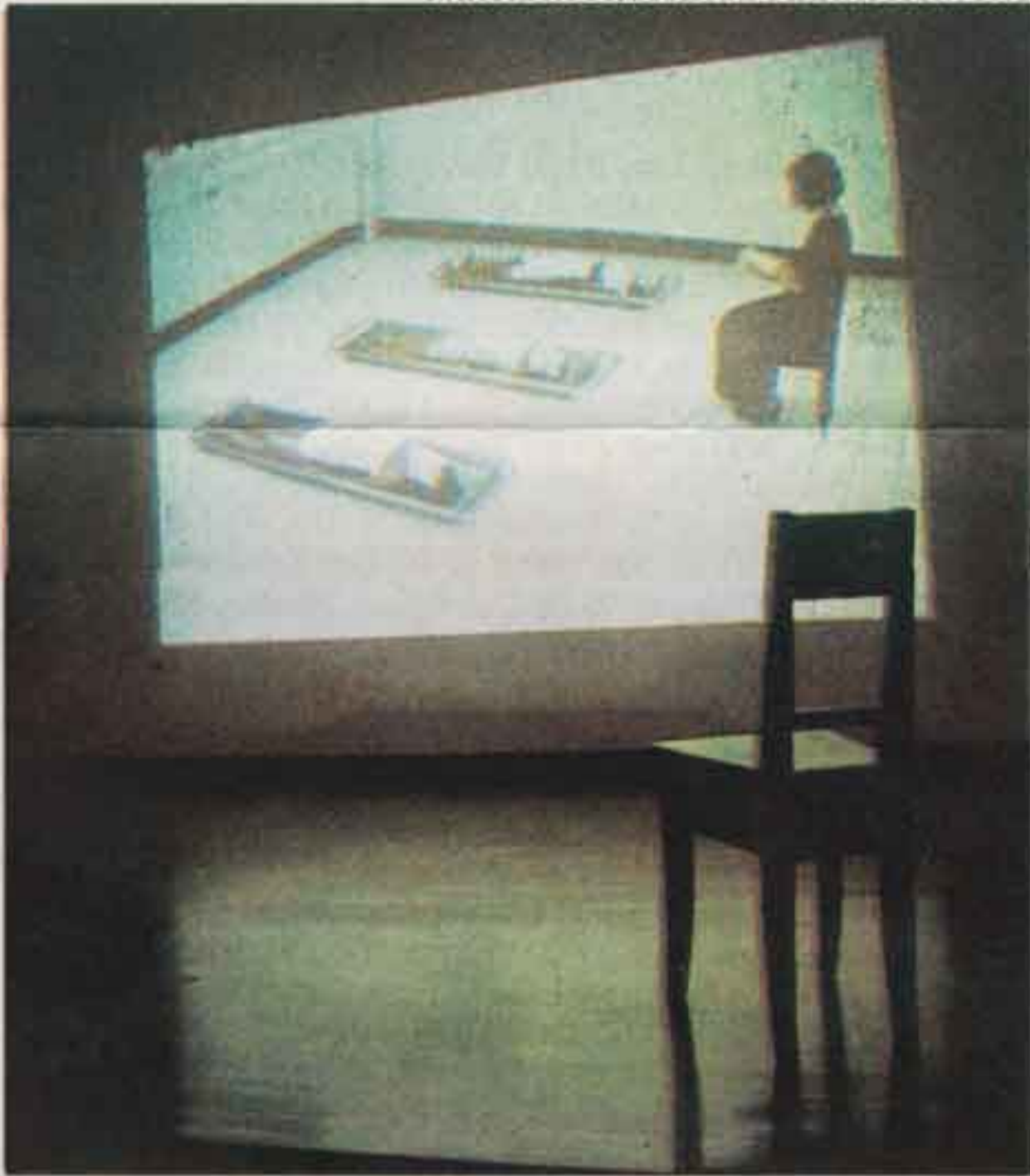
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Visitors to the Railway Hotel were initially puzzled by Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's "private performance"



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NATIONPHOTO/PRATHAI PIRIYASURAWONG



A scene from a video of Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's 'private performance' piece, 'Rite of Passage'.

piece, "Rite of Passage". What appeared to be a large empty fish-tank lay on the floor of a corridor in the hotel. Next to it stood a black wooden chair on which two books had been placed. A closer examination revealed these to be *I Nao* and *Matanaphatha*, epic poems written by King Rama VI in the early part of this century. From the fish-tank came the unmistakable stench of formaldehyde, a chemical used to preserve or embalm human corpses.

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Their second work was an enlarged cut-out of the front of the hotel made to look brand new again. It was presented as a billboard positioned right next to the building itself. The idea the artists wanted to convey was that by re-forming fragments into new wholes, what has become "too familiar" can be perceived anew with a fresh eye.

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■ *Deserted and Embraced – Revisited runs until Jan 29. The Goethe Institut is open Monday to Thursday, 8 am to 6 pm, and Fridays/Saturdays from 8 am to 4 pm. Call 287 0942-4 for information.*