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PERSPECTIVE

Possibilities of the Unreal

Shorts by Southeast Asian independent filmmakers and artists challenge accepted perspectives on charged political topics. *By Ceci Moss*

The representation of the real has been a primary concern of film since the beginning of the medium in the 19th century. A thematic series of screenings at this year's International Short Film Festival, "Unreal Asia," in May in Oberhausen, Germany, proposed to take on this perennial subject from a new angle, spotlighting innovations made in experimental film and video art from across Southeast Asia. Curated by Gridthiya Gawee Wong, director and founder of the Bangkok-based arts organization Project 304 and the Bangkok Experimental Film Festival, and David Teh, an

academic and critic based in Bangkok, "Unreal Asia" examined realism from a perspective rooted in Asia's own culture, history and traditions, with an emphasis on the explosion of digital video, mobile phones, digital cameras and the internet in Asia beginning in the late 1990s.

In their accompanying essay, the curators align their working definition of realism with Western modernism's enduring rationalism, rooted in empirical knowledge. In Southeast Asia, however, modernization has taken a different course, one influenced by political and cultural



1. MARTYN SEE,
Speakers Cornered,
2006, video stills.
Courtesy the artist.

2. LIN + LAM,
Unidentified Vietnam
No. 18, 2007, film
stills from 16mm film.
Courtesy the artists.

3. DINH Q. LÊ,
The Farmers and the
Helicopters, 2006,
video stills. Courtesy
the artist.

4. DINH Q. LÊ,
The Farmers and the
Helicopters, 2006,
production still of
two homemade, life-
size helicopters
made by farmers
in Vietnam. Courtesy
the artist.

5. LIN + LAM,
Unidentified Vietnam
No. 18, 2007, still from
16 mm film.
Courtesy the artists.

factors such as post-colonialism, civil conflict, paternalistic dictatorships, ancestral worship and Confucian family values. In making this claim, the curators also note that a stable notion of Southeast Asia is itself a thorny proposition considering the region's complex history and heterogeneous cultural lineages.

Given the lack of infrastructure for supporting independent film and video in countries like Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, Teh and Gaweewong relied on a network of friends and associates to compile material for the festival. This DIY ethos carried over into the films themselves, as many of the filmmakers are also engaged in activism. The first program in the series, "Present Tense: State Fictions, Fictional States," included the work of Hafiz, an Indonesian filmmaker, member of the artists' collective *ruangrupa* and director of the biannual OK.Video festival in Jakarta. *Bertemu Jen* ("Meet Jen") (2008) is a 16-minute film that is simply an interview with the filmmaker's friend Jen, a middle-aged, out-of-work actor who contemplates his life and notes that the political changes in Indonesia have had little impact on him. Hafiz alerts the viewer to each cut in the film with an audible censorship bleep, suggesting that politics may have a larger influence on Jen, consciously or not.

Video is also a medium for activism on the part of Martyn See, whose films have been banned in his native Singapore. *Speakers Cornered* (2006) captures a street demonstration against the IMF-World Bank meeting in 2006 in Singapore. More a document than a documentary, the straightforward, un-narrated film begins in the Speakers' Corner in Singapore's Hong Lim Park, which is a designated area for public speech exempted from police-sanctioned registration and approval. Groups of more than five people are not allowed to march outside of Speakers' Corner in the city-state, so See's film follows four participants as they attempt, unsuccessfully, to walk individually toward the site of the meeting as they are each thwarted by a small army of police. See provides no explanation, critique or narrative beyond the facts of the protest; the overwhelming ratio of officers to protestors conveys the lack of any meaningful existence of free speech.

Using video to give voice to under-represented stories is a frequent theme in works addressing the Cold War. Two films on Vietnam, Lin + Lam's *Unidentified Vietnam No. 18* (2007) and Dinh Q. Lê's *Người nông dân và những chiếc trực thăng* (*The Farmers and the Helicopters*) (2006), poetically

combined archival footage with contemporary video to address the United States' representation of the war during the conflict. New York-based Lin + Lam's documentary on 1960s American propaganda films in Vietnam is shot on location at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, where clips from slowly disintegrating film rolls (catalogued as *Unidentified Vietnam No. 1-17*)—made by dubiously named companies such as Freedom Films—are intercut with shots of the fluorescent-lit interiors of the government building's long, windowless hallways. One gradually becomes aware that the imperialistic motives behind the films and the celluloid's deteriorating condition exemplify American business as usual, casting a sinister shadow over the Library of Congress' aseptic environment.

The representation of the Vietnam War is central to Lê's *The Farmers and the Helicopters*, which pairs external representations of the war derived from American television with a series of present-day interviews and investigates the continuing symbolism of the helicopter for the Vietnamese. The interviews are shown alongside loud, dramatic footage of choppers flying over burning villages and distributing supplies during the war. The principal subjects, Le Van Danh, a farmer, and Tran Quoc Hai, a self-taught mechanic, build their own helicopter to better seed and spray their crops, and express pride, after years of self-study, in transforming a machine that represents suffering and combat into a more benign tool. Both *Unidentified Vietnam No. 18* and *The Farmers and the Helicopters* emphasized the personal stories of those living in Vietnam, bringing into relief the distortions of official rhetoric.

During the "Unreal Asia" panel discussion, Lê contrasted the development of video and the internet in Vietnam and other countries in the region with that of the US. He suggested that the spread of inexpensive video-recording technology and increased internet connectivity have resulted in a new sensibility unique to Southeast Asian filmmakers—whereas in the US video was a crucial precedent to the internet. The result is a different, more interconnected understanding of those mediums.

The curators' essay further expounds this point by proposing that "Unreal Asia" is a "gesture toward an 'expanded' cinema, since digital tools tend to bridge or differentiate the fields of fictional, documentary, personal or art filmmaking, animation and video art." Due to the range of material included in the program, it is difficult to argue that "Unreal Asia" captured a realism particular to the region. That said, individually themed screenings on subjects such as state control, migration and identity made it clear that new technology is encouraging filmmakers to tackle substantive issues with new, distinctive methods.

