

Reyum Arts Center, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Picasso in Phnom Penh: Can Western Arts Help Heal a Nation?



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Dedicated to the memory of Ingrid Muan, whose strength and character invaluable influenced and affected my experience in Cambodia.

Brown Feet

Part I

Brown feet and toes, hands and fingers, arms and legs; hairy and smooth, stretching out, folded in. They twitch and jerk, support and trip, tense and relax. Patches of darker gray and smudges of lighter black coat the soles and tips of the toes and fingers as they mold onto the hard, coffee-colored tile floor beneath them. Some feet rest flat on the ground, while others arch in a semi-circle; still others press up against their neighbors or curl up into themselves.

Long slender fingers and short fat ones hold pencils and crayons and glitter, moving along starch-white paper as they depict images from their minds. Voices coo and squeal; some laugh while others remain silent, but the movement of fingers and hands, toes and feet seems independent of the bodies that own them. Some rest in contemplation; others are active so as not to forget their task. Some move lazily, grazing the paper in strides and sprints. Others move intricately, with precision and meticulous care. Everyone thinks the same thoughts: *grosa, grosa, grosa*—family, family, family.

As the heat and humidity rise in competition with one another, small brown feet and hands appreciate the cool sensation of the tiles covering the floor of their school. The otherwise dirt-stained walls are hung with drawings and paintings, glistening with moisture, depicting such images as the countryside—the rice fields, the sparse palm trees, the feeble huts—Khmer traditional dancers, the Royal Palace, and portraits of mothers, fathers and relatives. The 7:00 a.m. air becomes saturated with vapor and energy from the rising sun. The churning of street-side rituals long ago set in motion echo through the small street and tight alleyway that separate the school from the main road.

Through the steel bars of three glassless windows, fresh light penetrates the crooked artwork. The pieces cast a glow in the sunlight that reflects upon the worn and peeling colors of the

high ceilings, the tattered and overused wooden tables, and the beaming blues and reds of the shiny plastic stools.

Sitting with my back against a wall under one of the large windows, I hear the innocent sounds of the younger group's fun and games in the courtyard. Their laughter and screams spiral upwards into the windows of the apartment buildings which surround the Reyum Art School. Looking at the artwork around me and the 60 or so students on the floor executing the task which I assigned—painting what family means to them—I am reminded of a conversation I had had a few days prior with Rith, the youngest of the four teachers here. On the porch of his small, second story apartment in one of the poorest areas of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, he showed me some of his previous paintings and in describing them stated, "Watercolors are for making money to feed the family. Oil paints are for expressing ideas, but no one wants to buy oil paintings because people here like realistic pictures." Glancing away from his paintings I asked him, "Which do you like more?" "Oil painting of course," he responded casually. "Watercolors are for work, oil paints for my own pleasure."

Looking around the rectangular room of the art school and into the three smaller rooms branching off from the main one, one fact remained clear: the paintings here—all produced by the students—were of watercolors.

The countryside, the traditional dancers, the glorious Independence Monument, the majestic Wat Phnom, the portraits...all exact and realistic replicas. I would soon learn more about the history of Khmer art and the 1000-year old tradition of painting things "as they are, not as we *think* they are." For now though, I would identify these only as "realistic paintings."

A minute's walk down the residential alleyway opens into a small road covered in quivering shadows. Hand-washed laundry sways from the grimacing balconies and wire-fences surrounding

the cardboard, metal and wooden shacks that range from rooms of three by three feet to apartment buildings of four or five stories. Luxurious and freshly painted villas smile pretentiously at the majority of poverty-stricken Cambodians who are too busy surviving to notice them.

Half a block away lay the main tourist attractions of this capital city. The Royal Palace, the National Museum and the boardwalk along the Tonle Sap River shimmer proudly for the hundreds of tourists who walk by them. Yet, as much as they try, these buildings cannot hide the reality on the streets. Vendors squat in rags and soiled clothing next to steaming pots of cooking food. The smoke and dirt seems to possess an aging effect on their young skin which is often dark and wrinkled. A cover of smog casts a thick blanket over the street-dwellers lining the sidewalks. They sell anything they can—a bowl of soup, meat, cooked noodles, fried dough, vegetables, random trinkets, bread, ice cream, sugarcane juice... Often their families sit alongside them. One does not see *this* reality, however, in the “realistic paintings” of the watercolor artists.

Near intersections, many men dressed in worn-out pants and wrinkled shirts smile as I walk by. Mostly they are countryside farmers who have had a poor crop season or students who need money and have come to the city to try to make an extra buck or two. They ask if I need a lift, yelling, as if calling me by name, the only English word they may know, “MOTORBIKE!” I shake my head and quietly reply, *ate akun*, no thank you.

These two word conversations repeat themselves each day as I make the seven-minute walk from my apartment to the art school. However, most striking remain the silent and grim older women—the tragedies of decades burning dimly in their eyes—who still smile at me when I walk by them in their squatting positions.

Strolling into the art school, I leave behind me the sounds which dominate the streets from 5:00 am each morning: voices of children crying, screaming and squealing; pigs fighting and dogs barking; mothers and women calling out; machines churning, growling and pausing; brooms sweeping and vendors dismantling their carts; cars groaning in the background; birds whistling; and the sharp, harshly-pitched sounds of metal and stone being used, ridden, cut, and molded.

Inside the Reyum Art School, small hands finish drawing their families; feet flatten against the floor and arms raise the body up high to have a look. “Proud, content, disappointed or unsatisfied?” I wonder to myself. Most seem happy and joyfully

back away to admire the larger picture made by the whole class. Many families and images; hands and feet stand and observe or sit and work. Images of families hugging, eating, dressing, laughing, posing, pointing, teaching or caressing. *Grosa, grosa, grosa*. These excited fingers and toes fill the saddened space of the school. Today we do not use watercolors to paint.

Part II

The history behind the smiling faces of the Reyum Art School students is an unhappy one. Between 1975—a year labeled as “Year Zero”—and 1979, the Khmer Rouge killed nearly two million Cambodians. The regime’s communist dictator, Pol Pot, pursued an ideal in which he attempted to purify the country by ridding it of capitalistic and Western influences in hopes of returning to an agrarian-based society. Under this rule, the Khmer Rouge perceived as a threat anyone “influenced by imperialism,” including intellectuals, skilled workers, and city dwellers, regardless of their individual political ideologies. Pol Pot’s regime evacuated entire cities in the name of cultural cleansing. Phnom Penh was labeled as “the great prostitute of the Mekong.” To reach the highest state of purity, the Khmer Rouge unhesitatingly murdered anyone opposed to their philosophy. According to their ideals, only the simple, uneducated and hard-working peasants would remain in the countryside, and all cities were to be demolished.

Over the course of his dictatorship, Pol Pot masterminded a genocide which massacred almost one-third of the Khmer population and destroyed an enormous amount of Cambodia’s land, cultural treasures and achievements. His soldiers looted and burned towns and cities, bringing the country to a state of utter devastation. By the time the Vietnamese troops took over the country in 1979, every Cambodian in the country had directly felt the impact of the four-year genocide. Yet, even over the next 20 years, during which time the U.N. and the U.S. became

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involved in Cambodia's politics and first-time elections, the remaining guerilla forces of the Khmer Rouge continued to use violence to terrorize the Cambodian population. When Pol Pot died in 1998, many Cambodians apathetically followed the news on television, not even knowing whether to believe it or not. After all, many of the former Khmer soldiers and leaders still reside in the countryside and cities today, occupying positions ranging from motorbike drivers to business owners, to government officials.

Perhaps the Khmer Rouge's most shocking aspect lay in what its name already conveyed: the Khmer Rouge was made up of Cambodians. Pol Pot, who was himself a French-educated Cambodian, used Cambodians to kill Cambodians. As Pol Pot increased his strict standards for purification, it became clear that every Cambodian would at some point fall into the traitor category. Trust played a central role throughout the genocide—one learned never to trust anyone. Unfortunately, but predictably, the destructive effects of this mentality still vibrate throughout the Cambodian population today.

With the reign of terror cast over Cambodians beginning to simmer down over the past decade, the country has seen an influx of foreign diplomats, workers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Additionally, Cambodia and its relatively unknown history has begun to interest outsiders who had heard little about one of the worst genocides of the past 50 years. Affected by this increased awareness, Ingrid Muan, at the time a graduate student at Columbia University, began her dissertation in Cambodia on modern art history. "I was interested in what modern art history might look like in a place like Cambodia, which is so often consigned to a glorious architectural past," she says. "No one seemed to think that art was also made in Cambodia during the 20th century." Soon after, she met Ly Daravuth, a French-educated Cambodian who escaped the wrath of the Khmer Rouge by fleeing to France and returned to his native homeland only years later. Together they installed a number of well-received small exhibitions. When offered a grant to continue such displays, the unexpected seeds of the Reyum Art School began to sprout. In 1998, Ingrid and Daravuth officially founded Reyum "in order to provide a forum for research, preservation, and promotion of traditional and contemporary Cambodian arts and culture." Most importantly, Reyum would serve as a free public space which would host a variety of performances, concerts, lectures and discussions within the walls which contained its exhibits. Its mission statement read and still reads,

"When Reyum was established in late 1998, few spaces existed in Phnom Penh for mounting exhibitions. Those venues which did show work tended either to offer permanent exhibitions of art objects, or to provide repetitive commercial paintings and sculptures for the tourist market. Within this context, Reyum decided to establish a space in which a changing series of exhibitions could address a wide variety of topics, not only in the visual arts, but within broader realms

of culture and society. Art exhibitions organized at Reyum aim to foster creativity and critical thinking while providing contemporary artists with the opportunity to explore and create new work."

In pursuing this mission, Reyum has hosted a variety of exhibits in such varying facets as the theme of communication, painting history, the legacy of absence ("in which Khmer artists were asked to consider the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge"), painted stories of individual lives, an exploration of modern art post-Cambodia's independence, visions of the future, and calling the souls. All of these exhibits function to encourage and support a space for lamentation, questioning, reflection, discussion, and perhaps, reconciliation with the past, present and future.

Initially consisting of an art gallery, Reyum's success has allowed it to expand its research facility and publishing component into separate spaces. The support of an eager sponsor allowed Reyum to open the Art School where I worked, which aims to offer an alternative to children who would otherwise remain unsupervised during the time when they are not attending regular school. An application process guides the selection of some of the poorest but most talented youth, ranging in ages from about seven to 20, that make up the 130 or so students who switch off between morning and afternoon sessions.

By means of a fellowship offered by my university, I obtained the opportunity to work at Reyum as a student intern and found myself particularly drawn to the charming atmosphere of the Arts School. It would not take long to learn that the Art School, the Reyum Gallery and the surrounding community represent in microcosm the very large and significant issues confronting Cambodia today. Through its example, one finds an opportunity to analyze the role of art, inter-cultural work and relationships in Cambodian society and culture.

Part III

It is a joke between Ingrid, the Director of Reyum, and her other Western friends that the most improved part of Phnom Penh has been related to the condition of the dogs. While such remarks often reveal more about the speaker than the subject, it remains true that the changes in the treatment of dogs as pets over the past several years have significantly bettered their standard of living from disastrous to bearable. Humor aside, when compared to any changes within the Cambodian people, Ingrid's comment may contain more truth than most individuals with any knowledge about Cambodia's past might like to admit.

"The one thing which Cambodians have yet to experience is therapy," she stated one night over dinner at her river house. I sat across from her, listening to the cynical thoughts emitted from the exhausted expression she typically wears on her face. Although harsh, her consistent cynicism and sarcasm always served to crack open my walls of ignorance and naïveté. "Cambodians still have not processed nor come to an understanding of the events in their country from over twenty

years ago. Without this help, Cambodians will remain cruel, manipulative, corrupt people who always act for the present and do whatever it takes to make a dollar. Most Cambodians are ruthless, Dan. It will just take you some time to realize it."

Scanning the small space of the Reyum Art School, one finds it difficult to imagine the manipulative and corrupt sides of the smiling and bubbly students. Sitting around large tables or bundled together on the floor, the children appear more as symbols of fading innocence, rather than heartless manipulators. While they could never be described as entirely naïve—the pain and suffering of their parents' generation remains too close to be ignored—they also still possess a sense of youthful playfulness long lost in the lives of those who have seen enough horror to question even the sanctity of trust between family members.

"This war has made it impossible to trust anyone. When children kill their own parents or husbands sacrifice their families, it is clear that everyone is living to survive," said Fousing Sem, a 23-year-old outspoken Cambodian, one of the few willing to openly comment on his society and culture. "During the time of Pol Pot, parents would risk their lives to steal a bag of rice to feed their children, and the following day their children would turn them in to the soldiers, just so that they could receive another bag of rice. Wives would turn against their husbands; fathers against their kids. I've learned from this that not even bloodline guarantees loyalty and trust. You cannot trust anyone but yourself."

At the Art School today, I have assigned the students the task of identifying their favorite part of Phnom Penh and pictorially representing it in a creative way. Many students choose to draw locations commonly found on tourist postcards, such as the Royal Palace and the riverside. However, after over a month and a half of working with them on ways to include interpretation in their artwork, they paint these common scenes in unusual ways: abstract shapes, designs, and hidden words fill the images; some students even paint with oil paints. Others paint images of their homes, their siblings, and the jobs in which their parents work.

While watching them create personally meaningful scenes, I wonder about the various types of families to which each of these students return at the end of the day. Some travel only 10 minutes while others ride their bicycles an hour and a half to get back home. Some live so far away that they instead remain at the school and sleep on the floor every night, simultaneously acting as guards. My interactions with them at the school revealed little about their home lives.

Yet, from conversations with the students when outside the school, I was able to learn much more about their thoughts and lives. One 20-year old student, Supon, with whom I would often walk along the river, used the space at the Art School not only for learning, but for eating and sleeping as well. His family lived 3 hours away in the provinces, and through night-guarding the school, Reyum gave him a small stipend as well as housing on the Art School floor.

On one Sunday afternoon, Supon and I sat along the boardwalk sketching the barefoot and shirtless children begging for money and otherwise filling the space with their screams, cries and games. Upon seeing Supon and I sitting alongside each other, a group of about 15 children would often surround us on all sides in inquiry of our activities. In Cambodia, one does not often see foreigners sitting with natives. Moreover, people do not use public spaces to engage in such leisurely activities as reading or drawing for pleasure. "The concept of 'taking a walk' is completely foreign to them," Ingrid once told me while we walked along the beach of a small island across the river from her weekend home. "Cambodians walk to the market, or to work, but they do not walk just for fun. When I tell them I'm taking a walk, they always look at me with a confused expression and ask, 'Taking a walk to where?'"

Sitting on the boardwalk wall across from Supon, I attempted to sketch his wavy black hair, his chiseled cheekbones, his eager smile and the small frame of his body. I became so frustrated with my embarrassing drawing skills that upon seeing my sketch, he offered a few pointers to help me improve it. While doing so, a small girl of no more than 4 years old wearing a faded blue short sleeve shirt and a torn red and yellow checkered skirt sat down on the stone wall next to us and propped her naked brother on her knee. Through curious eyes, she silently stared at us. Supon glanced up at her and thought for a moment before remarking to me, "I miss my family very much. They no live in Phnom Penh. When I see little girls, I pretend they my sister, or if I see old girl, I pretend they my mother. I pretend what they look like." The corner of his eyes filled up with moisture as he proceeded to masterfully sketch this little girl and her baby brother. Noticing that she was his model, she sat up proudly holding her brother, and a wide grin spread across her face. I had seen this girl often by the riverside, but this was the first time I had ever seen her still and quiet.

I couldn't help but think about the similarities between Supon and this little girl. Both were living on their own, without families, taking care of that which was of most importance to them. The girl had her brother; Supon had his sketchbook and fantasies.

Part IV

The oil paintings in Rith's small, second floor apartment shine in dazzling contrast to the peeling splinters of wooden planks which make up the walls of the young Reyum Art School teacher's home. To the right of a doorway leading to the back of the apartment hangs a portrait of a Cambodian man in his forties or fifties. When I asked Rith's wife about this painting, she explained to me that her husband had created it from the only photograph of his father that he has, a photograph taken before the time of the Khmer Rouge. We both glanced at the balcony, where Rith was painting with watercolors, and she lowered her eyes and meekly whispered to me, "Rith's father was killed by the Khmer Rouge." I glanced at the oil painting one more time: the smooth strokes, the three-dimensional texture, the ardor exuding from the canvas. I turned around and

noticed Rith standing up from his drawing table outside. He walked into the apartment to retrieve another pencil and noticed me standing by his father's portrait. When I looked up at it again, he told me that this painting was his favorite. "My father was taken away by the Khmer Rouge to study and be educated," he said. "That's what the soldiers told us. I know that he is still studying with them now."

When thinking about him later, it became clear to me that Rith's interpretation of his father's fate demonstrated an explanation of his father's death on his own terms. It was no coincidence that Rith had also decided to reproduce his father's photograph in oil paints, not watercolors. The painting had his father gazing off into the distance. Through the abstractions emphasized by the strokes of the oil paints in his father's face, skin, and casual clothing, one could understand that Rith believed his father to retain his capacity to "study," to learn, and to judge, even while under the thumb of oppression. He viewed his father as completely alive, even into the present day. Through doing so, he created an image of his father which was his own to treasure, admire and remember. Rith had taken a standard photograph and infused his own interpretation and commentary on his father's life, consequently producing a portrait and a story that allowed for him to communicate his thoughts and feelings about his father's disappearance to himself and others.

For the same reason that Rith benefited from painting his father in oil paints, one must question what other Cambodian artists might gain from incorporating interpretive creativity into their works. Certainly, Eastern art employs its own form of creativity. The detailed paintings of traditional Apsara dancers or the beautiful water festival held in Phnom Penh each year demonstrate a collection of ideas, colors and precision which remain very unique to Cambodian artwork. However, these forms date 1000 years back to the beginning of the Khmer culture and serve the purpose of preserving history and ancient culture. This form of artistic creativity does not serve as a medium through which to document present history in the making and thus differs greatly from the way in which many art forms function in the West. Could the use of a more Western-style of creativity open up doors into the past, present, and future that would otherwise remain closed? Would this type of creativity allow for the society to more openly question its values, norms and way of life? Or, would creativity as defined by Western culture—interpreting issues, events and people in original, expressive and unique ways—have no place in Cambodia's culture? When answering these queries, two all-encompassing questions arise: First, do the benefits of the use of creativity outweigh the costs? Secondly, does Western style creativity even have a place in this society?

In addressing the inquiry about positive and negative features which characterize the inclusion of creativity into artwork, one need not look further than the Western history of art. An explosion of artwork aimed at reaching enlightenment and wisdom marked the end of the Middle Ages and beginning of the Modern world. Following this period—the 1400's—were

a series of movements, all which explored varying venues, methods and styles through which artistic investigation could take place. The period between the 1500's and 1900's included a tremendous outburst of creativity and was home to movements ranging from Romanticism and Modernism, to Realism and Impressionism. Entering into the 20th century, one finds the movements of Expressionism and Cubism highlighting the abstraction of objective reality, and focusing on the "inner-experience" of spirit, development and growth. The progression of this art corresponded with a shift in the Western world as an interest in individual expression became quite popular. Consequently, creative artwork provided the perfect outlet through which to communicate new ideas to the population as a whole or to specific groups of individuals in society. Naturally, this gave rise to public debates, speculation and questioning of the changing role and possibilities possessed by art. In this way, the addition of creativity into artwork positively served a society which proved ready for a breakaway from the realities of everyday living. Creativity allowed interested Westerners to question all aspects of their lives by providing them with the means to tangibly produce any and all images in their minds for those who expressed interest in seeing them.

However, throughout my time in Cambodia, I found myself wondering whether this same benefit could apply to a society that doesn't condone individual expression and does not encourage change. Thus, the question evolved: can a traumatized society which does not place utility on the effects of personal expression gain anything from attempting to explore art as communication or therapy? For me, the most accessible example became the students and the curriculum of the Reyum Art School. The students, coming from a diversity of income levels and from residential areas ranging in distance from a block away to an entire day's trip to the countryside, make up a representative sample of many of the families of Phnom Penh and the surrounding areas. If one considers the school's students and families as representative of such a population, then it seems fair to say that the effects which creativity could have on the members of the school would be similar to those displayed by many Cambodians.

A typical day at the Art School includes about 125 children (split between a morning and afternoon session) arriving at the school and having assigned a task to them that must be completed within a given time frame, usually by the end of the class session. The days of the week differ on the basis of the type of artwork taught each day. These forms include painting faces and bodies, drawing traditional forms of art, and a free day used to catch up on past assignments or copy images out of picture books, magazines, or photographs. With so much focus on replication, the students at the school flawlessly reproduce every image they see. Considering that the majority of Phnom Penh's art shops and galleries display a wide assortment of replicas of the Royal Palace, Angkor Wat, Traditional Khmer Dancers and the countryside, the skill of reproduction represents one that commercial artists use heavily. Furthermore, in a school where the thoughts of many students often revert back to seeking

their eventual source of income, the students see the traditional forms of replication as well-received by both the tourist and local community, and thus they too want to pursue it. Logically though, this pattern does not act as evidence that the overseas market does not desire creative forms of Cambodian art. Instead, it simply demonstrates the difficulty of separating oneself from the norms of a society that emphasizes conformity on the basis of preexisting patterns. The Western tourist market may jump at the opportunity to buy oil paintings of the palaces, museums, and ancient temples. However, few individuals have the bravery to try out this option. Such conventionality highlights the reality of a culture that has rarely encouraged its individuals to seek out their own paths for success. If a group of Cambodians were willing to test their luck and explore the results of opening up a shop selling creative artwork, perhaps they would quickly meet an eager international market. With such strong internal pressure against this option, schools such as the Reyum Art School must question their interest and motive for pushing forward this consumer-driven focus on artwork.

Yet, what are the benefits of only teaching a technique that models what has already been done in the past? A consideration for other forms of art as well could result in a cultural blending and an interest from foreign customers as well as local consumers that thus far has remained unknown to many of the students. After all, the benefits of creativity as it appears in Western culture could be universal in nature. What if Cambodian children and adults could benefit from the opportunity to communicate their unexpressed thoughts about the recent past history as well as their current lives? Would they have the ability to do so? In fact, through an activity at the Art School which involved using both the Cambodian notion of modeled artwork and the Western concept of creativity, it became quite evident that not only were the students able to produce innovative images, but that the project also excited and stimulated them.

During my second week at the Art School, I assigned a project which included the use of a model but also utilized one's imagination. In this task, the students were partnered up with other students and told to imagine and draw how their partner's face would appear at 80 years of age. This assignment proved much more successful than the prior day's one (which asked students to draw the meaning of family), for it combined an element with which the students already felt comfortable—using a model—but also allowed them to express an original idea—a face that no one had seen before. The students seemed enthused by the prospect of controlling their own representations of their models. Some students even went so far as to create a number of different versions of their “old” partner, which in many cases looked as realistic as their replica-based drawings. This project made it quite clear that the students already possessed full faculty for tapping into their own creative thoughts; it was only a matter of the proper circumstances.

Through a variety of tasks that fused the Western notions of abstract expression with the Eastern idea of concrete realism, the students demonstrated time and time again that they not only

enjoyed the creative assignments placed before them, but also saw it as an opportunity to experiment with the models of art with which they already had familiarity. While it remains difficult to extrapolate these results to the entire Cambodian population, one can suggest that the notion of originality at least allowed the students one more language through which to deliver their thoughts.

Yet, one cannot ignore the reality that through its mission to offer a free arts education to some of Phnom Penh's talented youth, Reyum must also train its students so that they can support themselves in the future. In a devastated economy such as that of Cambodia, artwork inspired by financial reward may ultimately remain the only option. Under such circumstances, can Reyum justify risking the future of its students by teaching them a form of artwork that holds possible consequences of either success or failure? Is there room for the Westernized Cambodian artist in Cambodia? Seemingly, the more likely result would be similar to that experienced by Fousing Sem. “When I returned from France, I wanted to tell my friends about all the great things I learned there. But they would get so mad at me when I would start talking about it. They asked, ‘Do you think you are better than us now that you have gone to France?’ Of course I don't think I'm better; I just wanted to open their eyes. But they refused to listen.” Fousing was rejected by his friends because of the connotations—opportunity, wealth, change—associated with traveling to the West and their ensuing jealousy. In this way, the creativity of one individual could provide the opportunity for others to reject him or her, similar to the rejection of Cambodians who fled the Khmer Rouge and now have tried to return to their native country, only to be greeted by Cambodians who label those that fled during the Khmer Rouge as ex-Cambodians who can no longer consider themselves Khmer. If producing creative artwork threatens the very well-being of the artist—which it could likely do in a society which does not encourage deviation from the norms—then the merit of inserting this concept must be scrutinized. Likewise, even if the community accepted an avant-garde approach to artwork, the symbolic meaning behind Rith's comments on the general lack of interest in oil paints could leave many artists without any pay. Thus, the negative impacts which an increased focus on imagination could have on Cambodian society weigh heavily against the available rewards.

The issue of balance appears crucial when deciding whether creative approaches should have their own place in Cambodian art's future. The example of Vann Nath, a friend of Reyum, offers priceless insight into the possible role that a balanced approach to artwork could play. Born in Battambang, Cambodia in 1946, Vann Nath grew up with a very non-traditional immersion into artwork in which he painted movie posters and portraits. In 1976, the Khmer Rouge imprisoned him in a Phnom Penh prison called Tuol Sleng, where he experienced horrendous torture and was nearly killed. He surely would have died along with the rest of the 20,000 that were murdered in Tuol Sleng had it not been for the guard's discovery of his unusual artistic talents, at which point he was ordered to paint propaganda portraits of Pol

Pot. He and seven other artists were the only prisoners to survive Tuol Sleng. After the war, the new government commissioned him to paint the atrocities that were committed; often his memory was limited only to the noises which he heard from nearby cells. He painted the graphic scenes and methods of torture in

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a style uniquely his own—a style in which the images did not look like photographs but still contained a precise sense of accuracy. They hang in the Tuol Sleng museum today as an artifact which allows Cambodia and the rest of the world to understand the atrociousness that occurred under the rule of the Khmer Rouge.

When I met Vann Nath this past summer in the small restaurant that he owns with his wife and three children, I found myself surprised at his calm and peaceful demeanor. Adorning the restaurant walls were dozens and dozens of his

latest paintings, many of which were purchased by both foreign clientele and local customers and which expressed a much more optimistic reality than the one presented in his images of Tuol Sleng. While listening to him narrate the stories behind each one, it occurred to me that there existed a significant difference between the type of realism that Nath presented in his artwork and that pursued by the school. While most Cambodian artists focused on painting realistic paintings—replicas of portraits, buildings, and the countryside—Vann Nath created *paintings of reality*. His images of the horrors of Tuol Sleng conveyed his perspective on the trauma which both he and others experienced and witnessed. Thus, his emotion-driven work opened the eyes of millions of people and allowed for a type of historical awareness that would have been otherwise difficult to achieve.

Vann Nath's incredible artistic and life journey allows one to appreciate the possible role that an element of creativity can play in Cambodian artwork. By not limiting himself to the traditional forms of art and artistic expression, Vann Nath tapped into the emotions in his mind and feelings in his heart and positioned them in his work in a manner executed by few of his colleagues. His example suggests that while Western style creativity in the most extreme sense may not appropriately mix with Cambodian artwork, there still remains a form of creativity using both models and reality which could allow Cambodians to begin thinking more deeply about their recent past, their present lives, and their future ambitions. As demonstrated with the students at the Art School, when given the opportunity to adapt creativity to the forms of artwork with which they already feel comfortable, ideas begin to flow and emerge from the enforced repression of a society not yet confident of the results of allowing observations

to interrelate with sentiments and outlooks. Yet when given the opportunity to individually articulate these notions even within specific paradigms—such as those which dictated Vann Nath to reproduce what he had seen in Tuol Sleng, or those which govern the mindset of the Art School children when thinking about their future occupations, or even those which inspired Rith to produce a portrait of his father—the effects on both the artist and the surrounding community become invaluable. The ability to communicate one's real thoughts on paper—whether through artwork, writing, photography, etc.—leads to a greater understanding of oneself and one's surroundings. The students of the Art School as well as a few local artists have demonstrated an interest in cultivating this understanding. While Cambodia will always maintain its traditional style of exact replication, a new form of creativity in Cambodia's own terms will allow the country to continue developing its artistic culture as well as its concrete and realistic impression of the surrounding world.

Part V

While the merits of creativity may provide a rationale for the inclusion of foreign ideas into Cambodia's present-day politics, economics, and social issues, a visitor from overseas must still observe proper etiquette when trying to introduce his or her ideas. Phnom Penh has become home to hundreds of Western-directed NGOs, most which function in the name of sustainable development and improvement for Cambodia and its people. Yet on numerous occasions, I found myself audience to an explosion of criticism about the actual benefits offered by NGOs. All of these outbursts amounted to one and the same question: What role, if any, should Westerners play in Cambodia's present and future existence?

To some Westerners the answer seems simple. Send over our missionaries, politicians, economists and social workers and let them fix all the problems. Yet to others, the words “send,” “fix,” and “problems” send chills down their spines. “What else could the connotations and meanings of such words express other than a complete lack of understanding, respect and consideration for Cambodian history and culture?” they ask. Nonetheless, without some education about the dynamics between countries such as the U.S.A. and Cambodia, it remains easy to take the obvious differences between them—political stability, economic strength, social welfare—as a rationale which asserts the Western country's superiority. Although such an attitude ultimately only hurts the receiving end of such a negotiation, I myself recall feeling somehow empowered by the notion that I, as an American, had the opportunity to go to Cambodia and work on “coexistence and reconciliation,” as phrased by my Fellowship. In an early journal entry, I described this state of mind through a third-person narration.

Having prepared for months in advance, the Coexistence Intern Going to Cambodia is an energetic, excited, and “selected” 20-year-old. He has conducted research all about

Cambodia and is up-to-date on its history, politics, economic difficulties and social realities. He has read about the work of NGOs and knows about their respective successes and failures. He realizes the degree to which corruption runs through the government and misery through most families. He has collected a mass number of books of stories from personal survivors of the Genocide and can comfortably narrate the factual happenings between 1975-1979, when the Khmer Rouge presided over the entire country with its atrocious whips of terror.

The Coexistence Intern Going to Cambodia believes that he can leave a lasting impression on many of those whom he will meet; equal to the impression they will leave on him. He envisions that he will jump over the language barrier in leaps and strides and that through powerful eye contact and a genuine interest in those with whom he's speaking, all communication will flow and be understood. Although he has been told many times not to expect to change Cambodia, deep inside he hopes to make a difference. He expects to return to his University full of completed projects and stories of people he has gotten to know; people with whom he shall mutually share many memories and continuing contact. Most of all, he envisions helping many people talk—maybe even for the first time—about the tragedies of their personal histories and he hopes to assist them in beginning to reconcile with the past so as to move into the future.

I could not have entered Cambodia with a more naïve perspective on how the country operates. The title of “Coexistence Intern” already established an unequal playing field between me and those whom I was being “sent” to “help.” In reality, no one in Cambodia actually requested or needed my help, and my position as intern on a fellowship from a prestigious university with a coexistence program only acted to increase the distance between me and Cambodia. Yet, many western-based NGOs exist in a similar perpetual state of blindness where they refuse to accept the intrusiveness of their entry into a foreign culture. Even worse, some NGOs simply refuse to consider the disproportionately large input—their expenses—compared to the oftentimes small output—the benefit to the community—which they exchange in trade.

A smaller minority of Westerners have recognized this imbalance and consequently refuse to allow their own organizations to breed this mentality and behavior. Reyum falls into this latter category. From my first day entering the Art Gallery, Ingrid made her low regard for Western aid and student interns quite visible to me. Although still in transition from my first identity as Proud American Savior to a second identity as Lost American in Awe, Reyum's attitude hit me hard. In the same journal entry as before, I described the experience of having my idealistic preconceptions of Cambodia flattened into ones which began to make me aware of the reality of this country.

When the Coexistence Intern Going to Cambodia finally arrives in Cambodia, he is eager to begin all of his

important work. To his dismay, open arms, work itineraries and the many people with whom he will engage in “deep” conversations do not greet him. Quite on the contrary in fact, the locals are too busy working to survive to notice him and the survivors (namely everyone) have little intention of disclosing facts and stories about their past to someone they do not know and who does not speak their language. The women are too shy and oppressed to speak with him and the youth live in fear of discussing publicly any of their thoughts about the government. With those with whom it is possible to converse, the dialogue often exist in paradigms and limitations which remain nearly invisible to the Intern who has no grounding or foundations in a culture entirely not his own. However, he brushes these obstacles off as products of only having been in Cambodia for one day.

Yet, he is soon forced to acknowledge that with only two months in Cambodia, his offerings as an American are few and far between. The Coexistence Intern is not necessary in Cambodia. The country and her people will continue marking their path of survival with or without him. The most he can hope to offer is a little bit of cultural insight into what life is like in America and our creative approach to activity vs. the do-what-it-takes-to-make-money approach of this country. Even here though, the Coexistence Intern must understand that life in Cambodia functions on very different terms, and that while in the U.S. it may seem unusual for a child to skip over teenage-hood and go straight into the workforce at the age of 13, in Cambodia, it has become quite the norm. The Coexistence Intern feels guilty because he is doing very little Coexistence work as learned in his theory class prior to the internship.

The guilt I felt originated from my own expectations and only prolonged how long it would take for me to find a comfortable position in which I could spend the next two months in Cambodia. After some time however, I began to realize that if I intended to immerse myself in the Khmer culture, I would need to drop all of my preconceived notions and accept my role as outsider who would learn most through observation. Only after realizing this point did my experience as an intern begin to manifest itself into an experience of my own. Again, I continued writing in my journal entries about this process of assimilation and transition.

Over time, the longer the Coexistence Intern stays in Cambodia, the more he begins to discover and appreciate that his influence here can be real but that it must operate on very different principles from past work experiences. Everything must be self-initiated and the results must not be approached in a success/failure or progress/deteriorate type of context. Rather, results must be viewed in terms of the quality of interactions. Every conversation produces thoughts, ideas, and some degree of connection. These exchanges, even when they do not produce a single tangible or material result with which he can write back to his University, remain important

for a greater understanding and ability to communicate with people in general. The Intern must accept his role as a passive observer and that only when lucky, may he occasionally become an active participant. The Coexistence Intern Going to Cambodia must learn to drop all sets of expectations and simply function as a sponge that continuously absorbs everything around him; only occasionally may he be in the position to leak/squeeze/offer a few droplets of anything in return.

Thus, as with creativity, outsiders interested in working in the country should also begin with a mentality of meeting Cambodia on her own terms and not on those presented by a Western standard of ideals. As soon as one insists on using his or her own cultural norms and education as a basis upon which to decide whether another country needs “help,” “fixing,” or even “development,” one runs the risk of entirely missing the dynamics and factors which make each culture uniquely its own. A quote by David Whyte from his 1997 audiotape *Making a Friend of the Unknown* beautifully summarizes this concept.

Though I've written poetry since I was small, I actually studied marine zoology and worked as a naturalist in the Galapagos Islands. It's an old joke but when I got to those islands I found that none of the animals had read any of the zoology books that I had read. They all had lives of their own. I couldn't have gotten to the Galapagos Islands without my training, but my training was also the greatest thing which lay between me and that world. My training was like a grid which I would place over the world which I was trying to perceive. Sometimes the lines of that grid were so thick that you could barely see anything at all between them. There was a kind of innocence which I was forced to cultivate. I had to become innocent again after my training in order to see that world on its own terms. That innocence came out of the silence of being there, hour after hour after hour after day after day after month after month, watching the plants and animals and landscapes and changing weather patterns and the sea and becoming a part of that life. I think it's why I went back into poetry after I left Galapagos because I felt that poetry was a more precise way of describing the world than science.

Until I could remove from my eyes the grid of expectations and knowledge which I brought with me to Cambodia, I would not be allowed to connect with others on any but the most superficial of levels. However, the process of realizing this idea proved to be one of the most crucial turning points of my experience in the country. For this reason, it remains vital for interns and NGOs alike to acknowledge, undergo and accept their own internal changes before working on any substantial external changes. Without this process, any positive outcomes which could arise from inter-cultural communication will remain lost in the fog of cultural misunderstandings, assumptions and disrespect.

Part VI

“Is it my job to push Cambodians into a direction where they may not even want to go? Why aren't Cambodians doing this? Why aren't the government officials who have loads of money taking an interest in this? Why is it my responsibility? Is it even helping anything at all?”

I vividly recall the time when while standing in the small kitchen of Ingrid's apartment, she exclaimed these words. At first I found myself shocked and dismayed at her questions. How could Ingrid question the benefit of her work? How could she not see that most Cambodians weren't in the position to do what she had done? The issue seemed obvious to me: Cambodians concerned with putting food on their plates did not have the luxury of time to think about pedagogical issues.

Yet, Ingrid's trepidation about her role in Cambodia echoes that of other NGO directors who also question their position as Westerners working in third-world countries such as Cambodia. Her worries are twofold. Personally, Ingrid has been drained by the reality that the very people with whom she has tried to work often have fought against her to stop her from succeeding. Whether through overt forms of expression—such as the Reyum Art School Director stating that he found it offensive and disrupting that Ingrid would ask the students to question the role of traditional Khmer myths in modern day times—or through more passive types of resistance—the Art School Director begrudgingly complying with Ingrid's requests as if doing her a favor—the end result remains the same. A lack of appreciation and a constant sense of defiance raises questions about the benefits and harms of one's own motives, efforts and work. Ingrid's high self-consciousness and monitoring of her position as a Westerner in Cambodian society remains visible throughout nearly all of her decisions and actions.

Ingrid's second apprehension concerns whether Cambodians would initiate and want to promote an exploration of the recent past and culture if she were not there feeding them her ideas and paying them with her money. “Do you think the workers here would give a damn about any of this if they weren't getting paid?” she would often rhetorically ask me. Ultimately, Ingrid's concerns questioned the role which art could have in a traumatized society.

While both issues concern her right to act as a provoker of change in a society where she encountered resistance from the very people with whom she tried to work, the former point focuses on her own personal experience with service in Cambodia, while the latter issue focuses more on the general question of whether Cambodia wants and/or needs change from its current state.

In conjunction with one another, the responses to these two issues form the rationale which justifies the purpose of such an organization as Reyum in Cambodia.

In terms of her first concern, I felt a compelling need to understand how Ingrid went from a graduate student passionate enough to start-up such an organization as Reyum, to the cynical, skeptical and somewhat depressed woman she

is today. Her high level of self-monitoring began long before I arrived in Phnom Penh, and was directly linked to the many disappointments and frustrations she had encountered during the past several years.

When Ingrid first came to Cambodia over nine years ago, she felt a similar buzz as that which characterized my entire stay there this summer. One's first time in Cambodia is full of fascination, invigoration and awe. The cultural differences serve as adventure for each waking day and act to make each encountered challenge a stimulus for that much more enthusiasm and effort. Casual street-side conversations feel like monumental breakthroughs and the smallest achievement of any sort—whether interpreting directions, or learning to ride a motorbike, or having a conversation in basic Khmer—registers as a milestone in one's personal journey through Cambodia. Hence, the beauty of the naïve, unacquainted traveler.

After some adapting and familiarization with the culture however, the sense of innocent purity can be lost to stronger feelings of specific praise and critique. I recall when I first arrived to Cambodia, my fascination with the disposition of motorbike drivers towards anyone walking by them. Often lazily slouching across their bikes in groups of five or six others, the motorbike drivers would bounce up with interest and simultaneously shout out, "Motorbike!", playfully fighting to see who will be the first to reach this potential passenger. At nearly every corner, motorbike drivers sat cracking jokes at each other and waiting for the next opportunity to make a dollar or two. Yet, this layer of lightheartedness covers the reality burdening the minds of many of these motorbike drivers: lack of shelter, a failed crop season, a starving family back home...

Nevertheless, my interactions with them were always full of smiles, questions, and awkward attempts at directing them in Khmer. I once mentioned to Ingrid how funny I thought it was that as soon as anyone walked out from any building into the street, one could hear the distant squeals of the motorbike drivers, revving their engines, and driving up to make their friendly greetings: "MOTORBIKE!" After this comment, Ingrid shot me a glance and mumbled, "You just give it a few weeks and then see how much you still like them." Only after eventually understanding the level of desperation affecting these drivers, and the day in, day out personal offense which they took when someone decided to walk instead of paying them for a ride, did I begin to comprehend Ingrid's sharp answer to my comment.

Once, while taking a walk with Ingrid I asked her, "Ingrid, why are you always so critical of everything?" Without looking up, she broke one of her exhausted smiles and replied, "Because Dan, when you've seen all the fucked up things I've seen in this country, time and time again without any improvement, it's impossible to be anything but critical."

Ingrid's once youthful outlook had been corrupted by years of disappointments, lost opportunities and frustrating bureaucracy. Although she had arrived in Cambodia with the fresh perspective of a graduate student working on her dissertation, the years she had spent becoming well versed in the

language, the culture and the politics of today's society, ultimately served to corrupt her optimism and deplete her of strength.

I often found myself wondering about the mission which Ingrid had been attempting to serve. For what purpose or aim was her initial strength directed? To help Cambodians begin a dialogue with the past? To use art as a medium for communication in ways which it is not yet used? Perhaps to create an open space where Cambodia's culture can be presented, discussed, or studied? To me, these seemed like noble goals which she had been successfully tackling. So what could explain her constant frustration?

In fact, while all of these missions have embodied Ingrid's work for the past nine years, the reality of the situation is that she receives minimal feedback from the community about the benefit of her activities. Ingrid's comment questioning the responsibility and merit of her work puts into perspective the real problem confronting NGO work in Cambodia.

Both Cambodians and foreigners show very little support for service work done in Cambodia.

The Cambodian populace puts their time into ensuring that their families are fed—that their basic needs are met; the American world where Ingrid was born takes for granted the fulfillment of its basic needs, even when they are not fulfilled for everyone. In Cambodia, most people are too busy surviving to notice her work; in the U.S., most people are too concerned with the superiority of their own nation to notice any service work done in a third-world country. Due to these circumstances, Ingrid lacks the component of energy and encouragement which prompted her interest and active pursuit of coming to Cambodia in the first place.

The foreign service worker in residence in Cambodia enters perpetual cycles of doubt when they do not have others off of whom they can objectively soundboard their ideas and receive solid feedback. Thus, Ingrid's feelings were a manifestation of the inevitable fate of fighting a battle when one isn't even entirely convinced of one's own convictions.

Indeed however, this is the reality of working in most parts of Cambodia.

"Under the pressures produced by financial instability, fear of government, constant violence, and the need to pick up a dollar at every opportunity, Cambodians do not have the time or energy to engage in peace-building or reconciliatory work. Cambodians would love to be able to think of the future as a brighter possibility, but one cannot be so blind or naively hopeful. The corruption running through the government is so great that some Cambodians even fear a repeat of the Pol Pot regime (only within modern-day parameters). Even the youth are afraid to talk about their thoughts of the government because many who speak out against it are found "coincidentally" dead soon after. Most Cambodians cannot afford to think about the future, because there is barely enough time to think about the "now." Delivering food to the family represents by far the greatest occupation on most people's minds, and few Cambodians are in the position to be able to make longer-term plans that involve

education or stability. In a country where one cannot trust anything and where corruption and power remain the governing forces behind decisions, it remains difficult to know anything but what one sees on a tangible, day-to-day basis—and even this can often be entirely disillusioning. Cambodia one day may be in a position to think of the future—and will gladly embrace this day when it arrives—but for now, with the current circumstances, this is simply an impossibility.”

In an e-mail correspondence over the summer, I attempted to clarify the situation in Cambodia to an American friend of mine who could not understand why Cambodia could not just pick itself up and begin to deal with the past. He refused to realize however, that by victimizing the victim, Cambodia’s needs will never be addressed. In order to really understand what will benefit Cambodia, one must look at the dominating and underlying issues which plague her people.

The largest overlooked problem confronting Cambodia today revolves around the issue of *trust*. Whether through the stories of Fousing Sem, or Ingrid’s experiences with parents at the Art School, or in my daily conversations with students such as Supon, it became clear that lack of trust weaves its way through every interaction. Ingrid’s first piece of advice to me when I told her that I’d like to work at the art school dealt with this exact issue. “Just remember Dan, if you say you’re going to do something with them, you better do it. If you know you’re not going to be able to do whatever it is that you’re promising, then it’s better just to keep your mouth shut. This culture has seen enough broken promises.”

In a society without trust, relationships—between people, between organizations, between the government—remain unreliable. Yet, Reyum has become a space upon which some Cambodians have begun to rely. Contrary to Ingrid’s beliefs, the Reyum community—including the workers, the kids, and the Cambodians who have come to appreciate its work—has felt a taste of real trust. Although filled with cracks and gaps left to be filled, the children at the school have grown to rely and trust that the Art School will not disappear one day. The Reyum workers have learned to trust that their jobs will not be snatched from underneath them one morning. In effect, the Reyum community has come to see Reyum as a reliable space.

In this way, Reyum does serve a valuable function in Cambodian society by acting as the first stepping-stones for a society in desperate need of someone or something to trust. Cambodians have yet to begin speaking about their thoughts, memories and fears of the Khmer Rouge. A victim’s path to recovery lies in feeling safe enough to begin discussing (in either internal and/or external dialogue) the past. Yet, when everyone in Cambodia has been afflicted with the same illness—the death of over two million of one’s own people—which Cambodian will be the strong one to step up and begin the reconciliatory process?

In a manner of speaking, Reyum has been the one to step up. It has the time in its day to devote to thinking about this process; the majority of Cambodians cannot afford this time. Reyum embodies a position that actually grants it access

to a realm nearly unknown by most Cambodians: freedom of thought. As a foreigner, Ingrid’s position as director of Reyum allows her to address the issues confronting so many Cambodians, without the fear that prevents Cambodians from addressing these issues themselves.

Reyum can put up an exhibit about Cambodian identity; it can display art about the presence or absence of the soul since the Khmer Rouge; it can present the works of Vann Nath and Tuol Sleng; it can ask Cambodian children to draw their thoughts about the future or to imagine a past which their parents refuse to discuss. Reyum embodies a position which is available to few Cambodians—a neutral moderator of reflection.

In a traumatized society recovering from civil violence and warfare, the power of reflection-based artwork remains unbeatable. Art acts as the medium and moderator for thinking, speaking and listening. Most importantly, artwork, in any way which Cambodians deem appropriate, can begin to truthfully address the past. Realizing this, Reyum has used the notions of creativity and change to encourage artists to utilize their talents not only for commercial purposes, but for therapeutic and meditative ones as well. Specifically, Reyum has utilized the formula for creativity which ensures its utilitarian success: creativity on Cambodia’s own terms.

Through the use of reflection-based creativity grounded in the needs and wants of the Cambodian people, Reyum can allow Cambodians to use a new concept in a way which serves them best. *If Cambodians can trust art as a medium for exchanging new ideas, they can begin conversing about the past—sharing stories, memories and events.*

Despite this, many foreign workers worry that even with good intentions, the foreigner in Cambodia will ultimately plant ideas into the society which Cambodians might otherwise not have come up with on their own. Out of frustration Ingrid once asked me, “What if the culture only wants similarity? Commissions repeat themselves and everyone wants what someone else has. In such a context, the new is the strange, the bad, the unusual, the not wanted.”

Yet, my time in Cambodia this summer has led me to believe that Cambodia is not opposed to the new. Rather, most Cambodians have simply not been in a position to trust the new. When the Khmer Rouge took over, Cambodians began by rejoicing and celebrating, only to realize all too soon that this new leadership had a terrible fate in store for them. When the Vietnamese took over in 1979, many Cambodians again thought they were being saved, only to find out that they were now to be controlled and abused once again by another power. This cycle has continued until present day with unmet promises of foreign aid, fair elections and stability. In learning to mistrust any promises for change, Cambodians’ hesitations towards delving back into the past for the purpose of reconciliation—a novel concept in Cambodia’s history—remain completely logical.

Yet, only when the cycle of mistrust is broken will Cambodians finally begin rising from the bloody dust which still lingers through every part of their lives.

A form of reconciliatory creativity—even if introduced by a Westerner—which allows Cambodians to begin building their own foundations for trust must not be concealed behind doors of cultural self-righteousness. Despite the concern that Cambodia may not be ready for the new, the strange or the unusual, Cambodians have the right to decide for themselves whether these tools are ones which they want to use. One may ultimately find that all that Cambodians are waiting for is the initial spark and leader to fight for this cause.

Through a balanced transfer of ideas—from such organizations as Reyum to the local artists and Khmer people—one realizes that the potential role which foreigners and specific Western ideas can play in Cambodia can significantly and positively affect the lives of natives. Without the necessary trust lacking in present day Cambodia, the country's developments and attempts at standing up again will likely crumble to the ground. However, by using trust as a platform, and art as a microphone through which to begin addressing the real needs of the Khmer people—to enter into dialogue with the burning pain of the last thirty years—Cambodia will find the means by which to begin to remove from its eyes the blindfold of the past and look towards the future with clearer vision.

Part VII

Brown feet and toes, hands and fingers, arms and legs; hairy and smooth, stretching out, folded in. They twitch and jerk, support and trip, tense and relax. Patches of darker gray and smudges of lighter black coat the soles and tips of the toes and fingers as they mold onto the hard mounds of land beneath them. Some feet rest flat on the ground, while others arch in a semi-circle; still others press up against their neighbors or curl up into themselves.

Under the shade of a great palm tree, the Reyum Art School students and teachers do not feel the pounding and forceful sun which seems to make everything within its gleaming reach move in lazy stride. The warm wind passes by as if on a casual stroll. Cows brush up against brittle leaves, evading the sharp, jagged cacti which emerge from the ground through unforgiving vines and thorns. Rigid weeds penetrate soft patches of dirt, grass, and sand and remain visible throughout the flat land of the Cambodian countryside.

To the background music of clinking cow bells, the younger students run and skip in the bumpy field, playing games with small sacks of sand or plastic toys which they found near an old farm wagon. Some chase each other with dry palm branches, while others roll along the ground until small dust storms cover them and only the sounds of high-pitched laughter escape. The older students sit nearby against trees, sprawled along the grass or aligned with rocks, and draw the expansive farmland: the large trees, the water-filled rice fields, the small wooden shacks sprinkled along the horizon. Rith sits perched on a splintered wooden plow, and VanChan dozes nearby on the seat of his motorbike. I sit nearby writing in my journal and feel both the exhaustion and excitement of our isolation from the city.

The older students quietly munch on their tropical fruits while sketching the preliminary outlines of their drawings and paintings. Some wear long-sleeved shirts and pants while others have already taken off their shirts. Today it is Saturday morning, and almost all of the 130 Reyum students have come along on this field trip to the countryside. They sit with drawing pads and canvases. Some students color their images with crayons, while others lighten and darken their paper with watercolors. Rith elegantly shades his canvas with blue, green and yellow oil tones. At least half a dozen students share the limited supply of oil paints and gracefully create blurry and abstract images of the landscape.

For today, everyone's assignment remains quite flexible: draw anything, with anything that you like, in any form that you wish.

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