

**The middle is where I come from.**

**On a collaboration project between art and theory**

"Every orientation presupposes a disorientation."<sup>1</sup>

What Hans Magnus Enzensberger, the famous German poet, dramatist and philosopher claimed in his exquisite and always valid essays on problems of ethnicity, migration and violence, applies perfectly to this very special project the renowned Malaysian artist Ivan Lam came up with. In May 2016, one year ago, the KL-based artist defined together with his gallery Wei-Ling Contemporary a new path in his well-established working method. As each migration generates conflicts<sup>2</sup>, it was clear that this voyage, breaking out of the familiar patterns, would surely generate a friction. But according to Freud's concept of the "uncanny"<sup>3</sup>, this inevitable *migration* to new shores had to generate something that would paradoxically feel incongruous, instable and mysterious, yet strangely familiar.

The ten artworks, all of them of same format (210 x 120cm) but with different themes, are hybrids – a series born out of a collaboration between Ivan Lam – the artist, and the art theorist and curator, which is me. When Lam came up with the idea of bringing up a very personal art project, I was fascinated and thrilled about this "uncanny" plan of merging traditionally very opposed working processes of hands and thought. Breaking up the conventional meant giving up the common exhibition strategy with a curator at the very end of an art process. Twelve months later, the ongoing conversation, a back and forth of images, thoughts and philosophies between artist and theorist led to a series of in-betweens, a new middle between different positions, working and thinking approaches.

The "middle" can be defined as the point equidistant from extremes or limits, or as the centre of something. Particularly Buddhist philosophy stands for a middle as a rebellion against all extremes. Even French philosopher Camus propagated a concept called *la pensée midi*. Nothing new to Lam, who always challenged existing systems by mapping and negotiating visual and ideological dualities in all of his works, as also evident in this series with two distinct sections on each of the single canvases. By providing enough space for both polarities on the work surfaces, he manages to create a new statement, something like a third space between the extreme entities. Just as this body of works represents the midway point of the usual opponents art and theory, Lam's pieces like *They can't kill us all* not only broach eloquently the old duality issue. As a positive response to his previous work *They will kill us all* (2015), this piece negates the danger contained in the former title words. But instead of the previous image with children playing and simulating a shooting situation, this time the gun is real – but the title signalises hope. Hope, which is also being reflected at the bottom part of the painting. The linear connections between the dots which stand for all Malaysian cities can be read as borders which always separate and bind at the same time – something Lam emphasizes again and again.

Whether it is the complicated political situation in the multi-ethnic, but unfortunately not (yet) transcultural<sup>4</sup> state Malaysia or the negotiation of life and death, like Andy Warhol already explored

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<sup>1</sup>Enzensberger, Hans Magnus: Topological Structures in Modern Literature, in: Sur (May/June 1966).

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Enzensberger, Hans Magnus: Die große Wanderung: Dreiunddreißig Markierungen. Mit einer Fußnote „Über einige Besonderheiten bei der Menschenjagd“ (1<sup>st</sup> edition Frankfurt am Main 1992), 7<sup>th</sup> edition Frankfurt am Main 1993, p. 13f.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Freud, Sigmund: Das Unheimliche (1919), in: Psychologische Schriften. Studienausgabe, ed. by Alexander Mitscherlich, 4 volumes (1<sup>st</sup> edition 1970), 4<sup>th</sup> edition Frankfurt am Main 1978 (1. Aufl. 1970), p. 241-274.

<sup>4</sup> Transculturality stands for cultural hybridisation in a globalised world, whereas multiculturality denotes a parallel coexistence of closed and homogeneous entities. Cf. Welsch, Wolfgang: Transkulturalität. Zur

it in a similar graphical manner in his *Guns, Knives, Crosses and Skulls* series (1984), the dialectic approach is never only a comparison or a confrontation. In *Dead Bird*, the obvious death, pictured through a lifeless bird body split in a figurative and a more abstract, linear part, seems strangely beautiful. The bird's feathers lead us to think about life as something very fragile; but both their beauty and vibrancy surviving death can be reflected in connection with a death which is more than the end of all things. It was already the Futurists who embraced war and death through their impulsive and colourful brush strokes as a chance for a new beginning: erasing the past and simultaneously setting new standards. But, isn't death always linked to life, and vice versa? And isn't art always the production of new life? So the end would be the same as a new beginning and the artist would be a "creator" too, turning death, damage and loss into beauty. The tiny vectors of red, blue, green, lucid colours springing outwards from a radiating source – a middle (again) – behind the figurative motif in most of the paintings accentuate this energy representing movement and therefore life.

Another formal tool which led Lam and me to a deeper thinking was his usage of "the grid" as a set of linear (*They can't kill us all, Let your downlights shine up, Dead Bird*) and organically structures filling up the second half of his partitioned works. In Western art history the grid has been positioned as an emblem of modernism,<sup>5</sup> and still today it can be a sign for a radical art practice that addresses the topic of today.<sup>6</sup> In *Diabetic Love Affair* the upper part of the canvas is defined by a graphical set of circular lines representing a knitting pattern. It is juxtaposed to the bottom part, which is coated with honey, polyurethane and then burnt, illustrating a topographical map of the Nigerian villages and towns destroyed by Boko Haram. Lam's approach using grids is even more than modern: one man – the artist – standing up against a world led by men who kidnap, rape and even kill women: mothers, grandmothers, daughters, aunts and sisters. Is it a coincidence that Lam chose to repair this terrorised, indeed fallen apart world by throwing a graphically knitted net over it – a technique traditionally attributed to female labour? Here he is: a man questioning obsolete gender attributions and providing all women, especially the humiliated and despised ones, with power.

*To forgive* is an intensification of the grid seen as threads in a textile context. The diagonal and straight lines and systems of squares and triangles, reminding of fabrics and their pattern grids, are actually a whole textile surface – a quilt Lam got as a child from his grandmother and used as a cover for a long time. That is why this very personal grid contains the artist's physical traces. His DNA: blood, hair, sweat and tears are registered in each membrane of the threads and fabric pieces the quilt is made of. Maybe this is the grid Clifford Geertz meant when defining culture as a hand spun fabric of meanings, done all by one selves, staying in a constant change and never being finished.<sup>7</sup> Culture is never static<sup>8</sup> – so weren't obviously the Japanese conquerors who occupied Malaya between 8<sup>th</sup> December 1941 and 16<sup>th</sup> February 1942, a reality Lam's grandmother remembers only too well. The grid: a system of separation and connection, at times beautiful, at times painful and bloody too.

The maps of places Lam often depicts through a grid system with spots denoting where people died by climbing Everest or signalising open fires in East Asia as seen in *Melts in your mouth not in your hands* remind us of classical weather charts; the graphical, stylized crosses, points and dots in bright complementary colour contrasts and primary tones of yellow, blue, red and orange are very similar to the charts with their simple sign systems of arrows, winds, isobars and other

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veränderten Verfassung heutiger Kulturen, in: Hybridkultur. Medien, Netze, Künste, ed. by Irmela Schneider/Christian W. Thomsen, Cologne 1997, p. 67-90.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Krauss, Rosalind: Grids, in: The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths, Cambridge/Mass./London 1985.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Tupitsyn, Margarita: The Grid as a Checkpoint of Modernity (Autumn 2009), no. 12, in: Tate Papers, <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/12/the-grid-as-a-checkpoint-of-modernity>.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Geertz, Clifford: The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays, New York 1973.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Hall, Stuart: Cultural Identity and Diaspora, in: Identity: Community, Culture, Difference, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford, London 1990, p. 226.

meteorological marks. Pretty, all these signs. But what Lam's and the weather charts have got in common is their abstraction –they must depict a dynamical process by static means.<sup>9</sup> Not a logical image, as the *normal* state of the atmosphere (and the world) is turbulence. Hence constant colonisation and illegal settlements by humans of all kind count to this dramatic normality.

But it is not only the outer turbulences that Lam is trying to visualise in his, towards the end of the project, obviously more and more abstract art. Illustrating the inner state of being, the invisible, is something which doesn't work through abstraction as a means of simplification or reduction of *visible* things. It is rather the haptic quality of the material and the technical experiments of collecting pieces of our outer world that allow an inspection of Lam's inner ghosts. With the gold leafs, cassette tapes and vinyl as in *Black Gold*, glitter, aluminium blades and resin in *The first cut is deepest uncut* or beeswax, soya wax, vinyl, gunpowder, aluminium in *T marks the spot* some of Lam's inner fights and traumas concerning the outer world breach to the surface of his art. So, are the cuts he integrates in his works by adding blades and tearing the latex and resin surface openings to the artist's being? The outer fissures as inner cuts? They are indeed unrepeatable, unique traces of one's personality.

One thing should be clear – Lam's search for new shores will never end. How could it, when the arrival always signifies the end of the yearning.

Maybe it is the postcolonial, global world Lam is born in, which, for the constant search of cultural belonging, doesn't allow a standstill. Working *between* the things, positions, worlds, never means a completed "to be". Rather it's about staying in the middle, being an intermezzo, a constantly redefined alliance of different, sometimes opponent poles. The middle as an act of balance, hence, a permanent motion?<sup>10</sup> Probably, it is this middle Sigfried Giedion meant when proclaiming the equilibrium as the new ideal of humankind.

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<sup>9</sup>Cf. Enzensberger<sup>7</sup>1993, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Giedion, Sigfried: Mechanization Takes Command, Oxford 1948.