

AAA Martell Contemporary Asian Art Research

2005-2006

Grantee's Progress Report

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"Mediating the Mekong"

May 4, 2006

Since the midterm report submitted in December 2005, several events have occurred that are of significance to the Mediating the Mekong project. I highlight below some of these recent events by country, including an abridged itemization of materials collected.

CAMBODIA

Early this year, Cambodia was being compared to Myanmar in certain publications on account of the political offensive by Prime Minister Hun Sen against those he claimed were responsible for defamation. These parties included a Phnom Penh radio broadcaster and a human rights activist. The prime minister ultimately dropped legal proceedings against several of his critics – likely resulting from a voicing of international concern. This created a very interesting dynamic, at least from my perspective where a year earlier I marveled at the freedom within the press when compared with the cultural controls existing in Vietnam. It appeared that Cambodia had gone through a short-lived backlash from which it now appears to have quickly recovered. Despite the tendency for unexpected and wild fluctuations, Phnom Penh remains an extremely attractive city in terms of a location to openly exchange ideas. However, the arts infrastructure remains in the early developmental stage and in some respects behind both Myanmar and Vietnam – states that enforce rigid cultural controls. I was pleased to discover that there were indeed many more Cambodian arts organizations than I was previously aware but sadly funding of some of these organizations remained problematic. Last week I received word from Sovanna Phum that they are in extreme financial duress and facing dissolution unless immediate funding is secured.

From 30 March to 2 April, the Phnom Penh Arts Festival 2006 was finally held after several months of postponement. Originally slated to occur in December 2005, the festival program connected a number of important arts organizations including Sovanna Phum, Apsara Arts Association, Amrita Performing Arts, Sang Selapak Building Arts. It was surprising to discover that both the Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture (co-founded and directed by Ly Daravuth) and Saklapel (organizers of the December 2005 Visual Arts Open or VAO) were not involved in PPAF2006. I covered the VAO in my midterm report and from speaking with VAO artists during my February visit to Phnom Penh, it appeared that there was a developing rift in the organization and that the membership was in a state of transition.

The February exhibition "Reflow" of three Vietnamese artists (Bui Cong Khanh, Bui Trung The Nam, and Richard Streitmatter-Tran) and two Cambodian artists (Sopheap Pich and Leang Seckon) was held at the Java Café Gallery and Popil Photo Gallery in Phnom Penh. The curator, Christine Cibert, believes it was the first time Vietnamese artists had an exhibition in Phnom Penh. The Reflow exhibition also included a workshop at a site called "The

Building” constructed in the 1960’s by Cambodian architect Vann Molyvann that is slated for imminent demolition. This culturally significant site currently shelters a squatter community for artists among other displaced groups. The third component was the group panel discussion at Java Café Gallery where artists, students and communities were able to exchange their thoughts which spanned from the exhibition work to issues surrounding the delicate and historically antagonistic relationship between the two countries.

On March 26, an Ezine workshop “Visionz” with Mo-Ling Chui, Erwan Chevalier, Socheathy Ouk, Linda Saphan, Rattana Vandy and Thorneakea Toun was held at the Sun Dew Design Shop. I have wrote to Linda Saphan, who helped organize the VAO, for information on the current state of VAO and if this new assemblage of persons working for this workshop is the formation of another collective.

I have remained in contact with several other Phnom-Penh based artists and organizations, including SangSalapak which maintains an updated blog on Cambodian arts and culture. Arts activity, particularly those extending outside of the traditional into the contemporary are on the rise including film festivals, lectures and issue-based presentations at universities. It is this organization that I referred Hong-kong based researcher Lai Chingyee after receiving a message from Phoebe Wong at AAA.

Partial Listing of Collected Materials.

Visual Arts Open. Images on CD. Literature. December 2004

Reflow Exhibition and Projects. Images on CD. Literature. February 2006

Reyum Institute. Literature.

Various artist portfolios, exhibition announcements. Newspapers and popular press.

MYANMAR

The unexpected relocation of the national capital to Pyinmana, half way between the former capital city of Yangon and Mandalay has rekindled world attention on Myanmar with particular focus on the continued house arrest of NLD leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. Myanmar postponed its recent scheduled hosting of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Nations) to Malaysia in order to, according to Burmese officials, better focus on internal issues. Myanmar continues to be a problem for the ASEAN nations who feel that the internal Burmese politics have extended beyond its own borders into international relations between ASEAN and the world. During the conference early this year ASEAN was able to negotiate a near term visit by officials to monitor Myanmar’s progress toward forming the promised constitution (and not necessarily to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi). The meeting was at first cancelled and when the rescheduled, the official only stayed a couple of days opting to leave early because of the uncooperative reception by Myanmar.

This is nothing new and it seems that the artists in Myanmar know this best. And although the situation is severe, artists in Myanmar have been able at times to negotiate and find ways to continue their arts practice.

The 6th New Zero Art Show organized by the New Zero Art Space at the Lawkanat Art Gallery in Yangon. The show ran from 10th January 2006 to 16th January 2006 and included over thirty

Burmese artists. On April 1st, the show *Le printemps des Poetes* was held at the Alliance Francais in Yangon featuring a program on live performance art and poetry. Earlier this year should have seen the publication of a new cultural criticism magazine covering literature, poetry, visual arts, film and music. From my meeting with the editor of this publication in December, it was to be like nothing before. It was an intellectual magazine that to this day we have yet to see in Vietnam.

Yangon-based artists Moe Satt and Chaw Ei Thein have kept me informed via email of the recent and upcoming arts activities in Myanmar. Information on the arts in Myanmar will also be included in a new magazine being developed in HCMC as a result of this close relationship with several Burmese artists.

Partial Listing of Collected Materials

Phyu Mon. Artists Portfolio. CD
Chan Aye. *To the River*. VCD
Chay Aye. *Watch Tower to Look at the World*. VCD
Nyein Way (artist). *Isolated Sport*. VCD. June 2005.
Nyein Way, Kit Young, U Tin Ye. *Abstract Physical Theater*. VCD. December 2004.
Nyein Way. *5th New Directions*. VCD. November 2005
Various Artists. Performance. Alliance Francais, Yangon. September 2005
Hteit Lin. Performance. VCD
Chaw Ei Thien. Artists portfolio. CD
Chaw Ei Thein. Mahagita Music Education. 2005 CD.
Nyan Lin Htet. Artists Porfolio and Video. VCD
Popo. Artists Presentations. CD
Moe Satt. Artist Portfolio. CD
Saysaryar. VCD
Myint Soe Hliang. Other Performers and You. Book.
Nyein Way. Critical Skills Mirroring Practical Lives. Book
San Oo. MSO Artworks. Book.
Myint Moe Aung. Predatory Dance. Book.
Monthly art magazine published by the Arts Association. 2 issues (Jan & Feb 2006)
Several artist and group catalogs, portfolios, exhibition announcements. Newspapers and popular press.

VIETNAM

Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi remain the leading cities for contemporary arts practice and exhibitions in Vietnam, although the cross over between the two communities is less frequent than one might expect. In many ways, the arts communities continue to function separately. In the last weeks, Vietnam has concluded its 10th National Congress in which the seeds for future policies are laid out. As expected, there was no radical shift in any direction, although prominent cases of corruption at the ministerial level dominated many of the meetings and a continued effort to eliminate state corruption was given adequate rhetoric. For the arts I don't see much changing officially, but this year there seems to be a more relaxed environment. There haven't been any major campaigns against social evils within the contemporary arts sector in this year's memory. Things remain difficult while artists have found new ways to both operate within and under the radar.

HCMC

An exciting recent development in Ho Chi Minh City is the introduction of two new artist-run spaces: Atelier Wonderful and ALBB. Exhibitions, presentations and other events in these spaces are unofficial, meaning that official permissions have not been acquired. As such, the events technically could be considered as underground activities. However, it is interesting that as non-sanctioned activities, the press has not hesitated to cover the events in their publications and as a result the crowds have been increasing with each event. Being smaller and thus more agile, they are able to create programming that fills in the gaps between the gallery and museum exhibition scheduling and thereby keeping the alive continuous arts activity in Saigon.

Atelier Wonderful was established by French nationals Sandrine Llouquet and Bertrand Peret in the beginning of 2006 as an offshoot of the now defunct Wonderful District group. The programming schedule of the Atelier has been regular with an event occurring nearly each Saturday afternoon. Most exhibitions are accompanied by an artists talk. Events have included screening Andy Warhol videos, exhibition of visiting artists and students, international graffiti, and sharing of the art work collection. The Saturday programming will cease at the end of June and focus on other projects within the Atelier.

ALBB is operated by Sue Hadju and Motoko Uda, from Australia and Japan. Both Sue and Motoko have lived in Vietnam for many years and focus mainly on sharing information through artist presentations rather than exhibitions in the space. Both Sue and Motoko are regular writers for arts based publications worldwide and participants in curatorial projects such as the Yokohama Triennial.

This year Galerie Quynh, directed by Vietnamese-American Quynh Pham, has opened to more experimental work including performance and installation where it had earlier concentrated primarily on painting and small sculpture. Galerie Quynh has also a relationship with Atelier Wonderful and ALBB where Bertrand, Sandrine and Sue have recently exhibited their solo work in the gallery. Among the galleries in HCMC, this gallery has become the leading space.

The Saigon Biennale project has been renamed and reconceived as Saigon Open City (SOC). SOC is made possible through funding from the Ford Foundation. In the past months SOC has organized public presentations by Melissa Chiu (Asia Society, NY), Jeremy Strick (MOCA Los Angeles), and Cheryl Younger (The Photography Institute, NY). SOC held a press conference in January 2006 revealing their transition in name and focus where it was announced that Thailand-based Gridthiya Gaweewong and Rirkrit Tiravanija were selected as curators for the SOC project. The SOC has recently confirmed that they have received the curatorial proposal and it now is in review.

A number of artists have since the beginning of 2006 been working toward the realization of a critical arts and culture magazine published bilingually in English and Vietnamese. The trajectory of this project has shifted since its conceptualization but the mission has remained the same: to improve the critical discourse in Vietnam and to extend the communication of the Vietnamese contemporary art community with the world. This project has taken a very interesting new life, but I would like to save this surprise for the final report.

Artist Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba recently returned from Laos where he is planning a project to be resumed this fall. Jun has been invited to present new work at the 2006 Gwangju Biennale. Mai's Gallery continues to have exhibitions although the scheduling hasn't always been regular. The Blue Space Gallery has not publicized events in the recent months that I am aware of. I must schedule a visit to meet with the director of both Mai's Gallery and Blue Space for an update for the final report.

Hanoi

I will be traveling to Hanoi in May to meet with artists and organizations. As I had written earlier, there exists somewhat of a divide between the cities as far as collaboration, although information is often shared through email press releases and press covering is of exhibitions is largely balanced. I intend to reconnect with Tran Luong in Hanoi as well as meet with directors from Ryllega Gallery, Nha San Duc, the Alliance Francais and the Goethe Institute. These spaces remain sites of regular arts activity and programming.

Recently, a new site run by foreign artists opened in Hanoi called Campus. It will have a grand opening this May. From what I've heard, artists in Hanoi have not yet warmed up to the space which may in part be attribute that the organizers and operators of the space do not speak Vietnamese and came without initial contacts. The future success of this space cannot yet be determined.

HUE

Hue, located in the central Vietnam, is the third city where a contemporary art scene might be experienced. Surprisingly, the Hue College of Art remains the most open to experimentation having had in recent times workshops by foreign artists such as installation art and performance. This June, Hue hosts the Hue Festival 2006, an international event that occurs every two years in the city. The organizers this year have sought to extend the festival by inviting more foreign companies. By companies I mean performing troupes, dance and music organizations. The festival itself cannot be considered primarily a venue for contemporary art but has at times accommodated artists for installation and sculpture exhibitions in connection with the event.

Partial Listing of Collected Materials

Ly Hoang Ly. *Lo Lo*. A collection of poetry and visual art. Book.

Bui Cong Khanh. Artist portfolio. CD

Bui Cong Khanh. *Man Makes Rain*. VCD (2003)

Vu Nhat Tan (composer). Several CD's with sound art and experimental music.

Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba. Literature, various.

Saigon Open City. Transcript and Agenda for SOC press conference.

Various media and literature from Vietnamese artists, organizations and spaces.

NOTE: The largest collection of material for the archive will likely be from Vietnam, as I live here.

I will not attempt to do an exhaustive list for this second report.

THAILAND

The protests that culminated in the resignation of Prime Minister Shinawatra Thaksin have dominated news coming from Thailand. As such, the power of the public to affect political change remains the greatest in Thailand - at least on the surface. Bangkok-based artists had sent me photographs of the ongoing demonstrations of which many participated. The Vietnamese press regularly covered the demonstrations apparently unconcerned that similar domestic demonstrations could occur.

The international conference entitled "Bridge the Gap", the third of its kind, was held at Chiang Mai University and The Land on 24th and 25th of February 2006. BTG is an ongoing forum by artists, scientists, and philosophers of the humanities and social sciences facilitating the exchange the ideas and interdisciplinary exploration. The first session of BTG occurred two years earlier in Kitakyushu, Japan organized by Center for Contemporary Art Kitakyushu. BTG 3 was curated by Akiko Miyake, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Rirkrit Tiravanija and coordinated by Thasnai Sethaseree. I have asked that Mr. Sethaseree forward me the transcripts from the conference for the final report.

The Thailand New Media Arts Festival (MAF06) runs May 2-4, 2006. MAF06 runs in venues throughout Bangkok and includes exhibitions, performance, installation, screenings, workshops and meetings for cultural exchange. I have written to Francis Wittenberger, director of the festival, for more media and literature from the event for the expressed use of AAA and the Martell project.

Partial Listing of Collected Materials

Asiatopia Performance Art CD (1998-2005) and event catalogs
Sutthirat Som Supaparinya. Images and catalog
Santiphap Jay Inkong-Ngam. The Khong Legend. VCD. 2003
Art4D Magazine. January 2006

LAOS

I will be traveling to Vientiane in the next weeks to find what there is to discover. This will be the first country that I will enter with no established contact. I've enquired about Laotian artists from several people and there has not been a great response. In Luang Prabang, Vietnam-based Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba last month was working on a new project that will be continued this autumn. He has given me his impressions of the climate for contemporary art in that city. But as it relates to this project, his working in Laos as a part of a larger international project demonstrates the information exchange. I will be contacting Mr. Tim Doling, on the recommendation of Phoebe, today to hopefully arrange a meeting in Vientiane this month.

FUTURE TASKS:

I must be in Hanoi and Laos this month to observe, meet and investigate artists, organizations and dynamics. If time allows, I will also attempt to make a return trip to Chiang Mai. Unfortunately, I will not be able to travel to either Mandalay or Luang Prabang, but will try to provide information, if available, through contacts in Yangon and and hopefully in Vientiane. Arts information and national policy information will be reorganized and then compared to the thesis of this project: to investigate the information flow among and within the sub-Mekong region nations with particular regard to artists and arts organizations. Many of the materials I've collected on separate CDs will be recombined on media to save space and to enhance access to the information through an organized structure. I will give a presentation of the research in June at the Asian Art Archive where I will be handing over collected materials. The final report will be ready, per contract, for final delivery to the Asian Art Archive in July.