

Chasing the Shadows

- Homage to Soeung Vannara

In Tokyo I've been meticulously shaving bamboo sticks and sanding rattan to craft an artwork in response to the works of art by Soeung Vannara (Cambodia, 1962-). I've chosen to do so by creating my own Khheng Ek kites, traditional Cambodian Kites, drawing upon information gathered from sources including instructions from his 2002 workshop conducted at Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, and anecdotes shared by people who knew him. Gradually, as I comprehend the construction of this rather intricate kite, as the kite takes shape, I am also gaining insights into the natural resources, histories, and ways of life in Cambodia.

Kites as Artworks

It all began with a rare viewing of two kites by Vannara during my artist-in-residency at Fukuoka Asian Art Museum last summer. At that time, I had just begun preparing for the production of kites adorned with eye motifs, alongside conducting research on kite culture in Kyushu. His kites were quietly stored in the Exchange Studio, situated in a corner of the museum, coincidentally the birthplace of these kites.

I was stunned by their presence. Both kites have complex constructions with mesmerizing shapes. They were not intended to fly, but rather to be displayed indoors, which inspired me to contemplate kites as artworks further. I wondered what the shapes are based on and why it has an instrument attached. But most importantly I was curious to know what led him to make kites in Fukuoka. To find clues to some of the questions that emerged, I decided to research the history of Khheng Ek.

Echoing Sound of Kites

The ancient Cambodian tradition of kite flying, dates back to around 400 BC and holds profound ritual significance, intertwined with animistic beliefs and agricultural practices. The Khheng Ek is a musical kite featuring a bow-shaped instrument resting on the top. In Khmer, "Khheng" refers to flying kites, which also signifies a predatory bird and symbolizes freedom when soaring in the sky. "Ek" has meaning for both "unique" and "musical instruments," the perfect name for these kites. On some occasions, they are flown in the evening, paying attention to the sound they produced in order to predict the prospects for the upcoming year's harvest.

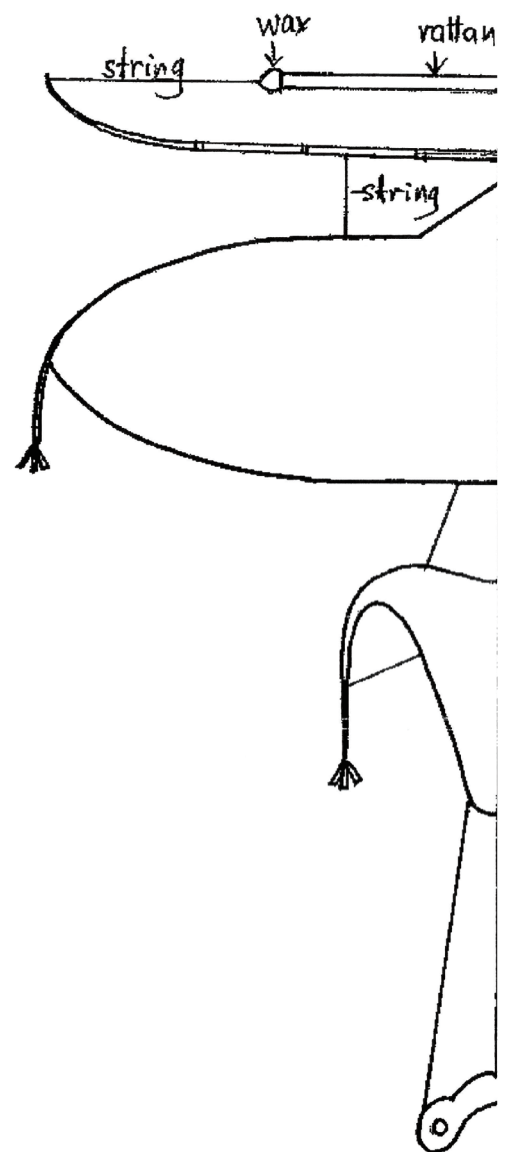


Diagram of Khheng Ek prepared by Soeung Vannara for the workshop "Taco Cup 2002" in 2002. This was used as a basis for my work.

Over time, the significance of kite flying changed with evolving agricultural practices and belief systems. The tradition faced near extinction several times, notably during the oppressive Khmer Rouge regime in the 70s, which even imposed a ban on kite flying. Until the early 90s, only a few elderly individuals retained knowledge of crafting traditional Cambodian kites due to cultural suppression and threats like landmines. However, active efforts to keep this tradition alive began in 1994 with kite festivals, competitions, and educational events. The revival of Khleung Ek holds great cultural significance for Cambodians, symbolizing peace and serving as a link to their cultural identity.



When the framework for the kite was just finished at the studio in Tokyo.

Legacy of Vannara

More than twenty years have passed since Vannara's residency participation at Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, yet reexamining his work now has a significance, particularly against the background of the current context of political antagonisms, environmental challenges and turmoil, marked by ongoing wars and conflicts. Kites serve various purposes - from ritualistic activities to being regarded as toys in times of peace. However, I cannot help but to think about the aspect of kites associated with the military, having been utilized for attacks during wartime.

In Vannara's text, he described that he felt free in Fukuoka. It was an environment where he could just focus on making art and that encouraged experimentation. For him, collaboration and crafting sculptural kites, along with creating installations, were entirely new experiences. And the workshops he conducted became a means for him to share the joyful essence of kites. He was not a man of many words, but his works are powerful and filled with a wish for peace.

My contribution to this exhibition, "Room for FAAM Residence Program PartIII The Flying Kite in the Sky: Soeung Vannara," will be a continuation of a series of kites I've created in recent years: the kites adorned with gazing eyes. The work represents an accumulation and traces of my discoveries and explorations. In embracing the experimental spirit of Vannara and his desire to share experiences, it is crafted as a pair. I ponder how they would perceive us as we perceive them.

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