“East of East”

by Churong-Dài Võ

East of East. To know East is to have a West. A center.

In California, we are East of East. West of Southeast. Separated by an ocean.

*Far from Indochine* stages three projects inspired by Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, by artists who have inherited the legacy of Modernism and narratives of *mission civilisatrice* and economic development.

The idea for the exhibition came about two years ago, in anticipation of the 40th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War. Contrary to its name in the U.S., the war was not just a proxy battle of Cold War giants. It was a civil war that embroiled Laos and Cambodia, which experienced their own civil wars. These decades-long upheavals witnessed the deaths of millions of people from the systematic bombing of the region by the U.S.; the rise of the Khmer Rouge and the Cambodian Genocide; and the persecution and forced exodus of marginalized ethnic minorities by the governments of all three countries.

*Far from Indochine* considers that world without borders as its historical inheritance and revisits the war not as a discrete event, but as part of the making of the modern. Before the U.S., the French had imagined a colonial possession called *Indochine*—a land waiting to be civilized and educated in the Enlightenment tenets of equality, liberty and fraternity. French paternalism and the project of *mission civilisatrice* rationalized colonialism as benevolent rule and a “duty” to salvage the cultural vestiges of ancient worlds. Meanwhile, the European avant-garde reinvigorated their practices with ideas and practices from Asia, Africa and Latin America. The U.S. shared these beliefs about civilization and benevolent rule, first replacing the Spanish as the colonial power in the Philippines in 1902, and later the French as the dominant Western power in Vietnam.¹

*Far from Indochine* brings together five artists from France and the U.S. whose projects provoke questions about perceptions of and in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. Through film, photography, sculpture and embroidered cloth, they address definitions of the modern and the contemporary, the blurry boundaries between appropriation and innovation, and artistic and curatorial strategies in and about Asia. The exhibition is an assemblage of illegible screens that recall and refract fantasies about another world.

The installation *Hiding in the Light* by Dewey Ambrosino offers a ghostly dance of night-vision photographs of an insect farm in Cambodia, and an acacia wood sculpture of a

Hindu and Buddhist protector deity Caturmaharaja. The juxtaposition of the mundane and the spiritual aligns with centuries-old practices that view the micro within the infinite time and space of the cosmic.

The project was inspired by the resourcefulness of farmers in Cambodia and their transformation of a former war zone into a productive area. The country is one of the most densely mined regions in the world with an estimated 2,756,941 tons of cluster bombs and landmines dropped by the U.S. during the Vietnam War and another four million landmines planted by the Khmer Rouge. Four decades later, farmers have turned a stretch of this land in Southeastern Cambodia into a mini-livestock operation by hand-making a wooden-and-plastic structure whereby insects are drawn at night to a fluorescent light hung at the top of the structure, fly into a vertical plastic sheet, and fall down to a pool of water for collection. An estimated 2 billion people eat insects worldwide; mini-livestock farming is an efficient source of rich protein that requires little land, water and feed, making the practice a highly viable response to the global, food crisis. While the fluorescent lights lead the insects to their death, they also map safe passage for humans and cattle.

Ambrosino’s installation constructs a corridor comprising two stage lights that project intense heat and reflect onto a curtain of mylar, that itself bounces the reflections onto an adjoining wall. The resulting modulation creates a hypnotic volume of light dancing overhead that lures the viewer toward it and down the uncomfortably heated corridor. Like the fluorescent lights that attract the insect, the mystifying practices of contemporary art exhibition can create an aura that entraps the viewer in a world of collection and speculation.

The Caturmaharaja sits quietly on the other side of the passage. The four-face, protector deity recalls the giant sculptures that the artist saw at the 12th-century temple complex Angkor Thom. Rather than perched on high in awe-inspiring proportions, however, Ambrosino’s Caturmaharaja is human size, and displayed at eye level. The cosmic and the human are part of the same universe. The contemporary is a continuation of geologic and cosmic time, rather than a break from historical time.

While the deity sees in all the cardinal directions, Frédéric Dialynas Sanchez and Jean-Sébastien Grill’s cloth work points to the triangulation of human greed, nationalism and empty symbols. Triangle plays with the celebratory and conflicting politics of nationalism, by merging the Cambodian, Vietnamese and Laotian flags. The title alludes to the three countries’ economic partnership, the Development Triangle Area—a supranationalist venture that champions capitalist development at the expense of the poor and the environment. The title’s other points of triangulation are Jasper John’s Three Flags; and the Bermuda Triangle, a mythic place where people supposedly disappear.

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This proposed flag of inverted red and blue—which reproduces and decontextualizes the symbols of the three national flags—is a mirroring of yin and yang, the positive and the negative. Its billboard size appropriates the authority of an advertising platform used by government and commercial entities to advertise slogans for the desires and platitudes of global capitalism.

Patty Chang and David Kelley’s film *Route 3* takes us along a new Silk Road that is a stage for local and transnational imaginings about the modern in Laos. The subject of the three-channel video film, *Route 3* runs through another Golden Triangle. The road winds along the northern part of the country as part of the government’s plan to build a road that will extend to Beijing, Harbin, Minsk, St. Petersburg and Paris. Fragmented scenes of the countryside intersperse with those of women in a beauty salon, vehicle traffic and construction workers on the road, and Chinese workers in the casino town Boten.

Nationalist narratives of development often portray women as symbols of either tradition or modernity. Departing from a Lao government report that mentions beauty salons as evidence of modernization in the area, the filmmakers use female speakers as the omniscient narrators. Chang provides English-language narration about the opening of the Lao Stock Exchange as a “frontier market”, and the opening of Boten as a casino town after the government leased it to Chinese investors for 75 years. A female Lao narrator is the voice of the anthropologist, who explains the Lao government’s preference for wet rice cultivation over shifting cultivation because the former is more easily taxable. The anthropologist of colonial times lives on in the anthropologist of the neoliberal state.

Multiple storylines and images pop in and out of the frames, continually interrupting each other and unsettling the linear structure of developmental narratives. It is difficult to focus on any particular scene without being distracted by the action in the other frames. Scenes of trucks and a rectangle of curtains covering nothing recur. The film’s illegible structure—its suggestions of rupture and emptiness—offers walking curtain sculptures and performative narration. Modernization is the accumulation of the nonsensical.

*Far from Indochine* questions definitions of the modern and the contemporary, the blurry boundaries between appropriation and innovation, and artistic and curatorial strategies in and about Asia. The title of this exhibition echoes the New Wave anti-war documentary *Far from Vietnam* (1967), directed by Joris Ivens, William Klein, Claude Lelouch, Agnès Varda, Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker and Alain Resnais. The exhibition originated as part of the Curatorial Opportunity Program at New Art Center in Newtonville, MA.