

visual communication

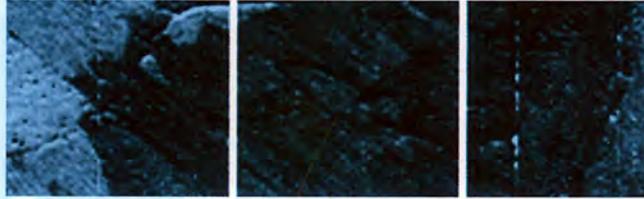
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(UN)IDENTIFIED: DÉTOURNED PHOTOGRAPHS FROM MODERN SIAM



KEY WORDS

archive • colonialism • criminology •
détournement • history • memory •
photography • portraiture • Siam •
visual culture

VISUAL ESSAY

NIGEL POWER

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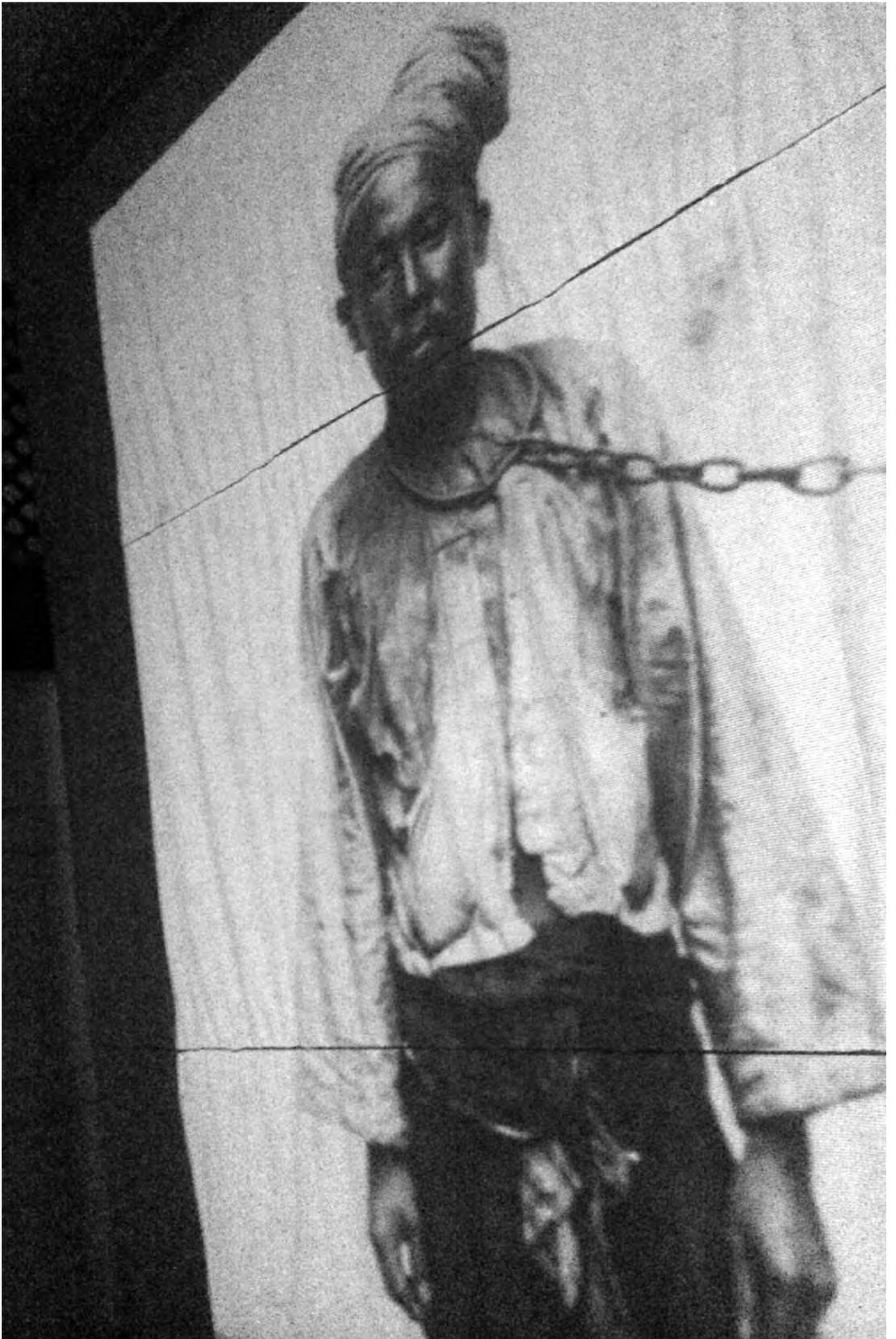


ABSTRACT

This visual essay weaves together images from an artistic research project with discussion of the critical and historical contexts which animated and informed it. The images – for the most part – are composites of late 19th and early 20th century photographic portraits discovered by chance in the National Archive of Thailand.

In November 2014 these were exhibited at H Project Space, a Bangkok gallery located in a neo-colonial house built by an Anglo-Thai couple around the same time as the photographs were taken. For this, the composites were generated in real time using software designed by the author. These were projected at monumental scale to create two immersive spaces. In the interests of clarity, images from this exhibition and others generated during the visual research process are included here.

The inquiry sought to raise questions about overlooked and taboo aspects of Thai history and to relate these to a political present characterised by mass censorship, curtailed freedom of expression and a heavily policed visual culture.





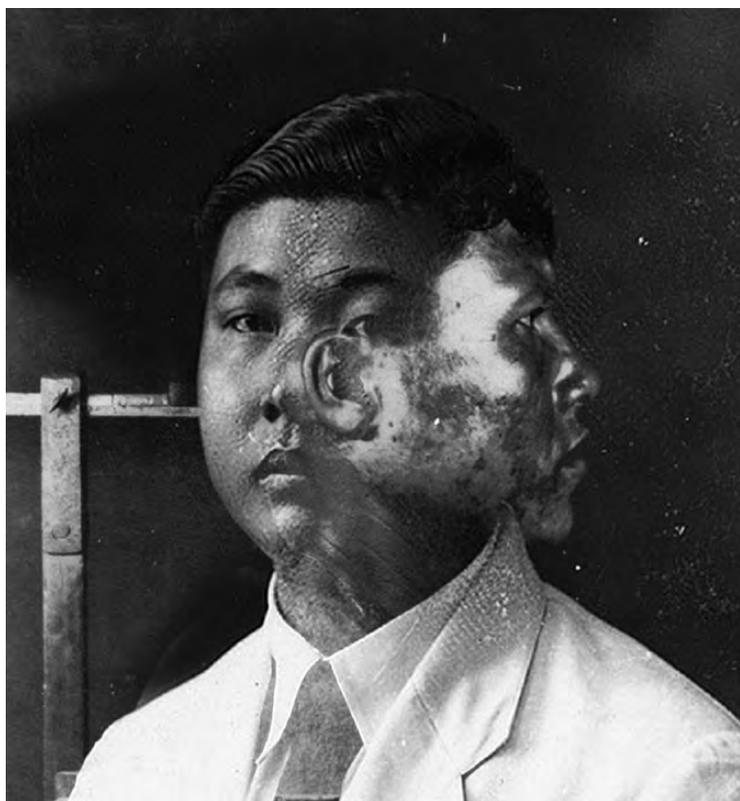
We are confronting then, a double system of representation capable of functioning both honorifically and repressively. This double operation is most evident in the portrait.
Allan Sekula





The American artist Renée Green often refers to an odd and anomalous property of the archive (Green, 2002). That is, the recurring and disruptive significance of chance and serendipity in an institution that is, above all, predicated on order, structure and predictability. According to Green, the archive is haunted by moments of counter intuitive unpredictability that she terms 'lacunae': unforeseen or overlooked fissures within a classificatory logic that seeks at once to produce and naturalise social and epistemological boundaries. It is in these gaps that 'records' become unruly, perturb official narratives and insinuate new modes of remembering. It is here that 'documents' murmur of different ways of bringing the past into the present and seeing the present in the mirror of the past.

Whilst working on historical research in the National Archive of Thailand we chanced upon two such 'lacunae'. The first was a collection of photographic portraits consigned to a kind of non-category. On the fringe of the main archive are three or four filing cabinets dedicated to people whom the archivists have, as yet, been unable to identify. Amongst these, we became intrigued by a large set of studio portraits from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a pivotal period in modern Thai history.



By the early 19th century, Siam was a loosely structured and shifting set of geopolitical alliances rather than the centralised nation state that we know today as *Thailand*. Whilst it is true that a Bangkok-based Siamese elite was dominant politically and militarily, political relationships were highly ambiguous with minor players often paying tribute to more than one regional power. In other words, political power was diffuse: strong at the centre yet weakening the further one went from the capital (Chaiyan, 1994). In the mid-19th century, however, Siam sought to capture this unruly geopolitical patchwork and bind it together as a modern nation state: to establish the *geo-body of the nation* to adopt a theoretical concept coined by Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul (Thongchai, 1997).

Yet a nation-state needs more than fixed and stable borders. It requires elite political and social actors fit for the raft of new ideological and administrative tasks that the state form necessitates. By far the largest group of the unidentified subjects that comprised our first lacuna were representatives of this transforming Siamese elite. Drawing upon a range of apparently contradictory symbolic registers: *bureaucratic and bourgeois, indigenous and international, traditional and modern, martial and civilian* – these images depict

how photography was used to work through the problems and possibilities of self-presentation in changing times.

Whilst this photographic technology had arrived in the trunks of colonial adventurers seeking 'god, gold and glory', it was quickly domesticated and, as Peleggi (2002) describes, played an important role in constructing and communicating the visual identity of the modernising Thai elite.

Of course, colonial interests brought more to Siam than the camera. Whilst it is an article of faith in nationalist Thai historiography that Siam was never colonised, the truth is somewhat different. By the end of the 19th century, imperial powers – particularly Britain – were *de facto* colonists of Siam, with great influence in the political and economic life of the emerging state (Chaiyan, 1994). Moreover, both the new Siamese state and the colonialists had interests in common. For example, whilst Britain needed teak – which was plentiful in the northern territories – Bangkok required means of imposing centralised power over local rulers. Working together economically, politically and militarily, the external and internal colonisers were, at one and the same time, able to fix the boundaries of the Siamese geo-body and ensure the flow of commodities from periphery to colonial centre (Chaiyan, 1994). It is not surprising, therefore, that the second



*But more insidious, more penetrating than likeness,
the Photograph sometimes makes appear what we never
see in a real face, or in a face reflected in the mirror.*
Roland Barthes





component of our first lacuna was photographic portraits of forgotten colonial agents and their families.

Whilst this first lacuna occupied a kind of categorical limbo, the second had escaped the classificatory logic of the archive altogether. On a table by the door, we encountered loose piles of unlabelled photographic reproductions – ordered but not collected – now offered for sale. Amongst these we came across a small set of images of dishevelled and manacled men from the same period as the studio portraits. These figures were elusive. The archivists were unable to help us locate them. Yet further research finally identified them as captives from a local insurrection in the North. They are imprisoned or executed resistors to both the loss of customary forest rights to British teak exploitation and Bangkok's attempts to replace regional with centralised power. These

involuntary portraits were arresting in their own right: signal examples of early photography's other role as the visual medium of criminology, anthropology and colonialism – the representation and production of dangerous others. Seen alongside our studio portraits, however, they both animated and illustrated a contradiction closer to home, a contradiction that continues to haunt Thai society to this day: the simultaneous construction of centres of spectacular power, status and authority, and subordinate peripheries of class, region and ethnicity. Indeed, our century-old subjects – the Bangkok elite, with their troubled relationship to Western conceptions and lifestyles – and marginalised political actors seeking recognition for regional and class interests, are, once again, at the heart of the current political conflict gripping Thailand.

These issues and reflections animated our approach to this archival material.

It was the friendship with imperialism that brought the Northern part of Siam into the orbit of the Bangkok powers.
Chaiyan Rajchgool









*There is no cultural document that is not at the same time
a record of barbarism.*

Walter Benjamin

We saw the potential of bringing these three pools of usually discrete and overlooked images and the historical actors and subjects they represent together: of bringing them into an overdue visual and political dialogue with each other. In order to achieve this, we synthesised an aesthetic concept with an historical precedent. The concept was *détournement*. Simply put, this Situationist method involves the subversion or semantic short-circuiting of appropriated imagery. The precedent was drawn from an early moment of contact between criminology and photography, the composite photographs of the English Victorian polymath Sir Francis Galton. In these, Galton overlaid a variety of criminal subjects in the belief that an optical record of a criminal type or social average would emerge. Of course, no such subjects appeared. Yet we borrowed the *form* of these

'blurred fictitious apparitions' – as Sekula (1986) described them – *détourning* Galton's optical empiricism and eugenically inspired rationalism along on the way.

The result is an endlessly repeating series of long and extremely slow dissolves of randomly selected and monumentally projected photographs. Most often, these slowly produced composite and ambiguous portraits of the largest group of images: members of the transforming elite. Yet other times more dramatic – sometimes poignant, often grotesque – montages of social difference appeared, composites of forgotten social actors who, though deeply interconnected historically, live separate lives in both the archive and in Thai society today.

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Original photographs courtesy of the National Archives of Thailand.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

(UN)IDENTIFIED ran between 13 November and 14 December 2014 at H Gallery Project Space in Bangkok. The exhibition was researched, designed and produced by Nigel Power and Dr Juthamas Tangsantikul. It was curated by Dr Brian Curtin.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

NIGEL POWER is a British-born and Bangkok-based artist, designer and academic. His current research work explores visual culture and historical memory in modern Thailand. Nigel leads the MfA in Visual Communication at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Bangkok.

