

BETTER TOGETHER

CAMBODIA

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In this feature, we look at how people have banded together in innovative ways to create, exhibit, teach, discuss and archive art in Southeast Asia. Read about the rebel group Stiev Selapak and the pioneering arts school Phare Ponleu Selpak in Cambodia, artist-run initiative and space 98B COLLABoratory in the Philippines, screenprinting studio The Archivist in Thailand, the public-minded Ilham Gallery in Malaysia and the guerilla efforts of various art collectives in Singapore.

REBELS AT HEART

THE STORY OF CAMBODIAN REBEL SUPERGROUP STIEV SELAPAK

BY NAIMA MORELLI

Clockwise from left: Khvay Samnang, 'Human Nature', 2010-2011, digital C-print, 80 x 120cm and 120 x 180cm. Image courtesy the artist; Chapei performance by Nou Samnang at Sa Sa Art Projects as part of 'Sensing the Capital' project, 2017. Image courtesy Sa Sa Art Projects; Dancers performing Khmer classical dance on the rooftop of the White Building as part of Bon Phum village festival, 2014. Photos by Damien Rayuela. Image courtesy Sa Sa Art Projects; A coffee shop turned to community cinema screening video as part of monthly Village Cinema programme at the White Building, 2017. Image courtesy Sa Sa Art Projects.



Have you ever noticed that the art world bears many resemblances with superhero comic books? If you think of artists as superheroes – each one with their own superpowers - you can see how in some instances they come together in groups.

Instead of the Avengers and the Justice League, Cambodia's own supergroup is called Stiev Selapak, which loosely translates with "the art rebels". It was founded in 2007 by six artists and photographers: Heng Ravuth, Khvay Samnang, Kong Volland, Lim Sokchanlina, Vandy Rattana, and Vuth Lyno.

The group came together after a class with a French photographer Stephane Janine in 2006, gathering individuals with a passion for art, but coming from different fields. "We became friends and later on we did our exhibition together, called 14 + 1 or 14 students plus one teacher," remembers Khvay. "We asked ourselves how could we share what we had developed with the world. At the time Vandy was the one who had a better understanding of photography and had the idea of us forming a group."

In an art environment lacking institutional support and attention for experimentation, joining forces was mandatory. "We wanted to learn from each other, share information about art and photography and help each other," explains Lim. "When we started in 2007 there were no other art collectives like ours in Cambodia. It was only after that we heard there were similar groups in Indonesia, in Thailand and Vietnam."

Back then all the artists from Stiev Selapak were working day jobs in order to sustain themselves and their art practices, but they were already looking for new opportunities to grow. In 2009, with the support of Baitong Restaurant, the group managed to open a gallery space in a small wing of the restaurant on street 360 named Sa Sa Art Gallery.

Young and determined, the artists from Stiev Selapak were yearning to explore new experiences and art practices. "We needed a space to showcase our work that was open to experimenting," says Lim. At the time, the only exhibiting



opportunities were presented by the French Institute, Java Café and Meta House, so young artists working in non-conventional mediums were looking for a place to start. Sa Sa Art Gallery assumed that role.

“We were also interested in sharing our knowledge about art for creating discussion and developing art together,” says Khvay. Indeed, the gallery hosted a number of exhibitions by young Cambodian artists and, along the way, developed a loyal audience of art advocates in the local Cambodian and expatriate community.

Later Sa Sa Art Gallery merged with Bassac Art Projects, an initiative of curator Erin Gleeson, to create SA SASSAC, a gallery and resource centre dedicated to creating, facilitating, and sharing contemporary visual culture in and from Cambodia. “We were keen to mix our energies in order to create a better, more serious gallery,” explains Lim. While Gleeson took care of the writing, managing and communication part of the operations, the group was more skilled in the technical side of putting up a show. The idea was successful, and today, SA

SASSAC constitutes a pivotal space for the development of contemporary art in Cambodia.

When a new branch called Sa Sa Art Project was created, they started running a whole new series of activities, including a residency program with local and international artists. “It is tricky for Cambodian artists to go abroad, so we tried to get international artists to come here and bring different experiences, practices and techniques,” explains Lim. “That’s how we can open a new page for our local artists, and allow them to learn and grow day by day, breathing new life into the Cambodian art scene. At the same time, the international artists can learn about us and from us,” says Lim.

Although the group members are very close, they never do actual work together: “It was never something discussed, making work together or not,” Lim points out. “We might do it in the future, but for now we are busy curating and organising events together. We have been invited to the Sydney Biennale to bring individual work that collectively represent our vision.”

Looking at all that Stiev Selapak has done since 2007, one can gauge the impact they had in grooming a new generation of artists and people in the cultural field through classes and teachings. “We asked ourselves how we would make and keep the new generation interested in art,” says Khvay. “We have no art classes in school, so we decided to make our own. And we have been quite successful. Heng and I have been teaching drawing and very hands-on, technical things, while more recently we have started art history classes by Vuth and Roger.”

Many young artists attending these courses now stay around to exchange ideas, while others have taken what they have learned and applied it in their work as fashion designers, filmmakers, musicians or stage designers. “We don’t want our students to necessarily stick to the visual arts,” says Khvay. “We simply want to open their sensitivity to art and bring that knowledge to everything they feel called to do.”

Khvay notes how making

money was never part of the conversation for Stiev Selapak, and the interest was focused on growing the cultural environment in Cambodia, saying, “It is about developing together and share with the new generation. This ethos is what made our space successful.”

In a country like Cambodia where most people are occupied in meeting their basic needs and are unfamiliar with art, to become an artist is very hard. In this regard, the artists from represent role models for the community, proving that an art project can survive and thrive if there is energy and passion. Keeping to their reputation of art rebels, Lim concludes, “People know we are weirdos, so if they are looking for something strange, they know they should come to us!”

More information at sasaart.info.