

2/A FILM HAS AN END
WHILE REALITY CONTINUES

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“In the beginning, we were very happy that they built a road. After only a short while, the Forest Department sent people to mark the large trees along the road. They probably logged many hundreds of thousands of those large trees. One tree could be used to build a house, but all the big trees are gone now.

“After that came electricity... and also television. Everybody thinks that TV is a good thing, and they concentrate only on Chinese movies. People don’t discuss their own culture and way-of-life any more. They don’t go to the dancing grounds in the villages any more.

“Records should be made of our way-of-life before all those who still remember, die. But one man cannot do it all by himself.”

*Abaw Buseu, from
the film Virtual Borders
(Manu Luksch, 1999)*



 From the series Signature
 or right thumbprint
 Photographic silkscreen
 print, 102 x 112 cm
 (Manu Luksch, 1993)

Manu Luksch

2000

First published in the
net.congestion reader
(Amsterdam: De Balie, 2000).
All images by Manu Luksch

[1] *UN Human Development
Report 1999*
[http://hdr.undp.org/
reports/global/1999/en](http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/1999/en)

[2] www.comunica.org lists
several radio-Internet
projects in developing
countries.

[3] As originally envisaged
the film of *Virtual Borders*
would, after a traditional
linear introduction, turn into
a random access, database-
driven movie that could be
navigated according to the
viewers' interests.

[4] www.hani-akha.net



*Distribution of Hani-Akha (in
orange) across the Mekong
Quadrangle*

VIRTUAL BORDERS OR DIGITAL DIVIDE?

Two per cent of the world's population have Internet access, half of them live in the US. 0.5% of the population in Southeast Asia have Internet access^[1]. In industrialized countries, the term 'convergence' is mostly associated with a promised fusion of TV and Internet: TV over broadband, or Internet via TV set-top boxes, with a single cable or satellite connection carrying the signal. Massive advertisement has confused consumers with alternative hardware solutions before they can even begin to anticipate the content that might become available.

The excitement about convergence stems partly from it being an imagined common future. However, the allegedly global Internet simply *isn't*, yet. In developing countries, the most common medium is radio, especially in rural communities poor in infrastructure. Here, too, convergence is coming – but a more radical and rooted convergence, bringing together radio and the Internet as a tool of empowerment^[2].

Virtual Borders is a hybrid media project^[3] for, with, and about the Hani-Akha, a mountain people of the Mekong Quadrangle. It intertwines local AM radio, online transmission of audio files, a documentary film and a website^[4] to reach and involve a diverse and dispersed audience. The underlying story is that of the journey of a village headman, Abaw Buseu, from Thailand to a cultural gathering of the Akha people in China. He is accompanied by an Akha radio presenter and the film team. Using the Internet, they transmit discussions from the gathering back to a radio station in Thailand for broadcast to remote mountain villages.

Three million Akha and Hani people live across the borderlands of five nations: China, Lao PDR, Vietnam, Thailand, and Burma (Myanmar). They identify as one people (Hani-Akha) through a common 'tribal' history, rather than the modern world history that created the nation states they live in. Theirs is an oral culture; traditional knowledge is passed on through the generations by recitation from memory. More recently, this transmission has been supported by programmes broadcast by the Mountain Peoples' Radio Station in Chiang Mai. Battery-powered transistor receivers provide the only access to media channels for many of the Akha villages.

Leftovers of the High-Tech Age

[T]he first electronic war in history was devised at Harvard and MIT. [...] In 1967, the Nakhon Phanom electronic surveillance centre in Thailand was picking up, interpreting and displaying on screen data sent from ground-interceptors and relayed by Lockheed Bat-Cat aeroplanes. In these offices, the new nodal point of the war, an IBM 360.35 computer automatically sorted the data, producing a 'snapshot' which showed the time and place when the interceptors had been activated. On the basis of this information, analysts drew up a schedule of enemy movement and passed on to fighter-bomber crews the 'Skyspot' combat data that enabled them to go into action with the greatest dispatch and precision.^[5]

Shooting a film in mountain jungle villages where infrastructure such as electricity, water systems and roads is mostly missing, one is tempted to celebrate, romantically, 'tribal' life in harmony with nature. However, not all is what it seems. During the 1960s, at the height of Cold War, the foothills of the Himalayas in the Mekong Quadrangle^[6] served as an operational area for state-of-the-art data-collection and -transfer technologies, in failed efforts to track down and exterminate the 'Communist guerrilla'. One relic of CIA activities is the radio station in Chiang Mai, in northern Thailand. The *Virtual Borders* team met with the director of what is now the Mountain Peoples' Radio Station, Vichien Kiratikanchai, and presenters of Akha language radio programs, Asseu Somsri Dzuebaw Jupoh and Apho Ratanawichaikul:

People who work here told me about the history of this radio station. They say that in the beginning, many years ago, a lot tribal people lived in the mountains who didn't know who they were: Thai or Burmese or Laotian or whatever. The Thai government thought it is better to get some news or information from the government to the tribal people in order to establish contact with them. That's why they started the mountain people [radio] programme.^[7]

... Or, as another friend put it, the state found radio a useful means to establish itself as protector of the mountain villages, and to warn the villagers not to host rebels. Today, ten ethnic minority groups including the Akha transmit daily programmes in their native languages. These reach deep into northern Laos and the Shan State in Burma, where radio is the predominant medium of mass communication.



Akha village swing

[5] Paul Virilio *War and Cinema. The Logistics of Perception*, pp 82–83 (London: Verso, 1984)

[6] Also known as the 'Golden Triangle', though this does not always include the Chinese province of Yunnan.

[7] Video interview with Apho Ratanawichaikul, December 1999



Akha family from Lao PDR

The Akha People Network



The Virtual Borders Team



Abaw Buseu



*Asseu Jupoh interviews
Cha Nyawrbyevq Ke, Vice
Governor of Xishuangbanna
Dai Prefecture*

I had been in contact with Akha individuals and NGOs since 1993, collaborating with them on video workshops and websites. The idea for *Virtual Borders* and its choice of media evolved out of this dialogue, and was catalysed by an invitation to attend the Third International Conference of Hani-Akha Culture in 2000. The Conference was hosted by the People's Government of the Xishuangbanna Dai Prefecture in Yunnan, China. The official focus lay in 'cultural and social issues', and representatives of the Akha leadership used the occasion to compare conditions within different national contexts.

Policies of the five nation states that the Akha inhabit impact differently on them in terms of citizenship, formal education, infrastructure, land rights, etc. The different predominant lowland cultures also vary in their effects. For thousands of years, the network of Akha villages has survived knowing no geographical centre or territorial borders, invulnerable as long as the oral transmission of shared experience, wisdom and history was unchallenged. However, in the face of new methods of communication, such as electronic media and various national scripts, this network has become fragile. How can such innovations be turned to the advantage of the Akha?

Exploring Media Hybridity

Documentary filmmakers typically attempt to minimise their own presence. *Virtual Borders* is driven by a different vision: not only to relate a story, but also to use the dynamics of various media to create a situation that will continue to empower those featured in the film. In this case, the project introduces the Internet as an effective, portable, and affordable solution for making temporary audio links between people separated by political borders and geographical distance. For an oral culture, the multimedia capabilities are especially important.

The structure of the project recognises an emerging 'media loop': film, radio, and the Internet. Presenter Asseu Jupoh transmitted conference discussions by Internet from China to the radio station in Chiang Mai, which broadcast them to Akha villagers. In the radio station, Apho Ratanawichaikul fielded questions from callers and communicated with the conference participants using video-mail facilities. All of these links are documented in the film.

A Film Always Has an End...

A film always has an end while reality continues. As part of the wider *Virtual Borders* project, the team taught some Akha people who were already familiar with computing the basics of HTML and web publishing. This led to the creation of the first Akha-made website. The site is in both Akha and English and serves both as an internal communications tool for the community, and as a means of self-representation to others. The end of the film of *Virtual Borders* leads to the community website, which serves as an 'online interface' to the people who appear in the film: the audience is given a tool to influence how the 'story' continues.

The *Virtual Borders* DVD (with subtitles in English, Thai, French, Italian, Slovak, and Japanese, and voice-overs in Akha and Hindi) is available at www.ambientTV.NET

Further information on *Virtual Borders*:
www.ambientTV.NET/akha

Converging Technology for Converging People

The convergence of Internet-radio-film content in *Virtual Borders* is at root a convergence of the people involved in the different media. People create borders and divisions, and it is people who bridge them (sometimes with the help of technology).



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A NEED FOR BORDER TV

*We call it witness video. They call it advocacy video.
We call it audience response. They call it evaluation.*

*We call it workshop. They call it training.
We speak of disciples. They speak of trainees.
We call our mission 'opening up one's perspective'.
They call theirs 'capacity building'.*

The Camcorder Revolution has finally arrived for the people of Burma. Almost overnight, members of exile organisations have been inspired to take up video cameras and begin to film. Women's organisations are at the forefront – the Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN), Karen Women's Organisation (KWO) and others have made a series of 'witness videos' that document the atrocities carried out by the Burmese army on ethnic women. These videos (including, notably, *License to Rape* by SWAN and Shan Human Rights Group) have substantiated the organisations' reports. Thai-based Burmese exile organisations are well aware of the power of such tapes and have successfully used witness videos to advocate their cause before international organisations, spurring them to action. KWO and the Free Burma Rangers have documented the recent attack on Karen villages and the massacre of Karen people. Meanwhile, Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), an exile radio station, has launched a video section and even commenced satellite broadcasting from Norway – a breakthrough in these early days of Burmese video journalism. News agencies such as Delhi-based Mizzima have also started a video section and made their reports available as streaming media. There is an underlying feeling of competition in this sector of new journalism – who will pull ahead of the others?

The Thai-Burma border is an institution – an institution of internally- and externally-displaced people. Since 1980, between 9 and 12 refugee camps have accommodated Karen, Karenni and Mon refugees. Some of these refugees have lived in the camps as long as 20 years, and children born inside grow up without ever seeing the outside world. Most other ethnic groups are not allowed to even enter the camps. Camps are listed in guidebooks as part of *der Alltag* (everyday scenario) of the border area. However, if you want to get out of your

Keiko Sei
2006

Alltag, 'you can volunteer with one of those refugee camps', as *The Lonely Planet Guide* advises long-stay backpackers. Outside the camps exist a variety of ethnic groups, some working and living illegally, some surviving from photo sessions with tourists in tourist villages, some working as democracy activists in one of the hundreds of activist organisations. These ways of life are long-established. Because of a lack of state provision, people have invented their own means to get by – they have their own government, a network of medical care, religious services, a bank-like money service, a job agency, media and communication services, and orphanages and schools. They have established methods to deal with the local police and the Royal Thai Army (part of Thailand's hidden industry). Some of these organisations send their personnel back and forth between offices in town and deep in jungle, sometimes to fight with guns, sometimes to report, and sometimes to bring humanitarian aid into the most heavily land-mined area on Earth. Transportation systems have had to be established for such operations, since there is little infrastructure otherwise.

Overall, life on the border is, if not virtual, then at least very precarious. The plight of the refugees and the peculiar conditions of life in the region have captured the imagination of the international community, and a steady stream of aid has kept coming in. Over the years, numerous NGOs have established their offices and missions, with their own methods of dealing with the Thai authorities, in the border area. As a result, the town of Mae Sot, the centre of the border region, is a curious mixture of refugees from Burma, members of exile organisations with diverse objectives and ethnic backgrounds, foreign NGO personnel, missionaries, and military intelligence agents from both Thailand and Burma living side by side with local Thai residents. It is a self-enclosed world, to enter and leave which people must pass through several police and army roadblocks. One humanitarian aid officer from Europe described the region as 'a place where we can find a robust civil society' – a civil society that has taken on an abstract and elastic shape, that floats around in a politics of whim.

Until recently, radio and printed media – BBC, VOA, Radio Free Asia (RFA), DVB, *New Era Journal*, *Mojo*, *Burma Post*, etc. – have served the community for information exchange. Most exiles rely on these traditional media for their information, and statistics show that 30% of Burmese living inside Burma secretly listen to the illegal exile radio stations. People in some areas can tune to shorter-range community radio that

provides listeners with a more personal service: some Karen people operate a radio channel for people in the camps, and an NGO called MAP (Migrant Assistance Program) offers a radio studio for ethnic language programs to be aired on Thai radio. The Mountain Peoples' Radio Station in Chiang Mai (featured in ambientTV.NET's *Virtual Borders* project) serves several minority language groups. The Internet is catching on too, but is used more to gather information and not yet as a means to muster an action program. Blogs and chat rooms are springing up, even inside Burma. These, however, are more seen as an activity of the wealthy of Yangon who want to gossip about love and movie stars – Internet cafés are still prohibitively expensive for ordinary people, and are monitored. We must yet wait to see net users develop a creative, or even political agenda.

In this media climate, video arrived last. The reasons for this late arrival, in my opinion, are twofold – the 'hidden camera effect' and 'pirated VCD psychology'.

– the 'hidden camera effect': people from Burma believed for a long time that video was solely an activity of foreign professionals from the BBC, Images Asia or Asia Works who smuggled cameras in and out of the country. This belief created a strange audience psyche – the more unstable the image, the more authentic the video, because the 'foreign professionals' had to film with hidden cameras!

– 'pirated VCD psychology': pirated commercial VCDs are readily available on the street in bigger towns; even during crackdowns on piracy by the authorities, people know how to get them. The audience assumes that VCDs that are copied and distributed non-commercially (and are not subject to anti-piracy measures) cannot have been made by professionals, and so cannot be worth watching^[1].

Now these rationalisations have been swept away by a counter-current. Video-making by ordinary people has grown explosively. People have discovered what media artist Barbara Lattanzi calls 'self-aware[ness] of the performative nature of their discourse'^[2]. Video cameras are becoming extensions of the body, and these cameras have started to penetrate into remote corners and unexpected places. A video presence is slowly but surely becoming part of *der Alltag*. In November 2006, one video made the headlines in many exile media. *The Wedding of the Year*, which documented of the lavish wedding of Burmese ruler Than Shwe's daughter, found its way onto YouTube, causing a huge uproar among the majority of the

[1] This is unlike the situation in communist-era Eastern Europe where anything that was made 'underground' or pirated and distributed freely was considered to be valuable because there was no independent or commercial information available. For example, *Original Video Journal* was a Czechoslovakian samizdat video magazine that was produced under the communist regime to provide citizens with the kind of news they wanted. To copy anything was illegal at that time, hence the word 'original' in the title to make the copies theoretically legal.

[2] On the occasion of the *Video Witnesses Festival of New Journalism*, Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, Buffalo NY, which she co-curated in 1991.

MEDIA LINKS:

BBC

www.bbc.co.uk/burmese

Democratic Voice of Burma

www.dvb.no

Irrawaddy

www.irrawaddy.org

(this site hosts the wedding video)

New Era Journal

www.khitpyaing.org

Mizzima

www.mizzima.com

Radio Free Asia

www.rfa.org/burmese

Voice of America

www.voanews.com/burmese

Ethnic-based media organisations can be found at the Burma News International site:
www.bnionline.net

Womens organisations can be found through the Womens League of Burma:
www.womenofburma.org/members.html

A moving documentary film about borders, *The Cross Border*, can be viewed at Shwe Media:
www.shwemedia.org

Burmese population whose most basic needs are not met. For the family of the bride, having the wedding filmed was probably the most natural thing to do. The video is said to have been leaked from within the military (likely from a deposed military intelligence officer). The opposition quickly seized the chance to criticize the junta as being self-serving. Thus the increasing everydayness of the camcorder is easing media out from the control of one of the world's most oppressive regimes.

What we expect to develop next is a need for screening and distribution of media activists' works. Independent media would be fully potent if all the players across the involved sectors collaborated in their efforts. Witnessing, documenting, editing, showing, distributing, collecting feedback, archiving, gatekeeping – the set of tasks is burdensome if done alone, but would be greatly facilitated by an efficient, coordinated system. But collaboration also gives rise to clashes of approaches, objectives, styles, tones and philosophies among NGO officers, artists, activists, media activists, religious missionaries, filmmakers and professional journalists – hence the song at the beginning of this piece. In many ways the Thai-Burma border is an experimental lab where people who have completely different modes of culture must invent a way to act together – creating a Border TV, perhaps. One key factor will be how the many ethnic groups and languages are dealt with. In addition to Burman, Karen, Karenni, Mon, Shan and the Sea Gypsies on the Thai border, there are also the Kachin along the Chinese border, Chin along the Indian border, Rakhine along the Bangladeshi border, and so on. Independent media initiatives in Burma could learn from the fate of Yutel – the first pan-Yugoslav TV station that failed spectacularly because of the complex of ethnic groups and languages involved. How will people in the Burmese borderlands deploy media to turn the multiplicity of languages and ethnicities to their advantage? An example of how multiple media technologies can be effective in borderlands is ambientTV.NET's *Virtual Borders*. The project used video, radio and the Internet to extend the reach of a cultural conference of the Hani-Akha people, once united but now separated by borders (and increasingly, language).

Borders are here to stay. A very carefully considered tactical media is needed.

VIRTUAL BORDERS: COMPLETING THE MEDIA LOOP

Manu Luksch

2004

After completion of the film, I had the opportunity to take it back to northern Thailand. I attended some of the screenings and was more than curious to find out the opinions and reactions of the Akha people...

I am often asked how Akha people like the film, so I'll summarise my experiences from the first screenings I was part of.

January 2004. I'm in a pickup truck making its way up the dusty road to Saen Charoen, an Akha village in the northern Thailand. This village was the first to welcome me into the Akha way of life during their Swing Festival ten years ago, when I spent an exchange year at Chiang Mai University's Faculty of Fine Arts. This is also the village where I made friends with the Jupoh family, whose elder Abaw Buseu is the protagonist of the film.

Abaw's son Aju (author of many of the Akha songs in the film) is driving the pickup, which also carries Noriko Higashide, charismatic Japanese director of an Akha NGO and fluent Akha speaker; Anja Kirschner, my friend from London who was the driving force during the difficult rough cut of the film; and Aju's kids, who grew up in the city and are having fun imitating their grandfather's distinctive eating noises. On the way, Aju suggests a detour to pick up supplies for the required celebration. We stop by a dog dealer, and eventually arrive in the village with a 15 kg dog in a bag and plenty of red dust in our lungs.

After the feast^[1] (that Anja preferred to miss out on) and never-ending rounds of fresh home-brewed rice whisky, we start setting up for the film screening. Our cable spaghetti illuminated by a candle and the full moon, we wire up a VCD player and speakers to two daisy-chained TV sets on the stage in the village square. The previous day, Abaw had announced the event through the village megaphone, so many villagers had already gathered, bringing chairs, making a bonfire, and offering around cans of beer.

I'm very excited but also quite nervous about this evening. It took many years to complete the film, and the villagers are the first audience to judge it. Abaw and Aju introduce the project,

[1] See *AV DINNERS 2: In the Year of the Fire Dog*, p. 170 in this volume.

[2] Reciter/teacher

[3] South East Asian
Mountain Peoples' Culture
and Development

and we start the screening. I wait for reactions. Rather unexpectedly, the whole village bursts into laughter during the opening dinner sequence, in which Abaw Buseu indelibly marks his presence by a prolonged bout of throat-clearing.

Children and the older audience members alike stay glued to the TV sets and visibly entertained for the entire 90 minutes, while the teenage boys take the occasion to get drunk near the bonfire. The response is generally greatly encouraging, but there is an unforgettable moment when a collective sigh of disappointment goes up as the reply of a pirma^[2] from China to Abaw's recital of his genealogy fades out. Anxious about the length of the film, I cut the pirma's recitation short after only a few names (the chain of ancestors is over 50 names long) – a mistake that I would later correct in the final version.

While the villagers express much appreciation of my return visit to their village to show the film, and are interested in the VCDs, the discussion following the second screening for the Chiang Mai based Akha community raises a more diverse range of issues.

In Chiang Mai, the screening takes place in the new, velvet-seated cinema of the University Art Museum. The film screening was organised by the SWITCH media lab team, and promoted by Noriko of SEAMP/MPCD^[3]. She handed out flyers in Akha language at the night bazaar, explaining the event to every Akha person she encountered. Announcements were also made on the Akha radio programme.

However, this being many Akha people's first invitation to a cinema, and with many not quite catching the address properly on the radio, we learn that a lot of eager viewers couldn't locate the venue. For the second screening, Anja and Nok (from SWITCH) respond by drawing huge posters depicting an Akha woman with traditional headdress and a movie camera, to indicate the site to literate and non-literate visitors alike. Noriko chairs the event.

There are many questions to Asseu Somsri Dzuebaw Jupoh, the radio presenter who was involved in all three phases of *Virtual Borders*: Internet, radio, and film. Asseu joined us during our trip to China, where we attended the International Conference on Hani-Akha Culture. There, she conducted many interviews with Akha people from different countries. Asseu has worked as radio presenter for over 40 years; her voice is very prominent



amongst the Akha, and the film audience enjoyed seeing the face behind it, as well as watching her at work.

Some audience members commented on the many levels of collaboration between Akha and non-Akha seen in the film – the Internet-radio link, the hybrid soundtrack, the film project as a whole – and suggested such approaches as a way to develop future perspectives. An Akha woman said that the film reminded her of just how many issues affect the situation of the Akha, regarding it as a helpful summary from where to pick up discussions and develop active approaches. One Akha man remarked that films showing traditional life in more detail should be made as educational materials for Akha and non-Akha. A young visitor asked if there would be more occasions to see the film, because he wanted to bring his friends.

Delighted by the overwhelming response, I was particularly happy about the way that *Virtual Borders* brought together people from two of my zones of focus over the past decade – community networks and media cultures. I hope the project serves as one timber in the bridge that is slowly being built between these cultures.



Flyer for Party with Purpose (London 2008), an initiative by Emma Phillips in support of Akha community projects in Northern Thailand

Manu Luksch

2005

Call for works. *FLY STORIES* was commissioned for *Fly With Me To Another World*.

www.flywithmeproject.org

FLY STORIES program:

Brilliant City (Axel Stockburger, Mike Faulkner, Matthias Kispert, UK 2004); *Burning Man as seen by a mammoth* (Piltown Camp, US 2004); *Cease! Fire!* (Kaw Lah Film collective, TH 2004); *Fast Film* (Virgil Widrich, AT/LU 2003); *Foliage Chorus* (Manu Luksch/Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company, UK 2004); *In the Beginning was the Eye* (Bady Minck, AT/LU 2003); *Just A Second* (Santiphap Inkong-ngam, TH 2005); karaoke videos including *Ase Waw* (Akha pop, TH), *Chengbo* (Akha pop, CN), *Mong bor dai ya* (Hmong pop, TH); *Mecanomagie* (Bady Minck, LU 1996); *Namaste Project* (Eric Filion, CA); Project documentation by Paris-based architects exyzt; *Stealth* (George Piper Dances, UK 2004); *The Josef Trilogy* (Thomas Worschitz, AT 2004); *Une Double Mort* (Alain Bourrillon, FR 2000); *Virtual Borders* (Manu Luksch, UK/AT 2003); *Yong in Transition* (Santiphap Inkong-ngam, TH 2004)

FLY STORIES

Migration, Movement, Mobility: Road Cinema and Film Workshops in Northern Thailand

ROAD CINEMA

'Road cinema', the screening of films from trucks in village places, was once commonplace in Thailand. As multiplexes opened in shopping malls on the outskirts of towns, the process was turned around: the cinema had previously driven to its audience, now the audience had to drive to the cinema. Not only are multiplexes disproportionately expensive for, and geographically out of reach of, those living in remote and/or deprived rural areas, but also their programming is limited to mainstream productions from major studios.

MIGRATION, MOVEMENT, MOBILITY...

Northern Thailand has hosted a rich variety of regional, semi-nomadic cultures in its long history as a dynamic crossroads of trade and migration. Current political discourse around culture and identity follows global trends by focussing on the question of immigration. The key event in migration and immigration is the movement of bodies across borders, but this is not the only type of movement that has political significance. With Thailand's 'shift to an information society', mobility of one sort (the mobility of data) is becoming highly valued, but the physical mobility of semi-nomadic peoples and refugees from regional conflict constitutes a political 'problem'.

FLY STORIES returns film as a means of storytelling and social happening into the public sphere, by touring an eclectic selection of international films that inform, raise questions and elicit responses to facts and fantasies of movement and migration. Film dialogues are interpreted live into Thai. The project also offers workshops in digital filmmaking.

FLY STORIES is part of *Fly With Me To Another World* (February–July 2005), a Lamphun-based project to build bridges between generations and art genres, and between professionals and the local community.

MANU'S FLY STORIES BLOG

Manu Luksch

2005

Twelve is considered a lucky number in Thailand. In spite of being bitten by 12 mosquitoes as I write this line, I believe so too. It is 12 months since the idea for FLY STORIES was born in Chiang Mai. I had returned from screening Virtual Borders in a mountain village and met Thai artist Navin Rawanchaikul (with whom I became friends 12 years ago) over a bowl of spicy chicken soup (12 baht). Navin was about to begin work on the art+community project, Fly With Me To Another World...

Chiang Mai, February 2005

I arrive at Deuleu's paradisaal teak house compound, which hosts her family, the Golden Triangle Akha handicraft workshop and store, and MPCD, the first NGO to support mountain people in Thailand. 12 years ago, as a student at Chiang Mai University, I spent lots of time here, researching and making friends for life...



The following day

I join Navin on his way to Lamphun, where a scooter gang is visiting his exhibition at Hariphunchai National Museum. Through media coverage of Navin's project, the gang have discovered their hero in Inson Wongsam, who made an art-road trip from Bangkok to Florence on a Lambretta in the 1960s. It's fun to watch them relating to all the historic info about Inson's trip, but totally ignoring all the artistic intentions of Navin's show.



The evening before departure...

...of the *FLY STORIES* mobile cinema. Checking equipment and getting hold of the Lambretta, which Inson has turned into a symbol: low-technology driven by sheer willpower.



15 February

Ong, Bo and I leave Chiang Mai at 6 am...get lost in the mountains in the Mae Salong area...and arrive in Saen Jai Mai village 12 hours later, just in time to set up the cinema. The village hosts an Akha pirma (reciter) meeting, attended by around 50 elderly pirma from Northern Thailand.

The programme begins with a film from an Akha village in Lao PDR, which shows amongst other things a woman putting on her headdress the 'old way'. The watching kids giggle their heads off, and when she spits on her comb before parting her hair, they insist on a rewind ;-).





Later on, we show *Virtual Borders* in the presence of its protagonist, with live commentary by Deuleu. This is followed by *Une Double Mort*, which was filmed in the neighbouring village several years ago. The local shopkeeper had played the role of 'traditional young man' in this film, but had never seen it before. The evening ends with Akha karaoke video clips and plenty of rice whisky.



18 February

Amidst Buddhist celebrations and a fair, *FLY STORIES* is officially launched at Suan-dok Temple, Chiang Mai. After a well-attended screening of *Yong In Transition*, Navin and I introduce the project to a mixed audience of international symposium attendees and Thai fair visitors. The DVD and projector are put on top of the Lambretta, next to an old-style cinema truck that provides the sound – and, most importantly, hosts the live narrator, who reveals himself as an entertainment genius during the screening of *The Josef Trilogy*. This rather

dark, claustrophobic Austrian film about five woodcutters who desperately want to emigrate from the Alps to Canada seemed somewhat risky programming amongst all the other attractions (food stalls, live pop bands...). However, only minutes after the interpreter has started to live-dub the film, the Thai-speaking audience burst into laughter: not only does he create sounds and voices in the most funny way, he also improvises side-stories and jokes. Inevitably, the non-Thai speakers ended up laughing with the laughter of the others ;-).

19 February

The screening is hosted by Noi and Manuel Lutgenhorst at esc (EmptySpaceChiangmai), 30 minutes outside the city and near artist project *The Land*. At esc, we're welcomed by a group of local musicians – none over 10 years old – playing traditional Lanna instruments. Noi presents the results of a video workshop, which involved teenage students from Bangkok interviewing villagers in the neighbourhood of esc about environmental issues.

The music and video attract many locals, who stay on for *Stealth*, a skilfully made three-minute dance video which provokes a storm of applause. This then leads interestingly into the hair-raising documentary *Cease!Fire!*, which was filmed at the Burmese border. The filmmakers have come all the way from the border for questions after the screening – an offer taken up by the audience for the next few hours. It's probably the most energizing Q&A session I've ever experienced. Note: *Cease!Fire!* is only available directly from the makers (kawlahfilms@hotmail.com).



The last night...

...of screenings throws us again into a totally different world, one of partying and dancing and excited goodbye chatter and a shadow theatre performance by Wandering Moon. This all takes place on a lawn behind the Chiang Mai Art Museum. We project *Just A Second, In The Beginning Was The Eye*, exyzt's compilation of architectural intervention videos, and, when the DJs turn the site into a dance floor, *Namaste Project*.



Finally,

I spend a few days in Bangkok with Navin and the city's most feared cultural critic Alfred Pawlin, who lives behind a door made by none other than the artist Inson – who was the starting point of this whole trip :-).


