Individualism with Values: The History and Everyday Ethics of Contemporary Art in Bhutan

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation, based on over three years of fieldwork, explores the cultural politics of contemporary art in Bhutan. Beginning in the 1950s and culminating in the transition to democracy in 2008, Bhutan has undergone profound social changes. Throughout these changes, the government has prioritized preserving Bhutanese culture, including in official understandings of what development means. Rather than using GDP to measure the country's well-being, Bhutan's government organizes development around the concept of GNH or Gross National Happiness, a concept believed to have deep roots in Bhutan's Buddhist culture. I argue that the tensions between continuity and change are framed in ethical terms in Bhutan. As Bhutanese navigate balancing tradition with cosmopolitan modernity, their king has called for an "individualism of values" as a corrective to "individualism at the cost of community and fraternity." While much previous work in Bhutan has documented culture, comparatively little research has examined the process of change or what the efforts to preserve cultural values means for the day to day life of Bhutanese. The realm of contemporary art, I show, provides an avenue to consider how Bhutanese are negotiating competing ethical values during these times of dramatic change.

Beyond the study of Bhutan, this dissertation contributes to the already rich discussion about agency and cultural politics often explored through art by drawing on recent discussions of the anthropology of ethics. Looking at ethics helps understand agency by examining not only how people act but also fashion themselves as particular types of actors. Using an ethnographic lens to study everyday social action and interaction through art allows the ethical negotiations underway in Bhutan to come into focus. Beginning with a history of Bhutanese contemporary art and overview of the official discourse on national identity, I turn to an ethnography of contemporary art. I show how artists prioritize some forms of individualism more than others, and work to situate themselves within the broader social fabric. Finally, I look at how contemporary artists use traditional Buddhist art, both balancing their pursuit of artistic subjectivity with Buddhist values and the sense of obligation to preserve Bhutanese cultural traditions.

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Despite all of this support, the dissertation here is still an imperfect product. I have tried my best to support an argument I stand behind, but undoubtedly there are misunderstandings that remain. Both the argument and any mistakes are my own and do not reflect the views of anyone stated above.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

During a visit to one of the six or so contemporary art galleries one can now find in Bhutan's capital city of Thimphu, a contemporary artist explained to me, "Artists talk about freedom, but freedom is not free." He elaborated, "human beings need restriction, we have to live as a society and not just as individuals. If we just do whatever it leads to junk." As I interviewed artists for my research, a tension between "freedom" and needing to "live as a society" manifested around the dilemma of figuring out how to simultaneously respect and distinguish themselves from tradition. Contemporary art, I argue in this dissertation, tactically expands the discourse on national culture to make room for an identity that emphasizes expressive individualism. In this way, art sheds light on the experience of modernity in Bhutan and how Bhutanese respond to state policies of cultural preservation.

Contemporary art in Bhutan—as distinct from the *zorig chusum* or 13 traditional arts—sits at a crossroad between understandings of the self derived from global modernity and those rooted in Bhutanese Buddhism and national identity. During my fieldwork, many Bhutanese participating in contemporary art spoke of the need to temper individual self-expression with respect for tradition and Bhutanese values that emphasize both personal conduct and the interconnectedness between individuals. These conversations echoed broader anxiety in Bhutan about liberal notions of the self crowding out Bhutanese values. Concerns about rising self-interestedness and the loss of Bhutanese values have grown with the transition to democracy in 2008 and the loosening of many of Bhutan's policies of cultural preservation.

Contemporary art, I argue, is an ideal place for exploring how Bhutanese understand and work out the tensions between an increasing emphasis on individualistic notions of the self the variety of values that emphasize links to shared culture and the past. Reflecting the broader

understanding of the values at stake as a result of profound social change in Bhutan, the title of the dissertation comes from a speech by the Fifth King of Bhutan Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck. Addressing a graduation in Calcutta, the king called for an "individualism of values" as a corrective to "individualism at the cost of community and fraternity," what he called a "leadership of the self" (Tobgay 2010). Although the king spoke in Calcutta, the speech reflects the dominant thinking in Bhutan about current cultural dilemmas. The then opposition party leader, Tshering Tobgay, said the speech was "even more relevant for every one of us at home" (ibid).

Contemporary artists often spoke to me in very similar terms to those found in the king's speech. However, part of what makes art tactical, I show, is that while the terms of the dilemma (individualism and values) are often the same as the hegemonic discourse in Bhutan, the emphasis is different in significant ways. In the speech, the king portrays individualism as something not inherently ethical that needs to be limited by other values. Contemporary artists complement this sense of the need to discipline individualism with an emphasis on the need to break from tradition and push conventional wisdom. The dissertation explores what this looks like in practice and what the experience of artists in Bhutan can tell us about how people work to carve out new subject positions within cultural worlds defined by power.

Cultural politics of the self

I seek to bring together both an interest in cultural politics and a recent interest in ethics. Cultural politics is the complex interlinking of power and culture. Sherry Ortner defines cultural politics as:

> the struggles over the official symbolic representations of reality that shall prevail in a given social order at a given time. One could argue that they are the most important kinds of politics, for they seek to control the terms in which all other politics, and all other aspects of life in that society, will take place. (Ortner 1989, 200)

A rich literature in anthropology has addressed how competition over meaning and what Pierre Bourdieu calls "symbolic power" plays out in society (Bourdieu, Loic, and Farage 1994). Raymond Williams's description of cultural hegemony as culture plus power is also instructive. There are in Bhutan certain representations, particularly those supported by the state, that fit what Williams refers to as "official" culture, the hegemonic representations (Williams 1985, 1977). In Bhutan, these "struggles" occur over representations of the self that are tightly linked to representations of Bhutanese culture. However, I found that artists struggle not only to resist but also for a degree of social acceptance.

The specific politics that contemporary artists pursue in Bhutan in many ways resembles what Michel de Certeau describes as "tactics." Exploring how people subvert the projects of power, de Certeau contrasts what he calls "strategy" with what he calls "tactics." He explains, "strategies are able to produce, tabulate, and impose these spaces, when those operations take place, whereas tactics can only use, manipulate, and divert these spaces" (de Certeau and Rendall 2011, 30). Rather than being passive recipients of power, de Certeau argues that in everyday life people improvise and make do to turn the intentions of power to unintended ends. Looking at something as simple as walking, de Certeau looks at how people in everyday life turn the structures of power to their own ends, how power becomes "subverted…from within" (de Certeau and Rendall 2011, 32). While I find much of De Certeau's argument convincing, it does seem to hold onto a bit of the "romance of resistance" (Abu‐Lughod 1990). I have tried in my findings to acknowledge the agency of artists as they reinforce and as they subvert, particularly since artists are in many ways patriotic and wish to support official national identity.

So too, limiting cultural politics to representations alone does not do justice to what I observed in Bhutan. It is not simply that artists want to represent Bhutanese-ness in different ways.

Rather, they want to be allowed to *be* modern and Bhutanese, and actively pursue new ways of being through their artistic practice. To get at the importance of not only representation but also self-cultivation at play in contemporary art in Bhutan, I find recent discussions in ethics to be insightful. Informed by Michel Foucault's notion of "technologies of the self" and Alasdair McIntyre's emphasis on virtue ethics, James Laidlaw's emphasis on "ethics" describes a type of "reflexive freedom" actors have that allows them to cultivate themselves as a variety of different types of agents (Laidlaw 2013). My hope is that this dissertation will join a broader discussion of ethnographically informed studies of ethics. Gabriella Coleman's recent study of the aesthetics and ethics of hacking, which shows how hackers both critique and try to further the project of liberalism, demonstrates how a focus on ethics and cultural politics can be insightful (Coleman 2013). Ultimately, what interests me is the complex ways Bhutanese answer and the politics surrounding the questions: who are we and how ought we to live?

Asking these questions brings together discussions of politics with those of ethics as artists engage in what I understand to be a cultural politics of the self. Specifically, artists cultivate and push for acceptance of cultural conceptions of the self that fit with "expressive individualism" in a context where individualism and materialism are values often seen to be at odds with national identity. These tensions are deeply bound up in the experience of modernity. Charles Taylor argues that an expressivist turn was a key source of modern cultural understandings of the self (Taylor 1989). Robert Bellah, et al's exploration of civic values in the US, nicely summarizes what expressive individualism means: "Expressive individualism holds that each person has a unique core of feeling and intuition that should unfold or be expressed if individuality is to be realized" (Bellah et al. 2007, 333). As with other scholars concerned with the rise of atomistic or "possessive" individualism (Macpherson 1962), Bellah is concerned with the rise of political

understandings that take the individual to be prior to and more important than society. My own work likewise explores the intersection of ethics, self-cultivation, and politics. Indeed, building on Bellah, I am also interested in how people, in this case Bhutanese, answer the question of "who are we" and "how ought we to live" and the tensions between the different answers.

Individualism, of course, has long been a topic of consideration in sociology and anthropology. Emile Durkheim, for example, was profoundly interested in the relationship between the individual and society as well as being concerned about the breakdown of social solidarity (Durkheim 1997). Louis Dumont's study of caste in India posited that the Indian self was holistic and organized around the concept of hierarchy compared to the Western self that he argued was organized around individualistic egalitarianism (Dumont 1980). Other anthropologists have questioned this facile dichotomy between a Western self and a non-Western other. Melford Spiro, for example, argues that a certain amount of individuality is common across cultures and that Western societies are not so clearly "individualistic" as some anthropologists make it seem (Spiro 1993). Essentializing representations of culture rely on assumptions that distort social scientific understandings of the self across societies. Spiro further argues that he is not trying to establish a universal concept of the self, but rather open the way for a more sensitive accounting of cultural differences in terms of representations of the self.

I find Spiro's arguments convincing, and my own study here is not concerned with locating a true "Bhutanese self" to compare with a "modern self," but rather to look at what Spiro calls "cultural representations of the self." That is, I cannot from my methods say what Bhutanese selves are really like. But I can shed light on the stated values Bhutanese seek to cultivate and the conflicts that arise between different identities and cultural representations of the self.

Art, agency, and the self

Art has been a particularly fruitful space for exploring theories of self and agency. While some works emphasize that visual production is a central activity where agency can be observed or that art as a product objectifies agency, my work is more interested in how the act of making is also an act of self-cultivation (Mahon 2000; Gell 1998). This interest puts my research more in line with recent literature on agency that emphasizes how agency grows out of culturally shaped "feelings, thoughts, and meanings" (Ortner 2006). Rather than assume that "aesthetics" is the opposite of doing as Alfred Gell does, my research plays Gell's theory off of those that share some of his aims but also acknowledge that art not only manifests agency but also is a process that is part of fashioning one's self as "a who and a what" (George 2009, 38; Gell 1998, 6). Other ethnographic studies show how artists creatively participate in the thorny issues of identity, religion in public life, the boundaries between self and other, the state and the market (Adams 2006; Myers 2002). In pursuing this line of thinking, I will draw heavily on recent work on the anthropology of creativity which complicates the division between modern and traditional art while also drawing attention to the thinking, feeling individuals at the heart of creativity (Hallam and Ingold 2008).

Art has proven to be a particularly rich object of study for understanding both self-fashioning, self-understanding, and broader cultural politics. Creativity, agency, and self have also been central to anthropological considerations of art. Scholars have pointed out that modern art has been taken to represent the apotheosis of Western ideas of the modern subject (Biehl, Kleinman, and Good 2007, 6). Art provides a place to consider many of the issues central to ethics. Frequently the discussion centering on the issue of the creativity of the artists mirrors debates in the anthropology of art over how to understand the artists across cultures. Howard Morphy and

Morgan Perkins describe how early studies of art classified it on a hierarchical evolutionary scale: those at the bottom were not considered art at all (Morphy and Perkins 2006, 6). Art, with its attendant notions of originality and creativity, was associated with Western modernity. In contrast "primitive" art was largely considered imitative and about reproducing sameness. However, the term "primitive art" was not always meant to convey a sense of superiority. Franz Boas' classic work from the outset makes it clear that he believes that "primitive" artists are fundamentally the same as modern man (Boas 1951, 1). In fact, surrealists and other modernists found "primitive" art to be the site of tremendously powerful human creativity that captured fundamental human experience (Clifford 1988).

Some models of agency seem to promote a universal notion of the artist and others a culturally specific notion. Gregory Bateson's work also seems to fit along this vein—that true art transcends particular cultural moments and represents a fundamental part of human experience. Grace, Bateson argues, is something that transcends and perhaps precedes consciousness, as it applies both to moments of true art and to animals who Bateson argues are not capable of the same sort of deceit that human beings are. True art, he argues, corrects a too conscious or reductionist mindset (Bateson 2000 [1972], 147). Here the experience of making art is a shared part of humanity. Clifford Geertz in comparison emphasizes the cultural specificity of art—the works themselves as well as the conceptual tools for understanding them were "made in the same shop" (Geertz 1983, 1497).

So too, Alfred Gell's consideration of art as technology has been central to debates over how to interpret artistic practices. Rather than look at the aesthetics, Gell proposes to look at the use and exchange of art, what it does (Gell 1998, 6). Gell's work allows for the distributed subjectivity of the maker to be effected through the object itself—chillingly recalled in the example

of Pol Pot's soldiers distributing land mines (1998, 21). This interpretation of agency shares many similarities with how Buddhists, for example, use relics in their practice. The problem is that in pushing for "methodological philistinism" and a focus on what art does, Gell too easily dismisses how central seeing and aesthetics are to the process of what art does. Though Gell's work focuses on art as a technology for affecting the world, what he labels agency, it combines nicely with the idea of "technologies of the self." It is not only how people use art to act on the world but also how they shape themselves into particular types of actors that matters.

The *look* of modern art in Bhutan often codes particular ideas of the self and can be seen as a problematic act in itself. At a recent opening in Thimphu, a few acquaintances remarked that unconventional expressionistic paintings of Bhutan's monarchs made them uncomfortable—the aesthetics violated what are considered to be the proper ways of visually representing the monarchy in respectful ways.

Considerations of agency and artistic self have been further complicated by studies of art and globalization. The study of the encounter between global cultural systems and local ones dovetails with the study of art. Fred Myer's work on aboriginal dot painting examines how the appropriation of aboriginal aesthetics as art brings western, global notions of artistic subjectivity into contact with aboriginal ones (Myers 2002). Rather than a "possessive individualism" (Macpherson 1962) that sees the artworks as the product of creative genius, artworks represent claims to land and to heritage through the notion of "dreaming." This interpretation means that reckonings of value as well as the meaning of the exchange does not fit the terms normally recognized in the art world: "What a father passes on, or transmits, in this way is not personal property that he has created or accumulated himself but an identity that is already objectified in the land" (Myers 2002, 49).

Tibetan art has shown some of the same complexity. Claire Harris notes that a study of artist and exile Gonkar Gyatso challenges the notion of categorizing art by territory. Not only is art a highly mobile product but Gyatso himself is an itinerant whose experiences have shaped his art profoundly (Harris 2006, 699). Nevertheless, location matters. Much of Gyatso's work draws on Buddhist imagery and Harris shows that the reading of Buddhist imagery has changed markedly between Lhasa, Dharamsala, and London (ibid). Recent writing on modern art in Lhasa has suggested an even more complicated dynamic. Seeking to capture contemporary lived Tibetan experience as part of tradition, the artists avoid labels of "ethnic" art that point to preservation of the past and religion while at the same time dismissing broader trends in Chinese art as not relevant to Tibet (Heimsath 2005).

The situation faced by Bhutanese artists is instructive for both its similarities to and differences from anthropological studies of art elsewhere. Unlike colonized countries like Vietnam where colonialism profoundly shaped ideas about being an artist, art in Bhutan was neither imposed by a colonial power nor modernizing state (Taylor 2004). So too, Bhutan differs from the studies of how traditional art is incorporated into the global artworld. Unlike aboriginal art described by Fred Myers or Maroon art described by Sally Price, an "artworld" has not sought to transform indigenous Bhutanese traditions into modern art (Price 2002; Myers 2002). Instead, Bhutanese artists have attempted to employ the visual markers of tradition and modernity to come to some way of being modern that is not synonymous with surrendering to cultural imperialism. When an exhibition of important Bhutanese religious artifacts went on world tour it was accompanied by monks who ritually consecrated the images every morning, thereby protecting the icons from becoming "art" (Gross 2008). The catalogue emphasizes that the images and relics were distinctly "not art" (Bartholomew and Johnston 2008, 8). The point of studying modern art

in Bhutan is not to distinguish genuine cultural differences from inauthentic ones, nor to reassert nationalist discourses about Bhutan's isolation. Instead, my intent is to put Bhutan into conversation with a broader literature concerned with the "indigenization of modernity" (Sahlins 1999).

I am particularly interested in examining how art itself serves as a practice for self-fashioning and how artists negotiate the national, religious, and artistic fields that surround them. Theoretically my own study builds on Kenneth George's exploration of how artists become both a "who and a what" (George 2009, 38). The "what" aspect of my study addresses the social construction of modern and traditional artists. In a complementary fashion, the "who" aspect of my research examines the experiences, desires, and intentions of individual artists. Art, in George's examination, can be understood as a medium for a Foucauldian care for the self. Indeed, Foucault critiques the notion that good art expresses one's true self. Rather, art is a "technology of the self": "From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art" (Foucault 1994, 262).

Bhutan makes an interesting comparison to art practices in countries like Indonesia and Thailand. Kenneth George's biographical ethnography of the artist AD Pirous, explores the influence of European colonial created art institutions on the artist's work. Sandra Cate's discussion of modern art in Thailand explores identity among artists whose state invited an Italian painter to help found the first fine art school in emulation of Western art (Cate 2003). Compared to these countries, Bhutan's artistic practice has been more vernacular and less formal.

In many of these cases, national identity has been a central frame for artistic production. My own study borrows from both Jessica Winegar and Nora Taylor's work exploring how artists use national frames to interpret their own artistic practices even as they grapple with colonial

history and globalization (Winegar 2006; Taylor 2004). Bhutan's case is somewhat different in that it is not coming to terms with a post-colonial and post-socialist regulation of culture and politics. Nevertheless, exploring the similarities and differences between Bhutan and other fields of modern art offers clues to what makes engagement with modernity different in Bhutan.

In particular, Winegar's concept of "reckoning" describes how artists engage with socialism, nationalism, and global modernity. As artists create their own original responses to these forces, Winegar argues they "reckon" in the sense that they not only navigate but also confront and challenge existing institutions (Winegar 2006). The work of artists, according to Winegar, demonstrates that the nation and nation-state are "categories and institutions that are contested by human agents" (2006, 21). In her work on Egyptian artists, Winegar argues that at times artists go along with discourse on art and at other times challenges them. Artist, Winegar argues, are not "malcontents" the way artists are supposed to be in the West, for example. This approach addresses agency, but does so in a way that neither prioritizes acts of resistance nor argues that artists are merely reproducing hegemonic cultural perspectives.

Specifically, I found artists practiced an understanding of freedom that was different from freedom as merely the absence of all constraints and the atomistic notions of the self that some scholars have identified as being at the heart of liberal ideology (Macpherson 1962). Artists had more substantive notions of the ideals towards which one was supposed to orient one's life. For example, artists very clearly approved of some and disapproved of other types of individualism. Artists valued individualism as a pursuit of understanding the world for oneself, of self-realization of one's capabilities, and living in one's own idiosyncratic way. Isiah Berlin famously made the distinction between "negative" concepts of liberty focused on the absence of constraint and

"positive" notions of liberty focused on self-mastery (Berlin 1969). While the art scene in Bhutan clearly valued negative liberty, the greater emphasis was often on positive notions of liberty.

Modernity in Himalayan Studies

Previous scholarship on Bhutan has sought either to help document traditional Bhutanese culture (Bartholomew and Johnston 2008) or critique the effects of modernity (Ura 1997); however, relatively little has been done to examine the responses state-led efforts to preserve culture in Bhutan. Most studies of globalization in Bhutan have located agency only on the side of foreign media and values, arguing that Bhutanese culture is being replaced (Dorji and Pek 2005). Television, film, fashion, even political styles are believed to carry foreign values that have impact the Bhutanese. Karma Phuntsho's recent piece about culture in Bhutan, for example, contains a diagram showing the risk that Bhutanese women's national dress will become progressively shorter so that it is indistinguishable from first *lungyi* and eventually mini-skirts (Phuntsho 2015a). After a peace walk I observed in 2008, participants were scolded by government officials and told that "protest culture" was not Bhutanese. Previous scholarship has done little to examine the creative cultural borrowing and mixing in Bhutan or the agency of the Bhutanese themselves in this process.

Modern life has frequently been left out of accounts of Himalayan societies. Informed by post-colonial literature, an increasing amount of scholarship addresses modern life in the Himalayas. Tshering Shakya lamented that scholars neglected the study of the lives of Tibetans post-1959, seeking a purer Tibet prior to Chinese occupation (1994). So too, Clare Harris's most recent work examines how the institution and metaphor of the museum and its attendant ideas of "preservation" have helped legitimate both Chinese and British Imperial power in Tibet (Harris 2012). Harris argues that both China and the UK largely confine Tibetan culture to the past and

have at various points in history set themselves up as the "protector" of that culture (Harris 2012, 4).

One of the main concerns of this literature was how Western representations denied historical agency to members of Himalayan societies (Lopez 1998, 11; Norbu 2001). The fictional "Shangri-La" from James Hilton's novel *Lost Horizon* has become synonymous with this sort of representation. A timeless bastion from the ravages of Western modernity and storehouse of the best of humanity, Shangri-La is run by foreign religious virtuosos who live above the valley where the native Tibetans stay and control the policies of Shangri-La and its valley. Indeed, the natives are presented as "charming" or "happy," but essentially living in a state of nature outside of civilization and history. For example, while the European or Chinese monks are able to make use of the wisdom stored in Shangri-La to live well beyond the normal limits of a human lifespan, the Tibetans according to the head abbot of Shangri-La cannot (Hilton 2012 [1933], 102). The representation of the Himalayas as isolated, as a source of spiritual wisdom of the East compared to Western materialism, and of its inhabitants as almost naïvely good is common even today.

Many of the characteristics of Shangri-La show up in non-fiction representations of Himalayan societies. The linguist Helena Norberg-Hodge's *Ancient Futures: Lessons from Ladakh for a Globalizing World*, for example, portrays Ladakhi life prior to modernization as idyllic. In her book, Norberg-Hodge describes Ladhaki life as full of contentment, good health, spiritual insight, and as one that was ecologically sound to boot (Norberg-Hodge 2009). Invariably Ladakhis are described as "happy" or "smiling" in Norberg-Hodge's book. A significant cause of their profound well-being is their connections to each other based on Buddhist ideals of non-attachment and emptiness that create a "holistic or contextual world view" (Norberg-Hodge 2009, 82). In Norberg-Hodge's representation, Ladakh was a seat of anti-consumerist and anti-

individualist spiritual wisdom. All this has changed according to Norberg-Hodge with the building of roads and the invasion of tourists, new products, and media. Ladakhis now feel themselves to be “poor” and mis-perceive the West to be full of rich and happy people who never work. Although Norberg-Hodge fixes Hilton’s problematic racial hierarchy, her book is still about *her* perception of Ladakh and includes relatively little space for Ladakhi voices. Likewise, the book follows a state of nature to fall from grace narrative that portrays Ladakhis as passive victims rather than active and creative parts of the process. Indeed, the Tibetan author Jamyang Norbu criticizes Norberg-Hodge for not addressing that she is the one that wants to keep modernity out and that the Ladakhis themselves may have a more complex perspective (Norbu 2001).

Critiques of representations like Hilton’s and Norberg-Hodge’s, inspired by Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, sparked much discussion within the study of the Himalayas (Said 1979). One of the primary debates occurred around Donald Lopez’s *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* and his argument that even positive representations of Tibet as a fully enlightened society in fact imprisoned Tibetans within Western representations (Lopez 1998). A particularly virulent critique of Lopez’s work came from Robert Thurman, a renowned scholar of Buddhism, who argued that in focusing on the ideological prison of representation, Lopez ignored the more material and pressing issue of Chinese occupation in Tibet (Thurman 2001). Lopez in his book replies to Thurman’s assertion that Tibet’s "gross national product of enlightened persons must have been proportionally higher than any other country ever," a sentiment echoed in Thurman’s work more generally (Thurman 1997, 38-40; Lopez 1998, 9). A more nuanced assessment can be found in Tshering Shakya’s response to Lopez which notes that understanding the role of power in representations is important, but also acknowledges that the ideological domination of the West over Tibetan communities does not go as deep as Lopez suggests (Shakya 2001). Not only does

Shakya argue that the adaptation of Western representations cannot imprison Tibetans, but he thinks that global capitalism rather than Orientalist theoretical constructs of Tibet are much more important for Tibetans living in diaspora (Shakya 2001, 186).

Addressing the dynamics of power between the West and the Himalayas also risks overemphasizing the subordinate position of entire groups like the Tibetan Diaspora, the Nepalese state, or the Bhutanese while ignoring internal power dynamics. Mary Des Chene, for example, argues that all of Nepal be seen as 'subaltern' in relationship to India and South Asian studies (Des Chene 2007, 219). However, this argument ignores the internal politics of the state of Nepal, which marginalizes certain populations and in the past promoted a particularly strong form of Hindu nationalism. So too, the Tibetan diaspora is rife with its own cultural politics over what it means to be *really* Tibetan (Korom 1997).

Indeed, a number of studies have examined the politics of the appropriation of global culture (often understood as "The West") in Himalayan contexts. Keila Diehl's study of rock-and-roll amongst Tibetan refugees examines how young Tibetans both go seeking freedom in new music but are also constrained by the demands of a conservative exile community (Diehl 2002). Against the prevailing theoretical emphasis on hybridity, indeterminacy, change, and deterritorialization, Diehl focuses on how the Tibetans she studies, even the rock-and-rollers, seek emplacement, continuity, and the preservation of a pure cultural essence (Diehl 2002, 4). Her argument is not that Tibetans actually have some sort of pure essence, but that theories about hybridity offer only an etic perspective. Rather than a cosmopolitan embrace of the diverse cultures they encounter, Diehl found Tibetan refugees react by becoming more resistant to change and foreign influence. This observation moves beyond the idea of a global cultural imperialism dominating local cultures. Instead, what Diehl finds is much more complicated. The construction

and maintenance of ideas of essential cultural difference creates its own political effects within the Tibetan community. Diehl especially draws attention to the way dominant ideas about the "rich cultural heritage of Tibet" silence more innovative attempts to articulate Tibetan-ness under the conditions of modernity in exile.

From this perspective, the adoption and adaptation of rock-and-roll by Tibetans represents neither the complete dominance of the West and global capitalism nor pure resistance. For example, while rock-and-roll musicians push the boundaries of the hegemonic definition of Tibetan culture in their search for self-expression, they ultimately accept the prevailing discourses about Tibetan culture that emphasize, among other things, political independence and Buddhist values. Tibetan rock musicians are neither totally "resistant" to nor completely "duped" by foreign influences (Diehl 2002, 150). Here, Diehl attempts to intervene both within anthropological theory and Tibetan cultural politics. Theories of globalization seem too blithe in their assessment of the creativity and cosmopolitanism associated with exile—refugees are far more anxious about exposure to what they consider foreign culture than these theories would predict. On the other hand, this sort of boundary making limits the discussion of culture within the refugee community to the binary of "loss" and "preservation" thereby devaluing some of the genuinely creative responses that are occurring. Diehl's book explores the struggles of musicians to gain acceptance and to balance self-expression or personal freedom with a commitment to the Tibetan community and their ongoing struggle for social justice. Rock-and-roll musicians, Diehl suggests, present another way of thinking about culture that allows for change without losing what it means to be Tibetan.

The lack of appreciation or even outright criticism the modern musicians in Diehl's study face mirrors the challenges faced by painter Gonkar Gyatso in Clare Harris' study of Tibetan art

after the Dalai Lama's flight in 1959 (1999). Harris is concerned not only with the ideological use of Tibetan imagery by the Chinese state outlined in other studies,[1] but also how art has been a site of struggle over and a resource for creatively re-imagining what it means to be Tibetan today. Trained in a Chinese modern art school in Beijing, Gyatso turned to the question of how to articulate Tibetan culture in contemporary China during the liberalization policies of the 1980s. Gyatso helped found a collective called "Sweet Tea House Art Association" which specifically aimed at finding an aesthetic at once wholly modern and genuinely Tibetan. Ironically, Gyatso's attempts to incorporate Buddhism into his artwork were not appreciated after his flight into exile. Tibetans, Harris argues, prioritized performing the memories of a pure Tibetan culture that existed before the 1959 Chinese invasion and were not appreciative of Gyatso's art. They found his use of religious imagery "sacrilegious and the idea that this work could affirm a type of Tibetan identity, deemed treacherous" (Harris 2006, 704). For many in the diaspora anything that suggests moving on or thriving betrayed the memory of exile. At the same time, Gyatso also had trouble finding a home in the global art community who criticized his work for either not being avant-garde enough or for not fully exploring his Tibetan-ness. Although Diehl's musicians seem to have been more successful than Gyatso in finding acceptance for their rooted cosmopolitanism, both Harris and Diehl attempt to remedy the way Tibetans and scholars of Tibet seem to stop any study of Tibetan culture at 1959.

Whereas both Diehl and Harris are concerned with production in their studies, Mark Liechty's work provides a complementary examination of consumption (Liechty 2002). Up into the 20th century the Nepalese state engaged in a process of what Liechty calls "selective exclusion," which sought to control foreignness, particularly in the form of goods (Liechty 1997). First as a

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[1] (see Kvaerne 1994)

way of asserting sovereignty and later for creating domestic class distinctions, the control of foreignness was central to state power in Nepal according to Liechty. Rather than isolated and unchanging, Nepal's rulers chose and incorporate elements of foreign power, particularly Western global power in the form of British culture, into their local political projects. Aerial ropeways, for example, allowed for the import of large quantities of European goods without the entry of European persons. According to Liechty, isolation and ahistoricity were "state policies and increasingly state myths" rather than simple truths about Nepal (Liechty 1997, 8). In fact, monopolizing access to European lifestyles, clothing, architecture and goods were part of the way the elite projected their own superiority in Nepal.

Shifting from the role of consumption in state projects to its role in the lives of individuals, Liechty also explored the development and experiences of middle class culture in the 1980s and 1990s in Nepal. In his study of how middle class Nepalis strive to be "suitably modern," Liechty argues that new forms of mass media, the availability of consumer goods, and local cultural production allowed the middle class to capture some aspect of the prestige previously available only to the ruling elite (Liechty 2002). Looking at class as something performed, Liechty explores how film, music, television, youth culture magazines, and fashion are part of a process of forming a modern Nepalese middle class. Far from liberating, Liechty poignantly describes how youth in particular and the middle class more generally are caught between the past and that future while both seem equally out of their reach (Liechty 2002, 239).

Although not entirely the same, Bhutan shares many characteristics with communities described in other studies of the Himalayas. For example, the country has also sought to control the rate and type of change by limiting the influx of the outside world. For example, tourists, who have only been allowed since the 1970s, must still get government approval to visit districts beyond

the capital or where the international airport is located. So too, Bhutan has selectively modernized. Indeed, some theorists understand Bhutan's development policy of Gross National Happiness as not only serving as a counterpoint to Western theories of development by valuing something other than economic production but also in questioning the naturalness of change itself (Mancall 2004, 17). As in other Himalayan contexts, a certain self-orientalizing or what Lila Abu-Lughod calls "reverse Orientalizing" takes place in portrayals of Bhutan as a spiritual opposite to the West's materialism (Abu-Lughod 2008). At the same time, Bhutan has made significant concessions to foreign influence. English continues to be a medium of instruction and of statecraft in Bhutan and a source of considerable prestige. Some scholars have lamented the superiority accorded to English language education (Phuntsho 2000).

A brief overview of Bhutan

Two institutions in particular shape the lives of artists: Buddhism and the state. While I think it overly simplistic to claim, as I have often heard in Thimphu, that Bhutanese culture *is* Buddhist, Buddhism has been a dominant social and cultural institution even before the creation of a modern nation state.[2] Buddhism likely first came to the region known as Bhutan sometime in the 7th century. Two temples were founded in Bhutan as part of the Buddhist geomantic project undertaken by the Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo to tame the landscape and ensure the flourishing of Buddhism. Although there is no conclusive evidence of his visits to Bhutan, most Bhutanese

[2] The long social and political dominance of Buddhism also produces the sense that Bhutanese history *is* Buddhist history. Buddhism is the dominant lens through which history today is understood in much of Bhutan. When I attended an exhibit of artifacts from the Zhabdrung at the Royal Textile Academy, even relatively mundane proclamations from his rule were framed as sacred relics. The few archaeological studies that have been undertaken in Bhutan have found that ruins are interpreted locally as sites marking the deeds of saints, especially the taming of local demons (Fux, Walser, and Tshering 2014). This has made archaeological research potentially sensitive. I heard one Bhutanese, perhaps tongue in cheek, speak of the need to "rescue archaeology from Buddhist explanations."

believe that the 8th century saint Padmasambhava, known in Bhutan as Guru Rinpoche (roughly translated to "precious teacher"), visited the region taming demons, meditating, and teaching Buddhism. Widely regarded as an enlightened figure on par with the Buddha, Guru Rinpoche's imagery can be found throughout Bhutan today including in state symbolism. Karma Phuntsho gives many examples of toponyms derived from stories about Guru Rinpoche and the landscape of Bhutan is still marked by the deeds of saints and many sacred sites.

Figure 1: Source *CIA Maps*, 2018.

Even urban Thimphu remains profoundly marked by the influence of Buddhism. A typical Bhutanese household will have an altar room with, at the very least, mass produced icons on

postcards or calendars. Likewise, the Buddhist temple founded in the 12th century in Changangkha neighborhood remains a key site where Bhutanese go for daily circumambulations (often now in athleisure wear) and to arrange for household rituals. Buddhism, in fact, has really gone global in Bhutan. Several large renovation and construction projects have been undertaken by Buddhist organizations with large financial support from devotees—especially from China, Singapore, and Taiwan—in the past few years. The most visible project is probably the enormous, bronze Buddha statue that stares east from its perch above Thimphu.

Buddhism has also been central to state power and the high culture associated with the state. By the time Ngawang Namgyal, a Buddhist lama known by his title "the Zhabdrung," came to the region that is now Bhutan in 1616, there were already well-established Buddhist communities. Fleeing a dispute over who could claim to be the rightful heir to the seat of the Drukpa lineage of the Kagyu school of Buddhism at Ralung in Tibet, Ngawang Namgyal would go on to establish a Buddhist state whose power approximately covered the region now known as Bhutan. He is widely regarded as the founding father of Bhutan and often referred to only as "the Zhabdrung," a title that means "at whose feet one submits."[3]

The symbolic power of the Buddhist state, if not its structure, remains important today. In fact, the name for Bhutan in Dzongkha, *Druk Yul*, has Buddhist roots. Sometimes interpreted as "dragon kingdom" because the term "druk" means dragon, the name refers to the rule of the Drukpa lineage of the Kagyu school of Buddhism in Bhutan under the Zhabdrung. So too, much political culture in Bhutan has roots in Buddhism. Organized around a concept of *chos sri nyi* or what scholars translate as a "dual system," the Zhabdrung's state combined spiritual and mundane

[3] For a fascinating history explaining how the Zhabdrung participated in a broader shift from kin-based to reincarnation based transmission of religo-political power in the broader Tibetan cultural world see (Imaeda 2013).

power. While the rise of the modern state in Bhutan has seen the growing importance of non-monastic power organized through a hereditary monarchy, the constitution still defines the king as a living embodiment of the principal of *chos sri nyi* (Bhutan 2008).

The monarchy specifically and the state more generally are also infused with Buddhist symbolism. Image making and aesthetics seem to have been an important, and historically durable, aspect of the Zhabdrung's state building. Ariana Maki's work has argued that iconographic representations of the Zhabdrung should be understood as ways of projecting and establishing political legitimacy in part by linking the Zhabdrung to enlightened beings and religious masters. In Bhutan's parliament building, the members sit below a dais with a throne for the king which is flanked by a large applique icon of Guru Rinpoche and of the Zhabdrung. Indeed, the state still works out of the *dzongs*, combinations of fortress and monastery, that were first established by the Zhabdrung in the 17th century. Many of the public rituals and etiquette that make up official culture in Bhutan have roots in the courtly culture of the Zhabdrung as well. Even the present monarchy links itself to the Zhabdrung's legacy. When a king assumes the throne, he is empowered by the remains of the Zhabdrung at a ritual in the *dzong* in Punakha.

While some elements of life in Bhutan have deep historical roots, there has also been much change, especially the creation of a modern state and a program of modernization under the direction of a monarchy founded in 1907. Although never colonized, the British colonial government in India played a key role in the establishment of the modern state in Bhutan. After a war with the British from 1864-1865, Bhutan signed a treaty in which they ceded tracts of land to and received a subsidy from the British Government. So too, the eventual first King of Bhutan, Ugyen Wangchuck (1862-1926), built his power not only on careful politicking between neighboring rulers but also through cultivating a close relationship to the British. Pivotally, Ugyen

Wangchuck served as a guide and mediator for the Younghusband military mission to Tibet in 1904. In 1905, Ugyen Wangchuck received the award of Knight Commander of the Indian Empire and in 1906 he travelled to meet the Prince of Wales in Calcutta, attended durbars, and received several awards from the British.

These awards helped Ugyen Wangchuck consolidate power and one of his closest allies, Ugyen Dorje, used the relationship with the British to justify Ugyen Wangchuck's enthronement (Aris 1994, 97). With a British representative in attendance, key senior monks and political figures gathered and leaders signed a contract or *genja* that established a hereditary monarchy in 1907. Although independent in terms of domestic governance, the British treated Bhutan in some ways similar to princely states in India. Aside from using the title of Maharaja for the King of Bhutan, the 1910 Treaty of Punakha, for example, claimed for the British Government the right to guide Bhutan's foreign relations. Throughout its complicated engagement with British colonial power, the state in Bhutan exercised relatively independent sovereignty. Maintaining its independence through the colonial period remains a point of pride for many Bhutanese and Bhutanese histories assert that Bhutan was "never colonized." Some in Bhutan claim this as a reason why Bhutanese culture has remained pure.

Indeed, independence remains another defining, and complicated, feature of life in Bhutan. However, many feel that Bhutan remains vulnerable. After independence in 1947, India assumed the position of the British government, and continues to play an active role in Bhutanese politics and government. India continues to maintain around 12% of the roads in Bhutan through the Army Corps of Engineers Project Dantak, the same project that up until the 1990s built most of the roads. Early five-year plans were also financed primarily by India, and foreign aid continues to be an important source of development funding, although taxes increasingly cover the cost. Maintaining

independence between India, which annexed the neighboring kingdom of Sikkim in 1975, and China, which annexed Tibet in 1959, remains a point of pride in Bhutan. However, that pride is mixed with a sense of vulnerability.

Generally, histories of Bhutan periodize the monarchy into two phases: consolidation and decentralization (Kinga 2009; Phuntsho 2013). Whereas the first two kings worked to consolidate power, historians of Bhutan generally mark the reign of the third king as the start of modernization and the process of decentralization that, with strong guidance from the fourth king, led to democracy in 2008. Indeed, the rise of the monarchy was far from guaranteed. As part of broader power struggles, the Second King of Bhutan Jigme Wangchuck ordered the assassination of a reincarnation of the Zhabdrung in 1931. The reincarnation had met with Gandhi's brother and was believed to be building a challenge to the monarchy (Kinga 2009, 206). Likewise, in 1964 the Prime Minister, a position appointed by the king, was assassinated with military involvement while the king was in Switzerland. Despite the challenges, the monarchy emerged in the mid-20th century as the dominant power structure in Bhutan.

At the direction of the monarchy, modernization kicked off in earnest in the 1950s and 1960s. A national flag and anthem were created and roads were built. The capital was moved to Thimphu in the early 1960s and the *dzong*, fortress monasteries that traditionally served as administrative centers, were rebuilt for a modern state bureaucracy. Education also expanded dramatically. There were earlier efforts to establish modern education in Bhutan, however in the 1960s the building of an educational infrastructure for a broad public began. Significantly, English was chosen to be the medium of instruction. Many of these early educated Bhutanese went on to serve in key government posts.

Figure 2: Tachicho Dzong in Thimphu, Photo by author.

A number of key reforms to the political economic structure took place in the 1950s and 1960s. A National Assembly held its first sessions in 1953, albeit in largely an advisory role. In 1998, the fourth king would formally devolve executive power to the National Assembly, remaining as head of state. Likewise, in the 1950s serfdom was formally ended in Bhutan and in the 1960s the practice of monasteries collecting rent from sharecroppers ended, and the state instead began directly subsidizing monastic practice. Local level state institutions were created that moved an increasing amount of development administration to ever more local levels. The 1960s also saw the first of Bhutan's five-year national development plans.

Although the change was radical, Bhutan largely avoided the extremely disruptive forms of development seen in other countries. Change was carefully controlled. For example, early on, the king declared that 60% of the forest would remain forested. To this day, the country maintains over 70% forest cover with numerous parks and biological corridors.

Culture was also consistently important to controlling change. Early on the state prioritized

patronizing religious institutions and sites. The growth of the state and development projects seeking to create employment in the growing cash economy led the creation of the traditional arts school in Thimphu and to several projects aimed at training and marketing traditional handicrafts. Starting with the 6th Five-Year Plan in the 1980s, cultural preservation became an official development goal (Ueda 2003). Carefully regulated tourism began in 1974. From the beginning, Bhutan sought to limit the effects of tourism. Many sites were off limits to tourists and permits were required for travel between many valleys. To this day tourists today are required to pay 200-250 dollars a day. This requirement is part of a policy of "high value, low volume" tourism. Tourists are provided with a state certified guide that ensures they follow local expectations for respectful behavior especially in sacred sites.[4]

The push to protect culture seems to have heightened as modernization and globalization intensified. Scholars have noted that the 1980s, after what could be considered the initial burst of modernization, was a time of heightened cultural sensitivity (Whitecross 2010). It was during this period that state culture in the form of *driglam namzha* (traditional etiquette) became heavily enforced as a way to protect eroding culture. Dress, language, and maintaining a sense of "cultural awareness" were all closely watched by the state and appear as concerns in the pages of the national newspaper, *Kuensel* (Ueda 2003; Whitecross 2008a).[5] Although the enforcement of *driglam namzha* and cultural regulation more generally has eased in recent years, culture is still a carefully monitored field and many elements, such as regulations on dress and architectural style, remain in

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[4] Tellingly, when a street artist known as Space Invader affixed a mosaic with concrete to the wall of a monastery and the outside of a water-driven prayer wheel in early 2018 questions were raised about why the guide and hotel did not prevent it.

[5] The hyper-vigilance regarding cultural identity coupled with a sense that Bhutanese sovereignty was threatened led, in part, to persecution of a Nepali speaking minority living in the south of Bhutan. Approximately 100,000 Bhutanese fled or were forced out of Bhutan in the early 1990s (Hutt 2003).

force.

The most famous example of this effort to cautiously engage in modernization is the emphasis on Gross National Happiness (GNH). Framed as an alternative to development focused on Gross National Product which symbolized crass economic productivity, GNH is a term attributed to the Fourth King of Bhutan that has developed into an overarching ideology and metric. At its core, GNH seeks to include cultural preservation, sustainability, good governance, and also equitable development in how Bhutan evaluates the success of development. Framed by some as an "indigenous" development policy, GNH in many ways resembles other "Asian values" development programs that framed development in nationalist terms (Ueda 2003, 81). GNH not only includes cultural preservation as a key component, it has itself become a key marker of Bhutanese cultural uniqueness.

The introduction of television and internet in the late 1990s similarly led to increased anxiety about the disappearance of Bhutanese culture. Outside influences, it was argued, would lead to "cultural diffusion" and the disappearance of local Bhutanese culture and customs. At the same time, Bhutan found ways to adapt national culture. The state created a national television service, and expanded its newspaper by equipping it with computers and a Dzongkha font.

Bhutan has also seen tremendous political change in recent years. In 2006, the Fourth King of Bhutan passed on the throne to his son and in 2008 Bhutan held its first elections under a new constitution that instituted a democratic constitutional monarchy. Bhutan continues to be in the process of figuring out many key elements of its new democracy, such as the limits of freedom of expression and the precise parliamentary procedures dictated by the constitution (Schultz 2016). So far, the transition of power has been relatively stable. The first three elections have seen a different party win each time. Although regulations that prohibit appealing to ethnicity or other

"divisive" issues limit the range of ideological difference, the most recent party won on a platform of "narrowing the gap," a surprisingly frank addressing of a growing sense of inequality in Bhutan.

Since the official programs of state-led modernization began in the 1960s, Bhutan has been going through a process of dramatic change. Rapid change has led to increasing divisions between generations as well as between rural and urban areas. Perhaps nowhere is this better reflected than in the literacy rate. While 98.4% of Bhutanese aged 10-14 are literate, only 22% of Bhutanese over 65 are (RGOB 2018, 24). Likewise, while 84.1% of urban Bhutanese are literate only 63.6% of rural Bhutanese are literate according to the latest census (RGOB 2018, 23-24). Education has had profound effects on Bhutanese society. Today English remains the medium of instruction with Dzongkha taken as a language course. This approach means that many young and urban Bhutanese speak English very fluently. Many Bhutanese still hold onto fluency in their mother tongue and usually at least one or two other languages even if they cannot necessarily read or write in those languages.[6] Similarly, roads, mass media, and tourism have connected communities within Bhutan to each other and Bhutanese to the outside world.

A middle income country, GDP per capita in Bhutan is now around $3,000, placing it a bit above its neighbor India and below Thailand. Today, Bhutan faces increasing youth unemployment and urban migration problems as more Bhutanese are educated and seek opportunities away from the farm. In recent years, remittances have formed an important part of the economy, especially for a country that frequently suffers shortages in foreign currency reserves. When a new remittance program achieved deposits of $1 million in only 8 months in 2017, the prime minister lit butter lamps (a way of blessing and making merit) for those working

[6] Published literacy rates to not specify literacy by language. I suspect that literacy in English is much higher than in other languages.

abroad (Dorji 2017). Though comparatively new, Bhutan increasingly is part of a global economy that involves work far from home.

Thimphu

The vast majority of my fieldwork was completed in Thimphu, Bhutan's capital city, with a few excursions to Paro and rural Punakha. Thimphu has exploded in size from a *dzong* surrounded by rice paddies in the 1960s to a city of around 115,000 according to the census taken in 2017 (RGOB 2018, 16). The main reason for my focus on Thimphu and, secondarily Paro, is that the overwhelming majority of contemporary art happens in these two urban areas. Paro and Thimphu are also heavily trafficked by tourists, expats, and educated urban Bhutanese who make up the art market. Likewise, Thimphu hosts the embassies and NGOs that fund art competitions, regional exhibitions, exchange programs, and scholarships. Because the city is so important to understanding art, the following section includes a brief description of what the city is like.

Following the river which runs north to south through a triangular valley, Thimphu has grown faster than planners can keep up with. The city feels disjointed, like there was a plan at some point but that it has since gotten away from everyone. On the north side of the city you can still see paddy fields by the *dzong*, a reminder of what the valley used to look like.

The growth outpacing infrastructure often gives the city an ugly appearance and I have often half-joked that Thimphu is an ugly city in a charming place. There is construction everywhere, four or five story buildings of simple, mass produced concrete in a style one artist described as "matchbox buildings." Regulations require a certain amount of tradition in new buildings. The roofs all have shallow angles associated with *dzongs* and the front of the buildings often have billowing cloud like spandrels decorated with key Bhutanese protective animals. The ratatatat of construction mixes with the din of cymbals from Buddhist household rituals emanating

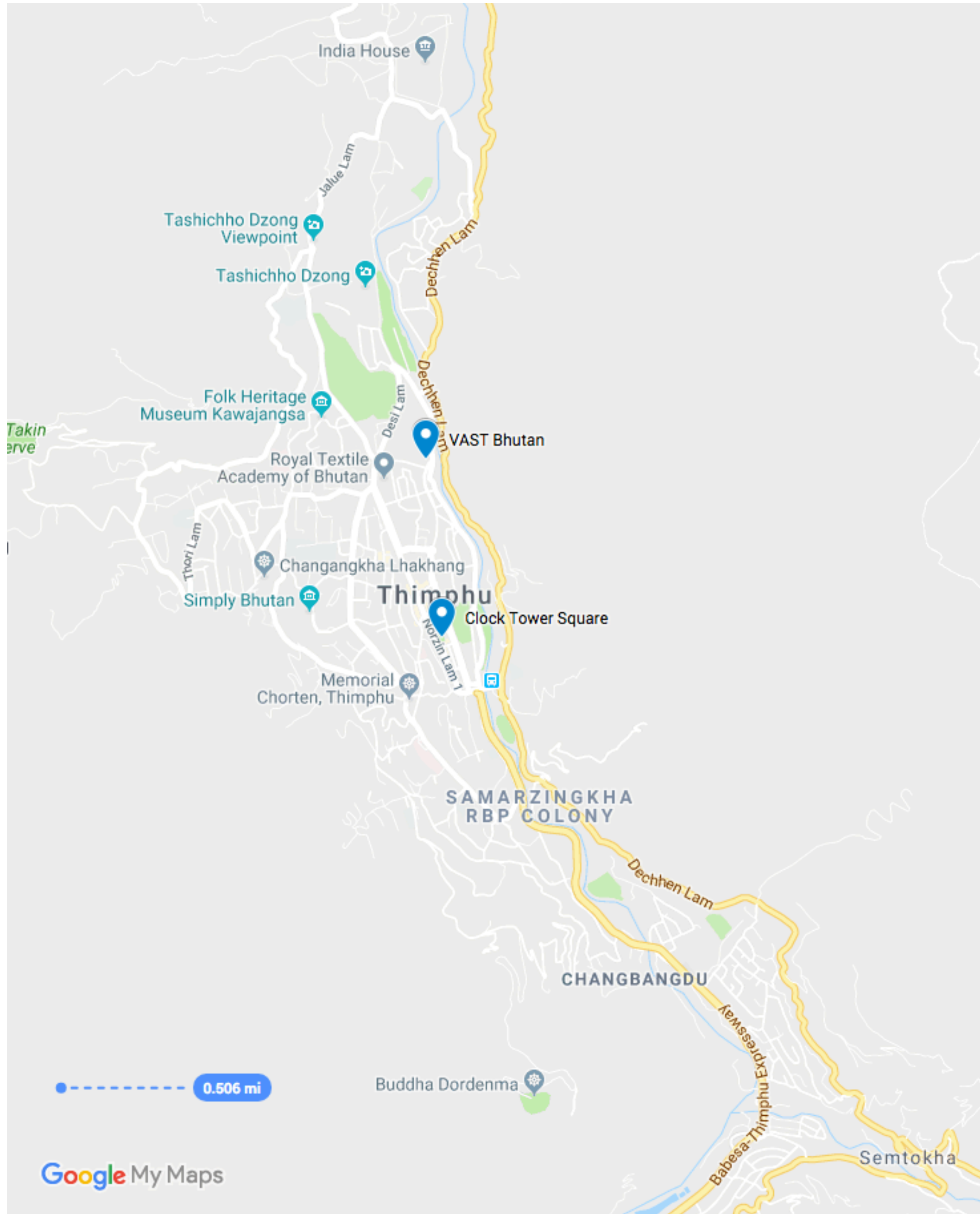

Figure 3: Map of Thimphu, Source: Google Maps

from houses. Interspersed between buildings going up now with large banks of glass windows are hovels of bamboo where the Indian or Bangladeshi construction workers live. Occasionally, in the middle of all the change there is still a traditional house or an old temple. None of it quite fits together, but the hills are still beautiful and the jumble of the city feels at times full of possibilities.

Thimphu, of course, has its problems. Packs of dogs were a concern I was warned about repeatedly. While some were pure strays, many are fed by the shops or houses nearby. People often love and name the dogs, but they are also a very practical type of security, sending up an alarm when strangers approach. Though I tried not to, I eventually became quite attached to the dogs at the compound where I was staying. I always knew based on the barking when a stranger was coming. Often it was the loudest when a lay person claiming one sort of religious purpose or another had come to beg for an offering from the building because they often came wielding a big stick they used to fend off the dogs.

Some infrastructure seemed missing as well. In the winter, the city is full of dusty streets; in the summer, they flood. Unable to keep up with the growth, any time of year the sewers could be seeping up from under the street. The city continues to grow, pushing out and filling in the neighborhoods of Olakha and Babesa to the southwest faster than services like running water or public green space can be arranged. Recently the neighborhood of Changzamtok had a cholera outbreak from their water supply. The flow of information had also grown faster than expected and the mobile network has required vast revamping and often runs slowly. I was told that problems with the network resulted from the fact that growth well exceeded what the initial planners considered a generous estimate of potential growth when it was set up in 2003. The city seemed to constantly be struggling to keep up with itself.

In the midst of the change, there were relatively few places for youth to hang out comfortably, especially in newer urban areas outside the city core. Thimphu downtown had the Thai pavilion and the Centenary Park where young people strolled, practiced b-boying,[7] and hung out. Coffee shops, bars, restaurants, and clubs have also popped up in Thimphu providing spaces not just for tourists but also urban Bhutanese. The new Buddhist monument on the hill overlooking the city, known as Buddha Point, had become a particularly popular place for youths to party. However, the spaces where you could hang out while spending little or no money, were relatively few.

In spite of the rough and tumble quality of Thimphu, I often found myself charmed by it. I wrote in my field notes:

> Winter in Thimphu is all dust and clear, cold air. The dry, cold conditions make it perfect for preserving meat and vegetables. Windows sprout bright red bunches of chilies and roofs have sheets of them. In the market, lom (dried turnip greens) and other dried vegetables show up amongst the other items, some redolent with the taste of smoke. The trees and bushes are sticks now, or dull yellow and brown, the roadside littered with dead leaves. Bukharis (wood fire stoves) have been pulled out and set up, giving homes that warm radiant heat that comforts and also makes you feel a bit like you're being cooked.
> (Field notes, December 4, 2017)

Part of the charm is that the city has not yet been completely paved over. Our yard, like so many, had a kitchen garden. A rather large one in our case that grew corn, chilies and potatoes. Mint grew by the side of the house and my neighbors grew apples. There were too many for them to pick, so when they were ripe I would regularly walk around the back and climb the trees to collect my fruit for the week.

In the process of my research, I found that rural Bhutan was never far away. Friends often brought goods from their visits to rural areas. I bought honey from an artist straight from the farm, another artist brought me *zaow*, a puffed rice snack especially enjoyed with tea. Others brought

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[7] Sometimes also known as "breakdancing"

lychee, spinach, and bananas. Even the shops often had unpasteurized milk from local cows with cream floating on top in reused plastic bottles. My neighbor would get a whole liter and boil it to make *chai* for a few days before seeking out another farm fresh milk at one of the shops near us.

Perhaps the greatest appeal of Thimphu was the sense of a mixture of everything in Bhutan and outside of Bhutan coming together, that whatever Thimphu will be was still not entirely set. Whether because it was all so new or so small, there was a wonderful sense of amateurishness to the place, a sense of people trying things to see what would work. This often led to surprises. Go up a few flights of stairs and you could find a Mexican restaurant that became a bar named Milliways for a *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* reference. Walk down the main street and you can find decades old movie theater where people often sing along to the heavily musical Bhutanese movies.

Of course, for me Thimphu was appealing because of the galleries and artists workshops tucked into spaces that I would never have expected if I had not been looking. I found artists sharing ground floor spaces in Olakha, a growing neighborhood in south Thimphu, painting for an exhibit of traditional art in Taiwan. Downtown I visited contemporary artists running tourist organizations with their art hanging on the wall, graphic design companies doubling as studios up three flights of twisting stairwells, and a comic book house in an attic space.

Another holdover from the past, Thimphu remains a seasonal city.[8] People in the region have long practiced transhumance moving between summer lodgings in higher, cooler elevations and often more fertile and warmer lower elevations in the winter. Many religious institutions in Bhutan's history also had winter and summer seats. The monastic body continues this practice, moving between the summer home of the central monastic body in Thimphu and the winter home

[8] Imaeda notes a similar pattern in the 1980s (Imaeda 2013).

in Punakha. When the monk body returns to Thimphu a long retinue of cars housing a sacred relic in the back of a Toyota Hilux slowly winds its way through Thimphu and people gather in the street to receive blessings from long scarves extending out from the covered palanquin transporting the relic. The monk bodies migration also marks when it is considered appropriate to start wearing tights underneath one's *gho* for men, a division between seasons. The winter too still remains a quieter season in Thimphu, with many government offices on shorter hours and people gone on vacation. Even the popular cafes, which have become gathering places for not only expats but also the middle class in Thimphu, often take a holiday.

Perhaps most important for my research, Thimphu is the capital city and the heart of modernity in Bhutan. Often, I was told that I should go to the rural areas to see the "real Bhutan," that Thimphu was different. But this also made Thimphu the perfect place for my research—the intersection of change and the government institutions meant to reign it in. While my fieldwork was focused almost entirely in urban Bhutan and in western Bhutan at that, I think Thimphu remains every bit part of "real" Bhutan. The split between rural and urban Bhutan sometimes assumed in accounts of Bhutanese culture is far more complicated in practice. While this dissertation and my research remains firmly rooted in the urban life of Thimphu, I believe that it deserves to be seen as part of "real" Bhutan.

VAST

Much of my fieldwork took place at one place in particular: Voluntary Artists Studio, Thimphu (VAST). Part participatory art school, part third space, part gallery, and part public service NGO, VAST plays an enormously important role not only in providing training for many artists but also as the space where artists socialize and build the norms that broadly shape the art scene in Bhutan. A number of its former members have gone on to work for the Royal Office of

Media, which works on a host of projects for the monarchy and helps create its public image. Members of VAST have designed many of the signs businesses display and at least two parks in Thimphu. When national day celebrations require some novel handiwork, VAST is called into action. When the cultural center sponsored by the Indian government needs artists for a joint exhibition or the Bhutanese state wants representation in regional art meetings, VAST is the organization they contact.

Figure 4: Artists at work in VAST, photo by author.

There are, of course, other art galleries and artists who operate independently from VAST in Bhutan. During my fieldwork in 2017, Thimphu had no fewer than seven contemporary galleries and there were three more galleries in Paro. However, even these galleries show VAST's influence. Many of these galleries tend to be run by former or current members of VAST. I saw artists with their own galleries teaching classes, contributing time and money to projects, and submitting work for exhibitions at VAST. For example, during my fieldwork in 2017 a pair of identical twins who show their work under the single name "Twinz" held an exhibit of giant, hyper-realistic portraits

at VAST. In some ways, VAST has provided a model for some gallery owners in Bhutan. One gallery owner I spoke to in Paro planned to include workspace for artists and specifically described drawing inspiration from VAST (Field notes, August 4, 2017). Understanding contemporary art and the values at play in contemporary art in Bhutan requires understanding VAST.

VAST began in 1998 as a relatively informal gathering at the central plaza in downtown Thimphu locally known as the “clock tower” for the tall, slender timepiece carved with Bhutanese decorations that stood at the center of the plaza. What originally began as a way to teach art to students and provide something productive outside of school, quickly took off. Many of the first generation of VAST described skipping school to help VAST with projects or spend time together. Although originally conceived of by five artists, the tight knit community as it exists today is the result of the actions three central artists Kama Wangdi, Jamphel Cheda, and Phurba Thinley Sherpa. Over the years VAST has held onto this organization as it moved from space to space before landing where it is today on the north side of town near the river in an area known as Chubachu.

Recently, VAST’s organization has begun to change. In 2014, VAST became a formally registered Civil Society Organization (CSO), the term used for non-governmental organizations in Bhutan. Registration required that VAST create a board and more formal organizational structure. Slowly this has led to a formalization of roles and positions at VAST. Even without the CSO registration and its required institutional reform, VAST would have likely needed to change given its size and the increasing pressure it put on some of its core staff. The shift has created opportunities for funding, but institutionalization also meant that certain aspects of the organization have become more bureaucratic. The balance between the two is something the organization was working through while I was there. Just a couple of months prior to my arrival

in February 2017, VAST held a formal organizational development meeting and produced a strategic plan in order to get at the heart of some of the challenges and tensions that had arisen.

Over the years VAST has relied on support from not only its members but also tourists and the local community. Sales from artists who display in the gallery go to support VAST and it is not uncommon for an artist after an exhibition to donate a sizeable amount of the profits to VAST. So too, a number of core VAST members (some Bhutanese and some foreign) have donated their own time, skills, and money over the years. Fundraisers like the annual Art of Giving, also help VAST raise money for its projects, and the list of donors for these events shows strong support from Bhutanese and expats with longstanding connections to Bhutan.

Like many other CSOs, VAST also relies on official support from the various state and non-state actors. For example, the royal family provides significant support. VAST has for many years relied on gifts of *kidu*[9] from the fifth king who also continues to be an important purchaser of contemporary art. The space VAST currently occupies is owned by an organization run by the Queen Mother Ashi Dorji Wangmo. Likewise, VAST continues to fund its programs through partnerships with international organizations; for example, student art competitions run by UNICEF and VAST.[10]

The exact size of VAST is a bit hard to discern. While I was there, a core of between 15-20 members were regularly present and contributed heavily to the running of VAST. Of that core,

[9] A compound noun combining *kyi po* or happy with *dug ngel* or suffering, to refer to one's current state of well-being, be it good or bad. The phrase in Bhutan refers to a form of charity that is explicitly enumerated by law as a prerogative of the king. There is even an office of *kidu* under the monarchy. School fees for poor families and land for landless families are common examples of *kidu*.

[10] Though the role the royal family plays at VAST is important, the organization should be seen as an instrument of the monarchy. Compared to many CSOs, VAST started in a very grassroots fashion and the involvement of the royal family remains less central at VAST than many other CSOs.

an intern, two staff members, Kama Wangdi, Jamphel Cheda, the executive director Chimi Zangmo, and usually two or three of the youngest artists (all young men who recently passed from class 12) were the mainstay of the day-to-day running of VAST in 2017. Maiyesh Kumar Tamang, a ceramic artist who ran a studio up around the back and who had built a kiln on the premises, also contributed heavily. But the reach extended well beyond the core group. From my interviews and notes, I estimate that approximately 40-50 people were regularly involved in VAST, attending openings or potlucks, contributing time and money to the organization.[11]

Though Thimphu based, VAST sees itself as a national organization and has for years run art camps in rural areas in Bhutan. Many of the current members were first introduced to contemporary art and VAST through these art camps. Furthermore in 2012 two teachers—Jigme Dorji and Chojay Tshering—founded VAST Yangtse in the eastern district of Tashiyangtse with the guidance and support of Kama Wangdi. While I was in Thimphu, two artists who had initially experienced contemporary art through VAST Yangtse were on their way abroad to earn degrees in the arts.

Methods

This dissertation is built on over three years of experience in Bhutan, the last year focused heavily on participant observation and interviews with artists and archival work outlining the history of contemporary art in Bhutan. I met many of the artists I eventually worked with on a trip to Bhutan in 2005 as an undergraduate at Stanford University, and spent a lot of time with VAST in the summer 2008. However, they were not the subject of my research at the time. These early trips were spent trying to find a topic and get a sense of the social and cultural landscape. I took classes in Dzongkha, the national language, dug through the National Library archive, visited

[11] This number does not include all of the art class students in Thimphu and rural areas.

temples, attended household rituals and tried to integrate into social life as much as possible. Before turning to art, I examined development projects, traditional medicine, journalism, and middle class Buddhist gatherings in Thimphu. For various reasons, none of these ideas turned into a research project. But they all contain a through line of interest in the creative engagement with modernity and, in particular, with the identities Bhutanese negotiated in that process.

For most of this period I was teacher at Royal Thimphu College. This experience was both an important breakthrough and a limiting factor for me. Teaching provided me with a clear institutional affiliation, and, not insignificantly, some importance. The college helped put me in touch with institutions and individuals that otherwise may not have answered. However, one cost was the time it took to teach. I struggled to fit research into 10-15 contact hours with students in addition to lecture planning, grading, and departmental meetings. Another cost was that I wound up positioning myself as something of an expert, especially on Buddhism in ways that sometimes made it hard to present myself with the appropriate amount of naïveté. In my classes, including a class on Buddhist Social Theory, I had to present myself as knowledgeable. Likewise, I had read quite a bit about Bhutan and, being something of a know it all, was probably showier than I should have been. Likewise, being able to read Tibetan and, consequently, a bit of high Dzongkha, my friends would often say I knew more than them. When I would stop at a sign, sound it out, and ask a friend what a term meant sometimes an answer was forthcoming, but just as often they would simply say that I could read better or knew more than they did. Often people would assume I knew things I did not. Sometimes I could summon the nerve to say that I did not know, but often I would let it pass hoping I could ask later or figure out a reference from context. In other cases, passing myself off as naïve would simply not have been believable.

English is the medium of instruction and, along with the national language Dzongkha, one of two languages of record in Bhutan. Most of my fieldwork was, in fact, conducted in English. However, the linguistic landscape is far more complex than these facts would suggest. I knew that English alone would not suffice heading into the field and prepared for the linguistic environment as best I could. Expecting to conduct my research in Dzongkha or with Tibetan religious texts and archival materials, I spent three years learning Tibetan. In the field, I made learning Dzongkha my first priority. However, attaining fluency proved difficult. In part, this was because English is widely and rather fluently spoken in the capital and I was expected to teach in English. Furthermore, the linguistic landscape in Bhutan is fascinatingly complex with more than 19 distinct, but related, languages being spoken. Most Bhutanese speak three or four languages which they often interweave especially Dzongkha, English, Nepali, and Tsangla or Sharchop. Furthermore, the "high" Dzongkha I learned with tutors and in books and the conversational Dzongkha I heard were, in fact quite distinct. Formal Dzongkha bore many more similarities to the classical Tibetan used in Buddhist scriptures, known locally as "*chö kay*" or "the language of religion." Indeed, many Bhutanese I spoke to told me that the Dzongkha they learned in class or heard on TV was difficult for them to follow as well.[12] Despite the challenges, by the end of my field work I developed a rudimentary if effective working understanding of Dzongkha, enough that I could follow conversational topics and pick out key themes to follow up on later.

Many of my interviews involved some amount of "Dzonglish." My knowledge of Dzongkha and of Buddhism at the very least helped with discussing many key terms that do not translate easily into English. In the few interviews done in Dzongkha, a former student named

[12] I learned from one Dzongkha teacher that this may have been a result of intentional state policy that adopted a more formal Dzongkha that was seen to be closely associated with the classical Tibetan found in religious texts.

Karma Tenzin Choden helped translate. She was a natural and made the interviewees feel comfortable, seamlessly becoming part of the conversation without either becoming too reticent or taking over. My Dzongkha was good enough I could usually follow the direction of conversation and sometimes based on the Dzongkha alone guide, usually in English, follow up questions for her to ask on topics as they came up. However, without Karma's help my conversations would have been far less rich. The one time she showed up late to an interview, I managed to get the mostly straightforward background of a traditional artist—where he grew up, where he trained, his area of expertise, and how long he had been doing it—but had to wait until Karma showed up to ask more philosophical or narrative questions. I suspect the hugely diverse language context of Bhutan will continue to present a challenge for future research.

Being able to read high Dzongkha and Tibetan proved useful to a point. However, I quickly realized that Bhutan, and particularly training in the arts, remains a largely oral tradition. Syllabi shown to me by artists contained many diagrams but very little writing. Traditional artists chanted prayers, but they were largely taught by example not by textbook. Even the syllabi relied largely on drawings made "by our grandfathers" as I was told. A recent program at the College for Language and Cultural Studies to combine a more scholarly approach to Buddhism and the practical arts fell apart. While I initially planned on digging through the archives or reading through Tibetan or high Dzongkha treatises regarding debates over iconography or how to paint, I soon realized I needed to talk to teachers and that the answers to my questions were not in texts.[13]

[13] The relationship to between literacy and orality in Bhutan would be a fascinating subject for someone with much better language skills than myself. Many Bhutanese have at least some literacy, being able to carve or write mantras, for example, even if they would be considered "illiterate" by official standards.

Defining who to interview also proved tricky. Limiting myself to only full-time professional artists would have missed an important part of the art world. Not only are there few artists who primarily make their income from art, but many of these hesitated to identify themselves as artists when I asked them, opting for more humble labels such as painter.

Furthermore, there is considerable overlap between different artistic practices. The art scene in Thimphu, for example, was never as autonomous as the scene Sherry Ortner describes in her ethnography of independent film in the US (Ortner 2013). Filmmakers, poets, writers, painters, sculptors, actors, and musicians all mingled together in Thimphu. I collected books of poetry, short stories, and children's books that all contained work by painters. This ambiguity is perhaps best illustrated by a conversation I had at Junction, a bookstore and popular hangout just below the traffic circle, where many of the creatives in Thimphu would come to hang out and which most of the serious readers in town regarded as the best bookstore. Sitting in a small upstairs café, I was talking to an important supporter of b-boying in Bhutan and a filmmaker about who counted as an artist. They suggested that everyone from fashion designers to a craft brewer who refused to expand production beyond what he could quality control to any *drayang*[14] where the performers took their choreography seriously should count as artists (Field notes, July 12, 2017).

I decided to focus on interviewing anyone whose work was on public display in any of the galleries in Thimphu or Paro. However, I took my informants seriously and I also wound up interviewing and spending time with fashion designers, filmmakers, authors, and a few musicians

[14] *Drayangs* are nightclubs where women sing and dance on stage similar to cabaret. They sing in Dzongkha and wear national dress, but also have a reputation for being seedy amongst polite society in Thimphu and have been denounced for encouraging immorality. Interestingly they are also regulated by Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority (BICMA) which reviews and regulates media content in Bhutan (Roder 2012, 156-158).

to get a sense of the networks between artists of various stripes and whether what held true for artists seemed to reflect the "field" more generally (I believe it did).

Although a few interviews were obtained by going through a tourist handbook offering classes and cold-calling the artists, most were obtained through a snowball method. Often, I would ask the person I was interviewing to put me in touch with someone I wanted to interview. Either having someone contact the artist I wanted to interview directly or being able to use the name of an artist's acquaintance was much more successful in getting people to agree to sit down with me than cold calling. Most of the contacts were made by phone or, occasionally, Facebook. As many other researchers and visitors to Bhutan have experienced, emails are an incredibly unreliable method to get in touch with people in Bhutan.

In the end, I conducted 105 semi-structured interviews supplemented by countless other small conversations and interactions during my fieldwork. Although most of these interviews were with people currently involved in or specifically knowledgeable about the arts scene in Bhutan, I also interviewed key informants to double check information about exhibitions or various elements of oral history. Most of my interviews lasted between 1-2 hours. But there were a few key informants to whom I returned regularly with questions about their own work, or to double check the information received in interviews about the history of art (e.g. Kama Wangdi, a founder of VAST).

In addition to interviews and deep "hanging out," I also took art classes and participated in one public exhibition of poetry as a form of "participant observation." The classes themselves included about 10 hours with a traditional artist and a contemporary art class lasting five months that met on Saturday afternoons at VAST. Due to the focus of my research, I spent more time on the contemporary art class. Nevertheless, the traditional art class provided some useful insights,

good contacts, and interesting materials. This experience provided a wealth of information about how artists understand their work, what is important about their art, and introduced me to would-be artists.

Taking art classes also helped me to see what artists were doing more clearly and see some the similarities between traditional and contemporary art in terms of skills. In both classes, for example, I was taught to divide a shape in order to draw it. The classes also gave me a sense of why one might come to VAST and of the encouragement and camaraderie found in a community of people with a shared interest. For example, posting my exercises from class to Instagram, I found much encouragement in my classmates' comments. However, most of all I was surprised that art class proved to be so value-laden, that art class was a key space for learning both values and a model of the self.

Outline

Based on over 3 years of fieldwork and four trips to Bhutan between 2008-2017, the dissertation focuses specifically on contemporary artists living and working in Bhutan's capital of Thimphu. In chapter two I establish a history of contemporary art in Bhutan, drawing on oral history and archival work with both contemporary and traditional artists. Chapter three builds on chapter two by examining how the preservation of national culture, often referred to as "traditional" culture in Bhutan, constructs national subjects through the promotion of certain values. Chapter four focuses on values espoused by contemporary artists, particularly those at VAST, compare to national values and the self-understanding implied by these values. I devote considerable time in this chapter to an ethnographic understanding the social dynamics at VAST even as I include insights from artists who operate galleries independently of VAST. Chapter five examines the artwork of four key artists in order to explore some of the patterns emerging in

Bhutanese contemporary art while also giving a sense of the individual particularity of these artists. In chapter six I relate the story of a visiting artist at VAST to consider how artists in Bhutan perceive their art compared to contemporary art from outside of Bhutan. I consider in this chapter also how artists both make room for greater modernity, as they understand it, and also push against critiques from the outside about Bhutan's contemporary art. Finally, I conclude the dissertation by looking at where contemporary art may be headed in the future.

Chapter 2: A history of the rise of contemporary art in Bhutan

Bhutanese contemporary artists have displayed their work from the United States to India to Japan, a remarkable fact for a country of only 700-800,000 people with no fine arts school. Although the contemporary art scene in Bhutan really blossomed with the founding of VAST in 1998, its roots go much deeper. In this chapter, I outline some of the key factors that explain how contemporary art arose in Bhutan.

I focus on primarily post-1960 as this is a conventionally accepted transition point, when the five-year plans, motorable roads, rational bureaucratic institutions, promotion of a national culture, and shift of the capital to Thimphu meant a more intense pursuit of conscious modernization. In many ways, the history of modern art forms in Bhutan is unlike its regional neighbors. There were no programs of intentional cultural modernization like those seen in nearby countries. Unlike India, art was not part of a colonial power on a mission civilisatrice (Mitter 2001, 173). Neither did the Bhutanese state introduce art by inviting westerners to help set up an art school the way Thailand did (Clark 1998, 84-87; Peleggi 2002, 194). Art in Bhutan, instead, has been ad hoc and improvised, something that has grown in the interstices of broader projects of modernization. Profound social change including shifts in education, the transition to democracy, and the introduction of television and the internet have all brought about cultural changes, but that was hardly their intent. Rather, the state has tended to focus on "preservation" of culture and to use culture instrumentally. Charles Taylor's distinction between "acultural" modernity and "cultural" modernity is apt here (Taylor 1995, 224-225). Bhutan has generally sought to introduce forms of "social modernity" while limiting their effect on "cultural modernity" through projects of preservation.

Contrary to historical narratives that portray modernization as primarily driven by the

monarchy, in this chapter I argue that contemporary art was the product of many different forces and many different people. The history offered here focuses on a number of key factors that have, since the middle of the 20th century, contributed to the rise of new art practices in Bhutan and continue to shape the practice of contemporary art today. In this chapter I describe how contemporary art developed out of the promotion of traditional art, access to fine art education, the increasing movement of people into and out of Bhutan, the creation of places to display art, the introduction of new media, and royal and elite support.

Not traditional art

Throughout the dissertation I use the term “contemporary art” as opposed to “traditional art” to refer to the focus of my study. Even in the West, the idea of fine art as relatively autonomous objects for aesthetic contemplation only arose in the 19th century (Shiner 2001). It is my understanding that art in this sense is now a global phenomenon and a relatively recent introduction to Bhutan. I refer to art that prioritizes originality, distinct individual style, and aesthetic and conceptual appreciation in its own right as “contemporary art.” I have chosen to use this term because Bhutanese artists themselves, notably at VAST, use it. In contrast to contemporary art, I refer to aesthetic practices deeply linked to tantric Buddhism and the historical Buddhist state in Bhutan as “traditional art.” As in other places, the practices and products included under the umbrella art and the boundaries between art and other forms of visual and material production are blurry. Usually Bhutanese, and visiting participants in the artworld like myself, use the English term “art” and in particular “contemporary art” to distinguish forms of visual culture deemed “modern” from those deemed “traditional.” This dichotomy is at the heart of creative production in Bhutan. The distinction between contemporary and traditional art forms is also marked linguistically: English terms for modern artistic practices and Dzongkha terms for the traditional.

For example, Bhutanese will frequently distinguish between "*lhadrip"* who paint the heavily rule bound Buddhist icons known as "*thangka*" and "artists" who are supposed to perfect a unique individual style and have more freedom to make "art."

Of course, the boundaries within contemporary art and across contemporary and traditional are blurred and always under negotiation. Although my main focus of my dissertation is on painting, artists themselves often do not limit themselves to one medium. Painters also write poetry and make short films, they open animation studios too. For example, the one professionally trained ceramic artist in Thimphu also paints. VAST itself often creates community installation pieces—plastic bottle cap mosaics, discarded toilets filled with chilies, or giant Andrew Goldsworthy inspired whorls of branches. Likewise, poets, filmmakers, musicians, and other creative types in Thimphu intermingle with each other and share ideas.

Though the boundary is often reinforced by mutual criticism across artistic practices, traditional and contemporary artists do also exchange information and even collaborate. VAST members, for example, attended a workshop on making dyes using local plant materials put on by a traditional artist through the Agency for the Promotion of Indigenous Crafts (APIC). Conversely, members of the Choki Traditional School collaborated with VAST to host a color theory workshop attended by both traditional art students and contemporary artists. Even the galleries sell both traditional works of art like masks and mandalas alongside contemporary art offerings. Likewise, Kama Wangdi himself often says that "contemporary art" includes Bhutan's traditional arts and handicrafts since these too are "contemporary." However, Kama Wangdi's statement only resonates because Bhutanese do distinguish between that traditional and contemporary art, and I believe the distinction is analytically useful.

In distinguishing between traditional and contemporary art, I am following the lead of other

scholars. Art historian Nora Taylor, for example, uses the terms “fine art” to refer to her study of oil paintings in Vietnam, a practice with a complex history linked to colonialism, communism, and global capitalism (Taylor 2004). Similarly, the historian Larry Shiner uses “fine art” to refer to the invented and incredibly modern art practices now taken for granted in the West (Shiner 2001). Anthropologist Kabir Mansingh Heimsath in his work on Tibetan art chooses to use the term “contemporary art” to talk about the practice of new painting styles in Tibet (2005). Heimsath defines contemporary Tibetan art against expectations surrounding Tibetan culture. Contemporary Tibetan painting according to Heimsath is “not artefact” and “not past,” distinguishing it from older Tibetan aesthetic practices.[15]

What is traditional art

Most often the term “traditional art” in Bhutan refers to one of the *zorig chusum* or 13 arts. In his book on the topic, Khenpo Phuntsho Tashi, head of the national museum in Paro, lists the following as the 13 traditional arts: “painting, sculpture, wood-carving, calligraphy, embroidery, casting, paper making” as well as “carpentry, masonry, textile production, blacksmith work, gold and silver smithy, and bamboo weaving” (Phun-tshogs-bkra-shis 2003, 13-14). Some arts no doubt precede Buddhism, but such historical information is scarce. Stone adzes dated by Michael Aris suggest that the region has been inhabited at least going back to 2000-1500 BC, but even these artifacts are often interpreted as *namcha* or “sky iron” from Buddhist deities (Phuntsho 2013, Kindle Locations 1646-1647). Buddhist art has been a part of life, if not the dominant aspect of culture it is today, in the region since at least the founding of temples in Paro and Bumthang by Songtsen Gampo’s in the 7th century Tibetan empire.

[15] Heimsath goes on to add that contemporary art also resists the expectations of the global art world by being “not ethnic” and “not fashionable.”

The 13 traditional arts have become an important part of the narrative that links national identity and Buddhism. Both popular and scholarly accounts attribute the organization and management of the traditional arts under the umbrella of *zorig chusum* to rulers of the early Buddhist state sometime in the 17th century. The act of codifying the traditional arts is most commonly attributed to Tenzin Rabgye, nephew of and successor to the Zhabdrung, although other authors include the Zhabdrung as an important figure in determining the arts of the state (Bartholomew and Johnston 2008; Bhutan Cultural Atlas 2017; Phun-tshogs-bkra-shis 2003).[16] Available biographies and historical information about the Zhabdrung and Tenzin Rabgye, among others, show that the Buddhist state imported artisans from neighboring regions (Ardussi 2008a; Maki 2016; Jackson 2008; Phun-tshogs-bkra-shis 2003). In this way, Bhutan was much like the rest of the cultural sphere across the Himalayas, where people, ideas, and goods spread through trade, politics, and religion. Much of scholarship on Bhutanese history echoes the nationalist narrative that the arts not only linked Bhutanese together in shared Buddhist culture but were organized to distinguish Bhutanese identity from Tibetan identity (Maki 2016, 102-103). Whether or not the arts created a nation,[17] the early interest of the state in the arts shows that art was an important part of a statecraft where religion and politics were deeply interlinked (cf Kinga 2009).[18]

In many ways the codification of arts into the category of *zorig chusum* is a classic example of an "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992). Invention in Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger's understanding does not imply inauthenticity so much as point to the way loose,

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[16] I have not found a source that adequately explains what this "codification" precisely entailed.
[17] Resistance leading up to the Zhabdrung's consolidation of power and collapse after suggests that some other principle, such as patron-client relationships combined with ritual authority, organized the early Buddhist state.
[18] I suspect that the codification of arts into "traditional" art is in part a product of modern nation building.

informally shared customs are formalized into traditions to create a sense of continuity with history. The invented quality of the *zorig chusum* in Bhutan can be seen in how the precise reckoning of what counts as traditional art is not entirely settled. The Smithsonian folk life festival put together in collaboration with the Bhutanese state does not, for example, include paper making as part of its list (Smithsonian Folklife Festival 2008; APIC 2017). Further discrepancies can be found by comparing the work of scholars and institutions documenting traditional art (Ardussi 2008a; Schicklgruber and Pommaret 1998; Bhutan Cultural Atlas 2017; APIC 2017; Smithsonian Folklife Festival 2008; Phun-tshogs-bkra-shis 2003). In an interview with the current head of APIC, Lam Kezang, I was told that there are actually a huge number of traditional arts, more than suggested by the label *zorig chusum* (Field notes, July 18, 2017). Lacquering, for example, was a skill done locally that seldom makes it onto the lists of traditional arts, but it is taught at the Tashiyangtse Institute for Zorig Chusum where it is presented as an element of specifically eastern Bhutanese culture. The disparate reckonings of what counts as traditional art in Bhutan shows how the category of traditional art is unruly and how its codification is the product of cultural work to create a standard idea of the traditional.

Today, the arts most commonly taught at the three traditional art schools are those associated with religion and with the greatest market: applique and embroidery, tailoring, painting, wood carving, and clay sculpture.[19] The National Institute for Zorig Chusum in Thimphu (IZC) used to offer slate carving, but this proved unpopular with students and has been (perhaps temporarily) discontinued.[20] Weaving continues to be a vibrant and thriving art form in Bhutan,

[19] The vast majority of students for religious arts such as sculpture and painting tend to be men. Tailoring and weaving tend to be dominated by women. The exception to this general rule was applique and embroidery where I observed the majority of students were women even though much of the work was making of Buddhist icons.

[20] I was told this was because students found slate carving to be dirty.

but is still generally taught by women to their relatives at home. The IZC in Thimphu does not offer weaving and while the Choki Traditional school does offer courses, there were only two students enrolled when I visited in the summer of 2017. The remaining arts are largely taught outside of schools, and while some, like paper making, have relatively well-established centers, others, like pottery and blacksmithing, have been struggling.

As with much of social life in Bhutan, Buddhism is central to the practice and interpretation of the arts. In fact, many of the *zorig chusum* are specifically Buddhist arts. Khenpo Phuntsho Tashi goes so far as to divide the arts into “exalted” and “ordinary” categories, grouping traditional painting, sculpture, calligraphy, paper making, embroidery and applique, wood carving, and casting under the category “exalted” (Phun-tshogs-bkra-shis 2003, 13). The division mirrors Buddhist philosophical divisions between ultimate and mundane truth, in addition to echoing broader cultural divisions that set aside the Buddhist sacred from the everyday profane.[21] Khenpo Phuntsho Tashi further divides the arts into body, speech, and mind, another common conceptual division in Himalayan Buddhism (Jackson 2005).

The conceptual links between Buddhism and traditional art are reflected in social practice. Both historical records and Bhutanese today ascribe religious qualities to master artists. I have personally heard people speak of Ugyen Lhendrub, a famous traditional painter, having a Buddha’s eye in the palm of his hand. Khenpo Phuntsho Tashi gives the example of the sculptor who has a sacred syllable in his thumbprint so that his statues do not need to be consecrated (Phun-tshogs-bkra-shis 2003, 25). David Jackson also notes that artists were frequently referred to as “*trulku*” a term most often used for reincarnated religious figures such as the Dalai Lama (Jackson 2008,

[21] See for example, Bhutan’s constitution which states in Article 3.3 that “Religious institutions and personalities shall remain above politics.” (RGOB 2008)

211). Buddhist art also creates fields of merit for both sponsors and daily patrons, symbolizes the power and authority of Buddhism over local deities, and projects the power of the state (Maki 2011). Even the mundane arts are frequently ennobled by associating them with a particular Buddhist saint or religious figure. A book on pottery published by the National Library, for example, argues that Guru Rinpoche introduced pottery for the benefit of the population (rDo-rJe 2011). Buddhist art still features heavily in the physical spaces of the Bhutanese state. Bhutan's civil administration still shares physical space with the central monastic body, both being housed in large fortress-monasteries known as *dzongs*.

Strict rules govern the making of the more overtly religiously oriented traditional arts. Painting, for example, follows a sophisticated and refined set of measurements and proportions known as "*tigse.*" Teachers at the art school carefully correct with red pen even the smallest deviations in the shape of a flame, width of an arm, or direction of a finger (Field notes, August 8, 2017). I have seen traditionally trained artists come into VAST and, with the intention of helping, correct the images that contemporary painters have made—changing eye positioning or face shape on a Buddha (Field notes, September 24, 2017). I have also heard traditional artists casually complain about contemporary artistic representations that deviate from the prescribed representations of deities (Field notes, July 15, 2017). Throughout my research, I was told that in traditional Buddhist art painting the Buddha incorrectly or incompletely was a sin and would result in a commensurate disfiguration on the painter's next rebirth.

When I asked traditional artists who make icons about these rules, I was usually told that "texts" were the source of the rules, though they could not tell me precisely which Buddhist texts nor did they learn their iconometry from those texts. I was also told that "lamas" could also authorize new compositions (Interview, July 30, 2017). Although lamas and texts may provide

ultimate approval, in my observation Bhutanese traditional artists learn their craft primarily through oral instruction and through emulating already approved examples of a particular composition.

Similarly, there is an assumption of a certain amount of moral discipline of the painter in the production of traditional art. A common ideal supported in writing about traditional art in Bhutan is that artists should be moral and paint with a pure mind. Painting is supposed to be an act of meditation and of being in the right mindset. At the IZC, for example, artists wake up early to do morning Buddhist prayers and end the day with prayers as well. Kama Wangdi frequently told me his shift to contemporary art was in part motivated by a feeling that he was not moral enough to make images for worship. Other contemporary artists I spoke to referred to the strict schedule and discipline at traditional art schools as being part of the reason why they could not do it. Which is not to say that all contemporary artists are undisciplined and immoral and all traditional painters strictly observant Buddhist. Linda Leaming, for example, in her book *Married to Bhutan*, describes the teachers at the IZC as having an earthy humor and being almost like “Teamsters” (2011, 77). Nevertheless, the remarks of Kama Wangdi and other contemporary artists show that the ideal type of discipline and devotion required to make traditional art has real social and cultural weight.

Traditional art continues to influence contemporary art. Trained at the National Fine Art Center—now the National Handicrafts Emporium, which no longer trains artisans—Kama Wangdi’s works continue to use *tigse* and Buddhist iconography even as his use of texture and composition has moved away from traditional painting. Phurba Namgay, who has displayed work at the Rubin Museum in New York and is perhaps the best-known artist outside of Bhutan, also trained and taught at the at the IZC uses many elements of traditional art in his work. Phurba Namgay is famous for combining imagery of rocket ships and sky scrapers with traditional

representations of clouds and animals. His overall aesthetic and coloring also reflects the flat, *ligne claire* style of *thangka* painting. Rinchen Wangdi, who runs Datog gallery and trained at the College of Language and Cultural Studies, similarly uses *thangka* styles to portray pastoral images of village life. Gyembo Wangchuck and Tshewang Tenzin, two other traditionally trained artists, have recently begun experimenting with contemporary art and similarly continue to use much of the iconography as well as the stylistic elements learned from traditional painting.

Traditional art also influences who becomes artists. Part of the responsibility for the fact that contemporary artists continue to be predominantly men falls at the feet of traditional art. Religious arts (including painting) in particular were and still are overwhelmingly the domain of men. The exclusion or discouragement against women's involvement in religious arts mirrors the ways in which women are excluded from *goenkhangs*, the temple spaces that house tutelary deities in Bhutan, and are prohibited from taking full Buddhist ordination vows. As in the broader Tibetan cultural world there is a common belief in Bhutan that women are several rebirths behind a man (Gutschow 2004). Even in the realm of textiles, religious robes need to be made by men, and cloth woven by men is perceived to be especially auspicious (Altmann 2016; Pommaret et al. 1994).

These disadvantages faced by women are often played down or denied. When I asked about the disparity between male and female professional artists, I was frequently told that no rule says women cannot learn these arts, but that women simply choose not to. This echoes a common refrain that "women should come forward" which is heard in many different social settings in Bhutan (Roder 2012). Needless to say, there are considerable unrecognized barriers surrounding gender inequalities in Bhutan. Traditional art in this way is both a source and a reflection of broader gender inequality.

However, there has been some incipient change in regard to gender in the arts in recent

years. A handful of women have begun training in *thangka* painting and even sculpture (Lhamo 2017). In fact, the wife of the artist from whom I took traditional painting lessons herself trained as a *thangka* painter (Field notes, April 16, 2017). Likewise, the number of women participating in contemporary art has been growing in numbers and prominence. VAST introduced a yearly all-woman exhibition called *Her Expression* in 2014, that each year has displayed dozens of different artists. Passang Dema and Kunzang Wangmo, two women, also took top prizes at the first *Patterns of Happiness* art competition sponsored by the Royal Textile Academy in 2017. Nevertheless, the number of professional contemporary artists, like traditional artists, remains predominantly male as of 2018.

Institutionalization of traditional art

As alluded to by the discussion of contemporary artists trained in traditional art, one of the main contributors to the rise of contemporary art was, paradoxically, the formalization of training in traditional art. Starting with the IZC and National Fine Art Center in the 1970s, the creation of institutions for teaching art independent of monasteries represented a major shift in the organization of the arts and how artists learned their trade. Prior to the introduction of formal arts organizations, religious traditional arts were learned from religious institutions, family members who had trained at a religious institution, or one of the various *chopas* or religious figures who may not necessarily be ordained monks. While the family and the monastery continue to play important roles in traditional arts, the creation of state sponsored centers for traditional art offered a third venue for training. This transition in art training mirrored the broader pattern of growth in power of the modern state centered in the monarchy as opposed to the previous organization of power around the Buddhist clergy described by Michael Aris (1979).

The bureaucratic, rational organization and management of art by the state created a class

of artisan for the state that no longer used corvée labor as it had in the past.[22] Though by no means a complete secularization of art, this shift in training with its relative autonomy from religious institutions contributed to traditional artists beginning to experiment in new arts styles.

The roots of Bhutan's earliest traditional art school go back to renovations of the Royal Palace and Tashichho Dzong in Thimphu. Construction and development projects begun in the 1950s and 60s planted the seeds for what would eventually become the IZC.

Finding an exact date for the beginning of the IZC is difficult as it seems to have grown somewhat organically. Accounts from Bhutanese living in Thimphu at the time and the first principal of the IZC confirmed that the institute had its beginnings in the workshops set up for artisans renovating the Dechencholing Palace and Tashichho Dzong (Interview, July 19, 2017). Work on the *dzong* was a massive undertaking, requiring the destruction of the existing building weakened by earthquakes and age, and the construction of a new building suitable to the requirements of a modern bureaucracy in the capital city. The government funded similar projects across the country as Bhutan modernized. Predictably, these construction projects also created a demand for trained artisans.

The demand for skilled artisans created a problem. Most available artisans were farmers or attached to a religious institution, and recruiting them to come work was difficult according to the one of the key figures in the founding of the IZC, Choki Dorji. A charismatic figure, Choki Dorji received his own training in the arts through his position in the court of the third and fourth kings. He traveled to various master artisans stationed in religious institutions, such as Bumdra Lhakhang above Taktsang. The idea for starting a school came about as a product of the need for skilled artisans from his time coordinating the renovations at the *dzong* and was modeled on the modern

[22] This seems to have begun largely at the behest of the third king (Kinga 2009, 224-225)

education system. In 1972 an institution known initially as the "Painting School" was born, housed in the Kawajangsa area near the National Library where the IZC stands today.

According to those involved early on, the school of traditional art was not really an "institute" so much as a collection of workshops when it began (Interview, November 6, 2017; Interview, July 19, 2017). Under principal Dasho[23] Kinzang Thinley, the "Painting School" became the IZC in the 1990s. Classes and management of the IZC became more like a classroom or vocational training course. To this day the IZC still operates much like a vocational school and is managed under the Ministry of Labor. Over the years, the institute also added more courses. An early article on the painting school suggests that it focused on painting almost exclusively (Kuensel 1988).[24]

Another important training institute, the National Fine Art Center, opened in 1971. The center opened as a result of efforts begun at the end of the 1960s by the Ministry of Trade, Industries, and Forests. The ministry planned to introduce handicraft centers for everything from *thangka* painting in Thimphu to bamboo weaving in Manas as part of the broader development goal of generating income (Kuensel 1969). Situated on Norzin Lam, the main road in Thimphu, the building included both a point of sale and place of training complete with workshops. Opened by Ashi Sonam Choden, the center was imagined as a way to sell cottage industry products and also to train new artists. In his address at the opening, industrial expert L.M. Menezes claimed the goal of the emporium and the other centers set up by the Ministry of Trade and Industry was to preserve cultural and artistic heritage while meeting market demand for handicrafts (Kuensel 1971). The building that housed many of the workshops at the National Fine Art Center is no

[23] Dasho is a non-hereditary official title granted by the monarchy literally meaning "best".
[24] Today, the IZC offers courses in at least 9 different arts, although some of these—like boot making—are usually included as a subcategory of one of the main arts.

longer in use, but can still be seen behind the National Handicrafts Emporium. The Fine Arts Center was where Kama Wangdi, trained starting in 1976. Kama Wangdi learned not only painting, but a host of other crafts and stayed at the Fine Art Centre for 10 years, helping them develop new products (Samal 2010). Although no longer run by the government, the emporium still sells handicrafts to this day.

Today the IZC requires students complete their studies until at least class 10.[25] As a result, many interested young people no longer meet the minimum requirements to attend the IZC. Choki Dorji, who was deeply involved in the founding of the IZC, started the Choki Traditional Arts School (CTAS) 1999 in response to the increasing number of students seeking his training when they failed to gain entry to the IZC because they had not completed enough of their formal education.

Across the different schools in Bhutan, traditional artists follow a very similar curriculum. CTAS and the IZC in Thimphu use similar syllabi that have students start with the basics used for house and *lhakhang*[26] painting in the first two years and progress through more complex *thangkha* painting[27] up to mandalas by the final year. Artists seem to follow the rough progression described by David Jackson in his seminal work on Tibetan *thangkha* painters—beginning with the simpler Buddhist symbols such as the eight lucky signs and decorative elements like clouds before focusing on deities (Jackson and Jackson 1984). My own traditional classes focused on learning to draw clouds, the eight lucky signs, and sacred animals. I was also given completed drawings of the eight lucky symbols to fill in.

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[25] This is the equivalent of studying up until Sophomore year of high school in the United States.
[26] The term *lhakhang* refers to a temple and literally means "house of the gods".
[27] The term *thangkha* refers to Buddhist icons set into a textile that could be rolled for easy transport and are frequently displayed in religious settings.

Of course, there are some differences between the schools. Notably, CTAS has also seemed more open to unconventional subjects and teaching. They introduced “creativity classes” by inviting artists and artisans from outside Bhutan to teach. The shop on the CTAS campus contains a section of “creative” works made by students including clocks, electric prayer wheels, and many unconventional paintings. Although most of the traditional artists I interacted with trained in Thimphu, a few have trained in the far east of Bhutan at the IZC in the town of Tashiyangtse in the east of Bhutan. Started in 1997, the institute varies slightly from the institute in Thimphu, offering many of the same courses but also sometimes making courses like mask making available that are not offered at the Thimphu IZC. Probably the most significant development to come out of the IZC Tashiyangtse is the research into natural, plant dyes explored by a teacher there and brought to Thimphu by one of his students, Paljor Dorji, who exhibited his work at the Nehru-Wangchuck center.[28]

Another key institute supporting traditional art in Bhutan is the Bhutanese government’s Agency for the Promotion of Indigenous Culture (APIC) which began in 2011 and is based in Thimphu. While not a school, APIC holds workshops and funds trainings that encourage both the production of and innovation in traditional art. They also set up and manage the line of over 100 handicraft shops on the north side of the capital. Significantly, APIC has been central to funding a number of projects such as traditional artists learning how to use modern electric wheels at VAST, and a workshop for contemporary and traditional artists to learn about plant based dyes. Tarayana Foundation[29] also supports training in traditional pottery and the development of new products,

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[28] A center for cultural exchange in downtown Thimphu run by the Indian embassy. The center has a gallery where many art exhibitions were held.
[29] A non-governmental organization founded by the Queen Mother Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck that supports various development activities.

often in traditional materials.

Despite the changes brought about by modernization and the market, certain aspects of the old apprenticeship structure remain. Students still often work for their teachers outside of the classroom. Several recent graduates explained the importance of paid "OJT" or "on the job training" they do, usually on projects obtained by their teachers. Thimphu, in fact, has many workshops tucked away where 6 or 7 traditional artists will be working on *thangka* for exhibitions abroad or *lhakhangs* at home. Although one of the atelier I visited seemed to be a group of peers, others are organized with a master artist who supervises the work. The master artist handled the overall design, quality control, and some of the trickier design or painting elements, but left much of the actual execution to the junior artists.

Figure 5: Traditional artists' atelier, photo by author.

Education

Education was another avenue for the introduction and promotion of new art forms. In the absence of a contemporary art school, the expansion of public education in the 1960s and 1970s contributed to the growth of contemporary art. Modern education also brought foreign teachers with an interest in art as a key part of holistic and their idea of wholesome education. So too, art clubs at schools were important avenues for young people to learn about art and create communities with a shared interest to practice art. Able to call on the resources of the education

system, art clubs also helped students get difficult to acquire supplies. So too, the introduction of contemporary art also depended on Bhutanese training abroad. Increasingly, artists have gone abroad to India, Bangladesh, the United States, and United Kingdom to get degrees in art, design, or other areas of study related to visual and material culture. However, many of Bhutan's early artists trained abroad in various professional visual techniques such as screen-printing and film making.

In particular, contemporary art in Bhutan can be traced to Yangchenphug Central School in the mid-1970s, an early public school in Thimphu. Opened in 1965 as Thimphu Public School and today known as Yangchenphug Higher Secondary School (YHS), Yangchenphug was one of the preeminent educational institutions in Bhutan at the time and a place where many ministers and important people in Bhutan today received primary and secondary education. Both the founder of VAST, Kama Wangdi and Paro-based artist Chimi Dorji, were students at Yangchenphug.

Two key educators at Yangchenphug Central School, Principal John (J.B.) Tyson and art teacher Naresh Sengupta, profoundly influenced the development of new art forms in Bhutan. Kama Wangdi and Chimi Dorji formed close bonds with J.B. Tyson and Naresh Sengupta and credit their teachers with encouraging their interest in the arts and eventual career as artists. Beyond professional artists, many other Bhutanese of the same generation that I spoke to fondly remembered both J.B. Tyson and Naresh Sengupta and it is likely that their efforts more generally helped foster an audience for new art forms and art education.

J.B. Tyson, arrived in Bhutan in 1975 as the principal of YHS. Already an accomplished mountaineer with a keen interest in the Himalayas, Tyson was also part of broader British support for education in Bhutan through the Overseas Development Agency. The school was also supported by India and had a number of teachers and administrators from Indian military schools.

Possibly due to differences in educational approach and competition for influence between the UK and India, conflict arose at the school which eventually led to Tyson's departure around 1977 ("John Tyson-Obituary" 2014; Field notes, August 28, 2017). Indeed, Tyson seems to have taken a holistic approach to education, introducing a school journal, leading mountaineering trips, and also bringing in Naresh Sengupta a professionally trained artist (Dorji 2001; Field notes, August 29, 2017).

The introduction of fine art classes and the arrival of art teacher Naresh Sengupta had a profound effect on contemporary art in Bhutan. Art classes began in April 1974 and were offered on a weekly basis for classes 1-8[30] and as an elective for class 9 and beyond (Field notes, August 27, 2017). Interviews with his students in Bhutan revealed that Mr. Sengupta was a professionally trained artist from West Bengal who fled in Uganda in 1972 when Idi Amin, as part of his program of authoritarian nationalism, expelled Uganda's South Asian community. By the time Mr. Sengupta arrived in Bhutan he was an experienced art teacher and exhibiting artist. An issue of *Cultural Events in Africa* describes an exhibit of mixed media works done with a palette-knife in Nommo, the national gallery in Uganda's capital of Kampala, by a Naresh Sengupta (1967). The same exhibition description states that Mr. Sengupta had previously exhibited with Ugandan artist John Sekibengo, and had three other exhibits in Uganda. According to the exhibition note and a corroborating note from the "Art Chronicle" in a publication by All India Fine Arts and Crafts, Naresh Sengupta taught art at Kololo Secondary School and had studied art at the Government School of Fine Art in Calcutta (All India Fine Arts & Crafts Society 1964, 120). The written documentation I found matches the descriptions from interviews with Bhutanese including Naresh

[30] Class level corresponds to the American education grade level. I've used "class" throughout since that is the term used by Bhutanese, in interviews, and in official documents.

Sengupta's time in Uganda and use of a palette knife in his paintings. Kama Wangdi stated that Mr. Sengupta was already in his 70s when he arrived in Bhutan and passed away in the late 1970s sometime after he left Bhutan. According to Kama Wangdi, some of Sengupta's paintings went to the leprosy and TB ward, but were lost after remodeling. There may still be paintings by Naresh Sengupta somewhere in Bhutan, although I was not able to locate any.

It is safe to say that the art scene in Bhutan would have been considerably different without the influence of John Tyson and Naresh Sengupta. VAST's art camps, which form a core component of the community, seem to be inspired by John Tyson's influence. Frequently when I asked artists for their earliest or most salient memories, they told me about camping trips. Numerous VAST members, past and present, described really becoming attached to the community through one of the many art camps where they would pick a spot on a mountain and trek, setting up camp, pathfinding, and doing all of the other necessary work on their own. The centrality of these treks to VAST no doubt owes something to Tyson's mountaineering with students. Kama Wangdi fondly remembers learning to estimate the height of mountains; trekking to up to Phajoding (a monastery that overlooks the Thimphu valley) and identifying wildlife with Tyson. Beyond this, Tyson helped Kama Wangdi get placed at the National Fine Art Center when he failed to progress to the next class at YHS and was unable to get entrance to art school in India. Likewise, Chimi Dorji wrote a heartfelt letter to Tyson in the pages of the Bhutan society thanking him for his guidance.

Stories of Mr. Sengupta show that he shaped many students in Bhutan who have themselves gone on to be quite influential. Former students described Mr. Sengupta as unusually open, encouraging, and sensitive to the students compared to other teachers. One student described how Mr. Sengupta tried to encourage the students to draw scenes from their own experience of

Bhutanese people and houses rather than the scenes of boats, oceans, and coconut trees they imitated from their textbooks (Field notes, August 27, 2017). The artist Kama Wangdi in particular formed a close bond with Naresh Sengupta, working as his assistant. From his time working with Mr. Sengupta, Kama Wangdi picked up the technique of painting with a palette knife.[31] So too, Mr. Sengupta advocated for Kama Wangdi with the other teachers, encouraging them to see Kama Wangdi as a good student because of his dedication to art and to help him improve in his other classes. Kama Wangdi recalled winning Best Artist of the Year and other students recalled Mr. Sengupta putting their paintings up when he especially liked them. A *Kuensel* article further credits Mr. Sengupta with an increase in Bhutanese student success in Shankar's International Art competition—a yearly competition organized *Shankar's Weekly*, an Indian magazine created by famous political cartoonist K. Shankar Pillai (Kuensel 1976b).

Indeed, art competitions form another key part of the introduction of contemporary art both the in past and today. The earliest art competitions I could find record of in Bhutan were both sponsored by India and won by Chimi Dorji.[32] In 1972, Chimi Dorji won a competition through the Indian Embassy and the following year *Kuensel* announced he won an award from Shankar's International Children's Competition (SICC) (Kuensel 1973). Started with support from cartoonist K. Shankar Pillai's publication Shankar's Weekly, SICC began in 1949 and accepted international submissions the following year (n.d.). The competition carried some prestige with it, *Kuensel* records that Indira Gandhi herself, the Prime Minister of India, handed out Chimi Dorji's award and the award was accepted by Lyonpo Pema Wangchuck, Bhutan's representative to India

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[31] He also an intense dislike for instant as he was in charge of making the endless cups they would drink.

[32] The Romanization of Bhutanese names is often inconsistent, so although the newspaper lists "Chhimi" Dorji and also "Chime" Dorji as winning, these are the same artist who I knew as "Chimi Dorji".

(Kuensel 1973). Notably, Chimi Dorji went on to become an artist, working on Bhutan's first feature film released in 1988 and opening his own gallery in Paro that sold modern art from 2005 until 2013 or 2014.[33] Even today awards remain an important way Bhutanese find encouragement to pursue contemporary art. During interviews, many current artists in Bhutan described to me how winning an art competition contributed to their decision to display their artwork publicly or pursue a career as an artist.

Another key contributor to contemporary art in Bhutan are art clubs. YHS had an art club that Chimi Dorji said also gave him encouragement to pursue art (Interview, August 3, 2017). A number of artists and members of VAST participated in the art club at Sherubtse College, Bhutan's first college located in eastern Bhutan. Artist Sukbir Biswas, who owns Art Yantra Gallery in Thimphu, recounted that the art club as Sherubtse was central to his interest in art and eventual decision to become an artist (Interview, May 6, 2017). The art club produced works to sell at the colleges "Fete Day" which in turn raised money for buying art supplies. The teachers often bought the artwork, providing both a source of approval to the students and funds for their painting. Art clubs at Bhutan's colleges of education have also fostered artists who have displayed and sold their work in Thimphu. The Tashigyangtse extension of VAST was started by Jigme Tenzin, who not only learned art at VAST but also was an active member of the Paro College of Education art club. Tshewang Darjey, a Dzongkha teacher north of Thimphu, also was an active participant in the Paro education college's art club. Another artist displaying his work in the galleries in Thimphu was an active member in the art club at Samtse College of Education, located in the southwest of Bhutan. The importance of schools to the rise of education is all the more remarkable because art

[33] The gallery was eventually taken over by his brother and moved to a different location in Thimphu. During fieldwork in 2017, Chimi ran a gallery called Art Life that was open by appointment.

classes are not part of standard curriculum.

The absence of a contemporary art school in Bhutan led many Bhutanese to seek formal training opportunities abroad. In the 1980s, a number of filmmakers trained in India and Japan, and Kama Wangdi trained in printmaking in Mumbai. In 1991 Kama Wangdi went to study design at Kent Institute of Art and Design in the U.K., completing his Bachelor's with distinction in 1994. Since then an increasing number of artists, often with the help of VAST and the Indian embassy, have pursued art degrees abroad. Tenzin Dorji studied print making at Visva-Bharati University in India in the early 2000s, and Maiyesh Tamang studied ceramic art at the same university. Maiyesh has since started a lively ceramic arts studio just above VAST, and built his own kiln.[34] Beacon House in Lahore, Pakistan is another key site where Bhutanese go for training in contemporary arts and design. Other artists have gone on for degrees in fine arts in the United States. Zimbiri studied at Wheaton College in Massachusetts and Tashi Om at Kenyon College in Ohio, where they pursued art training steeped in conceptual art and the conventions of the global world of high art. Both are exhibiting, although Tashi Om tends to work on commission. Zimbiri has shown her work at couple of impressive exhibitions in Thimphu since returning and she frequently visits VAST. Counting those currently studying, over 30 Bhutanese have pursued degrees in the arts internationally. Artists who have trained abroad often find what they describe as a lack of "appreciation" for art in Bhutan, and significantly more limited opportunities. However, they have also contributed to the shift towards more conceptual art that I discuss in chapter four and the conclusion of the dissertation.

Movement of people

Going abroad for an art education is just one example of how the increasing movement of

[34] In 2017 Maiyesh Tamang went to Australia to pursue training in glassblowing.

people, one of the hallmarks of globalization, shaped the rise of contemporary art in Bhutan. In addition to foreigners coming to Bhutan, Bhutanese traveled abroad in greater numbers over the second half of the 20th century. Bhutan long had links to India, Tibet, Sikkim, and Nepal; however, over the course of the 20th century Bhutan's cross-cultural links broadened and intensified. Specifically, many visiting foreigners opened galleries and provided training for aspiring Bhutanese artists. Likewise, the introduction of tourism in 1974 created a market for art and further led to the rise of tourist hotels that have been central to creating display spaces for contemporary art. Although there is increasingly a Bhutanese market for art, many of the gallery owners today continue to insist that without tourism, their sales would collapse.

Opened in 1968, India's embassy in Thimphu proved to be an important avenue for the introduction of contemporary art in Bhutan. In particular, the wives of several ambassadors played important roles in the arts in Thimphu. Notably, two ambassador's wives were ceramic artists. Gouri Khosla, wife of Shri I.P. Khosla (ambassador 1974-77), brought an electric wheel, kiln, and a passion for glazes when she was transferred from England to Bhutan with her husband. Linked to the Tagore family on her mother's side, Gouri Khosla studied glazes at Taggs Yard School of Ceramics in London (Khosla 1980). Ashi Kesang Choden, the current Queen Grandmother of Bhutan, and the third King's sister, Ashi Pem Pem, provided the impetus to start the ceramic gallery in 1975 after they saw Gouri Khosla's works at the Indian embassy (Kuensel 1976a). They brought artists from the National Fine Art Center under the Kikhor Lopen[35] to learn from Mrs. Khosla. As part of the studio, both an electric and wood fired kiln were built and a gallery called Joongshee was established. Using electric wheels, the traditional sculptors learned to make cups and bowls, as well as porcelain Buddhist deities (Khosla 1980). They also learned modern glazing

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[35] A title in the monastic body that roughly translates to "master of mandalas."

and firing techniques that were not part of Bhutanese ceramics. Kiln firing, for example, was new to Bhutan. Traditional pottery for utilitarian items is fired on an open flame whereas clay statues are normally just left in the sun to dry. Notably, Mrs. Khosla also taught the traditional artists about Western Renaissance painters and the “old masters” (Khosla 1980). In the 1980s, Kusum Haider, the wife of then ambassador Salman Haider, would use the kiln at India House[36] to make beautiful earthenware that played with Bhutanese designs (Field notes, August 6, 2017). A trained actress, Kusum Haider also put on plays in Thimphu, including a rendition of “Black Comedy” and a theatrical version of *Rashomon*, both with Bhutanese actors.

The Indian Embassy continues to play an important role in Bhutanese contemporary art. Not only do many Bhutanese go to India to study arts on scholarships facilitated by the embassy, but also the Indian Embassy also runs the Nehru-Wangchuck Cultural Center which hosts exhibitions in its gallery. A clean, well-lighted place, the gallery often hosts joint exhibitions by artists from India and Bhutan. Given the lack of display spaces in Thimphu, the gallery also provides an important venue for artists.

Volunteers, expats working for their governments, and tourists also helped create spaces for the display of non-traditional art in the proceeding decades. One of the earliest was the Druk Hotel. Reflecting Bhutan’s policy of “low volume, high value” tourism, very few accommodations existed early on, and visitors had to stay in government “guest houses” (Imaeda 2013). But by the 1980s, hotels were beginning to open. Part of the Bhutanese Tashi Group of Companies, the Druk Hotel opened in 1985. Early on, the hotel served as a space for displaying entrants of a Royal Society for the Protection of Nature art competition (Kuensel 1987). Artists soon found hotels

[36] The name of the estate tied to the Indian embassy, located just to the north of the *dzong* in Thimphu

were interested in displaying works that looked modern and also Bhutanese. In particular, artist Sukbir Biswas helped pioneer the display of contemporary art in hotels. He recounted traveling with his paintings, made in his spare time while working at the Ministry of Revenue, to try and convince the owners of the hotel to buy and display his work. Today, works by many contemporary artists can be found in the high-end hotels in Thimphu. Le Meridien, a global company which brands itself as supporting the arts and creating art experiences for its guests, has even donated gallery space to VAST in 2017. The Taj Tashi and Druk Hotels in Thimphu displayed Kama Wangdi's work and during my stay he worked on several new pieces for upcoming hotels.[37]

Expats coming to Bhutan to volunteer also contributed to the art scene. A few early exhibitions of photography and contemporary art took place at the Voluntary Service Organization offices in Thimphu (VSO).[38] Located on the top floor of the offices, the gallery hosted a number of exhibitions in the early 1990s under the impetus of VSO Coordinator Michael Etherton and his wife. The first exhibition by architect Namgay Retty took place in 1991. Although I was not able to locate any pictures of the exhibition, an article in the national newspaper from the time mentions that the artworks on display included oil paintings on canvas of the important religious sites and the deeds of Buddhist saints. Specifically, Retty depicted the burning of Punakha *dzong* in 1985. Punakha *dzong* is a key religious and historical site that serves as the winter home of the monk

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[37] Contemporary art might also be appealing to hotels because it appeals to the representation tourists expect but is less controversial than using traditional, religious art in the decoration of hotels. I have frequently heard complaints about the use of religious visual and material culture in hotels. For example, during the literary festival Mountain Echoes, a Bhutanese speaker publicly shamed several hotels for using religious musical instruments called *dung* as door handles, and religious imagery in a distinctly non-sacred manner.

[38] VSO is a London based international NGO that played an important role in education reform in Bhutan. The VSO offices were located just up from the expressway towards the Kawajangsa neighborhood where today the Rabten apartments, which rents to many expats working in Bhutan, stand.

body and houses the sacred remains of the Zhabdrung, widely regarded as the founder of the Bhutanese nation. Likewise, Retty depicted scenes of Guru Rinpoche, a Buddhist saint regarded as of equal importance to the Buddha in Bhutan, subduing demons. Retty himself, the article relates, trained in Civil Engineering in India and worked in the Department of Education, his artistic training came from a correspondence course based in Mumbai (Bombay) ("Exhibition by Local Artist," Kuensel 1991).[39]

In 1997, shortly after Kama Wangdi opened his own gallery, the Swiss architect Peter Schmidt opened a gallery at the clock tower in Thimphu. The husband of the owner of the Yu Druk travel agency, Schmidt used some of the agency's office space to open the gallery. The first exhibition, as recorded in *Kuensel* in October of 1997, showed architectural drawings and water colors done by Peter Schmidt himself (Kuensel 1997a). The inspiration came from backpacking around Australia and selling a few of his drawings to make ends meet (Interview, August 8, 2017). Half of the paintings sold at the opening according to Kuensel, and according to Peter Schmidt the gallery sold enough to cover the rent for the office space Yu Druk used. Eventually "Peter's Gallery," as the artists I spoke to referred to it, served as an important space for many Bhutanese artists in the early 2000s. Later the space became a shared gallery and café renamed "The Art Café." A visitor today to The Art Café might be confused by the name. The café sells a strong cup of coffee and good baked goods, but no longer displays art.

New art forms were not only introduced by foreigners but also brought back by Bhutanese. One of the results of increasing contact with the outside world seems to be that Bhutanese were privately experimenting with new art styles as well. Probably the earliest examples come from a

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[39] The next exhibit, according to the paper, would be thangkas painted by women. I was unable to verify if it took place.

man known by his title Dasho Drupon, half-brother of the second queens.[40] By the early 1970s, Dasho Drupon began producing realistic paintings of people, landscapes, and buildings. Those who knew him described Dasho Drupon as ceaselessly creative and also a bit mischievous (Field notes, October 8, 2017). Not only did he paint, but he was also an excellent *dranyen*[41] player and led musicians from the court of the third king of Bhutan to record their music in Kolkata in 1968. Whether painting, tailoring, practicing photography, playing music, or entertaining with magic tricks, his family told me that Dasho Drupon was always making something or doing something with his hands.

When I was generously invited into the home of Dasho Drupon's family, I was shown some of his paintings. Although clearly new styles, many of the works I was shown or told about had locally acceptable artistic precedents. Many of the Western inspired works included portraits of the third and fourth kings in poses matching their well-known and ubiquitous portraits. Other paintings included realistic paintings of landscapes and of important religious sites that made use of Western conventions of shading and perspective. Dasho Drupon also traveled to Hong Kong, a popular destination for Bhutanese at the time, and drew inspiration from Chinese paintings of nature and symbolism. The paintings I saw were done in oil paint and incorporated gnarled trees and black-necked cranes against a plain background that resembled Chinese landscape painting. The crane, additionally, is one of the six symbols of longevity commonly seen in Tibet and Bhutan that originates in China (Beer 2003, 53-55). Undoubtedly Dasho Drupon would have noticed the similarities between Bhutanese and Chinese symbolism. The painting I saw gave the cranes a

[40] Although not common in Thimphu during my fieldwork, polygamy and polyandry are practiced in Bhutan, most visibly by some of Bhutan's kings. The Second King had two wives who were sisters. The Fourth King married four sisters.
[41] A traditional Bhutanese stringed instrument.

simplified, almost graphic form like a woodblock print. Although Dasho Drupon never exhibited his work, Kama Wangdi attributes him as one of the "pioneering" artists in Bhutan. Certainly, among the elite in Bhutan Dasho Drupon's work, which he gave to family and friends, made an impact. Ultimately Dasho Drupon's artistic practice reflects changing taste amongst the Bhutanese elite that helped push forward interest in new artistic practices.

In some ways, these new paintings rest somewhere between Buddhist influenced practices of production and display and modern notions of fine art. Notably Dasho Drupon did not choose to paint scenes of the artisans he knew or farmers or ordinary members of court. Instead, he chose to paint kings[42] and important temples, two subjects already valued in Bhutan and deeply linked to Buddhist culture.[43] These paintings are modern in that they borrow from outside styles; for example, they use a realism not found in the more stylized local artistic traditions. However, they are traditional in that they fit subject matter already well known and approved of in Bhutan. Even the artistic styles he picked from China, which I was told he saw as "modern" because they were not Bhutanese, focused on symbols that would have been readily legible to a Bhutanese audience. From an interview with his family, it seems like Dasho Drupon did occasionally push a little farther, incorporating elements of historical realism and documentation into his painting. For example, his family described an image he painted with the fourth king wearing a *gho* with a modern jacket over the top and of the first king posed near an exhausted British soldier (Field notes, October 8, 2017). Even the more realistic portrait described to me still fell within approved of subject matter, in this case positive portrayals of the monarchy. Much like the pioneering work

[42] I was shown a portrait of the third king he had fixed because the original painter had made it look "too Thai" which was read as effeminate.
[43] The monarchy uses rich visual symbolism to project its authority (cf Kinga 2009, 325-342) and I was frequently told that the king was revered as a bodhisattva, a compassionate enlightened Buddhist figure.

of Dasho Drupon, many contemporary artists today in Bhutan choose familiar even traditional subject matter while experimenting with style.

The increasing travel of Bhutanese elites most likely also played a role in the artistic experiments of Aum[44] Tshokye Tenzin. Kama Wangdi recounted setting up an exhibition for Aum Tshokye Tenzin at the Royal Banquet Hall in the mid 1980s.[45] At the time she painted *thangka* and landscapes with oil paints, and according to Kama Wangdi was the first to do so. As the wife of foreign minister Dago Tshering, Aum Tshokye Tenzin would have been well connected to visiting foreigners and had the opportunity to travel abroad. Over many conversations, Kama Wangdi described both Aum Tshokye Tenzin and Dasho Drupon as the real "pioneering artists" of Bhutan. Aesthetic experimentation by members of Bhutan's elite also likely helped make new forms of art socially acceptable.

In more recent years, cultural exchange specifically through art has become increasingly important for the growth of contemporary art in Bhutan. One form of exchange has been exhibitions. Some early exchanges included exhibiting Bhutanese work in Fukuoka, Japan. Another recent "pop-up show" in New York organized by an American documentary film maker in early 2017 featured Pema Tshering, Gyembo Wangchuck, Kama Wangdi, and Phurba Namgay. Other artists have participated in residencies. Both Phurba Namgay and Kama Wangdi have done residencies at the Vermont Studio Center. The residency put them in touch with artists from around the world, including Tibet. Likewise, starting in 2011 the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)[46] has facilitated and offered funding for gatherings of artists from South

[44] Aum is an honorific used for women of high social standing.
[45] Aum Tshokye Tenzin declined to be interviewed for this research.
[46] An intergovernmental organization comprised of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, the Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka

Asia. A wide range of Bhutanese artists, both established and beginning, have traveled across South Asia as part of the program, in addition to working with visiting artists when it was Bhutan's turn to host the program. VAST, which began in 1998, has also been a key contact point for artists visiting Bhutan, and some visiting artists have offered classes. Notably, artist Dr. Suchart Vongthong has come to Bhutan from Thailand several times starting in 2005 and offered classes in water colors. His visit and classes inspired a renewed interest in watercolors in Thimphu, introducing new techniques to the artists.

New media

From books to film to newspapers to the introduction of television and internet in 1999, new forms of media had a profound influence on the development of contemporary art in Bhutan. During my time in Thimphu, I increasingly saw artists use a type of structured doodling learned through the internet, known as Zen Tangles. The technique has become popular through YouTube, an example of how smart phones and a faster mobile network have allowed people to watch demonstrations of a wide variety of techniques. Painters use YouTube for tutorials about water coloring, for example, and our art teacher at VAST encouraged us to look at a few different artists there. The influence of the internet extends beyond painting. B-boying, also known as breakdancing, has also exploded in the capital, greatly influenced by both the ability to post videos of oneself and access to demonstrations and tutorials online.

Although the internet and television have received far more attention, the influence of new media goes back decades to the increasing access to international and domestic print media. Mass produced print media had an early influence on the rise of contemporary art. Dasho Drupon supposedly relied on books about European painters for inspiration. Well into the 2000s books remained an important way artists learned new artistic styles, as the internet was not widely

distributed and too slow for much more than emails or simple browsing of websites. Even artists who during my fieldwork in 2017 were in their late 20s and early 30s described how winning a book about art in a competition when they were in school was a formative experience for them. One of the important resources VAST offered for early members was its library, and the older members have described how in the past these books were an enthralling and important source of knowledge about art. Even outside of Thimphu, books were an important introduction to art. One artist who grew up in the south of Bhutan recalled being enamored with a book of work by Thomas Gainsborough—the English portrait and landscape painter (Interview, May 6, 2017).

Beyond books about artistic techniques or movements, access to English language literature from abroad seems to have had a profound influence on the art scene in Thimphu. My art classes at VAST were filled with reading recommendations from one of our teachers. Intimidatingly well read, he recommended a huge range of books—fiction about artists like *The Agony and the Ecstasy* and philosophy like the writings of Martin Heidegger—which he said were important for getting us to think and, therefore, were important for making art.[47] Even the less philosophically inclined artists were often avid readers and lively exchange existed between a local bookstore named Junction and the artists at VAST.

Contemporary artists have also found some employment and a place to show their talents in Bhutanese books. The Paro based artist Chimi Dorji, for example, recounted drawing images for some of the early Bhutanese textbooks (Interview, August 3, 2017). More recently, artists have illustrated books for Bhutanese authors. Kama Wangdi contributed figurative paintings for Queen Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck's book that related her travels around Bhutan (Wangchuck 2012).

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[47] He also recommended films and TV. Everything from *La Jetée* by Chris Marker to the Japanese anime Naruto.

Children's books have been a particularly rich place for this artistic work. Pema Tshering illustrated several children's books by author Kunzang Choden (e.g. Choden 2012), and animator Chand Bhattarai illustrated a book written by the 11 year old Pema Seldon Tshering (Tshering and Bhattarai 2017). Other authors have used their books as an opportunity to also display their artwork, as in the poetry and paintings that make up *History in a Pebble* (Choden Dorji 2016). Thimphu even saw its first comic book, *Garpa: The Attendant* in 2015. Made by the studio Thimphu Comics, also headed by artist Pema Tshering, the comic adapted a Bhutanese folk story about a court attendant who could run like the wind (Tshering 2015). Full of battles and action, the comic presented a visual style not seen elsewhere in Bhutanese contemporary art that linked word and image in a fascinating way.

The national newspaper *Kuensel* also provided a print outlet for the artistically inclined. Starting in 1987, *Kuensel* began running Bhutanese drawn and written comics. Chimi Dorji, a former student of Naresh Sengupta, wrote and drew the newspaper's first comic which ran weekly from 1987 until 1988. The story followed the adventures of Tenzin Drugay who became the first head of the civil administration under the Zhabdrung, a position known as the "*Desi*" (Chimi 1987). Appropriately, the story reinforced the broader project of nation building. In the comic, Tenzin Drugay is portrayed as an early national figure, and the story itself reinforces values of loyalty, bravery, and religious devotion, even as it adapts a medium foreign to Bhutan. Readers must have enjoyed not only the history lesson, but the scenes of intrigue, swordsmanship, and dangerous travel across mountain passes.

Notably, Kuensel also began publishing sketches during this time. The first I could find was by Italian artist Franco Spuri Zampeti, but Bhutanese artists also contributed (Zampeti 1987). Many of the artists worked for the government and submitted drawings of important religious

structures such as drawings of walls with mantras written on them known as mani walls and the renovation of Tango, an important religious college located outside of Thimphu. Occasionally other subject matter made it into the pages of *Kuensel*; for example, the drawing I found of a woman dressed in full traditional dress in a field of maize (Yang 1988). By inserting drawings into its pages, Kuensel created a venue for drawings that were not meant to be objects of religious practice and helped reinforce the national imaginary of its readers.

Economic development also created demand for new media. During the 1980s the state began what is described as a "decentralization" of power that delegated power to regional offices (Ura 2004). Coordinating development projects and communicating important policies required radio and other forms of mass media to communicate to the public. Out of these developments, and with the help of the UN, Bhutan created the Department Support Communication Division (DSCD) in 1981 under the Ministry of Communication. The DSCD employed many early artists and gave them a chance to use their skills. Kama Wangdi worked for this department and helped make charts, banners and other materials communicating development policies for many departments. The DSCD also employed filmmakers to document Bhutanese life, including Ugyen Wangdi who would go on to make Bhutan's first feature film.

In fact, film and filmmakers are an important part of the art scene in Thimphu.[48] From the early 2000s, VAST screened movies as part of their "Monsoon Film Festival." Started by Dechen Roder and Pema Tshering with support from VAST members, the independent short film festival Beskop Tshechu ran from 2011-2016. Many of the participants were painters who used this as an

[48] The earliest movie theaters were created in the late 60s in Bhutan, and today Thimphu has four main theaters—Lugar, City Cinema, Ninda Bioscope, Trowa—that filmmakers rent out to show their films, earning revenue from ticket sales. Released in the fall of 1988, Ugyen Wangdi and the painter Chimi Dorji worked together on the first Bhutanese feature film, *Gasa Lamai Singye*.

opportunity to branch out into a new medium. Pema Tshering told me that working on the film festival not only gave him the chance to experiment with a new media, but led him to see film as an art.

Today the internet also informs how artists understand contemporary art in Bhutan relative to the rest of the world. Frequently artists posted or shared messages through Facebook about the exorbitant prices for art outside of Bhutan. Astonishment, envy, critique, and amusement mingled as artists commented on artworks sold at auction for millions of dollars, while the most expensive Bhutanese pieces I saw sold for roughly $7,500.[49] Many Bhutanese artists critiqued works that seemed to prioritize the ability to explain or justify over the skill of the artist. A quintessential example brought up in my conversation with Bhutanese artists was Tracy Emin's work *My Bed,* which, "features the artist's own bed covered in stained sheets, discarded condoms, blood-stained underwear and empty bottles of alcohol" and sold for over $4 million dollars in 2014 (Ellis-Peterson 2014). While sometimes artists used this information as proof that there was a lack of "appreciation" in Bhutan, at other times Bhutanese artists rejected the excesses of the global art world.

Bhutanese run galleries

One example of how Bhutanese actively cultivated the contemporary art scene in Thimphu is the opening of Bhutanese run galleries. The first opening happened on March 29, 1997 when Kama Wangdi opened a small gallery by the clock tower in downtown Thimphu (Kuensel 1997b). After finishing his Bachelor's degree in design in the U.K., Kama Wangdi returned home to work with the DCSD. The division closed in the mid-1990s, causing Kama Wangdi to take an early retirement from government work and setting him on the path to a deeper involvement in

[49] 500,000 Ngultrum at an exchange rate of about 65 Ngultrum to the dollar in 2017.

contemporary art in Bhutan. A single small room, the gallery had two walls for paintings and a wall of shelves with traditional handicrafts. At the opening about 30,000 Ngultrum worth of work sold. After several iterations, the gallery was known in 2017 as the Artshop Gallery and sat just below the traffic circle.[50]

Many other Bhutanese-run galleries have followed. With the exception of Artshop Gallery, all of the Bhutanese run galleries I visited were run by artists. Though relations between artists were relatively amicable, tensions between artists and gallery owners still arose during my fieldwork. Galleries generally take a 30% cut of the price[51], and I frequently heard artists complain about some artists being given a lower rate, or gallery owners selling for a higher price than what they told the artist. In some cases, artists felt deceived or unfairly treated by the gallery owners. However, Bhutan's art market is small and lacks the type of blue-chip galleries and artists seen in cities like Los Angeles, New York, or London. Much of the conflict arose from the sense of scarcity and the inherent fact that profit for gallery owners comes at the expense of profit for the artist.

Most galleries in Thimphu showed a diverse medley of artists, hung and stacked in no clear order from floor to ceiling. Only a few galleries offered themed shows or exhibitions of an individual artists' work. VAST, the Royal Textile Academy, and VAST Le Meridien hosted themed exhibitions or exhibitions by a single artist. These galleries tended to look similar to what someone visiting a small gallery in the United States would expect: white walls, uncluttered space, and a theme, catalog, or artist statement to accompany the exhibit. Terton Gallery had a similarly uncluttered aesthetic, primarily showing work by its owner, Kelly Dorji, along with a few pieces

[50] As of 2017, the gallery was run by Kama Wangdi's brother-in-law.
[51] Notably less than the 50% that seems to be standard in the US (Thompson 2012)

of personal accessories and paintings by other artists.

Some galleries also serve as work spaces. Occasionally in Art Yantra or the Artshop Gallery I found an artist—for example, a slate carver or a landscape painter—in a side room working. Many galleries felt like a cabinet of curiosities or were reminiscent of old pictures of the Paris Salon, chock full of not only contemporary art stacked and hung in every corner but also traditional art, wooden phalluses, piles of practice or not-quite-successful paintings on a discount table. A few galleries also sold supplies, like Karma Artshop Gallery, locally known as just Artshop Gallery. Paro's galleries were similar. White Lotus gallery was the most stereotypically gallery-like of the bunch, whereas an upcoming gallery by the main square in Paro also sold traditional art and had planned space for artists to work.

The growth of these galleries enormously expanded the opportunity artists had to show and sell their work. During the course of my work I constantly saw work from new artists show up alongside more familiar and established artists' paintings. Many of these aspiring artists—some teachers and office-goers, others fresh graduates—simply brought their work down to the gallery and showed it to the owner. If the owner liked it, he would offer to display it and take a commission if sold. Part of the reason certain galleries contained so much work was that the owners said yes to nearly all the work offered to them. In doing so, there was both idealism and pragmatism. The gallery owner sometimes wanted help a young artist who was trying to get a start. At the same time, gallery owners told me they were often surprised by what sells. Collecting a wide range of works at a wide range of prices also hedged the risk of selling art.

Perhaps the most significant development in contemporary art was the opening of VAST in 1998. Unlike other galleries, VAST from its beginning focused on creating community and teaching art to youth. The members of VAST described it as a "hub" or a "platform." In other

words, VAST was a community center, lecture hall, library, outdoors education organization, bohemian hangout space, and workshop rolled into one. Artists came to exhibit their work and to see the artwork of other artists. Though many of the commercial galleries remain artist owned, they, with the exception of Datog Gallery, had not tried to teach art or create social centers of artistic activity the way VAST did. VAST's influence can also be seen in the fact that a few galleries have been started by VAST members; for example, Datog near the bridge to Changjiji, and the now unfortunately closed Water Dragon Gallery up by Karma's Coffee.

Royal and elite support

Despite the lack of government programs or institutions, contemporary art today relies on the support from elites, royalty, and often tacit government approval. Perhaps this is what Pema Tshering meant when he said, "We are not getting help from the government, but whatever we do, the government supports" (Kotzathanasis 2017). As already suggested above, royal and elite patronage has been central to the rise of contemporary art. The Royal Grandmother was also an important artist and a drawing of hers dated 1946 hangs in VAST. She was the chief guest at the first *Her Expression* and even exhibited her work. The king gave a medal to Kama Wangdi and also provides the rent to VAST. The king himself also regularly buys paintings from VAST, and the exhibitions held there. Likewise, the current (as of this writing) Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay donated art to VAST to sell to raise money. While popular Bhutanese movies and music have sometimes been seen as "too Indian," art has consistently earned the approval of the movers and shakers of Thimphu. Without this support or, in some cases, benign neglect, contemporary art would have had a much more difficult time taking root.

Conclusion

As the changes described above were taking place, an official discourse on national

identity—led by civil servants, early scholars, and the monarchy—was also developing. As elsewhere in the world, the state sought to both represent Bhutanese identity and to create national subjects to fit the representation. The next chapter moves from looking at history to looking at the discourse on national identity with special attention to how Bhutanese identity has been defined through efforts at preserving national values.

Chapter 3: Cultural preservation and national values

The logic of cultural preservation in Bhutan profoundly shapes life. Led by the state, cultural preservation extends beyond state policies to a type of "governmentality," a term Foucault used to link the state to how people shaped themselves as subjects showing how power works without direct coercion (Lemke 2002; Li 2007). In Bhutan, this process is profoundly visually mediated. Symbols of national identity code for a specific idea of what it means to be Bhutanese often through a related discourse of key values and practices. Even though there are no laws specifically pertaining to contemporary art, the regulation of cultural production more broadly and the logic of cultural preservation profoundly shaped the work of contemporary artists. This chapter outlines the background needed to understand why contemporary art feels like it pushes boundaries but is also socially acceptable to many artists and viewers of art in Bhutan. Put another way, the chapter argues that understanding how artists both push against and reinforce hegemonic definitions of what it means to be Bhutanese requires understanding the contents and workings of cultural preservation.

An example of the logic of cultural preservation can be seen in a 2009 essay by Dasho Karma Ura, the head of the state founded Centre for Bhutan Studies, where he decried the disappearance of phallic imagery in Thimphu. Symbolically associated with bringing good luck, protecting against gossip, driving away evil spirits, and tantric Buddhist symbolism, Bhutanese hang wooden phalluses from the eves of their buildings and paint them at entrances to houses. For Ura, conspicuous absence of phalluses in urban Bhutan symbolizes a visible break with "earthy folk values" and marks the rise of prudish individuals who are also typically "competitive, materialistic, and selfish" (2009a).

Paradoxically, Ura finds the phallus, even if likely non-Buddhist in origin, symbolizes cultural values that are not only "earthy" but also deeply related to Buddhist ideas of "self negation" (2009a). In the same article he later states flatly that, "If I am correct, the absence of phallic images in urban areas marks a big attitudinal change - for the worse" (2009a). In his interpretation of the meaning of Bhutanese phalluses, Ura equates losing this element of traditional visual culture with losing a model of Bhutanese self and values. At times his essay takes an ambiguous position on direct state intervention. At one point Ura remarks that phallic symbolism might need to be protected by the government and in another he calls for "loosening the boundaries between government and public" to counteract the potential for "the formal, conventional and normal…to become insanely overbearing" (Ura 2009a). However, the overall thrust of Ura's argument is for Bhutanese to take up concern for tradition themselves, it is a call for governmentality over state regulation that taps into discourses about national culture.

Ura's lament about the disappearance of phalluses, illustrates the way discourse on national culture, values, and aesthetics work together. First, that the discourse on national culture treats modernity and tradition as opposing forces. Ura associates the loss of earthy humor and prudishness with foreign influence. The decreasing appearance of phalluses marks a shift away from what are considered traditional or appropriately national attitudes. Importantly, Ura also does not seek to combine the two, but rather sees modernity and tradition as mutually exclusive or opposing forces. Under this construction there is no such thing as modern Bhutanese culture. Second, Ura's complaint shows how the discursive binary opposition between the modern and the traditional is often framed in "moral" or "ethical" terms. The absence of phalluses is not only about the loss of a unique marker of Bhutanese-ness but also symbolizes the loss of traditional values and their replacement with modern values. Finally, the lament over the loss of phallic imagery

shows how visual and material culture is at the heart of debates about how to regulate national culture through cultural preservation. The discourse of modernity and tradition both profoundly shapes and in turn is shaped by what happens in the field of cultural production. Whether film makers or painters or poets, artists engaged in any medium considered “modern” in Bhutan must navigate this discourse.

Figure 6: Phallus on traditional building. Source: Greg Watkins, 2008.

Rather than offer a history of national identity, in this chapter I give a sense of the understanding of national identity at the time of my research, the ideal type that shaped the lives the artists I worked with. Roughly, the central narrative of cultural preservation represents Bhutan as a small country sandwiched between giants with ancient culture dating back to a 17th century Buddhist state that is simultaneously under threat and the only thing ensuring its independence. The discourse furthermore contrasts Bhutanese and modern identities as being polar opposites. In this formulation, global modernity is a threat to the very sovereignty of Bhutan because it threatens its cultural identity which, in turn, is the very basis for independence. The following chapter offers evidence for the construction of national identity outlined above. Ultimately, this chapter outlines the governmentality of the preservation of national culture that sets boundaries to the work contemporary artists do and also provides the terms in which artists pursue greater freedom.

The historical narrative of cultural preservation

Perceptions of Bhutanese identity have been profoundly shaped by Bhutan's policies of cultural preservation. In particular, two key components define the discourse on cultural preservation. First, a dichotomy between modernity on the one hand and Bhutanese culture, often simply referred to as "tradition," on the other. Second, a sense that Bhutan's very existence depends on the articulation of a sense of national identity. In her published dissertation research, Akiko Ueda traces this current understanding of cultural preservation to the 1980s when Bhutan's development, organized around five-year plans, began to link the preservation of culture to "safeguarding the sovereignty and security of the nation" (Ueda 2003, 94).[52] The framing of culture as an issue of national security continues to be important today, and is one of the reasons why cultural production in is taken so seriously.

As articulations of how influential figures in Bhutanese society think, policy documents offer a particularly important source for understanding the discourse on cultural preservation. Written by the Royal Government of Bhutan's Planning Commission in 1999 (just as Bhutan's first contemporary galleries were taking root in Thimphu), a good place to see the national narrative in policy documents is *Bhutan 2020: A Vision for Peace, Prosperity, and Happiness*. Although there are both older precedents for the *Bhutan 2020* document and more recent manifestations of the national narrative I elucidate here, *Bhutan 2020* reflects the field of cultural production many now well-established artists faced as they began to devote themselves full time to art. The document also reflects key thinking on the topic of culture that still holds for many of the current gatekeepers and intellectuals who shape official Bhutanese culture. Finally, *Bhutan*

[52] Other authors have drawn attention to the heightened concern about cultural preservation in the 1980s (Whitecross 2017; Phuntsho 2013)

2020 has remained an influential document setting the agenda for subsequent five-year plans. The 11th Five-Year Plan (2013-2018) specifically references *Bhutan 2020* as the touchstone guiding the concrete policy plans contained in Bhutan's development plans for the past 20 years (Gross National Happiness Commission 2013, 36).

Bhutan 2020 positions itself as articulating a vision for the future of Bhutan at a time of great change. A focus on preserving national culture shows up clearly throughout *Bhutan 2020*. Culture is presented as one of Bhutan's "assets" in development. Cultural identity, according to the authors, dates back to the 17th century creation of a Buddhist state and they seek to continue to protect that culture against globalization and development (Royal Government of Bhutan Planning Commission 1999, 18). Culture here means a broadly shared national culture based on Buddhism. The authors explain that, "The emergence of Bhutan as a nation state [sic] has been dependent upon the articulation of a distinct Bhutanese identity, founded upon our Buddhist beliefs and values, and the promotion of a common language" (ibid, 18). Throughout official conceptions of Bhutanese identity is the idea that "identity" predated the modern state. Sonam Kinga's history of Bhutan, for example, argues that while there was maybe not a "nation" there was a shared "polity" united by a sense of identity. Notably, the writers of *Bhutan 2020* position it as a continuation of the past rather than paving a new path.

One way the authors of *Bhutan 2020* situate their vision within a sense of continuity with the past is how they refer to the monarchy. The document itself is a product of changes motivated by the fourth king of Bhutan. In 1998, Bhutan's fourth king formally devolved executive power to a cabinet elected from the National Assembly, a transition often understood as laying the

groundwork for national elections and transition to democracy in 2008 (Kinga 2009, 285).[53] The authors of *Bhutan 2020* acknowledge the change, but also affirm that the document does not represent a break with the past but rather "embodies the development philosophy of His Majesty and sets out directions that give clear expression to this philosophy" (Royal Government of Bhutan Planning Commission 1999, 4). Likewise, the monarchy is listed as one of the key development assets of Bhutan (Royal Government of Bhutan Planning Commission 1999, 18). As represented by the development document, the monarchy has become a metonym for Bhutanese cultural identity as well as an unquestionable authority on topics of public culture and national identity. The authors of the document make sure that even if they are ostensibly independent, they are not trying to break with the precedents set by the monarchy.At the end of the document, the writers reiterate that there is a "cultural imperative" deeply embedded in Bhutan's development ideology. They write:

> This imperative, which has been linked to our identity, sovereignty and even survival as a nation state, must find clear expression in the priorities and directions we set for the future. More than 350 years ago, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal realized that Bhutan's independence was dependent upon the formation of a distinct identity that would enable the nation to preserve its culture and religion in world that was hostile to its existence. Today, it is the culture and tradition bequeathed to us by our ancestors that can protect us from some of the negative and indiscriminate forces of modernization and enable us to retain our identity and dignity in a world in which 'culture' is increasingly defined as a global commodity. (Royal Government of Bhutan 1999a, 34)

[53] In many ways, the shift was nominal. The Lhengye Zhungtsog act described the executive power of the parliamentary government as being "derived from His Majesty the King through the Royal Kasho" and the cabinet was still "responsible" to His Majesty and the National Assembly (Royal Government of Bhutan 1999b). The language here was ambiguous and its clear the Monarchy retains considerable authority. Even the shift to democracy has not always been seen as a clear break with the past. Many Bhutanese told me in 2008 they felt like there was little difference and the fact that the constitution is seen as a "gift" from his majesty has powerfully shaped the working of democracy (Bothe 2012; Kinga 2010).

Mention of the Zhabdrung (with the alternative spelling "Shabdrung"), the founder of the Buddhist state that ruled an area roughly corresponding to Bhutan today, links the Bhutanese nation-state to the past and to Buddhism. Elsewhere the writers of *Bhutan 2020* make the link between Buddhism and Bhutanese national culture even more explicit. They argue that Bhutan's culture is based on 1000 years of Buddhism and that Bhutan is especially important to the world because it is the last Mahayana Buddhist Kingdom (Royal Government of Bhutan Planning Commission 1999, 19, 24). The authors further portray Bhutanese national identity as something "bequeathed" by "ancestors," specifically the Zhabdrung, giving national identity an ancient past and the authority of an important religious, historical figure.

Finally, the authors portray Bhutanese culture as protection against a world described as historically "hostile" or "negative and indiscriminate" to Bhutan's independence. Much of the narrative of *Bhutan 2020* reflects broader understandings of Bhutanese national history. The claim that Bhutan's national identity is the creation of the Zhabdrung is an especially common belief, often accompanied by the argument that he created a national identity in part as a way to distinguish Bhutan from Tibet. Karma Phunsho's comprehensive *History of Bhutan*, for example, argues that the Zhabdrung created a national identity based on Buddhism through the intentional introduction of cultural forms such as a new form of government and rituals (Phuntsho 2013, Kindle Locations 5682-5683). In this representation, Bhutanese culture is definitively not modern. Furthermore, where the invention of culture is acknowledged, it is not the invention of an ordinary person but the sacred figure of the Zhabdrung.

In this way, while being an invention, culture is still not a "modern" invention and therefore authentically Bhutanese. Within the dominant understanding of Bhutanese identity reflected in *Bhutan 2020* culture protects Bhutan from a world at once "hostile" to its sovereignty and also to

its way of life. The national discourse seen above links preserving a Bhutanese culture in opposition to modernization as essential for maintaining Bhutan's political independence.[54]

Gross National Happiness

The emphasis on cultural preservation and the construction of modernity and Bhutanese cultural identity as opposing forces carries through into Bhutan's official development ideology of Gross National Happiness (GNH). Though a precise date for the advent of GNH is unproven, it is most frequently attributed to the fourth king, in particular to a quote by the fourth king stating that "Gross National Happiness is more important that Gross National Product." The story goes that this was a response to a journalist in 1987 asking about Bhutan's relative poverty and the progress of modernization, although the term may date back as far as the late 1970s (Dorji 2015a). At the time, Gross National Product was the predominant metric of economic progress, replaced today by the related measurement of Gross Domestic Product. GNH was meant to mark a difference in culture when it came to thinking about development. Broadly this reinforced the notion of Bhutanese cultural difference from "the West" and its neighbors and also linked cultural difference to political and economic sovereignty.

Both the narrative about and the content of GNH reinforce the discourse surrounding culture in Bhutan. Much of the literature links GNH to an ancient Buddhist ethos, finding roots for GNH in the 17th century Buddhist state's legal code (Thinley 2005; Centre for Bhutan Studies

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[54] A number of scholars have questioned the idea that Bhutanese national identity extends back to the 17th century. Drawing on Michael Aris' work on "alternative voices" to the dominant monastic literature, Richard Whitecross argues that the lay composition *The Ballad of Pema Tshewang Tashi* from the 19th century notably has the hero reflecting on the importance of loyalty to one's lord but not to the nation (Whitecross 2008a, 79; Aris 1987). Other elements of the historical record, such as the ongoing conflicts between regional rulers in the 19th and into the 20th century, suggest that valley-based authority was more important than a unified notion of national identity (Aris 1994; Maki 2011).

2016). In his essay "What is does GNH mean?," former Prime Minister Jigme Thinley links GNH to a Buddhist informed "predisposition" towards holistic thinking that emphasizes "taming" the internal nature of the mind rather than externally controlling nature or seeking instrumental advantage which is implied to be a Western mentality (Thinley 2005). In this way, GNH is often used in Bhutan as evidence of a "national" character that is intimately linked to Buddhism and to Bhutan's long independence. So too, the narrative found in the prime minister's essay reinforces the idea that the modern state is not an invention but continuation of the past. This narrative is also reproduced in much scholarship, including Bhutanese-written history. In this way, GNH is both an assertion of sovereignty and a declaration of Bhutan's longstanding independence based on an understanding of cultural difference. It is not uncommon to hear Bhutanese remark that Bhutan's culture has remained "intact" because Bhutan was never colonized, and GNH helps reinforce this narrative that links culture to sovereignty while at the same time emphasizing that recent inventions of culture in fact have longstanding precedents and are not really inventions at all. Such a narrative also reinforces the idea that culture is inherited from the past and radically different from anything deemed modern or Western.

Defining GNH has become the purview of two main organizations. The Planning Commission that wrote the five-year plans and *Bhutan 2020* is now the Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC) and produces literature on GNH. Additionally, the Center for Bhutan Studies, a government funded national research center, continues to push forward thinking about GNH including the development of a GNH metric. Cultural preservation is a key component or "pillar" of GNH, and both institutions continue to influence what counts as Bhutanese culture by which types of culture they include in their formulation of GNH. Notably, the most recent Gross National Happiness survey makes knowledge of traditional arts and participation in traditional

culture a metric of happiness but not art forms growing in popularity in Bhutan such as b-boying, photography, or contemporary art (Centre for Bhutan Studies 2016). Reflecting this omission, the 11th Five-Year Plan put out by the GNHC bases its Key Performance Indicators on GNH meaning that it only includes traditional arts and makes no suggestions for changing how GNH includes culture in its measurements. Even the recent inclusion of film into more recent five-year development plans emphasizes the film industries' value for preserving national language and dress but not the need for culture to change or evolve, qualities contemporary artists valued (Gross National Happiness Commission 2013, 231). Thus, even when recognizing more dynamic elements of culture, the discourse on national identity emphasizes the prime directive of cultural preservation, the point is not to create a Bhutanese modern so much as to allow for tradition to evolve.

The discourse of cultural preservation extends beyond policy documents. Its hegemonic nature is indicated by the fact that it is so wide-spread it becomes easy to miss, a set of almost self-evident truths. In a TEDx talk, the head of the Bhutan Center for Media and Democracy, Pek Siok-Sian Dorji offered roughly the same narrative. She describes Bhutan as "isolated" and said that the "mountains protected us," but that Bhutan is vulnerable. Survival, she argues, means preserving Bhutan's unique identity (Pek-Dorji 2012). She frames the threat to cultural identity from globalization in dichotomous, aesthetic terms: prayer flags vs. billboards. As with other Bhutanese concerns about the influence of media,[55] Pek Siok-Sian Dorji particularly singles out the role of media for introducing un-Bhutanese values and forms of culture that threaten identity.

[55] For an example of how one scholar criticizes the loss of values in Bhutanese pop music known as *rigsar* see (Kinga 2001).

Elements of the discourse on cultural preservation were also a part of day-to-day conversations. Like Ueda found in her fieldwork, I also frequently heard complaints from older Bhutanese about young people not respecting tradition, especially about the way young people dressed, spoke too much English, and consumed too much foreign media (2003). There is often a sense that youth do not know who they are, that they risk losing their identity caught between modernity and tradition. This division also creates the sense that a Bhutanese modernity is almost by definition an oxymoron.

I even heard elements of the discourse among artists. Two artists who ran an animation studio together in Thimphu, remarked to me one afternoon that the only thing keeping Bhutan independent was its culture (Field notes, March 29, 2017). Criticisms of becoming too materialistic were also leveled by contemporary artists at traditional artists. One contemporary artist reflected how traditional art today was becoming too focused on fast production and had lost the beauty seen in the past.

Defining national culture

The actual content of what is considered traditional culture in Bhutan is heavily driven by the state's nationalizing project. Michael Aris and Michael Hutt refer to the "prescriptive" nature of state policies on culture, perhaps most famously those requiring the wearing of national dress that equate "identity" in the sense of national identity and "culture" (Aris and Hutt 1994, 17). These policies became especially stringent in the late 1980s under a policy of "one nation, one people" that specifically sought to standardize what it means to be Bhutanese. As part of these policies and the broader push to promote national identity, tradition has come to refer to Buddhism, particularly institutionalized monastic forms, and a set of cultural practices linked to Bhutan's 17th century state. This narrative links national identity to cultural innovations begun at the behest of

the Zhabdrung under his Buddhist state. Sonam Kinga refers to this state as "ecclesiocratic" a term meant to reflect that the state united religious and civil matters and often required secular authorities in the state adopt many of the features of the Buddhist clergy (Kinga 2009).[56] Official definitions of national culture tend to constitute a closed discourse and generally extend a relatively narrow, standardized definition of Bhutanese culture across the entire population.

The definition of national culture in Bhutan excludes many cultural practices. Bhutan is an incredibly diverse country as evidenced by the 19 distinct languages spoken, the fact that a sizable minority of the country is Hindu (22%), and that pre-Buddhist beliefs abound. National culture was created in part to bring these disparate groups together. In general, national culture has been interpreted to mean the culture associated with the ecclesiocratic pre-modern state founded by the Zhabdrung and which remained a central model for authority even when political power became highly decentralized and contested from the 18th to 20th century. In fact the National Library of Bhutan argues that there are two main sources of Bhutanese culture, "community based" and "*dzong*- and monastery-based" (Dorji 2015b, xvi). Although there is increasing interest in "community based" culture that I will discuss at the end of this chapter, by far the most important element of national culture has been the *dzong* and monastery based culture which was generalized from courtly and state religious practices to the population at large.

The national language, Dzongkha, is a good example of how monastic and *dzong* culture was turned into national culture. Dzongkha literally means the "language of the *dzongs*," and was

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[56] For example, much like monasteries, *dzongs* up to the mid 20th century did not allow women to spend the night. Authors like Kinga have argued that the higher one went up the ranks of government the more religious one had to become. The resentment this created as laymen were forced into increasingly monastic forms of discipline is even reflected in what little courtly literature exists from Bhutan (Aris 1987).

the courtly language of rule in the Buddhist state with close ties to classical Tibetan.[57] Even designating Dzongkha as the national language caused a stir with more conservative members of Bhutanese society when first introduced for not being in accordance with the standards of classical Tibetan, the language of traditional education in monasteries. George Van Driem states that until 1971 it was actually classical Tibetan that was taught in schools not Dzongkha (Van Driem 1994). Karma Phuntsho argues that, "Dzongkha did not have the lexical strength and grammatical sophistication to construct advanced literary works without relying on classical Tibetan" (Phuntsho 2013, Kindle Locations 1363-1369). A Dzongkha instructor explained to me that classical Tibetan was the "soul of identity" for Bhutan, and that even as Dzongkha was moved closer to its spoken form by the government's Dzongkha Development Commission, there was a strong push to keep the Tibetan influence (Field notes, September 30, 2017).[58] Indeed, most of the Dzongkha teachers at the college where I worked were current or former monks. Written, formal Dzongkha differs significantly from everyday spoken Dzongkha. Likely this is because the vernacular Dzongkha people spoke was less shaped by classical Tibetan than the version formally adopted and taught in school. The example of Dzongkha shows the constructed nature of national culture.

So too, the emphasis on Dzongkha leaves out other important languages in Bhutan. The most recent GNH survey in 2015 found more participants spoke Tshangla[59] as their mother tongue than Dzongkha (Centre for Bhutan Studies 2016, 180). Although non-Dzongkha languages are accommodated in Bhutan (the national radio broadcasts in several languages), the emphasis on Dzongkha can have real world consequences. The Election Commission only allows Dzongkha in

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[57] Referred to in Bhutan as "*chö key*", literally "sacred" or "religious" language.
[58] In fact, often people spoke of "*chö key*" rather than "*bö key*" which means "Tibetan." Perhaps reflecting that Tibetan makes it sound like the language is foreign rather than deeply Bhutanese.
[59] Sometimes known as Sharchopkha, literally "eastern language".

official campaign gatherings and in the most recent elections, members of districts that spoke Tshangla complained that they could not understand the party platforms which were delivered in Dzongkha (Tshering 2018).[60]

Buddhism has also been placed at the heart of definitions of national culture. Bhutan is roughly 75% Buddhist and around 22% Hindu according to demographic estimates (CIA 2016).[61] However, the links between Buddhism and national identity go beyond statistics. I was frequently told that Bhutanese culture *was* Buddhist culture. In the edited volume *Buddhism in Bhutanese Culture*, the introduction claims both that Buddhism is at the heart of GNH and that Buddhism is a sort of total social fact, "Bhutan has a vibrant Buddhist culture that encompasses everything from the high culture of the Bhutanese court to the crude aphorisms of the peasantry" (Kumagai 2014, 3). So too, a recent book comprehensively documenting Bhutan's intangible cultural heritage links Buddhism to the "essence" of Bhutanese culture (Dorji 2015b, xv). Likewise, Buddhist symbolism continues to adorn government offices, money, and the altars many Bhutanese keep in the home. The parliament, for example, includes altars and large icons of the Zhabdrung and of Guru Rinpoche upon the large stage where the king's throne sits. The constitution further defines Buddhism as the "spiritual heritage" of Bhutan, the document itself beginning with a Buddhist prayer. The monarchy, likewise, is ritually invested with deeply Buddhist symbols and rituals. Likewise, the constitution specifies that the principle of the "dual system" of government that unites spiritual and secular concerns, a system introduced by the Zhabdrung and common in the

[60] English occupies a somewhat ambiguous position. Speaking English is privileged as a language of education and also of record; however, it is generally not considered properly Bhutanese. This risks excluding the ways English has also been "Bhutanized" in key ways. For example, the incorporation of "la" as an honorific such as "Yes, la".[60]

[61] From 2005. In recent years, the Bhutanese government has not collected data on religious affiliation. These estimates are also imperfect because they do not account for religious syncretism.

Tibetan world, continues in the form of the monarchy (Royal Government of Bhutan 2008, art 2.2). Just as the *dzongs* which house the state combine civil administration and religious offices in one building, so too the state is seen as being deeply Buddhist.

While on some level reflective of actual social life in Bhutan, the emphasis on Buddhism reflects a prioritization from the top down of official culture that excludes many aspects of religious life. Other scholars have noted how traditions such as the shamanic *nenjorm* and *pawo* that did not fit with official Buddhist definitions of culture have largely been left out definitions of national identity, crowded out of preservation because they do not fit with the state's preference for monastic Buddhism (Chhoki 1994). Other practices, such animal sacrifices to *yul lha*, the gods that protect certain valley communities, have similarly been on the decline in the face of Buddhist efforts to phase them out. Although research on this change has yet to be done, newspaper reports point out that this has been done with the support of district officials who persuade local ritual specialists to agree to discontinue practices of animal sacrifice seen to contradict Buddhist morality (Wangdi 2015). In a lovely essay reflecting on his childhood in a collected volume of creative non-fiction, T. Sangay Wangchuk remarks about how the practice of sacrificing and eating a pig made him feel part of the food chain. He describes raising the pig and how the ritual imbricates Buddhist and non-Buddhist practice. Considering the disappearance of the ritual, he wonders if in abandoning the ritual he was losing something important to "Economics and Buddhism" (Wangchuk 2011, 39).

So too, the preservation of culture in the form of keeping Buddhism pure has broader political implications for Buddhism itself, excluding some arrangements and practices over others. The insistence by law under the new democracy that "religion remain above politics" has meant that religious figures are prohibited from voting. While this seems to have the desired effect of

ensuring the *dratshang* (state monastic body) remains apolitical, it has also disenfranchised many lay-priests known as *gomchen* or "big meditators" who often take care of village temples and perform rituals but frequently do not wear the red robes that mark religious figures (Dema 2013; Wangchuk 2018). Nor does the official discourse on culture recognize that the primary way many middle-class Bhutanese access Buddhism is through English language literature. For example, Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche's book *What Makes You Not a Buddhist?*, a book that argues one is a Buddhist based on belief and understanding of the principle of emptiness, was on many book shelves in Thimphu while I was there. Preservation both prioritizes certain new political arrangements and misses important ways Bhutanese connected with their sense of shared culture through supposedly modern means.

The dominant version national culture relies on forms of culture associated with the ecclesiocratic state other than those directly related to religious practice. A highly hierarchical form of etiquette closely tied to the Zhabdrung's court known as *driglam namzha* was a for a long time treated as a top priority of the state project of nation building, a symbol of quintessential Bhutanese identity (Whitecross 2017). This set of practices has become the official culture of the state and can be found at receptions and events across the capital. The most expansive definitions of *driglam namzha* include everything from how to eat politely, to national dress, to architecture based on the *dzong* as a model. While Marc Dujardin notes *dzongs* could be sources of creative inspiration in indigenous architecture (Dujardin 2000), equating Bhutanese architecture with *dzongs* leaves out vernacular architecture from around the country that may be displaced by the national model (Phuntsho 2015b). Other forms of culture supported in the policy and discourse of cultural preservation likewise are tightly linked to *dzong* and monastery culture. The musical and

dance genre *zhungdra*, for example, is understood to have originated in the *dzongs* and to be heavily religious in content (Kinga 2001, 136).

The forms of culture codified as national tend to be rigidly defined and resistant to reinterpretation except by a relatively specialized set of gatekeepers. Part of this dynamic is the authorizing power of the state itself and its association with the monarchy and monastic body. Likewise, the links between cultural identity and sovereignty mean that anyone questioning the canon of culture risks coming across as an "anti-national" or "*ngo-lop*," a label used especially to refer to Southern Bhutanese seen to be agitating against the Bhutanese state in the early 1990s (e.g. Hutt 2003; Whitecross 2017). The elements of culture labelled tradition were, of course, never truly static. However, while lamas or important figures such as royalty could advocate for new forms, ordinary people could not. For example, writing *zhungdra* songs was open to lamas or powerful people (who in the ecclesiocratic state may have even taken on certain monastic affectations); however, it would be considered inappropriate, in bad taste, or disrespectful for ordinary Bhutanese to do the same. Often, I found it was the closed, relatively rigid definition of culture that contemporary artists wanted to change. Contemporary artists were not so much pushing for specific new representations as an opening up of the existing form that tradition took.

Individualism and Bhutanese identity

Often embedded in the broader narrative about Bhutanese national identity and the logic of cultural preservation is a more or less standardized sense of what it means to be Bhutanese. An emphasis on maintaining social harmony, hierarchy, and showing oneself to be culturally aware, have all been used to define Bhutanese identity. In a sort of self-orientalizing move, Bhutanese written sources often describe Bhutanese identity in terms of spirituality, hierarchy, and collectivism against the West's materialism and individualism. These modern values are seen as

on the rise especially in urban areas and a threat to traditional Bhutanese identity (Phuntsho 2013, Kindle location 13124-13133).

The ideological distinction between a Bhutanese self and individualism can be found in many written sources and is reinforced by scholarship in general in Bhutan. Individualism is often lumped together with materialism and has become representative of values and identity that are un-Bhutanese. Notably, the perceived conflict in identity is often couched in temporal terms as well, between the modern or new and the traditional or old. Karma Phuntsho, an Oxford educated scholar of Buddhism, links urbanization and modernization to rising individualism and a loss of Bhutanese identity. He describes how young Bhutanese are caught between two times, neither truly modern nor truly Bhutanese creating a "diachronic conundrum" (Phuntsho 2013, Kindle Locations 13076-13083). Phuntsho is pessimistic about the possibility of a Bhutanese modernity, seeing being modern and being Bhutanese as a zero-sum game that Bhutan is at risk of losing. Likewise, Karma Ura has written thoughtfully but critically about how liberal, individualistic notions of "choice" embedded in the promotion of diversity by the United Nations may not fit with the Bhutanese context where the self is regarded as an illusion and where choice may cut directly against even having a shared culture in the first place (Ura 2007). In the same paper he argues that Bhutanese culture traditionally lacks a sense of an "autonomous individual" (Ura 2007, 53).

Not only do Bhutanese intellectuals reflect the broader discourse on cultural preservation, they are also involved in the crafting of key policy documents. Dasho Karma Ura, for example, crafted a proposal for Gross National Happiness Commission on education. Notably in his recommendations, Ura argues that Bhutan ought to avoid the pitfalls of the emphasis on "individual rights" in US education which have led to "psychological individuals" which "militates

against altruism" (Ura 2009b, 3).[62] The document reinforces the idea that too much emphasis on the individual is not Bhutanese.

Even the king has expressed sentiments dividing "individualism" and "Bhutanese" values. The fifth king's speech at his coronation was a particularly moving articulation of the national narrative. Not only had his father voluntarily handed over the throne—thereby avoiding the problems of an aging monarch observed in, for example, Thailand—but Bhutan had transitioned in 2006 to a constitutional monarchy with a democratically elected government. At the cusp of so many transitions, the fifth king gave a statement that both reflected and reinforced the national narrative of Bhutan:

> As citizens of a spiritual land you treasure the qualities of a good human being – honesty, kindness, charity, integrity, unity, respect for our culture and traditions, love for our country and for God. Throughout our history our parents have upheld these values and placed the common good above the self. My deepest concern is that as the world changes we may lose these fundamental values on which rest our character as a nation and people. It is critical that we are able to recognise [sic] Bhutanese character irrespective of how far we look back into the past or into the future. The Bhutan we see is vastly different – unrecognizable [sic] even – when compared to the Bhutan in the time of our first King. Yet, the character of our people and the nature of our fundamental values have remained unchanged. (Evans 2008, 95)

The speech frames the "Bhutanese character" as essentially timeless, resting on a set of "fundamental values" shared by "our people" that have remained "unchanged." In fact, the desired condition is that the "character as a nation and people" be literally timeless, remaining constant "irrespective of how far we look back into the past or into the future." Though the country may change, the preservation of a set of "values" ensure that some essence or "character" remains the same. In the logic of the speech, this character is threatened "as the world changes," a phrase that

[62] Concerns about rising individualism and immorality connected to social change are hardly unique to Bhutan. Even in the United States scholars worry about individualism replacing moral traditions that value community (Bellah et al. 2007).

I think many in Bhutan would read as referring to modernization and globalization. Throughout the king emphasizes the essential moral element of "Bhutanese character," including various "qualities of a good human being" which include not only virtues like "honesty" but also "respect for our culture and traditions," each of which emphasize a value that "placed the common good above the self." Throughout, the speech sets up an opposition that plays out in the discourse on culture more broadly between modern values of individualism and Bhutanese values. The speech also makes cultural preservation about being a good person, giving it a moral overtone. More recently, the fifth king has advocated for an "individualism with values" (Tobgay 2010). The phrase shows an effort to incorporate individualism as an acceptable value and yet, at the same time, opposes "individualism" to the very idea of values itself.

A classic example of the juxtaposition between Bhutanese values and values considered to be modern and foreign is often told using the folk story of Meymey Haylay. In the story, a man finds a turquoise in his fields and proceeds to trade it for livestock of progressively lower value—a horse, an ox, a sheep, a goat, and a chicken. Finally, the protagonist trades the chicken for a song. The story is told with two different endings. In one, the protagonist continues on his way singing, happier than he could have been with any of the material wealth he had during the story. Another version of the story ends with Maymay Halay slipping on cow dung and forgetting the song.

The happy version of the story has been more common in official representations of Bhutanese identity. Dorji Penjore and Yoshiro Imaeda both relate versions of the story that emphasize that Meymey Haylay is happy at the end (Penjore 2005, 47-49; Imaeda 2013, 64-65). Imaeda argues that the story is a "self-portrait" of Bhutanese character and Penjore that it satirizes the profit motive. The point of the story according to both authors is to contrast Bhutanese-ness with Western materialism. Dorji Penjore uses Maymay Halay to represent "humanistic"

"Bhutanese values" in contrast to the "secular, pluralistic, egalitarian, and market values" learned in the education system necessary for running the machinery of the modern nation state. In fact, the figure of the farmer shows up elsewhere in the discourse about Bhutanese cultural difference. Other presentations of GNH, for example, relate stories of farmers who, when induced to work more with higher wages actually worked less, proof that Bhutanese do not adhere to materialistic, capitalist, or western values (Thinley 1998).

However, these representations of Bhutanese-ness should be seen as a selective interpretation of what it means to be Bhutanese, not a simple reflection. Kunzang Choden's book of folk tales explains that people who make silly business deals are often compared to Meymey Halay (Choden 2006 [1994], 6). This would seem to suggest, perhaps unsurprisingly for a country of farmers, that a strong sense of utilitarian, practical or instrumental reason was not a foreign concept, even if far from the hegemonic neoliberal ethics seen in the United States today. Representations of Bhutanese-ness, then, selectively read traditional sources in line with the logic of cultural preservation found in policy and discourse in Bhutan. In this case, Meymey Halay stands in holistically for the difference between being Bhutanese and being modern or foreign, a distinction in line with the image of Bhutan projected by GNH more generally.

Contemporary artists in Bhutan, I will eventually show, pushed against many of the assumptions of the logic of cultural preservation. The contemporary artists I spent time with neither saw materialism and individualism as the same thing, nor were they as pessimistic about cultural change as the broader discourse on cultural preservation.

Four key terms in national culture

At the heart of discussions of cultural preservation are traditional values that are seen to hold the culture together. As observed by Thongchai Winichakul, national identity in Bhutan

works in part by positing that individuals share some character (or habitus) that unites them to each other and to the whole (Winichakul 1997, 1). Cultural preservation is often framed in terms of maintaining Bhutanese values understood to be in opposition to global modernity, the West, and, in particular, individualism. Siok-Sian Pek Dorji in her TEDx talk, for example, links outside media influence to global values that emphasize individualism and materialism as being in opposition to Bhutanese values of "family, community, and spiritual values" which she, in turn, links to GNH (2012). Often efforts to describe Bhutanese identity portrayed it in collectivist terms with a high emphasis on social harmony, maintaining hierarchy, and a respect for traditional authority. In her study on perspectives on modernization, Akiko Ueda argues that Bhutanese value "patriotism, cultural awareness, and good manners" (Ueda 2003, 131). Though they use are generalized, etic terms, both Ueda and Pek-Dorji build on their understanding of the values emphasized by Bhutanese themselves. This section outlines four key locally meaningful or emic terms in the discourse of national culture: *ley jumdre, tha damtsig, tsa wa sum,* and *driglam namzha*.

These four terms show up in popular conversation and also in official discourse. For example, the Civil Service Rules and Regulations make *ley jumdre, tha damtsig, tsa wa sum,* and *driglam namzha*[63] central to the definition of a good civil servant stating that, "A civil servant shall subscribe and promote the values of Tha Damtsi and Ley Jumdre while serving the Tsa-Wa-Sum" (2018, sect. 3.3.2) and also that, "A civil servant shall maintain Driglam Namzhag" (2018, sect. 3.3.3). Serving in the civil service remained a key aspiration for many of the students I taught and for their parents. The fact these terms show up in the rules for the civil service means that they are

[63] As with other transliterations from Dzongkha to English, there are several different spellings of these terms. Since variations are minor, I have left them as is in quoted material.

salient for many people in Bhutan. Other scholars have pointed to how these ideas form a sort of condensed mentality or "ethos" of what is officially expected of Bhutanese (Whitecross 2008b; Phuntsho 2004). Below I explain what each term means, elucidating along the way why one might serve the *tsa wa sum* but maintain *driglam namzha*.

Ley jumdre is the Tibetan and Dzongkha term for the Buddhist concept of karma. On its most basic level, this concept is essentially an understanding of morality close to the English language expression that what goes around comes around. Moral acts, taken from a Buddhist perspective to be intentional acts, have a proportionate effect on one's life. As one artist put it to me—"good leads to good, bad to bad." These effects carry over from life to life in a society where reincarnation is largely understood to be true. Current suffering could be the result of actions in a past life or in this life, current prosperity similarly a result of behaving morally in the past or now. Even relationships to other people are shaped by these past actions.

Often in Bhutan this karma is considered the base line for having any moral compass or regard for others at all. To be without *ley jumdre* would be to act as if one's actions had no consequences, to act selfishly. As Karma Phuntsho puts it, "To have no [regard for] le judre (las rgyu 'bras med pa) is to be morally unconscientious, irresponsible and reckless" (Phuntsho 2004, 568). In this way, the term refers not only to a principle of cause and effect but also the value of considering the effects of one's actions, of being conscientious. However, the term also carries with it a sense of being Buddhist and therefore Bhutanese, of a local way of being conscientious in line with Buddhist ways of thinking and being.

Tha damtsig, a term conveying a sense of "respect" and "loyalty" as well as "integrity," has become another key concept in defining Bhutanese identity and civic values. Whitecross describes how his friends and informants thought of *tha damtsig* as the "Bhutanese alphabet,"

something basic and fundamental for life and what Whitecross describes as the "moral identity" based around shared values (Whitecross 2008a, 74). *Tha damtsig* as a term derives from Buddhism. Generally, the term is translated as meaning "highest promise" or "ultimate vow" and, as explained by Karma Phuntsho, the term refers to the taking of tantric precepts (Phuntsho 2004, 569).

A number of scholars have pointed out the importance of *tha damtsig* to Bhutanese cultural identity, offering slightly different understandings of its meaning. Richard Whitecross links *tha damtsig* to notions of "*dul wa*" and "*tsultrim*" or Buddhist moral discipline, that a person who shows *tha damtsig* does so because they have cultivated the appropriate moral virtues (Whitecross 2008a, 73-76). Phuntsho links *tha damtsig* to the power of tantric Buddhism viewed with "awe and fear" that "rewards the practitioner with swift enlightenment but an infringement of it is said to cause rebirth in the deepest hell" (Phuntsho 2004, 569-570). This notion of the "highest vow" originally applied to the vows taken to one's tantric teacher, but today it is used more broadly. For example, a person might complain about shopkeeper overcharging or an unfaithful spouse as lacking "*tha damtsig*." Winnie Bothe offers a more political interpretation of the term. Citing a book on educational values by the chief research officer from the National Library, Winnie Bothe argues that *tha damtsig* refers to the "unquestioned obedience" of a disciple to their lama (Bothe 2012, 33). She points out that for more "conservative" Bhutanese *tha damtsig* means "pure loyalty" that links a "beneficent" government to a "devoted" populace (Bothe 2012, 34).

The scholarship on *tha damtsig* tends to agree that the term conveys a "sense of obligation" (Phuntsho 2004, 570). Often the term implies obligation to one's teachers and Whitecross citing Ura describes the lama-disciple relationship as a key one defining society (Whitecross 2008a, 75). Although the term often seems to refer to a more focused relationships such as parent and child, master and servant, teacher and pupil, and husband and wife, Tashi Wangyal explains *tha damtsig*

means a sense of obligation more generally to the "sacred commitment to others in society" (Wangyal 2001, 107).

In my own interpretation, the most central meaning of *tha damtsig* implies loyalty to a superior. While benevolent on the part of the teacher, the relationship between a Buddhist teacher and student at the heart of the meaning of *tha damtsig* is clearly a hierarchical one. This interpretation is supported by an example given by Whitecross of how the story of the four friends is used as an illustration of *tha damtsig* (Whitecross 2008a, 77-78). Paintings of the four friends can be found throughout Bhutan depicting a bird, rabbit, monkey, and elephant under a tree. This painting is such a central part of shared national culture that when friends of mine began a children's toy company to make Bhutanese themed toys, one of the first products they developed was a version of the four friends. In the fable, the four animals go from squabbling to working together after they establish their rank based on age and are painted based on rank from top to bottom: bird, rabbit, monkey, elephant. The four friends are a metaphor for society that works better with clearly defined, hierarchical roles, age being an important one. In fact, Phuntsho notes that most frequently in understandings of *tha damtsig*, "The government plays the role of the senior party and is to be seen as an object of service and gratitude whereas the individual citizens are considered as the recipients of social benefit, who ought to be obedient" (Phuntsho 2004, 570). As will be discussed below, this element of hierarchy also seems broadly important to the construction of national identity.

Of the key concepts mentioned above, *driglam namzha* is probably the most well-known and visible. A set of etiquette codified for the Zhabdrung's court, *driglam namzha* covers everything from architecture, to ritual receptions designed to generate auspicious outcomes, to how to wear national dress, to how to behave before superiors. As part of Bhutanese culture,

driglam namzha has been central to the state's efforts at cultural preservation, forming one of the priorities of the Special Commission on Cultural Affairs formed in 1985 to protect national identity. The National Library manual describes *driglam namzha* as, "the very essence of our national identity, a means of security for the nation" showing how the practice is linked to broader discourse about the importance of culture to national sovereignty (1999, xxxix).

Driglam namzha is also frequently linked to notions of maintaining social harmony, often in the sense of maintaining a well-ordered hierarchy. The manual produced by the National Library states that *driglam namzha's* purpose was "wholesome behavior" so that people may "live harmoniously" and the emphasis on hierarchy including "conducting oneself in the presence of superiors" (National Library of Bhutan 1999, xxxviii). Other authors have emphasized that *driglam namzha* is more than the visible forms one sees in its public performance. Rather, *driglam namzha* is supposed to be a mentality one ought to cultivate, a disciplined respect for order through which social harmony is maintained (Phuntsho 2004). Kinley Dorji, former Secretary of Information and chief editor of the national newspaper *Kuensel*, explains that the ability of Bhutanese society work as a "family" depends on the traditional values in the discipline expressed by *driglam namzha* (Dorji 2010, 145). Kinley Dorji goes on to argue that "mental and physical obeisance" to the king is at the "heart" of driglam namzha, and is what keeps the whole system together (ibid).

Although ostensibly secular, *driglam namzha* has roots in the ecclesiocratic state where monastic cultural norms were applied to lay people. The publication on *driglam namzha* from the National Library explicitly makes this argument stating that: "being a Buddhist country Bhutanese society has derived the essence of its behavior norms…from the teachings of lord Buddha, in particular the kagyur dulwa (vinaya and monastic discipline)" (National Library of Bhutan 1999,

xxxiv). Likewise, Bhutanese scholar Dorji Penjore has argued that one component of *driglam namzha*, the *zhugdrel* ceremony, has historically functioned as a form of governmentality imposing hierarchy on chaos in Bhutan (Penjore 2011). A key civic ritual to bless an occasion where participants are seated by rank, prayers chanted, and symbolic foods offered to guests, the ritual continues today in Bhutan. I witnessed or participated in versions of it regularly, such as at an event for World Water Day or college graduation at Royal Thimphu College.

Indeed, the proper observance of etiquette was something I saw taken very seriously in Bhutan. During pre-dissertation work in 2008, I went to an indoor athletics facility locally known as "the swimming pool" to watch the king play a pick-up basketball game. Word had reached me through one of the artists at VAST that I knew, and when we arrived there was a small contingent already watching, presumably others who had also heard about the king playing by word of mouth. After the game, when the king came up to greet us on-lookers, I was instructed by the artist who brought me that I needed to cover my mouth and lower my eyes when speaking to the king. Even contemporary artists who did not regularly wear national dress and positioned themselves as relatively cosmopolitan took *driglam namzha* seriously.

During my time in Thimphu, I found *driglam namzha* to structured many social interactions, especially large, organized events. For example, graduation at the college where I taught showed off *driglam namzha* in its full and most resplendent form. Students would show up to graduation dressed in fancy *ghos* and *kiras* and wearing *kabney* and *rachu*, scarves marking rank for formal events. Faculty were seated in rows by rank as well, with the deans and registrar seated before the faculty. At outdoor events with important chief guests like royal family members, there were even pine needles spread on the ground along with a separate tent and a chair draped with vibrant textiles. Even something as simple as having a nicer mug for the important people

could be seen as a form of *driglam namzha*. An important visitor will be given a mug with ornate designs and a lid, compared the plain white ceramic or colored plastic reserved for ordinary visitors. The practice of *driglam namzha* places a heavy emphasis on disciplined conduct and a sophisticated hierarchy marked by behavior and symbols such as the fruit displayed on the chief guest's table depending on rank.

A number of authors have argued that even *driglam namzha* has become more formalized in recent years. Bothe and Phuntsho suggest that *driglam namzha* also exists broadly in Bhutanese society as a set of more loosely defined and informal sets of morals and manners (Bothe 2012; Phuntsho 2004). Sometimes this more general sense of good manners is referred to as "*bey zha*". Haltingly and after a number of notable mistakes, I learned in my time in Bhutan to behave with appropriate demeanor. On one occasion I was told that compared to another American attending the event my behavior was appropriately "simple" (meaning humble) and on another a friend remarked jokingly that according to her grandmother my "bey zha" or manners were better than her own.

Finally, the idea of serving the *tsawa sum* has become central to political culture in Bhutan. Literally meaning the three "roots" or "foundations," the term today to refers to the "country, king, and people" and claiming to serve the *tsa wa sum* denotes a person's patriotism. Whitecross traces the political meaning of *tsa wa sum* to the 1950s, though at that time he claims it referred to "country, king, and government," and its political use increasing in the late 1970s (Whitecross 2010, 77). Phuntsho identifies the term as being a sort of summarizing symbol meant to rouse nationalistic pride in everything Bhutanese (Phuntsho 2004, 576-577). Whitecross links the rise of *tsa wa sum's* political meaning to rising nationalism in Bhutan that coincided with the "one nation, one people" policies that sought to standardize national identity in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Moreover, Whitecross argues that the concept played an important role in "othering" southern Bhutanese, portraying them as "anti-nationals" who opposed the "*tsa wa sum*" when conflict arose in southern Bhutan over Bhutan's nation-building policies that imposed a singular cultural identity on Bhutan's populace.

Like the other terms explored here, *tsa wa sum* has older Buddhist meanings. The term would have usually been used to refer to the "inner roots" or foundations of the refuge Buddhists take in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Karma Phuntsho explains that the terms also have important tantric meaning, referring to one's Buddhist teacher, the deities at the heart of one's practice, and the deities that aid the practitioner (Phuntsho 2004, 575). However, at the beginning of his essay on values, Phuntsho notes that he has heard *tsa wa sum* used variously by a soldier to refer to the army, royal body guard, and police and in another case to refer to someone's three best friends (ibid.). This suggests the term has gained a somewhat broader use to refer to any three things to which a person is devoted or offers support. Nevertheless, it is the political meanings that dominate today. For example, Royal Thimphu College's school song, proclaims "may our youth aspire to serve the tsa-wa-sum (king, country, and people) with fidelity and commitment" (Royal Thimphu College 2015, 37).

A number of scholars have analyzed how *tha damtsig*, *ley jumdre*, *driglam namzha*, and *tsa wa sum* have become key terms for the construction of national identity, often emphasizing the shift in meaning from their original Buddhist significance. Winnie Bothe's analysis of the constitution and political authority in Bhutan treats the concepts of *tsa wa sum*, *driglam namzha*, and *tha damtsig* as all roughly performing the same function of "traditionalizing" the authority of the modern state under the monarchy, a way of evoking loyalty and creating national unity (Bothe 2012, 33-36). Specifically, Bothe argues that the use of *tha damtsig*, *tsawasum*, and *driglam*

namzha (she does not address *ley jumdre*) are part of a process that "sacralizes" the state's authority, especially through the portrayal of the monarchy in Buddhist terms. Whitecross and Phuntsho identify a similar process but inverted. Instead of focusing on the "traditionalizing" of state authority, they emphasize the way state has politicized key social and religious values. Phuntsho in particular emphasizes how the state has "secularized" traditional values away from their original Buddhist meaning. Whitecross, in turn, uses civics textbooks to argue that education has played a central role in promoting a sense of national identity that arose in the 1980s and 1990s (Whitecross 2008b, 79). Likely one effect of the rise of the power of the monarchy has been the progressive shift of power in favor of the state over the monastery in the "dual system" (Aris 1994). Part of this process, I believe, and a topic worth further exploration, is an increasingly "civic Buddhism" like that seen in Thailand (Reynolds 1977).

Looking at my own experience, existing scholarship, and written Bhutanese sources, the emphasis on four key values explored in this section suggest a cohesive model of what it means to be Bhutanese. All four terms place great importance on personal discipline, social harmony and hierarchy. In fact, the notion of harmony and of a well-ordered society built on hierarchy are tightly linked in Bhutan. The logic of cultural preservation is built on the idea that preserving the values of harmony and hierarchy through various culture forms is central to Bhutan's independence and shared sense of identity.

Contemporary art was an excellent place to explore these broader dynamics in practice. The artists I worked with tried very hard not to upset the social fabric, working to fit into the broader national community and to avoid explicit critique in their work. In this way, contemporary artists reflect broader dynamics in Bhutan. Explaining the importance of self-censorship, Kinley Dorji argues that it is a form of "discipline" based on Buddhist morality to ensure peace and

harmony in the community. In the same article, Kinley Dorji argues that at the heart of the monarchy represents the unity of the people. The emphasis on unity connects to a common historical narrative about how the monarchy was responsible for bringing Bhutan out of a period of Hobbseian chaos in the 19th century (Ura 2010; Kinga 2009). Behavior, independence, and shared cultural identity are in this way linked through discourses of cultural preservation.

This narrative about values is part of the reason why Bhutanese take changes in cultural form so seriously. Art in particular is often used by the state to link the sense of unity, justification for independence based on cultural uniqueness, and ideas about harmony, discipline, and hierarchy. The various strands outlined above come together in the arts and it is often aesthetically that linked notions of self and cultural identity are actually produced and negotiated.

National art and aesthetics

Art and aesthetics are a central site for the production and regulation of national identity in Bhutan. *Bhutan 2020* emphasizes that the promotion of arts is not just about their form but about the "spiritual values they embody" and that artworks specifically convey a "strong sense of morality" shared by the "vast majority of Bhutanese" (Royal Government of Bhutan 1999a, 38). Writing about the importance of national literature, Thakur Singh Powdyel argues that cultural forms such as *dzongs*, monasteries, and literature, "are expressions of the psyche of a people and a society—that they should be the way they are" (2008, 354). Powdyel's remarks conveys a notion of a people containing a unique spirit contained in their arts that links the notions of self, nation, and art together.[64] Notably, he decides that the cultural forms that contain the seed of national psyche within them are best left unchanged, that they need to "be the way they are." Art then is

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[64] Powdyel, like other Bhutanese, often express ideas on nationalism that look remarkably similar to Herder's (cf Barnard 2003)

often taken as a key medium through which people come to both identify and internalize the official version of Bhutanese identity outlined above.

Bhutanese art has often been used as an example of how the Bhutanese sense of self is not individualistic. I found this representation in both official literature and during interactions with artists doing my fieldwork. Traditional artists I interviewed, for example, told me that traditional art relied on "texts" or "lamas" for their composition not the creativity of the artist. Khenpo[65] Phuntsho Tashi, a monk and the head of the National Museum as well as author of a book on traditional art, described how in Buddhist art the artist was "killing genius" and that traditional art aimed at "perfection" not being creative. "Four inches," he stated, "has to be four inches." In comparison, he explained that contemporary art was about "ego," "creativity," and "showing off." Modern art, he went on, was concerned with the ordinary world and could disrupt the path to enlightenment or even create "divisions" in society instead of "harmony" (Field notes, July 21, 2017). Notably during our conversation, Khenpo Phuntsho Tashi considered *driglam namzha* or etiquette to be an art. He explained that harmonious and beautiful forms of speech, body, and mind could all be arts. Perfecting these arts of etiquette, he concluded, lead one to "know you're really Bhutanese." As in the broader discourse on national culture, in our conversation Khenpo Phuntsho Tashi linked morality, discipline, harmony, and identity together in the practice of art.

There are no laws directly pertaining to contemporary art; however, artists work under many of the same expectations faced by art forms like film and architecture that do have legal regulations. Understanding the governmentality at play in contemporary art means looking at the regulations of other art forms that are largely self-enforced in contemporary art. Film in particular

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[65] Khenpo is a title given to abbots or those who have completed their training in Buddhist philosophy.

is subject to a number of laws and formal institutional review before public screening. All films in Bhutan must be pre-screened for a board consisting of a representative from the ministry of culture and the independent body for regulating media. This board checks to make sure that the content is culturally appropriate. The laws in Bhutan on film are quite specific about the process for screening a film and the use of religious imagery needs to be appropriate. One of the main subjects of discussion while I was in Bhutan in 2017 was the state's refusal to permit the screening of the movie *Hema Hema, Sing Me a Song while You Wait* (Zangmo 2017). The film was banned for using religious masks in a way deemed inappropriate. The fact that the film was directed by an important Bhutanese *trulku* who had previously directed a film in Dzongkha apparently made little difference. The boundaries are quite tight.

Even fashion is closely monitored by the state. As discussed earlier, the length of women's *kira* has been the subject of some debate in Bhutan. Both men's and women's national dress also have accompanying textiles that mark status. Men wear a long sash called a *kabney* inspired by monk's robes, and women a rectangular piece of cloth often with fine embroidery worn over the shoulder called a *rachu*. The ministry attempted to ban the use of *rachu* with elaborate embroidered patterns commonly seen at religious festivals and important events. Instead the ministry sought to enforce the wearing of a simpler *rachu* known as the *ada rachu*. The main problem according to the Ministry of Culture was the feeling that, "Many women prefer different patterned *rachus* as they are not aware of the type of *rachu* they are entitled" (Dema 2016). Specifically, that more elaborately patterned *rachus* were meant to be reserved for royalty. Criticisms of people wearing flashy *rachu* echoed broader criticisms I heard in Thimphu of the commercialization of public religious festivals. Large, yearly ceremonies honoring Guru Rinpoche known as *tshechus* came under particular criticism for this reason. However, the historical record suggests that *tshechus*

long included a lively, carnival element (Ardussi 2008b). I suspect that part of the offended sensibility relates less to commercialization or conspicuous consumption than to the shifting class structures that are brought to the surface during the events. In either case, the efforts to regulate the use of *rachu* show how narrow the margins of socially accepted aesthetic display can be.

While some of the regulation of cultural production is formal, often it occurs informally through gossip or criticism. Perceptions of what are appropriate ways to express oneself and to represent Bhutanese-ness have filtered into popular consciousness. During a recent literary event in Thimphu called *Mountain Echoes*, I listened to panelists criticize the use of Buddhist symbols—such as hand-held bells and slender, conical horns—as decorations in luxury hotels. In particular, the panelists criticized the use of a red band high up on the exterior walls of some hotels, an architectural element that was normally reserved for religious sites. On numerous occasions, I also listened to traditional artists critique a contemporary artist's work for using inappropriate iconography.[66]

Even Bhutan's most apparently modern citizens have expressed conservative opinions when it comes to culture. One evening, I found myself at an exhibition opening party on the bottom floor of a steel and glass building in Thimphu discussing a series of splashy portraits of Bhutan's kings with a Bhutanese colleague from the local college. The artist had created five images of the kings based on the ubiquitous photographs that can be found in government buildings, shops, and homes across Thimphu. Inspecting the images, my colleague turned to me and, pausing to think, told me that even though he knew they were supposed to be "respectful" the images just "didn't feel right." The kings, he explained, should not be painted in such a messy fashion. Later the

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[66] As I discuss elsewhere, painting an image improperly is supposed to carry serious karmic consequences.

woman who purchased them recounted receiving criticisms from other Bhutanese for displaying the paintings rather than more acceptable images.

While the artist came at his subject from a place of respect, there was something a little bit gutsy about painting the king unconventionally. Notably the criticisms came not from the monarchy itself, but from the Bhutanese middle and upper class who viewed the portraits. In fact, the artist was tapping into a deep part of contemporary Bhutanese visual culture. Displaying images of the king is a ubiquitous element of Bhutanese visual culture. The college where I worked, like many offices, displayed photographs of all five kings dating back to the first king in 1907. Most homes will have at least display an image of the fifth king and frequently also the fourth king. The fourth king, who is still living and stepped down in 2006, is still highly revered. The apartment I moved into in 2017 was furnished with all the basics, including, an image of the fifth king in the regalia of his enthronement—it is the bare minimum expected for a place of habitation. Likewise, the image of the king can be found on buttons affixed to many lapels throughout Thimphu. When I asked about this, I was often told it was just something one did or else that the buttons helped create a sense of auspiciousness. But I suspect they are important for performing patriotism, showing one's loyalty to the *tsa wa sum*, an act so naturalized it barely gets remarked upon. Even though the image seemed to be fairly conventional to me on first viewing, the artist had picked a powerful image with which to express himself and had clearly pushed boundaries.

In addition to their artwork, the behavior of artists was closely watched. Riding down from campus one day, I was surprised when a faculty member explained to me off-handedly that he thought that VAST was doing good work but that he had spoken to Kama Wangdi about the bad impression that artists made. Specifically, he complained about his impression that artists

misbehaved and partied too much. In other words, that they did not present a good image. Members of VAST were aware of these criticisms. One artist complained to me that, "people think artists are only having a good time, but it's not true." He explained that he felt he had to defend VAST, "Artists don't have to have long hair, smoke, and drink," he told me (Field notes, March 15, 2017). But, of course, artists often do have long hair, smoke, and drink. It is precisely to behave in this way that many find the community appealing. I think part of what the artist I spoke to was complaining about was that people overlooked how artists were also hard working, committed to the community, and quite patriotic. The conventional aspect of being a contemporary artist sometimes gets lost in the aesthetics of how artists behave unconventionally. In fact, in the past the bounds for disruptive behavior were even narrower. I was told that when VAST first started with informal gatherings at the clock tower—the main public space in the center of town—it caused a mild scandal, that such gatherings simply were not done in Thimphu at the time.

Conclusion

The issues related to identity described in this chapter regularly show up in social life in Bhutan. Attending student research presentations, one student framed her research in highly nationalist terms, emphasizing that increasingly hybridized culture in Bhutan was a result of "media imperialism" and led to a "lessening of identity." New cultural forms, the student argued reflecting a familiar narrative, were harming the ability of "age-old" cultures that served as a shield against modernization. Surprisingly to me, some of the Bhutanese faculty pushed back. They gave the example of a formal dance form known as *zhungdra*, arguing that it was static because only people like the Je Khenpo (head abbot of the state monastic body) could write *zhungdra* pieces. It would not be "accepted" if an ordinary person wrote it, they argued (Field notes, June 23, 2017).

While I have presented a certain ideal-type of the dominant construction of national identity, the story of the reaction to the student presentation shows that the field of cultural production is perhaps changing. Indeed, within the hegemonic narrative about needing to preserve an ancient culture against the threat of outside influence are elements of a recognition of the need for change. *Bhutan 2020*, for example, argues that culture should be seen as dynamic or else would risk becoming an "unintended hindrance to change rather than a positive force and a source of inspiration, especially for our young people" (Royal Government of Bhutan 1999a, 34). Likewise regarding etiquette, the document states that the priority should be "underlying values" not "mechanical and compulsory observation of its rules and its physical manifestations" (ibid., 39). Karma Phuntsho's essay about values in parts reads as a conservative critique of the loss of Buddhist meaning of many of the values, but also argues that "homogenization through the implementation of uniform values and customs…kills the spirit of tradition" (Phuntsho 2004, 577-578). His remarks suggest, that there are voices within the dominant discourse that would seem to push for a more open and flexible approach to culture. However, these voices have largely been overwhelmed by the more conservative approach.

It is precisely the standardized and fixed version of national identity that contemporary artists must navigate as they pursue their art and to which, to some degree, contemporary art responds. Contemporary artists take great pride in their cultural identity and the cultural traditions of Bhutan, even if they do not express this pride in orthodox fashion. I remember a senior, incredibly cosmopolitan artist with a love for philosophy, English language novels and art house films asking why a younger artist had bothered painting ugly, "matchbox" modern apartment complexes instead of the more beautiful traditional houses (June 17, 2017). The next two chapters

explore how artists try to situate their expressive individualism within the Bhutanese field of culture.

Chapter 4: Art as a way of life: values and ethics in the contemporary art scene

You never knew who would stop by VAST. One afternoon a couple of the senior members of VAST spoke to an educator about starting art classes at his institution. After listening patiently, one VAST member told the man that, in the end, he needed to focus on process rather than product and that perhaps he should start with an art club, something less formal. The VAST member explained to the visitor, "you can't aim at product. Product is not important, only the change in values, in mindset." When I asked the artist from VAST about this later he said these were not "VAST values" but "art values." Later, both of the members of VAST spoke about how they appreciated that the educator was interested in art for its potential to benefit students, not just to increase the school's enrollment (Field notes, March 9, 2017). The interaction above exemplifies how it is not only the artworks but also the social interactions surrounding art, especially in the process of making art that matters for understanding the negotiation of identity and values in Bhutan. Many of the artists I interviewed linked art to values and learning to be a good person just as they linked art with a sense of freedom of expression. Likewise, VAST and other galleries provided key places to learn art, exchange ideas, and to sit and talk about life.

During my fieldwork, I was struck by how contemporary artists understood art as a practice shot through with morality. Part of what makes contemporary art compelling in Bhutan is the degree to which it functions as a space where people can think about and grapple with competing values, and work out their own answers to the lived dilemmas of modernity. At the heart of these discussions was also a sense of being one's own person, a sense of individualism as the freedom to figure out who one really was. At play was a complicated mix of an emphasis on freedom along with substantive notions about what sorts of individualism or freedom were appropriate. These

values were balanced by more sociocentric values. This chapter explores the question: If the values at VAST differ from official discourse, what are those values?

Most artists turned to contemporary art seeking some form of individualism and freedom understood in terms of personal liberty. Often the form of individualism found at VAST assumed the form of not being told what to do, the freedom to choose what they wanted to do, and decide who they wanted to be. That was why they made art. The values surrounding individualism broadly were spoken about in a number of different and complicated ways that could not be reduced to sheer egoism. Likewise, artists often sought to situate their subjectivity within social expectations of what it means to perform Bhutanese-ness. Artists especially sought to balance their individuality with social values that emphasize harmony and hierarchy even if artists rarely if ever spoke directly of the key national values of *tsa wa sum*, *tha damtsig*, *driglam namzha*, and *ley jumdrey*. So too, artists placed great importance on Buddhism, blending a rationalized Buddhist modernism with locally specific practices and rituals. Relying on vignettes that illustrate broader patterns of the art scene, I argue that the efforts of participants in the contemporary art scene to make room for a more individualistic (what is referred to locally as "modern") identity within national identity can be seen in both how members of the art scene pursue and in how they critique and limit individualism.

If art, as I argue, is to be understood as an important medium for tactically making room for new subject positions and understandings of identity in Bhutan, then the social interactions that occur around art and in art spaces need to be understood in addition to the artwork itself. This chapter deals with the values that characterize social life at VAST. Whereas the next chapter looks specifically at artworks and how artists talk and think about the content of their art, this chapter examines the values at play in broader social interactions and in the day-to-day practice of

participating in Thimphu's art scene. It also includes non-artists, amateur artists, and art lovers who participate in the broader community centered on VAST. After outlining the values at play at VAST, I will provide an overview of what VAST was like and how it worked. I will justify why studying VAST offers clues to the art scene in general in Thimphu (and to a lesser degree Paro) and end the chapter with a few vignettes examining how these values play out in everyday life.

The values discussed in this chapter are generally emic, that is, values that I saw discussed by the artists themselves, although I have drawn parallels to etic categories such as individualism when they seem to fit. The approach, therefore, is ground-up. The values covered in this section are not structural rules so much as the stated and implied ideals behind social action. Nor are these values a fixed essence of art, or Bhutanese-ness, instead the values in practice described in this chapter are always under negotiation.

Art values overview

As a hub for art and artists, VAST has also been central for setting the values that define the art scene in Bhutan. Both individualistic and communitarian values were important at VAST. Frequently artists explained their interest in VAST in terms of the freedom they found there. One young participant at VAST explained, "It's like a second home because, I don't know, you're free to do whatever you want. And it gives you kind of liberation, you can find yourself when you are in VAST. I really like that" (Interview, June 7, 2017). This sense of VAST as providing a "liberating" space where people can "find themselves" captures a theme I heard repeatedly. Other people I spoke to emphasized that VAST was a place to meet people who were "different" and "open minded" (Interview 9.1.17). Part of the value of freedom was found in the type of sociability people encountered at VAST that was based on choice, a feeling mutual regard, and shared interest rather than obligation. Freedom in the sense of the absence of constraints was clearly an important

value at VAST, and the organization's unstructured nature was part of what drew many people to participate not just in art but VAST specifically.

Considerable importance was placed on being free thinking at VAST. In fact, the model of individualism that found approval at VAST looks a lot like what other scholars have described as "expressive individualism." With roots in the Romantic movement, expressive individualism emphasizes the freedom to realize a true inner self in all of its idiosyncrasies and contradictions, often combined with a sense of pursuing transcendent experiences (Bellah et al. 2007; Taylor 1989). Rather than simply an absence of constraints, expressive individualism often carries with it the idea that one must learn how to express oneself, that it requires some amount of work or skill. At VAST people spoke frequently both of wanting to find their own viewpoint and that achieving true knowledge for oneself and of oneself required work and practice. While in some ways the rejection of received wisdom at the heart of expressive individualism could line up with rational scientific thinking, at VAST the emphasis was on a more subjective sense of knowledge. Skepticism came less from the sense that there was a universal truth discoverable through reason and more from the sense that true understanding meant discovering truth for oneself.

Not all sorts of individualism were valued among artists in Bhutan. In contrast to desirable forms of individualism, I found that much of the community at VAST seemed wary or outright critical of what has been called "utilitarian individualism" or "possessive individualism." Using Benjamin Franklin as a model, Robert Bellah describes utilitarian individualism as a belief that human beings inherently seek to maximize their own self-interest and that this is in some sense moral, an idea at the heart of "homo economicus" models of human action and neoliberal policy. The community at VAST overwhelmingly disapproved of actions perceived to be overly self-interested. For most members of the art scene, art was not supposed to be a self-interested

endeavor. However, a principled stance against more instrumental or commercially motivated action was far from uniform. Artists needed to sell their works to make a living and VAST needed funds in order to run. Many artists had found that selling their artwork to make a living provided them with freedom they would not have had working in an office, and some chose to be more nakedly commercial than others. Even if artists engaged in a certain amount of utilitarian behavior, it was a motivation that had to be justified or was spoken of with regret.

Contrary to the worry embedded in the official discourse on culture in Bhutan and in scholarship like Bellah's, individualism at VAST did not mean artists promoted an ideology of atomistic notions of the self. In fact, during my fieldwork I found most participants in the art scene placed great importance on many more communitarian or sociocentric values. As the contemporary artist mentioned in the introduction explained to me, "Artists talk about freedom, but freedom is not free." He elaborated that, "human beings need restriction, we have to live as a society and not just as individuals. If we just do whatever it leads to junk" (Field notes August 27, 2017). At VAST, I found that great importance was placed on how to "live as a society," both in interactions within the community at VAST and understandings of the relationship between VAST and society more generally. So too, many artists took a thoughtfully restrained approach to their art, seeking to show a certain amount of respect to broader cultural attitudes, and being careful not to shock their audiences too much.

One of the key communitarian values discussed at VAST was *gyenkhu*, usually translated as "responsibility."[67] Responsibility resembles other Bhutanese values that prioritize hierarchy and harmony. However, the emphasis tends to be on taking personal initiative rather than on performing because an authority ordered an action. Failing to show *gyenkhu* was a failure not of

obedience but of not being committed enough to the community, of being overly selfish, or lacking self-discipline. One of the artists who was studying art abroad at the time explained that both the "openness" of VAST and the sense of "being helpful" as part of "family" impressed him. He said he felt a responsibility to Kama Wangdi to give back (Interview, June 15, 2017). The description the artist gave of wanting to give back reminded me of the notion of "repaying kindness" that Whitecross argues is central to *tha damtsig* (Whitecross 2008a). However, when I asked the artist what term he would use in Dzongkha to describe the feeling and relationship he felt, he replied "*gyenkhu*" or responsibility.

While understandings of *gyenkhu* clearly overlap with *tha damtsig*, I believe it places greater emphasis on the individual. The artist I spoke to did not feel that he owed something to Kama Wangdi because loyalty dictated it, but because being a good person it was what he needed to do. If *tha damtsig* emphasizes the sense that there are rules that must be followed and which if broken are a sign of disrespect for authority, then *gyenkhu* plays more on the idea of seeing oneself as part of a community and behaving accordingly is part of a process of true self-realization. In the same interview, the artist spoke of Kama Wangdi admonishing artists that if they were really committed to VAST they should give fully. Responsibility in this sense was not a duty to "obey" as a repayment for the kindness, but to offer help, give back. The person being responsible positions him or herself less as servant performing a duty than as an agent in the position of power to give back to the community. Yet, the sense of the compelling nature of reciprocity, that kindness needs to be repaid is clearly there as well. *Gyenkhu* does not represent a total break with older Bhutanese ethical sentiments, but compared to *tha damtsig* a sentiment one cultivates rather than a rule one must follow.

A sense of responsibility to the community as well as to each other also played into the spirit of volunteerism at VAST. Tashi Choden has argued that volunteerism in the form of "community participation and social cohesion" is an important traditional trait of Bhutanese society, and these values certainly played an important role at VAST (Choden 2003). Specifically, Tashi Choden argues that volunteerism embodies the Buddhist virtue of "*jimba*" or generosity, an attitude of giving freely with no expectation of receiving benefit in return. At VAST *jimba* manifested in the ideal that a person should be a participant in rather than observer of the organization's activities. Likewise, VAST consistently sought to contribute to society outside of VAST through voluntary projects or art to raise awareness about issues like littering. Members of VAST were supposed to give of themselves if they were truly committed, rather than holding back. Connected to *jimba* was an emphasis on promoting social harmony and avoiding conflict where possible. To focus on giving rather than, for example, struggle was to implicitly argue that the improvement of society meant working together, not social critique. This became especially apparent in VAST's larger social projects as will be described below.

Finally, a sociocentric perspective remained important in the way in which artists incorporated elements of traditional sensibilities into their social interactions. Buddhism was an important part of the repertoire through which individualist values took form and were reconciled with the sense that one ought not to be too egocentric. Looking at how artists think about, talk about, and participate in various forms of Buddhism provides a sense of how they positioned themselves relative to what were considered more traditional identities. Likewise, daily life and social functions at VAST still incorporated elements of *driglam namzha*, albeit in reduced form. Artists in this way pushed for greater freedom, but did not position for themselves as rebels or malcontents the way global standards of contemporary art sometimes expect.

VAST as a third space

Through its open egalitarian structure, VAST resembled institutions sociologists have long identified as key for a sense of community. Georg Simmel discusses the importance in urban spaces of situations that allow for pure "sociability," a form of social play where the point is the social interaction itself which he likens to art in being both a form of play and something done for its own sake (Simmel and Hughes 1949, 255). In his seminal work *The Great Good Place*, the sociologist Ray Oldenburg described spaces like VAST as "third spaces" between the work place and the home (Oldenburg 1999). He argued third spaces were as necessary for the well-being of individuals as for the community and were the heart of a well-functioning democracy.

The values that characterize VAST were manifested in everyday social activities and in the way members of the community talked about these interactions, often while in the midst of doing them. During my research, I found VAST was both a place for art and for the art of sociability providing a space of informal public life where hierarchies are de-emphasized and where conversation was often the main activity. The overall structure was incredibly open and relatively egalitarian. There was an incredibly easy-going air to the place, and many non-members were regulars who stopped by daily or weekly to hang out, chat, or for help with a project. A wide variety of people, including artists, came to VAST for this freedom along with a sense of community.[68]

Although formal membership does exist at VAST, it is relatively loosely defined. Despite all my time spent there, no one asked me to become a member. I had to ask for a form when I wanted to see how much membership cost and what the forms looked like. Although the situation for

[68] In this way, VAST showed greater solidarity than Bourdieu's notions of a "field," closer to what Ortner describes as a "scene" or a "community of taste" that is "a space of collectiveness, of mutual pleasure and mutual recognition" (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993; Ortner 2013, 91).

artists may have been somewhat different as they used the space and art supplies in ways I did not, none of the artists described membership in interviews in terms of paying fees or filling out forms. One became a member by participating in the life of VAST. Consequently, despite a formal membership structure, there were many "non-member" participants.

Informality also characterized the day-to-day running of VAST. Although VAST has at various times run a café, and often has tourists visit, this was never the main purpose of the organization and participants were relatively free to come and go as they please. What seemed to keep people coming back was, in part, the social interactions and community they found there.

There being no formal structure, popping in for a visit could be a bit bewildering for a visitor. Day to day a surprising variety of people would stop by. People who ran plant nurseries, high school principals, writers, government officials, tourists, and visiting artists would all swing by the space. Some of these visitors were well acquainted with VAST and knew who to talk to and how to get in touch with the right person. However, I saw more than one set of tourists tentatively step over the threshold unsure of whether the space was private or public or who was in charge before some member of VAST noticed their presence and politely showed them around. Understandably, the more senior members of VAST were constantly trying to get the artists to be more proactive about welcoming people who were just stopping by. A few of the artists and members would consistently do so, but if they were missing, you could wander the whole gallery without talking to anyone.

Which is not to imply that VAST was unfriendly. If a person continued to show up, the community would take interest. People at VAST were curious and the more interest you took in the organization (and more dedication you showed) the more interest they took in you. For my own part, I found that once I was in, there was always someone to talk to and something to do.

At VAST a large portion of the time was spent chatting. Sometimes this chafed against my impulse to try to be a researcher and get the information I came for. I recall very clearly one afternoon sensing an opportunity to really dig into my research by spending time with an artist and instead of talking about research looking out across the river discussing which animal shapes could be seen in the cliff face. Other times, I would show up and spend the afternoon clearing rocks to build a path in the art park or simply enjoying a cup of tea. Over my time at VAST, I had conversations about how to find edible plants around Thimphu, Buddhist philosophy, literature, which places were best to eat in Thimphu, and, of course, how to improve my drawing. There was also a fair bit of teasing, about who was romantically involved with whom, relative artistic skill, and in my case, the fact that I often left events early because I was hungry and could not wait until 9 or 10pm to eat. One artist teased that everything was fine about me except I needed to eat on time and sleep on time. By the end of my fieldwork I realized that these interactions were not distractions nor simply building rapport, but a key part of life at VAST, part of the pleasure of being there and an embodiment of the values many artists pursued.

Often at VAST I would find myself deep into surprisingly philosophical conversations about big questions. For example, during an exhibition one artist asked me sincerely “what is life?” before arguing that what we know about the world around us is “101% your own experience” (Field notes, June 7, 2017). It reminded me of the excitement I felt freshman year of college where everyone asked big questions and was enthrallingly (perhaps a bit naïvely) unafraid to wade into answering them. These conversations were not only part of the playful sociability at VAST, they also often emphasized the importance my interlocutors placed on personal interpretation, showing that they had thought about something for themselves.

Unstructured time in the studio space together also made up a lot of the activity at VAST. At any given time I found some people working on art, peeking to see what you were working on, watching movies, listening to music, and gathered together in the library playing video games on their phones. I got a lot of suggestions on my own drawing this way, and got to see artists engaged in their daily practice. Eventually tea would be served, and someone would pull out a bag of *zaow*,[69] biscuits,[70] or peaches. The dogs outside were practically members as well and were frequently fed on biscuits. A *thup*[71] seller may come by in the afternoon and everyone would sip the filling, hearty rice porridge served in plastic cups so thin that if you didn't hold it just right it would collapse under the pressure of your grip.

While a network of word of mouth coordination was at work, sometimes you just had to be at VAST to know what was happening or going to happen. Although I was in the Facebook group, often I would arrive when the artists were already in the middle of doing something—such as pulling nails out of frames to ready them for an exhibition, or rebuilding the inside of a gallery with new false walls and track lighting—without realizing that such an event had been planned. All of this activity was, I think, important for both building a sense of community and also why many, especially young people, came to VAST. There was enough activity to keep things from being boring, but at the same time a young person could hang out with other people and often there would be no one telling him or her to do anything in particular.[72]

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[69] Puffed rice.
[70] Biscuits in the British sense—crisp, usually sweet, store-bought cookies.
[71] Rice porridge, often served spiced with ginger and chunks of *paneer* cheese.
[72] This is also made it the perfect place for "deep hanging out" as an anthropologist. It was one of the few spaces in Thimphu I felt I could hang out as long as I wanted without any particular purpose.

Though Kama Wangdi often led, there was an unstructured quality to activities. I soon learned that I should not ask what I could do to help, but should jump in and do what everyone else was doing if it was a skill I had. I would wind up doing the simpler tasks such as sanding walls or giving the gallery a fresh coat of white paint. Although I was certainly treated a bit more like a guest on these occasions and often spared the most demanding work, there was an element to this process of seeing what needed to be done, contributing, and adjusting as we went that seemed to characterize VAST's process more generally. When there was a lead to be taken, Kama Wangdi often took it. While not above nagging, complaining loudly, or coordinating a particular section of work, Kama Wangdi avoided ordering people to do anything. Once the initial project was set, much of the work seemed to occur on its own with senior members often stepping in to coordinate or lead by example. A mixture of expertise and seniority more than a bureaucratic authority seemed to determine who did which parts of the project.

This could lead to humorous results. One of the artists fondly recalled trying to roast a chicken over an open flame with a crowbar when tasked with cooking dinner on a camping trip, but in the end failing because the crowbar eventually got too hot for anyone to handle. And yet, it is precisely this willingness at VAST to let people take initiative and fail that made VAST such an exciting place to be.

The same looseness that made VAST such a liberating place to be could also make it difficult to navigate when it came to coordinating activity or planning. Indeed, there was a fair bit of criticism between members of VAST. Many members were young, in their late teens or early 20s, and often behaved in the careless, easily distracted ways common to youth. As will be discussed below, careless or selfish action was often the subject of criticism. It was also sometimes a problem of there being no one officially responsible for any part of it. Sometimes I have heard

the style of organization at VAST attributed to a particularly Bhutanese way of doing things. I remember sitting in a meeting where a Bhutanese colleague joked that, "In Bhutan, if it's everyone's responsibility it doesn't get done."

Nevertheless, much did get done at VAST. Members transformed a bare-walled shop space under the Le Meridien hotel into a white walled gallery with brightly colored rectangular boxes for seating and minimalist benches of wooden planks and cinder blocks. So too, the community turned a patch of barren earth across from VAST into a park. Much of the furniture at VAST was scavenged and repurposed—one afternoon artists placed discarded bus benches in a seemingly inaccessible spot on the far side of the river to create a sense of wonder. Spending time at VAST created the sense that art was as much about imagining and realizing possibilities as it was about learning specific artistic techniques.

The openness did not mean that people behaved exactly as they wanted with no regard for anyone else. One senior member explained to me that VAST's attitude was not egoistic. Describing the spirit of working together at VAST she told me, "People pitch in according to their interest. You do it because you want to, not because you have to" (Field notes, March 4, 2017). Her comments reinforced my own observation that work as a community was not run by command, but by a sense that people should pitch in as they can. Organizing events in a loosely egalitarian fashion mutually reinforced the shared perception at VAST that the space belonged to everyone. This meant in principle both that everyone needed to be responsible, but also that anyone could make something happen.

Although open and egalitarian in comparison to social organization more generally, VAST was not entirely without its own hierarchies, nor were Bhutanese traditions absent. Often the

exhibition openings contained elements of *driglam namzha* including a chief guest and a *khadag*[73] tied in front of the gallery. We would assemble outside and the chief guest, dressed in *gho* or *kira*, would untie the *khadag* to applause. However, unlike many other public events I attended in Bhutan, there deployment of *driglam namzha* was simpler and less formal. Although there might be an honorarium for the chief guest and they may be served first, there was no separate seat with fruit denoting rank, nor generally did the chief guest feel the need to wear *kabney* or *rachu*, the ceremonial scarves denoting rank for men and women usually worn at formal events.

A similarly toned-down version of *driglam namzha* played out on an everyday level. Kama Wangdi, myself, other senior artists, or guests were frequently served first even in the daily cups of tea, but there was seldom any fuss if this did not happen and there were generally no special cups for the more senior members of VAST. Likewise, there was a sense of age hierarchy, with the founders of VAST or teachers of the art classes frequently referred to as "sir" by their former students. However, I never saw seniors balk at having to do the more menial tasks. In fact, often the more senior artists were the hardest working when it came to the least desirable tasks. In this way openness at VAST took on a familiar Bhutanese shape.

Perhaps the clearest articulation of the ethos VAST sought to cultivate came with the opening of a new gallery space just below the Le Meridien hotel in Thimphu. As the opening neared, a few members of VAST collaborated to create a flyer to explain the new space and its connection to VAST. The flyer combined elements of Kama Wangdi's artwork and a poem presenting the new space to visitors written by a VAST member. The poem read:

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[73] A white ceremonial scarf offered by participants to bless special occasions.

This is not a shop
This is the place
That belongs to The Artists
Artists of all colors

Artists who sing, paint, tell stories,
Dance, play instruments, write and
Who also listen and observe.

This is the place
Where all of us can belong
To be in the moment
And to join in
The creative journey

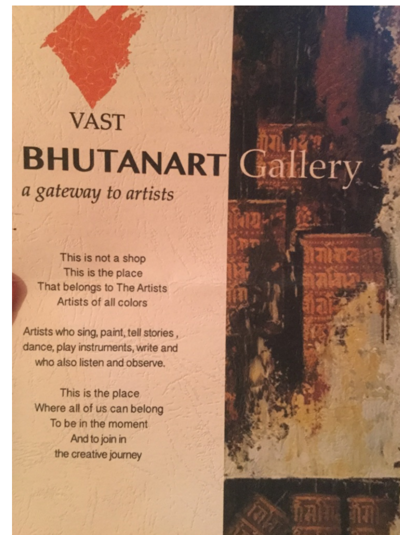

Figure 7: Flyer from Bhutan Art Gallery opening, photo by author.

From format to content, the flyer reflected how VAST understood itself. Rather than a bureaucratic declaration of how the space should be used, the flyer offered a poem creatively reflecting on the spirit of the space. The poem itself emphasized the idea of participation. Rather than a "shop," a space with an overriding commercial purpose or even a gallery, the poem used the general term "place" conveying a sense of openness. Likewise, the new gallery was portrayed as not only a space that allowed others to enter but which belonged to them. Throughout, the poem defined artists in the broadest possible way including those who "observe and listen." Finally, the poem imagined the new gallery as united by the experience of being in the moment and creativity. The flyer captures the version of expressive individualism so many people involved in VAST recounted to me. However, what may not be apparent to the reader is that at VAST the sense belonging also carries with it a sense of responsibility.

Art class

Nothing started on time in Bhutan. Or rather, it started on its own time. Like so many times before, I arrived at the stated start time for the opening to the art classes I signed up for through VAST. I knew I would probably be early, but figured that way I would not miss a thing. Finding

nothing in particular happening, I got wrapped up chatting to the artists I knew who ran the organization and playing with one of their kids, a child of three or four years who was totally at home in VAST and would confidently claim the attention of whomever she liked. Consequently, when the opening did finally begin some 30 minutes or so later, I wound up scurrying in late to the back of the group of about 60 assembled Bhutanese. These were mostly the children and young people who would be taking the "young hearts" class, but some adults who would be taking the "brave hearts" class with me were there too.

Art class also provided an opportunity to not only learn something about the techniques of drawing and painting but also the values that were at the core of being an artist and making art for contemporary artists in Bhutan. From its inception, art classes had been at the center of life at VAST, and it continued to be, aside from a few workshops or visual communication classes at the schools of education, the only real course in contemporary art in Bhutan.

When I arrived one of the founders of VAST, Kama Wangdi, affectionately known as "Asha" a term meaning maternal uncle, was in the middle of telling them about the spirit of the class, speaking in his practiced, off the cuff manner, laughing and getting laughs. "You have to apply art to your life," he advised the group, and switched into Dzongkha saying that hair, clothes, food, these activities are also all art. He punctuated his English with the Dzongkha phrases "*thup kha*" and "*inh mosh*," sentence ending rhetorical questions that invite the audience's agreement, their consent.

Almost no one in the crowd was in national dress. The conversation was informal and absent the hierarchical official protocol so common at opening events. VAST often explicitly avoids these protocols, or else plays them down, opting for a sort of low-key version of *driglam namzha*. Often the artists themselves, especially the men, would avoid putting on national dress—

an outfit known as *gho* for men and *kira* for women. When I asked about this, I was told by one of the artists that he wore his *gho* on the inside.

Kama Wangdi led the opening and in his opening remarks made sure to thank the king. The space, he explained, was a *kidu* provided by the king. The king's support, he reminds the audience, means they have a responsibility to make good use of the classes.

Turning to the benefits of art, Kama Wangdi made the case for art as not only important for skills but moral education. "Art will help with your studies," he explained, "It will help you be nice to your parents, it will help you be responsible, it will help you be active so that you will help your government and your country." Concluding with a smile, Kama Wangdi counseled that, "Art will engage you so you don't have to sit in the TV room. TV is so powerful it can pull you in. You become a fish man." Kama hilariously pantomimed an open-mouthed expression adding, "or a *tshagay*," a Bhutanese term meaning idiot but used also as a term of endearment or teasing.

Throughout the talk, Kama Wangdi emphasized the importance of responsibility. "We can only assist you here," he told the crowd knowingly, "Sometimes we say art can never be taught, but it can be learned" (Field notes, April 1, 2017). There was a skillful combination in Kama Wangdi's words of patriotism, humility, and also of independence. Those of us in attendance were told that we must take an active role in their art. We were told that we cannot be "taught" art, and were encouraged to not simply be reliant on art teachers as sources of authority on whom we were passively reliant. At the same time, this independence was framed as being beneficial socially, specifically to an implied national community or "government and country."

The speech reminded me of a conversation with Kama Wangdi from a few days earlier where—over the typical set lunch of daal, rice, and *datshi* a Bhutanese curry with cheese and chili—Kama Wangdi confided that, "I was wild. Art tamed me." Yet, the wildness never truly left

Kama Wangdi nor VAST. Perhaps in part aimed at reassuring the parents who were present, the speech conveyed to the audience that art was about self-discipline and serving the nation. But just as important was the casual atmosphere, the injunction to think for oneself, and the art that hung around the audience that very clearly was not conventional.

Artists placed great emphasis on contemporary art as a space for them to be relatively freer than in other social spaces in Bhutan. Kama Wangdi's insistence that "art cannot be taught" hints at this. As he represented art, learning was by its nature self-directed. One could not simply be told how or what to do. At the same time, Kama Wangdi called forth ideas of morality. A sense of responsibility, patriotism, and the sense of being "tamed" that has profound resonance with Buddhist morality, particularly those moral practices aimed at taming one's mind.

True to the speech Kama Wangdi gave to start off the classes, art class especially focused not just on learning techniques, but encouraging a way of being in the world that emphasized personal authenticity, introspection, and curiosity. After learning about different ways to shade to create the illusion of depth, our teacher urged us to take our skills outside the classroom and "learn from life." In any given class we might learn and practice how to draw noses and discuss Søren Kierkegaard's philosophy, Miyamoto Musashi's *The Book of Five Rings*, and French New Wave Cinema. All of this, we were told, was related, and we should always be looking for connections between what we learned rather than seeing them in isolation. Our teacher's admonishments to read and think broadly seemed aimed at getting us to understand the world, not simply learn how to make art. This, one teacher argued, was what made us different from other animals. In a characteristically acerbic manner he quipped, "If you're not going to question, you might as well go out to the field and eat grass" (Field notes, April 8, 2017).

Sometimes artists drew on their understandings of Buddhism to make their point. In explaining that we should not just take what he said as given, that there were no "draconian rules" for the class, our art teacher offered with offhand sagacity that, "As the Buddha says," he paused for effect, "question everything" (Field notes, April 8, 2017). I heard this refrain often amongst artists and the middle class in Thimphu, the saying occurring in conversations emphasizing the rational, non-dogmatic nature of Buddhism. When my art teacher said it, several of my classmates murmured the conclusion along with him.

Belief that we ought to question and learn for ourselves, was shared in the artistic community at VAST. Reading between the (literal) lines, I was surprised at how similar the values we learned were when we switched teachers. Introducing our new teacher, Kama Wangdi explained that the motivation for learning art was not in our teacher, but in ourselves, that our passion needed to lead us. Furthermore, he argued, the classroom ought to be interactive and that we should even, "fight with the teacher." This remark surprised me as it cut against the traditional etiquette and deferential behavior towards the teacher I both read about in scholarship about education in Bhutan and experienced myself as a teacher (cf Roder 2012). Our new teacher, for his part, was similarly insistent on being broadly curious. He explained how he was self-taught and had to seek out information for himself when learning color theory or choosing paints. We opened by covering how "red" was in fact many different reds. Rather than teaching us about Western color theory by covering something like complimentary colors, he encouraged us to "be scientists" and "experiment" often explaining which colors he found useful for painting everything from the robes of monks to snow-capped mountains (Field notes, July 21, 2017).

Notably, by emphasizing "process over product," Kama Wangdi and other artists were voicing a critique of models of success and achievement they saw as being prevalent in society more

broadly. A number of researchers have drawn attention to what Ueda describes the "ladder to success" in Bhutan (Ueda 2004). Students learn to aspire to become a doctor, an engineer, or a civil servant, and ultimately someday wear the red scarf that marks one as the having the status of "*dasho*" (Ueda 2004; Roder 2012). In comparison, at VAST the point of learning art was often portrayed as not really about achieving a particular end, but learning about oneself and finding an internal motivation and commitment. The reward for learning art was intrinsic to the process rather than extrinsic.

The emphasis on process over product was also likely a response to the changing opportunities and socio-economic structure of Bhutan. In Bhutan today, even those Bhutanese who attend government schools cannot depend on civil service employment anymore. For other artists art presented an alternative to the ladder of success. Some established artists initially held stable office jobs, but they turned to art because the office offered little room for creativity or self-directed action. Other artists, perhaps more practically, held onto their office jobs, but they turned to art as an escape. Likewise, many of the artists at VAST were not "toppers" in their schools, and found in art an alternative route to success. The emphasis on process is also an effort to avoid discouraging students who already feel they are not good enough.

Part of the ethos at VAST was the sense of pursuing something for its own sake based on internal motivation. This attitude often went hand in hand with a sense of self-improvement: that one needed to learn to be the kind of person who was committed and could be self-directed. Fascinatingly, this narrative downplayed talent in favor of seeing art as something one could achieve with work and discipline. Discipline, in turn, was to be achieved less from a sense of outcompeting other artists than from a sense of detachment from the results of one's artwork. For example, during a visit to the art class, Kama Wangdi told us not to create too many expectations

for the quality of the work we would do. He advised that if we had "expectations" we would be unable to draw and paint well by the end of the class, then we would think to ourselves "I don't have that talent" and would lose our motivation. Kama Wangdi went on to say that, "When you're discouraged your hand will not follow you." It was important, he explained, that we enjoy the process, enjoy the learning. "If you can draw 100 crooked lines, you have that talent," he said, explaining that even if the lines didn't come out right we still learned something and that there was value in the process. Like many of the discussions I heard about art at VAST, Kama Wangdi's remarks placed a heavy emphasis on the need to maintain "motivation" and "interest" (Field notes, July 21, 2017).

Criticism of overly individualistic behavior

While VAST generally ran amicably, like any close-knit group it had its moments of friction as well. Although participants in the art scene centered at VAST prioritized individual freedom, they were far from extreme libertarians. More communitarian values that emphasized social cohesion, harmony, and participation were also important to VAST. Often meetings were a chance to address perceived problems within the community in addition to preparing for future programs. Consequently, meetings also were a key space for articulating, sometimes self-critically, the values important at VAST.

A meeting in the late summer of 2017, captured many of the familiar themes that came up during official gatherings at VAST. Like many meetings, the notice went out relatively last minute, but members dutifully gathered in the late afternoon. The gallery filled with the familiar shuffle, scrape and slight screech of flimsy plastic chairs being moved across tile, as a semi-circle assembled focused around Kama Wangdi. Many of the points of this meeting had been repeated in the past, and had developed a certain theme to them. Kama Wangdi told the group they need to

be responsible, to show greater *gyenkhu*. He reminded everyone that there were a lot of events 'jammed up' in the schedule, that the expectations for VAST were high, and that people expected VAST to be able to do the impossible. If they wanted it to come out nicely, he counseled, they would need to work hard and could not relax. Kama complained that people only worked when he "threatens" them and that they needed to be more considerate of each other. He gave the example of one of the artists not noticing that some newspaper had gotten stuck to the paint on the sides of the painting they had moved. Smiling while he scolded, Kama Wangdi explained they should be taking care of each other without having to be told or asked (Field notes, September 20, 2017).

As the conversation expanded beyond preparing for upcoming activities, Kama Wangdi talked about how the members at VAST have a responsibility to represent the organization and contemporary art in the best possible light. Other organizations or individuals might undertake projects "only from a commercial" angle, he argued, but VAST could not be that way. Art in Bhutan, he explained, is getting "killed because of commercialism." Art, he went on, cannot just be about going to the mountains and making a painting to make money. In 15 years, he told the group, people will talk about us. He related his own experience of explaining to a guest that bridging the gap between the traditional and modern art is hard because "people's perception of art is completely different." In particular, he argued, the problem with only thinking about commercialism was that that people would think that an artist was "just a skilled person" and that art was just a "product" (Field notes, September 20, 2017).

In fact, many of these same themes were reinforced in my interactions with other members of VAST. The market and "commercialism" often served as foils for proper conduct or values. When the studio space had not been taken care of properly, one member pointedly objected that,

"VAST's not like a company." She explained that you don't just pay someone to clean up after you at VAST, "it's your home" (Field notes, April 3, 2017). Asking about a member I had not seen in a while, one of the artists told me, "that that guy is a bit money crazy" (Field notes, February 22, 2017). The artist in question had, apparently, devoted too much of his time to making money rather than making art or supporting VAST. Other artists criticized themselves for "selling cranes" a reference to a popular subject of artwork (Field notes, March 7, 2017). Usually these criticisms were framed as a weakness in character. To put it into an idiom from cultural production in the US, artists were criticizing "selling out." Artists learned at VAST that art was meant to be so much more than a product or a commodity.

In my own interpretation, the rejection of commercialism at VAST likely reflects the fact that much traditional art has been managed by government institutions aimed at economic development which tend to treat artists as laborers and art as an income generating mechanism. The traditional art schools, for example, remain part of the Ministry of Labor. From "commercialism" to the unfavorable comparison to a "company" an organization run for profit, the market stood as a powerful metaphor of immoral behavior and values distinctly at odds with what artists ought to be. VAST sought to distance the artwork it made and the value of contemporary art from these more commercial approaches to cultural production

Criticism of selfishness could also extend to other behaviors where the individual only sought their own benefit. In the account above, when Kama Wangdi complained about artists taking trips to the mountains to make paintings to sell, he was criticizing a specific artist for using a trip through VAST only to find material for his paintings rather than the broader benefit of the organization. Others at VAST explained how members had gone abroad but had not adequately shared the knowledge they gained of various techniques with the community. Another artist

reflected on the importance of sharing what he learned about art from his education abroad. "What's the use of learning if you can't share," he offered philosophically recounting how he always made sure to share what he knew freely at VAST (Interview, September 1, 2017).

However, the feeling about commercialism and other self-interested acts was clearly ambivalent. At the end of my interviews, I asked artists what the biggest challenge they faced was. While some noted the lack of appreciation, many emphasized the difficulty of getting the expensive art supplies required to make art in the first place or of selling their art. In a group discussion with a visiting artist where the artists at VAST suddenly found themselves trying to explain the lack of development of Bhutanese art, they argued that it was the lack of seeing art as an "investment" like it was in India that hindered art in Bhutan (Field notes, September 5, 2017). I heard this refrain repeatedly, with artists sometimes adding that the problem was the lack of "appreciation" by Bhutanese who would rather buy a car than art (Field Notes, March 15, 2017). Ironically, while artists wished for greater economic returns from their work, the actual pursuit of profit or personal benefit was strongly criticized in the artistic community.

Buddhism

As with the rest of social life in Bhutan, Buddhism was important to the art scene. Although neither the artwork at VAST nor the dynamics of the community were specifically religiously motivated, Buddhism nevertheless formed an important component of cultural background many artists took as given. In one way, the importance of Buddhism at VAST reinforced the dominant representation of national identity as Buddhist. Though many of the members of VAST came from regions where Hinduism or animism played important roles, only Buddhism formed a key part of both the artwork and shared cultural repertoire seen at events. However, members of VAST also

interpreted Buddhism through their own interest in expressive individualism and social responsibility.

One of the more revealing exchanges showing the understanding of Buddhism at VAST happened when I came to VAST to look for art supplies, hang out, and chat. Nothing in particular was happening and finding the staff with the key to the art supplies absent, I moved to sit with the artists. Avoiding the warm summer rains that had saturated the city, we sat inside chatting about nothing in particular. There was a big ritual happening at Memorial Chorten[74] that had caused traffic throughout the city, and I asked off-handedly if anyone had gone for a blessing at the *chorten*. The artists joked that they did not need to go because they were "already blessed." Puzzled, I asked what they meant. With bit of mischievousness in his eyes, one artist remarked that whatever you did, "if you put your heart and soul into it, it becomes religion," adding that even "drawing is a religion" if you did it right. "When you paint, you get lost," he went on, "You don't know what time it is, or if you're hungry. *Then*, it becomes a meditation" (Field notes, July 28, 2017).

Other artists made similar comparisons between art and religious practice. One artist even emphasized on his business cards that art was meant to "rest your mind." Overall, many of my discussions at VAST revolved around the idea of reflecting on behaving mindfully, contemplating the meaning behind actions, and looking inside for inspiration and meaning.

Such remarks from the artists prioritized intent and experience over established ideas of proper Buddhist behavior. In particular, artists played down both dogmatic orthodoxy and what was often portrayed as unthinking orthopraxy. The point was to reflect and think about what one was doing.

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[74] *Chorten* are a version of stupa, a type Buddhist religious monument built around a sacred artifact. Memorial Chorten was built to commemorate the untimely death of the third king in 1972 and serves as a key public and religious space in Thimphu.

The fact that the community at VAST approached Buddhism from a more "modernist" perspective struck me even in my pre-dissertation fieldwork. One artist told me straightforwardly that, "I'm spiritual, but not religious." When I asked what this meant and why his artwork so often used Buddhist themes, he explained that the Buddha was his teacher, not his god (Journal, July 2014). Still others spoke of how it was one's personal devotion that mattered. One member of VAST explained how she had been criticized by a monk for having a painting from a Bhutanese contemporary artist that only showed the head of the Buddha. The monk had scolded her for displaying an incomplete, and therefore inappropriate image. Personally, she did see the problem with the supposedly inappropriate figure as the figure itself did not matter as much as one's intent. For example, she explained, someone she knew had a statue properly consecrated with a *zung*[75] from an important Buddhist abbot but just kept it as decoration whereas she knew of a nun who carried a cheap, mass produced Thai statue that was not consecrated at all but which provided the nun with inspiration (Field notes, June 22, 2017).[76]

While in some ways artists approached Buddhism from a modernist perspective that prioritized individual experience, in other ways they remained deeply rooted within traditional practices and attitudes. This adherence to tradition became apparent when VAST chose a suitable day in accordance with the *zakar*, or traditional horoscope, to hold a large ritual or *rimdo*[77] in the gallery

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[75] A scroll of written mantras used to consecrate Buddhist statues.

[76] This interpretation while very much in line with what other scholars have described as "Buddhist modernism" has a certain elective affinity with older Buddhist traditions. The story here in particular mirrors a traditional Buddhist proverb about a man who returning from Lhasa realizes he forgot to bring a gift for his mother. He picks up a dog's tooth and gives it to her telling her it is an important relic. Much to his surprise, his mother's faith transforms it into a genuine relic and the end of the story.

[77] *Rimdro* is a term used to refer to an extremely broad set of rituals. I usually saw the term used to refer to rituals performed by Buddhist religious specialists (such as monks or *gomchen*) for lay people, often for very this-worldly goals. These may include rituals that occur annually for a

and workspace that faced the river on the north side of town. During the first six or seven months of my fieldwork, a series of misfortunes had befallen members of the community at VAST. Among other adversities, one member had been hospitalized for serious illness and two had family members pass away.[78] There was a sense that these difficulties and tragedies were connected, that there is some negative force influencing VAST. The ritual was organized to cleanse, purify, and protect VAST and its members from that influence.

Although the reasons for holding a *rimdo* were somber, there was something exciting about the flurry of activity and the transformation of the gallery in preparation. Throughout art class the day before the ritual, members of VAST moved walls, took down paintings, cleaned up supplies, and generally made the space feel clean and less cramped. Two moveable walls were positioned to separate the new altar space from the rest of the gallery, and benches and chairs arranged to make a space for the monks to sit, with a slightly raised central seat for the senior monk leading the ritual. A carpet was put on the floor. Upstairs in the office above VAST, monks made brightly colored butter sculptures called *torma* to be placed on the altar being made downstairs.

Along with all the elements of tradition on display, the space still bore VAST's sensibilities. Behind the central raised seat, a throne or "*chos thri*" where the most senior religious

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household, ensure long life, or seek to secure the success of a new project among many other purposes.

[78] Although I am not sure whether I counted in the consideration of the ritual, my own family was also going through a difficult time. Rituals form an important part of dealing with grief and misfortune in Thimphu. When my own paternal grandmother passed away during fieldwork, my friends' grandmother remarked that, in a way, it was fortunate that I was in Bhutan because I could arrange to have prayers read for her. With my friends' help, we did so on an auspicious day at Changangkha, a temple dating to the 12th century in the heart of Thimphu. Regardless of how religious one considers oneself to be in Bhutan, Buddhist rituals are an integral part of life. Changangkha brings together a wide cross section of life in Thimphu, from women in athletic wear power-walking clockwise around the outside of the temple, to Thai tourists dressed in Bhutanese national attire, to religious devotees, and those sponsoring rituals.

figure performing the ritual would sit, was Pema Tshering's painting of Guru Rinpoche from his *Essence* series. On either side of Guru Rinpoche were *thangkha*'s of Tara, green and white, who I was told were the central deities for the ritual. I was surprised by the inclusion of Pema Tshering's artwork. In the past artists had often told me that their paintings were not religious. To see Pema Tshering's painting used in this way seemed playful, but also an indication that a paintings' religiousness may have a lot to do with context and how it was used. On the far wall hung a set of three or four ink drawings depicting dancers from ornate Buddhist dances known as *cham*[79] by Pema Tshering.

[79] *Chams* are often performed at large, public rituals.

Figure 8: Set up for the ritual at VAST. Top: Seat for lama in the center. Pema Tshering's painting in the middle, with *thangka* depicting tantric deities on either side. Bottom: Set up for the altar at the beginning of the ritual, example of *torma* in yellow under central *thangka* of green Tara. Photo by author.

The scene taking place in VAST was one I was familiar with in terms of its structure, having seen much of the basic structure in rituals held in households and temples. After rearranging the space, the gallery where the monks conducted the ritual even resembled an altar room in a temple or house. Three *thangkha*, a space to make offerings known as *nyen dar*, butter lamps in brass, and water offerings faced the monks on the opposing side of the room as the monks chanted Buddhist texts. Underneath the images of Tara were *torma*, offerings made of often colored butter and flour the monks began making the day before. To one side, was a large sculpture of a human figure made from flour and water positioned in front of a *namkha*, an elongated diamond shaped figure made of string in five sacred colors, a common apotropaic ritual implement. The dough effigy and *namkha* were surrounded by a garland of leaves.

Across from the altar five monks sat chanting, drumming, trumpeting with a pleasing dissonance. The ebb and flow of their various voices as they intoned confidently and then faded out before pausing to catch their breath. The chanting occurred slightly out of synch, creating a slight "in the round" feel. This sort of ritual was familiar to everyone. In the past, I had sat in kitchens with friends and acquaintances as similar rituals unfolded in their houses. While there was considerable preparation for such a ritual—such as acquiring food to feed the Buddhist religious figures (who may or may not be fully ordained monks)—once the ritual started it felt surprisingly ordinary. As in my past experience, that day the members of VAST treated the ritual as something to check in on, but best left to the specialists.

Although normally VAST members take an abundance of pictures, no one took pictures of the ritual after it was underway, so I did not either. I am not sure whether no one took pictures because it was considered inappropriate, it was considered too ordinary to be worth a picture, or because pictures of this posted to social media would raise questions about why VAST felt it needed the ritual. However, one artist sketched the monks, before their lunch break, doing a double spread in the small spiral bound sketch book he carried. He used ink brushes, giving the drawings a sort of calligraphic flair. Even a ritual was an opportunity to practice one's art.

Dress also set the ritual off from ordinary gatherings at VAST. Most people in attendance were wearing *gho* and *kira*. In keeping with the gallery becoming a sacred space, but no one being quite sure where it began, some people took off their shoes at the entrance to the gallery while others piled shoes at the entrance to what was now an altar room. The staff who organized the event looked exhausted, having woken up at 5:30 am to prepare. They had to drive to the outskirts of Thimphu to get the bulk supplies they need for the *rimdro*: liter bottles of water, milk, and juice.

In town many supplies needed for *rimdos* had been bought up for the recitation of the Buddhist canon at Buddha point, a three month long affair that had drawn devotees from around Bhutan.

We moved in and out of the ritual. There was even an award during the ritual to members, including myself, for helping VAST. In thanks, we were given *khadags* and canvass prints of Kama Wangdi's work. Periodically we were pulled back into the ritual, such as when we were given dough which we clasped it in our hands and touched over our head, body, and feet. Some of the artists held the dough in clenched fists as they move it over their body. I held the dough gingerly and when I finished I was told that I needed to make sure my fingers make an impression in the dough. When I asked about this process, I was told that it was "cleansing" and a way of "warding off evil spirits" and getting rid of "negative energy."

Later, I was told to take "5 or 10 Nu" note, a small amount of money, and warm it against my body and then offer it at the altar. I warmed it and asked if I should also prostrate, suddenly unsure of myself even though I had done this before. It had just been a while since I had participated in a ritual like this, and it felt odd to be doing it in VAST. I asked where I should make my "donation" and one of the artists laughed at my use of the term "donation." She explained that what we were doing was *nyendar*, an offering done in the process of receiving blessings or protection, not a donation.[80] Worried about whether it was inauspicious to let the scarf I was holding touch the ground, I clumsily bowed—three times first to the lama and then three to the altar. As I rose, I held my hands in front of me in a gesture of prayer and once standing I waved them while still held together three times descending from above my head to my chest. The artists did the same, and we placed our *nyendar* on the dough sculptures. While the dough was new to

[80] Specifically, nyendar refers to the ritual offering of money to sacred objects or people (cfKinga 2010; Dorji 2009).

me, the offering and prostrations were a part of everyday religious life in Bhutan, something performed almost without thinking for many Bhutanese.

When I asked for more detail about the cause of the misfortunes and about the purpose of the whole ritual, I was told that it was devoted to Tara and arranged to cleanse VAST and its members of *kharam*. There was some debate about the meaning of the term *kharam*. Later, after sifting through all the possible homonymic spellings, I located the term in my dictionary, which defined *kharam* as "malicious talk, cunning talk, deceitful language." However, as is so often the case with dictionaries, the meaning in practice seemed somewhat richer and more ambiguous.

As I discussed the meaning *kharam* with the artists, I offered possible English translations trying to get a linguistic foothold on the various meanings. Every time I offered "gossip" as a possible translation it was dismissed as not being quite right. A little conversation further revealed that *kharam* was warded off by the phalluses, wooden or painted on, found on Bhutanese homes, and one artist joked that it would have been easier and cheaper to just put a phallus out front to ward off *kharam* than to hold an involved ritual.

One of the more senior members of community clarified, saying immediately that *kharam* meant "gossip," but that it could refer to both "positive and negative" speech. Both were bad, I am told. Positive speech, because it was often jealous speech, an attitude of "bwah, look at how good he's doing," one artist explained acting out a loud complaint by way of example. He went on to explain that there was "tension in the limelight," the benefits of doing well were undercut by the risk of *kharam.*

Through conversation I was told that *kharam* can also backfire. "Who gives it, brings out the bad in the person saying it," one person explained, though whether this suggested the ritual addressed that self-criticism among VAST members or between VAST and the public I was not

sure. At the time, it seemed impolitic to ask. The person I sat next to, a civil servant, explained that this is why people who are high officials or who get promotions often sponsor *rimdos*. The problems also came, my seatmate added, from "expectations." He continued that now that VAST has received a National Gold Medal, a civilian honor handed out by the king, there were "expectations" that "VAST has reached that stage" where if it did not live up to expectations, people may criticize it.

The ritual at VAST gave a sense about how situated artists truly were within the cultural and social context in which they lived, and how they not only understood themselves as part of that context but also sought to ensure that the relationship was harmonious. The ritual I observed gave a sense of how thinking about community happens through Buddhist terms. Individualism, while clearly important to the members of VAST, was not sufficient for understanding what artists were doing. As they sought to counteract the effects of *kharam*, the artists at VAST also showed their sense of solidarity with each other, links to Buddhist culture, and their deeply felt connections to the broader social fabric.

In particular, the ritual shows how poignantly VAST felt tensions with the broader community. VAST has always been incredibly socially engaged, working on projects such as the Rice Bank to provide rice to farmers in the lean season and Make a Wish where they took elderly villagers on pilgrimages. Reports from these projects emphasize their importance for building social cohesion between Bhutanese across rural/urban and generational lines. That gossip felt like a believable explanation for the misfortunes that befell many members of VAST reflects how deeply the perceived tensions within VAST and between VAST and the community were. That resolution was sought in a Buddhist ritual suggests that artists see themselves as part of the social fabric of Bhutan.

In many ways, the perspective on Buddhism I found at VAST resembled the "Buddhist modernism" that has been described by other scholars. In his comprehensive overview of the topic, David McMahan argues that Buddhist modernism refers to a wide variety genuinely new, but not therefore inauthentic, interpretations of Buddhism that engage with the ideas and lived realities of modernity (McMahan 2008). In McMahan's description the various aspects of modernism, which often are in tension with each other, share a focus on "this worldly" life and on a reflexive turn inward (McMahan 2008, 13). There may, in fact, be a certain elective affinity between the expressivism found in art and in Buddhist modernism. However, even while artists comported themselves in ways that were by Bhutanese standards unconventional, they did not seek to reject broader norms outright.

Art reflects broader shifts in Bhutan

What is happening at VAST reflects broader negotiations in Thimphu between individualism and more sociocentric values. The growing discussion about freedom in Bhutan in some ways resists and in other ways aligns with projects of nation building. There is a sense that, as one artist told me, Bhutanese increasingly wear their *ghos* on the inside, which resists a certain focus on outward display of culture by internalizing it.

Perhaps this is nowhere more apparent than the increasing discourse of "responsibility" or "*gyenkhu*." This shift may well have something to do with political and social shifts that increasingly call for individuals to take action. In particular, the increasing role for non-government actors emphasizes "responsibility." While I was in Thimphu, the Tarayana Foundation put out a photo competition for an annual CSO fair under the theme "*Nga chey ki gyenkhu –*

Celebrating Civil Society."[81] Participants posted on Instagram or Facebook with the hashtag #gyenkhu. The posts showed just how broadly the term could be interpreted. Some drew attention to failures of responsibility, adding the hashtag "avoid being selfish." Others emphasized following the rules, such as the nation-wide rules against smoking tobacco. A post from one member of VAST even included "making something you love" as a form of *gyenkhu*. While they cover a broad range of topics, the posts seem to mirror a sentiment of personal responsibility, rather than, for example, holding an authority responsible.

Winners for the competition were displayed with the help of VAST at a CSO fair in the Centenary and Coronation Park in October of 2017. Suspended elegantly in large, rectangular wooden frames so that they seemed to almost float, the images offered a sort of visualization of the values ideally thought to characterized civil society in Bhutan. The winners of the *gyenkhu* contest emphasized paying taxes, environmental conservation, and preserving traditional culture as forms of *gyenkhu*.

Although *gyenkhu* represents a shift towards personal responsibility, in many ways it reproduces the dominant discourse about national identity. In fact, civil society in Bhutan is generally seen not as a limit to state power but an extension of the state. A publication by Bhutan Center for Media and Democracy (BCMD), for example, links CSOs with 'nation building' (BCMD November 9, 2017). There is, in fact, often less strict enforcement today than in the past of cultural regulations and of the social hierarchy, but now individuals are responsible for self-enforcing. Values like *tha damtsig* that emphasize respect have become responsibility. The

[81] A video with a very catchy theme song promoting the event and competition features many of the members of VAST in addition to a sort of social portrait of Thimphu.

sentiments seem to mirror the idea of an internalization of power captured by Thakur Singh Powdyel's argument that "as am I, so is my nation."

Conclusion

This chapter covered the key values at play in everyday life at VAST. Artists push for expressive individualism and criticize utilitarian forms of individualism that prioritize profit or overly self-interested behavior. Through discussions of responsibility and Buddhist rituals, artists also showed how their individualism is not exclusive of understanding themselves as deeply tied to other people and the society in which they live. The next chapter considers how contemporary artists have drawn on Buddhist art and in so doing both reinterpret tradition through the lens of expressive individualism and at the same time reproduce an understanding of authentic Bhutanese-ness as being traditionally Buddhist.

Chapter 5: Buddhism in the work of four contemporary artists

Cultural politics regarding values occur not just through social interactions but also in art itself. As Kenneth George puts it in his reconsideration of his ethnographic work on art in Indonesia: "there is no ethics without things" (George 2016, 6). Specifically, in this section I consider how artists in Bhutan play with the methods, materials, and look of Buddhist visual culture. Buddhism is a part of day to day life in Bhutan. Whether an elaborate cabinet with sculptures or table with massed produced images, nearly every home in Bhutan has an altar. Even in Thimphu, the heart of modern Bhutan, a person taking a stroll through the main square will find walls with alcoves of prayer wheels. One of the key public spaces in the city is a large *chorten* erected in memory of the third king. Not all of the artists described in this chapter use Buddhist visual culture in the same way. Some are interested in exploring Buddhist concepts, whereas others seem more interested in playing with form. Nevertheless, all of the artists seek some sort of freedom and they share a use of Buddhist iconography and visual culture as a medium.

I have chosen to analyze the work of four artists that roughly represent the breadth of the artistic community in Bhutan. Kama Wangdi is probably the key figure in Bhutanese art and in many ways his work reflects his experiences in the early days of modernization in Bhutan. Pema Tshering, in turn, represents the current generation of senior artists in Thimphu, many of whom learned art at VAST. Gyempo Wangchuk's work represents traditional artists who have gone on to be involved in contemporary art in Bhutan, as well as artists whose motivations often retain many of elements of Buddhist art. Zimbiri's art offers insight into both the growing role that women play in the art scene and the increasingly conceptual nature of contemporary art as more artists train abroad.

Kama Wangdi: A founding artist

Perhaps the best-known artist in Bhutan, Kama Wangdi is a good example of how artists navigate Bhutan's field of cultural production. One afternoon, for example, sitting on the well-worn benches upholstered with faded, paint-flecked textiles amidst the creative mess and white walls of VAST, our talk turned to culture. Specifically, it turned to the problem with only focusing on cultural preservation. Kama Wangdi argued that culture always changes and that what he called the "discipline" or "consciousness" one has matters more than the external form culture takes. Explaining himself, he told me that, "the situation is different, so it [culture] must change." Artists like Kama Wangdi specifically pursue what they refer to as their "interest" or "expression," a type of self-exploration and development through art that fits with the modern idea of "expressive individualism" that Charles Taylor traces back to the Romantics (1989). However, Kama Wangdi pursues expressive individualism in ways that fit within the discourse of preservation.

Born in 1957, one could read Kama Wangdi's work as a reflection of his own experiences growing up at the cusp of Bhutan's modernization in earnest, which began in the 1960s. Kama Wangdi is part of the first generation of Bhutanese to enroll in public modern education and benefit from the ample jobs that a growing civil service and changing economy required. In fact, Kama Wangdi's earliest exposure to fine art came from his middle school art teacher Naresh Sengupta, an Indian artist who came to Bhutan from Uganda in the 1970s. After failing to pass his exams in class 8, Kama Wangdi first tried to study modern fine art in India before apprenticing to learn Buddhist art at the National Fine Art Center in Thimphu in the 1970s. Kama Wangdi worked as an illustrator and designer making materials that communicated development projects to the public for many years before finally going to study Communications Media at the Kent Institute of Art and Design in the UK, graduating with first class honors.

One way artistic individualism expresses itself in Bhutan is through the pursuit of a personal style. Indeed, individual style is one of the criteria contemporary artists in Bhutan use to judge success and is one of the reasons Kama Wangdi has become admired among artists in Bhutan. Kama Wangdi has become best known for large, textured compositions that often feature a red and gold palette, mantras, and elements of Buddhist iconography. His paintings at times contain almost expressionistic clouds of color peeking between a tattered fabric of impasto paint and an asymmetric composition.

Part of the visual power of Kama Wangdi's images and one of the markers of their originality is the way they break the norms of traditional icon painting. Part of a series, the work *Prayers II* distinguishes Kama Wangdi from traditional artists (Figure 9). Although not religious art, it uses religion. He demonstrates his individuality in part by breaking the rules. The central image in the painting is a depiction of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni. The identity of the figure can be discerned both from the yellow-orange color of the figure and the fact that the figure is seated with a begging bowl with its left hand reaching down in an only partially depicted "earth touching" mudra (Figure 12).

In the upper left corner of *Prayers II*, Kama Wangdi exposes the iconometric grid lines used to create Buddhist icons and overlaps it with text at the center of image which describes the proper positioning of the Buddha's waist. The text in the painting reads: "From ancient times the image of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas has flourished. The space above and below the waist is no more or no less than a measurement of 4 *sor*."[82] The markings on the grid are numbers in Dzongkha or Tibetan that tell an icon painter how many of each proportional unit of measurement to use. For

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[82] *Sor* is a unit of measurement used in icon making. Wylie transliteration: *sngon dang khyab 'gro ba'i srgas dang byang sems kyi bris rgyun sked pa sor bzhi las med stabs*. Thank you to Rinzin Dema for helping translate this.

example, a traditional painter would know from looking at the grid that that the measurement from the bottom of the eyebrows to the bottom of the eyes is the same as the measurement from the bottom of the eyes to the nostrils. Traditional artists use these lines to help ensure the images are correctly made, although more skilled artists may use more simplified grids (Figure 11).

Kama Wangdi draws attention to the strict rules of *thangka* painting even as he breaks the rules. *Thangkha*, or icon painters, would never paint just the head of a Buddha or a partial image the way Kama Wangdi does here. I was told by the traditional artists I interviewed that not using the prescribed proportions was considered a sin. Likewise, Kama Wangdi fills the bottom of the composition with the textured, impasto paint applied with palette knife. Traditional icon and wall paintings in Bhutan by and large have a fine, smooth quality to them, the paint being carefully applied to give them an even finish. Even the wrathful deities have a carefully composed wholeness and symmetry. Applying paints thickly and directly on the canvas in a textured impasto, Kama Wangdi's work looks messy, uneven, and aleatory in comparison with the discipline and control implied by the even surface and composition of much traditional art.

Though he breaks away from tradition in *Prayers II*, Kama Wangdi is also respectful and clearly careful not to cross certain lines in his paintings. In an interview with journalist Kinley Wangmo, Kama Wangdi remarked that he made sure never to "disfigure" the Buddhas (Wangmo 2015). Even if he used an incomplete image, he explained in the interview, he always kept the proper color and proportions. My own observation corroborates Kama Wangdi's statements in the article. I never saw Kama Wangdi change the fundamental iconography of his subjects that would be expected in religious application. His paintings of *Chenrezig*, the bodhisattva of compassion, had the figure depicted in white and holding a jewel, those of the historical Buddha were yellow with an earth touching mudra. Displaying the lines traditional artists use to ensure proper

proportions in *Prayers II*, Kama Wangdi may also be proving to the viewer that he knows the rules and is following them to a certain degree, even as the painting overall diverges from the conventions of icon painting.

The work to some degree reinforces national constructions of culture as Buddhist. Artists and participants in the arts scene in Thimphu see themselves as Buddhist, just not conventional Buddhists. While they challenge the rigidity of cultural preservation, they do not seek to unseat the importance of Buddhism from Bhutanese culture but rather arrive at better, more personal understandings of Buddhism. As Kama Wangdi once told me, "the Buddha is my teacher, not my god." By placing the image of the geometric scaffolding and text in front of the completed visage of the Shakyamuni Buddha, Kama Wangdi prioritizes the meaning behind religious images. Pairing instructions about how to paint an icon with small figurines (the triangular shapes at the bottom left) often found near holy sites in Bhutan and the mantra "*Om Mani Padme Hum*" (the larger text at bottom center) equates the various aspects of Buddhist visual culture that make up the painting. In *Prayers II*, the act of making various art forms and the act of prayer become one.

Another series of Kama Wangdi's works make use of reclaimed religious items such as prayer flags (Figure 10). Take for example Kama Wangdi's work with *lungta*, prayers flags depicting a jewel laden horse hung at passes, bridges, or other high and windy spots so that when they flutter the blessings from the prayers will be dispersed. *Lungta* are left where they are hung, eventually fading to white and frequently falling to the ground. When explaining to me why he chose to use abandoned *lungta* in his work, Kama Wangdi described finding the flags on the ground amongst condoms and cigarettes and rescuing them. In many of his paintings using prayer flags, Kama Wangdi paints the horses—whose three jewels symbolize the Buddha, Dharma, and

Sangha—flying out of the flags, simultaneously rejuvenating the flags and liberating the animate sacred forces within them.

Though far from conventional, there is a certain devotion to the work. In what Kama Wangdi described as "recycling prayers," the paintings are a way of both cleaning up the environment and also giving new life to the flags themselves. Using the flags this way Kama Wangdi obliquely critiques a common religious practice, asking the viewer to become more cognizant of the effects their actions have, even their devout ones.

Like many Bhutanese I met, Kama Wangdi tends to play down conflict. When asked whether using these items in his work ever upset anyone, he often claimed that they did not. However, other artists have told me that his works have been criticized for using religious objects inappropriately.

At the same time, Wandgi's art reinforces the centrality of Buddhism to Bhutanese identity. Kama Wangdi's images do not seek to criticize Buddhism *per se* nor suggest that being Bhutanese means something other than being Buddhist. Rather, they suggest an effort to arrive at a personal understanding that guides the viewer towards greater awareness of the implications of their actions. The idea that one should not take things merely on faith and should push beyond fixed mindsets is not absent from Buddhist discourse, but it is a modern reinterpretation. Kama Wangdi, I think, knows this. He is responding to the fixity of approaching culture and Buddhism in Bhutan as tradition, but not rejecting Buddhism. In this way, much of Kama Wangdi's work reflects a broader process underway in Bhutan, not least of which is a Buddhist modernist mentality that has been growing in Bhutan over the last couple of decades.

Figure 9: *Prayers II*, Kama Wangdi, 2009, 60x80cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 10: *Wind Horse Series*, Kama Wangdi, 2010. Image courtesy of the artist

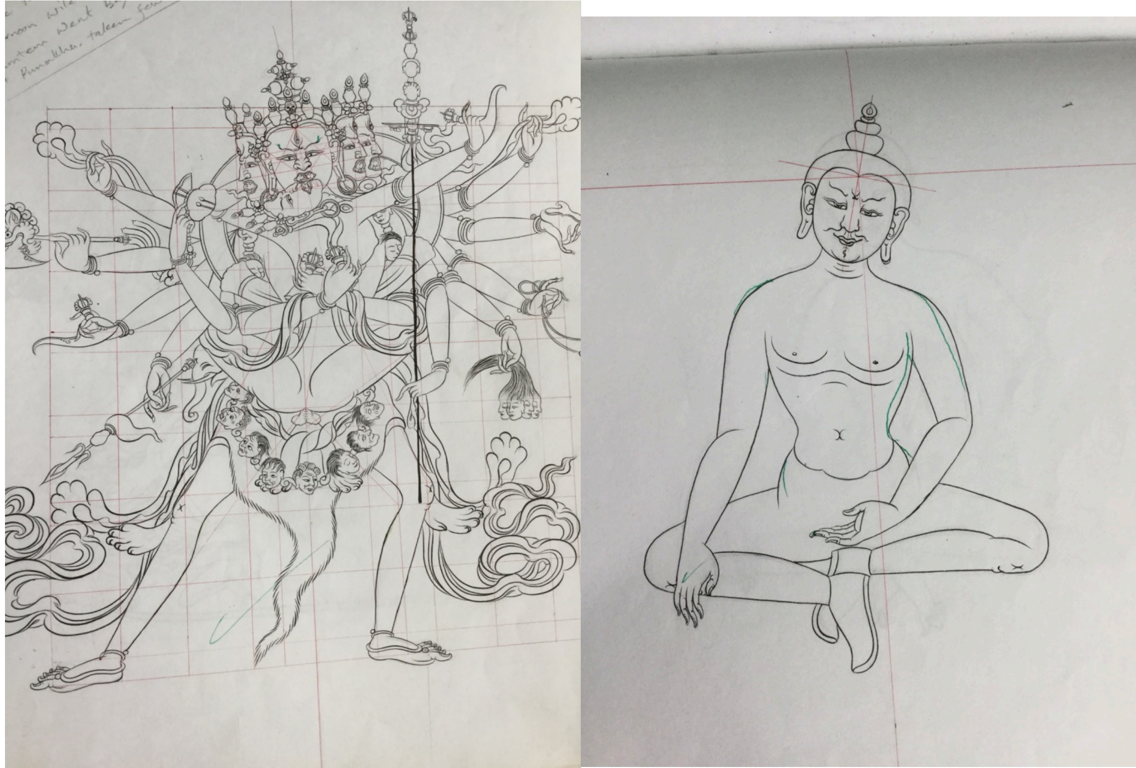

Figure 11: Left, detailed grid used for drawing a wrathful deity. Right, simplified grid for a saint. Photos by author.

Figure 12: A standard depiction of the Buddha in “earth touching” posture. Photo by author.

Pema Tshering: A product of VAST

Pema Tshering is one of the most prolific and talented of the first generation of artists to be trained at VAST. Thin with a deep voice and measured way of speaking, Pema Tshering pursued a degree in Information Technology and gave up a more stable office career to pursue his interest in art. Though far from fabulously wealthy, he comes from a family of comparatively well-to-do civil servants. He has over the years helped start an independent film festival, published a graphic novel, and founded comic book house in Thimphu. Throughout he has painted and displayed his artwork. Pema Tshering, who goes by the nickname "Tintin" due to his love of Tintin comics as a youth, has no formal art training except what he learned through VAST.

Like many other contemporary artists in Bhutan, Pema Tshering uses common subjects like Buddhist temples, dances, and icons for formal experimentation. Many artists pick relatively standard topics that either will sell or will be appreciated by a Bhutanese audience, and then experiment within those subjects. This is not so different from genres of painting that you see in the West—nudes or portraits, for example—except that in Bhutan the themes tend to be defined not by an academy but by nationalist symbolism. Landscapes, *dzongs*, Buddhist imagery, and scenes from village life tend to be the most commonly portrayed images.

While conventional in its subject matter, Pema Tshering's work is often fresh and vivid and shows a remarkable variety. Unlike Kama Wangdi, Pema Tshering has not created one singularly identifiable style, focusing instead on experimenting with many different styles and media, and often developing a distinctive series before moving onto another style with a radically different look. In this way, Pema Tshering finds his individuality to some degree in the constant experimentation.

For example, Pema Tshering's *Buddha Strokes*, part of his exhibition *Essence*, looks at key Buddhist symbolism and seeks to boil religious images down to their essence (Figure 13). These works share an interest in perception, in seeing just how much can be pared away and have the image still be recognizable. There is also, common to the work at VAST, a desire to make something aesthetically pleasing. Buddhas in these works are chosen not so much to explore a religious concept as to explore a formal principle, to push a minimalist aesthetic ideal and interest in perception forward. Likewise, Tshering's artwork focusing on religious dances plays with movement, using narrow, long strokes to convey a sense of dynamism and to emphasize the rotation of the dancer (Figure 14). Here again, the work is not so much about exploring the true meaning of the dances as it is a fascination with the dance's formal aesthetics.

Buddhism in Pema Tshering's work, as I would argue for most Bhutanese contemporary artists, is not so much religious as it is part of the general visual culture and of lived experience. Sitting in his studio one afternoon he explained that the images were "just what comes out" when he paints. I asked many Bhutanese artists about the religiosity of their paintings, but most of them denied that their paintings were religious. The fact that Buddhist imagery is what "comes out" more often than not reflects a genuine interest in the culture that surrounds him and the ubiquity of Buddhist imagery as part of life. However, it also reflects the way in which many Bhutanese have internalized hegemonic notions of what counts as Bhutanese. Buddhism seems natural when it comes to representing local culture. Importantly, commonly accepted sets imagery are also places for artists to experiment and explore. While artists are not, by and large, trying to push for a new definition of Bhutanese identity, they are pushing for greater freedom to experiment.

Other recent work by Pema Tshering has taken a notably more confrontational approach to the viewer. In the triptych *Spiritual Beings*, the central figures stare directly at the viewer, behind

them a plain, single colored background and in front sacred *lendza*[83] script (Figure 15, Figure 17). These works explicitly ask the viewer to reconsider how they see Buddhism and the meaning they ascribe to certain appearances. Portraying rather provocatively posed gang members with religious calligraphy and flashing mudras, Tshering exhorts the viewer to see that there is goodness even in gang members.

The work could also be read as an effort to make the unfamiliar feel less threatening to a Bhutanese audience. Though he has not explicitly connected these images to social realities in Bhutan, gangs have consistently been a problem in Thimphu and, to a lesser degree, even in more rural areas. Youth, in particular, are often portrayed as a problem, gangs being a central element of this portrayal of youth as somehow other, outside of normal Bhutanese society. Though displayed in New York, these images call on viewers, Bhutanese chief among them, to look with compassion at figures who might be seen as immoral or outside the normal bounds of society. In Pema Tshering's painting even gang members have Buddha nature. In a similar series, Tshering depicts surgeons with ritual implements, advocating for the viewer to see compassion behind what they do even though it is this worldly. While from an outside perspective the Buddhist quality might be the most salient aspect of the paintings, within Bhutan I believe it is precisely the more secular aspect that stands out. The paintings seem to be advocating for looking for role models and compassion beyond the monastery and red robes.

[83] The standard script used for writing Buddhist texts and mantras in Sanskrit. A common element of Buddhist visual culture in Bhutan, for example, on prayer wheels. See also in the background of Gyempo Wangchuk's painting in this section.

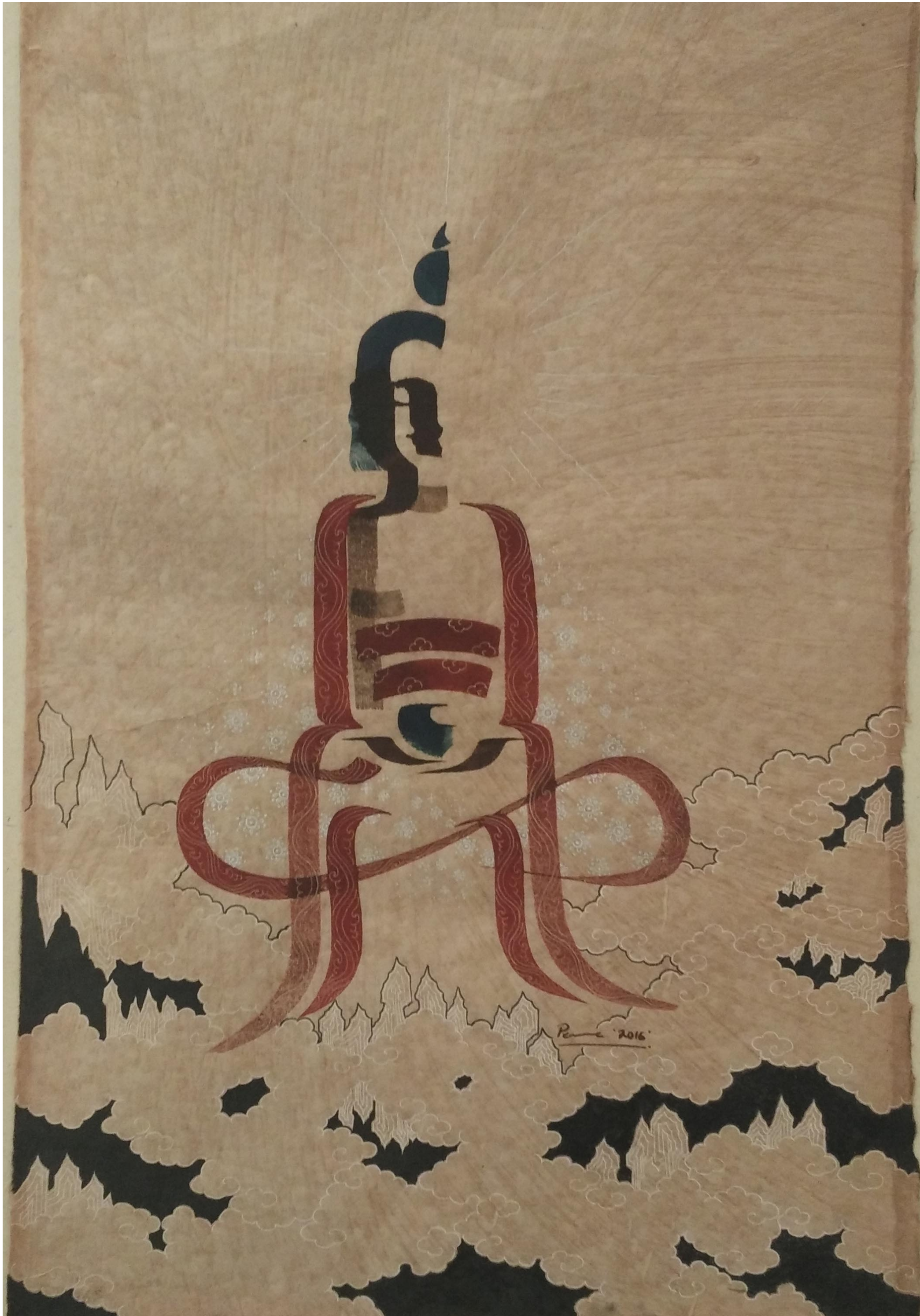

Figure 13: *Buddha Strokes*, Pema Tshering, 2013. Image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 14: *Black Hat Dance Series*, Pema Tshering, 2013. Image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 15: *Spiritual Beings*, Pema Tshering, 2015. Image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 16: Traditional Dancers. Photo credit: Greg Watkins, 2008.

Figure 17: Prayer wheels with *lendza* script. Photo by author.

Gyempo Wangchuk: A traditionally trained artist making contemporary art

Of course, some artists do work with more directly Buddhist purposes and messages in mind. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the artworks with the most self-consciously Buddhist even didactic themes are painted by artists trained in traditional icon painting who have adapted their skills to contemporary art. One of the most prolific traditional artists making contemporary art in Bhutan with explicitly Buddhist meanings is Gyempo Wangchuk.

Voluble and quick to laugh, Gyempo works out of a shared studio in one of the neighborhoods across the river just south of downtown Thimphu where space is cheaper. Artists in Bhutan tend to share spaces and Thimphu hosts a surprising number of ateliers for traditional artists and studios for contemporary artists tucked in among the apartments and shops.

Hiking up from the Thimphu expressway through the dusty streets in the early spring sun, my research assistant and I arrived at Gyempo's studio to find them in the middle of having their doorknob replaced. Laughing over the pounding of hammers and drone of a drill, Gyempo told us that they had lost the key two years ago and since then had climbed through the window to get into the studio. The studio itself was rafters to tiles paintings and in the back two canvasses close to 12 feet long and over 6 feet high of traditional icons in the process of being made stretched out onto frames.

Almost immediately after entering we were offered coffee—milky and sweet in ornate Chinese ceramics with tops—and Gyempo motioned for us to sit behind a small Bhutanese style table. Every studio I visited, no matter how rudimentary its accommodations, at least had a set up for tea and instant coffee, often also some biscuits from Bisk Farms or some other Indian brand. Between the din of the doorknob being replaced and our constant movement to look at paintings,

I decided against pulling out my recorder and took notes instead. Garrulous and animated, Gyempo flitted through the studio to show us various works and introduce us to his studio mates.

Gyempo traced his interest in art to his time in the monastery. Like many artists I spoke to, Gyempo struggled in the modern education system. After failing class 6, he was sent to serve as a *tozey*, a type of attendant, to the lama at Rigsum Gonpa[84] in Tashiyangtse, the district where Gyempo was born and raised. An old, historically important monastery, it was at Rigsum Gonpa where Gyempo became interested in painting. After six years at the monastery, Gyempo came to Thimphu to study at the IZC. A quick hand at art, Gyempo began to experiment with new styles of painting when he was unable to accelerate his course of study at the IZC. Personal interest, commissioned customized artworks, and making a connection to VAST encouraged Gyempo to pursue contemporary art further. Nevertheless, Gyempo's work remains deeply indebted to his training in traditional Buddhist art. Today he continues to paint traditional Buddhist icons and his training gives his contemporary art a look that seems closer to traditional Buddhist paintings than many other contemporary artists.

As was so often the case when interviewing artists, part of the pleasure of talking with Gyempo about his artwork was the sense he gave of a person right in the middle of thinking. For many of the artists I spoke to, art was less a conclusion than a snapshot of one moment in a thought process that spilled across multiple canvasses. In particular, Gyempo seemed to be thinking through sometimes opposing understandings of the function of art and ways of looking at art. Buddhist art is a profoundly moral medium, a teaching aide and support for Buddhist practice. For most lay people and many monks, this art has a singular meaning and a clear moral purpose. In

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[84] Gonpa is a general term referring to a Buddhist religious compound that usually includes a center for learning, temples, and a monastery.

contrast, contemporary art practices emphasize ambiguity and artists were often notoriously cagey about explaining their work, seeing the work as explorations of a topic rather than a final statement. My own experiences with art in America had shown me how post-modern art and contemporary art put considerable burden on the viewer to engage with and interpret the work rather than being told what the work means. Gyempo seemed to be figuring out how he wanted to combine Buddhist art with the openness of meaning in contemporary art.

Throughout our conversation Gyempo returned to theme of how to communicate a morally beneficial message through his work. He explained that he wanted his works to help people, "go from bad to good and from good to good." As we looked at his paintings, he explained how one painting was supposed to remind the viewer to not only ask the Buddha for things, but to remember "to bring something to him." Another art work visually reminded the viewer of the deeper meaning of the ritual of receiving water performed at Buddhist temples that he felt many people did without thinking. In a complementary fashion, Gyempo also described wanting to avoid causing harm with his work when he experimented. He spoke of pollution in both a social and environmental sense, referencing the damage caused by discarded materials like paints and also of the potential art has for causing conflict. He gave the example of political caricatures as a potentially harmful art form. When I asked if he meant he was trying to avoid creating disharmony, he told me he was. The moral purpose of art and the emphasis on harmony fit with commonly understood traditional values in Bhutan (Interview, March 15, 2017).

At the same time, Gyempo spoke of creating art and how he wanted his art viewed with more modern sensibilities. Making art from a more modern frame of mind in part meant making art for its own sake. In our conversation, Gyempo explained how contemporary art gave him more "freedom" to "express" himself. So too, in an interview posted to the Yellow Bhutan Facebook

page, a project run by the Royal Office of Media, Gyempo explained that, "I paint for the sheer pleasure of it" (Yellow Bhutan 2017). Despite wanting his works to have a positive moral effect, Gyempo was reluctant to absolutely determine the meaning of his work. In our interview, Gyempo discussed how he did not want to "directly tell" the viewer what to think, but show them, have them come to their own realization. The paintings in this way were moral messages, but they were also open to interpretation and response from the viewer. In fact, part of the message Gyempo related to me was to form one's own response and to not just take the image's message on his authority, but engage with the subject (Interview, March 15, 2017).

Gyempo's use of art as a modern moral medium shows up clearly in *Spirit of Suffering*, his painting about alcoholism (Figure 19). The painting offers a stark image showing a bottle and a *phop*, or small Bhutanese bowl-like cup, filled in with scenes of suffering inspired by the hell realms on a Buddhist wheel of life. In the background, the mantra *om mani padme hum* can be seen. Although during our interview Gyempo said that the viewer could take his painting however they wanted, the painting clearly represents drinking alcohol as having negative consequences. Gyempo explained that he intended the bottle to represent modern drinking practices and the *phop* traditional practices,[85] both sources of suffering. In the work, Gyempo applies elements of traditional style to entirely novel subject matter, reflecting on his own experiences and also more the moral and social problems that result from drinking.[86] The way the paint sits smoothly on the surface of the canvas, the hell-scenes, and the palette are all familiar from traditional painting. But

[85] It was long a common practice in Bhutan to carry your own *phop* and home brewed alcohol was commonly offered to guests as a basic form of hospitality.

[86] Although an intoxicant, and so technically in contradiction of one the basic precepts observed by devout Buddhists and religious figures, alcohol has an important place in tantric rituals and there are less social prohibitions regarding drinking in Bhutan than in other Buddhist countries. In fact, smoking tobacco in Bhutan was generally perceived by conservative Bhutanese to be more of a violation of Buddhist morality than drinking alcohol.

the composition, the subject matter, and depiction of glass bottles, would all be considered very modern in Bhutan. Inside the bottle are scenes of the physical, psychological, and spiritual negative effects of drinking alcohol (Interview, March 15, 2017).

Gyempo also takes inspiration from Buddhist stories and symbolism. When I asked why drinking was something bad, Gyempo related a Buddhist parable to explain the dangers of intoxicants. In the parable, a monk is offered the choice of either breaking his vow of celibacy, killing a goat, or drinking a bottle of alcohol. Thinking that drinking does not violate his vows, the monk drinks and, in his drunken state, sleeps with the woman and kills and eats the goat. The story is used to explain why Buddhism has a precept against drinking and intoxicants. The painting also includes a type of dedication of merit. The background of the painting is a stylized repetition of the mantra *om mani padme hum*. When I asked why he included the mantra in the background, Gyempo explained, "Even if I can't help my father, *om mani padme hum* helps every sentient being" (Interview, March 15, 2017). Gyempo, in fact, makes sure many of his paintings include it. In many ways, the work reads as a Buddhist modernist effort to make sense of personal experience and broader social problems through Buddhism. Though Gyempo may hesitate to offer a decisive explanation for the painting, the work is also clearly moralizing. The painting is not a reflection on the causes of alcoholism but a reminder of its costs, it reads as a visualization of the Buddhist precept against taking drugs that cloud the mind.

Another Buddhist concept that informed Gyempo's work was the figure of the *terton*, a social role Gyempo likened to being a contemporary artist. Often translated as "treasure revealer," *terton* refers to religious figures who revealed teachings believed to be hidden by great Buddhist masters for future generations. Like contemporary artists, *terton* often functioned socially as agents of change. Other artists have noted the similarities between *terton* and artists, and one of the major

galleries in Thimphu is named *Terton Gallery*. Significantly, *terton* worked from within accepted Buddhist paradigms and relied on religious authority to legitimate the authenticity of their revealed texts. In comparing artists to *terton*, Gyempo communicated a desire to work within established cultural norms in Bhutan. The model of the *terton* is one of reform not revolution.

In terms of formal aesthetics, Gyempo's work stands out for often being visually recursive. The recursive quality allows Gyempo to break and follow the rules of traditional art at the same time. It also gives the work the feeling of a sort of bricolage as Gyempo repurposes traditional imagery by folding it in on itself. For example, filling the Buddha with a painting of the four friends—a traditional composition with an elephant, monkey, rabbit, and bird symbolizing social harmony—Gyempo plays with perception and draws connections to normally separate symbols (Figure 18). Work like Gyempo's is highly unusual for traditional artists who learn and often come to value one right way of painting. One Bhutanese collector remarked to me that a traditional artist she asked to paint the four friends separately rather than together initially refused.[87] Other Bhutanese remarked to me that while their hands were disciplined, traditional artists had a hard time imagining beyond their training. In this context, Gyempo's work is quite remarkable.

The use of Buddhist themes in Gyempo's works often feels like a reimagining of Buddhist visual vocabulary. His prize-winning work for the Royal Textile Academy exhibit *Patterns of Happiness*, for example, looks traditional enough that one group of visitors to the gallery remarked that this was proof at how difficult it was for traditional artists to get away from their training (Figure 20). In fact, I think it shows how far that training can be taken visually. The figures of flying saints, an element I have seen used in murals or *debri*, and the central figure of the

[87] The solution that allowed the artist to not feel like he was painting incorrectly was to ask the artist to paint each of the animals separately.

bodhisattva *Chenrezig* look purely traditional. However, the way Gyempo centers the composition on a depiction of the world as seen from space, rather than the Buddhist cosmological model of the world seen in traditional painting, is novel.

Artists in Bhutan, especially but not exclusively traditional artists, often told me that it was important to separate traditional painting from contemporary art so that it remained pure (Interview August 25, 2017). However, Gyempo's works seem to muddy these distinctions. Many of Gyempo's paintings seem like a modern reimagining of traditional art complete with moral messages. As such, these images point to an ambiguity in much contemporary art in Bhutan. Gyempo's images are not icons, and so are distinct from religious art, but they do not read as clearly secular either.

Figure 18: A "four friends" painting by Gyempo showing his recursive style. Photo by author.

Figure 19: *Spirit of Suffering*, Gyempo Wangchuk, 2014. Image courtesy of the artist.

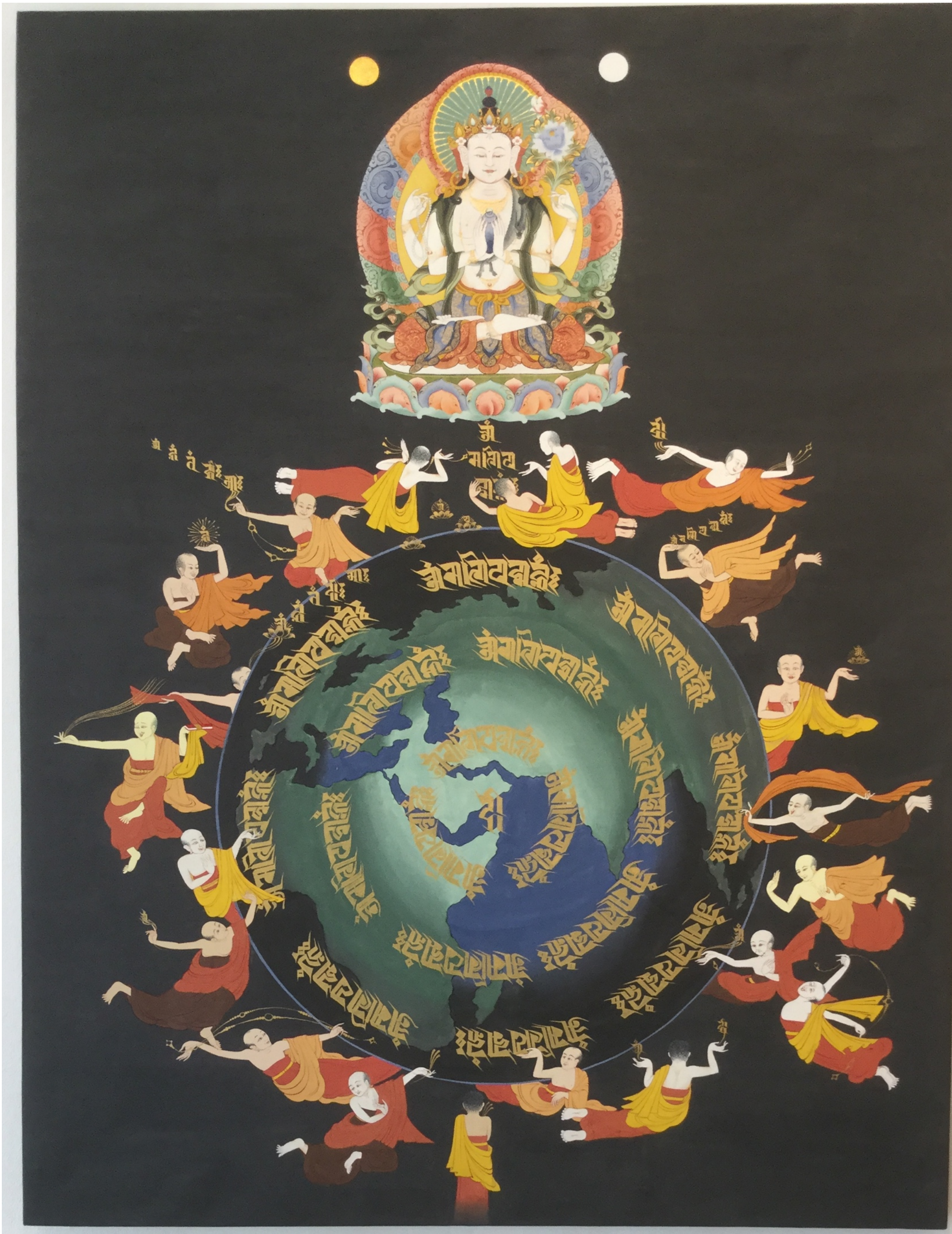

Figure 20: *Pattern of Happiness*, Gyempo Wangchuk, 2017. Photo by author.

Zimbiri: An artist trained abroad

Trained at Wheaton College in Massachusetts, Zimbiri has adapted her art practice to working in Bhutan even as she is also part of a recent shift to gradually more conceptual art. Like many Bhutanese artists trained in contemporary art abroad, Zimbiri has struggled both to bring Bhutanese culture to contemporary art and also to bring contemporary art to Bhutan. During our interview, she reflected on her training in the US, "it was a huge issue for me not to identify myself purely as, 'Zimbiri the Bhutanese artist'. I wanted to be somebody [whose] culture wasn't carrying me as an artist" (Interview, May 12, 2017). Since returning to Bhutan, she has also sometimes faced challenges adapting the more conceptually driven approach she learned in the US to the Bhutanese context. She described how when she tried to display artworks without frames it was not taken to be an artistic choice, but seemed unfinished to the Bhutanese audience. The excitement of digging into her culture (something left out of her art education) while at the same time adapting her fine art training to the Bhutanese context is an experience other artists trained abroad related to me (Field notes, June 2, 2017). Looking at Zimibiri's work gives a sense of the challenges and opportunities Bhutanese artists who trained formally in fine arts outside of Bhutan face when coming back.

Polite, thoughtful, and soft-spoken, during our interview Zimbiri reflected that the art scene in Bhutan was different than the one she experienced in the United States. Initially studying economics, Zimbiri became passionate about art while in college and decided to complete a double major in art and economics. Although many artists expressed how their parents were skeptical of their career choice, Zimbiri said that she was encouraged in her interests. As we spoke about her training, she remarked that so much more of the focus in the US compared to Bhutan was on

explaining and justifying one's work. In Bhutan, she explained, artist statements were not really taken as necessary and that there was less of an established practice of critique.

As we sat in the library at VAST on well-worn, low benches in front of a table made of reclaimed flagstone, Zimbiri said her works were interested in "society." During my fieldwork, I also heard Zimbiri emphasize the importance of making tradition speak to the present moment. In an interview with Kuzoo FM, she spoke of the need to make tradition "relevant" to the current moment in part to "ensure its survival." Like other Bhutanese contemporary artists, Zimbiri's comments did not call for a radically new culture for a new historical moment, but for contemporary art to engage with traditional art. In this way, her work was similar to that of other artists who argued for bringing culture into the present. Like contemporary artists in Bhutan, Zimbiri's comments did not participate in rhetoric about overturning the past that accompanies so many modernist art movements, like India's progressive movement or the futurists in Italy. Nevertheless, her work was markedly different than what I often found in galleries or at VAST and was considered to be innovative.

Zimbiri's negotiation with tradition and modernity were on display in her October 2017 exhibition *Found Icons* at the Royal Textile Academy. A large building that combines a sleekly minimalist profile with low-angled Bhutanese roofs and ornately carved traditional decorations, the space feels like a thoughtful union of traditional Bhutanese and modern aesthetics. It also feels grand. Entering the main museum, visitors are greeted by an expansive open space that extends three of four stories up and wraps around the left side of the building unimpeded. Upstairs are two galleries devoted primarily to textiles though sometimes the museum has exhibits on Bhutanese history and culture more generally. Sleek and white with glass cases, neat wall text explaining the objects, and plenty of space between objects, the museum is the best and probably only example

in Bhutan of the international, white cube aesthetic. Nearly all of the contemporary art, however, is displayed in a smaller room in the back of the museum across a courtyard. The space now regularly hosts a variety of contemporary artists as well as a national competition that began including contemporary art and traditional painting in 2017.[88]

In *Found Icons* Zimbiri used both traditional materials and imagery, but she used them to play with ideas that diverge widely from their original intent. Accompanied by short provocations, some of the paintings explored the nature of authorship, others reflected on memories, and still others focused on the cost of hiding the less ideal elements of ourselves. In fact, a theme Zimbiri has returned to throughout her still growing oeuvre is the tension between appearances and interior experience.

In the accompanying catalog's opening statement, Zimbiri likened traditional art to everyday, mass produced objects writing:

> Like Found [sic] objects, found icons takes preexisting images from traditional Bhutanese art and presents them in a way that creates a new conversation. It gives the audience a stage to consider how the re-presentation of the icons creates a scenario reflecting society and its behavior. The use of traditional Bhutanese icons are ideal for this as they are singular in their uses much like the generally (intended) singular functions of everyday objects. Structured and recreated with such precision and lack of variation like mass produced objects.

Notably Zimbiri's portrayal of traditional art was unromantic. Likening the imagery of traditional art to the found objects art movement that appropriated everyday objects, Zimbiri likened traditional art to mass production. By comparing her work with icons to the use of found objects made famous by artists like Marcel Duchamp, Zimbiri positioned her exhibit as an effort to break or complicate tradition as something taken for granted, mechanical, and possessing closed meanings and functions. The works themselves offered one example of how engaging with

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[88] Most of the artists I spoke with do not show at the Royal Textile Academy, the space being comparatively expensive.

tradition could include imbuing established symbols with new meanings and that the artist's experiences were authoritative sources for this reinterpretation. There was also a sense that by affiliating her work with the found object movement Zimbiri wanted to break the ability of power to dictate meaning. Like other artists who seek to break tradition, in a way Zimbiri's artist statement was quite radical.

Yet, as was also common among Bhutanese artists, the exhibit worked to soften these critiques. In the introductory essay, Zimbiri credited the monarchy's policies of cultural preservation with allowing her to experiment without fear that Bhutan's unique culture was under any threat of loss. The comment presented her work not as a critique of tradition but a complement to it. In so doing, Zimbiri positioned herself very much within the fold of conventional thinking, even as she broke out of it in key ways. The works themselves performed a similar tightrope walk between pushing for new interpretations, something more "modern," and being respectful of tradition. Zimbiri explained her choice to use traditional materials as a, "tribute to my rich culture and heritage." The lack of controversy surrounding the exhibit, whose opening was attended by many Thimphu elites and even a few monks, further supports my argument that the works were not perceived as overly critical.

Found Icons as a whole was notable for the way it engaged not only with the imagery of traditional painting, but also with its materials. Her use of soil pigments that were traditionally used in icon painting instead of acrylics produced matte colors rather than the sheen of acrylic. She also used traditional canvas prepared by with a gesso made from chalk and animal hide glue before stretching cotton onto a wooden frame with string. In our interview, Zimbiri described how she worked with a traditional artist to prepare the canvas and paints. This was, she told me, partially a practical issue of working with materials that are more readily available in Bhutan. Working

without fear of limited materials and or of holding back her Bhutanese identity, Zimbiri found a certain freedom in her engagement with traditional art (Interview, May 13, 2017). Even while pushing against what she claimed in the catalog was the mass produced, monolithic nature of traditional imagery, Zimbiri clearly takes the materials and methods of traditional painting seriously.

Thematically *Found Icons* addressed quintessentially modern concerns. Many of the works explored topics of alienation, the search for authenticity, and self-presentation. Skin, in particular, was an important icon in the exhibit. Some works portrayed animal skins spread out like rugs, the implied violence of such a display was part of what Zimbiri understood to be the violence of living up to particular ideals. The violence echoed the fact that tiger skins are often worn by wrathful deities in traditional iconography. Other pieces called for the viewer to shed their idealized self-presentation, urging them toward a freer, more authentic existence. Throughout the exhibit, Zimbiri's artwork drew attention to how presenting socially expected ideal selves exacted a price. In the process, traditional imagery came to symbolize the power of socially expected ideals.

Other works took on tradition more directly. Working together as a type of diptych, the pieces *Verisimilitude* and *Cropped* used icons to explore how society embellishes reality. The two pieces shared many visual similarities. In the exhibit, Zimbiri displayed the works next to each other. Each one was wrapped into the shape of large cylinders like *gyaltsen* or "victory banners" that hang from the ceiling in sacred spaces like temples. Both images featured a crane at the top, a female figure at the bottom right, a blue background, and scattered clouds set against white canvas backing. However, the way Zimbiri represented her subjects differed between the two works—*Cropped* displayed more stylized elements that resembled traditional art and *Verisimilitude* offered more photorealistic work that referenced the real rather than idealized world. The clouds in

Cropped, for example, rose up from small tendrils and curled in on themselves almost like smoke from incense and had a flat, two-dimensional appearance just like they do in traditional art. In *Verisimilitude* the clouds were rounded and shaded to provide a sense of depth and volume. Similarly, the female figure in *Cropped* resembled the depiction of a deity in traditional painting, garlanded with flowers and jewels and surrounded by an intricate golden aureole. The figure of the woman in *Verisimilitude* was comparatively plain, depicted wearing her hair down and wearing *koma*—broaches that clasp over the shoulder used in traditional women's dress. Zimbiri explicitly presented the two pieces as an inquiry into the relationship between truth and appearance. From its title to its contents, *Verisimilitude* pointed to the artist's sense of a "real" and used the imagery and aesthetics of traditional art to symbolize appearance and self-presentation.

The accompanying text reinforced the tension between truth and conventional representations of truth. Writing in the catalog about *Verisimilitude,* Zimbiri asked rhetorically, "are the beliefs and idols of our past embroidered truths made beautiful and fierce through the whispers of history?" Complementary text accompanied *Cropped* declaring that, "The picture we present the world is often not the one we live in." Zimbiri therefore positioned *Verisimilitude* as a "more unfiltered version" of *Cropped* and explained *Verisimilitude* as a piece "contemplates the disparity between belief and truth." The artwork and accompanying comments could have read as a radical criticism of tradition, as a type of false consciousness. However, I think Zimbiri was trying to build on traditional art, to make Bhutanese culture more of what John Clark calls an "open discourse," to see what new meanings and conversations could be derived from tradition (Clark 1993).

In fact, some elements of Zimbiri's artwork point toward interpreting *Found Icons* as respectful of tradition. *Cropped*, for example, was not a travesty, but positioned as an interpretation

of the real world. Compositional similarities to *Verisimilitude's* realness suggested that belief or traditional art share an underlying reality with truth. Tradition in Zimbiri's hand was an embellishment, something to be appreciated for its beauty and power, but also not to be accepted at face value. Likewise, the subjects from traditional art that Zimbiri used demonstrated a degree of tactical circumspection. Throughout the exhibition, Zimbiri used elements of traditional artwork that were generally considered to be more open to interpretation and less sensitive. Animals and elements of the landscape, like clouds, are learned early in traditional art training and are often the elements of traditional art most open to experimentation. The point of Zimbiri's work was not rejection of tradition, but to push the viewer to self-reflection and to make room for new conversations. Despite describing traditional art as mass produced in the catalog, Zimbiri's work showed great appreciation for the skill and technique involved in traditional painting.

Contrasting Zimbiri's exhibition with found object artworks outside of Bhutan further demonstrates Zimbiri's cautious approach to how she uses traditional art. Marcel Duchamp, for example, simply purchased many of his readymades, most famously in his use of a urinal in a work titled *Fountain* which he signed with a playful pseudonym. Duchamp's work prioritized the concepts of the artist over the hand of the maker of the object. Zimbiri's work, in comparison, delved deeply into the skill needed to use traditional materials. Another more confrontational, and possibly more radical, deployment of the idea of found objects can be seen in Ai Wei Wei's photographic triptych of himself destroying an antique Chinese ceramic vase titled *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*. Ai Wei Wei described the work as a "cultural readymade" that took aim at the ossification of official culture in the form of heritage (Guggenheim Museum 2018). Following the example of Duchamp or Wei Wei in Bhutan would have surely been met with greater controversy than *Found Icons* did.

Learning how to work with traditional materials and playing with elements of traditional art actually made Zimbiri's work less directly a challenge and more respectful. Zimbiri's choice to work with traditional materials also showed how the local art scene in Bhutan prioritizes skill in contrast to a global art world where art has become increasingly conceptual often to the point of denying the importance of the artist's hand at all. In this way, Zimbiri's tactics for reconciling tradition and modernity showed her work to be thoroughly a part of the Bhutanese field of cultural production.

Although Zimbiri's work showed striking similarities to other Bhutanese artists, *Found Icons* did signal some important shifts occurring as more artists receive formal training in contemporary art outside of Bhutan. One element that most likely indicated the influence of her formal training in fine art was the writing that accompanied *Found Icons*. The exhibition and accompanying catalog contained much more writing to contextualize its images than most catalogs by Bhutanese artists. Based on my fieldwork and collected exhibition catalogs, exhibitions in Bhutan will at most have an artist statement and a brief prefatory remark by a third party. Otherwise the images stand on their own only accompanied by labels with the title, size, and materials used in the works. Comparatively, text and image worked together in Zimbiri's exhibit to the point that you could read the exhibit as a set of image-text dyads. The use of writing likely connected to her formal fine art training. In our interview Zimbiri related that art school emphasized the importance of providing a written explanation of her work (Interview May 13, 2017).

Figure 21: Verisimilitude, Zimbiri, 2017 and *Cropped,* Zimbiri, 2017

Figure 22: *Verisimilitude* as it was displayed as a *gyaltsen* banner. Image courtesy of the artist.

Tiger Skin
68′ x 72′
Saa-tshen on Rhay-shing

Figure 23: *Tiger Skin* by Zimbiri. Image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 24: Traditional canvas with colors produces from “soil” pigments. Photo by author.

Figure 25: A *gyaltsen* or “victory banner,” the inspiration for Zimbiri’s artworks *Verisimilitude* and *Cropped*. Photo by author.

Figure 26: A wrathful deity wearing a tiger skin. Photo by author.

Chapter 6: Bhutanese artists' perspectives on art

As we sat eating a typical Bhutanese set lunch—a buffet of Bhutanese *datsi*, red rice, daal, pappadam, and a meat with chilies—an artist I had gotten to know well explained that art was supposed to foster individual growth, not lead to "fight culture" or to become a "national issue." This perspective meant keeping art small, low profile, and from engaging in explicit arguments. Instead, the artist told me that art should focus on "connections between people and between people and nature" among other topics. In other words, even as artists focused on individual growth, even as they explained to me their desire for "freedom" or "expression," they had to be tactical, to keep the scope of the art carefully calibrated. It also meant that contemporary art in Bhutan has in some ways been different than art elsewhere in the world where art has often been tied to explicit ideological arguments and schools. In not making art an "issue," artists often opt for non-confrontational approaches to art that preserve harmony. A central component of this negotiation has been engaging with traditional Buddhist art and carefully situating themselves within the discourse on national culture even as they push boundaries.

Having looked at the artwork of a few artists in the last chapter, this chapter briefly delves into artists' assessment of artwork in Bhutan relative to both state discourses of national identity and global modernity. Artists pursue being modern in a way that is doubly tactical, neither quite fitting the expectations of national culture nor those of the global art world. Just as artists do not set the terms of what counts as culture in Bhutan and have to work around and through them to create room for contemporary art, they do not set the hegemonic standards of the contemporary fine art world either. Instead, artists engage in a sort of bricolage, picking and choosing elements of contemporary art that interest them but that also suit the structure of the field of cultural production in which they find themselves.

Not modern enough

Many participants in the art scene in Bhutan felt that Bhutanese contemporary art was behind the times. Artists and people acquainted with the art scene told me that art in Bhutan was "naïve" or lagging behind art outside of Bhutan (Field notes, June 2, 2017; Field notes, September 9, 2017). I especially heard these criticisms from those who had either trained or traveled abroad and had some familiarity with fine art outside of Bhutan. Some pointed to the thematic similarities across Bhutanese contemporary art. Speaking with artists at VAST about how art in Bhutan was not yet really contemporary, two aspiring artists wondered, "Is this all art can be? Does it have to be Buddhist?" (Field notes, September 30, 2017). As can be seen in the previous chapter, many artists in Bhutan work explicitly with Buddhist art or with other common representations of Bhutanese-ness depicting subjects like landscape, traditional architecture, *dzongs*, or the monarchy. Or, as one exhibition regular put it, artists in Bhutan liked to paint "cultural" themes (Field notes, June 2, 2017).

Looking at art considered innovative in Bhutan helps clarify the homogeneity of much of Bhutanese art. Many people I spoke to found an exhibit of portraits titled *Warriors* to be something new in Bhutan. Painted by identical twins who sign their work simply "Twinz," the hyper-realistic portraits adorned with head gear of traditional Bhutanese warriors or dressed in Bhutanese fashion, seemed to me of a kind with other work in Bhutan. However, the audience found that these works were different from the more common work in Bhutan. The size, sometimes roughly 6 feet square, and quality of the portraits stood out from the ordinary offerings in Bhutan. Likewise, although many of the portraits were of monks, key religious figures, and royalty, others were composites of ordinary or semi-imagined people. This last element most of all set the works of Twinz apart in an art scene where most portraiture focused on royalty or religious figures.

Even still lifes were uncommon. Recent work by Ugyen Tshering, who studying in Dhaka as of 2017, was unique for composing still lifes which focused on ordinary objects often with an eye to the materiality of tradition. For example, his entry for the exhibition *Patterns of Happiness* titled *Tradition* depicted a typical wallet made from traditional textile that could be found in handicraft shops throughout Thimphu. So too, there was almost no sculpture in the contemporary art scene. Bhutan's one ceramic artist turned to making beautiful teapots and cups, finding relatively little scope for his reliefs or abstract sculptures. Artists also spoke to me of how doing art on "social themes," what would probably be called political or socially engaged art in the West, was simply not possible in Bhutan (Interview May 6, 2017; Field notes, March 30, 2017).

Others pointed to the lack of conceptually motivated works as an indication that art in Bhutan was lagging behind the rest of the world. Often traced to the interventions of Marcel Duchamp and his use of readymades at the beginning of the 20th century, conceptual art is a complicated term that among other things points to the fact that fine art today tends to prioritize the concepts behind a work over the skill or technique involved. Some contemporary art may not involve the artist's hand at all. Artists and some members of the art audience in Bhutan, especially anyone with experience with art worlds abroad, often remarked that there were no driving concepts behind artworks in Bhutan. Gesturing at the gallery we were sitting in, one artist reflected that art in Bhutan, "is not conceptual…the only thing there is what you see" (Field notes, August 21, 2017). The artists' point was that for much art in Bhutan the only thing to remark on was the composition or technique. Like many other artists with whom I spoke, the artist who made the comment above was reflexive about the remarks, calling herself a "hypocrite" for also not making more challenging, conceptually driven work.

Artists in Bhutan often explain the conventional nature of much of Bhutanese contemporary art rests on a lack of "appreciation" from the audience and also of "commitment" from the artists. The lack of appreciation reflected the feeling artists had that audiences in Bhutan—including but not limited to the hotels, tourists, and upper class Bhutanese that are the main buyers—did not want or appreciate more experimental work. Part of the perceived lack of appreciation, was the feeling that people did not see art as an investment the way they did in other countries. Another sign of a lack of appreciation was the sense that art was not taken seriously. Officials, I was told, saw art as "time wasting" or a "hobby" (Field notes, March 30, 2017). Or else, artists explained the difficulties of getting people to see the value in artwork, being unwilling to pay, or preferring to pay for a new car than a work of art (Field notes, August 27, 2017). Compared to the outrageous prices art sometimes auctions for at Christie's and Sotheby's, art in Bhutan was felt to be undervalued, placing a limit on what artists could do.

However, much more commonly, artists blamed themselves. One of the more established artist shared ruefully that, "It's my personal issue, for years I've been paving the way, now it's my time to prove I'm an artist. I have no proper body of work." When I asked why he had to prove he was an artist and suggested he had made a lot of art he responded with what seemed to me overly harsh self-criticism. "I'm only doing [it] because people like it and I'll get some earning. I don't even have a painting I can say is mine. I don't have a single piece to show whether it's bad or good," he reflected (Field Note, March 30, 2017). As we spoke, he clarified that he felt he was missing a work that was so personal he would not sell it, that he would hold onto it. These poignant remarks from a senior and well-respected figure in the Thimphu art scene reflect the pressure many artists put on themselves feeling that their own artistic practice has not been good enough.

Even while artists criticized themselves for not pushing their art further, they also rejected elements of the global fine art world that felt inappropriate or out of place in Bhutan. Often artists criticized global fine art for an excess of the same conceptual quality that many artists thought Bhutanese art lacked. Frequently I heard artists wryly joking that art outside Bhutan cared more about how you explained something than the artwork itself. A favorite story I heard illustrating the hypocrisy of the global art world was about how a couple of teenagers put a pair of glasses on the floor of a museum and no one could tell the difference between the art and the prank. The point being that the art world outside Bhutan was so inauthentic that there was no real way to determine the difference. In fact this was a true story. In 2016, two teenagers in San Francisco did indeed place their glasses on the floor of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art below a wall label and documented what happened on social media (Mele 2016).[89] Artists in Bhutan often used stories like this to talk about how the contemporary art outside of Bhutan had gone so far that the art itself did not matter.

Often the ambivalence contemporary artists in Bhutan felt towards what Jessica Winegar calls the "genealogy of the modern" that plays out through contemporary art surfaced in meetings with visiting artists (Winegar 2006). For many Bhutanese artists, meeting with artists from outside was an important way for them to learn techniques or gain exposure to the contemporary art world beyond Bhutan's borders. Bhutanese artists and VAST in particular had built relationships with artists across the globe and especially close links with regional artists. Once a relationship was built, Bhutanese artists also traveled to work with foreign artists. The meetings also provided a chance for Bhutanese artists to openly reflect on the art scene in Thimphu and to express a certain degree of "cultural sovereignty" in the face of the more universalized or cosmopolitan modernism

[89] The museum reinterpreted the act as an example of the spirit of contemporary art.

visiting artists sometimes brought with them (Winegar 2006). In the next section, I briefly recount one such encounter and the response of the artists at VAST.

An artist's visit

Artists could be especially resistant to the idea that art in Bhutan live up to the expectations of outsiders. The artists I spoke to did not, by and large, want to imitate either the West or the hubs of global art in India, Bangladesh, Thailand, or other regional neighbors. Artists learned from and engaged with artists from neighboring countries. However, some artistic exchanges created tension and frustration at being treated condescendingly or expected to engage in a type of art with a capital "A" that was perceived to be inappropriate to the Bhutanese context.

A particularly memorable visit from an Indian artist offers a good example of this resistance. VAST frequently hosted visiting artists. I often found out about these meetings last minute, a combination of events being organized to take advantage of serendipitous circumstance, the word-of-mouth communication system at VAST that depended heavily on happening to bump into the right person at the right time, and the fact that artists in Bhutan tended to have flexible work schedules and an equally flexible sense of time. In any case, these visits were key ways in which artists learned about the art worlds outside of Bhutan, exchanged ideas, made contacts, and even sought inspiration. Visits from foreign artists were key moments where ideas about art often came to the surface.

Although I had been told the meeting was at 3pm, typically VAST was still cleaning up when I arrived. Exhausted, I popped over to a nearby café for an Americano, the availability of what was locally called "brewed" as opposed to the "normal" instant coffee had grown immensely over the last few years in Thimphu, and it was often a life saver for me in the afternoons. Whenever possible, I arrived on time, which usually meant way too early. Having arrived hours before the

main event, often I was exhausted by the time the party following the gathering was still in full swing. But in this case people began showing up by 3:15pm, followed shortly by the visiting artist.

The volunteers at VAST arranged couches and paint-speckled, red plastic chairs in the back of the gallery into a rough circle. I avoided the couch next to the visiting artist, as did others, which felt a bit too much like the chief guest position. Events like these usually brought together the VAST regulars with artists and community members who were more infrequent visitors. The talk was popular and eventually even the seats on the couch right next to the visiting artist filled up. Hellos were exchanged wordlessly from across the room as people filtered in late. During the talk, a couple of volunteers served tea, casually and without the hierarchy of serving tea usually seen at public events in Bhutan.

Kama Wangdi opened with a speech. A gifted raconteur, Wangdi's unhurried and improvisational style belied his consistent, clear messaging. Attending one talk by Wangdi gave the sense he was making it up as he goes along, attending many gave the sense of someone tweaking a well thought out narrative for the audience at hand.

As I had heard him explain before, Kama Wangdi told the visitor that Bhutan had no art school and that VAST had been around for 19 years based on the hard work and commitment of volunteers. Kama Wangdi explained that while VAST was grateful for support from donors and the king, neither VAST nor contemporary artists more generally received official government support for their work. Rather, VAST had to rely on the generosity of individuals for their continued functioning. When asked by the visiting artist why there was no conversation about creating an institution of contemporary art in Bhutan, Kama Wangdi explained that "art here is still fringe." He did not explain that, in fact, there has been a conversation for a long time amongst artists about doing exactly that.

When, after these brief opening remarks, the conversation opened to general questions, there was a long, uncomfortable silence. I had only briefly skimmed the materials sent out over Facebook about the visiting artist, so I asked about his work in India and he, in turn, told us about himself and his projects. The main purpose for his visit, he explained, was part of a broader effort to create collaborations across the subcontinent particularly among young artists. Bhutan, he went on, interested him because the art world, in his estimation, was increasingly interested in the marriage between traditional and contemporary art. The visiting artist further expressed an understanding of art as "history now," that art must engage with the world and so too must artists. He further spoke critically of art and arts programs that worked to "pacify" people or "just make everyone happy," and generally spoke favorably of art that worked outside of and resisted the state, and also the West. His way of speaking about art was rich with the language and perspectives of a leftist understanding of art, of art as something radically resistant to the ruling class whether they be domestic or global. He had already visited a few studios in Thimphu and was getting a sense of the art scene here, on which he offered rather frank opinions.

Throughout the conversation, the visiting artist explained that contemporary art in Bhutan was "not very strong." By this he explained that he meant that artists in Bhutan were not engaging with the politics of the time. Nepal and Tibet had also struggled, but their art was taking off in the visiting artists' estimation. In a dig at Gross National Happiness, he explained that he used to joke with his colleagues that the reason why Bhutan did not produce strong contemporary artists was because Bhutanese were "too happy." In general, he found that the art in Bhutan showed a lack of philosophical intent, that there was not much to the art in Bhutan. Tradition, he said, could be very conceptual, there were Indian artists such as N.S. Harsha who were engaging with tradition in a conceptual way. For example, he argued, artists in Bhutan were not really ready to reinterpret the

Buddha. He returned throughout his examples to models of conflict: art as resisting the state in India which tried to control it, art that addressed conflict like Tibetan art, or art that struggled through adversity like Nepal after the earthquake. He argued that art could be made out of the social structure, but framed this primarily in terms of critique of that social structure.

Although I had certainly heard critical remarks in Bhutan, I could count on one hand the number of times I heard anyone address their critiques so brazenly. Bhutanese tended to avoid open disagreement, and I had more than once stuck my foot in my mouth by being more direct than I intended to be. Even as a teacher, I found getting students to debate or disagree with each other, with me, or with the reading to be incredibly difficult, doubly so in situations involving guests or Bhutanese culture. I do not think the artist meant to be disrespectful, but he was trying to provoke discussion in ways that are often avoided in Bhutan. This conversation made me intensely uncomfortable, partly because I felt the visiting artist was violating some unwritten codes of etiquette and partly because I wanted to disagree with him but felt that I should not do so directly. The exchange was also exciting, and it lead to some frank remarks from members of the artistic community that put into perspective some of the ways art in Bhutan is different from India.

While artists agreed that art in Bhutan was not where it could be, they bristled at the visiting artist's comparisons to other countries. In particular, the Bhutanese in attendance emphasized that the Bhutanese context was different, they stated that the visiting artist's emphasis on conflict and suffering being at the heart of good art did not fit for Bhutan. One attendee questioned the visiting artist's emphasis on good art coming from "trauma." Another emphasized that there was, "so much room to express your art through happiness. There's no need to only focus on the negative or stir up problems." Specifically, this artist spoke of the need to "take advantage of the situation" in Bhutan rather than trying to "fight" or push for being unnecessarily critical. In his estimation artists

had become a bit complacent, focused on hanging out too much. However, the Bhutanese artist went on, the solution was not that Bhutan needed the type of art the visiting artist suggested. Something more specific to the Bhutanese context, less overtly resistant and more focused on digging down into what could be done was preferable.

At other times, Bhutanese artists argued that the situation in Bhutan was different, but placed more emphasis on the sense of limits that artists felt. The same artist who expressed that Bhutan ought to make art through happiness also felt that there were limited opportunities for experimental art. He gave the example of how people look at art, both old and new, and just say "nice, beautiful" without engaging further. "Beyond that," he remonstrated, "society is not providing any room to go beyond that. There's no appreciation of art, of what is learned." Although some artists pushed back against the visiting artist openly, other artist expressed their resistance to the visiting artist's remarks amongst themselves afterwards. Chatting over tea, other artists commiserated about how art work aimed at raising critical consciousness about social issues was either extremely difficult or not really possible in Bhutan. One put it bluntly. She felt, "you can't put politics on the wall" and you needed to have one explanation for the public and another you keep to yourself (Field note, September 5, 2017).

Resisting modernity and wanting more

Both resisting and wanting more modernity, the ambivalence found in contemporary art in Bhutan suggests that the patterns and conventions of art in Bhutan are active, tactical choices not unthinking reproductions of cultural hegemony. The use of traditional or national imagery is a considered a choice. Artists, for example, do make the abstract art on occasion. Pema Tshering included a few pieces of abstract expressionist work in his exhibition *Re-lightened*. Jamphel Cheda (who goes by Rajesh) devoted a whole exhibition to abstract works titled *Mindscapes*. But neither

have continued sustained bodies of abstract work. Rajesh is currently best known for his water color landscapes, and his more recent abstract works at VAST have included more "cultural" figurative elements like dragons or the traditional bridge at the vegetable market. Pema Tshering, as detailed in the previous chapter, has focused on Buddhist themes.

The work that actually makes it to the gallery in Bhutan reflects a process of selection even before brush hits canvas. Outside of the art displayed in galleries, many Bhutanese artists approach the world as "painters of modern life" filling sketchpads with scenes of everyday life in Bhutan today (Baudelaire 2010). A fascinating exhibit could be made of the notebooks artists carry around which include things like portraits of people in mundane and intimate moments, dogs, street life, and concerts. In general artists decide these subjects are not worth displaying in galleries but instead save them for the more informal spaces of Facebook or sharing with colleagues over tea.

Although artists frequently blame themselves for a lack of "commitment" or seriousness, for becoming too focused on selling work or taking the easy way out, I think the explanation is a bit more structural. The choice not to challenge culture directly, not to "make an argument" or to make art an "issue," means that artists have to follow the rules set for the field of cultural production by the state and by the largely neo-traditional or conservative gatekeepers in charge of culture in Bhutan. Being tactical has allowed contemporary art to flourish, to create a space for greater individual interpretation, to offer alternatives to the dominant state-led version of culture.

However, there are limits inherent in the way artists have chosen to pursue their new art form and accompanying individualism. In being tactical, artists reinforce hegemonic notions of culture and identity as much as they challenge them. This is why contemporary artists also often resist comparisons between art in Bhutan and art elsewhere. Artists in Bhutan balance a desire to break rules with a sense of limits, a desire that does not always line up with universalized

expectations for art to be avant-garde. In this way, contemporary art in Bhutan is tactical relative both to the state's definition of "tradition" and towards global definitions of what it means to be "modern."

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Bhutanese today face a dilemma. On the one hand, they are encouraged to engage with the changing world around them. They are expected to become entrepreneurs, to voice their own opinion, to not wait to be handed what they need by the government, and to be independent learners. Simply put, they are encouraged to be more individualistic; they are expected to be modern. On the other hand, Bhutanese are expected to preserve the past. They are expected to dress in *gho* and *kira* even when they are not going to the office, to be appropriately respectful of rank, to hold onto timeless values, to serve the nation, to learn traditional crafts, and to not create disharmony. In other words, they are expected to be traditional. On the broadest level, this dissertation has been about how participants in the Bhutanese art scene in the face of this dilemma at this particular moment in history answer—to paraphrase Robert Bellah, et al's study of American values (Bellah et al. 2007)—who are we and how ought we to live?

Throughout this dissertation I have argued that participants in the art scene push for greater expressive individualism in ways that fit with official consciousness about national identity. First, I established the development of contemporary art within the broader experience of modernity in the Bhutan, showing how it developed in a relatively ad hoc fashion, rather than as part of an intentional project of cultural modernization. Next, I described and analyzed the values and national subject at the core of discourse on culture and national identity, arguing that cultural preservation has been not only a part of nation building on a macro level but also entails efforts to create national subjects. I compared and contrasted the values I found discussed and promoted at VAST, the heart of the art scene in Bhutan, with those of national identity. Further, I looked at how the themes contained in artwork also seek to tactically break with the official discourse on national culture.

Making sense of how participants in the Bhutanese art scene make room for expressive individualism speaks to broader discussions in anthropology about how to make sense of agency across cultural contexts. In many ways, the work of contemporary artists looks like what Michel de Certeau describes as "tactics," a type of "making do" or "bricolage" where the weak subvert the mechanisms of power towards their own ends (de Certeau and Rendall 2011). Artists in Bhutan do indeed largely take the definition of national culture as given. However, the problem with looking at artistic choices as tactics is that it prioritizes artistic resistance over the way artists choose to engage with and even reproduce tradition. This is a problem with accounting for agency or freedom more generally in anthropology (Ortner 2006, Laidlaw 2013). In order to understand what contemporary artists are doing I have found Jessica Winegar's use of the term "reckoning" to be useful (Winegar 2006). Reckoning captures the sense of artists "having to deal with (or discover) things that appear to have already been set" but without prioritizing the choices artists make to resist (Winegar 2006, 6). As contemporary artists make art, they do indeed resist certain elements of the discourse on culture in Bhutan, but they also see themselves as part of the social fabric and strive to as one artist put it, "live as a society."

So too, this dissertation joins a broader interest in ethics in anthropology. In particular, I have found James Laidlaw's work useful (Laidlaw 2013). Laidlaw is dissatisfied with how anthropology and similar disciplines theorize agency. Bourdieu, in particular, and practice theory in general comes under scrutiny for smuggling Marxist (in Bourdieu's case) or more generally instrumentalist notions of human action into the discussion. Much like the substantivists before him, Laidlaw seems to be arguing that agency is not only about a more or less universal process but about the substantively different sorts of selves people cultivate.

I also found that art in Bhutan and the lives of the people I worked with eluded simply summary. What struck me during my research was how much of life occurs beyond the edges of the field note and after the departure of the anthropologist. I constantly had the sense that I was missing something, that some part of life was just outside my experience. Indeed, there was a way in which the artists themselves embraced open-endedness as a philosophical stance. The open-ended quality of art, the sense that the questions of "who we are" and "how we ought to live" are always under consideration is part of the appeal, part of the objective artists have. I elucidate this quality below through an exploration of a few trends that I saw developing in contemporary art but did not cover in the dissertation. At the end of this chapter, I look at how a particularly memorable interview captured how important inconclusiveness was to art in Bhutan.

Changes underway in the art scene

Art in Bhutan continues to change. Two key developments in the art scene not covered in the main chapters of the dissertation are the increasing display of art made by women and a growing appreciation for abstract art.

Both potential shifts, which are by no means foregone conclusions, could be seen in the inaugural contemporary art exhibit and competition run by VAST and the Royal Textile Academy (RTA) in 2017 titled *Patterns of Happiness*. The exhibit coincided with an annual competition run by the RTA for traditional art. VAST helped organize and judge the competition; the RTA supplied the prize money for the top three artworks and the exhibition space for the top 20 artworks. With substantial prize money on the line—120,000 Ngultrum for first place, 65,000 for second, and 32,500 for third—there was considerable excitement about the competition.[90] Over 70 entries

[90] For reference, the exchange rate while I was in Bhutan was around 65 Ngultrum to the dollar. As a full time lecturer at Royal Thimphu College, a good but by no means extravagant salary for urban Thimphu, the salary was around 30,000 Ngultrum per month.

filled both VAST’s large gallery by the river on the north side of town and a new gallery, called Bhutan Art, in the heart of town.

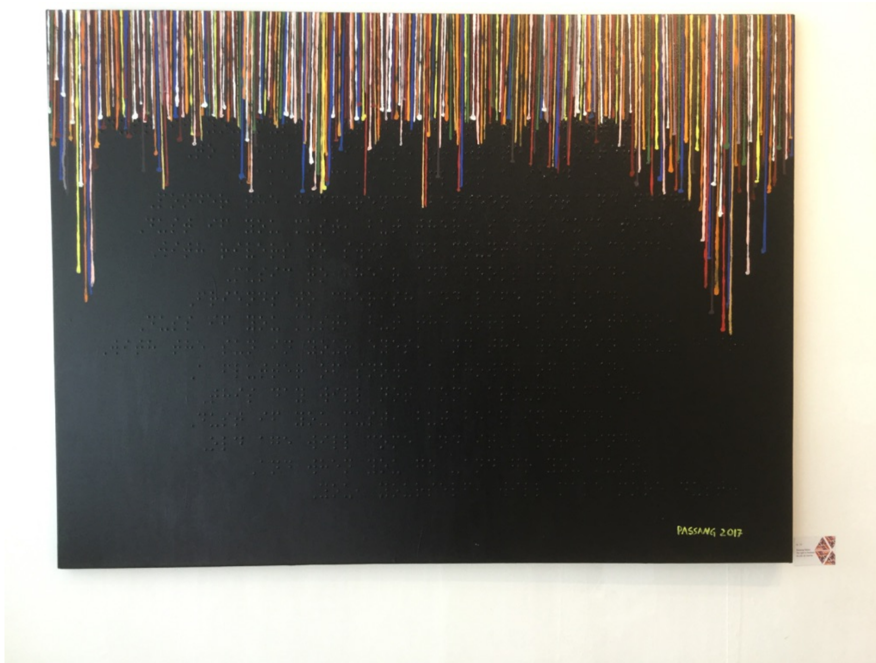

Figure 27: *The Light in the Darkness* by Passang Dema

Figure 28: *Blessedness* by Kunzang Wangmo

First and second place went to two artists who were women and had submitted relatively more experimental works. Passang Dema's work was abstract, not figurative, and combined play with color and space as well as including a tactile element; she used a poem in braille to convey a sort of carpe diem sense of happiness. Kunzang Wangmo's work, in turn, made use of multiple mediums, including both an embroidered flower with the needle still left in and a painted field of flowers that, while figurative, seemed more expressionistic than representational. Her work explored the idea of how happiness could spread, and also a sense of the happiness at play in labor implied by leaving the needle in the work as if it were in the middle of being sewn. Neither of the winners, when I interviewed them, considered themselves to be full time artists. Although Kunzang Wangmo trained in Visual Communication and Design at Beaconhouse National University in Lahore, she described switching to works that were more "design," in part because of the difficulty of making a living as an artist. Passang Dema was a long-time member of VAST; her degrees were in computer science and IT Management and she worked at the Office of the Attorney General in

The fact that two women won the *Patterns of Happiness* competition reflects the growing role women are playing in the contemporary art scene. Starting in 2014, VAST has run an exhibition of women's art titled *Her Expression* which has provided a venue for women who may not have a complete oeuvre. Many new as well as veteran artists participate in the *Her Expression* exhibits, and often I found them to be more experimental than what I saw in galleries. The comparatively innovative nature of *Her Expression* exhibits may reflect the fact that the artwork was not made with any expectation of being sold, or by artists who were not expecting to make a living from their art. Even amongst professional artists, there may be a growing role for women.

Zimbiri's exhibition at the RTA in 2017 was positively received and she also exhibited at the Art Basel Hong Kong with the gallery Nature Morte (a Delhi based gallery).

The competition, *Patterns of Happiness*, also marked another shift that has been underway: the rising acceptance of abstract art. The taste for experimental art in the Thimphu art scene could also be reflected in the winners of *Patterns of Happiness*. Many of the judges were themselves part of the broader art scene—poets, musicians, filmmakers, bookshop owners, organizers of hip-hop competitions—but all of them were people who participate in events at VAST, make art of one form or another, or stage creative events in Thimphu.

While figurative works of landscapes, portraits, still lifes, and Buddhist imagery still dominate, there has been a slow, but noticeable, rising interest in abstract painting in the art scene. The competition may also have reflected what artists are interested in when they do not have to paint for immediate sale. Even in the galleries, abstract paintings that captured a sense of fluidity, such as the series "islands" by Tenzin Yangchen, which showed that even outside of the competition there was a push for abstract work (Figure 29). With more artists returning from education abroad, many feel that they simply cannot pursue the types of multi- or new media work they wish to do, but there is a lively discussion about having more fleshed out "concepts" behind their work and push for more multimedia art. *Patterns of Happiness*, for example, found a surprising number of conceptually driven works. For example, Lobzang Zangpo's water color of an old woman traveling a rope between two planets with a Bhutanese demon's face emerging from the stars, explored the subconscious and dreams (figure 30). Ugyen Tshering Doya's work interrogating the nature of tradition through a still life of a wallet with a traditional textile exterior—an object found in many handicraft shops—questioned in nuanced way the relationship between tradition and modern life (Figure 31).

Figure 29: *White Sea* by Tenzin Yangchen. Photo by author.

Figure 30: *Wildest Dreams II* by Lobzang Zangpo. Photo by author.

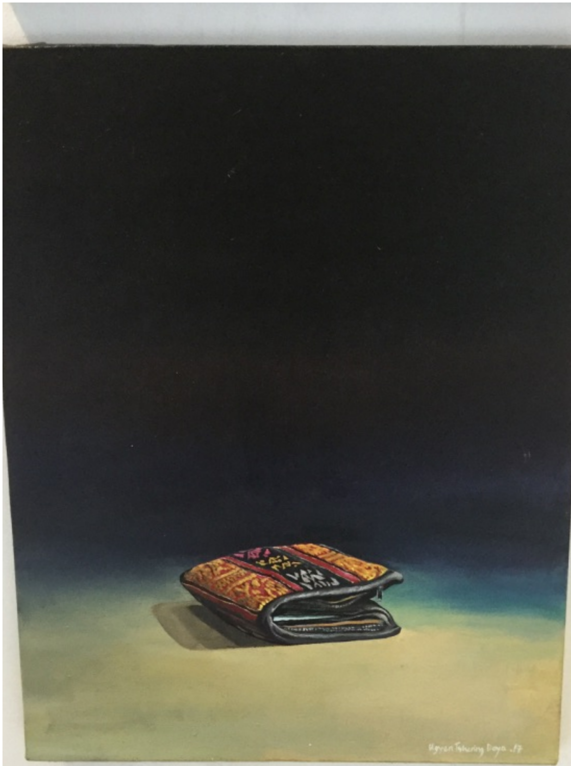

Figure 31: *Tradition* by Ugyen Tshering Doya. Photo by author.

Both who participates in art and what can be expressed are under negotiation in Bhutan, and the direction of change is far from a foregone conclusion. Although *Patterns of Happiness* and *Her Expression* may provide greater visibility for women artists, during my time in Bhutan starting in 2008, Zimbiri was the only woman to hold solo exhibitions. While I was at VAST in 2017, all of the official support roles at VAST were run by women, whereas the bulk of the artists who painted day-to-day were men. I think this reflects broader social dynamics, including the fact that women are still under represented in the most prestigious traditional arts closely tied to Buddhism. For example, at *Her Expression IV* in 2017, three traditional sculptors who were the first women to graduate from the IZC exhibited their work. It may be that although there is greater appreciation for women artists, the field will remain predominantly male.

So too, the nation remains a key frame for art. The abstractions at *Patterns of Happiness*, for example, were still framed within a theme, happiness, well in keeping with the official national

discourse on Gross National Happiness. Many of the works still featured images of the infant prince, or symbols of the monarchy and Buddhism. The explanations of artworks articulated a positive vision of how to find one's own happiness or values in line with nationalist sentiments, such as gratitude for the kindness of Bhutan's rulers, rather than cultural critique aimed at complicating the image or use of happiness in official policy. The third-place winner was by Gyembo Wangchuk, a traditional artist that used very traditional imagery and technique to visually capture the notion of virtuous action.

Figure 32: *Patterns of Happiness* by Tshewang Dargye. Photo by author.

There is no conclusion

Raymond Williams argues that, "…the making of art is never itself in the past tense. It is always a formative process, within a specific present" (1977, 129). Williams was trying to push for an understanding of emergent social positions, what he called "structures of feeling." He was

also arguing against fixing our analysis of society into tidy, finished packages when the lived experience is so much messier. Emergent positions, according to Williams, were often where "alternatives" to "official consciousness" arose, and so were an important part of understanding both the workings of power through culture and responses to it.

In fact, I have found art in Bhutan to be very much in the middle of a formative process. Artists frequently tell me that they themselves are still exploring, still figuring out not only what modern art is, but what they want to do with their art. So too, the artists themselves frequently resisted giving interpretations of their own artworks, either telling me that they were open to interpretation or asking me instead what I thought. Leaving the interpretation open was a way of advocating for greater freedom for both the artist and for the viewer. Asking me what I thought was part of a larger effort to create a definition of culture that is a bit looser and that had a bit more room for individual interpretation.

One interview in particular brought home how open-ended the whole practice of contemporary art was in Bhutan. I had moved to library in the back to conduct my interview with a junior member of VAST because the main gallery could be a bit noisy. Another artist with lively, self-deprecating humor had warned me that if we stayed in the main gallery he was guaranteed to make a lot of noise, so we made ourselves comfortable in the library. The library was multipurpose room off of the main gallery that not only housed bookshelves that went from the floor to ceiling, but also a mix of donated artworks that incongruously included everything from water colors of flowers to a Shephard Fairey style print of Lenin, a desk, and a well-worn, low profile sectional. On one side of the library, a stairway leading to nowhere housed completed canvas and a space where some of the younger artists sometimes slept.

Frequently this backstage area was where members would drop off their bags while they participated in the frontstage activities. The library, though certainly quieter, was also an integral part of VAST, so it was no surprise when towards the end the interview a senior member of VAST sat down and joined in.

After covering the basics of where the junior member of VAST grew up, how he became interested in art, and his family background, the interview took a more expansive turn as we discussed what contemporary art really was and what made it important. Listening attentively, the member of the conversation offered reflectively, "And for me, like what [he] was saying there is no conclusion, what I think right now can change tomorrow."

Both of my interlocutors spoke favorably of "evolving" and critically of being "stagnant." One told a story of a young woman criticized on Facebook by a teacher for wearing a short dress who responded by telling the critic to "please evolve." At this point the conversation between the two members of VAST built on itself. Contemporary art, they told me, is evolving. I agreed that yes, contemporary art had been changing a lot recently, but I had missed the point. The senior member clarified that, "Contemporary for me *means* evolving, change is the only constant. Preservation of traditions is important. When we say contemporary and change it doesn't mean that we discard what is there, but we evolve with it. We will not stay stagnant."

Applying the metaphor of evolution to social life as the artists did in the description above is fraught with problems. However, if one leaves out the notions of "survival of the fittest" and hierarchical progress from social Darwinism and early anthropology, evolution, in fact, works as fan apt metaphor. Particularly in terms of thinking about change over time, evolution offers a potentially useful metaphor for continuity and change. The term evolution, which implies building something incrementally new from a long lineage that may exist alongside other species, nicely

captures what artists seek to do and also the ongoing, always unfinished nature of their work. Likewise, in analyses of art, I think we can often see the dynamics at play without ever really knowing where they are headed. Artists, like many Bhutanese, must grapple with a variety of tensions in their day to day life, including the tensions between national identity that emphasizes a particular construction of tradition and more modern ways of thinking and being. In the end, however, the artists are right. Life is not stagnant; there is no conclusion.

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