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## Introduction

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# 1 Introduction

## She Said (Preamble)

There is a line from the classic work of literature, *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: “I lived my life alone, without anyone that I could really talk to...”

Writing begins here.

It’s a conversation that begins from an artmaker<sup>1</sup> who puts her artwork before her audience, on the white walls of an exhibition space,<sup>2</sup> on the cold floor of a large hall, and lets her work narrate, discuss and converse with a lone stranger who has dropped by for a visit.

A silent dialogue between art and its visitor is always interesting.

The moment in which art is being created never makes anyone feel lonely, but when the work is done and the artist steps out into the world, this is when one needs a transition: in a conversation about the weather and current headlines all the way to Vincent van Gogh’s star-studded sky, which is possible to talk about because there’s a song about it that both of us know, or because art is expensive, or because it is an immortal work of art.

But the conversation will not trespass the moonlit night with its radiant twinkling of stars and the stylised theatre of aged cypress trees which have long absorbed the story of that city, or it won't go beyond the fact that it wasn't Vincent's first imaginary starry night since there had been many others before it, or how a painting could console someone with such tenderness and sensitivity that it eventually makes us sob together.

Artmakers ask for the transition that never exists, not even as a faint pencil outline, because the real world is so far away from the world of art, because art has become a spoiled brat from the way people look up to it as a lofty practice, and even nowadays when art has transformed to become a part of society and culture, its image has changed to the extent that those who preferred familiarity are racked by doubt. Or because people just have no desire to know anything about that sort of thing: not Expressionism,<sup>3</sup> not Neo-Expressionism,<sup>4</sup> not Futurism.<sup>5</sup>

"Those terms are either too alien or too old." We are not accustomed to conceiving of art out of the ready-made forms professed by various cults in art history, not out of the second paragraph of the fifth page of some art theory. Although the philosophy of art<sup>6</sup> is born of humans, those thinkers and writers live so far away from us in both temporal and geographical dimensions that we don't have the confidence to borrow from those strangers. Meanwhile the Buddhist Art<sup>7</sup> that we're familiar with we treat with deference and humility reserved for the work of the forefather, and consequently keep reproducing and imitating it even if our ways of life have changed from those old days. And because our ways of life have changed, the reproduction is cruder than the original, both in image and in intention, in

process and in belief. It's surprising that there's no academic class that teaches us how to use the blank space in our mind to create art. We always un-blank the blank space, filling it up with busyness.

But "the blank space in an artwork," someone said, "has no need to be filled up, except by the circumstance of imagination."

Now that I've written this far, I'm not sure how much longer what I have said above will remain frozen and unchanged. Art flows like water, caressed by the reality that surrounds it and by the reality of the artmaker.

The phrase "being an artist" thus has several definitions:

Early years:

"Being an artist" was something beyond reach, something one only dreamed of achieving.

"Being an artist" was a phrase too embarrassing to utter, either due to the culture of the art community, the respect for seniority or, well, a lack of self-confidence.

Middle years:

"Being an artist" was an ambition cherished when one was full of strength and still working to become an artist. It was a bold declaration of one who had set out with one's head held high on one's own path.

Later years:

"Being an artist", "Being an artist", "Being an artist": a murmur repeated over and over in one's mind on a day weighed down by weakness, on a day one feels tired from playing the role of

someone who has to conceive and create a castle in the sky. “Being an artist”—*pen silapin*—is an offhand remark that carries no particular connotation, a phrase that only produces a singsong tone that’s hard to comprehend.

### He Said

There’s a reason why I feel an urge to write. I always want to do artsy<sup>8</sup> stuff when something disturbs my “Inner Human (*nai manut*)”<sup>9</sup> and my well-being (or unwell-being). This *something* is not considered creative in real life. If being creative means doing whatever puts rice on the table, promotes career advancement or entails tangible rewards—if being “creative” means having to achieve any of those things—then this *something* shouldn’t be part of the definition of the word. This *something* is not useful in real life, and thus it’s more fitting as material for writing or artmaking. I feel an urge to write about this *something*...

I suddenly realise that whatever it is that cajoles me to sit down and start writing may be something so brief that I can say it all in one essay, but then again I don’t trust myself and I might let it flow much farther since it’s always difficult to tie up all my thoughts and feelings. So in the beginning I would like to start with an overture, in case my text keeps lengthening. At this point, I feel that my sense of what it is to be an artist<sup>10</sup> has already reared its ugly head, if it could be visualised, just like shit in a clogged toilet, stubborn shit that can’t decide whether it wants to be flushed or to stick around, the shit that bobs up and down with hesitation.

This state of being an artist means an inability to stay the course for a long stretch of time. But there are artists who can do that, staying the course for such a long time. At this point I have discovered another clause between parentheses—namely the subjectivity regarding the male and female selves, the *He Said* and *She Said* thing. But I will leave it open. I don't need to spell out everything that I feel, do I? How can a writer write a good story if he is unable to contain everything he feels? I've come to an understanding that I should keep something inside me, and there's no need to lay everything bare. And yet what worries me is the shit in the clogged toilet; as an artmaker I always look for beautiful analogies and try not to unnecessarily soil my creative work with crudeness, filth and stench.

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Let me return to the issue of my inability to stay the course, which in the space of one paragraph has led me to digress, and up until this moment I still have no idea how I should start telling my stories. I would like to make it clear upfront to the editor that I didn't regard *Matichon*<sup>11</sup> as a rag that I could just submit anything to (just submit, not be published, which is another matter, but hey, why do I have to make it clear upfront about this trifling thing when I have done so much worse than this in the past?). When I started writing, I had no idea which publication I would send my text to. If I had been concerned with remuneration, I would have proposed it to a women's magazine that once accepted my articles, and that is sure to pay well. "Sure to pay well" means it won't be less than the last time though not more either. I decided to submit it to *Matichon* without knowing

how much I would get paid, though out of good manners the editor should at least give me a hint. Well well, I'm just testing the waters!

However—(this is how I effectively change the subject, especially from a sensitive issue when a writer inquires about the fees from the editor in a public space, which is the space in the magazine edited by that editor).

Finally I decided to submit my essay to *Matichon* because I recall what a German poet once said on a cold night as we were looking out of the window at the drizzling snow and sleet that came down like a misty-white curtain. We—a group of international artists, young and old, male and female, pianists, painters, poets—were hunched over hot Chinese tea like addicts in a cabin in an artists' village. As the snow and the sleet blanketed this cabin in the woods, we sat around a low table, our palms clasped around teacups to absorb their warmth. Our host got up to make the fourth pot of tea, as if he were serving wine, to sustain the heat amidst the cold night, then he said:

“If your creative works appear in many fields, there are more ways to communicate with different groups of people.”

This is why I have sent my piece to *Matichon*, because I don't think what I'm about to write is entertaining, amusing and light-hearted. It's not like when the female consciousness—the *She Said*—wreaked havoc and nudged me to write about my (late) grandmother, my anxiety over the acrimony of being a forty-something woman, those stories which had been published in a women's magazine a long time ago. I'm more stressed out than usual. I should stop explaining why I write. It's tedious.

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Another issue I would like to discuss is my use of the masculine pronoun *phom*, which says “I” in the way that a man would. In Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, the male protagonist wakes up one day to discover that he is female, so why can’t the male pronoun be used to describe a woman’s consciousness? The habit of quoting white intellectuals keeps recurring in me, but instead of quoting from an academic tome I have instead referred to a small novel that scholars rarely revisit. I realise instantly that the justification I have cited is weak. It’s like I simply wanted to boast about a book I have read—just lifted it and dumped it in here. I will consciously try to avoid doing that again for it goes against my intention to do something “genuine” for once without bothering about other things, such as to sound intelligent or unintelligent, to be highbrow or lowbrow. Oh, but Freud’s disciple Carl Jung also talked about the duality of gender in one person.

To me, the cultural condition relating to the use of the masculine pronoun *phom* is more enabling than the use of *dichan*,<sup>12</sup> the feminine pronoun, in many aspects. I’m also curious to know, in the end, if the two selves are so dissimilar that they have to split up, or if they can be unified—the unification between the real gender that expresses its real attitude in writing and the pronoun used to show the self in varying degrees of shallowness.

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Now the title. As I’m anxious and exhausted, as I’m bewildered by an assortment of energy drink brands from which I can choose to stimulate myself, my thoughts have slowly lined up. I tell myself that the title should be “Inner



Human (*nai manut*)". But then it sounds too deep and too old-fashioned, and I wish my stories to be neither deep nor old-fashioned, even though some passages may be serious. I want to swear when I feel like it, I don't want to suppress anything. It then dawns on me that I have been racking my brain about all of this because I am an artist, and the title I have decided to give to the book expresses a completely different sensibility from the artists who frolic about in the smell of paint and canvas glue in Pishnu Supanimit's story,<sup>13</sup> and utterly different from the image of zany oddballs which people look at artists or which artists intend people to look at them, and totally different from a declaration made with the sort of arrogance that an artist must possess, or happen to possess (well, because *I'm an artist!*).

If I am to read out loud the title of the book, my intonation will be soft, weak and dog-tired, like a sigh: "(Sigh)... I, err, am an artist."

Yes. *Phom pen silapin [I Am An Artist (He Said)]*. I'm an artist [He Said] who cannot paint (this is not modesty, I'm serious), but I make contemporary art<sup>14</sup> that doesn't rely too much on paintbrushes. Ah, paintbrushes, I haven't touched one in such a long time that I nearly forgot them. I'm an artist [He Said] who once studied a school of painting that focused on technique: I was taught to mix tempera colour with alcohol and egg white like in the old days, as well as to paint with watercolour using paintbrushes. But some modern scholars would say that this school is very obsolete, and instead we must focus on the cult of art as the subject ("subJECT", a Thai-style pronunciation hammers the second syllable, *JECT*, with no mercy). For instance, we study the cult of Impressionism,<sup>15</sup> which teaches us to incorporate scientific light and colour into our paintings, or we learn to

liberate ourselves from reality and delve into the hidden crannies of consciousness with the cult of Surrealism,<sup>16</sup> or we analyse and synthesise shapes and forms as in Cubism.<sup>17</sup> On and on like that.

If I keep going with more examples, we may have to round up artists into two opposing classrooms to battle it out with each other: those in Bangkok should head to Jitkam Silpakorn<sup>18</sup>—Silpakorn University’s Faculty of Painting<sup>19</sup>—and those in Chiang Mai to Vjitsilp Mor Chor<sup>20</sup>—Chiang Mai University’s Faculty of Fine Arts.<sup>21</sup> But that wouldn’t really make any difference, would it? Both classrooms would still be focusing on the cult of art as the SUBJECT.

I’m an artist [He Said] who cannot paint, or I can but I’m not good at it, so I flee into a field that relies on ideas, or that allows me to pretend to have ideas. The door of conceptual art<sup>22</sup> is wide open: no need for skill, just brainy exercises. Well, there remains a whispered debate in Thailand on that matter—whispered because it would come across as outdated to those who happen to overhear it. The argument goes that art students should at least be taught academic basics so they have a foundation. All right, an academic foundation is not a ceramic foundation, okay? Once a US-educated Thai lecturer got upset at this obstinate conservatism and yelled from the faculty floor:

“If the students can play the piano, why do you still teach them to clean the floor?” This may sound rather belligerent. But as you know, when people get angry, it’s not uncommon to act aggressively, don’t you think?

Another door is also wide open for someone who cannot paint well, and this one I rather enjoy. That is, to create artwork from ready-made materials. Even though I’m not writing this essay to introduce you to movements in

art, I'm afraid that my well-worn years spent on this narrow path called Art has put me several leagues ahead of some readers who may not be familiar with the art scene<sup>23</sup> (I'm not boasting). So let me explain a few things here because I do not wish anyone to imagine me as a long-haired, bedraggled, bushy-bearded free-spirited who spends the day leaping around and cartwheeling on a white canvas, with every move I make magically rendering shape and colour—red signifying the nation, white the religion and blue the Thai monarchy, like we have been taught in school. Don't, please.

Sometimes the sky is not three brushes of azure or two brushes of gold; sometimes it is red like blood as Edvard Munch, a master painter, once described:

One evening I was walking along a path, the city was on one side and the fjord below. I felt tired and ill. I stopped and looked out over the fjord—the sun was setting, and the clouds turning blood red. I sensed a scream passing through nature; it seemed to me that I heard the scream. I painted this picture, painted the clouds as actual blood. The colour shrieked. This became *The Scream of the Frieze of Life*.<sup>24</sup>

Whenever an artist is asked about his favourite artwork, he's pushed into an uncomfortable position, since it is so different from picking a favourite shirt or pair of shoes. As I was mentioning Edvard Munch—rattled by his painting of a half-dead, half-alive figure with a round skull for a head, hands cupping cheeks, the mouth agape in an inaudible howl that twists the torso of this figure trapped on a high bridge behind which lays a vast purple bay and below a swirl

of intensely red clouds—I felt thankful for another artist: Marcel Duchamp, who 80 years ago executed a form of perversion by installing a urinal in a gallery and insisting that it was an artwork. He called it *Fountain* by R. Mutt. Later, someone would attempt an interpretation and explain that this R. Mutt, whose urinal it was, symbolised a very foolish person. Though Duchamp's prank caused an uproar before the exhibition had started and was eventually excluded from it, today the art world embraces ready-made objects with open arms, either as a component of an artwork or as artworks themselves, without a flush of embarrassment about the fact that they have nothing to do with painting. Why a flush? I don't know, it seems pertinent to that historic urinal.

Here I am able to sum up the introduction of myself: I'm an artist [He Said] who paints badly, so I find an exit route by focusing more on thinking and less on painting, and I use the term “management of the creative and artistic process”<sup>25</sup> instead of “painting”. What I create is called an artwork, not a painting, because it hardly involves the act of painting, if at all. Not sculptures either, and not really printmaking since I mix different techniques in my work—installing, arranging, fitting, putting things together. Go ahead and call it whatever you want, I don't mind.

The range of sensibilities associated with the state of being an artist varies to a great extent. Artists are not limited to the rowdy, good-humoured and outspoken type that Thai society seems to picture them to be. There are the deep and depressed artists, then there are the happy-go-lucky ones unperturbed by all of life's troubles. In short: there are as many species of artists as there are non-artists. Only that the most popular and recognisable type is the fun-loving

one, since it fits within the reigning temperament of society and has become the archetype of Thai artists, which is kind of good, I guess (my hand holding the pen is trembling and my heart shrinks). Me? Personally I was inclined towards being the sensitive, romantic sort when I was younger, and over the years I have been hardened by life, like the soles of my feet after having taken countless steps. Some areas are marked with incurable corns and calluses, while the heels are cracked, tainted, creased and discoloured, professing a unique texture so different from the silkiness of my hands and tummy, for I have taken each footstep firmly, confidently, thanks to my accumulating experience.

But is this true? That confidence comes with experience?

I am reminded of an old scene from the printmaking studio at the Faculty of Painting. One evening while I sat morosely before a print I had recently completed, the work hit me square in the face: I was confused if I should have done what I'd done or how best to remedy what I had already finished to make it better than this. It was the first time I learned that during the creative process, insecurity is a constant visitor. Then, I heard the sound of a professor entering the studio, scattering the silent turmoil that hovered between me and my work. I leapt out of that stillness, using the professor's presence as an escape from the tremors inside myself. The professor who happened to enter my circle of confusion was... Pishnu Supanimit, my advisor.

“Professor, have you had to make a lot of choices in your life and in your work?” (Since I was young, I have always been either sharp or corny.) (In fact I wanted to make a sentimental remark, but that's the problem of emotional inconsistency that happens whenever I write.)

Ajarn<sup>26</sup> Pishnu's answer was equally sentimental, or perhaps equally corny.

"The older you get, the more you have to choose." His solemn countenance was lit by the golden sunlight reflected from the roof of Wat Mahatat<sup>27</sup> at twilight, and that elevated his run-of-the-mill answer to the realm of the sacred. That's why I will never forget it.

And now on this anxious day when I've decided to write this book, a long time has passed, and I have grown up. Still, how true are those words of my teacher.

Shortly thereafter I found my own answer to the question. One day, my father was reading *Reader's Digest*; there was no Thai edition back then, and my father was reading it in English. There was no way I could ascertain the accuracy of his translation, but according to him it was written in the magazine that: "If you can't prioritise which of two things you have to do, do them both."

Allow me to digress (not a major digression, since it's still concerning *Reader's Digest*). On the day my father passed away, I was supposed to fly to Australia to install my work. I postponed the flight and stayed for the first night of the funeral. Then I lit a joss stick and told my father that it was time to put into practice what we had once read together in the magazine. I would fly out tomorrow.

As I was giving a lecture in an auditorium before 400 people, at that same moment, smoke was rising from the chimney of a crematorium where the body of my father lay. I did well that day, despite my Silpakorn-style English, because I realised that the moment was precious. The *She Said* part is more adept at narrating a moving anecdote like this, but I do what I can.

Now I won't make an excuse about sharing a personal story in a public space, because people have long assumed that the life story of an artist and the artist's artwork are one and the same.

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- 1 **Artmaker**  
คนทำงานศิลปะ  
An alternative term for "artist". Araya deliberately uses it throughout the book to signify a more casual, perhaps more mundane association than "artist".
- 2 **Exhibition space, gallery**  
ห้องแสดง
- 3 **Expressionism**  
เอ็กซ์เพรสชันนิสม์
- 4 **Neo-Expressionism**  
นีโอ-เอ็กซ์เพรสชันนิสม์
- 5 **Futurism**  
ฟิวเจอริสม์
- 6 **Philosophy of art**  
ปรัชญาศิลป์
- 7 **Buddhist Art**  
พุทธศิลป์  
Traditional or religious art based on Buddhist imagery.
- 8 **Artsy**  
ศิลป์ๆ  
*Silp silp*, something akin to "artsy", a playful, slightly ironic term.
- 9 **Inner human**  
ในมนุษย์  
A term that roughly means a combination of instinct, inner wisdom and humanity, coined by Araya and used exclusively by her throughout the book.
- 10 **An artist**  
ความเป็นศิลปิน  
The state of being an artist, "artistness". Araya uses this both seriously and mockingly.
- 11 **Matchon**  
มติชน  
A media company that publishes *Matchon Daily* and *Matchon Weekly*, which ran the original essays by Araya in the early 2000s.

- 12 **Dichan**  
ดิฉัน  
A formal female pronoun.
- 13 **The Smell of Paint and Canvas Glue**  
กลิ่นสีและกาวแปรง  
A popular novel by Pishnu Supanimit that was later made into a film. It features an assortment of funny, eccentric art students from Silpakorn University.
- 14 **Contemporary art**  
ศิลปะร่วมสมัย
- 15 **Impressionism**  
อิมเพรสชันนิสม์
- 16 **Surrealism**  
เซอร์เรียลลิสม์
- 17 **Cubism**  
คิวบิสม์
- 18 **Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Arts, Silpakorn University**  
คณะจิตรกรรม ประติมากรรม และภาพพิมพ์  
Known unofficially as Chitrakam Silpakorn or shortened as Faculty of Painting. As the country's first formal modern art institution, the faculty is highly respected but was later subjected to suspicion of conservatism.
- 19 **Silpakorn University or Silpakorn**  
มหาวิทยาลัยศิลปากร  
The first fine art university in Thailand founded in 1943 by Silpa Bhirasri, or Corrado Feroci (1892–1962), an Italian-born artist.
- 20 **Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Chiang Mai**  
คณะวิจิตรศิลป์  
Known unofficially as Vijitsilp Mor Chor.
- 21 **Chiang Mai University**  
มหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่  
A well-known university in the northern city of Chiang Mai, sometimes referred to as Mor Chor.
- 22 **Conceptual art**  
คอนเซ็ปชวลอาร์ต
- 23 **Art scene**  
วงการศิลปะ  
Art community, art circle
- 24 Araya's prose here appears to be an adaptation of Munch's diary entry dated 22 January 1892.
- 25 **Management of the creative and artistic process**  
การจัดการในกระบวนการสร้างสรรค์ศิลปะ



- 26 **Ajarn**  
อาจารย์  
A respectful honorific used to address a teacher or scholar; also lecturer, scholar, professor.
- 27 **Wat Mahatat (Mahatat Temple)**  
วัดมหาธาตุ  
An old temple next to Silpakorn University; it was founded in the Ayutthaya period in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.