

[current affairs – affairs of currents]

making economies richer, making ecologies poorer?

In search of a we-we situation

created by TAN Vatey in the framework of Currents 2019

Opening Wednesday 27 March 2019 | 6pm ~ Closing Sunday 7 April 2019 | 6pm
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[current affairs ... affairs of currents] is an art installation created by TAN Vatey in the frame of the group exhibition CURRENTS 2019. With the magic & organic collaboration of the kids from the neighborhood: Im Makara Rithy Reach, Khun Dalen, Khun Dalin, Roeun Ratanak Thida, Roeun Ratanak Viseth, Long Puthea Rith, Long Sok Sreylin, Pich Mony Vatey. To know more about the art work, we have written down a conversation between TAN Vatey and Sinta WIBOWO:

Sinta: *Hey Vatey, how is it flowing with the Currents exhibition? Can you tell me a bit more about your new art installation I'm curious how you got the idea.*

Vatey: Hey Sinta, yes, I'm installing my work at the moment. Well, it all started from the wooden house of my grandmother that was destroyed to make place for a new modern house. I was in Chiang Mai when it happened and very shocked when I saw the pictures. I didn't know about it and it all went so fast! Some months later, I got another shock because the trees of my childhood died because of those construction works. Trees are my friends, we grow up together. My sister and I sat under the tree drawing on our chalkboards. We had a swing on the tree and a lot of fun. We picked the fruits and ate them. Some trees were also my toilets when I was a kid, hahaha... This year, many fruit trees died. It was not a natural death. It was because the land was filled with sand and cement, infertile ground that cut the tree's roots from food and drink.

Sinta: *Hmm, I feel your sadness. How did you want to tell your story in the materials you use for your installation?*

Vatey: I didn't want to use sharp tools to carve or remodel the pieces of the tree. I found them already cut on a pile, like a mass grave. This installation is a tribute to their death. I used clay and cement to put on top of the trunks and find a soft way to make the materials speak with each other. My father looked for *soil* to make the ground around our grandmother's place in Kandal better and grow plants again. He likes nature and growing things! He found the clay from a pond, actually good quality for construction or for making pots, but not good for farming because when it mixes with water, the clay becomes very strong and not breathable. With the "concrete revolution" and all these development projects, cement is everywhere! "People use cement because they find it solid, strong, cheap and modern. The current trend of modernity is to no longer use natural materials. With cement, the earth cannot breathe, the currents' flow stop. Have you noticed how hot it is around cemented places? Cement takes more and more space and grows over nature, suffocating it and interrupting the flow of life. But, did you know that when you put cement on wood, that wood doesn't stick to the cement and lets go of the cement at some point? I also didn't want to use nails to pierce or force it to stay together.

Sinta: *Oh, really? So the cement can drop off the trunks at some point? It likes life when things have to flow separate ways... How did you use the coloring of the cement?*

Vatey: Yes, I want to let it go and not control or fix the relation between wood and cement or interrupt. I was thinking about the white “wound paint” for tree trunks to protect or the paint that stops stump growth and kills it. I wanted to use color and make it alive and I started to experiment till it looks like “slimes”. Slimes are flexible and humid. Actually, when I was installing, the gate was open and kids from the neighborhood came in with curiosity, attracted by those shiny slime-parts. Making and playing with slime, is a big trend with young kids now. I was still busy with painting and the kids were so fascinated and enthusiastic that they asked me if they can also color some trunks. I was thinking why not, they can color one. I had only 2 brushes so I let them do the game of paper-rock-scissors and the one who loses, can have the brush and try to paint. They all wanted to lose the game! Hahaha... At some point, one of the kids started to dip one finger in the paint and drip the color on the cement. They figured out they didn’t need a brush anymore. They realized they can use their hands and not wait for the other kid to finish, hahaha... So now, every one of them wanted to color the cement and I let them do it, asking them to be careful not to drip on the wood, just the cement. Not an easy task! Also the 2-year old was helping by arranging the colors back in the box with so much care! While working together, I was telling them the story of my tree-friends like how I’m telling you here. The kids also noticed there were not many trees anymore in Phnom Penh. They felt for more and more trees dying. Do you also know that the cement used for all these development projects of modernity, is making our mountains disappear?

Sinta: *Oh no! Sigh, the current affairs have so many effects on nature! Actually, on several places in the world now, it are the children who are going on the street. On Fridays, students are on strike, trying to stop climate change and they will continue to skip school till their governments listen and go into action! Kids do know and do understand that something is not right. It seems that adults don’t listen or don’t apply the necessary care for their future. It reminds me of Spiderman’s uncle who said: “With great powers, comes great responsibility! So, who is most responsible for this ecological mess? Countries, systems and people with a lot of power, I guess... Global North also likes to complain about pollution by Global South, but it’s Global North who invented plastic and orders mass production with their power of money. In the courtyard, you have a special lay-out of the trunks and plants, can you tell me about that?*

Vatey: I wanted to make pairs of a dead trunk and a baby plant that is alive. Why not at least plant a tree for every cut tree? Wherever you stand in the courtyard, you can see one pair coming together. The rest of the trunks and plants are more random, forming a forest.

Sinta: *What happens with the plants after the exhibition is finished, because [current affairs ~ affairs of currents] is only on for a very short period, from March 27 till April 7?*

Vatey: “Yeah, I was also surprised it’s only 12 days so I want to make sure that the baby plants are taken care of. At the opening, people can sign up to adopt a baby plant. Their names are put on a paper and collected in a bowl. At 7pm, the neighbourhood kids will pick 10 lucky names and these people can become a foster parent to one plant. Also kids can sign up themselves, no need to be over 18 years! Each foster parent will receive an ‘agreement of foster care’ with their name and a name for the plant if they want. With that paper they promise to care for their baby plant and they can pick up the baby plant on Sunday April 7 at 10 am. We’ll make a group with these foster parents where we can share pictures of their new homes, exchange tips how to take care of them, get to learn plants better and each other!”

Sinta: *Waaw, so these are the current affairs & affairs of currents you are preparing, thank you very much for this nice conversation and good luck with the project, Vatey! Very happy you help people to apply their care for nature in togetherness!*