

Symposium

Contemporary Art in Cambodia: A Historical Inquiry

Museum of Modern Art, New York

April 21, 2013

This symposium is presented by Cornell University and the Center for Khmer Studies; co-organized by Pamela N. Corey, Doctoral Candidate, History of Art & Visual Studies, Cornell University and IN RESIDENCE co-curators Leeza Ahmady and Erin Gleeson.

***Contemporary Art in Cambodia: A Historical Inquiry* is the signature event for IN RESIDENCE, the Visual Art Program of Season of Cambodia, A Living Arts Festival, and a featured highlight of Asian Contemporary Art Week 2013.**

Speaker Abstracts

Cambodia as the Axis of the Southeast Asian Universe: Reflections on the Art Historiography of the Region

Nora A. Taylor, School of the Art Institute of Chicago

The 12th century temple of Angkor Wat became the cornerstone of Georges Coedes' 1948 theory of the Hinduization of Southeast Asia while it also stood as the most prized possession of the French colonial empire, revered, reproduced and subject to countless scientific, archaeological and numerical studies. This paper will examine the impact that the preferential treatment Cambodian art received during the colonial period has had on the writing of Southeast Asian Art History. It focuses on two main issues: the favoring of ancient religious stone statuary over contemporary popular or folk art, and by extension, modern art, and for another the fetishization of Angkor as a site of civilizational discourse.

Haunted Scenes: Painting and History in Phnom Penh

Ingrid Muan (1964-2005)

This presentation considers the history of painting and the painting of history in Phnom Penh during the 20th century. Muan briefly sketches successive representational regimes of two dimensional ornament (the Protectorate period) and the view from life (the period of Independence), before considering the way in which these two regimes intertwine to haunt contemporary painting in the city today. Bringing undercurrents to the surface through this formal analysis, Muan then considers the subjects of contemporary painting in order to speculate what these representations and their omissions - might reveal about contemporary urban society in Cambodia.

The Conditions for Contemporary Art in Post-Transition Cambodia

Pamela N. Corey, Cornell University

While certain structures of political and economic power arguably remained in place despite the transition from the socialist People's Republic of Kampuchea to the democratic State of Cambodia, the UNTAC (United Nations Transitional Authority of Cambodia) period from 1992-1993 initiated a sea change in culture and society as the country began to experience processes of globalization and neoliberalism. I discuss certain conditions that I argue set the stage for new forms of artistic expression, as contemporary artists in the country's capitol have developed their practices against a backdrop comprising various factors set in motion by the transition. These include alternative sites for artistic formation, NGO culture and memory projects, rising clashes over land dispossessions, a growing urban heritage movement, the influence of returnee artists, and the introduction of photography as a new mode of creative critique.

Knowledge Sharing and Learning Together: Historical Reflections from Stiev Selapak

Vuth Lyno, Sa Sa Art Projects

Formed in 2007, one of Cambodia's only active visual art collectives, Stiev Selapak, has been striving to engage with Cambodian contemporary art in several evolving forms. We began without a space, gathering for informal discussion, and in 2009 established a gallery to promote emerging Cambodian artists. In 2010 we shifted to running photography and mixed media classes and community-engaged projects in the White Building, a historic, dynamic, and low-income neighbourhood in Phnom Penh. Parallel to these activities, Stiev Selapak members assist each other to realise our respective art projects. This paper will present Stiev Selapak initiatives, including the experimental and ever-changing Sa Sa Art Projects, focusing on the idea of knowledge sharing and learning together as of central importance in our practice as a collective, primarily through group sharing, workshops and art classes. It will argue that this is a response to limited opportunities for contemporary art education in Cambodia, demonstrated through statistical and anecdotal evidence.

Forgetting to Remember, Again: On Curatorial Practice and "Cambodian Art" in the Wake of Genocide

Ashley Thompson, University of Leeds

This paper is part of ongoing work on modes of remembering the Khmer Rouge genocide. My goal is two-fold: to lay an interpretative ground for writing a history of post-1979 Cambodian art; and, to draw out ways in which this particular art history has something to say about art and the art institution in our times. The paper will explore ways in which Cambodian art and art scenes of this period may be seen to emerge in the encounter between different, even opposing cultural paradigms, crudely defined as Eastern and Western. The paradigms are formulated as such in the

encounter itself, which can be an encounter with non-encounter. Crucial to the topic are the ways in which the Theravadin Buddhist dimensions of the hybrid Cambodian contemporary socio-cultural complex, characterized by theories and practices of subjectivity that differ significantly from geographically dominant notions of subjectivity at work in the demand for contemporary Cambodian art, can be seen to inflect art production in the post-genocidal context.

Testing, Testing: Strategies of Uprooting in Modern and Contemporary Arts in Cambodia

Erin Gleeson, Sa Sa Bassac

The majority of political movements in 20th and 21st century Cambodia have followed the French Protectorate's endeavor to leverage the arts in constructing a Khmer identity according to a return to origin or rootedness in ancient form and tradition as if continuous and relevant. In this presentation, I discuss strategies of uprooting across generations and disciplines, considered within two frameworks: a local inquiry "tradition and continuity" from Reyum Institute of Art and Culture and the global Radicant Theory from Nicolas Bourriaud. Considered chronologically, the works highlighted reveal an increasing move away from 20th century constructions of national identity towards notions of inquiry, translation, mobility, and participation.

A Matter of Context: Writing about Cambodian Photography Today

Zhuang Wubin, Photographer and Independent Curator

In the last decade, we have seen the emergence of contemporary photography in Cambodia. This has prompted some curators and writers to speak of the photographic arts in Cambodia as something new. In truth, the years of displacement in the 70s and 80s ruptured the development, and our knowledge, of Cambodian photography. Today, as we begin to write the history of Cambodian photography, it is important to take into account its vernacular practices since the late colonial era. This is because in Southeast Asia, we tend to contextualize photography and its relationship with art in a very narrow way. In this presentation, I use Cambodian photography as a test case to suggest that curators and art historians in Southeast Asia should rethink the connection between art and photography.

Performance Art in Cambodia: Some Recent Observations

Roger Nelson, University of Melbourne

The boundaries between performance and other media—most obviously (but not exclusively) photography and video—are fluid, and accorded little importance by artists working with performance in Cambodia today. In this paper, I will offer a précis of existing scholarship on Cambodian performance art, including a summarized timeline. Yet rather than offering a broad survey, I will focus on the work of a small number of artists living and working in Phnom Penh, including Khvay Samnang, Lim Sokchanlina and Amy Lee Sanford. Like all other Cambodian artists

currently working in performance, these artists also work in more than one other medium. In discussing several performances made since 2008, I will note some important shared characteristics. These include the centrality of documentation, the mutual dependence between live and mediated performance, and the complex and often ambivalent attitudes toward live audiences articulated by artists and in their performance practice.

History of the Future: Leeza Ahmady in conversation with artists Vandy Rattana and Svay Sareth

Ahmady's efforts in complicating categorical notions about contemporary art practice in Asia have led to uncovering influential moments in history for individual artists' practices across the continent. Inquiries into these periods bring to light new understandings and reveal significant art from regions and time periods previously unnoticed or considered inaccessible. This conversation with artists Vandy Rattana and Svay Sareth will investigate the use and representation of history in their respective practices, and the significance of visual art as a platform for documenting and disseminating personal and collective histories. Vandy Rattana (b. 1980) began his practice in 2005 concerned with the lack of physical documentation accounting for the stories, traits, and monuments specific to Cambodia. His recent works in photography and film speak to the interconnected relationship between the practice of image making and historiography. Svay Sareth's (b.1972) artistic practice responds to themes of his life and traverses both present and historical moments. His work in sculpture, installation and performance questions the politics of power, processes of survival, or the more playful idea of adventure.

Bios

Leeza Ahmady's pioneering curatorial work and research concerning contemporary art practices in Central Asia – quickly evolved to complicating categorical representations of Asia in its entirety. Born in Afghanistan and based in New York, Ahmady is an independent curator and educator. She is noted for her ongoing innovative, educational platforms, The Taste of Others, and Asian Contemporary Art Week (ACAW), which are strategically collaborative with multiple museums, galleries, biennials and institutions to contextualize practices in New York, Asia, and elsewhere. Ahmady has presented artists, public programs, and exhibitions at numerous venues such as dOCUMENTA (13), Venice Biennale, Istanbul Biennial, Asia Art Archive, Asia Society, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, MoMA, and Independent Curators International, among many others.

Pamela N. Corey is a doctoral candidate in the History of Art and Visual Studies department at Cornell University. Her general research interests include Southeast Asian art history, modern and contemporary art, and urban studies. Her dissertation is titled "Cities Compared: Contemporary Art and Artistic Subjects in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, and Phnom Penh, Cambodia." This study examines the formation of contemporary artistic subjectivities using the framework of the city as the scale of comparison.

Iftikhar Dadi is an artist and art historian broadly interested in the relation between art practice in the contexts of modernity, globalization, urbanization, mediatization, and postcolonialism. He has authored numerous scholarly works, including the recent book *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*. Curatorial activities include *Unpacking Europe* at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, and *Tarjama/Translation* at Queens Museum of Art and Cornell's Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art. Dadi is an associate professor in Cornell's Department of History of Art, and is chair of the Department of Art.

Jane DeBevoise is an independent advisor and art historian, based in Hong Kong and New York. Prior to moving to Hong Kong in 2002, Ms. DeBevoise was Deputy Director of the Guggenheim Museum, responsible for museum operations and exhibitions globally. She joined the Museum in 1996 as Project Director of *China: 5000 Years*, a blockbuster exhibition of traditional and modern Chinese art that was presented in 1998 at the Guggenheim museums in New York and Bilbao. Ms. DeBevoise has a BA degree from Tufts University, an MA degree from the University of California, Berkeley, and a PhD from The University of Hong Kong. She is Chair of the Board of Directors of Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong, and a Trustee of Asian Cultural Council and The China Institute in New York.

Erin Gleeson is a curator focusing on contemporary art in Cambodia. Current projects include Season of Cambodia visual arts residency and public program IN RESIDENCE, NYC; the exhibition and book *Phnom Penh: Rescue Archeology/ Contemporary Art and Urban Change* in Cambodia ifa, Germany; and the 4th Singapore Biennale. She is a nominee for the 2012 ICI Independent Vision Award and the recipient of a 2013 Foundation for Arts Initiatives travel grant. Gleeson is currently Artistic Director of SA SA BASSAC, an exhibition and residency space and reading room dedicated to facilitating, archiving and mediating contemporary art projects and dialogues in and from Cambodia.

Kaja M. McGowan is Associate Professor in the Department of the History of Art, Archaeology, and Visual Studies at Cornell University. She is the co-author of *Ida Bagus Made: Art of Devotion* (Ratna Wartha Foundation, 2008). Her articles include "Chasing Sita on a Global/ Local Interface" in *Ramayana Revisited* (Oxford University Press, 2004), "Raw Ingredients and Deposit Boxes in Balinese Sanctuaries: A Congruence of Obsessions" in *What's the Use of Art?* (University of Hawaii Press, 2007), and "Love, Death, and Shifting Patronage in Bali during the 1930s: Two Spatial Models Meet 'Face to Face' on Sacred Threads of Sound" in *Asian Art in the Twenty-First Century* (Yale University Press, 2008). Currently she is writing a biography of the legendary Balinese Pita Maha painter and architect, I Gusti Nyoman Lempad (1862-1978).

Ingrid Muan (1964 -2005) was the first scholar to produce an extensive study on modern Cambodian art history, attending to systems of pedagogy, historical experiences, and questions of

artistic subjectivity in the twentieth century. Her dissertation, "Citing Angkor: The 'Cambodian Arts' in the Age of Restoration, 1918–2000" (Columbia University, 2000) examined the legacy of colonial art education on contemporary art in Cambodia. As co-founder of Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture, her work had a strong influence on the development of contemporary art history in the region. Her publications include *Cultures of Independence* (Reyum, 2001) and *Legacy of Absence* (Reyum, 2000). She was close friend and advisor to a generation of Cambodian artists.

Roger Nelson is an independent curator, and a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne researching twenty-first century Cambodian visual art. He is a recipient of an Asialink curatorial residency, Phnom Penh (2012) and of fellowships from Australia Council for the Arts and Ian Potter Cultural Trust (2013). Roger founded the non-profit NO NO GALLERY, Melbourne (2010-2012), curating over 30 exhibitions and public programs. Recent curatorial projects involving Cambodian artists include *new artefacts*, SA SA BASSAC, Phnom Penh (2012) and *Developments*, SEVENTH Gallery, Melbourne (2013). Roger's critical writing has appeared in publications including *ArtAsiaPacific* and *Art Monthly Australia*.

Lorraine Paterson teaches in the Department of Asian Studies at Cornell where she offers classes in Southeast Asian culture and literature with a special focus on Cambodia and Vietnam. She has had a long standing interest in all things in Cambodia after living and working there for three years in the early 1990s and completing research on Cambodian literature for her M.A. degree. Most recently she co-edited with Penny Edwards a special issue of the journal *Cross-Currents* titled "Mediating Chineseness in Cambodia." Her forthcoming book, *Exiles from Indochina in the Transcolonial World*, deals with the fate of Cambodian political exiles during the French colonial period.

Nora A. Taylor received her PhD in Southeast Asian Art History at Cornell University. She is now Alsdorf Professor of South and Southeast Asian Art at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She has published widely on Vietnamese and Southeast Asian modern and contemporary art, namely: *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art* (Hawaii and Singapore, 2004 and 2009) and co-editor of *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology* (Cornell SEAP, 2012).

Ashley Thompson is an Associate Professor in the School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies, University of Leeds, and is a specialist in Cambodian cultural history. The Cambodian case is informed by forays into the larger Asian context, with a view to theorising politico-cultural formations. Objects of analysis include ritual and literary practices and a range fine and performing arts. Most recently she acted as linguistic and historical director of a Cambodian production of Hélène Cixous' epic play, *The Terrible but Unfinished Story of Norodom Sihanouk*, which opened at the Festival Sens Interdit, Théâtre des Célestins, Lyon, 2011. A monograph entitled *Engendering the Buddhist State: Reconstructions of Cambodian History* is to appear with Routledge (Critical Buddhist Studies) in 2013.

Vuth Lyo is an artist, curator, and Artistic Director of Sa Sa Art Projects – a community-based, knowledge-sharing platform and experimental art program. Vuth's artistic practice encompasses photography and sound and is primarily participatory in nature, engaging specific Cambodian communities and the cultures unique to them. His curatorial practice currently considers community and notions of the alternative. Vuth was Visual Art Curator for 2012's Cambodian Youth Arts Festival. He is Curatorial Assistant for *IN RESIDENCE*, the Visual Art Program of Season of Cambodia, NYC. In 2013 he was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship, MA in Art History in the United States.

June Yap is a curator from Singapore, previously Deputy Director and Curator of the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, and curator at the Singapore Art Museum. Selected curatorial projects include *No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia* for of the Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative, *The Cloud of Unknowing* at the 54th Venice Biennale (Italy), *The Future of Exhibition: It Feels Like I've Been Here Before* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (Singapore), *Das Paradies ist Anderswo / Paradise is Elsewhere* at Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (ifa) (Germany), and *Bound for Glory* at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Museum.

Zhuang Wubin is a curator focusing on the photographic practices of Southeast Asia. A 2010 recipient of the research grant from the Prince Claus Fund, he is an editorial board member of *Trans-Asia Photography Review* (Hampshire College and the University of Michigan Scholarly Publication Office). Selected curatorial work include *Re-Connect: Contemporary Photography in Myanmar*, Esplanade Singapore, 2014 [forthcoming]; *A Certain Grace: Photography from Bandung*, Esplanade Singapore, 2012; *Ruptures and Revival: Cambodian Photography in the Last Decade*, Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, 2012; Southeast Asian section, Photoquai 2011, Musée du Quai Branly, Paris. Zhuang is also a photographer who strives to visualize the stories of the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia.