

2000~2020

King Sihamoni and the Age Of Plenitude

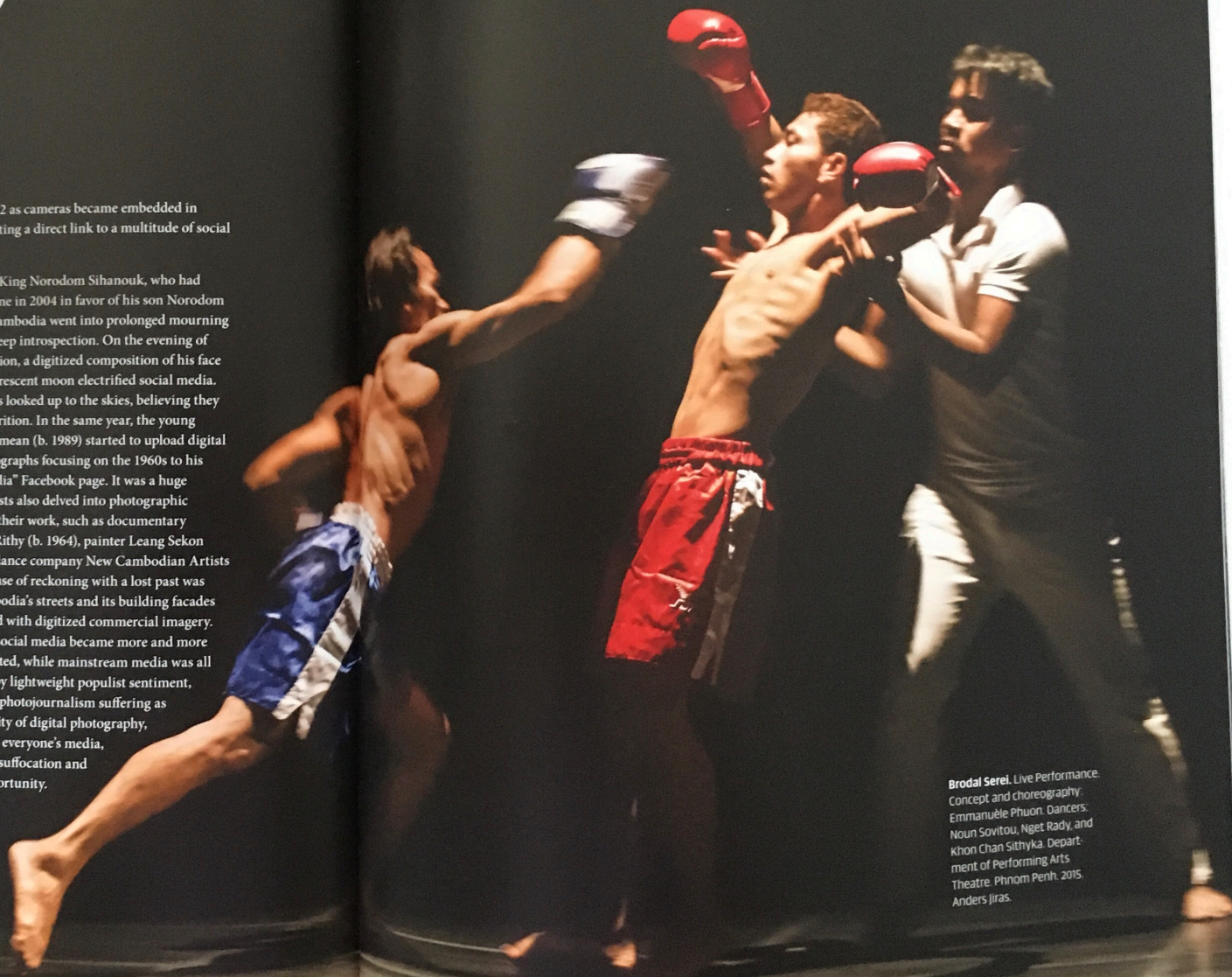
In the new millennium, a relative peace settled across the country and the economy boomed as international finance poured in and a new wave of NGOs arrived. They branched out beyond the provision of basic services by their support for the arts—dance, music, and fine art—through scholarships and the funding of gallery spaces and performances. In 2001, the Royal University of Phnom Penh established an undergraduate course in media management. In 2004, the Angkor Photo Festival began in Siem Reap, with the work of Cambodian and international photographers displayed across the city and its riverfront.

The years 2006–8 were a watershed period in Phnom Penh. The Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center, established by cinematographer Panh Rithy (b. 1964), collected film, photography, and sound recordings of Cambodia from a network of global archives. In 2007, the German film-maker Neco Mesterharm (b. 1967) and his Cambodian team opened Meta House as a vibrant media and exhibition center, and Stephane Janin (b. 1968) established Le Popil Photo Gallery, the first independent art space dedicated to photography. Participants in the gallery's workshops included Khvay Samnang (b. 1982), Heng Ravuth (b. 1985), Lim Sokchanlina (b. 1987), and Vuth Lyno (b. 1982), who were to form a new wave of creative photographers. In 2008, the first Photo Phnom Penh Festival was established by the French Cultural Institute, creating a platform for exchanges between international and Cambodian photographers.

In 2009, the Khmer Rouge War Crimes Tribunal began in Phnom Penh. The first defendant, Kaing Guek Eav (1942–2020), was formerly the director of the Toul Sleng (S-21) prison where Nem En had worked as a teenage photographer. The archive of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), established two decades earlier, was instrumental in providing evidence for Kaing's conviction. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, consumer digital cameras became increasingly affordable, but their popularity quickly

collapsed after 2012 as cameras became embedded in smartphones, creating a direct link to a multitude of social media platforms.

On October 2012, King Norodom Sihanouk, who had abdicated the throne in 2004 in favor of his son Norodom Sihamoni, died. Cambodia went into prolonged mourning accompanied by deep introspection. On the evening of Sihanouk's cremation, a digitized composition of his face embedded in the crescent moon electrified social media. Many Cambodians looked up to the skies, believing they could see the apparition. In the same year, the young academic Srin Sokmean (b. 1989) started to upload digital copies of old photographs focusing on the 1960s to his "Amazing Cambodia" Facebook page. It was a huge success. Other artists also delved into photographic archives to enrich their work, such as documentary film-maker Panh Rithy (b. 1964), painter Leang Sekon (b. 1974), and the dance company New Cambodian Artists (est. 2013). This sense of reckoning with a lost past was mitigated by Cambodia's streets and its building facades becoming plastered with digitized commercial imagery. At the same time, social media became more and more graphically orientated, while mainstream media was all but overwhelmed by lightweight populist sentiment, with the quality of photojournalism suffering as a result. The diversity of digital photography, and its ability to be everyone's media, had created both a suffocation and a plenitude of opportunity.



Brodal SereI. Live Performance. Concept and choreography. Emmanuèle Phuon. Dancers. Noun Sovitou, Nget Rady, and Khon Chan Sithyka. Department of Performing Arts Theatre Phnom Penh. 2015. Anders Jiras.