

Behind Rangoon's Park Royal Hotel, where an ever-increasing number of businessmen bid for slivers of Burma's final frontier, the New Zero Art Space is perched precariously. In any other city you might assume the building was closed or condemned. Several different shades of mould cover the concrete in fist-sized blossoms and the windows are papered over. A sheet of A4 paper taped to the door with New Zero's postage-stamp sized logo is the sole indicator of what takes place within this fluorescent-lit fort.

Inside, a young Burmese woman blindfolds herself (*Untitled*, 2011). She dips her hands in red paint then asks members of the audience to do the same. The artist, Yadanar, wants people to place blood-coloured palms on her body. She is playing with restraint, with what can and cannot be done in this country. It is a foreigner who first breaks social custom, touching the artist, smearing crimson paint on her brazenly bare arm. Yadanar was one of about 20 Burmese artists who showed work during the Nippon Performance Festival, which ran in October 2011. Artists from India, Japan and Switzerland also took part.

For the past 18 years, Nippon has facilitated performance festivals throughout Asia, often funding artist exchange programmes that have paved the way for uncommon international dialogues. The Nippon Performance Festival was the second time they partnered with New Zero. Despite its reputation as perhaps the single most important contribution to performance art in Asia, its iteration in Burma was unsanctioned and thus considered illegal, which prevented the centre from trying to engage the public. Those who gathered at New Zero were either closely affiliated with the venue, were made aware of it by word-of-mouth or were part of the larger community

of Asian performance artists who circulate in this self-made, transnational network, and, as such, are quite familiar with the difficulties of making temporal art in countries where censorship still reigns.

In Burma, the Ministry of Information controls artistic production so closely that it seems at times Orwellian. Galleries must appeal to the Ministry's Censorship Board not only for permission to host an exhibition, but for permission to hang each individual work. Unsurprisingly, the Ministry does not tolerate controversial content. Most artists simply don't make challenging work, fearing career isolation or the all-too-real threat of prison. Within what amounts to a devastatingly narrow range of options, performance has both attracted and forged some of the country's most individualistic,

if occasionally unfledged, artists. Those who perform do so illegally, at unsanctioned gatherings where their freedom of expression comes from claiming the body as one's own, beyond the censor's grasp.

'When I was in prison I had nothing to do. All I could think about was art. I had no pen, no paper. The art that was inside of me had no frame. This is how I became a performing artist,' says Aye Ko, the proverbial godfather of performance art in Burma and New Zero's founder. Performance, in the contemporary sense of the word, is a relatively new genre in the country. It wasn't until the late 1990s when a few select artists were granted permission to participate in residencies abroad that a true engagement with the genre began. While Aye Ko is certainly the most outspoken about

the three years he spent in jail (and the most famous performance artist abroad) his experience is by no means exceptional. Almost every performer old enough to accrue jail time has been there, serving an average of three years for 'threatening the longevity of the State of Myanmar'.<sup>1</sup>

But the work of Burma's first-wave performance artists is the opposite of what their state-destroying charges might lead one to expect. More often than not, their performances attempt to safeguard that which will be drowned – regional identities, social practices and centuries-old religious customs – beneath the tidal wave of development the country is currently undergoing. Buddhism and food preparation form the basic gestures from which many a performance takes its cues. By splicing and re-spinning



Yadanar, *Untitled*, 2011, performance at New Zero Art Space, Rangoon, as part of the Nippon Performance Festival

# Taking Place

Performance art in Burma

Elizabeth Rush



Aye Thwe Thwe  
*Path*, 2011

bombastic work that unsuccessfully relies upon imported materials to create the appearance of nuance. Coca-Cola, clingfilm, Nietzsche quotations, Scotch tape, plastic roses and Gap T-shirts are heaped into performances, sometimes two and three at a time, producing lamentably banal criticisms of globalization. Not only do the country's arts universities refuse to teach non-traditional techniques they also offer no courses in criticism or theory. For many of the young artists performing, New Zero is their sole source of training and information, functioning simultaneously as a library, a school and a stage. And like Aye Ko – who edits a fashion magazine and runs the family sandal business – they often hold two or three jobs in addition to the work they do as artists.

Compared to that of her young peers, the work of 20-year-old Aye Thwe Thwe is exceptional. In her performance *Path* (September 2011), she walks down a runway fashioned from hundreds of scraps of fabric. She drags a red suitcase behind her, bumping over discarded bits of colourful cloth that the artist describes as 'symbolic of the poverty the people of Myanmar endure'. Is further abusing Burma's underpaid workforce the only way to launch this poor

accomplishments. In their country, performance is a rare realm in which imported Western boundaries (and aesthetics) weigh less heavily than the region's deep historic interdependence and the artist's right to claim this once divided space as her own. The performance art network in eastern Asia has created a discursively determined space where participants attempt to transgress colonially derived borders and overcome the external and internal pressure for national identification.

'But in Myanmar making work alone simply isn't enough,' warns Aye Ko. 'There are no new museums in Myanmar, no curators or critics, or theory or new media courses at the university. The performance art network is our greatest teacher, but there are many obstacles to our learning.' Despite recent democratic turns, the right to freely express oneself in public remains elusive. Last summer, just months after the successfully clandestine Nippon Festival closed, seven Burmese, one American and four Malaysian artists were arrested in Mandalay while staging a performance art event. The foreign artists were deported, and the Burmese tried for violating an obscure law dating from 1964 that prohibits public gatherings near a library, museum or memorial structure without a permit. The seven local artists face up to three years in prison.

The most tenacious and telling art in Burma isn't painted, printed or hewn. It simply takes place.

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Burma's rich cultural heritage into modern art events, these artists are quietly ushering their country into the 21st century with a rare sense of grace and honesty.

'A lot of my friends have been asking me, "Is Myanmar finally changing?"' says Nyo Win Maung, addressing the group of international artists who have gathered at New Zero to participate in the Nippon Festival. 'This piece, *Change or No Change* [2011] is my answer to that question.' Nyo Win Maung plays the harmonica, filling the white-walled space with sweet raspy music. He removes his arms from the sleeves of his colonially-inspired pearl button top, holding the hollow tubes aloft like an insect's feelers. The body of the shirt now covers his face. His feet slip out of his traditional footwear. But Nyo Win Maung immediately recognizes what he has done and

begins to blindly grope around on the floor, trying to regain the shoes he so intently rejected just a moment before. The searching makes the artist's stance wide and unbalanced. Suddenly the harmonica music picks up, transforming into an optimistic folk melody – eerily echoing the alacrity of Burma's recent democratic developments. Just as quickly the music diminishes. A few more desperate steps and the artist falls on all fours. No one claps or speaks, we simply watch him, prone on the floor, labouring for breath. Stretched beyond his means as if searching for the traditions he misplaced, Nyo Win Maung embodies Burma's future, should resource off-loading and external exploitation disguised as investment occur.

Not every performance is as articulate and telling as this. The younger generation tends to make

country into the future tense? And who will reap the benefits? *Path* presents this question with eloquence and verve. The piece closes with Aye Thwe Thwe standing at the path's end, plastic suitcase in hand, waiting for her departure.

The Nihon International Performance Art Festival (NIPAF), a linch-pin of the independent if insular performance art network spanning eastern Asia and the Nippon Festival's mother organization, hosted Aye Thwe Thwe in Tokyo in 2011. She returned from her first residency abroad with *Path* percolating in her mind. For Aye Thwe Thwe and most of Burma's performance artists the goal is not to gain international attention for their work but rather to accumulate cross-cultural experience within the region and allies with whom they might share their enthusiasms and

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<sup>1</sup> Even the country's name is controversial. In 1989, after the military dictatorship quashed a nation-wide uprising against human rights violations, economic mismanagement and political unaccountability, martial law was implemented and the country's colonial-given name, Burma, was changed to Myanmar. While outside of the country the name Burma draws to mind a reluctance to cooperate with the military junta, inside locals have long referred to their country as *Myanma* (or Myanmar in English). Neither Burma nor Myanmar is free from negative connotations. However, opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi has continued to use the old name as a sign of defiance, along with some Western governments, including the UK and US, and media organizations.