

AGAINST AFFIRMATIVE ART

An interview with Mit Jai Inn for the Bangkok Biennial pavilion *coming soon* •
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Q: How do you position yourself and your practice in the Thai art world?

I am an ethnic minority by birth. What we consider ‘Thai’ here, I’ve never identified or positioned myself as a Thai since I was young. As for the ‘Thai art world’, I never wanted to be part of it. The problem is that I don’t believe at all that there is such a thing, and that this way of thinking exists. So, how will we live with others then? So, I don’t have an answer on how I position myself, or my practice in the Thai art world. I don’t have an answer to that.

Q: Does this also relate to the way in which art functions in Thai society?

First, in the Thai art world, there has always been a very rigid structure under which you practice and make art; from the past until now. Mostly we believe that there is something higher up, an institution, that needs to be protected; whether it is the nation, religion, monarchy, or whatever. So, art has become a sort of supporter. For me that is an illusion. Art has become a tool for the institutionalisation of the values of the ‘good’ people. Goodness, in the Thai way, is used to reinforce Thainess. For the international community, this is so out-dated. So, how I position myself and my practice in the Thai art world is... I will always be against it, disapproving all of this. I don’t want to have anything to do with the Thai art practice, or just art in general.

Q: So, what do you think that the role of artists in society should be?

This changes. Before I wasn’t sure, I didn’t believe we had a role to play. But there is, they call it ‘agency’ with many other interests. I am very interested in spiritual things, politics, and culture; in how people live, especially in this transitional time in which we are born, from technology to political conscience. Now, the artist’s role is never the same. There are many types of artists actually, focusing on the personal, the small village, the national, or the world. The assumption is that there are national artists who serve the institutions of society. But generally, artists should be free agents, free from nearly all social structures, although they must be part of society.

Q: So, how should artists position themselves regarding the dominant society?

Well, artists are people who are down there with the victims. Throughout history, there have been victims in every society: the disadvantaged, those who have been taken advantage of, or have been hurt. A few days ago, a scapegoat was executed. It happens all the time. The poor, or people without any chance, are victims in many

ways, as the main institutions cannot do anything to bring justice. In my opinion, artists should not take part in, or be friends with, injustice, inequality, limitations to freedom, limiting structures, any of society's blind spots, opinions of the middle-class or the elites that do not respect people. You must remember this until the last day of your life. They say that the votes of 300,000 Bangkokians, the 'good' people, are worth more than 30 million votes from rural people. If you are an artist, you must be angry. It's not right. We should go back to our common sense. We don't ask much. That is all that is required of an artist. Try to be human. Let's get back to being human. Demand and use whatever tools you have, be it in art, or the aesthetic, or any techniques. Just call out and say: "Hey, we're all the same." That's it.

Q: What have been your personal interactions with international curators and gallerists?

My personal experience? I was in Europe in the mid-80s, or during the 80s, mostly in big art events, for example... I went there by myself to earn some money as an artist's assistant. I got involved in art events, in the Venice Biennale, documenta, big galleries, and museums. This experience enlightened me. I didn't fit in well in Thai society at the time, or even now. We only just got a museum... Don't forget that we only just got a proper museum, which is different from other museums: MAIIAM. This was only 2 to 3 years ago. Thirty years ago, I was in Europe, the centre of art. When I came back to Thailand, I lost interest in being an artist. The process was very complicated; to be an art professional depends on a lot of things.

Q: You just mentioned MAIIAM, where we are meeting now. What does it represent for you within the setting of Thailand?

This relates to your first question. I don't believe that there is a Thai art world. MAIIAM is a good example of this. It is the first Thai contemporary art museum. No cultural ministers or governments have founded a real contemporary art museum before. And then MAIIAM doesn't position itself in the Thai or the international art world because villagers, and people who appreciate art come to MAIIAM, and don't think of it as an art museum. Everything is open. Maybe it resembles art, but it is not art. It does not belong to the art world. The thing that the Culture Ministry, BACC, or Bangkok have been trying to establish, art or Thai art: it has been a failure throughout history. It is not that I always disapprove of it. But in the reality in which we live, we know what painting, art, and performance are. But that reality is not yet reflected in Thai society. The answer may not be so clear. Why is there no truth in Thai culture? Where does this problem come from?

Q: How does MAIIAM relate to earlier events like the Chiang Mai Social Installation?

The story began a long time ago. In 1987, I and my foreign friends, who fled to cities illegally from eastern Europe, were living in Kassel where documenta was held. We were waiting to occupy a space to sell our works. Professor Montien was based in Chiang Mai... Four or five years later I came back to Chiang Mai. When he heard this,

he wondered what we could do with artists or art students in Chiang Mai who were very talented... At that time, there were many talented people in Chiang Mai University but there were no galleries or museums in Chiang Mai, nor in Thailand. No art facilities. Nothing. No art space. Professor Montien asked what we could do for these young Thai artists so that they could live and showcase their work in Europe. I suggested we didn't need to go abroad if we... We could build this ourselves. It might take time to realise an art space. Back then we were all looking for it, especially to survive as an artist. That's how Chiang Mai Social Installation started. Especially, we needed political space, which was very chaotic at that time under the military government.

Q: Based on this experience, how do you think you can organise art events so that they empower people?

As I said, artists... Actually, the role of an artist shouldn't be limited by social structures dictating what to do and how. I think 25-30 years ago, the role of artists started to change. Artists are no longer perceived as producers of beauty, goodness, or truth. But it should be in the necessary space and situation. And then, to organise Chiang Mai Social Installation, we wondered how to program this without having any program in an eastern way. How to organise it in an organic way? An organic way, meaning having a program without programming it. No fixed projects. We will not censor. We will not select or choose. This idea is already 30 years old. It's what is happening now with Cartel and the BB [Bangkok Biennial]. We don't want to be organisers in a structural sense, right? BB was organised in a really organic way like a... without a manager, selectors or curators. Everything is distributed. The idea of this distribution means working separately but together. For an organisation 30 years ago, in the beginning of the '90s, it is so abstract. But we see that similar problems still exist. The problems of the art world are still there. The influence of art, the journey of art, it is all the same. Practicing, managing, or organising art, there are more choices now. Take Tentacles, or the N22 group, and various new galleries for example.

Q: Do you think that international connections are important for art spaces and events like biennials?

For sure, it's good to have international connections. Also, for your own position. If you belong to a minority, international connections will help vocalise your concerns. But if you belong to the majority, and you have power and space and foreign connections to... Let's compare the BAB [Bangkok Art Biennale] and BB frankly. BB is the underdog, right? It is good that the BB is connected with the international world, making it more visible. More people know about it. Likeminded people can come together to witness the truth, which is oppression in society. Art relates to oppression, be it personal or social. Did you see BAB's motto? It talks about happiness, fulfilment, and bliss forever, and so on. Because they are happy so they want to promote and use international connections to become international to get acceptance. You see that it can work out very differently: the positive and the negative impacts of international connections. It's so difficult to put this in Thai!