

OF TRANS(NATIONAL) SUBJECTS AND TRANSLATION: THE ART AND BODY LANGUAGE OF SOPHEAP PICH

Boreth Ly

DINNER WITH SOPHEAP PICH ON JULY 28, 2007, AT BANTEAY SREI RESTAURANT, SIEM REAP, CAMBODIA

I had heard of Sopheap Pich and his art from my close friend, Leakthina Chau-Pech Ollier, long before I met him in person on July 28, 2007. He took a long bus ride from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap to join me and my two colleagues and friends, Nora Taylor and Khatharya Um, for dinner.¹ Banteay Srei Restaurant is well known among the local Cambodians for its down-home Khmer cuisine. We ordered many familiar dishes, such as grilled *prahok* (fermented fish paste), *amok* (fish steamed with coconut milk), chicken soup with herbs, and more. These dishes are dear to those who are born and raised in both the villages and cities in Cambodia—they are comfort food.² The group conversed about Pich's art and his life since his return to Cambodia in 2002.

I met Sopheap again on July 11, 2009, in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. We spent the whole day sharing ideas and looking at his drawings and sculptures in his studio. We were both born in Cambodia, but were educated in France and the United States. We hold United States passports, and we live transnational and cosmopolitan lives. And yet, the taste and smell of home-cooked Cambodian food triggers our memories of childhood experiences in Cambodia. Comfort food not only nurtures our bodies; it stirs memories of the past and has had a deep influence on Sopheap's visual arts and verbal articulations in his mother tongue, the Khmer language. These deeply rooted memories resonate profoundly into the present, both in concrete form in Pich's art and in their intersections with discourses of transnational ideologies.

This essay comprises two parts. In the first section, I argue that the tactile and corporeal sensations of taste, smell, and touch (haptic senses) in Sopheap Pich's childhood memories have shaped the visual geometry and content of his sculptures.

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² Sopheary Chea, *Food in Khmer Culture* (Phnom Penh: Reyum Publications, 2002).

Moreover, both the national and transnational bodies of the artist (i.e., his body replicated through time in different countries as he travels) provide us with insight into his concepts and vision. The second part of my essay addresses the politics of translation by looking at the challenges that a postcolonial, transnational, and local artist like Sopheap Pich encounters when he attempts to translate conceptual art into the Khmer language and thereby transmit his artistic ideas to a local audience. To this end, I have deliberately chosen to employ multiple and temporal styles of writing (travelogue, e-mail exchanges, and academic prose) within this essay to articulate what Walter Mignolo has called the "loci of enunciation."³ In this way, I seek postcolonial articulation of the multiple historical and temporal places from which the subaltern subject speaks and resists the hegemonic paradigm of culture established under colonialism.

OF TEXTURE AND TACTILE MEMORY: THE TRANSNATIONAL SUBJECT

Sopheap Pich was born in Cambodia, but has flexible citizenship.⁴ His works have been exhibited in museums and galleries around the world, including the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane, Australia, in November 2009. Pich's sculptures and drawings are not only gaining great visibility; they are highly valued, with larger pieces fetching between US\$40,000 and US\$50,000.⁵ Many private collectors have acquired his drawings, and institutions such as the Singapore Art Museum and the Queensland Art Gallery in Australia own large pieces created by him. In addition, he received a substantial commission from the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia. Two of his works, *Cycle* and *Upstream* (originally made of rattan and bamboo), were cast in bronze and stainless steel and were magnificently installed on the ground of the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology campus in 2009.⁶ "The Pulse Within," at the Tyler Rollins Fine Art Gallery in New York (November 12, 2009, to January 9, 2010), was Pich's first major solo exhibition in North America. In short, Pich is clearly one of the rising stars in the transnational and global art world.

Sopheap Pich has long struggled to find his voice and the right medium of artistic expression. His search for his sense of self, of individual and cultural identity, can be attributed to the trauma of displacement. Pich was born in Koh Kralaw, a rice-farming town of Battambang, Cambodia, on May 9, 1971. He and his family left Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge period (1975 to 1979), during which 1.7 million Cambodians were killed by the regime headed by Pol Pot.⁷ Pich and his family thus left Cambodia as political refugees and finally settled in the United States in 1984.

³ Walter D. Mignolo, "Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse: Cultural Critique or Academic Colonialism?," in *Latin American Research Review* 28,3 (1993): 120–34.

⁴ Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

⁵ See Robert Turnbull, "Cambodian Art Emerges from the Horror of a Murderous Past," in *The New York Times*, December 29, 2010, available at www.nytimes.com/2010/12/30/arts/30iht-cambart30.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1, accessed February 26, 2011.

⁶ E-mail exchange with Sopheap Pich, November 11, 2009.

⁷ David Chandler, *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), p. vii.

Like many political and economic refugees who were compelled to leave their homes, Pich seems to suffer from the trauma of linguistic, cultural, physical, and geographical displacement. Trauma is defined here as a psychic and emotional wound caused by violent experiences, with its lingering traces made manifest in verbal, visual, and body language.⁸ This sense of displacement was eventually made manifest in Pich's work and shaped his choice of media for artistic expression.

Pich recalls: "In 1993, I took school trips to photograph Mayan ruins in Mexico and Guatemala. It was during this time that I first realized that I had to return to Cambodia one day. It was the sound and smell of the forest and the temples at Tikal that conjured up so many childhood memories."⁹ Indeed, scholars of Mayan art and architecture, such as Michael D. Cole, have pointed out the structural similarity between the ancient stone temples of Angkor and Mayan architecture in Mexico and Guatemala. Clearly, this formal and structural parallel between the two ancient civilizations is fortuitous, since they had no direct contact with one another. Yet the the similar sight/site and smell of Mayan ruins strangely triggered Pich's childhood memories of Angkor.¹⁰

Subsequently, the artist returned to Cambodia and began to make sculptures using rattan, bamboo, and metal wire in 2004. These materials reflected his childhood memories of watching his relatives make fish traps, baskets, and other utilitarian objects out of these very same materials. He enrolled at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in 1990 as a pre-medical student. At the end of his second year, against his father's wishes, he changed his major to art, concentrating in painting. He later received his MFA in painting and drawing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1999. He is a good painter, but he did not find the artistic medium that fit until he experimented with materials that he had watched his relatives use.

Pich's tactile memory of the weight and texture of rattan and bamboo began to materialize in his art and creativity in 2004. Pich remembers, "Then, in 2004, I made my first rattan sculpture of a pair of lungs, which I had intended to cover with cigarette packages, but after having taken advice from the director of the French Cultural Center at the time, decided against it."¹¹ In retrospect, it appears that Pich was waiting to exhale, finally releasing his creative energy and sense of self and cultural identity. It was a liberating moment for Pich.

Interestingly, Pich's initial longing to return "home" was provoked by "the sound and smell of the forest and the temple at Tikal." One tends to think of memory as an experience that is purely visual and intangible. However, haptic senses of smell, taste, hearing, and touch register our experiences in the body and thus create memory. I would like to single out touch and tactile memory as a particularly apt way to understand Pich's works.

The trauma of displacement is inscribed on the body, and, in many instances, it is the experience of taste, smell, and touch that evokes and provokes that memory of childhood. Not surprisingly, the title for Pich's first solo exhibition was "The Pulse

⁸ For a more in-depth discussion of trauma, memory, and art, see Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

⁹ See Sopheap Pich's statement in *The Pulse Within: Sopheap Pich* (New York, NY: Tyler Rollins Fine Art Gallery, 2009), pp. 3–6.

¹⁰ <http://grad.berkeley.edu/lectures/event.php?id=138&lecturer=119>, accessed May 14, 2011.

¹¹ Interview with the artist on July 11, 2009.

Within." In order to take a pulse, one has to touch the body to assess the heart rate. Pich is more concerned with assessing the pulse of the Cambodian nation than the state of his own heart. In one of our e-mail exchanges, he relates how the current pulse of Cambodia has its own natural momentum. One of the great challenges for Pich is how to expose what lies underneath this surface, something he refers to as the "the pulse below." He writes, "This country is not getting better and it is not getting worse! It is going the way it should be going. I want to give visual forms to things that are on and below the surface ..."¹²

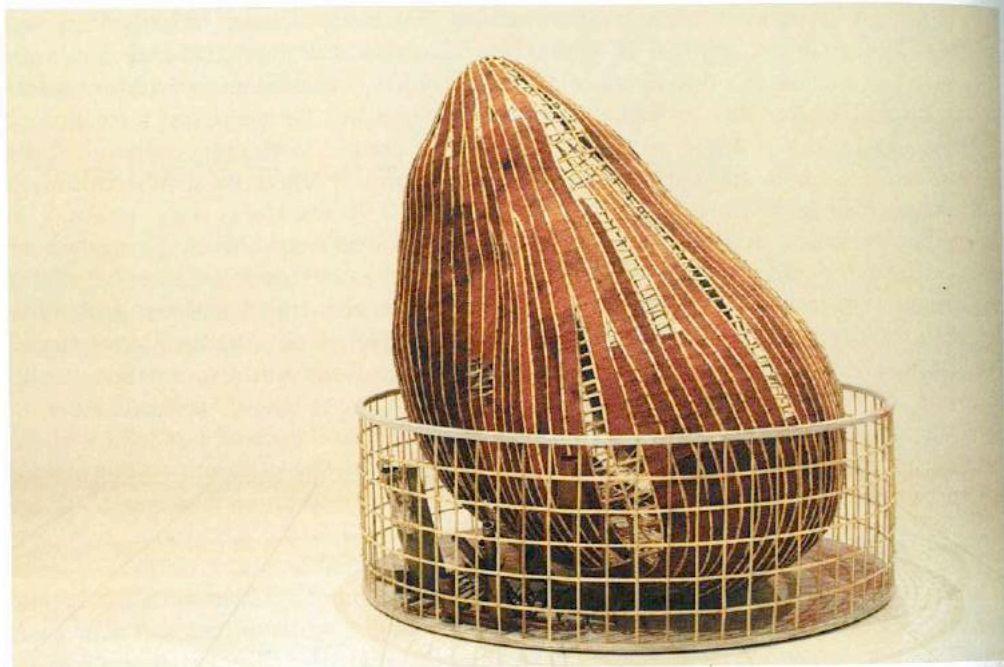


Figure 1: *Caged Heart*, 2009, wood, bamboo, rattan, burlap, dye, wire, metals, farm tools, 51x46x47 inches. Photo: Courtesy of Vandy Rattana

A poignant piece included in "The Pulse Within" is titled *Caged Heart* (see figure 1, above). We see an installation shaped like a heart. The artist has covered parts of it with dyed burlap, imprisoning the heart in a cage. We see, moreover, lots of wear and tear, suggesting that this is not a young heart, but an old one. Placed inside the small cage are tools used by farmers and other manual laborers. Clearly, Pich intended *Caged Heart* to have multiple layers of meanings. We can interpret this old heart as that of a good-hearted farmer or any blue-collar worker, but it could also be the heart of a wealthy, greedy, and ungenerous man whose heart has been damaged and is thus corrupt. I argue here that the metaphorical and linguistic reference to a "good" versus a "bad" heart as a way to characterize a person's ethical and moral standing in society is a common trope in Cambodian culture. *Caged Heart* both critiques and captures this specific cultural value. For instance, there is a proverb in the Khmer language that "it is all right if a houseguest feels that your house is small and claustrophobic as long as he/she does not feel that your heart is small and

¹² E-mail exchanges with Pich on September 27, 2009.

claustrophobic. In other words, a small space provides an opportunity for kinship, intimacy, and friendship, but a suffocatingly small and claustrophobic heart is not good.

DRAWING FROM TRADITIONS, TENSIONS, AND INNOVATIONS

I visited Pich's studio, located in Beng Kok, one of the poorest parts of Phnom Penh City, on August 11, 2009, and spoke to him.

Boreth Ly (BL): Why do you want to be an artist?

Sopheap Pich (SP): I want to be independent and to have the freedom to make something out of nothing.

BL: Name some of the artists whose works you admire.

SP: I admire works by Vincent Van Gogh and Brancusi. I never know how to read colors. For example, red equals sadness—all foreign to me. I prefer drawing and lines because they are far more expressive and energetic to me. Moreover, drawing is a Zen Buddhist process that requires meditative focus and concentration.

Indeed, Pich's sketchbooks are filled with drawings that eventually serve as initial ideas and inspirations for large-scale sculptures and installations. We also see traces of his drawings on the walls of his studio, where he plays with different dimensions, depths, and shadows. One sees expressive energy in schematic sketches of ideas that are transformed and materialized into both small and large three-dimensional sculptures. The result is a display of light and shadow that creates the effect of a volumetric space.

WAYS AND MEANS: MAKING VISIBLE THE POLITICALLY INVISIBLE

Raft is an imposingly large installation that offers a critique of the displacements resulting from global investment and real estate development in the Beng Kok area of Phnom Penh City. *Beng Kok* means "Reed Lake" in the Khmer language (*beng*, lake; *kok* is a type of reed). Herbs and aquatic vegetables such as morning glory are grown and harvested in the area by the local people. In addition, the residents fish in the lake, but the lake has been completely filled in to make land to build a skyscraper. More than four thousand families living around the Beng Kok lakeside were forced to move away. Each family living in the neighborhood has been given US\$8,000 by "a firm owned by Senator Lao Meng Khin of the Cambodian People's Party"¹³ to move so that a futuristic and global city can be developed in this place.

Most of the houses located around the lake were built on stilts over the water. Pich's studio was situated at the lakeshore in just such a house. All of these houses have been demolished. *Raft* comprises what looks like a tall building supported by what looks like elongated boats or bombs (see figure 2, below). The artist has

¹³ See Khouth Sophakcharya, "New Park to Displace Locals," www.phnompenhpost.com/index.php/2010081141146/National-news/new-park-to-displace-locals.html; and www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=90453, accessed, March 13, 2010.

intentionally couched his formal language ambiguously so it lends itself to multiple readings. Naturally, the two boats supporting the tall edifice remind us of the soon-to-be-filled-in lake where Pich and his two assistants, Sophai and Toma, watch their neighbors paddling their boats to fish and to harvest vegetables. Moreover, the water from the lake generates cool breezes on hot and humid days while Pich and his assistants create their works. On the other hand, the two objects supporting the skyscraper in *Raft* could also refer to the bombs that the American military dropped on Cambodia and Laos. In fact, the metal wire that Pich uses to join and stitch rattan and bamboo strips together is made from melted-down shell casings and unexploded ordnance.

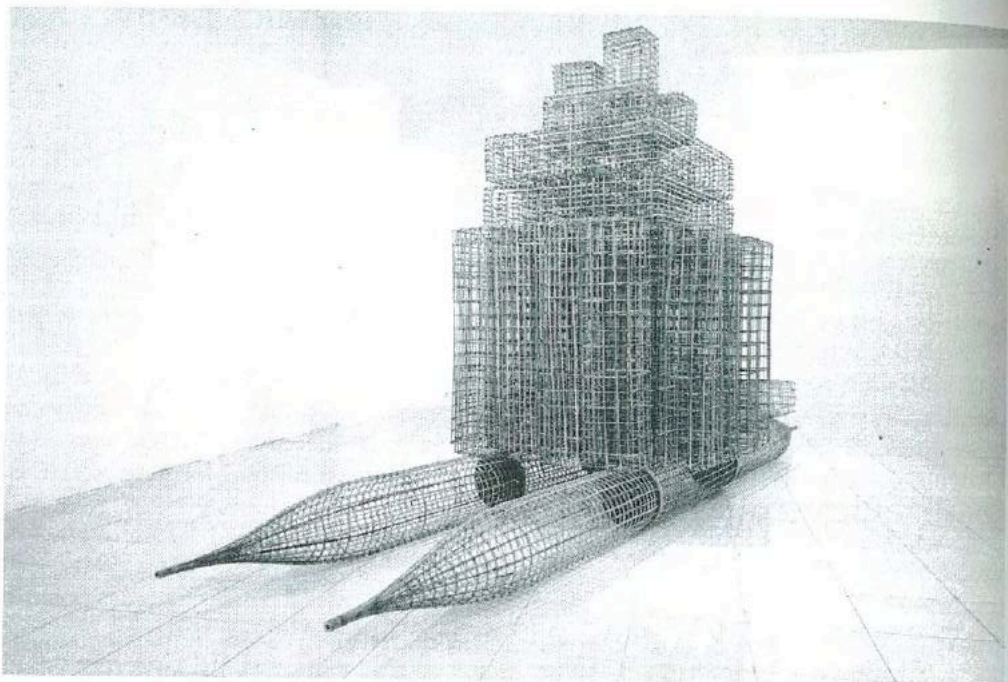


Figure 2: *Raft*, 2009, bamboo, wood, wire, metal bolts, 89x177x52 inches.
Photo: Courtesy of Vandy Rattana

Compound is an installation similar to *Raft*, with a differently developed idea. Unlike *Raft*, in which the buildings sit on two long tubes, the cubical, rectangular, and cylindrical buildings in *Compound* emerge vertically from the ground. One of the most impressive aspects of this large sculptural installation is the artist's attention to detail. It took Pich and his assistants eight months to create this one piece for the 2011 Singapore Biennale.¹⁴ *Compound* is a huge installation measures—height 4.5, width 2.5, length 3 meters—and was installed at the atrium of the Singapore National Museum.¹⁵ Each one of the bullet-shaped edifices in *Compound* is made from one single branch of bamboo that the artist and his assistants managed to split into multiple thin strips that are held together with wire and metal bolts. The metal

¹⁴ Interview with the artist on December 13, 2010.

¹⁵ E-mail exchange with the artist on February 28, 2011.

wire and bolts, as in *Raft*, are made from recycled bomb shell casings that were melted down as part of the recycling process in the post-Vietnam War period.

Compound questions and critiques the cycle of destruction and creation of buildings in the metropolis of Phnom Penh as part of a global real-estate development process. More important, it materializes and makes visible the inescapable conundrum of this ironic cycle of destruction and creation. It is ironic because the metal wire and bolts that hold Pich's sculptures together are made from recycled shell casings of bombs that the United States dropped in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in the 1970s. Violent and destructive weapons are transformed into utilitarian objects that secure the sculptures in Pich's installation. *Compound* could also be interpreted as a metaphor for Pich's life and success as a Cambodian-American artist. One can say that he was trying to sustain his aspiration as an artist on a fragile raft for a number of years, and he has finally arrived at a point in his life when he has a compound of his own where he and assistants can establish more stable economic networks; Pich is now able to afford a more commodious and well-appointed studio space.

Pich informed me in one of our conversations that, in his earlier body of work, he was keenly interested in achieving perfection of form, texture, and surface. He therefore rarely left his sculptures unfinished or exposed. Now that he lives in Cambodia for extended periods, he has a different political and social perspective. He seems to have evolved from the younger artist, concerned with formal questions, to an artistically mature and potent artist, who is now able to detect and to assess the pulse of this nation. I would argue that Pich is still a formal perfectionist. The artist's desire, however, to expose politically charged issues in his works is now revealed more clearly.



Figure 3: *Junk Nutrients*, 2009, bamboo, rattan, wire, plastic, rubber, metal, cloth, resin, 65x49x29 inches. Photo: Courtesy of Vandy Rattana

For example, *Junk Nutrients* makes visible what is underneath the tourist-and investment-friendly image that Cambodia projects to the world (see figure 3, above). *Junk Nutrients* is shaped like twisted intestines coated with burlap. The intestines are left exposed, with junk—plastic tubes, bottles, and other discarded materials—spilling out of them. Pich and his two assistants gathered “junk” daily from the lake located behind their old studio before the lake was filled in. The installation suggests that nutrients one needs from the soil of Phnom Penh City or below the surface of the lake have been supplanted by waste. A conceptual parallel can be drawn between Pich’s desire “to make something out of nothing” and that of some poor folk who live in the slums of Phnom Penh City; their livelihood is sustained by collecting and selling these pieces of junk to recycling companies.¹⁶ In short, Pich’s sculpture exposes an unhealthy pulse buried underneath the seemingly normal and tourist-friendly Cambodia, a nation that is being both created and destroyed by global investment.

The changing landscape and cityscape of Phnom Penh also triggers Pich’s memory of his journey back to his hometown of Battambang province in 1979. In 2009, Sopheap Pich created a series of sculptures titled *1979*, exhibited at the Queensland Art Gallery. *1979* comprises objects that Pich created to give tangible weight and three-dimensionality to things he had seen on the road back to his hometown of Battambang shortly after the fall the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979. Pich was eight years old then, and he remembers having seen landmines, bomb shell casings, and a pair of binoculars. Pich uses rattan, bamboo, and metal wire to conjure up these objects from his memory. He also remembers seeing an almost destroyed Buddha image resting against a wall and stained with human blood. He has deliberately left the Buddha image in *1979* unfinished to symbolize the incomplete and uncertain experience of memory (see figure 4, below). Admittedly, these objects, which were observed by the eight-year-old Pich, are clearly mediated. Pich has deliberately chosen to place two tiny buffalo statues at the base of the huge sculpture of a pair of binocular to emphasize the contrast between the size of the objects, and to remind the viewer that the world represented here has been perceived through a small child’s imagination.¹⁷ For Pich, the lingering vision of his journey and life under the Khmer Rouge regime is a trauma that was and is inscribed into his transnational body.

One of Pich’s worries is that he has failed to live up to his father’s expectations: he chose to pursue his dream of becoming an artist rather than becoming a medical doctor. He has, however, never left behind what he learned as a pre-med student, instead integrating his complex knowledge of the human body and medical science into his art and creative process. The synthesis of these disciplines and professions is evident in *Suture*. *Suture* comprises what looks like a pair of kidneys joined by a tube of some sort that has perhaps been sutured into place. Once again, as in much of the work in “The Pulse Within,” Pich has us look simultaneously at what happens within and what can be detected through surfaces.¹⁸ In brief, his sculptures solicit

¹⁶ A visual example of the desperate lives of Cambodian children who collect recycling materials from a garbage dump is featured in Rithy Panh’s 2006 docudrama film, *Burnt Theater*.

¹⁷ Interview with the artist on July 10, 2009.

¹⁸ E-mail exchanges with Pich on September 27, 2009.

critical looking from the viewer, a visual observation that enables the viewer to penetrate below surfaces and to go beyond stereotypes.

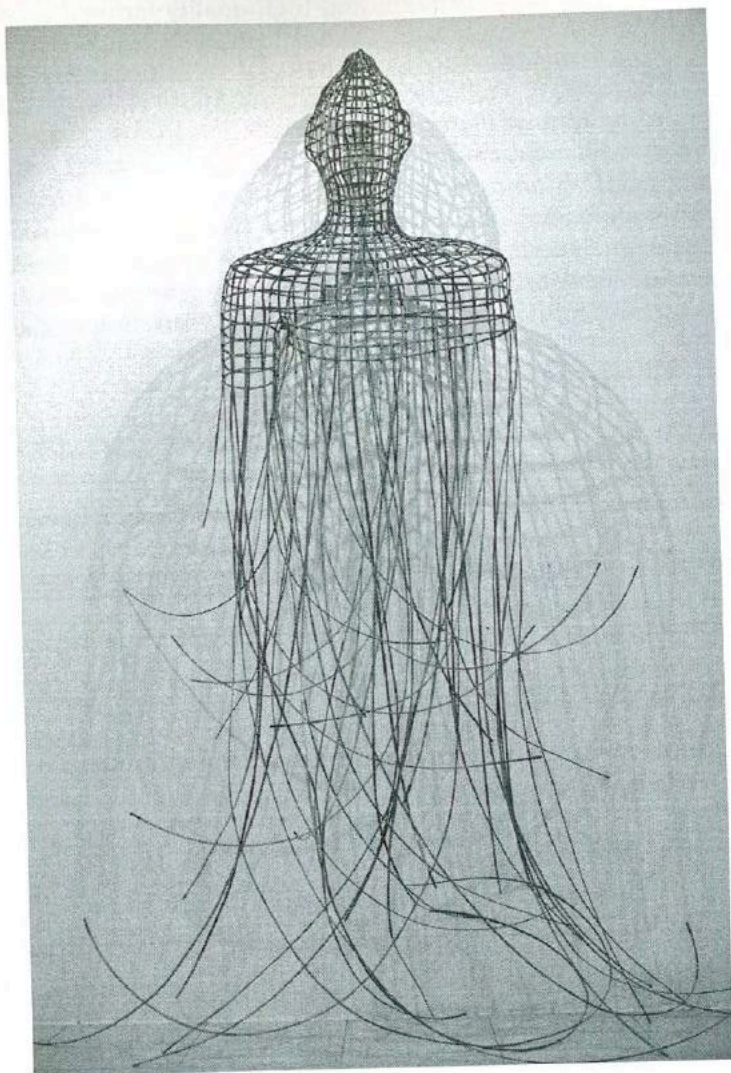


Figure 4: *Buddha*, 2009, rattan and metal bolts. Photo: Courtesy of Vandy Rattana

GALANGA ROOTS: DINNER WITH SOPHEAP PICH AND LEAKTHINA CHAU-PECH OLLIER AT ROMDENG RESTAURANT, PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA, JULY 11, 2009

After a long day with Sopheap in his studio, we joined our mutual friend, Leakthina Chau-Pech Ollier, for a dinner at Romdeng Restaurant in Phnom Penh. *Romdeng* means *galanga* in Khmer, a root that Cambodians use to spice up their food. Thina was born in Cambodia and was educated in France and the United States. She received her PhD in comparative literature at the University of California, Los Angeles. As usual, we ordered copious amounts to eat, more dishes than we could possibly consume. Three displaced and transnational bodies were starving for home-cooked food in our place of birth and homeland. We conversed in both English and

Khmer about Sopheap's ideas for his next project, and he told us that it involved the Khmer alphabet. As the flavors of the food settled in and were savored, we started to reminisce about different types of herbs and high-quality fermented fish paste that we can no longer find at restaurants in Cambodia; it is to be found only at home in the villages. Sadly, nostalgic feelings are ephemeral, as are companionable dinners, and we parted that evening. Thina returned to running *Anise*, her mother's adopted son's hotel and restaurant in Phnom Penh City. Sopheap was about to depart for Australia to install his artwork at the Queensland Art Gallery, and I was preparing to return to Santa Cruz, California, in the United States, where I live and work. We are global nomads¹⁹; our bodies and cultural identities inhabit a transnational space, perhaps more aptly characterized as an intersecting space at the crossroads of cultures within Southeast Asia. We cross paths in Cambodia once every few years, and we enunciate our cultural and ethnic identities from multiple geopolitical and temporal spaces.

THE POLITICS OF TRANSLATION: REINSCRIBING AND RE-ENUNCIATING THE LOCAL NOTIONS OF ART IN POSTCOLONIAL CAMBODIA

One of the biggest challenges for local and transnational Cambodian artists is to translate the language of modern art into the local Khmer language and make the foreign concepts embedded in their art culturally legible to the local audience. For example, consider You Khin (1947–2009), a Cambodian-French artist from an earlier generation who received his training in studio art from the Royal University in Phnom Penh. You studied at the École des Beaux-Arts de Luminy in Marseilles, France. You faced the same challenge that other transnational artists so often face when he exhibited his paintings and sculptures at the French Culture Center in Phnom Penh in July 2007. You's impressionist paintings, coded with a visual language that he invented during his years of exile in Europe and Africa, depict women engaging in various forms of labor such as sewing, cooking, and nursing their babies.²⁰ Speaking of the local audience, You said: "My world is modern, and I don't think that many Cambodians understand my art. But this is the beginning. I want people to come to my show, even if they don't understand it. I want them to ask questions about my work rather than be against it simply because it is different ..."²¹

Sopheap Pich takes on a similar challenge in translating and transmitting foreign concepts in his sculptures, which are made of rattan and bamboo. The materials are familiar to local Khmer viewers, but the abstract concepts and geometric shapes are not immediately legible to a local audience. Pich shared his perspectives on translating conceptual art for a local audience in an e-mail exchange and interview with me, dated June 23, 2010:

¹⁹ For literature on "global nomads" and contemporary art, see Miwon Kwon, "The Wrong Place," in *Art Journal* 59,1 (Spring 2000): 32–43; Carol Becker, "The Romance of Nomadism: A Series of Reflections," in *Art Journal* 58,2 (1999): 22–32; and Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000).

²⁰ You Khin, *Women* (Phnom Penh: Centre Culturel Français, 2009), p. 1.

²¹ See <http://khmernz.blogspot.com/2009/06/exhibitions-show-different-aspects-of.html>, accessed March 12, 2011.

BL: I know that an exhibit of your new body of works is on view at the French Cultural Center in Phnom Penh. Can you tell me what the show is all about?

SP: It is about the Khmer alphabet.

BL: What about the Khmer alphabet?

SP: Despite the many things that have been destroyed or disappeared from this country, we still have our alphabet. In fact, no one can tell me the last time that characters were eliminated for the sake of progress or a computer's facilities, i.e., word separations or character elimination, because of repetition in sounds, but with differently shaped characters, et cetera, et cetera. Of course Khmer is very difficult, but at least we are not tonal. And because of so many sounds, our alphabet allows us to write down just about any sounds thrown at us.

BL: Thank you for sending me digital images of your sculptures of the Khmer words *Selapak* [art] and *Chomlak* [sculpture]. Why do you single out these two Khmer words? How was your exhibit at the French Cultural Center in Phnom Penh received by the Cambodian audience?

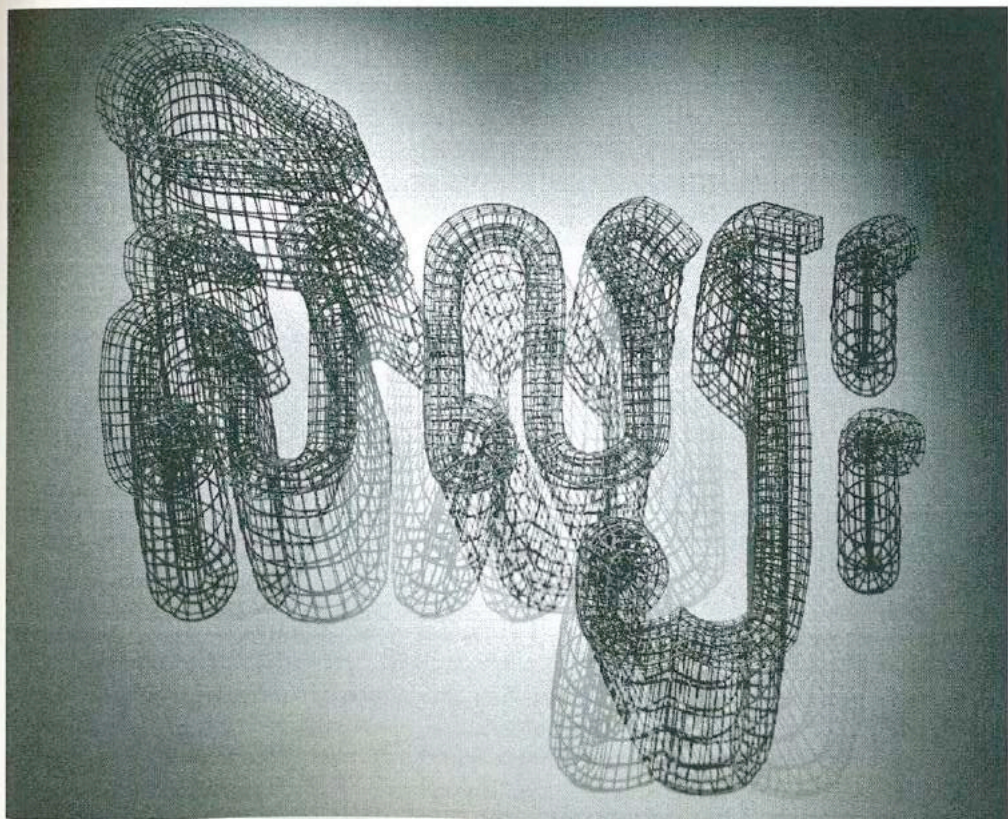


Figure 5: *Selapak*, 2010, rattan and metal bolts. Photo: courtesy of Vandy Rattana

SP: I chose these two Khmer words because I am beginning to make work that is directly aimed at the Cambodian public. I wanted them to think about questions such as: "What is sculpture? What is art?" It is a way to interact with the general public here. As you know, my work has always been "mute" in content. In other words, I never try to put much narrative in my objects. There are reasons for something to come into being, but I don't try to "explain" the story within the work. I was thinking recently that I'm growing more and more minimalist, if you can call Brancussi and Giacometti minimalists. But nevertheless, I thought it was important to make work that solicits a reaction from the Cambodian public. We can even say I had just made works that puzzled white people, which has not always been the case for me. And they did seem to enjoy seeing the alphabet. What I have talked about with the Cambodian media and public was more about the love of one's work. The attention to details as a way of meditation, or that paradise is at our fingertips when we do something with care. Things like that, which many of them were surprised and happy to hear. I told them that the meaning of art is not always what the picture is trying to "explain" to us, but [it is] in the way that the object is made. That is what we can learn from. Coincidentally, I was invited to put a piece in a group show at the National Museum in Phnom Penh at the end of my exhibit at the French Cultural Center, and I chose to submit the word *Selapak*. One can say that "Art is beautiful" because it was beautiful on the wall. I think the idea itself was still probably lost on the ordinary Cambodian viewers. I mean, who the hell cares about art in Cambodia anyway, right? But for me it is worth some serious thoughts about reclaiming the potential of the local language, the word's initial ability to provoke the local audience.

It is worth pointing out here that the National Museum of Phnom Penh was established in the 1920s, during the French colonial period, and was intended to house sculptures from the Angkorian period of Cambodian history.²² Objects from the Angkorian period are held in the highest regard by Cambodians and have a venerated place in the Cambodian national imaginary.²³ This highly static and historically frozen-in-time notion of art was conceived by the French, and it forms part of a French Orientalist ideology. Pich's choice to exhibit *Selapak*, the Khmer word for "art," in a building that was formerly the School of Art under the colonial regime can be interpreted as subverting a stifling and nationalistic institution. As a postcolonial transnational subject, moreover, Pich reinscribes and re-enunciates what "art" signifies in his own native language; his work decolonizes art in a colonial space. Pich's resistance echoes Frantz Fanon's prophetic analysis of colonialism and national culture:

If we study the repercussions of the awakening of national consciousness in the domains of ceramics and pottery-making, the same observations may be drawn. Formalism is abandoned in the craftsman's work. Jugs, jars, and trays are modified, at first imperceptibly, then almost savagely. The colors, of which formerly there were but few and which obeyed the traditional rules

²² Ingrid Muan, "Citing Angkor: Cambodian Arts in the Age of Restoration, 1918–2000" (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2001), pp. 10–127.

²³ Helen I. Jessup, *Masterpieces of the National Museum of Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: Friends of Khmer Culture, 2007).

of harmony, increase in number and are influenced by the repercussion of the rising revolution. Certain ochres and blues, which seemed forbidden to all eternity in a given cultural area, now assert themselves without giving rise to scandal ... The specialist coming from the home country and the ethnologist are quick to note these changes. On the whole such changes are condemned in the name of a rigid code of artistic style and of a cultural life, which grows up at the heart of the colonial system. The colonialist specialists do not recognize these new forms and rush to the help of the traditions of the indigenous society. It is the colonialists who become the defenders of the native style.²⁴

Certainly, Pich critiques the nationalist internalization of the colonialist's rigid notions of art and culture in postcolonial and post-independence Cambodia. Pich's sculpture *Selapak* is a visual interrogation of colonialist and nationalist discourses on art. First, it is made out of rattan and bamboo, which embodies the sight/site of tensions, traditions, innovations, and modernity. These materials, moreover, are used in traditional craftwork; such craft-making skills are considered by colonialists and nationalists to be in danger of extinction, as modern machinery and more durable materials, such as plastic, supplant the traditional methods and materials. Second, Pich's use of these crafty materials to create "*Selapak*" subverts conceptually and critiques static notions of traditional arts that were laid down in the colonial and nationalist periods.

I would like to conclude by pointing out that one of the greatest challenges for modern and contemporary artists of Southeast Asia is not how to translate Western-derived artistic concepts and ideas into the local languages of Southeast Asia, but how the local languages (verbal and visual) translate artistic concepts for ordinary viewers in a postcolonial, transnational, and global era. Pich's incorporation of the Khmer written language into the corpus of his sculpture reinforces further the unfinished project of modernity and its colonial legacy. Finally, as a transnational subject, Pich reinscribes and re-enunciates the concept of art in his mother tongue on his displaced body of art, decolonizing the notion that art is "timeless" and static in postcolonial Cambodia.

²⁴ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, preface Jean-Paul Sartre (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1963), p. 242.