

# Moving Cambodia

In November 2015, the multi-media exhibition *Futurographies: Cambodia-USA-France*, curated by our students, opened at the Sheila C. Johnson Design Center at The New School, New York ([www.newschool.edu/sjdc](http://www.newschool.edu/sjdc)). In 2016, it travelled to Sa Sa Bassac Gallery in Phnom Penh (February) and to the Parsons Paris Gallery (April). The exhibition reflected almost five years of our research and teaching focused on migration, the poetics of urban transformation, the mobility of culture and commodities, and artistic practices in states of emergency.

Jaskiran Dhillon, Radhika Subramaniam and Miriam Ticktin



## The Exhibition

CAMBODIA HAS RECENTLY become a locus of inquiry, and its history and politics drew our diverse disciplinary approaches together. With the curatorial-ethnographic workshop that generated this exhibition, we hoped to ignite new insights for ourselves and for an interdisciplinary group of design and social science students through the collision of methodologies. In the conversation below, we reflect on our collaboration and the issues the project raised in the context of our ongoing work.

RS: How do you think our varied backgrounds influenced what we did?

JD: As a scholar and advocate committed to social transformation, I foreground the interconnections among flows of knowledge, capital, labor, power, and people and examine their implications for social movements. Since 2010, I have worked in Cambodia, which is an exemplary site for exploring such transnational exchanges – its political history is deeply intertwined with other Southeast Asian countries, with Europe because of French colonization, and with North America through the US bombing during the Vietnam war, and in general, because of international aid. Since I teach at a US institution, the relationship between Cambodia and the US is a launching point for my students to interrogate the politics around development and humanitarianism. I was really excited when the opportunity to translate some of this into a curatorial platform emerged in 2012-2013 through my collaboration with Radhika.

MT: My role was to bring to bear the relationship of Cambodia with France in shaping both historical and contemporary lives. This transformed our place of inquiry into a tri-local (Cambodia-US-France) space, bringing in imperial histories and diasporic presents, and how people, ideas and experiences move in relation to these. I had worked with undocumented immigrants in France, researching their relationship with French colonialism and racism, but I knew nothing about Cambodia.

RS: Our earlier project, which also culminated in an exhibition, was more bi-lateral. The exhibition coincided with 'Season of Cambodia', a festival of art and performance that took place across New York in April 2013. We were eager that it was not about a place far away, and that it was not only historical but also traceable in the present, such that we were all implicated. So we highlighted US involvement in Cambodia. Interestingly, The New School has a direct link to this history – it functioned as a regional hub for the 1970 student strike against Nixon's Cambodian incursion. Art and design students, at the time, shelved their thesis show to mount an anti-war exhibition called *My God! We're Losing a Great Country*. Jaskiran has also been immersing students in the Cambodian context for some time.

JD: Yes, I've been teaching 'Lang in Cambodia', an immersive summer program in Siem Reap. This interdisciplinary program aims to expand student learning of 'development' by collapsing the distance between its emergence as a discourse and the way it plays out as a social and political practice. It compels students, in a very visceral way, to think deeply about the kinds of transnational flows I referred to earlier.

Our three-way collaboration presented another attempt to engage with these questions, adding a new place and new methods. It was really generative to have Miriam's expertise on French colonialism, since it broadened everyone's thinking about how Cambodia has been produced as a 'developing'

country in need of Western aid. But combining different methodologies was particularly challenging: leading students in intense ethnographic research in three different countries, and then asking them to translate this knowledge into an exhibit.

RS: I had two inroads; my work focuses on what I call 'cultures of catastrophe' informed by training in anthropology and performance studies. As the curator/director of The New School's galleries, I have over a decade's experience in art in the public domain. Despite this, the exhibition format was challenging for everyone, not just the social science students – how to make an argument visually and spatially that isn't reductive or merely illustrative and also open to the inevitable ambiguity of art? That was the real risk as an educator – instilling in the students critical, reflexive thinking about context and representation, while also encouraging an exuberant leap of faith into the realm of art where material and meaning might exceed one's framework. The students chose to split and juxtapose these strands in the exhibition with two intertwined timelines, one artistic, one historical. As a visual solution for an intractable disciplinary conjuncture, it was quite striking, and elicited vigorous discussion in the gallery. But the split also perpetuated the separations we were trying to work against. For an art gallery like Sa Sa Bassac, the historical timeline seemed extraneous or over-contextualizing the art; there, it was relegated to a handout rather than an interference on the wall. I understood the reasons, even the awkwardly academic quality of the timeline, but this was one of those stilted movements across disciplines that interested me – the inelegance of translations and mistranslations.

MT: On that, one of the key questions we faced was how to detect histories in the present. Where and how do we trace Cambodia in France and France in Cambodia? Our students wanted to use categories they are familiar with, i.e., identity. So, they asked, where are the Cambodian-French? How big are their communities, do they organize as a diaspora? In fact, our challenge was to trace these histories while being attentive to the mobility of conceptual categories themselves – not simply the mobility of people. Translation never results in sameness. In France, identity categories are not politically recognized in the same way as in the U.S., either by the state or the public. French theories of republican universalism suggest that, in the name of equality, one should keep identity (race, religion, ethnicity) in the private sphere, enabling one to claim equality in the public sphere. One exists as a citizen, not as a *particular* kind of citizen. Of course, there are many critiques of republicanism (to focus on race, this theory insists, would be to reproduce racisms; yet how does one tackle all-too-real racisms if there is no acknowledgement of race?), and while things are changing, this way of looking at the world underlies much of French society.

JD: One of the most interesting and challenging aspects of this project was stepping out of linear and causal perceptions of the linkages among people, place, and history in order to pay close attention to the notion of circulation. On the one hand, we found some clear continuities: for instance, the Cambodian diaspora living in the United States, mainly Khmer refugees fleeing from the genocide, have actively organized around US deportation through the 'I Love Movement'. People once welcomed to the US as refugees help a later generation that is no longer welcome, being deported, and blamed for the effects on them of the trauma of war. The U.S.'s own participation in that horror is ignored with the violence

externalized onto Cambodian bodies. So we saw continuities and explicit attempts to create discontinuities. At other times, the connections were not so clear.

MT: For instance, in Paris, we found that there were very few Cambodian-French organizations or recognizable Cambodian-French communities. Rather, people were dispersed, even if they were often located in places of greater disenfranchisement such as the *banlieues*. Ties with Cambodia barely figured in the French imagination despite a powerful and violent historical relationship. We know that Pol Pot was trained in France, that many of the ideas that later informed the Khmer Rouge took shape in France, before they traveled to Cambodia. We began to look at how equality and difference were configured in contemporary French society. How could theories of equality ultimately justify a genocide – did contemporary theories still embed that horrific possibility? To this end, we met with associations and activist groups who were interested in the history of French imperialism; and in inequality more broadly understood.

RS: Nevertheless, for students, there was almost a sense of relief when we caught up with a fantastic hip-hop group called Komlang Khmer (Khmer Power) in Paris whose raps were later included in the show. Although of diverse backgrounds, they were the first to speak in terms of a hyphenated identity – as 'franco-cambodgiens'. This says a lot about the ways in which the cultures of music travel. What meaning does hip-hop, forged from the U.S. experience of racism, have for those dealing with French republican racism – and how does such expression manifest within a different political framework?

Questions of identity dogged our heels – for instance, in how context affected the reception of the exhibition. We had been insistent with the students on keeping dynamic these triangulations: history-memory-mobility, ethnography-art-dialogue, Cambodia-USA-France. Yet, it was often the 'Cambodia show' in New York and Paris, or an exhibition by 'diasporic artists'; Remember the Khmer Times headline?: 'Diaspora Unite to Exhibit Alternative Futures'. Still, if I had one take-away, it would be that this 'three-ing' kept us generatively off-balance so that certainties were always out of reach.

MT: For my part, I was struck by the fact that the exhibition form opened up a way to grasp both the 'imaginary' (i.e., unrealized futures), and the 'real' that nevertheless eludes understanding (i.e., how equality could justify genocide).

JD: As an experiment, this was ambitious and hugely productive, but not replicable any time soon! The unique investment of time, fundraising, enthusiasm and goodwill that transcended graduations and semesters makes it (sadly) hard to reproduce in a university context!

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Above left: Student notes (Photo by Laura Belik).

Above right: NY exhibition view (Photo by Livia Sá).