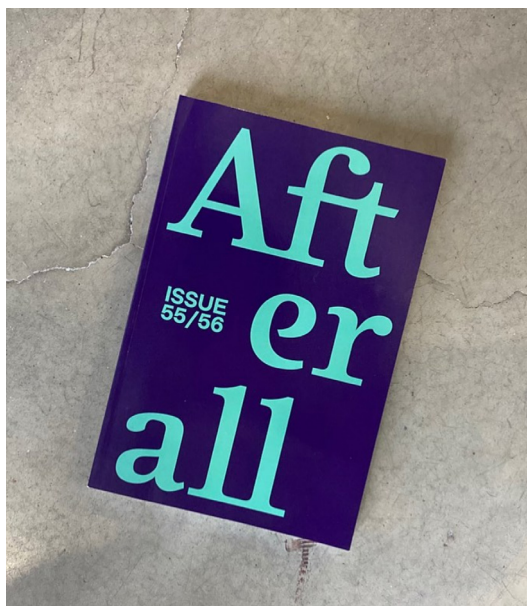


Afterall at 25

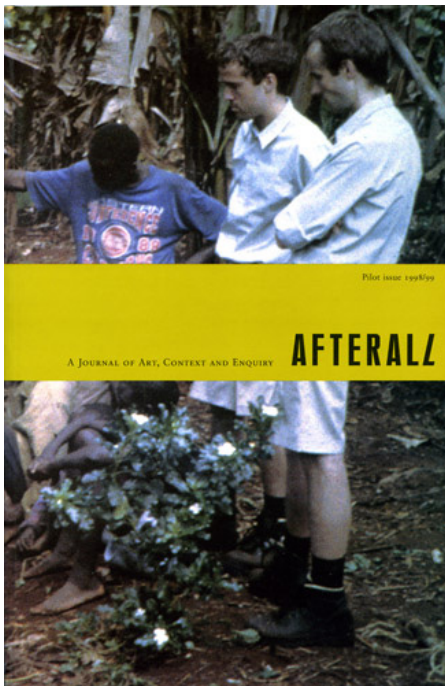
Adeena Mey



Cover of *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, Issue 55–56, 2023.

The first issue of ‘Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry’—a ‘pilot’ Issue 0—came out in 1998–99. Having very recently published the double Issue 55–56, the invitation from *Art & Market* to reflect on *Afterall*’s trajectory is timely. Indeed, *Afterall* is 25 years old. However, beyond the arbitrary as supposed cause for celebration, relevant is what the coincidental nature of an anniversary can tell us about art and publishing and what has made and continues to make a project like *Afterall* possible. Established in 1998 out of Central Saint Martins, now one of the six colleges of University of the Arts London, *Afterall*, as an organisation, started with its eponymous journal, founded by curator Charles Esche and artist Mark Lewis, becoming only later, in 2016, a research centre of University of the Arts London (UAL).

Issue 0 opened with a foreword and closed with an afterword, both penned by the two founding editors. The foreword included an epigraph by Pierre Bourdieu, the late French sociologist's notion of the "critical intellectual" — characterised by her questioning of "the things that are self-evident, in particular those that present themselves in the form of questions, her own as much as other people's."¹ This offered the conceptual basis for *Afterall*'s programmatic editorial. As Esche and Lewis wrote, "It is such a notion of the critical intellectual, broadly and fluidly defined, that *Afterall* claims for contemporary artists—artists who are researchers and experimenters as much as producers, and whose work tests out propositions in ways related to, but different from, both the philosopher and the scientist."² In the afterword, Esche and Lewis pondered "the end of utopia as a utopian possibility" and on "the art work"; seeing in the unnessariness of the labour of the work of art a space of negotiation for post-utopian artistic operations.³



Cover of *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, Issue 0, 1998–99.

25 years later, the organisation is reflecting on its trajectory to anticipate what is to come, in the present, a present significantly shaped by austerity measures in the spheres of art and academia in the UK. In the foreword to our 55–56th Issue, I wrote:

“Today, in mainstream art media, there is no shortage of artists from the Global South and whose practice engages Decolonial ideas. As a non-profit platform, operating between the art world and academia, what distinguishes us and what our hybridity, our non-compliance to standards and standardisation, our preference for heterodoxy, enable us, is to maintain a distinct approach and a singular position.”⁴

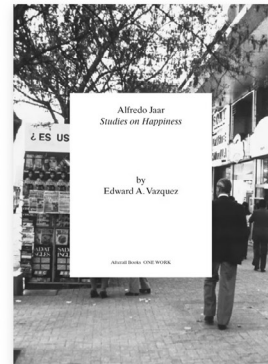
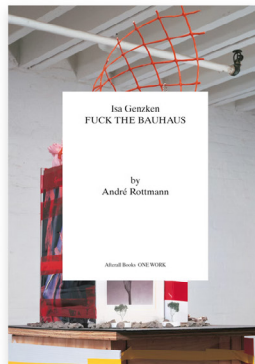
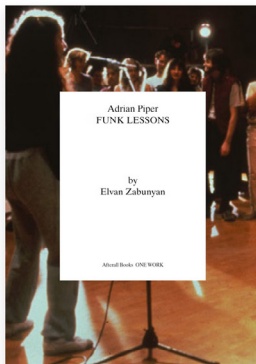


Talk by curator
Hyunjin Kim at the
Afterall office, Central
St Martins, London,
1 June 2023.

Based in an art and design and university, *Afterall* is explicitly exploratory and conscious of our in-betweenness since the beginning. *Afterall's* intellectual scope and the way it has redefined itself over the years, writer Hussain Mitha summed it up as a move from “a position of ‘criticality’ to one of ‘decoloniality’”.⁵ Moreover, it has been intimately interwoven with and co-dependent on its singular model of editorial and institutional partnerships.



Recent titles in the *Exhibition Histories* book series.



Recent titles in the *One Work* book series.

Indeed, with the exception of the *One Work* series, *Afterall* projects all operate through such partnerships. Currently, the journal is produced with M HKA, Antwerp, the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Design, University of Toronto, in association with The University of Chicago Press. As for the *Exhibition Histories* book series, it is an imprint of Asia Art Archive, the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, documenta Institut, and the Faculty of Fine, Applied and Performing Arts, University of Gothenburg.

ARTISTS

Askhat Akhmedyarov

*In the Middle of History
Looking Sideways: On
Askhat Akhmedyarov's
Work and His Time*
Mi You



Spread of an essay by Mi You published in *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, Issue 55–56, 2023.

THE WHITE BUILDING: BUILDING A COMMUNITY, A CITY AND ART Vuth Lyno

After gaining independence from France in 1953 Cambodia went through an unprecedented process of urbanisation and modernisation. Many housing projects were constructed in Phnom Penh in response to the burgeoning urban population. Among those were the Municipal Apartments, one of the first experiments in multi-storey, modernist, apartment-style housing in Cambodia designed by Cambodian architect Lu Ban Hap with Ukraine-born French engineer Vladimir Bodiansky. The structure was conceived along similar lines to the Carréres Cordoba Housing Project (1953) in Carabanza, Morocco, designed by Bodiansky and others under the aegis of ATBAT-Africap. The Municipal Apartments, later known as the White Building – in a precarious condition until its demolition – primarily housed municipal staff and then gradually cultural workers and low-to-mid income families who were seeking to own new homes in the face-changing city.



After the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime (1975–79), surviving artists were the first residents to come and live in the White Building while resuming work at the nearby National Theatre. The neighbourhood grew again as an artist village. Until 2010, it housed a vibrant community of more than 200 residents, including different generations of artists, ethnographic, cultural workers, civil servants, street vendors and migrants from the countryside. Over the



The White Building was in fact part of a larger project called Front du Bassac or Bassac River Front, a public and cultural complex built on reclaimed land along the Bassac River. It comprised several social housing structures, a National Theatre, the Sangkat Reat Nyum Exhibition Hall, and recreational parks. Altogether, the district represented a new vision of independent Cambodia: a pre-public and



The White Building in 2010, after its demolition in September 2010. Photograph by the author.

years, the residents had altered and adapted the structure to accommodate more spaces for their practical housing and living needs. The White Building had become a vibrant, creative and self-sufficient micro-city in itself, encompassing market stalls, restaurants, cafes, salons, entertainment houses and a community school. It was an extraordinary model of what an urban architectural block could be: an infrastructure that (even if unintentionally) allowed rooms for the residents to further transform and repurpose their space into an organically growing and lively neighbourhood.

In reversion of the White Building's dense historical and contemporary context, the Siav Selapak ('Art Rebel') art collective, of which I myself was a part, decided in 2010 to start Sa Sa Art Projects from an apartment inside this neighbourhood. We wanted to revisit the 1960s vision of building a society through public culture, experimentation and transformation of the built environment. We committed to experimental art practices grounded in interaction with everyday, ordinary people and artists from the White Building community, while fostering dialogue with audiences and artists from the city and beyond. We were interested in how art and community can transform each other. We wanted to explore, learn and share contemporary art by experimenting with different modes of engagement other than exhibitions; these included art classes, workshops, residencies, events and collaborations.

The process of making and presenting artworks and events at the White Building was the premise for building a transformative dialogue among the residents, visiting and resident artists, and Sa Sa Art Projects. Previously restricted to the interior space, our events began to happen



A view of the White Building in 2010, after its demolition in September 2010. Photograph by the author.

throughout the neighbourhood. Local students and artists would negotiate with residents to transform their places into ones in which people could experience art. For example, a café was converted into a community cinema screening different kinds of moving-image work (including short video documentaries, contemporary video art, educational animation and award-winning feature films); the street and the building's rooftop became platforms for traditional and contemporary performances; and a resident's exterior wall was transformed into a living installation of photographs where the residents collected their pictures over time. These kinds of short-lived events produced experiences and conversations rather than tangible outcomes or products. In this case, art enriched the community relationship and, in turn, allowed the community to challenge and alter the art itself. Art was infused into the fabric of everyday life, either becoming a part of life or temporarily disrupting and transforming it, highlighting the neighbourhood's resourcefulness.

Sa Sa Art Projects operated as a mechanism for catalysing locally driven initiatives by the residents and students. By facilitating relationships between the students, residents and artists through artistic activities, we strove to produce a form of agency among community members. For example, in the *Sa Sa 2012* (2012) project, twenty young students collectively decided how to present their works in various media, including choosing a title and location throughout the block. Though intended as a one-night event, the students rescheduled it the following evening. Through this process of organisation and presentation, the young students involved in *Sa Sa 2012* not only developed a sense of their own agency, but also gained organisational and negotiation skills, and performed a democratic exercise at a micro-level by producing a collective consensus. The same year, Sa Sa artist-in-residence Masaru Iwai did a project consisting of cleaning a staircase in the White Building, with the support of some local youths. The event started with the artist and the teens doing the cleaning. Then, one by one, the residents began to join in to clean their respective floors. The next weekend, the residents in the next block of the building collectively self-organised and cleaned their own staircases.

After Iwai's project, many more self-organised and collaborative campaigns of cleaning,

Spread of an essay by Vuth Lyno published in *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, Issue 50, 2020.

From 2017 to 2020, Nanyang Technological University's Centre for Contemporary Arts Singapore was an editorial partner of the journal. This was a partnership which can be seen as having contributed to the move to decoloniality mentioned above. To be sure, it amplified *Afterall's* work of attempting to de-centre contemporary art discourse from Western paradigms as primary anchorage, and of rethinking its idiomaticity by engaging with multiple trans-regional perspectives previously repressed or ignored by mainstream art discourses. Regarding our relationship with Southeast Asia, the most visible effect of these conversations were features on artists Yee I-Lann (Issue 45), Lee Wen (46), Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook (47), Thảo Nguyễn Phan (47), as well as contextual essays by Yin Ker on Burmese contemporary (46), and by Vuth Lyno on Phnom Penh's White Building (50), among others.

More recently, our engagement with Southeast Asia has revolved around pedagogy and the transmission of our work as editors, researchers, writers and publishers. In collaboration with Thanavi Chotpradit (Silpakorn University, Bangkok), Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez (University of the Philippines, Diliman), Brigitta Isabella (KUNCI Study Forum and Collective, Yogyakarta), Vuth Lyno (Sa Sa Art Projects, Phnom Penh), Simon Soon (University of Malaya, Malaysia) and the Singapore-based journal *Southeast of Now*, my colleagues Wing Chan, David Morris and myself have been conducting a series of art writing workshops, working together with a cohort of writers, researchers, curators, art workers based in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam. Funded by a British Academy International Writing Workshop Grant, a first iteration took place fully online in 2021. Thanks to a successful second funding scheme, a second iteration will be held both online and with a three-day intensive workshop facilitated with Sa Sa Art Projects and Dambaul reading room in Phnom Penh in July 2024. This writing workshop series is designed to address fundamental questions related to research and publishing, including methodologies, archives, modes of writing and editing, issues of labour and funding.



Online session of 'Terms and Conditions of Art Writing and Publishing in Southeast Asia' Writing Workshops, 2021.

In addition to its commitment to mentoring and nurturing emerging voices, it is also a testament to current dynamic processes that speak to the region's identity. On the one hand, being mindful of the fact that the region is made of different local ecosystems opens up to an expanded understanding of forms of writing, discourses and knowledge production about contemporary art. This acknowledges a diversity of epistememes, languages, forms and formats with regards to the (im-)possibility of acts of translation. On the other hand, while reckoning with the colonial imagination that underpins Southeast Asia as a regional identity and the desire to understand it as a whole, engaging with its inherent cultural hybridity, its kaleidoscopic-like composition, and acknowledging both differences and continuities across its various localities is a way to engage with its reality. The latter is not defined by a geopolitical map, but rather produced through our desires for polyphony and for troubling the laws of genres to produce new discourses and imaginaries for the Southeast Asia of tomorrow.

Notes

1. Pierre Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance – Against the New Myths of Our Time* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 8, quoted in Charles Esche and Mark Lewis, "Foreword", *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, Pilot Issue 0, 1998–99, 4.
2. Ibid.
3. Esche and Lewis, "Afterword: The End of Utopia", *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, Pilot Issue 0, 1998–99, 110–13.
4. Adeena Mey, "Foreword", *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, Issue 55–56, 2023, 5.
5. This has been synthesised in a report we commissioned in 2019 from writer Hussein Mitha: "Afterall Back Catalogue Reading Report", 2019, unpublished.