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"Postmodern": A Stranger in the Village

Published by

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I am an Artist (He Said).

1 ed. National Gallery Singapore, 2022.

Project MUSE. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/book.123209>.



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[172.71.254.233] Project MUSE (2025-04-05 02:51 GMT)

15 “Postmodern”: A Stranger in the Village

He Said

I want to tell you about the hardships faced by some art-makers who didn't live only in their own little world. This tale took place in a village...

A long time ago in a village there lived a group of people who were fond of beautiful things. They were casually called sculptors, painters and printmakers. But they were also thinkers and feelers. Sometimes they became errors and meddlers and whatever, which are basically the same thing but with different temperaments. The villagers rarely discussed these people's skills but often talked about their ideas and feelings, and even though their works looked nice they always came with deeper meanings. Sometimes, even before the audience could find any meaning, the makers would dance about, trying to instill some feelings in them beforehand. This village had been there for such a long time that the original settlers, the elders, had left (early departures or era leftovers, this latter group, forsaken by their times, could wait patiently until what was old-fashioned came back in fashion again, but be prepared, since time will never bring back smooth, unwrinkled skin). There were several

new teachers—young, energetic and ready to reproduce; these people called themselves “the staff”. Meanwhile the middle-aged teachers, not yet wrinkly but no longer silky-skinned, and long past breeding age, were also still around. The villagers were mostly inquisitive, though some weren’t; it depended on what it was that they were curious about, which sometimes involved digging up what was underneath them, not exactly like archaeologists, but digging into the past all the same, a past that mostly contained mystery.

This introduction to the village has taken me knee-deep into mud, not anywhere near that postmodern thingy. Oh right, a group of youngsters dropped by in the village, like Casper the Friendly Ghost, parachuting in late in the morning, never punctual. They came to find knowledge and left.

A routine chore for the villagers involved displaying what they had sculpted, painted or printed and sitting down to talk about these things. If someone was confident that they had created enough pieces of considerable quality, they would put them together for others to look at. The villagers looked at one another’s works a lot, looking and looking.

This village was in contact with other villages, sometimes those in Bangkok, sometimes villages far away, such as in the US. Sometimes we travelled, a favourite destination being the Alley. Oftentimes we travelled in group, like a parade, and because of these merry comings and goings we learned new terms that sounded rather electrifying. A few years ago, we learned about “postmodernism”, the term everyone is now talking about.

For example, at an opening at Doo Dee,¹ a middle-aged teacher, who was half-way between being wrinkly and unwrinkled, eyeballed a piece and proclaimed, “That’s

pretty postmodern!” in a not-too-soft voice, prompting a *farang*² scholar who was fluent in Thai and standing nearby to break into a mysterious Mona Lisa-like smile.

For example, in my morning class that discussed a mixture of subjects that have nothing to do with theory, a youngster burning with academic zeal announced that he wanted to know about postmodernism.

“Yeah, sure,” the teacher burning with bookish zeal answered. “But well, you’re not up-to-date. There’s already a new term, ‘Uk-Ka-Buk’,³ you know what it means.” (*Uk-Ka-Buk* is an art project by Uthit Atimana, who organised the Chiang Mai Social Installation,⁴ so called in order to dilute the meaning of the word “art”.) The teacher’s suggestion inspired in the Caspers a wide-eyed interest in this new term, and upon seeing this, the teacher delivered another punch line: “It has become so huge because they’ve added ‘Super’. Now it’s ‘Super Uk-Ka-Buk’”

A nice *farang* who has moved to the village and married a lovely Thai wife—he can speak Thai with a Thai sensibility though he is still fluent in English—tells the other villagers: “Postmodern art is like... playing pranks, being sarcastic and doing random things.”

Everybody pays attention to his explanation and repeats it to others, “Postmodern art is like this...” Since no one attempts to illuminate the true meaning of the term and since there is no new term for people to latch on to, the villagers have to discuss it from time to time. But time moves so slowly and people soon get tired of talking about something when they don’t really know what it is. Time itself discourages people from discussing postmodernism, because the more they talk about it, the more obscure it becomes. And yet no one dares to get up and bang the table

to spare everyone the mounting frustration, since there's a rule in the village that You Must Not End A Discussion—ending, blocking, clogging, warding off something with an amulet? This rule forbidding An End is issued by a Trend. And the rule is strict.

At an academic symposium on the subject of postmodernism for the teachers in the village, which involved three progressive-minded teachers, two Thai and one *farang*, a clash of ideas broke out between the panelists on stage and another teacher in the audience; so it was three against one, which seemed pretty lopsided. I can't remember the exact details but what they argued about was whether postmodernism came from modernism, and whether the former is a reaction against the latter.

Later that evening, a group of people sit down for an informal discussion.

Kaewlun, a girl from the village who just returned from a master's class in printmaking from Bangkok; Seekham, another girl who's studying for an MA in philosophy and the arts with a *farang* teacher; Tid Wee,⁵ who's leaving the village to teach in Bangkok; and Jaiya, the host. Plus Tid Mike, a Berliner who joins this dual-purpose farewell and reception party—a farewell to those who are leaving and a reception for those who have returned, with the same menu that leaves itself open to multiple interpretations.

Either because of the unusually zesty, masterfully seasoned dishes or because of Seekham's thesis topic, the conversation veers from jolly stuff to postmodernism and Jaiya, the host, feels compelled to invite Tid Wolfgang to the

jamboree. Tid Wolfgang lays down his textbook in a naked display of wisdom right next to a bowl of *tom yum goong* and a mug of beer. Without helping himself to any food or drink, he spews forth:

“The references to postmodernism in the US and the various strains of the concept that exist in France suggest that it’s all about ‘seeing’. We have to ask how far this can go on. It’s possible that one day no one will talk about postmodernism again.”

“Ouch!” Jaiya exclaims, a prawn’s whisker sticks out of her mouth. “We haven’t understood it yet and now they’re going to stop talking about it?” she says, munching a prawn and straining to see Tid Wolf since it’s getting dark and it’s hard to make out a face. Someone gets up to light a postmodern candle.

“My *farang* teacher told me that I’ve chosen a difficult topic and either I will quit midway or I’ll become famous,” Seekham chuckles at the prediction given by her handsome teacher in the Faculty of Humanities.

“Postmodernism has deep roots and may travel a long way. Its function is to follow the trail of daily problems.”

“As I understand it, we’re still in the modern age, but it shows some symptoms of the postmodern,” Seekham tells Wolf.

“We’re still living in the modern age. But it is as if our behaviours are framed by the vicinity of the postmodern,” Tid Wolf polishes Seekham’s sentence to make it more scholarly.

The candle flame flickers every time someone spits out the word “postmodern”. The flame is almost extinguished at the moment the word is uttered, and thus the term attains a sacred status.

"I think the postmodern has emerged to counter the modern," Seekham blurts out. Wolf, from the shadow of the *tom yum* bowl, cuts her off with his gentle voice.

"People tend to think of the postmodern as an era. But what if we see it as a happening?" Tid Wolf darts his eyes up and down from his book. "A happening..." he emphasises. "Don't forget that the modern era has its shortcomings, especially in the way it can't direct itself towards..." He squints, looking thoughtful to demand his audience's attention, "...towards a certain kind of truth. That kind of truth exists in the postmodern, and that's how the postmodern fills in the gap."

Jaiya chips in: "What fills in the gap must come from that gap, because it needs to understand itself. But it can't be identical otherwise it will never fill in anything. This filling-in must not go against the gap, either. Hence it's unlikely that the postmodern has come straight from the modern and is resisting the modern."

"Is it the same as filling a tooth?" Tid Wee asks while staring at the half-bitten chicken leg in his hand. He flips it around to search for any remaining scraps of meat while explaining: "The purpose of filling a tooth is to reinforce it, to enable it to chew without feeling pain." He chomps on the drumstick with hardly any meat left, while looking inquiringly at Tid Mike, who represents a beacon of hope since he came from the same village as Tid Wolfgang. But Tid Mike has fallen into a trance as he's shuttling enthusiastically between the *tom yum* soup and the beer without being able to distinguish one from the other. After a throaty slurp of the spicy soup he exclaims:

"So what's with the modern that makes it full of gaps and holes?" Silence descends upon the group. Each of us

has a partitioned knowledge of modern art. Impressionism and Cubism were the doors that opened to other modern practices—to the Abstract, to the use of utilitarian objects such as newsprint in artworks, to the simple forms of the Suprematist painters and the abstract compositions of Mondrian. Then one day everything came to a shocking halt and the motion was disrupted in a back-breaking fashion when a urinal was presented as an art object.

After World War II, the pioneer of modern art was Abstract Expressionism, moving on to the tranquil paintings, like meditation objects, of Barnett Newman, followed by Environmental Art, Minimalism, Conceptual Art, and Happening Art.

This thread of evolution is deduced from the words of the art historian Gottfried Boehm, who could have been chums with Tid Wolf had they lived in the same period. Boehm's views about painters were as follows: "In the beginning, nothing about the modern was new. And at a later time, the modern picked up whatever remained. The villagers are not convinced by the definition of the post-modern, whether it will form something more new, or more special, than the modern did."

"Modern art is..." Kaewlun, out of frustration, concludes decisively in one breath. "For example, the belief in the value of originality and the idea that art is a lofty object on a pedestal," she manages to push on to the end.

Seekham, the one who broached the subject, answers whether the postmodern offers something more novel than the avant-garde movements of modern art.

"This avant-garde wing of the modernists, they aimed high, but they couldn't realise their desires. For one thing, they couldn't reach the truth."

"And why does truth have anything to do with art?" Tid Mike brings an axe down on the conversation without sloshing his glass of beer.

"I wonder too," Miss Jaiya nods rapidly to show her support, like servants in Thai soap operas often do.

No one wants to talk to Tid Mike about truth and art, because it seems to be complicating things even further. But Tid Wolf clarifies the difference between the modern and the postmodern regarding the notion of truth.

"Let's put it this way..." his eyes sparkle as he looks at his book, as if he was about to explain something funny. "If the modernist explains that the sun lights up everything in the world, the postmodernist will say that the existence of the sun itself proves that there are places in the world that light hasn't yet reached."

"Oh," Kaewlun cries in a fit of lucidity. "Gotcha!"

"A candle doesn't just illuminate. But a candle illuminates from a certain height, then there is the wind and the darkness around it that accentuate the flickering light," Tid Wee follows through on what Mr. Wolf has begun. "This is the truth," he concludes while stabbing a finger into his cheek bulge to look for the postmodern truth lodged between his teeth.

Though he has brought light to the murky evening where the brainy jamboree is taking place, Tid Wolf from *Berlinnn* is afraid that these tipsy artists will be hugely misled and assume that the postmodern that they are tryingggg to grasssp while drinking beersss is an event in the aart world that needs to be embraced and can never be let out of one's sight. That if one doesn't drop the knotty postmodern angle into a discussion on art, then one has fallen behind. "No," he exclaims, and Tid Mike stops in his tracks while

reaching for his beer. “We have to accept and understand that postmodernism is not a discovery by any theorist, artist or philosopher. More than that, please understand that our reality and our worldly existence have already entered the postmodern era, that’s why there’s no need for any discovery.”

“This is the happening I talked about,” Tid Wolf concludes.

“At a time when travelling and communication take place at high speed, differences are brought together. At any given time, there are several differences. The total circumstance as differences exist in the same time leads to the essence of postmodernism, which is *pluralism*,” he lets slip an English word, *pluralism*, then recomposes and explains again in Thai.

“It’s not a discovery. It’s a reflection of what is already happening, this is important,” he stresses to the beer-soaked circle.

“Right...” Everyone acknowledges this except Tid Mike, who is still busy with his beer and looking nonchalant.

“By and large, postmodernism is cited here and there in rhetorical statements by specialists, and so the understanding of it is often limited to within each specific field—in literature, architecture and in art. But in totality, it’s not connected to other social phenomena, such as economics and politics.” Wolf is now unstoppable.

“But there’s one reliable common ground among the many explanations offered by these different specialists: postmodernism isn’t a conclusive term, but it suggests a meaning and expands a process of thinking—it’s not a pattern of thought. It’s not something to be ‘discovered’ because it’s a reflection of what’s already happening.”

"Fuck me," Tid Mike swears gently to himself. He suddenly remembers something through the fog of drunkenness.

"It doesn't have a form but it has a meaning," Tid Wee feels a gentle breeze that makes the candle flame dance. Meanwhile Wolf becomes silent as if he was no longer there.

"It's an entering into something," Kaewlun mumbles. "So it can't be stopped." Seekham is lost in thought.

The beer-soaked gathering begins to understand postmodernism as a happening. It can no longer be called a special dish and it can't be seen or touched.

It may exist in the cracks of the half-chewed chicken wing, in the blandness of the cold *tom yum* soup and the scraps of vegetables, or as mingled in with the candlelight that can't be touched but can expel shadows or as encroaching into the empty beer bottles that are lined up next to the table. Suddenly a gust of wind, without a warning, extinguishes the candle.

"It's a ghost, this postmodern thing," Tid Wee exclaims, sending everyone except the *farang* Mike into tense silence.

"It would be good if it might as well exist in empty beer bottles, because this thing seems to keep multiplying," Mike rambles on. "We'll see," he grumbles and pours the beer aggressively into his glass to challenge the ghost of postmodernism. Froth spills over the edge of his glass. "Let's see with my own eyes what it looks like!"

With their hearts unsettled by the happening that has no origin, can't be seen, and yet can explain the truth of all things with such clarity, everyone agrees to retire even before the clocks strikes 12.

Tid Mike gets up to pee, feeling miffed at his compatriot Tid Wolf, who's responsible for the untimely breakup of the party. He aims his piss-jet into a urinal with a vengeance. Coming from a *farang* land, he has no fear of either modern or postmodern ghosts.

The next morning, there is a discussion among the village's first batch of postgrad students.

"A newer term than 'postmodernism' is not 'Uk-Ka-Buk'. It's 'post-postmodernism,'" intones an associate professor in aesthetics. "'Uk-Ka-Buk' is a postmodern term because it's part of a discourse and it can be explained. Yesterday I met a Vietnamese lecturer and painter. His work uses traditional techniques, and he positions himself as a modernist. But he has exhibited in many foreign countries. Maybe in the *farang*'s eyes, his old-school practice fits the postmodern idea of assigning value to what used to be on the fringe."

"Anyway, how does knowing all of this benefit artmakers?"

"It doesn't at all," the associate professor answers confidently.

"You make your art. Leave to the theorists the task of analysing, critiquing, defining, finding structures and associations, and bridging the old to the new."

1 **Doo Dee**

ดูดี

A restaurant that has an exhibition space in Chiang Mai.

2 **Farang**

ฝรั่ง

A casual term referring to white or Western people. It's used commonly, without any negative connotation, by most Thai people.

- 3 **Uk-Ka-Buk**
อุกกะบึก
An art project initiated by a group of Chiang Mai artists in 2002.
- 4 **Chiang Mai Social Installation**
เชียงใหม่จัดวางสังคม
An art project that took place between 1992–1998 at various sites in Chiang Mai, conceived more as a socially-conscious events than strictly an art exhibition,
- 5 **Tid**
ทิด
A term used to refer to a man who has left the monkhood.