

MEDIATING THE MEKONG



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The report would not have been realized without the contributions of the many artists, curators and arts organizations in Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand who provided information, media and honest opinion.

It is my hope that this report may assist as an entry point for those wishing to explore further this unique and often overlooked region.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Richard Streitmatter-Tran".

Richard Streitmatter-Tran, artist
Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
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Precursors: A River Runs Through It

In January 2003, the Thai Embassy in Phnom Penh was ablaze as people throughout the city took to the streets, vandalizing Thai businesses for what now appears to be the consequence of an orchestrated political manipulation of media disinformation gone awry. This incident was widely believed to have followed a report in the Cambodian press that a popular Thai actress claimed that Angkor, the pride and soul of Cambodia, rightfully belonged to Thailand and ought to be returned. If there is one thing that can be associated with Cambodia, it is Angkor. Its preeminence in history, art and culture is the crux of all that is Khmer. The alleged comment was later discovered to either have been completely fabricated or attributed as a factual statement when in reality it may have simply been a line from a fictional character in a Thai soap opera taken out of context.

As the Thai Royal Army was dispatched into Phnom Penh, the media coverage in neighboring Vietnam, known for its sensitivity to regional stability, had very little comment about the unfolding turmoil just 150 kilometers west of Ho Chi Minh City. Less interesting were the riots than the power of the media to provoke and later dismiss the potential crisis. In just a few short months one would be hard-pressed to read follow-up coverage of the riots in the Cambodian and Thai media. What might have spread into a regional crisis was all but forgotten months later.

It begs to ask why what a Thai actress allegedly says about Cambodia really matters at all? For those familiar with this region of the world, it is clear. Economically, the mass exportation of Thai culture (programming, entertainment and media) has increasingly become an issue of national concern for Laos and Cambodia who share close cultural and linguistic similarities. These two nations are sandwiched between the larger and economically powerful Thailand and Vietnam. There is always an acute sensitivity to these pressures. And what potentially affects one country indeed affects all. One might only be reminded of the explosive potential of Eastern Europe and the evidence that ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Economic Nations) is troubled year after year about the situation in Myanmar. Cambodia's political volley between the evil to the east and the evil to the west is as predictable as the changing course of the Mekong River itself.

It is in Phnom Penh every year that waters from as far north as Tibet flow south via the Mekong River, engorging the Tonlé Sap river basin and forcing the river to double back upon itself, reversing its flow. It is the dynamics of this river that metaphorically inspire this report for the Asia Art Archive as made possible by the 2005 Martell Asian Art Research Grant. It is a contradiction and wonder that the Mekong River simultaneously separates and connects, nourishes and destroys, informs and obfuscates, geographically demarking national borders while connecting peoples and economies through a life sustaining artery. The GMS (Greater Mekong Sub-region including Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam) has historically been one of constant redistribution of land and people and thus culture. It continues to this day when one looks at resistance movements in Southern Thailand, the Karen and Shan states in Myanmar and among various minorities in Central Vietnam and with border and economic relations between Cambodia and Vietnam, Myanmar and Thailand. For example, we find many of Burma's political dissidents operating out of Chiang Mai in a similar way that Tibetan dissidents operate out of India.

The GMS has a rich social and political spectrum, from a developed market-based civil society in Thailand to a repressive military junta in Myanmar, with the former Indochinese colonies of Vietnam and Laos and Cambodia falling somewhere between. (Note: As of the final writing of this report, the Thai government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was overthrown in a military coup, which goes to reinforce an important point – all things that belong to the river flow like the river.)

Mediating the Mekong

The namesake of this project, *Mediating the Mekong*, may be read in two ways: mediation and media. Firstly, mediation can be understood as a process of negotiation and an attempt to understand how Mekong-based artists, curators, and arts organizations negotiate the production of artwork under widely disparate conditions both within their respective nations and among. On the other hand, we might focus on *media as communications technologies*. In this respect I am interested in the role that media plays in the Mekong region within the arts. As our information increasingly arrives through mediated channels, whether as websites, blogs, rss feeds, cds and dvds, streaming video on mobile phones, and even through television and radio programming, it becomes inevitable that these channels may be reversed, becoming transmission tools for artists. If artists in the Mekong are actively consuming and sharing information among one another, what evidence is there of such a network?

Together, these two approaches join when the Mekong River is metaphorically seen a conduit for contemporary arts information, mitigating local and national media controls. As such I set out to collect information and media related to contemporary arts in national media channels (newspapers, magazines, and internet sites), while at the same time observing the information infrastructure that they operate from within. This approach relies on the assumption that key to understanding the contemporary arts practice in this region was to better understand how information itself was produced,

distributed and controlled, rather than to solely understand the media technologies one has access to. Many artists, students and organizations may have access to media technologies, and yet without teachers, mentors, curators and spaces that possess a clear understanding of how these technologies can best be implemented into either a curriculum or emerging art scene, these technologies simply become hollow product showrooms, with the output being amateur or conceptually deficient and the networks inefficient. Thus many of the projects that I speak about do not directly concern media technologies, but rather engage the other sense of the word – *mediating as negotiation*. These examples demonstrate how artists in the GMS have found ways to produce and organize projects that connect countries within this region.

Over the life of the project, I traveled to Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar and various locations throughout Vietnam. I proceeded by taking a general assessment of the media infrastructure for each country and then seeking out artists that were either using, commenting or resisting media in the production of their work. I would collect videos, images and documents in the course of the research that were later given to the Asia Art Archive for their proper documentation. There were cases where artists created virtual spaces for critical arts discussion in their local language, yet hosted them beyond the borders of the country to avoid having the sites shut down, as well as other cases of underground publishing. The artists I met were encouraged to speak freely but I pressured no one to make comments they felt uncomfortable with, on- or off-record. Indeed much of the information gathered occurred through relaxed conversation often at small gatherings with artists at tea and coffee shops. Not surprisingly these public spaces were often central information depots, as we find in the case of Myanmar where artists remain well-informed of regional and world arts information despite extremely restricted internet and communications access.

This report is not intended to be an exhaustive academic investigation of any one particular area, including media studies, political science, or media art, but rather a personal observation of events and conditions as seen from the perspective an artist living in the GMS. As an artist, I had in many cases easy access to the communities where I collected information by virtue of shared experience, whereas if I had taken an approach as solely a researcher, it would have proven difficult. Through the course of the research, I was able to make many important contacts in the region, often through collaborative works, and I hope that the information gained from these experiences and shared in this report will be a valuable entry point for future researchers wishing to pursue work in this part of the world.

The Mekong Vacuum

A map in the latest *Alternatives Guide to Contemporary Art Spaces* published biannually by the Japan Foundation reveals a large gray expanse blanketing Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos, indicating that the guide currently has no information or contacts for these areas. For artists, curators and arts organizations familiar with the Mekong region, this might come as a surprise given that several successful GMS-based arts projects have occurred over recent years, including the Dance Theater Workshop's *Mekong Project* (Phnom Penh, 2004); Switch Media's *Chiang Mai Artist Residency Program* (2003-2004); The Heinrich Boll Foundation's *Globalization vs. Identity Exhibition* (Chiang Mai, 2004); *The Asiatopia Performance Art Festival* (Bangkok and Chiang Mai, 1998 - present); *Convergence* at the Blue Space Gallery (Ho Chi Minh City, 2005); *Performance Site* (Yangon, 2005); and the *Fly Me to Another World Project* (Chiang Mai, 2004-2005). Each of these projects has relied on the participation of GMS-based artists and spaces. Furthermore, arts professionals from these areas have shared their research and experience of these events in several forums worldwide. Yet, there seems to be a break in the flow of information from the Mekong to other arts communities, as the

Alternatives map indicates. This active region is so often overshadowed by the more established art communities in East Asia, mainly China, Korea and Japan, with their developed information channels with international circulation/distribution.

While the *Alternatives Guide* does focus on those "alternative spaces" as distinguished from commercial spaces, it clarifies:

The word "alternative" was used in the plural form to refer to many different activities being carried out by those people, including artists, curators, critics, art historians, and cultural policy makers, who are creating a vital new forum for contemporary art in Asia. It refers to the possibilities they are exploring outside of conventional art systems, which have been based on the values of Western modernism, and we believe it carries a message of hope for the future. (Japan Foundation, 2004)

Is it that these alternative activities occur less in the Mekong region, or rather is there a break in the communication of these activities? It is likely a case of both. The Mekong arts communities have still much work ahead in connecting with the rest of Asia, and perhaps the Alternatives guide published in Japan has yet to established contacts in Cambodia, Laos or Myanmar. It may also be that the Mekong contemporary art communities have still largely yet to explore beyond the conventional art systems, or to properly document their activities due to a lack of dedicated arts professionals (arts management, local curators and critics). A quick skim through any issue of *Asian Art News* reveals a plethora of commercial galleries and artists from the Mekong region, particularly in Vietnam, Thailand and Myanmar. However, there seem to be only a small number of Mekong-based arts writers covering the contemporary arts development in the GMS in international publications. Physical arts spaces, be it for lack of finances or cultural controls, are extremely difficult to establish in Myanmar and Vietnam; thus underground activities and spaces

(qualified simply by the virtue of not going through the proper protocols and not necessarily implying subversive activity) often wish to remain so and go unreported. With such underground or smaller-scale activities, the discourse is often restricted to the local language and does not extend immediately into translated material for publication and dissemination.

It was this vacuum of printed critical and informative art writing within Vietnam that inspired the creation of the magazines *A.ART* in Ho Chi Minh City and *Padauk Pwint Thit* in Yangon. In late 2005, Documenta researcher Ms. Keiko Sei arrived in Ho Chi Minh City as a part of her early research for the next exhibition. In 2007, Documenta 12 will focus on the platform of magazines, underscoring the increasing relationship between information and art. After speaking with the Vietnamese arts community, she concluded that none of the existing Vietnamese publications were suitable for her research. Her assessment came as no surprise. A group of artists in Ho Chi Minh City set to task in creating a bilingual Vietnamese/English magazine as a step to fill this void. Originally the artists considered a number of approaches, including the formation of a company, but soon realized that the lack of financial resources and the difficulty in obtaining necessary permits made a business track unfeasible.

In Vietnam, as in Myanmar, one may choose to publish under the umbrella of an existing magazine that has a license. In this arrangement you might find a culture magazine in the portfolio a publisher specializing in business and economics, or as in the real case in Myanmar, a magazine called *Beauty* focusing on teen issues. Magazines in Vietnam fall under two categories: for-profit magazines and in-house magazines. For-profit magazines are commercial undertakings and can be sold in bookstores and at newsstands. Most magazines fall in this category. In-house magazines require a different license and cannot be sold and are often promotional magazines such as the *Heritage* magazine published by Vietnam Airlines and distributed on board during flights. Obtaining either license comes at terrific cost and difficulty.

Furthermore, the editors-in-chief of magazines are often figure head positions of people in good standing with the government that act of guarantors of the content. Cultural productions are all contingent upon the final approval of various government organs such as the Ministry of Culture and Information. It is under these conditions that the artists of *A.ART* in Ho Chi Minh City developed the prototype. The commercial direction of the magazine was dismissed and reconceived solely as an artwork that would engage the international art exhibition circuit as nomadic publishers. The concept was discussed with Fumio Nanjo, curator of the Singapore Biennale who invited the publishing project as an official project for the exhibition. One year later, *A.ART*, with a circulation of 5,000 copies, premiered at the Singapore Biennale where upon 3,000 copies will be returned for distribution in Vietnam, satisfying the original intent of working to fill the void of arts writing in the local community.

In Yangon, *Padauk Pwint Thit* (Art and Literature magazine) was published this year. The Burmese-language magazine is divided into the following columns: long and short poems, essays, long and short stories, writer biographies, art and literature concepts, art and literary critique, classic Burmese literature, modern international literature, overseas poems and international film, music and arts with sections in contemporary ideology, social sciences, applied philosophy, history, education and technology. By the time I arrived in Yangon, a team led by the editor-in-chief Maung Tin Thit had been assembled (including Maung Sein Ni, Phone Thet Pine, Hein Myat Zaw, and Khant Min Htet) and had begun writing content and was in the process of finding a means for publication.

Both publications are artist-initiated projects specifically developed to fill a perceived void of printed cultural discourse in their communities. We discover in black holes rather than in an absence of material a great mass of it, only so densely compressed that it loses form and remains invisible. It is this lack of form that might be mistaken for regional inactivity.

INFRASTRUCTURES AND SUPERSTRUCTURES

Each Mekong nation varies widely in terms of arts infrastructure and cultural production. By infrastructure I mean those state institutions and organs used to enact and enforce cultural and information policy. Superstructure here refers to modes of cultural production as in the Marxist sense of the word. We might also see it as the playing field and its players.

There is a direct relationship between economic well-being and a strong civil society with the current state of contemporary arts. It goes without saying that an economically healthy and strong civil society makes for a good climate for cultural development. In the Greater Mekong Sub-region we find several combinations that make for some interesting observations. Thailand, with the most developed contemporary arts scene, is positioned as a locus through which artists in the Mekong often connect. Barring the recent coup, Thailand has a healthy economy and civil society. Cambodia is working towards a civil democratic society, but a poor economy hinders its cultural and contemporary arts development. You may be able to legally access materials worldwide, but the reality is you cannot afford to. Vietnam's economy is enjoying unprecedented growth but maintains authoritarian control over nearly every sector of society. Inversely, Vietnamese artists might be able to afford materials but are forbidden to access them. Laos, falling somewhere in between, borrows aspects from both Cambodia and Vietnam. Laos has a communist system that is similar to Vietnam but apparently less authoritarian. This system coupled with a stagnant economy results in a low interest and demand for development in the contemporary arts. Myanmar, arguably among the worst in terms of civil society and economy, is an enigma. Despite its overwhelming disadvantages it has developed an active arts community, yet the restrictions make it difficult to extend into other communities.

I will now proceed country by country, attempting at first to provide a snapshot of the conditions artists work within. I will speak about my observations and meetings with artists, educators, curators and organizations. There will

be times when these observations may not have a direct relationship with media or Mekong networking, but where I feel it is necessary to help establish a setting to better understand the challenges and conditions artists and art communities face.

CAMBODIA

In early 2006, Cambodia was being compared to Myanmar on account of a renewed political offensive by Prime Minister Hun Sen against those he claimed were guilty of defamation. These critics included a Phnom Penh radio broadcaster and a human rights activist who was arrested in a purge that swept through Phnom Penh. Hun Sen ultimately dropped legal proceedings against several of his critics in the media – likely the result of an international outcry. The same government struggle against media would months later be repeated in Thailand, where Prime Minister Thaksin would pursue legal actions against radio personality and critic Sondhi Limthongkul that would ultimately draw thousands of demonstrators to Bangkok in protest. Only a year earlier I marveled at the freedom of press in Cambodia when compared with the situation in Vietnam. It appears that Cambodia had gone through a short-lived backlash from which it now appears to have quickly recovered.

Despite the tendency for frequent and often violent political confrontations, Phnom Penh mostly remains an attractive city in terms of being able to openly exchange ideas, political or otherwise. However, the contemporary arts infrastructure remains in early development and lags behind both Myanmar and Vietnam – states that enforce rigid cultural controls. I was pleased to discover that there were several Cambodian arts initiatives than I was previously aware of, but sadly, funding for some of these organizations remained dire. Earlier this year I had received word from Sovanna Phum of extreme financial duress and the prospect of facing dissolution unless immediate funding was had. It appears that they have recently secured a source of funding and are currently performing new works in the capital.

Sovanna Phum is a traditional dance and shadow puppet theater established in 1994 by French national Delphine Kassem and Cambodian Mann Kosal. Since 1992, Kassem has been actively involved in promoting Khmer performing arts. She was formerly director of the art gallery *L'Atelier Khmer* and taught *Diabolo* in the circus department of the Phnom Penh Royal University of Fine Arts. Mann Kosal began his art studies in 1984 as a student of Bassac Theater at Phnom Penh's Royal University of Fine Arts. From 1991 to 1997, Kosal concentrated on Shadow Puppet Theater in the Department of performing arts of the Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts. When I first met with Delphine in February 2005, we had discussed her interest in extending Sovanna Phum to incorporate contemporary issues and new forms into their performances. Later that year, Japanese Butoh artist Ryuzo Fukuhara, while an artist in residency with *albb* in Vietnam, traveled to Phnom Penh and gave a performance at Sovanna Phum. I then made a note to stay in touch with Kassem and included Sovanna Phum as a primary source for this report. During my visit to Phnom Penh a year later, I was disappointed to hear that Kassem had been in a major accident while in France and her return to Cambodia was sadly not yet known. Meanwhile, Mann was assuming all responsibilities of Sovanna Phum. It is my hope that as one of the early arts organizations, Sovanna Phum can stay afloat. If they remain flexible in their balance between preservation and experiment, they may prove to be one of Cambodia's stronger hybrids.

The performing arts in Cambodia are considered to be an anchor of the arts. Nearly destroyed during the genocide of the Khmer Rouge regime (1975 - 1979) where nearly 90% of the artists, musicians, dancers and writers were killed, there is strong commitment to ensuring that these traditions are passed on and remembered. As with nearly all the countries in the GMS, there is a well-established traditional arts scene. However, because of the specific recent history of Cambodia, we find a commitment to the preservation and continuity of traditional Khmer arts (particularly in dance and music) so strong that there

exists a strong resistance for change. As such, we can realize a fundamental antagonism between traditional and contemporary arts: one embracing preservation, the other embracing change.

It is then no surprise that many events combine contemporary and traditional arts in their programming. In fact, unlike Thailand, Vietnam and Myanmar, it is nearly impossible to speak about the contemporary arts community in Cambodia without speaking to some length about the traditional arts. So, I will be speaking about the contemporary arts activity in Phnom Penh after establishing a setting in which these new forms operate.

In 2004, fourteen artists from seven countries, including representation from all GMS nations, participated in an ambitious project organized by the Amrita Performing Arts in collaboration with Sovanna Phum, The Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture and Phare Ponleu Selpak, Battambang. *The Mekong Project: A Program of Artist-to-Artist Exchanges in Southeast Asia* is a program of the Suitcase Fund of the Dance Theater Workshop in New York, made possible with funding from the Rockefeller Organization. While focusing on the Performing Arts, the project made gestures to the contemporary art community by inviting performance artists. Participants were expected to network and develop future projects together that would receive additional support from the Suitcase Fund. An emphasis was on continuity, an issue that has resonance in Cambodia in particular. One such project would bring Cambodian-American performance artists Anida Yoeu Esguerra to Ho Chi Minh City to develop a new performance with Vietnamese performance artist Ly Hoang Ly at Blue Space Gallery.

The organizer, Amrita Performing Arts, can be largely accredited with bringing Cambodian traditional performing arts to international attention. Established and directed by Fred Frumberg, a former consultant with UNESCO, Amrita tends to work toward large scale performances, often traveling to cities worldwide.

Perhaps the most widely renowned arts organization in Phnom Penh is the Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture, founded by Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan in December 1998. Unlike many of the arts organizations in Cambodia, and indeed in the GMS, Reyum's creative output is buttressed with its strong research activities. The research at Reyum focuses on the preservation and promotion of traditional and contemporary Cambodian arts and culture and often is realized in published works that are accessible to the public. The activities of Reyum can be divided into four areas: Research and Training, Exhibitions and Events, Publishing, and the Reyum Art School. Ly Daravuth is an active personality in the arts of Asia and frequently speaks on contemporary Asian art. Daravuth was a speaker at the Southeast Asia Performance Art Symposium in Bangkok connection in December. Sadly, in January 2005, co-founder Ingrid Muan died and a year later the exhibition, "A Good Friend is Hard to Find" by painter Svay Ken was installed at Reyum as a memorial to her friendship and contributions to the arts in Cambodia.

I was impressed in all aspects of the work being done at Reyum. Because of its unique focus on research and practice, it serves as a model that might be adapted to other Southeast Asian nations.

In February 2006, curator Christine Cibert organized the exhibition *Reflow*, at the Java Café Gallery in Phnom Penh, inviting three Vietnamese contemporary artists (painter Bui Cong Khanh, photographer Bui The Trung Nam and myself with a background in media arts) to collaborate in certain works with Phnom Penh-based artists. The program consisted of three main activities, including the realization of new work through collaborations between Vietnamese and Cambodian contemporary artists (Khanh with Leang Seckon and I with Sopheap Pich). The second activity was an open roundtable discussion with Vietnamese and Cambodian artists, with the intent of neighbors attempting to dispel long-standing stereotypes of the other. Vietnam, as I had mentioned in the introduction of this paper, has traditionally been seen as a threat on the border, with good historical reason. Vietnam

has within its population approximately 5 million Khmer-speaking peoples, which is quite significant if you consider the entire population of Cambodia is approximately 14 million. Many of the Khmer-speaking Vietnamese are live in the Mekong River delta area. Cambodians refer to this area as Khmer Krom and consider it as belonging to Cambodia and stolen by Vietnam. More recently, it was Vietnamese military forces that invaded Phnom Penh in 1979, driving the Khmer Rouge from power. Some have alleged Prime Minister Hun Sen, in collaboration with the Vietnamese, was originally placed into power as a puppet.

The third component of *Reflow* was a community arts project that occurred in an area formerly called "The Building". This area was a large housing complex built in the 1960s for foreign dignitaries, designed by Cambodia's most famous contemporary architect and student of Le Corbusier, Vann Molyvann. After the fall of the Khmer Rouge the complex was eventually squatted. After parts of the complex were destroyed in a fire a few years ago, the complex was slated for demolition. There was some resistance among the community, as many of the city's traditional artists, musicians and performers, notably from the Apsara Arts Association, had lived in this complex. In the summer of 2006, the complex was razed and thus displaced a large number of Cambodia's traditional artists. The *Reflow* programming at the Building occurred in its last days, as a way of highlighting the significance of its residents.

During the activities at the building, I made note that the directors of the traditional arts troupes refused to alter the costumes of their performances, even for the sake of fun or experimentation. These traditions seem to be inviolable, learnt in ways that have lasted for generations, and the urge to adapt or modify does not seem to have wide support or interest.

Of the Cambodian artists based in Phnom Penh, Leang Seckon is a familiar name. Primarily a painter, he has been quick to embrace contemporary arts practice. During much of his early life as an artist, he worked without much influence from the outside. His work was recently

acquired by the Royal family and he is seen at the city's contemporary arts events. Painter Svay Ken, who I mention above in connection with Reyum, is endeared by the Cambodian arts community. Svay Ken began making sketches documenting his everyday life in his sixties. Now 73 years old, he continues to document the changing times in Phnom Penh and was selected as Cambodia's entry for the Fukuoka Triennale in 1999. Both artists participated in a landmark event in Phnom Penh — the Visual Arts Open.

The Visual Arts Open (VAO) occurred in December 2005, organized by the new arts group Saklapel. The group includes many of the artists exhibiting in the VAO as well as supporters and arts organizations in the city. The name for the group is a play on the word *selapak*, meaning art in Khmer. The VAO was organized and curated by returning overseas Cambodians: Sopheap Pich and Linda Saphan, who had returned to live and work in Cambodia. Sopheap Pich since his return to Cambodia in 2003 has worked with elaborate bamboo and rattan sculptures. Linda Saphan is continuing to work toward her Ph.D in Social Sciences at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, Paris. The VAO was an ambitious project from the start. According to my conversations with Sopheap and Linda, during the early planning stages for the multi-site contemporary Cambodian art exhibition in Phnom Penh, they discovered a shortage of funding. Artists that expressed an interest in participating in the VAO were asked to donate one work to a pre-VAO auction as a means to raise funds for the development of the program. The curators had also convinced local business to open up spaces for the exhibition of artwork for the duration of the three-week event. With the assistance of additional in-kind support and a media sponsorship by Art Asia Pacific Magazine, Saklapel was able to deliver the show in December, showcasing 19 artists among eight locations throughout the city.

The VAO website remains updated despite during my visit to Phnom Penh in February, when the future of Saklapel was in question due to disagreements among its members over the future direction of the group. The VAO was a

remarkable example of a community of contemporary artists coming together to organize an event with little resources.

Also originally slated to occur in December 2005, the Phnom Penh Arts Festival 2006 was finally held after several months of postponement from March 30 to April 2, 2006. The festival program connected a number of important arts organizations including Sovanna Phum, Apsara Arts Association, Amrita Performing Arts, and Sang Selapak Building Arts. I was surprised to learn that both the Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture and Saklapel were not involved in PPAF2006. On March 26, an Ezine workshop "Visionz" with Mo-Ling Chui, Erwan Chevalier, Socheathy Ouk, Linda Saphan, Rattana Vandy and Thorneakea Toun was held at the Sun Dew Design Shop adjacent to the Java Gallery.

Regular arts programming can be found at the Java Café Gallery, operated by American photographer Dana Langlois, a founding member of Saklapel. My advice to first time visitors to Phnom Penh looking for information on the current art scene is to first go to Java. Some in Phnom Penh have voiced their opinion that as the Java Gallery has a clientele made up largely of expatriates, the work exhibited at the space does not always find a resonance with the Cambodian community. I suspect that it is not necessarily the space, but rather new work in general always takes time to penetrate. Stéphane Janin, photographer and French national, has opened the Popil Photo Gallery and has been active in exhibiting art photography in his space. Sang Salapak Building Arts also maintains an updated blog on Cambodian arts and culture.

The Centre Culturel Francais du Cambodge (French Cultural Center) has a cinema and modest exhibitions area. It maintains an active program of events and film screenings with occasional exhibitions for art work from local and international artists.

In August 2006, Nicolaus Mesterharm, a German filmmaker, came to HCMC to inform us of a new space and project based in Phnom Penh. The Meta Art Center at #9E0 Street 264 is currently under development and intends to provide a space for Cambodian and visiting artists. Over the last months, Mr. Mesterharm has traveled throughout the GMS, meeting with artists and directors of the Goethe Institut within each country to propose a large exhibition, Intercity, to be realized in 2008. The exhibition proposes to involve the cooperation of the several Goethe Instituts in the GMS, working in tandem. At this point the project remains an idea but I should hear of some updates in the near future.

The newspapers in Cambodia are often aligned with political parties such as the CPP (Cambodian People's Party) and the Funcinpec. The press by large does not offer much in terms of arts criticism, though the criticism of rivaling political parties is in abundance. The Cambodian people receive their news and information primarily via print and television. The internet as a means of information access has not yet caught on with the public at large. Although Cambodia does have governmental organs dedicated to different modes of cultural production, such as the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts and its various sub-agencies, like the Directorate General of Techniques for Culture, which is responsible for the fields of heritage, museums, fine arts, publishing and libraries, film, video and multimedia, cultural development and arts education, it is generally agreed among artists that there is little interference if any in the normal day to day operations and organization of local exhibitions and arts activities.

Creative activity, particularly that falling outside of the traditional and contemporary arts are on the rise and include film festivals, lectures and presentations at universities such as Pannasatra. The arts education in Cambodia is very much tradition-based, and art students are usually left to their own devices when it comes to attempting contemporary forms after graduating. Recent arts graduates not wishing to enter the commercial art sector can continue their development at the Reyum

Institute and other spaces as they become available.

Cambodia has the potential to develop an interesting art scene but lags behind its neighbors in Vietnam and Thailand, due in part to the nation's economic situation and focus on the traditional arts. However, given the relatively unrestricted environment, Cambodia could be an attractive area for hosting GMS events, as it did in 2004.

MYANMAR

The unexpected relocation of the national capital to Pyinmana in November 2006, halfway between the former capital city of Yangon and Mandalay, has rekindled world attention on Myanmar and the continued imprisonment of National League for Democracy (NLD) leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. Myanmar cancelled its recent scheduled hosting of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Nations), moving it to Malaysia in order to, according to Burmese officials, better focus on internal issues.

Myanmar continues to be a problem for the ASEAN nations who feel that the internal Burmese politics affect international relations between ASEAN and the world. This is also true for the ASEM (Asia Europe Meeting), where the European nations had threatened to boycott meetings on account of Myanmar's proposed membership into the organization. During the last ASEAN meeting early this year, ASEAN officials were able to negotiate a near-term visit by its delegates to monitor Myanmar's progress toward the formation of the long-promised. The agreed meeting was initially postponed, and when the rescheduled visit occurred, the Malaysian delegate returned early on account of an uncooperative reception by Myanmar. In the past weeks, pushed forward by the United States and the UK (and opposed by China) the issue of Myanmar has been brought to the UN Security Council to be discussed. The volleys of empty promises and regular purges have become routine over the last several years. The reluctance of the international community has played into the ruling Junta's consolidation of power.

Artists in Myanmar are accustomed to low expectations and insane policies. Although the environment is severe, they have been able to negotiate tactics allowing them to continue their arts practice. It is in Myanmar that I found an unexpected high level of activity and this was largely a stroke of last-minute luck by meeting the right people beforehand.

I made my initial contacts for the Myanmar trip in Bangkok at the Asiatopia festival in December 2005. There I met artist Chaw Ei Thein and Documenta researcher Keiko Sei. Together we assembled a list of artists and spaces to meet during my stay. I was met by artists Hteit Lin and Moe Satt in Yangon.

Hteit Lin was also a contributor to *A.Art*, writing of the seven years he spent in "school", a term used by inmates referring to prisons, as a political prisoner. Hteit Lin was a law student when arrested for his activities in the 1998 student resistance movement. While in prison, he would make arrangements with his guards for paints and brushes, and in lieu of canvas, he would use the white longyis (Burmese traditional sarongs) of prisoners. After he was released from prison he slowly began to reassemble his life and resume his art work. Hteit Lin remains one of the leading artists in Yangon along with Aye Ko, Aung Myint, Chaw-Ei Thein, Popo, and Nyon Lyn Htet.

In May 2005, Hteit Lin was rearrested with Chaw-Ei Thein for an interactive performance that involved setting up a stall and selling traditional medicines priced according to an obsolete monetary system. According to Chaw-Ei, the two were released with a warning not to repeat the performance. Each, if convicted, faced a 7-year jail term. A factor that may have contributed to their release was a series of bombings that occurred in Yangon during their detention, their release allowing authorities to better allocate their resources on the bombings.

As in Vietnam where there are restrictive controls governing public art exhibitions, artists in Myanmar have likewise been keen to seek the added buffer of

international organizations such as the Goethe Institut and the Alliance Francaise. Within the confines of these spaces, artists like Nyon Lyn Heet have been able to realize works that may not have been possible in other spaces. I must note that although these organizations work in partnership with their Embassies, they are not always privileged to diplomatic immunity. At the Alliance Francaise is a librarian known simply as Jimmy (Kyaw Myint Lynn). I met with Jimmy at the Alliance Francaise to discuss the programming and facilities that includes a small section on the arts. Jimmy confessed that he is also an artist and opened up a cabinet to show me his works.

In Yangon, I immediately noticed that there a conspicuous absence of female contemporary artists. This was not the case with female artists working in traditional or modern arts. I had spoke about this issue with my hosts and toward the latter part of my research in Yangon was able to meet two artists, Wah Nu and Phyu Mon. Both artists are married to artists and often collaborate on works with their spouses. Wah Nu is primarily a painter, though is now experimenting in video and photography, and exhibited her work in the last Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale. Her husband, Tun Win Aung is a sculptor combining sculpture and photography. Phyu Mon works primarily in painting and installation while completing a number of performances over the last years. Her husband, Chan Aye works primarily in painting and sculpture. Together they run a studio and gallery in Yangon.

Chaw-Ei Thein, whom I mentioned earlier for her performance with Hteit Lin, is a well-known for her work in the arts. She is the daughter of a well-known artist and collector, Maung Maung Thein, with whom she runs the Sunflower Gallery in Yangon. Chaw-Ei has participated in a number of performance exhibitions throughout Asia, including Asiatopia, the NIPAF Performance Art Festival in Japan, and the Taiwan Performance Art Festival in Tapei. In 2005 she had a solo exhibition at the Espace Gallery in Bangkok. Chaw-Ei is also former editor of Beauty magazine and was a contributor to A.ART in Vietnam during her one month stay in Ho Chi Minh City in January 2006. She has recently traveled throughout Myanmar

performing new works. Moe Satt and Chaw Ei Thein have kept me informed via email of the recent activities in Myanmar.

My research in Yangon was made possible with the assistance of performance artist Moe Satt, who is making efforts to develop the performance art in Yangon. In December 2005, Moe Satt was assisting in the production of *Night Moon Dance*, a performance and music event at the Gitamei Music Center founded by American Kit Young, currently the center's Artistic Advisor. During the time of my research, Gitamei was the only public Burmese space for contemporary arts in operation. NICA, operated by Jay Koh and the site of the Performance Site festival in January 2004, was said to have closed its doors. As for private spaces, Aung Myint operates his studio at the Inya Gallery of Art.

The 6th New Zero Art Show organized by the New Zero Art Space at the Lawkanat Art Gallery in Yangon ran from January 10-16, 2006 and included over thirty Burmese artists. In April, *Le printemps des Poetes* was held at the Alliance Francaise in Yangon featuring a program on live performance art and poetry.

As with the case in Cambodia where traditional performing arts often integrate with the contemporary arts, the same might be said about poetry in Myanmar. Many of the artists I met consider themselves poets as much as artists. Several artists work between the two disciplines such as Popo, who is one of Burma's earliest experimental artists. He incorporates his visual work within the published volumes of his poetry as well as integrates poetry into his installations. Popo recently gave a presentation on contemporary Burmese Art in the 1990s at the 2001 Yokohama Triennale and has exhibited work at the Gwangju Biennale in 2002. He is currently using the computer in the production of his new works, including video. Maung Maung Thein (also known by the pen name of Nyein Way and of no relation to Chaw Ei Thein), is also a poet and performer. Nyein Way was extremely helpful in giving an overview of the current art scene in Yangon and an artist's perspective on the relocation of

the capital to Pyinmana. Most agreed that the climate for artists in Yangon could only improve as the military would be replaced by the local police with whom the people tend to have better relations. In Nyein Way's office, he had several of the latest issues of international art magazines such as Art News and Art Forum. I had asked how he was able to obtain them and he simply replied that he ordered them from a certain bookstore in Yangon specializing in foreign magazines and books. The charge was merely a 20 percent surcharge. This is something you cannot even accomplish in Vietnam and was surprising considering the media controls in Myanmar.

VIETNAM

In the past years, Vietnam has surpassed Germany in terms of population, making it larger than any European and African nation save Nigeria. The population explosion that came as a result of thirty years of peace following the reunification of the nation at the conclusion of the American Vietnamese war has introduced demands that the government has found increasingly difficult to keep pace with. In order to meet its singular objective for entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), Vietnam has been forced to increase its campaign against corruption and toward economic transparency. Keen on regional and national stability, Vietnam has found itself in delicate positions in the last years, particularly with the politics of its neighbors. The recurring issue of Myanmar has become a thorn in Vietnam's side. In 2004 Vietnam hosted the Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM), during which several European nations threatened to boycott on account of Myanmar's proposed membership into the organization. Vietnam was able to orchestrate an eleventh-hour compromise with Myanmar, who agreed in principle to work toward democratic and constitutional reform. Satisfied, the Europeans participated in the meetings that would have gone well to Vietnam's credit and improved international status if Myanmar had not reneged on those agreements months after, much to Vietnam's embarrassment. Not having learned its lesson, Vietnam again backed Myanmar a year later during the 2005

ASEAN conference to again see Myanmar fall short of its promises for reform. Furthermore, ASEAN's members recently agreed in principle to move toward democratic reform, news which naturally received no mention in Vietnam's local press. Vietnam finds itself increasingly forced to comply with international and regional consensus, yet maintaining an authoritarian-style rule at home through its control over all media sectors.

In the last year, Vietnam has concluded its 10th National Congress in which the seeds for future policies are laid out. As expected, there was no radical shift in any direction. Despite woeful inefficiencies, most agree that Vietnam is the rising power in the GMS, fueled by its economic development. As the Vietnamese economy improves, one expects to see small steps toward a more civil society and a lessening of cultural controls. Just three years ago, cases where police would arrive to shut down exhibitions and performances were not uncommon. These types of interventions are far less common now. As for the arts, I do not expect any significant changes in the near term despite a more relaxed environment this year. If Thailand is any indication, in this region, anything can reverse at any time. Vietnam had experimented with a period in the mid-eighties called Doi Moi (Renewal) that saw a relaxing of press and artistic freedoms. Those gains were short lived when they were repealed after the June 4 Tiananmen incident. Vietnam's artists have found ways to continue working outside of the system.

In order to fully understand the contemporary art scene in Vietnam, one has to visit two cities. Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi remain the leading cities for contemporary arts practice and exhibitions in Vietnam, although the crossover between the two communities is less frequent than one might expect. In many ways, these arts communities continue to function separately.

Ho Chi Minh City

A new development over the last two years in Ho Chi Minh City is the introduction of two artist-run spaces:

Atelier Wonderful and a little blah blah (albb). Exhibitions, presentations and other events held in these spaces are unofficial, meaning that protocols such as applications for permission have not been acquired. As such, the events might technically be considered underground activities if they weren't so popular and widely known. It is interesting that as non-sanctioned activities, the state-owned press has not hesitated to cover the events and as a result their attendance has increased with each event. Being smaller and thus more agile, these alternative spaces have been able to create arts programming, filling the gap between the gallery exhibition circuit and thereby keeping continuous arts activity alive in Saigon.

Atelier Wonderful was established by French nationals Sandrine Louquet and Bertrand Peret in the beginning of 2006 as an offshoot of the now defunct Wonderful District group. The programming schedule of the Atelier until June 2005 saw a new event each Saturday afternoon. Most exhibitions were accompanied by artist talks. Atelier Wonderful's events included screening Andy Warhol videos, exhibitions of visiting artists and students, international graffiti, and documentary film. Sandrine and Bertrand are now considering the next direction for Atelier while refocusing on their own work.

Another arts initiative in Saigon is a little blah blah (albb), co-directed by Sue Hajdu and Motoko Uda, from Australia and Japan. Although widely appreciated for organizing artist presentations and lectures, albb will be focusing on larger projects with long-cycle productions. Beginning in July 2006 over the course of two months, A+A Public Art Project (the team of Ayumi Matsuzaka and Alba Navas Salmeron) as artists-in-residency developed the community art project *The Dream Collector*. Other projects for 2006 include *Transplash*, a zine exhibition and a presentation on propaganda art. Sue Hajdu was among 6 curators involved in the 600 images project (6 curators from 6 cities, 60 artists, 600 images) that also exhibited in Bangkok. Both Hajdu and Uda are regular contributors to arts publications and curatorial projects such as the Yokohama Triennial.

For Ho Chi Minh City, the idea of contemporary art and community is novel. Most community arts projects have previously tended to fall outside of what might be considered within contemporary arts practice, focusing rather on mainly teaching crafts to the underprivileged at the neglect of developing concepts.

Galerie Quynh was founded in 2000 by Vietnamese American Quynh Pham and Rob Cianci and began as a virtual gallery. In partnership with Swiss collectors Huong and Karl Knuesel, Gallery Quynh opened its permanent space in 2003. Galerie Quynh has focused primarily on Saigon-based painters but has expanded its scope this year to include more experimental work including performance and installation. The gallery has made efforts to connect to the international arts community via art fairs. It has been extremely successful in connecting with the expatriate community, ensuring that exhibitions regularly have a healthy turnout. Selectively working in concert with other groups, Galerie Quynh has co-produced shows for Sue Hajdu (albb) and Sandrine Llouquet and Bertrand Peret (Atelier Wonderful). The gallery publishes catalogs for most of their exhibitions and works closely with its artists. As the gallery continues to grow, Quynh may be seeking new spaces to accommodate works of larger scale. Among the galleries in HCMC, I would consider Galerie Quynh at the forefront in terms of exhibiting progressive young work.

Blue Space Gallery is widely acknowledged to be the first private contemporary art gallery in the city. Founded in 1996 and directed by Ms. Tran Thi Huynh Nga, Blue Space was one of the earliest supporters of experimental young artists. The gallery works closely with the HCMC Fine Art Association. One of their primary efforts is the ongoing organization of intensive workshop programs, inviting artists to work on location for a set period of time, usually 3-7 days. When there are multinational exhibitions in Vietnam, chances are they are at Blue Space. In 2004 Blue Space organized *Convergence*, an exhibition with invited artists from over 16 nations. Blue Space Gallery also serves as a location for visiting arts organizers seeking to connect projects with local artists, as was the

case with Chumpon's promotion of Asiatopia 2005. In October 2006, the gallery organized a performance art workshop, inviting international artists to develop work in Dalat City. Blue Space is roundly respected by artists in the city although it no longer attracts large audiences. In a city where most contemporary exhibitions attract large foreign visitors, Blue Space has yet to find a rhythm with the expatriate non-Vietnamese art community.

Mai's Gallery was established in 2002 by Ms. Do Thi Tuyet Mai. The gallery recently ended a series of exhibitions in 2006 highlighting several artists from the central city of Hue. Mai's Gallery might be seen as Mai's commercial enterprise, complimenting her non-profit work as director of the Saigon Open City project. There has been concern, however, by some in the community that the distinction between the two has not always been clearly defined. With this year's reorganization of SOC, this concern seems to have been resolved. Both Blue Space and Mai's Gallery were more active and popular among younger artists a few years ago. Many of the city's contemporary artists have gravitated toward projects with Galerie Quynh. These three commercial galleries are among the few of their type that have been open to newer practices and young ideas.

The Saigon Biennale was renamed and reconceived as Saigon Open City (SOC) in 2006. SOC is made possible through major funding from the Ford Foundation. Sitting on the Board of Directors are Mai Do, Dinh Q. Le and Tran Luong. The SOC has organized public artist presentations including Melissa Chiu (Director, Asia Society Museum), Jeremy Strick (Director, MOCA Los Angeles), Moria Roth (Art critic, Mills College) and Cheryl Younger (former Director, The Photography Institute) through its connection with artist Dinh Q. Le. In January 2006, Bangkok-based curator Gridthiya Gaweewong and artist Rirkrit Tiravanija were announced as Artistic Co-directors for the SOC project.

According to the SOC website, the long-term project will occur in three chapters during the next two years, commencing in November 2006 at several venues throughout the city:

Liberation will be the first chapter. It will focus on the social reality portrayed through the daily life of Vietnamese people during Liberation period, as well as the contextual influences which it had on the greater scheme of life on a global scale.

Unification will focus on the unification period and pre-open door policy. The term will serve as a metaphor. We would like to introduce the audience the notion of artistic practices both public and private. It will involve both direct and indirect collaboration with community. It should break the notion of *time capsule* and try to open up the community's expectation and familiarity with arts.

Reconstruction will focus on Vietnam today. It will center around changes that happened gradually in every aspect of daily life in Vietnam after *Doi Moi*. This chapter will focus on artists of today's generation. The exhibition will be a combination of existing works, works from previous chapter, and new commissioned works by young Vietnamese artists either local or Diasporas and international artists.

Vietnam has established fine arts associations on both a municipal and national level. Until recently, membership into the association has been considered a right of passage and a mark of legitimization. However, the associations have been slow to embrace new forms and ideas and thus suffer from a decreasing interest among the younger generation of artists.

Saigon has increasingly become an attractive city for expatriate and returning overseas Vietnamese artists, notably Dinh Q. Le and Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba. Both artists recently participated in the 2006 Gwangju Biennale. It is interesting to note that among foreign artists working in Vietnam, most prefer Hanoi with its small village charm

– with the exception of those artists of Vietnamese heritage who prefer the dynamism of the city.

In 2005, Mogas Station was formed to produce the *A.ART* project for the Singapore Biennale. The team includes artists Sandrine Llouquet and Bertrand Peret (Atelier Wonderful), Rich Streitmatter-Tran (diacritic), Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, Hoang Duong Cam, and photographer Gulschan Gothel and architect Tam Phi Vo. The group is currently considering new projects for the near term.

Artist Nguyen Nhu Huy often writes and translates material for Talawas.org, a Vietnamese language forum for cultural and literary criticism hosted in Germany. From time to time this site is firewalled for its coverage of topics such as politics. The site is extremely popular and well-known among the Vietnamese arts and literary community.

Project One was formed in 2003 to explore performance-based art. Its five core members include Ngo Thai Uyen (fashion designer), Bui Cong Khanh (painter), R. Streitmatter-Tran (media artist), Ly Hoang Ly (poet) and Nguyen Pham Trung Hau (movement). Inspired and loosely modeled on Japan's Dumb Type, its core members develop performance works, enlisting satellite members on a per project need, such as Hanoi-based sound artist and composer Vu Nhat Tan. They have created performances and installations throughout Vietnam including the 2004 Festival Hue. The group received a grant to create a new work for the Dance Theater Workshop in 2005 but had to suspend the project when both Ly and Uyen had their first children. The group has ceased to be active but continues to meet and discuss ideas informally.

Ly Hoang Ly, mentioned above, is Vietnam's first female performance artist. As a painter, poet and performer she participated in the *Globalization versus Identities* exhibition (2004), the Busan Biennale, and performed for the Asia Society New York and NIPAF in Japan.

Ly collaborated with Cambodian-American artist Anida Yoeu Esguerra in *Pushing through Borders*, a performance and installation at Blue Space Gallery in 2003. As poets, Anida and Ly hoped to involve some of Ho Chi Minh City's younger and more experimental poets, many whom have been unable to publish their work on account of containing "sensitivities" such as sex and politics. During rehearsals one day before the opening of the performance, cultural police arrived at the gallery, demanding that all poets submit their work to the authorities for inspection. Inspection results would be released the following day (of the performance), specifying which works would be authorized for inclusion. None of the work received authorization. Artists set to assist Ly in revising the performance that would instead include improvised electronic sound and video projection. As invited, guests arrived one hour before the performance, when electricity went out a block wide. Artists were dispatched to the markets for candles and other materials for a last minute improvisation. The show proceeded on schedule and performed without electricity with flashlights, candles, voices and percussion. While thanking of the audience for their patience at the end of the show, power was restored. It was later discovered that the power had been restored on the block hours before, yet the gallery alone, was mysteriously without power.

In 2004, police interrupted another performance at the business of Ngo Thai Uyen, where the shop had been reconfigured for a night of performance art with visiting Japanese artists from NIPAF. Plain clothes journalists in the audience wrote of the incident the following day in the city's popular newspaper, Tuoi Tre. A city official on record noted that a clear policy governing performance art had yet to be established and that the ambiguity would need to be resolved. Police intervened, citing public gatherings of more than 25 people needed a permit. Days before, the Japanese performance artists were prevented from performing by police in Hanoi.

Students at the Ho Chi Minh City Fine Arts University have formed the young artists collective, Arrow. The Arrow group recently completed a residency at the SOC

facilities, ending an exhibition of installation. The Arrow group includes Phan Cao Phong, Thach Thao, Thao Nguyen, Nguyen Thi Kieu Diem, Nguyen Thanh Lan, and Do Tha Hong Tham.

Hue

Hue, located in central Vietnam, is the third city where a contemporary art scene might be experienced. It is noted for the biannual Festival Hue. The Hue College of Art in the last years has offered workshops by visiting artists in installation art and performance, where the arts universities in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi have been reluctant or apathetic.

Twin artists Le Duc Hai and Le Ngoc Thanh operate New Space Gallery in Hue. The commercial gallery specializes in lacquer works, though the artists use the space unofficially for more experimental work in video and performance. In 2006, they held new exhibitions in New York and Ho Chi Minh City. In 2006, artist Truong Thien formed the Infinity artists group in Hue City, consisting of several young artists and students including Nguyen Dang Luong, Hoang Minh Tuyen, Phan Le Chung, Nguyen Van He, Le Thi Thanh Truc, Le Van Son, Le Nhu Hieu, Le Thanh Nam Tran, Nguyen Hoa, Ngo Thi Thuy Duyen, Le Thi Minh Nguyet, Nguyen Tuan, Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai, and Le Viet Trung.

Hanoi

Compared with Saigon, the contemporary arts activity in Hanoi has tended to be more regular due to some exceptional organizations. As the capital city of Vietnam, all foreign embassies are based in Hanoi as well as the headquarters for their cultural centers, namely the British Council, L'Espace Alliance Francaise and the Goethe Institut Hanoi, all of whom contribute a significant role in promoting the arts in Vietnam.

In the last years, L'Espace (Alliance Francaise) and the British council have shifted their focus from contemporary art toward more popular cultural programming in the

performing arts and film. The Goethe Institut Hanoi under the direction of Franz Xavier Augustin continues to be a major supporter of contemporary arts in Hanoi.

In 2004, with seed funding from the British Council, the Ryllega Gallery was founded by Nguyen Minh Phuoc and Nguyen Minh Thanh, who serve as Director and Advisor respectively. This space, located downtown near L'Espace on Trang Tien Street, has become a preferred space for small contemporary art exhibitions. The one room space is open only during times of exhibitions and special events. Artwork at Ryllega spans performance, installation, video, and plastic arts from Vietnamese and international artists.

A traditional house on stilts, known as "Nha San Duc", belonging to artist Nguyen Duc, has for years been a central location for artists in Hanoi, particularly those affiliated with artist and organizer Tran Luong. Tran Luong's pivotal role in Vietnamese contemporary arts cannot be understated. In the mid-nineties, he was among the artists known as "the gang of five" that burst upon the international community. He is the founder and former director of the Contemporary Art Center in Hanoi. Tran Luong currently works closely with Goethe Institut Hanoi and frequently represents Vietnam in a number of symposiums and exhibitions worldwide and is an Education Advisor with the Asia Art Archive. In the summer of 2006, he and Hanoi artists **Nguyen Tri Manh**, Nguyen Quang Huy, Tran Luong, Nguyen Minh Phuoc, Nguyen Minh Thanh, Truong Tan, Vu Thuy, Le Vu, and Nguyen Phuong Linh traveled to Phnom Penh, working in collaboration with Ly Daravuth of the Reyum Institute.

I was impressed early on with the work of the young artist Nguyen Manh Hung, who I consider one of Vietnam's brightest emerging artists. Primarily a painter, he extends into installation, performance, video and sound. Hung recently returned from a short residency in New York.

Campus, a new arts residency, opened in Hanoi this year. Founded by American Eric Berg, Vince Zager and Bernard Wong, Campus functions dually as a living space

and working space. The villa has also dedicated one level to an exhibition and gallery space. Originally under the direction of Vince Zager, it is now directed by Marcus Mitchell. Unique activities at Campus include art history classes and critiques, topics unfortunately not offered (with any rigor) in the university curricula.

Ho Chi Minh City has several cultural universities including the Ho Chi Minh Fine Arts University and the Architecture University. Hanoi has a Fine Arts University and Hue, a College of Fine Arts. Vietnam has placed the upgrade of its education system as a high priority, but long-standing challenges still adversely affect these goals: low salaries, unqualified staff, corruption and endemic cheating among students. The combination of these symptoms have recombined to make headlines in recent years with professional artists submitting plagiarized works in national competitions, cases of staff extorting students for money or sex, and general apathy. As such, students often are forced to find information outside of the university.

Internet usage in Vietnam has seen exponential growth since it first went online in 1997. The Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) had early hesitations about the power of the internet for political dissent, but its development was advocated by supporters within the VCP, banking on its potential as an economic tool. However, various decrees have defined and restricted internet usage.

In response to the increased political use of the Internet, the Ministry of Culture & Information (MOC) has decided to further restrict the freedom to provide information via the Internet and, amongst other measures, to hold owners of Internet cafes responsible for the Internet activities of their clients.

The MOC made two recent decisions concerning the restricted use of media. The first required a permit to establish a web presence and the second mandated that access to satellite television be restricted to "government officials, state media and foreigners."

All broadcast and publishing companies in Vietnam are state controlled enterprises. There are private broadcasters although there are private production companies. There is no “live news” for all published and broadcast information is first reviewed. Vietnam maintains a firewall to block out mostly overseas political sites critical of the VCP, as well as religious and pornographic material. As I wrote earlier, these sometimes include arts and culture sites such as Talawas.org.

Vietnam in the future has the potential to position itself as a central hub for arts within the GMS, similar to Thailand. However, restrictive and bureaucratic red tape makes planning and organizing international contemporary arts programs in Vietnam unattractive. Saigon Open City will ultimately be the first major large-scale international art project to test these. If the SOC project is successful, positive changes may be ahead for Vietnam’s contemporary arts community.

LAOS

I arrived in Laos with the forewarning that it was very quiet, artistically speaking. Weeks earlier I had contacted Mr. Tim Doling, based earlier in Laos in connection with his research for the Mekong-area Cultural Profiles. Mr. Doling and I shared an exchange of emails where he said that Laos has yet to develop a established contemporary arts scene. In fact, he requested that should I discover something interesting to kindly forward along the new information for inclusion in an updated version of the cultural guide. I found nothing to report. There is not a developed contemporary art scene as of yet. In spite of also being a communist nation like Vietnam, Laos does not appear to have active intervention from authorities. We then can only assume that the challenges are cultural and economic. Unlike Vietnam, foreign bookstores can be found in Laos with a small variety of worldwide magazines and books on contemporary arts, culture, design and media. Monument Books in particular has branches in both Phnom Penh and Vientiane, while it conspicuously does not operate in Vietnam.

There is a relationship between civil society, free press and economic development with the development of a contemporary art scene. While Cambodia, and perhaps Laos, enjoy more flexibility in terms of access to global information (by virtue of less controls) when compared with Vietnam, their economic situation diminishes the positive impact of access alone.

From the catalog of the Heinrich Boll *Identities versus Globalization* exhibition, I made efforts to contact artists via email and had not received a reply before my travels. Once I arrived I made effort to contact these artists again, and did come in phone contact with Mr. Kongphat Luangrat, who informed me of the space, *Maison de la Culture – Ban Naxay* that he helped establish. I traveled to the space but was unable to meet Mr. Luangrat in person. Located near the Lao-Singapore Business College and the Maison de la Culture is a small one-floor space adjacent to a smaller one-room building used for art instruction. Within the larger building is the MASK Gallery, an acronym of the first letters of the four founders of the gallery: May Chandavong, Anoulom Souvandouane, Sorasinh Bannavong, and Kongphat Luangrat. MASK first opened in 2003 in Baan Haysok before moving to the Cultural Heritage House in Baan Naxay in April 2005. The gallery is the first and largest gallery in Laos run by artists. The Cultural Heritage House was home to Marc Legay, a French artist in residence from 1952-1965. The founders also teach at the National Faculty of Fine Arts and are members of the Lao Arts Association.

I went to the National School of Music and Dance adjacent to the Faculte Nationale des Beaux-Arts (National Faculty of Fine Arts). Both locations were almost completely devoid of people including teachers and students. Through some extremely rough translation from my pedicab driver, it was unclear whether classes were on break or there simply wasn’t anyone around that day. There appeared to be studios for traditional woodcarving and sculpture. Other universities in the capital include Pakpasak Technical School, College des Techniciens de la Sante and Sangha College.

Across from Sangha College is the Gallery of the National Faculty of Fine Arts and the Treasures of Asia Gallery. The interior of Treasures is professional and well-lit. The art work consists of mostly of large oil landscapes and scenic photography.

Unlike Burma, where there is a flurry of unreported contemporary arts activity, the lack of information coming from Laos seems to accurately reflect that there simply isn’t much going on in the local arts community with the following project being the exception.

In 2004 curator France Morin continued *The Quiet in the Land: Art, Spirituality, and Everyday Life* project in Luang Prabang. It marks the third phase of a long-term project started in 1995. The community arts and education project invited fifteen international artists of renown to develop site-specific projects in Luang Prabang that would continue through until 2006. Among the artists from the Mekong region are Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba and Dinh Q. Le (Vietnam), Rirkrit Tiravanija (Thailand), Vong Phaophanit (Laos/UK), and Manivong Khattiyalath (Laos). According the press release, the project:

will consist of a series of collaborations between 35 artists and educators from Laos, the Mekong Region, and other countries, who will work with a wide range of local community members. The project is guided by the conviction that the practice of art, broadly defined, offers both individuals and communities-including the poor, the disenfranchised, and others who have been adversely affected by globalization -the potential to acknowledge for themselves the dignity of the activities of everyday life; to understand more deeply the relevance of preserving and adapting their cultural heritage to the challenges they face in the 21st century; and to build the capacity for transforming their lives for the better by harnessing the undertapped power of the creative spirit.

Quiet in the Land has made efforts to work in partnership with the Lao local and national institutions including the Department of Information and Culture. The project intends to establish and nurture networks and exchanges between Luang Prabang and Chiang Mai, Thailand.

In terms of arts information flow along the Mekong, Laos gets the least. As with Cambodia, there is tremendous cultural, economic and political influence from its western and eastern borders, Thailand and Vietnam. Most of the television channels in Vientiane feature Thai programming without the need for translation into Lao. There is no real infrastructure for a contemporary arts scene. If one is to develop in the next several years, I suspect it will be initiated by foreigners. Unlike Cambodia, it has no Angkor and thus will struggle for its identity. Vientiane is, for a lack of better words, a sleepy city.

THAILAND

In my midterm report, I wrote: The protests that culminated in the resignation of Prime Minister Shinawatra Thaksin have dominated news coming from Thailand. As such, the power of the public to affect political change remains the greatest in Thailand – at least on the surface. Bangkok-based artists had sent me photographs of the ongoing demonstrations of which many participated. The Vietnamese press regularly covered the demonstrations apparently unconcerned that similar domestic demonstrations could occur.

Last week, it was the military that staged a non-violent coup, apparently with the King’s blessing, in Bangkok while the prime minister was in New York addressing the United Nations. Between these two events, the political climate in Thailand had been in turmoil despite uninterrupted normal everyday life for the average Thai citizen. An early election ensued that was boycotted by opposition parties ensured that candidates from Thaksin’s “Thai Rak Thai” party easily won their races. The farce was described by King Bhumibol as “a mess” and the courts later nullified the elections leaving the Thai government in limbo.

Apparently, the recent coup has been met with initial public approval by those in Bangkok. Thailand's urban dwellers constitute Thaksin's largest critics with the rural population being his main support base. The military coup apparently has the blessing of the monarchy and with this blessing, a quick Thaksin comeback is unlikely. The next weeks will only tell how swiftly Thailand can move toward a new constitution and democratic process. Presently, the military junta has the nation under martial law with certain suspensions and restrictions on civil liberties including political gatherings and media.

While reactions in Bangkok have generally supported the results of the coup if not the methods, no one knows how people are reacting outside of Bangkok because of the tight media restrictions. A complete ban on political activities and political gatherings of more than 5 people was ordered, under penalty of up to 6 months in prison. Several protestors have been arrested. In addition the media is banned from expressing any opinion that is contrary to or critical of the new junta, shut down hundreds of community radio stations, and shut down at least one website.

The EU, the USA, and many other nations have condemned the coup as unnecessary and contrary to democracy, but have surprisingly failed to call for the immediate restoration of the existing elected government. (Wikipedia: Thailand)

In a recent email exchange among artists and intellectuals:

The Midnight University Website, the foremost free and critical educational and public intellectual website in Thailand with over freely accessible 1,500 scholarly articles, a lively webboard with ongoing thought-provoking debates, which receives well over 2.5 visits per month from viewers around the world, has already been shut down by the Thai Information & Communications Ministry last night, acting under the order of the

self-styled military Council of Democratic Reform. This is not only a huge loss to academic and intellectual freedom in Thai society, but also a closure of a free forum for the contention of ideas to find a peaceful alternative to violent conflict in Thailand.

Bangkok-based Documenta researcher Keiko Sei (October 1, 2006) added in:

spite the attempt by the military council to portray it as a friendly coup, they are imposing censorship in various fields. Recently they closed the important on-line education site, Midnight University <www.midnightuniv.org>. This on-line education has been created for those people who cannot afford to go to higher education to be informed and empowered. It is one of the most enlightening media in Thailand, and I contribute to them, too, for free and copyleft, as I support their object. In fact this is the second time they are closed down by the authority: the first time because by the Thaksin government, and this time because they are critical towards the coup and the military council. The closure of their site seriously obstructs educational process of millions of people who depend on them, blocking the free flow of information and exchange of people's ideas, and is a total setback of democratic process of the country, just like the coup d'etat is. I would appreciate if you help their petition campaign by adding your name and circulate their message to your friends. Thank you very much for your constant help for the democratic path of South East Asia.

Severe restrictions on public protest and media in Southeast Asia was recent news even before the Thai coup. Singapore made headlines for refusing to admit officially invited opposition guests to the IMF meetings and by banning all public protests (defined as a gathering of 4 or more people) citing security concerns. The Thai military junta is currently governing under the name, CDR

(Council for Democratic Reform) and sounds uncannily similar to military junta next door in Myanmar, SPDC (State Peace and Development Council). One could almost mistake Bangkok for Yangon (which only last week was introduced as an official matter of discussion for the UN Security Council much to the junta's chagrin).

Although Thailand has experienced nearly 18 coups in modern times, it has remained relatively stable. Of all of the GMS nations, Thailand still remains the most developed in terms of civil society, the arts being a part of that.

Many attribute the early development of the contemporary arts in Thailand with the late artist Montien Boonma. A generation later, several recent Thai MFA/MA in Arts Administration graduates returned from studies overseas to establish arts spaces with a different curatorial and organizational approach. These included School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) graduates: curator Griddthiya "Jeab" Gaweewong, artist Michael Shaowanasai, and filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasthakul, who were among the founding members of Project 304. Another alternative space is About Café/About Studio established approximately during the same period. These arts organizations were established as non-profit spaces financed largely by individual and private support. Both Project 304 and About Café/About Studio are accredited with the promotion of contemporary Thai arts to the international community through grassroots activities and networking. In the last several years, Thailand has become the networking hub for contemporary arts in the GMS, largely in part of the several initiatives organized by artist Rirkrit Tiravanija and curator Gridthiya "Jeab" Gaweewong (who are currently artistic co-directors of the Saigon Open City project).

Regarding these influential personalities, I would like to speak now about the organizations they've established. The first is Project 304, now based in Bangkok and the second is the Land Foundation based in Chiang Mai. Both organizations are outstanding examples as agile arts organizations whose flexibility and creative outlook

allow them to adapt to the Mekong's often-changing arts current. Project 304 was founded in 1996 and moved among several locations in Bangkok. During this time, Project 304 organized the first 3 Bangkok Experimental Film Festivals before relocating to Chiang Mai from 2002-2004 where another subproject, Switchmedia, was formed, focusing primarily on media art. It was through Switchmedia and Jeab's initial research in connection with the Mekong Lab project that I came in contact with Thai artists. In 2003 I completed a one-month residency program with Switchmedia called CARP (Chiang Mai Artists in Residence Program), which was funded by the Arts Network Asia (ANA) program. Over the duration of six months the CARP invited artists from Myanmar, Singapore, Vietnam, Cambodia and Japan to produce work in Chiang Mai.

Switchmedia also organized the Pathiharn Electron (Supernatural) Media Art Festival in Chiang Mai in April 2004. Later that year Switchmedia disbanded, as its small team sought projects elsewhere. Those team members now work in connection with other notable projects including video artist Jay Inkong-Ngam Santiphap with the *Fly Me to Another World Project*, Sutthirat Som Supaparinya with the Compeung Artists Residency Program, and Ratchanok Nok Ketboonruang with The Land Foundation. In 2004, Project 304 returned to Bangkok and currently operates through several venues throughout the city. Recent Project 304 projects include *Bangkok/Bangkok* (Barcelona), *Interweaving Cultures* (Bangkok), *Politics of Fun* (Berlin) and the 4th Bangkok Experimental Film Festival, *Democracy*. Project 304 has been instrumental in bringing together international and notable artists from GMS in Thailand, as well as offering those artists opportunities to exhibit internationally through their inclusion in Project 304 curatorial projects.

The Land Foundation was recently formed to administrate the Land Project, founded in 1998 by several artists including Rirkrit Tiravanija and Kamin Lertchaiprasert. In 2006 in Kamin's Umong Sippadhamma organization merged with the Land Project to form the Land Foundation. Over the years, the Land project has received

much world attention for its unique vision of incorporating art into experimental and sustainable site-specific projects that are often architectural in scale.

A relatively open and free cultural environment has allowed artists in Thailand the necessary space for experimentation and access to critical and current arts information. As compared with its neighbors, information in print is readily available in Thailand without a perceptible interference by censorship. Permits for public exhibitions may be required for logistical reasons as opposed to content regulation. The arts universities have also played a significant role in the development of contemporary arts in Thailand. I will be concentrating on one particular program at Chiang Mai University as an example.

In 2003, Chiang Mai University (CMU) established its Media Art Design (MAD) department. Originally falling under the administration of the Architecture department, it attempted to establish itself as either an autonomous department or one affiliated with the Faculty of Fine Arts. MAD from the beginning was an ambitious program positioning itself as “a new space for thinking”. Students would choose from one of three concentrations: Media Arts, Media Design, and Media Studies. Respectively, Media Arts might attract students with experience or interest in fine arts disciplines such as painting or sculpture, wishing to enhance their skill set with interactive media, video, computation, and sound art. Media Design would provide skills and knowledge for students wishing to work in more commercial sectors, including web design, advertising and broadcast media design. Media Studies might attract those with backgrounds in art history, criticism, theory and journalism. Within each of the three platforms were specialized research-oriented platforms such as Media Ethnography and the *New Space for Thinking: Center for Media Ethnography and Visualizing Culture Study* initiative described as:

New Space for Thinking is taking shape as an office that is aimed for critical research works. Media ethnography and visualizing culture are the main

concerned topics which have become the crucial research contents that this office will be launching out. Emphasizing on the topics, the Thai society is the case study where media phenomenon will be investigated and visual logics that have made the Thai culture a field of being or becoming visualized politically, economically, geographically, and linguistically will be explored.

I returned to Chiang Mai twice during my research, during which I was able to speak with Professor Kosit Junataratip, who had founded another platform, *Film Space* within the Media Arts concentration. Kosit described MAD during that time as being conceptually ambitious but at a critical juncture in its development due to a lack of support from the University. In the spring of 2006, the MAD program had temporarily suspended applications for new students in order to focus on matriculating the currently enrolled students. It appears that a large number of students were not meeting the expectations of the program nor able to graduate on time.

My observation is that while the faculty at MAD is extremely insightful and the program deserves credit for their efforts to raise the level of critical and experimental arts and design, they may have overestimated both the current ability of the students and the continued support of the institution. The MAD program continues, and it will be interesting to see how it resolves its current challenges. If the program can reorganize and find the support it needs, it will be an invaluable asset to the GMS.

In the meantime, CMU continues to host a number of GMS focused activities. The international conference entitled “*Bridge the Gap*”, in its third session, was held at Chiang Mai University and The Land on February 24-26, 2006. BTG is an ongoing forum by artists, scientists, and philosophers of the humanities and social sciences, facilitating the exchange of ideas and interdisciplinary exploration. The first session of BTG occurred two years earlier in Kitakyushu, Japan, organized by Center for Contemporary Art Kitakyushu. BTG 3 was curated by Akiko Miyake, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Rirkrit Tiravanija

and coordinated by Thasnai Sethaseree of MAD/CMU. I was initially slated to speak at the event but was informed of last minute funding changes that prevented me from attending. I have asked that Thasnai send me the transcripts to the event and his reply was that there weren't really transcripts to speak of, but that he would be happy to discuss the event in person. His opinion was that despite the large billing, there wasn't much output.

In Chiang Mai, I focus on two artists I had first met in 2004, each working primarily in the media arts and former lecturers at CMU MAD, Jay Inkong-Ngam Santiphap and Sutthirat Som Supaparinya. Both artists have also been involved in several GMS project, many of their own design.

Jay Santiphap is working primarily in video. I met Jay in December 2003 in Vietnam during the filming of *The Khong Legend*, a film that was shot along the nations of the Mekong River, including China. We became more acquainted during my 2004 artist residency in Chiang Mai with Switchmedia. Jay has been a prolific producer, having recently returned from Japan to work with the *Fly with Me* project, and is currently working on a long term video project in collaboration with a Buddhist monastery in Northern Thailand. Jay's low-keyed presence belies an incredibly powerful mind and work. Jay belongs to one of the Northern Thailand minorities and has recently completed a video project where he has sought out people who share his last name, Santhiphap, as a way of connecting himself to a history.

Sutthirat “Som” Supaparinya works primarily in interactive media installation. A graduate of Chiang Mai University and the Academy of Media Arts in Cologne Germany, Som recently created an interactive sound installation at the Jim Thompson House in Bangkok for the *Interweaving Cultures* exhibition organized by Project 304 and curated by Jeab Gawewong in April 2005. The installation consisted of small cones vertically hung by wires from the ceiling of the gallery. Embedded within the cones was either a microphone or a small speaker (considering children playing phone with two cups

connected by string). Some of the cones were attached to microphones located in Jim Thompson's bedroom as if to hear the ghost of Jim Thompson, while others were connected to the microphones of other cones. In another installation at Bangkok University a year earlier, Som created constellation-like patterns on the wall of a darkened space with reflective dots. Suspended from the ceiling were headbands attached with a light, similar to the gear miners and spelunkers use underground. The user would read messages on the wall while moving throughout the space illuminated only by the light on their head. More recently Som just completed a documentary on noodles in Vietnam and will exhibit a new media installation, “Orbited Objects” from November 9-30, 2006 at the Queen Gallery in Bangkok.

The Thailand New Media Arts Festival (MAF06) was initially slated to run May 2-4, 2006. Programming for MAF06 was to occur in venues throughout Bangkok and to include exhibitions, performance, installation, screenings, workshops and meetings for cultural exchange. MAF06 is organized and directed by Francis Wittenberger and is now in its second iteration, the first having occurred in 2004. An update was sent to artists informing them of a postponement with details forthcoming.

Performativity: 1st Southeast Asian Performance for Video Showcase organized by the Telekollectif (Southeast Asian Young Curators Network of Khairuddin Hori, Thanavi Chotpradit, Manuporn Leungaram, Theerada Suphaphong, Reungsak Anuwatrawimon, Patricia Chulamokha) at Gallery VER, debuted on September 23, 2006 in Bangkok. Bangkok-based arts writer Brian Curtin explains in an email:

Early this year, we sent out calls for submission of 'performances made for video' by citizen or resident artists of Southeast Asia. To that, we received a paltry response for which the lack of comprehension towards what constitutes a performance video was largely blamed. Nevertheless, several weeks ago, we decided

to put together several pieces of new and recently made performance video pieces to be screened in what we believe would be the First Performance for Video Showcase in Southeast Asia by Southeast Asian artists.

Gallery VER is a part of the larger VER organization that includes publishing and production facilities. The website provides some background and information:

Namdee publishing station was established in Bangkok, in the year 2000 by an internationally renowned Thai artist, based in Thailand/Berlin/NewYork, Rirkrit Tiravanija. and in 2004 had changed to PLAN.b. A publishing, production and design limited partnership. It is our aim to operate the office as a station for launching innovative ideas and creative conditions in various forms, such as artist's books, text books, magazines, music, films/videos, posters, graphics and designs. We are interested in ideas and objects which can be published and/or multiplied and distributed into the cultural stream.

The *Identities versus Globalization* exhibition held in Chiang Mai, Thailand in February 2004 brought together over 60 artists from all of the ASEAN nations. Curated by Dr. Jörg Löschmann, then director of the Heinrich Boll Foundation, the exhibition originally opened at the Chiang Mai University Museum (February 7-29), traveled to Bangkok (May 8–28) with its final destination in Berlin (October 22–January 16, 2005). The exhibition was my first experience in observing a large assemblage of artists from throughout the GMS in one location. Paired with the arts exhibition, international theorists and activists presented papers at a symposium held at the Amara hotel over the course of several days. I met Dr. Löschmann during my last visit to Chiang Mai to discover that he has since left the Heinrich Boll Foundation and is currently Director of the Goethe Institut in Bangkok.

The recent *Fly Me to Another World Project*, was a year-long project in Lamphun, Thailand, consisting of several

art and community activities concluding with the Public Art In(ter)vention Symposium held in Chiang Mai in February 2005. The symposium connected the *Fly with Me* project to other Asian projects such as The Long March Project (China) and regional organizations such as TheatreWorks (Singapore), Cemeti Art House (Yogyakarta) and albb (Ho Chi Minh City).

Finally, one of Thailand's longest running GMS projects is the Asiatopia Performance Art Festival, recently having celebrated its seventh festival and initiating its first Southeast Asia Performance Art Symposium (SEAPAS). Bangkok-based Asiatopia was founded by artist and activist Chumpon Apisuk in 1998. Artists from the world over have participated in Asiatopia and the event has brought Southeast Asian performance art to worldwide attention.

Thailand has a healthy press. Magazines with a focus on film, art, architecture and design can easily be found throughout the country. Most of the magazines are published in Thai, while a few domestic publications are bilingual, notably Art4D magazine (Thai with English synopsis) and Fine Art (Thai, with articles submitted in English remaining in English). Thailand also has a unique system where magazines are rented by the day (think of a video rental store, only books and magazines instead). Magazine rentals are approximately 5 baht per day, and this system allows for readers to access back issues.

Most agree that the media environment was more free before the election of Prime Minister Thaksin, who himself rose to prominence as a media mogul. The effect of the internet remains to be seen:

"The Internet was introduced to civil society organizations in the mid-1990's when the movement for democracy was reaching its peak. With the present government's control of the media, the civil society is likely to turn to the Internet as an alternative channel to present its views to the public and to provide space for open political discussion. The technology is now used by civil society organizations in many forms. There are over a hundred websites run by civil society groups." (Daoreung)

Many of the arts organizations in Thailand have now maintained websites for years and have long integrated electronic communications into their organizations and networks. Among the younger generation, as opposed to Cambodia and Vietnam, Thais are able to utilize the internet as a primary information feed, with content existing either in Thai or English, ready to take advantage of the wealth of online content while not being hindered by font rendering problems and the need for translation.

Thailand, barring a highly unlikely situation where the ruling military junta refuses to relinquish control and keeps the state in an indefinite state of martial law, will continue to be the primary networking hub for inter-GMS arts activities.

The Future Flow

With perhaps the exception of Thailand, the nations along the Mekong face considerable challenges as third world and economically emerging nations. Education, the eradication of poverty, disease and corruption, and economic and political development and stability remain priorities, and ones that will in turn affect the development of the arts communities in their respective nations.

Vietnam's authoritarian cultural controls will continue to relax, as has been the trend over the past couple of years, while it moves towards integration with the global economy with entry into the WTO. Vietnam is riding on record growth and has too much to risk by reverting back to policies that don't make practical sense yet toe the ideological line. By contrast, Myanmar has nothing to lose and the situation, I fear, could become worse. We will know in the next weeks what comes out of the Myanmar briefing at the UN Security Council. Under too much pressure, Myanmar may react as if cornered, and go on an offensive.

Among Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, there are no media and art criticism programs in academia or media. Without strong critical foundations in education,

there will not likely emerge strong artist communities in the near term. Individuals will continue to experiment and exhibit work in familiar venues and as more reliable and open systems, programs and initiatives for arts information exchange develop, we should hope to see small but perceptible positive changes for the GMS region as a whole. Established programs may adapt and expand. Funding remains a constant concern. Foundations such as the Ford and Rockefeller, through organizations such as *Art Network Asia*, as well as modest financial support from British, French and German cultural centers can potentially play a role in supporting sustainable programs connecting Mekong art communities. If the project connecting the various Goethe Instituts from the GMS that Nicolaus Mesterharm is working towards is successful, it may be a model to be later emulated by other government-affiliated cultural organizations.

For better or worse, as English proficiency among artists in the GMS improves, it may help to establish communications between smaller arts groups with larger organizations.

I believe that the success of the projects that have occurred over the last years in the GMS have demonstrated that small steps have led to results. There is indeed activity happening the GMS even if that activity often goes undocumented. Despite the many challenges, both internal and among the Mekong nations, there will be cooperative efforts to define an identity for contemporary arts in this area. Within the next years, the region will finally have its moment of color in the Alternatives Guide.

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