

# मन्या अनुभवाची वधिरहात्त

mànya anubhavasya vigãhêàti

## Isolates of Valid Perception

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## **What is my research question ?**

**In what ways can the medieval Indian notion of *prajna* - wisdom realising emptiness - be fruitfully utilised as a basis for making photographic art ?**

## **Why is this important to me ?**

For many years, during moments of artistic creativity, I have become increasingly sensitive to what I can best describe as an affective encounter with the Indian ontological notion of *dependent origination*.

The purpose of this AVPhD project is to conduct an intellectual enquiry that delves into the progressively subtle levels of embodied interaction contained in moments of clarity and flow that often accompany the process of artistic expression.

By identifying and articulating the flashes of embodied 'knowing' that keenly interest me, and examining them in the light of the endemic assumptions that underlie my habitual misreading of quotidian actuality, my purpose is to establish a discipline that assists me in consciously inhabiting such instants with a view to rationally expanding the creative possibilities that lie therein.

My aim is to enter into pursuit of a photographic equivalent for the paradox of impermanence and immanence that resides in the unrepeatable configurations that make up the flow of discernable moments, and to enunciate my process with integrity and sophistication.

In setting myself the ostensibly unachievable (yet artistically commonplace) task of representing the intangible, the possibility of discovering what the particularities of such an undertaking might reveal, begins to emerge. A crucial element, I suspect, is to suspend the temptation to conceptually preempt the specifics of potential outcomes.

### **What are the outcomes ?**

The main outcomes are a gallery exhibition and accompanying book comprising of both text and image.

### **What is my methodology ?**

The hermeneutic core of my textual research is Chapter 9: *Prajna*, of Shantideva's Bodhicaryavatara (Often translated as A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life.) This text is widely regarded as a pinnacle of Pala Dynasty Madhyamaka Prasangika philosophy dating from 8th Century (Christian Era) Nalanda – a medieval 'university' in North East India. Shantideva is popularly characterized as a scholar-saint whose exegetic teachings at Nalanda are based on surviving Sanskrit sutras (such as the *Prajnaparamita* – The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom sutra) ascribed to Siddharta Guatama, the historical Buddha (circa 500BC).

*Prajna* – wisdom realizing emptiness – is a foundational notion in Madhyamaka Prasangika epistemology. My textual research examines the fundamental importance of this term from the standpoint of contemporary critical theory. Merleu-Pontian phenomenology together with current theories that prioritise embodiment, affect and aesthetic performativity are important avenues of investigation. ***However, clearly defining my critical research framework is the most challenging aspect of the project for me. This is the area that I most seek guidance with.***

My methodology also involves the consideration of a spectrum of scholarly findings from research conducted over the last fifty years or so into Pala Period aesthetics that originate in an era in which Mahdhyamaka Prasangika logic is the dominant philosophical 'ideology'. For example, a key text is *Imaging Wisdom: Seeing and Knowing in the Art of Indian Buddhism* by Jacob N Kinnard. (Please see indicative bibliography.)

As a parallel to analytical reason, a perhaps unusual aspect of my methodology involves exploring the tradition of tantric visualisation as a means of inhabiting

embodied intelligence and embracing ocular investigation as a source of artistic navigation. Tantric visualisation practice directs single-pointed concentration during meditative equipoise towards engaging the body's subtlest physiological elements, commonly referred to as winds, channels, chakras, knots and drops.

Around a quarter of the surviving teachings of the historical Buddha are on the subject of Vajrayana - a term that signifies the Indian Buddhist as opposed to the Hindu tantric tradition. Visualisation in Vajrayana foregrounds subtle incarnate networks of energy channels by initially mimicking, then actively participating in the pre-conscious psycho-physiological patterning and movement that occurs during the life cycle of a living being - conception, formation, birth, life, death, intermediate state and rebirth - as conceived in medieval India.

The purpose of cultivating (even imaginary) ocular familiarity with these habitually unnoticed processes is to destabilise mundane 'ordinariness' and expand the speed, accuracy, clarity, context and flow of sensate perception.

### **What does my practice consist of ?**

The following is an example artwork on the subject of *Selflessness and Identity* that I am devising in liaison with a partner in Singapore. The *Identity* project sets out to observe how adopted modalities of personal identity metamorphose amidst the velocity of accelerating change in two global cities over the last 25 years.

*Identity* explores the analogical pairings of perception and impermanence; cognition and emptiness; and subjectivity and selflessness. Artworks in the project aim to embed the intricacy of internal mechanisms of perceptual motion inside the underlying structure of images.

Work under way consists of creating still and moving-image artefacts based on embodied narratives of connected isolation in two culturally mixed but starkly contrasting cities - Singapore and London. Artworks draw on the specificities of

each city and contrast differences as well as similarities between the two. Partners from each city do not discuss how work is devised.

On my side of the collaboration, non-native inhabitants of London are identified in a casting process. Photographic still and moving-image artworks are then created based on individual testimonies from participants.

Imagine that you and I are standing at opposite sides of a room / street / city / country / continent / planet. I may confidently declare that I am here and you are there. You may claim exactly the same thing, even although your here is my there and vice versa.

Yet there is no inherently existing here or there for either of us. My here exists only in relation to you, and your here exists only in relation to me. Nevertheless, we are both spatially accurate in the context of our individual experiences.

It would certainly be a mistake for either of us to assert that our here does not exist at all; nonetheless it might be helpful to acknowledge that each of our heres exists only in dependence on the other.

Similarly, the individual and collective *Identities* we inhabit persist only in relation to the reciprocity of our perceptions. While there is little doubt that I exist and you exist as living entities; it can be compellingly argued that in many important respects I only exist **because** you exist.

This project involves casting 20 actors and using an experienced facilitator to adapt and coordinate a series of Shambhala Art participatory exercises as devised by the late Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan Lama who escaped from the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959 on foot across the Himalayas into India aged 19. Trungpa consequently taught Madhyamaka poetics and art extensively in the UK and USA during the 1970s and 80s.

One of the exercises in *Identity* involves a participant gazing directly into the eyes of a partner participant. This exercise is used to make a portrait of the subject. A high definition cinema camera such as a Red Epic or an Arri Alexa films the subject at a very high frame rate, probably 400 frames per second.

When this footage is replayed at normal speed (25 frames per second) the result is significant slow-motion. Slow-motion footage is then further slowed in postproduction, perhaps to 10,000 frames per second. When played back, the result is barely perceptible motion.

An essential element of the artwork is placing the camera lens directly in the axis of the gaze of the participant. To achieve this, a device called an EyeDirect Interrotron (similar to a television Autocue device) is utilised. Components of the gaze such as what the participant engages with are altered to produce a range of unpredictable and varied emotional effects.

Further still and moving images are generated in each of the participants' environment. These artworks also derive from the testimony of participants, however testimony is not utilised explicitly. Rather, perceptual themes relating to identity are subtly woven into artworks through sensory means alone. Some may appear as green screen backdrops to slow-motion portraits.

A number of forms of exhibition are envisaged such as a panoramic projected wall installation utilising an array of projectors and incorporating corresponding sound design that similarly represents internally embodied movement.

### **How does my textual research relate to my practice ?**

This is primarily an art project. Critical research runs parallel with creative activity. Both components profoundly influence each other, but do not intersect explicitly or normatively. The trajectory of the initial two or three years of the project is likely to be determined predominantly by reflexive practice considerations . . .

Each photographic representation describes the abstraction of three dimensional space and uni-dimensional time, firstly in the comfortable dimensions of height and width. The third dimension of space - depth - is rendered perceptible via embedded visual cues such as planes of focus, focal perspective and tonality of luminance. Time is ascribed by the chosen means of encoding the spectrum between motion and stillness in a fluid sequence of unitary moments.

This abstraction of space-time induces a certain sensitivity in the perceiving observer that opens imaginative imperatives otherwise hidden behind the habitual performativity of mundane perception. The narrative tension that emerges between pictorial elements suggests both impermanence (motion) and immanence (stillness) - an eternal beginning and ending: a perceptual mandala.

The photographic image as catalyst fuses a union (yoga) between the ritual taming of fleeting perception and the transience of the object's retinal persistence: a union that de-stabilises duality. Immanent actuality is 'imaginatively' rendered perceptible in the fragile nature of presence / lack of intrinsic permanence within the universe of the image; an emptiness that is paradoxically full of infinite potentiality – the ground of *dependent origination* that is replete with what I am contingently naming *Isolates of Valid Perception*: a form of ocular knowing that is linguistically un-sayable.

Artistic reference points range from Marina Abramovich, Cindy Sherman, Bill Viola, Duane Michals, Andy Warhol (portraits), Odilon Redon, Ad Reihnhardt, Vija Clemins, Harry Gruyeart, Laurie Anderson, Wassily Kandinsky, Yves Klein, Chogyam Trungpa, as well as Zen calligraphy, archery and flower arranging . . . Film influences include Errol Morris (The Thin Blue Line), Chris Marker (Staring Back), Godfrey Reggio (Koyannisqatsi) and Thomas Balmes (The Himalayan Boy and the TV Set).

**What is my research context ?**

To the best of my knowledge, no-one has previously drawn so precisely on the specifics of Madhyamaka Prasangika logic as a basis for artistic output. The majority of Mahayana Buddhist influenced contemporary art appears to emerge from a Zen tradition that entered California from Japan in the 1950s.

My own trajectory pursues Madhyamaka Prasangika as preserved most eloquently in the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism – Gelug, Kagyu, Nyingma and Sakya. (Buddhist orthodoxy as a living tradition only marginally exists in contemporary India.) The Tibetan epistemological tradition continues to spread around the world via the diaspora that was caused by the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959, and the systematic political oppression that has been applied ever since.

Contrary to prevailing ethnocentric conceptions that Eastern philosophy is founded on mysticism and magic (and is therefore unsuitable for academic consideration), Madhyamaka Prasangika logic is profoundly rational, not mystical. Its tenets have been rigorously dissected and critically scrutinized over a period of centuries since the era of its 'founder' Nagarjuna in the 4th century. By the time Shantideva encounters the tradition in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, it is a firmly established, highly sophisticated philosophical system that has given rise to a flourishing of poetics and art throughout Asia. This project re-examines these foundational tenets through the lens of contemporary photographic practice.



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**Madhyamaka (Svatantrika sub-school):**

Bhavaviveka: 'Tarkajvala' (Blaze of Reasoning)

Bhavaviveka: 'Pranjapradipa' (Lamp of Wisdom)  
Jnanagarbha: 'Satyadavayavibhanga' (Differentiation of the Two Truths)  
Kamalishila: 'Bhavanakrama' (Stages of Meditation)  
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