

# Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook

SCULPTURECENTER

A centerpiece of the Thai Pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale, the video *The Class*, 2005, shows Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook in her element: staging impossible conversations with interlocutors unable to respond. Standing by a blackboard, the artist peers over a row of cadavers. "Death is today's topic," she says. "Tell me what you think. Oh, you need some more time to think." An uncomfortable silence sets in. Her audience lies on the floor, unresponsive. Their shriveled heads and feet, rendered a sickly yellow by the garish fluorescent light, emerge from the white drapes that cover their bodies. The artist looks up toward the camera as if holding out for a reply, not just from her dead students, but also from us. After a long pause, she continues, "As the atmosphere is very quiet, it may help a little if I begin."

*The Class* was among the nineteen works—videos, photographs, and sculptures—that were on view at SculptureCenter in the first and long overdue North American retrospective of one of Thailand's most important contemporary artists. Like the best of Araya's works, *The Class* underscores sheer alterity at the same time that it offers the hope of mitigating that distance. Shifting between registers of the didactic, the lyrical, and the confessional, the artist discusses with her lifeless students the etymology of death, metaphors for death, deaths in world literature, and personal experiences with death. The lilting cadence of her speech softens the formality of the setting, quickly changing the classroom into a private sphere for conversations that delve into the autobiographical and the sentimental. In *Great Time Message: Storytellers of Town (The Insane)*, 2006, a three-channel video featuring simultaneous song and speech performed by mentally disabled women, a similar pairing of personal divulgations and music creates an intimate atmosphere that draws the viewer into a close compact. Meanwhile, *Village and Elsewhere: Artemisia Gentileschi's Judith Beheading Holofernes*, Jeff Koons' *Untitled*, and *Thai Villagers*, 2011, transports the eponymous works of Western art into a Thai temple, where a monk leads a discussion on the karmic consequences of the scenes of passion. The scenario humorously inverts the entry of foreign objects into the white cube, presenting an extreme case of cultural translation premised on wholly different understandings of art.

Arranged nonchronologically without labels or didactic texts, the spare installation of small televisions and projections spread across the large former trolley-repair shop of SculptureCenter sidestepped the burden of contextualization so as to give precedence to the specific



Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, *The Class*, 2005, video, color, sound, 16 minutes 30 seconds.

dialogues in each work. With essays by curator Ruba Katrib and scholar Arnika Fuhrmann discussing the nonnormative interpersonal relationships that Araya sets up, the small accompanying catalogue offers a measure of how the presentation of contemporary Asian women's art has changed since Araya's debut in New York nearly two decades ago. For if the artist's participation in Asia Society's landmark 1996 exhibition "Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions" came at a moment when the exigencies of multicultural discourse and identity politics tightly framed the reception of non-Western artists, today there is more flexibility, allowing for the redirection of attention to the affective dimensions of the viewing experience itself.

While the retrospective featured some of Araya's best-known works since 2002, emphasis was given to a group of recent video installations—by turns moving, absurd, sad, and disturbing—and sculptures that turn on her relationship with stray dogs. Some of the more recent entries into this body of work appeared in a concurrent solo show at Tyler Rollins Fine Art. In *Pray, bless us with rice and curry our great moon*, 2012, shots of a barbecue party Araya threw with her dogs are juxtaposed with footage from news reports about the Thai dog-meat industry accompanied by a sound track of Thai classical music (*plaeng Thai derm*). Araya's new experiments with appropriated footage and sound introduce a self-reflexive play with the sensational and the sentimental that further complicates the desire for companionship that runs through her oeuvre. In creating conditions for intimacy that turn on poetic musings and affective atmospheres rather than pure language, Araya continues to push the question of how we might construct new forms of relationships in a world of mutable identities.

—Chanon Praepipatmongkol