

ASSURING OUR CULTURAL LEGACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Edited by Boon Hui Tan

ASIA SOCIETY MUSEUM

SUSTAINING EPHEMERALITY A CONVERSATION

PANELISTS

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NICHOLAS CHAMBERS: It's an honor to be here and contribute to such a stimulating series of presentations and panels. [During the last day and a half] we've heard from a diverse group of people coming from different organizations and different disciplines. It has been inspiring and very refreshing.

Our topic is "Sustaining Ephemerality" and I would like to start by taking a moment to sketch out the very broad set of cultural artifacts, as well as what we might think of as "cultural events," that can be considered "ephemeral" for one reason or the other, and also outline some of the wide variety of motivations that we might have for sustaining them.

At one end of the spectrum, I'd like to propose that we have artifacts or events whose ephemerality is "built in" to the art object. By that I mean ephemeral objects that are designed as such by the artist. This might be because the materials selected are going to degrade or

change over the course of time or, in the case of a performative work, it might be due to the construction of an event that is designed to exist in a particular place at a particular time. At the other end of the spectrum, we have cultural artifacts that have indeed been built to last, or that may have existed in a particular location for millennia, but find themselves at risk due to a whole range of circumstances, whether they be environmental, political, or social.

Now, when it comes to the question of “sustainability,” a similarly wide variety of approaches may be taken, and of course, they’re not mutually exclusive. On the one hand, we have what we might think of as a more conventional museological approach—one that seeks to understand the concrete facts or circumstances surrounding an artifact, so that we may attempt to preserve it in its original state; or in the case of a performative work, to understand these circumstances so that we can repeat the work in a way that represents the original as accurately as possible. On the other hand, we have the idea that what is important to sustain is actually not the manifestation of the artwork at all, but the spirit or the conceptual drive that underpins it.

This is really an incredibly broad topic, and a deeply fascinating one that I hope we’ll all have lots of discussion about at the end.

ARAHMAIANI: I’m delighted and honored to be here. First of all, I’m going to read a short text, a kind of explanation of my practice. After that, I will give you some examples of the work that I have been creating.

Transdiscipline Art and Culture: My work in the form of painting, object, installation, video, and performance is often categorized as conceptual art. This is in addition to other categories, such as feminist art, and socio-political and environmental activism. Indeed, I tend to be critical in the practice of my work, to question the definition and creation of art in relation to life and culture. I live in diverse cultures and ways of thinking, and I realize this will then affect my practice. The fact that I was born and grew up in the hybrid culture of Indonesia has given me the opportunity to understand the different forms of various cultures and civilizations. I find that the wide range of similarities and differences indicates how assimilation occurs. Also, problems and misunderstandings or conflicts and tensions can arise at the same time. This so-called cultural heritage is important to me. These cultural aspects



Fig. 32. Arahmaiani, *Handle without Care*, 1996, performance, Brisbane, Australia

of life formed a view that I consider to be a guide to understanding the conditions of the past, present, and future. My approach toward the issue of culture as well as its implementation in my work are more likely conceptual and philosophical. And sometimes, if necessary, I will use visualizations of traditional forms.

Handle without Care (fig. 32) usually serves as a marker of the direction of the thought or question that I want to raise. Indeed, the work I often use to convey the message is only a tool. Sometimes my work, in its visual form, appears to have no relationship with tradition but, in fact, the concept or idea comes from rethinking cultural traditions. I try to assimilate the fact that modern life originated from Western scientific culture with Eastern cultural philosophy and spirituality. The basic concept of my practice is the idea of balance or reconciliation of feminine and masculine energy, although a binary approach can be used at some particular level.



Fig. 33. Arahmaiani, *Etalase* (detail), 1994–2014, glass and wood vitrine and found objects, 42½ x 71 x 28 in. (108 x 475 x 71 cm)

Etalase (fig. 33) always reminds me that the understanding of reality contains a level of depth, in the “vertical” (or “spiritual”) sense, and not only on the “horizontal” (or “material”) plane. Reality is dealing with the physical or material, also the nonphysical or spiritual. So in my creative practice and process, I try to connect art, science, and spirituality in addition to individuals, communities, and the universe. Because another meaning or philosophy of balance is the interconnections as well as the differences integrated in “harmony.”

This multidisciplinary approach then becomes “natural” and the selected media are adjusted based on the idea or message that needs to be conveyed in that particular context. Similarly, this multicultural approach is the way to describe a more integrative understanding. But even so, there is no guarantee that there won’t be any misunderstanding or risk. And this is the case with some of my work, which causes me to deal with those who feel they have the political or religious authority. Indeed, the expression can be integrated according to the perspective of others, and I appreciate it. Similarly, the perspective of creators can be different, and through my work I want to open the valve for communication in understanding and appreciating difference. For me, the important thing is to open a dialogue through my work, because only in this way can all of the differences be negotiated. Prejudice can be

clarified so that humans can live together in diversity, and creativity can function optimally, making life more dignified and human.

Breaking Words (fig. 34) is one example of a work that created a misunderstanding because in this performance I broke the plates [with words written on them]. I will explain the idea behind the work later in the discussion. [. . .] Thank you.



Fig. 34. Arahmaiani, *Breaking Words*, 2006, performance, Kuala Lumpur