

# FIELD OF DREAMS

by NAIMA MORELLI

**“THE VISION OF THE ZHONGSHAN BUILDING BOILS DOWN TO AN IDEAL OF COMMUNITY AND A SHARING PHILOSOPHY THAT SEEMS QUITE ALIEN TO AN ARTS SCENE LARGELY COMMANDED BY CAPITALIST SENTIMENT.”**



Establishing a culture of reflexive collaborative community lies at the heart of the vision that Ho and Ng have for the building. For them, without this connective force, it's unclear whether or not the Zhongshan can truly survive. “Collaborations. That's what this whole building is for,” says Ng. “So we thought, why don't we join forces with all these indies, and then we're a big indie, but still it can be whatever it wants to be. But it's a progressive transformer, if I can put it that way.”

“We're like Mama-san's!” joked Ng. “Whenever people come to visit the gallery, we take them on tours of the whole building.” The women are actively working to bring outsiders into the insular art world, and also to encourage artists to enter into working relationships with one another. Hopefully then the Zhongshan's nascent artistic community can evolve into a long-lasting culture. Already some collaborations are beginning to bear fruit: MDA and Ricecooker are planning showcases that blend their music and visual resources, while Tandang and Bogus Merchandise have longstanding relationships that feed into the Malaysian alternative music scenes.

As Ho rattled off the list of tenants, it seemed like everyone was bringing their own friends and collaborators to turn the place into an arts kampung. Tandang Record Store and Bogus Merchandise have been introduced by Joe Kidd, who runs Ricecooker Archives. Raman Roslan plans to bring in indie publisher Rumah Amok, as well as the Kenyah sape player, Alena Murang, who has been making waves in the local music scene.

The concept of an artistic commune feeding itself is visibly referencing similar communities that already exist in the West. “It's not a new concept but it takes a lot of work for it to work,” says Ng. “There are some parties that need to do the nurturing. Now that you're an anchor, you actually have to anchor these things.” On their own, these indie groups might forever stay under the radar, but by pulling together these communities, the tenants will feed into each other and organically grow a foundation from which others can benefit from and engage with the arts.

“Personally my practice does not require a studio, but I do think — and as much a sociophobe that I am — as an artist it's important to have community,” says Chi Too. “It's important to be able to bounce things off other people, to rub off other people's ideas and thoughts because I think the biggest problem with artists is how insular we are.”

More information at [ourartprojects.com](http://ourartprojects.com)

Above, left: The interior of OUR Art Projects gallery, featuring Nirmala Dutt's posthumous exhibition, 'The Great Leap Forward', 2017. Image by Karya Studio.

## META MEONG AND KON LEN KHNHOM, AND ERIN GLEESON AND SA SA BASSAC IN PHNOM PENH

When the word “dream” is spoken in well-established art systems, it is almost always rhetoric. Conversely, in countries where a contemporary art system is yet to be built (or re-built), the word suddenly becomes alive and bright with meaning. Art operators in new contemporary art scenes might face many difficulties, but the invaluable advantage they possess is the tangible perception that what they are doing really matters. There, art is not an individual pursuit; it is linked with the growth of an entire society.

Since the 1980s, the cultural spirit of Phnom Penh has been slowly making its comeback into the capital after the bloody repression of the Khmer Rouge regime and forty years of war. While spaces like the French Cultural Center (now French Institute), New Art Gallery, Reyum Institute of Art and Culture, and Java Café have pioneered the contemporary art rebirth, new spaces are springing up. The new kid on the block is called Kon Len Khnhom, which translates as “my place”.

“It was important to have a name for the art space in the Khmer language, because I wanted the locals to really feel it was their place,” explains Meta Moeng, founder of the space. “I'm catering not only to the art community, but also to the non-art people. I want to increase access to Cambodian arts and culture and build a network here in Phnom Penh.”

Meong explains that in Cambodia most people know little about local contemporary visual art, although there are a few artists who are established internationally. “We don't have art programmes in schools and the government is not really interested in promoting the art scene. We need education to be more focused on public programmes. We have to become part of the solution ourselves, to try to engage people who are not necessarily part of the art world and might be intimidated. We can't complain. With Kon Len Khnhom, I set out to work mostly with art institutions, independent art projects and students.”

Audience building is a serious commitment for Meong, whose training is in management: “Perhaps this makes the way that I see things a bit different. Art was something that was never encouraged in my family; all I had to do was to go to study.” In 2013, she was awarded a place on the Creative Leaders Programme, a competitive personal development program for arts managers offered by the arts organization Cambodian Living Arts. That brought her closer to the arts, and she then became a co-founding member of the Cambodian Arts Network (CAN): “I was really amazed to see the passion and love artists pour into their work, overcoming every struggle and leading a life that is so different from the rest of society. I enjoyed their intellectual speculations and just spending time with them.” After meeting Erin Gleeson, a Phnom Penh-based curator and artistic director of SA SA BASSAC, she started working at this independent art space, becoming the Community Projects Manager.

Meong decided to open up her own space in February 2017 almost by chance. Initially, she was looking for a quiet space for herself in the city, to meet with clients and do her freelance work as a consultant and artist's assistant, for she is currently studio manager to the internationally acclaimed Cambodian visual artist, Sopheap Pich. A friend offered her a house for rent: a two-storey traditional wooden Khmer house tucked in a silent alleyway near Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum.

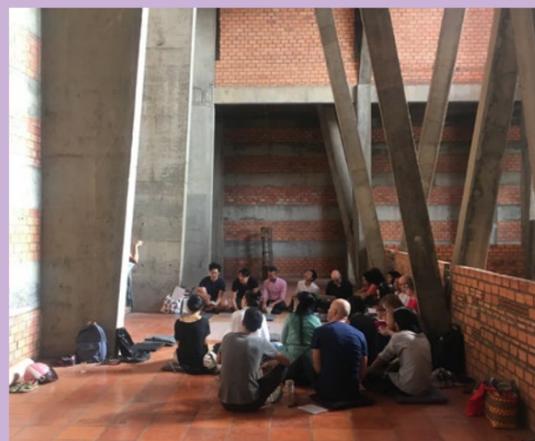
“When I got there, I had no doubt. This was not simply a house, it was my dream,” she explains. Discarding the idea of a private studio, she started envisioning a space where the artistic community could gather. She immediately planned to use the space for art talks as opposed to exhibitions, as well as conjuring up a residency space devoted to students, researchers and curators: “I didn't want to offer artist's residencies, because we had Sa Sa Art Projects already and they were doing a great job,” notes Meong. “In order to contribute to the art scene, we need to do something different. I think the goal is to create and be part of a network.”

Gleeson is on the same page. “We are a small scene, and I believe the distinction of our different programmes should be seen as complements to one another and a broad range of artistic practice,” she explains. “I'm thrilled and excited for Meong and her new initiative Kon Len Khnhom, which has immediately become integrated as a warm and welcoming space for artists and audiences in Phnom Penh. Her passion is bringing people together.”



From top to bottom: 'FIELDS: An Itinerant Inquiry Across the Kingdom of Cambodia', curated by Erin Gleeson and Vera Mey. Rabbit Island, Gulf of Thailand, 2013; 'Cambodian Art Histories for Daily Use, Part 1', with Roger Nelson, 2015. Images by Lim Sokchanlina.

# “PERHAPS THIS IS A SUITABLE METAPHOR FOR THE ARTS, IN WHICH MOST ARE OPERATING LARGELY WITHOUT A LOCAL SUPPORT STRUCTURE OR ANY SEMBLANCE OF AN OFFICIAL CULTURAL INDUSTRY.”



From top to bottom: Artist Talk by Vandy Rattana; The Vann Molyvann Project architecture studio at SA SA BASSAC, 2015. Image by Prum Ero, courtesy SA SA BASSAC; 'FIELDS: On Attachments and Unknowns', 2017. Image by Erin Gleeson.

A native of Minneapolis, Gleeson first came to Cambodia as an artist with a grant from the Human Rights Centre at the University of Minnesota Law School. Her proposal was to be in Cambodia to research creative methodologies in human rights education and to extend her Art History honours thesis research on histories of photographic archives associated with genocide.

She then visited Cambodia again to pursue further research and interview Nhem En, a photographer at the prison S-21, and S-21 survivor and artist Vann Nath, as well as the painter Svay Ken and scholars Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan. “Meetings like these were highly moving and inspiring.” During that period, she was invited to teach an elective art history course at Pannasastra University, the first private liberal arts university in Phnom Penh, where she shaped a course in art history that would be meaningful in the Cambodian context: “I learned with my students as we entered studios, listened to artists and attended exhibitions happening at that time.”

Over the years, she became friends with Vandy Rattana, a leading artist and founder of Stiev Selepak art collective. Here the word “dream” comes into the picture again. “From there we started dreaming of a lot of things, including a space of our own.” That is how SA SA BASSAC was born: from the merging of Erin’s curatorial platform BASSAC Art Projects and Stiev Selepak’s Sa Sa Art Gallery.

Rattana once told Gleeson something that often comes back to her: “It becomes hard to think when we are forced to look down constantly so we don’t trip.” He was referring to the sidewalks of Phnom Penh, literally and metaphorically,” recalls Erin. “He implied that, at that time, their unevenness and obstruction were deliberately kept that way.”

Perhaps this is a suitable metaphor for the arts, in which most are operating largely without a local support structure or any semblance of an official cultural industry. Without government funding or established companies for the likes of art handling or PR in the arts, “we remain ‘D.I.Y.’” says Gleeson. “It’s challenging, of course, but it also breeds the art that is made, some of which profoundly inspires.”

The programme of SA SA BASSAC is designed to fuel the local art environment, while connecting Cambodian artists to regional and international art networks: “SA SA BASSAC is based in Phnom Penh, but not isolated there. We were founded in 2011 with a focus on emerging Cambodian artists. These early exhibitions, complemented by our public programs, extended through informal networks regionally and internationally, leading to artistic, curatorial and institutional collaborations.” The many initiatives include a residency programme called FIELDS, which is programmed every three years by Gleeson and a co-curator and brings people together from different countries to exchange in different areas around Cambodia. SA SA BASSAC also dedicates a level of its space to its reading room and archive, which Gleeson notes “is primarily of use to artists, and is of growing use to the growing amount of students, scholars and curators engaging in Southeast Asia and Cambodia.”

In terms of the impact on the local cultural environment, Meong is open to the unpredictable: “Kon Len Khnhom is an experimental platform for me. If you ask me what it will be in the future, I don’t really know. I feel like I’m experimenting with the space, with the students, so we can mutually grow. We currently have students-in-residence from The Royal University of Fine Arts from April to August 2017 and research team-in-residence from Rong Kon Project, an independent research team from May-October, 2017. And I’m also interested in communicating with the wider art world and other fields, such as architecture. Above all, I want people to come here to do research and bring friends along.”

Thinking back to the sidewalk metaphor, Gleeson has nothing but appreciation for working in the so-called margins of the art world: close to art and its conditions, on a small scale, in close relation with one another. But at the same time, she says, “It is welcome when continued growth in the field cultivates access to more sidewalks on which we can think together while walking.”

More information at [konlenknhom.com](http://konlenknhom.com) and [sasabassac.com](http://sasabassac.com)

# A SENSE OF PURPOSE

by TEO HUIMIN



## ZOE BUTT AND THE FACTORY IN HO CHI MINH CITY

Uniquely placed within the burgeoning and rapidly evolving arts landscape of Vietnam, Artistic Director of The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre (The Factory), Vietnam, Zoe Butt, understands the importance of a collaborative relationship of mutual understanding between artist and curator that allows for the emergence of engaging and meaningful artistic discourse.

Butt’s development of a pan-Asian curatorial approach can be traced back to her involvement with the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art while she was working at the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane, Australia from 2001 to 2007. Following this, Butt spent time as Director of International Programmes at the Long March Project in Beijing China, until 2009 when she formally moved to Vietnam to become Executive Director of Sàn Art which she co-founded with artists Dinh Q Lê, Tuan Andrew Nguyen, Phunam and Tiffany Chung in 2007.

Attaining the invaluable experience of working within various contexts of the global arts landscape from institutions, commercial galleries, and fluid, interdisciplinary spaces such as Sàn Art, Butt is regarded as the foremost authority on Vietnamese contemporary art and a frequent commentator on the conditions of art production in Vietnam as well as being a member of international communities such as the Asian Art Council of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and a Young Global Leader of the World Economic Forum.

For Butt, the relationship between artist and curator is particularly essential within the tenuous circumstances of contemporary art in Vietnam. Established in Ho Chi Minh City as a contemporary art organisation in the service of the interdisciplinary presentation of contemporary art in Vietnam through community-centric programmes, Sàn Art came under pressure from the authorities regarding

the participation and representation of foreigners under the ‘Sàn Laboratory’ artist residency programme. Under these circumstances and the associated pressures of financial sustainability, Sàn Art brought an end to its artist residency programmes, and Butt decided to step down as Director. The space currently functions as a resource centre and meeting point.

In assuming her new role at The Factory, Ho Chi Minh City, the first purpose-built location for contemporary art in Vietnam, Butt brings not only the wealth of her experience, but the relationships of camaraderie and trust that she has built with artists over the years. Through The Factory, Butt seeks to continue developing meaningful networks between artists in Vietnam and in the wider region, and alongside founder Ti-a Thuy Nguyen, explore the benefits of a hybrid space that functions as a space for exhibitions, education, and lifestyle. In the case of Vietnam where the general exposure of contemporary art remains limited, the focus on community outreach becomes a key pillar to the success of a space that positions itself as a social enterprise.

Navigating her particular place as curator and Artistic Director of a contemporary arts space in Vietnam, we asked Butt to share her opinions on the specificity of The Factory as a space for collaboration, and her personal thoughts on the relationship between artist and curator within the current landscape.

**Having worked globally and over a wide range of projects, what has been your most memorable and meaningful collaborative project or relationship, and why?**

This is a tough question as there have been many. I could name the ‘Erasure’ project I did with Dinh Q Lê (commissioned by the Sherman Art Foundation) where I learnt how the experience of being a boat refugee can never be reconciled; or the ‘Dislocate’ project I did with Bùi Công Khánh (organized by Sàn Art with thanks to the support of the Prince Claus Fund) where I learnt how the traditional techniques, cultural underpinnings, and symbolisms of architecture can be kept alive through the art practice of a contemporary artist; or I could look

Above: Opening of Bùi Công Khánh’s exhibition, ‘Dislocate’. Image by Đại Ngô.