

THE QUIET IN THE LAND LUANG PRABANG, LAOS NEWSLETTER

SPRING/SUMMER/FALL2005

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Under the High Patronage of the Department of Information and Culture, Luang Prabang, Laos.

WITH ARTISTS: MARINA ABRAMOVIC, JANINE ANTONI, HANS GEORG BERGER, CAROL CASSIDY, CAI GUO-QIANG, ANN HAMILTON, MANIVONG KHATTIYNALATH, DINH Q. LÊ, JUN NGUYEN-HATSUSHIBA, SHIRIN NESHAT, VONG PHAOPHANIT, ALLAN SEKULA, SHAHZIA SIKANDER, NITHAKHONG SOMSANITH, and RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA

Dear friends,

This is the second issue of our newsletter to keep you informed about our work in Luang Prabang, Laos

The Quiet in the Land: Art, Spirituality, and Everyday Life in Luang Prabang is the third project of *The Quiet in the Land* series. Each project in the series is structured as a carefully planned group of long-term community-based collaborative art and education projects. *The Quiet in the Land* in Luang Prabang is taking place from 2004 to 2006. It consists of a series of collaborations between more than 40 artists and educators from Laos, the Mekong Region, and elsewhere and a wide range of local community members. The project is guided by the conviction that the practice of art, broadly defined, offers both individuals and communities—including the poor, the disenfranchised, and others who have been adversely affected by globalization—the potential to acknowledge for themselves the dignity of the activities of everyday life; to understand more deeply the relevance of preserving and adapting their cultural heritage to the challenges they face in the 21st century; and to build the capacity for transforming their lives for the better by harnessing the under tapped power of the creative spirit.

France Morin,
Project Director
Luang Prabang, December 14, 2005

VISIT OF THE ARTISTS DINH Q LÊ AND NITHAKHONG SOMSANITH IN COLLABORATION WITH ANTHROPOLOGIST CATHERINE CHORON-BAIX



In February and March 2005, the internationally recognized Vietnamese artist Dinh Q Lê and Lao artist Nithakhong Somsanith developed an art project in collaboration with Dr. Catherine Choron-Baix, an anthropologist at the CNRS, Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Urbaine, in Paris.

Both artists take inspiration from their Southeast Asian roots for their creations, and are concerned with textile and traditional arts and handicrafts of their homelands. Their collaboration in this project challenges them to confront their approaches to their homeland traditions, to their images of the past, and to allow them to create together and produce new works of art that will tell something new and strong about their culture to the people of Luang Prabang, and to the Lao people in general.

They were both struck by the necessity for Lao people, especially the younger generation, to communicate with the past, and decided to work on the coexistence of tradition and modernity in present day Laos. Their first work, which is now finished, deals with this through representing the banners of the cremation ground. In Lao funeral rites, these banners are meant to help the deceased persons to find their way to the “other” world (during the transmigration process). Somsanith and Lê worked with this symbolism to express the necessity of a link between the younger generations and their ancestors. Another work is in gestation, and the completed project will consist of seven works of gold and silver thread embroidery on silk, to be exhibited in Luang Prabang in October 2006 and possibly in New York at the end of the project in 2007. See some biographical notes about Dinh Q Lê in our newsletter N°1.

Nithakhong Somsanith was born in Luang Prabang and is one of the few practitioners of its courtly tradition of gold-thread embroidery, which he learnt from his family. He started to embroider and paint in Laos, but his artistic work became more intense after he moved to France, where he now lives in Paris. There he studied the visual arts, as well as pursuing studies in psychopathology. He first returned to Laos in 1997 after an absence of 11 years, and began to take inspiration in the landscapes of his childhood and the frescoes of the monasteries.

Catherine Choron-Baix, who has been studying Lao culture for more than 20 years, witnessed their collaboration with the aim to analyse their collective productions and the underlying intentions. She interviewed the artists, France Morin, students, weavers, and Achan Luk, the Director of Luang Prabang School of Arts, to have a general view of all participants' understanding of the project. Considering the link between artistic creation, spirituality and rituals in Lao tradition, she is observing the changes that are presently occurring. She will discuss the status of the artist in Lao society today, and observe the conversion of young Lao artists to contemporary art.

She directed the film *Memories of Gold, Memories of Silk* about the work of Somsanith. This film was shown almost every day at the Project House during their stay, to audiences including 50 students and teachers of the School of Fine Arts, 30 novices and monks of the UNESCO *Cultural Survival and Revival in the Buddhist Sangha*, a general audience of 50 people, the Director and Deputy Director of the Museum, the Deputy Director of the Department of Information and Culture, representatives of The Heritage House, NGOs, teachers, young embroiderers, weavers, and other interested people.

Lê also showed his work and gave detailed explanations of the meaning and the way he creates it. Both artists gave presentations of previous works, with drawings, books and other teachings in contemporary art. The intimate participation of the artists, Catherine Choron-Baix, France Morin, and other project collaborators in the daily life and ceremonies of the neighbourhood of the Project House was especially significant, and demonstrated the essential presence of art in the lives of the local people of Luang Prabang.

The special bonds the artists made with the local community will be an essential element of future phases of the project as it continues to explore the coexistence of tradition and modernity – a theme at the heart of present-day life in Luang Prabang.

SOUT HEUANE CEREMONY

A ceremony for The Quiet in the Land Project House was held on February 14, 2005

This ceremony is at once a “house warming,” strengthening social bonds with neighbours, and a religious service bringing happiness and prosperity (*mongkhoun*) through the presence of monks.

In the house itself, the furniture was arranged to allow a large open space on the upper floor. On the ground floor, the offerings and other things required for the ceremony were made ready. First of all, baskets of offerings were prepared to be given to each of the nine monks invited to recite the blessing chants.

Next the flower offerings were prepared, which took much longer to arrange. Several elderly ladies shared the work of cutting and sorting the flowers, trimming the banana leaves, folding and shaping them, and fastening them into cones with bamboo pins. The flowers were attached to the second layer of this structure with a beautiful dark green base. In this season, the women chose flowers of yellow, red and white, with suitable names, fragrances, shapes and colours for the offerings: Several bouquets of different importance were prepared. The preparations ended in the early morning of Monday 14 February. Little by little the invited guests arrived, many bringing an offering of money which would be conveyed to the monks from different temples during the course of the ceremony.

In the mid-morning the monks arrived and took their places in a dignified way. Sathou One Keo, the Abbot of Vat Pak Khan and Vat Xieng Thong sat in the centre, facing the offerings, with four monks on either side.

The master of ceremonies (*mo phon*) helped to make the appropriate offerings of flowers, candles and incense sticks, the appropriate prostrations, to recite the blessings and to respond to the chanting of the monks. In the name of the participants, the master of ceremonies asked the monks to recite the precepts which were then taken by everyone. The monks intoned a long recitation of the blessing chants (*paritta mongkhoun*) which were the heart of the ceremony. Sathou One Keo then gave a sermon and a talk on the merits of generosity.

THE PHRA VET FESTIVAL

This festival at Vat Pak Khane is especially meaningful to our project since it is the temple of Pha Satou Onekeo Sitthivong, a member of our Supervising Committee and a close collaborator on many of our projects. David Wharton came to Luang Prabang from Vientiane for this





ceremony organised on 3 days, March 11 to 13, 2005. David entered the monastic tradition of Theravada Buddhism at the age of 22, practising for over 12 years in forest monasteries in England and Thailand. After leaving the robes, he worked in Cambodia for six years in peace building and reconciliation. He now lives in Laos, and is currently working at the palm-leaf manuscripts project of the Lao National Library in Vientiane. He often edits, translates or photographs for *The Quiet in the Land* as a part time staff member.

Once a year the larger monasteries organize this three-day festival of Buddhist literature where the monks read from the manuscripts libraries. The most important story tells of the generous Prince Vessantara (Pha Vet) who is seen as the last

incarnation of the Buddha before his rebirth as Prince Siddhartha. The festival is a mutually organized event resulting from the complex interplay of monks and lay people. Monks who are schooled in recitation are invited from the surrounding monasteries to participate. They take turns in reading from the stories handed down on ancient palm-leaf manuscripts, while their large lay audience sits assembled in front of the sermon chair. Many of the audience stay at the monastery for the whole duration of the recitation, about seventeen hours, which is only interrupted for the meals and the music of a small orchestra. The *jataka*, the stories read during the Pha Vet festival, belong to the greatest treasures of Lao literature. As Prince Vessantara was reputed to be extremely generous, which improved his reincarnation, the listeners also wish to show their generosity: they donate money that helps the monks to maintain the monastery and make it more beautiful.¹

APRIL 2005

VISIT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VINCENNES STUDENTS

As part of our education program, 15 students of the University of Vincennes Saint Denis (Paris, France) and their Art History and Aesthetics teacher, David Rosenberg, also an editor and writer², stayed in Luang Prabang and worked with the local School of Fine Arts from April 24 to May 7 2005. Last year, *The Quiet in the Land* installed a computer room at the art school, and several of the students gave classes during the two weeks, they also gave the art school two computers and a scanner.



VISIT OF THE ARTIST VONG PHAOPHANIT



Vong Phaophanit was born in 1961 in Savannakhet, Laos. In 1970, his family sent him to France to be educated where he studied art in Aix-en-Provence from 1980 to 1985. He became a British citizen in 1993 and now lives in London, England. He has exhibited internationally and his work is included in major public and private collections. He is currently working on a number of large scale public commissions and often collaborates with architects, landscape designers, and choreographers. Although trained as a painter, he now works mostly on large scale installation/sculpture-based works which often include materials such as lead, bamboo, rice, neon, rubber, slide projections and video productions. The use of light is also a vital element in his work.

In the context of *The Quiet in the Land*, Vong Phaophanit is making a video on Luang Prabang today. Trying to avoid clichés, the artist is documenting how the city is changing and how it is being transformed everyday by tourism and globalization. He is documenting the life of the city at different moments of the day, of the year, as well as through different ceremonies and rituals. He looks at the invisible city, the intimacy of the people and how the city reveals itself through the rituals of everyday life.

The artist decided to work with three art students, Sone Khounepaseuth, Khamla Punhyasith and Bangon Heuangnakhone. To do his or her work, the student has a camera and a tape recorder borrowed from The Quiet in the Land project. Each idea suggested by the artist had to be documented with 20 photographs or 10 minutes of sound.

The second step will consist of filming with the artist at various places discovered through the students' photographs.

Some of the topics for the photographs were: everyday life, historical material of Luang Prabang, scary places, activities related to the rivers, walking meditation cells, sounds of the city at night, portraits of monks or novices, portraits of tourists, market places, objects and products that can be found at the different markets, preparation of a ceremony and related objects.

VISIT OF PARTICIPANT SOMSANOUK MIXAY DURING LAO NEW YEAR OR PIMAI



The Lao year begins with extensive celebrations between the sixth day of the waning moon in the fifth Lao month and the fifth day of the waxing moon in the sixth month. The houses and monasteries of Luang Prabang are cleaned, and water is ritually poured over the city's most important Buddha statues. During the four-day celebrations, processions, pilgrimages to holy grottoes, special presentations of alms for the monks, *su-khuan* ceremonies in the houses, dances and night-time performances gradually develop into high-spirited general festivities.

On the last day of the New Year celebrations an exuberant festival takes place where families, group of friends and work colleagues build stupas out of sand on a large sandbank in front of the Vat Long Khun monastery.

The stupas are decorated with rice flour and streamers bearing drawings of the Buddha and the signs of the zodiac. The hundreds of stupas are reminders of the Buddha who has entered nirvana and symbols of spiritual happiness and release. Each grain of sand stands for a burdening thought, an unpleasant memory from the year that has just ended and will soon be washed away by the rising river in the approaching season.³

JULY 2005

SUPERVIZING COMMITTEE MEETING

The members of the Supervising committee and the staff of The Quiet in the Land attended on July 12, 2005, a meeting for a presentation of the various projects to date by Project Director France Morin. Participants were also invited to comments on our various education programs as well as on the future of our project as a whole which we hope to continue after the reunion of all the participants in October 2006 and presentation of the projects in Luang Prabang to the various communities.

DISTRIBUTION OF THE *SMALL LAO-ENGLISH DICTIONARY OF RELIGIOUS AND BUDDHIST TERMS*

On July 27, 2005 France Morin distributed to more than 1000 monks and novices of Luang Prabang a copy of the Second Edition of the *Small Lao-English Dictionary of Religious and Buddhist Terms* printed by *The Quiet in the Land* and written by Patrice Ladwig. The financial contribution of The Quiet in the Land project ensured that it will again be for free distribution.

Luang Prabang has a special position in the Lao cultural landscape. As a World Heritage Site it has become the major centre for tourism in Laos, while at the same time the strong presence of religious life and monasteries makes it one of the most important centres of traditional Lao arts and culture. At a vipassana-meditation retreat for 538 monks and novices in December 2004 in Luang Prabang Vat Phone Phao, the Venerable Satu Virachitto mentioned that meditation and the correct conduct of monks would be a chance to "beautify Luang Prabang through the authentic practice of the Buddhist Dhamma." In the same spirit we hope that the printing and distribution of this booklet will be a small contribution to these efforts and will enable the monks and novices of Luang Prabang to transfer their knowledge to those who want to learn more about Buddhism and to the traditions of the city.



FIRST VISIT OF THE ARTIST ANN HAMILTON



Travelling the Mekong by boat, walking on its turbulent edges by foot, one is struck by the strength of the water's flow, in how its movement is hypnotically patterned by the pooling of many forces. The Mekong is a river that is intimately tied to its local shores, while also extending the entire length of Laos. Always central to the country's economy, history, and culture, the water's many surface patterns are a visual embodiment of the confluence of cultural currents where a traditional past meets a modern present. A river is a place of constant change. It is liquid, deep, a place in between, a place that gives life and receives death.

In Luang Prabang, there are three monastic grounds with architectural structures built for walking meditation which are no longer in use. Vat Hatseo, Vat Kok Pap, and the renovated Vat Long Khoun are all located on the right bank of the Mekong River. A fourth one, also abandoned and no longer in use, is located on the left bank Vat Khom Khwuang. These structures remind us that places for such experiences are now more and more threatened as sound and speed exert pressure on the existence of quiet places.

As part of her project for The Quiet in the Land, Ann propose to build a large-scale metal and wood boat inspired by the profile and form of a traditional Walking Meditation Structure.

Its presence on the water will be a reminder of the need to cultivate attention and compassion, in a place of travel and during a time of transition and change. We hope that for the monastic community, it will be a place to renew their practice.



At times, a second smaller boat will be attached to the main boat. This boat will carry a choir or group of eight to ten people from the Luang Prabang community who will recite or chant in unison. A social vessel of speaking, the small boat will be linked to a solitary vessel of silence, the large boat, on the river.

By linking physically together, the two boats will also link the present and the past, the sacred and the secular, silence and voice. In their visual and aural relationships, they are a demonstration for this place in this time.

Visit of Grant Evans to work with Ann Hamilton

CEREMONY TO HONOUR THE TRADITIONAL PUPPETS AT VAT XIENG THONG



A ceremony to honour the traditional puppets and a short performance were organised for Dr. Carol Becker in January. It was performed a second time for the artist Ann Hamilton and writer Grant Evans. The ceremony is described below:

This morning, in the chapel of the funerary carriage at Vat Xieng Thong, the offerings were arranged little by little. Fifteen inanimate marionettes were taken out of the wooden box and the cupboard, and laid against each other on a large piece of material which separated them from the marble floor. This is only a part of the troupe which counts more than twice this number. The costumes, which are more than 30 years old, have lost a little of their freshness. The painted wooden faces have kept their freshness and their naivety. The wooden stick and the two bamboo rods which animate them project from their gaudy costumes.

On a mat, a conical bouquet of yellow flowers sitting in a ceremonial bowl is placed in front of the master of ceremony. The offerings arrive little by little from outside on six large trays placed on the floor in two rows. Two trays near the marionettes each carry a boiled pig's head decorated with two red hibiscus flowers, the colour which pleases the spirits, accompanied by the tail and the feet.

When all the offerings have been correctly arranged and the candles lit, the marionettes are set upright. A small orchestra made up of a xylophone, a long horizontal drum and small cymbals, add rhythm to the ceremony.

The assistant of old Ouane, the master of the marionettes, picks up a cornet, dips it in the alcohol, and proceeds with the sprinkling of the marionettes. Their spirits are awoken through this ritual. The five kneeling participants join their hands and start to speak to address the marionettes. They are prayed to with deference to come to feast on the dishes that have been brought for them. Firstly the *nyak*, or *yaksa*, a majestic ogre with a face tinted the divine colour green, dances on the dishes. Thao Ling Thong, his father Sangkasa and their companions dance in a frenzied way and gorge themselves on the good things prepared. The orchestra and the participants punctuate the meal with laughter and cries of joy. After a short invocation, the marionettes are put away with respect and gentleness. The good mood continues while the assistants share the rest of the meal.

AUGUST 2005

WORK WITH THE ARTIST MANIVONG KATTIGNARATH IN COLLABORATION WITH DR. BORETH LY



The transmission of knowledge in Southeast Asian cultures is based on orality and thus names of artists are seldom recorded in ancient inscriptions. This is a rare opportunity to record the artistic intentions of an important artist in the history of Laos.

As part of the The Quiet in the Land Project, Dr. Boreth Ly, a specialist of Southeast Asian Art and Culture is writing an essay on the life and accomplishments of Ajan Manivong Kattignarath, one of the few designer-architect-artist living in Laos today. This essay will be published in The Quiet in the Land publication. Ajan Manivong provided us with the knowledge of how traditional arts (dance, theatre, visual arts: carving, painting, etc.) and practices in Luang Prabang is transmitted from one generation to the next.

Dr. Ly teamed up with France Morin, Vanpheng Keopannha, and Patrice Bleton. Four interviews of two hours with Ajan Manivong Kattignarath were conducted on August 7, 10, 12 and 15. An on site visit to Vat Xieng Thong took place on August 12.

Ajan Manivong Kattignarath was born in 1929 at Ban Sithan (now Ban That Luang) and is the son of Khattignavong, a former governor of Luang Prabang. He went to Primary school in Luang Prabang and graduated from High School at the age of sixteen. Traditional Laotian definition of an artist is very different from the modern notion of an artist which celebrates individualism and creativity. Ajan Manivong considers himself a "*Nak On Baet*", a creative person who provides others with an artistic model.

This is precisely what he did with the "Funerary Carriage House," a wooden edifice located at Vat Xieng Thong. That building was started in 1963 and completed in 1975. The structure was built to house King Sisavanvong's funerary carriage. The King died in 1959 and Ajan Manivong started to design the entire narrative program of the *Phra Lam Phra Lak*, the Laotian version of the Indian-derived epic poem, *Ramayana*. Ajan Manivong mentioned that a traditional Laotian artist-designer often does not draw on a sketchbook; he instead sketches each episode from the story directly onto the wooden panels with a piece of chalk. Subsequently, members of the artistic team, for instance, Pia Sing (Ajan Manivong's teacher), and Pia Tanh, the master woodcarver and his assistants, examined the sketches and gave their approval before Ajan Manivong fixed the drawing with a felt tip pen. Pia Tanh and his assistants carried out the carvings. We were originally perplexed by the fact that Ajan Manivong never attended Ecole des Beaux Arts (like many painters and sculptors in Vietnam and Cambodia) but what learnt from him was that the training of a traditional Laotian artist is grounded in orality. For example, he learnt his drawing and design skills from Pia Sing (who was also officer in the Royal Palace). Comparable to our way of approaching and documenting this artistic knowledge, we got the impression that traditional Laotian way of approaching arts and creativity involved multiple parties and each artist possesses multiple talents and skills. Last, this knowledge and skill is passed down from generation to generation through the act of listening, observing, and mimicking.



OCTOBER 2005

FIRST VISIT OF THE ARTISTS: CAI GUO-QIANG, ALLAN SEKULA, RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA, AND SECOND VISIT OF JUN NGUYEN-HATSUSHIBA

PUBLISHING A POSTER ABOUT TAK BAT (MORNING ALMSROUND)



The Tak Bat is a profound expression of generosity, a cardinal virtue for the Lao people, and is a significant source of religious merit for the Buddhist community. It is probably the closest religious interaction between lay people and monks. Whenever it is performed, it is done with a profound sense of beauty and affection, with piety, care, thoughtfulness, and with deep commitment. Most of the Buddhist believers of Luang Prabang practice this ritual every morning. At sunrise, they prepare the offerings by cooking the rice and kneeling on a mat, in silence, waiting for the monks to approach, their heads and feet bare in humility. They quickly and silently place a small amount of rice in the monks' alms bowl without making eye contact.

Sometimes cakes and fruits are offered. They practice this generous act with joy knowing that it will benefit them, their living or departed relatives, and all beings.

For their part, the monks meditate on impermanence and on the meaning of the offerings they receive, which symbolise their intentional poverty, humility, and dependency on the lay community for their material needs. When they return to the monastery, they share the rice, accompanied by other dishes prepared by the community. They eat this first meal of the day in silence

During a visit to Pha Onekeo Sitthivong, Abbot of the Vat Pakkhane and Vat Xieng Thong monasteries and Director of Buddhist Education in Luang Prabang, with Hans Georg Berger in 2004, we had the opportunity to discuss the consequences of the development of tourism on monastic life. The Tak Bat, the monks' morning alms in the streets of the city, is particularly affected. The project of printing a poster and disseminating it around the city started from this statement. After several meetings with the local authorities, specially the Provincial Tourism Office, the Heritage House, an agreement has been reached about the text.

On one side a photo provided by the artist Hans Georg Berger shows the line of monks and says in six languages (Lao, Thai, Japanese, Chinese, French, and English) "Help us respect the alms giving ceremony". A text explains on the other side, what this ceremony is and how to behave appropriately. It starts with these words: "The monks' alms round is a living Buddhist tradition for the people of Luang Prabang which, because of its beauty, has become a major tourist attraction. However, when tourists are unaware of its customs, their inappropriate behaviour can be disruptive. We would like to draw your attention to this religious practice, which has great meaning for the population of Luang Prabang."

THE FIREBOATS FESTIVAL and BOUN OK PHANSA

For Boun Ok Pansa (October 18 and 19, 2005), THE QUIET IN THE LAND collaborated with the 24 monasteries of the peninsula to encourage the creativity of the monks and novices by celebrating the tradition of its decorations. The project offered the materials necessary, including bamboo, scissors, thread, glue, colour papers, including gold and silver, for the fabrication of at least 20 lanterns per monastery and other decorations. France Morin and Francis Engelmann visited the 24 Sathous of the monasteries to discuss the project with them.



Pha Onekeo Sitthivong, Abbot of Vat Xieng Thong and Vat Pakkhane, and a Member of the Supervising Committee of The Quiet in the Land supported this initiative.

The 24 Monasteries involved in this project were: Vat Pak Khane, Vat Xieng Thong, Vat Khili, Vat Si Boun Heuang, Vat Siri Mounghoune, Vat Sop, Vat Sene, Vat Nong, Vat Siphouthabot (V. Pa Khe), Vat Tham Phousi, Vat Paphay, Vat Xieng Mouane, Vat Choum Khong, Vat Mai, Vat Phonexay, Vat Ho Xieng, Vat That, Vat That Louang, Vat Manorom, Vat Mune Na, Vat Vixun, Vat Aham, Vat Aphyay, Vat Phrabat Thai.



During the rainy season, which lasts about three months, the monks traditionally remain in the monastery. At the end of this period of retreat, Luang Prabang celebrates a Festival of Light where all the monasteries and houses in the city are lit throughout one night with lanterns made of bamboo and paper. In the preceding days, families and other groups of lay people start making bamboo boats and rafts of different sizes. After a ceremony of blessings at Vat Xiang Thong, the fireboats float downstream on a slow, majestic journey. In the middle of the dark river they meet up with other boats from further upstream and continue on their way until they finally catch fire and sink in flames. Some say that the beautiful boats are sent out in an appeal for forgiveness to the mother of water for what the humans have done to the river over the past year; others see the festival as an offering for the dead who are greeted and bidden farewell with the boats. The monks interpret the rite as a symbol for the renunciation of earthly goods which marks the first step towards overcoming suffering. To them, the steady departure of the boats on the water and their silent sinking into the current of the great river symbolizes that moment when the perfect person is free of all ties and enters nirvana⁴.

NOVEMBER 2005



FIRST VISIT OF THE ARTISTS SHAHZIA SIKANDER, SHIRIN NESHAT and SHOJA AZARBAYJANI
SECOND VISIT OF THE HISTORIAN GRANT EVANS

ORGANISING A TEXTILES EXHIBITION

The title chosen for the exhibition is *ENDURING HANDS GLOBALIZED EYES, Historical and Contemporary Lao Textiles*. The venue is at the Luang Prabang National Museum, in the inner courtyard of the former Royal Palace, closed for 30 years. This patio has been restored for the exhibition by the Heritage House (La Maison du Patrimoine). The exhibition

was opened on November 25, 2005 and will last up to February 27, 2006

The Quiet in the Land was pleased to take part through this exhibition in the 10th Anniversary of Luang Prabang UNESCO World Heritage Site celebrations.

The exhibition is curated by Vanpheng Keophanna, Linda S. McIntosh, and France Morin in collaboration with Francis Engelmann. Scenography in collaboration with Nithakhong Somsanith.

The Quiet in the Land is designed to revitalize traditional arts by confronting them with new contemporary art forms. The Lao textiles are internationally known for their combination of complexity of the techniques, colours, materials, and patterns as well as the skills and enduring patience of their creators. The development of tourism and the commonality of the products on the market could lead us to believe that this richness is threatened and that the quality of the textiles is declining. The objective of these exhibitions is to demonstrate that the creative originality and resources of the textile artists that have contributed to building the exceptional reputation of the Lao textiles still exist in Luang Prabang, and that this reputation can be maintained given the right conditions.

The *Contemporary Lao Textile Competition* featured award-winning works from the competition, which became part of the Luang Prabang National Museum's collection. The Jury was composed of Douangdeuane Bounyavong Viravongs, one of the foremost researchers of traditional textiles in Laos, Somsanouk Mixay, Advisor to the Minister of Information and Culture, and Vice President of the Lao Journalists Association, and Linda S. McIntosh, a Scholar and Curator of Lao Textiles. The jury decided not to give a first prize but 2 second prizes, 2 third prizes, 2 fourth



prizes and 2 special mentions to 2 outstanding works for their sense of creativity, technique, composition and colour.

The winners are: Mr Kheum Manichanh, from Ban Phonexay, Ms Bounsong, from Ban Donekang who won a second joint prize and a 4th joint prize, Ms Chanh Noi, from Ban Xang Khong, Ms Nang, from Ban Khom Kouang, a group of women of the handicraft Centre, from Ban Phanom, Ms Lan Noi, from Ban Kouatinung, Ms Noi, from Ban Done Kang.

For the *Historical Clothing Exhibition*, The Quiet in the Land, as a community-based project, wanted to present the diverse cultural heritage of the peoples of Laos with examples of clothing from the beginning of the 20th century until present day. Over fifty ethnic groups compose the population of Laos, and textiles and clothing symbolize each of these groups' identity, providing Laos with a rich culture. The dress connects an individual to society, including their local community and overall to the nation of Laos. Weavers and embroiders apply their skills and imagination to create cloth utilized as clothing, everyday household items and gifts of exchange. They combine knowledge of their ancestors with artistic innovation in these markers of individual and group identity. It is the project's desire to introduce examples of Laos' diverse heritage in the Historical Clothing Exhibition with the Contemporary Lao Textile Competition in one venue in order for visitors to see the continuity in the creativity of the textiles of Laos. We also hope that both exhibitions will be an inspiration for the production of new contemporary textiles prolonging Lao textiles' reputation worldwide.

A series of Lectures and Panels will take place in the Museum Courtyard during the exhibition period.

DECEMBER 2005

SECOND VISIT OF THE ARTIST HANS GEORG BERGER⁵



The project of Hans G. Berger is entitled *SEARCHING THE NATURAL MIND, the Renewal of Buddhist Meditation in Luang Prabang*. The visit of Hans G. Berger takes place at the moment of the second Vipassana meditation retreat at Phon Phao monastery attended in 2005 by 714 monks and novices of Luang Prabang.

His present work is the following of his first work last year. Hans Georg Berger describes it as follows: "In December 2004, I had the unique and extraordinary privilege to assist, as a western artist, a meditation retreat for several hundred Lao monks and novices, organized by the Buddhist Sangha of Luang Prabang. (...) My place in this experience was that of an artist-documentarist who, with his particular method⁶⁶

and through photography and videography, accompanied the actions and life of the community of monks, their teaching and everyday-life. The invitation for me to take part in this experience came from the Sangha of Luang Prabang and is the result of a previous working experience centred on the sacred ceremonies of Luang Prabang⁷, organized with the help and support of the Sangha from 1994 to 1999 (...)

Within the cultures of South East Asia, Laos has developed its own characteristic forms and contents. Lao art has its own distinctive qualities; Lao literature, Lao ceremonies and cultural traditions are different from those of the neighbouring countries. (...) Also Lao Buddhism is different from Buddhism in Thailand, Myanmar or Vietnam. And Lao monks have developed, over more than seven centuries of religious practice and teaching of the Dhamma, a very special form of meditation. The revival of this Lao tradition of meditation was at the centre of the retreat organized in December 2004, and is the focal point of my artwork.

The meditation retreat at Vat Pa Phon Phao, Luang Prabang, was the first large scale attempt to reintroduce the knowledge of Vipassana meditation in Luang Prabang since 1975. Over almost 30 years, the practise of Vipassana has been scarce in Luang Prabang. (...)

My work consisted in the observation and documentation of this process, starting from its preparation during the month of November, observation of *Parivassakam* and the following Vipassana exercises, until its conclusion. (...)

This collaboration process with the participants of the meditation retreat constitutes a further application of my method to the life and spiritual practice of the Sangha, and the culture of Laos by means of photography⁸. The project's collective goal is not only to document meticulously the particularity of Luang Prabang's meditation tradition, but also to empower all participants and their spiritual practise through the photographic process. One important aim of the retreat was to create a moment of spiritual tranquillity and concentration for a large number of novices and young monks educated in the monasteries of Luang Prabang, and confronted there

with the everyday life of the city, tourism, and modern-day consumerism. In recent years, life in some of the monasteries has become more and more disturbed by the influx of exterior influences. The teaching of the Dhamma in the monasteries today very much needs a regular support through a large collective effort in a place of tranquillity and concentration. The retreat at Vat Pa Phon Phao, to my judgement, did this with extraordinary success. It is to be wished that this experience will continue in the future.

The result of my work can be used in different ways. First of all, it constitutes a thorough documentation of the first major meditation retreat of the Lao Buddhist Sangha organized since the revolution of 1975. Together with France Morin, we are planning and preparing several publications both in English and Lao languages. One of the Lao publications is a compilation of texts used in Vipassana that will be illustrated with colour photographs taken during the retreat. Another one is a new schoolbook explaining concentration exercises for the use of novices and young monks.”

The Quiet in the Land team wishes you a Very Peaceful Holiday Season. Thank you for your support.

Francis Engelmann, Vanpheng Keopannha, Bounkhong Khuttao, Marisela LaGrave, Khonesavanh Litthavong (Outh) and France Morin.

Special thanks to Francis Engelmann for his collaboration in editing this newsletter and to Paul Bloxham for the design.

Footnotes

¹ *From Hans Georg Berger Het Bun Dai Bun – Laos Sacred Rituals of Luang Prabang*

² *He published a monograph on Chen Zen and Art Game Book (Assouline, Paris, 2003).*

³ *From Hans Georg Berger Het Bun Dai Bun – Laos Sacred Rituals of Luang Prabang*

⁴ *From Hans Georg Berger Het Bun Dai Bun – Laos Sacred Rituals of Luang Prabang*

⁵ *For more information on Hans Georg Berger's work in Laos and Luang Prabang, and a biography, see: www.hansgeorgberger.de Contact: eremo@gmx.net*

⁶ *“Community Involvement”: The photographer, who is an outsider, seeks to blend in with the community he seeks to photograph to avoid disturbing the unfolding of the activities to which the community has granted him access. The aim is the creation of a unique relationship between the people participating and the photographer. The concept of “Community Involvement” is at the base of my teaching at Silpakorn University, Bangkok, since the year 2000.*

⁷ *Several publications of this work exist in English, Lao, German, French and Thai languages. A major publication in English is “Het Bun Dai Bun – Sacred Ceremonies of Luang Prabang”, Westzone Publishing, London (2000). In Lao language, there is a schoolbook, today in its 3rd edition, “Korb Jai Ti Leiow Boeng” with texts by Somsanouk Mixay.*

⁸ *In addition to my work on sacred ceremonies of Luang Prabang, there is a corpus of photographs on ancient libraries and manuscripts of Laos.*