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1 Yvon Chalm, *Catalogue raisonné*, 2013, unpublished, 68–9. Thanks also to James Mizerski for the background on the reproduction history of these two pieces. Notes in the voice of Vann Nath recorded in the *Catalogue raisonné* attribute the pencil sketch to 2006, presumably in the context of preparing the 2007 digital print exhibition and sale. This chronol-

ogy is not, however, confirmed in the materials associated with the 2007 and subsequent print exhibitions which posit the pencil drawings as preparatory sketches for paintings.

2 Vann Nath, quoted in *ibid.*, 69.

3 Pamela Corey, "The 'First' Cambodian Contemporary Artist," *Udaya, Journal of Khmer Studies* 12 (2015): 87.

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## Emergenc(i)es: History and the Auto-Ethnographic Impulse in Contemporary Cambodian Art

Ashley Thompson

Vann Nath painted *Seeing Myself in a Piece of Mirror* in 1996, nearly two decades after the moment it depicts. A pencil sketch of the same scene also exists. Both were digitally reproduced in a limited edition of prints as part of a fund-raising effort by a group of Vann Nath's friends to alleviate the artist's medical costs (figs. 21.1 and 21.2).<sup>1</sup> It is a scene of self-recognition in the split second of misrecognition, a distant echo, if not a reflection, and certainly not a citation of what Lacan called the Mirror Stage, the first step in the constitution of the human subject as fundamentally and constitutionally alienated. "Is that me? Is this me?" Vann Nath asks himself at once innocently and knowingly, in 1978, and again, if otherwise, decades on as he paints and draws the scene. Time is out of joint, as memory is retrieved, from the very first iteration of the scene when he first re-sees himself in the mirror.

In 1978 Vann Nath was held in S21, or Tuol Sleng, the infamous Khmer Rouge tor-

ture and execution processing centre in Phnom Penh. One February day in that year, he was brought from the prisoners' cell to, in his own words, "complete a short questionnaire before being allowed to clean myself of filth and animal-like bodily odors."<sup>2</sup> Washing oneself is always something of a renewal, perhaps a constitution of human subjectivity through the removal of a perceived mark of animality, a more-or-less ritualised process of portraying oneself with or without an actual mirror prop. And perhaps it is the use of the mirror which makes a distinction between the animal and the human intent on cleaning themselves. At that moment, preparing to apply water to his body, or having just done so, he saw himself as a radically different person—nearly an animal—from the one he had seen in the mirror of the modern artist before the war. Yet in this estranged figure he saw himself. The multiple reproductions of the scene, where he applies paint or lead to (represent) himself clutching

a fragment of a mirror, themselves constitute a representation and a recognition of himself as fundamentally alienated, in their very multiplicity—the repetition belying a certain anxiety over the success of the depiction—(re)enacting the alienation as a privileged mode of self-identification. This is a reflection of the artist's condition, of course, evidenced by the traces of preparatory sketches and pentimenti. But for Vann Nath, the artist's condition overlays that of the survivor.

Many metaphors of the passage of time characterise accounts of the Khmer Rouge period. Time is said to have stood still; or the clock is said to have been turned backwards, as society reverted to a primitive state. The Khmer Rouge declaration of 1975 as Year Zero is now infamous. Vann Nath, like many others under the regime, kept close count of the agonisingly slow passage of time as it happened. The phrase “three years, eight months and twenty days” has taken on the status of a proper name in Khmer, synonymous with the “Pol Pot period” (17 April 1975–7 January 1979). Vann Nath's subsequent recounting of his time under the Khmer Rouge often incorporated literal re-counting, on the order of the February day specified here, along with a continued counting of the passage of time since his liberation. Together, however, the two counts of time progressing perpetually ran up against another equally real *compression* of time in his lived experience. The mirror image, seen and then seen again in art, participates in this uncanny experience whereby time progresses by way of an unsettling presence of the past.

The process of self-other (mis)recognition, as of the dual quality of time upon which that process is premised, is interrupted in the painted image. Pamela Corey has written astutely of the triangulated gaze at work in the mirror painting, with the two guards looking at the prisoner looking at himself.<sup>3</sup> While the artist appears on the one hand to be protected from view behind the wooden barrier, the lack of spatial depth in

the broader foreground composition compromises his intimacy: what we see is that he is seen even when apparently hidden. The single open barred window of the white structure looming behind yet pressed flat against the wooden barrier enhances this effect, as if a monstrous Cyclops of a panopticon prison holds the scene in its scopic grasp. The artist's self-seeing moment is not cut short in this way in the drawing of the same scene. In the drawing, the foreground depth accords with the guards' gazes turned on themselves to separate the two groups, the man-with-urn-and-mirror on the left, and the men-with-cigarette set slightly back on the right, affording the artist time in all its complexity. With the guards drawn at once in and out of the picture, and no looming Cyclops, the artist is, for a moment at least, the exclusive focus of his own gaze. Whether the drawing was a preparatory sketch for a painting or a piece specifically produced for sale after the painted fact, the private exchange it renders, whereby the prisoner would have momentarily gained some form of sovereignty, would seem to not have been initially offered up to the gaze of the audience that we are.

I take Vann Nath's *Seeing Myself in a Piece of Mirror* as emblematic of a seminal source of what I will call an “ethnographic impulse” in contemporary Cambodian art. The “impulse” in question has multiple origins, many of which are shared across the Southeast Asian region if not globally. We might note that Hal Foster's 1996 “Artist as Ethnographer” was contemporaneous in real terms with Vann Nath's mirror painting, though of course Vann Nath's concerns arguably had little to do with those of the artist-ethnographer under Foster's critical microscope. In this sense, the contemporaneity of the two interventions seems little more than an historical artefact, and yet the two resonate meaningfully in the newly insistent mobilisation of and concern with “ethnographic” questions in more recent Cambodian art. Time, from this perspective, was and is still

out of joint. On the one hand, what Foster described in 1996 as an “ethnographer-envy” that “consumes artists today” might be said to apply to the Cambodian art scene over the past 20 years.<sup>4</sup> In Cambodia, as in many other places, this tendency reflects, at least in part, a recognisable and ultimately rather banal identitarian and oftentimes nationalist orientation—even, often, when nationalism is purportedly under fire. However, there is simultaneously a historical Cambodian singularity that overlays and overdetermines this development, as articulated by Vann Nath in 1996: the brutal rupture of the Khmer Rouge period. For more than anything else, in Cambodia today, this artistic slant is *auto*-ethnographic, and one haunted by a singularly alienating inheritance with regard to sociocultural identity, in which radical estrangement from and within a sociocultural body has triggered a nexus of art and ethnography. In no way do I mean to reduce post-1975 Cambodian art to an effect of the Khmer Rouge period; nor do I mean to subsume the vastly diverse aesthetic dimensions of this art under an authoritative political, social and cultural contextualisation. With reference in particular to Jim Supangkat’s caution of drawing the materials into a mainstream discourse, also published in 1996, these risks are duly noted, and mitigated, I hope, by an attentiveness to more than one haunting of history entangling collective and individual lives.<sup>5</sup>

In what follows I will briefly examine a series of historical ruptures layered at once under and over that of the Khmer Rouge, and participating, for themselves but also as integral to a process of repetition, in what I will now call the Cambodian *auto*-ethnographic impulse. As time would have it, there is no clear stratigraphy, no simple chronology; events which by one historical count occurred earlier are manifest in apparently later ones, with a kind of after-effect that might best be described in psychoanalytic terms, but which here has an objective historical *raison d’être*. My choice of

the term “impulse” over that of the more obvious “turn”—as in the “linguistic turn”—evokes the latter while emphasising those dimensions of the phenomenon in question which trouble any interpretation singularly bound to a linear chronology of events. “Impulse” gestures to the internalisation of external events, with attendant processes of reorganisation thereof on individual and collective registers; and synchs with the “emergenc(i)es” of our title announcing breakthroughs associated with but not necessarily operating breaks with the past. I will examine these layers of historical rupture through the person of one other man who, as far as I know, did not know Vann Nath personally but whose ethnographic lifework otherwise intersects with the work of the artist and, I will argue, will have been otherwise pivotal in the emergence of contemporary Cambodian art.

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In 1994, Cambodian anthropologist Ang Choulean returned to Cambodia to pick up, in a sense, from where he had left off 20 years before. As a student at the Department of Archaeology of the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA), Phnom Penh, from 1968 to 1974, he had studied classical Cambodian art and archaeology, Sanskrit and ethnography. The curriculum was based on that of the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, but integrated a focus on Cambodian classical art from its inception and included an ethnography component.

The founding of the Department of Archaeology in 1965 was part of a national programme, spearheaded by King Norodom Sihanouk and his architect of independence, Vann Molyvann, to establish the institutional infrastructure of a modern state after the country gained independence from France in 1953.<sup>6</sup> It was one of a number of departments, institutes and academies comprising the new RUFA, situated in a complex of buildings including the National Museum and what had previously

- 4 Hall Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer?," in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), 305.
- 5 Jim Supangkat, "Multimodernisms," in *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions/Tensions* (New York: Asia Society, 1996), 80. See also my concerns with the category of post-Khmer Rouge art and mainstream discourse in Ashley Thompson, "Forgetting to Remember, Again: On Curatorial Practice and 'Cambodian' Art in the Wake of Genocide," *Diacritics, Review of Contemporary Criticism* 41, no. 2 (2013): 82–109.
- 6 Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture, *Cultures of Independence: An Introduction to Cambodian Arts and Culture in the 1950s and 1960s* (Phnom Penh: Reyum, 2001). Helen Grant Ross & Darryl Leon Collins, *Building Cambodia: 'New Khmer Architecture', 1953–1970* (Bangkok: The Key Publisher Company, Ltd, 2006), 167.
- 7 Ingrid Muan, "Citing Angkor: The 'Cambodian Arts' in the Age of Restoration" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2001); Gabrielle Abbe, "Le développement des arts au Cambodge à l'époque coloniale: George Groslier et l'École des arts Cambodgiens (1917–1945)" [The development of the arts in Cambodia in the colonial period: George Groslier and the Cambodian School of Arts (1917–1945)], *Udaya, Journal of Khmer Studies* 12 (2014) : 7–40; Pamela Corey, "The Artist in the City: Contemporary Art as Urban Intervention in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, and Phnom Penh, Cambodia" (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2015), 20, 119.
- 8 Ang Choulean, *Les êtres surnaturels dans la religion populaire khmère* [Supernatural beings in Khmer popular religion] (Paris: Cedoreck, 1986).

been called the École des Arts. The complex is situated adjacent to the Royal Palace, and was designed to harmonise with it. While the Department of Archaeology represented a new addition to academic training in the arts, the Fine Arts components comprised a renovation of the École des Arts founded by the French out of Palace workshops in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The National Museum had also been founded by the French concomitantly with the École des Arts: Regular observation of museum masterpieces and reproduction of traditional decorative motifs anchored the study programme which was distinctly oriented to the production of traditional, not modern art. While new techniques, objects and styles of representation considered to be modern were programmatically introduced in the wake of World War II in the lead-up to independence and further institutionalised with the founding of RUFA, pedagogies of reproduction established in the colonial École des Arts proved tenacious.<sup>7</sup>

In 1974, as a final-year student in archaeology, Ang Choulean received a fellowship to undertake graduate work in ethnography in France. In Paris he studied under Franco-Vietnamese ethnographer Georges Condominas at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, where he produced an encyclopaedic PhD dissertation on the hosts of supernatural beings who populate the Cambodian cultural landscape.<sup>8</sup> He considered responding to the Khmer Rouge 1975 appeal to intellectuals living abroad to return to Cambodia, but decided not to. In Paris he was at the heart of a group of Cambodians studying Old and Middle Khmer language and texts with Cambodian linguist Saveros Pou. In the 1990s, he began to return to Cambodia on research missions supported by the École française d'extrême-Orient, during which he renewed professional and personal ties with the Department of Archaeology at RUFA. In 1994 he returned permanently, with his family, and began what has proven an in-

- 9 Both journals are now housed by a cultural institute, Yosothor, founded by Ang Choulean in 2012. See Yosothor—For Khmer Culture, <http://yosothor.org> (accessed 23 November 2016) which provides a historical presentation of Yosothor as well as the journals it now houses, along with online access to the latter.
- 10 From Levi-Strauss' 1963 *Structural Anthropology*, quoted in John & Jean Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 7.
- 11 Ibid.

tensive and ongoing career at the Department, where he has taught both ethnography and Old Khmer epigraphy. He co-founded and co-edits two journals, *Udaya*, a trilingual (Khmer–English–French) interdisciplinary academic journal of Cambodian culture, and *KhmeRenaissance*, a Khmer-language journal with a similar interdisciplinary cultural remit, but privileging short, abundantly illustrated articles, accessible also to a non-academic audience.<sup>9</sup>

From the turn of the millennium, Ang Choulean worked periodically with Reyum Institute of Culture in Phnom Penh and, to a lesser degree, Phare Ponleu Selpak in Battambang, the two main poles of contemporary art production at that time. The formation and development of the ethnographic research components underpinning the contemporary art programme of Reyum were thoroughly indebted to Ang's work both through direct counsel and through his RUFA students employed by Reyum. In addition to participating in a series of activities at Phare, he sat briefly on the institution's Executive Board.

In the conclusion of this essay, I will attempt to demonstrate ways in which Ang Choulean's pedagogical work and published oeuvre, along with his role taken more broadly as mentor or model, have had many informal incarnations and repercussions in the contemporary Cambodian art world within and be-

yond these two formal institutional contexts. In fact, I believe that Ang Choulean's unique position in Cambodia, not just the exceptional depth and breadth of his knowledge or the fact that so few intellectuals of his generation survived the Khmer Rouge period, but his particular constellation of knowledge, abilities and interests, his virtually secret wilder poetic side, his commitment to a discreet form of critical reflection and his dogged dedication to work at RUFA for more than two decades now has had as much of an impact on the evolution of contemporary art practice as it has had on the development of the ethnographic field itself in Cambodia. I would also argue that the condition of possibility of Ang Choulean's work has to some degree been the resonance it has had in diverse communities, some close to, but some quite far from RUFA. In fact, something that interests me here is the way that what I have just called a "resonance" appears to move sometimes in one direction, sometimes in the other, and often seems to function at a distance, with no clear or obvious chain of cause and effect. One crucial shared concern involves a stubborn determination to think the past and the present together, despite the impressive institutional, intellectual and cultural resistances this determination encounters at every turn. I am referring most pointedly to the resistance that quickly became an unspoken colonial trope,

confirmed even in the few notable and laudable exceptions, regarding the absolute disjunction between the “ancient period” and the “modern period.” Had there not been a collective sense of urgency for tying the present to the past, in subtle or overt, unconscious or conscious defiance of the historically repeated violent (declarations of) disjunctions between the two, Ang Choulean’s work would not itself have evolved as it has. Had he not persevered, the sense of urgency in this regard would not, I believe, have found the expression in contemporary art practice we know today. Before, however, taking a look at artworks which bear the traces of this particular history, I will probe the historical moments of (mis)recognition in self-othering incorporated into Ang Choulean’s professional trajectory as I have described it here.

### Education

The study of art in Cambodia has long served as handmaiden to the heroic progress of the historical and archaeological sciences, with over a century of meticulous attention to style and iconography enabling the establishment of a remarkable evenemential history of the rise and fall of the Angkorian empire. Rooted in this nexus of art and history, Khmerological scholarship long found a justification for its notable disengagement (save exceptions) from the “contemporary” in its enabling or constituting objects. The postcolonial period ushered in the possibility of new perspectives on, and respect for, the contemporary, whereby the classical traditions would find continuity rather than rupture between the people and practices of Cambodia past and present, demonstrating the political underpinnings of the narrative of rupture by which European scholars appeared as saviours and protectors of a noble culture—now their own.

Ang Choulean’s two pedagogical paths, ethnography and Old Khmer, may appear incongruous, but they are not. The drive behind

both is a commitment to identifying and teaching—and perhaps thereby conserving—historical continuity between ancient and contemporary Cambodia. In a first instance, Ang’s trajectory can be interpreted as evidencing the structural relation between the disciplines of history and ethnography explored by the Comaroff via Levi-Strauss. “Both history and ethnography are concerned with societies *other* than the one in which we live. Whether this *otherness* is due to remoteness in time ... or to remoteness in space, or even to cultural heterogeneity, is of secondary importance compared to the basic similarity of perspective.”<sup>10</sup> But the postcolonial post-Khmer Rouge trajectory veers from the Levi-Straussian path in the bodies of those practitioners for whom the difference with regard to the object of study—be it the temporally distant Other of history or the spatially/culturally distant Other of ethnography—is emphatically subjugated to its opposite: sameness and proximity. For Levi-Strauss, “in both cases [history and ethnography] we are dealing with systems of representations which [...], on the whole, differ from the representations of the investigator.”<sup>11</sup> For Ang Choulean it is the latent sameness underlying the difference exaggerated if not veritably constructed and certainly reified through politico-academic violence which must now be uncovered and preserved. Ang’s politico-academic drive differs significantly from the universalist dimension of that informing structural anthropology in its infancy, for here we see a distinct affirmation of difference traced between the whole of the colonised politico-cultural entity called Cambodia and that of the Euro-American Other in particular, an essential difference premised on a primary discourse of sameness between the investigator and the temporal and spatially distant Others located within the newly circumscribed domain of study.

This was the imperative variously driving the Cambodian study group of which Ang was a part in Paris, an imperative formed in



response to the colonial excision of the contemporary from the scope of scholarly inquiry. The narrative characterising colonial expansion globally took particular form in Cambodia and over time, but never lost its core: When not veritably seen as a different race from those who built Angkor, contemporary Cambodians were projected as a degenerate race vis-à-vis their ancestors; they held poor, if any, knowledge of the ancient past, which could only be properly accessed through European science. Ethnography as a discipline arrived relatively late on the European academic stage, and has always been a poor cousin to archaeology and monumental art history. In the Cambodian case, the European mission to recover the ancient past did not spur the establishment of a school of archaeology or art history for Cambodians. Instead, it led to the founding of a School of Arts where those deemed capable of best scrutinising and appreciating the finest work of Angkor could train Cambodians to reinvigorate local craft production on its models.<sup>12</sup> The Protectorate's investment in "contemporary arts" was subjugated to that in classical art and archaeology insofar as support for contemporary production was strictly channelled to ensuring *reproduction*.

The roots of what I see as a privileged relation between ethnographic and artistic practice in Cambodia today can also be located here, in the assimilated (mal)formation of the two disciplines. Within the Protectorate's formal educational system, the two were effectively reduced to a spare one, as the study of traditional form was thoroughly instrumentalised to underpin reproduction thereof. The reinvigoration of "tradition" inevitably contributed to a reification thereof. The forward march of the disciplines of art history and archaeology, not taught to Cambodians in Cambodia, hinged upon this marginalisation of academic work attentive to *contemporary* creativity. The contemporary relation between the artistic and ethnographic practice is a legacy of this colonial context, as

well as of its fraught negation in postcolonial times. After independence, as national arts education emerged as a privileged site of nation building, ethnography and art practice were taught as modern disciplines and disciplines of the modern, alongside those disciplines of the past: art history and archaeology. The contradictions typical of postcolonial societies, well documented now in academia, were evidenced in many ways in the Cambodian context. RUFA, for example, adopted a curriculum aimed at promoting (knowledge of) national culture based on European models, and largely taught by foreigners. The self-other mirroring of ethnographic practice found itself creatively reproduced in the French teaching of the discipline to Cambodians, who were effectively called to other themselves in order to play the role of the self, and so to see the other in Cambodians sited outside the closed yet necessarily, structurally open because now ethnographically inclusive academic circuit. So too did the self-conscious introduction of (European) modern art to Cambodian art students engender a transpersonal metamorphosis on the part of the artists as they were brought to adopt new media, technique and subject matter. Reproduction of Khmer "tradition" was still high on the artistic agenda, but the Cambodians were no longer made to strictly and exclusively embody their artistic predecessors; instead, at a great distance from them, they were enabled to depict "tradition" in the form of painted landscapes, agricultural labourers and Cambodian beauties holding cooking pots. In such, they adopted new selves in identifying with those they simultaneously posited as Other. Self-identification emerged through a new process of alienation. The tensions between the reactionary and the progressive characterising colonial investment in contemporary Cambodian art production were displaced but not resolved.

The post-independence mission of which RUFA was an integral part in the decade between 1965 and 1975 took on new meaning af-



- 12 For consideration of the development of the broader field of Southeast Asian art history out of this foundational rupture between the classical and the modern/contemporary, see Nora A. Taylor, introduction to *Studies in Southeast Asian Art: Essays in Honor of Stanley J. O'Connor*, ed. Nora A. Taylor (Ithaca, New York: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 2000), 9–14; and Nora A. Taylor, “The Southeast Asian Art Historian as Ethnographer?” *Third Text* 25, no. 4 (2011): 480.
- 13 For a cogent discussion of the evolution of fine artists’ training at RUFA and through associated scholarship programmes in the Soviet-Eastern bloc throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, in contrast with a decline in dynamism after this period, see Corey op. cit., 128–40.
- 14 Ibid., 156–7.

ter the war. In 1980 art practice components of RUFA reopened as a secondary School of Arts, including training in fine arts, drama, dance, music and circus performance. In 1988 the School was expanded to include archaeology and architecture, and administratively transformed into a university. The demonstration of continuity with the past at this historical juncture, so widely perceived as having been broken by the genocide and so fraughtfully embedded in RUFA’s post-independence foundations, was doubly important. The reopening of RUFA was itself emblematic of continuity. The pre-war curricula was theoretically reinstated in the Department of Archaeology though many factors (limited teaching resource, the precarious educational and socio-economic situation of staff and students, the political context, a sense of need for modernisation ... ) militated against full implementation. From the early 1990s, the Department of Archaeology benefited from a UNESCO-sponsored pedagogical programme incorporating a range of international teachers and bolstering the national teaching staff. Over the years, RUFA has hosted numerous international artists and teachers, some independent, others backed by institutional contributions to the Department. Under Ang Choulean’s direction, ethnography, taught in Khmer, became a

strong dimension of the archaeology curriculum. Set within the larger RUFA context, and inheriting from the history described above, ethnography at RUFA has been oriented first and foremost towards indigenous aesthetics. This ethnographic exploration of the aesthetic might be said to privilege the visual, but is not limited to it. A keen attentiveness to the aesthetics of language also characterises the work in a significant way, and is key to the ongoing “Khmerisation” of the discipline. This is one crucial intersection between Ang’s dual focus on Old Khmer epigraphy and ethnography. As an object of study, old and new, Khmer language use informs ongoing refinement of the language as a pedagogical tool.

A relative lack of focused, sustained and productive nurturing of contemporary art practice within RUFA’s Department of Fine Arts, particularly since the mid-1990s and the nominal transition to democracy, contrasts with the story just told of ethnography within the Department of Archaeology. As Corey has noted, many aspiring or established Cambodian artists turn away, disillusioned, from RUFA’s Fine Arts Department today.<sup>13</sup> For Cambodian inspirational models they look instead to the “self-trained modern artist,” embodied in an exemplary manner by Vann Nath.<sup>14</sup> They look

- 15 Grégory Mikaelian, "L'aristocratie khmère à l'école des humanités françaises," [The Khmer aristocracy and the French humanities] *Bulletin de l'Association Française des études Khmères* 19 (2014), <http://aefek.free.fr/pageLibre00010c37.html> (accessed 23

November 2016). See also Pierre L. Lamant, *L'affaire Yukanthor, autopsie d'un scandale colonial* [The Yukanthor affair, autopsy of a colonial scandal] (Paris: Société française d'histoire d'outre-mer, 1989).

also, if often indirectly, to the ethnographer, who looks himself to other types of self-made men and women, those contemporary artisans who devote themselves to nurturing the aesthetics of everyday life.

### Class

Other roots of the auto-ethnographic arts can be located in a recently reconfigured middle class consciousness. There is, first, a residue of the failed Khmer Rouge championing of a perceived oppressed and authentic Khmer people far from bourgeois urban worlds. Many harbour regrets in this regard. But the regrets for a catastrophically failed defence of the rural poor are at the same time intensely contemporary, and for this, shared by Ang Choulean with pockets of young RUFA students and graduates, as well as many contemporary artists in Cambodia. Though in many different ways, they each bear witness to and experience the contemporary disappearance of deeply rooted cultural forms of all sorts in the current sociopolitical context, where the countryside is emptied of both its forests and its youth seeking employment in the factories of the capital or the migrant market of Cambodia's neighbouring nation-states while a small elite accumulates an ever-greater portion

of the national wealth. If only the time of an interview, a performance or an exhibition, the artist and the ethnographer identify themselves in more ways than one with the disappearing rural figure or dispossessed urban migrant in counter-distinction to the urban elite made highly visible through the pageantry of money and politics. In this, ethnographic and artistic practice share an activist dimension.

### Generations

At the same time and in some ways quite paradoxically, the radical rupture accomplished by the Khmer Rouge, reiterated in ways I have just suggested in the ongoing post-Khmer Rouge period, has triggered a nostalgic relation to pre-war Cambodia. Any identification of the causes of the rise of the Khmer Rouge in the consolidation of modern forms of social inequality again, if otherwise, manifest in the contemporary condition does not necessarily go hand in hand with a rejection of the forms that modernity took. Contemporary artistic research also arises from a burning desire embodied by many born during or after the 1970s to know the pre-war past. The ethnographer, who in his own person and body of work bridges the temporal and societal gap, is a precious source of inspira-

tion as much as information. As a transmitter of the past whose lifework has been devoted to seeing the self in the other, he carries a promise of the relocation if not also the reinvention of a lost *modern* Cambodia.

### Diaspora

Much Cambodian contemporary art is made in or out of a diasporic space opened up literally and in some ways metaphorically by the Khmer Rouge period, but again not limited to this singular historical source in experiential terms. Cambodia's diasporic populations, like many others, can find themselves at home nowhere, at once belonging and not belonging here or there. They can also find themselves at home everywhere. The separation from "home" perpetuated even when ostensibly home, and often intensified in the experience of return, resonates with the artistic and ethnographic iterations of the Mirror Stage discussed in opening: one sees another and oneself at the same time. Ang Choulean can be said to inhabit this impossible place by wielding the one, ethnographic investment, against the other, diasporic alienation. In this, he takes ambivalent inspiration from certain of his predecessors reanimated of late in research undertaken by one of his successors. I refer to Grégory Mikaelian's work on Aruna Yukanthor, the famous late 19<sup>th</sup>-century named heir to King Norodom's throne who, in publicly challenging, on French soil, the ways in which the Protectorate violated French Republican principles, was disowned by his father back home; Yukanthor's son, Arenu Vachiravong Yukanthor, an accomplished artist, poet and Orientalist who pursued, also on French soil, the challenges brought by his father, exiled in Singapore and then Bangkok, to the Protectorate, only to end himself in a cloud of rumours of reclusive madness in his mother's Phnom Penh residence; and Au Chhieng, a brilliant Cambodian scholar whose 1941 doctoral dissertation

in Law at the University of Paris comprising a critical analysis of the legal foundations of the Protectorate was completed and printed in multiple copies before being rejected, seized and destroyed on the orders of the French police, and whose subsequent critiques of the colonial relationship were articulated in a rather more oblique manner via the study of Cambodian Sanskrit epigraphy in Paris, where he lived out his life.<sup>15</sup> The figure of Ang Choulean, in turn, serves as a model or a sounding board of sorts for the globetrotting contemporary artist whose condition with regards to home is not unlike that of the diasporic figure, and who, in the Cambodian case, often comes, at some point in his or her life, from abroad.

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There are numerous recent artworks which evoke the ethnographic in more or less literal terms. Than Sok's 2009 *Negligence Leads to Loss; Attention Preserves* (fig. 21.3), a video piece staging the burning of what appears to be a traditional spirit house but made of incense sticks rather than wood, set inside an installation featuring a sturdy gold-painted concrete spirit house of the kind favoured by most who can afford them today, is a prime example of this genre. The work is now held by the Singapore Art Museum and was included in a group exhibition curated by Phnom Penh resident Erin Gleeson titled *Phnom Penh: Rescue Archaeology: Contemporary Art and Urban Change in Cambodia*. Amy Lee Sanford's *Full Circle (Day 3)* (fig. 21.4), co-produced by the artist and Dana Langlois of Phnom Penh's JavaArts, is a performance piece which makes use of a traditional clay cooking pot to explore cultural and personal integrity or, more precisely, the loss and reconstitution thereof in a highly ritualised process of breaking and meticulously repairing pots—a process itself citing at once Buddhist meditation and archaeological practices. On the cover of the French catalogue of Kh-

vay Samnang's performance/video installation, *Rubber Man*, also curated by Gleeson, we see a passage from an article by Ang Choulean on the material forms given relations between soil and ancestors in traditional Cambodian culture.<sup>16</sup> The text runs off the cover, front and back, and, in conjunction with photographic stills of the performance, participates in the artwork rather than explicating it.

Pich Sopheap's redeployment of an artisanal practice of rattan weaving to make representational forms rather than utilitarian objects is well known internationally. The gesture of pouring a liquid substance over one's own head, seen in diverse work by Khvay Samnang (*Rubber Man*, for example) and Tith Kannitha's *Heavy Sand*, evokes the traditional ritual gesture of consecration (figs. 21.5 and 21.6). In its most formal mode, the consecration of a king or a Buddha statue, the ritual is called "abhisheka," but it can take a range of more banal forms. The twist these two artists give to the gesture is in the turn to the self, where the symbolically pure ritual substance which has been materially or contextually denatured is poured by the artist over his or her own head, effectively reinventing a consecration inseparable from desecration.

But the relation I am attempting to demonstrate here, between art and auto-ethnography in the contemporary Cambodian context, is not wholly dependent upon evidence of direct morphological, gestural or material citation. Nor is it dependent upon the influence suggested by any individual artist's actual contact with the person or work of an ethnographer. It is situated rather in shared processes of self-(mis)recognition. Much of the work I have just cited has, as an ostensible goal, an estranging of the self. Khvay Samnang's *Rubber Man* is the eerie naked and white rubber-covered anthropomorphic manifestation of an ever-disappearing territorial spirit. Like Samnang, Tith Kannitha strips down to then cover herself with a liquid of the earth—wa-

ter and sand. The distorted consecration ritual renders the artists strange creatures rather than societally integrated ones, unrecognisable but in the space of performance. This staged denaturing of the social body is a (re)naturalisation thereof, a means by which the artist asserts, if only momentarily, self-controlled embodiment, extending a fragile dominion over social space. With reference to anthropologist James Siegel's "supplementary notion of recognition by which I discover something in myself always there and that makes me what I have become," it is a means of groping his or her way to a modern identity through the purposeful embodiment of a "natural foreignness."<sup>17</sup>

Some work explicitly turns the mirror onto others. Anida Yoeu Ali's *Buddhist Bug Project* and Svay Sareth's series of durational performance pieces culminating at one stage in *Mon Boulet* are exemplary in this regard (figs. 21.7 and 21.8). Staging themselves in extravagant crossings of public space, the artists trigger (mis)recognition. The picture of a fantastic saffron-robed female-faced veiled creature travelling in and out of others' everyday lives is strikingly reminiscent of that of Svay Sareth, like a beast of burden, dragging a gigantic metal ball along decrepit Highway 6, through village after village from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh and then through the blaring traffic of the capital. Both artists act themselves—as if nothing were out of place. Yet these selves are animal-like, sharing with Vann Nath, then, the discovery of misrecognition at the heart of self-recognition, and demonstrably offering the effect of the mirror to their audiences. They do not seek to preserve this or that. Nor do they analyse the other. Instead, their art comprises fields of (mis)recognition. Their chance viewers have double takes—momentary interrogations of just who, where and what they are—before also continuing along their ways. Ali periodically scrutinises those scrutinising her (fig. 21.9). But she does this with a steady leaning forward and a studied stern blank gaze which returns to the

16 Khvay Samnang, *Rubber Man* (Dijon: les presses du réel, 2015). The trilingual (French-Khmer-English) catalogue was produced for exhibitions at the Jeu de Paume

and the CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux.  
17 James Siegel, *Fetish, Recognition, Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 159.

viewer more than it takes from it, like the gaze she projects into space with no direct address. Her staged stills jolt the viewer into seeing the unrecognisable in the apparently familiar street or bucolic scene, to ponder the appearance of harmony enabled by the Bug's disruption of social space (fig. 21.10).

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We appear to be witnessing a turning of the tables whereby ethnography in Cambodia, while still informing art practice, also now emerges as beholden to it. This is the case, I believe, in

terms of public recognition of ethnographic practice. The making of art in Cambodia today makes ethnography relevant, not just as it appeals to or uses ethnography, but as it triggers and probes (mis)recognition, exploring, we might say, the wilder side of ethnographic practice. For its acts of disruption, where resonance and dissonance meet, contemporary art practice harbours a theoretical promise for ethnography in Cambodia today to skirt the risk of falling prey to reductive reappropriating narratives of continuity on the one hand or progress on the other. Like time, it tells us we are out of joint. And for this, I am grateful.



21.1

21.2





- 21.1 Vann Nath  
*Seeing Myself in a Piece of Mirror*  
1996  
Acrylic on canvas  
Collection of Katie de Tilly  
Image by James Mizerski  
© Family of Vann Nath
- 21.2 Vann Nath  
*Seeing Myself in a Piece of Mirror*  
Date unknown  
Print from pencil on paper  
28 x 48 cm  
Image by James Mizerski  
© Family of Vann Nath
- 21.3 Than Sok  
*Negligence Leads to Loss;*  
*Attention Preserves*  
2009  
Single-channel video installation,  
9' 42" Installation view, Singapore  
Art Museum, 2012  
Collection of Singapore Art Museum

21.3







21.4

21.5





21.6

21.6



21.4 Amy Lee Sanford  
*Full Circle (Day 3)*  
Durational performance, 2012  
Image courtesy of the artist

21.5 Khvay Samnang  
*Rubber Man*  
2014  
Performance  
Image courtesy of the artist  
and Sa Sa Bassac

21.6 Tith Kanitha  
*Heavy Sand*  
2012  
Performance  
Images courtesy of the artist

21.7 Anida Yoeu Ali  
*Buddhist Bug Project*  
*Around Town 2*  
2012  
Performance  
Image courtesy of the artist

21.8 Svay Sareth  
*Mon Boulet*  
2012  
Performance  
Image courtesy of the artist  
and Sa Sa Bassac

21.9 Anida Yoeu Ali  
*Buddhist Bug Project*  
*Reflection #1*  
2013  
Performance  
Image courtesy of the artist

21.10 Anida Yoeu Ali  
*Buddhist Bug Project*  
*Oxcart Grazing*  
2014  
Performance  
Image courtesy of the artist

21.7



21.8







21.9

21.10

