

Sopawan Boonimitra
Feel It Like Home



Matts Leiderstam
Grand Tour,
Göteborgs Konsthall,
26 nov 2005 – 15 jan 2006
Photography: Andréas Hagström



Miya Yoshida
The Invisible Landscapes



One Step Forward

A review of three dissertations in art

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Sopawan Boonnimitra, *Lak-Ka-Pid-Lak-Ka-Perd*

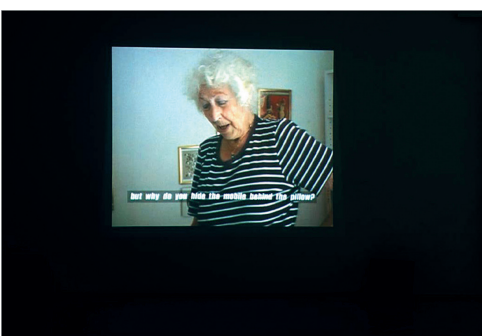
Matts Leiderstam, *See and Seen*

Miya Yoshida, *The Invisible Landscapes*

Doctoral Studies in Art is a recent and still nascent phenomenon in Sweden. These first three PhD dissertations provide a rare opportunity to examine the possibilities and limits of the intellectual and aesthetic field established by Doctoral research in Art. On a thematic level; the notion of space seems to be a common point of reference. While Leiderstam indirectly relates his study of landscape to the notion of space, both Miya Yoshida and Sopawan Boonnimitra, place this notion at the heart of their investigations. A dialogue between projects is not surprising since all three researchers carried out their doctoral research in the same programme at Malmö Art Academy.

However, in this review I will emphasize the specific difference proper to each project. Not only for the obvious reason that each dissertation treats a different subject, but more importantly because each one of them could be viewed as a model for dissertation in artistic practice. A model is not only a simple template, it provides a didactic pattern which sets the boundaries for what is imaginable as dissertational rationale. It conveys embedded practical knowledge about how to proceed, and how results may connect to external events, meanings, and spaces.

In order to delineate the models involved in these dissertations, minimum premises need to be established. Firstly, the documentation and text of a dissertation not only transmits an experience, but also, and more importantly, articulates knowledge about the artistic and theoretical conditions of the experience. Secondly, (in order to dissipate common misunderstandings), the experience and knowledge referred to do not need to form an epistemic system that follows a pre-established definition of boundaries between academic disciplines. While the project does not need to be an epistemic entity incrustated in an institutional framework, a dissertation should outline epistemological problems encountered in the research process, articulating both its problematics and a set of objectives to be achieved. This said, our remarks intend to retrace these premises by examining how these studies function, which rationales and styles are detectable, with which problematic they intend to interact, and finally, which other discourses are mobilized in and through the rationale deployed in these dissertations.



Miya Yoshida
The Invisible Landscapes

1. A Good Vantage Point

Miya Yoshida, *The Invisible Landscapes*

Miya Yoshida's project examines a range of implications that follow from the introduction of mobile communication. The project consisted of curatorial activity that resulted in an exhibition and a number of seminars in Sweden and Thailand. This was followed by extensive documentation including an impressive long essay. The Bangkok part of the project was realised in connection to Boonnimitra's project. Miya Yoshida's research could be seen as a mediator between Matts Leiderstam's research and Sopawan Boonnimitra's work on Bangkok's gay culture. The subject matter offers some difficulties (as Miya Yoshida points out in the conclusion of her essay), since the mobile phone has become a standard subject of media studies and sociology, rather than that of art studies. It is this intricate disciplinary situation that motivates, what I would call, a quest for a vantage point in this long essay, from which to clearly see an entry to the exhibition space.

Miya Yoshida sees mobile communication as part of a new complex landscape. According to the author, this new complexity, not only redefines the border between the public and private, but also reshapes self-perception in relation to an external social reality. One of the foremost features of this complex landscape is its invisibility which is specified in the following terms:

... a spatial-economical, political, social and perceptual complex that I have come to call 'invisible landscapes', landscapes being created by newer communication and navigation technologies. (p. 29)

Yoshida has even included the technological and physical reality of mobile communication devices in her survey. Such an expansion of the field is motivated by following argument:

... the portable phone already incorporates a host of functionalities far beyond placing and receiving calls. It is becoming a model platform for the interconnection, fusion, and integration of all

portable media –and promises to achieve the same with its users.
(p. 22)

The significance of the hardware remains however somewhat unclear throughout the dissertation. Some of the unclarity may be due to her methodological approach. Reflecting on her experience from the curatorial work on this vast landscape, Yoshida draws some methodological conclusions. She calls her methodological approach ‘juxtaposition’ (p.100). Juxtaposition is according to Miya Yoshida an attempt to catch a hold of a rather non-disciplinary approach that goes beyond technical, media, or sociological studies. This seems to indicate an awareness of, and a will, to avoid the pitfalls of the worn-out clichés of inter-disciplinarity. The difficulty of the subject matter, and the limited and exhausted inter-disciplinarity, serves as the motives for the assemblage of a range of views, perspectives, and theoretical and practical approaches in a four hundred and sixty-three page long essay.

The result is an impressive panoply of data from diverse theoretical approaches, a declaration of purposes that goes well beyond the initial stated objectives of the research, and includes what the author calls “The commodification of the immaterial in the capitalist system” (p. 389). A discussion about the physical and environmental aspects involved in telecommunication (for example the substance used in microchips called Coltan) is also as important in this essay, as the ambition “to highlight mobile telephony by thinking about their ‘operative system’ and making these thoughts visible”. Between ‘making thoughts visible’ and allusions to the commodification of ‘the immaterial’, Miya Yoshida introduces general notions of space and self-centred subjectivity which is developed into what the author calls a ‘flat psychology’. This last notion, flat psychology, concludes the dissertation and is considered a point of departure for future investigations into the impact of emerging modes of communication. In fact, the last page of the dissertation briefly mentions Greenberg’s thesis on late Modernist painting as being relevant for further studies in flat psychology. The association between Greenberg and flat psychology remains however highly problematic. Greenberg’s thesis concerns above all the formal composition of an aesthetic object, whereas Yoshida employs the term flatness as a means to identify a mode of subjectivity (i.e. the receiver of the work of art in the visual field). The term ‘flat psychology’, proposed by the Art Historian David Joselit, seems to provide a better theoretical framework for Yoshida’s purpose. Joselit conceptualises the contemporary state of subjectivity in terms of surface, flatness and superficiality. Yoshida discusses Joselit and his reference to Fredric Jameson, arguing that

“Since the mobile phone can be considered as much more than a tool, but as the symptom of subjectivities that are replaced by society, ‘psychological flatness’ may seem close to the model of mobile subjectivity that is the constant adjustment (or non-adjustment – since this model, like any power relation, should be seen as dialectical) of a context-sensitive self.”¹

In a concluding note, Miya Yoshida resumes her project with these words:

“I tried to describe and analyse mobile phone culture in terms of its role in “everyday reality”, that is, from a more integrative

1. It is another incomprehensible point: how could Greenberg’s analysis of an aesthetic form be unproblematically connected to a flatness that is meant to identify a mode of subjectivity (i.e. the receiver of the work of art in the visual field) in contemporary society.

philosophical point of view, rather than by following strategies of media studies or sociological discourses.“ (p. 426)

This “integrative point of view” sought for in the lines quoted above remains a problem throughout this study. The essay contains a number of different and sometimes incompatible theoretical frameworks from Jameson to Habermas via Agamben to Negri, but this listing of contemporary thinkers and ideas is scarcely guided by a clearly formulated problematic or a concise thesis about the boundaries of the problematic she intends to deal with. They remain packages of transmitted data to be poeticised. Landscape, visibility, self, subject, flatness, and capitalism are enrolled like small sailors, their ears plugged with wax. What remains constant and integrated is the sirens song of ideas from which we have a four hundred page slice of text.

The point is that this listing of sources, images, theories, the enumeration of ‘unimaginable’ imaginaries and technically transmitted codes, hardly constitutes a juxtassemlage, but could definitely be viewed as a coalescence of data, impressions and ambitions, as if the story of portable telephony, is told from a series of vantage points. Such a coalescence of information pieces is not unfamiliar to the contemporary reader. Encyclopaedic and personal at the same time, it is the constituent mode of textual production within cyberculture. The arborescent configuration of information in contemporary capitalism generates in itself the quest for a good vantage point, since the inter-textualised network of data fosters the fantasy that there should be a subjective vantage point from which everything is lucidly cognisable as a whole, even though this position always remains vacant.

This fantasy is even an explicit theme in popular culture. A recent Hollywood production, *A Vantage Point*², could perhaps elucidate this point further. The movie narrates an attempted assassination of an American president from numerous points of view. The event’s short lapse of time is looped again and over, each time from the perspective of one of those who either witness or participate in the terrorist attack. These micro-narratives cross and interlock into each other and conspiracies and terrorist plans are put out as pieces of a puzzle. In the final scene, the puzzle is laid out and the story reaches its end as one single American security officer foils the terrorists and save the life of the president.

The film’s narrative structure is an ingenious formalization of some of the principles of what I would call the Giddensian middle class ideology: reality is relative to each actor’s point of view and accumulated layers of information, and identities are constantly unstable and shifting. The same person could be the President’s security guard and in the next moment a disguised terrorist. Yet, the movie’s subtle and far more crucial point is that it, with glaring clarity, demonstrates how the conspiracy paranoia and the middle class relativist liberal ethics (each individual point of view is limited in relation to the real meaning of events, each of us has a personal vocabulary and no vocabulary is closer to reality, the world is utterly complicated and therefore let’s make peace at the mall and sell more weapons at the same time, etc.) are intimately intertwined. In fact, parallel and partial narrative threads in the same story are nothing new, the basic model is the taped interrogation of witnesses and victims, as if a police investigation is being carried out. The film’s main point resides in the fact that it places the spectator in a policing position. The source

2 Columbia Pictures, 2008.

of enjoyment is that the spectator is identified with the good vantage point, the film itself, that monitors the unfolding of an event. The delicate point is that such a monitoring position includes inevitably a self-monitoring activity, simply because this position is by definition assumed to be an all-seeing instance. In a wider context, such an auto-monitoring and self-policing activity constitutes new patterns of consumption in contemporary capitalism.

A great part of these consumption patterns are made up of communication, dialogue, statistical calculations. We are checked and check others and this checking both generates new consumption patterns at the same time as it consolidates the fantasy about a monitoring instance outside the circuit. From the score of a seller on Ebay to the kind of book purchased on Amazon, to the web pages that invite people to list up their friends, partake in an endless circuit between monitoring of everyday life and consumption. Mobile communications, not per se but as a part of capitalist social relations, plays its role in such a self-referring loop.

Back to Miya Yoshida and her *juxtaposition*, the essay, with its listings, its partial recapitulation of almost all available theoretical frameworks, follows a similar line. As if the logic of embedded knowledge in mobile telephony determines the shifts, the re-formulations of the problem the project deals with. The central but unstated preoccupation of the dissertational essay is its quest for that unattainable, but still operational, good vantage point. This quest casts its lasting shadow upon her ambitions to the extent that the reader, by the end of the essay, wonders what the author wants to accomplish intellectually. In a passage, reflecting upon her project, Yoshida seems to pay attention to the problem involved in her “*juxtaposition*”:

Thinking back to my experiences curating the documentary section on the Coltan monopoly and its political and social consequences, both for the exhibition and the symposium in Malmö, (as I wrote in chapter B.3.6.) I could not help noticing that my own intentions were so easily flipped over to become an act of consumption. (p. 422)

It is not clear how this reflection changes the course of the project, or whether it really modifies its ambitions. However, this quote draws the attention to the subjacent academic model that guides her presentation. In fact, in spite of the shifting point of view and the endless enumeration of references, certain terms turn out to be surprisingly stable. These stable operational terms in the argument are the following: 1) Identification of spaces of negotiation, a term that Miya Yoshida uses frequently in many key passages but really never tries to define and consequently its operational value for argumentation remains unclear. 2) the notions of dislocation/relocation of identities which is closely linked to an idea of multiplicity of subjective positions. Additionally, a streak of self-criticality frames the prose and nuances the terms. Terms such as negotiation and multiplicity of positions can be traced back to either a modified version of communicative act theory (Habermas), or to a critique of logocentrism (Derrida, or at least the Anglo-Saxon reception of Derrida). Such a rationale in the English-speaking world, specifically in the British critical studies, is what we may call Criticalism. The most disappointing outcome of such a rationale is that it ends up in an endless pursuit of its own shadow, an attempt to include its

own 'self' in this ever enlarging ring of critique. In practice, it tends to become an ethical self-justification that closes the space of reflection.

The element lacking in this project is the affirmative simplicity of a subjective standpoint. Is not a cell phone, after all, a gadget? Somehow, this cellular simplicity, this thing with the magic capacity of "connecting people", becomes the vehicle of a net of names, references, anti-methods and juxtassemlages. On a more philosophical note, the basic problem is that this mute, stupid gadget is buried under the mass of references and in a way negated in its pure thingness, while the cell phone, the connector, with its status as a nexus in an ever widening ring of information processing, is elevated to such a level that it becomes a metaphysical entity that returns to its proper status inside the capitalist logic; it becomes the expression of an abstract value, now introduced into the white cube.

Self, subject and multiplicity

As already noted, the essay starts from notions such as landscape and visibility, halfway into the text, they are left behind and the author turns her attention towards an investigation of spatial implications of what she believes to be emerging new selves or subjectivities, and ends up in the psychology of flatness. The discussion that leads to this point deserves some more attention. In fact, a cornerstone to what we called criticalism, is its peculiar understanding of the category of subject. The following citation from Yoshida, apart from her quest for the vantage point, relates the main feature in such an understanding:

Here, the cultures of copying and sharing through portable networked technologies seem to offer a good vantage point for considering different shapes and meanings that the boundaries between the self and non-self can take on. These used to be only possible in cyberspace; portable network communication can claim to have brought them "out" and to have fused them with lived social reality (p. 411).

From the self (and its negation in something called a non-self) the author continues immediately to the category of subject:

Such a condition promotes a mode of communication that does not control a single subjectivity, but the transformation of subjectivities through the acknowledgment and enactment of new desires and capabilities. It provides an opportunity to construct a new process of self-constitution (p. 412).

Our problem is not only the 'sellable' vision embedded in these lines, but the fact that this saccharine vision presupposes that "to construct a process of self-constitution" is a meaningful expression in any conceivable theoretical framework. Throughout the last chapter of the study, Miya Yoshida employs subject, self, I, and identity as interchangeable terms. The category of subject subsequently glides from a philosophical framework over to a psychological register and to other culturally determined categories. This is not merely a question of lacking precision. This is a common trait within the literature associated with post-colonial theories since beginning of the 90's. The crucial

problem of such an approach is that the category of subject which precedes socially and imaginary constructed self-identities is reduced to psychological terms such as persona and personal identity. And its application is narrowed down to a bourgeois conception of a self-referential individuality, an Ego that serves as an instrument to construct subjectivity. This unfortunate trivialisation of the category of subject is a theoretical backlash after the radical break with the bourgeois notion of individuality and the critique of the philosophy of consciousness accomplished by major radical thinkers such as Lacan or Deleuze. More specifically related to Art History, this is two steps back from the insights and the aesthetic values implied in works by artists such as Art & Language.

Model one

It is now possible to outline the characteristic of a first model for dissertations in art. We call it the critical model. In this model, the refinement of the question, the extrapolation of the terms and conditions preceding the question are less important than the exposition of short description of thinkers and texts that prove the doctoral student has searched through the relevant literature for her or his project. It is not a place for new arguments or establishing new connections, but one is expected to propose new names and brands that can bring some order and arrange empirical phenomena into classes. In this sense, the critical model strictly respects ideals of an old empiricist rationale and its analytical or positivist foundation. There is a strong inclination towards the use of continental thinkers and philosophers, but these thinkers are usually quoted without a deeper discussion about their differences. They are 'sources of inspiration', the step from Habermas to Francis Ponge is almost a continuous trajectory that happens to pass through Foucault's writings. The notion of subject often tends to be synonymous to self, and this self is constantly viewed as shifting, non-fixed and renewable in a rainbow of predominately ethnic, culturally defined identities. Finally, we find in this model an approach to art that prefers to remain 'aformal' and tends to conceive the content of the work of art as the site of representation of extra-artistic and predominately culture sociological categories. The outcome, historically identifiable in a series of texts and art works during late 80's and a great part of the 90's, has been in many respects thought provoking, but perhaps it has reached a limit. A limit understandable by the fact that this criticality, at least in the English speaking world, is an established part of academia. Miya Yoshida brings it over to other places.



2. Retained Romanticism

Matts Leiderstam, *See and Seen*

Matts Leiderstam's *See and Seen* has a classical point of departure, the notion of landscape in painting. We will see that the approach, the style and the tradition that this study relies upon differ significantly from the previous dissertation and introduces yet another model for what a dissertation might be.

Matts Leiderstam explores landscape in the post-classical landscape paintings not only as the determinant component in what has been called 'the picturesque' since the 17th Century in Europe, but also as a matrix for 'the seen'. For Leiderstam, this means that the representational structure of landscape played a crucial, constitutive role for how a supposedly modern subject was supposed to see the world. Two concrete sites were chosen, one is a painting, Claude Lorraine (1600-1682), *Landscape with Rebekah Taking Leave of Her Father*, 1640-41, and the other one, photographs from what Leiderstam calls "a real view of an existing historical Landscape" seen from the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. Leiderstam's doctoral project comprises a web site, the text and an exhibition. Relying upon the historical positioning of the gaze, Leiderstam investigates "What are the implications for what is becoming a new kind of viewer of landscape today, and how could this be addressed in my work?" (p. 4)

In order to investigate the bearings and possible answers to these questions, he employs the term 'mimicry'. The choice of the term remains somewhat ambiguous and Leiderstam's essay only gives some indirect hints. Mimicry, which in the 80's, had some resonance in British postcolonial theory (specifically employed by Homi Bhaba to single out a certain misrecognition between the colonised and the coloniser³) has originally been taken over from Biology and was extensively employed in the post-war French intellectual tradition. The more important and well-known reference is Lacan in his discussion of the visual field in the *Four Fundamental Concepts* (In fact, Bhaba borrowed the term and then creatively misread it!). Lacan discusses mimicry in connection to the gaze. Lacan's discussion concerns the visual fascination and the constitution of the scopic field. Emphasis is put on the enigmatic case of the so-called Batesian mimicry in certain insects who simulate the shape of an eye. The main conclusion that Lacan drew from the discussion concerned the functioning of lure. Not as a simple dupe, as this is the case in the animal scopic field, but as a constituent subjective moment in the visual field. The mimicry is not purely scopic but organised in a symbolic structure. The proper subjective moment is when the visual appearance leads the subject to suppose that there is something hidden behind the appearance. Lacan's argumentation is a dialectical turn, it identifies the lure, the concealment itself as the real substance of that which may be concealed.⁴

As Leiderstam's presentation unfolds, one could grasp a sight of what he wants to articulate by using the term mimicry. At more than one occasion, the mimicry is used to signify concealment, lure and modelling: "I am uncertain about my role as I act through mimicry and conceal my desire..." (p. 45). But, there is also another layer of meaning in the text. The ambition seems to be the expansion of the notion of the concealment of desire and its transformation into a self-modelling process that turns the whole project into an intermittent



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Below: Painting by Carl-Johan Fahlcrantz,
Göteborgs konstmuseum
Photography: Dorota Lukianska

3. *Locations of culture*, Routledge, 1994.
4. For a longer discussion, see my essay, "Divulsions", in *Aletheia, An exhibition*, Göteborg Konstmuseum, 2003.

and uncertain space between mimesis and parody, between irony and seduction. Leiderstam writes:

Mimicry, the missed target, is in a way the deviant's defiant response to the oppressive forms these grids may take. By simulating a likeness through mimicry, my intention is to produce an image in response to my gaze, my fantasy in front of the original; it is this that creates any difference. (p. 62)

Isn't the dissertation itself a deliberately cogitated part of such a simulacrum, a lure? Or better still, does not the term mimicry embrace the researcher/artist's uneasy, and silent deviant position in regard to 'production of knowledge' in artistic research? If so, the dissertation may be seen as an instance of mimicry, a brilliant endeavour, and surely an example of performativity, which in accordance with Butler's definition of the term, short-circuits the rules of the game, a game in which Leiderstam accepts to participate. Leiderstam is not unaware of the fact: "My work is 'perverse' in the sense that I deviate from the assumptions about the point of view of the historian – my work is an obsession knowingly disguised as, [. . .] research." (p. 60)

From this follows a style of presentation in which personal and sometimes even anecdotal notes are blended with theoretical accounts. Hence, by the end of the text, the author feels obliged to relate that "Per Bjurström points to the fact that Claude possibly slept overnight in the landscape he would make his preparatory drawings from." (p. 70). Such art historian's trivia (notice also the subtle usage of a scientifically cautious attitude expressed by the adverbial form 'possibly') play a meaningful role for the context. It underscores the obsessive nature of author's investigation and the process of identification of the artist with another painter. This is also why Leiderstam takes up a classical instance of the play of gaze and mimicry in film history, Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. In that film, the protagonist, a private detective assigned to follow a woman, is duped by his own desire to see in what is given to be seen. To these elements, one should add Leiderstam's discussion about belonging to a gay culture and the role of the gaze in gay culture. In that context, he becomes personal and self-exhibiting.

But in spite of the opening questions and the theoretical references, the text is overtly marked by a narration in which the 'I' moves from one personal site of interest to another, lays out some theoretical references, and stumbles over what is referred to in the text as 'that something'. By the concluding pages of the dissertation, it becomes clear that 'that something' is in fact the looming 'I' who arranges its seen and lived experiences, mobilises the textual references and geographical sites as a vehicle in order to return to the self. Beyond the personal style of the author, his obsessions, and the blend of anecdotes and theoretical references, the crucial question is the stuff this 'I' is made of.

I, me and skylines

Reading the first pages of Leiderstam's text, which I did after having seen his exhibition, I was reminded of a little book by one of my favourite artists, the filmmaker Raul Ruiz, whose *Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting*, made jointly with Pierre Klossowski⁵ was for a short time imported by me and screened successfully for a local public ('successfully screened' meant for 'the happy few' in 1989). Ruiz has also a little book in two volumes, *Poétique du cinéma*⁶, a collection of inspiring and original trajectories from narration theory in film to



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5. *L'hypothèse du tableau volé*, INA, 1979.
6. *Poétique du cinéma*, Dis-Voir, Paris, 2005.



Matts Leiderstam, *Grand Tour*,
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Photography: Matts Leiderstam

medieval rhetoric and back to other odd volumes in the author's private library. In the middle of a discussion about the central conflict theory in the dramatic narration, Ruiz did not hesitate to deliver a compelling and amusing account of the narrative structure in Hollywood movies with the help of how American football is played. Looking through the window in my temporary study room on the twentieth floor in a tropical Kuala Lumpur, I could only regret the unavailability of my books and this little volume with its subtle and erudite thoughts on the originality of the art of copying. The comfort offered by the bird's eye perspective in the urban Malaysian skyscraper appeared as a cognitive, programmatic manipulation, a visual consolation or better, an ideological interpellation. As I looked through the window, a strange and distracting idea struck me: Lewis Carroll's cats never played in these neighbourhoods.

In other words, the capitalist skyline framed by the window implies many 'I's. While one of them is identified by the act of viewing, yet another one is caught by the unexpectedness that gazes back at me as a reader. Midway in my reading, to my surprise, Leiderstam mentions and briefly discusses Ruiz's book. This surprise effect has been an ambiguous one. In Leiderstam's essay or exhibition I could scarcely detect the intellectual curiosity and aesthetic sensibility that permeated Ruiz's works. The question 'why?', I believe, could enable us to better understand the characteristic structure of Leiderstam's work. More precisely, the problem is that the result of Leiderstam's trajectories from concealment to a play between original and copy, simulacrum and mimicry, lacks the concise but floating, distracted but exact approach that could have followed from the initial question his project had posed. Some art historically well-informed references to traditional Chinese painting, in which the relation of copy and original is differently defined than in modern painting tradition, could, for instance, provide more substantial and aesthetically more relevant material than some anecdotes about Claude.

Leiderstam, in both his text and exhibition exposes a highly interesting but endlessly stern and calculating attitude. As if the coherence of a certain image, which is not shown in the exhibition, and a voice, which remains anonymous in the text, should be restored after each encounter with the reader or viewer. It is this work of restoration that interpolates a project that could have been far more intellectually and artistically challenging. The shadow of a stern, calculating 'I' blocks out the intellectual and artistic potential of an otherwise original essay style. Consequently, the anecdotes, the parody on the theme of participating observation and insightful associations around mimicry and landscape, all turn out too well-calculated, too tidily represented and the supposedly post-modern gesture disappears like the Cheshire cat's smile in Alice's adventures.

On a different and more historical note, the term 'distractedness' could shed some light upon the structure of the 'I' in Leiderstam's project. The tidiness and calculative feature of the work discussed here may seem a struggle against distractedness that jeopardises a looming ego that properly belongs to the age of museums. The productive dimension of the distracted curiosity has been noticed early on by Walter Benjamin who wrote:

Distraction presents a covert control of the extent to which new tasks have become soluble by apperception. [...] The film makes the cult value recede into the background not only by putting the public in the position of the critic, but also by the fact that at the movies

*this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner, but an absent minded one.*⁷

This subject of curiosity is completely different from a romantic 'I' that long ago has descended from the mountain peak in a Caspar David Friedrich landscape. The subject of curiosity operates at a lower altitude, it changes focus constantly, remains indifferent to the question of authenticity or identity, but affirms truth as it emerges, in passing, in a vanishing lapse of time. The fundamental question, inadvertently evoked by Leiderstam's dissertation, concerns a historical choice, either the visual calculations in order to restore the image of a romantic subject, which is already integrated, digested and commodified in the contemporary society as a dream that vehicles the fashion industry, or a new curiosity that absent-mindedly moves along the trajectories of the new and scarcely shaped movements of people; playfully switching from background to foreground, from the perceived to the imitation, from work of art to its historical setting; with distracted senses, transforms and remoulds traces from the immaterial labour of multitudes.

At this point, we would be able to better grasp the central function of terms such as concealment and mimicry in Leiderstam's project as a whole. If mimicry comprises both the topic of the project and the position of the artist/subject, this is made possible by the fact that what he gives us to see is nothing else than a concealed something in the landscape behind which the viewer is supposed to detect the real authentic point, the "I", everything else is the repetitions and copies, unfixed roles and transcendence of fixed positions. A mild stoic irony will be the final destination.

Model Two

'See and Seen' provides a second model for a dissertation, the one that I call retained romanticism. The operational term is an imaginary I, it conceals its non-being like a butterfly that simulates the shape of an eye that looks back at what is presumably a hostile gaze. It should be added that this is far from proper romantic gestures, even though the specific style and form of presentation is, via meddling stages, borrowed from the essayist's tradition. The retained romanticism differs from the previous dissertation in which the panoply of data clearly followed the ideal of an accumulation of knowledge. The retained romanticism is nourished by the memory of aphorisms.

At the same time, it goes without saying that the essayistic form in retained romanticism is fundamentally different from the German essay-form with great examples from Schelling to Novalis to Benjamin and Adorno. This tradition strived for a condensation of personal experience as a hinging point for conceptual work, re-worked the personal to dense argumentations and poetical vision, to the extent that the 'I' remained a prey to the unexpected, not a window frame but rather a pinhole for a Camera Obscura of ideas and senses. In this contemporary retained romanticism, the relation to the essay-form remains problematic, since retained romanticism abandons the playfulness of the representation and curiosity of the author and shifts towards the playful 'I'. Subsequently the text, or the visual representation becomes the mere expression of this 'I'. The result is markedly personal, but low-pitched, openly biographic, but discrete and economical, calculated, but with a streak of mild irony.

7. *Illuminations*, Walter Benjamin, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt, New York: Schocken Books, 1969., 240-241



Sopawan Boonnimitra
Feel It Like Home

3. The Re-disempowered

Sopawan Boonnimitra, *Lak-Ka-Pid-Lak-Ka-Perd*

Boonnimitra sees her project, *Lak-Ka-Pid-Lak-Ka-Perd* (literally ‘sometimes open, sometimes closed’ a term that refers to homosexuality in Thai slang) as a platform for juxtaposing different ideas and approaches by questioning binary terms such as public/private, hetero/homo, self/other in the urban space in Bangkok. The onset of her project was a festival of gay and lesbian films she organized in Bangkok. The festival was subsequently interrupted by the city authorities and closed down. She writes: “The festival brought to the surface conflicts that may not be visible in what seems to be a peaceful society”⁸. For her, this event underlined the “unfixed relations between space and sexuality” viewed in the larger context of the spatial determinations of power relations.⁹ The questions raised in her project has much in common with Miya Yoshida’s research and accordingly the two researchers cooperated closely with a specific exhibition in Bangkok.

As the author underlines in the conclusions, the Foucauldian term ‘heterotopia’ has been instrumental for her in order to think of the transforming urban culture in the South East Asia, particularly in Thailand, “beyond the binary opposition”. Boonnimitra draws attention to the emerging new urban spaces in South East Asia and the in-between spaces generated by the changing forces at work in this region. She includes a discussion of the gaze with specific reference to Laura Mulvey. Mulvey’s short essay belongs to period of productive critical approach. The work done by the Screen editorial group in the 80’s is the best example. Both her ambitions and the questions she poses are undeniably of critical importance, especially if the superficial representation of this development in Western media is taken into consideration.

Hence, Boonnimitra’s study offers, for instance, some insightful and subtle discussions about the link between the architectural organization of habitat and gender relations. The Thai terrace in the organization of the household in Chapter Three is one instance of the strength of the author to discern significant notions and to establish necessary distinctions such as the physical boundary between the public and the private, and its transformation in the 20th century.

In the chapter ‘Mapping out Homosexuality’, the author relates a vivid description of the street scene and brings the reader closer to a multi-layered urban landscape. One moves from the blend of an accelerated pace of diverse activities along the streets to the marked and unmarked spots of sexual desire and erotic anxiety in a well-known neighbourhood in downtown Bangkok. Curiously enough, in this painterly description two MacDonald’s restaurants play the role of epicentres for this vibrant orbit of urban life with its vices and virtues. What else could be a more adequate sign than a piece of fried minced meat squeezed between two round pieces of white bread to orient the steps of a rushing crowd from a shiny promise of bourgeois freedom to the frenzied pursuit of insipid satisfaction?

However, the pertinence of the opening questions and the sharpness in some observations remain flares of an initial ambition, irreversibly disciplined by the ingrained formulations quoted from the field of cultural studies. For instance, the study returns in the conclusion to the idea that ‘the old meaning

8. Re: ‘Roadmap’ chapter. For technical reasons, I cannot refer to specific pages in her dissertation. This aspect in itself invites some reflections on how a dissertation in artistic practice forces a different approach to questions such as references and academic protocols.
9. Ibid.

of Space' is expired and a new one has yet to fully grow out. Yet, the author does not clarify what this old meaning of space was, or how it differs from a new one, except for a vague idea that the old one was based upon binary positions. The reader assumes consequently that the new one is according to the author non-binary, whatever this may mean. A fundamental concept such as 'space' deserves a more thorough examination and perhaps it does not suffice to quote Lefebvre without engaging with a more theoretically informed discussion if we additionally want to grasp something about the novelty of spatial organization in a city such as Bangkok. Unfortunately, this style, which to a great extent reminds the reader of British cultural studies, is a constant part of this study. It is, for instance, unclear why the author, speaking of the new urban landscape, feels obliged to assert that "any meaning becomes unsettled and constantly shifting, in a constant process of negotiation"¹⁰, while the world, including everyday life, seems oddly more structured than ever, surveyed and mapped (which means definite locations designated to definite entities, the designation may be a matter of some social negotiation, but not the act and process of mapping and allocating a pre-defined position to a pre-determined entity), than ever before in the history.

I am not suggesting that such phrases, repeated endlessly at different occasions in certain academic contexts, are devoid of analytical substance, but they should be critically examined in any attempt to apply them. Since art has always been about occupation of space and preoccupied by the spatial coordinates of objects, artistic research should be the most adequate place to re-assess terms such as 'a new emerging space' or 'unfixed and constantly shifting meanings'. A re-assessment that at the same is a concrete reflection upon the rhetoric of human sciences and cultural criticism. This does not happen in this study.

Thailand, a peaceful signifier

The central theme in the study is gay culture and identity. From a critical distance, one could perhaps raise the question: Are not 'gay' or 'queer' as identities rather recent historical constructions, which are introduced to Thai society during the process of its integration into the capitalist order? These identities like other tribal identities in the late capitalism should be viewed, not as synonymous to the sexual behaviour of men and women but rather as a construction that discursively departs from bodily presence of human subject in order to be an ideal for identification. The author's emphasis on the notion of boundary and binary positions and in between spaces somehow blurs such a critical historicisation of queerness and renders homosexuality synonymous (whatever it may signify) with 'gay' or 'queer' identities. This issue is closely related to the ambition of the project, which is close to Miya Yoshida's work but opposed to Leiderstam's. It is about making homosexuality in Thai society visible. Why should this visible/invisible positioning be a defining part of an artistic project? Let me rephrase the question in even more provocative terms: Why should the centrality of a visualized human body remain an unquestioned paradigm for artistic and representational exploration of power relations in, what the author prefers to call, a "peaceful" Thai society? Are not the exposition of visual attributes proper to these particular identities and the textual production around these acts of exposing, another instance of an invasive gaze, the same gaze that stares back at us from the pages of tourist catalogues? Is not a conception of space in relation to sexuality, reshaped in terms of visualization

10. Conclusion, last page

and unveiling, in itself one of the main functions of the contemporary ideology of global capitalism, which mobilizes terms such as control and exoticism, mimesis and exposing at once?

Model three

Many features in this study may be understood as an impact of a strategy adopted in parts of English-speaking critical tradition of the 80's and 90's, namely 'empowering the Other through discursive strategies'. The overarching ambition was to defy the hegemonic discourse both on a cultural and intellectual level. One can today, as Fredric Jameson already has pointed out, question such a counter-strategy. Thailand and Bangkok are not about the possibility of another discourse in which the body is more present in the culture than in the West. Bangkok is, among other things, a wasteland for imperialism and its tourist industry. No doubt, this creative destruction of a given urban place, as in many other localities, creates new spaces and isolated enclaves of contradictory existence, chiasma of imaginary representations of the same and the other (which is by the way constructed upon a binary structure), gives rise to new disastrous situations, but the empowering strategy, the declaration of a joyful heterotopia, as the case was presented in a Nordic setting, also runs the risk of strengthening a pattern of consumption of exotica. The empowering strategy ends up in a new form of disempowering the Other, a new particularisation based upon the assumption that vision is the true corollary of authenticity.

The third model, shares to a certain extent, the academic framework that we have already discussed in connection to Miya Yoshida's project. Still, its scope is different, its observations more markedly ethnographic, its style more reflective and less accumulative. Yet, the decisive difference resides in the fact that it is positioned, and its ambitions are defined in relation to an 'other place'. It is not only about fulgurations of urban life in general. It is a decisive point that the project represents Otherness in an ideologically significant site. The third model follows the strategy of describing the subaltern, a cultural configuration outside Europe and North America. That is why the insertions about the unfixed meanings and shifting realities, etc, do take on additional significance. This model, 'the literature of empowerment', brings forward the voice and sight of the disempowered, the unrepresented. Its background in a Post-Colonial critique; such as Said's critique of Orientalism, the subaltern studies proposed by Spivak, or the focus on hybrid forms of identity; are all important and oft-discussed parts of the critical traditions of the last few decades in connection to artistic practice. The danger is that it becomes an aesthetically attractive hagiography for victims with no empowerment in sight.

What is a dissertation in artistic practice?

Given the contemporary situation, both locally and internationally, these three models provide a good point of departure for re-considering the above question. Criticalism, essayistic, and empowering discourse are not mutually exclusive models, the strength of a place where a certain time is allocated to research, lies in the insight that this diversity of theoretically well-informed approaches to artistic practice is perhaps the most fundamental feature of a vital academic milieu. Obscurantism, if it is true that it is a widely spread phenomenon in contemporary world, would ask us to curtail the diversity, to minimize the ambiguity of artist's position. This obscurantism, which is nothing other than

the continuation of a triumphant middle class ideology, does not oppose the diversity, it neutralizes it. It does this by its desire to reduce artistic research to the outdated art historical protocols and empiricist ideals. The reaction to such an obscurantism has too often been either irony or a celebration of liquid discourses, floating spaces or hybridization of ethnic trivia.

In the opening of the essay, I noticed that these three studies claim to share a preoccupation with the notion of space. This claim however relies upon a superficial reading of the theses. After our review of these studies, it seems obvious to me that the common trait is not to be found in their relation to the notion of space (including the space of work they were in the academic institution) but rather by the time that is disposed. This common trait is easily missed at the first glance, perhaps due to the fact that the authors do not reflect upon it, yet it is easily detectable. All three dissertations are the outcome of a long-term practice and the project they deal with had started well before the doctoral studies. A long and laborious duration of time marks all these projects.

Perhaps, this temporal axis is part of the answer that one could provide to the simple question of what a dissertation may be. A dissertation in artistic practice encompasses a temporal dimension proper to independent reflection, a temporal dimension that in its own way, in spite of the discursive elaboration of this lapse of time, undermines the ignorance embedded in the ready made templates and the promise of academic conformity.