

Paola Pivi. *Tulkus 1880 to 2018*
November 9, 2012 – January 6, 2013

In recent decades, contemporary art's interest in Buddhist images has increased exponentially. From the exotic appeal of Buddhist iconographic symbolism to more conceptual and philosophical aspects and even more superficial or market-oriented interested, artists have explored this philosophical and religious school and used it to transform its images into something else: their own works of art.

Paola Pivi's approach to this world of philosophical and religious symbolism follows a sharply different and particular trajectory. In her *Tulkus 1880 to 2018* project, the artist overturns the conventional approach to the "foreign" Buddhist world, creating a complete series of works in which the artist's presence is as though distilled and rendered ephemeral in what are "works of art without art".

It is as though the artist had appreciated the greatness of the subject, seeking out and gathering the "manifestation" of her artistic voyage and allowing it to express itself for what it is without doing or adding anything, removing or changing the original significance of these images.

The portraits of the Tibetan *tulkus* (considered to be reincarnations of the masters¹) that have attracted the attention of Paola Pivi are part of the large number of religious images common to all the Tibetan Buddhist territory and areas in which Tibetan Buddhism is present (Tibet, Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan, Inner and Outer Mongolia, together with Buryatia, Kashmir, Ladakh and other areas of India, Bhutan and Nepal).

The photographic images have become part of the traditional pictorial continuum. Among the objects associated with ritual and offerings, there are formalised pictures noted commonly as *thangka*, which are created to be a source of inspiration and assistance for meditation, and which are surrounded with magnificent brocades. These *thangka* are considered physical depictions of the word, body or mind of Buddha and are ritually consecrated in a ceremony (*rab gnas*) in which a divinity penetrates the image itself.

With the introduction of photography, however, photographic reproductions started to appear in Tibetan homes for the consecration of domestic altars. The photographic icons are today more visible and widespread than the consecrated images of Buddha. These photographs play a similar role to those of the early *thangka* pictures in the distribution of the religious power represented by the *tulku*. In other words, these images have the same power as an actual *tulku*.

The *Tulkus 1880 to 2018* project aims to be a group of photographs of all the *tulkus* in the world, from the advent of photography to the present day. It is a colossal project that has seen a team of international expert at work for three years, collecting, seeking out and cataloguing thousands of images around the world. This is the first attempt to create a comprehensive survey of the *tulkus* of all the Tibetan Buddhist schools, and has been conducted in even the most extreme geographic areas. Moreover, this is a unique and unprecedented project that combines academic research and the world of contemporary art in the organisation and consequential presentation of these images within a contemporary art context.

The survey is being effected throughout the world, with images found in temples, museums, archives, studies, etc., and also borrowed from private individuals, scanned and then returned, or snapped by professional photographers in temples or private locations.

These images tell the story of the Tibetan diaspora, described in an apparently chaotic visual system in which the images of the *tulkus* speak with the same power of spirituality irrespective of past, present and future. It is a chorus of single voices, a perfect cacophony, with sounds – all different – uniting in a fragment of space and time.

Paola Pivi's role in this project is that of orchestral conductor, putting together thousands of images to create a visual reading of these powerful beings, but also – through the subtle details of the photographs (architectural details, decoration of thrones, religious objects, everyday objects, garments, poses, facial expressions, looks or body language) – creating a dynamic, unconventional narrative of the history of Tibetan culture.

The photographs collected for this project will be displayed in various formats: about 200 in a large format, 600 in a medium-sized format and 700 in a small format, each accompanied by biographic information about the *tulku* and a caption.

A carefully selected, extraordinary antique Tibetan *thangka* will also be on display amidst the photographs. It represents an important *tulku* with his lineage: a symbol of the direct link of these photographs with the ancient artistic tradition of the portraits of the sacred Tibetan *tulkus*, a memento of the original tradition of the merciful gaze.

Travelling exhibition

The first stage of the exhibition, at the Castello di Rivoli, will include about 1000 *tulku* portraits. The project will then be developed in further stages over the next few years until the final completion that aims to have over 1500 portraits. The next exhibition will take place in 2013 and will be held on both floors of the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art of Rotterdam, co-commissioners of the project together with the Castello di Rivoli Museo d'arte Contemporanea. The exhibition will be accompanied by a pocket booklet with a selection of portraits and a symposium to be held in the weeks following the vernissage. The project for a library and film based on the research material gathered over the years will then lead to the personal exhibition of Paola Pivi's work at the Witte de With Center. The project for the library and film will be presented at the Witte de With for the duration of the exhibition at the Castello di Rivoli.

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