

**ISAAN  
DREAMING:  
MEDIA AND  
THE SYMBOLIC  
IN ALEX  
KERSHAW'S  
PHI TA KHON  
PROJECT**  
BY DAVID TEH

The mid-afternoon sun distributes crisp shadows on the glaring hot bitumen. Silhouettes slide, lurch and dance around un-choreographed, coming to rest in groups, then dispersing again. Their heads are horned with angular, exaggerated features. In a maelstrom of colour, sound and heat, a procession is making its way from the tessaban (town hall) to Phon Chai Temple. A fleet of pick-ups have been converted into floats, styled on the masks that are the signature of the Phi Ta Khon festival. Some are mobile stages bearing *morlam*<sup>1</sup> bands and towering batteries of speakers. Roaming amongst them in uniformed teams are the young men. Long lines of girls perform traditional dances. Local officials touting megaphones, give the parade some semblance of order. But the teams answer to no one. They dance, holler and taunt the onlookers with their *palaad kik* – thick timber clubs, one end carved into a phallus, the other an axe-head – cowbells and tin cans hitched to their belts to amplify the clangour. The ghosts are at large in Dansai.

Alex Kershaw is among them, moving slowly through the parade with his video camera and steadicam mount. The locals seem barely to notice him. His months of research began with extensive interviews with the townsfolk, including key figures in the festival's administration. This oral history forms the background for the process, but not for the artwork. As the artist explains, "the festival and Dansai set the parameters for making the work but the work is not necessarily about Phi Ta Khon or Dansai." While some footage – especially that of the festival itself – resembles documentation, Kershaw's video vignettes are far from ethnographic. Choreographed, yet permeable to improvisation, they are "open-ended and exploratory" engagements with sites and people, probing the performative and material channels of their symbolic world.

'Relational' art is said to bridge the gaps between the art world and other communities. Each side brings its own assumptions and history. This project stages the therapeutic sharing, reduction or maintenance of these differences; the exchange is documented by way of some production, the chosen media often locally contingent. Contemporary art

thus congratulates itself for the magnanimous abdication of its elitist skill-set.

While certainly engaging with the community, Kershaw is not here to share his own culture, nor an enlightened appreciation of the exotic. He makes no pretence of relinquishing his authorial role. Rather than a softening of the subject/object divide, we see a keen assertion of video as apparatus of capture. What emerges as the shots get more imaginative and inventive is not exactly collaboration, but rather a series of displacements – orchestrated twists of context and materials challenging their traditional roles and meanings.

A *bai sri*<sup>2</sup> ceremony transposed to a dragon-fruit orchard; two old women encrust a tree with clumps of sticky rice; a young man dives in the river for sacred stones utilise symbolic materials, but with ambiguous offerings. Neither everyday scenes, nor sacred rites, they divert both local and outside readings of places, things and gestures.

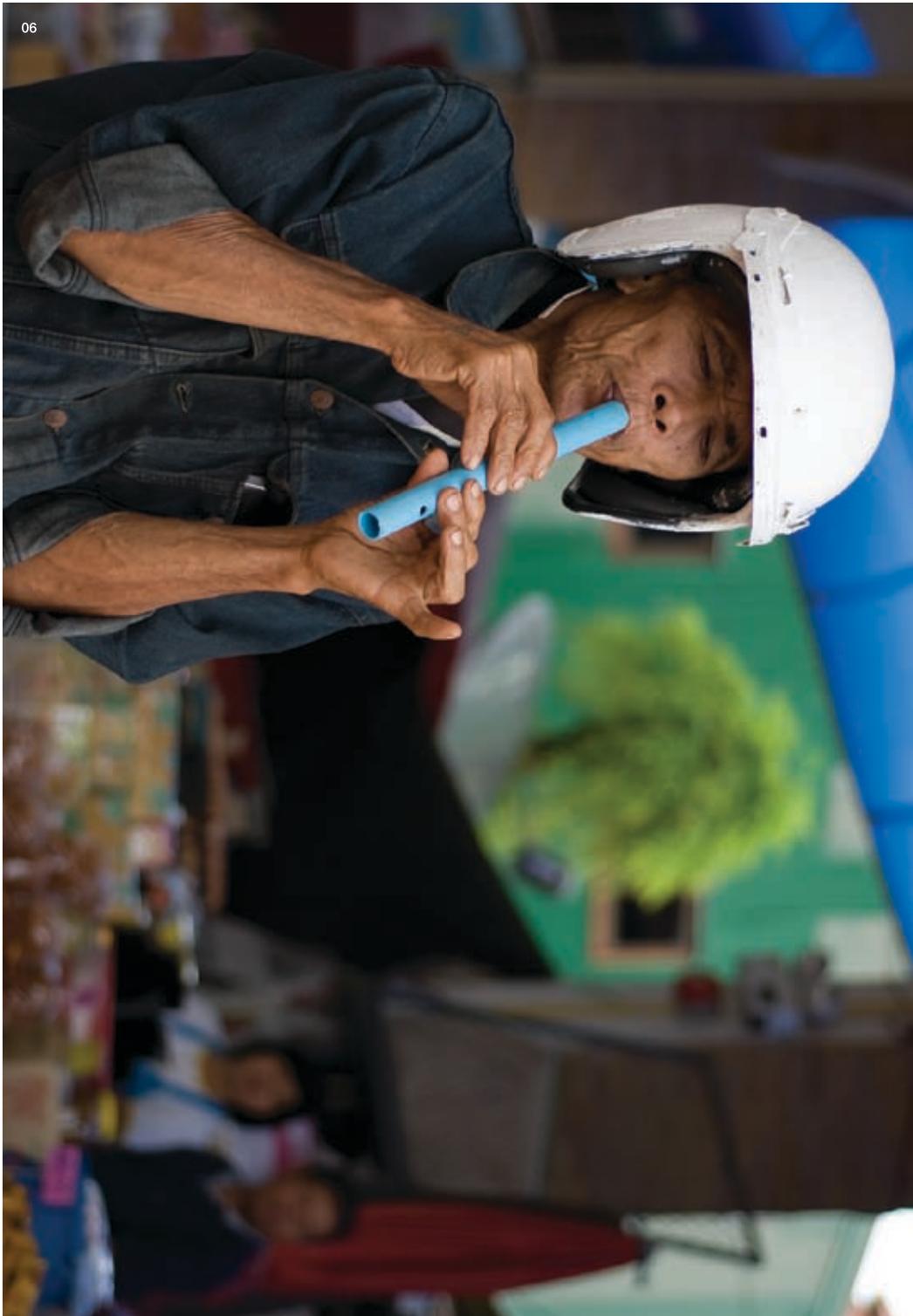
**Spirit/Medium**

Phi Ta Khon, and the ritual calendar it culminates, attests to a prodigiously syncretic cultural matrix. Evident are the vestiges of Brahmin practice, some garden-variety Theravada Buddhist rites and underlying these, indigenous animist practices – the Isaan dreaming which articulates the bonds between the dead and the living, between sexual and agricultural fertility, between the community and their spirit-infested natural world. We should therefore keep the broadest notion of 'medium' in play. Phi Ta Khon is nothing if not a radical proliferation of media. All the community's resources – human and environmental, spiritual and material, traditional and contemporary – dilate to channel the excesses of the symbolic economy. Most conspicuous is the famous mask, combining a coconut palm-frond and a *huad* (wicker vessel for steaming sticky rice). the festival's most distinctive symbol has been appropriated nationally and beyond, appearing on buses, in brochures, websites, in-flight magazines and even phone cards.

Yet it is difficult to speak of the mask's content. It is a cipher, a channel for a certain necro-phantasmatism performance for a discourse with what Jacques Derrida called the *plus d'un*<sup>3</sup>, the collective spirit of nameless forebears in which the singular identity of the living is also effaced. This explains the locals' blasé approach to the object itself, whose value consists in the making and wearing. More medium than message, the mask exists only as a vehicle for other intensities.

The same may be said for the human media, the community centred around chief spirit medium Jao Por Guan, whose discourse with the ancestors gives the celebration its schedule and its law. Or for the fluids, from the Mun River, home of the phra wet spirits, where the rites begin and end each year to the ubiquitous *lao khao* (rice whisky) that lubricates the festivities. There are alternative media too. Like the 'nature' spirits whose outfits – organic, soiled and plain – propose a kind of nature/culture divide. A water buffalo spirit charges through a crowd of revellers. A helmeted flautist blows a PVC piccolo. There is even a journalist spirit, shouldering a homemade camera fashioned from cardboard and an old flashlight. This is no observer. He is one of the ghosts, his performance one with theirs. His disarming prop a spiritual prosthesis.

Could we say the same of our artist, the troop of photographers from Bangkok, or the slick TV crew from Hong Kong? How do Dansai's mediums connect with these regional, national and global channels? Certainly, tradition is changed – streamlined and distorted – in this extension. But might not the spirit-world, in a reciprocal process, possess and coopt the extensions? What is the spiritual capacity of contemporary art, and of video in particular? By channelling, abstracting and improvising with tradition, Kershaw opens fertile ground for this enquiry, bearing witness not just to its survival but also to its contemporaneity.



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ALEX KERSHAW | THE PHI TA KHON PROJECT | APRIL 2009

**ALEX KERSHAW:  
THE PHI TA KHON  
PROJECT**  
**GALLERY 1  
GRANTPIRRIE  
02-25 APRIL  
2009**

YOUR INVITATION  
TO ATTEND THE  
OPENING OF  
THE PHI TA KHON  
PROJECT  
6-8PM THURSDAY  
02 APRIL 2009



**Alex Kershaw:  
The Phi Ta Khon Project**  
**Opening:  
6-8pm Thursday  
02 April 2009**  
**Exhibition:  
02-25 April 2009**

To preview the work prior to the opening please contact the Gallery on (02) 9699 9033 to arrange an appointment.

The artist would like to thank Jao Por Guan and Tan Nayoke Suntipap Chuaboonmee for their personal support and encouragement.

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Alex would like to acknowledge and thank the people from the Dansai community who participated in the filming of the project.

**Images:**

- 01. *The Phi Ta Khon Project* (production still) 2008-09  
Digital video + sound  
Edition of 3 + 2 AP  
Duration: 18:35min
- 02. *The Phi Ta Khon Project* (production still) 2008-09  
Digital video + sound  
Edition of 3 + 2 AP  
Duration: 15:35min
- 03. *The Phi Ta Khon Project* (video still) 2008-09  
Digital video + sound  
Edition of 3 + 2 AP  
Duration: 8:55min

- 04. *The Phi Ta Khon Project* (video still) 2008-09  
Digital video + sound  
Edition of 3 + 2 AP  
Duration: 22:35min
- 05. *The Phi Ta Khon Project* (video still) 2008-09  
Digital video + sound  
Edition of 3 + 2 AP  
Duration: 22:35min
- 06. *The Phi Ta Khon Project* (production still) 2008-09  
Digital video + sound  
Edition of 3 + 2 AP  
Duration: 18:35min

**Cover image:**  
01. *The Phi Ta Khon Project* (production still) 2008-09  
Digital video + sound  
Edition of 3 + 2 AP  
Duration: 8:55min

Images courtesy the artist + GRANTPIRRIE

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