

STATES OF PANIC:
PROCEDURES OF THE PRESENT IN 1950S CAMBODIA¹

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In a recent conversation with a United States Embassy spokesman in Phnom Penh, I was told that Khmer language copies of *Muslim Life in America*, a recent publication of the Office of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs of the US State Department, are being distributed in the Cambodian countryside. Word in town is that any project involving the Cham Muslim community will easily receive US Embassy funds, and a check of the listings of educational and cultural grants found on the US Department of State web site shows that someone has seemingly been hired to go through the web site and add the phrase “and especially Muslim youths” to each description of targeted communities considered possible grant recipients. In the countryside of Cambodia, this new attitude means that rice farmers belonging to the Muslim Cham communities are suddenly being encouraged to read about the “togetherness” of Family Life in the USA, see Ramadan as it is celebrated in the United States, peruse various types of mosques found in the US, and learn that Muslims are “officially recognized” by US government institutions. The farmers respond in two ways apparently, according to the rather forthcoming spokesman: either they politely say thank you for the publication and then proceed to inform US embassy personnel that they have too little rice, no rain and not enough money, or, they ask more pointedly, where have you been before and why are you interested in us now? The publication ends with a page offering its readers “the chance

¹ This paper was given at the Performance Studies International #10 Conference *Perform, State, Interrogate*, held in Singapore, June 15-18, 2004. As we were unable to obtain the collection of images accompanying this presentation, we have again selected images from Ingrid’s thesis, as well as from the image collection Ingrid submitted to the College Art Association panel conveners to accompany her paper “Playing with Powers: the politics of art in newly independent Cambodia,” also included in the present volume. (Ed.)

to be heard.” Whether these messages to the “American People” are ever delivered, is an open question. Unfortunately I do not have the Khmer language version. After distributing the 5,000 copies ordered by the Embassy initially, the Public Diplomacy office of the US Embassy in Phnom Penh is out of Khmer language copies, probably only for the moment.

Compared to the 70,000 copies of *Free World* distributed in late 1950s Cambodia courtesy of an earlier incarnation of all this, *Muslim Life in America* has a long way to go (Figure 1). Published by the USIS Philippine office in each of the languages of the countries in which it was distributed, the magazine stressed the unity of “free Southeast Asia” (Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, South Vietnam) as well as the integral connection between this bloc and the larger “free world,” particularly the United States. While some articles in the magazine are predictably political, other sections addressed arts and culture including, for example, articles on the Islamic wing of the Met (Vol. 1, #10), Grandma Moses (Vol. 2, #1), the “Traditional Arts of Cambodia” (Vol. 1, #12), and the photographs of Alfred Stieglitz all in easily accessible format with plenty of pictures accompanied by brief explanatory texts. The covers of *Free World*, underscore the delicate balance which the publication straddled between the promotion of the new (the US as the land of technological advances) and respect for local existing traditional practices in the region. Allegiance was the primary aim, and preservation and development could therefore both be embraced.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, the US perceived Cambodia as a “boundary of the Free World,” purportedly in danger of “being lost to the Communists.”² The country, according to US policy makers, was a crucial domino, waiting to fall, and in the name of defending its “free-world

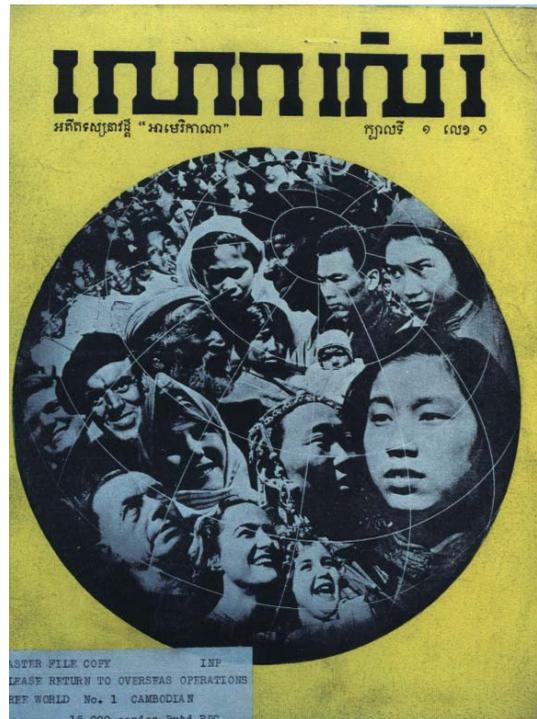


Figure 1: Cover of the first Cambodian issue of *Free World*. (Volume 1, #1, 1952?)

² “Inspection Report, USIS Cambodia,” by James Meader, March 37, 1959, in RG306 Records of the US Information Agency: Inspection Reports and Related Records 1954-1962, Box 2.

position in Southeast Asia,” the US distributed enormous amounts of aid to Cambodia.³ The race to win the “hearts and minds of the Cambodian people” had to be pursued in a discreet manner, however, given then Head of State and now King Norodom Sihanouk’s national policy of neutrality as well as his adeptness in playing major Cold War powers off against each other. In response to the delicacies of this situation, US policy makers developed an approach in which the US would “present” itself as “a nation supporting Cambodian independence and respecting its policy of neutrality.”⁴ The US Mission in Phnom Penh in the 1950s was to “present an image of the US” that was “friendly, dignified and trustworthy.” The presentation of “an image of the US” relied on an extensive machinery which disseminated visual materials throughout Cambodia during the 1950s. “All media” were to be mobilized in the effort to convey “the image” and the campaign’s effectiveness was repeatedly measured in surveys and opinion polls.⁵

Image construction can be loosely divided into two categories. Through the first, “proper” representations of US actions and intentions in Cambodia were to be produced at a time when US involvement was increasingly visible in the country. Model homes, model villages, model roads, model farmers and model toilets were all built with US aid money (Figure 2). Hygiene, organization of social space, agricultural development through mechanized tools, hybrid seeds and pesticides, modern education – all this came under the purview of US aid (Figures 3 and 4). The “dramatisation” of such aid activities would, the argument ran, supply “evidence” of US

³ By the end of 1960, total American aid had reached 195 million dollars; 102 million dollars were for military support (91 million for troop salaries, 11 million for military equipment and construction projects), and 32.5 million dollars were spent on the Khmer American Friendship Highway. The remainder of US aid was spent on agricultural and educational development, health projects and USIS activities. The extent of US involvement in Cambodia comes clear through a comparison with estimated aid received from other countries. By 1960, Cambodia had only received \$18.5 million from France, \$4.1 million from Japan, \$1 million from the United Nations, \$28 million from Communist China, and \$10 million from the Soviet Union. See “Briefing papers for Saccio Visit,” November 20, 1959 and Confidential Memo Trimble to Secretary of State (undated) in RG59 General Records of the Department of State: Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Office of Southeast Asian Affairs: Cambodia Files 1958-1963 Box 2 and 5, as well as the State Department Telegram to Phnom Penh, December 30, 1959 851H.0093/1-260 in RG59 General Records of the Department of State, Central Decimal File 1960-3, Box 2559.

⁴ “Country Assessment Report – 1960,” Dispatch #16, January 28, 1961 in RG59 General Records of the Department of State, Bureau of Cultural Affairs, Planning and Development Staff, Country Files 1955-1964, Box 220.

⁵ See “User’s Evaluation of the USIS library, Battambang, August 1961” IRI.CAM.11 in RG306 Records of the US Information Agency: Office of Research and Research Reports 1953-1986, Box 15 and “Country Assessment Report – 1960,” Dispatch #16, January 28, 1961 in RG59 General Records of the Department of State, Bureau of Cultural Affairs, Planning and Development Staff, Country Files 1955-1964, Box 220.

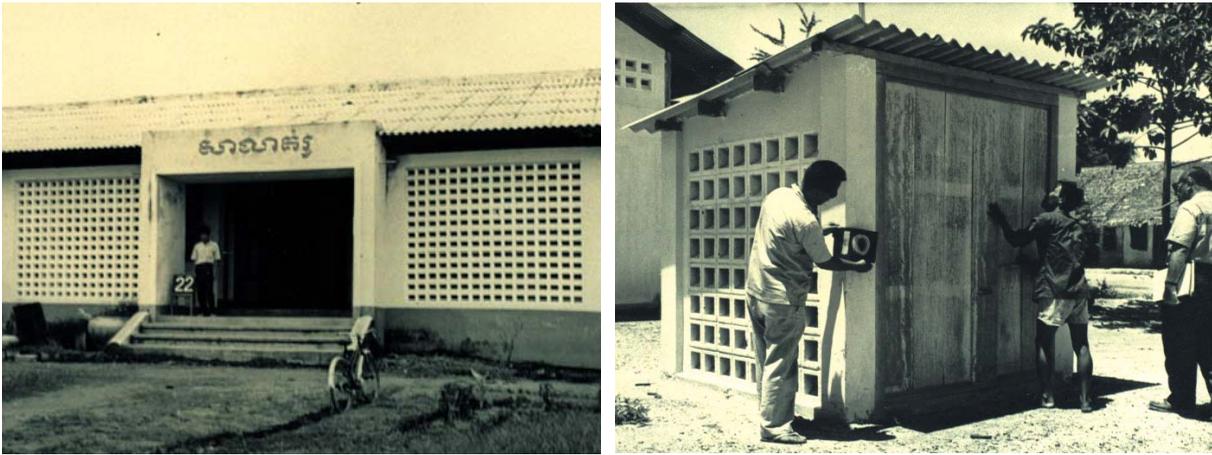


Figure 2: US Aid project in Cambodia. Left, model school. Right, model toilet.
(US National Archives at College Park, Maryland RG286 CAM-62-1898 (right), CAM-62-1597 (left))



Figure 3: United States Operations Mission Cambodia Building window display: Delicious new crops grown in Cambodia!, 1963 (US National Archives at College Park, Maryland RG286 CAM-63-265)



Figure 4: US-sponsored agricultural cooperatives advisor Fred Knobel giving a demonstration of how to deliver an illustrated lecture, August 3, 1962. (US National Archives at College Park, Maryland RG286 CAM-62-1955)

“support for, and strengthening of, Cambodian independence.”⁶ Less emphasized and more covert was, of course, the massive amounts of American money pouring into shoring up and supposedly training the Cambodian military. The dramatization of local activities was to be complemented by a second component of image construction: making the distant image of America visible and present. “Life in America” (and in a more general sense, “Life in the Free World”) was to be repeatedly described and elaborated for Cambodian audiences (Figure 5). As the introductory billboard to the 1957 “Life in America” exhibition put it, “we hope this event will enable Cambodians to visualise how Americans live and work and play,” “providing [them with] an imaginary trip to a great friendly nation in the West” (Figure 6). Representations of daily life at home and at work, on the farm as well as in the “great cities,” allowed Cambodians to view life as it was supposedly lived in America. Through publications, photographs, radio, and films, the



Figure 5: Cover of *Free World*.

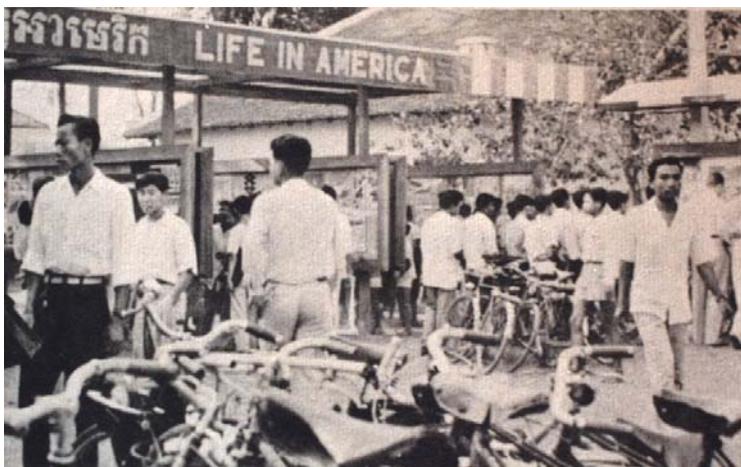


Figure 6: “Life in America” exhibition 1956-7. (*Free World*, volume 6, #11)



⁶ “Country Assessment Report – 1960,” Dispatch #16, January 28, 1961 in RG59 General Records of the Department of State, Bureau of Cultural Affairs, Planning and Development Staff, Country Files 1955-1964, Box 220.

argument ran, Cambodians would be converted to “our way of life.” By the early 1960s, each annual Country Assessment Report invoked this campaign to create the “desired Stereotype of the US.”⁷

We can see then, that Cambodia in the late 1950s provides a kind of showroom for spectacles of the State (and I do not here discuss the similar image-building campaigns of China and the Soviet Union). But it was not just Cambodia. The US, newspaper accounts from the time put it, was engaged in a desperate “global salesmanship effort to show the world the true story of life in America under both a free political system and free enterprise.”⁸ In exhibitions such as “Products of Freedom for All Free Men,” and “The People’s Capitalism Exhibition,” the US countered Communist representations of a life of drudgery under capitalism by presenting “typical” (happy and prosperous) workers surrounded by the most modern appliances against a backdrop of jazz and sports meant to illustrate the essence of American life.⁹ By 1956, the Commerce Department would announce that “the US is winning the cold war” at international exhibitions; US displays had “literally stolen the show” from the USSR.¹⁰ To which *Pravda* replied, “Since 1953, this gigantic factory of lies regularly belches out its evil-smelling product for the needs of the imperialists. This product is diverse and varied, ranging from crudely concocted leaflets and clumsy anticommunist comics to special films, multi-volume publications, and various exhibitions. The American moneybags, naturally, spare no funds. USIA is a truly tremendous monster of the ‘cold war’ which has no equal in other capitalist countries. Its agents labor in 80 countries. Annual circulation of its publications amounts to several million copies. Dozens of its radio stations contaminate the air with thick torrents of lies.”¹¹

It is certainly engaging, frightening and often funny to describe and detail this truly tremendous monster, this spectacle of a state. But what I want to do now is shift to the transmission side of things and look at some of the reactions or outcomes which this spectacle produced that perhaps make it all seem like a less easy one-way street.

⁷ See “Country Assessment Report, 1961,” Field Message #9, January 31, 1962 in RG59 General Records of the Department of State, Bureau of Cultural Affairs Planning and Development, Staff and Country Files 1955-64, Box 220 and “Country Assessment Report – 1962,” Dispatch #8, January 29, 1963 in RG59 General Records of the Department of State, Bureau of Cultural Affairs, Planning and Development Staff, Country Files 1955-1964, Box 220.

⁸ “Our Trade Fairs are Scoring over World,” *The Evening Star* (Washington DC) February 18, 1957.

⁹ See “The People’s Capitalist Exhibit: A Study of Reactions of Foreign Visitors to the Washington Preview,” Bureau of Social Science Research, American University, March 1956 in RG306 Records of the US Information Agency, Office of Research, Country Project Files 1951-64, Box 17.

¹⁰ “Trade Fair Victory is claimed for US,” *The New York Times* January 3, 1956.

¹¹ “RG306 Records of the US Information Agency, Office of Research, Research Memorandums 1963-1982, Boxes 1-12 250/67/19-20/07 to 01-02, Box 1, M-279-63, August 29, 1963, The Soviet Attack on USIA, Major attacks on USIA in Soviet Press, March and April 1963, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, March 21, 1963.

First there is Sihanouk's Sangkum. After a decade of such stately spectacles beamed in from various sides of the Cold War, Sihanouk produces his own image Kingdom. He publishes glossy magazines filled with stories of nation building and development, establishes provincial display halls to display the achievements of his Sangkum, he makes movies about himself as leader and generally takes each of the elements of the US Information Service and recreates them in the service of his own image of a neutral and independent flourishing Cambodia. He also builds model villages, installs model wells, and generally pursues the same projects of infrastructure development and public good which the US had trumpeted in their aid. The image is consumed by foreign visitors and at exhibitions abroad. So this first reception of state spectacle is on an official plane – a new state taking over the elements and producing its own spectacular state, thus understanding the power of images and appropriating the tactics for itself (Figures 7-9).

A quite different and more fragmented appropriation of different elements of the spectacle also had an impact on local cultural developments during the 1960s. Among the painters I know, for example, the American



Figure 7: Exhibition on industrial progress under the Sangkum. The paint on display was manufactured in Cambodia. (Royal University of Fine Arts Collection, uncatalogued)



Figure 8: Jackie Kennedy visiting the permanent exhibition of the Sangkum, with then-Prime Minister Sihanouk, Phnom Penh 1967. (National Archives of Cambodia Photography Collection, Album 3, #92)



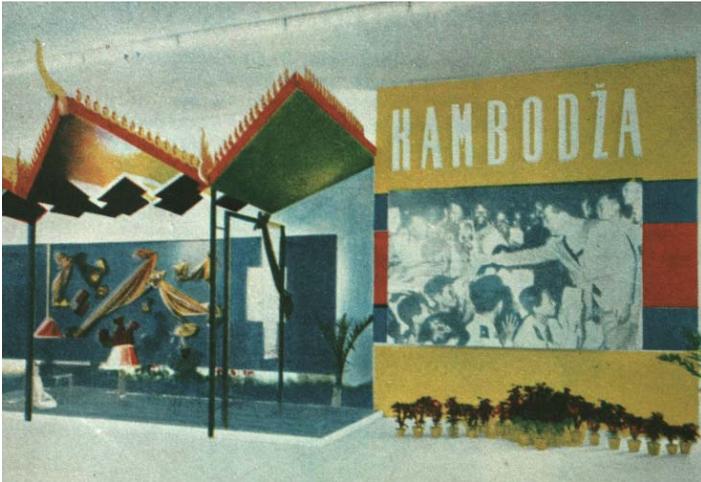


Figure 9: Cambodia section of the Zagreb Fair, 1961, designed by Cambodia's first Western-trained architect, Vann Molyvann. The caption explains that the installation "joins the Khmer decorative tradition to modern imperatives." (Le Cambodge aujourd'hui, September/October 1961)

"Haunted Scenes..." and Figures 7 and 10 of "Playing with Powers..."). Ly Bun Yim, one of the most famous filmmakers of the 1960s and early 70s, attributes the beginning of his career to Americans coming to his province and handing out free cameras for a photography competition associated with the "Life in America" exhibition through which "all Cambodian students throughout the country... were urged to emulate the American photos in the Exhibit."¹² Sam Som Ol was a soldier whose unit was trained in documentary filmmaking by the US Information Service. He quickly left the service and went to make what is remembered as the first Khmer language feature film, *Phka Riek Phka Roy*. Thus elements of the spectacle were productively refigured to produce new forms of local culture that had little to do with their intended message of conversion.

¹² Conversation with Ly Bun Yim, May 2000.

library with its free art books, illustrations and articles about art found in *Free World*, and the annual painting exhibitions sponsored by USIS had a substantial impact on developing a local art scene centered around what they called "modern Khmer painting" (Figure 10. See also Figure 9 of "Haunted Scenes..."). Nhek Dim, perhaps the most famous painter in the 1960s, worked for the USIS information service and even studied cartoon production at Walt Disney studios in California (See Figures 10-12 of

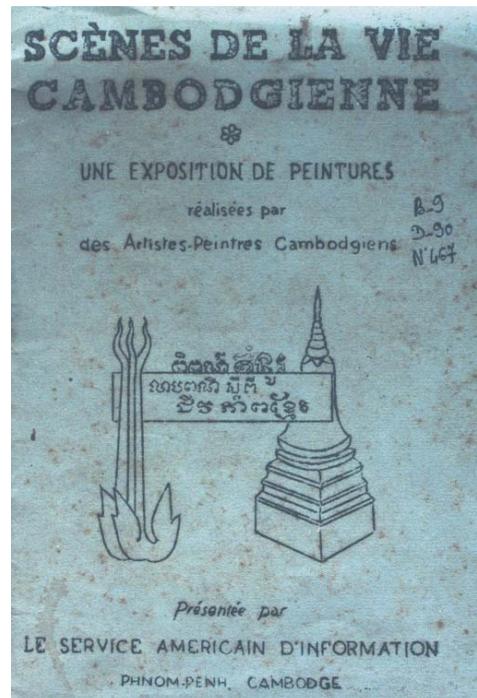


Figure 10: Cover of the 1960 USIS-sponsored painting exhibition at the American Library, Phnom Penh. (National Archives of Cambodia, Documents of Cambodia)

But things didn't always transmit, translate and refigure so easily. The American Festival,¹³ for example, opened in Phnom Penh in 1956, with a performance of something called "Mr. Dorsey's Tom Two Arrows," an event which apparently included "Native American dances" and a special appearance by the newly crowned Miss Cambodia in "Indian costume."¹⁴ While general audiences were apparently entranced by the "vaudeville" nature of the entertainment, reactions among diplomats and government officials ("more educated and traveled Cambodians") ranged from "frank boredom to open disappointment."¹⁵ Subsequent festival performances by the Westminster Choir, the Benny Goodman Orchestra, Mr. Sebastian, and the San Francisco Ballet all met with similarly mixed successes.¹⁶ Mr. Sebastian's Bartok was apparently incomprehensible to local audiences and Benny Goodman's music was described in one local newspaper as sounding like "a turkey gobbling" (AF: 20). In addition, an embassy evaluation noted "even when [the performance] does interest them, Cambodian notions of audience manners do not include the idea that spectators should be silent." Local audiences were talkative and "exuberantly noisy," something the famous performers were unaccustomed to and sometimes irritated by. The most successful events of the Festival were, ironically, those with large foreign attendance on the part of diplomats and local expatriates since such audiences were appreciative and behaved according to the performers' expectations" (AF: 23).

In the countryside of Cambodia, things got even worse from the perspective of USIS. A US Information Service photo exhibition entitled "Country Agent," displayed in various venues in Cambodia, for example, could - the embassy report notes - have "reminded one of what life [was] like in the Corn Belt if one had grown up in Iowa and moved away to the city, but to the

¹³ The "American festival" was the "single-largest cultural exchange effort" by the US in Cambodia during the 1950s. It was comprised of a series of performances and exhibitions held during an eight-week period from late 1956 to early 1957. (US Embassy Dispatch #402, June 18, 1957. 511.51H3-1857 in RG59 General Records of the Department of State, Central Decimal Files, Box 2155) (Ed.: from Muan 2001, p. 172).

¹⁴ "Educational exchange: The American Festival," Dispatch #341, April 22, 1957 511.51H3/4-2257 in RG59 General Records of the Department of State, Central Decimal Files, Box 2155: 9-14. All subsequent references to this report are followed in the text by (AF: page). USIS films on Native Americans were also screened at the end of the night. It would be interesting to further consider the promotion of marginalized indigenous US cultures within USIS-sponsored programming of the 1950s. The celebration of diversity evidenced in the programming contrasts bitterly with the slow and bloody history through which civil rights legislation was finally passed in the US.

¹⁵ AF: 12 and "Inspection Report, USIS Cambodia" by James Meader March 27, 1959 in RG306 Records of the US Information Agency: Inspection Reports and Related Records 1954-1962, Box 2.

¹⁶ AF: 28-9. Mr. Sebastian was a harmonica player who traveled with his piano accompanist. Cold War cultural competition can be clearly seen in the wake of the Festival. Shortly after the announcement of the planned San Francisco Ballet performance, a Czech dance troupe suddenly appeared and performed in Phnom Penh; a Soviet ballet troupe, also scheduled at the last moment, danced in Phnom Penh the week after the San Francisco Ballet had performed.

uninformed with no frame of reference, the exhibit carried no message at all.”¹⁷ “Most Agency-supplied exhibits,” the inspection report concluded, “are far too sophisticated for our audiences,” and many of the agency films “presume a frame of reference about US geography, history and institutions which only a very few of the most highly educated Cambodians possess.”¹⁸ Local audiences tended to become fascinated with things entirely outside of the intended message – the light beam of the projector, the spectacle of movement in the night, a certain character’s clothing, a particular building or interior. In USIS terms, such readings had no meaning. The message was not transmitted.

The degree to which USIS was successful in “conveying information about the US” and “shaping attitudes towards the US” became a major obsession by the late 1950s.¹⁹ Questionnaires, studies, reports, field work – every tactic was used to attempt to measure “impact.” The musings of officials in the remarkably voluminous remains of this effort are filled with panic and paranoia. Large crowds at exhibitions, for example, did not necessarily mean they were “successful.” “Are the designated target groups for this kind of activity being exposed to the exhibit? What proportion of the audience belongs to such target groups? Is this exhibit achieving its purpose of educating those who see it? Are they carrying away with them the kind of information they are intended to obtain? Is the exhibit creating desired attitudes among the viewers? Are we hitting the target?” A “net profit” of attitude change was desired for each activity. But even the measuring got confused in translation. “In assessing the importance of the 24% [of viewers to the fair] in Karachi and the 19% [of viewers to the US exhibition] in Vienna who labeled the central theme [of the US display] as ‘propaganda’... this word in many cultures means ‘good’ propaganda or information. (Since no follow-up questions were asked to explore further the meaning of the word, it remains unclear how many actually were talking about information as such and how many were registering their resistance to what they might suspect as ‘false’ propaganda).” Was the television at the 1955 Jakarta Fair a “success”? another agency report pondered. Certainly many people had seen it, although there was some disagreement about whether they were watching the television itself or the popular Indonesian entertainers performing on a stage in the same room in front of the camera which fed them live onto its screen. And even if they were watching the television, what was the

¹⁷ “Inspection Report, USIS Cambodia,” by James Meader, March 27, 1959 in RG306 Reports of the US Information Agency / Inspection Reports and Related Reports 1954-1962, Box 2.

¹⁸ Since film accessibility must be a problem for all developing countries, it was headquarters in Washington rather than individual country offices which should consider this problem, the report concluded. See “Country Assessment Report – 1962,” Dispatch #8, January 29, 1963 in RG59 General Records of the Department of State, Bureau of Cultural Affairs, Planning and Development Staff, Country Files 1955-1964, Box 220.

¹⁹ We have been unable to trace references to the majority of the citations made from this point in the paper. (Ed.)

link of the television to the United States, to democracy and elections and freedom of speech? “Beware of the boomerang effect,” one report warned, by which the opposite impression is created than the one desired. “Everything moves” in the US pavilion, another report tells us. “But what does it mean to the viewers?” In Jakarta, the US television was eventually countered, in the Chinese displays, by films projected outdoors to large crowds. The Americans in turn, “countered by setting up an army searchlight which nightly swept the skies from a position just behind the US building.”

These competitive arenas of spectacle had influence at home as well, in the US, where I want to end with a few of the renegade megalomaniacs who began to aspire to creating their own state spectacles. In 1963, Count Berni Vici of Count Berni Vici’s Enterprises in Hollywood California writes directly to President Kennedy, telling him: “In your inaugural speech, you said “Don’t ask what the country can do for you, but what you can do for your country. I definitely believe I have an answer with regard to world problems in our cold war.” Count Vici’s answer is the Stagemobile. He proposes an initial tour through Latin America, adding that the actual show by fifty international artists will be preceded by “their national anthem,” “our national anthem,” and “a motion picture of you, Mr. President, speaking to these people direct on our large 30 by 40 foot screen.” Indeed, as the 1950s proceeded, the State Department and the Exhibits Division of the Information Service were deluged with offers, not only from artists and photographers eager to garner all-expense-paid exhibitions in exotic foreign locations, but also from enterprising souls such as Count Vici whose projects in a sense embody the grandeur of a pervasive panic. In 1963, the United States Floating Fairs Company (Great Neck NY), writes to the Exhibits Division of USIA to inform them that, “We are contemplating outfitting a 10,000- to 15,000-ton ship, for use as a Floating Fair;” outfitted with displays about the US and its products, the ship was to travel to “countries in a pre-determined area... with special emphasis on the many new independent countries throughout the world.”²⁰ Stergar Industrial Shows Consultant propose “The American Mobile Village,” a 10-12 mobile unit village with “its own fiber-glass swimming pool with an air-inflated plastic cover, its own electricity generating truck and a film projection unit” which would travel through Europe and Russia.”²¹ “Why?” the writer asks rhetorically and then proceeds to answer: “Moscow is pushing her peasants to become spacemen without having ever tasted the

²⁰ RG306 Records of the US Information Agency, Exhibits Division, Records Concerning Exhibits in Foreign Countries 1955-67, General Correspondence 1964 to General Correspondence 1961, Box 38 250/64/03/06.

²¹ RG 306 Records of the US Information Agency, Exhibits Division, Records concerning exhibits in foreign countries 1955-67, Box 37 Letter from VA Stergar, Industrial Shows Consultant to Mr. Larson, Special Assistant to the President, May 28, 1958.

joys this earth can offer. The Mobile village would center European and Russian people's thoughts on realistic, terrestrial life." My all time favorite out of this correspondence, however, comes in 1961 from Betty Lou Raskin, Research Associate at the Johns Hopkins University Radiation Laboratory. Foamed plastic particles, "synthesized from virtually all types of resins and "chemically tailored to suit their end-use requirements" will produce a "new mass medium of communication." "This medium," she writes, "will make it possible for vast numbers of people within a given geographical area to be given large amounts of useful information in a novel and inexpensive way. For example, with an accompanying public address system, thousands of Congolese could be taught agricultural techniques; many Indians could be taught to read; and valuable information could be disseminated to Southeast Asians and South Americans from shipboard-based equipment. The technique is simply to project information (pictures and/or words, in black and white or color) in the sky at night on either natural or synthetic clouds. The equipment consists of a powerful new mobile slide projector called Skyjector (about the size of a Coca-Cola truck) and a foamed plastic smoke generator like the one shown in the enclosed reprint. This generator produces a floating movie screen from a relatively minute amount of ingredients. The Skyjector-smoke combination was very successfully field tested at Fort Meade, Maryland on February 22, 1960, under the auspices of the Unexcelled Chemical Corporation, owners of Skyjector. I am the inventor of the foamed plastic smokes (popularly known as 'holey smokes') and have assigned a royalty free license to the US Government to use them. I highly recommend that the US Government make a large-scale field test of this new propaganda tool and I would be pleased to assist in any way possible." In an internal memo from the White House, a Mr. Washburn writes, "concerning Ms. Raskin's proposal of projecting pictures and messages on natural and artificial clouds as a propaganda tool. Frankly, as so many things do these days, it sounds utterly fantastic. However, we at USIA are very much interested in the suggestion."