



Rubber Man, 2014, by Khvay Samnang

UNCERTAIN FUTURES

Cambodian artists Khvay Samnang and Lim Sokchanlina are questioning the country's unchecked modernisation.

BY BRIAN CURTIN

“Phnom Penh is a city that gives herself without reservation, that lets herself be abused without flinching. She abandons herself to those who possess her just as she does to those who inhabit her, and she regrets it too late.” This horribly accurate observation by the journalist and author Thierry Cruvellier is the feminine *ying* to the masculine *yang* of Cambodia’s governance.

Cambodia’s long-standing PM Hun Sen is typically referred to as a “strongman” by the international media and is known to refer to his opponents as “dogs.” It should come as no surprise to learn, then, that Hun’s particular understanding of power was formed during the time he served the Khmer Rouge: absolute and brutal. Among a spectrum of human-rights abuses, one of the most the urgent – and highly emotive – issues facing contemporary Cambodia is the so-called land grabs. Under Hun’s

direction, thousands of people have been displaced from community land in order to make way for private-property development.

Two artists who are critically responding to this accelerated modernisation of Phnom Penh are Khvay Samnang and Lim Sokchanlina. Visitors to Cambodia’s capital gain little understanding of the human cost of its beautiful facades, languorous pace and tree-lined boulevards. But through photography, performance and installation, Khvay and Lim draw attention to the politics of urban development and, most profoundly, elucidate ideas about the very relationship between art and political engagement.

Both artists are original members of the arts collective

Stiev Selapak (Art Rebels), which was formed in 2007 as a mutual support group and has been crucial to the development of the contemporary art scene in Phnom Penh. They founded a noted art gallery in a restaurant which has since merged with SA SA BASSAC, the city’s premier art gallery and resource centre. Stiev Selapak also founded what is possibly the most unusual art and performance space in the world, the non-profit SA SA Art Projects in Phnom Penh’s White Building. This building is a Modernist masterpiece that was left unfinished due to the emergence of the Khmer Rouge and is currently home to hundreds of families who suffer the deprivations of Cambodia’s current governance.

The White Building is a

microcosm of the forced change facing the country. Under the threat of so-called development, Khvay interviewed the residents about the potential disruption to their lives and discovered a fearful unwillingness to reveal their identities. His photographic series “Human Nature” (2011) instead explored self-imposed anonymity as the residents wore masks of the artist’s making. The results are strange scenes of doll-like figures posed amidst often-garish props that humanise the dilapidated quarters. These figures become actors or ciphers for general questions about how a sense of home can be achieved.

The issue of anonymity is a curious one and I asked Khvay about the demands of censorship in his home country. He explained: “If you don’t have power, you cannot do anything. For an artist, the police can bribe you for the most arbitrary of reasons.”

artwork photos courtesy of the artists; portraits by Roger Nelson

There is an ambiguity at the heart of Khvay’s practice that may have been shaped by this awareness. Avoiding any implication of partisan politics, the artist creates metaphors that bring us away from the specific contexts of his interests to more universal considerations. Moreover, the sheer visceral impact of his work does what visual art does best: engages our imagination to think about the current world and perhaps imagine it differently.

In Khvay’s series “Untitled” (2011), the artist performed a gesture of pouring sand over his body at a number of different sites around Phnom Penh. The accompanying text for these works is a prose poem that described his movement through the different sites, including the waters on which vernacular houses are built. Khvay’s succinct gesture of showering himself with sand appears iconic and suggests both the pleasures of primal play and an experience altogether more ominous. Referencing the displacement of communities in order to develop land and lakes for private investment – the so-called land grabs – the prose poem was required for fear of seeming to directly criticise Hun’s government; and the images function very effectively as a contemplation of relationships between the individual, the environment and human agency which can be both beautiful and destructive.

At the time of writing, Khvay’s exhibition “Rubber Man” had opened in Phnom Penh. Comparable to “Untitled,” here the artist was prompted by the deforestation occurring in Cambodia in order to establish profitable rubber plantations. The Khmer word for rubber translates as “crying tree” and the artist can be seen performing as a ghostly, animistic presence on agitated, contentious sites.

While Khvay typically focuses



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The White Building (top left) forms part of the Modernist Bassac Riverfront Cultural Complex

on the relationship of the human body to the environment, Lim creates views and scenarios derived from both the literal and more fantastical urban face of Phnom Penh, playing on ideas of memory and change. His series “Wrapped Future” (2009–12) are photographs of corrugated iron hoardings that mark areas in the city under re-development. Shot in harsh daylight, their minimalism and seeming anonymity manages to be both benign and ominous, as we are unsure if we are within or outside the demarcated zone. The titles poignantly use “former,” such as *Former Ministry of Tourism, Southeastern Boulevard* and *Sisowath Quay*. And while the photographs are testament to the effacement of memory, they also signal an unclear future.

Urban Street Nightclub (2014) was a video installation that explored how property developers in the entertainment district of Phnom Penh use idealised images of Cambodia’s past as a palliative to their aggressive interventions in the present world. The gallery was filled with the noises of nightlife as viewers

were invited to circumnavigate a large metal fence on which the artist projected bustling scenes against a backdrop of large images of Angkorian temples, lotus flowers and beautiful beaches, the images used by developers to front their construction sites. Amidst the tacky glow of neon, we become spectators to our own world, and the achievements of history are flattened to mere symbols, a branding exercise to try and exonerate the materialism of the present.

"Rising Tonle Sap" (2012) is a series of photographs of the eponymous river and lake which Sokchanlina traveled, fascinated by its diversity. His intervention was simple: with the aid of local families, he floated industrial blocks of ice, which would quickly melt in the tropical climate. The



Lim Sokchanlina

works are a curious meditation on how the entirely incongruous can appear so natural.

While it can be casually assumed that an artist, like anyone, is shaped in particular ways by the cultures and societies that they emerge from, this fact is little elaborated on because it would exist in tension with the concurrent assumption that artists fundamentally orchestrate the meanings of their own practice; to suggest that art is not the product of free will is to worry that it is not "distanced" enough from society to function effectively as art, instead becoming a mere symptom of greater forces. When artists are deemed political, this issue is heightened: after all, it is hardly the function of art to tell us what to think when there are so many other vehicles for bias and propaganda in the world.



Human Nature, 2010-11, by Khvay Samnang

Urban Street Night Club, 2013, by Lim Sokchanlina



One could say, without hyperbole, that Khvay and Lim manage their politics sublimely. I spoke about this with the curator and academic Roger Nelson, who has worked with both artists over a number of years. He explained: "Khvay and Lim feel a great sense of urgency to respond to the intensity and rapidity of changes and tensions in Cambodia. Importantly, both artists use a focus on the locally and/or nationally specific as a way to address issues and raise questions of broader significance: they have a deep and intuitive understanding of the regional and global importance of local concerns. Neither Khvay nor Lim address political issues head-on, or in any straightforward manner. The complex layers of coding and humour make their work richly rewarding of careful and close consideration, and I think this appeals in different ways to a great variety of publics."

In both artists' works we gain a great sense of how the spaces we daily occupy are not mere

Urban Street Night Club, 2013, by Lim Sokchanlina



backdrops to how we behave or to the relationships we form. Instead, space is inherent to ways we see ourselves and each other; in the examples of Khvay and Lim, questions of an accelerated modernity, abrupt change and an uncertain future are reflected in the presence and absence of human bodies, where individual desires and needs are effaced or just about to disappear.

There is undoubtedly much of relevance to be discerned outside the interest of Cambodia itself. Lim will carry out an artist residency at Toot Yung Art Center in Bangkok this October. This is under the auspices of a project curated by myself and Nelson titled "Rates of Exchange, Un-Compared: Contemporary Art in Bangkok and Phnom Penh," a series of workshops, exchanges and exhibitions funded by the Australia Council for the Arts. To date, there has been little dialogue between these two cities that suffer on-going critical issues of "development" and change.✳