We spoke of Keng Kok, the town my mother’s family originates from, of the turtles who live in a lake there. They will emerge from the lake only with the singing of a certain song. The turtles had names, such as Little Brother, Older Sister. I remember the song. It sounded like the prayer from a Baci.¹

These are the words that open the film *All that’s solid melts into air* (*Karl Marx*), a film made by Vong Phaophanit (b. 1961, Savannakhet, Laos) with text by Claire Oboussier (b. 1963, London) in 2006. The anecdote is recounted in the Lao language and is foregrounded only as sound: the voice of the artist. No visual imagery is shown, only a black screen with English-language subtitles. For those who do not understand Lao, the words are slowly processed as sonic textures, as vocal rhythms. Through their translation, the words engender a relationship between storyteller and listener, speaking of speech and describing the sound of song. Lured

¹ English-language subtitles from *All that’s solid melts into air* (*Karl Marx*) (2006). A *baci* is a Lao ritual that involves the saying of blessings and tying of white strings around the wrist in celebration of an important event, such as a marriage, birth, homecoming, or an annual festival.
into this sonic imagination, this intimate matrix of memory, conjured both at the level of listening and reading, the transition to visual stimuli feels sudden, like being jolted awake. We now perceive a film crew from afar, as they ascend the steep steps leading from the river’s edge to a temple at the top of a hill. We follow their progress in closer proximity as a procession of flower-bearing girls crosses the top of the steps, passes under and continues along the length of the camera jib crane, heeding the director’s prompts (Fig. 1). A moment later, we watch the crew ascend another set of steps to reach the temple grounds, the team working together to transport the cumbersome jib crane. From there the camera zooms in to focus on the eerie and seemingly autonomous rotational movements of the film camera mounted on the jib crane as it stretches to an optimal height for panning its setting in Luang Prabang, Laos (Fig. 2). Evincing an omnipotence of vision, and set in stark contrast against the sky and temple rooftop, this representation of the optical apparatus in motion heightens our attention to the work of visual capture, or the shaping of what one sees on film as a process that conditions the act of seeing as one of knowing.

The film’s introduction can be understood as a passage in several ways: as a filmic vignette; as translation from Oboussier’s English script into Lao and read by Phaophanit, and as a transition from listening to a description of listening to seeing a description of seeing.\(^2\) The latter transition illuminates a central concern of this essay, which queries the ways in which the conjunction of visual and sonic images in the artworks of Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier stymies the processes and politics of identification. Like the all-seeing camera’s eye in the beginning of *All that’s solid melts into air* (*Karl Marx*), the act of looking – an act of projecting as much as of receiving – uses visual surface perception as a primary

\(^2\) Oboussier herself uses the concept of ‘passage’ to describe the process of translation, as will be discussed at greater length later in the essay.
lens of interpretation and bringing into knowledge. How this process inflects a ‘politics of identification’ illuminates not only the ways in which Phaophanit’s works have been misrepresented at the moment of their reception, such as in the controversial media coverage of his Turner Prize-nominated work *Neon Rice Field* (1993), but also the limits of analysis afforded by the identification of Phaophanit as a British black artist from that period. In both instances, identity has unsurprisingly served as a predominant, and insufficient, lens onto artistic practice.

But rather than revert to the familiar critique of identity politics, I use the term ‘politics of identification’ to more specifically distinguish tensions between the mechanisms of perception that discursively frame the artwork and those operating within it. In terms of its framing function, such a term describes a contentious process of representation that encompasses identification’s definitional scope, denoting both that which is done to someone as well as with someone. To identify someone may be a pernicious act but to identify with someone is often a gesture enacted in a spirit of connection, expressive of solidarity, sympathy, and at times, ambivalence. Naturally, both avenues of identification – based on perceptions of such factors as race, culture, and gender – risk foreclosing openings of meaning and navigating more complex interpretations of the work itself.³

A deeper consideration of Phaophanit’s practice and his collaborations undertaken with Oboussier reveals a deliberate and poetic obfuscation of these identificatory processes

³ An example of this tendency to allegorise the formal structure of the artwork as the condition of the ‘Eastern artist’ perpetually “under the microscope” of the exoticising gaze of the West, can be found in Richard Dyer’s review of Phaophanit’s *Ash and Silk Wall* (1993). Richard Dyer, ‘Vong Phaophanit: Ash and Silk Wall’, *Third Text*, Vol. 8, no. 26, 1994, p. 91.
within the artwork, particularly through the artists’ blurring of the boundaries of visual and sonic images to destabilise perceived hierarchies of perception. To that end, I emphasise the role of vocality in their work as it is implicated through various sonic modalities, including ventriloquial exchange, the sounding of things, and horizontal perception. These are most tangibly grasped in the 2006 film *All that’s solid melts into air (Karl Marx)* through its montage-like approach and the probing use of Oboussier’s text and Phaophanit’s voice-over. However, I first foreground the necessity of understanding *Neon Rice Field* (1993) and other sculptural installations by Phaophanit as antecedents to the 2006 film not simply because they represent an earlier stage of artistic development, but because they augur an artistic contemplation of sonic presence and of the horizon as a visual, structural, and perceptual evocation, productive entanglements that would be collaboratively developed with Oboussier in later work. This scrutiny of materials provides a basis from which we might understand the artists’ presentation of a different kind of voice: one suggestively and productively opaque in relation to representation as well as the often contentious metaphorisation of art as voice, too often construed through biography and identity. Whereas this opacity is made manifest in *Neon Rice Field* through the artist’s withholding of speech and the solicitation of a sonic imagination, *All that’s solid melts into air (Karl Marx)* more explicitly deployed sound and voice, in particular, as forms of agential materiality.

Toward Opacity: *Neon Rice Field* (1993) and the Sonic Imagination

Exhibited in various venues between 1993 and 2005, Phaophanit’s Turner Prize-nominated work *Neon Rice Field* (1993) found subtle formal iterations according to site
Always comprising seven tons of white long-grain rice and six strips of red neon light, the installation spans a large plot of floor space, ranging in scale from 12 by 7 metres (as in the Tate Gallery installation) to 15 by 8 metres (for the Serpentine Gallery). Shaped into a geometric configuration with red neon strips traversing the precisely spaced and equidistant lengths of the oscillating furrows, the resulting installation evokes such art historical associations as Minimalism and Arte Povera. The red neon glow permeating the translucent grains and illuminating the atmosphere surrounding the rice transformed the gallery into an auratic space. Another element that enacted a synesthetic experience of the work was olfactory – the smell of the grains and of their prolonged contact with hot points on the neon tubes.

Although not readily apparent, the aural dimension, and the notion of sonic imagination, present new avenues for experiencing Neon Rice Field and other earlier works by Phaophanit, as well as his collaborations with British artist and writer Oboussier. In his

4 The first major public exhibition of Neon Rice Field was at the Serpentine Gallery in 1993. It was exhibited at the Aperto section of the 45th Venice Biennale later that same year, and at the Sunderland Glass Centre in 2005.

5 At the time of his short-listing for the Turner Prize Phaophanit was in the process of obtaining British citizenship, having emigrated first to France in his childhood for his education, finding himself then in exile in 1975 with the victory of the communist Pathet Lao. He pursued his studies at the École supérieure d’art d’Aix-en-Provence, and met his wife and artistic collaborator, Oboussier, in Paris in 1985. Shortly thereafter the two settled in the UK, and Oboussier continued her studies in French critical theory at the University of Bristol, where she earned her doctorate in 1995 for a thesis titled ‘Ecriture Feminine and Visual Significations in the Writings of Roland Barthes and Hélène Cixous’ (University of
essay on sonic imagination, media theorist Jonathan Sterne describes it more generally as an openness or a feel for sound as a part of culture. Sterne claims that ‘there is no knowledge of sound that comes from outside culture, only knowledge that works from particular limits. These limits in turn work like affordances – baseline assumptions and massive traditions to build from, as well as conventions worth playing with or struggling against’.6 This feel for sound, as a form of imagination and wielded as a creative force, can be used to ‘satisfy and frustrate expectations in order to produce something meaningful and engaging (for themselves and their communities and audiences)’.

This notion of sonic imagination is relevant for introducing Neon Rice Field due to what has been an overarching emphasis on the work’s cultural denotations, and, following Sterne’s language, the affordances yielded by a reliance on grasping the work through sight alone. If the notion of affordance for the sonic imagination signals both the limits of knowledge but also the creative possibilities for playing with those limits, so too could Neon Rice Field be viewed as risk-taking in terms of its visual form and materials. However, as an early and high-profile work, and the one that catalysed Phaophanit’s international art world

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Bristol, 1994). While the artists maintain individual studio practices, the collaborative nature of their artistic partnership spans twenty-five years. The decision to formalise their collaborations (under the name of Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier Studio) came after their return from Berlin, Germany, where they had produced the site-specific installation and corresponding publication for Atopia (1997) under the auspices of a DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) fellowship. Interview with the author, London, 15 May 2018.


profile, *Neon Rice Field* prompts a consideration of how alternative significations of materials and mediums may disrupt the affordances of optical comprehension as a totalising means of perception. As such, whereas ‘sonic materiality’ may predominantly be used to describe the material and tactile qualities of sound, it might also – as a pathway for the imagination – describe the ways in which ‘silent’ materials and things themselves compel the viewer to infer or otherwise feel sound, audibility, and language, and subsequently reorient their initial assumptions.  

As Sterne notes, ‘*Sonic imagination* is a deliberately synaesthetic neologism – it is about sound but occupies a position between sound culture and a place of contemplation outside it. Sonic imaginations are necessarily plural, recursive, reflexive, driven to represent, refigure and redescribe’. The aural perception of *Neon Rice Field*, which, if characterised as silence, is simultaneously reductive and generative, situates such a sonic imagination within a more encompassing synaesthetic experience beyond the visibility of sound or the audibility of silence.

Phaophanit has described *Neon Rice Field’s* Turner Prize nomination as professionally and creatively formative to his current practice, albeit not necessarily for ideal

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9 Sterne, ‘Sonic Imaginations’, p. 5. This sense of sonic materiality as inference or as sensation in otherwise ‘silent’ things can be further explored in new materialist arguments for sound as material and vibrational, thus expanding the parameters of sound’s experience, agents, and receivers. See, for example, Milla Tiainen, Heidi Fast, and Taru Leppänen, ‘Vibration’, *New Materialism Almanac*, 30 March 2018, [https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/v/vibration.html](https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/v/vibration.html), [accessed 14 April 2020). See also Eliza Tan’s contribution to this issue.
The Turner Prize is renowned not only for its reputation as a gauge of avant-gardist practice but also for its history of inciting – and in some views, courting – media controversy, often resuscitating the time-worn question of what is contemporary (British) art. The reception of *Neon Rice Field* alongside those of the other nominees continued to be embroiled in ongoing questions of the nature of contemporary art and what makes for good art that were preponderant in the rhetoric of art criticism in 1990s British media. But Phaophanit’s shortlisting for the 1993 Turner Prize drew distinctive controversy, and it is no coincidence that he was the only non-Caucasian nominee within the group whose ethnicity was not legibly moored to Britain’s imperial past, unlike the 1991 Prize winner Anish Kapoor. Surrounding the question of Phaophanit’s eligibility, art critic Brian Sewell posed the question, in parenthetical brackets, within a largely vituperative critique of the Prize’s nominated works: ‘… (but I thought the Prize, according to the rules, was for a British artist?)…’

The latent racism of Sewell’s coyly innocent query was made manifest in


12 Sewell’s full quote: ‘To use Waldemar Januszczak’s word, this year’s exhibition is particularly dismal. Rachel Whiteread contributes *Room* - another Whiteread sepulchre, cast in plaster, using, I imagine, a workman's cabin as her jelly-mould – a surreal whimsy that grows thin with repetition and meagre with increasing scale. Vong Phaophanit (but I thought the Prize, according to the rules, was for a British artist?) varies the red neon strips under a
disturbingly blunt and coarse form in a cartoon illustration by Michael Heath that accompanied an article by Gordon Burn in *The Independent*, of an Asian peasant wearing a conical hat, presumably meant to portray Phaophanit, treading the installation of rice. Reductive narrative assumptions perpetuating the East meets West trope or equally limiting neo-orientalist commentary would emerge as baselines for public criticism surrounding *Neon Rice Field*, invoked by its title and materials, and stereotypical perceptions of its author’s ethno-national identity.

On these assumptions, Phaophanit refused to speak: ‘Silence is the only word I have found that describes it … silence is to do with the eyes, the look; the look can stop words’. Through his entreaty to silence, Phaophanit asked the viewer to yield their assumptions to a deeper engagement with modalities of perception, conjoining the visual and the aural in a synesthetic reading of the work. Claire Oboussier wrote about how the materiality of the two components, the rice and the neon tubes, activated one another, elevating their respective capacities as mediums, and Phaophanit also described the olfactory sensations triggered in

heap of rice that we last saw in the Serpentine Gallery - it is now 19 yards long and weighs seven tons.’ Brian Sewell, ‘Ballyhoo and the glittering Prize; The Prize descends to the intellectual level of the freak show in a circus,’ *Evening Standard*, 4 November 1993, p. 29.


the room as grains of rice were slowly toasted by the neon. The neon itself provided an almost imperceptible background hum - a kind of centring, white noise. The ways in which *Neon Rice Field* was staged in various site-specific exhibitions also evoked a range of associations between architecture and landscape. In the Tate’s version, the geometric furrows resemble both the troughs made in the ploughing of rice fields but at the same time are reminiscent of motifs from modernist urban ruins, such as those in the artist’s birthplace of Savannakhet, Laos, the very concept of the urban ruin itself conjuring temporal associations with noise and activity turned spectral and silent. In the sonic imagination, rice and neon appear to host illusory binaries about place, whether the bucolic setting of the rural or the hum and buzz of commerce and entertainment typically sited in the urban; the work may thus appear to bring incongruous elements into a harmonious unity.

In its deceptively simple formal and material presentation, *Neon Rice Field* had articulated a complex conjunction between visual, sonic, and spatial narratives, unfortunately subsumed by a politics of identification enacted in haste and subject to superficial interpretations. For Phaophanit, *Neon Rice Field* was meant to defer any easy readings. Scrutiny of the wall label should have alerted the viewer to the fact that the rice was in fact an American product, and recognition of its site of manufacture, together with an imagining of the sound of some seven to eight tonnes of rice grains being industrially processed, poured, and transported – as invoked simply through the scale of the work – beckons a troubling of easy tropes about Asian rurality and traditional labour. Hence Phaophanit’s invocation to

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16 The rice was provided through the sponsorship American Rice Council, and at the close of the installation would be cleaned and recycled for redistribution.
silence, whether in the visual or aural experience of the work, or in any quick narrative interpretations. In this use of silence as a symbolic, political, interpretive, and formal strategy, Ana Maria Gautier has aptly proposed that silence provides ‘the potential of questioning the binary logic of apparent opposites by dissolving one into the other (presence as absence, emptiness as plenitude, quietness as expressivity, silence as intensity of life’.

*Neon Rice Field,* and in turn, Phaophanit, was thus subject to a problematic politics of identification as the work and the artist entered into contending frames of discourse surrounding British art in the early 1990s. One conception was institutionally projected through the Turner Prize and its nationalist and increasingly internationalist aspirations, according to Terry Atkinson: ‘… the Prize celebrates a particular conception of British art at the same time as it celebrates the Tate establishment as its high temple and centre of its relations of distribution’.

Perhaps it was this framework that provoked contention as inferred through the words of Sewell and others. The other historical context is that of what would become known as the British Black Arts movement, considered to have been pioneered by Eddie Chambers and Keith Piper in the 1980s, in a spirit of radical resistance against the racialised social violence and institutional exclusion of British artists of Asian and African descent – collectively described as black artists by Rasheed Araeen.

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19 Rasheed Araeen, ‘The Success and the Failure of Black Art,’ *Third Text*, vol. 18, no. 2; 2004, pp. 136-138. The experiences and practices of black artists in Britain in relation to the Black Arts movement (itself queried as an ostensible ‘movement’), is by no means historiographically resolved, as evident in Araeen’s essay and other accounts by participants.
contextualised within the legacy of this community, or in the wake of the movement, works such as *Neon Rice Field* sit uneasily within the more politically transparent works that had characterized the Black Arts movement in the 1980s, with what Araeen describes as its ‘loud and noisy’ militancy and iconography, paradigmatically having developed, for example, from such works as Chambers’ *Destruction of the National Front* (1979-1980).\(^{20}\) Both Araeen and Stuart Hall describe how iconographic and figural visual language came to serve as the movement’s hallmark and as a form of voice in the face of realism’s and abstraction’s insufficiency as vehicles of representation in the context of real violence and struggle in 1980s Britain.\(^{21}\) For black artists, a vital objective – and one to which Phaophanit has been

\(^{20}\) Araeen, ‘The Success and the Failure of Black Art,’ p. 139.

linked due to his inclusion in a number of ‘British Art’ exhibitions in the 1990s – was the very redefinition of British identity as it bore crucial stakes for their institutional visibility and social well-being.22 As historian Paul Gilroy noted in 1990, ‘The desire to make art out of being both black and English has become a major issue in the black art movement and should be seen as part of the long, micropolitical task of recoding the cultural core of national life’.23

The term ‘black artist’ as a category of inclusion is one that Phaophanit himself used, perhaps with some ambivalence, to describe collective challenges faced by non-Caucasian artists in early 1990s Britain, as art institutions increasingly sought to embrace the international in tandem with the developments of globalisation and the impending branding of British art vis-à-vis the Young British Artists (YBAs).24 However, the historiographical identification of Phaophanit as a black artist primarily by virtue of his ethnicity, biography, and the particular timing of his emergence on the international scene through the Turner Prize shortlisting, presents an uneasy discursive framework, albeit enacted in the spirit and shared challenges of artistic community.25 It risks the very ‘optical wobble’ effect described by


24 ‘Fragments of Memory.’

25 This was apparent when Phaophanit and Oboussier, among other artists, were invited to present on their practice at the conference Now & Then, Here & There: Black Artists and
Kobena Mercer in 2005, in his critique of the perpetual ‘elision of backgrounds and foregrounds’, that troubled deeper readings of the work of art, as a result of which ‘the dignity of objecthood is very rarely bestowed on the diaspora’s works of art, on the actual art objects that black British artists have produced …’. At its worst, a by-product of such an approach as driven by curatorial agendas or the market could be a label like ‘refugee art’,  

Modernism, held at the Chelsea College of Arts and Tate Britain on 6-8 October 2016, organised by the BAM researchers. To meet the perceived remit of the conference theme, Phaophanit began by describing experiences such as Sewell’s comments surrounding his nomination for the Turner Prize in addition to the memory of a former art school tutor’s advice that he produce identifiably ‘Laotian’ art. The artists then proceeded to speak about their collaborative work in an unrelated vein to such themes of identity, representation, Black artists, or a theoretical positioning of modernism. The conference thus afforded artists the opportunity to come together as a community based on shared experiences of marginalisation and prejudice, and to address what the organisers described as the art historical amnesia surrounding Black British artists. Yet – as the organisers themselves queried - the question arises as to whether this foregrounding of identity as the basis for historical and methodological reappraisal paradoxically hindered the stated priority of approaching, rather than forgetting, the artwork within its context, despite the programme’s inclusion of break-away study sessions around works of art. See ‘BAM - Now and Then – Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier - London Conference, Session 1’ and ‘BAM – Now and Then – Day 2 Welcome & Intro – Sonia Boyce, London Conference’, http://www.blackartistsmodernism.co.uk/2016/12/12/nowthenherethereseion1-artistspractices/, accessed 26 March 2020.

which Phaophanit notes was imposed on his work and came into wider currency following
the 1991 exhibition *tok tem dean kep kin bo dai (what falls to the ground but can’t be eaten)*
at the Chisenhale Gallery.\(^{27}\)

Very likely in capitulation to the jingoistic media commentary surrounding
Phaophanit’s nomination in 1993, in tandem with efforts to secure the Tate’s internationalist
foothold, the Turner Prize eligibility criteria was revised in 1994 to specify an artist born in
or resident in Great Britain, rather than ‘British Artist’.\(^{28}\) And whereas once Phaophanit may
have discussed his work with more open reference to memory and place, to some extent
through a diasporic perspective, identity had proved to be a problematic fulcrum of
interpretation for *Neon Rice Field*. Phaophanit and Oboussier acknowledge that the
controversy may have prompted them to adopt greater caution with the kind of language used
to describe their work, and in the aftermath of the Turner Prize, more conscious awareness of
materials and their potential to be misconstrued.\(^{29}\) In 1995 Eddie Chambers had curated an

\(^{27}\) Interview with the author, London, 15 May 2018.

\(^{28}\) In 1994 the wording of the Turner Prize nomination form was changed to ‘for the purposes
of the Turner Prize, “British” applies to British born artists working in the United Kingdom
and abroad and to foreign-born artists living and working in the United Kingdom, even if not
naturalized citizens’. Katharine Stout (ed.), *The Turner Prize and British Art* (London: Tate,
2007), p. 99 note 34. This is explained as a clarification following the 1993 nominations of
Laos-born Phaophanit and Irish-born Sean Scully.

\(^{29}\) The artists describe how the DAAD-funded project *Atopia* (1997) represented, to some
extent, a divergence from previous work in its materially-focused site-specificity in a way
that could not be appropriated by a culturalist discourse. The work consisted of two parts: an
evolving, time-based installation of polybutadiene rubber spread out on galvanised steel
exhibition of Phaophanit together with Keith Piper, and wrote that ‘From his earliest exhibitions in this country, his work has demonstrated a clear ability to demand (and secure) from the viewer a wide range of readings, whilst still being anchored around the central concerns of his history and his identity’. Oboussier’s own essay in the catalogue provided a counterpoint to this characterisation:

Writing on Vong Phaophanit's work is inevitably a somewhat paradoxical enterprise in as much as the work itself consciously plays at the borders of what is and is not accommodated by language. ... an effort can be made to attend to the work's own terms, its own materiality, over and above any impulse to define and fix it within the ready made categories of language and beyond any anecdotal narratives that may temptingly offer themselves in a process of ‘reading’ and ‘understanding’ the work.

shelving with string, occupying the entire room of the DAAD villa; the other component was a rooftop installation of anti-pigeon devices. For the artists, Atopia was an important step in consolidating the artists’ methodological approaches to interweaving image and text, as is apparent from the connections between the ensuing publication and All that’s solid melts into air (Karl Marx). Interview with the author, London, 15 May 2018. See also Vong Phaophanit, Claire Oboussier: Atopia (Berlin: Berliner Künstlerprogramm/DAAD, 2003). An iteration of the anti-pigeon device installation was commissioned by South Bank Centre and exhibited at the Royal Festival Hall, London, in 1998.


Oboussier’s words challenge the compulsion to understand through the projection of narratives, be they tied to the artist’s biography or to fixed notions of identity. Such a claim resounds with that made by Edouard Glissant in *Poetics of Relation*, in which he situates historical colonial projects of knowing the Other and calls for the right to opacity: ‘But we shall perhaps see that the verb *to understand* in the sense of ‘to grasp’ [*comprendre*] has a fearsome repressive meaning here’. Revisiting Phaophanit’s entreaty to silence, works like *Neon Rice Field* began to ‘speak’ through opacity to the politics of representation, problematising the transparency that art critics frequently demand of – and impose on – artists deemed ‘non-Western’ then, and even now, and furthermore, in the case of *Neon Rice Field*, reveals a critical blind spot in the historical narrative of contemporary art in Britain.

As such, in relation to Phaophanit’s perseverance in using textual and material forms that might be described as deliberately ambivalent, one should query how possible, and how useful, is comprehension. Such works include sculpted Lao characters and words (Fig. 5) evoking formal and linguistic frustration, with neon as an auratic medium and site of sonic

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materiality. Whether individually warped or jumbled in a multiplicity of forms to elude legibility, the working of Lao script as tactile form in what are often challenging or intractable sculptural materials, such as neon tubing or wiring, invokes both frustrated writing and garbled speech, alluding to confounding expressions of language. Beyond these metaphorical implications, the material element of sound provokes further reflection. As Michele Friedner and Stefan Helmreich have argued, sound can be apprehended as ‘a vibration of a certain frequency in a material medium, rather than centring vibrations in a hearing ear’, thus siting sound – audible or inferred - in the medium itself.\(^{34}\) The audible undercurrent of what may be the buzz, droning, or flickering of neon thus extends the work beyond that of calligraphic abstraction and lends it another level of plasticity and semantic disruption.

These sonic and textual elements may occasion readings centred on cultural identity and displacement vis-à-vis the metaphoric load of language.\(^{35}\) However, I would note that in their conceptualisation as linear, vectorial architectonic elements, they often subtly gesture to or are literally directed toward a spatial horizon, an recurring thematic in the artists’ works (Figs. 6, 7, and 8). The horizon as a perceptual construct would be developed further through the dimension of the temporal vis-à-vis the use of sound and voice in\(^{34}\) *All that’s solid melts into air* (Karl Marx), a collaborative undertaking with Oboussier, in which the medium of the moving image is used to investigate and destabilise the conjunction of looking, listening, and reading as modes of consolidating identification and memory. Ultimately, the crafting of

\(^{34}\) Michele Friedner and Stefan Helmreich, ‘Sound Studies Meets Deaf Studies,’ *Senses & Society* vol. 7, no. 1, 2012, pp. 77-78.

\(^{35}\) See, for example, Kimberly Lamm’s discussion of the mother tongue in her essay in this issue.
these materials does not necessarily pursue an anti-iconological reading, but rather attempts to unravel the fabric of meanings that context may appear to afford.

Voice and Aurality in *All that’s solid melts into air* (Karl Marx) (2006)

I must make myself precarious, as precarious as the blue hut at the edge of the Mekong. …

To look – from the middle high Germen luogen – to mark, behold – originally ‘to look through a hole’ – loch – a hole or dungeon, lochern – to pierce, to lock. …

The boy said nothing but his toes spoke a silent dolorous dance, curling up, recoiling from the scorching macadam. …

In the temple she saw the woman adjust herself, adopt the required position, make her salute, earnest in her observation of protocol – she watched as the woman’s mobile sang out its electronic chant – she answered and chatted in a desultory way. …

Her eyes didn’t pierce us, they fell gently upon us, never in the eyes, never to hold, never to possess. …

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36 English subtitles, *All that’s solid melts into air* (Karl Marx), 2006.
Over a decade after *Neon Rice Field* was featured in the 1993 Turner Prize exhibition, Phaophanit began work on *All that’s solid melts into air* (*Karl Marx*). The film was commissioned by The Quiet in the Land project in Luang Prabang, Laos (2004-2008) and was shot in the city in 2005 and 2006.\(^{37}\) Within the framework of The Quiet in the Land’s ethos of site-responsiveness and community engagement, Phaophanit gathered over ten hours of footage of various locations, some of which were inspired by students from the Luang Prabang Fine Arts School, who photographed sites in response to themes suggested by Phaophanit.\(^{38}\) As described at the beginning of this essay, the film begins (and closes) with

\(^{37}\) The Quiet in the Land: Luang Prabang, Laos (a shortened version of the project title The Quiet in the Land: Art, Spirituality, and Everyday Life, Luang Prabang, Laos) was an artistic residency project organised by Frances Morin for The Quiet in the Land, Inc. It took place in Luang Prabang, a city in northern Laos and UNESCO World Heritage Site, from 2004 to 2008. Morin invited fourteen artists, including Dinh Q. Lê, Marina Abramovic, Janine Antoni, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, Cai Guo-Qiang, Ann Hamilton, Shirin Neshat, and Allan Sekula to undertake residencies and develop collaborative projects with local students, artisans, scholars, and members of the sangha, or Buddhist monastic community. Several of the resulting artworks, including *All that’s solid melts into air* (*Karl Marx*), were exhibited at the Luang Prabang National Museum (the former Royal Palace) from October 2006 to July 2007. See France Morin and John A. Farmer (eds.), *The Quiet in the Land - Luang Prabang, Laos: A Project by France Morin* (New York: Quiet in the Land Inc, 2009).

\(^{38}\) In terms of how the Luang Prabang community responded to the film, the artists describe the viewing public as both intrigued and estranged: most were unfamiliar with the film’s non-
Phaophanit’s voice-over against an absence of visual imagery. This segues into the footage of the film crew ascending the steps to the temple and the rotating camera hoisted on a jib crane. What follows feels like a tactile exploration of surfaces in and around Luang Prabang. These include interior spaces centred by windows, doors, and other apertures; walking paths and roads, enlivened by wind, traffic, thunder and lightning, dimmed by the light of dusk or dawn; close-up shots of chipped and faded statuary, and festival and ritual debris; the Mekong riverscape, whether of the water itself or a boat passenger’s view; the textures of the forest, trees, and leaves, as foliage contrasted against the sky or as layers on the ground; and heaps of rubble, whether piled stones on the river’s shoreline or as detritus in dilapidated buildings (Figs. 9-13).

Much of the film focuses on non-human actors, mainly objects, surfaces, and fragments of landscape. The people who do appear include tourists, vendors, and the crews for the film and the riverboat. But human voices are a frequent presence in the audio track, alongside amplified sounds, such as those of nature (gusts of wind, peals of thunder, pelting raindrops, dropping leaves scratching the ground) and those of human activity (temple gongs, motorbike traffic, boat engines, the clatter of heavy stones being piled). Phaophanit’s voice-over sets a rhythmic tone to the interweaving of images and sounds, providing an additional rendering of imagery through the subtitled words (following text written by Oboussier), recounting in Lao various anecdotal passages and observational musings. His voice further narrative format, a structure which challenged legibility despite the use of the Lao language and viewers’ general familiarity with the film’s scenes and subjects. Nonetheless, exhibitiongoers stayed to watch the entirety of the film. V. Phaophanit and C. Oboussier, ‘RE: question about All that's solid melts into air (Karl Marx)’ [email to the author], 17 April 2020.
textures the surfaces seen, and frequently gives pause to process these strata of stimuli vis-à-vis vocal silence.

Phaophanit and Oboussier described the conception of the moving image and the textual work as evolving through an instinctual process of *tissage*, a kind of weaving, in which ‘each shot is treated like a tableau, a fragment,’ derived from the experience of site: ‘a kind of anti-act, a wandering, drifting motion which is a way of opening up and allowing oneself to be reached by the materiality of one’s surroundings’.\(^{39}\) If read semantically, as suggested by the titular reference to Marx and Engels, and as described in the curatorial essay from the catalogue, the film can be interpreted as a reflection on modernity and the erosion of place: ‘Luang Prabang at the beginning of the twenty-first century is a culture haunted by the ghosts of the old social order that is waning and the new one that is waxing’.\(^{40}\) Such a reading

\(^{39}\) Vong Phaophanit, ‘Vong Phaophanit: All that’s solid melts into air (Karl Marx)’, in Rebecca Fortnum and Nigel Whiteley (eds.), *Inspiration to Order* (Turlock, California: University Art Gallery, California State University, Stanislaus, 2006), p. 34; ‘Artist Statement: By Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier’, in France Morin and John A. Farmer (eds.), *The Quiet in the Land*, p. 151.

\(^{40}\) France Morin, ‘Vong Phaophanit: All that’s solid melts into air (Karl Marx)’, in France Morin and John A. Farmer (eds.), *The Quiet in the Land*, p. 150. The quote from the 1848 Communist Manifesto holds points of connection with the Buddhist concept of impermanence and other textual references to the Marx and Engel passage, such as Marshall Berman’s book, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York City: Verso, 1982). A line from the film, “He wrote that human societies cannot tolerate such ephemeralness” describes a quote by the late historian of Laos, Grant Evans, in his own
is not incongruent with the metaphoric and allegorical possibilities of the film’s formal structure and material invocations, whether framed through a materialist, Buddhist, or Marxist framework. Nonetheless, to allow for narrative plurality and ambiguity, Phaophanit emphasised the importance of allowing the images to be released from assumptions of knowing and overburdened significations, concerns which informed the process of making the film: ‘I try to act with discretion but also without becoming a voyeur or a spy – I am always very conscious of the way I am “taking” the images, to give them the greatest possible space from which to make their meaning’.

Perhaps in closest affinity to montage, the film’s vignettes propose multiple possibilities for meaning; a number of micro-narratives are suggested, with references to such themes as impermanence, the nature of looking and of photographic capture, tourism and tradition, ritual and death, place-making and placelessness. But a resounding effect of the film as a whole, with its truncated or lingering visual and sonic captures, and its muting or


An example of such a nuanced approach is advanced by Chairat Polmuk’s notion of atmosperics, in relation to the film’s engagement with what he terms ‘the post–Cold War historical sensorium’: ‘Against both the complete erasure of leftist history and the nostalgic, restorative impulse to monumentalize the revolutionary past, this kind of haptic media foregrounds ephemerality as a mode of reconstructing and inhabiting historical memory’. Chairat Polmuk, *Atmospheric Archives: Post–Cold War Affect and the Buddhist Temporal Imagination in Southeast Asian Literature and Visual Culture*, Ph.D. Thesis, Cornell University, 2018, p. 10.

Vong Phaophanit, ‘Vong Phaophanit: All that’s solid melts into air (Karl Marx)’, p. 34.
amplification of these moments, is its predilection for projecting imagistic and acoustic traces as perceptual sensations, or synesthetic entanglements. It could be considered an exploration of the process through which perception moves into identification, or how the latter might be assumed to condition the former. Phaophanit voices the statement ‘When we look we have already decided what it is that we will see’ against a quieted shot of domestic interiors, a form of withdrawal from or bringing into stillness the preceding soundscape’s activity: rain showers, thunder, bells. It is a shift that revisits Phaophanit’s entreaty to silence with reference to Neon Rice Field, a form of sensory reorientation evoked as productive friction. In reflecting upon the way in which these perceptual transitions impact the viewer, Phaophanit stated

What I like about that film is that state of mind where you swing or you flip from one scene to another. It’s like when you’re still asleep and then you wake up, or your dream suddenly switches to noise, to awakening noise, like the sound of road traffic. But that’s the moment I find really interesting, that moment where you make that switch, where you separate the two different moments – why do you separate the two? It’s only one moment but you suddenly have to operate differently.

In this regard, the conjunction of landscape and soundscape in All that’s solid melts into air (Karl Marx) play on openings and closures of vision – and sound – as conjoined in the concept of the horizon. In connection to the role of Laos as Phaophanit’s birthplace, or as

43 English-language subtitles, All that’s solid melts into air (Karl Marx).

homeland rendered ambivalent, formal devices – such as impeding full visual access to the horizon – defer the potential for the landscapes in the film to succumb to projections of nostalgia or exoticism, or at worst, sensationalist clichés. Tropes are deliberately captured, as in a scene of tourists frantically photographing monks begging for alms or shots of Buddhist statuary, and ‘turned’: in some instances cut so quickly that the image is captured as a glimpse, or as a moment of fringe perception that offers the potential for resistance (Figs. 14-16). Openings and closures of vision – whether the light-filled slats in a dark and smoke-filled room, or the camera pan that follows the riverside only to be cut just when the water line meets the sky – don’t necessarily frustrate visual gratification, but defer ‘possible avenues of identification between viewers and the film’s subjects’, as described by T.J.

45 The objectionable series produced by Marina Abramovic for Quiet in the Land, titled 8 Lessons on Emptiness with a Happy End, featured tableaux vivants of children garbed in combat fatigues re-enacting acts of wartime violence, such as executions by firing squad or the dragging of Abramovic’s body across a field. Such images were juxtaposed with picturesque shots of scenic landscapes around Luang Prabang, speaking to Abramovic’s reflection on ‘the relationship between the violence [the children] acted out in their games, the suffering experienced by Lao people as a result of the long civil war, and the increasingly pervasive presence of the violent imagery of global media culture in Luang Prabang—all seemingly paradoxical phenomena in the context of a placid Buddhist culture’. Despite the work’s stated intention of inducing prolonged perturbation vis-à-vis initial aesthetic seduction, it nonetheless appears to fail in ironic and conceptual efficacy, doing little more than reifying pervasive Orientalist tropes.

Demos with regard to parallel filmic devices in the Otolith Group’s *Nervus Rerum*.\footnote{T. J. Demos, ‘The Right to Opacity: On the Otolith Group’s “Nervus Rerum”’, *October*, vol. 129, 2009, p. 118.} By choosing to include subjects that risk these avenues of identification, the film speaks to a perspective on opaque attachment or probing familiarity as described by Glissant, when he concludes that ‘it does not disturb me to accept that there are places where my identity is obscure to me, and the fact that it amazes me does not mean I relinquish it’\footnote{Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 192.}

In striving to create a zone of hearing rather than of listening, the use of soundscape and voice-over in *All that’s solid melts into air* (Karl Marx) further emphasise the limits of intentional perception and subsequent meaning-making.\footnote{Interview with the author, 15 May 2018.} Following Emily Ann Thompson’s theorisation of the soundscape as both material and ideological (‘a world and a culture constructed to make sense of that world’), the use of sound in the film is a crucial affordance in the sense of Sterne’s sonic imagination; in playing with the limits of sound against those of the visual, it uses the material to bring the ideological into moments of transparency.\footnote{The work perhaps most literally draws on the notion of the soundscape as described by Emily Ann Thompson in her work on early twentieth-century American media landscapes: ‘Like a landscape, a soundscape is simultaneously a physical environment and a way of perceiving that environment; it is both a world and a culture constructed to make sense of that world’. For Thompson, the soundscape includes material components, the objects that may create or destroy those sounds. Emily. A. Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2008), p. 1.}
Jarring sonic truncations jolt the viewer and listener into self-awareness, as though rejecting the possibility that sound might become seductive and too immersive. Voice often becomes one texture within what could be considered a sonic democracy, an equal treatment of the sounding of things: raindrops on corrugated metal, chimes of gongs being struck, rocks being piled, materials being cut, food being prepared, the roaring of a boat motor, a leaf dropping and scratching the ground. In this way, as postphenomenology philosopher Don Ihde describes, what may be dismissed as background noise often occupies the foreground as a focal inversion, or in place of the sound that centres consciousness – voice:

> For every material thing has a voice—which, however, is all too easy to miss. … Yet each thing can be given a voice. The rock struck, sounds in a voice; the footstep in the sand speaks muffled sound. Here, however, we must note that the voices of things that are often silent are made to sound only in duets or more complex polyphonies. … Here we must attend carefully to our perception. For to isolate the voice of a thing, we must listen carefully and focus on one of the voices in the duet.\(^50\)

Providing a sounding of flesh and both an acoustic and imagistic core for the film is Phaophanit’s voice. As a voice without a seen source - what Michel Chion refers to as the acousmatic voice - the voice asserts itself as ever-present, a constant that holds the fragments of the film in continuity.\(^51\) As one acoustic sign among others, the artist’s voice is

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consistently quiet, calm, and even in rhythm. With gentle modulations in pitch, his voice scales its distance to the listener as one in proximity, as though reading or storytelling, or in the act of reflection, marked by short and long pauses. The voice often tapers in volume, its tone shifting from enunciative to assuaging, reaching the limit of vocal articulation. In bordering on aspiration – as quietly as a voice can express itself before becoming a whisper – it eludes individuation, or the ability to discern identity through the marker of voice.

As the bearer of language, Phaophanit’s voice inevitably occupies a centring function in the listener’s conceptual foreground, choreographed with, and at times, compromised by, the soundscape. Bringing the listener into its proximity, the voice sites the speaker and the listener into multiple positions, moving in tandem from aural centre to periphery and back. This aural implication brings the listener into the soundscape, and through this participation in the auditory field further implicates the hearing body as part of it. Sonic captures traverse disparate shots and further render the imagery as ephemeral as the constitution of sound and voice, undoing the assumed fixity of visual representation as promised by the recorded image. Returning to the horizon, of which we catch momentary or prolonged glimpses in some riverine shots, or to which we are given partial access through barriers of mountains, architectural structures, door or window frames, Ihde also situates the horizon at the limits of the audible, whether as a recession into silence or as background ‘noise’:

The horizon is that most extreme and implicit fringe of experience that stands in constant ratio to the ‘easy presence’ of central focusing. There is also a resistance offered by the horizon. It continually recedes from me, and if I seek for sounds and the voices of things, I cannot force them into
presence in the way in which I may fix them within the region of central presence.52

The horizon as signifier of both the limit of perception and opening toward infinity thus opens up a space of imagination vis-à-vis opacity, or as a resistance to a centred, ‘easy presence’, discerned through what Ihde refers to as easy or naïve listening.53 Yet to equate horizon with silence as a kind of negative space against which sound is foregrounded is to take its possibilities for granted. Silence may punctuate and refine our attention to the soundscapes and the rhythm and grain of Phaophanit’s voice-over, together with the concerted labour of reading the subtitles. However, just as voice amplifies the silence, and opens up the imagination through the space of the horizon, it serves an equally stifling function, in its intrusion as a sensory stimulus that draws our focus.

If the voice of language is the centre, which Ihde describes as the position from which we experience the world, and as that which draws human listening according to Michel Chion, the generation of text and speech in All that’s solid melts into air (Karl Marx) plays on various passages, as noted by Oboussier.54 Written in English in Luang Prabang during the process of filming, edited and shaped in French-language discussions upon the artists’ return

52 Ihde, Listening and Voice, p. 108.
to the UK, and subsequently translated into Lao by the poet Soradetj Bannavong, Oboussier described how

It is the passage of the words through the two languages, through the different voices, back and forth, that is of real significance. I am interested in what happens to language through that process: The word *translation* comes from the Latin for ‘bearing across’ – to move from one place to another. When the words I had written were turned from one language into another (from English into Lao), and spoken through the voice of the male narrator (Vong’s voice) I lost access to them, they were no longer in my control…it is always said that something is lost in the act of translating but I think that it is a creative act through which something is gained.55

The passages in *All that’s solid melts into air* (*Karl Marx*) include the passage in and out of language, the passage of time, the passage from page to voice, and the passage of authorship, from one’s voice into another’s. According to Walter Ong, voice is the vessel that provides meaning: ‘Written texts all have to be related somehow, directly or indirectly, to the world of sound, the natural habitat of language, to yield their meanings. “Reading” a text means converting it to sound, aloud or in the imagination, syllable-by-syllable in slow reading or sketchily in the rapid reading common to high-technology cultures’.56

55 Unpublished ‘In Conversation’.

As voice conveys the written passages, so too does it carry its own meanings by bearing multiple registers of identification depending on the listener, for example, speech as lyricism for the non-Lao speaker, the degrees of foreignness indexed by language, accent, and pronunciation, and the linguistic anachronisms and slippages borne through acts of translation. The text and its rendering through speech thus implicate a multiplicity of listening, or hearing, subjects, as these vocal and textual passages reveal themselves to some and not to others. Having left Laos in his childhood and more at ease speaking French, Phaophanit notes that his pronunciation would convey a sense of familiarity but also estrangement for a Lao speaker, in addition to the creative renderings of the translator, who used more poetic and now obsolete expressions used in pre-1975 Laos – embedded artefacts of language. As voice embodies these multiple passages it not only approximates what Ihde refers to as the dramaturgical voice, that which, in the case of actors, exhibits the voice of another, but in the film, also offers numerous dimensions of authorship and performance. The question becomes who is speaking whose words, or who – or what – gives voice to whom? Do the images speak through the writing, or does the writing speak through the images? Does Oboussier speak through Phaophanit, does Phaophanit speak through Oboussier, or does the poet translator speak through Phaophanit/Oboussier or Oboussier/Phaophanit? The channels for these ventriloquial exchanges abound, gesturing to a fluidity of authorial position and thus of voice beyond what is easily heard and identified.

Conclusion


58 Ihde, Listening and Voice, p. 197.
When Phaophanit invoked silence as the means through which to best apprehend *Neon Rice Field* and to open it to meaning, he conjoined aurality and vision as a synesthetic event: ‘silence is to do with the eyes, the look; the look can stop words’. If silence is the absence of sound, thus enabling heightened aural focus, then he intimates that only by being able to listen could one fully look at the work. However, against the acts of looking and listening, seeing and hearing have been juxtaposed as arguably less ideologically conditioned acts of perception, modalities that I suggest more accurately characterise the artistic intentions driving the interweaving of images, soundscapes, and voice in *All that’s solid melts into air (Karl Marx)*. While the theme of ephemerality – as denoted by the film’s title – has been taken up as a reference to modernity, Buddhism, Romanticism and Symbolism, and to Benjaminian theories of photography, the prominence of sound and vocality as structuring aesthetic devices has been less foregrounded in the material nature of their constitution. Mladen Dolar’s description of voice as emission is particularly resonant in ‘fleshing out’ an embodied dimension of the Marx/Engels quote: ‘It is, rather, something like the vanishing mediator (to use the term made famous by Fredric Jameson for a different purpose)—it makes the utterance possible, but it disappears in it, it goes up in smoke in the meaning being produced. … This gives rise to a spontaneous opposition where voice appears as materiality opposed to the ideality of meaning.’ In this essay I have attempted to ground voice and aurality as prominent features driving the ambiguities of identification to which the artists

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59 ‘Fragments of Memory: Vong Phaophanit in conversation’.

60 Morin, ‘Vong Phaophanit: All that’s solid melts into air (Karl Marx)’, p. 150.

have endeavoured to give form, and as crucial elements that have been largely superseded by appraisal of the visual and its relationship to contextual narratives and voice as metaphor. But as I’ve tried to show here, the artists stymy such a politics of identification not only in relation to art world commentary and social histories of art, but in terms of playing with the very order of the senses itself.

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Image Captions

Figures 1-2. Vong Phaophanit (with text by Claire Oboussier), film still from *All that’s solid melts into air (Karl Marx)*, 2006, single screen projection, dimensions variable, 33’29”. © Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier Studio
Figure 3. Vong Phaophanit, *Neon Rice Field*, 1993, six strips of clear red neon and rice, 1500 x 500 cm. Tate Gallery (now Tate Britain) installation view. Tate, London. (Photo: Tate) © Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier Studio

Figure 4. Vong Phaophanit, *Neon Rice Field*, 1993, six strips of clear red neon and rice, approx. 1200 x 700 cm. Serpentine Gallery installation view. © Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier Studio

Figure 5. Vong Phaophanit, *Azure Neon Body*, 1994, clear blue neon script, 700 x 50 x 50 cm. © Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier Studio

Figure 6. Vong Phaophanit, *Untitled*, 1995 and 1996, 7 strips of green and red neon, Laotian words, approx. 1000 x 100 cm. © Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier Studio

Figure 7. Vong Phaophanit, *From Light*, 1995, video, clear blue neon, approx. 1500 cm. © Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier Studio

Figure 8. Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier, *Gilding the Border*, 2018, small island, aluminium sheet and gold leaf, Nang Beach, adjacent to Princes Cave, Krabi, circumference of island approx. 3000 cm, gilded area 200 cm in height. Commissioned by Thailand Biennale 2018. © Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier Studios

Figures 9-16. Film stills from Vong Phaophanit (with text by Claire Oboussier), *All that’s solid melts into air (Karl Marx)*, 2006, single screen projection, dimensions variable, 33’29”. © Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier Studios