
Conversation: Phnom Penh

Art, National Comfort in a Decolonising Southeast Asia

ISSUE editor, Venka Purushothaman with artists Mella Jaarsma a, Sopheap Pich, Khvay Samnang, Milenko Prvački

This conversation took place in Phnom Penh, Cambodia on 27 and 28 April 2022. The discussion aims to be as close to the participants' comments within the vernacular expressions and has only been edited for clarity where needed. The original transcription was considerably longer; the present form is a focused rendition.

Contextual Space for Art and the National

Venka Purushothaman

Change is ever-present, and artist communities, educational institutions, governments, and economies are all responding in particular ways. But we are not finding enough voices of artists in these changing moments speaking to issues. Perhaps people think that artists' expressions of their voice are only through their artwork. But we know that is only one dimension of expression. ISSUE is a space for artists to 'speak'. We feel that it's important to engage them in conversation, to understand their own take on different issues that concern us. This conversation is ultimately to formulate critical questions for our times. The focus for us is the concept of a 'playground' both as a practical space of play and a sophisticated embodiment of existential conditions. Play, ground, ground play and playground open us to opportunities to reflect critically on our current condition.

Milenko Prvački

Last few years have been a bit dark because of the global situation and you know, we question some very big issues and even now, each year seems to be worse than the last. So, we decided to take a slightly lighter issue like a playground, but not only a playground like the one for kids or for leisure, but a more sophisticated one. Because even I find that what happens in Ukraine is a playground for war.

Venka Purushothaman

So, for us, I think the 'playground' itself was something that is more than a physical space in terms of the play but there is also a metaphysical dimension that's emerging. A playground is also about artistic and creative exploration. You know, how do you, through playmaking, how do you discover, how do you explore? So, we were reflecting on the fact—and we've also gotten different writers to think about it—that through play humanity has also evolved in many ways. And sometimes play is called experimentation, you know, in many ways. There is a lot of space



From left to right: Venka Purushothaman, Reaksmay Yean, Mella Jaarsma a, Khvay Samnang, Sopheap Pich, Milenko Prvački. YK Art House/Silapak Trotchaek Pnek Gallery, Phnom Penh

for joy, discovery, and fun; and as Milenko says, there are also lots of opportunities to critically look at it, and the fact that you know war itself has become a playground of sorts. Then there's also another dimension, there's the technological dimension which has entered the art world. Today, technology and you know when you talk about the metaverse, it is as a playground of disembodied the human out of the lived condition to a virtual one. And the fact that the world is investing so much in a virtual human more so than in the embodied human also makes for quite an interesting playground that we are considering because so far the only approach we have seen taken is that it is only a financial dimension to this playground of the metaverse and not necessarily a social, creative dimension. We are in many different layers of 'playgrounds' right now. So, we think that play itself is also looking at a spatial dimension, [such as] the gallery as a playground of ideas.

But playgrounds are always managed by adults for children, you know; they call it safe and sound and protected and developmental work happens. However, playgrounds today are also unsafe spaces. So, when it's not safe to be in a playground, what does that playground really mean? So I think that's the whole idea of, you know, 'playground' also becoming a place of surveillance, right? So, we find that irony, the fact that what a playground means originally, if you look from a child's perspective, is all about freedom.

What does freedom mean? In contextualising ideas, Milenko and I landed on the 'playground' to enable us to raise these questions alongside artists. What ground play is in action? Such interesting concepts when what was supposed to be fun and free and about self-discovery, playgrounds, no longer is about self-discovery. For example, I come down a slide. I fall. I injure myself. Therein lies my discovery.

Sopheap Pich	That's when there's no playground!
Venka Purushothaman	And there's no more playground!
Sopheap Pich	Which is the best playground I think.
Venka Purushothaman	<p>Absolutely. Today, we spend more time injury-proofing playgrounds and it is no longer about discovery or self-discovery. Are we setting new ground rules for what the playground is? What are the new rules, are there going to be new rules for this or should we not have them? All right, should there be a shape and structure to the playgrounds? And is it about the construction of that space? The most important ingredient of the 'playground' is the human at the centre of human association and interaction with others. And our children—we apply the concept—children go to the playground, they don't know the other children but they all work together, they come together, they collaborate.</p> <p>I have said a lot but I would like you to consider these questions and concerns and share with us your own take on those kinds of processes.</p>
Milenko Prvački	To add to Venka's point, I was thinking about different artists with strong practices who are all happy with doing the same things and nothing else. The reason why the three of you are here is because of [each] your own different practices, functioning and creating in your own studio, your own playground.
Khvay Samnang	Just a short introduction about my art practice. I studied painting at the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA), Cambodia. But, of course, I did very little painting because I was into photography, and digital technology. I paint with light. I am more performance-focused, performance with my body. I work mostly on issues of land rights, human rights. Where there is a problem, I go there and from that place, learn what happened and then experiment with that place.
Sopheap Pich	<p>I'm Sopheap. I continue to find out what the hell I'm doing. Questioning it all the time but I keep doing the same thing, I still can't get to what that is. I think that I, if I have to summarise my way of thinking or working, it would be that I try to absorb things from my memory and from my experiences and try to consolidate them all at the same time into an artwork, every single artwork. And that entails politics, that entails childhood memory, art history, things my teachers taught me, what not to do; and it entails play, most of it is play, but a serious kind of play I guess because I'm an adult and I have to accept that I'm somehow responsible for something, not sure what it is exactly, I just know I have to be responsible. So, that entails sometimes taking myself too seriously, and sometimes being a bit hard-headed which can be read as selfish and egotistical.</p> <p>I've been back here in Cambodia for 20 years and it's where I have found my path, I think I might have found my voice but I think my path is more important than my voice. And I try to do the most work I can, every year, to be honest. I try to be productive. So maybe that has something to do with my belief that in order to survive we have to be responsible.</p>
Venka Purushothaman	Where were you before you came back?
Sopheap Pich	I was born in 1971 and my family left after the Khmer Rouge in 1979, living in refugee camps for five years and then ended up in

Massachusetts, USA when I was [between] 13 and 14 years old. I did all my schooling in the US and I was fortunate enough to be hard-headed to not listen to the better advices and went on my own to pursue an art degree. I came back here in 2002. My father passed away last year, my mother's still in the US, my three brothers are still in the US. I have one brother here, we both came back.

Milenko Prvački

So interesting to see the new generation of Cambodians coming back, but not the parents. That's interesting.

Venka Purushothaman

We can come back to some of the points you mentioned, but let's hear from Mella.

Mella Jaarsma

My name is Mella, I was born in the Netherlands and I came to study in Indonesia in 1984 and since then I lived there. Because somehow I feel it's my place, in 1988 I started together with my Indonesian husband, an art playground, called Cemeti. Since 2016, Nindityo, my husband and I stepped down after 28 years so that a new generation can continue with the art space. We need new voices, new generations. Of course, it has changed a lot but that's part of it and I am also happy with it. So yeah, I feel it very much relates to this idea of 'playground' with the idea that I always question the function of the arts, so how can we contribute something through the arts to open up questions but also to sort of make statements to think for the better. So this playground, or Cemeti, that I run for so many years was always a place to provoke, to connect, to open up, to show all the voices than the regular constitutions of education and religion—this is so strong in Indonesia. And also this idea of 'playground', what does it mean nowadays to have an art space in the global area with the internet? So sometimes I feel like we had more freedom during the beginning of this century because it was just before the internet and Whatsapp and Instagram, related to censorship. We had more freedom to do things in an art space, in this playground we could express what we wanted; but now because everything is captured and then put online—some artists were already caught by the police because art events were put online and got censored because of that.

Also with creating my own work, I feel like it's also very important to show the things that concern me and I work a lot with costumes, especially since the end of the 1990s. For me, costumes create a close bridge with the audience so the messages I want to address through my work or through the costumes directly connect with the public. I always look for ways, how to make the connection with the people standing in front of the artworks so I'm really thinking from the position of the audience. So this also somehow relates to the playground and also the idea of what do you want, as an artist to communicate and for what to place artworks in this world. Where and what kind of community is looking at it and what do you want to address.

Milenko Prvački

I was born in a country that doesn't exist anymore. I was born in the former Yugoslavia and when I came to Singapore, it was Yugoslavia. Then slowly because of the civil war, it disappeared. But I was originally from Belgrade, Serbia. I studied in Romania, and I end up in Singapore. I'm an educator and I trained as a painter. I have lived in different systems—a socialist country, a communist country, and Singapore. I have spent time in the US. So, I experience these different playgrounds and frames for playgrounds.

Just thinking about Romania which was very restrictive during Ceaușescu's time and as a student we couldn't see any shows, only very ordinary social-communist narratives, but if you visit the studio, it was always amazing, it's a totally different playground. Because they can play, explore and do whatever they want in the studio except not show up. And then in other countries, that time was so free, and so it was a good experience for me, and that's what I'm talking about—a sophisticated playground, that even if it's hard, even if it's complicated, all of us as artists we are in permanent confusion you know and that's what differs us from other people. And when my students tell me "I'm lost!" I always reply that I have been lost over 50 years. It's fine, it's our stage you know. I'm trained as a painter but I do installations, a lot of drawings, sculptures. I love movies, video, but I start doing abstract art because of too strong narratives around and I found that painting is out of that speed; every photograph, video maker, filmmaker they can tell this story much easier, faster and so I move only in abstraction exploring different kinds of areas. At the same time I have been an educator for almost 30 years, so I'm watching my lost students playing around and teaching them that this is the way to do it.

Mella Jaarsma

Super!

Venka Purushothaman

All your backgrounds have some interlinks around displacement, discovery and play. But I would like to return to a point Sopheap made earlier that the path is more important than the voice in any given space.

Sopheap Pich

The most important thing for me is to be an artist. So, when you're an artist in a country where 90% of the artists have either died or been killed during the Khmer Rouge rule, you're trying to find your identity as an artist and also within the history of that void. As a result of the civil war, you are basically disconnected between the past and future for almost 25 to 30 years. Well, what do you do? What do you do as an artist?

And I lived outside of Cambodia; so for me that question is big because you see so much art, I saw so much art when I was away, when I was in school and all the art that I looked at was somebody else's art, so this question of what am I supposed to do as a Cambodian refugee, son of refugees, living through the civil war, living through the famine, the dark, maybe the darkest history in Cambodia, what is my responsibility, what do I say? What do I fight for?

Our young artists are talking about land and nature and rights, people's rights, nature's rights, spirituality's rights and I'm coming back to a place that has more temples than libraries, more mess than beauty. Though you can say the mess is beauty, I'm not so clear about that. I can see why some people would see that but if you live inside the mess, sometimes you are not thinking it's beauty anymore because you have to deal with it every single day. So then, the path is to be an artist and not to swayed, not to be steered to convenience into so called usefulness because if it's up to my parents they would say, be someone useful, right? Be someone useful because if you are someone useful then the society needs you but if you are simply a critic or decorator or entertainer you are only useful to a handful of people who can afford to use you as an entertainer, to use you as a decorator. This idea that somehow art is the spirituality of a nation or something like this is a kind of propaganda in Cambodia—I don't believe it, I mean when I'm in my grave possibly I will believe it, they'll put it on my tombstone or something. But in daily life at the present? I don't see art here in Cambodia as important at all,

nobody's thinking it's important. They just say it's important but they don't do something that is important for art. So the question is, what do we do? My stance, after being away and coming back, is that I am an artist in spite of all that. I'm useless but I want to be an artist.

Venka Purushothaman

If we take then take the Cambodian experience as what you've described, is there a need to frame the work that you do as necessarily art, to the new society?

Sopheap Pich

I do, I do, I think it's essential. I really think it's essential because whether we Cambodian people know it or not, what we find is our identity in the art that is left, that hasn't been stolen or completely broken to pieces. Even of the small broken pieces, people are still saying is this real? Is this from the 9th century? Is this from the 10th century? So this for Cambodia for what we know, this is our art. We have not come to a point where we just say well, that is art for a different purpose now this is art for your house, that's a different kind of art, it's about Buddha, it's about worshipping, no, we don't separate the two. We only have one national museum and it's just that, it's historical. So we know, we feel that art is essential, but we have not made, we have not had the chance, to actually progress to a point where we understand there's a way that art has progressed. So [the way is] art history right? And art education.

When I came back I was so confused as to what I'm doing because I am a painter. I studied painting, I never know anything about sculpture except looking at sculptures and saying that's amazing! A Brancusi or a Giacometti...

Milenko Prvački

Ah! That's why you're so good! You are a painter.

Sopheap Pich

I found that painting was not telling me anything; it was no longer a thing that I enjoyed because I couldn't make it mine. When I started making sculptures, it was something very irrational, because I happen to make sculpture that was quite, not really understandable and I couldn't really—I knew I was doing something right but I just didn't know what it was I was doing. Something in my bones...it was just connected through my veins and it gives me goosebumps. I have this sort of emotional experience very much as if I were a musician. So when I did sculpture first, I had to convince everybody that this is something interesting and unique, important, and should be interesting to more people than just me, you know? So that's what I'm talking about, my path.

And then it's a matter of, I say it's only a matter of time because if I feel like this is right and I feel that I'm old enough to say that about what I'm doing, and I say I've gained enough experience, I know this is the final point or the beginning, so it's just that, a matter of time. There are people I need to convince like my mother, like my father, you know. When they tell me that I'm living in this impoverished condition, they say ទុក្ខ in Khmer. They say you are living in a ទុក្ខ, you are ទុក្ខ, it means you are like—what's the word?—suffering. You are living in this kind of condition of suffering, why do you choose to continue? You're making these silly baskets, you can't even give it away, you can't give it away you got to store it on the rooftop because there's no space, you got to work in the open because there's no studio, why are you doing it? What for? I say well that's what I'm supposed to do, I mean it's just what I'm supposed to do. And I know that art requires suffering sometimes, it's just how it is. Artist is not someone, no one nominates you to be an artist, no one pays you to be an artist, so you are an artist by choice and it's because I made my choice, you don't owe me anything, you know?



From left to right: Sopheap Pich, Milenko Prvački, Venka Purushothaman, Mella Jaarsma. Sopheap Pich studio in Phnom Penh

Venka Purushothaman But it is perception that you're suffering because you've said that the sculpture is an extension of who you are.

Sopheap Pich But I'm not suffering, only other people tell me I'm suffering. People say well you have a Master's degree in painting, you were teaching for thousands of dollars a year, why don't you stay and teach? And I say well, you know...But I think the battle with that negativity also allows me to continue too.

Mella Jaarsma Yeah, that happens... It's like, also people thought I was crazy to move to Indonesia. Is there art in Indonesia? That was always the question especially in the 1980s. When I came to live there I ran the Cemeti for 10 years during the Soeharto regime. People said I was restricted. But that is also the interesting thing in the sense that art can somehow find its way to comment on the dictatorial regime. Working in Cemeti gave space to artists who found clever ways to create works that tell the story of what was going on politically, without being caught for censorship. We had spies coming to exhibitions but they could not put a finger on it.

Sopheap Pich Sorry to interrupt. Your story reminded me of Samnang's *Rubber Man* where he was naked in the indigenous plantation and had to deal with the police. He has an amazing story I wish he would tell.

Khvay Samnang Yeah, I don't know, under Cambodia law if you are naked in public—15 years in the jail!

And for me you know, researching that time, land rights, human rights, and concession land had many problems in Cambodia around 2008 onwards? And in 2012, the government starts to help the builders, giving the licenses, and getting students to work for them. For example, second-year university or graduate students were engaged as volunteers in land redevelopment—they were given the costumes, military costumes— to measure land under a land-titling program; at the time, there grew protests from villagers and rights groups to protect the environment or their land rights.

So that time I came to research this and asked for volunteers from the area to help record and document. One of the students was my friend and we lived with them in the plantations. Of course, they all respect one spirit house nearby, what I mean is a forest spirit (Neak Ta) you know? There should be many trees there but there are only a few trees left near the spirit house. This shocked me! When I returned home to Phnom Penh, I had a dream: one white guy comes into my dream and showed me around different landscape with systematically grown trees [like in plantations]. Maybe he's one of the spirits who had lost the house when human.

That's why I started to follow my dream [that led] towards a rubber plantation in the north of Cambodia—and to walk around this landscape. The rubber plantations were planted during France colonisation, the French had obtained the rubber tree ('cry tree') from Brazil. During 1960s King Sihanouk [increased the plantations] after we got Independence from the French and the people were made to go and live on them to protect the Khmer border. But not many people went because they didn't have support, like if people got sick with malaria.

During my research for the *Rubber Man* project, I visited many different plantations and there were different ages of rubber trees from four-year-old trees and a bit further, it had two-year-old to one-year-old trees from Monduliri province to Rattanakiri province to the border of Vietnam. I have a question, you can imagine—where is the forest?

And then I started to collect the rubber [latex]. I never knew before that rubber could 'kill' (affect) my eyesight [which happened] or how sticky they are when they are on my body and yeah... but finally my eye can still see. I [continued to] follow my dream: I was dreaming about one indigenous village which has all rubber plantations around this village, I have to question how the indigenous lived because they live by nature around them: they picked things from nature and hunted for a living etc.

After that I saw one village in my dream that had land concessions around it. During this research, [I found] this village; it was so quiet. Good for my performance and shooting. But on the day I arrived to shoot, many people and kids came. I said to myself: oh my god, I need to do, I need to do, I need to finish. And I said to everyone, please go home! They said no, they want to see the performance. I said, I'm naked, is that okay? They said, yes! So, I took off my pants and poured a bucket of fresh rubber on my body and then I went deeper into the plantation and then I saw two women in their traditional clothes. At that time one person called the village chief to report my performance. The villager came and used his mobile phone to take a video of my performance. And I ran around and my face is so ugly like a ghost.

Yes. The cameraman is my friend and not a professional. His camera shook a lot when walking and I had to direct the shoot myself: I asked him, please take portrait, take landscape, everything of mine. The village head was angry with me: "Why did you do this? It is not nice to do something like this in our village." I think: "Oh my god! I don't know what is going to happen to me." And then I went to the car, and my Cambodian friend who has a rubber plantation business and know these village people, said to the village chief, "who are you and why you don't know me?" Luckily my friend knows some kind of black magic or you can say 'Charm'. My friend called [out to] (Charm) "hey! Come, come, come, this is my friend, we just come for test shooting. The Charm says it is okay to the village chief. Today, just rehearsal, not yet shooting, tomorrow we can come back to do the shooting?" The village chief [then] said yes.

My other work was at Areng village, Koh Kong province; it had one Chinese company wanting to build a dam there. Community people protested and government blamed the opposition party or human rights NGO and activists for helping them for land rights. But the community doesn't care about politics, they care only for their land and nature. This village has complex politics. My students connected me to activists there. And then, the community, what do they think of me? They don't want to give me rice; they say I'm a spy of China, because my face looks Chinese. And what would the police think of me? What am I doing? Police think I am an activist or NGO, or something like that. So, I need to find my own way to research between community and police. Finally I finished my work.

After I finished my work, I go to join a party or wedding ceremony there, one guy comes to me, "Oh! This is Samnang? I know your name, do you know me? I spy on you!" And this policeman comes to me, and he drinks with me, and he say, "Oh Samnang you finished your work?" [To these] mostly I say fine. During the shooting, I needed to hide some masks in my friend's house. Sometimes when I get there in the evening, I go directly to the jungle for the shooting. Let's learn, let's play, let's adapt, experiment with this: this is normal for me.

But this is the artist's response or like what I can say to what is art in Cambodia? For me, art is education, you know?

The path of the question, maybe [lies in] imagination like the Angkor empire; Cambodians know about art through dance and Apsara sculptures around the temples. Modern painting and new kinds of technology or photography is less known since the war. During French colonisation in Indochina (Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia) the Cambodian arts came under supervision of Mr. George Groslier. In Saigon, the most capital of cities of the French, the French think they should be teaching modern painting. But in Cambodia, most French here really loved our culture. They want to keep it as is. But why? And who teaches modern painting?

Two paintings of Mr. George Groslier, who was art director [Museum of Cambodia], is showing at the National Gallery Singapore that was curated by Roger Nelson. Roger saw Mr. George Groslier's work on auction in Paris and [they are] now displayed in Singapore. I haven't been there specifically, but [Groslier] knew modern painting. He painted the king, keeps our Cambodia traditional. During the second World War, Japan took over Cambodia for a few years and the King asked one soldier, named Suzuki Shigenari to teach modern painting in Cambodia. After the war, he taught at fine art school, [from which] one group [emerged] that became famous with a new style of painting. [But] 90% of the artists were killed by Khmer Rouge and only 10% survived.

The most important thing that Cambodians think and feel first, is dance. Foremost is dance, why not painting, not sculpture, not anything? This question is raised by Dr. Toni Shapiro Phim, asked during her research with refugee people that survived after Khmer Rouge. Dance is the soul of Cambodia; this is the spirit of Cambodia because [if] you can imagine, in dance no one can watch the dance easily—only a few. It is for the king and other ceremonies. This is the dance with a kind of language connecting human to the god and the god to the land.

Venka Purushothaman Samnang, you started with land rights and brought it back to the idea of what you talked about spirituality. That all land has spirituality, all art has some sort of spirituality, not in the conventional description of spirituality, there's something that makes that connection somewhere. Maybe that's what makes it particular to that moment in history.

Mella Jaarsma Yeah, but it's also like if I compare with Indonesia in the 1980s, the art was sort of pushed by the regime to show the spiritual, abstract aesthetics, because in that sense you did not need to talk about the politics and what was really happening. So, to connect the spiritual as the international identity you know, you sort of cover up what was really happening on the ground.

Venka Purushothaman So Mella could you elaborate on the idea of spirituality in Indonesia because the government also came up with the Pancasila?

Mella Jaarsma The Pancasila, or state philosophy, was created at the beginning of the Independence, during Soekarno's era. But during Soeharto's time, the art had to be more inspired by traditional art forms, in that sense for the shaping of a national identity. This idea of the connection with the spiritual and formal way of painting, was taking away the attention to show what was happening on the social and political level, you know, and critical art that had already started as a movement against the Dutch during the Independence movement in the 1940s. So, there were like these two streams—the critical artists and then the artists who were more like, following the mainstream and being more say, spiritual or religious. Like Islamic influences are important, so there are some abstract painters explaining their work as being spiritual, and this was also reflected during that time in the education systems, through the art schools, especially in Bandung.

Milenko Prvački I think it's very interesting what you say. I find not only that we are all born or displaced but we have survived the same, similar ideas of countries trying to impose identity you know because that saves space for them. And the one who they—all countries— always want to control is the artist because we are very good at finding holes and leaks, so that idea of control is through imposing an identity or imposing spirituality. I call it imposed identity or imposed spirituality, [and] especially when you put national identity foremost, this may lead to more readiness for conflict and war you know? Because what is 'national'? We are so different, and the idea of art is to be different, not be the same. And I always used to tell my students they have to find their own language, and voice, and I always tell them about my case because I didn't speak English when I came to Singapore so my accent is very Serbian and my English is not perfect and I was telling him that we are all different, we look different and speak differently, but can you imagine if I suddenly start to speak perfect English you know? There's something wrong,

it's not my identity. So, we carry these things and it's just that in time the identity will be formed but that obsession with heritage is always a mistake because we are creating each time, we are creating heritage, it's going to be heritage.

Sopheap Pich

But what's disappointing to me, is when the so-called experts in the culture industry who run cultural spaces, they run the customs they are familiar with. I do not necessarily mean the ministers, we won't be so aggressive as to attack the ministers but the people who are you know, the so-called experts. I was often times attacked, all the time actually, in the early days. They don't really do it anymore because now my work is in the museums so they figured if they attack people whose works are in the museums, they kind of look silly, right? But my work was not always in the museums, you understand what I'm talking about? There are people who give lectures on Cambodian art and they will use my work as an example as someone who is like a thief. I am made to feel in my sculptures that I am taking baskets for free, away from farmers' sweat and tears you know.

Mella Jaarsma

Oh, so that's how they interpret it?

Sopheap Pich

Yeah, that's how they interpret it! They put it on a slide and they say, "What is this? This you can see on the road! This you can see on the farm, how come they don't put that thing on the farm, get the farmer to exhibit at the galleries, how come they take this guy who just takes the technique from the farmer, and then make art, so-called art? This is not art, this is not Cambodian art!"

Khvay Samnang

I would like to comment on that because I work mostly with dancers and in performance—basically from mask dances. It's a traditional Khmer dance. I worked with two dancers; they had trained since they were eight years old, they become professional dancers. We enjoyed working together. The most I will say is, I'm not a dancer. When I talk about my projects, I question them, my work is very critically [engaging]. So, I asked, do you know how to swim? As my project sometimes is not very nice, sometimes we need to perform in the river, in muddy waters and it is not like performance on stage in the theatre. No beautiful costumes. And then they said: "Yeah!" They love new freedoms and experimental work. I don't know if the government likes it or not. But after my project finished, the work has toured around; especially last year I joined a conference and workshop with master-dance teachers and other dancers, [where] I presented my work, and they loved it and they were appreciative of what I did.

Sopheap Pich

I think [the same] in this culture, I'm very close to the dance and the performing arts as well because I was involved with a few art organisations when I first moved to Cambodia. What I experienced is that in a culture where we feel things are being lost and we're all trying to gain it back we all feel this sort of ownership. But we also have this tradition of reverence toward our teachers and the teacher's feeling is hurt when a student changes, right?

[You hear:] "You're breaking my heart if you change what I taught you. If you modify, it means you disregard what I taught you!"

Milenko Prvački

It's a very good example of what I talk about [regarding] nationalist approaches, looking for nationalist language or style or methods for

artists. I always question how come they didn't introduce national mathematics. And that's the idea of...but again to come back, it's always addressing this problem of restricting artists because our ideas are 'leaking,' and they can't stop it. I like to say 'leak' because it's out of their control. It's always some hole that opens up, and I remember in Romania we didn't exhibit some artworks for 35 years but then they were exhibited after that period, and are very popular, you know like [what happened with] Chinese art after the Cultural Revolution. You know, you can't stop it!

Mella Jaarsma In Indonesia as well, you can't stop it. It is about criticising. Especially after Soeharto resigned, we entered the reformation era and then it became sort of popular to look back at the past and create art full of comments on the political and social circumstances. I mean finally it was possible to dig up histories, reflect on the regimes but also colonial history, up till today.

Sopheap Pich It's the artists who make art not anybody else. It is the non-artists' job to actually try to understand what is being made and conveyed. Maybe bring themselves down a little bit to our level and say hey, what are you doing? Instead of saying "no that's not what you're supposed to do." How do you know? You're not an artist, how do you know?

Mella Jaarsma Yeah, but then so, what is interesting is also like, it creates different levels once the work is up there, it can do different things. So, for example [the collaboration] with Agus Ongge, was made in 2021 for the Jogja Biennale and we were invited again last year to show that work in relation to the G20 summit. The G20 was in Bali and then the Ministers of Culture were invited to come together at the Borobudur.

Khvay Samnang I was there.

Mella Jaarsma Yes! Because I was showing a video of my collaborator Agus Ongge [who is] from Papua (Indonesia); I interviewed him and made a video documentation. He could not come because of Covid and then, during the Ministers' visit, this video was censored. [In the interview] I asked him all of those questions about the past and he was really honest telling everything about the history of Indonesia and what happened in Papua and this video was not allowed to be shown to the Cultural Ministers from all over the world you know?

So there is a freedom now, but then [it's] also related to, of course the tradition which is always viewed as something very positive. [Nevertheless] there are things they want to censor, so we had to change the wall text and everything. But in that sense, it always has an impact, right? Although you think it's just an artwork.

Sopheap Pich Well, if you didn't do it then you wouldn't pass that threshold. It's totally choreographed, right?

Mella Jaarsma Like we have now the Minister of Culture, he's like a historian, not an art historian. He's critical and educated so he's doing all those interesting projects. Finally, we have support for artists and art infrastructures. But yeah, we don't know [what will happen] next year, there's a new election, we don't know. And that's the problem, it always changes and you don't know. So you build up something and then by the next new political situation, you can start from zero again.

- Venka Purushothaman When an artist becomes a politician, decision maker or policy maker, their discipline may shape their decision-making. For example, if they are a traditionally or classically trained artists, their process may be more instructional to you and tell you you're not following the rules. But isn't it the beauty of coexisting systems, because tradition is learning to build a rule book, and institutionalising the form in different ways, while in contemporary art practice, it's about unleashing the individual, in their full manifestation before it becomes contextualised.
- Sopheap Pich Being a contemporary artist, we still learn from the past, we wouldn't be doing what we do if we don't know the past.
- Venka Purushothaman True. But you don't hold the tradition for yourself. In a sense, because you work with tradition.
- Sopheap Pich We don't need walls around ourselves.
- Venka Purushothaman And hence you become more difficult to manage.
- Sopheap Pich Exactly!

Comfort in Cultural Practice

- Venka Purushothaman Absolutely! And we have knocked on the fact, that in the future, there are ways to manufacture concepts of nationalism through comfort. Comfort as the national, the national objective. The comfort of funding, the comfort in finding allies in museums and critics, the comfort of acknowledgement.
- Mella Jaarsma We have that as a sort of similar problem in Indonesia. Curators since the beginning of 2000 became powerful. So they set the theme of the exhibitions and then artists, young artists especially, started to work along the taste of the curator or the gallery and according to the theme and they have no time to think and consider what do they really want to address actually, so it was really just following the demands.
- Venka Purushothaman Because this is something that... there is this kind of level where the ministry comes in, education comes in, the curators are coming in, the historians are coming in, everyone is putting a particular kind of demand. So going on your journey of self-discovery you know, art is about that self-discovery, that journey that you go through is also going under a lot of pressure to quickly professionalise so that you can speak to this. And so that's what happening to students, young art students are being asked to be professional, but your practice itself needs to evolve.
- Mella Jaarsma It has a certain, what do you call it, rhythm, time. Sometimes you cannot force this it just has to naturally develop.
- Venka Purushothaman That's right. I'm interested in your experience as to what this rhythm means because it is an important question to the history of art because it's one of the key things in the notion of any form of play. Artistic practices are very much tied to individuals and a good ally to that is the philosophy that someone works through, not so much the social, the economic or the national. [Sopheap: Exactly!] In a time, under the guise of professionalisation of some form or way like you already pointed out, curators shop and transact artists, rather than help build a very strong point of inquiry.

Also, Indonesia has some serious art collecting going on. On my recent visit to Jakarta and Bandung in February-March 2023, I was taken by the new wealth and also the one-to-one number of collectors to artists. There are so many collectors' shows, collector-run or sponsored spaces all of which are good as they build cultural capital because governments or artists cannot do it on their own. I still think it's generally good for art, but I put forth the question in this active ecosystem, is the artists' space shrinking?

Sopheap Pich

Well, taste becomes a ruling party. It isn't knowledge, deeper knowledge.

Khvay Samnang

Can I mention a bit about our collective, Sa Sa project— you know about that? Sa Sa Art Projects is run by a collective since 2010, but we first met in 2007 because we studied photography together. After that, we were thinking [about] how to stay together, sharing information, sharing the work and helping each the group is small but grows. We make work together, we make a gallery to showcase our work and [reserve] one-half [places] for emerging artists. In Cambodia, we have mostly cafe galleries but art students, they don't go there. And our project is to think about the ecology of art, and we are teaching three classes. One contemporary art class is taught by me, one photography— documentary and contemporary— by another co-founder, and [one class] English for artists by another co-founder because no artist know English like *Bong Sopheap*. I learnt English very late and started talking in English in 2010. We also do experimental residencies with different invited artists from the region. And documenta fifteen, curated by Ruangrupa, gave us an opportunity to develop and showcase our communal space, like a kind of working space, like Rong Cheang [a Community Art Studio].

Venka Purushothaman

Mella, did you have the same experience in Cemeti?

Mella Jaarsma

The first days in 1988 or the first years there was nothing, so when we started it was a bit like Sa Sa Art projects, [that] just started from an urgent [need] also you know? First, we focused just on exhibitions because there was no space to exhibit and the largest art school is in Yogyakarta. There were very few exhibition spaces, so we just rented a small house, and the front room became a gallery and then we started to show works from our friends first and then it just developed like that. And now we're doing residencies as well and things like that.

But I think that's also the importance of communities and that's also why in Indonesia there are so many communities. The artists become critical towards their educational systems and they start with creating their specific communities, to learn from each other. They are eager for discussions, and communities are founded based on different principles; for example, based on a discipline like photography or new media, or sometimes it's because they were in one class in art school. So there are different communities related to different ideas. It becomes like a safe playground to be in a community and develop in the community and then yeah, most artists in that community have their own career, successful careers, and then they give back to that community for the regeneration as well. That happens a lot in Indonesia, but [laughs]... yeah maybe it's good to have a bad education system, because then the artists gain a critical attitude, and then they develop something differently.

At Cemeti, we started with a residency programme in 2006 with the idea to create an opportunity for artists to think about what they are interested in actually. We paired them up with researchers and gave them assistance to experiment on all kinds of things. So, to do a residence of three months is very intensive; [it] is a starting point for further development, so this process is very important.

Also, in Indonesia, we always depended on invitations. Since the Reformation, we realised that as artists, if we want the government to reform, we have to be part of the process. So we also have to include our government and to educate them. So we have to inform them what the needs of the artists are, so we had all sorts of focus group discussions with people from the Ministry of Education and Culture, and Creative Industries. It really became a dialogue. So this year for the first time they give grants to the artists and artists' run spaces, it's the first time after so many years—25 years of reformation already, so it's a long process.

Venka Purushothaman I want to return to this point about being a professional. It comes to an important point that all of you touched on, about and also getting the 'professional' to be able to curate it to help make sense of it both for the artist and the community.

Sopheap Pich And then, there's something else. There's curation, so-called curators. Just because you hang some paintings on the wall, paint some wall, or put up the lights, you're not a curator, that's not curating. That means an organiser at best, right? So then this becomes also... I mean I'm not a curator, I've never done it in my life but I respect it because I like to work with good curators. And I respect what they do, they read, they write, they study, they really do their homework and then you have kids who come and say I'm a curator! Really, what have they done? That said, I do participate in many local shows when I'm asked because I support and want to encourage the culture.

Mella Jaarsma Yeah, in that sense I like to support young or emerging artists and curators' projects, because then I'm also part of the discussion. So that's mostly also maybe why I participate, you know?

Sopheap Pich If you have shows all the time as a young artist, you're making work for the show. It's unhealthy to think that every work I do is for a show. You need time to play; you need time to see something that is dangerous, that is bad, that is ugly, that is not right.

Also, I've seen a lot of artworks, and I think that this work does not belong on the wall in a public space. It doesn't. It needs to go, and the artist needs to go back to her or his space and look deeper before you show.

Current Trajectories, Material Study

Venka Purushothaman I want to come back to your own material studies, in terms of your choice of material, and how are you negotiating that space for yourself in your practice?

Mella Jaarsma For me, material is very important because the choice of material represents the concept or brings the concept forward. For example, when I started to work with frog skins, I started to work with frogs at the end of 1998 when there were riots in Indonesia to get rid of the regime.

The black sheep in the society were the Chinese people, who has lived there already many generations. When politics are tense, they are the scapegoats. This relates to the colonial past where they were sort of the people in-between the locals and the colonisers. They had better access to education, and they were the traders. So after the Independence, when the Indonesians came into power, they pushed the ethnic Chinese people down, they are discriminated against and could not work for the government and things like that. So when there were some tense situations in Indonesia like in 1998, their shops got set on fire, the women got raped and whatever, really disgusting. So yeah, I started to do a performance on the streets frying frog legs, because it is a Chinese food and yeah, my being Dutch, also being a minority and then part of the colonial background as it was the Dutch who settled those systems, so I asked all the white people, all my white friends living in Yogyakarta to come with me to fry the frog legs and discuss the situation of the Chinese and what happened the few weeks before with all those tensions before Soeharto resigned. So I used the frog legs as an idiom, you can say that, to open up that question with the public. So I was sitting in the main street and frying these frog legs. It's unclean or haram for Muslims, it's like pork, you know? But interestingly, in the end, all the frog legs were eaten. I used my position as a white person in that sense, because people passing by in the street got curious... why are these foreigners sitting in the street frying frog legs? They came close and started to ask why and automatically discussions took place about what happened with the riots a few weeks before. So choice of material is so important.

After that I started to make costumes, the first one I made were of frog skins in the shape like a Muslim veil, but the material was frog skin, to create this contradiction. The first time I exhibited this work in Bandung and after that in Yogyakarta, I had to write a statement, so as not to upset the dominated Muslim public. I wrote down what it meant and why, because it was quite provocative. So that's the first costume that I created. Since then, yeah for me, the material choice is very important because it brings the meaning of the work out. And until now, not all the works start from that sense, but yeah, material-wise, it is important. And also how then finally, the piece comes together, because I believe that every material has a certain logic—how to, for example, sew frog skins together in a pattern, I mean yeah, I never thought about it before. When the material is in front of me, then automatically there's a logic of how to put things together and create it into a shape.

Venka Purushothaman

And what are the current materials you're working through?

Mella Jaarsma

Barkcloth, because before [loomed] textiles entered Indonesia, everybody was wearing barkcloth like loin cloths or sort of dresses. The barkcloth is mostly [found] in the inlands. Through a residency in Vienna in the World Museum I found these piles of barkcloth costumes, something you can hardly see in Indonesia because it's always about *batik* and *ikat*, so I did research on that and found a book of two missionaries written in the beginning of the 20th century, 1905, to be precise, in a certain village in Sulawesi. So I went there and then I found the community of women still making it you know, so they're still producing it. I made a documentary about them, and then I started also to learn myself how to make it, and I made some costumes out of bark cloth, communicating the colonial history.

Lately I collaborated with the Papuan artist, Agus Ongge, who also works with barkcloth, but he makes paintings on it. In Papua, at Lake

Sentani, barkcloth was used as a sarong, loin cloth or a blanket, with painted motifs on it. But the Dutch missionaries came—and also later in the Soeharto era—and they had to destroy or forbade the use their traditional objects, in order to be converted and modernised. So, I had [carried out] this research with him, and then during our collaboration project, I brought back the barkcloth paintings made by him into wearables. So that was one of my latest projects, related to many things, to the material itself that actually also relates to the past as well as the present.

In some of his paintings, Agus Ongge uses the motif of the sawfish. I learnt from him that it is an important principle, that he paints the same image of the sawfish over and over again. It was last seen in 1972 at Lake Sentani, the lake in the east of Papua. He repeats just to keep the next generation remembering this extinct fish. I love this idea as a contrast, because we contemporary artists always have to look for the new, but [here] he works as a contemporary artist [concerned with] repeating. I recorded this conversation and made this video reflecting the visual art history and developments from this marginalised eastern Indonesian province.

Sopheap Pich

As a painter prior to being an accidental sculptor, I was trying to find how to make a sculpture, I mean, I didn't have any strong political or social agenda or want to make any kind of commentary and, in fact, I was trying not to do anything that would make any commentary.

In 2002, two years after grad school, I came back here with basically two suitcases: one was my art materials from graduate school, whatever I had for painting, brushes, and stuff that I was still able to keep; and then the other suitcase [held] just my clothes, so I didn't have anything to work with and I didn't have any money. I had US\$3000 dollars from selling some works when I was in Boston, that I had left after buying the ticket, so that's all I had. So I struggled with painting for the next two to five years? In 2004, when I felt like I didn't know what to paint because my head was full of subject-matters, too much that I could even slow down enough to even focus on anything. And I was very much just listening to the radio all the time about Cambodian politics and I'm learning, and I'm thinking about my relatives: they live in huts, they live in the countryside, they still go to the bathroom by just poking a hole in the ground. So it was very strange to me and my heart was stuffed with anxiety and you hear on the radio all the time, and all the politicians from all the political parties were loud, everybody was loud. There was a lot of chaos.

It was a time when everything but the Buddha was on the cigarette box. And so, I was like, what do you do here, what am I doing to quiet all that down, which meant putting the brush away and making something about things that affected me, which was smoking and drinking! In reality, everything was just around me; the thing that I was suffering from is smoking and drinking. And then I thought, maybe I should make some work about my internal organs because that's what I think about most, or that's what I feel about most, not think about, I feel about. So I said maybe I make something that I feel, not think, so that's kind of the entryway into art, really, my own art.

When I made my first sculpture, I made it out of rattan because, well, I don't have any skill, and I don't have any material; there were rattan makers across the street who made furniture. Now you have wood and stuff from all over, but before that, it was all rattan shelving, chairs, everything I owned was rattan—and it was ugly. I hate rattan furniture. But for artwork it seems like, wow—if they can make volume,



From left to right: Mella Jaarsma a, Sopheap Pich, Milenko Prvački, Khvay Samnang, Dr Venka Purushothaman, Reaksmay Yean. YK Art House/Silapak Trotchaek Pnek Gallery, Phnom Penh

and if they can make it strong that you can sit on and put stuff on it, and you can make beds, you can make whatever, then I can make a sculpture out of it. So that's kind of how it happened. But more importantly, when I started making my first sculpture, I felt so happy; for the first time, I was like oh! This is like making a slingshot, this is like making a toy boat, this is like making things that I used to make to occupy my time during the Khmer Rouge.

Venka Purushothaman

Sopheap, how did [the idea of] the material form with your work?

Sopheap Pich

I was sharing a house with two artists, and Guy Issanjou, the French Cultural Centre Director at the time, came to see us and he saw my sculpture on the floor, lying on the floor against the wall and he told me that's the first modern sculpture he's ever seen in Cambodia. And it just took me for a spin. And he said to me: "Listen I'll buy some photographs that you made, I'll buy it from you for US\$2000 dollars, and you take that money, and invest it in the rattan, and maybe you can get another person to help you cut the rattan, and then you just spend the next three months to make sculptures, if you want to make sculptures." So for next three months, I was by myself, and I made sculptures, and I got an assistant to shave the rattan, and then I built my first group of four sculptures.

Venka Purushothaman

[Samnang], how did your materials emerge?

Khvay Samnang

As students we were stubborn. New media was starting. I'm a graduate of modern painting you know, and I also learnt photography for one year, just very basic: how to take photographs, and also some art history of photography too. I enjoyed photo landscapes because I'm painting

with the landscape, we do a lot. And I think this is why I love photography because I think that I still paint though I use light as material including digital lights, and I am still painting the landscape. You know all my work is about the landscape [around me]. I find the material (light) works in different places. For example, at a people's protest against moving sand, people were attacked with sandblasting, and as they were escaping from the mud, it looked like a killing scene of humans by sand. The sand is [either] moved to Boeung Kok lake in Phnom Penh or sold to Singapore. A lot of things [occur] in construction which are covered in the news, and some news reported that some families were crushed in their house at night, [they] died. So, I wanted to find out for myself and took a boat [there], and then I wanted to take a photo of people from the village in front of the crushed house.

This is a kind of material I use and some people ask me, how is this art? I open my thing depending on the story, the situation, and even my body. I think everything around me is my material in my performance and my participation.

I talked to a mother in the space and [asked] if I could shoot her and she agreed to wear the mask I have. Her daughter came back from school and she was angry. She said I looked down on her family and had given her mother a dirty mask to wear. She threw my bag out of her house and brought a knife and tried to cut my brother, who had accompanied me to help me on the trip. I told him to run. My brother ran off! I told her: "Please, please I talked with your mum already please, put [the knife] down and I can talk to you." We sat down, I explained to her and then she drank water and then calmed down, and I said: "I will not show your mother's photo or anything. I apologise." I explained I think this is art. And then I came back home, and I am very sad. I think, what is art? If people understand they will appreciate it, but if they don't understand, they will be angry. Then I feel like I'm hurting people.

But then I thought, okay, I still want to say something about the river, the grandmother and granddaughter who had died in the house that was crushed at night. The village chief said it [had happened] at night and they didn't have emergency equipment to help them. And I [thought], how little can they breathe in the mud, and how can they escape from the mud, how much they hurt, you know? I questioned myself, should I stop working on this project? Or should I need to find other way to do it?

So, in telling [you] about bodies in motion, I found a dancer Nget Rady who is so experimental. I ask him if he can swim, and he said he is a good swimmer. I said: "Ok! Lucky!"

Looking at the location of the crushed houses, I [returned] to the house where the daughter had tried to cut me. I shot my dancer in front of her house. And then at another place in front of the Mekong River, where the machine had moved the sand to Boeung Kok Lake. And then I explained to the dancer that, your body or your soul is floating on that. I drew a storyboard for him, [to show him] this project was dangerous, and then I said to the dancer that I will swim together with you, shooting you, if you die, I die with you.

Venka Purushothaman

So you don't rehearse, you don't plan, you go on-site and improvise?

Khvay Samnang

Yes, but I did research and plan [just] before the experiment.

Turning to another work, the jungle one, with a mask. This is after the censorship of me, the village and the community began to understand me. I go [there] to research talking about the spirit, talking

about believing, talking about what is important to them and starting to drink alcohol a lot. I started to make animal masks paying respect to different animals. Because the animals have been around all generations, they tell us about this and still respect them, until now. And for me, I'm a city man, I come and can see, but I feel like, this [is] what humans know [too, but] they do not respect animals and nature? You know, those who are living in the jungle, they respect the animals, they respect the spirit forest and think about how to save the environment in the world. I feel like in the city, where developers always want to do more [to 'develop' land], we have lost respect.

So for my other work, I decide to work with traditional performers. This is kind of interesting for me, the philosophy of dance, like a circle of life, like a seed that drops on land and grows into a tree and then turns into a leaf and then becomes a flower and then becomes a fruit and then falls and regrows again, it's kind of like that. For me, this is relatively the history of the colonised and with the circle of life of us that we can see from the past until now, we are like a circle of politics, always. With something political, you know how to colonise but [today to do so] differently—like the economic colonisation, something like that. I created the work *Popil* to [show] the ritual of Cambodia, from birth to death and the continuing cycle.

Venka Purushothaman

In your performance works one thing that gets visualised for me from our conversation is that you get chased around a lot. Someone is chasing you with a knife, chasing you in the jungle, you get chased a lot. You know you're running.

Khvay Samnang

Yeah, yeah, the most important thing is that we are scouting and shooting. I am working in restricted places. I ask: How/why am I shooting this? But I believe in art and it is a part of education. And what I want to do, I will do it even if it can be dangerous for me.

Venka Purushothaman

The performance work that's emerging is in-situ, you know in that kind of location and it's also what's quite interesting, you know, when we talked about frog or crocodile skins with Mella, it dates particular moments in history. Here, you're talking about a live event (rapid redevelopment against the environmental and human conditions) that's unfolding in front of you. It is a live commentary.

This dialogue has been far more enriching than what we set out to do. I thank you very much and hope to continue the discussion. Still, the areas that we focused on actually crystallise the conversation on how we are looking at the notions of play: 'play' in live spaces, historical spaces, and material spaces. I thought the two dimensions of material and environment came out very strongly presenting how artists working in Southeast Asia create new ecologies of practice and learning. This conversation gets into the pulse of what Southeast Asians are also going through as shifts around us are rapid. Importantly, the issue of decoloniality and how are we thinking through the new spaces is a concern that we all have. What is available to artists, what are they searching for as they explore, and how they deal with the comfort of nationalising their practice are important and emerging dimensions in a truly porous world.

All photos courtesy LASALLE College of the Arts.