

FROM THE EDITORS

Pamela N. Corey, Guest co-editor, and Ashley Thompson

This special issue of *Udaya* was prompted by the symposium “Contemporary Art in Cambodia: A Historical Inquiry,” which took place at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City on April 21, 2013.¹ While several of the symposium presentations were developed for publication in the present issue, we solicited a number of additional contributions as a means of addressing perceived gaps in the public conversation in New York.

In her closing comments at the MoMA symposium, Jane Debevoise decried the growing international fetishization of “the contemporary.” We are acutely aware of how a special volume on the topic could contribute to the market frenzy. We hope however that, to the contrary, the volume will bring to the art and the artists a depth and complexity which defies facile branding. Each contribution is grounded in biographical accounts, historical records, the voices of artists and the realms of encounter produced by their work. The authors have striven to bring in-depth historical and ethnographic research rooted in Cambodia into broader critical frameworks. Nonetheless, if such theoretical apparatuses enable analyses only insofar as they are informed by attention to locality as well as historical and formal specificity, it must also be said that the term and the concept of “the local” struggle to express or delimit the dimensions of artistic formation, material production, and discursive circulation that compose “modern and contemporary Cambodian art.” We can only note that always already constituting dispute over origins, the “local” is a construction embedded in political and racial ideologies, market agendas, and paradigms of cultural and psychological salvation across transnational formulations, no matter how necessary and useful it may appear

¹ The symposium was convened by Cornell University in collaboration with the Season of Cambodia Visual Arts Program, and major support from the Center of Khmer Studies. The co-organizers were Pamela N. Corey, Erin Gleeson, and Leeza Ahmady. Further details on the program and its content can be found in Pamela N. Corey, “Situating Contemporary Art in Cambodia,” *Cornell University Southeast Asia Program Bulletin* (Spring 2014), 23-26. Video footage of selected presentations are available for viewing at Asia Art Archive, <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/Collection-Online>.

today.

As such, many of the authors in this volume have sought to understand how Cambodian art in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries came to be represented and experienced as “modern,” “contemporary,” and “art” – and even as “Cambodian.” The ever-collapsing distinction between representation and experience, turning on such factors as policy rhetoric, pedagogy, art criticism, and material practices, has engendered apparently paradoxical – in ways productive, and in other ways destructive – relationships between the two poles. Similarly, our contributors pay attention to the tandem between arts and aesthetics, exploring how particular regimes of visibility in present-day Cambodia intersect with contemporary evolution in language use, social and civic awareness, and historical memory, most notably of the Khmer Rouge period. Many of these issues lie at the heart of Ingrid Muan’s 2001 dissertation, “Citing Angkor: The ‘Cambodian Arts’ in the Age of Restoration, 1918-2000,” which laid the groundwork for subsequent research into the intersecting impacts of systems of pedagogy and the politico-historical dimensions of artistic subjectivity in twentieth-century Cambodia, and which serves as a pivotal reference for many contributors to the present volume.²

Adding to Muan’s discussion of Cambodian modern art and educational systems, Gabrielle Abbe tracks the paths through which colonial administrator George Groslier established modern institutions to intentionally cultivate non-modern artistic subjectivities. In a study of a recent exhibition of Groslier’s photographic project to document classical Cambodian dance postures on the verge, it appeared, of disappearance, H el ene Suppya Nut provides broader context for an ongoing discourse of cultural decline by detailing the colonial administrative policies that effectively undermined the perseverance of royal dance traditions. Pamela N. Corey’s piece on the “first” Cambodian contemporary artist considers systems of value constructed across transnational fields of language and artistic production in which several artists are brought to sport the title “first.” At the same time, gaps between representation (as language) and experience (as enactment) engender creative possibilities in the face of what Rey Chow has termed “cultural translation.”³ This is further demonstrated by Roger Nelson’s consideration of how “performance” as a loan term has produced meaningful engagements across new media practices, theater, and dance.

“History” serves as a point of departure for other essays. Joanna Wolfarth critically examines the visual historiography and historicity of Sihanouk, as his portrait came to be embodied in the still, moving, and virtual image, the persistence of his presence revealing shifts in popular and civic consciousness. Historicity also drives the photographic and performative practices of artists Vandy Rattana and Svay Sareth, as shown in their conversation with Leeza Ahmady. Historical narratives inevitably map centers and peripheries; they are spatial orientations as much as they are temporally-based accounts. While recent consolidation of discursive and curatorial frameworks have tended to site Phnom Penh as the epicenter of modern and contemporary artistic development, the

² Ingrid Muan, “Citing Angkor: the ‘Cambodian Arts’ in the Age of Restoration, 1918-2000,” Ph.D. Diss., Columbia University, 2001. See also the special issue of *Udaya, Journal of Khmer Studies* 6 (2005) dedicated to Muan, featuring four of her unpublished conference presentations.

³ See Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

contributions by Véronique Decrop and the “founders” of Phare Ponleu Selpak in Battambang literally challenge the draw of the capital. Vuth Lyno recounts another spatial story, that of an engagement between artists and community, prompted by what was perceived as a need to assert local Cambodian voices against the expatriate-dominated commercial artistic landscape of Phnom Penh. Through this account and others, the specter of “authority” – whether governmental, market, curatorial or academic – operates in fluid ways with and against the establishment of institutions, collectives, and commercial spaces, prompting both interventions and collaborations.

The multilingual nature of *Udaya* has brought certain dimensions of the issues mentioned above to the fore in the editorial process, for many of the “Khmer” words or phrases currently used in the contemporary arts community are awkward neologisms created as direct translations of English or French terms. We read for example of a collective project led by two artists from the Cambodian diaspora entitled “Cakkhu Silpaḥ Samāy,”⁴ literally “eye art historical period,” an incomprehensible phrase in Khmer without prior knowledge of its origins in the English “Contemporary Visual Arts.” The creation of the phrase reflects the goal of the project, to introduce new artistic practices into Cambodian communities; it also reflects a turbulent state of affairs with regards to language. The effective policy of Reyum, a precursor to the “Cakkhu Silpaḥ Samāy” project in supporting contemporary art production in the capital, was to discreetly mark the issue of linguistic – and perhaps conceptual – disjunction at work in their work by producing bilingual exhibition titles and materials in which Khmer and English texts had little pretension to directly mirror each other. Another dimension of these issues is evidenced in the usage of the term *sabasamāy* within the Cambodian arts community represented in this volume. The term is constructed from two Pali words, *saba*, a translation of the English prefix “co-” or “con-,” and *samāy*, meaning “time period,” “era.” As a compound noun the word translates the English “contemporary.” The term rubs the wrong way on two counts: though more easily accessible than “Cakkhu Silpaḥ,” it is contrived and incomprehensible outside of select arts contexts; secondly, many in the arts community think it to derive from the Sanskrit for “one thousand” (*sahasra*), and so to designate art after the millenium... We wonder why the more colloquial term “*silpaḥ paccupunn*” is not used. *Paccupunn* is the Pali term for “contemporary” commonly used in Khmer. We have used “*silpaḥ paccupunn*” when translating from English or French ourselves into Khmer in the present volume. For “Visual Arts” we have opted for the relatively accessible neologism *das(n)silpaḥ*, combining *das(n)*, a Pali word regularly used in Khmer in words associated with visibility (*durdas(n)*, “television;” *dassanavidyā*, “philosophy,” as in “insight”; etc.) and *silpaḥ*, a Sanskrit term for “art.” This marks a distinction from usage of the term *sūn rūp*, combining Khmer *sūn*, “to shape,” with Sanskrit/Pali *rūp*, “form, body, image,” a phrase which has traditionally translated the French “Arts Plastiques” and which emphasizes sculptural dimensions of the broader English “Visual Arts.” For “Applied Arts,” and for want of a simpler option, we have reluctantly accepted the awkward literal translation *silpaḥ anuvatt* used by Phare interviewee Srey Bandol and adopted by the institution he represents. In their unwieldiness in the Khmer tongue the neologisms peppering this volume attest to struggles defining the field, as artists and institutions seek to adopt or subvert, at times by appropriating, hegemonic Western forms and powers. Insofar as one of *Udaya*’s priorities has always been to cultivate simple yet elegant Khmer

⁴ Linda Saphan and Sopheap Pich, the organizers of the *Visual Arts Open*, used the transliteration “Chakok Selapak Samai.”

language usage, drawing from the resources of traditional usage whenever possible, this incursion of ill-fitting terminology has been a challenge to handle. The volume remains patchy, as we have, more or less, left our contributors to use the language they see fit.

This volume also introduces a related twist into *Udaya's* "Translation" rubric. Since its foundation in 2000 *Udaya* has striven to include a Khmer-language translation of a seminal foreign-language article in the field of Khmer Studies. Given the steady rise of *Udaya's* sister journal, *Khmerrenaissance*, a quarterly Khmer-language journal founded in 2005 and comprising short essays on aspects of Cambodian cultural practice, we have decided, here, to inverse the knowledge transfer flow. This issue includes, thus, English-language translations of three *Khmerrenaissance* essays which all evince concern for highly localized aesthetics. The types of materials and practices they document are crucial to "modern and contemporary Cambodian art" even as, and even because, they sit outside of the global networks in which the said "art" evolves. These are by Chea Narin on the fabrication of palm leaf screens in Trapeang Po village, Kandal province; by Chea Socheat on a type of rice granary characteristic of the Tonle Toch region; and by Ang Choulean on a rice threshing apparatus used in Kompong Trach district of Kampot province.