

“PERFORMANCE IS CONTEMPORARY.”  
PERFORMANCE AND ITS DOCUMENTATION IN VISUAL ART IN CAMBODIA

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At a “live painting” and “performance” event in Battambang on March 30, 2014 (titled សិល្បៈកញ្ចប់] *Selpak Kandia* and collaboratively organized by a group of artists including Roeun Sokhom [រ៉ូន សុខុម] and Pen Robit [ប៉ែន រ៉ូប៊ីត]), one artist inadvertently flung paint onto an expensive DSLR camera (the photographer happened to poke the lens around the edge of a canvas just as the painter was expressively hurling paint with his hands). Clearly, photographic and video recording was not a key consideration in the planning of this event. Rather, *Selpak Kandia*—like many other “live painting” and “performance” events organized by this group of artists over recent years in Battambang—was intended to gather and engage a large, live audience of passersby (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, when Khvay Samnang (ខ្សែ សំណាង) covered his face and bare body in newspaper clippings and stumbled blindly for several minutes over the newly sand-filled Boeung Kak Lake on March 7, 2011, there was no live audience other than fellow artist Lim Sokchanlina (លីម សុខចាន់លីណា), who assisted with filming. Indeed, the timing and precise location of this action was

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I acknowledge the continuing sovereignty of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nations as the Indigenous owners of the land, in Melbourne, Australia, where sections of this essay were written, including at The University of Melbourne. As is customary, I offer my respects to the Wurundjeri elders, past and present.

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<sup>1</sup> Conversations with Pen Robit and Roeun Sokhom, 2014. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent references to Pen Robit or Roeun Sokhom are from conversations with the author during 2013 and 2014. Where necessary, all translation is by the author.

*Selpak Kandia* translates as “termite art.” Roeun explained that the event organizers believe that it would take the interest and participation of “many, many people” to build the kind of art community of which they dreamed—just as it takes “many, many termites” to build a nest. I estimate that there were at least 200 people gathered to watch this event.

carefully chosen to minimize the risk of encountering incidental passersby, especially authorities. Yet Khvay considers this action, as well as the single-channel video that resulted from it (titled *Newspaper Man*, 2011), to be “performance,” and it is understood in this way by many of his peers in Cambodia (Figure 2).



*Figure 1: Two views of Selpak Kandia, a ‘live painting’ event collaboratively organized by a group of artists including Roewn Sokhom and Pen Robit, held in front of Psar Nat, Battambang, March 30, 2014. Photographs by the author.*



*Figure 2: Khvay Samnang, Newspaper Man, 2011. Digital C Print, and single-channel digital video. Courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.*

*“Performance is Contemporary:” Performance and its Documentation in Visual Art in Cambodia*

These two examples are introduced as indicative of the breadth of the spectrum of approaches to performance and its documentation in the practices of visual artists in contemporary Cambodia.<sup>2</sup> In this essay, further examples of works by Lim Sokchanlina, Amy Lee Sanford, Anida Yoeu Ali (អានីដា យ៉េវ៉ា អាលី) and others will be also be discussed in some detail, informed by my ongoing dialogues with many of these artists.<sup>3</sup> While attitudes to live audiences and recording technologies clearly vary, in this essay I argue that what is consistent in performances by these artists is the central presence of documentation. Of course, an apparent ubiquity of digital technologies is by no means unique to Cambodia, and documentation of performance is arguably becoming the norm in many disparate locations. Yet what is especially noteworthy about the Cambodian case is that performance by visual artists is a comparatively recent phenomenon, arising within the past decade, approximately concurrent with the mass availability and adoption of digital technologies, especially photography and film.

I will argue that this centrality of documentation is due to four, often overlapping, factors. Firstly, that artists are chiefly exposed to international performances not live but in the form of their documentation; secondly, that documentation renders performance legible as visual art in the contemporary context; thirdly, that photo- and video-documenting is an automatic and everyday activity in urban Cambodia for those with access to the technology; and finally, that the format of some performances is actually shaped by the apparatuses used to record their documentation.

Moreover, I will propose that these performance works display, with very few exceptions, very little connection to existing systems or traditions of performance, including of Cambodian *lekhon* (ល្ខន្ត, “theater”) or *rapām* (រាំ, “dance”). Performances by visual artists are fundamentally experimental creations that are almost always conceived, and received, without reference to existing theatrical or choreographic conventions.<sup>4</sup> Rather than engaging with performance traditions,

<sup>2</sup> Recognizing the historically contingent nature of the term “Cambodian artist” (and its constituent components), I consider the practices of both lifelong residents and returning diaspora.

<sup>3</sup> I draw on long-term conversations with artists in part out of necessity, given the paucity of written and archival sources on their practice, but also out of a commitment to privileging the perspectives of artists and local audiences. My use of what may be termed a partly ethnographic methodology is informed both by Taylor, “The Southeast Asian Art Historian as Ethnographer?”, and also by conversations with several artists themselves. For example, Khvay Samnang has said to me that “if you want to know, you have to come, and not just talk, but *enjoy!* And spend time, not just one hour or one day.” Khvay Samnang, conversation with the author, 2013. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent references to Khvay Samnang are from conversations with the author during 2012, 2013 and 2014. Where necessary, all translation is by the author.

Taylor notes that “Historical records are held in living archives, in artists’ memories” (“Southeast Asian Art Historian,” 481). I am interested in these “records” and “memories” but also in the testimony of audiences, including of artists as audiences. My background, which includes training in the disciplines of art history and cultural studies as well as work as a curator, encourages me to look also to the reception of culture: to the “historical records” held in the memories of theatre-goers and gallery visitors and other publics, as well as to new forms of “archives,” including those created in online contexts such as Facebook. My practice as a curator working with several of the visual artists I will discuss below has allowed me the opportunity to have long-term conversations about their work that have included many glimpses of the processes of creation as well as exhibition. My interpretation of the work of the artists discussed here tends to be informed both by the artists themselves, and by their audiences. I gratefully attribute many of my thoughts here to conversations with artists and audiences in Cambodia: conversations had in my capacity as doctoral researcher, as curator, and as friend—and frequently as all three. Much of this research has been, in part, a collaborative activity.

<sup>4</sup> While this is the dominant tendency, it is of course not true of all performances by visual artists. For example, most “live painting” events, while perhaps not narrative in the usual sense, still has a clear sense of progression from begin-

their central concern is with documentation. The self-consciously experimental nature of these performances is in contrast to many contemporary performances for the stage. This will be demonstrated through discussion of the choreography of Sophiline Cheam Shapiro (ស៊ីលីន ជាម សាភាវី) and Emmanuèle Phuon, and the theater of Jean-Baptiste Phou. Unlike most performances by visual artists, these performances for the stage engage with codified traditions as a key source of meaning. Yet despite this difference, these two genres share many other qualities, including a mutual dependence between live and mediatized forms, and a simultaneously national and transnational attitude that, I propose, may be considered an example of cosmopolitanism or “cosmopatriotism.”<sup>5</sup>

As suggested in the title of this essay, it is my contention that performance in its varied forms can be understood as a privileged articulation of contemporaneity in the Cambodian context, as elsewhere. Rather than seeking to elevate one approach to performance as somehow “more” contemporary than any other, I argue for an inclusive understanding that registers the multiplicity of the contemporary, in Cambodia as elsewhere, and the multivalent nature of artists’ understandings of and implied relationships to this state. I moreover propose an inclusive understanding of performance, too. The temporally bound nature of performance makes it an especially powerful format<sup>6</sup> for artists’ explorations of the experience of the present. Following Philip Auslander’s theorization of performance in mediatized societies—in which he questions “whether there really are clear-cut ontological distinctions between live forms and mediatized ones”<sup>7</sup>—I regard both “live” performance and its documentation as sharing many essential qualities; indeed, they are in some instances conceived of by artists in Cambodia as interchangeable, as shall be seen.

## ON DEFINING PERFORMANCE

Beginning around the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, several Cambodian visual artists have made works incorporating performances that are not comfortably encompassed by standard existing terms, either in Khmer or English. Performances by visual artists are not satisfactorily described as *kār saṃṭaeñ* (ការសំដែង, “performance”), *lekhon* (ល្ខោន, “theater”) or *rapām* (រាំចំ, “dance”), and stretch usual understandings of the term *silpaḥ* (សិល្បៈ: “art”). Yet the central importance of documentation in both the creation and exhibition of these recent Cambodian works places them at odds with “performance art” as it has historically come to be understood in Euro-American and other contexts, where the most cited histories and teaching texts

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ning to end. Several performances by Svay Sareth (ស្វាយ សារ៉េត) explicitly reference Albert Camus’ *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (*The Myth of Sisyphus*). Khvay Samnang’s *Preah Ream Thlaeng Sor* (2012) features *qnak pratāl* (ក្បួនប្រដាល់, “boxers”) photographed by the artist in poses derived from their usual profession (Figure 8).

<sup>5</sup> De Kloet and Jurriëns, “Introduction,” *Cosmopatriots*, 9-18.

<sup>6</sup> My use of “format” in place of the more familiar term “medium” follows Joselit, *After Art*.

<sup>7</sup> Auslander, *Liveness*, 7. My theoretical debt to Auslander predates the scandal over the 2007 publication of *Theory For Performance Studies: A Student’s Guide* (Routledge, Abingdon, New York), originally attributed to Auslander and subsequently revealed to have been plagiarized. I concur with the performance studies scholarly community’s resounding condemnation of Auslander, while also agreeing with Schechner et al that he remains “a leading figure in performance studies” whose contributions should not be overlooked, subsequent misconduct and scandal notwithstanding. See Schechner, Beal, et al., “TDR Comment: Concerning ‘Theory for Performance Studies.’”

on performance art typically emphasize the specifically live encounter as of defining importance. For example, RoseLee Goldberg’s widely cited survey, which announces itself as the “first history of performance,”<sup>8</sup> proposes that “By its very nature, performance defies precise or easy definition beyond the simple declaration that it is *live art* by artists.”<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere the author repeats her insistence that performance is necessarily “live,” but a full definition of this slippery term is not given.

Significantly, the word that most Cambodian artists use for performance in visual art is *performance*. The common use of the loan word, rather than *kār samṭaenī* (performance) or another Khmer term, is of course evidence in part that performance in visual art is sometimes conceptualized by Cambodian artists as an exogenous form.<sup>10</sup> More importantly though, the use of the loan word *performance* to describe performance in visual art is a demonstration and a performative example of the ways in which visual artists are seeking to define a new discursive space for themselves and their performances, separate and distinct from existing forms of performance such as *rapām* (dance) and *lkhon* (theater). A new word is used because performance by visual artists is felt to be a new phenomenon. Roewn Sokhom explains that, for him, “the word *performance* has more meaning, stronger meaning, than *kār samṭaenī*. Our *performance* is...something different.”<sup>11</sup>

“Performance” is notoriously contested and difficult to define, in visual art as in other contexts. In the simplest terms, in relation to visual art in Cambodia, I use the word performance to refer to any bodily action that is usually called performance, by either the artist or audiences.

My use of the related term, performative, is based in the understanding first articulated by J.L. Austin,<sup>12</sup> and since elaborated by numerous scholars of performance studies, including Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.<sup>13</sup> In the Austinian sense, a performative act of speech is one that does not simply describe something, but rather that actually constitutes the action. Austin proposes that a performative act of speech is one “in which to *say* something is to *do* something.”<sup>14</sup> Extending the concept beyond purely linguistic contexts, I regard any action as performative if its meaning and function is immanent in the form of the action, rather than represented by the action. For these artists to use the loan word *performance* does not only “announce” a desire for a new conception of performance and a new discursive space for these practices; the very use of the word actually constitutively contributes to the creation of that new space and understanding. That is, to refer to performance in visual art in Cambodia as *performance* is itself a performative act.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 9. Emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> The notion of “exogenous” cultural forms draws from John Clark, *Asian Modernities*.

<sup>11</sup> At a discussion of the terminology of performance during a symposium in 2014, artist Srey Bandol (ស្រី បណ្ណាល) asked for help in understanding the difference between *kār samṭaenī* and *performance*. Dancer and choreographer Sophiline Cheam Shapiro answered that “the method of performing is different,” speaking of the importance of rhythm in dance and theater. By contrast, Tith Kanitha (ទីតិ កនីថា) and several other visual artists agreed that, in their opinions, the key difference was rather one of concept and attitude, with Svay Sareth concluding that “the body becomes a slave of the idea.” *Roundtables: the Body, the Lens, the City*, symposium convened by SA SA BASSAC, Phnom Penh, March 22, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, see especially 1-24.

<sup>13</sup> Parker and Sedgwick, “Introduction: Performativity and Performance,” 1-18. Their discussion is based in large part on Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” 307-30.

<sup>14</sup> Austin, *Words*, 12-13. Emphasis in original.

I purposefully avoid the term “performance art” as I see it as both limiting and misleading in the Cambodian context. Cambodian artists themselves rarely use the term: in Khmer, the loan word *performance* alone is understood to refer specifically to performances made by visual artists (as distinct from, for example, performances by dancers). In North America and Western Europe, while “performance art” now has a fairly broad range of associations, the term’s (and form’s) emergence and original meanings can be traced to a few specific artists and scholars.<sup>15</sup> Peggy Phelan, an oft-cited early theorist of performance art in the U.S., famously argued that “Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance.”<sup>16</sup> Phelan’s cleaving of the live performance from its “representation” in “record[ings]” or “document[ation]” makes her conception of performance of limited use in the Cambodian context, where the live and the recorded are inextricable and mutually dependent, both in the works Cambodian artists are making, and in their reception of performance works by international artists chiefly through their mediatized form (usually online), rather than live.

It is also worth noting that most Cambodian artists are not only unfamiliar with Phelan, but also with the generation of artists that she chiefly discusses. Many are more familiar with Chinese performance artists of the 1980s, 1990s, and especially 2000s. As they encounter works by high-profile Chinese artists not live but solely in the form of (usually online) documentation, artists in Cambodia often discuss not only the nature of the performed action, but also the quality of the photographic, video and/or other documentation. There is an equal importance placed on the live and the documented versions of the performance, which supports Auslander’s view that, in mediatized cultural contexts, there is not a clear distinction between these live and mediatized forms, and there is often not an intuitive sense that the live phenomenologically precedes the recorded.

Of course, the live actions of artists in China do temporally precede the circulation of their documentation. But since artists in Cambodia (as elsewhere) experience the documentation first (and often exclusively), it makes no sense to argue of Cambodia, as Thomas J. Berghuis does of China, that “many of the performances we have witnessed would in fact be *simulacra*” in the Baudrillardian sense.<sup>17</sup> Such a view implies that the live performance is somehow more “real” than its documentation, which (as Auslander argues) is not the usual experience of most viewers in mediatized contexts. Writing of “performance art” in China, Berghuis traces a clear trajectory from an early focus on the live body, through a growing sense of the importance of documentation, finally to a point where “it became no longer essential to stage performances in front of an audience.”<sup>18</sup> The logic here is progressivist. Such a linear narrative cannot apply in Cambodia, where for most

<sup>15</sup> See Brentano, “Outside the Frame: Performance, Art, and Life,” 31-61.

<sup>16</sup> Phelan, *Unmarked*, 146. Phelan’s exclusive interest in the live, “present” experience of performance in fact overlooks the presence of “representations” even within some of the very performances she discusses: for example, by Phelan’s own criteria, the performance by Angelika Festa which she discusses as a key work of “hardship art or “ordeal art” perhaps ought not to be considered a performance at all, since the *mise en scène* includes a video recording of the artist’s body. See Angelika Festa, *Untitled Dance (with fish and others)*, 1987, in Phelan, 152ff.

<sup>17</sup> Berghuis, *Performance Art in China*, 22.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

visual artists interested in and working with performance, the first introductions came in the form of documentation rather than live experience.

I contend that to name certain forms of practice as “performance art” necessarily opens the possibility for proscriptive delineation; if I choose to call one work “performance art” then I can just as easily declare that another work is *not* “performance art.” But since the definitions and meanings of the term were developed in another context and are largely unfamiliar in Cambodia, and moreover since the nature of performance in visual art is changing very rapidly, such boundary-drawing seems to me quite unhelpful.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, to speak of “performance in visual art” allows a much more open and flexible range of interpretive possibilities.<sup>20</sup>

## ON DEFINING THE CONTEMPORARY

If conceptualizing “performance” is challenging, defining the contemporary is perhaps even more complex. Currently, the most commonly used Khmer language term for “contemporary art” is *sahasamāy* (សហសម័យ). The term was created to translate the English “contemporary” (or in French “contemporain”). *Saha* (សហ), a Pali word, means “together with;” *samāy* (សម័យ) means “period” or “era.” While *samāy* is usually specified by an adjoining adjective—as in *samāy arīgar* (សម័យអង្គរ) (the Angkorean period)—in current vernacular usage, *samāy* on its own is understood to refer particularly to the current era.<sup>21</sup> I will return to this point in my concluding comments. The English prefix “con” means “together with,” and the origin of “temporary” is “tempus,” the Latin for “time,” “season,” or “portion of time.” So one understanding of the term “contemporary,” in Khmer and in English, could be “together with the time,” or even more pertinently in Khmer as “together with *this* time.”

Art historian Terry Smith, who is among the most prominent and active of theorists of contemporary art in English, has written on several occasions about the implications of the English language etymology of the word “contemporary.” He argues that “*con tempus* came into use, and remains in use, because it points to *a multiplicity of relationships between being and time.*”<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Smith insists that “the concept of the ‘contemporary,’ far from being singular and simple—a

<sup>19</sup> In her rich and otherwise very insightful essay on Southeast Asian “performance art,” Taylor declares that “The presence of an audience is what makes performance art a performance. Although, this is subject to debate as performance artists often perform in front of a camera” (Taylor, “Networks of Performance Art in Southeast Asia,” 36). As will become clear in my discussion of what I call “performance for the camera” below, such an assertion perhaps does not quite capture the complexity around performance in Cambodian visual art.

<sup>20</sup> This is also informed, in part, by a growing sense that analysis of “medium” is of diminishing importance in understanding contemporary art. David Joselit articulates a widely held belief, arguing that “we must discard the concept of medium (along with its mirror image, the postmedium), which has been fundamental to art history and criticism for generations.” Joselit proposes that, to make sense of contemporary art, we must “expand the definition of art to embrace heterogeneous configurations of relationships or links” (*After Art*, 2).

<sup>21</sup> The similarity between *sahasamāy* and *sahassavats(r)* (សហស្សវត្សរ៍ “millennium”) has led to some confusion. For some, using *samāy* alone to refer to the current era is in fact to refer to the “new” millennium, with *saha* being taken to be short for *sahassavats(r)* rather than to mean “together with.”

<sup>22</sup> Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?*, 4. Emphasis is original.

neutral substitute for ‘modern’— signifies multiple ways of being with, in, and out of time.”<sup>23</sup> Literary theorists of contemporaneity, Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks, make a similar proposal that “the contemporary is thought as the con-temporal, conjoined yet incommensurate ‘times together.’”<sup>24</sup> While acknowledging the impossibility and undesirability (given its colonial, totalizing overtones) of “conceiving a ‘total’ history of the contemporary moment,”<sup>25</sup> they posit that part of what defines both the word “contemporary” and the nature of our “contemporary moment” is a certain kind of “together”-ness, something that is shared translocally, that brings together places as well as perhaps times, collapsed into a shared present. All of this can apply equally to “*sahasamāy*” as it does to “contemporary,” since the one term translates the other.

In the discourse of defining contemporary art, it is now often said that contemporaneity—not modernity—has become a “global” condition, radically distinct from (yet still in other ways continuous with) that which came before.<sup>26</sup> There is widely held agreement that, in order to be understood as contemporary, art necessarily “demonstrates the way in which the contemporary as such shows itself—the act of presenting the present,” and that “the term ‘contemporary art’ does not simply designate the art that is produced in our time.”<sup>27</sup> Increasingly, I contend, what is discursively permitted to “count” as contemporary—especially in the visual and performing arts—is decided by a fairly narrow set of aesthetic (and economic) criteria. How art can be “produced in our time” yet somehow not contribute (however indirectly) to “presenting the present” is never convincingly explained. While space won’t allow me to fully address my concerns with this widely accepted formulation, I hope that by looking closely at a few phenomena as they are experienced in Cambodia—some of them perhaps peculiar to this location, and others very widely familiar<sup>28</sup>—I might begin to unsettle some of its underlying assumptions, and to suggest that any meaningful understanding of contemporaneity in the Cambodian context must encompass performance in all its forms.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>24</sup> Luckhurst and Marks, “Hurry Up Please It’s Time: Introducing the Contemporary,” 3-4.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>26</sup> See Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art*; Smith, “The State of Art History: Contemporary Art”; Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents*; Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*. Smith defines contemporary art as necessarily concerned with global concerns. Smith is discussed in relation to Southeast Asia in Supangkat, “Indonesia in Contemporary Art Discourses,” 18-43. Okwui Enwezor describes global contemporaneity as a “postcolonial constellation” (“The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition,” 207-45). Nikos Papastergiadis emphasizes cosmopolitanism and hybridity, but downplays the “newness” of these global conditions; see Papastergiadis, *Cosmopolitanism and Culture*. Peter Osborne characterizes contemporary art as inherently geopolitical and postconceptual; see Osborne, *Anywhere Or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*. Hans Belting et al. propose that contemporaneity is made global in part by the rise of multiple, new art worlds (a shift, they assert, from one art world, with a center and a periphery); see Belting, Buddensieg, and Weibel, eds., *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*.

<sup>27</sup> Groy, “The Topology of Contemporary Art,” 71.

<sup>28</sup> There is a general pressure in “area studies” to identify the locally specific. This is perhaps especially so in Khmer Studies, for various reasons. While some of the phenomena I discuss are experienced in distinct and unique ways here, others might be regarded as nearly universal. In this latter case, I take Cambodia not as an aberrant exception, but rather simply as an example, a case study, in the study of the purportedly global phenomenon that is contemporary art. Svay Sareth expressed a view that is common among many younger visual artists in Cambodia, when he asserted that “We are living in a globalized world. When we make art, I don’t care if it is distinctively Khmer or not. Why is it important to distil, to filter like that?” Comment made at *Roundtables: the Body, the Lens, the City*, symposium convened by SA SA BASSAC, Phnom Penh, March 22, 2014.



## PERFORMANCE IN VISUAL ART: THE CENTRALITY OF DOCUMENTATION

As mentioned in my introductory comments, I propose that there are four broad factors that contribute to the central place of documentation in performances by visual artists in Cambodia. It should be noted, however, that several of the issues raised relate more broadly to the rapidly changing status of documentation of artwork in contemporary culture internationally. The internet plays a central role in the swiftly shifting meanings of documentation of artworks. It is becoming increasingly common for artworks of all kinds to be viewed first—and often only—in the realm of the internet.

In just one demonstration of this, many well-known and well-endowed museums have in recent years made high-resolution images of artworks in their collection available free online. This includes, since 2014, the Cambodian National Museum’s collection. Many institutions now permit photography in gallery spaces and participate actively in the resulting dissemination and discussion of photographs through various social media sites. Writing on this phenomenon, curator Daniel S. Palmer has argued that “The museum experience of most visitors now includes cell phone documentation and sharing,” and that one result of this is that “today, social media is playing a central role in determining the popularity of artworks (and maybe even which artworks get made and exhibited at all), based on an acute awareness of what kinds of images are most likely to transmit successfully on the web.”<sup>29</sup>

The ways in which art can be encountered online are significant, too. Curator Omar Kholeif has observed that the algorithms of websites such as Amazon.com and Artsy.net, which provide users searching for one artist (or art-related term) with a range of related artists (and art-related terms), are offering to these users in an instant “a simple but meaningful historical trajectory... which would have ordinarily taken someone in a world without databases and algorithms hours pouring [*sic*] over...books in order to draw such correlations.”<sup>30</sup> The implications of this for contexts such as Cambodia, in which there is a comparative scarcity of books and in which many users of the internet have limited English language skills, have yet to be fully addressed.

## PERFORMANCE IN VISUAL ART: ON THE LIVE ENCOUNTER

Visual artists in Cambodia rarely announce that they will be making a performance at a set time (with “live painting” events in Battambang and elsewhere—as well as some workshop events—being notable exceptions, as shall be discussed below). This is a marked contrast to most performances for the stage; in urban centers, these are widely publicized in advance, and in rural areas, according to Preap Chanmara (ព្រាប ចាន់ម៉ារ៉ា), *lkhon khol* performances traditionally always

<sup>29</sup> Palmer, “Share and Share Alike (Part I): Museums and the Digital Image Explosion.” See also Palmer, “Share and Share Alike (Part II): Sharing and Liking and Lacking.”

<sup>30</sup> Kholeif, “The Curator’s New Medium,” 80.

happen on the same day, every year, with the possible supernatural consequences for failing to respect the set time having included the roof of *roñ dhvoe bidhī* (រោងធ្វើពិធី “the performance venue”) collapsing on the performers.<sup>31</sup>

Many —perhaps most— visual artists perform primarily in order to make photographs, video or both. Indeed, most people who see performances by visual artists see them in the form of photographs, videos, and other documentation —not in the form of a live performance. Those who do happen to see a performance live often seem baffled by it; this can be seen in the facial expressions of the “audience” in Anida Yoeu Ali’s *Around Town 1* (from *The Buddhist Bug Project*, 2012) (Figure 3) and in a related video of this performance, and is also vividly recalled by Khvay Samnang in a story about the making of his 2011 *Untitled* series. Khvay recalls that a group of construction (or rather, demolition) workers at Boeung Kak Lake, having asked him what he was doing swimming in the water with a bucket filled with sand, responded only with laughter when the artist told them he was *dhvoe silpah* (ធ្វើសិល្បៈ: “making/doing art”).



Figure 3: Anida Yoeu Ali, *Around Town 1*, 2012. From the series *The Buddhist Bug Project*. Digital C Print. Concept and performance by Anida Yoeu Ali, photography by Masabiro Sugano. Image courtesy of Studio Revolt.

The workers’ reaction is not discernible in the photograph made during this performance (Figure 4), or in the video of this and related performances, as it was originally edited for exhibition at SA SA BASSAC in 2011 (and subsequently re-edited for a multi-channel showing in the 2013 Singapore Biennale). But their curiosity (evident in their brief downing of tools and quiet attention to the artist in the moment as he enters the water) can be seen in a longer version of the videos, which Khvay first exhibited in *new artefacts*, an exhibition I curated at SA SA BASSAC in Phnom

<sup>31</sup> ព្រាប ចាន់ម៉ារ៉ា [Preap Chanmara], ល្ខោនខោល វត្តស្វាយអណ្តែត [Lkhon Khol, Wat Svay Andae], 10.



Figure 4: Khvay Samnang, *Untitled*, 2011. From the series *Untitled*. Digital C Print. Courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.

Penh in 2012. A reflection on the ways in which Khvay’s viewing of that video differs from my own initial impression is revealing of the artist’s approach to performance, and specifically to live audiences.

The curatorial premise of *new artefacts* was to “experimentally [explore] *process*: in the practice of contemporary artists, and also as a mode of documentation and exhibition.”<sup>32</sup> When Khvay and I first viewed the longer video filmed in Boeung Kak Lake together, along with several other similar videos that were also exhibited in *new artefacts*, I commented on the reactions of the workers and others who appear in the footage. The live encounter with an incidental audience, as a part of Khvay’s “process,” seemed to me important. But Khvay thought I was rather missing the point. For him, the value of these videos was not in showing the live reactions to his performances, but rather in detailing his own strenuous labor.

The gendered nature of Khvay’s and other artists’ physically strenuous performances is a topic for further discussion at a later date. Svay Sareth has made numerous performances that also involve physical strength and endurance. So too has Anida Yoeu Ali, both in *The Buddhist Bug Project*, and in other works. Ali did, however, point out during a 2014 symposium that if she was in Svay’s position and had been offered assistance as he had been, she would readily have accepted it, whereas on several occasions he did not. Ali had at the time of the symposium recently completed a series of performances while heavily pregnant, and had been grateful for the help of many collaborators and helpers. The refusal of physical assistance is perhaps an expression of a

<sup>32</sup> Nelson, *new artefacts*, 5. Emphasis added.

specifically male privilege.<sup>33</sup>

Khvay's videos showing the process of making *Untitled* vividly focus on the sometimes filthy water through which the artist swam, and they reveal the physical endurance required to swim and stand in the water, as well as to pull each bucket of sand, and to lift it over his head. These aspects of the "process" were what mattered for Khvay. The live act of performance, for him, is primarily about his own bodily experience; the encounter with an incidental public during that live performance is of little importance for the artist.

By contrast, in Anida Yoeu Ali's *The Buddhist Bug Project*, interactions with present publics are often central. A video and several photographs in the series focus on the artist-as-bug's encounters with villagers and Phnom Penh residents, who generally appear fairly nonplussed by the exchange. Interestingly, when asked in an online interview about the reactions of her audience, the artist's answers seem to imply that she understands the question to refer specifically to the live audience. She explains that her audience is "amazed... They definitely point and laugh and have conversations," and continues that "my performances are ephemeral and [that's] why I love to perform in the moment... it's about engaging in that moment and reacting in the moment."<sup>34</sup> This answer strikes me, because whenever I ask a similar question of many other artists—including Khvay—the response will never be about the live audience, and always instead about the audience for the photographs and/or video made during a performance. Ali's photographs and especially video relating to her *Buddhist Bug* performances are also perhaps the only works made in Cambodia that deliberately focus on and document the facial expressions and other physical responses of live viewers.<sup>35</sup>

Ali's attitude, which clearly delineates between the live audience, and subsequent viewers of the artist's mediatized documentation, differs from conceptions of performance advanced by many other Cambodian artists. To what extent this interest in live audiences is a product of Ali's formal education, which was specialized in performance and took place in an esteemed US art school,<sup>36</sup> is an unanswerable and perhaps uninspiring question. Regardless, I see her interest in the specifically live encounter, as one that both temporally and phenomenologically precedes the mediatized documentation, as perhaps unique among Cambodian artists who work with performance, and certainly among those that I am discussing here. Organizers of "live painting" events in Battambang (and, occasionally, elsewhere) are also primarily interested in the "live" encounter, yet use documentation of past events as a way to build audiences for those live gatherings, as shall be

<sup>33</sup> Anida Yoeu Ali, comments at *Roundtables: the Body, the Lens, the City*, symposium convened by SA SA BASSAC, March 22, 2014. Both Khvay and Svay's endurance-based performances have involved walking great distances, often carrying burdensome objects, as in Svay's *Mon Boulet* (2011) and *Tuesday/Mardi* (2009) and Khvay's *Sammang Cow Taxi Moves Sand* (2011). A discussion of these actions in light of the historical and continuing tendency for Cambodian monks to protest injustice through long walks, and a discussion of all three artists' performances in light of *jatake* (ជាតិក, "jataka") and other tales, will be taken up by the author at a later date.

<sup>34</sup> *Art Radar Asia*, "'It takes a village to raise a bug': Cambodian performance artist Anida Yoeu Ali – interview."

<sup>35</sup> Amy Lee Sanford has also shown live viewers in four video works exhibited during *40 Pots + 4 Sketches* at JavaArts | Lab in 2013, as will be discussed below. But the responses of the viewers in Sanford's videos are generally difficult to discern due to the angle of the camera and the editing of the footage.

<sup>36</sup> School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Performance Department, 2010. Anida Yoeu Ali, *The Space Between Inside/Outside*, 57.

discussed further below.

For Khvay the live experience of performance is in many ways secondary to the photographs and/or videos that he makes by doing his performances. These photographs and videos become, for Khvay, more than just indexical signs of the live performance; in a way, they *are* his performance. It is not uncommon for Khvay to offer to show someone his performance, only to then open his computer and load some image files or digital video. Following Philip Auslander, I find it most revealing to think of these artworks not as photographs or videos *of* a performance, but rather as “mediatized performances” themselves.<sup>37</sup> I see the latter formulation as revealing the inextricable and mutually dependent relationship between the live and the recorded, as well as evoking the notion that mediatized performances, despite being infinitely reproducible and thus repeatable, in each moment of viewing do also exist in time and space for the viewer, much as live performance does.

Khvay’s control over the appearance of his mediatized performances is near total. While the form of the performed action itself is almost always conceived without reference to existing traditions of performance, the documentation is deeply indebted to codified traditions of photography, including of careful framing and capturing of the image. Although he usually works with an assistant, who operates his camera, Khvay is always careful to stress that it is he himself who composes each frame, adjusts shutter speed and light settings, and controls all other technical and compositional aspects of each image.<sup>38</sup> For Khvay, making a performance is primarily a way of making an image that is “interesting.” When speaking in Khmer, as well as using the loan word *performance*, Khvay often says *interesting* rather than the more usual គួរឱ្យចាប់អារម្មណ៍ *guor oy cāp’ āramm(n)*. Several other artists use these words, too.

## PERFORMANCE IN VISUAL ART: A NEW DISCURSIVE SPACE

The use of the loan words *performance* and *interesting* displays a kind of cosmopolitan cultural capital and creates a sense of semi-exclusivity —performatively constituting a community of artists fluent in these words and concepts. While it may at first appear tempting to see these usages of English loan words as signs that performance in visual art is understood by Khvay and others as a wholly foreign (perhaps even specifically Anglophone) concept, or that Khvay is seeking only to

<sup>37</sup> Auslander, *Liveness*.

<sup>38</sup> If Khvay is particularly mobile during a performance, or if the primary mode of documentation is video rather than photography, he is “flexible” and thinks laterally about “how can I control” (not just through camera settings). During work on this essay, I was one of several assistants called on to help film performances Khvay made in Singapore and Rattanakiri, and also to assist him in filming a performance by dancer Nget Rady for a collaborative work, co-authored by Khvay and Nget. Khvay’s instructions in each of these instances were very general, mainly regarding the use of zoom and the filming of the incidental environment. I suspect that the artist’s growing interest and expertise in video editing may contribute to his somewhat more *laissez-faire* attitude to camera settings and composition since 2013. Before filming these performances, I observed as Khvay was greatly impressed by his collaboration with a professional video editor (at New York’s Residency Unlimited) in reworking *Untitled 2011* for exhibition as *Untitled 2011/2013* in the 2013 Singapore Biennale. The experience showed Khvay that he could exercise control over the aesthetic of his mediatized performances not only through the use of the camera, but also through post-production editing techniques.

please (or, rather, to be “interesting” to) a foreign audience or market, this would be a serious error. Many hours of conversations with Khvay over a prolonged period have left me with no doubt that it is not “foreignness” that attracts the artist to performance, but rather the form’s “newness” and “strangeness” (often described as—but not fully encompassed by—the common word *cam laek* (ចំឡែក), which may be translated as strange, uncommon, weird). Khvay is wholly uninterested in making art that does not engage with and connect to specifically Cambodian publics, a concern he shares with fellow members of Stiev Selapak (ស្ទីវ ស៊ែល៉ាក់), the artists’ collective he co-founded in 2007.<sup>39</sup>

Khvay’s use of the terms *performance* and *interesting* reflects not a fetishizing of the foreign, but a fascination with the strange and the new. Perhaps there is also an element of iconoclastic provocation here: a desire to displace old traditions (rather than to mobilize and reshape them, as we will soon see that choreographers Cheam Shapiro and Phuon and theater-maker Phou do). Khvay’s and other artists’ use of this terminology can be seen as constituting an attempt to assert a new discursive space for performance-based visual art practice, separate to and distinct from existing paradigms of *rapām* (dance) and *lekhon* (theater). Khvay’s theoretical understanding of *performance*—much like his views on what counts as (artistically) *interesting*—is fluid, flexible, and open to expansion through discussion. At a 2011 symposium hosted at SA SA BASSAC gallery and reading room in Phnom Penh, Khvay listened intently to a presentation by Nora A. Taylor, titled “Networks of Performance Art in Southeast Asia.”<sup>40</sup> Taylor’s paper did not include discussion of artists in Cambodia. But in a panel discussion after her presentation, Khvay stated that “I realized that my performance artwork actually began with my installation pieces,” referring to a 2007 work titled *Spirit House*. He also described the physical process of making another piece which recreated the tracks of vehicles, and, significantly, said that “after hearing Nora [Taylor]’s talk, I realize that the performative component of my work actually started then, at that point, while I was creating this installation.”<sup>41</sup> The artist’s understanding of his own practice was productively expanded by his engagement with Taylor’s presentation, in a way that he and his audiences regarded as positive and enjoyable.

*Spirit House* was a temporary installation made by the hanging of many hammocks in a large tree outside the Khmer Arts Ensemble studio in Takhmau (Figure 5). As far as the artist and others

<sup>39</sup> One antecedent for this self-conscious desire to engage a specifically Cambodian audience is in Pich Sopheap (ព្រីង សុភាព). His 2004 turn from painting to the more “vernacular” material of rattan and bamboo was motivated, in part, by this desire; his series of relief sculptures in the form of the Khmer alphabet makes this aspiration even clearer. See Ly, “Of Trans(national) Subjects and Translation,” 117-31. I have previously discussed this connection between Pich and the Stiev Selapak artists, including Khvay; see Nelson, “Stiev Selapak: A Cambodian Artists’ Collective,” 47-50. I have observed each of the Stiev Selapak artists articulating numerous times their primary interest in engaging Cambodian audiences; this focus extends beyond their own practice and into their work operating Sa Sa Art Projects, an artist-run space located in Phnom Penh’s “White Building” community. See Nelson, “Non-Profit Art Spaces in Cambodia,” 22-5.

<sup>40</sup> *Encounters With Performance Art, Cambodia: A Timeline 2002-2011*, symposium convened by Erin Gleeson, SA SA BASSAC, 2011. Taylor’s presentation was based on Taylor, “Networks.”

<sup>41</sup> Quotes taken from an English language transcript of the symposium, held in the SA SA BASSAC archives, Phnom Penh. A Khmer language recording or transcript is not extant. Translation is by Vuth Lino, edited by Erin Gleeson, and the word “performative” is used to mean “related to performance,” rather than in the Austinian sense. After conversations with both Khvay and Vuth in 2012, I am confident that Khvay’s meaning is adequately conveyed in this edited transcript of the translation.

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recall it, this was both conceived of and received at the time as an installation, not as performance. But, as a result of —and indeed while still participating in— the discussion with Taylor at the 2011 symposium, Khvay revised his thinking about this and other early works, retrospectively recasting it as *performance*. I take this to be a demonstration of the discursive nature of Khvay’s conception of performance. The artist describes his first introduction to the idea of performance in visual art at a residency at Tokyo Wonder Site in 2010. What appealed to him was what he perceived as the freedom and “flexible” nature of performance: there were no rules, and anything was acceptable (often expressed in the common, informal phrase *qī ka pān* (អ្វីក៏បាន)). Khvay was not interested in existing conventions of what is elsewhere called “performance art;” his performances were exploratory.



Figure 5: Khvay Samnang, *Spirit House*, 2007. *Temporary installation, Takebmau.*  
*Courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.*

## CONVENTIONS OF PERFORMANCE IN CONTEMPORARY THEATER AND DANCE IN CAMBODIA

The self-consciously experimental nature of Khvay’s performances is typical of many visual artists’ lack of interest in engaging with conventions of performance, including those of *lkhon* (theater) or *rapām* (dance). By focusing on ways in which contemporary dance and theater engages with conventions of stage performance, I seek to highlight the contrast between this and the performances by visual artists. I choose to focus on two choreographers and one playwright whose works, while created for live performance, have also been widely distributed as documentation.

This documentation is not viewed *as* performance in the same way that photography and film of performances by visual artists often is; nevertheless a certain interdependent relationship between the live and the mediatised can again be seen in these examples.

The longstanding traditions of classical Cambodian dance and theater, based in complex systems of gesture, movement and costume, have been well described in monographs such as *Dance in Cambodia* and *L'khon Khol, Wat Svay Andaet* (វត្តស្វាយអណ្តែត), as well as being articulated, proudly and often, by Cambodian dancers and performers themselves.<sup>42</sup> In the past decade, a number of important new works in dance and theater, from outside the classical tradition, have been made by Cambodian artists in direct dialogue with these systems. These new works self-consciously contrast experimental innovations with the fixed forms of tradition. Key examples of new performance works engaging with older performance traditions include the choreography of Sophiline Cheam Shapiro and Emmanuèle Phuon, and the theater of Jean-Baptiste Phou.

Much of the power of Cheam Shapiro's choreography lies in her engagement with the tradition of *rapām purān* (របាំបុរាណ "classical dance"). It is remarked in most reviews of her performances by international newspapers, most recently in a *Financial Times* review of 2013's "stirring" *A Bend in the River*, which effused that the piece "gains from the choreographer's dual fluency in modern theatre and her country's ancient court dance" and "delivers on...Cheam Shapiro's long-held faith that her native classical dance, like ballet, is powerful enough to adapt to the times."<sup>43</sup> Scholar of Cambodian dance Toni Shapiro-Phim has also asserted not only the importance of tradition in animating the choreographer's work, but also her originality and daring in using the classical form in new ways that reflect contemporary realities. Of the 2005 dance and film *Seasons of Migration*, Shapiro-Phim argues: "Sophiline's creation of a classical Khmer dance based on an individual's interpretation of a modern-day phenomenon and her personal experience of it...had been unheard of previously."<sup>44</sup>

I underscore the importance of engagement with tradition in Cheam Shapiro's work, however, as I see it connecting with the larger tendency of contemporary stage performances to rely on codified forms.<sup>45</sup> In a 2013 public discussion at New York's Asia Society convened by Ly Boreth, Cheam Shapiro explained that what her choreography does with the classical form is "deconstruct." Ly laughed as he queried this, asking, "but you also have to construct, when you

<sup>42</sup> Phim and Thompson, *Dance in Cambodia*; Chanmara, *L'khon Khol*. See also Burrige and Frumberg, eds., *Beyond the Apsara*; Shapiro, "The Dancer in Cambodia," 8-23; Cravath, *Earth in Flower*; Shapiro, "Cambodian Dance and the Individual Artist"; and interviews in Daravuth and Muan, *Cultures of Independence*.

<sup>43</sup> Scherr, "A Bend in the River, Joyce Theatre, New York – Review."

<sup>44</sup> Shapiro-Phim, "Cambodia's *Seasons of Migration*," 65.

<sup>45</sup> Tellingly, this aspect of her rich and complex work is most often emphasized by Cheam Shapiro herself; an engagement with the classical extends beyond her choreography and into her many public statements, as a respected leader and *nāk'grū* (អ្នកគ្រូ "teacher"). Cheam Shapiro is clearly and proudly invested in educating her audiences about the codified traditions of the classical form to which her own choreography unfailingly responds. Her company, Khmer Arts Media, has published a book that illustrates in rich detail the many gestures of *kpāc'pāt nān* (ក្បាច់បាតនាង), the foundational movements of female characters in classical dance. (Menh Kossany (ម៉េង កុសន), *kpāc'pāt nān* (ក្បាច់បាតនាង)) Moreover, the choreographer regularly attends artists' talks, discussion groups and other events in Phnom Penh, and contributes generously to conversations by offering examples from the tradition of *rapām purān* (classical dance).



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deconstruct.” Cheam Shapiro responded firmly that “it’s been constructed already.”<sup>46</sup> This is a clear message of her tireless demonstrations, publications and other efforts: the classical form is “constructed,” a “finished art form,” and as such its codified systems are fixed. Cheam Shapiro explained that her classical training “provides me a tool to create new work.” Her performances rely on established and recognizable systems, such as the *kepāc*’ (ក្បួន “codified gestures”), as the fixed foundations on which her innovations are based and from which they respectfully deviate.

Whereas visual artists reject existing terminology, creating a new discursive space for their work through the use of the loan word *performance*, Cheam Shapiro is able to find freedom and room for individual expression within existing structures. Although some might suggest that this reliance on engagement with classical traditions makes her a “modern” choreographer, I see Cheam Shapiro’s choreography as clearly contemporary.<sup>47</sup> Following Geeta Kapur, I regard the mobilization of “tradition” as an affective tool as a quintessentially (and perhaps even necessarily) contemporary act.<sup>48</sup> Kapur argues of the use of the term “tradition” in what she calls “third world” contexts that “It has the power to transform routinely transmitted materials from the past into volatile forms that merit the claim of contemporary, even radical, affect.”<sup>49</sup>

Emmanuèle Phuon’s choreography also looks to codified forms, Cambodian as well as European. Her 2007-2013 *Khmeropédies* trilogy contrasts the traditions of ballet and other European forms with the *អុយ្យា* *apsarā*, *svā* (ស្វា “monkey”) and other forms from classical Cambodian dance, and indeed the title combines the words *khmaer* (ខ្មែរ) and *Gymnopédies*, the latter a reference to Erik Satie.<sup>50</sup> As with Cheam Shapiro, the classical origins of Phuon’s work are almost always remarked on in international reviews. Indeed, in an otherwise glowing review of *Khmeropédies III* at New York’s Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, a *New York Times* writer expressed a “wish we had been told, in person or program material, more about the centuries-old Cambodian monkey dance tradition,”<sup>51</sup> while *The Phnom Penh Post* described the piece as “an inventive reinterpretation of traditional Khmer dance.”<sup>52</sup> Clearly, engagement with the classical is seen as an important point of entry to this work. In reviews such as these, the performance’s engagement with codified forms becomes the primary (and at times the only) aspect of the work to be publicly remarked. Yet my observations from attending the performance in New York, and from attending screenings of that performance in Phnom Penh’s Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center thereafter, is that the physical skill of the

<sup>46</sup> *An Evening After Year Zero*, panel discussion convened by Ly Boreth, Asia Society, New York, April 15, 2013.

<sup>47</sup> It fits Groys’ criteria, mentioned above, of contemporary art “presenting the present” (Groys, “Topology,” 71).

<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Osborne controversially suggests that the very idea of “multiple modernities,” of which Kapur is a key proponent, is itself a concept that is only understandable from the point of view of contemporaneity. See Osborne, *Anywhere*, 25-26. Fredric Jameson shows us the ways in which modernity involves a necessarily shared, collective (rather than individual) “modification of temporality” (Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 18), yet this does not need to be shared *universally*. It is only the notion of contemporaneity (as distinct from modernity) that is collectively shared on a necessarily *global* scale.

<sup>49</sup> Kapur, *When Was Modernism*, 268.

<sup>50</sup> Phuon, “Note From the Choreographer” in program for *Khmeropédies I & II*.

<sup>51</sup> Macaulay, “It’s Monkey See, Do and Dance.”

<sup>52</sup> Murray, “Dance is All Monkey Business for Experimental Performers.”

dancers was another important source of pride and pleasure for both performers and audiences.<sup>53</sup>

Phuon describes the *Khmeropédies* trilogy as responding to a “task” she set herself: that of “revisiting traditional Khmer dance using western ideas of choreography.”<sup>54</sup> I see the choreographer’s choice of words as significant; a “task” is, of course, something that is decided in advance. Thus, as much as the works involve experimentation and evolve organically during the rehearsal process (including, in the case of *Khmeropédies III*, through consultation with a scientist who advised on animal mobility), their overall form is set, and their use of “traditional Khmer dance” and “western ideas of choreography” is assured. This is not to overlook the importance of happy and meaningful surprises along the way: for example, Phuon was very pleased when one of the dancers, Nget Rady (ង៉ែត រ៉ាឌី), told her “with enthusiasm that some of the steps we found [in *Khmeropédies III*] will surely be incorporated in the classical role.” This is a beautiful illustration of what Shapiro-Phim describes as “the adaptability of this highly codified art form” that has been repeatedly and creatively “re-imagined...at many historical and contemporary junctures.”<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, the broad parameters of Phuon’s project had been pre-determined by the choreographer, much as the broad expectations of audiences had been conditioned by the tone of media coverage.

Of course, Phuon’s richly complex work should not be over-simplified, but, as with Cheam Shapiro, the interplay between codified forms and new innovations becomes the dominant mode of appreciation and interpretation of this work, and the primary frame for reception. By contrast, Jean-Baptiste Phou’s 2010/2012 play *Cambodia, Here I Am* (also titled *Cambodge, me voici* and *sruk khmaer! neh hoey khnum* (ស្រុកខ្មែរ! នេះហើយខ្ញុំ)) was received quite differently by critics, both in Cambodia and in France. Although the work features striking scenes incorporating Cambodian classical dance gestures, karaoke, ព្រហ្មទេវតា *lekhon spaek* (shadow theater) and other traditions, these stylistic characteristics were largely overlooked by critics: the play’s narrative themes dominated reviews. *The Phnom Penh Post* described the Khmer language version as “tackl[ing] the question of confused identity through the lives of four Cambodian women born and raised on foreign soil,” and made no mention of the formal aspects of the production.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, the French website *Toutelaculture.com* focused on the theme of “uprooting” (*déracinement*). Although it did note the play’s “subtlety and humor [...] fantasies and stereotypes” (*subtilité et humour [...] les fantasmes et clichés*),

<sup>53</sup> Some (non-Cambodians) who also attended the April 2013 New York performances have expressed to me a concern about a perceived power imbalance between the choreographer and the dancers. Certainly, for a Parisian and a (Caucasian) North American to call on a group of Cambodians to effectively behave like monkeys unavoidably carries some uncomfortable echoes of colonial presentations. But in my eyes, this is effectively mitigated by the collaborative nature of the choreography—in which Phuon deferred to the dancers’ expertise in the classical form, allowing them to introduce elements of this in the piece—as well as the performers’ immense and evident pleasure in their role. (I am reminded also of the tendency of dancers who perform the *svā* [monkey] role to playfully pose for casual photographs with friends in monkey-like positions.) I wonder whether to perceive a power imbalance here is to under-estimate the dancers’ agency and cosmopolitan cultural capital as widely-traveled and critically acclaimed performers. Certainly, in my observation, the majority of audiences both in New York in April 2013 and in Phnom Penh thereafter were positive in their reception of *Khmeropédies III*, just as the dancers were positive about their experiences.

<sup>54</sup> Phuon, email interview with the author, April-May 2013. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent references to Phuon are from email interview with the author, April-May 2013.

<sup>55</sup> Shapiro-Phim, “Cambodia’s *Seasons*,” 65.

<sup>56</sup> Mackos, “Theatre Festival To Unite Khmer and Western Artists.”

none of the scenes of stylistic pastiche are mentioned.<sup>57</sup>

Yet these scenes, which were greeted by some of the loudest applause during the staging of the play in Phnom Penh that I attended in September 2012, are among the most memorable and affecting in *Cambodia, Here I Am*. They are also particularly important to Phou, who sees them as offering humor and lightness to “counterbalance” the seriousness of the play’s themes.<sup>58</sup> This is a close echo of Phuon’s description of the monkey role within classical dance as typically offering “comic relief in the long saga of battles and betrayal and love.” Far from seeing traditional forms as a burden or as something to escape, Phou (like Phuon) regards them as entertainment of a most enjoyable and popular kind. In conversation, the playwright proudly stresses the ways in which the dance and musical scenes complement the larger narrative, contributing an elaboration of its themes rather than a moment of rupture; they “fit the story.” In one example, a few moments of French music and dance evoke the youngest character, Sophea’s fondness for France, where she was born; minutes later, Mom’s and Metha’s deep yearning for Cambodia is revealed in their nostalgic karaoke rendition of a favorite song by Sinn Sisamouth. Later, a scene in which strong directional spotlighting transforms the actors into living “shadow puppets” (clearly reminiscent of the Cambodian *spaek dham* (ស្បែកធំ)) reveals dramatic tension through what Phou calls “symbolic violence” as expressed in dramatically codified form (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Jean-Baptiste Phou (writer and director), *Cambodia, Here I Am*, Cool Cat Productions, 2012. DVD, 90 mins. Digital screenshot, Scene 15, with Dy Saveth (playing Metha) and Yim Nimolika (playing Mom).

<sup>57</sup> Hallard, “*Cambodge, me voici*: de la complexité des retrouvailles.”

<sup>58</sup> Unless otherwise noted, this and all subsequent references to Phou are from email communications with the author, 2013, as well as conversations with the author in 2013 and 2014.

Although largely overlooked in the critical reception of *Cambodia, Here I Am*, the play's engagement with codified traditions of Cambodian culture —both ancient and more recently developed (such as karaoke)— is central to the work's power, as well as its appeal to Cambodian audiences (both in Cambodia, and in France in diasporic communities). Phou's decision to cast Dy Saveth (ឌី សាវ៉េត) attracted keen interest from audiences for whom the actor is inseparably linked to the 1960s films in which she starred. Phou was determined to cast Dy, even before auditioning her: in fact, it was only at the actor's insistence that an audition took place at all.<sup>59</sup> In the promotional website for a DVD version of *Cambodia, Here I Am*, within only one paragraph of text, the author mentions that the “Khmer version of the play mixes modern forms and traditional elements such as *dance, music* and *shadow puppetry*, starring legendary cinema actress *Dy Saveth* in her stage debut.”<sup>60</sup> This further highlights the importance of these “traditional elements” for the playwright, as well as for the work's various publics.

For many in the Cambodian audience for *Cambodia, Here I Am* —at least, for many of the visual artists and dancers with whom I attended— the play was the first Khmer-language narrative theater they had seen that was not in a traditional *lekhon* (theater) form. For some, it was in fact their first “modern” play in any language. These mostly young artists enjoyed the play, they told me, for its subtle and emotionally complex rendering of the diasporic experience, for its deft treatment of the Khmer Rouge period's effects as felt by those too young to have experienced the regime firsthand (and disinclined to allow this period to define their sense of self or nation),<sup>61</sup> and, perhaps most of all, for its innovative style of presentation.

Yet it is valuable to see the play within the context of staged contemporary performances of dance and theater in Cambodia as I have sketched it here. Phou's use of codified elements of Cambodian and other traditions in his work —the moments of shadow puppetry, *apsarā* dancing, karaoke sing-along and so on— was very appealing to his (mostly younger, Phnom Penh) audiences in Cambodia, but importantly it was also *familiar* to them from the works of Cheam Shapiro, Phuon, and others. *Cambodia, Here I Am* both reflects and contributes to an important tendency in performances for the stage in contemporary Cambodia: the use of codified forms as a stylistic motif, and as a point of contrast for new innovations.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Phou, *Cambodia, Here I Am*.

<sup>60</sup> See <http://coolcat.fr/commande.php>. Emphasis in original.

<sup>61</sup> In an interview published online, Phou states: “I did not want to focus on the Khmer Rouge, because currently, you rarely find literature in Cambodia that revolves on other subjects. I didn't want to talk about the genocide, but rather, how it has affected our lives. Not as a central element, but rather as a backdrop—a starting point that marks our fate.” Phou, “Jean-Baptiste Phou, Cambodia Here I Am.”

<sup>62</sup> There are many other examples of stage productions that operate in this way, which space does not allow me to discuss here. Phare Ponleu Selpak's circus productions draw on the widely familiar traditions of the European and North American circus, as well as sometimes (as in the case of 2012's *Rouge*) using gestures from classical Cambodian dance. Amrita Performing Arts, an NGO based in Phnom Penh, regularly hosts non-Cambodian international choreographers; the contrast between the balletic and other forms these guests introduce, and *kepac'* and other gestures from Cambodian dance, is a recognizable feature of their frequent public performances.

## BETWEEN STAGE PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMANCE IN VISUAL ART

Before returning to and continuing this discussion of performance in visual art, I will reflect briefly on two qualities shared by the stage performances of Cheam Shapiro, Phuon, and Phou, and the performances by visual artists including Ali, Khvay, Lim and Sanford.

Firstly, consider the relationship between live performance and its documentation, or mediatized representation. As in visual artists' performances, the examples given of performances for the stage demonstrate a symbiotic synthesis of the live and the mediatized, of the kind that Auslander proposes is paradigmatic of contemporary, mediatized cultures.<sup>63</sup> The dance titled *Seasons of Migration*, choreographed by Cheam Shapiro, becomes just one of innumerable source images for the film titled *Seasons of Migration*, written and directed by John Bishop, and featuring interviews with Cheam Shapiro.<sup>64</sup> The film features fades to black and other conventions of cinema that in turn have their roots on the stage.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, the film *Cambodia, Here I Am* is shot from several angles and includes subtitles—features unique to film—yet the theatrical version also features surtitles, projected on screens above and to the side of the stage, itself a theatrical convention derived from cinema. In each of these examples, as in those from visual art that I will discuss shortly, there is an inter-animating relationship between live performance and its mediatized version, or recording. A further example of this dynamic can be found in a 2014 dance film choreographed and performed by Nget Rady, titled *Forward*, which according to him was specifically and solely created for filming.<sup>66</sup> Several of its expressive and elegant gestures (some of which are based in Khmer *krăv*) are composed in such a way that they require the closeness of a camera to capture them, and would be lost should the piece be transposed onto a stage—yet Nget speaks of the act of dancing the piece as having been meaningful and important also.

And secondly, it is important to consider the prevalence of simultaneous Cambodian and international references in these stage performances. Cheam Shapiro uses Cambodian dance to discuss transnational migration and (as she terms it) "culture shock," Phuon draws on the traditions of both European ballet and Cambodian dance, combining specifically Cambodian traditions with cosmopolitan forms of narrative theater and karaoke. I note that Cheam Shapiro, Phuon and Phou are all artists who have spent some or most of their lives outside of Cambodia. I see their work, with its strong sense of national and cultural pride, operating alongside and in tandem with its evidently transnational origins and appeal, as an example of what Jeroen De Kloet and Edwin Jurriëns have termed "cosmopatriotism," that is, the simultaneous and conjoined feelings of cosmopolitanism

<sup>63</sup> Auslander is writing chiefly of the U.S., but expresses a hope that his description can be generalized to what he describes as "western/ized societies" (Auslander, *Liveness*, 5.) While I reject the notion of "western/ized" societies, I do accept that urban Cambodia—especially Phnom Penh—is mediatized in the way that Auslander (following Baudrillard) describes. Auslander's argument on the mutual dependence of live and mediatized forms of performance only applies to mediatized contexts, and as such I recognize that it will not be applicable in many rural and economically disadvantaged areas.

<sup>64</sup> Bishop, writer and director, *Seasons of Migration*.

<sup>65</sup> Auslander, *Liveness*.

<sup>66</sup> Rady, *Forward*, 2014. Unless otherwise stated, this and all subsequent references to Nget Rady are from conversations with the author in 2013 and 2014. Where necessary, all translation is by the author.

and patriotism that are common in arts and culture throughout many parts of Southeast Asia, as elsewhere.<sup>67</sup> Matthew Isaac Cohen and Laura Noszlopy also identify the (historical and continuing) prevalence of what they term “the transnational dynamic” in Southeast Asian performance, pointing out also that many cultural traditions usually seen as specific to one nation are in fact of mixed origins and common throughout the region.<sup>68</sup> Transnational and “cosmopatriotic” qualities are common in recent Cambodian visual art, including in performance works. These are attitudes shared by artists who have lived (and/or studied) outside of Cambodia—that is, those often called the diaspora—and by lifelong residents. This supports the view articulated by Nikos Papastergiadis that contemporary culture is shaped by a cosmopolitanism that “lives within the aesthetic domain of transnational networks and on local streets.”<sup>69</sup>

## RETURNING TO PERFORMANCE IN VISUAL ART: ON “LEARNING FROM SAMNANG,” AND LEARNING BY “DOING” OR “MAKING”<sup>70</sup>

While performances for the stage proudly display their debt to traditions of theatrical and dance performance, Khvay’s performances and their documentation are clearly indebted to visual art traditions. Before he began working in performance and other formats, Khvay had previously studied painting and drawing in a very traditional manner at the Royal University of Fine Arts (graduating in 2006), as well as learning photography in a not dissimilar way based in the slow and steady accumulation of technical skills.<sup>71</sup> He often describes himself as having been a painter, first, and likes to discuss the ways in which his training in painting have influenced his more recent works in photography. “My eye is a painter’s eye,” he has told me. Khvay sees his carefulness with composition and especially his interest in color in his photography—including in his photographs documenting performances—as derived from his training in chiefly realist painting. Another influence on his aesthetic impulses is perhaps that he worked as a professional wedding photographer’s assistant for one year, a role in which precise composition and bright color surely become habitual through repeated practice and on-job training.

<sup>67</sup> De Kloet and Jurriëns, “Cosmopatriots.” The authors distinguish between “patriotism—which stands for love for the country—and nationalism—referring to respect for the state” (12). The role of nationalism—specifically in agonistic relationship to Thailand—in discourses of classical Cambodian dance is a site for further discussion. Hideo has argued that the Thai influence on Cambodian dance has been understated in both colonial and postcolonial discourse. See Hideo, “Post/Colonial Discourses on the Cambodian Court Dance,” 418-41.

<sup>68</sup> The Cambodian *spaek dham* (shadow puppetry) is just one of many possible examples. See Isaac Cohen and Noszlopy, “Introduction: The Transnational Dynamic in Southeast Asian Performance,” 1-24. Essays collected in the volume further illustrate Cohen and Noszlopy’s thesis, including Prenowitz and Thompson, “Cambodia’s Trials,” 79-106.

<sup>69</sup> Papastergiadis, *Cosmopolitanism and Culture*, 89. Historicizing theories of cosmopolitanism, Papastergiadis notes that, increasingly, “universalist claims are situated within specific and context-bound positions” (88).

<sup>70</sup> In Khmer (as in many other languages), the verb “to do” (*dhvoe*) also means “to make.”

<sup>71</sup> Khvay was among a group of fourteen young Cambodians taught photography by French photographer Stéphane Janin in 2006 and 2007. Although the students were encouraged to experiment freely and were required to practice their skills throughout the learning process, a clear focus of the class was in the transfer of technical skills and compositional conventions. Stéphane Janin, interview with the author, 2012.

By contrast, Khvay did not “study” performance, he simply began to “do” or “make” (ត្រូវ *dhvoe*) it, experimenting on the streets of Tokyo. While he has since had the opportunity to meet with numerous other visual artists who work with performance, Khvay has no particular interest in the history of performance in visual art internationally. This disinclination to study the development of performance in visual art in an international context places Khvay at odds with fellow Stiev Selapak artists Lim Sokchanlina (who often spends hours researching artists online) and Vuth Lyno (វុធ ល័ណ្ណ, who in 2013 commenced graduate study of art history in the US). Nevertheless, many artists in Phnom Penh consider Khvay to be of central importance in “introducing” or pioneering performance and other notions of experimentation, particularly after his 2010 residency in Tokyo (although his earlier informal mentorship with Pich Sopheap is also an important source of his perceived authority). When I first asked Lim what prompted him to begin thinking about performance, he answered without hesitation, “I learned from Samnang.”<sup>72</sup> And indeed Khvay’s influence is not only reputational: he has also been teaching a class of almost twenty students (aged from late teens to early twenties) regularly since Sa Sa Art Gallery was founded in 2009. As such, many aspiring visual artists have encountered performance through the prism of Khvay, whose primary interest is not in traditions of performance, but rather in codified conventions of visual art, as used in the documentation of performance.

In 2014, Anida Yoeu Ali taught a workshop on “performance” (which was translated in this context as *samṭaeng thmī* (សំដែងថ្មី, “new performance”)) to students of the Royal University of Fine Arts.<sup>73</sup> At the workshop’s conclusion, students had the option to join an evening of public performances at Phnom Penh’s Institut Français, on January 23, 2014, which was very well-attended by other students and their friends. Ali’s workshop was originally intended to consist of five days of learning followed by a short break (or “incubation period”) and then individual meetings, however the format and participants of the workshop changed unexpectedly after the first day. The original plan had been for the first day to focus on discussions of performance history (including viewing of photo and video documentation of works from the Dadaists, Futurists, and 1970s feminist artists), and for the subsequent days to move into bodily experiments. But because the make-up of the class changed after the first day, the workshop ended up being even more participatory and interactive than expected, with lessons in history, mostly involving viewing of video and other documentation of performances, being integrated into the practical workshop activities. After a short break (during which Ali was out of the country), Ali returned to find that the remaining students in the workshop had in her absence gone ahead and already begun—and in some cases completed—construction of various props and costumes. At least one student modified her planned props after an initial experiment revealed the original plan to be technically too difficult.

These details about Ali’s 2014 workshop with students from the Royal University of Fine Arts are another example of a situation in which learning about performance in visual art in Cambodia has been based in learning by “doing” or “making.” After the participants changed and the schedule

<sup>72</sup> Unless otherwise noted, this and all subsequent references to Lim are from conversations with the author, 2012, 2013 and 2014. Where necessary, all translation is by the author.

<sup>73</sup> Unless otherwise noted, this and all subsequent references to Anida Yoeu Ali are from conversations with the author in 2014.

was unexpectedly disrupted, the planned progression from learning about history to participatory learning had to be modified, with the result that all learning was intensively improvisational and experiential. Students, inspired by the excitement and energy of Ali's workshops, went ahead and continued to work on their projects in Ali's absence, taking it upon themselves to learn by "doing" and "making" rather than to await her return. "Trial and error was an important part of the process," Ali confirms. In Ali's 2014 workshop, just as in the experience of Lim, Khvay and others, the study of performance in visual art was based in learning by "doing" or "making."

Moreover, Ali keeps in contact with and continues to informally mentor several of these student participants, meaning that her influence and inspiration continues to shape these students' understanding and experience of performance and visual art, just as Khvay's influence has been important for those artists and students who are closer to him. Several of the examples of performance by visual artists that Ali shared with her students were from Myanmar/Burma, artists whom Ali had met while participating in various workshops as part of the *Beyond Pressure: Festival of Performance Art, Myanmar* in 2012. Workshops, informal networks, and experiential learning continue to shape the development of performance by visual artists in Cambodia, as has been the case since the earliest known experiments with performance by visual artists in Cambodia, facilitated by visits from artists Eiko and Koma from Japan as well as Aye Ko from Myanmar/Burma in 2003, as well as artist and curator Tran Luong in 2006 and artist Seiji Shimoda in 2010.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, this centrality of learning by "doing" or "making" is consistent with the much older tradition of some performances for the stage. Preap Chanmara notes that the roles for *lkhon kbol* (at least in Wat Svay Andaet) were learned through group rehearsals where each role had an assigned older teacher, and there was no school at which performers studied.<sup>75</sup>

## PERFORMANCE IN VISUAL ART: ON "PERFORMANCE FOR THE CAMERA"

Although Lim was quick to say that he "learned from Samnang" about performance, in fact his own 2008 series, *My Motorbike and Me*, predates Khvay's Tokyo residency and constitutes one of the earliest Cambodian examples of a mode of practice that I will call "performance for the camera." *My Motorbike and Me* is a series of seven color photographs, in which the artist is posed, with his motorcycle, in various somewhat comic roles: as a sleeping policeman, a rural doctor, a semi-nude thief, a diligent student, and so on (Figure 7). In most of the images, Lim seems to be hamming up his assumed role—he's not trying to "pass," and the fact that the artist is recognizable in each of the images underscores the playful sense of artifice.

<sup>74</sup> This early history is outlined in Taylor, "Performing Bodies," 123-32.

<sup>75</sup> Chanmara, *Lkhon Kbol*, 3-4.





Figure 7: Lim Sokchanlina, *A Traffic Police Man*, 2008. From the series *My Motorbike and Me*. Digital C Print. Courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.

Lim's caricaturing impulse has trace echoes of many forms of contemporary media, including advertising, visual art (particularly postmodern photography from China, Japan and North America, with which Lim is familiar), low-budget television and so on. But while the *My Motorbike and Me* series reflects many aspects of the visual and performance culture in which it was made, it does not seek to overtly engage with any existing codified forms of performance known to Lim or his Cambodian audiences. Its influences are clearly from the visual, rather than performing arts. There is a tradition of caricature in some classical Cambodian dance and theater, for example, yet Lim rejects the notion that these modes of performance influenced him in any direct way, and insists that these forms are not a conscious site of engagement in this work. When the possibility of even an indirect influence from such traditions is proposed to Lim, he greets the suggestion with frustration. By contrast, the artist will enthusiastically speculate as to which photographers and other visual artists have shaped his aesthetic sensibility.

While there was no live audience, other than the photographer, Lim regards *My Motorbike and Me* as performance, and it is viewed in this way by many of his colleagues and contemporaries. The series is important in that it is, I believe, a pioneering example in Cambodia of this kind of "performance for the camera." In the years since, this has been a common mode in the practice of both Khvay and Ali, as well as regularly reappearing in Lim's own practice. There are numerous precursors for images of bodies performing for the camera in Cambodia, of course, from colonial photographs of dancers (such as those exhibited during the 2013 *Season of Cambodia* festival in New York, which also included exhibitions of more recent photographs, including by Lim), to the late

King Sihanouk's many films of dance and other performance, as well as more recent and popular forms including advertising and television. Yet none of these precursors are explicitly referenced in recent visual artists' "performances for the camera," and traditional forms such as classical dance are almost always studiously avoided.<sup>76</sup>

Nget Rady's *Forward*, 2014, mentioned briefly above, is an example of "performance for the camera" in the field of dance rather than visual art, while also arguably suggesting a fluidity between dance, visual art and film. Given the close friendships and active, mutual support between Nget and several visual artists who have worked with performance, the influence between this filmed dance and filmed performances by visual artists can be assumed to be mutual; indeed in conversation Nget affirms his growing interest in visual art, not only aesthetically but in terms of the centrality of the concept, and the "freedom" that he sees in the practices of artists like Ali and Khvay.<sup>77</sup>



Figure 8: Khvay Samnang, *Preah Ream Thlaeng Sor*, 2012. From the series *Preah Ream Thlaeng Sor*. Digital C Print. Courtesy of the artist and SA SA BASSAC.

<sup>76</sup> There are only two exceptions to the avoidance of traditional Cambodian forms that I am aware of. Both are by Khvay Samnang. Firstly, Khvay's ongoing series of performances *Samnang Cow Taxi* (2010-), in which the artist wears artificial buffalo horns, was in its first iteration (in Japan) inspired in part by the Trot dance (*rapāṃ trudi*, រាំត្រូឌី). Secondly, 2012's *Preah Ream Thlaeng Sor*, a series of nine photographs, depicts *qnak pratāl*' (boxers). Their poses and costume are unmistakably recognizable, and in two images the boxers stand in poses borrowed from classical dance (Figure 8).

<sup>77</sup> In June 2014, during final stages of work on this essay, Khvay and Nget began work collaborating on a performance titled *Where Is My Land?* (2014), including a three-channel video and photographs.

The expression “performance for the camera” is not used by the Cambodian artists I am discussing here. Nora A. Taylor has used a similar term, in her essay on Southeast Asian performance art, as discussed above.<sup>78</sup> But I first heard “performance for the camera” used in conversation in 2012, when Nge Lay, an artist from Myanmar/Burma, visited Phnom Penh and gave a talk about her work. Her visit was coincidental, but Nge Lay’s talk came about as a result of Lim’s existing friendship with her and other Yangon-based artists: itself an example of the horizontal artist-to-artist “networks” that Taylor reveals to be of such importance in Southeast Asian performance. While showing images of her 2011 series of self-portrait photographs, *Observing of Self on Being Dead*, Nge Lay described her experience of posing for these photographs as very emotionally intense. Childhood memories of political violence and more recent experiences of miscarriage, as well as depression, combined to make Nge Lay’s performance very difficult. The blood on the dress she wears in the photographs, she explained, is real: the dress had previously belonged to a woman in a nearby village, who was wearing it when she died during childbirth. Hearing this description of Nge Lay’s harrowing process, in which the live experience of making the images was clearly so important, Lim assumed that Nge Lay would call *Observing of Self on Being Dead* a performance. Nge Lay corrected him: oh no, she explained, this wasn’t performance, because there was no audience. Perhaps, she conceded, “I perform only for the camera.”<sup>79</sup>

## PERFORMANCE IN VISUAL ART: DOCUMENTATION TO MAKE PERFORMANCE VISIBLE

As Nge Lay explained, performance has appeared in the practice of visual artists in Myanmar/Burma for more than a decade longer than in Cambodia. Significantly, performances made in the late 1990s and early 2000s in Myanmar/Burma predated the widespread availability of the Internet or of low-cost, high-quality digital technology.<sup>80</sup> By contrast, the first occurrences of performance in Cambodian visual art<sup>81</sup> approximately coincide with the widespread adoption of (chiefly digital) photography among artists, as well as the boom in Internet connectivity and other expressions of what is often called “globalization.” The nature and extent of the impact caused by these historical differences is impossible to precisely gauge, but their importance is unquestionable.

It makes no sense, I have discovered, to ask most Cambodian artists whether they have ever considered making a performance without documenting it in photography, video, or both. For these artists—as for many others of their generation and class in urban centers—digital photography and online social media are part of the fabric of daily life. A special gathering, trip or meal rarely

<sup>78</sup> Taylor, “Networks.”

<sup>79</sup> Nge Lay’s artist talk was held in November 2012 at SA SA BASSAC, Phnom Penh.

<sup>80</sup> See Ching, “Art From Myanmar.”

<sup>81</sup> For a summarized history, see Taylor, “Performing Bodies.” Taylor’s chronology is based in large part on Ly Daravuth, “Perspectives From Reyum,” unpublished paper presented at *Encounters With Performance Art, Cambodia: A Timeline 2002-2011*, symposium convened by Erin Gleeson at SA SA BASSAC, June 16, 2011. Presented in English; transcript held in SA SA BASSAC archives, Phnom Penh.

takes place without it being photographed (or video-recorded, or both). Life, or at least its key events, is mediated in contemporary urban Cambodia, for those with access to the technology—which includes all the artists discussed here. So it is hardly surprising that documentation is so central to performances by visual artists today, or that cameras and other devices are ever-present.<sup>82</sup>

The omnipresence of digital cameras is of course by no means unique to Cambodia, and many of the cultural attributes I have just described are now perhaps close to universal. Nevertheless, they are worthy of study in this context for two reasons. Firstly, because the contemporary art and culture of Cambodia must be seen as rewarding close attention not only insofar as it can be seen to be uniquely or specifically Cambodian, but also as an example or case study in the consideration of translocal issues in contemporary art and culture. And secondly, because of the rapidity with which these digital photographic technologies—as well as widespread affordable and reliable internet access—have become available in Cambodia, within the past decade, concurrent with the emergence of performance in visual art. Curator Okwui Enwezor expresses a commonly held belief when he states that “the globalization of economic production and culture [was fused by] the technological and digital revolution.” Importantly, he observes of globalization and its attendant “technological and digital revolution” that “the access of artists to its benefits is massively uneven.”<sup>83</sup> Cambodia offers a salient example of this “massive unevenness.”

The relatively rapid rise in economic security enjoyed by several artists who have worked with performance, which has coincided with the availability of high-quality and low-cost photography equipment, must also be considered a key factor in the enthusiasm with which documentation has been embraced in Cambodia. Many artists grew up in very limited economic circumstances, in which the purchase of expensive cameras would have been prohibitively expensive, even if the technology had been locally available, which it was not. As Khvay once said to me, “I have a nice camera now, so why not use it?”

These material and historical forces notwithstanding, the centrality of documentation in Cambodian visual artists’ performance may also be understood as a way of rendering performance legible as an activity that can be understood by audiences in Cambodia as “art.” There are a number of connected aspects to this. Firstly, and most obviously, photography, video and other modes of recording and documentation allow for a much larger number of Cambodians to see performances by visual artists. Documentation makes performance visible.

Art historian Boris Groys has discussed the complex distinctions between “artwork” and “art documentation,” arguing that “Art documentation is by definition *not* art; it merely *refers* to art.”<sup>84</sup> But such a distinction is not applicable in the Cambodian context, where documentations of performance—usually photographs or video—are in many cases unambiguously created, exhibited and received as art. Following but adapting Groys, we might actually consider many of the “works” discussed here to in fact be two (inextricably connected) works: the “artwork” that is the live performance and the “artwork” that is the photograph or video.

<sup>82</sup> I am particularly grateful to Khvay Samnang for patiently guiding me to this realization. Outside of Phnom Penh and other urban centers, conditions are different.

<sup>83</sup> Enwezor, “Constellation,” 227.

<sup>84</sup> Groys, *Art Power*, 53. Emphasis in original.

*“Performance is Contemporary:” Performance and its Documentation in Visual Art in Cambodia*

Although, as I have suggested, artists often display an ambivalence or indifference to the live encounter with an audience, this is also due in part to a practical concern with avoiding unwanted attention. The group of artists in Battambang who organized the *Selpak Kandia* and other “live painting” events know that they are very fortunate to be able to relatively easily obtain official permission for their activities; artists in Phnom Penh and elsewhere often feel very nervous about the possible consequences of performances in “public” spaces. Unlike in neighboring countries, Cambodian artists may not fear official censorship of live performances, per se, but rather there have been a number of occasions where artists have worried for the security of their equipment when performing in outdoor or “public” spaces. For example, Anida Yoeu Ali says of the experience of performing in a semi-derelict building near Boeung Kak Lake in 2012, for *Enter the Ruins #1*, that “the kids were helpful and guarded our stuff.”<sup>85</sup> Khvay’s experience in making 2012’s *Newspaper Man* was more troubled; he explains that the reason the video footage is so shaky is that his videographer, Lim Sokchanlina, rushed to hide the camera in a bag when he saw police approaching. Part of Amy Lee Sanford’s choice of locations for outdoor performances (discussed below) is based on avoiding the attention of police and security guards.

Many other examples such as these suggest that, even if they were so inclined, artists may find it practically difficult to gather large audiences at their live performances. Exhibiting photo and video documentation of those performances is, in many cases, a way to increase Cambodian audiences. This is a perhaps surprising contrast to Vietnam, where Taylor argues that one of the appeals of performance is the possibility of evading censorship, due to the ephemeral nature of undocumented performance.<sup>86</sup> My conversations with several artists based in Yangon suggest that this is commonly believed to be the case in Myanmar/Burma, too. Berghuis (2006) makes a similar argument regarding artists in China. Indeed, transcending these locally and/or nationally specific situations, it would appear to be a widely held belief that artists working in politically sensitive or repressive contexts turn to performance as a means of expressing otherwise too-risky positions. For example, RoseLee Goldberg asserts that performance is “ephemeral and therefore the perfect medium for evading government watchdogs in countries where artists’ activities were considered politically subversive.”<sup>87</sup>

This popular notion simply does not apply in Cambodia, where performance by visual artists emerged concurrently with the rise of accessible digital recording technology, and where there have been few if any performances by visual artists that have not been documented and had that documentation circulate widely. To the extent that performance is seen by visual artists as a way to evade the possibility of censorship, it may be due to the notion that the authorities would find it difficult to decipher meaning in such works, not because of their ephemeral nature.<sup>88</sup>

Recording performances is also, of course, a way to increase international audiences, and

<sup>85</sup> Ali, *The Space Between Inside/Outside*, 52

<sup>86</sup> Taylor, “Art in Space,” 179.

<sup>87</sup> Goldberg, 227. In Singapore, of course, the opposite has been true, with performance by visual artists banned for two decades, and with many artists reporting in conversations during the years 2009-2014 a feeling of still being closely scrutinized.

<sup>88</sup> I am grateful to curator Erin Gleeson for suggesting this, in conversation with the author in 2014.

to make potentially saleable works. An historical precedent for this imperative may be found in the performance-based work made in Eastern Europe, especially during the final decades of the Soviet empire. Slovenia-based curator Zdenka Badovinac notes that “Western [European] art has mainly presented itself to the relatively isolated East [Europe] as reproduced in magazines and books.”<sup>89</sup> A similar situation exists in contemporary Cambodia, except that instead of looking to “magazines and books,” artists now look primarily to online sources. Since they are experiencing performances by other artists primarily in their mediated form—that is, not live but in documentation—it is perhaps understandable that Cambodian artists generally consider the documentation so carefully when planning their own performances.

Badovinac goes on to argue that “the East has been presented in the West with a small quantity of poor-quality documents”<sup>90</sup>—and this is where the situation in contemporary Cambodia differs greatly. While it remains true that artists must participate in what Badovinac terms the “representative economy” in order to be visible to publics outside of Cambodia,<sup>91</sup> new photographic technology combined with artists’ skill and confidence in its use mean that Cambodian artists today have much greater control over the nature of their representation. Far from being known for “a small quantity of poor-quality documents,” Cambodian artists are increasingly known for producing recordings of performances that transcend the status of mere “documents” and that frequently take multiple forms, often reworked several times for the requirements of different exhibitions and following the desires of the artist. Khvay’s numerous reconfigurations of the video footage of *Untitled*, 2011 and 2011/2013, are a clear instance of this, and Ali’s repeat returns to *The Buddhist Bug Project* and its presentation as installation, video and photography in the *5th Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale*, 2014, are another high-profile example.

Berghuis has argued that “In Asia, performance art is at a distinct disadvantage in the face of a system of institutional privilege that rewards more conventional forms of art.”<sup>92</sup> While this may be so in China—the subject of Berghuis’ study—and perhaps also in nations such as Thailand and the Philippines with an established system of support for “national artists,” it is increasingly untrue of performance by visual artists in Cambodia. Admittedly, it is the case that the Royal University of Fine Arts still strictly enforces a division between media, and prohibits any experimentation with performance (outside of externally organized workshops such as the one presented by Ali in 2014). But without a strong structure of “rewards” for “more conventional forms of art,” artists in Cambodia rely on the patronage of galleries, curators and others, both locally and internationally. To work in performance is, arguably, a means of attracting interest, both from local patrons and from the increasing number of international curators visiting Cambodia.

<sup>89</sup> Badovinac, “Body and the East,” 9-18.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>91</sup> A stark contrast to Peggy Phelan’s thesis that “Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance” (Phelan, *Unmarked*, 146). Perhaps it can be surmised that Phelan was not thinking of performance in contexts where there is a strong desire to engage with transnational publics, and where there are significant economic as well as geopolitical hurdles to that engagement happening in anything other than recorded formats.

<sup>92</sup> Berghuis, 18.

*“Performance is Contemporary:” Performance and its Documentation in Visual Art in Cambodia*

In Cambodia, in contrast to neighboring nations, there are almost no regularly exhibiting artists whose work engages with established and recognizably Khmer visual forms, comparable to the work of other Asian artists who have been dubbed “neotraditionalists.”<sup>93</sup> Berghuis argues that there is a “growing stigma attached to the idea of performance art in China,”<sup>94</sup> but in Cambodia, the opposite would seem to be true: performance in visual art enjoys a growing cachet. This cannot be discounted as a factor motivating artists to work in performance, and the desire to exhibit (and potentially sell) work must be considered as a contributing cause of the consistent documentation of performance.

Photography and video are, after all, very portable media and frequently predominate in biennales and other large international exhibitions. One critic, lamenting the presently “unfashionable” status of printmaking, has (perhaps rather cynically) suggested that “Philanthropists of Cambodian art today favor exportable media.”<sup>95</sup> Certainly, there have been plenty of instances where artists have been unable to transport bulkier items for exhibitions.<sup>96</sup> But there have also been numerous examples of large, fragile and otherwise unwieldy work being exhibited internationally, even by younger artists. Tith Kanitha (with *Hut Tep So Da Chan*, 2011, a large-scale installation in Berlin recreating her Phnom Penh home) and Neak Sophal (with *No Rice For Pot*, 2011, a pyramid built from metal rice cauldrons, also recreated in Berlin) are two artists who in their first few years of practice have been supported in this way. A further example to challenge the implied suspicion of a cynical use of recording technology is Khvay’s insistence on printing his photographs at the largest size available in Phnom Penh. He does this even though this makes them more difficult to freight for international exhibitions, and more costly to have printed abroad. While documenting performances makes them more visible to international audiences, there is no evidence to suggest that this leads to a commercially calculating use of photography and video. At a 2014 symposium on performance, the approximately three dozen artists in attendance broadly agreed that making documentation was not primarily about making sales, but rather about “sharing stories.”<sup>97</sup>

<sup>93</sup> See Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, 71-87. See also Clark, *Asian Modernities*, 89-93 and 140-43.

Perhaps the only regularly exhibiting artist using established and recognizably Khmer visual forms in Cambodia is Chan Dany (ចាន់ ធានី), who consistently uses Khmer *kpác*. See Nelson, “On the Coequalities of the Contemporary in Cambodia,” 193-207.

<sup>94</sup> Berghuis, 20. This thesis is demonstrated with the examples of two artists: Zhu Ming and Chen Lingyang. Berghuis notes that “Whereas both of these artists’ works involve the body and include nudity, Zhu Ming has been excluded from prominent local and international exhibitions organized by government-controlled institutions” whereas Chen Lingyang has enjoyed numerous comparable opportunities and successes. The reason given for this discrepancy by the artists—and endorsed by Berghuis—is that Zhu Ming refers to his work as “performance art (*xingwei yishu*)” whereas Chen Lingyang “is said to produce ‘conceptual photography (*guannian sheying*)’.”

<sup>95</sup> “*Les philanthropes de l’art au Cambodge privilégient les media aujourd’hui exportables*,” Stella, “Nouvelles Impressions du Cambodge” [New Impressions of Cambodia], 91.

<sup>96</sup> Two examples will suffice. One is a wooden and metal model of a house on stilts, part of Vuth Lyno’s sculpture *Rise and Fall*, 2012, that was remade in Phnom Penh when funds prohibited its transportation from Thailand. The other are carts made by Khvay Samnang and a group of 11-year-old collaborators during a workshop in the Bronx, New York, 2013, that were unable to be shipped back to Phnom Penh for the artist.

<sup>97</sup> Comments by Pen Robit, Lim Sokchanlina, Tith Kanitha and others at *Roundtables: the Body, the Lens, the City*, symposium convened by SA SA BASSAC, Phnom Penh, March 22, 2014.

## PERFORMANCE IN VISUAL ART: DOCUMENTATION TO RENDER PERFORMANCE LEGIBLE

It is more interesting to consider the ways in which these media might conceptually render performance legible in the Cambodian context. As mentioned above, the widespread adoption of performance by visual artists approximately coincided with the newly common use of photography as an art form, facilitated in part by a rise in quality and drop in prices in digital photographic technology. But there is a longer history of photography in Cambodia, within which art photography can be situated.<sup>98</sup> Photography, it could be argued, might more readily “make sense” to a broader section of Cambodian publics, in a way that live performances, of the kind made by visual artists, might not. While artists are uninterested in referencing codified traditions of performance in their work, they are clearly engaging with the system of photography.

The kind of photography that has appeared in Cambodia in the last decade has, almost without exception, been documentary in nature, and based in an exploratory, investigative impulse. Pamela N. Corey has argued that the rise of documentary photography has facilitated novel ways of interacting with the urban environment: “new forms of photographic practice, which involved immersive looking, active research and planning opened up avenues for alternative conceptual models via engagement with public space.”<sup>99</sup> Performance emerges from and extends this quality of photography. The documentation of performance in formats already familiar from documentary photography both draws on and extends the codification of documentary photography in twenty-first century Cambodia.

Emerging concurrently with —or within a few years of— such photographic practices, performance generally displays a similar deeply curious and socially minded sensibility. Many artists spend lengthy periods researching locations and communities, as part of the process of conceiving a performance, just as they often do when making photographs. This mode of research, which might be considered ethnographic, privileges the oral testimony of usually anonymous and

<sup>98</sup> See Zhuang, “Mekong Spring.”

<sup>99</sup> Corey argues that such “active research” and exploratory practice, specifically in relation to the space of the city, is a generally new phenomenon: “Acts of wandering and exploring the cityscape to find one’s subject matter or materials – inherently a form of site-specific artistic process,” Corey proposes, “has almost no precedent in the history of the Cambodian visual arts due to the inculcation of the grid-copying model dating from Groslier’s colonial pedagogy” (Corey, “Urban Imaginaries in Cambodian Contemporary Art,” 117). Corey is right to register the daring innovativeness of these artists. Perhaps, though, an antecedent might be found in the late 1940s and 1950s at the Royal University of Fine Arts, when the newly arrived French-trained Japanese-born teacher, Suzuki, insisted on Cambodian artists painting from life (or “*peinture*” as it was called). According to Pen Tra (ហ៊ុន ត្រា), Suzuki insisted that his students visit specific sites at set times: “He would tell us a certain place that we should sit and the time we were to paint: Vat Phnom at noon, for example.” (Ly and Muan, *Cultures of Independence*, 281.) Although with less freedom to experiment, this is surely a kind of “active research.” Srey Bandol’s *Looking at Angkor* exhibition and publication, based in extended on-site investigation, is another precedent for photographers’ “active research.” (Srey and Thompson, *Looking at Angkor*.) Since 2012, the Japanese-owned Yamada School of Art has also insisted on its students (which include a few Cambodians) drawing from life outdoors, according to my interviews with several Cambodian students and staff. Outside of the visual arts, there is a clear precedent of “active research” in dance. Pich Tum Kravel explains that “Chheng Phon [ចេង ផ្លុង] led research into folk dances (វិទ្យាប្រពៃណី) in 1960, under oversight of Queen Kossamak Neary Roth, travelling to Northwest, Southwest and Northeast regions of Cambodia, with a focus on Indigenous (ជនជាតិ) people.” Thereafter, folk dances began to be taught at the Royal University of Fine Arts, and various other avenues from the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts. Pich Tum Kravel (ព័ត៌មាន គ្រុវីល), *Khmer Dance* (វិទ្យាប្រពៃណី), 132. Translation by this author.



typically lower-income citizens that artists happen to meet, rather than official sources, which are widely mistrusted. While a majority of exhibiting artists in Cambodia are men, it is often women who are cited as the sources of the special, localized knowledge they have gained during their “field research.” Although many of these male artists often fail to consider the gendered nature of either their work or their cultural context, an ideological commitment to championing the experience of the exploited leads them to often privilege the testimony of women in both their performance and photography practices.<sup>100</sup>

By documenting their performances in photography or video, Cambodian visual artists are rendering performance legible by presenting it in a form that, although still historically new, is nevertheless arguably more familiar to local audiences. This is of particular importance in the local context given the near total absence of criticism authored by Cambodians, especially related to performance. Speaking at the 2011 symposium on “performance art” at SA SA BASSAC, mentioned above, Ly Daravuth lamented this lack of critical culture, arguing that “critical thinking, the discourse behind some of these [performance] productions...most of the time, doesn’t exist.”<sup>101</sup> This may have been an overstatement, but certainly “critical thinking” exists almost exclusively as an oral discourse, and not in a written form. By documenting performances—or rather, by exhibiting their performances in mediated form—Cambodian artists are submitting them for the discussion of their peers, inviting what Ly calls “critical thinking.” That is, artists are rendering their performances legible as artworks by presenting them in the recognizable media of photography and/or video.

Boris Groys has written insightfully about the ways in which various cultural institutions render objects legible as art. As Groys argues, this is of particular importance now that it is often impossible to tell, just by looking, whether or not we should consider an object to be an artwork. In a discussion about the dynamic relationship between artists and curators—arguing that each relies on the other to legitimate and render legible their own practice—Groys makes an important observation. “Not by chance do we speak of art today as ‘contemporary art,’” he writes, since “It is art that must currently be exhibited in order to be considered art at all.”<sup>102</sup> It is my contention that artists in Cambodia share a similar view. Strictly speaking, it is not only being exhibited that allows something to be “considered art,” but having the *potential* to be exhibited seems to be an essential requirement. Documenting performance makes it possible to exhibit performance, and thus makes it legible as art, that is, it makes it possible for performance to be “considered art at all.”

<sup>100</sup> A deeply held belief in what might be termed “history from below”—coupled with a purely practical tendency to do their “ethnography” during the daytime—frequently places male artists in conversation with women, rather than men. See, for example, the high number of women portrayed in Khvay’s *Human Nature*, 2011, a series of photographs of residents of Phnom Penh’s White Building taken as part of an ongoing project of research into the neighborhood. More women are portrayed in this series because it was mostly with women that Khvay conversed during the making of the work. Thus, Khvay’s understanding of the White Building can be seen to be based in the testimony of women more so than men. Similarly, his attention to the plight of Boeung Kak and other evictees was raised in part by protests, which were also led by women. While, like many other male artists, Khvay is often not aware of gendered aspects to injustice, his performance and photography practice is often informed by the perspectives and experiences of women. This is a topic for further consideration at a later date.

<sup>101</sup> Ly Daravuth, “Perspectives From Reyum.”

<sup>102</sup> Groys, *Art Power*, 94.

Let's return to the *Selpak Kandia* “live painting” event in Battambang in March 2014, with which this essay began. As mentioned, the organizers intended for this event to engage a large number of “ordinary people” as spectators of the live event. In conversation, Roeun Sokhom and Pen Robit explained to me that by “ordinary people” they meant people not already known to the artists, not involved in the art community of Battambang, and also those with lower incomes. With this in mind, they chose to locate the event in an open space on the banks of the Sangker River, directly opposite Psar Nat, the city’s main market.<sup>103</sup> Advertised for 5:30pm, the event began almost 45 minutes later, with the extra time allowing the crowd to gather along the streets. Several of the onlookers, including a number of market-sellers, said they had seen “live painting” events like this before, although they did not know the artists personally.

The organizers had hoped to connect to such people through their poster advertising the event, which included a photograph of a previous “live painting” event (Figure 9) and was designed by Battambang-based artist Prak Ke (ប្រាក់ កែ). While the primary aim of “live painting” events such as *Selpak Kandia* is to engage with a live audience, documentation is clearly seen as an important means with which to attract people. When I asked one photographer who was documenting the event why he had taken such care to set up his camera and tripod, he explained that the organizers could use the photographs for their advertising next time. A case, in a way, of the mediatized documentation of performance preceding the live.

Moreover, the organizers believe that it is important to document events such as *Selpak Kandia* for historical posterity.<sup>104</sup> Roeun Sokhom compares the urgency of visually recording old

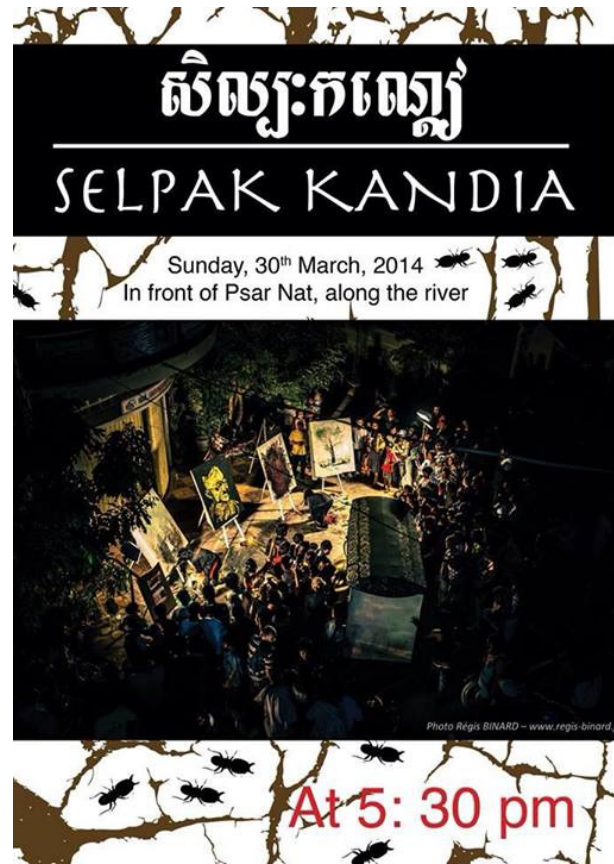


Figure 9: Poster advertising *Selpak Kandia*, a “live painting” event collaboratively organized by a group of artists including Roeun Sokhom and Pen Robit, held in front of Psar Nat, Battambang, March 30, 2014. This poster was distributed electronically as well as printed on paper and on vinyl for display in Battambang’s streets.

<sup>103</sup> The open space was the former site of a restaurant and nightclub at which Sinn Sisamouth and his peers regularly performed, according to conversations with long-term residents of central Battambang.

<sup>104</sup> There is evidence that a similar archival impulse was present in Cambodia during the early 1970s, and conceived of in part as a kind of “catching up” with other, more “developed” nations. For example, Tauch Chhuong (ត្នោច ច្បង), author of an important early 1970s history of Battambang based also in part on an ethnographic method, has explained that his work was “compiled for the youth of later generations, as is done for the youth of the developed countries” (xi).

buildings before they are destroyed with the imperative to document performances by visual artists. “We need to document so that things are not forgotten,” he explains. Roeun makes watercolor paintings of colonial-era buildings in Battambang that are either earmarked for demolition or that he fears will be soon. Having been born and raised in the city, the artist uses his watercolor practice as a way of preserving both his personal memory and creating shared historical records. Similarly, he appreciates photographic and film documentation of “live painting” events both for their private, sentimental value and for their usefulness as tools to collaboratively improve and develop new ideas for future performances. Typically, artists involved in “live painting” events in Battambang will gather for a meeting within a day or two of each “performance” in order to collectively reflect on the event. These meetings often involve the viewing of documentation, which is also often shared online via social media websites such as Facebook. A case of the live performance and the documentation cycling, one after the other, and sometimes both intertwined.

## PERFORMANCE IN VISUAL ART: DOCUMENTATION INTEGRATED INTO PERFORMANCE

In some performances made by Cambodian visual artists, the documentation is actually integrated into the live action. This is usually not the case in those works I have discussed as examples of “performance for the camera.” In those works by Ali, Khvay and Lim, the camera functions as a proxy for our own eyes. Nor was the documentation considered in the spatial planning of the *Selpak Kandia* event, as we have already seen illustrated in the accidental throwing of paint onto a DSLR camera. Yet in Amy Lee Sanford’s *Full Circle*, 2012, the recording apparatus serves not only to record the live performance, but also shapes its very form.<sup>105</sup> This is not to contradict my contention, elaborated from Groys, that documentation functions to legitimize performance practices as art. It does, however, complicate the relationship between the live and the mediatized, further pointing to their inter-animating and mutually dependent status.

In Sanford’s 2012 performance, the artist sat on the floor, surrounded by forty clay pots from Kampong Chhnang province.<sup>106</sup> One by one, she broke and then repaired the pots, a process that took six days. Despite explicitly stating that she “needed” *Full Circle* to be public and accessible, Sanford is also quite candid about various decisions she made that knowingly limited her live audience. She decided early on that to perform outdoors would be impossible, given the climate, ants, and so on. After choosing to perform in the ground floor gallery of Meta House, which is known for its all-glass frontage onto busy Sothearos Boulevard, Sanford decided to close all the curtains, which negated the possibility of casual passersby stopping to look in. This decision

<sup>105</sup> In some ways, perhaps this is also sometimes true of “performance for the camera” too, at least, insofar as all artists consciously plan the time of day, as well as the location of both the action and the camera, so that they will be suitably lit for photo- and/or video-documentation.

<sup>106</sup> Sanford has presented similar performances at various locations since 2012, including one other also titled *Full Circle* (at the Performance Studies International Conference at Stanford University in 2013). It is specifically to the 2012 performance at Meta House in Phnom Penh that I am referring here.

was made, Sanford explains, because the glare of the sunlight would have affected the photo documentation.<sup>107</sup>

That documentation —consisting of some forty thousand photographs— is so extensive that the artist spent well over a year working through how to present it. During that time, selected photographs —both wall-mounted and in flipbook format— were exhibited, as documentation, in the *new artefacts* exhibition that I curated at SA SA BASSAC (Figure 10), and the pots themselves were exhibited as sculptural objects in a solo exhibition at Java. Ironically, the one thing missing from the documentation of *Full Circle* is the recording apparatus itself, which formed a defining aspect of the live experience. While Sanford sat on the floor, surrounded by her circle of pots in an otherwise empty room, a three-meter-high crane loomed over her, with a camera clicking loudly every six seconds (Figure 11). That sound provided a kind of “heartbeat” for the performance, the artist said, and helped her to judge the passage of time, which was particularly important as she had set herself the task of completing all forty pots within the six-day period. Perhaps it was also the loud clicking of the camera —and its imposing presence on the crane— that caused there to be a consistent hush in the gallery space during Sanford’s performance. This quietness felt respectful and appropriate, yet was never actually requested by the artist or gallery staff. It is another way in which the live experience of *Full Circle* was shaped by the documenting devices.



Figure 10: Amy Lee Sanford, *Full Circle*, 2012. Digital C Print first exhibited in *new artefacts*, curated by Roger Nelson, SA SA BASSAC.

<sup>107</sup> Unless otherwise noted, this and all subsequent references to Sanford are from conversations with the author, 2012, 2013 and 2014.



Figure 11: Amy Lee Sanford, *Full Circle*, 2012. Photograph showing the set-up of the gallery at Meta House during the six day performance.

The quietness of the performance space emphasizes the meditative nature of Sanford's performance. The artist resists suggestions that her work functions as “therapy” (often raised by audiences during Q&A discussions, including at events I have organized or attended in Cambodia, Thailand, the U.S., and Australia), and is careful to explain that, when repairing a pot, she is thinking not of her troubled history but instead of the logistical challenges of gluing the small pieces together. Nevertheless, Sanford describes the repetitious nature of her chosen task as inducing a kind of meditative reflexivity. The still photographs she has chosen to exhibit of the *Full Circle* performance tend to emphasize this introspective quality through their blurred focus (Figure 10), which deflects attention from the specific details depicted, in favor of a more abstract contemplation. While the form of the performance (either live or in documentation) does not appear to be directly influenced by the format of meditation sessions, Sanford's work clearly resonates



Figure 12 (right): Amy Lee Sanford, *Container Port Break Pot Performance*, 2012. Digital still 5.

with this deeply codified practice. Even the ticking of the camera in *Full Circle* recalls the rhythm of footsteps during a walking meditation, a form that the artist herself practices.<sup>108</sup>

Methodical and repetitive tasks recur in Sanford's recent work. Before *Full Circle*, her *Broken* (2010) involved the piecing back together of dozens of sheets of broken glass. More recently, a video exhibited at Topaz Arts in New York in 2013 titled *Scanning* (2013) saw her patiently scanning some of several hundred letters sent by her late father. In all of these works, the slowness and repetition of Sanford's actions is key to their affective power, both live and in documentation. This is, perhaps, a rare example of the form of the performed action drawing on an existing tradition—namely, that of meditation practice. The nature of the documentation also reflects these conventions.

Almost a year after the *Full Circle* performance, Sanford decided to experiment with performing outdoors, after all. Still wary of the sun's heat, she decided to perform very early in the morning, and her choice of locations was dictated by the need for shade more than by the volume of foot traffic. I assisted Sanford with the filming of one of these performances, near the container port at the northern stretch of Sisowath Quay in Phnom Penh. My job was really just to mind the camera. But over the course of around ten hours (over several mornings), I came to realize that we functioned—the camera and tripod and me—also to attract passersby. Since Sanford was seated on the ground, dressed in all black and engrossed in the repairing of a large clay pot, she was not highly visible from any distance (Figure 12). An evidently foreign man standing by a professional-looking tripod signaled to passing traffic that there was something worth slowing down for here. Interestingly, it was those moments when people stopped to watch that Sanford chose to include on the edited version of the footage that she later exhibited.<sup>109</sup> While during the live performance she had generally refused to speak with or otherwise engage with her few spectators, in the documentation she afforded them a place of central importance in the piece.

At a public talk to coincide with that exhibition, Sanford eloquently suggested that, for her, the four video “sketches” made with public performances like this one allegorize the “intensity of private activity” that must go on even when surrounded by fast-paced daily life, as seen in the busy traffic on Sisowath Quay. Sanford's live performance and her videos inform each other; it seems to me that the artist's process of viewing and editing her footage offers her new insights into and readings of her live performance, as well as new ideas about form.

A guest at that public talk, visiting from Thailand, explained that for him Sanford's performances with pots recall various ritual traditions, both of mourning and of celebration, that involve a deliberate destruction of crockery and pottery. He offered examples from northern Thailand as well as Greece. Sanford was pleased by this contribution to the discussion; she has often expressed her hope that her work, while in some ways deeply personal and specifically “about” Cambodia, also “resonates everywhere.”<sup>110</sup> Yet while the artist—and others present at

<sup>108</sup> For a discussion of other visual art practices in light of Buddhist walking meditations, see Ly, “Buddhist Walking Meditations and Contemporary Art of Southeast Asia,” 267-85.

<sup>109</sup> *Container Port Break Pot Performance*, exhibited in *40 Pots + 4 Sketches*, JavaArts|Lab, January 30 to March 30, 2013.

<sup>110</sup> This is a clear example of the at once local and global impulse that many scholars suggest is definitive of contemporary art (and perhaps of contemporaneity more generally). Nikos Papastergiadis eloquently asserts that “It is now

the discussion—were intrigued by this reference, it also underscored that Sanford’s performance practice, while drawing on what she calls the “pre-verbal,” is neither conceived nor received as an act of ritual. It boldly and experimentally seeks a new space, drawing not on traditions of Cambodian *kār samṭaen* (performance) or *lkhon* (theater), but rather on that of meditation: a simply methodical activity that becomes meditative through its repetitiveness. The manner in which this activity takes place is uniquely shaped by the apparatus with which is it recorded. In this, the live and the mediatized become mutually reliant in Sanford’s practice to a singular degree.

## “PERFORMANCE IS CONTEMPORARY”: A CONCLUSION AND POSTSCRIPT

In numerous discussions about the nature of contemporaneity, Khvay has often asserted to me that “*performance is contemporary.*” What can we make of this? As I hope is now clear, this is a deceptively simple claim. But it also expresses a belief that would seem to be widely held. On one level, we can see the increasing global popularity of the idea that “performance is contemporary” in the fact that performance—most often in the form of its documentation—is increasingly prominent in exhibitions such as biennales that self-consciously strive to present (and even to define) contemporary art on a global scale. In another way, I propose that the nature of performance itself makes it a privileged format for engaging with the present, that is, for articulating artists’ sense of, and relationship to, contemporaneity.

I will conclude by introducing one final example of a recent conversation with an artist in Cambodia that illustrates some ways in which performance is clearly conceived of by some in the local context as a site for reflection on the contemporary. In 2013, an artist named Phok Sopheap (កោត សុភាត) undertook a residency at Sa Sa Art Projects as part of the space’s *bisodh(n)* (ពិសោធន៍) residency program. The organizers require that artists-in-residence “experiment in their practice” including “try[ing] new ways to use different media.”<sup>111</sup> Since 2011, Phok had previously made figurative paintings that depicted memories from his childhood, spent near Battambang.<sup>112</sup> For his residency, though, he had decided to make a performance in the Sa Sa Art Projects space. The performance (which was documented in video and photographs, and which incorporated pre-recorded audio elements) was articulated by Phok as reflecting his observations of the White Building neighborhood, where he had been staying during his six-week residency; he was intrigued by the ways in which the community functioned, and saw in it a marked contrast from life in Battambang (Figure 13). When I asked Phok why he had decided to make a performance based on his observations of his *present* circumstances, whereas his paintings almost always depicted

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plausible to defend the dual right of contemporary artists to both maintain an active presence in a local context and participate in transnational dialogues. Everyone who enters the context of contemporary art is already part of the complex process of intervention and feedback that now cuts across the world. This duality is experienced neither as an irreconcilable opposition nor as a loss of authenticity” (“Spatial Aesthetics,” 363-64).

<sup>111</sup> Sa Sa Art Projects [Khvay Samnang, Lim Sokchanlina, Vuth Lyno]. *ពិសោធន៍ Pisaot Experimental Arts Residency*. [2013.]

<sup>112</sup> This and all subsequent references to Phok Sopheap are from conversations with the author, 2013. All translation is by the author.

memories and imagined scenes (rather than observations) of his childhood and *past*, the artist responded simply that *performance* (for he too used the loan word) was “new,” and so of course it should be about something “new.”



Figure 13. Phok Sopheap, 5-Star Building, 2013. Performance at Sa Sa Art Projects, Phnom Penh. Photograph by Lim Sokchanlina.

I have argued that performances by visual artists in Cambodia are distinct from contemporary performances for the stage, while also sharing numerous characteristics. I have proposed that codified traditions of performance shape stage performances in Cambodia, whereas performances by visual artists are notable for their lack of engagement with existing performance traditions, their general disinclination to create new ones, and their reliance instead on the codified forms of visual art, especially photography, in the documentation which is consistently central to their work—although in ways that differ along a fairly broad spectrum.

Most of the visual artists I have considered are avid admirers of the work of Cheam Shapiro, Phoun, Phou and other makers of performance for the stage. Yet in their own work, these visual artists largely ignore the many rich traditions that choreographers, playwrights and others have used to such novel effect. Instead, visual artists look to the conventions of photography and other visual arts. Does this inter-media impulse make performances by visual artists somehow more contemporary than works on the stage, or actions in the streets? As I hope is by now clear, of course it does not. The rich complexity of the present allows—indeed, requires—an infinitely multivalent spectrum of creative responses.



*“Performance is Contemporary:” Performance and its Documentation in Visual Art in Cambodia*

The diversity of performances, all of them making a conscious claim to be “contemporary,” will make no sense unless we expand our understanding of the nature of the contemporary. To make sense of contemporaneity, we must register its complex and contradictory diversity, while also historicizing it: seeing the once-presentness of the past, as well as the inevitable pastness that lies in wait for the present.<sup>113</sup> We must resist the increasingly common attempts to regulate what is permitted to count as contemporary, that is, those attempts to define contemporaneity not as an all-encompassing presentness (or recentness), but rather as a limited range of aesthetic styles or conceptual attitudes. Failing to do so has dangerous material as well as interpretive consequences. For example, Cheam Shapiro has complained that her work is often seen as “not traditional *or* contemporary,” and that consequentially, “most of the time, I couldn’t find a presenter because they can’t place me anywhere. And so as a result, with the great company that I built, we are facing extinction.”<sup>114</sup> What Cheam Shapiro describes is a familiar problem in many places: overly narrow views of what constitutes the contemporary lead to overly narrow views of what is deserving of patronage.

The Khmer terminology of historical time, like its English language counterpart, easily facilitates the kind of historicizing that I believe is essential if we are to register the staggering array of cultural forms that coexist in our time. The common expression *huos samăy haey* (ហួសសម័យហើយ) —literally “past the era, already” or “past the present, already”— is used to dismissively denote something as dated, old-fashioned or irrelevant. So in this understanding of time, the present, while implicitly understood as being a period or an era in itself (given the polysemous nature of “period” and “present period,” both *samăy*), is also privileged as a marker not only of currentness but also of relevance: if something is dated, it is named as being “past the present.” To dismiss something as being *huos samăy haey* (out of date), as Cambodians often do, is simultaneously to point to its once having been *samăy*/present (“past the *present*, already”), and also to point to its shift into periodization (“past the *era*, already”). An English language analogy might be in the unusual word “outmoded,” which points to that other quaint term, borrowed from French, *à la mode*, meaning of the present, or in fashion. Even the most outmoded of things or concepts—including and especially art— were once *à la mode*, just as anything that is *huos samăy haey* (outdated: past the present, already) was once *samăy* (contemporary, present).

And so in Khmer as in English, we have the linguistic tools to perceive the once-presentness of the past, as well as the inevitable pastness of the present. It follows that we can conceptualize the contemporary as not only one or another style of art, or mode of performance. Rather, our understanding of the contemporary must encompass all that co-exists in our time: all new forms, all old forms, and all of the many combinations of both. A coequality of old and new is inescapable and may well be defining of our time and its cultural politics. The great multiplicity of performances that I have considered here makes Khvay’s claim that “*performance is contemporary*” at once a very complex and a very all-embracing statement indeed.

<sup>113</sup> This aspect of my thinking on contemporaneity and art is especially indebted to Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?* and Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?*

<sup>114</sup> Cheam Shapiro, speaking at *An Evening After Year Zero*, panel discussion convened by Ly Boreth, Asia Society, New York, April 15, 2013.

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## ABSTRACT

“Performance is Contemporary?” *Performance and its Documentation in Visual Art in Cambodia*

Roger Nelson

This essay is a study of performance and performativity in visual art in contemporary Cambodia. I argue that, while stage performances often draw on existing traditions of performance, and rapidly codify new conventions, performance in visual art is largely uninterested in existing traditions of performance, and instead relies on systems of codification from visual art, especially photography. In close readings of performance works by Khvay Samnang, Lim Sokchanlina, Amy Lee Sanford, and Anida Yoeu Ali, I argue that documentation is central to the performance practices of visual artists, and that live and mediatized performances are mutually dependent and inter-animating. I suggest four key, overlapping reasons for the centrality of documentation to performances by visual artists. These are: firstly, that artists in Cambodia are chiefly exposed to international performances through documentation rather than in live form; secondly, that documentation renders performance legible as visual art in the contemporary Cambodian context; thirdly, that photo- and video-documenting is an automatic and everyday activity in urban Cambodia for those with access to the technology; and finally, that the format of some performances is actually shaped by the apparatuses used to record their documentation. I conclude by proposing that any meaningful understanding of contemporaneity in the Cambodian context must encompass performance in all its forms.

## RÉSUMÉ

“La performance est contemporaine.” *la performance et sa documentation chez les plasticiens cambodgiens*

Roger Nelson

Il s’agit d’une étude de la *performance* et de la *performativité* chez les plasticiens du Cambodge. Si les arts de la scène au Cambodge de nos jours puisent ses ressources dans les traditions théâtrales khmères, il n’en est pas de même de la pratique de la *performance* chez les plasticiens, lesquels font peu de cas des dites traditions, se référant plutôt aux codes des arts visuels, surtout à ceux de la photographie. L’analyse des œuvres de Khvay Samnang, Lim Sokchanlina, Amy Lee Sanford et Anida Yoeu Ali, démontre que la documentation se trouve au cœur de l’art tel qu’il est pratiqué au Cambodge, où les formats en direct et médiatisés sont interactifs et interdépendants. J’identifie quatre raisons sous-jacentes au rôle central que joue la documentation dans ces pratiques. Tout d’abord il faut dire que la première rencontre que peut avoir les artistes cambodgiens avec la *performance* sur la scène internationale se fait le plus souvent à travers des enregistrements et non en direct ; ensuite, la documentation rend la *performance* lisible en tant qu’œuvre plastique pour un public cambodgien ; troisièmement l’enregistrement photographique et vidéo rentre dans les mœurs quotidiens des citoyens ayant accès aux technologies; enfin, la forme même d’une *performance*



peut se définir en fonction du travail d'enregistrement. L'article conclut que toute caractérisation de la contemporanéité au Cambodge doit prendre en considération l'éventail des arts du spectacle au Cambodge, des arts de la scène proprement dits à la *performance* chez les plasticiens.

### សង្ខេប

“Performance គឺបច្ចុប្បន្ន” ៖ ការសម្តែងនិងការរៀបចំឯកសារទស្សន៍សិល្បៈ  
នៅកម្ពុជា

Roger Nelson

សំណេរនេះជាការសិក្សាទៅលើការសម្តែងនិងលទ្ធភាពសម្តែងក្នុងទស្សន៍សិល្បៈនៅកម្ពុជា។ ខ្ញុំហ៊ាននិយាយថា ការសម្តែងលើឆាកច្រើនតែផ្អែកទៅលើប្រពៃណីសម្តែងដែលធ្លាប់មានមក ហើយមិនយូរមិនឆាប់តែងតែបង្កើតជាទម្លាប់មួយដែលអំណើតទៅគេនឹងធ្វើតាមគ្នាជាការសម្តែង (Performance) នៅក្នុងទស្សន៍សិល្បៈវិញមិនសូវយកចិត្តទុកដាក់ទៅប្រពៃណីឬទម្លាប់នៃការសម្តែងឡើយគឺតែងតែផ្អែកទៅលើក្បួនច្បាប់នៃទស្សន៍សិល្បៈនោះតែម្តង ជាពិសេសបើនិយាយពីរូបថត។ ក្រោយពីការពិនិត្យល្អិតល្អន់ទៅលើការសម្តែងនៃខ្មែរសំណាង, លីម សុខចាន់លីណា, Amy Lee Sanford និងអាទីដា យ៉េ អាស៊ីមកខ្ញុំឃើញថាឯកសារមានសារសំខាន់លើសលុបទៅលើការសម្តែងនៃ សិល្បករក្នុងវិស័យនេះ ហើយម្យ៉ាងទៀតការសម្តែងឲ្យ ទស្សនាផ្ទាល់ឬដោយមានការផ្សាយផ្ទាល់ផង ក៏ទទួលនិងជះឥទ្ធិពលទៅវិញទៅមកដែរជាមួយឯកសារ។ ខ្ញុំឃើញថាមានគន្លឹះបួនចំណុចសំខាន់ៗ ទី១គឺសិល្បករខ្មែរច្រើនតែឃើញការសម្តែងនានានៃបរទេសតាមរយៈឯកសារពោលគឺពុំមែនតាមការទស្សនាផ្ទាល់ប៉ុន្មានទេ។ ទី២ ឯកសារទាំងនោះជួយជម្រុញឲ្យអ្នកទស្សនាងាយយល់ការសម្តែងក្នុងក្រប ខណ្ឌនៃទស្សន៍សិល្បៈនាបច្ចុប្បន្ននេះ។ ទី៣ ការរៀបចំឯកសាររូបថត, ខ្សែវីដេអូ ជាការដែលគេនិយមបំផុតនៅកម្ពុជា។ ទី៤ គឺរបៀបរបប, លំដាប់, ខ្នាតនៃការសម្តែងខ្លះកើតឡើង ដោយបត់បែនទៅតាមប្រព័ន្ធនិងបរិក្ខារប្រើប្រាស់ក្នុងការរៀបចំឯកសារ។ ខ្ញុំសន្និដ្ឋានដោយស្មើថាដើម្បីយល់ពីបច្ចុប្បន្នភាពនៃសិល្បៈនៅប្រទេសកម្ពុជាឲ្យបានពេញលេញគេត្រូវតែយកការសម្តែងគ្រប់បែបយ៉ាងដែលមានមកជាគំនិតពិចារណា។

