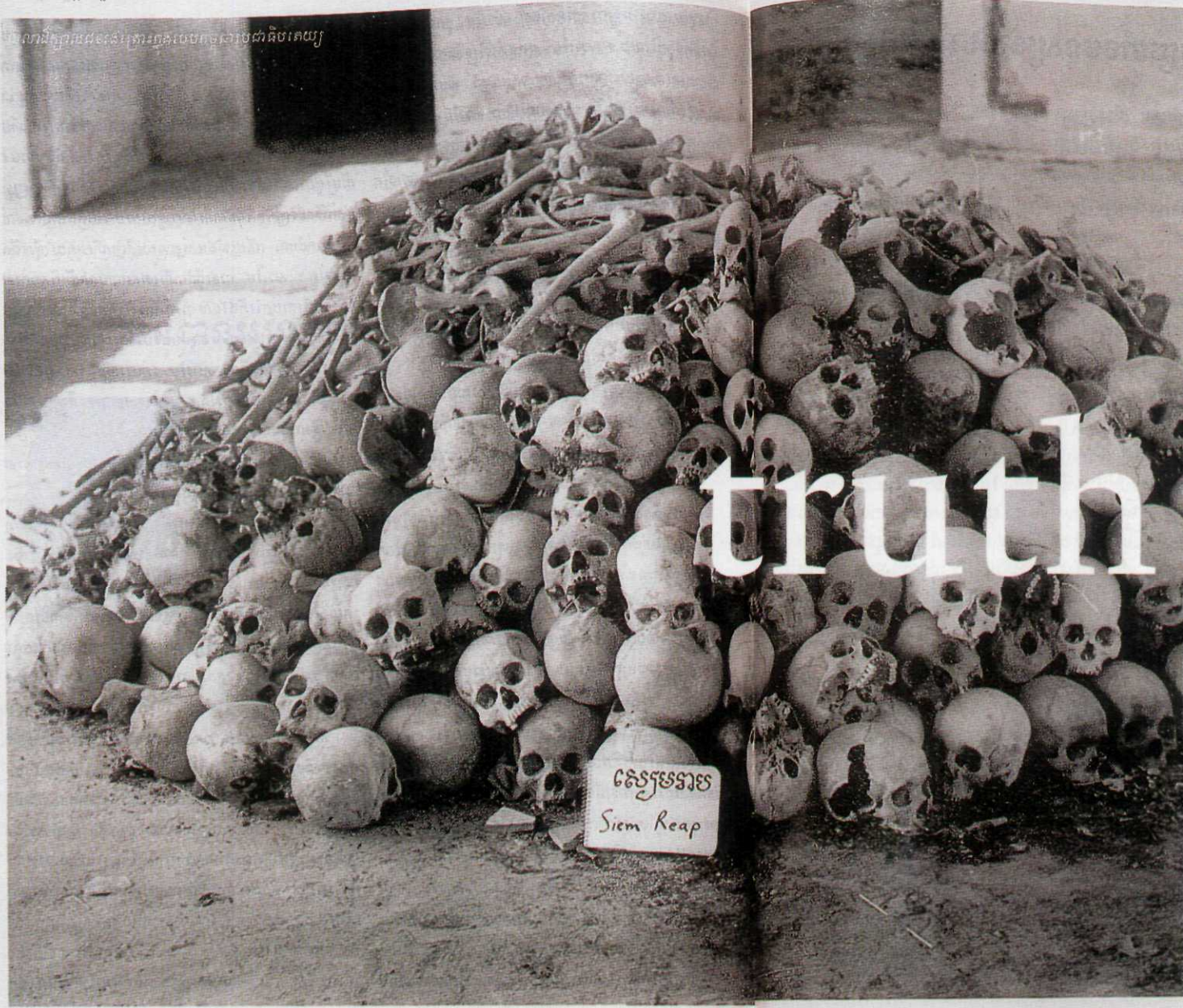


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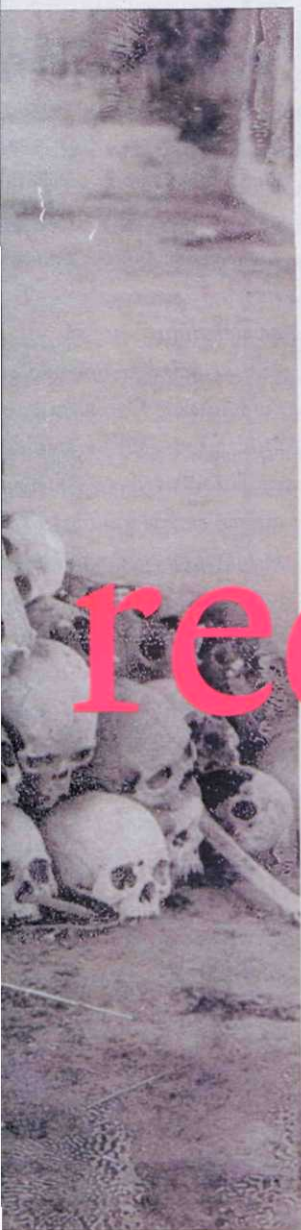
All pieces were art-directed and designed by Youk Chhang, and published by DC-Cam, unless otherwise specified.

Spreads from *Searching for the Truth* magazine. Designers: Youk Chhang, Sopheak Sim.

**Above:** Issue no. 55, July 2004. A room at the Siem Reap Genocide Memorial.

**Opposite:** Issue no. 54, June 2004. Photograph of an unidentified prisoner of S-21, the Khmer Rouge facility also known as Tuol Sleng, where thousands of Cambodians were tortured and murdered. Many of the prisoners at S-21 were themselves KR cadres who were arrested, brutally interrogated, and executed. This photograph was printed in the hopes of finding the man's relatives.

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A CAMBODIAN DESIGNER ATTEMPTS TO MAKE PEACE WITH THE PAST BY ARCHIVING THE HORRORS OF THE KHMER ROUGE YEARS.

By Edward Lovett

# reconciliation

In the late 1970s, Youk Chhang was living, as all Cambodians were, in the Khmer Rouge's idea of Maoist agrarian utopia. In reality, his home was a slave labor camp riddled with famine and disease, ruled by an oppressive regime that was simultaneously paranoid, brutal, and inept. The prisoners in the camp were forced to work the fields all day, every day. They were also critically underfed, and they risked their lives to gather more food, often for loved ones.

One day, Youk Chhang's sister was accused of stealing rice. "The Khmer Rouge wanted proof," Chhang has recalled in an interview with the *Phnom Penh Post*, "so they cut her open with a knife to see if the rice was in her stomach." She died.

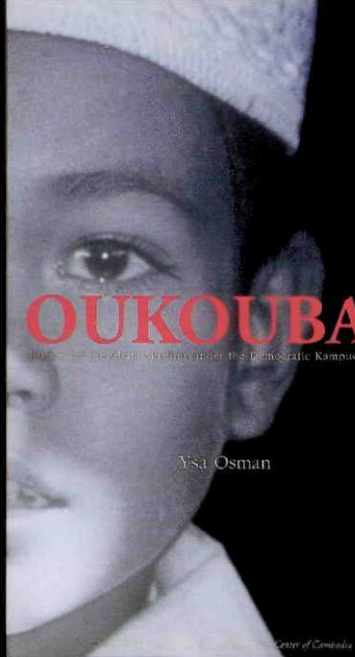
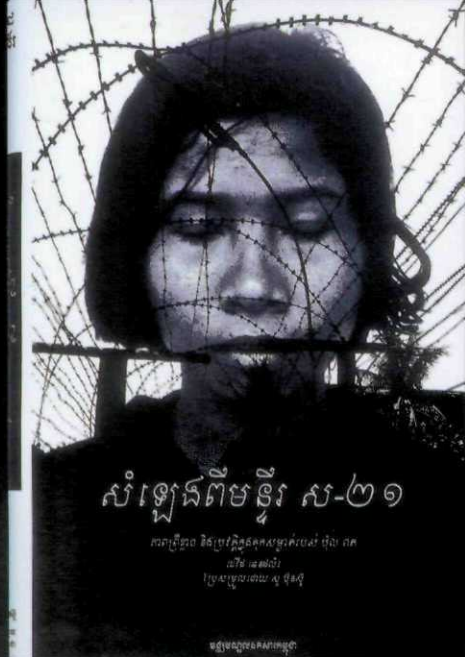
This is just one story among millions, and it's impossible to muster a response that could hope to grapple with this singular horror. Youk Chhang understands this, but he also knows that silence is an ignoble cop-out in the face of past calamity.

Chhang is now director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), a non-governmental Cambodian organization that

archives the history of the Khmer Rouge years. Since the victims cannot speak for themselves, Chhang has sought to unearth (often literally) and document a history that would otherwise remain unknown.

In overseeing the design and production of DC-Cam's publications, Chhang is also a graphic designer. But the content he presents is categorically different from that of most designers. Chhang contends with the difficult, sometimes banal, and often heart-breaking question of how to present information about genocide. His life and work are reminders that design can be profoundly moving and redemptive.

Chhang was 14 when the Khmer Rouge took power in 1975, renaming Cambodia as Democratic Kampuchea. After the KR fell in 1979, Chhang came to the U.S., where he became a community outreach representative for a crime prevention program affiliated with the Dallas police. He studied political science at the University of Dallas, and eventually returned to his homeland in 1992 as an electoral officer for the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia. Chhang



Two books published by DC-Cam.

**Left side:** Cover of *The Lady in Black*, a translation of *Voices from S-21*, a book by David Chandler about the S-21 prison and the broader moral and philosophical implications of the Cambodian genocide. The photograph shows a Khmer Rouge member named Hong Kun. After her arrest in October 1976, she was tortured and executed. Translator: Bousou Sour.

**Right side:** Cover of *Oukoubah*, a book by Ysa Osman about the genocide of Muslims from the Cham ethnic group. (The title is the Arabic word for “justice” used in the Quran.) The photograph shows a young Cham Muslim boy currently living in Cambodia. Photographer: Youk Chhang.

decided to use his education and experience to help his native country. His inclination to document the KR atrocities was strengthened by the doubt that foreigners showed when he told them stories of life during the Khmer Rouge era; they were skeptical even when he told them how his sister was killed. “People could not believe it,” he said in the *Post* interview. “It made me angry, because this type of thing happened to all of us. I wanted people to accept the truth, but it was very difficult. I had to do research so people could see the facts.”

Since its founding in January 1995, DC-Cam, based in the capital city of Phnom Penh, has produced the facts. The organization was started as the Cambodian base of Yale University’s Cambodian Genocide Program, which received funding from the U.S. State Department in 1994. By now, everyone knows that something horrific occurred not so long ago in Cambodia: The phrases “Khmer Rouge” and “killing fields” have become part of the lexicon of 20th-century malevolence. DC-Cam’s core mission is to do the laborious and painful work necessary to

detail what these phrases stand for, to account for what actually happened.

The organization’s 45 full-time Cambodian employees gather materials and histories in many forms—KR records and photographs, survivor accounts, interviews with former KR cadres—that document the years of the regime’s existence. They find, map, and exhume mass graves all over the country (last count, as of December: 19,541). They organize these data geographically, chronologically, and thematically. This accurate, thorough body of information ensures that Cambodia’s history will not be lost. And since the United Nations and the Cambodian government recently agreed, after long and contentious negotiations, to hold a tribunal to prosecute surviving Khmer Rouge leaders for genocide and crimes against humanity, the DC-Cam material will be the evidence used by both prosecution and defense. If the tribunal is derailed, the work of DC-Cam will at least be able to serve as what Chhang calls a “surrogate truth commission.”

The organization disseminates its findings in various forms: print publications, photog-

raphy exhibitions, films, and radio programming. The printed output is particularly robust and is the most visible face of DC-Cam. A magazine, *Searching for the Truth*, is published monthly in Khmer and distributed at little or no cost throughout the country. (There is a quarterly edition in English.) The magazine is a forum for research about the Khmer Rouge regime and presents legal issues related to prosecuting the surviving KR leaders. DC-Cam also releases books about different aspects of the KR history—one recent project examined the persecution of a certain group within Cambodia’s Muslim minority—and publishes Khmer translations of genocide-related texts such as *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

Youk Chhang designs all of this—in addition to writing, editing, managing the staff, talking to the press, and raising money. He designs with several key principles in mind. DC-Cam’s publications must convey credibility and political neutrality, and they must communicate a respect for the dead and their survivors.

The resulting esthetic is understated and

Covers of *Searching for the Truth*.

**Left:** Issue no. 56, August 2004. Contemporary photograph of Noun Hong, a former S-21 prison guard who joined the Khmer Rouge in 1972. Photographer: Heng Sinith.

**Center:** Issue no. 54, June 2004. Photograph of a prisoner named Kim Bol.

**Right:** Issue no. 55, July 2004. Photo shows a group from the Svay Rieng province commemorating the annual Day of Hatred (May 20), a day devoted to remembering the crimes of the Khmer Rouge.



reverent. Chhang uses a minimal color selection of black, white, gray, and red. The predominant black—reminiscent of the clothes that were the national uniform during the KR years—conveys a mournful tone as well as a seriousness of purpose. The red alludes

**DC-Cam's publications must convey credibility and political neutrality, and they must communicate a respect for the dead and their survivors.**

to the blood spilled by the KR and the blood ties that unite the Cambodian people; it also hints at the red-checked *krama*, a scarf worn by many KR leaders and cadres. The overall color palette underscores the frequent use of the KR's own black-and-white photographs of its victims, one example of the regime's obsessive self-documentation.

The design may be allusive, but it also looks good: simple, modern, elegant, on par with the standards of a scholarly production. In Cambodia, this is an anomaly. Due in large

part to the decimation of the professional classes by the KR (who reviled them as “bourgeois capitalists”), Cambodian design and print production are generally dismal, which makes the high quality of DC-Cam’s publications all the more necessary and effective. Even so, Chhang insists he designs DC-Cam’s publications “from the heart without thinking about the look. It is an expression from the heart.”

The immense importance of Chhang’s work to Cambodia’s future—by way of its past—makes it politically volatile. Cambodia’s contemporary culture is one of violence and impunity, and Chhang’s life is constantly in danger. Because of this, there is no sign outside the large white house in Phnom Penh where the center is housed.

When I visited DC-Cam last year, Chhang met me with a smile and a firm handshake. He thinks and moves with the alacrity of one who is gifted and purposeful. Cambodians are terrific and prodigious smilers. Chhang is no exception, but when he’s not smiling, his face betrays a touch of sorrow and the weight of his task. Neither the Cambodian govern-

ment nor the United Nations had set up a formal entity to do what Chhang is doing, and it’s far from certain that the Khmer Rouge holocaust would have been documented otherwise.

Cambodia’s prime minister, Hun Sen, has suggested that the nation should “dig a hole and bury the past.” Maybe so. This would be simpler, easier, and arguably less threatening to its stability. After all, no one wants to see the country start to fall apart again.

Yet most survivors of the Khmer Rouge years want resolution, justice, and healing. They want to know why some Khmers killed two million of their brothers and sisters. The question is unanswerable, but Youk Chhang is defying the silence with an accounting of just what happened.

When I came across the Bertolt Brecht quotation, “Pity the land in need of heroes,” I thought of Chhang. For Cambodia and for those of us abroad who are charmed by and devoted to the country, he is nothing short of a miracle. ●

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