

You can be our window,

a Burmese artist told us. You can tell the world about Burma and you can tell us about the world outside.

This text offers glimpses of contemporary Burma reflected in the artworks we made there during a ten-week residency in 2007 and 2008.

/Erik Sandelin and Åsa Ståhl, February 2008

Little information gets in and out of Burma. In our artistic practice we deal with communication, everyday action spaces, participation and storytelling, so we decided to go there ourselves to learn more on location. Despite the volatile situation after the September 2007 events, as well as calls for boycotts from many Western countries and organisations, we opted for presence rather than isolation and went for a ten-week artist residency from November 2007 to January 2008.

This text is one way to tell the world about our Burmese experiences and hence about Burma today. It is written for everybody who are interested in Burma, contemporary art, both, or generally curious about creative practice under difficult circumstances. We hope this text is open enough for questions coming from different positions. If you don't find the answers you are looking for, please contact us through erik@unsworn.org and asa.stahl@misplay.se. There are other ways of telling this story.

We don't claim to be Burma Experts. We write from our personal experiences of a short time of living and working from lower Burma to upper Burma, of meeting, discussing and collaborating with numerous Burmese artists. By describing and reflecting on the artworks we produced during our stay we think we can communicate something about the everyday action spaces for artists and others in contemporary Burma.

Pronouns will change from we, Erik Sandelin and Åsa Ståhl, to I as in Erik and I as in Åsa. Sadly we cannot use Burmese names without putting people at risk.



Chaungtha Language Exchange

One of the sounds we will remember from Burma, besides the ubiquitous rumble of generators producing electricity when the power lines are dead, is the sound of what many Burmese call 'parrot learning'. It's the call-and-response choirs of primary school kids repeating their teachers' words. It's the monotonous monologue of a high-school student reading aloud to memorise every word on every page for an upcoming exam. Knowledge and education became recurring themes during our stay.

After some initial days of introducing ourselves to artists in Rangoon we went southwest on a six hour bus ride to Chaungtha, a fishing village by the Bay of Bengal. We spent a lot of time with the villagers and this was the first time we encountered complaints about the educational system, complaints we later heard voiced and whispered throughout the country. One of our friends refused to go to the university because he thought it was such a humiliation to proper learning.

After the September demonstrations the university semester didn't start until 21 January, not in early

December as scheduled. Teachers didn't know what date classes would resume. Many government officials, including those who teach foreign languages, have to sign an agreement not to interact with foreigners. When language students want to practice pronunciation at the phonetics lab, they might find that the extra ration of petrol, distributed to keep the generator going during power cuts, has been sold on the black market.

A large percentage of the university students have classes only for ten days per year. They are called distance students. In theory it's good for those who have a long way to go to the universities in a country with unreliable infrastructure. In practice we have met an overwhelmingly many who have course books in English, but who cannot answer the questions "Where are we now?" and "When will we arrive?". You have to wonder how much of the education they are able to grasp and turn into something they are able to use after the exam. Many of the students we met were wondering what to do with their degree, other than to use it as a title.

At the same time ambitious young people strive to go abroad to study. Christians in the Kachin state dream about the Philippines while most others hope for Singapore and Japan. Europe and other parts of the West are hardly worth dreaming of. Parents with money and insight send their children to private English classes. Most teachers also give private tutoring during evenings and in the weekends.



There are also networks of forward-looking people who are organised non-hierarchically, trying to create their own information sources such as libraries and web sites to help one another, and others, to a deeper and wider knowledge. Since unauthorised gatherings are technically illegal it is always risky to organise outside the educational system.

This is what we've encountered and it made us think about simple, yet radical, questions such as "What do you want to learn?" and "What knowledge do you have that you can share?" It is a challenging task to take responsibility for your own learning process and at the same time share what you know. We did an experiment in Chaungtha. Six nights in a row we gathered with three Burmese people around a small whiteboard. They wanted to learn English and we wanted to learn Burmese, so we took turns in being teacher and student. At the end we all signed a diploma both as teachers and students. We didn't improve our language skills enormously, but we had tried out a way of meeting, engaging in a dialogue, exchanging ideas, knowledge and insights. On a small scale we practiced participation and exercised articulating one's own opinions.

Timestamps

When we arrived in Burma we expected to see heavily armed soldiers patrolling the streets. Instead we were greeted by an army of stamp-toting bureaucrats. Our guesthouse had to report our whereabouts to three different authorities, seven times a day. This adds up to

21 forms to be checked, stamped and archived. Every day. Somewhere in Rangoon or Naypyidaw there must be hordes of skilled stampers and an ocean of overflowing file cabinets. Forms, licenses, and permissions are ever-present features of Burmese everyday life. To us, the totalitarian powers of the state, and the intricate web of complicity which all Burmese citizens by necessity are entangled in, is manifested in the stamp.

A painter we worked with showed us a series of pencil drawings in a plastic folder labelled '6-7 am'. We made a copy of one of his drawings, cut the paper into twelve pieces, all of the same size, and then convinced one of Rangoon's many stamp makers to craft a rubber stamp for every piece of paper.

When exhibited, the twelve different stamps and a blue ink pad lie scattered on a small table. A set of white papers, empty except for a one-hour time interval such as '10-11 am' or '1-2 pm' written in the lower right corner, is attached to an adjacent wall. Exhibition-goers are invited to stamp the paper as they like. They can try to recreate the original drawing, choose not to do anything, or improvise a new motif using the stamps. Each hour one stamped paper is removed from the installation and fixed to a nearby wall, adding to a series of completed stamp-artworks.

The lone signature painter is the dominant model for artistic creation in Burma. By involving several co-creators (painter, interaction designer, stamp maker, stamper) in an unfinished process with many possible

endings *Timestamps* complicates the role of authorship and, consequently, responsibility. An unfinished, participatory artwork is more elusive to the censors but is also more difficult for the initiating artist to make a living out of.



A few hours before the opening of a public exhibition in Burma a group of censors arrives. They inspect the artworks and sometimes ask the artist to explain their piece: What is this person in the painting doing? Why do you use red colour here? A work with only the slightest trace of nudity, violence or political imagery is promptly removed. Ambiguity is dangerous and discouraged. Each blurry face is potentially a secret portrait of the The Lady.

We were surprised that artists are given an opportunity, however arbitrarily interpreted and acted upon, to explain themselves or, in other words, to contextualise and describe their artwork in a way appropriate for the authorities.



We were also intrigued by the intimacy of these meetings between the artist and the censor. When standing in front of a deep purple-tinged painting of a naked woman in foetal position, the artist was asked by the censor: What did you feel when painting this? She replied that she hadn't cried in public since she was six years old. She cries only through her paintings.

The *Timestamps* installation is partly conceived as a prop in a similar, but so far only imagined, meeting with the censor:

CENSOR: What is this? What does it mean?

ARTIST: It's an installation where people can participate by stamping on that white paper on the wall.

CENSOR: So, hmm, people could stamp anything they want?

ARTIST: Yes, as long as they use these stamps. Of course you could always stay here and make sure the finished stamp-paintings are appropriate. I'm sure you are quite skilled at stamping.

The absurdity and naivety of this dialogue is matched only by reality. Most likely the form of the work is too unfamiliar for the censors even to engage in a dialogue.

As one Burmese artist bluntly predicted: They would not participate.

Four Portraits (This person is afraid of birds and has calves shaped like hearts)

Rarely have we met so many technically skilled painters as in Burma. State art schools teach realistic painting and excellence is passed on from master to student. Recurring and encouraged themes are Buddhist monks and pagodas, beautiful landscape scenery and stereotypical portraits of the 'national races' of the Union. Contemporary art (as it is known in the West with performance, conceptual art, video, interactive art and so on) is not part of the curriculum. It is our firm impression that individual creative expressions occur despite, not thanks to, the Burmese art education.

We rarely use the brush and canvas ourselves, but we wanted to find ways to collaborate with Burmese painters. In Mandalay we presented an idea to two excellent painters. We wanted them to make portraits based on not on models or photos, but on our words describing two persons. They agreed to spend two hours with us. We, as the storytellers, had one person each in mind and prepared ourselves by jotting down notes on the person we would describe to the painters.

Erik started and Åsa went away. A timer was set to 60 minutes and as time passed he described a person by mentioning details and short anecdotes about looks, character and situations related to the person. After 60 minutes the painters had finished their first canvases and a new session started, this time with Åsa in the

storyteller-sofa. As opposed to Erik's fragmented storytelling, which came in paragraphs throughout the hour, Åsa spent the first twenty minutes trying to paint a picture in words about the person she wanted them to portray visually.



We ended up with four portraits, portraying two people and signed by the painters. The paintings are obviously imbued with the style of the painters, but our different rhythms of conveying information about the persons be portrayed clearly affected the outcome on the canvas.

Afterwards, while the portraits were drying, all four of us sat down, laughed and asked Who is the artist?

In Burma we encountered few artists' collaborations where several people work together from concept to production. In Rangoon there are several artist groups, but the members work individually and then help out arranging a group show once a year.

In *Four Portraits* all the different actors are needed to complete the work. At its best, collaboration means learning from each other. It allows multiple narratives to flourish, since all the participants have their own, first-hand experience of the project.

Four Portraits also stems from discussions about information exchange, imagination and interpretation. How is it possible to communicate a human being's complexity from one person to another, translating from one medium to another? To be able to picture something other than the life you are living and the world you are living in, you need imagination. It cannot be taken for granted, or as George Orwell put it in one essay: "The imagination, like certain wild animals, will not breed in captivity". A painter running a private art school told us that she, in contrast with the meticulous realism of the state art schools, welcomes her students by saying that In my school you can make big strokes with your brush and the paper you are painting on can be as big as you like.

1-Pixel Camera

I didn't know what was ok to bring with me to Myanmar. When the rules are nowhere they are everywhere. "No professional cameras", someone said. Surely 0.000 001 megapixels is unprofessional enough? So I built my own 1-pixel camera and danced confidently through the customs. I stared into 264 tea cups from south to north, from Yangon to Myitkyina, where my pocket accidentally deleted the camera.

This is how I, Erik, introduced the project, written on a small note lying on the floor among 264 postcard-sized prints of enlarged, colourful pixels ranging from pitch black, to numerous shades of milky brown and pale green, punctuated by the occasional hibiscus red or sky blue.

Swedish media rarely mentions Burma. In the autumn of 2007 this changed abruptly as the demonstrations, which fit perfectly with the media logics, was front-page news for several days and TV aired shaky clips of saffron-coloured processions filmed with mobile phone cameras from pavements or hotel rooftops. Reportedly, military intelligence raided hotels and seized mobile phones and digital camera memory cards from both foreigners and locals.

By the time I was ready to leave for Burma in mid-November the media was again quiet. Sporadic and sometimes contradictory rumours on web forums couldn't confidently answer my questions. Can I bring



my laptop or will the customs confiscate it? How about my camera and sound recorder?

This is when I had the idea of using a very small camera. Not small in size, but in information capacity; a camera that captures such a minimal amount of data that it cannot be considered a threat. Since no such camera was readily available (camera manufacturers are busy racing towards more megapixels) I made a program for my mobile phone that captures only the centre pixel of the camera viewfinder and saves it to a file in the phone's memory.

Looking back, I realise I was both preparing alibis for (and perhaps wanting to provoke) a discussion with the authorities objecting to me photographing something unsuitable:

MILITARY MAN: You can't take photos of this!

ERIK: Oh but I'm only using this 1-Pixel Camera. Look here (showing him the phone screen). All the photos are only small dots with one colour.

MILITARY MAN: Haha, I understand. No problem, carry on then.

This reasoning is not merely naive but also based on reason; that you are innocent until proven otherwise. In Burmese reality, if something is suspicious or just a little bit strange it is simply removed. Only later would I come to understand that similarly absurd dialogues (though usually with a not so happy endings) actually do occur when the censorship board comes to inspect the artworks at the gallery as described in the *Timestamps* section.

After exhibiting the printed pixel-postcards a Burmese friend wanted to write an article about the project, but said that the description I provided was not possible to publish due to the current political situation. For the first time in my career I was asked to present an alternative, politically correct, project description. (It's actually amazing that he asked this as being the most natural question in the world. But of course, it was what needed to be done.)

So here goes: The 1-Pixel Camera is about making your own tools when you can't find the ones you need. It is about memory, and how small fragments, a smell or a movement, can trigger vivid memories. It is about our urge to capture and store increasingly detailed data of our lives. For what and for whom? When will we actually browse through our gigabytes of films and photos? Some will remember a situation through the act of taking a photo, not by going back to the actual photo. Pressing the camera button and hearing the click of the shutter becomes a ritual that emphasises that this is a moment to remember. Perhaps the next step, then, will

be a 0-Pixel Camera, a placebo device where the act, the ritual, is all that is left.

This is also a celebration of Burmese teashop culture. You never have to walk far to find a set of small plastic furniture on the pavement and hot, free, Chinese green tea waiting for you in a thermos. This is where you meet up with your friends, talk and gossip about the latest news. The 264 photos are fragments of such tea-shop conversations. The files are named to indicate the date, time and colour of the pixel. For example, when creating the file 20080105_155415_ff9c4929.png I was probably enjoying a *lapeiye* (strong tea sweetened with condensed milk) with Åsa in the afternoon Myitkyina sun on the first day of the Manau festival, where all the Kachin tribes gather to 'dance their culture', eat, gamble and celebrate their unity. Tiny reflections of Burma.

Reading Circle

In Burma some books are forbidden. Others are just very hard to find. Access to good readings is limited despite the xerox-copy culture.

As always when preparing for a long trip I, Åsa, had planned what books to bring with me just as carefully as I had planned what medicines to pack and how much money to exchange in advance. This time it was even more important since I knew that what I brought in I could also leave for others to read.

While getting adjusted to Asian time zones in Bangkok, before entering Burma, I realised that I had to get the

one book missing in my pile, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi.

It's the memoirs of an English literature teacher in Iran who formed a secret reading circle with some of her former students. The Thursday meetings in her home were a response to the constraints the religious leaders put on everyday lives as well as cultural expressions in Tehran.

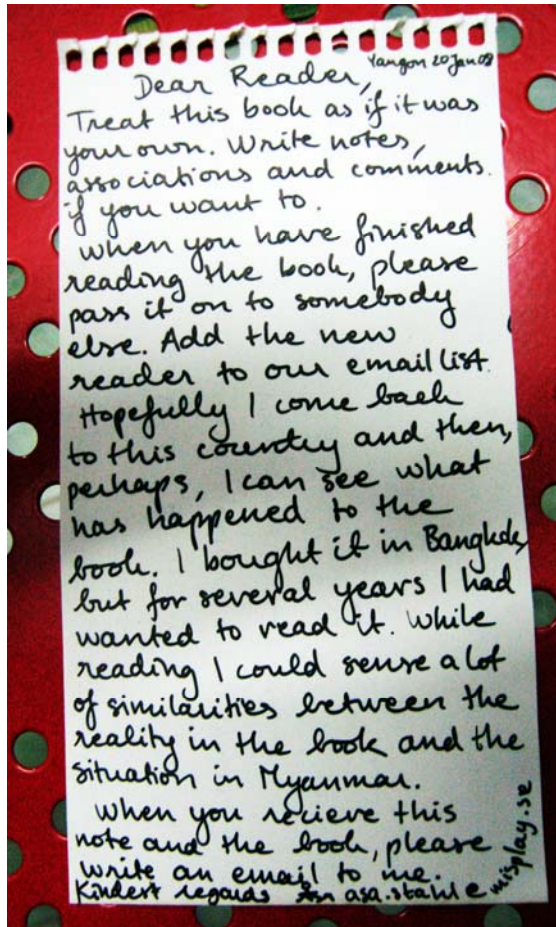
I opened up the first pages while we were on a river boat going upstream the Irrawaddy. Nafisi writes: "Fiction's influence on reality is invisible and intangible but essential. How can fiction open the spaces that reality closes to us?"

The book deals with issues similar to those of my own artistic practice: dialogue, storytelling, meetings and an interest in others and other people's worlds; trying to understand, and trying to create situations where knowledge sharing can take place.

While reading I was as usual writing comments in the margins: *Their reading circle is like a pause. But what about afterwards? What kind of breathing spaces do people find in Burma? Is it a place, a time or a feeling?*

The content provoked questions and comparisons between Iran and what I was experiencing on my travel from lower Burma to upper Burma. Slowly I realised that I wanted to involve this book and myself in a reading circle.

The intent of this project is for the book to act as a relay baton to be handed over from one reader to another. I instructed the first person to handle the book as if it was her own and then give it to somebody she thought would like to read it.



This kind of relay is well known to Burmese word lovers. This is how knowledge usually spreads in Burma: by word of mouth and by handing over texts in closed circles. For more about this, please read the excellent *Finding George Orwell in Burma* by Emma Larkin (a book that I didn't dare to bring in with me), where she writes extensively about the reading culture in Burma.

My hope is that those who get involved in my reading circle will engage in a dialogue in an email list that I have set up. The last reader decides who is next to invite in the reading circle.

When the book has been scribbled in and handed over until exhaustion it will be put in a building with lots of space to breathe. I know about a hidden goldmine in this country of gems and jade, a place on a bookshelf next to other books, where there is respect for words, imagination and facts. Hopefully I can come back one day and tap into the conversation that has taken place on the pages of the copy of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* that I gave to a friend.

To be continued.

Time Is in the Air

In one of the relocated townships in the outskirts of northern Rangoon we met an artist – let's call him Painter – who impressed us with his vivid imagination and extraordinary productivity. We could also relate to his work process of shamelessly using many different media, preferring materials close at hand, and mixing

process-based thinking with spontaneous expressions. When he asked if we would like to collaborate with him to make a film with his work we gladly accepted, but only if we could remix it according to our interpretation. We could.

He introduced us to his friend, Poet, and the four of us had many discussions about time and art. As a Buddhist Painter insists that we cannot possess anything in this life. Yet he paints, thereby freezing moments of time and turning thoughts and memories into possessions. In our practice we struggle with the notion of the unfinished, of finding a balance of permanence and openness that allow people to finish the work in their own ways. In these discussions of temporality we found a common point of departure for our collaboration.

Every day Painter strolls for one hour in his village-like neighbourhood. When he gets back to his house he paints from his memory of the walks. Our initial idea for a short film was to make improvised clips of the Painter's drawings outdoors and then use a VJ-software to live-edit the clips in sync with a 6 minutes sound collage we, Åsa and Erik, would create.

The four of us left Painter's house with a small digital camera and a plastic bag full of drawings, walking past simple houses and then, suddenly, grand villas housing the ruling generals and their families. Curious passers-by slowed down and lent a hand to stop the thin papers from escaping in the late morning breeze, as we filmed drawings laid out on a wooden table next to the dirt road. Standing on a small bridge across a sewage channel

we passed the drawings between us with the camera panning from left to right. We stopped at a teashop for snacks and Chinese tea. Ceasing every opportunity to shoot the drawings, we spread them out on the red plastic chairs and filmed them as if the ink creatures and pencilled people had come alive to join us for tea.

When people approached us and kindly asked what we were doing Poet answered in Burmese that We are doing an international artwork. They are Swedish and they appreciate the work of our country's artists.

This is the first time I'm doing art outside, said Painter when we returned from our half-day filming session. I'm not brave, he said, I'm afraid of strolling and many people don't understand me and my work. I'm happy we did this.

In Burmese public space there is no sanctuary, no place where the military cannot go. Not even the Buddhist pagodas or monasteries are truly safe havens. You are especially exposed when moving through public areas. The process of simply *handling* the drawings in public in this context became a performance in itself, perhaps more important than the actual drawings and the finished film.

The soundtrack of *Time Is in the Air* is a collage of sounds we recorded through our travels around Burma. The rhythmic beating of a loom in the ancient city of Amarapura outside Mandalay; the hushed, late-night whispering of two sleepy artists afraid to leave the illusory safety of the mosquito net to deal with the

metallic clanking of the trapped-yet-not-quite-dead rat nearby; the melodic tick-tock of a Rangoon taxi's customized indicators; the drunken impersonation of a Burmese fighting rooster. Several of the sounds relate to time, especially early morning hours. Others qualified simply because they sounded great.

Editing *Time Is in the Air* is quite a story in itself where dealing with the constant and unpredictable power-cuts is a main feature. Memories of navigating Rangoon's cracked concrete pavements while lugging a heavy desktop computer to generator-powered Internet cafés linger. Being refused to use the same facilities when the



owner realised we were foreigners is another recollection. In the end we finally had a neat pile of 50 Time Is in the Air-DVDs and we – Poet, Painter, Åsa, Erik – proudly stamped the labels with blue ink.

One week later *Time Is in the Air* premiered on a generator-powered TV at a semi-public show in a private home, together with Poet's poems, Painter's paintings and some of the works described in this text.

Soundwalk Workshop

Sound is rarely used as a material or medium for artistic expression in Burma. Many people were, however, interested in sound art and we were asked by a Rangoon artist group to host a workshop where they could get to know more. After several soundwalk projects in Sweden, *Omvägar i ljud* and *[ljudstråk]* I, Åsa, thought it would be a concept suitable for Rangoon. I was thinking of it as a way of blurring the division between public and private sphere as well as trying out ways to turn up the volume and distribute people's everyday stories without having to pass through the censorship boards. In Rangoon, as elsewhere in the world, it is common to listen to music in headphones while walking and thereby creating a kind of private sphere in the public space. The people who walk soundwalks will be seen as part of that social practice – they look the same as walkman-users from the outside and nobody will know what they are listening to. But, what stories to tell? And how to deal with the anxiety concerning recording devices? Perhaps mobile phones are a solution for audio recording when

most electronic devices in public space are considered suspicious?

The workshop started off with me explaining, by exemplifying with previous soundwalk projects, how soundwalks are a way of making the city into a meeting place and a space for art. The listener gets a chance to experience the city through another person. Hopefully both the storyteller and the listener become more aware of their surroundings and can perceive them in a slightly different way.

After listening to a soundwalk prototype I had recorded in my neighbourhood in Rangoon, the task for the participants was to record their own soundwalk in one take; walking and recording live on tape. Although initially finding it a good idea, the majority of the workshop participants later expressed that they felt uncomfortable making recordings in public, even though they had a friend by their side and used mobile phones as if they were involved in a long phone conversation.

After several hours a crucial misunderstanding was revealed: the participants had not recorded with the intention of expressing any artistic ideas themselves. They came back from their recording sessions and thought I would then compile and make 'art' out of their sounds. This confusion stemmed from different viewpoints concerning what to expect from a workshop and what a work of art can be. We discussed these topics without necessarily agreeing. Afterwards I scribbled down one of the challenges: How to communicate and

work in practice with the concept of soundwalks to someone who is not used to art in public space, sound art, nor participatory art?

VJing in Rangoon Workshop

Before going to Burma I, Erik, made sure that I didn't have too many fixed plans of what to do in the country. I knew little about the place, but I still had to make some choices of what resources and materials to bring with me. When I thought about possible workshops I early on ruled out anything related to VJ culture. What could be more unsuitable for a place with erratic power supply, no established club culture, and limited access to video projectors? Then, after a presentation in Rangoon, three guys came up to me. They said they were DJs and they thought that VJing sounded really cool. Perhaps I could host a workshop for them and their friends?

VJing is the art of live creation and mixing of video, usually in relation to music in a club or at a concert. My own VJ practice, developed in close collaboration with Andreas Kurtsson in our group TV-OUT, has focused on club performances. TV-OUT finds and amplifies everyday movements, zooming in on the quotidian and projecting it big to the sounds of heavy electronic music. We produce an, often absurd, disco-ethnography, played out and experienced at loud, flickering, late-night dancefloors. Our aesthetics only requires simple capturing tools – small digital still cameras capable of recording short movie clips – making it a good starting

point for a Burmese situation where there is a lack of high-quality video cameras.

After finally deciding on not renting a ridiculously expensive projector, moving the workshop starting time to 6 in the morning because of a hostile electricity schedule, and assembling three working PCs we started the workshop at one of the DJs' apartment.



During the next hours the participants went out in the streets to film their own clips and then mix them using a VJ software application. Soon 10 fresh VJs were mixing their own neighbourhood footage of speeding cars, leaking water conduits, skillful chapati-bakers and monks adjusting their attire – to the sounds of heavy hiphop and M-Pop.

Capturing VJ footage in this way turns you into a tourist in your own neighbourhood, as you perceive your familiar surroundings with fresh VJ eyes looking for

interesting movements and visual patterns. The discussion afterwards also touched on the power of the VJ as an artist who has access to huge projection surfaces and an enthusiastic crowd.

At exactly 11 am the apartment started beeping loudly – that familiar event in Burma which means you have five minutes before a complete power cut – signalling the end of the workshop for this time.

Unfinished Art: Sounds, Interactions and Surprises

Three times we presented our previous and ongoing work under the above title. Initially it was difficult to find venues to host the presentations. One gallery owner was afraid, since he feared we would show video and play sounds – media which are seen with suspicion by the authorities. Local art scene intrigues was another obstacle.

We decided to go for small semi-public or private settings, which made us think of the Parisian salons of the 18th century. In the French context it was one of few ways for women to access information and discuss literature, art and science. In Burma, more or less the whole population is denied proper possibilities for an open exchange of ideas and knowledge.

Part of our talk was dedicated to discuss the expanded role of an artist, which includes, as we see it, an artist

who uses her/his creativity and communication skills to share knowledge. Perhaps s/he could be called a catalyst (for change). We were talking about artistic work in academia, in the public sphere, as well as in the business arena.

There was an apparent interest in our talks and workshops. The Burmese art scene is hungry for news and thoughts from the outside. During the first two presentations we didn't manage to involve everybody in a discussion, although we were happy to be approached afterwards by those who wanted to ask questions and know more. It dawned on us that we should have provided a written version of our presentation to the audience, both due to language difficulties and to the limited number of participants that could fit in the presentation spaces. Parallel to the text you are reading now, we are working on a written version of our Unfinished Art-presentation, to be translated into Burmese, printed and distributed in Rangoon and Mandalay.

Language was a hurdle in many ways, but in the third presentation it somehow didn't matter. Our talk about multidisciplinary artistic work – about professional amateurism and going in and out of several professional identities – provoked a discussion that boiled down to Who are you? This question about identity is fundamental and in Burma you have to be really careful with how you answer it. Not being able to clearly express your identity leads to hidden narratives, to parallel stories about the self and your work.



On the eve of our last day in Burma a poet was arrested. One week earlier another poet was arrested and the paper that had published one of his poems was banned for two weeks. We were told that those who work with the written word are more vulnerable to scrutiny since they can publish and thereby spread their words to more people than artists who only show their paintings a couple of times a year to a few people. You are always representing something that is larger than yourself.

Beyond Pressure

At the end of our stay we were asked to help out with a grant application for a performance festival. An Asian funding body had contacted a Burmese artist and encouraged him to write an application for a festival since they receive so few proposals from Burma. Writing applications for art funding is an art in itself, mastered by few artists and organisers in the country. (Language difficulties, a bumpy and costly process of acquiring passport and visa documents, and the risk of rejection, of 'losing your face', stop many Burmese artists from

applying for, for example, travel grants – effectively minimising the number of international art exchanges). We tried to write collaboratively and transparently in an attempt to pass on our knowledge of this field. We spent many hours to express what this festival is about, how it will be organised and why. Hopefully we will co-host a workshop series, on performance and learning-situations in public space, prior to the festival in November 2008.

We all have to perform every day, wherever we are, but in Burma a weak performance or acting outside of your designated role may have especially dire consequences. One person suggested we write an essay about the 'unconscious performance of the everyday in Burma', about the multilayered narratives that people have to choose carefully between when they present themselves. We were told that a group of students distributed candle lights to poor people in a neighbourhood, encouraging them to light them at dusk and pray that, just as the fire burns out and dies, may the present ruling of the country soon fade away.

The everyday performance and performance as an art genre intertwines. Performance art is ephemeral, can happen everywhere and at any time, in public as well as private spaces. It doesn't have to be announced, often no specific material is necessary and can therefore be made at a low cost. This makes performance art powerful in an environment where you need to evade control and censorship.

The working title for the performance festival is *Beyond Pressure*.



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We want to extend especially warm thanks to those Burmese artists whose incredible generosity and patience made us feel at home away from home.

 **Networking and Initiatives
for Culture and the Arts**

① A S P I S