



Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier: Three Decades, Four Moments

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Introduction

'Three Decades, Four Moments' is based on the edited transcripts of two interviews that took place in 2016 and 2017 with the artists Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier in their studio in London. The text foregrounds a number of works by Phaophanit/Oboussier, signalling four 'moments' in their artistic practice over several decades, at turns identified as individual, collective and collaborative. In these, we may find coincidences, correspondences and divergences from the three (or four) 'moments' in Stuart Hall's 2006 essay 'Black Diaspora Artists in Post-War History' – moments that interrogate the space of the 'international'; that complicate the 'problem space' of the 1980s (sympathetic to, yet never aligned with either 'Black diaspora arts', or 'young British art'); and arguably always already inhabit and explore the 'thematics of what Zeigam Azizov calls "the migration paradigm" – boundaries and border crossings, liminal and disrupted places, voyaging and displacement, fault lines [...]'.¹

The 'four moments' here are prefaced by two (or four) beginnings: 'Beginnings – Laos, France, England / England, France' contextualizes the artists' respective early entries into Western art and education in the early 1980s. Phaophanit trained as a painter in the classical French system, at once expected to identify with an established French 'School' while also expected to produce 'Laotian art'; Oboussier encountering the burgeoning post-colonial transdisciplinary intellectual culture of Sussex University. 'Beginning again' contextualizes the emergence of their collaborative practice and thinking through their involvement with two collectives, one located in Brighton, the other internationally dispersed. At the beginning of his 'Black Diaspora Artists in Britain' essay, Hall takes time to acknowledge the close intersection of 'personal, intellectual, political' paths with Raphael Samuel (in whose memory his lecture-turned-essay was given). Here, multiple 'beginnings' outline the crossing of personal, intellectual, creative and political paths – not only with each other, but also, importantly, with wider networks and groups both 'local' and 'international'.

Phaophanit's early experience as a 'first post-colonial' Laotian subject and first-generation immigrant to France and then Britain, is distinct from those of Hall's 'last "colonials"' and 'first "post-colonials"', yet there are certain parallels with both, despite geographical and generational disparities. Born in Laos, in the wake of the country gaining full independence as a constitutional monarchy under communist rule after sixty years of French colonialism as part of French Indochina, Phaophanit was sent to France as a child in order to receive a 'proper' (Western, Eurocentric, imperialist)

Detail from Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier, *IT IS AS IF*, 2015 (plate 11).

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DOI:
10.1111/1467-8365.12585
Art History | ISSN 0141-6790
44 | 3 | June 2021 | pages
624-649

education. During his later years at art school (while pretending to his parents that he was studying economics at university), any 'cosmopolitan and modernist' aspirations were summarily dismissed by the institution's ethno-centric and culturally essentializing expectations – which also determined Phaophanit's resolve to resist such constraints. Oboussier's parallel trajectory as the adopted child of French and British parents, following an upbringing and formative education that were notably feminist, bilingual, interdisciplinary, transnational and post-colonial, crosses with Phaophanit's in Paris in 1985. Their meeting leads quickly to the development of a shared experimental and exploratory dialogic collaborative practice, one that continues to challenge institutional terms of value and recognition.

From the first-wave 'anti-colonials' to the second-wave 'first post-colonials', Hall maps a 'generational shift [...] in relation to wider socio-political and cultural developments, including the growth of indigenous racism, the new social movements, especially anti-racist, feminist and identity politics'.² This is the political and cultural context in Britain to which Phaophanit and Oboussier return after Paris and with which they readily align.

Turning away from individualistic capitalistic art market-driven exhibition strategies to focus on collective processes of making and encounter, they emphasize their self-identified 'exteriority' to the dominant narratives of both British art and Black art. Touching on their friendships with Eddie Chambers and David Medalla and their international networks, they allude to the imbrication of debates around identity politics and wider colonial histories and legacies, entwined and embodied. For Hall, writing in 2006, the second-wave 'moment' is located within the 'late 1970s/early 1980s [...] really two moments condensed into one'. He states that this 'was followed by a sustained wave of new work in the early 1990s [which] [...] operated on a "problem space" largely defined by the 1980s. If there is a third moment proper – or, perhaps, a fourth? – then it is the one emerging now, before our eyes', and it is too soon to attempt to configure it. What we can say is that "black" by itself – in the age of refugees, asylum seekers and global dispersal – will no longer do'.³

Here, the 'four moments' focus on a practice that began to take shape in the mid to late 1980s, gained a particular kind of institutional recognition in the 1990s, and since the 2000s, has increasingly tested the tensions between individual, institutional, collective and collaborative narratives. Emerging with and through Hall's 'second', 'third' or 'fourth' moments, Phaophanit/Oboussier's practice arguably operates on a palimpsest of 'problem spaces' – cognizant of and briefly engaged with the politics of Black and feminist arts movements, resistant to the burden of representation or authorial certainty, allied to experimental participatory practices (cinematic, kinetic, immersive), committed to dialogic critical aesthetic strategies, that in turn inscribe and reflect their shared yet distinct experiences of dwelling and displacement. For Phaophanit/Oboussier, always at least double in familial, cultural, colonial, geographical and linguistic removes and dislocations, 'black' would never 'do'. Unequivocally occupying the domain of installation since their earliest experiments, their dialogic artistic alliance and collaborative process comes up against discursive limits, habituated to dealing with difference in binary terms. Yet, '[d]ifference refuses to disappear'.⁴ The text attempts to foreground the evolving, elliptical movements in Phaophanit/Oboussier's practice – playing on language and light, memory and place, playing across conceptual, formal, visual, spatial and acoustic registers, playing out positionalities – always shifting, contingent, in dialogue, exceeding appearances.

Beginnings: Laos, France, England

Vong Phaophanit (VP): As a child, I always enjoyed drawing, but it was also always connected to some sense of the forbidden – a waste of time, a waste of white blank paper.

This was 1960s Laos; I came from a nouveau riche family context, and there was no room for recreational activity. Aged ten, I was sent to France to receive a 'proper education', according to my parents. I could hardly speak French, so I couldn't follow much in the classroom. But one teacher noticed I could draw, and asked me to illustrate some lessons – geography, science – a map of Europe or a human skeleton, etc. So drawing became useful. I was more or less self-taught – in the 1970s and 1980s, art, sport and music weren't seen as very important educationally.

I pushed myself to go to museums, to try to understand why Picasso was doing such bad drawing, but at the same time was highly respected and commercially extremely successful; and I started to discover the Impressionists, the Cubists and modernists. Little by little, the horizon opened up. Then I decided to go to art college, and spent five years in Aix-en-Provence; in the last three years I specialized in painting.

The first show that really had an impact on me was seeing Turner's paintings in Paris, in the Marais Quarter. I can't remember the year, possibly 1982, 1983. At the start of the exhibition you had to take this little train through a dimly lit room – it was quite playful – and then you came to the paintings and eventually the beginning of something completely abstract. It was all about light, questioning light through paintings, and ideas of the finished and unfinished, showing areas of canvas completely untouched. It was a real revelation for me.

Claire Oboussier (CO): When you went to art college, you also signed up at the university to study economics on the side, didn't you?⁵

VP: Yes, I was jumping from one place to another one – I didn't say anything to my parents until I was almost through my third year [...].

In my last year, I met Claire and decided to come to England; there was no sophisticated plan. Arriving here, into another context, culture and language, it was like beginning again. At the same time, I was trying to become an artist. In our small provincial college in Aix, it had all been about creating something beautiful. We were pushed to follow either the École de Paris or the École des Beaux-Arts. I don't believe that after five years of art college you are suddenly an artist. When I arrived in Brighton, England, I felt that there were different kinds of questions being asked. In the mid-1980s and early 1990s, the artists that we came across were very engaged with social and political issues, rather than pure aesthetics.

England, France, England

CO: If I go back as far as Vong did: I was given up for adoption in the early 1960s in London and brought up in Devon. It was a real cultural backwater in a way but my adoptive family had a great deal of connection with the arts. My grandmother was at the Slade and my mother was an architect – she went to the AA (the Architectural Association) – at a time when there were far fewer women in education. On my father's side too, there was historically a big interest in the arts. I was brought up very much with a sense that creative thinking and doing was absolutely essential – my mother never really bought anything, she made everything.

In the early 1980s, I went to university, not art college, and studied French at Sussex in the context of the School of African and Asian Studies which meant that

suddenly the doors opened to a whole new vision of France and French culture. I had tutors like Homi Bhabha and Partha Mitter and I was looking at Francophone writers from French Guyana, Martinique, Guadelupe and so on, as well as cinema and visual arts. Then I met Vong in 1985, when I was studying in Paris.

Later I did a PhD looking at the work of Roland Barthes and Hélène Cixous in particular, moving away from the literary and more towards visual language. I was doing quite a lot of writing, quite a few catalogue essays but I never saw them as essays 'on' Vong's work. It was more about evolving a dialogue between us – a creative writing 'from' or 'around' his work and a kind of fluid discourse emerging around what we were doing. This also related to our close involvement with two collectives at the time: Situation Cinema and Overture.

Beginning Again: Situation Cinema

CO: In Brighton, the first studio we had was with an artist group called Red Herring. They were very organized and professional in setting up spaces to produce their work from, but we were sort of renegades and not really in that space at all. We found it quite constricting.

VP: We wanted more dialogue, more exchange. Debates about what we were doing, and why we were doing it.

CO: We were right in the middle of Thatcherism and there was very little expectation at that time that any arts graduate would successfully get a job. Artists of our generation were automatically disenfranchised. However, we had an extraordinary level of freedom – there was a real liberty in being exterior to the 'system', because we just had to invent something else for ourselves. So we occupied buildings and created studios and work out of nothing and we formed collectives, one of which was Situation Cinema. Situation Cinema was founded by Greg Pope, who's still a very close friend. With him and other artists we created this fluid open group, often using Super 8 cameras, having ideas one evening and trying to realize them the next morning – it was a very responsive, quite edgy practice –

VP: – made up of people coming from performance, dance and film, and music and fine art. So all these ideas were taking place and we all accepted and tried to combine them, not knowing exactly what the outcome would be. For me, I was moving away from canvas painting and starting to explore different ways of expressing my ideas, through installations with film and other mediums.

CO: And for me, as a non-art school artist, instead of being rejected as non-trained I was suddenly part of this collective conversation and action. I found that people were really excited about the critical and theoretical practice that I could bring to the mix.

I also think the reason why Situation Cinema was such a creative time and context for us was because we had no infrastructural support, no funding, no forms to fill out, no links to any institutions whatsoever. It was completely self-generated and, in a sense, quite anarchic, politically as well.

VP: More or less at the same time, there was another scenario of young artists – people like Sarah Lucas and Damien Hirst – who were organizing their own shows, except that they went further by contacting art critics and galleries, to get them to come and see their work.

CO: There was some connection with the YBAs early on, through Sarah Lucas and Gary Hume, who were together at that point [...]. Vong knew Damien quite well. Sarah and Gary invited us up to their studio and flat, and we had a discussion about the *East Country Yard Show*,⁶ which was the show that –

VP: – more or less launched the YBAs.

CO: They wanted Vong in the show, and they wanted me to maybe write something. I remember having a really good conversation with Sarah who was a very anarchic thinker, a very fluid, open person [...]. In the end, Vong chose not to take part.

VP: We were already heavily involved in *Situation Cinema*, and *Ouverture*, and somehow a few steps ahead in terms of organizing exhibitions and questioning their content. So when they approached me and I asked, 'What is the show about?' – they couldn't answer, because it was simply an opportunity to show work and attract the right people to come and look at it. I didn't accept the invitation, because I was maybe expecting a little bit more than that. The process was lacking, and for us, it's crucial.

CO: We were much more interested in critical political debate. We were making work about the Falklands War and using footage of Thatcher on tanks and flags. I respected very much that the YBAs at that stage felt, 'We're not going to wait for the commercial world to come to us, and we refuse to be exteriorized by your system'. Obviously it led to an extraordinary history of commercial art in this country, but we were definitely not engaged with or very interested in doing that ourselves. So, the decision not to be part of that – some people would probably say it was absolutely stupid, but it was very considered.

Ouverture

CO: *Ouverture* came out of Vong's experience at the art college in Aix, which was very international.

VP: It was based on the simple idea that each of us should organize an exhibition for the group, in the city and country where that person lived. It went on for three or four years.

CO: We did one in Amsterdam, Brighton, Bergen in Norway, Germany [...]. That was a good process. Some of the links were stronger than others, and we still have close dialogues.

VP: There were students coming from all over the world into this French institution – Japan, Korea, Egypt, Cameroon – and we were all somehow expected to 'represent' [...]. There was this joke that if a tutor saw a student from Spain, he was presumed to be a representative of Spanish culture, and so on. The joke becomes serious when they try to stop you thinking differently and push you back into that box. One of my tutors, after seeing my painting, just ignored all the work that I was doing and said, 'You are Laotian, you must do Laotian art.' I didn't understand. I'd spent ten years of my life in Laos, and lived almost fourteen years in France. Who was he to say, 'You must be Laotian'? From that moment on, I resisted this, and it had a really strong impact on the work that came afterwards.

CO: We were walking in the dark and trying to make sense – a lot of these experiences happened before discourses around fluid identity had been articulated or established. It was quite an intuitive process; there was quite a ‘lostness’ in a way [...].

Because of personal histories and choices we’ve made in relation to the art world, there is a degree to which we have maybe wanted to feel and position ourselves as exterior to certain things. Not as an aggressive rejection, but it’s a space in which we found ourselves, and, in some ways, it’s the space in which we’ve stayed.

VP: The art world tends to categorize types of work, types of artist, types of movement, etc. – it’s very conservative. We are constantly pressured to align with a specific space or theme or set of questions. I don’t want to be represented as the artist from South East Asia. How can you define me as a Laotian artist or from Laos – why not from France or from England? I think our collaboration challenges all that, in that the cultural identity of the artwork moves away from the identity of the solo artist. Strategically speaking, we didn’t decide one day that that’s how we should play it, but it was an intuition, and we followed it. We have since made our partnership official, but –

CO: – people – the mainstream art world – still find it really uncomfortable. We’ve collaborated unofficially since 1985, we were in various collectives together, then a couple of really exciting opportunities came Vong’s way and suddenly he was shortlisted for the Turner Prize. So he went from having a practice – not just with me, but with a number of people – to being this gallery-represented artist shortlisted for the Turner. He was sort of catapulted into that world, zero to 100 mph, and all of a sudden, Vong, I felt that your identity was basically drawn out for you, and you were always uncomfortable with that.

VP: During that period – we’re talking the mid-1980s to the early 1990s – the Black art movement was also going through this process of redefining itself. Many artists felt that it was important to know your origins, where you came from, your historical background. And we were going against that approach, almost. We understood its importance, but it shouldn’t be the only path to follow.

CO: Historically, we had so many arguments and discussions with Eddie [Chambers], who was a good friend and someone we exchanged ideas with all the time, about the structural thinking behind ‘Black art’ and what it meant, and identity being fixed and static, whereas for us, it was all about fluidity and stepping outside of all that.⁷

You might have expected that a project that goes under the name of ‘Black artists and modernism’ is wanting to categorize even more, but I’m really heartened by the fact that you and Sonia [Boyce] are choosing to reach out and unpick [these categories] [...] you’re ahead of the art world, which I think is fairly disinterested by our collaboration. They’d like to recuperate Vong, because it suits their histories and collections, and it props them up; but my presence – as an ‘imposter’ – makes that harder to navigate.

I

The first ‘moment’ focuses on *Neon Rice Field* (1993), originally commissioned from Phaophanit by the Serpentine Gallery, formerly housed at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (IMMA), and acquired in 2013 by the Tate – one of three works held in the Tate Collection under Phaophanit’s name.⁸ Consisting of a rectangular floor-based installation of approximately seven tonnes of American long-grain rice,

this undulating surface is illuminated by six strips of clear red neon placed along its furrows. Phaophanit/Oboussier reflect on the development of *Neon Rice Field* in relation to earlier and later pieces, in particular *Line Writing* (1994); Phaophanit's nomination for the Turner Prize, and the work's critical reception, attracting acclaim, controversy, scepticism and racism.

From *What Falls to the Ground but Cannot be Eaten?* (1991) to *Litterae Lucentes* (1993), *Ash and Silk Wall* (1993), *Neon Rice Field* (1993) and *Line Writing* (1994), light is manipulated within and between lines, multiplying and reducing in dimensions, oscillating between words and walls. Ambiguity and openness reside in and with the line itself, and the terms designating the work: 'neon', 'rice', 'field'. We move in scale and direction between the linear, granular and expansive, holding their physical and imaginary dimensions and textures in tension.

Line Writing, points in particular to the ambiguity of language, and the slippage, or spillage, between the drawn and written. Neon rises into the curvature of script and straightens out again, bringing to mind lifelines perhaps, or life signs, signalling a heartbeat, monitoring breath. One might also read these lines as arterial, alluding to bodies buried in the hidden histories of the IMMA building; or the building itself as a body, skin and bones, embodying history. There is space in the juxtaposition of 'line' and 'writing', room to shuffle, between the materiality of the work, and its immateriality – the invisible and unsaid or unsayable, the 'what's not there'. The conversation reveals the blurring of memory and practice as a continuum, where significance lies less with where, or when, a work begins or ends, but rather with how memory spills, language spills, and the work itself spills over and moves.

Neon Rice Field

VP: There were two versions of *Neon Rice Field*, one at the Serpentine and one at the Tate (plate 1). There was also *Untitled*, at De Appel Foundation in Amsterdam. It's a different work, but it's part of a series which explores this idea of a simple line of neon that turns into a script and then disappears into a line again.

CO: And there were several different iterations experimenting with the materials, including an *Overture* exhibition in a dark, derelict space in Amsterdam, where we had one of the old canal houses and no budget. Vong found some fluorescent tubes and decided to buy a bag of rice; there was quite an established Asian community.

VP: It was in the cellar, against the base of the wall. That's how *Neon Rice Field* started [...].

CO: *Neon Rice Field* was very well received by the establishment, which was a huge surprise. There was no expectation on our part that this piece of work would somehow become a flashpoint at that moment in the art world in this country. It immediately became appropriated and grasped by a narrative that needed to constrain it, and then, as has been well documented, people start narrating the work in certain ways and imparting quite rigid meanings. It was in the broadsheets and the red tops [tabloid papers], on the front of *The Independent*, in *The Times* and *The Financial Times*, and there were racist cartoons of Asian people [...]. A lot of people were saying, 'Oh, well, the neon, it's a Western commercial language', and 'Rice, of course, the staple food of the ethereal East', and then, 'The piece is just bringing these two things together, bash.'

Actually, the rice was given by the American Rice Council. The neon was as much an expression of environments like Hong Kong or Macau, as Vong pointed out at the



I Vong Phaophanit, *Neon Rice Field*, 1993. Six strips of clear red neon and rice, 12 × 7 m. London: Tate Britain. Installation: Turner Prize, Tate Gallery, London, 1993. Photo: Tate.

time. And the third element that was being lost was the 'field'. And what is a field? It's an open terrain, isn't it? Often fenced, but still an open area or zone [...].

Line Writing

VP: I met Declan McGonagle, Director of IMMA, in 1993 – he was one of the judges for the Turner Prize.⁹ *Neon Rice Field* was acquired by the Weltkunst Foundation, and that collection went to IMMA. So we were invited to Dublin to install the work for the opening, and after that Declan suggested the idea of a commission that became *Line Writing*.

IMMA, the actual building, used to be a convent and then a military hospital, and there used to be a twin building somewhere in France, which no longer exists [...]. So the idea came that the work could be seen but also disappear under the floorboards. I wanted to expose the foundation of the building, so you could see the bare ground. I

wanted the neon to have a direct connection with the building – the tubes pass through the beams, they're embedded (plate 2 and plate 3). So the notion of the hidden and the exposed, what you show, what you say and what you hide, is in the words. And all the words refer to equatorial disease, the fact that during colonization, people had to travel to different continents and would come back to the military hospital with different illnesses. The words are Laotian, but the semantic dimension and background history are almost secondary. It's about the 'non-saying' [...].

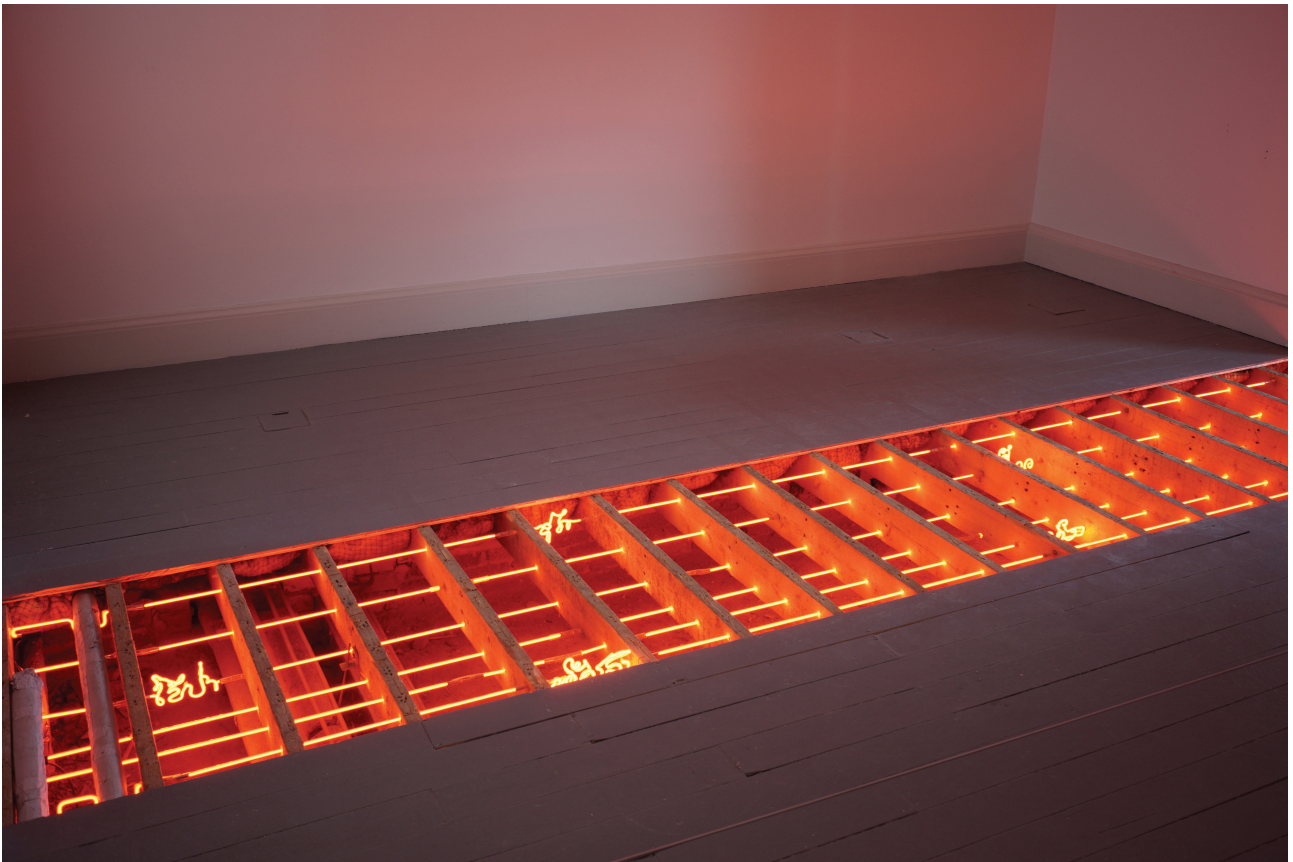
CO: The titles relate to how we've collaborated over thirty years. I come up with most of them, but not in a unilateral way – it's always a dialogue, another level of the interchange between everything we do. With *Line Writing*, there was something there about early years education – line writing as a punitive, mechanical, repetitive, didactic system of imparting limited pieces of information.

But we try to keep the titles on the edge of meaning, like a trigger – instead of holding the work like a clamp that constrains and explains and boxes it up so that it can be easily comprehended, interpreted. We struggle with them sometimes, because often it's a question of, 'No, no there's too much in that [...] it contains too much.'

VP: We tend to go down a reductive route, to bring it down to the actual materials.

CO: A lot of titles are simply – almost as if you're just pointing to the work. Pointing is something Barthes talked about, this idea of the child who points at something saying, 'That, that there'. So, there's the word or the sound coming out of the child's mouth,

2 Vong Phaophanit, *Line Writing*, 1994. Six lines of clear red neon, Laotian script, approximately 10 × 1.5 m. Commissioned by IMMA (Irish Museum of Modern Art), Dublin. Photo: Phaophanit and Oboussier Studio.



and the finger pointing at the thing – there's a direct connection. So, *Neon Rice Field* – it's a way of setting it free.

VP: It also allows space between these two or three words for a weaving through, rather than packing the title with meanings or so much narrative that it doesn't allow any other interpretation.

For us, the more the work unsettles the position of the viewer, the more successful it is. In many cases you are within the work as well as out. You shouldn't feel comfortable; there's always a contradiction. You think you've got it and then another element of the work tells you 'no'.

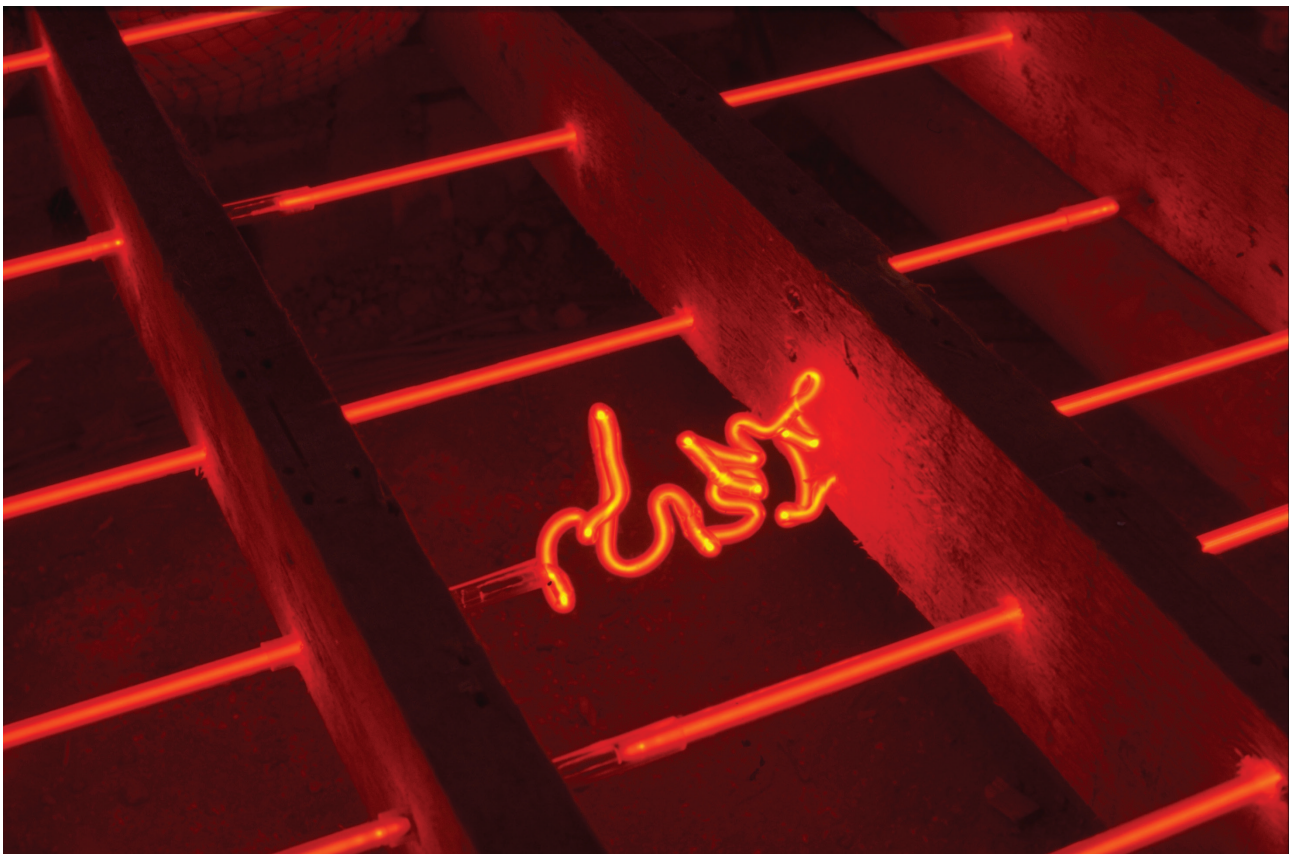
CO: We never want the work to tell you what to think or do or know. It has to be non-didactic, it has to have ambiguity and openness.

VP: We always offer different points of access and departure. No matter where you're coming from – you don't have to be cleverer than the next person or to have more knowledge – the work simply requires you to be there.

II

The second 'moment' focuses on *Atopia*, an installation and book project that spans locations within and across cities (Berlin and London), and indeed Phaophanit/Oboussier's entire practice, lending a poetically ironic domain name to their website, atopia.org.uk. In 1997, *Atopia* was a two-part installation staged in Berlin by Phaophanit as the recipient of a DAAD Fellowship, which he undertook with Oboussier, relocating for a year with their two young children. Phaophanit/

3 Vong Phaophanit, *Line Writing*, 1994. Six lines of clear red neon, Laotian script, approximately 10 × 1.5 m. Commissioned by IMMA (Irish Museum of Modern Art), Dublin. Photo: Phaophanit and Oboussier Studio.



Oboussier's 'Berlin book' of the same name was conceived at the same time and realized in London several years later. *Atopia* (1997, 2003) signals the attenuated moment in which Phaophanit/Oboussier's collaborative practice becomes more 'solidified', even as their predilection for dematerialization and dissolution becomes more pronounced.¹⁰

'Atopia' may suggest a place or condition of placelessness, or a state of being without borders. We might perceive a doubling and splitting in the work – firstly in the divided installation across two locations in the former East and West Berlin created in 1997; secondly in the division of the project between Berlin and London (the installations partially recreated at the Royal Festival Hall), and between the installations and the collaborative artist book published in 2003.¹¹ Alternatively, we might see these as disparate elements of a single conceptual work, materializing in different modalities, responsive to different moments: adjacent yet apart, separated by miles or years, demanding physical or imaginative movement between. The divided, dispersed yet conjoined body of work echoes the iterative development of *Neon Rice Field*, and the invisible or lost twinned buildings that inspired the earlier *Line Writing*. It also evokes the complexity and ambiguity around the in/visible and divisible body of the artist(s), and their gradual acknowledgement of a key juncture and shift in their practice, towards formal collaboration.

*

CO: We were always very interested in borders.

VP: And this notion of the wall is always important in our work. When we moved to Berlin for the DAAD Fellowship, the Berlin Wall had come down just a few years before in 1989, and we realized that it was still very much in people's minds – in the way they saw each other and treated each other; we came across this on a daily basis. This was 1996, 1997?

CO: Well, Chanti was born in 1996 and we moved when she was three months – so we arrived in October 1996 and left in September 1997. It was quite a big transition for us. Savanh was three, so there were two babies in the picture. We had a studio in Kreuzberg and we must have gone there three times.

VP: Well, the work took place somewhere else. It wasn't in the studio, but it was very much to do with our experience of wandering around Berlin –

CO: – with two small kids.

VP: – and being approached by German people. We had a few people coming to visit, and we met other artists, including David Medalla, who was travelling with bin bags.

CO: Something like twenty-five bin bags with all his stuff in. It was brilliant, and then he lived out with Adam [Nankervis].

VP: I think he did more or less as we did. He gave himself four years to travel and wander.

CO: For us, being really truthful and breaking through this mythology of the artist in Berlin, it was four people wandering around, with wet and hungry children – it was an amazing, incredible year, but it wasn't always easy [...].



4 Vong Phaophanit, *Atopia*, 1997. Installation in two parts: polybutadiene rubber, galvanized steel shelving, string; anti-pigeon devices on a roof-top. Commissioned by DAAD, Berlin. Photo: Phaophanit and Oboussier Studio.

I remember Alison Wilding talking about being shortlisted for the Turner Prize [in 1988]. They made films of the other artists in the studio, the 'heavy metal brigade', as David Medalla used to call them. And she just said, 'Film me at my kitchen table with my kids, because that's the reality.' It was candid and truthful, really refreshing, like oxygen.

***Atopia*, Berlin**

VP: As you come into the installation in the former West, you see a row of shelving, and it goes across three spaces, with an entrance and an exit. You are physically stopped by the piece – it comes very close to you, so you can't even enter. It was quite –

CO: – confrontational.

VP: You had to bend and go underneath, and you had to do the same thing to enter the next room, and then you would be scared of coming into contact with this sticky rubber –

CO: – which was moving –

VP: – which could drop on your head while you were bending under (plate 4).

CO: On the night of the launch it was hot, hot, hot, and the rubber all just dropped, it just went. It was hitting the floor in great wads and we never anticipated that. We thought it would be a slow, quite graceful but menacing sort of ooze.

VP: We had the option to use the actual shelving system. You could put all these little bars across.

CO: Yes, like the Dexion classic.

VP: But I didn't want to do that. The idea of the string came because I wanted to introduce a manual activity and make knots. We had to find the right thickness of string, that wouldn't break under the weight of the rubber, but rather cut through it, with gravity [...] like the wire you use to cut cheese. Fragile but also somehow dangerous.

CO: You basically removed the shelves, so it became completely functionless as an object. And you introduced this completely useless material instead, that was somehow supposed to support this mass [...]. It was a very intuitive piece, but coming back to it later, it struck me that so many conversations we had during that year were about the weight of history in Berlin at that time – a dead, lead weight that seemed to be weighing on people –

VP: – including ourselves.

CO: It was like a physical manifestation of this glutinous mass of history, supposedly shored up by a structural narration of what had happened and how things were. Actually, that sheer massive weight just took its own path and oozed its way through in a really rather insidious manner [...].

VP: The installation was in two parts conceived at the same time – the one doesn't work without the other. So the choices of materials and ready-made objects were made in relation to each other. The rubber piece was in the former West and the piece with the anti-pigeon sticks was in the former East.

CO: Anti-vermin devices.

VP: So, you had these fine pointed frosted plastic spikes on a rooftop, and a path through them until there was a dead end and you were surrounded by them (plate 5 and plate 6). You had to try to mentally see that in dialogue with the other idea, the piece with the man-made rubber.

CO: Again, it's putting two things next to each other.

Atopia, London

VP: It's a grey area, the question of when the work became more collaborative [...]. We played with that for a while, moving away from the author, the sole author of the work. Unfortunately, when it comes to how we are represented, it is very much a case of very conventional ways of seeing.

CO: This is quite an interesting territory. There's no doubt that the installation pieces were under your name, and that's absolutely right and proper. But it was shortly after that, while we were there in Berlin, that the book was conceptualized. And then there was a hiatus. We relocated to London and things sat for a while, and we decided to formalize our partnership more. I think you've identified a key moment for our work where, as Vong said, we were questioning authorship and authority. *All That's Solid Melts into Air* is an important part of that, although it was a bit later.

VP: Yes, you'll probably find traces of *All That's Solid Melts into Air* in this earlier project; the mapping is there.

CO: *Atopia* was the first time we made these juxtapositions of word-images – that's the way I think of them – and image-images (plate 7 and plate 8).

One very strong influence on us early on was Chris Marker. We were living in Bristol and one night, by complete chance, Vong flipped on our tiny black and white TV and there it was – it must have been the first ever UK screening of *Sans Soleil*.¹² We immediately locked onto it, not knowing what it was, who'd made it, anything. From there we saw it at cinemas, and managed to get a VCR tape of it, and it became a seminal piece for us really. He definitely influenced our relationship to text and image.

VP: Our method of working is to give ourselves quite a lot of freedom, and then things come together and then we test them.

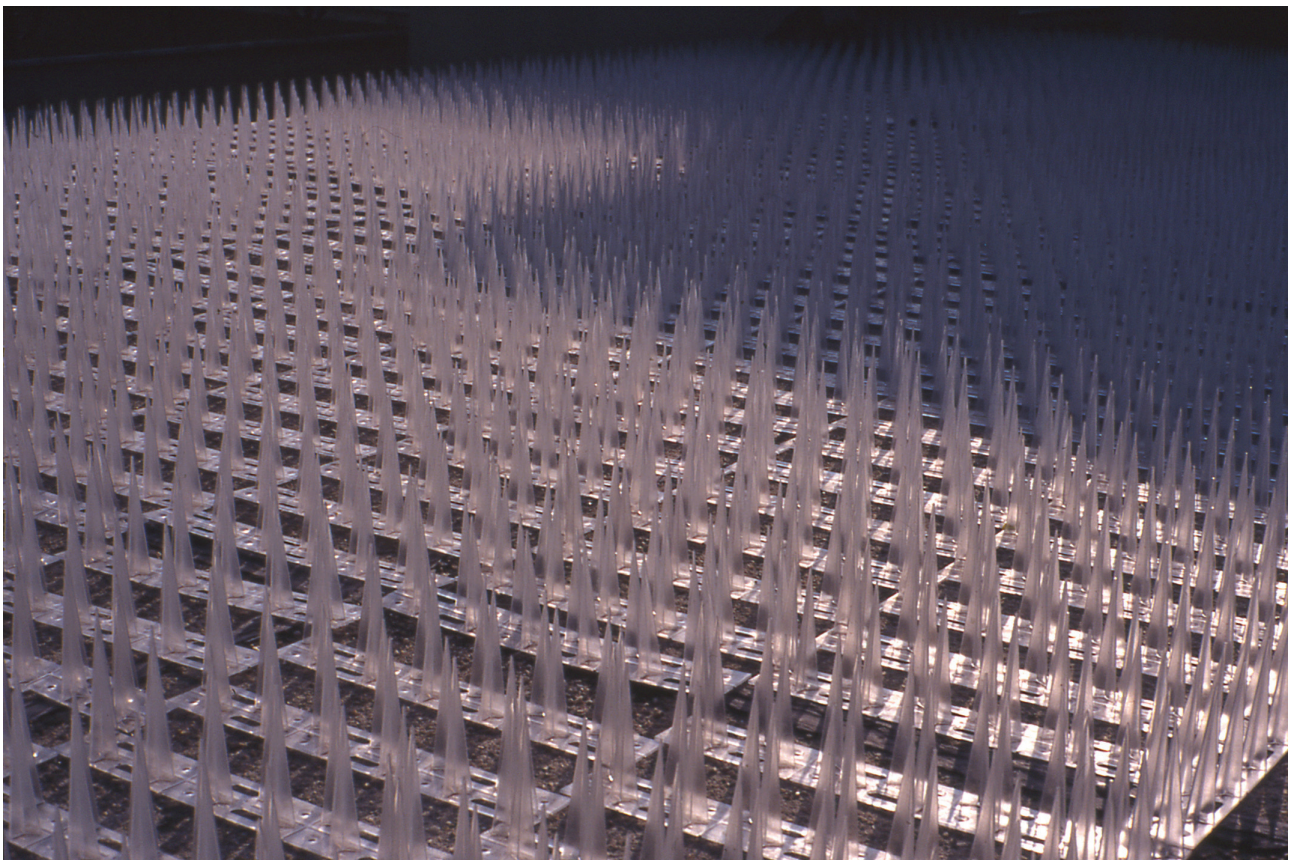
CO: We put them side by side and see.

VP: It's collaboration, but not in an obvious way. It's always been one hundred per cent trust in each other, no matter who does what. It's to do with the work that takes us there. And the foundation is in that little book there.

5 Vong Phaophanit, *Atopia*, 1997. Installation in two parts: polybutadiene rubber, galvanized steel shelving, string; anti-pigeon devices on a roof-top. Commissioned by DAAD, Berlin. Photo: Phaophanit and Oboussier Studio.

III

The third 'moment' explores the making of *All That's Solid Melts Into Air* (Karl Marx) (2005–6), the institutional resistance to Phaophanit/Oboussier's collaboration that





6 Vong Phaophanit, *Atopia*, 1997. Installation in two parts: polybutadiene rubber, galvanized steel shelving, string; anti-pigeon devices on a roof-top. Commissioned by DAAD, Berlin. Photo: Phaophanit and Oboussier Studio.

accompanied the work's commissioning and production (as part of an independent curatorial project, *The Quiet in the Land*, and its subsequent acquisition by Tate Collection).¹³ Despite the artists' assertion that *All That's Solid...* constitutes their first formal collaborative film work, Tate's attribution reads, 'A film by Vong Phaophanit, text by Claire Oboussier'. The separation infers a hierarchical distinction between image and text, and by implication, between artist and writer. Such distinctions are countered by the artists' discussion of their dialogic process, in which film image, sound, voice, language, text, are conceived together and intricately interwoven. Their resistance to curatorial and museum narratives is arguably enacted and inscribed through the work, whose fluid and enmeshed authorship confuses classificatory orders, values and constraints.

The Quiet in the Land

VP: It was France Morin who came up with the idea of getting a group of artists to go and live in a city or a place that they didn't normally practise from, to work with a specific community. Instead of bringing artworks into a different context, she wanted to bring the artists and allow something else to take place, so it wouldn't be a 'one-way trip'.

CO: She had been a curator in New York at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, and I think she had an impulse to do something radically responsive to that scenario. There were lots of problems with it, as it turned out, as you might expect [...]. But the notion of de-contextualizing artists, and offering the opportunity of stepping away from the art establishment and certain expectations and practices, was extremely interesting.

VP: Her third and last project of *The Quiet in the Land* was in Luang Prabang in Laos. She had done her research, and she wanted to have at least one artist from Laos originally – she did find two. The other one was –

CO: Nite – Nithakhong Somsanith.

VP: Nite, yes, the prince [...].¹⁴

It was completely open in terms of what we wanted to do, but at the same time –

CO: – there was also a curatorial expectation that Vong, rather than just being one of the invited artists (who included Marina Abramović Janine Antoni and a lot of others), Vong was somehow ‘the Lao one’. So I felt, right from the beginning, – coming back to what his tutors had said all those years ago – his work was expected to somehow ‘represent’.

VP: And I had problems when I first arrived. Luang Prabang is in the north and I came from the centre – different accent – so, having been away for such a long time, I could hardly understand the language. I felt myself, again, to be almost in a different country. And then we had to negotiate what we were going to do there, with whom and how. Under a one-party government regime, they have their eyes on you; if you’re not part of the political scene, the artistic scene, the cultural scene – you could be seen as a *détracteur*.

7 Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier, *Atopia*, 2003. Artists’ book. Berlin: DAAD, Berlin. Photo: susan pui san lok.





8 Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier, *Atopia*, 2003. Artists' book. Berlin: DAAD, Berlin. Photo: susan pui san lok.

CO: Yes, a kind of detractor, someone who is subtly critiquing the state. It was also very ambiguous for me. What the curator really needed, the box she really needed to tick [...] she loved Vong's work, don't get me wrong, but he recognized immediately what role he was playing. He was a very valuable asset to that project, because of the credentials of previous exhibitions, and because of his Lao heritage – his family still lives in Laos. But there was this vague notion of an unproblematic 'Lao identity' which, of course, is nonsense. And in relation to that, there was absolutely no space at all for an ostensibly white female voice or any kind of collaborative discourse. So, there was a discomfort there. We resolved it through the work, not through saying anything, but by doing; by showing and not saying.

The way it unfolded was Vong made the first two trips to film, bearing in mind we still had two very young children. Then the third trip, all four of us went. We had already talked about some kind of textual relationship, a bit like the Berlin book, where there was the image and the words, and their relationship was very fluid. So we had this vision, while Vong was building up this visual library, that there might be a piece to be made in a similar way. And it happened very quickly – Vong was filming and then I just started writing, and there were all these haiku-like things emerging, and I was showing them to Vong and we were talking about them. Some of the text evolved from conversations we'd had, or with other people in Luang Prabang.

Vong used to say how the whole journey of filming was one of avoiding at every turn the terrible trap of everything becoming a cliché – because you had the beautiful Mekong, and the monks in their saffron robes, and all those very established images embedded in a colonial or 'Third World' discourse (plate 9).

9 Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier, *All That's Solid Melts into Air (Karl Marx)*, 2005–6. Commissioned by *The Quiet in The Land*. London: Tate. Photo: Phaophanit and Oboussier Studio.



VP: You're dealing with hundreds of years of narrative codes, whether it's in the film or documentary or propaganda tradition. It was a question of how our work could exist within this context yet somehow outside of this qualified tradition.

CO: It was interesting because there was this curatorial idea of liberating artists and their practices so that they were no longer constrained by the art world of London, New York, or wherever – and, I suppose, challenging the commercial art world. But actually, arriving in Luang Prabang – which is a World Heritage site, an extraordinarily beautiful place full of exquisite Buddhist temples – you're paradoxically confronted with a quite different challenge of how to not reproduce a very palatable National Geographic aesthetic [...].

So, when we got back, we had this bank of imagery, a lot of it relating to waste and ruin, and this bank of text, written in English by a woman, then translated back into Lao by a man, and narrated by Vong (plate 10).

VP: Sometimes it's a woman speaking and sometimes it's a man – you move constantly between one and the other, but you are neither. There's a displacement [...]. When you work on a project like that, you unconsciously allow space for other people to come in.

After a while, France Morin understood and accepted the piece.

CO: But there was a struggle there. There was no acknowledgement of my role, as has often been the case. There was a sort of question mark about whether or not I was part of it, and I'm still not, I think, officially documented.

VP: The whole process was like a wrestling exercise, where you're constantly trying to avoid being trapped.

CO: So it's never been acknowledged properly as a collaborative piece of work, and that goes back to the initial approach to Vong. Now it's in the Tate Collection as Vong's work. We've never thought to correct them, to be honest. I think the work corrects them, but [...] no. Maybe we've made that ambiguity part of what we do, because Vong makes and I make, we both practise in any way we please, and there are no borders.

There's not really an understanding of the way we create, which goes back to an early collective ethos of exchange and dialogue. There's a perception that I am associated with a more commercial side of what we do, that relates to large-scale commissions – that's how we finance our studio. Where I struggle is when there's no recognition at all of our collaborative history, because it casts me as somehow foisting myself as an imposter onto the practice that we've actually had together for thirty-one years. And it's always been a slight shadow over what we do. We haven't really had the opportunity to talk about it much.

VP: I think it's going to carry on [...]. There will always be a misunderstanding. The main thing is we are happy with what we do together; the rest is secondary. But we are correcting it slowly; the most recent video work has both our names attached to it. It's up to us to make sure that it's done properly for future work.

CO: I think our collaboration is troubling to an art world that depends upon an often male paradigm, and the very strong modernist myth of the lone artist, the sole authorial voice and all that. We were chatting with Lesley [Sanderson] and Neil [Conroy] after the Black Artists and Modernism conference.¹⁵ –

VP: It sounds like it was much tougher for them. It was one thing for Lesley to be a solo woman artist in Sheffield, from Malaysia, but as soon as they introduced the idea of their collaboration, it's as if doors were suddenly closed [...]. It comes down to preserving the



10 Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier, *All That's Solid Melts into Air (Karl Marx)*, 2005–6. Commissioned by *The Quiet in The Land*. London: Tate. Photo: Phaophanit and Oboussier Studio.

Endless the series of things without name.

freedom of being able to reinvent yourself. You have to shake up the entire foundations of how institutions see art and artists – how they represent, talk and write about us.

CO: Our daughter is at the Slade and she was talking a few months back about the strong resurgence of identity politics. She was asked by another student to identify herself, meaning, are you Asian or are you white? And she said, 'No, I won't do that.' She said to us, 'Everyone's talking about the idea of non-binary sexuality. Why can't I be a non-binary person in terms of my ethnic heritage?'

All That's Solid Melts into Air

VP: You see the images, you see scenery of Luang Prabang and the Mekong River but there are other things going on. What you see is not necessarily what you're looking at, or what you're hearing, because the text starts bringing another element to the work.

CO: The text is somehow subterranean, under the images. But it's also subterranean in the sense that – I don't really like using the term the 'unconscious' because it's immediately co-opted by psychoanalytic thinking, and I don't mean it in a Freudian or a Jungian way particularly – but it's just this idea that we can try and form pathways into those spaces in our consciousness or unconsciousness that we haven't mined or acknowledged yet. The whole way that we've been working with film, starting with *All That's Solid Melts into Air* (Karl Marx), is about those spaces. The way it emerged was almost as if the images released the words, and the words released the images.

The authorial voice is pushed around quite a bit, rather than located in a solid identity, or embodied in a piece of artwork. Maybe it goes back to that idea of exteriority.

For Vong, who was brought up between languages, perhaps it's obvious to say this but language is a different material to someone who's been brought up completely mono-linguistically. Sometimes you experience it as a noise, something you have no access to; other times, it's maybe more like music.

For me, it's probably less obvious, but I also grew up experiencing a kind of uneasiness. I always felt on the outside of everything. Children who are abandoned at a very early age and then taken into new circumstances can feel that. If you have no sense of identity, no sense of your genetic heritage, or your heritage at all, you're constantly constructing and imagining who you might be.

We've always felt that although we come from such extraordinarily different backgrounds – they just could not be further apart – we're very close in the way we position ourselves imaginatively in relation to the world.

VP: Language is a presumption of belonging. You may speak the language, but carry an accent [...]. When I speak English I have a slight French accent and when I speak French I have a slight Asian accent [...]. I feel a stranger when I go to Laos and at ease when I go to France, the same as I do in England [...].

As Claire said, the way we use language in our work is not just on a semantic level. It brings another colour, another sound to our palette. The way we choose the words, the vocabulary, allows the work to exist outside of that vocabulary as well. The meaning escapes.

IV

The fourth 'moment' dwells on *IT IS AS IF* (2015), an installation whose title proffers a conditional, tentative and partial state of being, invoking possibility and uncertainty.¹⁶ The combination of materials – film, sound and timber – fill the space in precarious

and ambiguous relation. Evolving and extending Phaophanit/Oboussier's collaborative practice in dialogue with a trauma surgeon, Professor Roger Kneebone, the installation appears to centre on a single shot framing his hands, performing an imagined re-enactment of an operation. The gestures invoke embodied knowledge displaced, as memories and absences slip between rivers, while the act of suturing entails cutting and closing, a cautious reparative violence that offers a metaphor for a piecing (back) together.

IT IS AS IF recalls the open-ended bringing together of elements in their early collective experiments in expanded cinema, projecting light and/as image and material, arranging neon in the manner of concrete poetry. Their recollection of pieces with buried televisions invites connections between the subterranean and subcutaneous, linking that which lies beyond or below the visible and tangible. As with *All That's Solid*, the 'voice' of *IT IS AS IF* is continually in transition, moving between images, languages, text, sound and music, suggesting a determined narrative 'irresolution' and what might be called a deliberate 'authorial dispossession'. Refusing to hold or take hold – to possess – the artists infer instead a permeability within their work and practice, a striving towards a liminal consciousness via a shared sense of 'exteriority', and a propensity for porosity. As Phaophanit says, 'meaning escapes'. Here, we might attend to Cixous' on escaping writing, or writing escaping – the work runs away, gets away; and the artists escape too.¹⁷

*

CO: The way we've worked with film since the 1980s has as much to do with its materiality as to do with its potential for narration and image-building. Most of the early pieces are either undocumented or badly documented, and have yet to be excavated from our archives.

VP: We did multi-projections with Super 8s, so the physicality of the films themselves, the loops going around, was important. But back then, we were making the work almost with this deliberate idea of not saving it. It was quite seductive at that time, the idea that you just did it and forgot about it.

CO: Someone like David Medalla does that to such an uncompromised degree. I admire that hugely, that itinerant responsive artmaking with less concern about its preservation. We were enjoying that as well.

VP: To create that brief moment where the viewer sees and experiences the work, even if they only retain it for a matter of a second – for us that was sufficient. How can you quantify that second in terms of emotion, or intellectual response?

CO: All the pieces we did in rooms above pubs in Brighton, with *Situation Cinema*, lasted no more than a few hours – everyone brought their own projector along and we would end up with twenty-five, literally lashing them together so you got this physical interplay of projectors up here and down there, film wobbling around and moving through space – the content was quite arbitrary in a way; that work was all about light. Then there were the pieces we did in Bristol when we were burying television sets in the soil, and projecting up through the screens [...].

VP: There's light and there's play. When we were kids and people used to be able to smoke in the cinema, I used to love that beam of light and all the smoke in it [...].

Light is the shortcut, there's no rubbish in the middle. Light cuts through that and takes you to the core of what we as human beings are afraid of, or are comforted by. When you talk about light, you also talk about darkness; you can't separate one from the other.

CO: Subterranean screens – I'd never thought of the link before, but *Line Writing* is subterranean.

VP: *IT IS AS IF* (2015) is quite subterranean.

CO: *IT IS AS IF* is absolutely about the sub-terrain of the body. And a lot of the filming in Laos has that sense of the subterranean [...]. Those series of images when you were doing long exposures at night. They feel subterranean because you've drawn the image out of the blackness [...].

IT IS AS IF

CO: The title reminds me of something our daughter wrote. She's very dyslexic and she used to draw a lot, a bit like Vong did as a small child, but when she first started trying to navigate words, she wrote something on a small piece of paper, which I've still got: 'There is a secret and the secret is'. I think the spirit of *IT IS AS IF* comes from that terrain. But of course, you can also rejig those words, *AS IF IT IS*.

It's also a nod to metaphor. Why should metaphor be a discredited, disgraced way of thinking? Over the years, it's been seen as feminized or second-class in relation to, say, scientific discourse. In a sense, the title is again showing not saying, pointing towards a more poetic dimension of understanding.

VP: What I like about the title is it's not full of confidence. *IT IS AS IF* – it could be something, it could be something else [...]. It's an open door. It's about possibilities of being, of interpretation, of meaning; it's also about possibilities of dialogue [...].

CO: And there's no overarching narrative. Some people might see it as very unresolved. But I see it as resolved in the sense that it maintains that open-endedness. It doesn't try to close anything down.

For a long time, Vong has been making a series of pieces like *Viscount 812* (1999), *Porous Child's Chair* (1999/2006) and *Fenestrated Skateboard* (2006), extracting huge amounts of material and just leaving this very lacy delicate shadow of the object. There was also a piece on a football match, *England and Poland*, which was filmed off the television.¹⁸ This goes back at least ten years now. We basically removed the ball from the match, so we ended up with all these men running around after nothing, and it became a slightly absurd choreography.

Various things had happened in our lives that had involved lots of surgery and Vong said, 'Do you know what? It would be great to film a surgical operation and remove the body, so you just have the hands [...].' So we'd been talking about that for ages, and then we were working with this stone carver in Deptford and we mentioned this idea, and he said, 'Oh, I've got the perfect person for you.' He had been working with Professor Kneebone on another project and he put us in contact with him. So we had an exploratory meeting with him at the Wellcome Institute, where he's a Fellow in surgical engagement.

Then we realized that rather than remove all the extraneous material, it might be more interesting if the film became simply his hands re-enacting an operation, through a mixture of imagination and memory. We said, 'You choose the operation. We don't want to impose anything on you. Decide what is meaningful for you and that should be the one you perform.'

It turned out that in his very early days, he had been a surgeon in Apartheid South Africa and he had performed a lot of trauma surgery. So he said, 'Right, this is the operation I'm going to do' and it was a stab wound that happened in Soweto in the early 1980s, I think. The director, Sarah Keenleyside, with her cameraman Devan, managed to capture a forty-five-minute re-enactment of this operation in one shot.

VP: It was important to have it in one shot. There was a discussion first with Roger about how he was going to re-enact it, and there was a very subtle change in gestures between re-enacting and performing [...]. Like an actor pretending to be the surgeon. So we had to be quite clear that it wasn't acting that we were after.

CO: In other words, he was trying to not forget bits or shake or get lost, and what we wanted were all those moments. We wanted him to have lapses of memory, to hesitate, even possibly to get something wrong and have to go back.

So there are three discrete films: the surgical re-enactment, a fusion of the Thames and the Mekong and a ruined Lao cityscape. They're completely separate pieces yet they come together, projected at different angles. You see them through this mass of timber struts as you move into the space. There's a central clearing where you can see all the films, if you turn and swivel, but you can't see them all at once. The struts took weeks to put up, because there was no master plan, it was done completely organically. So one piece went up, then another – it just grew and grew. Of course it had to be safe, but it looked as though if you pushed one, it would all tumble like pick-up-sticks – we wanted that strong sense of precariousness about it (plate 11 and plate 12).

II Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier, *IT IS AS IF*, 2015. Three-channel HD video and sound installation, 44.39 mins. Supported by the Wellcome Trust. Brixton: Block 336. Photo: Phaophanit and Oboussier Studio.





12 Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier, *IT IS AS IF*, 2015. Three-channel HD video and sound installation, 44.39 mins. Supported by the Wellcome Trust. Brixton: Block 336. Photo: Phaophanit and Oboussier Studio.

VP: We also wanted to mark a change when you came into the building from the street. You go downstairs and suddenly there's a screen of timber, a mass of poles, floor to ceiling. The only light is coming from the projections and it keeps changing with the images, moving from blue, white, yellow, orange, green [...]. It's a transitional zone and by the time you arrive at the clearing, you are almost –

CO: – lost.

CO: We painted one face of the timber white, and left the other three raw. It's very banal, very utilitarian, very every day. It's not 'heavy metal'.

VP: It's a half-processed product, like the rubber, in the sense that that's created from oil/petrol, but still malleable.

CO: And the fifth element in the installation is the soundscape, composed by our son Savanh, who's a musician. It takes the data from all three of the films. There's Professor Kneebone muttering as he enacts the surgery, trying to jog his memory, as if he's talking to nurses who aren't there. There's quite a lot from the Laos footage, from chickens clucking to dogs barking, to people talking, to rain; then there's sound from the rivers Mekong and the Thames and sound from under water.

VP: You can slide from one state to another one. The sound allows you to be in one story, then come out and enter another one. Despite having three separate films physically next to each other, the images don't really fit together.

CO: There was no editing to make them relate to one another – they remain discrete. The sounds allow the meaning to start building between them [...].

Is it disorientating or orientating? Probably both. People find it quite troubling. I could see the curators were worried, because they weren't sure how they were going to talk about it.

VP: The meaning has to be created in situ, while you're there. That's why it feels like it's unresolved.

CO: It's quite performative in a way, and the surgeon pre-empts that by enacting these gestures in an empty space. I was thinking the other day about how his hands are always – not in the centre, but in between – the two films. And a lot of what he's doing is suturing. He's joining things up, he's repairing wounds, he's saving a life [...]. What does it mean that we have a surgeon in between these two territories, stitching up, stitching flesh? Our bodies remember [...]. Your body can remind you of things that you have no idea you're recalling [...]. The suturing leaves its trace; it leaves its scars.

Notes

'Three Decades, Four Moments' is based on the edited transcripts of over four hours of interviews and conversations that took place between 2016 and 2017, in the studio of Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier, in London. Two interviews were conducted a year apart, on 8 July 2016 and 6 July 2017, and a further conversation was recorded on 17 October 2017 in their studio, in the course of filming for the forthcoming extended film-essay, *Re Moves*, written and directed by susan pui san lok and produced by Illuminations Media.

- 1 Zeigam Azizov, quoted in Stuart Hall, 'Black Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three "Moments" in Post-war History', *History Workshop Journal*, 61: 1, Spring 2006, 1–24, 22 (no reference given).
- 2 Hall, 'Black Diaspora Artists in Britain', Abstract.
- 3 Hall, 'Black Diaspora Artists in Britain', 22.
- 4 Hall, 'Black Diaspora Artists in Britain', 22.
- 5 Phaophanit attended the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, L'Université d'Aix-Marseille, from 1980 to 1985. Oboussier attended the University of Sussex from 1981 to 1985, gaining her PhD from the University of Bristol in 1995.
- 6 The East Country Yard Show, Rotherhithe, 31 May–22 June 1990, organized by Henry Bond and Sarah Lucas.
- 7 Phaophanit and Piper, 1995, Angel Row Gallery, Nottingham; Site Gallery, Sheffield; Cambridge Darkroom; and Firstsite, Colchester; curated by Eddie Chambers.
- 8 *Neon Rice Field* (1993, rice, neon tubes), was acquired by the Tate Collection in 2013. The earlier work, *What Falls To The Ground But Can't Be Eaten* (1991, installation with bamboo poles, metal and light) was presented by Tate Members in 2008.
- 9 Declan McGonagle was Director of the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) from 1990 to 2001.
- 10 Vong Phaophanit, *Atopia* (1997), installation in two parts: polybutadiene rubber, galvanised steel shelving, string; anti-pigeon devices on a roof-top. Commissioned by DAAD, Berlin. Germany. Image courtesy of Phaophanit and Oboussier Studio. Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier, *Atopia* (2003), artists' book. DAAD, Berlin.
- 11 *Atopia* was installed at the Royal Festival Hall, 3 April to 17 May 1998. An eponymous essay by Oboussier can be found at <https://www.atopia.org.uk/collaborative-work/publications/catalogue-essays/atopia/>. See also Niru Ratnam, 'Vong Phaophanit', *Art Monthly*, 216, May 1998, 32–34.
- 12 Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil* (1983), film, 100 min.
- 13 *All That's Solid Melts Into Air* (Karl Marx) (2006), video projection, 33 min.

Tate Collection, presented by Tate Members in 2008. The Quiet in the Land, a non-profit organization, was founded by curator and art historian, France Morin. It produced three projects between 1995 and 2008, located respectively with The Shaker community of Sabbathday Lake, Maine; Projeto Axé, Centre for the Defense and Protection of Children and Adolescents, Salvador, Brazil; and the community of monks and novices, artisans and students of Luang Prabang, Laos.

- 14 'Nithakhong Somsanith was born in Vientiane, Laos, in 1959, a member of the Lao royal family [...]. He divides his time between Paris and Luang Prabang.' http://www.thequietintheland.org/laos/project_le.html; accessed 29 July 2019.
- 15 Having met at Sheffield Polytechnic (now Sheffield Hallam University), Lesley Sanderson and Neil Conroy established separate artistic practices. Eddie Chambers featured Sanderson's work in the exhibitions *Black Art: Plotting the Course*, 1988, at the Bluecoat Gallery, Wolverhampton Art Gallery and Oldham Art Gallery; *History and Identity*, 1991, Norwich Gallery and Lincolnshire College of Art and Design; and *Four × 4*, 1991, at Harris Museum and Art Gallery. Chambers also curated a significant touring solo show of her work, *These Colours Run*, in 1993–94. After working together informally for many years, Conroy/Sanderson began exhibiting collaboratively in the late 1990s, including in London, Norwich, Ireland, Lithuania, Austria, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and China. 'Now and Then, Here and There' was the second of three conferences organized as part of the AHRC-funded research project, *Black Artists and Modernism* conference, which took place at the University of the Arts London, Chelsea College of Arts and Tate Britain, 6–8 October 2016. Phaophanit/Oboussier and Conroy/Sanderson both featured in the 'Now! Now!' exhibition curated by Sonia Boyce in the Triangle and Cookhouse galleries, Chelsea College of Arts, staged to coincide with the conference. Video documentation of the first and second conferences (the former at Bluecoat Gallery) is available at <https://vimeo.com/blackartistsmodernism>. An ebook comprising the revised papers from the third conference held at Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, including embedded video links, is available at <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/research/resources/articles/conceptualism-intersectional-readings-international-framings/>
- 16 *IT IS AS IF* (2015). Three-channel HD video and sound installation with timber, 45 min.
- 17 Helene Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, New York, 1993.
- 18 *England and Poland* (2005). DVD, colour, 10 min. Commissioned by Angel Row Gallery for the exhibition, *The Animators*, curated by Angela Kingston.