

Java Arts' founder Dana Langlois: Making Soup | COBO Social

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Portrait of Dana Langlois



View of Java Cafe





Yean Reaksmey and Dana Langlois at the opening of Object(s) of Collecting

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Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written...

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Dana Langlois is the founder of Java Creative Café, a seminal space for the development of contemporary art in Cambodia. She tells us about the importance of being an “engine” in the emerging art scene.

TEXT: Naima Morelli

IMAGES: Courtesy of Dana Langlois



Portrait of Dana Langlois

“I have tried to come up with different metaphors to describe what I do,” says Dana Langlois, founder of the Phnom Penh art space at Java Arts and Creative Café. “My favorite is making soup. By having conversations with artists, as well as observing and researching, I tend to identify things that have creative potential for me. I’ll take all of these ingredients and throw them in the pot. I then turn on the heat and see what happens.”

Dana has been based in Phnom Penh since 1998. With a background in photography, she came to Cambodia as a volunteer for an NGO, providing PR assistance and public relations. In the meantime, Dana kept on doing photography on the side. “I was always a little bit frustrated as a photographer. I felt very voyeuristic and uncomfortable, especially when I was taking pictures of people, as many of them were in difficult situations.” As a result, she put photography to one side and made a creative contribution in a different form.

At the time, there were only two institutions that promoted and showcased visual art in Cambodia: the French Institute, as it was called then, and the Reyum Institute, a private, non-profit space and research center that worked with the local university. In 2000, Dana started Java Arts. “I came in with no big ideas. I was young and just thought it would be cool to have a café and gallery. I was interested in the visual arts, and fantasized a little about running this kind of European-style salon, a place where people could come around, talk, meet artists and, possibly, reinvent the world.”

What we see today, as we savor the colonial-style atmosphere of Java Creative Café, is that the place has embodied Dana’s original dream. It is a hub for the arts community and the location of choice for local and visiting intellectuals and researchers to gather. It also welcomes writers who just sit at a table and type for hours, just as the existentialists did in Paris back in the day, but this time it is set in the unique Cambodian context.

More importantly, Java Arts has a role in kick-starting the contemporary art scene in Cambodia. Dana has been actively involved in curating, researching and producing hundreds of exhibitions, as well as launching new artists through the space and projects like ‘Our City Festival’. A determined, inspiring and yet private woman with pre-Raphaelite features, piercing blue eyes and a cloud of mahogany hair, Dana recounted during the interview what it takes to work in an emerging art scene, such as the one in Cambodia.



View of Java Cafe

What was your programming when you first started Java Arts, and has it changed over the years?

I showed the work of both foreign artists and Cambodian artists from the beginning. I was interested in building connections between people, or at least exhibiting artists that might not normally be seen. The French Institute was mainly showing Cambodian and French artists, while the Reyum Institute was also exhibiting Cambodian art with a specific focus within the university. I initially wanted to have a mix of local and international artists for Java Arts, but this ratio has changed over the years. As the scene grew, I was able to build closer relationships with several artists, to the point that I ended up having long-term relationships with some of them and showed their work over time. My program now is almost entirely Cambodian, although we do have a few exceptions.

How did you start building your network?

Back then, Phnom Penh was rather small and there wasn't a lot going on, so it was really

easy to get people excited about an event with wine, food and art. It didn't take long for me to build up a reputation among the artists. The embassies also contributed to building my audience, which was almost completely ex-pat at that time. Now, it's very different because the scene has grown a lot in terms of engaging Cambodians. Luckily, the audience is much more diverse now, compared to when I started.

Is there room in the emerging art scene for an alternative to the Western structure of the contemporary art system?

Definitely. But you need to have engines because you don't have any institutional support in places like Cambodia and it is all led by individuals. People often don't do it on their own, you need to give them the resources to keep things moving forward. You need strong individuals who will just drive things forward.

You need a lot of energy, love, passion and determination when you're the person who is driving things, as you are the one who is coming up with things by yourself and making the important decisions. You get so much out of it, compared to having someone from the outside saying that you really need to do this, which doesn't get the same results.

We need to note that almost all the major players in the development of Cambodian contemporary arts are from abroad at the moment. As a foreigner who is deeply committed to the Cambodian scene, how do you balance the need to be an engine with the importance of letting locals take the lead?

In my case, I need to play different roles. There are times when I'm responding to the need of my community and other times when I'm driving ideas, doing projects and pushing things. And there are moments when I need to sit back and leave space so that others can build themselves up.

There's a limit to how much I want to interfere. For example, I don't want to be the one

that says: ‘OK, this school needs to have more art history programs.’ It’s not my place or role to do that, it’s not my education, it’s not my country. It is up to Cambodians to say: ‘That’s important to me, I’m going to do this.’ And, in fact, it has happened on their own terms. One of the country’s private universities has actually brought in two figures from the arts community to develop an art history program, which is amazing.

Let’s talk about collectors and the art market. You and Reaksmei Yean curated the show *Object(s) of Collecting* in order to create awareness about the importance of collecting art in Cambodia. In this regard, what is the state of the art market in Cambodia at the moment?

Since the beginning, Java Arts has attracted locally-based Western foreigners and sometimes people from other places in the region, such as Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong. We do have Cambodian collectors, of course, and that’s one of the reasons we wanted to do the show. We wanted to highlight the fact that there are people who care about the historical and cultural value of art, as well as its aesthetics. The Cambodian way of collecting is different as they do not work through the market and gallery system, but through trades, relationships and studio sales. This is partly because of the economics; it’s cheaper to be able to work through one’s own network in such a tiny art system.

Personally, I’d like to see things expand, because collectors will eventually run out of both space and money for art. Eventually, you have to start building a wider international market. For now, it is still quite small and local.





Yean Reaksmey and Dana Langlois at the opening of Object(s) of Collecting

In terms of the themes and mediums of the artworks, do you see some trends coming out of Cambodia?

I've seen some small examples of experimentation in both the medium used and technology very recently. I've learned this through the Creative Generation program, which consists of artists in their 20s. Interestingly, one of the things that comes up is gender identity. I've known artists over the years who have carefully hidden their sexual orientation although they might have hinted it in their work. But I've seen a lot of work recently that is very open and blatant, exploring LGBTQ and gender identity.

Daring political and social commentary is another trend that was prevalent a few years ago, especially around performative gesture because performance art elicits an immediate reaction. It is safer if it's undocumented because you don't have to worry about the authorities. Over the years, I have seen contemporary arts flourish that are influenced by the Western style as many artists can find safe pockets of expression and hide what they really want to say from the local authorities, knowing that the international community

will understand. It's a kind of a private language in many ways, a secret code.

Naima Morelli is an art writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She has written for ArtsHub, Art Monthly Australia, Art to Part of Culture and Escape Magazine, among others, and she is the author of “Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un'introduzione” a book focused on the development of contemporary art in Indonesia. As a curator, her practice revolves around creating meaningful connections between Asia, Europe and Australia.

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