Pathways in Performance (in and around Cambodia)?

Roger Nelson

Standing in the middle of an empty four-lane boulevard, official roadblocks just visible in the background, a lone woman begins to dance. The repeated swooping of her arms accentuates the emptiness of the street around her; her unshakeable smile belies and underscores the eeriness of the scene. At the time of making this performance and video (Fig. 1)[1] the four lanes of Phnom Penh's Sihanouk Boulevard, like many of the Cambodian capital's main thoroughfares, were closed to traffic in the tense aftermath of the 2013 national elections, the result of which was disputed. The performance and video is the project of a collaborative duo called Studio Revolt, which was at the time based in Phnom Penh, and which includes Anida Yoeu Ali (born 1974), an artist who describes herself as "a first generation Muslim Khmer woman born in Cambodia and raised in Chicago."[2] As the artists explain in text that appears on a black screen before the dancer is revealed, this is a moment in which "Both parties declare victory / Barricades go up on the main street / It's time to dance."

Fig. 1 Studio Revolt (Anida Yoeu Ali and Masahiro Sugano; collaborative formed in 2011), *DANCE: election, anxiety and a vacant street in Phnom Penh*, 2013. Directed & edited by Masahiro Sugano, performed by Mandy Liu. Image courtesy of Studio Revolt.

Like performance itself, perhaps, roads of various kinds are essential to the modern project in its many manifestations. The easy transport of materials of various kinds—from goods for trade to materials for modernization—has long been and remains a core requirement of most societies. The necessity of physical pathways, and their adoption by artists as sites rich in poetic possibilities, is one among countless continuities between that which we call the modern and that which announces itself as contemporary.

Looking back from the 2013 dance on an empty Phnom Penh boulevard, this essay will begin by discussing in detail a 1959 dance performed to celebrate the opening of a highway, which adapted classical Cambodian choreographic forms in distinctly modern ways. I will then more briefly introduce several performances made by visual artists in and around Cambodia in the last half-decade, all of which engage in some way with roads or other passageways. The essay will conclude by looking to political demonstrations that took place in Cambodia at the time of the historically significant 2013 national elections; the actions of opposition demonstrators will be considered in light of their performative intersections with pathways of various kinds.

While Cambodia will be the focus of this essay, many of the performances discussed have close counterparts elsewhere in Southeast Asia, and further afield. The historical and contemporary political and cultural forces at play, including Cold War-era state-sponsored cultural diplomacy and

twenty-first-century biennial patronage, while perhaps especially concentrated in Cambodian and surrounding contexts, will also be very familiar in other locations, both near and far.

What follows is not an attempt at a comprehensive survey, and my intention is not to sketch a linear history of these performances. Rather, I focus on certain repeated gestures and actions within them. It is hoped that this attentiveness to recurring embodied forms may facilitate a meaningful comparison that encompasses disparate modes of performance, including dance and political demonstration, as well as works by visual artists. This approach hopes to intersect with new narratives of performance in this discourse that we hubristically call the "global"—accounts that work specifically to counter the progressivism that has dominated many earlier art histories, including of performance, in Euramerican contexts.[3] Let us begin by looking back. The need to historicize the contemporary is too frequently overlooked, especially in locations that have largely been peripheral to Anglophone discourses around performance, and especially in curatorial and related contexts.

Nation-building dances and nation-building roads: the *Ballet of Khmero-American Friendship*, 1959

In the middle of the twentieth century, subsequent to gaining independence from colonial rule by various European powers, many Southeast Asian regimes used dance and other kinds of performance as part of a larger strategy of nation-building through cultural expression. Large transnational gatherings in the region, most famously including the pivotal 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, provided important opportunities for newly independent Southeast Asian and other nations to showcase their cultures to one another. For various reasons, including its easy portability, performance was the preeminent medium for such displays. In a study that casts the entire Bandung Conference as "diplomatic theatre," Naoko Shimazu argues that the whole city was transformed into a "stage" for the event, and that politicians became "actors" whose "performances" cohered new national as well as regional and political identities.[4]

In mid-century Cambodia, the connection between political rule and performed diplomacy was especially intimate, with deep historical roots, as well as quite particular circumstances.[5] Norodom Sihanouk (1922–2012)—who as King had presided over independence from France in 1953, and two years later abdicated in order to rule as Head of State—was keenly interested and personally active in the arts, releasing several pop music albums and later directing (and starring in) numerous films. Sihanouk's mother, Sisowath Kossamak (1904–1975), took over control of the royal dancers when Sihanouk ascended the throne in 1941, initiating numerous choreographic and diplomatic innovations. Paul Cravath, a historian of Khmer dance, neatly encapsulates the triangulation of royal, political, and

performative power when he writes, “Kossamak knew that the dancers were Cambodia’s best possible ambassadors. In allowing them to leave the palace and the kingdom, she lent authority to Sihanouk’s presence.”[6] Indeed, as Cravath further notes, for decades “the visible political activity of the Cambodian king would be identified with the art of his personal dancers.”[7]

This rhetorical union of the king and his dancers relied on repetition and reiteration: over and again the dancers would “leave the palace and the kingdom” in order to continually maintain the “authority” of Sihanouk’s “presence.” As well as travelling incessantly with dancers as his constant companions and politico-cultural “ambassadors,” Sihanouk also arranged for foreign dignitaries visiting Cambodia to be entertained by performances by the Royal Ballet, often with specially composed librettos and alterations to the choreography. A 1959 dance for a visiting United States politician, titled (in English only) the *Ballet of Khmero-American Friendship,* is particularly revealing of the relationship between performance and politics, and the complexly layered meanings embodied in repeated gestures and actions in this context.

A commemorative program in Khmer and English was produced to accompany the event, and includes an image of the Royal Corps of Ballet during a performance (Fig. 2).[8] This shows the dancers with the national flag of the United States of America raised in one hand and the Cambodian flag in the other. Aside from the flags, the troupe’s attire is strictly *boran* (traditional, classical, ancient): the young and shapely women wear the intricately woven costumes of gold and silk worn by royal dancers for over a century, with many elements dating back hundreds of years more, to Angkorean times.[9]

Fig. 2 Image from the commemorative program of the Ballet of Khmero-American Friendship, 22 July 1959. Image source: National Archives of Cambodia, Box B-311.

The dance itself was also *boran,* yet its meaning reshaped to be unmistakably *modern,* too*.* The precise choreography of the *Ballet of Khmero-American Friendship* has not been recorded; other than the commemorative program, no other documentation is known to have survived the devastation of war (in which archives were specifically targeted), if ever it existed. Yet we know from many other dances by the Royal Ballet at this time that the piece would certainly have employed the “classical” Khmer choreographic vocabulary, in which every gesture is codified and embodies cultural ideals of beauty, as well as poetic details of narrative.[10] These slow and repeated gestures, many of them fabled to have been in use for centuries, while *boran*, were also clearly legible as *modern*. The dance’s tempo had been quickened and its duration abbreviated, among the many innovations introduced under Kossamak’s control. Even more significantly, these forms which had previously been used to narrate tales of ancient folklore and spiritual belief were now employed to engage explicitly and directly in the modern political matters of the day.

This was one of at least three known occasions in which the royal dancers performed with flags in their hands.[11] Only one year after the *Ballet of Khmero-American Friendship* was performed, the same troupe would present the *Ballet of Khmer-Chinese Friendship* (1960), again with the use of flags, this time Cambodian and Chinese. Another kind of

dance, known as the “Fan Dance,” was often performed during Sihanouk’s rule with fans decorated with the Cambodian flag, and sometimes also with the flag of another nation.[12] That the gesture of raising national flags was repeated numerous times foregrounds Cambodia’s political and performative flexibility in the midst of Cold War political turmoil.[13] Despite the nation’s relatively small size, Sihanouk was aware of Cambodia’s strategic importance to the larger powers competing for influence in the region, and keen to maximize its prominence in what came to be known, in Khmer as in English, as the “international stage” (*chhaak anterakjiet*).

The Royal Ballet performed for visiting foreign dignitaries with great frequency during the late 1950s and early 1960s: just one month before the *Ballet of the Khmero-American Friendship*, the troupe performed for Indonesia’s President Sukarno, and a month before that, for the Japanese Minister for Foreign Affairs.[14] While special librettos at these performances do not appear to have been standard, they were not especially uncommon; for example, when the troupe performed for Sri Savang Vatthana, King of Laos, on March 18, 1963, he was honored with a poem in French written especially for him by Princess Norodom Viriyane, and reprinted also in Lao and Khmer.

Reviewing this busy schedule of dances, the recurrence of certain key features within them is particularly instructive. Just as the repetition of actions in rituals performatively reaffirms their spiritual power, the reiteration of these diplomatic or “ambassadorial” performances, and of charged gestures within them—including most strikingly the use of special librettos and the raising of flags—likewise serves to strengthen the symbolic bond between Sihanouk’s regime, his dancers, and the newly independent nation of Cambodia. That such dances took place both “at home” in Phnom Penh’s Royal Palace and “on the road” in various international settings underscores the connection between performance and pathways of various kinds.

The frequency and flexibility of such performances notwithstanding, the *Ballet of Khmero-American Friendship* was singular in its intervention into political affairs of the day, and specifically those related not only to the notion of travel in the abstract, but indeed to the physical construction of an actual road. The occasion for the creation of this dance and libretto—and for the American politician’s visit—was the opening of the much-feted Khmer-American Friendship Highway, a major arterial road from Phnom Penh to the new seaport of Sihanoukville.[15] The construction of this large and strategically valuable road was freighted with challenges and controversies. At its completion, in the very same month as the performance of the *Ballet of Khmero-American Friendship,* the United States produced a special issue of its monthly magazine, *Lōk Serei* (Free World) (Fig. 3). Whereas for the preceding eight years the magazine had consistently offered a mix of cultural, educational, political, and other topics, the July 1959 issue was focused solely on the Khmer-American Friendship Highway. The first issue of *Lōk Serei*, published in October 1951, had a circulation of 15,000 copies; according to internal documents of the US Embassy and State Department, by the time of the Khmer-American Friendship Highway “special issue” in July 1959, the

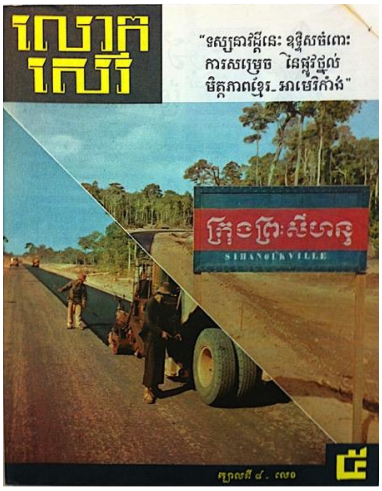

Fig. 3 Cover of *Lōk Serei [Free World]*, vol 8, no 5, published July 1959. A “special issue” on the Khmer American Friendship Highway, this would be the final issue of the monthly magazine that the US was permitted to publish. Image source: United States of America National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. RG 306/230/46/43/6 Box 231.

circulation had reached 100,000 copies.[16] Yet this would prove—unexpectedly—to also be the final issue of *Lōk Serei* that the US was permitted to publish: Sihanouk forbade any further issues, reportedly taking offence at a recent edition's placement of his image under a heading announcing the "leaders of the Free World," since Sihanouk's policy of "neutralism" and non-alignment for Cambodia was intended to be seen as distinct and separate from both the "Free World" and the Soviet Bloc.[17] America's immensely popular travelling cinema program was also discontinued at this time,[18] further demonstrating the extent of the diplomatic upset that had been caused in the context of heightened tension during the highway's construction. In dancing while holding both the American and Cambodian flags, the royal dancers were symbolically announcing that Cambodia's friendship with the US would always be balanced by its own national interests. Moreover, the troupe's demonstrated ability to shift from celebrating "friendship" with the US to "friendship" with China and other powers sent a clear message underscoring Cambodia's commitment to official "neutralist" non-alignment in the Cold War.[19]

An internal United States government document dated 1959 states that it was at the time providing the majority of Cambodia's military budget. The document explicitly links US strategic "aid" with the post-independence project of nation-building, asserting, "Though it has accepted economic aid from communist sources, Cambodia is continuing to rely upon the U.S. for major support during these *critical formative years of its national existence*."[20] While in the Cold War context the US was aggressively involved in the affairs of many nations—including in culture, as was discussed in the first issue of this journal[21]—the escalating war in neighboring Vietnam made Cambodia a uniquely important priority for the US between the 1950s and 1970s.

"Cambodia is probably the most critical area in Southeast Asia today," the US Ambassador wrote to the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence in Washington, DC, also in 1959.[22] Yet in numerous other internal documents, the US displayed its disdain for Sihanouk, frequently referring to him as "the little prince," "vain," "pathetic," and worse. Such duplicity was by no means the sole domain of the US. Sihanouk himself complemented his public diplomacy with private and often secret meetings with politicians from all sides.

Cambodian ambivalence toward American "aid" can also be discerned in a comparison of the Khmer and English versions of the special libretto composed for the *Ballet of Khmero-American Friendship.*[23] The versions differ markedly, and significantly the grandiloquent title is printed only in English, not in Khmer. The English libretto speaks of "Americans and Khmers / United by destiny in a heartfelt friendship." By contrast, the Khmer version makes no mention of "destiny" (despite it being a commonly expressed and popular notion in Cambodia) but instead implies that the "friendship" with the US should be understood as *recent* and based in strategic (rather than "heartfelt") alliance: "Khmers and Americans / That *have become* friends / Joined their idea / To build happiness."[24] Moreover, the English version suggests that Cambodia's "progress"—as epitomized in the

highway—is owed entirely to American assistance: “Friends, how priceless was your help.” By contrast, the Khmer text is careful to state that “Friends […] / Helped Khmers to quickly progress,” implying that this “progress” (and this highway) was a collaborative process, the work of *both* Cambodians and Americans. Such nuances in the way that the newly independent nation saw itself and its relationship to global superpowers is revealed in the libretto itself, the lyrics of which would likely have been sung repeatedly during the performance of the dance. I will soon return to the notion of duplicity being embodied in repeated actions during performance in a discussion of several contemporary works.

Within two years of the Khmer-American Friendship Highway’s completion (and the presentation of the *Ballet of Khmero-American Friendship*), the United States was in full-scale damage control as the road itself had fallen into unusable disrepair. A telegram from the US Embassy in Phnom Penh to the Secretary of State, dated May 1961, tersely states that the “deplorable condition of Khmerwaka [sic] American Friendship Highway… is a matter of grave concern to me because of its potential for dealing severe blow to U.S. prestige and good faith.” The telegram goes on to recall: “Highway inaugurated with great fanfare July 1959 with Secretary Interior Seaton in attendance, represents most conspicuous impact project in Cambodia funded under U.S. Aid program.”[25]

The failure of the highway to convey a lasting image of “U.S. prestige and good faith” was part of a larger diplomatic failure of the United States in intervening in cultural affairs in Cambodia, which is revealed especially clearly in the area of performance. Numerous internal communications between the US Embassy in Phnom Penh and various central US agencies reveals a sense of disconnect between the kinds of performers that America was sending to Cambodia and the perceived expectations of local audiences.

The essence of the problem was the perception by United States personnel in Cambodia that they were providing only “high-class” performances, rather than events that could appeal to the mass of the overwhelmingly rural population. A 1959 tour of Cambodia by acclaimed American singer Marian Anderson “was lost on all but a handful of Cambodian guests,” according to a report on the United States Information Service in Phnom Penh.[26] Historian of Cambodian modern arts, Ingrid Muan, also quotes this report’s lament: “Ballet soloists, symphony orchestras and sophisticated dramas, so popular in other parts of the world, are a complete waste of time and money here.”[27]

The United States’ solution to this perceived problem was to look to and emulate what they understood their geopolitical (and cultural) competitors to be doing. “The communists have been far more successful [than us] in their cultural presentations programs,” the 1959 report notes; this anxious jealousy a recurring theme in internal documents from the period, especially in relation to performances of all kinds. Another report, from the previous year, asserts, “What we need here is precisely what the Communists are sending, namely ‘low brow’ variety acts with good troupers who are willing to learn one or two songs in Cambodian and tour the provinces,” since “the bulk of our attractions should be

aimed at the masses."[28] The report continues: "High-class cultural attractions should be sent only on rare occasions and for reasons of prestige. We should understand that they would appeal only to a very small Cambodian élite."

Whereas American activities in Cambodia during the 1950s and early 1960s were more cerebral in nature, Chinese and Soviet cultural diplomacy clearly saw the *bodies* of Cambodians as a key site of what was known, in Khmer as in English, as "psychological warfare" (*sangkriem jettasastra*). An internal US memo from October 14, 1963, expresses alarm that "Chinese remain the most enthusiastic support" for transnational sporting events in Jakarta and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, and that "there is no question that Peking is cultivating Cambodian youth through sports. For the past year, Chinese Communist sports and youth groups have paraded regularly through Cambodia." The memo explains that such "activity might be considered a minor aspect of Peking's people's diplomacy if the development of Khmer athletic capability had not become, over the past several years, almost an obsession of Prince Sihanouk and the government." This expression of alarm followed a November 1962 memo, which noted that "three Chinese Communist coaches" had come to work with "Cambodian Army teams, the first known penetration by the Bloc of the Cambodian Military Establishment."[29]

If the "Communists" of the "Cold War" period considered Cambodian bodies a political site for control, contemporary artists of the twenty-first century employ their own bodies as sites for resistance. We will return to this in the next section of this essay. The notion of "low brow" as counterposed to "high-class" performance reveals a striking misunderstanding on the part of the United States of one of the defining features of the Royal Ballet dances that Sihanouk had presented to them. Cambodia's Royal Ballet, like many other official and state-sponsored performances throughout Southeast Asia in this period, successfully appealed at once to a mass population of rural peasants and to an urban "elite" of cosmopolitan and self-consciously modern citizens. Of course, this is not to say that the royal dance was *universally* admired, but rather that there is no evidence to suggest that there was any significant division along *class* lines in terms of its audiences or admirers. Although the private thoughts of rural Cambodians—especially those aligned with the growing anti-royalist political movements during the time—are of course beyond reach, numerous accounts suggest that performances by the royal dancers were greeted with enthusiastic crowds throughout the kingdom.[30] According to historian Anthony Reid, this unity between what the US thought of as "high-class" and "low brow" culture was longstanding. Reid writes that "it is impossible to distinguish between court and popular culture" in Southeast Asia during the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries.[31]

Even the location of many performances by Cambodia's Royal Ballet attests to the dance form's ability to successfully address multiple publics simultaneously, including royal and political elites, visiting dignitaries, and ordinary citizens. The *Ballet of Khmero-American*

Friendship, like many other dances of its kind, most likely took place in the Royal Palace's Chan Chhaya Pavilion. Open on three sides and located at the very edge of the grounds adjoining busy Sothearos Boulevard, the pavilion is the palace's most public stage. It was here that the French had ordered the performance of French classical music at the conclusion of the Great War in 1918,[32] and it was from here that, following President John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963, Sihanouk would broadcast music and command his citizen-subjects to dance in the streets in enforced celebration.[33]

In each of the multiple publics that are addressed in a dance such as the *Ballet of Khmero-American Friendship,* women were playing an increasingly active role in newly independent Cambodia. As such, the fact that it was female dancers who performed this politically charged piece takes on a new and specifically modern form of gendered significance. Women had always been the dancers in the Khmer royal tradition, and indeed among the innovations that Sisowath Kossamak had introduced after Sihanouk came to power was the incorporation of male performers from other traditions into the Royal Ballet.[34] Yet with women from all sectors of society being called on to engage in politics and the workforce in new ways during the mid-century period, the performing bodies of women can be understood to also be communicating in new ways. Sihanouk produced a short film on the subject of women in the newly independent nation that included scenes of women playing active sports of various kinds, as well as working in a range of settings including factories, farms, and laboratories.[35] Dances such as the 1959 *Ballet* suggest that the performance of nationalism amidst neutralism was another of the new and modern duties that women were called on to perform.

This dance about a highway, which likely took place overlooking a boulevard, is at once extraordinary and very typical. It is typical not only of mid-century performances in Cambodia, but also of several other newly independent Southeast Asian nations at the time. That a certain attitude to dance was shared throughout the region at the time is surely a product, in part, of the fact that the performers travelled so frequently. Often mistakenly imagined to be a quintessentially *contemporary* phenomenon, the cross-border movement of performers of various kinds was also a hallmark of mid-century artistic modernity in Southeast Asia (and in many cases pre-dated colonialism, often by centuries).

With this in mind, let us turn our attention away from modern dance, to look to some contemporary performances by visual artists who also engage with pathways in various ways. Our focus will remain in Cambodia, but will extend also to artists working in neighboring locations. As well as sharing intertwined histories, artists (and also curators, art spaces, and so on) within the region are closely linked through official and especially informal networks.

Many of the most widely known early performances by more senior visual artists in Southeast Asia are characterized by their connection to both a geographical *location* and an historical *moment*. To list just a few of the more regionally canonical examples: Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook (born 1956) began reading to corpses (for video) in mortuary facilities in 1997, within a year of beginning to publish her own writings (and three years after the death of her father);[36] Josef Ng undressed in a Singapore mall (for a live audience) and cut his own pubic hair in *Brother Cane* (1993), not long after the Singapore government's crackdown on LGBT+ venues; and Arahmaiani (born 1961) first performed her *Burning Bodies, Burning Country* (1998), only months after the killing of four students involved in mass anti-government protests in Indonesia.

The ability of the mid-century Cambodian dance to straddle class lines and appeal simultaneously to various publics is intimately related to its combining of *traditional* costume forms and choreographic gestures with a distinctly *modern* context and message. Continuities between the "classical" and the "modern" also extend into the context we call "contemporary." While addressing smaller audiences than the Cambodian dance, each of the contemporary performances discussed here also draws on everyday and/or non-art actions, further enriching a sense of *commingling* that spans historical moments and potential publics.

In what follows, I want to briefly introduce a few more recent examples of performances by visual artists in which the site that is being engaged is a road, a path, or a zone of transit from one place to another. The artists' repeated gestures and actions engage with and are activated by these specific sites of passage and movement in various ways. As I have previously argued in a detailed study of performance and its documentation in visual art in Cambodia, in the contemporary context there is often no meaningful distinction between "live" performance and its "mediatized" appearance in video, photography, or other media.[37] As such, the performances I discuss include pieces for live audiences and works in video and other media.

Each of the artists discussed here employs his/her own body as an instrument of resistance, of various kinds. This may be seen as inverse to the mid-century use of Cambodians' bodies—dancers, athletes, and others—as sites of cultural diplomacy. In the Studio Revolt performance and video with which we began this discussion, it was the specific place of an empty boulevard in Phnom Penh and the specific time after the 2013 Cambodian national elections that charged the location with meaning. The circumstances surrounding those elections will be addressed in the closing section of this essay. This work, too, is bound not only to a *location*, but also to a *moment*. But that particular stretch of Sihanouk Boulevard has also been the setting for several other performances and videos by Anida Yoeu Ali.

In 2012, Ali arranged for a white, internally illuminated stage-like platform, with two white chairs on it, to be carried through peak-hour traffic on this road (Fig. 4). It eventually came to rest in a small public area on Sothearos Boulevard (just one kilometer from the Royal Palace's Chan Chhaya Pavilion, where Sihanouk's dancers had performed). There, Ali invited friends and strangers to join her in occupying the seats on the platform and talking together. Titled *The Public Square* (2012) (Fig. 5), the work was described in the program of the festival in which it was presented as a "24-hour durational performance and installation work."[38] The artist explains that *The Public Square* "furthers her interest in both challenging and playing with the aesthetics of the 'white cube,' expanding the discourse of contemporary artmaking and artviewing into the public sphere."[39] These concerns may be understood to align with the interests of the international non-governmental organizations that sponsored Phnom Penh's "Our City Festival," presenter of the piece.[40] In his survey of performance art festivals in Asia, curator Thomas J. Berghuis notes that use of and engagement with public space has recurred since the 1990s in many locations.[41] Ali's unspoken reference to Marina Abramović's big-budget production in New York's Museum of Modern Art of the same year was strangely charged in a place that has no museum that supports living artists. The densely trafficked road becomes a kind of symbol of possibility and change.

Fig. 4 Anida Yoeu Ali, *The Public Square – Street Encounter*, 2012. 26 July 2012, 3 minutes on Sihanouk Blvd between 6-7pm, Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Performance by Anida Yoeu Ali, Photography by Masahiro Sugano. Image courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 5 Anida Yoeu Ali, *The Public Square*, 2012. 24-hour durational performance, 6pm on 5 October to 6pm on 6 October, 2012, Phnom Penh. Image courtesy of Studio Revolt.

Several other works produced by Ali and by her Studio Revolt collaborative from 2012 to 2015 also engage with public spaces, and especially with those that are zones of transit. In her ongoing *Buddhist Bug* series (2012–), Ali dons a worm-like costume, often dozens of meters long, which covers her head in the manner of a Muslim hijab while being made in fabric colored in the saffron-like orange shade of Theravada Buddhist monks' robes. Photographs produced during these performances show Ali-as-*Bug* climbing a staircase in a Phnom Penh alleyway in *Spiral-Alley* (2012) (Fig. 6), riding in a Cham Muslim woman's fishing boat in *On the River* (2013), and cascading from the back of a wooden cart being pulled by two cows in *Oxcart Grazing* (2014). Given the work's concern with hybrid cultural identities and layered senses of longing and belonging, such pathways become both settings and sites of metaphoric meaning. One of the most recent "appearances" of the *Buddhist Bug* was again in that same stretch of Sihanouk Boulevard: Ali-as-*Bug* rode a tuk-tuk that travelled through hectic peak-hour traffic in an early 2015 performance. I observed the startling scene of the artist impassively ignoring the teeming crowds around her, staring in wonder. A video of this iteration of the performance was commissioned by the 8th Asia Pacific Triennial, and its image was prominently featured in that exhibition's promotional materials in Brisbane, Australia.

Fig. 6 Anida Yoeu Ali, *Spiral Alley*, 2012. Digital C-Print. Concept and performance by Anida Yoeu Ali, photography by Masahiro Sugano. Image courtesy of Studio Revolt.

Questions of individuality and conformity are taken up also in *Waltz of the Machine Equestrians* (2012), a performance and video by Uudam Tran Nguyen (born 1971). Nguyen is based in Ho Chi Minh City, less than 300 kilometers from Phnom Penh; he also appears in the 8th Asia Pacific Triennial. In the *Waltz,* two dozen women and men ride their motorcycles and scooters in loops, around and around in perfect formation, physically linked together by clips

attached to the colorful rain ponchos that they all wear (Fig. 7) Riders in such attire, elbow-to-elbow in dense traffic, are a familiar scene in any of Vietnam's cities during the monsoon season, and indeed also in Cambodia and throughout much of the region. But Nguyen transforms the everyday experience of transit and commuting into a dramatic metaphor, a kind of "dance ballet."[42] After driving in repeated loops around an otherwise empty stretch of road with the city skyline visible in the background, the riders suddenly disperse, the clips binding their ponchos together sent flying in the process of separation. The metaphoric image of breaking free from a group may seem heavy-handed, but is complicated by the individualized yet anonymous appearance of each rider in her or his own unique poncho, as well as the performance's location on what appears to be an unfinished stretch of highway. Where, after all, are these riders going? Linked together in formation, they can go only in circles, but upon breaking free, they scatter in every direction and the seductive spell of the repeated motions is broken. The performance, much like the road on which it takes place, is baffling: we are left wondering exactly where it might be leading.

Fig. 7 Uudam Nguyen, *Waltz of the Machine Equestrians – The Machine Equestrians #13*, digital print, 2012. Image courtesy of the artist.

Engaging more explicitly, although still obliquely, with the history of conflict in Vietnam (and necessarily also in Cambodia and the region) is Ho Chi Minh City-based Tran Minh Duc (born 1982). In his performance and video, *A Land in Nowhere* (2013) (Fig. 8), Tran walks Ho Chi Minh City's wide boulevards and narrow alleys, as if aimlessly. He trails an ex-military parachute like a cape, and wears a hooded costume, both of which he has dyed lurid pink in reference to Agent Orange's lesser-known chemical counterpart. Tran describes *A Land in Nowhere* as a "chain process of perceiving—analyzing—adapting and growing."[43] Its movement through space, along paths of various kinds—a "chain process"—is central to the work. The inscrutability of the images and videos the artist produces during his performances is matched by the opaque histories and meanings of many of the grand monuments and structures that he passes along his way. These are streets that Tran has known his whole life. Yet their history—before, during, and after the American War in Vietnam—remains for him at least partially out of reach.

Fig. 8 Tran Minh Duc, *A Land in Nowhere,* 2013. Stills from 3-channel video. Image courtesy of the artist.

Pathways as sites of inscrutable mystery, as zones of sublimated conflict, as places to meet and talk, or to catch fish and do business, or simply to battle traffic: these are just some among the many complex and overlapping vistas that emerge in many performances made in recent years by artists in Cambodia as elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Just as the simple gesture of holding national flags aloft communicated such powerful yet coded diplomatic connotations in the 1959 *Ballet of Khmero-American Friendship,* so can the repeated act of travelling along various public pathways convey complex meanings in multiple ways as well.

Number four and number seven:

Performing political preference in the 2013 Cambodian election campaign

I want to conclude not with an attempt to draw out the many possible connections between the disparate performances I have discussed thus far, but rather by briefly introducing another kind of performance: that of political demonstration. Whereas dances and performances by contemporary visual artists generally aspire to a multiplicity of layered meanings, the actions of political demonstrators typically seek to convey a singular and straightforward message. This was especially so in the lead-up to the 2013 Cambodian national election, as the primary act of political demonstration was simply the raising of either four or seven fingers, in order to signal support for either the ruling party or the opposition. The position of parties on the ballot paper was randomly assigned, with the ruling party being placed at fourth, and the opposition at seventh. Once this had been announced, the number four very rapidly came to be universally understood to represent the ruling party, while seven came to represent the opposition. The numbers four and seven, in both Khmer and Arabic numerals, appeared everywhere: on stickers, signs, posters, banners, apparel, homemade placards, and so on. The hand gesture was repeated online in digital "performance," in a popular Facebook profile picture (Fig. 9).

Fig. 9 Digital image popular as a "profile picture" on Facebook during the 2013 Cambodian national election campaign. Author anonymous. Image source: Facebook.

Yet duplicity, perhaps ambivalence, and certainly playfulness are still possible even in these formally simple repeated gestures. This is seen in a popular digital image posted on Facebook by the pro-opposition page *Domnoeung Hueh Jet* (Fig. 10).[44] The image shows two women facing a ruling party procession, and holding up four fingers, as if to demonstrate their support of the government rally. The photograph is taken from behind the women, however, and thus reveals the three extra fingers that they are each displaying behind their backs. The clear message is that these women are only *pretending* to support the ruling party (by showing four fingers to the ralliers), and are in fact backers of the opposition (and show a total of seven fingers to the photographer behind them, and by extension to us, as viewers of the image). A digital drawing, superimposed over the photograph, circles their fingers and graphically explains that "4 + 3 = 7."

Fig. 10 Digital image posted on Facebook by Domnoeung Hueh Jet, 24 July 2013. Author anonymous. Image source: Facebook.

What complicated the situation, and rendered this duplicity an apparently necessary performative strategy, is that many erstwhile supporters of the government—even many members of the ruling party—shifted to supporting the opposition in 2013. The election was historic because it saw the highest vote for the opposition in decades, and also because the mass demonstrations were the largest the nation had seen in decades. When opposition leader Sam Rainsy returned from self-imposed exile in July 2013, he was greeted by a rally that lined Russian Boulevard (part of which had formerly been known as the Khmer-American Friendship Boulevard), that was reported as the "largest opposition rally ever" with 100,000 attendees,[45] and rumored by some to approach in size the one million people who had

gathered on the occasion of the return of the body of the late King Norodom Sihanouk in 2012.

That the anonymous creators of the "4 + 3 = 7" image chose to represent women as active and wily political actors in public space is significant, given the electorally decisive importance widely held to lie in the overwhelmingly female workforce employed at garment factories in Phnom Penh and surrounds. The presence of women in the 2013 election campaign—both in street rallies and in online forums—was notable, especially in support of the opposition. It reflected a larger shift in cultural norms, at least in Phnom Penh, where, for example, it is often remarked that increasing numbers of young women can be seen socializing publicly at night.[46]

For opposition supporters to performatively articulate a strategy of cunning pretense, as in this image, is for them to draw on an established trope of politics in Cambodia. Historian Steve Heder describes "the flagrancy with which [Cambodian ruling Prime Minister] Hun Sen… paid occasional lip service to human rights and democratic principles, only to violate them at will and with impunity," an approach which Heder argues "was part of the very public theatrics of their exercise of power over Cambodians," and "proof of their power and cleverness at making deviousness a public political art form."[47] In the context of widespread rumors of ruling party members clandestinely supporting the opposition in the 2013 vote, the *Domnoeung Hueh Jet* "4 + 3 = 7" image of ruling party-style "deviousness" in support of the opposition could conceivably be read as instructional, aspirational, or both. The image represents at least the hope for—or at most the beginnings of—a duplicitous shift in behavior on the part of the opposition and its supporters.

That this image—and many others like it—required no caption to be legible to and understandable by its mostly young, urban Cambodian viewers is significant, and a simple yet powerful testament to the prevalence of repeated gestures and actions in the production and reception of performed meaning in contemporary Cambodia's streets. These demonstrators, like Ali and the other contemporary visual artists discussed above, use their *bodies* as instruments of resistance, especially when sited along pathways.

But, as this essay has sought to demonstrate, performances involving repeated gestures and actions and engaging with streets of various kinds are by no means unique to the contemporary moment. They are not restricted to stages, or to the practices of visual artists; moreover, some such actions may not be thought of as performance at all by those taking part. Nor, of course, are they isolated only to Cambodia. Indeed, a comparison of the performances discussed with examples from elsewhere in the region would be a fruitful site for further inquiry.

Perhaps a view of performance that is historical yet not progressivist, and that accounts for the diverse forms that performances take, may offer one pathway in understanding.

Roger Nelson is an art historian and independent curator based in Phnom Penh, and a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne researching contemporary and modern Cambodian arts. His writing has appeared in specialist magazines including *ArtAsiaPacific*, in the scholarly journals *Contemporaneity: Historical Presence in Visual Culture* and *Udaya: Journal of Khmer Studies*, in books, and in numerous exhibition catalogs. In 2015–16, Roger joins *Ambitious Alignments: New Histories of Southeast Asian Art*, a Getty Foundation research initiative. He is co-founding co-editor of a new scholarly journal, titled *SOUTHEAST OF NOW: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art*, which will launch its first issue in early 2016.

Thank you to Hendrik Folkerts for his invitation to contribute this essay, following our meeting in Phnom Penh. Thank you also to Nikos Papastergiadis and Simon Soon for reading earlier drafts; to two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments; and to the artists for generously providing their images for reproduction here.

Original research in the United States of America's National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland, was made possible by support from the Getty Foundation's 2015–16 research initiative, *Ambitious Alignments: New Histories of Southeast Asian Art.*

Original research in Cambodia and the region was undertaken with support from an Australian Government Postgraduate Award, and the University of Melbourne's Asia Institute Scholarship.

1. Studio Revolt (Anida Yoeu Ali and Masahiro Sugano; collaborative formed in 2011), *DANCE: election, anxiety and a vacant street in Phnom Penh,* performance and video with dancer Mandy Liu (2013), accessed August 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NM48PMoOY5Q.
2. Anida Yoeu Ali, "Biography," accessed August 2015, http://www.anidaali.com/biography.
3. John Clark, historian of modernities in Asian art, provides helpful geographic and epistemic parameters for the term "Euramerica" and its derivatives, observing that there are equivalents for the compound term in many Asian languages. Clark argues that "cultures in Asia distinguish the cultural continuum of Europe and [North] America as unitary." John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1998), 11–12.
4. Naoko Shimazu, "Diplomacy As Theatre: Staging the Bandung Conference of 1955," *Modern Asian Studies* 48, no. 1 (2014): 225–252, doi:10.1017/S0026749X13000371
5. A compelling account of the relationship between dance and royal authority in the colonial era can be found in the novel *Saramani: Danseuse Khmèr,* published in French in 1919, and written by Russian-born French colonial, Roland Meyer. A Khmer translation was published in 1970: Roland Meyer, *Saramani,* trans. Chan Bophal (Phnom Penh: Angkor Book Shop, 2005 [1970]). According to a publisher's note in the new edition of this volume, *Saramani* was the only book that Norodom Sihanouk took with him when escaping from Pol Pot's genocidal Khmer Rouge regime in 1979. For discussion of Khmer dancers performing in Colonial Expositions in France during the late 1800s and early 1900s, see Panivong Novindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 28. See also Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860–1945* (Chiang Mai: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 38–39.

6. Paul Cravath, “Earth in Flower: An Historical and Descriptive Study of the Classical Dance Drama of Cambodia” (PhD dissertation, University of Hawai’i, 1985), 228.
7. Cravath, “Earth in Flower,” 215.
8. Held in the National Archives of Cambodia (NAC), Box B-311. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent references to this event, including quotations from the libretto, draw from this document. All translation from Khmer to English is by the author. Hereinafter, all references to these archives will be abbreviated as NAC.
9. For an introduction to *boran* (traditional, classical, ancient) costumes in Khmer, see Neak Srei Troeung Ngie née Laay Hunki, *Areyathoah Khmer* [The Khmer Civilization] (Phnom Penh: Editions Angkor, 2007 [1974]), 94–100. In English, see Toni Samantha Phim and Ashley Thompson, *Dance in Cambodia* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
10. Cravath, “Earth in Flower,” 217–229.
11. Ibid., 227. Cravath notes that the first known occurrence of dancers performing while holding national flags was during the Japanese occupation of Cambodia, in 1945. Cravath further proposes that in the 1945 performance can be traced the origins of the “Friendship Dance,” an especially elastic form that was performed for numerous politicians and delegates from a variety of nations throughout the coming decades, both in Cambodia and “on the road.” My own research points to additional occurrences, which will be examined at a later date.
12. Toni Shapiro, “Dance and the Spirit of Cambodia” (PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1994), 423.
13. For an introductory overview of the Cold War context in Southeast Asia, see Malcolm H. Murfett, “Introduction,” in *Cold War Southeast Asia,* ed. Malcolm H. Murfett (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2012), 1–10. See also Tony Day, “Cultures at War in Cold War Southeast Asia: An Introduction,” in *Cultures at War: The Cold War and Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia,* ed. Tony Day and Maya H.T. Liem (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2010), 1–20.
14. The NAC’s collection of official programs from Royal Ballet performances date mostly from the years 1956–1964 (although it is not possible to know how incomplete this archive is, with many records destroyed during the years of civil war and Khmer Rouge rule). These documents are held in NAC Box B-311, and unless otherwise noted, all subsequent references to Royal Ballet performances for foreign dignitaries draw on this archive, with translation by the author.
15. The creation of a seaport at Sihanoukville, also known as Kampong Som, was a strategic initiative of Sihanouk’s regime, intended to reduce reliance on the former thoroughfare in Vietnam. Vann Molyvann, who oversaw the project, explains: “Under the [French] Protectorate, all goods entering and leaving Cambodge were channeled through the port in Saigon (present-day Ho Chi Minh City). With independence in 1953, Cambodia needed an ocean port within its own national boundaries.” Vann Molyvann, *Modern Khmer Cities* (Phnom Penh: Reyum Publishing, 2003), 192.
16. A complete set of *Lōk Serei* [*Free World*] is held in United States of America National Archives and Records Administration (USA NARA), College Park, MD, RG 306/230/46/43/6 Box 231. Hereinafter, all references to these archives will be abbreviated as USA NARA.
17. *Lōk Serei* [*Free World*] 7, no. 12 (1958).
18. Confidential Despatch from Arthur R. Lee, Acting Country Public Affairs Officer, USIS [United States Information Service], Phnom Penh to USIA [United States Information Agency],Washington, October 26, 1959, headed “Country Plan for Cambodia FY 1960,” USA NARA. RG 306/490/42/13/7 Box 2.
19. For an introduction to Cambodia’s “neutralist” policy in Khmer, see Diep Sophal, *Robab Sangkum Reastr Niyum: Maha Chey Chomneh Ning Vibat (1955–1970)* [The Sangkum Reastr

Niyum/People's Socialist Community Regime, 1955–1970: Great Victory and Crisis], especially Chapters 2 and 3 (Phnom Penh: Jauk Jey, 2009). In English, see Ek Madra/Ek Tha, *The Factors Contributing to Cambodia's Civil War, 1950s–1980s. Lessons Then and Now* (Phnom Penh: Ek Tha & Madra Associates, 2015), and David Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War, and Revolution since 1945* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 1999 [1991]), esp. Chapters Three, Four and Five. See also Bruce Lockhart, "The Fate of Neutralism in Cambodia and Laos," in *Cold War Southeast Asia,* ed. Malcolm H. Murfett (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2012), 195–223.

20. "Far East. Cambodia: Defense Support," 1959, USA NARA. RG 59/250/51/26/3-4 Box 1 (my emphasis).

21. Jennifer McComas, "Reconstructing Cold War Cultural Diplomacy Exhibitions," *Stedelijk Studies* 1 (November 2014), accessed August 2015, http://www.stedelijkstudies.com/journal/reconstructing-cold-war-cultural-diplomacy-exhibitions/#_edn1.

22. Letter from Ambassador Trimble to Major General John C. Williams, Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Dept. of the Army, Washington DC, October 29, 1959, USA NARA. RG 59/250/63/10/5-7 Box 5.

23. The French term "ambivalence" has been explained in Khmer by a respected scholar of history and philosophy as a "situation of conflict in the mind (*jet*) between two ideas or desires or sentiments." Vandy Kaonn, *Kbuen Jettasastra* [*Principles of Psychology*] (Phnom Penh: Kroeusthan Mittapheap, 1973 [1970]), 16. [In Khmer.] The emphasis on *conflict* is at odds with most English and French definitions of "ambivalence," which tend instead toward a notion of *mixed* "ideas or desires or sentiments."

24. My emphasis.

25. Telegram from the US Embassy in Phnom Penh to the Secretary of State, May 17, 1961, USA NARA. RG 59/250/4/18/3 Box 2559.

26. Confidential "Inspection Report: USIS Cambodia" by USIA, by Inspector James L. Meader, March 27, 1959, USA NARA. RG 306/490/42/13/7 Box 2. According to a biography of Marian Anderson, the performance in Cambodia was one of twenty-six concerts given in twelve countries throughout Asia. The US State Department arranged the tour, "aware of the impact that Anderson's Met debut was having abroad…. Shackled with their own histories of subjugation by white colonial powers, the Asian countries were particularly sensitive to civil rights issues in the United States." Allan Keiler, *Marian Anderson: A Singer's Journey* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 282.

27. Quoted in Ingrid Muan, "Citing Angkor: The 'Cambodian Arts' in the Age of Restoration" (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2001), 242.

28. Letter from Edmund H. Kellogg, Counselor, US Embassy, Phnom Penh, to Laurin Askew, Cambodian Desk Officer, Office of Southeast Asian Affairs, Washington DC, November 19, 1958, USA NARA. RG 59/250/63/10/5-7 Box 6.

29. USA NARA. RG 306/250/67/19-20/07 Box 1.

30. See Shapiro, "Dance and the Spirit," 99–130.

31. Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce,* vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 202. Quoted in Shapiro, "Dance and the Spirit," 100.

32. Doeuk Kiem and Diek Om, *Phum Terechhan* [The Bestial Village] (Phnom Penh: Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2009 [1971]), 10. [In Khmer.]

33. Kennedy's assassination occurred in November 1963, coinciding with Sihanouk's severance of diplomatic ties with the United States. Historian Milton Osborne recounts that it was when the Thai "dictator," Marshal Sarit, died in December 1963 that Sihanouk announced that Kennedy, Sarit, and recently assassinated South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem would "all meet in hell," and called on Cambodians to celebrate.

Milton Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1994), 163.

34. Cravath, "Earth in Flower," 218.
35. Norodom Sihanouk, director, *Le femme cambodgienne à l'heure du Sangkum* [Women during the Sangkum Reastr Niyum], Khemara Pictures, 1960s, color with sound, 24 min. (Bophana Center archives, Phnom Penh). Archive Reference NSI_VI_001568.
36. See "A Chronology of Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook," in *Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook: Storytellers of the Town,* exh. cat., ed. John Clark, (Sydney: 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2014), 122–125.
37. Roger Nelson, "'*Performance* is Contemporary': Performance and its Documentation in Visual Art in Cambodia." *Udaya, Journal of Khmer Studies* 12 (2014): 95–143. The notion of "live" and "mediatized" performance being inter-animating draws on Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999).
38. Program of Phnom Penh's *Our City Festival* (2012), accessed August 2015, http://www.ourcityfestival.org/festival/events.
39. Anida Yoeu Ali, "Public Square," accessed August 2015, http://www.anidaali.com/artworks/public-square.
40. These organizations included Heinrich Böll Stiftung and UNESCO, accessed October 2015, http://www.ourcityfestival.org/2012.
41. Thomas J. Berghuis, "Art Into Action: Performance Art Festivals in Asia," *Diaaaloguue* (October 2010): accessed August 2015, http://www.aaa.org.hk/Diaaalogue/Details/915.
42. The term "dance ballet" is from the didactic notes that accompanied the work's exhibition at the 2013 Singapore Biennale, accessed August 2015, http://www.singaporebiennale.org/downloads/folios/UuDam%20Tran%20Nguyen_Final.pdf.
43. Author's conversations with the artist, 2013 to 2015.
44. Posted July 26, 2013, the image attracted over 1000 Facebook "likes" within two hours.
45. "Rainsy Returns to Largest Opposition Rally Ever," *Cambodia Daily,* July 19, 2013.
46. The representation of women as electoral candidates, however, was actually lower in 2013 than in the 2008 elections: according to National Election Committee figures, only 22% of candidates were women, and most of those were in fact reserves, in case a (male) candidate withdrew.
47. Steve Heder, "Political Theatre in the 2003 Cambodian Elections: State, Democracy and Conciliation in Historical Perspective," in *Staging Politics: Power and Performance in Asia and Africa*, ed. Julia C. Strauss and Donal Cruise O'Brien (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 162.