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# ជាប់ចំណង

## Knotted

*community focused social art practices as healing tools  
that binds us together*

An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements of the degree of

Master of Fine Arts at  
Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.

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២០១៩ | 2019

## ABSTRACT

ឆាប់ចំណង (Knotted) explores Cambodia's architectural identity aligning it with a trajectory of Cambodia's history, political agendas, economic growth as well as global position. ឆាប់ចំណង (Knotted) engages the cultural and architectural fabric of Cambodia, as a lens through which we might begin to gain a deeper understanding of our identity. The project explores the notion of identity, as a place where connections, conversations and discussions happen. I have applied a multiple approaches of making and facilitation including, poetry, collages, zine workshops, short documentaries, spatial installations as well as collections of conversations, photographs (archival and recent), videos (archival and recent). I work with these different materials and methodologies in order to gain a better understanding of the knotted nature ឆាប់ចំណង (Knotted) of Cambodia's current cultural schema.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A huge thank you to my supervisors, Kerry Ann Lee and Shannon Te Ao for being an amazing support and being so understanding throughout my journey. Thank you helping me navigate around my role as a spatial designer, artists and facilitator.

Thank you to my family without whom this would not be possible.  
A special shout out to Diana Kham, without you, I would of fallen apart.

Thank you to my lovely friends and MFA cohort for being nothing but supportive of me.

ឃុំ Vorrith Chem for your dedicated hours of editing all my writings.

Kaliane Tea, Karen Zhang and ឃុំ Marneth Na for being my support systems, and cheering me on throughout my entire journey. Bunny Sing and Sothy Tep for educating and helping me find all the informations I needed.

Finally a massive thank you to the art community in Cambodia, Migrant Zines Collective and Asian Aotearoa Arts Hui for making me feel welcomed and giving me a sense of belonging.

Thank you ឃុំ Meta Moeng for your generosity and opening your heart to trust in me. For being a huge mentor in my journey in becoming an artist and a facilitator.

**This exegesis aims to explore and discuss the complexity of  
Cambodia's Architectural Identity.**

It is important for me to note, that I am not looking to find faults in people, I am merely looking at circumstances that have led us to the current situation with our urban fabric and lost identity. Part of our culture is to look forward to the future and to remain positive, as we firmly believe it is how we can achieve the state of *ស្ថិតិស្ថិរ* (peace). This is a healing period for Cambodia, that is something I aim to stay truthful to.

*Breaking from the idea of imperialism and dependency, we enter a new generation of strong and empowered Cambodia with its own established story.*

*How can art be used toward community building and empowerment?*

ឆាប់ចំណង (Knotted) started as a project that aimed to explore Cambodia’s architectural identity. This history resonated with my own journey and cultural heritage. Like many of my generation, I was not interested in my heritage, partly because I never felt connected to it. I was also away from Cambodia for half of my life, living in diaspora, in Aotearoa New Zealand. Frankly, I thought that history was boring.

My mind was changed when a building that held a special place in my heart was demolished in 2016. I couldn’t really explain why that building held such an importance to me, I never lived there. I had never been inside. However, it was a building that we drove by every time we would go to and from our house, it had become such a core part of my daily ritual that without it, that ritual felt emptier. The building was situated right in the centre of the city. Before its demolition it was always lively and full of people including merchants but also locals simply ‘hanging around.’

This prompted me to learn more about the building and its history. “The White Building,” was in fact designed by Khmer<sup>1</sup> architect Lu Ban Hap and Russian architect Vladimir Bodiatsky under the supervision of Architect Vann Molyvann who is widely acknowledged as the “Man Who Built Cambodia”. (Pen, 2018)

ឆាប់ចំណង (Knotted) developed into an ongoing project in response to this revelation. Although ឆាប់ចំណង is a project that has been worked on for almost 2 years, it is by no means a refined and finished project. ឆាប់ចំណង is always evolving and changing just as societal needs evolve and change. With that said the core values of the project have consistently stemmed from an ambition to evoke dialogue, conversation and connections. I have tried to facilitate an all-welcoming space aimed at community building; a space of support, encouragement and exchanging of views and knowledge. I have aimed to foster social interactions, reflections and contemplation. ឆាប់ចំណង determines a flexible framework that can be contextualised specifically for Cambodia and to some extent Aotearoa but hopefully adapted to suit much wider contexts.

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1 Khmer means the people of Cambodia

Robert Adam (2012) argued that “architecture can be a mirror to society” as it plays an important role in providing shelter, social functions, arts, technology, and politics. This holds true for ភ្នំពេញ (Phnom Penh). Looking into its various architectural styles we can identify traces left by different eras. French Colonial buildings, to Sangkum Reastr Niyum, to Modern Day architecture and in some outskirts of the city, traditional timber homes could all be found. Furthermore the remnants of unmaintained and abandoned homes from the Khmer Rouge era are still very prominent. These buildings are starting to disappear as economic development has driven demolition and re-construction. This in turn creates space for economic opportunity. Our architecture and the urban fabric this informs reveals a visual representation of our history, evolution and our societal change.

Cambodia’s architectural identity is complex. The influence of international forces have meant that our architectural and cultural identity are sites of constant flux. Sometimes this feels out of our control and sometimes it can feel as if there’s no choice to be made. We can find ourselves confused, without a stable sense of self, even within an independent country carrying such a rich history.

Between 1975 to 1979 the ខ្មែរក្រហម (Khmer Rouge Pol Pot regime) conquered Cambodia and evacuated the population from Phnom Penh, the capital city. Their political ideas were to bring back Cambodia’s old agrarian lifestyle and to restart anew at “Year Zero” through the rejection and destruction of what the អង្គការ (organisation) deemed as foreign influences and killing those who were in high positions (Deth, 2009). This led to the killing of what is estimated to be up to half of the population at the time. Living in an extreme communist and autocratic system meant people had very few possessions, no opportunity for self-determination and a disrupted sense of individuality.

Although the regime lasted for only 4 years, peace and stability really only came 22 years later in 1997. The survivors returned to ghost towns, with no possessions, into empty shells (Waibel, 2017). Homes were reinvented and altered. The population had to adjust from farming to city life. There was no education system, no services or structure for living (Waibel, 2017). We are still healing process from this trauma. Political stability and economic growth have been prioritised over agency within our architectural and cultural identity. We live in fear of returning to “nothingness”.

Architectural identity then is knotted with our sense of national and cultural identity. We are one of the few countries in the world whose national flag contains a building, ours being a temple called Angkor Wat. Architecture and urban landscape then, play a huge role in how we define ourselves to the world (Noren-Nilsson, 2016).

Phnom Penh finds itself in a period of rapid development (Pen, Mcgrath, 2014). The majority of foreign investors aren’t interested in keeping and cultivating our cultures in their buildings. Profit is often prioritised or paramount<sup>2</sup>. As it is within the globalised free-market. However, it is worth noting that there are a growing number of local and expat communities interested in both preserving the past and making an income. Nonetheless, not all those who are enamored and intrigued by our culture have the capability to do so within their projects as compared to those who are merely interested in capital gains. As mentioned by Adam (2012) “architecture can be a mirror to society” and skyscrapers aren’t just buildings; they represent the economic, political and cultural power of “modernity” (King,2004). Modernity means catching up to first world countries, but more importantly it means stability and prosperity for the country.

Although economic growth is important, these shifts can impact the quality of life for the local people. The fast pace of urbanisation often means that certain architectural and cultural identities, such as buildings in different eras and traditional living spaces can be overlooked and disregarded as a core part of identity (Pen, 2018). Currently there’s an imbalance between preservation and restoration initiatives serving heritage sites in the city compared to the building of new, modern, and more often than not, cost-effective buildings.

The sound of the city becomes synonymous with the sound of construction. Rapid development often bringing foreign investors and a huge influx of foreign expatriates, all the more impactful for a developing country like Cambodia. The urban landscape and lifestyle are changing capriciously and with urbanisation and modernisation, Cambodian culture is also evolving in unprecedented ways.

Local society struggles to adjust to the new “globalised” Cambodia. Most modern buildings are not built for the needs of the local people. The simple act of cooking, often undertaken outdoors, has been seemingly overlooked in many modern buildings. Furthermore, most buildings are empty shells for investors as rental prices are often far too expensive for the average monthly Khmer’s salary<sup>3</sup>. In Phnom Penh, a modern, one bedroom apartment with security, gym, pool and cleaning service will cost around \$500 USD per month while the average salary was around 340 USD in 2016 (Leffel, 2016)<sup>4</sup>.

The knot is a useful metaphor when talking about identity as it is a complex and conflated matter. Local cultural, national and architectural identity intermingle with many global influences such as economics, politics, history, and migration. It’s impossible to untangle a clear image of who we are as a “nation”. Arguably, it’s difficult to define what is “truly” Khmer as our history would suggest we’ve always been influenced externally since the Angkorian Era.

2 For Example, once a beautiful leisure beach city, Kompong Som or also known as Sihanoukville, has turned into a mini Macau with a huge population of Chinese immigrants and huge amount of casinos built. It is worth noting that it is illegal for Khmer to participate in gambling.

3 Some used as money laundering tools, more information can be found here <https://www.voacambodia.com/as-skylines-transform-Cambodian-local-buyers-persist-with-familiar-housing/5072733.html>

4 A cappuccino at a modern coffee chain costs \$3, while a locally sourced brew at a Cambodian stall in a traditional market costs less than \$0.75. There’s currently a huge discrepancy between local and the new modernised world.

Currently Cambodia finds itself divided into two generations: those who survived the horror from 1975 to 1979 and the majority of the population—young adults who only experienced the war second hand. The trauma that we, as the younger generation, have is not as deeply rooted as those of our parents and grandparents. We are more interested in understanding the past, reconnecting with and preserving our history. Within younger generations there is a tangible desire to know, to preserve and to understand the past. There is also a large portion of the younger generation who were taught, survival first mentalities by their parents. Cambodia's Curse: The Modern History of a Troubled Land by Joel Brinkley stated that Cambodia was one of the first cases that it was discovered that PTSD could be passed on from one generation to another. This can often instill a prioritisation of the accumulation of wealth without valuing interest and curiosity in the past. As the traumatic memories from the Khmer Rouge regime continues to be frozen in the hearts of the older generation, the "path to the future seems to rely on the destruction of the past" (Dym & Vann, 2014).

What role then, does art play in creating, shaping and understanding our urbanscape? How does ជាប់ចំណង contribute into building a sense of community and begin to tease apart some of the threads?

In Cambodia, currently there are a few established community-focused art practices that aim to support values besides capitalism, economic growth and consumerism. They focus primarily on creating a space where youth feel supported through creativity. These include, non-profit art galleries, architectural tours, studio and archival spaces and traditional dance schools. These types of initiatives can play a huge role in trying to close the gap between two generations and encourage healing, as well as educating the youth to become more interested in our history and culture. In a way, these community focused art practices are constantly engaging in soft activism and cultural values outside of profit seeking. I will be discussing these art practices further into the exegesis.

These issues have also been addressed by many architecture firms, architecture students and organizations who have taken a stance in the face of a cultural shifts. Khmer Architecture Tours is a non-profit organisation run by architects, architecture students and researchers. The aim is to promote understanding of modern and colonial architecture in Cambodia, promote dialogue on urban heritage and design as part of Cambodia's cultural heritage ("ka-tours", n.d).

Similarly, the Vann Molyvann Project is run by an international team of architects, architecture students and researchers who document buildings of Vann Molyvann. Their goal is to archive Vann Molyvann's remaining buildings through architectural drawings and models. They want to bring value to his work in order to promote its preservation and to foster collaboration and exchange of knowledge between Khmer youth and international actors ("thevannmolyvannproject", n.d.). Furthermore, architecture firms such as Bloom Architecture and HKA+partners have taken a step forward in understanding the local context, culture and materials.

ជាប់ចំណង (Knotted) weaves in between the architecture preservations and community focused art practices as well as Cambodia and Aotearoa/New Zealand. The core ambition of the project is to encourage connection between the general public and the art community allowing societal issues to be discussed and deliberated, creatively for everyone. As the knot of architecture, history, art and cultural identity is a complex system, I've adopted a multi-faceted response to reflect this. My practice includes poetry, collage, zine-making, zine-making workshops, short documentaries, installation, photographs (archival and recent), videos (archival and recent) as well as conversation. As I piece things for myself, my audiences are also putting the pieces together for themselves to create meaning. I work with different materials and methodologies in order to gain a better understanding of the knot.

My practice in Aotearoa New Zealand, also involves collaborating with a community focused creatives organisations, aiming to bring forth the voice of minorities and creating cross-cultural conversation.

In this crucial moment, we need to take a step back, reflect, discuss and learn about one another, about our past experiences, present realities and expectations for our future in order to build our sense of identity and belonging, furthermore in healing from our traumatic past. It's important to find a way to connect and tie us together to be able to understand and grow with each other.

Although impossible to untangle, we are able to explore and pull apart bits and pieces in order to gain a better understanding and embrace the knot that we know. This exegesis explores many topics in essence, as each topic could be expanded much further with more time given. ជាប់ចំណង is always evolving and changing as our societal needs evolves and changes with us.

ដែលបានកសាងឡើងដោយសុពលភាពនៃសហគមន៍មួយ  
រឿងរ៉ាវនិងប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្របានធ្លាក់ជាប់នឹងជញ្ជាំងថ្ម  
សាសនាបានដឹកនាំយើងអោយដើរលើមាត់មួយត្រឹមត្រូវ  
បន្ទូលទុកនូវទីក្រុងថ្មមួយជាភ្នំដំណែល

តែចូលដល់យុគសម័យបច្ចុប្បន្នចូលស្រុក  
យើងហាក់បីភ្លេចចោលនូវមោទនភាពរបស់ខ្លួន  
យើងដើរតាមមាត់របរទេស និយាយកាសាបវៃទស  
និងទទួលយករចនាបទស្ថាបត្យកម្មរបរទេស

បានកសាងឡើងនៅលើប្រធានីបារាំង  
មើលទៅហាក់ដូចជាខ្មែរ  
ប៉ុន្តែយើងបានបាត់បង់អត្តសញ្ញាណរបស់ខ្លួន  
បាត់បង់ឥទ្ធិពលរបស់ខ្លួនក្នុងពិភពលោកថ្មីនេះ

ប្រទេសបានធ្លាក់ក្នុងសង្គ្រាម និងដំណោះផ្ទៃក្នុង  
មនុស្សត្រូវបានទទួលរងការរំលោភ ធ្វើឃាត និងស្លាប់  
មិនមានសង្ឃឹមថានឹងមានសន្តិភាព និងវប្បធម៌  
យើងក៏បីភ្លេចចោលនូវមោទនភាពរបស់យើង

យើងបានប្រយុទ្ធប្រឆាំងដើម្បីដោះខ្លួនចេញពីន្ទ្រុង និងចង្កាក់អសន្តិសុខ  
តស៊ូដើម្បីសេរីភាព សន្តិភាព និង វិសាលភាព របស់យើង  
បន្ទាប់មកសេរីភាព និងវប្បធម៌ក៏បានក្លាយជាតារាងរឹត

តែបរទេសក៏ចូលស្រុក  
អរិយធម៌របរទេស និងទំនើបភាពនយោបាយក៏ជ្រៀតចូល  
យើងក៏ភ្លេចពីមោទនភាពរបស់ខ្លួនម្តងទៀត  
ទីក្រុងរីកដុះជាលឿនបំផុត  
ប៉ុន្តែតើយើងជាអ្នកណា ?

មូលដ្ឋានគ្រឹះនិងការរីកចម្រើនបច្ចុប្បន្ន  
គឺផ្តោតតែលើប្រាក់ចំណូល និងការរស់នៅប្រចាំថ្ងៃប៉ុណ្ណោះ  
យើងភ្លេចពីមោទនភាពរបស់ខ្លួន

ដែលការពិតយើងរស់នៅក្នុងទីក្រុងរបរទេស  
ប៉ុន្តែតើយើងជាអ្នកណា ?

Kham, Poem, 2018, in Khmer  
Wellington, NZ  
  
Translated by Charya S. Hen  
Wintergarden, USA

Construit sur une base de force et de communauté  
Les légendes et les histoires sculptées dans les pierres  
Les religions nous ont guidés vers le meilleur chemin  
Ne laissant qu'une ville de pierre en souvenir

Voici les étrangers qui arrivent  
Notre fierté oubliée, nous les suivons  
Adapter une nouvelle langue  
Adapter un nouveau style architectural

Construit sur la culture française  
Vivre comme un(e) khmer  
Nous sommes perdus  
Impuissant dans le nouveau monde

Le pays est tombé dans la guerre et le conflit  
Torturé, assassiné et décédé  
Désespéré pour atteindre la paix et la prospérité  
Oublié notre fierté Notre fierté oubliée

Nous nous sommes battus et déchaînés  
Nous nous sommes battus pour notre liberté, paix et prospérité  
Devenir libre  
La paix et la prospérité sont devenues notre réalité

Viennent les étrangers  
La civilisation étrangère et la modernisation émergent  
Encore une fois, notre fierté est oubliée  
La ville a grandi rapidement

Mais qui sommes-nous ?  
Notre fondation et notre croissance  
Évaluées avec l'argent et la survie  
Nous avons oublié

Vivre dans une ville d'étranger  
Mais qui sommes-nous?

Kham, Poem, 2018, in French  
Wellington, NZ  
  
Corrected by Kaliane Tea.  
Paris, France

建立在社会力量的基础上  
历史与故事被刻在石墙上  
宗教引导我们走向正确的道路  
最终只留下一座石城的记忆

外国人来了  
曾经的骄傲被遗忘了，我们跟随  
适应了一种新的语言  
适应了一种新的建筑风格

建立在法国的文化上  
像高棉人一样生活  
失去了自我  
在新世界中无能为力

国家陷入了战争和冲突  
折磨，谋杀与死亡  
对和平与繁荣的绝望  
曾经的骄傲被遗忘了

我们战斗，没有伤害和束缚  
我们为了自由，和平与繁荣而奋斗  
为了自由  
和平与繁荣成为了现实

外国人来了  
外国文明和现代化出现了  
我们再次追随，我们曾经的骄傲被遗忘了  
这座城市在迅速的发展

我们是谁？  
我们成长的根基  
只剩下金钱与生存  
我们被遗忘了

生活在一个陌生的城市  
我们是谁？

Kham, Poem, 2018, in Mandarin  
(Chinese)  
Wellington, NZ

Translated by Remy Lei  
Wellington, NZ

**Built on a foundation of community and strength  
Stories and histories carved into stonewalls  
Religions guides us to right path  
Left with a stone city to remember**

**There comes the foreign  
Forgotten our pride, we followed  
Adapt a new language  
Adapt a new architectural style**

**Built on french's culture  
Live like Khmer  
Lost ourselves  
Powerless in the new world**

**The country has fallen in war and conflict  
Tortured, murdered and died  
Hopelessness for peace and prosperity  
Forgotten our pride**

**We fought, uncaged and unchained  
We fought for our freedom, peace and prosperity  
Becoming free  
Peace and prosperity became our reality**

**There comes the foreigners  
Foreign civilization and modernisation emerges  
Our pride is forgotten as we followed once more,  
Grew rapidly**

**But who we are?  
Our foundation and our growth  
Looked only into money and survival  
We have forgotten**

**Live in a city of foreign  
Who are we?**

Kham Poem, 2018, in English  
Wellington, NZ

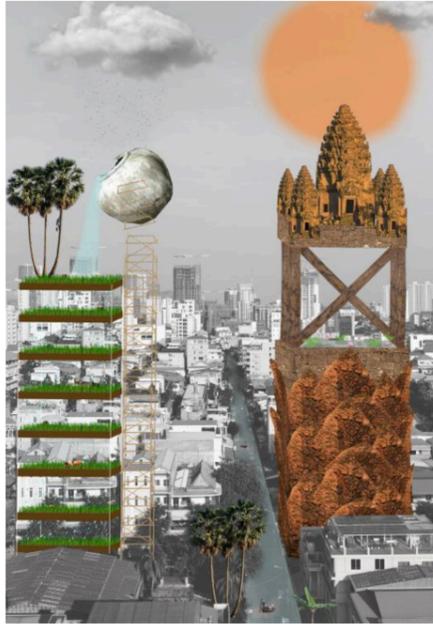
# ្ក្រ (Strings)

## *Poem, 2018*

This poem was written and translated into four different languages that have most impacted Cambodia historically; Khmer, French, Mandarin (Chinese) and English. They reflect each major cultural era that Cambodia has gone through, the Khmer empire, French Protectorate, and rapid urbanisation. The poem was inspired by the Khmer national anthem. The lyrics highlight the value on looking back and remembering our past from our ancestors while wishing for a prosperous future for Cambodia.

The poem was a collaborative effort between my mother and friends living in diaspora. I first wrote the poem in English, in which my mother and peers have then translated into different languages. In doing so, I've created a point of discussion in which, we begin to talk about the history of Cambodia and how things have changed. It served as a conversation starter and educational tool, but also as a connection between them and I.

The poem evokes a nostalgic response and also raises questions surrounding our identity and our history. The idea of an ephemeral identity in both ourselves and our urban landscape is reflected in the text as our identity shifts through each verse and each language. Yet the colour red remain consistent, alluding to a foundation of blood shed of our ancestors. The text stresses that, despite having a rich history, we constantly find ourselves living in 'change' and different identities. It depicts architecture and a way of life. This knot is physical.



Kham, 2018, Series of Digital Collages,  
Wellington, NZ



### *Four Collages of each eras, 2018*

National, cultural and architectural identity can be explored by looking at the urban fabric of Phnom Penh. It's important to look at key buildings in each era and understand their impact on the modern day urbanscape. Unraveling the history, political situation and structure of each building can give us a better understanding of our complex identity. These series of Collages were made to reflect Cambodia's past, looking at each architectural period and representing them visually within a modern context. They are speculations on an imagined world where "modern" has not been disrupted by different eras. Buildings collaged on top of photos of the modern city, almost reclaiming their spaces in the modern world where they are deemed less valued.

The collages are used in order to create a speculative world through photography. This technique provides a way to go beyond reality. This allows the audience to be able to visualise a version of Phnom Penh and of Cambodia that is settled somewhere in between the past and the present. These works help us question our architectural identity and leave us to wonder what the future might hold as we fight for our cultural heritage identity amongst modern high risers<sup>5</sup>. The purpose of speculation is to unsettle the present rather than predict the future [...] once we move away from our present, we enter the realm of possible worlds (Dunne & Raby, 2013).



<sup>5</sup> I am not against high-risers as I think it is needed in order to make use of space in a high density city, however, I think it's important for Cambodia to not be so narrow minded as to how the high risers function for its people.



Kham, 2018, The Khmer Empire, Digital Collage  
Wellington, NZ

### *The Khmer Empire*

Angkor Wat temple is synonymous with common place representations of Cambodia for Khmer people and foreigners alike. In fact in 2018 alone, the complex has been visited by over 6 million foreign visitors (Khidhir, 2018). When we, Khmer, refer to our ancestors, we often refer to those traced to the era of this temple. The temple plays a significant role as a foundation for our people. In fact 98% of the population consider themselves as theravada buddhist which stems from the Angkorian period (Hirst, 2017).

In today's world, the Angkor Wat complex is used to promote national and cultural identity. Although the complex is at the core of Khmer identity, it's still arguably not "100%" Khmer as it's construction is heavily based on Hinduism. How can we identify what is Khmer? For most, the Angkorian period is the birth of our traditions and way of life, including living practices, religion, languages and so on. Images and language attached to the tourism industry promotes this idea too. As such, one has to question the disproportionate weight a single image might carry. The complex receives approximately 6 million foreign visitors per year.

Many buildings, mostly hotels in **សៀមរាប** (Siem Reap), where the complex is located, are now built in homage to Angkor Wat complex. The carving styles identified as part of the temple are also used in different contexts within the modern Cambodian world; such as in pagoda's on tombstones, memorials sites, household furniture and other wall decorations. Often modern architects, 1997-current, will also refer back to this period as inspiration and a way to mix contemporary and traditional designs together.

This collage explores the iconic Angkorian era in a modern-day context, an overlay of "stone skyscraper" as well as a tall structure belonging to a rice plantation onto a photo of modern-day Phnom Penh. The collage aims to evoke questions surrounding our architectural identity. What would a modern city look like if the Khmer Empire maintained more continuity and our history was not so turbulent? What does a rice plantation look like in a modern city context? This collage also serves as a homage to our ancestral heritage. The roads are flooded to represent the architectural aspect of the temples which are built based on Hinduism, the temple represents Mount Meru, the home of the gods, and the water represents the ocean.



Kham, 2018, The French Protectorate Era, Digital Collage. Wellington, NZ

### *The French Protectorate Era*

Cambodia became a French protectorate in 1863, which greatly impacted our architectural style<sup>6</sup>. The new colonial masters has imposed their westernised ideas of architecture on the country (Baumgartel, 2012). ភ្នំពេញ (Phnom Penh) was designed and planned by the french, who divided the city into different quarters; the French, Khmer and Chinese (Dym and Vann,2014). Each quarter was planned and divided into a grid system which was easy to navigate with long wide boulevards (Veerepalli, 2015). Although buildings were very much built in the French style, they also possessed references to Khmer architecture in response to the local climate and environmental conditions such as flooding and tropical weather.

This collage explores a vision of mixed identity by combining both concrete French colonial buildings with traditional wooden houses on stilts. The roads are flooded to represent our roots in the water, as well as the local climatic conditions. The mixed building is the main focus of the collage, evoking a hidden treasure with a contemporary world. ពិធីឡើងផ្ទះ literally translate to “Ceremony (of) going up (the) house”, this is important to note as traditional khmer homes are built on stilts due to flooding, dampness, insects and reptiles. The houses are no more than huts, made of wood or bamboo built 1.5 meters above the ground (Igout, 1993). Each house consists of one main building, subdivided by smaller rooms with partitions of leaves. The roof were made of dwarf palm tree leaves or thatched (Igout, 1993).

When Cambodia and France signed the Protectorate Treaty (1863), Phnom Penh was a little more than a string of huts along side Tonle Sap River (The largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia). Amongst the populations were numerous foreigners, Chinese, Annamites (Vietnames), Malaysians, Siamese, Indians, Laotians and so on. In a way, Phnom Penh was a cosmopolitan city (Igout, 1993). Different ethnicities worked on different fields, for example the Chinese (the most numerous foreign ethnic group) worked within commercial exchanges such as markets. The Siamese and Khmer focused on land work, cultivating rice fields. During the 1860s, the King and the French administration aimed to replace the sordid rows of huts.

<sup>6</sup> There was a period where the temples were forgotten and were buried under the jungle which was later found by a French explorer. This leads to a relationship with France and French culture which then led to the French protectorate period. It is also important to note that French Colonisation is very different from the Aotearoa Colonisation, as the French did not want to “erase” or “claim new land” as the English, they were more looking to “help” and “grow” the country they deemed civilised as well as gaining allies for power. With that said, colonisation always comes with a huge about of imperialism.

In 1884 a new convention was signed, leading to an increase in authority and influence for the French colonial power. During this time period, the municipality of Phnom Penh was also created to provide a much needed administrative framework and financial organisation for urban management and planning. As a result of the power increased asymmetrically in favour of the French, their protectorate controlled the buying, selling and renting of property in the urban areas (Igout 1993).

To this day, Cambodia has many ties with France and French culture, with many families having ancestral ties to France and the French language. Many present government officials still speak French, and many official documents including instructions for medicine are in French.

Alongside our relationship with France, it's also important to acknowledge our relationship and the subsequent history of immigrant Chinese, Siamese, Annamites in Cambodia. It has appeared that we have lived alongside from other cultures since the Angkorian period. Alongside our relationship with France, it's also important to not forget our relationship and the history of the of Chinese, Siamese, Annamites populations in Cambodia. It has appeared that we have lived alongside one another since the Angkorian period. All this leads back to the knot and how Cambodia is a country that has been influenced externally from the very beginning, it is difficult to pinpoint what is truly Khmer.



Kham, 2018, The New Khmer Architecture Era, Digital Collage. Wellington, NZ

### *The New Khmer Architecture Era*

The 1960s Sangkum Reastr Niyum period was the birth of the New Khmer Architecture style. Gaining independence from the French, Cambodia entered a new age of identity, merging colonial history and architectural influence with traditional timber housing. The era was a “golden age” for creatives of Cambodia, in disciplines ranging from music, theatre, fine arts and architecture.

The White Building, was the first attempt at an apartment complex in Cambodia. Built with Khmer lifestyle in mind, and inspired by traditional wooden homes, the apartment space is divided into two sections, one for living and sleeping and the other for the kitchen and toilet (Pen, 2018). The building was designed by Khmer architect Lu Ban Hap and Russian architect Vladimir Bodiansky, while being supervised by Vann Molyvann<sup>7</sup>. During this period, many other New Khmer buildings were built including the Olympics stadium and the Institute for Foreign Languages. They were considered iconic buildings due to the fact that it was the first time in history that a Khmer architect built and designed a “modern” building since the era of the French protectorate.

After the civil war, the White Building also became a space of shelter where survivors took refuge. In recent history, the building has become a space where creatives gather, alongside drug-users, sex workers and prostitutes, civil war veterans etc..., eventually the building was so dilapidated that it had to be destroyed. The property was sold to NagaWorld, which is a casino corporation (Pen, 2018)<sup>8</sup>. Today, many iconic public buildings such as the Olympic Stadium are being destroyed in favour of high risers.

This collage superimposed buildings onto the modern day urban fabric of Phnom Penh. Specifically, one of them is overlaid on top of the Central Market, an iconic french colonial building. This is a reclaiming of space, the sky represents the period we call “the golden age”.

<sup>7</sup> Further readings about the building and how much impact it has on Cambodia’s social fabric can be found in “A Genealogy of Phnom Penh’s White Building” by Pen Sereypagna

<sup>8</sup> In Cambodian legend, the Naga is a mythical seven-headed dragon who was believed to reside in the rivers guarding the entrance of Phnom Penh. In the legend the Naga King’s daughter married the King of Ancient Cambodia, thus gave rise to the Khmer people. The Naga is seen as a symbol of prosperity.



Kham, 2018, The Khmer Rouge Regime,  
Digital Collage. Wellington, NZ

### *The Khmer Rouge Regime*

During the Khmer Rouge era, no new buildings were erected as the goal was to bring Cambodia back to “year zero”. The brutal communist movement aimed to destroy all “foreign influences”. This ideology reached as far as modern medicine, genocide, and the culling of intellectuals and creatives (Deth, 2009). During this period, no buildings were able to be maintained, including ones from the Sangkum Reastr Niyum period and the french colonial period, as a result of the evacuation of the city, the buildings are left, abandoned and to “die” almost mirroring the tragedy that happened for its inhabitants (Deth, 2009). This nightmare induced a trauma and pain that still plagues all of us today. Cambodia’s Curse: The Modern History of a Troubled Land by Joel Brinkley stated that Cambodia was one of the first cases that it was discovered that PTSD could be passed on from one generation to another.

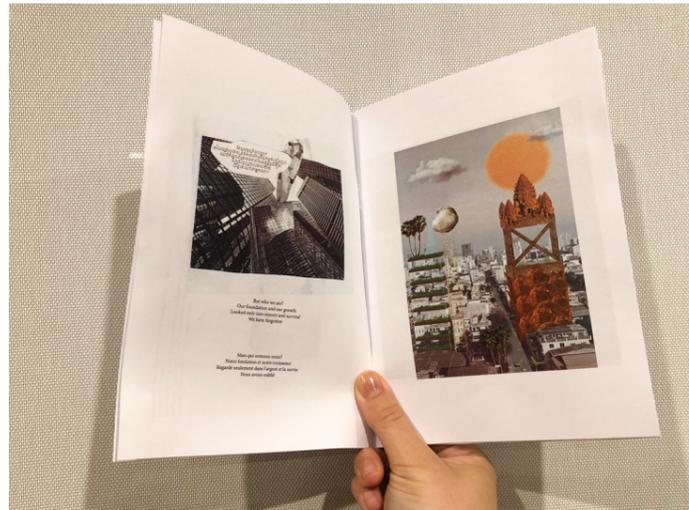
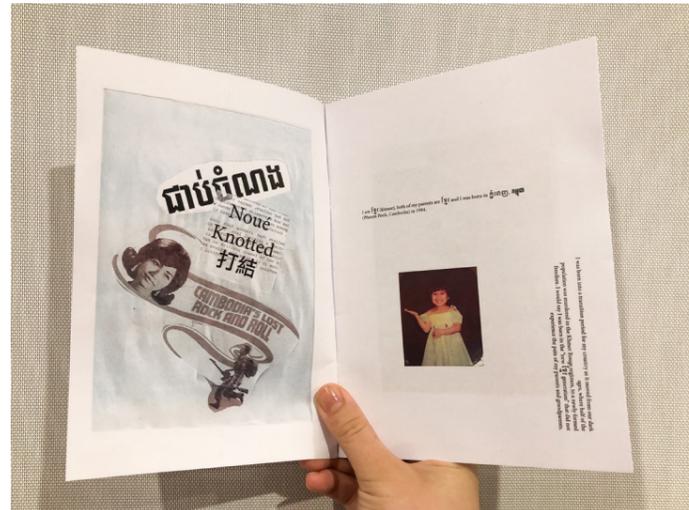
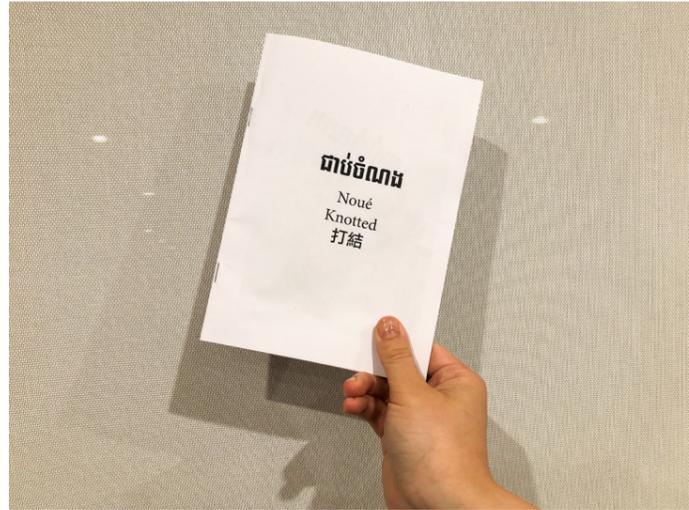
This dark age is without a doubt, a huge knot in our identity. Peace came only 22 years ago, so for most of us, the terror still lingers. Living within an extremely violent, totalitarian communist system meant people had no possession and no differentiation in identity, with the same dyed black clothing, and same haircuts. We are still very much living in fear of “nothingness”. This work reflects upon this dark history with a blood-stained rice paddy taking over the city as a “new social reality”. It is laid over the city, permanently.

These collages evoke discussion, curiosity and prompt education. History and subsequently nostalgia are disrupted as to evoke an emotional response. Both the poem and the series of collages have served as educational tools that are thought provoking for the audience.

Conducting this project mainly in Aotearoa New Zealand meant that these collages are used as didactic images that aid me to tell our history to the people outside of Cambodia<sup>9</sup>. It also helped me understand the history more clearly. Showing these to Khmer people, both living in diaspora and in Cambodia yield an array of emotions. Some living in diaspora say the series are thought provoking, and question what the future city could look like. They also showcase how much things have changed and highlight the significance of these heritage buildings as treasures not to be forgotten. For those living in Cambodia, these collages sit between nostalgic and dream-like. They play with a sense of the past, present and future and disrupt a conventional timeline. Some people express sadness when engaging these images, highlighting the current situation. Most of these buildings are slowly disappearing as modernisation continues rapidly.

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<sup>9</sup> Doing this project, not in Cambodia, made me feel like I have to constantly be explaining myself and my country. I often feel lost and alone. It was very difficult to be able to put myself in a position where I didn't feel like I was constantly explaining our history.



Kham, 2018. Photographs of Zine #4, Wellington, NZ

### Zines, 2018

Zines are a great tool for self-expression, and are synonymous with discourses that sit outside the mainstream. This includes dialogue surrounding feminisms, minority cultures and rainbow community discourse (Fontichiaro, 2018). They also provide opportunities for like-minded people to build a community and to share and discuss interests and knowledge (Bold, 2017).

In Cambodia, zines do not really exist, introducing the zines to people as a way of self-expression has often been met with surprise and intrigue. The notion of self-expression beyond traditional and formalised methods is seen commonly seen as improper and invalid. Offering a way for people to explore beyond convention has the potential to empower Khmers through discussions and self-expression through a creative and safe platform. Within my ongoing series of zine-workshops, participants are encouraged to be self-expressive and to make their own. The content is steered in a way as to be 'non-confrontational' but employs a subtle nudge to encourage the audience to think further about what they are seeing.

Although Zines are a great tool for free speech and a way to get people curious about the notion of the knot, I felt that it didn't serve my goal of servicing people with immediate discussion and conversation. I wanted a more direct platform for exchange and discussing of the Knot. This has led me to creating works that prompt a different kind of bond.

# ចំណង (Knots)

Moving away from a historical and cultured focused lens, I began to look at my own identity and what place I have within the knotted strings. Knotted, Narrative Documentary, was a video work that was showcased at the cinema, in Aotearoa New Zealand to an audience of 13 people. It is a 13 minute long video work, exploring my childhood and my identity as a person living in diaspora for over 10 years. The video parallels my childhood to the history of Cambodia.

Building narratives is a core part of my practice. I often try to ease the audience into the story at a slower pace in order for a more immersive experience. I want the audience to have the time to wonder or think throughout the work. This is often done through sounds and the pacing of each video. The music used is a traditional song using ស្លឹក (blown leaf) as an instrument. This is used by country people often played whilst riding their water buffalo through their rice paddy. Storytelling on top of slow paced music is also inspired by traditional way of telling folklore where, often the story is sung.

This work was part inspired by William Yang's live performances. These might be described as theatre-like presentations or dramatic monologues. Storytelling is a way for him to share his human experience through registers such as love, pain, identity, death and grief. This method has given a new experience to his photography and "giving them a longer and more animated life" (Gibson, 2016). This way of working has enabled me to be able to combine archival photos and videos to create narratives. It can be a great way to connect to an audience, through personal stories and relatability. More importantly, William Yang's work inspires and encourages others to tell their stories by sharing his own.

After the viewing, the work continues as the audience are invited to have a discussion surrounding the film. The conversations are not formal in nature. It was crucial that people felt comfortable with what they had to say and that there was a communal understanding. Being in Aotearoa New Zealand, I did not expect the conversation to lead toward Cambodia in general. To my surprise the work sparked conversation surrounding the idea of belonging and living in diaspora and what identity means in a globalised modern world. The conversation was not focused on architecture but rather the individual experience and the people.

This work was also shown to a small group of people in Cambodia, with positive responses. However the work wasn't discussed as culturally, Khmer people are not used to constructive criticism<sup>10</sup>. Despite this, it served as a way for me to form a closer bond with the audience, as we listen to my story surrounding my diasporic identity.

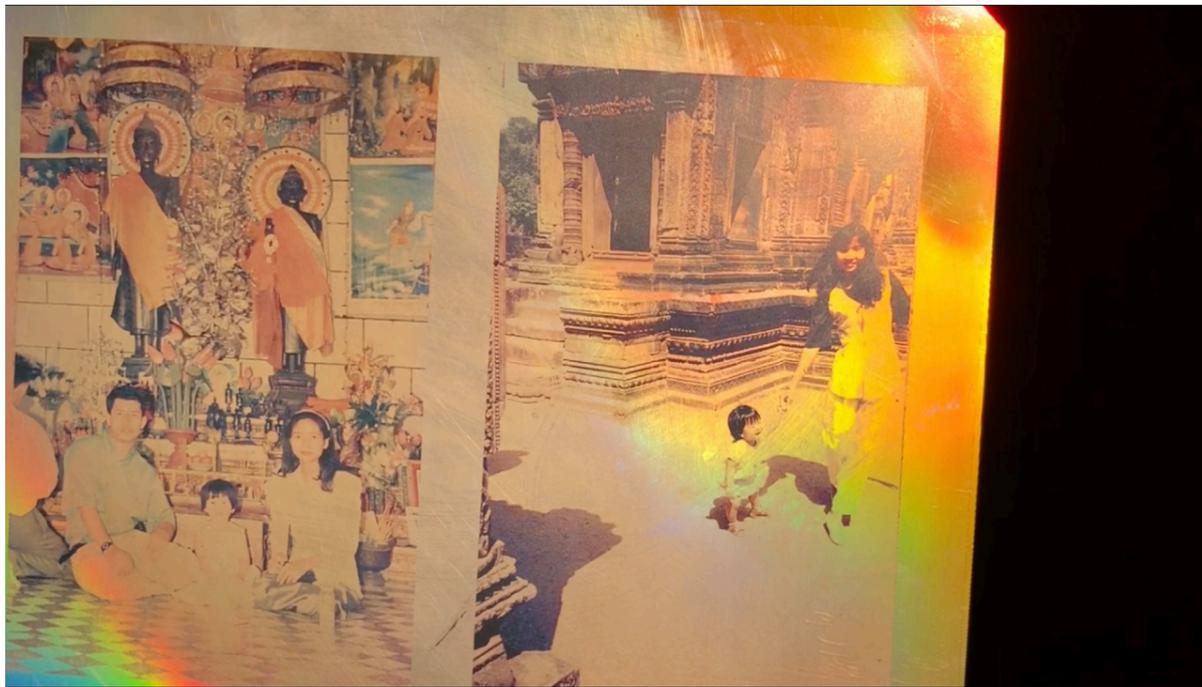
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<sup>10</sup> The education system in Cambodia is underdeveloped due to the trauma, this means that critical thinking, in depth discussions aren't as popular or common with the locals.

*Short Documentary Work can be viewed here*  
<https://sopanhakham.com/knotted>



Kham, 2018, Knotted Narrative Documentary Still, Wellington, NZ



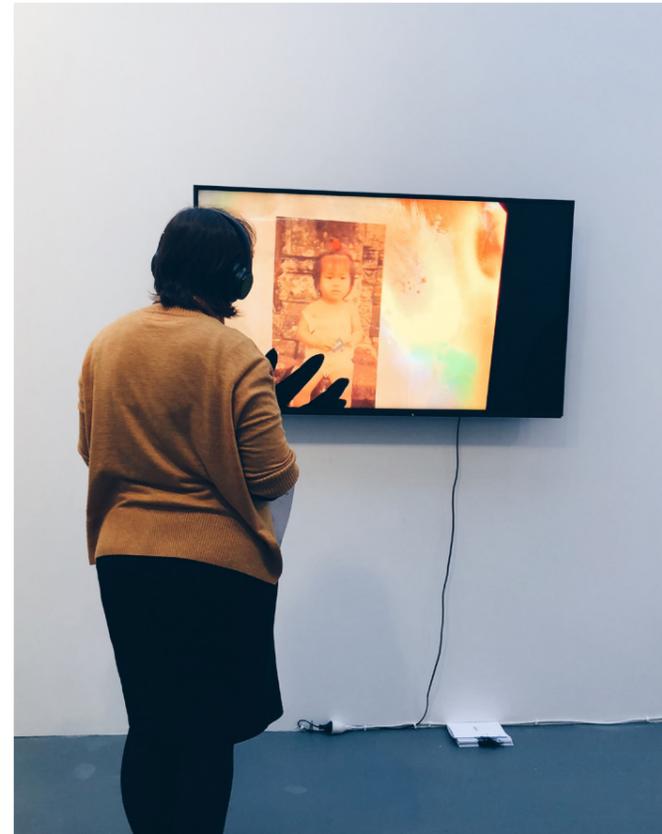
Kham. 2018. Knotted Narrative Documentary, Still  
Wellington, NZ



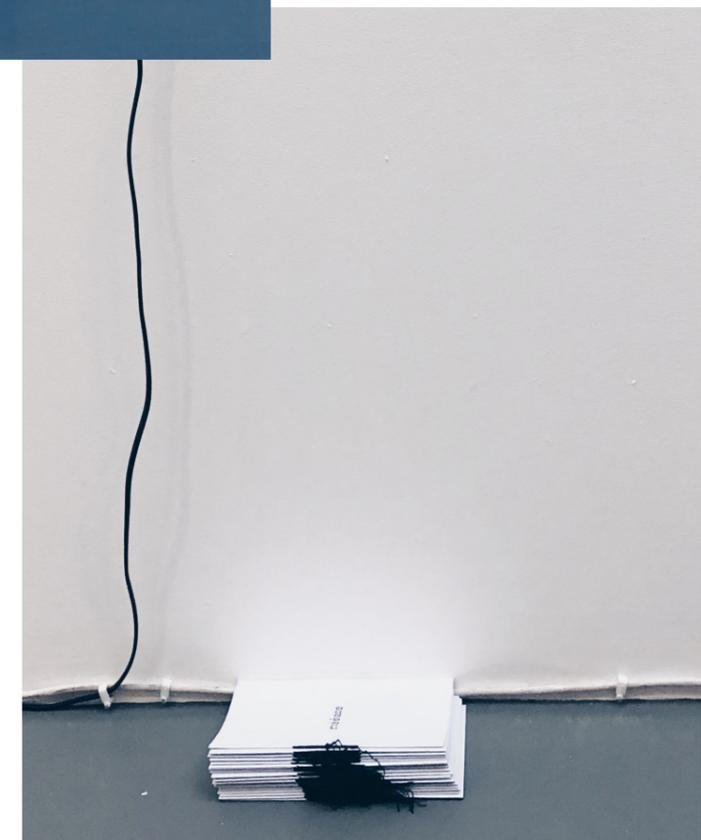
Kham. 2018. Knotted Narrative Documentary Still,  
Wellington, NZ

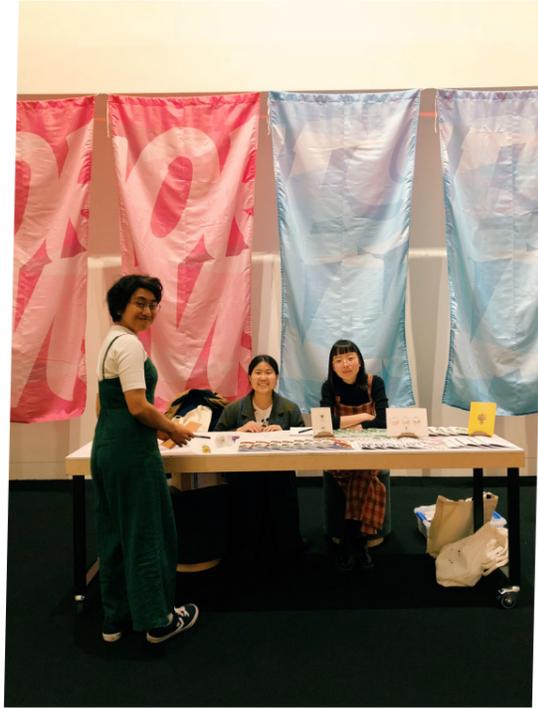


Kham. 2018. Group Exhibition,  
Photographs, AAAH@2018, Engine  
Room Wellington, NZ



Kham. 2018. Group Exhibition,  
Photographs, AAAH@2018, Engine  
Room, Wellington, NZ





MZC at Te Papa, AAAH2018 Opening Party 2018,  
Photograph, Wellington, NZ  
Retrieved from  
<https://www.facebook.com/migrantzinecollective/>

MZC as part of AAAH@Te Pikitanga Gallery 2018,  
Photograph,  
Massey University, Wellington, NZ  
Retrieved from  
<https://www.facebook.com/migrantzinecollective/>



## Zine Workshops 2019

I wanted to further understand how we identify ourselves, and how we view our sense of belonging. **කරුණා** became a way to communicate with people and discuss their cultural identity. Zine workshops (in various different ways), conversation with locals and collecting objects, photos and videos are among the strategies employed in this vein. These are also called knots. They are smaller knots that comes together in order to support the bigger knot and all together they are knotted. Rather than trying to unravel the knot, the project became about embracing and understanding each knots in order to gain a better understanding of what cultural, national and personal identity means.

Zine workshops became an interest after my participation in the Asian Aotearoa Arts Hui 2018. The AAAH2018 aimed to support Asian New Zealand creatives through sharing ideas, exhibitions and networking. Their goal is to showcase settler histories in Aotearoa and the creative cross-cultural conversations generated from relationships with Māori, Pasifika, Pākeha, as well as other migrant communities (“AAAH”, 2018).

I began to truly understand why community events are so crucial while trying to understand and find yourself in the world. The AAAH2018 has created a bridge for me to connect with people living in diaspora. It has formed a safe place for me that I didn’t know I had access to. Having my first artwork being exhibited to the public, within a space where I felt like I belonged has played a huge role in my current journey as a facilitator and an artist.

During the AAAH2018, I’ve met Helen Yeung and Ivanova Anjani who are a part of the Migrant Zine Collective. MZC is an Auckland-based zine collective, run by women of colors, aiming to amplify, celebrate and share the voices of migrants-of-colour in Aotearoa (“migrantzinecollective”, 2018). The aim is to have a space where people-of-color are able to discuss safely, topics such as identity, feminism, racism, decolonisation and inequality. It is also a way to connect individuals through zines workshops and other community events. Reclaiming space through self-expression, telling stories and connecting with other migrants in a Pākeha dominated world. Zines are chosen as the method of self-expression as they have roots in activism but are also accessible. They are use zines as a radical break from the mainstream media where there are no restrictions as to what can or cannot be said, “zines for the migrants by the migrants” (Yeung & Singh, 2019). Being in MZC has supported my understanding of working with the public in a workshop setting. As well as understanding the behind-the-scenes activist works. It is a great opportunity that has left me with lifelong friendship, and it was possible through events such as AAAH. me with lifelong friendship, and it was possible through events such as AAAH.

My experiences left me questioning whether a space like AAAH or MZC exists back home. Inspired by the AAAH and MZC, as well as community focused art practiced in Cambodia, I've hosted zine workshops of my own in Cambodia at កន្លែង (Kon Len Khnom, February 2019) and ដំបូល (Dambaul, two workshops, July 2019), as well as in Aotearoa New Zealand at Massey University (April 2019, May 2019), with MZC in Auckland (April 2019) and at AAAH@ Te Pitanga (two workshops, August 2019).

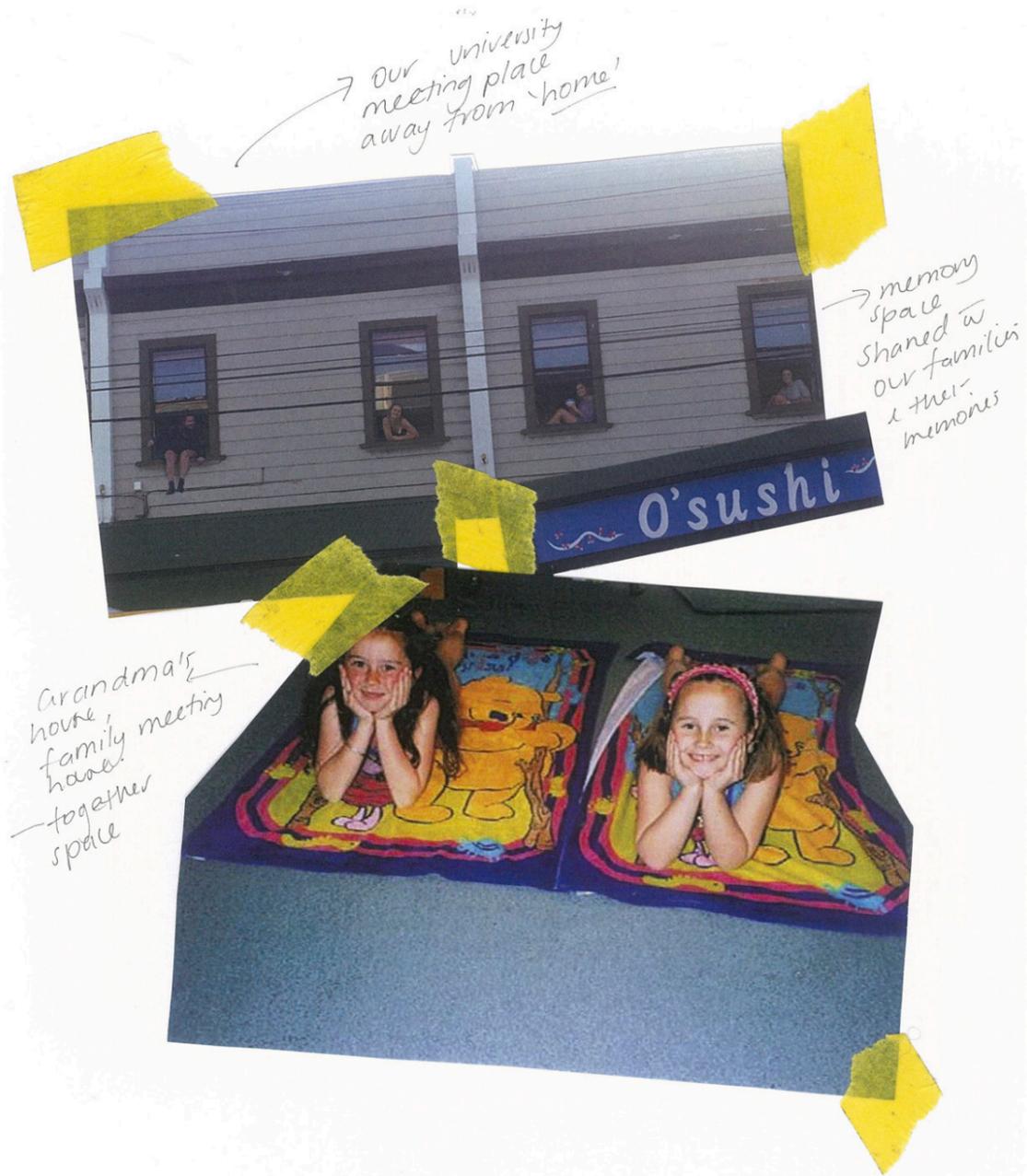
Being in Aotearoa New Zealand, has informed a different focus with my zine workshops. I have struggled when contextualising my work here as I am responsible to the context of Cambodia's history. My work has a focus on the empowerment and education of local people. As a non-Māori person, I did not feel like it was my place to host a workshop empowering locals. However I've used the workshop to build a way for me to understand cultural identity in a country where it plays a huge role. The colonial history of Aotearoa New Zealand has impacted the national and cultural identity of its people until today. Inspired by the AAAH and MZC, my workshop in Aotearoa New Zealand, focus more on individuals' cultural understanding and identity.

The workshops use zines as conversation and discussion starters. Unlike most zine workshops, the focus is not on the zine itself but rather in the exchange of stories, experience and knowledge surrounding the ideas of cultural, national and personal identity. The zines act as a gentle ice-breaker, allowing for the participants to eventually engage in heavy topics, making them more comfortable with in-depth discussion.

The workshops at Massey University in April 2019 were centred around conversation with individuals, one on one, while they are collaging and expressing themselves on an A4 piece of paper. Participants were asked to bring a childhood photo and a meaningful photo of a place they are attached to. My role as a facilitator was to ask questions and listen to the stories they had to tell. The conversations were casual, non-formal and consisted of me asking questions about their photos. The experience is intimate and really offers a chance for me to understand the individuals better. My role as a facil



Anna McAllister, 2019, Collage,  
Collaborative Zine Workshop,  
Wellington, NZ



Anonymous, 2019, Collage, Collaborative Zine Workshop, Wellington, NZ

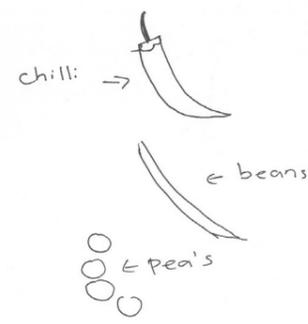


Holly Walker, 2019, Collage, Collaborative Zine Workshop, Wellington, NZ



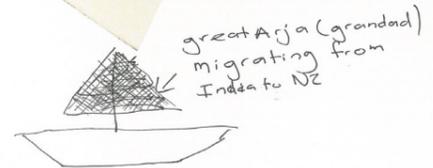
AT THE STRAWBERRY FIELDS IN ALBANY WITH MY 媽媽. THEY LATER DEVELOPED BUILDINGS (MY HIGH SCHOOL) OVER IT, SO WE NO LONGER WENT STRAWBERRY PICKING.

TAKEN IN 1999



Picking Pea's in Pukekohe (south Auckland)

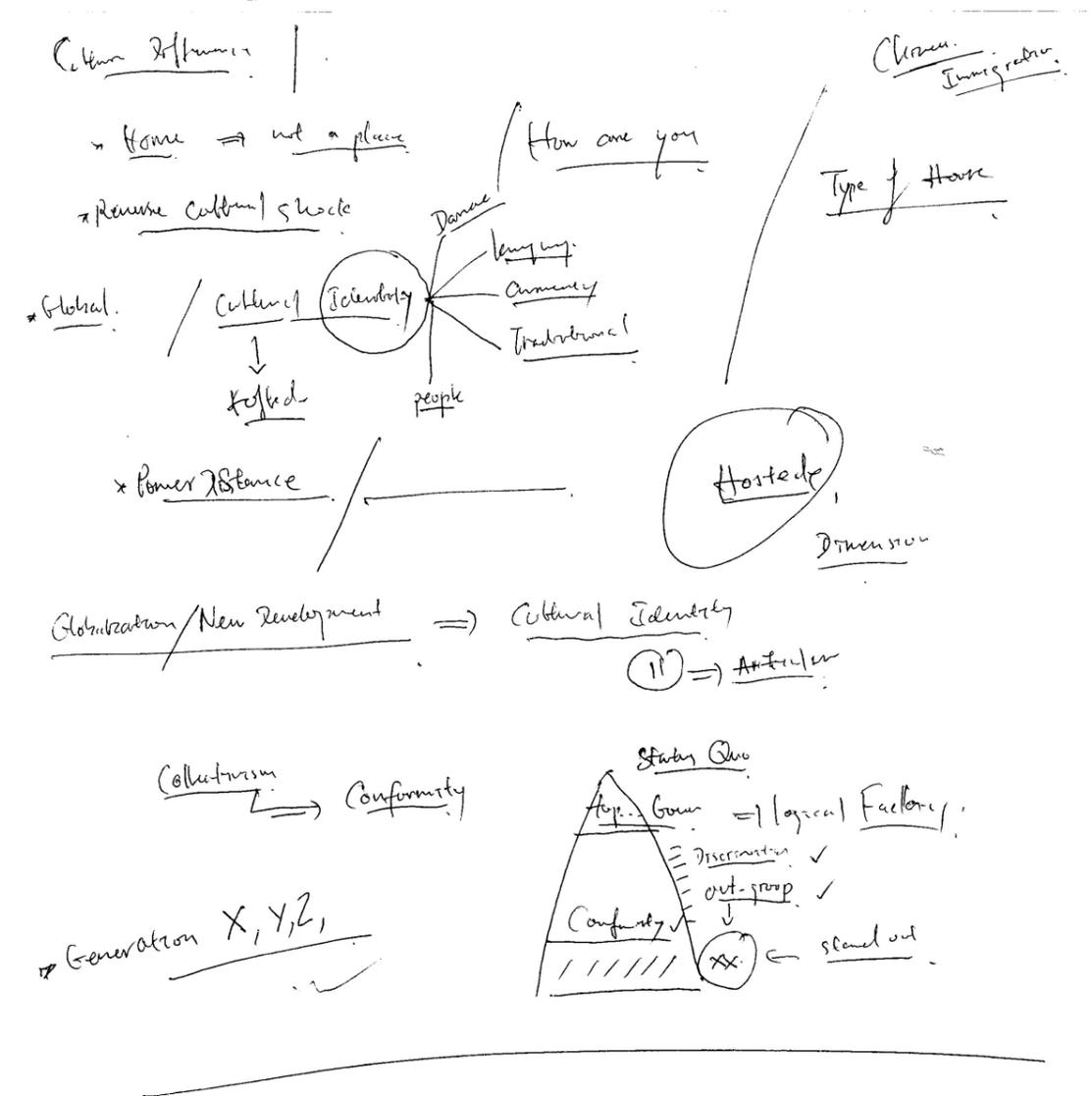
my great Aja moved to Pukekohe and was one of the first indians. he worked hard to get his sons over and from that they were able to get land here (after the white asians law) Now family is trying to sell land in India as they no longer need it, as family who it will get passed to will not be in India

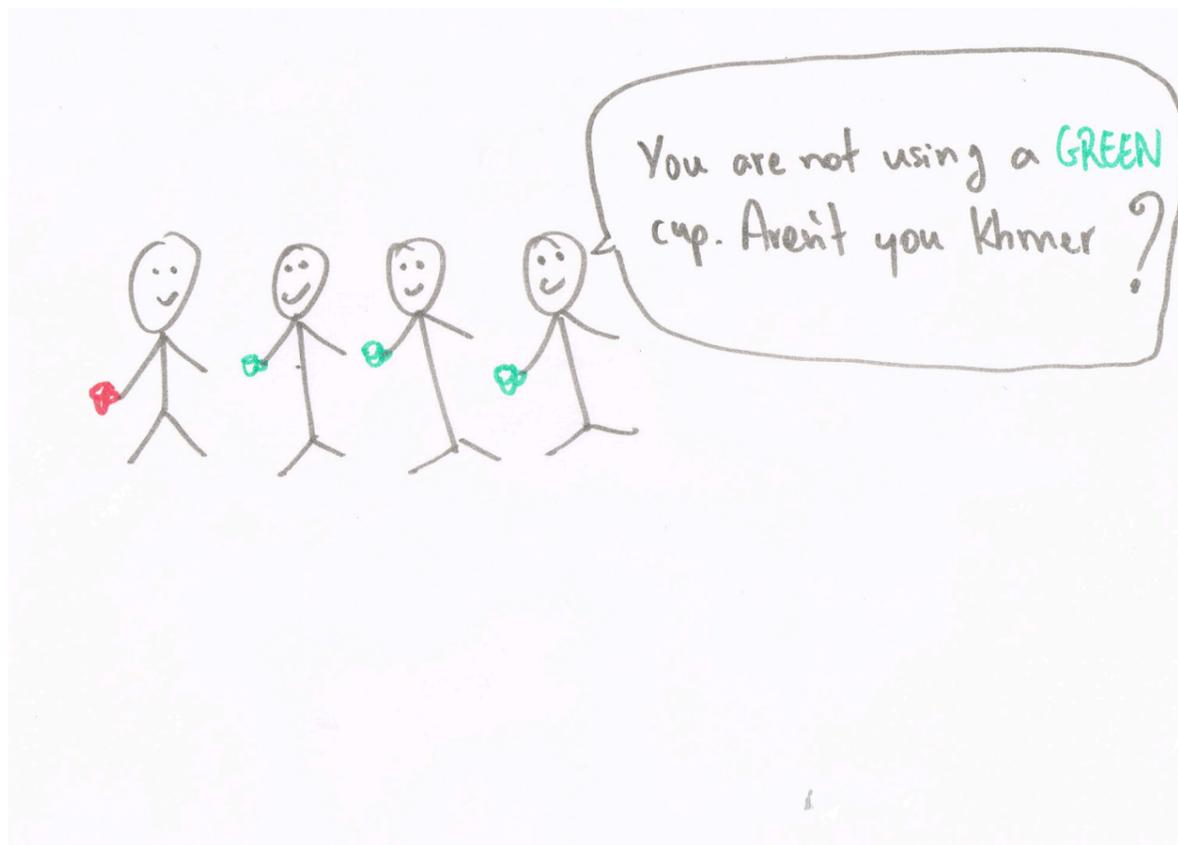


great Aja (grandad) migrating from India to NZ

The second workshop was hosted with a group of Khmer students living in diaspora in Aotearoa New Zealand. Working with an audience with a cultural connection but also clearly outside of my own artistic community made the workshop and subsequent conversation interesting. This was a really different conversation compared to previous iterations, that explored individual identity. With Khmer students, our conversation were about national identity, economic growth, how the government should improve in order to better educate its people. The idea of what makes us 'Khmer' was not being questioned, as for us, being Khmer means having Khmer ancestors regardless of where you were born or where you live. Cambodia is always home. Although some pages were made for the zine, they were not interested in expressing themselves on paper but rather, orally.

These two workshop showcases my constant struggle to connect and contextualised the project in Aotearoa New Zealand and Cambodia. Having drastically different conversations and experiences due to the cultural differences and different historical context. Although both countries are exploring cultural and national identity, the priority and views on the topic are drastically different. Aotearoa New Zealand is implicated by its multicultural identity and the reclamation of space for the minorities and the indigenous. The questions raised within workshops here focused on how to live in a multicultural country. Whereas Cambodia focuses on finding and discussing its pre-existing identity and how to unite its local in order to change and shape for a "better" society. Although they are relatable each context yields very different conversations. I have to keep in mind who my audience is each time a workshop is hosted and how to accommodate them accordingly.





"It is difficult to have a voice in Cambodia, it is almost a social taboo to have a different opinion. You get excluded for being different"

Within Cambodia’s arts communities, many are engaging with Cambodian history and socio-cultural values. There is a notable trend to educate younger generations of our heritage and the ensuing knot. They constantly break with Khmer societal expectations and introduce art as a form of expression and community building to the wider public audience. This is often supported by a cross-disciplinary approaches. Architects, photographers, dancers and curators, can all be cited in recent artistic activity in this vain. Art events now commonly range from conventional presentations at art galleries to transient community spaces and more alternative performance art festivals.

Meeting **ឃុំ**<sup>11</sup> Meta Moeng (who is the founder of Dambaul and Kon Lenh Khnom) has provided me with an entry point into the Cambodian’s art community. Moeng facilitated a residency at **ដំបូល** (Dambaul) which I undertook between May 2019 and June 2019. **ដំបូល**, meaning rooftop, is an arts resource home that acts as a reading room, an art archive, and a space for the sharing of knowledge. It was founded in 2019 in response to the needs of the local arts community whom had a hard time finding creative books. The space also hosts archival exhibitions and accumulates a database on Khmer artists and their activities (dambaul, 2019).

Dambaul has played a huge role in my growth as an artist and facilitator. It has been an inspiration to work within a space where I feel free and a sense of belonging. During this time I have been able to learn and connect with my cultural heritage, be amongst relevant literature, but also to be able to be amongst the most inspiring people. I was able to immerse myself and learn about the art community in Cambodia and gained a better understanding of what is needed of me as an artist and facilitator.

During my residency I’ve hosted two zine workshops, one more successful than the other. The first workshop was hosted at Dambaul, with around 6 attendees. It was a small group of architects, architect graduate students and an urban planner. This mix directed the conversation towards urban planning, the current architecture identity crisis and the role of architects and urban planners within a rapidly developing urban context. The conversation was deep and each person in the workshop made connections with one another. Some feedback I received was that it was one of the most energetic conversations members of the group had engaged concerning art and design in Cambodia.

The collage and zine-making aspect of the workshop were not necessarily needed as conversation starters, thereby was not in focus. We didn’t even really manage to make zines, but we did form connections and have a rich discussion surrounding art and design in Cambodia. I was left feeling like it was a great event that progresses many aspects of my learning.

<sup>11</sup> **ឃុំ** (Bong) means “older brother/sister” and often used as a sign of respect towards someone who is older as the social hierarchy is important in Khmer culture.



2019, Photograph by Sopanha Kham  
Dambaul, Phnom Penh, Cambodia



2019, Photograph of Workshop 1  
by Amara Sao  
Dambaul, Phnom Penh, Cambodia



Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA, 2019, Photograph,  
Phnom Penh, Cambodia,  
Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/prumsodun/>

During this time, I've also learnt of the different ways in which the Khmer art community has worked to reconnect and reintroduce history and cultural values into Cambodia's society.

Prumsodun Ok & Natyarasa is Cambodia's first gay dance company that "restage classical dances with a vital freshness and create original, groundbreaking works at the intersection of art and human dignity"<sup>12</sup>. They combine traditional dances with contemporary values to elevate and rework traditional views in order to create a better quality of life for LGBTQ people in Cambodia and beyond (ponatyarasa, n.d). Founded in 2016, the company has provided artists with skills and resources to live with pride, dignity and independence. "Through cultural preservation, artistic innovation, rigorous education, leadership development, and fearless advocacy, they strive to create lasting, positive transformation that is local in character and global in significance" (ponatyarasa, n.d).

Combining traditional classical dances and contemporary values, challenges how contemporary society views classical dances and forces them to re-evaluate their own social positions. The performing arts can offer multiple generations of Cambodia, a way into the contemporary arts.

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<sup>12</sup> Cambodia is not as accepting towards the LGBTQ community as the rest of the world. In fact, gay marriage is illegal in Cambodia.

កន្លែងឌី (Kon Len Khnhom, my place is yours) is an independent art space dedicated to building a community for creatives in Cambodia. The studio is where art students, artists, curators and researchers come together to connect and inspire each other through their own individual projects (konlenkhnhom, n.d). They often also host presentations, artist talks and workshops. They offer residencies for khmer art students, artists, curators, writers, and researchers<sup>13</sup>.

Having been there a few times myself, កន្លែងឌី (Kon Len Khnhom) sometimes feels like a library where everyone is immersed in their own work, respecting the conventions of a common library. At other times, it feels like a college lounge, where there are lively conversations and debates covering a wide range of topics. The building itself is a semi-traditional home with outdoor staircase and a wooden upper floor. It is homely and welcoming as soon as the door is opened. The space is interchangeable depending on what it is used for.

<sup>13</sup> Those in residence have a key to the space and are able to use whenever they please and it is all free to use. The slogan 'My home is yours' truly reflects the founder's, Meta Moeng, generosity and belief and trust in the community she is building. She believes that while she gives trust to the people she let in, they will take care of the space and use the space as she intended for it to be used. Her goals are to inspired, enriched and nurtured the youth in the arts scene. To create value and empowers local talents and creatives.



2019, Photograph by Sopanha Kham  
កន្លែងឌី (Kon Len Khnhom) Phnom  
Penh, Cambodia



2019, Photograph by Meta Moeng  
កន្លែងឌី (Kon Len Khnhom) Phnom  
Penh, Cambodia



2019, Photograph,  
SaSa Art Project  
Phnom Penh, Cambodia  
Retrieved from  
<https://www.facebook.com/sasaartprojects/>

Sa Sa Art Projects another community focused art practice based space is Khmer artist-run dedicated to experimental and critical contemporary art practices (sasaart, n.d.) The space is geared towards engagement with young Khmer artists and arts graduates while also building a deeper dialogue with within Asian arts discourses through various programs, exhibitions, residencies. SA SA Art Project was founded in order to address Cambodia's lack of infrastructure for contemporary arts education and critical discussion. The three active members include Khvay Samnang, Lim Sokchanlina and Vuth Lyno. (sasaart, n.d.)

I've visited Sa Sa Art Project on a few different occasions, to view exhibitions, and also as an audience member for artist talks. The former shophouse has a feeling of homeliness. The space, like any art gallery changes as exhibitions change. During community events, such as an artist talk or presentation, the space transforms with floor mats and sitting cushions which are provided for the audience. Everyone is expected to sit on the ground. The most recent artist talk that I was able to attend consisted of a presentation and a Q&A with the live audience, while the event was also streamed live on their facebook page. It is clear that Sa Sa Art Project goes above and beyond in accommodating their artists and their audience by providing as much as they can to support the conversation and engagement between the art community.



2019, Photograph of Oral Presentation  
English for Artist, by Sopanha Kham  
Phnom Penh, Cambodia

I've been fortunate enough to have met វុធ លីណូ, ប៊ុន ប្រុមសុដុន ឌុក and ម៉េតា ម៉េង ម៉េង observing their individual accomplishments but also the community that they have built. One of the most notable programs that they facilitate is English for Artists. The program is a 3 months class designed to help young artists and cultural workers in developing their English skills in vocabulary, cultural knowledge and public speaking. Students increase their ability to read, write and speak by engaging in tasks such as writing artist statements, reading academic texts and giving oral presentations about their work. The goal is to elevate the students' English, as well as teaching them how to critically express their works. (konlenknhom, n.d.)

The oral presentations I have seen from students have been inspiring. Students' public speaking ability is commendable, but also a palpable community spirit that exists within the space. Students and facilitators have built long lasting relationships of learning and exchange. These community focused art practices, reflect an emerging spatial identity. Their use of familiar objects for Khmer people such as woven floor mats, shophouses, timber houses and traditional dances are just some of the tools employed. These are all used in combination with modern or less familiar concepts such as art galleries, reading rooms, studio spaces. All this can help a general audience to interact with new and at times challenging concepts, all the while fostering communal understanding and pride.



2019, Photograph of Oral Presentation  
English for Artist, by Sopanha Kham  
Phnom Penh, Cambodia



2019, Photograph by Sopanha Kham  
 AAAH@ Te Pitanga Gallery  
 Wellington, NZ

Returning back to Aotearoa New Zealand, I continued my practice in workshops and have worked in spatial design as part of AAAH@ Te Pitanga Gallery in Conversation with Kerry Ann Lee. I hosted two workshops, one focusing the discussion surrounding national and cultural identity in Aotearoa New Zealand, and the other as part of MZC's living in diaspora.

The space at Te Pitanga Gallery consists of an evolving space, including a living wall of zine pages, collages, photos which comes alive as more pages and things are added after each workshop. The space itself aims to promote relaxation, with floor mats, bean bags and plants. The space creates a shelter for discussion, contemplation or relaxation. The first workshop happened in 2 sessions, the participants were asked to make a zine about what they think of national and cultural identity in Aotearoa New Zealand. After making the zines, we gather at the "living space" to share our stories, as well as begin our discussion surrounding national and cultural identities that exist within Aotearoa New Zealand. This was my most successful workshop in terms of balancing between zine making, storytelling and discussions in the end. People left feeling that they had learnt something and have had a say within a conversation where they play a crucial part.

The second workshop drew a small group of 4 including myself. Due to the intimacy of small group discussion and conversation happened as we were making the zines rather than after. This meant that sharing the story of the zine became less important as it was no longer being used as a conversational tool. I still made connection with the participants and one of which, Jessica George, is collaborating with me on my next project under the umbrella of គ្រាប់ចំណង (Knotted) called ទីជំកិ (Shelter). This will be discussed in the next part of the exegesis.



2019, Photograph by Lauren Deacon. Zine workshop  
 AAAH@ Te Pitanga Gallery, Wellington, NZ  
 Retrieved from  
[https://www.instagram.com/coca\\_librarians/](https://www.instagram.com/coca_librarians/)



Amber Strain, Huey-Yi Lim, Kimberley Zhou, Liang Cui  
 Sam Buchanan and Sopanha Kham  
 Zines made from Collaborative Zine Workshop  
 Scanned, AAAH@ Te Pitanga Gallery  
 2019, Wellington, NZ

### *Accumulation of things, 2018-2019*

While also being immersed in the art community, I also have accumulated a lot of what I called “spatial knots”. These refer materials and objects that define space in relation to who we are. These include the use of archival photographs, childhood photographs, archival videos, recent photos and videos as well as traditional objects such as woven floor mats and baskets. I have collected these because they hold more than just a material value and promote connections between participants. Together they become things that people can relate to either through. I started to wonder how these could hold value outside of my collections. Having worked in spatial design and installation for AAAH@ Te Pitanga, and learning about how spaces can accommodate for community building and bonding during my residency in Cambodia, I wanted to explore this further.

I came across Patrick Pound’s exhibition at City Art Gallery, Wellington. His practice consists of collecting and systematically ordering objects in an attempt to make things coherent. As Pound says, ‘to collect is to gather your thoughts through things’ (city gallery, n.d). The idea that collecting is a natural part of thinking, and to showcase the collection is to showcase your thoughts and your “puzzle” for the audience to decipher. Inspired by his work, I wanted to create an installation in which I would be able to showcase my collection as the knot in which the audience unravel through time. Pounds’ work is systematic whereas I wanted my installation to be less formal and not confined to a conventional gallery space.

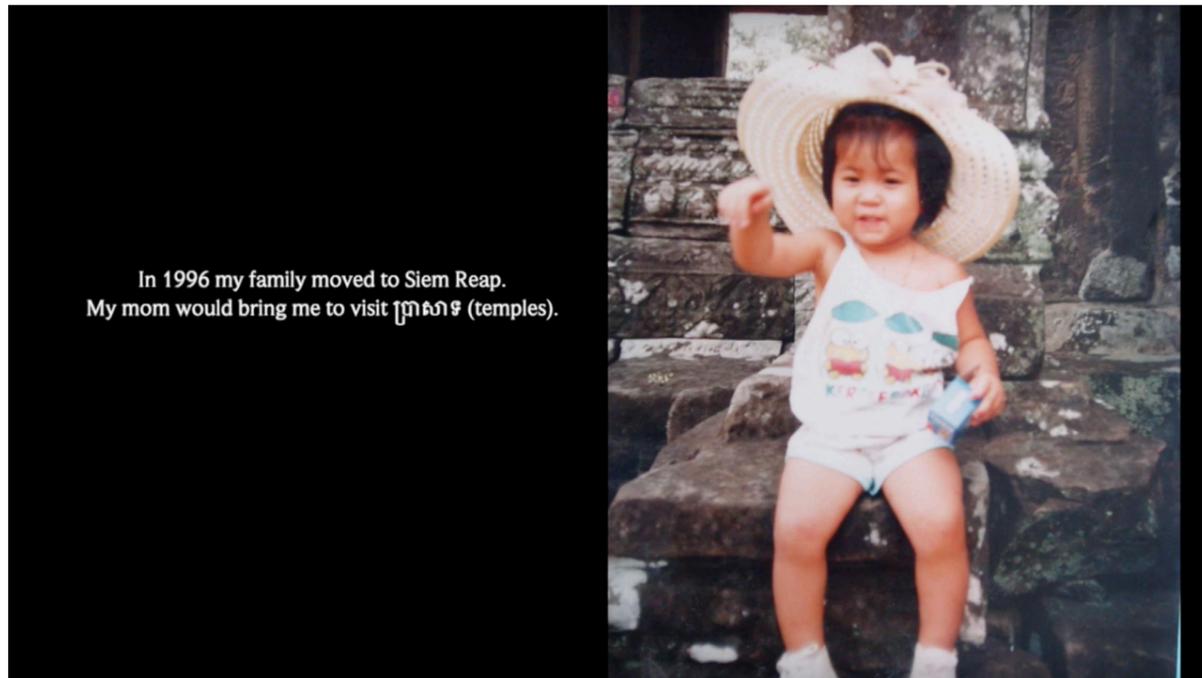
This has led me to look into Rirkrit Tiravanija’s works. Untitled (Free) in 1992 is a huge inspiration for my installation. In this work, the artist converted a gallery into a kitchen where he served rice and Thai curry for free. He invited the audience to engage with the art in a more social way, blurring the line between the creator and the audience. The artwork is about community and social engagement. (Allen, 2012).

**ទីជំរក់** (Shelter) will be showcased at Exposure 2019 and is an installation inspired by these two artists and the Khmer's art community. The installation consists of a living room like space, mimicking a traditional Cambodian household. There's a traditional woven floor mat on the ground with sitting cushion to invite the audience in the space. This was inspired by my time in Cambodia, and learning and understanding how they used their space in a traditional and modern way. The installation consists of household items such as a broom, a small table, snacks, coffee and tea. The audience will be able to eat the food and make their own drinks at their convenience. It is important that the space is interactive.

Throughout the space, there will be a wall of archival and recent photographs that I've collected over the years as well as television (monitor) showcasing a documentary made in collaboration with Aotearoa New Zealand filmmaker, Jessica George.

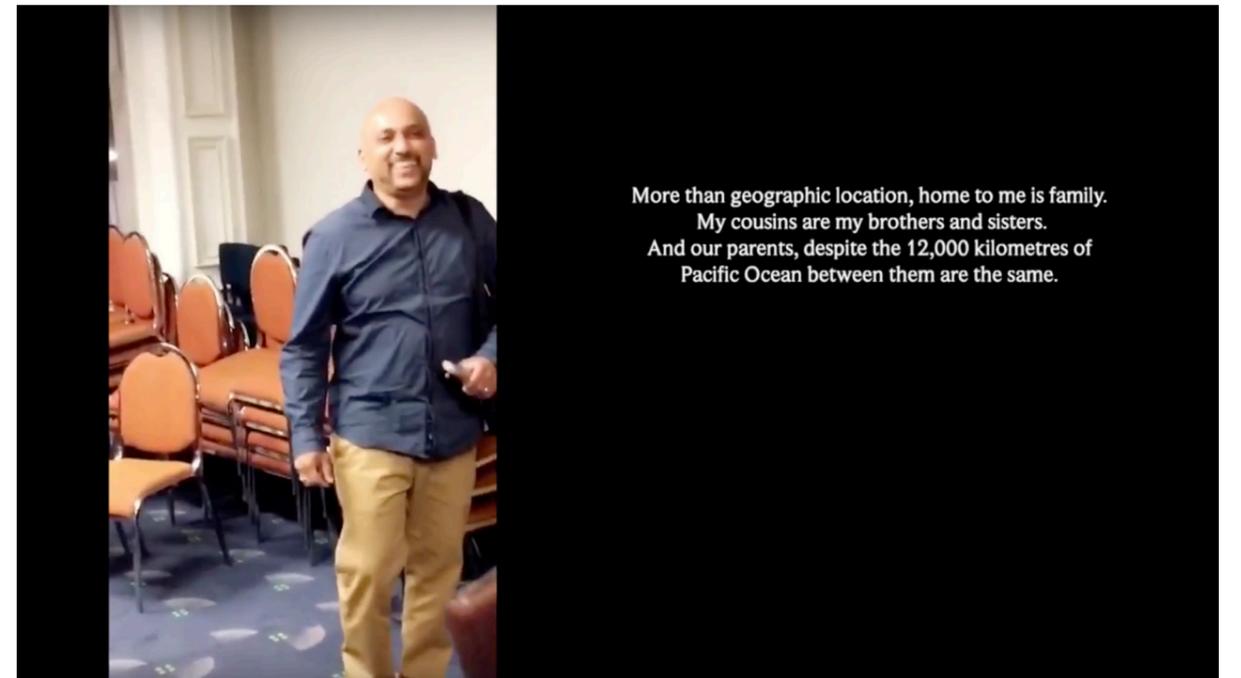
On the television, a 13minute long documentary will be played. This documentary work is inspired by the works for Kavich Neang, who is a Khmer filmmaker. His work "Last Night I Saw You Smiling" is about documenting the moments leading up to the evacuation and demolitions of The White Building, more importantly it is a record of the emotional journey as the protagonists have to leave a place they call home after the war (antiarchive, n.d). The film was shot in a cinema verite (truth cinema) style, where the shots showed people in their everyday life with authentic dialogues in natural situations. There's no manipulated story or conclusion, it's a simple journey in a snippet of the residents including the director's life.

**ទីជំរក់** (Shelter) documentary is a collaboration work with Jessica George, whom I met during one of my workshops. Having talked a lot about feelings of confusion surrounding our individual diasporic identity and living between cultures. This documentary is a bridge between my identity as a Khmer person living here, longing to connect to Cambodia, and George, as a second-generation Indian migrant family, who is trying to navigate herself in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Using the cinema verite style, as well as footage that we have both collected over the years, the documentary explores our identity through snippets of our lives in a cinema verite style.



In 1996 my family moved to Siem Reap.  
My mom would bring me to visit ព្រះវិហារ (temples).

Jessica George, Sopanha Kham, 2019,  
Still of Shelter Documentary  
Wellington, NZ



More than geographic location, home to me is family.  
My cousins are my brothers and sisters.  
And our parents, despite the 12,000 kilometres of  
Pacific Ocean between them are the same.

Jessica George, Sopanha Kham 2019  
Still of Shelter Documentary  
Wellington, NZ

# ជាប់ចំណង (Knotted)

It is clear that the framework surrounding one's sense of cultural, national and personal identity is knotted with many other aspects of society. It is impossible to untangle this knot. This research has taught me that embracing the knot might lead to a healthy healing period for Cambodia and a sense of union between its people. Cambodia's community focused art practices can play a huge role in breaking Khmer societal expectations and gently introducing art as a form of expression and community building.

ជាប់ចំណង (Knotted) weaves in between the architecture and community focused practices. The core ambition of the project is to connect the general public and the art community allowing societal issues to be discussed and deliberated. The project acts as a bridge while I take the role of a facilitator in order to bring forth the community into the space of the project.

It's important to take a step back, reflect, discuss and learn about one another, about our past, present and speculate upon our future. All this in this in order to build our sense of identity and belonging. I acknowledge that the project is still in its early stage as there are still so much to learn and discover further. It is a shame that I must end this as part of my Masters of Fine Art degree, however my work will continue as it my life ambitions to bring changes to Cambodia. I will do this while challenging societal views such as supporting the LGBTQ community. I expect a lot of changes in economic, societal values as well as a huge amount of healing for Cambodia for the next 20 years. With this in mind, I hope for ជាប់ចំណង to continue to grow and adapt as it is needed for the people.

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