

HISTORY OF THE FUTURE:
LEEZA AHMADY IN CONVERSATION WITH SVAY SARETH
AND VANDY RATTANA*

LEEZA AHMADY:

As director and co-curator of IN RESIDENCE, the Visual Art Program of Season of Cambodia Festival, and co-organizer of this first dedicated academic symposium on the subject of contemporary art in Cambodia, I felt it was imperative that we include individual artists' perspectives. My curatorial efforts in general revolve around complicating categorical notions about artists, contemporary art, and its history. Among other facets, curatorial work involves the unraveling of individual artistic practices and art-making processes in relationship to influential events and periods in history, as well as the collective consideration of a broad range of aesthetic traces and cultural specificities. Critical inquiries into the making and thinking about art in different regions of Asia also have profound implications in re-examining global contemporaneity.

This conversation with artists Vandy Rattana and Svay Sareth investigates the use and representation of history in their respective practices, and the significance of visual art practice as a platform for documenting and disseminating personal, aesthetic, and collective histories.

We will begin the conversation with Rattana. Vandy Rattana was born in 1980 in Phnom Penh, and lives and works between Phnom Penh, Paris, and Taipei. He is the founder of the artist group Stiev Selapak (loosely translated as Art Rebels), who established Sa Sa Art Gallery between 2009 and 2010 and co-founded SA SA BASSAC in 2011, both dedicated exhibition spaces for contemporary art in Cambodia. Rattana began his practice in 2005, concerned with the lack of physical documentation accounting for the stories, traits and monuments unique to his culture. His serial work employed a range of analog cameras and formats straddling the line between strict

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photojournalism and artist practice. His recent work marks a shift in his philosophy surrounding the relationship between historiography and image-making. For Rattana, photographs are fictional constructions, abstract and poetic surfaces, histories of their own.

Rattana, what led to your work with photography?

VANDY RATTANA:

I didn't plan to be a photographer; actually I really wanted to be a pianist, but my parents said no. I didn't go to photography school; photography schools still do not exist in Cambodia. My becoming a photographer was an accident. I actually went to a university to study law because I was interested in philosophy. In the first two years I studied general education – a little bit of philosophy and biology and art history. There I met Erin Gleeson, who was my art history teacher for a semester, and in the class, she found me a strange student; I'm not sure why. But she told me that through my writing assignments, she could sense the way that I look at things, and she asked me if I would like to take pictures. I said yes, I would like to do that. At the same time I had another teacher in the Communications department who bought me an analog camera, a Yashica. At first I was really disappointed because I wanted a digital camera, but after I saw the results, I understood that capturing images on film is such a different phenomenon compared to the digital process.

LEEZA AHMADY:

When I look at an image like this one, I assume that at some point after your initial adventures with the camera, you did begin to recognize your deep connection to image making. Could you go back to a particular time in your life at home, or at work and other arenas where you had thought about image-making in one way or another?

VANDY RATTANA:

In the 1980s, when I was eight or nine years old, I spent a tremendous amount of time watching Indian Bollywood films. I would spend from morning until late at night, sometimes until the next morning, watching films. My brother would go around the neighborhood and call out my name, "Rattana! Where are you?" I would try to stay still, hiding at the neighbor's house. I spent many years watching films at the homes of neighbors, who were rich enough to rent VCRs and screen films on a small television set. When they had these screenings hundreds of people would gather around to watch. And years later I "graduated" to become the film operator, meaning I was the one who would press "play" on my friend's VCR. The kinds of images in *Looking In* (2005) were taken around my home and at my neighbors' homes. While they capture private spaces and moments, to me, they are perhaps more reflections of all the time I spent watching films.



Vandy Rattana, *Looking In series*, 2005, digital C-print, 40 x 60cm. Courtesy of the artist.

LEEZA AHMADY:

So your photographs are reflective of your love for the formal compositions, color and light in cinema?

VANDY RATTANA:

At that time in 2005 when I was shooting my first rolls of film, I just fell in love with looking through the viewfinder. In particular with the 50-millimeter lens, there is a blurry quality that reminds me of film - a kind of cinematic look. When I put the camera up to my eye I just feel that I've seen this kind of image somewhere before. What interests me is the light, the harmony of light and line that brings out reality.

LEEZA AHMADY:

Considering this series back in 2006, *Looking in my Office*, what would you say is the significance of this work? Why did you make it?



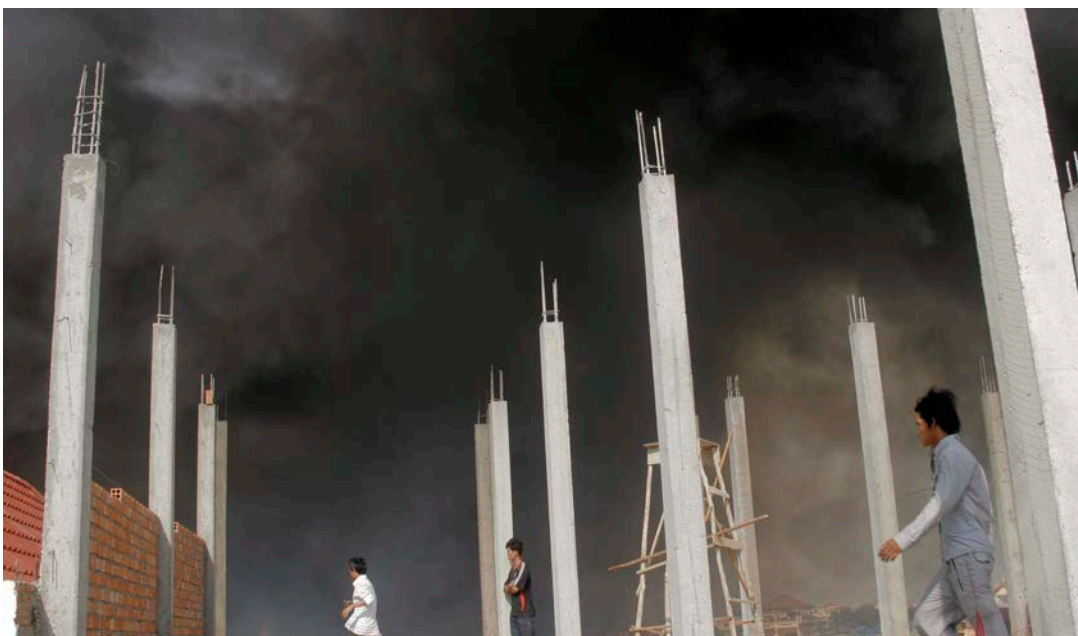
Vandy Rattana, *Looking in my Office series*, 2006, digital C-print, 40 × 60cm. Images courtesy of the artist.

VANDY RATTANA:

When I created *Looking in My Office*, I was actually a telephone technician. I had to climb electrical poles and fix wires in order to earn money to go to school. After making *Looking In*, which focused on private domestic spaces, I was also curious about life in the office. So for a year – which ended up being my last year working there – I brought my camera to work every day to take pictures. People were very, very happy and responsive when I asked to take pictures of them. A year later Erin Gleeson curated my first solo exhibition of this series at a popular gallery in Phnom Penh named Popil. We soon learned that those who had been happy to have had their picture taken in the office were not so happy when they were shown outside the office, saying that they gave a bad image to the company. For example, in this photograph of the three ladies, the exposed wire and plastic tape was seen as something bad that shouldn't be shown to the public. My former supervisor even asked my friend to take down the exhibition but I said no. I wrote a letter of apology but I knew it was important to do this, that it could be an inspiration for other people to see reality in a different way.

LEEZA AHMADY:

So when you were working on that project, going to the office to take photos of scenes with colleagues, were you thinking of something larger than that particular immediate environment? Were you aware at the time of your desire to document Cambodia, or to reveal Cambodian life to Cambodians? Do you still hold that position today?



Vandy Rattana, Fire of the Year series, 2008, digital C-print, 60 x 90cm. Images courtesy of the artist.

VANDY RATTANA:

I was – let’s say - a little bit nationalistic that time. We had TV and radios but these media do not really serve our real interests; they are just propaganda. I felt like I had to leave the system and I had the intention to reveal “reality.” The series *Fire of the Year* (2008) began spontaneously very early in the morning when I was woken by a phone call from a former student. At that time I was teaching photography to journalism students at the Department of Media and Communications at the University of Phnom Penh. He said there’s a fire, you have to go there. I went and spent five hours at the site to observe how people were responding to the situation. It was very difficult, because it has become a tradition now in Cambodia that we have to pay like \$2000 or \$3000 for the police or the fire department to come put out a fire. In a way there was beauty in the smoke and people running around, but at the same time I couldn’t deny the sadness in taking these pictures. At that time I idealistically felt that photographs could communicate “reality,” which I no longer believe.

LEEZA AHMADY:

Your *Bomb Ponds* series, which explores the U.S. bombing of Cambodia during the Vietnam War, has received quite a lot of attention this past in the last year, and was exhibited in *dOCUMENTA (13)*. I would like you to talk about this work because based our conversation in Phnom Penh, it feels as though you have come to a place where you generally do not want to take a definitive position on anything; yet you were quite adamant about the need to actually have this work say something particular, which I found very moving.



Vandy Rattana, *Walking Through* series, 2009, digital C-print, 60 x 90 cm. Images courtesy of the artist.



Vandy Rattana, *Takeo*, from *Bomb Ponds series*, 2009, digital C-print, 91 × 111 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist.

VANDY RATTANA:

Bomb Ponds and *Walking Through* are connected. While I was documenting life at a famous rubber plantation for *Walking Through* in 2008 or 2009, I found a circular pond in the plantation, but I had no idea what it was. Suddenly a young farmer turned around and said “It’s a bomb pond.” From that day on it haunted me. I felt like I had to do something. In Cambodia we don’t really learn about Cambodian history at schools or universities. When thinking about the bomb ponds, I really felt ignorant. I felt this absence, the lack of documentation and knowledge. We found the article “Bombs Over Cambodia” by Ben Kiernan and Taylor Owens in the Canadian magazine *The Walrus*, which was very revealing about US policy at the time of the bombings, and which included a map of the bomb sites, but the map was impossible to read because the sites overlapped so much. I decided to buy maps of the most heavily bombed provinces, those in the east that border Vietnam. We got a small grant and I was able to organize a small crew and hire a car, and we just drove to the countryside and asked people “Where are the bomb ponds?” Everyone could identify some, and exactly where they were, and sometimes their particular characteristics, like the shape or depth or surroundings or color. They would point them out, and we’d mark the location, write down the name of the villages, then go there and spend a couple days at one village. We continued like this over the course of a month. So many stories were told... there are strong memories and emotions about the time of the bombings.

LEEZA AHMADY:

So what does *Bomb Ponds* mean to you?

VANDY RATTANA:

Well, when I hear about the war in Cambodia, I hear claims about how Cambodians killed Cambodians. But I think without international involvement that the war in Cambodia might not have reached the level that it did. I think that as people of the world we have to be responsible for what we created and what we are creating, especially in terms of war.

LEEZA AHMADY:

So, in a sense, the work is not just your personal individual contemplation of what happened but also a call for attention to humanity's collective responsibility, to ask what happened, and why. *Bomb Ponds* for you is therefore a missing page in history, not only Cambodia's history, but also world history.

VANDY RATTANA:

History should be alive; you cannot hide it, because history is just like the truth. To get to understand it and to go on, we cannot put it in a muted mode. We have to keep it alive, for all of us. That's why its absence creates misunderstandings, like the bombs causing one million or more than one million casualties and the Khmer Rouge 1.7 million, yet why do we only talk about the Khmer Rouge? We have to talk and we have to solve these problems, to acknowledge them.



Vandy Rattana, Rattanakiri II, from *Bomb Ponds* series, 2009, digital C-print, 91 × 111 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

LEEZA AHMADY:

Svay Sareth was born in 1972 in Battambang, Cambodia. He lives and works in Siem Reap. He was a member of the historic group of children who studied art in the Site 2 refugee camp with French artist and relief worker Véronique Decrop. Sareth went on to co-found Phare Ponleu Selpak, an art school in Battambang, where he was a teacher, before receiving a scholarship to study in France. Sareth holds an MFA or a Diplôme National Supérieur d'Études des Arts Plastiques, avec félicitations, Caen, France.

Sareth's artistic practice responds to particular themes of his life and traverses both present and historical moments. His work in sculpture, installation and performance questions the politics of power, processes of survival, or the more playful idea of adventure. Until recently his practice has centered on the lasting effect of war, but his more current works mark a clear shift to the present tense in which he interrogates the notion and use of power and the driving idea that the present is also a dangerous time.

Can you tell us about your background, and initial engagement with drawing and painting?

SVAY SARETH:

In 1979 my family was moved to a camp on the Thai border, following my father who was a soldier from the Sihanouk regime. I spent thirteen years in the camp, until it was closed in 1992, and then I moved to Cambodia. At nineteen or twenty years old I discovered my own country! The palm trees and the landscapes of Cambodia - I had only seen these in books at school, so I spent some time to appreciate this moment and to acknowledge the potential of the moment that my mother often repeated, that one day we could find our liberty when we went back to our country.

I had started learning to draw when I met a friend living at the orphanage who told me he was studying art with Véronique Decrop. I asked if he could take me there. I remember Véronique asked me, "Do you know how to draw? Why do you want to learn to draw?" And she gave me paper and a pencil. The first drawing I showed her was a landscape from Cambodia that I had never actually seen. I drew it from a picture in a book. So I would go to this art school and continue to develop skills in drawing and painting at Site 2 whenever I was not in public school.

LEEZA AHMADY:

How did you arrive at this work? I know that after you returned to Cambodia, you established the art school Phare Ponleu Selpak with Véronique Decrop and several other of her former students. Can you talk about your journey from student to teacher and how you eventually – in your own words –liberated yourself from painting and its traditions?



*Svay Sareth, Bouclier (Shield),
2008, iron, 45 cm diameter.
Image courtesy of the artist.*

SVAY SARETH:

This is one of the works that I did during my studies in France. One day I asked myself, how can I do something that I've never done before? When I paint, it makes no sound. I would just hear the sound of the brush moving on the canvas. I decided that I would like to go away from painting and drawing, and then I felt really alone, like I couldn't do anything else, and then I became sick. I refused to take medicine. I tried coin-rubbing, which is a traditional Cambodian method of healing, where you rub a coin with oil on parts of your body. I took a coin - one euro - and I rubbed it on my body. Then I had the idea to try something like this as an artistic process, but I wasn't sure how. I returned to the studio and fabricated a metal disk, like a large coin. I wondered how I could rub this on the land. I attached it to my bicycle, which I used to ride to my studio every day. I began taking longer journeys, eventually riding from Normandy to Paris, dragging the disk behind. I went on the road, inside the subway, across vast parts of France, past all the authorities, without being stopped. The work made a very loud noise, like a noise inside me. Rubbing it on the ground was healing. It acted as kind of scanner, sliding across surfaces of my stored memories.

LEEZA AHMADY:

So you were rubbing that symbolic shield or coin not on your body but on the earth to create scars and to simultaneously also remove the scars.

Can you talk about *Hunters*, which in my view represents not only your departure from painting but also a kind of homage to it.

SVAY SARETH:

While I was riding my bicycle with the *Bouclier*, I met a group of hunters along the roadside, at a small village in the countryside. When I met them it was in a small house, they were very old,

and they were grouped close together like that; somehow it reminded me of my own past. I had flashbacks to the resistance army. I instinctively asked to take a photograph of them, to bring home as souvenir or something like that. After returning from the trip I went to my studio and printed the photograph, and lived with it in my studio for a while. After some time I felt like I needed to do something with it, to process it.



Svay Sareth, *Chasseurs (Hunters)*, 2008. Embossed iron, 140 × 70 × 1.5 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

LEEZA AHMADY:

Why do you think you used metal to re-make the piece? Why not painting?

SVAY SARETH:

I chose to use metal because after *Bouclier*, it felt like the right material to process my past, my memories, and my ideas. It is the material of war. But I had never worked with metal before, so I learned how to work with it, project by project. I started to understand its qualities; with force, it can bend but it can also easily scratch or dent, and I liked the noise made by the hammer on the metal.

LEEZA AHMADY:

In another piece, *Porte* (2010), an installation where you again employed the use of metal, you told me you had begun thinking about space and how to engage with space in your works. You said you wanted us to be able to walk around the work - to somehow experience being inside of a painting. Tell us about the military uniform the figure is wearing here and its connection to another performance you did in France.



Svay Sareth, Porte (Door), 2010. Embossed metal, paint, banana plant, paprika, video Assault on the National Assembly, Paris. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

SVAY SARETH:

The video in this photograph is from my performance *Assaut de l'Assemblée Nationale, Paris* (*Assault on the National Assembly, Paris*). The self-portrait in the painting is embossed from a photo of my performance in Caen when one day I decided to simply wear a military uniform, all in black, with the mask, and walk around the town in Caen. I mainly wanted to observe how people would respond to me, too see what they were thinking. Many people looked at me strangely but nothing significant happened. As with *Hunters*, I kept this photograph in my studio, and eventually I wanted to process it in metal. After embossing it, I stood it upright; the silhouette looked like a doll. When I saw it I thought, wow, maybe I can move it around so that it could be experienced from viewpoints on either side of the door, or *Porte*, which is the title I gave to the work. While my self-portraits as a *faux* soldier were made in France, the banana tree was meant to reference the Vietnam War. I used the red pepper powder because I wanted people to be able to smell the artwork, to have an uncomfortable sensation, something that tears you up.

LEEZA AHMADY:

With the work *Mardi (Tuesday)* in 2009, you decided to build a boat completely from scratch, again something that you never had done before. There is something decisive here, a strong intention behind putting yourself in the process of making your works and then afterwards engaging with them. Why was it so important for you to make the boat? Why not have it manufactured or buy it?

SVAY SARETH:

When I was in high school I read *Robinson Crusoe*. I loved it. How he fought to go back to England, how he learned to live alone on the island, how difficult it was. Also, just to go back to what my mother told me in the camp, so many times I asked her, “Mom, when will we go back to



*Svay Sareth, Mardi (Tuesday), 2009, boat (wood, resin, 450 x 125 x 60 cm), durational performance.
Image courtesy of the artist.*

our country?” And my mother said repeatedly, “One day.” And I asked her “How will we go back to our country?” And my mother said, “Maybe by camel.” I wondered, why not by bus, but no, we have no buses in the camp, and then I concluded, maybe by boat. When I was in France and missing Cambodia, I thought about these moments. In France I really felt like I was on an island, and I thought about how Robinson Crusoe cut wood to make his boat, his own boat. I refused to ask specifically how to make the boat because refugees take risks without necessarily knowing *how* or knowing the outcome. I just started to make scale drawings and then I looked for scrap wood around my studio to make the boat. Finally, when the boat was finished, I just felt that, wow, I am the only one responsible for bringing my boat to the sea. I didn’t think about how far my studio was from the sea! So I had to push it over twenty kilometers, and only then could I see if it would float. And it did float.

LEEZA AHMADY:

So the physical hardship in which you put yourself not only in making the boat, but being inside the work and then pushing it to the sea all alone. What does the word “responsibility” signify?

SVAY SARETH:

I am responsible for making the boat, and for testing whether it will float and how it will hold up, because for me it symbolized a potential escape to freedom. I felt that I needed to do this, because I physically could. I could use my body as a form of resistance, like a shield, like back when I was in the camp. By using the body, I could find how to get something, to climb trees to find whatever fruit was available in the camp, sometimes to walk very far - thirty kilometers - to bring water for my family. “To imagine that I am now in great peace” is related to the effort to do all one can do in certain circumstances for survival, to keep living. There seems to be futility in what I do,

but from the beginning it is always potentially useful, liberating even, not futile at all. I was happy to use it as an offering of my life.

LEEZA AHMADY:

Moving from that work to this monumental one, *Mon Boulet* (2011), not only in terms of the actual object that you once again made by hand, but it being an aesthetic object - a sculpture if you will - and a durational performance, with your body as its core agent. There have been many readings of this work, for example, its symbolism as a burden that you feel you have to carry. Is it your own burden, or does it represent the processing of psychological traumas endured? Or is it more symbolic of your feelings about Cambodia?



Svay Sareth, Mon Boulet (My Burden), 2011. Iron and aluminum sphere, 200 cm; durational performance, five days, Siem Reap to Phnom Penh, Cambodia; single-channel video with sound, 8' 25" looped. Image courtesy of the artist.

SVAY SARETH:

This work is a little bit different because I did this in Cambodia. I remember how when I returned from France in 2009, that first week I felt very scared and uncomfortable to be living in Cambodia. With all the images that I saw in the newspaper, with all the information that I saw from the television, the pressures of politics and the liberty of the people. For me it felt like weight, real live weight. If you look at this ball, you might imagine it is empty, but it still has weight, around 80 kilograms. In high school I had to read about Sisyphus, and how despite his constant efforts, sometimes the stone rolled over him, but he continued to try over and over again to push it to the top of the mountain. I knew in Cambodia this act of crossing the country pulling this ball behind

me would look bizarre, so I brought some markers with me as a way to interact with people along the road. I didn't want to speak or engage with them too much as I wanted it to be a very personal journey. So when they asked me what I was doing, I let them write some of their impressions and thoughts on the ball. Some children wrote "I would like to be a lawyer," some people made drawings of the Buddha, and some people gave me their phone number.

Mon Boulet was in part to learn the weight of the past and how I should be living now. How can I live in the present? And what is my perspective for the future? I didn't just want to think. I wanted to apply my body to these questions as a philosophy. I wanted to test – as though pinching myself - whether I hurt or not. I wanted to experience real sensations, so that is why I began to use my body in my work: to learn about myself and to learn about others, too.

LEEZA AHMADY:

In reference to your thoughts just now, I want to also read this in regards to the Myth of Sisyphus in which Camus claims that when Sisyphus acknowledges the futility of his task and the certainty of his fate he is free to realize the absurdity of his situation. He concludes that the struggle itself is enough to fill a man's heart; one must imagine Sisyphus happy.

Let's briefly talk about *Churning*, a large-scale site-specific banner commissioned by Art Brookfield for the In Residence program as part of the Season of Cambodia festival, which was on view at the World Financial Center in New York. The background is one of the most popular squares in Phnom Penh, superimposed with an image that you designed. Please discuss the imagery, the superimpositions, and how they connect to your previous practices.

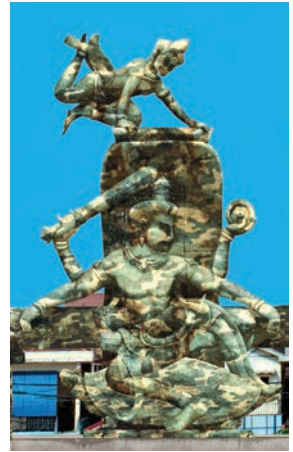


*Svay Sareth, Churning, 2013, site-specific vinyl banner, 3 × 17 meters.
Rendering for banner at World Financial Center, New York City. Image courtesy of the artist.*

SVAY SARETH:

All of my works can be read as questions, a process of personal questioning. I need to question. I like questioning myself, I like questioning society, I like questioning politics, I like questioning my body. The image of the monument in this banner is taken from the bas-relief at Angkor Wat depicting the epic creation-destruction story called Churning of the Sea of Milk. There are two groups: one

side is a group of *asuras*, representing bad spirits or bad beings, on the other side are the *tevodas*, who represent good beings, and in the middle is the all-powerful god Vishnu. Vishnu asks the two sides to work together to churn the sea of milk, which contains many things including *amrita*, or the nectar of life, which Vishnu wants, and plans to share only with the *tevodas*. In the process, a life-threatening elixir also emerges. I was very interested in these figures and this story, which I covered in camouflage. How timeless these concepts are – the tug of war between good and evil – which relates very much to today's situation of Cambodia. I wanted to reflect on this.



*Svay Sareth, Churning, 2013, site-specific vinyl banner, 3 x 17 meters.
In situ at World Financial Center, New York City. Images courtesy of the artist.*