



## The Age of the Kampuchea Picture: A Video Installation

This video installation recognizes the December 2017 visit of Rithy Panh, whose film and archival practice inspires new ways of thinking about visibility, memory, and history. The installation utilizes materials from the collection of journalist Elizabeth Becker, who has collaborated with Panh in his efforts to conserve and promote images from Cambodia's past.

"Every time I remember Elizabeth Becker's pictures, I cannot help but see Pol Pot's total control of the production and consumption of these images; his vision of Kampuchea saturates them all. I cannot see beyond it."

--Adrian Alarilla

The Age of the Kampuchea Picture is comprised of a video projection and a makeshift screen. The projection is a selection of roughly half the black and white images in Becker's archive of her visit to Democratic Kampuchea in 1978. The screen is made of photocopies of documents from Becker's archive, arranged to form a rough map of Kampuchea. The sites of killing fields are represented as black holes.

The installation takes its title from Martin Heidegger's (1977) essay, "The Age of the World Picture." Heidegger writes of how epistemological frameworks, such as science, make nature a blank slate, drawing into focus some aspects and excluding others that are not yet tidy or systematic and therefore incomprehensible. Political theorist Timothy Mitchell brings these ideas to the field of colonial visual representation, exploring how an "exhibitionary order" was integral to European domination. Despite its anti-imperialist rhetoric, the Khmer Rouge twisted this modernist logic of ordering to its extremes. Kampuchea had to be emptied out, turned into a blank slate for Pol Pot to project his seemingly rational plan onto it. In a way, Elizabeth Becker's documentary evidence is a reflection of Pol Pot's exhibitionary order. Belying the supposed rationality of his plans is the violence of the regime that is intentionally hidden from view. This violence is embodied by its very absence; the pictures are missing.

Instead, images depict people working in factories and rice fields; views of the countryside from a moving car; meals and conversations between the journalists and their hosts; the temples at Angkor Wat, even. These pictures show us an industrious self-sufficient nation with deep cultural history. But the projection is not perfect. The screen is not blank. There are dark holes where the senselessness of genocide overcomes the ordered Kampuchea that Pol Pot attempts to project. Parts of images are distorted as they conform to the bodies of passersby. We, too, in the US, are implicated. We are part of this picture.

The Age of the Kampuchea Picture is the conceptual work of Adrian Alarilla, in collaboration with the Libraries Southeast Asia Section and Jenna Grant. Adrian Alarilla is a Seattle-based filmmaker, community organizer, and MA student at the UW Jackson School of International Studies, focusing on Southeast Asian Studies. Jenna Grant is Assistant Professor in the UW Department of Anthropology.

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For more information on this page for the installation, visit <https://www.washington.edu/libraries/seas>

Poster design and graphics by Adrian Alarilla.





## Elizabeth Becker's Collection at the University of Washington Libraries

Elizabeth Becker is an award-winning journalist who worked for the *New York Times*, National Public Radio, and the *Washington Post*. She covered the Cambodian Civil War in the 1960s and 1970s for the *Washington Post*, and was one of only a few journalists from the mainstream western media to visit Democratic Kampuchea under the Khmer Rouge. Becker has a BA in South Asian Studies from what is now the Jackson School at the University of Washington. She began donating her documents to the Libraries in 2007, in appreciation for the education she received. Because her papers and photographs were presented as important evidence at the Khmer Rouge tribunal, she wanted to make them available as a permanent public record.

Her collection in the University of Washington Libraries Special Collections consists of photographs, notes, and documents from her visit to Democratic Kampuchea in December 1978, days before the Vietnamese invasion that ousted the Khmer Rouge. At the end of the trip, one of the three participants, Malcolm Caldwell, a Professor at the University of London, was murdered. The reasons are unclear, but may have to do with his professed support for the Vietnamese government. Becker was one of only two journalists to interview Pol Pot while he was in power. The audio and transcript of that interview, and others with Ieng Sary and Ieng Thirith, are part of her collections at the UW Libraries. She won an Overseas Press Club citation for her reporting on this 1978 trip.

In 1986 Becker published the history *When the War was Over: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution* (1986). The book featured a young woman called Bophana, a victim of the Khmer Rouge whose file Becker discovered in the interrogation documents from the infamous Toul Sleng prison (S-21). Once Becker's book reached Cambodia and the large expatriate community in Paris, Bophana became a folk heroine, known for the letters and confessions she wrote before her murder. Her story became even more widely known as a result of Rithy Panh's 1996 film, *Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy*.

## Rithy Panh

Rithy Panh is visiting UW as a Walker-Ames Scholar the week of 4 December 2017. Free public events around his visit include the screening of *First They Killed My Father* at Mt Baker Village Apartments on 6 December, and of *The Missing Picture* at the Henry Art Gallery on 7 December.

Rithy Panh is a diasporic Cambodian filmmaker who studied and lived part of his life in France. He is known for his innovative practice that includes re-enactments, animation, and improvisation in addition to more traditional techniques of documentary and narrative cinema. His films deal with memory; genocide and its effects; French colonialism in Indochina and in Africa; and precarious life in present modernity. His 2013 Film *The Missing Picture* won the Un Certain Regard Jury prize at Cannes and was nominated for an Oscar. His work on the Khmer Rouge period and its aftermath have been the topic of writing by scholars in film studies, human rights, postcolonial studies, and Asian/Asian American studies.

Panh is also an archivist and educator. He co-founded the Bophana Center, which is dedicated to repatriating and preserving film, photography, and audio materials related to Cambodian history. In addition to maintaining this unique archive, open to the public, the Bophana Center hosts regular screenings and workshops, trains Cambodians in media-making, and produces new audiovisual projects. Panh recently produced *First They Killed My Father* (2017), based on the memoir by Loung Un and directed by Angelina Jolie.





## The Age of the Kampuchea Picture: Documentary History

This audio installation is one of the media events in connection with the December 2017 visit of Rithy Panh, whose film and archival practice inspires new ways of thinking about visibility, memory, and history. The installation utilizes materials from the collection of journalist Elizabeth Becker, who has collaborated with Panh in his efforts to conserve and promote audiovisual history. The audio presented here, unedited conversation in Khmer and English with Ieng Sary, is one of three interviews that Becker recorded during her 1978 trip to Democratic Kampuchea: with Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, and his wife, Ieng Thirith. Becker, along with British academic Malcolm Caldwell and US journalist Richard Dudman, were given scripted access to life under the Khmer Rouge, at a time when world opinion was increasingly alarmed about reports of widespread atrocities being committed in the country.

The Khmer Rouge, which followed a radical form of Maoism devised by its leader, Pol Pot, took control of Cambodia in 1975 at the conclusion of decades of conflict. What began as anti-colonial struggle for liberation in Cambodia, as well as Laos and Viet Nam, had by the 1970s become a major regional and global Cold War conflict. The Khmer Rouge carried out drastic programs to empty the cities, seen as decadent; punished intellectuals, professionals, and civil servants; and instigated an agrarian revolution that left the economy devastated and starvation widespread, causing the death of two million people. The Khmer Rouge faction of the communist movements that took hold in the former French colonies of Indochina was at odds with the ideology of the dominant Stalinist Indochina Communist Party, established in Hanoi in 1930. By 1975, hostility towards the triumphant Vietnamese communist government, as well as centuries of intermittent subjugation of Cambodia by Viet Nam, (see Khatharya Um 2015 ‘multiple imperial formations’), became the basis of Khmer Rouge paranoia that rationalized the murder of Vietnamese populations in Kampuchea and at the border, and purges within government ministries.

The time of this informal dinner conversation is December 1978, weeks before the Vietnamese invasion that ousted the Khmer Rouge from power. The journalists submitted questions in advance to Ieng Sary and he also asks them questions. Sary (1925–2013), known as ‘Brother Number 3’, was Deputy Prime Minister in Charge of Foreign Affairs for Democratic Kampuchea. His role included welcoming foreign visitors and representing Democratic Kampuchea at the United Nations—as such he did not have a private identity—and he was also responsible for the purges. The latter part of the recording focuses on two points: the situation inside Kampuchea, and the situation with Viet Nam. In 1977, Cambodian refugees presented evidence of atrocities to the United Nations. Sary asks the journalists repeatedly whether they believe the refugees or what they have seen on their visit with their own eyes. Sary insists that Viet Nam must respect Kampuchea’s sovereignty, describes acts of Vietnamese aggression, and states that Viet Nam is trying to “put Kampuchea under their thumb” in the form of the Indochina Federation.

Becker’s collection also includes photographs from the Viet Nam Information Agency taken just a few months later in 1979, showing the full extent of the crimes against humanity that had taken place under the Khmer Rouge – crimes for which the world previously had little documentary evidence. Together with Pol Pot, Ieng Sary was sentenced to death in-absentia by the People’s Revolutionary Tribunal after the Khmer Rouge were overthrown in 1979. In 1996, he left the Khmer Rouge with thousands of followers in exchange for a royal pardon. In 2007, he was arrested and charged with crimes against humanity, genocide against the Vietnamese and Cham, and grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 in the Extraordinary Chambers of the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), also known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal. He died of ill-health in 2013 while on trial.

For more information see the Guide for the installation on the UW Libraries webpage: <https://guides.lib.uw.edu/c.php?g=755175>

