

(Un)Silencing the Past – Other-Archives of Enslavement and Genocide

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Abstract :

Between 1975 and 1979, the Khmer Rouge regime transformed Cambodia into what prosecutors before the ECCC described as “the first slave state of the modern era.” Millions of people were subjected to forced labour in agricultural cooperatives and infrastructure projects. Among them were ethnic Vietnamese communities, whose enslavement was part of a broader campaign to ‘eradicate the Vietnamese minority from Kampuchea’ – including through forced displacement, forced marriage, mass killings and reproductive control. The persecution of the ethnic Vietnamese was recently ruled as genocide. Yet, their experiences are consistently erased from collective memory and official narrations of Khmer Rouge violence.

This presentation explores the erasure of Vietnamese histories of forced labour, displacement, and genocide under Democratic Kampuchea. Drawing on an art-research collaboration and an ongoing digital archive project with artist Nguyen Thi Thanh Mai, it asks how we can trace and evidence erasure through a focus on ‘other-archives’ (El Guabli, 2023): scarred bodies and landscapes, artefacts, embodied experiences, and memories that bear the marks of enslavement and genocidal violence. Other-archives foreground knowledges and narratives that exceed the political grammars of the state. In doing so, they invite a rethinking of which events come to be accepted as history, what forms of knowledge are recognised as legitimate, and whose experiences of violence are made (in)visible.