It's Just a Watch: Ambiguity, Ethics and the Politics of Representing and Reading Slow Violence

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Katherine's paper is, for me, an interesting and rich exploration of the political implications of creative practice. It touches on many of my own experiences and concerns when working on Cambodian performing arts, and how to navigate ethical responsibilities towards research participants in an increasingly authoritarian country. Since my Ph.D., my research has always focused on groups who are marginalised or discriminated against in some way, and I have found this to consistently rub up against the positive associations often attached by geographers to creativity, creative practices and creative practitioners. Implicitly, creative practices are frequently seen as liberating or as holding the critical potential to bring into existence alternative worlds that might signal a more liberal or egalitarian future. This is not to deny the historical existence of those currents of thought and praxis that have demonstrated how creativity has reinforced and produced inequalities, but for me these accounts have not been dominant. As Hawkins argues, "while the relationship between geography and creative practice has intensified […] the critical discussions surrounding these practices, their politics and possibilities has not kept pace" (2019, 966). In part, this is because of the contexts in which geographical work on creativity has been conducted; there is less work in what can be called, for want of a better phrase, 'the Global South', in regimes that are authoritarian or not well-functioning democracies, or using postcolonial frames of analysis (notable exceptions here include Stupples and Teaiwa 2017; McKay 2020). Theories of potentiality and possibility do not always marry with on-the-ground realities, so I welcome Katherine's work here, her troubling of creative research practice, and her discussion of the fine lines that many of us working in such contexts must navigate.

Arts and Slow Violence

My first comment is around how the arts represent violence and slow violence specifically. There is, of course, extensive research examining this in genocidal and post-genocidal contexts such as Cambodia – particularly regarding photography and film – with this work exploring the politics of aesthetics, expression and witnessing violence (Vuth 2012; Boyle 2019; Cooke et al 2022). I really appreciate how Katherine's paper emphasises that slow violence in Cambodia is *made* invisible by those in power, and how she questions Nixon's (2011) call for dramatic responses to alleviate slow violence to instead emphasise the potential effectiveness of representing the banality and ordinariness of slow violence for Cambodian citizens. In my own research (Rogers 2018, 2020a, 2020b) I have explored the different ways that artists respond to the decades-long legacies of violence left by the Khmer Rouge – particularly as around 90% of all Cambodia's artists were executed by the regime or died from torture and starvation.

In a paper published in 2021 (Rogers 2021), I explored how contemporary Cambodian dance can express and enact a form of slow violence to the performing body, one that reflects the residual and reverberating effects of the Khmer Rouge on dancers today. The anthropologist Toni Shapiro-Phim (2020) has similarly explored the emotional responsibilities and difficulties faced by dancers when representing experiences of forced marriage under the Khmer Rouge, particularly when performing in a testimonial piece of dance by her sister-in-law Sophiline Shapiro called *Phka Sla*. This enactment of slow violence can, and does, produce a spectacle for audiences to witness because they see the physical breakdown of the dancing body, one that opens up a series of ethical questions around how to represent violence. One response that the dance world has had, is in fact contra to the type of work that Katherine and other collaborators have produced that is presented here. I argued that there is also a resistance to the documentary or testimonial imperative that itself can enact other forms of violence to research participants, artists and researchers. In this, one of the

things I became interested in, and which other geographers such as James Riding (2020) have pointed to, is about details and small things as having power and political effects. What do details do? Because they can ground intense pain and trauma in ordinary spaces.

In the film *The Wedding Ring*, it was the details that struck me. In particular, it was the moment where we watch the landlord's second visit that gave me pause. As he looks at the gold ring, we see his thick gold watch set shining against the otherwise dark and bleak backdrop (both metaphorically and aesthetically). As I will talk about next, in Cambodia they would likely say, 'It's just a watch' but for me it is a material artefact of slow violence; it encapsulates the intense extraction of wealth from everyday citizens and its accumulation by certain individuals enmeshed in networks of power and privilege. The watch exposes those structures that facilitate the accumulation of debt and wealth in which ordinary people are trapped. Indeed, in Cambodia there has been much speculation about Prime Minister Hun Sen's watch collection, social media questioning of how he can afford watches that cost USD 2 million on his salary of approximately USD 1,100 per month (Wallace 2018) and of him gifting expensive watches to ASEAN dignitaries (RFA Khmer 2022). Luxury watches are often the preserve of authoritarian leaders and some high-end retailers openly write about these associations on their websites (Montredo 2020). It is here, therefore, where creative practice brings big 'P' and small 'p' politics together, in the showing, not just the telling, and in the ambiguity of meaning.

Ambiguity and Ethics

This brings me to my second point about ambivalence and ambiguity. There is ambivalence around creativity's critical potential in Cambodia, particularly when working in relation to the authoritarian ideologies of the state. This is something that geographers have really not paid enough attention to when thinking about creative practice. Again, I appreciate Katherine's refusal to cast the

creative domain as simply critical or oppositional. Creativity need not hold an intrinsically critical capacity, and the artist is not necessarily always a critical outsider or commentator. In a context like Cambodia, where the lines around what is or is not permissible constantly shift and are becoming ever tighter, creative freedom is ambiguously played with by both artists and the state. Indeed, performances that were produced a few years ago could not be performed now, and opinions expressed by artists in interview in 2014 could land them in trouble nearly ten years later. When talking about creativity (ការច្នៃប្រឌិត *gachnaibradit*) in Cambodia, dancers are most likely to use the verb 'to develop' (អភិវឌ្ឍ *aphivordth*) rather than 'to create' (បង្កើត *bangkeut*) or 'innovation' (a word that does not directly translate, with creativity likely to be used instead, or its shortened version (*bradit*), or related phrases such as ដើម្បីនាំយកគំនិត *dambei noam yuk komnut* 'to bring ideas'). This is because 'development' is the preferred language of government when discussing cultural matters, particularly contemporary art, tying contemporary dance to the evolution of tradition (see also Tuchman-Rosta 2018; 2021). For dancers, describing their work as 'development' therefore has to be seen as a political move because it is a way of legitimising their work with the state. Until the Cambodian government became interested in contemporary dance in around 2017/2018, there was an increasing tendency to be oblique, to use dance as a kind of minor politics (see Closs Stephens 2019). This period, when Cambodia's main opposition party was dissolved by the ruling Cambodian People's Party, and contemporary dance came under closer government supervision, has since been accompanied by a greater emphasis on making contemporary dance that is understandable for audiences. Transparency in meaning and message has become important. Ambivalence is thus intrinsically political. The art academic, curator and critic Roger Nelson (2014) puts it well in the Cambodian context when he suggests the difficulty for the authorities in reading meaning into works is often more important than their form or content. In thinking about how to represent slow violence and how this inevitably touches on much wider social issues, there is a need to be ambivalent and ambiguous at times – something Katherine explores here in relation to Neak

Sophal's work. There is an interesting debate to be had around this idea, around the need to represent and surface issues, and how oblique or ambiguous to be.

However, care needs to be taken around casting all artists in the same mould. In Cambodia, visual artists have much greater freedom and critical capacity than their performing arts counterparts – although there are always exceptions, and there are also individual performers who work with visual artists in critical ways. Many performing artists are government employees as this provides them with a stable base income and because freelance opportunities have become fewer since the closure of some arts NGOs and the Covid-19 pandemic. There is also a fetishization of the dancing body regarding nationality in Cambodia; Apsara dancers are an icon of Cambodian culture and identity – they are also engraved on Angkor Wat, Cambodia's most famous landmark. All dancers are aware of discourses of nationality, cultural development and preservation, and must uphold these and their associated values – particularly morality. From a western perspective, the extent to which even young dancers feel that they embody and represent their national culture is both impressive and surprising (Rogers et al 2021). In addition, many performing arts activities in music, theatre and dance are supported financially by the Union of Youth Federations in Cambodia which is a civil society youth organisation linked to the ruling party. Its President is Hun Many, Hun Sen's youngest son. As such, the performing arts, and dance specifically, are tied to networks of power, privilege and patronage that characterise Cambodian government and society generally (Strangio 2020).

All of this highlights the political importance of ambivalence and ambiguity, including as a mode of ethical response that extends to academic writing. Katherine's discussions around anonymity and dehumanisation were really interesting and important for me because, as she states, when it comes to the arts and the analysis of particular pieces it's impossible to anonymise people. Sometimes I think academic reviewers and editors don't always fully realise the implications of being

openly critical – people have different views and experiences of this, but I am really careful what I write and how far my analysis goes, sometimes my articles don't push as far as they might or as far as people want. This is not because I don't know or understand, but because I don't want to read too much intent into what a work is saying or doing, or because dancers tell me things and they say, "but you have to find a way of saying that carefully." For example, I have endnotes that read "the works discussed here are all inspired by individual experience and are not tied to any specific political agenda, although they inevitably address a topic that is deeply sensitive in Cambodian society" (Rogers 2021, 17). Even if interviewees give consent to name them in quotations, the political context can shift, artists can be reprimanded (or worse), and I have a responsibility to consider what the current context is, and what the future might hold. There's a constant navigation at play, and, to complicate this further, sometimes I also find myself in more sympathy with some government views or actions than I initially thought I might be.

This raises thorny questions around whether creative methods and our writing on these can get co-opted in these kinds of contexts – and, indeed, if we enact our own forms of self-censorship. As De Leeuw et al (2017, 157) put it, we need to "remain sufficiently vigilant and critically aware to ensure they do not become a parody of themselves, something wholly corruptible and able to be put to use in exactly the opposite ways as those for which they were intended." I wondered if the film *The Wedding Ring* in particular can inadvertently do work *for* the Cambodian government, as the 'blame' is pushed upwards into broader structures, into the cancelling of clothing contracts by western companies. This is not a narrative that would upset the Royal Government of Cambodia, whose political orientation has shifted East to China – but if the supply chains led back to Chinese companies, this might be different. I also wondered if the academic status of the project and film gives it greater freedom, and how it would be received in Cambodia, particularly because film is subject to greater direct censorship. All of this raises difficult questions around whether or not

creative practice actually has the potential to engender meaningful change, and what our purpose is in pursuing creative outputs – especially in politically challenging contexts.

Audience Responses

My final point is that I am interested to find out more about the audience response to the photographs and film in Cambodia. Ambiguity as an ethical mode of response in this context suggests that there needs to be a whole range of meanings attributed to representation – it can be 'just a watch' or it can be much more. Katherine begins to signal this potential variety of photographic representation at the end of the paper. And yet, for all the talk about ambiguity, and for all our in-depth analyses of these creative products, there are question marks over the extent to which these are read and understood by Cambodians themselves – particularly when it comes to contemporary art forms like these, and particularly in the provinces.

As part of my ongoing collaborative research with Cambodian Living Arts I have been working with Cambodian researchers to conducted the largest audience survey to date on young audiences (around two-thirds of the population is under 30) to find out what they understood, what they liked, what they wanted to see more of (Rogers et al 2023; Rogers et al 2021). This is really important to know for helping to build a sustainable arts industry in Cambodia. We recently extended this further and also conducted the largest province audience survey. What is relevant from this work here is that there is a small, but growing, core arts audience in the urban centres that is largely middle class. Yet one striking thing is that, across the board, young people don't always know what they are watching or looking at, whether it is traditional or contemporary art. They do not always know how to read it, and they are often frustrated by works that they perceive as too abstract or not clear in meaning. Artists also talked about this in interview, about being clear, about the need to bring audiences along with them, and to build audience knowledge of how to read

contemporary work. For instance, we conducted watch-alongs where we asked young people what they thought of online performances using Telegram and Messenger groups. We found, for example, that young people in the provinces didn't always know that the dance form *lakhon khol* is all-male, with men performing as women. Instead, the audiences asked why women weren't performing female roles and viewed their absence as a form of discrimination. This was surprising because in Cambodian arts terms this is a basic fact to know about this art form, and in contemporary hip hop MVs there is a trend to use traditional and contemporary arts (such as Vann Da's *Time to Rise* and Tep Boprek's *Top of the Lady*). This suggests that audiences are quite segmented and that many ordinary Cambodians don't know much about reading artworks that are oblique in meaning beyond a small cohort of educated, urban arts goers. This is especially important in a context where there is little arts education and public critical commentary on social and political issues is muted. Indeed, Eng et al (2019) found that such discussions only happen at home with close family members. As such, I'm interested in how ordinary Cambodians responded to the films and photographic work, and who the imagined audience was for them.

Audiences are where the potential of creativity lies to reach into social consciousness, to make people stop, think, and question. Creative methods can enable participation and inclusion, they can imagine alternative futures that offer possibility and promise. Yet are creative methods incorruptible? Are they not also fundamentally enmeshed in darker forces and politics that not only limit expression but also challenge our assumptions around what creativity is and does, and what values it holds? As Katherine's work deftly shows they can expose inequalities both directly and indirectly, they traverse the ambiguity of meaning that comes with all manner of ethical and moral responsibilities that can conflict and diverge. There is no easy way to navigate these thorny tangles – or is there? For after all, it's just a watch. Right?

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