

THE AESTHETIC OF CONCEPT:



PERFORMANCE ART IN CAMBODIA

by Roger Nelson

PURVIEW: Megafauna Mo, Clare McCracken, 2012, *Full Circle*, Amy Lee Sanford, 2012, *Riverscapes*, Lim Sokchanlina, 2012, Svay Sareth, and the Khmer Rouge.

Performance art is often pretty boring. I mean, it's usually pretty weird, and I like weird, and it's sometimes pretty sexual, and I like sexual, and it's occasionally quite dramatic, and I like drama, but somehow it's still kind of dull. A guy jerking off under the floorboards is not as fun as... other things. (Oh, and that's not just a random thought: it's a reference to a seminal 1971 performance art piece by Vito Acconci. But you already knew that.)

I get it. Being an artist shouldn't just be about making stuff for a gallery to sell. Seeing art can be an ephemeral 'you had to be there' experience. The body is a contested site of... yawn. Why is something that arguably began as a challenge to institutionalised stuffiness now so wrapped up in pretentious self-referential fakery?

But I'm starting to change my tune. Performance art *can* be cool, if you just ignore the oh-so-kooky canon of Abramovic and Actionism and flared-trousers-wearing Americans. A few months ago, my dear friend Clare McCracken made a sweet performance in Melbourne: she gave out pink fake moustaches at the opening of an exhibition I'd curated. The show also included a giant pink moustache backlit on the wall. McCracken took a few photos, and if you were there then you got to keep your moustache. It wasn't really clear where the boundary was between the performance (the handing out and wearing of the moustaches) and the objects of documentation (the photographs of moustache wearers, the Photoshopped mock-up of a moustachioed Clare, the various mo's themselves). That felt like at least half the point of the work. That was it. Hilarious, Fun, Not pretentious.

Now I'm in Cambodia and I can't stop thinking about performance. It's generally not hilarious here. Or fun. But it's also not pretentious. That line between the performance and the

documentation is even more obscured here and that blurring is even more crucial to the power of these works. In the Cambodian language of Khmer, the word for art—*selapak*—has traditionally referred more to the classical performing arts than to visual works. But despite this, within the swiftly shifting (and tiny but growing) contemporary art scene, performance art remains a marginal practice.

There are very few artists who work with performance, and of those who do, most are blissfully unaware of the crusty Eur-American canon. Workshops with a handful of visiting international performance artists, and insights brought home by Cambodian artists who have travelled, have thus far been far more influential on local practice than textbook 'art history'. The overlapping relationship between the real live you-had-to-be-there act of the performance and the documentation (in various media) of that performance is a complex and challenging issue. It's one way in which Cambodian art makes a unique and valuable contribution to a regional Southeast Asian conversation about the place of documentation in visual culture, and to a broader international discourse on the interplay between performance, photography, video, and new media.

'Self-indulgent and self-indulging' is how Amy Lee Sanford describes boring performance art of the wanky/wanking variety. But to describe her own piece, *Full Circle*, she simply says 'Um, I'll be sitting in a room, I'll be breaking pots, I'll be gluing them together again.' And it's fair, she's right, that's it.

Full Circle was a durational performance piece which was presented in March 2012 in Phnom Penh. The simplicity of the work—the fact that this really is all that Sanford did, for six consecutive days—belies its extraordinary richness of associations, inhering in layers of symbolic references that are at once unmistakably specific and irrepressibly universal.

'This is my first public performance piece,' explains the artist. 'My other works have been really studio-based and I have really

not wanted the process to be in public, and there's something that changed in me, that this piece needed to be done and be accessible by people.' Previously, Sanford's practice has centred on textiles and new media, including most recently works made with broken sheets of glass.

That something 'changed' in Sanford's practice during the development of *Full Circle* is perhaps unsurprising: this is her most frankly personal work, addressing the subject of the Khmer Rouge genocide that many—if not most—Cambodians are unable or unwilling to publicly discuss. Since announcing this performance, the artist notes, her colleagues, neighbours, landlords and friends all know the details of what is rather euphemistically called her 'story'. Just as this is the first time she has made her working process public, it is also the first open sharing of this painful past.

Although born in Cambodia, Sanford was raised in the US by her Swedish-American adopted mother; she was the only Asian in her neighbourhood. Her father wrote regular letters from Cambodia, but 'after April 17, 1975, the letters stopped coming... I grew up with the belief that all of my family had been killed during the Khmer Rouge era, and that I was the only surviving member,' she explains. It was not until 2004 that Sanford discovered she had blood relatives who had survived. The pots used in *Full Circle* are all made in her father's province of Kompong Chhnang, which is famed for its production of these simple and robust vessels.

Full Circle is in part, a meditation on Sanford's fractured family history and process of healing. 'I create art in order to observe, examine and transform the lasting effects of war including trauma, loss, displacement and guilt,' she says. The repetitive process of breaking and remaking the pots, while mesmerising in itself, is also richly allegorical of ways in which Sanford—like countless Cambodians—has had to reconstruct her understandings of her life and family. Its slowness is at once necessary and excruciating; I imagine it has a similar feel to sitting through a session of the interminable Khmer Rouge Tribunal.

But it would be a mistake to see *Full Circle* as solely or straightforwardly being 'about' the Khmer Rouge. Presented at a time when growing numbers of young contemporary artists in Cambodia express a frustration at the myopic international view of their country as defined by Pol Pot's regime, *Full Circle* is richly multi-layered and open in its associations and echoes. The performance may have been especially poignant here, but its gently cathartic appeal is also universal. 'It's certainly not specific to Cambodia, but it resonates. It resonates *everywhere*, in my opinion,' Sanford affirms.

New photo- and video-based works made with the images that documented *Full Circle* are currently being prepared for prospective exhibitions and the performance itself may be recreated around the region and/or globe, in varying permutations and using materials (in place of the Kompong Chhnang pots) that are vernacular to each new setting.

So although the performance is over for now, the documentation remains in process and its future is as yet undecided. *Full Circle* is a work that is presently and indefinitely in flux. This seems appropriate, as the processes of healing that it both allegorises and facilitates are also perpetual. Sanford conceives of the work as an 'offering: not an example but an *offering*. I'm showing the struggle of putting things together, the intensity of the energy that goes into it, and the focus and the diligence.' And for Sanford, it's because the work is an offering that the process had to be presented in public: 'I'm doing this for people who can't do this, or who won't do this.' As I come to discover, this notion of performance as offering is something this artist shares with others.

Interestingly though, Sanford wasn't particularly bothered with whether or not she had an audience for the performance. She considered the possibility of doing it in a public place—out on the sidewalk—but a combination of the heat, pollution and ants deterred her. She tried leaving the curtains of the gallery open to attract passers-by from the busy boulevard, but the glare of sunshine deterred her also—as it clashed with her carefully-lit, somewhat theatrical aesthetic. Although she felt a need for this performance to be publicly 'offered', she didn't necessarily need a public to receive it—which may be where the importance of the documentation comes in. That achieving the right 'look' was more important to her than maximising her audience, demonstrates the centrality of documentation in Sanford's work. But that's not to say that the performance was *only* done in order to be documented: it was also important as a public 'offering' and as a personally meditative process. Indeed, the loud ticking of the timer on the camera which loomed over Sanford became for her a handy aid in inducing a trance-like concentration on the Sisyphean task at hand.

For Lim Sokchanlina, a performance is more simply and straightforwardly a means of making photographs and/or video. When I ask him whether it's important to him that he has an audience for his performances, he says, without hesitation, 'I don't care.' The performance he's currently working on involves making iced confections—similar to the snowcones you find in Australian beach towns—and giving them to fishermen from Kompong Phluk village, on the Tonle Sap lake in northern Cambodia. He's videoing and photographing this activity, a process necessitating the hiring of several boats. The work grew out of an earlier series of photographs taken in Kompong Phluk for the Southeast Asian touring exhibition *Riverscapes*, in which Lim addressed issues of climate change and its social implications in a collection of beautiful images of metre-long blocks of ice floating in the gentle brown water.

So if he doesn't care if he has an audience, I ask, then why does he call this work performance? Why not just call it video art or photography? After all, artists have been orchestrating kooky situations just in order to photograph them for decades. 'Because it's an *offering*,' he answers. 'I want to give the ice to the fishermen as an offering, because it is so hot for them under the sun in the boats.' He also wants to thank the villagers for their generosity in hosting him, and to continue to strengthen and elaborate his connection with this precarious community.

Amazingly, *offering* is Lim's word, just as it is Sanford's. To my knowledge, they haven't discussed this terminology with each other or heard it from anyone else. And yet as a way of understanding the reason it's important that their work involves a performance—even if the documentation is what most people are going to see—I can't think of a more perfect word. 'Offering' captures the personal natures of their chosen acts, private and almost spiritual (and recalling Buddhist offerings made at home or at the pagoda, a part of daily life for many Cambodians).

But it also captures the artists' generous and community-minded natures. In the same way that McCracken would never have wanted just to Photoshop a pink moustache onto herself, Lim and Sanford needed to invite a public to participate in their process. (And indeed, in the course of writing this article, Lim invited me to travel six hours by bus to be there when he made snowcones for the Kompong Phluk fishermen. It turns out that previous performances have had small groups of close friends and trusted curators there too. Maybe having an audience is something he cares about more than he realises or lets on.)

Documentation may be central to Sanford's and Lim's practice, but for Svay Sareth it's an afterthought—if it even happens at all. On several occasions, he's been literally heading out the door to make a public performance when a friend just happens to catch sight of him and run along after him carrying a camera. Svay's performances, which typically are physically arduous activities that run over several days, are 'like medicine,' he says. They're cathartic acts which he explains as helping him to address his enduring memories of wartime: the artist was raised in constant flight from forests to refugee camps. He did not see a coconut or a palm tree until he was nineteen years old, unfaithful in tropical Cambodia, and in his conversation, horrifically violent images frequently recur.

'It's important that something happens that is not planned; chance; something that I cannot plan, that happens during action,' Svay says. I ask him to elaborate on this idea of chance, and why it's so important in motivating him to make 'action' or performance-based work. Since he is a gentle and romantic man, educated in France, I expect that Svay will idealistically wax lyrical about the creative beauty of chance happenings, or the freedoms of artistic possibilities. But instead he says that chance is 'like during the war, when the bomb can go in a place but people cannot know before—cannot plan before—if the bomb will come to this place. And they need to know ... but they cannot know exactly if the bomb will destroy their house or not.' The artist's eyes burn with

the frustration of trying to communicate a feeling that I will never fully comprehend.

For Svay, the public that he encounters during his performances is an irrelevance, an annoyance. They're just a distraction from his solitary task of pushing his boat or pulling his giant ball or riding his bicycle as it tows an oversized silver coin. Lim or Sanford basically aren't fussed about having an audience. But for Svay, public interaction is something to be actually avoided. 'I need to do this,' he says simply. Sometimes, he has even carried information cards to hand out in order to dodge the need for conversations with passersby.

Hearing this, I asked about the documentation, why this is also so irrelevant and uninteresting to this artist (especially since for several years now it has formed the basis of what he exhibits). His answer is one of the most challenging and exciting things I have heard in a long time. 'For me, I do not think about beautiful or ugly. I think there is an aesthetic of materials, there is even an aesthetic of pain and of poverty.'

'For me, there is an aesthetic of *concept*,' he continues. And I now understand that 'aesthetic' is what these artists (and a few others in Cambodia, too) are searching for. An idea with elegance. It's somewhere there in the divide between the performance and the documentation, in the spaces between the artist and audience, between the past and the future.

Rachel Baxendale
recommends

RAMONA KOVAL

It shouldn't have taken a daggy mother figure to shut Bret Easton Ellis down, but there's something amusingly telling about the fact that it did.

At the 2010 Byron Bay Writers Festival, Ellis made a rare appearance, and it was erstwhile ABC Radio National *Book Show* host Ramona Koval who interviewed him—if 'interviewed' is the appropriate term. 'Babysat' might be closer to the mark.

Koval opened with a standard-issue question about character development between an earlier novel, *Less Than Zero*, and his latest, *Imperial Bedrooms*.

Listening to the podcast, you can almost hear Ellis's thought process during the awkward pause before he speaks.

He's nervous, he ponders possible answers, then he reverts to twelve-year-old mode, responding with a tangent on the topic: 'Delta Goodrem is hot'.

Koval lets him go for a few minutes, but finally asks: 'Do you want me to ask you another question? Didn't you like that question?'

Her second question elicits a monologue on the statement, 'eighties music videos are so gay.'

Absurdist contempt for the formulaic rules of the book publicity game is often laudable. The problem with Ellis is that his contempt exists to disguise his inability to play the game.

When Koval finally does get him talking about his work, his responses are rarely more complex than 'I just like writing a four-hundred-page plotless novel'—lending credence to the perception that with Ellis, as Gertrude Stein once said of her hometown of Oakland, 'when you finally get there, there's no there there'.

Koval's tough Jewish grandmother act with Ellis is but one of her good deeds as daggy mum of the Oz lit scene—her archive of interviews with many of the greatest living writers speaks to that.

Her latest public project has involved hosting a free and frequently booked-out weekly series of Australian literature lectures at the Wheeler Centre, set up in the wake of Melbourne University student Stephanie Guest's heroic staging of a series of lectures with writers such as Elliot Perlman, Sophie Cunningham and Helen Garner, after the university dropped all Australian literature offerings in 2011.

Having last year axed Koval's Book Show in pursuit of a 'younger, hipper, audience' (apparently *The First Tuesday Book Club*'s Jennifer Byrne and her all-compensating smile are more the choice *du jour* among our demographic—really?), Auntie ABC may beg to differ, but as a wake-up to some literary 'young people' and a saviour to others, Ramona Koval gets my vote.