

Since the 1990s,
Araya Rasdjarmr-
earnsook has

received high

acclaim for a variety of

works inspired by the artist's

personal experiences, in particular her video pieces which deal with themes such

as death, madness and femininity. One of her most important works, *The Class I-III*

(2005), centers on a quiet lecture on death delivered by Rasdjarmrearnsook in the

guise of a teacher to a group of dead bodies lying on the floor. In another work,

The Nine-Day Pregnancy of a Single, Middle-Aged Associate Professor (2006), the artist

creates a stir among her colleagues at Chiang Mai University by pretending to be

pregnant, and captures their candid reactions of outright

shock and confusion to reveal a wide range of value judgments regarding women. In *The Two Planets Series* (2008),

Rasdjarmrearnsook assembles a group of villagers, who

live near her in Chiang Mai, and documents their spontaneous

responses to reproductions of 19th century French

masterpieces in an outdoor setting. In this work, which

plainly presents the mechanism of appreciating fine art

in a non-European society, the villagers' comments, unaffected by economic and cultural

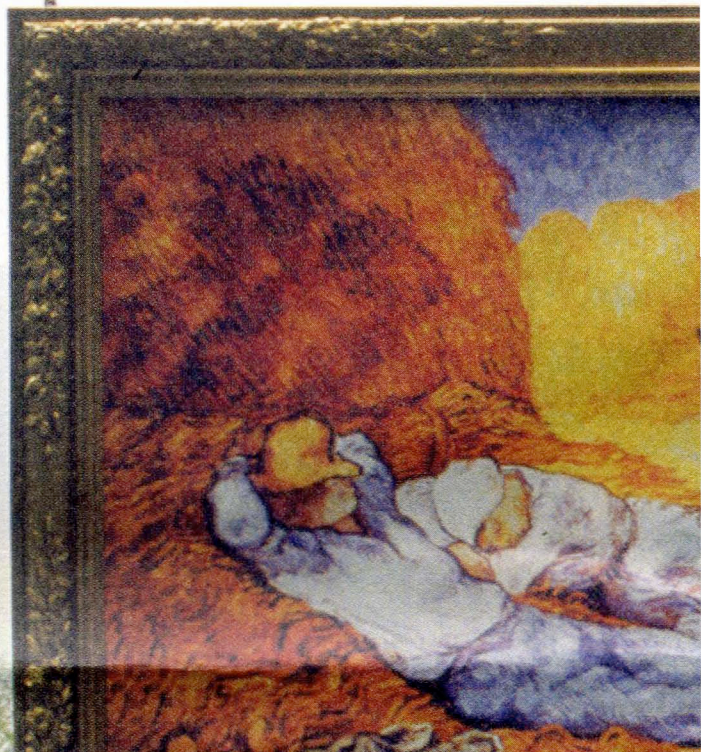
preconceptions, are surprisingly open and free, while also implicitly suggesting the

essential difficulties involved in "interpretation." This

series, which has received more criticism than any of

Rasdjarmrearnsook's past works, is a product of the artist's

everyday life.



This exhibition, "Kaza Ana / Air Hole: Another Form of Conceptualism from Asia," presents the work of nine Asian-born individuals and groups, including several from Japan, whose work displays conceptual tendencies. Whenever I mention this to anyone, I am invariably faced with the following questions: What is conceptualism? What are you referring to when you use the word "Asia"? What kind of a metaphor is "air hole"?

1. Conceptualism

Today, it is difficult to differentiate between a "conceptual" work and a "non-conceptual" one. But the dematerialization of works and creative expressions that began making inroads in the 1960s can certainly be seen as one element of conceptual art. (1) When we state without any hesitation that a certain work or artist is "conceptual," we are implicitly suggesting that its conceptual aspect is of greater importance than its material aspect. But at this considerable remove from the '60s, many dematerialized expressions, including those that are limited to language, actions such as performances and happenings, and works that are based entirely on the act of communication, no longer have the power to be specified as "conceptualism."

Let's next examine the origins of conceptualism. Can they perhaps be traced to the term "concept art" as used by Henry Flynt in a 1963 Fluxus publication? (2) Or Joseph Kosuth's work *One and Three Chairs* (1965)? Or Sol LeWitt's text "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" (1967)? (3) Or the exhibition "Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects," held at the New York Cultural Center in 1970? (4) Or Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, which created such a scandal in 1919? If we merely confine ourselves to events that occurred in the West, the question becomes an extremely narrow-minded pursuit because, needless to say, conceptualism is derived from pluralism. With this in mind, one might mention the "Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s" exhibition, which was held at the Queens Museum of Art in 1999. (5) This large-scale event presented conceptual expressions dating back to the 1950s (some of which occurred simultaneously, and some of which occurred after a slight delay) from all over the world, including Japan, Western Europe, Latin America, North America, Australia, New Zealand, the Soviet Union, Africa, Korea, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South and Southeast Asia.

A number of artistic trends from the 1960s and '70s were introduced in the Japan section of the exhibition. (6) Not only did "Global Conceptualism" present works that made use of words as an expression, it also introduced artists who were engaged in Dadaistic actions born out of anti-art and those who examined their own specific social context. Among the artists included were Ono Yoko, whose work made use of a variety of word-based instructions; Matsuzawa Yutaka, whose word-based work included notices like, "Erase the object"; Akasegawa Genpei, who became closely associated with the "1,000-Yen Note Incident," after replicating one of the bills and using it as a work; Nomura Hitoshi, who turned actions into works such as *Telephone Eyeshot* (1970); and Bikyoto, who waged war on art-related institutions. Instead of merely trying to introduce artists who at the time were introduced

In particular, the increase in size and frequency with which artists from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East came to be featured in international exhibitions beginning in the 2000s led to a greater awareness of this kind of multicultural approach among curators.

But when creative expression becomes a prisoner of this attitude and is overly concerned with "political correctness," it assumes a strongly ideological flavor, leaving only a critical structure that prevents the viewer from voicing either agreement or disagreement. Just as globalism is linked to imperialism, post-colonialism and multiculturalism are linked to fundamentalism – thus confining art to a narrow context. In other words, a unified message reduces the breadth of creative activities, eliminating the playful aspects of the work, and threatening to become a kind of shackle. In contrast, the curator Gao Shiming chose "Farewell to Post-Colonialism" as the slogan for the Third Guangzhou Biennale, held in 2008, in an effort to expose the positive and negative elements that post-colonialism brought to the field of contemporary art. In this exhibition, I would like to examine what sort of approaches lead to a deeper understanding of the complex and diverse aspects of Asia. (8)

3. Places with Air Holes

In order to discover the myriad possibilities in their own particular situation, the artists in this exhibition have adopted a militant approach to shifting the focus from the "margins" to the "center." And instead of intentionally rushing ahead in search of something new, they have adopted a rather slow and circuitous methods.

a. The Potential of Locality

Art was developed primarily in urban areas that contained essential structural elements of the art world such as museums, galleries, and universities. At present, that structure shows no signs of changing. But I'd like to start with an affirmative reevaluation of the potential of the "local area" as a "marginal" presence in regard to the city as the driving force behind art.

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, who lives in the suburbs of Chiang Mai in an expanse of rice paddies, asked some villagers to offer their impressions of some famous masterpieces in an outdoor setting. (9) In front of a reproduction of Jean-François Millet's painting *The Gleaners* (1857), they earnestly speculate that an elephant is pulling the wagon and the people are picking up toads, and then excitedly go off on a tangent about a village sports competition before switching to the subject of a lottery. Rasdjarmrearnsook, who holds a teaching post at Chiang Mai University, says that she was surprised at the eloquence of the villagers despite their comparative lack of vocabulary and background knowledge of Western art. Needless to say, their statements are not "correct" interpretations of the work. But their relaxed water-cooler-type chat in this beautiful landscape transcends the question of whether their remarks are correct or incorrect, bringing home the fact that they are living their lives to the fullest in the village. And despite posing serious questions about the reception and interpretation of Western art in Asia, the beautiful video work, imbued with an airy, rich environment, leaves us with a positive impression of this locality.