

ARAYA RASDJARMREARNSOOK
STORYTELLERS OF THE TOWN
14 MARCH – 10 MAY 2014

As one of Thailand's foremost contemporary artists Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's practice deals with the formation of boundaries between life and death, processes of mourning, gendered desire and the configuring of the self through the redeployment of everyday images and situations. Araya's work is inextricably tied to her own biography and experiences as a woman, a Thai person, daughter or granddaughter, teacher and artist. In choosing an unusual career path she has been able to surpass the professional and artistic limitations of her position as a female Thai artist, to produce works that address that which is unrepresentable in conservative Thai artistic discourse. In this sense, Araya's unique position as an artist, is reflected in works that are at once highly personalised and intimate, as well as socially aggravating and confronting.

In *Has Girl Lost Her Memory* (1994) Araya oscillates between a rejection of and respect for the gendered roles inhabited by women in Thailand. The corn husks surrounding an upturned iron bed recall female labour, but are discarded in the same way as Araya has discarded this social positioning. In losing her memory of cultural and social expectations of what it is to be a woman in Thailand, Araya has freed herself from not only physical work but also sexual work. While she recognises her own surpassing of these roles, Araya does not disavow female labour in Thailand as indicative of a position of weakness. Rather, her more nuanced approach is also an account of her own indebtedness to women in her family who may have found through gendered labour, personal and financial independence.

For Araya's first video work, *Reading to Corpses* (1997), the stimulus to use video had come from her own technical requirements. She had wanted initially to do a photographic work involving the actual dead linked to the kinds of texts she would go on to read in imaginary conversations, but was perplexed by issues of how to handle duration and sound. These were solved by using video with the language for her voice-overs coming from her own literary work in professional teaching and writing. The reading of texts to the dead, even if from a literary classic like *Innocence*, are more like oral devices for the staging of an interior monologue which includes occasional and often biting ironic references to what Araya imagines the dead are thinking. Although the use of real corpses may initially seem melodramatic, even gothic in excess, the very ordered and ironic conversations the artist has in front of the corpses (and apparently with them), point towards a deliberate and clear-headed Brechtian alienation. One wonders how much she has thought about different kinds of theatre in staging these?

This staging goes with one of four different kinds of conceptual strategies. The first is the most serious, although Araya's conversational ironies take away some of the grimness. In *The Class* (2005) the artist lectures with a blackboard to the assembled corpses under sheets before her. This is one of the most iconic images in her work, the idea of a morality tale or even a poetic romance being read to the dead. In some cultures, like medieval Europe, this would be the sinners-soon-to-be-dead (Northern Gothic paintings). But the light directness and the pedagogical display using the blackboard seem to be as much about the ironies and ambiguities of all communication as the notion of saying to the dead what they might not have heard, or even might have liked to hear had they been alive.

A second kind of conceptual strategy at play is the ferocious separation from the actual world by the mentally unhinged - one might say those who are alive but dead to life, as in *Great Times Message, Storytellers of the Town, The Insane* (2006). The full horror of the experiences which have unhinged these unfortunate souls can only be grasped by long exposure to most of each story, or we should say, stories between different narratives, so different and fractured sometimes that only the space of narrative, not any given content, is graspable by the viewer/hearer. Here the audience's experience of the work exists in a nexus between the highly personalised recollections of individual women and the universality of the experience of gendered trauma.

A third kind is a sort of promenade through meadows with companions, recalling the double and triple figures in ambulatory space of Araya's prints around 1990 in Germany, such as *Some unexpected events sometimes bring momentary happiness. Afterwards, regret rises in our memory even for bygone hardships* (2009). This work features the dogs who are also victims, the dogs which Araya has chosen to keep alive and protect, those animals which otherwise might be destroyed by the dog pound: the neurotic, the incontinent, and sometimes the just plain vicious. She cares for them and would like us to care for them too, as companions. One finds in these 'companion' pieces a kind of insouciance which presumes to charm because Araya, from her position at least, pretends to know the reaction of the audience.

Finally, a fourth kind of visual and auditory play with the audience and its social and visual position as well as its preconceptions is found in *Treachery of the Moon* (2012). In this work Araya examines the paradoxes and contradictions in an audience's experience of everyday visual production. Presenting two circumstances transmitted to Thai television audiences - reportage of the country's political clashes and soap operas - blurs the boundaries between fictionalised and actual events. Here the political clashes become the highly stylised performance of actors, as much as the soap operas become invested with the real and violent actuality of real life. The inclusion of objects and remnants from the artist's own life, including a mobile phone, glasses and splints from her dog's broken leg cause a slippage between the layers of experience between the national, the personal and the universal. Indeed, Araya and her dog companion serve as surrogates for the audience outside the video frame perhaps also function as a marker of how each semiotic layer between fictitious and actual representations and ourselves as audience is articulated: the viewer may only marvel at how meaning flows between these levels.

CATALOGUE OF WORKS

GROUND FLOOR

Has Girl Lost her Memory
1994

recreated installation, corn husks and bed frame
dimensions variable
courtesy the artist.

The Class

2005

single-channel video installation
16:35 mins
courtesy the artist and 100 Tonson Gallery, Bangkok.

FIRST FLOOR

Great Times Message, Storytellers of the Town, The Insane

2006

three-channel video installation
44:21 mins
courtesy the artist and 100 Tonson Gallery, Bangkok.

Treachery of the Moon

2012

single-channel video installation, eye glasses, mobile phone, dog splints
12:37 mins
courtesy the artist.

Some unexpected events sometimes bring momentary happiness. Afterwards, regret rises in our memory even for bygone hardships

2009

single-channel video installation
20:00 mins
courtesy the artist.

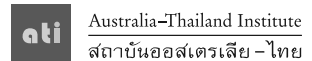
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Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook was born in Trad, Thailand, in 1957. After earning both a BFA and MFA in graphic arts from Silpakorn University, Bangkok, she continued her studies in Germany at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste Braunschweig, receiving a diploma in 1990 and an MA in 1994. Radjarmrearnsook's work has been installed in solo presentations at international institutions including the National Gallery, Bangkok (1987, 1992, 1994, 1995 and 2002); Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm (2003); Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach (2012); Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (2012) and Denver Art Museum, Denver (2013). She has been included in a number of biennial and periodic exhibitions including the Biennale of Sydney (1996 and 2010), Istanbul Biennale (2003) and Documenta 13 (2012). The artist's work has also been shown in group exhibitions internationally, at venues including Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki (2001 and 2007); Fine Arts Museum, Berne, Switzerland (2006); National Art Gallery, Singapore (2010); National Museum of Art, Osaka (2011); Asian Art Museum of San Francisco (2012) and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2013). She is a lecturer at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Chiang Mai University, and lives and works in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

John Clark is a specialist on modern Japanese and Chinese art as well as several other Asian countries. He retired from Professor of Asian Art History (Personal Chair) at the University of Sydney in October 2013, and is a Fellow of the Australia Academy of Humanities. He first visited Thailand in October 1976, and has been working on modern and contemporary Thai art since 1992. He recently published the first comparative study in English of two modern Asian art cultures, *Asian Modernities: Chinese and Thai art of the 1980s and 1990s* (Power Publications, 2010) with a foreword by Yin Shuangxi and Apinan Poshyananda.

Clare Veal is a PhD candidate in the Department of Art History & Film Studies at the University of Sydney, where she is completing her thesis on the relationship between photography and Thai identity from 1950 to 2010. She has published in *Trans Asia Photography Reviews*, *Modern Art Asia*, and the *Silpakorn Journal of Fine Arts*, and is currently working as a sub-editor for Asian art for the *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Modernism*. Between 2012 and 2013 she was a researcher in residence at the Thai Art Archives, Bangkok and completed fieldwork in Thailand with funding from the Asia Institute, Melbourne and the Royal Thai Embassy.

Storytellers of the Town will tour to Canberra to the ANU Drill Hall Gallery in mid-year where it will be accompanied by a new publication on the artist. An associated exhibition *Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook: The Village and Elsewhere* is presented at the University Art Gallery, University of Sydney, 17 March - 3 May 2014.



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