

THE QUIET IN THE LAND LUANG PRABANG, LAOS

NEWSLETTER 3

Year 2006

The Quiet in the Land is a 501(c) (3) nonprofit art and education organization based in the United States. Under the High Patronage of the Department of Information and Culture, Luang Prabang.

2004-2008 Artists: MARINA ABRAMOVIC, JANINE ANTONI, HANS GEORG BERGER, CAI GUO-QIANG, ANN HAMILTON, MANIVONG KHATTIYARAT, DINH Q. LÊ, SHIRIN NESHAT, JUN NGUYEN-HATSUSHIBA, VONG PHAOPHANIT, ALLAN SEKULA, SHAZIA SIKANDER, NITHAKHONG SOMSANITH, RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA

IN COLLABORATION WITH UTHIT ATIMANA, DR. CAROL BECKER, CAROL CASSIDY, DR. CATHERINE CHORON-BAIX, DR. VISHAKHA N. DESAI, DR. GRANT EVANS, BOUNKHONG KHUTTHAO, DR. BORETH LY, SOMSANOUK MIXAY, RASSANIKONE NANONG, SISAVATH NHILATCHAY, DR. VITHI PHANICHPHANT, DR. HEATHER PETERS, DAVID ROSENBERG, ACHARN LUK SINGKHAMTANH, OUANE SIRISACK, PHRA ACHARN ONE KEO SITTHIVONG

THE QUIET IN THE LAND IS CONCEIVED AND ORGANIZED BY FRANCE MORIN

Dear friends,

This is the third issue of our Newsletter to keep you informed about our work in Luang Prabang, Laos. As you know, each project in the series The Quiet in the Land is structured as a carefully planned group of long-term community-based collaborative art and education projects. Our third project in the series in Luang Prabang is taking place from 2004 to 2008



2006 was a very special year for us with residencies by our participating artists and the opening on October 7 of nine exhibitions of artists' projects at

the Luang Prabang National Museum (former Royal Palace) in the newly restored temporary exhibition galleries around the inner courtyard, as well as at The House of Guards (behind the museum). The exhibitions will be on view until July 2007 with an extensive education program with the Lao

schools. We also organized in October a 5-day reunion in Luang Prabang with more than fifty of our participants and supporters.

The exhibitions and projects are by artists Janine Antoni, Hans Georg Berger, Ann Hamilton, Manivong Khattiyarat, Dinh Q. Lê and Nithakhong Somsanith, Vong Phaophanit, Shahzia Sikander, and Allan Sekula. They were conceived and organized by France Morin, in collaboration with Vanpheng Keopannha and Francis Engelmann.



The program of the five days of reunion consisted of the openings of the exhibitions, a workshop for the participants, the launching of our Limited Edition, celebrations, and visits to the 24 monasteries as part of Boun Ok Pansa. The Quiet in the Land has been collaborating and supporting, for the past two years, the 24 monasteries of UNESCO's World Heritage Site Protected Area to encourage the creativity around this typical Luang Prabang festival.

We wanted this event to coincide with this very special festival. During the rainy season, which lasts about three months, the monks traditionally remain in their monasteries. At the end of this period of retreat, Luang Prabang celebrates a Festival of Light (Boun Ok Pansa), in which all the monasteries and houses in the city are lit throughout one night with lanterns made of bamboo and paper. In the previous days, monks and novices, families, and other groups of lay people start making decorations, bamboo boats, and rafts of different sizes. After a ceremony of blessings at Vat Xieng Thong, the fireboats float downstream.

We take this opportunity to wish you a very peaceful 2007.

France Morin, Project Director

In collaboration with Bounkhong Khuttao, Francis Engelmann and Outh Litthavong.

INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITIONS

The exhibitions at the museum are the result of two years of encounters between the population of Luang Prabang and the various invited artists and scholars, and they demonstrate the vitality of Lao heritage and traditions and the capacity to incorporate the best of international cultural exchanges. With this series of exhibitions, we are proud to contribute to the new desire of Lao museums, as proposed by the Ministry of Information and Culture, to involve the community and educational institutions in the management and promotion of cultural heritage for the benefit of Laos and its people.

In the first gallery, The Quiet in the Land presents a special exhibition in homage to **MANIVONG KHATTIYARAT**. One of the most living renowned designers and artists of Luang Prabang, Acharn Manivong was born in Luang Prabang in 1929. Twenty of his historical drawings and four of his masks for the Phralak Phralam performance were displayed in the museum's first gallery. The former includes drawings of architectural projects, both realized and unrealized, carved doors and other architectural elements, furniture patterns, and embroidery cartoons, as well as sketches for the Phralak Phralam performance.



JANINE ANTONI exhibits *To Ply*, a conversation in thread between women across cultures and generations. On her first visit to Luang Prabang in January 2006, she decided to work with the Hmong women who sell their goods at a craft market in the city because she was inspired by their unique needlework. During her month-long visit, she worked with Mo Ly, a Hmong vendor at the market, and Xia Song, her mother. In the work they produced together, their common ground was the handmade—more specifically, the needlework traditions passed down from woman to woman. As the project progressed, Antoni and Mo Ly made objects that told the stories of their lives and that responded to each other's stories. Their language took many forms, including embroidery, appliqué, crochet, and surgical suturing. For the exhibition, these objects were presented on a long table in one of the museum's galleries.



HANS GEORG BERGER shows fifty large-scale photographs portraying aspects of the spiritual life of Luang Prabang titled *The Floating Buddha*. Eight photographs were from a series he produced from 1994 to 1998 on the sacred rituals of the city. The remaining photographs were from a series he produced for The Quiet in the Land on two teaching retreats for young monks and novices, which the Sangha of Luang Prabang organized in 2004 and 2005. These retreats represent a courageous attempt to reintroduce the tradition of Vipassana meditation into systematic Buddhist teaching in Laos, strengthening in this way Lao Buddhism in a complex situation of social, economic, and cultural change. Berger's role in the retreats was that of an artist-documentarian who accompanied the teaching and the meditation practice. Reflecting his theory of community involvement, he produces the photographs by relying on the knowledge and expertise of the people he portrays, liberally giving them the last word in a subtle, carefully orchestrated process of choice, discussion, and shared decision on the value and importance of the images produced.



ANN HAMILTON presents *The Story of the Meditation Boat*, a series of more than 75 photographs by the artist and others documenting the story of the fabrication of the Meditation Boat that she designed for the project, as well as various influences from the life and heritage of Luang Prabang.



During her first visit to the city in August 2005, she was struck by the flow of the Mekong River, which became for her “a visual embodiment and confluence of cultural currents, where a traditional past mixes with the modern present.” She also visited four monasteries in the forests surrounding the city, each of which included a long, narrow building designed specifically for walking meditation. Inspired by these structures, she decided to design a boat for spiritual meditation by the monks and novices of Luang Prabang. The architects Laurent Rampon and Yushi Kawaguchi, along with Jean-Pierre Cuomo, refined her designs, and the boat builder Sichan Phongsavath and his team at the boatyard in Luang Prabang built the vessel. The boat was blessed in a ceremony at the stairs of Vat Xieng Thong on the Mekong, on October 9, 2006, by Phra Acharn One Keo Sitthivong, five monks, and three novices as well as more than fifty participants. The boat will be completed by April 2007.

DINH Q. LÊ and NITHAKHONG SOMSANITH exhibit three large works— *The Banners of Luang Prabang*, *Inner Self and Outer World*, and *The Blessing of the Land*—that they developed during their collaboration with the anthropologist Catherine Choron-Baix. On their first visit to Luang Prabang in February 2005, they were struck by what they perceived to be a city under the pressure to modernize, yet stay the same. They met again in January 2006. Their works feature motifs that are part of the city’s everyday life, such as funeral banners and satellite dishes that explore the coexistence of tradition and modernity. These motifs were embroidered in silver and gold thread onto silk by Somsanith, one of the few practitioners of the tradition of gold-thread embroidery, which he learned in Luang Prabang from his family.



The Lao-born **VONG PHAOPHANIT** with his collaborator Claire Obussier came with their family for the month of April 2006 to work on their 35-minute film.



He presents the film, titled *All that is solid melts into air (Karl Marx)*, which he produced with Claire Obussier. Although Phaophanit was born in Savannakhet, in southern Laos, his first visit to Luang Prabang was in 2005, when he came under the auspices of *The Quiet in the Land*. During his two visits, he shot footage for the film, which is built as a collage of images and sounds of the city. He sought to explore the minutiae of the city, touching on intimacy and on that which we normally might not notice. An antidote to the tradition of didactic documentary film-making, the film features a poetic narrative written by Obussier that is spoken in Lao.

ALLAN SEKULA presents *A Short Film for Laos*, a 40-minute digital



video, with color, sound, and Lao subtitles, which is on continuous view in one of the museum's galleries. He came to Luang Prabang for the second time in January 2006. In January 2005, he had visited and filmed at the Plain of Jars, a series of archaeological sites on the Xieng Khouang Plateau in Laos containing thousands of huge stone jars—one of the most heavily bombed regions in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War and littered with metal detritus. Following the story of the metal, he subsequently filmed the blacksmiths of

Ban Had Hien, a village near Luang Prabang whose economy largely depends on the production of metal implements in spite of increasingly stiff competition from imported factory-made tools. In the film, he writes, “the story of the war and the ‘mystery of the jars’ begins to intertwine. An ancient civilization forged an electrical connection to the sky and a secret magnetism brought American bombers to earth, where they were refashioned into spoons.”

SHAHZIA SIKANDER exhibits two series of works, *Portraits* and *Sinxay* that she produced over the course of two visits to Luang Prabang. Sikander

came for the second time in July to complete her two works. Both series are influenced by elements of the city's everyday life and visual culture, especially their ephemeral aspects. These elements include the important presence of the monks and novices; the labor of rituals and ceremonies, such as the making of flower and food offerings; the wall murals, stencils, and sculptural elements of the temples; and the great epics of Lao literature, such as the story of Sinxay.



For the *Portraits*,



composed of seven portraits, she took photographs of Phra Acharn One Keo Sitthivong (the Abbot of Vat Pakkhone and Vat Xieng Thong and the Director of the Buddhist Schools in Luang Prabang), as well as of six monks and twelve novices from both monasteries, to capture each face. She also spent time with the novices explaining and

demonstrating the works' technique. Afterward, she made portraits based on the photographs in the style of photorealism. Requiring solitary patience, each portrait took a few days of intense labor with various graphite pencils.

Sinxay is composed of eight paintings on paper inspired by Sinxay, the epic poem by Pangkham, a masterpiece of Lao literature. Having worked in depth with the tradition and techniques of Indo-Persian miniature painting, she was particularly excited to recognize the visual links in the Lao mythological iconography to Hindu religious narratives.

OTHER RESIDENCIES

In March, we had the third visit of **JUN NGUYEN-HATSUSHIBA** with his assistant Lam to continue his film *The Ground, the Root, and the Air: The Passing of the Bodhi Tree*, a collaboration with students from the Luang Prabang Fine Arts School. Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba came for the fourth time with his crew to film the last scene of his film in October 2006. This scene was made possible with the financial support of Mizuma Gallery in Japan and Lehmann Maupin Gallery in New York.

The Ground, the Root, and the Air: The Passing of the Bodhi Tree

is a short film made by *Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba* with the participation of a group of art students from the Luang Prabang Fine Arts School. The story begins with a gathering of about fifty students at the stadium to warm up in preparation for a jog around the track. Attempting to explore the pattern of the shifting values of youth in this region of the world, the film is divided into two chapters: *The Ground* and *The Air*, with an interlude titled *The Root*.

The Backdrop - Tourism, the Internet and Thai media widely present in Laos, promote the "active" lifestyle as a means to success and opportunity. Sports and pop culture are becoming trendy stimuli for youths in Southeast Asia. Global social and cultural significance of brands like Nike, extend beyond the mere athletic value of its products.

The geographic location of Laos places it squarely within the engine of globalization. Laos is presently collaborating with surrounding developing nations in infrastructure and development projects and is strengthening its position in ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). Just above the border is China, which has



experienced exponential economic growth. Its influence is rapidly expanding beyond economics and prompting the world to understand it as a new kind of world power.

Within the context of the expansion of Chinese markets as far as the quiet city of Luang Prabang, Nike's marketing strategy of globalization has been unsuspectingly challenged by various imitations of its swoosh logo and branded shoe designs. The most perfected imitation of all is Meike, a Chinese company with its own product line, advertising campaigns, and branded website, available at <http://www.meike-shoes.com>. Will the Chinese take over the world with styles that they are producing for the feet of billions?

The opening chapter of the film *The Ground* begins with about fifty runners preparing to jog around the track of Luang Prabang's sports stadium. Each runner was supplied with running gear, including a pair of Meike running shoes.

This chapter portrays the self-motivation necessary for conditioning the mind and the body, the commitment of the runners, the desire for opportunity and success. The stadium is a microcosm, and the act of running around the track is a metaphor for the pace at which Lao society is struggling to train to rise.

Interspersed between and during the two chapters are short sequences depicting the traditional lanterns featured during the annual Festival of Light in Luang Prabang. The lantern sequences signify the other

experience of time that Lao society has lived for so many generations. In contrast to the stadium, the fragility of the slow-turning lanterns evokes the mystery of the location and the power that remains in Buddhist ritual to this day.

The chapter titled *The Air* closes the film with a downstream journey on the Mekong River with the same group of students, painters, each of whom occupying a small, simple, roofless boat with a boatman navigating.

In contrast to the first chapter, which portrays the idea of microcosm, this chapter portrays that of macrocosm: an invisible linear timeline signified by the mono-directional current given by nature. The flow does not stop, drifting the fifty or so painters downstream. What they pass will not be revisited. What they attempt to paint shifts across in grace, slowly and surely vanishing from view, allowing them only to romanticize the details of the moment.

The final scene filmed on location at Vat Sing, a monastery where a large Bodhi tree stands tall by the river shore. As locations and moments are left behind by the flow of the river, so this symbol of Buddhism gradually fades away from the view of the painters, leaving them with some measure of doubt about the journey they have started.

Hopeless and uncertain, the culminating frustrations force some of them to make a sudden gesture to swim back to the Bodhi tree, abandoning their boats, while other painters just go with the flow, dazed.

This particular scene may take the audience away from a more predictable conclusion: it is the painters who swim back to the tree who wake us up to the urgency of their challenged heritage.

In July-August, **MARINA ABRAMOVIC** came for the first time to begin her project.



EDUCATION PROGRAM

The project organized or hosted several education activities.

The project welcomed in January a study trip of 15 students from **The School of the Art Institute of Chicago** with Dr. Carol Becker to work with the Luang Prabang Fine Arts School and The Quiet in the Land.

Visits and lectures at the Luang Prabang National Museum are organized from January to July 2007 by the staff of The Quiet in the Land on the museum and the contemporary art exhibitions for Luang Prabang schools and Universities.



On the occasion of **Boun Ok Phansa**, a second year of financial contributions helped to develop the artistic abilities of the monks and novices for the decorations of this festival.

First Steps of Vipassana Meditation: A

Guide for the Young People of Laos, by Sathou One Keo Siththivong and Hans Georg Berger was published in 2006. Ten thousand copies are being distributed as a Dhamma gift to students in all the provinces in Laos in 2007 by the National Library of Laos.



Financial support was provided for the third **Vipassana (Buddhist Meditation)** retreat held in December 2006.

Two large-scale **posters** for the exhibitions at the Luang Prabang National Museum were printed in 2006, many of which are still distributed to Lao families, schools and universities in Luang Prabang.

Hans Georg Berger published a **leaflet** and a fully illustrated **book** on his exhibition as part of The Quiet in the Land, titled *The Floating Buddha*, thanks to the financial support of the German Embassy in Vientiane and the German government.

ACTIVITIES FOR 2007 AND 2008

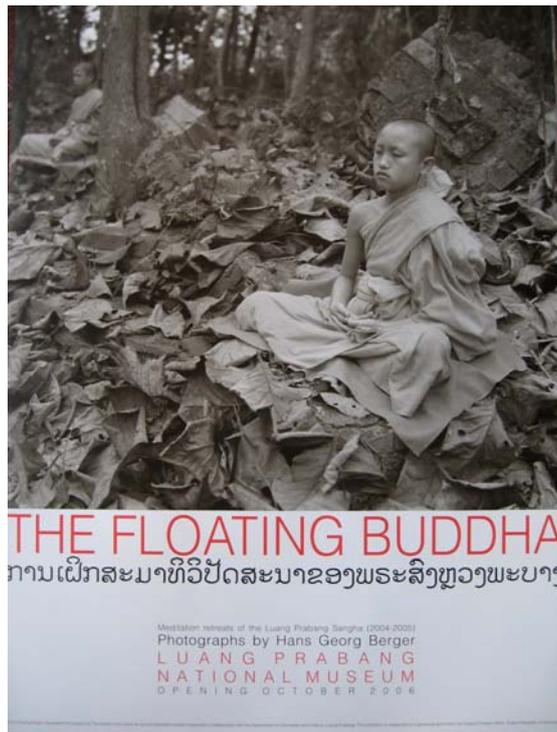
In March 2007, we will present at the Luang Prabang National Museum, the video project of **JUN NGUYEN-HATSUSHIBA** entitled *The Ground, the Root, and the Air: The Passing of the Bodhi Tree*

At the request of the Department of Information and Culture of Luang Prabang, the series of **exhibitions** at the Luang Prabang National Museum will be extended for three more months, until the end of July 2007.

In 2007 and 2008, we will also develop and complete the art projects of **MARINA ABRAMOVIC, CAI GUO-QIANG, SHIRIN NESHAT** and **RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA**.

The Quiet in the Land **publication** will be completed in 2008.

Special thanks to Francis Engelmann for his collaboration in editing this newsletter.



ABOUT *THE QUIET IN THE LAND*



The Quiet in the Land is inviting from 2004 to 2008 more than 35 artists and educators from Laos, the Mekong Region, and elsewhere to visit Luang Prabang to collaborate with a wide range of local community members. The collaborative projects open up for questioning broad social and cultural categories such as art, craft, heritage, tradition, and religion to envision how the creative process can be used to address poverty, displacement, the loss of tradition, and the other effects of globalization and to reveal how the preservation and development of local cultural traditions can be a source not only of such intangibles as pride in local identities, but of sustainable development that could

enrich the livelihoods of excluded persons..

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.

The Quiet in the Land presents a wide range of programs, including exhibitions, publications, and other initiatives, to help foster diverse artistic traditions, cultural vitality, understanding and communication, and the potential of contemporary artists as catalysts of positive change.

The following foundations and individuals have contributed to our third project in Laos. For the project in Luang Prabang, it has received the support of the American Center Foundation; the Asian Cultural Council; Lorenz Bäumer; the Culture Envoys Program of the U.S. Department of State and the American Embassy in Vientiane; John Alan Farmer; the Federal Foreign Office, Federal Republic of Germany and the German Embassy in Vientiane; Ken Freed; the Henry Luce Foundation; the Jim Thompson Foundation; Sean Kelly; the Open Society Institute; Cecile Panzieri, Keith Recker; Ruby Shang, Brent Sikkema; the Thin Man Fund, and Gerard C. Wertkin.

The Quiet in the Land in Luang Prabang is funded in part through the sale of the limited edition portfolio. The portfolio has been published in October 2006 as an edition of fifty, numbered I to 50, plus sixteen hors commerce (HC), numbered I to XVI, for the artists and the author, and two Printer's proofs. Each portfolio includes twelve photographic diptychs (twenty-four 11 x 14 in. [28 x 35.5 cm] produced specifically for the project by twelve of the participating artists). Each diptych signed by the artist. The photographs are presented in a case in silk designed by Carol Cassidy. The case's clasp is designed by Lorenz Bäumer.

For information www.thequietintheland.org