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Where Is My Land?: Sand Extraction, Land Reclamation, and Artistic Imagination in Cambodia and Singapore

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Where Is My Land?:

Sand Extraction, Land Reclamation, and Artistic Imagination in Cambodia and Singapore

ANA BILBAO

Abstract

*When placed within the logic of extraction, sand is perceived as useful matter, but is it possible to imagine it as a site with its own temporal and spatial organising principles? Can those foreign principles offer a pathway towards recalibrating our relationship with our surroundings? This article examines issues brought about by sand dredging in Cambodia and land reclamation in Singapore by discussing the work of contemporary local filmmakers and artists such as Charles Lim, Yeo Siew Hua, Tith Kanitha, and Kalyanee Mam. Their work discloses distinctive aspects of this multifaceted dispute, often visualising what otherwise reaches us as abstract data. Whereas the works of these artists heighten the dimensionalities of experience, the works of Cambodian artist Khvay Samnang, namely *Enjoy My Sand* (2013–15) and *Where Is My Land?* (2014), offer us a dislocated glimpse into the conflicting narrative of extraction: the playful character of the former invites us to share and be comfortably complicit in the coloniser's enjoyment of Cambodian natural resources. Through a contained yet highly sensorial choreography, the visual language of the latter work transmits the devastating consequences of sand extraction. Instead of representing the conflict, or the sides of it, these works invite*

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us to think through sand by bringing about forms and methods of engagement with non-human multiplicities that contain unique ways of embodying temporality beyond colonial notions.

Sand is the second most consumed natural resource in the world and, together with gravel, the most mined commodity.¹ Issues related to its extraction, ranging from slow renewal rates to lack of regulation, have led to significant negative impacts on the environment as well as severe human rights violations. Macarena Gómez-Barris calls this colonial-like position the “extractive zone”, referring to how territories, peoples, plants, and animals are perceived and reorganised “as commodities, rendering land as for the taking, while also devalorizing the hidden worlds that form the nexus of human and nonhuman multiplicity ... [facilitating] material and immaterial accumulation”.² Life organised according to the extractive zone implies specific spatial and temporal configurations, including the development of categories that highlight the distinction between different types of humans, and between the human and the non-human. Such distinctions have profound implications on social and environmental justice. When placed within the logic of extraction, sand is perceived as useful matter, but is it possible to imagine it as a site with its own temporal and spatial organising principles? Can those foreign principles offer a pathway towards recalibrating our relationship with our surroundings?

Like many other substances, sand exposes how economic development and the safeguarding of human and nonhuman livelihoods can be radically incompatible. Conversely, beyond the extractive zone and as an object with a cultural memory, sand is quintessentially a substance for radical compatibility. It is composed of traces from various geological eras that coexist. It is made of nonhuman and pre-human residues and is pivotal to human livelihoods and technological development.³ Sand holds histories of places and non-places, as well as personal and geological memories. Yet, it predates history and memory. One grain after another, the hourglass measures the passage of time. Simultaneously, this seemingly homogenous substance has collapsed various time forms into its single material existence, thereby symbolically intercepting our ways of making sense of the past and the future. Sand’s appearance as a commodity and as cultural memory, its destructive and its retentive powers, are juxtaposed in yet a third role this substance can take on: as the material or the subject of art.

In what follows, issues brought about by sand dredging in Cambodia and land reclamation in Singapore will be examined by briefly addressing the work of contemporary local filmmakers and artists such as Charles Lim, Yeo Siew Hua, Tith Kanitha, and Kalyanee Mam. Their work discloses distinctive

aspects of this multifaceted dispute, often visualising what otherwise reaches us as abstract data. These practitioners engage with formats such as installation, documentary, feature-length narrative films, or video-performance. Referring to Cambodian contemporary artists, Pamela N. Corey suggests that they started experimenting with various media to produce “art as a social document” while responding to everyday inequalities associated with neo-liberal development and urban regeneration.⁴ She further argues that through duration, repetition, or timing, artists conglomerate site and temporality, thereby allowing works to exert their “affective density and perturbation”.⁵ Works by Lim, Yeo, Tith, and Mam exert their affective density by encountering the public in a specific context or in a distinctive geographical location, resulting in intricate processes of reception. However, what is shared between the works is that they exist partially or fully through time-based media. Unlike sand (the substance that animates their content)—which arrests spatial-temporal trajectories when placed within the extractive zone—these works unfold to the public gradually, attesting to the elasticity of the passage of time. Furthermore, the physical qualities of space are dissolved into a single virtual entity. Time-based media, as suggested by Jennifer Fay’s account of cinema, can potentially make “the familiar world strange to us by transcribing the dimensionalities of experience into celluloid, transforming and temporally transporting humans and the natural world into an unhomely image”.⁶

Whereas the works of the artists discussed in the contextual sections of this text heighten the dimensionalities of experience, the works of Cambodian artist Khvay Samnang, namely *Enjoy My Sand* (2013–15) and *Where Is My Land?* (2014), engage the spectator in a contradictory encounter, as they create an atmosphere that is homely and unhomely at the same time. These two works of video-performance capture the neo-colonial implications of sand-dredging from the Cambodian and the Singaporean perspectives,⁷ but they also offer us a dislocated glimpse into the conflicting narrative of extraction: the playful character of the former invites us to share and be comfortably complicit in the coloniser’s enjoyment of Cambodian natural resources. Through a contained yet highly sensorial choreography, the visual language of the latter work transmits the devastating consequences of sand extractivism. Instead of representing the conflict, or the sides of it, these works invite us to think through sand by bringing about forms and methods of engagement with non-human multiplicities that contain unique ways of embodying temporality beyond the “imperial conquest and mastery of time”.⁸ Such forms and methods are potentially transferable and open up prospective pathways to recalibrate our relationship with the world.

Land Reclamation in Singapore: Environmental and Human Rights Violations

Singapore is both one of the world's largest importer and largest consumer of sand for the purposes of construction and land reclamation, the process of creating new land. The country started reclaiming land with the aim of creating spaces to facilitate trade as early as 1822, three years after Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, the founder of modern Singapore, established the country as a British crown colony and as part of the East India Company. Munish Abdullah's account of 1849 narrates how 200 or 300 workers from China, Malaysia, and India were recruited to work in local sand extraction for low payment.⁹ Since the nineteenth century, Singapore not only imports sand but also foreign labour.

After its independence in 1965, Singapore has tripled its population and increased its land mass by around 25%: whereas in 1965 Singapore's territory was 581 km², by 2015 it had increased to 719 km². The authorities of the city-state plan to continue this expansion until at least 2030.¹⁰ Although sand extraction for land reclamation continued locally in post-colonial Singapore, the government ostensibly stopped the process in the 1980s.¹¹ However, there is evidence of further reclamation efforts throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s. For instance, former Olympic sailor and contemporary Singaporean artist Charles Lim has documented processes of land reclamation in the country as a part of *SEA STATE*, a multifaceted project (2005–15) exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2015.



FIGURE 1: Installation view of Charles Lim's *SEA STATE* at the 56th Venice Biennale, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

SEA STATE is a ten-part visual and multimedia investigation that aimed at reshuffling perceptions of sea and land in the city-state. *SEA STATE 2: as evil disappears*, first exhibited in Manifesta 7 in 2008, documents how, through the observation of hydrographic charts of Singapore, the artist noticed that an island called Pulau Sajahat and an adjacent islet Pulau Sajahat Kechil had disappeared in 2002, having been subsumed under Pulau Tekong, the second largest of Singapore's outlying islands. Such disappearances were a consequence of a land reclamation project in the 1990s.¹² After exhibiting this work at Manifesta, Lim discovered that the Sajahat Buoy (a navigator marker) had also disappeared, by being either removed by the marine authorities during the land reclamation ventures or being buried in sand.¹³ Thus, when the work was exhibited again in Venice in 2015, the artist decided to rebuild the buoy, putting it at the centre of the exhibition space. The artist assumed that if the buoy were to be under the sea, it would be covered in rust and barnacles, and this is exactly how it was displayed alongside the hydrographic charts.

Kevin Chua argues that the buoy represents a piece of infrastructure through an imaginary exhumation. Infrastructure undergirds a society and makes it function while being mostly unnoticed. In opposition to the visibility of politics, infrastructure operates discreetly and can often be "a more potent means of state power".¹⁴ Discussing *SEASTATE 2*, Chua highlights the prominent role played by infrastructure in Singapore's rhetoric of progress and development. Along these lines, Charles Lim reflects on the reclaimed sand as a substance with a history even though it claims otherwise. He states that:



this sand continues to move with the assumption that an inherently finite resource will be made to become limitless. It is an alteration of the manner in which the nation, the governed and the state may be imagined. It is reminiscent of the post-geological: that this newly reclaimed land is not inherited, but proclaimed for *SEA STATE* from what was once the sea.¹⁵

Lim's work not only advances research on the consequences of land extraction within Singapore, but commentators such as Chua and Joanne Leow have put forward an interpretative framework in which art that explores the material characteristics of a substance like sand offers further insights regarding current and future discourses of governability and behaviour. For instance, Leow discusses how *SEA STATE* conveys the time and infrastructural efforts required to produce new land by unsettling the viewer and allowing her to contemplate the materiality of the reclamation processes.¹⁶

In addition to its role in territorial shuffles, land reclamation has contributed to the destruction of mangrove forests in Singapore, which are significant feeding stations for migratory birds.¹⁷ Beyond the negative consequences at a local level, together with industrialisation, land reclamation has transformed the city-state's weak economy of the colonised into that of a colonising "Asian Tiger".¹⁸ Joshua Comaroff refers to the country's need for sand as a type of "original debt", which means that in order for the city-state to survive, it needs to introduce space, to create land.¹⁹ In fact, Vanessa Lamb, Melissa Marschke, and Jonathan Rigg argue that Singapore's economic development, political survival, and the continued prosperity of its inhabitants is "predicated on continuing flows of sand and gravel from the neighbouring countries",²⁰ thereby galvanising its neo-colonial status. Negative consequences resurge, now beyond national borders.

Malaysia and Indonesia were the primary exporters of sand to Singapore. However, due to its social and environmental toll, both governments banned sand export to Singapore in 1997 and 2007, respectively. Aggressive sand dredging caused several inhabited islands to disappear in Indonesia as well.²¹ After Malaysia and Indonesia (and later Vietnam) banned or limited sand exports to Singapore, the city-state then turned to Cambodia, which alongside Myanmar is today its main sand supplier, despite Cambodia's official ban on coastal sand mining in 2017.²² Since the mid-2000s, policies around sand dredging have been notoriously inconsistent in the country. For instance, prime minister Hun Sen banned the export of dredged sand in 2009, and in 2011 several rivers, including the Mekong River, were deemed protected areas. However, in 2012 the prime minister agreed with various ministries that a plan needed to be articulated to dredge sand from the Mekong.²³ A report

published in 2010 by the environmental and human rights NGO Global Witness documented how little the official bans had meant and how sand exports to Singapore had, in fact, increased.²⁴ Furthermore, the document stated that the country was not only purchasing but also stockpiling sand. The report also exposed high levels of corruption within both governments, especially the Cambodian, as well as in companies involved in sand dredging.²⁵

In 2019, the investigation conducted by Lamb, Marschke, and Rigg showed that the governments of the two countries had been reporting mismatched sand trade data. The fact that the numbers did not add up implies the existence of continued illicit activity. The study claims that such illicit activities “might have military or mafia links, and the multiple layers of the production network can obfuscate responsibility”. The authors add that there are a variety of actors involved not only in the dredging but in the transportation process, suggesting that “the range of actors is not limited to local entrepreneurs but includes military and ex-military; ethnic armed organizations; Cambodian, Singaporean, and Chinese firms; as well as joint venture companies”.²⁶ The results of this investigation confirm the complexity and the layers of networks that enable both the extraction of sand and its transportation from Cambodia to Singapore. But what happens when the sand reaches the city-state? In what follows, I will discuss human rights implications in Singapore, followed by an analysis of Khvay Samnang’s *Enjoy My Sand*. In a later section, I will return to the environmental and human rights implications of sand dredging in Cambodia before introducing Khvay’s work *Where is My Land?*, which visualises these issues.

Geographers Robert John and William Jamieson claim that, “Singapore has enacted its seemingly-miraculous transition into the archetypal Global City not only on a diet of cheap sand but cheap labour as well”.²⁷ Much like in the colonial period, sand extraction for construction and land reclamation in Singapore has relied on the migrant workforce. Around 200,000 workers are in the country on agent-mediated work permits for construction jobs. Such permits are the lowest paid and the most dangerous, with no opportunity to obtain citizenship or residency, and with a large proportion of the income dedicated to paying the extremely high agent fees. Abuses and workplace injuries are not properly dealt with, and workers can be repatriated with only two weeks’ notice. Workers dedicated to sand extraction engage in a range of activities, including preparing shipments and mixing sand into concrete. These workers and their labour are kept out of public view in the city. They are housed in dormitories in industrial areas that can accommodate up to 8,000 people. Workers live in precarious conditions and sleep in bunk beds surrounded by the constant sound of dredging machinery.²⁸



FIGURES 2 AND 3: Film stills of Yeo Siew Hua's *A Land Imagined*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

Singaporean filmmaker Yeo Siew Hua captures the realities of everyday life in these dormitories in his film *A Land Imagined* (2018). The film is a neo-noir production about Lok, a detective investigating the disappearance of Wang, a Chinese migrant worker from a land reclamation site in Singapore. During his investigation, Lok uncovers how migrant workers have an initial debt with companies that subsequently confiscate their passports so they

cannot escape the sites until the debt is paid. During Lok's visits to the dormitories, one can see the metal bunk beds and the bright neon lighting that would make it difficult for anyone to sleep. Labour on the sites is shown as physically intense, and employees often suffer work-related injuries. Wang breaks his arm, which results in a severe salary reduction, triggering other health issues. He is fortunate enough that the company managers assign him a new job as a driver to transport Bangladeshi workers to the site. In his new job, he befriends Ajit, who confesses to Wang that his mother had an accident back home in Bangladesh, where his wife was struggling to take care of her. Ajit trusted the site manager to give him permission to go home in spite of the debt he had with the company. Wang shows scepticism, which is vindicated the following day when Ajit mysteriously goes missing, leaving behind his passport.

This event is followed by Wang's own disappearance after confronting the site managers about Ajit's whereabouts. The characters in the film also wonder about the need for visas when enjoying some sites in Singapore, given that visiting them means stepping into territories made with sand that was originally Malaysian, Indonesian, Vietnamese, or Cambodian. The film offers a snapshot of this almost invisible aspect of the working culture in Singapore. Furthermore, it rehumanises relationships as it exposes the significant networks of solidarity that emerge between migrants amid the precarity of alienated labour.

Enjoy My Sand

Like much of Khvay's artistic production, *Enjoy My Sand* (2013–15) is a network of research and visual experiments in various media. It is both the end and the beginning of a research project, the extension of a previous artwork by the artist, a spontaneous performance, a single-channel video, and a series of six digital prints. All these branches of the work stem from a single moment: Khvay's running around a sandy beach in Singapore with locals climbing on his back "under the hot October sun", as witnessed by historian of Cambodian visual culture Roger Nelson.²⁹ Context to the work's emergence will be provided before turning to an analysis of it.

Thanks to *Untitled* (2010–11), Khvay became aware of sand extraction for construction and land reclamation in Phnom Penh, a city built on reclaimed land by filling adjacent lakes with sand. *Untitled* shows the artist bathing inside the disappearing lakes during the in-filling process and repeatedly pouring buckets of sand over his head, much to the dismay of the local communities. During a long research process that entailed spending considerable



FIGURE 4: Khvay Samnang, *Samnang Cow Taxi at Asakusa*, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

amounts of time in the lakes, talking to the affected people, and gathering information on the activities of NGOs and local activists, Khvay became aware of the devastation caused by the reclamation process. At the time, newspaper headlines discussed the incarceration of two Cambodian activists who were drawing attention to the environmental and human rights violations caused by sand exports to Singapore.³⁰ A year before releasing *Untitled*, Khvay spent time in an artistic residency in Tokyo, which culminated in a performance called *Samnang Cow Taxi at Asakusa*. During his residency, the artist travelled across Japan and noticed that he did not see a single cow on the journey, while in Cambodia “you see cows everywhere ... although we don’t eat them, they are almost part of the farmers’ family”.³¹ Whereas the visual field in Cambodia is largely occupied by rural landscapes, in Japan, Khvay always felt almost engulfed by buildings without being able to see a horizon below the skyline. However, he was overwhelmed by the generosity of the Japanese community that received him, and so he wanted to bring them some joy as a token of his gratitude. At the time, joy for him meant being able to see nature again, so he decided to bring a bit of the Cambodian landscape to the streets of Japan. *Samnang Cow Taxi at Asakusa* was a vehicle driven by the artist, who was wearing big cattle horns. His friends in Japan helped him to build the small car, in which he would offer rides to strangers and passers-by. According to the artist, the participants enjoyed the



FIGURE 5: Khvay Samnang, *Samnang Cow Taxi Moves Sand*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

experience.³² This work was recreated in Phnom Penh in 2011 with the title *Samnang Cow Taxi Moves Sand*. For this iteration of the work, he “cleaned” his city from the dirt and the sand used for in-filling in Phnom Penh.³³

In 2013 Khvay was invited to participate in a research programme for performance artists as part of the upcoming 4th Singapore Biennale (2013–14). During his first visit to Singapore, he remembered his research for *Untitled* and realised that the different sites he was visiting were built with sand from the Koh Kong province.³⁴ Singaporean reclaimed lands built with Cambodian sand are today populated by artificial beaches, high-end malls, and real estate developments inhabited by the locals. This generated mixed feelings in the artist, since he could see the locals wholeheartedly enjoying the sand—his sand—which reminded him of the disinterested joyful engagement experienced by the participants of *Cow Taxi* in Japan. The artist gave himself permission to shoot and engage with the sand in Singapore, this time with less constraint than in *Untitled*, where he had to constantly evade police officers and protect his camera.³⁵ *Untitled* and *Cow Taxi at Asakusa* are the undergirds that bring *Enjoy My Sand* to life.

The video-performance work (10 min 52 sec) shows the artist followed by the camera while he engages in different conversations with families, children, and groups of friends by the beach in Singapore. The work starts by showing the artist drawing a sign that reads “Free Cow Taxi from Cambodia”.



FIGURE 6: Khvay Samnang, *Enjoy My Sand*, 2013–15. Courtesy of the artist.

Wearing only a swimming suit, sunglasses, big cattle horns, and a generous smile, Khvay walks along the beach holding the sign and offers his taxi services to bathers. Initially, he is met with scepticism, but eventually, primarily children begin to climb on his back and take the ride. Some adults are not prepared to climb on his back, but they share their food with him or walk by his side along the beach. The landscape shows the Singaporean horizon line over the water populated with industrial boats. The sand, the main character of this work, emerges from the ocean but then encroaches into the grass, creating a strange mix between a park and a sandy beach. Previous awareness of its artificial character creates a consciousness of a landscape that is closer to the art of stage production than to nature. As the sun shines, the soundscape is dominated by the wind blowing and the waves rolling.

The artist then takes a break to dip into the ocean, often swimming with his chest gently touching the sand. The calming sounds are replaced by exhilarated laughter as the sun goes down. Cow Taxi from Cambodia starts to attract larger groups of people who are curious and eager to engage with him. They take selfies and group pictures with him in the middle, invite him to play volleyball, and some of them even challenge him to carry on his back some of their heaviest members: “Since I am very skinny, they thought I wouldn’t be able to do it but I managed,” he recounts.³⁶ Eventually, Cow Taxi waves goodbye and runs away from the camera.

The playful character of the work conceals the suffering involved in the construction of a space that hosts innocuous recreation. As a spectator, the sand in this work seems to be the only witness of every stage of the suffering, but it performs its significance almost in silence. Although the artist’s smile never fades, he puts his lean body at the service (and at the mercy) of others, reinforcing Gómez-Barris’ idea that, akin to a colonial-like viewpoint, territories and peoples are there for the taking. When I raised the paradoxical character of the work with the artist, he brought to my attention yet another witness that, unlike the sand, is unavailable to us viewers: the pain felt in his back while transporting joyful passengers. Production-wise, the work is as discreet as the artist’s back pain, but as such, it also has the potential to instantaneously unravel the collection of aggressive histories and implications outlined above.

Sand Dredging in Cambodia: Environmental and Human Rights Violations

Sand dredging takes place in lakes, rivers, estuaries, and shallow seas by extracting sediment from the waterbed. Sand is consumed for domestic construction or exportation, but it is also used in the country as a justified measure to widen or deepen waterways to reduce flooding and for the adequate navigation of boats and barges.³⁷ Although sand dredging can be key to the economic development of the country, deregulation has transformed it into a threat to human and environmental rights.

Beyond its exchange value, sand plays a key role in the development of human and nonhuman life: “shallow coastal waters are important nursery and fishing grounds and home to important mangrove wetland systems that serve as shelter from winds and storms”.³⁸ Around three-quarters of the population of Cambodia depend on natural resources for survival. There is an intimate link between human rights and environmental issues, and there is a legal framework for safeguarding this connection in the country.



FIGURE 7: Film still of Kalyanee Mam's *A Disappearing World: Singapore is Harvesting Land from Cambodia*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

Nevertheless, companies have been able to bypass this framework while governments turn a blind eye.³⁹ In 2016, the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) produced a report that highlighted the direct impact of sand dredging on human rights, especially the right to life, the right to water, the right to food, the right to work, and the right of freedom of expression, assembly, and association.⁴⁰

Rampant sand dredging in Koh Kong province has caused a dramatic decrease in fishing. Erosion, pollution, and the deepening of the water has affected fish caught on the coast as well as fish, crab, molluscs, and lobster stock from the rivers.⁴¹ Communities have reported that their fishing equipment has been destroyed by the heavy machinery brought by the companies, thus affecting their right to work. Cambodian-American filmmaker Kalyanee Mam exposes some of these issues in her short documentary *A Disappearing World: Singapore is Harvesting Land from Cambodia* (2019). Phalla Vy, a young activist from the island of Koh Sralau, is shown in her journey speaking against sand dredging. In a section of the film, she mentions how her brother can no longer get crab, and her grandmother recalls how people would find the catches right next to their homes before sand dredging. The current scarcity of food has mostly affected women in the community, who now have to leave their children alone to go further and further away to find food: "If you

want to see, walk around the island. The houses are empty.”⁴² Leow suggests that this work enables the viewer to “reclaim the intimacy between body and sand, identity and land—that there are forms of personal solidity amid sand’s liquidity”.⁴³ The author’s remarks signal how the work enunciates the role of the substance in determining livelihoods and in impacting societal and family roles.

This work also offers a glimpse of how the sand is transported, showing aerial images of equipment and boats carrying sand to Singapore and images of the sand being dropped from the boat into the water for in-filling. Such images are borrowed from Singaporean artist Charles Lim’s project *SEASTATE 6 phase 1* and *SEASTATE 9: proclamation*. Meaningful collaborations among cultural practitioners are shaping the visual narrative of what Mam calls an “ecological massacre”.⁴⁴

The CCHR report includes case studies of communities being unable to farm their land due to water turbidity caused by extreme suspended sediment. Furthermore, livestock suffered from lack of potable water due to this turbidity, which in turn meant that the community was forced to use its designated clean water for the livestock. People subsequently had to buy water for drinking and cooking elsewhere, contributing to further strains on their expenditure and thereby affecting their right to water and their right to food.⁴⁵

As in Singapore and Indonesia, islands are also disappearing in Cambodia. The collapse of mangroves and shorelines is not only affecting farming by washing away crops but is also jeopardising the homes of families near the rivers.⁴⁶ The right to life is violated in various ways: some families have suffered forced displacement with little to no compensation by the dredging companies. Others have decided to take out bank loans to settle elsewhere due to the fear of their homes collapsing into the water. Families are unsure if they will ever be able to pay back these loans. There are also reports of entire families dying due to the sudden collapse of their homes, but in spite of the obvious correlation to sand dredging, the government considers these events as arising from the river’s natural erosion processes. Villagers, NGO representatives, activists, and students have all been persistent in drawing attention to these incidents, only to face harassment and intimidation by the companies and unlawful detention by the local authorities, who thereby violate citizens’ right of freedom of expression, assembly, and association.⁴⁷ This is also documented in *A Disappearing World*, where a group of women are peeling crabs and commenting that when villagers try to chase away the dredgers, they are threatened with jail. Phalla Vy states: “The more we chase and beg them, the more they step all over us.”⁴⁸



FIGURE 8: Tith Kanitha, *Heavy Sand*, 2012.
Courtesy of the artist and SASA BASSAC
Gallery.

Roger Nelson discusses the work of Khvay and of other Cambodian visual artists working with sand, such as Tith Kanitha and Than Sok. For example, Tith's work deals directly with eviction caused by sand extraction in *Hut Tep So Da Chan* (2011) and in her performance *Heavy Sand* (2012). After the experience of seeing her neighbours being displaced from their homes in the Boeung Kak area, Tith first presented her project *Hut Tep So Da Chan* for SurVivArt in her own childhood home, which was originally by a lake that is now filled with sand.⁴⁹ She invited the neighbours to bring personal objects, including family photographs, fish posters, a big plastic water container, and fishing equipment, thus building an immersive installation/exhibition space. The artist hosted and displayed a series of multiple stories of individuals whose human rights had been directly violated due to sand

extraction. Most significantly, she carved out a space for art in the middle of a place that had long been deprived of it. Yet, as Pamela N. Corey argues, these works “maintain a sense of legibility for a wider public”.⁵⁰

The wooden home was later recreated at the *Heinrich Böll Stiftung* in Berlin, and it momentarily drew the attention of the international artistic community to this topic. Her performance, *Heavy Sand*, entails the artist’s presence in a room filled with sand. She tries to bathe, but the water available is insufficient, resulting in her being buried beneath a pile of sand. At the same time, a child plays in the sand with his toys, building castles.⁵¹ The work gestures towards the water shortages that bury and disempower entire livelihoods, whereas elsewhere, malls and luxury homes for the rich are being built as castles in the sand.

Labour conditions are also a concern on the Cambodian side. The field-work conducted by John and Jamieson from 2016–19 shows that workers mostly come from other provinces in Cambodia. However, local villagers often mistake them for Vietnamese nationals. This has caused the long-standing resentment with their neighbours to increase as locals see it as “another example of Vietnam ‘robbing’ Cambodia of its resources”.⁵² Workers are mostly dedicated to operating and fixing the machines and to organising the sand piles. As an activity that belongs to the informal economy, often with an illegal character, workers’ rights, including contracts and health and safety in the workplace, are neglected. Describing the conditions of workers, John and Jamieson add: “workers were isolated, living and working on the boats, only able to escape once in a while to the mainland ... with little to say in the dredging and ... under pressure to deliver precious tonnes for export in time in conflict with the villagers trying to defend their livelihoods.” The fruit of this work is enjoyed by the companies, corrupt sectors of the government, and local moguls.⁵³

Where Is My Land?

Where Is My Land? (2014) is likewise a junction. It is a single-channel HD video, a three-channel HD video, and a series of nineteen digital C-prints of various sizes. It is also the extension of Khvay’s long-term research endeavours, an unprecedented collaboration, and the development of previous work, a series of photographs also titled *Where Is My Land?* (2012). The photographs show members of the communities living by the riverbank in front of their collapsing homes. Residents wear mud masks covering their faces. The work’s title evokes the community’s reaction when they see their sand disappear. In protest, they ask with indignation: where is my land? The government’s



FIGURE 9: Khvay Samnang with Nget Rady, *Where Is My Land?*, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

most common response—and one difficult to argue against—is that the land disappeared due to climate change.⁵⁴

Where Is My Land? (2014, 13 min, 28 sec) materialises the collaboration between Khvay (this time working behind the camera) and dancer Nget Rady, who performs at the heart of the scene. Although almost imperceptible to the viewer due to smooth transitions and the captivating nature of the dancer's bodily movements, the video is filmed in three different locations near Phnom Penh: Boeung Snaur, the riverbank along the Mekong River, and a Cham fishing village.⁵⁵ Each location represents a different use or consequence of sand dredging: in-filling for the purposes of construction, collapsed homes, and the predominance of invasive equipment for dredging. Khvay already knew some members living in those communities from his previous work. In fact, during his first encounter with them, a conflict emerged after he photographed several of the family members. He mischievously recalls that he was even “threatened with a knife” once.⁵⁶ After such tensions decreased as a result of the community's recognition of his artistic practice, and faithful to his scouting approach, Khvay brought Nget to the locations before starting to record the new work so the dancer could embark on his own research and imaginative processes.⁵⁷

The video is inspired by a story of a grandmother and her granddaughter trying to escape their homes and ultimately dying: “I imagined them dying in the sand, floating in the river.”⁵⁸ Nevertheless—and unlike *Enjoy My Sand*—this work dispenses with an obvious narrative. Scenes show the dancer's moves reacting to each site. Exaggerated, sudden, and violent gestures draw attention to a distinction between bodies that belong in the landscape and those that do not, the dancer often being on the borderline. Strong movements take place on the very edges of the riverbank or on unstable surfaces



FIGURE 10: Khvay Samnang with Nget Rady, *Where Is My Land?*, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

over the machinery, the performer's actions expressing utmost precarity. Nget is not always answering to the landscape; he sometimes softly blends with it or disappears into it as into quicksand. Sand is part of the landscape, but it is not there to merely witness the passage of time: rather than a discreet bystander, sand—dry or muddy—is activated by Nget's provocations. His kicks and punches make it collapse into the river, as happens with the families' houses. His body then dwells against the traces left by the collapsed homes.

With an effort, one can hear the sand, even if the sound is overpowered by the dancer's heavy breath, his contact with the water, and the running excavator. The sudden touch of his skin against the mud is loud: sand finds an expression in this work. Sand communicates again as it is suctioned by the machine; the grained lumps rub themselves against the pipes, producing resonance as Nget moves in synch with the equipment. He either integrates the machines into the choreography or hides inside them. Sand is, however, not doing all the heavy lifting: the choreography is intense, the muscles stretch up to the point of inviting anxiety, and the work itself is demanding. It presents itself to us unhurriedly, challenging us to activate our senses as we painfully bring the work to life. We follow the movements as they slow burn with our sight. We lend our ears, which struggle to bring the sounds of sand to the fore. We lend our imagination to creating a picture of the everyday life of the Cham (an Austronesian ethnic minority group living in

Southeast Asia, predominantly in parts of Vietnam and Cambodia),⁵⁹ after listening to festival songs in Arabic at the end of the video. Finally, if we lend our sense of smell to the work, we can almost perceive the odour of muddy water, plants, and rust.

Though children laugh and birds sing, the work delineates a sombre space. Suffering and protest are not explicit but perceivable. One can hear the dogs barking, frightened by the excavators. *Where Is My Land?* (2014) is in line with Khvay's resistance to producing works that are "too direct" or to being perceived as a spokesperson for the communities, as "a superhero".⁶⁰ He is an advocate of art and of finding ways of making it: "how to shoot things quickly and escape".⁶¹ The artist is in constant dialogue with artistic media but without neglecting the relationships between humans and nonhumans that are produced by the negotiation with the materials. His body of work shows the potential behind substances like sand and rubber—what they can disclose, and their ability to shift our perceptions if negotiated artistically.

Conclusion

Gómez-Barris' "extractive zone"—a colonial-like viewpoint that renders humans and nonhumans extractible—is here embodied by sand dredging for the purpose of land reclamation in Cambodia. Cultural practitioners in Cambodia and Singapore such as Charles Lim, Yeo Siew Hua, Tith Kanitha, and Kalyanee Mam have been key in revalorising "the hidden worlds that form the nexus of human and nonhuman multiplicity"⁶² by visually activating what otherwise is presented to us by scientists as raw data. Their work has advanced research around sand extraction and has further articulated the human and environmental rights implications that this issue entails. However, the most significant aspect of their contribution is that their efforts allow us to give the problem a different texture, prompting us to engage with it distinctively, beyond numeracy. The value of these works lies not in their ability to offer practical solutions but in their ability to redress the dehumanisation of physical and epistemic colonial infrastructures by means of revalorising what is often neglected: relationships. Such revalorisation can enable us to imagine prospective futures that serve as alternatives to current structures. How? These artists and filmmakers disclose hidden worlds that artistic methodologies can enable us to reach when they make us think through a substance instead of representing it. This is an exercise of the imagination.

I have argued that the work of Khvay Samnang goes a step further when it comes to erecting perspectives grounded on epistemic infrastructures:

his video-performances allow us to exercise imagination too, but built on ambivalent undergirds, such as quicksand. That is to say that not only do Khvay's works prompt us to think through a substance, beyond numeracy, or by means of disclosure as an artistic strategy, they create a visual language resistant to the gaze that upholds subject-object relations by embracing sand's unevenness and contradictory nature as a vital material.

In space and in time, sand encapsulates narratives of joy-provoking infinite development and incommensurable suffering. It represents prosperity while profoundly threatening human and nonhuman livelihoods. It carries incompatible promise while being a substance of radical compatibility that collapses various time forms into its single material existence. *Enjoy My Sand* (2013–15) and *Where Is My Land?* (2014) expose the contradictions embodied by sand extraction and land reclamation simultaneously, without us having to choose between artificial dichotomies. Instead of offering a solid standpoint from where to build empathy or disgust, these works allow us to see our current temporal structures as transversal, especially if we take the multivalent character of the substance as our epistemic undergird. Khvay's works embody what Heather Davis describes as the "ability to embrace contradictions that don't have to be resolved", without ceasing to interrogate the source of such contradictions. Davis renders this ability as a valuable device when trying to rethink our relationship with the world.⁶³ Both video-performances embrace contradictions in their own way, through devices not easily accessible to the viewer, either formally or materially. Joy is what is obvious in *Enjoy My Sand* (2013–15), but it is the back pain suffered by the artist that gestures towards suffering. Suffering is only palpable to us if we make an effort to 1) see beyond the seemingly playful character of the work and 2) think about time not only in terms of past, present, and future. *Where Is My Land?* (2014) activates our senses through formal gestures that incite us to use more than our sight when relating to video. This exercise shows us the possibility of engaging with aspects of our existence through senses that are ostensibly not required for a given medium. Beyond their contents, these works are imbued with forms and methods that include: learning how to think within contradiction, activating the landscape beyond its role as a passive bystander, inviting the use of the senses counterintuitively, and negotiating with substances artistically without neglecting relationships. These forms and methods can be borrowed should we believe that our relationship with the world must be recalibrated.

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BIOGRAPHY

Ana Bilbao is a lecturer in modern and contemporary art at the University of York (UK). Her research explores histories of exhibition-making, art institutions, and contemporary art from the Global South, mainly Latin America and Southeast Asia. She is interested in extractivism, decolonial pedagogies, and the links between contemporary art and human and environmental rights. She is currently a co-investigator of the AHRC project “Can the Arts Save Human Rights?”, in partnership with the Centre for Applied Human Rights at the university and other arts and human rights organisations in the UK, Colombia, and Canada. Prior to joining York, she was editor of *Afterall Journal*, a research fellow at Afterall Research Centre at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, and teaching fellow at the University of Essex. In 2017 she was visiting scholar in the art history department at KU Leuven, Belgium.

NOTES

- ¹ Marius D. Gavrilitea, “Environmental Impacts of Sand Exploitation. Analysis of Sand Market”, *Sustainability* 9, no. 7 (2017) and Aurora Torres, Jodi Brandt, Kirsten Lear, Jianguo Liu, “A Looming Tragedy of the Sand Commons”, *Science* 357, no. 6355 (2017).
- ² Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 5. By using the term “extractive zone”, Gómez-Barris explicitly refers to the colonial legacies and worldviews. Her account suggests how the development of social ecologies after the sixteenth century was grounded and shaped on the premises of an extractive global economy, a system put in place by what she calls “colonial capitalism”. Although she periodises this with a starting point in the 1500s (with the colonisation of the Americas), she discusses its afterlife in a global context. She discusses the rise of neoliberalism and deregulation, as well as new forms of extractivism by describing how strong global economies extract natural resources from rich territories for the benefit of the few.
- ³ Yasemin Zeisl, “Connecting Sand Mining and the High-Tech Industry”, *Global Risk Intel* 6 (November 2019), available at <https://www.globalriskintel.com/insights/connecting-sand-mining-and-high-tech-industry> [accessed 25 June 2021].
- ⁴ Pamela N. Corey, *The City in Time: Contemporary Art and Urban Form in Vietnam and Cambodia* (University of Washington Press, 2021), pp. 98–9.
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 156.
- ⁶ Jennifer Fay, *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 3.
- ⁷ In this context, the word “neo-colonial” refers to how extractivism has been and continues to be a mechanism for the exploitation of raw materials and peoples in favour of the prosperity of global economies even in the aftermath of colonialism. Whereas colonialism is traditionally understood as the historical process of political or military control of mainly European countries over other territories with the aims of economic dominance, neo-colonialism highlights processes of exploitation through more indirect means. It is associated to late capitalism, as global powers (which may include corporations) exert oppressive influence and violence in less economically developed territories.
- ⁸ The phrase comes from Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, who uses it to refer to the mastery of time as a form of imperial violence in: *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London and New York: Verso, 2019), p. 73.
- ⁹ Charles Lim Yi Yong, “First Hill Lost at Sea”, available at <https://www.seastate.sg/lecture> [accessed 17 December 2021].
- ¹⁰ Vanessa Lamb, Melissa Marschke, and Jonathan Rigg, “Trading Sand, Undermining Lives: Omitted Livelihoods in the Global Trade in Sand”, *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 109, no. 5 (2019): 1517.

- ¹¹ Charles Lim Yi Yong, "First Hill Lost at Sea".
- ¹² Shabbir Hussain Mustafa, "'Mr' Anthrobalanus", in *SEA STATE: Charles Lim Yi Yong* (exh. cat) (Singapore: National Arts Council Singapore), p. 30.
- ¹³ Charles Lim Yi Yong, "SEASTATE 2: as evil disappears", available at <https://www.seastate.sg/2> [17 December 2021].
- ¹⁴ Kevin Chua, "The Sajahat Buoy", in *SEA STATE: Charles Lim Yi Yong*, p. 65.
- ¹⁵ Charles Lim Yi Yong, "SEASTATE 7", available at <https://www.seastate.sg/7> [accessed 17 December 2021].
- ¹⁶ Joanne Leow, "'This Land Was the Sea': The Intimacies and Ruins of Transnational Sand in Singapore", *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 6, no. 2 (2020): 167–89.
- ¹⁷ A.T.K. Yee, W.F. Ang, S. Teo, S.C. Liew, and H.T.W. Tan, "The Present Extent of Mangrove Forests in Singapore", *Nature in Singapore*, no. 3 (2010): 142.
- ¹⁸ Gary Gereffi refers to South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore as the "Four Asian Tigers" to describe those nations' rapid economic growth from the 1960s, sustained during the 70s and 80s. For more information, see his "Rethinking Development Theory: Insights from East Asia and Latin America", *Sociological Forum* 4, no. 4 (December 1989): 505–33.
- ¹⁹ Joshua Comaroff, "Built on Sand: Singapore and the New State of Risk", *Harvard Design Magazine*, no. 39 (2014), available at <http://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/issues/39/built-on-sand-singapore-and-the-new-state-of-risk> [accessed 30 April 2020].
- ²⁰ Lamb, Marschke, and Rigg, "Trading Sand", p. 1517.
- ²¹ Maria Franke, "When one country's land gain is another country's land loss" [working paper], Institute for International Political Economy Berlin, Berlin School of Economics and Law, p. 1, available at <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/97163/1/784933251.pdf> [accessed 30 April 2020].
- ²² Charles Lim Yi Yong, "First Hill Lost at Sea".
- ²³ "The Human Rights Impacts of Sand Dredging in Cambodia", *Cambodian Center for Human Rights* (September 2016), p. 8, available at [https://cchrcambodia.org/admin/media/analysis/analysis/english/2016_09_06_CCHR_BN_Sand_Dredging_and_HR_in_Cam_\(ENG\).pdf](https://cchrcambodia.org/admin/media/analysis/analysis/english/2016_09_06_CCHR_BN_Sand_Dredging_and_HR_in_Cam_(ENG).pdf) [accessed 30 April 2020].
- ²⁴ "Shifting Sand: How Singapore's Demand for Cambodian Sand Threatens Ecosystems and Undermines Good Governance", *Global Witness* (May 2010), available at <http://bit.ly/1UBoNZz> [accessed 30 April 2020].
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Lamb, Marschke, and Rigg, "Trading Sand", p. 1519.
- ²⁷ Robert John and William Jamieson, "Singapore's Scentless Growth is Built on the Brutal Extraction of Cambodian Sand and Imported Labour", *Failed Architecture* (March 2020), available at <https://failedarchitecture.com/singapores-scentless->

growth-is-built-on-the-brutal-extraction-of-cambodian-sand-and-imported-labour/ [accessed 30 April 2020].

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Roger Nelson, “Art and Sand in Cambodia: Please Enjoy My Sand!”, *Artlink* 33, no. 4 (December 2013), available at <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/4054/art-and-sand-in-cambodia-please-enjoy-my-sand/> [accessed 30 April 2020].

³⁰ “Khvay Samnang Tackles Environmental Issues Through Art and Humour”, *B-side* [online platform] (25 March 2019), Cambodia, available at <https://b-side.city/post/khvay-samnang-tackles-environmental-issues-through-art-and-humour/> [accessed 30 April 2020].

³¹ Conversation with the artist, April 2020.

³² Ibid.

³³ For more information about the works described here, please see R. Nelson, “Art and Sand in Cambodia”.

³⁴ Conversation with the artist, April 2020.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ “The Human Rights Impacts of Sand Dredging in Cambodia”, p. 2.

³⁸ Lamb, Marschke, and Rigg, “Trading Sand”, p. 1520.

³⁹ For more information, see “The Human Rights Impacts of Sand Dredging in Cambodia”, pp. 3–7.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ M. Franke, “When one country’s land gain is another country’s land loss”, p. 30.

⁴² *A Disappearing World: Singapore is Harvesting Land from Cambodia*, dir. Kalyanee Mam, Emergence Magazine and Go Project Films, 2018.

⁴³ J. Leow, “‘This Land Was the Sea’: The Intimacies and Ruins of Transnational Sand in Singapore”, p. 177.

⁴⁴ “When Your Land is Stolen from Beneath Your Feet”, *The Atlantic* [online magazine], 11 (March 2019), available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/584563/singapore-cambodia/> [accessed 30 April 2020]. For a lucid account of the links between Charles Lim’s and Kalyanee Mam’s works, see J. Leow, “‘This Land Was the Sea’: The Intimacies and Ruins of Transnational Sand in Singapore”.

⁴⁵ “The Human Rights Impacts of Sand Dredging in Cambodia”, p. 13.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 11.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 18.

⁴⁸ *A Disappearing World: Singapore is Harvesting Land from Cambodia*.

⁴⁹ “Tith Kanitha: Once Upon a Time in a Cambodian Hut”, *CoBo Social* [online platform], 18 (July 2017), available at <https://www.cobosocial.com/dossiers/tith-kanitha-once-upon-a-time-in-a-cambodian-hut/> [accessed 30 April 2020].

- ⁵⁰ Pamela N. Corey, “MAKING SPACE: The Documentary Impulse and Civil Spectatorship in Cambodia”, *The City in Time: Contemporary Art and Urban Form in Vietnam and Cambodia* (University of Washington Press, 2021), p. 113.
- ⁵¹ R. Nelson, “Art and Sand in Cambodia”. In 2017, *Hut Tep So Da Chan* was subsequently shown at the National Art Center, Tokyo, the Mori Art Museum, and the Japan Foundation Asia Center as part of the exhibition *SUNSHOWER: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia 1980s to Now*. Since then, it has been acquired by the Singapore Art Museum.
- ⁵² R. John and W. Jamieson, “Singapore’s Scentless Growth”.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Conversation with the artist, April 2020.
- ⁵⁵ Roger Nelson, “Where is my Land? 2014”, *Khvay Samnang* (June 2017), available at <http://www.khvaysamnang.com/works/where-is-my-land-by-khvay-samnang-with-nget-rady/> [accessed 30 April 2020].
- ⁵⁶ Conversation with the artist, April 2020.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid.
- ⁵⁹ Whereas those living in Central Vietnam are mostly Hindu, Chams living in Southern Vietnam and Cambodia are largely Muslim. There is a small number of the Easter Sharm who are Mahayana Buddhists.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Ibid.
- ⁶² M. Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone*, p. 5.
- ⁶³ Heather Davis interviewed by Rosa Menkman, “Queer Kinship”, *Sonic Acts*, 15 November 2016, available at <http://sonicacts.com/portal/queer-kinship> [accessed 30 April 2020].

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