(DE)CONTEXTUALISING BUDDHIST AESTHETICS

Vichaya Mukdamanee

Ruskin School of Art

St Hugh's College

University of Oxford

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Abstract

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(De)contextualising Buddhist Aesthetics is a practice-led artistic research project focusing on the interchanging transition between Buddhist and artistic practices. Essentially inspired by the concept of *vipassanā* meditation, I created a series of performances involving repetitive actions centring on the tasks of re-arranging readymade objects into multiple precarious configurations. Many exercises challenge the laws of gravity and other physical limitations of objects, as well as encouraging the learning experience through the process of trial and error. During the course of mindful observation of the performing body and objects, the mental state gradually gains moments of stillness and silence, which approach the meaning of emptiness (*suññatā*) in Buddhism. Repeated failures generate intermittent feelings of exhaustion and disappointment, which naturally become part of the progress, and can be personally used to develop insight into the notions of impermanence and the non-self derived from *dhamma* (Buddhist teachings). The video and photography documentations were edited and altered to generate a visual experience that echoes my thoughts and feelings developed during the proceedings; these moving images later inspired other series of hand-made artworks, including collages, drawings and paintings on paper and canvas, exhibited as part of the installations. Various techniques were applied so these objective components resonate a comparative experience of uncontrollability and controllability: dynamic and stillness, fast pace and slow rhythm, abstract and representation. Some two-dimensional pieces are transformed to three-dimensional and their displays keep changing from location to location, and from time to time, in conjunction with an unstable state of the mind. All artworks were created in various formats and interrelate and inform each other. They act together as evidence of the endless journey of artistic learning, which also mirrors the concept of self-learning in Buddhist meditation.

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there were many down moments during these three years. Some were painful and unbearable. Without my family, I would not have been able to get through them. My utmost gratitude goes to my parents, Vichoke and Nopporn Mukdamanee, and to my wife, Somkamol Mukdmanee, and my daughter, Natee Mukdamanee, for joining me on these adventures. Lastly, I would like to thank my beloved son, We Mukdamanee, for giving me precious happiness and teaching me to become stronger. This research would not come this far without all of you being part of my life.

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List of Images: Artworks and Exhibitions

Note on Non-English Texts and Translation

Technical Buddhist terms appear in a transliterated form of the original Pali. These terms are italicised. As there is no standard transliteration for Thai, Thai words appear in transcription, and are also italicised except in the case of names. However, quotations are rendered according to the originals. I also refer to many texts originally written in the Thai language. If the texts have already been translated into English in the original source, only the English translation is quoted, and I also remark the translators' names in the references if available. However, in many cases, the translators are not indicated. In cases where English translations were not given I undertook my own translation after citing the original Thai versions, and include my name as the translator in the footnotes. These quoted Thai texts are not italicised.

Introduction

Artistic Research as an On-Going Practice

The idea for *(De)contextualising Buddhist Aesthetics* began with my interest in the relationship between art and research and the characteristics they share with personal learning. As an artist, I realised long ago that not everything in my art practice can be planned ahead. Sometimes, knowledge can be gained along the way as an on-going process, which can lead the research into unexpected directions or approaches. As Estelle Barrett, an Australian professor in the field of creative arts research and visual cultures, writes in the introduction of her co-edited book with Barbara Bolt, *Practice as Research Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*: '[…] within the context of studio-based research, innovation is derived from methods that cannot always be pre-determined, and "outcomes" of artistic research are necessarily unpredictable'.[1] Therefore, to pursue practice-led artistic research, it seems impossible to follow a rigid, pre-determined research question and method. Art itself is about exploring unknown territories, inventing practices, and challenging the expectations of audiences and artists themselves.

Many kinds of artwork, including my own, cannot be pre-sketched most of the time; the finished artwork remains unknown to me until it reveals itself during the working process. Some works of art are not even meant to be finished, but rather to remain in endless process. In her essay "In A Language You Don't Understand", published in *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think,* the contemporary art curator Elizabeth Fisher considers Donald Barthelme's well-known essay, "Not Knowing", published in 1987: 'The not knowing is crucial to art, is what permits art to be made. […] without the possibility of

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[1]. Estelle Barrett, "Introduction," in *Practice as Research Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry,* by Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (New York: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd., 2014), 3.

having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there would be no invention'.[2] This is why I have been interested in the possibility of designing the method of my artistic research in a flexible manner, to allow the journey of experiencing, experimenting and studying through kinds of not-knowing conditions. The principal subject matter forms the root of the research topic, from which the rest of the research elements can branch out and develop according to the guidance of the learning experience itself. Although the research questions and problem need to be stated in advance, they are designed to be open to necessary changes. The research method has the flexibility to allow for developments in both concept and technique. In this way, in addition to the final artwork produced, my artistic concept and technique have progressed and evolved throughout the research process, becoming essential parts of my research context and output.

Theravāda Buddhism as an Animating Principle

Theravāda literally means 'doctrine of the elders'. It claims to be the oldest living interpretation of Buddhism, and it professes strict reliance on teachings and rules to regulate the community of monks in accordance with the Pali Canon, the orthodox Buddhist corpus established by the First Council, a meeting of senior monks shortly after the Buddha (i.e. Siddhārtha Gautama) passed away in the 5th century BCE. Theravāda was originally one sect of a larger grouping called Hīnayāna or the 'Small Vehicle;' this name was invented along with its counter-grouping, Mahāyāna, the 'Great Vehicle.' Theravāda came to dominate and ultimately substitute for Hīnayāna, with the two – Theravāda and Mahāyāna defining themselves against each other. For the purposes of this dissertation, it should also be noted that an important distinction between Mahāyāna and Theravāda is in terms of soteriology: in Mahāyāna many beings – Buddhas (enlightened beings) and Buddhas-to-be (*bodhisattva)* can be appealed to for assistance in reaching salvation; in

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[2]. Elizabeth Fisher, "In A Language You Don't Understand," in *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think,* by Elizabeth Fisher and Rebecca Fortnum (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2013), 8.

Theravāda emphasis is placed on the historical Buddha, and, in theory, the practitioner is him or herself solely responsible for obtaining salvation. This point, key to differences in Theravāda and Mahāyāna, is equally important for understanding tensions within Theravāda itself, which often pivot around an investment in the human, individual capacity versus that of the supernatural or divine.

Theravāda Buddhism in Thailand, especially certain forms of meditation integral to contemporary practices in Thailand, interests me mainly because of its concept of self-purification, as well as its tradition of learning-by-doing, which parallels the endless journey of learning in which I aim to engage through my practice-led artistic research. Some forms of Theravadin meditation exemplify the generation of knowledge through the process of practicing. Theravadin meditation can be explained into two different modes of practice, called '*samatha*' and '*vipassanā*'. *Samatha* meditation focuses on the concentration of mind or *samādhi.* It is the mental state of mindfulness, balance and steadiness, which can be reached only by self-training through consistent mind practice, or *bhāvanā*. *Vipassanā* meditation targets a different goal that is to gain 'knowledge' or 'wisdom'. Paravahera Vajirañāṇa Mahāthera, a monk from Sri Lanka who was invited to study for a PhD at Cambridge University during the 1930s, wrote in his book *Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice* (1962) that: 'In the doctrine of meditation the term [*vipassanā*] signifies the whole system designed to induce that "insight," with or without the practice of the Samādhi method.'[3] Using these interpretations as inspiration, I have striven to explore *vipassanā* meditation in my personal art practice. Although the artwork may derive from the mental state of concentration, the main purpose is to 'learn' from the process and generate forms of knowledge that intertwine concepts and practices of Buddhism and Art.

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[3]. Paravahera Vajirañāṇa Mahāthera, *Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice* (Colombo: M. D. Gunasena & Co., Ltd., 1962), 22.

The goal of meditation is subjective, remaining unknown to each individual meditant until it reveals itself during the course of the action. Teachers can only guide meditation as they deem appropriate for individual apprentices. The process of observing and exploring the existence and relationship of mind and body happens inside each person. Joanna Cook, a writer and lecturer in anthropology and religion, explains the essence of the subjective experience of meditation in *Meditation in Modern Buddhism* thus: 'I argue that ascetic practice gains its force as the mean by which individual monastics develop subjective processes of interiority within the context of the monastic community, which ultimately lead to the removal of individuality.'[4] Cook also links other forms of mindful practices she was taught during her experience at a Buddhist monastery in Thailand as ways to 'learn' meditation. She further writes 'These Buddhist renunciates learn to recognise the principles of Buddhism in their bodies and in their minds. Of interest to me were the ways in which people learn to use cognitive concepts to interpret their experience and response.'[5] If there is going to be any kind of knowledge or experience arising from the meditation, the individual meditator is the only one who can recognise it along the performing journey. I find this explanation of meditation very resonant with how I articulate the development of my art practice, whereby I am a practitioner who discovers, learns, and interprets everything subjectively, and my personal wisdom cannot be compared with that of others.

The research focuses on Theravāda Buddhism as the essential subject matter, which dovetails into the intimate association between this religion and the notion of Thai-ness. Although Theravāda Buddhism is not officially proclaimed to be the national religion of Thailand, its practice has clearly been recognised as the state religion and animating principle of Thai civilization for a millennium, with the majority of Thais identifying

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[4]. Joanna Cook, Meditation in Modern Buddhism: Renunciation and Change in Thai Monastic Life (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 13.
[5]. Cook, 9.

themselves as Buddhists. The three colours of the national flag, red, white and blue, symbolise the nation (land and people), religion and the monarchy (respectively). In spite of the fact that this white colour represents all religions that Thais believe in, Buddhism is clearly the most influential one. In contemporary Thailand, the presence of Buddhism can be detected in almost everything, including economic policy, tourism strategy, diplomatic planning, and domestic politics. Theravāda Buddhist teaching is widely applied as a form of philosophy embedded in many aspects of the ways Thais think and live their lives.

In terms of art, Buddhism remains one of the most popular sources of narratives represented through various forms of art created by Thai artists. Thai traditional Buddhist art, such as temple murals and Buddha sculptures, have been created as tools to convey *dhamma* (the teachings of Buddha) to a larger audience. They can also be seen as the symbolic representation of the identity of Thai culture. Many contemporary artists nowadays return to these traditional Buddhist art forms and narratives, and some artists create work to preserve traditional Buddhist art and techniques, while others add their own style and character or apply Buddhist teaching to their artistic practice to create 'new' Buddhist art. No matter which techniques or styles are used, many continue to see the content of Buddhism represented through art as a reflection of the faith and goodness of Thai society. Many also recognise these contemporary artworks as the way to revive tradition and bring Thai-ness back to life. The relationship between art and the context of Buddhism is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Constructing Artistic Language

(De)contextualising Buddhist Aesthetics pursues a dialogue between the process of creating artwork and the practice of Buddhist meditation to examine the research methodology of 'learning-by-doing' that happens and develops during the research process. I am interested in the blurry boundaries where Buddhism and Buddhist meditation merge into Thai culture at large and daily life. Buddhism is the motivation behind my artistic

creation, but I do not create artwork to illustrate the Buddhist narrative or the *dhamma* teaching. Rather, I see Buddhism as a mode of practice that leads individual practitioners to create their own interpretations based on actual personal experiences. Therefore, I generate certain 'performing actions' and 'activities' that I have found can be used to reflect and uncover what Buddhism describes as emptiness, the conditioned-unconditioned, thing-nothing, permanence-impermanence, and self-selfless. I use my artistic research to explain that such concepts might not be able to be thoroughly portrayed by any conditioned elements, shapes, colours, or objects, but can be observed through personal experience when the person encounters and continually concentrates on a repetitive action for a certain period of time. It can be said that my personal analysis of certain aspects of Buddhist teaching and meditation do not appear as art forms or representational narratives, but rather become part of the grammar I use to construct my artistic language.

The grammar of my visual artistic language employed in *(De)contextualising Buddhist Aesthetics* has developed and progressed throughout the period of three years since this research began in 2013. The changes mainly come from the on-going learning experience of interacting with my own artwork, encountering the artwork of others, and exploring various reading materials about Theravāda Buddhism, Buddhist meditation, and their connections with Thai contemporary art practice. The continuing and open-ended learning journey encourages me to keep re-contextualising, over and over again, my knowledge about Thai Buddhism, especially its ideologies and practices, the understandings in Thai contemporary art associated with Buddhism in many different aspects and levels, and, essentially, how I see myself and interpret my own position in the complicated relationship between art and religion.

The 'new' knowledge constantly added into my personal experience enables me to intellectually connect my research project with things and situations I confront in everyday life. Some of the work by other artists and some of the reading materials cited in my

project might not show a clear association with the concepts of Buddhism and Buddhist meditation, but they have influenced my artistic practice greatly, through dialogue with my own work on Buddhism. They are substantial ingredients that have nourished my artistic research and my self. In addition to relevant materials referred to in the main text of my written component, a full list of relevant resources that I have studied and used in conducting this artistic research project is given in the selected bibliography at the end of this document.

The first chapter, entitled "Thai Contemporary Art with Buddhist Contexts", talks about a mural painting at Buddhapadipa Temple in London, followed by selected contemporary artworks created by five Thai contemporary artists associated with Buddhist contexts, including work by Chalood Nimsamer, Vichai Sitthiratn, Ithipol Tangchalok, Montien Boonma and Kamin Lertchaiprasert. Together, it could be said that I used these artworks as a platform from which to depart in my own work. By focusing on their different artistic techniques, I examine the varied ways in which some Thai artists use their artworks to reflect their personal perceptions regarding the meaning of Buddhism and its teachings. Through their work, I am able to develop my own understanding regarding certain aspects of connections between art and context of Theravāda Buddhism, concepts of Theravadin meditation, and how some examples of so-called Buddhist art is possibly manifested in Thailand nowadays. In addition to the example artworks and their analysis, there is also some contextual background of Theravadin Buddhist concepts and culture, which I feel it necessary to explain in order to enable those unfamiliar with this tradition to approach the work, especially for those unfamiliar with contemporary Thai 'Buddhist' art.

The second chapter, "(De)contextualising Buddhist Aesthetics", is the main content of the discursive component of the work, in which I explore the experiences that particularly affected me and my artistic practice in this research journey, mainly using a diary-style format to reflect the progress of my artistic practice and research methodology,

and to emphasise the phenomenology of lived experience when interacting with artwork by myself and others. The chapter records the reasons for making the artwork, the development of concepts, and the improvement of technique during each period of research. It also lays out the connection between my artistic research methodology and practice inspired by Buddhist practice and philosophy.

Another important element in the second chapter is the analysis of referenced works of art, artists and reading materials that together helped me shape the research. However, unlike the way most diaries record events in a chronicle, my research written component edits the timeline of my research experience into several sub-chapters based on different aspects of how my body interacts with the artwork. These sub-chapters include "Body and Emptiness", "Body and Tasks", "Body and Self-Learning", "Body from Video to Hand-Made Artwork: Two-Dimensional Objects", "Body from Video to Hand-Made Artwork: Three-Dimensional Objects", and lastly" Becoming My Own Audience". Images of artworks to which I refer are inserted within the texts. In addition, there are more images of artworks and exhibitions appended after the conclusion. Video pieces are included in the DVD attached inside the back cover of this thesis. All videos have been converted into MP4 format with a reduced file size to be compressed onto one DVD. Their resolution is acceptable for viewing on computer screens only.

Just as my artwork under the *(De)contextualising Buddhist Aesthetics* project functions as a record of the on-going practice, the written component comprises documentation of my learning journey over a certain period of time. It is also worth mentioning here that the written component also has a life of its own; as the writing is produced, it helps me to crystallise my ideas and adds additional elements, and sometimes even alters the way I see my own art practice. There is something I do not see during my practice in the studio but which is revealed during the process of writing. It is truly a

‘written component’ in the sense that it becomes an integral part of my project alongside the artworks, rather than being an extrinsic commentary.

The end of the research project, for me, is not the end of the journey; it is but another turning point where I learn from the past and move into the future. The goal of my research project is not to produce perfect artwork that can best portray the concept of Thai Buddhist philosophy, but rather how to explore Buddhism as an intellectual resource to generate an unending process of questioning that keeps me active as an artist and provides lively engagement with the creation of my artwork. In other words, *(De)contextualising Buddhist Aesthetics* evidences how Buddhist philosophy operates in merging my art and my research together as one life experience.

Chapter One: Thai Contemporary Art with Buddhist Contexts

In this chapter, I will explore in more detail regarding certain aspects of how Thai contemporary artists draw from Buddhist contexts by examining selected examples of artworks. These artworks are specifically chosen not because of their thematic approaches to Buddhist contexts, but rather how each one significantly serves as a very important part of a platform where *(De)contextualising Buddhist Aesthetics* artistic practice emerges. The investigation concentrates on how I, as an artist, view the work and extract particular information that can be applied as the background knowledge for conducting my artistic research and making interchanging connections between Buddhism and art. However, the examples mentioned in this chapter in no way represent the whole picture of Thai Buddhist art. It must also be noted that the selected artworks do not represent the entire artistic careers of these particular artists, many of whom have created works using various techniques of much more complexity than suggested by this cursory analysis. I cite certain works here because my research project focuses on finding possible 'techniques' that artists can use in order to apply *dhamma* into their artistic practice. I am interested in transformations between the realm of religion and the realm of art, rather than Buddhism's connection with politics, society and cultural critique. I therefore use this group of selected artists and explore some pieces of their work by focusing on their technical approach, especially aspects that these artists have learned from tradition, and ways in which they mix such knowledge with artistic skill, style, and concepts to generate 'new' visual languages.

My selection starts with the murals at Buddhapadipa Temple in London. This is an example illustrating a close technical relationship between contemporary art and Buddhism,

as the work is located inside a religious space. After this, I turn my focus to contemporary Buddhist artwork shown in art spaces by examining Chalood Nimsamer's two-dimensional representational art, sculptures and installation works by Vichai Sitthiratn, and abstract paintings by Ithipol Tangchalok. Lastly, I end my selection with sculptures/installations by Montien Boonma and Kamin Lertchaiprasert as an example of how artists can completely turn away from Buddhist narratives and forms, and create other kinds of connections with Buddhism. In Boonma's case, he uses artwork to generate spiritual and meditative experience inspired by his personal understanding of Buddhism, while Lertchaiprasert chooses to apply philosophy to the artistic practice.

The range of artworks mentioned in this chapter includes two-dimensional, three-dimensional and installation pieces. The intention is not to say that these are the only media and techniques generally used in Thai Buddhist art nowadays; the purpose is actually to explain that Thai artists deal with the Buddhist context in various disciplines, and these works are just a small example of that variety. The most important point is that these artists have also continually used 'Buddhism' as the principal concept of their artwork. With the exception of Montien Boonma, who passed away in 2000, and Chalood Nimsamer, who passed away in 2015, these artists still actively create artwork that deals with the context of Buddhism and remain important figures in the Thai art scene in general.

In addition, I also need to mention that the artists used as examples in this chapter, except Montien Boonma and Kamin Lertchaiprasert, were all awarded the laureate title of National Artist, in different years, by the Department of Cultural Promotion of Thailand's Ministry of Culture (Chalood Nimsamer in 1998, Itipol Tangchalok in 2008, Chalermchai Kositpipat in 2011, Panya Vijintanasarn in 2014, and Vichai Sitthiratn in 2015). According to the honouring statement of Thai National Artists:

> 'ทรัพยากรบุคคลสำคัญทางด้านศิลปะที่ได้สืบสานงานศิลปะของชาติให้เชื่อมโยงจากอดีตมาสู่ปัจจุบัน เป็นการถ่ายทอดภูมิปัญญาของบรรพบุรุษในอดีต ให้มีความรุ่งโรจน์สืบไปยังอนาคตข้างหน้า'

> (The significant human resource in the field of art, who perpetuates the art of the nation from the past to present, which is an incredible way to pass on the great knowledge from antecedents to the bright future).[6]

It can be stated that these artists' practices and artwork comprise an official narrative that forms part of a national knowledge and narrative that is approved by the Thai government. As Poshyananda writes in the foreword of Boonma's retrospective exhibition catalogue *Death Before Dying: The Return of Montien Boonma* held in 2005, five years after the artist's death, Boonma's work was also considered a landmark in Thai contemporary art: 'Although Boonma did not live to fully appreciate his international reputation, his artistic achievement has placed him among the echelon of Asian contemporary masters.'[7] Although Lertchaiprasert is the youngest of this selected group, his works have been shown widely in Thailand and abroad, and are included in the collections of major museums and galleries such as the Guggenheim Museum, Queensland Art Gallery and Singapore Art Museum. These artists are considered to be among the most influential contemporary artists of the nation that deal with the context of Buddhism. Together, their artwork represents not the whole, but a significant part of Thai art, at least in the perception of many domestic audiences.

There are of course many other Thai contemporary artists whose work (in whole or in part) has been linked to Buddhist contexts, including internationally acclaimed Thai artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook and Manit Sriwanichpoom. However, they are not referenced here because their artworks seem to pay more attention to situating Buddhism in the context of political conflict, wielding it as a symbol of differentiation depending on socio-economic status, educational background and political opinions, which as I mentioned earlier are not the main focus of this artistic research project.

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6. *Thai National Artist*. Department of Cultural Promotion, Ministry of Culture, 1 May 2016, http://art.culture.go.th.
7. Apinan Poshyananda, "Forward", in *Death Before Dying: The Return of Montien Boonma* (Bangkok: Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Ministry of Culture, Thailand, 2005), 9.

Wat Buddhapadipa Murals & Thai Neotraditional Art

The push and pull balance between preserving tradition and inventing the 'new' artistic style interestingly appears in the murals at Wat Buddhapadipa, a Thai temple located in Wimbledon, London. These murals were created between 1984 and 1992 by Chalermchai Kositpipat (b. 1955) and Panya Vijintanasarn (b. 1956), along with 30 other artists who volunteered to work on the project. Although the murals maintained the same Buddhist narratives found in many temples in Thailand, their design, composition, technique, and some character details definitely express the inspiration the artists received from the modern art world.

Thai traditional murals portray humans, animals, objects, and architecture in a two-dimensional style, without the concept of perspective. Colours are simply filled into the flattened forms without the shading of light and shadow. The depth of pictures is created by placing objects in front of each other. However, no matter where the objects are placed, they are all depicted in the same size. The stories in traditional paintings are usually separated into multiple but continuous episodes, each of which is illustrated in one particular area of the painting (e.g. in the lawn or around a palace), separated from other stories by rows of trees, city walls, or a traditional zigzag line called a *Sin-Thao*. Sometimes artists use the area placed in front of another to indicate an episode that happened earlier.

The fundamental narratives illustrated in Thai traditional murals include the history of the Buddha, especially the scenes of his birth, enlightenment (or the scene of the defeat of the demons), and his death. There are also the stories of *Jataka*, which are tales of the Lord Buddha's former incarnations, the most popular of which are the last ten births before he was born as King Siddhartha. The stories are recalled to represent the ten kinds of perfection, or *barami*, that the Buddha had greatly accomplished and eventually led him to his final live in which he could approach *nibbāna*. Another favourite is the classical

literary text, *Traiphum* or the *Three Worlds*, a Thai Buddhist cosmological text detailing a broader Buddhist cosmology. In addition to these narratives, Thai artists often depict the daily lives of the people in the background of the painting reflecting the traditions, culture, and rituals of Thai Buddhist society in different periods of time. Since mural painting is the essential form of Thai traditional painting, we might be able to say that the main purpose of Thai traditional painting, besides decorating religious architecture, is to illustrate, interpret, and explain the meanings of the sacred stories, and their relationship with the society. Anthropologist and folklorist Sandra Cate writes in *Making Merit, Making Art: A Thai Temple in Wimbledon*:

> While authoritative texts exist in Theravada Buddhism, such texts come alive to serve particular purposes and attain new meanings through specific acts of translation, within contested structures of authority, and though particular modes of transmission or performance in social context. Here mural painting is a textual practice as much as a social one.[8]

The murals at Wat Buddhapadipa carry on with the forms and contents familiar from traditional Thai Buddhist murals, despite the artists inserting many new creations and 'modern style'. The mixture of the new elements is not intended by the artists to supplant the traditional but to supplement them, manifesting a new age of Buddhist murals that iterates the synergy of Thai tradition and globalisation. The new elements are consciously superficial, while the essential purpose and concept of the murals remains rooted in tradition, such as the didactic use of charming pictorial images to narrate Buddha's life and philosophy to people with various levels of knowledge about Buddhism and its teachings. The pictures trigger personal ways of interpretation and generate new meanings.

For example, in the realms of earth and heaven, the artists deliberately fused contemporary elements with traditional style in their paintings. However, the heaven scene is kept in a classical composition by generally maintaining 'the formal poses, gestures,

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[8]. Sandra Cate, *Making Merit, Making Art: A Thai temple in Wimbledon* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 13.

costumes, and positions of divine and mortal beings in the Thai cosmic hierarchy as muralists have painted for centuries'.[9] The three-dimensional images of figures and objects, some even painted in photorealistic style, are intermingled and blended into the world of flatness of traditional murals. The colour of the forms and the atmosphere of these murals appeared to be more vivid and more vibrant than traditional ones, since the artists used acrylic paint rather than following the old technique that used natural pigments mixed with a binder made from gum Arabic. Many are painted with distinctive character so they can be recognised. For example, the murals include images of Thai kings as well as leaders from other countries, contemporary buildings and landmarks, commercial and popular icons, weapons, and the portraits of artists and patrons of the murals project.

The front cover of the book *Making Merit, Making Art: A Thai Temple in Wimbledon*, shows a detail image of *The Defeat of Mara* scene (Fig. 1), taken by photographer Andy Whale, which is a part of the mural located on the wall of the entrance door opposite the presiding Buddha Image. In addition to the illustrations of demons depicted in Thai traditional style and costume, the scene includes images of Vincent van Gogh, a NASA space shuttle, and a modern aeroplane. According to art writer Andrew J. West in *Thai Neotraditional Art*, while Vijintanasarn depicted contemporary world leaders such as Ronald Reagan and Muammar Gaddafi, and figures from the history of art such as Mona Lisa and a portrait of Vincent van Gogh, 'Chalermchai likewise included several contemporary elements such as a depiction of Margaret Thatcher and the Eiffel Tower in his rendering of Three Worlds.' Illustration *Plate 31* by photographer Robert Gumpert, published in the same book by Cate (Fig. 2), shows the detail of the *Traiphum* (three worlds) scene that West describes. Persian nobles, a Christian angel, Margaret Thatcher, and a group of elderly English women appear within a crowd of Thai people and angels portrayed in Thai traditional style. All of them are sitting on the earthy ground looking at

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[9]. Cate, 90.

the scene of Hell, the underground world appearing in the middle lower part of the mural. As mentioned earlier, Thai Kings and the royal family also appear in the Wat Buddhapadipa murals, for example in *The First Sermon* scene on the right side wall of the chapel. *Plate 29* in the same book is a detail image of this particular section (Fig. 3). In this picture, the muralists depicted Khun Sawet, one of the main patrons of Wat Buddhapadipa murals, and his wife paying respect to King Rama IX (King Bhumiphol Adulyadej).

Fig. 1: Panya Vijintanasarn. *The Defeat of Mara* [detail of Wat Buddhapadipa murals], 1984 - 1992.

In: Sandra Cate, *Making Merit, Making Art: A Thai temple in Wimbledon*
(Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003)

Fig. 2: Chalermchai Kositpipat. *Three Worlds* [detail of Wat Buddhapadipa murals], 1984 - 1992.

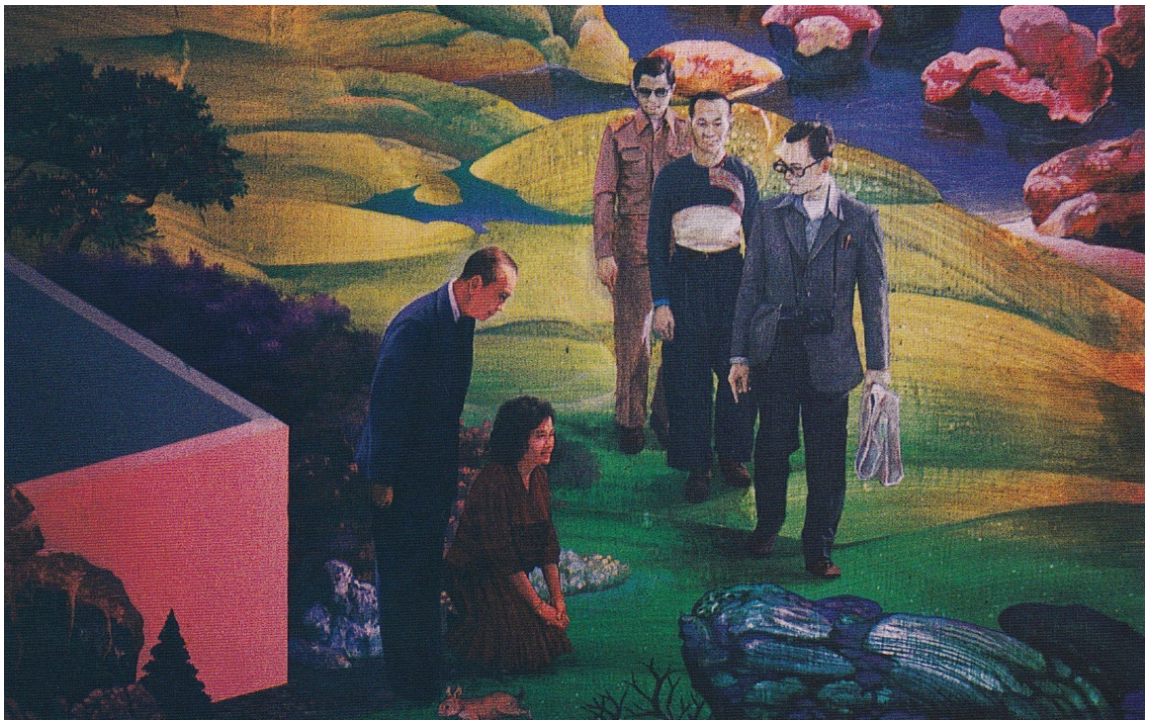

Fig. 3: Panya Vijintanasarn. *The First Sermon* [detail of Wat Buddhapadipa murals], 1984 - 1992.

In: Sandra Cate, *Making Merit, Making Art: A Thai temple in Wimbledon*
(Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003)

The idea of including contemporary narratives such as important historical events, up-to-date architectures, distinguished (particularly royal) personages and even pictures of foreigners existed in Thai murals from the Ayutthaya period, but the muralists of Wat Buddhapadipa took a step further by creating, according to Sandra Cate, an 'imagined world' that 'expands beyond Thailand'.[10] Wat Buddhapadipa murals not only document Thai history and record the relationship between Thailand and 'outsiders'; they also express how Thailand should be positioned as a part of the larger world community. Cate further writes: '[…] they also portray the interactions of coequals, sharing experiences, and together confronting the moral dilemmas by the stories in which they appear.'[11]

For some audiences, the Wat Buddhapadipa murals are very successful and represent an influential movement, but for others in the art world they initiate many interesting discussions, including problematic questions about whether murals should be perceived as artworks made to express the artists' self, which is essentially an egoistic antithesis to Buddhism, or as a tool conducive to Buddhist *dhamma*. This also leads to further questions about the role of the artist dealing with Buddhist contexts nowadays, which can be seen as contradictory with the Buddhist concept of no-self. Realistically speaking, since the murals are situated in the actual *ubosot* (Buddhist chapel), it is very easy to still position them in the realm of religion as a tool to instruct moral and *dhamma* teaching similar to traditional murals. Therefore, the much more vivid colour scheme and the more dynamic composition, compared to the older ones, can also be criticised as not suitable for the atmosphere that is purposefully meant to generate calmness and tranquillity in the mind of Buddhist practitioners.[12]

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[10]. Cate, 88.
[11]. Cate, 92.
[12]. Cate, 6.

In the chapter "Competing Discourse: Art and Religion", Sandra Cate refers to the opinions of 'Anna', an English lady who was a member of the Wat Buddhapadipa community:

> In her [Anna's] view the huge eyes of Mara that dominate one wall break the unified mode of narration through color, forms, and rhythm that she finds characteristic of murals in other Thai temples. […] In her opinion temple murals that function too obviously as decoration enhancing a temple's overall 'niceness' encourage 'going off on the wrong track' in understanding the Buddha's teachings.[13]

However, from the artists' point of view, the action of creating Wat Buddhapadipa murals seemed to be an opportunity to transform the function of religious architectural structure into a space for pure artistic creation. They saw the fact that this temple is located outside of Thailand as a possible advantage to escape the strict censorship of Thai traditional culture. During an interview with Julia Wilkinson published in *Sawasdee* in 1986, Vijinthanasan mentions that:

> Both of us [Chalermchai Kositpipat and Panya Vijintanasarn] had always wanted to do a complete temple mural, but in Thailand we were never able to find the right place. We knew there that we would have to follow very traditional concepts of mural painting and we didn't want to do that. We were interested in using new techniques, new styles. These wouldn't be acceptable for a mural in a temple in Thailand but here, in Wimbledon, we were given the opportunity to do exactly as we wanted.[14]

One aspect of the influence that Wat Buddhapadipa murals give to many Thai artists is how to position the artwork in the transitional state between learning from tradition and communicating with an international vocabulary. Cate writes: 'The conceptual, moral universe depicted in older Thai murals gives way here to a world recognizable to diverse viewers as their own.'[15] For the audience equipped with basic knowledge about Buddhism and traditional Thai murals, the 'strange' modern elements invented by the artists are easily recognised. Many make connections that the adding of hybrid techniques and the application of new forms and modern artistic styles is the act of

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[13]. Cate, 6.
[14]. Julia Wilkinson, "Thai Artists: Panya and Chalermchai", in *Sawasdee* (n.d., 1986), 30.
[15]. Cate, 92.

reviving traditions of Buddhist painting. Above all, despite the alterations by the artists, the core concept of using murals to teach *dhamma* is visible, as the traditional narratives are still carried on. According to Sandra Cate, during an interview, Vijinthanasarn explained that the key concept of *dhamma* teaching through murals is to encourage the viewers to:

> …take painting out of the frame into their own life, into their own idea, their own experience. Everyone can look at the painting differently, because Buddha says that after his enlightenment he cannot teach everybody to be enlightened. […] He can only teach them and tell. It then depends on them.[16]

The Wat Buddhapadipa murals clearly state that the teaching of *dhamma* cannot be limited only to Buddhists, but should be extended to *farang* (the Thai term for 'foreigners') and non-Buddhist audiences. Although mainly presented in an exotic style, the murals are made to be shared as a globalised experience. The modern visual elements and images of contemporary iconic figures and familiar objects act like a gateway for personal reading and interpretation.

In addition to the fact that the artists all claim that the mural should be seen more as a pure work of art, they also seriously state that the project was undertaken gratis, and the artists 'received no commission for their work, but rather a small monthly allowance for modest living expenses that enabled them to spend days off seeing art in London'.[17] It was done out of dedication and devotion of spirit, time, and labour. As such, the act of executing the murals comprised a devotional act, in keeping with the tradition of the anonymous artists who created traditional Buddhist painting throughout the ages. The difference is that most of the artists who volunteered for the project at Wat Buddhapadipa later became extremely famous among the Thai local audience and some of their works became extremely valuable in the local art market.

Several artists among this group carried on the technique and idea they developed at Wat Buddhapadipa. Some critics called their style 'Thai Neotraditional Art', a

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[16]. Cate, 81.
[17]. Cate, 3.

neologism 'coined in 1980 to describe the work shown at the *Exhibition Thai Art '80* at Bangkok's Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art',[18] in which Kositpipat and Vijinthanasan also participated. Since then, Thai Neotraditional Art has become very well known among Thai audiences, and the works of these artists have been widely shown and sold in private galleries both inside and outside the country. Many local Thais are able to relate this particular style with a Thai national identity that correlates with the concept of change influenced by the international modernised world. Apinan Poshyananda writes in *Montien Boonma: Temple of the Mind*:

> For various reasons, neotraditional artists attracted enormous attention, and as neotraditional Thai art garnered institutional recognition through prizes and financial rewards, it became closely associated with economic and political power. Cultural entrepreneurs with dominant positions in artistic hierarchies have tended to defend the status quo by steadfastly promoting traditional revivalism, while for their part, the neotraditional Thai artists create cultural products that serve both the academicians and the sponsors, in order to gain recognition as defenders of national principles.[19]

In 2015, the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Bangkok, founded by Boonchai Bencharongkul, a wealthy entrepreneur, exhibited the work in his private collection in a major show titled *Thai Neotraditional Art.* The exhibition contained 50 works of art by six artists who participated in painting murals at Wat Buddhapadipa, including Kositpipat, Vijinthanasan, Sompop Budtarat, Rearngsak Boonyavanishkul, Thongchai Srisukprasert and Alongkorn Lauwatthana. As Thai neotraditional art that portrays Buddhist narratives and teaching, bolstered by immense support from many local collectors and the press, has been seen as part of the country's identity. In this way it has had a major impact on younger generations of Thai artists and can be considered one of most influential art movements in the Thai contemporary art scene today.

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[18]. West, 13.
[19]. Apinan Poshyananda, "Montien Boonama: Paths of Suffering (*Dukkha*)", in *Montien Boonma: Temple of the Mind* (New York: The Asia Society, 2003), 12.

Chalood Nimsamer & Dhamma Art

The murals at Wat Buddhapadipa are exemplary of how Thai contemporary artists try to seek 'new' forms of traditional Buddhist art by playing with the relationship between art and the context of the religious space. Other Thai artists take a different route by taking Buddhist art completely away from the religious space and putting it inside the art gallery. They refer to the Buddhist narrative as 'the abstract' or concept of the artwork, and apply Buddhist philosophy as the aesthetic. The work can be expressed through any form and compared to many kinds of stories, depending on the experience, interest, and technique of each artist. It does not matter if the work is two-dimensional, three-dimensional, or installation, using techniques developed from Thai traditional craftsmanship or completely from Western-style art schools; the essential thing is how the artist explains the concept of the art and links it with Buddhist philosophy. In most cases, although the artwork does not look like traditional Buddhist art, the aim is still to teach *dhamma*, or at least to explain certain aspects of Buddhist teaching to the audience. In some work, the connection between the work and Buddhism is undoubtedly visible, but in some work, the connection might be clearer in a verbal explanation and the artist's statement.

Chalood Nimsamer (1929-2015) created representational work that also explored the meaning of Thai Buddhist philosophy. Nimsamer was one of the first generation of lecturers at Faculty of Painting, Sculpture, and Graphic Arts at Silpakorn University, the first art university in Thailand established in 1943. He also performed a very important role in laying the foundation for the Department of Thai Art at Silpakorn University, which was founded in 1977. Many artists who volunteered to create the murals at Wat Buddhapadipa graduated from this department. Nimsamer often referred to *dhamma* as morality and *mēttā* (kindness or mercy), which he believed intrinsic in the nature of every human. He depicted the relationship between human life and Buddhism as simplicity and innocence. Nimsamer once explained the concept of grace and virtue in his artwork:

> ในทัศนะส่วนตัว ข้าพเจ้ายังเห็นต่อไปอีกว่า ความเป็นมนุษย์คือความดี และความดีนั้นสามารถแสดงออกได้ด้วยความงาม มนุษย์คนหนึ่ง กลุ่มหนึ่ง หรือหลายกลุ่มที่เราเห็นว่ามีพฤติกรรมไปในทางลบ อาจเป็นเพราะความผิดปกติทางร่างกายหรือจิตใจ หรือพันธุกรรม หรืออาจเนื่องมาจากอิทธิพลของสิ่งแวดล้อมที่บันดาลให้เห็นไป แต่เนื้อแท้ของความเป็นมนุษย์นั้นยังคงเป็นความดีอยู่เสมอ และถ้าจะจำกัดความของความดีให้แคบเข้ามาในความคิดของข้าพเจ้า ก็อาจกล่าวได้ว่า ความดีคือความรัก ความเมตตา ความเห็นอกเห็นใจ และความไม่เบียดเบียนระหว่างมนุษย์ด้วยกัน และระหว่างมนุษย์กับชีวิตทั้งหลาย ข้าพเจ้ามีความเชื่อเช่นนี้มาโดยตลอด ดังนั้นงานศิลปะที่ข้าพเจ้าทำขึ้นจึงมีแนวโน้มไปในทางที่ดีงาม สงบ บริสุทธิ์ และอบอุ่นด้วยความเป็นพี่น้อง รูปแบบและเรื่องราวของงานอาจเปลี่ยนไปตามความเหมาะสมและความจำเป็นในการแสดงออก แต่ชีวิตภายในซึ่งเป็นเนื้อหาสาระของงานศิลปะโดยตรงนั้นไม่มีเปลี่ยนแปลง
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> (In my opinion, I also think that virtue is the character of the human being. It can be expressed through beauty. One man, a group of men, or many groups of men may behave badly because of physical or mental disorder, or even genetics. The very nature of humans, however, still remains in the realm of goodness. To narrowly define the meaning of virtue in my concept, it can be said that virtue is love, mercy, generosity, and not taking advantage, between human beings themselves, and between humans and other living beings. I always believe in this. My artwork is therefore created in the tendency of beauty, calm, purity, warmth, and kinship. The techniques and narratives of the work may change according to suitability and need of expression, but the internal life, which is the essential and direct artistic concept, never changes).[20]

It must be noted Nimsamer's artworks also involve other related subjects such as Thai rural and everyday life, history and traditional culture. His art also represents various techniques and art forms, ranging from drawing, abstract painting, assemblage and sculpture in public space. Art historian John Clark writes in *Asian Modernity: Chinese and Thai Art Compared, 1980 to 1999*:

> Chalood has gone in and out of a direct Expressionism. He had both a private and public face: he did almost faux-naïf representations of individual farmers, his father was a gardener, but he also did large pieces inspired by Thai public and usually Buddhist or royal symbolism, either in public sculpture designs or in carefully orchestrated abstract prints. Sometimes he has sought a synthesis or correspondence between these installation-sculptures of objects from everyday life and prints hanging from cords.[21]

However, it was Buddhism that became the essential concept of Nimsamer's works in the later period of his artistic career. From 1987 to 1996, Nimsamer created a series titled *Dhamma Art* (*Dhammasilpa* in Thai); *Dhammasilpa* emerged from Buddhist

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[20]. Chalood Nimsamer, trans. Vichaya Mukdamanee, "เกี่ยวกับผลงานศิลปะของชลูด นิ่มเสมอ" ("About the Artwork by Chalood Nimsamer"), in *ศิลปากร* (*Silpakorn Magazine)*, 29:4, 4 August 1984, 1−42.
[21]. John Clark, *Asian Modernity: Chinese and Thai Art Compared, 1980 to 1999* (Sydney: Power Publications, 2010), 133.

devotional practice, as noted by the artist and critic Vichoke Mukdamanee in *Mixed Media and Installation in Thailand*:

> Following his retirement [from teaching position at Silpakorn University, Bangkok] in 1989, Chalood had more time to study and practice Buddhism. He learned how to control his own mind, to concentrate, deliberate the essence of life and the world around him. This period resulted in the "Dhammasilpa" series consisting of paintings, drawings, and sculptures.'[22]

Although this particular series received much inspiration directly from Thai traditional Buddhist art and borrowed representational forms and characters from the traditional Buddhist murals in order to tell stories about the history of Lord Buddha, *Jataka*, or *Traiphum* (religious cosmology), the artist's essential aim was to present the meaning of *dhamma* through the feeling of calmness, harmony and serenity. Some examples of this series are tempera painting on traditional *Sa* paper entitled *Buddhapada Glorification* (1995) and *Cosmos* (1996) (Fig. 4). Both were approximately 85 x 89 cm and were exhibited recently in Nimsamer's last solo exhibition at Bangkok Art and Cultural Centre in 2013. The artist used symbolic forms found in traditional Buddhist art, such as images representing the footprint of the Buddha, temples, palaces, trees and *chedi* (Buddhist stupas in Thai), which often appear in scenes of heaven in *Traiphum* cosmology. Nimsamer also depicted these images in traditional idealistic forms, decorated with Thai traditional ornaments. The alteration part by the artist appeared as he recreated the composition and applied fine and unsophisticated drawing lines, in addition to a simple and elementary colour patterns on *Sa* paper to generate characters full of apparently sincere and serene feeling with a naïve charm.

In another series of paintings titled *Mural Painting* (2010−2013) (Fig. 5), also exhibited at Bangkok Art and Cultural Center in 2013, Nimsamer clearly showed how he re-interpreted the context of traditional Buddhist murals in his own way. He chose not to

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[22]. Vichoke Mukdamanee, trans. Chantima Ongsuragz, *Mixed Media and Installation Art in Thailand* (Bangkok: Art Centre, Silpakorn University, 2002), 28.

depict images of the Buddha and any forms related to the traditional narratives of Buddhist murals; rather, he created his own characters and patterns to portray the teachings of Buddhism that had already been applied as part of the Thai Buddhist's way of living. *Mural Painting* consisted of hundreds of small paintings on paper. They were carefully placed to cover the whole area of large walls inside the exhibition hall. These small paintings were similar to a personal diary used by the artist to document his thoughts continually for more than three years.

Instead of writing down his thoughts, Nimsamer chose drawing and painting as tools to capture the moment of his thinking. In *Mural Painting,* Nimsamer particularly transformed the Buddhist concept of harmony and serenity into images of a little girl, or 'Daughter' as he called her, which appeared on every small painting in the series. The little girl was always surrounded by forms and motifs, all inspired by local life and culture in Thai villages. The girl figure and background changed in every piece. Although the composition and colour were diverse, the one thing they shared was the feeling of cleanliness and cheerfulness. It does not matter if this little girl is the actual daughter of the artist or not. The work is not about the girl but about symbolizing the spirituality of Thai culture and reflecting the way Thai Buddhist people live their lives with peace and harmony, using *dhamma* as a guiding light.

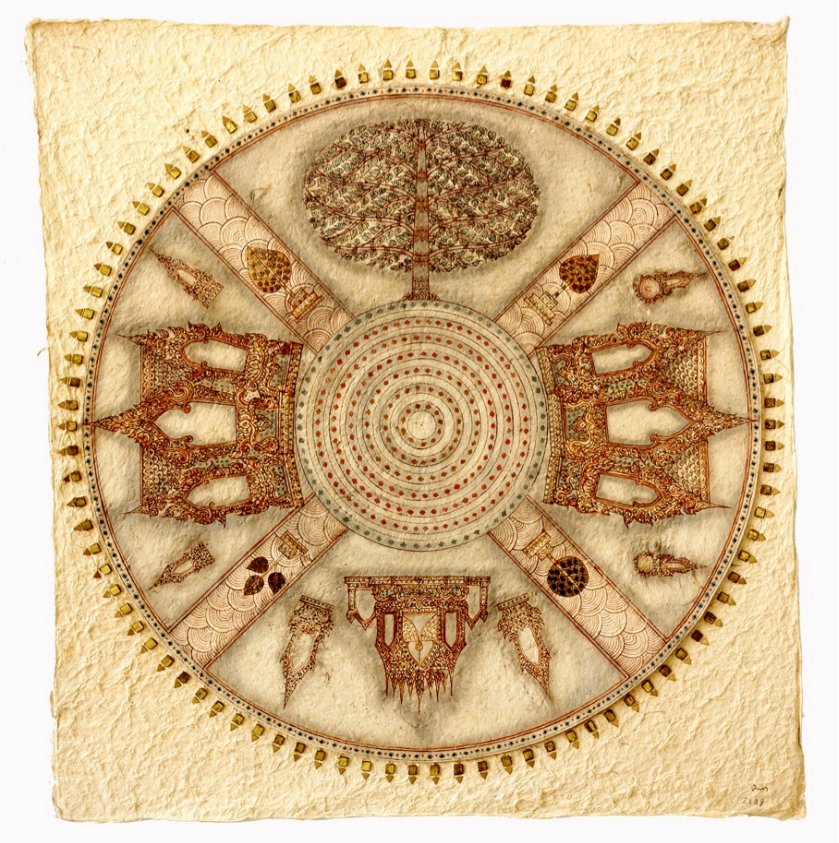

Fig. 4: Chalood Nimsamer. *Cosmos,* 1996

Tempera on Sa paper (85 x 89 cm)

Fig. 5: Chalood Nimsamer. *Mural Painting* [detail], 2010 - 2013

Acrylic, ink, and tempera on paper, dimension variable

Vichai Sitthiratn & the Revival of Buddhist Sculpture

Besides murals, the Buddha sculptures found in Buddhist temples and also in the working and living spaces of most Thai Buddhists can also be seen as another form of traditional art that are created to spread Buddhist *dhamma* to Thai locals. These various forms and symbolic meanings of the Buddha sculptures became a great inspiration for Thai contemporary artists, especially sculptors. Some sculpt Buddha images to preserve the traditional concepts and forms, while some try to invent a new style of Buddha sculpture. Some create work by focusing more to serve religious purposes while some look at their work more as art pieces. Among these various ideas and concepts, there are some artists who only use certain parts of the Buddha images as inspiration. They mix certain aspects of the Buddha image with form and elements that come from their own artistic knowledge and style. Although their sculptures tend to focus on the context and expression of form, space, balance, texture and material, in the end, the concept of these three-dimensional works can still relate back to the artist's exploration or questioning of the existence of Buddhism from the contemporary point of view.

Vichai Sitthiratn (b. 1947) has always been known as a sculptor whose work regularly deals with interpretations of Buddhism, spirituality, superstition and the concept of meditation. His sculptures deal with Buddhism from many different approaches, and involve various levels of traditional contexts. Some are understood as representational images, while some are created in more abstract and semi-abstract manners. When Sitthiratn works in representational images, he may seek to represent Buddhism in its traditional narrative form because some of his sculptures are even cast and distributed to the public for the sake of worship. He becomes deeply engaged with stories and mythology of the Buddha, and also seeks to develop understandings of *dhamma* in order to illustrate sculptural details of characters, clothes and gestures authentically. However, it is in the

abstract and semi-abstract sculpture that the artist has more room to insert his personal style and artistic concept into the work. Poshyananda writes:

> His [Sitthiratn's] early works consist of interlocking forms that suggest infinity. As Vichai searched for a philosophical framework for his sculptures, he found inspiration in Buddhism and Taoism. [...] Vichai remains one of the few Thai artists who express Buddhist concept in abstract sculpture.[23]

The traditional images are greatly transformed in order to extract only what the artist sees as the essential philosophy of Buddhism. The work does not illustrate the story, but reflects the feeling of calm and graciousness, which are characteristics of Buddhism in the understanding of Sitthiratn.

Thai artist and art professor Kamchorn Soonpongsri discusses the different ways of associating with Buddhism in Sitthiratn's artistic practice in the article "โอกาสอย่างนี้ยังจะมีที่ไหนอีก" ('Hard to Get Such as Opportunity'), published in the catalogue of Sitthiratn's solo exhibition, *In Homage to My Masters* (2007), at the National Gallery in Bangkok:

> ในแนวประเพณีนิยมหรือการสร้างพระพุทธปฏิมาสืบเนื่องจากอดีต หรืองานที่คล้ายกันตามแนวนี้ อาจารย์โก้สร้างได้อย่างสมบูรณ์แบบ ถึงพร้อมด้วยแนวทางคลาสสิก แม้จะขาดและอ่อนด้อยในการเสนอแนวคิดใหม่อยู่บ้างก็ตาม แต่จากทักษะในฝีมืออันละเอียด ประณีต และงดงาม ได้สร้างให้ประติมากรผู้นี้บรรลุถึงและรักษาความงาม ในอุดมการณ์เก่าอย่างดีเยี่ยมคนหนึ่งในปัจจุบัน ส่วนแนวทางการสร้างงานประติมากรรมสมัยใหม่ ประติมากรได้นำกระบวนการ แบบ (Style) กลวิธี (Technique) และมโนทัศน์ (Concept) ของคตินิยมสากลมาใช้ อาทิ การค้นหารูปทรงบริสุทธิ์ การให้ความสำคัญของอวกาศ (Space) รวมไปถึงความงามของมวลปริมาตร และเส้นกับแสงเงา ที่นับว่าเด่นและน่าสนใจเป็นพิเศษคือการนำเอาสัญลักษณ์ทางพระพุทธศิลป์มาใช้ผสมผสานสร้างงานขึ้นใหม่ ดังเห็นได้จากระฆัง พระกร และอื่นๆ มาใช้อย่างเหมาะสม
>
> (Regarding the traditional style, the creation of the Buddha image according to the past, or other similar artwork, Ajarn Koh [Vichai Sitthiratn] can do it perfectly. His work reaches the classical context, although there might be some lack of the expression of new ideas. The refined character in his extraordinary skill helps the artist become one of the best artists who has a great ability to preserve the great beauty of idealistic tradition. However, in terms of his creation of modern sculptures, the sculptor uses broader international style, technique, and concept to explore the purified forms, relation of shape and space, light and shadow. In addition, the unique and distinctive character comes from the way artists borrow some symbols from

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[23]. Poshyananda, Modern Art in Thailand, 140

> Buddhist art, such as bells found in the temple and the hands of Buddha images. Then he applies these elements to his idea to create new work).[24]

Sitthiratn's semi-abstract bronze sculpture *Stop* (2001) (Fig. 6) is one of the greatest examples of how the artist uses the relation of space and form to reflect the philosophical meaning borrowed from traditional Buddha sculptures. *Stop* is created in the form of vertical rectangular three-dimensional structure. It is almost four meters high, and the form is split almost from top to bottom, leaving a narrow rectangular empty space in the middle. The artist carves out the front surface of the structure to create a negative space curving inward, suggesting a simplified form of a human body wearing a cape. There are two open-palm hands stretching forward from both the left and the right sides of the structure. The gesture of these hands resembles one of the admonishing postures of traditional Buddha statuary that means *stop* (i.e. to stop committing sins, hurting other people and violating other religious principles), from the story of Lord Buddha using this gesture to stop his relatives from killing each other. However, in the case of Sitthiratn's sculpture, the artist reduces the Buddha statue to its fundamental concept. He uses the relationship between geometric forms and the volume of hollow space to express the meaning of Buddhist emptiness. This does not show the body that stops doing or acting, but rather conveys the mind giving up feelings of hatred, and any other craving of desire (*tanha*).

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[24]. Kamchorn Soonpongsri, trans. Vichaya Mukdamanee, "โอกาสอย่างนี้ ยังจะมีที่ไหนอีก" in *In Homage to My Masters by Vichai Sitthiratn* (Bangkok: Silpakorn University Art Centre, 2007), 6.

Fig. 6: Vichai Sitthiratn. *Stop*, 2001

Bronze, 40 x 20 x 50 cm
In: Vichai Sitthiratn, *In Homage to My Master* (Bangkok: Art Gallery Silpakorn University, 2007)

Many also recognise Sitthiratn's work in the form of installations associated with multiple small figures of *Kuman Thong* ('golden boy'), a household spirit in Thai folk religion. Sitthiratn's sculptures of *Kuman Thong* are often represented as a little boy, dressed up in traditional Thai clothes with his hair bound up tightly in a topknot. Sitthiratn often sculpts his *Kuman Thong* sitting in meditation posture, and repetitively casts them in either fiberglass or plaster. They are then either presented in the original material or covered with white or gold paint, installed with other bigger sculptural forms or structures.

The artist explains that these *Kuman Thong* sculptures symbolise the meditative mind of the human, often related to his own mind in particular. In *Consecration,* created in 2001, when the artist undertook a short exchange residency program in Kunstwerk, Cologne, Germany under the project *Bangkok Meets Cologne*, co-organised by Art Centre of Silpakorn University, Sitthiratn performed meditation with 30 *Kuman Thong* sculptures. The artist sat cross-legged on the floor facing toward this congregation of small plaster replicates, closed his eyes, and remained still in a meditative position for two hours. Vichoke Mukdamanee writes about this particular piece in his article "Associate Professor Vichai Sithiratn's International Creation," seeing it as a ground-breaking artwork, as the artist started to include his own body performing meditation in front of an international audience. In addition to commenting on Buddhism and meditation, the work actually manifests the omnipresent belief in ritual in Thai religious practices and culture.[25] Mukdamanee further notes that 'ritual is a language communicated through the mind. To understand it, one needs faith and unswerving concentration,'[26] and quotes Sitthiratn's statement explaining this particular work:

> The consecration ceremony has inspired me. I apply the content of the ceremony to my concept for this sculpture. I installed 30 boy sculptures. These boys imply the meaning of mind within 30 days or one month. How do we navigate our mind each day? It is a dharma enigma that you need to consider according to the state of your mind. Concentration connects to many things including power, Buddhist wisdom, peacefulness, and happiness within your own body. I wish to awake your mind and body to experience holiness and to have power over ordinariness.[27]

Another work titled *Mind…Meditation* (Fig. 7), exhibited in Sitthiratn's solo exhibition *The Sculpture of Spirit* (2009) at the National Gallery in Bangkok, consists of 121 small sculptures of *Kuman Thong* covered with gold paint. They are placed in rows around the big sculpture of a golden bell at the centre. In addition, there is one more sculpture of *Kuman Thong* sitting atop the bell that is not covered in paint, rather it is made

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[25]. Vichoke Mukdamanee, "Associate Professor Vichai Sithiratn's International Creation" in *In Homage to My Masters by Vichai Sitthiratn* (Bangkok: Silpakorn University Art Centre, 2007), 5-6.
[26]. Mukdamanee, *Mixed Media and Installation Art in Thailand*, 75.
[27]. Mukdamanee, "Associate Professor Vichai Sithiratn's International Creation", 6.

of translucent paraffin. The bright warm white light that the artist sets inside the golden bell passes through the small space at the base of the heavy bell and seeps through the sitting sculpture on top. This light setting creates a captivating effect of light and shadow cast on surrounding figures and illuminates the single figure at the higher position.

According to art historian Kisana Honguten in her article "Vichai Sithiratn's THE SCULPTURE OF SPIRIT", Sitthiratn relates the number of 121 sculptures with the concept of 121 consciences existing in the mind of the human being (according to Buddhist *dhamma*). Some of these consciences are immoral and some are moral. They are explained as elements that constantly move and change as our minds continuously attach with many things that happen in our lives. Sitthiratn tries to say that when the mind is approaching the meditative state, all of the consciences harmoniously focus and concentrate on one thing, as Honguten writes: 'Thus the bell that appears to be floating in space and the infant that grows with light are symbolic representations of the mind that is so peaceful to the point of attaining purity and becoming a singular entity through meditation.'[28] *Mind…Meditation* is a clear example of how an artist who does not directly use the figurative image of Buddha as part of his artwork, aims to otherwise convey concepts of Buddhist meditation in his work. One can argue, nonetheless, that the aim of the work remains essentially the same as that of traditional Buddhist art: to teach people the *dhamma* through visual language.

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[28]. Kisana Honguten, "Vichai Sithiratn's THE SCULPTURE OF SPIRIT", catalogue *The Sculpture of Spirit* (Bangkok: The National Gallery, 2009), 41.

Fig. 7: Vichai Sitthiratn, *Mind…Meditation,* 2009

Fiberglass, lighting, wax, and iron, 500 x 500 x 240 cm
In: Vichai Sitthiratn, *The Sculpture of Spirit* (Bangkok: The National Gallery, 2009)

Ithipol Tangchalok & Buddhism in Thai Abstract Art

Some Thai artists, although much inspired by Buddhism, eschew 'representational images' borrowed from religious stories and narratives. They do not create art to 'illustrate' *dhamma* teaching, although their association with Buddhism is deeply embedded in the level of philosophy and ideology of how their artwork is made. They apply and intertwine their interpretations of Buddhism in the process of art making. The very existence of the artwork signifies the relationship between the artist and Buddhism. Since these artists are

not concerned with representational forms, their artwork is often made in an abstract style. Apinan Poshyananda discusses the use of Buddhism in Thai abstract art in this way:

> Being deeply rooted in Buddhism, many Thai artists have associated spiritualism with the search for the abstract in art. The impulse for spiritual expression in abstract forms can be seen as an attempt to attain purity and transcendental beauty. Abstract art, with its emphasis on the reduction of the plastic structure to the fundamental elements of visual perception, has been associated by Thai artists who refer to the Buddhist philosophy to overcome chaos through simplicity, calmness, and serenity. [29]

Hundreds of very small dots and lines that curve out from the plain surface of abstract paintings titled *1,728 dots* (2000) (Fig. 8) and *Three Squares* (2000) (Fig. 9), by Ithipol Tangchalok (b. 1946) are good examples showing how a Thai artist represents the teaching of Buddhism by applying it in the process of art making. Tangchalok carefully places his equipment, which works like a cake decorating tool, on top of the canvas, then gently squeezes his hand to let a very small amount of paint drip to create one small drop on his painting. He then moves on to another spot right next to the previous dot and squeezes his hand once again. This process continues until hundreds of dots form lines and shapes all over the painting exactly the way he planned. The artist then puts another thin layer of paint on top. He waits for a moment then wipes some of the paint layer out to leave the stains, marks, and texture that he wants, then he repeats the process (i.e. he starts to squeeze his hand to create dots, lines and layers of paint again and again) until the work is complete. Tangchalok explains about his abstract paintings as the expression of 'the true essence of painting without having to refer to or imitate any real objects of the world.'[30]

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[29]. Poshyananda, *Modern Art in Thailand*, 134.
[30]. Ithipol Tangchalok, "The Evolution of a Primal Spirit", in *Ithipol Tangchalok: A Primal Spirit – An Exhibition of Painting 2003-2005* (Bangkok: Gallery of The Faculty of Painting Sculpture and Graphic Arts, Silpakorn University, 2006), 13.

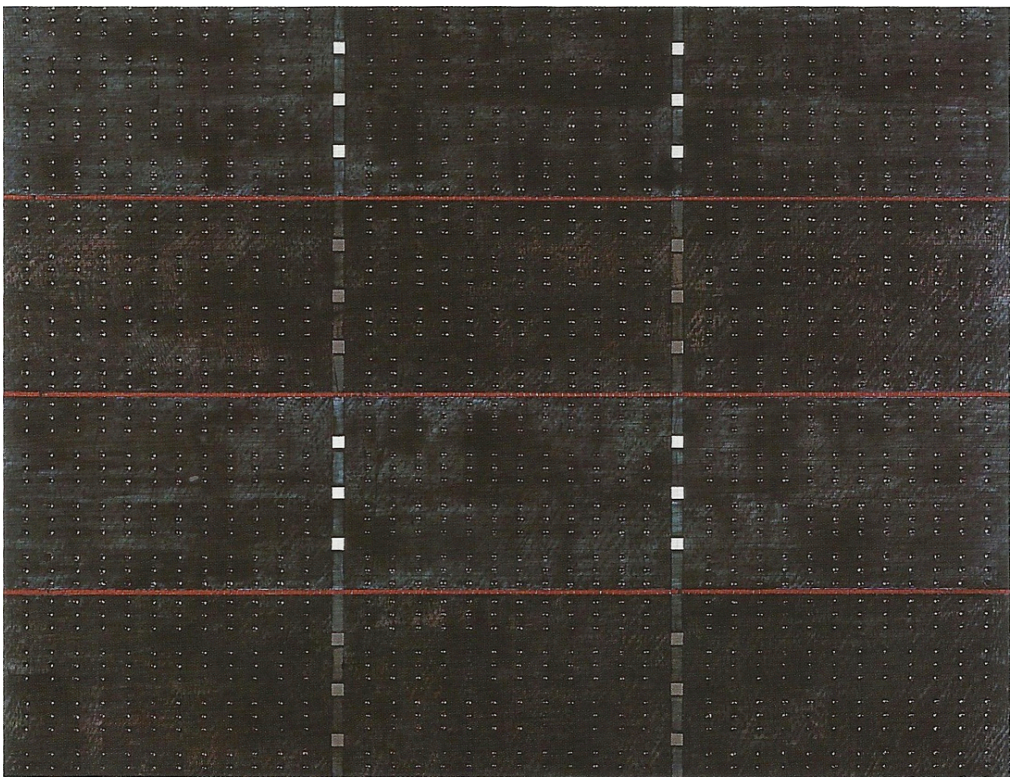

Fig. 8: Ithipol Tangchalok. *1,728 dots*, 2000

Acrylic on Formica and wood, 122 x 159.5 cm

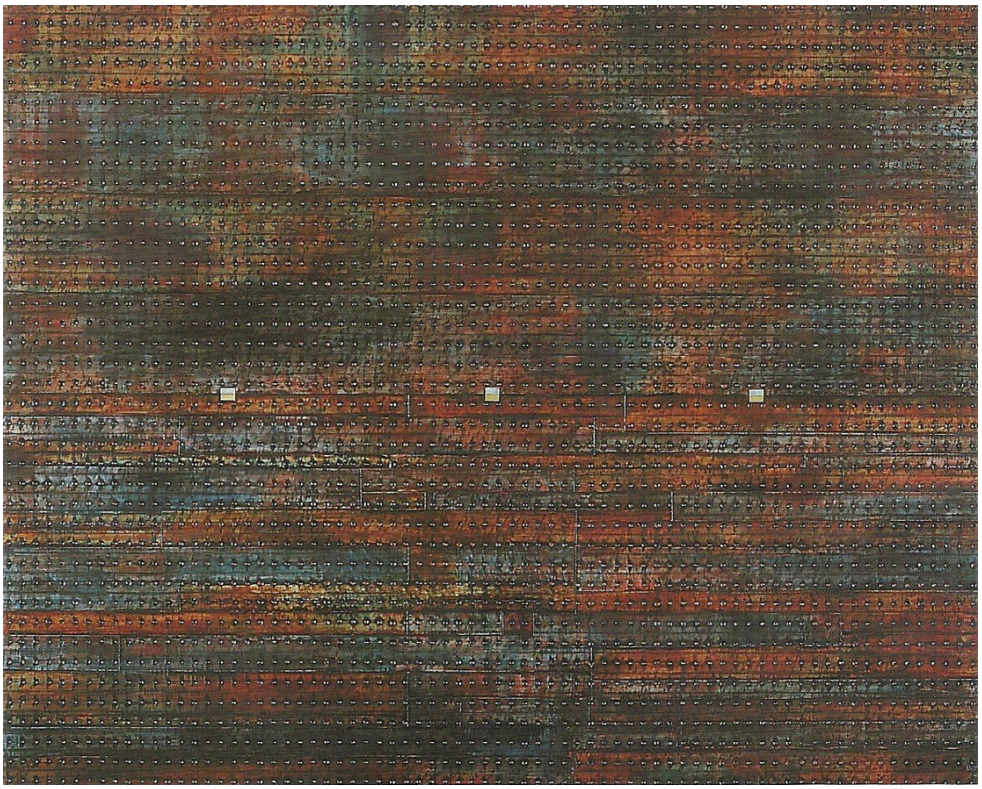

Fig. 9: Ithipol Tangchalok. *Three Squares*, 2000

Acrylic on Formica mounted on plywood, 120 x 150 cm
In: Ithipol Tangchalok, *Intuition and Intellect* (Bangkok: Art Gallery of Silpakorn University, 2008)

Tangchalok began his artistic career in printmaking and received numerous awards from both domestic and international competitions. According to Vichoke Mukdamanee in *Six Decades of Contemporary Art in Thailand*, Tangchalok later 'continuously created his graphic arts and paintings, and then he created only paintings and firstly staged a solo exhibition in 1991 [titled *Recent Paintings*] at the National Art Gallery.'[31] The artist borrows some techniques from printmaking, such as the use of lines engraved onto the surface and the overlaying of multiple layers of techniques. During this early period, Tangchalok focused on:

> A comparative of opposition; for instance, day and night, birth and death, control and freedom, form and space, etc. […] Afterwards his concept is under the theme of soul and past, movement and calmness through water and fire as the symbol of energy of life in the endless cycle of life.[32]

Looking at the development of subject matters in each series of Tangchalok's work, one can see that the artist has gradually increased his interest in applying Buddhist philosophy in his artistic practice. He creates abstract art to represent the essential element of nature, which, for him, can eventually be understood as the ultimate truth of everything. The two opposite elements of light and shadow, or dynamic and stillness, which he analyses from the surroundings can be explained as the symbolic representations of good and bad characters of everything in life. With a different approach from Chalood Nimsamer's description of Buddhist *dhamma* in his artwork grounded on the human nature of goodness and generosity, Tangchalok sees the meaning of opposite characters represented in his artwork as the truth of nature. The word *dhamma* in Thai is the first element of the compound noun *dhammachat,* which means 'nature'. Buddhist *dhamma* is also understood as the absolute truth in nature. The Buddha, it is understood, did not invent *dhamma*, but rather discovered it and spread it out to people as the teaching of Buddhism.

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[31]. Vichoke Mukdamanee, *Six Decades of Contemporary Art in Thailand* (Bangkok: Art Centre, Silpakorn University, 2004), 106.
[32]. Mukdamanee, *Six Decades of Contemporary Art in Thailand*, 106.

Tangchalok's abstract paintings in the series *Matter of the Mind* (2002) exhibited at the Faculty of Painting Sculpture and Graphic Arts, Silpakorn University, Bangkok, reflects how the artist wants to reduce the narrative of his painting to its most fundamental visual elements. He describes this process as the way to abandon 'desire' in his mind, which in Buddhism is the source of suffering. The accurate and mindful action of placing countless small dots, hundreds of elegant fine lines, and multiple thin layers of paint is equal to the process of meditation. The mind is calm and purified as the painting is simply created with delicate movement and great discipline. He explains about the relation between the emerging of his abstract art and his practice of meditation:

> What influenced the concept of this work [the series Matter of the Mind] to become so apparent, were knowledge, understanding and experience gained from two occasions of serious meditation practices in 1992 and 1993 which led me to think in terms of metaphors, and to reduce and simplify the content, meaning, subjectivity and worldly feelings that were generally full of confusions in my work. For instance, reducing desires so as to arrive at a most perfect ad vietous state in addition to reducing the nimber of shapes and the repeatedly tedious composition until what finally remains is the "dot" which is the tiniest of all visual elements. [33]

In Tangchalok's view, Buddhism and meditation not only inspire him to work but also to generate the essence of Eastern culture into his abstract art. He explains the connection between his artworks, an interest in abstract art, Buddhist philosophy, and the teaching of Taoism, which is 'to experience the truth that lies beyond the exterior "likeness".'[34] His process of working clearly needs the extreme concentration of the artist. It can, no doubt, be considered as the action of mindfulness. Although Tangchalok does not clearly state whether he does or does not consider his process equivalent to Buddhist meditation, the art demonstrates the artist's meditative state of mind. Considering the character of repetitive actions that have to be performed for a very long period of time in order to create each piece of abstract painting, and also the discipline that the artist needs

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[33]. Ithipol Tangchalok, 13.
[34]. Ithipol Tangchalok, "Abstract Paintings: Dual Series", in *Intuition and Intellect: An Exhibition of Abstract Paintings* (Bangkok: Art Gallery of Silpakorn University, 2008), 6.

to maintain in order to continue in his series, Tangchalok's artistic practice shares many aspects with Thai Buddhist practitioners who seriously commit themselves to meditation and continually devote much time and labour to regular practice.

Montien Boonma & Buddhism as the Quest for Serenity

To talk about Thai contemporary art associated with the Buddhist context, one must include the work of Montien Boonma (1953-2000), not only because he was among the first group of Thai artists to gain an international reputation, as, in Vishakha Desai's words, 'one of the perennially peripatetic artists traversing the globe, fulfilling site-specific commissions, and participating in major international exhibitions', but also because 'he had found his creative voice in the depth of Buddhist ideas and forms'.[35] Boonma's artistic approach toward Buddhism does not illustrate the narrative of Buddhism and the teaching of *dhamma*, rather it looks at Buddhism and meditation as a sanctuary that can be used to calm the mind, a refuge from a confusing world where one can heal mental pain. Boonma's way of understanding Buddhism is not so much about morality but rather a therapeutic ritual that can bring peace, relief, and serenity to the practitioner. The technique Boonma uses to convey his Buddhist concept is also very unconventional compared to the stereotype of Thai Buddhist artworks often created with a clean appearance and simple structure. Desai further writes:

> Metallic enclosures outfitted with meditative chants and startling yet poetic juxtapositions of contemporary industrial materials such as steel and cement with traditional herbs had become central to his work. Together, they created an exquisite aura of fragility and impermanence, with a tremendous sense grounded in Buddhist ideas and an utter confidence in the execution of form. [36]

Before Boonma turned his interest to Buddhism, his main focus had involved the using of found and readymade materials to represent art concepts ranging across concerns

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[35]. Vishakha N. Desai, "Forward", in *Montien Boonma: Temple of the Mind* (New York: the Asia Society, 2003), 6.
[36]. Vishakha, 6.

about Thai identity, environmental issues and local ways of life. Vichoke Mukdamanee writes: 'The reason behind each piece of Montien's creative work vary […] Once inspired, the artist proceeded to consider "the need and possibilities" of a creation.'[37] In the catalogue of exhibition *Montien Boonma: The Pagoda & Cosmo Drawn with Earth* (1991), curator and art writer Tani Arata, writes:

> Works produced by Montien in the past few years alone draw on a host of materials, ranging from bamboo birdcages and straw to hoes and other farm implements, leather, animal horns, hemp bags, buckets, brooms, and rice paper. Moreover, earth and clay are often used on flat surfaces and three-dimensional forms. All of these items can be classified as premodern materials in the sense used here. Conversely, 'Pagoda Construction' (1990), created out of a pile of powder boxes, and the 'Venus of Bangkok' (1991), made of sheet iron and other items found at a construction site, consist of an assemblage of objects discarded in the process of modernization.[38]

A personal turning point seems to have brought Boonma to Buddhism, as his wife was diagnosed with cancer, eventually passing away in 1994. Boonma became deeply interested in meditation and Buddhist teaching during this time, especially the teaching of *vipassanā* meditation by Achan Chah Suphatto,[39] and he created a series of sculptures entitled *Sala of the Mind* (1996). The idea is to provide a spiritual space that people can use as the way to escape from the outer world. The word '*sala*' is associated with the meaning of a place for relaxing and healing. On the catalogue's front cover of the exhibition by Montien Boonma and Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook titled *Those Dying Wishing to Stay, Those Living Preparing to Leave* for the Thai Pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005, *Sala of the Mind* is featured as a sculpture that allows the viewer to get under the elevated forms and put their head inside a hollow space (Fig. 10). According to contemporary art curator Gridthiya Gaweewong in *Montien Boonma*, the sculpture/installation *Sala of the Mind* encourages the audience to enter and rest their mind,

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37. Mukdamanee, *Mixed Media and Installation in Thailand*, 92.
38. Tani Arata, trans. Janet Goff, "Montien and the Contemporary Thai Scene", in *Montien Boonma: The Pagoda & Cosmo Drawn with Earth* (Tokyo: The Japan Foudation ASEAN Cultural Center Gallery, 1991), 8-9.
39. Poshyananda, *Montien Boonma: Temple of the Mind*, 22-23.

similar to the experience of meditation. In other words, being inside and participating with the sculptures can be equivalent to performing a Buddhist ritual.

Fig. 10: Montien Boonma. *Sala of the Mind*, 1996

Steel, graphite, and tape recording, 75 x 84 x 277 cm. Collection of Jean Michel Beurdeley
In: Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Ministry of Culture, Thailand.
Those Dying Wishing to Stay, Those Living Preparing to Leave
(Bangkok: Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Ministry of Culture, Thailand, 2005)

Gaweewong writes: 'Not only does the space stimulate the viewers to reconsider themselves, but the walls, covered with herbs, were also another substantial form and material that reinforces the notion of purifying oneself.'[40] The sculptures are also

[40]. Gaweewong, 10.

perforated with multiple question marks, so the audience once inside will be able to see the outside world through these holes. In the catalogue of an exhibition at the Thai-Australian Cultural Space in 1994, Boonma explained the question marks as 'the symbol of the unknown realization through meditation. The spiral shapes of the question mark represents the movement from the outer to the inner (and vice versa).'[41]

Boonma also described *Sala of the Mind* during an interview with Gaweewong published in the same article:

> Sala of Mind was influenced by the Khmer Prang at Angkor Wat, in Cambodia. The faces of Shiva and Isuan in such an architectural structure are amazing. I like the concept of Tevalai, a palace of God. It's the space of God which is so inspiration that I, too, would like to create a specific space. This piece was derived from my former project, Room, a square shaped room surrounded by question marks and exclamation marks printed on curtains. This project focused only on the question marks. When audiences visit this room with a dome roof, they look like they are wearing a Shada. Shada, like a hat, is a metaphor for the belief system that one believes in – each religion or 'ism', so to speak.[42]

The concept of sculptural canopy space that requires the participation of audiences was developed in many following series. *Melting Void: Molds for the Mind* (1998) followed similar inspiration and was one of the last series Boonma created before he passed away in 2000. The sculptures are made out of the molds of Buddha images from the foundry of his assistant's family. The images of this particular sculpture (Fig. 11, 12) published in the catalogue of retrospective exhibition *Death Before Dying: The Return of Montien Boonma* (2005), clearly shows that, from outer views, the metal molds are attached with casting rods and sculpted roughly in free shapes. Some of them have distinctive characters informing us that they were originally used as the molds of heads and torsos of Buddha statues. However looking inside can gives the audience different experiences as the artist painted interior surface with red pigment and made several small holes at the top of the sculpture to let some light pass through. According to curators Sutee

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[41]. Montien Boonma, Thai-Australian Cultural Space (Bangkok: The Trustee of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1994), 34.
[42]. Gaweewong, 13.

and Luckana Kunavichayanont in the exhibition catalogue *Those Dying Wishing to Stay, Those Living Preparing to Leave*, published in 2005, 'Once the viewers go inside and their eyes are accustomed to darkness, they will gradually see the face of the Buddha. They will also see the light shining from outside through little spots at the head of the Buddha seeming to be like stars.'[43]

Fig. 11: Montien Boonma. *Melting Void: Molds of the Mind*, 1999

Steel and herbs
In: Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, *Death Before Dying: The Return of Montien Boonma* (Bangkok: Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Ministry of Culture, Thailand, 2005)

[43]. Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Ministry of Culture, Thailand. *Those Dying Wishing to Stay, Those Living Preparing to Leave* (Bangkok: Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Ministry of Culture, Thailand, 2005), 10.

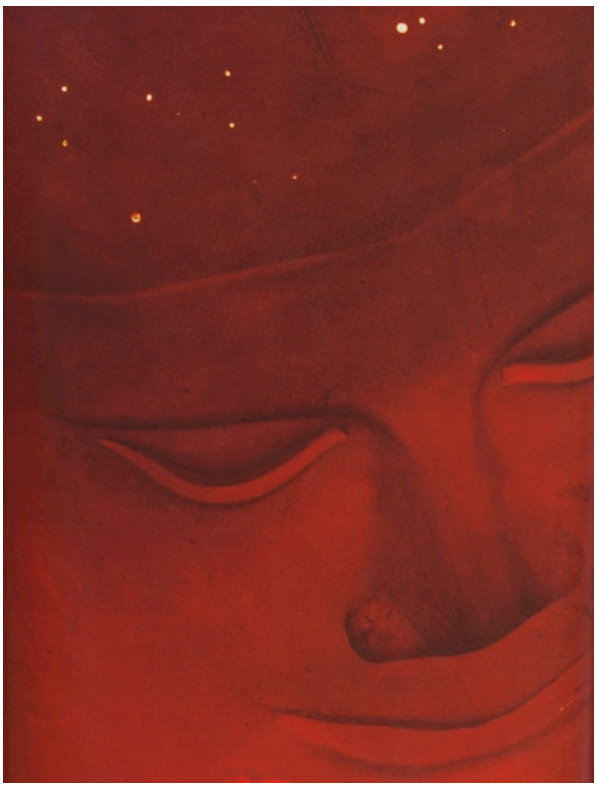

Fig. 12: Montien Boonma. *Melting Void: Molds of the Mind* [detail of inside the sculpture], 1999

Steel and herbs
In: Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, *Death Before Dying: The Return of Montien Boonma* (Bangkok: Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Ministry of Culture, Thailand, 2005)

Kamin Lertchaiprasert & Buddhist Mind in the Process of Art Making

Kamin Lertchaiprasert (b. 1964) is a Thai contemporary artist whose work is shown regularly in Thailand and internationally. Lertchaiprasert uses his creative process as a tool to study himself, inserting art practice as part of his regular daily life and using art to define the meaning of his being. Since 1990 he has worked on multiple series of drawings, paintings and sculptures whereby he creates one daily piece of work, or one step of the creative process, continually for a period of one or two years. For example, in the exhibition titled *Time & Space 1990* (2000) (Fig. 13) at the Numthong Gallery, he exhibited a series of 365 pieces of an oil painting on canvas that he had created during a period of one year. Each piece was about 20 x 20 cm. He used his fingers to paint an abstract picture representing the feeling he had each day. On top of every piece, there were

Thai numbers, from 1 to 365, to identify the day he worked on the piece. The series of paintings on canvas were installed on the floor. Each piece was carefully placed to leave an even space from the previous, created a repetitive pattern similar to a chessboard. In the same exhibit, a series of 365 watercolour paintings on paper were hung on the wall. Each one was 29.5 x 21 cm. The artist painted his feet and stamped on a piece of paper every day for the period of one year as well.

Another example is *Problem – Wisdom, 1993-1995* (1995) (Fig.14) exhibited at the Visual Dhamma Gallery and the 2nd Asia-Pacific Triennial, Queensland Art Gallery, Australia, in 1996. Lertchaiprasert worked on this project continually for a period of two years. In the first year, every day, the artist collected interesting news articles he found in the newspaper, which were transformed into a small papier-mâché sculpture. The process continued for one year, so 365 sculptures were made. The forms of these small sculptures were all related to the feeling and perception of the artist regarding the news he read each day. In the second year, every day, the artist came back to one piece of sculpture. He read the news that appeared on the surface and re-considered the sculptural form, then he wrote down some text onto the sculpture responding to the thinking and interpretation in his mind. For example, on the sculpture that looked like a heart, he wrote:

...ควรสรรเสริญบุคคลที่ทำกรรมดีเพื่อเผยแพร่คุณธรรม...

(To spread out morality, one should honour a person who has done good karma).

On a sculpture that looked like the hammer and sickle, the symbol of the USSR, he wrote:

ประเทศจะดีหรือชั่ว อยู่ตัวผู้นำ

(For the country to be good or bad, it depends on the leader).

Fig. 13: Kamin Lertchaiprasert. *Time & Experience*, 1990

365 pieces, oil on canvas, 20 x 20 cm; 365 pieces, oil on paper, 26.5 x 21 cm

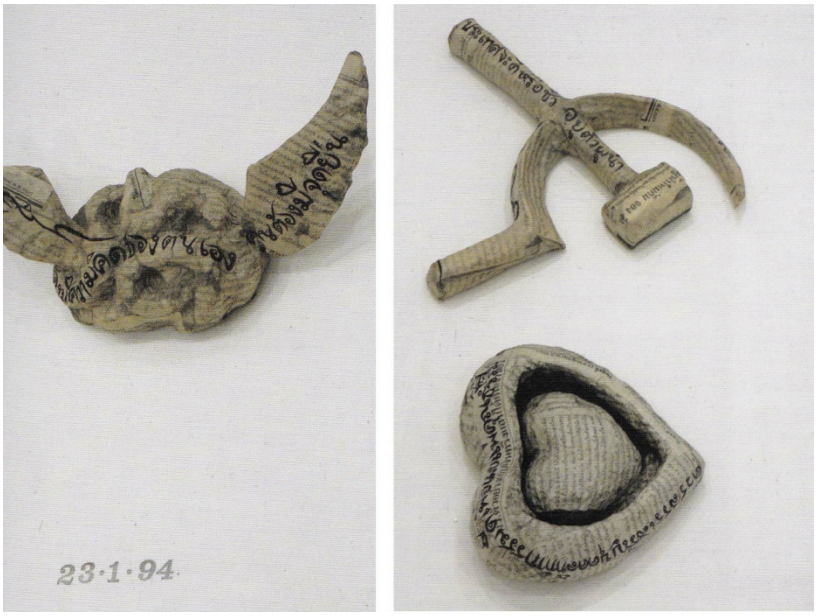

Fig. 14 : Kamin Lertchaiprasert. *Problem – Wisdom* [detail], 1993 - 1995

365 pieces, papier mache, dimension variable
In: Tang Contemporary Art. *Lifeveryday by Kamin Lerchaiprasert* (Bangkok: Tang Contemporary Art, 2007)

All of these sculptures with texts were installed on the floor with the date each work was completed. This particular kind of art project done by Lertchaiprasert shares certain content with the *Today Series* by On Kawara (1932-2014), the internationally well-known Japanese artist who lived and worked in New York City. Starting in 1966, Kawara created what he wanted to be a lifetime project. He painted the date on the canvas to represent the day each painting was executed. The ways these dates appeared in each painting, including the language and its structure, also depended on how the local people of each place the artist was visiting or living documented the date. The white numbers and letters were neatly painted on a plain solid background. Their precision made the painting look almost like they were not done by a human hand but mechanically printed on canvas.

The obvious difference between the work done by Lertchaiprasert and Kawara involves the artists' expressions and feelings in the work. While Kawara's date paintings are almost lifeless, as they imitate the characters of machine-made lettering, Lertchaiprasert tries to document the various feelings, emotions and ideas he had each day within the piece. If the artworks are the documentations of the artists' everyday existence, in my opinion Kawara presents himself as the product of the industrial world, where human life is fully controlled by machines. Every day is all about the routine. On the other hand, Lertchaiprasert's meaning of life is all about learning uncertainty. He presents himself as an object that keeps changing. There are certain things that control everyday life in repeated format. However, in that repetition, lives also exist with never-ending experience.

By repeatedly creating similar artwork every day for a very long period, Lertchaiprasert's artwork becomes a very important part of his daily life. Art making is considered almost similar to the way the artist eats and sleeps. The time of his life is controlled and documented by his artwork. Regarding the character of repetition, discipline, and how the artist uses the artistic process to document and study the changing of his

personal feelings, emotions, and experiences, one might be able to say that Lertchaiprasert creates artwork by intertwining art-making techniques with procedure interpreted from meditation. In the essay, "Kamin Lertchaiprasert and His Timely Interventions", Josef Ng, the curator of Lertchaiprasert's solo exhibition *Lifeveryday* (2007) at Tang Contemporary Art, comments on the relationship between Lertchaiprasert's artwork and Buddhist practice and philosophy:

> To view these installations is to experience both a spatial and textual narrative inextricably collapsed together. And the extent to which meditation plays an intricate role later in the creations of some of these projects, it is no surprise that Lertchaiprasert excels towards a poetic contemplation of a meeting between philosophies and contemporary experience… As exemplified clearly in Toeingam Guptabutra's essay "Temporal Pararells Between Normal & Nature by Kamin Lertchaiprasert and Going Forth by Day by Bill Viola", where she analysed the conceptual intent behind one of the artist's year-long projects, "The process of art is thought of as a parallel of the Buddhist Practice of achieving the truth. Therefore, what we may experience from his charcoal drawings and writings might not necessarily be the ultimate truth for every audience. It is the artist's experimental philosophy that is formulated through a close parallel between art and religious exercises. Such direct, and open philosophy invites us to consider what the writings mean to the artists and perhaps to us as well.[44]

Lertchaiprasert also admits that he has been interested in Buddhism, including Theravāda and Zen, and has brought their philosophy into his art practice. Writer and social critic Kham Phaka writes in the catalogue of Lertchaiprasert's *Lifeveryday* exhibition that 'Not only the "time", but making meditation or Vipassana becomes one of the tools in his working process on art. He is interested in practical Buddhism and a book by monk Luang Por Char Supattho…' [45] Lertchaiprasert explains how he receives inspiration from Buddhist philosophy in the catalogue of his solo exhibition titled *Normal & Nature* (1997) at Tadu Contemporary Art and Faculty of Fine Arts, Chiang Mai University, Thailand, as Kham Phaka further writes: 'I [Lertchaiprasert] believe that [the] process of art creativity is another way for learning more about my self-awareness. When I

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[44]. Josef Ng, "Kamin Lertchaiprasert and His Timely Interventions….", in *Lifeveryday* (Bangkok: Tang Contemporary Art, 2007), 46.
[45]. Kham Phaka, "lifeveryday", in *Lifeveryday* (Bangkok: Tang Contemporary Art, 2007), 50.

understand it, I can also understand what the truth is. It is the same as the process of making meditation of Buddhism.'[46] Regarding Zen Buddhism, Lertchaiprasert learns to explore the relationship between his own self and the surrounding nature. He said that he practices meditation regularly, and his artwork is often represented as a tool to discover the truth. Such an approach definitely coincides with his understanding of Zen Buddhism as he writes in the catalogue of *Before Birth – After Death (sculpture)* exhibition that 'Zen Buddhism has three major practices to reach the truth of nature, which are contemplation of Dhamma puzzle (Koan), immediate question-answer dialogues (Mondo), and sitting meditation (Zazen)'.[47]

The link between Buddhism and Lertchaiprasert's art practice becomes much clearer in his recent artwork, especially in the use of text that gets embedded into the paintings and sculptures. For example, in the exhibition *Before Birth – After Death (sculpture)* (Fig. 15, 16) at the Numthong Gallery and Art U Room Gallery in Thailand in 2014, the artist displayed 1155 white plastic sculptures made in the form of the human skull. They were all hung from the ceiling, and together they created another big human skull floating in the exhibition space. There were different texts written down on each small white skull. Most of these Thai texts evidently showed the connection with teaching extracted from Buddhist *dhamma*, such as 'ตายเพื่อธรรม' (Die for *dhamma*), 'เกิดก็ทุกข์ ตายก็ทุกข์ ต้องไม่เกิด ไม่ตาย จึงพ้นทุกข์' (Birth is suffering - Death is suffering - To not be born nor die is liberation from suffering), 'อุเบกขา เฝ้าดู กาย ใจ คือการภาวนา' (Equanimity, observe, body and mind is meditation [*bhavana*]), or 'ตื่น! สุข ทุกข์ ไม่ยึดมั่น' (Awaken! Happiness and suffering are not to attach). Beside this large installation, a series of paintings covered almost the entire space of the wall. These paintings were collages of thin sheet materials the artist found in his daily life, such as receipts, envelopes, paper and plastic packaging, brochures,

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[46]. Kham Phaka, 50.
[47]. Kamin Lertchaiprasert, *Before Birth – After Death* (Sculpture) (Bangkok: Numthong Gallery, 2014), 4.

book covers, pictures, photographs and articles from magazines and newspapers. On top of the collage Lertchaiprasert inscribed some Thai epigrams, some of which probably came from the teaching of Buddhist philosophy, such as 'อุเบกขา' (Equanimity), 'เมื่อสิ้นกิเลส' (When desires are gone), and 'ตายอยู่ในเกิด เกิดอยู่ในตาย' (Birth in the death, death in the birth).

Fig. 15: Kamin Lertchaiprasert, *Before Birth, After Death (plastic skull)*, 2008 – 2014

Permanent marker, screw and recycled plastic bottles, 225 x 285 x 340 cm
(1089 pieces, average size of each plastic skull 14 x 16 x 22 cm)
In: Numthong Gallery. *Before Birth - After Death (Sculpture)* (Bangkok: Numthong Gallery, 2014)

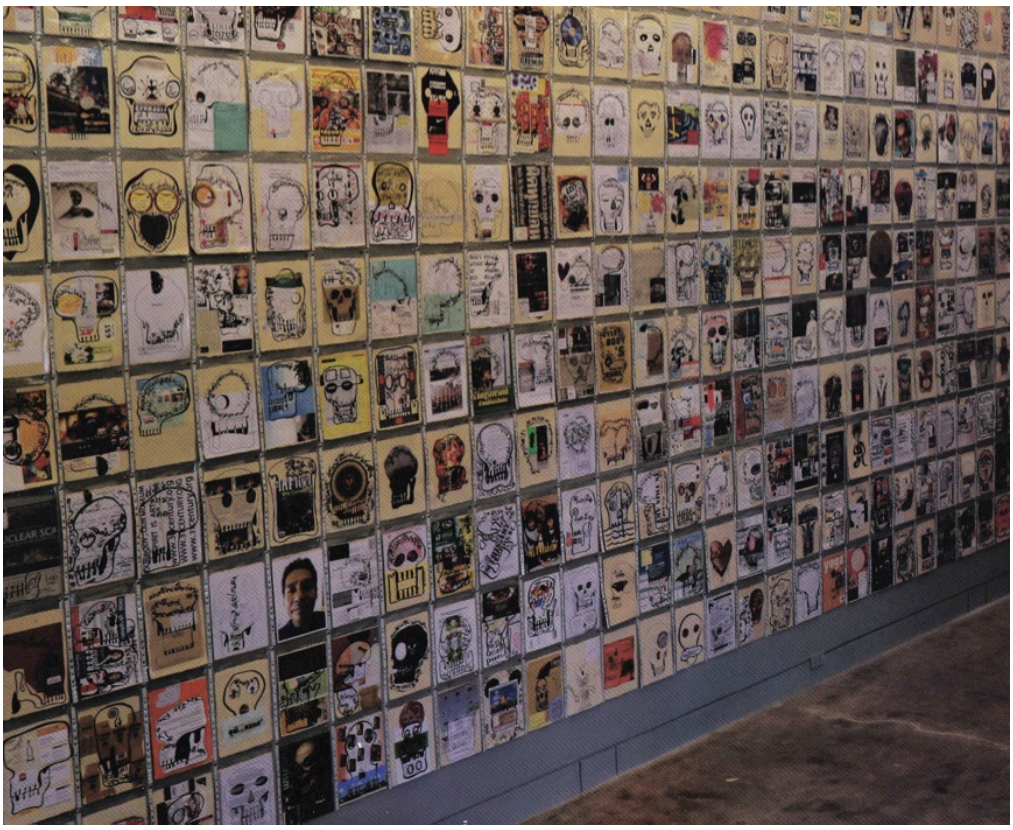

Fig. 16: Kamin Lertchaiprasert, *Before Birth, After Death (drawing)*, 2008 – 2014

Permanent marker and collage on Sa paper, wall size 1340 x 520 cm
(715 pieces, size of each piece 21 x 31 cm)
In: Numthong Gallery. *Before Birth - After Death (Sculpture)* (Bangkok: Numthong Gallery, 2014)

Creating Connection – Thai Contemporary Art with Buddhist Contexts

One of the essential questions raised during my research journey is why Buddhism, as a religion primarily constructed around the idea of the annihilation of the ego, encourages the practitioner to pay great concentration to the existence and function of one's own body and its relationship with the mind. One obvious example of this is the practice of Buddhist meditation. Most contemporary meditation techniques celebrated in reform Buddhism, long concentrated in urban areas and now projected around the country and abroad, seem to relate to ideas of using controlled breathing and the movement (or stillness) of the body as objects of focus for practitioners seeking to attain meditative states. According to Kate Crosby, a specialist in Buddhist studies, the underlying concept of meditation is the technique to transform one's mental states 'either by calming the mind, or

by developing new capacities, or by a certain degree of objectivity or estrangement from the individual self and thus a heightened awareness of one's own habitual identifications and responses'[48]. During meditation, people are instructed to become continually well aware of all activities happening in their own bodies, including the beating of their heart, the rhythm of their breath, and the stream of thoughts appearing in their mind. As Buddhists recognise meditation as a very important part of the religious practice, the question becomes even more apparent: how can a ritual literally based on self-centredness (i.e. focusing the mind and body inward) lead people to an understanding of self-detachment?

For me, the best response to this discussion is probably by 'interpreting' the body of a meditating person as the evidence of religious doctrine, especially regarding the teaching of the three principle characteristics of all things exist in nature: *anicca* (impermanence), *dukka* (suffering), and *anatta* (non-self). According to Steven Collins, a historian of Buddhism, 'as an interpretation of physical sickness or mental restlessness, impermanence, suffering and non-self come to be compellingly in evidence: the uncontrollability, imperfection and transience of mental and bodily states are readily enough available'.[49] By following this perception, I assume that in order to fully understand the notion of selflessness, one cannot be shown or told what it is, rather one must experience it. The concept is extremely abstract and can only reached by using one's own body as subject of experimentation; it is the task of learning by doing. The more each person practices with his or her body and 'learn[s] to interpret internal and external sensory phenomena in a specific way',[50] the closer one may be able to naturally recognise the state of nothingness.

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[48]. Kate Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism: Continuity, Diversity, and Identity* (Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 140.

[49]. Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 90.

[50]. Collins, *Selfless Persons,* 90.

The question that follows is how do contemporary Thai artists create art in order to reflect such the complexity of Buddhist *dhamma*, especially the key concept of Buddhist nothingness, and the examining of self through practice of body? This chapter presents examinations of selected examples of Thai Buddhist artworks that reflect how Thai artists apply *dhamma* in various ways in their artistic practices. By studying these artworks in particular, I am able to build up the platform where my own artistic practice emerges. I generally divide these selected artworks into two groups. The first group, including the murals at Buddhapadipa Temple, Chalood Nimsamer's two-dimensional *dhamma* art, and Vichai Sitthiratn's sculptures expressing Buddhist concept, base their idea on the representational formats and various way to insert individual artistic concepts within the illustrations of narratives derived from Buddhist teaching and mythology. The second group, including Ithipol Tangchalok's abstract paintings created by the mindful repetitive techniques, Montien Boonma's sculptural canopy spaces that generate experience of isolation and calmness, and Kamin Lertchaiprasert's application of the Buddhist philosophy of self-studying in artistic practice, tend to intertwine art-making technique with procedure; thus each artist individually interpreted Buddhist philosophy.

Using the murals at Buddhapadipa Temple, Chalood Nimsamer's paintings, and Vichai Sitthiratn's sculptures as case studies, I developed the understanding that a lot of productions of Thai art nowadays associated with the context of Buddhism essentially involve the process of interpretations. Inspired by traditional Buddhist art, many modern Thai artists created representational art to teach viewers *dharma* using analogy, wherein the characters and the content of the stories portrayed can always be compared and concluded with an extended explanation of moral teaching. These representational figures and stories are also varied. Some come directly from orthodox Buddhist narratives, while some characters come from other sources, such as local folktales, other religions, and other countries. In addition, some figures can also be purely invented by the artists' own

imaginations. They may reflect the artist's attempt to engage with the religion in the contemporary context, and echo how Buddhism is really perceived in today's era of globalization and pluralism.

Although with some background knowledge of Buddhism one can comprehend *dhamma* as an abstract concept, by reading the illustration as metaphor that consists of spiritual and religious meanings, there are limitations to these representational Buddhist art functions. For example, some content of the teachings that consist of very abstract experiential characteristics, such as the notions of selflessness, and Buddhist emptiness (*suññatā*) can never be completely portrayed by any representational forms, even by using very complex methods of analogy. These Buddhist concepts exist in the un-conditioned realm that may be impossible to explain by any conditioned forms used by representational artists. However, one aspect these examples of representational Buddhist artists deliver through their work that I feel goes beyond the common function of *dharma* illustration is how artworks are often created in the tendency of calm, warmth and kinship. They not only inform but also encourage the viewer to develop the feeling of simplicity and serenity in their own mind that might relate to the abstract meaning of Buddhist aesthetics, which I am seeking.

Since these specific Buddhist teachings of emptiness and selflessness are very abstract, I suppose that one of possibilities to communicate certain aspects of them can be done through abstract elements, such as feeling and emotion developed in the abstract human mind, which together create sets of experience. As the meditating condition has in the modern period been adopted and can be attended by any activity, including ones in daily life, I see the possibility to intertwine art-making techniques with procedure interpreted from Buddhist philosophy. The second group of artists (Ithipol Tangchalok, Montien Boonma and Kamin Lertchaiprasert) definitely serve as foundation of this argument and feed directly into my interest in a pragmatic approach. Tangchalok, Boonma

and Lertchaiprasert are examples of artists who use the process of making artwork as a way to learn about the existence of the mind and the relationship of the body, similar to how meditants observe their own cognition during the practice of *vipassanā* meditation. These artists tend to look at religion as a subject that can be applied to fit individual needs and a philosophy that cradles artistic production; Buddhism is clearly described as a concept open to any artistic forms and techniques, ranging from traditional to the very unconventional.

In the case of Tangchalok, the artist carefully and exquisitely applies delicate visual elements, such as fine lines and tiny dots, to create simple tonality and subtle texture. The process of neatly making these marks on the artworks, performing repetitive and committed routine actions, symbolises the character of stillness, repetition and mindfulness of meditation. Visual elements and artistic compositions that are neatly created in well and precisely organised structures reflect the high degree of concentration and tranquillity, while artworks that look more aggressive and disorganised can easily be linked to a confusing and perturbed state of mind. The work does not represent Buddhism, nor *dharma*, but they act as the documentation of the artist's mind that approaching the state of meditation while practicing his artwork.

Montine Boonma created installations that allow the participating audience to experience the works as a place of refuge for mindfulness and calmness. Some artworks that get produced during this period of experience act like an evidence of personal knowledge and participation happening along the journey. Boonma also often declared that the focus and the essential meaning of his art project relied on the 'process of making' rather than the completion of the finished production. Looking at Boonma's work, especially *Sala of the Mind* (1996) and *Melting Void: Molds of the Mind* (1999), I am also able to create a connection with Vichai Sitthiratn's installations titled *Consecration* (2001) and *Mind…Meditation* (2009), as these artworks re-create forms of meditation inside the

gallery spaces. The differences are that, in the case of Sitthiratn, the artworks or even Sitthiratn himself performs the meditation, while Boonma's artworks rather encourage the audience to approach the state of meditation as they step inside the work.

Lastly, in the case of Lertchaiprasert, the artist aims to integrate Buddhist philosophy into an art project routinely practiced as part of his everyday life. Artists commonly claim that making art and living life merge into one thing, but Lertchaiprasert takes one more step further by saying that he does not only do art, but also 'learns' about his life and Buddhism through the process of making artworks. His Buddhist arts therefore are described as 'experiences' of the artist that he shares with audiences. One might also find some similarity with Lertchaiprasert and Tangchalok's artistic concepts, as both of them see the mode of their artistic practice as the essential link to the core teaching of Buddhism. For them, Buddhism and art are applied to one's life as the way for learning about the self and awareness of each exact moment in their experience. I am able to link this particular idea with the reform Buddhist meditation concept of 'the state of freed mind' developed by Buddhadasa (1906-1993), one of the most well-known Buddhist monks in the modern history of Thailand. Buddhadasa's meditation technique focuses on the process of maintaining mindfulness that gradually leads to the state of mental emptiness, or *cit-wang*. In Thai language, *cit* means 'mind' and *wang* means 'empty', or freedom from being occupied. His way of meditation can be practiced in any form of activity with 'natural concentration'. In addition, the meaning of meditation is no longer attached with the religious context but rather with the 'current' experience of the practitioner. Cultural historian Peter A. Jackson, writes that, according to Buddhadasa, the existences of temple, hells, heavens, and even '*nibbāna*' occur 'within the mental scope of human beings alive on earth here and now.'[51]

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[51]. Jackson, *Buddhadasa: A Buddhist Thinker for the Modern World*, 18.

Chapter Two: (De)contextualising Buddhist Aesthetics

In this chapter, the main content of this artistic research project is discussed and explained in a diary-style format in order to highlight how the practice is done according to lived experience, derived from an on-going learning journey. It records the process of creating artworks, starting from the arising of inspirations, the developing of concepts during each period, the improvement of techniques crossing between artistic media, to the step of exhibiting artworks in different venues. It also describes how I position my artwork as the interchanging transition between the concept of artistic research and the context of Buddhism. The discussion started with the idea of examining the concept of Buddhist emptiness revealed through the process of learning experience. The series of performance is designed as the way to explore the relationship between objects and myself and the association with the continual concentration in repetitive activities in the silent space. The discussion then moves on to question the possibility of re-transforming the artwork by continuously re-transferring the content of artworks into other forms of media, such as on paper, canvases, or re-installed in the actual exhibiting space. Conclusively, through this method, the whole series of artwork together generates a continual learning process. During this mechanism, the detached original meanings, including the functional purposes of found objects, are forgotten, fluid and impermanent.

In addition to some selected reading materials that are considered as essential supporting ingredients of my discourse, another extremely important fragment expressed here is attention to the experience of experiencing the artworks of others, which is a crucial component of inspiration I use to establish and develop my own artistic language. It must be noted that the artworks of other artists to which I refer in this chapter are directly

pertinent to my actual artistic practice. During the process of creating my own work, I recall the experience of interacting with these artworks as very significant parts of the inspiration. Some I encountered during the three-year period of my DPhil study, and some were exhibitions I saw before I came to the UK. The attempt to explain and analyse in this chapter is to focus on the specific aspects that really feed into my research. It is not about what others, or even the artists themselves, say about the meaning of these artworks, but rather how I see them and what I can use from them. There are of course many other artists whose practices or artworks seem to be more similar or closer to mine, however they are not included here, mainly because I do not legitimately use them as references during the process of creating art. The research intentionally concentrates more on the knowledge that arises during the actual procedure of making artwork inside the studio, rather than by contextualising artworks after they have been produced.

Body and Emptiness

In *512 Hours*, a major exhibition by Marina Abramović (b. 1946) shown at the Serpentine Gallery between June 11 and August 25, 2014, one of the most interesting questions she raised was how to explore the meaning and existence of 'nothingness' through contemporary art practice. *512 Hours* was considered a mixture of performance and relational aesthetics, as it required audience participation as the essential component. The audience had to spend several hours queuing and waiting to get into the gallery spaces. Once they were inside, without knowing, they were already part of the performance. Some of the members were asked to participate by closing their eyes and co-performing with others in three different actions: standing in a group and facing each other in the middle of the room, walking in a steady pattern back and forth along the length of the room, and lying down on the camping beds. The exhibition was created in the simplest way and there were very few other elements added in the empty gallery spaces. These additional elements, such as a small stage in the centre room for audience to stand on, folding camping beds in

the left-wing room for the audience to lie down, and the exhibition lighting, were all adjusted to create a clean and quiet environment that worked naturally to draw attention and participation to the performance, without any distraction. Abramović clearly stated her intention was to create performance in the most minimal way, with the maximum output experience. This method seemed to have been embedded in Abramović's interests for years, as stated in the article written in 2003 by Thomas McEvilley, an American art academic and critic. About one of Abramović most well-known works, *The House with the Ocean View*, McEvilley says:

> Some years ago [Abramović] said to me that she wanted to do a kind of performance that didn't involve any mediation; there would be no objects, such as artworks or props, nor anything else, such as words or ideologies or a scenario, to get between her and her "viewers". Instead the viewers would be invited to enter into an "energy relationship" with her, which would have no external visual exponent. I asked her how this might transpire. What would you do, without sets and scenarios, when you walked into the space and there was the audience? [52]

Although there was almost no talking, no music, and not much instruction given, the total exhibition (performance) could still be carried out in a very smooth way; explanations were kept to a minimum, with only a few sentences printed on the wall. All the participatory performances were conducted with very few words, such as 'close your eyes', 'walk', and 'sleep', whispered by the gallery assistants. I spent time watching the audience and their ways of participation. I saw that once a new group entered the internal gallery spaces, they watched and learned from the people who were already there. They kept everything silent and replaced the empty positions of people who left. Some audience members agreed to continue the performance if they were asked, while some refused to do so and preferred to keep participating as inspectors. Others, who were not asked to participate in the performance at the centre of the rooms stood or sat around, and continued observing the performance. To my point of view, everyone looked curious as they tried to

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[52]. Thomas McEvilley, *The House with the Ocean View* (Milan: Charta, 2003), 169.

decode the messages. I felt the shared belief between myself and the audience that there were messages the artist and the artwork were trying to convey to us individually.

Despite the fact that all performances in the three exhibiting rooms were managed as quietly as possible and everyone was given headphones to cover their ears in order to cut off all noise and sound, I could still hear the voice of my own thoughts inside my head very clearly and loudly. In contrast to the quiet, calm and peaceful environment inside the galleries, the stream of my curiosities, questions, answers, frustration and bewilderment was intensely running through my mind. That was when I realised how confusing and disorienting my thoughts actually were. My brain seemed to have a life of its own. When I tried to think of nothing, there would always be another thing springing up out of nowhere. Surprisingly, at the moment I recognised this complicated presence, the noisy sound in my head began to fade. As I spent more time learning about my own thoughts and looking at my thinking more carefully, I eventually understood that, although I might not be able to stop thinking, the thing I could do was to control it, to change it to a much slower tempo. My mind was still not completely clear, but it was clear enough for me to concentrate on each picture or each story that occurred. The voice inside my head was not yet completely quiet, but I could at last hear the rhythm of my heartbeat and the flow of my breath. At this moment, I started to feel the existence of ‘emptiness’.

It was not the empty exhibiting spaces of the Serpentine Gallery, and definitely not the word ‘nothingness’ that I saw in the artist’s quotes in the exhibition’s catalogue that transmitted the idea of ‘emptiness’ to me. It was actually the experience of my self being in the quiet space, closing my eyes and performing certain actions guided by the artist that led me to look back and listen to my own thoughts. My self had learned to blend in with the environment. The body automatically acted in the same ways as other audience members. My mind became quieter in order to match our surroundings. There was nothing else

needed except breathing and performing certain actions repetitively. It was at this particular instant that my mind became almost empty.

Being in Marina Abramović's *512 Hours* exhibition reminded me of an experience I had the last time I visited Wat Phra Kaew (Temple of the Emerald Buddha), which is situated in the Grand Palace in Bangkok. Although the appearances of the two are totally different, as one is designed to reach the simplest and most minimal character and the other is extravagantly decorated with traditional ornamentation to express the grandeur of a royal temple and greatness of Buddhism, I was surprised to find that the feeling inside my mind during the experiences of being in these two spaces eventually became quite similar. Such a feeling could not arise from the visual stimuli in a direct way, but only from cognition triggered in complex ways through a sort of awe arising from expectations, the space and the imagery, with the brain concentrating and trying to make sense of something for certain period of time, which induced me to feel myself getting lost in the stream of thoughts, then tremendous images and sounds circulating in my mind started to disappear one by one until absolute silence suddenly took control of my mind.

As I stepped inside the gigantic chapel hall (*ubosot*) of Wat Phra Kaew everything around me became quiet, cool, calm and peaceful. The first thing I saw was the Emerald Buddha. The brilliant deep green colour of the jade from which the statue is carved caught the light and it appeared to shine from within. The statue in meditating posture looked smaller than I expected, probably because it sat inside a very big golden elevated altar. I guessed the structure was probably more than six meters high, since I had to raise my head in order to see the detail of the statue's attire, which I knew had to be changed three times a year, according to three seasons of the Thai climate (summer, rainy and winter). Everything was decorated with gold and precious stones. When I looked around, I was shocked, amazed and impressed by the sublime scenery of the large mural painting that surrounded me covering the entire space of four walls, each almost 30 meters high. The

paintings on two sidewalls contained images of many palaces and the scenery of the city with thousands of small characters. Each section of the painting told its own story. Every square inch was filled with remarkable detail. There must have been hundreds of stories portrayed all at once; I was overwhelmed, thinking it would take weeks to read and understand all of them. The wall in front of the Emerald Buddha depicted the events just prior to the Buddha's enlightenment in Thai Buddhist mythology. In the picture, King Siddhartha was surrounded by hundreds of gods and angels. Below was the goddess of earth. She was twisting her hair and releasing water to flow over and destroy the army of demons who were attempting to stop Siddhartha from attaining enlightenment and becoming the Buddha. The wall behind the Emerald Buddha depicted *Traiphum* (the Three Worlds of Thai Buddhist cosmology). The first world was the world of desire, which is the place for animals, ghosts and humans. The second was the world of form, for angels and gods still attached with love, greed, anger and desire, but with refined morality. The third one is the formlessness world, for angels and gods who have started to sacrifice their attached emotions.

Similar to many murals in Thai temples, the Third World in *Traiphum* was depicted as floating empty palaces, which signifies the meaning of formlessness. There was no picture of the '*nibbāna*' world, which can be understood as the ultimate goal of Buddhism, because it is beyond formlessness. It is said to be the state of being free from the cycle of reincarnation. Some people choose to explain it as the final end of self or 'the ultimate death', as Collins mentioned in *Nirvana: Concept, Imagery, Narrative*: 'a place (metaphorically), state, or condition where there is no death, because there is also no birth, no coming into existence, nothing made by conditioning, and therefore no time'.[53] It is simply nothing that can be depicted. It is free from any conditioned contexts. It is believed

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[53]. Steven Collins, *Nirvana: Concept, Imagery, Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 38.

that even time does not exist in this state of absolute nothingness. It is not characterised as anything, not a person, nor a place, nor an object. It cannot be symbolised as 'the extinguishing of fire', 'the untraceable depth of the sea', or 'beyond the edge of the empty land'. All of these pictures express the meaning of 'ending' and 'emptiness', but, in the end, they still refer to the elements of light, water, wind, and land. They can represent empty spaces, but not 'absolute nothingness'.

I gazed over the detail of every square metre of the mural. Part of my brain told me to appreciate the beautifully illustrated characters, the intricate design of Thai ornamentation, and the refined colour schemes created by meticulous traditional craftsmanship. But another part of my brain was trying to interpret and explain the meaning and stories conveyed by each section of the painting. Some images were easily understood. Some reminded me of my experience in Buddhism study classes in school and from reading books about the teaching of *dhamma* written by Thai monks. However, some illustrations were too complicated or the stories beyond my personal knowledge. Thus, understanding or not understanding did not seem to be a problem at the moment as I still kept gazing. Knowing, not knowing, understanding, and not understanding were confusingly happening in my mind. Surprisingly, the more I spent time looking, the understanding part and not understanding part started to merge and became one thing. In the known, there was some unknown, and in the unknown, there was some known. I realised that it was not the mural I was looking at, but rather the reflection of myself. It was not the mural painting that I was trying to make sense of, but rather my own thoughts that I was trying to arrange and analyse. It was me looking at myself. The painting faded out. Suddenly, I heard the voices of other people around me and realised that I was not alone. I needed to walk out of the *ubosot* and let other tourists come inside. As soon as I stepped outside the door, my eyes were flushed with bright sunlight. My ears were filled with the loud talking noise of several languages that I did not comprehend. My nose sensed

the exhaust of cars on the street behind the temple wall. Although it was very short, I could tell myself there was a brief moment that I appreciated the indescribable feeling of silence and isolation.

I purposefully compare my experience inside the *ubosot* of Wat Phra Kaew and Marina Abramović's *512 Hours* at the Serpentine Gallery to show that it is not how minimal or baroque the style of art and architectural space is that effects the experience of emptiness, rather it is how much the art and space generates interest and encourages thought and mental interaction with the art. I went to Wat Phra Kaew with very definite cultural expectations of a state temple inside the royal palace, the spiritual nucleus of the Kingdom of Thailand, constantly used in many dimensions that relate with Thai monarchy and tradition. Conversely, I attended Abramović's exhibition because she is one of the most famous international performance artists and I realised that my artistic practice shares certain aspects with her performance art. I had studied her work and been to some of her previous exhibitions. Therefore, my experience with these two places began with certain knowledge and expectation.

In both cases I went with a very strong determination to learn, to concentrate, to question, and to test my presuppositions. Another shared aspect is that both experiences involved the presence of my own body participating in the activities inside the space. In Abramović's exhibition, my body was part of the performance the minute I entered the exhibition (or even while waiting in the long queue in front of the gallery); at Wat Phra Kaew, I entered the space by squeezing in with other visitors and tourists, walking up the stairs and going through the small entrance of the hall. I sat among the crowd, genuflected to the Buddha statute by bowing down with palms pressed together in a Buddhist prayer gesture, and repeated the mantras of Phra Kaew (the Emerald Buddha), which my parents taught me to memorise when I was very young. After that, I started to appreciate the Buddha statue and other elements installed and decorated inside the hall. Through these

participating actions, I was then able to create a conversation inside my mind. Through the process of engaging with activities, I realised the existence of my body being inside the spaces before I talked to myself regarding the expectation of what to see versus the new thing that I had learned. One of the most important aspects is the moment of encountering the emptiness in my mind, which only happens during the process of observing and analysing the subjective interpretation of knowing and not knowing. I discovered that what we know cannot entirely describe who we are, while recognising what we do not know can also reflect the true self.

I look at my mind as a container. The already-known part is used to shape and construct the space inside this container. Although there is always empty internal space waiting to be filled, I often forget the existence of this space and only recognise myself from the external look of this container. By participating and observing the repetitive actions in Abramović's *512 Hours*, and by being surrounded by the gigantic mural with all its great detail that I could not continue interpreting, I found myself entering the unknowing territory inside my mind. I cannot use only the knowing part to interact with such experiences. It opens up opportunities for me to spend time and look closely back to my 'container'. I keep my body moving, participating in the activities, my eyes keep gazing, my brain keeps thinking in order to answer the question. Then, there is always another question popping up. The whole process of questioning and answering inside my own thoughts seems to keep going forever, until I am too exhausted to think of anything else. The aim of these continual actions of my body and the endless conversation inside my mind is not meant to fill up the empty space, but rather to keep reminding myself that the space of not knowing can never be filled. The unconditioned emptiness I have mentioned probably comes from the experience of encountering this not-knowing space. Everything becomes empty as my mind realises that the purpose of all action is just meaningless. Nothing is enough for the limitless and endlessly expanding journey of my thoughts.

Body and Tasks

In order to re-create the experience of emptiness, I design activities to be performed by myself inside the studio. These activities require the interaction of my body with selected objects to carry out certain tasks. In *Re-Constructing Two Elements* (2013; Fig. 17, 18, 58; video, 14.32 minutes), I locked myself inside a small studio room with a grey floor and large white walls. In front there are two found objects: a 40 cm square piece of wood and a square pole, a discarded piece of a plastic parking lot pole about 120 cm long. Both ends of the wood and the parking lot pole are broken. The task is to create multiple precarious re-configurations from these two objects. Since some parts of the found objects are broken, the process of stacking and leaning the objects on each other to find states of balance is even more difficult.

I begin the experimentation by patiently placing one object as a foundation to hold another object in position. The second object is put on top of or leaned against the first one in the most critical post and angle I can think of. Both objects are gently moved to find the right position that can sustain both of them in balance. I then step away from the structure to observe and think about the next possible way to re-configure these found objects. The re-configured structures often collapse, as one object cannot cling to the other object. Some precarious structures are very insecure, so only a small unsteady movement from my hands during the moment I slowly take my hands off the objects can make the whole thing fall apart. The activity involves the repeated action of walking into the space, continually re-arranging the objects in a precarious structure, slowly pulling my hands out to let the objects stay still in position, re-doing the whole process all over again if the structure collapses, and walking away to look at the structure from a distance if the task is accomplished. The process is done multiple times, until I feel too exhausted and cannot think of any other way to experiment with this task. I then stop, and the activity is finished.

Fig. 17: *Re-Constructing Two Elements* [still], 2013 – placing objects

Fig. 18: *Re-Constructing Two Elements* [still], 2013 – stepping away

Video with sound, 14.32 mins.

I set up the video camera to document these performing activities. The situations when the structure falls down are also included to show how my learning process involves the recurrence of failure. I edited the video to depict the process of endless trial and error. It is a personal journey of my mind that goes through the process of discovering and solving problems based on physical experimentation and experience. Moving images in the edited video seemed to have their own meanings; they are no longer simply a copy of actual activities. The image of my body has its own existence in the virtual world, which runs by its own particular rules. Some situations that appear in the video might look like the imitation of reality, but some parts convey something strange beyond that. The body is trying very hard to perform certain actions in order to fulfil some kind of meaningless assignment. They seem to be nonsensical in actual life, but definitely take on a very serious role in the virtual world of the video. Sometimes the video looks exciting as several actions are edited to continually happen at a faster pace. Sometimes one action is shown without any editing. It can be long and feel like it will never end, so the video becomes very boring and loses the attention of the audience. The shifting of pace in the video reflects how time is felt differently when my mind is really concentrating during the actual action in the studio. Sometimes I feel the time inside my mind is running faster than the actual time on the clock. At other times, I feel that time is slowing and even stopping. Similar to the virtual world in the video that can exist on its own, my mind can also have its own being when separated from the actual world.

During the activity, my mind and the objects are connected and become part of each other. My mind concentrates on the position of the objects, their weight, forms, and broken shapes. As the objects are gradually being placed into the balance structure, my mind moves slower and slower. I am gently reaching a state of calmness. The feeling of worry and anxiousness, concern about performing the activity I have planned, and thinking about multiple ways to accomplish the task are all starting to vanish. At the moment

objects remain in the precarious re-configuration, I find that my mind is also stopping. The heart is still beating, but everything else is blank. My mind is empty, for at least a brief moment, until the feeling of appreciation that I can accomplish the task enters my consciousness. Suddenly, my mind seems to work again, as so many thoughts quickly happen. There are just too many for me to see all of them at once. All of them are like voices speaking at the same time. I try to grasp one thought or work on one idea at a time, but it is very difficult. I start to work on another possible re-configuration, and then the sounds of my multiple thoughts start to disappear one by one.

I use gravity and the objective characters of selected objects as the essential controlling conditions of my task. They are used as tools to create a connection between my body and the objects. They are the rules of this game. Although I designed how this game would be played, I ended up becoming just one player. The objective of this activity is not to find the most amazing precarious structure or the most beautiful re-configured posture; the goal is rather to control my body and mind to continually focus on a certain activity as long as possible. There is no plan or sketch prior to the experimentation. There is no final answer at the end of the activity. All precarious re-configurations are equally considered as part of the experiment. The failures are also components of the process. Everything that happens during the activity comes from the immediate decision while I am facing these selected found objects. They are the reflection of my thoughts, my choices, and most important, they are the elements of my learning journey.

Although the artworks are totally different forms, I find that the feeling I have while I am re-arranging the objects into precarious re-configurations shares many aspects with that I experience when standing in front of the mobile sculptures of Alexander Calder (b. 1898). *Black Widow* (1948, wire and painted metal, 325.1 cm x 251.5 cm) is probably the largest mobile sculpture shown in the *Performing Sculpture Exhibition* by Alexander Calder at the Tate Modern (November 11, 2015–April 3, 2016). It is installed in the last

exhibiting room before the exit; while other rooms are occupied with multiple pieces of sculpture by Calder, some installed on white pedestals, some hung from the ceilings, and some placed on the ground, *Black Widow* is alone in the room, suspended from the ceiling and almost reaching the floor. The sculpture is made of many small weighted black elements cut from metal sheets. Some of them are cut in circular shapes with small holes in the middle, while others are cut in free forms to look like leaves. Each small detailed element is attached at the end of a slim metal rod to balance each other. The forms are bigger at the top of the sculpture and gradually get smaller descending toward the bottom. The black sculpture is placed in front of the white wall, which makes it look like a silhouette of a large tree twig with several leaves floating freely in the space. Below the sculpture there is an elevated white floor made of plywood, about two inches high. This white floor, which occupies more than half of the room's floor space, acts as a barrier for the work. We, the audience, must view the sculpture from a distance. Art historian Sérgio B. Martins discussed *Black Widow* when it was installed at the lounge of the Instituto de Arquitetos do Brazil:

> *Black Widow* can feel massive and daunting to anyone standing right below it, and yet its gentle motion, far more pronounced in the work's "tail" than in its higher and larger "petal", eases this very feeling by suggesting a gradual and ordered—albeit playful—transition from bodily lightness to architectural mass. View[ed] from above, on the other hand, the mobile cascades towards the ground, restoring a sense of gravity that is nevertheless devoid of sculptural weight…[54]

Being controlled to stay in form by using the rule of weight equilibrium makes the metal mobile sculpture look very light, as if it can freely float in the space. The way *Black Widow*'s structure is balanced does not create a symmetrical form. The artist uses several small forms to create a balance with one larger shape, so although it looks very well proportioned, the overall sculpture's composition is very complicated, like a freely grown tree branch. The complex relationship of lines and forms should express the confusing and

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[54]. Sérgio B. Martins, "Wind Chimes of Modernity: Calder's 1948 Trip to Brazil", in *Alexander Calder: Performing Sculpture* (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), 59.

chaotic movement, but since they are placed in the right position to create perfect balance, the feeling of form and space is very fixed and stable. The sculpture hangs from the ceiling and moves gradually because of the wind from the window or the movement of human bodies around it. Its gentle motion contrasts vividly with the actions of the people who walk in and out of the gallery space. The feeling of stillness and silence from the sculpture is very appealing. As I spend more time looking at the piece, I can feel the slowing of time inside the room. I start to separate myself away from the other people in the gallery. It is just the sculpture and me, talking to each other.

It is not necessarily the material and formal quality of Calder's artworks that inspires me, but rather the way they are installed in the exhibition. It is not the meaning behind the concept or how the work gets made, but essentially the feeling I gain when I perceive the work at the specific moment. I am influenced by the very slow motion of the artwork, which almost reaches the state of stillness, which strongly contrasts with the dynamic movement of people walking around in the same space. For me, the way Calder's sculptures play with balance also generates a unique atmosphere around the work, where time seems to slow down.

The control of balance that challenges gravity is the essential condition of many of the activities designed to be in my artwork. Beside the activity of re-arranging objects to create multiple versions of precarious re-configurations, I also create other kinds of activities based on the objective quality of the chosen objects. However, the tasks of all activities are similar in one aspect: to encourage the body to move and interact with objects. The actions performed by my body are easy and simple, similar to practical things we do in daily life, and they do not involve any specialized skills. In *Re-Constructing Emptiness No.3* (2014; Fig. 19, 36, 37; video, 20.07 minutes), the activity I designed tried to create a three-dimensional shape from a piece of canvas, approximately 1.5 x 2 m. The canvas is originally the painting titled *Conditioned; Unconditioned No. 2* (2014; Fig. 20; acrylic,

pencil, kitchen roll paper and paper on unstretched canvas). The activity happens in a small room with a white wall as a background and a floor covered by a simple grey carpet. Everything is video documented. I begin by bringing a roll of canvas into the room and unfolding it on the floor.

By using the strength of fabric and materials I collaged onto the surface of canvas, I try to re-form the piece of canvas by making it stand on the floor. Obviously it keeps collapsing, since the fabric is not strong enough to hold the weight. I repeatedly experiment with other possible forms. The best I can do is to make the canvas stand in three-dimensional form for brief moments. After a while, gravity gradually brings it down to lay in a heap on the floor again. The process of trying and coping with failure happens again and again. Since the size of the canvas is about the height of my body, the action of pulling, lifting, and adjusting the shape of the canvas are documented clearly in the video images. This activity requires more physical engagement of my body than the other activities of re-arranging multiple small objects. The canvas and my body interact with each other. The adjusted structures of canvas at the moment when it stays still in three-dimensional shape are correlative to the posture of my body trying to hold it in position.

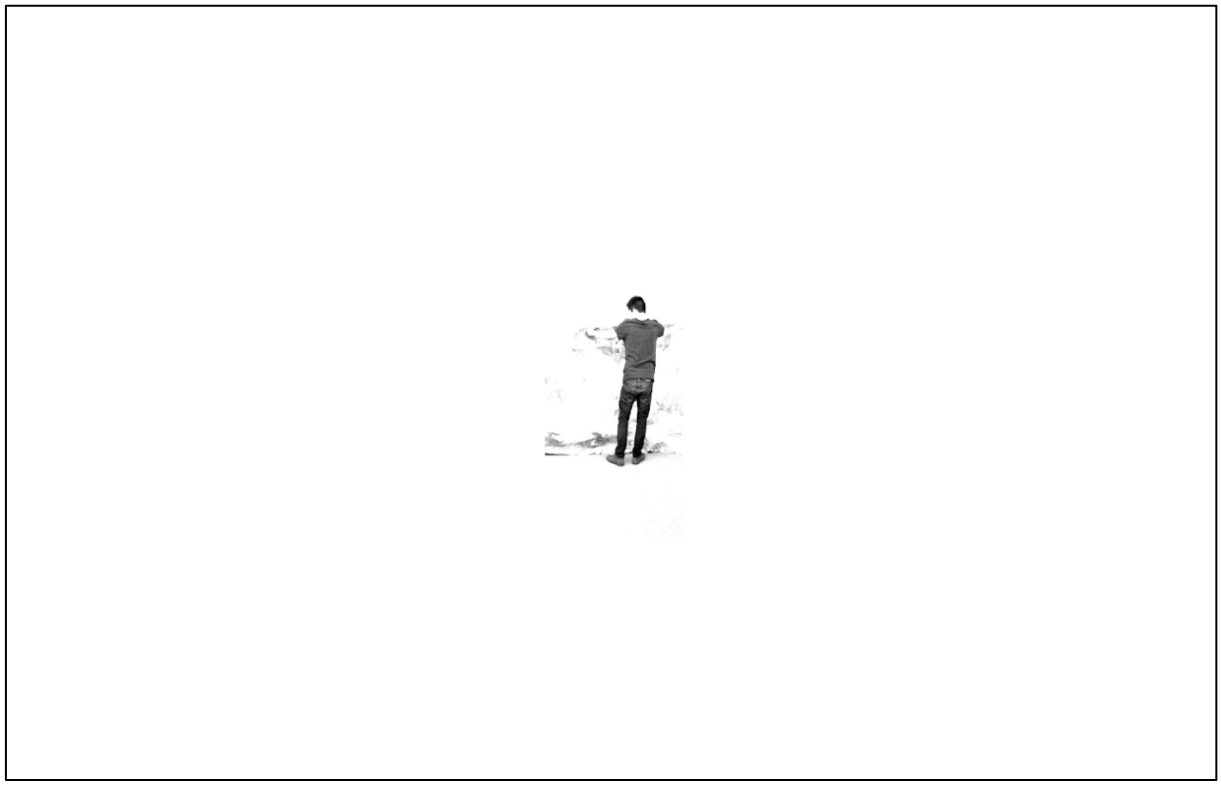

Fig. 19: *Re-Constructing Emptiness No.3* [still], 2014

Video with sound, 20.07 mins.

Fig. 20: *Conditioned; Unconditioned No. 2*, 2014

Acrylic, pencil, kitchen roll paper, and paper on unstretched canvas (size 150 x 200 cm)

The aim of this activity is not only to encourage the learning experience through the process of trial and error, I also play with the idea regarding the relationship between two-dimensional and three-dimensional art. What is the line that separates these two kinds of artwork? Is there any line? Do we need to draw that line? In this particular activity, the meaning and objective quality of canvas can fluidly travel between various kinds of art media. It starts from being a painting and transforms into sculpture, performance art and video art. As I claim that the virtual world in my video is not meant to be an imitation of the actual activities, I edit it to represent the conversation inside my mind that is concurrent with the learning process of my body. In *Conditioned; Unconditioned No. 2* one can also see that the painting in the video is also not a form of reproduction of actual painting (Fig. 20). In my video, I see that the objects can freely transform. As the painting gets repeatedly re-presented through various possible re-configurations, the original character of the painting starts to disappear. For me, the question of whether it is a painting, sculpture, performance, or video is no longer relevant. It becomes just a tool I use in order to explore the meaning of nothingness—not only the emptiness inside my mind, but the meaning of painting, for me, also becomes empty as well, through the process of this activity.

Becoming Selfless (2015; Fig. 21, 38, 57; video, 12.30 minutes) is another example of my video pieces designed to use gravity as an essential part of its production. The task of the activity, which is used to produce the moving images of this video, is to control a helium balloon to stay in one position and not float away. By using masking tape to stick pieces of kitchen roll paper on the outer surface of a balloon, I try to add weight to the helium balloon so it remains floating right at the level of my chest. The point is to balance the weight of kitchen roll paper and masking tape with the lightness of the helium gas inside the balloon. If I add too much weight, the balloon sinks down to the floor. Contrarily, if I tear off too much of the paper, the balloon becomes too light and does not stay in the position I want. After the process of adding and pulling off the kitchen roll paper, the

balloon eventually floats in the designated place. For only a brief moment, it slowly moves in the horizontal direction and, in that moment, looking at this gentle movement makes me feel like gravity does not have any effect on this balloon. Then, suddenly, the balloon gradually descends to the floor once again because a small amount of helium gas constantly leaks from the balloon.

Fig. 21: *Becoming Selfless [installation view],* 2015

Video with sound, 12.30 mins.
Helium balloon, video projector, dimension variable.
Location: *Becoming (Un) Conditioned Exhibition Part II*,
Ratchadamnoen Contemporary Art Center, Bangkok (December 2015)

The tasks performed in these video pieces (*Re-Constructing Emptiness No.3* and *Becoming Selfless*) are clearly not meant to be successfully accomplished and can only be attained for a short period of time. In the first video, it is impossible to retain a piece of canvas in sculptural forms without any skeletal structure. It might stay in three-dimensional form for a while, but only for a limited time; the nature of fabric is not strong

enough to hold itself against gravity. In the second video, the balance state between the weight of added materials and the floating force of the helium balloon is uncertain. As soon as kitchen roll paper and masking tape are added to the balloon, the small amount of helium gas has already leaked out. It is an endless game of playing catch-up. These two activities show how I admire failure as an essential part of the learning experience. The process in the videos is a journey toward the illusory that can never become real. It is similar to chasing a dream, happiness or success; once we get what we want, we realise that it has come to an end, and there are always other dreams, other kinds of happiness, and further successes waiting to be reached.

Body and Self-Learning

The repetitive actions of interacting with objects and performing in these activities are a very important part of experimentation and have to be performed continually for certain periods of time. Through the performing process, the body learns what to do step-by-step. By constantly doing the action over and over again, the body starts to be familiar with the process. The mind is then able to concentrate and learn how to develop each movement in order to explore multiple possibilities to accomplish the task. It is similar to repeatedly doing long-distance walking. First I put myself on an unknown track and only roughly describe what the destination should be. I let myself carefully walk. I look at every step I take and everything I see. I take many wrong turns until I reach some place I think is the destination. I then force myself to walk again, and try to find a better trail than the one I took before. I think and try over and over again. I become familiar with the track. There is no competition, so I keep exploring this area. I keep finding new tracks and new places. I gain more experience. Through the process of trial and error, I understand that there are various ways to reach the destination. More importantly, there are actually multiple places that can be called ‘destination’. At this moment, it is no longer about finding new tracks or reaching a destination. I just keep walking and walking. I stop looking at the trail and start

to hear my heartbeats. I see my feet move repetitively and see my arms swing concordantly. I breathe heavily because I start to get tired. Suddenly, I think I am too tired to walk any further. I stop focusing on both the track and the movements of my body. I want to do other things besides being here and walking. That is when I call an end to this learning activity.

In this sense, I then see the way I explore the experience of not-knowing during my studio practice shares certain aspects with the educationalist Mike Jarvis, who in his essay "Articulating the Tacit Dimension in Artmaking" says that when artists cope with the unknown, they often create some kind of strategy, which involves the balance of planning and intuitive action. In my case, the planning takes place at the beginning as I set up task of the activity with certain rules to keep the process going. I also design where the camera should be located and what will roughly be captured inside the video screen. After that, everything is mostly run by my intuition. In her article, "Creative Accounting: Not Knowing in Talking and Making", Rebecca Fortnum explains that:

> When documenting how artists make [art], it is possible to identify certain general stages, procedures and techniques in the creative process. However as TJ Diffey points out, it is difficult to pin down "how far" they have got in their "understanding". He explains the lack of an available predictive model for artistic endeavor, "To create is to engage in undertakings the outcome of which cannot be known or defined or predicted, though there may be some presentiment of the outcome".[55] For virtually all artists, the search for the unknown outcome is not only welcome but provides a driving force within the creative process...[56]

Activities used as the source for my video are similar to the self-learning exercise. The difference is that this is not a course designed to be shared in a classroom, but rather for the sake of studying by myself. In my exercise, there is no introduction, nor instruction for how to carry out this task. The lesson's objective and procedure begins with almost no idea of the outcome. Certain rules are set up to start and keep the activity going, but

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55. T.J. Diffey, "On Steering Clear of Creativity", in *Journal of Visual Art Practice* (3) 2, 2004, 95.
56. Rebecca Fortnum, "Creative Accounting: Not Knowing in Talking and Making", in *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2013), 70.

everything else happens by immediate decisions made during the activity. There is no exact plan prior to the experiment. I start to link whatever comes up during the process with my personal experience to create what I think can be explained as the result of procedure. Since the whole process is made to serve my personal logic and in response to my own curiosity, what I claim to be the outcome of the lesson might be meaningful and can be understood by only myself.

In *The Ignorant School Master,* the philosopher Jacques Rancière talks about a similar kind of 'self knowledge', by comparing it to the case of the self-learning of a foreign language. The education system for Rancière is not so much about the process of teaching and listening – the role of the teacher is not to tell the students what to do, which is already established by the institution of lessons. Successful learning is often thought to be a ceiling that some students can reach but very few can pass through. Rancière proposes that the teacher facilitates and encourages students to learn by themselves. There is no need to repetitively memorise what have been told or what is written in the textbook; in order to navigate unknown territory, one learns and discovers one's own ways of making sense:

> One learns sentences and more sentences; one discovers facts, that is, relations between things, and still other relations that are all of the same nature; one learns to combine letters, words, sentences, ideas. It will not be said that one has acquired science, that one knows truth or has become a genius. But it will be known that, in the intellectual order, one can do what any man can do.[57]

There is therefore no ceiling, as everyone has an equal chance to do what any man can do. There is no right or wrong but only the working path. One's path might not work for others as one will not understand that doing the same way as any other would understand.

Inspired by Rancière's idea, I see that the essential content of self-learning is not to fulfil the expectations of others, but to maintain the personal will to learn and make connections between everything that occurs during the journey. My art activities originate

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[57]. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant School Master* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991), 26.

in the state of not-knowing, and the destination of the lesson is unknown. I do not even know what is going to happen along the way and what can be useful for the project. As the activities approach the end, I realise that the projects might not be supposed to generate 'answers' that can lead me to the exit of this not-knowing condition. The artworks that have been produced along the way are the proving evidence of many moments of knowing. However, they are not final answer, and, after all, I think there is probably no final answer anyway. Every answer and every knowing always lead to another question and curiosity. The lesson is probably designed to keep myself exploring and getting lost. Similar to what life is, my art is the endless journey of self-learning.

In *Re-Constructing Emptiness No.1* (2013; Fig. 22, 23, 46; video, 30.15 minutes), I re-arrange 40 kitchen rolls to create precarious re-configurations. The objective is to make the structure as tall and unstable as possible to fit into the studio space. A kitchen roll is very different from the found piece of wood and discarded broken parking lot pole I use in *Re-Constructing Two Elements* (Fig. 17, 18, 58). It is a roll of thick paper normally used for cleaning up small amounts of liquid and food etc. After use, it is thrown away as trash. It can easily be bought from any local convenience store. The price varies depending on the thickness and quality of paper and the quantity in one roll. I chose this object because I see it as the representation of the ordinary, convenient consumerism in today's urban daily life. Another reason is its simplicity of form, colour and material. The kitchen rolls that I chose are mass manufactured, so they all look identical. The cylinder shape, the lightness, and the softness of the paper allow me to stack them much easier and less dangerously in case the precarious re-configuration collapses on my body during the process of re-arranging. However, since it is made of soft paper, the shape is not very rigid and can be a little distorted. To vertically stack 40 rolls and create a precarious re-configuration can also be very difficult. The structure keeps falling to the ground, creating a growing feeling of frustration and disappointment, yet I have to force myself to re-do the whole process again

and again. The mind becomes familiar with the failures. The task transforms from making the highest structure to making as many mistakes as possible, so I can eventually find out the methods of re-configuration.

During the process of stacking these rolls of paper, the most important thing that regularly comes to my mind is the shifting between knowing and not-knowing. I do not know what the precarious re-configuration in which I am engaged is going to be like eventually. I do not know if that re-configuration is going to be successful or not. Essentially, I do not know what exactly I am doing. Sometimes, I can respond to my curiosity by developing some kind of answer to myself. Through the experience of trial and error, there are multiple moments where I feel confident, like I know something, and there also many occasions that I get the doubtful feeling that everything I think I know might be wrong. I feel like I have found the answer, and then I start to question that answer again. The knowing and not-knowing constantly take turns in my head.

To reflect the self-learning dialogue inside my mind, I edit the video so the moving images of my body and the re-configurations of the kitchen rolls gradually disappear into the whiteness of the background. The video is represented in monochrome with very high contrast. The bright area of my skin gets blown up to look exactly the same tone of white as the whiteness of the paper and the studio walls. At the same time, the shadowy area of my body, my dark clothing, and the core of kitchen rolls are adjusted to be the same tone of black. The human body, objects, and environment are merged into one thing. It is almost impossible to distinguish the white kitchen rolls from the white background. Therefore, viewers barely see how the precarious re-configurations look unless the dark area of my clothes is in the position between the re-configuring structure and the wall.

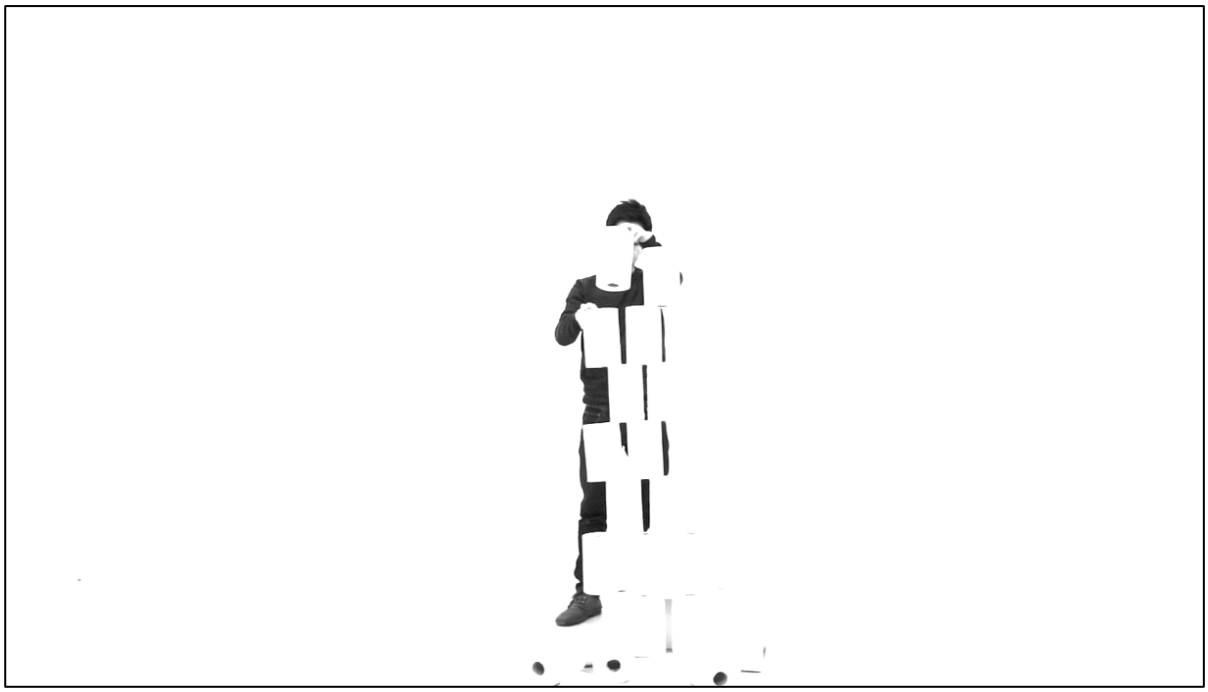

Fig. 22: *Re-Constructing Emptiness No.1* [still], 2013, A

Fig. 23: *Re-Constructing Emptiness No.1* [still], 2013, B

Video with sound, 30.15 mins.

Most of the time, the video looks like a documentation of myself moving and performing some actions in a white space. In addition, since the picture is in extremely high contrast, the detail of everything also disappears, including the different tonality of the greyscale. This also reduces the quality of the three-dimensional representation of objects in the moving image. All black and white areas look flat on the screen. The only way to define the depth of the picture is by analysing how each small element of black and white are put in front or at the back of other elements. The virtual world of video takes over the actual event and claims the quality of the artwork in itself. It is no longer the documentation of actual activity, but artwork for its own sake. There are several extremely short moments where I re-adjust the picture contrast back to normal. They are like flashes of lightning that reveal the actual situation. We can see the movement of my body, the emotion on my face, the concentration, and the disappointment, but we can rarely see what causes these to happen. Everything looks white and clean, like there is nothing. Suddenly, we realise that although we do not see, it does not mean there is nothing. What we see does not equal what we know.

The use of exaggerated whiteness in the video to question the relationship between knowing and not knowing and existing and not existing develops further in the video *Re-Constructing Emptiness (White Wall)* (2015; Fig. 24, 25, 55; video, 28.42 minutes). In this work, the activity is to repair and clean up the white wall of the gallery, starting with refilling the nail and screw holes, sanding the wall, and re-painting to cover the entire area in white. The video is a mixture of two kinds of shots. The first one comes from the camera set up in front of the wall capturing the activity from a distance. The second shot comes from the small camera attached on my forehead capturing the activity from closer range. The whole video is made in black and white, but only the distance shot gets edited to be in extremely high contrast.

Fig. 24: *Re-Constructing Emptiness (White Wall)* [still], 2015, A

Fig. 25: *Re-Constructing Emptiness (White Wall)* [still], 2015, B

Video with sound, 28.42 mins.

The viewer can see the moving image of my body, tirelessly using a trowel to fill wall putty into screw holes, rubbing sandpaper to smooth the surface, and using a paint roller to spread the white paint all over the wall. However, the over brightness of white gets rid of almost all the detail of the nail and screw holes and the uneven texture and cracks on the wall. The wall looks white and clean. It is like my body is doing all of this hard work for no reason. Then the video shifts to show the shots from the smaller camera attached to my head. Without the high contrast adjustment, the viewer can see the reason for all the actions through my perception of the work in front of me.

In the end, the video still does not explain the reason why the artist cleans this wall, nor the best and most effective way to repair the wall. In this video, there are moments that show how inexperienced the artist is with this kind of job. Nevertheless, the aim of this video is rather to leave viewers in the state of not-knowing. By observing the repetitive actions of the body and the function of the tools in the artist's hand, the viewers are pulled into the world of the artist. The constant movement and the sounds created by the actions are synchronous with the heart beating and breathing of the artist and viewers as well. This sharing persistent rhythm acts like a device that connects the artist, viewers and the artwork together. By watching and hearing the video, it actually brings our concentration back and forth to the movement of our own body. We are invited to get lost in the space we created between the inside and outside of our mind.

Other works that makes to resonate the idea of self-learning are two video pieces created in 2015 titled *Self-Learning the Emptiness No.1* (2015; Fig. 26, 48; video, 11.10 minutes) and *Self-Learning the Emptiness No.2* (2015; Fig. 27, 48; video, 17.36 minutes). *Self-Learning the Emptiness No.1* consists of two overlapping videos, both of which document me performing the activity of re-arranging multiple small empty glass bottles of an energy drink. These two videos were shot in the same location only in two different times. One of the videos happened before the other one. One of the videos is the record of

myself trying to accomplish the task by learning from the mistake of another attempt that happened earlier. In the end, neither of them succeeds as the stack of bottles collapses. As these two sets of actions are merged into one video, the ordering of events are mixed up. Two moving images of myself are doing what seem to be very similar activities at the same time in the same place.

Fig. 26: *Self-Learning the Emptiness No.1* [still], 2015

Video with sound, 11.10 mins.

Self-Learning the Emptiness No.1, for me, is not the documentation of the actual performance events, but rather acts as the recording of my memory as I am trying to prepare myself to do the third attempt. Although I realise that the first and second attempts happened in chronological order, in order to use them as the information for my on-going self-learning process, I merge them together and compare them as one set of knowledge. They thus informed one another. As I look at the image of myself that appears at the left of the screen, I concurrently realise the success and failures of another image of my body that

appears in the middle of the screen as well, with no need to know which one really happens prior to the other. Each body seems to continually learn from the other, and I, as the owner of these memories, simultaneously learn from them.

Self-Learning the Emptiness No.2 consists of three videos. They do not overlap but are shown separately as a three-channel video installation, documenting a performing action from three different angles: front, rear and side. The event takes place in a big rectangular-shaped art studio. The room has a very high ceiling, white walls, and large windows. A dozen fans attached to the ceilings are switched on. There are black painting easels, chairs, cabinets, and plinths untidily placed all over the room. The performance is an attempt to create a precarious reconfiguration of five big metal painting easels. These heavy easels are carefully arranged to lean on each other in very unstable positions. As these easels are dragged on the floor, and sometimes collapse, very loud noise echoes in the room.

Fig. 27: *Self-Learning the Emptiness No.2* [still], 2015

Video with sound, 17.36 mins.

The video on the left screen documents the whole performing action from the front view, while in the third video on the right screen there appears the image of the finished precarious structure that I am working on in the first screen. The third video is documented from the opposite point of view to the first one, the so called front and rear angles. However, as the re-configuration structure in the first screen eventually becomes similar to that in the third, the still image in the latter changes, then the whole process of working starts over again. The middle screen is the shot from the side angel documenting the performing action from closer range. The main focus of this shot is not the structures made of metal easels, but rather the action of my body and the expression of my face that happen during the performance. The events appear in the left and middle screens happen synchronously, while the image of the structures in the right screen appear almost like a still image of the easels placed together.

For the viewers, *Self-Learning the Emptiness No.2* might only act as three forms of documentation of one single event. However, for me, it represents the journey of my thinking during the actual performance. The three-channel video features three components that happen at once; the movement of the body, the emotion/feeling of my mind, and the plan in my head. In the actual event, I do not have a clear picture in my head about the final re-configuration. The plan is continually developed one step at a time. I work to accomplish the task determined by the first picture of the possible configuration that appears in my head. When the first plan is done, I then create the second picture. The whole process is continually built up from the previous self-learning journey until I cannot think of any further image. *Self-Learning the Emptiness No.2* also highlights the notion of working on the unknown journey. Although I might have pictured in my mind what the end of each small step of the whole journey would be, the strategy to reach it is unclear. During the working process, there are moments of failure and attempts of re-doing happen over and over again until I can find the successful way.

Body from Video to Hand-Made Artwork: Two-Dimensional Objects

My video pieces are often shown in two ways: using a projector or playing them on a television screen. If I use the projector, I prefer the video piece to be projected on a white wall. The monochrome image of my body and objects surrounded by the white walls of my studio are blended into the white wall of the exhibiting space. The world inside my video pieces and the actual world inside the gallery are merged into one. Playing it on a television screen might detract from the idea of two worlds that imbricate each other; on the other hand, the video increases the feeling of isolation even more. The virtual world is locked inside the frame, separating it even further from the actual world. For me, both of these presentation formats equally strengthen the concept of my video in two different aspects.

In the *Becoming (Un) Conditioned - Part II* exhibition (December, 2015) at Ratchadamnoen Contemporary Art Centre in Bangkok (Fig. 28, 29, 56), I decided to combine the two kinds of presentation. There were two video pieces projected facing each other on two opposite walls. In the side area of the gallery, there were four televisions lined up to play four different video pieces. Although these six video pieces presented myself performing various repetitive actions with different kinds of objects, they all shared a similar concept: using the activity of creating precarious conditions in order to generate moments of mindfulness, which would gradually lead to the experience of emptiness inside the mind. Each video generated its own conversation with the audience. Walking through the exhibition room, viewers encountered multiple representations of what looked like my body, but none of them really was the body.

Fig. 28: *Becoming (Un) Conditioned Exhibition Part II* [installation view] A

Fig. 29: *Becoming (Un) Conditioned Exhibition Part II* [installation view] B

Ratchadamnoen Contemporary Art Center, Bangkok (December 2015)

My video pieces can be seen as fragments of learning experience and memory from the past that have been captured and re-presented again and again by technology. They do not represent real-time actions, but collections of responses between my mind and my body. Their forms can be edited, bent, reproduced, and even erased. Their actions can be fast-forwarded, reversed and stopped; as the video reaches its end, the machine automatically replays the whole thing from the beginning. Its existence can be witnessed over and over again until the machine is turned off or broken. On the other hand, these representations of my body are no longer under my control. They have their own life in the world of the machine and technology. Especially when using a projector, the body and objects that appear on the wall are all made of light projected using a light bulb. They are an illusion that can be seen but cannot be touched.

If one puts a hand in front of the projected wall, the image just transfers itself onto the skin and leaves an empty shadowy space on the wall. Although the image of myself appears on your hand, you feel no weight at all, although you might be able to feel a small amount of heat radiating from the light bulb. Although I recognise that the bodies and activities projected on the wall or played on the television screen are created from the actual activity performed by myself inside my studio, somehow I often feel unfamiliar with the moving images I see. The repetitive action of trial and error that is played in what seems to be an endless loop makes me feel uncomfortable. I start to look at the image of my body as someone else and question the reason behind these activities. I try to recall the memory of the activity and ask myself if I will eventually find out the purpose of what I am trying to do in these videos. Do I know now how the experience of emptiness looks or feels? Can I describe such a feeling? The answer is unclear. What I see in the video now is the relationship of form and space, black and white, fast and slow pace, repetitive continuation and stillness. I become a third person, one who observes the interaction between the human body and objects.

When the video shows the moments wherein objects reach the state of balance and stay in precarious re-configurations, I can also feel like time is slowing down, but from the perspective of the audience, not as the person who is performing in the video. I guess whether the experience of emptiness really happens during the activity, and whatever the outcome of the activity is, it occurs and remains only in that particular place and time. Although I video document the whole event and try to edit it to reflect the way that I feel is the closest to how the experience worked in my mind during the actual activity, I can only capture certain parts of the dialogue. The outcome of this video does not remind me of the past, but rather generates a new experience and a new inspiration.

In the black and white video *Re-Constructing Emptiness No.1* (Fig. 22, 23, 46), the images of the kitchen rolls piled up to create precarious structures and some parts of my body performing the re-arranging action are dissolved into the whiteness of the background. Because of a very high contrast adjustment, the over-blown whiteness kills all the small details of the objects, body, clothes, walls, and floor. The stacks of 40 white kitchen rolls can hardly be seen since their colour blends in so well with the white wall. Most of the time, as the objects become nearly invisible, it almost looks like the body is performing meaningless actions inside an empty space. The blurriness between what really exists and what does not exist plays a big role through the actions. The connection between objective tangibility and the illusory effect created by the technology of the moving image becomes a source of inspiration for other series of hand-made artwork.

The series of hand-made artworks is created to explore other possibilities of re-examining the experience of emptiness regardless the limitation of artistic materials and media. If the essential concept of the artworks created in video format is the personal experience that mainly consists of a series of feelings, there should be ways to re-transfer these contents into other forms of artworks, such as drawing, painting, sculpture and installation. Using Itthipol Tangchalok's abstract painting as inspiration, I re-create the

mindful process of working by changing from performing certain tasks in the studio to the practice of collaging, cutting and pasting, painting and drawing. Similar to the video pieces that act as the documentation from the past that cannot be re-performed, each marks-making technique I apply in the hand-made artworks operate as documentation of feelings and thoughts that happen at certain moment and cannot be re-produced. The fast and slow movement inside the video becomes the dynamic brushstrokes and still gestures on paper and canvas. The action of finding the weight balance through the re-arranging objects into precarious positions in the video pieces can be compared to the process of finding the right composition of visual elements coming into sight in hand-made artwork.

I collage and depict several still images of my body taken from the video and place onto paper and canvas. I create a unique rough texture by collaging layers of kitchen roll paper onto the piece and then carefully apply pencil, charcoal, ink, and various kinds of paint to create a composition of lines, splashes, brushstrokes, tonality, and forms. The still images of small figures repeatedly performing continuous actions are inspired by what happens in the video. The body's gestures are paused, providing a contrasting feeling with the more dynamic abstract background. This reflects the condition when the mind is resting on the body and its action. Although the body is constantly moving, the mind is slowed down.

Fig. 30: Series of *Documenting: Conditioned; Unconditioned*, 2015, A

Fig. 31: Series of *Documenting: Conditioned; Unconditioned*, 2015, B

Fig. 32: Series of *Documenting: Conditioned; Unconditioned*, 2015, C

Paper, acrylic, pencil, and ink on paper (size 42 x 140 cm each, 15 pieces)

All series of video and hand-made artwork created under this research project are interrelated to each other. Not only are their physical appearances developed or built on one another, I also see them together as an on-going process created to investigate the possible relationship between the objective character of materials and my personal subjective aesthetic. The series of hand-made artworks are not reproductions of the video pieces. These drawings, paintings, and sculptures are able to reflect only certain characters of the work in video format. The hand-made artworks borrow some ideas from the moving images and transform it to the format of still pictures. There are many things that can be carried across the line that separates the two categories, but there are obviously some aspects of the work that cannot be shared. However, at the very least, I see this crossing between media as a great possibility to develop my work. The conversation between my mind, my body, and the objects, and the journey to explore the experience of emptiness continues to happen without the limitation of art material and medium.

Inspired by the learning experience I have gained during the continuing process of doing activities documented in video pieces, I see the process of making these hand-made artworks as part of the learning mechanism as well. Without a sketch, I start the process by collaging still images of myself captured from the video and pieces of kitchen roll paper on the supporting paper or canvas. I place these materials, re-arrange, and adjust the composition by responding to my feelings and intuition at the moment. Using watery glue to fix the objects in place affects the flimsy kitchen roll paper, making it wrinkle and change its own form. Therefore, after I glue one object onto the surface, I need to repeatedly re-arrange the composition of other materials that have not yet been glued. While everything is still wet, I apply more watery paint and ink onto the picture, so that the pigment gets absorbed right into the texture of paper. I collage more materials, tear some off, add some glue, and apply more paint, again and again until the whole picture looks right according to my intuition.

After the glue, paints, and materials dry, I start the second process by applying white paint, black ink, and pencil onto the picture. Using the result from the first process as the platform, the second process is about balancing what to keep, what to highlight, and what to erase. It is about planning and precision. I add layers of white, grey, and black tones to highlight forms, make space, generate transparent grey layers to cover certain parts, create shadow effects, and eliminate some areas. Adding these white, grey, and black elements, for me, helps unify the whole picture and brings out the prominent character. The essential concern is to find the best quality created by the first process and adding just the right elements to maintain this quality. After the second process is done, I use the picture as the inspiration for the next piece. I look at the result of the technique and try to come up with other possible compositions. I enlarge and change the size. I look at another video to find new inspiration.

Fig. 33: Series of *Documenting: Conditioned; Unconditioned* [installation view], 2015

Location: Conditioned; Unconditioned Exhibition
North Wall Arts Centre, Oxford (April 2015)

Fig. 34: *Documenting: Conditioned; Unconditioned* [installation view], 2015

Location: Becoming (Un) Conditioned Exhibition Part I
Buddhadasa Indapanno Archive (Suan Mokkha Bangkok) (November 2015)

Fig. 35: Series of *Documenting; Conditioned; Unconditioned* [detail], 2015

The difference between the first process and the second is the controllability of the techniques. For example, by using watery glue and paint to attach paper and kitchen roll paper to the surface, the materials become very soft, flimsy and fragile. It is very difficult to adjust their forms when placing them on the supporting ground. It is also very difficult to control the outcome when applying wet paints onto the wet materials, compared to putting black ink on a dry surface. However, the result from the less controllable technique happens to be very interesting for me since it cannot be re-created. It is the mixture of something that is created through intention and something that accidentally happens. Whatever appears in the work is the product of specific time and feeling. Therefore, when I apply the second process, which is more controllable, I try to keep the result from the first process as much as possible. The balance between being able to control and not being able to do so keeps changing all the time while I am working. The dialogue of knowing and not knowing that happens again in my mind is quite similar to what happened during the production of my video pieces.

I use pencil to draw countless small straight vertical marks that are tidily and densely squashed together to create a flat layer of dark grey. Since there is a very small space between the lines, the viewer can see the layers of paint and materials that are hidden below. In addition to acting as a transparent atmosphere that covers certain parts of the painting, this layer of pencil drawing also represents the continual repetitive action and the length of time consumed by this particular technique. Such characters are really different from the nature of any other techniques applied in this work. By comparing the numerous pencil marks with the expressive swipes of brushstrokes and splashes of paints, I see the collaboration of various characters of movements: fast-slow, one single move-repetition, and immediate-plan ahead. My own existence is clearly portrayed in these hand-made artworks, not only in the static representational images of my body, but also from the various modes of action revealed through the appearance of these abstract visual elements.

The drawing process in my hand-made work is partially inspired by Park Seobo's series, *Ecriture* (*Myŏbop* in Korean), which translates as the 'way of drawing'. Park Seobo (b. 1931) is one of the most important contemporary Korean artists. He is described by a curator and writer Miki Wick Kim in *Korean Contemporary Art* as 'a leader of Korean Informal and Monochrome Art, which proliferated during the 1960s and 1970s, respectively, and which are regarded as the most innovative of the Korean modern art movement'[58]. Seobo and Lee Yufan (b. 1936) come from the same generation. Both of them work to question the process of creating paintings that can portray the essence of abstraction and the meaning of Eastern philosophy. While Yufan focuses on the expression of one single brushstroke that can control the composition and movement of the whole painting, Seobo chooses to use repetitive drawing of pencil lines that continually appear all over the painting's surface. Although the work is executed with a very simple technique, the relationship between marks and space in Seobo's painting is really complex and full of movement. In some pieces, the artist repeatedly draws straight lines to intensely cover the whole area. The length and angle of these lines vary from painting to painting. Sometimes he also uses curved lines that continually bend themselves in order to fit in the canvas space. Regularly using white paint to coat the canvas, Seobo often leaves some parts of the canvas uncovered. The background behind the pencil lines is then a mixture of the white colour from the primer paint and the pale yellow or light grey of the fabric texture. Sometimes, the artist draws the lines onto the surface while the thick layer of white paint is still wet. The affect is that the lines appear to be engraved into the surface of painting.

Park Seobo has worked on his *Ecriture* series since the 1970s. The purpose is to define the connection between the artist, artworks, and nature. In Seobo's first solo exhibition in the UK (15 January−12 March, 2016) at White Cube Mason's Yard Gallery,

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[58] Miki Wick Kim, *Korean Contemporary Art* (London: Prestel, 2012),152.

curated by Katharine Kostyál, the exhibition's press release explained that the artist has always been interested in the possibility of representing the meaning of emptiness through his painting. He reduces the expression of his feelings and emotions by using only basic visual elements. In 2006, the artist said:

> My work is… related to the oriental tradition of space, the spiritual concept of space. I am more interested in space from the point of view of nature. Even though my paintings may represent an idea about culture, the main focus is based on nature… I want to reduce the idea and emotion in my work to express only that. I want to reduce and reduce—to create pure emptiness.[59]

At the Lower Ground Floor Gallery of Park Seobo's exhibition at White Cube Mason's Yard, the viewers are surrounded by nine *Ecriture* paintings created between 1973 and 1979. Four of them are approximately 130 x 160 cm, and three are 130 x 195 cm. The other two pieces are slightly smaller. The expressions of lines are different from painting to painting. Some pieces display straight lines, while some show sets of curved lines. The layers of white paint on the background of some paintings are not evenly spread on the surface of the canvas. Because of the uneven thickness of the background, lines that are drawn over these different textures exhibit a variety of tonalities. Lines in some areas are denser and thicker. In addition, when two sets of small lines overlap, the areas look darker and less transparent. The artist uses these different characters of the lines to control the composition of each picture. Park Seobo's paintings are completely abstract, as they do not depict any representational form. In *Contemporary Korean Art: Tansaekhwa and the Urgency of Method,* art historian Joan Lee talks about Park Seobo's *Myŏbop:*

> When *Myŏbop* made its Korean debut at the Myongdong Gallery in October 1973, Park remarked: "I am specifically trying not to insert meaning [into them]; my works do not possess that which is called an image. Since there is no image, there is no expression". Yet as Lee did with the brush in *From Line and From Point*, Park controls the pencil in ways that compel viewers to consider the resulting marks as traces of the artist's physical presence. [60]

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[59]. Katharine Kostyál, Press Release of Seobo's solo exhibition (15 January−12 March, 2016) at White Cube Mason's Yard Gallery.
[60]. Joan Kee, *Contemporary Korean Art: Tansaekhwa and the Urgency of Method* (Minneapolis: University of Minnestota Press, 2013), 192.

While I am sitting at the bench in the middle of the exhibition room, I feel the calmness and silence. The room is quite large. Four white walls are clean. I cast my eyes over Park Seobo's painting, piece by piece. I can sense the repetitive rhythm created by his lines. It is like hearing the sound of a pencil scratching on the surface of the canvas over and over again. It is like hearing the sound of rain dropping on the window. There is no explanation of the concept on the wall. There is no representational form or any symbols that I can use as a leading clue to any story. Strangely, these abstract paintings that only consist of lines drawn on white space can communicate so many things to my mind even if the message might not contain any words. Although the dialogue might be silent, a conversation is going on between my mind and Seobo's paintings.

Body from Video to Hand-Made Artwork: Three-Dimensional Objects

In addition to the concept of transformation between the moving images and two-dimensional still pictures, partially inspired by Tony Oursler's (b. 1957) *Eyes* series (1997−1999), my project explores the relationship between video pieces and three-dimensional work as well. In this particular series, Oursler projects moving images of a human eye onto three-dimensional sphere shapes the approximate size of a human head. Many of these sculptures are hung from the ceiling. They look like big eyeballs floating in the air. The projected moving images of eyes sometimes blink and move like they are looking at viewers and gazing over the surrounding exhibiting space.

Oursler uses technology to put life into objects. The sculptures exist in the gap between the artificial reality, represented by virtual image, and the actual world, represented by the tangible quality of these objects. Inside each eyeball, there is the reflection of a television or computer screen. Many aspects in the series show how the artist tries to criticise the influence of technology and moving images upon the lives of people. As art historian critic Elizabeth Janus says about Tony Oursler in her essay, "To Paint in Moving Images": 'In the art, Tony Oursler digs deep into the complexities of

seeing and knowing, embracing contemporary technology while at the same time continuously probing and uncovering the effects that it has on us'.[61]

Looking at Oursler's *Eyes*, I became very interested in the role of three-dimensional form used as the projected background of video. Instead of projecting the video directly onto the wall, I experiment by placing found objects between the projector and the wall. Part of the projected video appears on the found object; the rest of the video still presents on the back wall with the shadowy blank space in the outline of the found object. In *Re-Constructing Emptiness No.3* (2014) (Fig. 19, 36, 37), the documentation of the process of trying to re-form the painting on canvas into a three-dimensional shape is projected onto the kitchen roll hung from the ceiling. In this particular video, the scene of the activity in my studio is cropped into a small vertical rectangular frame, located in the middle of the whole video image, in order to fit the space of the kitchen roll paper hung freely above the ground. The rest of the video is a collection of water scenery in nature.

I use water to explore the fluidity and changeability of the on-going learning process inside my mind that keeps evolving during the transformation of objects from one precarious re-configuration to another. The moving image of myself performing the action looks like it is floating in space. Being in this installation, the viewer is standing in the co-existence of two different spaces—the actuality of exhibition space and another one that belongs to the virtual world.

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[61]. Elizabeth Janus, "To Paint in Moving Images", in *Tony Oursler* (Valencia: Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno, 2001), 49.

Fig. 36: *Re-Constructing Emptiness No.3* [installation view], 2014

Fig. 37: *Re-Constructing Emptiness No.3* [detail], 2014

Video with sound installed with a kitchen roll, 20.07 minutes
Location: OMS, High Street Building, Ruskin School of Art (November 2014)

In *Becoming Selfless* (2015) (Fig. 21, 38, 57), there is a helium balloon installed in front of the wall. The video of myself trying to balance the weight of the balloon to stay level with my chest is projected on the surface of the installed balloon. Similar to what happens in *Re-Constructing Emptiness No.3*, the rest of the video appears on the back white wall with the blank shadowy circular space resulting from the balloon blocking the light of the projector. This moving image on the wall is also the documentation of myself doing the same action of balancing the weight of the balloon. Although they are performing the same task, the images on the wall and on the balloon seem to be different most of the time.

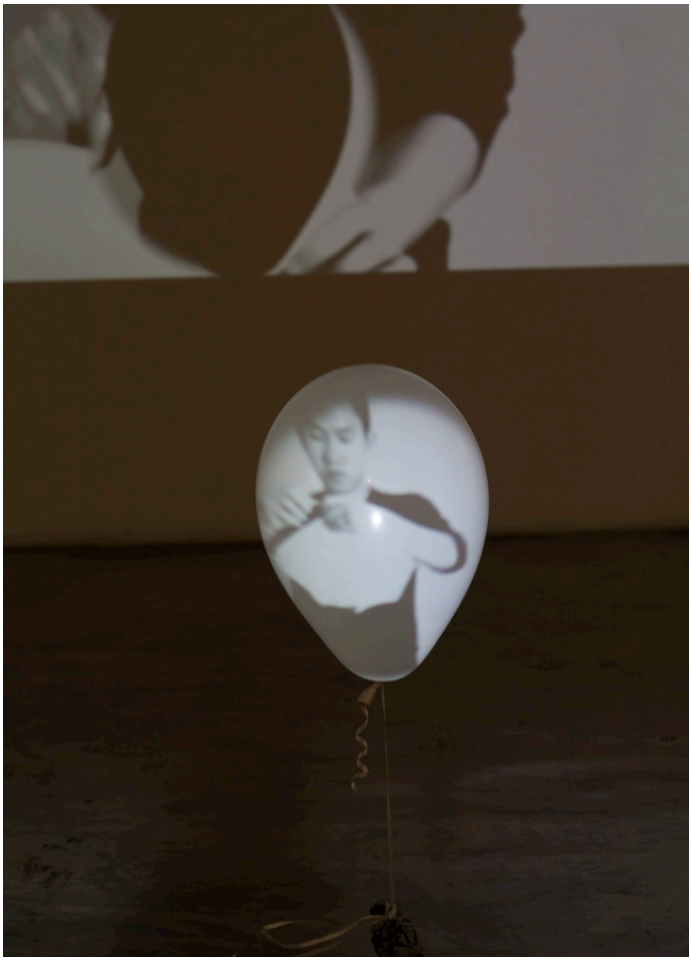

Fig. 38: *Becoming Selfless* [detail], 2015

Video with sound, helium balloon, video projector, dimension variable.
Location: *Becoming (Un) Conditioned Exhibition Part II*,
Ratchadamnoen Contemporary Art Center, Bangkok (December 2015)

Sometimes, the image appears on the wall with only a white space on the balloon. Sometimes they happen in the opposite way. Sometimes images appear on both, the wall and the balloon, but their actions seem to come from different steps of the whole performance or from the different shooting positions. There are only a few moments when these two images are the same. The relationship between these two images is inspired by the way my mind works during the process of doing this activity. The concentration of my mind keeps changing its focus between my body and the balloon. The image on the wall represents the awareness of my self that is performing the action in front of the camera, and the image on the balloon implies the moment that my mind only focuses on the balloon, without associating with the surrounding environment.

The image of my body that moves and performs certain actions in the video is bent and distorted depending on the form and texture of the objects upon which the image is projected. The material quality of the objects, such as the rough texture of the kitchen roll paper, the elastic surface of the balloon, and the curvy shapes of kitchen roll and balloon, gets embedded as part of the video. The body keeps changing its form as it moves around different areas of the objects. As I have claimed, the concentration of my mind on the activities brings my mind and the objects together to become part of each other. How I projected the moving image of myself performing the activities onto the object clearly symbolises the particular concept in a very practical way. The imitation of my body is presented in the form of light emitted from the machine, and when the light is cast on the object, the image of myself is flowingly transformed into different shapes and forms. The question that arises in my mind is what is the remaining meaning of the representation of myself in the artwork? I started the research project with the process of realising the existence of my self and its learning experience through association with objects and their environment, but as the project developed into forms of artwork, although there are images of my body inserted in almost every piece, the meaning of the self softens. The

interpretation of my being, my actions, and even my art concept seems to keep changing according to the place where my work is installed and the context of the exhibition space. There can be multiples of 'me', and I am not exactly sure which one is the real me, or whether a real me really exists.

Inspired by the way moving images are projected onto the objects displayed freely in space and the activity of re-constructing a painting, made on unstretched canvas, into multiple three-dimensional forms in the video *Re-Constructing Emptiness No.3*, I created a series of paintings that are installed in sculptural conditions, which can constantly change every time they are moved from one place to another. I began the experimentation by creating paintings on unstretched canvases so the crinkled nature of fabric becomes an essential part of the work. The technique is very similar to how I create the two-dimensional drawings and paintings mentioned previously. I collage still images of my body captured from the video, kitchen roll paper, and pieces of blank canvas and apply paint, ink and pencil to create marks, texture and brushstrokes. What appears on the paintings looks like the battle between the stillness of the small pictures of my body performing different actions and the movement created by brushstrokes and visual elements of paint and countless pencil lines. I then use objects, furniture or architectural details in the exhibiting space as the supporting structure in order to fabricate these paintings in three-dimensional configuration. By using various ways of hanging, covering, wrapping, and leaning, the painting is no longer represented as a two-dimensional object. It gets rolled up, folded, compressed and twisted. In addition to the pictorial side, the back of the canvas is equally visible. Material characteristics of the canvas, including the colour, texture and smell of the fabric, the sewing seams, the thickness of primer paint, and the weight of the whole piece, are considered as essential parts of the work. When the work is moved to be installed in a different location, the three-dimensional structure is always transformed.

In the process of installing my paintings, I recall my experience when I first saw *Untitled* (1970) by Robert Morris (b. 1931) in 2011 at the National Art Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne. The piece was about 2 x 4.5 m (landscape orientation). A large, rectangular piece of dark-grey felt was hung loosely on the white gallery wall by only two nails at two top corners of the piece. There were five long straight horizontal cuts from almost one end to another end of the fabric. Because of these cuts, parts of the felt were suspended and dropped on the floor. Through this kind of work, Morris presents his idea of 'Anti-Form' as there is no permanent form of the artwork. The strength of the felt changes through time and creates new forms of hanging and dropping. In addition, whenever this piece is reinstalled in a new location, the felt always creates a new version of itself.

Conditioned; Unconditioned No.1 (2014) (Fig. 39) consists of two pieces of painted canvases. I collage pieces of paper and kitchen roll pape□□□□r, mixed with expressive strokes of black and white acrylic paint on one side of the canvas, leaving the other side blank. Each canvas is about 300 x 100 cm. Together they are folded in half and hung with a wall coat hanger. The middle parts of canvases are squeezed to create a slim thick section in order to cling to the hanger hook. The rest of canvases are freely dropped and almost reach the floor. The front and the back of canvases are shown together. The two-dimensional paintings are transformed to look like a lump of painted fabric stuck on the wall. In the exhibition *Spirit of Thai* (March, 2016) at the Exhibition Research Gallery, John Lennon Art and Design Building, Liverpool John Moore University, in which I exhibited my work in collaboration with Kriangsak Raksadeja, a PhD student in Fine Art at Liverpool John Moore University, *Conditioned; Unconditioned No.1* was installed side by side with two other paintings, *Conditioned; Unconditioned No.2* (2015) and *Conditioned; Unconditioned No.3* (2015) (Fig. 40).

Fig. 39: *Conditioned; Unconditioned No.1* [installation view], 2014

Acrylic, kitchen roll paper, and paper on canvas, hung on a wall coat hanger, dimension variable
Location: Conditioned; Unconditioned Exhibition
North Wall Arts Centre, Oxford (April 2015)

Fig. 40: *Conditioned; Unconditioned No.3* [installation view], 2014

Acrylic, pencil, kitchen roll paper, and paper on unstretched canvas, installed with a lumber, dimension variable (canvas size: 150 x 200 cm)
Location: *Spirit of Thai Exhibition*, the Exhibition Research Gallery, John Lennon Art and Design Building, Liverpool John Moore University (March, 2016)

These two paintings were made using a technique similar to *Conditioned; Unconditioned No.1*, except the still pictures of my body and countless pencil lines were added. Each piece of canvas was about 150 x 200 cm. I used two-by-two pieces of lumber, approximately 240 cm in height, as a supporting structure for each painting. Two paintings were displayed separately and similarly. Each one was held up freely at the top end of the wood. The wood was then leaned against the gallery wall. The painting and piece of lumber were adjusted to stay in precarious positions without any nails or glue to maintain the objects in place. Part of the paintings got clamped onto the wall with the end of the reclining wood, forming three-dimensional free forms popping up from the wall. These cases are examples of how my paintings are transformed into three-dimensional representations. However, they still exist in the relationship with the wall as their supporting ground.

Becoming (Un) Conditioned No.1 (2015) (Fig. 41, 54) and *Becoming (Un) Conditioned No.2* (2015) (Fig. 42) shown in the exhibition titled *Becoming (Un) Conditioned: Part I* (November, 2015) at the meditation centre called Buddhadasa Indapanyo Archives or Suan Mokkh Bangkok are examples of my paintings that are removed from the wall and get displayed freely in the actual space. Each of these paintings is approximately 270 x 400 cm (portrait orientation). They are executed with techniques similar to the other paintings I have mentioned. The difference is that these paintings were the largest paintings in the series at that time, and the canvases were tightly stretched on frames during the process of painting. They were taken out of the frames right before they were installed the day of the exhibition. At Suan Mokkh Bangkok, there are many steel cables vertically linking the floor and the ceiling, evenly located along the sidewall of the gallery space. They were originally designed to display pictures without making holes in the wall. The picture frames are supposed to be locked with these strings, leaving a distance of about 30 cm from the actual wall. I decided to use these cables to create three-

dimensional structures for my *Becoming (Un) Conditioned No.1* and *Becoming (Un) Conditioned No.2* pieces.

Fig. 41: *Becoming (Un) Conditioned No.1* [installation view], 2015

Paper, canvas, acrylic, and pencil on canvas, dimensional variable (canvas before hung: 270 x 400 cm)

Fig. 42: *Becoming (Un) Conditioned No.2* [installation view], 2015

Paper, canvas, acrylic, and pencil on canvas, dimensional variable (canvas before hung: 270 x 375 cm)
Location: Becoming (Un) Conditioned Exhibition Part I
Buddhadasa Indapanno Archive (Suan Mokkha Bangkok) (November 2015)

Four ends of each canvas were attached to the cables in the way that the painting surface would be loosely and curvily suspended outward. I then hooked up several more areas at the edges of the canvas to the cables so the bulge on the painting surface became even more visible. Although from the front view they might look like large pieces of painting fabrics dangling on the wall, there was no part of these paintings that actually touched the wall. However, the audience still could not walk around the works and gain a full perception of how they looked from behind, since the space between the work and the wall was not wide enough for someone to walk through. The sculptural forms created in these two particular artworks demonstrate how the nature of materials is challenged by the tension and gravity that play a very big role in my work, not only in the video pieces, but also in my hand-made art objects.

In the exhibition titled *Becoming (Un) Conditioned: Part II* (December, 2015) at Ratchadamnoen Contemporary Art Center in Bangkok, my paintings were removed completely from the wall and displayed as sculptures that viewers could walk around. *Becoming (Un) Conditioned No.7, No.8, and No.9* (Fig. 43, 44, 45), were all created in 2015 using a mixture of acrylic paint, pencil marks, and collage of still images of my body captured from the videos documenting the activity I performed in the studio, on canvas. In contrast to *Becoming (Un) Conditioned No.1* and *No.3*, this time I did not stretch the canvas on to the frame during the process of painting. I even merged multiple pieces of canvas together and adjusted their shape to create uneven thickness and bulgy texture. The paintings had three-dimensional qualities even before they were installed in the exhibition. To transform these paintings into sculptures, I installed the painting with an aluminium ladder, wood benches, and metal tables found in the gallery space. I arranged two tables in vertical position and leaned them on each other before I wrapped the whole thing with the painted canvas. I folded another piece of painted canvas and placed it on a ladder placed against the gallery wall. I covered two wood benches with other paintings. The paintings

were stretched and suspended by the angles of these objects. This time the audience could view the artwork from many angles, but some parts of the paintings were still hidden from sight, as they were folded, stuck inside or under the objects. There was no left, right, up or down in the format of these paintings. The painted images, the collaged material, the supporting canvas, and the furniture merged into one single object.

Fig. 43: *Becoming (Un) Conditioned No.7* [installation view], 2015

Acrylic and paper on canvas, installed with two benches, dimension variable
Location: *Becoming (Un) Conditioned Exhibition Part II*,
Ratchadamnoen Contemporary Art Center, Bangkok (December 2015)

Fig. 44: *Becoming (Un) Conditioned No.9* [installation view], 2015

Acrylic and paper on canvas, installed with two tables, dimension variable

Fig. 45: *Becoming (Un) Conditioned No.8* [installation view], 2015

Acrylic and paper on canvas, installed with a ladder, dimension variable
Location: *Becoming (Un) Conditioned Exhibition Part II*,
Ratchadamnoen Contemporary Art Center, Bangkok (December 2015)

Becoming My Own Audience

Developing Buddhist Mind and Relationship with 'No-View'

Looking back to my artistic research practice, I see how I develop my work in direct response to both Buddhist concepts and a series of selected artworks which are not necessarily Buddhist, and which are generally not Thai. In addition, as the research has continually been pursued, in many ways, I also include myself as one of these 'external' artists, and also respond to my own work in much the same way that I respond to that of others. In order to develop my artistic practice, I have become the audience of my own artwork and see various ways and aspects by which 'my body' is connected with my artistic production.

At the beginning of my research, I applied Buddhist philosophy and teaching as the backbone of my artwork. Inspired by various kinds of artworks of many modern Thai artists that have claimed to create work in the context of Buddhism, especially installations by Montien Boonma that act as a spiritual and meditative space where people can use to escape from the outer world, and Kamin Lertchaiprasert's artwork, whereby the artist has applied Buddhist philosophy and aspects of meditation into the on-going process of artistic production, I started to question the confusing interpretations between didactic artworks created to convey and teach religious texts, and artworks that reflect the ritual practice as a living experience. Through the process of my art research, I tried to define the essential meaning of Buddhism among the countless different interpretations regarding how to draw an outline of what it could mean, particularly for me. Using the various media available in today's contemporary art, including performance and video, I investigated how to transform ideas from verbal explanations in Buddhist teachings into artistic concepts and applied them to different forms of art-making mechanisms. On the other hand, it could be said that, during the beginning of this research, my art acted as a continuous learning experience that coincided with the learning practice persistent in Buddhism. I did not mean

so much to convey Buddhism but rather used the framework of Buddhism to activate my art practice and to maintain the development of concept and idea during the working process. Buddhism became a great inspiration motivate me to continually explore many possible relationships and shared experiences between my life inside and outside my art studio.

However, as the research project has been developed, I sometimes do not feel the need to relate my artwork back to the teaching and philosophy of Buddhism. Buddhism might be used as the inspiration at the beginning of the concept developing process, but as soon as the artwork starts to be created, there are moments wherein the meaning and existence of Buddhism as apprehended by cognition gradually fades away from the work, and during these stages the conversation in my mind concentrates on the relationship and interaction between my body, my mind, and the objects in front of me. Occasionally, no tangible element of Buddhism appears in my artwork; the conscious evidence of Buddhism seems to every now and then be forgotten and leaves the chance for visual elements and visual aesthetics to take control. Some might want to link this transcendence of consciousness of Buddhism itself with the manifestation of 'no-view' and the ability to become 'selfless'; in this regard, Collins discusses in *Selfless Persons* the different interpretations of 'right view' and 'no-view':

> I shall distinguish two forms of the soteriological strategy of anattā, corresponding to the two emphases of the doctrine as the true description of reality, or as an instrument of salvation. There is the "right view" of "not-self", which opposes other "wrong views", and which forms part of the practice of "mental purification"; and there is the "no-view" approach, which imposes a certain moral and epistemological attitude towards the activity of conceptualisation per se, and which brings with it a particular, and peculiarly Buddhist, aesthetic of "emptiness".[62]

According to this view, my loss of purchase on the cognitive apprehension of 'Buddhism' informing my artistic creation represents an abandonment of the external form of Buddhism and a realisation of the true essence of Buddhism itself, becoming at-one with

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[62]. Collins, *Selfless Persons,* 13.

the process of artistic creation. The concept of mindful action in my art practice can be compared to how people perform everyday tasks in a state of mindfulness conducive to spiritual development. However, as far as this research has been developed, I did not primarily intend to establish the outcome of my artwork as my way of performing ritual practice. It has turned out that what I try to discover through my artistic research is not 'the form' but rather 'the mind' of Buddhism. From the beginning of this research I used my artwork as a mechanism to experience the feeling that can be compared as Buddhist meaning of 'emptiness'. The repetition of self-awareness has led me to the feeling of self-disappearance. The aesthetic and concept of artwork, not the appearance and presentation, are what bring my art into the context of Buddhism. Although there might be some vocabularies and certain characteristics that are shared between Buddhism and my art practice, the way I learn Buddhist philosophy and the way my art practice has developed seem to operate on parallel tracks that do not intersect, rather acting as mirrors that reflect each other.

Still, the absence of an overtly Buddhist context that occurs from time to time does not mean that it completely disappears from my practice, and I return to it intermittently. I developed an understanding that the essential meaning of Buddhist context can be founded in the conceptual level, not the form or appearance of the artwork. Some artworks created in very unconventional techniques and very different forms from the tradition of Buddhist art can be considered very Buddhist if the concept is well defined by Buddhist philosophy; it is fundamentally the mind and intention of the artist that makes the artwork Buddhist. This particular idea opens up the opportunity for me to discover connection between my artworks and those of other artists who are not even Thai and who do not claim to be related with Buddhism at all. This is not to say that works by Marina Abramović, Alexander Calder, Park Seobo, Robert Morris, and Tony Oursler mentioned in the chapter are created with Buddhist concepts, but I personally can extract certain elements of

Buddhism out of these artists' work, and use them as inspiration to develop my own artistic practice.

Time, Gravity, and Failure

I developed the concept of my artistic research based on the experience of emptiness, which I compared to my actual participating experience inside the installation/performance work titled *512 Hours* (2014) by Marina Abramović at the Serpentine Gallery. I also link it with my personal feelings and thoughts that emerged when I visited the main chapel hall of the Buddhist temple inside the Royal Grand Palace in Bangkok. It was the mental state of emptiness that automatically emerges when the mind gets exhausted after a certain duration of deep concentration and continuous thinking. To resonate the experience, I then created repetitive performances inside my studio space that involves the activities of re-arranging and re-adjust selected found objects in order to create multiple possible re-configurations. Such tasks require continue concentration over long period of time. Everything is documented in video as one continuous action. The work resembles a live performance whereby the artist expects to cope with struggles, failures and tiresome situations that keep happening along the way. The end of tasks is often defined when the artist's mind and body are too exhausted and can no longer come up with any more ideas or imagination of any other possible re-configuration.

Experience through time is therefore very essential in this artistic research. In addition to the artist's performances, which need to be done over time, using video documentation as the main medium requires the audience to look at the work for a certain period in order to learn the actions and feel the struggle that happens in the artist's studio. However, most of the videos documenting the real-time lived action are edited. Some parts are cut off to shorten the videos. Some of them even contain several video footages overlapping or placed side by side in one video piece. This echoes the intention of the artist, whereby he does not want to re-create the performance again in the exhibition space. He

does not aim to put the audience in the similar situation and cope with the same experience he already passed through. The real-time experience gets edited and becomes ‘a story’ that the artist tells to the audience, where he is a third person looking at the moving images of his own body, choosing the parts he feels important for himself, and revealing them to the viewers. The time these performances happened always stays in the past. What we see in the exhibition is the collection of memory and thought of the artist, not the mere documentation of actions. It is impossible to repeat the performance because the experience will never be the same.

One of the essential elements that generates moments of concentration for the artist during the performing process comes from the instructions to accomplish most activities designed to challenge the law of gravity. Many exercises that play a central role in video pieces are to control the weight balance and re-arrange objects in precarious re-configurations. Different kinds of readymade and found objects are stacked, balanced, leaned against, and placed to cling to each other. Some precarious structures are very insecure, and can only stay in position for very short moment. As objects are gradually placed into balanced structures and I slowly take my hands off, I experience the state of calmness and deep concentration. I also compare such feelings to my personal impression when I went to see the mobile sculptures by Alexander Calder shown in the *Performing Sculpture Exhibition* (2015) at the Tate Modern. By playing with the state of weight equilibrium, my objects in precarious positions and Calder’s hung sculptures are given a particular kind of shape and movements. They look lighter than their actual weight and move in a slower and gentler motion than other surrounding objects. Gravity is one of the most fundamental components that control and regulate the condition of everything in nature; we are used to the movement of everything that happens subject to the law of gravity. When this law is challenged, at least for a certain moment, objects in precarious positions seem to escape from the common condition of familiarity, and everything seems

to be paused, not only the objects that stay still in position, but also my breath stops and my mind is frozen from thinking for a brief time period; at that moment, even time does not seem to exist.

Another major theme that can be found in my practice is the repeated failure that continually occurs throughout the performance. Most of the tasks designed as frameworks of my performances are never meant to be successfully accomplished. Creating re-configuration in very unsecure and precarious positions is already very difficult. In addition, most chosen objects I used in these activities are either too soft, pliant, or in broken shapes so they do not have forms and qualities that would be easy to stack. In some cases, the goal might be able to be achieved, but only for temporary moments because the objects keep changing forms or their weight renders them unstable. Failure is therefore expected during the process; structures are destined to collapse, allowing me to re-create the re-configurations all over again, which also ends with another failure. The act of failing is considered as important part of the trial-and-error journey of my performance, as well as of every human life. In this sense, one might be able to say that the self-learning method embedded in my artistic practice is to create mistake as much as possible. What even more important is that, at the end, there might not even be the successful path to be discovered. One might be able to find the best way to reach the goal, but eventually also realise that the success is contingent and temporal, and nothing remains certain forever. The key message of my performance is not to find the best way of reaching the finished line, but rather to use activities as a tool to keep my body moving and my mind concentrating as long as possible until the experience of emptiness can gradually occur.

Intermediation between Videos and Hand-Made Artworks

In addition to the video pieces, the *(De)contextualising Buddhist Aesthetics* research project also includes a series of drawing and paintings mixed with collage technique. I used moving images from the videos as inspiration to create these hand-made

artworks. Still images of my body performing continual actions are taken and transferred from the videos as printed black and white images on paper, subsequently collaged onto paper and canvas. The background of these images is the mixture of rough texture and expressive brushstrokes made of pencil, charcoal, ink and various kinds of paint. These collaged paintings are mostly done in monotone colours. The stillness of paused small figures is in contrast with the dynamic abstract composition of various visual elements. Inspired by the abstract paintings and drawings of the Thai artist Ithipol Tangchalok and Korean artist Park Seobo, who compare the method of continually and carefully applying small dots and lines on the surface of artwork similar to the meditative process (leading to the state of calmness and serenity), I then add another layer of greyscale tones, which consist of countless small fine lines of pencil, on top of the collaged painting. The layers of numerous small pencil lines compared with energetic brushstrokes and paint splashes resonates the mixed feeling of fast and slow movements, which might also be interpreted as the reflection of how my mind and body work in various paces during the process of performance.

I also become very interested in the work of Robert Morris and Tony Oursler in the sense that these artists are able to develop a technique that transforms two-dimensional into three-dimensional objects. Morris creates drapery from a piece of torn fabric, and lets the combination of objective nature and gravity generate the structure of the installation, while Oursler projects video onto a three-dimensional surface to create a new form of moving images that engages with the audience in the actual space outside the tradition of the video's rectangular flat frame. Using their works as inspiration, I started to project my video onto three-dimensional objects and install my drawings and paintings by hanging, covering and wrapping three-dimensional furniture, architectural structures and objects found in the gallery space. Some installations are also created with precarious structures, echoing the concept of gravity challenging re-configurations in my other video pieces. The

pictures are folded and twisted depending on the objects with which each painting is installed. Other objective characters of the canvas, such as the thickness of fabric and primed paint, the back side of the canvas, its sewing seams, and even the smell of all materials applied to the canvas are included as part of the installation.

My artistic research travels back and forth across different media, such as video, painting, sculpture and installation. Through intermediate exploration, all of these artistic productions are interrelated to each other and reflect the on-going route of the self-learning journey. One artwork gives inspiration and lays the foundation for another. Such progress also resonates my idea that the Buddhist nature of art does not depend on the appearance of the work, but rather the concept and intention of the artist. Emerging from a concept associated with Buddhist context that is to generate the experience of emptiness through repetitive performing actions, which is parallel to how Buddhist practitioners apply meditation context into their daily life practice, the artworks may change their forms and appearances but they are all still considered as the production of Buddhist mind and intention. One might imagine that as the images of my body repeatedly appear in almost every piece of the artworks, the significance of the artist should be even more highlighted. However, I rather see that the more I look at multiple images of my body, the less distinctive they have become. I start to recognise the image not as ‘me’ anymore, but someone else. Someone who is just an ordinary person who carries out repeated actions, copes with struggles, fails, and re-starts the actions over and over again.

Conclusion

(De)contextualising Buddhist Aesthetics is practice-led artistic research that has developed through an evolving dialogue between the concepts of Theravāda Buddhism, meditation and artistic practice. While Buddhist meditation is used as the essential inspiration for the creation of my artwork, I also apply the artwork as a tool to understand and contextualise Buddhist ideology, especially the concepts of 'emptiness' and 'no-self'. The research is an on-going process since my artistic practice continues to develop synchronously with my growth of knowledge and lived experience, gained mainly by encountering my own artwork and that of others.

Many aspects of the learning journey cannot happen according to a set plan. They reveal themselves along the path of the research investigation. Therefore, the research method is designed to allow essential changes and some alterations in order for the artist to freely experiment with his artwork into unknown territory and respond to unexpected curiosity. In order to emphasise the phenomenology of this specific personal learning journey, the research therefore needs to be documented in diaristic entries.

I pointed out several Thai artists, including Chalood Nimsamer, Itipol Tangchalok, Vichai Sitthiratn, Chalermchai Kositpipat, Panya Vijintanasarn, Montien Boonma, Kamin Lertchaiprasert and their particular artwork as examples to explain the diverse of techniques used by Thai contemporary artists to transform the contexts of Buddhism into the unique concepts of their artwork. These artists have treated Buddhism as the main concept throughout most of their artistic careers and still remain active influential figures in the Thai local art scene. Amongst such diversity, I have also noted that many Thai artists create artwork to 'represent' certain aspects of Buddhism, ranging from the narrative and stories of the Buddha, the teaching of dhamma, and Buddhist philosophy as a way of living. In view of this, I have raised the question of whether there are any other possibilities to

create *Buddhist art* without illustrating the *context of Buddhism*. Using the concept of 'emptiness' as a case study, I see that many aspects of Buddhism cannot be completely portrayed and perceived through visual language. Can I therefore create art that communicates and generates the meaning of 'emptiness' through 'experience' that can be shared between the artist and the audience?

This research explores the all-embracing role of Theravāda Buddhism in Thailand, which imbues the daily lives of Thais with its spirit and generates countless diverse interpretations among various levels of practitioners. Buddhist meditation has been one of the most significant cultural as well as spiritual influences of this religion, particularly as championed by Buddhadasa, one of the most well-known Thai Theravāda Buddhist monks, and his reform concept that Buddhism and meditation can be applied in everyday life. Based on this, I wove the concept of meditation into my art practice. I began my artistic research by analysing meditation through three characteristics, according to my personal experience of practising meditation. These included the action of repetition, the action of mindfulness, and the action that requires spending time in an isolated space. I then applied and intertwined these meditative characteristics into my artistic performance practice. Found materials, mostly household furniture and objects used in daily life, were the centre of my performance as they are objects of concentration.

All meditative actions in my performance were meant to fulfil certain tasks designed to interact with the found objects, such as the task of stacking and re-arranging to create precarious re-configurations. The performances were done inside my studio space. I performed the action alone and set up the video camera to document what transpired. The essential purpose of these actions was not to achieve a goal, but to learn how to deal with problems and to cope with the failures that occurred over and over again. I hoped that I would be able to make use of such experience to investigate the concept of the 'egolessness of existence' and the 'aesthetic of emptiness', centred on *Selfless Persons:*

Imagery and Thought in Theravada and *Nirvana: Concept, Imagery, Narrative* by Steven Collins. The main objective at the beginning of this research was to investigate the meaning of conditioned-unconditioned, thing-nothing, permanence-impermanence, and self-selfless, which together create the core structure of Buddhist teaching.

In addition to the meditative performance inside the studio space, I also created 'physical' or 'objective' artwork, such as drawing, painting, and installation, using the still images captured from the video pieces as inspiration. They are not meant to represent or illustrate the concept of 'emptiness' or 'selflessness', but rather act as other forms of documentation of my practicing journey. The series of stop-motion images of myself performing continuous activities with various found objects were collaged on pieces of canvas and paper. I then applied paint, added marks, and collaged more materials to create abstract paintings. Some paintings on canvas and on paper were tightly stretched, while some were freely hung and laid, creating loose and graceful folds. They were installed by attaching and draping with the architectural structure and furniture found in the exhibiting spaces. The two-dimensional work was transformed to three-dimensional work. The artwork kept changing its form since the methods of display were different from location to location, and from time to time. This is analogous to the changeable state of the human mind. Inside the mind, things keep appearing and changing, which makes them almost impossible to recognize. The body's gestures were paused, providing a contrast with the expressive brushstrokes and complex layers of textures. The dynamic movement was harmoniously composed with slow and static action. This reflected the condition when the mind was resting on the body and its exercise during the meditative state. Although the body was constantly moving, inside, the mind was slowed down.

However, as the research gradually evolved, I started to see that the art practice began to grow and develop in its own way, with less need to reference back to the teaching of Buddhism. Throughout the research, I also recalled the experience of confronting and

engaging with some artwork and exhibitions of other artists. Among them were Marina Abramović, Alexander Calder, Park Seobo, Robert Morris, and Tony Oursler. Some of these artists might seem very unusual cases, especially when the research was created in the context of Buddhism, but they were influential in my research and my actual personal interpretations and experiences; their work really affected me and fed into my artistic practice. I still visited some ideas of Buddhist teaching, especially the concept of selflessness, in order to see the parallel context between my performance and the meditating process or finding a shared concept between the way I made trans-media art objects and the traveling of self from body-to-body. However, at a certain point, Buddhism and art practice, for me, seemed to exist on the same level. Although, they created conversation and interchanging ideas between each other, each of them had its own character and identity. I started to feel that it was possible to see Buddhist elements in everything if one is able to claim and contextualise the work in that direction. On the other hand, I could also see that my work was able to exist without an overt explanation or link to Buddhism. The time came when explaining my artwork concept by referencing the teaching of Buddhism was sometimes unnecessary; the artwork created its own meaning and generated its own context.

Every Buddhist artwork plays on the balance between focusing on the contexts of art and Buddhism. Some Buddhist artwork is didactic, while some is Buddhist-inspired but oriented to aesthetics and technique in order to respond to questions, movements, or interests of the art world. The context of Buddhism can be applied or hidden in any part of Buddhist art. Some are very noticeable, while some are more difficult to see. Artwork created under the *(De)contextualising Buddhist Aesthetics* project had a strong connection with Buddhism at the beginning of the creative process, as well as some parts along the way, since I often revisited the concept of emptiness, selflessness, and the relationship between body and mind during the meditative actions. Buddhism is embedded in my way

of thinking, influences my way of making decisions, and inspires me to make artwork. However, since the artwork does not contain any representational forms that relate to Buddhism, and the artist eventually does not require the work to be contextualised with Buddhism, the question is whether the artwork is still considered as a form of Buddhist art or not.

Although it seemed like my artwork was drifting away from the Buddhist context, many observers could still identify linkages whereby my approach was coincident with the concept of no-view, which is actually explained as the path leading to 'emptiness' in Buddhism. If someone wants to break free, he must detach himself from everything, including the knowledge he has gained and that has brought him to the current position. Looking at my work from that perspective, the action of decontextualising Buddhist aesthetics is intrinsically a realisation of Buddhist teaching, being intrinsically Buddhist without the need to reference Buddhism itself.

Throughout the period of three years of DPhil research, I kept asking myself all of these questions regarding the connection between my practice and the concept of Buddhist art: what am I really trying to convey through my practice? Am I creating artwork to investigate my own way of interpreting Buddhism and generate knowledge of how to understand Buddhism as another form of ideology applied in my way of living, working, and making art? Or am I just using Buddhism as a springboard releasing me to a specific direction, but after which I will still have to find my own way to swim and survive in the water, which is probably equivalent to the art world in general? Do the more challenges I encounter mean the further I distance myself from Buddhism? Or do I actually choose to swim around the springboard, keep going up and jumping into different directions and then swimming back to the springboard over and over again?

The answer every time was slightly different. Sometimes I felt the need to go back to the contexts of Buddhism, but at others I tried very hard to decontextualize my practice.

I kept going back and forth between these two directions. After all, the question that *(De)contextualising Buddhist Aesthetics* has asked throughout these years might not be about the direction I swim around or away from the springboard. The focal point of the project is actually the moment of jumping. How and in what direction did I jump from the springboard? What did I do with my body during the time I floated in the air? Finally, how did I eventually land myself into the water?

I repeatedly experimented with this process by jumping over and over again in slightly different ways. Different audiences look at my jumping from many different angles. Some are standing on the same springboard while some are already in the pool. Some are more interested in the stage that my jumps take off; some like to look at the ways my body hits the water; and some are probably more curious about the transformation of my action along the way. The performances, video pieces, paintings, drawings, installations, and this written component are all created as various documentations of these jumps. Up to this point, I find that there is no perfect way of jumping. Every jump is a part of my exercise. I will probably keep doing it until I find myself losing interest in such action. However, up until the current moment, I still find interest in this on-going learning process, and all of my artwork validates the engagement of my body, both physically and mentally.

Additional Images: Artworks and Exhibitions

Fig. 46: (a) *Re-Constructing Emptiness No.1,* 2014; (b) artefact from *Re-Constructing Emptiness* [installation view], 2013

(a) Video with sound, 20.07 mins.
(b) Acrylic, kitchen roll paper, and paper on canvas, hung on a ladder, dimension variable
Location: Project Space, Bullingdon Road Studio, Ruksin School of Art (March 2014)

Fig. 47: *Artefact from Re-Constructing Emptiness* [installation view], 2013

Location: Project Space, Bullingdon Road Studio, Ruksin School of Art (June 2014)

Fig. 48: *(a) Self-Learning the Emptiness No.1*, 2015; (b) *Self-Learning the Emptiness No.2,* 2015 [installation view]

(a) Video with sound, 11.10 mins.; (b) video with sound, 17.36 mins.
Location: Project Space, Bullingdon Road Studio, Ruksin School of Art (June 2016)

Fig. 49: *Spirit of Thai Exhibition* [installation view]

Exhibition Research Gallery, John Lennon Art and Design Building,
Liverpool John Moore University (March, 2016)

Fig. 50: *Becoming (Un) Conditioned No.3, 4, 5* [installation view], 2015

Location: Becoming (Un) Conditioned Exhibition Part I
Buddhadasa Indapanno Archive (Suan Mokkha Bangkok) (November 2015)

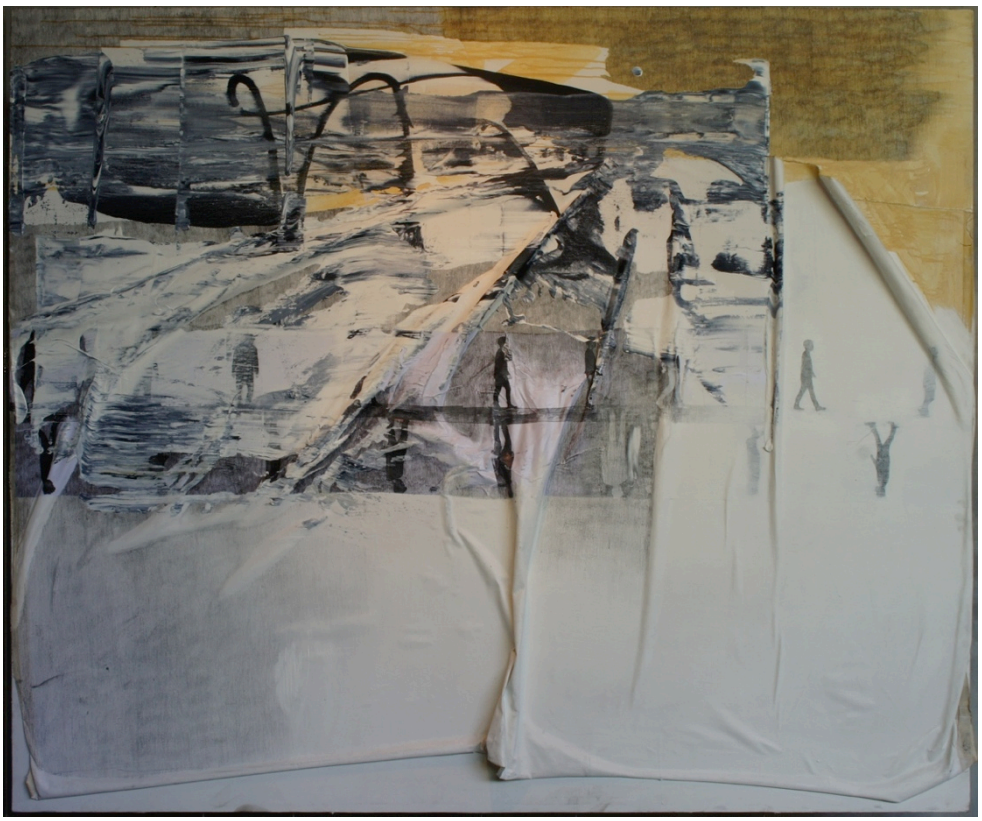

Fig. 51: *Becoming (Un) Conditioned No.3*, 2015

Paper, canvas, acrylic, and pencil on canvas, 200 x 170 cm.

Fig. 52: *Becoming (Un) Conditioned No.4,* 2015

Paper, canvas, acrylic, and pencil on canvas, 200 x 170 cm.

Fig. 53: *Becoming (Un) Conditioned No.5*, 2015

Paper, canvas, acrylic, and pencil on canvas, 200 x 170 cm.

Fig. 54: (a) *Becoming (Un) Conditioned No.1*; (b) *Documenting – Conditioned, Unconditioned* [installation view], 2015

(a) Paper, canvas, acrylic, and pencil on canvas, dimensional variable)canvas before hung: 270 x 400 cm(
(b) Paper, acrylic, pencil, and ink on paper (size 42 x 140 cm each, 15 pieces)
Location: *Becoming (Un) Conditioned Exhibition Part I*
Buddhadasa Indapanno Archive (Suan Mokkha Bangkok) (November 2015)

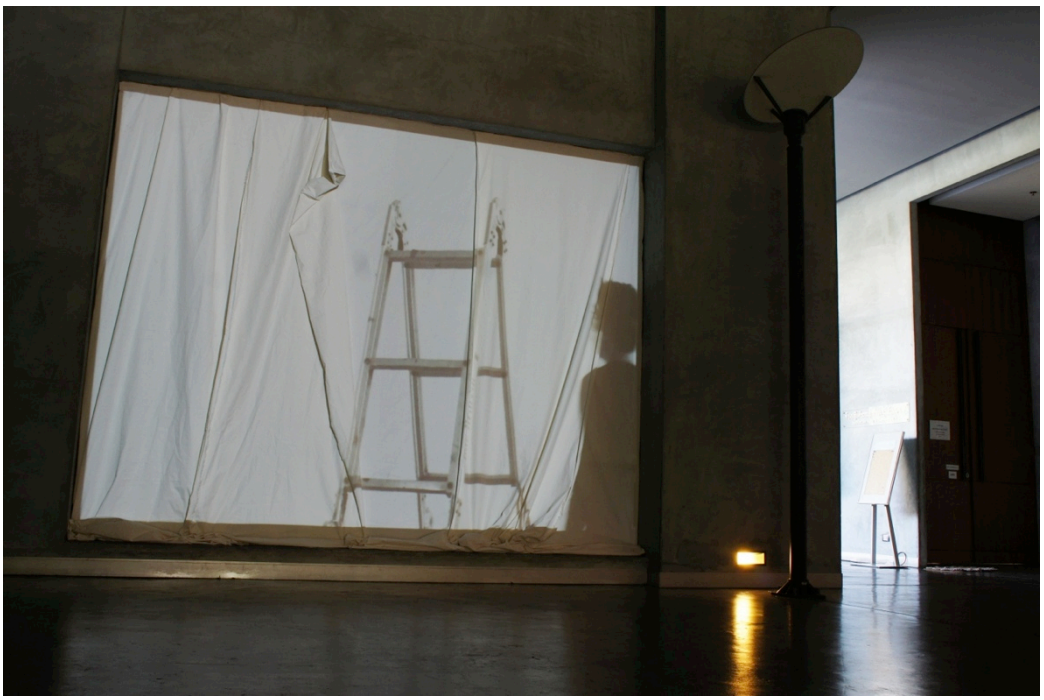

Fig. 55: *Re-Constructing Emptiness (White Wall)* [installation view], 2015

Video with sound, 28.42 minutes.
Location: *Becoming (Un) Conditioned Exhibition Part I*
Buddhadasa Indapanno Archive (Suan Mokkha Bangkok) (November 2015)

Fig. 56: *Becoming (Un) Conditioned Exhibition Part II* [installation view]

Ratchadamnoen Contemporary Art Center, Bangkok (December 2015)

Fig. 57: *Becoming Selfless [installation view],* 2015

Video with sound, helium balloon, video projector, dimension variable.
Location: *Becoming (Un) Conditioned Exhibition Part II*,
Ratchadamnoen Contemporary Art Center, Bangkok (December 2015)

Fig. 58: *Re-Constructing Two Elements* [installation view], 2013

Video with sound, 14.32 minutes.
Location: *Becoming (Un) Conditioned Exhibition Part II*,
Ratchadamnoen Contemporary Art Center, Bangkok (December 2015)

Fig. 59: *Re-Constructing Emptiness No.2* [installation view], 2014

Video with sound, 32.11 minutes.
Location: *Becoming (Un) Conditioned Exhibition Part II*,
Ratchadamnoen Contemporary Art Center, Bangkok (December 2015)

Fig. 60: Series of *Drawings from Re-Constructing Emptiness* [installation view], 2014

Pencil on paper (size 42 x 59 cm, each)
Location: *Becoming (Un) Conditioned Exhibition Part II*,
Ratchadamnoen Contemporary Art Center, Bangkok (December 2015)

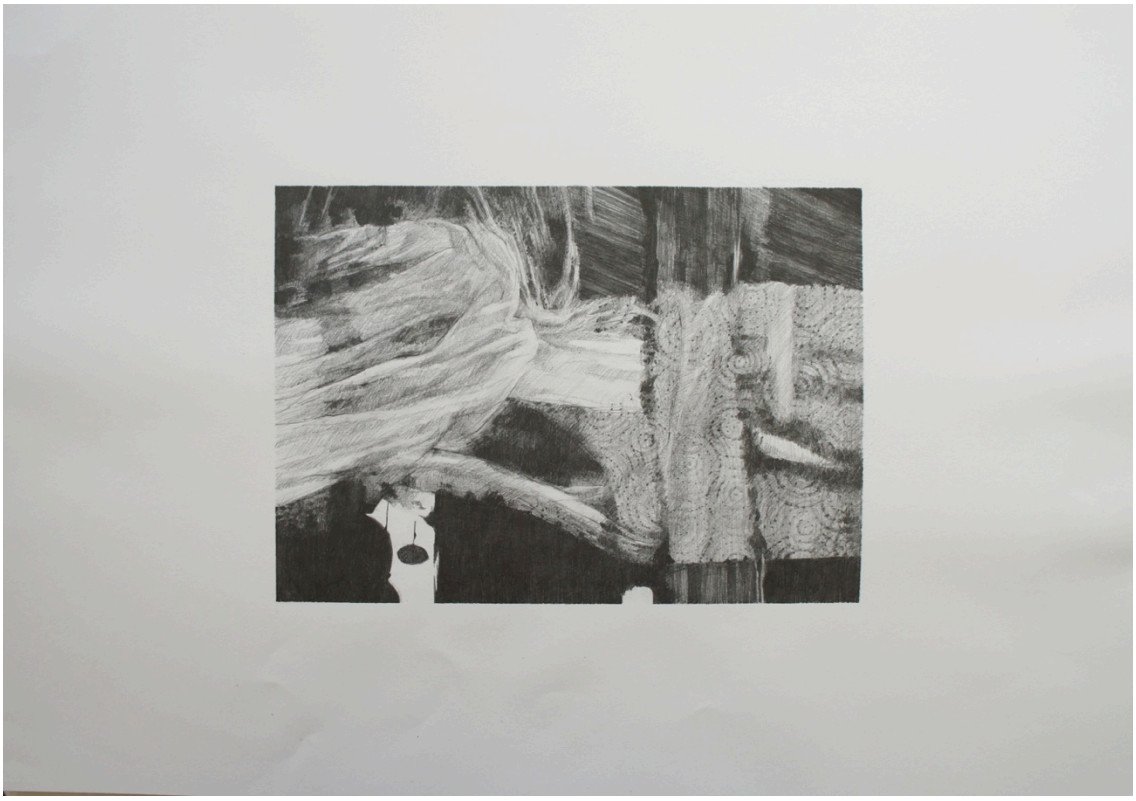

Fig. 61: *Drawing from Re-Constructing Emptiness No.1/6,* 2014

Pencil on paper (size 42 x 59 cm)

Fig. 62: *Drawing from Re-Constructing Emptiness No.2/6,* 2014

Pencil on paper (size 42 x 59 cm)

Fig. 63: *Drawing from Re-Constructing Emptiness No.3/6,* 2014

Pencil on paper (size 42 x 59 cm)

Fig. 64: *(De)contextualising Buddhist Aesthetics Viva Exhibition* [installation view]

Project Space, Bullingdon Road Studio, Ruksin School of Art (October 2016)

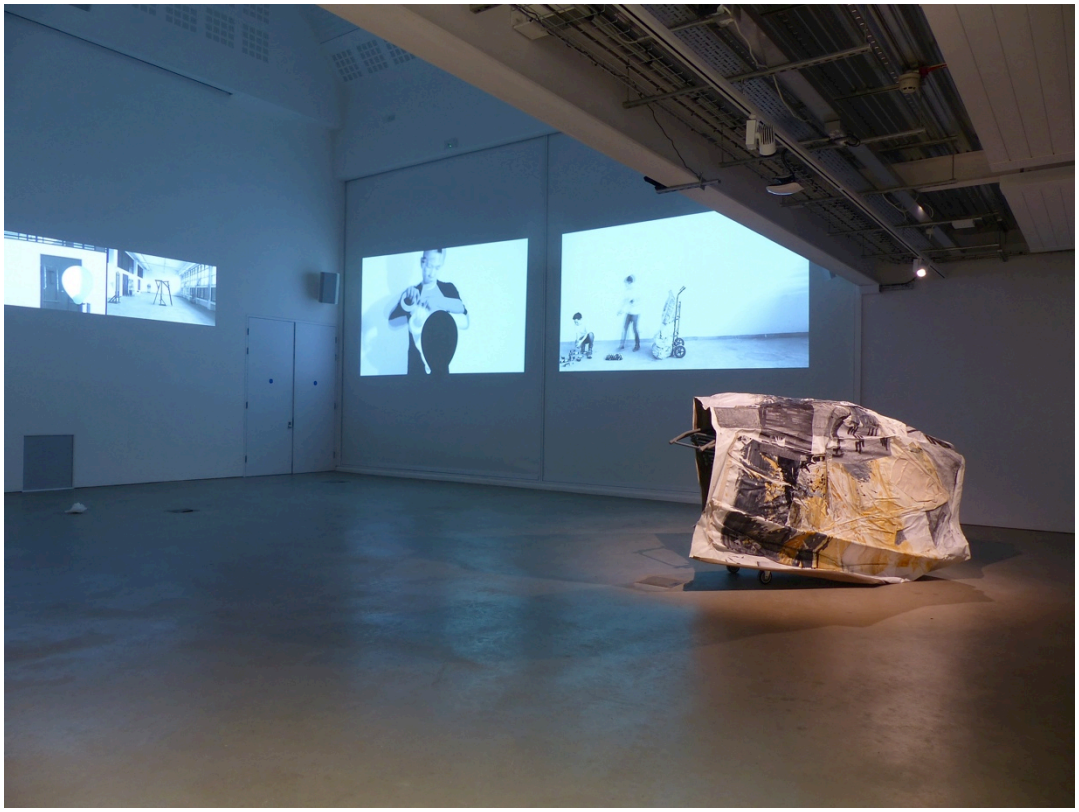

Fig. 65: *(De)contextualising Buddhist Aesthetics Viva Exhibition* [installation view]

Project Space, Bullingdon Road Studio, Ruksin School of Art (October 2016)

Fig. 66: *(De)contextualising Buddhist Aesthetics Viva Exhibition* [installation view]

Project Space, Bullingdon Road Studio, Ruksin School of Art (October 2016)

Fig. 67: *(De)contextualising Buddhist Aesthetics Viva Exhibition* [installation view]

Project Space, Bullingdon Road Studio, Ruksin School of Art (October 2016)

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