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The Museum of Modern Art

AN EXHIBITION OF PHOTOGRAPHS OF KHMER ROUGE PRISONERS OPENS THIS MONTH AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Photographs from S21: 1975-1979

May 15–September 30, 1997

Photographs from S21: 1975-1979, an exhibition of some twenty black-and-white photographs of Cambodian prisoners, opens at The Museum of Modern Art on May 15, 1997. The Communist group known as the Khmer Rouge seized power in Cambodia in April 1975, after five years of disastrous civil war. Under the leadership of Pol Pot, the secretary of Cambodia's Communist party, the Khmer Rouge rounded up and held captive more than 14,000 Cambodian men, women, and children in S21, a top-secret prison in the Phnom Penh district of Tuol Sleng.

A former high school, S21 was one of many detention centers where those accused by the Communists of being enemies of the state were interrogated and tortured. The anonymous photographers, Khmer Rouge soldiers, took the photographs for purposes of identification and documentation. Eventually all but seven prisoners at S21 were executed, died from horrific abuse, or committed suicide.

When the Khmer Rouge fell from power in 1979, S21 was converted into the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide. American photographers Chris Riley and Doug Niven discovered 6,000 original 6 x 6 cm negatives in an old cabinet at the museum—all that remained of the identifying photographs that had been taken of prisoners held at S-21—and recognized that these powerful images warranted viewing by a larger audience. The negatives were cleaned, catalogued, and printed by the Photo Archive Group, a nonprofit organization founded by Mr. Riley and Mr. Niven in 1993. One hundred pictures were selected for inclusion in the final printing, called the Tuol Sleng Photo Archive Project; many of these photographs, some of which were taken just after the prisoners had their blindfolds removed, are reproduced in *The Killing Fields* (Twin Palms Publishers, 1996).

Organized by Adrienne Williams, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Photography, The Museum of Modern Art, *Photographs from S-21: 1975-1979*, is installed in Gallery Three in the Museum's second floor photography galleries. A collaboration between the Museum's Department of Photography and Department of Education, Gallery Three offers a place where visitors may pause to sit and reflect, and where Museum curators may share their enthusiasms for particular photographs, their thoughts about particular episodes in photography, and their explorations of the Museum's rich collection. Gallery Three is made possible by a generous grant from CameraWorks, Inc.

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