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**1. CONVERSATION I-III.** 2005, still from video installation with five synchronized screens, 12 min. The artist sits between two corpses, quietly singing and humming in Thai.

**2. THE CLASS I.** 2005, video still. The artist gives a lecture to a "class" of corpses.

**3. THE CLASS III.** 2005, video still. The artist gives a lecture to a "class" of corpses, asking them questions such as, "Can death be a state of salvation?"

ARAYA  
RASDJARMREARNSOOK

# Dialogues With Difference

Through enigmatic but tender interactions with corpses, an artist questions social attitudes toward death and those on the margins of the mainstream.

*By Brian Curtin*

Partially covered by white sheets, two human cadavers on stainless-steel trays lie on either side of a small stage. There are no markers to identify the context. The room, blanketed with white cloth, feels serene. A woman dressed in a long, white coat enters the setting and sits between the corpses with her back to the audience. She hums and sings quietly in Thai, and after a few minutes, she leaves. Moments later, she returns, sits down and begins to hum and sing again. Across five synchronized video projections entitled *Conversation I* (2005), artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook walks in and out of this scenario, engaging with the dead. The corpses in each projection are different but Araya's actions remain the same; often she appears simultaneously on the five screens. To what end she is performing is not immediately evident.

Born in 1957 in the eastern Thai province of Trat, Araya is best known for her video documentations of performances in which she variously engages with corpses in a hospital morgue in Chiang Mai, the northern Thai city where she now lives and teaches art at Chiang Mai University. These performances include her singing songs or reciting poetry to cadavers, delivering lectures on death to a "class" of the dead and dressing female corpses in garments such as wedding dresses, everyday clothes and shrouds. However, the trajectory of Araya's oeuvre is not solely defined by a preoccupation with death. She has recently extended her subject matter to include the voices of female patients from a Thai psychiatric institution and impoverished rural folk in Thailand.



**I'M LIVING**, 2002, video still of the artist putting a dress on a female corpse.

All images in this article are courtesy of the artist and 100 Tonson Gallery, Bangkok.



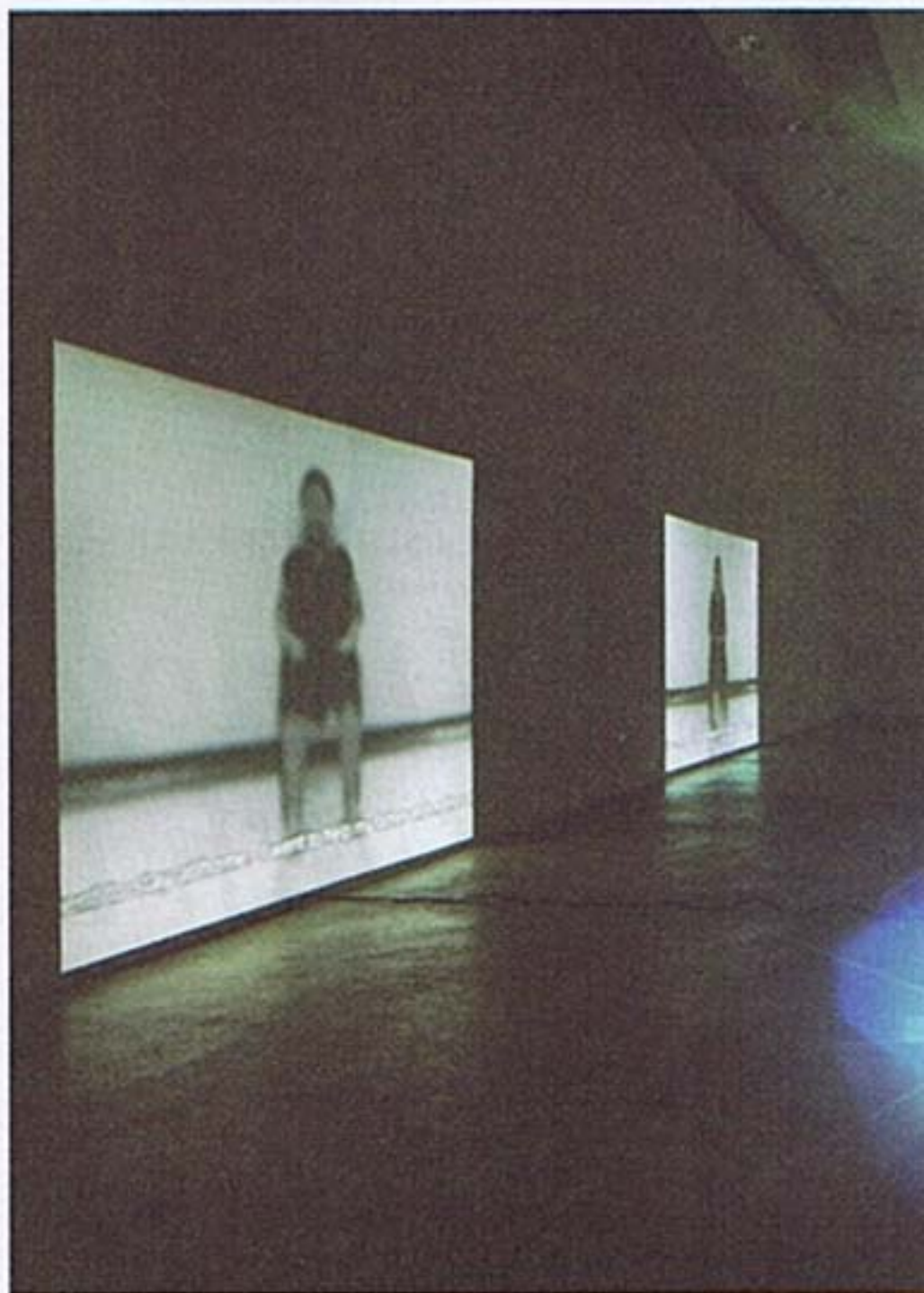
At the heart of Araya's practice are questions of communication, and its limits, between different spheres of existence: the living and the dead, the artist and the audience, and the individual and society.

Araya explores her concerns not only in visual art but also in writing. The texts she publishes in her exhibition catalogs are not conventional explanations of her work, but tend to include poetic streams of consciousness that blur the boundary between fact and fiction. In a monograph published by Thailand's Matichon Book, Araya's text for her 2005 video installation, *The Glass*, shown at the Venice Biennale that year, asks, "What do dead persons expect? Are your expectations different from the time when you were alive?"

Araya's engagement with these questions is rooted in personal experiences of loss, and is evident in her early prints and installations. Her mother died when she was three years old, and she lost her half-sister a few years later. Her grandmother passed away just as Araya's career as an artist and an academic began to bloom in the late 1980s. In 1987 she became a lecturer in the Department of Fine Arts at Chiang Mai University, where for years she was the only female staff member. That year she also held solo shows of her etchings and other prints at the National Gallery and the Goethe-Institut in Bangkok, and received a scholarship for further study in Germany. Her prints depict ghostly, isolated figures in anonymous and heavily shadowed spaces. The black-and-white aquatint *The Dream of Mother* (1990) is typical of this period, suggesting autobiographical interest while hinting at concerns that would eventually be rendered explicit in later performances. Two figures, one standing and one in a fetal position, convey ideas of thwarted contact or communication as the upright mother figure stands at a distance, overlooking the hunched body. They are connected by a sharp shadow that emphasizes the intangible space in the gap between them.

As Araya's career gathered momentum with her participation in the first Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane in 1993, her father died of cancer. She responded to this loss by making *Dinner With Cancer* (1993), a haphazard installation consisting of a hospital bed, hanging plastic tubing and bowls—all stained with puddles of oil that referred to the blackened phlegm her father coughed up in his final weeks. Describing the work as "nauseating" in a 1995 essay on Araya in *ArtAsiaPacific*, Thai critic and curator Apinan Poshyananda pointed out that while Araya looked after her father in the hospital, she read an article about pollution in Bangkok. Hence, while tied to the death of a family member, the work also reflects on death in society as a whole—as he put it, "Humans are not only consumers, they are also being consumed."

Araya's two-decade engagement with the theme of death is rooted in her personal experiences of loss.



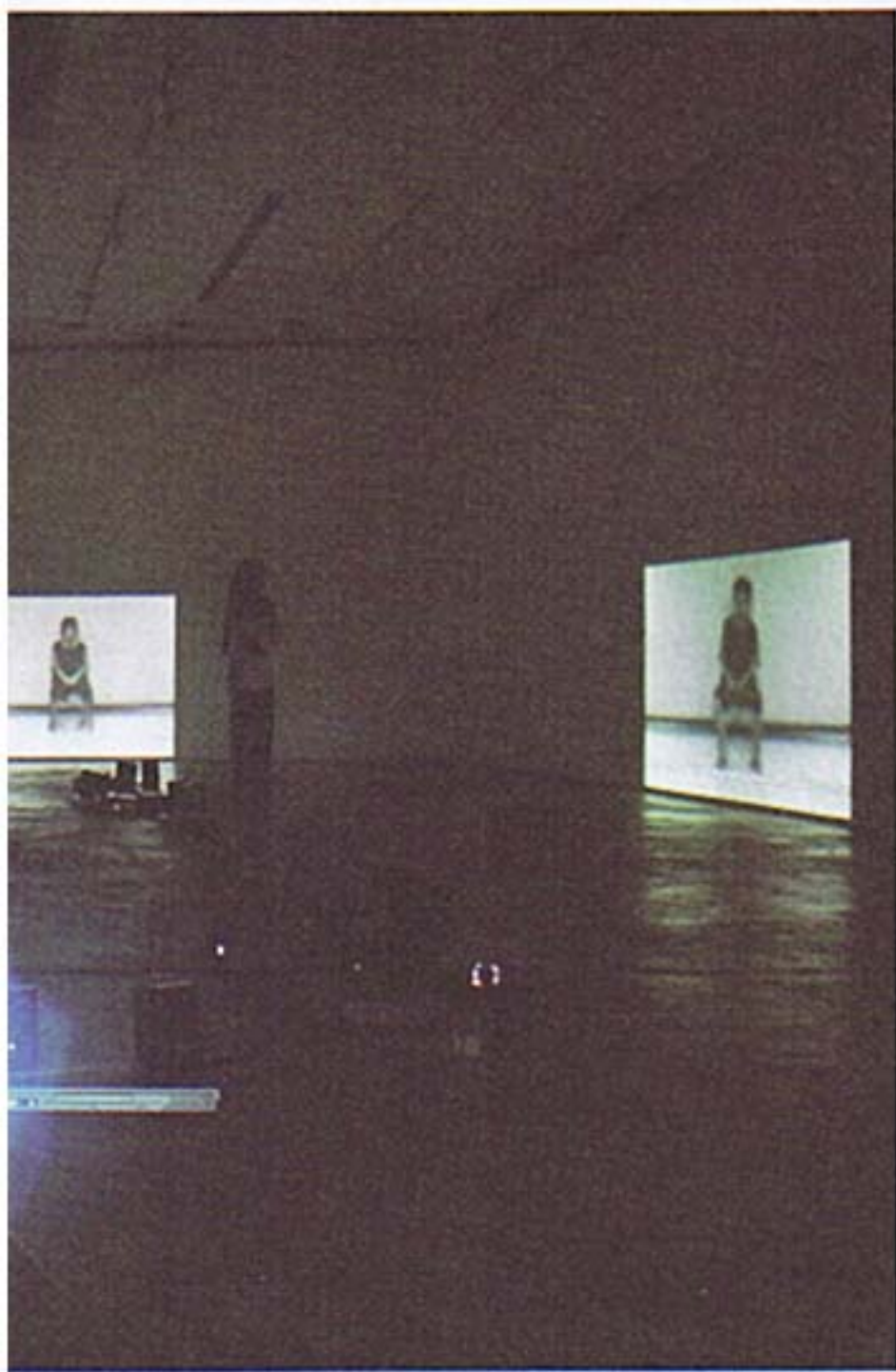
**4. THE INSANE, 2006,** six black-and-white, subtitled video projections of Thai women in a psychiatric institution. Installation view at 100 Tonson Gallery, Bangkok, 2006.

**5. DINNER WITH CANCER, 1993,** mixed-media installation consisting of a hospital bed, plastic tubing, bowls and oil. This work was the artist's response to the death of her father that year.





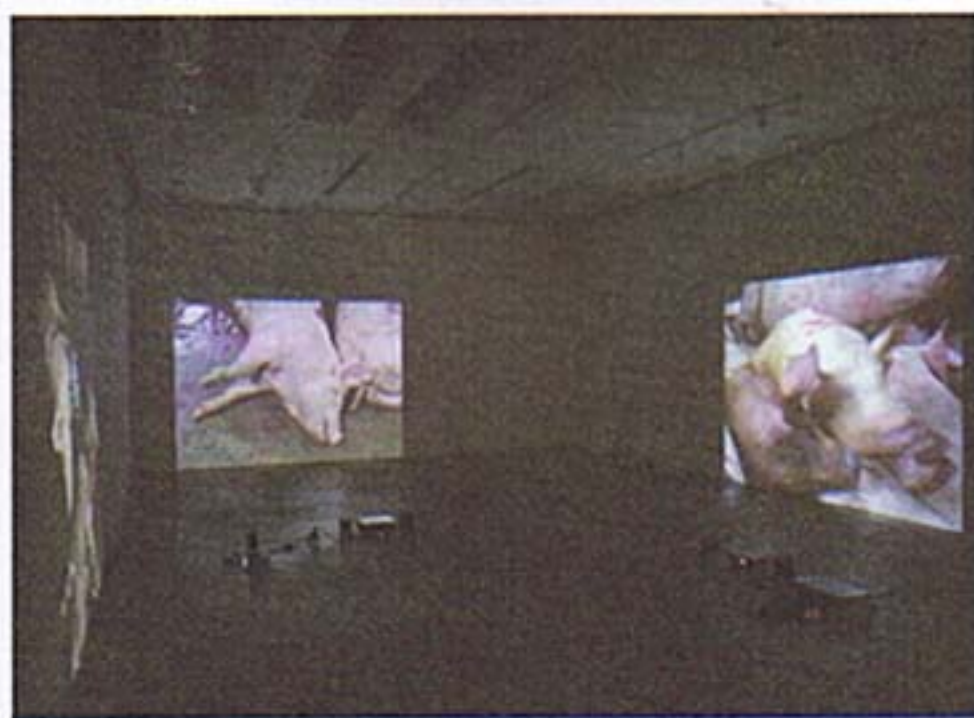
IN A BLUR OF DESIRE, 2007, three video projections of animals being killed at a Chiang Mai slaughterhouse. Installation view at 100 Tonson Gallery, Bangkok.



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In person, Araya is soft-spoken, self-effacing and somewhat disingenuous about the impact and implications of her engagement with the fact and signs of death. When I interviewed her in 2007 about the shocking slaughter of animals in her video *In a Blur of Desire* (2007), she declared, "But our daily life is brutal." Her statement can be interpreted in the context of Thai Buddhist thought and practices, but as Araya does not consciously address Buddhism one should necessarily be wary of invoking it. Buddhist teachings in Thailand use the Sanskrit term *samsara* to describe existence (human and otherwise) as a cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Moreover, Buddhism teaches us that suffering is defined in terms of the body and the mind, and nirvana is understood as a transcendence of the conditions of life and death. Among at least 40 meditation practices in Buddhism, the Pali term *asubha kammattana*, which translates literally as "unbeautiful meditation practice," refers to reaching an understanding of the impermanence of the physical body through the contemplation of corporeality, often using images of bloated, decomposing or dismembered cadavers. Araya's performances with corpses can be linked to these practices, but whether or not they are of direct relevance is an open question, not least because her use of ostensibly anonymous bodies raises concerns about ethical conduct.

Araya has taken care to adhere to medical standards in her work.



After submitting her proposal to make artworks using cadavers to the Anatomy Department of Chiang Mai University Hospital in 1997 and undergoing numerous interviews with doctors, Araya was allowed to record her performances, under supervision, using bodies donated for anatomical research. These vary from bodies given by the deceased prior to their death, to bodies handed over by relatives unable to afford a funeral for the deceased, to bodies of those who had no relatives to organize their funerals. Araya works with anonymous cadavers because she prefers not to know their names or histories.

Throughout her work, Araya directly engages with death, though she varies the nuances of its representation. In 2002, she showed *Chant for Female Corpse* (2001) at St. Mary's Cathedral in Limerick, Ireland, as part of "EV+A (Exhibition of Visual Art)," curated by Apinan Poshyananda. Beautifully composed within a gilded, ornate frame, this video projection consisted of a subtle and slow-moving image of a corpse partially covered with white cloth and sinking in water. While undeniably depicting a dead body, the striking visuals of the work emphasize the aesthetics of classical art rather than dwelling provocatively on the physical fact of death. In my 2007 interview with Araya, she stated that she wanted to "confront the reality of death" and not hide behind ritual. However, *Chant* can be understood as an exploration of how one can avoid engaging fully with that reality; alongside the tranquil but ornate aesthetic of the video, the setting of an Irish cathedral inevitably framed this portrayal of a dead body in quasi-religious terms, as something spiritual and contemplative, and not something jarring or confrontational.

By contrast, in *The Class I-III* (2005), Araya stands in front of blackboards of scribbled notes and lectures "classes" of corpses partially covered with white sheets. After admonishing the corpses in *Class I* and *II*—with provocations in English such as, "After you died, how long did you think of the living, those whom you left behind?" and "Do you believe in rebirth?"—in *Class III* she asks the cadavers, "How can we approach the different meanings of death?" She later inquires, "Can death be a state of salvation?" The corpses, of course, remain mute in the face of her questions. Eventually, like a condescending, officious lecturer, she tells them, "You're being very quiet."

The inevitable silence of the cadavers in Araya's work raises questions of her intended audience. In the catalog for the 2006 Taipei Biennial, curator Dan Cameron wrote: "We know that the cadavers do



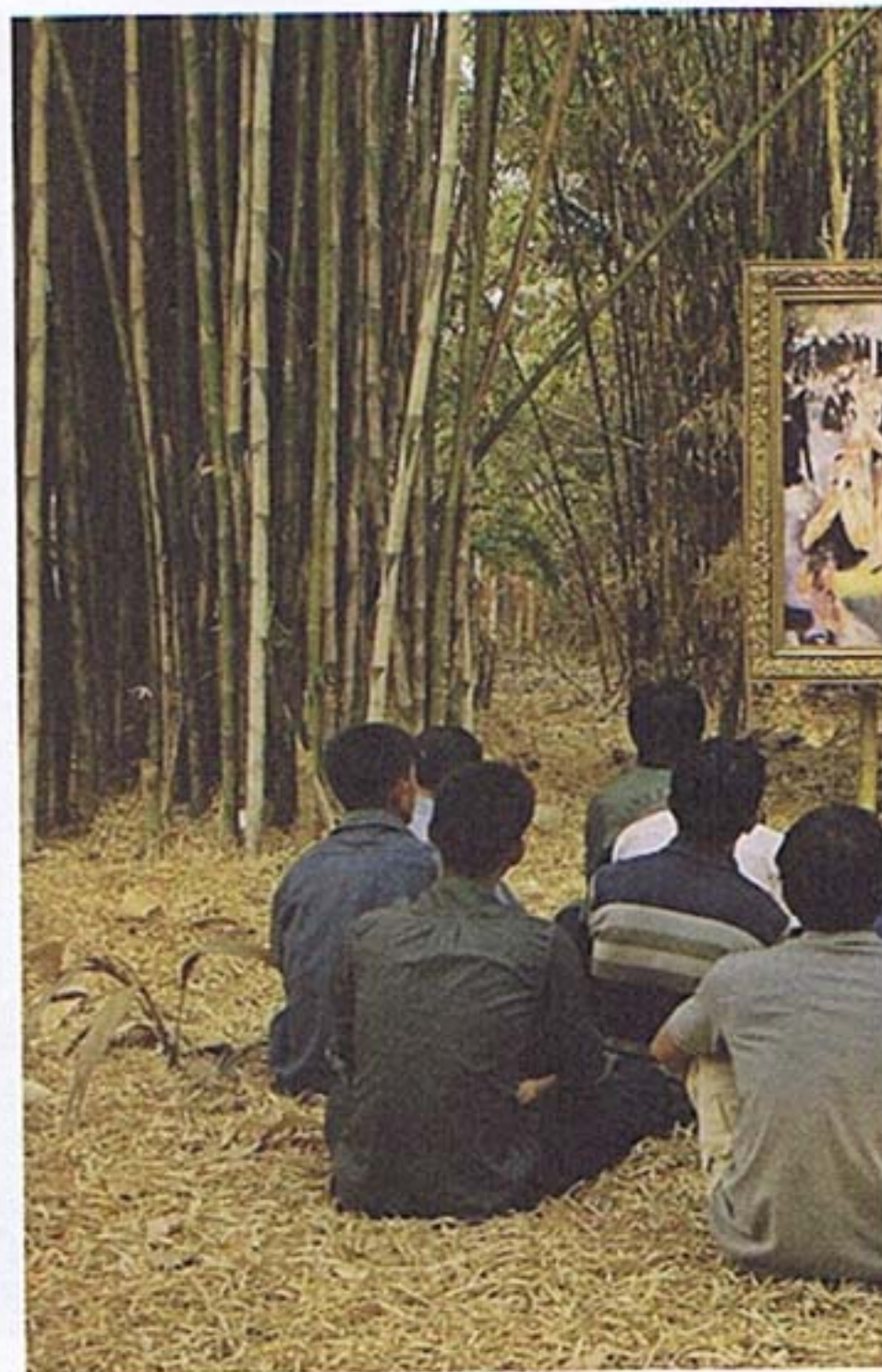


**THE NINE-DAY PREGNANCY OF A SINGLE, MIDDLE-AGED ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, 2006**, video still. The artist walks around Chiang Mai University pretending to be pregnant, to the surprise of her colleagues.

not 'understand' her . . . but this seems far less important than the fact that we, her living audience, can understand her perfectly well, and it is no exaggeration to say that we are really her intended audience." Though Cameron is referring to Araya's work with human corpses, her participation in the Taipei Biennial came as she was beginning to broaden her approach, exploring the theme of death through subjects other than human cadavers while also giving a voice to a different kind of "other" in Thai society—her submission for the Biennial, *Village Storytellers* (2006), was a blurry, black-and-white, multiscreen video installation of monologues by clinically insane Thai women.

Araya effectively concluded her explorations of how the living relate to the physicality of death when she showed *In a Blur of Desire* (2007) at 100 Tonson Gallery in Bangkok in early 2007. In this work, three large projections begin with pastoral shots of cows grazing in a field, but switch to unflinching depictions of a cow, pigs and a buffalo being beaten and speared to death by workers at a Chiang Mai slaughterhouse. The soundtrack of the animals' cries alone was enough to discourage visitors from entering the gallery, prior to witnessing the violently explicit images of the animals being killed. Given its relative lack of ambiguity and pronounced viscerality, *In a Blur of Desire* emerged as something of an exception within Araya's oeuvre. In contrast with the stillness of her other videos with cadavers, there is a general artlessness and spontaneity in these images that heightens the appalling impact. It seems Araya's intention here is to explicitly confront the audience with the fact of death and the understanding that brutality is inevitable. As it would be impossible for her to stage such a scenario with humans, the animals appear to function as a proxy for the viewer. However, there is a caveat: we are what we do. The animals were being killed late at night in order to produce fresh meat for the following day. In its subtext, the work echoes Apinan's earlier interpretation that as much as humans are themselves consumers, they are also the object of consumption.

Araya's parallel exploration of the voices of "others" is best illustrated by her presentation of the series "Great Times Message: Storytellers of the Town"—an expanded version of *Village Storytellers*—shown in June 2006 at 100 Tonson Gallery. There, viewers found themselves surrounded by the main work, *The Insane* (2006), which consists of six black-and-white, subtitled video projections of Thai women in a psychiatric institution making heart-wrenching confessions. One woman compares her life to withering flowers on a Buddhist altar while a second patient speaks of



her husband declaring her to be 'crazy; another claims that her three children were murdered by her husband's mistress. Blurred footage hides the women's identities and the cacophony of their voices—confusing even to a native Thai speaker—which suggests a critique of technology and its potential for both elucidating and obfuscating communication between the subjects and the artist, and the art and the viewer.

*The Insane* was accompanied by a single projection of three short video loops. Among them was *The Nine-Day Pregnancy of a Single, Middle-Aged Associate Professor* (2006), in which Araya pretends to be pregnant by concealing a large sponge in her clothes as she walks around Chiang Mai University, her bump eliciting gossip from her colleagues and students. This performance took place after Araya returned from her sabbatical in Germany and therefore her pregnancy would have been credible. Startled looks on her colleagues' faces ensure a sense of veracity and underline the concerns of what it might mean to be single, middle-aged and pregnant in Thailand.

The autobiographical and the confessional have long been associated with art made by women, from Surrealist artists such as Leonor Fini and Frida Kahlo to early feminists such as Mary Kelly. More recently, Sherrie Levine and Barbara Kruger, among others, have engaged with



The idea that art is mediated through socially conditioned preconceptions is an underlying concern in her work.



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theories of the actual representation of gender. "Great Times Message: Storytellers of the Town" can be situated on a continuum with this art. Araya raises critical issues of the value of perceived feminine subjectivity against perceived masculine objectivity, and the experiences of those marginalized within Thailand's patriarchal society and culture. In a compilation of essays entitled *Phom Pben Sinlapin*—meaning "I am an artist" but making use of the masculine pronoun—Araya presents a string of conversations between a man and a woman who talk about art and artists in contemporary Thai society. The man's speech is full of funny words, often rude and containing sexual innuendos, while the woman uses politer language. At one point, Araya pokes fun at male viewers, describing the experience of a female artist who, as part of a performance, took off her clothes but was assessed by the male audience members in terms of bodily proportions and skin color, and not cultural context or artistic concept. This suggestion that art is mediated through socially conditioned preconceptions is an underlying concern in Araya's work, and something that she believes needs to be challenged.

Araya's most recent series of subtitled videos, "The Two Planets" (2008), continues a critique of patriarchal norms—in this case the production of knowledge and art history—as small groups of rural Thai folk are shown sitting in the open air, blithely discussing replicas of European Impressionist and Realist oil paintings placed before them on makeshift easels. The series is a humorous critique of sanctioned meanings. Faced with works such as Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *Ball at the Moulin de la Galette* (1876), which depicts a crowd of jubilant Parisians drinking in a city square, and Jean-François Millet's *The Gleaners* (1857), which shows French peasant women scything wheat, the Thai farmers make comments, such as "That guy seems quite drunk," while looking at the Renoir, and "That's grass being piled up to look like a tree," as they observe the Millet.

As with her previous works, in "The Two Planets" Araya seems concerned with employing directness as a means of upending sanctioned understandings and giving a voice to those on the margins—in this case the art world and its creation of art-historical narratives. From her challenge to society's perception and ritual management of death to autobiographical issues and the subjectivity of "others," Araya engages with aspects of society that are unpalatable or distanced from popular consciousness. Moreover, she works in the gap between performance and representation, consciously manipulating the rhetoric of both. Creating bridges between otherwise normative differences, she explores a curious yet provocative means of collapsing relations of self to other, and other to the definitively different.



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**6. RENOIR'S BALL AT THE MOULIN DE LA GALETTE & THAI GARDENERS, 2008,** from the "The Two Planets" series, video still. Thai gardeners discuss a replica of a 19th-century painting by Pierre-Auguste Renoir.

**7. MILLET'S THE GLEANERS & THAI FARMERS, 2008,** from the "The Two Planets" series, video still. Farmers sit by a riverside discussing a replica of a painting by Jean-François Millet.