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Confronting Art, Confronting Strangers

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He Said

Suddenly I feel thankful to art for letting me “confront” something as well as “avoid the confrontation” with something. In my former naïveté I thought that without art, my experience would have been lacking in many ways. The idea may have grown more complicated over time, but it all started very superficially as follows:

The satisfaction derived from artmaking—the entire process from conceptualisation to execution, with revision in between and after the work is finished, as well as the acknowledgement of other people’s views—doesn’t seem to be any different from the satisfaction one could derive from other kinds of work, and so I’m not sure why I have to talk about it.

Then there is the self-examination as one proceeds along the path of art (change, improvement, negligence, earnestness, responsibility, even vulnerability and perseverance). Which, again, doesn’t seem any different from other lines of work.

A unique experience nevertheless comes from the essence of the work: the manifestation of certain messages,

or the nearly inexplicable bliss that comes with the decision to confront something (either by merely contemplating it or by setting out to work on topics that most people pay no attention to, or topics that are transformed into emotions through the filter of art, giving them an implicit meaning, or sparkling, multi-faceted implicit meanings). Such an experience wouldn't have yielded spiritual or intellectual results had it not been for the condition of artmaking.

Besides direct confrontation through art, on the contrary, the fact that art is ethereal, wayward, outlandish, and exempt from always having to be real allows me to avoid confronting some aspects of reality that I feel averse to, as art becomes my excuse.

In conclusion:

Through art, I confront something that rarely happens in my life.

Through art, I also avoid confronting something that happens in my life.

That's about the size of it. Sigh! It took me a while to put it in words. It's like I'm hooked on a book and don't want to leave it to do something else, since that would mean I would have to go back to my daily routine. I have no problems reading a book, reading on and on, except for a minor eye problem that necessitates the need for ample lighting.

What I don't like is when I happen to compare my artistic path with other non-art paths: if the comparison reveals the two paths to be different, I feel like an alienated minority; but if the comparison shows that the two are similar—that both concern a struggle for success, fame and wealth—then I feel that art, which I value so much, is utterly banal. I admit that art can hardly please this artist either way.

But within that insecurity and alienation felt as a minority in the world where people hardly care about art, there's another layer of alienation that every artist feels. That is, it's not easy for an artist to embrace those who think about art differently or practice other kinds of art. It's not a big deal when two people have different tastes in food, drink, travel or fashion. But this is art. Artmakers are deeply attached to the value of their art after years of being devoted to specific schools or practices, through perseverance and creative investment, and then suddenly a different kind of practice which rejects what he or she has been pursuing is celebrated and extolled as valuable—how is that possible?

I feel this confusion too. I'm a product of a certain school and period of art appreciation that values truth, originality, substance, gravity, seriousness of content, etcetera—should I go on listing these values, it would become so sanctimonious as to be worthy of a shrine. I mean, if I could only just hole up in my world and my work, it would be fine. But that's not possible: I'm exposed to news and information, and as an art teacher I can't possibly shut myself out, and so this exposure to the world sometimes causes puzzlement, doubt and alienation as I regard some artworks and fail to understand their worth—because I don't have the fundamentals to understand them, because they are so unfamiliar, so removed from my knowledge, that it's not easy to try to get to know them. And then I have to maintain my neutrality, which, again, isn't so easy in my effort to understand such works—what they are, do and mean.

When struck by this internal sense of alienation—between the kind of art I appreciate and the kind that everyone else appreciates—as an art teacher I have a way to circumvent it: there are plenty of references I can use in

class; I can skip over something or change the subject to talk about something else. But to do that means I'm avoiding confrontation when, as an artist, I'm taken by a blissful sensation when I choose to confront something that most people regard as unworthy of attention. How selfish an artist can be!

If writing is "creative" work (what a silly idea!) then I should admit that I've skipped over something despite its significance because I wanted to avoid confronting what seems distant, what's not to my taste, what I know little about or what I have some doubts over. I'm pondering whether to ignore it. Should I ignore the works that other people deem creative, just as writing is deemed creative? Or should I confront this?

Ah, I've warmed up just enough.

This one Thai artist, we're sometimes confused by a label attached to his work that says, Argentina. That doesn't really matter because it's part of his biography; what matters is he's pretty famous. But that doesn't really matter either; what matters is he has squarely bewildered people in the Thai art scene as well as those outside: how come making *pad thai* is art? Why are the *farang*¹ so excited about it? The success has made him an international star. And though I admit (for the second time) that art is wide-open and can be so many things, I don't quite get this *pad thai* thing. I rarely order it; the fried egg keeps getting stuck in my teeth. I've never made it myself either since the recipe is too complicated.

The huge space between me and *pad thai* has brought out my bad habit of ignoring it. But no. The truth is I don't know why I would want to know anything about *pad thai*. What could *pad thai* give me that every bowl of noodles in my life hasn't already? At least until this artwork by this artist has spawned generations of offspring in several major exhibitions around the world, pushing a legion of Thai, Korean, Chinese and *farang* artists to start a craze for interactive services. If you're not ordering *pad thai* then you should buy Thai products or read Thai comics in English; if you don't have Thai noodles then a Korean artist will cook you something else; if you're not hungry, a table will be set for you to play chess and drink coffee. I went to an exhibition and saw the artist waiting outside; he told me to go in and take a rest, there's Coca-Cola and magazines to flip through. I looked puzzled; sheepishly I told him I didn't want to rest, I just had a Coca-Cola and I came to look at art. So he said *this* was his art and enthusiastically offered supplementary services such as an oxygen mask and a massage. A massage? I came for art and he told me to lounge on an armchair, watch TV and snack when I wasn't even hungry or thirsty.

I'm tired of this cajoling to snack and drink. Then I thought about a work by Montien Boonma. Once he gave a talk in Brisbane and showed images from his work with several round tables covered with red sheets set up in the National Gallery, with heaps of *kaolao* bowls² and chopsticks piled high on them. One day at the exhibition, these bowls came tumbling down and half of them broke. Montien laughed with delight: there you go, the uncertainty of life. He took photos of the damage and talked about it at the lecture: "What's the point of eating so much? Eating and drinking? You like eating that much? Why? We're going to

die soon anyway!” His shrill, nearly-neurotic tone cracked up the Brisbane audience. Okay, I said I won’t eat, so I won’t eat. Then a white girl tries to sell me a t-shirt, saying it’s only available here and not online. Well, I’ve never bought anything online because what I didn’t buy keeps getting sent to me anyway (a computer virus and other kinds of virus as well)! Anyway, the point is I should buy the thing from the girl since there needs to be an interaction. Interaction, sure, I have plenty of it at home. What kind of interaction you want? *Ko Hang* meatball, *Ah Koh kuayjab*, *Chai Si Mee Kiew* wanton-noodle,³ all lined up on a footpath where you sit and eat and watch while the Chinese vendor knocks her spatula on a stove and lords over her husband and scolds her child, while a pack of street dogs chase a bitch in a chaotic tussle and a cat leaps up on the table and knocks over a fish sauce bowl, licking its paws with relish, its eyes drooping dreamily, and a *jingjok* lizard swallows the moths buzzing around a light bulb and falls into the noodle bowl in which a fly is already floating. All these interactive activities completely contained in a bowl of noodles worth 25 baht. On a fateful day, a lonely bus will make an interaction with a community, say, by smashing into a pawn shop in Sapan Kwai or into an outdoor cinema screen in Nong Ma Wor. All kinds of interaction we have, you see.

It would be all right to keep ignoring one thing. But now that there are hundreds and thousands of them...

So I collect myself and accept that a confrontation is inevitable. I have to contemplate the value of this art that feels like a total stranger to me, something that exists so far away from me. Why is it so popular?

pad thai (1990) was presented at Paula Allen Gallery in New York. It is an artwork that propelled the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija to worldwide stardom. Rirkrit built a temporary kitchen in the exhibition space and transformed the tradition of the opening night into a dinner party. The crowd who showed up was a crucial element of his work. After this artistic event ended, after the frying, the eating, the drinking and the talking, the shelves, half-opened packages, utensils, kitchenware, ingredients, spoons, forks, spatulas, used dishes and bowls were left lying there until the end of the exhibition period. What Rirkrit was doing was not showing objects made to be displayed in a gallery (what an exhibition has always been about), and he also wasn't serving a pre-show meal before the guests went on to watch a film or a performance. No. So what is it he was doing? Let's find out together.

Normally galleries in the West are accused of being spaces reserved for commercial activities (really? Thai galleries are not like that), spaces for selling art (Thai galleries can't even sell entrance tickets), or for selling the names of artists and their collaborators, or for selling art-related products and even artworks themselves. Besides, a gallery is where visitors can experience an aesthetic trance, either deep or shallow depending on their inclinations, by standing in tranquility before each artwork.

pad thai, by the artist who was born and schooled outside Thailand, is a live performance in a gallery space that encourages the interaction among guests; it is an informal gathering that becomes an artistic activity. The work extends beyond the cooking; it's also made up of other relational activities such as eating, drinking, playing games, listening to music, reading and resting. These *or-di-na-ry*

activities take up the gallery space usually occupied by ordinary art—the kind which is hung on the wall or placed on a plinth, the serious, solemn artworks that are surrounded by shimmering halos. It's like Rirkrit has launched a debate, politely but forcefully, about the essence of art and the stagnant status quo of the art world.

What's unusual is that he chose cooking, a chore for Thai housewives. Imagine a young artist who doesn't paint or sculpt but cooks Thai food for *farang*—lovers of Thainess will find it endearing. But see it through the lens of feminism, maybe the artist is dismantling the boundary between male and female activities, and also the boundary between public and private matters. Am I overthinking this?

To conclude: the gist of *pad thai* lies in creating social interaction through simple tricks and mundane activities assembled into an artwork that, ultimately, leaves behind dregs and leftovers of cooking and consumption, traces of a transient event that has already ended. None of this would have mattered had it not been done in an art space and in the name of art.

Next, Rirkrit moved on from being “the cook in the Oriental kitchen” to playing the role of an interior designer or architect. He opened cafés in galleries in Cologne and Vienna; he designed a living room with game desks, sofas and a refrigerator stocked with drinks for an exhibition in Dijon, France; he recreated the interior of a Swedish home at Rooseum in Malmo and the famous “glass house” of Philip Johnson at the Museum of Modern Art in New York; his own apartment was rebuilt at full scale complete with separate rooms, a kitchen, a toilet, for an exhibition at Kunstverein in Cologne, in 1995.

The artist explained, “...When we cook, we’re in a house or a building. There’s a question about the essential things we use. We require clothes, medicine, food and a space to live. But what kind of space is required? When my work is about cooking, I need a space... In any situation, that situation somehow builds a frame around us. That frame is a room.”

Though it isn’t clear if each ingredient from everyday life is considered art in Rirkrit’s view, since his *pad thai* it is clear that the activities that make up daily life have been roped into the context of art as high culture.

We should ponder this act of inviting people to eat, have coffee, sit around or just live: Rirkrit offers to transform the role of an artist from being the creator of art objects to being the provider of services, so his work doesn’t affirm any unique voice of any individual, not in terms of content or skill. He instead provides social experiences.

The question that always comes up with this kind of work is, don’t we already have these social experiences in our daily lives? We read comics, we go to wet markets, we eat and drink, we enjoy music.

It’s just that these experiences aren’t intended as art; they do not occur in an art gallery or in the context of art and they do not challenge the existing idea of what art is. The inherent value derived from social experiences in ordinary life and in the context of art may be similar; but it’s the artistic setting and artistic content that eventually turns such ordinary experiences into something special.

Contemporary artworks that challenge historical precedent are valuable more because they defy the boundaries of art rather than because they actually create value in the reality that exists outside the frame of art. We must

remember that an artist's intention when challenging the old way has nothing to do with creating a new value, which could be comparable to or better than ordinary experiences (which are borrowed by art).

We never care to find any value in the social interactions that take place at a noodle stall, we never think about whether Thais or Americans like having meals with strangers, we never consider if it's a man or a woman who's making the *pad thai*, we never ask if cooking is a public or private matter—we never care about any of these things until the cooking is presented as art, and then the questions arise. And I am not sure which is more significant in this case, the questions about art or the questions about cooking.

The answer may lie in the generosity of the people in the art world who accept the *pad thai* and bring the issues of cooking to the fore. But to not accept that frying some noodles is art would put more weight on the question of what art is. Well, it could also go in reverse, and now I'm hungry and have a headache.

I have never participated in any of Rirkrit's cooking or service-providing shows. But I once saw a remnant of one of his works at Sculpture Projects Münster, in 1997. It was left on a small stage abandoned in a park, which indicated that there had once been a show there, an event had occurred sometime in the past at which guests enjoyed themselves and interacted with each other. Then the performer, the audience and the artist had left. I as an exhibition-goer was looking at a space at which an event had once happened and had since ended.

The interactions among the participants who showed up at the date and time designated by the artist, usually the opening of the show, was thus different from my interactions

with the abandoned stage. When I flipped through the programme catalogue, I was revisiting something that had happened in the past, though by then I was sitting at home. It was like in a novel, as if I, as the protagonist, were looking at the photo of a house in Europe that I had once visited, then at the photos of a party that took place in that house. My kind of interaction is more out-of-date and doesn't lead to the excitement intended by the artwork, which is so novel that it defies all other movements in the history of art. And so out-of-date my interaction is that it shouldn't be taken into account.

And thus several artists arranged to have 19 unicycles connected together and 19 riders to pedal them around town. The work is called *Her 19th Foot* (1993) by Yutaka Sone. After the riders had finished, the 19 unicycles were arranged in a circular shape in an exhibition room, along with a video of the ride.

And thus Thai artist Surasee Kusolwong, on the opening day of one of his shows, put some objects on a table and asked people to buy them with their small change; quickly the objects were snapped up by the lively crowd, and when the bustle had died down, the artist left the empty table and a video of the activity for other exhibition-goers to watch what had already taken place.

To watch a video of a recorded event that has already happened, at a specific location or using specific objects, means that the exhibition-goer has to fill in the blanks of an experience, due to the fact that they weren't present at the real event.

My oh my, the art that seems so mundane: changing a light bulb in a hotel room is art, although hotel staffers do that all the time; pig farming is art, although we already have pig farmers; growing rice is art, even though farmers grow rice everywhere in this country; returning to Nature is art, even though a man actually fled the city with his family to live in the jungle, and there's even a TV documentary about them; an artist working on biogas is art, despite the fact that rural people have been using biogas to cook for ages; selling stuff is also an artistic activity, when we already have flea markets where non-artists sell all kinds of stuff.

When performed with non-artistic intentions—such as to make a living or for other personal reasons, either good or bad—these activities do not invite discussion, deconstruction or debate like when artists perform the same activities. When artists get their hands on such mundane practices, curators and critics chime in, writing about and analysing them in magazines, programme notes and textbooks to enlighten the art crowd. Well, actually this only takes place abroad. And so if artists get down to perform these things in the wrong country—in a place where no one cares to deconstruct their motifs and mechanisms or to shine an intellectual aura over them—then they should just go and sell *pad thai* for real—that would be better than cooking *pad thai* as art. Ah, what a strange world we're living in.

While I can't find a way to end this chapter, I happen to glance at an article by Thanom Chapakdee⁴ about the artist Chuang Moolpinit⁵ in *Nation Weekend*.⁶ Thanom begins by targeting academics, the assistant professors et al., for their lack of interest in producing art textbooks. My writing has reached a point where, in this country, there are no mechanisms or experts to articulate the meaning of flea

markets and *pad thai* when they're treated as art. What Thai artists have made into an international sensation has been reduced to being just another flea market and second-rate *pad thai* in our own country—a snake is eating its own tail, kind of.

There's no art that beckons analysis. Or there is, but there are no critics or scholars to analyse it. So art is just proof of Thai artists' craziness. Because there's no system of support, there's no growth of knowledge. Because there's no growth of knowledge, people only want art as decoration—art sells like crazy in that regard. The high point in the career of an artist, the ultimate pride, is when his art is used to decorate the second floor of a house or the top floor of an office building. Meanwhile there's no growth in knowledge of art, which is frozen, fossilised, and thus there's neither art that beckons analysis nor art textbooks.

Why do frogs croak? Because they have a stomach-ache. Why do they have a stomachache? Because they ate uncooked rice. Why is the rice uncooked? Because the firewood is wet. Why is the firewood wet? Because it rained. Why does it rain? Because frogs croak.⁷

A sentence in Thanom's article left me with sadness—a deep sadness because I have experienced it personally. He said that artists have to save up and count their pennies to self-publish their own monographs.

But when Montien Boonma passed away unexpectedly from cancer, people came together and chipped in to make a book about him. It reminded me of what Petch Osathanugrah⁸ asked at the opening of Thana Laohakaikul's⁹ exhibition called *Cancer*, which was so well-attended that the art centre was almost bursting: he said, does an artist have to have cancer first before people pay attention to his work?

Sad, isn't it? Should I desire to have cancer so a lot of people would turn up at my opening and someone would make a book about me after I died? But if I had cancer I couldn't make art. Then I couldn't die in peace since I would have to force my eyes to stay open, even just a sliver, to make sure that they would really publish that book. Now I'm an artist with no cancer, and I'm not an actor either, so no one pays me any attention. Ah, it's so sad that I should stop now. I'll go out to get *pad thai* at the market. Let the ugly fried eggs stick between my teeth, lots of them, and then I'll flash you a smile if you don't believe me.

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- 1 **Farang**
ฝรั่ง
A casual term referring to white or Western people. It's used commonly, without any negative connotation, by most Thai people.
 - 2 **Kaolao**
เกาเหลา
A popular Thai dish of Chinese origin which contains meat and vegetables in soup, often eaten with rice.
 - 3 **Ko Hang meatball, Ah Koh kuayjab, Chai Si Mee Kiew wanton-noodle**
ลูกชิ้นไก่แข็ง ก๋วยจั๊บเอาไกว ชายสี่หมี่เกี๊ยว
Araya reels out names of popular Thai roadside food stalls.
 - 4 **Thanom Chapakdee**
ถนอม ชำภักดิ์
Thanom Chapakdee (1958–2022) was an artist, art lecturer, curator and art critic based in the northeastern province of Khon Kaen.
 - 5 **Chuang Moolpinit**
ชวาง มูลพินิจ
Chuang Moolpinit (b. 1940) is a National Artist known for his paintings.
 - 6 **The Nation Weekend**
เนชั่นวิคเอนด์
A Thai-language weekly news magazine published by The Nation Group. It stopped publishing in 2017.

- 7 **Why do frogs croak?**
กบเอ๋ยทำไมจึงร้อง
An old-fashioned Thai lullaby.
- 8 **Petch Osathanugrah**
เพชร โอสธานุเคราะห์
Petch Osathanugrah (b. 1960) is a businessman, art collector and songwriter.
- 9 **Thana Laohakaikul**
ธนะ เลาะห์กัญกุล
Thana Laohakaikul (b. 1941) is an artist and former dean of the Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Printmaking, Silpakorn University.