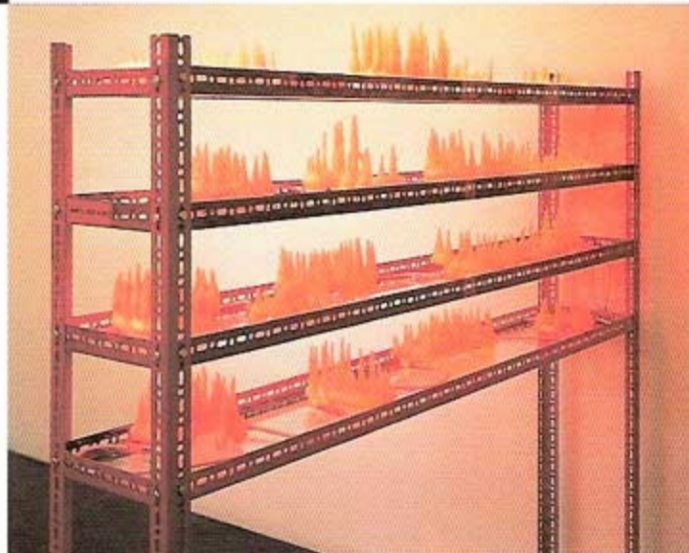


116. *Azure neon body* (1994), detail and overall view. 180 Laotian words in clear blue neon



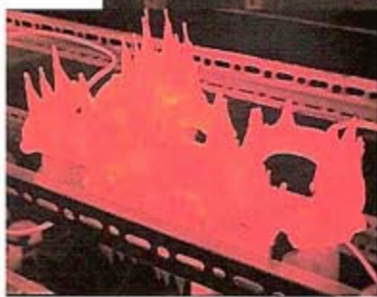
117. *Untitled* (1995-96). Laotian words in clear red neon, wax, glass, painted steel

By suspending certain interpretive practices, Vong Phaophanit's work permits other, more immediate approaches. Engaging both physical and conceptual (in)tangibility through formal refinement, it impedes conventional readings in order to open a sensual and material reckoning of the situation.

Phaophanit often uses language, specifically text in his native Laotian, as a medium for this inversion. *Azure neon body* (1994) featured a ten-metre-long trench cut into the gallery floor, filled with an illegible tangle of clear blue neon pieces of script. The individual Laotian words, already incomprehensible to most viewers, coalesced into a formless pulsing body whose aura filled the room, permeating and transforming the

space and its audience. In an untitled work from 1995-96, glowing wax stalagmites rise from red neon Laotian words laid on glass shelves. The unstable fiery peaks eclipse the communicative function of the script.

These works both condense and abstract language. The enervated, veinlike material of *Azure neon body* and the coagulated flow of the wax piece are transpositions of language into matter, where the physical forming of the neon words and the pulsing information they contain can stand for inhabiting language. Yet, the semantic and cultural meanings of both the words and the materials





118. *What falls to the ground but can't be eaten - tok tem dean kep kin bo dai* (1991). Bamboo, lead, light

with which they are formed cannot hold; they are barely legible even to Laotian speakers, and further emptied out through abstraction and displacement from their normal uses. In these situations, conventional linguistic meaning is suspended to establish a semantic malleability and a phenomenological encounter with material in an open field of possibility: "The work is based on nothing, no strict discourse, no rules, except perhaps a new subjectivity.... If there is an object, an aim, it is to start from a point and lead outwards from there.... That to me is creativity. We have to create possibilities of meaning."¹

While language (and its negation) provides a *literal* metaphor for conveying (and overturning) meaning, Phaophanit also takes on and carefully deflects the cultural weight of other familiar materials. Neon, rubber, rice, industrial shelving, and bamboo all have social, economic, and historic connotations. By distilling these materials – insisting on their sensuous physical attributes and using them as basic, almost minimalist material units – Phaophanit's work forces a suspension of these connotations. Nonetheless, it is the persistence of these connotations which makes the situation compelling, as the critical viewer is forced to balance the cultural resonance of the objects against their overwhelming material presence. *what falls to the ground but can't be eaten - tok tem dean kep kin bo dai* (1991) created a sort of bamboo grove suspended off





119. *Neon rice field* (1993).
Rice, clear red neon tubes.
Wellkunst Foundation
Collection, London



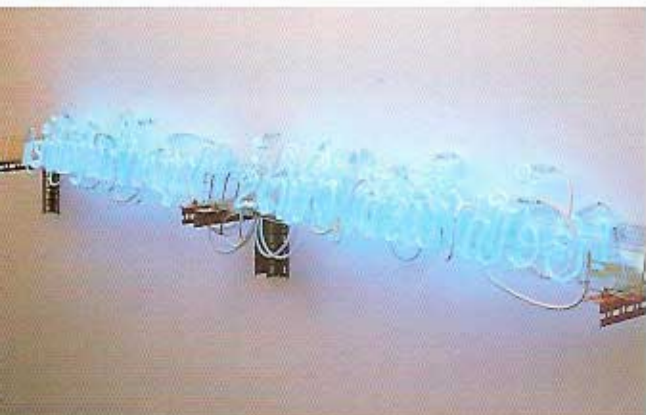
the floor, filtering overhead light. The metre-thick curtain of stalks swung to permit entrance to a teardrop-shaped interior space of undetermined suggestiveness. The artist's use of the raw form of a multi-functional material inextricably bound to Asian economies was a simple means of clearing a palpable space of potentiality, further incarnated by the enigmatic light. In another installation, *Neon rice field* (1993), Phaophanit covered an expanse of floor with dry rice underlaid at intervals by parallel clear red neon tubes, like furrows animating the field. Claire Oboussier describes how the neon and rice meld to take on sensory significance beyond hackneyed allusions:

"A material does not simply elegantly analogise an anterior idea or place. Rather the metaphor mobilised here turns upon an impulse to regain and render the materiality of the substances he works with.... Thus rice does not stand in for the East and neon does not imply the West, rather rice and neon meet at the level of their materiality, both activate each other; the translucence of the rice becomes visible through the glow of the neon and in turn the light emanating from the neon is transformed into a quasi-solid substance through its contact with the rice."²

Notes

1. Unpublished 1988 statement by Phaophonit cited in Claire Oboussier's essay in *Vong Phaophonit: what falls to the ground but can't be eaten/lok tem dean hep kin bo dai* (London: Chisenhale Gallery, 1991), n.p.
2. Claire Oboussier, "From Light," *Phaophonit & Piper* (Bristol: Eddle Chambers, 1995), n.p.
3. *Ibid.* (italics added).

Oboussier argues that by creating a material amalgam, Phaophonit reduces the gap "between *looking* as the most culturally bound of acts, historically implicated with systems of power and control and histories of representation, and *seeing* as a sensory act in which the eye of the viewer and the object meet and a kind of sensible infusion takes place," concluding that this "expanded form of metaphoricity ensures that the material can never entirely be collapsed into the discursive; it rescues the thing from the sign."³



120. *Un/Weat* (1995–96). Laotian words in clear blue neon, glass, painted steel

This simultaneous retrieval and negation of significant materials (a kind of provisional suspension or a silent presence) was anticipated in early works that collapsed time and memory into a sensuous flux. Often these employed images specific to Phaophonit's background – but at a distance, as a tangible record of the ruptures separating him from his family and originary culture (as a child he was sent to France for schooling, and was declared a refugee there when Laos came under Communist rule in 1975). In *Fragments* (1990), snapshots – one of the artist's only palpable connections to his distant family – were slide-projected onto a bank of whirling fans, the images – provisional memories backed by no experience – insistently dispersed at the point of their formation.

The distilled elegance of Phaophonit's work is an assertion of presence and process. *Atopia* (1997), an installation of blocks of uncured rubber, draped over strings lashed between long rows of skeletal shelving, is an insistent prolongation of a dramatic moment. Over time, the rubber sags, droops, and eventually plops onto the floor, whence it may be returned to the improvised supports to begin the cycle again. The piece is a condensation of process, stubbornly insisting on infixity, on negotiating the present tense, in the same way that the immaterial physicality of Phaophonit's light works exposes a simultaneous presence and loss that permits conditional meaning. It shows up the condition of unfixed physicality as a way of being fully present. G. K.