

Speech, the Still Image, and their Silent Returns in Vandy Rattana's MONOLOGUE (2015)

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A follow-up comment on the workshop "Histories of Art and Art as History in Contemporary Southeast Asia" by Pamela N. Corey

In April 2017 the "Art Histories and Aesthetic Practices" workshop "Histories of Art and Art as History in Contemporary Southeast Asia," organized by Wulan Dirgantoro, was held at the Forum Transregionale Studien (find a workshop report here). I was invited to share current research and presented on the works of two artists, Vandy Rattana (b. 1980, Cambodia) and Nguyễn Trinh Thi (b. 1973, Vietnam), who instrumentalize voice-over and the epistolary form to shape their engagements with the moving image. This paper has been developed into an article that will appear as "Siting the Artist's Voice" in *Art Journal* in 2018. For this blog entry, I have summarized some of the points I made in the public talk and included a significant passage written by the artist, extracted from our communications, for his voice best expresses the ideas driving his filmic trilogy.



Vandy Rattana, still from *MONOLOGUE*, 2015, single channel HD video, color, sound, 18:55 min. (artwork © Vandy Rattana, image provided by the artist).

The Cambodian-born artist Vandy Rattana has received major acclaim for his documentary photographic series *Bomb Ponds* (2011), which has been prominently exhibited and collected by major international institutions. Vandy's earlier photographic work was driven by a documentary impulse responding to social and political exigencies. Whether the tenor of his images reflected domestic or workplace languor, such as in his *Looking In* (2005-2006) series, or urban crisis (*Fire of the Year*, 2009 and *Boeung Kok Eviction*, 2008), the pictorial framing of such everyday realities in Phnom Penh staked a reactive form of image-making within the artistic landscape of Cambodia in the first decade of the new millennium. The subtext of much of his work was an evocation of the private as an interruption of the public, namely in relation to accepted and official forms of imaging the past and the present. The use of the camera lens to frame these moments, whether of private introspection or abject struggle, would come to express an alternative mode of protest for Vandy.[1] The pursuit of alternative forms of rhetoric through image-making may be one consequence of his university studies in law, but it also reflects his ongoing interests in philosophy and literature. These concerns have extended beyond his artistic work to collaborative transnational endeavors of translation and publication, which he considers crucial to the larger project of expanding access to and pushing critical intellectual engagement with Cambodian knowledge production.[2] As a whole, these commitments have resulted in the ongoing production of historical records grounded in the emancipatory potential of text and of image.

Conceived as the first instalment of a trilogy, *MONOLOGUE* (2015) focuses on an unreturned dialogue – both confessional and cathartic – with the artist's older sister, who died before he could meet her. Using a map hand-drawn by his father and with assistance from a local village head, Vandy located an unmarked plot of land in northwest Cambodia, under which he was told some five thousand who died under the Pol Pot regime are buried, including his sister. The primary protagonists in the film include a thicket of mango and palm trees, the artist himself, and the invisible voice of nature, represented through the oscillation of leaves and branches as indicative of wind, as a parallel kind of breath. Vandy's voice-over draws together these discrepant elements as he speaks to his sister, posing questions, ruminations, and at times, emotional outbursts, on the topics of their family, the community of dead that lie beneath the ground, the flora and fauna that grow from this soil, and the spectral relationship that constitutes their relationship.

The primacy of landscape in *MONOLOGUE* (2015) draws elements of continuity from the *Bomb Ponds* series, which focused on singular portraits of individual bomb craters – ecological scars left from the United States' covert bombing campaign during the Vietnam War – overgrown and integrated into the landscape. The role of landscape as witness and bearer of historical tragedy spurred Vandy to extend his documentary work in the filmic medium. His turn to the moving image may have been partially compelled by what he perceived as the limitations of still photography, particularly in contending with such history. On giving form to such a negotiation, it would seem that the moving image, for Vandy, opens up space for artistic subjectivity and intuition limited by photography:

"It is difficult to think about technical aspects while I am working on a particular project. *MONOLOGUE* is almost entirely guided by instinct or intuitive feelings. When I encountered this landscape, it was too

immediate for me; I became hopeless, angry, a bit lost, because this graveyard has become a rice field again, of course, as it was. People cultivate rice on top of people's remains. That was the moment I started to write my poem, perhaps to console myself, to negotiate with such absurdity. It was also the moment that I accepted the existence of this absurdity. It is not an idea or fiction. I spent about two hours at this former graveyard, in front of two mango trees, to write everything down. I didn't re-edit my text much afterward because when I was writing it, it was as though I was talking to someone in front of me in a very natural way. I had to bend down unconditionally when I encountered my older sister's grave, and my rationality dissipated in front of the grave and this landscape of absurdity. And I simply began filming the tree and the sky...any technical rationality was dead. I held my camera with fear and with many questions...what questions?

Regarding close-up and wide shots, they just happen naturally when I arrived at the site. It is hard to plan the shots in a room without seeing and feeling the air, or the smell of absurdity. Technical decisions only work in the field of finance, but not in art. Or it works in art as finance. So I don't have any particular explanations regarding the shift in shots. It is like the way we look or feel things. We have certain gestures when we look at things that we love or things that frighten us, and that might guide how the images are framed.

Still shots. I find this way provides a comfortable way to connect with the past. The past is a still. A still that is strong enough for everyone to remember.

I don't know if it links to photography. From what I felt at that time, most of the images are still because I believe that we don't have much choice in how we deal with horrors of the past except to accept it...that's the only solution. And I know I can't do anything more for these shots when my thoughts are paralyzed by the sudden resurgence of the past. So my body became all feeling, like the feeling of standing in front of a gigantic still, like a mirror.”[3]

MONOLOGUE is a powerful example of how contemporary artists are using art to either construct new forms of historiography, using such elements as image, landscape, and voice as alternative and potent texts. For many artists, silence is as instrumental as voice or text as a formal and content-laden element within the artwork, and Vandy's moving image works provide rich investigations of these relationships.

[1] Conversation with the author, 24 June 2011.

[2] L'association Ponleu is a Franco-Khmer collective that “aims to provide access to international reference books, through their translation and publication in Khmer. It also publishes its own books, focusing on various fields of knowledge (philosophy, literature, science, etc.)” <http://ponleu.org/>, accessed 6 January 2017.

[3] Edited excerpt from e-mail correspondence with the author, 5 January 2017, with the artist's permission.

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