



Literary Landscapes

Literary Landscapes is a monthly column by Indra Wussow, a writer, translator and director of the Silt Foundation.

Artists, writers, composers and curators from different countries are part of a new exchange programme that aims to negotiate our different approaches to reflect on our 'burden of history' through the means of art.

How do different countries, whose histories have been marked by huge social upheavals and violence, deal with their pasts, with the resulting trauma and different perceptions of different generations? In what way is the future informed by the past, and how do artists and curators experience the processes of transformation, of shifting identities, of trauma and reconciliation? Will there be common experiences that we all share despite our different cultural codices and historical asynchronicity? What connects us and what separates us?

All the artists involved have dealt with the topics of shifting social parameters and identities and will work together and meet each other several times for the duration of this programme. The countries involved are chosen because of their relevant transformations. This programme will take place in Cambodia, Chile, Cuba, Germany, Haiti, Myanmar and South Africa. The curator of this programme is Indra Wussow.

One of the first trips this new 'transformation project' initiated was the stay of South African pianist, Jill Richards, in Myanmar in July. We were staying in Yangon, the biggest city in Myanmar and had an incredible, intense journey into the heart of a changing country. Changes so dramatic, a historical time that is triumphant and intimidating at the very same time.

The port city of Yangon served as the capital from British colonial time onwards, the remains of which were still visible in many old buildings in its centre until 2005, when the regime suddenly moved the seat of government into an undeveloped area in the middle of the country. Removed from the trials and tribulations of ordinary citizens. It is in the city of Yangon where the economic upswing is most visible. Amidst the relicts of British

megalomania and golden stupas, there are new bars, fancy restaurants in high-class shopping malls and the enormous amount of recently bought cars makes travelling the streets in Yangon rather arduous.

After long years of isolation, this metropolis, with its six million inhabitants, is becoming a new boomtown of South East Asia. Businesspeople from all over the world seek opportunities in a country that is very rich in natural resources, with a projected economic growth of 8,5% for 2016. Three years ago there was still no internet, today there is free WiFi in many cafés and public spaces, billboards are everywhere and young people are constantly using their cell phones.

The speed of transformation is impressive even though the consequences are not clear yet and the new boom does not reach the majority of the people, who still live in utmost poverty. It is a kind of 'guinea pig-capitalism' that has the capital, if not the whole country, in its grip.

It is the past with its isolation, and its extremely difficult space for the arts during the dictatorship, that is still such an overwhelming subject of many conversations and of the many artworks and events that took place while we were in Yangon.

Censorship was a major part of politics and aimed to silence artists and dissent. It was only abolished recently, in the beginning of 2016. Before that, every artist risked imprisonment, torture and the welfare of her or his family. While visiting the Monsoon Poetry Festival, we became witness to an amazingly diverse and vibrant literary scene. We met the Burmese poet laureate who spent a lot of his time in prison, but also young hip hop poets who have been part of an international poetry scene for quite a while and have travelled to festivals in Bangkok and Singapore. The decisive election that brought 'the Lady' Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the 'National League for Democracy', finally to power took place in the beginning of November. Yet in November, poet and curator of the Monsoon Poetry Festival, Song Ka was arrested because he had written a smear poem about the former president. But times have changed. Song Ka was granted a fair trial that he and his lawyer won and he



Shwedagon Pagoda

was released immediately. Finally, respect for the rule of law and human rights was re-established.

Such a poetry festival is an interface between the old and the new and the transformation process has established new production realities that differ tremendously from the previous ones. Nyein Way, fondly referred to as the 'master poet' by his younger colleagues, is a huge man in his 50s who had bravely fought the old system with his only weapons – the power of his wit and his pen. What does this change mean for him? 'First of all, there is finally a freedom to speak out loud and do so openly. Before, we used ambiguity and camouflage as literary means to transport what was important to us and to bridge the living silence of that time.'

It is too early to compare the poetry that is produced today to the older one as the change is too recent, but it remains to be seen how different language and topics are chosen and conveyed when it is not the fear of the censor but the rules of the market that define literary production.

Way Kha, a celebrated poet in his own right, founded the publishing house HSP in 2014. It offers an interesting mix of international writers and local ones from different generations. 'Many Burmese people read and are very much interested in writers from overseas as they could not be published before. That enables an extremely fruitful dialogue between cultures and stimulates our writing, too. It also supports translators who are such important bridge builders between the cultures.'

One very interesting point for him is also the question of how literary production will change among those writers



Curator Indra with editor/poet Way Kha and poet/lawyer Di Lu Galay

who come from a generation that still worked under censorship and the threat of imprisonment.

'Our heads cannot change overnight. We learnt how to use the language to obscure meaning and criticism. Out of this notion, we developed our very own use of the Burmese language that was understood by our readers. It is born in the dictatorship but will definitely survive for some time in the new dispensation and is an integral part of our writing.'

Over the coming years, we will be working with artists and writers from Myanmar in our project and will revisit Yangon. It will be exciting to see how this transformation will continue and how it will be depicted in local and international art production. During this process, Jill Richards will have worked together with local poets, musicians and composers and the result will hopefully be experienced in Myanmar – and in South Africa. **CF**