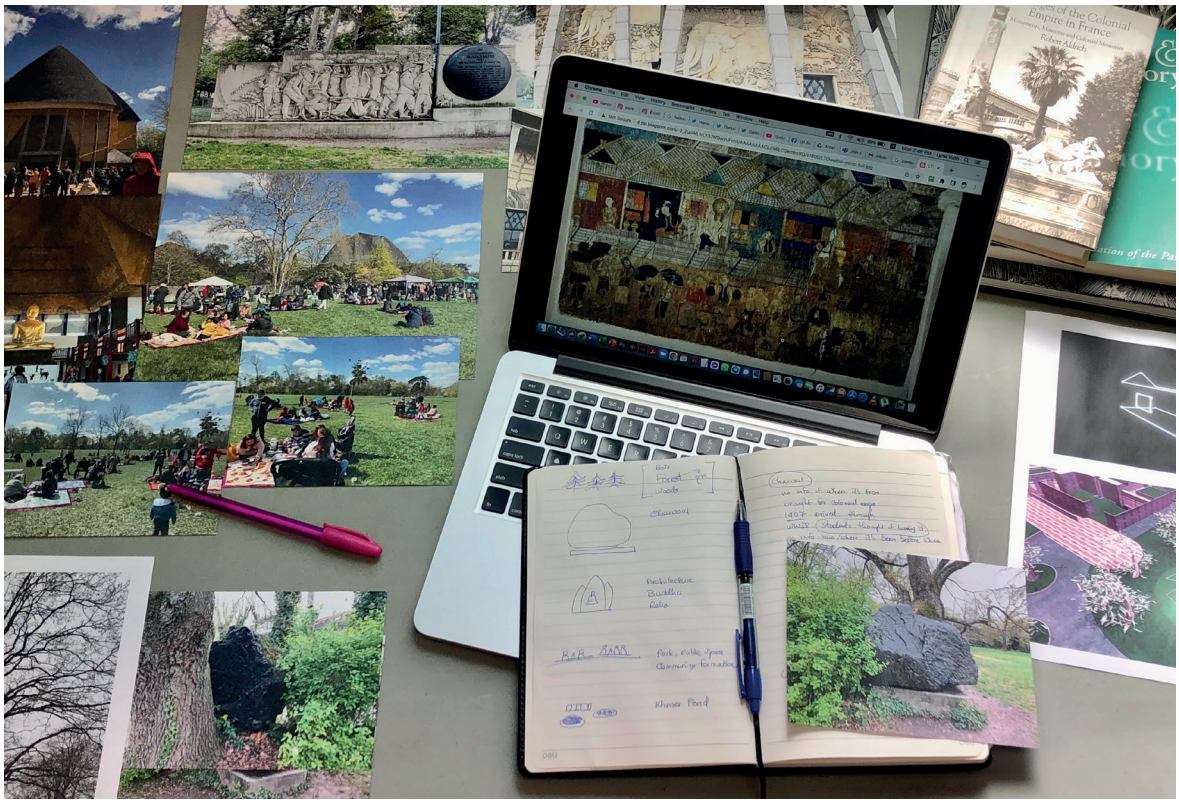
Studio visit of artists in residence

lyno vuth



Lyno Vuth, *studio views at Villa Arson, 2022*

villa arson

May 15 – May 22 2022

Studio 2

nice

Éric Mangion: You describe yourself as « an artist, curator and educator interested in space, the history of culture and the production of knowledge. » How did this triple vocation begin?

Lyno Vuth: I first started my practice as an artist. Soon after, my peers and I formed a collective Stiev Selapak which has been running Sa Sa Art Projects, a long-term initiative committed to fostering a growing contemporary art community in Cambodia. Due to limited human resources supporting this small contemporary art landscape, I grew into multiple roles because I felt compelled to do so: if I didn't do it, who else would.

Curating and teaching came in naturally to me as I liked organising and facilitating workshops. It was overwhelming initially. At times, I questioned who I wanted to be: artist or curator? It took time for me to reconcile, consolidate and build confidence in my interwoven practice. I find that these roles inform one another. Whether making art, curating, or teaching, I have the same goal: fostering creative and critical avenues for people to sense, feel, think, imagine, and take action for themselves empathically and critically.

É. M.: Your work often investigates "micro-histories and forgotten histories, notions of community, the creation of venues and the production of social relations". Could you for instance tell us about the research you have been conducting on the Bois de Vincennes in Paris?

L. V.: I'm particularly interested in how a place is built for a specific purpose, how it is actually used, and what kind of political, social, and cultural forces it produces. Paris' Bois de Vincennes is such a vibrant and unique place, historically, politically, and socially. Cultivated as a royal hunting preserve in the 12th century, it was a hosting ground for the colonial exposition in 1907 and 1931. The former Cameroon pavilion (next to Lac Daumesnil) from the 1931 exposition was converted into the Museum of Wood Industries from 1933-1971. It was later renovated and converted into La Grande Pagode in 1977. It currently houses the largest Buddha statue in Europe and is one of the most important Buddhist pagodas in France, especially for Cambodian communities.

Every Khmer New Year in April, the Pagoda and the ground next to it turn into a festive celebration by thousands of people, the majority Cambodians, exercising their religious practice, picnicking, socialising, and essentially just being themselves. People put picnic blankets and mats on the grass and have fun. I'm particularly struck by this simple act of placing a picnic mat on the grass on which social, cultural, and political activities occur. By laying a picnic mat on the grass, people claim and transform their space, creating a temporary and transparent demarcation of existence and agency. Altogether, they form into a mass collective, a sense of community.

Bois de Vincennes is a place where many marginalised and immigrant communities use and adapt. This very same ground where people from the colonies were brought in to perform their identities, hence colonised subjects, during the colonial expositions, is now a place where people come together and "perform" their identities by themselves and for themselves. They adapt and make Bois de Vincennes theirs. This is a profound example of decolonial practice from the ground. I'm fascinated by the idea of the woods or forest as a place of refuge. Either for religious practice, leisure, sex work, or gay cruising, people adapt and use the woods to form communities, identities, and ultimately liberate themselves.

É. M.: You also describe your artistic practice as "participatory". What does this mean concretely?

L. V.: I enjoy the process in which I get to interact, exchange, and learn with and from people, and that my project is open to people to join in. For example, in my early work Thoamada (2011), I collaborated with an LGBT+ activist and we engaged with nine gay or bisexual male participants. We discussed and shared about sex, gender identity and expression, and sexual orientation through each person's life journey. In the end, each participant painted on their face by themselves an image that spoke about them, and I took their portrait photographs. In this way, the project was a mechanism to create a safe situation where people could join in and share personal and intimate stories, then formulate into an artistic language for communicating with the public.

Another example, 25 (2018), is a project where three children of UNTAC peacekeepers (United Nations Transformational Authority in Cambodia 1992-1993) sat together and exchanged their stories. UNTAC was largely praised as the most ambitious and successful UN peacekeeping operation at that time. This very peacekeeping project, however, also produced new cycles of injustice. There are many undocumented children born to UNTAC peacekeeper fathers and Cambodian partners. Many of the children of UNTAC that I met are of African descent who have Cambodian mothers and do not know or lost touch with their fathers. The conversation among the three, who I have known since 2013, was unscripted and video recorded. The project connects these three individuals with remarkable stories. The video is presented in a 3-channels triangle installation. The audience observes the

conversation, and they would turn to whichever screen that talks. In this way, the audience doesn't consume the images as objects on one plane screen, but rather observes them like individual persons.

É. M. : Coming back to Sa Sa Art Projects, can you describe its actions?

L. V. : Stiev Selapak collective is a group of artists and art administrators. Each of us has our own individual practice. We never produce or co-author an art piece as a collective. However, together we run Sa Sa Art Projects. We create a mechanism and a structure. Sa Sa comes from S S of the collective's name. Sa Sa Art Projects started as a small experimental initiative to explore what we could do with art and how we could engage with everyday Cambodian audiences. We started Sa Sa Art Projects in 2010 inside a former social housing complex known as the White Building. It was the first apartment-style public housing built in the 1960s during Cambodia's post-independence period. Until 2017, it was a dynamic community of more than 2,000 people, including generations of artists, musicians, performers, and primarily low-mid income residents.

Through Sa Sa Art Projects, we experimented with various approaches. We tended to say we did everything except exhibition. Through art classes, artist residencies, and collaborative events, we worked with young students, residents, and artists to transform various communal spaces in the neighbourhood into places for art interactions. For example, a local coffee shop was turned into a monthly community cinema, screening different formats of video works for the young and old residents. The building's rooftop was converted into a dance stage for spectacular classical Khmer dances by the dancer residents. The street was turned into a platform for performance with live light projection by visiting and resident artists. An existing TV inside a hair salon played video works done by the students. Together, we activated these existing communal spaces and facilities into new forms and experiences.

When the White Building was demolished in 2017, we moved Sa Sa Art Projects to a new location, still central in Phnom Penh. However, our community changed almost entirely because the previous primary audience was the White Building residents. At the new site, a middle-class residential area, Sa Sa Art Projects shifted to focus more on supporting young artists through advanced art classes, exhibitions, and our continuing residency program. From 2020, we work more on strategies of collective sustainability: not of Sa Sa Art Projects, but of Cambodian art ecology at large. Sa Sa Art Projects' participation at documenta15 this year is one of the crucial steps towards that.

É. M. : Can you give us some details about your project for this summer at the documenta in Kassel ?

L. V. : At documenta15, Sa Sa Art Projects presents a multi-component project based on a Cambodian tradition of a post-harvest ceremony called Dar Lean. It is a tradition where farmers come to pay respect to the land and the water for the crops they harvest, share their experiences and solutions they encounter and celebrate. One component is an exhibition by Stiev Selapak collective members and some invited artists from Southeast Asia titled Mchas Teuk Mcash Dei (Master of Lands and Waters). The exhibition raises questions on various meanings of who are the caretakers of the lands and the waters: humans, natural lives, spirits, states, etc., and the implication and contestation over these lands and waters.

Another component is learning activities, in which we will have a series of masterclasses for young Cambodian artists. We are inviting some of the most respected artists and collectives from Cambodia, Southeast Asia, and beyond to share and engage with young Cambodian artists in artistic development and collective practices. The goal is to support a stronger art community and ecology in Cambodia. The third component is a celebration through food and music. We will have a physical space in Phnom Penh and another one in Kassel, both of which workshop and celebration activities will take place concurrently during the documenta15. Some events will be live shared from one place to another. These will be done with mindfulness of shared resources and collective impact. We want Dar Lean to benefit the Cambodian art community beyond the documenta.

É. M. : In Nice, you wish to work on making neon lights. What is your aim? And speaking of which, could you tell us about your installation Sala Samnak, 2020, which seems to be almost suspended in the air?

L. V. : There isn't a fully equipped neon workshop in Cambodia. I rely on pre-production in neighboring countries. There aren't also many options when it comes to supporting materials. My two previous neon light projects involve inventing a new joint system made of 3D prints that could hold the neon tube in suspension. Technically and aesthetically, I feel it isn't the most efficient solution yet. So, while I'm in Nice, I want to see a professional neon workshop to understand the possibilities of technical solutions for installing neon lights in different spatial situations. I also

want to create a neon sketch for new work, part of the project on Bois de Vincennes.

My first neon light work, Sala Samnak (2020), is a light sculptural installation of a housing structure (H:225 x W:300 x D:200 cm) that floats in space. It concerns a particular type of Cambodian architecture called Sala Samnak, which means a rest hall or rest house. It is traditionally built on the roadside by the villagers offering it to travelers and passersby as a rest stop during their respective journeys. I'm fascinated by this philosophy of collective hospitality and generosity in the practice of place-making. It is a grassroots initiative by the people and offering back to the people and the society. However, this kind of traditional structure is also being replaced by commercial places such as gas stations, cafes, and mini-marts.

The ancient name of Sala Samnak is Agni Griha which means house of fire, most likely referring to the ritual with the divine that took place in the Sala. So, I want to respond through a gesture in a contemporary form of fire: light. I want to bring this collaborative practice of hospitality and generosity in building a public place to the audience through Sala Samnak installation. The radiating light, the otherworldly experience, and the hollowness of the structure raise the potent power and mixed relevance of Sala Samnak today.

É. M. : Can you also tell us about House-Spirit, 2018-2019 and Light Voice, 2015 ? These are both rather intriguing installations.

L. V. : Light Voice (2015) is a site-specific spatial intervention in an abandoned staircase of the former White Building, Phnom Penh, where my collective and I had been running Sa Sa Art Projects. Designed by Khmer architect Lu Ban Hap, the modernist apartment block was part of the response to the public housing needs for the expanding Cambodian capital in the 1960s. With little maintenance over the decades, some staircases were abandoned, left in darkness, and became a deposit of rubbish. Together with some young residents, we cleaned up and repainted one staircase to its original white color. I installed LED lights and radios, and through motion sensors, they are activated whenever people pass by. The light and the sound permeate the architectural space, highlighting its beauty and accompanying the passersby. This light and sonic installation transformed the staircase into a living space again.

House — Spirit (2018) is a four-meter-high installation of 119 spirit houses from the former White Building complex. The building was knocked down in 2017 to make way for new development, as the government decided that the structure was no longer safe. As people moved out, many left their spirit houses there. They are for the spirit who takes care of the house, the spirits of their deceased family members, the Buddha, their spiritual teachers, etc.

These spirits accumulated a dense history and rich stories of the families and the neighbourhood. They knew the community's anxieties and desires, having witnessed what happened in the area. They are an archive or a bank of knowledge, though paradoxically are inaccessible, safeguarded, and remain private. After seven years of continuous work in this vibrant community, I felt the need to document its collective memory that lasts beyond its physical disappearance. I organised a collection of donations for the spirit houses. They are installed on a structure made of used window and door grills collected from all over the city. Together, they reconstruct pieces of history and memory of the White Building community and Phnom Penh city, forming a refuge for their collective spirit.

É. M. : You studied in the United States and in Australia. As far as I know your residency at the Villa Arson is your first experience living in France and in Europe. How does this differ from your past experiences ?

L. V. : This is the first time I have stayed in France and Europe this long (3 months), asides from my studies in Australia and the US. I've been to France and other parts of Europe before, though they were relatively short stays. This time is different. I feel I could connect more in some small ways. Being here at Villa Arson gives me such great stimulation. The architecture, the location, and the vibe of the school community here are such a rare combination of settings as a place to learn, experiment, and be creative. I've made two trips to Paris for my research on Bois de Vincennes. So it has been a good balance between research trips to Paris and processing information and experimenting here at Villa Arson.

I'm also inspired by the old olive trees in the Villa Arson's garden which were planted in the 16th century. They are perhaps the oldest living beings on the premise. They witness the changes that took place here over the centuries. I felt connected with them immediately when I learned about them. I'm very grateful to meet with a Villa Arson's graduate Ange Delamaure who produces a virtual game by creating an entire Villa Arson complex in 3D. Ange proposed a collaboration with my Sala Samnak project, which I also have produced in 3D and AR forms with other collaborators. So we build a Sala Samnak neon house next to the olive trees in the garden in Ange's game. I want to make a gesture by having a conversation with the olive trees, thinking about

the past, the present, and the virtual.

É. M. : When one discovers your work and becomes acquainted with you, one feels that there is a need to assert your Cambodian identity, as well as a desire to go beyond it in order to become a totally international person and artist. Is this so?

L. V. : I never think about affirming a Cambodian identity in my work at all. Though I was born and grew up in Cambodia, and I deeply care about the ancestors who came before me and who invented and left behind some of the most remarkable legacies of knowledge. I believe this rooted consciousness manifests itself in natural ways in my practice. I'm more interested in ideas and practices that are rooted in specific localities yet have the resonance of values beyond the framework of state and nation. I want to create art that is sincere to a situated knowledge yet speaks widely across borders and cultures.

For example, Sala Samnak, though specific to Cambodian tradition, speaks about a people's philosophy and practice of collective place-building for the public. This idea and practice are seen in many cultures in various forms, such as tea houses, rest stops, etc. Another example, Wave Gate: A Shrine Passage (2021), is a site-specific sculpture and soundscape produced in collaboration with Australian sound artists Madeleine Flynn and Tim Humphrey, and installed near the seaside of Ilgwang city in Busan, Korea. The life-size mirror replica (H:357 x W:318 x D:70 cm) of a traditional shrine and the 5-channel soundscape along the passage invite the audience into a sensorial and meditative chorus to feel and reflect on our co-existence: natural lives, built environment, humans, and spirits. The work creates a situation for contemplation of our past, present, and future co-existence between the visible and the invisible. While the work is specific to this Korean town and community, the subject matter speaks across places.

Saturday May 14th, 2022

- 2 - 9pm

Open doors of the studios of the artists in residence

Communication contact

Margaux Verdet
margaux.verdet@villa-arson.fr
+33 (0)6 77 08 61 21

Visits for groups

School activities & young audience
servicedespublics@villa-arson.fr

Réseaux sociaux

@vuthlyno
#villaarsonnice
@villaarsonnice

Lyno Vuth is a laureate of SEA AiR - Studio Residencies for Southeast Asian Artists in the EU, a programme developed by NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore and supported by the European Union.

Practical information

Open every day except Tuesday from 2 to 6pm. From July 1 2022, open every day except Tuesday from 2 to 7pm. Free admission.

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20 avenue Stephen Liégeard
F–06105 Nice cedex 2
tél. +33 (0)4 92 07 73 73
servicedespublics@villa-arson.fr
www.villa-arson.fr