

regarding Meditation Boat

During my initial visit to Laos in August 2005, I was struck first by the flow of the Mekong River—the strength of its underwater forces and the hypnotic pattern of its pooling surface. Liquid and deep, the river is a place in-between, a substance that both gives life and receives death. While walking the perimeter of the Luang Prabang peninsula, I began thinking about the Mekong itself as the site for my project, and about how the rhythms of the water might meet the rhythms and pace of my walking body. The movement of the river became for me a visual embodiment of the confluence of cultural currents where a traditional past mixes with the modern present.

While the river is visible from most parts of the city, more hidden and closer to the town's edges and forests are the four unique monastic grounds with peculiarly long and narrow buildings built expressly for walking meditation. Vat Hatseo, Vat Kok Pap and the renovated Vat Loun Khoun are located on the west bank of the Mekong River. The fourth Khom Khwuang, is located on the east bank. In profile and form this boat is inspired by these traditional monastic structures. Placed on the water during a time of transition and change it's an emblematic presence that makes possible a quiet suspended and separate.

One purpose of the boat is to house the practice of solitary Vipassana (meditation) by the Luang Prabang Sangha [under the supervision of Sathou Onekeo Sitthivong, Abbot of VatXieng Thong and Vat Pak Khane]. A second smaller boat will sometimes be attached to the main boat and carry eight to ten people who will recite, chant or sing in unison. Thus the smaller craft becomes a vessel for sounding tethered to the larger vessel of silence—both suspended upon the moving surface of the water. The Quiet in the Land Project will also use the boats for temporary performances.

While the primary function of the boat is for spiritual meditation, its making was in every way material, collaborative and conversational. I would like to thank Francis Engelmann for his inspired narrative as we hiked the west bank of the Mekong where this project had its beginnings, and to thank him as well for his careful oversight of the vessel's construction. Architects Laurent Rampon and Yushi Kawaguchi together with Jean Pierre Cuomo skillfully refined my initial drawings to make a more elegant and functional form. Jean Pierre Cuomo's studio built the wood structure and ingeniously developed both its large and small joints. The boat builder – (name?) and his team at the boatyard (name?) gave the project life and the boat buoyancy. With great humor and patience Outh (spelling of last name?) knit the team and languages together. Finally, France Morin, my visionary curator, created the context for this work to be made. To all of them I am grateful.

Our physical bodies are repositories of cultural knowledge and memory. This knowledge is inherited, repeated and passed down through generations. The role of an artist is often to address specific actions and processes through which this cultural knowledge is physically embodied. It can be recognized in the quotidian rhythms and patterns formed in walking, sewing, weaving, or writing; patterns that in their familiarity can be invisible and hence, when lost, not perceived. How can art be part of helping us remember what is being lost or eclipsed by the pressures of the invisible forces of a globalized world? How can an art work participate in the local and daily traditions and help us see a way in which they remain relevant. These two boats are one way to address these questions. By linking them physically together, we also link the present and the past, the sacred and the secular, silence and voice. In their visual and aural relationships, they are a demonstration for this place in this time.

regarding appreciation

Curator, Project Manager, and Founder of The Quiet in the Land Project: France Morin

Research Assistant: Frances Engelmann

Project Assistant: Outh Litthavong

Project Architects: Laurent Ramon, Yushi Kawaguchi, P'Elizabeth Koelker

Design and Fabrication, wood structure: Jean Pierre Cuomo, Naturalia Moulage

Pilot and Fabrication, metal keel: Sichan Phongsavath