



Tith Kanitha *Heavy Sand* 2012, performance, Phnom Penh.

Art and sand in Cambodia

“PLEASE ENJOY MY SAND!”

■ Roger Nelson

Artist Khvay Samnang¹ laughingly called these words while ferrying confused tourists and bemused locals along one of Singapore’s pristine beaches. He staggered as he carried people on his back under the hot October sun. Khvay is based in Phnom Penh, and is a rising star in Cambodia’s swiftly growing art world, having exhibited in six countries in the last year alone. He was offering free beach ‘rides’ as part of a performance timed to coincide with the opening of the 2013 *Singapore Biennale*, in which he is exhibiting another, related work.²

Singapore’s beaches were not always so wide – or so popular – as they are today. Their expansion and ‘improvement’ is

owed to a strange coincidence: the sand beneath Khvay’s feet in Singapore was mined from rivers in his home country. In recent years, large quantities of sand have been exported from Cambodia to expand Singapore’s coastline, offering not only luxurious beaches but also new real estate to the tiny island city-state, while contributing lucrative revenue to Cambodia. Troublingly, though, most Cambodians see no sign of that revenue: widespread rumour concurs with suspicions raised by non-governmental organization Global Witness:³ profits are being monopolised by senior figures associated with the ruling Cambodian People’s Party, which has controlled the government for almost three decades. Annual gross domestic product in Singapore is over nineteen times

that in Cambodia,⁴ where recovery from decades of violent conflict has been slowed by foreign interference, endemic corruption and the lasting effects of war.

The ubiquitous sand dredging barges are a common sight in rivers throughout Cambodia, notably at Koh Kong (a popular tourist destination) and in the Tonle Sap and Mekong Rivers that meet at the capital, Phnom Penh. The far-reaching effects of the mining of sand, ignored by the government, include not only a devastation of rich ecosystems, but an attack on vital food sources, as well as ruinous erosion which destroys the homes of struggling fishing communities based along the riverbanks. Significant in themselves, the problems of sand mining are also potent symbols for many larger issues already plaguing the small Southeast Asian nation, which is increasingly infamous for land grabs and power disputes.

Sand has become a rich site of investigation for a number of Cambodia's younger generation of artists based in Phnom Penh. While Khvay's performance, photography and video works are the most prominent, Tith Kanitha and Than Sok have also made performances with sand, and Lim Sokchanlina has documented sand dredging barges as well as the ongoing transformation of Koh Pich (Diamond Island), where new luxury towers are being constructed on foundations of sand sucked from the surrounding rivers.

Khvay's first project with sand was 2011's *Untitled*, exhibited at Phnom Penh's SA SA BASSAC gallery and subsequently toured internationally. To make *Untitled*, the artist entered several of Phnom Penh's large lakes and poured a bucket of sand over himself. Captured in nine elegantly composed photographs and on video, this repeated gesture reads as an expression of empathic solidarity with the plight of the thousands of mostly low-income households forcibly evicted from these sites, as the government has sold the land to private corporations. Lakes are being filled with sand to make way for luxury developments: Boeung Kak Lake in central Phnom Penh is the largest and highest profile example. In 2007, Boeung Kak was home to over 4,000 people, and was Phnom Penh's largest body of water (with an area of over 100 hectares). Now it is an arid desert of sand, awaiting the arrival of construction

machinery. Former residents languish in poorly serviced housing camps outside the city, with several remaining imprisoned for their brave resistance to the land confiscation they say is illegal.

Khvay's sustained attention to the issue allowed him to identify its wider effects. The artist never tires of explaining that lakes historically provided Phnom Penh with rare leisure space, as well as offering an important food source: both of fish, and of fast-growing and nutritious water vegetables like *trokuen* (morning glory). They also helped to prevent flooding during the rainy season by collecting rainwater. In 2011's performance and video *Sammang Cow Taxi Moves Sand*, the artist walked the city's streets, pulling a *cyclo* (rickshaw) which he filled with sand collected from low-lying areas. By symbolically cleaning his city, Khvay pointed to the environmental after-effects of increased flooding. Wearing horns like the water buffaloes still commonly used for agriculture in Cambodia, the artist's performance was at once familiar and humorously bizarre to local audiences.

Filled with sand, the cart was pulled by Khvay to a site of rapid erosion on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. The artist used the sand to attempt to repair the root system of an ancient Bodhi tree, significant to the local Buddhist community and in danger of collapsing into the Mekong River. Khvay's investigation of erosion resulting from sand mining continues in *Where Is My Land?* (2012-), an ongoing series of photographs depicting houses located along collapsing riverbanks. The residents of these homes wear disguising masks, perhaps fearing reprisals for their participation in the project.

In *Newspaper Man*, (2011) Khvay covers himself in newsprint and stumbles, blindly, over the sand at Boeung Kak. The crumbling walls of a house buried in sand prove difficult to navigate. A video of this performance was shown in a gallery carpeted with sand, with intermittently flashing fluorescent lights evoking the oppressively surreal experience of walking on a 'lake' of sand, and of seeing fountains of sand spout from flowing rivers. Khvay's practice is notable not only for drawing attention to issues arising from sand mining, but for its basis in deeply sensitive research. While the Cambodian

Khvay *Sammang Newspaper Man* 2011. Courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.





A fishing boat and sand mining barges, Tonle Sap River, Phnom Penh, 2013.
Photo by Khvay Samnang.



Khvay Samnang *Where Is My Land* 2012, courtesy the artist and SA SA BASSAC.

government fails to conduct environmental impact studies, the artist takes it upon himself to ask questions of those most affected.

For Tith Kanitha, the experience was first-hand. Her home is in the Boeung Kak area, and she watched as her neighbours were forcibly evicted. In 2011, Tith transformed her traditional wooden house into a temporary exhibition space, an immersive installation of objects collected from her community, titled *Hut Tep So Da Chan* and later recreated in Berlin at a Heinrich Böll Stiftung project called *SurvivArt*.

In a 2012 performance, *Heavy Sand*, Tith stripped to her underwear and attempted to bathe herself – but she had only small vessels of water and was standing on a bed of sand. The futility of the challenge seemed to overcome her: the artist collapsed, burying herself in the sand. Meanwhile, a small child played, constructing castles with the very substance that has claimed so many homes. *Heavy Sand* brought the private act of bathing into public view, much as Tith's 2011 installation invited the public into the personal space of the artist's home. Tith's practice poetically reveals the ways in which the mining of sand – a flagrantly public act of environmental destruction – affects the lives of many, creating a sense of powerlessness and private suffering.

Futility appears also in Than Sok's 2012 performance, *Sorting*. The artist uses a woven rattan sieve, called a *chang-eh*, to sift through sand. The implement is usually used in the processing of harvested rice, a staple of the Cambodian diet. In Than's performance, the sieve was rendered useless, and the sand in the small gallery space began to seem infinite. *Sorting* may be read not only as an indictment of sand dredging's ubiquity in contemporary Cambodia, but also of

the repetitiveness of so many common daily tasks. An earlier installation by Than, *To Give Is To Receive I*, 2012, includes paper money buried in small mounds of sand. The artist speaks of this work as pointing to the strangeness of the Cambodian ritual of prayer using sand mounds: a practice mistakenly considered by many to be Buddhist, but in fact derived from ancient Hindu beliefs.

Sand is mysterious, mercurial, and potentially menacing. Historian Lewis Mayo observes that "Sand's capacity to shift position surreptitiously, to accumulate and dissipate [...] makes it foundationally unpredictable and seemingly treacherous." Sand, for Mayo, is a "category violation: though solid, it partakes of the qualities that distinguish water and wind, the very elements which cause it to move."⁵

In Cambodia, the mining of sand destroys homes and lives. It also inspires the creation of powerfully moving works of art: brave expressions of resistance in defiance of the "treacherous" sand. ■

Roger Nelson is an independent curator, and a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne researching contemporary Cambodian art. He has published on Southeast Asian and Australian practice, including for *ArtAsiaPacific*, *Art Monthly Australia*, and *The Phnom Penh Post* and has written. (together with Erin Gleeson) on Khvay Samnang for the *4th Asian Art Biennial*, Taiwan (2013-14).

1 In this essay, Cambodian family names precede first names.

2 The *Singapore Biennale 2013: If The World Changed* runs until 16 February 2014. Khvay's six-channel video installation, *Untitled*, 2011/2013, is an official selection, on display in the Singapore Art Museum. Khvay's performance on the beach was not affiliated with the Biennale.

3 Global Witness published a report on sand mining in 2010, titled *Shifting Sand*, and has continued to monitor the situation since then. See <www.globalwitness.org>

4 The World Bank, records available at <data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/GDP-ranking-table>.

5 Lewis Mayo, 'Prefects, Chiefs and the History of Sand: Systems of Pre-eminence, and the Pacific and Asian Pasts of the Manukau Harbour' in Paola Voci and Jacqueline Leckie (eds.), *Localizing Asia in Aotearoa*, Dunmore Publishing, Auckland 2011 pp24-35.

Than Sok *Sorting* 2012, performance, Phnom Penh, courtesy the artist and SA SA BASSAC.

