

University of the West of England, Creative Arts £1000 Gane Trust Travel Scholarship

WEST BORDERS

Written Report
Southeast Asia Trip 17th of June to 28th of July 2011

By Abbie Vickress

Gane Trust Travel Award

Report from Abbie Vickress, BA Graphic Design,
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Earlier this year I spent six weeks in Southeast Asia undergoing a research project to contribute some remarkable input to my final year projects. Without the Gane Trust this would not have been possible so I would just like to express how very grateful I am for being provided with such a fantastic opportunity. During my trip during I interviewed designers, artists, tourists and residents, visited studios, galleries and museums from which I learnt a great deal. I focused my research on the Western cultural infiltration into the Southeast environment in which I am now focusing one of my major final projects on. Throughout all four of the countries I visited I have gained good contacts for the future and investigated various opportunities for when I finish my education.

Before I proceed to explain my sequence of events there are a few alterations to my proposal I would like to justify. Firstly on arrival in Southeast Asia I had no response from the international advertising agency Leo Burnett so I supplemented this with a variety of other design studios with Western Designers or Art Directors to still provide cross-cultural exploration. As you will see I did not have the best of luck throughout my trip in regards to my own welfare on one occasion due to severe weather conditions and matters out of my control I was unable to reach North Vietnam and pursue the contacts I had made at Studios. Unfortunately I did not have time to replace these contacts as I lost four days out of my six weeks in a tropical storm. On another occasion in Koh Phangan I was in a road accident, which again resulted in me losing a few days of research.

Arrival in Thailand

My first day in Bangkok was the 17th of June. I began the day by meeting up with a City Guide called Joe. We travelled down the Chao Phraya River and Canal so he could show me a major, physical border within the city. Along each side of the river were rickety, local, wooden houses on stilts above the water. The water acts as both a tangible and intangible barrier between Muslim and Buddhist families each rival residing opposite. Joe explained how they would throw rubbish across at one another hence the water being so polluted, I found it interesting to see that religious barriers do not alter anywhere in the world.

It was on this trip I first noticed a lot of the signage had been hand drawn, this provides the environment with a really rich variety of hand rendered typography but Joe explained how people see it as a hindrance as it is deemed unprofessional if not printed on something large and shiny, an aesthetic Westerners find tacky.



Do you see tourism as a positive or a negative?

"Both to be perfectly honest, Tourism is what Thailand's development is based on without it we would be nowhere. Yet it frustrates me how busy it can get. Bangkok is busy with our population let alone everybody else's it. Saying that, without it I would be out of a job!"

I asked Joe how he felt about the cultural overlap; he pointed out that the letters I saw were part of their own alphabet according to their own language whilst the numbers took the form of western numerals.

Do you think design; such as typography has changed much in terms of tourism?

"Yes everything is in English. I went to school to learn English as most jobs in tourism you need the language. Signage is exactly the same, I like that they leave Thai writing on some things, it is a shame not all of them."

What do you think will happen next?

"The same. Maybe my language will disappear all together."

During the evening I had arranged to meet two barmen, John and Jack on Koh San Road, one of the most tourist orientated streets in the whole capital. I chose to enter a discussion with these two people in particular as John was originally from Linken, UK whilst Jack was from Chang Mi, Thailand and I felt that this would provide cultural diversity in the debate I planned to start.

So why did you both choose to live and work on Koh San Road?

(Jack) Well I lived in Chang Mi for most of my life but there is so much more here in Bangkok than most places. (John) As for me I came out here travelling when I was much younger and never went back.

What in terms of design does Koh San Road have to offer?

(Jack) Well look at all the beautiful merchandise and bright lights and signage. (John) Well I don't think it's nothing special in terms of design, looks like a glorified Blackpool. (Jack) What's Blackpool? (John and I Laugh) (John) I do think it's a shame that people come all this way and it's so much like England in terms of dynamics. Well England but rowdier.

Is the word you're looking for 'Westernised'?

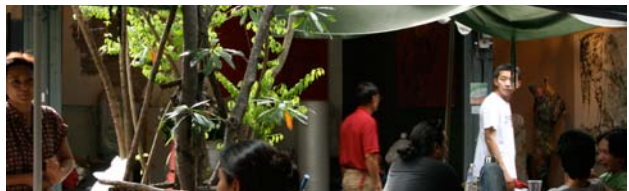
(John) Yes exactly. But I guess it's become like that because that's what the Westerners want. (Jack) And that's what the Westerners get. I really love it here; it is so different from my home. There is so much more going on. (John) But don't you think that these people should want to come to see the real Thailand and not a replica of home?

Jack went on to agree and explain how he felt Westerners were bringing awful cultural traits with them. After being informed of the horrors of the 'ping pong show' and how the 'tiger temple tour' ruin what he considers the real Thailand it made me consider how people use and have used sex tourism and animal cruelty as a means of advertising the city. Jack explained how he used to be a tour guide here on Koh San Road but stopped as too many people were asking for things such as the above that he would "never suggest or recommend to tourists."

On the 18th of June I went to see the metro and sky train rail services as I was told they were heavily infused by western transport. Although a very

simple idea it is clear evidence of Thailand developing into a western culture with the means of expansion and ease for workers becoming a priority to encourage a growth of industry.

From here I travelled to North of Bangkok to Chatuchuk Weekend Market to explore artists corner that John had suggested might have relevance to my project. Whilst on the train I noticed a series of graffiti works on various buildings, I was intrigued to see that the majority of it was in the Latin not Thai alphabet.



As well as many tourist stalls, the Weekend Market had an open-air gallery where the local artists exhibited their work. Most of the work was contemporary with infusions of Thai technique or Thai content. It was interesting to see that my first impressions of Thailand were that it was so heavily westernised that there wasn't much in terms of their own, unaltered culture anywhere yet this was completely contradicted upon seeing some of the beautiful artworks. Unfortunately I was not allowed to take pictures of the work as requested by the artists.

That evening at 8.00pm I travelled to Vientiane, Laos on the night train to Friendship Bridge (the border crossing/visa control). At 8.25am I had to change at Nog Khai station and pass through passport control. A short while later, at 9.15am I arrived in Thanaleng station to pass through the border / visa control. Border crossings were something I anticipated during the trip and I had heard stories of all kinds of dramatic situations could happen yet my first border went smoothly. The border crossing being named 'Friendship Bridge' suggested a strong connection between Laos and Thailand even though they are so culturally different.

Arrival in Laos

On the 19th of June I arrived at Rivertime Resort, just off the Nam Ngum River. I chose this area, as it is an excellent example of eco tourism – tourism in a positive light. A man named Barnaby, originally from Milton Keynes ran the facility.



*Where are you from originally?
Milton Keynes*

*Why did you choose to live in Laos?
Because I lived in Milton Keynes! Well my brother already lived out here and set up the Rivertime Resort so I came out to give him a hand.*

*What ideas went through your brother's head setting up a place like this?
I can't really speak for my brother but I remember thinking there are so many people from Europe, America and Australasia out here running resorts and offering tourists the comfort on an English speaker, but none of them put back into the community. So I was secretly proud - I would never tell him of course- but even from the beginning he made this place part of the community.*

Barnaby went on to explain the mission statement of the resort and that it was built from entirely local materials, using local labour and expertise sensitively constructed to work with the forest and the locals. There is also a written agreement with local villages under which they contribute \$2.00 per guest to education and employment within the resort and surrounding area.

*Do you think that overall tourists are causing more trouble than Laos needs?
Well in terms of my job and the tourist industry not at all. In fact without them we – I say we as though I am officially a Lao – would not be developing at all. Resources here are so scarce we have not much to offer like Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia as nothing has happened here for a long time so we have had to make use of what we have got.*

On the 20th of June I sat in on an English lesson Barnaby was giving to Lao children. A little boy taught me how to say sabai dee and I taught him to say hello. I find language the most rich and fulfilling topic as the border between languages results in to many creative alternatives. This is an issue I dealt with my entire trip and a great starting point for a project.

I visited the Laos natural history museum to try and find an area of cultural overlap. The political and law documents kept there were beautiful containing all old Laos script on worn stock. Similar to the hand rendered typography of Bangkok, people seemed to just make use of what materials and resources they had, not a lot of money was put into design yet the result of this is much more appealing from my point of view. After witnessing the typography at the museum it became apparent there was political script everywhere suggesting printed Lao letter forms are scarce, thus making me understand that people deem hand rendering as the best approach to avoid a constant political connotation.

I also visited Pakpasack Press Printing House; unfortunately the language barrier proved too much of a hindrance for any kind of interview but the gentleman showed me a few publications all of which held the same body text typography and a more elaborate hand rendered title, backing up my previous findings at the museum.

On the 21st of June I travelled from Vietiane up to Vang Vieng. Here I met a student studying sustainability, development and peace, called Pearly Wong from Malaysia. It was interesting to receive her perspective of the area with regards to my project.



Why did you come to Laos?

Well Malaysian girls don't tend to travel at all, let alone solo so I wanted to pick somewhere beautiful but still quite popular with tourists so I felt safe and not lonely.

Do you like Vang Vieng?

The area itself is so beautiful, easily one of the most beautiful places I have ever been, but all the drinking bars and visitors it attracts ruin it.

If you could change anything about the area what would it be?

I would ban all the Westerners. No offence, but you tend to waltz into these beautiful places with no regard for the scenery and local life. As long as you have a drink in your hand and the sun is out you could be anywhere in the world.



The following day, on the 22nd of June Pearly accompanied me to an interview I had set up with a local businessman in the town. After sitting down for about five minutes this man had us on our way to the Vang Vieng caves and trekking through jungles.

*Where are you from originally?
I was born in Vang Vieng.*

*Why did you choose to stay here?
I cannot really afford to move plus caves are good here. They are my passion.*

*How do you advertise your tours?
My mother and father owned a tourist information centre. I know there are lots of them in town but it's very good and reasonable in price.*

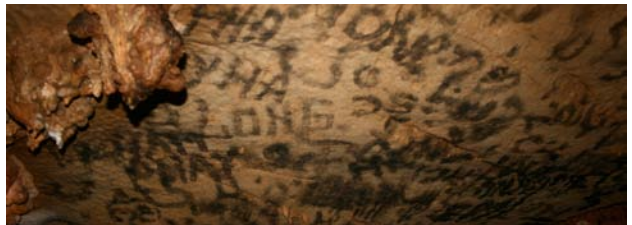
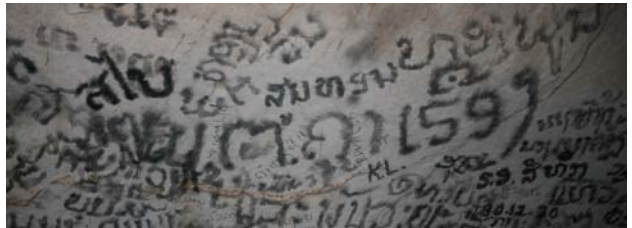
*Do you put posters up? Hand out flyers?
Have a website?
Oh no. (Laughs) I don't even have a computer. There is no real need to invest money into posters and flyers people who come here are looking for things to do so they come find us.*

*What do you think of the tourism generated by tubing?
I think it's really great money wise. It's the most popular thing we have got and attracts so many people to the area. The concept of tubing and drinking itself is very stupid. We always joke you English were the first ones to start that.*

*Is it dangerous?
Very, many people have died yet we have no such laws to shut it down. The area needs the money too badly.*



Lam had worked for his father all his life and took over his business when he died two years ago. The reasoning behind the expedition was to witness the hand rendered typography on the walls of the cave that people wrote when they hid during the war. Tourists have vandalised by adding their own graffiti on top.



In the afternoon I travelled to a locals market, I spoke to some frog farmers and tried to ask some questions of my project but they were too intrigued by an English girl and a Malaysian girl sat down eating together.



On the 23rd of June I travelled from Vang Vieng to Luang Prabang. I spent the majority of the day travelling but still managed to trigger a debate amongst the tourists on my bus. Lucy Gemma and Jordon from the UK and Ben Jeremy and Karl from the US were arguing for and against tourism yet most issues that the group finally agreed on they contradicted by being in the country.

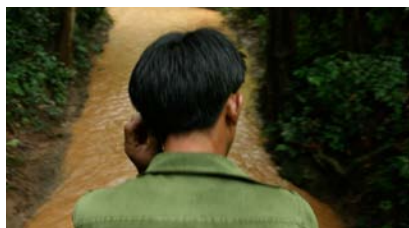
(Jeremy) Because it is so cheap! Every backpackers dream is to come to a place like this. Although yes it's very expensive to get here it's all worth it. Plus you have all the creature comforts of home, everyone speaks English, all the signs are in English and everything has been thought of to make sure we have a good time.

On the 24th of June I visited Lao Elephant Village to interview a mahout (elephant rider / trainer) called Ka. Whilst we were talking he took me through various villages in the area.

How are you helping the elephant's welfare?

All these elephants were rescued from the logging industry, as it is now illegal to log in Laos. Elephants were used as a cheap and easy way to transport the heavy materials.

Do you think using these animals, as a tourist attraction is good for them? The issue with elephants is that they get very bored. And now they have no work, to let them stand still in their houses all day would be crueller than to take them on walks through the jungle.



I then travelled up to Kuang Si Waterfall in the National Park too investigate whether the area has received the donated money and fulfilled their ambitions of conserving and protecting the environment.

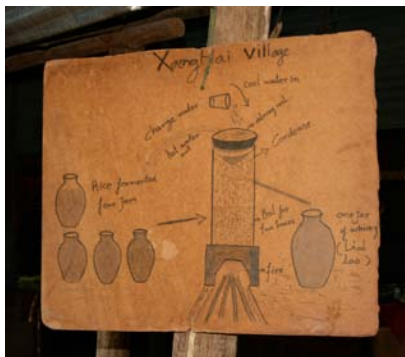


On arrival it was immediate that this was inaccurate as the signage was in both languages, making me very aware this 'preserved' area is for tourists.

On route back to Luang Prabang I stopped at a local village. As soon as I got out of the bus I was surrounded by children desperate to sell me all kinds of things, yet there were adults no where to be seen. Emotional blackmail was something I was warned about on my arrival in Laos but I had no idea just how emotional it would be. I asked the children what they knew about words most of them indicated they could not read but two girls were able to read a little bit from my sketchbook.



On the 25th of June I took a boat to another local village where they distil wine and whiskey. I spoke with the organiser of the class and asked how he presented the information to another nationality. He then showed me some unique looking information graphics he had drafted up himself. If there was a language barrier he felt it easier to explain with images as they are universal to everyone, no matter where you are from.



I continued onto the boat to the Buda Cave. It was here I realised in some aspects of life there will never be a border, the cave was filled with thousands upon thousands of Buda statues left by worshippers all over the world in all different colours, sizes and materials. The sight just reinforced the magnitude of religious followers who unite using one common belief regardless of nationality.

The charity UNESCO had recommend I visit the city of Luang Prabang with regards to my project. The architecture had a French influence due to French invasion in 1893. I began by visiting a contemporary art gallery called Saaifone Gallery featuring the artist Thep Thavonsouk. I was drawn to this exhibition in particular as the artist is quite a famous Lao painter and has started travelling all over the world to exhibit his work yet his common themes throughout stays related to his own culture. It will be interesting to pursue this artist now he has become international to see if his new western environment influences him.



I then followed up a conversation I had had with a gentleman at Sivilat Print House. He explained the process of his printing equipment and took me on a tour around the facilities. He explained how he rarely gets work of Westerners as they go to the printing houses run by western people. He explained how he was not offended and understood that with something quite particular you need to know that each participant had been understood.



During the 25th to the 29th of June my original plans to visit North Vietnam came to a halt. To cut a long story short, I ended up being one of only eight passengers on a full bus to Hanoi, Vietnam. Unfortunately we did not make it to the border as we met fallen trees in the road, landslides and floods in which we manually had to clear by hand or wait for big industrial machines (which were not provided by the Laos government – but we all had to chip in).

So instead we started travelling south and made it to Phonsavan we had the first meal we had had in 42.5 hours. All the passengers swapped contact details and played cards due to a general language barrier between the variety of nationalities everybody turned to me for translation as English was common ground, making me an important aspect to the group.



Unfortunately I had to miss Hanoi completely due to lack of time and funding. So headed back down to Vietiane where we had been informed the crossing to hue was clear. Here the group of eight departed, the Belgium and his Vietnamese girlfriend, the Polish couple who had just got married and spend four days of their honeymoon trapped on a bus with us, the two students from Israel and the North Korean who wouldn't tell us how she got out of North Korea and me, "the English Girl" – I was used to correct peoples language and translate so everybody could understand each other. Although the situation was quite horrendous it provided me with an opportunity to observe a collection of Eastern and Western bodies and study their cultural differences and overlaps.

On crossing the Laos / Vietnamese border further down the country it became a fantastic chance to witness numerous Vietnamese posters and billboards still mostly hand rendered.

The border itself was incredibly unusual. There was a long distance; of about a mile we had to walk through between the ingoing and outgoing parts of the country. I considered who this land belonged to if it was in between a physical border.

Finally after four long days I reached my intended destination with the total time being trapped on a bus totalling 76.5hours.



Arrival in Vietnam

On the 30th of June I was back into my normal itinerary. I visited a local market to discover American war merchandise; this was one of the many aspects of my trip that suggested tourists travel to see the effect the war had on Vietnam rather than the country itself.



I then went to the Monuments of Hue that include the Citadel and Forbidden City, I discovered a variety of aspects which could contribute to my projects. Some of the more prominent were that this time the warning signs were not in English. Also the vast amount of graffiti on the buildings disgusted me, the more I saw the more I felt that tourism was a negative for the countries well being, tourism can ruin ancient artefacts.

At the Citadel I began speaking to a Vietnamese mother and her daughter. The mother explained that she has been here a few times as she loves the buildings but every year Laos becomes a more and more popular tourist destination so her enjoyment is declining. I then asked her why she had come today and she explained it was her daughter's first trip to the Citadel.



I also spoke to a variety of travellers who considered themselves to have travelled to this area to gain something other than the obvious gap year lifestyle, Colt St. George a Canadian Religious Studies Student, Scott Sheridan an Australian Programmer and Vilhjálmur Guðmundsson an Icelandic temporary bar manager and traveller. Each traveller explained their travels were had a direct link to their work or study but they all felt it was almost impossible not to get dragged in by the lifestyle of a backpacker.

On the 1st of July I had organised an interview with a taxi man I had met the day previously, the reason he attracted my attention was that he marketed himself as tourist free and hassle free. He explained his need for the western infiltration for his job as he had no qualifications to do anything better. This was his only choice.

During the afternoon I travelled to two galleries, Du ca Art Gallery and Newspace Art Gallery. Both facilities were about promoting new, emerging artists and designer in the city. Both the curators to the galleries were there to discuss what type of work they see. Both explained that the more modern approach to work with computers and cameras seems to be increasing. But they do tend to pick out the artists that are relevant to the area and will generate most tourist attraction.



I was then invited to the Arts and Crafts Village, as the curator knew Jed, a gentleman who had a studio inside. I got taken on a tour of all the craft that Laos generates and was invited to the calligraphy and embroidery workshops. Jed explained that he thought Vietnam could thrive without the tourist industry but people are too afraid to revert back to their original trades because there is no demand for it anymore. He also explained how he chose not to use a computer for any of his work to avoid this modernisation.

Within the facility was a small display on the design and packaging on the Arts and Crafts Village. I spoke to Jed about this and he explained that the facility insisted they have a brand identity and a tourist presence as the income generated from the artefacts was not enough profit for him to endeavour.



During the evening I travelled out on a Dragon Boat, considered to be one of the most touristic orientated traditions of Hue, and watched Vietnamese performers. The ladies who performed were happy to sit down and talk to me but again the language barrier proved too much of a difficulty to get any information regarding my project. I did get the impression that the women really loved what they did and found it really rewarding that tourists from all over the world come and watch them perform.



On the 2nd of July I travelled around various temples and ruins to try capture a traditional view of Vietnam, unfortunately everywhere I ended up was packed with tourists. The story of Thích Quảng Đức and his self-immolation to protest against the persecution of Buddhists by South Vietnam's Roman Catholic administration was a story that stuck in my mind in relation to dark tourism, which I will explain a later.

On the 3rd of July I travelled from Hue to Hoi An. Again the architecture has heavily French infused due to French invasion. I met up with a street tailor to ask her if she takes any inspiration from the Western world. She explained that nearly all of her work is influence by the west as most of her customers are tourists and she therefore provided what the customer wants. She sat down with me and explained her working process, and in doing so together we designed a one off dress and pair of shoes, which she posted to me over the summer without warning.

On the 4th of July I visited an antique book centre, I assumed as it was antique the books inside would be less affected by tourism and western influence but the centre also retained a great deal of foreign books, again providing for the tourist.

I then visited the museum of Folklore; it was really great to see the traditional beliefs, customs, and stories of a community, passed through the generations on display. Although there was the standard gift shop and touristic signage it was still nice to see that some of these traits still existed.



I also visited A3 art gallery and Ami gallery before heading off to, Mi Son ruins, which were devastated by natural disasters, war and pillaging. My most memorable part of the trip was being told that the French stole a lot of relics when they invaded and now keep them in the Louve refusing to return them.

It was in Hoi An I took my favourite photography that sums up my travel and investigation beautifully.



On the 5th of July I took a 24hour bus to Ho Chi Minh City, the capital of Vietnam. On the 6th I travelled to the Museum of fine art to see the Vietnamese war propaganda posters and war related artworks. Now these were understandably heavily influenced by the Western culture as the overlap during war was intense and not just an intangible one.

Situated inside the museum, the Blue Space Contemporary Art Centre hosted many paintings and art works trying to contradict the museums heavily western dominated pieces.

In the afternoon I travelled to OUT-2 Design Studio where I spent the remainder of the day working with some of the designers. The workforce was primarily Vietnamese but the art directors and partners of the firm were Westerners. They explained the reason being that OUT-2 Design is a multidisciplinary design studio aiming to provide clients with international expertise in Briefing, Architecture, Interior Design & Workplace Strategy. Because Vietnam is not as developed as, let's say America, the studio felt they needed to educate them and get them up to speed. The design philosophy is a belief in the physical environments in which we live, work, learn and play has a direct and tangible influence on the quality of our lives. It was interesting to see the cultures working together side-by-side and bouncing ideas to and from. This was the first time I deemed the cultural overlap a positive in design sense as so many ideas were being generated in regards to my project. I spent my time there helping the workers to generate ideas to pitch to the art director, I also got to sit in and watch the idea and concept stage of design unfold.



During the evening one of the workers had suggested I see a water puppet show, as this was the Vietnamese performance culture at its best. The theatre was situated in Ho Chi Minh Zoo, upon walking through I was saddened by the amount of graffiti covers buildings all prominently English words.



The benches throughout the park had been sponsored by various brands all over the world and many familiar brands to myself suggesting the zoo is western funded. I was quite confused by the signage at the theatre there appeared to be Chinese and Latin script whilst everyone was speaking the Vietnamese Language.

On the 7th of July I visited Liebe Photography Studio where they explained what they did and how they did it. The majority of their work was wedding, fashion and commercial photography. Nguyen Tran Minh Trang, the administrator of Liebe explained that they don't very often get western requests as they market themselves to Vietnamese and surrounding areas. Yet she showed me an infographic of their customers since 2009 when they were established and the information is quite a lot different, in fact there appears to be more Westerners than Southeast Asians.

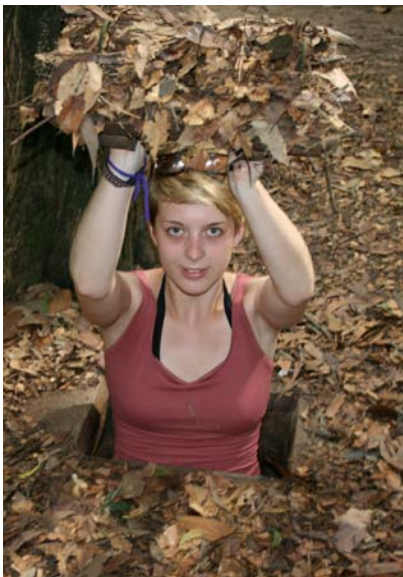
The remainder of the day consisted of quite a lengthy journey out of the city. My first point of call was a multi-religion temple called a Codice Temple. It was remarkable to see so many different religions under one roof, singing, speaking and praying together.



Here I met an Australian ex army militant called Dennis and his Zimbabwe housewife. I asked them what they thought about the cultural overlap of the world and they said they didn't think it mattered. "Look at the Codice Temple, look at me and my wife. Cultural overlap is everywhere and it is so very much so worth it." I stopped at a local family home for lunch where they taught me to cook my own spring roll. I asked them the same question as I had asked the couple earlier in the day and they agreed. They loved seeing the diversity and mixed races. It is just a shame it doesn't operate on the same level for Vietnamese to go visit England.

Next stop was a rubber plantations farm where I got to see the introduction of mass marketing and capitalism greed. A gentleman explained how much of the rubber will be exported out to the rest of the world because without the resources there is not a great deal that the Vietnamese can generate with it.

I then travelled out to Chu Chi Tunnels. The guide took a group to an area in the forest and said 'find the trap door' we searched and really couldn't find it anywhere. He brushed away some leaves and revealed a tiny little rectangle in the ground about 50cm by 30cm. the guide jumped into the tunnel and put the lid over his head and disappeared. He then reappeared walking back through the trees. Now I am not the biggest of people at all but that was tight squeeze. The tourist tunnels were about four times the size of the original and even then I felt claustrophobic.



At the centre there was a gun firing range. I fired an ak47 and I mention this due to a recent debate in The Guardian regarding the design museum. The gun's origins in the second world war and the military design genius of Kalashnikov, makes you feel you have crossed an invisible line into the world of terrorists and lone assassins. This is a border I would like to investigate in much detail, when is something of a sensitive nature taken to far into the eyes of the media. The ak47 is a perfect example as this object killed people, should it really be placed in the 'Design Classics' exhibition?



On the 8th of July I decided to follow up the research into sensitive material and visit the War Remnants Museum. There was so much material and content for a variety of projects within this building. I took great inspiration from the world support on war resistance including images of protest. There was also a photography exhibition documenting the photojournalists of the war and people affected by Agent Orange.

The remainder of the day I spent travelling into Cambodia.

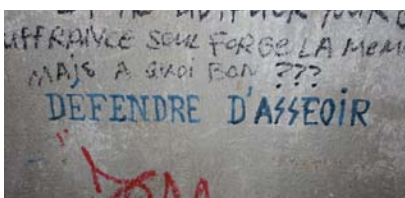
Arrival in Cambodia

On the 9th of July I met up with a worker from the hostel I was staying in called Poe. As I explained my project to Poe he made of a list of things I must see in the area before I depart and ended up accompanying me on the majority of my journey.

My first stop was the Tuol Sleng holocaust museum. It is hosted in an old primary school turned prison / torture unit by the Khmer rouge to interrogate people suspected of over throwing the regime. In some of the rooms there was nothing more than a metal bed frame that the prisoner was chained to and a gruesome photograph of the body remains.

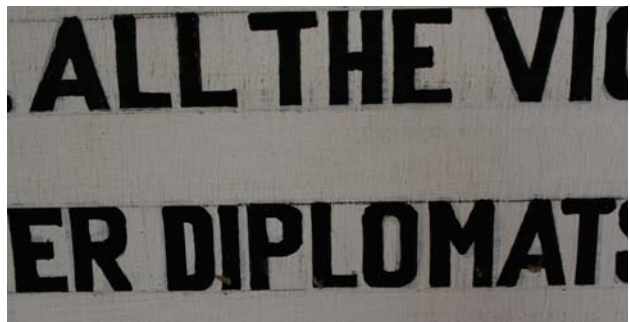
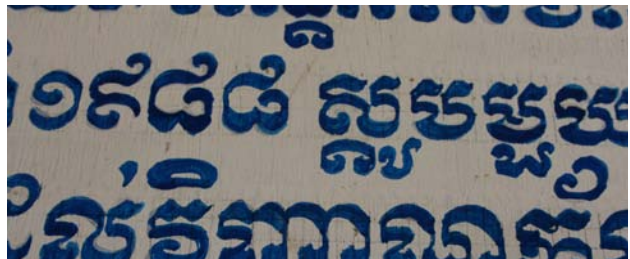


The displays were in three languages as they anticipated educating the world on such a horrific time that nobody outside of the country really knows about. The most interesting part of this museum from my perspective was the graffiti articles left behind from tourists.



They consisted of writings of sympathy all over the world. This was quite an interesting point as the graffiti itself suggest western infiltration for bad, but the fact that people can lend their sympathy no matter what race, country or destination, suggests that it has more of a positive than a detrimental affect.

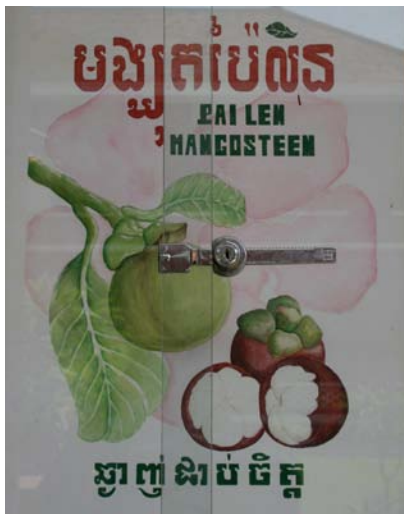
Pol Pots was the leader of the Khmer Rouge Regime to overthrow democratic, capitalist state. The design and clarity of this information is vital so it was obvious they had employed a professional (see base line grid) and that the hand rendering was for aesthetic effect.



In accompaniment to the museum were Choeung Ek killing fields; this was a horrific example of dark tourism that I found harrowing and emotionally draining. Throughout the countries I had visited so far there seemed to be a lot of this dark tourism, where

people used their downfalls as a tourist attraction. Yet this is not limited to Southeast Asia at all, take Auschwitz in Krakow, Poland for example. I visited this area in February 2010 so it would be interesting to compare the two stories of holocaust, one from the West and one from the East to see what the result bares.

My next destination was the University of fine art. I entered and explained to the receptionist what I was doing and she said I was more than welcome to look around as long as I did not interrupt any classes. After looking around the exterior of the buildings some students approached me to ask what I was doing, I explained and they took me into their "Visual Communications Room" so I could see some of the graphics they were producing.



I visited a contemporary art gallery called XEM Design as one of the students had explained the designer was likely to be in the studio at this time of year. I spoke to Xem who explained his process and cross-disciplinary approach to work. He let me look through all his supporting work and it was evident he took great pride in being influence by the West.



On the 10th of July I visited Assax art gallery and studio where I spoke to Assax about his work process, he is another artist who chose to deliberately move away from modern, western techniques and methods to working. His approach is very hands on and traditional. I spent the majority of the day with Assax working and helping him make moulds, paintings and statues.



I also managed to get in contact via telephone with a lady called Chandara Vireak who was applying for the design school in Cambodia. In the end we swapped email information and I continue to have a dialogue with her now fourth months after originally speaking to her. We are currently discussing the need for a design education to be taken seriously amongst your field as Chandara is a self taught designer looking for work in Western areas.

In the afternoon I went to the Pixel Studio, run by Joe Ogden from London. I spent the day sitting in on meetings and re-sampling images of websites. It was within this time I managed to quiz Joe on my project.

*Where are you from originally?
London*

*Why did you move to Southeast Asia?
My father works in Thailand, which is where I really want to be but I was not able to obtain a work visa so Cambodia was my next best alternative.*

*How many staff work here?
All together there is five of us, two western and three locals.*

*Do you produce more west infused work or eastern?
More western as westerners come for western design and easterners come to westerners for a western design. Yet most of the work we produce is more small local Cambodian companies. But we have done some work for the UK and Australia. You cannot source work from Thailand and no work from Vietnam or Laos as the company is not big enough.*

*How much of your work is tourist related?
About 40% tourist and 60% other – so not as I first assumed. Usually because tourist information cannot afford to out source design.*

Do you think it is a good idea to use

western design styles in an eastern country?

Yes, we are not limiting or restricting or hiding anything, they are not developed enough As for using history and culture in design it is all about appropriation and half the time the client wants a westernised look. That is why they come to a western designer.



Joe goes on to explain that the cultural differences limit the ability to be creative as Cambodians think on a different wave length.

On the 11th of July I travelled up to Siem Reap and visited a huge variety of galleries and small organisations. These included Bloom Cambodia, an organisation promoting recycling in the country, her ideas came from the way in which Europe handle their landfill waste. I also visited Art Deli, which is a studio, turned café, turned bookshop turned library. The curators explained that they needed to adapt to the market so making the small area multifunctional generated more interest. Again one of the curators is American and it was his idea to transform the studio as he explained he saw the benefits of it very often in America.

My favourite part of the day consisted of chasing up a contact I had made at the Art Village. I got to witness and participate in stone, wood, lacquer and all different Cambodian technique workshops. The aim of the village was to reintroduce the cultural aspect of Cambodia back into the country. The man who set up the facility was said to be frightened that they might lose it therefore made an active decision to continue teaching it.



And finally at the end of the day I visited a landmine museum. I felt this was appropriate as it displayed the physical borders of countries as opposed to a metaphorical one, the man who ran it was a child soldier for both the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese army. So he was one of the many leaving and scattering these bombs around the country mostly at the Thai / Cambodian borders. He now runs an organisation which dismantles them, the profit from the museum goes to the children who have been effected by the mines – they live / work / study / / play right behind the museum and the owner has become their father figure.

On the 12th of July I woke up at 4.30am to meet my tuktuk driver at 4.45am to get to the Angkor Wat ticket office for 5am. It was £20.00 for a day ticket and I wanted to make the most of it. So I arrived at 5am to see the sunrise at the huge Angkor Wat. I then travelled around Angkor Thom, Bayon, Ta Keo, Ta Prohm, Banteay Srah Srang, Pre Rup, East Mebon, Ta Som, Neak Prean and finally Bakheng Mountain. Although, like the majority of other touristic areas I visited this one really prided on keeping it traditional. I had a conversation with two young girls selling bananas who told me they had heard stories that before they opened up the temples to tourists Siem Reap was in incredible financial trouble after the war and holocaust.

I spoke to an artist who uses the temples as a studio. He usually makes stone rubbings of the carvings and sells them to tourists but he explained there was something really marvellous and inspirational about the environment he worked in. It reminded him to often revisit his traditional techniques.



There is also a massive divide between our currency and Southeast Asian currency. I was speaking to a man on the locals market about fish foot pedicures; I have seen these advertised in Bristol for about £20.00 for 15 minutes. Here at Dr. Fish it would have cost \$2 for an hour, two bottles of beer and a bowl of peanuts. I also enquired if he knew why Cambodians have started dealing in American dollar instead of their traditional Riel. He explained the tourist's money is too large and Cambodians worked out they could earn more if they don't give them the option of smaller divisions to trade with. This is a very unusual but prominent infiltration of western culture, money and capitalism.

On the 13th of July I headed back to Bangkok stopping at Battambang, Cambodia for the evening. I managed to participate in a trip on a bamboo train, the

traditional way poorer families would travel on existing railway lines. The driver explained how this was now a novelty as there are so many more direct trains and buses that public transport is becoming a lot easier and cheaper as the country is developing. He also said the influence most likely came from a bigger, wealthier country.



Arrival in Thailand

On the 14th of July I visited The Queen's gallery that had two large exhibitions one with oil on canvas and the other was ceramics. But my main priority was to visit the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre.





It consisted of a huge nine floor building containing galleries, student and children study events, film and camera workshops, exhibition rooms, art/ food shows, photo exhibitions and reams of illustrations on a show wall. The building was so vast I came back a second day to continue. The content I generated over the two days will play an important factor to my design work for my final year project as well as giving me more scope in my overall direction of work outside my education.

On the 16th I flew from Bangkok to Surat Thani and crossed over to Koh Phangan. This was a complete culture clash as everything was in English and I saw very little Thai writing at all. Unfortunately on my first day on the island I was in a road accident when a motorbike stopped at a junction abruptly and flew off his bike into the main road as the tuktuk i was in approached. The driver slammed on his breaks and I flew to the front to the tuktuk hitting my shoulder and head on a tin bit of rusty metal. This resulted in me being unable to continue my project properly for a few days.



On the evening of the 17th of July the Full Moon Festival was scheduled to commence so I managed to speak to a lot of the performers before hand. These included fire throwers, lady boys and professional dancers and singers. As a group they all said they really enjoyed the tourist enthusiasm but there was part of me that did not believe that they enjoyed being spectacles and being under so much pressure. Again bad luck hit me as I had my mobile phone and money stolen. When I reported it, the police explained it was most likely another tourist as Thai people tend to be very honest. It was quite a culture shock to see just how badly tourists and westerners are devastating the environment of Koh Phangan.

For the rest of the week I began island hopping as I started to see a repeat of Koh Phangan everywhere I went. Over four days I travelled from Koh Phangan to Koh Samui, Koh Saumui to Koh Phi Phi. As I researched and explored the areas it was evident there were no design studios or art related materials unless providing something for the tourist industry. The areas had been completely dominated by mainstream Westerners. The residents I spoke to were torn, some loving the business and wealth they were generating whilst others were adamant that tourists were bringing nothing but destruction and a bad name to the islands.

On the 21st of July I arrived in Koh Phi Phi where again I bore witness to the heavy western influence and constant reference to the western world.

On the 22nd I pursued the main reason I stopped in this destination to see the Tsunami Village, a village created at the highest peak of the tallest mountain. During the monsoon season of 2004 Koh Phi Phi was hit by a devastating tsunami in which wiped out all the residential areas. The government then replaced the residents' homes with holiday homes and apartments to encourage the growth of tourism and resulting in the residents being forced right up to the top of the island a long distance from their amenities.



There is also a huge link back to the Western film industry in Koh Phi Phi. Films such as James Bond and The Beach were filmed here and a lot of opinions from the residents suggest that the industry exploited the area for its beauty thus creating this sudden growth in uncontrollable tourism. An example being The Beach was filmed on Maya Beach that is a national park, yet they still let people bring heavy-duty film equipment in.

On the 23rd of July I travelled from Koh Phi Phi to Phuket. On the 24th I stayed in Phuket Town and concentrated on the effects tourism has on the environment and animal welfare. I visited the national park Bang pae Waterfall, a Sun Bear Centre, a Gibbon rehabilitation centre run by western volunteers and a turtle hatchery which is dependant on tourism to fund the animals breeding programme. All these areas were generally quite positive and most of the facilitators explained they would not be able to function without tourist interest and funding.

In the evening I visited two educational facilities one called Phuket Camera and the other Bo(ok)hemian Art House. I obtained an interview from Phuket Camera and managed to help out on the late shift at the Bo(ok)hemian art house gallery.

As I only had a few days left I really wanted to cram in as much research as possible so I visited some galleries, studios and printing houses to ask for their input to my project. These included 2507 Sarasil Gallery, Art Home Studio, Kong Thong Printing House, Sin & Lee Printing Works, Serendipity Designs Co. Studio, Wva Art Studio and Imon Studio. The majority of the studios let me stay a few hours to watch how they worked and how they dealt with customers, primarily tourists.



I particularly enjoyed my time at Serendipity Design Co. Studio, as they were mass producers of tourist information flyers, maps and booklets so knew exactly what I was trying to achieve with my project.

On the 26th of July I travelled over to Patong. This area is so strongly affected by Western infiltration that it has become the sex tourism capital of south Thailand.

In the day I visited Lamiae Art Centre hoping to discuss how the artist there markets his paintings to the public but upon arrival it was clear that the work consisted of replicas, the artist reproduces western work as it is in higher demand than his original work. It was upsetting to see when the gentleman explained why had to do this that he really disliked it. He said there was no creativity left in Thailand because the tourists don't want it. He suggested that the tourist industry was the dictator of the country's welfare.

In the evening I saw a Ladyboy Burlesque Show, the performance itself was western influenced and contained in majority references to Western pop culture. I interviewed some of the performers at the end of the night and it was clear this is not an occupation they chose, they feel like spectacles for the eyes of Western men yet they have no other option due to their lack in qualifications and finance to do anything else.



On the 27th of July I flew from Phuket to back to Bangkok. I went to The Thailand Creative & Design Centre (TCDC). It triumphs over the many of its kind in Bangkok, as it is considered a testament to the importance of strong design and has Thai government support and funding, which is incredibly rare in such a vast city.



'What is Design?' is a permanent exhibition within TCDC, it is prefaced by a video called 'Genius Loci' arguing the notion that geography, culture and history influence (and perhaps even determine) design, as much as a designer's individual personality. Thus suggesting that specific cultures give rise to certain types of design. The exhibition concentrated on ten countries, Spain, France, UK, Italy, Brazil, Netherlands, Finland, Germany, Japan and Thailand and how they have each interpreted their design culture.

Each nation has interpreted their design culture into the 20th century and explored the effects this has of the genius loci of design in Thailand. The items, which reflect the nations, can be slightly over-simplistic but it's all presented with such attractive professionalism the trite is easy overlooked. They have nailed appropriation down to a tee, you can speculate the country just by the design themes, summarising the exhibition itself.

Another key element of the exhibition is the timeline of country design, a bright colourful spectacle that displays the late evolving of the Eastern design scene, unlike the early progress of the West. The ease of information and navigation of the design work itself pays compliments to the exhibition and Design Centre.

This is an important exhibition as not only does it highlight key design factors such as appropriation and stereotyping, but also the countries considered to have effect on Thailand's design scene are mainly westernised, developed countries. Therefore it encourages debate on the evolving design scene and the dominance, which lies in the western world. It is also just a showcase of great designs that all have purpose and concepts that are vital to create a thriving design.



I also had chance to visit the art student's degree show which will be interesting when comparing it to the system in which an English degree show takes place when participating in my degree show in June 2012.

On the 28th of July I flew home.

Thankyou

Now back in England and in the full swing of my final major project and setting myself up for after graduation via professional practice I am aware just how beneficial the trip has been and it will be interesting to see how the trip and my experiences will influence my work in the future. Again I would like to send a great deal of thanks to the Gane Trust for making this trip possible as well as Matthew Partington and Lucy Cox for help along the way.