



PROJECT MUSE®

Translator's Note

Published by

Rasdjarmrearnsook, Araya.

I am an Artist (He Said).

1 ed. National Gallery Singapore, 2022.

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



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/123209>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

[172.71.255.2] Project MUSE (2025-04-05 02:50 GMT)

Translator's Note

KONG RITHDEE

Plunging into the fathomless ocean of Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's text, I kicked my feet to stay afloat and thought of Walter Benjamin. In the essay "The Task of the Translator", Benjamin's overture to his translation of Baudelaire's poetry, he wrote:

The question of whether a work is translatable has a dual meaning. Either: Will an adequate translator ever be found among the totality of its readers? Or, more pertinently: Does its nature lend itself to translation and, therefore, in view of the significance of this form, call for it?¹

Then, launching into a prism of ideas and ruminations on the nature of language and its invisible essence, Benjamin declares:

It is evident that no translation, however good it may be, can have any significance as regards the original. Nonetheless, it does stand in the closest relationship to the original by virtue of the original's translatability...²

It may seem far-fetched to say that Araya's text is untranslatable, since you're holding this book in your hands. But as I swam out into her vast ocean of letters, I realised that it would be disingenuous not to admit the limitations of what one can do with a text as rich, deep, blithe and incandescent as this one. A text that oscillates unpredictably between lyrical poeticism and philosophical pondering, between articulate self-reflection and cheeky unintelligibility. A text that will make you brood and chuckle, nudged along by joy and bewilderment. A text that conjures up a perfect storm of tender reveries, gorgeous nostalgia, art history, abstract musings, wacky quirks, canine gags, moving odes to friends and colleagues, epic descriptions of artworks, made-up terms (lots of them), songs, poems, jibes, jokes, travel journals, autobiographical anecdotes, gossip about living artists and imaginary tête-à-têtes with dead ones, and then, without so much as a wink, sudden, impulsive, thrilling digressions that at once stretch the contour of the narrative and test its resilience. Dear Ajarn Araya, we're heading into a typhoon of untranslatability! I shouted into the howling wind as more made-up terms and culture-specific (or period-specific) details and titbits splattered all around me like sea foam whipped up by the aforementioned storm.

Then the wind dropped and we were back on the serene sea again. The looming prospect of untranslatability, as Benjamin suggests, is real. But time and again, with invaluable help from my editors, I managed to cut through its devastating path to deliver the reader this unique book from one of the most unique minds in the art world.

I Am An Artist (He Said), in Thai titled *Phom Pen Silapin*, is a collection of essays on the subject of art and

“artmaking”—one of Araya’s pet terms. It is as much about her own understanding, preferences and prejudices in relation to art as it is about those of other people. It is also a quest, an expedition, a literal and metaphysical voyage into herself—an intense look into her Inner Human (*nai manut*)—and concurrently into the world in which she hopes to make contact with the inexpressible essence of art, or at least to glimpse what art *is*, or what it could be at any given point in the history of artmaking.

And of course, the text *is* an artwork in itself: the process of writing it is also a process of artmaking, the laborious nuts and bolts of which is scrutinised by the writer herself throughout the book. She writes:

The writing and the thinking must go together,
so writers can’t hire someone to think and write
for them.³

And then:

It doesn’t matter if the artist or the writer lives
or dies, because the reader and the audience is
born... Do I regard writing as unworthy, since I
have treated it as brusquely as this?⁴

To add to its exhilarating DNA, the book flaunts its performative self-consciousness from the very first word of its Thai title—in English, the “He” in “He Said”—throwing down the gauntlet of near-untranslatability with the Thai male first-person pronoun *phom*, gender-specific and loaded with cultural and social implications, the equivalent of which doesn’t even exist in English. The entirety of the

book, in essence, is an ongoing conversation between two Arayas, one male, one female, their dual voices, dual consciousnesses, and their schizophrenic bickering and divided egos, constituting an internal dialogue on which we happen to eavesdrop.

That's for starters. Like her other artworks, *I Am An Artist (He Said)* thrives on an experimental spirit. Araya treats all units in the language—word, phrase, sentence, and so on—as materials, like paint or wood or video, that allow her to plumb the depths of her own thoughts while at the same time letting her toy around with the text, taking it apart and manipulating it at will. She exploits the loose grammar and elastic nature of the Thai language to test its own expressive limits: that which exists in her mind must find its shape—its *life*—in written (Thai) words, regardless of how self-defeating the task may seem or how tortuous a sentence or a paragraph may appear.

In different chapters, she tries out different techniques and framing devices—straight-up lectures, travelogues, comic sketches, diary entries, correspondences, question-and-answer exchanges—sometimes grounded in fact, sometimes infused with dream alchemy. Her writing is a literary specimen that manifests a push and pull between control and instinct, between artistic choreography and streams of consciousness. Virginia Woolf comes to mind, obviously, and in more ways than one: Araya admits to being a big fan of *Orlando*, and its gender-switching device and feminist fantasy are probably major inspirations as well.

Devoted Thai readers know that these experimental qualities are a feature in her fiction, too; her untranslated 2018 novel, *Pud Kerd Ma La Ram* [Born to Bid Farewell] was a sensation and shortlisted for the prestigious S.E.A.

Write Awards, while according to popular rumour, one of her earliest pieces of writing, back in the 1970s, was her take on the authoritarian treatment of freshmen students at Silpakorn University at the time.⁵

But in truth, it's hard (and it won't give us any pleasure) to distinguish fact from fiction in Araya's textual domain where realities shift like tectonic plates, where identities are illusory, and where what was, what is, what will be and what should have been are entangled in an eternal, time-bending waltz. The lack of clear grammatical rules for tenses in the Thai language becomes Araya's greatest conspirator, a Virgilian non-compass, as she guides us through a kind of delicious disorientation, holding our hands and sometimes playfully letting them go. Rendering this in English, we have to determine what came first and what came later in the fertile grove of her recollections, to sift through what actually happened and what is imagined, and yet in the end we can't be absolutely certain if things are what we think they are. And still in the end, I guess it doesn't really matter anyway.

It would be unwise, however, to approach *I Am An Artist (He Said)* with a sense of trepidation. The book is full of evocative mini-stories and beautiful passages (though Araya may regard the "beautiful" with some trepidation) in the style of classical literature, during which her descriptive power is luminous.

I miss blades of tender grass woven like a raft, welcoming the soft-pink petals of three lotus flowers ruffled by a gust of wind. I miss yellow bamboo leaves falling on the surface of a pond behind the hill, a rendezvous spot between silence and someone?⁶

This, for instance, is how she sees things and experiences them through her senses, like cinema, and when the words flow, they flow like tributaries that collect in the ocean of her consciousness.

Then there's the context. These essays were originally published from January to August 2004 as guest columns in *Matichon Weekly*, a Thai-language news magazine, and later collated as a book in 2005. But even as weekly installments, each part appears to construct a grander narrative that lends itself collectively to the book form. So, while *I Am An Artist (He Said)* exists in that liminal space that transcends a specific period, it is also a record of Thailand at the turn of the century—a giddy, action-packed moment of political and social transformations whose reverberations were felt in the art community. Like an inadvertent chronicle of the new millennium, Araya mocks politicians, teases political campaigns, comments on newspaper headlines and scandals (my favourite is the story of Pret Ku, the charlatan who in 2000 orchestrated a legendary hoax in which he claimed to have staged an outdoor film screening for *pret* monsters, which Araya contemplates in the guise of artistic interpretation⁷).

But even more valuable—and what makes this book an important work on Thai art history—is when Araya writes about her artist friends and colleagues, a few dozen of them, as their brief portraits altogether make up a larger portrait of the Thai contemporary art scene during that heady moment of the late 1990s and early 2000s. An anecdote on her jury duty with Thawan Duchanee (1939–2014) is as humorous as her description of Apinan Poshyananda (b. 1956) as “a young artist” is, to say the least, endearing. Navin Rawanchaikul (b. 1971) is remembered as a student and an upcoming talent; Manit Sriwanichpoom (b. 1961) and Sompong Thawee

(b. unknown) had just launched their *Pink Man* project; the Hemingway-like writer 'Rong Wong-Savun (1932–2009) is presented in a chapter that takes a long, frank look at how masculinity reigns supreme in the art world. Then there's the saddest tribute to Montien Boonma (1953–2000), the pioneer of Thai contemporary art whose death in 2000 still feels like a shock after two decades. The brief passage in which Araya and Montien are waiting for the metro late one night in New York City—a poignant scene befitting a biopic about an artist who has suddenly realised that in end we all will be defeated by life—is the most moving text I have read in years.

In her quest to grasp the elusive essence of art and artmaking, Araya also travels to the farthest reaches of international artistic movements to inspect the possibilities, in awe of some of them and clearly dismayed by others. She throws in artists from Egon Schiele to Käthe Kollwitz, Jeff Koons to Joseph Beuys; she revisits the classical school of landscape painting then takes a dip into the visceral radicalism of 20th century performance artists (blood, pee, sweat, gore, the whole shebang). A whole chapter is devoted to post-modernism, and another to the complicated relationships between image and text—again, the idea of writing as artmaking permeates the pages from start to finish.

What emerges from all of this, what is filtered through her intense introspection and her desire to understand the world around her—through her friends, through other artists, through artworks that she loves or hates, through the capriciousness of her ideas and ambitions—is a kind of tension that doesn't so much oppress as levitates the reader. *I Am An Artist (He Said)* is as close as we are allowed to be to Araya's Inner Human (*nai manut*), a state of sublime beauty

and seriocomedie in equal measure. Beautiful, because she lets us be privy to the intimate process of discovering herself, her loves, her biases, her fears and her joys; and serio-comic because she accepts their inevitability with grace, and with a lot of humour.

While the international art community has been familiar with Araya's artworks for decades, this book, I hope, will fill a missing piece in the jigsaw of her vast and intriguing repertoire. I would like to offer my profound gratitude to Roger Nelson and Chanon Kenji Praepipatmongkol of National Gallery Singapore and Singapore Art Museum for their editorial insights; the translation of this book wouldn't have been possible without their hard work. I also would like to thank Matt Changsupan, Thanavi Chotpradit and Pornpisuth Osathanond for their help, support and patience. Lastly, I would like to thank Araya Radjarmrearnsook for trusting me to perform the task of the translator, which to me is akin to granting me permission to read her mind.

Bangkok, 2021

—

- 1 Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Volume I 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), 254.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Chapter 13, 179.
- 4 Chapter 2, 31.
- 5 Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, *ผุดเกิดมารู้ Phud Kerd Ma La Ram [Born to Bid Farewell]* (Thailand: Matchon Books, 2018), 260. Araya's infamous 1970s text, rumoured to have been published in an internal Silpakorn University magazine, has not been located.

- 6 Chapter 3, 35.
- 7 Chapter 25, 349.