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**LUMIERE.GALLERY**  
**Online exhibition DISPLACED**  
**1 January – 31 June 2024**



The online gallery LUMIERE.GALLERY presents the exhibition DISPLACED by Zurich photographer Steff Gruber at the beginning of 2024.

The exhibition is dedicated to poor, landless communities in Cambodia who live in hundreds of illegal settlements in makeshift shelters in the most precarious conditions. Over a period of several years, Steff Gruber has visited some of these people in the places to which they were forced to move. They live on boats on the banks of rivers, in a cemetery, or along a narrow stretch of railway line, where they are threatened once again with displacement.

## **DISPLACED**

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the number of displaced persons worldwide has reached a record 110 million. Displacements are the result of violence, human rights violations and persecution, as well as conflicts and wars that are happening all over the world.

In his exhibition «Displaced», which is dedicated to poor, landless communities in Cambodia, photographer Steff Gruber highlights the far-reaching impacts of displacement. In a long-term

project, he portrays these people and the precarious situations in which they live, the causes of which go back almost five decades.

After the fall of the brutal Khmer Rouge regime in 1975, many displaced persons returned to Phnom Penh. The Cambodian capital experienced an influx of migrants who needed housing and who therefore began living in informal settlements or occupying buildings or land when their former homes were no longer free.

Four decades after the Khmer Rouge regime banned the ownership of private property and destroyed all land records, Cambodia started to experience a property boom. In the last few years, slums in the capital city have been cleared – sometimes by force – and the destitute people who lived there have been forced to move to larger settlements on the outskirts of the city, where access to sanitation, electricity, jobs, schools and medical care is difficult.

Today, more than a quarter of Phnom Penh's population of 2.3 million live on occupied land or are otherwise affected by poverty. These informal settlements – almost 300 in total – consist of often unsafe, makeshift shelters, and the people who live there have no guarantee they will be allowed to remain.

### **Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum – S-21, Phnom Penh, Cambodia**

The former Khmer Rouge S-21 prison in Phnom Penh now houses the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and commemorates the crimes that were committed there during the Cambodian genocide between 1975 and 1979.

The radical communist dictatorship at that time wanted to establish a classless, agrarian society. It abolished money and private ownership and sent a large part of the urban population to agricultural labor camps. The religions, languages and culture of minority groups were banned and cultural institutions and schools destroyed. Members of religious and ethnic minorities, including Thai, Chinese, Vietnamese and, in particular, the Muslim Cham group, were systematically murdered. Intellectuals were also targeted; even wearing glasses or owning books was enough for someone to be arrested and murdered.

Within four years, the brutal regime wiped out almost a quarter of the country's population of approximately eight million, or people died as a result of epidemics, starvation or conditions in the work collectives.

### **Railway Community, Phnom Penh, Cambodia**

Over 300 families known as the «Railway Community» live in Phnom Penh's «Kilometer 6» commune, which is located alongside railway tracks that stretch from the districts of Tuol Kork via Daun Penh to Russey Keo. The families live in self-built shacks, usually consisting of a single room.

Because of the limited space, everyday life takes place on the train tracks. Several times a day, whenever a train horn sounds, they quickly gather up their cooking utensils, chairs, sunshades and children, and clear the track.

Like many families before them in Phnom Penh, the Railway Community faces eviction because local authorities are planning to build a concrete road along the railway line. The plans sparked a dispute over ownership of the land. For a decade now, members of the community and activists have been campaigning for their right to land and adequate housing. The first result of this campaign work was the allocation of 4 x 15-meter plots of land in a nearby area to every family. At the beginning of August 2022, 320 families accepted this offer, albeit without any monetary compensation. By the end of 2022, however, none of the families had actually relocated because the resettlement site is still not ready. It has neither clean water nor electricity, nor is it connected to a proper road.

### **Smor San, Phnom Penh, Cambodia**

Smor San is a community of people who live in a cemetery in Phnom Penh. They have built makeshift dwellings on graves or live in empty burial chambers. This is where they eat

meals, watch TV, hang up clothes to dry, look after their children and sleep – just inches from the dead.

Many of the cemetery-dwellers built their houses in the 1990s, and since then, the community has steadily expanded. Some people moved to the cemetery after their homes on the banks of the river collapsed due to sand dredging, others were driven here from a nearby plot of land which they had to vacate to make way for a new market. Today, around 700 people live in the cemetery which has an estimated 200 graves and is sometimes visited by relatives of the deceased.

### **Boeung Trabek, Phnom Penh, Cambodia**

The Boeung Trabek community lives alongside a sewage canal known by the same name in Sangkat Phsa Deum Thkov in Phnom Penh. The canal transports rainwater and human waste to flooded fields and wetlands in the south of the city. The Boeung Trabek district is located downstream, in an area where the walled canal gives way to an almost natural embankment. Here, where shallow water mixes with decomposing material, a cluster of stilt houses rises above the toxic sludge. It's estimated that around 400 people live in these and other makeshift dwellings close to the banks of the canal. They are at the mercy of the rise and fall of flood waters – which damage homes and increase susceptibility to illness – but also to the consequences of rapid urban development which is threatening their rudimentary way of life. The government blames increased flooding in the area on the growth of the community, and yet the authorities have massively encroached on the ecosystem themselves by filling Boeung Trabek Lake to allow for commercial development.

The community lives under repeated threat of eviction because the settlement is still considered illegal, even though it first organized itself in 1999 to obtain formal land titles.

### **Cham Gemeinschaft, Phnom Penh, Cambodia**

On the banks of the Chroy Changva peninsula in the eastern part of Phnom Penh, where the Tonle Sap and Mekong rivers merge, around 300 families live on fishing boats in conditions that are extremely precarious. Many of the boat dwellers are members of the Cham, a predominantly Muslim minority, which has its own history and language that is distinct from Khmer. With fishing as their main source of income, the families have lived on the river for generations, having lost everything during the Cambodian genocide by the Khmer Rouge. Local authorities have repeatedly forced the community to relocate. Since 2012, their boats have been moored in the shadow of the \$100-million Sokha Hotel. Selling fish has become difficult because the marketplace is now so far away. On top of this, the Sokimex Group, owner of the Sokha Hotel, is trying to get the community evicted from the narrow strip of land where their boats are moored.

### **Living on Water / Tonle Sap Lake, Siem Reap, Cambodia**

Tonle Sap near Siem Reap is the biggest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia. It is one of the world's richest inland fishing grounds and home to over one million people.

The local community depends on the lake, but their livelihoods are under acute threat.

Reservoir dams in south China, overfishing, climate change, illegal logging, the exploitation resources and pollution all threaten the stability of Tonle Sap's socio-ecological system.

Until just a few years ago, many thousands of people lived on the water in self-built houseboats and on rafts, which formed floating villages all across the lake. The Cambodian, Vietnamese and a few Chinese families made a living primarily from fishing. But since 2019, more and more of these desperate people have been forced to return to their home countries.

In early 2022, the last hundred Cambodian families awaited final eviction from their houseboats, which now have to remain moored on the shore.

Steff Gruber (1953) is a Swiss photographer and filmmaker. He started taking photos for local news-papers and on behalf of the agency Keystone at the age of just 17. Photography has always been an important part of his life. Steff Gruber is a member of the Swiss Association of Journalists and Photographers IMPRESSUM.

**Links:**

[www.lumiere.gallery](http://www.lumiere.gallery)

[www.steffgruber.com](http://www.steffgruber.com)

[www.kino.net](http://www.kino.net)

Wikipedia:

[https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steff\\_Gruber](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steff_Gruber)

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