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Buddhism, Contemporary Art and Social Practice
(October 25-27, 2019)
A research convening report

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“In the Present Moment: Buddhism, Contemporary Art and Social Practice” is a major multiphase research and exhibition project being developed by the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria (AGGV), led by Curator of Contemporary Art, Haema Sivanesan. The first milestone for this project was an artist-centered research convening organized in partnership with the University of Victoria (UVIC). Unlike a standard conference this research convening was structured to be very conversational and experiential, incorporating two participatory workshops, and a range of art installations and performances. It also consisted of two public keynote lectures, and three panel discussions centered on questions of practice—Buddhist practice, art practice, and social practice. This convening brought together professional artists, practicing Buddhists, and scholars from a range of disciplines to consider contemporary art in North America as a site of inquiry into Buddhism today.



Figure 1. *Lecture on Nothing*, 2019. Text by John Cage. Score by Kay Larson. Directed by Christopher Butterfield. Performance, 40 mins. Philip T Young Recital Hall, University of Victoria. © Edition Peters Group, New York. Photo by Marina DiMaio. Reprinted with permission

The opening keynote lecture featured New York based writer and art critic, Kay Larson, who discussed how John Cage’s seminal text, *Lecture on Nothing*, comprised an inquiry into Buddhism. The central statement of the lecture, Larson argued, “I have nothing to say and I’m saying it,” reveals Cage’s inquiry into Zen. Larson began her keynote by painting a picture of how Zen came to Cage through Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki in the early 1950s and resulted in his ground-breaking score *4’33”*, which she considers the first piece of “conceptual” or “process art” in the Western world. Throughout the lecture Larson identified Cage as a catalyst through whom Buddhist ideas and practice became popularized as a framework and source for revolutionizing art in the West. Larson’s lecture was followed by a forty-minute collaborative performance of Cage’s

Lecture on Nothing, scored by Larson and directed by Christopher Butterfield, Director of the School of Music, UVIC. The performers featured local artists and musicians, and UVIC faculty and students. The score was organized around a series of “empty” time intervals during which speakers would stop reading their randomly assigned excerpts from Cage’s text; musicians were similarly allocated a designated period of time in which they were invited to play any composition on an instrument of their choosing that they were intimately familiar with. The performance, which incorporated intervals of silence and stillness, chaos and structure, everyday sounds and music, could be considered as a Cageian reflection on concepts of non-duality, formlessness and form, drawn from the *Heart Sutra*.



Figure 2. Charwei Tsai, *Driftwood*, 2019. Performance: sumi ink on driftwood; 120 mins. Visual Arts Building, University of Victoria. Photo by Kirk Schwartz. Reprinted with permission

The *Heart Sutra* proved to be a leitmotif throughout the weekend, appearing in Taipei-based artist, Charwei Tsai's, *Driftwood* performance where the artist inscribed the *Heart Sutra* in Chinese on pieces of driftwood—a piece that Tsai considered as a kind of group meditation. Michael Zheng, a San Francisco-based artist, also contributed a durational drawing performance titled *Mindwaves*, considering drawing as a form of meditation. Zheng's performance resulted in forty-six blue lines on a hallway wall that were gradually erased on the final day of the convening, also contending with ideas of form and formlessness, impermanence and duration.



Figure 4. Michael Zheng, *Mindwaves*, 2019. Endurance performance: variable duration. Visual Arts Building, University of Victoria. Photo by Kirk Schwartz. Reprinted with permission

Other artworks featured at the convening included Mike Hoolboom's film lecture, *Soft Animal Body*, a collage of found film overlaid

with narrative-based text that reflects on the moment of “pause;” the moment of non-action that fosters deep inquiry. In another video work, titled *Boudhanath Stupa*, Susan Stewart, a Vancouver-based artist and the Founding Dean of the Faculty of Culture and Community at Emily Carr University of Art and Design, documents the great stupa in Kathmandu, Nepal, which she describes as a reflection upon an “enormous tradition of social practice.” Placed in front of Stewart’s video work was Chrysanne Stathacos’ *Bodhi Rose Mirror Mandala* incorporating mounds of rose petals, and *bodhi* leaves, around a large mirror. This installation was based on an earlier work created for His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama’s visit to Buffalo, New York in 2006.



Figure 5. *Practiced Presence: A collective reflection on the different ways we practice presence*, workshop facilitated by James Rowe. Interfaith Chapel, University of Victoria. Photo by Kirk Schwartz. Reprinted with permission

The first workshop, *Practiced Presence: A collective reflection on the different ways we practice presence*, was led by UVIC Associate Professor of Environmental Studies, James Rowe. It began with a fifteen minute meditation facilitating the “process of arrival,” then moved into break-out groups to discuss questions of meditation and its effects, practicing presence in daily life, the notion of the ego as it comes up in the personal and professional world, and Buddhist ideas of impermanence, interbeing, and non-self as they are expressed and applied to contemporary life. The break-out discussions allowed participants to generate connections and establish relational modes of speaking and listening. These discussions anticipated a thread through the research convening that centered on questions of the individual and the collective, or the individual in relation to the collective, a noteworthy discussion among practitioners of the dharma in the West, where individual achievement and status is often given privilege over the collective good.



Figure 6. *Buddhism as Methodology*, panel one with (L to R) Katherine Hacker (moderator), Michael Zheng, Chrysanne Stathacos, Kalsang Dawa, Dylan Thomas. Visual Arts Building, University of Victoria. Photo by Kirk Schwartz. Reprinted with permission

The morning workshop was followed by the first panel discussion, [*Buddhism as Methodology*](#), chaired by Katherine Hacker, Professor Emeritus, Department of Art History, Visual Art and Theory at the University of British Columbia. The panel brought together Kalsang Dawa, a Tibetan thangka painter based in Vancouver, Coast Salish artist, Dylan Thomas, Toronto-based multidisciplinary artist, Chrysanne Stathacos, and Michael Zheng. The panelists analyzed the various ways through which Buddhism in North America, as a paradigm for thinking and living, has become a framework for contemporary artistic practice. The discussion explored the various social, familial, and cultural means by which these artists became involved with their diverse practices of Bud-

dhism (Chan, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism), and in turn how their practices of Buddhism inform their approach to making art.



Figure 7. *Modern Buddhism, Contemporary Art and the Asian Diaspora*, panel two with (L to R) Haema Sivanesan (curator), Tzu-I Chung (moderator), Farheen HaQ, Charwei Tsai, Tomoyo Ihaya, Laiwan. Visual Arts Building, University of Victoria. Video still by Kirk Schwartz. Reprinted with permission

Panel two, [*Modern Buddhism, Contemporary Art and the Asian Diaspora*](#), was moderated by Tzu-I Chung, the Curator of History at the Royal British Columbia Museum. Victoria-based artist Farheen HaQ, began by speaking to the complexity of intersectional identities accessible within the dharma. HaQ discussed her experience of practicing in the Therāvada tradition as a Muslim on Lekwungen territory, studying also with angel Kyodo Williams, a queer black Zen Roshi. Tomoyo Ihaya, a Vancouver-based artist, addressed the pressures of growing up in a conservative Buddhist family in Japan on the one hand, and her experience of encountering Tibetan Buddhist traditions in an English-speaking multi-ethnic environment in Canada, on the other. She related this transformed inner, personal, practice of Buddhism, to her art which is innately rooted

in cycles of life and death. Laiwan, an interdisciplinary artist based in Vancouver, spoke to the Daoist idea of flow, questioning how artists might make peace with deep space, deep time, and deep bodies. She considered models of liberation in which art aids in making peace with generational trauma, reconciles public spaces, and makes space for counter colonial narratives. Charwei Tsai, referencing her *Driftwood* performance, contrasted the introspective expression of her art practice involving the *Heart Sutra* and ephemeral materials, with the social expressions of her art practice. Her current artistic research maps the reach of Tantric Buddhism in countries as far apart as Mongolia, Indonesia, and Japan, finding cultural interconnections and resonances. In another recent social practice-work Tsai created artistic platforms for refugees and women asylum seekers to voice their journeys of struggle, resistance, and hope.



Figure 8. Pauline Oliveros, *The Heart Chant*, 2019. *Deep Listening Into Sounding* workshop presented by Tina Pearson. Interfaith Chapel, University of Victoria. © The Pauline Oliveros Trust. Photo by Kirk Schwartz. Reprinted with permission

The final day of the convening began with the workshop, “Deep Listening Into Sounding: An Introduction to the work of Pauline Oliveros,” led by local artist, Tina Pearson. Pearson is a certified Deep Listening practitioner through her teacher, the experimental composer, Pauline Oliveros, who had the realization in the 1950s that musicians would hear and perform, but did not truly “listen.” Oliveros said: “Listening is directing attention to what is heard, gathering meaning, interpreting and deciding on action.” As a result, Oliveros came to develop a practice of deep inner and expanded listening. Pearson led the group through a series of Deep Listening exercises, focusing on breath, walking meditation, imagination, attention and intention. She led participants through two of Oliveros’ vocal scores, including “Angels and Demons” (1980), and the “Heart Chant” (2001), clearly illustrating how Oliveros absorbed aspects of Buddhism into her work, through her teaching and studying at Zen Mountain Monastery, Mount Tremper, and through her contemporaries such as David Tudor and La Monte Young.



Figure 9. *Engaged Buddhism: Art and Social Action*, panel three (L to R) Mali Wu, Oliver Kellhammer, Susan Stewart. Visual Arts Building, University of Victoria. Photo by Kirk Schwartz. Reprinted with permission

Panel three, [*Engaged Buddhism: Art and Social Action*](#), was moderated by writer, journalist and professor of English at York University, Marcus Boon. The panel expanded on definitions of “social practice” and considered its relationship to issues of social change, centering various positions on how the ethical and relational demands of Buddhism are put into practice within the field of contemporary art. Panelists included Oliver Kellhammer, artist and lecturer from the Parsons School of Design, New York, Mali Wu, artist, professor, and chair of the Graduate Institute of Transdisciplinary Art, National Kaohsiung Normal University, Taiwan, and Susan Stewart. Their conversation reflected on how practices of art and Buddhism are not always visible, material, or explicit, but can be embedded in and indistinguishable from daily life. The artists stressed a collective model for art practice as opposed to the individualistic model typically celebrated in the West. They encouraged artists to step aside, to establish projects that can sustain themselves and intervene within communities to reduce suffering. The panel closed by exploring how artists might translate the dharma into material form by using “materials with agency” and “deep time materials” such as plants, earth, plastics, oil, and insects.



Figure 10. *Beautiful Trouble: A Conversation on Activism, Art and Buddhism*, closing keynote conversation with Jodie Evans, and Suzanne Lacy. Harry Hickman Building, University of Victoria. Photo by Kirk Schwartz. Reprinted with permission

The closing public keynote conversation, “[Beautiful Trouble: A Conversation on Activism, Art and Buddhism](#),” featured internationally renowned artist, Suzanne Lacy, a Professor at the Roski School of Art and Design at the University of Southern California, and her longtime friend, and high profile activist, Jodie Evans, co-director at CODEPINK. Referring back to the opening of the convening, Lacy traced the lineage of her Buddhist practice as emerging from the line of John Cage through her art teacher Allan Kaprow, who introduced her to her Zen teacher Joko Beck. The conversation illuminated the ways in which Lacy’s and Evan’s Buddhist practices were aligned, while unpacking an ongoing critique of each other’s positions as artist versus activist, and their differing approaches to mobilizing social change, motivated by their understanding of Buddhism. Their conversation spoke to ideas of culture-jamming,

peaceful troublemaking, service, and witnessing, where the realms of public and visual culture provide a context in which art, activism, and Buddhism converge.

Using a range of discursive and experiential strategies, the research convening considered the role of Buddhism in contributing to the development of conceptual art. It resulted in a compelling body of primary research that will ultimately inform a future exhibition and publication.