

THE ARTIST IN THE CITY: CONTEMPORARY ART AS URBAN INTERVENTION IN HO
CHI MINH CITY, VIETNAM, AND PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA

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THE ARTIST IN THE CITY: CONTEMPORARY ART AS URBAN INTERVENTION IN HO CHI MINH CITY, VIETNAM, AND PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA

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This thesis examines the development of contemporary art in Vietnam and Cambodia by introducing new ways of visually analyzing the city as a site of experience and field of representation. As part of a micro-region loosely referred to as “the Mekong,” named for the river that runs through it, Ho Chi Minh City and Phnom Penh share an intimate geography despite the contentious history their respective nations of Vietnam and Cambodia have experienced for centuries. Pivotal experiences shaping the present in both cities include their colonial pasts as part of French Indochina, postcolonial “golden ages” of independence, and deep imbrication in the wars of the 1960s-70s and traumatic aftermaths including societal upheaval and genocide. New forms of artistic practice and subjectivity began to emerge in the 1990s and became especially pronounced in the first decade of the new millennium, as market-oriented economic reforms in Vietnam and procedures of democratization in Cambodia indexed new relationships to neoliberalism and globalization. While these parallel events guide the comparison of the present, the larger argument is framed by a rigorous engagement with the politics of place and possibilities of built space. As such, I let the detailed stories of two cities relate how artistic practices represent complex affiliations with city and nation, as well as a form of social and creative labor with ties to past forms of modernism. Contemporary art is thus accounted for as a historical episode, a discursive category, and a socio-spatial intervention in the urban and national landscape.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Pamela Nguyen Corey was born on October 1, 1980 in Hong Kong. After spending most of her childhood moving between Asia, Europe, and the United States due to her father's work for the State Department, her family settled in Laguna Niguel, in southern California. In 2002 she received her B.A. in Studio Art from the University of California, Irvine, with a minor in Art History. Switching from artistic practice to research and writing, she received a M.A. in Art History from Arizona State University in 2007 and then pursued a Ph.D. in the History of Art at Cornell University, with a focus on Southeast Asian studies and Modern and Contemporary Art. Her dissertation fieldwork in Ho Chi Minh City and Phnom Penh (2010-2012) was supported by a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad fellowship in addition to grants from the Center for Khmer Studies and Cornell University's Mario Einaudi Center for International Research and Southeast Asia Program.

For Holden

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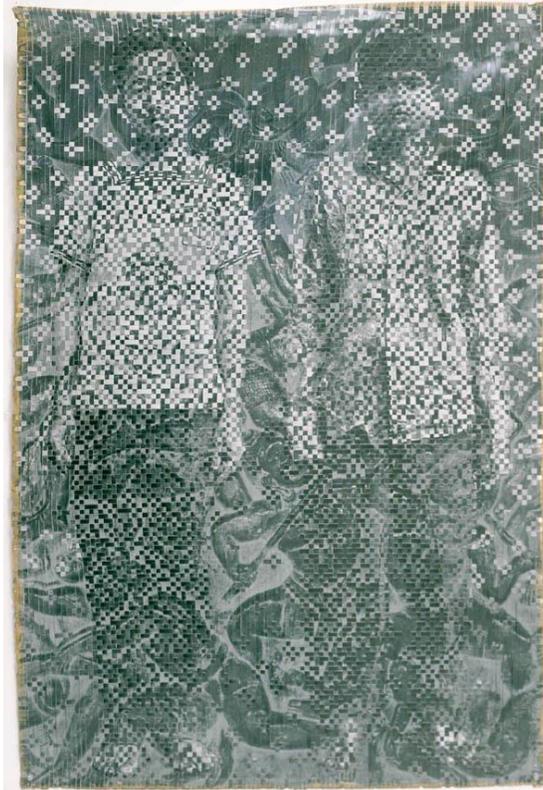


Figure I.2: Dinh Q. Lê, *Untitled*, from *Cambodia: Splendor and Darkness* series, 1998, c-print and linen tape, 63 x 44 in. Collection of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art.



Figure I.3: Dinh Q. Lê, *Untitled (Tom Cruise & Willem Dafoe, Born on the 4th of July/Highway 1)*, 2000, c-print and linen tape, 40 x 60 in. Sourced from Elizabeth Leach Gallery, <http://elizabethleach.com/Artwork-Detail.cfm?ArtistsID=45&NewID=176> (accessed June 2, 2015).

The international career of the Ho Chi Minh City-based Vietnamese-American artist Dinh Q. Lê¹ (b. 1968, Hà Tiên, Vietnam) was launched by a body of work in which Lê – following a technique learned from aunt during his childhood – interwove strips from two enlarged photographic prints, thus producing what have been called photo-weavings or photo-tapestries. Lê first began this experimental technique during his MFA studies at the School of Visual Arts in New York, and it has since served as a praxis for numerous series commenting on documentary and filmic representation, the production of knowledge, and the phenomenological nature of photography. The captivating tension produced by the enmeshed imagery is the result of a visual slippage between what seem to be polarized metonymic associations of place, first Cambodia in *Cambodia: Splendor and Darkness* (1994-9) (Figure I.2), then Vietnam in *Vietnam to Hollywood* (2003-6) (Figure I.3), and both countries in *The Hill of Poisonous Trees* (2008). The materiality of the photographs gestures towards their emblematic status as the fundamental instrument of the project of modernity and its desire to document and classify, while the act of weaving revisits manual craft practices and haptic labor retrieved from the artist’s childhood memories. The conceptual basis of Lê’s photo-weavings surrounds the imagery that has dominated popular Western perceptions of Vietnam and Cambodia, once part of the former French colonial federation officially titled the Indochinese Union (*Union Indochinoise*), but commonly referred to as *Indochine*. The very process of decolonization in the mid-twentieth century would navigate these two modern nations through the geopolitical conflicts subsumed under the umbrella term “the Vietnam War.”

¹ While I consistently use diacritics for the names of Vietnamese artists and refer to them by their first name, as is the convention, I maintain the Westernized use of last names for Vietnamese-American artists who have spent most of their upbringing outside of Vietnam. Accordingly, diacritics are used for their names in the manner in which they are used by the artists.

Lê has a self-professed obsession with the war and its representations, having fled to the United States with his family in the late 1970s, and subsequently growing up amidst the flourishing of a genre of Hollywood films produced in response to the wars in Southeast Asia:

As a child growing up in Simi Valley, California with the distant memories of a country whose culture and imagery was being fed back to me via mainstream television and film, it was at times difficult to pinpoint which memories were mine or popularly inherited (this was a topic I pored over in “From Vietnam to Hollywood” a photo-tapestry series and “The Imaginary Country” a 4-channel video installation). This was also one of the reasons I chose to return to Vietnam – to determine for myself my own memories and contexts of who I was as a Vietnamese.²

Throughout his artistic career he has maintained a commitment to the subject of the wars, the exodus of their refugees, and the experience of Vietnam as a memory and a present condition. Representations largely produced through the still and moving image have shaped this particular region of Asia as an Orientalist paradigm, the particularities of local experience subjugated by dominant visual metonyms largely pertaining to the racialized, sexualized, suffering body, as in the Napalm Girl photograph,³ or the documentary photographs of prisoners at Tuol Sleng, the former Khmer Rouge detention center in Phnom Penh.⁴ For Lê, the impetus to create a counter-narrative to the ways in which this episode of history has been represented outside of Vietnam first made its way through a remediation of iconic imagery associated with Cambodia, chiefly the Tuol Sleng mug shots and the bas-reliefs from the Bayon temple in the complex of Angkor.

² Zoe Butt, “Interview with Dinh Q Le, artist and co-founder of San Art, Ho Chi Minh City,” April 16, 2010, http://curatorsintl.org/images/uploads/Dinh_Q_Le_web.pdf, accessed 4/16/14.

³ For more contextual discussion of these images, see Patrick Hagopian, “Vietnam War Photography as a Locus of Memory,” in *Locating Memory, Photographic Acts*, eds. Annette Kuhn and Kirsten E. McAllister (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 201-23, and Nancy K. Miller, “The Girl in the Photograph: the Vietnam War and the Making of National Memory,” *JAC* 24, no. 2 (2004): 261-90.

⁴ There is now substantial literature on the Tuol Sleng photographs and their circulation. See, for example, Rachel Hughes, “The Abject Artefacts of Memory: Photographs from Cambodia’s Genocide,” *Media, Culture and Society* 25, no.1 (2003), 23-44, and Lindsay French, “Exhibiting Terror,” *Truth Claims: Representation and Human Rights*, eds. M. Bradley and P. Petro (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

Lê's choice to use subject matter from Cambodian history was compelled by memories of the Khmer Rouge invasion of his hometown of Hà Tiên (located near the Cambodian border) together with preoccupations stemming from a 1994 trip to Cambodia:

After learning about the history of Cambodia, I realized that violence is also rooted deeply in Cambodia's culture, as in so many other cultures. Much of its violence is carved on the walls of the Angkor Wat and Bayon temples, temples built as monuments to the victories of kings. Our culture has a tendency to build monuments only. I wanted to include the faces of the victims in these monuments and turn these monuments into memorials.

The Cambodians themselves were obsessed with their glorious past. Everywhere I went in Cambodia, I kept seeing the five towers of Angkor Wat... Pol Pot wanted to return Cambodia to the glorious days of that Angkor Empire. Misguidedly, he believed that through farming, as during the Angkor period, Cambodia could become glorious again. This belief, with others, led to the forced mass evacuation of people from the cities into farming communities and began the Cambodian holocaust.

I see Angkor and Cambodia's holocaust as connected with each other. That is why I started to weave together images of victims of Pol Pot and the wall carvings of Angkor Wat and other temples.⁵

Lê's obsession with how the Vietnam conflict has been historically represented, vis-à-vis metonymic abstractions distilled from the contexts of documentary journalism or cinematic entertainment, would dialogically participate in his own act of representing "Cambodia" as constructed through his personal memories of violence and from his views of present-day Cambodians' relationship to history. In order to memorialize the Tuol Sleng photographs, he chose to interweave images which have come to serve as tropes for Cambodia: trauma and temples. As such, this body of work – while aesthetically and emotively powerful - can be seen as a stage in the development of his artistic praxis, yet is at the same time subject to the same critique he would carry out in his *Vietnam to Hollywood* series.

⁵ Moira Roth, "Obdurate History: Dinh Q. Lê, the Vietnam War, Photography, and Memory," *Art Journal* 60, no. 2 (Summer, 2001), 51.

The artist is cognizant of the aesthetic properties of the photographic documents, which at times have been elided with “art,” such as in the exhibition of the Tuol Sleng photographs as fine art photography at a 1997 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.⁶ This is a fine line that Lê’s photo-weavings may appear to contest and yet embrace, for while it is the surface of these representations that both fascinate and provoke him, his work too participates in a level of abstraction that would appear to iconicize the imagery without depth. Lê produces an intervention in representation for audiences for whom, according to Michael Bibby, the Vietnam War inaugurated postmodernity in the United States.⁷ However, while the photo-weavings alert us to this condition, exposing the fragments that have structured popular understanding of a region, they do not always provide alternative means of grasping historical experience beyond the signs of war and crisis. His artistic critique inevitably enters this regime of visual circulation, and in its act as an intervention into representation, is at risk of reaffirming the iconic stature of the imagery, and possibly sealing a further totality to the metaphors of Vietnam and Cambodia. Alternative paths to representing the war through alternative signs and stories would be realized with works like *Damaged Gene* (1998), *Tapestry of Memories* (2007), and *The Farmers and the Helicopters* (2010).

Lê’s fixation with the war and its long-term repercussions is widespread among the Vietnamese diasporic community, particularly among those who experienced refugee migration as young children. The artist’s work speaks to a subjectivity shaped at the crossroads of various spatial mobilities, having grown up in the border town of Hà Tiên in the Mekong Delta, from where he witnessed violent incursions by the Khmer Rouge, and subsequently as a refugee, a

⁶ See French’s critique in “Exhibiting Terror.”

⁷ See Michael Bibby, *The Vietnam War and Postmodernity* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000).

Việt kiều (overseas Vietnamese) largely educated in the United States. The final stage of these movements would return him to Ho Chi Minh City, a city known for its economic opportunities, a cosmopolitan and multicultural atmosphere, where many diasporic Vietnamese have returned since the 1990s to settle. As I will discuss in the subsequent chapter, Lê was himself a pivotal actor in both the shaping an important dimension of the local art scene in Ho Chi Minh City and of a new understanding of “Vietnamese contemporary art” for the global art world.

My introduction takes a story of movement across borders and between representations in the work of Lê as a departure point in order to situate the objective of this thesis, which aims to serve as an acute questioning of the specificities of place, history, and site within and yet beyond nation. Through the study of urban art worlds in two cities, I attempt to ground names and descriptions of places like Vietnam and Cambodia and the works of artists in those places beyond the metaphorical abstractions that have continued to lend a certain appeal to their work in the global contemporary art circuit. The objective is to provide depth beyond the surface of representation that until now has provided the legible interface of “Vietnam” and “Cambodia” that Lê’s photo-weavings have sought to problematize and yet may be seen to further accentuate. In order to do this, I examine the surfaces of experience in two cities, and draw upon the local stories embedded in their urban topographies, the spaces occupied by artists and the interventions they in turn produce in the cityscape. All of these surfaces contribute to an understanding of how contemporary art emerged in both places as a discursive means of self-actualization, a form of social and creative project to recover pre-war histories of modernity and modernism, and as a platform through which a collective urban identity could anchor local communities and global networks.

In one entry point into the history of Vietnam “beyond nation and region,” eminent historian Keith Taylor uses “surface” as an analytical construct of time and space that I find best captures the particularity of immersive experience. Taylor uses the term to index the “particular times and terrains upon which human activity took place,” offering a methodology for understanding the dialectical relationship between the state, the people, and the space they occupy and narrativize.⁸ Taylor describes the “surface-oriented” experiences of five places in Vietnam, and the ways in which their human and geographical landscapes shaped terrains for the enactment of important events in Vietnamese history, emphasizing the need to concentrate specifically upon the notion of locality and temporality as key to understanding moments and sites of human activity.⁹ In focusing on the specific cultural, social, and physical landscapes of these places, and relating them to each other through the perspectives of their inhabitants, Taylor argues for the situating of historical knowledge within a fluctuating ‘third’ space between narratives of nation and region, and it is this third space for the writing of art histories that I locate in the cities of contemporary Vietnam and Cambodia.

This work is in accord with a renewed call for local specificity in the growing project of realizing a global art history, an endeavor whose scope ultimately strives to decenter “the West” as the locus of progress. Atreyee Gupta suggests that “It is only through such an approach that the entangled landscape of the global contemporary will become discernable, one in which multiple spatialities, temporalities, and power relations combine. I suggest that we connect history to place – not to recover an imagined rootedness, the fabled local, but to think of a new

⁸ Keith Taylor, “Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 57:4 (November, 1998): 954.

⁹ *Ibid.*

ethics for transformational art practices that has emerged through the politics of locality.”¹⁰ My project similarly examines the development of contemporary art in Ho Chi Minh City and Phnom Penh by introducing new ways of visually analyzing the city as a site of experience and field of representation, and in which contemporary art is accounted for as a historical episode, a discursive category, and a socio-spatial intervention in the urban and national landscape. To this end, I look at the importance of works that are produced within and for these cities, which may also use the cityscape to both evoke national belonging as well as state critique. One example that I will discuss in more detail later is Lê’s 1998 *Damaged Gene* project, which further catalyzed the artist’s international career, but also stands out as what many consider to have been the first public artistic intervention in Ho Chi Minh City. Situating *Damaged Gene* as such contributes to an understanding of the internal textures of artistic communities, modes of production, and discursive use of language at a certain time and place. My first three chapters ground examples such as this one to provide a portrait of the globalizing landscapes of 1990s-2000s Ho Chi Minh City and Phnom Penh, and the ways in which discourses and practices of contemporary art were shaped by particular topographies of urban form, curatorial aspirations and limitations, and artistic imaginaries.

To grasp these impressions through others’ memories required ethnographic methods alongside textual research and visual and spatial analysis. My fieldwork was site-specific in order to understand the affective registers of the urban experience in these two cities, and ethnography was by necessity the primary mode of gathering information. This approach to researching modern and contemporary art history in Southeast Asia has been elucidated by art

¹⁰ Atreyee Gupta, “*On Territoriality, Temporality, and the Politics of Place*,” *Asia Art Archive Field Notes 01: The And: An Expanded Questionnaire on the Contemporary*, April 3, 2012, <http://www.aaa.org.hk/FieldNotes/Details/1167>, accessed 4/16/14.

historians Nora Taylor and Patrick Flores as the field of contemporary Southeast Asian art has begun to gain more critical discursive ground in the last five years.¹¹ The absence of archives and historical documents is a lack that is felt keenly in the countries most directly affected by the Vietnam conflict, and as such, much of the historical and cultural narrative presented here has been constructed through the anecdotal accounts related by artists, scholars, and cultural workers. This reliance on stories told by living artists and their friends and families has predicated ethnography as a key method in art historical scholarship in numerous parts of Asia, thereby necessitating what Nora Taylor has described as a “shift from relying on classificatory models rooted in Western art history and move towards a more ‘local’ mode of interpretation, one that accounts for living culture, living artists and regional differences.”¹² Yet this ethnographic shift is also required of research in contemporary art more generally, as Terry Smith has pointed out, as the experience of contemporary art is usually one of direct immersion in present-day art worlds, through studio visits, gallery and biennial rounds, attending artist talks and conferences, and exploring websites as forms of virtual exhibitions and archives serving as contemporary art’s ultimate “regime of representation.”¹³ As such, the lens of ethnographic narration merits close attention to positions of enunciation and interpretation, as Flores rightfully points out in his observation that

the imagination of Southeast Asia has been set in discourse through ‘texts’ on an artworld, a gamut of writing that is probed as ‘ethnographic’ as well as ‘allegorical’ to the degree that the ethnographic may be read allegorically as a narrative of (be)longing, of the conquest of a world and of prevailing in that world. It proposes that such a gesture of imagining the terrain partakes of

¹¹ See Nora A Taylor, “The Southeast Asian Art Historian as Ethnographer?”, *Third Text* 25, no.4 (2011): 475-88, and Patrick Flores, “Field Notes From Artworlds,” *Third Text* 25, no. 4 (2011): 383-94. These two essays were included in a special issue of *Third Text* titled “Contemporaneity and Art in Southeast Asia,” co-edited by Joan Kee and Patrick Flores.

¹² N. Taylor, “The Southeast Asian Art Historian as Ethnographer?”, 478.

¹³ Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 2-6.

ethnography in the sense that it mediates the political process of representation (the recognition of the other as self), the description of everyday life in a perceived periphery, and the engagement with the native or the other whose authentic speech and semblance must be duly registered.¹⁴

Given the conversational tone in which many of these stories were provided, my own narration of these accounts attempts to capture both the spirit of the memory, its source of enunciation, and to contextualize its articulation in relation to the larger argument in which it is framed. Examples of this form of recounting include the polemical framing of accounts of the “first Cambodian contemporary artist” in Chapter 3 and the reconstruction of the contentious events of Saigon Open City in Chapter 1. It is between the immediate responses captured in the media and in published criticisms at the time and the present-day recollections of what the event was meant to do and what it ultimately did, shifting from past to present subjectivity in relation to the event, that I have tried to capture a space of reflexivity from which to write about Saigon Open City and other similar episodes that took place in the two cities’ art histories.

Nations, Borders, and Cities

To focus on cities is not to neglect the attendant forces of collective imaginations and sentiments of belonging that undergird studies of nations and the development of nationalist movements. In his argument for a de-imperializing project in East Asia, Kuan-Hsing Chen emphasizes its mutual imbrication in ongoing movements to “de-colonialize” and “de-Cold War,” all of which center around the relationship between subjectivity and the nation.¹⁵ While my study attempts to shed perspective on art historical production in a third space beyond nation and region, to borrow Keith Taylor’s phrase, it nevertheless takes into deep consideration how

¹⁴ Flores, “Field Notes,” 384.

¹⁵ Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

collective memory and national aspiration are symbolically mapped onto landscape and built space at the scale of the city, the most tangibly embodied and immediate space of everyday life for these artists. My attention to the “local” grounds its meaning in “location,” corresponding to Chen’s argument that “In the third world, nationalism has been a force forged in response to colonial conquest, and in order to eventually move beyond it, we must first dig into local histories and distinguish the different effects that nationalism has manifested in different locations.”¹⁶ This furthermore situates the local as a form of lived space in which multiple engagements between scales, from the body to the global, are enacted, as opposed to a diametric opposition between the “local” as symbolic of the vernacular or the provincial and the “global” as the cosmopolitan and universal. This also calls attention to the fact that such scales are themselves unstable analytical units, as they are representational constructions whose spatial references are continually in flux.

The turn towards cities is not a turn, per se. The foundation of numerous art historical studies, particularly in the modern era, have not attempted to grasp the entirety of the nation in its geographical scope. Rather, they have narrated developments situated in or produced antagonistically against “the city” as the principle actors and events composing national art histories. Important work on modern art in Asia has duly attended to the embodiment of national debates within metropolitan art practices, and increasingly turned reflexively toward the transnational construction of phenomena including modernism, cosmopolitanism, and tradition.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid., ix.

¹⁷ See, for example, Nora Taylor’s discussion of the national politics of painting centered in the Vietnamese capital of Hanoi in *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009); Dakar as the site of emergence of Negritude in Senegalese modernism in Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor’s Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960-1995* (Duke University Press, 2004); the transnational framing of a Muslim South Asian modernism in Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,

Yet “Asia” as geobody, method, or metaphor continues to be an object of fixation and debate as scholars continue to argue for a project that not only decenters the West from disciplinary fields in the academy, but also from subjectivities within Asia.¹⁸ Chen’s project of de-imperialization within Asia is part of a proposal to use Asia as method – to shift the center of gravity of global history and re-situate histories of globalization, to recalibrate Asian studies in Asia, and to ultimately invoke new questionings of the self in relation to the nation, the region, and the world. To carry out this work, he claims that “This turn toward Asia is suggested by the argument that only by multiplying the objects of identification and constructing alternative frames of reference can we undo the politics of resentment, which are too often expressed in the limited form of identity politics.”¹⁹

While I agree with Chen in the importance of constructing alternative frames of reference through multiplying our objects of study and identification, I see this as a first step. The important question remains, what do we then do with this multiplicity of alternative reference points? A broad shift towards alternative, multiple, or comparative modernities has witnessed strong growth in critical scholarship on art histories once considered peripheral to the West and within the academy. Yet little explicitly comparative work has been done. Benedict Anderson’s *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* gestures towards a project very much in line with Chen’s proposal. As a more regionally focused follow-up to *Imagined Communities*, Anderson provides a collection of eloquent investigations into specific

2010); debates in Seoul about Tansaekhwa and the contestation of the Korean art world in Joan Kee, *Contemporary Korean Art: Tansaekhwa and the Urgency of Method* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); and the relationship of Jakarta’s urban plan and architecture to collective memory of the nation in Abidin Kusno, *The Appearances of Memory: Mnemonic Practices of Architecture and Urban Form in Indonesia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

¹⁸ I refer here to three texts: Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994); Chen, *Asia as Method*; and Pekka Korhonen, “Monopolizing Asia: The Politics of a Metaphor,” *The Pacific Review* 10, no.3 (1997): 347-65.

¹⁹ Chen, 2.

topographies in Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines, in which dynamics of media, social class, geography, revolutionary consciousness, language and literature are threaded together in order to uncover nationalist imaginaries. John Clark's comparative study of contemporary art in Thailand and China, bracketed between 1980 and 1999, also provides a dizzying array of empirical data and conceptual mappings of discourses of modernity within Thai and Chinese art worlds. Yet, like Anderson's text, what is ultimately provided is a multiplicity of accounts, rather than an acutely comparative tandem that lays out for the reader provocative angles of comparison engendered by dialogical juxtaposition.

Scale may be a primary reason why such work is presented collectively rather than comparatively, ultimately asking the reader to structure the points of comparison rather than arguing for a framework both proposing new methodological critique. If the object of comparison remains the modern-day nation, which in much of Asia, and particularly in Southeast Asia, can be viewed as a problematic and porous territorial and historical unit, the question of feasibly comparing like structures of affiliation and motivation within national contours presents a challenge. In line with Thongchai Winichakul's compelling study of Siam, the comparison of such geobodies is complicated by their histories as discursively and politically constructed entities, in which multiple vantage points and modes of self-identification compose an ever-shifting and heterogeneous body politic. However, if we bring our vantage point down to the level of the city, a more precise comparative argument may be more feasible. The city itself is not to be understood as a homogeneous geographical unit in contrast to the nation; on the

contrary, the city is grasped as an “experience of multiple temporalities” yet where “everyone marches in the same step,” as Lee Weng Choy describes cities that are *not* Singapore.²⁰

In Choy’s comparative reflection on Hong Kong and Singapore, he suggests that both places can be best understood in relation to one another if they are defined by their states of temporality: “If Singapore is constantly remaking itself to be the next thing, Hong Kong, according to Lau and other commentators, is, in China’s eyes, already the next thing, and therefore is not allowed to remake itself. It must stay frozen in that ‘already’ state.... Yet what connects them, at a fundamental level, is how for each the future is impossible.”²¹ Rather than deploy a broad comparison of two cities (or one city and one city-state), Choy uses the future tense – Singapore as the “near future” and Hong Kong as the “future perfect” - to describe the structure of feeling in a fast-paced place of limited space, a feeling that relates to hope and nostalgia as two sentiments predicated on temporally oriented perspectives of longing.²² As such, the metaphor of futurity positions the two cities dialogically, but what is ultimately being carried out is a site-specific comparative reading of how space and governance shape popular subjectivity, and how artists negotiate this relationship, which he suggests falls more upon adaptation rather than resistance. Choy’s language of art criticism grounds the comparison by moving from the symbolic scales of governance (implying the state) to that of the local (in terms of artistic production in the city) even when the two scales are collapsed into the same delimited topography. What makes this comparison provocative is the specific scope of its focus - rendered dialogical through attention to temporality and subjectivity - and its attention to perspectives about places, of views, and not necessarily of the places themselves.

²⁰ Lee Weng Choy, “The Future Was When: Art Criticism and the Comparative Tenses of Hong Kong and Singapore,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 6 (2007), 345.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

This study of Ho Chi Minh City and Phnom Penh follows a similar endeavor in that it is not necessarily a comparison of cities. Rather, it provides a comparison of perspectives from and about cities: those of artists towards their city, how the city serves as a lens onto an affective relationship to the nation, and how the relationship to the built environment inspires and even shapes art forms and practices consciously articulated as “contemporary.” However, the sentiment of identifying with a certain city, e.g. being from Phnom Penh or from Battambang, from Hanoi or from Saigon,²³ must also accommodate complex historical affiliations structured by border tensions within and along the contours of the nation. Conflicts between the modern states of Vietnam and Cambodia date back to the 12th and 13th centuries, if we consider the wars fought between the Chams (whose kingdom was situated in central Vietnam) and the Khmers of the empire of Angkor, battles recorded in visual form in bas-reliefs at the Bayon in the temple complex of Angkor. A more explicit conflict between the Việt people and the Khmers occurred during what is today referred to as the “southern advance” (*nam tiến*) in the 17th and 18th centuries, when separatist Nguyễn lords broke from the ruling Trịnh dynasty in northern Vietnam to gradually expand the borders of the polity of what was then known as Đại Việt, annexing the territories of the Cham and the Khmers as they moved south.²⁴ To this day, many Cambodians continue to refer to the area of the Mekong delta that was formerly part of the Angkorean empire as Kampuchea Krom, meaning “lower Cambodia,” designating its historical and cultural belonging to Cambodia while under the political sovereignty of Vietnam. Successive Nguyễn

²³ I use the names Ho Chi Minh City (*Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh*) and Saigon (*Sài Gòn*) interchangeably throughout my discussion to indicate perspectives and positions of enunciation. Referring to Ho Chi Minh City – its official name after 1975 – indicates a position of neutrality in the context of discussion. When I explicitly use Saigon – its name prior to 1975 and still the dominant term of reference by local residents and Vietnamese in the diaspora – I am situating its name in the context of a popular and sentimental sense of attachment to place and a claim on history.

²⁴ See Claudine Ang’s historicization of the modern term “southern advance” in her article “Regionalism in Southern Narratives of Vietnamese History: The Case of the ‘Southern Advance’,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 8, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 1-26.

rulers sourced Cambodian labor and enacted colonizing programs during the southern advance, particular under Emperor Minh Mạng's program to "civilize" the Khmers in the 19th century. The fear of ongoing attempts to "Vietnamize" Cambodia was revived during the decade-long Vietnamese occupation after their 1979 invasion and overthrow of the Pol Pot regime. To this day, prime minister Hun Sen is accused of being a puppet of the Hanoi regime, as he began his ascent to power in 1985 under the Vietnamese-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea (1979-89). Historical resentment still lingers in response to the imbrication of Cambodia in the U.S.-Vietnam war, in which Nixon's secret bombing campaign dropped over 2.5 million tons of bombs along Cambodia's border with Vietnam in efforts to destroy communist guerilla arteries.

Despite the more far-reaching cultural differences between the two nations, given that one bears the formative imprint of what we may consider a Sinitic orientation in language and culture (due to modern-day Vietnam's origins as a frontier province of the Han empire), while the other maintains strong connections to Indic cultural systems, French colonialism was without a doubt a profound and integrating event in both Vietnamese and Cambodian history.²⁵ In the late nineteenth century, French colonial policies in Cochinchina and Cambodia were shaped by the locations' respective geographical and cultural environments, and governed by opposing policies of rule. French colonialism in Cochinchina (southern Vietnam) was far more rigorous given its status as the only directly controlled territory in *Indochine*, while Cambodia was governed by a form of indirect rule. In his comparative study of colonialism in Cochinchina and Cambodia, Milton Osborne also asserts that south Vietnamese and Cambodian responses to

²⁵ There are more recognizable cultural and linguistic affinities between south Vietnam and Cambodia given the fact that the Mekong delta was once Khmer land, and southern Vietnamese 'frontier' society has always been characterized as more fluid and multicultural than in the north. Large Vietnamese and Khmer communities continue to occupy opposite sides of the border today.

French colonialism during this period foreshadowed the nationalist movements of the twentieth century.²⁶

The cityscapes of these two regional capitals, Phnom Penh in Cambodia and Saigon in French Cochinchina, experienced similar processes of transformation and urban design during colonialism.²⁷ Few can dispute that colonialism was synonymous with modernization in the region; under the French administration, public works improved the mobility of the population through new road systems, railway transportation, and general infrastructure projects. As part of the colonial project to modernize urban infrastructure, the French rebuilt large sections of Saigon into a version of “a French provincial town,” resulting in a fragmented urban plan, featuring numerous areas with French-planted saplings, major boulevards, and the characteristic neo-classical buildings and villas.²⁸ In Phnom Penh, the French sought to create another Paris of the Orient, as they had done in Saigon. They commissioned new buildings in the Royal Palace Complex to be designed in a “traditional” Khmer aesthetic, alongside numerous French colonial

²⁶ See Milton Osborne, *The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia: Rule and Response, 1859-1905*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969). Beginning in 1867, France established control over Cochinchina, Annam, Tonkin, and Cambodia, and officially created the *Union Indochinoise* (Indochinese Union) in 1887. Laos was added in 1893. Osborne outlines a distinctive difference in the style of administration in Cochinchina and Cambodia in the late 19th to early 20th centuries: “Certainly concepts of civilizing the Khmer, of effectively bringing pressure on Norodom and his court to institute reforms, were in harmony with the philosophy underlying much of the activity in Cochinchina. But in contrast to the Vietnamese region across the frontier, the French officials in Cambodia never had sufficient personnel to effect changes of the sort that they attempted and achieved in Cochinchina. Although the pretense of indirect rule had, in fact, been abandoned by the end of the nineteenth century, the theory that Cambodia was a protectorate was honored to the extent that French interference stopped short of the mass of the people” (55).

²⁷ See Gwendolyn Wright, “Indochina: The Folly of Grandeur,” in *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 161-234.

²⁸ Dean Forbes, *Asian Metropolis: Urbanisation and the Southeast Asian City* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996), 10.

villas and mansions lining the paved boulevards of the city.²⁹ Alongside these endeavors, another project to theorize and develop a local “Indochinese” architecture attempted to synthesize diverse elements of vernacular architecture throughout Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam in order to brand a modern yet “indigenous” colonial style.³⁰

The French also used related administrative policies in regards to the artistic sphere in Cambodia and Cochinchina. The art schools established in Phnom Penh and in the south of Vietnam were used to train artisans or art workers as opposed to artists; this was in marked contrast to the *École des Beaux-arts* in Hanoi, whose pedagogy aimed to allegedly “revive” so-called traditional art forms, such as lacquer and silk painting, while transforming students into modern artists through practices identified with Impressionist painting, e.g. painting *en plein-air*.³¹ The three provincial art schools established in southern Vietnam in the early years of the twentieth century focused on the decorative and applied arts, such as ornamental drawing, lithography, ceramics, and metalworking.³² The curriculum emphasized technical training for the sake of commodity production and providing labor for regional industries, neither advocating

²⁹ See Ingrid Muan, “Citing Angkor: The ‘Cambodian Arts’ in the Age of Restoration, 1918-2000,” Ph.D. Diss., Columbia University, 2001, 48-64, and Sylvia Nam, “Phnom Penh: From the Politics of Ruin to the Possibilities of Return,” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 23, no. 1 (2011), 55-68.

³⁰ See Caroline Herbelin, “*Construire le style indochinois*: Identity Formation through Geopolitical Territory and Architecture,” *Architecturalized Asia: Mapping a Continent through History*, eds. V. Rujivacharakul, H. H. Hahn, K. T. Oshima, and P. Christensen (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013), 172-188.

³¹ See Nora Taylor, “Orientalism/Occidentalism: The Founding of the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine* and the Politics of Painting in Colonial Việt Nam, 1925-1945,” *Crossroads: an Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 11, no. 2 (1997), 1-33.

³² Prior to 1954, there existed in the south three provincial artistic or craft institutions, a school in Thủ Dầu Một focused on the production of decorative woodwork and lacquer, a school in Biên Hòa training students in ceramics and bronze sculpture, and the school in Gia Định which provided training in industrial and ornamental drawing and printmaking. For more information regarding the establishment and curriculum of the French-established art schools in Indochina, see *Les Écoles d'Art de l'Indochine* (Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, 1937), *Trois Écoles d'Art de l'Indochine* (Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, 1931), and Nora Taylor, “The Artist and the State: The Politics of Painting and National Identity in Hanoi, 1925-1995,” (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1997).

modern artistic subjectivity nor fervently attempting to preserve traditional artisanal practices. In Cambodia, the *École des Arts Cambodgiens* (School of Cambodian arts) was established by George Groslier in 1917. The principal mission, as articulated by its director, was to renew artisanal traditions inherent to Khmer native genius, a project of urgency in the crisis of Western modernization.³³ However, commercial motivations also undergirded these interests, as the objects produced in this project of recovery were circulated in colonial commodity networks.³⁴ Regardless, in both regions, the French played an important part in defining what they deemed to be traditional native aesthetics, the project of preservation of local art and craft practices, and models of institutional pedagogy which retain aspects of their forms today.

Returning to ongoing sentiments of cultural prejudice based on historical conflict, to speak of national resentments between the two countries elides the complexities of the specific tensions between regimes and their embodiment in cities. Cambodian accusations of ongoing attempts by Vietnam to colonize Cambodia are referring specifically to the Hanoi government, just as in Vietnam, southern criticisms against northerners often use the term *bắc kỳ* (once the Vietnamese term for the northern region of Tonkin), also referring more to Hanoians than to the general northern populace. With memories of the 1975 take-over by the Communist Việt Minh, the articulation of a distinctive southern identity embodied by “Saigon,” often expressed through nostalgia for South Vietnam’s 1954-75 period of independence, continues to be expressed in modern day Ho Chi Minh City as well as in the diaspora, particularly in southern California. In Cambodia, Phnom Penh as an urban theater for political strategizing was exemplified in Norodom Sihanouk’s construction of the capital city as emblematic of modern nationhood. Yet

³³ For more on Groslier’s administration of the school, see Gabrielle Abbe, “Le Développement des Arts au Cambodge à l’Époque Coloniale: George Groslier et l’École des Arts Cambodgiens (1917-1945),” *Udaya, Journal of Khmer Studies* 12 (2014), 7-40.

³⁴ Muan, “Citing Angkor,” 33-46.

the 1967 peasant revolt in Battambang province against the power embodied through Phnom Penh in the person of Sihanouk catalyzed the events of the civil war and the rise of the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s. Sihanouk's showcasing of Phnom Penh as an international modern capital was shattered during the Khmer Rouge's emptying of cities in 1975, and Phnom Penh would gradually take form again as a fragmented urban center in the late 1980s as residents of largely rural origins began to repopulate the city.³⁵ The construction of Phnom Penh as a post-Khmer Rouge urban entity may also be seen as taking representational form in tandem with the growth of refugee communities in the camps in Battambang and along the Thai border, in which the Khmer Rouge continued to operate as a resistance movement into the 1990s.³⁶

The formation of contemporary art worlds centered in and representative of these cities would further heighten notions of cultural identity and affiliations to place. We may think of these sites as porous receptacles, as references to the art scenes of Hanoi, Saigon, Phnom Penh, or Battambang often draw upon the histories of the cities and their art institutions rather than the origins of resident artists, for example, the stylistic affinities among the artists linked to the arts school Phare Ponleu Selpak in Battambang as opposed to those having graduated from the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh. Whereas Battambang in Cambodia and Hanoi in Vietnam are seen as the cultural heartlands in terms of locating the origins of their respective countries' most acclaimed artists, Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh City may be perceived as less cohesive sites of artistic tradition. The contemporary art worlds of the two cities are remarked upon for the heterogeneity of styles and media forms that have rendered a distinctive pattern of

³⁵ See Christiane Blancot, "Phnom Penh: Defying Man and Nature," *Cultural Identity and Urban Change in Southeast Asia: Interpretive Essays*, eds. M. Askew and W. S. Logan (Geelong, Victoria: Deakin University Press, 1994), 71-84.

³⁶ Ashley Thompson outlines a concise history of the border camps and attempts to lend expression to the subjectivity emerging from the status of displacement in "Oh Cambodia! Poems from the Border," *New Literary History* 24, no. 3 (Summer, 1993), 519-44.

practice less legible as opposed to Battambang painting or Hanoi performance art. Much of this has to do with a diversity of institutional and non-institutional forms of training, the significant presence of diasporic returnee artists, and histories of multicultural populations. In both their pre-modern and modern formulations, the two cities were cultural melting pots, both sharing an intimate geography within the region of the Mekong River. Today, an easy six-hour bus ride connects the two metropolitan regional centers, and one is almost thought of as an extension of the other for urbanites seeking medical care in Ho Chi Minh City or business opportunities in Phnom Penh.

To lend coherence to their artistic communities as having particular impetuses and perspectives in common, like Choy's consideration of the future tense in Hong Kong and Singapore, I also think about a particular temporal outlook that drives the practices of numerous artists residing in the two cities, a perspective that looks backwards in order to look forward, and fixates upon geography and urban space as sources for representation and intervention. In accord with David Clarke's argument that all cities are in some fashion "haunted" by their "others" in the sense of projects of remaking with reference to other cities, I focus here on the haunting enacted by the temporal others of Ho Chi Minh City and Phnom Penh.³⁷ The major trauma produced by the events of April 1975 in the two cities – in both cases what is perceived as their "falls" – is seen as a historical moment in which urban bodies were violently displaced and rendered abject. Therefore, the trajectories of modernity are perceived as having been severed, and the pre-1975 cities of Saigon and Phnom Penh serve as today's temporal "others," conditioning the aspirations for a return of a particular ethos of modernity and creativity associated with urban identity. Such a "haunting" nonetheless operates within hopes to become

³⁷ David Clarke, *Chinese Art and Its Encounter with the World: Negotiating Alterity in Art and Its Historical Interpretation* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 201.

world cities, whether in support of or in contestation of state designs. As I discuss in Chapters 1 and 3, the desire to transcend the limitations of historical crisis and the notion that creative possibilities are foreclosed by social authoritarianism was manifested in the exhibition projects *Saigon Open City* (2006) and *Visual Arts Open* (2005). The word “open” designated the hope that the city as an architecture for art would provide the means through which creative communities could be revitalized, and the cities could be constellated within global art networks, thereby producing effects of true contemporaneity and contesting perceptions that Vietnam and Cambodia would always be behind in terms of cultural and more specifically, artistic development.

The Spatio-Affective Turn

In Michel de Certeau’s description of spatial stories, he suggests that “stories thus carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places. They also organize the play of changing relationships between places and spaces.”³⁸ De Certeau is noted for his description of “everyday practices” as actions characterized as strategies and tactics, in which he views the urban populace as cultural consumers whose creative practices of everyday life are in a sense ‘tactics’, ‘enunciative practices’, or ways of operating. Recuperative and productive tactics on the parts of the individual or the mass populace activate the spaces that they inhabit and traverse; as such, this process of making sense of the images and representations disseminated through public institutions is a type of production and form of resistance in itself. Critiques of de Certeau’s opposition between tactics on the behalf of the populace and strategies as derived from institutional apparatuses center on these categories as totalizing and polarizing, despite de

³⁸ Michel de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, transl. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 118.

Certeau's imbrication in a post-structuralist project. His definition of space and place could similarly be placed under such a critique (e.g. space is a practiced place), as there is a kind of slippage in between that both defines and destabilizes such concepts.

In my discussion, space becomes place through acts of signification, however, place is as subject to intervention at the level of representation as space is at the level of affective experience. Ultimately, this is in dialogue with de Certeau's conception of spatial stories as one that produces a tension between the desires for fixity and motion, and experience and representation at the city's interface. Abidin Kusno succinctly describes this relationship between built space and memory: "A building can trigger memory and political action, but it cannot be relied upon to deliver an intended consciousness. It can never adequately represent memory, yet it can initiate something beyond the memory itself. The visual environment can be seen as a medium through which to interrogate what lies within as well as beyond representation."³⁹ It is this imbrication of instability and promise that has spurred numerous intellectuals and artists to take on the city as a laboratory and as a text, using acts of intervention, observation, mapping, and narration in order to produce spatial stories.

Comparison as a process is meant to further animate these spatial stories. Comparison is a method and an action that positions these places in motion not necessarily against each other, but in dialogue with each other as stories of cities, histories, and artistic subjects. Therefore, the chapters are episodes moving in between scales of historical narrative and geography, between globe, nation, region, city, artist, and artworks, a series of gestures that pull particular concepts, words, and images into relief and in contrast with the other. What I hope to achieve is an

³⁹ Kusno, 10-11.

illustration of similarity and difference, but also the destabilization and more explicit elucidation of borders, spaces, and holistic terms like local, global, and universal.

But the framework of comparison pivots on urban space, and more explicitly, the city, for the primary reason that my argument turns on the notion of spatial intervention. Urban aesthetics has come to attention as a broader category within which episodes of modernism have been framed and metropolitan sites have served as laboratories and landscapes for the avant-garde.⁴⁰ I use the concept to frame a series of dialogical actions between landscape and its representation in the way that Robin Visser defines her study of urban aesthetics in post-socialist China:

Proceeding from the premise that the built environment is not an autonomous realm, but rather an economic and social field with important political implications, I consider how the aesthetics of the urban environment shape the emotions and behavior of individuals and cultures, and how individual and collective images of and practices in the city, whether consciously organized or not, produce urban aesthetics.⁴¹

My consideration of urban aesthetics in the context of contemporary art further situates such gestures and enunciations as incisive interventions. As I elaborate in Chapter 6, the act of envisioning and representing space is part of a historical artistic compulsion to view the landscape as a pictorial field, one in which the artist maintains an immanent presence. Aside from the close analysis of artworks that aim to represent and animate space and present claims upon place in Chapters 4 through 6, I also intend to reframe the concept of urban intervention not only as artistic gesture in or about the city, but the very establishment of an alternative space/place for art as a kind of intervention in the urban landscape. The present-day cityscapes of Ho Chi Minh City and Phnom Penh are panoptic sites in which the spaces of the everyday are

⁴⁰ Here I am thinking about what may be the most recognized study of urban aesthetics, in T.J. Clark's *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1985).

⁴¹ Robin Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Post-Socialist China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

nonetheless always considered in terms of risk. The very act of establishing a space and holding exhibitions unsanctioned by the Ministry of Culture in Vietnam presents a confrontation to state mechanisms for regulating the public display of art. The navigation of administrative controls and bureaucracy to exert what we can consider curatorial interventions therefore may be seen as employing similar strategic measures as Cambodian artist Khvay Samnang's surreptitious planning for his photographed performances in the surveyed waters of Boeung Kak lake. The notion of urban intervention therefore provides one connection between the differentiated concepts of space and place, if we think of such gestures as disrupting or reviving narratives of place by mapping space, a project that seems to run alongside yet in opposition to the ways in which space has been organized and represented in historical state projects.

Much of my interpretation of these curatorial histories, site-specific projects, and artworks related to space and place is informed by French thinkers who were - at the time of formulating their analytical treatments of space vis-à-vis treatises on everyday life - responding to the conditions of post-World War II France: the state's neo-colonization of space in the wake of the decolonization of their former colonies, the project of statecraft and modern planning/architectural modernism, and the catalytic effects of May 1968.⁴² I draw upon the ideas of these social thinkers – Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau and those of subsequent or separate schools who continue to grapple with their foundational writings - because of the ways in which their analyses construed space, subjectivity, affect, and the everyday as mutually imbricated dimensions of subject formation. The landscape of simultaneously urban, post-war, post-colonial, and postmodern conditions underpinned these intellectual developments. As planners and the state attempted to grasp the totality of the social plan and bring it under their

⁴² Derek Schilling, "Everyday Life and the Challenge to History in Postwar France: Braudel, Lefebvre, Certeau," *Diacritics* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2003), 32-35.

control, so too did these sociologists try to grasp the totality of the everyday and understand its potential as a realm of resistance and intervention against these systematic acts of regulatory domination. Half a century later, in the former French colonies of Vietnam and Cambodia, contemporary artists fashion aesthetic strategies and investigations into the space and time of the everyday as ways to enact gestures of resistance and expressions of individuality in the face of authoritarian states, who - whether as part of nominally democratic or communist regimes - nonetheless employ the same language of modernization to enact spatial controls over the social body.

As such, the spatial turn in the humanities has provided analytical tools that I argue are crucial to the understanding of contemporary art practices that are undertaken in some circumstances as forms of social labor/work/activism.⁴³ Emanating from a shift within the field of human geography over the last two decades, an orientation towards the theoretical enrichment of empirical data in the wake of postmodern provocations has concentrated on the insights gleaned through a careful consideration of how space, publics, social bodies, and subjectivities are critical factors in the production of culture.⁴⁴ One indication of the spatial shift in studies of contemporary art, I would suggest, manifested itself as a social turn. Art as a form of social work has as its audience a population designated as “community,” which necessitates a specific reading at the level of scale. In attending to scale as a measure of formal relations within the

⁴³ The writings of Miwon Kwon, Grant Kester and Claire Bishop have explicitly attended to understandings of contemporary art in its function as a type of work engaged with locality, community, and audience. See Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); and Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso Books, 2012).

⁴⁴ For a more detailed historicization of the spatial turn, tracing the suppression of space to history in the nineteenth century through the impact of globalization studies on theorizations of space in the 20th century, see Barney Warf and Santa Arias, “Introduction: The Reinsertion of Space in the Humanities and Social Sciences,” *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. B. Warf and S. Arias (London: Routledge, 2009), 1-10.

composition but also between object and viewer, Joan Kee argues for the invigoration of this mode of formal analysis to produce further insights into the way scale has been mobilized in artworks on the part of the commissioning body (patron or state) or as a play between artworks and artists.⁴⁵ But I propose a different treatment of scale: that the deployment of scale as it has been used as a spatial construct or conceptual gauge in the discipline of human geography further lends itself to the field of art history. As I discuss in *Chapter 6: Cambodian Artists Jump Scales*, whether it be through the sustained engagement of a community in a particular site, or a more conceptual or symbolic unpacking of scales within a singular image, there is a broader application of the concept that reveals alternative forms of agency and interpellation on the part of the artist, particularly as the body is constellated within a jumping of scales.

The body is integral to constructs of scale either in the literature of phenomenology or geography, and it is this somatic core of experience that anchors much of the language used to theorize space as well as affect. While the spatial turn emphasized why space matters, the turn to affect in the humanities reinserted the centrality of the body and the pre-cognitive to provoke new ways of describing that which exceeds language and representation. Yet both turns are mutually imbricated, as both space and affect are constructed around the body and a sense of liminality – that is, the experience that occurs between surfaces of bodies or in the spaces between bodies and non-bodies. Nigel Thrift’s prolific writings on cities and affective politics explicitly emphasize the imbrication of affect in spatial and political experience, and of space in the mobilization of affect, and it is telling that his career as a scholar began with significant empirical work on urbanization in Vietnam.⁴⁶ As post-World War II French thinkers developed

⁴⁵ Joan Kee, “Fitting in Scale,” *Art Bulletin* 94 (December 2012), 499-501.

⁴⁶ See Nigel Thrift and Dean Forbes, *The Price of War: Urbanization in Vietnam, 1954-85* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986).

new theoretical possibilities for perceiving the city and the realm of everyday life as a canvas for the political instrumentalization of space, so too did Vietnam provide a crucial model for a post-modern era of cultural production and critique, as Michael Bibby has argued. In this way we might see how Vietnam - as lived place and as a localized site of study rather than as a screen of representation and debate associated with the wars - foregrounded a radical new mode of thinking in Thrift's writings. Perhaps this is why his propositions for spatial analysis as a means of gauging the mobilities of cities and subjects vis-à-vis affect and non-representational theory have so aptly characterized both the methods and objects produced by the artists discussed in *Chapter 5: Staging Affect and Excess*.⁴⁷ Thrift's call for a renewed spatial politics of affect, subsequently taken up by Ben Anderson and Adam Holden as "affective urbanism," provides a connective thread throughout all of my chapters.⁴⁸

In restating that contemporary art in this region should be understood as part of a larger politico-aesthetic discourse, this work is in dialogue with current debates and shifts in approaches to contemporary art as a relatively new field in the discipline of art history.⁴⁹ As a study of Vietnamese and Cambodian cultural production, I emphasize how the urban interface provides the means through which we can understand artistic practice as an ongoing act of self-making and of community formation. While recent published scholarship has addressed aspects of this approach in case studies from East and South Asia, this study is one of the first to extend this form of inquiry to cities in Southeast Asia, using micro-histories and geographies to invoke

⁴⁷ Nigel Thrift, *Non-representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (London: Routledge, 2008).

⁴⁸ Nigel Thrift, "Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect," *Geografiska Annaler* 86B (2004): 57-78, and Ben Anderson and Adam Holden, "Affective Urbanism and the Event of Hope," *Space and Culture* 11:2 (2008): 142-159.

⁴⁹ The discursive shaping of the field of contemporary art in the academy is a primary focus of discussion in Hal Foster et al., "Questionnaire on 'the Contemporary'," *October* 130 (Fall 2009): 3-124.

an alternative perspective on artistic production in countries that continue to be read as metaphors for war and trauma.

CHAPTER 1

DRAWN INTO THE GLOBAL ART MAP I: HO CHI MINH CITY

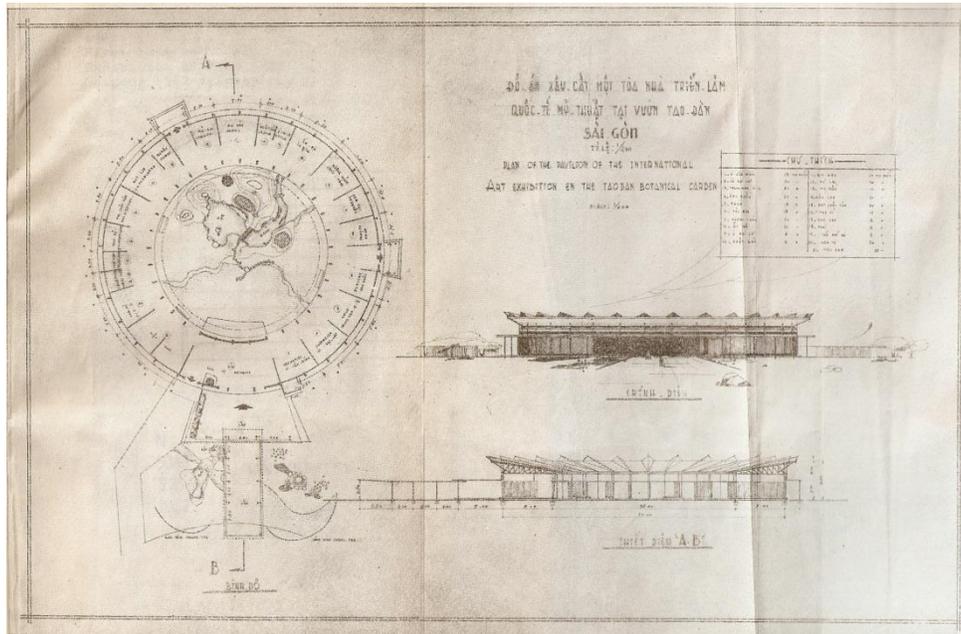


Figure 1.1 “Plan of the pavilion of the international art exhibition in the Tao Dan Botanical Garden,” *Đệ Nhất Triển Lãm Quốc-tế Mỹ-thuật tại Sài Gòn 1962 / First International Exhibition of Fine Arts of Saigon 1962*. Saigon: International Exhibition of Fine Arts of Saigon, 1962, n.p.

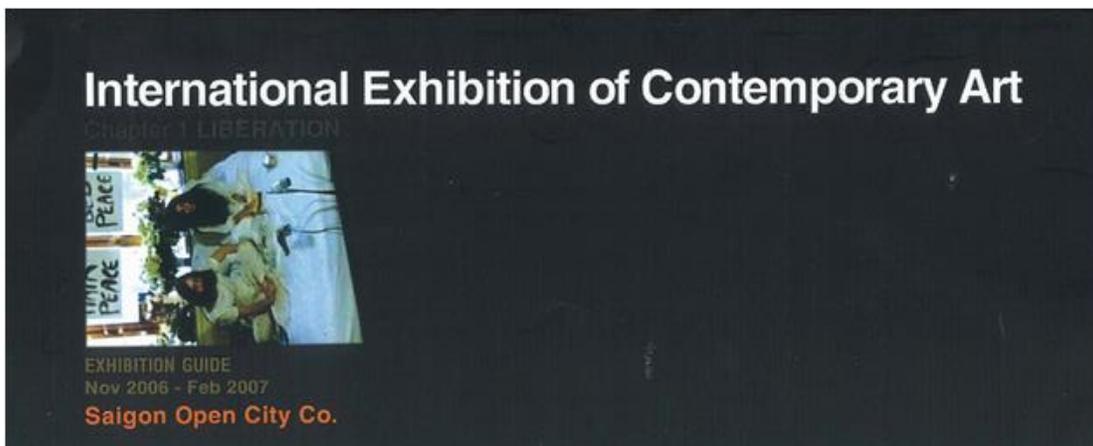


Figure 1.2 Cover of exhibition guide for Saigon Open City: International Exhibition of Contemporary Art, Chapter 1: LIBERATION, Nov. 2006 – Feb. 2007. Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam: Saigon Open City co., 2006.

My discussion of Ho Chi Minh City's contemporary art history centers on three developments that can be perceived as significant turning points in the city's recent art history. These illustrate an overlapping sequence of events that demonstrate the growth of a local art community, and a collective will partially conditioned by both nostalgia and the hope to rekindle the city's past in the present (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2). For the sake of chronologically framing the historical development of contemporary art, and its formation as a discursive event specific to the south, I choose to describe this period as post- *Đổi Mới* (literally "New Change" but commonly translated as Renovation), following the economic reforms that were officially enacted in 1986.⁵⁰ I suggest that the process of *Đổi Mới* marked an entry into globalization in ways that have resonated throughout the region, and therefore brings into relief a notion of contemporaneity that is salient to the discussion. Nevertheless, developments that ensued following the reforms are anchored in historical precedents, most notably Saigonese artistic

⁵⁰ Nora Taylor addresses the perception of *Đổi Mới* as a perceived turning point in Vietnam's twentieth-century timeline, and emphasizes a disentangling of "*Đổi Mới*" from its attendant understanding as "reform." Taylor states that in actuality, impacts of the reforms in the cultural arena began to be actualized in the 1990s in terms of demonstrable changes following the liberalization of the market and relaxation of government controls over artistic production. Therefore, whether or not the phrase "post-*Đổi Mới* Vietnamese art" accurately describes a distinctive stage in artistic development is rather complicated. In both the north and the south, the adoption of relaxed state controls over artistic expression did not signal the immediate efflorescence of experimentation, although artists in Hanoi began much earlier to test out new media forms and practices. While the year 1986 was a momentous year in the country's economic history and change in its official outlook on culture, with the inauguration of the open-door policy, artistic developments had been occurring regardless of the socio-economic constrictions imposed by the state prior to 1986. The writer Phạm Thị Hoài also problematizes the impression that 1986 indicated a watershed moment for artists, and distinguishes a short-lived Renovation literary movement from 1986-88 from what she terms "Post-Renovation," an amorphous and inconclusive period beginning in the mid-1990s. She drily remarks that "We felt like centipedes whose feet are tied but tied with a very soft rope. It has taken a while to figure out that the most significant knot is the one tying literature to politics. If Renovation promised to allow literature and art a certain space of freedom, and to limit the right of the machinery of politics to interfere with the machinery of literature, then the task of the post-renovation era is to determine precisely the parameters of this space of freedom for literature and to determine the circumstances in which the government maintains a right to interfere with literature." See Nora Taylor, "What is *Đổi Mới* in Art?" unpublished paper, and Phạm Thị Hoài, "The Machinery of Vietnamese Art and Literature in the Post-Renovation, Post-Communist (and Post-Modern) Period," February 4, 2004, *UCLA Center for Southeast Asian Studies Occasional Paper Series*, <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/79z98070>, accessed 06/02/15.

modernism, and I address this in the first section. Issues of sociality and space are key to each of these discussions, as space remains a highly contested issue in Vietnam in terms of determining what kind of art can be publicly exhibited, which artists have official status, what kinds of discussions can take place, and as Chapter 4 will consider in more depth, how state controls over space and expression shape the way artists conceptualize projects. I suggest that prolonged definitions of official versus non-official and public versus private are less useful to the discussion of this contemporary art history than a critical narrativising of the key artists, groups, and endeavors that firstly, gave shape to what today is a surprisingly interlinked community of artists, across generations, in a city of approximately 8 million residents, and secondly, paved the way for the city's imbrication in the map of the global art world.

The first section looks closely at a high-profile group of contemporary artists (*họa sĩ đương đại*) in 1990s Saigon. This period coincided with the privatization of the art market and the grouping of northern and southern artists in national and international exhibitionary circuits following *Đổi Mới*, the 'renovation' in economic policy which shifted the centrally-planned economy of the state towards a "market economy with Socialist orientations" (*kinh tế thị trường với hương dẫn chủ nghĩa xã hội*) in 1986. These artists can be seen as continuing a form of praxis emerging from 1960s Saigonese modernism, namely in the form of painterly abstraction and other experimental techniques. The first such group to gain widespread recognition in the 1990s as a distinctive artist community was the Group of 10 (*Nhóm 10 Họa sĩ*), founded by Nguyễn Trung (b. 1940, Sóc Trăng), a leading figure in the postcolonial South Vietnamese art world. I suggest that the work of these painters is important to consider within a historicization of contemporary art in Vietnam for several reasons. In a similar vein to how I discuss the notion of recuperating modernism in the case of Cambodian contemporary art, one can perceive a

variation of a similar concern in the work of these painters. This ethos manifests itself as a form of intense examination of individual subjectivity, a means of painterly experimentation along the lines of testing the potentialities of the medium, and as an alternative and oblique mode of social commentary. These concerns are aligned with a deliberate turning away from the Socialist-prescribed styles and subject matter of the 1975-1986 subsidy period (*thời bao cấp*) in Vietnam, generally remembered as a time of scarcity and constriction of freedoms. Together, these factors produced a moment of recognizable innovation and the demonstration of a particular artistic subjectivity corresponding to the climate of transitional 1990s Vietnam.

The impression of Ho Chi Minh City as more liberal, progressive, and open in comparison with Hanoi is one that many would describe is at odds with their individual experiences of organizing events and exhibiting work, as the southern city's distance from the nation's capital is perceived by many artists and organizers as actually hindering its activities and cultural progress rather than facilitating it. The second section of this chapter thus addresses the role of institutional apparatuses in shaping the spatial and social terrain of artistic dialogue, community formation, and shifting perceptions of contemporary art practice. I will focus on the role that Blue Space Contemporary Art Center played in providing an important platform for contemporary art at various moments in time, in essence serving as the first "alternative" art space in the city. Its built spaces inspired new spatial imaginings of form, and with Mrs. Nga's international connections and democratic direction in curatorial selection and programming, Blue Space provided a major step in contributing to the gradual recognition of Ho Chi Minh City as a global art city.

In terms of initiating new models of collaboration and facilitating entry into the exhibition circuits of the contemporary art world, the impact that the diasporic Vietnam-born

(*Việt kiều*) artists who returned to Ho Chi Minh City in the early 2000s have made on the local art scene cannot be ignored. Some of these individuals catalyzed collaborative endeavors with local artists, and various groups were formed which soon represented Vietnam at various international biennales and triennials. Yet just as this dynamic has played out in other parts of the world, so too have the familiar issues surrounding the global/local divide, authenticity, and representation surfaced. Many of these tensions catalyzed the production of Saigon Open City as an event/non-event of hope, ultimately resulting in a failed biennale project that had been conditioned by the collective memory of the city's cosmopolitan past and potential for future possibilities. Nonetheless, the failure of Saigon Open City would provide the impetus for new micro-spaces of artistic collaboration and programming throughout the city. As such, in the final section of this chapter I address these issues but also highlight the productive nature of early collective efforts within the community of local and returnee artists that arguably resulted in changing the landscape of contemporary art in the city.

Post-Đổi Mới Abstraction and the Legacy of Saigonese Modernism

My discussion of the development of contemporary art in Ho Chi Minh City begins by foregrounding the context in which the first “group” of abstract painters began to draw attention to the medium not only as a revival of 1960s Saigonese modernism and cultural cosmopolitanism, largely centered around the figure of Nguyễn Trung, but also as a distinctly southern, or Saigonese, expression of post-*Đổi Mới* artistic renovation. These artists provided a form of lineage from the period prior to unification in 1975 and casually established an informal community of painters drawn together through national exhibitions of abstract painting. This Group of 10, as they came to be known, are identified as distinctly contemporary artists through

their recuperation of a mode of practice associated with 1954-1975 Saigonese modernism, thereby rejecting the prescribed ethic and representation of Socialist Realist painting, in addition to their examination of artistic subjectivity in the face of social change particular to the conditions of the city after *Đổi Mới*.

It must be addressed early on that it is nearly impossible to begin a discussion of post-*Đổi Mới* contemporary art in Ho Chi Minh City without being pressed with the inevitable comparison with Hanoi. Hanoi, considered the seat of Vietnamese culture dating from ancient times through the present, has drawn the most attention for its role as the primary locus for Vietnam's avant-garde, both in the early twentieth century with the first modern painters trained in the *École de Beaux Arts d'Indochine*, and in the contemporary period, with the youthful and radical innovators of new media such as installation, performance, and video in the vein of more pointed political and social critique. What is often commented upon is the apparent absence of such forms in Ho Chi Minh City during the early years of *Đổi Mới*, a brief period in the late 1980s and early 1990s during which the country – or rather, Hanoi - experienced a short-lived efflorescence of literary, filmic, and artistic expression prior to subsequent restrictions on cultural expression.⁵¹ This would mark a pattern of tension and relaxation in terms of artistic freedom that has characterized the general atmosphere of contemporary Vietnam to date. Painter and chairman of the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts Association (*Hội Mỹ thuật Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh*) Huỳnh Văn Mười (b. 1950) used the analogy of a pendulum to describe the difference in the pace of artistic development in the north and south:

When the 'Open Door' (*mở cửa*) policy came about, things took place more quickly in the north. One way of picturing it is the north was like the pendulum of

⁵¹ Natalia Kraevskaia describes "signs of stagnation" appearing in the late 1990s in the Hanoi art scene. Natalia Kraevskaia, "Contemporary Vietnamese Art: Obstacles of Transition," *focas: Forum on Contemporary Art & Society* 4 (2002), 363.

a clock, being pulled far back, as far as it could go, so that when released, it sprung in the opposite direction very quickly, because the north had been closed off for such a long time, so that with the Open Door policy it was a great rush and very intense change. Whereas in Saigon, they had followed capitalism before unification, and hadn't really absorbed socialism [during 1975-1986], so when 'Open Door' came along they were more hesitant and unsure.⁵²

This transition can be contextualized by two factors that lend credence to the notion that the overarching bridge between artistic climates of the subsidy period (1975-1986) and the renovation period (1986 – 1990s) in Ho Chi Minh City was characterized more by slow transition than drastic change, as many would describe the situation in Hanoi. While I do not by any means understate the extreme nature of socio-economic and political change that wrought major changes in everyday life for most of the southern population following the Communist take-over in 1975, I do emphasize, as a key element of continuity, the renewal of artistic forms of expression that reference and revive the seeds of abstract painting in the 1960s as a creative legacy.

To explicate the nature of the slowly oscillating pendulum as a metaphor for southern artistic development after 1986, one must understand first the specific nature of the subsidy period in Saigon as it impacted artists, namely painters, and secondly, the resumption of forms of painterly abstraction that originated in the 1954-1975 period pioneered by Saigonese artists, and how Nguyễn Trung took a leading role in configuring a community in the 1990s. Yet prior to this, a brief description of postcolonial modernism in Saigon is necessary. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to go into detail regarding the cultural atmosphere of the city between 1954 and 1975, and I primarily want to emphasize the nature of experimental painting, the community of artistic youth that aimed to reform Vietnamese visual art, and the role of Nguyễn Trung as a prominent figure and organizer prior to his attempt to leave Vietnam and his arrest in Cambodia.

⁵² Interview with the author, October 14, 2010. Author's translation.

“Saigonese modernism” also needs to be defined as I want to problematize the contextualization of Vietnamese art history that, like its geography, has been demarcated into north and south.

For historical and political reasons still inflected by wartime allegiances, southern “dissident” artists have been largely excluded from nationalist narratives of modern Vietnamese art history.⁵³

The polarization of the art of the north and the “other” art of the south may be the most politically charged aspect of looking at Vietnamese art, as it seems that all narratives have been inflected with political bias, whether it is the official nationalist history privileging a socialist ideology or the bitterly nostalgic voices of southern émigrés. In this sense, I want to complicate the perception that Vietnamese art from 1954-1975 can be divided along a neat geopolitical and sociocultural binary, the prescribed Socialist Realist art of the north as opposed to the cosmopolitan and modernist art of the South, within a larger binary schema which Neil Jamieson proposed early on with his characterization of the “yin” nature of the Hanoi and the “yang” of Saigon.⁵⁴ One can certainly acknowledge the distinctively different cultural sensibilities, geographies, and climates of the north and south, with general observations that Hanoi feels like a city in China whereas Ho Chi Minh City feels much more Southeast Asian. Yet the geographic and cultural demarcation of artistic developments needs to take into consideration the mobility of artists within the country, particularly in 1954 with the mass migration of northern Vietnamese to the south, among which were numerous artists who played key roles in influencing painting

⁵³ For this reason, much is owed to the scholarship of the late Boi Tran Huynh-Beattie, who devoted a chapter of her doctoral dissertation to the history of the south during the postcolonial period of 1954-1975. See Boi Tran Huynh-Beattie, “Vietnamese Aesthetics from 1925 Onwards,” PhD Diss., University of Sydney, 2005.

⁵⁴ “Saigon had always been an extraordinarily *yin* city. It was considerably younger, bigger, richer, more diverse, and lustier than Hanoi or Hue... Morals and manners in Saigon were always more eclectic, pragmatic, and flexible than anywhere in else in Vietnam.” Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 236.

movements in postcolonial Saigon.⁵⁵ This pattern has continued through the present, and typically characterizes a north-south movement as very few Ho Chi Minh City artists have chosen to relocate to Hanoi.

In general, a distinct phase of artistic modernism had occurred earlier in Saigon than in Hanoi, within a cultural climate most have characterized as dynamic, cosmopolitan, outward-looking, and full of intellectual debate, with a flourishing of artistic activity in literature, poetry, music and the visual arts, despite an increasingly unstable political scene and the growing presence of American troops. The period of 1954-1975 thus marks a radical difference in the historical experiences of the states of North Vietnam under a Communist regime and South Vietnam as a non-communist republic. “Modernism” as an analog for a cosmopolitan outlook and experimental impulse is the general term used to describe the overarching climate of the visual arts during the 1954-1975 period in the south. I would contextualize this expression of modernism is a slightly different way than Nora Taylor in her examination of modernism in Hanoi, or Huynh-Beattie’s account of the Saigonese variant. In Taylor’s study of twentieth-century painting in Hanoi, the term “modernism” is used to describe painting that both referenced European modernism while also searching for indigenous forms of expression, and Huynh-Beattie’s use of the term describes challenges to figurative realism.⁵⁶ While there is a general consensus by most art historians that the 1954-1975 period in the south was a time during which communities of artists strove to keep up with the outside world, to be modern, and found abstraction and surrealism to be the means of expression which could fulfill these objectives, I specifically employ modernism in the Greenbergian sensibility to convey the

⁵⁵ These included Tạ Tỵ (1922-2004), Lê Văn Đệ (1906-1966), Nguyễn Gia Trí (1908-1993) and Thái Tuấn (1918-2007) – all northern-born artists, some who graduated from the EBAI in Hanoi, and all of whom later became prominent figures in the southern art scene.

⁵⁶ See N. Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi*, 71-74, and Huynh-Beattie, 242-249.

relationship these painters had with the materiality of the medium and their interest in testing its possibilities, in elevating painting on its own terms and purifying it of any political or social ideologies, chiefly any inflections of Socialist Realism.

Within the community of visual artists in Saigon, Nguyễn Trung was a prominent figure. Trung won the silver prize in the first of an annual juried exhibition series beginning in 1959, the *Phòng Triển lãm Mùa xuân Kỹ hội* (Annual Spring Exhibition).⁵⁷ In the absence of a fine arts association (which was not established until 1981), Trung founded the *Hội Họa sĩ Trẻ Việt Nam* (Society of Young Vietnamese Artists) in 1966, with the objective of simply having an association through which they could organize exhibitions and activities.⁵⁸ According to Trung, there was no state opposition to their organization, as at the time, in his words, artistic life had nothing to do with political life. Members were free to follow whichever artistic direction they wanted to pursue, as freedom of individual experimentation and development was the primary characteristic of the association.⁵⁹ The group formed through an association of peers and friends, mainly sharing an interest in new forms of creation and expression, and who saw themselves as more forward-thinking than the older generation. Yet despite Trung's description of the group as being an informal and relaxed network of artists, the Young Artists' manifesto uses distinctively radical language to reveal their concerns with moving Vietnamese art forward in a manner relevant to the specificities of their time and place:

⁵⁷ This was the first step in initiating a tradition of large annual art exhibitions, with an average of 75 artists participating, each showing around four paintings. See Huỳnh Hữu Ủy, “Mỹ thuật Sài Gòn từ Đầu Thế Kỷ đến 1975” (“Art in Saigon from the Beginning of the Century until 1975”) *Địa chí văn hóa Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh* (*The Cultural Geography of Ho Chi Minh City*), eds. Trần Văn Giàu and Trần Bạch (TP Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà xuất bản TP Hồ Chí Minh, 1998), 274.

⁵⁸ Interview with the author, December 15, 2010.

⁵⁹ According to Trung, “Il n'y a pas de direction exacte. Chacun son chemin de creation.” Interview with the author, December 15, 2010.

We are aware that Vietnamese Art, and especially painting and sculpture, for more than half a century since the founding of the original EBAI in Hanoi, has not responded to Vietnamese reality...

This period is in effect marked by the poverty of artistic inspiration characterized by a disconcerting self-indulgence and an individualism of limited thought that does not truly reflect the Vietnamese soul and its problems, which are as vast as they are varied...

The erroneous norms of the past have never been truly analyzed; the self-styled oriental characteristics have been exploited as a source of inspiration whereas it constituted nothing more than a form of allegiance to China or Japan...

In other cases, Vietnamese art continued to be tributary of European art, and more particularly the Paris school the principles of the Paris school were established as unchangeable rules as well as plans of conception and of execution, all of which have imprisoned Vietnamese art in the limited frame of the colonial cage and which was made into a by-product of Occidental art...

We use these contestations to launch an appeal, with the intention of the Vietnamese artists of the young generation. The time has come to promote a progressive artistic movement.⁶⁰

These concerns echo the writing of various advocates of abstraction at the time, such as painter Tạ Ty's description of the disruptive potential of abstraction and its revolutionary possibilities:

Abstract art is the art of revolution. It wants to wipe out every form that is enslaved to spirit as well as materiality. It searches for the balance of life. It cannot be absent from a society that has yet to discover Beauty with its ideas about magnanimity and equality. Art does not accept borders. It is the universal language of humanity.⁶¹

Radical language, relatively in the same vein as that used in the north, was being used to propose a sweeping reform of the arts. Yet despite its advocacy by painters like Tạ Ty, abstraction was not the dominant mode of 1960s modernist painting, but rather an emergent form with a small but devout following. Trung described how at the time it held little appeal for him and that it was not even on the radar of most cultural authorities. Therefore, while some considered it a drastic

⁶⁰ *15 Hội sĩ Điêu khắc Giả: Hội Họa sĩ Trẻ Việt Nam / 15 Sculptors and Painters: Society of Young Vietnamese Artists*, Saigon: Hội Họa sĩ Trẻ Việt Nam, 1973, n.p

⁶¹ Tạ Ty, "Nổi xao xuyến của hội họa trừu tượng" ("The Upset of Abstract Painting") *Nghệ Thuật* 65, October 16-23, 1965, 11.

means of painterly innovation, others took little notice. Trung had painted several abstract works, but did not really connect with “true abstraction” (“*je n'arrive pas a faire le vrai abstrait*”) until much later, and his signature style through the sixties was developed through figurative painting (Figure 1.3). In these earlier works, war was often evoked as subject matter, symbolically rather than literally, for example in his portraits of women as icons of maternity or mourning. It would take a year-long imprisonment in Phnom Penh and a later sojourn in Paris before Trung embraced and developed abstraction as his principle praxis, during which time he continued to remain a highly esteemed figure among younger artists in Saigon in terms of his mastery of the medium, his outlook on artistic labor, and his active role in the community.



Figure 1.3: Cover of *Văn Nghệ* (Literature) magazine, image by Nguyễn Trung, 1961. Sourced from Đinh Cường, “để đi đến xám trắng đen, nguyên trung đã là...” (in order to go to gray, white, black, Nguyen Trung was...), February 28, 2011, *Da Mau* magazine. <http://damau.org/archives/18597> (accessed 06/02/2015).

Before I address Trung's experience in Cambodia, I want to briefly describe the nature of the social rupture that occurred in Saigon with Reunification. The project of modernizing the visual arts and placing Saigon on par with other cosmopolitan cities was harshly interrupted by the Communist takeover on April 30, 1975, which saw the city's name change from Saigon to Ho Chi Minh City, and an upheaval in the structure and norms of southern society. Intellectual and artistic groups were forcibly disbanded as some were sent to reeducation camps and others chose to flee the country as refugees. Those who previously had wealth and property became the dispossessed and lost their former stature, while party cadres rose in the ranks of socialist society. The 1975-1986 Subsidy Period (*thời bao cấp*) was recalled by many artists as a time of hardship but also of improvisation and survival. According to Ken Maclean, a new narrative has recently emerged that portrays this period as marked not only by "great collective hardship and suffering, but by individual creativity and cleverness as well. This hybrid formulation, frequently expressed through the Vietnamese saying *cái khó ló cái khôn* (Necessity is the mother of invention), was twofold. First, it accorded historical value to experiences that had been previously marginalized. Second, it conceptually linked two radically different narrations of the nation that had otherwise failed to meet one another."⁶²

During the subsidy period, continuing to paint was a means to preserve a sense of normalcy and psychological fulfillment, even though some artists would have to compromise in order to be able to work and earn a little income. This also marked the end of the Young Artists' Association because most of the members were either in reeducation camps, as many of them had served in the south Vietnamese army, or had left the country and settled in the U.S or elsewhere, never to return. When those in the re-education camps finished their sentences they

⁶² Ken Maclean, "The Rehabilitation of an Uncomfortable Past: Remembering the Everyday in Vietnam during the Subsidy Period (1975-1986)," *History and Anthropology* 19.3 (2008), 285.

too left the country as refugees and settled abroad. Trung himself encountered few difficulties, despite his record, because he had attempted to leave the country under the regime of Ngô Đình Diệm, an act that was seen in a favorable political light. Nguyễn Trung described how some artists would “follow the revolutionary road” (*suivaient le chemin révolutionnaire*) and adopt Socialist Realism as subject matter in order to continue to have opportunities to exhibit, as all exhibitions were organized by official associations administered through state ministries.⁶³ Trung himself took up subjects favorable to Socialist Realism as well as portraits of women; this was a way to make a living. But he noted that one could continue to work in the styles they wanted - and not really even covertly - but it would just be done in the privacy of one’s home without possibility for exhibition.

In addition, it is possible to perceive the subsidy period as a productive period, despite its constrictions and dearth of resources, in that there were new forms of exchange between different populations. Trung remarked that what really mattered was artistic talent; that was what connected people. One could attain materials although they were difficult to come by. And there were other unofficial networks that one could use. Some artists had previously hoarded materials in case there should be a shortage, and some returnees from abroad brought back materials and texts to share. Đỗ Hoàng Tường (b. 1960) described how some painters would go abroad and bring back materials, and upon their return, groups would discreetly get together to socialize and check out the books, journals, and catalogues.⁶⁴

The transition into a market-oriented economy following the 1986 reforms and the new “Open Door” (*mở cửa*) policy in the late 1980s signaled little explosive or reactionary activity on the part of artists, especially visual artists, in Ho Chi Minh City. The first significant

⁶³ Interview with the author, December 15, 2010.

⁶⁴ Interview with the author, October 26, 2010.

development towards a new sensibility in the visual arts and a more recognizable community of painters in Ho Chi Minh City was the profile of abstract painting as a distinctively southern expression of contemporary art, one that revisited Saigon's history of artistic modernism but pushed it in new directions as several painters, old and new, explored the medium and techniques in the 1990s through the present. These works may have been perceived as being distinctly apolitical, in that abstraction was neither condemned nor promoted by the state after the reforms in 1986. Several of the painters would also utilize abstraction as a means to master technique, thereby earning respect as more "senior" from subsequent generations of artists. Most of the painters I interviewed who had belonged to the Group of 10 also described how inspiration was drawn in large part from locally-sited external observations, encompassing the changing cityscape and attending to its corresponding social issues, media, and internal unrest in the face of Vietnam's rapid entry into the contemporary era of globalization.⁶⁵

Almost every painter I spoke with cited Nguyễn Trung as the quintessential southern artist and a role model for the next generation. This is perhaps attributed to his relaxed yet intriguing persona and manner of speaking, but also because of his senior status in the Group of 10 and the way in which he strove to develop his craft after what can only be described as a highly unusual and lengthy journey.⁶⁶ As mentioned earlier, Trung came to embrace abstraction

⁶⁵ Author's interviews with Nguyễn Trung, Đỗ Hoàng Tường, Nguyễn Tấn Cường, and Trần Văn Thảo, 2010-2011.

⁶⁶ By manner of speaking, I'm referring to Trung's predilection for the French language as well as his distinctive regional accent when speaking Vietnamese. In Vietnam one's accent can be used to identify one as being from the north, central, or southern regions, and sometimes can even be used to pin-point one's hometown. The different accents are often associated with clichéd characteristics, such as southern perceptions that the clipped, over-articulated tones of the north are reflective of the stereotype of northern superciliousness and grandstanding, whereas the more relaxed and blended tones of southern accents are often derided as being reflective of rural origins and laziness. One "ideal" accent often cited in casual conversation is that of the 1954 generation, indicating those who migrated south from the north during the partition of the country into North and South, as it combines the clarity of the northern accent with the softer intonations of the south.

after a prolonged stay in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and later, in Paris, France. The former of these was not voluntary. According to his retelling, it was in 1962 or 1963 that Trung quit school in his third year as he wanted to work independently and continue his studies in France. But because it was wartime, he couldn't leave the country without permission and funding from the government. In 1964, Trung illegally crossed the border into Cambodia and spent one week in Phnom Penh before being stopped by the authorities, who arrested him for not having the necessary legal documents. He spent almost one year in the central prison in Phnom Penh as the administration continually delayed his court dates.⁶⁷ He remembers his fellow inmates consisting of Cambodians, Vietnamese, Thais, and Malays, and that the time in prison gave him the opportunity to learn about Buddhism, as a Buddhist monk came once a month and spoke with the prisoners about Buddhism and distributed books. It was through this encounter that Trung says that a newfound affinity for Buddhism began to bear a significant influence on his painting practice.⁶⁸ He thus became drawn to abstraction, particularly as it connected to ideas drawn from Zen Buddhism, and later, through his time spent in Paris, really began to strive for a thorough investigation of the medium as a psychological and artistic process. *Inside the Pagoda* from 1999 (Figures 1.4 – 1.5) reveals the lingering appeal of Buddhism represented both as a multiplicity of icons (stupas) on close inspection, and from afar, as abstract form, suggesting a view through a grid, perhaps evoking memories of his prison stay.⁶⁹

Later, following the onset of the official Đổi Mới reforms, Trung realized his dream of going to France and stayed one year in Paris through an affiliation with the Union of Vietnamese

⁶⁷ He visited Cambodia again in the mid-2000s and in our interview he described the prison as his *vielle demeure* (former residence).

⁶⁸ Trung also collects antique Khmer Hindu-Buddhist sculpture, and his prolific collection occupies a significant amount of space in his painting studio.

⁶⁹ A similar interpretation has been lent to Sopheap Pich's series of grids from 2012-13.

in France.⁷⁰ It was there that he says he really saw “*le vrai abstrait*” for the first time and that he began to question what he really wanted to do, in terms of artistic practice. For him, abstraction provided more “light” (“*plus de soleil*”). The French sojourn was instrumental in his personal commitment in the direction of abstract painting, and he returned to the rapidly evolving urban and artistic landscape of Ho Chi Minh City in August 1991. After his return to Vietnam, Trung would assume a quiet yet crucial role in shaping a profile and discursive platform for contemporary art in Ho Chi Minh City, chiefly in his editorship of the local art magazine *Mỹ Thuật Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh* (Fine Arts, Ho Chi Minh City) and his position in the coalescing of the Group of 10 painters.

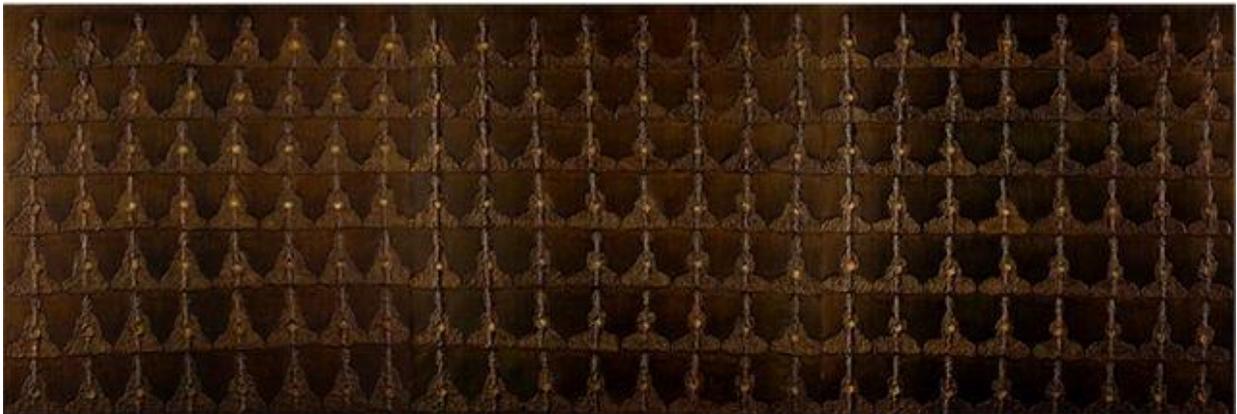


Figure 1.4: Nguyễn Trung, *Inside the Pagoda*, 1999, papier-mâché and oil on canvas, three panels: 100 x 100cm (each). Post-Vị Đại collection. Image courtesy of Galerie Quynh.

⁷⁰ See unpublished monograph by Nora Taylor and Boi Tran Huynh-Beattie, *Nguyen Trung* (Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam: Post-Vi Dai and Galerie Quynh).

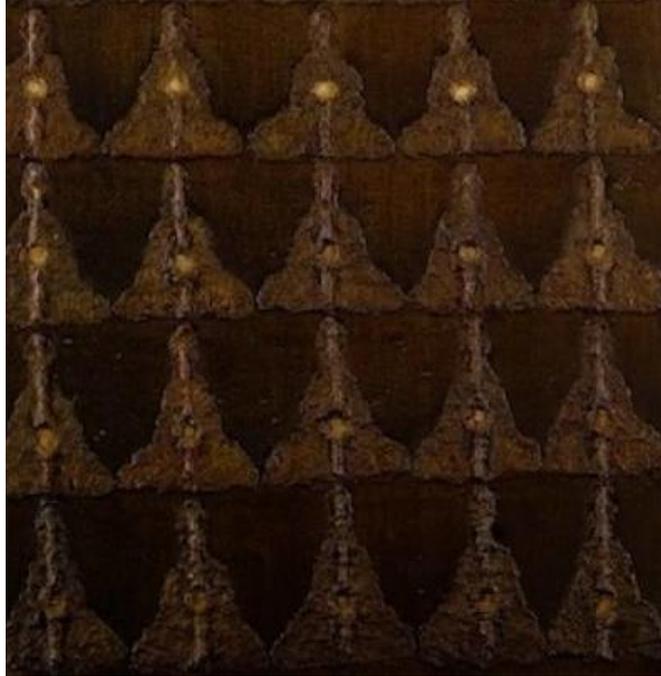


Figure 1.5: Nguyễn Trung, *Inside the Pagoda* (detail), 1999, papier-mâché and oil on canvas, three panels: 100 x 100cm (each). Post-Vị Đại collection. Image courtesy of Galerie Quynh.

According to painter Trịnh Cung (b. 1938), three notable developments shaped the face of the art scene in Ho Chi Minh City after *Đổi Mới*.⁷¹ One was the forms of artistic and cultural exchange organized by the Fine Arts Association, which included the publication of the bilingual journal *Mỹ Thuật* (in Vietnamese and French), founded by Nguyễn Trung and Ca Lê Thắng in 1989, and the organization of numerous exhibitions featuring artists from Vietnam and other countries, such as Singapore, Thailand, and Japan.⁷² Another important factor was the

⁷¹ Trịnh Cung. “Mĩ thuật thành phố Hồ Chí Minh từ khi có ‘Đổi mới,’” (Art in Ho Chi Minh City since Renovation), <http://www.talawas.org/talaDB/showFile.php?res=10106&rb=0202>, accessed 06/02/15.

⁷² The journal *Mỹ Thuật Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh* (Fine Arts, Ho Chi Minh City) was established as a locally-specific branch of the Hanoi *Mỹ Thuật* journal, but in contrast to the northern version, was devoted exclusively to the visual arts at a local and international scale. Artists and critics contributed essays and reviews, and translated pieces, usually from French, lent a window onto international developments. Artist and curator Nguyễn Như Huy attributes the development of artistic discourse and consciousness in the 1990s in part to the journal, believes that the co-editors had a complementary relationship that enabled *Mỹ Thuật*'s success; Ca Lê Thắng had experience working from inside the

establishment and support of the Group of 10 painters, which included Nguyễn Trung, Ca Lê Thắng (b. 1949), and Đào Minh Tri (b. 1950) as the more senior painters, and seven artists representing the first generation of painters to graduate from the renamed Ho Chi Minh City University of Fine Arts: Đỗ Hoàng Tường, Trần Văn Thảo (b. 1961), Nguyễn Thanh Bình (b. 1954), Nguyễn Trung Tín (b. 1956), Hứa Thanh Bình (b. 1957), Nguyễn Tấn Cường (b. 1953) and Vũ Hà Nam (b. 1962) (Figures 1.6 – 1.7). He characterizes this group as being exceptional for propelling a highly internalized and experimental subjectivity into their painting practice, and compares them to Hanoi's "Gang of Five."⁷³ The third major factor was the increase in galleries and art spaces as Vietnam's art market was privatized and began to attract major clientele through the expanding tourist industry. The privatization of galleries was symptomatic of the city's transition into a new phase of socialism; the commodification and repurposing of public space indexed a new relationship to urban aesthetics, and what the city could offer to an emerging consumer populace.

system, whereas Trung had worked from outside the system, therefore the working relationship found a productive balance. According to Huy, the journal at that period of time was critical in developing awareness of contemporary art in the south, unlike in the north where the parallel publication did not push such a discursive edge. The journal had a print run from 1991 to 1998, subsidized largely through advertising and in 1995, through funds from the French embassy to produce bilingual and trilingual issues. In 1998 the journal ceased publication due to funding and licensing issues. For more in-depth information, see unpublished monograph by Nora Taylor and Boi Tran Huynh-Beattie, *Nguyen Trung (Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam: Post-Vi Dai and Galerie Quynh)*.

⁷³ The Gang of Five consisted of Hanoi-based artists Trần Lương, Đặng Xuân Hoà, Hà Trí Hiếu, Hồng Việt Dũng, Phạm Quang Vinh. There are mixed opinions on the degree to which this group really functioned with sincerity as an artistic collective. Kraevskaia argues that the Gang of Five "was created only with promotional purposes in mind and the artists had no other networks except for social ones," and that the name of the group was coined by a gallerist, in a similar fashion to the Group of 10 in Ho Chi Minh City. Kraevskaia, "Contemporary Vietnamese Art," 372.

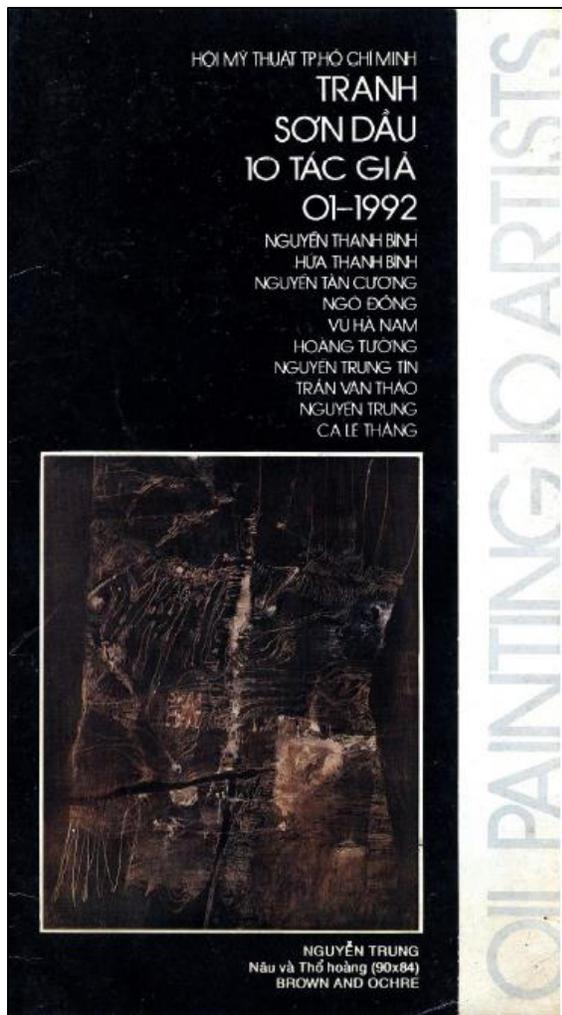


Figure 1.6 (left): Cover of exhibition brochure for *Oil Painting: Ten Artists*. Ho Chi Minh City: HCMC Fine Arts Association, 1992.

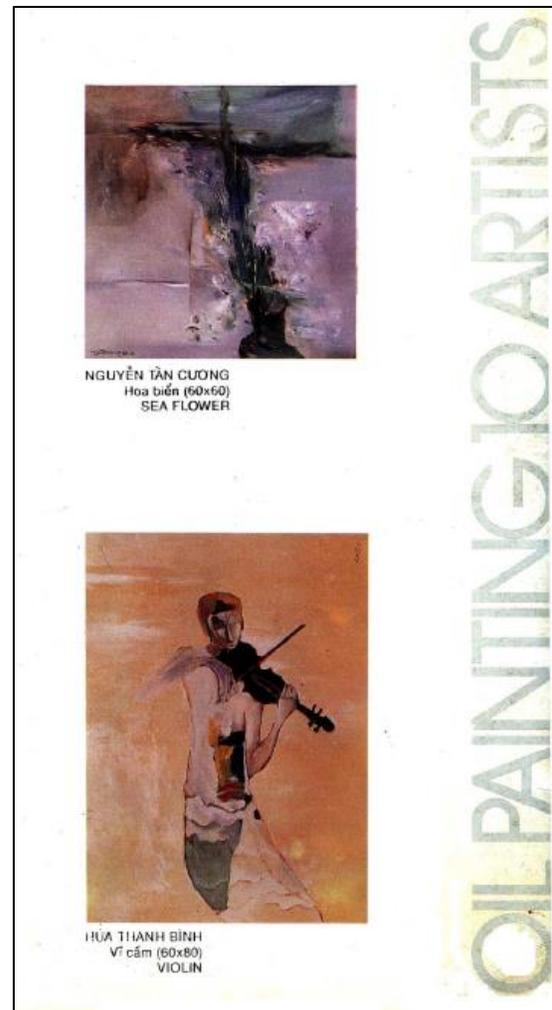


Figure 1.7 (right): Interior of exhibition brochure for *Oil Painting: Ten Artists*. Ho Chi Minh City: HCMC Fine Arts Association, 1992.

Prior to the establishment of Blue Space Contemporary Art Center and various independent spaces that emerged in the first decade of the new millennium, the Fine Arts Association was an important mechanism and display space for organizing exhibitions and providing an initial means for artists to find opportunities to show their work and also socialize with each other. Vietnamese-American Quynh Pham, owner of Galerie Quynh, describes how in

her early days in the city in the mid-late 1990s she would often spend time getting to know the artists at the Fine Arts Association, as it served as the equivalent gathering ground for painters as the cafés in Hanoi.⁷⁴ It is also undeniable that the socio-economic context of post-*Đổi Mới* Ho Chi Minh City was essential in providing a market for the works of these painters.⁷⁵ Many painters said that it was during the early 1990s that they began to work as professional artists through their ability to sell through the private gallery system. They witnessed the emergence of press coverage and media, international exhibition circuits through state-sponsored artistic/cultural exchanges, and the proliferation of private commercial galleries, all of which contributed to the sense of a professional art world. This naturally had its repercussions as many artists began to cater to the demands of the market for signature styles and subjects. In an article in *Mỹ Thuật* titled “Are we ready to step into the next age?” Ca Lê Thắng critiqued the commercial orientation of artistic activity in the city. In 1992 there were 130 group and solo exhibitions in Ho Chi Minh City, including local, regional, and international artists, featuring more than two hundred artists. According to Thắng,

There exists in our city an irreconcilable paradox which is extremely dangerous to the development and future artistic foundations of the city, yet one where people are somehow gradually becoming reconciled to. This paradox is: disregarding the artistic integrity and value of a gallery or work, art is exhibited for the sole purpose of selling pictures... This is the problem: we do not need a glut of exhibitions, but rather need to guarantee that each exhibition satisfies a few basic requirements, above all spiritual requirements – that the work be a ‘noble feast’ for the public’s consumption.”⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Conversation with the author, September 14, 2011.

⁷⁵ Nora Taylor provides an in-depth discussion of the impact of the 1986 reforms on the Vietnamese art market, noting the effects of the growing tourist industry and the international art market, along with an increased emphasis on locating ‘Vietnameseness’ within artworks in the face of the globalizing art world. She also notes the initial enthusiasm and hope of the Hanoi artist community with the onset of the reforms in the 1990s, but ten years later, the disenchantment with this promise. See N. Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi*, 108-17.

⁷⁶ Ca Lê Thắng, “Are we ready to step into the next age?” *Mỹ Thuật* 7 (1993), 52-3.

Yet while some may have appeared to “sell out” in the perceptions of foreign collectors and curators, others see what they did – making works appealing to the market alongside paintings that they continually reworked and are less viable for sales - not as a form of compromising their artistic integrity, but as a means of making a living, a situation common for artists in developing countries. Collector Trần Thanh Hà, part-owner of the Post-Vị Đại collection of contemporary art in Vietnam, is understanding in her view of artists whom she describes as making left-hand work for more commercial sales in order to support the kind of personal work they make with their right hand.⁷⁷

Many artists maintained that those who did not work within the gallery system, or who had little commercial success, continued to practice at home and thus retained continuity in their creative process. The community that began to take shape after 1986 was one founded more on social recreation rather than serious intellectual discourse, mirroring the general criticism of art groups that have emerged in Vietnam in the 1990s.⁷⁸ None of the artists interviewed were hesitant to describe it as such, rather, they all spoke to this as being an intrinsic characteristic of social life in Saigon – one of informality, freedom, and individuality, in contrast to what many southerners characterize as the clannish, over-intellectualized, and hierarchically exclusive community of artists in Hanoi. Another major factor impacting the aversion towards the language of “group” or “collective” work in Saigon – despite the labeling of the “Group” of 10 - is the stigma the terms have based on historical experience, considering that the south was unwillingly unified with the Communist north in 1975. In regards to artistic discourse, painter Trần Văn Thảo drily asserted – as have most other artists from that generation – that the kind of debate over the arts that was and is prevalent in Hanoi had no parallel in Saigon, and that the

⁷⁷ Conversation with the author, February 16, 2011.

⁷⁸ Kraevskaia, “Contemporary Vietnamese Art,” 372.

extent of a critique might be “if beautiful, good; if not beautiful, then keep going” (*đẹp thì tốt, không đẹp, thì tiếp tục*).⁷⁹

Despite the perception that the community in the 1990s appeared remarkably passive in contrast to the fervor and radical rhetoric of the 1960s, it is important not to underestimate the liberating capacity of abstraction as an initial form of artistic expression after an eleven-year period that saw Socialist Realism imposed as the official style of creative production. Therefore, the first exhibition of Vietnamese abstract painting in 1992, *Abstract Painting (Hội họa Trừu tượng)*, organized by the Hoàng Hạc Gallery, is still perceived to be a momentous event in the context of the south (Figures 1.8 – 1.10).⁸⁰ For the first time, artists from all over the country – some thirty painters and almost one hundred of their works - were exhibited together under the umbrella of a particular style, one that had been banned by the Communist government since 1957. Nguyễn Trung wrote the introductory essay for the catalogue and emphasized the transparency of emotion that could be conveyed through abstraction, perhaps implying that such a form could allow for a quiet yet direct access to truth after a period of upheaval and repression: “For the time being, in this exhibition, what is most evident is that the artists have been embarking on a trail-blazing research. To them, abstract art is not a *fashion*, not an *ism*, but the best, most direct and most truthful means of expression.”⁸¹

⁷⁹ Interview with the author, April 25, 2011.

⁸⁰ This exhibition was funded by 3 agencies: the HCMC Culture & Information Service, the HCMC Fine Arts Association, and the Museum of the Armed Forces of the Eastern Nam Bo (Miền Đông Nam Bộ).

⁸¹ Nguyễn Trung, transl. Duong Tuong, *Abstract Painting*, exhibition catalogue, May 20-30, 1992 (Ho Chi Minh City: Hoang Hac Gallery, 1992), n.p.



Figure 1.8: Cover of exhibition catalogue for *Abstract Painting*. Ho Chi Minh City: Hoàng Hạc Gallery, 1992.

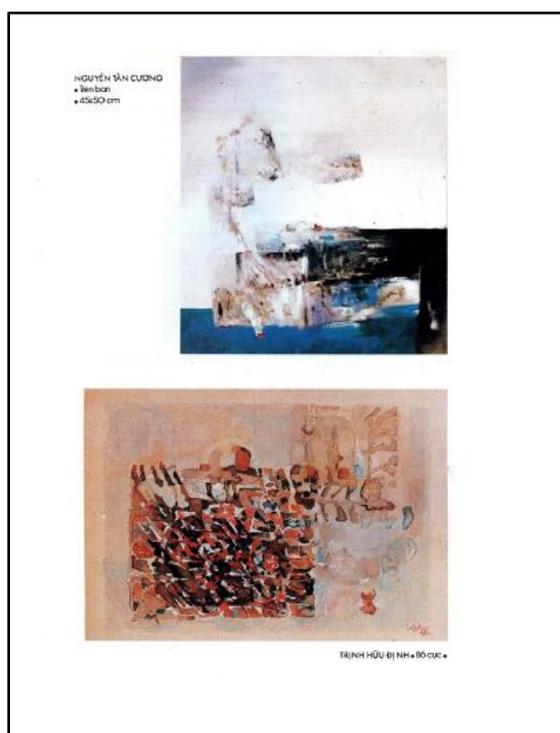


Figure 1.9 – 1.10: Pages from exhibition catalogue for *Abstract Painting*, Ho Chi Minh City: Hoàng Hạc Gallery, 1992, featuring paintings by Nguyễn Tấn Cường, Trịnh Hữu Định, Đào Minh Trí and Nguyễn Trung.

The 1992 exhibition of abstract painting followed what had come to be an annual exhibition of *Recent Works: 10 Artists from Ho Chi Minh City* (*Tác phẩm mới: 10 Họa sĩ TP Hồ Chí Minh*) organized by the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts Association beginning in 1989 and which was held annually until 1996 (Figures 1.11 – 1.12). In his essay for the *Abstract Painting* catalogue, Nguyễn Trung hinted at the emergence of a distinctly southern, urban aesthetic, and a caliber of technique and artistry that rivaled the reputation of painting from Hanoi:

We should take notice of two specific, though not too obvious, features which characterize the art of the two cities: the paintings from Hanoi are festivities of colors and curves, of signs and designs, while those from Ho Chi Minh City dwell on media, simplification of colors, sparseness and powerfulness of forms and lines. Whether these specific features will grow more accentuated or will be fading gradually from interference is hard to predict.⁸²

The respective aesthetics of north and south are thus charted along a continuum of artistic objectives: in Hanoi, art toward representation through “signs and designs” indicating a level of legibility resonating with speech or text, and in Saigon, a concern with materiality and what simplification through abstraction can enact in terms of the performativity of the artwork.

The coining of the name “Group of 10” was a loose title given to the artists from the *Recent Works* series, but some of the group’s painters asserted that they were by no means a kind of collective or discursive art group, they just happened to have been chosen by the organizers of the exhibitions, namely the Fine Arts Association, although it is perceived by many that Nguyễn Trung had a guiding hand in establishing the selection of artists. Thảo mentioned that it was natural for them to come together, although they continued to work individually within their respective artistic careers, and *vui chơi chính* (mainly to have a good time) seemed to have been the primary objective of the exhibitions. Not all of the artists really knew each other prior to the

⁸² Ibid.

exhibition, unlike in the case of the Gang of Five in Hanoi, in which Trần Lương and his fellow group members had been classmates. The *Recent Works* series would even switch out artists from year to year so that it was not necessarily a consistent ‘Group of 10’ from 1990-1996. But it was the impression that it was the first official artists’ group to represent contemporary Saigonese art that gave its formation a sense of importance, and the style and quality of the works rather than the official roster of artists that lent it prestige. The 1992 *Abstract Painting* exhibition can be considered the most important exhibition in the Ho Chi Minh City arts scene after *Đôi Mỏi* in that it promoted the work of abstract painters for the first time after 1986, affirming its popularity as a mode of modern Vietnamese artistic expression. Furthermore, at the national scale, it asserted a form of agency and aesthetic determination on the part of the southern artistic community in the face of a Vietnamese art history that has until today located modernity and national identity in the north.



Figure 1.11: Đào Minh Tri, *Evil Spirit (Hung thân)*, 1993, Chinese ink on silk, 80 x 105 cm. From the exhibition catalogue of *Recent Works: 10 Artists from Ho Chi Minh City*, Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts Association, 1993.



Figure 1.12: Ca Lê Thắng, *Floral Lantern (Hoa đăng)*, 1993, oil on canvas, 60 x 80cm. From the exhibition catalogue of *Recent Works: 10 Artists from Ho Chi Minh City*, Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts Association, 1993.

The generation of painters that graduated from the Ho Chi Minh City University of Fine Arts and who became known through the *Recent Works* exhibitions comprise some painters who now – for lack of a better term – mass-produce particular motifs for high-end commercial galleries (e.g. Apricot Gallery), as well as painters who continue to develop bodies of work with changes in style and method, and have obtained a following from a different set of international clientele. One can characterize the work of the latter group as being driven by inspiration drawn from external observation, which is then highly interiorized and critically processed through painterly abstraction or surrealist figurative expression. For example, Nguyễn Trung’s 2011 *White-Grey-Black* series reflected impressions derived from morning walks around his

neighborhoods, and aesthetic perceptions of something as mundane as the stream of urine on a concrete wall (Figures 1.13-1.14). Đỗ Hoàng Tường's dark paintings of distorted human figures, often women, embody the disturbances of contemporary society reflecting the artist's state of mind as he interprets local news he receives through the media (Figure 1.15). Trần Văn Thảo and Nguyễn Tấn Cường both continue to rework their painting techniques to develop their unique engagement with the medium (Figures 1.16-1.17). At times using hybridized styles of abstraction, symbolism, and surrealism, these processes can, in a sense, be considered as a parallel to what a similar generation of painters was doing in Phnom Penh, albeit in a less representational way. In both of these situations, what is emphasized is the specific nature of the contemporary condition for these artists, and how historical foundations have influenced the modes of expression that emerge in periods following an "opening" of society. For the Cambodian painters, literal or figurative depiction of any chosen subject matter could be liberating for various reasons I enumerate in the following chapter. For the southern Vietnamese painters, a precedent of painterly modernism - as propelled through the works of the Saigonese painters in the 1960s - could be recuperated, even unconsciously, for further developments in expanding the dimensions of what abstraction could convey. And the figurehead of Nguyễn Trung as a senior artist, colleague, mentor, and friend helped to shape that community of painters today.



Figure 1.13: Nguyễn Trung, *Dawn*, 2004, acrylic, house paint, oil stick on canvas, 250 x 600 cm. Courtesy of Cuc Gallery.

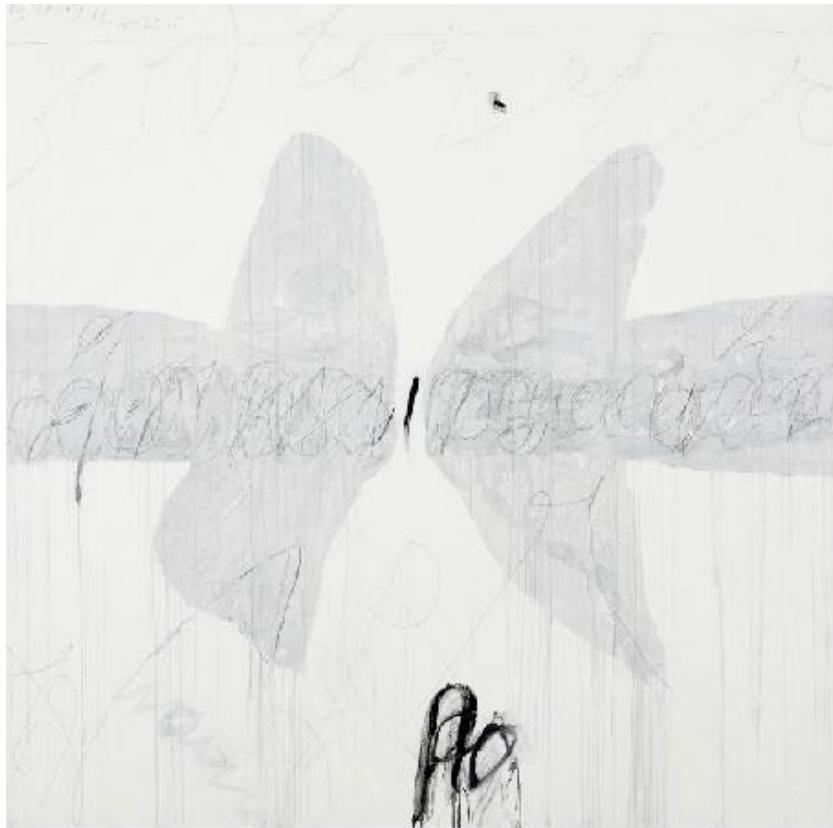


Figure 1.14: Nguyễn Trung, *Ao*, 2010, acrylic, house paint, pencil, oil stick on canvas, 180 x 180 cm. Courtesy of Cuc Gallery.



Figure 1.15: Đỗ Hoàng Tường, *Alone II*, 2004, 120 x 90 cm, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Quỳnh.



Figure 1.16: Nguyễn Tấn Cường, *Light of The City*, 1998, mixed media on canvas, 200 x 130cm. Courtesy of the artist and Post-Vị Đại collection.



Figure 1.17: Trần Văn Thảo, *#5*, 2006, acrylic, oil, cut canvas, pencil on canvas, 85 x 110 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Post-Vị Đại collection.

Institutional Spaces and Blue Space Art Contemporary Art Center

In a recent study of twentieth and twenty-first-century Vietnamese art, Nguyễn Quân notes the rise of the individual subject in the post-*Đổi Mới* art world towards the end of the 1990s, as witnessed by a shift in language denoting the change from the artist as painter (*họa sĩ*) to the artist as visual artist (*nghệ sĩ thị giác*), thus demonstrating a paradigm shift in conceptions of modern and contemporary art.⁸³ The focus on individuals driving the developments of modernism or contemporary art resonates with Trịnh Cung's argument that the main agent of change in the development of art in a certain place, such as Ho Chi Minh City, does not completely depend on a policy like *Đổi Mới*, but also on the authors of creativity, the intellectual actors.⁸⁴ Yet significant developments are contingent upon the kinds of institutions which are in place to support the activities of artists, and in a place like Vietnam, the conditions of sociality and physical space are highly relevant to any discussion of how exhibitions can be enacted and what effect they have on different scales of community.

Until the mid-1990s, the main venues for large-scale public exhibition in Ho Chi Minh City were spaces administered by the Ministry of Culture: the University of Fine Arts; the Fine Arts Association; and the Museum of Fine Arts. The overall negative consensus towards these institutions reflects general opinion of the education system, similarly to views in other developing regions towards present-day institutions of art education that have deviated little from colonial models and which continue to suffer from lack of resources and misdirected funds. Between the restrictive exhibition and membership policies of the University, Fine Arts Association, and Museum, and what many feel is the high-pressure and controlling reins of commercial galleries, it is unsurprising that artists in Ho Chi Minh City generally work in a

⁸³ Nguyễn Quân, *Mỹ Thuật Việt Nam Thế Kỷ 20* (Hà Nội : Nhà xuất bản Tri thức, 2010), 126-30.

⁸⁴ Trịnh Cung. "Mĩ thuật thành phố Hồ Chí Minh từ khi có 'Đổi mới'."

highly individualized vein, aside from coming together for socialization. As painter Nguyễn Sơn (b. 1974), among others, reiterated, they create individually, and only come together to have a good time – there is no intellectual exchange. He and other artists prefer not to be represented by a commercial gallery, as they find that they benefit more from navigating personal connections and finding patronage from local and international collectors. Sơn said that his most recent clients include a growing group of domestic (Vietnamese) collectors consisting of architects and actors, those working in creative industries and who represent a higher socio-economic class that has emerged in the last decade.⁸⁵

Almost all artists in Vietnam have studied and received degrees from one of the three national fine arts universities, and most consider the highest quality of education to come from the school in Hanoi, the original *École des Beaux-arts d'Indochine* established in 1925. Most artists describe how the training they received at the university in Ho Chi Minh City consists of pure technical training, recalling the nature of the curriculum focused on decorative craft specialization established during the colonial period. Some also describe how the general atmosphere of Ho Chi Minh City, the country's economic center, is less conducive to creative production. As a result of favors pulled to avoid being drafted to fight in the war with Cambodia, Hanoi-born artist Trần Lương briefly attended school in the south, along with the abstract painters from the Group of 10, including Nguyễn Tấn Cường, Đỗ Hoàng Tường, and Trần Văn Thảo.⁸⁶ He described how the most valuable experience of living in Saigon was the access he had to all kinds of theoretical texts and books on contemporary art that had been accumulated through Saigon's period of independence. He felt extraordinarily lucky to have these books available to him, something which he would likely not have had access to in Hanoi. But in the

⁸⁵ Interview with the author, February 25, 2011.

⁸⁶ Interview with the author, April 2, 2011.

last year of study he wanted to return to Hanoi as he said that Saigon didn't suit him, that the environment there is more commercial, too entrepreneurial, less romantic, and less of an artistic environment. In his view the training at the school was and still is inadequate. He emphasized that the university training in Hanoi, despite its faults, will always be better, and this may be a legacy of the alternative pedagogies established during colonialism, with the teaching of modern painting in Hanoi in contrast to the teaching of various craft specializations in smaller, separate schools in the south.⁸⁷

At the present, the university in Hanoi is the only one that provides an art history and theory course, established by Nguyễn Quan in 1978. A similar program at the university in Ho Chi Minh City was authorized by the director, Nguyễn Phước Sanh, in 1976, yet was discontinued after a few years.⁸⁸ This is one of the reasons that the atmosphere of the contemporary art community in Hanoi may appear to be more oriented toward intellectual discourse. Aside from the reputation of Hanoi as the “cradle of Vietnamese culture,” this perception is also grounded in the history of independent and experimental artist-run spaces in Hanoi, the earliest space being Salon Natasha, and most recently, Nhà Sàn Đức, which has provided an alternative site of formation for young artists newly graduated from the university in

⁸⁷ The fine arts university in Ho Chi Minh City has a rather complicated history. The colonial establishment of art schools in Vietnam began with the School of Applied Arts in Thủ Dầu Một (with an emphasis on decorative woodwork and lacquer) in 1901, the School of Applied Arts in Biên Hòa (ceramics and bronze sculpture) in 1903, the Gia Định School of Drawing in Cochinchina (southern Vietnam) in 1917, and finally, the École des Beaux-arts d'Indochine (EBAI) in Tonkin (northern Vietnam) in 1925. In 1940 the Gia Định school changed its name to the School of Applied Arts. Subsequently, in 1954, the Saigon government established another art school, the National College of Fine Arts in Gia Định (NCFAGD), under the directorship of EBAI graduate Lê Văn Đệ (1906-1966). The college was modeled after the EBAI, and most of the faculty and staff was recruited from France and Hanoi. In 1975 the two schools were integrated as one, which was ultimately named the Ho Chi Minh City University of Fine Arts, under the directorship of Nguyễn Phước Sanh. See N. Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi*, 81-82; Huynh-Beattie, “Vietnamese Aesthetics,” 224-233; and “Giới thiệu về trường” (Introduction to the school), *Đại học Mỹ thuật Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh*, <http://hcmufa.edu.vn/gioi-thieu/gioi-thieu-ve-truong/>, accessed 11/18/13.

⁸⁸ E-mail exchange with Nguyễn Quân, May 4, 2011.

Hanoi.⁸⁹ Foreign cultural institutions like the Goethe Institut and L’Espace have also hosted exhibitions of experimental art in Hanoi, whereas such institutions are either absent or play little role in supporting contemporary art in Ho Chi Minh City.⁹⁰ Most graduates from the Fine Arts University go into trade professions, and very few of the older painters teach at the university, due to their lack of interest in working within highly controlled curriculum constraints.

Painter Nguyễn Thị Châu Giang (b. 1975) graduated from the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts University in 1998 with a specialization in oil painting, and is today one of the most commercially successful painters in Vietnam. She recollects that in the mid-late 1990s that the Fine Arts Association or the university would hold occasional workshops and exchanges with foreign artists. During a France-Vietnam cultural exchange program hosted by the university, French art students from the University of Lyon held a series of talks and workshops, which Giang described as very focused and intimate, after which she believes the Vietnamese artists had a much better understanding of the medium of installation, perhaps meaning a stronger sense of formal experimentation, as may be gleaned from the artworks exhibited at Blue Space (Figures 1.22 -1.24).⁹¹ One of Giang’s classmates, Bùi Công Khánh (b. 1972), also described

⁸⁹ While some have described the atmosphere in Hanoi to be clannish and exclusionary, often likened to a traditional Vietnamese village, one positive dimension of this is that younger artists may have a community in which they can receive mentorship and camaraderie beyond their undergraduate degree, and what they receive – fraught though it might be in terms of social politics – could be considered in some ways an informal form of post-graduate training or a guided transition into the realities of being a practicing contemporary artist. Salon Natasha was founded by artist Vũ Dân Tân (1946-2009) and Natalia Kraevskaia (b. 1952). For more information, see “Salon Natasha Archive: Project Overview,” <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/SpecialCollections/Details/17>, accessed June 30, 2013. For more on Nhà Sàn Đức (est. 1998), see <http://www.nhasanstudio.org/web/index.php>, accessed June 30, 2013.

⁹⁰ The French-Vietnamese cultural center IDECAF (Institut d’Échanges Culturels avec la France) has on occasion hosted arts events but has largely focused on film, music, and literary activities in its programming. For more information regarding the role of foreign cultural institutions’ involvement in supporting contemporary art in Hanoi, see Nora Taylor, “Vietnamese Anti-Art and Anti-Vietnamese Artists: Experimental Performance Culture in Hanoi’s Exhibition Spaces,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2:2 (2007), 108-28.

⁹¹ E-mail correspondence with the author, March 8, 2011.

how such exchanges were valuable opportunities for learning, in comparison to today, when the internet is a primary resource for those wishing to learn more about contemporary art. Prior to the spread of internet technology in the mid-2000s, he described how during his studies at the university he would make frequent trips to the Alliance Française or the library in order to research international contemporary art practices.

As a result of research and exposure to certain new media forms through cultural exchanges and workshops in the mid to late 1990s, young artists like Giang and Khánh explored installation and performance within the confines of officially organized exhibitions, like the 1996 Young Artists' Club (*Hội Họa sĩ Trẻ*) exhibition. Giang describes this as her first important exhibition, as various new media artworks were featured, mainly installations. The process of producing this work left her with a powerful feeling, as she put it; she felt strongly that such new forms resonated with the contemporary, either in terms of where art should be, or in relation to contemporary society. Although the installation works in the 1996 show were received with the general consensus that they were strange (*lạ*), she described the reception as also being positive, in that viewers seemed to like the works. The next trend was performance art, which made its way slowly onto the scene, after installation had become a more widespread practice in the early 2000s. Upon reflection, Giang and other artists acknowledged that although one primary setback was the lack of support and encouragement from their teachers and older artists, the main obstacle was the fact that the artists themselves did not really know what they were doing, and many humorously acknowledge that their work was quite bad. They admitted that while they eagerly experimented, they lacked any real understanding of how they should be executing the work in harmony with conceptual direction. This resonates with Natalia Kraevskaia's critical observation that most works of installation in Vietnam possess "strong visual effects but [are]

still based upon referential functions, without a profound symbolic content. Artists often choose to illustrate a topic or a theme as their ‘concept’ which transforms their works into an illustrative imitation of a real situation, and the fixation of casual or ordinary events.”⁹² The translation of “installation art” into Vietnamese is *nghệ thuật sắp đặt*, an imprecise term that lends to conceptual mistranslation, as it literally means “art of arrangement or placement.” The notion that the mistranslation in concept engenders an alternative negotiation of the medium finds a parallel in the case of performance art in Cambodia, as will be discussed in Chapter 6.

In general, according to Giang, the younger generation of artists in the late 1990s held no clear understanding of what contemporary art was or what it was supposed to do. This is where Giang, among others, felt that the integration of the *Việt kiều* (overseas-Vietnamese) artists into the community in the early 2000s filled a major gap, in that the returnee artists worked with and collaborated with local artists, encouraging stronger criticality and more professional execution and presentation of work. They therefore provided a stronger sense of orientation in regards to contemporary art practice than had existed when the primary institutions for art were commercial galleries and the government-run university, museum, and Fine Arts Association.

Prior to the wave of collaborations with *Việt kiều* artists in the early 2000s, the most significant alternative space for exhibition and art-related activities was the Blue Space Contemporary Art Center, under the direction of Trần Thị Huỳnh Nga, the wife of painter Trần Trung Tín (1933-2008). Although Blue Space was a flexible exhibition platform, as opposed to a kind of social and intellectual meeting ground like Salon Natasha in Hanoi, it served an important function in the city’s artistic development in that it might be perceived as the first “alternative” art space, despite its housing in the HCMC Museum of Fine Arts. This alternative

⁹² Natalia Kraevskaia, “From Nostalgia towards Exploration: Essays on Contemporary Art in Vietnam” (Hanoi: Kim Dong Publishing House, 2005), 33.

status can be drawn from its active programming, which operated independently of “official” directives but also did not rely on commercial sales, its role in hosting numerous forms of artistic cultural exchange, and also on Mrs. Nga’s democratic stance toward providing exhibition opportunities to marginalized artists, especially women and younger artists. In addition, the size and architectural layout of the museum’s space presented opportunities for innovative experimentation in large-scale installations and performance events that had had no precedent in the city. These factors distinguish Blue Space from other art spaces that attempted to showcase artworks by local and international artists, such as Espace NK (housed within the Fine Arts Association during the 1990s), Alpha Studio (run by a Swiss Artist), Mai’s Gallery (founded in 2001 by gallerist Đỗ Thị Tuyết Mai), and Galerie Quynh (established in 2003).⁹³

Mrs. Nga’s trajectory from flight attendant for Air Vietnam to director of the city’s most prominent contemporary art space in the late 1990s and early 2000s is an interesting one, and her story follows a similar pattern in Vietnam, where Vietnamese women – often as the wives of artists or of Vietnamese or foreign partners with financial capital– often play a key role in cultivating art collections, driving exhibitions, or running new art spaces.⁹⁴ In 1975, while

⁹³ In a 2005 essay for Asia Art Archive, Sue Hajdu suggested that Galerie Quynh could “by a weird twist of logic - be argued to be one of Vietnam’s truly alternative art spaces,” due to the standard of professionalism in advertising, organization, curatorship, and relationships with clientele, all qualities that were considered to be lacking in the Vietnamese gallery scene. Sue Hajdu, “Asia Art Archive Perspectives: Ho Chi Minh City - Emerging Scenes, Emerging Scenarios,” May 2005, www.aaa.org.hk/Diaaologue/Details/154, accessed July 1, 2013. As I discuss in Chapter 6, this finds a striking parallel with the reception of Sa Sa Bassac gallery in Phnom Penh, established almost ten years after Galerie Quynh. While Blue Space is regarded as a highly important venue representing a transitional stage in the contemporary art scene of the city, it has not gone without criticism, in that Mrs. Nga – while generous, charismatic, and dynamic – did not have the background in education or professional training to really develop the space into a critical platform or exhibition space for contemporary art, in the way that it could be argued that Galerie Quynh was able to do to some degree.

⁹⁴ Conversations with Sue Hadju and Craig Thomas, 2010-2011. One important example is Trần Thanh Hà, part-owner of the Post-Vị Đại collection, perhaps the most significant private collection to focus exclusively on contemporary art in Vietnam. An interesting account of how a commercial gallery took off in the 1990s is told by Xuân Phương, the owner of Lotus Gallery in her memoir. See Xuân Phương

working as a flight attendant for Air Vietnam, family connections introduced her to the Hanoi-based painter Trần Trung Tín upon his return to Saigon.⁹⁵ Tín was not a well-known painter yet, despite the degree of respect and admiration his circle of friends and colleagues in Hanoi - including the celebrated Bùi Xuân Phái - had for his work. His lack of a formal education at a time when a degree carried a lot of weight led to negative criticism of his work by other artists and institutions. He was “officially” not a good artist, and his painting style was critiqued for being “strange” (*kỳ lạ*). After their marriage in 1976, they experienced difficulties in post-Reunification Ho Chi Minh City, with both of them unemployed; Mrs. Nga had lost her position at Air Vietnam to a party cadre once the company became state-owned, and Tín, formerly a film actor as well as a painter, was also “taking a break from work” (*ngỉ việc*). To get by, Mrs. Nga privately sold clothes and cosmetics in the informal sector (cosmetics she had collected during her travels as a flight attendant). Yet they still found a way to buy basic materials for Tín to continue painting, and he continued to have the full support of the family to continue his art practice.

Prior to 1975 Mrs. Nga had had many friends in the arts, and although she stated that she had no deep comprehension of the arts and artistic practice, she had a stronger understanding than most because of her and her husband’s social circles. In 1989, Mrs. Nga organized the first exhibition of Tín’s work at the Fine Arts Association, which garnered much attention and launched his local profile, allowing him to officially begin selling work (Figures 1.18 – 1.19).⁹⁶ The success of his show surprised many artists from the association and the community. As Mrs.

and Danièle Mazingarbe, *Ao Dai: My War, My Country, My Vietnam* (Great Neck, N.Y: EMQUAD International, 2004).

⁹⁵ All references to Mrs. Nga in this chapter are drawn from an interview with the author, May 28, 2011.

⁹⁶ Prior to this Mrs. Nga described how Tín did not make a profit off of his paintings; he would exchange works with colleagues and friends, but had not seriously thought about making art to earn a living.

Nga described it, because of the rigid and stifling education system, Tín's paintings were like a breath of fresh air, overturning all the rules of formalism and technique that other artists and students had been taught in the system. Seeing his paintings was a major stimulus in changing their way of thinking.

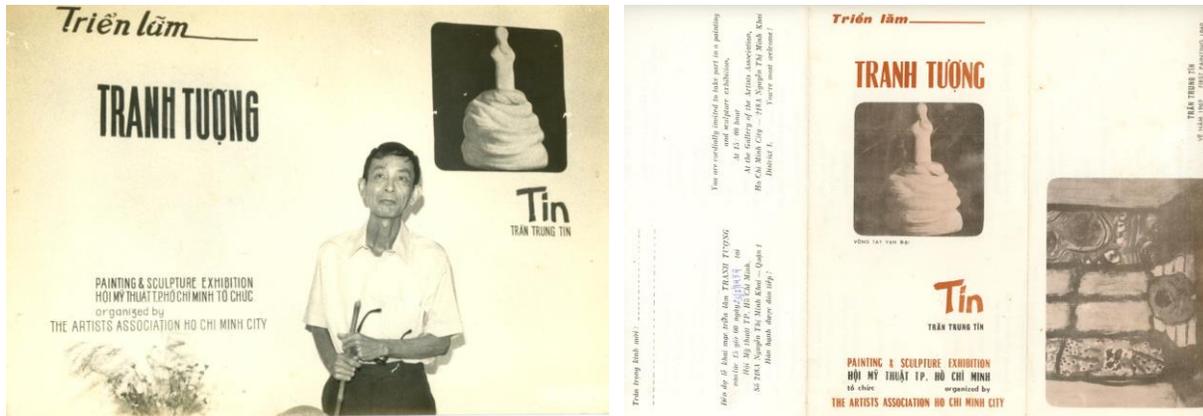


Figure 1.18 (left): Trần Trung Tín at the opening, May 23, 1986. Blue Space Contemporary Arts Center Archive, Asia Art Archive, <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/SpecialCollectionItem/4583>.

Figure 1.19 (right): Invitation to the exhibition of Trần Trung Tín. Blue Space Contemporary Arts Center Archive, Asia Art Archive, <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/SpecialCollectionItem/5449>.

It was one particular encounter several years later that motivated Mrs. Nga to begin thinking about running a different kind of space, both in cooperation with and yet independently of the official institutions governing spaces for exhibition and artistic formation in the city. Indochina Arts Partnership Director David Thomas had come to Vietnam in 1988 to scout artists for an artistic exchange between American and Vietnamese veterans; this project would culminate in the exhibition and publication *As Seen by Both Sides: American and Vietnamese*

*Artists Look at the War.*⁹⁷ In Ho Chi Minh City he contacted the Fine Arts Association to get contacts, following the standard procedure, and was given a list of artists to meet. This roster consisted primarily of officially approved artists whose work fell loosely under the category of Socialist Realism. However, in the actual space of the Association building, he happened to see some of Trần Trung Tín's paintings hung on the wall, even though the artist wasn't included in his list of contacts. He then requested permission to use Tín's paintings in the publication as well, and reluctant though they might be, as Mrs. Nga put it, the association couldn't refuse. This made Mrs. Nga realize how difficult it was for "outsider" or "unofficial" artists to be able to show their work and participate in these kinds of cultural exchanges, which were important opportunities, both personally and professionally. Mrs. Nga felt strongly that artists who demonstrated passion and talent, regardless of their "official" standing and opinions, *had to have* access to these kinds of opportunities, and that it was unjust for just a few in power to decide the fates of these artists, particularly young artists. She described the younger generation of artists in the 1990s as very different from the previous generation, in that Tín's generation were a community of self-sufficient and romantic painters, romantic in the sense they were driven by the principle of art for art's sake. However, the younger painters that Mrs. Nga knew needed a great deal more guidance, more encouragement and support to develop their artistic practice, and this was difficult in a system ruled by officialdom, bureaucracy, and exclusive membership, to which the other primary option at the time was to seek a living through the scores of small commercial galleries catering to the growing tourist market. At this point she began to use the money from the sales of Tín's paintings towards a project to establish a different kind of contemporary art gallery.

⁹⁷ David Thomas, *As Seen by Both Sides: American and Vietnamese Artists Look at the War* (Boston, Mass: Indochina Arts Project, William Joiner Foundation, 1991).

The process of procuring a venue was fraught, as Mrs. Nga had to become affiliated with the Fine Arts Association in order to facilitate bureaucratic procedures, such as securing exhibition licenses. Initially, she rented a space from the association, which worked out well for less established artists but created resentment from more senior artists, who were unhappy that Mrs. Nga would introduce young artists before them, ignoring the pecking order so to speak. The more she became a primary contact for foreign organizations, the more unhappy the Association became, due to what she described as their loss of power. The growth of her reputation as a primary professional contact for those scouting the art scene coincided with the questioning of the effectiveness and relevance of the Association, and the lowering of its prestige as a necessary agent for promoting artists' careers. This led to increasing difficulties and obstacles for Mrs. Nga in her work, with constant questions as to her motivations and much “spouting of nonsense” behind her back (*nói bậy bạ*). This is when Mrs. Nga realized she could no longer work with the Association and she had to find a new space, and she turned to yet another state-owned institution, the Fine Arts Museum (Figures 1.20 – 1.21).



Figure 1.20 (left): Entrance to the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts Museum, 2008. Photograph by the author.

Figure 1.21 (right): The museum’s interior courtyard with badminton court, 2011. Photograph by the author.

At that time the Fine Arts Museum was a relatively new institution, established only in 1987 with a small collection divided into pre-Reunification and post-Reunification art, few programs, and little support for artists.⁹⁸ According to Mrs. Nga, the director, Mr. Toàn Thi was fairly open-minded yet a little wary when she approached him about housing a contemporary art space at the museum. He had heard all the suspicions and criticisms leveled at her and wondered what she had done to deserve all the negative publicity. When they agreed to have her rent a

⁹⁸ Current museum director Mã Thanh Cao’s interview with the author, March 25, 2011. An extended history of the museum can be found at Pamela Corey, “Biography of a Building: The Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts Museum,” March 11, 2014, Guggenheim UBS Map South and Southeast Asia / Blogs, <http://blogs.guggenheim.org/map/biography-building-ho-chi-minh-city-museum-fine-arts/>, accessed 4/10/14.

space, she had to agree to certain conditions, one of which was that the space had to be officially housed at the space underneath the museum. By now, the Fine Arts Association had officially cut off all ties with her and did not allow her to hold any activities in conjunction with their name, allegedly even reporting her to the cultural authorities. However, no reasonable pretext could be found to halt her activities or to prevent her from renting the space at the museum. The name “Blue Space” was chosen in reaction to everything that had happened during the process of establishing the gallery, as she saw the color blue as symbolic of hope, youth, peace, clarity, and understanding.

Initially there was no budget to hire staff, so Mrs. Nga had to do everything on her own and with help through friends and artists. However, Blue Space would soon acquire major funding from the Ford Foundation. Mrs. Nga worked on a Vietnam-Thai art exhibition with the Siam Society (then supported by the Ford Foundation), thus acquainting the Foundation with her work and raising her profile as a contact for future projects. At that time the Ford Foundation had no office in Vietnam.⁹⁹ Oscar Saleminck, then a Foundation program officer, became a close contact. He asked her why the gallery space was named as such, and upon hearing the story of its establishment, he encouraged and assisted her with the process of seeking funding from the

⁹⁹ “The Foundation started its Vietnam programs in 1992 with the appointment of a dedicated program officer, but only opened a representative office in 1996. While much of the initial effort went into establishing relationships and credibility, two lines of work were explored that were precursors of the two initiatives presented here. One line of work contributed to the normalization of relations between the US and Vietnam in the aftermath of the Second and Third Indochina Wars through artistic and literary exchanges through grants to US-based organizations such as the William Joiner Center for War and Social Consequences, and the Indochina Arts Project. Another line of work, dubbed “Social Consequences of Economic Reform,” was an effort to contribute to the institutional capacity to reflect on and analyze the effects of the economic reforms on women and ethnic minorities in Vietnamese society. With the appointment of the current program officer in Social Sciences and Humanities in February 1996, these two lines of work were expanded and formalized into regular grantmaking initiatives in the fields of Social Sciences and Arts and Culture. These grantmaking initiatives are in conformity with Foundation worldwide grantmaking that attempts to strengthen democratic values and enhance human achievement.” Document POM6-99 provided by Oscar Saleminck.

Foundation. As a result, she received a substantial amount of seed money to alter the nature of the space and the gallery changed its name from Blue Space Gallery (*Phòng tranh Không gian Xanh*) to Blue Space Contemporary Arts Center (*Không gian Xanh Trung tâm Mỹ thuật Đương đại*).¹⁰⁰ She reiterated that it was the first of its kind, as contemporary visual art (*mỹ thuật đương đại*) was an alien concept for most of the public. In addition, she described how the connection with American capital was seen in a negative light from some, due to lingering bitterness about the war. Yet the foreign funding was much easier to use and gave her a great deal more freedom with budgeting and programming, as she did not have to account for every expense and keep strict records as she would have had to do with state funding.

Mrs. Nga's philosophy in running the space was fairly simple: make each show a success with an eye towards a follow-up project. Outside of showcasing local and international artists (with an average of two exhibitions per month), hosting exchanges and special projects, one dimension of the space was to function as resource center. One project involved children's art education, establishing a pedagogy program for art teachers. She said that she also tried to find ways to maximize the budget, for example, with \$1000, she would find a way to establish seven programs instead of five. She never considered her work curatorial, as she regarded the gallery as more of an open platform; therefore, she sees what she did as following what could be considered a novel democratic experiment in artist selection, and she treated all the artists she worked with equally. One could compare this with the approach of the curators at the Reyum

¹⁰⁰ The agreement specified a sum of \$60,000 for three years of support, beginning in 1997, for a Center for Contemporary Arts under the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts Museum, and for exchange between Vietnamese and Thai artists. "Proposed activities include a gallery space, which would feature works of junior and senior artists, especially women and ethnic minorities; a shop where artist's materials are sold at reasonable prices; a professional photographic studio; an art library; a computer room where computer time can be rented by artists for creating art works or for income generation from advertisement work; and a café where artists and the public can meet. Also, an artistic exchange and a joint workshop and exhibition of Thai and Vietnamese artists in Vietnam will be supported." Documents courtesy of Oscar Salemink.

Institute of Arts and Culture, in Ashley Thompson's description of their project as a democratic exercise and intervention within the context of Cambodian society and culture in the 1990s.¹⁰¹ Mrs. Nga reiterated that at Blue Space, one artist was never promoted over another. Since its cessation of activities, she said that artists have had much more opportunities and easier access to resources, and are no longer in need the support that she provided in the late 1990s and early years of the new millennium.

The exhibitions held at Blue Space often presented relatively unfamiliar forms of media to the larger art-going public in Ho Chi Minh City, such as installation, performance, and video. Mrs. Nga recalled how in one negative press review a reporter called some works garbage. Yet she reiterated that there were almost always packed audiences. Blue Space held various group exhibitions of painters from the northern, central, and southern regions of Vietnam, featuring some who are now considered among the country's most prominent artists, such as Nguyễn Minh Thành (b. 1971), Nguyễn thị Châu Giang (b. 1975), Bùi Công Khánh (b. 1972), and Ly Hoàng Ly (b. 1975).¹⁰² In 2000 Blue Space hosted a performance art workshop held by Seiji Shimoda, thus imbricating Ho Chi Minh City in a network of performance art that would sweep Southeast Asia in the 2000s.¹⁰³ 1997, the opening year of Blue Space Contemporary Arts Center, saw near monthly exhibitions of installation and site-specific projects, undertaken by artists like Lê Thừa Tiên (b. 1964) and American artist Bradford Edwards (b. 1955) in *I+I* (April) (Figure 1.22), Nguyễn Minh Phương's (b. 1964) *Red, White, and Black* (September) (Figure 1.23), and

¹⁰¹ Ashley Thompson, "Forgetting to Remember, Again: On Curatorial Practice and 'Cambodian Art' in the wake of genocide," *Diacritics* 41, no. 2 (2013), 83-87.

¹⁰² Despite the great variety of artists that she worked with, she described that particular generation – painters, in particular - as being very focused and committed to their creative process. They accepted their living and working conditions, which were quite difficult at the time, but they used their environment and way of life as creative inspiration.

¹⁰³ See Nora Taylor, "Networks of Performance Art in Southeast Asia," *Negotiating Home, History and Nation: Two Decades of Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia, 1991-2011*, ed. Iola Lenzi (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2011), 33-40.

Soul of Soil (October) (Figure 1.24). Perhaps the most significant site-specific installation was carried out by Jun Nguyễn-Hatsushiba in 1998, in one of his first major exhibitions in Vietnam, not long after he had settled in the city in 1997.¹⁰⁴



Figure 1.22: Bradford Edwards, Lê Thừa Tiên, *Healing the War*, 1997, traditional Vietnamese hats and soldier hats wrapped with golden paper. Blue Space Contemporary Arts Center Archive, Asia Art Archive, <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/SpecialCollectionItem/5579>

Figure 1.23: Installation view of Nguyễn Minh Phương, *Red, White, and Black*, September 1997. Blue Space Contemporary Arts Center Archive, Asia Art Archive, <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/SpecialCollectionItem/5485>

¹⁰⁴ Interview with the author, May 27, 2011.



Figure 1.24: Chi Lý Trần, *Lamp*, 1997, terracotta, pottery, wood. In *Soul of Soil – The Art of Installation*, 18 October to 3 November 1997. Blue Space Contemporary Arts Center Archive, Asia Art Archive, <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/SpecialCollectionItem/5497>.

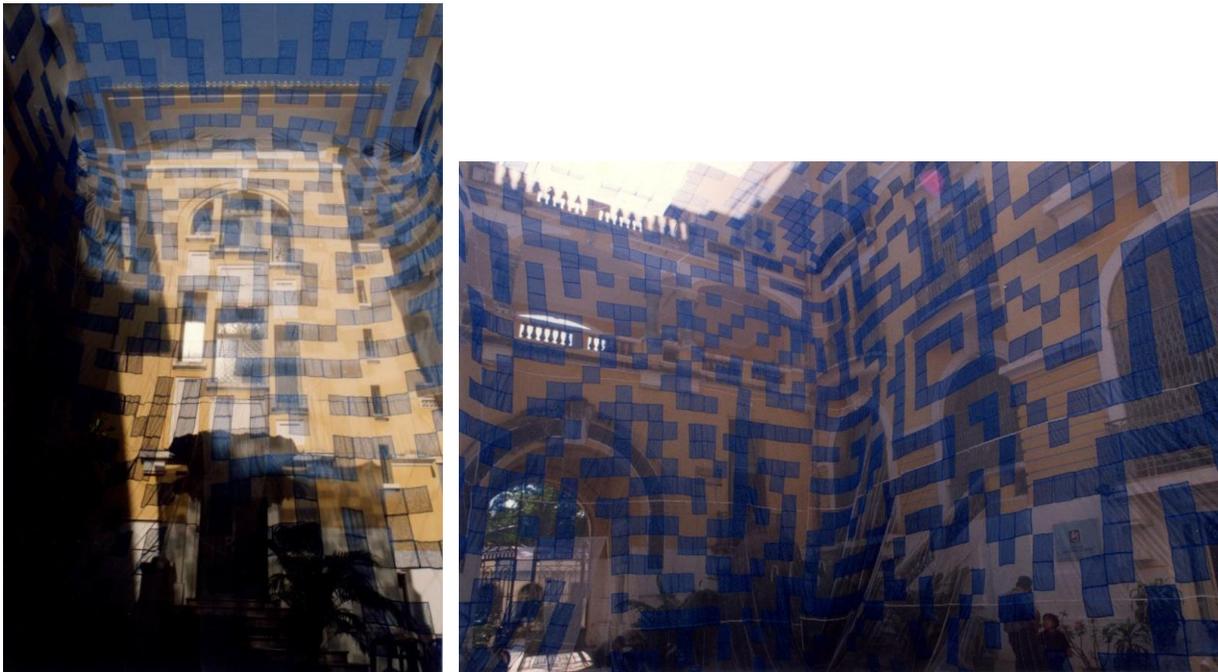
Nguyen-Hatsushiba's *xeom.com* exhibition consisted of a variety of installations occupying different spaces in the museum, such as the courtyard and interior rooms (Figures

1.25-1.27). The title of the exhibition was derived from the Vietnamese term for motorbike taxis (*xe ôm*), literally translated as “hugging vehicles.” The various components of the exhibition thus dealt in oblique ways with the artist’s fascination with cyclos and forms of public transportation quickly becoming obsolete in the urban centers of Vietnam, as well as paths of movement: of refugees, of traffic, of *xe ôm* drivers. Curious about the open structure of the colonial building, a former Catholic school, he considered how to make dynamic use of the space in a way that puzzled, or annoyed, some of the museum officials.¹⁰⁵ In the courtyard he set up a mosquito net that spanned the width of the space, covering the entire exterior. The mosquito net was white, with a blue grid-like pattern stitched onto it, symbolizing a kind of maze with no exit. While formally engaging with the site in an unprecedented way, producing “a drawing in space,” the maze-like pattern also alluded to the path of refugees, their process of thinking about their way, finding their direction.¹⁰⁶ In one of the three rooms inside the museum he installed a quilt woven with business cards, which he had created based on his interest in business cards as status symbols, signs of cultural and social property at that specific time in Vietnam. In another room he displayed photographs of earlier installation works, so that the audience could get a sense of the trajectory of his art practice. The title of the show was drawn from his interest in the movement of motorcycle taxi drivers, in that he enjoyed observing them as a community and social phenomenon: how they would all gather in one place, talk to each other, hang out, and when clients showed up, they all scattered in different directions, but in the end all came back to

¹⁰⁵ Nguyen-Hatsushiba recalls the museum officials being unhappy about his installation because they couldn’t use the courtyard to play badminton for two weeks, which left him curious about the meaning of art for locals here and their understanding of how art is supposed to function, as well as the function of an art museum. A symptom of their lack of understanding of contemporary art, they seemed to see it as a burden, and not something creative, productive, and provocative. Interview with the author, May 27, 2011.

¹⁰⁶ Nora Taylor, “Running the Earth: Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba’s *Breathing is Free, 12,756.3*,” *The Migrant’s Time: Rethinking Art History and Diaspora*, ed. Saloni Mathur (Williamstown, Mass: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2011), 211.

the same place. This pattern was interesting to him, again triggering a particular fascination with motion and pathways of individual and mass movement, themes that have continued to pervade his work through the present.¹⁰⁷



Figures 1.25-26: Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, *Water on Air*, 1998, fabric installation in the courtyard of the Museum of Fine Arts, part of the *xeom.com* exhibition. Blue Space Contemporary Arts Center Archive, Asia Art Archive, <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/SpecialCollectionFolder/696>.

¹⁰⁷ For example, his *Memorial Project* series (2001-2005), which comprised video works of underwater performances, and his *Breathing is Free, 12,756.3*, an ongoing project in which the artist proposed to run 12, 756.3 kilometers, the diameter of the earth, with his routes traced on Google Earth maps, thus producing a cartographic drawing of his journey. For more on the artist's body of work, see N. Taylor, "Running the Earth."



Figure 1.27: Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, exhibition opening of *xeom.com* and view of business card installation on floor. Blue Space Contemporary Arts Center Archive, Asia Art Archive, <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/SpecialCollectionItem/5567>

Figure 1.28: Anida Yoeu Ali Esguerra performing at *Pushing Through Borders*, 17 - 27 December, 2003. Blue Space Contemporary Arts Center Archive, Asia Art Archive, <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/SpecialCollectionItem/6232>

Until the establishment of smaller independent art spaces around 2004 and 2005, Blue Space was the primary venue for hosting of international collaborations and exchanges, the kinds of projects that were beginning to lay the foundation for transnational regional networks and the imbrication of Southeast Asian cities in the global art world. International organizers and curators who came to Vietnam balked at having to correspond with state-run institutional spaces, which were subject to numerous bureaucratic procedures and applications for various permissions, a situation that persists through the present. Blue Space became a meeting ground

for artists from throughout Asia, both at the level of cultural and diplomatic exchange as well as more individually-driven projects. An artistic exchange between Thailand and Vietnam was a condition of the funds provided by the Ford Foundation, and this was carried out as a residency workshop in May 1999 in the city of Dalat with a culminating exhibition of more than forty artworks at the Fine Arts Museum. Among some of the Thai artists were Chumpon Apisuk (founder of the performance art festival Asiatopia), Kamol Phaosavasdi, and the renowned Montien Boonma.¹⁰⁸ Other international workshops and group exhibitions at the level of cultural exchange included ones with Singapore, Korea, Japan, and Myanmar. More small-scale and personal cross-border exchanges include the 1998 exhibition of works by American expatriate artist Bradford Edwards and the Cambodian painter Svay Ken, in his first and only exhibition in Vietnam. An event that created quite a public impact was a collaborative performance between Vietnamese artist Ly Hoàng Ly and Cambodian-American performance and spoken word artist Anida Yoeu Esguerra, which took place just a few years after performance art had been introduced to the city's art community (Figure 1.28).

Blue Space was an important space for introducing performance art in 2000, hosting the first workshop on performance art with Seiji Shimoda, the founder and organizer of Nippon International Performance Art Festival (NIPAF) in May (Figure 1.29), and a similar talk by Chumpon Apisuk in August 2000.¹⁰⁹ Subsequently, several young Vietnamese artists were invited by Apisuk to participate in the performance art festival known as ASIATOPIA, which was supported with funds from the Thai government. Mrs. Nga has been described as having taken an active role in attempting to organize activities and projects related to the medium, such

¹⁰⁸ Lan Chi, "Meeting point between Thailand – Vietnam," *Saigon Tiep Thi* 22, 6 June 1998, Culture section, page unknown.

¹⁰⁹ Th.Th. "ASIATOPIA 2000: Meeting of Asian 'performance' artists." *Lao Động [Labour]* 5 September 2000: 5.

as the workshop for young artists at Bình Quới Park, where Ly Hoàng Ly first carried out her *Round Tray Monument* installation and performance in 2003.¹¹⁰ Ly, who had been the first Vietnamese artist to participate in NIPAF, had met Cambodian-American performance and spoken word artist Anida Yoeu Esguerra through the Mekong Project, a project organized by the New York Dance Theatre Workshop from 2000-2005, in which performing and performance artists from each of the Greater Mekong Subregion countries were invited to establish a network of collaborative projects. The two decided to carry out a collaborate performance titled *Pushing through Borders (Xuyên Biên Giới)* in 2003, hosted by Blue Space, that met with numerous licensing and logistical obstacles due to the large-scale participation of other artists in the community, most notably members of the Mở Miệng group, a controversial underground poetry group that has incited some scandal and widespread criticism for their use of obscenity and outright vitriol against the state. Throughout the preparations there was a deep current of fear among the younger artists of recriminations from the cultural police, according to Ly and Ali.¹¹¹ However, the performance managed to take place and create a deep impression for many of the young artists in the city.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Interview with the author, January 21, 2011.

¹¹¹ Interviews with the author, 2011-12.

¹¹² A more detailed account of *Pushing Through Borders* can be found in Anida Yoeu Ali, “Pushing Through Borders // Ho Chi Minh City (Dec. 2003),” *Anida Yoeu Ali*, http://atomicshogun.org/journal_hochiminhcity_f.htm, accessed 11/18/13.



Figure 1.29: Seiji Shimoda workshop, May 16, 2000. Blue Space Contemporary Arts Center Archive, Asia Art Archive, <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/SpecialCollectionItem/6172>.

In 2005, another group exhibition and performance took place at Blue Space, this also the result of collaboration between local and international artists, some of whom would become prominent artist organizers in Ho Chi Minh City, such as Vietnamese-French artist Sandrine Llouquet (b. 1975, Montpellier, France) and Vietnamese-American artist Richard Streitmatter-Tran (b. 1972, Biên Hòa). The exhibition *Rendez-Vous* opened on November 17, 2005, and featured video installations as well as a live performance by the artist Kim Ngọc (Figures 1.30 – 1.31).¹¹³ It was around this time that returnee artists (*Việt kiều*) were beginning to create an impact in the community, in terms of initiating collaborative projects and groups with local artists, and also raising the profile of the city as another significant contemporary art hub in Vietnam. Much of this energy would culminate with Saigon Open City and the subsequent

¹¹³ Q.N. “Witnessing a strange performance.” *Tuổi Trẻ* [Youth] 19 November 2005: page unknown.

establishment of a network of small art spaces that aimed to innovate the nature of exchange, collaborative production, and level of artistic experimentation in the city, as well as develop connections between locally-based projects and international platforms in the contemporary art world.



Figure 1.30: A group photo taken at *Rendez Vous*, an exhibition held in Blue Space Contemporary Arts Center, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, November 17-20, 2005. From left: Michel Morel, Claude (French visual artist), Ghislain Merat, Mrs. Trần Thị Huỳnh Nga, Rich Streitmatter-Tran, Sandrine Llouquet, Bertrand Peret, and Patrice Gaillard (French sound and visual artist). Blue Space Contemporary Arts Center Archive, Asia Art Archive, <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/SpecialCollectionItem/6299>.



Figure 1.31: Video installation by Bùi Công Khánh at *Rendez Vous*, November 2005. Blue Space Contemporary Arts Center Archive, Asia Art Archive, <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/SpecialCollectionItem/6299>.

Diasporic Artists, Saigon Open City, and Alternative Art Spaces

A discussion of contemporary art in Ho Chi Minh City has to consider the significant impact of the diasporic artists who returned around or soon after the turn of the new millennium in order to connect with the culture and initiate artistic projects.¹¹⁴ Some of these individuals catalyzed collaborative efforts with local artists, and various groups were formed which would soon represent Vietnam at various international biennales and triennials, facilitating international recognition of Ho Chi Minh City as another active node of contemporary art alongside Hanoi. Some might disagree with Nguyễn Thị Châu Giang that the integration of the returnee artists into the community in the early 2000s filled a major gap, in terms of encouraging a certain type of conceptual practice and new models of collaboration and dialogue via informal networks, yet

¹¹⁴ Among the first of the returnees were Dinh Q. Lê, who settled in Ho Cho Minh City in 1996, and then Jun Nguyễn-Hatsushiba in 1997. Later, Tiffany Chung moved back in 2000, Richard Streitmatter-Tran in 2003, Tuan Andrew Nguyễn in 2004, and Sandrine Llouquet and her partner, Bertrand Peret (b. 1971), in 2005. Gallerist Quynh Pham had returned to settle permanently in Vietnam in 1997.

most of the original lines of friendship created through these earlier groups are still in place today. These developments unsurprisingly provoked a degree of contention surrounding issues of representation and identity politics, and resentment felt from both sides of the local/diaspora divide – all of which have appeared to become familiar by-products of a globalizing art world. Yet most would not deny the productive nature of some of these earlier collaborations and collective efforts in changing the landscape of contemporary art in the city. As such, the years between 2003 and 2007 is remembered by many as being a particularly energetic period in terms of dynamic plans for projects and collaborative endeavors, and the memorable quality of work being produced. Yet there was still a shortage of viable venues for exhibiting experimental work and continued difficulties in the exhibition licensing process, and many of the returnee artists found less difficulty and more success showing their work outside of the country. The most ambitious endeavor to attempt to alter the landscape of the contemporary art in the city was Saigon Open City, a biennial project that sought to institute deeper changes in the city’s arts infrastructure and to find ways to work collaboratively with yet to distribute agency beyond the Ministry and its institutional organs.

The return of several of these diasporic artists – many of whom had left the country as refugees during their childhood – traces an interesting path of reverse migration across the Pacific, as they had received their bachelor’s and master’s degrees at California art schools.¹¹⁵ What they brought back to Vietnam was a training through a conceptually-based artistic formation derived from the legacy of the California Institute of the Arts, the University of California system (notably in southern California), and other schools imbricated in a regional contemporary art history which thrived in the 1970s and 1980s, and continued to permeate

¹¹⁵ The exceptions are Richard Streitmatter-Tran, Sandrine Llouquet, and Jun Nguyễn-Hatsushiba.

artistic pedagogy in southern California through the 1990s. In addition, their work in Vietnam fortuitously coincided with particular trends in the art world, most notably the global turn or transnational turn. Dinh Q. Lê (b. 1968, Hà Tiên) himself acknowledges that the timing of his art education and return to Vietnam coincided with the wave of identity politics in the 1990s, and Tiffany Chung (b. 1968, Đà Nẵng) too felt that she – as a woman of Vietnamese heritage who had left as a refugee – was certainly pressured to produce work that spoke to those issues. Two of the members of the The Propeller Group, Tuan Andrew Nguyễn (b. 1976, Saigon) and Matthew Lucero (b. 1976, Upland, CA), had met during their MFA programs at Cal Arts, during which they began to collaborate on projects, setting the tone for their future work.

Yet I do not wish to make the argument here that they imported particular forms of artistic training and distributed these pedagogies and conceptual apparatuses amongst the local community; rather, they contributed to establishing a new dimension of creative production that could take place, albeit not necessarily exhibited, in Vietnam. Their involvement in establishing small, independent art spaces in the mid-2000s was partially a response to the fact that they themselves had difficulty integrating into the local infrastructure.¹¹⁶ Sandrine Llouquet studied at the Fine Arts University from 1997 to 1998, but was given a separate space to work and provided with a private tutor, rather than being allowed to study in a classroom setting with other students. As these artists were rarely able to integrate within the official system, for example in roles as teachers or even as students at the university, many of them begin to think about ways to establish spaces to meet their own creative needs but with an eye towards community

¹¹⁶ Despite the limitation imposed on foreign teaching in Vietnamese art institutions, many artists in Hanoi believe German national Veronika Radulovic played an important role in the shaping of a generation of contemporary artists. Through an exchange program supported by the Freie University and the Goethe Institut, Radulovic taught at the Hanoi University of Fine Arts between 1994 to 2000, introducing practices such as video and performance art.

development as well.¹¹⁷ Lê described how he had wanted to teach at the university but faced several obstacles in doing so:

I have always wanted to teach at the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts University, even for free. Unfortunately, the law in Vietnam only allows foreigners to teach technical practice. Yes, today Viet Kieu's are still considered as foreigner [sic]. If I were to teach an art class here, I can teach all the techniques I want to but I am not allowed to discuss the content. The government still thinks that we will poison the Vietnamese youth with our Western contaminated mind. What we are doing at San Art is much more interesting and we have been able to find ways to get around this paranoia policy. We have been able to hold lectures and discussions on contemporary art practices by some of the top people in the field.¹¹⁸

Streitmatter-Tran co-taught a course on video art at the university from 2003-2004, in collaboration with a friend, Nguyễn Lòg, whom he had met in Boston while Lòg was participating in study abroad program at MassArt. The course aimed to introduce contemporary video artists and practices as well as teach basic video technical skills. Streitmatter-Tran believes this opportunity was only made possible because Lòg's father was the president of the Fine Art University at the time. When his tenure was over, the course was not renewed. Streitmatter-Tran also initiated a panel discussion on December 23, 2003, between himself, art historian Boitran Huynh-Beattie, Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, Ly Hoàng Ly, and Vũ Nhật Tân on the subject of performance, installation, and video art. He recalls that at the time it felt like a natural thing to organize, but is surprising how rarely, if ever, such dialogues would take place afterward within the context of the university.¹¹⁹

It can be argued that Saigon Open City, as an ambitious plan to initiate a city-wide international exhibition in three parts, brought into relief the necessity of independent micro-art

¹¹⁷ But she soon became acquainted with several of the more prominent Saigon artists today, who were at the time finishing up their studies at the university, artists like Nguyễn Như Huy and Bùi Công Khánh. At the time they didn't really know each other and were only just starting to branch out.

¹¹⁸ Zoe Butt, "Interview with Dinh Q Le."

¹¹⁹ E-mail exchange with the author, July 1, 2013.

spaces – neither “official” nor “commercial” - that operated on a smaller scale with more flexibility, more improvisation, and more privacy. During the lengthy process of planning and after the outcome of Saigon Open City, several of these artist-organizers made strong efforts to tangibly realize particular forms of physical and discursive artistic spaces. As such, despite the fraught dynamics that often characterize the introduction of diasporic artists into a “local” community and the subsequent success they often garner from the cultural capital they bring as cosmopolitan “natives,” there were still productive instances of collaboration and exchange beginning in the early 2000s.¹²⁰ This resulted in new attempts at critique and self-definition for many of the artists in Ho Chi Minh City, both local and returnee, and therefore, for some of them, particularly those of the younger generation, changing forms of artistic subjectivity.

A major figure in the planning of Saigon Open City, and subsequently the lead founder of Sàn Art, is Dinh Q. Lê, who is also the highest profile artist of Vietnamese origins to date.¹²¹ Lê left Vietnam in his childhood and lived in the United States for fifteen years, completing undergraduate and graduate degrees in art before deciding to make his home in Ho Chi Minh City in 1996. As I discuss in the Introduction, his work has always been deeply connected to topics of Vietnamese history from the perspective of a former refugee, and issues of migration, war, historical narratives, and trauma have been recurring topics in his work (Figures 1.32 – 1.35). The production of these surrealist/documentary counter-narratives has been a consistent compulsion in his practice, including ongoing work with photo-weavings, photograph and

¹²⁰ Viet Le elaborates upon these dynamics in his essay “Many Returns: Contemporary Vietnamese Diasporic Artists-Organizers in Ho Chi Minh City,” in *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology*, eds. N. Taylor and B. Ly (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012), pp. 85-116.

¹²¹ Lê’s body of work is quite expansive, and it is beyond the scope of this chapter to address them all in depth. Further discussion can be found in Viet Le, “The Art of War: Vietnamese American Visual Artists Dinh Q. Le, Ann Phong and Nguyen Tan Hoang,” *Amerasia Journal* 31:2 (2005): 21-36, Roth, “Obdurate History,” and *Vietnam: Destination for the New Millennium: The Art of Dinh Q. Lê*. New York: Asia Society, 2005.

postcard tapestries, and video-installations. In Lê's solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2010, *The Farmers and the Helicopters* (2006) comprised a 3-channel video installation produced in collaboration with The Propeller Group, accompanied by the sculptural component of a helicopter built from scraps by two Vietnamese farmers. According to Lê, the video installation aimed to give a voice to those who had been kept silent for so long, by including clips from war-time documentaries, footage from Hollywood films about the war, and present-day interviews with a farmer who built a working helicopter from scrap metal and farming equipment.



Figure 1.32: Dinh Q. Lê, *Untitled (Soldiers at Rest)*, from *Vietnam to Hollywood* series, 2003, c-print and linen tape, 116.8 x 181.6 cm. Collection of MoMA. Sourced from http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A26740&page_number=2&template_id=1&sort_order=1 (accessed 06/02/15).



Figure 1.33: Dinh Q. Lê, *Untitled* (from *The Hill of Poisonous Trees* series), 2008, C-print and linen tape, 120 x 200 cm. Sourced from P.P.O.W Gallery, http://ppowgallery.com/artist/dinh-q-le/available-work/fullscreen_avail#&panel1-3 (accessed 06/02/15).



Figure 1.34: Dinh Q. Lê in collaboration with Trần Quốc Hai, Lê Văn Danh, Hà Thúc Phù Nam, and Tuan Andrew Nguyen . Still from *The Farmers and the Helicopters*, 2006, three-channel video (color, sound), 15 min., and helicopter. Sourced from Projects 93: Dinh Q. Lê, <http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1061> (accessed 06/02/15).



Figure 1.35: Dinh Q. Lê, *The Farmers and the Helicopters*, 2006, installation view at MoMA. Sourced from A Different Kind of Helicopter: Projects 93: Dinh Q. Lê, https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/10/18/a-different-kind-of-helicopter-projects-93-dinh-q-le (accessed 06/02/15).

While Lê has gained a heightened profile as a Vietnamese artist, largely because his work continues to be geographically and historically situated in and about Vietnam, his work is exhibited internationally and rarely in Vietnam. Yet one of his earliest works in Ho Chi Minh City is remembered by many – both inside and outside of the community - as one of the most meaningful and provocative artworks of “Vietnamese art,” and in actuality, may have been the first public participatory project to have taken place in the city. The *Damaged Gene Project* (Ho Chi Minh City, August 1998) concerned the controversial subject of the use of the chemical defoliant Agent Orange during the Vietnam War, and its lasting effects on the living population, namely as birth defects, and the United States’ refusal to acknowledge responsibility at the time

(Figures 1.36 - 1.37). There was also silence in Vietnam, due to fear that speaking about them could lead to the actualization of one's fears, in this instance, of giving birth to children with deformations, often in the form of Siamese twins. Lê spoke to the need to address this silence, an impetus which also drove his later projects:

In 1998, my work returned again to the subject of my birth country to deal with Vietnamese issues. My public art project, "Damaged Genes," evolved from the silence that prevailed around the presence of deformed beggars roaming the streets. Victims of Agent Orange, they had all kinds of deformities; twisted limbs like strange roots, babies with huge heads, and a profusion of Siamese twins. At the time, the Vietnamese government never spoke about them, nor did the people in the streets. And the U.S. government refused to even acknowledge the issue.¹²²

Lê had Siamese twin dolls and their clothing manufactured and sold at a busy market stall selling children's clothes and tourist souvenirs. The aesthetic of the Siamese twin dolls and their outfits blended in with the aesthetic of other mass-produced toys made locally or in China, and thus didn't stand apart from the rest of the merchandise until closer inspection. In addition, clothing articles made to appear as cheap brand name knock-offs were embroidered with the names of chemical companies that had produced Agent Orange. In terms of the reception of the work, while the half the customers displayed interest, the other half did not, and the most curiosity was displayed by researchers and medical students. Lê himself recalled the risk involved with the public display and interactive dimension: "The project is a big departure for me... Culturally I was bringing a taboo subject and putting it right in the middle of the market for one month. It was the scariest opening I have ever held."¹²³

¹²² Carolee Thea, "Elephants and Helicopters: Dinh Q. Lê with Carolee Thea," <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2010/09/art/elephants-and-helicopters>, accessed July 1, 2013.

¹²³ Chanika Svetvilas, "The Art of War," *Dialogue*, Spring-Summer 1999, 27-28. Cited in Roth, "Obdurate History," 46.



Figure 1.36: Dinh Q. Lê, *Damaged Gene Project*, 1998, polymer, ea. 5.7 x 7 cm. Sourced from Ken Johnson, “Images of Vietnamese in the Generation Since the War,” October 7, 2005, *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/07/arts/design/07john.html> (accessed 06/02/15).



Figure 1.37: Dinh Q. Lê, *Untitled* from *Damaged Gene Project*, 1998, 43 x 58.4cm (irreg.), cotton knitted sweater. Courtesy of the artist.

Tiffany Chung returned to Vietnam in 2000, having left in her teens through the Orderly Departure Program (ODP). Along with Lê, Chung has gained a prominent profile as one of Vietnam’s foremost female artists, a category toward which she admits ambivalence. While Lê

and Chung both acknowledge that their careers may have been launched at the moment during which 1990s identity politics was a driving force in the globalizing contemporary art world, Chung confessed that returning to Vietnam, where the lack of discourse on history pertaining to the Vietnam War was actually refreshing. Whereas a lingering fascination with the war, alongside trauma and memory discourses, had impacted her own artistic formation, this has continued to be a fraught representational framework for her, and one which she has attempted to depart from in her work. While the absence of such discourse in Vietnam was initially refreshing, after a couple of years Chung began to feel disturbed by what she described as social apathy and a complete vacuum in terms of engagement with historical issues. It seemed that in order for society to so frenetically leap into the future and into modernity, it had to disengage with historical truths and maintain the narrative illusions propounded by the state. Chapter 5 will discuss in more depth the ways in which the residential base of Vietnam has served as an immersive creative impetus for Chung's work, in which she attempted to confront these issues and to delve into historical events as a springboard for creative practice and sustained dialogue surrounding issues of urbanization, pop culture, propaganda, and social crises.

Chung, Lê, and other artists like Sandrine Llouquet and Tuan Andrew Nguyen initially settled in Vietnam as a means of cultural reconnection, which would in turn fuel their creative practice. Streitmatter-Tran, on the other hand, claims a different trajectory, as his own *Việt kiều* identity is less clear-cut given the fact that he never was a refugee, but was adopted as a baby by an American family and raised in the United States. Streitmatter-Tran studied at the Massachusetts College of Art and graduated in 2003, and it was in Boston where he met two Vietnamese students, Ngô Thái Uyên and Nguyễn Lòng, studying abroad. As a result of this encounter, Streitmatter-Tran came to Vietnam less than a year later to develop video art

curriculum for the Ho Chi Minh Fine Arts University, and in doing so, he began to establish a network of friendship and collaboration with several locally-based artists, both Vietnamese and returnee. One outcome was the formation of a performance group called ProjectOne. In December 2003, ProjectOne launched four exhibitions along with the organization of a contemporary arts panel discussion at the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts University.¹²⁴ The group comprised five artists with backgrounds including media, fashion, poetry, and painting; these were Richard Streitmatter-Tran, Ly Hoàng Ly, Bùi Công Khánh, Ngô Thái Uyên, and Nguyễn Phạm Trung Hậu. According to Streitmatter-Tran, "... these early relationships would set a tone for practically everything I've done in Vietnam since. In the years say between 2003-2006, art seemed boundless and we had a lot of energy."¹²⁵

While ProjectOne's activities ceased after a year, due to divergent career and personal developments, Streitmatter-Tran continued to play an important role in connecting people and shaping collaborative endeavors in the city. In 2005, he was a founding member of Mogas Station, a collaborative consisting of Streitmatter-Tran, Sandrine Llouquet, Bertrand Peret, Hoàng Dương Cẩm, Vũ Liên Phương, Tam Vi Pho, Gulschan Gothel, and Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba (Figures 1.38 – 1.39). The mission of the group was to "promote and present contemporary art in Vietnam" and to pursue "a collective artistic reflection which aims to the realization of collaborative art works."¹²⁶ Some of the important projects realized by the group include *Aart*, a bilingual contemporary arts magazine in Vietnam published for the Singapore Biennale in 2006, the first publication of its kind, and a collaborative work, *Rokovoko*, which

¹²⁴ http://www.diacritic.org/blog/about_rst.htm, accessed 3/4/13.

¹²⁵ Zoe Butt, "Interview with Richard Streitmatter-Tran," June 16, 2010, http://curatorsintl.org/images/uploads/dia_interview_for_web.pdf, accessed March 4, 2013.

¹²⁶ http://www.diacritic.org/blog/about_rst.htm, accessed 3/4/13.

was featured at the 52nd Venice Biennale as part of the Migration Addicts project, curated by Biljana Ciric.



Figure 1.38: “Mogas Station: Meeting at Atelier Wonderful, HCMC, Vietnam, 2006,” http://www.diacritic.org/blog/about_rst.htm (accessed 06/02/15).

Figure 1.39: “Mogas Station debuts A.Art Magazine at the Singapore Biennale 2006,” http://www.diacritic.org/blog/archives/2006/09/mogas_station_d.htm (accessed 06/02/15).

ProjectOne and Mogas Station played an important part in drawing global attention to an alternative set of practices and the presence of returnee artistic activity in Vietnam. This also played into growing international perception of Ho Chi Minh City as a largely diasporic art scene, in large part due to the presence of the *Việt kiều* artists in numerous events and exhibitions in which they were asked to represent or speak about the contemporary art scene in Vietnam. Alongside the high profile activities of these artists, other major projects were in the works during the early to mid-2000s, most notably plans to launch a biennial in Ho Chi Minh City. Saigon Open City, the eventual name of the project, would mark the peak of global interest in the city as an active contemporary art platform in the mid-2000s, and what many considered to have been the height of its activities, collaborations, energies, and possibilities. Unfortunately,

numerous factors would undo the potential of Saigon Open City to significantly impact the city's arts infrastructure in the way that some of the planners had hoped, and it stands out in the memories of most of the art community as a disastrous and bitterly fracturing event. However, I would argue that Saigon Open City was – in several ways – conditioned by various historical specters: the city's modernist episode, in which it was the site for artistic experimentation and events such as the 1962 First International Exhibition of Fine Arts of Saigon, and its unwilling association with liberation and unification in the narrative of Communist nation-building (Figures 1.1 – 1.2). Yet Saigon Open City itself would come to serve as a specter, both traumatic and nostalgic, conditioning a collective will on the part of various artists and organizers, to carry on a momentum that the event was seen to have launched and yet aborted.

Đỗ Thị Tuyết Mai, the owner of Mai's Gallery, initially conceived of a biennial situated in Vietnam, specifically in Ho Chi Minh City, as a way to push local arts development. Having spent time in Hanoi and New York City, she had some knowledge of the arts infrastructures and communities in Vietnam, and had also developed some contacts through her trips to New York, notably through friendships with U.S.-based artists like Rodney Dickson. She also happened to be the emerging point of contact for Michael DiGregorio, the program officer of the Vietnam office of the Ford Foundation at the time, and who was interested in funding further art projects in Ho Chi Minh City following the success of Blue Space Contemporary Arts Center. Mai proposed a biennial, and according to some artists, was assisted by Australian artist and independent curator Sue Hajdu in drafting the grant proposal.¹²⁷ The Ford Foundation provided a budget of approximately \$200,000 to fund the project in the guise of a private non-profit

¹²⁷ Given the contentious nature of Saigon Open City and differing accounts of what happened, I attempt to preserve the anonymity of the informants when deemed necessary. Between 2010 to 2012 interviews were conducted with all of the named organizers except for Đỗ Thị Tuyết Mai and Rikrit Tirivanija.

organization. Later on, Dinh Q. Lê, Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, and Sandrine Llouquet, amongst others, were asked to brainstorm possible themes for the biennial, in which it was envisioned that international curators would be invited to come in to carry out the planning. This was likely proposed in light of the fact that Vietnam had next to no seasoned or professional curators at the time, and those who did call themselves curators were reluctant to take charge of the programming. Apparently at one point even Hou Hanru was approached to potentially curate the project, and he came to Ho Chi Minh City in 2004 to give a talk as part of the planning process. During his talk he used the phrase “a little blah blah,” which Sue Hajdu would then use to name the independent arts initiative she and Motoka Uda founded shortly after.

Several years of planning preceded the disastrous opening of Saigon Open City, the eventual name of the exhibition, shifting the context and function of the project away from a traditional biennial model. Numerous locally-based artists went on board as advisors or curators but would gradually drop out of the planning as miscommunications and tensions rose, particularly in the face of the difficult job of procuring exhibition licenses and permissions when artists were still being selected. In addition, Mai was reportedly in absentia as she was using significant resources from the budget to travel to international locations to conduct research on biennials in different parts of the world in order to understand organizational processes and exhibition structures. This has been one of the most vociferous critiques of the handling of Saigon Open City, with strong criticisms leveled at Mai’s use of the Ford Foundation funds.

In the end, and not long before the launch of events in 2006, the final organizers of Saigon Open City consisted of Mai as director, Dinh Q. Lê and Trần Lương as advisors, and through Lê’s contacts, established relational aesthetics pioneer Rikrit Tiravanija and Bangkok-based curator Gridthiya Gaweewong were brought on as the curators. Lê had emphasized the

need to procure “regional practitioners” rather than international curators, in order to have a combination of seasoned professionalism as well as local knowledge of the limited infrastructures and cultural climates in Southeast Asia.¹²⁸ Through the brief involvement of Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, a grant was secured to fund a studio program for young artists, which entailed a renovation of the warehouse in which the studios and other exhibition spaces were housed.¹²⁹ After a serious revisioning of the project in light of budgetary concerns, Lê had invited the Thai team to act as curators for the project, given their understanding of the region, and experience working within constrained budgets and limited infrastructures. They were willing to commit to a rather unorthodox biennial structure that would not comprise the usual truncated period of time and then be finished, but a project which would aim to engender an infrastructure for contemporary art over a period of at least two years. In regards to the name change from Saigon Biennale to Saigon Open City, Gaweewong emphasized that the theme of Saigon Open City, a title coined by Tiravanija, was a reaction against the original plan of doing a biennial, which would not have been appropriate for the local conditions.¹³⁰ According to the official website,

¹²⁸ Dinh Q. Lê, speaking at “Saigon Open City: Curator and Artist Talk,” held November 27, 2006. *Saigon Open City: Curator and Artists' Talk, November 27, 2006*, DVD CDAAA.000609, Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.

¹²⁹ His chief point of interest in SOC was what it could do for educational infrastructure for recently graduated art students. He said that he remembers looking at the large warehouse space and was interesting in designing it for post-grad studios. At the time, he recalled, he and Rich wanted to use the space as an educational facility, as studio spaces for young artists, and they were interested in developing a curriculum. His primary interest was in effecting long-lasting change in the system, and according to him, the project initially went in that direction. Interview with the author, Ho Chi Minh City, May 27, 2011.

¹³⁰ According to Gaweewong, the biennial as a now somewhat institutionalized form of international exhibition felt too conventional for this initial project, and Saigon Open City also aimed to be a “locally”-organized arts venture, something in reaction to what she called the more top-down organized arts projects that had received major funding from the Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation since the 1990s. Interview with the author, Bangkok, October 13, 2011.

Saigon Open City, as a metaphor of the potential of the new city, which recently opened itself to the world, will serve as a forum for artists of all disciplines to interact, exchange ideas and support new initiatives. It will be an alternative to the existing model of international art exhibitions, e.g. Biennales and Triennials around the world, providing artists with an opportunity to re-think their cultural marketing, and organizational processes. It will also try to foster and cultivate a contemporary art infrastructure and audience in Vietnam and the neighboring region.¹³¹

An important aspect of the project was to more fully engage the public and achieve long-term effects, essentially sustaining a dialogue with the community and enhancing the development of artistic discourse. For these reasons they envisioned the event as consisting of chapters, with a salon-style exhibition as a model for the first Chapter.



Figure 1.40: Gridthiya Gaweewong speaking at “Saigon Open City: Curator and Artist Talk,” held November 27, 2006. Photograph courtesy of Richard Streitmatter-Tran.

Figure 1.41: Inside the Saigon Open City Studio Space. Photograph courtesy of Richard Streitmatter-Tran.

¹³¹ Saigon Open City website, <http://saigonopencity.vn/content.asp?view=index&id=1>, accessed December 28, 2010.



Figure 1.42: Performance by Lê Vũ and his father. From *Photologue: Saigon Open City and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, 25-29 Nov 2006*. <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Diaaalogue/Details/183> (accessed 06/02/15).



Figure 1.43: A chronology of Vietnamese art juxtaposed with the development of contemporary Western art. From *Photologue: Saigon Open City and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, 25-29 Nov 2006*. <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Diaaalogue/Details/183> (accessed 06/02/15).



Figure 1.44: *Saigon Open City*: Curator and Artist Talk, November 27, 2006. From left to right: Rirkrit Tiravanija, Po Po, Mella Jarrsma, Gridthiya Gaweewong, Nindityo Adipurnomo, Dinh Q. Lê, Trần Lương, Kamol Phaosavadi, Đỗ Thị Tuyết Mai, and Đặng Hoàng Giang. From *Photologue: Saigon Open City and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, 25-29 Nov 2006*. <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Diaaologue/Details/183> (accessed 06/02/15).



Figure 1.45: Installation of Round Tray Monument by Ly Hoang Ly at the Southern Women's Museum. From *Photologue: Saigon Open City and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, 25-29 Nov 2006*. <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Diaaologue/Details/183> (accessed 06/02/15).

Over a series of trips, Tirivanija and Gaweewong spent time visiting studios and meeting with artists and other cultural actors in the field (Figures 1.40 – 1.45). A conference was held during one of their research trips, and they gave periodic talks. At the end of their research, they put forth a proposal for Saigon Open City to comprise three chapters (over a two-year span) following a periodized historical theme: Liberation, Unification, and Reconstruction. The first chapter, Liberation, was intended to “focus on social reality portrayed through the daily life of Vietnamese people during Liberation period, as well as the contextual influences which it had on the greater scheme of life on a global scale.”¹³² Yet Tirivanija emphasized that this initial chapter was meant to be a starting point of self-reflexivity and not meant to be read politically.¹³³ They planned to exhibit works by different generations of Vietnamese artists roughly grouped into those who had studied at the École des Beaux-arts d’Indochine, the ‘Resistance Class’, and Vietnam Diasporas. The curatorial scheme was to present the artworks “in juxtaposition and contrast with each other, whereby giving the audience an opportunity to visualize for themselves how different artistic methods and approaches are able to mediate or negotiate and reflect the conditions in society.”¹³⁴ The second chapter, Unification, was more politically sensitive due to the climate of opinion about this moment in history. They envisioned this chapter as being less an immediate event, for example, one large exhibition, and being more of a spread-out series of smaller exhibitions and talks, in order to reduce the ‘impact’ of the material.

¹³² Saigon Open City website <http://saigonopencity.vn/content.asp?view=index&id=1>, accessed December 28, 2010.

¹³³ Rikrit Tirivanija, speaking at “Saigon Open City: Curator and Artist Talk,” held November 27, 2006. *Saigon Open City: Curator and Artists' Talk, November 27, 2006*, DVD CDA000609, Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

Yet negative reception of the curatorial schema lay not just with this particular chapter, but with the fact that the chapters seemed neither ironic nor sincere in corresponding to standard state narratives of modern Vietnamese history. In Sue Hajdu's essay, she notes that

For those versed in Vietnam's history it is immediately obvious that these themes are in line with State ideology and in no way constitute a critique. As one artist put it, such a theme "very much loves the country" and was probably chosen in order to secure government support. Some in Saigon were hesitant about the theme's northern bias. 'Liberation' by the northern communists was not necessarily welcomed by many in the south, and thirty years later there is still strong resentment towards a perceived imposition of the north upon the south, through large-scale migration and the resultant domination of real estate and positions of status. The curatorial theme also reverberates with a typically politically-correct Western view of the Vietnam War, the American presence and sentiments of pacifism at the time. It overlooks many of the complications of a nation at war during the Cold War period and the ongoing social repercussions of the communist victory. In 1975 the shooting stopped, but even thirty-five plus years on the children and grandchildren of those who served in the southern administration are effectively barred from university education or attractive employment options.¹³⁵

For these reasons too the project aroused suspicions from the Ministry of Culture, who according to some of the organizers, presented the greatest obstacle in allowing even the first chapter to be fully realized. Numerous reasons were raised in regards to why the cultural authorities prevented rather than supported such an endeavor taking place. There was the notion that they wanted to preserve Hanoi as the cultural capital and therefore undermined the potential for prestige in the south. Another explanation surrounded the resentment of *Việt kiều* and foreign involvement, and their organization of such an event largely independently of the Fine Arts Association and other state-run spaces. The bureaucratic mechanisms that prevented the event from even having a public opening lay in the procedures needed to secure licenses, the process during which the majority of censorship takes place in Vietnam. According to Lê, panels of artists and

¹³⁵ Sue Hajdu, "Saigon Open City," *Broadsheet Contemporary Visual Arts + Culture* 36:1 (March 2007), 36.

administrators from the Fine Arts Association were formed in order to individually assess the licensing applications submitted by the Saigon Open City organizers, and then the panels submitted their reports and their recommendations to the ministry. Video was the most problematic, as the Ministry asked that the video work be sent to Hanoi for review, and subsequently, every single video work was censored (including Lê's *Farmers and the Helicopters*), except for Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba's *Memorial* series.¹³⁶

Video was one aspect of the constant shuffling and deferrals that persisted throughout the whole process, and which ultimately resulted in Saigon Open City never receiving official permission to open the show, despite the fact that most of the museums (the Fine Arts Museum, War Remnants Museum, Tôn Đức Thắng Museum, and the Southern Women's Museum) had allowed them to install work. They could only take people through the exhibitions privately. As a result, the warehouse on Lê Thánh Tôn street, which housed the young artists' studios, was used as a key exhibition venue and as much work was hung as possible. Despite the postponement of the original opening date of November 26, 2006, and then again on January 27, 2007, it was decided that an opening be held at the warehouse anyway, but without the necessary permissions it could not be publicized. What resulted was a very nondescript opening, more along the lines of a party, and they held some informal panel discussions about the artworks. In Sue Hajdu's critique of the event – or “non-event” – she stated that “Members of the general public, however, would have had to literally stumble across these works to know of their existence in the city, as without permits SOC was not able to be publicized. As the Saigon art community cringed under the second opening failure, insult was added to injury when volunteer

¹³⁶ Interview with the author, November 30, 2010.

art students were not paid what was promised, and the wishes of satellite partners being disregarded in printed materials.”¹³⁷

The event never attained official licensing or the status of a major international event, despite some of the big-name artists that were on the exhibition roster, including Yoko Ono, Martha Rosler, and Josef Beuys. Indeed, some of the exhibits were never even completed, and some recall seeing paintings propped up against the wall or piled on the floor because installations were left incomplete. For most of the art community in Saigon, the entire enterprise of Saigon Open City retains the bitter flavor of a colossal failure and even betrayal, with fingers pointed at Mai, the curators, and the state administration.

According to Vietnamese artists and administrators involved in processing and approving the exhibition license applications, fault lay with the disorganized submission of paperwork on the part of the curators.¹³⁸ Given the two primary curators were from Thailand, despite the advisory capacities of Luong and Lê, they naturally could not have an in-depth understanding of the vagaries of the system in Vietnam.¹³⁹ And with the number of figures who had entered and then dropped out of the project, and the general instability of the management, it seemed inevitable that the shaky process of preparing license applications for the scrutiny of the ministry would be further undermined. While some describe the obstacles as being political in nature, some argue that it had nothing to do with politics, but with the faulty submission process, given that most local artists and organizers understand the drawn-out nature of exhibition license applications. Some have described the endeavor as far too ambitious in scale, and largely

¹³⁷ Hajdu, “Saigon Open City,” 35.

¹³⁸ E-mail correspondance with Nguyễn Quân, May 4, 2011.

¹³⁹ E-mail correspondance with Nguyễn Quân, May 4, 2011, Trịnh Cung, “Nhà tổ chức “Sài Gòn thành phố mở” thực sự yếu kém về tổ chức,” (The weakness of the organizers of Saigon Open City in organizing), December 12, 2006, <http://www.talawas.org/talaDB/suche.php?res=8688&rb=0202>, accessed January 4, 2011, and Hajdu, “Saigon Open City.”

impractical given the reality of attempting such a project within the infrastructure of the city, but had the project focused more exclusively on showcasing Vietnamese artists, with local curatorial direction, the event may have had more potential for success.¹⁴⁰ In addition, the general consensus is that too much publicity and funds were expended before confirmation of artist participation or that the event could even be officially opened to the public. A sense of betrayal on the part of the community arose from the fact that such a financial investment had been made and nothing had come of it, and some remain bitter about the fact that those in charge had never publicly expressed regret or apologized for what to some was a complete debacle.

However, the perceived failure of Saigon Open City generated several productive outcomes. The younger artists describe it as having been a positive experience in that it provided them with exposure to international artists and artworks that they otherwise who not have been able to encounter in Vietnam. The studios they used in the warehouse were a novel experience, as such spaces are not provided during undergraduate training at the university. It was at Saigon Open City that two young artist groups, the Arrow Group from Ho Chi Minh City and the Infinity group from Hue, had chances to connect and dialogue with each other, and these exchanges are generally spoken about favorably, despite the fact that some look back on the work they made and cringe.¹⁴¹ The curators acknowledge that the failure of the event can be attributed to various factors, yet they also attest to the generative function of the fiasco. Gaweewong was adamant about the fact that Saigon Open City accomplished positive results, in that it invoked a stronger awareness of the need to have some kind of discourse and activity that shifted drastically away from what was in place prior, namely scores of small commercial

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Author's interviews with Ngô Lực, Lê Quý Anh Hào, Thịnh Nguyễn Đức, and Ngô Thùy Duyên, 2011.

galleries throughout the city. She strongly believes that the event was necessary for the sake of even instilling in public memory such an attempt to enact a major arts exhibition in the city; that such a conscious remembrance was needed as a starting point, and it could then serve as a historical reference for future endeavors.¹⁴² Some perceive Saigon Open City as having served as a productive mechanism for the establishment of small independent artist initiatives, given what seems to have been the contemporaneous or subsequent activities of various projects like Wonderful Atelier, a little blah blah, and San Art – independent artist-run programs and spaces which operated on a much smaller scale and that could function successfully by circumventing much of the city’s bureaucratic infrastructure. Others believe that it was not so much Saigon Open City but the natural timing of developments that led to the coinciding establishments of these alternative spaces, independent art initiatives that were bound to operate more successfully due to their participation in a more informal arts sector comprised largely of social networks. These artist-run models also served as important alternative sites of artistic formation, as part of their function was education outreach in the form of talks, lectures, and dialogue-based activities, functioning in a similar way to the workshop model run by NGOs and cultural institutions in Phnom Penh.

Prior to the establishment of alternative art spaces such as Himiko’s Café, a little blah blah, Atelier Wonderful, San Art, Dia Projects, and Zerostation, artists Nguyễn Nhu Huy and Hoàng Dương Cẩm, and writer Vũ Liên Phương had run what might be considered a virtual artists’ resource space, vietnamvisualarts.com.¹⁴³ All three were Hanoi-born but had settled in

¹⁴² Interview with the author, October 13, 2011.

¹⁴³ Here I provide some background on the spaces which held discursive aims as part of their programming objectives, and so I do not focus on spaces that largely function as exhibition venues, despite the fact that these have served as important spaces for exhibition and at times discussion in the 2000s. Himiko’s Café was established by artist Nguyen Kim Hoang (b. 1976) in 2005 with the aims of

Ho Chi Minh City after the turn of the new millennium for various professional reasons. When husband and wife Phuong and Cầm had moved down south in 2001 they found the absence of artistic dialogue perturbing, and they decided to create a site that provided information translated into Vietnamese - however basic - about contemporary art, in order to provide an accessible resource for the community and young artists.¹⁴⁴ Articles from *Art Forum*, *Frieze*, *October*, and excerpts from websites from museums and galleries were translated chiefly by Phuong. They distinguished their site from www.talawas.org in that they aimed to simply provide resources and directly translated materials, without accompanying editorial essays, reviews, and spaces for comments and dialogue - a function that would be taken up by soi.com in 2009.¹⁴⁵ The involvement of Nguyễn Nhu Huy occurred through a meeting at an exhibition at Blue Space.¹⁴⁶ Huy contributed translated theoretical texts for the website, mainly chapters from books, and the site was organized into three sections: Theory, News, and Contemporary Art in Vietnam.

According to Huy, the magazine format responded to the changing environment of technology at

creating an alternative gallery – not based on selective curatorship - and social space, and bringing “art closer to the everyday lives and spaces of everyday life of the Vietnamese people,” in a parallel fashion to the launch of Java Café and Gallery in 2000. Interview with the author November 29, 2010. Having volunteered at Galerie Vietnam in 1996, a gallery run by a German-Vietnamese woman, Vietnamese-American Quynh Pham had assisted with writing texts, curatorial work, and running the gallery, alongside free-lance work organizing shows for the City Exhibition House. She also published catalogues, namely funded by partner Rob Cianchi, and receptions underwritten by Renaissance Riverside Hotel. In 2000 she and Cianchi established Galerie Quynh initially as a website serving as an arts resource for and about Vietnam, and then a physical gallery space in 2003, which relocated in 2008. Interview with the author, September 14, 2011.

¹⁴⁴ Hoàng Dương Cầm and Vũ Liên Phuong’s conversation with the author, January 13, 2011.

¹⁴⁵ www.talawas.org was a popular web-zine run by the writer and critic Phạm Thị Hoài, based in Berlin, Germany. It was a forum for Vietnamese-language translations of numerous texts of literature and criticism, as well as online discussions and debates in a vein of critical free expression from a variety of perspectives, from within Vietnam and in the diaspora. From 2002-2009 it was updated almost daily; after 2009 it took on a quarterly format, until it ceased operations in 2010. The various websites (Talawas Sunday, Talawas blog, etc.) still remain available online as archival sites. See “Talawas – Lời Tạm Biệt” (Talawas - Words of Farewell), 02/11/2010, <http://www.talawas.org/?p=26665>, accessed 11/20/13. www soi.com is another forum for Vietnamese-language translations of critical essays, reviews, and online debate largely about the visual arts.

¹⁴⁶ Nguyen Nhu Huy had moved to Saigon in 1990 and graduated from the HCMC Fine Arts University in 1997.

the beginning of the new millennium in Vietnam.¹⁴⁷ Given the incredibly fast development of the internet the format of published resources had to adapt, and blogs and other such web-based interactive media rose to the forefront.¹⁴⁸ The partnership dissolved after a couple of years due to organizational difficulties and creative differences, and the energies of the founders were directed elsewhere, particularly as they began to collaborate with several expat and returnee artists on group projects. Cầm and Phuong became part of Mogas Station with Richard Streitmatter-Tran, and Huy was temporarily involved in establishing a little blah blah, founded by Hungarian-born Australian artist Sue Hajdu (b. 1966) and Japanese artist Motoko Uda (b. 1976).

Sue Hajdu had begun regularly traveling to Vietnam since 1993, but decided to settle in Ho Chi Minh City permanently in 2001, just as the city was beginning to emerge from what she described as a state of wildness, a portrait captured in French-Vietnamese filmmaker Trần Anh Hùng's 1995 film *Cyclo*.¹⁴⁹ Hajdu's involvement with Saigon Open City precipitated the launch of a little blah blah in 2005 – its title inspired by a talk given by Hou Hanru during a visit to the city in 2004 - which functioned not as an exhibition or residency space, in its initial conception, but rather as a fluid discursive and rotating physical space, taking place all over the city, from more traditional venues like cafes and galleries to more non-conventional spaces.¹⁵⁰ Hajdu credits the success of albb and her own curatorial projects, such as *MAGMA*, the *Bao Loc Project*, and *Superstructures*, to adaptive organizational skills and flexibility, realizing that

¹⁴⁷ Interview with the author, January 4, 2011.

¹⁴⁸ vietnamvisualarts.com was even invited to the first round of Documenta 12 in Singapore, but Talawas ended up in the final round.

¹⁴⁹ See Trần Anh Hùng, *Cyclo (Xích Lô)*, (Arles: Actes sud, 1995). Many recollect the roaming gangs, high degree of petty crime, and lack of supermarkets and taxis of 1990s Ho Chi Minh City. This is often juxtaposed against present-day Phnom Penh by visiting Saigonese artists to the city, who describe the Cambodian capital with a mixture of wonder and nostalgia: "It's Saigon twenty years ago."

¹⁵⁰ Interview with the author, January 10, 2011.

contingency plans and a knack for working around the system were vital attributes.¹⁵¹ Among the activities organized by albb were talks by international artists, scholars, and curators, research tours within the region, residency projects, the establishment of a reading room, and several exhibitions. In 2008, albb shifted in focus, as the “introduction of talks or reading rooms by other art organizations in Saigon was a signal that albb’s period of pioneering had matured, and it was now time to re-orientate the program.”¹⁵² As such, albb, largely directed by Hajdu, continued to organize annual projects, but ceased active operations by 2010 as Hajdu became less involved in artistic life in Ho Chi Minh City.

Many of the artists in the community recall the short-lived but effective program run by French artists Bertrand Peret and Sandrine Llouquet, which they called Atelier Wonderful after a similar model begun in France. In 2005, the couple moved to Ho Chi Minh City and first established the creative think tank and art collective Wonderful District, and in 2006 (from February to June) they launched Atelier Wonderful as a physical space in their studio apartment, hosting weekly art talks, workshops, film screenings, and exhibitions (Figures 1.46 – 1.47).¹⁵³ Atelier Wonderful was an incredibly enriching and rewarding experience for its founders, but was from the beginning envisioned as a six-month venture in the recognition that it could not be sustained long-term due to financial strains and the amount of work required on the part of the artist-organizers. Yet the program is described by many artists as being one of the most successful creative community ventures to have taken place in the city.

¹⁵¹ For more about these projects, see Sue Hajdu’s personal website, <http://www.suehajdu.com/index.html>, accessed 11/20/13. I discuss MAGMA in more depth in Chapter 4.

¹⁵² *a little blah blah*, <http://about-albb.blogspot.com/>, accessed 12/03/2010.

¹⁵³ For more information on the role of the physical space called Atelier Wonderful within the larger project scheme of Wonderful District, see “From Wonderful to Wonderful District,” <http://www.wonderfuldistrict.org/about/index.php>, accessed 07/01/2013.



Figure 1.46: Preparation by Cambodia-based composer and electronic musician Laurent Jeanneau (aka Kink Gong), Atelier Wonderful, June 2006. <http://www.wonderfuldistrict.org/archives/index.php> (accessed 06/02/15).

Figure 1.47: Bùi Công Khánh, *Dirty Hands*, Atelier Wonderful, March 2006. <http://www.wonderfuldistrict.org/archives/index.php> (accessed 06/02/15).

Dinh Q. Lê openly attests to the fact that Sàn Art emerged from the experience of Saigon Open City (Figure 1.48).¹⁵⁴ Lê saw a new model of an artist-run space as a way to bridge the gap and create communication with the various Ho Chi Minh City institutions and with cultural authorities, with the larger goal of creating meaningful dialogue and facilitating future projects. Within a year after the end of Saigon Open City he used personal connections to bring Tiffany Chung, Tuan Andrew Nguyen, and Hà Thúc Phù Nam in as co-founders. The space initially held solo and group exhibitions of artworks curated by the co-founders, reflective of their own artistic

¹⁵⁴ Interview with the author, November 30, 2010.

interests, and featured works by both local and international artists. Sàn Art also served the needs of the returnee artist founders in creating a discursive and exhibition space that could in part promote a vision of contemporary art practice more akin to what the artists missed from their training in the United States.¹⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the space has taken on an at-times fraught yet prominent role in representing the face of the contemporary art scene in Ho Chi Minh City, and has begun to provide more sustained opportunities for young artists in Vietnam and in the region in the form of residencies and collaborative exchanges. Much of its prominent profile is due to the work of Zoe Butt, an independent curator who had worked at the Queensland Art Gallery and also served as the director of International Programs for the Long March Project in Beijing, China. Butt was brought on in a directorial and curatorial capacity in 2009 as the careers of Lê, Chung, and The Propeller Group had begun to gain momentum and less of their energy could be invested in managing the space. Sàn Art has come to take an active role in international dialogues on contemporary art in Asia, particularly in regards to the role of alternative spaces in countries perceived as being sited in the periphery of the global art world.

¹⁵⁵ Tuan Andrew Nguyen's conversation with the author, 2008.



Figure 1.48: Opening of exhibition by Trương Công Tùng titled *Above the Sky, Below the Sea* (*Trên Trời, Dưới Biển*), Sàn Art, 2011. Photograph by the author.

The year 2010 witnessed a new cropping of independent art initiatives. *dia / projects*, founded by Richard Streitmatter-Tran, and Zero Station (*Ga 0*), directed by Nguyễn Nhu Huy, have become prominent spaces for discursive activity, the former in a more informal fashion than the latter.¹⁵⁶ A group of young artists, largely led by Hanoi-born artist Ngô Lực, established an informal group interested in public art, body art, and multi-media performances. Named after the poem *Khoan Cắt Bê Tông* (“drilling cement”) by Lý Đợi, a member of the controversial *Mở Miệng* (Open Mouth) underground poetry group, the group initially conveyed interests in more radical forms of artistic expression and institutional critique, with criticisms largely directed at

¹⁵⁶ *dia / projects* serves as Richard Streitmatter-Tran’s studio, library, and meeting space, while Zero Station hosts workshops, lectures, performances, and on occasion, unconventional exhibition projects. See “*dia / projects*: one year,” May 11, 2011, <http://www.diacritic.org/blog/>, accessed March 16, 2013, and Zero Station / *Ga 0*, <http://www.zerostationvn.org/home.php?id=106>, accessed 11/20/13.

what some of them perceived as the exclusionary art spaces run by *Việt kiều* or foreign artists (Figure 1.49).¹⁵⁷



Figure 1.49: Performance by Nguyễn Văn Tiến at *Xà Bàn* (debris) II, Khoan Cắt Bê Tông event, October 24, 2010. Photograph by the author.

While *Khoan Cắt Bê Tông* has largely operated loosely and has received criticism by numerous artists in the community for what has been perceived as their haphazard and noncommittal artistic endeavors, their critique of what at a time seemed to be the dominating presence of the diasporic returnee artist-organizers has resurfaced in a less acute way in several conversations with artists. A general characterization of the work of by *Việt kiều* artists that was mentioned in several of my interviews was the impression that their work lacked emotion or feeling (*vô cảm*). Given what tends to be a more methodologically and conceptually-oriented process instilled by training at schools in the U.S., their work is often perceived by other artists as too calculated, too research-based, and lacking in emotive inspiration and spontaneity (*không*

¹⁵⁷ Ngô Lực's interview with the author, February 17, 2011.

ngẫu hứng). This assessment of a certain auratic quality in artwork, often typically expressed through the question of whether or not the work has soul, will be addressed in more depth in Chapter 4.

In conclusion, I would return to Saigon Open City as a pivot around which we can see various events and developments to have taken place, each of which contribute to an understanding of Ho Chi Minh City as a local, regional, and global art city. It is important to note that Saigon Open City would appear to have been the outcome – or next step – in a chronology of events that has to take into account the role of individual artists in initiating an alternative paradigm of aesthetic practice, and hence, contributing to the sense of a city's unique artistic identity, for example, the acclaim of southern abstraction. In addition, an institution like Blue Space demonstrated the potential to attract major international capital to establish a different kind of art space, one that functioned as an exhibition venue and an organizing agency for exchanges and workshops that could operate as an alternative platform to the official spaces of state institutions and commercial galleries. Finally, the assimilation of diasporic returnee artists would introduce or orient interests in new artistic practices, such as performance, video art, installation, sound, and new media works, for several local artists, and also initiate dynamic projects in the vein of collective practice and promotion of a dynamic transnational contemporary art scene centered in the formal capital of southern Vietnam. I argue only after these developments had taken place could such an ambitious scheme - a biennial in the one of the most bureaucratically constricting and state-monitored arts infrastructures in the region - even be imagined. A similar endeavor to map actors and events in the shaping of an art world is the subject of the following two chapters, which focus on Phnom Penh and the more fraught articulation of Cambodian contemporary art.

CHAPTER 2

DRAWN INTO THE GLOBAL ART MAP II: PHNOM PENH

To draft a trajectory of art history in Cambodia within the frameworks of the modern and the contemporary presents a further challenge to historicization that is more acutely felt than elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Following a relatively recent practice to frame contemporary art practices in Asia as a responsive process following a moment of rupture or transition, with examples including post-Martial Law Taiwan, post-Bubble Japan, or, as in the previous chapter, post-Renovation Vietnam, the term “post-war” has long denoted practices by both Vietnamese and Cambodian artists who were responding specifically to projects of recuperation in relation to memory, history, and socio-cultural rebuilding after the Vietnam War and the Khmer Rouge. However, most discussions of contemporary art also presume a precedent of modernism, in its many variations, in its capacities as a reaction to tradition and to institutional hegemony, as a reflection of a cultural encounter, often between East and West, or as an experiential relationship with the possibilities of materiality and the artistic medium, purified of political narrative. Therefore, to attempt a chronology of Cambodian contemporary art, which only recently gained international attention within global exhibition circuits after 2009, entails a more in-depth semantic engagement in contrast with my discussion of contemporary art in Vietnam.

While particular groups and movements in Vietnam have self-identified with the modern (*hiện đại*) and the contemporary (*đương đại*) via attempts at localized terminology and dialogues, thereby presenting less of a challenge to place certain currents of thought and practice in Vietnam within discursive categories familiar to Western chronologies, Cambodia, on the other hand, faced a different set of circumstances that altered the course of its art history throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. There is, to begin with, the burden of its art

historical legacy, with Angkor representing one of the monumental traditions underpinning the canon of Southeast Asian art.¹⁵⁸ Colonial artistic formation in Cambodia also set in motion a paradigm of artistic subjectivity that differed from other scenarios in neighboring countries. Within French Indochina, colonial administrators held different attitudes toward training artists in each of the respective states in the federation: Tonkin (north Vietnam), Annam (central Vietnam), Cochinchina (south Vietnam), Cambodia, and Laos, largely reflective of alternative modes of governmentality and cultural perceptions of the various populations. The simple fact that modern “artists” were trained at the *École des Beaux-arts d’Indochine* in Hanoi, who then went on to teach at the Saigon National College of Fine Art, has born a deep imprint on the nature of artistic formation in Vietnam, despite variations in the northern, central, and southern regions. In contrast, the rigorous training of “artisans” at George Groslier’s *École des Arts Cambodgiens* (School of Cambodian Arts), within the larger project of recuperating and preserving traditional Cambodian arts, laid the foundation for subsequent patterns of pedagogy that have persisted through the present, despite the inculcation of alternative teaching methods under the Japanese teacher Suzuki during the postcolonial period of independence.

What I emphasize here is that this presents another absence alongside that which is often reiterated as the most profound absence of all, referring to the lack of discussion surrounding memory of the Khmer Rouge experience in the early years after Cambodia’s entry into globalization in the early 1990s, which I will discuss in more depth shortly. This was most

¹⁵⁸ The perception of Angkor Wat and other architectural and sculptural achievements associated with the Angkorean empire (which thrived from the 9th to 13th centuries) as the exemplary canonical representation of Southeast Asian art in colonial historiography is the subject of Nora Taylor’s conference paper, “Cambodia as the Axis of the Southeast Asian Universe: Reflections on the Art Historiography of the Region,” presented at *Contemporary Art in Cambodia: A Historical Inquiry*, April 21, 2013, Museum of Modern Art, New York City, NY. This also serves as the basis for the title of Ingrid Muan’s unpublished doctoral dissertation, “Citing Angkor: The ‘Cambodian Arts’ in the Age of Restoration,” Ph.D. diss, Columbia University, 2001.

keenly felt at the dawn of what might be called post-Transition Cambodia, following yet another significant turning point in social and economic transformation in the region. I elaborate on the artistic and institutional responses to this historical amnesia further on in the chapter, but what needs to be stated at the outset is that this “lack” builds upon another “lack,” and that is a local discourse of consciously articulated artistic modernism, rather than an institutional history that many artists today simply disregard. Therefore, placing modernism in the Cambodian context is less clear-cut as opposed to the way in which Vietnamese artists in the south have embraced the postcolonial period of artistic experimentation.

This chapter provides the cultural contextualization for the utterances and discourse surrounding contemporary art, impetuses that emerged from what I call recuperative moments, driven by the context of post-war rebuilding within the arena of cultural expression and production. My use of recuperation emphasizes its dual meanings, in the notion of both recovery (from an episode of ill health) and retrieval or repossession (of a lost object). As such I wish to distinguish various drives within the category of recuperation as an overarching creative impulse, as productive tension emerges between the various languages and methods of these recuperative projects, from the perspectives of organizers, curators, and the artists themselves. This is where it becomes apparent that the concept of recuperation is both affirmed and contested via alternative models of artistic and historical engagement, particularly in the sense that numerous contemporary artists have sought recourse to prior alternative forms of modernism in order to access and express the “contemporary” as a state of being and as a social outlook. This chapter and Chapter 3 begin to address those issues through an in-depth survey of the actors and events that placed contemporary Cambodian artists on the map of the global art world, and Chapter 6

extends these inquiries through close discussion of particular artists and their engagements with urban spatiality.

Painters of Modern Life in Phnom Penh

On December 31, 2002, an exhibition titled “*Visions of the Future: An Exhibition of Contemporary Cambodian Art*” opened at the Reyum Institute of Fine Arts and Culture. On the eve of the new year, the works of twenty-one artists – most of whom were trained during the last twenty years at either the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh or at one of the art academies throughout the former Soviet-Eastern bloc countries - were presented to the public as a body of works with a forward-looking vision. This was the first time that such a large group of Cambodian artists had exhibited together in such a context and venue. At this point in time the concept of contemporary art was ungrounded in local understanding beyond its resonance as “modern” (*samăy* សម័យ),¹⁵⁹ that which was not traditional or *purān* (បុរាណ).¹⁶⁰ The curators of

¹⁵⁹ There is today no standardized and commonly used system of transliteration for the Khmer language. Most transliterations approximate a range of informal and formal phonetic transcriptions. For this thesis I follow the system of transliteration established by Michel Antelme, whose linguistic methodology is clearly and compellingly explained in “Note on the Transliteration of Khmer,” *Udaya, Journal of Khmer Studies* 3 (2002), 1-16.

¹⁶⁰ Muan traces various understandings of “modern” in her dissertation, particularly in the resonance of the term as it was expounded by the Japanese teacher, Suzuki, who is remembered by many as “the person who brought ‘modern painting’ to Cambodia” (267). The exact reasons behind his role at the university remain unclear, although it is understood that Sihanouk engaged him for the part he could play in modernizing art education. Suzuki is credited with advocating direct views and engagement with the subject of representation, and “modern” ways of being an artist, such as painting en plein-air. Through my own interviews with artists, “modern” art specifically refers to painting and often denotes an independent subjectivity and an affinity with realism and figurative painting. The terms *samăy* and *damnoep* are typically used to frame the modern, and the French word *peinture* is most often used in place of the Khmer term *gamnūr* (កំនូរ), which refers more specifically to drawing. Several artists from the 1980-90s generation refer to contemporary art as *l’art contemporain* to reference painting in surrealist, symbolist, and abstract styles. According to Muan, Suzuki had taught in French, and one dimension of the general understanding of modern painting is conveyed by its translation as កំនូរលល

the exhibition, Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan, co-founders and directors of Reyum, had worked with this select group of artists to encourage a liberation of expression and experimentation as the primary curatorial impetus of the show.¹⁶¹ For many artists, the notion of freedom of expression was the essence of the contemporary.¹⁶² The deliberate and individual choice of subject matter and style was all that was needed to express the sentiment of being in the now, and given the structures of pedagogical formation that characterized Cambodian art education in the twentieth century, it is not altogether surprising that at this precipitous moment at the turn of the twenty-first century that the encouragement of ‘contemporary art’ would begin to foreground a shift in communal artistic and popular consciousness.

Much of the significance of this exhibition arises from the spatial and situational context in which it was presented. Reyum represented a unique type of cultural institution that distinguished itself from the various NGOs and foreign cultural centers that had begun to pepper the landscape of Phnom Penh in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Reyum had been founded initially as a gallery to host an exhibition of artists’ works responding to a call for submissions by curators of the first Fukuoka Art Triennale in Japan.¹⁶³ Ingrid Muan, an American doctoral candidate conducting research on twentieth-century artistic pedagogy and institutions in Phnom Penh, had partnered with recently returned Cambodian-born Ly Daravuth, who had studied visual art and art history in Paris, to provide a venue to show the works prepared by the artists,

ពណ៌ វិចិត្រកម្ម គំនូរមើលឃើញ (literally “painting by putting down colors” or “painting looking seeing”).

Ingrid Muan, “Citing Angkor,” 273, n. 38.

¹⁶¹ This work consisted of close mentorship of numerous artists participating in the show, in the form of individual studio visits and group meetings at Reyum. Ly Daravuth’s interview with the author, July 2007.

¹⁶² Interviews with Chhim Sothy, Hen Sophal, Suos Sodavy, Tum Saren, Venn Savat, 2011.

¹⁶³ Muan, Ingrid, “Musings on Museums from Phnom Penh,” in *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*, eds. I. Karp et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 273-275.

many of whom were professors at the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA).¹⁶⁴ The first exhibition, titled *Communication*, opened in August 1998 in a space which Muan recognized with unease as “the well-lit white box of the typical Western art gallery.”¹⁶⁵ Muan suggests that this show may have been a first foray into contextualizing these artists’ works as “contemporary” following the Euro-American model of display, public engagement, and textual presentation: “We printed invitation cards on a computer printer and put up posters publicizing our opening. In other words, we produced ‘contemporary art.’ Visitors came and newspapers wrote about ‘modern Cambodian art.’”¹⁶⁶

After *Communication*, the space which Muan and Daravuth had initially named Situations changed to Reyum Insitute of Arts and Culture, and had taken on an expansive and critical project that delved into documenting knowledge of vernacular creative traditions and practices in Cambodia alongside providing an exhibition venue for the visual arts. Through funding provided by major international organizations, such as the Prince Claus Fund and the Rockefeller Foundation, the two directors organized research projects, exhibitions, lectures, workshops, and a series of publications that aimed to provoke an exceptional standard of scholarship, and an open platform for dialogue and exchange primarily targeted at academically

¹⁶⁴ Muan had formed close friendships with numerous professors at RUFA, whom she interviewed for much of the source material in her dissertation. She also worked closely with them to attempt reevaluations of university pedagogy, and several of the professors describe the impact she had in shaping a community around the painters in Phnom Penh who had come together again after some had returned from studies abroad to teach at RUFA. Some saw it as their responsibility to share the knowledge they had gained from their studies outside of Cambodia. However, there is a combination of confidence but also resignation that tinges their recollections, as they have accepted the limitations to change presented by a severe lack of resources and physical space, representative of the state’s overall lack of interest and support for public educational institutions. Interviews with Chan Vitharin, So Chenda, Chhoeun Rithy, 2011-2012.

¹⁶⁵ Muan, “Musings,” 274.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

and artistically-oriented Cambodian youth. The Reyum website indicates several ongoing research projects including:

- 1-Traditional tools and the changes which modernization brings to habits and ways of using things.
- 2- Kbach, the unique ornamental language used in many forms of visual arts in Cambodia.
- 3- Traditional painting and the representational canon through which characters and stories are presented.
- 4- Local histories, individual recollections and the relation of such informal memories to official histories.¹⁶⁷

Alongside these efforts, and given Muan's research on modern art history in Cambodia, exhibitions were organized to provide exposure to the works of artists from various generations, including a commissioned series of works by painter Pech Song in 1999, *The Legacy of Absence* in 2000, and *Painted Stories* in 2001. These exhibitions responded to what Ashley Thompson has described as an absence of expression in light of recent history,¹⁶⁸ and upon which Muan herself eloquently mused:

I have been thinking about a certain gap that seems to open up in Cambodia today, a gap between contemporary surfaces of glass, metal, skin, paint of various kinds – and life as it was and is experienced by the vast majority of average city dwellers in Phnom Penh. That is to say, the world of certain surfaces seems utterly untouched, overly smooth, completely unruffled by histories of conflict, tragedy, suffering and loss. Is it an aesthetic of amnesia? A symptom of trauma? An expression of repression? Or was visual production always in a separate sphere, in a different relationship to life than that proposed by European modernism?¹⁶⁹

I elaborate upon this particular paradigm of absence and the seeking of artistic expression to fill this gap further in the chapter, but what I emphasize here is that the prestige that Reyum

¹⁶⁷ The website continues to function despite Reyum's largely inactive operations since 2009. See "Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture: Research and Documentations," <http://www.reyum.org/research.html>, accessed 6/18/13.

¹⁶⁸ See Ashley Thompson, "Forgetting to Remember, Again: On Curatorial Practice and 'Cambodian Art' in the Wake of Genocide," *Diacritics* 41, no. 2 (2013): 82-109.

¹⁶⁹ Ingrid Muan, "Haunted Scenes: History and Painting in Phnom Penh," *Udaya: Journal of Khmer Studies* 6 (2005), 15.

had begun to attain by 2002 meant that its selected representation of contemporary artists bore significant weight not just for the culturally-minded Cambodian and expat population, but also for the various international arts and cultural agencies that comprised the global network in which Reyum had successfully become imbricated.¹⁷⁰ Furthermore, Muan and Ly produced exhibitions and catalogues that have shaped the construction of a Cambodian modern and contemporary art history. Reyum is noted for several landmark exhibitions that ultimately would serve in historicizing visual art, as in *Cultures of Independence* in 2002, using visual art to historicize, as in the 1999 *Painting History* exhibition of work commissioned by Pech Song, as well as building on the discursive introduction of contemporary art, such as with *Visions of the Future* in 2002. When *Visions of the Future* was presented to the public, its title and glossy catalogue served as a reification of “contemporary Cambodian art,” and this pronouncement was lent weight by the foreign-educated curators and scholars who produced the bilingual text for the catalogue (Figure 2.1).¹⁷¹ But I would note that the Khmer title of the exhibition differed from the English, with the term “contemporary art” only used in the English title. The Khmer-language title was *Future: An Exhibition of Artworks*. Therefore, the aspect of this discourse that I address pertains significantly to international perceptions and how this may have then been received, appropriated, or adapted by artists.

¹⁷⁰ These included prestigious international organizations and funding bodies such as the Prince Claus Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Asian Cultural Council.

¹⁷¹ Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan, *Visions of the Future: An Exhibition of Contemporary Cambodian Art* (Phnom Penh: Reyum, 2002).

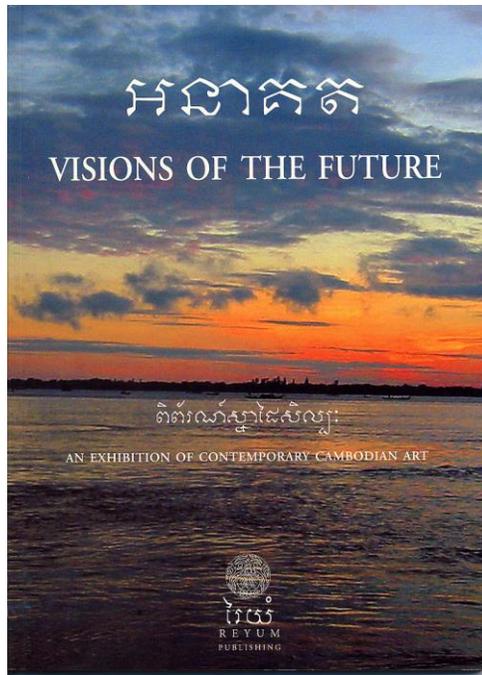


Figure 2.1: Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan, *Visions of the Future: An Exhibition of Contemporary Cambodian Art* (Phnom Penh: Reyum, 2002). Cover of catalogue.

This is not to say that such a pronouncement was easily accepted by neither the immediate audience of the exhibition nor the larger global audience that could procure copies of the catalogue. There were mixed opinions about the merits of many of the works, from sheer lack of comprehension of some pieces that attempted to be more abstract and conceptual, such as Suos Sodavy's assemblage *The Peaceful World* (Figure 2.2), to critiques based on pure aesthetic judgment to those influenced by personal or institutional affiliations. Reyum itself was not considered a neutral space, given its location across from the Royal University of Fine Arts, a spatial positioning which some inferred as opposing or competing with the school, especially with the founding of the Reyum Art School in 2001.¹⁷² In addition, the small, white-cube space of its interior, due to the directors' original aspirations to create a professional gallery

¹⁷² *In Transition: Contemporary Cambodian Artists* (Phnom Penh: Reyum, 2008), 72. Tith Veasna's conversations with the author, 2011-2012.

atmosphere, still kept some at a distance, despite the large and diverse turnout which came to each Reyum lecture and exhibition opening (Figure 2.3).



Figure 2.2 (left): Suos Sodavy (b. 1955), *The Peaceful World*, 2002, wood, found wood, paint, 189 x 183 cm.

Figure 2.3 (right): Opening reception of *Painted Stories*, June 22, 2001. Both images sourced from Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture, http://www.reyum.org/exhibitions/exhibit13/exhibit_photo_gallery.html#A (accessed 06/02/2015).

For those at a distance, the mere mention of Cambodian contemporary art was enough to spark interest, particularly for those curious about cultural development in a place only known for its affiliation with the Vietnam War and the Khmer Rouge regime. But for many, the works which appeared in the catalogue or on the Reyum website caused puzzlement because of what seemed to be a fairly haphazard collection of paintings, many of which were surrealist, abstract, or impressionistic, which drew on a limited iconography of easily recognizable Cambodian symbols, and which appeared overall to be derivative and outmoded, even kitsch. It may have seemed difficult to embrace this selection as representing contemporary art on par with what was being seen in the neighboring countries of Thailand or Vietnam, even in a place like Cambodia, which had understandably only begun to rebuild numerous infrastructures and whose modern art

history was fragmented to prior to the major rupture that occurred with Democratic Kampuchea (1975-79).

To understand the spectrum of these aesthetic predilections, one has to understand the import of artistic formation that occurred within Cambodia as well as in the Soviet-Eastern bloc, where many of the teachers received graduate education. What guides their creative process and choice of style also reflects as much on the current commercial nature of some of their professions as well as the imprint of decades of academic artistic formation which reflect shifts in ideological cultural expression predicated on transnational movements and geopolitical currents. For many, their training at the Royal University of Fine Arts and subsequent return to professorship at the school has shaped their conviction in different forms of expression for the self and the public. The journeys of many of these painters to various countries in the former Soviet-Eastern bloc, as they received scholarships to study at art academies in Ukraine, Russia, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Vietnam, amongst others, opened them up to what many of them see proudly as a Western art education, giving them a sense of assurance in their abilities and competency as being cosmopolitan contemporary artists, yet with the added benefit of having a deep grounding in the culturally specific training of their earlier education in traditional Khmer arts. And it is against this exposure and formation in the Soviet Bloc countries, as well as in Cambodia during the 1979-89 period of People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), that many of them have embraced particular styles, notably symbolism and surrealism, to counteract the prescribed ideologies of Socialist Realism.¹⁷³

In order to attend to the questions of aesthetic choices and stylistic predilections, some background regarding the notion of absolute rupture in artistic pedagogy is needed. Given the

¹⁷³ Interviews with Heng Monypal, Venn Savat, Chhim Sothy, Chhoeun Rithy, 2011-2012.

devastation wrought by the Pol Pot regime during Democratic Kampuchea (DK) from 1975-79, it may seem surprising that great initiative was taken to restore the Royal University of Fine Arts or as it is still popularly known, *Sālā Racanā* (សាលាវិស្វកម្ម), so quickly after the fall of the regime.¹⁷⁴ The initiative was taken by a handful of teachers, led by the renowned master craftsman and silversmith, Som Samai, who became the first dean of the faculty in what was reopened under the name of the School of Fine Arts in 1980.¹⁷⁵ Venn Savat (b. 1968), a member of the first class of students to reenter the School of Fine Arts after 1979, recalled how during his foundational studies, he worked with others to renovate and clean the campus, which had fallen into a jungle-like state of disrepair during the Khmer Rouge period. However, Savat looked back on what was for many an incredibly difficult and fairly dark period of social change with a positive attitude, describing what appeared to be continuities in teaching prior to DK in tandem with energetic aspirations to revive what had once been one of the most prominent educational institutions in the country.

¹⁷⁴ Groslier's School of Cambodian Arts was renamed the Royal University of Fine Arts in 1965, under the rectorship of renowned architect Vann Molyvann. It maintained a curriculum based on that founded by Groslier, yet incorporated new directions under the patronage of Norodom Sihanouk. According to Philippe Peycam, "It was an experiment of a post-colonial university anchored in the "local", combining the arts and humanities, ancient studies, and contemporary ethnology, under the protective mantle of the monarchy." Philippe M. F. Peycam, "Sketching an Institutional History of Academic Knowledge Production in Cambodia (1863-2009) — Part 2," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 28: 1 (2011), 21. The introduction of Suzuki was part of a larger nation-building project to now produce modern artists as opposed to artisans (Muan, "Citing Angkor," 320). According to master painter Chet Chan, before Molyvann, the school only had Plastic Arts (Fine Arts), Royal Ballet and Drama, Music, Weaving, and Sculpture, and largely trained students to work for the Royal Palace. Interview with the author, January 18, 2012.

¹⁷⁵ Through the efforts of master silversmith Som Samai, the School reopened under the name of the School of Fine Arts in 1980, when they admitted their first class of students. At that time, instruction was only provided at the high school level; university-level training was only restored after the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops in 1989, at which time the departments of Archaeology, Architecture, and Plastic Arts were incorporated (Muan, "Citing Angkor," 398, n. 21). The five majors students could pursue were Architecture, Plastic Arts, Archaeology, Music, and Dance. Interview with Chhim Sothy, August 7, 2011.

During the period of 1979-1989 under the nominally socialist People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), backed by the Vietnamese state, numerous efforts by the new government were directed primarily with the reinstatement of the most basic infrastructures in society.¹⁷⁶ Examples of these difficulties included the restoration of a monetary economy and basic public services such as electricity and water throughout the city.¹⁷⁷ In addition, although the Vietnamese had effectively driven out the Khmer Rouge from Cambodia's major urban and rural areas, the PRK period continued to witness ongoing violence as civil war raged between remnants of the Khmer Rouge at the Thai border, supported by China and various international states in the West, along with several other factions fighting in the name of resistance against the Vietnamese 'puppet regime'. A state of social instability and civil war throughout the 1980s characterize most descriptions of the period, if people were willing to talk about it all. Naturally this placed severe limitations on the quality of education as access to materials and resources were restricted, and overarching pedagogical directives catered to a Socialist Realist schema. Few of the artists that I interviewed wanted to discuss the details of their studies at RUFA during the PRK period, and while they would share images of the posters or signage they had produced

¹⁷⁶ Rebuilding efforts were further impeded by the refusal of aid by most of the international community, with the United States' trade embargo against Cambodia, which had been in effect since 1975, representative of an act of recrimination against the Hanoi government in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

¹⁷⁷ In 1980 the *riel* was reintroduced as the official monetary currency, and later in the mid- to late 1980s, dollars gradually began to enter the economy through overseas remittances and humanitarian aid. Under UNTAC, the economy underwent a massive dollarization. However, throughout the early to mid-1980s, exchange was largely based upon an informal barter system, and a can of uncooked rice was a common unit of currency used as payment for services or goods. Painter Chhim Sothy recalls being paid one can of rice for one hour of French language tutorial while he lived at Wat Saravan during his studies at the art school. Interview with the author, August 7, 2011.

during the time, they preferred to talk about their painting philosophies and their time spent abroad.¹⁷⁸

When asked about the climate of education during PRK, most of the artists who studied at RUFA described the hardships of the time, particularly in regards to the constraints with which they were faced in terms of pursuing serious studies in the absence of basic material resources, such as paper, artistic implements, and books. In addition, the psychological atmosphere of the city in the early 1980s was one of continued suffering and mental and physical trauma incurred by the devastation of the DK regime. There were many who returned to Phnom Penh in a state of utter exhaustion, psychologically debilitated, with no familial or social connections, having lost all family members during the war. Chhim Sothy (b. 1969) recalled his return to Phnom Penh with no funds or close social connections, and having to rely on the *wats* (Buddhist temples) to provide food and shelter in exchange for some labor and services.¹⁷⁹ Sothy said he and others taught French to the monks as well as provided routine maintenance work at Wat Saravan, where he stayed for three years due to its proximity to the school. He described how doing this work for the most basic room and board while simultaneously trying to resume their studies was a grueling task.

However, some artists, like Savat, describe such conditions as being generative, due to what was felt to be the most urgent project of recuperating previous knowledge. From Muan's interviews, she inferred that "Both students and professors of the early 1980s remember a

¹⁷⁸ Some of this reticence is still likely attributed to an unease that many Cambodians have in describing the hardships of PRK, a deep reluctance to dwell on the traumatic past, and in part, lingering fears about openly critiquing a regime which many believe to be a predecessor to the current party in power, particularly with respect to the rise of Hun Sen. Hun Sen came to power during PRK, when he was elected Prime Minister in 1985, and he has more or less held that position since, through strong-arm tactics as the head of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP). For an overview of art education during the PRK period and how programs endorsing Socialist ideology were inculcated within the curriculum, see Muan, "Citing Angkor," 386-475.

¹⁷⁹ Interview with Chhim Sothy, August 7, 2012.

rigorous discipline (the flag was saluted at 7:30) which was motivated as much by what they had gone through as by fear of the new authoritarian regime.”¹⁸⁰ Yet several artists I interviewed reiterated the vigor of efforts to take maximum advantage of the skills that the few surviving teachers had to offer for the new generation.¹⁸¹ An informal interdisciplinary structuring of materials and diverse subject matter, including courses not normally taught at the high school level, characterized the curriculum, in large part because of the lack of separate faculties at the time. Art History was taught as part of Painting, which was broadly divided into two categories: traditional, referring to the highly codified and stylized manner of painting reserved for temple murals and subject matter related to religion or epic narratives such as the Reamker, and *peinture*, which included just about everything else under the loose category of the modern.¹⁸² Students were required to have extensive training in all styles of painting, and for this reason many look back and consider their early training at the newly reopened school to have provided them with a diverse and thorough skill set, which some of them would bring to bear on the education they received abroad. In addition, all tuition was paid, as students received ‘scholarships’ provided by the Ministry of Culture throughout the 1980s.¹⁸³ When asked about the disadvantages or challenges of studying at the art school during the time, Savat recalled that there was perhaps too much pressure and stress put upon this first generation of art students in

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Savat described the fortune he had to study with respected scholars, many of whom had taught at the university prior to 1975, among them Som Samai, Pao Tien, Son Rin, and Mon Sonee. Peycam also notes several Cambodians who had trained at RUFA, left prior to DK, and returned later to effect change as part of the rebuilding effort. These included Ang Choulean, Son Soubert, and Nouth Narang. Peycam, 22.

¹⁸² The Reamker is the Cambodian version of the Ramayana.

¹⁸³ “When the school allowed the first class to enter (1980), a flood of applicants appealed to authorities for entrance since those studying would be allowed to stay at the school with basic meals provided” (Muan, “Citing Angkor,” 398). During the Lon Nol regime from 1970 to late 1974, RUFA was transferred from the auspices of the Ministry of Education to what was then the Ministry of Information, Religion and Culture. Chet Chan’s interview with the author, January 18, 2012. The Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts (ក្រសួងវប្បធម៌ និងវិចិត្រសិល្បៈ) was officially established in 1997.

this period of rebuilding, and he attributes some students' nervous breakdowns to the pressure of the workload.

From the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s numerous students at the school received scholarships to pursue bachelor's and master's degrees at art academies throughout the Soviet-Eastern bloc as a form of state-sponsored cultural exchange and as a way to ensure the credibility of advanced training that could only be achieved outside the country, ensuring that former students who returned to teach at the university would possess an international standard of education.¹⁸⁴ With the ostracization of Cambodia under the PRK regime due to Vietnam War fall-out, countries that were part of the Soviet-Eastern bloc, including countries in Eastern Europe, the USSR, and Vietnam, were a primary source of financial and material support for Cambodia. Students were offered full scholarships to study specific subject matter at their art academies and universities, including the majors of painting, sculpture, interior design, or architecture. These were perceived as highly enviable opportunities to go to the "West" (in the case of Eastern Europe or the USSR) and receive a higher caliber of education. Ironically, when describing the curriculum at these schools, some former students acknowledged the similarity in pedagogy to what they had been used to in the School of Fine Arts, such as a focus on copying from models and demonstration of technical skills as opposed to individual critical thinking.¹⁸⁵ However, most of the artists who received these scholarships speak to their experience as having been an excellent opportunity to live abroad and take advantage of resources not available to them in Cambodia. For example, Chhoeun Rithy (b. 1965) studied at RUFA from 1980-1985, then at the Academy of Fine Arts, Kiev, in Ukraine, until he received his MFA in 1992 (Figures

¹⁸⁴ See Muan, "Citing Angkor," Chapter 6.

¹⁸⁵ Interviews with Venn Savat, Tum Saren, Chhoeun Rithy, Heng Mony Phal, So Chenda, Suos Sodavy, and Chhim Sothy, 2011-2012.

2.4 – 2.5). The focus of his training in painting was realism, and a primary exercise involved copying from selected “master” artists largely drawn from a canon of Russian landscape painters (Figure 2.6). Still, he maintained that his teachers possessed superior teaching methods and that there was naturally better access to resources for students.¹⁸⁶ In the ‘foundational’ years (years 1-3) of his bachelor’s degree program in Kiev, students had to analyze various movements and styles drawn from art historical examples, and then think about which professor’s style they wished to emulate or follow. In the last year one would “apprentice” with that professor, which he described as encouraging students to use as a way to create their own path and develop their own individual artistic process. This bears a striking similarity to the process of training which RUFA students receive in the present, which is unsurprising given that the generation of artists who studied abroad comprise much of the core faculty at the university today.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Interviews with So Chenda, Chhoeun Rithy, Tith Veasna, Khvay Samnang, Linda Saphan, and Leang Seckon, 2011-2012. Some twenty Cambodian students studied abroad beginning in the PRK period, and according to So Chenda, fifteen returned to teach at RUFA.

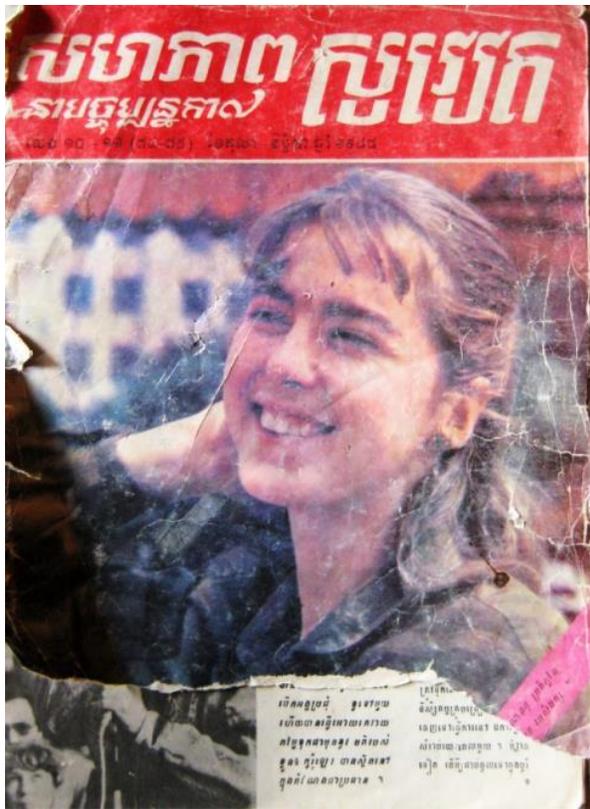


Figure 2.4: Cover of *Soviet Union Now* magazine, volume 10-11 (74-75), October-November 1988. Courtesy of Chhoeun Rithy.



Figure 2.5: Article featuring Chhoeun Rithy. Courtesy of Chhoeun Rithy.



Figure 2.6: Photographs of paintings by Chhoeun Rithy. Both untitled and undated. Courtesy of the artist.

The residence abroad also allowed students to travel for leisure or exhibition opportunities, although for some, these exhibitions held little appeal due to their political content. Chhoeun Rithy said that he didn't participate in many shows because the exhibitions were much more deeply connected to politics than art, with Socialist Realism as the primary creative

ideology shaping artistic production.¹⁸⁸ But he did take advantage of short breaks throughout the academic year in which he traveled to see exhibitions as part of the larger learning experience. According to Muan, “Through their new alliance into the ‘socialist brotherhood’, Cambodian artists were drawn into an existing network of exhibition. In 1981, for example, several sculptors were included in the ‘International Exhibition of Small-Scale Sculpture’, a display of sculptures from socialist countries which was held in Budapest, Hungary.”¹⁸⁹ However, the artists that Muan interviewed spoke with some bitterness in regards to this exhibitionary circuit, as they claimed some of their work was never returned and were even claimed as the works of officials who attended the exhibitions and who then sold the works for personal profit.¹⁹⁰

As for whether the study abroad was an isolating experience for Cambodian students in terms of feeling disconnected from events in their home country, many found ways to make fairly regular trips back, and after completing their studies, most of the twenty who had gone abroad chose to return to Cambodia and to the School of Fine Arts.¹⁹¹ For Tum Saren (b. 1957), who attended the University of Fine Arts in Ho Chi Minh City (*Đại học Mỹ thuật Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh*), he was able to easily make the bus trip between Ho Chi Minh City and Phnom Penh once a year, and Chhoeun Rithy found a way to cover his airfare from Kiev by bringing merchandise, such as clothing and craft items, from both directions to sell and make some profit.¹⁹² This way he found a means of financially supporting his travel to enjoy fairly regular visits home. As such, most of the artists spent almost a decade abroad during what was deemed a critical shift in Cambodian society and the seemingly major changes that occurred in the early

¹⁸⁸ Interview with the author, December 7, 2011.

¹⁸⁹ Muan, diss., 412.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 419.

¹⁹¹ So Chenda’s interview with the author, September 9, 2011.

¹⁹² Interviews with Tum Saren and Chhoeun Rithy, 2011-12.

1990s, three transitions that Caroline Hughes has described as the attempts to democratize, attain peace, and reform the economy.¹⁹³ Yet because of the fair degree of mobility that many of them enjoyed, few of them described experiencing major culture shock upon reintegration into Cambodia society upon their return in the late 1990s or early 2000s. In addition to the fact that many were able to visit Cambodia fairly regularly, this was also likely due to what some have described as the largely “surface” nature of the state’s transition from socialism to democracy, and from centrally planned economy to market economy. These changes were accompanied by the ongoing presence of major political players that took center stage during the PRK regime and continued to be at the head of state after Cambodia became a democratic society, after the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) oversaw peacekeeping operations and the administration of the first national elections in 1993.¹⁹⁴

For many of the artists recently returned from abroad and for those who had stayed in Cambodia and continued to study and teach at the University of Fine Arts, the UNTAC period (1992-93) presented exciting opportunities for cultural exchange and learning but also with the difficulties that typically surround a sudden influx of human and financial capital. For those who had returned to teach at RUFA, it was a particularly stimulating period due to the level of exchange between international aid workers, art teachers, and the RUFA faculty. The new professors and staff who had received their MFAs abroad took pride in their abilities and level of knowledge, considering their “Western” education to be superior to that of their colleagues who

¹⁹³ Caroline Hughes notes that these three transitions have remained incomplete projects and also mutually-conflicting processes, and in particular, the economic transition (which occurred in various stages since the fall of the KR regime) has actually hampered the projects of peace and democracy. See Caroline Hughes, *The Political Economy of Cambodia's Transition, 1991-2001* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 1-3.

¹⁹⁴ See Andrew Cock, “External Actors and the Relative Autonomy of the Ruling Elite in Post-Untac Cambodia,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 41:2 (2010): 241-265, and Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge: Inside the Politics of Nation Building* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

had stayed in Cambodia, but even they acknowledged the shortcomings of having had a higher art education prescribing to Socialist ideology or limited to study of certain groups of “master artists” namely from Russian impressionist and expressionist schools. Several of the RUFA professors describe the international teachers during the UNTAC period through the mid-1990s as having provided further exposure to alternative ideas about contemporary art and exposure to different kinds of practices, such as installation and other new media and styles.¹⁹⁵ Many of the current teachers nostalgically recall the high level of activity at RUFA in terms of cultural exchanges, exhibitions, and workshops that were organized as part of cultural development programs initiated by NGOs and other agencies that began to flood the city.

In contrast with the mid-1990s, Chhoeun Rithy and others described how RUFA has to a certain extent become obsolete in the present, and how being part of the RUFA faculty and lineage ensures a degree of being cut off from the developments taking place in other art venues around the city. Because of severely limited funding from the government, complicated bureaucratic processes, internal politics, and the lack of appeal that the institution now holds as a site for artistic formation, the school is no longer the main stage for hosting cultural exchanges and exhibitions.¹⁹⁶ In addition, while RUFA was the central platform for these kinds of events and provided some access to international artistic developments in the early to mid-1990s, since then there has been little to no innovation in teaching pedagogies, despite desires to change or update curriculum. On the one hand, the faculty do not experience the level of restrictions and governmental control that face the faculty at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Fine Arts; on the other hand, the concept of contemporary art lacks understanding among not only the wider public but even amongst the visual arts students at the school.

¹⁹⁵ Interviews with Chhoeun Rithy, Suos Sodavy, Chhim Sothy, Tum Saren, Venn Savat, 2011-12.

¹⁹⁶ Interview with the author, December 7, 2012.

Rithy emphasized that little had changed in students' understanding of these concepts from when he returned to teach painting at RUFA in 1992 until now. Most of the artists currently teaching at RUFA assert that one of the fundamental issues facing the development of contemporary art concerns the problem of pedagogical training at the school, which they have little power to change. A basic conceptual foundation of the visual arts is still lacking due to the focus on technical skills and reproduction of styles, a pedagogical structure which, in a sense, has evolved little from the initial mission of the colonial art school founded by George Groslier even through the educational reforms instituted by Suzuki in the immediate post-colonial period.¹⁹⁷ Numerous faculty and former students described how when students try to go against the grain or break out of the mold they would receive low grades or not pass their final exam; in order to succeed within the system one must follow the professor's model. Rithy described how although there is development of contemporary art on the 'outside' (of RUFA), on the 'inside' there is no allowing for experimentation in that one must successfully learn how to replicate a particular style or subject.¹⁹⁸ The system is not changing, and in addition, the graduates have to cater to the market to earn a practical living. Various members of the RUFA faculty noted with resignation that in order for such an art practice to develop there needs to be a social awareness or public understanding as well as a substantial commercial market; in Cambodia there are neither, even at a rudimentary scale.

The development of a local market for "Cambodian contemporary art" can be linked to UNTAC and the chain of events that ensued with rapid processes of economic liberalization. The

¹⁹⁷ With specific reference to the Plastic Arts department at RUFA, while Groslier's pedagogical model can be traced in the present, larger endemic institutional issues in the realms of public education, governmental support, and allocation of resources should be considered the primary factors undermining progress in arts education, among other sectors. See Muan's discussion of continued patterns of reproduction, the art of the multiple, and the armature in "Citing Angkor," 475-485.

¹⁹⁸ Interviews with Chhoeun Rithy, Tith Veasna, Khvay Samnang, and Leang Seckon, 2011-12.

process of the peace agreements in the early 1990s could be regarded as the official starting point of Cambodia's entry into globalization, but the sheer level of international aid workers that flooded the country during the UNTAC period, followed by a rapidly growing tourist industry, catalyzed the open market and Cambodia's integration into the global economy.¹⁹⁹ This had an almost immediate impact upon the art market – indeed, it created an art market amongst the expanding NGO and tourist population, and this was a market that many of the new RUFA faculty took advantage of in order to supplement the meager salaries they received from the state.²⁰⁰ Many of them deployed their fairly sophisticated level of technical training to produce appealing impressionistic Cambodian landscapes, such as flat rice fields dotted with sugar palm trees (an emblematic national symbol), peasants wearing traditional scarves (*kramā*) working the land alongside buffalo, or men and women catching fish in baskets. These paintings continue to hold great appeal in the tourist market due to their stylistic affinity with the brushwork and composition of French and Russian impressionist landscape paintings. With the growth of tourism and its market for arts and crafts in the 2000s, the subject of Angkor Wat became a primary subject matter in the small commercial galleries across the street from RUFA on Street 178 (Figure 2.7). Consequently, despite increasingly garish renditions of the temple landscape, this has become the primary artwork sought by local business owners for restaurant or hotel lobby decoration.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ See Gottesman and Downie for their discussion of the onset of economic liberalisation in informal sectors during the late PRK period.

²⁰⁰ At the time of Ingrid Muan's research in the 1990s it was around \$20/month, at the time of my fieldwork in 2011 it was an average of \$30/month.

²⁰¹ A new model of artist-run studio/gallery has emerged in recent years, with more upscale and high-concept design spaces opening up along the riverfront, run by artist-designers (typically in partnership with a financial backer), who showcase and sell their own work. These include self-trained Thang Sothea and French-trained Em Riem, not to mention perhaps the first instance of this model, the self-titled gallery of the artist who goes by the name Asasax, established in 1999.



Figure 2.7: Painting of Angkor Wat outside the storefront of a gallery on Street 178. Photograph by the author, 2007.

Some of the artists of this generation sought a primarily commercial as opposed to academic route in the 1990s, whether they or not they had the opportunity to work at RUFA. Because Venn Savat had never officially received his degree from the university, he opened up a private studio and shop on Street 178 and began working as a professional painter in 1993.²⁰² Painter Hen Sophal also chose to pursue his dream of having his own shop and also opened a studio and gallery on Street 178 (Figure 2.8).²⁰³ Both receive enough commissions that they have little time to pursue other projects, but such work might include teaching private classes or tutorials, or working on paintings of their own choosing. Their clientele for the most part is foreign, but they both described within the last ten years they have received more and more requests from Khmer corporate clients, who typically request the reproduction of large paintings illustrating episodes of Angkorean history, such as landscapes inspired by Bayon bas-reliefs, or rendering family portraits from photographs into large oil paintings. According to Sophal, when the market began

²⁰² Interview with the author, January 17, 2012.

²⁰³ Interview with the author, October 25, 2011.

to take off in the early nineties with the influx of foreigners, the price of paintings ranged from \$30 to \$300. These days, Sophal sells work priced from \$250 up to \$5000.²⁰⁴



Figure 2.8: Interior of Hen Sophal's shop on Street 178. Photograph by the author.

These painters were included in the group exhibited in *Visions of the Future*, which featured artists who for the most part represented the generation who had experienced three changes of regime in Cambodia: DK (1975-1979), PRK (1979-1989), and State of Cambodia (1989-1993). Most of them were affiliated with RUFA, yet the group also included some artists who were self-trained and therefore stood outside of the academic lineage. This included Vann Nath (1946-2011), most well-known for being the survivor-painter of Tuol Sleng, and Svay Ken (1933-

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

2008), considered by some in the artist community to be the father of contemporary Cambodian art (Figures 2.9 – 2.10).²⁰⁵ While many of the artists in the exhibition painted with familiar styles and subject matters, several took the opportunity – at the curators’ encouragement - to show works that represented a degree of experimentation that they felt represented a more innovative personal vision less likely to be accepted within their official circles or the larger public. Suos Sodavy ruefully laughed about the reception of his piece, *The Peaceful World*, an assemblage of found materials - namely wooden planks - when it was shown in the exhibition, and joked about how people completely failed to understand why he used such media and why he hung it on the wall as an artwork, why it had no subject matter or clear narrative, and how he received a great deal of criticism at the time for producing the work.²⁰⁶ This was likely the first time that an assemblage from found materials had been exhibited in Cambodia by a Cambodian artist. Many of the artists in the exhibition chose to portray relatively figurative and legible subject matter using familiar icons and symbols to narrate their point-of-view in regards to the general theme of the show, the future. These included *apsara* dancers, the familiar face of Jayavarman VII on the Bayon towers, the flat Cambodian landscape with sugar palm trees, a Khmer mother and child wearing *kramas*, and variations of the Cambodian flag (Figures 2.11). Muan describes this choice of iconography as a concerted effort to Cambodianize the Western artistic styles in which they been trained.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ Tuol Sleng is another name for S-21, a high school turned into a prison during the Khmer Rouge period. Both Vann Nath and Svay Ken will be discussed in more detail in the last section of this chapter.

²⁰⁶ Interview with the author, October 27, 2011.

²⁰⁷ According to Muan, this concentration on recognizable Khmer iconography may have had to do with the experiences of many of the returning artists from overseas, whose “imported” styles met with disdain from older faculty and accusations that their work was no longer Khmer. Muan, “Citing Angkor,” 426.

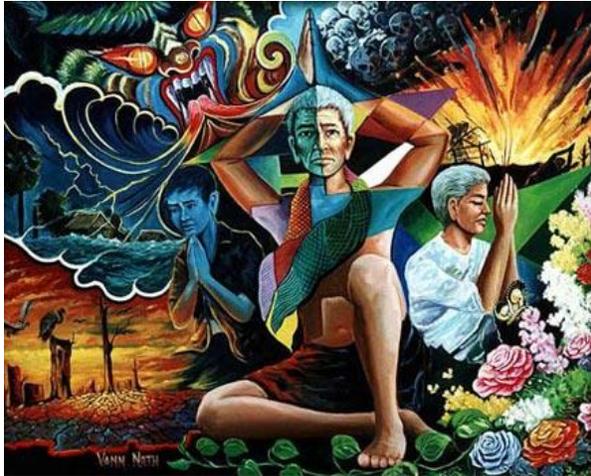


Figure 2.9: Vann Nath, *Prayer*, 2002.

Figure 2.10: Svay Ken, *Greed*, 2002. Both images sourced from Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture, http://www.reyum.org/exhibitions/exhibit13/exhibit_photo_gallery.html#A (accessed 06/02/2015).

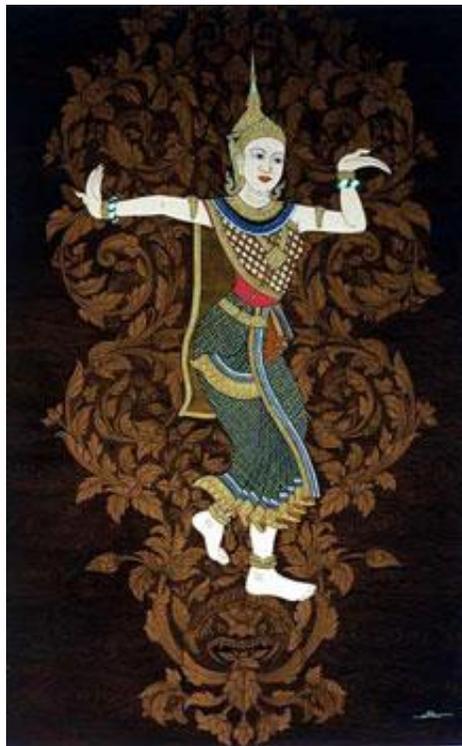


Figure 2.11: Duong Saree, *What Will Tomorrow Bring?*, 2012. Sourced from Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture, http://www.reyum.org/exhibitions/exhibit13/exhibit_photo_gallery.html#A (accessed 06/02/2015).

In the catalogue, the curators of *Visions of the Future*, Ingrid Muan and Ly Daravuth, said that “other than stipulating this theme, no other limitations were set on the work and we exhibit here what was produced in largely unedited form.”²⁰⁸ Artists who were part of the exhibition recollect how the two directors of Reyum worked closely with the artists, particularly Muan, and focused on encouraging the artists to express their ideas.²⁰⁹ After private studio visits and discussions, larger meetings and “critiques” – namely artists sharing their ideas and decisions behind their work - were held at Reyum. As such, the exhibition represented an exercise in introducing the loose format of a curated group show, an alternative pedagogical engagement with the artists (in terms of individual meetings and then larger critique), and the introduction of a particular generation of Cambodian artists as producers of contemporary art. Despite the vague theme of the exhibition, the motley collection of works was hard to decipher or connect beyond a few stylistic affinities and specific references to Cambodian culture through recognizable imagery.

One could argue that the primary accomplishment of *Visions of the Future* was to create a presentation to the public that, first, introduced an informal community of artists which constituted a collective presence of recent Cambodian art history, thus concretizing the notion that Cambodia had a lineage of visual arts producers with definitive perspectives, styles, and conceptual motivations, however retrograde or incongruous with more widespread notions of contemporary art for a larger audience. Secondly, it connected the idea of contemporary art not with new forms of media or conceptual practices, but with a particular perspective on time and place, and for this selection of artists, both categories were firmly situated in the present (not the future) and in Cambodia, in terms of geographic or cultural location. A diverse array of stylistic

²⁰⁸ *Visions of the Future*, 2.

²⁰⁹ Interviews with Ly Daravuth, Venn Savat, Choeun Rithy, Suos Sodavy, etc.

devices were chosen to convey their ideas, from the impressionistic brushwork passed down through post-DK teachers who had studied under Suzuki's curriculum of the independence period, to the Socialist Realist or romantic Russian landscape aesthetic that carried over from artistic training in the Soviet-Eastern bloc, to the fantastical and more ornamental forms that drew on traditional temple mural painting or individually-inspired surrealist or symbolist scenarios. In some instances, the use of symbolism could be considered more radical in the sense of a rupture from tradition, in that certain symbols would appear unmoored from significations drawn from traditional iconography, such as in Hen Sophal's *The Work of a Government Official*. These represent new modes of conceptual coding and self-expression, potentially radical in the context of the highly codified aesthetics and iconography present in other art forms, such as classical dance.

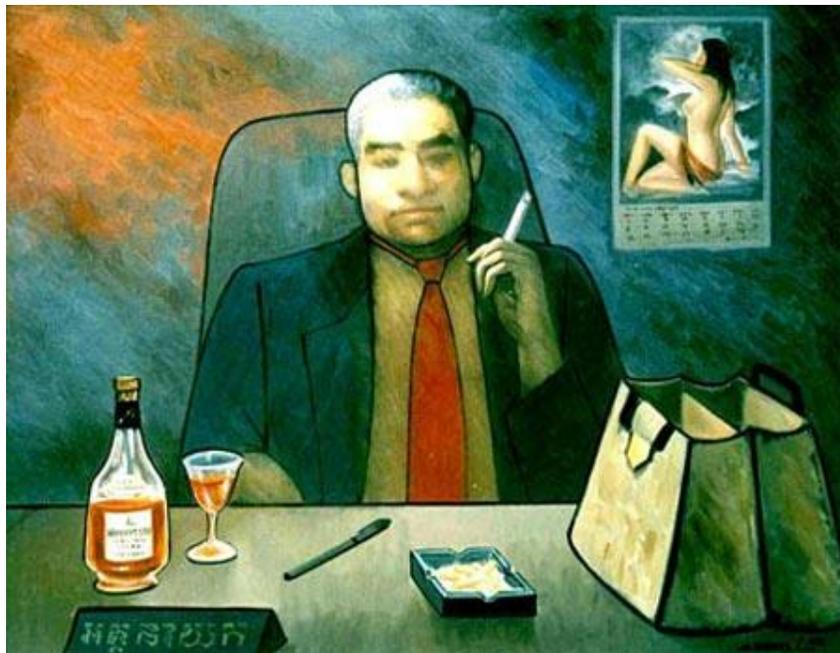


Figure 2.12: Hen Sophal, *The Work of a Government Official*, 2002, oil on canvas, 100 x 80 cm. *Visions of the Future: An Exhibition of Cambodian Contemporary Art* (Phnom Penh: Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture, 2002), p. 67.

If isolated from date and title, *Visions of the Future* certainly could have been perceived as representing decidedly *modern* view-points and stylistic schemas, if placed within a Euro-American chronology of artistic development, but the embracing of the collective group of artists and their works as contemporary would highlight the urgency perhaps felt at the time to jump into the present, into the contemporary here and now, after what felt like to many to have been a prolonged historical chasm in which all forward movement seemed to be at a standstill. The artists' focus on the present and on social and aesthetic critique related to the current and local climate of Cambodia, despite the curatorial theme of the future, would perhaps pave the way for next generation of artists who would choose to express the contemporary in a different way.

NGO Culture, Globalization, and the Shaping of Artistic Discourse in the Period of Cultural Rebuilding

The patterns of discourse, systems of educational training, and the formation of artistic subjectivity established by French colonial rhetoric have maintained a persistent legacy, due to a reiteration of models of training and stylistic reproduction reinforced by a generation of artists training in the Soviet-Eastern bloc and assimilating back into the educational system at RUFA. However, this has been further intensified by a focus on the arts as a tool for community development and cultural rebuilding as NGO discourse became a primary language of newly established arts organizations and galleries in the late 1990s and particularly throughout the 2000s. I would argue that the strong influence of Cambodia's NGO culture had unwittingly set artists apart from the project of what I might call *contemporary* artistic modernity, which can be identified with the individual and group practices, veins of discourse, institutions, and international exhibitionary circuits that characterize the current contemporary art world.

The support of NGOs and development platforms for the arts was critical in the 1990s as a means to support artistic production, exhibition, and some sales to support the artists. The artistic practices promoted by cultural workers and curators in Cambodia in the 1990s and 2000s encouraged pure creative expression - particularly in regards to recuperating historical memory and reconciling with a traumatic past - in the name of cultural rebuilding, to serve the larger purpose of recuperation. This is in contrast to the later trend of returnee artists and international curators who expected artists to engage with more experimental and conceptual forms of artistic production, responding to and encouraging a younger community of artists who have sought to create alternative forms of discussion and practice.²¹⁰ However, it was occasionally described to me – both directly and obliquely - in several informal conversations with local and returnee artists and organizers that Cambodian artists who strove to produce artworks using media such as performance, installation, or research-oriented processes were imitating the foreign. Cambodian-American artist Sopheap Pich expressed frustration with such comments:

I had very heated discussions with foreigners about the issue that Cambodian artists should learn English. They should learn English and draw. But what I'd met is almost total opposition: "Why do they have to learn another language? They should learn their own and let people come to them!" It's as though learning a foreign language would make us less "Khmer", that it somehow will pollute us with "others" ideas.²¹¹

These kinds of statements can be attributed in part to larger rhetorical claims circulated throughout the discourse of cultural rebuilding, with focused efforts on reviving traditional art forms perceived as emblematic of Cambodian identity. The language used to describe the urgency of this recuperation bore echoes of Groslier's own rhetoric of saving the Cambodian

²¹⁰ This includes some diasporic Cambodian returnees, such as Sopheap Pich and Linda Saphan, who initiated various projects in the hopes of sustaining a collaborative and discursive ethos among various communities of artists. I will expand on this in Chapter 3.

²¹¹ "Sopheap Pich," www.artsandsociety.info/Sopheap-Pich, accessed 3/10/2013.

arts. As such, the socio-cultural setting in which Cambodian artists find themselves even today encumbers them with the familiar constraints of having to produce culturally legible work that registers within ethno-national categories for the global art market. At the same time, this burdens artists with an ongoing development discourse that asks them to be key players in the project of cultural restoration and community engagement, corresponding to what have been largely imported “international” models of development and reconciliation, exemplified by the ECCC (Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia), commonly known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal.

The early efforts by café-galleries, NGOs, and foreign cultural institutions to establish spaces and opportunities for Cambodian visual artists were critical to the encouragement of artistic practice at the level of individual artists and even institutional initiatives, and very much served as a preliminary platform for the visual arts in the period of rebuilding after Cambodia’s ten-year phase as a Socialist nation. However, I would emphasize that this mode of engagement and cultural promotion has changed little until very recently, and has resulted in actually doing a disservice to those artists who have begun to focus on more conceptual and critical practice, in the sense of art for art’s sake. Phnom Penh-based American curator Erin Gleeson has described this kind of societal attitude as essentializing in its flattening-out of Cambodian society at large in order to prescribe that if art cannot be understood and appreciated by the majority, then it is ineffective and self-serving.²¹² This mentality has echoes in the familiar art for life’s sake versus art for art’s sake argument, in its various guises, but most notably as it has been historically debated in communist countries like Vietnam and China.

The understanding of what I call “NGO culture,” and particularly of Phnom Penh as an

²¹² Conversations with the author, 2011-12.

NGO city, is imbricated in the larger critique of the detrimental effects that such a dominant development discourse can have on the encouragement of alternative arts practices. This is particularly undermining in a society in which the visual arts continues to take a back seat to the art forms (primarily dance) that have been emphasized as representative of authentic Cambodian culture, and therefore have gained the most focus and funding in projects of cultural and commercial promotion. This cultural discourse provides a counterpart to the social, economic, and political repercussions of aid dependency, which has been the subject of a recent critique by Sophal Ear.²¹³ Heightened awareness of the NGO presence in Cambodia, perceived as further perpetrating a culture of dependency, is also due to the visibility of a socio-economically and racially segmented urban population, and an expatriate community connected to NGO work consolidated in areas of the city with prime real estate, a presence which is still relatively unmatched in neighboring countries.²¹⁴

The changing human and spatial geography of Phnom Penh since the close of the Socialist regime in the late 1980s reflects its gradual transition from a sparsely populated city still rebuilding vital infrastructures to what is perceived as a rapidly developing cosmopolitan

²¹³ See Sophal Ear's recent book, *Aid Dependence in Cambodia: How Foreign Assistance Undermines Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

²¹⁴ In 1988, nearing the close of the PRK regime, there was an estimated foreign population of just 130 Westerners, but over the next three years, prior to the arrival of the UNTAC troops, the number tripled, and this population moved from rented 'apartments' (hotel rooms in two main hotels, the Monorom and the Samaki) to the rented villas around the city occupied by the dwindling community of Vietnamese advisors, the bulk of whom vacated the country in 1989. According to Susan Downie, "From 1 May 1989 Cambodians automatically had the right to own the house they lived in, on that day. At the same time, the last Vietnamese advisers were leaving, and vacating dozens of large villas which the government then allocated to senior officials. In the new spirit of capitalism, these instant home owners – seeing flashing dollar signs – made their new homes available to foreigners, while they crammed their families into less palatial dwellings, or used the rental advance to build a smaller house at the rear of the villa or in the outer suburbs." Susan Downie, *Down Highway One: Journeys Through Vietnam and Cambodia* (Hong Kong: Asia 2000, 1993), 217.

capitol with the potential to become a global city.²¹⁵ During the dawn of official liberalization and Cambodia's efforts to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the international community for the sake of foreign aid, NGOs were allowed great deal of leeway and freedom to operate within the new State of Cambodia.²¹⁶ In Grant Curtis' account of the transition, he describes this "post-UNTAC aid market," as a result of lingering guilt on the part of the international community, but which proceeded largely in consideration of international rather than Cambodian decision-making.²¹⁷ This transformation occurred in tandem with what Caroline Hughes described as the perception of Cambodia as a laboratory for peace-building, "a concept shaped by Kantian theories of international democratic peace and a link between political participation and international democratic peace."²¹⁸ It was later that the growing expatriate community primarily connected to NGO work and aid projects would become the local art market for the emerging café-galleries and commercial art galleries in the 2000s, and that a simultaneous focus on cultural development and 'the rebirth of Cambodian art' would begin to draw attention to the Cambodian visual arts scene.²¹⁹ Over a ten year period, beginning in the early 2000s, local and foreign press latched on to the idea that – out of the ashes of a recent genocidal history - a contemporary art scene was on

²¹⁵ In their comparison of Vientiane (Laos), Napidaw (Burma), and Phnom Penh (Cambodia), John Walsh and Fuengfa Ampostira suggest that out of the three cities in the Mekon region of Southeast Asia, because "in Phnom Penh the private sector is given the most free rein to pursue its own agenda (and at the same time enacting certain state developmental goals)," it has the most potential to "embrace the future as a potential global city." John Walsh and Fuengfa Amponstira, "Infrastructure Development and the Repositioning of Power in Three Mekong Region Capital Cities," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37:3 (2013), 889.

²¹⁶ According to Andrew Cock, "Politically, with many of the 'empirical' attributes of statehood absent, the external recognition of its territorial identity and international status becomes a key basis on which a distinctive 'Cambodian' economic and political entity can be conceived. From external recognition, flows foreign aid." Cock, 247-248.

²¹⁷ Grant Curtis, *Cambodia Reborn? The Transition to Democracy and Development* (Washington, D.C. : Brookings Institution. 1998), 69.

²¹⁸ Hughes, *The Political Economy*, 13.

²¹⁹ Some of these first spaces include Java Café, Two Fish Gallery Café, and the New Art Gallery.

the rise in Phnom Penh, and the ‘Cambodian arts’ continue to be “reborn” to this day.²²⁰

The onset of this cultural revival in sync with a growing community largely comprised of aid workers has led several artists and organizers to characterize the expatriate presence and their patronage of the arts within a critique of neocolonialism in the guise of development.²²¹ In the early 1990s, journalist and travel writer Susan Downie drily described the climate of the early UNTAC period:

By early 1992 the Khmer Rouge were legitimately back in Phnom Penh as members of the Supreme National Council which had established its headquarters here. The ‘god-king’ [Sihanouk] was happily ensconced in his beautifully restored palace, entertaining diplomats just as he had done in the flamboyant 1960s when French champagne flowed till the small hours. Diplomatic missions were re-established for the first time since 1975 and flag-flying limos purred up and down Tou Samouth Boulevard. Plans were underway to repatriate refugees, and at last the UN were here: an advance mission (UNAMIC) had been sent to help the actions maintain their ceasefire and prepare for the arrival of UNTAC, the 22 000-strong election and peacekeeping force... This gave Cambodia a new confidence. But it also sent the dollar plummeting and real estate prices skyrocketing. Restaurants were dominated by soldiers, white Toyota Landcruisers displaying huge ‘UN’ letters occupied precious parking spots, and prostitutes were increasing significantly. This was only the beginning. The first UN contingent numbered only 268 military and administrative personnel; UNTAC would be more than 80 times larger. Paradoxically, UNTAC was coming to end an era dominated by the Vietnamese, who were said by the West to have ‘occupied’ Cambodia for 10 years. Yet UNTAC could be regarded as yet another occupying force, and this was going to be difficult for the Cambodians to accept.²²²

Linda Saphan, a Cambodian-born Canadian citizen, returned to Phnom Penh for the first time in 1995, with later visits for anthropological fieldwork related to her graduate studies, and finally settled in the city in 2003. She later became a prominent figure within the arts community in the first decade of the new millennium, and is a particularly outspoken critic of the model of dependency between Cambodian artists and foreign patrons in what she describes as a

²²⁰ I will elaborate upon this further in Chapter 3.

²²¹ Caroline Hughes describes at least 164 NGOs operating in Cambodia in 1996, and an estimated 400-900 NGOs in operation by 1999. See Hughes, *The Political Economy*, 140-145.

²²² Downie, 233.

neocolonial framework. Saphan argues that NGOs provided a model of labor and commerce with which Cambodian entrepreneurs cannot compete, particularly in the standard NGO appeal to customers to encourage industries employing the crippled and traumatized. Saphan was frank in stating that this was an example of neocolonialism, and that its reach had extended to the art world.²²³

Phnom Penh's appeal as an international city or cosmopolitan city in the eyes of many international visitors is in large part due to the pervasive presence of the NGO population, the ensuing expatriate neighborhoods (desirable areas of real estate dominated by serviced apartments and Western cafes and restaurants), and the ubiquitousness of the English language as the lingua franca outside of Khmer. The comfortable lifestyle of expatriate development workers and the ease with which the English language enables the international community to embrace a certain lifestyle is reflected in the fact that it was only in the mid-2000s that art exhibitions provided translated curatorial text in Khmer. Prior to 2007, almost all art exhibitions were curated by foreign curators, cultural workers, or "art-preneurs," most of whom came to Cambodia as researchers or development workers, and almost none of whom had advanced artistic or academic training.²²⁴ Dana Langlois, Kate O'Hara, Erin Gleeson, Lydia Parusol, Sasha Constable, and the late Ingrid Muan are the most well-known names associated with resident expatriate curators, all with different perspectives on curatorial work in Cambodia. The fact that all of them are European, Australian, or American nationals, and women, speaks to an interesting gendered phenomenon of "Western" women developing curatorial careers in Cambodia,

²²³ Interview with the author, June 9, 2011.

²²⁴ The term "art-preneur" was used by Dana Langlois in a biographical sketch on her website, <http://javaarts.org/about-java/>, accessed April 21, 2011. Two young Khmer curators are Tith Veasna and Vuth Lyno, and they describe what they do as primarily organizing exhibitions for the sake of communication with the local population and in the spirit of helping out artist friends in the community.

following a comparable course of artistic formation with a focus on nurture and development in the cultural sphere. In a conversation with Ashley Thompson, it was noted that this is revealing of certain contextual conditions for this type of work for women, particularly in relation to creative industries and recuperative paradigms, in which they are enabled by their nationality and in some cases, their partnership with Cambodian male cultural organizers or artists, to take on innovative projects in the artistic arena perhaps less accessible to them in their home countries by nature of their level of educational or professional experience.²²⁵

The establishment of various foreign cultural centers, café-galleries, and foreign-funded arts organizations, such as Reyum, Java Café and Gallery, the Institut Français, Metahouse German Cultural Center, and the Bophana Audio-Visual Resource Center has contributed to an atmosphere tinged with a form of cosmopolitanism that Pheng Cheah associates with the agencies and instruments of human rights, namely an NGO brand of cosmopolitanism, in which “there is the automatic identification of the existence of these NGOs and human right instruments with the actualization of new cosmopolitanisms so that these NGOs are often called ‘international civil society’.”²²⁶ This is in accord with Hughes’ argument that an understanding of civil society in Cambodia should be considered a space for the enactment of autonomous actions rather than as a defined set of actors comprising representatives of prominent local NGOs

²²⁵ Conversation with the author, March 13, 2013.

²²⁶ Yuk Hui, “Interview with Pheng Cheah on cosmopolitanism, nationalism and human rights,” *Theory, Culture, and Society*, March 17, 2011, <http://theoryculturesociety.blogspot.com/2011/03/interview-with-pheng-cheah-on.html>, accessed September 24, 2011. The French Cultural Center, popularly known as the Alliance Française, was established in 1990; its name then changed to the Center for Cultural and Linguistic Cooperation, and then the French Cultural Center of Cambodia in 1992. In 2011 it changed its name again to the Institut Français. Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan founded Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture in 1998, and Java Café & Gallery was established by Dana Langlois in 2000. Bophana Audio-Visual Resource Center was opened in 2005 under the directorship of French-Cambodian filmmaker Rithy Panh. Metahouse was founded by German filmmaker Nico Mesterharm in 2007 and became a branch of the Goethe Institut in 2010. A Japan-Cambodia Cooperation Center was also established in 2004 with the purpose of improving human resource development, with less involvement in cultural development and the arts.

who, she argues, prioritize international rather than local agendas.²²⁷ Similarly, because NGOs remain instruments that participate in global governmentality, Cheah expresses ambivalence about the degree to which progressive change can truly be achieved within this brand of NGO-cosmopolitanism.²²⁸ In terms of Cheah's latter statement, I would suggest that this environment has engendered productive responses in the form of resistance. These issues have been recognized by artists and spurred several of them to react, in terms of recognizing the need for a form of local autonomy within the emerging landscape of contemporary art in Phnom Penh, and the necessity for alternative spaces for contemporary art, both in their physical spatial form and in their discursive function.²²⁹

In other cities in the region in which there is a heavy presence of foreign cultural institutions, such as in Hanoi, these centers provided key venues for the exhibition of controversial 'avant-garde' practices in the late 1990s and 2000s.²³⁰ In Cambodia, these spaces have attempted in different ways to serve as alternative sites of artistic formation, providing workshops and forms of training in a more open and less structured format as opposed to the academic regimen of RUFA. The appeal of workshops as 'neutral spaces' reflects what I gleaned from several artists and cultural organizers as a fundamental disenchantment with state institutions as representative of the government's apathy towards its citizens, its glaring failure fulfill its end of the social contract. Aside from RUFA, the relative absence of arts institutions throughout modern Cambodian history has contributed to a general lack of faith, and for some, distrust, towards state-sponsored educational institutions (due to knowledge of internal politics, corruption, lack of commitment and compromised ethics on the part of teachers) and a growing

²²⁷ Hughes, 138-139.

²²⁸ Yuk Hui, "Interview with Pheng Cheah."

²²⁹ I will discuss these artists in more detail further in this chapter, and particularly in chapter 4.

²³⁰ See N. Taylor, "Vietnamese Anti-art."

admiration for the ‘self-trained modern artist’ (*silpakar damnoep*, សិល្បករទំនើប), such as Vann Nath or Svay Ken, particularly in the eyes of a younger generation of artists who themselves received training through tutorials (e.g. via the master/apprentice relationship) or training in workshops held at foreign cultural centers.²³¹ Some workshops, particularly the photography workshops led by Stephane Janin, were productive in that they reproduced the model of studio critique and pushed students to critically analyze their own and their colleague’s work on the basis of individual artistic development. Some foreign cultural spaces were described as feeling more ‘neutral’ and ‘open’ (literally, in terms of space) compared with smaller, more private venues that is some way attempt to emulate a more intimate space, such as Reyum and Java Café and Gallery. Various younger artists have cited the Institut Français (formerly the Centre Culturel Français) as the favored venue for exhibition because it feels the most public, given its open façade onto the street and its spacious interior, allowing for easy entrance and exit, providing for a more anonymous comingling of Khmer and foreign visitors.²³²

²³¹ One such example is the personal training and tutorials provided by celebrated film actress Dy Saveth, in the absence of a film school in Cambodia or coursework in theatrical training outside of the classical repertoire.

²³² Interviews with Tith Kanitha, Tith Veasna, Linda Saphan, Meas Sokhorn, 2011-2012.



Figure 2.13: Exhibition by Tith Kanitha, 2011, Centre Culturel Francais. Photograph by the author.

In addition to a heavy emphasis on cultural revival targeted at recuperating classical and traditional artistic forms, part of the growing rhetoric of this cultural restoration (after Muan's dissertation title), is the fervent nostalgia for what many refer to as the golden age of independence in the late 1950s and 1960s, notably characterized by the music of Sinn Sisamouth and the New Khmer Architecture movement spearheaded by Vann Molyvann. One could describe this nostalgic reverence as having had a immobilizing effect on the notion of invigorating and innovating arts and culture; however, I would contend that the recuperation of a form of aesthetic modernism from this period has played a strong role in articulating contemporary artistic practices, as I will discuss in further detail in Chapter 6. What I want to emphasize here is that the multifaceted discourses emanating from within the larger project of cultural rebuilding and restoration has, as one of its pitfalls, relegated the practices of

contemporary artists into uneasy territory. The overarching emphasis on memory projects and the restoration of the traditional arts - the cultural sphere in which a focus on Cambodian identity and authenticity was concentrated - became the primary basis for curatorial projects and larger institutional endeavors to engage artistic production in tandem with psychological healing and societal reconciliation. This speaks to a paradigm of expectation outlined in Thompson's argument that "much of Cambodian art of the past decade has been produced, in one way or another, in response to more-or-less external demands that Cambodians assume responsibility for the Khmer Rouge as both a historico-political event and traumatic experience."²³³ By 2010, in recognizing the marked shift from the context of Reyum's *Legacy of Absence* in 2000 to exhibitions like Metahouse's *The Art of Survival* in 2007, it became apparent to many observers in Phnom Penh that "trauma art" had uncomfortably become a predominant curatorial framework at the local and international scales in representations of Cambodian art.²³⁴

The growing interest in creative representations of memory, trauma, and engagements with the past, particularly the Khmer Rouge period, coincided in the early 2000s - with the rise of regional biennials and triennials in Asia - with international curators beginning to travel to Cambodia in order to mine for new talent in the last Asian countries off the art world map. Since the late 1980s, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia had occupied a

²³³ Ashley Thompson, "Mnemotechnical Politics: Rithy Panh's Cinematic Archive and the Return of Cambodia's Past," *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology*, eds. Nora Taylor and Boreth Ly (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012), 225.

²³⁴ Erin Gleeson comments on this condition at a specific moment during her own formation as a curator working in Cambodia: "...I became more sensitive to curatorial approaches that seemed to cultivate a wide range of negative effects, such as a perpetuation of 'speechlessness' by exclusion in South East Asian group exhibitions both regionally and internationally, government-sponsored and therefore censored inclusion, a sensationalising of Khmer Rouge history by foreign curators, and more generally misrepresentations or siphoning of local artist's [sic] concepts, capacities, or narratives." Erin Gleeson, "Mutualism for the Future," *Who Cares? 16 Essays on Curating in Asia*, Eds. Alvaro Rodriguez Fominaya and Michal Lee (Hong Kong: Para/Site Art Space, 2010), 61. It is important to note important shifts in this exhibitionary impulse, and Ashley Thompson speaks to the specific context in which *Legacy of Absence* took place. See Thompson, "Forgetting to Remember, Again," 83-87.

prominent place in exhibitions showcasing Southeast Asian contemporary art, and soon after, Vietnam acquired representation and a great deal of interest as the market for Vietnamese modernist painting peaked in the mid to late 1990s. But Cambodia, Laos, and Burma were still unknown entities due to their lagging economic development and recent emergence from or continued immersion in repressive dictatorial regimes and periods of war.²³⁵ In attempting to fit their artistic findings within the schema of global contemporary art, international curators worked with local art organizers or advisors to consider which artists would best be suited for international representation or which themes would best represent the artistic climate or trends of a particular country at the present. According to Ingrid Muan, “After Vietnam, Cambodia was next on curators’ shopping lists. The only problem was that there was almost no “work” that could fit the conceptions of ‘contemporary art’ carried by those who came looking for it.”²³⁶

The interest in uncharted art worlds for inclusion in the growing regional biennale circuit coincided with an increase in public discussions about retrieving personal Khmer Rouge period memories as part of a larger reconciliation project. Perhaps this occurred at a time in which enough distance had been achieved for it to become a topic of discourse, particularly in tandem with the long-planned Khmer Rouge Tribunal, which began proceedings in 2007 after almost fifteen years of planning. At the same time, the visual arts became an arena in which artists were largely encouraged to explore whatever personal stimuli they had within in order to produce work, and unsurprisingly, for that particular generation of artists, dark memories of the DK regime surfaced in various ways on canvas. This subject matter began to characterize Cambodian artistic identity through a number of internationally funded projects and exhibitions, such as

²³⁵ One can trace this pattern of emergence in the contemporary art world to the successive entry of these nations into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), founded in 1967 as a regional political and economic alliance.

²³⁶ Muan, “Musings,” 274.

Legacy of Absence and *Art of Survival*, and the rise of artists such as Vann Nath, and early works by Sopheap Pich and Vietnamese-American artist Dinh Q. Lê (see Figures 2.14 – 2.18). This lent international visibility and legibility to “Cambodian art,” following the release of the “The Killing Fields” and the controversial 1997 exhibition of Tuol Sleng photographs at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.²³⁷



Figure 2.14: Cover of *The Legacy of Absence: A Cambodian Story* (Phnom Penh: Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture, 2000).

²³⁷ For a critique of the MoMA exhibition, in which photographs from Tuol Sleng were displayed within the context of high art, see French, “Exhibiting Terror.” In the last decade, the Tuol Sleng photographs have been the subject and material for numerous contemporary artworks, largely by non-Cambodian born artists, except for Ly Daravuth, whose work *The Messengers* was exhibited at Reyum in 2000 and at the 3rd Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale in 2005. Other artists who have incorporated the imagery of the mug shots include Binh Danh, Alice Miceli, Massiliano Gioni, and Despina Meimaroglou. The use of these photographs in contemporary artworks is addressed in Stéphanie Benzaquen, “Remediating Genocidal Images into Artworks: The Case of the Tuol Sleng Mug Shots,” *re-bus* 5 (Summer 2010): 1-20, http://www.essex.ac.uk/arhistory/research/pdfs/rebus_issue_5/Benzaquen.pdf.



Figure 2.15: Svay Ken, *The Flight from Phnom Penh (History of My Family Series, No. 1)*, 1990s, oil on canvas, 60 x 80 cm. Sourced from http://www.legacy-project.org/index.php?page=art_detail_large&artID=549&num=1 (accessed 06/02/2015).

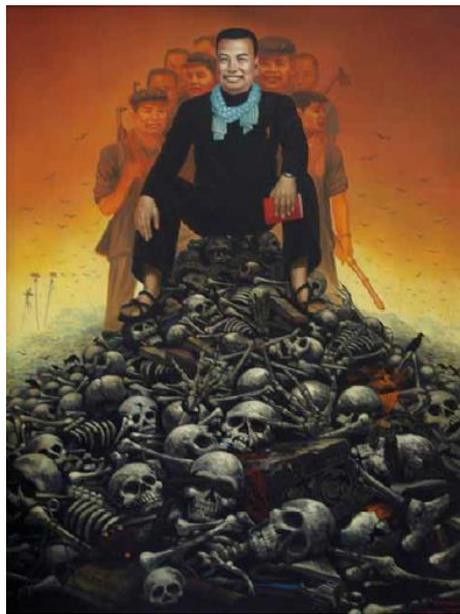


Figure 2.16: Hen Sophal (b. 1958), *The Khmer Rouge Leader Reigns Over More Than 3 Million Bones*, 2000, oil on canvas, 182 x 117 cm. From *Cambodian Artists Speak Out: The Art of Survival* (2008), http://www.meta-house.com/main/exhibition/p_hensophal/detail (accessed 06/02/2015).



Figure 2.17: Display of photographs of Tuol Sleng detainees during the Pol Pot Regime. Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide, Phnom Penh, 2007. Author's photograph.



Figure 2.18: Dinh Q. Lê (b. 1968), *Untitled #11* (from *Cambodia: Splendor and Darkness* series), 1999, C-print and linen tape, 40 ¼ x 58 ¼ in. Sourced from Robert Hirsch, "Flexible Images: Handmade American Photography, 1969 – 2002," *The Society for Photographic Education's exposure* 36, no. 1 (2003): 23 – 42, <http://www.lightresearch.net/articles/handmade.html> (accessed 06/02/2015).

There is no doubt that younger and older Cambodian artists recognized this growing demand within the context of a cultivated trauma culture spurred by development discourse. Muan commented on the early appearance of this trend in her work at Reyum: “Lately, for better and worse, these young ‘artists’ have recognized another subject which can identify them as Cambodian while offering them entry into the exhibition channels of ‘modern art’. In works such as ‘Fire and Spirit’ and ‘The Koh Tree’, Soeung Vannara and Phy Chan Than have made some of the first images to reconsider the legacies of the DK regime. These are works of memory filtered through public symbols.”²³⁸ By the end of the first decade of the new millennium, memory of the Khmer Rouge experience had come to serve as the dominant metaphor through which much of the artwork by Cambodian-born artists was being curated and subsequently interpreted, and this was perceived as a burden of representation against which numerous artists born around or after 1980 would resist in favor of critiquing contemporary social issues to shape their conceptual practices.²³⁹ The next chapter pursues a close reading of four artists of different generations and life experiences, each of whom individually came to be regarded as a pioneering leader of Cambodian contemporary art at a particular moment between 2004-2009, and Chapter 6 follows through with a close examination of the youngest generation of artists to have attained international prestige since 2010, and whose work I analyze through theorizations drawn from urban studies and discourses of spatial production.

²³⁸ Muan, “Citing Angkor,” 435, 439.

²³⁹ This position was expressed to me in numerous informal conversations with members of the *Stiev Selapak* collective, comprising Vandy Rattana, Vuth Lyno, Khvay Samnang, Lim Sokchanlina, Heng Ravuth, and Kong Vollak in 2011 and 2012.

CHAPTER 3

“THE ‘FIRST’ CAMBODIAN CONTEMPORARY ARTIST”

In 2012 and 2013 Cambodian artists were featured prominently in some of the most prominent cities for contemporary art in the world.²⁴⁰ Sculptor Sopheap Pich, photographer Vandy Rattana, and the late painter Vann Nath were exhibited at *DOCUMENTA (13)* in Kassel Germany. Pich enjoyed solo exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and at his representative gallery, Tyler Rollins Fine Arts, in New York City, and in the group show *Phnom Penh: Rescue Archaeology / Contemporary Art and Urban Change*, hosted by the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (Institute of Foreign Relations) in Berlin and Stuttgart. The Season of Cambodia Living Arts Festival occupied numerous center stages in New York City during the months of April and May, organizing performances of dance, music, and theater, and through its Visual Arts Program, residencies and exhibitions for ten visual artists and one curator. Within its program, a symposium titled “Contemporary Art in Cambodia: A Historical Inquiry” took place at the Museum of Modern Art. It seemed that the oft-cited phrase “the rebirth of Cambodian art,” which presumed a nascent status for the arts, and symbolically, for Cambodia, had been rendered obsolete, the “rebirth” having transcended to a global declaration of the full-fledged and active state of the arts in Cambodia and its diasporas.²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ These were metropolitan sites in Europe and the United States, thus marking a change in the circuit of visibility beyond the cities in the Asia-Pacific region where Cambodian artists since the 1990s have been shown in exhibitions sponsored by ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), biennales and triennales (including the Fukuoka Biennale, Singapore Biennale, and Asia-Pacific Triennial), and gallery exhibitions.

²⁴¹ This catchphrase was reiterated in promotional materials and press surrounding the Season of Cambodia festival, organized by the Cambodia Living Arts organization, but the notion of “emergence” has been reiterated in English-language media through the last decade. See Cynthia P. Schneider, “Think Again: Lessons from Cambodia’s Rebirth through the Arts,” *Huffington Post Arts and Culture*, 05/14/2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/cynthia-p-schneider/arts-cambodia_b_3249076.html, accessed 07/11/2013, and Carolyn Weaver, “Cambodia's Trauma, Rebirth Reflected in Khmer Sculptor's Work,” *Voice of America Arts and Entertainment*, April 26, 2013,

In the context of the symposium at MoMA, of which I was a co-organizer with curators Leeza Ahmady and Erin Gleeson, a concern over its discursive objectives was raised at an early stage of planning. As the larger theme surrounded historical inquiry into contemporary art practices, was one of our aims to produce a timeline of firsts? For example, did we want to put forth propositions regarding the origins of performance art in Cambodia? What were the conceptual contours of the fields from which these historical origins could be located, e.g. tradition, religion, the vernacular? Given the predominance of post-war chronological frameworks for contemporary art in the Asian region, was Year Zero the implicit baseline in Cambodian case, thereby categorizing contemporary art as part of post-Khmer Rouge cultural developments? In recognizing the necessity of understanding historical trajectories, it seemed inevitable that the task was to propose some kind of historicization of practices identified as contemporary art. Yet, in acknowledging the potential narrative biases in such projects, ranging from judgments based on assessments of universal values and notions of progress, it was recognized that such an endeavor be presented with transparency and self-criticality.

This chapter further expands on the question introduced in the previous chapter, concerning the desire for the modernist episode in the production of art historiographies. The concern of investigations of comparative or multiple modernities recognizes that the project of historicization is embedded in overlapping art historiographical discourses constituted in the West, largely related to modernist critiques and teleological narratives fueled by paradigms of

<http://www.voanews.com/content/cambodia-trauma-rebirth-reflected-in-khmer-sculptor-work-at-met/1649283.html>, accessed 07/11/2013. This perception of emergence can be traced through English-language press articles including Robert Turnbull, "Contemporary Art: After troubled past, new expressions in Cambodian art," *International Herald Tribune*, July 6, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/05/arts/05iht-cambart.2120931.html?p>, accessed September 10, 2011; Linda Saphan, "Emergence," *NY Arts Magazine*, January/February 2006, <http://www.nyartsmagazine.com/january-february-2006/emergence-linda-saphan>, accessed Oct. 24, 2011; and Jill Wong, "Cambodian Art: Opening the Box," *C-Arts* (March/April 2009), 82-84.

the “avant-garde” as the driving agents of artistic paradigmatic shifts. Modernism as both a chronological and geographical demarcation and an artistic ethos has been already discursively constituted in most Western art history surveys, with broad categories pinned to movements of “early” and the formation of the historical avant-garde in the case of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Europe, and “high” with the identification of a New York-based neo-avant garde movement driven by post-World War II painterly abstraction. Scholars and critics have already addressed the subsequent tension between the retrospective gaze of articulation and analysis of “modernism” and the perceived atemporality of its stylistic discourse.²⁴² How then, can a similar proposition of historicization be applied to contemporary art, which has fairly recently been recognized as a distinctive field of study in art history?²⁴³ The attempt to historicize the contemporary has to a certain extent, been finalized in Western narratives of artistic conceptualism and postmodernism dating from the 1960s. However, at the same moment in other parts of the world, artistic modernism was a self-conscious discourse in full force, and an category of practice called “contemporary” would begin to be presented as such in the 1980s through the 1990s.

In the case of Cambodia, both local and international popular perceptions generally associate contemporary art with new media forms in tandem with the growing presence of

²⁴² See Foster, *Return of the Real*, and Nicholas Halmi, “Romanticism, the Temporalization of History, and the Historicization of Form,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 74 (2013), 363-389, for his discussion of the institutionalization of Romanticism in literary history.

²⁴³ In recent years a fairly dense body of critical work has examined the notion of the “contemporary” and “contemporaneity” in relation to artistic and aesthetic expression. These include numerous publications by Terry Smith, including “The State of Art History: Contemporary Art,” *Art Bulletin* 92 (December 2010): 366-383, and *What is Contemporary Art* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee, eds., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Hal Foster et al., “Questionnaire on ‘The Contemporary’,” *October* 130 (Fall 2009): 3-124; Claire Hsu and Chantal Wong, eds., “The And: An Expanded Questionnaire on the Contemporary,” *Asia Art Archive Fieldnotes* 1 (2011), <http://www.aaa.org.hk/FieldNotes/Details/1167>, accessed October 7, 2013; and Joan Kee and Patrick Flores, eds., Special Issue: Contemporaneity and Art in Southeast Asia, *Third Text* 25:4 (2011).

Cambodian artists in global biennials and triennials at the turn of the millennium, reflecting regional perspectives that the division between modern and contemporary may be relatively straightforward. Indonesian artist, curator, and scholar Jim Supangkat cited Filipino artist Charlie Co's observation that the use of locally-sourced materials denotes the turning point from modern to contemporary. In 1995, Co stated that "The modern era, in my view, was when I was still using western materials. In this contemporary era, I use local materials."²⁴⁴ A correlation can be made with two of the artists discussed in this essay, literally illustrated through Leang Seckon's collages using various local print media and photographs and Sopheap Pich's bamboo and rattan sculptures, both forms of work respectively exhibited by the artists for the first time in 2003 and 2004. The demonstrative appeal of these works can additionally be seen as imbricated within the dialogue of Cambodian cultural restoration and the locally-specific projects of the Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture, which I will expand upon shortly. The problematic classification of contemporary art as that which draws upon "new media," be it video, performance, or even through the perceived innovation of local materials, is certainly not unique to Cambodia, but this observation was made by Reyum co-founder Ly Daravuth at a symposium on performance art held at SA SA BASSAC gallery in 2011. In response to an invitation to share a timeline of sorts in order to historicize the onset of performance art practices by Cambodian artists, Ly reiterated that there was a need for caution in the full embrace of such practices as performance art. For Ly, many of these forms progressed in a hollow manner, assuming the vessel without critically undertaking discursive or conceptual content:

²⁴⁴ Comment made at the discussion "Asian Modernism," Asia Center, Tokyo, Japan, held in conjunction with the exhibition *Asian Modernism*, October 1995. Cited in Jim Supangkat, "Contemporary Art of the South," *Contemporary Art of the Non-Aligned Countries: Unity in Diversity in International Art* (Jakarta : Balai Pustaka: Project for Development of Cultural Media, Directorate General for Culture, Dept. of Education and Culture, 1997), 24.

So [the international curators] went through China, they went through Vietnam, and at different levels or different speeds or rigors, perhaps because China is bigger, Cambodia is smaller. So because of that time, anything we do becomes exceptional in the context of Cambodia. But issues of language, and issues of context, are still lagging in Cambodia. For many of the artists here, you can read a text, shout loudly, and so forth. So the first reaction is mimicking – people do what they see. I think it has happened to the younger generation. And I think it's good and it's bad, at the same time. It's good, because without that, they might not be doing things. But for example, they might see Aye Ko do something with a gun, and then they decide to do something similar but replace the gun with something else. But the approach is not there, and also without the discussion of context, which is very important.²⁴⁵

I suggest that given a specific chronological frame, or moment, an attempt to trace a pattern of discourses dwelling on “Cambodian contemporary art” can give form to the multivalent criteria underlying such a category, effectively destabilizing its hegemonic reading, and as such, provide important groundwork for the larger historical project to come. Aside from mapping a discourse of contemporary art corresponding to Reiko Tomii’s tracing of *gendai bijutsu* in the case of Japan, this argument is also inspired by T.J. Clark’s in-depth analysis of Gustave Courbet’s *Burial at Ornans*, among other paintings, in which Clark attempts to understand the particular impact of Courbet’s artwork at a specific moment in time and place.²⁴⁶ His concern with the “categories of experience” that would have born an impact on Courbet’s artmaking is salient in its relevance for understanding the precipitous moments that lead up to the

²⁴⁵ Ly Daravuth, “Perspectives from Reyum: Encounters with Performance Art in Cambodia 2000-2011,” presentation made at “Enter The Stream At The Turn: Performance Art in Cambodia and Southeast Asia,” Sa Sa Bassac Gallery, Phnom Penh, July 16, 2011.

²⁴⁶ Tomii notes that “when studying modern and contemporary art in Japan, one quintessentially local factor is language. In recent scholarship, attention has been directed to the words, such as *bijutsu* (art), which were coined in close relationship with the institutional development of Japanese modern art. Language, however, is also created or shaped through living experiences, such as the kinds of discursive practices engendered by those on the forefront of contemporary art: critics and artists.” Reiko Tomii, “Historicizing ‘Contemporary Art’: Some Discursive Practices in Gendai Bijutsu in Japan,” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 12:3 (Winter 2004), 614. Courbet’s *Burial at Ornans* is the pivotal subject matter of T.J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 1982).

phenomenon of an artistic break-through, or the point of recognition and/or discursive construction of a cultural “emergence,” such as the notion of a rebirth of contemporary art in a post-conflict developing country. I want to elaborate on Clark’s important question by presenting examples of artists whom, at a particular moment, played formative roles in the discursive production of “Cambodian contemporary art,” in their respective attributions as “firsts.” To borrow from Clark, what made these artists’ work distinctive and effective at a certain moment?

Therefore, I set forth a proposition of “firsts” in terms of artists who have claimed to be or who have subsequently come to represent the notion of being modern and pioneering within the context of the contemporary, but this is done in order to expose the simultaneous yet divergent perspectives of artistic judgment that constituted utterances of “the first Cambodian contemporary artist.” These articulations are dialectical in nature, as they are issued from different subject positions, criteria of value, historical and spatial contexts, and from within nuanced relations of formality and intimacy, for example, the relations of friendship, collegial discourse, and commercial or professional representation. How then, to define which artists were or are pioneering (in terms of new paradigms of critical artistic and innovative aesthetic practice) or avant-garde (in critically responding to and/or breaking with tradition) in the context of Cambodia, and is it even possible to claim those titles within the context of the contemporary?

As it is, to be “contemporary” holds no distinctive meaning other than to be working in the present; it is a concept that remains unsuccessfully translated in its relation to a categorical artistic practice.²⁴⁷ At best, in Khmer and in other Asian languages, it is typically used to denote

²⁴⁷ In my conversations with artists, curators, and translators in Cambodia, I encountered a variety of terms used to broadly refer to contemporary art and artists. These included “contemporary art” in English, *silpah samăy* សិល្បៈសម័យ (modern art, connoting an institutional formation), *silpakar damnoep* សិល្បករទំនើប (modern artist, connoting non-institutional formation), *silpah sahasamăy* សិល្បៈសហ

new media practices, which may include installation, performance, video, sound, and participatory projects. *Samăy* សម័យ (“modern”) continues to hold more salience and importance as a value and state of being. However, the two terms are often used interchangeably in the Cambodian context, and various attributions that find parallel with a basic notion of being avant-garde or pioneering also have come to gain appeal in terms of the rise in prestige of contemporary artists on the local and global stages.

The principle artists discussed in this essay are Leang Seckon (b. 1974), Pich Sopheap (b. 1971), Svay Ken (1933-2008), and Vann Nath (1946-2011).²⁴⁸ However, not all of these artists are necessarily considered to be the first to introduce a new medium or to innovate a new conceptual practice within Cambodia. Nonetheless, I focus on this particular group as representative of a certain moment of transition in the Cambodian art world, and in what seemed to be a point of convergence from around 2005 to 2010, when these artists gained a level of international exposure through various platforms of reception, including art exhibitions, film, art writing, autobiographical publication, and scholarly work. This is not to say that all of these artists entered into a process of internationalization via the circulation of their work and their persons on the global contemporary art circuit, such as in biennales or triennales. It seems that

សម័យ (loosely understood as art of the new millennium), as well as the French phrase, *l'art contemporain*, used by artists who trained at the Royal University of Fine Arts and abroad in the Soviet-Eastern bloc in the 1980s and 1990s.

²⁴⁸ I choose not to include Vandy Rattana (b. 1980) in this discussion despite the fact that his photographic practice deserves in-depth treatment, as well as his role in establishing the *Stiev Selapak* (“Art Rebels”) collective and the Sa Sa Arts Projects space in the White Building. However, his “emergence” as a prominent Cambodian artist fell after the specific moment discussed here, which is concentrated from roughly 2003 to the latter half of the first decade of the new millennium. Rattana’s practice received growing international attention beginning in 2010 with his series *The Bomb Ponds*, first exhibited at the Center for Curatorial Studies Bard Galleries at the Hessel Museum of Art in New York City in 2010, and subsequently shown in venues including the Singapore Art Museum’s *Signature Art Prize Finalist Exhibition* in 2011, *DOCUMENTA* (13) in 2012, and at the Asia Society in New York in 2013.

each of them came to represent, in different ways and through a nexus of internalized and externalized articulations, “the first Cambodian contemporary artist.”

This linguistic framing itself is deliberate, as there are countless contemporary Cambodian artists, yet the use of “Cambodian contemporary artist” implies the geographic framing of a universal category of individual. The term “contemporary artist” seems to describe the relative autonomy of a creative provocateur or agent, often striving for a praxis that is assessed through universal criteria and audiences. Contemporary implies simultaneity and a shared experience; as such, what is simultaneously shared in effect collapses time, and possibly space, inferring a universal phenomenon. In addition, the connotations of being contemporary evoke discourses of cosmopolitanism and transnationalism in resonance with a historical phase of globalization often associated with the onset of contemporary art. Therefore the juxtaposition of “Cambodian” or “Asian” with “contemporary artist,” but even more so with “contemporary art,” could appear to be paradoxical in what appears to be a localizing endeavor, despite the standard biographical and ethno-national bases of ascriptive conventions used at major international exhibitions.²⁴⁹

For these very reasons the use of “Cambodian contemporary artist” engenders a tension that is productive. By presenting examples of Cambodian artists who are considered to be “firsts” and the contextual frameworks of these articulations, I am arguing for the value and

²⁴⁹ Joan Kee describes this semantic tension in relation to “contemporary Asian art” in her essay “Guest Editor’s Introduction: Twenty Questions,” *positions* 12:3 (Winter 2004): 599-610. She explains, “We must also grapple with what we mean by “Asia” and “Asian” in relation to the creation and reception of visual art. For this reason, I have chosen to use the phrase, “contemporary art in Asia,” rather than “contemporary Asian art,” which tends to act as a taxonomic marker, closing down the interrogative affect raised by the fragment, “in Asia.” Is it a geographical marker? Is it a politically strategic one, used to bind otherwise disparate entities together for the sake of a given purpose? Is it a fiction, a construct serving as a repository of external desires and speculations?” (600). A similar decision was taken by the organizers of the symposium, “Contemporary Art in Cambodia: A Historical Inquiry” in choosing the title of the event.

relevance of using these terms for the sake of historical and discursive provocation. That is, a primary objective of this work is to uncover the embeddedness of seemingly universal concepts as avant-garde, pioneering, modern, and contemporary, so that we can ascertain to what extent hegemonic definitions are of use, but also consider the degree to which these concepts have been productively articulated within local social and artistic discourses to hold more relevant value. It is important to recognize how a pioneering practice or position on art-making is relevant in the context of Cambodia in ways that are different from contexts elsewhere, and how such values are grounded in attributions of technical mastery, dedication to craft, or the cultural importance of historical exposure or knowledge-sharing as ethical form of artistic labor. Aside from expanding on these questions, I trace what Terry Smith has described as “art’s internal history, that is, the densely textured interplay between artists, those who knew each other as well as those connected by imaginative sympathy.”²⁵⁰ This internal history is essential to understanding what connected this particular grouping of artists at a certain moment in time, and in ways that participated in the seemingly external assessments of their respective roles as pioneering contemporary artists.

Leang Seckon

In 2003, with the assistance of Java Café and Gallery owner Dana Langlois, artists Leang Seckon and returnee Cambodian-American artists Sopheap Pich and Chath Piersath established an artists’ collective titled Saklappel, an anagram of *selapak* (the common transliteration for “art”), with initial aspirations to collectively provide resources on the local art scene for an international audience through a website, as well as to promote their own artistic practices and

²⁵⁰ Terry Smith, “The State of Art History,” 368.

initiate community-oriented projects, namely in the form of workshops and exhibitions.²⁵¹ Saklapei attempted to embody the ideal of an artists' cooperative that could both fulfill the individual creative needs of its members, however these might be seen to vary between the returnee and local artist members, and also explore how such a concept could be adapted to the climate of the time and place, and gain appeal amongst the local artist community. Pich, Piersath and Seckon temporarily shared a house (Figure 3.1), with individual studio spaces, and also exhibited together at Cambodian Living Arts and the French Cultural Center between 2003 and 2004. The group's residential collectivity was flexible; cartoonist John Weeks and senior painter Svay Ken also lived in the house at different times, Linda Saphan joined the group after Piersath left for the U.S. in 2004, and Seckon moved his studio to Boeung Kak Lake in 2004.²⁵²



Figure 3.1: Sign from the Saklapei house. Photograph courtesy of John Weeks.

²⁵¹ Author's interviews with Pich, Saphan, and Piersath, 2011. Chath Piersath first came to Cambodia in 1994 for social development work, and then returned to Lowell, Massachusetts for the next seven years. In 2001 or 2002 he returned to settle in Phnom Penh and began exhibiting artwork. His first show, titled *Outsider Art*, was with Svay Ken in 2003. Chath Piersath's interview with the author, October 18, 2011. Linda Saphan, a Cambodian-born Canadian citizen, returned to Phnom Penh for the first time in 1995, with later visits for anthropological fieldwork related to her graduate studies, and finally settled in the city in 2003. She later became a prominent figure within the arts community in the early and mid-2000s with her work on the *Visual Arts Open* and with the Selapak Neari group.

²⁵² Sopheap Pich's conversation with the author, June 24, 2011.

The context of the decision to establish an informal artists' collective lay in the promise that such an endeavor might seem to hold in the scope of contemporary art activity in Phnom Penh in the early 2000s. As I discussed in the previous chapter, venues for exhibition consisted primarily of small commercial shops, café-galleries, and foreign cultural centers. An exception was the Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture, the non-profit space run by Ingrid Muan and Ly Daravuth, who functioned in multiple capacities as curators, teachers, artists, ethnographers, and historians. The relationship between artistic expectation and production that governed most of these early exhibitions of contemporary art emerged in large part following a model of themed commissions for artistic projects animated by the significantly growing presence of NGOs in Phnom Penh following UNTAC (United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia) in 1992 to 1993. The support provided by NGOs and other development-based platforms for the arts was critical in the 1990s in providing the means for artistic production, exhibition, and sales. The artistic practices promoted by cultural workers and curators in Cambodia from the mid-late 1990s through the following decade encouraged creative expression - particularly in regards to addressing historical memory and reconciling with a traumatic past - in the name of social rebuilding, to serve the larger purpose of what Muan described as cultural restoration.²⁵³

Leang Seckon has vocalized criticisms of what he considers an exploitation of trauma through the context of exhibition, citing as an example the museological dimension of the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide. In criticizing the spectacle enacted through the exhibitionary function of the prison-turned-museum and the dimension of visitor – largely touristic - engagement, he described to me how the museum serves an important educative function for foreigners, but serves no useful purpose for Cambodians, who have no desire to relive their

²⁵³ Ingrid Muan, "Citing Angkor."

trauma and see their worst memories depicted literally.²⁵⁴ He considers the display of human bones within a glass case to be sacrilegious, because the bones need to be cremated or properly buried so that the souls can be at rest, according to Buddhist belief. Reconciliation and transcendence are themes which have driven the artist's practice and also elevated him to the ranks of one of the country's most prominent artists. Having experienced the Pol Pot regime as a child, Seckon often describes how his artistic practice serves as a means of personal healing. In one work from the series *Shadow of the Heavy Skirt*, Seckon paints the grimly iconic photographic portraits from Tuol Sleng with smiling faces, which he described as representing the hope that the souls can be at peace and soar above the ground, floating away to a better place (Figure 3.2). Aside from the meditative process of artistic labor, this notion of psychological transcendence is visually enacted through a recurring perspectival vantage point in his work, such as in the form of a bird's eye view in his mixed-media painting, with the artistic gaze cast from above upon planes flying in formation or parachutes descending upon a landscape (Figures 3.3 – 3.4).

²⁵⁴ Interview with the author, September 2, 2011. Unless noted, all subsequent references to the artist are from this interview. For further background on the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide, and the controversy surrounding its displays, see Judy Ledgerwood, "The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes: National Narrative," *Museum Anthropology* 21:1 (1997): 82-98, and Hughes, "The Subject Artefacts of Memory."

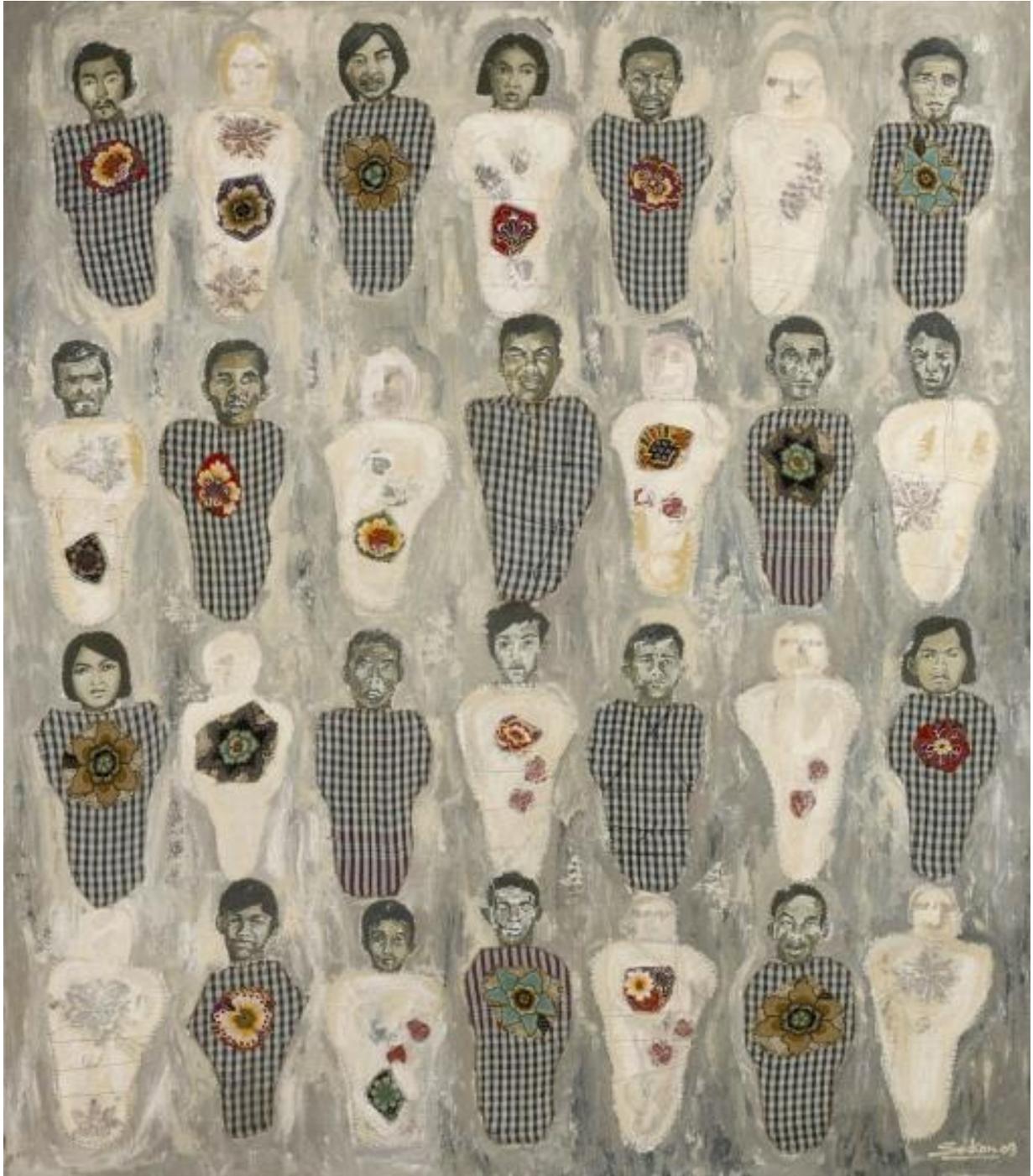


Figure 3.2: Leang Seckon, *Stuck-In-The-Mud Skirt*, 2009, mixed media on canvas, 150 x 130 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Rossi & Rossi.

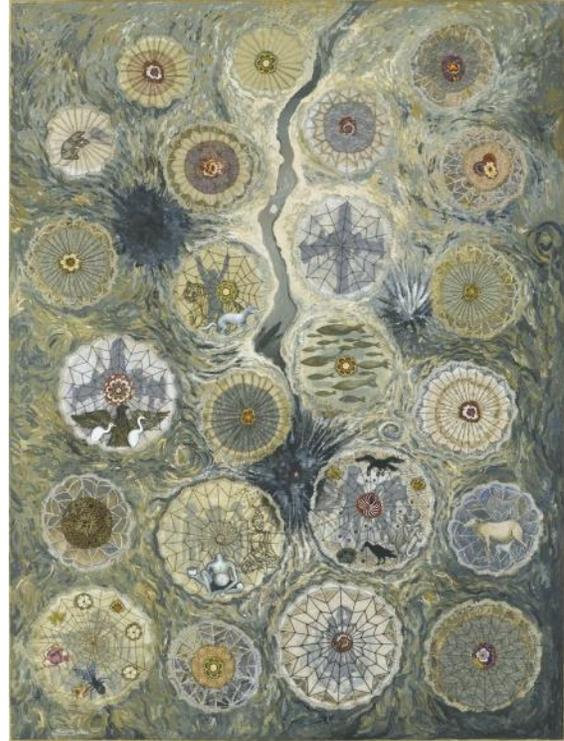


Figure 3.3: Leang Seckon, *Torn Skirt (Somphut Rohait)*, 2009, Mixed media on canvas, 150 x 130 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Rossi & Rossi.

Figure 3.4: Leang Seckon, *Parachute*, 2012, mixed media on canvas, 200 x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Rossi & Rossi.

In my conversation with Seckon, he displayed no hesitation in asserting that he was the first true Cambodian contemporary artist, a claim supported by the fact that his work originates from life experiences unique to Cambodia, and is grounded in his life-long residence and artistic formation in Cambodia.²⁵⁵ Therefore his education at the Royal University of Fine Arts, where he studied Plastic Art and Design for ten years, and the absence of influences or references to non-Cambodian subject matter, is indicative of what he – and likely others – consider to be an

²⁵⁵ The residencies Seckon spent at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in Japan in 2009 or in New York City for Season of Cambodia in 2013 are not considered part of this lived experience in terms of his permanent residency in Cambodia.

authentic Cambodian artistic formation. In addition, his work grapples with cultural and historical topics in literal and symbolic ways – most notably through the vehicle of collage - which attests to his autobiographical perspective as witness to local change, demonstrating the “Cambodianness” of the content. Seckon said that he was the first Cambodian artist to have a solo exhibition at Java Café and Gallery in 2002, which is a revealing distinction as he was preceded the month before by a French-Cambodian artist, Marine Ky (b. 1966), who would represent Cambodia, along with Reyum co-founder and artist Ly Daravuth, at the 3rd Fukuoka Triennale of Asian Contemporary Art in 2005.

In a profile of the artist published in the *Phnom Penh Post*, a characterization of Seckon’s multiple artistic talents is used to evoke a flamboyant creative persona: “One of the country’s leading contemporary artists – some say the country’s first – Seckon, 44, is a man of contrasts. At times an extrovert, he seems to slip into gregarious performance with ease. When speaking, he spontaneously launches into flamboyant singing and contorts his body in contemporary dance moves.”²⁵⁶ Seckon is an accomplished singer and has performed publicly alongside local celebrities. There is no reluctance on his part to emphasize one artistic practice to the detriment of another, and no concern that public perception of his musical performances in any way compromises his renown as one of the country’s most established contemporary artists. It may be that his multiple talents further endorse this attribution, given the semantic denotations of the commonly used term for artist (*silpakar*), which embraces a fuller spectrum of artistic practice, similar to terms for “artist” in other regional languages, which alludes to a broader category of practitioners, including singers, actors, dancers, and poets, rather than specifying visual artists.

²⁵⁶ Claire Knox, “Man in the mirror: the many sides of Leang Seckon,” *Phnom Penh Post*, August 30, 2013, <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/7days/man-mirror-many-sides-leang-seckon>, accessed October 7, 2013.

As such, the performative aspect of Seckon's persona, as described in the *Phnom Penh Post* feature, may be seen as operating in an illustrative yet potentially oppositional fashion to the performative dimension of his speech, in which he related to me that he was the first true Cambodian artist. Such a declaration can be understood as a performative utterance, which subsequently participates in a critical regime of engagement that produces "contemporary art" as a discursive category. Whether from the position of self-professed artistic enunciation or external critical observation, a facet of this discursive circulation may begin with a seemingly simple utterance or pronouncement that enacts identification. Such is the case of Sopheap Pich's first rattan sculpture described to him as the first work of modern art in Cambodia, which I will discuss in the next section. Such a statement may perform a transformative function, endowing the artist with a task to fulfill, thus producing an altered subjectivity upon the completion of a work, or following the impact of discovering a newfound commitment to a particular media. Consequently, such articulations may be transmitted through exhibition titles, conversations, interviews, press releases, curatorial essays, and academic writing, seemingly anchoring the utterance in reality, whether in an affirmative or critical way. Therefore I consider such articulations in their various capacities as speech-acts, utterances that perform a function upon their vocalization, and I assume the responsibility for my imbrication in such discourse as the deconstruction of such an articulation forms the basis of the essay's subject and method.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁷ The concepts of the speech-act and performative utterance derive the basic premise of declaration, performativity, and transformation from a set of complex philosophical and linguistic debates. I suggest that the potential for these debates to extend to the field of the visual, particularly in relation to discourses of artistic authorship and historiography, is worth exploring beyond the empirical aspects of their linguistic context. For more in-depth discussion of speech-acts and performative utterances, see J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), Klaus H. Jacobsen, "How to Make the Distinction Between Constative and Performative Utterances," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 21:85 (Oct. 1971): 357-360, Michael Bérubé, "Autobiography as Performative Utterance," *American Quarterly* 52:2 (Jun. 2000): 339-343, and Regine Eckardt, "Hereby explained: an event-based account of performative utterances," *Linguist and Philos* 35 (2012): 21-55.

In addition, I underscore here the nature of contemporary art as both a material object of analysis in addition to a discursive regime, in which diverse utterances foreground what has become the lens of theorization through which the artwork achieves critical value. In her recent book on photography's potential to shape the civic imagination, Ariella Azoulay regards the art object as the primary and conclusive utterance within an art historical hierarchy of discourse in which "the speech and concrete actions of participants in the relations of exchange surrounding the image are not taken into consideration except as the means to achieve a single goal: the illumination of the meaning of the work of art and its preservation as the center of gravity of activities in the field."²⁵⁸ She distinguishes the artistic paradigm from that of visual culture, arguing that in the latter instance, "the image is not the telos or sole object of investigation, and the order of utterances under consideration does not have to begin and end with it."²⁵⁹ This dichotomous positioning of art history and visual culture is problematic, as it reveals an understanding of the art historical paradigm to be dominated by discourses of the autonomous avant-garde artwork, notably defined in Peter Burger's 1984 theorization shaped through Euro-American historiographies.²⁶⁰ Currently, the method of biography-influenced discursive interpretation has come to be critiqued for its predominance in artistic assessment following the "global turn," in what appears to be a longing for the modernist autonomy of the artwork as the premise for critique.²⁶¹ It cannot be ignored, perhaps in its contextualization as perpetually *post-modern*, that contemporary art –regardless of geographical context - is produced through

²⁵⁸ Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (London: Verso, 2012), 56

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Transl. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

²⁶¹ What is reductively considered "the global turn" in contemporary art is another way of noting the rhetoric of multiculturalism and globalization discourses in tandem with the intellectual currents of postcolonial theory that facilitated the entry of what Supangkat labeled "Third World" artists into global exhibitionary circuits. See Supangkat, "Contemporary Art of the South."

multiple strata of engagement in which the artwork no longer assumes complete primacy, whether it is attached to the author's biographical narrative or is seen to operate through political metaphor. Art objects and their interlocutors have become imbricated in a critical regime comprising diverse "orders of utterances" that enables the identification as contemporary art, and hence, its conceptual production.

Seckon's self-articulation has drawn support from the successful international reception of his works, and is reinforced through artist statements and curatorial writing that firmly establish the culturally-specific historical and spiritual dimensions of his practice.²⁶² The artist also asserted that he was the first Cambodian artist to use collage, a medium bearing significant weight due to its pivotal role in modernism through its deployment by Cubists Picasso and Braques.²⁶³ If modified to state that Seckon was the first Cambodian artist to demonstrate a commitment to the medium and its innovation, and to exhibit those works in Cambodia, this is true. After several years of collaboration with American mixed-media artist Chris Lawson, Seckon exhibited collage works for the first time for the *Mekong Jitney* group show at Java Café and Gallery in 2004 (Figure 3.5). However, one precedent of a collage work by a Cambodian artist includes *The Edge of the Sea*, by Moscow-trained Long Sophea (b. 1965), which was exhibited at *Communication* in 1998 (Figure 3.6).²⁶⁴ Sophea was one of the few Cambodian

²⁶² See for example Tara Shaw Jackson, "Heavy Skirt," and Anne Elizabeth Moore, "Flowers Come From My Mouth," in the exhibition catalogue *Leang Seckon: Heavy Skirt* (London: Rossi and Rossi, 2010), 3-17.

²⁶³ See Christine Poggi, "Frames of Reference: 'Table' and 'Tableau' in Picasso's Collages and Constructions," *Art Journal* 47:4 (1998): 311-322.

²⁶⁴ This work was exhibited in the *Communication* exhibition at Reyum in 1998, however, like many of that generation of artists who worked with Ingrid Muan and Ly Daravuth, other career or family demands have led to alternative commercial paths for art-making, and very few have sustained independent artistic practices or exhibited in venues for and international circuits of contemporary art. This is revealing of the establishment of discursive and market mechanisms that enabled artists to gain purchase on non-ASEAN or states-sponsored cultural exchange-related international exhibition circuits after many of the 1990s generation had already withdrawn from asserting publicly-exhibited artistic practice as a career path.

women who went to study in the Soviet bloc, and she spent seven years in Russia training in textile design. Another predecessor in collage could be considered Suos Sodavy (b. 1955), Vice-Dean of the Plastic Arts at the Ministry of Culture, who studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest for ten years, and who exhibited what is likely the first assemblage shown by a Cambodian artist in the context of a contemporary art exhibition in the country, in *Visions of the Future* in 2002. In a similar methodological manner to collage, *The Peaceful World* relied upon careful composition of found materials.



Figure 3.5: Leang Seckon, work exhibited at *Mekong Jitney* exhibition, Java Café and Gallery, 2004. Java Arts, <http://javaarts.org/exhibitions/detail/?id=80&PHPSESSID=cb5a3d2e5deecb8e97ef3d5dddeeb21> (accessed 06/03/2015)

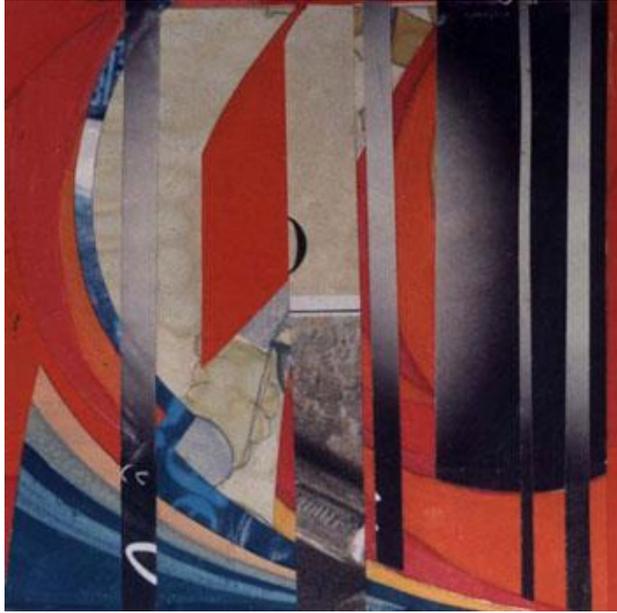


Figure 3.6: Long Sophea, *The edge of the sea* (detail, collage on paper), 1998. Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture, http://www.reyum.org/exhibitions/exhibit1/exhibit_photo_gallery.html#A (accessed 06/03/2015).

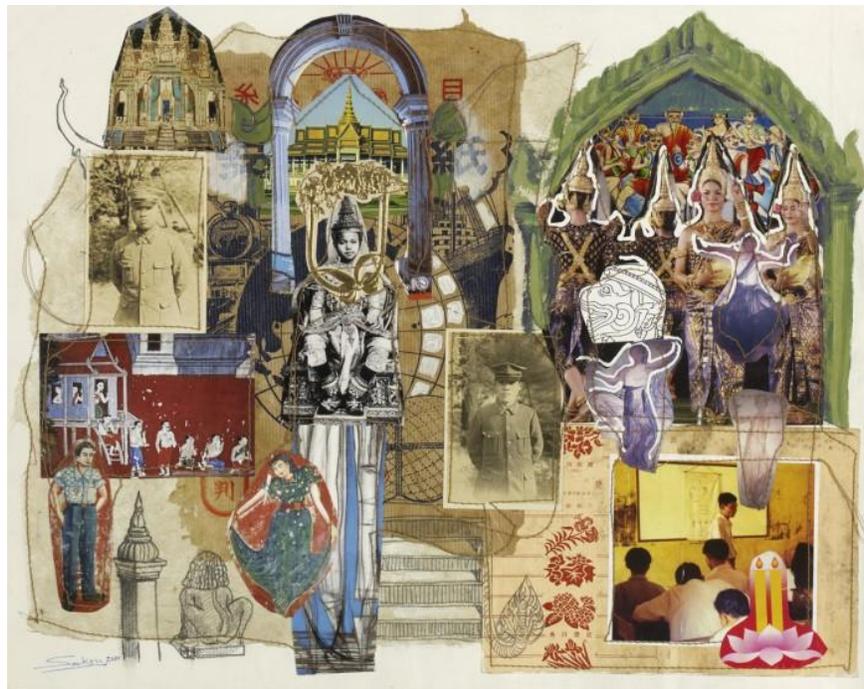


Figure 3.7: Leang Seckon, *Soldiers Arrive at the Palace*, 2010, mixed media on canvas, 42 x 52 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Rossi & Rossi.



Figure 3.8: Leang Seckon, *Goodbye Cambodia*, 2012, Mixed media, collage on canvas, 150 x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Rossi & Rossi.

Nonetheless, I took Seckon's statement to mean that he considers his collage work the first example of sustained formal engagement with the medium, in the manner of locally-relevant innovation with an emphasis on the critical and conceptual content of the work via its narrative capacity to provocatively comment upon history and contemporary events (Figures 3.7 – 3.8).

The medium itself retains the ability to both disrupt and enhance the perception of pictorial unity, with the composition of found materials referencing everyday life, most notably printed matter; therefore the careful assemblage of these elements on and as the picture plane enhances both the autonomy and porosity of the collage's objecthood, serving the artist's desire to exceed formal experimentation and direct the reading of the work through locally-specific frameworks.

Seckon's attraction to meticulous manual labor – including sewing and embroidery - as an artistic and spiritual method is rooted in childhood memories of crafting natural materials, like leaves and vines, while attending to his duties as a “buffalo boy” in Prey Veng province. The elements of sewing and collaging thus constitute a fundamental material methodology in his practice, driven by an instinctual attraction to working with found materials and textiles. Here too he claimed that these skills were accomplished through self-training, as no one ever taught him how to sew. The pride manifested in this attestation to being self-taught also pertains to popular perceptions of Svay Ken and Vann Nath, speaking to their independence from institutional formation and to the appeal of the “imperfect,” a kind of value used to describe the aesthetic properties of the two senior artists' painterly techniques. In a similar vein to the stated motivations of the two late artists in regards to the autobiographical dimensions of their work, Seckon also emphasized that the most important objective of art-making is to express feelings and share knowledge, speaking to a form of ethical work that further pushes the understanding of artistic production as – along the lines of Foucault's work on moral subjectification - a technique of the self.²⁶⁵ This recurring characterization of the four artists' practices is related in different

²⁶⁵ In his project to historicize certain discursive institutions in order to understand how practices of the self are enacted, he sees the shift towards the ‘care of the self’ as a Cartesian moment in philosophical paradigms. According to Foucault, the relation between the care of the self and the knowledge of the self is one way of approaching the historical and philosophical connections between the subject and truth, and these relations employed techniques of discursive and meditative self-reflexivity. Michel Foucault,

ways, and for Sopheap Pich, his self-actualization as Cambodian artist and modern sculptor emerges from an encounter that can be loosely be approximated as a studio visit or critique.

Sopheap Pich

The artist embraced by the global art world as the most “contemporary” Cambodian artist par excellence is Sopheap Pich, who is frequently featured at international biennials and triennials, and was the principle artist representing Cambodia for the first time at *dOCUMENTA (13)* in 2012.²⁶⁶ I suggest that the international articulation of Pich’s sculptures as emblematic of “Cambodian contemporary art” was catalyzed at a time in which the notion of contemporary art had begun to be circulated discursively, not only within international and largely Western-derived discourses, but also within the local urban context of production in Phnom Penh. The fact that Pich’s artistic predecessors – chiefly the artists who had trained at RUFA and abroad in the 1980s and 1990s - had not experienced similar forms of recognition, though their work might also find a similar degree of appreciation, may be in part explicated through the fact that arguably prior to 2000, an emerging discourse on contemporary art, together with the market mechanisms of the global art world, had not yet achieved a certain degree of circulation within Phnom Penh. It took several ambitious projects and exhibitions, in which I would argue that diasporic actors played a key role in terms of utilizing and expanding existing transnational networks, to draw Phnom Penh and its resident artists into the global art map and to heighten the art world’s interest in Cambodian contemporary art.

Frédéric Gros, François Ewald, and Alessandro Fontana, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1981-1982* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005).

²⁶⁶ Sopheap Pich, Vandy Rattana, and Vann Nath were represented at *dOCUMENTA (13)* in 2012, but whereas Pich and Vandy had individual exhibitions of their work, a painting by Vann Nath was curated into the space of Pich’s exhibition.

It was upon this emerging platform that Pich's sculptures could be said to have triggered modes of local and international recognition of "Cambodian contemporary art," glossed through certain material and formal signifiers, including the locally-sourced materials and figurative and abstract rendering of representational forms narrativized through the local context (such as Buddhist sculpture, morning glory, human organs). In addition, the appeal of Pich's sculptures relies in large part on a modernist aesthetic whose formal qualities resonate with the perceived balance of East/West celebrated in the sculptures of Isamu Noguchi, or, within the more immediate field of perception, the New Khmer Architecture Movement pioneered by Vann Molyvann. At the same time, this identification of Pich's work as "Cambodian contemporary art," was particularly effective at a certain time because of the discursive frameworks that had already emerged as a result of localized linguistic negotiations of "contemporary art" and its semantic properties. These discursive utterances were often enacted within the context of exhibition-making, public endeavors typically organized by transnational or diasporic actors, such as Pich himself in the case of the *Visual Arts Open* in 2005, and within spoken circulation in interviews and artist talks, in which Pich has gained a prominent standing with his wry explanations and dry sense of humor.

Pich was born in Battambang province in 1971, and left the country with his family as refugees to settle in the United States in 1984. He would go on to study art, with a focus on painting, at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and then receive his MFA at the School of the Art Institute, Chicago, in 1999. Pich decided to return to Cambodia and settle there in 2002 for motivations including cultural reconnection, artistic development, self-actualization, along with the more practical concerns of the lower costs of living and making work. Pich initially continued with his painting practice for two years after settling in Phnom Penh, struggling to

make a living off meager sales of his work. His first solo exhibition in Cambodia took place at Java Café and Gallery in 2003, where he exhibited paintings of clay vessels – abstractly-rendered forms that one can perceive as providing a template for later sculptures (Figure 3.9).

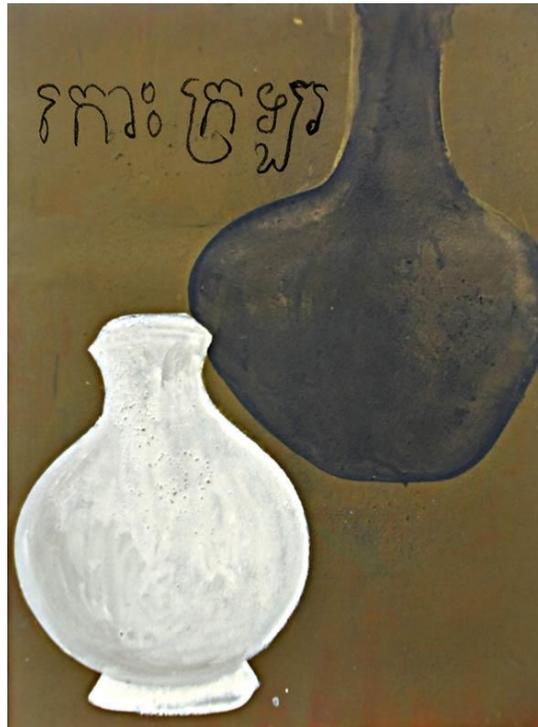


Figure 3.9: Sopheap Pich, *Couple*, 2003, watercolor and acrylic on paper, 57 x 77 cm. Exhibited at *Excavating the Vessels*, 2003, Java Café and Gallery. Java Arts, http://javaarts.org/exhibitions/detail/promos/?id=85&promo_id=50 (accessed 06/03/2015)

The following year, Pich was preparing for a group show at the French Cultural Center, and he describes having felt compelled to seek an alternative medium to painting, one that would be more accessible to the Cambodian public.²⁶⁷ At an artist talk for the 6th Asia Pacific Triennial exhibition *The Mekong*, Pich described this struggle:

²⁶⁷ Sopheap Pich, “Artist Statement,” <http://www.trfineart.com/exhibitions/11>, accessed August 1, 2013.

I had to find some other way... The thing is – with painting – why it wasn't enough was because it just didn't seem to have any effect. I was making these things on this flat surface in my studio, and it didn't make any sense to other people. It was some kind of struggle in my head, because of all the painters I knew, and the history I had in school, and all that stuff, and it was missing something.²⁶⁸

This statement can be read in two ways. First, the artist himself felt constricted by the medium of painting, in which he had trained throughout his undergraduate and graduate education, but felt at this point in his trajectory as an artist that painting had exhausted its possibilities for expression. Secondly, he considered modern painting to hold less popular appeal among local audiences due to the predominance of dance and theater in the traditional hierarchy of the arts, in addition to the monumental sculptural legacy of Angkorean art history.²⁶⁹ Seeking recourse through experimentation, Pich attempted to translate the drawing process into three-dimensional form by delving into sculpture, shaping a grid-like armature of rattan into an abstract pair of lungs (which he then planned to cover with cigarette packages) for the exhibition (Figure 3.10). He described the critical shift in his practice occurring when the former director of the French Cultural Center, Guy Issanjou, came by to look at the work, and said that it was the first modern Cambodian sculpture he had seen anywhere in the world. Pich recalled how this moment provoked a renewed excitement and trepidation, and how he began working sixteen hours a day without respite.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁸ “APT6: Sopheap Pich (Cambodia): Artist Talk,” December 14, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApDk16yapgl>, accessed July 30, 2013.

²⁶⁹ In his artist's statement for *Silence and Cycle*, Pich stated “I was painting at that time and was getting ready for the group show at the French Cultural Center in Phnom Penh. It was my third year back in Cambodia, and I felt the need to make works that were more accessible by Cambodian people. My paintings were too limited. Because health was a major issue of people around me, forms of the human organs as a starting point seemed obvious.” <http://www.trfineart.com/exhibitions/sopheap-pich-the-pulse-within>, accessed October 11, 2013.

²⁷⁰ Interview with the author, June 24, 2011.



Figure 3.10: Sopheap Pich, *Silence*, 2004, rattan, wire, 46 x 26 x 53 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Arts.

As such, the circulatory utterances that foregrounded Pich’s “emergence” as a Cambodian contemporary artist seem to originate in the moment of Issanjou’s declaration, which is often cited by Pich in interviews, as he recollects the experience as a crucial turn in his subjectivity as an artist. It brings to light the way a simple utterance can play, in first, foregrounding a type of recognition and hence altered consciousness of an artist upon the production or completion of a work, and the ripple effect this will have upon the artist’s later

praxis as a more holistic and embodied form of labor. The artist was, at that moment, both artist and spectator, having produced the first utterance (the artwork) and receiving the consequent utterance (on the part of Issanjou), which he would then reproduce. Issanjou's statement, identifying Pich's work as the first modern sculpture in Cambodia, would be iterated in subsequent discursive explanations in the artist's accounts of the shift to sculptural work, producing the channel of interpretation between artwork and public in the form of exhibition reviews, curatorial texts, scholarly articles, and other media forms engaged in the realm of artistic discourse.²⁷¹ Issanjou's statement would serve as the impetus from which Pich would go on to develop his sculptural practice and investigate various formal propositions, ranging in scale and formal qualities, including the abstracted forms indexing body organs, urban architecture, functional objects, and figurative sculptures depicting the Buddha, morning glory, and the Khmer alphabet (Figures 3.11 – 3.15) . In his recent body of work exhibited at *dOCUMENTA* in 2012, Pich pared away figurative resemblances to construct grids meriting comparisons to high modernism and Arte Povera (Figure 3.16).

²⁷¹ See, for example, "Presentation by Sopheap Pich," Asia Art Archive, October 30, 2011, <http://www.aaa-a.org/2012/04/24/presentation-by-sopheap-pich/>, accessed October 11, 2013; Gregory Galligan, "Woven into History," *Art in America* (May 2013), 141; and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, "'Live like a Frog and Die Like a Snake': Conversations with Sopheap Pich," *Sopheap Pich: Sculptures 2004-2013* (New York: Tyler Rollins Fine Arts, 2013), 12.



Figure 3.11: Sopheap Pich, *Buddha* (from 1979 series), 2009, rattan, wire, dye, 220 x 70 x 110cm. Courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Arts.



Figure 3.12: Sopheap Pich, *Morning Glory*, 2011, rattan, bamboo, wire, plywood, steel bolts, 210 x 103 x 74 in. Courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Arts.



Figure 3.13: Sopheap Pich, 1979 installation view, 6th Asia Pacific Triennial, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia, 2009-10. Photograph: Natasha Harth. Courtesy of the artist and the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane.



Figure 3.14: Sopheap Pich, *Compound*, 2011, bamboo, rattan, plywood, and metal wire, 117 x 134 x 126 cm. Installation view at the Singapore Biennale. Photograph by the author.



Figure 3.15: Sopheap Pich, *Selapak*, 2010, rattan and metal wire, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

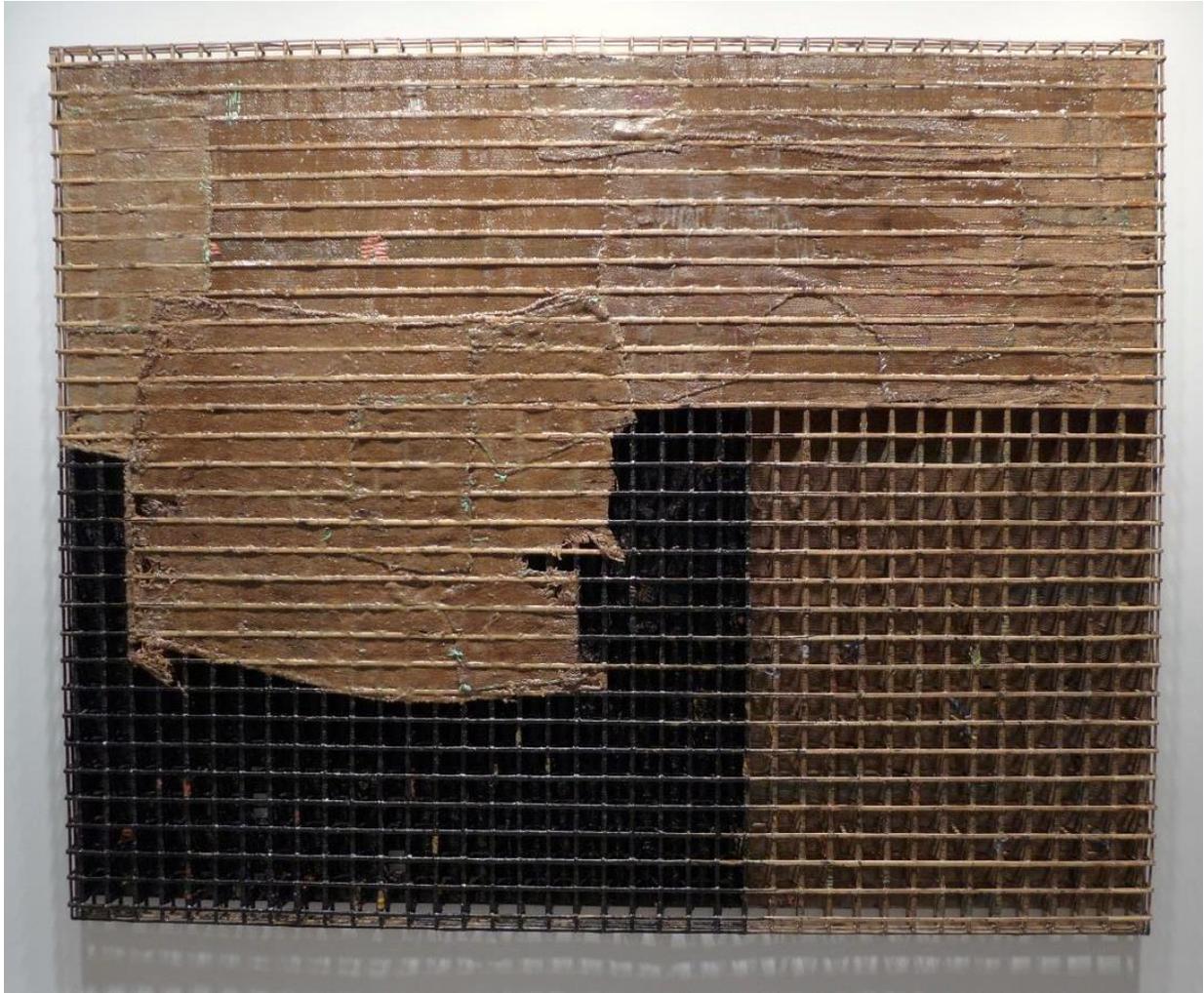


Figure 3.16: Sopheap Pich, *Barren Land*, 2013, bamboo, rattan, wire, burlap, plastic, beeswax, damar resin, synthetic resin, charcoal, 200 x 250 x 8 cm. Photograph by the author.

The modernist attribution has been pivotal in formal assessments of Pich's work. To begin with, one could question the specific choice of words Issanjou used in his declaration that Pich's sculpture-in-progress was the "first modern sculpture" in Cambodia. Purely based on formal assessment, such a description reveals an attraction to the non-representational and self-referential, a style that appears to lack a preceding period of artistic experimentation in the country's art history. Pich has described his own attraction to modern European sculpture, namely the amorphous and abstract works of Brancusi and Giacometti, alongside the inspiration

found in local vernacular objects, particularly the woven rattan fishing implements used in the countryside. While Pich's sculptures fluctuate between the representational and non-representational, his largely "naked" sculptural works expose the process of their making, revealing the material tensions of the rattan and bamboo skeletons and their imperfections. As he has described, "To create a three-dimensional object from the beginning to the end is to take a journey, to discover something new without erasing the footsteps, the evidence. It was not very practical, as my objects tended to be large, and there are other issues that come with working with natural materials – but characteristically, each successful work has a life in it that is somehow a reflection of where it comes from."²⁷² The exposed labor of material manipulation finds some resonance in Clement Greenberg's treatises on painterly modernism, and the advocacy of elevating the material based on its own possibilities.²⁷³ Thus, there is a confluence of modernist inspirations evoked by Pich's sculptures, in which locally-sourced material is used to illustrate subject matter often drawn from the artist's memories of growing up during the Khmer Rouge period, such as in the *1979* series, or to comment upon social issues in contemporary Cambodia.

Yet was Pich the first to produce a "modernist" artwork in the perceived absence of a delineated historical stage of modernism in the visual arts in Cambodia? Pich would certainly reject such a notion, as the artist often alludes to Vann Nath as a modernist practitioner in his assiduous concern with the medium and its unique properties. Earlier examples of sculpture which reflected formal properties reminiscent of modernist investigation include *Air Bridge* by Prom Sam An, exhibited at the inaugural *Communication* exhibition at Reyum (then known as

²⁷² Sopheap Pich, "Artist Statement."

²⁷³ Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *The New Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1966), 100-110.

Situations gallery (Figure 3.17).²⁷⁴ But the appearance of such a work in 1998 was delimited in its reception by the lack of an expanding discursive field which serves to locally enunciate and further promote contemporary art and its relevance. A literal example of this attempt to underscore this legibility is shown in one of Pich's sculptures, in which the letters of *silpah* demonstratively spell out and display a work of "art" in the Khmer script, therefore naming its objecthood and its regime of cultural engagement for a Cambodian audience. In response to art historian Boreth Ly's question as to why the artist chose to render words ("art" and "sculpture") into sculptures, Pich responded:

I chose these two Khmer words because I am beginning to make work that directly aimed at the Cambodian public. I wanted them to think about questions such as 'What is sculpture? What is art?' It is a way to interact with the general public here. ...

Coincidentally, I was invited to put a piece in a group show at the National Museum of Phnom Penh at the end of my exhibit at the French Cultural Center, and I chose to submit the word *Selapak* [sic]. One can say that 'Art is beautiful' because it was beautiful on the wall. I think the idea itself was still probably lost on the ordinary Cambodian viewers. I mean, who the hell cares about art in Cambodia anyway, right? But for me it is worth some serious thoughts about reclaiming the potential of the local language, the word's initial ability to provoke the local audience.²⁷⁵

²⁷⁴ The comparison between Prom Sam An's sculpture and a work by Pich was made by Daravuth Ly at the symposium "No Country: Regarding South and Southeast Asia," at the Queens Museum of Art in New York City on April 18, 2013. During his presentation, Ly posed questions and comparisons in order to interrogate the perception and status of "contemporary artworks" in Cambodia, citing precedents and instances of aesthetic contemporaneity with vernacular objects of practical and ritual function.

²⁷⁵ Pich's e-mail exchange and interview with Boreth Ly, June 23, 2010, cited in Boreth Ly, "Of Trans(national) Subjects and Translation," *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art*, eds. Nora Taylor and Boreth Ly (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications), 128.



Figure 3.17: Prom Sam An, *Air Bridge*, 1998, Khmer clay pot, steel frame, wooden boat. Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture, http://www.reyum.org/exhibitions/exhibit1/photo_gallery.html#A (accessed 06/03/2015).

In the local context of Phnom Penh, Pich is regarded not only as an established artist, but also as an organizer with close ties to artists in senior and junior generations. Through his work on the *Visual Arts Open* in 2005, co-organized with Linda Saphan, Pich grew close to senior painters such as Hen Sophal and Vann Nath, and given their transnational connections and bilingual facilities, Pich and Saphan would become representative spokespersons for the contemporary art scene. The two artists mentored different groups of artists, Pich in an informal fashion with artists like Meas Sokhorn and Khvay Samnang, and Saphan with a group of women artists under the umbrella of the Selapak Neri project in 2007.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁶ It is possible to claim that Pich's work should be considered a predecessor to other artists' large-scale sculptures woven from rattan and other materials that can be seen to have proliferated from 2009-2012.

The *Visual Arts Open (VAO)* in 2005, organized by Pich and Saphan, marked a decisive difference from the presentation of the artists in Reyum's *Visions of the Future* in 2002, in which the word "contemporary" had not been used in the Khmer-language title.²⁷⁷ Returning to the notion that literal articulations of contemporary art perform a declarative and transformative function, the titles of certain perform such a function describing and changing the social reality of "contemporary art" for the viewing public. With *Visions of the Future: An Exhibition of Contemporary Cambodian Art*, the English-language term "contemporary art" was circulated among a relatively large urban university-age audience; more than a decade later, "contemporary art" in English is the most commonly used. For *VAO*, Pich and Saphan attempted to literally translate the concept of contemporary visual art for a Khmer audience through the literal

Formal similarities can be found in the 2009 *Exhale* series by Meas Sokhorn (b. 1977) and various sculptural works by Battambang-based Mao So Viet (b. 1981). Rather than seeing these artists as copying Pich, it is more fruitful to understand these artists as working in an experimental vein with similarly locally-sourced materials, and attempting to adhere to a method of recycling. Sokhorn has acknowledged his friendship with Pich, and the fact that he often sought advice from Pich; it is unsurprising that some influence would be derived from the exchange. The stigmatized notion of copying is also a more complex concept for many emergent artists, particularly as it is an institutionally-driven pedagogical method. While the method of copying is critiqued for its predominance in the curriculum at the Royal University of Fine Arts, driven by a focus on style and mastery of technique that may have origins in George Groslier's pedagogical mission for the School of Arts in 1920, it is nonetheless a rigorous exercise implemented in postsecondary art schools almost everywhere during the beginning levels of instruction. Therefore, examples of this form of experimentation with similar materials often serve as a stage in artistic formation. Based on my interviews in Cambodia, the stigma of copying appears in most cases to be treated with ambivalence or nonchalance.

²⁷⁷ The *Visual Arts Open* took place from December 9-31, 2005, and exhibited the works of twenty participating artists: Chhim Sothy, Chhoeun Rithy, Duong Saree, Hen Sophal, Heng Sinith, Khun Sovanrith, Leang Seckon, Mak Remissa, Pich Sopheap, Piersath Chath, Prom Vichet, Saphan Linda, Sa Piseth, Suos Sodavy, Svay Ken, Tang Chhin Sothy, Tum Saren, Vandy Rattana, and Vann Nath. Sopheap and Linda worked closely with the older generation of artists, while Erin Gleeson curated the photography component. *VAO* was a first attempt to introduce a large-scale arts festival or group show in a biennial format to Cambodia, and utilized various venues in central Phnom Penh to make the exhibition a city-wide event. The two organizers met with a broad range of artists, from the 1980s-90s generation of painters to the budding young photographers who were beginning to establish themselves as the vanguard of an emerging Cambodian photography scene. The event took eight months to prepare for, as Saphan and Pich requested that all the artists create new work, and according to Saphan, rather than follow the NGO model of organizing an exhibition with a particular theme, most notably "peace" or "memory," they followed the model that Muan and Ly had used in organizing *Visions of the Future*, and again, chose to have the artists work within the broad framework of "the present."

translation *cakkhu silpah samăy* (ចក្កសិល្បៈសម័យ), which referenced the visual through the use of *cakkhu* (ចក្ក), meaning “eye” or “eyes.” The organizers attempted to lend coherence to this

uneasy literal translation in the trilingual catalogue (Figure 3.18):

When people refer to arts (selapak [sic]) in Cambodia it generally means performing arts. The word visual art has yet to be recognized in the Cambodian concept. The translation of the term does not exist. We took the word “chakok” [sic] which means “eye” alluding to staring to define visual. The word “samai” [sic] refer to now or the present. VAO's purpose from the very beginning was to create a binding relationship between artists of different dimensions, connecting them to exhibiting spaces and vice versa, and to show the public the most creative minds working in the visual arts nowadays in Cambodia.²⁷⁸

It is difficult to gauge the linguistic effect this phrase had at the time in terms of its facilitating semantic access through a optically-oriented approach to contemporary art. If the immediate impact was to provoke an emphasis on the visual, the use of *cakkhu silpah samăy* may have become attached to the exhibitionary model but not necessarily to the work on display, largely featuring paintings by artists who had shown at Reyum since 1998.²⁷⁹ In addition, the emphasis on the “visual” revisits the modernist ideology of appreciation of the autonomous art object, isolated from a narrative framing that in Cambodia had been primarily attached to interpretive readings of memory and trauma. As for its long-term impact as artistic nomenclature, one can assess its efficacy by noting that “modern art” or *silpah samăy* has continued to dominate popular usage in denoting contemporary art. However, even in the time span from *Visions of the Future* in 2002 to *VAO* in 2005, the discourse surrounding contemporary art had attained new dimensions of appeal, as the organizers and the participating

²⁷⁸ *Visual Arts Open* catalogue, 7.

²⁷⁹ In terms of offering a different spectrum of “visual art,” *VAO* played an important role in raising the profile of photography as an emerging dimension of contemporary art practice in Phnom Penh. Yet only one of the young photographers exhibited, Vandy Rattana (b. 1980), would continue afterward to seriously engage the medium in its conceptual artistic and documentary possibilities.

artists all described the event as a major success in terms of drawing local and international media attention to Cambodian contemporary artists (Figure 3.19 – 3.20). It provided significant exposure for both the organizers, Pich and Saphan, and for the artists, who sold almost all of the works shown. In addition to his involvement with the Phnom Penh artist community and his role in Saklapel and VAO, Pich’s patrons and his own articulate stance on his practice have been important factors in facilitating the artist’s growing exposure in solo and group exhibitions in prominent international venues, inevitably drawing global interest in the development of a “contemporary art scene” in Cambodia with Pich as its frontrunner.²⁸⁰



Figure 3.18: Cover of *Visual Arts Open* catalogue

²⁸⁰ Most recently, dOCUMENTA (13) curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev has been a prominent patron of Pich’s, in terms of curating his work for dOCUMENTA. Excerpts from their long-term e-mail correspondence has been published in *Connect: Phnom Penh, Rescue Archaeology / Contemporary Art and Urban Change in Cambodia*, ed. Erin Gleeson (Berlin: IFA, Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, 2013) and *Sopheap Pich: Sculptures 2004-2013*.



Figure 3.19: Planning meeting for VAO. Photograph courtesy of Linda Saphan.



Figure 3.20: Artists and organizers at VAO, opening night. Photograph courtesy of Linda Saphan.

Svay Ken

In attempting to place contemporary art along some form of spectrum or chronology, the question arises as to a precedent of modernism in the visual arts. It is tempting to place Svay Ken or Vann Nath, the so-called “naïve” painters of autobiography, history, and everyday life, as “modernist” practitioners, who, despite their senior standing, developed their painting practice contemporaneously with younger generations of artists. It is interesting to note that these two painters, each considered to be pioneering modern artists in different ways, were posthumously featured with Pich in highly prestigious international platforms for contemporary art. Ken, Pich, and photographer Vandy Rattana were featured in the 2009 exhibition *The Mekong* at the 6th *Asia Pacific Triennial* as the first artists from Cambodia to be included in the triennial, and Vann Nath was curated into Pich’s exhibition in *DOCUMENTA (13)* in 2012, also marking the first-time representation of Cambodian artists.²⁸¹ Given the fundamental issue of representation at the heart of curatorship and exhibitionary practices, what do these curatorial choices “say” in terms of selection and for the first-time inclusion of artists representing Cambodia in these respective platforms? What kind of dialogue is produced by the pairings of the art objects on display and

²⁸¹ The inclusion of Pich, Ken, and Rattana in the Mekong exhibition likely had much to do with co-curator Richard Streitmatter-Tran’s own friendship with the artists, which had formed during his 2005-2006 research project titled “Mediating the Mekong,” funded by the Hong Kong-based institution Asia Art Archive. The final report of Streitmatter-Tran’s research for “Mediating the Mekong” can be viewed at the Asia Art Archive website, http://www.aaa.org.hk/cms/Content/upload/download/research/Richard_Final_Report.pdf, accessed August 1, 2013. Combined with his genuine respect for the artists, I would suggest the prominence of the three Cambodian artists, representing half of the group, and the attendant “narratives” of their biographies and their artworks were key to the curatorial premise of the geo-imaginary of the Mekong as a microregion in Southeast Asia, with the envisioning of regional artistic networks based on mutually-imblicated geo-histories emerging from shared colonial and wartime experiences. Within the platform, the frameworks of destruction, survival, and renewal characterized the thematic denotations of the three artists’ works. For Pich and Ken, there was also the appeal of the manifest labor of the hand-crafted object. This stood in contrast to Thai artist Manit Sriwanichpoom’s black-and-white photographs in the series *Waiting for the King*, whose photographic oeuvre draws comparison with the photojournalistic images of Vandy Rattana.

between their authors? What notion of Cambodian contemporary art is articulated for international audiences at these major exhibitions?

These specific questions can be framed as part of the larger debates surrounding the construction of regional artistic identity within the process of internationalization, as Mari Carmen Ramirez has described in the case of Latin American art. She notes the preponderant use of reductive tropes in the selection of particular works to represent a particular region, or imagination of a region, in exhibitions within the U.S, noting that in essence, “a regional version of identity was exchanged for access into the “universal” community of modern art,”²⁸² echoing Muan’s observation that symbols of memory could serve as markers of Cambodian identity and as the means through these artists could gain access to the exhibitionary circuits of modern art.²⁸³

While I do not wish to treat the works of Pich, Ken, or Nath in a reductive manner by associating them with a regional trope, the fact is that Cambodian artists have very rarely been exhibited in major international platforms, most notably in the biennial or triennial format, without being curated through the framework of art in response to the genocide, and subsequently representative of post-conflict subjectivity.²⁸⁴ Nonetheless, the issue of traumatic memory is

²⁸² Mari Carmen Ramirez, “Brokering Identities: Art Curators and the Politics of Cultural Representation,” *Thinking about Exhibitions*, eds. R. Greenberg, B. W. Ferguson, and S. Nairne (London: Routledge, 1996), 28.

²⁸³ Muan, “Citing Angkor,” 435, 439.

²⁸⁴ The shift in this mode of representation followed a period in which any artistic expression of the Khmer Rouge episode in history was distinctively absent in works by Cambodian artists. Thompson attributes the post-conflict paradigm of representation in large part to the 2000 Reyum exhibition, *Legacy of Absence: a Cambodian Story*, which took part in a larger U.S.-based project that commissioned artworks from various countries with histories of war and/or genocide: “The Legacy of Absence Project had some role in opening the floodgates to representation of the Khmer Rouge period by Cambodian artists in Cambodia. Western tourists are no longer left wanting. To the contrary, the past decade has seen a veritable explosion of work on the Khmer Rouge theme. If Muan and Ly hesitated over the aesthetic, ethical and political implications of commissioning Khmer art on the genocide for an American-coordinated Shoah-commemoration-inspired project, they could not have foreseen the extent of the consequences of their gesture as Cambodia moved into the twenty-first century: the creation of an art market driven, at least in part, by production on the Khmer Rouge period. From artisanal billboards

without question a sincere concern for all of the artists discussed.²⁸⁵ The most senior artist within this group, Svay Ken (1933-2008), devoted much of his painting to autobiographical narrative accounts, with honest depictions of historical and personal tribulation, yet his artistic productivity, experimentation, and development in subject matter (marking thematic and stylistic “periods” in a career span that lasted less than twenty years) is especially remarkable considering he began to paint at the age of 60. For these reasons, Ken is credited by many in the Phnom Penh community as the father of contemporary art, thereby locating the origins of a particular artistic ethos and praxis in his person, supporting his standing as the “first” (Figure 3.21).



Figure 3.21: Svay Ken at his easel. Photograph courtesy of Erin Gleeson.

advertising thanatourism to carefully crafted autobiographical tableaux, the industry is booming.” Thompson, “Forgetting to Remember,” *Diacritics*, 86.

²⁸⁵ Leang Seckon has spent his entire life in Cambodia, and in large part attributes his status as a true Cambodian contemporary artist to the fact of having been witness and survivor. Having left the country in his childhood, Pich is a member of the “1.5 generation” of diasporic Cambodians who retain deep memories, although perhaps not total clarity, of the environment of suffering and violence. Vann Nath is commemorated as Cambodia’s survivor-artist by merit of his role as the official painter at S-21.

Ken was born into a family of farmers in Takeo, and spent a short period of his youth in the monkhood before looking for work in Phnom Penh in 1955.²⁸⁶ He found a job as a server at the Hotel Le Royal, where he worked for almost forty years in total, not including the period during which the Khmer Rouge forced him and his family to return to Takeo to work in the fields. He began painting during his last years at the Hotel, and went from selling his paintings roadside next to Wat Phnom to being featured as the first Cambodian artist to be included at the Fukuoka Triennale in 1999, thus attaining international status as a contemporary artist.

Included in the *Visions of the Future* exhibition at Reyum in 2002, Ken may have stood out from the rest of the painters in terms of his technique, which posed a marked contrast to the romantic or surrealist aesthetic of other paintings in the exhibition. His status as a self-trained artist who painted the mundane, the vernacular, and the autobiographical afforded him a degree of respect among a younger generation of artists, who were distinguishing themselves from the RUFA lineage. Ken came to symbolize the idea of the “modern artist” expressed by the term *selapakor tumnup*, which implies a modern sensibility attained through self-training outside an institution, a title which characterizes many of the rising contemporary artists in Cambodia in the last five years. An incredibly prolific painter, he was rumored to have completed as many as 2000 works from the time he began painting at the age of 60. At the time during which his paintings began to acquire quite a following, his style stood far apart from the painterly aesthetics associated with the artists trained at RUFA and abroad in the 1980s and 1990s, and for a Western audience, Ken’s visual language was appealing in his raw application of bold outlines and vibrant colors. His engagement with history via honest retellings of his life stories began to garner appeal in the late 1990s when international curators and collectors were beginning to take

²⁸⁶ A more extensive biography can be found in Svay Ken, *Painted Stories: The life of a Cambodian family from 1941 to present* (Phnom Penh: Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture, 2001).

an interest in a contemporary art scene in Cambodia.²⁸⁷ Ken's rigorous practice and Reyum's 2001 exhibition and subsequent publication of his paintings in *Painted Stories: The life of a Cambodian family from 1941 to the present* spoke to a period in which artistic expression as a form of reconciliation with the traumatic past was a fundamental component of development discourse. Alongside his biographical paintings, Ken also illustrated alternative forms of ethical narrative and moral instruction, such as in the *Sharing Knowledge* series in 2008.²⁸⁸ He also painted subjects typically perceived as mundane, capturing their objecthood in an embrace of their everyday aesthetic appeal, elevating them to the status of what might be considered urban vernacular ready-mades.



Figure 3.22: Svay Ken, painting exhibited at *Things* exhibition, Java Arts, 2007. Photograph by the author.

²⁸⁷ His first exhibition in Cambodia took place at the New Art Gallery in 1994.

²⁸⁸ See *Svay Ken: Sharing Knowledge* (Phnom Penh: Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center, 2008).

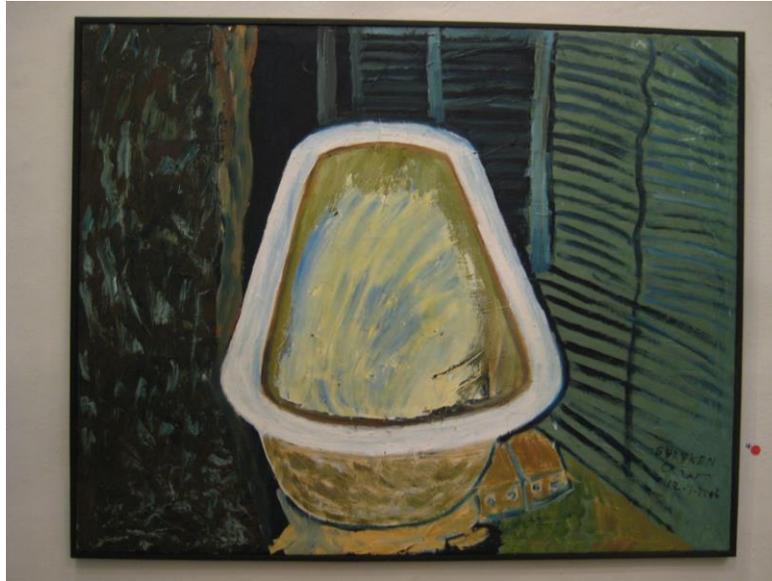


Figure 3.23: Svay Ken, painting exhibited at *Things* exhibition, Java Arts, 2007. Photograph by the author.



Figure 3.24: Svay Ken, *Circuit Board*, 2008, oil on canvas. Image courtesy of Erin Gleeson.

One explanation for Ken's popularity has to do with his unique style of painting and his choice of mundane subject matter, such as highly personal autobiographical scenes from memory and figures from everyday urban and rural life. His technique was set apart from the work of the Cambodian painters who had studied abroad within the Soviet-Eastern bloc during the 1980s and 1990s, whose paintings likely appeared recognizably derivative of outdated European styles to international art collectors and curators. For this reason Svay Ken possessed what seemed to be a more unique modernist appeal, drawing comparisons with Richard Diebenkorn and David Hockney in terms of his brushwork, application of color, and choice of subject matter.²⁸⁹ At the same time, in *Painted Stories* and other works one sees recessive planes of perspective in tandem with axial spatial demarcations, which evokes the group formations and angular divisions used in classical temple mural painting (Figure 3.25 – 3.26). These visual devices enhance the narrative strategies in Svay's painting while underscoring elements of both familiarity with and departures from Cambodian artistic traditions.

²⁸⁹ Bruce Blowitz, "Svay Ken: Light at the Beginning of the Tunnel," NYArts, the international guide to the art world, January/February 2006, cited at Metahouse, Phnom Penh/German Cambodian Cultural Center: Reflections, <http://www.meta-house.com/main/reflection/sknlbt>, accessed 10/12/2013.



Figure 3.25: Svay Ken, *Vietnamese Planes and Pol Pot Soldiers in Battle*, 1979, 1996, oil on canvas, 28 ½ x 51 ¼ in. Collection of the Queensland Art Gallery. Image courtesy of the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art.



Figure 3.26: Svay Ken, *Weekly Cleaning at Royal Hotel*, 1995, oil on canvas, 20 x 25 ½ in. Courtesy of SA SA BASSAC.

In response to the question of what it was about Svay Ken's paintings that held such an attraction for him when he began collecting them in 1994, Peter Gyallay-Pap reflected upon how much of it had to do with getting to know the artist himself, who seemed very genuine, sincere, pure, local – really Khmer.²⁹⁰ As such, the formal appeal of his paintings was one facet of a larger discursive engagement with the Cambodian person of Svay Ken. The perceived naïvete and honesty of his artworks, his dedication to the craft, and the appeal of his personality were

²⁹⁰ Conversation with the author, December 8, 2011.

formulated together to relate an artistic conception of “Cambodianness,” which found a strong collector base and curatorial following, and which subsequently earned him the titles of “grandfather of contemporary art,” “the nation’s father of modern art,” and “artistic visionary and pioneer of Cambodian contemporary art.”²⁹¹

Ken’s *Sharing Knowledge* series was included in *The Mekong* group exhibition at the 6th Asia Pacific Triennial, along with Pich’s sculptural works and a photographic series by Rattana.²⁹² The *Sharing Knowledge* paintings depicted illustrations of Khmer proverbs drawn from religious and moral texts, with the meaning of these often orally-cited sayings animated through hand-painted text and a minimalistic tableau of characters. The selection of paintings shown were described by co-curator Russell Storer as a message for the future, while clearly responding to the past and the erasure of a moral foundation in society from which such teachings should continue to be spread.²⁹³ Ken’s artistic occupations thus demonstrate a care of the self that is enacted through collective concerns for the future. If artistic labor can be perceived as a technique of the self, encompassing a means through which one cares for the self in order to gain knowledge of the self, Foucault suggests three forms of reflexive technique which allow for this knowledge to emerge: memory, meditation, and method, which may be

²⁹¹ Erin Gleeson, “Svay Ken (1933-2008),” *ArtAsiaPacific Magazine* 62 (March/April 2009), <http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/62/SvayKen19332008>, accessed 10/15/2013; Luke Hunt, “Emerging from the Shadow of War,” *China Daily Asia*, May 8, 2012, http://www.chinadailyasia.com/life/2012-05/08/content_113548.html, accessed 10/15/2013; and “The Paintings of Svay Ken,” *Khmer-Buddhist Educational Assistance Project (KEAP)*, <http://www.keap-net.org/art/>, accessed 10/15/2013.

²⁹² Pich’s sculptures were crafted after memories of objects the artist recalled from his memory of the journey made on foot by his family in 1979 when the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia to defeat the Khmer Rouge. Leaving the rural commune to which they had been assigned during the Pol Pot regime, Pich recalls seeing various discarded objects lying in disarray, such as field binoculars or Buddhist statues. Equally powerful is the memory of blood-spattered temple walls, a traumatic residue with which he attempted to imbue his own recreation of a partially deconstructed Buddhist statue, whose stray rattan strips he dipped in red dye. Rattana’s *Fire of the Year* series featured a photojournalistic depiction of a fire that devastated an outlying neighborhood of Phnom Penh, with a curatorial text that revealed the corruption underlying the city’s provision of fire and rescue services for a fee.

²⁹³ Russell Storer, “Svay Ken,” *Asia Pacific Triennial 6*, p. 135.

considered universal attributes of the artistic process.²⁹⁴ For Ken, alongside his reputation as the painter of everyday life, an archivist of the present, we can locate his role as a forerunner in the archival impulse that would drive several younger artists who have recently gained acclaim in the international art world for their interest and methods in documenting current social issues and the changing landscape of the country. The fundamental “Cambodianness” of the painter has been discursively reinforced through the work performed by his paintings; as primary utterance, his artworks - notably the *Sharing Knowledge* series – can be read as the artist’s willingness to take on the burden of the future, in terms of moral education, in addition to the weight of the past, such as in *Painted Stories*. This serves as a counterpart to the reading that artists from developing countries must often bear the burden of self-representation through the visual negotiation of local histories in order to gain purchase on global exhibitionary circuits. As such, Svay’s technique of the self could be perceived as not for the self, but for others. At the same time, his teachings through art still enact a care of the future self, according to Buddhism: “I know very little about [Buddhist teachings], but I think I must share them with others. In Buddhist terms, we call it dhamma daana. Dhamma means ‘universal laws’ and daana means ‘sharing’. If you spread dhamma, you will be an intelligent person in your next life.”²⁹⁵ The statements further reinforce to the paternalistic and Buddhist appeal of the artist’s person. He is thus often portrayed as the quintessential Cambodian contemporary artist, who bears the weight of ethical responsibility and education through his art. This subjectivity can be productively compared with that of fellow senior artist, Vann Nath.

²⁹⁴ Foucault, Gros, Ewald, and Fontana, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*.

²⁹⁵ Svay Ken, “Artist’s Statement,” *Svay Ken: Sharing Knowledge*, 8.



Figure 3.27: Svay Ken (1933-2008), *One who is rich and has abundant food but hides delicious food for himself is subject to ruin* (from *Sharing Knowledge* series), 2008, oil on canvas, 79.5 x 99.5cm. Image courtesy of the Queensland Art Gallery.

Vann Nath

If his tableaux of torture scenes were to become icons of the genocide, the image of Vann Nath painting them in his prison studio became an icon in and of itself. In representing the genocide he represented art as a means of resistance, time and again resisting oblivion and co-optation by the powers that be. Even as his work was deemed to fall outside the category of “high art,” he was framed by an international community as the emblematic artist en puissance, a locus of autonomous thought, living proof of the empowerment art can bring. As painting, his work was more than documentation. It had been Vann Nath’s focussed self-mastery as a prisoner-painter in Tuol Sleng which had allowed him to escape execution. The post-1979 paintings rendered as much his determination to overcome as they did the torture experienced there.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁶ Ashley Thompson, “Vann Nath,” *Contemporary Buddhists*, eds. J McDaniel, J Samuels and M Rowe (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2014), forthcoming.

In this passage Thompson alludes to the paradoxical relationship produced by the high standing of Vann Nath within the Cambodian artistic community and the comment by *dOCUMENTA* (13) curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev that Vann's paintings are not "high art," thus necessitating their pairing with Sopheap Pich's work in the 2012 Kassel exhibition as a form of historical commentary, or representational "alter ego" in opposition to Pich's modernist non-representational artwork.²⁹⁷ In contrast with the integration of Cambodian artists in the Mekong exhibition at the 6th Asia Pacific Triennial in 2009, a more striking and somber effect was produced by the inclusion of a painting by Vann Nath within the exhibition space of Pich's most recent sculptural work, a series of grid structures reminiscent of Arte Povera fabrications (Figure 3.28). Curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev had developed a rapport with Pich over the previous months leading up to her visit to Phnom Penh in 2011, and documentation of their e-mail correspondence was included in a volume of the *dOCUMENTA* catalogue as well as a catalogue of Pich's body of work over a decade, published by his New York gallery, Tyler Rollins Fine Art, in 2013. Revealed through excerpts are the hierarchical categories embedded in conceptions of contemporary art as such formulations are disseminated through international exhibitionary platforms and in their accompanying texts, catalogues which perform inclusionary and exclusionary articulations through the curatorship of conversations and the language of curator-speak.

Dear Sopheap, ... I have been thinking about our visit to Vann Nath and how moving that was. I think as artworks on their own his paintings are however not really "high art", and it is therefore difficult for me to include his work in documenta directly. I am wondering if by chance you would be interested in including a painting of his inside the space of your own presentation? [...] to have

²⁹⁷ Correspondence between curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and artist Pich Sopheap, reproduced in *dOCUMENTA* (13). *The Logbook, Catalog 2/3* (Ostfildern Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2012), 60-61. The painting by Vann Nath selected for inclusion is titled *Interrogation at the Kandal Pagoda* (2006), and is part of Pich's own collection.

this complete opposite of your work, a sort of alter ego, embedded within a space of modernity as your “non-painting” paintings suggest could be weirdly interesting and generous too. A sort of contradiction in the space itself. What do you think? We could frame it as his own work, but hosted by you. Please feel very free to disagree.

Dear Carolyn, [...] In my mind, Vann Nath and Svay Ken are two very important artists of Cambodia. Both are well-known here but Svay Ken is much more popular with everyday collectors and his works has been shown in many countries and also in commercial galleries such as Java Café and Metahouse while Vann Nath’s work has received limited commercial success for obvious reasons. [...]

While I can talk about Svay Ken’s work more at ease (he is the painter of daily life, or modern life – is what most people will say), Vann Nath is much more complicated. [...]

I think I understand when Vann Nath says he paints because he wants to tell his story and that what happened should not be forgotten. But for sure, he’s also interested in the knowledge of painting for its own sake too. He’s always very conscious of colors and lines, for example. So he looks up other artists as reference where Svay Ken, to my knowledge, doesn’t. Svay Ken is more intuitive and relied on his emotion in how he used colors. Vann Nath is interested in what makes a “good” painting. [...]

I have been thinking about Vann Nath’s work and I agree that his piece may fit well. [...] As an artist, I think not having had any “real” trauma, which in some ways left me very confused in the United States [sic]. I knew that I was “Khmer” as opposed to being “American” as I was always thinking and having dreams involving Cambodia but I couldn’t make works that people expected to see – “Where is death????” they would say. [...] What sculpture has given me is the ability to quiet most of these issues.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁸ From correspondence between curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and artist Pich Sopheap, reproduced in *DOCUMENTA (13). The Logbook, Catalog 2/3* (Ostfildern Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2012), 60-61.



Figure 3.28: Vann Nath, *Interrogation at the Kandal Pagoda*, 2006, oil on canvas, 70 x 100 cm. Personal collection of Sopheap Pich. http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/bien/documenta/2012/photo_tour/fridericianum/27_vann_nath (accessed 06/03/2015).

The core of the discussion surrounding Nath's painting surrounds the notion of the "real" in terms of content and style. Pich's use of quotation marks to express "real" trauma emphasizes that the powerful yet ephemeral traces of childhood memories prior to his departure from Cambodia at a young age are to be contrasted with the authenticity of experience, of suffering, of the responsibility of historical truth-telling with which Nath continued to grapple until his death, and which Leang Seckon alluded to in his self-proclamation as the first true Cambodian contemporary artist. Nath's desire to illustrate his memories in the most direct manner, in an earnest style of realism, produced for international curators the effect of relegating his painting to

the margins of modernity.²⁹⁹ Vann's perseverance in pursuing the representational project, in a direct manner of personal and historical exposure vis-à-vis realism, and as a never-ending task in terms of constant artistic personal and technical training, distinguished his practice from that of the other artists discussed here, as Pich noted in his exchange with Christov-Bakargiev.³⁰⁰ However, the curator's perception of his painting style as obsolete neglected the very urgency of the project at hand, which was to access the real – historical truth as construed through individual and collective experiences – at a time during which that very history was the nexus of contention in spectacularized processes of public reconciliation.³⁰¹

For local and international audiences, it is because of his identity as artist-survivor, regarded with some awe for his safekeeping by the Pol Pot regime (as one of eight to survive detention in notorious S-21 high school-turned-prison) because of his ability to paint, that for Vann Nath has in some contexts been perceived as the foremost Cambodian artist.³⁰² As Thompson points out, "His life literally depended upon his realistic painting skills."³⁰³ Yet his

²⁹⁹ As critic Arthur Danto has described, the crisis in painting occurred when photography assumed the task of realism; in response, the work of modernism challenged modes of visual perception in order to effect a paradigmatic change in artistic representation. See Arthur C. Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

³⁰⁰ Vann did experiment with other styles, such as surrealism, as with his work for *Visions of the Future*, but he is most celebrated for the direct portrayal of personal memories of the Khmer Rouge experience. His sacrifice of producing aesthetic pleasure in order to embrace what is difficult to portray and to look at has earned him a depth of respect from the community for what is considered his tantamount courage in this form of artistic labor.

³⁰¹ Here I refer to the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) otherwise known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal.

³⁰² The inclusion of Nath's painting, which Christov-Bakargiev categorized as not "high art," is interesting, for it is exactly this perception of his craft as an elevated form which ensured his survival as a prison-painter, and not merely a documentarian, such as the photographer of the infamous Tuol Sleng mugshots. Yet, in an earlier twist, the exhibition of the S-21 photographs in the context of "high art" at a 1997 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York was met with major criticism for their "trafficking" in the world of art photography. See Lindsay French, "Exhibiting Terror."

³⁰³ Thompson, "Forgetting to Remember, Again: On Curatorial Practice and 'Cambodian Art' in the wake of genocide," longer version of conference paper circulated to presenters at the symposium "Contemporary Art in Cambodia: A Historical Inquiry," Museum of Modern Art, New York, April 21, 2013.

eerie persistence in attempting to continuously refine the painterly illustration of his darkest memories until his passing in 2011 reveals a mindset shaped by two divergent trajectories of artistic formation (Figures 3.29-3.31).³⁰⁴ Prior to 1975, Nath had learned to paint from observation during his monkhood from the age of 17 to 21, followed by enrollment in private painting courses and a subsequent apprenticeship, after which he began to paint professionally, receiving commissions for portraits, landscapes, movie posters, and large-scale panel paintings.³⁰⁵ After 1975, the act of painting during his imprisonment was a form of coerced artistic labor, as he was directed by the regime to paint portraits of Pol Pot and other leaders, and subsequently the Vietnamese-backed regime of the PRK tasked him with illustrating nightmarish episodes of his imprisonment for the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide. With the momentum of cultural restoration projects and the address of Khmer Rouge culpabilities with the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, Vann became more and more recognizable as a face for the notion of Cambodian reconciliation. Thompson notes that Nath gained international prominence through his role in Cambodian-French filmmaker Rithy Panh's 2003 documentary, *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*, and "became the most visible representative of the victims, speaking through his painting and through the lens of Rithy Panh, and many other journalists, to the international community searching for recognizable signs of memorialization."³⁰⁶

³⁰⁴ In a series of workshops conducted by Mexican artist Fernando Aceves Humana, a member of a Oaxaca-based collective who donated an etching press to the Royal University of Fine Arts, Nath continued to portray grim subject matter drawn from his memories of detention by the Pol Pot regime. In a visit to the studio in August 2011, I observed him run several prints through the etching press, regarding each print with a critical eye for formal imperfections, in search of the desired artistic rendering for the exhibition of prints the following month.

³⁰⁵ "Vann Nath," *Vann Nath Tribute* (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Bophana Audio Visual Resource Center, 2013), 104.

³⁰⁶ Thompson, "Forgetting to Remember, Again," longer version of conference paper.

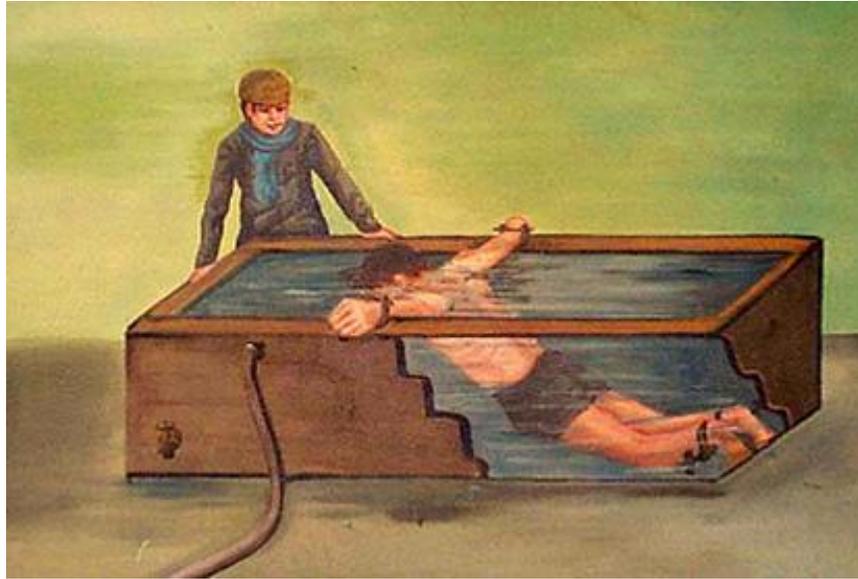


Figure 3.29: Vann Nath, *Electricity and Water Torture*, ca. 1980, acrylic on canvas. Museum Syndicate, <http://www.museumsyndicate.com/item.php?item=24745> (accessed 06/03/2015)

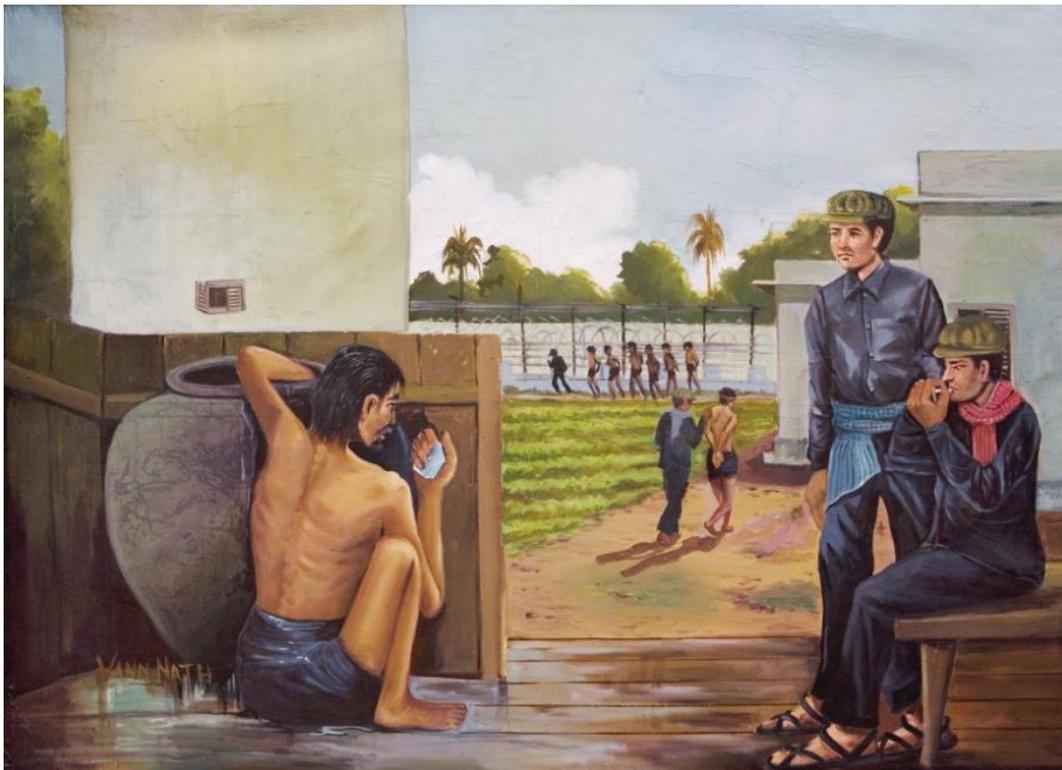


Figure 3.30: Vann Nath, *Seeing Myself in a Piece of Mirror*, undated, oil on canvas. Collection of Katie de Tilly. Photograph © Philippe Bataillard 2008, courtesy of Le Cercle des Amis de Vann Nath.



Figure 3.31: Vann Nath working with Mexican artist Fernando Aceves Humana on prints produced by RUFA's first etching press, donated by La Buena Impresion Tequia Oaxaca. August 22, 2011. Photograph by the author.

For Christov-Bakargiev to desire the presence of Nath's haunting vision within Pich's "space of modernity" is indicative of several things. One is the insistence on contextualizing work by an artist like Pich as representative of an "other" modernity, by pairing the abstract object with a signifying accompaniment, which can thus carry a specific burden of history that the contemporary artwork can allude to in an oblique manner. One can observe too Pich's own iteration of Vann Nath's artistic preoccupations, articulating the senior painter's concerns with the formal qualities of the medium: "But for sure, he's also interested in the knowledge of

painting for its own sake too. He's always very conscious of colors and lines, for example. So he looks up other artists as reference where Svay Ken, to my knowledge, doesn't. Svay Ken is more intuitive and relied on his emotion in how he used colors. Vann Nath is interested in what makes a "good" painting."³⁰⁷ In insisting on seeing Vann's painting as method and not just as representation, Pich also described *Interrogation* as a "personal and significant work," confessing, "It seems wrong for me to talk about how he paints instead of what he paints, but there is something very straightforward about this painting, in terms of color treatment, that is quite different from most other paintings."³⁰⁸ Pich is speaking in defense of Vann as an artistic practitioner, resisting the perception of the artist as documentarian and naïve realist painter. In fact, Pich has been one of the primary advocates for Vann's standing as Cambodia's "first real painter," iterating the seniority of the latter's commitment to painting practice and in his exemplary role as a font of tolerance and spiritual wisdom.³⁰⁹

The four accounts here may seem to operate in a counter-intuitive fashion to other arguments surrounding pioneering contemporary artists who have been instrumental in shaping the face of a critical local or regional movement. Several accounts frame the Asian modern or the pioneering artist-curator as an exemplary actor appropriating the language of Euro-American modernism or conceptualism to effect radical paradigm shifts in artistic vision imbricated in socio-political movements, and as an individual member of a larger vanguard during

³⁰⁷ From correspondence between curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and artist Pich Sopheap, reproduced in dOCUMENTA (13). *The Logbook, Catalog 2/3* (Ostfildern Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2012), 60-61.

³⁰⁸ Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, "'Live like a Frog and Die like a Snake': Conversations with Sopheap Pich," 11.

³⁰⁹ See Gregory Galligan, "Woven into History," *Art in America*, May 8, 2013, 137.

contemporaneous historical moment.³¹⁰ This group of Cambodian-born artists is disparate in terms of their generational affiliations, biographical experiences, and modes of artistic formation, which respectively symbolize divergent micro- and metanarratives of history and art history: Leang Seckon as artist/artisan/performer and local pioneer of the collage medium; Vann Nath as ever-striving to perfect his painterly craft while persevering to illustrate traumatic episodes of Khmer Rouge detainment; Svay Ken as the painter of modern life vis-à-vis autobiography and his elevation of the urban mundane; and Sopheap Pich's own modernist sculptural praxis and his embodiment of the transnational artist in the global contemporary art world. However, each has been considered a "first" in his own right, and the attributions of value that have placed them in these positions of esteem reflect criteria imbricated in historical Western artistic discourses concerning modernist avant-gardes, while demonstrably resituated by local historical and social inflections. Ultimately, this undermines the notion of timelines as providing tangible historical anchor points, while at the same time pointing to their use within the project of historicization as a method of self-reflexive value. The discursive illuminations revealed through their construction undermine their function as a gauge of chronological firsts, yet provides a rich lens onto art worlds comprising diverse scales of production, enunciation, and immersion.

³¹⁰ See for example John Clark, "The Southeast Asian Modern: Three Artists," *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology*, eds. Nora Taylor and Boreth Ly (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Programs Publications, 2012), 15-32, and Patrick D. Flores, "Turns in Tropics: Artist-Curator," *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology*, eds. Nora Taylor and Boreth Ly (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Programs Publications, 2012), 171-188. It goes without saying that these accounts are almost always focused on avant-garde movements as decisively masculine imperatives, a dominant framework to which I am aware my own discussion contributes. It is difficult to locate in-depth accounts of practicing women artists in the immediate period of independence in Cambodia, and even information on the painters embraced as Cambodia's modern postcolonial artists - Nhek Dim (1934-1978) and You Khin (1947-2009) - is scant. In terms of contemporary women artists, the ratio is still very low compared to the number of practicing male artists; however, several young women are beginning to develop their artistic practices in significantly sophisticated and experimental ways, such as Tith Kanitha (b. 1987) and Yim Maline (b. 1982).

CHAPTER 4

SYMBOLIC INTERVENTIONS IN THE LATE SOCIALIST LANDSCAPE OF HO CHI MINH CITY

As a lens onto Vietnamese culture and society in the aftermath of the economic reforms (*Đổi Mới*) in 1986, the genre of fictional writing broadly known as “Renovation” literature has served as a key source of social critique. Given the government’s watchful eye over cultural expression, particularly in the arena of literature, this genre developed in the midst of a loosening of cultural controls in tandem with the onset of *Đổi Mới*. Novels and short stories typically focused on narratives of everyday life set against the backdrop of the failed promises of a utopian Communist state. Nguyễn Đình Hòa describes the window between 1986 and 1990 as a period in which Renovation authors

addressed such burning issues as the nature of socialism, the birth of a new class, the senility of the state and party apparatus, and the relation between politics and the arts and letters. Fading out was the trite slogan which the docile, regimented writers had to follow for many years: ‘Real People, Real Deeds’ themes had resulted in uniform, affected, and false writings that strictly toed the party’s guidelines.³¹¹

Dương Thu Hương, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Phạm Thị Hoài, amongst others, have authored powerfully crafted and poignant stories containing veiled or direct critique of state corruption and societal disenchantment in the wake of the 1975 unification, and subsequently, critical responses to the economic reforms, which ushered in a new set of ideological compromises on

³¹¹ Nguyễn Đình Hòa, *Vietnamese Literature: A Brief Survey* (San Diego, CA: San Diego State University, 1994), 169. In tandem with similar reforms being enacted in numerous socialist countries, following the model of Perestroika, the Vietnamese government announced a policy of extended literary freedom in December 1986. Subsequently, in 1990, concerned with the course of social change following reforms in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the Vietnamese government decided to reinstate controls over the freedom of expression. Journalists received directives over how to report on matters concerned with the state, and authors who had flourished in the years following 1986 suddenly received taboo status and their books were removed from stores. See Greg Lockhart, “Introduction,” in Nguyen Huy Thiep, *The General Retires and Other Stories* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1992), 2-4.

the part of the paternalistic State.³¹² As such, several Renovation authors have attained the status of dissidents in the eyes of the state, and have had their works banned within Vietnam, despite their popular followings and widespread critical acclaim.

The urban landscape is typically the setting for these novels and short stories, as the city has long served as the site for governmental projects to reform and civilize the population. With *Đổi Mới*, the Vietnamese cityscape witnessed the manifestation of extensive state projects to further regulate the appearance of a modernizing urban populace and define spatial regimes of public and private.³¹³ For Renovation authors and critics of contemporary Vietnamese society, the benefits that the reforms reaped for the economy were accompanied by the pipe dreams of the growing population of rural-urban migrants, and the banal material obsessions of consumerist Vietnamese society. In her short story “Sunday Menu,” author Phạm Thị Hoài stresses the surface quality of governmental campaigns in the post-*Đổi Mới* era, in which the focus on ‘saving face’ to preserve the appearance of Vietnamese prosperity and development echoes the emptiness of materialistic preoccupations and the hypocrisy of state rhetoric. The main character in the story describes the results of the “Keep the City Clean and Beautiful” campaign, in which police raid her mother’s street-side food stall:

I came out of the kitchen and saw Mother throwing herself on the ground, rolling over the broken bowls among the puddles of grey and green crab soup, the reddish crab eggs stuck in her hair like sequins. It was quite early and no customers were around. Thai picked up a hose and began to hose the mess of

³¹² These kinds of literary currents were not unique to Vietnam; similar expressions of disenchantment can be seen in 1990s Chinese fiction, which Robin Visser describes as attending “in particular to the formation of the moral subject and new forms of citizenry as the logic of the marketplace supplants earlier ethical and regulatory paradigms” (Visser, 7).

³¹³ These urban spatial reforms are analyzed in Erik Harms, “Vietnam’s Civilizing Process and the Retreat from the Street: A Turtle’s Eye View from Ho Chi Minh City,” *City & Society* 21, no. 2 (2009), 182-206; Erik Harms, “Eviction Time in the New Saigon: Temporalities of Displacement in the Rubble of Development,” *Cultural Anthropology* 8, no. 2 (2013), 344-368; and Christina Schwenkel, “Civilizing the City: Socialist Ruins and Urban Renewal in Central Vietnam,” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 20, no. 2 (2012), 437-470.

spilled food on the ground as if he were washing a motorbike, each spray accompanied by a curse, ‘Bloody Clean City’, ‘Bloody Beautiful City’. The whole street turned into a huge pot of combination soup.³¹⁴

This brief summary of intellectual dissent and societal critique in the field of Renovation literature is meant to provide context for the ways in which concerns paralleling those of the above-mentioned authors - with a focus on the contemporary condition in late socialist Vietnam - have found form through the visual arts. In this chapter I focus on several artists who present similar claims regarding the cityscape as a disputed terrain of ideological compromise. What is often evident in these artworks is the attempt to interpellate a historical consciousness constructed through and yet against the specter of socialism. I would suggest that Vietnamese artistic subjectivity cannot be disentangled from the presence of this ideology, as it is one the state actively attempts to embed in its subjects through educational apparatuses and evolving forms of sensory propaganda in the public domain. The urban landscape of Ho Chi Minh City, as palimpsest, has experienced numerous erasures, reinscriptions, and contestations, and as such, has served as terrain for both literal and symbolic intervention, as well as creative fodder for divergent yet dialogical artistic engagements. Therefore, while I consider the ways in which Ho Chi Minh City-based artists navigate the larger critiques of modern subjectivity in the era of globalization and neoliberalism, and the failure of the social contract in late socialist Vietnam, these analyses are grounded in the specificities of the urban framework and its attendant affective registers. This is to say that I consider the spatial environment in which artists locate themselves - most notably, the perceptual field(s) of and within Ho Chi Minh City - and how the representation of space and its attendant historical and political attachments become principal preoccupations in their work.

³¹⁴ Phạm Thị Hoài, *Sunday Menu: Selected Short Stories of Phạm Thị Hoài*, transl. Ton That Quynh Du (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2006), 24-25.

For urban subjects, the rapidly changing landscape of Ho Chi Minh City literally signals the disappearance of Saigon, yet strengthens it as a nostalgic imaginary and as a site of local affiliation for self-described Saigonese artists. In contrast with the millennium-old history of the region of what is now the northern capitol of Hanoi, the urban origins of the southern metropolis can be considered fairly recent, undergoing formation as a trade entrepôt as early as the beginning of the seventeenth century, due to its strategic location serving Chinese, Malay, Dutch, and Portuguese merchants. Prior to this, the settlement had been part of Khmer lands within the territory of the Angkorean empire, which had flourished from the 8th to 13th centuries. Even today, many rural Cambodians still refer to it as *Brai Nagar* (ប្រៃសណីយ៍), meaning “Forest City” or “Forest Nation.” The city gained further importance with the consolidation of the Nguyễn dynasty when Gia Long took the title of emperor in 1802. However, the weakening of the country due to civil warfare throughout the nineteenth century paved the way for the French to seize Cochinchina (the southern part of Vietnam) as a protectorate in 1859, where Saigon served as the regional colonial capital until 1954. From 1954-1975 Saigon witnessed civil strife and economic inflation with the growing presence of American military troops during the escalating conflict with the United States. In 1975 communist armies overtook the city in what is either known as the fall or liberation of Saigon, signaling the name change to Ho Chi Minh City. During the subsidy period (*thời bao cấp*) from 1975 to 1986, the country as a whole experienced sluggish development due to ineffective economic policies and agricultural reforms, until the institution of economic reforms under the rubric of *Đổi Mới* in 1986. From this point on, Ho Chi Minh City has developed into the country’s primary economic center as an outcome of major urban development schemes, population growth, and spatial and economic restructuring.³¹⁵

³¹⁵ For one account of the urban history of Ho Chi Minh City, see Nguyễn, Khắc Viện, and Hữu Ngọc, 228

The urban fabric of Ho Chi Minh City faces less heterogeneity in terms of visible cultural and historical heritage in comparison to Hanoi. William Logan has described how the “multilayered character of Hanoi’s cultural environment” can, to the outsider, make it difficult to discern the extent to which “authentic” Vietnamese culture has contributed to the formation of the urban landscape.³¹⁶ Hanoi bears the imprint of numerous historical regimes of governance and their architectural programs, from ruins dating to as far back as the 3rd century BCE³¹⁷ to French colonial planning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, to Soviet-built architecture designed in the “modern international style” during the latter half of the twentieth century. Logan characterizes Hanoi as a city strewn with political icons in the forms of monuments, statues, parks, and buildings, and the manifestation of repeated attempts to reshape the landscape according to the ideological imperatives of subsequent regimes (Figures 4.1 – 4.2).³¹⁸ The notion of cultural heritage in Hanoi has witnessed renewed attention given the capital’s status as the ancient source of Vietnamese civilization, and the government has supported ongoing public projects to protect the old quarter and other monuments deemed cultural patrimony.

From Saigon to Ho Chi Minh City: A Path of 300 Years (Hanoi: Thế Giới Publishers, 1998).

³¹⁶ Logan, William S., “Hanoi Townscape: Symbolic Imagery in Vietnam’s Capital,” in *Cultural Identity and Urban Change in Southeast Asia: Interpretive Essays*, eds. M. Askew and W. S. Logan (Geelong, Victoria: Deakin University Press, 1994), 43.

³¹⁷ Archaeological evidence supports the dating of the Cổ Loa polity to the 3rd-2nd century BCE. See Nam Kim, “Cổ Loa: A Site of Manifold Significance,” *Arts du Vietnam: Nouvelles Approches*, eds. C. Herbelin et al. (Rennes, France: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015), 67-70.

³¹⁸ Logan, “Hanoi Townscape,” 46.



Figure 4.1: Temple of Literature, Hanoi, 2008. Photograph by the author.



Figure 4.2: Poster celebrating the millennial anniversary of the founding of Hanoi, 2008. Photograph by the author.

Ho Chi Minh City faces a similar palimpsest-like condition, albeit not to the extent that such a depth of history is visibly manifested in the daily urban fabric. As in Hanoi, numerous temples and native structures were razed to construct modern buildings for the colonial administration, and most vestiges of its historical origins as a Khmer settlement have by now been effaced. Saigon experienced various phases in French colonial design, in large part, attempting to emulate Haussmann's urban plan. Gwendolyn Wright argues, however, that "while the colony responded to the prevailing fashions in urban design from Paris, the military engineers could not replicate the elegant composition and majestic proportions of a European capitol in this provincial setting."³¹⁹ Nonetheless, numerous structures built in the late nineteenth century by French architects remain sites of cultural and historical attachment for contemporary Saigonese. These include the Notre Dame Cathedral (*Nhà thờ Đức Bà*), Ben Thanh Market (*Chợ Bến Thành*), and various colonial buildings used as hotels and cafes by the French *colons* and subsequently by American journalists and military attaches in the 1950s and 1960s (Figures 4.3 – 4.7). One example is what is popularly referred to as the Eden building, built in the 1930s, which housed the offices of the Associated Press during the Vietnam War (Figure 4.8). On its ground floor was the Café Givral, rumored to be a gathering place for spies during the war, and also where one of the characters from Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American* would go for afternoon tea. Located across from the historic Caravelle hotel in downtown Ho Chi Minh City, the building's value as an example of Art Deco architecture and also wartime history has been nostalgically reiterated by both locals and foreigners. Many artists in particular expressed anger when plans were announced that it would be torn down so that property developer Vincom could

³¹⁹ Wright, 173.

build a new shopping center tower, high-rise structures that have begun to overshadow the skyline of downtown Ho Chi Minh City.³²⁰



Figure 4.3: Notre Dame Cathedral, Ho Chi Minh City, 2010. Photograph by the author.



Figure 4.4: Ben Thanh Market, Ho Chi Minh City, 2013. Photograph by the author.

³²⁰ Author's interviews with Tiffany Chung, Bùi Công Khánh, Đinh Q. Lê, Ngô Đình Trúc, Hoàng Dương Cầm, 2010-2011.



Figure 4.5: Street vendor in front of a billboard with the picture of the Post Office, Ho Chi Minh City, 2008. Photograph by the author.



Figure 4.6: Statue of Ho Chi Minh in front of the Central Post Office, 2008. Photograph by the author.



Figure 4.7: View of district 1 from Thu Thiem district, Ho Chi Minh City, 2008. Photograph by the author.



Figure 4.8: The Eden building, demolished in 2010. Photograph by the author.

Reflecting predominant methods of structural analyses, the landscapes and architectural markers of Vietnam's two major cities, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City have been extensively analyzed through the lens of urbanization and heritage studies, chiefly in regards to changing spatial formulations connected to market developments accompanying major economic transitions.³²¹ This model of economic and spatial change is often described as a hybrid phenomenon given that most theoretical conceptions of urbanization have drawn from the work of Marxist geographers, including David Harvey, Neil Smith, and Henri Lefebvre, in their critiques of urbanization within the context of capitalist structures.³²² As such, studies of Vietnamese urban change typically accommodate these frameworks in modified fashion in order to take into account the macro- and micro-scales of change in market-oriented socialist cities.³²³ Urbanization has been perceived by the state as synonymous with modernization and development in the economic and technological domains, yet often brings what are considered undesirable cultural phenomena as an attendant condition of globalization. It is toward these social behaviors that the state maintains an uncertain and ambivalent stance. Erik Harms has discussed how the new spatial regimes in late socialist Ho Chi Minh City reveal a convergence of interests on the part of the government and the rising middle-class, both tied to the

³²¹ See, for example, Terry McGee, "Interrogating the Production of Urban Space in China and Vietnam under Market Socialism," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 50 (August 2009), 228-246; Lisa B. W. Drummond, "Street Scenes: Practices of Public and Private space in Urban Vietnam," *Urban Studies* 37 (2000): 2377-391; Dean Forbes, "Urbanization, Migration, and Vietnam's Spatial Structure," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 11 (1996), 24-51; Mandy Thomas, "Spatiality and Political Change in Urban Vietnam," in *Consuming Urban Culture in Contemporary Vietnam*, eds. L. Drummond and M. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2003), 170-188; and Erik Harms, *Saigon's Edge: On the Margins of Ho Chi Minh City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

³²² See David Harvey, *The Urban Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (New York: Blackwell, 1984); and Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

³²³ See for example, Hy Van Luong, *Urbanization, Migration, and Poverty in a Vietnamese Metropolis: Hồ Chí Minh City in Comparative Perspectives* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), and Harms, *Saigon's Edge*.

disciplinary logic of “civilizing” the citizenry and their engagements with the once-blurred categories of public and private space.³²⁴ Harms dates these spatial reforms to the “Year of Order and Urban Civilization” in 2003, concurrent with the city’s hosting of the Southeast Asia Games. As for the reasons behind the ongoing success of the state’s endeavors to civilize the city, Harms suggests that “this campaign simultaneously speaks in the name of ‘the people’ and divides the Vietnamese people into class-differentiated segments. In doing so, it aligns the interests of propertied elites with the socialist state’s governing agenda.”³²⁵

The hastened course of urban development and parallel processes of neoliberalism and market expansion are recurring subjects of critique for artists and intellectual actors, particularly as sweeping construction projects threaten the existence of popular architectural heritage. Such destruction feeds into further criticisms levelled against what they perceive as the state’s apathy towards cultural patrimony, a symptom of what cultural critics have described as the state’s hollow iterations of what possesses value within the historical narrative of Vietnamese nationhood. This characterization has roots in the extensive history of modern Vietnamese historiography. As part of the larger project to politicize and institutionalize historical studies in Vietnam, the government established an Institute of Historical Studies (*Viện Sử Học*) in 1959 in order to align historical research with Party interests, henceforth establishing a Communist-sanctioned paradigm of scholarship. In these circumstances, Patricia Pelley has described the historian’s task – accorded canonical status due to political affiliation - as writing “a new collective memory of the past,” on ongoing and ever-shifting project due to the priority of

³²⁴ See Harms, “Vietnam’s Civilizing Process.”

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 186.

historiographical concerns in tandem with changing Party imperatives.³²⁶ Yet Hue-Tam Ho Tai has suggested the possibilities for alternative narratives and spaces of articulation in late socialist society, noting that “public memory in present-day Vietnam is characterized as much by confusion as profusion.”³²⁷ She argues that while the *Đổi Mới* reforms saved the Vietnamese government from historical irrelevance (in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet-Eastern bloc), the reforms effectively signaled the end of the utopian socialist project, taking away the “telos that had made possible a particular writing of Vietnamese history.”³²⁸ Similarly, Nguyễn Võ Thu Hương argues that the “presence of a market and its incitement to freedom to produce and consume must be processed beyond the domain of government as the Communist Party and its state apparatuses no longer have the monopoly on the production of social imaginaries in society.”³²⁹ Nguyễn notes that the representation of these imaginaries in relationship to the “contradictory modes of simultaneous and differentiated governance” can now be traced through cultural productions in the realms of film and literature.³³⁰

However, the fields of journalism, and cinematic and literary production remain subject to acute governmental surveillance and disciplinary response. The domain of contemporary art, however, can be more difficult for state censors to “read,” particularly in the development of less legible conceptual practices and artists’ increasingly adept maneuvers to sidestep official scrutiny in the exhibition licensing process. Nonetheless, in response to the state’s ongoing efforts to control public terrain as a means through which citizen subjects can be shaped, public

³²⁶ Patricia M. Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 20.

³²⁷ Hue-Tam Ho Tai, “Introduction: Situating Memory,” *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 2.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

³²⁹ Nguyễn Võ Thu Hương, *The Ironies of Freedom: Sex, Culture, and Neoliberal Governance in Vietnam* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 185.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

space remains a highly contested arena in which artistic interventions and critiques are rarely, if ever, staged, particularly in Ho Chi Minh City. From what I have witnessed and gathered from numerous conversations and interviews, there is a preference to produce critical statements and conversations via symbolic interventions in what I would describe as the representational pictorial field, for example, a manipulated photograph, painting, or spatially delimited installation. Such artistic acts serve as an intervention into representations of space as opposed to representational space, according to Henri Lefebvre's distinction of spatial categories that are key to understanding the nature of space as both socio-political product and unstable process. He defines *representational space* as space that is "directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users', but also of some artists and perhaps of those, such as a few writers and philosophers, who describe and aspire to do no more than describe."³³¹ As such, one can conceive of this as the artist's *image of the world*, in contrast to the *world as image*, which corresponds to Lefebvre's characterization of *representations of space* as "conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers, as of a certain type of artist with a scientific bent – all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived."³³² The representation of space is exemplified by architecture and urban planning, entailing the design of built space and the immersive structuring of lived experience.

A particularly subtle yet powerful intervention into representational space is the series of photographic texts crafted by Ngô Đình Trúc (b. 1973, Saigon), an artist whose work tends to situate itself as either installation, photography, or both. What often surfaces in his artwork is a concern with the relationship between text and image, and how this interaction can function as an

³³¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992), 39.

³³² *Ibid.*, 38.

interruptive device within representations of places and their attached narratives. Trúc perceives text as a type of ready-made image-object, and therefore one of the devices he often uses is its simple insertion into iconographic frames, at times intruding on the integrity of the photographic image. His *Idle Talks* series from 2005 is a series of ten old black and white photographs of people and famous architectural landmarks in Ho Chi Minh City, places that denote the Saigon of pre-1975 rather than the Ho Chi Minh City of today (Figures 4.9 – 4.13). Trúc describes the series as follows:

The *Idle Talks* comprises stories that are imagined from ready-made photographs. These stories are simply personal feelings. I reproduce the ready-made photographs not as “windows” but as “mirrors.” These photographs provide opportunities to tell my own stories. The ready-made photographs in *Idle Talks* might have been taken about Saigon, in Saigon or could be unrelated to Saigon. But all of them are used to talk about Saigon.³³³

In Trúc’s photo-texts, Saigon conjures both a geographic location and historical imaginary, revealing the artist’s concern with discerning an individual relationship with the past in a way that complicates and interrupts official framings of historical imagery. *Idle Talks* was first exhibited as part of Sue Hajdu’s curated component for *600 Images/60 Artists/6 Curators/6 Cities:Bangkok/Berlin/London/LosAngeles/Manila/Saigon*, an international photography project that took place in 2006.³³⁴ However, they were then exhibited twice at San Art, and the second time, two of the images – one of which was of Hồ Chí Minh - were not given permission to be

³³³ <http://www.ngodinhtruc.com/en/works-projects/detail/3.html>, accessed March 8, 2011.

³³⁴ Hajdu was the Saigon-based curator for the project, and she selected photographers and artists David Hodkinson, Ngô Đình Trúc, Hoàng Dương Cẩm, Ryuzo Fukuhara, Motoko Uda, Rich Streitmatter-Tran, Phuong M. Do, Bùi Thế Trung Nam, Nguyễn Như Huy, and Fabrice Lecouffe. In her curatorial essay she states that “Saigon’s participation in a project such as 600 Images represents a coming of age for this city — a city that has historically been eclipsed as a center of artistic practice. Through this project, ten Saigon-based artists have been provided with a meaningful context in which to discuss their ideas about what it means to be living in this city at this important historical juncture, and to present these ideas to audiences in parts of the world that may still be unfamiliar with the details of life in a city such as Saigon.” Sue Hajdu, “600 Images, 60 Artists, 6 Curators, 6 Cities: Bangkok, Berlin, Manila, London, Los Angeles, Saigon, The Saigon Work,” July 2006, http://suehajdu.com/writing_600.html, accessed 6/7/2013.

exhibited. Despite the lack of overtly controversial text, the censorship of Hồ Chí Minh's image in this artwork reveals that the state maintains a uneasy stance towards the appropriation of his portrait, and continues to seek control over image production as it pertains to the former president's quasi-sacred presence.³³⁵

The simple act of narrating these images presents a variant of the concept of narrating the city, as discursively deconstructed through literature and film, in which the urban landscape is often construed as a melancholy textual space subject to different kinds of semiotic readings. In these accounts, the foremost interrogation is directed at the psychic state engendered by physical and phenomenological inhabitation of the cityscape, as well as the evocations summoned through image-objects. Trúc's reflections recall philosopher Gaston Bachelard's belief that through the process of daydreaming as a response to image-objects one could recover the most possibilities for truly engaging the human psyche and exploring the semi-conscious states of thinking, dreaming, and processes of memory.³³⁶ As such, Bachelard emphasizes the "architectural imagination," revealing the ways in which images associated with dwelling, and our immediate responses to these images, can be used to map a far more intimate domain of the human self – both mind and body – than previously realized.

It is through these lenses that I believe Trúc's series invokes a far more profound examination of self and community as distinctively "Saigonese," as the photograph-texts reveal personal acts of almost colloquial narration in the form of musings. These may be interpreted as the stories that Michel de Certeau describes as carrying out a labor of signification, in terms of

³³⁵ See Nina Hien's discussion of Ho Chi Minh's iconic portrait and the ways in which its ubiquitous display in public and private spaces signals the multivalent readings of his posthumous presence. Nina Hien, "Defacements & Refacements," in "Reanimating Vietnam: Icons, Photography & Image Making in Hồ Chí Minh City," Ph.D. Diss., Cornell University, 2007, 173-99.

³³⁶ See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Transl. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

“organizing the play of changing relationships between places and spaces.”³³⁷ Trúc’s stories function as an interruptive device within a larger narrative of nation and history, inserted alongside singular portraits of people and buildings, images flipped horizontally to produce another subtle effect of disorientation. His typed text, as representative of his speech, presents a claim upon place and history as it inhabits the space of the pictorial frame, and thus produces a signifying relationship to the images. This image-text interplay therefore produces a disruption of the dominant readings which have accrued psychically in public consciousness over time, and represents the social imaginary in a way that points to the wavering control the state holds over narrating historical truth. As such, these embedded associations are unsettled by the aesthetic effect of a singular voice in the act of reflecting on places and memories, and reveals that the act of mapping the city is akin to mapping the self.

³³⁷ Certeau, 118.

Idle Talks #2

Raymond Cauchetier
took this photo of Norodom Palace
from the air in 1955.

In 1962, two pilots, Cu and Quoc
destroyed the palace with bombs.
Their view must have been the same
as Raymond's.

After the palace was damaged, it was replaced by
another one which is now known as
"Unification Palace".

Fortunately, through this valuable photo, we can see the building, which had existed
for nearly 100 years, as it stood in the last minutes of its life.



Figure 4.9: Ngô Đình Trúc, *Idle Talks #2 / Chuyện Phiếm #2*, 2005, digital black and white print, 21 x 29.7 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

Idle Talks #5

About ten years ago, thanks to a photo that had been taken by a female French journalist, we finally discovered which tank actually was the first to break through the gates of Independence Palace and liberate Saigon on April 30, 1975.

But for long time before that (and even now) for many people this is still the image of the first tank, because this is the photo that is in public circulation in Vietnam.

This photo is used as a symbol for Liberation Day, so people do not care about its authenticity.



Figure 4.10: Ngô Đình Trúc, *Idle Talks #5 / Chuyện Phiếm #5*, 2005, digital black and white print, 21 x 29.7 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

Idle Talks #7

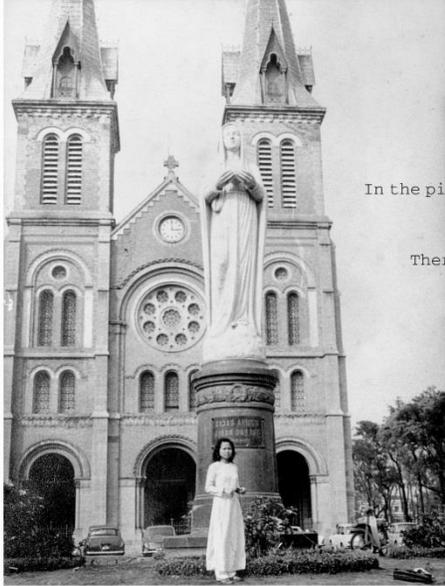


About 20 years ago,
the musician, Trinh Cong Son
wrote a song after rain:
"staying under the roof
and seeing the streets that
look like rivers running
around..."

Even now, after heavy rain,
the streets of Saigon
become "rivers
running around", just like that.

Maybe people want to
hold on to this as a romantic
image of Saigon.

Figure 4.11: Ngô Đình Trúc, *Idle Talks #7 / Chuyện Phiếm #7*, 2005, digital black and white print, 21 x 29.7 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Idle Talks #9

This photo is from my family memories.
In the picture, taken in front of the Notre Dame Cathedral
in the center of Saigon, is my Mom
when she was a student.

There must be so many private albums that hold images
like this about Saigon.

Because of these personal collections,
images of Saigon will be saved and contemplated
forever.

Figure 4.12: Ngô Đình Trúc, *Idle Talks #9 / Chuyện Phiếm #9*, 2005, digital black and white print, 21 x 29.7 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

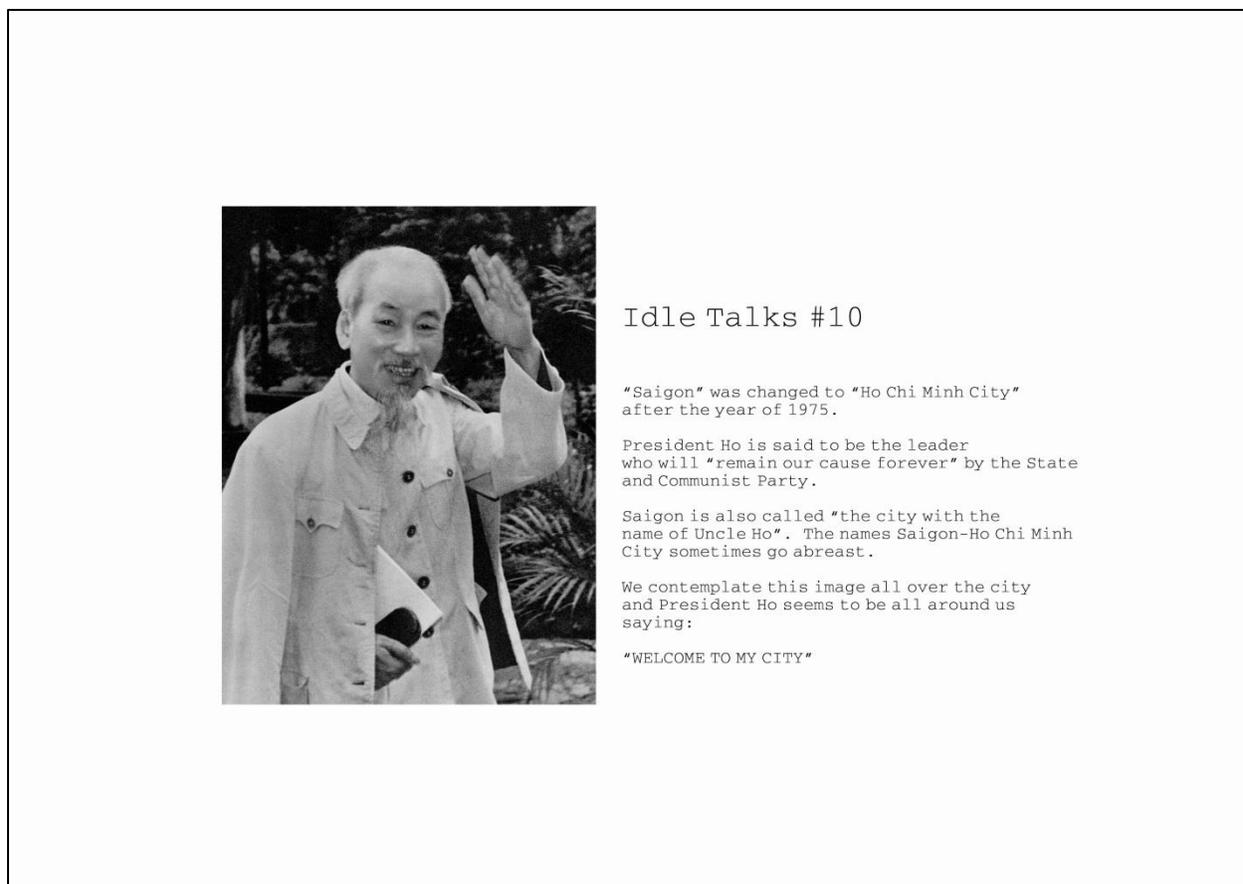


Figure 4.13: Ngô Đình Trúc, *Idle Talks #10 / Chuyện Phiếm #10*, 2005, digital black and white print, 21 x 29.7 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

Trúc's straightforward insertion of diaristic narrative into frames containing carefully selected found photographs is demonstrative of a persistent thread that runs through numerous acts of creative production in late Socialist societies, and that is the assertion of the individual voice against the narrative of collective identity. In her analysis of post-socialist China, Robin Visser categorizes a diverse array of creative mediations by artists, writers, and filmmakers under the rubric of "urban aesthetics," noting that "the rejection of metaphors of the nation-state, the main aesthetic strategy from the May Fourth period until the 1980s, is a key aspect of

postsocialist urban aesthetics.”³³⁸ In Vietnam, there is a long history of linguistic and literary mediations in poetry and literature, and in the contemporary period, these also occur at the level of every-day vernacular. One example surrounds the numerous re-namings of streets in Ho Chi Minh City in tandem with regime changes throughout the twentieth century, the last one drawing on names of historical national heroes and slogans associated with revolution and liberation. In a sardonic word play on the changing of “Freedom” (*Tự do*) street to “Rise Up in Revolution” (*Đông khởi*), and *Công lý* (Justice) street to “Southern Uprising” (*Nam Kỳ Khởi Nghĩa*), it is jokingly said that “‘Rise Up in Revolution’ lacks Freedom” (*Đông khởi thiếu Tự do*) and “‘Southern Uprising’ lacks Justice” (*Nam Kỳ Khởi Nghĩa thiếu Công lý*). It is striking that *Đông khởi* street, situated in the commercial hub of downtown Saigon, is particularly well-known for its luxury boutiques, which include Louis Vitton and Gucci, thus demonstrating a visual excess of consumerism and luxury that only renders its name more ironic. Such wordplay is indicative of ways in which the imposition of text on the map of the city triggers a reaction and form of resistance on the part of the city’s subjects, for whom the utterance of such terms in their everyday life signals another banal effort by the state to instill ideological vocabulary. These everyday phrases could be interpreted, to a certain extent, through Mandy Thomas’ description of a growing political consciousness of the urban populace, in which shifting uses of public space for political protest and leisure activity is indicative of the merging of the public sphere and civil society with the Vietnamese cultural landscape.³³⁹ In cities like Hanoi, public spaces

³³⁸ Visser,10.

³³⁹ According to Thomas, sites of memorial and state authority no longer hold a ‘sacred aura’ for the much of the populace, whose new consumption patterns, both of material goods, cultural ideas, and of space, are revealing of the impact of the market-oriented economic transformation of society. Thomas suggests that these shifting spatial practices and the rising voice of the populace in contesting certain state projects involving development and building in key areas of the city are representative of a growing and

are now beginning to coalesce with Western notions of the public sphere, but not because of governmental intervention, according to Mandy Thomas. Because of local community activity, movement, and interaction, such as the attempts to use public spaces for large gatherings and protests, the “spaces of the city change through the claims of the populace.”³⁴⁰ As such, these street names are subject to playful appropriation, in the form of language subversion as a means of state critique, and it is also revealing of this persistent desire on the part of cultural producers to tell the history of their city on their own terms.

Within the urban landscape of Ho Chi Minh City, Saigonese artists have demonstrated a preoccupation with the iconography and aesthetic of Socialist propaganda as it continues to be embedded in public spaces of visibility, and yet evolves in its appeal both in terms of aesthetic and content. As a space of representation, the cityscape thus becomes a palette of signs and icons to appropriate and re-encode, and is hence perceived through artistic vision as a screen to be recomposed as a visual text. Yet these appropriations are employed in quite a different way than in their manifestations in the genres of cynical realism or political pop more popular in the north, namely in Hanoi and China. What seems to resonate in the works of Saigonese artists is a larger concern with signifiers that can be subtly deviated or redirected in order to enact alternative connotations and inquiries into the iconography and its accompanying texts, with the goal of provoking questions. As such, the recurring objective appears to be the artistic scrutiny of the visual effects of the state’s attempts to craft a public landscape with the purpose of shaping a citizenry, which are inevitably subject to the everyday interventions of the populace and flows of globalizing processes.

significant popular political consciousness that plays out through urban public spaces. M. Thomas, “Spatiality and Political Change in Urban Vietnam,” 170-88.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 185.

As another example of symbolic intervention into representations of space, an early series of paintings produced by Tuan Andrew Nguyen, a Ho Chi Minh City-based Vietnamese-American artist and member of the artist collective The Propeller Group, in collaboration with various artists invokes numerous questions surrounding the palimpsestic nature of cities. Nguyễn questioned the historical and dialectical notions of modernity that continue to resonate within everyday life in contemporary Vietnam. The 2005-2006 *Proposal for a Vietnamese Landscape* series comprised painterly compositions of visual signs referencing competing aesthetic and ideological programs currently interwoven into the landscape of major Vietnamese cities, attempting to capture the artist's somber yet humorous vision of a hybrid capitalist/socialist "utopian" cityscape (Figures 4.14 – 4.16). Through the paintings' fabrication as a collective endeavor between photography, digital manipulation, and painterly rendering, a dialogue is captured in which signage, graffiti, advertising, state propaganda, and tourist images both compete with and yet complement one another formally and semiotically, illustrating Nguyễn's main concern in exploring "how signage, both propaganda and advertising, resemble each other in such remarkable and uncanny ways."³⁴¹ The different forms of signage contend with each other as alternate signifiers of modernization, and of the state ideologies and economic systems that have in turn attempted to animate and orient these forms of modernity. In line with Benjamin's conception of historical materialism as meaning gleaned through the representational value of imagery rather than narratives, the *Proposal for a Vietnamese Landscape* paintings aimed to reveal the nature of contemporary Vietnamese "urban phantasmagoria."³⁴² In this

³⁴¹ Gridithya Gaweewong, "Tuan Andrew Nguyễn: Proposals for a Vietnamese Landscape," *The Fifth Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, eds. Lynne Seear and Suhanya Raffel (South Brisbane, Queensland: Queensland Art Gallery, 2006), 158.

³⁴² Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989), 82-83.

montage-like composition, the aestheticization of both politics and commodities are equally intrinsic to an urban visual culture in which representational value comes to the fore and associated narratives or significations only retain superfluous meaning.³⁴³ Ultimately, the paintings convey the difficulty of easily categorizing late-socialist or post-socialist Asian societies, whose ambivalent visual landscapes are indicative of their hybrid and paradoxical socio-political character.

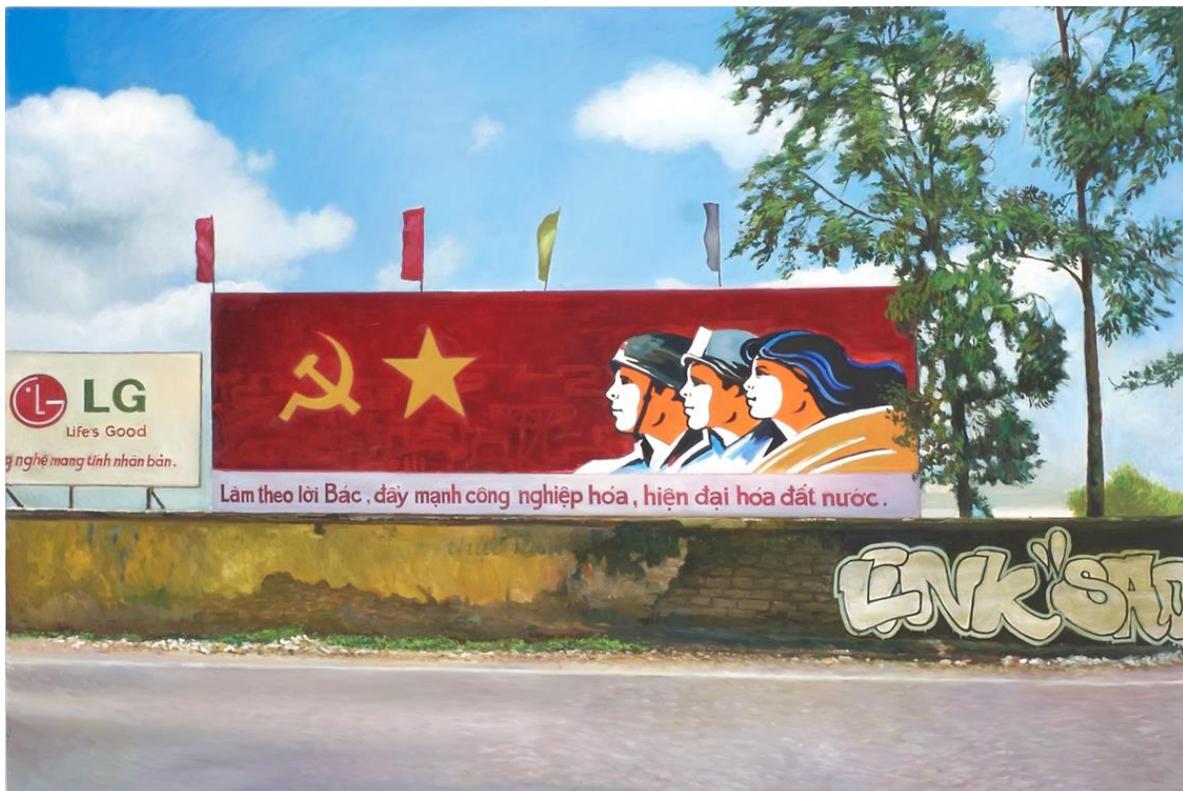


Figure 4.14: Tuan Andrew Nguyen, in collaboration with Link Sao, Ngô Đồng and Jason Huang, *Proposal for a Vietnamese Landscape #3: Link sao, đẩy mạnh công nghiệp hoá, công nghệ mang tính nhân bản* (Link Sao, push industrialization, human technology), 2006, oil on canvas, 180 x 120 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

³⁴³ Ibid.



Figure 4.15: Tuan Andrew Nguyen, in collaboration with Hà Thúc Phù Nam, Wowy, Seller, Sorry, Ngô Đồng, Jason Huang, *Proposal for a Vietnamese landscape #4: Wowy kháng chiến pop mới* (Wowy new pop resistance), 2007, oil on canvas, 180 x 120 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4.16: Tuan Andrew Nguyen, in collaboration with Hà Thúc Phù Nam, Linkfish, Cá Sấu Yellow, Gil, Ngô Đồng and Jason Huang, *Proposal for a Vietnamese Landscape #2: Độc Lập Tự Do, Gil, Tóc Luôn Vào Nếp* (Independence and freedom, Gil, your hair back into place), 2006, oil on canvas, 180 x 120 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

The dialogical relationships described above can be best illustrated with a close visual reading of *Proposal #2* (Figure 4.16), and a deconstruction of the painting's layers. The first layer of the composition is painted in the style of the colonial *École des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine* (EBAI), the colonial art school in Hanoi established in 1926. During this period, Vietnamese artists trained under French painters and sculptors who brought oil painting and the practice of painting in *plein-air* to the colony.³⁴⁴ The landscapes produced were often heavily impressionistic and romantic, and subjects were typically seascapes, domestic scenes, and

³⁴⁴ See N. Taylor, "Orientalism/Occidentalism."

tropical landscapes dotted with Vietnamese women in *áo dài* (Vietnamese traditional dress) against the background of temples and indigenous architecture. Nguyen asked Ngô Đồng, a former member of the Vietnam People's Army who trained at the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts University, to reproduce this visual style. Đồng employed the soft, muted palette and the subtly impressionistic brushwork characteristic of the EBAI painters to render a contemporary streetscape photographed from an actual location in Ho Chi Minh City into the oil medium, softening its contours and romanticizing its edges of decay. But the street and the building are themselves remnants from and are reminders of the colonial period of urban design, when the French rebuilt large sections of Saigon into a version of "a French provincial town," resulting in a fragmented urban plan, featuring numerous areas with French-planted saplings, major boulevards, and the characteristic neo-classical buildings and villas.³⁴⁵ Today the wide boulevards are circulated with street vendors, motorbike and automobile traffic, and the buildings with their faded yellow exteriors provide a touch of the aesthetics of colonial urban decay.

The billboard on the far left is characteristic of the government propaganda posters and signs that are a dominant feature of key urban spaces of Vietnamese cities, particularly in Hanoi. They have served as a primary instrument of the government's social mobilization campaigns, often targeted at families, women, and youth, and are highly visible throughout public spaces in large cities and in popular culture and media (Figures 4.17 – 4.18). They have been a long-standing tradition since older campaigns beginning in the 1940s, under the initiative of Hồ Chí Minh's 'new way of life' (*Nếp Sống Mới*), to modernize social life and behavior.³⁴⁶ Today, mobilization posters (*tranh cổ động*) such as the one in Figure 4.17, which reads "Every person

³⁴⁵ Forbes, *Asian Metropolis*, 10. See also Wright and Logan.

³⁴⁶ Drummond, 2385.

and every sector contributes everyday” (*Người người thì đưa, ngành ngành thì đưa, ngày ngày thì đưa*), which demonstrate the state’s attempt to infuse public spaces with messages aiming to ingrain a sense of communal civic responsibility in the name of society-building, are in the process of being overshadowed with posters condemning social evils such as drug use and prostitution – social problems that many argue have become more exacerbated with the accelerated pace of globalization and flows of foreign peoples and capital since the economic reforms. According to Nguyễn-võ Thu Hương, these prolific and often graphic posters can be found all over the city, thus casting “a prominent police presence in the physical and representational space of the city.”³⁴⁷ Such initiatives and state projects that utilize visual campaigns in public spaces recall Nestor Garcia Canclini’s description of the Mexican government’s role as a principal actor in national and urban life, whose development of national patrimony was founded on imagery of visual culture rather than print because of high rates of illiteracy.³⁴⁸ Because visual surfaces are fundamentally instrumental to such programs, these signs and billboards are done with care, rendered in striking vibrant primary colors, dynamic and robust shapes, and simple and direct slogans for the most effective legibility.

³⁴⁷ Nguyễn-võ Thu Hương, 125.

³⁴⁸ Nestor Garcia Canclini, “From National Capital to Global Capital: Urban Change in Mexico City,” Transl. Paul Liffman, *Public Culture* 12:1 (2000), 208.



Figure 4.17: Propaganda poster, Hanoi, 2008. Photograph by the author.



Figure 4.18: Propaganda posters, Ho Chi Minh City, 2013. Photograph by the author.

The secondary layer of the painting can be considered to comprise the political poster as well as the commercial poster. The propaganda poster commemorates Saigon's liberation (or, for many overseas Vietnamese, its 'fall') by Communist troops on April 30, 1975, and its unification with the north. The text at the bottom is a standard wartime rallying phrase that reads, "There is nothing more precious than independence and freedom" (*Không có gì quý hơn tự lập tự do*). The curvilinear flag which forms the wing of the dove is the flag of the National Front for the Liberation of Southern Vietnam, temporarily adopted by the *Việt Cộng* from 1975-1976, later replaced by the current Vietnamese flag, which is red with a central yellow star. Underneath the wing is a miniature cityscape, an outline representing troops approaching the Reunification Palace on the day of the takeover in 1975. The poster proclaims an optimistic message of freedom and independence, key paths of progress towards a new state of nationalist modernity. The liberation of Saigon connotes its freedom from decades of foreign presence, a city "made by the colonial experience"; hence its name change to Ho Chi Minh City was in large part an attempt to distinguish itself as a Vietnamese city born anew.³⁴⁹ The Hanoi-based government's post-unification attitude towards Ho Chi Minh City was contemptuous of its earlier postcolonial status in the 1950s and 1960s as a cosmopolitan city open to the imports and presence of foreign cultural and economic capital. In the eyes of the Hanoi regime, Saigon's ongoing relationship with the United States and France after its 1954 independence and its rampant commercialism were evidence of its participation in a neo-colonial power dynamic, thus preventing it from attaining true modernity.³⁵⁰ Therefore, the 1975 takeover marked its liberation from what was perceived and is still proclaimed as the southern city's entrenchment in a neocolonial state of

³⁴⁹ Forbes, 9.

³⁵⁰ Philip Taylor, *Fragments of the Present: Searching for Modernity in Vietnam's South* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 38.

subservience, and its new integration into the nation's project of modernization and true independence within a unified state.

What stands in ironic contrast to the poster's optimistic message of progress is the peasant who stands in front of it, blocking part of its text. The faceless and androgynous figure is an old woman attired in gray pajamas and the conical hat symbolic of agricultural labor and thus, the opposite of modern industry. She is rendered in the semi-realistic and muted brushstrokes used for the rest of the background landscape, capturing the wrinkles and folds of her clothing, depicting her three-dimensional presence in opposition to the poster's flat surface of bright color. Consequently there is a depth to her rendering that is absent in the colorful and depthless billboard. And while the dove in the poster looks forward to the future, its wings extended in a dynamic composition suggesting vitality, enthusiasm, and motion, the peasant or rural migrant stands idly, looking backwards down the street, as though awaiting something or someone that has yet to arrive.

On the far right of the painting is a SunsilK advertisement, with the text translating as "Even when the wind blows, your hair will fall back into place" (*Mặc gió thổi tung tóc luôn vào nếp*). The woman vivaciously looks over her shoulder at the viewer in a direct and alluring way, while her hair curves out in the direction of the text. The shades of pink and the white lettering and the sweeping expanse of her long hair, emblematic of traditional Vietnamese conceptions of feminine beauty, emphasize the poster's marketing towards women, which is starkly contrasted with the androgyny of the old woman on the left. Since *Đổi Mới*, such advertising for foreign imported consumer goods have multiplied throughout Vietnam's urban centers, and have become ubiquitous signs in the city fabric. While now indicative of Vietnam's growing market-oriented economy since its 'open-door' (*mở cửa*) policy and subsequent restructuring of the social make-

up of the urban populace - particularly its burgeoning middle class - such images of foreign consumer products were once viewed with suspicion and outright intolerance by the Socialist state. With the 1986 reforms, which called attention to the government's previous errors in economic policy, there was no choice but to also revise notions and proclamations about modernity and progress, seeing as how the realms of cultural production are inevitably bound to economic activity. For many, though, the association of the influx of foreign goods and cultural influence with social evils persisted through *Đổi Mới*, and the circulation of global capital within Vietnam has been seen as a challenge to cultural integrity and a threat to national identity.³⁵¹

The placement of the billboards on either side of the painting suggests this entangled relationship. Diametrically opposed to one another as representatives of competing visual regimes, one propagating the state's version of the nation's unification and liberation, the other indicative of the frenetic visuality of the current state of foreign investment, capitalist marketing, and Vietnamese consumerism in the era of globalization, the billboards are placed in a way that they visually counter each other in direct engagement. The dove looks forward towards the shampoo advertisement, towards a future in which the ideals of the revolution have had to compromise with capitalist economic systems, while the girl in the ad turns towards the past, towards the Socialist poster, only to look over her shoulder towards the present-day onlooker. Formally, the curving shapes in both posters also reflect each other, with the extension of the dove's wings and the uplifting swell of the girl's hair. The juxtaposition of these visual elements was a deliberate compositional decision made by the artist, but, in addition, their dialogic

³⁵¹ P. Taylor, 126. Mandy Thomas also discusses this issue in relation to the ambivalent reception of Korean and Taiwanese pop culture products, e.g. film, music, television, in contemporary Vietnam. See Mandy Thomas, "East Asian Cultural Traces in Post-Socialist Vietnam," in *TransPop: Korea Vietnam Remix* (Seoul: ARKO Art Center, 2008).

positioning also suggests the parallels between the intentions of socialist propaganda and socialist realist art and the objectives of capitalist advertising, or what Michael Schudson has called “capitalist realism.” In his comparison of the two forms of visual production, Schudson acknowledges the differences in their surface qualities and their emotional intensities, but in terms of their ideological functions, he argues that

both forms subordinate everything to a message that romanticizes the present or the potential of the present. If the visual aesthetic of socialist realism is designed to dignify the simplicity of human labor in the service of the state, the aesthetic of capitalist realism - without a masterplan of purposes - glorifies the pleasures and freedoms of consumer choice in defense of the virtues of private life and material ambitions.³⁵²

As such, both socialist realism and much of capitalist advertising can be viewed as modes of aestheticized political and social ideology that flatten out the depth of experience in order to promote or make assumptions about progress; both serve interpellating functions which attempt to implicate the viewing and consuming subject within collective projects promising utopian outcomes.

Furthermore, the two are brought even more into a spatial relationship through the central image of graffiti on the wall. The graffiti visually connects the two posters through its vibrant blue color and the organic curvatures of its form, serving as a counterpoint to the images on its left and right. But it stands in opposition to these state-sponsored or corporate billboards because of its direct and unmediated engagement with the city terrain. Graffiti is by nature an interventionist medium as it represents uncensored artistic self-expression that wavers between decoration and defacement on the often-prohibited surfaces of public spaces. The incorporation of this imagery reflects Nguyễn’s own personal interest in graffiti, along with urban change,

³⁵² Michael Schudson, “Advertising As Capitalist Realism,” *Advertising & Society Review*. 1. 1 (2000). Reprinted from Michael Schudson, “Advertising as capitalist realism,” *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 209-233.

youth, and global flows of pop culture.³⁵³ In a way, its addition to the imaginary cityscape serves as the artist's personal intervention into his representation of space, as a kind of wishful projection, or proposal, for urban modernity from the perspective of a returnee artist. It also serves to illustrate what David Crouch has argued in his essay on the role of the street in popular geographical knowledge, in that the graffiti provides a point of counterbalance to the types of social ideologies conveyed by the billboards. Following Michel de Certeau's work on urban spaces and practices of everyday life, Crouch asserted the role of popular and political culture in producing our mental geography of the street, and claims that such imagery is not necessarily locally situated, that it draws from collective memory and from other spaces; therefore such spaces are the site of potential resistance to hegemonic visual narratives, whether they be from the state or the market.³⁵⁴

As an emerging urban phenomenon, Vietnamese graffiti art is a visual practice without embedded social histories tied to political and economic institutions, like socialist mobilization posters and consumer advertising.³⁵⁵ Today's underground graffiti scene in Vietnam marks the country's first generation of graffiti artists, and represents a new wave of creative tactics of self-expression, focusing on individual mediation in public space and the tension between art and vandalism. The rather limited but slowly growing practice of graffiti has particular resonance

³⁵³ Conversation with the author, July 2008. Prior to this series of paintings, the artist had produced a short documentary film (*Spray it, Don't Say it*, 2006), on the growing graffiti movement in the city.

³⁵⁴ See David Crouch, "The Street in the Making of Popular Geographical Knowledge," *Images of the Street: Planning, Identity and Control in Public Space*, ed. N. R. Fyfe (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 160-175. This essay can be viewed as a response to de Certeau's writings about urban tactics in *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

³⁵⁵ Graffiti art in Vietnam emerged about 4 or 5 years ago. It is technically illegal but the fine is only 100,000 dong, or \$6.25 -- about the cost of three cans of spray paint. Melanie Lidman, "Hanoi and Beyond: Vietnam and the Road to Change: Hip-Hop Hanoi-style: Dancing in the shadow of Lenin and Uncle Ho -- A Dateline Merrill Special Report." <http://www.merrill.umd.edu/dateline/vietnam/hiphop.html>, accessed 11/30/08.

within the context of Vietnamese public space, which has had an ongoing history of control and surveillance under colonial, socialist, and late-socialist regimes. In the city of Johannesburg, Sarah Nuttall has looked at how the abundance of city texts and commodity images in the popular media signal black people's efforts to attain an urban presence given that Johannesburg's past as a racial city underscores its present metropolitan form; such consumer and media images thus serve as representations of self-making in the city. Nguyễn's insertion of graffiti into his imagined streetscapes attempts to draw attention to a similar act of 'self-making' in Vietnamese urban youth culture, although it has not attained the same kind of circulation and impact as the forms of popular media in Nuttall's study. However, this does contribute to Nuttall's argument that what still merits further attention is a theory of the circulation of forms, which pays heed to consumer forms and popular youth culture, therefore returning to the importance of considering surfaces of form as analytic constructs.³⁵⁶

The circulation of forms in the works of contemporary art discussed thus far focuses on the representational mediation of iconography at the level of the street, comprising state propaganda, architecture, advertising, graffiti, and the human figures that make up the urban populace. Phan Quang (b. 1976, Bình Định), a photographer who – like Ngô Đình Trúc - has been developing a conceptual photography-based practice in recent years, has also revealed a preoccupation with the artistic language of Socialist propaganda and the ways in which it can be re-purposed. In his 2010 photographic series and installation titled *Farmer's Diary (Nhật ký người nông dân)*, a deliberate compositional staging and framing of bodies in both the city and the countryside reveal a re-contextualization of the visual vocabulary of Socialist Realism and propaganda art in order to comment upon persistent spatial inequalities of development, particularly in regards to

³⁵⁶ See Sarah Nuttall, "Stylizing the Self," *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, eds. S. Nuttall and J.-A. Mbembé (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 90-118.

the urban/rural divide. His compositions reflect a careful concern with framing the landscape, and this is where the photographs illustrate not only the eye of a photographer, but also what could be considered a painterly attitude toward the scene. The deliberate grouping and positioning of human bodies within the landscape references various traditions of landscape painting, including pastoral idylls featuring the nude female body in nature (Figure 4.19). Yet, in contrast to the vigor and dynamism of the human body in propaganda art, Quang's figures embody the ambivalence and disenchantment expressed in Renovation literature (Figures 4.21 – 4.23). During an artist's talk, Quang revealed uncertainty as to his precise intentions regarding what appeared to most viewers to be a manifest connection between his staging of men and women in rural and urban landscapes and the influence of Socialist propaganda iconography, in terms of geometric arrangements of figures and the repetitive pattern of bodies posed or moving in unison (Figure 4.20).³⁵⁷ While I do not intend to characterize Quang's work as an offshoot of political pop, it is worth noting that his reticence to speak to these connections during the artist talk was revealing of what Gao Minglu has described as the ethos of political pop artists in China. Minglu describes most of them as ambivalent about the political ideologies espoused by Socialism and Capitalism, yet are captivated by the aesthetic and mobilizing dimensions of propagandist art.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁷ Artist talk, Galerie Quynh, October 23, 2010.

³⁵⁸ Gao Minglu, "Towards a Transnational Modernity," *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, ed. G. Minglu (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 29.



Figure 4.19: Phan Quang, *Trôi Sông (Floating on the River)*, 2010, digital c-print, 70 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Quynh.

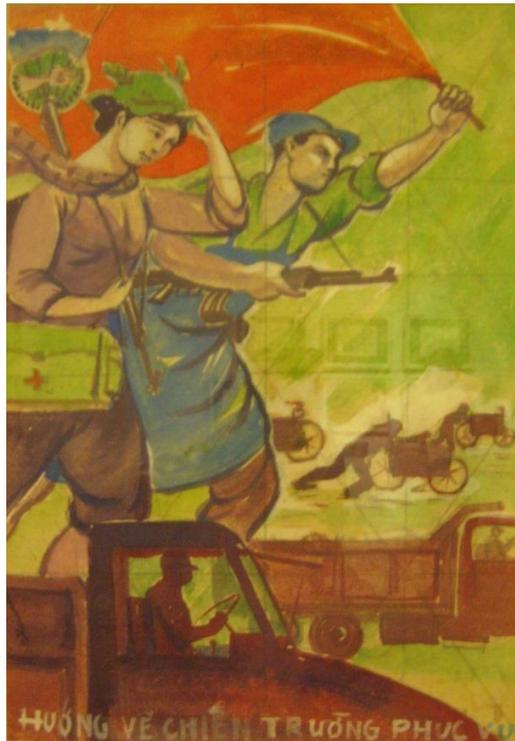


Figure 4.20: “Heading toward the Battlefield.” Watercolor sketch for wartime poster. Collection of the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts Museum. Photograph by the author.



Figure 4.21: Phan Quang, *Công Cụ* (Tools), 2009, digital c-print, 70 x 105 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Quynh.



Figure 4.22: Phan Quang, *Nghe Phát Thanh* (Listening to the Radio), 2009, digital c-print, 70 x 105 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Quynh.



Figure 4.23: Phan Quang, *Fusillade (Hàng Loạt)*, 2010, digital c-print, 70 x 105 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Quynh.

Based on the artist's stated concerns, the surrealist quality of his carefully composed landscapes and the spatial relations between the people and their settings intentionally critique conditions of labor and inequality along the urban and rural divide. This concern can be perceived as conversing to a certain extent with Socialist Realism as an artistic genre that also allegedly champions the rights of the proletariat, or in the case of Vietnam, agricultural laborers. Quang was attempting to draw attention to the living conditions of the rural majority who cannot afford the imported items of middle-class consumerism that have become symbolic of the *Đổi Mới* economic reforms. However, this preoccupation with the urban/rural divide appears belated, in a sense, speaking to issues that appear to be losing some of their urgency, particularly in comparison to neighboring developing countries like Laos and Cambodia. To borrow Visser's

phrase “the city surrounds the countryside” in relation to Vietnamese development, the rural is beginning to take on an urban character.³⁵⁹ This is not to say that certain problems have been resolved, such as the spraying of pesticides depicted in Quang’s *Listening to the Radio* (Figure 4.22), where the artist likens the intake of national broadcast news and pesticide as mental and physical forms of pollution. An elderly woman who had come 2 hours by bus from an outlying rural town to hear the artist talk spoke up during the Q&A, explaining that while she appreciated the photographs and their artistic beauty, the concerns which the artist was addressing were in fact no longer as dire. Most rural houses have running water, electricity, refrigerators, and laundry machines, and new farming equipment, and the expansive system of roads and public transport have facilitated the daily migration of laborers to the city and back, as well as rural-urban circulation of consumers and youth, who go to the city for a night on the town. Mass media and internet access have become common-place phenomena in rural areas, enabled by inexpensive and widespread cellular networks. In other words, the urban/rural divide is no longer as bifurcated as it was twenty years ago. Yet Quang’s portrayal of urban and rural heterotopias reveals a persistent desire to see these spaces as part of a historically and culturally crafted binary relationship, building on a chain of visual and literary re-contextualizations of the countryside (*quê*) and the city (*thành phố*) and their formative role in Vietnamese subjectivity.³⁶⁰

As such, one can see Quang’s photographs as participating in a political history of landscape painting. W.J.T Mitchell has described landscape as the ‘dreamwork’ of imperialism, emphasizing its instrumentalization as “an art that conceals its own artifice” in erasing the signs of labor and constructive activity that went into the making of the landscape’s meaning and

³⁵⁹ See Visser.

³⁶⁰ This relationship is naturally not unique to Vietnam, but forms part of a larger discourse of the spatial symbolism of rural and urban in numerous cultural discourses, most notably in the literary analysis by Raymond Williams with his work *The Country and the City* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1973).

value.³⁶¹ Therefore, it has served as a crucial instrument in the spatial project of imperialism. Realist artists like Millet and Courbet attempted to strip away the artifice to which Mitchell refers, subverting the traditional subjects of landscape painting by focusing instead on the underrepresented members of society, for example, laborers who gather the scraps of the harvest for their own sustenance, or peasants amassing at a funeral. From a Marxist reading, such kinds of images disrupt the surface aesthetic of nostalgic depictions of landscapes, and in Vietnam, the appealing tourist images of bucolic rice fields, by drawing attention to the processes of labor that construct the landscape and the raw products that are processed for consumption largely in urban areas.

In a more playful appropriation of similar compositions and gestures identified with the genres of Socialist Realist painting and propaganda posters, Bùi Công Khánh's *Coopérative des Beaux Arts* was produced during a month-long artist residency in the Chateau de la Roche Jacquelin, Anjou, France, in 2010. Khánh was inspired by the stories collector and residency-sponsor Iola Lenzi told him about their conflict with their tenant farmers, being that they, as the landlords of the property and its farmland, had little say when it came to what the farmers did with the land they owned under the system of agricultural semi-collectivization and farmers' unions. He thus decided to carry out a satirical series of photographic portraits of the land-owning family, comprising Lenzi, her husband, and two children, posed in the postures reminiscent of Socialist Realist propaganda posters, stressing forward movement, collective formation of bodies, and dynamic lines (Figure 4.24).³⁶² In addition, Khánh's stagings evoke traditions of family portraiture in Dutch and English 17th-18th century landscape painting, infused

³⁶¹ See W.J.T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1994), 5-34.

³⁶² Conversation with the author, May 11, 2011.

with symbolic and politicized connotations of power and possession. By inserting banners with hand-painted slogans indicating collectivity or socialist mottos, the compositional amalgamations reflect an improvisational and tongue-in-cheek quality. The landowners assume the guise and spatial positions of collectivity and protest, yet they do it in a lackadaisical way, in a kind of facetious commentary on the reversal of power which was particularly resonant for Khánh, who is familiar with the utter lack of agency farmers possess in Communist Vietnam. Khánh was told that French socialist-oriented administrative powers have usurped the same kinds of power that the bourgeois landowners used to hold. He confessed fascination with the fact that in France's welfare-state, it is the unions and the cooperatives that have come to hold power in the present, who have risen above the legacies of French feudal history, while such feudal power structures continue to persist in Vietnam.³⁶³



Figure 4.24: Bùi Công Khánh, *Coopérative des Beaux Arts* series, 2010, photographic and drawing installation. Image courtesy of the artist.

³⁶³ Ibid.

The indoor portrait is particularly evocative, in its careful staging of bourgeois domesticity with the incongruous hand-drawn portrait of Sarkozy placed beneath a banner bearing a commonplace socialist slogan in French (Figure 4.25). The meticulously arranged setting of the family in a living room interior, with specific kinds of objects and accoutrements arranged to evoke a somewhat bourgeois kitsch atmosphere. The photographs invoke an implicit sense of sardonic critique, albeit in a less extravagant and excessive fashion than the portraits of Mexican nouveau-riche youth taken by artist Daniella Rossell (Figure 4.26). What results is a form of awkwardly humorous pastiche, a transference of socialist visual rhetoric combining text and portrait, together with rich references to bourgeois family portraiture. However, in the same way that Quang's photographs in *A Farmer's Diary* reveal an uncertain fixation with particular kinds of iconography, Khánh's images do not contain a clear message or implicit form of critique, rather a feel of curiosity in the exploratory placement of figures and objects within a particular setting. This is perhaps reflective of the artist's own ambivalence towards the landowning family's situation, perhaps both sympathetic but also irreverent, and as Gao Minglu described, an overarching fascination with the aesthetic language of Socialist iconography.



Figure 4.25: Bùi Công Khánh, *Coopérative des Beaux Arts* series, 2010, photographic and drawing installation. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4.26: Daniella Rossell, *Untitled* from *Ricas y Famosas*, 1999. Alyssa Coppelman, “The Poor Little Rich Girls of Mexico,” *Slate: Photo Blog*, December 11, 2012. http://www.slate.com/blogs/ behold/2012/12/11/daniela_rossell_documenting_the_rich_and_famous_mexican_youth_photos.html (accessed 06/03/2015).

These staged compositions, involving types of “characters” within particular landscapes, can be perceived as a continuation of an earlier series of work which Khánh had recreated in various locations. Much of Khánh’s work comments on modernization, excess consumption, the changing cityscape, and the degradation of community and individual decency in the face of market-oriented development. He is particularly well-known for ceramic vases on which he hand-paints surreal scenarios and figures depicting elements of contemporary Vietnamese society, typically using a blue and white palette in order to initially present a connection to 15th-17th-century Vietnamese trade ceramics (Figure 4.27). Another project – begun in 2010 as a solo exhibition titled *Life is Consumption (Cuộc sống là Tiêu thụ)* at Sàn Art – entailed a gallery installation in which the artist produced hand-drawn streetscapes in charcoal as a form of mural backdrop (Figure 4.28). He would then recreate this scenario with a streetscape drawn on the walls of his studio, a rendering the artist himself undertook by exploring his neighborhood and sketching particular areas in detail (Figures 4.29 – 4.30). The particular street that he chose to replicate is slated for demolition in the near future for a road expansion project, and the people living there have been – for the most part – inadequately compensated by the government, a pattern repeating itself throughout the expanding metropolis of Ho Chi Minh City. He then invited the locals from the neighborhood along with his personal friends to have their portrait taken against the setting of their “street.” In his artist statement Khánh described the performative dimension of staging the portrait-like setting of the photographs:

Through posed interaction with the graphic interpretation of my local street-corner, I invite my Saigon subjects to think about and perform the changing cityscape, each participant’s involvement in the piece different according to perspective. My local lane, with its pavement businesses, improvised Buddhist shrines, dangling electrical wires, and propaganda-dispensing megaphone, is due to be demolished to make way for a new steel and glass tower-block. Thus, in tribute and as documentation, I design a charcoal-on-paper human-scale set

reproducing my patch of city and ask my friends and neighbors to sit for a photograph against this fictional backdrop of soon-to-be-razed community life. The piece preempts history, looking back to the future in a way that triggers the audience to think as much about this particular fragment of the past – a Saigon street’s imminent transformation and sanitization - as about the way in which we write it, perceive it once written, and whether it is important now, and later.³⁶⁴

Khánh described how comfortably the locals took to the setting and the act of photography, whereas those who weren’t from the neighborhood posed awkwardly like tourists. The photographs of the installation serve as a portrait or snapshot of their neighborhood, making a statement about one’s attachment to place and the siting of community in a way that highlights the government’s lack of concern about these issues. In one photograph, the artist himself posed, playfully performing the persona of the developer responsible for the transformation of his neighborhood. Khánh’s own performative turn evokes the liminality of the artistic representation of place - as symbolic intervention into Lefebvre’s notion of the representation of space - indexing the ephemeral simulation of a state of transition between the Saigon that has nearly become the Past in order to become the Ho Chi Minh City of the Future. The city in miniature is evoked through a hand-drawn replica in crude materials, suggesting the sentimental futility of the gesture.

³⁶⁴ Text provided by the artist. Written with assistance from his collector and curator Iola Lenzi.



Figure 4.27: Bùi Công Khánh, *Quarter of Culture / Một phần tư văn hóa*, 2009, ceramic vase, height: 44 cm; width: 20 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4.28: *Life is Consumption* exhibition, Sàn Art, Ho Chi Minh City, April 22 - June 23, 2010. <http://san-art.org/exhibition/life-is-consumption/> (accessed 06/03/2015).



Figure 4.29: Bùi Công Khánh, *The Past Moved (Quá khứ đã qua)* series, 2010, charcoal on paper backdrop and photographs, drawing installation: 300 x 200 x 241 cm; photographs: 50 x 75 cm each. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4.30: Bùi Công Khánh, *The Past Moved (Quá khứ đã qua)* series, 2010, charcoal on paper backdrop and photographs, drawing installation: 300 x 200 x 241 cm; photographs: 50 x 75 cm each. Image courtesy of the artist.

The artistic renderings enacted by Trúc, Nguyễn, Quang, and Khánh thus bring into scrutiny Vietnamese urban space as a creatively disputed terrain and a fraught territory of ambivalent desires. Yet in contrast to forms of urban spatial interventions staged by artists elsewhere, it might be observed that Vietnamese artists in both the north and south rarely enact similar interruptions, events, or gestures. In reference to such spatial interventions, examples can be drawn from the practices of various artists in Johannesburg, whom David Bunn describes as critiquing the city's history of racialized systems of labor control and exploitation, or racial capitalism, artists in Beijing such as Song Dong and Zhang Dali, and Karachi-based artist Naiza

Khan.³⁶⁵ Bunn interprets the Johannesburg-based artists as explicitly drawing on the notion of surface, such as in the films and charcoal drawings of William Kentridge and Clive van den Berg's drawings projected on slopes of mine dumps. Visser frames the practices of Song Dong and Zhang Dali as critical spatial interventions in response to the loss of cultural heritage in Beijing, creating site-specific artworks that "evoke traces of the vanishing essence of the city, rather than invoking its history per se."³⁶⁶ Iftikhar Dadi describes the henna hands of Karachi-based artist Naiza Khan as enacting a decisively feminine "spectral corporeality" in the urban popular public arena.³⁶⁷ The larger pattern that I identify in Vietnam, and particularly in Ho Chi Minh City, is an approach to public space as a field of representation which is then appropriated through artistic renderings in diverse media, drawing on Lefebvre's category of representations of space. But by making the spaces of the outside the field of intervention, the question may arise as to why aren't there artistic interventions *into* public space comparable to the works briefly cited above?

When I asked artists about public art – its definitions, translations, enactments – I often heard them speak to a desire to engage with space and the public sphere in order to make their art more meaningful and efficacious, on the one hand participating in more globalized trends of socially-engaged art, and on the other, departing from the model of production in which works are perceived as being confined to the gallery space.³⁶⁸ Hoàng Dương Cầm claimed that public

³⁶⁵ See for example, David Bunn, "Art Johannesburg and Its Objects," in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, eds. Sarah Nuttall and J.-A. Mbembé (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 137-169; Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside*; and Iftikhar Dadi, "Ghostly Sufis and Ornamental Shadows: Spectral Visualities in Karachi's Public Sphere," *Comparing Cities: The Middle East and South Asia*, eds. K. A. Ali and M. Rieker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 159-196.

³⁶⁶ Visser, 163. See also Francesca Del Lago, Song Dong, Zhang Dali, Zhan Wang, and Wang Jianwei, "Space and Public: Specificity in Beijing," *Art Journal* 59 (2000), 75-87.

³⁶⁷ Dadi, 180-81.

³⁶⁸ Author's interviews with Ngô Lực, Tuan Andrew Nguyen, Hoàng Dương Cầm, Ngô Thị Thùy Duyên, 2010-11.

art does not exist in Vietnam because such a concept is redundant; the public *is* art, the street as site is already entangled, and it is there that transformative experiences occur on a daily basis for the conscientious observer. A common complaint that I heard in numerous conversations - which is not particular to Vietnam but resonant of universal criticisms of the art market - is that most Vietnamese artists don't understand what critical value there is in public art, and this is based on their perception that art is supposed to be 'high' or elevated (*cao*), and art staged in public or on the street is more embedded in everyday life (*gắn liền với đời sống bình thường*), and therefore not an elevated form. And it was cynically reiterated that something with no commercial value is of no practical worth to most Vietnamese artists today, who operate first and foremost with an entrepreneurial mindset.

To counter these statements, other artists have said that this reluctance is more indicative of a variation of fear and thus self-censorship. Earlier I suggested that Dinh Q. Lê's 1998 *Damaged Gene* piece was the first example of a public art intervention. Yet Lê was frank about how fearful he was because of the tight control the state attempts to exert over public space and behavior. This is typically enforced through both covert and overt surveillance by officers employed in a department intended to enforce "urban order" (*trật tự đô thị*), thus perpetuating the atmosphere of a normalizing and disciplinary scopic regime.³⁶⁹ The degree to which ordinary citizens feared surveillance twenty years ago, to the extent where people would hesitate to gather publicly or speak in whispers on matters remotely related to politics, is no longer as present. Yet it was matter-of-factly recounted to me by various artists and curators that they suspected

³⁶⁹ Foucault's notion of the "scopic regime of 'malveillance'," as described by Martin Jay, describes this preponderant condition of the immanent awareness that one is constantly the object of a disciplinary gaze. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 416, and Michel Foucault, "The Eye of Power" in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. C. Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 158.

surveillance of their everyday activities, to the point that they were being followed at times. In addition, one common way that the state keeps an eye on artistic developments – aside from the strict licensing process required of exhibition organization - is through the cultural police wearing plainclothes while surreptitiously attending openings and events, thus surveilling art works, performances, and the spoken and written language used by artists and curators.

In one instance of an attempt to enact a form of artistic intervention in the public sphere, the antagonistic onset of authorities forced the project to be abandoned. The work was initiated by The Propeller Group collective, which has consistently shown an interest in provocative and playful engagements with aligning and confusing state and market ideologies and revealing fraught relationships between historical narratives and contemporary processes of memorialization.³⁷⁰ Member Tuan Andrew Nguyen described a project in which they planned to rent out billboard space (reserved solely for advertising or for propaganda) on Phạm Ngũ Lão street in downtown, using the backdrop for a bus-stop for an artistic intervention in the public sphere under the project title of *Temporary Public Gallery* (Figure 4.31). Initially, in brainstorming images that would likely be accepted by the Ministry of Culture, they thought about using a beautiful black and white photograph of Matt Lucero's father's hands, chiseled and rough from decades working as an industrial painter (Figure 4.32). Yet when they submitted it for approval, they were questioned as to whether they could put a bar of soap in the image. In the ministry's concern that the work not provoke controversy, they pushed the group to appropriate the aesthetic of an advertisement. As such, it was of no import whether it actually was a commercial ad, but just that it referenced a form of visual signage familiar to urban spectators.

³⁷⁰ The Propeller Group was founded by Tuan Andrew Nguyen, Hà Thúc Phù Nam, and Matt Lucero in 2006.



Figure 4.31: The Propeller Group, *Attempt 01: Advertising the Advertisement: mypublicwebsite.com, Image 01 (mock-up), Temporary Public Gallery, 2010.* www.the-propeller-group.com (accessed 06/03/2015).



Figure 4.32: The Propeller Group, Proposal for *Temporary Public Gallery, Attempt 03: Personal Histories in Public Space; Billboard 3: Matt Lucero.* www.the-propeller-group.com (accessed 06/03/2015).

This odd request further illustrates an argument made by Lisa Drummond and Mandy Thomas, who have both commented on the transformation of Vietnamese public space, once the dominant canvas for state sponsored visual texts, symbolic monuments, and architectural organization, into consumption space. Thomas argues that the new cultural spaces of post-socialism, where the state recognizes the loss of popular emotive appeal in the revolutionary nationalist project, endorses instead new forms of iconic consumption.³⁷¹ Drummond characterizes this consumption space as the commercialization and commodification of leisure space and leisure itself.³⁷² In this way, one could argue, as others have, that the socio-economic reforms of *Đổi Mới* ushered in a “post-modern” phase of modernity, in which the erosion of defined state projects of national identity and socio-cultural development have become entangled with the effects of global cultural flows, the circulation of capital, and consumer mentalities. As an example of the way urban space as representational space is thus narrativized yet contradictory, Andreas Huyssen describes how cities are “imagineered” to illustrate how state projects and private enterprises often closely resemble each in the cultural engineering of a place to attract tourism, business, and investment.³⁷³

The Propeller Group decided to hire a woman working for an advertising company to “bypass” the red tape, essentially meaning that someone would be paid off to secure a letter of permission for the work to be exhibited publicly. They chose an old black and white family portrait, a photograph likely taken in the mid-twentieth century as a standard image of middle-class domesticity, over which a poem written by Nguyễn’s grandmother was transposed (Figures 4.33 – 4.34). However, once they had installed the image, a crowd began to gather, and within

³⁷¹ M. Thomas, “Spatiality and Political Change in Urban Vietnam,” 175.

³⁷² Drummond, 2387.

³⁷³ Andreas Huyssen, “Introduction: World Cultures, World Cities,” *Other Cities, Other Worlds: Urban Imaginaries in a Globalizing Age*, ed. A. Huyssen (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 9.

minutes a van with uniformed officers - the *trật tự đô thị* (“urban order”) - arrived and the policemen began aggressively questioning the woman from the advertising agency. Even after she showed them the license, they continued to argue, and the police hustled her into the van and drove off. Nguyễn and Hà Thúc had been standing across the street photographing the public response to the installation, and after witnessing the dispute with the police, Nguyễn described how they began to worry for their own safety, and ultimately decided they had to leave the scene. He believes the only plausible reason the authorities could have had for having such a hostile response to the image was that the poster was creating “public disorder” because of the curiosity it engendered.³⁷⁴

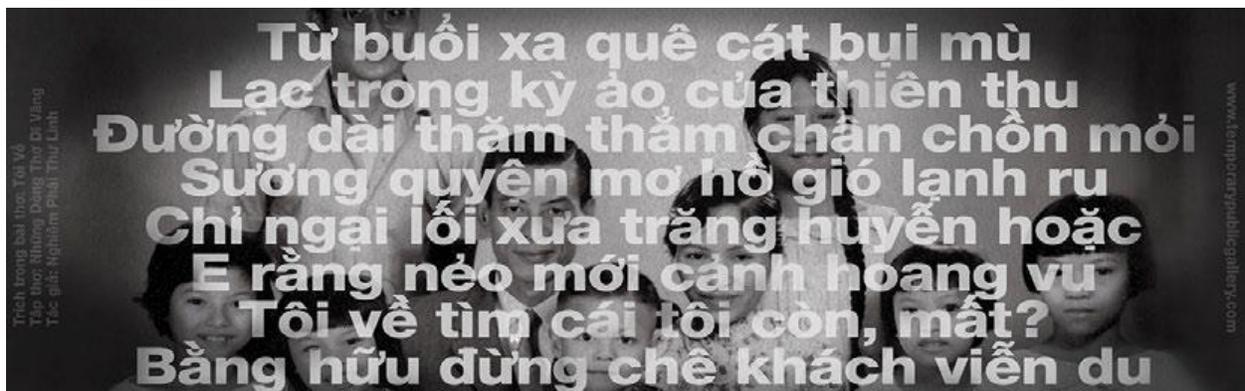


Figure 4.33: The Propeller Group, *Proposal for Temporary Public Gallery, Attempt 01: Personal Histories in Public Space; Billboard 1: Tuan Andrew Nguyen*. The text is from a poem written by the artist’s grandmother. www.the-propeller-group.com (accessed 06/03/2015).

³⁷⁴ Conversation with the author, February 12, 2011.



Figure 4.34: The Propeller Group, *Proposal for Temporary Public Gallery, Attempt 01: Personal Histories in Public Space; Billboard 1: Tuan Andrew Nguyen*. The text is from a poem written by the artist's grandmother. View of installation. www.the-propeller-group.com (accessed 06/03/2015).

Returning to what appears to be an aversion to public performance or intervention and recourse to the art object, much of this disinclination seems to be on the one hand a general waning interest in performance art in Ho Chi Minh City, as opposed to its continued popularity in Hanoi, and on the other hand, an emphatic disavowal of works considered pure spectacle. There is also the risk factor involved in staging any public action considered disruptive or incoherent. Other artists have staged public performances without authorization from the ministry, and typically have been temporarily detained for disorderly conduct depending on the

degree of spectacle and coherence of the work's meaning. But most artists find that the risk involved in producing too provocative of a work and the trouble it could cause for them in the short-term and long-term is not worth it. Many also describe the system of censorship in Vietnam as no excuse for delayed development or innovation in the arts, rather, it needs to be perceived as a further challenge which can cleverly exploited or circumvented, and may in fact lead to the production of more sophisticated work.

One successful effort to stage a type of performative spatial intervention – in that it was effectively carried out full-term over the originally conceived time span of almost two weeks - was initiated by Sue Hajdu, whose self-described focus at one point included enacting “projects in public space that take on the monumental scale of the city as a whole, balancing this against ephemeral materials, hit-and-run performances and the immateriality of rumor.”³⁷⁵ The conception of *MAGMA* (2006 and 2007) arose from her ongoing preoccupation with the visual markers of communist regimes, and the ideological associations of certain signs and colors – in this case, red velvet (Figures 4.35 – 4.36). This interest in communism stemmed from her background as the child of Hungarian parents. She wondered what it would be like to be in a completely red room, with its connotations of decadence, sensuality, opulence, but also the dangerous nuances of radical ideology. This tactile preoccupation relates to Hajdu's ongoing interests in manipulating materials, particularly in working with fabric and textiles, but also in the idea of documentation.

³⁷⁵ <http://www.suehajdu.com/about.html>, accessed January 10, 2011.



Figure 4.35: Sue Hajdu, *MAGMA, we're not counting sheep*, 2006, night view installation and performance, and live webcast. Street view of installation at Galerie Quynh. http://www.suehajdu.com/images/magmacountingsheep/01Street_Views/ (accessed 03/27/2013).



Figure 4.36: Sue Hajdu, *MAGMA, we're not counting sheep*, 2006, night view installation and performance, and live webcast. Artist Nguyễn Thanh Trúc and daughter sleeping. http://www.suehajdu.com/images/magmacountingsheep/03The_Sleepers/ (accessed 03/27/2013).

MAGMA was enacted as a site- and place-specific time-based work which she described as playing with ideologies and collapsing notions of private and public space, as well as engaging all strata of the Saigonese local public. It was staged in two components: *MAGMA / we're not counting sheep* (2006), and *MAGMA / the innocents* (2007).³⁷⁶ The first installment was exhibited at Galerie Quynh nightly from April 26th to May 7th, in a vitrine facing the street, with a night-view installation and performance, and live webcast. In passing the window at Galerie Quynh, passerbys would see an opulent interior of red sateens and velvets, in which various figures, also garbed in sumptuous red fabrics, lounged in various states of sleep. The description accompanying the project on her website is as follows:

I desire your romance, your body, these jewels, put them on me, this lipstick, paint my lips, make me glamorous, seduce me with perfection, in arab perfume houses, perverted in opera houses, with your parades and slogans, put me to sleep, make me comatose, I am willing, I am mute.³⁷⁷

The work's provocative erotic and affective connotations, as well as a non-subtle critique of the failure to produce similar kinds of work on the part of Vietnamese artists, were emphasized in the catalogue essay, written by an anonymous author:

As an unwitting form of public engaged art, *MAGMA / we're not counting sheep* has been wildly successful. No doubt this has much to do with the fact that Hajdu has embraced rather than rejected the slick surfaces of consumerism creating a 'Vina-kitsch' (the artist's term) space which, it turns out, is perfectly attuned to the desires and dreams of the crowds of Saigonese viewers who flock to view the show every night. In this she is unlike her Vietnamese contemporaries, who in their performance and installation work have often been concerned with making a frontal assault on consumer capitalism's advance into Vietnam. Perhaps this kind of denial of the pleasure of consumption is too reminiscent of the official discourses of socialist asceticism to capture the popular imagination, in sharp contrast to the seductive pleasures of Hajdu's room. The success of this work is a testament to Hajdu's capacity to read the local grammars of advertising and

³⁷⁶ The latter was curated by Thea Baumann, and was installed at The Hardship/albb space.

³⁷⁷ http://www.suehajdu.com/project_magmacountingsheep.php, accessed 03/27/13.

interior design, and to interpret Saigonese aesthetic sensibilities in a respectful but penetrating way.³⁷⁸

While the essay acutely grasps the successful dimensions of the work as a conceptual experiment in evoking and occupying certain liminal spaces of intensity, such as the contested borders of public and private, interior and exterior, erotic and official, pleasure and politics, the comparison presented between Hajdu, an Australian expatriate curator and artist, and her Vietnamese artistic contemporaries is unfortunately framed as an overriding criticism of the latter's practices characterized through such terms as 'denial' and 'frontal assault.' As such, it is implied that Hajdu's work is presented as being subtle, sophisticated, and successful, whereas Vietnamese artists produce work that is coarse, overtly legible, and one-dimensional.

This was an unfortunate choice of words and may be the reason why several artists spoke critically about *MAGMA* in retrospect. However, in terms of presenting such an audacious public piece, Hajdu gave credit to the ingenuity of her collaborators, particularly those Vietnamese artists or artist-spouses who had an in-depth understanding of the system, and who knew how to word license applications in a way as to portray an innocuous artwork about love and romance. When authorities showed up on the night of the performance due to the gathering crowd, she said it was those same collaborators who negotiated with the officers, effectively defusing what could have become a dangerous situation for the artists and the gallery owners. For her, one aspect of the work's success along the lines of a social experiment was due to the way it could gauge the kind of public that occupied the space at a given time, from prostitutes, office workers, vendors, and students, thus serving as a way to understand which people were occupying a particular urban space at particular times.

³⁷⁸ *MAGMA / we're not counting sheep* (Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam: Galerie Quynh and a little blah blah, 2006), n.p.

For several artists and viewers, *MAGMA* was more successful as a spectacle but not necessarily on its merits as a conceptual artwork. Part of the lack of understanding of what the work was necessarily intended to convey or do was due to the lack of textual explanation surrounding the performance until the publication of its catalogue. But at the time, despite the work's affective connotations and the reasoning behind its site-specificity in an art gallery space in a Vietnamese city, some dismissed the piece as a form of performance art spectacle, a genre that has by now become all too familiar through the performances of Hanoi-based Đào Anh Khánh.³⁷⁹ Perhaps because the state endorses Đào Anh Khánh's spectacles as "contemporary art" for local and international audiences, much to the chagrin of most Vietnamese artists, there appears now to be an emphatic concern on the part of performance artists that their work be distinguished from anything perceived as spectacle.

Yet these works also invoke questions as to the discursive and practical distinctions within the genre of public art in the context of Vietnam. This is often a heated distinction for artists, as I witnessed, who often emphatically disavowed state programs to establish a public art genre in the form of commemorative monuments honoring national heroes and wartime efforts.³⁸⁰ In her study of the transnational commemorations of the war, Christina Schwenkel discusses the government's large-scale project of memorializing the postwar landscape, a topic of much contention among artists, architects, and other cultural actors who protest the 'foreignness' of many of the monuments, given their Soviet Socialist Realist aesthetic. However, she accurately notes that the issue of aesthetic and cultural identity is an ambiguous one in Vietnam, for many of these discourses cannot precisely define what Vietnamese aesthetics are,

³⁷⁹ For more on Đào Anh Khánh's performances, see N. Taylor, "Vietnamese Anti-Art."

³⁸⁰ Conversations with Ngô Thùy Duyên, Tiffany Chung, Bùi Công Khánh, Ngô Lực, and Hoàng Dương Cẩm, 2010-11.

given the confluence of Chinese and French influences.³⁸¹ The failure of these monuments and sculptures at aesthetic and affective levels is the subject of often scathing critique, especially in the perception that they are symptomatic of political hypocrisy and the state's increasingly futile attempts to instill nationalist ideology.³⁸² Artist and art historian Nguyễn Quân contends that if they are ineffective as artworks they are ineffective as propaganda. This might be usefully contrasted with Rana Mitter's analysis of public art and memorialization in China, in which he argues that Chinese public art dealing with memories of the Japanese conflict during World War II utilized a more 'global' aesthetic, thus participating in a globalized form of public art, while at the same time re-narrativizing the significance of its war against Japan, thus attempting to shape popular memory and public history about the event.³⁸³ In this context, a concerted attention to the aesthetic merits of public sculpture through participation in a form of global artistic contemporaneity – however an unstable concept this might seem - is seen as lending to the efficacy of ideological persuasion.

In one sculptural work, Tuan Andrew Nguyen obliquely comments upon the condition of commemoration and state hypocrisy. In 2009, the artist's attention was caught by a notice of the construction of a national monument commemorating the self-immolation of the Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức on June 16, 1963, a moment that shocked the global populace as it was

³⁸¹ See Christina Schwenkel, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

³⁸² Nguyễn Quân, *Mỹ thuật Việt Nam Thế kỷ 20*, 121. In "Không gian rộng lớn" (Enlarged Spaces), he discusses the "official" genre of Vietnamese public art, particularly the visual campaign of endowing the landscape with monuments and memorials (*phong trào nghệ thuật hoành tráng và tượng đài*). He argues that the poor execution and low artistic standards of much of these sculptural projects ultimately negated their function as instruments of socialist propaganda and nationalist sentiment. With the exception of individual sculptures shown at the New Space exhibition (*Không gian mới*) at the Museum of Fine Arts in Hanoi in 1999, this generation of public sculpture at the end of the 20th century was of generally poor quality and aesthetic merit.

³⁸³ See Rana Mitter, "Aesthetics, Modernity, and Trauma: Public Art and Memory of War in Contemporary China," *Asian Art History in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. V. N. Desai (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, 2007), 123-37.

transmitted via media coverage of the escalating war in Vietnam. The self-immolation was carried out as a protest against acts of violent repression towards the Buddhist community, carried out by the strongly Catholic Ngô Đình Diệm regime. Diệm had initially been supported by the American government, but became widely critiqued for his autocratic and nepotistic style of rule, and his regime's repressive and violent treatment of the Buddhist population. The irony – or hypocrisy - of the current Communist government installing a memorial to a “martyr” protesting a type of discrimination against Buddhists not so far removed from the current state's attitude towards religion and treatment of monks, for which they have received criticism from human rights groups, prompted the artist to re-engage the idea of memorializing, monuments, ideological confrontations, and aesthetic artefacts in a work titled *Enemy's Enemy: A Monument to a Monument* (2009) (Figures 4.37 – 4.39).



Figure 4.37: Tuan Andrew Nguyen , *Enemy's Enemy: A Monument to a Monument, Prototype 2A*, 2009, carved baseball bat, height: 87 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4.38: Self-immolation of the Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức on June 16, 1963. Photographed by Malcom Browne. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Th%C3%ADch_Qu%E1%BA%A3ng_%C4%90%E1%BB%A9c_self-immolation.jpg (accessed 06/03/2015).



Figure 4.39: Lam Điền, “Khởi công xây tượng đài Thích Quảng Đức” (Construction of Monument to Thich Quang Duc Commenced), 07/11/2007, *Tuổi trẻ*. Newspaper clipping provided by Tuan Andrew Nguyen .

Seeking an alternative symbol of an oppositional ideology to communism, Nguyễn was intrigued by the idea of baseball as a metaphor for American military legacy. As a symbol of violence, an object of immanent threat in its symbolic and physical form, the baseball bat also conjures the emotional intensity that runs through crowds at sporting events, an affective current that also finds resonance at political rallies in terms of rousing nationalist fervor. The mass of the bat was carved away to become a replica of the very memorial statue of Thích Quảng Đức in flames that the state was planning to build, and also to be transformed into an object of aesthetic fragility. Its resulting exoskeleton-like form thus became instantly recognizable in an Asian context because of its ornate decorative qualities, referencing woodcarving traditions and religious ornament, such as incense burners. And returning to a theme which has surfaced throughout the conceptual practices of Nguyễn and The Propeller Group, the sculpture evokes the renegotiation of historical narratives and paradoxical meshing of ideologies promoted by the government in its effort to redeem the authority of the Socialist state through attempts at shaping societal consciousness. In their program to dot the landscape with nationalist monuments to ingrain patriotic sentiment in everyday city dwellers, the state commemorates an event which feels not so far removed in time or political climate.

Schwenkel has questioned the ways in which monuments serve as disciplinary sites for narrating particular histories and memorial hierarchies. The general consensus among Vietnamese artists is that the artistic program of public monuments and sculpture in Vietnam essentially fails at the affective level, further gesturing towards the hollowness of the state's historical narrative. In her examination of public uses of public commemorative spaces in Hanoi, Mandy Thomas observes that “the stark monuments of the state are now being used by citizens as backdrops for activities that are apolitical,” such as skateboarding, social gathering, and group

exercise.³⁸⁴ These everyday practices represent vernacular interventions into constructed space - representational space - that are now so common-place that notions of official and unofficial spatial regimes are so blurred as to no longer hold any real relevance for the city dweller. For artists in Vietnam - and Cambodia, as I will discuss in Chapter 5 - the question of popular cultural heritage continues to be an ongoing preoccupation, particularly in terms of defining such “ruins” against the state’s narrative of modernity and progress. As such, Schwenkel discusses how “official” visual expressions of commemoration have been reworked and contested, and have engendered alternative new practices and spaces of remembrance.³⁸⁵ This form of popular resistance is channeled by artists through the construction of alternative attachments and remembrance, which can be analyzed through works deploying a heightened focus on affect and emotion. Affect and excess as methods further reveal a preoccupation with registering the individual subject’s negotiation with social formation in late socialist Vietnam, and the larger dynamics at play in permutations of an affective urbanism. These topics are the focus of the next chapter.

³⁸⁴ Mandy Thomas, “Out of Control,” 1612.

³⁸⁵ Schwenkel, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam*.

CHAPTER 5

STAGING AFFECT AND EXCESS

The Vietnamese term *cải lương*, which references an operatic style of sung performance originating in southern Vietnamese folk culture, is often used in an informal descriptive capacity to designate that which is considered melodramatic, theatrically excessive, and overly sentimental. It is one of the most pejorative ways of describing an artwork. A recurring complaint by artists is that the Vietnamese public still seeks an image of the artist as a scruffy, dirty, long-haired, romantic loner, hermetically confined to a studio, painting works that are *cải lương*. In artists' criticisms, the state figures prominently in bearing responsibility for public misunderstandings of contemporary art; the bureaucracy of the state university system has, in the words of one artist, crushed the spirits of the teachers, to the point where they develop an attitude of apathy and hermetic retreat. In addition, there is an absence of productive discourse and critique amongst colleagues, often due to the social nature of some networks, as discussed in Chapter 1, but in some instances this absence – or hollowness - takes on a performative quality akin to the self-criticism model of the Cultural Revolution. One artist joked about how, when asked to talk about their work, the iterations of “It makes me too sad to speak about it, it’s too emotional of a subject, I can’t find the words” are often used as an evasive strategy by Vietnamese artists.³⁸⁶

For contemporary artists in Vietnam, the aura of eccentricity and hyper-emotionality surrounding the figure of the artist for the larger public may be predicated linguistically, as the term now used to describe contemporary artists or artists producing work beyond painting is *nghệ sĩ*, which references writers, poets, musicians, and actors. Therefore, there are still popular

³⁸⁶ Author’s conversation with Hoàng Dương Cẩm, January 13, 2011.

misunderstandings when contemporary artists are referred to as *nghệ sĩ*, rather than *họa sĩ* (painter). When contemporary artists delve into performative works, this confusion is further accentuated and the expectation that the artist should have deeper access to a more emotive persona and “soul” (*hồn*) is heightened. “Soul” is one of the most ubiquitous words in the language of Vietnamese artistic appreciation, and typically serves as the qualifier that distinguishes a work of art from a work of “research,” quoting one artist who used this term to characterize the work of *Việt kiều* artists. “It must have soul” (*phải có hồn*) or “it doesn’t have soul” (*không có hồn*) are the validating statements often used to assess the ethos of an artwork, whether it be painting, sculpture, video, installation, or performance. Even when I heard collectors and curators complain that most Vietnamese artists held too provincial a worldview, and that they refused to look beyond their “fishbowl” to make art that responds to larger global issues and universal topics, there was still a definitive judgment as to whether their work had soul. This criterion was often based upon perceptions of beauty, the manifest labor of the craft, and choice of subject matter; these three assessments would establish the degree to which the work had soul.

Therefore, I introduce this section with a discussion of a judgment that is not quantifiable, in that the perception of an artwork as having soul is grounded more or less in a phenomenological engagement. It thus brings into question the ways in which the emotional and affective effects of an artwork act upon the viewer, but also the creative processes and concerns of the artist to produce and convey the “soul” of a creation. The larger questions surrounding this relationship concern how emotion and affect play into the conception and execution of an artwork as a self-reflexive and relational process of questioning, negotiating, visualizing, gauging, and concluding.

What are the nuances of this process for artists making work in response to the experience of Vietnam as a place of immersive experience and/or as a site of representation? An emerging line of inquiry into the linguistic and sensory manifestations of affect in post-Socialist cities concerns the concept of affective urbanism, “an urbanism attentive to how various modalities of the more than/less than rational, including affects, emotions, and feelings, compose urban life.”³⁸⁷ Nigel Thrift has argued for renewed attention to the “spatial politics of affect” in everyday urban life, as cities are “roiling maelstroms of affect.”³⁸⁸ Such a description recalls artist Hoàng Dương Cầm’s emotive description of the street – cited in the previous chapter – as an everyday site of affective invocation and transformation. He recalled his daily experience of seeing an elderly woman carrying her crippled adult son on her back, and his feeling a powerful and confusing combination of awe, sympathy, dejection, and self-questioning; as such, he expressed skepticism about what seemed to him like the trivial desire for “public art.” As these textures of experience often challenge succinct and rational description, the task at hand, then, is to investigate why and how artists give form to these sensory and emotional currents that characterize the particularities of the urban experience.

In Christina Schwenkel’s study of bricks as objects that invoke affect in postwar urban socialist space, she poses a key question, which is “how to read and “feel” socialism and its lingering affectations and sentimentalities on the urban landscape?”³⁸⁹ Generally speaking, various studies have begun to address the affective character of the urban body through literature and film, while specific analyses of the affective implications of contemporary art are scant,

³⁸⁷ Ben Anderson and Adam Holden, “Affective Urbanism and the Event of Hope,” *Space and Culture* 11, no. 2 (2008), 144.

³⁸⁸ Nigel Thrift, “Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect,” *Geografiska Annaler* 86B (2004), 57.

³⁸⁹ Christina Schwenkel, “Post/Socialist Affect: Ruination and Reconstruction of the Nation in Urban Vietnam,” *Cultural Anthropology* 28, no. 2 (2013), 255.

particularly in relation to cities in Southeast Asia and those that are currently experiencing an ambiguously defined stage of late or post-socialism.³⁹⁰ As such, what has yet to be specifically addressed is the role that artists play in capturing and interpreting these affective currents in conceptual practices that respond to the contemporary conditions of the late socialist Vietnamese city as urban “assemblage.” The term “assemblage” has surfaced in various urban theorizations for its semantic resonance as a representation of irrational accumulation, but its association with a form of artistic fabrication is particularly fitting in light of Benjamin’s and Lefebvre’s approach to urbanism as image-based, as visual ideology.³⁹¹ In their discussion of “affective urbanism” as an analytical construct, Anderson and Holden suggest that “the term assemblage designates not a static states of affairs but rather a process of arranging, organizing, and fitting together multiple, heterogeneous elements,” and that “assemblage is a useful concept from which to approach cities as processual configurations of multiple states of affairs and events.”³⁹² Li Zhang finds the concept of assemblage particularly suited to characterize the condition of late socialist urbanism in Vietnam and China, as the two countries have reinvented themselves through a form of “flexible postsocialism,” one marked by selective incorporation of such neoliberal strategies as the devolution of state power, governing from afar, self-governing, and optimization in diverse domains beyond the marketplace.³⁹³ For Li, the pressing question within this framework of flexible postsocialism concerns the ethics of the self, and how to analyze emergent subjectivities

³⁹⁰ See, for example, Lauren G. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Jennifer Doyle, *Hold it Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside*.

³⁹¹ See Walter Benjamin and Rolf Tiedemann, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1999), Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, and Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*.

³⁹² Anderson and Holden, “Affective Urbanism,” 146.

³⁹³ Li Zhang, “Afterword: Flexible Postsocialist Assemblages from the Margin,” *positions* 20, no. 2 (Spring 2012), 661.

that are shaped in response to formative yet destabilizing strategies of assemblage in the urban setting.³⁹⁴

The “affective turn” in cultural studies has emerged as a methodological line of inquiry into subject formation, looking foremost at dimensions of embodied experience that typically defy rationalist language and structural analysis, and emphasizing the role of social transformation as opposed to social determination.³⁹⁵ Clare Hemmings predicates these concerns as a response to a “perceived impasse in cultural studies,” as a result of the insufficiency of constructivist models, empirical and textual analysis, and binary oppositions (such as public/private, power/resistance) to fully account for the exigencies and spontaneities that compose states of feeling and being.³⁹⁶ I suggest that analyzing affect plays a crucial role in attempting to understand artistic subjectivity and aesthetic perception, as these are domains – imbricated in subject formation – which exceed the deconstructive frameworks of semiotic analysis and deconstruction. Following Hemmings’ characterization of Franz Fanon’s insistence that social relations are based on *unreasonable* ties, the acts of artistic production and reception – as embodied and unstable processes of labor, expression, and self-formation – are *unreasonable* attachments.³⁹⁷

Perhaps the artistic medium that serves as the most manifest form of the convergence of intensities and affects is performance art, as the body serves as the primary instrument of expression. In Vietnam, performance art is seen as originating in Hanoi, as its embodied and

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 663.

³⁹⁵ See Clare Hemmings, “Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn,” *Cultural Studies* 19, no. 5 (September 2005), 548-67; Ruth Leys, “The Turn to Affect: A Critique,” *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2011), 434-72; William E. Connolly, “The Complexity of Intention,” *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 4 (Summer 2011), 791-8; Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (NY: Routledge, 2004); Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

³⁹⁶ Hemmings, “Invoking Affect,” 549-50.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 550.

ephemeral creative process access affect and emotionality in a way that many artists found particularly liberating and empowering as a mode of avant-garde experimentation in the mid-1990s. Yet resistance to the popularization, and, as I discussed in the previous chapter, the state-sanctioned spectacularization of Vietnamese performance art, can be considered one factor which has led most artists in Ho Chi Minh City to take only a passing interest in the medium. One might consider the previous discussion of *MAGMA* as an alternative performance enactment that still drew criticisms of “it’s just spectacle.” However, the medium has continued to attract younger artists who have employed performance as a means of artistic experimentation and orientation in future practice. Despite her degree in painting from the Hue University of Arts (*Trường Đại Học Nghệ Thuật Huế*), Ho Chi Minh City-based artist Ngô Thị Thùy Duyên (b. 1981) has described the medium as the most liberating, and has obtained various opportunities to learn about performance and create performance works at international and national workshops and festivals.³⁹⁸ One of her most effective pieces took place at a performance festival organized at Nhà Sàn in Hanoi in 2006. In order to critique conservative expectations of feminine domesticity, she constructed a cube with walls of plastic sheeting, placed herself inside, and began cooking rice (Figure 5.1). The hot steam from the rice filled the cube, making it difficult for her to breathe. A disquieting engagement with sensuality and suffering emerged in her haptic interaction with the plastic sheeting, as she urgently and desperately pressed her lips and her body against the walls in futile efforts to seek relief from the steam, while leaving imprints of her lips and hands as traces of visibility amid the translucent opacity of the misted surfaces.

³⁹⁸ Conversation with the author, January 2011.



Figure 5.1: Ngô Thùy Duyên, performance at Dom Dom, Nhà Sàn, Hanoi, 2006. Image courtesy of the artist.

Another young artist based in Ho Chi Minh City who has used performance as a means of emotional reconciliation is Lê Quý Anh Hào (b. 1980). His multi-media performance *Story of Images* staged a ritualistic conversation, largely with himself, in a kind of confessional and diaristic narrative in which he spoke to and about his deceased father, who passed away in 1998 (Figure 5.2).³⁹⁹ Garbed in white clothing reminiscent of funeral attire, he and two friends paced in carefully choreographed movement on a platform, circumambulating and traversing the space at given moments, against the backdrop of a screen on which Hào's face was projected, constantly in the act of speech. Throughout the performance certain iterations were voiced, including commentary on how each generation must change, a phrase he often heard from his father. The performance served a larger purpose of invoking an engagement with history, in particular, the wartime experience, to provoke dialogue. At the end of the performance, the video screen in the background showed the text: "It seems that what I want to say is 'I do want and I just want to think of nostalgia.' But it seems to be very difficult to understand. Then I continue to

³⁹⁹ Conversation with the author, December 2010.

be overwhelmed with such a sadness that causes my eyes to tears for through days and months.”⁴⁰⁰



Figure 5.2: Lê Quý Anh Hào, *Story of Images*, 2008. Performed at the Danish Cultural Fund in Hanoi. Sourced from Như Huy, “Tình yêu từ những bức ảnh” (Love from pictures), November 5, 2008, *BBC Vietnamese*, http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/inpictures/story/2008/11/081104_lequyanhhao.shtml (accessed 06/03/2015).

The topics of melancholy and disappointed idealism have been central themes in numerous works of literature since *Đổi Mới*, as well as in the southern musical genre of “yellow music” (*nhạc vàng*), which is often played to invoke nostalgia for 1960s and 1970s Saigon. For various contemporary artists, these topics have surfaced in artworks illustrating a fascination with emotion and affect as subject and as method. While the performances cited above could be – in an over-simplified way - argued as accessing affect through haptic expression as a means to

⁴⁰⁰ Như Huy, *Tình yêu từ những bức ảnh* (Love from pictures), *BBC Vietnamese*, November 5, 2008, http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/inpictures/story/2008/11/081104_lequyanhhao.shtml, accessed 06/03/2015.

conjure emotion, works by Nguyễn Như Huy, Hoàng Dương Cẩm, and Tiffany Chung also use affect, and the manifestation of its excess, as an artistic method in order to produce commentary on sociality, ideology and idealism, and historical amnesia.

A more ethnographic approach to the subject is demonstrated through a video work by Nguyễn Như Huy (b. 1971), in which he first made a documentary asking friends from Hanoi to talk about love.⁴⁰¹ He then created a video piece with several well-known Vietnamese actors and actresses responding to a prompt which asked them to invoke the sadness that would enable them to cry (Figure 5.3-5.4). The frame of the camera focused closely on each actor's face as they looked into the distance, and then very slowly began to cry. The audience would observe every minute facial contortion and gradual accretion of tears as the actors slowly phased into the act of weeping. In a statement accompanying the video's posting online, Huy said "In this video, I would like to investigate the in-between space between the real and the faked, the past and the present, the lie and the truth, which is, to me, the space that can define exactly Vietnamese society now."⁴⁰² The film has the empirical quality of minute capture, honed onto each physiological shift in the actors' expressions, the uncomfortable intensity of their gaze searching for an emotional source from which to invoke tears – at least on the surface of the viewer's understanding, knowing the artist's intention. The viewer is left wondering as to the various components driving the performance, such as whether the tears are a successful product of emotional invocation, or whether the tears can be physically generated, and in turn, facilitate access to the source of sadness. Yet the opacity of their depth of memories and experience is something the viewer cannot transgress, and as such, is left unable to gain a more sincere form of

⁴⁰¹ Conversation with the author, January 2011.

⁴⁰² Nguyễn Như Huy, *Emotions / Cảm xúc*, 2011, single channel video, duration: 14'40", *Vimeo*, <http://vimeo.com/28603154>, accessed 06/03/2015.

empathy with the performance. In William James' provocative 1884 essay "What is an Emotion?" he comments on this "incomplete" expression:

The immense number of parts modified in each emotion is what makes it so difficult for us to reproduce in cold blood the total and integral expression of any one of them. We may catch the trick with the voluntary muscles, but fail with the skin, glands, heart, and other viscera. Just as an artificially imitated sneeze lacks something of the reality, so the attempt to imitate an emotion in the absence of its normal instigating cause is apt to be rather 'hollow'.⁴⁰³

As such, we can only connect with the surface quality of their emotion through the manifestation of its affect. For Huy, perhaps it is this incompleteness and artificiality that bridges the performative invocation to cry with his interest in the amorphous space of the in-between, "between the lie and the truth," of contemporary Vietnamese society, and its polarized traits of tradition and modernity, surface and depth, communism and capitalism, action and rhetoric, sincerity and performance.



⁴⁰³ William James, "What is an Emotion?" *Mind* 9, no. 34 (Apr., 1884), 192.



Figures 5.3 – 5.4: Nguyễn Như Huy, stills from *Emotions / Cảm xúc*, 2011, single channel video, duration: 14'40".

For Hoàng Dương Cầm (b. 1974, Hanoi), the topic of idealism, perhaps understood as a combination of optimism and ideology, is a central preoccupation in his work, and it is largely driven by personal experiences, notably concerning his deceased father and his own role as a father.⁴⁰⁴ His work has obliquely explored these subjects through various media forms while painting remains a particular anchor throughout. In one statement regarding a body of work produced from 1998 to 2000, he described the experimentation that surrounded these initial concerns:

Being trained as a painter, at that time, I was trying to experiment [in] contemporary arts other than painting. My works often started with the concerns about the contextualizing of expression, interpretation, association and the implicit relations between them... It deeply rooted from the visible/invisible conflicts, that take a dominated role in our culture and society. I like to speak my mind through metaphor, so it is in my work. It was a transition period for me, continuing to deal with the black hole situation (the lack of almost everything:

⁴⁰⁴ All citations from the artist within this chapter are derived from periodic conversations with the author from October 2010 to December 2011.

information, knowledge, skills...) as well as the dramatic changes in Vietnam after the “Opening.”⁴⁰⁵

Cầm is one of the few artists in Ho Chi Minh City that actively pursues philosophical groundings for articulating his artistic practice, often delving into metaphysical engagements surrounding the notions of self and duality. These preoccupations are usually explicitly tied into socio-cultural phenomena specific to the context of Vietnam, and can be wide-ranging, for example, the relationship between the growth of Vietnamese middle-class tourism and the representation of ethnic minorities in his collaborative work *Camamoto*.⁴⁰⁶ At times his works have taken on a playful and provocative edge, interrogating artistic and exhibitionary conventions, such as when he and an artist collaborator herded motorbikes into the gallery space on an opening night, thus making the space of exhibition a crowded parking lot. For the artist, this fixation on the porosity between inside and outside is an investigation of the spatial paradigms of self and other, as illustrated in his statement titled “Inside vs. Outside”:

Having [an interest] in consciousness, along with my own self exploration, I found out that it was not only the process of building awareness about one’s own but also the projections, that create one’s relations to the outside world. It is an adventure of life that can be started from many vantage points and go through many directions or a process of learning about oneself (or thing) in between their complicated intertwining relations to environment. “*Tree, a view from both sides, Ho Chi Minh City, 2003*” was my first work [that] addressed that interest of mine. Studying “relations” has brought me to the realms of duality and paradox, which were always [shifting] and relative according to the angles of view. It also broadens my reading list to philosophy, Buddhism, phenomenology and quantum physics. The most interesting part is, for me, to find the links/relations that might exist between things, such as karma and parallel universes, time and space, history and present, the inner and outside worlds of a human being... In my practice, I’d like to imagine the aesthetic as a liquid and the art-making process as a mold, so that the aesthetic, to a certain degree, could be molded by the artist naturally, flexibly even, without any awareness by the artist. Jan Bas Ader,

⁴⁰⁵ “Hoàng Dương Cầm,” <http://hoangduongcam.com/works.html>, accessed 10/16/2010.

⁴⁰⁶ The collaboration began in 2009 when Cầm met Nagoya-based artist Takayuki Yamamoto at an artist’s residency in Tokyo. For more information, see “Camamoto: Concept,” http://hoangduongcam.com/cama/cama_concept.html, accessed 06/03/2015.

Martin Kippenberger and Janine Antoni could be cited as my main source of influence.”⁴⁰⁷

Cầm often cited the inability of the Vietnamese language to convey the subtle distinctions of artistic expression in the way that he considered the English language could, and part of this frustration with language surrounded his invocation of “idealism” as a central concern in his work. Yet even in English the term of idealism is unsettling as it occupies a semantic space between ideology and the state of being idealistic, and is seldom used in a vernacular manner. Its closest translation in Vietnamese, according to Cầm, provides a similar parallel in terms of being situated between *lý tưởng* (ideal) and *người mơ mộng* (dreamer). Therefore it is a concept that finds no equivalent articulation in either language, which may explain why the artist has continued to search for alternative conceptual means of expressive this particular state of being.

Most artists will describe their artistic practice as an intensely personal process, as way of understanding one’s own subjectivity and psyche, and Cầm often reiterated that idealism was a characteristic he saw in all artists, and especially some of those around him in the artistic community of Ho Chi Minh City. This driving interest is located in intersecting sources of influence for the artist. It likely stems from his own father, whom Cầm described as highly idealistic, for example, in his desire to uproot and start a new life in Saigon, but only living there for three weeks before moving back to Hanoi. Being raised by a single father, and having a relationship that he described more like that between brothers, has born a strong impact on his work. But his role as the father of a young daughter certainly also inspires numerous concerns, particularly in relation to her education in the state school system. On one occasion, their daughter, at the age of 8 or 9 years old, in usual fashion described what she had learned at school that day, recounting how the students had been taught that they should love Ho Chi Minh. Cầm

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

and his wife Phuong felt that it was important to sit down with her and explain what love means, and how one cannot really ‘love’ someone they have never met. Similar discussions took place around the teaching of themes surrounding patriotism, love for the homeland, *thương nhớ quê* (the closest approximation of translation would be “nostalgia/longing for one’s village or the countryside) and so on. In essence, the parents took on the role of attempting to educate their daughter in ways that she could learn alternative lessons from the pedagogical material without necessarily contradicting how it was being taught in school. Teaching methods at the lower grade levels are described as largely reiterating certain parables emphasizing attachment to land and nation, in which Ho Chi Minh has begun to attain an iconic and sacred status. As such, education in the socialist state has ironically become imbued with religious inflections, in which Confucian-oriented patriotism has become the new religion, not to be questioned or critiqued, but endowed with faith. Building on the topic of love as a contentious subject of appropriation, in a discussion of Renovation-era authors such as the celebrated Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Dương Thu Hương, and Phạm thị Hoài, Cầm asserted that the popular interpretation of these writers as searching for or attempting to define love within their stories is misguided, as love is completely absent from much of the work in this genre. Rather, these authors examine various manifestations and distortions of familial ties and erotic/affective explorations, variations of the sentiment loosely referred to as love. The writings of this period were inspirational for Cầm, who was surprised and yet gratified to find earlier artists who were investigating the same issues that have and continue to preoccupy him.

For these reasons, I suggest that Cầm’s deep-rooted interest in these topics manifests itself throughout his work in the form of excess, as it pertains to the process of execution and the aesthetic effect of his finished work. Excess appears to be not only a methodological means used

to engage topics about unconstrained idealism and ideology as surface in the realms of education, familial relationships, and the situation of artists in post-reform Vietnam. It also serves as a deliberately contrived aesthetic device which aims not to present a carefully rendered end-product, but something that perhaps can be described as striving to convey particular affective intensities, rather than a more pleasing object of beauty.

In a series of paintings from 2005, a sense of frenetic yet controlled intensity is conveyed through the application of linear outlines, gestural contours, scumbled forms, and planar volumes, all rendered with vibrant hues (Figures 5.5 – 5.6). Cầm admitted being inspired by German Expressionism as an aesthetic expression of the social and cultural climate of its time, via a painterly style that visually deployed the angst and social unrest that pervaded post-WWI German society. He wondered how such an artistic paradigm could be used to reflect the social circumstances of urban Vietnam, particularly in relation to social ills such as the hardships of daily migrant laborers (*di cư*) and the growth of prostitution and sex trafficking. Emerging from Cầm's canvases is a “noisy” affective intensity, one that would be further amplified in subsequent paintings. What is perceptible upon closer examination is the superimposition of the top-most linear configurations upon emergent layers in which painterly specters of faces and forms peer out from beneath. Each of these paintings is conversant with one another in terms of speaking to a symbolic rendering of conscious and subconscious imagery, and the deeper psychological processes that the artist attempts to interpret via the medium of paint and its gestures. Certain symbolic imagery leaps out for the viewer, such as the figures in embrace in *Three People* or the manic patterning of hearts traversing the pictorial field in *Behind the Silence*, both speaking to an aesthetic profusion of sentimentality. Beneath the visible, outwardly perceptible imagery, however, is the spectral presence of earlier renderings. It appears that these

immanent forms are meant to occupy and complicate the same picture plane, symbolically anchoring or haunting what appear prior to closer discernment to be brightly and frenetically rendered utopian portraits of affection. Cầm's painterly methods thus invoke an archaeological visual interrogation, asking the viewer to look beyond the surface, whose vibrant hues and gestures of intimacy for the onlooker's enjoyment are striking only because of the abstract forms and muted applications which provide the base layers for the topmost figures. This series and even more so Cầm's paintings from the late 2000s have been praised by some as unconventionally beautiful and powerful, while others have described them more guardedly as manic, excessive, and out of control.



Figure 5.5: Hoàng Dương Cầm, *Three People*, 2005, oil and acrylic on canvas, 100 x 100cm. Post-Vi Dai collection. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5.6: Hoàng Dương Cầm, *Behind the silence*, 2005, oil and acrylic on canvas, 100.2 x 100cm. Post-Vi Dai collection. Image courtesy of the artist.

A series of paintings, photographs, and sculptures begun in 2010 emerge from a preoccupation with the notion of the fallen, whether this is in relation to structural conceptions of modernity or at the scale of individual personal ambitions (Figures 5.7–5.9). As the various works began to be juxtaposed alongside each other in potential installation scenarios, Cầm began to gain an intense curiosity about formal and symbolic object relations through the recognition that a series of paintings and sculptures could be created and edited in tandem with each other, in a mutually reflexive or dialogical relationship. For example, when asked how he would know when to stop, he said that the sculpture would tell him when the painting was done, and vice

versa. He cited Plato's *Theory of Form* as an ongoing inspiration throughout the process. In addition, he mentioned a performative aspect of the work once the viewer enters the framework or space, in that the bodily dimension of the viewer circulating the spatial field of the painting and sculpture adds a third object to the relational space. A phenomenological relationship thus informed the conceptual direction and development of the work as a whole, which still drew on Cầm's concerns with excavating the unconscious and the drives of idealism.



Figure 5.7: Hoàng Dương Cầm *The Weirdness of an Ideal Mind, Painting & Sculpture Duo No. 1*, 2010. Installation view in studio. Photograph by the author.



Figure 5.8 (left): Hoàng Dương Cầm, *The Weirdness of an Ideal Mind (Pray)*, 2009 – 2011, acrylic on canvas, wire, glue, cement, acrylic and torn, protective clothing, dimensions variable. Installation view at Galerie Quynh.



Figure 5.9 (right): Hoàng Dương Cầm, *The Weirdness of an Ideal Mind (The Ship)*, 2009 – 2011, acrylic on canvas, wire, glue, cement, acrylic, used fabric and burned, protective clothing in wax, dimensions variable. Images sourced from <http://galeriequynh.com/exhibition/something-new/>.

What comes across in the imagery of the paintings and sculptures is a continuation of dynamism and potential energy, both driven to the point of excess, yet with a deliberate and calculated application of colors, layers of textures, and semi-abstract forms, a stylistic praxis carried through from his earlier paintings. The shapes that one tries to discern are by all purposes feverishly jumbled, albeit in an intentional fashion. The motif of stars are repeated in both the paintings and sculptures, alluding to the Vietnamese flag, and allowing for the viewer to

potentially glean a sense of Cầm's interest in the persistence of nationalist ideologies and forms of debate that take place in the realm of politics. His decision to use cement mixed with papier mâché creates a conscious reference to the history of the material as the premier medium of choice for architectural modernism, and Cầm's sculptures also play on structural qualities associated with early modernist movements, such as Constructivism and Bauhaus design. Cầm was also very aware of how the arrangement of the forms would affect the viewing experience, and his choice of placing the sculpture on the ground lends to the reading of it as something fallen from above, denoting sadness or creating an affective response in the viewer. This embodied experience is one of the most important objectives for him in his art practice, in terms of what he wants the artwork to do for the viewer. The choices of material, the chaotic, almost mutated 2-D and 3-D forms, and their placement within each installation allude to fallen forms, whether it be of shifting ideologies in art or development projects surrounding modernist construction and building.

In the 2011 exhibition *Ideal Fall* at Galerie Quynh, several additions were integrated into the spatial compositions. Further building on the general scheme of the fallen in relation to conceptual, artistic, and political ideals, Cầm added woven strips of burned workers' uniforms, loosely piecing them together to form a wilted exoskeletal replica of Tatlin's Monument to the Third International. Tatlin's structure was designed to serve as the headquarters of the Comintern following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. With plans to be constructed from iron, glass, and steel, the monument was intended to embody the full potential of industrial and revolutionary modernity, embracing the full aesthetic of architectural Constructivism. But as too grand and symbolic of a utopian vision rather than a functional blueprint, it was ultimately never built. In his fascination with this emblem of a fallen promise of utopian communist modernity, Cầm hung

the ‘monument’ against the painting and extended it to anchor against the sculpture, intending the woven strips to drape dejectedly through the viewing space, in effect producing another structural element within the installation (Figure 5.9). Again, there is the artist’s choice of utilizing excessive symbolic expression to convey not meaning, but curiosity on the part of the viewer via phenomenological and conceptual engagement with the work. I read this application of excess as a methodological compulsion, which has often served to the detriment of the artist in critical reception of his work. He often eschews aesthetic reflexes in order to produce a sense of uneasiness in the audience, and favors artistic interrogation as a means to access internal processes of self-examination, whether or not the ultimate work will appear to be successful as an integrated whole or as a commercially viable piece.

Càm has repeatedly used manipulations of scale and his own figure within the pictorial field of his photographic compositions, typically digitally altered in a way to visually relate to the themes which recur throughout his work, ranging in the emotional spectrum from whimsical to melancholy. In the *Fat-Free Museum* (2006) series, the artist digitally inserted images of his fingers or his face, along with specifically chosen visuals drawn from Vietnamese cultural history, into photographs taken on a visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2005 (Figures 5.10 – 5.11, 5.13). On the surface of some of the recomposed photographs, the artist’s fingers are magnified to occupy the foreground, indexically pointing, touching, or intervening in objects of art in the background, thus rupturing the integrity of the picture plain in a humorous fashion. The viewer is reminded of unwanted snapshots in which the tip of the photographer’s finger is accidentally captured by the lens. The inclusion of the artist’s face, juxtaposed either within a work of art at the museum or ephemerally inserted into the compositional space speaks to an individually-driven intervention, one in which the artist speaks to his own symbolic presence.

What this presence is meant to indexically signify is not always clear, as are the rest of the associations produced by the spatial recompositions and alterations. This is an intentional invitation to create connections based on any signified meanings as well as to take playful pleasure in visually linking formal components that are apparent to the viewer.

As such, Cầm does not want these relationships to be entirely legible. He is more interested in the process of free association on the part of the viewer, to whom many of the images digitally inserted into the frame may not be recognizable, such as the painting of the woman holding flowers in *Flower by ...* and the white sculpture of a woman in *Soft Extraction – Femininity*. These are works of art drawn from the canon of Vietnamese modernism (Figures 5.12 and 5.14). In some of the photographs, other images are perhaps recognizable because of their metonymic relationship to Vietnam vis-à-vis iconic photographs from the Vietnam War or the familiar forms of Socialist propaganda and revolutionary visual culture (Figure 5.15). The underlying motivations for the series surrounded the artist's desire to produce connections – both critical and humorous – between Vietnam and the West, each accessed as a geo-imaginary represented by narratives constructed through their dream-images of modernity or post-modernity.⁴⁰⁸ In *Soft Extraction – Femininity* Cầm forged a juxtaposition of a famous mid-twentieth century work by a Vietnamese sculptor against a stereotypical image of “Western” art,

⁴⁰⁸ I use “dream-images” here in reference to Susan Buck-Morss’ work on Benjamin’s *Passagen-Werk* or Arcades Project, in which she describes Benjamin’s method as similar to that of montage, in that his conception of historical materialism approaches historical processes through the representational value of its images, and not its narratives. Through Benjamin’s compilation of notes and images, Buck-Morss suggests, the nature of this urban capitalist modernity as a type of dream-world infused with collective wish-images is captured. This collective dream was generated by the desires of the bourgeois class, reflecting the fetishized historical processes that were now conceived as natural and mythic. Benjamin called for an awakening from this collective dream through a political experience that entails an exposure and critique of the ideologies of historical progress, automatic development, the transmission of culture, and the expanding scope of the commodity form. I see this analysis of Benjamin’s work and Buck-Morss’ attention to the fetishization of dream-images and the elision of historical processes as resonant with my discussion with the current immersive daily experience of Ho Chi Minh City’s urban subject in the late socialist landscape.

its meaning made hyperbolic and literal through a painting of a cowboy. The sculpture by Phạm Mùôi (b. 1935), titled *Sharpening Spikes (Vót chông)* (1969), depicts a female guerilla fighter rendered in the smooth and undulating contours reminiscent of a Brancusi sculpture. In the photograph the outline of the sculpture was photo-shopped so that it would blend into the clouds in the background of the painting. This was a crafted gesture signaling the ephemerality of historical memory, amnesia of processes of modernization, and Vietnam's selective recollection of sources of influence for their versions of modernity. Cầm's intention was to convey those forgotten historical processes of cultural transmission, in this case, artistic influence from the West, that have since been rendered mute and invisible in official art historical narratives and popular imaginaries about national art in Vietnam. In the artist's view, in Vietnam's efforts to attain modernity, it borrowed and assimilated a great deal of Western culture (or colonial culture), which it then transformed and "Vietnamized." Thus, the nationalist narrative conceals what is considered by Cầm and several artists to be a compromised (art) history.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁹ I was told by a few young artists that they didn't believe there was a Vietnamese art history, specifically, that "Vietnam has no art history." Upon further clarification, I understood this to be an assessment of unconstrained artistic developments operating free of external influence; only such art could be considered authentic and indigenous, in a manner of speaking. Art produced during colonialism is seen as a product of French colonial hybridism, Socialist artistic production is coerced by the state, and contemporary art is imitative of foreign conceptual models, notably from the U.S. and China. This is naturally an extreme stance only expressed by a few artists, but it reflects a continuing preoccupation with the national framework as a container and local source for truly Vietnamese artistic expression.

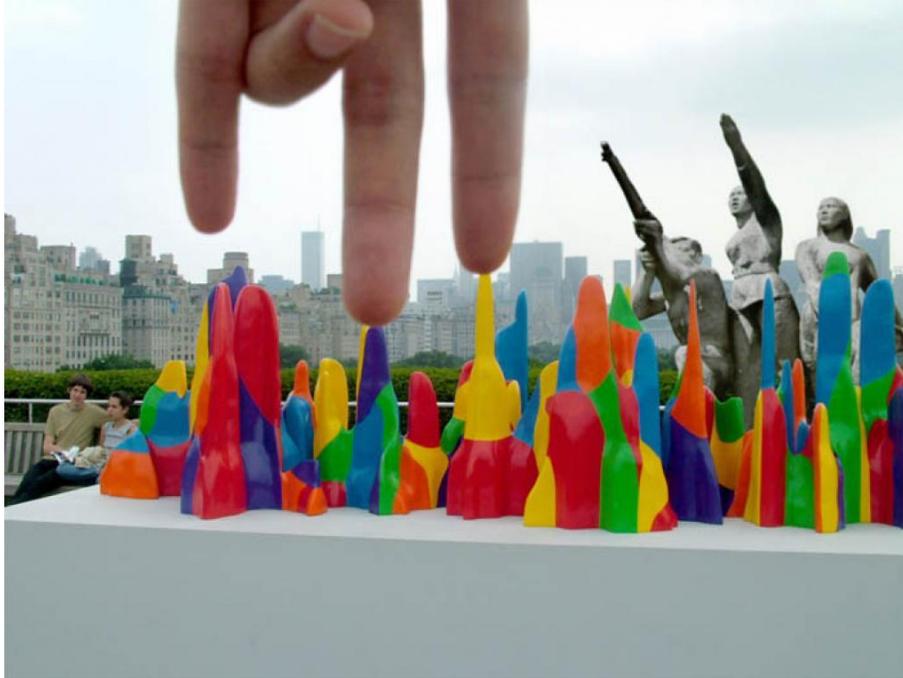


Figure 5.10: Hoàng Dương Cầm, *Attack - Sculpture - Protect*, 2006, digital photograph, 70 x 93cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5.11: Hoàng Dương Cầm, *Flower By...*, 2006, 70 x 93cm, digital photograph. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5.12: Tô Ngọc Vân (1906 - 1954), *Thiếu nữ bên hoa huệ* (*Woman next to lilies*), 1943, oil on canvas. The Vietnamese Fine Arts Association, http://www.vietnamfineart.com.vn/Story/Cactacgia_tacpham/giaithuonghcmnhanuoc/2013/11/3720.html (accessed 06/03/2015).



Figure 5.13: Hoàng Dương Cầm, *Soft Extraction – Femininity*, 2006, digital photograph, 70 x 93cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5.14: Phạm Mười (b. 1935), *Cô gái vót chông* (*Girl sharpening spikes*), 1967, plaster. Collection of the Vietnam Museum of Fine Arts. The Vietnamese Fine Arts Association, http://www.vietnamfineart.com.vn/Story/Cactacgia_tacpham/giaithuonghcmnhanuoc/2013/11/3832.html, accessed 06/03/2015.



Figure 5.15: Hoàng Dương Cầm, *Grey Rainbow*, 2006, digital photograph, 70 x 93cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

Scale continued to be the primary framework of self-insertion into photographic compositions in the 2007-2008 series *Representation in the meaning of a metaphor for a forest as endoscopy / links between locations*, a series of digital prints shot in various locations, which included a courtyard in Venice, an ice palace in Saigon, and an old apartment building slated for demolition in Vietnam (Figures 5.16 – 5.19). Cầm talked about this series of photographs as an attempt to capture inner subjectivity by using the vehicle of public space and the structural form of selected architectural places. The notion of endoscopy thus invokes a highly intimate yet invasive examination of that which cannot be viewed without specialized technology. By drawing attention to the body in space through the lens of a scrutinizing gaze – as the scale is so manipulated as to make Cầm barely perceptible – the series invokes a questioning of how the self might be conceived through a phenomenological engagement with the spaces we inhabit. Such a project resonates with the writings of Bachelard, who, as mentioned earlier, articulates theorizations of space rooted in the core of the architectural imagination, with key discussions emerging from structural imagery, for example, the house image representing the topography of our intimate being.⁴¹⁰ As such, Bachelard’s musings on structured, architectural space are deeply tied to our sensory and imaginary core, connecting our inhabited spaces to our own corporeal sense of self. Cầm endeavored to render this premise visible via photography as digital craft and the strategic handling of scale and the artist’s figure in the pictorial field.

In terms of the invisible crafting of the images, Photoshop was used to seamlessly stitch multiple photographs together – shots taken of the same site from minute shifts in angle – to create wide angle perspectives of spaces. What results are ‘impossible visions’ or illogical images, a manipulation not apparent upon first view. But after closer analysis, one finds their

⁴¹⁰ Bachelard, xxxii.

perceptual frame forced into an alternative mode, a slight distortion of one's vision. A kind of optical unease may result. While it is subtle, it nonetheless creates an oscillation in the visual sensory process and disrupts our sense of perceptual expectation. These are self-portraits of the artist, who is always positioned in liminal spaces, physically located between outside and inside spaces, partially submerged and exposed at the same time. In response to why he is always lying prone in these settings, with eyes closed, he described how one always leaves fragments of themselves behind wherever they go, like leaving detritus on the ground and forgetting about it later. The fragment of self/ego as detritus, fused with space that one has temporarily inhabited may illustrate what is meant by the embodiment of place.



Figures 5.16: Hoàng Dương Cầm, *Representation in the meaning of a metaphor for a forest as endoscopy / links between locations, no. 1*, 2007-2008, Digital c-print, 120 x 187.7 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figures 5.17: Hoàng Dương Cầm, *Representation in the meaning of a metaphor for a forest as endoscopy / links between locations, no. 1*, 2007-2008, Digital c-print, 120 x 187.7 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5.18: Hoàng Dương Cầm, *Representation in the meaning of a metaphor for a forest as endoscopy / links between locations, no. 2*, 2007-2008, digital c-print, 150 x 93 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5.19: Hoàng Dương Cầm, *Representation in the meaning of a metaphor for a forest as endoscopy / links between locations*, no. 3, 2007-2008, digital c-print, 120 x 187 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

Various conceptual permutations of “idealism,” as a fundamental psychoanalytical construct delineating preoccupations with the inside/outside binary, inner vs. outer reality, etc., continue to drive the artist’s creative practice. Yet it appears that for the artist these concerns can only be tangibly grappled with within the context of narrative and opposition, often drawing from the contemporary circumstances of living in Vietnam. Therefore certain threads resurface throughout his work, such as the vital importance of retrieving history in order to understand the underlying structures of present-day habits and behavior. His projects continue to reveal a concern with uncovering certain patterns and discourses in Vietnamese society, particularly those pertaining to language, notably the language concerning love and affect. Cầm’s particular way of

working, of building up layer upon layer in his paintings as well as in his digitally-rendered photographic compositions, yields a metaphorical analog for his excavation of memories and the language of feelings which he tries to recover and categorize.

Tiffany Chung's (b. 1969, Danang) art practice enacts a similar objective of excavation and retrieval, and stages excess and affect both stylistically as an aesthetic preoccupation and literally as a choreographical directive. As she consciously articulates her conceptual and research-based practice, these interests are incisively situated in the examination of shifting geo-spatial configurations – often in the urban context - as they are affected by varying scales of socioeconomic development and devastation:

My work attempts to re-imagine the urban landscape and to understand our experience of the city by looking at spatial and cultural transformations linked to economic development in the midst of urbanization. Incorporating drawing, photography, sculpture and sometimes video, my work doesn't just document the tangible manifestations of the never-ending urbanization process but rather explores its underlying meaning and structure by investigating the social and cultural impacts. It questions how spatial positioning effects both culture and lifestyle both in inner city and areas where rural and urban intersect. It examines the influence of pop culture in people's daily lives. It depicts comical abnormality and humorous desire of consumers in contemporary society by revealing the burgeoning escapist spirit of reveling in the excessive consumption of goods and the quick absorption of new information and technology. It alludes to the artificiality and stylized presentation of nature within the urban landscape. It seeks to reinvent the idealized concepts of utopia and to envision new images of the city while being transformed not only in just spatial terms.⁴¹¹

Chung has received significant acclaim for an ongoing series of map drawings, cultivated through cartographic research into specific locales, and intended to chart, in a non-linear fashion, various topographical changes which have ensued as a result of urban development or environmental disaster. This interest in cartography developed in 2005-2006, a period during which Chung was living in Japan, and it thus produced a shift in focus from her work on pop

⁴¹¹ *Galerie Quynh*, <http://www.galeriequynh.com/gq/index.htm>, accessed 06/03/15.

culture and consumer excess.⁴¹² This interest in pop imagery and consumerism in tandem with the new interest in urban topography would be revived upon relocation to Ho Chi Minh City, a time during which she recollects the onset of the building boom in Vietnam. The experience of living in Ho Chi Minh City during this specific time could be perceived as a springboard for launching site-specific inquiries into urban transformation, as a result of her daily immersion in the pervasive imagery extracted from daily headlines. Chung began to conduct research into local issues related to urban development, with particular attention to daily news items related to such topics as resettlement, reconstruction, demolition, and construction accidents. The artistic decision to punch holes in the drawings, in a manner of precisely incised craters, was inspired by one local story about a corporate land purchase in Ho Chi Minh City that necessitated the removal and displacement of circular plots of soil. Yet the project was halted midway, leaving behind large craters into which water and refuse could accumulate. Stories about people and animals falling into the craters began to emerge in the headlines, yet no efforts were taken to refill the holes.

Therefore, while Chung's drawings are aesthetically arresting, it is in part a methodological imperative to drive the technological craft and presentation of her work to beautiful excess (Figures 5.20 – 5.23). For the artist, this speaks to a compulsion that resonates with the precarious ramifications of the urgent, at times frenetic, desire for modernization and progress, particularly as this was manifested at a specific time in Vietnam. The crafted component of the cartographic drawings, at times utilizing embroidery and grommets, is also driven by autobiographical recollections of the artist's childhood spent in wartime Vietnam (Figures 5.20 – 5.21). The act of sewing invokes memories of patching worn garments in times

⁴¹² All citations from the artist within this chapter are derived from periodic conversations with the author from October 2010 to the present.

of scarcity or of crafting hidden stashes of jewelry and gold in articles of clothing upon attempts to flee the country as refugees prior to the Orderly Departure Act in 1990. As the artist commented, “In some ways embroidery is reminiscent of war... It is domestic and resilient; something that everyone can relate to. And for me, it is also meditative.”⁴¹³

Criticisms of her work have targeted the excess of beauty and craft in her drawings, whose reticular topographical forms appear bejeweled and ornamental while also conveying a sense of organic growth, like a fungal spread under the lens of a microscope. Chung’s intention has been not only to defend beauty as a key component driving the phenomenological engagement with her work, but I would argue to further render the crafted component to the point of excess in terms of utilizing formal pleasure for conceptual purposes. As such, she has attempted throughout her larger body of work to use excess not so much to push the ironic narrative that resonates with the stark imagery of political pop, but rather to convey a veiled pathology of underlying social and environmental degradation vis-à-vis urban transformation and crisis. Chung’s defense of beauty is inspired by the writings of Dave Hickey, whose criticisms were deeply influential in Chung’s artistic formation during her post-graduate studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara.⁴¹⁴

⁴¹³ “Presentation by Tiffany Chung – Asia Art Archive,” *Asia Art Archive*, November 7, 2010, <http://www.aaa-a.org/2011/11/01/presentation-by-tiffany-chung/>, accessed 06/03/15.

⁴¹⁴ See Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Essays on Beauty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

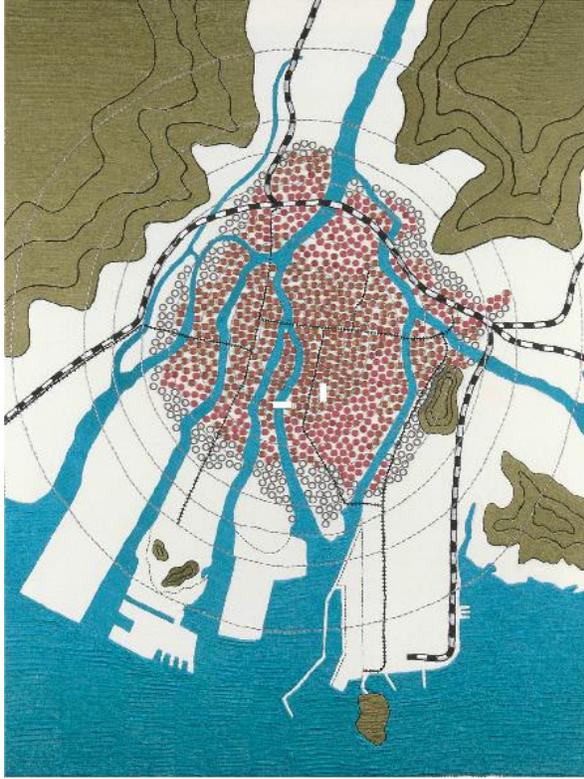


Figure 5.20 (left): Tiffany Chung, *Hiroshima*, 2010, embroidery, metal grommets, and buttons on canvas, 110 x 82 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Arts.



Figure 5.21 (right): Tiffany Chung, *up and down the Mekong - migration of the fish*, 2010, embroidery, beads, painted metal grommets, and buttons on canvas 108 x 83 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Arts.

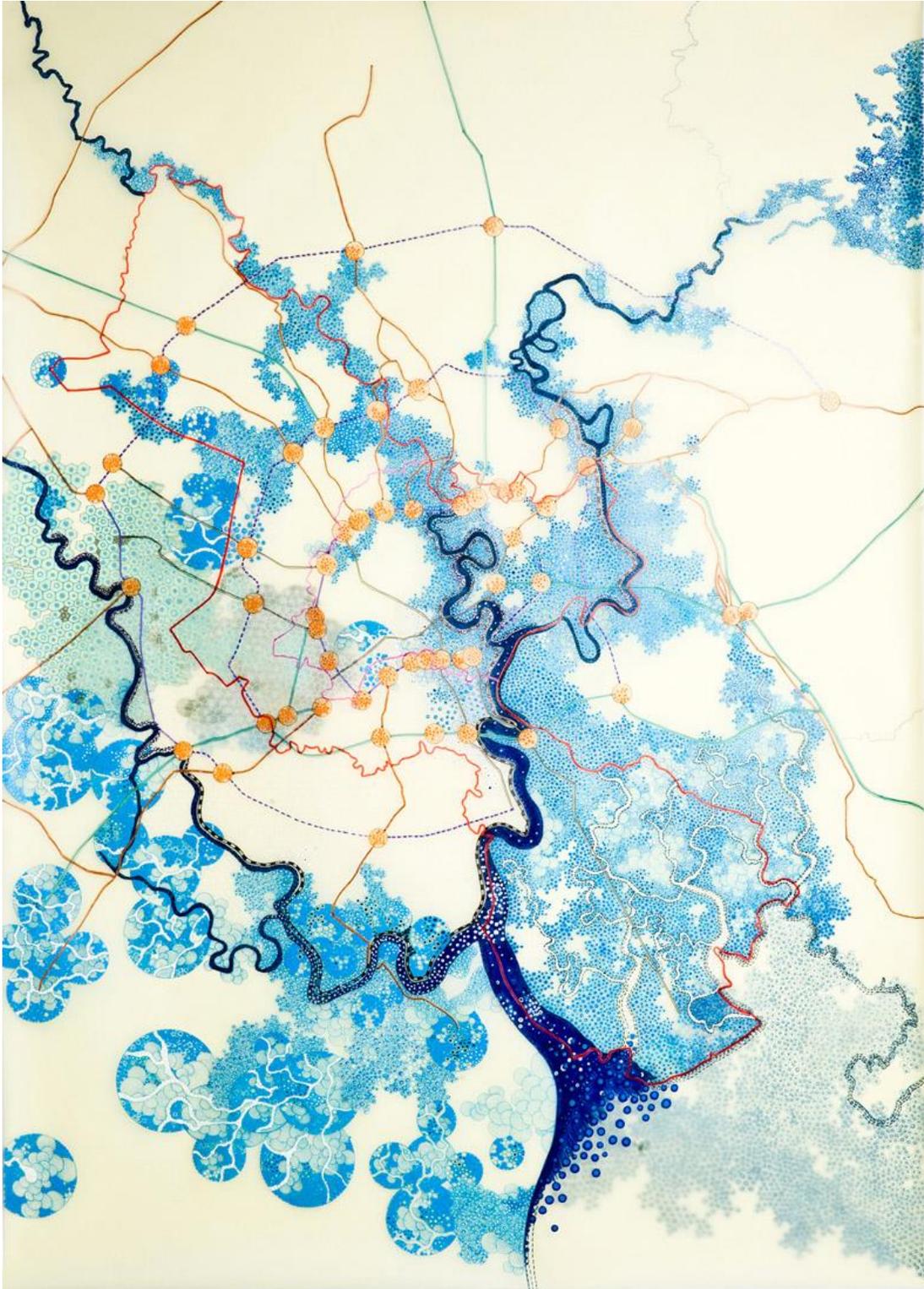


Figure 5.22: Tiffany Chung, *One Giant Great Flood 2050*, 2010, micropigment ink, oil and alcohol-based marker on vellum and paper, 110 x 70 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Arts.

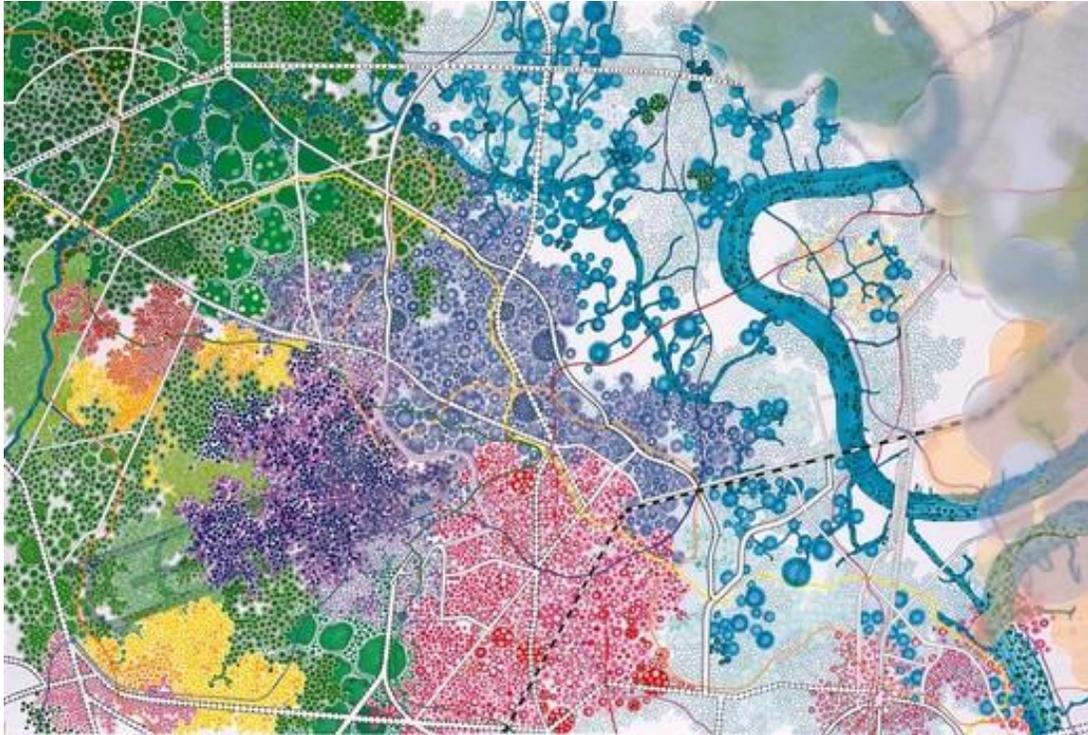


Figure 5.23: Tiffany Chung, *Gò Váp*, 2008, oil and alcohol-based markers on paper, 140 x 92 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins Fine Arts.

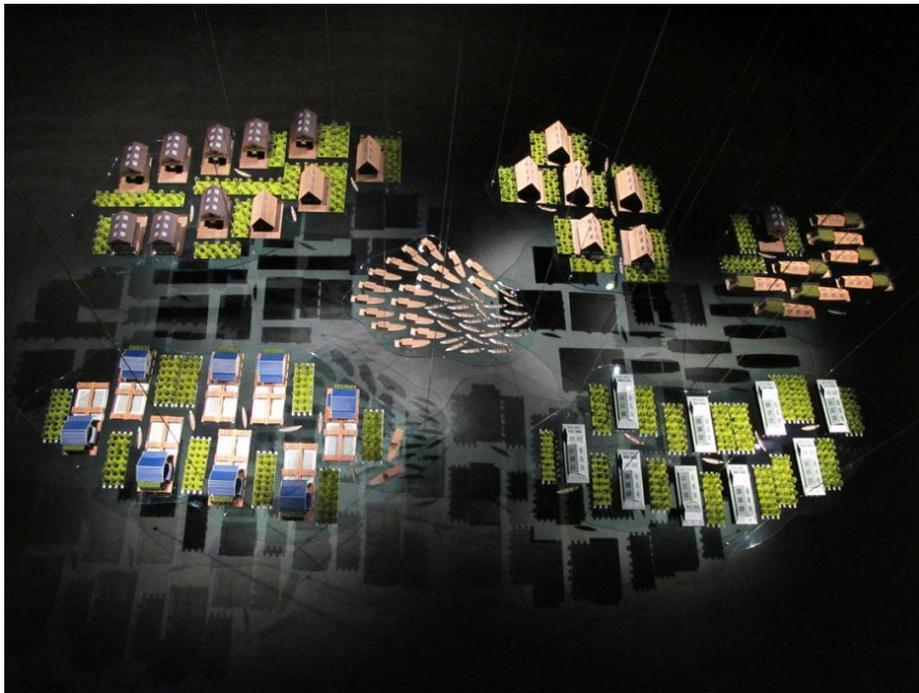
The full expression of these concerns presents itself in what may appear to be a divergent fashion for the artist in the work *Stored in a Jar: Monsoon, Drowning Fish, Color of Water, and The Floating World*, which was commissioned for the 2011 Singapore Biennale (Figure 5.24 – 5.26). For the installation Chung designed the model of a self-sustaining floating village, incorporating design principles drawn from various examples of vernacular architecture throughout Asia and elsewhere, but also drawing on and critiquing a modernist ethos in terms of playing into the scheme of master planning. While *Stored in a Jar* reflected an interest in constructing an alternative sustainable urbanism, this was not the first time that Chung had created the resemblance of a city in miniature, in what would appear to be a recognizable artistic project of viewing and recreating the city, a pattern arguably dating to the onset of

industrialization.⁴¹⁵ Chung's previous incarnation of an urban topography in three-dimensional form was *D-City* (2010), an architectonic sculpture with brightly upholstered buildings, mounted on a similarly organically-shaped glass platform (Figure 5.27).



Figure 5.24: Tiffany Chung, *Stored in a Jar: Monsoon, Drowning Fish, Color of Water, and The Floating World*, 2011, mixed media installation (plexi-glass, wood veneer, plastic, aluminum, paint, steel cable, foam, copper wire), dimensions of installation: 236 ¼ x 141 ¾ in., houseboat dimensions variable. View of installation at Singapore Biennale 2011. Author's photograph.

⁴¹⁵ "Presentation by Tiffany Chung – Asia Art Archive."



Figures 5.25 – 5.26: Tiffany Chung, *Stored in a Jar: Monsoon, Drowning Fish, Color of Water, and The Floating World*, 2011, mixed media installation (plexi-glass, wood veneer, plastic, aluminum, paint, steel cable, foam, copper wire), dimensions of installation: 236 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 141 $\frac{3}{4}$ in., houseboat dimensions variable. View of installation at Singapore Biennale 2011. Images courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5.27: Tiffany Chung, *D-City: Where Sidewalk Cafes Meet the Stars*, 2010, plexi-glass, MDF, polystyrene, decorative tape, thermoplastic adhesive, 79 x 265 in. base, dimensions of buildings variable. Installation view at the Centro de Cultura Contemporania de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain. Image courtesy of the artist.

In addition to the floating village model, the installation for the Singapore Biennale comprised several cartographic drawings created for an organization in Sydney, Australia. The maps abstractly illustrated historic patterns as well as projected future patterns of flooding in Ho Chi Minh City and the southern provinces of Vietnam (Figure 5.22). The premise for the entire grouping was partially inspired by the artist's own childhood experience of the historic Mekong flood in 1978. *One Giant Great Flood 2050* reflected the projection for massive flooding in the future, and the artist's interests in how communities would negotiate these conditions and adapt to a flooded environment. From these concerns Chung undertook research into vernacular architecture and floating villages in India, Pakistan, Halong Bay in Vietnam, the Tonle Sap in Cambodia, and Yamaguchi-style vernacular houses in Japan, with the intention of revealing universal ecology principles that have been in place for generations, in light of the fact that these ecological concerns and design strategies for sustainability are neither a contemporary nor Western phenomenon.

Stored in a Jar was an experimental turn for the artist, and reflected an interest in arcology, an ideological and practical approach to the fields of architecture and ecology

expounded upon by architect Paolo Soleri.⁴¹⁶ The floating village model delighted viewers at the biennale with its precise details, immaculate presentation, and suspension in mid-air, thus producing patterns of shadows on the floor and walls. An element of experiential play was present for many who wandered in and out of the installation, navigating between the glass panes, and at times giving in to the desire to touch the miniature houses, much to the artist's discomfort. However, Chung had struggled to convey a certain intention that runs through much of her work: that beyond the surface of aesthetic pleasure there is always meant to be an element that unsettles the viewer. However, this aspect is not always easily accessible without deeper knowledge of and familiarity with the artist's in-depth research and larger preoccupations. In the case of *Stored in a Jar*, the artist evoked an interesting dialectic based on the premise of master urban planning, which often claims to be in the service of the local population, but assumes universalist architectural plans often ill-suited to the needs of the community at the ground level. In addition, Chung attempted to expand on the critique of failed utopian planning by manipulating the principles of arcology in relation to the design of the houseboat community:

This floating town keeps the basic principles of arcology - using solar panels, rainwater harvesting system, vertical and rooftop gardens, as well as floating rice paddies. But moving beyond this, my work in fact questions the failed utopias by twisting the key ideas of arcology: rejecting its vertical hyper-structure and instead having the town spread horizontally; keeping the vernacular architectural forms instead of designing futuristic megacities. It examines the utopian ideas of 'arcology' by questioning the self-sustainability and effectiveness of hypothetical mega-structures, in which the designs and building materials are mostly alien to local inhabitants. It attempts to focus on building a public space using the traditional floating market setting, in contrast to the failed utopian community model. As a form of comparative global ethnography, this project also reveals how vernacular architecture and arrangement of these floating communities is a fluid form of urban planning; that 'arcological' principles have already existed in the ways of life here.⁴¹⁷

⁴¹⁶ Paolo Soleri, *Arcology, the City in the Image of Man* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1969).

⁴¹⁷ "Presentation by Tiffany Chung – Asia Art Archive."

In an ethereal fashion, the oscillating shadows of the houseboats and boats on the floor gave the viewer the sense of what they might see looking up at the utopian floating village from the riverbed, metaphorically invoking the sense of dialectics of power from above and histories from below.

While earlier work inspired by the conditions of change in Vietnam – and the specificities of living in Ho Chi Minh City – generated expanding interests in topics related to the impacts of environmental crisis and urban degradation on resident populations, certain personal experiences also shaped an interest in historical excavation and site-specific research. Having received her MFA in 2000 and thus having trained in California as a conceptual artist during the height of the focus on identity politics in contemporary art, Chung felt weary of expectations that she – as a Vietnamese female artist and former refugee – continue to produce representative work accounting for that historical burden. Upon her return to Vietnam she admitted feeling initially refreshed by the lack of discourse on the war, as she was thoroughly fatigued by those repetitious discussions in the West, while at the same time recognizing how those discourses had affected her own formation as an artist. But after a couple of years of residence in Vietnam, Chung described how she began to feel disturbed by what many have described more as historical apathy rather than amnesia, an utter lack of engagement with the past when the country was so frenetically trying to leap into the future in the ongoing project of modernization. She noted that it was this environment that compelled her to confront issues towards which she had been reluctant, and to delve into research surrounding topics drawing on her other interests as an impetus for creative practice and sustained artistic development.

Perhaps a way to resolve quandaries regarding ethnographic self-fashioning was to carry out work outside of Vietnam, and for Chung, a deep-rooted affinity for Japan provided the means

to conduct certain site-specific projects that have shaped a significant dimension of her work.⁴¹⁸ Before discussing these endeavors, I want to note that I employ the description of site-specific as its meaning has become multivalent through various discourses related to space, place, community, and audience.⁴¹⁹ These definitions now encompass models of socially-engaged art projects, which themselves are the subject of various contentious arguments that emphasize the obscurity of the functions of socio-political activism and formal engagement of this kind of work.⁴²⁰ The projects that Chung is often invited to undertake incite a deep engagement with the site in question, and an expectation that the work not only revive local meanings already embedded in the location, but also enact further value for the community via aesthetic intervention and popular interaction. This departs from earlier conceptions of the site-specific artwork as one that is experienced in a phenomenological matter through its spatial and material relationship to its physical environment, often within the context of fulfilling the role of public art. While this relationship is also seen as serving a social function, in terms of uniting the public through communal spatial use and aesthetic pleasure and/or provocation, the vagueness of “site” within these descriptions can connote disembodiment, abstractness of location, and absence of belonging. The urge to provoke social consciousness by drawing on the full associations of “place” have thus incited alternative means of commissioning site-specific work that speaks to

⁴¹⁸ Tiffany was based in Japan from 2005-2007, after which she would make semi-annual trips back from Vietnam.

⁴¹⁹ A succinct yet thorough overview of these discourses in relation to the notion of site-specific art can be found in Kwon.

⁴²⁰ Here the views of Grant Kester and Claire Bishop can be positioned in a dialogical and productive fashion. Kester has written extensively about modes of collaboration in participatory community projects, and defends the aesthetic criticality of works that otherwise are perceived as less conceptually-oriented and artistically autonomous in their practical effects. Bishop is a critic of the ethical turn in artistic criticism, which she argues over-valorizes the political and social instrumentalization of collaborative art projects, and undermines the possibility for this kind of work to achieve a critical artistic value that has the potential to destabilize and further expand the discursive field of contemporary art. See Kester and Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents,” *Artforum* (Feb. 2006), 178-183.

particular issues and audiences, at times bordering on conceptually didactic and narrative presentations that ultimately produce a type of artistic chronicle of the site.

One project in particular that dealt with the Japanese rice riots of 1918 revealed Chung's ability to approach what one could describe as a traumatized site, in this case, a historic building, and transform it into an alternative multidimensional stage for exhibition, play, performance, and archive. The 2011 *Fukagawa Shokudo (Fukagawa Dining Room)* project consisted of an exhibition in-situ along with a group performance in collaboration with the Off-Nibroll group, in the Fukugawa region of Tokyo, Japan (Figures 5.28 – 5.30).⁴²¹ To produce work and a performance that was site-specific, in terms of speaking to the historical narrative attached to the building, as well as the spatial conditions of the structure as an exhibition venue, Chung researched the history of the building as symbolic of early twentieth-century *Shōwa Modan* (literally “Showa Modernness”) and the damage it incurred during the 1923 Great Kantō earthquake as well as bombings during the wartime period.⁴²² The building now holds the status of Japanese Cultural Heritage Property because of its historical significance and the fact that it has survived major environmental and military destruction.

Chung envisioned various physical pieces and artworks for the site. One was a silver plaque etched with a history of the building, which was installed permanently in a specific part of the structure. By facing a series of historical images of the building with little context, its placement was meant to supplement these pictures in providing a more complete historical account of the site. She also included three cartographic drawings based on maps dealing with

⁴²¹ The project was funded by Art Matters New York and Fukagawa Tokyo Modan Kan Gallery in Japan. Off-Nibroll is a performance, dance, and multi-media group founded by Keisuke Takahashi and Mikuni Yanaihara in 2005.

⁴²² *Shōwa Modan* is the term used to describe a cultural movement combining Japanese and European influences, beginning with the *Shōwa* period, dating to the Great Kanto Earthquake in *Taishō* period.

the Kanto earthquake in the main exhibition room. The dance performance, which she directed in the role of artistic director in collaboration with a choreographer and dancers from the *Sân Khẩu Mở* (Open Stage) group of experimental dancers, based in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, was shown as a video artwork on another wall in the main exhibition room. In addition, the dining tables in the room, representative of a traditional Japanese furniture style, occupied the central space. On the surface of the tables was inscribed numerous words and phrases excerpted from books and texts that she had found, which had provided various kinds of accounts and narratives in relation to the 1918 Rice Riots.⁴²³ The collaborative component of the exhibition was a performance with the Japanese Off-Nibroll group. This also included an interactive component in which audience members could register to be in the performance; they would don the costumes and sit at the tables with the female performers. In considering the role of women during the 1918 riots, the performance reenacted in improvisational fashion the communal discussions that fishermen's wives had held to debate political and social issues during the time of the food shortages. Chung described how they were, in a sense, the political activists of the period, and such a performance in effect paid tribute to their lesser-known involvement in the events of the time.

⁴²³ The 1918 Rice Riots consisted of various popular uprisings, originating in the fishing town Uozu, Toyama prefecture, that followed a drastic increase in the price of rice. The riots eventually led to the downfall of the Terauchi Masatake administration.



Figure 5.28: Tiffany Chung, *Edo Tokyo*, 2011, micropigment ink and oil on vellum and paper, 110 x 70 cm. From *Fukagawa Dining Room* installation, Fukagawa Tokyo Modan Kan, Tokyo, Japan. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5.29: Tiffany Chung, *Fukagawa Dining Room*, 2011. Installation view, Fukagawa Tokyo Modan Kan, Tokyo, Japan. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5.30: Tiffany Chung (writer and director), *Chronicles of a Soundless Dream*, 2011, duration: 35 minutes. Image courtesy of the artist.

The group dance performance that Tiffany directed in collaboration with a Vietnamese choreographer served as a reenactment or reimagining of a scenario familiar to those who have experienced mass food shortages (Figure 5.30). For Chung, the personal memory of the 1975-1986 subsidy period (*thời bao cấp*) and the 1978 food shortage played a part in shaping her vision for the piece, in which the dancers grappled and struggled for a place in line, using a brick to demarcate one's position and ultimately physically fighting over a sack of rice.⁴²⁴ The use of certain objects, namely bricks, to hold places in line during food distribution is a custom that Chung recalled from the 1978 food shortage and which she projected back into history as a

⁴²⁴ After reunification in 1975 the state initiated programs beginning in 1977 to collectivize agricultural production in the south. This program was largely opposed by southern peasants due to their status as freeholders of land and not tenants; therefore they were averse to collectivization, which would curtail their property rights. The lack of voluntary collectivization provoked coercive measures by the state to force participation by the peasant population. This resulted in increased food shortages, popular conflict, and heightened security concerns, which ultimately led to the state relaxing its control over agricultural production in the south.

device used during the Rice Riots. Schwenkel focuses on bricks as key symbols in a sensory-aesthetic formulation of postsocialist affect:

Although often ignored or seen as ordinary and banal, bricks, I argue, are symbolic cultural objects that convey complex messages and ideologies about cities and the people who build, manage, live in, and experience them. Bricks matter—politically, materially, and affectively, for a political economy of material affects, catalyzed by the state, was crucial to postwar nation-building and the production of new socialist citizens.⁴²⁵

The effect produced by the visual absorption of the performance is palpable. An abstract yet tangibly felt current of energy among the dancers and the slick surfaces of their skin as they move, fall, grapple, seize objects and bodies speaks to a transmittance of affective intensity passing through their movement, speaking to Brian Massumi's description of the body as event:

With the body, the "walls" are the sensory surfaces. The intensity is experience. The emptiness or in-betweenness filled by experience is the incorporeal dimension of the body referred to earlier. The conversion of surface distance into intensity is also the conversion of the materiality of the body into an *event*... It is a relay between its corporeal and incorporeal dimensions.⁴²⁶

While the dancers intermingled, clasping and throwing each other in aggressive yet powerfully fluid movements, the repetitive intonation of lines read in Japanese by one of the dancers provided an atonal and semi-structured meter for the feverish pacing of the dancers' chaotic and seemingly improvisational movements. What resonated from the piece was a portrait of bodies in pain and exhaustion, but the aestheticized physicality of their interactions producing the mesmerizing sensation of beautiful struggle, an effect that only the contemporary dancers could achieve. Chung's negotiation of affect in her artistic direction of the performance, and the firm focus on the aspect of beauty – verging on a sublime sensory experience - in the harmonious melee of near violence, demonstrates the importance of the performance as providing a

⁴²⁵ Schwenkel, "Post/Socialist Affect," 254.

⁴²⁶ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 14.

complement of affective projection and intensity as an affective component of the larger installation.

The individual elements of Chung's artistic vision for the *Fukagawa Dining Room* project reveal a meticulous eye towards crafting the whole from the parts, with the artist relying on the reenactment of fragments of historical narrative, often distilled from archival documents, to ground the material or performative rendering of psychic states embedded in chaotically shifting spatial terrains. To describe her larger artistic preoccupations as well as – I would suggest – her methods, she uses the term psychogeography, a term defined by Situationist Guy Debord as “the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.”⁴²⁷ Therefore, one might characterize Chung's work as as taking on a variation of psychogeographical methods as her projects entail specific forms of investigation and reenactment, involving varying degrees of play with critical connotations. These forms entail components of aesthetic and affective excess, but also haptic and psychic engagement on the part of the viewer, often in a playful fashion akin to the premise of various Situationist principles.

As one of the chief interests of the Situationists, psychogeography entailed the study of the way the city was mapped psychologically and socially in the mindsets of its inhabitants, using such devices as the *dérive* and *détournement*.⁴²⁸ The intense research and concern with

⁴²⁷ Guy Debord, “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography,” *Les Lèvres Nues* 6 (September 1955), transl. Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Online*, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/geography.html>, accessed 06/03/2015.

⁴²⁸ The *dérive* was a strategy to explore parts of the city and produce alternative mappings of routes and places guided by instinctual desires and the transgression of codified spaces. The *dérive* was part of unitary urbanism, the Situationist critique of the ideology of Capitalist urbanism as it is ingrained in people's everyday consciousness through architecture, the urban plan, and mass media. The *détournement* was another aesthetic strategy that critiqued capitalist systems of value, and consisted of a mediation or variation of a previous media work so that the former's original meaning was subverted. See Ken Knabb, ed, *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), 62-68.

tangible craft and concept distinguishes Chung's works to a degree from what is perceived as the more improvisational work of the Situationists. Yet the strategies of ecological and urban analysis, the study of maps, and the role of behavioral disorientation – all integral methods for Chung - were considered fundamental to psychogeography, and the role of chance less emphasized in producing meaningful interactions and generating tangible analyses.⁴²⁹ Chung's interests in human responses to drastic changes in living conditions and the transformation of one's environment are manifested through attempts to map or perform these psychic states in her projects. For Chung, the spatial reconfigurations of social imaginaries and the historical processes that shape the shifting identities of a city are most effectively represented through performative reenactments or conceptually stratified art objects. Thus, her topics of psychogeographical inquiry are rendered legible only to a certain extent without extinguishing the poetic ambiguity of the artwork.

Leading to what I argue is a staging of affect and excess are various works produced in Japan which focused on pop culture and consumption frenzies, utilizing what Chung described as an “early pop abstraction” and a more literal interpretation of play in order to create frenetic, immersive environments, very much inspired by her interest in Baudrillard's writings on simulacra (Figure 5.31). Such work was also influenced by Chung's experience of the aftermath of Renovation (*Đổi Mới*) in terms of witnessing the manic drive to accumulate in the wake of the Subsidy period, a social phenomenon Chung has described as a “psychosis of culture.” To convey the postmodern jumbling of signifiers and signified through appropriation of popular symbols, Chung and other artists used the insignia of everyday life in late Socialist Vietnam to comment on this condition (Figure 5.32 – 5.33). In an anecdotal passage from Việt Lê's

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

catalogue essay for Chung's 2008 exhibition "Play," at Tyler Rollins Fine Art gallery in New York City, Lê describes the sensory qualities of daily life immersed in the sights and sounds of Hanoi:

Late afternoons spent strolling the streets near *Hồ Hoàn Kiếm* (Sword Lake), I would often be startled from my internal reverie by the tinny sound of daily propagandistic messages (about duty, unity, and so on) followed by the national anthem transmitted by megaphones perched high on poles throughout the garden city. On the dense shopping plazas of Shibuya in Tokyo and Myeongdong in Seoul (the artist has lived in both cities), mini-dress-clad female salesclerks would often stand in front of stores yelling into their bullhorns about promotions over the techno beats thumping from boom boxes. Proletariat ideology, "playtime" for the idle, and even protest are linked by the use of the bullhorn, an instrument used to broadcast to the masses. For Chung, the bullhorn becomes a symbol of power and play.⁴³⁰



Figure 5.31: Tiffany Chung, *Famous for Fifteen at the Sugarless Factory*, 2005, mixed media performance. View of performance at The 3rd Fukuoka Triennale, featuring Minh Thu. Image courtesy of the artist.

⁴³⁰ Việt Lê, "All Work, All Play: Of Workers and Cosplayers, or, **Pop**aganda: the Art of Tiffany Chung," *Play: Tiffany Chung* (New York: Tyler Rollins Fine Art, 2008), n.p.



Figure 5.32 (left): Tiffany Chung, *All Work All Play*, 2008, digital c-print, 39 x 59 in. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5.33 (right): Tiffany Chung, *Morning Glory, Glorious Mornings*, 2008, pvc, mdf, polyester fiber filler, plush fabric, felt, height 104 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

While Tuan Andrew Nguyen's *Proposal for a Vietnamese Landscape* series painted a more somber perspective of the hybrid social imaginary imprinted on mass consciousness via urban semiology, Tiffany Chung and Hoàng Dương Cầm have made explicit use of behavioral and haptic experiential relationships by means of absurdity and play to characterize the nature of post-*Đổi Mới* subject formation, and attempts to regulate the citizen as consumer in the regime of everyday life in contemporary Vietnam. In Chung's staging of a pop music performance for the 2005 Fukuoka Triennale she composed a scenario characterized by exuberance and excess, recalling her own memories of attending pop concerts at the time (Figure 5.31). She described

the practice of fans swarming the stage at the end of the performance and gifting the musicians with super-sized stuffed animals, and at a certain point, an element of alarm overtaking the exhilaration as the paraphernalia began to accumulate on stage to the point of claustrophobic panic. A similar enactment of excessive accumulation was performed by Cầm in *Elephant – Bis, bis!* in 2007 (Figure 5.34). In the stop-motion video projection, the artist rocked from side to side, his back turned to the camera, as a gradual accretion of individual objects began to attach themselves to the artist's body. In its conclusion, the stuffed animals, toys, pillows, and other objects had so accumulated on the artist's person that Cầm was no longer perceptible, his sense of presence obliterated by what appeared to be a large pieced-together sculptural form composed of mass-produced commodity items with little practical use value.



Figure 5.34: Hoàng Dương Cầm, *Elephant – Bis, bis!* (film still), 2007, Two-channel video installation: DVD, 6:44 min. Courtesy of the artist.

The affective methods deployed by the artists discussed in this chapter bear topical similarities with the works of several Phnom Penh-based artists that will be the focus of the next chapter. For artists in both Ho Chi Minh City and Phnom Penh, prevailing concerns with psychological and architectural excavation, and a concern with mapping the city and the self are resonant in performances, installations, drawing, painting, and photographic works, particularly in the way that the state continues to be subtly positioned as the spectral antagonist. What emerges in an examination of selected case studies in Phnom Penh is a focus on site-specificity and the placement of the artist's body at risk within the pictorial field; hence there is a further emphasis on artistic performativity and an urgent concern with specific urban places and its collective bodies as sites of recuperation. In the Cambodian case, as I will discuss in the next chapter, one can observe more concerted attention to documentary photography, performance, and architectural embodiment, and artworks that blur the distinctions between these categories.

CHAPTER 6

CAMBODIAN ARTISTS JUMP SCALES

Chapters 2 and 3 mapped the articulation of contemporary art as it was espoused by different generations of Cambodian artists from the 1990s to the present. For most of the RUFA-trained artists of the 1980s and 1990s, the contemporary expressed a particular sensibility expressed through what were typically more traditional media, such as painting and sculpture. It wasn't until the latter half of the first decade of the new millennium that the media forms associated with contemporary art, such as performance, installation, sound or video, became more familiar sights in the city's exhibitions as a younger generation artists took to experimentation. In the meantime, I would argue that the medium that bridged the old and the new – all within the operative notion of Cambodian contemporary art – was photography, and the photographers that emerged first from the *Visual Arts Open (VAO)*, and later from the *14+1* exhibition at the French Cultural Center, changed the landscape of contemporary art in Phnom Penh. This shift in aesthetic practice towards the documentary and archival, enabled by photographic capture, coincided with an increased interest in urban heritage at a time when conflict surrounding inflated real estate values, shaky land laws, and mass evictions began to rise sharply. A rapidly transforming cityscape coincided with the rise of civil strife as dispossessed residents mounted public protests, leading numerous observers to suggest that a public sphere was taking form, from which a radical democratic movement could be perceived as emerging.⁴³¹

⁴³¹ What is being hailed as democratic movement came to full expression in the wake of the country's July 2013 elections, in which opposition leader Sam Rainsy, heading the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), was allowed to return to the country from his exile in Thailand, and run against incumbent Prime Minister Hun Sen, of the Cambodia People's Party (CPP), who has held power for the last twenty-eight years. Over the subsequent four months following the poll results, in which the CPP led with 68 to 55 parliamentary seats, mass demonstrations by opposition supporters took place in the streets of Phnom Penh, with tens of thousands of protestors demanding international intervention into electoral reforms.

From this juncture came the need to also react against the climate of a development-driven cultural scene entrenched in NGO discourse. Against this backdrop, a generation of artists born after the Khmer Rouge period sought to produce socially embedded work or alternative models of media practice that bore relevance for the documentary project at large – that is, within the archival climate of post-Khmer Rouge cultural production – while distancing themselves from the kind of language that had come to pervade many cultural projects within the last ten years.

It is from the platform of photography that I suggest a conscious shift in art-making occurred, one which explored alternative ways of understanding aesthetic properties, of negotiating subject matter that spoke to the jumping of scales, collapsing signifiers of body, city, nation, and region within the dimension of the picture field, and of articulating new dimensions of artistic subjectivity. Within the realm of photography I look closely at the work of Vandy Rattana and members of the *Stiev Selapak* (Art Rebels), who collaboratively launched a space at The Building, a structure that might be considered a present day ruin of post-Independence architectural modernism. In their efforts to recuperate this modernity, they thus laid claim to new iterations of being contemporary.

In my interpretation of these works, ranging from photography to performance, I make use of a particular spatial lens, one that draws on the notion of scale as it has been discursively interrogated in the field of human geography. This builds upon larger theorizations of space and its theoretical engagements, most notably initiated by Henri Lefebvre's text on the social production of space and the concept of space as a social process, and to a certain extent, Michel De Certeau's ideas about everyday tactics in the activation of and popular claim to space.⁴³²

⁴³² See Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, and Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

Within the discourse surrounding the production of space, and its instrumentalization within political, economic, and social systems, a preoccupation with scale as a conceptual apparatus of spatial application emerged and was extensively theorized by scholars in human geography from the 1990s to the 2000s.⁴³³ Within these discussions, geographers analyzed how scale could be used to gauge relations of power, control, and resistance, yet was in itself a relational outcome and not a fixed framework comprising local, regional, national, and global, amongst other units such as home and body. In Sallie Marston's discussion of the social construction of scale, she elaborated upon its dictionary definition ("a level of representation") by describing scale as a "contingent outcome of the tensions that exist between structural forces and the practices of human agents."⁴³⁴

What is considered a task of some urgency is the recognition that scale, as a seemingly logical and intrinsic way of understanding the way the world is ordered, is manifestly constructed through hegemonic institutional apparatuses in order to exercise relations of power. In Neil Smith's analysis of the Homeless Vehicle Project, he ties an individual artistic intervention into a larger call for awareness of this elision:

It is hardly that historians agree to some objective and universally applicable division of social history into formal eras and epochs; rather, the significant point is that the intensely political debates and struggles that go into the continual definition and redefinition of historical periods are not at all replicated vis-a-vis space. No such contentiousness has evolved over the categories and politics of spatial differentiation. Where are the political debates over the scale at which neighborhoods are constructed, the boundaries of the urban, what makes a region,

⁴³³ See, for example, John Agnew, "Representing Space: Space, Scale, and Culture in Social Science," *Place/culture/representation*, eds. James S. Duncan and David Ley (London: Routledge, 1993), 251-271; Neil Brenner, "The Urban Question as a Scale Question: Reflections on Henri Lefebvre, Urban Theory and the Politics of Scale," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 24:2 (June 2000): 361-378; Sallie A. Marston, "The Social Construction of Scale," *Progress in Human Geography* 24: 2 (2000) : 219-242; Neil Smith, "Contours of a Spatialized Politics: Homeless Vehicles and the Production of Geographical Scale," *Social Text* 33 (1992): 54-81.

⁴³⁴ Marston, "The Social Construction of Scale," 220.

the scale of the nation-state - or indeed, what makes the global scale? It is not that such debates have never occurred - they have, although they have generally been obscure - but that regardless, the division of the world into localities, regions, nations, and so forth is essentially taken for granted.⁴³⁵

Such theorizations of scale and the notion of jumping scales often focus on political instrumentalization and activism, and the mediation and reproduction of scale through individual acts of agency, largely in the socio-political arena. Demonstrations serve as an example of such intervention and activism, with the collection of individual bodies en masse used to enact a radical gesture of jumping scales in order to exert human agency against the socio-spatial controls of the state. Therefore such theorizations of scale as a unit to be manipulated or “jumped” emerge from a platform of social construction within the discipline of human geography, and less attention has been devoted to what I would suggest are the explicitly cultural dimensions of scalar construction and aesthetic possibilities of such actions in their specific contexts. Here I propose that borrowing the concept of jumping scales from the discipline of human geography offers the potential to revision methodological strategies for understanding symbolic spatial registers in visual art and the presentation of artistic subjectivity, particularly as constructed through a pictorial field, whether it be in a performance or in a photograph. Several recent works by Cambodian contemporary artists present particularly productive case studies for such an application, as this chapter will illustrate.

Documentary as Social Turn

In Cambodia, one’s self-identification as a contemporary artist for many is a purely subjective notion in line with beliefs about artistic freedom and one’s positioning within a certain chronology. For many of the Cambodian artists previously discussed, it was their training in “the

⁴³⁵ Smith, “Contours of a Spatialized Politics,” 61.

West” (in Soviet bloc countries) and their active practice in the post-UNTAC period – UNTAC marking Cambodia’s entrance into market- and technology-based globalization - that legitimized them as contemporary artists. For other artists, like Sopheap Pich, Leang Seckon, and Svay Ken, it was their affirmation by the contemporary art world and their exposure to international audiences through global exhibitionary circuits, such as biennials and solo shows, that gave them validation as the vanguard figures of the Cambodian contemporary art scene. However, in the late 2000s, the first active Cambodian art collective, *Stiev Selapak*, would heighten international interest in Phnom Penh’s art scene to a new degree given their stance on local autonomy within global networks of collaboration and exchange.

I argue that the medium of photography, particularly in line with the archival impulse within the project of cultural restoration that characterized much of the 2000s, galvanized a new artistic consciousness amongst this young generation. My reference to an archival impulse emphasizes the documentary dimension of this trend, rather than the methodological imperative in which montage and *detournement* are used to sample and recontextualize, as described by Hal Foster in his noted essay.⁴³⁶ One facet of photography’s appeal for Cambodian artists was the medium’s distance from overt markers that identify it as imitative of outmoded Western art movements, something of which many young artists were aware since the 2002 Reyum exhibition. The seeming neutrality and frank realism of the photograph allows, to a certain extent, for interpretation and criticism untainted by initial impressions of technical styles that appear backwards based on the Western trajectory of modern art, and in addition, feels more

⁴³⁶ Hal Foster, “The Archival Impulse,” *October* 110 (Autumn, 2004), 4. There are of course, several artworks to whom Foster’s characterization of the archival impulse would apply, such the collages of Leang Seckon and the domestic installation *Hut Tep So Da Chan* (2011) by Tith Kanitha, but my discussion here focuses on the documentary urgency in capturing and critiquing present-day social concerns.

current due to its pictorial relationship to that which can only be captured in the present, thus expressing what is contemporary in a temporal and spatial sense. For some, this new subjectivity was shaped by a need to extend one's artistic practice into a larger social commentary and into dialogue with the public sphere: as one artist put it, photography for him was initially a medium of protest.⁴³⁷

The growing popularity of the photographic medium amongst this young generation, aged roughly 20-30 years of age, coincided with the escalation of protests and violent conflicts over land dispossessions in and around Phnom Penh as the government began rapidly selling tenuously designated public land to foreign companies. As photography is a spatial practice involving a corporeal dimension, particularly in the journalistic or documentary mode, these young photographers had to physically situate themselves amongst their subject matter, exploring spaces outside in order to find inspiration. This act of wandering and exploring to find and capture one's subject matter – inherently a form of site-specific artistic process - has almost no precedent in the history of practice in Phnom Penh due to the inculcation of the grid-copying model dating from Groslier's colonial pedagogy. Such a pedagogy, which encourages a teacher/apprentice relationship, studio-confined practice, and the copying of styles as the primary mode of learning, has persisted through the present at the Royal University of Fine Arts. Therefore, while photography is not new to Cambodia, its use consisted primarily of facilitating painting.⁴³⁸ Therefore, new forms of photographic practice which involved immersive looking

⁴³⁷ Vandy Rattana's interview with the author, June 2011.

⁴³⁸ Muan discusses the use of photography in enabling painterly renderings in "Citing Angkor," 454-474. She draws attention to the inculcation of the "model" and "copy" method in the labor of painters and sculptors who produce works on commission or for tourist clientele; this category of artist is loosely referred to as *jeang selapakor*, or "worker artist." Muan notes, "All these paintings reproduce a given image through the grid, and the first lesson of apprenticeship for a 'worker painter' is to learn to 'put

and active research and planning opened up avenues for alternative conceptual models via engagement with public space. This typically involved exploring the city, and as such, with investigating those subjects openly embedded in the urban fabric, including issues of social injustice, environmental concerns, urban heritage, and historical memory. Such investigations of spaces in the city, and their ensuing ‘texts,’ in the sense explicated by Elizabeth Grosz, would “produce unexpected intensities, peculiar sites of indifference, new connections with other objects, and thus generate affective and conceptual transformations that problematize, challenge, and move beyond existing intellectual and pragmatic frameworks.”⁴³⁹

Stephane Janin is credited with creating the context from which a more radicalized group of artists emerged. His was one of several initiatives, typically in the workshop format, that created avenues of informal photographic training, a curriculum that had been briefly introduced at RUFA through the establishment of a short-lived photography department by Thierry Diwo in 1993.⁴⁴⁰ Several of its first students, like Mak Remissa, were quickly immersed in the growing field of photojournalism, as press agencies such as Agence France-Presse, the Cambodia Daily and the Phnom Penh Post were in need of trained photographers. When the department ran out of funding in 1995, Remissa continued to work with students after hours, teaching a next generation

down squares’ (វិញ្ញាណកម្ម). Thus, these ‘worker painters’ also perversely repeat the foundations of Groslier’s curriculum” (464).

⁴³⁹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 57. Here Grosz uses the term ‘text’ to refer to a material node of ideas, such as a book, film, painting, or architectural structure, one which is open-ended and contains the potential to act upon the reader, viewer, or wanderer in a particularly provocative or even volatile way. As such, the relationship between the city as text and the photographer illustrates the corporeal dimensions of this relationship, in which the camera lens serves an interface between the texts of the city and the body’s surfaces.

⁴⁴⁰ The department closed after running out of funding in 1995, after which it existed as a minor in the painting department; however, the minor was eventually cut completely in 2009 due to the same problem of funding. See Zhuang Wubin, “Photography in the Post-Khmer Rouge Era,” *Asian Art Magazine* (June 2010), pp. 7-8. See essays by Zhuang Wubin for more detailed information on the development of contemporary photography in Cambodia.

of photojournalists, such as Sovan Philong, who continue to develop bodies of artistic photographic work shown internationally.⁴⁴¹ Earlier workshops, such as those led by photographers John Vink and Antoine D'Agata from the Magnum Photo Agency, along with the *On Photography Cambodia* project initiated by Polish-born photographer and curator Maria Stott, laid significant groundwork for shifting widely-held notions about the boundaries between photographic genres and the function of the medium as an instrument of documentation as well as artistic conceptualism. Stott founded *On Photography Cambodia* as a way to initiate an ongoing educational program for Cambodians interested in photography, and using it as a springboard for critical dialogue and participatory projects.⁴⁴² In *The Building* project, which lasted 18 months beginning in early 2008, supported by the Bophana Audio Visual Resource Center and UNESCO, she collaborated with photographers Thy Heang, Vandy Rattana, Chan Moniroth, and Cheng Meng Heing to use the structure locally known as “The Building” on Sothearos Blvd. as a focal point for various avenues of discussion - from the use of photography as a research tool, instrument of documentation, educational outreach, artistic medium – all surrounding the history of the structure, the social composition of its inhabitants, and its key profile as emblematic of the ongoing transformation of the city in the midst of civil strife over evictions and land disputes.⁴⁴³ Adding to the growing sense of frustration amongst local Cambodians that they were being undermined by Western expats in the fields of cultural production, Stott stated “that work is made in Cambodia by Cambodians and for Cambodians. It

⁴⁴¹ Sovan Philong's interview with the author, October 2011.

⁴⁴² See Johan Smits, “Maria Stott,” *Asia Life Cambodia*, February 26, 2009, <http://www.asialifeguide.com/stories/storyboard/pp-life/216-maria-stott>, accessed 06/03/15, and Sue Hajdu, “A History, Rising and Falling: Photography in Vietnam and Cambodia,” in *Transport Asian: Visions of Contemporary Photography from Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2009), 36.

⁴⁴³ “Interview with Maria Stott,” <http://ladypenh.com/article2021.html>, accessed 06/03/15.

is time we put an end to the domination of Westerners in the field of photography. The project aims at revealing Khmer photographic identity and make sure it functions by itself.”⁴⁴⁴ The Building would later become the site for Sa Sa Art Projects, an experimental space founded by Vandy Rattana (who would also spearhead the collective *Stiev Selapak*) as well as the location inspiring numerous performance pieces, photographic works, and community projects, all commenting on or engaging in different ways with the psychogeography of the structure and its particular place in the city.

While numerous workshops provided alternative means for young Cambodians to study photography in more intimate and experimental settings, the public profile of the medium was being raised by various cultural institutions as the latest face of the Cambodian contemporary art scene and as an important instrument of cultural revival. The the Angkor Photo Festival (2005-present), the Bophana Audio-Visual Resource Center (founded in 2007), and the French Cultural Center’s Photo Phnom Penh (2008-present) all provided resources for photographic training, and played a large role in elevating its popularity amongst the local population. However, Stephane Janin’s workshop, held from September 2006 to June 2007 at his gallery, Popil Photo Gallery, is credited as providing the setting for nurturing a particular outlook and fostering a rapport amongst several young Cambodians who would comprise the country’s first active visual arts collective. Janin’s workshop was beneficial in fostering a discursive environment and pushing critical and technical practice to a much more advanced level, and also in using the critique

⁴⁴⁴ Corinne Callebaut, “Cambodian photographers: a new generation is developing for the better,” Ka-set - Information website about Cambodia, October 4, 2009, <http://cambodia.ka-set.info/culture-and-society/news-cambodian-photography-photographer-gallery-journalist-art-media-090410.html>, accessed 06/03/15.

system which has been challenging for most Cambodian art students.⁴⁴⁵ Given the nature of the workshop as a site of alternative artistic formation which creates the informal atmosphere needed to foster dialogue and a collective sensibility, it is not surprising that the first members of a group with a more activist vision of artistic production, independence, and social engagement would emerge from its setting. In fact, it has been through networks of gatherings in the format of workshops and festivals throughout Southeast Asia that new artistic media, such as photography, independent film, and performance art, circulated within the region and developed unique characteristics within local contexts as they grew in popularity as experimental media.⁴⁴⁶

At that time I think [Popil Photo Gallery] was the first contemporary photo gallery in Phnom Penh. It closed in 2007 when Stephane left Phnom Penh. There were fourteen students in the class, including Vandy Rattana, who wasn't a student, I think, he was already quite senior because he was already practicing photography and showing in exhibitions at that time. At the end of the class we had a group photo exhibition at the French Cultural Center. Together there was fourteen of us, so it was quite a big show, and I think that was the biggest photo show in Phnom Penh. The show was called "14+1". So that was important in changing the face of the photography scene in the city. At the end, five us, including me and Rattana, were wondering what we should do next.⁴⁴⁷ (Figure 6.1)

⁴⁴⁵ Erin Gleeson's conversation with the author, November 2011, and Vuth Lyno, "Knowledge Sharing and Learning Together: Alternative art engagement from Stiev Selapak and Sa Sa Art Projects," *Udaya, Journal of Khmer Studies* 12 (2014), 253-302.

⁴⁴⁶ See Nora Taylor, "Networks of Performance Art in Southeast Asia," and May Adadol Ingawanij and Benjamin McKay, eds., *Glimpses of Freedom: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012).

⁴⁴⁷ Interview with the author, June 16, 2011.



Figure 6.1: Exhibition poster for *14+1*, French Cultural Center, July 2007. Photograph by the author.

While many of the first photographers to study under Thierry Diwo returned to the field of professional photojournalism after carrying out several bodies of artistic work, Vandy Rattana stands out as having continued to seriously pursue a developing body of artistic work, particularly one that was for a length of time committed to the larger cause of truth via the documentary mode. Rattana initially attended Pannasastra University in Phnom Penh with the intention of studying law, but withdrew after two years due to a disenchantment with the quality of the education he was receiving. Equipped with a camera gifted to him by a communications teacher, and with the encouragement of Erin Gleeson, his English teacher and future director of SA SA BASSAC art gallery, he decided to pursue photography. While earning a living at a telecommunications company, he did some freelance work, including covering VAO, and began developing a body of work called *Looking In* (Figure 6.2 – 6.3). *Looking In* comprised two

parts, one which documented the everyday activities at the office in which he worked, the other part which gave intimate glimpses of family life in his and his friends' homes.



Figure 6.2: Vandy Rattana, *Looking In* series, 2005. Image courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.



Figure 6.3: Vandy Rattana, *Looking in my Office* series, 2006. Image courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.

The everyday subject matter that characterized his first exhibitions in 2005 and 2006 can be seen as part of a particular visual paradigm of capturing and elevating the mundane, a concept which may not seem outwardly noteworthy yet was somewhat groundbreaking in its simplicity and its ordinariness in a local environment where the aesthetic was privileged in both subject matter and form in popular art appreciation. The large-scale rattan sculptures of Sopheap Pich, the romantic rural and temple landscapes painted by the RUFA professors, and the intricately assembled tactile paintings and collages of Leang Seckon all held the high status as finely crafted high art forms in the perceptions of the various sectors of the arts community and the popular public. Yet Svay Ken's naïve paintings of isolated everyday objects, the episodes of his life story, and textual images of Buddhist-inspired teachings of how to live a good life had paved the way for a new aesthetic appreciation of the mundane and the understanding of the broader

subjects and applications of contemporary art. With photography, a mechanistic medium that continues to elude understanding as an art form by the larger Cambodian population, and the pedestrian subject matter of everyday life that Rattana chose to portray, he was, in a sense, attempting to provoke a dialogue which he asserts is not possible in Cambodia due to limitations in education and a climate of self-censorship which hamper the possibilities of critical discourse.⁴⁴⁸ In expressing his frustrations with the impossibility of such discourse and in the lack of communication of truth on the part of the state, Rattana reminded me of the embittered protagonists of exiled novelist Soth Polin, whose anti-heroes search for or attempt to convey larger philosophical or political truths through verbal or physical communication in the atmosphere of censorship and political repression in 1960s and 1970s Phnom Penh.⁴⁴⁹ Like Rattana, in reaction to this frustration with the futility of communication, Polin's characters would resort to alternative - at times more drastic and radical - means through which they would find relief or a deeper potential of possibilities for expression.

The work he had done for *Open Photography* had likely played a large part in his ongoing involvement with the Building and his subsequent photographic works, in which he attempted to document particular episodes that had been or would likely be glossed over in historical narratives specific to Cambodia. In attempting to create a new open-ended historical record of Cambodia, these bodies of work would elicit questions while at the same time subtly reveal Rattana's critical stance on the state's role in the production of historical knowledge. By

⁴⁴⁸ Interview with the author, June 2011.

⁴⁴⁹ See Soth Polin, *L'Anarchiste: Roman* (Paris: Table Ronde, 1980), and Soth Polin, "Communicate They Say," in *In the Shadow of Angkor: Contemporary Fiction from Cambodia*, eds. Frank Stewart and Sharon May (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 1-35. Born in 1943, Soth Polin was a prolific writer of fiction and non-fiction, and was the founder of the newspaper and publishing house Nokor Thom. His fictional writing was influenced by ideas in existentialism and Buddhism, and often contained veiled or open political critique. In 1974 he left Cambodia for political reasons and lived in exile first in France, and then in Long Beach, California.

attempting to position his work as intervention into mass historical consciousness, he deliberately inserted his artistic practice into the larger field of social action, by maintaining that what was at stake was the notion of larger truths. This activation of the documentary mode as antagonistic artistic mediation corresponds to Geeta Kapur's description of a "third world aesthetic whereby 'artists' lay simultaneous and rhetorical claim on realism, modernity, and the avant-garde, and, more specifically, on documentary 'truth' as an avant-garde strategy of resistance and renewal."⁴⁵⁰

His series *Fire of the Year* (2008) was shot in a outlying district of Phnom Penh called *Teuk Tlah* (Clear Water), large parts of which had been destroyed by fire (Figure 6.4). Allegedly, some of the homes of the 300 families were saved due to bribery and negotiations with the fire department. This has become an all too familiar scenario in the city, where poorly allocated resources for basic infrastructural needs result in disasters like flooding or fires occurring far too frequently, and prompt response and resolution usually the result of corruption and bribery.⁴⁵¹ What Rattana captured in this series of photographs was the atmosphere of resignation and isolation - the isolation of individuals rummaging through wreckage to salvage what they can, the isolation of a community razed by fire against the backdrop of new housing developments in the distance, the roofs of their villas delineating the clear skyline above the haziness of the smoke.

⁴⁵⁰ Geeta Kapur, "A Cultural Conuncture in India: Art into Documentary," *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, eds. T. Smith, O. Enwezor, and N. Condee (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 41,43.

⁴⁵¹ "At the same time, aspects of Phnom Penh's existing infrastructure, much of which is aged and damaged due to neglect in the years of war, have struggled to keep up with this development and rapid population growth. Notably, the drainage system is beyond capacity, a problem exacerbated by the reclamation of urban lakes for development projects and increases in the proportion of paved roads. As a result, much of the city routinely floods during the wet season, although this has improved in recent years with the implementation of JICA-funded drainage improvement projects." Willem Paling, "Planning a Future for Phnom Penh: Mega Projects, Aid Dependence and Disjointed Governance," *Urban Studies* 49, 13 (October 2012): 2891.



Figure 6.4: Vandy Rattana, *Fire of the Year* series, 2008. Image courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.



Figure 6.5: Vandy Rattana, *The First High-Rise*, 2008. Image courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.



Figure 6.6: Vandy Rattana, *Boeung Kak Eviction*, 2008. Image courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.



Figure 6.7: Vandy Rattana, *Khmer Rouge Trial*, 2008. Image courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.

Rattana's concern with exposing the realities of contemporary Cambodia in a manner of transparency against the state's narrative of social progress and economic development characterizes currents of intellectual and artistic critique throughout the region, such as in Vietnamese *đổi mới* (Renovation Era) literature, or in the work of Thai photographers like Manit Sriwanichpoom, whose photographs were exhibited together with Rattana's in the curatorial platform "Mediating the Mekong" at the sixth Asia Pacific Triennial in 2009. In contrast to the work of Sriwanichpoom, it is difficult to decisively categorize Rattana's work within the trope of ironic critique of nationhood that characterized work by numerous contemporary Asian artists from 1990 through the present. In the interest of making a quiet, yet powerfully subversive statement for the sake of popular edification and transformation of historical consciousness, Rattana's direct portraits of quiet desolation embrace or assume the guise of the documentary for reasons elucidated by Kapur:

On the opposite side, between high art and (the realist) genre, I suggest placing the critical, self-reflexive form of the documentary, carrying a mandate for raising the subjective pitch in proportion to the political partisanship of the maker. And, on the curve between realism and the popular, I place the documentary as a recording genre dominated by an information-ethnography ethics and aspiring to enrich a 'common culture.'"⁴⁵²

The various series which Rattana worked on in the late 2000s attests to an documentary impulse found in the work of photojournalism, but his eye for certain compositional frames and the capturing of particular moments speak to an auteurship attracted to the aesthetic of cinematic narrative. Rattana often recounts the time he spent watching films in his youth, including imported Bollywood and Chinese films, and there is a lyrical quality to the framing of his subject matter, with his protagonists often poised for or in the middle of action. His *First Highrise* series in 2008 captures workers weaving in and out of the skeletal framework of Phnom Penh's first

⁴⁵² Kapur, "A Cultural Conjunction," 49.

high-rise, in high relief against the bright sky, the deliberate choice to print in black and white evoking the urban aesthetic of early twentieth-century avant-garde and documentary films (Figure 6.5).⁴⁵³ So too is such a feeling conveyed in the photograph from his *Boeung Kok Eviction* series, which captures the kinetic potential of the falling beams from the truck, which speaks to the futility of the evictees' situation (Figure 6.6). One of his most moving images is the emotionally-charged yet seemingly serene profile portrait of the painter and S-21 survivor Vann Nath, a chief witness at the Khmer Rouge Tribunal (Figure 6.7). Again, there is a quality to Rattana's oeuvre that extends beyond the action-oriented lens of the photojournalist; there is always an imminent promise of narration that is deliberately elusive, much like in the allure of anticipation in film plots. Rattana is neither interested in the elucidation of "truth" nor in the larger notion of documentary exposure, rather, he aims to instigate a historical consciousness and its accompanying sense of discomfort and desire to question.

One of Rattana's most striking images is from his 2008 *Preah Vihear* series, a composition focusing on the back of a soldier in the foreground and the temple of Preah Vihear in the background (Figure 6.8). The soldier faces away from the lens and hunches over, his actions out of view. He could be praying or he could be lighting a cigarette. On his sweat-beaded back is an elaborate yantra tattoo (in Khmer *sāk' yānt* ស៊ីក៏យ៉ង់្រូ), composed of script, symbols, and diagrams. With origins in ancient Cambodian culture, yantras have long been popular among warriors and present-day military personnel as an invocation of magical protection against bodily harm, usually in return for a particular code of behavior. Mirroring the corporeal embodiment of the cosmos in the soldier's person, the Shivaite temple of Preah Vihear

⁴⁵³ See for example, *Manhattan* (Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand, 1921), *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Walter Ruttmann, 1927), and *Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929).

stands in the distance as an architectural invocation of the divine.⁴⁵⁴ Both the body and the structure stand as vehicles through which human contracts are formed with sacred elements, representing metonymic imagery created as a means to gain merit for the sake of spiritual preservation, in the case of the Shivaite sanctuary, but also as a means to preserve the corporeal body in the context of warfare.



Figure 6.8: Vandy Rattana, *Preah Vihear*, 2008. Image courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.

⁴⁵⁴ While certain Angkorean temples, such as Phnom Bakheng, Bakong, and Angkor Wat are symbolic representations of the Mount Meru or the cosmic temple-mountain, Preah Vihear's sacred and spatial order differs in its function as a sanctuary or monastery, despite its siting on a high promontory, for whom the trek itself would have been a merit-gaining act. Therefore its north-south linear configuration guide movement in a different manner to gain access to inner shrines. Construction began in the 9th century under Suryavarman I and continued through the 11th and 12th centuries. See Michael D. Coe, *Angkor and the Khmer Civilization* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 113, and Helen Ibbison Jessup, *Art & Architecture of Cambodia* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 118-121.

This relationship is rendered more vivid by historical and present-day national tension surrounding Preah Vihear (or *Phra Viharn* in Thai) as the source of geopolitical dispute between Thailand and Cambodia. Located at a higher altitude on the Dangrek range and approached from the north, in close proximity to a stream which demarcates the national border between the two countries, the temple has been an ongoing source of conflict as it has and continues to be claimed by both Thailand and Cambodia. Its construction began during the reign of Suryavarman I, when the king undertook an extensive building campaign which extended the domain of the Angkorean empire into present-day Thai lands, once Dvaravati territory. Its liminal positioning in the colonial era resulted in its being ceded back to Cambodia through negotiations by the French protectorate regime, but it was only in through the 1962 International Court of Justice that it was confirmed cultural property of Cambodia.⁴⁵⁵ Ongoing disputes and full-blown combat in the form of gunfire and demolitions around the temple have resurged in recent years, following the 2008 declaration of Preah Vihear as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, contributing to a history of violence in the area and its perception as a “haunted landscape.”⁴⁵⁶ Today, there continues to be military presence at the site, despite the 2011 ruling at the United Nations International Court of Justice that all troops be withdrawn.

The icon of Preah Vihear thus appears to animate numerous encounters between the individual and different scales of attachment and affiliation, encompassing the social contract with the state as well as that with the divine. What Rattana also managed to capture during his

⁴⁵⁵ For more details surrounding the 1907 colonial mapping project that resulted in the dispute surrounding the siting of the temple in either Cambodian or Thai territory, see P. Cuasay, “Borders on the Fantastic: Mimesis, Violence, and Landscape at the Temple of Preah Vihear,” *Modern Asian Studies* 32 (1998), 849-890.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 882. See also B. Borrell, “The Battle Over Preah Vihear: a Territorial Dispute Involving a 1,100-Year-Old Khmer Temple on the Thai-Cambodian Border Turns Violent,” *Archaeology* 66:2 (2013): 53-60.

week-long stay at the site was the nature of the encounter between the Thai and Cambodian personnel, whose casual and nonchalant interactions presented a different portrait of the haunted landscape (Figure 6.9). Therefore, in the first photograph of the temple and the soldier, Rattana collapses into one picture frame numerous scales of interaction, thus figuratively jumping scales in the sense that I argue is a critical artistic strategy of producing provocation through the capture of narratives rendered multivalent and relations revealed to be ambivalent. Yet the subsequent image potentially complicates any grand claims to interweaving meta- and micro-narratives on the part of the artist, whose is usually reticent in terms of framing his practice in any kind of didactic manner.



Figure 6.9: Vandy Rattana, from the *Preah Vihear* series, 2008. Image courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.

Rattana's most acclaimed series, *The Bomb Ponds*, further demonstrates the artist's interest in traveling to areas characterized by geopolitical strife and his desire to produce quiet portraits of landscapes that provide ambiguous access to historical inquiry (Figure 6.10 – 6.11). This 2009 series heightened international attention to his work, making him a finalist for the 2011 Signature Art Prize, a prestigious award granted by the Singapore Art Museum, as well as one of the photographs within the series being exhibited in dOCUMENTA (13).⁴⁵⁷ For *The Bomb Ponds*, Rattana's subject matter extended into a larger regional and global history, that of the military quagmire of the Vietnam War, in which a secret bombing campaign directed by Nixon devastated border regions in Cambodia deemed to be possible bases of operation for Vietnamese communist forces. Rattana had come across one of the craters, seasonally filled with toxic rain water, on an assignment to photograph rubber plantations. Attracted to the unique shape of the pond, he questioned a local villager, who referred to it as a bomb pond (គ្រាប់បែក៖ គ្រាប់បែក *srah grāp' paek*). Rattana's dissatisfaction with his own lack of knowledge about this particular history, and with the larger absence of documentation on the subject of the war and its repercussions in Cambodia, led him to search for these craters in the regions most heavily bombed during the war.

When I returned to Cambodia I started doing the research, and then we started looking for funding, just a small amount, and I went around asking people about

⁴⁵⁷ The grand prize in 2011 was \$45,000 Singapore dollars (roughly US \$36,600). According to the website: “Established in 2008 by the Asia Pacific Breweries (APB) Foundation and the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), the APB Foundation Signature Art Prize is a prominent platform for both emerging talents as well as established artists and reflects developments in the region's contemporary art landscape. The triennial Prize is open to all visual artworks, regardless of medium, subject matter and size. Entry is by nominations only with independent, established art experts from the region combing through the visual art landscape to pick out recently produced works that are groundbreaking in their artistic insight and concept, technique and expression.” <http://www.singaporeartmuseum.sg/signatureartprize/about.php>, accessed 10/10/12.

the bomb ponds, just simple questions about their experiences at that time, how they escaped the bombing, what kinds of bombshells were used, and the sounds of the bombs, something like that. And that changed my life. Before that I had no idea about Cambodian history, what happened in Indochina, and about the bombing in Indochina, I had no idea about that, so I got many books about history and spent so much time reading, reading, reading. And I found out that history is very important, and I realized that the government of Cambodia tries to shut down the history; they're not willing to share their history with the people. I learned so much about the history of Cambodia. So the bomb ponds changed my life. That started the point that I think I need to use my photography to protest.⁴⁵⁸

Because the bombings were carried out in secret, Rattana had no map or particular sense of where to find the craters; he had to wander through villages and ask people, who would casually point out their locations. The body of photographs documenting the presence of these craters turned ponds are deceptively peaceful, bucolic, and reminiscent of the idyllic rural landscapes sold in the galleries on Street 178. The indelible traces of violence are aestheticized in the bucolic, unassuming landscapes, enacting a moment of uneasiness conflict for the viewer upon realization of what is being portrayed. For Rattana, the medium of photography, in its simultaneous journalistic qualities and artistic potential to transform the viewing subject, possesses the ability to illustrate the Khmer proverb “You can hear something a thousand times and not know it, yet if you see it with your eyes just once, you know.” *The Bomb Ponds* earned him further recognition on the international art stage, and one factor may be because of the connection to the Vietnam War in his subject matter, a historical event which still configures in the global imaginary as a haunting episode metaphorically invoked through various geopolitical episodes.⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁸ Interview with the author, June 2011.

⁴⁵⁹ For this reason, the politicized aspects of the photographs may have led to the cancellation of their exhibition at Sàn Art in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, due to exhibition licensing restrictions, the government's main instrument of censorship.



Figure 6.10: Vandy Rattana, *Kompong Thom* (*The Bomb Ponds* series), 2009, digital C-print, 90 x 105cm. Image courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.



Figure 6.11: Vandy Rattana, *Rattanakiri II* (*The Bomb Ponds* series), 2009, digital C-print, 90 x 105cm. Image courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.

The Stiev Selapak and The Building

When Rattana gave a presentation at Stephane Janin's photography workshop in 2006, he became acquainted with several students who would later comprise the *Stiev Selapak*, or Art Rebels as they have translated the name in rough approximation, the first Cambodian experimental art collective in Phnom Penh. The group came together in the interest of pursuing art practice both collaboratively and individually, recognizing that more could be achieved as a group in terms of pooling resources, sharing contacts, assisting each other with their work, and in creating exhibitionary opportunities for themselves and others outside of the foreign-run galleries, café-galleries and cultural institutions that dominated the visual arts landscape of Phnom Penh.⁴⁶⁰ The group, which emerged from Janin's workshop and the *14+1* show at the French Cultural Center, consisted of seven young artists, not all of whom had formally trained through RUFA. Three of them had no academic background in art: Vandy Rattana, Lyno Vuth, and Lim Sokchanlina. Heng Ravuth, Khvay Samnang, and Kong Vollaak had studied the fine arts, chiefly painting and sculpture, at RUFA. In choosing to call themselves *Stiev Selapak*, they took on both a playful and yet subversive stance. *Stiev* literally means young bull, but had long been used as a masculine slang term for hooligans, thugs, miscreants, or rebels. *Selapak* means art. When put together, the literal understanding of 'art rebels' later came to be associated with avant-garde, a born again concept in contemporary intellectual circles in Phnom Penh, which is likely linked to local familiarity with the group.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁶⁰ See Vuth.

⁴⁶¹ Based on conversations I had with artists and translators, the term avant-garde was commonly understood in its French usage amongst pre-Khmer Rouge society, and its closest term of translation today is *stiev*. During the symposium "Contemporary Art in Cambodia: A Historical Inquiry (Museum of Modern Art, NYC, April 21, 2013), Ashley Thompson argued that *stiev selapak* should also be understood in its positioning as a hyper-masculine slang reference, translated as "cock art." The fact that the group only comprises only men certainly establishes a gendered affiliation among the members, yet

The articulation of protest or rebellion made by the group can be subtly understood within the local context and historic dimensions of contemporary artistic expression and exhibition in Phnom Penh. When the group opened their own gallery space, Sa Sa Art Gallery, as the first Cambodian-run professional art space in the city, they chose to open a space that operated outside of outside of two arenas – what is often described as the clannish system of RUFA, and the NGO spaces which encourage a notion of art for communal development, yet at the same time could employ exhibitionary frameworks that could border on sensationalism, commercialism, and models of dependency. In addition, the *Stiev* attempted to use what they saw as a more democratized system of collaboration, exhibition, and artistic production by showcasing the works of artists without the credentials of RUFA training. It was perhaps this diversity in the group’s backgrounds that positioned them to experiment with alternative forms of art making, some which gained international appeal due to visual similarities with Asian – notably Chinese - performance art in the form of urban spatial interventions, and some which sat more comfortably within the kinds of community-engaged projects that are the subject of discourse on participatory and site-specific work. According to Rattana,

Our group was born in the workshops organised by Stéphane Janin who taught us a lot, like all those foreign photographers who come here too, but it is time to stick out from that example. We opened the gallery in order to open up Khmer mindsets to photography, a world which they know nothing about. We also wish to make other youngsters want to become photographers. For that matter, everyone is welcome to come and put up an exhibit here.⁴⁶²

such a reading is also complicated by the nature of the work produced by several of the members, such as Ravuth’s intimate nude self-portraits (*Nude*, 2010), Sokchanlina’s sexually bifurcated self-portraits in (*Half Man Half Woman*, 2010), and Lyno’s collaborative work with homosexual communities in *Thoamada* (2011) and *Thoamada II* (2013).

⁴⁶² Corinne Callebaut, “Cambodian photographers: a new generation is developing for the better,” Ka-set - Information website about Cambodia, 10/4/2009. <http://cambodia.ka-set.info/culture-and-society/news-cambodian-photography-photographer-gallery-journalist-art-media-090410.html>, accessed 8/23/2011.

In a discussion with Erin Gleeson, she commented that perhaps one aspect of the ‘rebellious’ nature of the *Stiev Selapak* was in their choice of running a gallery space, both democratically open in its collective autonomy as well as emulative of the white cube model, within Phnom Penh’s commercial and development-driven art scene, where NGO-related catch-phrases such as “art as instrument of cultural restoration,” “art as platform for sustainable dialogue,” and “art as healing” were ubiquitous.⁴⁶³ In 2007 the group established their gallery space, calling it Sa Sa Art Gallery (Sa representing the spoken sound of the letter S in the Khmer alphabet, an acronym for *Stiev Selapak*), adjoining the Beitong Restaurant in the popular Boeung Keng Kak neighborhood, which is popular with expatriates for its cafés and restaurants. This use of a white cube gallery model held appeal for the artists for perhaps the reasons which Grant Kester sardonically describes in his discussion of ethical-capitalism: “NGOs practice a patronizing cultural superiority, but the ‘giver-receive’ relationship established by the market is refreshingly free of humanist cant and pretension. The market is an ideologically neutral device which artists can easily appropriate and turn to their own ends.”⁴⁶⁴ Yet Cambodian artists in the first decade of the new millennium faced the obstacle presented in other developing countries, in that the desire to produce and sustain a living off experimental work outpaces the local understanding and market for such work, in its desire for reification as contemporary art. For these artists, having one’s work shown in a professional “white cube” gallery and artist-run space speaks to a merit-based system as well as freedom for experimental artistic direction, rather than art as response to the cultural initiatives driving such shows as *Art as Survival* at Metahouse or *Legacy of Absence*. Oscar Ho Hing-Kay, guest curator at the 2nd and 3rd Asia Pacific Triennials, suggested that in the

⁴⁶³ Conversations with the author, 2011-2012.

⁴⁶⁴ Kester, *The One and the Many*, 129.

context of Cambodia, “the ‘white cube’ gallery is a surprisingly alternative space.”⁴⁶⁵ For the *Stiev Selapak*, critical acceptance of Cambodian contemporary art was predicated on first presenting the work within a professional and neutral space, within a critical context devoid of developmental discourse (Figure 6.12).



Figure 6.12: Opening of *Old Buildings* exhibition, 2010, Sa Sa Art Gallery. Photograph courtesy of Sa Sa Art Projects.

In 2011 the Sa Sa Art Gallery space closed when the group decided to work with Erin Gleeson in co-founding a new commercial gallery space, SA SA BASSAC Gallery, named by combining the initials of *Stiev Selapak* as pronounced in Khmer and the Bassac neighborhood of central Phnom Penh. There was backlash within the community for various reasons, including Gleeson’s profile as an American woman essentially running a higher price point commercial

⁴⁶⁵ Quoted from Roger Nelson, “Non-Profit Art Spaces in Cambodia: Strength in Diversity,” *Art Monthly Australia* 253, September 2012, 24.

gallery, unusual in that it was one of the only spaces exclusively devoted to contemporary art by local Cambodian artists, as well as the primary venue legitimized by the global contemporary world as its first point of contact in Cambodia. Critiques of the white cube model abounded amongst other expatriate independent curators and figures in the art community, particularly in their perceptions of the gallery as an elitist space, repeating arguments of older Euro-American discourses about the bourgeois commodification of art. In the context of Phnom Penh, this variant also emerges from a NGO discourse in which such a space (and the work within) is by merit of the contemporary art gallery context too inaccessible and illegible to the popular audience. As such, this kind of rhetoric often delimits the possibilities of art practices that extend beyond singular art objects holding instant aesthetic appeal. Such discourses also challenge the ability for artists interested in social engagement to attempt more nuanced and researched community projects that target a particular public as well as speak to complex negotiations between conceptual premise, practical function, and aesthetic dimension. This backlash was revealing of a sensibility amongst the largely expat-driven and NGO-run arts initiatives that for the last decade has contributed to undermining the possibility of developing a more conceptually oriented artistic environment with higher standards of professionalism and legitimacy in the eyes of the contemporary art world, which is what – in part - the *Stiev Selapak* were striving to achieve.

In all of my interviews, no Cambodian artist had echoed these criticisms against the white cube model, and in fact, talked about the desirable – albeit risky – aspects of showing their work in SA SA BASSAC. The risks came with what they perceived as the less commercially-viable nature of the space, therefore lessening the chance of immediate local sales. Yet because SA SA BASSAC was affiliated with *Stiev Selapak*, who were part of the tightly knit young Khmer artist

community, there was often a sense of local pride in the way the space was described. In several expatriate organizers' criticisms of the space, there seemed to be a profound misunderstanding of the realities of artistic development in Cambodia, with assertions of democratic selection of artists, the naiveté of Cambodian artists in the face of an art market and their lack of readiness, and pervasive notions of Khmerness and authenticity as represented by particular styles of work.⁴⁶⁶ In her discussion of the National Museum and systems of display in colonial Cambodia, Ingrid Muan argued that "the classical museum had to first be reconstructed, it seems, before its critique could even begin, just as the monument and the archaeological park had to be reestablished and promoted as a wonder of the world before recent deconstructions of such an idea could be set in play."⁴⁶⁷ In a parallel vein, although many of SA SA BASSAC's criticisms emerged from a combination of misinterpretation and resentment, what seemed to be absent from larger understanding was the futility of critiquing an institutional feature of the commercial arts system that had not yet taken root in Cambodia and had time to develop.

Yet, by all appearances, some of the artists represented by SA SA BASSAC – those who were members of *Stiev Selapak* - participated in the very kinds of social outreach that echoed the rhetoric of development discourse. Such practices can be subsumed into the large rubric of relational aesthetics and its variants, under the notion of the social turn in contemporary art.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁶ One prominent figure in the community told me that Cambodian artists were just not ready to sign contracts with exclusive gallery representation, and that most of the artists were so young and inexperienced that they simply weren't ready to enter the global art market. He, as well as few other expatriate artists and organizers with whom I spoke, noted that the artists from Battambang are more "genuine." This impression may be due to the recognizable aesthetic that can be seen in many Battambang artists' works, which is likely a result of their education at Phare Ponleu Selapak, a regional art school that teaches visual arts, drama, dance, and circus arts, among other curricula.

⁴⁶⁷ Muan, "Musings," 260.

⁴⁶⁸ Claire Bishop dates a prioritization of an ethical approach to artistic praxis – corresponding to an ethical turn in art criticism - in which process is evaluated over the artistic product (all relative to a Capitalist context), to the early 1990s, "when the fall of Communism deprived the Left of the last vestiges

For the artists interested in such practices, the theoretical language surrounding relational aesthetics is inaccessible and maintains no direct bearing on the way they conceive and carry out projects. However, these practices have gained a high profile through their favored status within the biennial format, and evidence of a predilection for such work in the Southeast Asian art world can be witnessed in the region's own biennials and in the prestige and appeal of artist collectives and projects such as the Jakarta-based Indonesian artists' initiative Ruangrupa and the artist-run The Land Foundation in Chiangmai, Thailand.⁴⁶⁹ By seemingly falling within this trend in the 2000s, the *Stiev Selapak* quickly began to attract international attention, particularly when they opened an experimental art space in the ghettoized apartment structure in Phnom Penh locally known as The Building.

It was Rattana's initial idea to start an experimental arts space specifically sited in The Building, and it was the structure's significance in the history of Khmer architectural modernism that he felt was particularly important for the siting of a space for artistic experimentation, dialogue, and education.

... I had been dreaming about having a room at the Building, so my idea was to have a room where you could see the original form of the room, and you could feel the first example of modernity in Cambodia. Modernity in Cambodia is very hard for Cambodians to adopt, and to feel inspired by this kind of modernism. As a model, the building is the first example of modernism in Cambodia, of that kind of architecture started by Vann Molyvann, who studied in France and brought back these ideas and this kind of style to Cambodia, those kinds of modern buildings. I asked my group [*Stiev Selapak*] if they could find a room where you could see the original form of the room, in its walls, in the floor, in its structure,

of the revolution that had once linked political and aesthetic radicalism." Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn," 179.

⁴⁶⁹ For more on Ruangrupa, see David Teh, "Who Cares a Lot? Ruangrupa as Curatorship," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 30 (Summer 2012): 108-117, and Thomas J. Berghuis, "ruangrupa: What Could Be Art to Come," *Third Text* 25:4 (July 2011): 395-407. For more on the Land Project, see <http://www.thelandfoundation.org/>, and Sandra Cate, "Thai Artists: Resisting the Age of Spectacle," *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology*, eds. Nora Taylor and Boreth Ly (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012), 69-84.

you know, and I would like to paint and make everything look original as it was before. So when people come to the building, they can see and feel how healthy the room is – the air, the light, the space – unlike houses in Cambodia now. I feel so sick when I go in [new buildings], there are no windows, no light, no air, it's very dangerous for people to live in this kinds of houses. It's a place for the festering of viruses, unlike in the Building, where you can see the quality of the original design. So it's one way for people to come here and see the space, and think about the space.⁴⁷⁰

The Building finds itself spatially situated at the geographical nexus of historical memory and present-day socio-political strife. It represents the state's lack of concern for the upkeep of architectural heritage, which appalls most artists and cultural workers in Phnom Penh given their perception of the New Khmer Architecture to be Cambodia's most significant contribution to global modernism. The post-colonial nationalist project witnessed Sihanouk's patronage of flourishing art forms, such as theater, music, dance, and cinema, that have gained local status as premier standards of excellence, yet this is largely due to their nostalgic value and their appreciation among a mass audience as remnants of a thriving popular culture in the 1950s and 1960s. In terms of aesthetic forms embraced for their universal excellence, the buildings designed by Vann Molyvann and his international team of architects hold a privileged place for today's artists and intellectual actors, designating the transnational modernism embodied by the Khmer New Architecture as Cambodia's exemplary modernity, a golden era in Khmer modern history before its eclipse by Pol Pot's regime.⁴⁷¹ At the same time, The Building is sits on prime real estate in central Phnom Penh, and neighboring areas have already been sold to developers (Figures 6.13 – 6.14). In Rattana's emphasis on instigating a kind of historical consciousness through media such as photography, it is unsurprising that he would choose one of the most undesirable and yet most desirable locations in the city in which to attempt something without

⁴⁷⁰ Interview with the author, June 24, 2011.

⁴⁷¹ The last concrete vestiges of this history are the few remaining examples of New Khmer Architecture that dot the country's landscape, notably in Phnom Penh, Battambang, and Sihanoukville.

precedent. I suggest too, that this attempt to revive the structure as a locus of creative interaction speaks to a symbolic attempt to recuperate what Rattana referred to Cambodia's first form of modernism, the modernism embodied in the Building's architecture. By accessing and invigorating a precedent of modernism in the Cambodian context, such an action lays claim to unique form of contemporary concern and articulation.



Figure 6.13: The Bassac River Front Municipal Apartments, c. 1960. Image sourced from <http://rupert-england.blogspot.com/2012/03/six-studies-of-bassac-river-front.html>.



Figure 6.14: The Building, 2012. Photograph courtesy of Sa Sa Art Projects.

The Building is was one of the achievements of the New Khmer Architecture movement spearheaded by Vann Molyvann and his international team comprising French, Russian, and Cambodian architects.⁴⁷² Trained in Paris at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-arts, Molyvann is perceived as the builder of Cambodia's modernity, having attempted to transform the Kingdom's infrastructure and to pioneer an architecture melding design principles drawn from high modernism and Cambodian vernacular sources and premodern traditions.⁴⁷³ Towards this goal he and his team achieved a standard of architectural achievement under a paradigm of nation-building and exemplary urbanism, arguably unparalleled in the region.⁴⁷⁴ Vann Molyvann described how the ambitious construction schemes along the Bassac region was spurred by

⁴⁷² The Building was constructed in the early 1960s to serve as low-cost municipal housing. In June 1961, Norodom Sihanouk addressed the issues of population growth and inadequate infrastructure, telling Phnom Penh Governor Tep Phan, "Finally, our capital must deal with the problem of the urban population. I do not think it necessary to remind you of the social and hygiene problems, the fire risk and the infrastructure and transport problems associated with unplanned development on the periphery of the town. We must begin the construction of low-cost apartment buildings that can be rented or sold to average and small-income families. This will no doubt take some time and requires progressive planning and investment" (Ross and Collins 16). To this end, an international planning team led by Vladimir Bodiensky and Gerald Hanning assisted Lu Ban Hap (director of the Municipal Town Planning and Housing Department) and Vann Molyvann (head of the Urban Planning and Housing Department of the Ministry of Public Works) to carry out a building scheme along the Bassac river front, which included the Sangkum Reastr Niyum Exhibition Hall (1961), National Bank Apartments (1963), Olympic Village Apartments (1963), and the Preah Suramarit National Theatre (1968), and the Municipal Apartments (1963). The Municipal Apartments initially comprised 468 apartments, stretching over 300 meters long, divided into six distinct blocks separated by open-air stairwells. The apartments were designed to maximize cross-ventilation in the tropical climate, with kitchens and bathrooms external to the main living spaces. See Helen Grant Ross and Darryl Leon Collins, *Building Cambodia: 'New Khmer Architecture' 1953-1970*. (Bangkok: The Key Publisher Company, 2006), 16-27, and Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan, *Cultures of Independence: An Introduction to Cambodian Arts and Culture in the 1950's and 1960's* (Phnom Penh: Reyum Publishing, 2001), 11-12.

⁴⁷³ See Vann Molyvann, *Modern Khmer Cities* (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture, 2003). Molyvann also oversaw various infrastructure projects, such as new water drainage and supply systems to facilitate the growing population of Phnom Penh. Blanchot describes how "piles, mounds, and human-made ponds came together to make up a distinctive landscape, reinterpreting the most profound elements of Khmer civilization and integrating them at the same time into an uncompromising modernity" (Blancot, 78).

⁴⁷⁴ See Ross and Collins, and Kusno, *The Appearances of Memory*.

Cambodia's role as host for the 1966 Games of the New Emerging Forces.⁴⁷⁵ Squatter populations were already inhabiting the area, and it was in their interest that they be initially relocated so that permanent low-cost housing could be built:

At that time, my idea was to do whatever it took in order to build urban housing, especially for the poorer people or the civil servants, such as teachers who didn't have enough money to buy their own plot of land or to build their own villa. My idea was also to save areas of open space in the city. To do that, one had to start constructing multi-storey buildings which would stack living quarters one on top of the other. I felt that Cambodians were not yet used to living like that. ... When the group of buildings today known simply as 'Building' were built, it was really an experiment to see if we could make housing for Cambodians living in the city.⁴⁷⁶

With the emptying out of the city by Khmer Rouge troops in 1975, and the repopulation of Phnom Penh in 1979 by citizens of largely rural origins, Phnom Penh's urban identity was in flux throughout the 1980s, as development began again from the ground up in terms of state-sponsored infrastructure projects as well as a population learning the so-called norms and vagaries of urban living, such as in conceptual notions of public and private.⁴⁷⁷ Yet even the concepts of public and private space were ambiguous as the nominally Socialist regime of the People's Republic had abolished private property. From 1979 onwards The Building became home to a motley population of what would remain the city's lowest income earners, including moto-taxi drivers, street vendors, prostitutes, policemen, civil servants, and artists (chiefly

⁴⁷⁵ According to Ewa Pauker, the Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEF), established by Indonesia in late 1962, were a counterpart to the Olympics and designated for athletes of the "emerging nations," or recently independent socialist states. Ewa T. Pauker, "Ganefo I: Sports and Politics in Djakarta," *Asian Survey* 5: 4 (Apr., 1965), 171-185.

⁴⁷⁶ *Cultures of Independence*, 9, 11. At odds with the predominant Chinese shophouse model of the majority of apartments being built in the 1960s, the Municipal Apartments contained more of the atmosphere of the Soviet-style apartment blocks being constructed in Hanoi, Vietnam, locally dubbed "vertical villages."

⁴⁷⁷ See Linda Saphan, *La Vie Sociale des Espaces Publics À Phnom Penh: Processus D'appropriations Urbaines et Dynamiques de la Citadiné des Nouveaux Habitants de aa Capitale Cambodgienne* (Saarbrücken, Germany: Éditions universitaires européennes, 2010).

classically-trained dancers who had survived the Pol Pot regime).⁴⁷⁸ Over the next three decades, this population would continuously rework the building's spaces and structures in order to meet the needs of what is essentially a mini-city within the city. This renovation from below occurs in the absence of government spending for maintenance and repairs since it is widely believed that the building is slated for demolition given its location on some of the city's most valuable real estate, which retains the status of state public land.⁴⁷⁹ The residents of the Building recognize that they are living on borrowed time and space, and that the building may come down at any time, despite efforts on the part of various urban heritage initiatives to find solutions to both revitalize the structure and retain its status as a historical landmark.⁴⁸⁰

At odds with these concerns on the part of artists, architects, and cultural workers in the city are the more locally-widespread misgivings about the building due its undesirable reputation as a slum and host to illicit activity such as drug dealing and prostitution. A significant portion of its residents are transient, leading Vuth Lyno to describe its human geography within as mysteriously and organically evolving:

I feel like that community is always changing, endlessly, all the time. It's kind of organic, changing all the time. It's the general question from outsiders, when they come in. It seems to change, this and that, the people...it's just this feeling you get when you go in, you only get to see something once, and you don't get to see

⁴⁷⁸ As the Cambodian National Theatre Company had been housed in the Preah Suramarit Theatre (known locally as the Tonle Bassac Theatre), another iconic feature of this Bassac precinct before it was destroyed by fire in 1994, is the fact that at least one-third of The Building's residents were once involved with the performing arts. See Simone AbdouMaliq, "The Politics of the Possible: Making Urban Life in Phnom Penh," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 29, no. 2 (2008), 191.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 190. The accompanying plot of land east of the building, known as *Dey Krahom* (literally 'Red Dirt or Soil'), and once site to a settlement of some 1400 households spread over 4.7 ha, has already been sold to developers. *Sambok Chap* (Sparrow's Nest), 50 of which held official legal rights to occupancy. Most of these residents have had to resettle elsewhere due to reoccurrences of fire (largely suspected to be arson).

⁴⁸⁰ Khmer Architectural Tours, Manolis House, and the Heritage Mission are several initiatives that aim to raise awareness of the state of architectural heritage in Phnom Penh and the need for its preservation. Maria Stott's project, <http://manolishouse.wordpress.com/about/>, <http://www.ka-tours.org/>, and <http://phnom-penh.biz/web/pp/annuaire.nsf/allbyidgb/Commerce-493-579>, all accessed 06/03/15.

more. You step in and this time you only get to see this, the next time you see something different, and so on – they never all appear at the same time. And people close their doors - I think it's just a matter of security reasons or something like that - so they close their doors, so at one time you only get to see maybe what one half of the community looks like. So this time you see this part, next time another bit, later another bit. It's kind of strange.

In my first visit to Sa Sa Art Projects, I was lost for about fifteen minutes, wandering hallways that were pitch black even in the light of day, losing sense of direction as I traversed sections of the length of the building (Figure 6.15). These dark stretches were broken up by open-air staircases dividing the expanse of the structure. Garbage littered the ground at the base of the stairwells, groups of children ran up and down the hallways and staircases while being supervised by a neighbor, the pungent smells of various foods being cooked and sold on makeshift platforms in the “mini-market” at the base of the fourth segment of the building wafted high above. It was a daunting and intimidating experience, and it is unsurprising that the *Stiev Selapak*'s efforts to host artist residencies and various workshops and talks within their small room in the Building were initially slow-going. Due to a constrained budget, they could not renovate the space to the degree desired, and they ended up moving to a larger, more functional space within the Building several months after. After the first year, the level of activity and popularity of Sa Sa Art Projects grew amongst the art-minded local and expat population, and this grew in tandem with the larger metaphoric and physical use of the Building as a site for various performance works and community projects (Figure 6.16).



Figure 6.15: Dark hallway in the Building. Photograph courtesy of Sa Sa Art Projects.

Figure 6.16: Crowd waiting outside the Sa Sa Arts Project room. Photograph courtesy of Sa Sa Art Projects.

When Vandy Rattana accompanied his diplomat fiancée to France in 2010, Vuth Lyno took over as the manager of Sa Sa Art Projects. With degrees in Information Technology and Social Science from RMIT University in Melbourne, Lyno was uniquely positioned to take on both a managerial role alongside pursuing his artistic interests in community outreach and participatory projects. Based on his background in communication, Lyno often speaks for the group to articulate their function within the network of arts agencies and spaces in Phnom Penh and elsewhere. In a presentation made to the 2011 Social Forum organized by the UN’s Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Vuth made the following point of clarification:

It is important for me to note that Sa Sa Art Projects is not an NGO. We are an experimental mechanism rather than a fixed, permanent organization. One of the reasons is that we are trying to move away from traditionally operated NGO model, which heavily relies on funds. Of course, we do need money, but by not binding to a rigid organizational model, Sa Sa Art Projects is able to “evolve organically” to adapt to the changing society.⁴⁸¹

⁴⁸¹ Copy of presentation provided to author by Vuth Lyno.

Initial projects at the Building included an ethnographic documentary project in which the group attempted to reach out and get a sense of the resident population, as well as have the community become familiar with the artists and their activities. Unsurprisingly, not all of the residents were open to being interview or filmed. However, as the residents became more familiar with the artists over time, the artists themselves seemed to have gained more of an awareness of the sensibilities of the community, learning how to adapt their creative projects to the need for both privacy and yet the desire for expression on the part of the Building's residents.

One such example is Khvay Samnang's *Human Nature Series* which was first exhibited at the Photo Phnom Penh festival in 2011 (Figures 6.17 – 6.18). The series consisted of portraits taken of the tenants of the Building, whose need for privacy was fulfilled by concealing their faces with hand-crafted masks made by the artist. Thus, the real portrait of these individuals is told by the objects adorning their living spaces. I recall that at one dinner with several artists, a comment was made critiquing the use of the masks in Samnang's piece, saying that this was by now an over-repeated motif in Cambodian artists' works.⁴⁸² But this comment was tempered by his stated admiration for the artist's ability to establish a relationship of trust with The Building's residents, who allowed him to photograph them inside their homes. While it is true that masks are a popular element in many works by Cambodian artists, very likely stemming from their traditional status as a master craft as well as essential element of classical dance, the crafted and raw aesthetic of Samnang's papier-mâché masks – sometimes overlaid with the fabric of *krama*, Cambodian traditional scarves - for this portrait series fulfills what appear to be simple aesthetic and functional purposes. Only by disguising their faces were the residents comfortable enough to allow the photographer to enter their dwelling space, and furthermore to allow themselves to be

⁴⁸² Source kept anonymous.

photographed against what is a glaring backdrop of poverty. Yet within this backdrop are signs of vernacular ornamentation, accumulation of objects of attachment and heirlooms, and the unmistakable evidence of home-making and therefore a space of comfort, intimacy, and functionality.



Figure 6.17: Khvay Samnang, *Human Nature* series, 2011, digital c-print. Image courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.



Figure 6.18: Khvay Samnang, *Human Nature* series, 2011, digital c-print. Image courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.



Figure 6.19: Khvay Samnang, *Newspaper Man*, 2011. Photograph courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.

The crudely crafted appeal of the masks speaks to this sensibility, and also provides an aesthetic and symbolic linkage to Samnang's other works, such as his hair sculptures and several of his performance works, such as *Newspaper Man* in 2011 (Figure 6.19). In addition, while this was not necessarily a conscious connection for the artist, the masks disguising The Building's tenants in the *Human Nature* series provide an eerie subtext for a portrait series that has become perhaps the most searing visual icon for Cambodia's tragic recent history, the collection of some thousands of mugshots of prisoners taken at Tuol Sleng, which continue to be on display at the prison-turned-museum. In their forced exposure to the camera lens and the subsequent re-display and re-contextualization of the photographs, one cannot help but feel the disturbing nature of the way the faces of the victims continue to be bared to the public in various exhibitionary and artistic incarnations. With the masks that Samnang provided to his photographic subjects, they avoided what is often a sensationalistic manner of portraiture and display in the context of Cambodia, where impoverished Cambodians have too often been the subject of trauma tourism and its promotion through photography. Therefore, one gleans a sense of agency on the part of the Building's residents in Samnang's photographs, one in which the subjects speak to their photographer and express their desire for their manner of representation, and the photographer works with them to fulfill both their and his artistic needs.

Thus, some of the works of the *Stiev Selapak* in the Building centered as much on the community, with its transience a condition specific to the location itself, and a growing concern for Lyno, in particular, with the audience. This attention to the population as site is indicative of early re-thinkings of site-specificity along the lines of socially-engaged artwork, as discussed in the previous chapter in regards to Tiffany Chung's projects. In particular, this reconception embraces the "fundamental rethinking of how an art work is to (or should) engage with its

‘public’,” a turn which Miwon Kwon describes as a “crucial shift in which the ‘site’ is displaced by notions of an ‘audience,’ a particular social ‘issue’, and most commonly, a ‘community’.”⁴⁸³ As such, the *Stiev* began to find ways to produce artistic bodies of work or activities that spoke to the conditions surrounding what they estimated to be the needs of the Building’s residents, whether it be in the form of public outreach, such as children’s art classes or photography, sound, and mixed media workshops in which young residents then extended their knowledge to other residents, resulting in a community exhibition, or within the rubric of relational aesthetics, a symbolic performance such as the communal cleaning day led by a Japanese artist in residence (Figure 6.20).⁴⁸⁴ Aspects of this kind of work, and some of Khvay Samnang’s performances, recall the mass teeth cleaning on the riverfront led by Vietnamese artist Trần Lương, which Ly Daravuth masked as a NGO project to the district authorities.⁴⁸⁵ In this way, the artists have become adept at utilizing the platform of development as a language of opacity, thus circumventing difficulties with municipal or district committees or authorities.

⁴⁸³ Kwon, 109.

⁴⁸⁴ Sa Sa Art Projects: The White Night, <http://www.sasaart.info/thewhitenight.htm>, accessed 10/16/12.

⁴⁸⁵ Ly Daravuth, “Encounters with Performance Art in Cambodia 2000-2011,” talk given at Enter The Stream At The Turn: Performance Art in Cambodia and Southeast Asia, Sa Sa Bassac, Phnom Penh, July 16, 2011.



Figure 6.20: Masaru Iwai, *White Building Cleaning*, 2012, single channel video. Courtesy of Sa Sa Art Projects.

These activities fall under the loose rubric of relational aesthetics but speak more to the kinds of collaborative community-engaged works that Grant Kester has advocated in his various texts. As Claire Bishop describes, “These practices are less interested in a relational aesthetic than in the creative rewards of collaborative activity – whether in the form of working with preexisting communities or establishing one’s own interdisciplinary network.”⁴⁸⁶ Whether the activities of the *Stiev* in *The Building* can be conceived of along the lines of debate that have shaped the discourse on relational aesthetics and collaborative practice, particularly from the conflicting views of Kester and Bishop, it is primarily external perceptions that have valorized

⁴⁸⁶ Bishop, “The Social Turn,” 179.

Sa Sa Art Projects given the predilection for these kinds of initiatives in the contemporary art world.⁴⁸⁷

The art classes and workshops are considered community outreach on the part of the artists, more rewarding for their impact on creative learning amongst the youth in the Building, most of whom do not attend school on a regular basis, indicative of the larger state of public education in Cambodia. The performative aspects of the communal cleaning project, led by Japanese artist Masaru Iwai, lend a more conceptual narrative to the simple symbolic and literal act of cleaning the building, and speak again to a certain absence of care on the part of the state in their neglect of urban heritage and their apathy toward the ruins of Khmer modernism. Stretching further into alternative lines of experimentation, *The Sounding Room*, a collaborative project between Lyno Vuth and UK-based sound artist David Gunn, was the first real test of the of Sa Sa Art Projects as a site-specific venue for creative, and acoustic, experimentation designed as a laboratory for experimental sound art while taking into consideration participatory dimensions of the work that could engage the Building community.⁴⁸⁸

As a precursor to *The Sounding Room*, Lyno had begun to experiment with conceptual artistic installations that simultaneously served the purpose of a providing a tangible outcome of his activist work for the public. His general artistic interests are often an outcropping of his more earnest desire to create forums for dialogue and expression, particularly in regards to subjects often considered taboo in Khmer culture. Thus emerges a desire to provide avenues of communication out of what he describes as a culture of silence innate to Cambodian subjectivity:

⁴⁸⁷ See my abbreviated description of the counter-positioning of Kester's and Bishop's views in the previous chapter, footnote 34.

⁴⁸⁸ From September to October 2011, the artists attempted to "transform Sa Sa Art Projects space into an interactive sound installation," http://sasaart.info/projects_thesoundingroom.htm, accessed 06/03/15.

I think it's something inherited from Cambodian culture going back thousands and thousands of years, which has to do with the tradition of speaking out, engaging. In Cambodian culture, we are taught to be humble, to speak less but to think more. Do more, but talk less. So even in a conversation, if you talk a lot, people think that you're arrogant, that you're trying to show off. So it's just better to be silent, to be... polite. So that's one reason. But it also really reinforces this culture of silence, which is obviously not very good, when it comes to expressing, because people feel like they just shouldn't express...⁴⁸⁹

For Lyno, sound has become an integral element to his artwork and creative process, whether they took the form of a workshop for gay men which resulted in an installation consisting of photographic portraits of the participants, who, in a similar fashion to the subjects of Samnang's *Human Nature Series*, expressed the desire for anonymity.⁴⁹⁰ To that end, Lyno suggested they paint their faces with images they thought symbolized their identity. The gallery installation for *Thoamada* (ធើម្មតិ literally meaning “normal” or “usually”) comprised a circular suspension of the large-scale photographs, underneath which was a parallel set-up of small platform on which audio-devices with ear-pieces were placed (Figure 6.21). The viewer could connect the painted face of the participant to his vocal narration, in which he spoke about particular personal experiences. The work as a whole was a creative outcome for what Lyno takes seriously as

⁴⁸⁹ Interview with Lyno Vuth, June 15, 2011. Several Khmer proverbs ‘speak’ to this valorization of silence and humility: “Better to be quiet than talk” (ស្ងៀមជាងស្រដី), “Quick with words but incapable of moving one’s backside” (រហ័សតែពាក្យ ត្រគាកស្លាប់ស្លុក), “When you speak too much no one listens to you and your faculties fade away” (និយាយច្រើន គេពុំស្តាប់អប្បប្រាជ្ញា).

⁴⁹⁰ “For a closing activity, participants were asked to paint their faces as an expression of their identity. The results are personalized masks with meaningful symbols—an animal, a landscape, the Cambodian flag, and so on. One face is patterned with abstract shapes and circles to refer to the life cycle. The man behind the fierce lion mask notes that unlike lions, he doesn’t attack unless provoked. A butterfly—half in color and half in black and white—reveals the joy and sadness we all experience. An asura, a demonic Hindu mythical figure also referred to as a yeak, evokes some of the public fear still associated with LGBT communities. The flag conjures national pride and Khmer kindness. These symbols show the wide range of Khmer MSM [Men having Sex with Men] identities.” Viet Le, “Thoamada: Vuth Lyno” (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Sa Sa Bassac, 2011), exhibition brochure, n.p.

activist work with the LGBT community in Cambodia, a movement which has gained a high profile in youth culture in Phnom Penh.⁴⁹¹



Figure 6.21: Vuth Lyo, *Thoamada* (ធាមាណ), 2011, installation view at SA SA BASSAC, 2011. http://www.sasabassac.com/artists/vuthlyo/vuth_2011_thoamada.htm (accessed 06/03/2015).

Extending his interests into the specific context of the Sa Sa Art Projects space at the Building, Lyo applied for an Arts Network Asia grant and funding from the British Embassy to support a collaborative project over the duration of several months that would be sited at the Building. Consisting of various workshops, talks, and performances over the months of September and October 2011, *The Sounding Room* aimed to:

“Rediscover Cambodian history of music, instrument-building and performance for a new generation of residents, through an interactive musical installation;

⁴⁹¹ LGBT Pride Week was first launched in Phnom Penh in either 2003 or 2004, but began to gain momentum in 2009 and 2010.

Promote innovative approaches to participatory art in Cambodia, and to engage local Cambodian communities directly in the creation of contemporary art; and Revive the reputation of The White Building as a thriving artist community, using public, participatory events.”⁴⁹²

In the presentation made at the UN Social Forum in 2011, David Gunn, a British sound artist and founder of the UK-based participatory and new media arts organization *Incidental*, and Vuth’s collaborator on *The Sounding Room*, emphasized the nature of the project as parallel yet distinctive to the kinds of projects initiated by cultural development NGOs:

I think it is important to mention here that we are interested in culture AND development, rather than cultural development, i.e. we are not focusing upon forms of cultural conservation or support, but rather the ways in which grass roots, participatory cultural activity, or the arts, can both comment on, enrich and challenge parallel processes of development.

Firstly, cultural projects can offer radically open platforms for participation. Much development activity focuses upon “target audiences” or “communities in need”, where individuals are identified, and engaged because of particular features of their socio-economic, ethnic or geographical background. Such processes can be helpful, but also impose fixed identities upon diverse, complex groups.

With the creation of “strange spaces” such as the Sounding Room, we seek to establish radically open environments, where individuals are encourage to attend as “entire selves” and to shape both the form and content of the work. In this way, cultural projects can work to resist imposed identities, to articulate more complex and multiple senses of belonging, to replace permanent communities of place with ideas of “temporary communities of action” and to surface resistance to established norms of engagement and development.⁴⁹³

The Sounding Room featured manually fabricated instruments following the design and acoustic effects of traditional Cambodian instruments installed within the room to produce an visually and aurally aesthetic experience (Figure 6.22). Lyno and Gunn invited numerous local artists to engage with the room as instrument and acoustic space, and organized workshops and performances. The Sounding Room subsequently attempted to animate the site, both the

⁴⁹² Press Release: *Creation from the Community: Residents at The White Building Experiment with Contemporary Sound Installation Art*, distributed September 6, 2011.

⁴⁹³ Copy of presentation provided to author by Lyno Vuth.

architectonic space of the room as well as the residential community of the building, through music. As such, it produced a dialogue with history, given The Building's past as residence to artistic communities, namely dancers and musicians, and the future, through engagement with children and youth. While The Building has become a major attraction for photographers, for whom the play of light and shadows within the rhythm of its facades, ajar doorways, murky halls, and resident population are constantly in motion, the Sounding Room engaged another artistic invocation of architecture through the other senses, this time privileging hearing and haptic engagement. For those in the room and in proximity, Sa Sa Art Projects became an acoustic arena, an experiential region animated by the tones resonating emanating from the instruments and drawing together an affective community of listeners.⁴⁹⁴ The line-up of events and collaborative performances included a memorable performance by dancer Belle Chumvan Sodachiv, who used classical dance gestures alongside contemporary movements in her engagement with the sounds produced from the make-shift instruments as artists, audience members, and children from The Building were invited to take turns on the instruments (Figures 6.23 – 6.24).

⁴⁹⁴ The concept of an acoustic arena is described by Barry Blesser and Linda Ruth-Salter in *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?: Experiencing Aural Architecture* (Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 2006), 22.



Figure 6.22: Installation view of *The Sounding Room*, Sa Sa Arts Projects space, The Building, Phnom Penh, 2011. Image courtesy of Sa Sa Arts Project.



Figure 6.23: Performance collaboration with Belle Chumvan Sodachivy, Sa Sa Arts Projects space, The Building, Phnom Penh, October 25, 2011. Image courtesy of Sa Sa Arts Project.



Figure 6.24: Performance collaboration with Belle Chumvan Sodachivy, Sa Sa Arts Projects space, The Building, Phnom Penh, October 25, 2011. Image courtesy of Sa Sa Arts Projects.

This historical consciousness and desire to animate the ruins of Cambodian modernity have driven various artistic projects sited in The Building, which can be seen as illustrating Abidin Kusno's suggestion that "buildings serve as a reminder of the practices of the past and the starting point for both the performance of unfinished fantasies and the desire to overcome troubling memories and remake oneself within, as well as beyond, one's particular time and place."⁴⁹⁵ Kusno, among other spatial theorists, most notably Henri Lefebvre, have expounded upon space as key to structuring popular subjectivity, and architecture as the premiere sensory and aesthetic apparatus which filters and generates process of social engagement and, I would

⁴⁹⁵ Kusno, 3.

suggest, artistic imaginaries.⁴⁹⁶ In Cambodia, the few remaining examples of New Khmer Architecture have become important sites of recuperation for artists, vis-à-vis site-specific projects which encounter the building as alternative artistic space and as ruins of a modernity to be recuperated in fragments. What is of particular importance is the need to haptically engage with these sites, a desire to occupy and immerse oneself in the architecture at the levels of the aesthetic and ethnographic. I consider these spaces to constitute the artist's pictorial field, the larger site for intervention and representation, and as I continue to discuss in the following section, a representational space that the artist's body activates in order for it to become a space of representation.

Photograph as Performance/Event: The Aesthetics of Performance and Protest

Cambodian artists who have received wide acclaim for works described as performance include Khvay Samnang and Svay Sareth. These performance artworks, accessed through their documentation in photography and/or video, can be perceived as being in dialogue with the notion of urban spatial interventions, which I will elaborate shortly. In Phnom Penh, these practices have emerged within the context of a popular engagement with urban change and architectural heritage.⁴⁹⁷ From the visual arts sector, Dana Langlois, owner of Java Café, founded an annual festival under the name of *Our City* in 2008, which brought together talks, exhibitions, performances, and architectural tours by various international and local groups and artists under the general rubric of the changing cityscape of Phnom Penh and the issues surrounding its urban

⁴⁹⁶ For pertinent case studies, see Kusno, Visser, Ali and Rieker, Nuttall and Mbembé, and Schwenkel, "Post/Socialist Affect."

⁴⁹⁷ As I mentioned in the previous chapter, various international organizations have initiated projects concerned with raising the profile of the fragile state of architectural preservation in the city, most notably concerning the buildings associated with French colonial design or the New Khmer Architecture.

development.⁴⁹⁸ In 2007, Metahouse: German Cambodian Cultural Center hosted a series of events under the title of Intercity, a three-year umbrella project hosting various individual artist exhibitions, film screening, and lectures. Yet these events have largely been experienced as forms of art entertainment and surface dialogue, demonstrating more of an interest in illustrating the changing urban landscape rather than achieving real depth or serious engagement on the part of the artists involved or sustainable interaction between the different groups whose interests are at stake.⁴⁹⁹

Since the latter half of the first decade of the new millennium, heightened attention to the rising violence surrounding demonstrations against land grabbing has brought the city and civil rights into especially acute focus. Issues surrounding real estate development and dispossession have a fraught history in the city, given the complex nature of land ownership and the notions of public and private land in the wake of the Pol Pot regime.⁵⁰⁰ The controversy surrounding the

⁴⁹⁸ From the Our City website: “Our City Festival is Cambodia’s first and only public festival to bring together creatives from Cambodian cities to focus on urbanism and its influence on contemporary culture. Initiated in 2008 by Java Arts to acknowledge the city’s accelerated urban change and its intersection with the surge of activity within the contemporary arts. Presenting art and architecture themed exhibitions, events, performances, screenings, talks, and workshops, Our City examines Phnom Penh’s present, remembers its past, and imagines the future... In the past five years, its exhibitions, talks, workshops, and tours have operated as creative and critical explorations of the city’s urban trajectory. It has sought to reflect on change and document them through artistic response and expression: to bear witness to the multiple shifting forces which constitute the present- and indeed- the city.” <http://www.ourcityfestival.org/festival/pages/view/1>, accessed 11/5/12.

⁴⁹⁹ This is based upon my own assessment of the 2011 *Our City* festival, as well as conversations with art organizers and artists from 2011-2012.

⁵⁰⁰ During the period that the Vietnamese sponsored-PRK regime worked on restoring basic infrastructure and the economy in the 1980s, the government owned all property rights in Phnom Penh, which would gradually repopulate to prewar levels (approximately 600,000) by the late 1980s. With the decline of Soviet bloc aid after the fall of the Soviet Union and the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops in 1989, the National Assembly amended the constitution, changing the name of the country from PRK to SOC, and granting the status of urban residences from state property to private property. In addition, they initiated a policy that allowed newcomers to Phnom Penh to settle relatively freely in unoccupied buildings and on vacant land. The 1990s saw a booming real estate market and inflated land values associated with the increasing liberalization of the country’s economy, in tandem with the decollectivization of agriculture and the beginning of an overwhelming rural to urban migration. By 1994 it was estimated that 12-15% of the population were living in squatter encampments, many of whom had lived elsewhere but had had to

filling of Boeung Kak lake in the northern area of central Phnom Penh in 2010 has had a particularly high profile due to its proximity to the city center, the major protests and demonstrations sparked by the eviction of some 4000 families, and the personal ramifications this bore for several artists who had studios or homes in the area; as such, the Boeung Kak events inspired such artworks as Pich's 2009 *Raft* sculpture (Figure 6.25), Khvay's 2011 *Untitled* performance and photograph series, and Tith Kanitha's 2012 *Heavy Sand* performance (Figure 6.26).⁵⁰¹

relocate due to rising costs of land and housing. In 2001 laws were passed allowing for any 'private state land' to be appropriated by the government, who could then allocate up to approximately 25,000 acres to companies and private developers. These opaque transactions surged after 2008 with massive property inflation in the city. It was around this time that the squatter encampments along the Bassac region and then particularly Boeung Kak gained notably high visibility in the daily press as evicted residents began to mount vociferous protests. Since then, land grabbing and popular protest in both rural and urban parts of the country have become daily headlines in the media. See Y.K. Sheng, T. Standley, and R. Ottolenghi, *Report of the UNCHS (Habitat) needs assessment mission in the urban sector in the light of the imminent influx of returnees, 26 April -24 May 1992 (draft)*. Phnom Penh, May 1992, quoted from Gavin Shatkin, "'Fourth World' Cities in the Global Economy: the Case of Phnom Penh, Cambodia," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 22, no. 3 (1998), 383-390.

⁵⁰¹ In 2007, the government made a deal with Shukaku Inc., a corporation owned by Cambodia People's Party senator Lao Meng Khin and Erdos Hongjun Investment Corporation, a Chinese group, to fill in the lake in order to build an up-market housing development. Mass evictions began in 2008, with some parties receiving monetary compensation and others none; by the end of 2010 the lake had been almost completely filled with sand, amid violent clashes between evicted residents and the police during demonstrations at the site and elsewhere. The fact that women will usually be at the forefront of these protests also gained acute media attention. Sopheap Pich had his studio on the banks of the lake, neighboring Leang Seckon's home and studio. See L.H., "Justice in Cambodia: the Boeung Kak 13," *The Economist*, Jun 27, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2012/06/justice-cambodia>, accessed 11/17/13, and *Cambodia: Imprisoned for Speaking Out: Update on Phnom Penh's Boeung Kak Lake* (London, England: Amnesty International, 2012).



Figure 6.25: Sopheap Pich, *Raft*, 2009, bamboo, rattan, wood, wire, metal bolts, 226 x 450 x 132 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Tyler Rollins.



Figure 6.26: Tith Kanith, *Heavy Sand*, 2012. Performance at SA SA BASSAC, Phnom Penh. <http://seasonofcambodia.org/kanitha-tith/> (accessed 06/03/2015).

The phenomena of public protests enacted in response to Boeung Kak and other instances of dispossession and the breach of human rights represents a surge in what has been perceived as a growing public sphere, which in recent years has escalated to almost unprecedented levels in Cambodian society since the PRK, particularly in the wake of the 2013 elections.⁵⁰² Caroline Hughes comments that, “the upsurge in protest over the past few years appears to be linked to the perception, on the part of a range of discontented groups in the city, that a space for public expression has emerged.”⁵⁰³ In his analysis of this growing “geography of protest” in the context of a post-transition era of neoliberalism, Simon Springer attributes the increasing demonstrations in public spaces to expressions of agitation amongst Cambodian who contest the various manifestations of capital interests of the politico-economic elites.⁵⁰⁴ As such, the spread and intensification of these demonstrations have seemingly paved the way for a more radical democratic movement to emerge with a particular instrumentalization of public space and media awareness. These increasingly fraught and violence-ridden battles for “the right to the city,” to

⁵⁰² One might date the origin of this escalation to a short-lived “Phnom Penh Spring” in 1991, sparked by the arrival of the United Nations Advance Mission in Cambodia, in which students and Ministry employees protested the illegal sale of state-owned enterprises and the subsequent laying-off of workers. The demonstration was eventually suppressed by riot police who fired into the crowd, killing nine protesters. Protests would also occur in outright defiance of the so-called democratic process of elections, such as the one following the elections of 1998, in which Prince Norodom Ranariddh won the popular vote yet the outcome was again rigged in favor of the CPP. Thousands gathered in Democracy Square on August 24, 1998 protesting the election results, and, as would be the ensuing pattern, the protest was quelled with violence. Not long after, Hun Sen banned demonstrations. However, from 1999 to 2002, the government appeared to ease up its constraints on public expression, or as Springer describes, its “overt domination of Cambodian public space,” as demonstrations occurred without major consequence, coinciding with Hun Sen’s attempts to modify his public image, reasons for which opinions differ. Springer and Peou attribute it to renewed confidence after the 1998 election, Osborne links it to attempts to pacify international donors. See Caroline Hughes, *Dependent Communities: Aid and Politics in Cambodia and East Timor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2009), 92; Peou Sorpong, *Intervention and change in Cambodia: Towards democracy?* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2000); Milton Osborne, “Cambodia,” *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2000): 101–12; and Simon Springer, “Violence, Democracy, and the Neoliberal ‘Order’: The Contestation of Public Space in Posttransitional Cambodia,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 99 (2009): 138-162.

⁵⁰³ Hughes, *The Political Economy of Cambodia's Transition, 1991-2001*, 183.

⁵⁰⁴ Simon Springer, *Cambodia's Neoliberal Order: Violence, Authoritarianism, and the Contestation of Public Space* (London: Routledge, 2010).

quote David Harvey, bring into relief the changing face of Phnom Penh's urban landscape as a field of contention, several aspects of which are innocuously addressed through arts festivals like *Our City* but also acutely drawn into focus through the works of various artists who expand on the general themes of disorderly development and the rights of the urban populace.⁵⁰⁵ Aside from the works cited above by Pich, Khvay, and Tith, other pieces include Meas Sokhorn's *Pore* series (Figure 6.27), which featured sculptures wrought from urban detritus, Lim Sokchanlina's 2011 *Wrapped Futures* (Figure 6.28), in which the artist photographed corrugated metal fences delineating sections of the city slotted for development, and Tith's large-scale installation, *Hut Tep So Da Chan*, in which a traditional wooden house located in the Boeung Kak district was transformed through community donations and interactions into a domestic archive and display space (Figure 6.29). It is interesting to note that many of the works pertaining to this subject matter were all created and exhibited in 2011, indicating a communal surge of creative or dialogical interest in response to city-wide events.

⁵⁰⁵ David Harvey, "The Right to the City," *New Left Review* 53 (Sept.-Oct. 2008), 23-40.



Figure 6.27: Meas Sokhorn, *Multi-Skill*, 2011, helmet, motorbike mirrors, license plate, clothes hanger and wire, 22 x 28 x 45 cm. Image courtesy of JavaArts and the artist.

Figure 6.28: Lim Sokchanlina, *Phnom Penh. Cambodia. 2009: North Street 106, between Street 61 and Street 67 (Wrapped Futures series)*, 2011.
<http://www.limsokchanlina.com/portfolio/wrapped-future/> (accessed 06/03/2015).



Figure 6.29: Tith Kanitha, *Hut Tep So Da Chan*, 2011. Installation view.
<http://survivart.boellblog.org/2011/07/27/tith-kanitha%C2%B4s-huts-tep-soda-chan/> (accessed 06/03/2015).

As such, the questions that bear pertinence in relation to artistic subjectivity in urban Cambodia are whether these public protests an indication of a growing public sphere, and whether this is revealing of a spreading civic consciousness whose public enactments have exerted influence over shifting paradigms of artistic production and aesthetic concerns. One might observe certain visual tactics that surface in public protests, such as in the demonstration staged by the Prey Lang Network in Phnom Penh in May 2011, including the use of face painting, headwear crafted from leaves, and the playing of traditional musical instruments.⁵⁰⁶ In

⁵⁰⁶ “Photo Album: Prey Lang Protest in Phnom Penh,” *Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights*, http://www.licadho-cambodia.org/album/view_photo.php?cat=47, accessed October 23, 2012.

another recent demonstration, protesters used inscribed masks to protest the detention of Boeung Kak community activist Yorm Bopha (Figures 6.30 – 6.32).⁵⁰⁷ These aesthetic motifs, which bring to mind the face painting in Vuth Lyno’s *Thoamada* installation, or the papier-mache masks in Khvay Samnang’s *Human Nature* portrait series, spark the question of whether these aesthetic contemporaneities in the artistic and the public sphere are linked. One might say such strategies are embedded in deep-seated cultural knowledge and attraction to particular visual and artistic modalities of everyday life, as well as a spreading popular engagement with how such visual gestures can speak to more powerful symbolic expressions of antagonism and agency. While these questions cannot be decisively answered at this time, I do argue that the photographs of performances by various individual artists have appeared to be the most meaningful physical text produced within the realm of artistic critique, and this is in large part due to certain dialectical qualities, including the spontaneity versus the staging of the performance, the placement of the body at risk but at the same time, in play, and the attempt to reconcile the singularity of the event, in the Derridean sense, with its reproducibility vis-à-vis the photograph. The embodied gestures of these performances evoke dialogical notions of public engagement, in which civic actions of individuals *en masse* are positioned against what is perceived as the more cerebral and haptic expression of individual artistic expression.

⁵⁰⁷ Phak Seangly and Mom Kunthear “Villain or victim? Protesters divided over activist pre-trial detention,” *Phnom Penh Post*, September 11, 2012, <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/index.php/2012091158623/National-news/villain-or-victim-protesters-divided-over-bopha.html>, accessed 06/03/15.



Figures 6.30 – 6.31: “On May 25 2011, demonstrators came to Phnom Penh to protest the destruction of Prey Lang forest. Recent economic concessions have put at risk the livelihood of thousands of people.” *LICADHO: Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights*, http://www.licadho-cambodia.org/album/view_photo.php?cat=47, accessed 06/03/15.



Figure 6.32: “Protesters wear masks bearing the likeness of detained Boeung Kak community activist Yorm Bopha during a demonstration in Phnom Penh.” Photograph: Meng Kimlong/Phnom Penh Post. From “Villain or victim? Protesters divided over activist pre-trial detention,” September 12, 2012, <http://www.cam111.com/photonews/2012/09/12/153172.html>, accessed 06/03/15.

If art is considered an everyday act of making, or a creative “tactic” which de Certeau characterizes as a popular public practice, it can naturally be argued artistic expression is integral to the assertion of agency within the domains that I have described above.⁵⁰⁸ Given these instances of artistic expressions of agency both in the exterior spaces of public protest and in what can be considered the interiorized acts of contemporary art production (fabrication typically takes place indoors, thinking processes are internalized or held in discussion with select participants), a return to the interpretative framework of scale can be productively raised here. In terms of its usefulness in interpreting the symbolic spatial registers of particular performance artworks, perhaps the most involved discussion surrounding the concept of scale within cultural production and political critique has come from Neil Smith, most notably in his analysis of Krzysztof Wodiczko’s *Homeless Vehicle Project* (1988).⁵⁰⁹ Smith broke down the functional, aesthetic, and symbolic components of the larger project to place it within a paradigm of social critique, in which the Homeless Vehicle enabled its owners to carry out an act of socio-spatial transgression:

As instruments of political empowerment, Wodiczko's vehicles work precisely to the extent that, symbolically and practically, they enable evicted people to “jump scales”-to organize the production and reproduction of daily life and to resist oppression and exploitation at a higher scale-over a wider geographical field.... citywide. Put differently, jumping scales allows evictees to dissolve spatial

⁵⁰⁸ These tactics of the everyday popular masses are enunciative operations which set in motion the spaces of the built environment, the inhabited landscape, and its spaces of production, reproduction, and consumption, often in opposition or resistance to the planned functionality and meaning of those spaces as set by hegemonic institutions. In opposition to tactics are the ‘strategies’ used by more hegemonic institutions as spatial devices to maintain order and status quo. De Certeau gives ‘tactics’ the sense of a popular, spontaneous activity of resistance – gestures and actions that undo spatial meanings and rules that are instituted through strategies. This distinction between strategies as institutional and hegemonic and tactics as commonplace, popular, and resistant has received criticism for being too dualistic, and for imposing too much agency and political meaning to certain everyday activities. See de Certeau.

⁵⁰⁹ See Smith, “Contours of a Spatialized Politics.” One can find more in-depth discussion of Wodiczko’s larger body of work, with particular attention to his architectural projections, in Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

boundaries that are largely imposed from above and that contain rather than facilitate their production and reproduction of everyday life.⁵¹⁰

Wodiczko himself suggested that the Homeless Vehicle Project would facilitate a subversion of scales. The artist named Architecture (as a metonym or metaphor for the city) as more than structured, tangible space, but a built system in which economic and psychic power are embedded; it is not only the material representation of certain agendas but comes to exact further desires and terrors due to its ruthless but necessary expansion.⁵¹¹ The bodies of the homeless, as the disenfranchised evictees of this Architecture, are transformed into “permanently displayed outdoor ‘structures,’ symbolic architectural forms, new types of city monuments,” whose contrast helps produce value while their presence is relegated to political amnesia.⁵¹² Therefore, Wodiczko’s *Homeless Vehicle* performed a subversive performative act, by providing an “architecture” for the homeless individual to embody, enabling them to claim agency and privacy through a structure which also amplifies their presence on the street, magnifying “the scale of the homeless to the scale of the building!”⁵¹³ The *Homeless Vehicle Project* thus illustrates an example of the perceived political force attributed to the jumping of scales, even in a symbolic sense. However, this perception of such a possibility as ultimately futile is embedded in some critiques of the project as functionally ineffective in terms of producing even a temporary shift in the urban psyche, and even further rendering the human subjects objects of spectacle.

I suggest however that a similar spatial lens that plays close attention to the way a jumping of scales is ultimately enacted within the pictorial field is particularly useful for looking

⁵¹⁰ Smith, 60.

⁵¹¹ Krzysztof Wodiczko, “The Homeless Projection: A Proposal for the City of New York (1986),” in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings*, eds. K. Stiles and P. Seltz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 425-6.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, 426.

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*

at certain performances and their documentation. Here I articulate the pictorial field in two senses. One is literal, in that it is the field of perception and immersion which the artist inhabits. From the vantage point within this space the artist chooses to delimit the space of representation for the artwork, in which his/her presence is meant to be imperceptible. Therefore, while the artist is part of the pictorial field, he or she may not be in the ensuing picture. One example could be the seemingly invisible presence of the photographer, particularly in the genre of photojournalism where it is assumed that what is being conveyed is the truth of live unscripted or un-staged action. In Vandy Rattana's photographs, his very presence in the immediate space of representation allows for the seeming occlusion of the artist's hand in capturing the pictorial field framed as a deliberate photographic composition.

The other perceptual sense of the pictorial field is one that presents an image in which formal composition is immanent, waiting to be realized through the vision of the artist and completion through an artistic rendering. For example, in the ocularcentric tradition of landscape painting, the practice of painting a particular spatial view entailed the creative, and oftentimes partially imagined, depiction of a landscape that may have already been constructed to serve viewing pleasure. The aestheticized and symbolic creation of a landscape was often designed with the perspectival view of a two-dimensional representation in mind, as Lefebvre notes in the case of the Tuscan landscape, in which alleys of cypress trees deliberately crisscrossed the land in an arrangement evoking the grid-like perspective developed by Renaissance painters; thus a space was already created for painters to discover and reformulate in the genre of landscape painting.⁵¹⁴ John Tagg notes that the city of Paris has already been 'read' as a multiplicity of

⁵¹⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 78. Lefebvre describes how "These artists 'discovered' perspective and developed the theory of it because a space in perspective lay before them, because such a space had already been produced" (79).

texts in which space was carefully planned and controlled to facilitate certain kinds of movements and spectacles, therefore its urban landscape was a representation in itself prior to its picturing in painting.⁵¹⁵ Such landscapes as pictorial terrain are thus animated via the cognition of the artist and their subsequent representation. Within this landscape, the artist's self-placement in the final pictorial field thus effects a shift in the artist's mastery over vision, as the artist cannot simultaneously be behind the lens and in action within the frame. Subsequently, an alternative negotiation and presentation of authorship and subjectivity is produced. It is this choice, which has been made by several Cambodian "performance" artists, that is particularly interesting to note.

Therefore, part of my discussion reconsiders the self-positioning of the artist within the pictorial field, and what this means in terms of picturing artistic subjectivity as well as invoking dialogue rather than overt critique in relation to current social issues that have arisen in the foreground of their daily lives. These artists engage in symbolic (in the case of Samnang) and literal (in the case of Sareth) jumping of scales, yet do not attempt to enact tactical transgressions in an overtly antagonistic posture towards particular spatial controls to the degree that Smith argues that Wodiczko instigated with his Homeless Vehicle Project. Tactical transgressions are produced in the context of subterfuge or play for the sake of the artwork, yet deliberate political critique on the part of the artists is carefully avoided. Within the context of Cambodia, such works may appear to be too politically risky in an atmosphere which still retains currents of fear of surveillance and its repercussions, a reason for which many artists deny the label of being a political artist, and prefer the symbolic and abstract over the textual, in a case similar to Vietnam. Rather, I suggest that through physical embodiment and the use of the body as the most intimate

⁵¹⁵ John Tagg, "The Discontinuous City: Picturing and the Discursive Field," *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations*, eds. N. Bryson, M. A. Holly, and K. Moxey (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

and primary locus of engagement within a larger dialogue often comprising the scales of the city, the nation, the region, or the globe, that they activate particular dynamics of symbolic negotiation within this constellation. What characterizes many of these performances is a concern with its formal composition as a pictorial field, and the element of the body in the landscape becomes as an aesthetic priority for the sake of the documentation. The documentation extends beyond its function as a record of the performance, and for many of these artists, perhaps considering their entry into contemporary art practice via photography, the resulting image must have the capacity to stand on its own as an artistic object of provocation and aesthetic pleasure.

As such, I suggest that some of these performances, notably those of Samnang, should be seen as a continuity rather than break in photographic practice stemming from the medium's impact on conceptual practice in Phnom Penh beginning in 2007. I propose that rather than seeing the performance as photograph, we understand the photograph as event, as discursively argued by Ariella Azoulay, and furthermore, the photographic event as performance.⁵¹⁶ As such, many performances are not carried out for an immediate public audience, but rather for the lens of the camera. They conceive of the photograph/performance as an aesthetic formal product while at the same time as an important document for social dissemination and interpellation, following Azoulay's theorization of the photographic event: "The photograph is usually thought of as the final product of an event. In contradistinction to this common assumption, I see the photograph – or the knowledge that a photograph has been produced – as an additional factor in the unfolding of the event of photography (not of the photographed event). The encounter with the photograph continues the event of photography that happened elsewhere."⁵¹⁷ It has been articulated by one artist that the ephemerality of the performance is less useful than the

⁵¹⁶ Azoulay.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

permanence of its documentation, and therein lies the social responsibility of the artist.⁵¹⁸ The aesthetic focus on the resulting two-dimensional compositional framework of the performance reflects upon the artists' grounding in photographic training, a concern with the longevity and reproducibility of the documentary work, and with the production of a tangible artistic object.⁵¹⁹ Furthermore, a flexible notion of authorship is enacted through this photographic collaborations. If the artist is both agent and subject of the image, but depends upon two other agents to capture the image (the artistic collaborator/photographer and the camera itself), we can further envision the ways in which the larger performance – the photographic event – distributes control over vision. Azoulay compellingly describes this scenario, in which

...the pencil of nature could be seen as an inscribing machine that transforms the encounter that comes into being around it, through it and by means of its mediation, into a special form of encounter between participants where none of them possess a sovereign status... Human subjects, occupying different roles in the event of photography, do play one or another part in it, but the encounter between them is never entirely in the sole control of any one of them; no one is the sole signatory to the event of photography.⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁸ In one after-event dinner, a discussion came up between myself, a Cambodian photographer and performance artist, and a foreign performance artist as to why, for Cambodian artists, the photographic work was so important and of equal concern to the artist as the staging of the performance (which has never had an intentional immediate audience for the actual event itself). When the foreign artist said that it's much easier to sell the photographs, the Cambodian artist bristled, and elaborated upon why it was much more than that; much of it had to do with the reproducibility and hence, the more democratized distribution of the art piece. While the performance could only be accessible to a particular audience – if any – at a given moment and location, the photographic work could speak more to larger aesthetic concerns and hence provoke a larger audience into contemplation, curiosity, and different ways of thinking. However, I don't wish to discount the commercial motivations that may underlie this concern with producing an object for distribution, as sales are a sincere preoccupation for most of these artists.

⁵¹⁹ If one reads tradition into this aesthetic drive, one could understand the compulsion to produce an art object – a photograph – is in part rooted in a particular sensibility and attachment to the crafted product, which stems from both historical artistic formal training as well as a kind of aesthetic appreciation which one might argue is born from the ornamental traditions that infuse everyday life in Cambodia, such as childhood training in classical dance and its gestures, an embodied replication of *kpāc*, the ornamental vocabulary of ancient Khmer architectural and artistic design.

⁵²⁰ Azoulay, 17.

A salient question that arises in nature to this model of artistic production - performance for the sake of the picture or the photograph provoking the event/performance, most notably in which the backdrop of the landscape is as much an formal concern as is the captured gestures of the performing body – is linked to the problem Kathy O’Dell described in her discussion of the haptic encounter with early photographs of performance: “How can knowledge of a performed work of art be gained through a document which, due to the technological limitations of the apparatus producing it, so vastly delimits information?”⁵²¹ In the context of developing contemporary art scenes in which there are no institutional structures for critical artistic formation or the training of art critics, curators, or art historians, the role of the foreign curator has often come into play as an educator and mentor for young artists, and an interpreter for their work. In such institutional absence, the curator often serves as an agent of discursive innovation, according to Patrick Flores: “The issue in the case of curatorial history is that the modes of display constitute the artifice itself, with the curator as site of artistic agency. ‘Display’ or the act of making art visible, therefore, becomes a context, not only because it is the environment within which art makes sense; but also because it enables the social practice of art to be a communicative event, to assume sensible sociality.”⁵²² One example of this kind of linguistic and cultural translation – which also serves as a type of artistic intervention on the part of the curator - is the curatorial text prepared by Erin Gleeson for Khvay’s *Untitled* exhibition (Figures 6.33 – 6.34), excerpts from which I cite here:

He went to an area of water that had many houses. He saw names and addresses written above the doorways. He entered the water and noticed the residents

⁵²¹ Kathy O’Dell, “Displacing the Haptic: Performance Art, the Photographic Document, and the 1970s,” *Performance Research* 2, 1 (1997), p. 73.

⁵²² Patrick Flores, *Past Peripheral: Curation in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: NUS Museum, 2008), 25.

watching him. One person asked him if he was an actor making a film. He replied, “I am making art.” In the water, he found a piece of wood to sit on. He poured a bucket of sand over his head...

He saw a lot of garbage floating in the water. He began swimming in the water and garbage in search of a secure place to stand. He found a piece of wood below the water, where he stood. He poured a bucket of sand over his head...

He saw dense plant life on the water. In the distance he saw a cluster of buildings. People told him, “The water is very deep.” People also told him, “The apartments are mostly empty.” He found two pieces of wood and placed them on top of the plants. He stood on the wood. He poured a bucket of sand over his head...⁵²³



Figure 6.33: Khvay Samnang, *Untitled* series, 2011. Image courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.

⁵²³ Erin Gleeson, *Untitled: Khvay Samnang*, exhibition brochure (Phnom Penh: Sa Sa Bassac, 2011), n.p.



Figure 6.34: Khvay Samnang, *Untitled* series, 2011. Image courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.

In his 2011 *Untitled* series, Khvay partially immersed himself in various sites in and around Boeung Kak lake, some of which appeared to be areas of rancid water used as for garbage dumping, and poured a bucket of sand over his head, each action set against a particular landscape of poverty, nature, and urban development, and carefully staged for photography with the assistance of fellow *Stiev Selapak* artist Lim Sokchanlina. While these gestures could be read quite incisively as sardonically mimicking the state's filling-in of the lake in order to sell the land to developers, Khvay's reticence to lend any critical clarity to the text describing the exhibition is in part likely due to the reluctance on the part of any artist to render their work too legible. It is also a practical concern on the part of young artists to be labeled political, a widespread fear

amongst cultural actors within Phnom Penh's urban intelligentsia based on the now-familiar repertoire of stories surrounding journalists, activists, dissidents, and lovers who have gone missing, been maimed, or killed in suspicious circumstances.⁵²⁴ As such, in considering how best to articulate the work for its exhibition, Erin Gleeson described what kind of language could be used to simultaneously protect the artist without sacrificing the artistic coherence of the work:

In Khvay's case, I searched for a philosophy that mirrored his intention – how to present something that is definite, an action without a doubt, yet an action that is surreal and visionary in its attempt to make such a powerful metaphor, rooted in location and a belief in art...

[Khvay] went to physical spaces in complicated states of flux, where language is used to manipulate legal documents, protestor choruses, journalism, government speeches and policy, and made himself bare and showed us that he is pouring a bucket of sand over his head – a precise metaphor for what is happening. There is little language one needs when something is so succinctly done. So, for the exhibition text, by interviewing him, I was able to describe his physical experience at each location that led to this action, and then stripped away the words that would politicize or overshadow his experience: 'lake' became 'water', 'excavator' became 'machine', etc. I hoped the repetition and the physicality would bring audiences close to the artist and his point of creation. Locally, the text in Khmer was met with as a poem, an understandable language, like a caption to a photograph. From international audiences in English, it has drawn interest for it not being standardized.⁵²⁵

In shaping the curatorial text as a series of poetic iterations of the artist's transcribed actions, the performance was thus translated and activated, in a sense, in a rhythmic textual fashion across photographic frames. In addition, the transparency of the language used for the text attempted to render opaque the artworks' conceptual meaning, thus shielding Khvay from what would likely be perceived as his production of subversive political critique.

⁵²⁴ To this day, the name of Hun Sen is often whispered or replaced by a nickname, like "the big guy," in public conversations due to a persistent suspicion of public surveillance. A few artists and cultural organizers I spoke with described what they suspected was the existence of informal surveillance networks, in terms of a system of reporting within the ministry, its institutions, and those brought into the fold, e.g. teachers.

⁵²⁵ Document provided to author by Erin Gleeson.

In a subsequent iteration of the *Untitled* performances, the artist traveled to Japan in 2011 for another round of participation in a residency sponsored by Tokyo Wonder Site, and reproduced a similar series of gestures in video work titled *Air*. This performance spoke to the residues of radiation perceived to linger in the atmosphere after the 2011 series of disasters that occurred on Japan's east coast and the Fukushima power plant. While emptying buckets of air onto his head in different venues, a Geiger counter provides an alarming soundtrack for the performance. As such, Samnang's performances engender a symbolic jumping of scales as he embodies the actions and effects of the state's machinations upon the local environment, or draws attention to that which is invisible in terms of what is not perceived or what is quickly forgotten, and which may manifest as pervasive biological effects on the body public. His *Untitled* series in Cambodia is particularly evocative of a historical model of power diffusion, in which negotiations that take place between international agencies then result in injustice, conflict, and disenfranchisement at the ground level – all in the name of modernization and progress.



Figure 6.35: Khvay Samnang, *Air* series, 2011, digital c-print, 80 x 120 cm. http://www.sasabassac.com/artists/khvaysamnang/khvay_2011_air.htm (accessed 06/03/2015).

Before continuing with a discussion of the symbolic and spatial registers of Samnang's work, it is worthwhile to note the semantic meanings and local understandings of performance art in order to approach the nature of the larger reception of "Cambodian performance art." In speaking with various curators who have expressed interest over what they perceive as a refreshing contemporary art scene in Cambodia, in particular in relation to such artists as Khvay Samnang and Svay Sareth, they have commented on the earnest and affective quality of the artists and their work, which they perceive is due in large part to the fact that the artists operate in a space fairly isolated from external references. Most of the younger generation of Cambodian artists have little to no education in contemporary art history, and what sources are accessible via the internet and other forms of mass and social media, is often little understood in terms of conceptual depth due to a dearth of translated texts into Khmer. In addition, this quality of what might be described as naïve innovation can be attributed to the very recent introduction of performance art in Cambodia, via the workshops of Seiji Shimoda.⁵²⁶ I attended and participated in Shimoda's 2011 workshop, held at Metahouse, and observed the ways in which Shimoda attempted to convey a very general sense of physical expression and performance as distinct from performing, all within a group of sixteen artists from Cambodia, India, Japan, and Vietnam, ranging from complete "novice" artists to those who were considered more seasoned in their respective communities, in a setting in which linguistic communication was near impossible. Therefore, no kind of verbal discourse was provided in which a firm understanding of performance art and its history could be grounded. Rather, artists attempted to follow the most basic of prompts, composed and practiced very brief performances, then performed for the rest of the group one after another.

⁵²⁶ Seiji Shimoda's performance art workshop at Metahouse German Cambodian Cultural Center, Phnom Penh, October 21-22, 2011, with culminating performances for the public on the 22nd.



Figure 6.36: 2011 workshop with Seiji Shimoda at Metahouse, Phnom Penh. Photograph courtesy of Sa Sa Art Projects.

For the young Cambodian artists new to the workshop and the medium, the notion of performance art had yet to be distinguished from performing arts, and many drew on what appeared to be some degree of training in traditional dance gestures as they performed narrative vignettes, contingent on emotional transitions through facial expressions and gestures, for the rest of the audience.⁵²⁷ This understanding of performance art is likely linked to its translation in

⁵²⁷ The Hanoian artists Lai Thi Dieu Ha and Nguyen Huy An, as part of a more established young generation of Vietnamese artists in the Hanoi art scene, performed acts of physical endurance, with Lai cutting her arms, bleeding into a pile of scooped up debris from the floor, tying the pile up in cloth and fashioning a tea bag, from which she brewed a cup of tea and drank it. Several Cambodian artists in the audience were quite disturbed, having to look away, and one whispered to me, “Why do Vietnamese artists always hurt themselves?” These reactions are revealing of a still exploratory stage of performance

Khmer as *silpah samtaen* (សិល្បៈសំដែង), which literally means “art of performance/expression/acting.” Very often Cambodian artists embrace the idea of performance art through live painting, usually choreographed to music, thus reinforcing the blurred distinctions between understandings and interests in performance art as distinguished from performing arts.⁵²⁸

The aforementioned topics of performance as picture, local understandings of performance art, and the aesthetic tactics of protest contribute to the way I interpret the blurring of boundaries between performance art and symbolic social engagement in the form of urban intervention and staged photography that characterize Khvay Samnang’s performance work. Because of the ephemeral nature of the performances, whose tangible products exist only in the form of photographs or video, Samnang is widely considered a performance artist. Inspired by Boeung Kak-related protest that he witnessed in front of the Phnom Penh City Hall in 2011, he decided to carry out a site-specific performance at the lake. In *Newspaper Man*, he used his body and face as the canvas for a collage of local newspapers, while simultaneously attempting to playing the role of a newspaper salesman. He covered almost every inch of his body and face to the point of almost completely obscuring his vision, and then ambled in disorientation along the bank of then-water-filled Boeung Kak Lake, his performance documented in DIY manner by his fellow *Stiev* member Lim Sokchanlina. By blocking his own vision and making himself the object of the lens, he again relegated control over artistic vision in large part to Sokchanlina, whom he asked to pay equal attention to the documentation of the landscape. His concern with

art in Cambodia, and their perceptions and critical assessments of the ways in which the genre is revealing of certain group, or regional, sensibilities.

⁵²⁸ This is particularly popular in Battambang, which is home to Phare Ponleu Selpak, an NGO arts school which has programs in theater, music, dance, the circus arts, and the visual arts.

later seeing what he looked like against the backdrop of the lake conveys the sense that his body served largely as a screen, as one could perceive him to be embodying the detritus of media covering the controversy surrounding the lake.⁵²⁹ Like pages of newspaper flung about by the wind, so too did Samnang wander, trip, and fall about the banks of the lake.

In a series of performances linked in continuity by the use of his hair sculpture in the functional shape of a helmet with cow horns, Samnang's *Cow Taxi* series turned upon the idea of basic services and exchange in shaping or bridging communities. The sculpture itself was created from hair collected from streetside barber stands, speaking to a cyclical reclamation of detritus and re-use in Samnang's work. Beginning in his Tokyo Wonder Site residency in 2010, he crafted an ornamental rickshaw that he used to offer rides to random strangers in the streets of the city. Describing his persona as that of a cow or buffalo pulling along people, he said his decision to choose that particular animal was predicated on his perception of the cow as a kind and generous creature. In Phnom Penh, he transformed the rickshaw's function from transporting people to carrying dirt, which he arduously scraped and swept off the streets of the city, piled into the cart, and then pulled it by foot 30km outside the city to the eroding banks of the Mekong river, a result of shoddy urban and environmental planning. He then used the collected dirt to attempt to rebuild the riverbank in a 2011 performance titled *Cow Taxi Moves Sand*.

⁵²⁹ Transcript of artist's talk, *In Conversation with Vuth Lyo*, September 2012, Sa Sa Bassac, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, transc. and transl. Sum Sithen, ed. Roger Nelson. Document provided by Roger Nelson.



Figures 6.37 – 6.38: Khvay Samnang, *Cow Taxi Moves Sand*, 2011. Images courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.

He also performed another *Cow Taxi* piece at The Building, literally carrying people into the structure and up several flights of stairs (Figure 6.39). He described his role as simply serving as a vehicle to bridge communities, transporting the outsiders who avoid the Building because of

its seedy reputation inside to introduce them to the residential community atmosphere as well as the deteriorating interior of the modernist structure. Lim Sokchanlina has also performed at the Building, in a similar vein to his other works in which he embodies an aspect of the built or natural environment upon which human actions pollute, destroy, or degrade, such as in the 2009 *My Motorbike and Me* series (Figure 6.40). In the performance on the rooftop of the Building Lim used his body to represent the building being torn down by competing corporate developers, bearing the weight of a large piece of concrete rubble until his arms gave way and he fell into the open pipe on which he stood (Figure 6.40). Both Lim and Samnang carry out these symbolic actions in public spaces to comment upon land dispossession, environmental pollution, and state apathy towards urban planning and civic well-being. An element of play is often integral to the work, and yet this humor can be tinged with a morose sense of mortality, particularly in the lengths that Khvay would go to in his works, from which he often suffered physical after-effects.⁵³⁰

⁵³⁰ Most of Samnang's performances entail a lengthy process of preparation and collaboration with fellow Stiev artists in their execution and documentation. The planning and execution of *Untitled* (2011) took place over a year, with attention to mapping and scouting the site, and also understanding the everyday routines of the community residents as well as the presence of authorities surveiling the site. These strategic practical considerations balanced an understanding of how to logistically carry out the work outside the scrutiny of the authorities while at the same time assessing the aesthetic potential of various locations and their compositional properties for the ultimate photograph.



Figure 6.39: Khvay Samnang, *Cow Taxi*, at The Building, 2011. Image courtesy of the artists and SA SA BASSAC.



Figure 6.40: Lim Sokchanlina, *My Motorbike and Me*, 2009, digital c-print, 60 x 90cm. Image sourced from <http://www.limsokchanlina.com/portfolio/my-motorbike-and-me/>.



Figure 6.41: Lim Sokchanlina, *White Building (Rock)*, 2011, performance of 6.15 min. duration and video documentation. Image sourced from <http://www.limsokchanlina.com/portfolio/rock-white-building/>.

Similarly, Svay Sareth (b. 1970), while not a native Phnom Penh, has carried out performance journeys that span time and space, often a test of physical endurance which he described as a cathartic process.⁵³¹ Born in Battambang and raised in a Thai border refugee camp, Sareth was one of the founders of the Phare Ponleu arts school in Battambang, and due to the school's cooperation with various French organizations, Sareth was able to receive a scholarship to pursue college and graduate education in France.⁵³² After living in France for six years and receiving his MFA from the L'Ecole Régional Supérieur des Beaux-arts de Caen in 2009, France, he returned to Cambodia with his former student and wife, Yim Maline, also a

⁵³¹ Svay Sareth's conversations with the author, 2011-2013. Subsequent references to the artist's statements are drawn from these conversations.

⁵³² In-depth information on the founding of Phare Ponleu Selapak through artist interviews and an essay by Veronique DeCrop can be found in a special issue of *Udaya, Journal of Khmer Studies* (2014), forthcoming. See also Ashley Thompson, "Forgetting to Remember, Again," *Diacritics* 41 (2013).

practicing artist, and worked as the artistic director of Artisans d'Angkor out of Siem Reap.⁵³³ From 2009-2011, he has staged various incarnations of a performance which began in France, during his last year in his graduate program. With no prior knowledge or experience, Sareth hand-crafted a wooden canoe, which he then dragged on foot for eleven hours to the Normandy coast, and then set in the water and paddled out to sea. The work *Adieu* existed as a video-documented performance, and commented upon his highly personalized experience of displacement and migration - as a child of the military and an upbringing in a refugee camp. In 2011 he would revisit this theme in Cambodia in a performance titled *Mardi* – inspired by the story of Robinson Crusoe - when he pushed the boat from his home in rural Siem Reap to the city center, where it was installed for exhibition at the Hotel de la Paix art gallery (Figure 6.42). The performance took on its final form in *Mon Boulet* later that year where instead of pushing his boat, Sareth hauled a metal sphere, two meters in diameter and weighing 80kg, from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh, a journey on foot following a well-established and populated route that traced the path of the ancient Khmer capital to the present-day capital along the Tonle Sap river (Figure 6.43).

⁵³³ While a discussion of Yim Maline's work is beyond the scope of this dissertation, I would describe Maline's practice as currently one of the most profound and provocative in terms of conceptual process and technical execution within the young artists' community in Cambodia, particularly in the sophistication of her diverse range of media work, encompassing ceramics to video work. Recurring themes in her work include the inscription of the domestic as a site for feminine agency and articulation, and moral reflections inspired by cyclical iterations of cosmic and environmental processes.



Figure 6.42: Svay Sareth, *Tuesday/Mardi*, 2009, Documentary image of performance, Siem Reap, 2011, wood, resin, 450 x 125 x 60 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.



Figure 6.43: Svay Sareth, *Mon Boulet*, 2011, performance, video documentation. Image courtesy of the artist.

Comparisons can be drawn to the spatial and durational runs of Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, and both series – in which the artists positions his body as the agent, the object, and a site of risk and of resistance within a project of mapping the self and the landscape – have also led to physical damage meaning that such work is no longer viable for the respective artists. Sareth characterizes his journeys pushing beyond performance, indeed, not even being definable as performance, as the element of pain is essential in deepening the experience, pushing him to his limits, and making the physical experience of the artwork or process more akin to what he is trying to convey or express conceptually. The performance is an event but also an iteration of a kind of truth, accessing latent psychological and corporeal memories. In his words, this is a kind of “harmony” that he finds more powerful and appealing than the physical experience of making a painting or drawing in the delimited space of a studio.⁵³⁴ As such, the affective and emotional content and significance exceeds the space in which the work is produced and results in a feeling that he has been constrained. As Svay described, he has no desire to revisit the past, but in order to move forward and find a space in which he is “liberated from pain” (*liberer de la douleur*) he has to recognize those sensory memories from the past and reconfirm them, in a sense. Sareth’s concern with documentation differs from Samnang in that photography and filming is often a secondary preoccupation, and perhaps because the journeys are so laborious and tasking, as well as in constantly in motion, Sareth says that he is less interested in composing carefully staged images for aesthetic production and distribution.

In discussing these particular works, I am attempting to further complicate the notion of an urban intervention, a task which I began in my discussion of Vietnamese artists’ interventions into spaces of representation. In line with the discussion of such interventions into the pictorial

⁵³⁴ Conversation with the author, July 2011.

field, I reiterate how such symbolic gestures and journeys enacted by artists can instill a moment of realization and impact upon the viewer in their forms as photographs or video documentation, and hence be considered interventions within the urban imaginary. In Cambodia, the importance lies in the degree to which the use of the body speaks to physical endurance in excess, and the significance of this can be linked to the notion of agency and authorship of embodiment against the backdrop of historical memory, in which bodies were worked to fatal excess in the Pol Pot regime, but also in connection to a culture in which haptic performativity is ingrained in one's subjectivity from the earliest ages, as dance gestures and physical training are an integral part of boys' and girls' social and cultural education. In referring to this physical excess, I differentiate it from the kind of bodily abjection that performance artists in China and Vietnam have staged, in works by artists like Chinese artist Zhang Huan or Vietnamese artist Lại Thị Diệu Hà, which often speaks to kind of alienation of the self and disenchantment with societal mechanisms.⁵³⁵ Such work does not appeal to most Cambodian artists, as these acts of self-mutilation and violence are perhaps too abhorrent for many given the country's recent history. The overarching tendency for many of these performance works is to contain an aesthetic dimension through accompanying objects and the captured image of the performance as artwork, as previously discussed, and poeticized elements of repetition, hence Khvay's *Untitled* series and Svay's reenacted journeys.

In addition, these artists challenge territoriality and notions of restrictive space by endowing the body with the capacity to transgress and enact powerful symbolic gestures, whether it be in the perceived social commentary of Khvay's and Lim's performances or in the

⁵³⁵ See Melissa Chiu, ed. *Zhang Huan: Altered States* (New York: Asia Society, 2007) and Qian Zhijian, "Performing Bodies: Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, and Performance Art in China," *Art Journal* 58:2 (July 1999), 61-81.

historical commentary of Svay's durational journeys. One might question the relevance of determining whether such work needs to be considered urban intervention or site-specific performance or both. These questions hinge upon the degree with which it impacts the viewing subject in a physical and/or psychic manner. The concept of urban intervention usually involves an architectural dimension in terms of a built element or physical manipulation of some component of the landscape or structure, or reactivation of some structure or device considered archaic or obsolete. In these discussions, the concept of urban intervention is to a certain extent conflated with public art, in that it is a form of what Rosalind Krauss has described as "sculpture in the expanded field," and the audience is meant to experience a corporeal engagement with a spatially transformed environment.⁵³⁶ The artists I discuss do not attempt to physically modify the landscape in a permanent manner, neither do they leave physically ephemeral traces in the cityscape as in the case of Naiza Khan's henna hands, Zhang Dali's portrait profiles, or even the celebrity street artist Banksy's playfully stringent graffiti paintings.⁵³⁷ Yet I contend that that these site-specific performances must nonetheless be considered urban interventions, even if the evidence of intervention is displayed as artistic photography and displayed in the white-cube exhibition space of the art gallery. It is in the gallery context that they can be shielded from the scrutiny of authorities – who have yet to pay serious attention to the visual arts, unlike in Vietnam - and yet convey their most provocative potential to viewers, as the gallery space in Cambodia often serves as a public forum for more critical expression than would otherwise be able to take place elsewhere. In addition, these works often have to take place in a covert

⁵³⁶ See Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 30-44.

⁵³⁷ For elaborations upon these artists' works, see Iftikhar Dadi, "Ghostly Sufis and Ornamental Shadows: Spectral Visualities in Karachi's Public Sphere," *Comparing Cities: The Middle East and South Asia*, eds. Kamran Asdar Ali and Martina Rieker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 159-196, Francesca del Lago, "Space and Public: Site Specificity in Beijing," *Art Journal* 59 (Spring 2000), 74-87, and Banksy, Rhys Ifans, and Jaimie D'Cruz, *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, (United States: Oscilloscope Pictures, 2010).

manner, with a fair degree of research and planning, or if not explicitly covert, at least with an eye towards playful subterfuge in the form of humorously literal explanation, such as when Khvay explained to authorities that he was simply cleaning the streets, or Sareth explained that he had to bring his enormous metal ball home. From the medium of photography as protest, to the photographic event as performance, to architecture as animating the ethos of modernism, and the body as a site of resistance, I suggest that what enlivens these works of art and collaboration is the particular facility with which artists demonstrated – consciously and unconsciously – an ability to map scales within the pictorial field. The use of the artist’s body to situate itself within this constellation endowed their work with a form of radical social investment that found full expression in numerous endeavors carried out in 2011.

CONCLUSION

These artists' critique of globalization is faceted through an engagement with the aesthetic forms of architectural and urban space as expressions of political and historical experience, and the current impacts of neoliberal policies and land development. The urban interface thus provides the means through which we can begin to glean the multiple contours and substances of an affective urbanism, but beyond that, the ways in which a feeling somewhere between nostalgia and fantasy is constituted and in turn constitutes representational acts in and about the city. To this end, metaphors and actual methods of excavation and archaeology play into what could be considered Romanticist notions of recuperating past spatial forms in the hopes of effecting change for the future. This study of contemporary art in Ho Chi Minh City and Phnom Penh thus provides further reference points for the ways in which contemporary art in the era of late globalization has been mapped through "turns." Alongside the social turn and the transnational turn is the postcolonial turn, in which Terry Smith describes a strong impulse in the countries of the former second, third, and fourth worlds to recover history.⁵³⁸

Echoing Arthur Danto's provocative text *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, this turn to history feels ominous if we consider the ways in which imagined histories have provoked modern crises in Vietnam and Cambodia.⁵³⁹ And in thinking about the "end" of art, which has always – in its time – been a contemporary phenomenon, it is just as important to track the shifts and events that produce a contemporary art world as it is to note when and why the phenomenon ceases to be. The phrase "Vietnamese contemporary art is over" has already begun to waft through conversations with artists and observers looking back at the

⁵³⁸ Smith, *What is Contemporary Art*, 151-171.

⁵³⁹ Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997).

dynamism of the 1990s and the 2000s. In the same way, an impending sense of beginning to “be over” is already being voiced by similar actors in and familiar with Cambodia who bemoan the absence of a future generation to sustain the momentum captured at a particular moment in time. In the latter case, how can an art world that has seemingly just been “reborn” already begin its descent into history? There is the sense that as soon as it is decisively and globally embraced, it is already over in terms of the promise it is supposed to continue to hold.

This has to do with the spatial and temporal significance of art as belonging to a place and a moment, especially in those contexts in which contemporary art is expressive of a new subjectivity that uses it as a liberating mode of communication. Contemporary art held a certain sense of urgency and momentum in Vietnam and Cambodia at a certain temporal juncture: as a local response to societal change, a language of resistance and self-determination finding the means and methods to enact creative and powerful critique, and a means of conversing within the language of contemporary art and connecting to local, regional, and global circuits of exhibition. Yet as this precise frame of time unfolds, so too does the geographic specificity of these actions also begin to disperse, thus displacing the importance of location that I have emphasized throughout this study.

Vietnamese art, for example, for a long time now has not been exclusively about art made by Vietnamese artists in Vietnam. Its semantic framing has come to be founded on work made about Vietnam, whether in the country or in the diaspora, and it is this latter category that has gained purchase on the global market and in institutions. Moving along this trajectory of dispersal, could today’s exemplary Vietnamese artist be the current international art star and Danish citizen Danh Vo, whose conceptual projects of archiving fragments turns on what might ironically be considered a postmodern methodology, often framed through the lens of

Vietnamese history?⁵⁴⁰ We might then think about the fragments of these places or histories as persisting through their artists, who continue to exert the presence of these narratives throughout the global art world. But art “scenes” themselves, as vital stories unfolding in specific places in time, have short shelf lives, which makes not just the memory but the critical interpretation of these narratives so important.

⁵⁴⁰ Vietnamese-born Danish artist Danh Vo (b. 1975, Bà Rịa, Vietnam) won the 2012 Hugo Boss Prize, which is awarded bi-annually to an outstanding contemporary artist. Former recipients and nominees include Matthew Barney, Francis Alÿs, Rirkrit Tiravanijia, Ólafur Elíasson, William Kentridge, and Lorna Simpson. Nora Taylor has queried the “Vietnamese” dimensions of Danh Vo’s identity and his work in a lecture titled “Is Danh Vo a Vietnamese Artist,” given at the Renaissance Society, Chicago, November 4, 2012.

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