

ART

THE ARTIST, ONE OF THE OTHERS

By RIRKRIT TIRAVANJJA



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One of the most acclaimed artists in her native country of Thailand, Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook has only shown in New York periodically: The first time was in a group show at Asia Society in 1996; her first solo show came 16 years later. The survey of her work currently on view at SculptureCenter is the first of this scale in the United States for the artist, featuring highlights of her practice between 2002 and 2012.

Comprised largely of videos, the exhibition touches on a number of divergent extremes. Among her best-known works, the three part video series *The Class* (2005) depicts Rasdjarmrearnsook lecturing to rooms of real corpses on the subject of death, among other topics, while *Great Time Message: Storytellers of the Town* (2006) shows interviews with three women in mental institutions. These themes of death and mental illness contrast with the recurring subject of her dogs—which she rescues from the street—including a new work titled after all 21 of them, consisting of their fur and respective photographs in separate glass jars. Also on view is a documentary-style video work titled *The Nine-Day Pregnancy of a Single Middle-Aged Associate Professor* (2003) that follows Rasdjarmrearnsook as she pretends to be pregnant, fooling friends and coworkers in academia; their excited reactions followed by feelings of betrayal when they find out the pregnancy was faked reveal attitudes about traditional gender roles.

Despite the show's manifold nature, SculptureCenter's curator Ruba Katrib argues there is a single anchor. "Tackling large questions about cultural hierarchies of sentient beings, Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook poetically critiques the construction of knowledge regarding a range of

disparate entities linked by 'otherness,'" Katrib writes in an essay, referring to social marginalization or inferiorization of women, dogs, the insane, and even the dead.

Born in Trad, Thailand in 1957, Rasdjarmrearnsook obtained her BFA and MFA at Silpakorn University, Bangkok, before moving to Germany to attend Hochschule für Bildende Künste Braunschweig. Since receiving her MA there in 1994, her work has been shown in cities worldwide including Bangkok, Sydney, Miami, San Francisco, Baltimore, Stockholm, and Singapore. She currently teaches at Chiang Mai University in Thailand.

Prior to the opening at SculptureCenter, Rasdjarmrearnsook connected with her friend the artist [Rirkrit Tiravanija](#) by phone. —Rachel Small

Editor's Note: This conversation has been translated from Thai.

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA: Which works are you exhibiting in New York?

ARAYA RASDJARMREARNSOOK: It's work since 2002 until 2012—approximately 10 years in total. I still can't picture it. They would probably look strange all together. The day before yesterday I just shipped fur from the dogs that I look after in Chiang Mai, by FedEx.

TIRAVANIJA: This is dog fur that you collected?

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: Yes. I have a few dogs at the University of Chiang Mai and a few at home. I've made photographic portraits of the dogs. I had the team over there prepare glass containers—some glasses, some pitchers, and other similar kinds of receptacles—so that I can put the materials in them. The work will be titled after each dog's name.

TIRAVANIJA: The first video works in which you started to perform with corpses [will also be included].

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: They were never intended to be video works. At first they were photographs, but I wanted to capture more details so I eventually shifted to video. Video opened up new conditions, or freed me from old conditions that... Can we actually change to interviewing you? [*laughs*]

TIRAVANIJA: [*laughs*] Can you elaborate on these conditions?

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: I mean, the condition of good conduct that the living must have towards the dead—good in the way that the dead must be respected, even venerated with the name *ajarn yai* [literally "great teacher," referring to cadavers used for pedagogical purposes in medical school]. This is one condition that I have had to shoulder for a long time since I began working. It's mainly a condition set up by Thai society.

TIRAVANIJA: I would like to hear more from you about these conditions set up by Thai society, because I feel that it's



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a topic that your work always raises.

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: Even if I am working elsewhere, I might still run up against these conditions. There might just be a universal expectation to respect the dead, but my work is also born from another aspect of Thai society—that is, the overemphasis on familial bonds. It begins there. I don't know if using the word "complex" is correct—it sounds like it can be a good thing, but ultimately it becomes a complex. It begins with good intentions but turns into a matter of expectations and restrictions. So I heard that you reject this?

TIRAVANIJA: What do you mean by reject? What am I rejecting?

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: I mean I don't think it is a feeling that you have while working, but it might be a reaction you have towards other artists doing similar work. For instance, the overly explicit nature of the artworks being "challenging" as a quality in itself. Let's assume that's what we're talking about. What is challenging about our art might be different because of our different backgrounds and positions in Thai society. My work might challenge the limits of Thai society, while your work might be viewed as conforming to Thai societal conventions. But perhaps you are mounting a challenge against a larger target elsewhere?

TIRAVANIJA: I think for me, my starting point is not about taking a challenging position as you have. This might be the issue. My starting point was the search for my identity in foreign places, in places where I am estranged from myself. When I first started working it was as if I didn't understand myself. The fact that I didn't understand myself was tied up with not understanding where I came from, where I began.

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: From that point, from when you didn't understand your beginnings, to now, would it be wrong for me to say that for you the word "challenge" might apply? Or maybe I should use the word "play"—playing with human habits. Are you playing with human habits?

TIRAVANIJA: Yes, in part. But one of the first issues I dealt with was the struggle to find a language, to find my own words. *[laughs]* But now you've become my interviewer.

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: *[laughs]* Maybe we're playing with human habits. What's interesting is why your starting point, which is so personal, led you to your work now. If we talk about playing with human habits, that's a very universal topic. Why has it come so far?

TIRAVANIJA: I flip back and forth on this. I might be working with a space that appears to be universal, but once you take a closer look, there's also a lot of individuality involved. This might be an interesting thing that motivates me to keep working.

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: So there's both a universality and individuality that you cannot easily manage or control.

TIRAVANIJA: I never give too much thought to the idea of universality. But that brings me to a question that I wanted to ask you, because your work also begins from a very private

and individual point of view. These are issues that come from your personal experience?

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: Yes.

TIRAVANIJA: Because I think in my own work, there are issues that might not seem as personal. When you speak of human habit and individuality, does this have to do with gender? Actually, how do you even say gender in Thai?

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: I don't know how women outside of Thai society think or act. Wouldn't you be more familiar with this topic than I am? *[laughs]* This is a tricky question. Women in Thai society have been placed in the space of the home. It is possible that women have assuredly taken up that place without thinking too critically about it. Actually, I think I myself have been too complacent with my upbringing and formation. Maybe that's why my work is in that place you describe.

TIRAVANIJA: I mean, when I talk to other artists in Thailand, sometimes they refer to your work as "feminist" as if that label alone can explain everything. I have always wondered why they would think that—as if a work of art is an intellectual puzzle that can be solved with a single keyword. I don't agree with this line of thought.

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: My answer is I need to thank you for disagreeing with them. Can you tell me more about this?

TIRAVANIJA: It is as if they are using this one word to explain something that they cannot speak of, using it so that they don't need to talk about the real issues.

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: And to give weight to their observations. To explain the work of women artists using the word feminism alone—that's something I disagree with. This is more a reflection of that person's thoughts than a reflection on the work of women artists.

TIRAVANIJA: Can we backtrack a little bit? I would like you to tell me about your experience. Why did you decide to become an artist? I want the people reading this interview—those who have never read about you before—to have a starting point.

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: When I began making art, I just thought I liked it. But in retrospect, I'll quote a book that says that "art is a safe space." As a woman who was placed in spaces with various conditions, conventions, and restrictions on self-expression, turning to art—whether visual art, writing novels, or writing articles—was to gain freedom from the space around me.

TIRAVANIJA: When you first started art school did you already have these ideas?

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: No. Because when I started art school the institution basically framed who I should be. But my art practice eventually arrived at a point where I had freedom from various limiting conditions; the institutional mindset is not airtight and isn't altogether ideologically programmed. There are ways of escaping.

TIRAVANIJA: These lines of flight that you speak of, that you see, do they begin by leaving home? And can you speak briefly about how that experience has shaped your thinking?

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: There was a sense of growing understanding. Now another question is that if we stay in place, how can we gain a better understanding of ourselves?

TIRAVANIJA: But for me, staying in place might mean staying with my own thoughts, even if the body keeps traveling. I might be experiencing new things, but I'm also here, with myself. So, you have much more experience than I do when it comes to the reception of art in Thailand. Do you feel that your work is understood?

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: Not at all. Or... It might not be so interesting to answer this question with a yes or no. But it is interesting to ask why people who come to view art suddenly posture themselves as full of righteousness. It's as if my artwork suddenly lends a higher moral ground to everyone else in the Thai art world. In academic circles, especially, I was criticized for lacking morals, values, and ethics. I'm feeding that angry feminist reading of my work now, aren't I?

TIRAVANIJA: *[laughs]* Yes... When you exhibit abroad, do you feel that the reception of your works differs significantly?

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: Luckily so...and you already know this well. In shows where the audience wants to try to understand the work, the work is placed in a space of possibility where it becomes a subject of inquiry rather than being subject to conclusive interpretations. This is the gift I receive when I go abroad.

TIRAVANIJA: Because you are a writer and a poet too, do you think your work begins with writing rather than with making, or do they go together?

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: It begins with language...

TIRAVANIJA: Do you think language is a kind of counterweight that you can use to deal with the conditions of society?

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: When you use language directly to communicate as in writing, Thai society rarely attempts to control literature in the same way that it vigilantly polices visual art. It's ironic because people in this society are more aware of literature than they are of art. So it's surprising that readers don't see challenging writing as morally hazardous, when it might be pushing the same kinds of boundaries as art does. So why, when we compare literature and visual art, does the latter bear the brunt of the censure? When you reach this point, this point where we are dealing with the language of criticism, why are critical responses towards visual art stronger? Do you have an answer?

TIRAVANIJA: This might sound a bit sarcastic... It's like you're born in their home, and they think that feel entitled to an opinion because you are born in their home.

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: Might this little place be called

Bangkok? [*both laugh*] It's complicated because there's the imbalance of power between the genders. Hearing myself speak this might all fold into the angry feminist frame. What is difficult is to keep the sweet voice with an aggressive message.

TIRAVANIJA: That is a voice that is continually repressed. For me, when I have the opportunity to exhibit abroad, I feel that the public understands some points I have raised and are open-minded and make an effort to understand my work, but there are still certain things that remain inaccessible.

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: So the ideas that people here have about your nomadism—it might not be as convenient as they make it to be?

TIRAVANIJA: [*laughs*] Not convenient at all. Let's return to your work for a moment. We might be able to say that your work starts with bodies—these are bodies both with and without life. Among these bodies is yours, a body that is giving or receiving. But how did you come to work with bodies?

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: If you remember, we exhibited together at a deserted hotel by the railway station in Chiang Mai. We might talk about issues of relinquishing the material world and cycles of rebirth, but before that, there was a turning point when I began keeping my own sculpted works at home. Let's imagine that these sculptures are my cohabitants who stay by the door, on the chairs, couch, bed, and dining table. The day I could not take care of them because the clay had turned brittle and they were covered in dust, and my pillows and sheets had become moldy, the question of care occurred to me—relationships I created in space and lost when I threw those sculptures away. That led me to the morgue, where I began reading poetry and then played dress up, read stories. I kept doing these activities for a while until I felt I had enough.

TIRAVANIJA: So this "allure of death" came from there?

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: Actually, the "allure of death" had been with me since I was three, when my mother passed away. Even though I didn't understand what really happened then, I might have still shared in the atmosphere of the funeral. I probably sensed the serious formality of the ceremonies and felt what others were feeling then. Looking back, I'd guess that it had opened up a gaping hole in my psyche. In the process of creating art, I might be trying to fill that hole, or to reduce its depth, or to make it feel less hollow. I think that making art could have helped from that moment on.

TIRAVANIJA: Do you still feel that art can offer much help?

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: When you've passed a certain point, it no longer helps. It's only a temporary relief. What is helping me now are two thoughts: The first is that I'm still useful in my capacity as an arts educator and caretaker for the stray dogs—quite concrete things, don't you think? [*laughs*] Why I put education and stray dogs together, I don't know. Another thought: The way to fill this hole—I'm interested right now in divination and seeing what type of

cancer I will have in the future, where will I need surgery. It's like exploring and concentrating and waiting on what will happen to the body...I think we've gone beyond the parameters of the interview.

TIRAVANIJA: *[laughs]* Do you see a future for your work in these ideas?

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: Um...no. *[laughs]* I don't quite see it. Do you see anything Rirkrit? Tell me if you do.

TIRAVANIJA: *[laughs]* Me neither.

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: Same here. Let me put it this way, Rirkrit: I extol life so much that I cannot make art.

TIRAVANIJA: *[laughs]* Yes, but I'm thinking about [doing something else that involves] not necessarily making art. Some other form of intellectual activity.

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: Which might give more clarity than being an artist.

TIRAVANIJA: And there might be more answers too.

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: More answers than art can give?

TIRAVANIJA: Yes.

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: The real question is why I or why you have stuck with the ambiguity of art for so long.

TIRAVANIJA: I have spoken about this before that if we have too much clarity, we might not be compelled to continue searching for new ideas. It's as if though there are no answers, we still continue searching, searching for something, something that's not a direct answer.

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: You might be the first person to solve this problem. *[laughs]*

TIRAVANIJA: You've said before that when you're asked about dying. You said that you want to be like a pilot, flying away into the darkness.

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: Oh yes. I wish for a new type of cancer that just makes you disappear...*[laughs]*

TIRAVANIJA: But before you disappear...

RASDJARMREARNSOOK: Before I disappear...

ARAYA RASDJARMREARNSOOK'S *SHOW AT SCULPTURECENTER WILL BE ON VIEW THROUGH MARCH 30.*

