Video, an Art, a History

1965–2010

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media artists, who tend to be attuned to their mediums' pre-histories, could moreover be pivotal in the recalibration of the *dispositif* of art history.

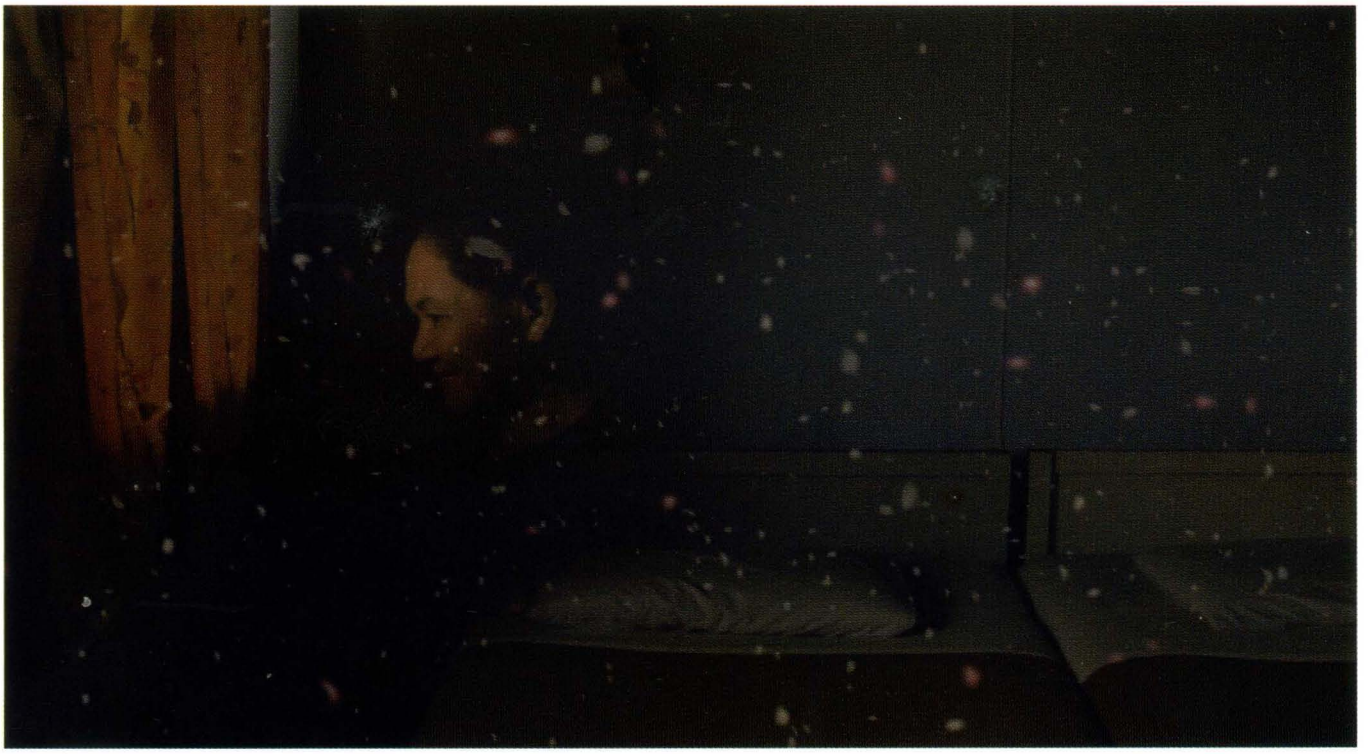
At any rate, where the technical and cultural landscapes are so varied, a formal overview of video practices will not be of much use. Regional coherence is more apparent at the level of theory and history, than in the mix of artistic styles. It might be more fruitful then to try to discern the *programme* of video, in the sense of what Vilém Flusser called the "programme of photography": characteristics not just of the video image, but of the socio-technical parameters within which it is made.[4] Who has had access to video, as producers or consumers? How has it been distributed, and how has it interacted with other, older media? What does it make possible, that was not possible with earlier technologies? And if this activity is not much informed by the medium's Euro-American history and aesthetics, what are the local conventions and histories that inform its production and secure its legibility?

Dissemination and Reflexivity

In one of the works in SAM's collection, Araya Rasjdamrearnsook's *Two Planets Series* (2008–09), villagers from the artist's neighbourhood in northern Thailand sit in peaceful rural settings before reproductions of some masterpieces of early modern painting (p. 224). As they try to make sense of the images – and frequently digress – we observe with delight what happens when an oral culture confronts the stuff of a literary art history. How vain seem all our academic readings of Van Gogh and Millet, how removed from the lives of the people and places they depict! In these irreverent encounters, art is temporarily demystified – it becomes a mere thing-in-the-world again, a pretext for idle talk, local gossip and bawdy jokes – refreshing our sense of what it might *mean*.

I first saw this work in 2008, in a hopelessly jumbled exhibition called *Traces of Siamese Smile* at the then new Bangkok Art and Culture Centre. The following year I saw it again, this time as a single-channel video in a short film festival in Germany. More recently, I saw it installed multi-channel in a cramped room at a museum in Sydney, as part of the biennale there. In each iteration, its presentation – not to mention its context – was drastically different. Media artists and theorists have long grappled with the question of what, in such cases, constitutes the actual work of art. Mounting it on a large flat screen on a gallery wall emphasises the artist's play on notions of the picturesque; showing it in a cinema might draw us closer in to the narratives and personalities of those on screen; while an immersive installation will yield more disjointed narratives, but provides a richer sense of the place in which it was made. But if no one permutation is definitive, what is it that the museum has collected?

Araya's work is not even at the slippery, site-specific end of the spectrum. But this constant shifting of the work's material, social and spatial parameters is a fundamental condition of media and video art. And it is exacerbated by the ease with which moving images now cross between the formats of film and of art, as well as by their deployment in performance, installation or online. This exchange has been the subject of vigorous discussion in the West – prompted as much by contemporary art's constant rediscovery of the cinema as by the explosion of video-making – and has demanded a major rethink of the space-time of the gallery and the museum. If all this gives artists, curators and conservators a few headaches, it also energises the work, allowing it to adapt to the spatial and social



Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Morakot (Emerald)*, 2007. Courtesy of Kick the Machine Films.

dynamics of each new exhibition context.[5]

Araya's continuously morphing art work reveals two key tendencies that shape video art globally: reflexivity and dissemination. These forces sometimes pull the medium in opposite directions. They were visible, and visibly opposed, in its experimental heyday, the late 1960s and 1970s. The reflexive instinct was exemplified by the work of, say, Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, or Dan Graham. Here, video had to find its place in the artist's toolkit, in the studio and the gallery. The result was a new anthropometry, characterised by Rosalind Krauss as a kind of narcissism, and marked by a keen self-awareness – both on the part of the artist whose actions it captured, and of the machine itself, whose materiality and functionality were often foregrounded.[6] Meanwhile, many artists and activists were more interested in what video could do *outside* the studio, allowing them to engage with theatres of social and political struggle, and even plug these into broadcasting infrastructure, in ways that seem to us now – especially in contemporary Singapore with its emaciated public sphere – quite radical.

Along both avenues, video was used to document with a new immediacy, trumping the slower and more expensive *enregistrement* of celluloid film, and short-circuiting the hitherto much slower feedback cycles of art and society respectively. But these two tendencies point towards different historical backdrops: dissemination (often hastily characterised as 'democratic') highlights what is fundamentally modern about the medium – its reproducibility – and thus, its *social* and *economic* valence. Reflexivity, on the other hand, points to a history more specific to art, emphasising video's *aesthetic* valence. Southeast Asian video art is more beholden to the former tendency than the latter; formal reflexivity is not high on the agenda – a generalisation we could not make about

of American James Turrell as influential.[8]

Phaosavasdi's cerebral-therapeutic messaging was not dissimilar to other spiritually concerned Thai artists. Considering its centuries-old central role, Buddhism has long been pivotal to Thailand's cultural ideology. Aside from representations of the Buddha and his teachings, attempts to infuse modern referencing into traditional imagery have propelled the genre of Neo-Buddhism. Employing video art as a composite, Amrit Chusuwan is another artist preoccupied by Buddhist theology.

Gaining a BFA and MFA at Silpakorn University, Chusuwan studied in the late 1980s in Poland, where he regularly visited the studio of conceptual artist Tadeusz Kantor (1915–1990), who encouraged him to explore video art. Returning to Thailand at the start of the 1990s, Chusuwan created composite art installations that married conceptualism and Buddhism, evident in the Buddhist-focused video *Silent Communication* (2000). The 20-minute video shows Chusuwan intensely staring at a Buddha image and attempting to communicate by locking eyes – a simple yet potent juxtaposition of an earthbound mortal with a divine icon.

Exploring concerns over globalisation, in 2007 Chusuwan marked Thailand's third national entry at the Venice Biennale, by using malleable materials to enforce Buddhist notions of impermanence and the void of space. Installing a 2-tonne bed of sand that visitors stepped through barefoot, *Being Sand* was enhanced with ambient video wall projections of a solitary man and a dog wandering along a beach. Contradictions between the sanctuary-like cocoon and Venice's tourist crowds were heightened when exiting visitors encountered a screen showing live CCTV footage of a busy lane outside.[9]

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's (b. 1957) mortally engaged narratives avoid theological entrenchment. Since the latter 1990s, the Chiang Mai-based artist moved her main practice from gender-related print and sculptural installations to aesthetically arresting time-based video that have featured in numerous international showcases. A lecturer in Chiang Mai University's art faculty, Rasdjarmrearnsook received an MFA from Silpakorn University before further studies in Germany. While her art and poetry have a feminine sensibility, it is as much a provocative challenge to the accepted values in Thai art, delving into issues of dominance, religion, human relationships, origins and destiny.

While early video performances, like *Pond* (1998), were passive in delivery (Rasdjarmrearnsook recited poetry to a group of pickled cadavers floating in formaldehyde), the scholastic performance, *The Class* (2005), involved the artist directing a tutorial to a line of corpses. Engaging issues of death while highlighting differing religious and cultural attitudes to mortality, *The Class* was presented at the appropriate locale of a 13th-century church as a part of the Thai pavilion for the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005.[10]

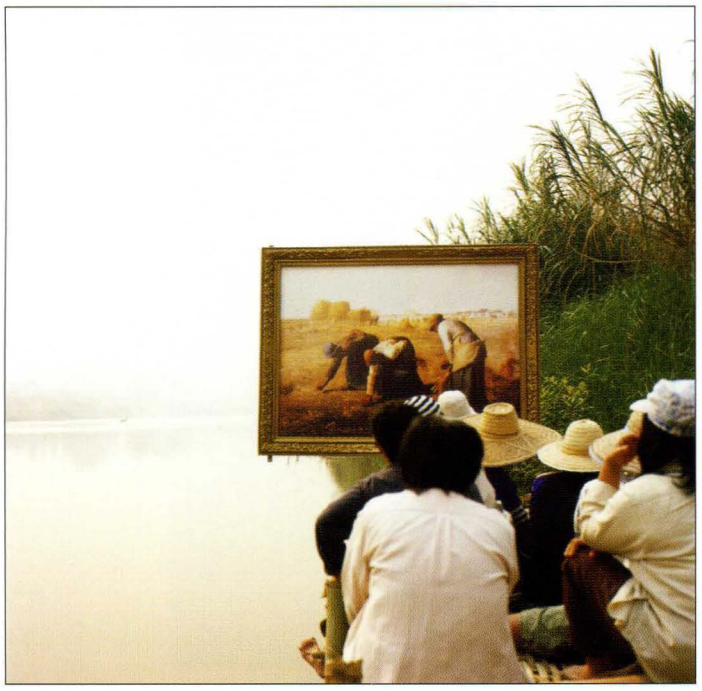
In *Two Planets* (2007–08), Rasdjarmrearnsook reacted against the largely Western conventions to art viewing and appreciation, with four video vignettes that placed reproductions of familiar 19th-century masterpieces in front of villagers to record their responses (p. 224). Captured against rural backdrops, the anonymous gathering sit with backs to the camera, with the humorous responses from the unconditioned commentators revealing cultural nuances, as well as attitudes to race, gender roles and sex. Their sincerity and lack of pretension was a provocation towards the art-informed.[11]

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook

Two Planets, 2008

Since her beginnings in intaglio printing, loss as well as its reconciliation has been at the heart of Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's oeuvre. Her earlier video works include the morgue series in which the artist attempts at communion with cadavers (such as *Reading for Female Corpse* and *I'm Living*). In this video installation, *Two Planets*, the leitmotiv of loss takes on a twist: gone are the enclosed spaces, the stillness laced with pathos and the artist's monologues to the dead who do not respond. Here, Rasdjarmrearnsook takes us out to the open fields of the Thai countryside where she gives local farmers free play to air their views on four masterpieces of French impressionism: Millet's *The Gleaners* (1857); Manet's *The Luncheon on the Grass* (1863); Renoir's *Ball at Le Moulin de la Galette* (1876); and Van Gogh's *The Siesta* (1889–90).

In *Two Planets*, the object of loss is the significance of these four iconic paintings in their transfer to an *other* context: on the other side of the globe after an interval of more than a century. What would have been irrefutable for students of art and a litmus test for the purportedly genteel urbanite becomes as irrelevant to the farmer as a sickle is to the banker. Seated on the ground with their backs to the camera, about a dozen men and women known to each other share candid comments on a framed reproduction placed before them: "If you look at the painting closely, you'll see they take care of their feet better than their faces."; "Her face is so fresh like white chicken drop-



pings (so white and soft)."; and "See the shoes look like numbers 0 0 and the sickles look like 5 0. The lottery number zero means you won't get anything." etc.

The Thai farmers recognise these paintings in their primary signification as an image – not unlike a picture made by a neighbour's child – without the preconceptions of 'art', making free associations from their own perspective. Their responses are thus spontaneous and ingenuous. Having lectured on Western art history at university level in Thailand for many years, Rasdjarmrearnsook is painfully aware of the abyss between experience and regurgitated knowledge, which non-Western art students grapple with vis-à-vis Western artworks borne of an entirely different historical and cultural process too often assumed to be universal. It is the local farmers' absence of pretence that lays bare this chasm.

Where does this leave the museum visitor who does not necessarily know more about the paintings – apart from the obvious facts provided in the caption – but who does not possess the farmers' candour? Who is doing the signifying and who is merely present? The audience is caught between the farmers and the paintings, the passive observer of action on a planet split into contrasting pairs: the dead and the living, the city and the countryside, the haves and the have-nots, the East and the West. Communication remains thwarted as with the corpses but Rasdjarmrearnsook no longer mourns.

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