

13

Tigers and splashes: An action-oriented art and art education exchange between Bhutan and Switzerland

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Today, many cross- and transcultural discourses are seeking to map the arts globally.¹ These discourses are situated increasingly between diverse art traditions and within several production, distribution, and reception spaces. This is a relatively new phenomenon, which needs to be understood as an effect of ongoing globalization. Since the 1970s, we have been witnessing a rapidly growing worldwide interlinking of economic, social, cultural, financial, and political activities, whose number and complexity are accelerating as we write. Various forms, styles, and conceptions of art are now interrelated, just as practitioners and institutions alike are exchanging ideas about art practice and education across the world.

In 2010, FOA-FLUX, Zürich, and Choki Traditional Art School (CTAS), Thimphu, initiated an exchange project to investigate the above processes in educational settings dedicated to contemporary European and Bhutanese Buddhist art traditions.² The project explored how art practices and understandings in Switzerland and Bhutan are similar yet different and aimed to reveal the future potentials of our particular art notions.

This chapter describes the formative stages of our collaboration. It invites readers to understand a complex exchange process, which involved a constant rethinking of positions, the renegotiation of interests and disposable media, and the joint production of a mural.



FIGURE 13.1 Collaborative mural in Kabesa, Campus of Choki Traditional Art School. Details with crane. Photo © Foa-Flux.

Preliminaries

Motivations and rationales

Our exchange project, which is still ongoing, is rooted deeply in globalization's paradigmatic uncovering and reshaping of the arts and art contexts. From this spring not only a multitude of co-existing or competing art notions and practices, but also a major disorientation about the criteria for discussing art.³ But how to deal with this? What Dave-Mukherji⁴ (2014) raised as a question for art history—"what becomes of art history when the world shrinks into a planet?"—is also a pressing concern for practitioners. Simply put, there is no single answer to this question. Art is always context-based—"however multilayered this context may be."⁵ Thus, our project set out to explore art in global contexts, not exclusively on theoretical grounds but also within practical settings and with an experiential perspective on doing.

Our exchange used art to produce knowledge symmetrically for collective benefit. Neither CTAS nor FOA-FLUX was interested in rubber-stamping existing and imaginary dictonomies ("we and the others"⁶ and "contemporaneity and tradition"). While CTAS suggested a joint workshop to enhance its understanding of contemporary art, FOA-FLUX from the outset envisaged collaboration as an invaluable opportunity to reflect on and challenge the prevailing European notion of art as much as to learn

more about Bhutanese Buddhist art. Both partners, then, were strongly driven by their practical interests to position themselves within the complex reality of art, to question their specific notions, and to further develop these by applying a multiperspective approach that links and repositions their respective arts within a global framework. Our common goal was not to reach a shared understanding of art, but to open up our conceptions for examination from multiple perspectives, to critically explore our assumptions and beliefs, and to take these into consideration for further production.

From its outset, our project thus rested on the multiperspectivity provided by our different notions, by our diverging theoretical and practical perspectives, and by their meta-level comparison. This approach proved highly productive, as it enabled a thicker understanding of particular art notions and their transfer into practice. Our project, then, can be seen as a stream of interrelated events undertaken with various partners in various places at different times.

Partners, encounters, interfaces

Such projects depend much on appropriate funding, partners, and personal encounters. Our project began in 2010, when the directors of FOA-FLUX and CTAS met in Zurich for the first time and discovered their shared awareness of particular art practices and art education (see below). The fundamental desire to collaborate on these questions led us to consider how to best develop and run a mutually beneficial exchange program.⁷

FOA-FLUX⁸ is an independent art research venture operating in transcultural and transnational contexts. Its main goal is to investigate the functions of art in global contexts and to consider the paradigmatic changes in the arts arising from global and glocal processes. FOA-FLUX analyzes selected art phenomena that exemplify glocality⁹ and are linked with local and global structures. As a platform for critical reflection, research, and action, FOA-FLUX interconnects art practice, art theory, and interdisciplinary approaches to gather, generate, and exchange data, information, and knowledge (see below).

Choki Traditional Art School (CTAS)¹⁰ is a privately supported non-profit educational institution offering training in selected traditional Bhutanese arts (painting, woodcarving, weaving, embroidery, etc.). CTAS is located outside Thimphu in the village of Kabesa. It was founded by Dasho Choki Dorji in 1999 to provide training in traditional Bhutanese arts to disadvantaged and underprivileged Bhutanese youth. Besides enabling students to find employment and become self-sustainable, CTAS preserves and promotes the country's traditional arts. A complete course lasts six years, during which students follow a curriculum designed by experienced artists and craftsmen and that includes theory and practice. Because students come from different educational backgrounds, they are also taught basic mathematics, English, and Dzongka. Years 1 and 2 focus on basic drawing and painting and lay the basis for studying other crafts, which students choose from Year 3. Besides their academic development, CTAS also fosters students' spiritual development through special prayer sessions every morning and evening.

The Bhutanese Ministry of Labour and Human Resources, which approved of our joint workshop, suggested the National Institute for Zorig Chusum (NIZC) in Thimphu as a partner. Established by the Bhutanese government in the early 1970s, NIZC is the first institution for traditional arts and crafts to preserve Bhutanese culture and to offer four- to six-year programs in the traditional thirteen arts (*zorig chusum*).

A further partner in both workshops in Thimphu and Bangalore was Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK).¹¹ ZHdK is Switzerland's largest arts school and has five departments (music, art and media, design, performing arts and film, cultural analyses), several research institutes, and a notable design museum. The university offers Bachelor and Master degrees in various arts and related fields.

Conflicting or converging art notions?

Exploring the arts in global contexts implies accounting for different art notions, practices, and their potential intersections. Below, we therefore first outline the prevailing concepts of contemporary art and traditional art. This requires a twofold awareness of these perspectives as verbal devices. On the one hand, these concepts are used to negotiate different understandings of art. On the other, if taken seriously, they limit each other's reach: both become obsolete in a paradigmatic sense while remaining relevant within particular, limited contexts.

Within the last few decades, the term "contemporary art" has widened significantly.¹² In 2009, the influential MIT journal *October* published an edition on "The Contemporary," which collected various relevant statements debating the ongoing shift in art. What has indeed changed is that the "contemporary" now subsumes art practices and art works from various traditions—and that can therefore not be seen as exclusively handing down the Euro-American modern / postmodern tradition. Consequently, contemporary art has evolved into a more inclusive category than into an exclusive one used to classify heterogeneous art phenomena.

Bhutanese artists and arts between tradition and contemporaneity

The creation of art in Bhutan was and remains linked to Buddhist spiritual practice and is used to convey spiritual values. The most important clients for artists were and still are the Dzongs,¹³ where existing works are preserved and new ones commissioned.

Bhutan also has a market for painted symbols in more profane contexts, such as house façades and interiors. Public space abounds with murals, considered "signs of good fortune." Painted vignettes of penises, conches, lotus flowers, fishes, tigers, etc. emblazon façades all over the country.

This functional regime started to change with the rise of globalization and the ensuing contact with other worlds. On the one hand, tourists expressed a desire for

local souvenirs and galleries offered an alternative market. On the other, promoting Bhutan's art tradition in international contexts revealed its long-standing confinement to ethnographic museums and its difficulty of living up to a contemporary art world pervaded by Western art notions.

Bhutanese traditional arts are known as *zorig chusum* (*zo* = the ability to make; *rig* = science or craft; *chusum* = thirteen). These thirteen practices encompass the creative handling of various techniques (such as carving, painting, weaving, smithing) and materials (such as paper, stone, iron, wood, textiles) to produce objects for spiritual and everyday practices. They are listed in Dzonghka as follows:¹⁴ Dezo (paper making), Dozo (= stonework—used in the construction of stone pools and the outer walls of dzongs, gompas, stupas, etc), Garzo (= blacksmithing), Jinzo (= clay arts for religious statues, ritual objects, pottery, the construction of buildings), Lhazo (= painting: thangkas, walls paintings, statues, decorations on furniture and window frames), Lugzo (= bronze casting for bronze roof crests, statues, bells, ritual instruments, jewelry, household items), Parzo (= wood, slate, and stone carving: printing blocks for religious texts, masks, furniture, altars, and the slate images adorning many shrines and altars), Shagzo (= woodturning), Shingzo (= woodworking, for the construction of dzongs and gompas), Thagzo (= weaving), Trôzo (= silver- and gold-smithing: jewelry, ritual objects, and utilitarian household items), Tshazo (= cane and bamboo work), and Tshemazo (= needlework: working with needle and thread to make clothes, boots, or the most intricate of appliqué thangkas).

Zorig chusum date back to the fifteenth century, when Pema Lingpa, a famous master of Tibetan Buddhism, introduced these practices to the Bhutanese people so they could make art merely for themselves and their ritual practices. In the seventeenth century, *zorig chusum* were established by founding a strict regime for the proper teaching of these art forms. It is in these times that *zorig chusum* were formally described and categorized.

Developed through the centuries, the thirteen arts and crafts of Bhutan have been passed down mostly through generations of families with long craftmaking traditions. Thus, the traditional Bhutanese arts not only have religious roots but are also anonymous in terms of individual authorship. Bhutanese artists often lead a nomadic life, journeying through the country to perform their arts and to earn a living. For their commissioned work, performed in situ, they receive board and lodging and a small fee.

This specific context has generated a rich cultural heritage, which provides Bhutanese cultural identity and values with a solid foundation. Not only does the handing down of knowledge from father to son, mother to daughter, preserve a strict system of rules, but it also keeps alive and legitimates traditional arts and crafts, even amid today's rapid economic and technical change. To protect *zorig chusum*, the Royal Government of Bhutan established the National Institute for Zorig Chusum. The government places great emphasis on preserving Bhutanese culture and tradition and on supporting the traditional arts.

Outside Bhutan, the country's traditional arts are displayed in ethnographic museums and in so-called museums of non-European art, as evidence of diverse

traditions within world art. This conceals the fact that, beyond traditional art production, Bhutanese artists aspire to joining international art scenes with their corresponding market systems and exhibition institutions.¹⁵

Engagement

Negotiating interests and approaches

Collaborative art production has become a global phenomenon. Numerous contemporary artists develop their work within micro-communities and through dialogue and exchange. This reveals an increasing interest in considering different perspectives, positions, and needs when working on particular issues. Working *with*, working *together*, evokes a broad range of terms, with the prefix “co-” used to describe these phenomena: *cooperation*, *collaboration*, *collectivity*, *community*, *communication*, *consensus*, *complicity*, etc. Discussing community-based art, Grant Kester speaks of a “dialogical aesthetic” because, broadly speaking, dialogue plays an essential role in producing art besides its use as an artistic medium.¹⁶ Beyond dialogue, FOA-FLUX views negotiation at all levels as an important means of pursuing collaborative projects.

CTAS and FOA-FLUX were both interested in learning more about their specific understanding of art through another perspective. We therefore decided to co-design the workshop contents, tasks, and formats, and to co-organize the events. Thus, from the outset, dialogue and negotiation were pivotal: from conceptualization and content definition through discussing preliminaries and specific interests to choosing formats and practical work. Discussions intensified before meetings and on site.

CTAS interests: Learning about the “contemporary” and reflecting on tradition

CTAS’s interests in our exchange were rooted deeply in the current situation of the arts in Bhutan (an outstanding tradition, changing functions and media, dissenting perceptions inside and outside the country). This raised fundamental questions, which revealed the main reasons behind its interest in our exchange: how to consolidate and transform tradition without destroying its agency.

Bhutan’s rich cultural heritage offers great potential for identification. Notably, the thirteen arts of the *zorig chusum*, grounded in religious and national history, first and foremost serve religious purposes and everyday needs. Such an introverted orientation coheres with Bhutanese society, which looks much more to innate traditions for guidance than to external stimuli. Thus, heritage became and remains a powerful argument for guidance in Bhutan. In a global perspective, however, this contrasts with the widespread concept of modernity and development that denies well-established

customs and traditions. Given the current changes in Bhutan, its growing openness to international exchange challenges art produced exclusively for local use. But how, then, can Bhutan's artistic production achieve international visibility?

Outside Bhutan, as observed, traditional arts are often displayed in ethnographic museums, which positions them as one of many indigenous others of a Western tradition. This situation is changing rapidly, also due to active exchanges, theorization, and the rethinking of art histories within global and South Asian contexts. Nevertheless, Bhutanese artists are challenged to break the borders of these prejudiced institutions and to become visible in the global art world with contemporary contributions.

Training disadvantaged youth, and thereby complementing the National Institute for Zorig Chusum, CTAS is substantially shaping the role and profile of the artist in Bhutan. CTAS is responsible for establishing a feasible role model and for ensuring artists' livelihoods. So how to adapt the role of the Bhutanese artist to present global contexts and conditions while maintaining the means of subsistence?

FOA-FLUX interests and approach: Why art?

There is a consensus that the existing criteria of art history and art theory as practiced in the West fall short of substantial discussion on ongoing art phenomena.¹⁷ This formerly dominant art discourse is informed largely by self-limiting and ideological concepts and biased perceptions of art, which have failed to amount to a convincing framework for studying the ongoing transformations in the arts. Consequently, this art discourse is suffering from a randomness of criteria and methodology.¹⁸

Therefore, studying art in global contexts means examining methodological possibilities for overcoming these limitations. Which methodological framework allows us to study art in global contexts while taking seriously its many traditional traits and contextual specificities?

Given these questions, FOA-FLUX decided to ground its research approach in both theory and practice and to collaborate with like-minded stakeholders from different contexts and who are affiliated with various art traditions. Our research provides the theoretical analysis needed to study art in global contexts *and* fosters practice-based and action-oriented knowledge production. Studying art in global contexts amid dynamic changes and in a multilayered art field involves exploring exemplary interfaces and studying concrete cases. Merging theoretical, practical, and collaborative approaches, FOA-FLUX research produces such interfaces and creates self-reflective and productive contexts. The seeds and the motivation for such interface-projects often spring from exchanging experiences and interests with other art stakeholders. Therefore, collaborative production and the negotiation of interests are essential to FOA-FLUX research on art in global contexts.

FOA-FLUX values art both as a cross-cultural phenomenon to be investigated *and* as a research tool for investigation. Such an extended understanding of art departs from the prevailing aesthetic and essentialist perspectives of a European tradition championing

a highly exclusive notion of art. To overcome this limitation, FOA-FLUX research draws on an anthropological definition of art as a cross-cultural category that meets distinctive needs in every context, especially on Alfred Gell's view of art as a form of action.¹⁹ This approach refrains from understanding art through (seemingly) convincing definitions or through viewing existing phenomena solely through the lenses of such definitions. Rather, it adopts an anthropological framework to value art as a powerful social agent. Instead of predefining what art is, this approach reveals and describes the functions attributed to art in particular contexts. Furthermore, it considers art in relational terms, identifying its constituents and describing their relations. Thus, it asks "Why and where is art?" and not the essentialist question "What is art?"

Gell's anthropological approach provides a promising starting point for studying art in global contexts. It does not, however, supply everything needed for detailed study. FOA-FLUX has therefore devised a set of methodological tools (GLOCAL SET).²⁰ This set comprises useful research procedures and principles based on the transdisciplinary methodological knowledge of global studies, anthropology, cultural studies, and art history.

Over time, these preliminary assumptions have led FOA-FLUX to carefully consider the interrelations between data collection, knowledge production, collaboration, and practical needs—which, in turn, has resulted in a particular research design:

1 Data, information, knowledge production

FOA-FLUX collects the much-needed data on the globally extended art field. By data, we mean an accurate representation of the research context including facts, observations, descriptions, and even practical experience. Responding to an overarching research question, this mode of data collection is context-driven and self-reflexive, and enables focused knowledge production.

2 Collaboration and negotiation

FOA-FLUX researches art fields from within—that is, *with*, and not for, possible users: we plan and conduct projects *with* practitioners and theorists whose interests and aims collude. Consequently, research objectives and the corresponding research questions emerge from the convergence of more than one perspective. This multiperspectivity (arising from the research partners' cultural, social, and individual differences) means that these collaborative strategies are not aimed at canonization, but instead at opening up a transdisciplinary field of constant encounter, questioning, and negotiation.

3 Practice-based and action-oriented research

Art practice offers not only a direct form of experience but also a mode of knowledge production.²¹ Surprisingly, little attention has so far been paid to such artistic research. Acknowledging artistic practice as a research component refers to the concept of action-oriented research, defined as a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations

and validated in practice.²² Adapted to the art field, this involves studying a specific art context or situation using art and transdisciplinary method-clusters to explore the functions of art in global contexts. Because this action-oriented approach comes from within, and closely interlinks the research process and its context, it is chiefly practical and helps stakeholders to improve their skills, or indeed to better cope with a concrete situation.

In sum, FOA-FLUX combines action and reflection and fosters bottom-up collaborative strategies. It creates and maintains interest-driven research communities, organizes safe spaces for dissenting opinions, approaches and aims, and promotes dialogue²³ and negotiation as key methods.

Places of encounter

Our meetings in Switzerland and Bhutan revealed that aside from planning, various specific issues needed attention, including new contextual features or dissenting perceptions. Fundamental pre-collaboration questions included “How to organize decision making?” “How to call for stewardship on site?” and “What is reasonable for outsiders?”

The Zurich context: Teaching the contemporary

At a 2010 exhibition on Bhutanese art at Zurich’s Rietberg Museum (“Bhutan—Heilige Kunst aus dem Himalaya”), Sonam Choki and three CTAS students were invited to act as *thangka* painters and to pay tribute to their tradition for the benefit of a Western audience. Besides their performance, the CTAS group wanted to visit a local art school and to learn more about art education in Switzerland.

Initial contact between the Bhutanese and Swiss artists and teachers was established through the Swiss person in charge of the Bhutanese group during their stay in Switzerland. This call reached Annemarie Bucher and Dominique Lämmli while co-teaching a seminar on art in global contexts (“Why art?”) aiming to provide BA Fine Arts students with a multilevel perspective on contemporary art fields worldwide. A meeting was arranged, and the Bhutanese group joined a seminar session, where all students were asked to present their works. Essentially, the Swiss students’ works represented the dominant paradigm of contemporary Western art, especially its focus on individual artistic authorship and research. By contrast, the Bhutanese students showed their traditional Bhutanese paintings, which they had been producing at the Rietberg Museum.

This situation reflected not only two obviously different art notions but also two very different teaching concepts. On the one hand stood academic instruction

aimed at promoting individual artistic expression as well as critical reflection on aesthetic norms, artistic means, and their contexts. On the other stood an oral tradition comprising skills and techniques combined with a predefined process handed down for generations. CTAS and ZHdK teachers understood art not only as a complex subject to teach but also as a challenge for future developments and positionings within the arts. What emerged very plainly from the seminar was a shared interest in how to best ensure a successful and sustainable future for art education.

The Swiss/Bhutanese group also visited an exhibition of works by Klaudia Schifferle and Tatjana Gerhard at the Helmhaus Zürich. The visit led to a fundamental but fruitful controversy. The works of Schifferle and Gerhard, two Swiss women artists from different generations, focus on extreme physical and mental states, such as joy and despair, tenderness and violence, seduction and abuse. Both artists act out various identities through their paintings and sculptures. Whereas the Swiss participants acknowledged the exhibition as a referent for their own work, for the Bhutanese participants it was a disturbing experience that amounted to a clear statement: these works would not be recognized as art in Bhutan. The distorted forms, as well as the blurred lines and colors, would be perceived as a provocation and could never fulfil the intended purpose of art.²⁴ This encounter plainly revealed a strong shared interest in an open and direct exchange about different *and* differing perceptions, expectations, and aims. Whereas both groups were aware of their conflicting notions, this prevented them neither from openly stating their views and arguments nor from expressing genuine interest in each other's reactions.

The Thimphu context: Teaching tradition

One and a half years after the first meeting in Zurich, CTAS suggested organizing a workshop in Bhutan, which included the possibility of inviting students from ZHdK. Soon afterwards, CTAS and FOA-FLUX began co-designing a workshop along the following lines:

Content: We agreed that the workshop would question tradition and contemporaneity and embrace both traditional and contemporary artistic strategies as appropriate guiding principles for art education.

Participants: CTAS wanted to involve more local stakeholders such as the National Institute for Zorig Chusum in Thimphu.

Development process: We co-defined which content would be addressed during the workshop and who would take the lead in which sequences. Consequently, we all became participants in each other's workshop-sections. The exchange worked so well because from the start we knew each other's interests and expectations and based our collaboration on the belief that each party knew best how to create an action-oriented setting that introduced their particular viewpoints and practical expertise.

In April 2013, after nearly a year's planning via e-mail and Skype, a delegation of two Swiss teachers and researchers and five ZHdK students traveled to Bhutan to participate in a two-week joint learning program entitled "Our traditions: Re-thinking contemporary art and traditional art."

The workshop took place at the CTAS campus in Kabesa. The Swiss participants were invited to stay on campus, which also houses most of the local students. For the Swiss students, this closeness facilitated an intense everyday experience that enabled them to gain a foothold in daily Bhutanese routines and to behave accordingly. Life at CTAS follows strict rules; teaching and learning are accompanied by religious ceremonies and traditional folk activities such as archery, dancing, and singing according to a formal timetable. Days begin with a traditional early morning assembly, where spiritual and social rituals are performed and discussed. Apart from reciting prayers, the director gives instructions and provides information.

The workshop involved fifty participants: Sonam Choki and three CTAS instructors,²⁵ eighteen final-year students and eight students from different specializations; one instructor²⁶ and twelve students from NIZC; one instructor²⁷ and five students from MAF; one researcher-cum-observer²⁸ from IFCAR. Group composition seemed somewhat lopsided: a minority of Swiss female participants (in their mid-twenties to late forties) faced a majority of much younger and mostly male Bhutanese students. This created a particular relationship among participants, which mirrored customary teaching practices and gender relations in Switzerland and Bhutan. Both sides, however, accepted the imbalance as part of the cooperation.

CTAS, as the host, sequenced the sessions. The first session was dedicated to the question of the contemporary. The introduction questioned the terms "traditional" and "contemporary": What do they denote? How are they related to "Traditional Art" and "Contemporary Art?" The introduction concluded that both forms have their traditions *and* are contemporary, suggesting that their usual designations are somewhat misleading and imply value judgments. The introduction also established terms for negotiating and examining the different art notions and practices.

The following sessions were sequenced according to local courtesy habits: the guests from abroad were followed by the guests from Thimpu, who were followed by the hosts. The Swiss students were asked to create situations reflecting their own art practice (including key issues and methods) to facilitate active participation.²⁹ NIZC and CTAS participants gave brief introductions to selected *zorig chusum* arts (painting, carving, weaving, embroidery). Mr. Tenzin, a NIZC instructor, presented a twofold approach to art to highlight the current situation of Bhutanese artists between tradition and contemporaneity: predefined rules concerning forms and techniques on the one hand, experimentation with these elements to achieve individual expression and tackle everyday issues on the other.

CTAS teacher Mr. Katru and his students demonstrated the technical and symbolic dimensions of color and paint. They showed participants step by step how to paint and draw clouds and flowers. Other CTAS-led sessions (Ms. Tenzin and Ms. Dorji) displayed wool-dyeing and weaving techniques using local products and plants.



FIGURE 13.2 Collaborative mural in Kabesa, Campus of Choki Traditional Art School. Details with tiger and four friends. Photo © Foa-Flux.



FIGURE 13.3 Collaborative mural in Kabesa, Campus of Choki Traditional Art School. Details with tourists. Photo © Foa-Flux.

Production

Collaborative mural painting

Already in the early workshop preparation phase, the idea of collaboratively painting a mural arose. This offered an unexpressed traditional basis for developing a material art work drawing on both traditions.

Bhutan has a long tradition of figurative and ornamental murals in profane and sacral contexts. These so-called lucky signs appear on house façades and complex narrative wall paintings in Buddhist temples. The murals are geographically concentrated and are therefore an important signifier of Bhutan's cultural landscape. In preparation for their collaborative painting, workshop participants studied exemplary Bhutanese murals on the CTAS campus and in its surroundings.

In Switzerland, murals are a traditional category of public art. Sgraffitos and mosaics appear on town halls, school buildings, churches, and other significant façades, but seem to be waning. However, significant amounts are spent on site-specific wall paintings and on other commissioned works (artists range from blue-chip to local). Recently, street art has also entered the public sphere. Graffiti can be seen as extending the mural as a traditional artist medium in subcultural contexts. Born in the subcultural contexts of big cities, this uncurated art reclaims the streets with various visual strategies (mostly signs and tags).



FIGURE 13.4 *The first layer of the mural represents a traditional Bhutanese landscape.*
Photo © Foa-Flux.



FIGURE 13.5 *The second layer adds an abstract color pattern with loosely poured paint from the top of the wall. Photo © Foa-Flux.*



FIGURE 13.6 *The third layer covers the first two layers with blotted paint. Photo © Foa-Flux.*



FIGURE 13.7 *The fourth and last layer consists of figurative and narrative inserts. Photo © Foa-Flux.*

The making of the mural

CTAS chose the wall to be used for the collaborative mural: located on campus, it was 30 meters long and 2 meters high. When FOA-FLUX and the Swiss students arrived, the finishing touches were being applied to the wall. Technical aspects—which paint to use, which painting strategies to apply, how to involve everyone, how to build up the image—were discussed by CTAS, FOA-FLUX/ZHdK, and NIZC instructors. A mixture of natural pigments and synthetic paint was considered best suited to the local climate and the smooth surface.

Negotiations also covered meaning and form (which iconic or emblematic style?). The possibilities of mixing visuals from traditional Buthanese art and contemporary art were carefully discussed and the process of collaboratively developing image-solutions designed. Other aspects of the collaboration were also decided (action leaders, group composition, in-process decision making).

The instructors decided to work in several layers with each covering the whole wall. The first layer was a simple line drawing of mountain scenery. While the students were busy in the workshop, three instructors, one from each institution (CTAS, NIZC, FOA-FLUX/ZHdK), drew the horizon on the cement using charcoal to make it visible.

When the actual painting started, participants were asked to cover the wall with white paint, but not to touch the lines and not to cover the sky. The result was an

impressive huge landscape. At this stage, the wall already displayed an interesting image. Next, all fifty participants took a cup filled with blue color, lined up in front of the wall, and let the color drip down the wall from above. Then everyone crumpled up a piece of paper, dipped it into green, yellow and red paint, and pressed it against the wall wherever they liked. So what first seemed to be a jumble of formal languages became a common basis for further work. Painting an unconventional layer over the given layout was not understood as a destructive action, but as a serious contribution to a new, collectively designed image. The initial mountain scenery turned into a noisy visual surface, which called for further action. Participants³⁰ were asked to propose specific motifs. The instructors had decided to run a competition to choose the best motif. But the students had already divided up the wall among themselves, thus knowing which section was theirs and allowing each motif to be realized.

The fact that all motifs could be painted raised the question of how to create an overall dynamic. A painting, be it traditional Bhutanese or contemporary, works when its many elements come into a thrilling interplay. With so many motifs, and with participants knowing which surface to cover, there was a significant risk that all groups would choose similar dimensions and thereby create an all-too-even image. Therefore, it was decided to paint all motifs, but to predefine their dimensions. Everyone seemed happy with this decision, and the final layer was added the next day.

The final layer was created by groups of students finalizing the multilayered ground with their own iconic ideas, such as tigers, four friends, cranes, tourists, and other mythical creatures. This prolific phase of detailed finishing involved both innovative and traditional image production strategies.

Within a week (the actual painting was done in two days with a few days for motif design) a completely new combination of motifs had emerged from our collaboration.

Careful collaborative planning made the actual painting and the concrete motif decisions by all workshop participants feel like a gentle and somehow self-evident process. Here, then, conceptual decisions and implementation converged as a result of collective negotiation.

The richness of traditional skills and motifs was negotiated in shared decision-making and implemented by all participants, leading to a playful and insightful collective experience. The result was stunning: there, before us, was the energy of fifty painters mustered in a short, intense period, dedicated to shaping a vast surface and demonstrating the dynamics and verve of collaborative production.

Learnings

Outcome

The collective wall painting on the CTAS campus emerged from rolling wave planning and revealed amazing novel formal and discursive qualities. These resulted on the one

hand from collaboration and negotiation, and on the other hand they represented and produced a multiperspective context comprising different art notions and practices reflecting the current global situation of the arts.

The painting is a visible milestone in a project that extends far beyond the mere conception and production of material work. This chapter has illustrated how an art and art education exchange project might be organized and conducted based on mutual trust and respect. By integrating different positions (theoretical understandings and practical experiences) into shared knowledge production, we not only collected but also generated data on art in global contexts. By data, we mean all kinds of findings on the forms and functions of art gathered, gained, and produced by observation, participation, and interaction in a specific context. Such data forms a robust basis for further reflection and negotiation and might initiate new exchange projects.

Learning and researching through mutual artistic production shifts the focus from what an ideal art context requires, from following its rules, to what is possible in a specific context. Our approach enables those involved to engage directly with co-designed content and work processes. We see ideas not as guiding principles, but as open questions to be considered and integrated into one's specific context. Mutual respect and open communication are crucial to achieving broader understanding and greater insights for everyone.

Obviously, such short-term collaborative art production runs the risk of being criticized for remaining superficial. This might be true if one claims a deeper understanding of the so-called "other" from an exclusive perspective. But it is certainly not true of experiencing a concrete situation as part of a collective of practicing artists or of a research community. Thus the outcome in our case served not so much a closeted research institution, but each and every person involved. Hence, such projects can best be evaluated from within, by their participants together with their fellow participants.

Notes

- 1 Hans Belting, Jacob Birken, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel, *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011); Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg, *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets and Museums* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009); Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried van Damme (eds), *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008).
- 2 foa-flux.net; www.chokischool.com [accessed 12.10.2016]; see also Society Switzerland-Bhutan (ed.), *Far Apart and Close Together: Bhutan and Switzerland—Partners in Development Since 1950*.
- 3 "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary,'" *October*, 130 (Fall 2009); "The And: An Expanded Questionnaire on the Contemporary," *Field Notes*, 01 (Hong Kong: Asian Art Archive, 2012); Annemarie Bucher and Dominique Lämmli, *Art in Action*, exhibition booklet (Zurich: FOA-FLUX, 2014) available online: foa-flux.net; Dominique Lämmli, *Art in Action: Make People Think!* (Zurich: FOA-FLUX, 2014) available online:

- foa-flux.net/texts; Dominique Lämmli, *Why Art? Contemporary, Traditional and Global Art* (Zurich: FOA-FLUX, 2010).
- 4 Parul Dave-Mukherji, "Art History and its Discontents in Global Times," in Jill H. Casid and Aruna D'Souza (eds), *Art History in the Wake of the Global Turn* (Massachusetts: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2014).
 - 5 Dominique Lämmli, *Gobalist or Glocalist View? Taking Preliminary Assumptions Seriously* (Zurich: FOA-FLUX, 2012) available online: foa-flux.net/texts [accessed 12.10.2016].
 - 6 We have to be careful not to shift "othering" into the negotiation of different art notions and practices. On othering as a strategy of alienation, see Gayatri C. Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (eds), *The Spivak Reader* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 203ff.
 - 7 2010: Seminar sessions at ZHdK on "Culturally informed notions of art," conducted by Bucher/Lämmli at ZHdK, Zurich; 2013: First workshop (CTAS and FOA-FLUX) in Thimpu, Bhutan: "Re-thinking contemporary art and traditional art"; 2014: Second workshop (CTAS, FOA-FLUX and Srishti) at Srishti in Bangalore, India: "Talking Sites (Bangalore)"; 2015: art production (CTAS and FOA-FLUX) in Schmerikon, Switzerland; 2016: Third workshop (CTAS and FOA-FLUX) planned in Thimphu, Bhutan. Besides its initiators (FOA-FLUX and CTAS), the project has at times involved others institutions.
 - 8 See foa-flux.net. The private research venture was founded by artist Dominique Lämmli and art-and-landscape historian Annemarie Bucher, who both also teach at Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK).
 - 9 With the concept "glocality" we refer to Roland Robertson, "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity," in Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson (eds), *Global Modernities* (London: Sage, 1995), pp. 25–44.
 - 10 See www.chokischool.com [accessed 12.10.2016]
 - 11 www.zhdk.ch [accessed 12.10.2016]
 - 12 See, for example, *What is Contemporary Art?* e-flux reader 2010; Dominique Lämmli, *Art in Action*; Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (London: Prentice Hall, 2011); Julian Stallabrass, *Contemporary Art: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary'"; "The And: An Expanded Questionnaire."
 - 13 A Dzong is a distinctive type of Buddhist fortress architecture.
 - 14 See *The Dragon's Gift: The Art of Bhutan* (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2009); see also http://www.bhutantravelportal.com/miscellaneous/thirteen_crafts.php [accessed 21.3.2015].
 - 15 A renowned artist in this regard is Asha Kama, who received his traditional art education in Bhutan and then studied in the U.K. where he earned a degree in media communication. He has built his reputation with exhibitions, art awards, and grants. He is also one of the founders of VAST, a voluntary artist's studio in Thimphu. VAST was set up in 1998 by a group of contemporary artists as a non-profit and non-governmental organization (NGO) with the aim of providing an opportunity to Bhutanese youth to develop their potential talents and to share social responsibilities through artistic explorations. VAST promotes the importance and the value of visual art and a corresponding contemporary expression for taking part in national, regional, and international art events.
 - 16 Annemarie Bucher, *"Co-art": Remarks on Collaboration, Community Building,*

and *Addressing the Public in Contemporary Art Projects* (Zurich: FOA-FLUX, 2015) available online: foa-flux.net/texts; Tom Finkelpearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013). For “dialogical aesthetics” see Chapter 3 in Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004); Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

- 17 Dominique Lämmli, *Art in Action*.
- 18 See “Questionnaire on ‘The Contemporary’”
- 19 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998); Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretative Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers, *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright, *Anthropology and Art Practice* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). By analyzing art objects from a subject’s perspective, Gell (1998) reveals an active aspect of art and therefore declares art as a powerful agent within a specific social context. According to Gell, art objects are seen as direct components of social relations; the making of objects is a means of influencing the thoughts and actions of the members of a community or society.
- 20 Annemarie Bucher and Dominique Lämmli, “The Glocal Set,” unpublished paper (Zurich: FOA-FLUX, 2012).
- 21 On artistic research, see The Hague Reader 2010: *Can Art be Demonstrated? The Artist as a Researcher*, a two-day international conference on artistic research and the Ph.D. in visual art and design, Royal Academy of Arts (KABK), The Hague (2010).
- 22 Action research identifies and investigates problems within a specific situation. It is evaluative, reflective, and participatory as it aims to improve and provide the basis for collaborative, team-based investigation. See also Stephen Kemmis, *The Action Research Planner* (Geelong: Deaking University Press, 1988).
- 23 See Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces*.
- 24 In Bhutan, to walk by such a painting when, for example, leaving the house would provoke bad luck and maybe one would have to encounter such terrible human psychological states in reality.
- 25 Mr. Katru, Ms. Dorji, Ms. Tenzin.
- 26 Mr. Tenzin.
- 27 Dominique Lämmli, artist, philosopher, professor of drawing and painting at ZHdK.
- 28 Annemarie Bucher, art historian, curator, art critic, landscape historian, senior lecturer at ZHdK.
- 29 Ideally, they would use the opportunity to create their art while allowing everyone involved—the other Swiss participants and the Bhutanese participants—to contribute in an essential way.
- 30 They were grouped such that all groups included CTAS, NIZC, and ZHdK students.

