

PHOTOGRAPHING THE PRESENT FOR HISTORY TOMORROW

Abigail Reichard, McMaster Scholar

The purpose of my project was to contribute to the photographic history of the Cambodian people. My idea was to take portraits of the people I met, print the images on site, and give to them to the subjects of the photographs. I chose this project because of the strong connection I see between photography and history, both public and personal. Because of the horrors of the Khmer Rouge, Cambodians have lost a sense of heritage and history. I chose to use the medium of photography to document the hardship this nation has seen while preserving its current history and its people's enduring sense of identity. Through this project I learned the importance and influence of visual history and the value of photographs in personal and public history.

A SHORT HISTORY

After suffering under the brutal rule of the Khmer Rouge and a genocide that caused the death of two million people, only the country of Cambodia is still "present." I say present because both people and their history have been removed from Cambodia in a way from the destructive forces they were forced to endure. In Cambodia, lives are defined as "before," "after," and "during" (Stansell, 2005). "Before" is a history that is largely unknown to those in Cambodia today; they are for the most part the children that escaped the brutal killings of the Khmer Rouge. "After" is a new history slowly creating itself, building from a nation where 60% of the population is under 20; a population seemingly without a sense of history; a population lacking a historical identity, except for the scars of "before."

My project involved going to urban and rural settings and taking portraits of children, youths, and adults. The unique aspect of this project was that I printed these portraits onsite and gave each individual their photo within 24 hours of taking it. I also took portraits of hotel staff members, tuk-tuk drivers, and schoolteachers and staff. It was apparent to me that, unlike Americans, photographs were not a regular part of these Cambodians' lives.

At Chey Chom Nias, an urban Cambodian school, I took 60 class photos, had them framed, and gave them to the school to distribute. All the framed photos were in one box. The framed photos immediately caught the children's attention. They would peek into the box and giggle. Yet the principal seemed awkward, as if he were waiting for something or someone. At first he just looked at the photos on the top. After a while, he dug a little

deeper. He approached the photos hesitantly, appearing uncomfortable touching them even though they were in plastic sleeves and framed in glass. I presented the 60 framed pictures to the principal with a student interpreting in English. I asked the student if the principal liked the photos. He said, "Yes, very much." He asked if we wanted to go around and pass the photos out to each class, but we told him it would take too long; perhaps that was what he was waiting for. As we left, I wondered if I came back where the photos would be. Would they be in each classroom or exhibited in the office or nailed to a hallway wall? I had no real way of knowing.

We also spent an entire day at a rural school in Ba Prey. I took photos of the schoolteachers first, then children ages zero to teens, and then women and the elderly. There was hope in these children's smiles. There was joy in the younger children's faces, eyes, smiles, laughs, and voices. The children at the schools laughed at me as I said "moy-be-bye" or "1, 2, 3."

When I began to hand out the teachers' photos, I noticed that they spent a long time looking at them. Each would first stare at the photo lovingly for moments and then pass it to friends eagerly waiting nearby. When the photo was passed back to the owner, he or she continued to stare at it for awhile. When the teachers first received their photos, they bowed slightly, using both hands to receive it. They then smiled and some laughed after the transaction. Many squinted as they examined their image. I wondered, "Do they judge themselves as harshly as we do ourselves?" We Americans have book after book of our images, stored away for generations to come, saved on film, photo paper, disk, and drive; a never-ending testament to our lives. And when we take a trip, we take a hundred pictures to remember--those smiling faces in the school yard; that battered beggar in the street. But how will they--the Cambodian people--remember? The purpose of this project was not to fill my photo



albums or the McMaster School's, but to give a handful of Cambodian people images of themselves--a rare gift.

In my academic research, I learned that since 1839, photography has been a vital means of communication and expression (Newhall, 1982). The photographic medium greatly influences our interpretation of past events and our understanding of history. Photographs help people illustrate the stories of their lives and the significant stories of their society (Garry & Gerrie, 2005). Pictures are an essential component of how humans observe, communicate, celebrate, and remember (Hirsch, 2000). In 1999, a National Public Radio reporter asked Oklahoma tornado survivors what their most irreplaceable object was. One after another said that their snapshots were what they wanted to recover from their ruined homes (Hirsch, 2000). I wondered how these Cambodian children would remember the day when we arrived at their school. Would they remember how they got their photographs? Would they remember crowding around two modern printers in their school yard with an American white female handing their photos to them? What would their parents say when they saw the pictures? As the mothers pushed their children in front of the camera, I realized that this may be the only picture that they will have of their child's childhood.

Photographs have far more significance in the long-term than the short-term. Human beings have visual memories. Who does not have a picture that becomes the icon of who they were at a certain place in time – that is



who I was in high school . . . that was me when I was married. When I was taking their photos, I thought, let a Cambodia child say, “That was my great-grandmother . . . that was my sister.” An image survives the subject and becomes the remembered reality (Szarkowski, 2007).

At times I was surrounded seven children deep in each direction printing out photos. It was hot and dusty. There was a one foot space of blue curtain against which to capture their images. In many of the photos before they were cropped, there was a hand, a face, other children trying to break their way in front of the camera. They all waited a long time to see their image print out of the printers. One of the boys took a misprinted photo I tore up, like a treasure. The photo was not even of him. The children crowded around the printers, fascinated by the process of seeing their friends’ faces come out of the printer.

I took more than 310 individual portraits and more than 80 class photos in Cambodia. In Ba Prey, we started with 40 teachers, which then grew to a scattering of school kids, building up to a reunion of the entire township. Word of mouth brought people to the school because they wanted to get their pictures taken. I had hoped that my project would be received well, but I was astounded by how popular it became. I found myself wondering how my project was being described.

The potential impact of this project could be profound for both personal and public history. For example, what if one of these images is of the next equivalent of Mother Theresa or the Dalai Lama? On a personal level, a family will have a visual trace of their history in generations to come. On a public level, there are members of a generation of people who will not be forgotten from public record upon their physical death. I am interested to see the impact that this type of project could have on other cultures where the absence of photographic images may be hindering remembering history.

I don’t want to stop here. While it may sound pretentious, in my research I have not found another person doing a project like this, in which the point is to return the image to its maker. At the end, I didn’t care if I returned with any photos. It was critical to me though, that I give a picture back to provide evidence of an individual to him or herself, to their family, to their country.

NARRATIVE AND REFLECTION

When we returned, we all wondered how it would be when we got back. Would we be tired? Sad? Lonely? Missing Cambodia? Feeling out of place? Misplaced in our bodies and society? Did we do our best and can we be

without regret that it was enough? What we did was not enough. We can all do something. Let us bring justice. Let us be justice. In our efforts, we do not bring “relief,” we bring renewal. Today, our time in Cambodia seems like a dream. What can you take away from a dream? Hope.

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Photo by Abigail Reichard