

MANY RIVERS TO CROSS*

HO CHI MINH CITY AND PHNOM PENH

I sometimes joke that if you take a wrong turn in Ho Chi Minh City, you'll end up in Phnom Penh. Here what makes the joke so consistently funny is that it operates at the extremes. Phnom Penh, or Ho Chi Minh City—depending on your vantage point, is a city so close yet far away. I've written a handful of texts over the last few years on the contemporary art scene in Ho Chi Minh City. Each article has been largely an update of the previous. However, this exhibition presents a unique opportunity to take a comparative detour and speak about our local Vietnamese community through its relationship with our neighbors. I hope Biljana will indulge in my last minute change of focus.

THE THREE BASICS

Recently, international attention in the Southeast Asian region has been focused on the contested territory between Cambodia and Thailand at Preah Vihear, and the ensuing political positioning. To anyone familiar with the regional peculiarities of the Greater Mekong Sub-region, this confrontation comes as no surprise. Only a few years earlier, Thailand saw its own embassy in Phnom Penh set afire by riots following alleged claims about the Thai ownership of Angkor Wat. And when the focus shifts from Thailand, its direction inevitably flows toward Vietnam. These three countries form a rather unique spectrum of political, economic, cultural and as I shall argue here, an artistic block that can speak to the state of contemporary arts development in Southeast Asia.

In my earlier research paper, *Mediating the Mekong*, completed in 2006 I argue that in the Marxist sense of base (economics) and superstructure (culture/civil society) we can clearly see how the two interact to set up primary conditions for contemporary arts practices. In the case of Thailand, with exception to recent military coup d'état, its leaders are elected and has enjoyed a relatively healthy market economy. In Vietnam its non-elected leaders are determined internally from within the Communist government and yet has prospered over the last few years from a rapidly developing and increasingly globally integrated economy. As in Thailand, Cambodia enjoys—at least in principle, a freely elected government yet suffers from a consistently underperforming economy dependent of foreign aid. In this matrix, Thailand with a popular elected government and a healthy market economy enjoys an arts infrastructure that has multiple venues, international film festivals, and has established a national pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Vietnam on the other hand has enjoyed a relatively outstanding economy as it moves from socialist economic policies to global markets, yet suffers from strict controls of culture, speech and expression by the Communist authorities. Thus Vietnam maintains a partially developed arts infrastructure with very few spaces and organizations, and little if any national support for the development of contemporary arts in the international integration. Cambodia might be seen as the inverse of Vietnam, with a multi-party elected government who rarely if ever interfere with cultural production and yet plagued by an economy that has not reaped the benefits of WTO membership and is largely dependent on NGOs and foreign capital. Of the three nations, Cambodia has the least developed contemporary arts infrastructure and whose artists have enjoyed little exposure and access to the international contemporary art community.

FORM, TRADITION, AND CONTEMPORANEITY

These conditions create some interesting possibilities as exchanges among artists and organizations in these countries increases. The cities Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh City are the closest both in proximity and rhythm. In the 1930s during the World Fair in Paris, the organizers were confronted with a peculiar but serious problem: How to represent Vietnamese architecture for its colonial pavilion. Whereas Cambodia had an established and magnificent history of architectural form dating back to Angkor, Vietnamese architecture suffered from a serious identity problem. It was difficult for the organizers to distinguish what might be considered native Vietnamese as opposed to Chinese, whose imported sense of aesthetics had come to dominate Vietnam's architecture. This schizophrenia in Vietnamese form continued into the post-colonial and modern periods unlike in Cambodia where visionary modernist architects in Phnom Penh, such as Vann Molyvann, embarked on hybridizing modernist aesthetics inspired by ancient form. Today, many of these innovative, and thoroughly modern, structures in Cambodia are crumbling from neglect but can still be appreciated for their historical innovation while Vietnam embarks upon its rapid urban development through underwhelming concrete boxes that continue to create eyesores to this day. I have often heard that all creative energies in Cambodia have always focused exclusively on preservation and continuity of tradition, particularly now given the devastation of its artistic communities during the reign of the Khmer Rouge. However one cannot be correct in saying that creative development in Cambodia has not seen beyond traditional form and practice, if architecture is any indication.

It's the cities that I believe the artists in this exhibition are responding to. Where it might be tempting to pit Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh city against each other in a competitive battle of the arts, I think the reality is that both communities exist, and co-exist, without the sense of competition and indeed are more alike than one would suppose. Anyone having done contemporary arts research in Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh City discover something very peculiar about these two cities that is unlike anywhere else in Asia – it is easy to meet artists. There isn't the sense of rivalry or cliquishness that exists in so many other cities in Southeast Asia. Some might say that it is simply that the art communities are too small but I would disagree. Yangon also has a small arts community somewhere on the same level of development yet is extremely private, closed and with groups reluctant to share information and make introductions. There is something about the artists and their outlook in Phnom Penh and Saigon that make a whole new sort of chemistry. It's about openness and it's about knowing that the situation can only improve a concerted effort. This mode of operation, existing independently in each city, will soon extend to each other. If this exhibition is any indication, perhaps it has already.

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**Many Rivers to Cross*, written by Jimmy Cliff and released on the 1972 soundtrack album for the film *The Harder They Come*