

## Anybody: Diasporic Subjectivities and the Figure of the “Historical” Buddha

### The empty signifier and the diasporic condition

The Buddha figure in the contemporary world is laden with meaning—multiple different meanings depending upon the eye of the beholder and the context of the beholding—accounting for, but also above and beyond iconographies and styles. So laden, I would suggest, as to be a Lévi-Straussian empty signifier, a sort of *mana*: “always and everywhere, these kinds of notions intervene, a little like algebraic symbols, in order to represent an undetermined quantity of signification, in itself void of meaning and thus apt to receive any meaning...”; a “symbol in the pure state” with “symbolic value zero”, which “allow[s] symbolic thought to operate”.<sup>1</sup> The signifier (*signifiant*) in these Lévi-Straussian terms “is that through which meaning takes place”; while the signified (*signifié*) “is on the order of the known”.<sup>2</sup> The Buddha figure can represent the Buddha (a historical or legendary man) or Buddhism (an institutionalized religion), or the Dharma (doctrine or teachings), or a particular edifying moment in the Buddha’s legendary life. For members of the Cambodian diaspora, who are one oblique object of this essay, the Buddha figure can also embody home, nation, tradition. For diasporic artists it can be the ethno-national emblem to be borne even if critiqued as such. It can embody (a projection of) the Buddhist practitioner. A Buddha figure, a specific one, can also embody given ancestral spirits, and in such embodies personal or collective memories and specific locales. These are, in the first instance, among the knowns, on the order of the *signifié*. But the empty signifier is more—or less—than this. The empty signifier “indicate[s] that in a specific circumstance, on a specific occasion... a relation of inadequation is established between *signifiant* and *signifié*...”<sup>3</sup> Here is where the known and the unknown meet in a discordant concomitance, with the *signifiant* apparently containing that which cannot be contained for its conceptual excess. In our example, the figure of the Buddha, this relation of inadequation is also the effect of a peculiar form of excess whereby it is *nothing* that defies containment. Signifying its own impermanence and impersonality, the Buddha figure embodies and generalizes an interrogation of the signifier of the body as irrevocably and singularly linked to the signified of a person.<sup>4</sup> Because the Buddha also means precisely and essentially *no one*, the Buddha figure can be anything for anyone.

1 Jeffrey Mehlman, “The ‘Floating Signifier’: from Lévi-Strauss to Lacan,” *Yale French Studies* 48 (1972): 23.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 The classic study of the philosophy of the “non-self” in Pali Buddhist traditions is Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

In other words, this capacity of the Buddha figure to mean anything and everything today is not solely a function of globalization in which the crossing of borders enhances at once yearnings and possibilities for meaning in the figure of the Buddha. Nor is it strictly a function of post-globalization as the era of identity politics morphs into a strangely shared world of closing national borders. Nor is the fact that the Buddha figure bears multiple meanings simply attributable to instrumentalization—commercial or political, or otherwise. It is also, I will argue, a function of the Buddha figure “itself”, if the singular, neuter reflexive pronoun can be said to maintain in this case. And therein lies the rub: it is not itself.

The Buddha figure is always already an empty signifier, and as such is a ready-made figure of diasporic investment. Yet insofar as the Buddha figure’s selflessness comprises a core dimension of its identity, an identity theoretically—radically and explicitly—evacuated of identity, diasporic investment in the figure of the Buddha always carries the seed of its own dissolution. These questions are developed and explored in myriad ways over the vast time and space of Buddhist traditions. The narrative of the Buddha’s life is one of them: it is the story of a homeless man who works his way, through physical and metaphysical wandering, to a state stilled in himself whereby his self—like his home—no longer is. The Buddha figure gives expression to a state of homelessness *devoid* of attachment, nostalgia or desire, where there is neither longing nor belonging, by which and in which the self is effaced. In this radical homelessness it gives expression to diasporic experience while also challenging its established affective norms. If, therefore, a strict historical interpretive prism cannot wholly account for the ongoing global progress of the figure of the Buddha and the proliferation of meaning this progress entails, I aim to demonstrate nonetheless that there is a certain affinity between the Buddha’s story and the story of our times in which another experience of radical homelessness evinces affect at similar odds with established diasporic norms.

Homelessness lies at the heart of the Buddha’s story. The Prince Siddhartha abandons home for the life of a wandering ascetic. An oft-cited characterization of the advanced globalized condition points up the affinity noted above: the Prince-turned-ascetic is self-consciously, at this point along the path, a “self without place”, not unlike those wandering after expulsion from a homeland. But the diaspora of today which captures a certain wandering academic attention transcends itself as such, not unlike the Buddha for whom the obtention of Enlightenment is a transformation of this “self without place” into a “place without self”.<sup>5</sup> In the Buddhist case the selfless place is the Buddha’s body insofar as the achievement of Enlightenment represents the literal realization of the non-self. This realization, accomplished through the development of insight into and acceptance of the impermanence of all things, is an overcoming of the suffering that is life blindly driven by desire. The Buddha’s body is the site of hyperbolic non-attachment. The reaching of Enlightenment is conceived as a meeting of theory and practice, whereby the experience denies the said experience to any person as such. The wandering man with a proper name becomes the “Buddha”, the “Enlightened One” in a lineage of Buddhas. This literal realization of the non-self comprises a transformation of a person with an

<sup>5</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, “The Immunological Transformation: On the Way to Thin-Walled ‘Societies’” in *In the World Interior of Capital*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004): 149–54.

identity into a figure; it is a literal transfiguration. The Buddha “himself” is, thus, on the order of a statue, his enlightened body no more or no less than a physical object signifying not his person but the transcendence thereof. Siddhartha’s wandering is stilled in utter detachment. Yet, so enlightened, the Buddha makes a decision to share this realization with others before entering nirvana. Re-adopting a self-willed diasporic condition but now thoroughly detached even from “himself,” the Buddha wanders more, teaching by example, displaying “himself” as a model for others, likewise, to go forth from the householder’s life. Sloterdijk cites a number of selfless places characteristic of our times: in addition to the “earth’s uninhabitable regions. . .the secondary man-made deserts” such as airports or tourist cities. “By definition”, he writes, these deserts do not “hold on to those who pass through them. They are the alternately overrun or empty no man’s lands... In these ‘societies’, globalizing tendencies work against a prior normality—life in massive, ethnic or national containers... and the unendangered license to confuse land with self... there is an increasing number of transit places that cannot be inhabited by those who frequent them”.<sup>6</sup> To the examples, my colleague Vipash Purichanont in the present volume has suggested we add the contemporary art gallery. I further suggest we add the figure of the Buddha.

One last note before I work my way to the artists and the artworks at hand. For my purposes here, the figure in question is that of the Theravadin Buddha, or the “historical” Buddha as the Buddha known throughout contemporary mainland Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka is often called. “Historical” is in scare quotes because though a man named Siddhartha Gautama of the Sakya clan who came to be called *the* Buddha did apparently live, he is understood to be one in a lineage of Buddhas whose legendary life stories are variations on a single repeated structure.<sup>7</sup> The status of his person is in question from the very start. He is a transcendent figure as much as he is a man. And through his life story the figure of the prince-turned-Buddha embodies an interrogation of personhood in intimately linked historical and theoretical terms. The challenge the figure of the Buddha represents to personhood as historically conditioned ontological reality is therefore also a challenge to any perceptions of time by which the linear or chronological would be opposed to—and exclusive of—the repetitive or cyclical. It is from this vantage point that I dare to speak of “the Buddha figure” out of time and place while situating figures of the Buddha in their many dimensions, including the atemporal, in our times.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 151–2.

<sup>7</sup> For extensive exploration of this construct of repetition, see Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

### Anida Yoeu Ali and Amy Lee Sanford: Embodying the figure of the Buddha

Anida Yoeu Ali and Amy Lee Sanford were child refugees from Cambodia. They both settled in the US and returned to Cambodia as adults to make art, and now continue to make art, here and there. They are diasporic twice over at least, having first left Cambodia and then America; and we cannot be sure where is called home. For both, some form of Buddhist embodiment serves as a matrix for transformations of self-and-place. For both, I will argue, the (Cambodian) figure of the Buddha offers opportunities for exploration of subjectivities which skirt established diasporic affect of longing for realization of selfhood through unification with homeland, while nonetheless consolidating affiliations with Cambodia.

### The Buddhist Bug



Figure 1. Anida Yoeu Ali, *Oxcart Grazing*, 2014, Buddhist Bug Series, A Project of Studio Revolt. Archival Inkjet Print, 150 x 100 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

Anida Yoeu Ali's "Buddhist Bug" is a colossal part human, part animal, part Buddha, part Muslim, part female, part male creature.

The Bug's saffron robe explicitly cites—while provocatively distorting—the Buddha figure, or the Buddha figure as cited by his monastic followers in their sartorial code. It is something of a reclining Buddha, its face rising at one end of a long, extended body, its feet sticking out from beneath the robes at the other end. It is also something of a walking Buddha, marking the landscape through its displacement in space, gathering onlookers along the way and teaching through the simple modeling of composed movement. The Bug is statuesque. It is the same stilled face and body which reappears everywhere, staged in different sites.

Even in its mobility, the Buddhist Bug conveys immobility. The Buddhist Bug appears in a range of iconic sites identified with and identifying Cambodia today: a rice field, a river, a river landing, a mosque entrance with throngs of children, an urban alley, a university diner, a wooden bridge, a primary school classroom, an abandoned cinema, among others. The work includes photographs of the staged Bug, as well as performance or "performance-installations"; while the documentation of performance appears to privilege photographic or video stills over the moving image. These media, like the staged winding body, illustrate the Bug's mobility while nonetheless showing s/he/it set still in each site; circulating online and in exhibition spaces, the documentation participates in this demonstration of motionlessness in motion. There is a suggestion of attachment to place in these quintessentially contemporary Cambodian settings. But if the presence of the Buddhist Bug highlights these as such, nostalgia does not emerge as the dominant affect of the artist; nor is nostalgia elicited from the viewer inside or outside of the frame. Because even as it functions to define these settings as the iconic mundane, the colorful disruption transforms them into quasi-blasphemous quasi-sacred ones, transcending the established everyday. In the displacement and replacement of the Buddha statue operated by the Bug, the staid postcard images of Cambodia today are themselves displaced and replaced. A range of mobile pedestals—the oxcart, the rickshaw, the boat—play this logic out to an extreme. The bridge and the spiral staircase too are peculiar pedestals, connoting, not unlike the transport-pedestals noted above, the movement of the Bug which all the while stays still.

That the Buddhist Bug does not appear to mock the Buddha figure may appear surprising, a fact I was prompted to consider by the reactions of a group of scholars of Burmese Buddhism to whom I showed images of Ali's work. In the contemporary Burmese context, these scholars affirmed, such art would meet official if not also spontaneous popular censorship for its blasphemy.<sup>8</sup> On one level, the

<sup>8</sup> At the June 2017 annual meeting of the Theravada Civilizations Project, Springfield Missouri. These remarks were made in the lead-up to what has been called a "textbook example" of ethnic cleansing of the Buddhist majority Burmese military of Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims (UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein speaking to the UN Human Rights Council, Geneva, 11 September 2017, cited in Michael Safi, "Myanmar treatment of Rohingya looks like 'textbook ethnic cleansing,' says UN," *The Guardian*, 11 September 2017). The perceived impossibility of anything like Ali's Buddhist Bug appearing in contemporary Myanmar was not however strictly tied to the artist's Buddhist-Muslim amalgamation. Of more general concern was the distortion of Buddhist iconographies—the Buddha figure, the monastic figure, the draping of the robes.



Figure 2. Anida Yoeu Ali, *Spiral Alley*, 2012, Buddhist Bug Series, A Project of Studio Revolt. Archival Inkjet Print, 150 x 100 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

Cambodian reception can be attributed to the contemporary socio-political scene in which—to the date of writing at least—much art goes uncensored by governmental authorities, and in which religious sectarian difference is relatively rarely cause for public dispute. On another level, the acceptance of the repeated appearance of the Buddhist Bug can be attributed to the creatively serious engagement of the artist and her art with the traditional Buddha figure's formal modes of signification, pushing these to an extreme rather than contesting them in the act of distortion. This is how I read the displacement of the Buddha statue described above, where immobility is conveyed through the repeated appearance of the same figure, displaced as it were, here and there. As the places identified with Cambodia's contemporary self are (de)constructed, Anida Yoeu Ali's Buddhist Bug emerges now and again like a Buddha or a Buddha statue, as a place without self, an embodiment obtained in the wake of the wanderings of a self without place. She or he or it is a site as much as a sight, but is visibly unhinged from longing for (settlement in) any given place, moving, unmoved, from pedestal to pedestal,

and as these pedestals move.<sup>9</sup> This reading suggests a second interpretation of the “Bug” of the artwork's title: like an ant drawn to the sweetened coffee spilled through the cracks of a keyboard, this insect has gotten into the works of the figure of the Buddha.

Another mode of retooling the Buddha figure's formal modes of signification can be deciphered in the (ant)iconography of the Buddhist Bug. In traditional iconographic terms, specific signification is concentrated in the hands of the “Historical Buddha” statue. The face is notably expressionless, or in what can be said to amount to the same, expresses detachment. But the hand gestures (*mudrā*) convey specific events or actions to the informed viewer. Anthropologist James Siegel has commented insightfully on the operative disconnect between head and body in the Buddha figure: the hands are *manifestly* detached from any controlling mind.<sup>10</sup> How, then, are we to read the Buddhist Bug's handlesless body? Stripped of upper limbs, the Bug's means of signification is condensed, radicalizing the purposeful disconnect between the head and the hands of a Buddha statue. There are not even hands to make meaningful gestures; while, set at an extreme distance from the head, the feet serve to challenge the perception of a link to the head as controlling mind. If the hands disappear altogether, the feet appear uncontrolled and uncodified. This treatment of the extremities in the body of the Bug makes that much more manifest the vacuous head itself. Stripped down in a big way, head and body are nearly one. Being without expression is the most potent form of expression of the Buddha and the Buddhist Bug.

The unsexed body of the nonetheless male figure of the “Historical Buddha”, another form of meaningful meaninglessness, is also, otherwise, radicalized in the Buddhist Bug where two human bodies apparently make one sexually nondescript animal-like body, the barely female head topping the creature which ends in the barely male feet. What makes the head female is also what makes it male, as the veiled head, hiding the female sex to only better reveal it and signifying a Muslim woman, renders at the same time the shaved, haloed head of the Buddha, producing a perpetually disrupted fusion of the two sexes as of the two faiths. If the interfaith intervention points up the ambiguous appearance of seamless relations between Islam and Buddhism in contemporary Cambodia, the aesthetic rendering of this is the artist's singular invention, explicitly citing her personal background as a Muslim in Cambodia's predominately Buddhist society. The play with sexual difference in which the dual religious expression is embedded, however, finds at least one of its sources elsewhere: in the figure of the Buddha which harbors challenges to the multiple phallogocentric dimensions of Buddhism it all the

<sup>9</sup> The pedestal is an understudied supplement of the Buddha figure for these questions of relations between person and place. The pedestal, in short, is the localized and localizing condition of possibility of the appearance of the cosmopolitan figure of the Buddha. On the centrality of the pedestal in the unification of person and place as prerequisite to Enlightenment, see Angela Chiu, “Buddha Images and Place,” in *The Buddha in Lanna: Art, Lineage, Power and Place in Northern Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), 69–97.

<sup>10</sup> James Siegel, “Georg Simmel Reappears: ‘The Aesthetic Significance of the Face,’” *diacritics* 29, no. 2 (1999): 100–13.

while sustains. This is a vast topic which I cannot develop adequately here. Let me simply note that the sexuality of a person who theoretically and iconically transcends subjectivity or, in the case of certain committed Buddhist practitioners, who aspires to do so, is in question; this questioning can be detected in the body of Buddha statues as in Buddhist bodies, in aesthetic and ritual terms.<sup>11</sup> Of particular pertinence to the explorations of these relatively obscure dimensions of Buddhist art/practice undertaken by the Buddhist Bug is the role of the serpentine animal in defining the de-sexed, re-sexed, and sometimes hyper-sexed Buddhist body. On first ordination, a Cambodian boy enters a liminal state. The transition to (temporary) monastic life, representing an ambiguous rejection of domestic relations with a certain focus on that between mother and son and with an eye to sexual relations at the heart of domesticity, doubles as a first rite of passage into puberty. The boy briefly becomes a *nāga*, before affirming his hetero-masculinity in order to gain formal acceptance into the monkhood.<sup>12</sup> The serpentine creature of ritual, like that of Anida Yoeu Ali, embodies the neither-male-nor-female, even as its phallic symbolism cannot be ignored.

### Break Pot

In a piece which has navigated between public performance (*Break Pot Sketch: Tree Island* [2013]; *Break Pot Sketch: Banteay Samre* [2013]); and gallery installation (*Full Circle* [2012]; *Full Circle Unbounded Arc* [2015]; *Single Break Pot: West 52<sup>nd</sup> Street* [2016]), Amy Lee Sanford also stages herself as an off-kilter Buddha figure. Her pedestal is a thick, off-white or grey cotton cloth. Set in established sites of sculptural display: a traffic circle, an Angkorian temple, and an art gallery, she stands to drop a pot from shoulder-height, stoops to collect the shards, and kneels or sits to repair the broken pot. Pot after pot.

The face is expressionless, eyes downcast, studiously not engaging with the onlookers who have nonetheless been convoked by the very appearance of the artful body. The body is controlled, composed, nearly stilled. Standing something like the Buddha displaying *abhayamudrā*,

<sup>11</sup> Some relevant and relatively recent work on these questions: Kate Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism: Continuity, Diversity and Identity* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014); Vidya Dehejia, *The Body Adorned: Dissolving Boundaries between the Sacred and the Profane in India's Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Visakha Desai, "Reflections on the History and Historiography of Male Sexuality in Early Indian Art," in *Representing the Body: Gender Issues in Indian Art*, ed. Vidya Dehejia (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1997), 22–41; John Powers, *A Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex and the Body in Indian Buddhism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> See Ang Choulean, Preap Chan Mara, and Sun Chan Doep, *ṭamnoe jivit khmaer, moel tām bidhī chlañ vāy* [The Life Journey of Khmer People seen through Rites of Passage] (Phnom Penh: Yosothor, 2015), 44–50. For a fuller picture, see also sections on pre-pubescent ritual for boys and girls, female puberty ritual, and marriage, in this same volume. Human embodiment of the Buddha appears here and there with the decorative treatment of the head of both boys and girls, while the *nāga* princess of etiological legend reminds us that the *nāga* also stands in for the indigenous, female yet phallic, watery earth, who emerges to support the Indic cosmopolitan prince in founding Cambodia. See Charles Keyes, "Ambiguous Gender: Male Initiation Ritual in a Northern Thai Buddhist Society," in *Gender and Religion: on the Complexity of Symbols*, ed. Carolyn Bynum Walker, Stevan Harrell, and Paula Richman (Boston: Beacon, 1986), 66–96.



Figure 3. Amy Lee Sanford, *Break Pot Sketch: Banteay Samre*, 2013. Video still of performance. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4. Amy Lee Sanford, *Break Pot Sketch: Tree Island* performance, 2013. Photo documentation during the performance. Photo by Lauren Iida. Image courtesy of the artist.

sitting something like Jayavarman VII or the Buddha in a lotus position, kneeling something like Cambodia's hallmark *Prajñāpāramitā*, the artist renders displaced Cambodian Buddhist prototypes. The hand gestures are strikingly meaningful too. While modifying established codes, they are *mudrā*, nearly set in time and space even before documentation and conveying meaning of care and repair, in short conveying this episode in the central figure's life story. The statuesque is enhanced by the duration of the performance—one lasting six days.

Here too the body is desexed and/or resexed. There are no staid markers of femininity: no breasts, no skirt, no long hair; any such markers of masculinity: cropped hair, trousers—are at once made manifest and undermined on the artist's (female) body. The clothing, in its formless form and black color, which is to say affirmative negation of color, participates in the effect: not the inversion of sexual difference, whereby a woman adopts a man's appearance, but rather a deconstruction of the binary itself through a near erasure of sexuality. "Near erasure," I say, because the erasure makes apparent alternatives to the binary. And because the pot remains.

The broken pot is an explicit trope for the broken person who has become the artist, the process of highly controlled breaking and repair an avowed metaphor for and means of undertaking self-repair.

In *Full Circle* (2012), launched on the eve of the artist's fortieth birthday, forty pots encircle the central figure. The pots are broken and repaired as best they can be before being replaced in the circle. They are each a projection of the central figure, together forming a sort of mandala, bringing the process of desexualization full circle indeed, because the identification between the artist and the pot is also a deanthropomorphization of the central figure of the artist, thoroughly abstracted in the projection of the pot. A sequel to *Full Circle* comes in the form of *Full Circle Unbounded Arc* (2015) in which all that remains are the repaired pots.



Figure 5. Amy Lee Sanford, *Full Circle*, 2012. Photo taken during the performance. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 6. Amy Lee Sanford, *Full Circle* (day 3 of performance), 2012. Photo taken during the performance. Image courtesy of the artist.

Arranged in an open arc rather than a closed circle, the pots no longer depend upon a central figure. The projection, the abstraction, is the work of art in and of itself.

Yet this aniconic work as it would be called in Buddhist art historical terms, where an emblem stands in for the central anthropomorphic figure, is sexually-charged through the figure of the pot. And so also is the body of the artist sexually charged, even as s/he/it appears anthropomorphically-culturally desexualized in numerous iterations of performance. Contemporary Cambodians may not have knowledge of the iconographic evolution of the Earth Goddess, who, in one strain of Theravadin



Figure 7. Amy Lee Sanford, *Full Circle Unbounded Arc*, 2015. Photo by Yavuz Gallery. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 8. Narrative stele currently on display in the National Museum of Cambodia, Phnom Penh. The iconography appears hybrid, with the Buddha's posture indicating the episode of the Buddha Calling the Earth to Witness in the Victory over Mara (Evil) on the eve of Enlightenment, while accessory figures indicate a different episode of the Buddha's legendary life story, in which the Gods Brahma and Indra entreat the Buddha to teach the dharma in the Heaven of the 33 Gods. Interpretation of the pot with lotus flowers as simple ritual accessory or as metonymical Earth Goddess remains open. Late 12th–13th century. Found at the Bayon temple. Sandstone. Height: 78cm; Width: 70cm; Thickness: 21cm. Inventory # Ka. 1710. Copyright National Museum of Cambodia.



Figure 9. Narrative stele representing the Buddha Calling the Earth to Witness in the Victory over Mara, currently at the Angkor National Museum, Siem Reap (CA 1357; N° 55). Likewise here, the role of the pot, which, like the Earth Goddess in much Cambodian iconography, crosses out of the ground-pedestal into the Buddha's space of display, remains open to interpretation. Late 12th–13th century. Found at the Bayon. Sandstone. Photo École française d'Extrême-Orient, Fonds Cambodge réf. EFEO\_CAM19559\_a1. Copyright École française d'Extrême-Orient. (Thanks to Nicolas Revire for assistance in identifying the current location and inventory numbers of this piece.)

Both of these sculptures can be profitably compared with the pediment from Angkor Thom's 'Buddhist Terrace D' depicting another somewhat off-kilter Victory over Mara scene, with the pot underneath the Buddha's pedestal participating in one way or another to the pacification of Mara's army. (See EFEO photo database CAM16168.)

narrative dominant in modern Cambodian iconography, remains at the Buddha's beck and call to vanquish the latter's challenger to the throne of Enlightenment, the Evil Mara.<sup>13</sup> But they do know the sexuality of the pot. Rising out of the earth to defeat Mara, the Earth Goddess functions as the enabling condition of the transformation of a young man called Siddhartha into a transcendent figure called the Buddha. In her extra-Southeast Asian iconographic life, the Earth Goddess can appear in or beside the Buddha's pedestal-throne holding a pot denoting the water she wielded to drown the enemy. In Cambodia, she is typically depicted in the Buddha pedestal in anthropomorphic form, wringing out her wet hair to accomplish the crucial enabling act. But she can also be evoked in the sole body of the pot, as I suggest, in some way the case in *Figures 8 and 9*. In Cambodian iconography broadly speaking, as well as in literary and ritual metaphor, the water pot is effectively assimilated with the feminine. The fine line in interpretation of the pot in the early post-Angkorian imagery illustrated here, between a mere ritual accessory and a feminized representation of the pedestal/earth, appears with reference to both earlier ancient and later, modern materials. It is no coincidence, in my view, that the clay pot itself figures in the modern visual landscape, beyond the boundaries of the pagoda, as a marker if not a substitute for the woman of the land, or for women-as-land, the land personified as female, or the female abstracted into the Earth. From the Earth Goddess to the rural woman holding a pot, the female figure embodies the local—the land—up against the cosmopolitan transcendent, itself embodied by the Buddha or the artist depending on the context.

The clay pots appearing as icons in modern and contemporary art are famously from Kompong Chhnang province in central Cambodia. This is to say that in the modern imaginary the pot itself is inseparable from its provincial site of production, just as, in its very name, Kompong Chhnang or the "Port of Pots", the province is inseparable from the pot. Witness a common postcard image of Cambodia: the itinerant merchant oxcart laden not with colossal Buddha Bugs but with clay pots from Kompong Chhnang. The rough clay pots of Kompong Chhnang are the down-to-earth complement, the śakti as it were, of fine Angkorian anthropomorphic sculpture. They are an alternative in the contemporary visual landscape to the grotesque imagery of the Khmer Rouge period, where the country closed in on itself in a radical formulation of the local stripped of windows onto the world, in its tourist pairing with imperial, cosmopolitan Angkor. In *Full Circle Unbounded Arc*, the central figure whose manifest masculine features underpin transcendence is deconstructed and reconstructed in the form of the pot, a local figure of the feminine and a feminine figure of the local. Yet this is no final return "home", where nostalgia is perpetually reproduced in its quenching; there is no tidy closure where the feminine self finds its realization through unification with place. The oxymoronic tension of the work's title suggests, rather, that closure is had only here in the contemplative embrace of the lack thereof. The work of art is a working towards attachment to detachment. How can a full circle be unbounded? And no pot is whole.

<sup>13</sup> For an art historical account of the Buddhist Earth Goddess in Cambodia, see Elizabeth Guthrie, "A Study of the History and Cult of the Buddhist Earth Deity in Mainland Southeast Asia" (PhD dissertation, University of Canterbury, New Zealand, 2004).

## Coda

Questions of relations between original and replica, statue and living body, “traditional” and “contemporary” circulate with the figure of the Buddha as it variously appears in contemporary Cambodia. The Buddha image functions as an empty signifier at once in the semiotic sense and the specifically Buddhist sense, as I attempted to outline in opening, with the latter underpinning the former; in addition to more familiar modes of appropriation or redeployment of “tradition”, this too has, I believe, driven the use/citation/production of the Buddha image in contemporary Cambodian art. Concomitantly, the *contemporary* diasporic condition evinced by these artworks/artists is not only historically contingent, and in such effecting a certain relation to the Buddha image; it is also a hermeneutic tool for analyzing the Buddha image as a place without self challenging the longing/belonging opposition typically associated with diasporic affect. Let me say loud and clear that the two artists I have considered in this essay are not, in my reading of their work, longing for the lost homeland. The detachment from desire (longing/belonging) which the Buddha figure is supposed to convey, is also an effect and affect of this diaspora, now.

With due respect to the artists themselves, I have said little about their persons and nothing about the research process by which the artworks were developed. The reasoning behind this impersonalization as it were is multifold. First, I aim to sound a mode of analyzing relations between traditional and contemporary art in and of Cambodia which would not fall prey to the tokenization of the former, and in so doing to obscuring what I see to be a crucial dimension of the contemporary work in question; the aim is thus also to skirt any tokenization of the latter which the said obscuring might produce in naming the art or the artists as “Cambodian” or “Buddhist” or both on the basis of the appeal, in the art, to traditional iconographies. Is it possible, I ask, to examine the work of the Buddha figure, and the Buddhist figure, as it escapes the grasp of those who, in one way or another, give it form? While the approach seeks to establish the necessity of historical and cultural contextualization of this art in the first instance, the said contextualization leads to its own destabilization. Despite the best efforts of art historians or other pertinent authorities, iconographies are never fixed once and for all in time and space: At the very moment they are grasped, they are, again, in circulation. I have not noted, for example, in the above discussions of clay pots, that Amy Lee Sanford’s father, once a well-known monk and Pali scholar, who is arguably, for the artist, a maternal figure and the principal object of her longing, came from Kompong Chhnang; and that the monk can be assimilated in common parlance as in ritual with a pregnant woman. Further analysis of the Buddhist iconography in Sanford’s work might take this into account, although such accounting would no doubt fail to do justice to the open explorations of familial and historico-cultural relations undertaken in Sanford’s artwork itself. Anida Yoeu Ali and Amy Lee Sanford’s art brings me to ask rather how the Buddha figure itself, or the Buddhist figure him- or her- or itself, functions in a particular time and place while always already transcending the specific, shall we say personal, geo-temporal frame.

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