

Looking Into the Face of Our Own Worst Fears Through Photographs

By Thomas Roma

I CANNOT IMAGINE anyone seeing the 22 portraits in "Photographs from S-21," an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York this summer, without being deeply moved. We see in these portraits photography's ability to communicate a sense of drama in a still moment with an economy of visual device. In picture after picture, all of the subjects are seen frontally: The point of view barely changes. Yet they convey a

remarkable range of feeling, from resignation to terror. Each subject is fitted with a number, which adds a troubling sense of mystery. And in one picture, of a boy looking directly at the viewer with a completely detached expression, a small numbered patch appears to be pinned directly to his flesh.

These starkly powerful photographs are as complex and human as any series of portraits I've ever seen during my career

as a photographer. But this exhibit differs in a significant way from other shows of emotionally challenging portraits, by the likes of Diane Arbus and Richard Avedon: The museum's wall text tells us what fate befell the people in these pictures after they were taken.

Among other things, we learn that S-21 was a former high school in the district of Tuol Sleng—in Cambodia's Phnom Penh—that had been turned into a secret prison by the Khmer Rouge. We learn that S-21 was one of many prisons, and that between 1975 and 1979, 14,000 Cambodians were imprisoned there. That men, women, and children accused of being enemies of the state were interrogated and tortured, and that all but seven were brutally executed. That the photographer was unknown, and that these photographs were meant to be a record of prisoners—some taken just after blindfolds were removed.

Obviously, these are deeply troubling facts, seemingly out of place in the Museum of Modern Art, whose wall panels more commonly discuss the lives and work of the artists being shown. Since I first saw the photographs, I have read several articles about the exhibition and have learned even more disturbing details about the events in S-21 and about the photographs themselves. (A similar exhibition is at Boston University's Photographic Resource Center through November 17 and will travel to other museums.)

In 1993, two American photojournalists, Chris Riley and Doug Niven, came across 6,000 negatives of Khmer Rouge prisoners in a back room of S-21, which had been renovated into the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide after the Khmer Rouge fell from power in 1979. Riley and Niven organized the negatives into a photo archive for the museum, selecting 100 photographs to

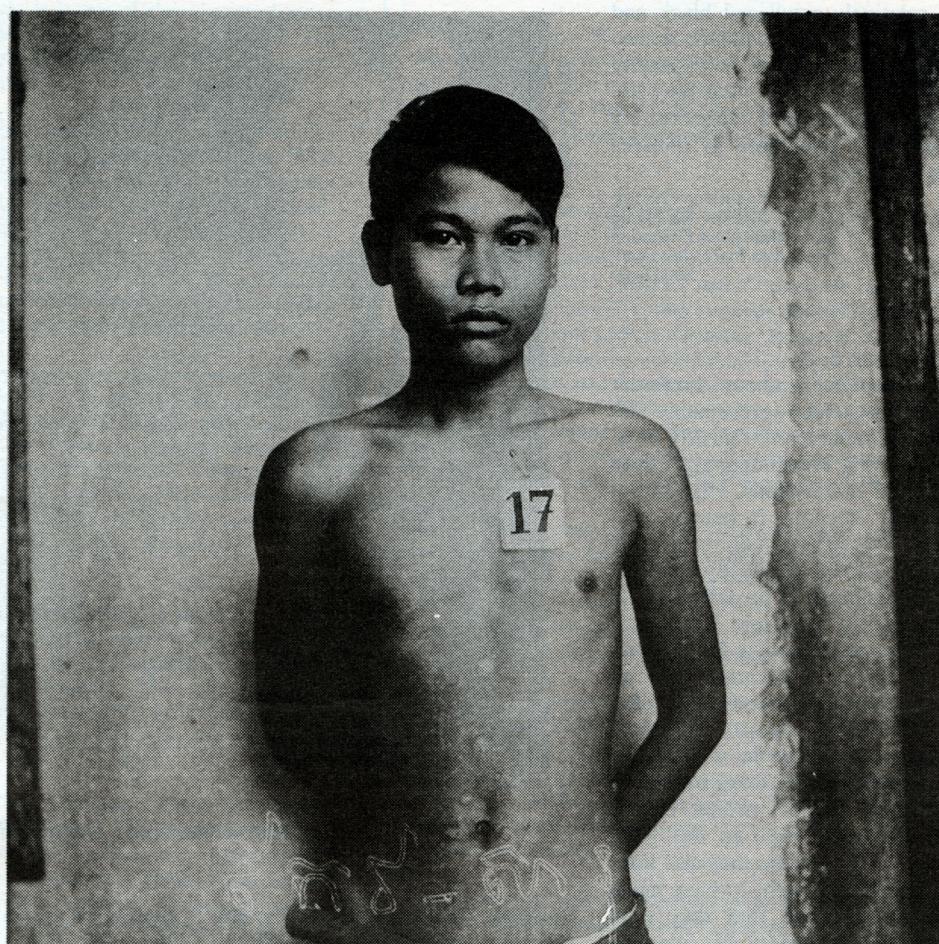
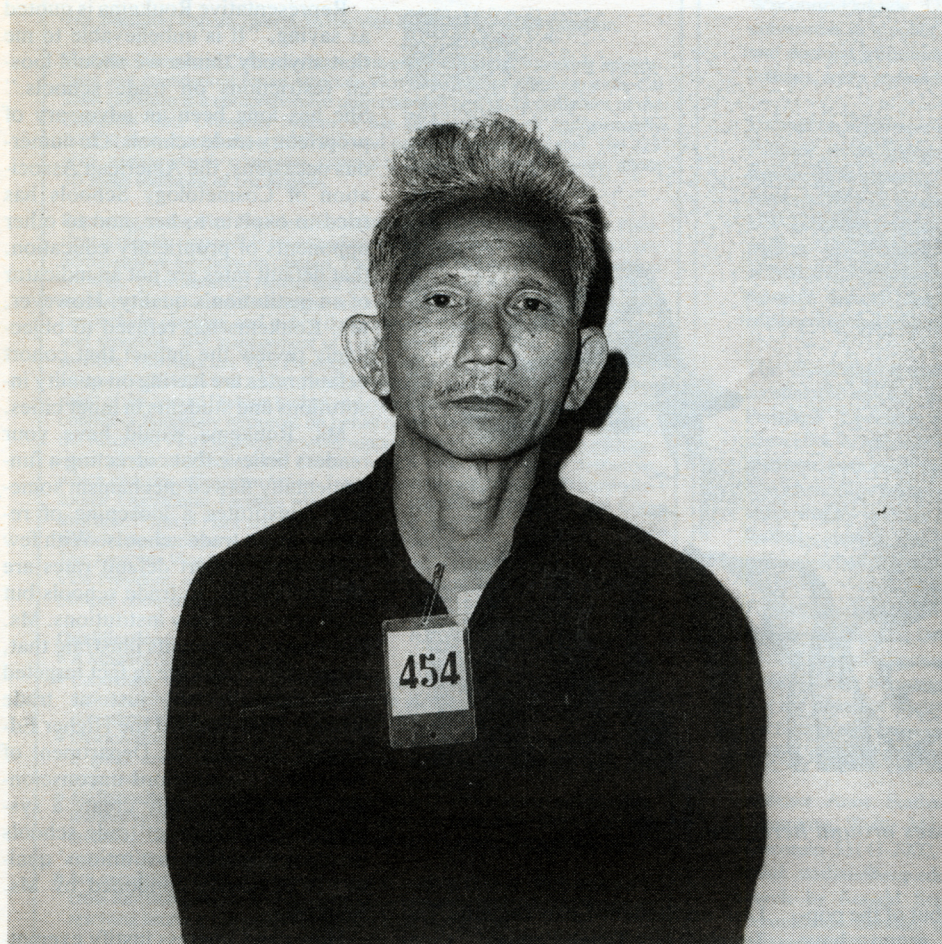
print for themselves. Seventy-eight were published in a book called *The Killing Fields* (Twin Palms, 1996). Riley and Niven also made several sets of art-quality prints, which they are selling to collectors and museums.

Some writers have criticized, on moral grounds, the idea of showing these pictures in art museums at all, considering that their subjects were murdered after the pictures were taken, and considering that many Cambodians are still trying to discover the fate of their loved ones. Cambodians are so desperate for images of their lost relatives that, according to a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, "People scour the world for former friends or neighbors who may have captured a missing relative on film before the war."

It's also worth noting—as a reviewer in *The Village Voice* did—that, although the Museum of Modern Art declared in its wall text that the photographer of the portraits was unknown, Reuters had reported the photographer's name, Nhem Ein, some four months before the exhibit opened in May.

The question of who actually owns the S-21 photographs is a moral one. Riley and Niven have obtained the international copyright for the 100 negatives they printed, prompting one writer to ask if anyone can truly "own" the evidence of lost human lives.

SINCE COMING OF AGE during the media-saturated Vietnam War, I have absorbed a steady stream of accounts of the horrors that humans are capable of inflicting on each other. So I have to admit that the details of the Cambodian atrocity were not unfamiliar. I couldn't help comparing Pol Pot's murderous regime to other documented genocides in recent history. It was heartbreaking for



me to realize that such cruelty has become no longer unthinkable, but only unbearable, until, in what must be an act of self-preservation, one's mind turns to other things.

Still, I was unsettled by the details of the Museum of Modern Art's wall text, by something beyond the horror of the subject matter, something that I couldn't put my finger on, that I kept coming back to. It was only later, when I was editing some of my own work, that I realized what had most disturbed me about the exhibit: the idea of the selection process necessary to create it in the first place.

As a photographer, I understand just how crucial a role in photography editing plays. After pictures are taken, a photographer must make a series of critical decisions, starting with looking at contact sheets and choosing which images to make into "proof prints." (A proof print is a kind of rough draft of the final, finished photograph.) The next decisions are even more important: Which of the proof prints should be made into final prints, and thereby become part of one's body of work? The photographs must meet self-imposed standards. Most photographers agonize over these choices.

The question is not simply whether a picture is "good" in some formal, technical sense, but, Does it mean what I need it to mean? Writers can edit sentences that may be well-crafted but that don't express an intended thought. But in photography, there are no revisions: A photograph is in or it's out, and the photographer must live with the consequences of his or her choices.

In "Photographs from S-21," I had to ask myself, What was at stake, and for whom? How could these pictures—made as documentation for the Khmer Rouge, a record of who was to be killed—be viewed

critically by anyone, whether editor, curator, or viewer? How could someone look at 6,000 of these images and make decisions about which 100 to print? I found myself asking, Whose portrait was good enough to make the cut? By what measure? When I discussed these questions with Todd Gitlin, a professor of culture, journalism, and sociology at New York University and a columnist for *The New York Observer*, he compared the prospect of selecting which images to print and display to having to decide who was going to live or die.

I DO BELIEVE that the two Americans who found and printed these negatives had their hearts in the right place in wanting to bring the pictures to the public's attention. But I wonder: Weren't they afraid that, just by choosing which prints to make, they might be participating in some other injustice? Given the public's notoriously short attention span and our demonstrated inability to empathize with the plight of others, weren't Riley and Niven afraid that the chosen 100 might fill our quota for Cambodian victims and push the 5,900 other victims forever out of our consciousness? Did they weigh the risk of their choices, and, more important, was it their risk to take?

I still don't know if the Museum of Modern Art—or any museum—is the correct place to exhibit these pictures. But the larger question really is: How can we learn about the S-21's of the world in a meaningful way? At best, the photographs from S-21 allow us to look into the face of our own worst fears and to contemplate our failure to protect others from living their worst fears. For me, as disturbing as it was to imagine someone deciding who will, or will not, be remembered, it was that very act that kept the larger human issues sur-



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rounding this body of work alive in my mind. And kept me thinking about those other, unseen faces.

Thomas Roma is director of photography and an associate professor of art at Columbia University. After leaving Boston University's Photographic Resource Center on November 17, the exhibition "Facing Death: Portraits from Cambodia's Killing Fields" will be at the University of

Arizona's Center for Creative Photography from January 18 through March 1, 1998; at the University of California at Riverside's California Museum of Photography from April 4 through May 31; at the Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego, from September 10 through November 5; and at other locations through 1999. The exhibition was organized by the Photographic Resource Center with the Photo Archive Group.