

The Lay of the Land

Written for *The Quiet in the Land*, Luang Prabang, Laos: A project by France Morin, edited by France Morin and John Alan Farmer

In order to theorize one leaves home.
James Clifford 1

Introduction

The conversations about “art, spirituality, and everyday life” evoked by this third iteration of *The Quiet in the Land* could not have come at a more opportune moment. During the late 1990s and into the twenty first century, theories of postmodernism captivated the art world of the West, enabling us all to understand more profoundly the designations of “center” and “periphery,” self and other, homogeneity and heterogeneity, territorialization and deterritorialization. But however important and provocative these philosophical complexities may be, they have left us more self-conscious about how we position ourselves and our work in the world. Those of us from societies of greater economic resources and technological advancement have become more dubious than ever about collaborating with, and fairly representing, the world outside our own immediate environment. We have come to fear “appropriating” or in any way “exploiting” our relationships with others. Similarly, we have become immobilized by postcolonial theory, which has broadened our understanding of the weight of history, but often, in reflecting trauma, has left us reticent to interact with those outside our own immediate orbit, just as we are being asked to imagine ourselves as “global citizens” functioning in a much more diverse arena.

In such a highly charged and ambivalent conceptual environment, it has been refreshing and liberating to witness the joy and hopefulness of *The Quiet in the Land* first-hand, as it launched itself into the layered social reality of Laos, quite aware of these accompanying theoretical and practical concerns and contradictions but nonetheless fearless and determined to act. As it did in Sabbathday Lake, Maine, with the Shakers and in Salvador, Brazil, with Projeto Axé, *The Quiet in the Land* has brought

to Luang Prabang, Laos, some of the most interesting transcultural artists practicing today, to work across political, geographical, and formal boundaries to create projects and work in collaboration with local communities in this most magnificent location.

1. Putting Down Roots

The Quiet in the Land is a concept, a way of thinking about art making and context. It is also an opportunity, an event, and a deliberate relocation of art production outside the designated cultural centers of the West. It encourages artists to access the daily life of particular locations through the making of art, and it energizes its host communities with educational initiatives and collaborative projects. It demonstrates how contemporary art can relate to more traditional forms of artistic production, as well as to various spiritual practices, while facilitating previously unimagined cross-cultural encounters.

France Morin has brought her project to those locations where she found the context thick enough—i.e., culturally rich enough—to allow for this interweaving. It is she who envisioned, with creativity at its core, how methodologies of a diverse group of artists could be accepted and understood in particular settings. And it is she who, in each manifestation of *The Quiet in the Land*, has been able to see the complexity of place—the physical, cultural, political, historical space as it existed—and then recognize “the potentiality of consciousness,” as Maurice Merleau-Ponty might call it, residing there.

Sinking deep roots into each chosen site, *The Quiet in the Land* itself becomes a location, encouraging a meeting of cultures, which, although historically coexistent, may be separated within distinct cultural and technological time frames. Creating a “condition of complex connectivity,”² it is based on at least one radical assumption: if the ground were properly prepared, a very accomplished group of artists from disparate backgrounds, all sensitive to and interested in cultural complexity, could find significant ways to interact with local communities.

To lay the foundation for the artists’ work, Morin, as project director, immersed herself in the day-to-day life of these societies, building trust on the ground, especially important given the depth, scale, and originality of the projects that emerged. In ad-

dition to Morin, the list of those who worked to secure the success of *The Quiet in the Land* is long. It includes art historians, historians, architects, artists, and writers—Lao and others—who are experts of the place, as well as government officials and directors of local cultural and educational initiatives. The cumulative weight of all these associations enabled Morin to build a strong foundation for the project from its inception.

In Luang Prabang there were many particular challenges, even for those who already had close ties to the location. Among them was the specificity of the communist government and its hierarchies and protocols, as well as the equally complex, very large, and well-established Theravada Buddhist community, with its own deep proprieties. Some of those who also had to be considered were the local population of lay Buddhist practitioners and residents of Luang Prabang, who participate in the daily life of the monasteries through their own practice and contributions of food and service. And there was the local community of artisans, Hmong and other, immersed each day in artistic production.

Into this layered cultural fabric entered 14 extraordinary artists who came as travellers and tourists, but neither for leisure nor distraction. Most of their projects have required multiple visits, sometimes lasting for months, so that they could understand how to intersect with the society, and how to translate their unique perspective and responses to place into comprehensible forms of art making. Beneath their activity and behind the scenes is the armature of *The Quiet in the Land*.

When Shahzia Sikander needed permission to enter into the uniquely male environment of the monastery to evolve her intense portraits of monks, *The Quiet in the Land* relied on relationships, carefully built with the abbots over time, to gain access for her. Ann Hamilton could never have worked so closely with the monks to envision her meditation boat if Morin had not established those unique relationships beforehand. The best Lao architects and builders who could actualise a project of this scale, and who could work closely with an artist and with monks, also came to Hamilton through connections made by *The Quiet in the Land*. She probably would never even have seen the walking meditation halls that originally inspired the concept for the boat, if Francis Engelmann, a cultural historian and writer who worked

closely with Morin, had not taken Hamilton on foot to see these buildings. When Allan Sekula wanted to shoot parts of his film in several small villages, Engelmann, who had built personal connections with these places over years, also assisted. Similarly, the preparation for Marina Abramović's filming of 27 children simulating scenes associated with war necessitated months of elaborate behind-the-scenes preparation by both the artist and *The Quiet in the Land*. While many artists possess an unusual proclivity for arriving in new locations, observing them, and finding in them infinite sources for imaginative response, gaining access to a society like that of Luang Prabang is another challenge. Great care must be taken if one is to understand its traditions and history. It would be so easy to offend if one were not briefed every step of the way, and it would be impossible to gain the trust of local participants without a proven commitment to the place itself.

From the outside, one might wonder how these artists, many of whom are well known to the art world of the United States, Europe, Asia, South America, and elsewhere, found a way to be accepted into this community. It clearly was this slow process of connectivity, before the artists' arrival, that allowed *The Quiet in the Land* to become part of the cultural landscape.

This organic acceptance is the gift Morin gave to these artists, who were then free to dream their own concepts into being. The year 2006 evidenced the impact of those connections and the project's success when an impressive exhibition of several of the artists' works opened at the Luang Prabang National Museum. Not only did important Lao dignitaries and high-ranking Buddhist monks attend the exhibition, but they expressed their appreciation and interest in the project by officiating the opening ceremonies as well.

Because *The Quiet in the Land* now moves within the complex landscape of globalisation, it has raised important and timely questions about postcolonial encounters among those from the West, those who now live in the West, and those who live in indigenous communities of the East, as well as how these individuals negotiate commonalities and differences. This liminal space of interaction and transformation could be understood as the "contact zone."

2. Liminality

In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt, who borrowed from linguistics, introduced the concept of the “contact zone” into the study of postmodernity. For more than a decade, many others have elaborated the term. In her original intention, focused on colonialism in the nineteenth century, she defined it as such: “[S]ocial spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today.”³

Since Pratt’s work on this topic in 1992, with a special emphasis on British imperialism, there has been an explosion of conversation about the construction of “otherness.” Such relationships to culture can either irrevocably collide or can be negotiated by those moving across them to create entirely new terrains. In these new territories, disparate groups with unique points of orientation can not only co-exist but can actually work together from their different histories and locations rural/urban, traditional/postmodern, haptic/technological—to create new and hybrid forms of original thinking, often embodied in visual production.

Although many artists have left their countries of origin for political or economic reasons and have taken up residence in major cities in Europe and the United States, they nonetheless continue to make work about the complexity of their own identities and their new ambiguous, and often ambivalent, situations. Such artists reflect upon the political environments they have had to negotiate, and they place this work within the contemporary art world of the West. As a result, some of the most interesting observations and visual markers of these postcolonial debates have come out of this hybrid artistic production and its surrounding theory.

Many artists, curators, art historians, and cultural theorists, having taken up these questions, have created an entire body of writing and thinking concerned with negotiating difference in art production across global landscapes. This work speaks to the nature of postmodernity, the concept of the nation state, redefinitions of geographic boundaries, and more conceptual, imaginative solutions to the notion of place. This work also addresses what

it means to navigate border crossings, nomadism, and *créolité*—concepts still being theorized. Some of the most significant and well-known artists working within these interstitial spaces, whose nature they have helped define, such as Marina Abramović, Dinh Q. Lê, Shirin Neshat, Shahzia Sikander, and Rirkrit Tiravanija, participated in *The Quiet in the Land*.

These complex dynamics have become even more problematic as the influx of tourists and travellers to the East from the West has accelerated in countries that have great cultural heritages, but which have not yet achieved their full economic or technological potential. In Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, for example, interactions between French and U.S. tourists and citizens of these respective countries now take place daily. But however affable these encounters may be, they are inevitably shadowed by postwar, colonial, and imperialist legacies. Several artists who came to work with *The Quiet in the Land* took on these embedded histories of Laos, a remarkably gentle country that has sustained incomprehensible aggression. They did not simply see the sites as others might—absorbed by what was visually apparent—but they also attempted to articulate the images well hidden in the society's personal and collective memory. Some attempted to evoke Laos's history, as those entering a society from the outside and then inhabiting the "contact zone" sometimes do, telling the stories those inside may experience as too painful to articulate.

3. The Specificity of Place

In January 2005, at the invitation of *The Quiet in the Land*, filmmaker and film theorist Jeffrey Skoller and I traveled to Laos to understand how we and our students, from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, might participate in this iteration of the project. After taking the time to understand the lay of the land, we decided to structure a week of our "Globalized City" study trip, scheduled for January 2006, in Luang Prabang. We loved the landscape—physical and social. And there we found many issues that were of great interest to us and that we knew would resonate with our students, not the least of which was how this particular place has been affected by globalization. It was important for young artists to note how more mature artists and thinkers, observant of such a particular configuration, could navigate the space of the

traditional as well as the transitional.

Once in Luang Prabang, we observed several unique conditions that gave us fertile ground for the conversations we believed young artists needed to engage. These included communities where residents live cooperatively within the great traditions of Lao culture, Hmong culture, and Theravada Buddhism; the successful integration of art and daily life; the use of more advanced technology coterminous with handmade production; the adaptation of old traditions to new economic realities, such as the creation by Hmong women of new, hybrid embroideries, as well as traditional patterns, to sell to tourists in the market each day; the selling of wares by students from the local art school by the Mekong River in the afternoon; and the continual production of silk, embroidered cloth, ceramics, paper, and metal ware by those both inside the town and in its outlying villages.

Many of these conditions hearken back to a time in the West when most communities and the social connections between people were structured around the production of useful goods. Advanced technology has led many societies to be organized around information, media, and the exchange of signs; in such places, the integration of production into daily life is rare. Manhattan's SoHo district is a good example of such metamorphosis. A place that was once filled with small working factories, which then became a center for art making and art exhibition, is now a site of "shop 'til you drop" consumer consumption. One might ask: where have all the artists and art production gone? Across the bridges to the boroughs. And where are the centers of product fabrication in New York? More difficult to answer. Many U.S. cities, like New York and Chicago, have become predominantly service-sector centers and are scrambling to convert their retired factory buildings into arty environments for consumer culture. Such factory districts and "seaports," which have lost their original meaning, have been "repurposed" as tourist shopping centers and sites of café culture.

Even when production does exist in the United States and Europe, its sites are often well hidden within urban metropolises, or are on their outskirts. In contrast, cottage industries are strewn throughout Luang Prabang and are very visible. This creates a unique and exciting environment, as several of the shops that sell goods are also centers of production. You enter a store to admire

gorgeous Lao silk scarves and then can walk to the back where craftspeople are weaving them on the premises. If you are interested, the owners will gladly describe the process of creating natural dyes and will show you the relationship of the new products to the historical garments in their personal collections. Or you can go to shops that sell handmade paper and paper objects and, in the same location, observe how these are made. Such stores function as factories, sales outlets, educational centers, and small museums. You can also walk into the courtyard of the Luang Prabang Fine Arts School and watch students painting, working with stencils, or carving tree trunks into sculptures, and then enter the School's gallery and see the results of these efforts in its exhibition space.

This abundance of visible process gives the community a sense of constant production, an apparent integration of art and life. Yet, at the same time that this physical making of objects, including the carving of Buddhas and other iconic representations, is taking place, so too is the education of young monks. One can hear them chanting at particular designated times of day and then, when walking around the town, observe them studying in classes taking place on the monastery grounds. All of this activity creates a powerful visible, spiritual, and artistic axis around which the town appears to revolve. Such communal life reflects Luang Prabang's ongoing process of visible renewal.

This transparency of multiple forms of practice is inspiring because it allows everyone to observe the regeneration of traditions. But as the twenty-first century washes over this layered society, whose citizens include the Sangha and the laypeople who support the Sangha, a continuous erosion of traditions is taking place, which is less visible to those from the outside but very apparent and upsetting to those on the inside. This erosion is the inevitable result of tourism and of globalisation, with its accompanying homogenization of place. Technology and media have already accelerated this process, compressing space and reducing cultural difference, and thus creating the impression that the world is shrinking.

While many visitors come to learn about and to appreciate the uniqueness of this society, some also travel to escape the encroaching sameness of their own societies. Discerning tourists might recognize this paradox: the more we travel, the more we

contribute to the obliteration of the very uniqueness we hope to find. And the more societies become homogenized, the greater the quest for Difference and “authenticity” while romanticizing that which is Other.

As a result, the society in Luang Prabang now appears to be separating from itself with increasing self consciousness, in part attributable to the seductions of technology: one can see young monks searching the Web in Internet cafés up and down the main street, side by side with other residents from Luang Prabang and visitors from around the world. This mix of tradition and contemporaneity surely creates challenges for a historic Buddhist education that necessitates meditation, isolation, and celibacy. This small town has attempted to adapt to the rapidity of these transformations, but the community is no longer exempt from the effects of the “density and velocity of social contacts.”⁴ The leaders of the community of monks have begun to question how much longer they can continue their spiritual practices in the public arena, as their world now becomes increasingly populated by those who do not understand Buddhism and, as a result, do not always show respect for its practices or its practitioners. Were this to occur, it would greatly affect the lay Buddhist community in Luang Prabang as well. Given such disruption, one can easily understand Hamilton’s desire to offer the monks an unexpected place of retreat on the Mekong River, where they might meditate in solitude.

In our plan to bring students to this location, and to educate them about globalisation and its apparent effects, we anticipated that they would observe these contradictions, recognise their own role in exacerbating them, and thereby learn important lessons about the inevitability of hybridisation now that international travel has become so ubiquitous. We imagined that we could juxtapose the experience of the small town of Luang Prabang with that of the metropolises of Hanoi and Bangkok, saving Luang Prabang for the end of our journey in the hope that, by the time the students arrived there, they would have become interested in, and sensitive to, Buddhist practices and other aspects of life in Laos.

4. Artist Travelers

Artists were some of the first travelers—painting, drawing, and, later, photographing fabulous locations and landscapes that then became famous and desirable because of their romantic repre-

sentations. And surely artists may be guilty of some of the same manifestations of insensitivity as other tourists, but, in general, they are good travelers, agile in their ability to admire and absorb complexity, visual and otherwise, and easily adaptable and adept navigators of the “contact zone,” often able to transform what could be a barrier for others into a point of entry. Where some may be stymied by or resistant to Difference, artists are themselves often the articulators of Difference. They are professional producers of visuality as well as viewers, and therefore draw great inspiration from cultural originality for their own work. Therefore, they are often very appreciative of that which is Other.

Whereas social scientists feel the need to re-present the entirety and complexity of societies before they are able to evaluate and respond to them, artists, who conduct their own type of research, are adept at trusting their experience of place and acting on it. Their enthusiasm for visual and performative traditions, their intuition about what gesture might work in a particular context, and their ability to sit still and listen are all qualities that allow them to move within new societies, often quite effectively. Artists can also become the recorders of these sensitive moments when a society like Luang Prabang is in transition—not a slow transition, as might have occurred in the past, but one occurring at a heretofore-unknown velocity—that can easily throw an environment off its own center. At such moments, it is useful to have artists who can function as recorders, documenting what once was and reinterpreting how the past intersects with the present.

When successful in such situations, artists can create a free zone of hybridization, a new location where the past, present, and future can meet, and where an otherwise undigested barrage of visual and cultural information can be brought into coherence. Artists working outside their usual environments can achieve this coherence either through a consistency of media—a form within which they have always worked, such as sculpture, photography, performance, film, painting, intervention—or by a consistent methodology, a way of working that is historically aligned within their past projects. Finding something in the outside world that corresponds to a location in their interior world allows artists to function as transmitters of cultural integration. Examples from *The Quiet in the Land* include Allan Sekula, with his own familial history of blacksmithing; Janine Antoni, with embroidery as

a form of expression to be found across her family's transmigrations; and Nithakhong Somsanith, with his inspired creations and adaptations of traditional gold-and-silver-thread embroidery motifs. Actions like these and those of other artists who move between multiple societies, such as Dinh Q. Lê, Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, Shirin Neshat, and Shahzia Sikander, create new zones within which forms of historic practice are liberated for a time, so they can reimagine themselves and evolve.

Personal acts from one's own points of orientation can catalyze collective resonance. Rirkrit Tiravanija's gesture of commissioning a Thai master carver and his workshop to carve a thousand Buddhas from a prototype whose style references the historical relationship between Laos and Thailand is a good example of artistic generosity. The act gains further meaning because of his desire to have others reposition these simulacra in temples and other religious sites throughout the district from which statues have disappeared.

Such work, once contextualized, can be read, or understood, in Luang Prabang but also in various cultural centers around the world, because it connects disparate places and historical moments while acknowledging and moving beyond pastiche, appropriation, irony, and the analytic—the conventional methodologies of postmodernism. The gestures of the artists in *The Quiet in the Land* are neither cynical nor provocative. Rather, they are hopeful and demonstrate what one person can accomplish, given an opportunity to enter a particular situation and to respond with serious intent. In this way such actions can begin to heal some of what have been called the ruptures of postmodernity—the dislocation of place, the sense of an absence of belonging, the conflation and reconfiguration of symbolic orders that twine around and inside each other until their distinctness is eclipsed by appropriation and transformation. In this sense, these artists can add to the hybridization that is necessary for cultures to evolve, without adversely affecting their uniqueness.

These acts might also show that some artists have the capacity to bridge the dislocation that is often related to a type of historical amnesia—i.e., not being able to find the past in the present or to see the future prefigured in the past. Artists can bring back memory through visibility.

Even disrupted narratives, as represented by montage, collage,

and juxtaposition, can help to integrate conscious and unconscious thoughts linking cultural space through the production of new imagery. If Antoni brings her family story to those of Xia Song or Mo Ly, they can each also do the same. Hmong women may be superior craftswomen of embroidery, but they are interested, nonetheless, in another artist's desire to engage their practice in a serious way.

Sekula created a film that locates the present continuously in relationship to the past—the “dirty war” in Laos as well as the war in Vietnam. His film, part analysis and part memoir, presents this particular terrain to us, which is literally loaded with the detritus of war. War also becomes the constant in the ever-changing landscape of trauma that links Abramović's own past to that of Laos and her own childhood to the children, dressed in camouflage, whom she directs. For his part, Vong Phaophanit integrates his own dislocation of time, place, and memory through the medium of film, marking his experience of return and touching us all with what it means to lose and then to regain one's original home.

This ability to move fluidly into situations where there are large gaps between what has occurred and what is allowed to be remembered is something that many artists do well. They will work in any form if it can actualize their vision, and they usually are not obsessed with the distinctions between art and popular production, or with notions of high and low, as art historians and cultural critics can be. These artists are most concerned with manifesting ideas effectively. And because these artists often live in the world of metaphor and the symbolic, they are also interested in the resonance of the icons of the society. These objects have accrued psychic value, and the artists are intrigued by their spiritual or religious significance, whether they themselves are observant of these icons or not. They understand the discipline of reproducing stand-ins for the absented, sacred, or the disappeared referent that may have morphed into something cross-cultural as mass media has intersected with, interrupted, or embellished tradition, and as time has transformed consciousness.

Perhaps most significant, many artists can live and work in the simultaneities of time, culture, and diversities of scale because they can grasp in what ways traditional societies may be less technologically equipped to deal with twenty-first-century complex-

ity, but perhaps spiritually and aesthetically more prepared to do so. These artists live easily in the “in-between,” the spaces where cultural imagery converges and overlaps, and where it takes on new meaning as history evolves.

In a reciprocal way, because artists also often make things, those who live in societies that exist within exchange-based modes of production can appreciate the work that artists from other societies do. They see the individual in the work and are attracted by the unusual and visually interesting. Even when it might appear as Other, the work is nonetheless intimate and does much more than reflect the anonymity of mass production, accomplished only for consumption. There is still a recognizable, identifiable imaginative source for and meaning to the project, whether it is fully understandable to the community within which it is staged or not. In one example from *The Quiet in the Land*, although there was surely discussion about the project, it is not clear exactly what the villagers thought of Abramović’s use of children to reenact scenes of war. But we know that war is something that Lao people understand very well, whether they wish to discuss this knowledge with Westerners or not. And perhaps they also understood that the war Abramović was reenacting may well have been her own, not theirs.

Artists’ gestures have the potential to cut across barriers, real or imagined, allowing practitioners and viewers to connect with the mind and the heart of other cultures. Most who travel are also touched by the places and the people they encounter and would be delighted to write, paint, or create a formal response of their experience, but few have the tools, the “objective correlative,” the metaphor, image, or vehicle to translate their internal experience into an external form accessible to others.

Some will always see as intruders those who come into a society from the outside to imagine a new space to be experienced by those inside. But it must be remembered that the global society marks a time when all of us moving through space, whether as travelers, pilgrims, émigrés, migrants, visitors, or workers producing culture for a time, are inevitably interlopers. *The Quiet in the Land* helps us to accept this. But it simultaneously allows us to see the potential value that artists can bring to societies in transition when those involved are sophisticated in their negotiations of the “contact zone,” and when they approach their work by consider-

ing both what exists and what still wants to come into being.

Neither there nor here, past nor present, individual nor collective, these new hybrid spaces allow for a desired intimacy to emerge, yet are also dramatic enough to acknowledge the complexity of the societal moment, historical conflicts, and ambivalences they represent. When artwork moves confidently outside the parameters of individual societies and still manages to avoid cultural insensitivity, it allows us to experience the immediacy of the local while positioning us within the imaginary expanse of the global. Successful projects like these take time, patience, wisdom, bravado, and vision. Such is the practice of *The Quiet in the Land*.

1 Chris Rojek and John Urry, eds., *Touring Cultures: Transformations of Travel and Theory* (London: Routledge, 1997), 10. The editors cite James Clifford, *Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

2 John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 33.

3 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 2008), [].

4 Rojek and Urry, eds., *Touring Cultures*, 68.

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