



Vandy Rattana, *Takeo*, 2009, from *Bomb Ponds* series; image courtesy the artist; all images this article courtesy SA SA BASSAC, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Stiev Selapak: a Cambodian artists' collective

ROGER NELSON

You can hear something a thousand times and not know it, yet if you see it with your eyes just once, you know.

This Khmer proverb, a favourite of photographer Vandy Rattana's, is quoted in the catalogue accompanying his 2011 exhibition *Bomb Ponds*. It can also be read as a something of a guiding principle for the Cambodian artists' collective Stiev Selapak,¹ which Vandy² co-founded in 2007. Artists Khvay Samnang, Lim Sokchanlina and Vuth Lyno operate Phnom Penh's only artist-run space, Sa Sa Art Projects,³ and are co-founders of SA SA BASSAC, a gallery and resource centre in the capital. Although Vandy left the group in 2012, relocating to Taipei, the remaining members remain increasingly active. This year, they launched Cambodia's only experimental residency program, and also headed to New York to undertake residencies themselves, as part of the Season of Cambodia festival. Stiev Selapak are striving, as the proverb suggests, to see and to know – and also to show and to share. And they are enthralling local and international audiences in the process.

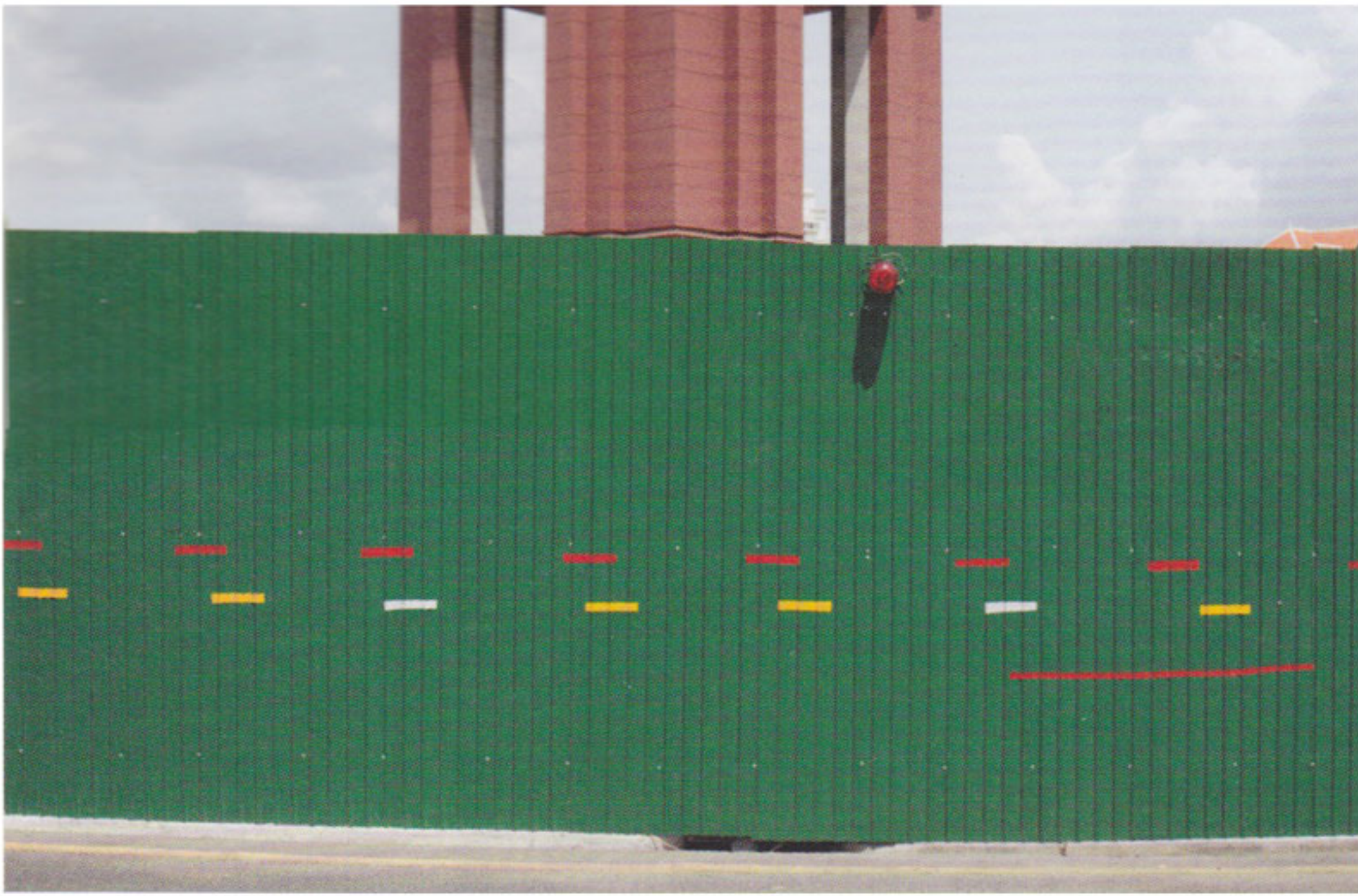
As a collective, Stiev Selapak hosts residencies, facilitates collaborations, offers free art classes to low-income youth, and in other ways fosters a community of creative experimentation. Their aim since founding has been to strengthen Cambodia's nascent yet growing contemporary art community, with an emphasis on learning together. During the 1975-79 Khmer Rouge genocide, an estimated 90% of Cambodia's artists and

intellectuals were murdered. Many Khmer language books and cultural artefacts were also destroyed. Given this, and the continuing shortage of governmental or institutional support for contemporary art, Stiev Selapak's is a particularly important role.

While artists' collectives are common throughout Southeast Asia, Stiev Selapak are unusual in that to date they have not created artwork collaboratively: unlike, for example, The Propeller Group from Vietnam/US or Indonesia's Ruangrupa. Stiev Selapak are also perhaps the only active artists' collective in Cambodia. Each of the group's three members regularly assist with realising each other's projects, sharing skills, equipment, and insights based on their diverse backgrounds encompassing economics, development, and education.

Vandy (b. 1980, Phnom Penh) is internationally the best-known former member of Stiev Selapak. He has exhibited in a staggering nineteen countries to date: a fact of which he was, until recently, modestly unaware. Vandy was among the first Cambodians to be included in the 6th *Asia Pacific Triennial* in 2009, and significantly, a photograph from the 2009 series *Bomb Ponds* was included in last year's *DOCUMENTA(15)* in Kassel.

Bomb Ponds is a series of nine photographs and a single-channel video documenting the bomb craters that, to this day, are scattered across the Cambodian landscape. Almost three million tons of explosives were dropped on Cambodia by the USA between 1964 and 1975; the US did not acknowledge this until a quarter-century later. It has



(clockwise from top left) 1/ Lim Sokchanlina, *Independence Monument*, 2011

2/ Lim Sokchanlina and friends during wrapping (with construction/protective mesh) of a condemned former public park, Brooklyn, New York, May 2013; photo: Roger Nelson

3/ Khvay Samnang, *Untitled*, 2011; from his series addressing the sand-dredging of Phnom Penh's lakes and subsequent eviction of local residents

4/ Vuth Lyno, *Thoamada*, 2011, installation view; images courtesy the artists

been argued that this sustained attack was instrumental in creating the conditions in which Pol Pot's regime was able to seize power in April 1975. In Vandy's photographs the scenes formed by these craters appear eerily serene.

Like much of Vandy's practice, *Bomb Ponds* is driven by a desire – an urgent need, even – to document contemporary Cambodia. In the 1950s and 1960s, many of Cambodia's 'modern' painters worked also as newspaper cartoonists. More recently though, Vandy and several of his contemporaries have at times worked as photojournalists. *The First Highrise* (2008) captures the now ubiquitous sight of construction workers towering over the once flat city of Phnom Penh. Also from 2008, *Fire of the Year* poignantly bears witness to the sudden devastation of a low-income neighbourhood. The striking straightforwardness of Vandy's images – what he describes as 'very strict ... classical composition' – allows his subjects to speak for themselves. The artist asks, 'What details make us Cambodian?' and insists that 'I want to reveal the internal, to archive Cambodia as much as I can. It's not for me. We have to tell the world who we are.'

This documentary impulse is shared among Stiev Selapak. Recent work by Lim Sokchanlina (b. 1987, Prey Veng), the group's youngest member, focuses on changes in Cambodia's environment: both constructed and natural. *Wrapped Future* is a 2012 solo exhibition that debuted in Phnom Penh and has since shown in Canada, Singapore, the

USA, and within Tobias Rehberger's project at South Korea's *ROUNDTABLE: The 9th Gwangju Biennale*.⁵ Large colour photographs depict the iron fences erected around an ever-increasing number of construction sites in Phnom Penh. In recording these temporary structures, Lim explains that his work is about 'Cambodia right now, right this second'. Yet the images also comprise a kind of elegy for the loss of architectural heritage, affordable housing, and shared space in the rapidly transforming urban landscape.

Alongside this documentary work, Lim is increasingly interested in staging interventions into his environment. For *Rising Tonle Sap* (2012), the artist floated large blocks of ice into the river flowing through a remote floating village. A series of photographs was included in the Southeast Asian touring exhibition *Riverscapes IN FLUX*, and a related video work was included in a local festival curated by fellow Stiev Selapak member Vuth Lyno. Lim frequently works in performance; his actions tend to orient to the video and photographic documentation more so than to a live audience. Although the Khmer word for art, *selapak*, typically refers more to dance and theatre than to visual arts, performance art in Cambodia remains a marginal field. Lim elegantly describes many of his own performance pieces as either 'offerings' or 'humble happenings' and explains that 'I think about the community I'm working in, what does the community want; I don't really think about the audience.'

As Artistic Director of Sa Sa Art Projects, Vuth Lino (b. 1982, Phnom Penh) works primarily in a curatorial capacity. This year he commences postgraduate study of art history in the US, supported by a Fulbright Fellowship. Vuth's own artistic practice, like his curatorial work, engages specific Cambodian communities and the cultures unique to them, often through a participatory approach.

For his 2011 *Thoamada*⁶ exhibition, the artist ran an extended workshop for nine Cambodian men who have sex with men. Alongside larger-than-life photo-portraits of the participants adorned with expressive face paint, the resulting installation included extended recorded excerpts of interviews with the men. With a background working in international development, Vuth has a strong interest in facilitating social change through his curatorial and artistic practice. At least one of *Thoamada*'s participants has reported an increased confidence and sense of community acceptance as a result of the project.

A recent text Vuth co-authored for a community exhibition at Sa Sa Art Projects declares the space's aim to 'explore a new kind of art that [is] developed in collaboration with everyday Cambodian people, designing art experiences that [are] accessible, relevant and enjoyable to them.'⁷ This impulse is perceptible in the work of all four Stiev Selapak artists. A significant precursor to this attitude may be found in Pich Sopheap, probably Cambodia's best-known artist internationally, and an early mentor of Khvay Samnang (whose 2004 turn from paint to sculpting with local materials bamboo and rattan was motivated in part by a desire to connect with Khmer audiences). Speaking of a 2010 series of sculptures in the form of the Khmer alphabet, Pich announced that he is 'beginning to make work that is directly aimed at the Cambodian public.'⁸ The Khmer language sound recordings – and title – of Vuth's *Thoamada* similarly demonstrate the artist's insistence on specifically addressing his fellow Cambodians. Yet the work's subsequent exhibition at the 2011 *Chongqing Youth Biennale* and at Gwangju last year reveals its more universal resonance.

In a typical example of the collective's mutual support, the face-painting in Vuth's images was assisted by fellow Stiev Selapak artist Khvay Samnang (b. 1982, Phnom Penh). The only member of the group to hold formal qualifications in art, Khvay has worked as a teacher, and has twice held prestigious residencies at the Tokyo Wonder Site. His work uses subtle humour to examine tradition and change in Cambodian culture, and he has pioneered a fluid exploration of photography, video, performance and new media in his work.

In an ongoing performance piece, *Samnang Cow Taxi*, the artist pulls a simple cart around the city. In its first manifestation, in Tokyo in 2010, the artist offered free rides to passersby in a simple rickshaw while wearing outsized buffalo horns. The horns refer to the traditional reliance on cattle in Cambodian farming; they are sculpted from human hair collected at roadside barbers in Phnom Penh. Each of these longstanding Cambodian traditions – cow-drawn ploughs, human-powered rickshaws, old-style hairdressers – remain commonplace in the nation today, in stark contrast to the high-tech culture Khvay encountered in Japan. *Samnang Cow Taxi* highlights these cultural and economic specificities of the artist's home country, while also repaying the generosity of the

Japanese Khvay enjoyed during his residency. In a 2011 performance in Phnom Penh, the artist elaborated this impulse to help his community, practically and symbolically. This time, Khvay collected a rickshaw full of dirt and deposited it at a nearby riverbank that had been eroded by government-sponsored sand dredging.

Concern with the particular implications of sand dredging continues in Khvay's 2011 *Untitled* series of nine photographs and a video, and in 2012's *Newspaper Man*, perhaps the first primarily video-based installation to be exhibited in Cambodia. Just as in *Samnang Cow Taxi* the artist uses his body to physically haul his rickshaw, so too he places himself at physical risk to make these works. Khvay is concerned by the environmental and social implications of the destruction of Phnom Penh's lakes, which are being filled in with sand in order to make way for exclusive private developments. The courageous resistance of some 4000 families evicted from the former Boueng Kak Lake is now known internationally. Khvay's *Untitled* images, in which he submerges himself in fetid water and showers himself in sand, constitute a deeply empathetic registration of the plight of the evictees, as well as a moving chronicle of landscapes and neighbourhoods which have, by now, already vanished.

Empathy is central in the work of Stiev Selapak's four members. As they are all male, their perspectives are at times inherently limited; the absence of older artists to act as mentors is also sometimes keenly felt. Yet the group's commitment to recording Cambodia's rapidly unfolding history demonstrates a vital sense of responsibility to their community and culture. Their practice is all the richer for emerging within a context in which contemporary and experimental approaches largely lack history or infrastructural support. Importantly though, the contribution these artists are making lies not only in their impulse to document. The Stiev Selapak artists are innovators in the possibilities of their chosen forms and media.

1. The name is usually translated as 'Art Rebels', although *stiev* in Khmer language in fact refers specifically to rebellious youths; the word is a recent creation, and was originally used to denote young cows.

2. In this essay, Khmer family names precede first names.

3. This space was discussed in detail in *Art Monthly Australia* #253, September 2012.

4. At the time of founding, Stiev Selapak had six members. Like Vandy Rattana, Heng Ravuth and Kong Vollak have since left the collective, but remain supportive. The six young men met during an informal photography class in Phnom Penh in 2007.

5. In collaboration with Tobias Rehberger, *You Owe Me. I Don't Owe You Nothin*, 2012.

6. *Thoamada* is a commonly used Khmer word, generally translated as 'normal' or 'usual'.

7. Co-authored with David Gunn: *The White Night*, February 2012.

8. Quoted in Ly Boreth, 'Of Trans(national) Subjects and Translation', in Nora A. Taylor and Ly Boreth (eds.), *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology*, Ithaca (Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications), New York: 2012, p. 128.

Roger Nelson is an independent curator currently based in Phnom Penh. He curated the exhibition *Developments*, including work by Stiev Selapak artists Khvay Samnang and Lim Sokchanlina, recently shown at Melbourne Artist-Run-Initiative SEVENTH Gallery, 27 March to 13 April 2013: www.seventhgallery.org