



1/ Installation view of *The White Night*, 2012, Sa Sa Art Projects, Phnom Penh; photo: Khvay Samnang



2/ Installation view of *2 + 3 + 4*, 2006, JavaArts, Phnom Penh, featuring work by Sopheap Pich, Leang Seckon, Cong Khanh Bui, and Richard Streitmatter Tran; image courtesy JavaArts

Non-profit art spaces in Cambodia: strength in diversity

ROGER NELSON

In Cambodia, there are no institutions that collect contemporary art. There is no publisher dedicated to printing books on contemporary art, no government funding for contemporary artists or galleries, and virtually no indigenous market for contemporary art. The contemporary art scene in Cambodia remains in its infancy, among the last in Southeast Asia to develop a strong regional and international following. What there *is*, however, is a small but growing number of extraordinary artists (some now attracting keen international attention), and a surprisingly dynamic range of approaches to exhibiting their work. The work being made is deserving of its own fuller discussion. Much of the best of it is in photography, although there is a growing interest in performance, video and new media. This essay will instead focus on some of the key spaces in which this work is exhibited, specifically on three differing versions of non-profit.

Elsewhere internationally, non-profit art spaces emerged primarily in opposition to ageing and inflexible institutional forms; in an art world as small as Cambodia's though, new models of exhibition spaces have no old institutions to rail against. Rather, they have the potential to shape new terrain through experimental approaches and mindfulness of the local context. For some, being not-for-profit is an administrative decision or a choice influenced by development discourses moreso than creative practice; for others though, it is a radical gesture of adventurous experimentation.

When American Dana Langlois arrived in Phnom Penh in 1998, there were almost no venues showing contemporary art.¹ Decades of civil war and genocide devastated the nation's once thriving artistic and cultural community; most sources estimate that 90% of

Cambodia's artists and intellectuals were killed by the Khmer Rouge. In 2000 Langlois opened Java Cafe & Gallery on majestic Sihanouk Boulevard, serving espresso and baked goods to a growing community of expats, and using some of the profits to cover the cost of exhibiting artworks by local Cambodian and foreign artists on the walls. 'I don't think I had these big grandiose ideas initially,' Langlois says. By 2007 she began to charge commission to artists but the cafe business was still significantly supplementing the art exhibitions.

Twelve years on, the financial situation has begun to change. Langlois's cafe still provides free exhibition space and staffing, but with art sales to expats and tourists increasing, JavaArts (as it is now known) has become self-sufficient. An expanded program including residencies, an annual festival and other activities are all supported by income generated by JavaArts – and Langlois is now incorporating the organisation as a non-profit in her native United States, with '501c3' status allowing her to solicit tax-free donations from US citizens. She explains:

I decided I would basically formalise what I've been doing all these years anyhow, which was shifting resources out of the cafe ... into producing projects and exhibitions. All JavaArts activities are sustained by gallery sales, so the commercial element is still there, but it is now very specifically and officially filtered right back into the system. And what the cafe does is subsidise staff, rent, overheads.

So while JavaArts has been expanding its activities to provide more opportunities for artists, the shift to a non-profit model is as much an administrative decision as a 'philosophical shift'.



Installation view of Romeet Gallery, Phnom Penh, 2011; photo: Dylan Walker



The White Building, Phnom Penh; photo: Chhon Pisal, one of the residents of the Building and a participant in the photography classes offered by Sa Sa Art Projects

Langlois's passion for contemporary art is undeniable: without formal training, she has dedicated twelve years to nurturing the fledgling art scene in this post-trauma society. Many of Cambodia's most internationally successful artists have exhibited at Java – including photographer Khvay Samnang, painter Leang Seckon, and sculptor Sopheap Pich² – and the warmly generous Langlois is widely liked and admired. Yet her language reflects the jargon of NGOs moreso than of contemporary art. She speaks of wanting to support 'the long-term sustainability' of JavaArts and proudly credits many of her ideas to her husband Sebastien Marot, the founder and Executive Director of NGO Friends International who is often hailed as one of the world's leading social entrepreneurs.

Twenty years after the UN's biggest-ever intervention, Phnom Penh reputedly remains more densely populated with NGOs than any other city internationally. Unsurprisingly, JavaArts is not the only art space to be shaped by this peculiar context. Nearby is Romeet Gallery, which opened in September 2011 as a 'social business' of Phare Ponleu Selpak.³ An incorporated NGO, Phare is one of Cambodia's largest art schools, also teaching circus, theatre and music, and providing social welfare programs. Gallery Manager and curator Kate O'Hara explains that Romeet 'is giving career paths for graduated students' from Phare, providing a dedicated exhibition space and pristine, professionally prepared catalogues. Moreover, Romeet Gallery hopes to expose its artists – most based in the poor and isolated rural city of Battambang – to Phnom Penh's artistic community and to regional developments. Lamentably, Phare does not teach art history, and thus many students and graduates show little awareness of the work of their international contemporaries. Through artist's talks, visits from regional artists, and perhaps eventually residencies, O'Hara hopes Romeet can provide 'a centre for exchange in the arts ... space to have conversations, discussions and dialogue'. O'Hara's dedication is inspiring, and her work through Romeet is 'piquing interest,' she says.

Although the standard of exhibited work varies, Romeet strives for what NGOs like to call 'excellence,' rather than positioning itself as in need of charitable help. Several corporate sponsors – including oil business Total, the world's fifth-largest company – support Romeet in meeting running costs as it becomes more established. O'Hara explains that 'our sponsors really see us as a cultural partner, not as part of their charitable works'. Formerly of Melbourne's Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI), O'Hara is keenly aware of the

total absence of government support for arts in Cambodia and sees corporate sponsorship as an alternative in this context. Romeet's sponsors are 'not particularly hands-on', she says, but do provide helpful advice with identifying and developing potential markets. Like any social business (and Phare has several), one of the longer-term goals of Romeet Gallery is to outgrow the need for sponsorship, and to generate income which can be used to support Phare's social welfare and education programs. So in time, Romeet may feel the same pressure to exhibit saleable art as any commercial gallery.

The organisational structure of both Romeet and JavaArts is clearly influenced by – indebted to, even – the multitude of NGOs and international aid groups in Southeast Asia's poorest country. Conversely, Cambodia's only artist-run non-profit space, Sa Sa Art Projects (SSAP), operates in opposition to this prevailing context. 'We want to challenge the NGO model of how development is run and managed ... and look at another model that can be engaged with the community in a more rewarding and effective way,' says SSAP Director, artist Lyno Vuth. In a submission to 2011's UN Social Forum, Vuth spoke of wanting 'to create high-quality works that are easily accessible to and enjoyed by everyday Cambodian people, rather than answering the interests of expats and the international art market'.

The 'Sa Sa' in SSAP's name is short for *Stiev Selapak*, or 'art rebels'. Alongside Vuth, artists Khvay Samnang, Lim Sokchanlina and Vandy Rattana founded the collective in frustration at the foreign domination of contemporary art spaces.⁴ Their vision has evolved; they now work in tandem with US-born curator Erin Gleeson, who is Artistic Director at new commercial space SA SA BASSAC and perhaps the country's most internationally known curator. The Sa Sa artists have all presented solo exhibitions at SA SA BASSAC, developing their own practice alongside their community projects.

SSAP's space is in the so-called White Building, an iconic example of 1960s New Khmer Architecture.⁵ Crumbling and crowded, the White Building is now perilously dilapidated. 'It's awkward, and strange, and it's dangerous, but it is an artists' community. So we wanted to go where people didn't want to go,' Vuth explains. Comparing SSAP with JavaArts, Romeet Gallery and SA SA BASSAC, he says that the project 'is looking at what *other* groups of artists that we haven't engaged with'. Poverty and the stigma attached to the White Building typically marginalise this community. It's for this reason that SSAP decided to engage in collaborative dialogue and 'experiment together'.

SSAP runs free weekly art classes for White Building residents, teaching skills in photography and installation, among others. The participants help to shape exhibitions that are the public manifestations of this ongoing collaborative process. The most recent exhibition, *The White Night* (February 2012), was conceived and planned in partnership with the mostly teenage artists who participated. The artists chose what parts of the Building to exhibit their work in: 'not just inside the studio,' Vuth explains, 'because in the end we don't want it to be just a studio within the building; we want to break the boundaries, to be part of the people there, within the neighbourhood.' *The White Night* included public video projections and a slide show in a neighbourhood beer garden. The participating artists were enlisted 'to spread [news of the project] within the community in the process of the making,' with some artists choosing to take portraits of residents while others chose to teach those residents how to use cameras themselves.

It's likely that the White Building will soon be demolished; it occupies prime real estate (and the Cambodian government is very friendly to private development). Vuth admits that 'we worry about it,' but stresses that 'we want to be there while it lasts, and work with the community there while they're still there'. And when the Building is gone, SSAP will simply move on. 'I think the idea of longevity is totally fake and pretentious,' Vuth declares. Mimicking the 'sustainability' jargon of NGOs, he argues that too many non-profit models strive 'to make things sustain, to make things sustain ... but what do we sustain? Ourselves, and not the thing that we want to sustain.'

SSAP does not claim to have the answers; their process is one of discovery, and their non-profit and non-NGO organisational fluidity is strategically necessary to facilitate the flexibility and experimentation they insist upon. But it is not just in organisational structure that Cambodian art spaces are creatively challenging accepted models. The physical space of exhibition venues is also an important point of difference. In an Australian or Euro-American context, it's hard to imagine a gallery in a cafe being taken seriously. Yet after twelve years, Langlois remains enthusiastic that JavaArts is 'about inserting art into daily moments'.

Certainly, the informal feel of the space makes it more accessible for many Cambodians than other galleries. Anida Yoeu Ali, a Cambodian-born, US-raised artist currently in residency at JavaArts, asserts her wish to 'challenge this need to remove art/the artist from their homes/studios, everyday life, community settings, public spaces in order to achieve some idea of "cerebral" contemplation or acceptance'. Ali admits that 'sometimes there is a need to present in a "white box" but ... one should be aware of the limited audience that has access to those spaces'. Of course, being co-located with a cafe means that JavaArts is loathe to exhibit work that is

grotesque or disturbing and its installation and lighting flexibility is somewhat limited.

Independent curator Oscar Ho Hing-kay, who was guest curator at the 2nd and 3rd Asia Pacific Triennials, argues that in the Cambodian context 'the "white cube" gallery is a surprisingly alternative space'. In more developed art communities, the 'white cube' is generally viewed as synonymous with institutional conservatism. In Cambodia, though, the absence of traditional institutions allows experimental artists such as the Sa Sa collective to reframe such models and ascribe to them new meanings. For some Cambodian artists, having one's work presented with the same degree of professionalism and care as other international contemporary artists would expect is synonymous with being taken seriously in both a local and a global context. That SA SA BASSAC proudly announces its status as the country's only such space is testament to its appeal.

It may no longer be a lawless state but Cambodia remains a place where widely accepted rules often don't apply. This is certainly true of the nation's contemporary art. With international attention on Southeast Asian artists ever intensifying, new models of exhibition spaces will doubtless continue to proliferate; the Cambodian example suggests that those driven by creative experimentation are set to produce enthralling results.

1. Other than the French Cultural Centre, which continues to play a respected role.
2. At thirty years of age, Khvay Samnang is hotly tipped as a 'rising star'; earlier this year he was included in important group exhibitions at Singapore Art Museum and New York's Tally Beck Contemporary. Painter Leang Seckon is represented by Rossi & Rossi in London and exhibited at the 4th Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial in 2009; he is perhaps the best known living artist in Cambodia. Sculptor Sopheap Pich (born in Cambodia and educated in the US) is showing in the current *Documenta15* in Kassel, Germany (until 16 September) with a solo exhibition, and is represented by Tyler Rollins Fine Art in New York; he is perhaps the best known Cambodian artist internationally.
3. 'Social business' is a term credited to Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus. It is in common usage in Cambodia, typically for restaurants or handicraft stores catering to expats and tourists.
4. Artists Heng Ravuth and Kong Vollak were also founding members. Both have since left the Stiev Selapak collective but remain supportive of SSAP and exhibit at SA SA BASSAC.
5. New Khmer Architecture is the name given to a vernacular expression of the modernist International Style most famously championed by the Le Corbusier-trained Cambodian architect Vann Molyvann.

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