

SELLING SPACE:
SOCIALISM AND SIGNAGE IN PHNOM PENH AFTER THE KHMER ROUGE¹

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“How are post-socialist modernities imagined and what kind of artistic engagement takes place in the post-socialist city?” Shifting these questions from personal imagination, engagement, and expression to a register of perhaps less active individual agency, I offer a reading of the surface of public spaces in Phnom Penh from 1979 to the present. I argue that the accumulative surfaces of signage – and the tangled chains of interconnection which I describe here – constitute an in-between. A form – a style perhaps – or better, the gestures of a place that was neither socialist nor, now, post-socialist – a place caught between modernities and their not-yet. This in-between place I find expressed with more acuity and force along the streets of Phnom Penh than in most of the self-conscious “art” being produced in Cambodia today.

¹ This paper was given at the international conference *Our Modernities: Positioning Asian Art Now*, organized by the Asia Research Institute and the Department of History of the National University of Singapore, February 19-22, 2004. Many thanks to conference convener John Clark for agreeing to the publication of Ingrid’s paper in *Udaya*. The paper will also appear in a volume of collected conference papers: *Eye of the beholder: Reception, audience, and practice for Modern Asian Art*, edited and with contributions from John Clark, Maurizio Peleggi, and Kanaga Sabapathy, Wild Peony Press, Sydney, 2006.

Though we received this paper in PDF format, with a number of images integrated into the text, it nonetheless posed editorial problems similar to those encountered with the other three papers published here. Firstly, the images included were not systematically referenced in the text. Additionally, the majority of references made explicitly in the text to specific images did *not* concern those reproduced in the PDF file. We have included here all but one of the images in the original PDF file, and have inserted figure references to these throughout the text; only some of these figure references appeared in the same place in the original. We have not attempted to add legends, or to identify sources of archival images. Most photographs are nonetheless more or less well identified in the text. We believe all but the black and white archival photos were taken by Ingrid personally. (Ed.)

The streets of Phnom Penh, paved and unpaved, are filled with handmade signs made to look manufactured, the finish of plastic and the veneer of global advertising rendered in local ways. A jumble of signage not yet coagulated into a single coherent style. Instead of a logo-like visual identity, an accumulation by addition in layers of ever more. Corporate images from faraway seep into the most homemade spaces through posters and stickers used as decoration and advertisement. An excess of additions sign upon sign. The more the better. Imitate, translate, add (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1



Figure 2

The sign, it seems, is for the stranger, for those unaccustomed to the familiarity of everyday use. In the village, everyone knows who sells groceries, who sharpens knives, when and where the fish will be brought each day. The owner of a shop laughs when I ask her why she doesn't put out a sign. "It's not necessary. Everyone knows what I sell here," she says. Still, within this familiar context, display does occur, although perhaps by default. Packets of cakes and sweets hang down on rubberband chains alongside small plastic bags of cooking oil and seasonings. Tins of cookies and bottles of detergent fill the counter at another village store. Fruit and vegetables are piled up in baskets or on tables, sometimes in careful arrangements. This is not only a habit of the countryside. In the large markets, as well as in the individual storefronts throughout the city, things for sale are on display, from meat to brassières to sculpture to Santa Claus outfits (Figure 3). A kind of double marking goes on in which the goods set out in front tell as much about what the store



Figure 3

sells as its sign (Figure 4). And sometimes more. Storage or conscious display? The shop as storeroom, or the storeroom as shop? These displays spill out from the private home onto the public space of the street. Repeated attempts by city authorities to clear the sidewalk of things fail with a stubborn regularity. Selling today seems to refuse to submit to a perimeter, a border, the excess of all the available things not yet displaced into the summary of a sign, not yet condensed into representations of words or images.

The state of in-between seems inherently uneven, splayed out along a wide range. Only fifteen kilometers outside the capital, a barber shop on the island of Koh Dach is marked simply by its chair and a small hand-lettered blue and black sign: cutting hair. In the city, the modest Chan Thou hairdresser storefront relies on a single handpainted sign and added stickers to draw customers into an interior where posters of hair



Figure 4



Figure 5

for example, signs made from letters cut by hand out of electric tape stuck onto clouded sheets of plexiglass. In a backroom studio, the recent purchase of a letter cutting machine hooked to a computer allows Tim Thorn to mechanically cut the stencils that he needs for larger jobs. In a throwback to former ways of teaching, two teenage apprentices from the families living upstairs make these modern imitations in a studio filled with spray painted backdrops (Figure 6). The idea to paint backdrops, Tim Thorn (pictured here) explains, came from travelling salespeople who began to bring such canvas scenes from Vietnam and China a few years ago. These foreigners sold the backdrops to local photo studios which used them for increasingly popular fantasy portraits. The backdrops provide the imagined

styles from Thai catalogues are tacked to the walls. Moving up the spectrum of gloss, Sophos Phalla Hairdresser has new plastic images and gold lettering below its older dirty cloth sign. At Clinique Lux, on the main city boulevard, Christmas, Apsaras, and the Eiffel Tower all find their place (Figure 5). From the simplest of services to the most elaborate of displays, this is the spectrum of in-between.

I went to see Tim Thorn at Neak Poan Artist, one of any number of open storefront shops where “worker painters” (*jeang komnu*, translated in the Neak Poan shop sign as “artist”) produce handmade signs, panels, banners, and billboards. Many of their efforts increasingly mimic the glossy plastic finish of mass produced advertising in ingenious handmade ways. We see,



Figure 6

elsewhere of another life. Since Tim Thorn can more precisely depict the specific fantasies of a local audience, he and his brother make a reasonable business selling the backdrops at 30 USD, five dollars more than the foreign versions. It is stencils and airbrushing that build these fantasies (Figure 7). Perhaps unaware of the ironies of their portraits, monks pose in gardens of love and brides stand in the villa interiors to which they aspire. On holidays Tim Thorn now takes his backdrops to the park by the river where he charges photographers to take pictures of park-goers in front of his scenes.

In the same riverside park, “Street Furniture” has recently been installed, courtesy of the Phnom Penh Media Company (or PPML) in “collaboration” with City Hall (Figure 8).² These double sided “garden light box advertising displays” are only one facet of an ambitious PPML campaign to promote outdoor advertising in Cambodia.³ As the flyer “Exposing Our Products” puts it:

Outdoor advertising exists where people are. At its best, outdoor achieves direct communication with consumers where they live, work, play, where they drive and shop, where they commute and where they congregate. Visual impact makes outdoor a great medium with nothing to match this larger than life look. It is often said if you can’t do it in a poster, then you can’t do it.

“Expose yourself outdoor[s](sic),” the company urges. Until PPML finds paying clients for their Street Furniture, they are advertising their own services as well as offering a series of tourist



Figure 7

² PPML was founded in 1994 as “an innovative pioneer in the media industry in the Kingdom of Cambodia.” “Collaboration” is how the company characterized its relationship to City Hall in a December interview. See www.ppml.group.com as well as various corporate brochures and flyers.

³ “Exposing Our Products” Flyer, PPML.

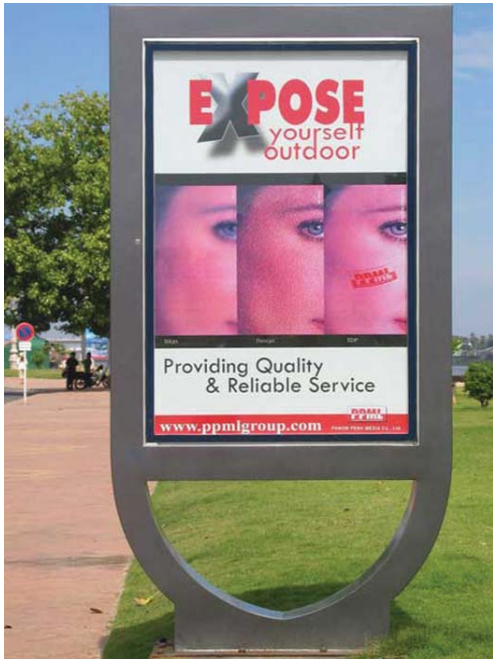


Figure 8



Figure 9

messages which allow the park visitor to stand in the city and be told that she or he is “Visiting Phnom Penh and around.” In addition to Street Furniture, PPML provides official street signage for the city, again through a “collaboration” with City Hall by which each street sign leaves a bottom panel for a PPML advertisement.

A similar “collaboration” seems to have occurred between PPML and the Royal Palace, since the façade of the Chan Chhaya is now graced with a huge photograph of His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk (Figure 9). The logo for PPML is found on the lower left of the portrait, while the “Ministry of Royal Palace” is lettered in larger letters on the lower right of the image. Down the street, at the National Assembly, the King is still depicted in a painted version signed by an “artist” – or worker painter – rather than by the logo of an advertising company (Figure 10). The Monarch – like much of Phnom Penh today – seems caught between painting and photography, between the handmade and the mechanical, between display, propaganda, advertising, and art.



Figure 10

The contrast in the visual appearance of public space in Phnom Penh between 1979 and the present could not be starker. Those returning to a virtually empty city following the end of the Khmer Rouge regime in early 1979 found deserted streets, scattered with garbage and debris, and abandoned shuttered houses (Figure 11). Today, the same strip of road is a vibrant jumble of stores, signage, and traffic (Figure 12). Standard accounts attribute this transformation primarily



Figure 11



Figure 12

to the purported regime change ushered in by the UN-sponsored elections of 1993. Through these elections, the so-called socialist regime of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (after 1989, the State of Cambodia) was transformed into a constitutional monarchy which, at least officially, came to espouse democracy, development, and a free market economy. Under the socialism of the 1980s, this line of thinking tells us, urban spaces were controlled and signage was informational. Simple standardized signs, regulated by State officials, marked ministries, military facilities, schools, and the few official State stores that existed. Along the roads and in public spaces, *komnu kosana* or communication paintings, visually condensed and projected messages of the State via huge poster-like paintings, such as an image celebrating the 5th Party Congress while urging increased production (Figure 13). A colleague remembers the Phnom Penh streets of August 1985 as having “big signs showing the ‘unity under the flag of the front’

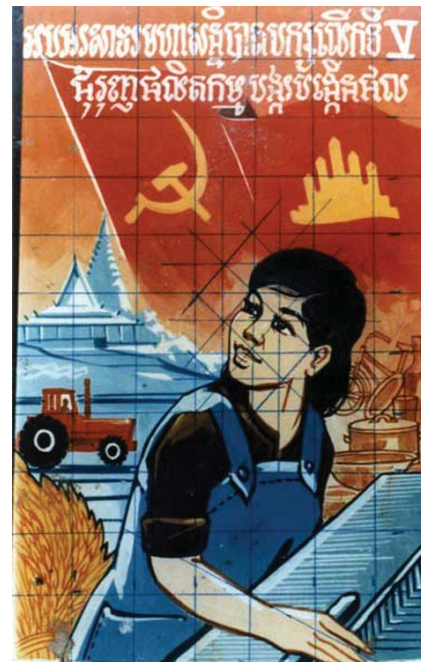


Figure 13

...seen at the major crossroads where you find now Alain Delon's image for tobacco advertisement."⁴ With the fall of the supposedly socialist regime, these billboards of the State have been retrospectively pejoritized as propaganda, and have been replaced with the advertising of a free market. Only at election time does the party reappear alongside Hennessy (Figure 14).



Figure 14

A startling influx of international advertising and local imitations has come to chaotically paper the surfaces of Phnom Penh during the 1990s. With the return of the monarchy, State Culture is royalized and images of the King grace public spaces. Besides royalty and advertising, an onslaught of aid has left public space filled with “instructional educational communication” produced by the alphabet soup of NGO campaigns seeking to promote “awareness,” “empowerment,” and “behavioral change.”⁵

Certainly Phnom Penh in 1979 was in what Evan Gottesman, in his recent book on 1980s Cambodia, has called a “precommercial state of chaos” (Figure 15).⁶ Those I asked about the early days of the return to the city laughed at the idea of there being signs – or stores – for that matter.⁷

⁴ Email correspondence, December 19, 2003, from Dr. Heike Löschmann, Director, Heinrich Böll Foundation, Thailand and SEA Regional Office.

⁵ Thanks to Rosanna Barbero of Women's Agenda for Change for providing me with the proper terms.

⁶ Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge: Inside the Politics of Nation Building*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003, p. 79.

⁷ Conversations with Chet Chan, Oum Suphany, Som Sinuom, Chan Lay Heng, and Tum Saren, December 2003.



Figure 15

At first, not many people lived in the city, and those who did knew where things were sold. Given the devastated infrastructure, the displaced population, and the non-existent government bureaucracy, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (or the PRK), was initially utterly unable to impose the "centrally controlled collectivized economy" dictated by most orthodox definitions of socialism (Gottesman 2003: 101). Instead:

Survival for most Cambodians was a matter of personal initiative rather than state intervention. In camps set up around Phnom Penh and the provincial capitals and on the sides of roads, everything was for sale: vegetables, fruit, meat, fish, noodles and old clothes. The currency was rice, available to soldiers, state officials and a few ordinary Cambodians lucky enough to receive more than a small allotment of internationally donated food aid. Rice itself was for sale, its value determined according to the currency that came to dominate the economy: gold (Gottesman 2003: 88).

Whereas official State policy in the early 1980s urged populations to stay in the countryside and participate in collective farming, by 1982, cities were expanding and the leadership was faced with an increasingly vibrant urban private market largely in Chinese-Khmer hands. In Gottesman's portrait of 1980s Cambodia, PRK socialism is increasingly hollow. The regime failed to centralize anything, including local obedience by State officials themselves to the central principles of the State. Collectivization of the countryside thus faltered "because local state officials, whose ideological commitment to collectivization had always been weak, were selling off the land"(Gottesman

2003: 272-3). Consumer goods were not only being sold privately, but were increasingly manufactured through private enterprise as well.⁸

Given the extraordinary context of the Cambodian situation in 1979, the reason for a supposedly socialist State to permit such free market activities is clear. The minimal State bureaucracy, hastily patched together following the liberation - or invasion - of the country (depending on how you look at it), was incapable of providing enough basic goods through State stores. “Cadres, workers and even Vietnamese advisors” had to buy “from the free market” simply to fulfil their basic needs (Gottesman 2003: 200). As the 1980s proceeded, the PRK of Gottesman’s portrait did not consolidate into a socialist state. Instead, anarchic forms of the early 1980s were allowed to congeal into a curious kind of State Capitalism which continues largely unchanged into the present, despite elections and purported regime changes.⁹ Under this system, the State in a sense abdicated from its responsibilities to support an increasingly large civil servant bureaucracy. State employees were allowed, and even encouraged, to engage in private business to supplement their extremely low salaries, thus being able to hold full-time jobs in the purportedly socialist State while spending large parts of their day pursuing private enterprises. State employees were also permitted to use, within limits, the powers of their office and position to make modest sums for themselves and the party. The result was “a system in which local positions were valued according to their revenue-generating potential while higher-level officials wielded power and wealth in accordance with their ability to distribute those positions. Authority was handed down; money was passed upward” (Gottesman 2003: 328-9). In this form of State Capitalism “officials were apt to consider the resources at their disposal – land, factory parts, timber, vehicles, soldiers – as assets to be exploited for profit.” (Gottesman 2003: 300). By allowing local officials to enrich themselves using the possessions of the State, the PRK consolidated power, “creating networks of happy officials whose loyalty the regime could count on, even after the Vietnamese withdrew and Sihanouk returned” (Gottesman 2003: 300).

But what does all this have to do with public spaces? On the surface of things, the PRK tried to appear socialist, and therefore public spaces were important to the Cambodian government during the 1980s. If a self-proclaimed socialist regime depended, *under* the surface of things, on a private sector to feed, clothe, and supply people, thus keeping society functioning at a minimal level, publicly – at least for show - it attempted to stamp out free market selling. Thus, for example, on October 24, 1982, Circular 351 ordered State officials to collect information on Chinese

⁸ Gottesman claims that by January 1981, there were 2000 private manufacturing enterprises compared to sixty official State run manufacturers.

⁹ State Capitalism is Gottesman’s term for this system.

Khmer merchants in preparation for their proposed removal from the cities into the countryside, thus halting their growing market activities and reinserting them into collective farming. Officials were to determine:

the ownership of every photo shop, copy shop, radio repair shop, publishing [house], stamping [business], dentist's office, noodle shop....Are they trading privately or as a company? What goods do they have? What is the source of their goods? Where are goods distributed? Are there companies or intermediaries that give them the goods? How much initial capital is there? (Circular 351 as quoted in Gottesman 2003: 183).

An August 1981 sweep of private businesses in Phnom Penh closed "twelve of the capital's one hundred and forty noodle shops, ten of its thirty coffeehouses, and all twenty seven of its bars." (Gottesman 2003: 179). The merchants' obvious response to such sweeps was to "hide their activities" (Gottesman 2003: 179). In such a climate, the last thing one would want was a sign.

Whereas today the open storefronts of ground floor apartments are considered the most expensive real estate in the city since they can be turned into stores of all kinds, in the early 1980s, people apparently generally preferred upstairs apartments where they felt safer and less likely to be bothered by military.¹⁰ The logic of the city has thus reversed over the last two decades. Where once, above-and-inside were considered the best locations, now open storefronts, down-and-in-front are coveted. Where once the market which did exist was secretive and non-visual, now selling has burst out everywhere, coating the surfaces of public life with its signs. All this can still change overnight though, as the State which is not socialist asserts its economic monopolies on various assets. When the Ministry of Communications finally carried out a long-threatened crackdown on Internet phone establishments over New Year 2004, within the space of a day, any mention of Internet telephoning had been papered over on all the signs of the riverfront cafes catering to tourists. The sign was gone and the practice momentarily too, although it is sure to come back soon (as it did the last time a crackdown was threatened), unadvertised and in back rooms, much the way business was carried out during the 1980s.

If we follow Gottesman's well argued portrait of a system of State Capitalism, developed in the early 1980s and continuing largely unaltered into the present, then all that has really changed *is* the surface of things: the aspect of public space, the fronts and facades, the labels and logos. What does it mean if the surface of things changes dramatically while the State remains largely the same? Are public spaces interchangeable backdrops for the anarchic State, allowing it to pose first as socialist and now as a parliamentary democracy with a free market economy?

¹⁰ From conversations with Chet Chan, Oum Suphany and Som Samai, December 2003.

Many people today say that Cambodia is developing - on its way to modernity – through a package of infrastructural improvements (roads, sewers, electricity, communication systems) coupled with initiatives in education, health, family planning and human rights. From the jumble of in-between, the visual logic of the start and finish of this path look surprisingly similar. The public surface of supposed socialism in the 1980s was visually coherent with uniform style communicational paintings, and standardized signage for all state institutions and stores. Public spaces were ordered and visually predictable, with relatively sparse signage making the spaces of the city much less visually arresting than the jumble of today. At the end of the purported road to development lies full blown modernity and the plunge into global capitalism. The vanguard of this advance is being physically inserted into public space in Phnom Penh in the form of the international corporate offices and global chain stores which today can be anywhere and are increasingly everywhere. These outposts of the end are designed to cohere into single logo-like corporate identities which thus, ironically, can seem as coherent and visually predictable as the public surface of the supposed socialist order of things.¹¹ In time, the sidewalks of Phnom Penh will be regulated, and zoning and trademark protection will decant the current jumble into the clarity of international urban order. For today, however, the outposts of global capital startle the eye as quiet islands in the jumble of in-between (Figures 16 and 17). Within the perimeter of the Total and Caltex gas stations, or at the stores of their local equivalents, the clutter of signage is swept away and everything is standardized to a single image. Gone is the layer on layer of reinterpretation, the piling on of the always more that is flooding into Phnom Penh these days. The experience of entering modernity locally, on the ground, with all its excesses, is far from the streamlined board rooms where these corporate identities are planned and imposed.



Figure 16



Figure 17

¹¹ Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, London, Flamingo, 2001.

Supposed socialism had its meeting rooms as well, where meanings and messages were centralized and standardized in a curiously similar way. In the early 1980s during the age of *Kar Rus Nou Thmei* (Living Anew), the painter Pech Song (pictured here, painting today) worked for the office of *Kosana Aprom*, the central public education department (Figure 18).¹² His job was to attend Party leadership meetings and listen to policy discussions. Following these meetings, he distilled the images and slogans which were to convey what he considered to be the most important public messages of the Party: collaborative work to rebuild the nation, increased rice production, national defense, etc. Approved by Party members, his small-scale designs were distributed to “worker painters” throughout Cambodia to be copied into large, billboard size signs set in public spaces throughout the country. Like Adidas today, the supposedly socialist State projected the same image everywhere. Now that Alain Delon’s



Figure 18

cigarette advertisements have replaced the billboards of the State at the major intersections, Pech Song has returned to being what he calls “an artist,” painting repetitive scenes of Angkorian temples, celestial apsaras, landscapes, and portraits of Kings past and present (See Figures 16a-h of “Haunted Scenes...”). They are facile paintings, often copied from photographs in rapid multiples, usually on commission. When I ask Pech Song about the terms with which we began – imagination and engagement – he quickly asserts that, for him, his most creative work was the compositions which he designed for the supposedly socialist State in the early 1980s. In these designs, he explains, he could “create” an image from an idea. Today, in contrast, he simply copies and recopies hollow signs for contemporary Cambodia and its art.

As an American who grew up during the Cold War, some part of me is infused with assumptions of socialism and its constraints, juxtaposed of course, in this stereotypic construction, to capitalism and its freedoms which are said to foster initiative, creativity and the new. In the curious kaleidoscope of contemporary Cambodia, nothing fits such easy assumptions and terms refuse to

¹² Conversation with Pech Song, Phnom Penh, December 11, 2003. Pech Song has painted for each of the political regimes that has ruled Cambodia since the 1960s.

anchor at their customary moorings. For Pech Song, creativity lay in fashioning the messages of a socialist surface out of a standardized visual language which today is retrospectively dubbed as clichéd propaganda. The coherent surfaces of this supposed socialism exploded in the early 1990s into an anarchic urban landscape of copies, imitations, layers of addition, and references to elsewhere. Through zoning, regulation and urban planning, this jumble is sure to be corralled – in the future – into public spaces with a less unruly visual aspect. For now, however, the gestures of this in-between rely on technical innovation grounded in repetition, using the handmade to replicate what is developed faraway. In the opening onto supposed post-socialism, imagination is thus consigned to a feeling of inferiority and a structure of replication set in the service of the spaces of selling.