

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH AUNG KO AND IOLA LENZI

Aung Ko's Village (2011)

Presented by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay

As part of Visual Arts

13 May – 3 July 2011, Esplanade Concourse and Jendela (Visual Arts Space)

Notice:

This interview was published in the programme booklet for *Aung Ko's Village* in 2011. Minor edits have been made for clarity.

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Aung Ko's Village is an art exhibition by artist, Aung Ko (Myanmar).

It was exhibited at the Esplanade Concourse and Jendela (Visual Arts Space), from 13 May – 3 July 2011.

Aung Ko's Village by Aung Ko

Myanmar artist Aung Ko is a versatile young practitioner active on the performance scene in his country. He lives and works in Yangon, but also returns regularly to his village Thu Ye` Dan, located nine hours drive North-West of the capital, not far from the Indian border. Since 2007 Aung Ko has been developing visual art projects in his village, the rural community intrinsic to both his pieces' concept and execution.

Iola Lenzi (IL): Your work revolves around the village, far from the Myanmar capital Yangon. Please explain the role and place of the village in your work.

Aung Ko (AK): I don't like Yangon life much so I go back to my village to make new art. Whereas in Yangon I don't feel I can influence life, in my village, I can hopefully change things for the better. Part of the reason for this is that in the country- side, news spreads easily so information about my projects is communicated widely. There are few distractions in rural Myanmar and villagers are curious so people quite naturally gravitate towards this new experience of the work I propose.

Another reason is the freedom of the village. Questions are easily asked because I am myself one of the villagers even though I left to study in Yangon in 1997. My audience includes both adults and children. Village kids are very simple so they are not afraid to ask essential question. They particularly love to touch, are not afraid even if not familiar with what I am making. I think Yangon people are more inhibited. Children are important to my work because they can change my country's future. In the village, children do not get the opportunity to study for long so my work is also important for them as a learning-exploring experience. In the city, children can change their own life through their knowledge of English. This is not the case in rural Myanmar. Showing kids the language of creativity and art can be a powerful motor for change.

IL: Here in Singapore for this new work at Esplanade, one part in the Concourse, the other in Jendela (*Visual Arts Space*), you aim both to depict the village as an experience, and as a metaphor. Please explain the two different parts of the exhibition and what you want to achieve.

AK: The idea of the piece is to question the idea of high-tech and the ease with which everything, in particular building, is achieved these days. Everything is quick quick! This work is to remind people of nature and village techniques of cooperation and community. Before we become developed, we come from the village. The city people tend to forget this but the village comes first.

IL: The installation in the Concourse is a more literal, if somewhat fantastical, lyrical depiction of the village, easy to read and contemplative in approach, asking viewers what the village means to them today. However, the Jendela sequence - video, photographs and bicycle installation designed to be used - involves the community, both in the building and use of the piece. Please explain this.

AK: Bicycles were rare when I was a child in the village. Those who owned or rode one were considered great! My father took me travelling on his bicycle and used his bike to explain life. I have fond memories of those rides even though now I don't have a bicycle. So, I decided to build a bicycle with the villagers, from parts of bikes used by the villagers through time, the old trips taken by the villagers now part of this new work. This hybrid bike is ridden by three at once and references the past of the local people while also referencing the future in its forward movement. It is yellow like summer and in some ways represents Burma as well, since yellow is the colour of my country. Three people ride the bicycle, the three ages of man, three seasons of Burma, three components of Buddhism, *Buddha, Dharma, Sangha*. Unity of purpose of the three riders is essential for the machine to move forward. This balance is a distinguishing feature of my art.

IL: Explain please how the different media in Jendela are connected and what you aim to achieve with these in terms of concept.

AK: All the elements here relate to one another: the photos of the village and seasonal change, the video, the bicycle. The idea is for audience members to feel like they are in their own village. Thirty photographs document how the village evolved over a year, including how the bicycle changed. I want to invite Singaporeans to experience this because Singaporeans are very urban. Life seems glossy and high-tech here. I want to give them the experience of fresh fruit plucked from a tree, simple cooking, basic pleasures, the opportunity to remember their own village history. In fact everything still

today comes from the village but people in cities forget this. So this involvement of the community –Singaporeans and Burmese workers riding the three-seat bicycle- reminds us both of the village community, and of the fact that even in cities, communities can be formed.

IL: Why do Burmese artists often deal with community in their work?

AG: **Something seems to be missing in urban society. Life there is about artificial relationships. Everything seems covered and fake.**

IL: Is the work about nostalgia?

AK: **Yes and no. We don't want to go back to the past but we want some balance. So we look to the countryside.**

IL: Why do you favour installation and performance?

AK: **I love this kind of work. I don't feel close to painting and prefer to show my work to real working people and not gallery audiences for whom artists make paintings. Installation and performance allow closer contact and communication with the audience, especially the village audience.**

IL: When did you start this type of work?

AK: **I started making installation and performance in 2005 but it was first shown in 2007, the ladder performance. But I did not join performance events in Yangon. I prefer to produce these in my country.**

IL: Do villagers know contemporary art or any art?

AK: **No they don't know. But sometimes it is good not to know and for this reason I think they get more out of the work, can talk about the work freely. I am prepared to accept their interpretation, bad or good. This is an important aspect of the work, this freedom to see what they want in it.**

IL: Freedom is a big theme for outsiders looking in at Myanmar. But what is your freedom about?

AK: People are quick to bring politics into this question of freedom, but it is not so simple. We are all citizens and it is up to us all to effect change. Many people blame the government for problems in my country. I don't see things this way and feel we are all responsible for changing our lives. There is no time to blame others and wait. Better to act now. I make art as a way to act and provoke change. No need to push others to follow. If they want, viewers will take something away from this work. If they don't want to absorb anything, they will not. All must be free to choose their own way. This is how my work is about freedom.

IL: Going back to the ladder performance and installation of 2007, I see something sacred in your work. Am I correct?

AK: I am part of the 1980s generation and grew up in the country-side with not much opportunity to study and get a good education. Technology only arrived recently. Education is important for everyone. I saw fake society in the city. In the village, people are open, there are few secrets. I think life in the country has a sacred quality because it is more human: no materialism, so more transparent; closer to peace and clarity, quiet and essential. The fears there are about the harvest and weather, basic natural things. Also, the natural environment of my part of Burma is very beautiful – waterfalls, mountains, streams, changing with the seasons, so perhaps this is why too.

IL: Do Buddhist ideas influence your work?

AK: We are taught Buddhist philosophy, sympathy and generosity, that everyone must choose his own way. I like to make people think about this idea of choice. This is going back to your question before about installation- more dimensions and interaction with the audience means people can be confronted with this idea of choice and must respond.

IL: Tell me about the idea of empowerment at the heart of your work. Your audience is asked to act, is important and at the centre of the work.

AK: Audiences have different ways of thinking. I want people to react to the piece and think. But maybe the thinking is different to mine. This is fine. On the three-seat bicycle participants must pedal in synch or else they won't move. This is a message: solidarity and cooperation as in human society. We can try but may or may not succeed. I am open to non-success. The riders must respect each other in their pedaling or the bike won't

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move ahead. If there is no balance, the bicycle will not advance. This is the essence of my art.

Exhibition co-curator Lola Lenzi is a Singapore-based critic, researcher, and curator specialising in the contemporary art of Southeast Asia.